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“To Better Tracks and Steadier Nerves”: The Role of the Train in the Representation of Masculinity in *The Narrow Margin* (Richard Fleischer, 1952)*

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In many ways, the phrase “To better tracks and steadier nerves” – proffered to Detective Walter Brown (Charles McGraw) by Ann Sinclair (Jacqueline White) – sums up the renewed representation of the male protagonist as a complex noir antihero. In *The Narrow Margin*, Sinclair is a benevolent, upper-class mother and an unobtrusive train passenger who turns out to be the widow of a mobster. Brown is a police detective in charge of escorting Frankie Neal, a “gangster moll” (Mary Windsor), on the same train from Chicago to Los Angeles, where she is to testify before a grand jury against her late husband’s associates. Neal is, of course, but a decoy for the real widow, Sinclair. Brown’s efforts to protect the slain gangster’s wife against the mobsters out to get her, puts him in an apparently dominant position. However, he also has to face a series of setbacks which befits his precarious status as a hero, especially when it becomes clear that he has been used as a pawn, since he ignored that the “widow” was *in fact* an undercover police officer. Brown finds out that the home office has been testing him, because he was suspected of taking bribes, and he ultimately turns out a classical film noir anti-hero on two accounts: he is manipulated and wrongly accused.

In keeping with a long line of film noir detectives who are characterized by their problematic relationship with law enforcement, Brown can also be defined by his ambivalence.¹ He hesitates between righteousness and corruption. Indeed, one of the central elements of the plot is the fact that he is torn between good and evil, as he is tempted by bribes. Wavering between excessive manliness and the lack of it, the male

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¹ Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton were among the first scholars to note that film noir was peopled with shady police officers, and that good and evil were blurred: “If there are policemen, they’re of dubious character”, *A Panorama of American Film Noir 1941-1953* (1955), translated from the French by Paul Hammond, (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2002), 7; “Good and evil often rub shoulders to the point of merging into one another” *Panorama*, 12; “It is easy to come to a conclusion: the moral ambivalence, criminal violence, and contradictory complexity of the situations and motives all combine to give the public a shared feeling anguish or insecurity, which is the identifying sign of film noir at this time.” *Panorama*, 13. Continuing this line of thought, Foster Hirsch states that “a potential criminal is concealed in each of us,” Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (San Diego: A.S. Barnes, 1981), 172, and Robert Corber considers the film noir detective as “Hollywood’s reincarnation of the gangster,” Robert Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America, Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 27. These remarks apply even better to later films noirs, which, as Paul Schrader has noted, “finally got down to the root causes of the period: the loss of public honor, heroic conventions, personal integrity, and, finally, psychic stability” with protagonists such as Mike Hammer (*Kiss Me Deadly*, Robert Aldrich, 1955) and Hank Quinlan (*Touch of Evil*, Orson Welles, 1958), Paul Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir”, (1972) in Alain Silver and James Ursini eds., *Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), 59.

protagonist is alternately represented as a ~~very~~ self-confident cop or a disempowered antihero. Like other film noir protagonists, Brown is characterized by his ambivalence and his inner contradictions. Classical though these notions might be, they are given new expression in *The Narrow Margin* as the train renders the traditional representation of the noir detective as an antihero more complex and his contradictions more dramatic. As Mark Seltzer explains, the railway system has the ability at once to enhance and constrict human action:

[...] the railway system combines mobility and incarceration, confining still or stilled bodies in moving machines directed by mechanical prime movers. The railway, like the elevator [...] puts stilled bodies in motion. What these mobile technologies make possible, in different forms, are the thrill and panic of agency at once extended and suspended.²

The train extends space and allows for faster spatial movement while paradoxically keeping the body still in an enclosed space. Hence, it concurrently extends the limits of the human body while confining it in an enclosed space.

By using the trope of the train, this film participates in the transformation of the genre at work in late films noirs. As Foster Hirsch explains in his comprehensive study of film noir, “[i]n the fifties *noir* [...] began to tamper with generic elements that had become traditional. Some of these variations extended the life of the genre.”³ Although *The Narrow Margin* is not the first film noir to utilize the visual and aural possibilities of trains, it exploits this traditional noir setting in a way that renews tough guy masculinity, one of the classical subjects of film noir, and the genre’s complex representation of the male protagonist as an ambiguous and ambivalent hero.

The train creates confusion between the human element and the machine, and thereby renews the themes of moral ambivalence and duality of the male protagonist. This article is concerned with exploring the contradictory effects of mechanization on the hero’s actions to see how they modify the depiction of the classical film noir detective. Moreover, as “the mechanical double of cinema,”⁴ the train draws attention to the camera, and thereby to the artificiality of film noir conventions and codes. Clearly, in this film “railway language [...] works as a metalanguage for cinematography.” These metafictional devices shed new light on the characterization of the film noir protagonist as an antihero. In fact, the ambivalence of the male protagonist, as well as his dual status as a superman and anti-hero, echoes contemporaneous debates on the changing status of men in the 1950s, the so-called “Cold War anxieties” shaped by concerns about gender, sexuality and the male itself.

Human enhancement: a Super Hero?

During most of the film, Brown is represented as an overly self-confident cop, in charge of the action. He displays all the skills of a good detective: physical strength, professionalism, quick decision-making, self-confidence, absence of hesitation, and a strong

² Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 8.

³ Hirsch, *Dark Side*, 200.

⁴ See the introduction to this issue on “Railway and Locomotive Language in Film” by Taina Tukhunen, paragraph, 3.

sense of authority. In short, he possesses all the qualities of Hollywood's "official heroes"⁵ namely, "the best attributes of adulthood: sound reasoning and judgment, wisdom and sympathy based on experience". "Willing to undertake even those public duties demanding personal sacrifice,"⁶ he has a lot in common with Chandler's "ideal hero,"⁷ and also follows in the footsteps of the prototypical western hero in charge of escorting a prisoner from one place to another.

The train plays an important part in enhancing and extending Brown's physical capabilities. He seems to absorb the visual and aural energy of the train, as a series of parallels between his behaviour and the train's manifestations indicate. For example, at Chicago's Grand Central Station, shortly before the train's departure, the soundtrack is composed of a series of rattling, whistling and chugging sounds that stop as soon as Brown boards the stationary train. This makes perfect sense at the diegetic level: Brown has entered the train, and the noises of the platform can no longer be heard once he is inside the train. However, these noises are replaced by the sound of his coarse voice as he addresses Mrs. Neal. This creates a kind of continuity between mechanic and organic sounds. Throughout the film, his regular outbursts of anger when he addresses either the gangsters or Neal, are echoed and amplified by the rattling sound of the locomotive.

Visually, parallels between his physique and the locomotive are established by transitions with shots of the locomotive. For example, his conversation with Mrs. Neal, in which he displays self-confidence and a strong sense of authority, cuts to a shot of the locomotive:

Neal: I'm in a spot, Brown, and it's your job to protect me. It's your move.

Brown: You're wrong, it's his [the gangster's]. We're going to let him make it, Mrs. Neal.

In this scene, the verbal exchange establishes him as a manly man. It indicates that he knows everything, and is capable of making quick decisions, without hesitating⁸. Conversely, Neal claims her need for protection, and puts her fate in Brown's hands in one of these stereotypical "interpersonal rituals" described by sociologist Erving Goffman as conveying "the belief (in Western society) [...] that women are precious, ornamental, and fragile, uninstructed in, and ill-suited for anything requiring muscular exertion or mechanical or electrical training or physical risk."⁹ This exchange ends with a shot of the locomotive, racing along the straight tracks, unhampered by the horizontal iron railings that frame the screen and seem to block the way. Instead of slowing down, the locomotive lets off steam to cover the railings and races along (fig. 1). This transition establishes a parallel between

⁵ Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the American Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 59.

⁶ Ray, *A Certain Tendency*, 60.

⁷ Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder," *Raymond Chandler, Later Novels and Other Writings*, (Library of America, 1995 [1944]), 991.

⁸ Assertiveness is one of the stereotypical traits of manliness listed in the Bem Sex Role Inventory, among other skills such as self-control, aggressiveness, ambition, and analytical skills. See Jeff Hearn, "Masculinity/Masculinities", in *International Encyclopedia of Men and Masculinities*, ed. Michael Flood, Judith Kegan Gardiner, Bob Pease, and Keith Pringle (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 390.

⁹ Erving Goffman, "The Arrangement between the Sexes," *Theory and Society* 4, no. 3 (Autumn 1977): 311.



Fig. 1

Brown and the locomotive that reinforces his strong verbal domination. It is almost as if the locomotive transferred its steam energy onto Brown, providing an apt metaphor for sexual intercourse, thereby reinforcing his sexual potency, and heightening his manliness.

In the same way, Brown is endowed with the driving force of the machine when he enters into a fight with one of the gangsters. As a primitive form of masculine testing, fighting is the opportunity for the detective to display his manliness. Fighting scenes are almost a prerequisite of film noir.¹⁰ Frank Krutnik noted that “the boxing-scenes themselves often serv[ed] to present a stark spectacle of masculine triumph and defeat. The ring becomes an enclosed arena of masculine performance.”¹¹ This is precisely the case here. The jolts of the train amplify the blows that Brown strikes and are instrumental in his victory. It seems that the energy required for the train to maintain its speed propagates to his muscles and his flesh, and creates a correspondence between man and machine. In a way, Brown benefits from the technological enhancement of “auxiliary organs” mentioned by Freud in his description of the “technological man”:

Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times.¹²

In that regard, he is a kind of superman, or an ideal hero. However, substituting a machine for human strength minimizes the importance of physical abilities. This is what might give him “much trouble at times”. Indeed, the consequence of victory at the hands of the machine is that it also casts doubt on the efficiency of his actions, illustrating Seltzer’s remark that “the uncertain status of the principle of locomotion precipitates the melodramas of uncertain agency.”¹³ In other words, neither the characters nor the audience are sure whether it is the machine or the human who has won the fight. The identity of the real agent remains unclear.

Moreover, Brown expertly uses the reflection provided by the window of a train passing in the other direction to kill Densel (Peter Virgo) by an adroitly triangulated shot through the door of a railroad car. This very unlikely shot that allows him to save Mrs.

¹⁰ There are famous fight sequences in classical films noirs such as *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), *Murder My Sweet* (Edward Dmytryk, 1944), *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), and *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (Otto Preminger, 1950).

¹¹ Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street, Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 190.

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontent* [1930] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, (London: Vintage, 2001 [1964]), 91-92.

¹³ Seltzer, *Bodies*, 18.

Sinclair who was held hostage turns him, albeit temporarily, into a superhero. He owes his victory as much to his personal fighting skills as to the motive power of the train.

Constriction, Control and Fusion: A Disempowered Hero in the “machine culture”¹⁴

At the same time as he is “augmented”, Brown is also disempowered by the movements of the machine. The train works as a visual motif of entrapment. As one of the classical film noir locales it provides a “tight, confined space [...] from which there is no escape.”¹⁵ The characters move through narrow corridors; they are seen sitting or standing in stuffy compartments, walking through multiple doors. The lack of space is further reinforced by the use of close shots and two-shots. Classical high- and low-angle shots and light effects – shadows and chiaroscuro – create a sense of claustrophobia and oppression. The fight sequence illustrates this characteristic treatment of space and suggests that Brown is submitted to the spatial constraints of the train. The cinematography highlights the impression of confinement, or even of incarceration: as the fight intensifies, and as the two fighters occupy more and more space, the scale of the shots shifts from medium to close shots, while a hand-held camera and high-angle and low-angle shots are used to save floor space. A close-up of the two men wrestling on the floor, shot from behind the pipe of the washbasin (fig. 2), increases this impression of entrapment. Visual entrapment is used to express the male protagonist’s



Fig. 2 Joseph Kemp (David Clarke) and Walter Brown (Charles McGraw)

lack of control over the events. Brown’s endeavours are hindered by a series of obstacles. He loses his balance in the narrow corridors, as the train is jolting along. He tries to track down Joseph Kemp (David Clarke) during this cat-and-mouse game on rails, but waiters or other passengers block his way as when, for instance, he has to squeeze by a fat man (fig. 3).

¹⁴ Seltzer, *Bodies*, 19.

¹⁵ Hirsch, *Dark Side*, 86, 85.



Fig. 3 Walter Brown (Charles McGraw) and Sam Jennings (Paul Maxey)

The train also seems to contain narrative power and exert narrative control, as the plot follows the course of the railway journey. It starts when the characters board the train in Chicago and ends when the train reaches its final destination, once the gangsters have been arrested, and the widow has arrived safe and sound. As the train dashes along the tracks, unhampered, it seems to deprive Brown of his control over the course of events. His tribulations and hesitations are dependent on the direction taken by the train. The spatio-temporal constrictions of the train seem to prevail over the extensions of the body, giving the train, so to speak “the upper hand”. Motion and volition being no longer connected, the male character is disempowered by the machine in motion.

Moreover, the links between the train and the male protagonist point to a confusion between organic and mechanical systems that redraw “the uncertain and shifting line between the natural and the technological in machine culture and also the ways in which such shifts in the traffic between the natural and the technological make for the vicissitudes of agency.”¹⁶ This blurring of boundaries announces the prominence given to machines. It is aptly noted by Mrs. Sinclair when she comments that Brown behaves like a machine: “Maybe you’re like the train. When it’s moving everything is a blur. When it slows down and stops, you begin to notice the scenery.” The aural and visual channels of expression further this confusion.

The soundtrack is characterized by the absence of extradiegetic music and the omnipresence of the intradiegetic sounds of the train. These sounds create dramatic and aesthetic effects that enhance the visual drama. Although the whistling, rattling or puffing of the train should be nothing more than mere background noises, or sound effects subjected to the impression of reality, they provide here a kind of emotional orchestration. For example, in the fight sequence, the continuous sound of the wheels on the tracks matches the rhythm of the heavy panting of the two men, thus having a double effect: that of personifying the train and reifying the fighters.

The editing also points to confusion between humans and machines. In one of the transitions, a shot of Windsor filing her nails dissolves into a shot of the train’s wheels, while the sound of the nails on the file turns into the sound of the wheels on the tracks. These overlapping shots and sounds fuse together human and mechanical movements, and illustrate how the film “couples the body and the machine.”¹⁷ While the train is endowed with anthropomorphic attributes, the bodies are subjected to an alteration that seems “to

¹⁶ Seltzer, *Bodies*, 4.

¹⁷ Ibid.

be actuated by a mechanical logic that defies conscious choice.”¹⁸ As the train is, so to speak, gaining momentum, the characters, on the other hand, and particularly Brown, tend to become more passive. The reversal of roles bestows volition on the train and deprives the characters of their agency, and this inversion of the natural order of things has not only a disempowering function as shown earlier but also a dehumanizing effect.

The prominence given to the train also works for the camera. The association between the two machines is foregrounded in the opening sequence, where a series of swift tracking shots of a train establish both the mobility of the locomotive and the conspicuous presence of the camera. The trajectories taken by the train and by the camera follow opposite directions. The absence of human beings either controlling the train or looking at it suggests that the locomotive and the camera are, in a sense, endowed with wills of their own. The opposing forces of the filmographic movements – the movements of the camera – and the profilmic movements – the movements of the train placed in front of the camera – create a tension that relegates the characters to a position of secondary importance and establishes the reign of the machines: that of the locomotive in the first place – as the train is set up as the ruling force of the film – but also that of the camera, as its mobility cannot be accounted for merely by human presence or activity.

These multiple parallels established between the train and the camera not only blur the boundaries between organic and mechanical elements, instituting the reign of the machines, but also hint at a metafictional interpretation. They draw attention to the artificiality of the diegetic world, when, for example, the length of the story coincides with the time it takes for the train to reach its destination. They also point to the fact that characters are not made of flesh and blood, but are the products of multiple mechanical artifices inherent in filmmaking. The shooting and editing phases as well as the process of adding the soundtrack are rendered visible to draw attention to film noir codes and conventions, and more specifically to the conventional representation of gender roles.

Metafictional Intent

The film teems with metafictional devices that remind the spectators that they are watching a film. One of the main devices is the visual establishment of parallels between the camera and the train. Indeed, the “mechanization of film noir” made possible by the introduction of a train as the driving force of the plot is suggested through the conspicuous presence of the camera.

To begin with, the train itself works as a direct reference to the camera, since the cinema and the locomotive are, after all, two inventions dating from the industrial revolution. The similarities are striking: first in the soundtrack, with the incessant background noise of the train, akin to the rattling sound made by the first projectors and cameras, and secondly in the visual style, with the dark corridors and compartments lit by flickering lights, similar to the lights in a projection booth. As Wim Wenders has noted,¹⁹ trains, cameras and projectors use the same material and technology: they are all made of wheels, axles, connecting rods and reels. They are still objects that create movement; they

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Wim Wenders, “Preface,” in *Travellings du rail*, Daniel Corinaut and Roger Viry-Babel (Paris: Editions Denoël, 1989), 11.

have the effect of increasing and amplifying human beings' physical, perceptual and conceptual capacities. Moreover, a camera and a train both take spectators and travellers from one point to another. The spectator of a film in a movie theatre is placed in the same position as a traveller on a train, who would be watching the passing landscape, enjoying a long magnificent tracking shot.²⁰

Then, the "plastic signs"²¹ of the image – that is to say all the signifiers including colors, light, texture and form – evoke the equipment needed for the shooting of a film. The squares and rectangles formed by the windows look like a celluloid film passing through the projector (see fig. 4) and the white posts placed along the railway tracks look like the perforations on the edges of a film strip. As the train is slowing down, the filmstrip even becomes perceptible, highlighting the similarities between the train and a projector (see fig. 5). The rivets driven into the train's body recall the small perforations on both sides of the filmstrip. This type of shot taken from the inside of the train recurs so as to create a motif.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5 Densel (Peter Virgo) seen from the back by Brown (Charles McGraw)

Finally, the scene in which Brown uses a highly sophisticated scheme to save Sinclair's life has an interesting composition that draws attention to the *mise en abyme* of framing. Beyond the diegetic motives, this arrangement highlights the techniques necessary for the creation of such cinematographic effects, while distancing the main point made in the sequence, namely, the fact that Brown has recovered his agency and his manliness. In his study of the scene, Alain Masson notes that the cinematographic effect is plainly visible, and intentionally so:

²⁰ Ibid. "le paysage passe comme sur un grand écran et on y est le seul témoin d'un travelling magnifique."

²¹ Martine Joly, *L'image et les signes : approche sémiotique de l'image fixe* (Paris : Nathan, 1994), 96-102.

The sequence is highly improbable, not only because of the miraculous presence of the other train, but also because of the camera setup: McGraw turns left to see the reflection of the people who are to his right! The coincidence is thus a mere cinematographic effect that no one attempts to conceal.²²

Besides the visual hints of metafiction, the film also contains self-reflexive dialogues. For example, Brown mentions the iconography of classical 1930s gangster movies to prove that the gangster's widow is going to have all the attributes of a "gangster moll" as his conversation with Forbes on their way to pick her up shows:

Forbes: Bet you wonder that same thing I am: what she looks like.

Brown: I don't have to wonder. I know.

Forbes: Why that's wonderful Walter. Nobody's seen her, but you know what she looks like. What a gift.

Forbes ironically points out that Brown is prejudiced. The latter's conviction that she will be "cheap, flashy, strictly poison" as he later adds, almost sounds like a catchphrase from a classical 1930s gangster movie. His opinion ultimately reduces her to the status of object. Likewise, his interactions with Neal, who behaves like a gangster moll, are mostly based on perfunctory stimuli and blunt responses. He reacts exactly in the same way every time she does or says something predictable: he yells at her commonplace, prejudiced statements, implying that she is an unscrupulous woman of easy virtue. Neal's retort ironically alludes to the chivalric attitude of the private detective described by Raymond Chandler in his 1944 definition of the "ideal hero,"²³ which obviously no longer applies to Brown.

Neal: How long will my luck last?

Brown: As long as there are cops like Forbes around to get killed for you.

Neal: Like you, I suppose.

Brown: Yeah, like me.

Neal: Well, my taste doesn't usually run to cops, but you might not be such dull company at that.

Brown: Mrs. Neal, we better get one thing straight. You're just a job to me. A COD²⁴ package to be delivered to the LA grand jury... and there's no joy in it. I don't like you any more than Forbes did, but he got himself murdered for you... and maybe I will, too. That's what they pay me for. Do we understand each other?

Neal: Relax, Percy, your shield's untarnished. I've changed my mind.

This self-conscious dialogue about the codes of classical gangster movies and hard-boiled fiction turns them into stock characters. For Hirsch, "her dialogue sounds like a parody of the hard-boiled school and the exaggeration is a tip off that *noir* conventions are being burlesqued."²⁵ Kinesics reinforces the self-consciousness of the dialogue. As they confront their arguments, the two characters alternately move their heads forward and backward (figure 6). They look like two puppets in a Punch-and-Judy show. It is as if the rhythmic movements of the train had contaminated them. Such sparring matches evoke "something mechanical encrusted upon the living"²⁶ and hint at the extrafilmic reality of two actors performing roles, distancing and almost parodying the traditional gender roles that are staged in their interactions.

²² Alain Masson, "Richard Fleischer—le vertige et l'élan," *Positif, Revue mensuelle de cinéma*, no. 544 (2006), 97 (my translation).

²³ Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder," 991.

²⁴ COD: "Cash On Delivery."

²⁵ Hirsch, *Dark Side*, 202.

²⁶ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, (Mineola: Dover, 2005 [1911]), 24.



Fig. 6 Brown (Charles McGraw) gets angry because Neal (Mary Windsor) suggests that the gangsters should choose Mrs. Sinclair as a target instead of her.

All in all, the metafictional devices used in the dialogues, in the acting, and in the visual channel of expression have the effect of turning the characters into objects of study. They allow for metafictional comments on the film as a film, but also on film noir as a genre and on the performative aspects of gender roles. As Thomas Schatz points out, generic evolution entails “patterns of increasing self-consciousness”:

As a genre’s classic conventions are refined and eventually parodied and subverted, its transparency gradually gives way to *opacity*: we no longer look *through* the form (or perhaps “into the mirror”) to glimpse an idealized self-image, rather we look *at* the *form itself* to examine and appreciate its structure and its cultural appeal.²⁷

Even though film noir was not established as a genre until the 1960s, it clearly contains most of the ingredients of the films later included in this film cycle. *The Narrow Margin* was released during what Paul Schrader retrospectively named “the third and final phase of *film noir* 1949-53.”²⁸ It contains metafictional comments expressed through the parallels between the train and the camera, and through characters shown as performing roles. Mary Windsor plays the role of an undercover police officer playing the role of a gangster moll, a character that had long vanished from the screens in 1952. Charles McGraw’s attempt at playing the part of an incorruptible cop, with Chandleresque, chivalric overtones appears somehow outmoded. These anachronistic characters who overplay gender differences and who perform their roles in a very mechanical style, reveal that gender is a role that one plays.

The introduction of metafictional distancing of gender roles, as well as the parallels established between the male protagonist, and the train are interesting for a film that was released at a time when the lack of virility was seen as the root cause of many social and political issues. Film noir has often been analysed as reflecting the anxieties about changing masculinity in the postwar and cold war eras. We have seen that in this film, the train endows the hero with extraordinary powers as much as it disempowers him. In doing so, the train helps to modify the representation of masculinity.

The Train as a Political Metaphor

²⁷ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York: Random House, 1981), 38.

²⁸ Schrader, “Notes”, 59.

Although the cold war era was in many regards a period of a “return to normalcy” as far as traditional gender roles are concerned, it was considered in the contemporary media as a period of reversal of gender roles, precisely because men were afraid of losing their prerogatives as breadwinners and heads of family. These anxieties were fuelled by the media of the 1950s who were passing on the message that there was a crisis in masculinity, and by a number of conservative “socially-oriented psychologists”²⁹ who blamed social changes for disrupting traditional family values – for example, the rise in divorce rate, the public debate over male sexuality, the sexual and financial autonomy gained by women, and “momism.”³⁰

These anxieties form the ideological background of the period. They tie up with what K. A. Cuordileone calls “a political culture that [...] put a new premium on hard masculine toughness and rendered anything less than that soft, timid, feminine and as such, a real or potential threat to the security of the nation.”³¹ Her argument about the “softening” of men is linked to fears of communism:

The accusation of softness was the primary weapon with which Joe McCarthy and his allies clubbed their political enemies, who were not so much Communist, but eastern establishment liberals and internationalists.³²

In this way, cultural fears of decline of masculinity, and surrender of the male self were translated into a politics of anticommunism. The ideological background of *The Narrow Margin* refers explicitly to two interrelated and concomitant political major events: the Kefauver Commission, and the HUAC (U. S. House of Representatives Un-American Activities Committee) hearings which investigated alleged disloyalty and subversive activities on the part of private citizens and organizations suspected of Communist affiliations. These events are both products of Cold War tensions and both reveal the so-called “climate of paranoia.” Munby notes that “images and stories about a syndicate-controlled society overlapped with Cold War concerns about Communist conspiracy.”³³

It seems that the film uses the trope of the locomotive to express these anxieties about the HUAC hearings and the generalized atmosphere of suspicion triggered by the Kefauver commission. This appears explicitly when Sinclair refers to the HUAC hearings when she tries to clarify the situation:

I think they call it Internal Affairs Division [...] They’ve been testing you. There’s a grand jury investigation of graft and payoffs, remember? [...] Maybe with the way things are, they can never be sure. When I married Frankie Neal, I was pretty sure of him, too. Then I found out how he made his money and I left him. I only saw him once again before he was killed.

²⁹ Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995), 8.

³⁰ Wendy Chapman Peek, “Cherchez la Femme: *The Searchers*, *Vertigo*, and Masculinity in Post-Kinsey America,” *Journal of American Culture*, 21, no. 2 (1998): 74.

³¹ K.A. Cuordileone, “Prologue”, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, (New York and London, Routledge, 2005), Kindle edition, Loc. 96-97.

³² Cuordileone, “Prologue”, Loc. 80.

³³ Jonathan Munby, *Public Enemies, Public heroes: Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 133.

This passage illustrates the preoccupation of the times with “the fact that nothing (including the judicial system, politics, real estate, the union, and trade) is immune to graft and mob control”.³⁴

Along the same line of thought, Brown’s puzzlement and lack of grasp expressed in his question “I’ve been played for a sucker. Why?” echoes the words of an entire lineage of film noir antiheroes in “a spate of 1950s syndicate ‘exposé’ features made following Senator Estes Kefauver’s televised investigation of organized crime in 1950-1951.”³⁵ This expresses as much the general paranoia about institutional power as the fear of infiltration and corruption of the institutions. This tense and ambivalent climate is rendered through Brown’s eventful journey. The train is the “hellish mechanism”³⁶ that has replaced the femme fatale of early films noirs. While the early films noirs were about doomed characters obsessed with and influenced by bewitching women, *The Narrow Margin* displaces the origin of manipulation from the femme fatale to the train. Instead of being controlled for the purposes of a femme fatale, the male protagonist of *The Narrow Margin* is controlled by the institution that hires him and suspects him of taking bribes.

The train thus gives metaphorical expression to the rampant idea that an overpowering force that went beyond individual will and understanding controlled people’s destinies. Simultaneously, Brown’s bouts of hyper masculinity are revealing of his struggle to exculpate himself as a possible traitor. By showing how tough he is, he might be trying to avoid accusations of softness, and thereby of communism.

Conclusion

As she delivers the line “To better tracks and steadier nerves,” Sinclair voices the conventional idea of the lack of self-control of the male protagonist since she suggests that the train makes him nervous. But these words also introduce a new dimension by implying that the train undermines the representation of the male protagonist as a tough cop. The conjunction “and” that linguistically joins two elements of the same type puts on an equal footing “better tracks” and “steadier nerves”, bringing together a mechanical manifestation and an emotion, hence, human beings and machines. This anthropomorphic implication introduces the idea that the train affects the behavior of the male protagonist. This line is also a manifestation of the metafictional intent that informs the film and prompts a self-conscious look at film noir conventions and codes, one of the main ones being problematic male identity.

The triple implication of the line “To better tracks and steadier nerves” synthesizes the complex connections between the train, the camera, the protagonists and the plot. The parallel between humans and machines points to reification and anthropomorphism. It also suggests the influence of machines on humans in a process of enhancement and constriction. Finally, it also contains a metafictional comment on the process of storytelling and filmmaking, all of which I have tried to show in this analysis of *The Narrow Margin*.

³⁴ Munby, *Public Enemies*, 133.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ “une mécanique infernale,” Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, *Le Film noir: Histoire et significations d’un genre populaire subversif* (Paris: CNRS editions, 2012), 310.

The introduction of the train helps to renew the traditional ingredients of film noir, in keeping with the studio system which works on the principle of variation and repetition, recycling the most successful elements of films and introducing new elements to old plots. Following this principle, *The Narrow Margin* brings into play a machine rather than a femme fatale, and thus gives new impetus to the character of the ambivalent noir hero torn between righteousness and corruption, self-confident manliness and lack of virility.

The train proves to be a perfect locale to convey the instability of the *noir* hero who has lost his grounding, both in the literal and figurative senses. The dialectics of enhancement and constriction as shown to be produced by this machine questions an alleged ultra-powerful manliness of the hero and brings us back to the fragility of the human condition. The train works as an objective correlative for the uncertainties about normative masculinity. At the same time, the fear of internal subversion of the institutions and the fear of manipulation of individuals by the institutions, two somehow contradictory but concurrent fears, have been pinned down as the historical background, and the film like most films released during the Cold War period can be said to translate the anti-Communist hysteria of the times.