Chapter 8
Cities of Sin, Backroads of Crime

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This chapter examines two ways of representing criminalized space within popular U.S. print culture. One of these styles is represented by the cover illustrations for two books by Hendrik de Leeuw, a once popular and largely forgotten author of travel narratives and adventure literature (Figures 8.1, 8.2 and 8.3). De Leeuw's *Cities of Sin* and *Sinful Cities of the Western World*, first published in the 1930s, moved in and out of the markets for semi-illicit pornography through multiple editions over a 30 year period. Sometimes the covers to these books highlighted their claim to documentary truth and usefulness. On other occasions, as with the editions shown here, cover illustrations promised access to shadowy worlds of sexual commerce described in titillating detail. These unusual images present spaces which are oneiric, exotic and sexualized, marked (most notably in Figure 8.2) by a highly stylized play with light and shadow.

The other sort of space emerges later, in the mid-1950s, on the covers of US true crime magazines (Figures 8.4, 8.5 and 8.6). The three magazines shown here each display a compositional figure which quickly became a cliché of magazine cover illustration during this period: on an isolated patch of earth or road, a body lies still, while other human figures stand near it. Virtually unseen in true crime magazines before 1955, this figure would be repeated across dozens of cover photographs over the next decade. These images are all staged tableaux, shot by commercial photographers and posed by models. Nonetheless, each strives for a matter-of-fact, journalistic sense of *actualité*, of an action caught in the midst of its unfolding.

The two kinds of spaces to be discussed here did not succeed each other in any strict genealogical sense, as if one neatly took over the cultural function or space of the other. The styles and compositional figures of each represent, nevertheless, distinct ways of endowing criminalized spaces with a sense of the peculiar. In the covers to de Leeuw's books, 'strangeness' is a function of the openings enacted by each image, of the lines of association which link each locale to a set of other places criss-crossed by sexual traffic and criminal intrigue. A sense of each image's incompleteness is conveyed by the elaborate play with light and shadows which obscures key details of each space, producing an aura of secrecy and concealment. In the magazine covers of the second set, in contrast, strangeness resides in the peculiarly disconnected quality of the space and the clarity with which it is shown. All three of these
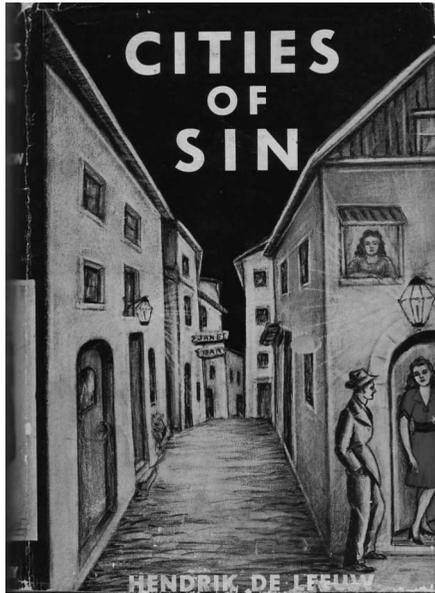
Figure 8.1 *Cities of Sin*, Hendrik de Leuw. Front cover. Artist unknown. New York: Willey Company, 1943. Author's collection

Figure 8.2 *Cities of Sin*, Hendrik de Leuw. Front cover. Artist unknown. New York: Gold Label Books, 1943. Author's collection
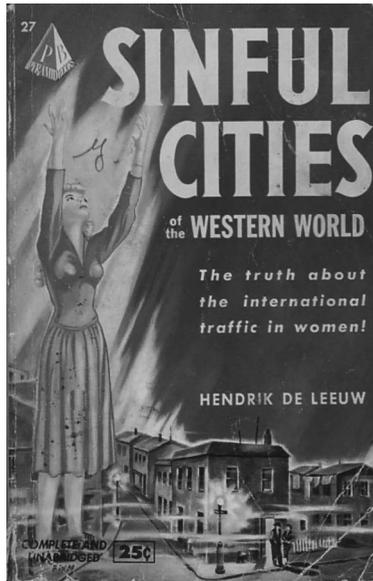
Figure 8.3 *Sinful Cities of the Western World*, Hendrik de Leuw. Front cover. Artist unknown. New York: Pyramid Books, 1951. Author's collection
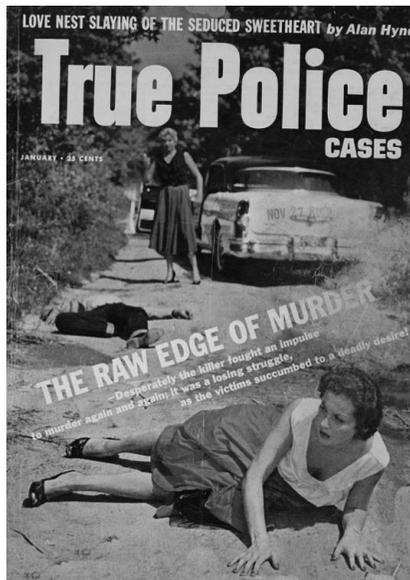

Figure 8.4 *True Police Cases.* Front cover. Vol. 9, No. 95, January 1957. New York: Fawcett Publications. Artist unknown. Author's collection

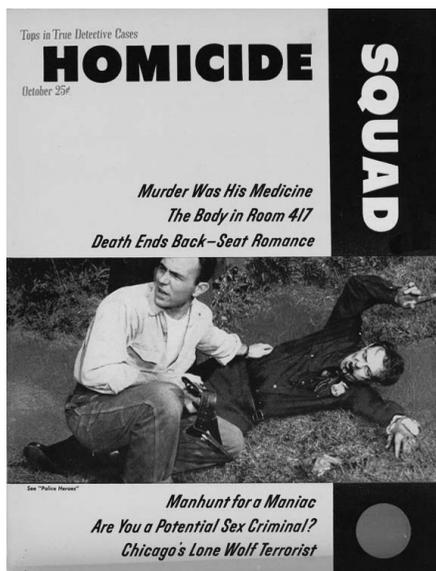**Figure 8.5** *Homicide Squad.* **Front cover. Vol. 1, No. 1, October 1957. Artist unknown. Author's collection. Sparta, IL: Precinct Publications**

Figure 8.6 *Confidential Detective Cases.* **Front cover. Vol. 7, No. 1, June 1956. New York: A Sterling Magazine. Artist unknown. Author's collection**

true crime photographs are characterized by high levels of illumination, by an almost total absence of the shadows which conventionally serve to render crime scenes atmospheric. These are images lacking the familiar stylistic gestures which link crime to hidden, secret forces.

In the analysis which follows, I will use each set of images to gather up resources with which we might think about the relationship between criminality, place and visual style. The covers of de Leeuw's books invite us to reflect upon the ways in which crime and secrecy serve to magnify space, rendering it elastic and extendable. This magnification, I will argue, underscores the preoccupation of so many interwar popular cultural texts (like pulp magazines and vice exposé books) with globalized networks of vice and sexual traffic. The staged photos of the true crime magazine cover, on the other hand, suggest the restriction of criminalized space, its confinement within places of bright illumination. In the move from our first set of images to the second, a sense of menace is no longer conveyed through a shadowy, nocturnal obscurity. It will come to reside, more and more, in the isolation of empty spaces subject to the heat and light of day.

De Leeuw's Sinful Cities

The covers of *Cities of Sin* which accompany this chapter are from two different editions of that book, both published in the US in 1943. The Dutch-born author of *Cities of Sin*, Hendrik de Leeuw (1891–1977) had moved to the United States as a young man, then written a series of travel narratives while serving as Far Eastern representative for the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. The first publication of *Cities of Sin*, in 1933, coincided with (and clearly sought to exploit) the release of the League of Nation's *Report on Traffic in women and children in the East*, a document whose themes are the same as those of De Leeuw's book. *Cities of Sin* offers itself as a study of 'prostitution, white slavery and trade in women and children', and is organized around chapters devoted to individual cities of the East (Yokohama, Hongkong, Shanghai, Macao, Port Said, and Singapore). De Leeuw's 1935 follow-up, *Sinful Cities of the Western World*, contained chapters on Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin and New York, but was taken up, for the most part, with journeys through the vice districts of cities of the middle East. In 1939, de Leeuw pursued adjacent themes in his *Flower of Joy*, on the production and consumption of narcotics in Asia.

Mail-order advertisements for *Cities of Sin* could be found in the back of 'spicy' periodicals of the 1930s and 1940s, even as the book was listed or reviewed in academic journals of the time, such as *Social Forces* and the *American Journal of Sociology*. In one of the few scholarly references to *Cities of Sin*, Yingjin Zhang notes how quickly de Leeuw's persistent moralism and documentary zeal give way to hallucinatory, highly visual fantasies. Following

its businesslike preface, *Cities of Sin* opens with 'Dreams of Lost Woman', a chapter set entirely in dreamy italics that recounts, in Zhang's efficient summary, de Leeuw's 'final private vision of a stream of naked, languishing, and hysterical women careening toward the cavern of lust' (Zhang 1999, 179). 'Cities fade', de Leeuw writes, in an apocalyptic vision that collapses the cities of Asia into a generalized image of sex, opium and human traffic (1933/1943, 20).

The unsigned covers for *Cities of Sin* shown in Figures 8.1 and 8.2 convey something of this oneiric strangeness. Both are deliberately vague as to the precise geographical locales covered within these books. So, too, is the cover for the 1954 paperback edition of *Sinful Cities of the Western World* (Figure 8.3), whose lower third, curiously, seems to be an expanded view of the scene contained in Figure 8.1. Like the covers of most vice exposé publications from mid-century, these simultaneously convey the book's promise to travel far, in search of sexual exoticism, and the titillating possibility that vice may be found close to the reader's own world. Just as each cover shows a very specific context of sexual encounter, it offers lines of vision and thematic flight which suggest a myriad of spaces beyond it, within a larger world of sin and vice. As we shall see, this vision of interconnected global circuits of vice and criminality shaped the spatial imaginary of a great deal of Western popular culture in the first half of the twentieth century.

Secrecy and the Magnification of Criminalized Spaces

It is common to think of crime as something that simply contaminates a space, infusing it with a sense of menace or insecurity. We might reflect more broadly, however, on the ways in which criminality acts upon spaces to expand their volume and meaning. In his well-known article on the secret, Georg Simmel noted that secrecy posed 'the possibility of a second world alongside the obvious world', creating, in Michael Taussig's summary, 'a world split between a visible exterior and an invisible depth that determines the exterior' (Simmel 1906, 462; Taussig 1999, 56). This sense of invisible depth is rendered in literal fashion in crime fictions which propose secret criminal conspiracies operating through hidden networks or venturing out from spaces of concealment. Crime fictions typically work on the basis of elaborate metonymies and displacements which function to expand the radius of criminal action within narrative worlds. As Dennis Porter has observed, the hard-boiled detective novel is organized around the structure of the 'spreading stain', in which the social and geographical reach of crime is magnified as a narrative unfolds (Porter 1983, 333). The shadows and obscurity which typify popular crime imagery (in films and magazine illustration, for example) magnify space by blurring its limits, suggesting its potential for unlimited extension.

Recent work on the representations of crime in pre-World War II France has described the expansion of space characteristic of cultural texts which linked the local mystery to the global conspiracy, the urban *fait divers* to the worldwide criminal network. In the Fantomas serials of print and cinema, Dominique Kalifa suggests, we glimpse 'the shift from a monocentric world toward a noticeably polycentric one. Telegraph, telephone, radio broadcasting, ocean liners, and transcontinental trains make Fantômas a great traveller who visits such places as Scotland, Russia, Mexico, Columbia, and Natal' (Kalifa 2004, 187). In his book *Shanghai on the Métro*, on the prevalence of spy figures in French popular culture of the 1930s, Michael B. Miller shows how the localized spaces of Parisian criminality were seen, inevitably, to be caught up within global intrigues and conspiratorial networks that ran through exotic, faraway locales (Miller 1995). Metonymic lines tied each urban mystery to broader struggles unfolding across the distant arenas of colonial power. And, finally, Adrian Rifkin, writing of the French crime newspaper *Détective*, speaks in similar fashion of the ways in which, in the 1930s, popular cultural forms inscribed global intrigues onto the spaces of Paris: 'One of the peculiar abilities of *Détective* is to open up the vistas of the glance between the spaces of the city and beyond, so that the distant seaport, the Spanish bordello or the colonial deserts can be mapped back on to it – a collapsing of cartographic distance and its problem of inaccessibility into the topography of city mnemonics' (Rifkin 1993, 162).

Images like those which adorned the covers of Hendrik de Leeuw's books convey something of this collapsed distance in at least two ways. First, they offer an image of a globalized district of sin, imaginable in each case as both familiar and exotically distant. Like other purveyors of what Pierre Mac Orlan had called the 'social fantastic' (Mac Orlan 1929/1989), De Leeuw traces, across his books, circuits of interconnected port cities, systems for the transnational traffic in women, and a generalizable urban topography of red light districts, opium dens and waterfront spaces of encounter. Second, the organization of these cover illustrations works to produce a sense of almost labyrinthian space, through the permeability of buildings (with their open windows and doors) and a sense of each image receding into twisted alleyways or foggy obscurity. These convolutions heighten the sense that each locale is interconnected with others, through the lines of metonymic flight built into each image's compositional style.

Criminal spaces may be magnified in other ways, through the ways in which they absorb within themselves the depth of historical time. This is another of the many insights of Dominique Kalifa's (1995) work on crime fictions of the French Belle Epoque. During this period, crime journalists, novelists and the creators of characters like Fantomas reached back to a pre-Hausmann Paris to recover a city of murky spaces and obscure trajectories. 'The medieval city', Kalifa suggests, 'imposed its structure on many feuilletons: its alleys, its mazes, its zigzag trenches formed the outlines of the story – and commanded

the narrative web, plots, and successive connections and dead ends within each story' (Kalifa 2004, 192). Through their constant reintegration within fictional and journalistic narratives of crime, older topographies of the city were reinvigorated, used to strengthen the city's resistance to being fully understood. Mitchell Schwarzer has made a similar claim about US television crime programmes of the late 1950s, like *Naked City*. Shot on location, these programmes kept their gaze on the old New York of 'brick and stone' even as the city was being transformed by an architecture of steel and glass (Schwarzer 2004, 292).

Space is magnified here by the ways in which crime narratives integrate within themselves the sedimented residues of earlier architectures and forms of urban order. In his analysis of the case of London serial killer John Christie, who lived and buried his victims at 10 Rillington Place in North Kensington, Frank Mort shows how journalistic coverage of the murders and their geographical context operated as the excavation of lost historical phenomena: 'Much of the material environment for the murders was quintessentially nineteenth century, with corpses buried in the decrepit Victorian house and the narrow streets and terraces providing the dominant setting for the action. Many of the social actors in the affair were also presented through the language of nineteenth-century urban typologies' (Mort 2008, 328). More than most narratives, those of criminal investigation are able to capture the uneven development of urban species and environments. The frequently uncanny quality of such narratives has much to do with their capacity to resuscitate social types and situations long believed to have disappeared.

De Leeuw's books of the 1930s, *Cities of Sin* and *Sinful Cities of the Western World*, claimed topical relevance based on their echoing of League of Nations reports and other contemporary documents about international sexual commerce. Today, what binds them to their period is a sense of mystery and sensation closer to that of the pulp magazines, movie serials and other fantastic cultural forms of the time. In the 1930s, pulpy adventure narratives drew on a deep inventory of styles and motifs from the previous half-century. The raw materials of Victorian adventure, World War I intrigue, colonial revolt, political conspiracies, revolutionary upheaval and organized crime all piled up, in the popular culture of that decade, to make each story a dense wound set of interconnections. The visual renderings of place which accompanied these narratives overlaid the compositional clichés of Victorian melodrama upon the luridly colourful visual rhetorics of mass-produced print culture.

The shifts in de Leeuw's writings after World War II are symptomatic of the waning of such rhetorics; these shifts provide a bridge to our second set of images, those of the postwar American true crime magazine. In 1952, Hendrik de Leeuw published *Underworld Story,* an expose of criminal rackets and vice in the United States. *Underworld Story* was clearly intended to resonate with Senator Estes Kefauver's investigations into organized crime and municipal corruption within the US (Straw 1997). The inventorying of sex and vice,

always prominent in de Leeuw's work, now came to organize itself around American examples exclusively. At the same time, the sense of reverie which had marked his books of the 1930s – the hallucinatory evocation of sensual abandon – was gone, replaced by a matter-of-fact reporting of dates and events. This shift in de Leeuw's attention and rhetoric mirrored a broader turn in the popular print culture of crime and vice – from the exotic and fantastic towards the highly specified, from tales told in the language of exploration and adventure to reportage which borrowed from journalism and the judicial investigation. One of de Leeuw's final books, *Woman, the Dominant Sex; From Bloomers to Bikinis* (1957) fits easily into a series of misogynistic polemics, from Philip Wylie's *A Generation of Vipers* (1942) through Lee Mortimer's *Women Confidential* (1960), which focussed almost exclusively on contemporary Western cultures.

The True Crime Magazine of the 1950s

The so-called 'true crime magazine' (or 'fact detective' or 'true detective' magazine) was born in the 1920s, in part as an offshoot of the true confession magazine. From among the confession magazine's multiple genres of sensation and confession (which included tales of fallen virtue and white slavery), crime quickly emerged as the focus of a specialized wave of new magazines. From the early 1920s until the death of the genre at the end of the twentieth century, these magazines offered ostensibly true stories of crimes and police investigations. To bolster their claims to documentary truth, these magazines employed photographs as the most common form of illustration, often printing official police mug shots or crime scene photographs. Vast numbers of the images published in these magazines, however, were imaginary reconstructions of crimes and crime scenes, staged by commercial photographers in studios and using professional models. As a result, the history of true crime magazine photography is interwoven just as tightly with those of fashion magazine illustration or print advertising imagery as with a history of the official documentation of crime.

In patterns I have described elsewhere, authentic photographs of crime scenes and criminals (taken by journalists or supplied by police departments) were arranged, within the true crime magazine, alongside clearly 'fictional' photographs of crimes staged in studios and posed by models (Straw 2006). Across the 80-year history of the true crime magazine, fashions in true crime imagery rippled across multiple titles and publishers, producing distinctive period styles. In the 1930s, the period of the genre's first great expansion, the typical covers of true crime magazines contained one or two human figures, painted with rough lines in compositions that conveyed fear or murderous rage. By the late 1940s, covers had come to be dominated by painted or touched-up photographs of the faces of solitary women. Throughout the 1940s, the covers

of true crime magazines sought to convey a glamour from which all but the most oblique references to crime were banished. Set against backgrounds of solid colour, the cover models of the late 1940s true crime magazine occupied no recognizable dramatic, geographical or architectural space. Indeed, the development of true crime magazine cover illustration since the 1930s had seen the markers of distinctive spaces and of punctual moments of action gradually eliminated. The weakening of spatio-temporal visual markers was echoed in the tendency of 1940s true crime stories to unfold in relatively abstract, thinly textured historical moments and geographical places. Gone were the links to high-profile public crimes (like the capture of Bonnie and Clyde or killing of John Dillinger) which had characterized the true crime magazine of the 1930s. The stories recounted in 1940s magazines took place, for the most part, in generic locations familiar from crime fiction, like penthouse apartments or isolated country houses.

In the 1950s, the American true crime magazine elaborated a new relationship to place. This development was immediately evident on the covers of these magazines, which changed dramatically during the decade. Around 1953, magazines began to offer covers containing images of compressed dramatic action. Cover models, who had once gazed solicitously at a magazine's readers, now receded into scenes of action which involved multiple characters acting within detailed settings. On the covers of the most stylistically innovative of 1950s true crime magazines, like *Inside Detective* (published by Dell) and *Homicide Squad* (Sterling), the bright colours of the 1940s gave way to unglamorous, documentary-like black and white images. In this change, the status of spatio-temporal referents within these magazines was transformed as well. While celebrity criminals had served to ground the 1930s crime magazine in actuality, the magazines of the 1950s based their claims to realism on the ordinariness of tawdry settings and empty landscapes.

It is on the covers of these magazines that a new space of action first appears and quickly becomes a visual cliché of the genre. This space is that of the grassy field or gravely rural road, on which a body lays sprawled while other figures (friends, killers, policemen) crouch over it. The three images which accompany this chapter offer different versions of this visual composition, chosen from a larger corpus of similar images. In the 1950s, this dramatic space would become as common as others, more widely-known, which have long defined the visuality of crime, like the neon-lit city street or the fog-saturated urban harbour.

Race and Place

The human figures which inhabited this space were, virtually without exception, white. While this fixation on white characters and populations was typical of the true crime magazine as a genre, it was underscored in images

characterized by high levels of illumination. In one of many columns written to help would-be writers of true crime stories, *Writer's Digest*, in 1938, had claimed the following: 'Picking your crime is restricted by a few rigid editorial taboos. Most fact detective editors will not consider the story of any crime perpetrated by a coloured person' (Monroe 1938). The consistency with which this prohibition was enforced is clear from the examination of a large corpus of these magazines, even if the precise reasons behind it are not. In the 1930s, the pulp fiction periodicals published alongside true crime magazines had been full of racially marked villainous characters and perilous situations. Likewise, the men's adventure and celebrity gossip magazines which flourished in the 1950s regularly offered up words and images which hinted at interracial romance or mobilized fantasies about interracial violence. The brazen directness with which other magazines marshalled anxieties about race makes the absolute whiteness of true crime magazines all the more noticeable. With very few exceptions, these magazines never engaged with the hot button issues of race, urban decline and poverty which ran through popular arguments about crime. Racially-based acts of violence, perhaps the most horrific American crimes of the twentieth century, were nowhere to be found in the true crime magazine. Well into the 1960s, these magazines remained fixated on bandit couples, rural fugitives and, increasingly, serial killers. These are all, statistically and stereotypically, the stock figures of white criminality.

The isolated spaces which recur on true crime magazine covers, from the mid-1950s onwards, are usually located on backroads or in rural areas. A fixation on such spaces is part of a broader flight, in these magazines, from urban glamour, towards hinterlands and small towns. This shift expresses a vision of crime as unfolding principally in a world of small-town white people. The well-lit covers of true crime magazines of this period offered a coherent stylization of rural white criminality, one distinct to the period and traceable to the influence of leading titles like *Inside Detective* (cf. Straw 2006). The lighting of cover photographs betrayed a prejudice which saw crime as a matter for poor whites, photographed to make their faces seem pale and under-nourished. Treatment of the Cutter family murders, covered by *Front Page Detective* in 1960 and the focus of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965/1993), stands as a canonical example of this prejudice at work.

The isolated spaces of the mid-1950s true crime magazine cover invite a reading which sees them as visual devices designed to circumscribe the social meanings of crime. Images of rural backroads and white bodies detach crime from the thematics of race, poverty and urban life which increasingly, in the post-World War II era, shaped public debate over justice and the law in the United States. If this act of containment was not conscious or deliberate, it nevertheless expressed the urge to offer images of crime untroubled by lines of connection leading to larger social contexts – contexts that were less easily deciphered than the isolated patch of road or grass. We may contrast

this impulse towards closure with the multiple gestures towards a variety of *elsewheres* on the covers to Hendrik de Leeuw's books.

Film Noir, Blanc, Gris, Soleil

The decline of shadowy stylization in true crime magazine illustration of the 1950s is part of a broader unravelling of the aesthetic associated, in the cinema, with film noir. Between a film like *Night and the City* (Jules Dassin 1950) and stylish crime films made 10 years later, like *Odds Against Tomorrow* (Robert Wise, 1959) or *A bout de souffle* (Jean-Luc Godard 1959), we see a general whitening of tone, a turn from shadowy spaces to scenes shot under bright sunlight in open, exposed settings. A major cause of this whitening was the increased use of on-location filming, itself influenced by developments in camera technology, film stock and lighting. One index of the dissolution of film noir is the tendency of films of the late 1950s to convey a new sense of menace through dramatic spaces marked by a bleached-out emptiness.

Film studies scholars have proposed a series of new terms to describe the mutations of a film noir style over time or across adjacent genres. One of the most widely adopted of these has been film gris (or 'grey film'.) For Thom Andersen (1985), who proposed the term, film gris circumscribes a cycle of American thrillers of the 1950s in which crime narratives were deployed in the service of leftish social commentary (see also Maland 2002). '*Gris*', here, functions in a double sense. As a secondary, hybrid colour, 'grey' serves here to designate the space of generic overlap between otherwise distinct genres (the noir thriller and the social commentary film), as if grey were produced in the overlaying of a post-war 'dark' cinema upon the illuminative conventions of the documentary. At the same time, film gris suggests the bleakness of grey spaces, of the impoverished small towns and highway stops (like diners and gas stations) which are, increasingly, the locations for crime (see also Dimendberg 2004). This dreariness, it is suggested, is often absent from the oneiric, shadowy worlds of film noir. In a further development of the term, Dana Polan uses it to characterize the grey, depressing landscapes through which characters of limited means and opportunity move in such films as *Thief's Highway* (Jules Dassin 1949) (e.g. Polan 2000, 136).

The term film blanc ('white film') has a more convoluted history. Unsurprisingly, it is most often used to describe an aesthetic that inverts the defining features of film noir. The most common use of film blanc has been to group together films whose transcendent optimism counters the stereotypical despair of film noir. (A website devoted to film blanc calls it the 'Cinema of Feel Good Fantasies': http://filmblanc.info/.) Ongoing exchanges, on the internet and elsewhere, have sought to specify this sense of the film blanc, using the term more narrowly for films concerned with the afterlife (e.g. Genelli and Genelli 1984). *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra 1946) is the

most frequently invoked example of such films, interesting in part because it contains, embedded within it, scenes which are more conventionally *noir*. In this usage, '*blanc*' suggests both the optimism of religious faith and the cloudy visual blankness which, in so many films of the 1940s, stood for heaven or its antechamber, as in *Heaven Can Wait* (Ernst Lubitsch 1943) and *Here Comes Mr Jordan* (Alexander Hall 1941).

Other uses of the term 'film blanc' have employed it in a more literal sense, in reference to films whose dominant aesthetic is one of brightness. In her review of Paula Gladstone's 1978 documentary on Coney Island, *The Dancing Soul of the Walking People*, Judith Bloch writes that '[h]er film could be called a film blanc, its use of sunlight matching the *noir*'s use of shadow, its mood so much the daytime, seaside equivalent of the noir's urban light' (Bloch 1981, 62). In her reference to sunlight, Bloch anticipates ideas about 'sunshine *noir*' or 'film soleil' developed in recent years by Hoberman (2007), Holm (2005), and others. Central to all these moves is a recognition that the characteristic spaces of danger and crime in films are no longer those of the *noirish* city, organized around the play of light and shadow. On the contrary, a sense of menace is now conveyed most forcefully, in crime films, through the intense heat and light of spaces exposed to the sun.

Hoberman offered his term 'sunshine noir' to designate an aesthetic which has become prevalent in representations of criminality based in Los Angeles. Hoberman sees prefigurations of this style in the 'moody high-noon surrealism' of 1940s experimental filmmaker Maya Deren, or in the daytime ghostliness of early, LA-based experimental films by Kenneth Anger. In the Californian crime stories which follow, from *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder 1950) through *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski 1974) and beyond, sunshine is part of the structure of hypocrisy, hiding a deep cultural rot beneath bright, warm surfaces. Holm, in his pocket-sized guide to 'film soleil', develops similar ideas about the semi-independent crime thrillers of the 1980s and 1990s set in small southern towns. For Holm, the cycle of 'film soleil' begins with the Coen brothers' *Blood Simple* in 1984 and continues through other 'sunlit crime films' like *Kill Me Again* (1989) and *After Dark, My Sweet* (1990) (Holm 2005, 14).

This detour through arguments made in the contexts of film scholarship and criticism is necessary to our discussion of true crime magazine photography. It allows us to point to a broader reversal, between the late 1940s and the late 1950s, in the cultural meanings of darkness and light, brightness and obscurity. Across the thousands of photographs (staged and genuine) published in true crime magazines during this period, the consistency of this reversal becomes clear. The use of shadowy obscurity to evoke unease would become less and less common by the end of the 1950s. It gave way first to the grey, low-contrast look of black and white photography, as in the examples reproduced here. Then, by the 1960s, noirish chiaroscuro had further ceded its place, if only on covers, to garish colour photography and a flirtation with psychedelic

effects which used excessive sunlight as the basis for distortions of light and composition.

The menacing strangeness of the brightly lit space stands as a puzzle in late twentieth century popular aesthetics. Thomas Elsaesser's astute analysis of R.W. Fassbinder's 1982 film *Veronika Voss*, a work he labels a film blanc, opens up several routes we might follow in taking up this puzzle (Elsaesser 1981, 114). If clean, white environments now seem oppressive, it is perhaps because their primary association is with a history of twentieth century institutions, a recurrent object of political critique in late modernity. Some of these institutions, like large bureaucracies, are simply dehumanizing; others, like hospitals and laboratories, may figure as places of cruelty and death, particularly through their association with totalitarian regimes. Amidst such new prejudices, arguments for the progressive character of shadowy obscurity find their conditions of possibility. Elsaesser notes how blacks and greys, in the antiseptic environments of modern institutions, may offer places of refuge, of 'security and respite.' He quotes French critic Yann Lardeau on the function of shadows: 'Without shadow a person cannot live, without it a person has no soul because no secrets' (Elsaesser 1981, 114).

We may trace this rehabilitation of the shadow across a number of recent interventions in cultural analysis. In all of them, shadowy obscurity becomes a zone in which human depth and freedom may thrive, rather than the space from which something emerges to threaten them. Rifkin notes how urban avant gardes in interwar France were drawn to obscurity as that which 'provides a glimpse of alternative trajectories and senses.' The darkness at the edge of visualized space may offer a sense of the endless possibilities latent within the everyday, rather than standing as a boundary which limits such possibilities (Rifkin 1993, 157). In his book *L'envers du visible: Essais sur l'ombre*, Max Milner (2005) explores the wide variety of ways in which shadows have functioned, like Simmel's secrets, to magnify the world. Shadows, he suggests, have made phenomena as diverse as human psychology, painterly space, and material objecthood all seem to possess a depth and volume that would be lacking in contexts of pure illumination. Shadows are no longer the signs of an ignorance or distortion which clarity and truth will banish, but, rather, guarantees of the incompleteness and multiple displacements characteristic of any image and of the identities it puts into play. A 'world without shadows', Ina Blom suggests, following visual artist Olafur Eliasson, is a 'world without difference' (Blom 2008, 119).

In a history of crime imagery, the benign character of the shadow in the present day is nourished by the sentimental familiarity which has attached itself to gothic, expressionistic or *noirish* films and photographs. This is in part because, as these styles have aged, the contrast between light and shadow within them matters less than the ways in which both together produce a visual texture comforting in its coherence and noble in its cultural lineage. The shadowless images of sun-drenched open spaces, on the other hand, or

the bright emptiness of deserted noon-time highways, have snuck into our popular culture with no comparable pedigree. They partake of the menacing strangeness which, in late modern life, has attached itself to excessive levels of illumination and clarity.

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