Theory and Interpretation of Narrative

James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, Series Editors

Publicity still for *Five Star Final,* 1931. Frances Starr and H. B. Warner playing Nancy Vorhees Townsend and Michael Townsend. (*Five Star Final* © Turner Entertainment Co. A Warner Bros. Entertainment Company. All Rights Reserved.)

TABLOID, INC.

CRIMES, NEWSPAPERS, NARRATIVES

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To Penelope's In-laws and Out-laws:

Anne and Brady Deaton, Brady James Deaton,
Justine Richardson, Brad and Christina DeMarea, and
David and Becca Deaton

And

To all of Nancy's students, past and present.

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DOPE ON STARR'S LOVE TRIP

2¢ IN CITY LIMITS 3¢ ELSEWHERE

NEW YORK EVENING GRAPHIC

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BOAT BLAST BURNS BEAUTIES

TABLOID, INC.

SCARED BUT NOT SCARRED—Virginia Biddle's heart is still thumping and jumping after her thrilling escape from death when Harry Richman's yacht Chevalier, on which she was a passenger, was wrecked by mystery gasoline explosion at Greenport, L. I., pier. The gorgeous "Golden Girl" was painfully burned about the ankles. Helen Walsh, another show sister, was more seriously singed

"WHAT - A - MAN" Hudson, otherwise the Rev. Guy Edward Hudson, who married Mrs. Minnie (Ma) Kennedy, mother of Angel Aimee McPherson, as he signed the prisoners' register in Los Angeles, where he is held as a fugitive on a bigamy charge from the state of Washington

BINGO! BINGO!—Bingo — Bingo —Bingo that's the lingo! Yah, ah-cha-cha, or something like that resounded from the mixed party with mixed drinks that was going into a battle royal when Hollywood coppers dragged Count (A. C.) Tamburini out of the melee and into the wagon

Joyriders Plunge to Death in Wild Jaun

Top and left: Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Bottom right: From the authors' collection

INTRODUCTION

WE HAVE a confession: this book has sometimes felt like our dirty secret. Utter the word "tabloid" and what comes to mind is a string of unappealing associations: false reportage, gory headlines, libel lawsuits, and very bad prose. To those who know us—a poet and a Victorian scholar whose ignorance about today's popular culture is downright laughable—this project has seemed an especially dubious choice. "*Why* are you writing this book?" our friends and colleagues have asked. It's a question we often posed to ourselves, particularly in the early stages. In fact, we never set out to write a book about tabloids. Originally, we planned a study of film noir's aesthetic debt to photography, drawn by our love of photographs and all those stylish movies of the 1940s and 1950s. This interest led us to Weegee, New York's legendary crime photographer, whose images then drew us back to the tabloid issues where they originally appeared. Before we knew it, we were immersed in the smudgy, badly microfilmed pages of the *New York Daily News* and its tabloid rivals, the *New York Daily Mirror* and the *New York Evening Graphic.* Fascinated by their pulsating content and style, we found ourselves irresistibly pulled back to the 1920s and early 1930s, when these papers enjoyed their highest popularity.[1]

There, we were surprised and delighted by what we found. Yes, the papers were chock-full of purple prose and emotional excess. But their literary quality was often astonishing, especially given the low level of discourse in the American press today. Reading these papers, we were charmed by their literary allusion, metaphorical wordplay, rich vocabulary, and deft wit. Producing this medley of narrative pleasures, we soon discovered, were wordsmiths like Ernest Lehman, Ben Hecht, Ring Lardner, and Damon Runyon, all of whom wrote for the tabloids

at various points in their careers. Even names we may not recognize now—Florabel Muir, Jack Lait, Emile Gauvreau, Louis Weitzenkorn—were literary celebrities during the period, their tabloid fare constituting only part of their vast production. More surprising still are the guest columnists who often graced the tabloids' pages, including such Hollywood luminaries as D. W. Griffith, Anita Loos, Norma Talmadge, and Cecil B. DeMille.

Considering the tabloids' linguistic snap, it's not surprising that the terms used to describe them were often colorful. "Jazz journalism," "hot headlines," "hot news": these monikers all indicate delight in the vigor the tabloids injected into journalism. At the same time, the names make clear that these papers' freehanded storytelling favored the incendiary over the factual. And more denigrating labels, such as "scandal sheet" or "scandal rag," illustrate the anxiety many felt about the tabloids' potential for reckless misrepresentation. Yet the verve of these negative descriptors suggests that the tabloids had created such a linguistically rich discourse that even their detractors could not resist using it.

Of course, the tabloids were not just verbally inventive; they were also rude, lewd, and sensational. But they paraded these qualities as virtues. And though the *Saturday Evening Post, Commonweal,* and the *New Republic* bemoaned their fabrications and exaggerations, the tabloids flaunted their excesses. They pushed readers to navigate a range of literary genres and modes as well as a blend of fiction and fact. To enjoy these tabloids, then, was not necessarily a sign of illiteracy, as many historians have assumed. While it is true that the tabloids' richly illustrated pages made them accessible to less literate or non–English speaking audiences, contemporaneous surveys—as well as the papers' enormous circulation—suggest that their readership was much broader than critics have been willing to acknowledge.[2] George Douglas seconds this notion, remarking that while it was easy for intellectuals to imagine that the *Daily News* was purchased "only by subliterates or morons," in fact "the writing was good, and would get better, and the mix of materials was very well crafted to meet a perceived public demand" (228). In short, the tabloids offered many narrative pleasures, enticing agile readers as well as the "gum chewers" scorned by detractors.

We are not alone in trying to reclaim tabloid media for serious study. Critics such as John Fiske, Kevin Glynn, S. Elizabeth Bird, Robert W. Dardenne, and Martin Conboy have all found points of praise in examinations that are culturally driven and theoretically sophisticated: Fiske investigates the role of tabloids in 1980s popular culture; Glynn urges us to consider their subversive capability for challenging the "truths" circu-

lated by mainstream news; Bird and Dardenne locate tabloids within a tradition of oral folk narrative; and Conboy writes of the ways tabloids have created an "imagined community" of readers in Britain.[3] Yet these critics focus on the newer breed of supermarket tabloid that arose in the 1960s and proliferated in the 1980s, exemplified in America by the *National Enquirer,* the *Star,* and the *Globe.* These differ from the earlier tabloids not only in their subject matter but, more importantly, also in their storytelling practices. Influenced by television, they pair extreme subject matter with monochromatic language, flattening out the competing linguistic registers we see in the earlier publications. Their stories tend to be recounted in bland prose devoid of the wit that typified jazz-age tabloids.[4] While these supermarket tabloids are sociologically fascinating and even fun (what's not to love about a new Elvis sighting?), they are quite different from the papers we study here.[5]

Slowly, the New York tabloids migrated to a central position in our study. We realized that in their heyday these publications were so important to American culture that we could have focused on just the years 1927–33, when they reached their collective zenith. Yet because a comprehensive analysis of them remains to be written, we decided our book would be most valuable if we balanced a synchronic with a diachronic investigation. Hence, part I examines several overlapping interactions between the tabloids and Hollywood during the papers' most fertile period. Here we study the tabloids' influence on movie advertising, consider how Warner Bros. drew from both tabloid and straight reportage for its "headline news" films, and trace cinematic depictions of tabloid news workers. Part II then moves into the 1940s and 1950s, mapping a two-decade trajectory of the papers' influence on hard-boiled fiction, autobiography, museum culture, and film noir.

Kevin Glynn declares that the tabloids have long functioned as "the low Other against which the respectable attempts to distinguish itself" (4). Echoing Glynn's observation, one of our central arguments in part I is that the tabloids have always been crime film's disreputable doppelganger, shaping the genre's narratives in a variety of direct and diffuse ways. Other scholars have noted this relationship but have been vague in analyzing it. Movie critics of the earlier twentieth century (e.g., George Jean Nathan) remarked that gangster movies owed not simply their content but also their storytelling strategies to tabloid newspapers. Critics writing on Fritz Lang note his interest in mass media.[6] Meanwhile, scholars have written about the aesthetic similarities between photographs from papers like the *Daily News* and film noir classics like *Double Indemnity.*[7] Nonetheless, these critical discussions tend to be marginal or ahistorical.[8] Everyone,

it seems, agrees that Hollywood and the tabloids have long been partners in crime, but few have actually examined this relationship in depth.

Such neglect is especially surprising when we consider that the connection between sensational journalism and cinema dates back to the earliest days of moviemaking. Pointing to early filmmakers' interest in spectacle, Tom Gunning has famously designated the nascent movie industry a "cinema of attractions."[9] Other critics such as Lynne Kirby and Ben Singer have joined Gunning in comparing early cinema with other contemporaneous diversions, including circuses, vaudeville, the railway, and live reenactments of catastrophes.[10] But we would add that sensational journalism was itself a major entertainment venue. As Simon Bessie puts it, "the melodramatic generation which tearfully warbled such paste-pearls of sentimentality as 'She May Have Seen Better Days'" turned toward these papers as "a primary source of entertainment, guided by the simple principles of human amusement" (44).

The first examples of such journalism in America are generally considered to be the penny papers that flourished in New York and other urban areas during the 1830s and 1840s. These papers carried on the tradition of the "true crime" narrative that, as Karen Halttunen describes, had evolved since colonial days through forms such as the execution sermon, the first-person criminal confession, and reports of murder trials. The expanding print culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries contributed a growing number of secular crime narratives, and after 1820 these took an increasing interest in the grisly interplay of sex and crime. Unlike Puritan sermons that focused on Christian redemption for the sinner rather than on details of his transgression, nineteenth-century crime narratives built on the tradition of Gothic horror, "treat[ing] passion and sometimes the sex act itself with novelistic details, and indulg[ing] a pervasive tone of prurience" (Halttunen 176).

With their interest in murder and mayhem, the penny papers stood in contrast to the practical newspapers of the day, which tended to be expensive, stodgy, and visually forbidding. Yet the wider appeal of the penny papers, as of the later tabloids, resided in their human interest. The inaugural 1833 issue of the *Sun,* for example, featured a dialogue about an Irish sea captain, a tale about a grain mill tiny enough to be carried in a sleeve, and an account of a "Melancholy Suicide" (Douglas, *Golden* 6). This broad content, along with simple language and a rhetorical stance as the voice of "ordinary people," established the penny papers as populist vehicles. In fact, one of these papers, the *New York Herald,* actually used the figure of "the gossip" as an image of its own role as a "vector for news within the community" (Conboy, *The Press* 48).

The penny papers did not have the visual appeal that would be central to the later tabloids, however. Because they were short—usually four pages—even the most spine-tingling entries had to be thinned to a few lines. The *Sun* was the only penny paper to provide lengthier treatment of key stories. Yet while it offered an extended parade of law breakers, it was dull-looking. Dominated by blocks of text set in small typeface, its pages must have induced as much frustrated squinting as fascinated scanning.

It would take two other tabloid precursors—the *Police Gazette* and the *Graphic*—to bring visual impact together with racy content. Both papers were founded in New York. The *Police Gazette,* begun in 1845, was originally a chronicle of criminal activity and a populist watchdog against government corruption. Yet it had transformed by the 1870s (ironically, when an actual police chief took over as editor) into a garish treatment of vice, relying heavily on the illustrations that were its distinguishing feature.[11] Meanwhile the *Graphic,* founded in 1872 as an "Illustrated Evening Newspaper," frequently deployed lurid illustrations and often narrated an entire story through images.[12] It was the first paper to use granulating photography, a primitive engraving method that enabled the newspaper to make cuts directly from photographs and to print actual photos of the culprits and victims of crimes such as murder.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the trends represented by the penny papers, the *Graphic,* and the *Police Gazette* reached new heights in Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal.* Distinguished by bold layouts, banner headlines, heavy reliance on unnamed sources, staged photos, reconstructions of events, and unabashed self-promotion, these rival publications were both so popular and so big that they won national attention.

Founded in 1883, Pulitzer's *World* was soon the most widely imitated newspaper in America. It was, according to George Douglas, "a blatantly popular paper," packed with eye-filling headlines, line drawings (and later, photographs), and cartoons (96). Its prose style was sentimental and hyperbolic, featuring stories with titles such as "A Bride but Not a Wife," "A Mother's Awful Crime," and "Love and Cold Poison." Furthermore, in a move that would also mark the later tabloids, the *World* made an unabashed appeal to a feminized commodity culture with "women's pages" of etiquette hints and columns on topics related to beauty and the home. Pulitzer was responding to current media thinking: W. Joseph Campbell's recent book on the turn-of-the-century sensational press cites a *Fourth Estate* article from 1895 advising the "wise publisher" to "appeal to the women['s] . . . prejudices and preferences" (68). The paper also debuted entertainment items that would become newspaper staples,

including puzzles, diversions for young readers, and a sports section. Tellingly, the *World*'s journalistic style was nicknamed the "Coney Island Method," alluding to its myriad entertaining stimuli.

William Randolph Hearst challenged Pulitzer on his own titillating turf in 1896 by purchasing the *New York Journal* and embarking on reportorial "excursions into the bizarre and the erotic" (Bessie 55). His paper brimmed with articles such as "Strange Things Women Do for Love" and Stephen Crane's notorious series on the red-light district. It sent out Valentine's Day cards to potential female readers, urging them to peruse its women's pages (Campbell 60). And the *Journal* was brasher than the *World.* It emphasized "lurid tales of demented criminal activity . . . combined with literally thousands upon thousands of illustrations that were beginning to turn journalism into a visual as opposed to a written expression" (Spencer 88).

All of these papers sparked antisensationalism crusades in the closing years of the nineteenth century. Yet it was not until Pulitzer's paper came into direct contest with Hearst's in the mid-1890s that these publications garnered the now-familiar and denigrating term "yellow journalism." The epithet soon evoked reckless reporting, partisan editorializing, and overblown emotion.

Even a cursory glance at cinema's subjects in its nascent years—burglaries, lewd scenes, prostitutes picking up country rubes—shows how much film's content had in common with all these sensational papers. Porter's *The Execution of Czolgosz, with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (1901), for example, presents a reenactment of the electrocution of President McKinley's assassin as covered in the press. Other short films of the period that were adapted from crime stories in the newspapers include the Edison series on the Biddle Brothers (1902), *Capture of the Yegg Bank Burglars* (1904), *The Life of Charles Peace* (1905), Biograph's *Great Jewel Mystery* (1905), *The Man in the Box* (1908), *The Bank Robbery* (1908), and the variety of films dealing with the Thaw-White murder case in 1906 and 1907.[13]

During cinema's transitional period into feature-length films, its debt to sensational newspapers became more pronounced. In addition to borrowing content, movies began to adopt the papers' story-telling strategies. *Traffic in Souls* (1913), for example, owes its coverage of white slavery mainly to Pulitzer's *World,* which took on the subject as a special—and especially stimulating—crusade. Like its journalistic counterpart, *Traffic in Souls* presents the world's oldest profession by walking the line between documentary and fiction. Containing scenes set in brothel interiors and location shots of street solicitation, the film clearly tries to authenticate

the actual social dilemma as the *World* had done. At the same time, it produces a thrilling narrative, full of the impious content and voyeurism that made the sensational papers so popular.[14]

Nonetheless, while this earlier journalism influenced film, New York's three jazz-age tabloids provided fresh narrative inspiration and sustained a distinctive relationship with Hollywood. Inspired by London's *Daily Mirror,* New York's *Daily News* appeared in 1919. Not to be outdone, Hearst introduced his own tabloid, the *Daily Mirror,* in 1922. They were joined in 1924 by the *Evening Graphic.* These three were the first of what would eventually be a tabloid wave; by the mid-1930s, there were forty-nine tabloids in circulation nationwide. Nonetheless, we focus on these three papers exclusively because, as progenitors to the rest, they provided Hollywood with the supreme and highest-circulating models of tabloidism. Their connection to New York was also crucial, for, as historians such as Ann Douglas and Steven Adler have documented, New York in the 1920s was the glittering capital of America's social landscape.[15] By the late 1920s, speakeasies, dance halls, and Harlem nightclubs abounded. As Damon Runyon once remarked, New York during this period conveyed a "sense of excitement, the heady possibility that just around the corner something extraordinary could happen" (qtd. in Schwarz 37). As a result, Hollywood displayed an almost obsessive interest in the Big Apple during the 1920s and 1930s. The film industry turned to these tabloids, in large part, because they captured the vibrant modernity of America's most exciting metropolis.

All three papers boasted a smaller, new-fangled format. Made from a regular newsprint page folded in half, they were easy for readers commuting on public transportation. But their form inflected content as well. We might usefully pause here on the meaning of the word "tabloid." John Osborn explains that it was "coined as a trademark for condensed medicines in 1884" and was then used to describe "smaller-than-average newspapers, compact airplanes and efficiency yachts, and the linguistic condensations of slang" (508). Readers soon expected the tabloids to compact narratives—via photos, zippy language, and blazing headlines—into immediate excitement. These headlines, Osborn remarks, "even if glimpsed for a split second on a street corner," convey the rush of a whole action "raised and resolved in a single instant" (507). Compared to earlier sensational papers, this condensation allowed the tabloids to deliver a visceral punch. Responding to this intensity, Neal Gabler remarks that the tabloid "really wasn't a newspaper at all, but rather an entertainment medium, and as such it had far more in common with the motion pictures than with journalism" (72). It is not surprising, then, that the tabloids

would exert such an influence on Hollywood, especially once the movie industry transitioned into sound and began searching for new tales, and a new language and style for telling them.

The tabloids' compressed vigor also made them eye-catching on the newsstand, where they competed for attention with the pulp magazines whose popularity also crested in the same decade.[16] Named for the rough paper on which they were printed, the pulps were cheaply produced biweekly or weekly periodicals, sporting bright, action-oriented cover art. By the early 1930s, there were well over two hundred pulps in circulation. Specializing in tough-guy fiction, these magazines likely attracted some of the same readers as the tabloids; city residents may well have picked up their copies of *Black Mask* or *Dime Detective* as they reached for the *Daily News.*

Indeed, the tabloids' language, right from the start, had an edgy, colloquial quality closer to the pulps' writing than to the stiff Victorian prose of earlier sensational papers. And the tabloids gleefully mixed fact and fiction, proclaiming that they intended to both fictionalize and personalize the news, choosing stories for their emotional value and presenting them via striking visual techniques. Consequently, readers of the *Daily News* in these decades would find anywhere between five to thirty-five stories a day involving sex, crime, or violence: four times as many as articles on politics or world affairs. Readers were also treated to a rich assortment of genres, including first-person confessions from murderers, serialized novellas based on actual crimes, and man-on-the-street interviews. Accompanied by diagrams and elaborate captions, even tabloid photographs were invested with narrative elements.

Altogether, such "interpretive reporting," as one writer called it, stands in contrast to both earlier sensational journalism and the mainstream papers. Unlike them, the New York tabloids paid scant attention to government policies or world events. Nor did they get involved in muckraking. As media historians have documented, muckraking had definite social aims and, at times, a progressive political agenda: both Hearst's and Pulitzer's papers reported on corruption among union leaders, for example. The tabloids, in contrast, were relatively insular, concentrating their attention on crime, sex, domestic relationships, problems of modern metropolitan life, and entertainment.[17] And while these topics echoed earlier sensational journalism, the New York tabloids were clearly more open—if still conflicted—in their stance toward such subjects. To a great degree, the reason is that the tabloids depended so heavily on guest authors and contributions from readers. The result was a polyvocal forum, evoking what James Carey calls a "model of conversation," rather than the

"model of information" provided by the mainstream press (qtd. in Spencer and Overholser 8).

This "conversation model" set the jazz-age tabloids apart from their mainstream rivals at a point when standards of journalistic professionalism were being codified. University journalism programs had been established in the first decade of the twentieth century, and by the 1920s specific credentials and regulations, including principles of objectivity, were expected in the straight press. In the decade after World War I, the mainstream press experienced a prosperity and popularity it would never again attain.[18] Papers like the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times* were powerful engines of social opinion, boasting attention to national and global events, uninflected prose, and factual accuracy. "All the news that's fit to print," the *Times* loftily announced on its masthead. The tabloids thumbed their noses at such high-toned ideas of "fitness," instead ramping up their ballyhoo to distinguish their pages from those of the "snooze news."

The desire of mainstream news to professionalize itself was a response, in part, to much larger questions of social hierarchy that had been shaping American society since the 1870s. Before this decade, Americans of different economic levels valued similar cultural artifacts and phenomena, from Shakespeare to burlesque opera. But as society became less homogenous, "crossing cultural boundaries became increasingly problematic" (Kammen 11). By the 1910s these boundaries had hardened, and American culture was stratified into distinct taste and social levels. The term "lowbrow," to describe a person or thing of limited intellectual or aesthetic refinement, was in popular circulation by the first decade of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, "highbrow," indicating elevated intellectual and aesthetic capabilities, was widely enough known by 1908 to appear in the *Saturday Evening Post.* In the late 1910s and the 1920s, these two binaries were often used to categorize culture at large. Yet in the wake of World War I and in the throes of the jazz age, Americans also saw the demarcation between "lowbrow" and "highbrow" becoming permeable. Attesting to a broadening cultural spectrum, the term "middlebrow" entered the parlance in 1925 via *Punch* magazine, which described a new class of citizens who are "hoping that someday, they will get used to the stuff they ought to like" (qtd. in *Oxford English Dictionary*).

Despite the humor with which *Punch* addressed it, the question of taste level preoccupied many Americans. It also challenged magazines and newspapers that were trying to claim their own audiences. In the fracas, the tabloids—with their rude energy and populist appeal—were the frequent targets of publications working to establish their own higher status. The *Saturday Review of Literature* chastised the tabloids as a "new

black plague," for example, while Samuel Taylor Moore of the *Independent* described them as "an unholy blot on the fourth estate—bawdy, inane, and contemptible" (qtd. in Bessie 184; 264). The tabloids were "the prankish and irresponsible illegitimate child of journalism," according to the *Nation* (qtd. in Bessie 342). And Aben Kandel fumed in the *Forum:*

> To every thinking man and woman in the United States the menace of the tabloids is apparent. They are converting readers into witless gossips, gutter vamps, and backyard sheiks. They mock at privacy and finger in glee all the soiled linen they can discover. They fill the mouths of readers with intimate details of all the illicit love affairs they can uncover. They fire their restless minds with lewd photographs. They lay stress only on those aspects of modern life that can be interpreted in terms of sensationalism. They implant in children, who are their most avid readers, a dangerous sophistication. They teach youngsters the vocabulary and lurid ritual of illicit love! The tabloids make eavesdroppers of reporters, sensual meddlers of journalists, and reduce the highest ideals of the newspaper to the process of fastening a camera lens to every boudoir keyhole. (384)

These invectives indicate how publications struggling to define themselves as middlebrow or highbrow elevated their own refinement by casting aspersions on the reading matter of the "backyard sheik." They bring to mind Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's observation that a cultural elite reifies its own status by denigrating forms associated with those lower in the social hierarchy.

To complicate this cultural picture even further, we must keep in mind that, as Kammen points out, the 1920s "witnessed more than its predictable share of audiences participating in multiple taste levels" (110). In part, this was due to the fact that a burgeoning popular culture made new experiences available across social strata. The growth of leisure time; the commercialization of organized entertainment sites; new transportation that made it easier for audiences to access amusement: all contributed to a popular culture that appealed widely. More importantly, perhaps, Kammen argues that this period was still typified by distinct regional lifestyles that gave popular forms a vital connection to their local audience. As a result, popular culture still remained largely participatory and interactive, inviting different taste publics to enjoy its pleasures.

Framed by this uneasy mobility between cultural levels, our book opens in the last years of the jazz age, a time boasting several milestones in cinema and tabloid history. Most obviously, in 1927, sound entered

film. Sound would be crucial to many of the elements that solidified the crime genre and became its evocative clichés: chattering machine guns, screeching getaway cars, slangy dialogue. Meanwhile, 1927 witnessed the initial narrative impulses that would culminate in a cycle of gangster-inflected newspaper movies. As Richard Ness observes, while the 1928 Broadway play *The Front Page* was the most recognized influence on the flurry of press-themed movies that followed, the 1927 picture *The Final Extra* demonstrates that many of the tropes of the newspaper film were firmly established by that year (8). Furthermore, as if signaling how closely crime movies and the newspaper business would mesh on both narrative and extra-cinematic levels, 1927 also saw the release of Joseph von Sternberg's *Underworld,* considered by many historians to be the first modern gangster movie. Written by Ben Hecht—who would win one of the first Academy Awards for his screenplay—the narrative was drawn from Hecht's years of writing for a handful of Chicago daily papers (Clarens 31). This was also the time when Queens housewife Ruth Snyder became a tabloid sensation by convincing her lover to help her murder her husband. The case ended with the killers' executions in 1928, but tabloid coverage rippled outward through time, inspiring James M. Cain's fiction. By the late 1920s, too, Hollywood was imitating the tabloids in its advertising, inviting moviegoers to equate film viewing with tabloid reading.

Most importantly, New York's three major tabloids had achieved a zenith by 1927. The *Daily News*'s circulation topped one million, the largest of any paper in the nation and two-and-a half times the circulation of the *New York Times.* The *Daily Mirror,* meanwhile, tagged along in second place with roughly half that figure. The *Evening Graphic,* though falling into third place with a circulation of 400,000, achieved the most notoriety due to its hodgepodge of faked photographs and zany narratives. Simon Bessie observes that though "None of the other New York papers had lost circulation. . . . in less than seven years three tabloids had acquired 1,500,000 readers, apparently conjuring them up out of the blue" (21). This enormous new population of writers, readers, and editors created a powerful culture, however disreputable the tabloids might have appeared to middlebrow and elite scoffers.

Each of these tabloids had staked out an individual style and content by 1927. Certainly, one flagrant error in media history is the tendency to lump these three papers together. While it is true that the *Daily Mirror* began as an unabashed imitation of the *Daily News,* anyone who studies the two papers carefully will observe that, within just a few years, the *Mirror* had departed from its rival. And by 1927, the *Evening Graphic* had come fully into its own as America's most audacious newspaper.

Given the tabloids' literary showmanship, narrative variety, and extraordinary cultural influence, it is no wonder that after 1927, Hollywood studios began hiring reporters by the droves in order to meet the script demands of the new talkies. Representing a whole new breed of screenwriter, they took the crime film by storm, reworking tabloid articles into screenplays celebrated for their vivid depiction of a criminal milieu.[19]

It was easy for these writers to make the transition from tabloid to celluloid in the late 1920s in part because both media were popularly conceived of as serving a similar audience. Though evidence shows that they drew patrons of both genders from all social strata, both the tabloids and Hollywood were persistently charged with pandering to "low" tastes and morals.[20] And this criticism was especially directed toward crime films, which were frequently attacked for their "vulgar" and "garish" elements. After seeing *The Public Enemy* in 1931, for example, one commentator quipped that "if Hollywood keeps up its love affair with gangsters, 'movie' will soon be as dirty a word as 'tabloid.'" He then proceeded to compile a laundry list of offenses shared by each medium, including "a nauseating reliance on melodrama" and "a revolting blend of humor, playfulness and violence" ("Tabloid Offenses" 486).

If the kinship between the tabloids and Hollywood film stemmed from a perceived mutual appeal to working-class Americans, then their oftentense distance over the next two decades speaks to the different degree of social prestige each medium commanded. By the mid-1930s, movies had clearly gained legitimacy as middlebrow entertainment. Meanwhile, the tabloids' popularity had waned. Crippled by the Depression, the *Evening Graphic* folded in 1932, while the *Daily Mirror* meandered along on a steadily declining circulation. The *News* thrived, but it did so at the expense of its sensationalism; by 1930, as we discuss in chapter 2, it had undergone a facelift, emerging as a much more sober newspaper.

Yet even as the tabloids dwindled in popularity, the *idea* of "the tabloid" gained new cachet for a growing middlebrow population. As C. W. E. Bigsby argues, "Popular culture . . . can be transformed into 'high' art by a simple critical act of appropriation. Indeed so insecure are these categories that the popular culture of one generation can become the high culture of the next and vice versa" (qtd. in Kammen 6). As our diachronous examination shows, Cain's writing earned "tabloidesque" stories an increasingly respected place within the growing canon of hard-boiled literature. And as America approached the Second World War, jazz journalism was nostalgized as a colorful part of a bygone era. Weegee capitalized on retrospective middlebrow interest in tabloid imagery, landing exhibitions at the Photo League and the Museum of Modern Art in the early 1940s. Mean-

while, Mark Hellinger, a celebrated Broadway columnist for the *Daily Mirror,* relocated to Hollywood to produce movies. Known as the creative vision behind cinematic touchstones such as *The Roaring Twenties* (1939) and *The Naked City* (1948), Hellinger specialized in adapting early tabloid material into sentimentalized portraits of New York.

Our examination of the tabloids' influence across two decades ends in the 1950s, the nadir for both the tabloid press and American crime film. By then, the sensationalism that had been just one element of the New York tabloids had birthed a brutal new type of journalism, the Hollywood scandal magazine. These publications married intrusive reportage to an exclusive focus on celebrity culture. *Confidential* and *Hush-Hush,* the most notorious, published gossip about stars' homosexuality, adultery, or drug addiction, promising information "Uncensored and off the record," as *Confidential*'s masthead put it. By 1957, however, lawsuits had been filed against the magazines, resulting in a backlash against their thuggish tactics. Likewise, the late 1950s witnessed the bleakest period in the history of the Hollywood crime movie. Critics generally mark this as the end of film noir's fertile period. Faced with increasing competition from television, which was producing a spate of crime series including *Dragnet,* even the more prestigious studios were resorting to tired, retrospective biopics of criminals such as Capone and Dillinger.[21] Tabloid journalism and the American crime film had both collapsed in narrative exhaustion.[22]

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AS WE STUDIED this history, we discovered a complex web of narrative reinscription. The tabloids were, from day one, expert at recycling the same story types across media, genres, and styles. They multiplied events by shaping them around literary archetypes or by publishing reports emphasizing different interpretations of the same action. They retold the same episode in photos and in text. They also gestured tirelessly toward Broadway, crime fiction, romance literature, and Hollywood, announcing that their own material stood ready for adaptation. In fact, we argue that the tabloids' most important characteristic is not the sensationalism with which they are always equated; rather, it is their status as the era's supreme site for mobilizing narratives.

In many ways, what we discovered resembled processes that other media scholars might study as *adaptation* or *remediation.* Yet neither of these two concepts quite fits the tabloids' relation to narrative. As critics such as Linda Hutcheon, Robert Stam, and Thomas Leitch have pointed out, adaptation studies is still dominated—despite recent broadening efforts—by a

formalist interest in how one medium, the novel, translates into cinema. As a result, most adaptation critics have not engaged seriously with narrative theory, an ironic omission given how central issues of narrative are when converting literature to film.[23] Moreover, the term "adaptation" is problematic, since it implies that the newer text is always a derivative response to an original. Until recently, then, adaptation studies have been concerned primarily with "fidelity," examining how "faithful" a movie adaptation is to its source. With the tabloids, though, we realized that finding the "original" version of any story would be impossible. "Fidelity" and "originality" make no sense in the cacophonous mélange that typified these papers.

Remediation, a term Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin coined in the late 1990s to describe the relationship between rapidly developing digital media and older forms such as painting and film, doesn't quite suit the tabloids, either. Bolter and Grusin are particularly concerned with remediation's "double logic"—that is, our culture's desire to multiply media while simultaneously erasing all traces of mediation (5). Given its emphasis on repurposing, erasure, and the conviction that no medium works in isolation, remediation is a valuable concept. More successfully than "adaptation," the term acknowledges the influence of older media without attributing primary importance to them. And yet, the tabloids do not face the bind of remediation's double-logic. Rather, they happily foreground the fact that their narratives are mediated and mediating. Moreover, because Bolter and Grusin conceptualize remediation as a way of approaching new media such as computer games and the Internet, it is arguably more suited for theorizing the interface between older and newer visual forms.

We, too, are deeply concerned with the visual. Yet ours is primarily a narrative and literary study. Even when we discuss movies and photography, we are engaged with how images are embedded in language. We pay more attention to screenplays, dialogue, and advertising press books than we do to the purely visual or technological aspects of film. In Weegee's case, we are as interested in the words he penned to surround his pictures as in his photos themselves.

Crucially, too, because we are studying a popular form of journalism, issues of class, taste, and cultural prestige are paramount. And so we developed the term "narrative mobility" to describe the way that narratives (or elements of narrative), in transiting from one medium, genre, or mode to another, reveal the underlying social class boundaries that circumscribe that movement. Sometimes narrative mobility traces a process akin to "upward mobility," as when narrative elements from a tabloid

are mobilized into middlebrow fiction. Elsewhere, it reveals how media, genres, or modes use narrative elements to define themselves as they struggle to stabilize their own cultural position at a particular historical moment. Attending to narrative mobility thus deepens our understanding of how different cultural forms rework narrative elements to define their own social status.

Our work departs from most narrative studies in that it tends toward historical specificity rather than transhistorical theory. As literary scholars fascinated by cultural studies, we couldn't resist reading the cookbooks by *Evening Graphic* founder Bernarr Macfadden, or the glut of hypermasculine autobiographies by news photographers in the 1930s, or the spicy reports of Walter Winchell's career. This marriage of narrative theory with American cultural history makes our book an unusual contribution, which our concept of narrative mobility deepens. Though theorists have examined how narratives are constructed, how they influence their audiences, how they influence one another, and how they are interpreted, relatively little attention has been paid to how narrative elements move across media, genres, or modes of differing cultural prestige. Yet the status levels across which narrative elements transit can alter both their meaning and their reception.

Our study also offers what we hope is an important contribution to crime film scholarship. Thomas Leitch has noted that "the subgenres of the crime film, like the gangster film of the 1930's and the film noir of the 1940's, have been more often, and more successfully, theorized than the forbiddingly broad genre of the crime film itself" (*Crime* 2). The tabloids' symbiosis with Hollywood is most visible against such a "broad" panorama, however, and we have tried to provide the range for which Leitch calls. Moreover, though Leitch is correct in observing that film noir and the gangster film have been extensively discussed, much of this scholarship is insufficiently historicist. Scholars writing on film noir, for example, have been invested for decades in advancing its "art" while carefully maintaining its perimeters. "As [film noir] has come down to us through the decades, it is an object of beauty" writes Marc Vernet as he argues for more historical study (1). Vernet alludes here to the critical and popular fascination with classical noir's neatly contained time frame (1940–58), its stylish black-and-white cinematography, and its presentation of Hollywood's "coolest" performers. Vernet also notes that the two influences critics identify most often when discussing film noir's contexts are German Expressionism and hard-boiled fiction (7). Yet hard-boiled fiction is as far as most noir criticism has gone in identifying these movies' popular contexts, leaving the narrative mobility between film noir and the tabloids invisible.[24]

Given the preciosity of most film noir scholarship, its neglect of the tabloids may not be surprising. What *is* startling, however, is the scant attention given to tabloid journalism within critical discussions of the gangster film. True, many scholars have commented that movies like *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface* owe their plots to tabloid coverage of mob doings. But content is only one point of connection. Gangster films frequently veer toward a sensational mode of storytelling.[25] This is presumably what Richard Corliss also had in mind when he noted of the original *Scarface* that "its all-but-suffocating vitality is a kind of cinematic version of tabloid prose at its best" (qtd. in Yaquinto 27). Until our study, however, such stylistic overlap had been critically neglected, mainly because, as Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield argue, the gangster movie has generated an "etiolated" body of scholarship (1). Rarely moving beyond discussions of *Little Caesar* (1931), *The Public Enemy* (1931), *Scarface: The Shame of a Nation* (1932), and the Godfather trilogy (1972, 1974, and 1990), criticism in this area has tended not only to ignore the incredible wealth of films engaged with gangster narratives, but also to efface the diverse history preceding the 1930s.[26]

If crime film's connection to the tabloids remains to be historicized, so too does the broader connection between journalism and Hollywood. Most studies examining this nexus have focused on representations of reporters and other media figures in the movies.[27] While this approach helps us recognize journalism's cultural standing at various historical moments, it ignores a number of relevant questions that our book addresses.[28] For example, what mediating roles has newspaper reading played in the reception of films? How did Hollywood studios negotiate negative portrayals of journalists without offending the press on which they depended for publicity? And how did Hollywood manage the imperatives for speed and timeliness when adapting well-known stories from the news?

Though our scope is broad, we consider the material complexity of the media we engage. First and foremost, we approach tabloids as more than merely what David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson term an "adjacent" industry to Hollywood. Instead, we draw on extensive archival materials including Hollywood production files, film reviews, and the pages of the tabloids themselves. We also examine what may be the most valuable resource in understanding how films from earlier decades were promoted and received: the advertising press book. Unlike the few critical treatments that exist, we approach the press book as a narrative forum, a space where Hollywood studios imitated the tabloids in order to generate more audience excitement.

Part I, providing a synchronous study from 1927 to 1933, opens with a chapter examining these press books, for they provide ample evidence that the studios saw crime movies as extensions of the tabloids. Chapter 1 offers a reading of these texts informed by narrative theory and reception studies, arguing that studio advertising departments developed tabloid strategies as a way of encouraging potential audiences to regard moviegoing as an activity full of the same racy pleasures delivered by the popular press. In this chapter, we give special attention to the *Evening Graphic.*

Chapter 2 shows that if the *Evening Graphic* provided the playful ballyhoo Hollywood copied in its advertising, then the *Daily News*—its increasingly sober sibling—offered a model of hard-hitting populism ideal for Warner Bros.' headline news films. As many critics have pointed out, Warner Bros. specialized in crime movies that balanced sensational action with a more serious concern for social problems. Through a case study of the studio's dramatization of the 1930 murder of Chicago reporter Jake Lingle, this chapter investigates how the studio drew from both the *Daily News* and the mainstream press to give its movie punch and social relevance. At the same time, the studio needed to compensate for the time lag between the headlines on which the script was based and the film's later release date. It did so by allegorizing the story, thereby ensuring that its treatment—the 1931 box-office hit, *The Finger Points*—would stand as a "timeless" version.

While the first two chapters demonstrate the open acknowledgment Hollywood paid to the tabloids, chapter 3 complicates this pattern. Here, we find that even while the industry was gesturing toward the tabloids in its advertising and in some of its films, it was simultaneously producing a cycle of movies remarkable for their depiction of tabloid work as a quasi-criminal occupation. We call this hitherto-neglected body of films from 1931 to 1933 the "tabloid racketeer" cycle. The cycle demonstrates how Hollywood mobilized criminal-type characters into newspaper settings in order to extend the gangster's dynamism at a time when civic and religious forces were demanding that he be censored off the screen.

Part II of the book considers the tabloids' wider temporal influences on a variety of media. Chapter 4 traces the Snyder-Gray murder trial through countless iterations in the tabloids and into Cain's hard-boiled fiction. As we see, Cain reworked much of the tabloid narrative's melodrama in order to locate his story within an increasingly esteemed hard-boiled discourse. Yet a good deal of the story's emotionalism remains even in Cain's treatments, a fact we highlight by looking at the story's evolution in the *Daily Mirror,* the most consistently melodramatic of the three papers.

Chapter 5 also traces narrative mobility over time, examining how the meaning of Weegee's photographs shifted as he maneuvered them from the pages of the tabloids into increasingly celebrated settings. This mobilization was part of an elaborate campaign of self-presentation that Weegee carried out not only in visual media but also in his authorship of eight books and dozens of articles. Countering the critical tendency to valorize Weegee as a "noir-like" visionary, we contextualize him within a larger trend of masculinizing the news photographer during the 1930s and 1940s. As part of our study, we argue that Weegee's *Naked City* (1945)—a seminal collection in the photojournalism canon—must be reconsidered as a hard-boiled autobiography.

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CERTAINLY, no form of popular culture seems more degraded than the tabloid. These papers remain especially marginal because the scholar studying them confronts real practical difficulties. First, few libraries in the United States even contain tabloid holdings. The *Evening Graphic* is particularly rare: it is archived in only four libraries, and none possess the paper's entire run.[29] Compounding this problem, what remains often exists only as dismally copied microfilm. Further complicating these problems is the sheer abundance of material the extant tabloids present; the famous Hall-Mills murder case of 1926, for example, generated 12 million words—enough, according to one critic, "to fill nine volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica" (Bent, "Hall-Mills" 580). This overproduction is symptomatic of the tabloids' tendency toward excess, a trait they share with popular culture in general. Repetition, hypervisualization, and abundance of detail abound, and once the tabloids got hold of a story, it would inevitably be overplayed. John Fiske observes that such excess is "meaning out of control," spinning and reinventing itself in defiance of dominant ideologies (*Understanding* 109).

Yet this tabloid material, both incomplete and forbiddingly voluminous, provides a trove of crime narratives and a stunning panorama of strategies for recounting them. To work with this material, we had to accept that it was permanently damaged: reproductions of original photos often appeared blurred; page numbers and dates were not always legible; articles were sometimes impossible to read in their entirety. We were crushed to learn that all issues of the *Evening Graphic* for January 1928—the month Snyder and Gray were executed—appear to be lost.

Meanwhile, many of the relevant early films were difficult to find or exist only as poor copies. Thankfully, the Internet led us to several collec-

tors who were able to provide viewable materials, and the move to DVD has made at least a few of these films easier to access. We hope that this trend continues and that these movies become more available, for this book was motivated as much by our commitment to recovering them as by our pleasure in the tabloids' happy excess. If the loss of the 1928 *Graphic* issues was the nadir of our research experience, then the many nights we spent watching thrill-bandit actors like Lee Tracy and Edward G. Robinson were our recompense. The verve of their performances kept the tabloid-celluloid mobility center stage, inspiring us to tell its story and reminding us how vital popular culture can be at its best.

RUM-CRAZY RIPPER CARVES DRUNKEN WOMAN TO DEATH

STORY ON PAGE 3

2¢ IN CITY LIMITS 3¢ ELSEWHERE

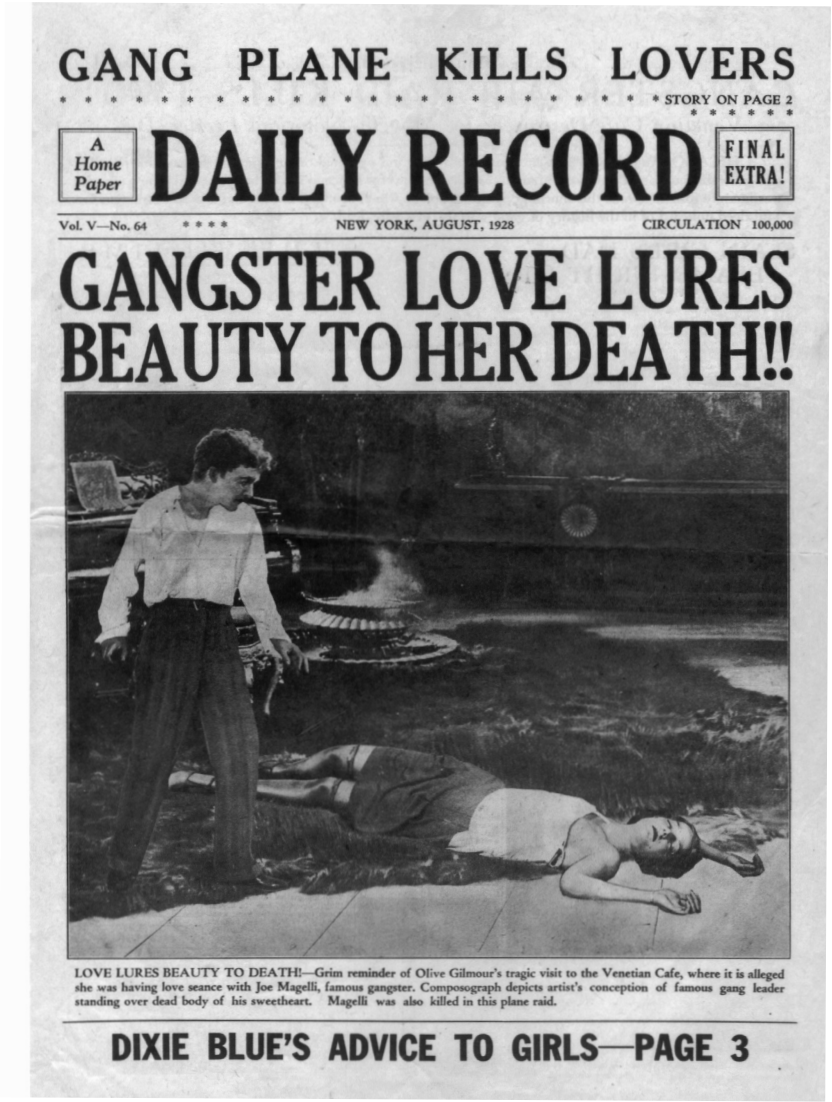
NEW YORK EVENING GRAPHIC

FOUR STA... CITY EDITIO...

Vol. 8. No. 2168. NEW YORK, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 2, 1931 Cloudy Today

PART I

MIGHTY MACKMEN VICTORS in first game of World's Series, as veteran Connie Mack (upper right inset with Pitcher George Earnshaw) directs destinies of Philadelphia Athletics in 6-to-2 victory over St. Louis Cardinals in opening championship match at Sportsman's Park, St. Louis. Top telephoto shows general view of packed stands and bleachers in third inning when Athletics scored four runs. Bottom panel shows Frisch, Card's third baseman, scoring second run for Red Birds dur... first inning. Inset (lower left) shows veteran Connie Mack study... score in dugout twenty years ago in opening game of series won by Gian... although pennant was captured by Athletics. Earnshaw, only Sou... Registerite ball player in big leagues, is expected to pitch for the Athlet... in second game of the series today


GANG PLANE KILLS LOVERS

STORY ON PAGE 2

A Home Paper

DAILY RECORD

FINAL EXTRA!

Vol. V—No. 64 NEW YORK, AUGUST, 1928 CIRCULATION 100,000

GANGSTER LOVE LURES BEAUTY TO HER DEATH!!

LOVE LURES BEAUTY TO DEATH!—Grim reminder of Olive Gilmour's tragic visit to the Venetian Cafe, where it is alleged she was having love seance with Joe Magelli, famous gangster. Composograph depicts artist's conception of famous gang leader standing over dead body of his sweetheart. Magelli was also killed in this plane raid.

DIXIE BLUE'S ADVICE TO GIRLS—PAGE 3

FIGURE 1.1 Mock-tabloid herald for *Gang War,* 1928. (Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.)

C H A P T E R O N E

For Shopgirls and Stenographers

Narrative Mobility, Hollywood Advertising, and the Tabloids

AUGUST, 1928. Jack Dempsey reigns as heavyweight champion of the world, Walter Winchell is on the cusp of international celebrity, and Amelia Earhart has just become the first woman to cross the Atlantic in a plane. Broadway glitters in the cultural imagination, and the tabloids have gained their highest circulation to date. A weary stenographer, finishing a long day at her Manhattan office, picks up a copy of the *Daily Record* hoping to escape the workaday grind. Immediately the headline grabs her attention: "Gangster Love Lures Beauty to Her Death!!" (see figure 1.1, opposite). Below, a composite photograph depicts a scantily clad girl collapsed before a gunman. The caption declares this image a "Grim reminder of Olive Gilmour's tragic visit to the Venetian Cafe, where it is alleged she was having a love seance with Joe Magelli, famous gangster." The stenographer flips through the rest of the pages, coming across "Dixie Blue's Advice to Girls," as well as other articles on racketeering and the Magelli-Gilmour slaying.

This issue of the *Daily Record* exemplifies the era's tabloids in several ways. It points to their simultaneous romanticizing and censuring of gangsters; it expresses a moralistic fascination with flapper culture; and, suggestively, it hints at interconnections between crime and fads of the decade, such as spiritualism. But most remarkable is the fact that the *Daily Record* is *not* an actual newspaper. It is a movie industry "herald"

or "throwaway," distributed en masse to cinemagoers as a promotion for *Gang War,* which hit theatres in September, 1928. *Gang War* was just one of many crime films produced in the 1920s and 1930s to include a mock-tabloid herald as part of its advertising.

The *Gang War* herald doesn't just gesture toward the tabloids; it *exactly* copies the look and tone of the *Graphic,* the paper that reporters, editors, and publishers alike repeatedly scorned as the "pornoGraphic" and the "fornoGraphic." To one editor, it was the country's "outstanding example of sleazy, vulgar journalism"; to another, it exhibited "sensational incoherence." For a film studio in 1928 to loosely model its advertising on tabloid journalism is one thing; for it to offer a studied imitation of the paper castigated as the "most contemptuous of all scandal sheets" is another—especially when Hollywood had spent the last decade building elegant theatres and producing quality films in order to position itself as "respectable entertainment for all classes" (Ross 30). For the most part, Hollywood had achieved this status by 1928. Yet it still lay open to censorship threats and charges—especially from the mainstream press—of indulging in the same lewdness and violence for which civic groups denigrated the tabloids. Given that context, the idea that a studio would invite comparison between its product and the *Graphic* demands explanation.

Since the turn of the century, the movie industry had sought to elevate its public image, in large part by courting a positive relationship with mainstream journalism. The wide circulation of newspapers in the early decades of the twentieth century, Richard Koszarski says, "suggests that their coverage of film was of real significance in shaping the way their readers approached the phenomenon of motion pictures" (191). Good press for a film not only drew audiences to that picture; it also reflected well on the movie industry at large. And this was especially true once film reviews became a news staple during the 1910s. Of course, the flip side was that negative publicity could portray the cinema as a dangerous scourge. Indeed, through the late 1910s and early 1920s, the movie industry faced public censure, often conveyed through the press. For example, when studios followed Cecil B. DeMille's naughty *Old Wives for New* (1918) with a slew of other suggestive titles—including *Can Wives Be Trusted?* (1919), *Blind Husbands* (1919), and *Blind Wives* (1920)—the result was uproar from some public quarters and a muckraking exposé in the *Brooklyn Eagle* on how the movie industry had paid off censors to get questionable material passed (205).

Criticism of the movie industry throughout these decades was not confined to the content of films. Movie stars' private lives stirred indignation as well as interest. Mary Pickford's 1920 Reno divorce and hasty remar-

riage, for instance, sparked print and public criticism. Then, in 1921, Fatty Arbuckle was charged with rape after a model attending one of his wild parties died. Shortly thereafter, director Desmond Taylor was murdered, and actors Wallace Reid and Olive Thomas died from drug overdoses. Altogether, these goings-on "drove Hollywood from the entertainment section of American papers to the front page" (Leff and Simmons 3).

Newspaper editorials calling for studio accountability only increased with the advent of sound. By 1929, over half of the theatres in the United States had been wired for the talkies and, as Richard Maltby puts it, "Hollywood brought Broadway to Main Street" ("Production" 45). And what was this chattering stimulus doing to Main Street's young audiences? Public watchdogs feared it was contributing to bad behavior. *Children and Movies,* compiled by sociologist Alice Miller Mitchell in 1929, was the first study to seek a statistical correlation between movie-going and criminal activity. Mitchell's news was not heartening: according to her survey, 27.7% of Chicago's juvenile delinquents responded that they went to the pictures five to seven times a week, while only 0.4% of Boy Scouts went that often (Koszarski 27). If that didn't raise parents' hackles, surely some of her informants' remarks did. One reformatory inmate, for example, reported that he committed hold-ups because he "had to have money for the movies" (qtd. in Koszarski 26).[1]

It is against this fraught backdrop that we find heralds such as the one for *Gang War,* as well as a wide variety of other advertising materials, all gesturing toward hot news. In fact, for at least a ten-year period between the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s, Hollywood alluded openly to the tabloids in its advertising. By the period of classical film noir in the early 1940s, these allusions had mostly disappeared. Yet for a decade, tabloid journalism appears to have been *the* dominant influence on print advertising for crime movies of all types. By associating its own products with the tabloids, wasn't the movie industry in effect "slumming" while still trying to extricate itself from the "ghetto" of its origins? And in patterning advertising on mainstream journalism's favorite scapegoat, weren't studios begging to be alienated from the respectable press whose attention they sought? This fraternizing with the tabloids seems a risky move, to say the least.

One way of contextualizing this situation is to note that, in imitating the tabloids, Hollywood was following widespread advertising trends. As Roland Marchand has shown, businesses in the 1920s understood the popularity of newspapers like the *Daily News* and identified what they called a "tabloid mind" that responded to personalized, confessional advertising. Moreover, businesses and public relations firms "began to

surmise [that perhaps] the 'tabloid mind' defined a much wider segment of the consumer audience than even the circulations of *True Story* and the tabloid newspapers revealed" (Marchand 56). Ad agencies began teaching their employees how to write in a sensational way, educating them, as one executive put it, on "The Mental and Emotional Life of a Tabloid Reader." As a result, advertisements for even innocuous products took on a confessional tone, with captions presumably emanating from a housewife asking "Should I Tell Him?" about her use of a new laundry powder or breakfast cereal. Like these other businesses, the movie industry dosed its products with sensationalism to appeal to the presumed tastes and desires of an "average" tabloid reader.

But Hollywood studios wanted to do more than attract the generalized "tabloid mind" that Marchand identifies. They also wanted to depict crime films as offering elevated versions of the narrative thrills that were boosting tabloids to unprecedented circulation heights. To explore this narrative mobility, we divide our chapter into two sections. The first looks at mock-tabloid heralds that, in overtly copying the look and language of hot news, mobilized moviegoers to imaginatively assume the role of tabloid readers. The second section examines advertising press books—the bound pamphlets containing advertising materials such as heralds, posters, and lobby cards—that were distributed to theatre managers for each film. Here we find that Hollywood employed smaller doses of tabloid language and rhetoric. When mobilized by theatre managers into different promotional contexts, the doses were designed to activate a tabloid-like reading experience.

Advertising offers the ideal site from which to begin this book, for it makes clear that in this period the movie industry worked hard to emphasize connections between its crime films and the issues churned out by the tabloids. As the movie industry's more "lowbrow" commercial wing, advertising directly acknowledges a kinship with hot headlines that the studios were often reluctant to express elsewhere. At the same time, however, heralds and press books reveal how studios tamed and conventionalized the radical elements of tabloidism, thereby presenting their films as more reputable variants of a truly sensational medium.

Mock-Tabloid Heralds

Returning to the *Gang War* herald, we are impressed by how cleverly it captures the look and tone of the *Graphic.* It reproduces, for example, the *Graphic*'s banner headline, front-page layout, and small-box insert identi-

DOPE ON STARR'S LOVE TRIP

2¢ IN CITY LIMITS & ELSEWHERE — NEW YORK EVENING GRAPHIC — FOUR STAR CITY EDITION

Vol. 7, No. 2131. NEW YORK, MONDAY, JULY 27, 1931 Fair Today

BOAT BLAST BURNS BEAUTIES

SCARED BUT NOT SCARRED—Virginia Biddle's heart is still thumping and jumping after her thrilling escape from death when Harry Richman's yacht Chevalier, on which she was a passenger, was wrecked by mystery gasoline explosion at Greenport, L. I., port. The gorgeous "Golden Girl" was painfully burned about the ankles. Helen Walsh, another show sister, was more seriously singed

"WHAT - A - MAN" Hudson, otherwise the Rev. Guy Edward Hudson, who married Mrs. Minnie "May Kennedy, mother of Angel Aimee McPherson, as he signed the prisoners' register in Los Angeles, where he is held as a fugitive on a bigamy charge from the state of Washington

BINGO! BINGO!—Bingo—Bingo—Bingo—that's the lingo! Yah, ah-da-cha, or something like that resounded from the mixed party with mixed drinks that was going into a battle royal when Hollywood yappers dragged Count (A. C.) Tamburini out of the melee and into the wagon

Joyriders Plunge to Death in Wild Jaunt

FIGURE 1.2
Front page of the *New York Evening Graphic,* July 27, 1931. (Courtesy Ellis Library, University of Missouri.)

RUM-CRAZY RIPPER CARVES DRUNKEN WOMAN TO DEATH

STORY ON PAGE 2

2¢ IN CITY LIMITS & ELSEWHERE — NEW YORK EVENING GRAPHIC — FOUR STAR CITY EDITION

Vol. 8, No. 2168. NEW YORK, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 2, 1931 Cloudy Today

MIGHTY MACKMEN VICTORS in first game of World's Series, as veteran Connie Mack (upper right inset with Pitcher George Earnshaw) directs destinies of Philadelphia Athletics in 6-to-2 victory over St. Louis Cardinals in opening championship match at Sportsman's Park, St. Louis. Top telephoto shows general view of packed stands and bleachers in third inning when Athletics scored four runs. Bottom panel shows Frisch, Card's third baseman, scoring second run for Red Birds during first inning. Inset (lower left) shows veteran Connie Mack studying score in dugout twenty years ago in opening game of series won by Giants, although pennant was captured by Athletics. Earnshaw, only Negro-ette ball player in big leagues, is expected to pitch for the Athletics in second game of the series today

Health World's Biggest Need, Macfadden Says

STORY ON PAGE 5

FIGURE 1.3
Front page of the *New York Evening Graphic,* October 2, 1931. (Courtesy Ellis Library, University of Missouri.)

fying the edition (see figures 1.2 and 1.3). It also spotlights the "composograph" technique that the *Graphic* notoriously pioneered, in which the faces of actual news figures were pasted onto the posed and photographed bodies of models. But beyond simply creating a visual parallel, each page of the throwaway captures the zany tone quite specific to the *Graphic.* Audiences used to the real paper's "Affairs of the Heart" column, for example, would have noted how the throwaway's "letters" to Dixie Blue satirize the amorous dilemmas of actual readers. "Dear Miss Blue," one letter begins, "I am a young girl, 19, and keep company with a man two years my senior. . . . He is really a refined young gentleman, only he carries a sawed off shotgun which he jokingly likes to aim at me." Similarly, many would have recognized the mock tabloid's notice of an "Indignation Meeting," at which citizens were invited to gripe about crime, as a direct commentary on the *Graphic*'s theatrical crusades against racketeering.

To understand why a studio would so closely imitate a specific tabloid, we might consider heralds as a type of paratext. Gérard Genette coined this term to describe the varied materials around a text, emanating from the author or publisher, that serve as "thresholds" to it. Prefaces, titles, and introductions are all paratexts; other materials at some physical distance from the text, such as author interviews, may also be considered paratexts. Each of these elements is "dedicated to the service of something other than itself that constitutes its raison d'être. This something is the text" (12). If we take the (admitted) liberty of transposing Genette's literary concept onto film and the promotional materials around it, we may find his methodology helpful. Key to Genette's practice is asking what *function* each paratext serves in relation to the text. Posing this question of crime film heralds and press books, we see that they allowed the studios to project an alternative tabloid identity for each film. For *Gang War* in particular, the studio crafted a paratext offering its movie as another version of the newspaper that most exuberantly gabbed about crime.

Gang War's herald suggests that, despite the disdain it drew from highbrow commentators, the *Graphic* was not only wildly popular but also culturally potent. Writing about it in 1927, Silas Bent grudgingly admits that "the *Graphic*'s despised sensationalism forced competing papers to adopt a louder tone" (*Ballyhoo* 205). As Bent's remark makes clear, though critics have generally dismissed the *Graphic* as an outrageous blip in the history of journalism, it exerted a shaping stimulus on the rest of American media and culture at large. A movie studio likening its product to the *Graphic* was making a pronounced claim that the film, too, had a splashy, fast-paced, narrative style.

In large part, the *Graphic*'s influence can be attributed to its publisher, Bernarr Macfadden, one of the oddest characters in New York history. Variously termed a "buffoon," "an abomination," and a "disgrace to all publishers," Macfadden has been the target of scathing criticism by many historians. A zanier version of William Randolph Hearst, Macfadden was "a one-man media empire, fusing interests in magazines, movies, radio, and all manner of popular culture" (Wallace 23). In 1899, at a time when health information was not readily published, he inaugurated the successful magazine *Physical Culture.* Its popularity led within the next few years to a slew of companion publications, including *Beauty and Health* and *Physical Culture for Boys and Girls.* Urging readers—women as well as men—to exercise vigorously, abstain from tobacco, eat natural foods, and regard sex as a healthy part of life, Macfadden was far ahead of his time. Yet because his habits also included walking into the city barefoot and swimming at Coney Island in winter, his regimen retained a cultish aura.[2] And his strategy of spicing up his magazines with real photos of nearly nude men and women doubtless improved the circulation of many readers.

Macfadden expanded his media interests in 1919 by founding another monthly magazine, one that, as Robert Ernst notes, "would revolutionize popular periodicals" (75). Called *True Story* and pitched toward women, it published confessional nonfiction in which ordinary readers were invited to "tell their stories in their own clear and simple way, recounting events of young love, betrayal, good or bad fortune, marriage, motherhood and family, and countless challenges to innocence" (Ernst 78). By the end of World War I, *True Story* had nearly 300,000 readers. Its success led to imitations from competing publishers. Macfadden's response was to generate his own knock-offs for varied audiences, including *True Romance, True Experiences, True Detective Mysteries,* and *Master Detective.* Subsequently, he began two fan magazines, *Movie Weekly* and *Movie Mirror.* His biggest coup was acquiring *Liberty,* a weekly periodical that first published Cain's fiction. By 1935, Macfadden's magazine empire had a circulation surpassing the total of *all* other magazine publishing giants combined.

Macfadden brought all his interests to the *Graphic,* interweaving them with reportage of gangland crime and pictures of gruesome accidents, thereby making his newspaper as different from the mainstream dailies as possible. On the *Graphic*'s first day of publication, a reader turning to the second page would have seen an editorial from Macfadden admonishing her to take charge of her destiny: "Don't be a dead one! Gird up your loins . . . and go after what you seek in life!" To help her achieve that goal, the *Graphic*'s pages were flooded with articles on physical improvement.

To satisfy her love of the grotesque, photos of accidents and crime scenes were splashed across the front page. To keep her amused, the newspaper carried an abundance of cartoons and other humorous items. And to slake her desire for romance, two or three confessional stories appeared in every issue.

The *Graphic* embodied the smorgasbord of narrative entertainments typical of the tabloids in general, yet it mixed story types and tones to an even wilder degree. A case in point: one typical *Graphic* article from June 1929, "Criminals Are Made by the Food That They Eat as Children," combined Macfadden's fascination with gangsterism as a social problem with his crusade to introduce whole grains into the nation's diet. Meanwhile, the regular feature "Antics of Arabella" insouciantly blurred exercise with news. Depicted in photographic sequence, "Arabella"—a lithe young woman in a body stocking—did calisthenics while her "talk" about current events hung in dialogue balloons above her head. As these examples suggest, the *Graphic* represented in extreme form precisely the kind of multifarious, democratic entertainment Hollywood was claiming for its own products.

As part of this populist appeal, the *Graphic* solicited active participation from its readers. Macfadden announced frequently that he would pay a dollar for published contributions to the newspaper's personal columns, including "Why I Blushed," "How I Won My Husband," and "The Fat Women's Club." Friendless people were invited to describe their loves and hopes in the "Lonely Hearts" department. Readers were thereby "enlisted in the production of news," as Aurora Wallace describes, creating a sense that New Yorkers were not just the subjects of the newspaper but its authors.[3] These audience participation devices illustrate Kevin Glynn's important observation that the pleasure of reading a tabloid like the *Graphic* was not simply getting information. Rather, as with any popular text, readers gained satisfaction from knowing they were part of a communal in-group. By reading and then discussing its contents, the *Graphic*'s patrons enjoyed both self-expression and "the experience of solidarity with others," as John Fiske puts it (*Understanding* 134).

Riotous and titillating as it was, the *Graphic* also assumed a decidedly moralistic stance at times. Punctuating its pages with Bible quotations, it continually reminded readers that the newspaper's more salacious contents were to be enjoyed from a distance. According to Joseph Valente, all tabloids possess this "double directedness"—on the one hand channeling readers toward the lewd, violent, and vulgar, while on the other hand reinforcing that what readers are enjoying is taboo (14). Like the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, which through its wild performativity defines

the border of what is acceptably transgressive, the *Graphic* and its rivals allowed audiences to read about sensational events while maintaining that the "kiss-and-kill sheiks" and "two-gun sallys" of tabloidia were outside the range of acceptable behavior.

Given the tabloids' associations with social transgression and violence, it's not surprising that Hollywood would model crime film advertising on them. In fact, it's likely that studio executives believed potential moviegoers would be ready to regard crime films as extensions of the tabloids' narrative fare. These papers were famed for bringing crimes of passion and racketeering to the public as entertainment. A mock-tabloid herald therefore served to connect the real tabloids' speedy conversion of gats and gangsters to edge-of-the-seat cinematic thrills.

Given how little information exists regarding the creation of these heralds, we can only speculate that ad agents got the idea from their own proximity to hot-news production. The advertising departments of most studios were located in Manhattan, just a short cab hop from the nation's leading tabloids. On their way to work each day, ad agents would have passed newsstands hustling these papers. Riding on subways packed with commuters reading the *News* and the *Mirror,* overhearing people in elevators and at lunch counters discussing the *Graphic*'s latest publicity gimmick, perhaps picking up their own copies before sitting down to work, these agents could not have missed the fact that the tabloids were running a roaring business selling crime.

And this urban crowd was precisely the audience the movie industry wanted for pictures like *Gang War.* According to Richard Maltby, it was in the 1920s when, under the direction of their sales departments, the major studios began organizing their production around different taste publics, divided according to such binary distinctions as "class" or "mass" and "hicks" or "flappers." We speculate that crime film advertising began referencing the tabloids so heavily because studio executives believed the movies would attract their largest audiences in urban areas, the same locale where these papers held their greatest circulation (Maltby 30).

Numbering among those patrons was our stenographer, whose gender no doubt also affected the studios' decision to imitate the tabloids in advertising. Melvyn Stokes remarks that Hollywood in the 1920s and early 1930s pitched its ads toward "Woolworth sirens" and those employed in the "stenographer trade," since polls taken by various sources, including the *New York Times,* suggested that women constituted the majority of moviegoers (35). As Stokes puts it, "Whether women really formed a considerable majority of the cinema audience of the 20s and 30s . . . may actually be of less importance than the fact that Hollywood itself assumed

that, both through their own attendance and their ability to influence men . . . [women] were its primary market" (44). And this presumed female audience was also depicted as composed of tabloid readers eager for sensational stories. Lea Jacobs cites a *Variety* article from 1931 announcing that "Women love dirt. Nothing shocks 'em. They want to know about bad women. The badder the better." The article goes on to state that the "women who make up the bulk of the picture audiences are also the majority readers of the tabloids. . . . It is to cater to them that all the hot stuff of the present day is turned out" (23). Though scholars note that it is uncertain whether women really comprised a statistical majority for either media, and whether and to what degree this presumed tabloid-celluloid overlap truly existed, studios operated on these assumptions.[4]

We surmise, then, that the mock-tabloid herald was calculated to draw more women to crime movies, the one genre that surveys reported was preferred by men. The New York tabloids provided an invaluable model in this arena, since they were making crime stories of all kinds attractive to female readers. Indeed, this appeal to "everyday women" was part of their stated mission. Hearst claimed that he founded the *Daily Mirror* for the "average New York reader—you know, the secretary and stenographer" (qtd. in Stevens 111). Macfadden's *Graphic* addressed much of its material to women. And the *Daily News,* at least in its early years, pitched heavily to women readers.[5] In fact, the *News* in the early 1920s was nicknamed "The Stenographer's Gazette" due to the large number of help-wanted ads for women it carried alongside its tales of transgression (McGivena 43). If the tabloids could generate such interest in crime among "stenos," then surely movie advertising could learn from them.

Hollywood advertising no doubt also likened its product to the tabloids because of these papers' populist appeal. Invoking them allowed Hollywood to promote movie-going as a social, egalitarian experience. By the mid-1920s, even as its sales departments were busily identifying different taste publics, the movie industry had adopted rhetoric claiming to offer entertainment that cut across class, gender, and even regional lines. Movie theatres were billed as places where, as the owner of the Roxy Theatre said on its opening in 1926, a "truck driver and his wife" could "feel like a king" (Ashby 188). The creators of the *Gang War* herald may well have turned to the tabloids for inspiration because of how well these papers built imagined reader communities. While all newspapers seek to form such patron identification, the tabloids were distinguished by the animated, interactive ways they did so. A mock-tabloid herald suggested that movie audiences could join a similar type of exuberant in-group.

For the scholar interested in narrative mobility, however, the most compelling way to understand the mock-tabloid herald is to consider its function in engaging moviegoers across the taste spectrum. Though as we noted, statistics about actual movie audiences in these years are ambiguous, it appears that the studios assumed an "authorial audience" (the audience that an "author" imagines will view his product) composed of people familiar with the tabloid phenomenon. We believe that the mock-tabloid herald worked because it invited those who enjoyed the tabloids as well as those who didn't into the "narrative audience" role of hot-news readers. Peter Rabinowitz explains that the "narrative audience" is "a role the text forces the reader to take on" in relation to its fiction, an imaginative persona the reader is willing to assume for the pleasure of engaging in the fiction (*Before* 95). Although Rabinowitz conceptualizes this term in relation to fictional works, we argue that some advertisements can be described as inviting a narrative audience, especially if they overtly reference a popular fictional form. Ads in the first decades of the twentieth century were learning to exploit the power of fiction, as Marchand details. And advertisers were increasingly conscious of targeting a specific audience and pitching a "product narrative," if we may call it that, to that group. Part of this process was imagining what the consumer wanted before the consumer herself was aware of the desire, and inviting the potential buyer into an imaginary world (the happy home; the exotic locale) to occupy a persona (the savvy homemaker; the dashing traveler) implied by ownership of the product.[6] This process was no different when advertising a movie, even if it were an experience rather than material goods being marketed. And though the mock tabloid was intended to sell tickets, it functioned by addressing a fiction to an audience familiar with tabloid narrative tropes.

If the average member of the studios' authorial audience was a shopgirl or a stenographer, then the tabloid herald makes perfect sense for crime films. Playing along with the fiction that the herald was a "real" tabloid, this steno would take on the narrative audience role of hot-news reader. She would pick up the snappy-looking pages, glance at the headlines, skim the articles, study the photos and gossipy tidbits about stars revealed in the columns, and chat with those seated nearby about whether the advertised movie would be as "smashing," "shocking," or "stunning" as promised.

Given the tabloids' popularity, it is not surprising that the studios imagined an audience composed in part of people who read the papers as gospel. And no doubt some members of the actual audience met this

expectation. In rhetorical terms, these patrons would be parallel to what Rabinowitz calls the "ideal narrative reader." If, as he posits, every fictional text implies a narrator (in the case of *Gang War,* the imaginary publisher of a paper called the *Daily Record*), then the ideal narrative audience is the one "for which the narrator wishes he were writing . . . [one that] accepts his judgments, sympathizes with his plight, laughs at his jokes even when they are bad" ("Truth" 134). Moviegoers whose actual practices placed them close to such an ideal narrative audience might read the *Daily Record* herald and make the correlation: tabloids cover crime in a punchy way; *Gang War* is like a tabloid; therefore this movie will present an exciting crime story.

But did the studios really assume an authorial audience made up only of tabloid-lovers? Studio executives knew that, even if the majority of moviegoers fell into this demographic, not all would. And those who did not fancy the tabloids might well have a condescending view of them after reading the denunciations raging in the middlebrow magazines. How would a mock-tabloid herald serve the movie with these viewers? A rhetorical analysis suggests that the herald may have been effective in this case because it pushed these moviegoers to imagine the ideal narrative audience, thereby evoking a sense of irony vis-à-vis the real tabloids and their readers.[7] Invited by the herald to assume the narrative audience role of hot-news lovers, they might enter the fiction and study the zippy headlines and vivid graphics. At the same time, understanding that the herald's immoderation exaggerated the actual excess of papers like the *Graphic,* they might experience a pleasurable gap between themselves and readers who regarded hot headlines as true. The herald probably provoked a chuckle from them at the expense of tabloid audiences. Borrowing from James Phelan's further distinctions about audience, we can say that, for some potential viewers, the tabloid heralds likely worked by creating a complex (if condensed) fiction that positioned them as both "believers" and "observers" in relation to the fiction (145). In turn, these patrons might have responded positively to the herald's implication: the advertised movie was influenced by the tabloids' thrill-power, yet was wise enough to wink at their claims toward veracity.

The number of archival copies suggests that mock-tabloid heralds were indeed successful. Over this period, studios created them for at least thirty crime movies, including *Little Caesar, The Public Enemy, Scarface, G-Men* (1935), and *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), as well as lesser-known offerings such as *Silent Witness* (1932) and *Gangster's Boy* (1938). Given their number, it seems likely that these heralds were among the advertising items moviegoers saw regularly. In fact, theatre managers were

FIGURE 1.4 Mock-tabloid herald for *G-Men,* 1935. (*G-Men* © Turner Entertainment Co. A Warner Bros. Entertainment Company. All Rights Reserved.)

encouraged to purchase mock tabloids by the thousand, with unit prices decreasing the more the manager ordered. Those who purchased more than 15,000 copies of the *Scarface* herald, for instance, could get them at just $3.60 per thousand. This enormous volume suggests that the studios worked hard to place them into moviegoers' hands.

Studios specializing in both feature films and shorter, more economical B-films employed the mock tabloid. On the fancier end of the spectrum were four-page heralds, such as the ones for *Gang War* and *Scarface.* Yet

even Poverty Row studios like Monogram were able to offer fairly sophisticated mock tabloids. For *Gangster's Boy,* a melodrama about a young athlete falsely accused of murder, the studio created a four-page herald that borrowed both its name and its centerfold photo layout from the *Daily News,* leaving the last page blank for exhibitor information. That even less affluent studios created elaborate mock tabloids suggests how widespread the device was.

More common were one-page heralds featuring the name of the theatre printed in its headline as part of the "news." Before Warner Bros. released its FBI-drama *G-Men* at the Strand in New York, for instance, it created a "4-star" edition of the "United States Eagle," embedding the theatre's name in a banner at the bottom of the page (see figure 1.4). For easy use by theatres across the country, the herald might be more generalized. Alluding to the *Daily News*' self-description as "New York's Picture Newspaper," Warner Bros. created a "Picture News Flash" template in the 1930s. Standardization meant that the studio could simply plug facts about each new picture into a ready-made tabloid format, thereby associating the studio with jazz journalism through repetition. Heralds for *San Quentin* (1937) and *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1939) are just two that made use of the template (see figure 1.5).

At this point it is crucial to make clear that, even when a studio copied the look and style of a tabloid as outré as the *Graphic,* the resulting herald is never as extreme. In fact, our findings suggest that, even as the studios mobilized tabloid narrative elements, they tamed them. The result, oxymoronic as it seems, is a kind of restrained sensationalism. Of course, this makes perfect sense in context: mobilizing and taming tabloid tropes suited the film industry's larger efforts to elevate its image by standardizing its publicity mechanisms. Small-town theatre managers in this decade were encouraged by the studios to create their own advertising for films showing at their theatres. The problem, as studio correspondence indicates, was that managers sometimes went overboard in their gimmickry, presenting films in a risqué manner that offended local audiences and generated bad press (Miller 171). Exploiting the excitement of the tabloids while controlling the actual shock potential of their content, the mock-tabloid herald was a stroke of publicity genius. Fiske remarks that while certain popular forms "have derived their innovative energies from culturally and socially disreputable sources . . . they have also operated under systems of convention and regulation that keep contained the subversive potential of their origins" (41). As if illustrating Fiske's point, the *Gang War* herald—unlike the *Graphic*—contains no photos of

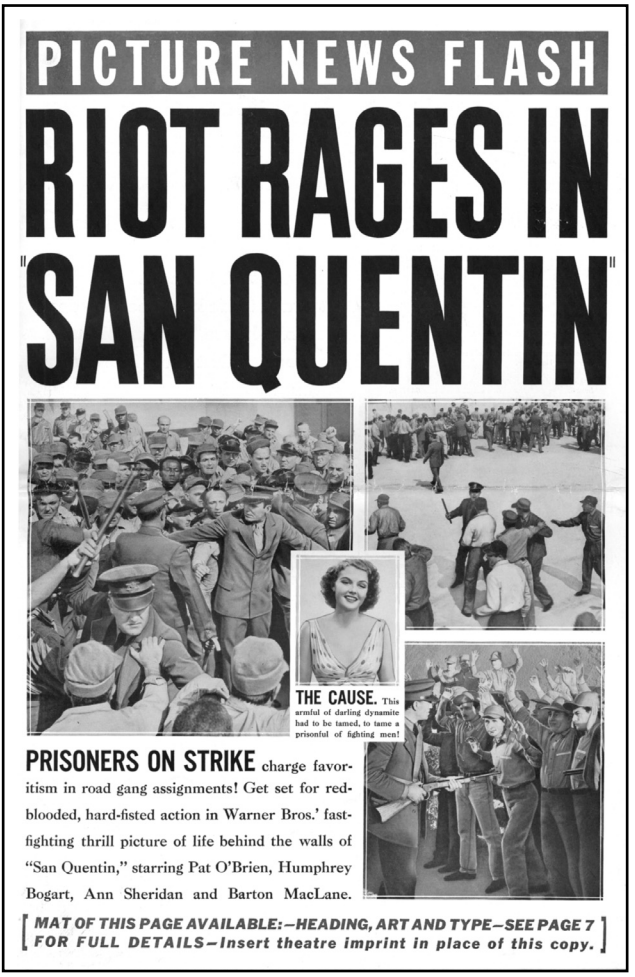


FIGURE 1.5 Mock-tabloid herald for *San Quentin,* 1937. (*San Quentin* © Turner Entertainment Co. A Warner Bros. Entertainment Company. All Rights Reserved.)

real crime scenes, no nudity, and no mention of "orgies" or "wild parties." Its "love seance" is spiritual enough to leave readers wondering whether any actual anatomy was involved. It invites comparison to the country's loudest tabloid without quite reproducing its lurid aspects.

If viewed alone, the mock-tabloid herald might appear a clever but relatively anomalous advertising device. When we turn to the press books, however, we find a dizzying barrage of materials that mobilize tabloid language and rhetoric in the service of crime movies.

Press Books

Their very name evoking Hollywood's dependence on journalism, press books constitute the richest body of paratext in film studies.[8] Thousands of them, dating from 1915 to the present, fill the archives of cinema research centers. Each book offers a range of materials for advertising a given film. Since theatre managers were largely responsible for publicizing movies to their own communities, they needed facts about each picture with enough time to get the word out. Yet under the era's block booking system, managers often knew little about the films they had agreed to rent.[9] Press books filled this gap. Originating in the 1910s, the press book was by the late 1920s the standard publicity device, distributed by every studio, regardless of size, for every movie.[10]

Yet the single book-length study of press books addresses only Warner Bros. movies during a brief period, and it remains unpublished.[11] Meanwhile, the volume of press books daunts; like the tabloid, this is a medium characterized by dizzying excess.[12] Excess and, paradoxically, invisibility: since the press book was made for theatre managers to extract material from, moviegoers would rarely have seen the whole books that we find in the archives. And because press books have not achieved the retro popularity of old movie posters or fan magazines, today's readers are unlikely to have any familiarity with them. Yet press books are crucial to our understanding of the relationship between tabloid and celluloid in this period. They demonstrate that studios mobilized an alternate identity for crime films even through small doses of tabloid language and rhetoric.

Usually measuring a handy 12" by 17"—just an inch larger than a tabloid newspaper—press books packed information and photographs about each film into four sections. An opening "Publicity" segment featured pages of canned articles and reviews, actor biographies, and anecdotes from studio publicists on the West Coast. Designed to be clipped and sent to local newspapers, these publicity treatments visually aped journalism: laid out in columns measured to newspaper proportions, they opened with a "headline" and often included a film still positioned to mimic a news photo (see figure 1.6). Each press book also included an "Advertising" section of variously sized "mats" that managers could purchase from the studio to place in the press. The ad mats combined robust graphics with headline-like taglines. Another section, "Exploitations," listed ideas for publicity stunts and audience participation gimmicks through which managers could drum up attendance. Finally, a fourth section offered "Acces-

YOUR EDITOR WANTS TO SEE YOU

HOWARD HUGHES' "SCARFACE" PUBLICITY SECTION

PLACE PLENTY OF PEP IN THE PRESS

Gangland's Ruthless Sway Exposed in "Scarface"

Million Mobsmen Take Tribute From Business All Over United States

Public Pays Toll

(*Feature Story*)

Racketeering in all its ramifications, particularly that branch which centers its activities in the illicit liquor traffic, is forcibly pictured in "Scarface," the Howard Hughes epic which will come to the .... theatre on ....

The result is a vehicle which for sheer dramatic power has seldom been equalled upon stage or screen, as has been attested by stage and film producers, playwrights and public officials who have witnessed the picture at private previews.

Rackets, as newspaper readers have long since learned, are illegal activities organized upon a business basis, and it is the working of this tremendous organization which is pictured so forcibly in "Scarface." After all, it is admitted publicly that rackets are the bane of the country, and it is confidently predicted that "Scarface" is pictured with such powerful authenticity that it will go a long way toward correcting the evils of crime.

A mob of more than a million underworld characters are today engaged in some form of racket, taking toll from business all over the United States.

While liquor and the collection of protection is the source of the gangsters' biggest graft, the tentacles of gangland reach out into all lines of business endeavor, padding the racketeers' purse from many sources.

If a gangster stole an auto, he would be just a plain thief. But if through organized crime he steals an auto over and over again, it is called a racket and he gets away with it.

The completeness and the extent of the gangster system is the biggest police problem in the United States today.

Hundreds of swindlers, pickpockets, dope peddlers, petty thieves and ladies of the evening are dependent upon the racketeer for existence. Even the hotels are not immune.

Wipe Out Gangland

All of this can be changed and gangland wiped out once and for all, according to a picture just released by Howard Hughes, the young producer, who has spent millions of dollars giving splendid screen entertainment to the public.

Hughes has made an underworld picture called "Scarface" for United Artists, which comes to the .... theatre on ...., that points the way to ending the racketeer.

Hughes points out that the gangster shows no mercy and none must be extended to him. Wipe out the racketeer, down with the gunman and show no mercy whatever to the mobsmen who are responsible for the loss of millions of dollars in property every year, and the taking of innumerable lives.

"Scarface" tells of the rise and fall of Tony Camonte, and the leading role is played by Paul Muni, famous character actor, Ann Dvorak, a new leading woman, is on the cast, and William Boyd, Karen Morley and other players of importance.

62 SETS IN NEW HUGHES' PICTURE

HOWARD HUGHES leased practically an entire studio and constructed 62 sets in preparation for the filming of "Scarface," the adaptation of the Armitage Trail novel which comes to the .... theatre on ....

Lack of sufficient stage space at the United Artists studio made it necessary to take over most of the Metropolitan studio to facilitate production. Mr. Hughes used his own newly-acquired sound equipment on this picture.

The title role in "Scarface" was played by Paul Muni, supported by a brilliant cast, including Osgood Perkins, the original "Walter Burns" of "The Front Page."

FACING THE END

Paul Muni in a Scene from Howard Hughes' "Scarface"

8—*One Col. Scene (Mat 5c, Cut 30c)*

Film Has Large Cast

One of the largest casts ever assembled for a motion picture takes part in the latest Howard Hughes production. "Scarface," the United Artists film showing at the ....

It includes Paul Muni, Ann Dvorak, Karen Morley, Osgood Perkins, C. Henry Gordon, George Raft, Vince Barnett, Harry J. Vejar, Edwin Maxwell, Henry Armetta, Bert Starkey, Ines Palange, Boris Karloff, Tully Marshall and many others.

COURT PASSED ANN'S CONTRACT

HOLLYWOOD'S latest Cinderella, Ann Dvorak, had to go to court to have her first film contract legalized, because she is only 19. The court gave the stamp and approval to Miss Dvorak's long-term contract with Howard Hughes, president of the Caddo Company.

Miss Dvorak, for the past three years, had been a dancer and bit-player at the M-G-M studios. But she was virtually unrecognized until she was selected by Producer Hughes for a leading role in "Scarface," which comes to the .... theatre on ....

Her tremendous success in this role won her the long-term contract, and potential fame and fortune as a movie star.

Record Shot Made

One of the longest photographic "shots" on record was made in the filming of the United Artists film "Scarface," the Howard Hughes production at the .... A scene 400 feet in length, with cameras swinging from one setting to another over a space of four minutes, was obtained by mechanical means. It is one of the most extraordinary technical effects ever shown on the screen.

The film is enacted principally by Paul Muni, who is starred, and Karen Morley, Osgood Perkins, Ann Dvorak and Boris Karloff. Others in the cast are George Raft, C. Henry Gordon, Purnell Pratt, Vincent Barnett, Ines Palange, Harry J. Vejar, Edwin Maxwell, and Tully Marshall.

New Faces Are Seen In "Scarface"

TROUBLE AHEAD

Paul Muni in a Scene from Howard Hughes' "Scarface"

6—*One Col. Scene (Mat 5c, Cut 30c)*

Shoots Another Million

"Scarface," the Howard Hughes production at the ...., is one of the new million-dollar pictures made in Hollywood this year. While other producers were retrenching, in line with the nation-wide economy wave, Hughes splurged as usual to make this the outstanding picture of the year. Critics and public both agree he rang the bell once again with "Scarface," an United Artists' picture, which was more than a year in the making.

Half Dozen Players Make Bid For Fame In Hughes Picture

First Big Roles

(*Advance Story*)

At least half a dozen players, comparatively new to the picture loving public, achieved sudden fame, and prominence in Howard Hughes' United Artists picture, "Scarface," said to be the last word in gangland films. In fact, it is said no production since "The Miracle Man" has established so many players.

Mr. Hughes, in making the picture, selected his cast from the ranks of the comparatively unknown, making certain he obtained the most perfect types available for each role, regardless of previous box office prestige.

Producer Hughes is probably the most exacting of the movie-makers. He is known to have made more than 100 tests for an important role before filling the part. He spends months in preparation on a picture while other producers spend weeks—and when he starts actual filming he is convinced that his production will be right. More expensive, perhaps, but in the long run more economical, as the outstanding pictures, particularly in this era of entertainment, return the most money at the ticket-windows.

The title role in "Scarface," which comes to the .... theatre next ...., is played by Paul Muni, a Broadway stage-star, who quit the screen two years ago after making two pictures for Fox Film Corporation.

Ann Dvorak, a girl who for three years was on the pay-roll of a major studio without receiving a single chance to display her talents, was given the outstanding feminine role and her performance was a sensation. Today she is sought by every producer in Hollywood for leading parts, although her role in "Scarface" was her first.

Karen Morley, another girl who played in only minor and "bit" parts, was given her first real opportunity in this picture, and the critics now acclaim her one of the outstanding actresses of the screen.

Osgood Perkins, the original "Walter Burns" in "The Front Page," has alternated between stage and screen for years, and has appeared in many pictures. But not until "Scarface" was he given an outstanding role, which he enacted with such brilliance that he is now regarded one of the foremost character actors in Hollywood.

George Raft, who resembles the late Rudolph Valentino, has tried for years to obtain parts in pictures which might win him recognition. His portrayal of the dapper gunman in "Scarface" won him instant favor with Hollywood producers, and lavish praise from critics and the public.

Vince Barnett, for years has been known in Hollywood as the "professional ribber"—appearing at banquets and parties as a paid "insulter" of famous guests. Successful as he was, producers hesitated to give him more than minor parts in their pictures. Producer Hughes gave him one of the prize roles of the year in "Scarface"—a comedy impersonation—which he performs with such finesse that he, too, made a reputation for himself overnight as one of the leading character actors of the screen.

HOWARD HAWKS WINS TRIUMPH

Howard Hawks is considered the leading candidate for first directorial honors from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences at their next annual awards meeting for his direction of "Scarface," the United Artists film. The Howard Hughes sensation is playing at the .... theatre. Hawks was placed by critics among the "10 best" directors of 1931 for his "The Criminal Code" and "The Dawn Patrol." "Scarface" is regarded by long odds his finest directorial accomplishment.

DRAMATIC STORY OF "SCARFACE"

Johnny Lovo, ambitious and ruthless gang-leader, decides to corner the beer market of his district. His first move is to assassinate "Big Louis" Costillo, his chief competitor. Tony Camonte, Costillo's bodyguard, is chosen to do the killing, and he does the job so well that he is rewarded by Lovo with a promotion to chief lieutenant of the gang with a split of the profits.

Camonte and his own bodyguard, Rinaldo, are arrested upon suspicion of the slaying, but are quickly released upon a writ of habeas corpus obtained by Lovo. The newspapers play up the start of a new gang war.

Led by Camonte, Lovo's gangsters launch a campaign of terror in neighboring territory until they gain a virtual monopoly of the beer racket. By brute force, Lovo is made president of the "First Ward Social Club," succeeding Costillo.

With money rolling in, Camonte becomes ambitious. He soon develops designs upon Lovo's leadership and upon his girl, Poppy. He wants to clean up the whole city and add this territory to their already lucrative realm. Lovo warns him to lay off. But one night Camonte invades another ward with a gang and breaks up a beer joint. Lovo tells him in no uncertain tones that there will be no "muscling in" on O'Hara's territory in the other ward. As they leave Lovo's office, an automobile rolls up and drops the body of one of Lovo's henchmen to the curb. Pinned to his lapel is a note reading: "Keep out of the Second Ward."

Undaunted, Camonte opens up luxurious offices, which are as impregnable as a fort, and takes on a secretary, Angelo. He avenges the recent killing by having Rinaldo "bump off" O'Hara in his flower shop. This incenses Lovo, and they have it out in words.

Poppy calls on Camonte just as Lovo leaves, sensing that he is destined to succeed to the boss's shoes. Shortly afterward the police arrive to pick up Camonte for the killing. Guarino, a courageous plainclothesman, walks in single-handed to make the pinch. But, as usual, Camonte is released immediately on a habeas corpus writ.

He goes to Levy's restaurant, where he meets Poppy. While he talks to her, a fusillade of bullets splatters against the entrance. Poppy and Rinaldo fall to the floor and are uninjured. Dorgan, successor to O'Hara, had staged the raid, and for the first time in the city's warfare, machine guns had been used. This intrigues Camonte, who decides to adopt them at once. Rinaldo has picked off one of Dorgan's men, so Camonte steals his machine gun and escapes through a rear door to Lovo's office.

He decides to stop Dorgan's activities. He orders three auto-loads of the gang made ready, despite Lovo's efforts to stop him. They drive to the other ward, and when the smoke of battle clears away more than a dozen of Dorgan's gang are dead. During the killings, Camonte is sitting in the office of the Chief of Detectives, with a perfect alibi.

Several days later, Dorgan, last of the Second Warders, is machine-gunned by Camonte. Thus, having taken over the whole city, he decides to usurp Lovo's place. He and several of his henchmen crash a cafe party where Lovo is entertaining Poppy. He plants himself between the boss and the girl, and treats Lovo with utter contempt. This is the last straw for Lovo, and he plans to have his lieutenant taken for a ride.

Camonte is waylaid and taken out to be killed. As the car in which he is prisoner speeds to the outskirts, he gives the wheel a jerk and causes it to crash head-on into another machine. He escapes, badly hurt. Camonte gets Rinaldo and they go to Lovo's headquarters. The boss realizes that the end has come and begs for his life, but Rinaldo disposes of him with a bullet.

Camonte is now undisputed king, and Poppy immediately moves her belongings to his apartment. He mends his fences, and his profits from the booze syndicate are enormous. All opposition having been disposed of, he proceeds to build up an air-tight political machine. His notoriety becomes world-wide.

He and Poppy spend their summers on a palatial yacht off the East Coast, while Rinaldo and Angelo direct the racket. Meanwhile, Camonte's sister, Cesca, whom the gang-leader has tried to keep straight, falls for Rinaldo. Camonte's mother wires him about it, and, returning in a rage, he kills Rinaldo. Cesca notifies the police. A pitch battle results, in which Angelo is wounded. He staggers to their rendezvous, where he dies a few minutes later.

Cesca arrives, her flare of hatred for her brother having passed, but suddenly police sirens are heard approaching. The gang lord, drunk with power, swings into action. In a frenzy of mad triumph, he yanks out machine guns and ammunition. "You load 'em, we'll show 'em," he tells Cesca.

The phone rings. It is Guarino. Camonte refuses an offer of surrender. The police open up a devastating fusillade, splattering the steel walls of the headquarters. Cesca is struck by a bullet, and, dying, she urges her brother to avenge her death. But Camonte, realizing that he is cornered, suddenly turns yellow. As she dies, Cesca taunts him for his craven actions.

Guarino, over the phone, issues another ultimatum. "You haven't got Rinaldo any more—come out—you rat."

The attacking officers hurl a tear bomb into Camonte's room, and he is forced out into the street. As he emerges, still firing his pistol, an officer's bullet clips him in the right hand, disarming him. Without this gun, Camonte turns completely yellow and pleads for his life. The officers cease firing and put the handcuffs on him. Tried for murder, Camonte is convicted, and within 60 days he is hanged—ending the lawless reign of the Camonte gang for all time.

HOWARD HUGHES

Presents

"SCARFACE"

A Howard Hawks Production

United Artists Picture

By Ben Hecht

From the novel by Armitage Trail

Copyright, 1931, by The Caddo Company, Inc.

Co-Director	Richard Rosson
Screen Story	Seton I. Miller, John Lee Mahin, W. R. Burnett
Photography	Lee Garmes and L. W. O'Connell
Editorial Advisor	Douglass Biggs
Settings	Harry Oliver
Film Editor	Edward Curtiss
Sound Engineer	William Snyder
Musical Directors	Adolph Tandler and Gus Arnheim
Production Manager	Charles Stallings

THE CAST

Tony Camonte	Paul Muni
Cesca	Ann Dvorak
Poppy	Karen Morley
Lovo	Osgood Perkins
Gaffney	Boris "Frankenstein" Karloff
Guarino	C. Henry Gordon
Rinaldo	George Raft
Publisher	Purnell Pratt
Angelo	Vince Barnett
Mrs. Camonte	Ines Palange
Costillo	Harry J. Vejar
Chief of Detectives	Edwin Maxwell
Managing Editor	Tully Marshall
Pietro	Henry Armetta
Epstein	Bert Starkey

FIGURE 1.6 Press book for *Scarface*, 1932. (Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.)

sories" such as lobby cards, posters, publicity stills, and heralds that managers could rent or purchase. The format of the press book evolved from 1915 through the 1920s. By the 1930s, Mark Miller states, individual press books varied from ten to as many as fifty pages, but the four-part structure was unified across the different studios and used for all film genres (5).

Press books were made to be mobilized. As one guide to Paramount's books explains, material was "quickly accessible" for extraction and insertion into other settings. The books featured single-sided pages (so that materials could be clipped out), along with suggested publicity stunts adaptable to varied locations. Manipulating this carnivalesque flurry was the theatre manager, whose job demanded that he act as a "Great Mobilizer." If, as Douglas Gomery indicates, an average theatre in the 1930s booked roughly one hundred films a year, then we must picture the manager reading through a couple of press books every week (68). As the only person who would see the hyped-up assemblage in its entirety, his ability to sell tickets depended on his skill at channeling promotional materials so that they would make the biggest impact in his community.

As this description suggests, the press books were filled with bloated claims, aggressive phrasing, enlarged visuals, and an overall spirit of hyperbole. In this, they and their individual components such as the herald exemplify Hollywood advertising practices. A glance at this advertising history will help us contextualize press books as material phenomena. Jane Gaines has written about press books as part of her larger focus on Hollywood's promotional flamboyance during the early twentieth century. She notes that, although advertising in general had by then developed more restraint than in the previous century, movie publicity still employed levels of exaggeration that harkened back to earlier days. During the 1910s and 1920s, in fact, advertising for movies was flashier than for other products, since its goal was not to sell a tangible product but to entice audiences into an experience. Sandwich-board men paraded the streets barking enticements to pedestrians; theatre lobbies were staged to look like movie sets; and, for a film like *Tarzan* (1918), audiences might have spotted an elephant lumbering through town caparisoned in a giant movie poster. Gaines traces such carnivalesque spectacles to nineteenth-century traditions of theatrical showmanship, vividly exemplified by P. T. Barnum.

Although Gaines's argument that the sensationalism of Hollywood advertising had been muted by the late 1930s is mostly true, the ballyhoo she describes continued to shape the reception of many films produced during this decade. Unfortunately, while their influence on movie reception must have been powerful, such exhibition contexts have disappeared from our cultural memory. As Gaines points out, "the transience of the promotional apparatus, the disassociation of the theater from commerce, and finally later critical interest in the film 'itself' over its reception context have contributed to the vision of early motion pictures as unencumbered by commerce" (39). These factors have erased exhibition history, just as they have hidden Hollywood's long association with the tabloids.

But ample evidence suggests that this carnivalesque dimension to Hollywood advertising was in operation all through the 1930s, and that it was designed to mobilize a popular audience that would transcend presumed taste divisions between classes. We use the word "carnivalesque" deliberately, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's famous notion of carnival, which refers to the "undisciplined" pleasures stereotypically associated with the lower classes. Though focused on early modern Europe, Bakhtin's observations have been widely applied to many forms of popular culture from cockfighting to television game shows; meanwhile, Fiske, Martin Conboy, and Feona Attwood have considered the carnivalesque dimension of contemporary tabloids.[13] As Bakhtin writes, carnival can be many things at once: festive pleasure, the mocking of those in authority, bodily enjoyment, the inversion of rules that govern everyday life, the parody of official discourse. As such, the carnivalesque is fluid enough to attract audiences across class strata, a point Bakhtin and others stress repeatedly.

Published in 1990, Gaines's article was among the first to recover the lost history of film publicity and reception. Since then, numerous scholars have revealed the commercialized, untamed, and even oppositional nature of movie-going in America through the Second World War.[14] Nonetheless, much remains to be considered, including the question of how press books, by mobilizing an alternate tabloid identity for crime films, contributed to the widespread perception of the genre as vulgar entertainment. With their constant flashing of guns, frenetic energy, and noisiness once sound was introduced, gangster films were especially suited to the kinds of showmanship Gaines describes. And their press books prove it: even those created during the Depression, when the era's "sobriety" supposedly tamed advertising, still draw heavily on inflated lasciviousness and exaggerated violence.

Indeed, much of the material in these press books prompts us to ask whether critics charging gangster movies with "indecency" may have been responding more to what John Ellis calls their "narrative image," generated by studio publicity, than to the film itself.[15] Maltby argues that this was the case, observing that the industry's "most vociferous critics judged the movies on their advertising far more frequently than on their content" ("Production" 50). And that advertising played up tabloid-like sensationalism. As a case in point, press book ads for MGM's rather flaccid 1931 gangster picture *Dance Fools Dance* feature titillating illustrations of Joan Crawford in skimpy lingerie. Raising the film's most risqué moment as a representative image, the ads imply that *Dance Fools Dance* is far racier than it actually is.

We must also wonder whether certain movies that now strike us as

relentlessly bleak were viewed more lightly by their original audiences because of the ballyhoo surrounding them. For example, a press book plug for the grim *Little Caesar* admonishes managers to "print out plenty of quizzes on underworld slang" for patrons. Meanwhile, an exploitation tip for *Each Dawn I Die* (1939), a hard-edged Warner Bros. picture about a reporter wrongly imprisoned for murder, recommends that ushers dress up as convicts. The whole atmosphere in the theatre for any of these films might well have been antic anticipation as raffles or costume contests bracketed the screening. In going to see *Gang War,* a tragic story about a mobster who dies to save the woman he loves, our stenographer may well have been shown to her seat by a man dandied up as a racketeer—that is, before she herself won a prize for being dolled up like a moll. Janet Staiger argues that "context is more significant than textual features in explaining interpretative events," and even if we quibble with her prioritizing, we must acknowledge that press books likely mobilized interpretations different from those that we, watching the same films in our more sedate spaces, now posit (*Perverse* 30).

The tabloids provided a superb model of ballyhoo for crime films. Indeed, the word "ballyhoo" itself, popularized in the 1920s to describe cultural forms characterized by noisy excess, was regularly used to describe *both* publicity campaigns *and* tabloid news. Certainly, no media in the 1920s functioned more obviously than the tabloids as a site of exaggerated narrative freedom. By mobilizing their look and style, press books implied a similar freedom for movie audiences.

But liberation from what? Whereas tabloid newspapers promised to free audiences from the authority of mainstream journalism, we might see the function of press books as that of offering release from the tyranny of the movies themselves. That is, while individual films presumed a moviegoing experience shaped by the narrative dictates of Classical Hollywood filmmaking, by the moral injunctions of the Production Code, and by other social and economic constraints, press book components invited a far more transgressive cinematic experience. As scholars such as Staiger, Altman, and Miller also point out, press book materials encouraged audiences to activate their *own* meanings for any movie by presenting them with a dizzying array of alternate readings.[16] Variant plot lines would be presented side by side; a single film would be billed as embodying characteristics of multiple genres; numerous snippets of information about the actors would direct attention away from the movie itself into the extra-cinematic realm.[17] Press book materials, in fact, did not so much provide information about a film's *actual* content as mobilize a frantic overlapping of all its possible narrative permutations.[18]

Leafing through crime film press books today, we are struck by how often they invite viewers to make associations between the film and the tabloids simply by using language that suggests a tabloid "sender." As Genette explains, the "sender" of a paratextual message "(like the sender of all other messages) is not necessarily its *de facto* producer, whose identity is not very important to us" (8). The producer of these press book paratexts was, obviously, a studio. Yet a potential moviegoer, encountering in her local paper one of the ads, would likely be grabbed by the dose of sensational language whose "illocutionary force," to use Genette's term, derived from its seeming to "come from" tabloid reportage. Ads for *The Public Enemy* or *The Secret Six* (1931), placed in a straight paper, created the jarring sense that the sedate page was being commandeered by the hot news. And this tabloid language erupted in the host paper to show that the advertised film was possessed of the same vigorous essence.

Perhaps the most obvious examples are ad taglines that flaunt crime movies as direct cinematic analogues to tabloid reportage. *Gang War* is touted as "a story torn from last night's paper on the talking screen." As this tagline indicates, movies were being advertised for their similarity to hot news at least two years before Warner Bros. famously announced its "headline news" policy in 1930. And though Warner Bros. was loudest in its claim to pull scripts from the press, other studios consistently employed the same trope, equating movies with tabloid reportage. *Making the Headlines* (1938) uncovers how "murder writes the headlines"; *Silent Witness* offers "the strangest love crime that ever burned the headlines"; and *Boys Reformatory* (1939) features "Faces You See in the Headlines!" Meanwhile, *Missing Girls,* a 1936 offering on white slavery from Chesterfield Motion Pictures, takes this rhetoric to the full, promising to "scoop the film world" and "reveal for the first time the inside story" of a racket that is "to-morrow's news! To-day's facts!" To some degree, calling a movie a "story" is a common device that illustrates classical cinema's foregrounding of narrative as the prime reason for film viewing. But the accent on "headlines," alongside the insistence on "scoops" and "exposés"—terms expressly associated with the tabloids—reinforces how these promotional materials are made to sound as if they are emanating right from tabloid reportage.

In a related vein, press book materials often insist on the melodramatic veracity of their narratives, a trope familiar to tabloid readers. Publicity for *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) pledges that the book from which it was adapted is "not a scenario writer's dream, but the true, unshackled facts," the pun heightening the drama in which "every anguished, blood-stained word is True!" In this and many similar ads, "facts" and "truth"

are equated with titillation, secrecy, and disclosure, rather than with duller concepts like judgment or analysis that dominate the straight news.

Press book materials also repeatedly borrow a staple of tabloid rhetoric that we call the "guarantee of immediate insider revelation." When it appears in the tabloids, the guarantee lures readers to buy multiple editions by promising that hidden details of a current drama will be presented within a specific time frame. Readers were consequently exhorted to "see the next edition," "read all about it tomorrow," or "get the inside scoop tonight," emphasizing how "fresh" and "exclusive" news should be for full effect. Crime ads often adopt this strategy for added suspense.

Elsewhere, press book ads deploy confessional language, a tabloid staple. One ad from *Little Caesar* shows Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. above a "personal" caption spoken by his character: "I was a gangster, but I fell in love with a beautiful girl. If I leave the gang Rico will put me on the spot. If I stay she will squeal. What shall I do?" Below the caption, a short passage promises us we'll "[s]ee his strange story thrillingly unfolded in *Little Caesar.*" Using the newsprint imagery of "unfolded," the caption emphasizes the private glimpse of a public figure, implying that movie audiences, just like tabloid readers, will get an immediate insider perspective on secret activity.

Even at the level of diction and syntax, press book materials read as if emanating from tabloid pages. As Martin Conboy explains, the tabloids utilize a style that should be understood not as a downgraded version of straight press talk, but rather as "a distinct linguistic compendium with its own, highly influential range of language use" (15). Most obviously, press books use highly emotive language, especially an extreme application of adjectives, verbs, and punctuation. Hyperbole, of course, is key to advertising and public relations in general. Yet when we look at these press books, we see how often their verbiage imitates the tabloids' exaggerated lawlessness. The films are described as "hard-hitting," "blazing," "smashing," "heart-pounding," "scorching," and "dynamite": adjectives that also dominate tabloid pages because they are intended to produce an immediate visceral response.

As these snippets suggest, slang abounds in the press books. A prominent element in sensation reportage and the columns penned by figures like Walter Winchell, slang allowed the tabloids "to talk to a readership in its own, informal manner" (Conboy 23). Similarly, publicity for crime films, far more than for other genres, exploits informal language as a means of appealing to audiences. Slanginess was even one of the selling points for early gangster movies: the advertising for *Gang War* boasted that the picture would deliver "Gangster jargon" along with "Gunfire! Police sirens!

Machine guns in action! Bedlam! Bomb explosions!" And while the gangster genre is famous for making slang an integral part of the talking film, the tabloid condensation in many ads actually results in their "outslanging" the movies themselves. These ads deploy vernacular language on a grand scale: they abound in contractions; address characters (and occasionally audiences) as "girls," "boys," and "mugs"; and employ a litany of informal compound expressions from the tabloid pages, such as "red-hot," "white-hot," "man-bait," "love-nest," "love-crime," and "thrill-a-minute."

The press books also employ flamboyant linguistic tropes that echo the alliteration, punning, and metaphor of hot headlines. Like slang, these headlines locate the tabloids within a terrain of linguistic irreverence that is inconceivable for more serious-minded newspapers. Press books copy this alliteration and punning to affect a similarly insouciant attitude. One ad for *Little Caesar,* for example, smacks audiences with the promise that its central character "Backs His Gaff with His Gat," while the female gangster in First National's *Blondie Johnson* (1933) is drolly described as "The Girl Who Set Hell's Kitchen on Fire!" These tropes are taken to melodramatic extremes in taglines as frequently as they are in tabloid headlines: "When killers meet . . . the loser goes to the morgue . . . the winner goes to the chair," one ad for *Each Dawn I Die* blares. As with hot headlines, these taglines succeed by leaving out most actual information while still creating a strong "scenario" in readers' minds (Lindemann 54).

As well as slanginess and colorful turns of phrase, press books borrow the frantic transitivity stereotypical of tabloid language, with verbs applied in a rowdy way to indicate who does what to whom. Notorious for this hyperactive emphasis on action, the tabloids even present speech acts as a form of physical violence. Individuals "blast" one another; a complaint is a "slam"; to comment is to "expose." This kind of transitivity, says Conboy, simplifies events by making individuals "figure prominently in verbal expressions either as victims or subjects" (35). It is not surprising, then, to find such transitivity used prominently in crime film publicity. An ad for *Road House* (1934), for example, promises that viewers will see its star "land [a] surprise k.o." on his nemesis, while *Each Dawn I Die* prepares audiences to see James Cagney and George Raft "pack dynamite" that will "sock" viewers "right between the eyes!" This aggressive verbiage is certainly not confined to publicity from major studios. Ads for the low-budget *Trapped by G-Men* (1937) pledge that viewers will get the whole "bullet splattered story" of the feds "mopping up the last of the mobsters."

These ads so successfully appeared to emanate from tabloid pages that, when they were placed in an actual tabloid, they were activated in a way that *amplified* their sensational qualities. This gave them a startling

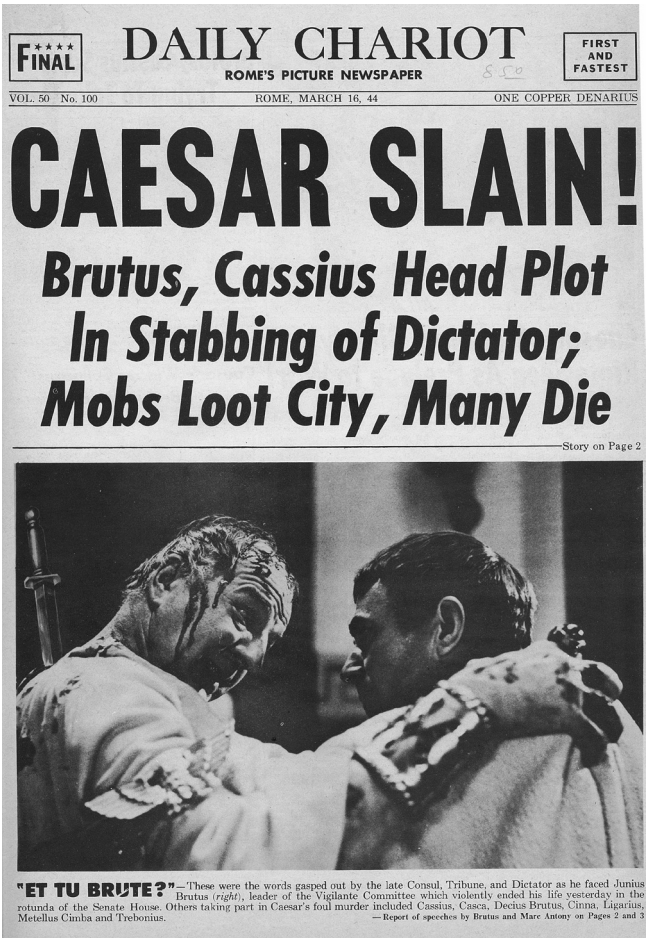
resonance with the paper's own content. In 1930, an average issue of the *Graphic* ran forty-five to fifty theatre and movie ads per issue, with four or five of them spreading across a quarter- or half-page.[19] And unlike the straight papers, the tabloids were less likely to segregate movie news onto a single "entertainment" page. Instead, articles on Hollywood were often splayed through each issue. As a result, movie ads often read like sidebars or sections of a larger news story the paper was running.

In one dramatic example from the *Daily Mirror* in January 1931, for instance, we find advertisements for *Little Caesar* placed near a serial called "The Truth about Al Capone, 'Potentate' of Crime." The language in both ad and story accentuates the power and angst of, as the serial puts it, this "modern Robin Hood's rise to power." In another instance, also from 1931, the *Graphic* ran a front-page headline about a local child slain in mob crossfire: "Tiny Victim of Butchers Goes to His Grave Today." Page 5 of the same issue then features a full-page "Open Letter to District Attorney Crain and Police Commissioner Mulrooney." The "letter" announces:

> This is not a publicity stunt. It is not our idea to capitalize on one of the most unfortunate incidents that has happened to New York and America. But because we too are aroused and appalled by the wholesale slaughter of little children, WE ARE READY TO PLACE IN YOUR HANDS, AND ARE FORCING AHEAD THE SHOWING OF THE PICTURE, "THE STAR WITNESS," WHICH, IN OUR ESTIMATION IS THE GREATEST INSTRUMENT FOR PUBLIC GOOD THAT HAS EVER BEEN DEVISED! . . . Months ago we foresaw this last terrible happening. Months ago we put our hearts and hands to the task of finding some means of coping with the dread forces of the Invisible Empire to which our Nation has apparently capitulated—And so we made THE STAR WITNESS—our answer—YOUR ANSWER—America's answer—to its greatest menace.

Signed by "The Management, Winter Garden Theatre," the "letter" illustrates how advertising could be activated, via the heading, to tie in with the host paper's reportage of current events.

If the mobility we have traced throughout this chapter emphasizes Hollywood's imitation of tabloid narrative style to market its own products, then the placements we have just looked at suggest that this exchange was not one-directional. The tabloids were not simply passive "style donors" and "hosts" for the resultant movie publicity. Although a theatre manager selected the ads to send to the *Mirror* and the *Graphic,* it was the layout editor at each paper who positioned the material in relation to the stories


FINAL

DAILY CHARIOT

ROME'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

FIRST AND FASTEST

VOL. 50 No. 100 ROME, MARCH 16, 44 ONE COPPER DENARIUS

CAESAR SLAIN!

Brutus, Cassius Head Plot In Stabbing of Dictator; Mobs Loot City, Many Die

Story on Page 2

"ET TU BRUTE?"—These were the words gasped out by the late Consul, Tribune, and Dictator as he faced Junius Brutus (*right*), leader of the Vigilante Committee which violently ended his life yesterday in the rotunda of the Senate House. Others taking part in Caesar's foul murder included Cassius, Casca, Decius Brutus, Cinna, Ligarius, Metellus Cimba and Trebonius.

—Report of speeches by Brutus and Marc Antony on Pages 2 and 3

FIGURE 1.7 Mock-tabloid herald for *Julius Caesar,* 1953. (From the authors' collection.)

filling the pages. At least in these cases, it seems the tabloids were intentionally laid out to encourage readers to see movie publicity as an extension of the papers' own narratives.

Sensational Schlock: Later Mock-Tabloids

By the 1940s, many of the tabloid elements we've seen were toned down or eliminated in crime film press books. These later books contain far less visual clutter, far less hyperbole, and far fewer references to specific newspapers. And while earlier press books often used tabloid rhetoric to

exaggerate the naughty "sins" of the films they promote, later press books do just the opposite. Publicity photos for *Double Indemnity* (1944), for example, all downplay the sex appeal of Barbara Stanwyck and accentuate Fred MacMurray's "wholesomeness"; one photo even features the two of them huddled together with Edward G. Robinson, all of them flashing toothy grins, as if they were advertising a musical rather than Hollywood's grittiest genre. These more subdued products can be explained in part by tighter restrictions on Hollywood's advertising, but they also point to the fact that by the 1940s, tabloids no longer occupied center stage in the cultural imagination.

Curiously, it seems that mock-tabloid heralds were created for films well into the 1970s, though they seem less common and their associations clearly change after the mid-1930s. Noticeably, they no longer have a specific connection with crime movies. Instead, studios created exaggerated mock tabloids for B-films like *Invasion, USA* (1952), *The Psychopath* (1966), or *Boxcar Bertha* (1972). Elsewhere, heralds were created as comically anachronistic gags, as in the mock tabloids for *Julius Caesar* (1953) and *One Million Years BC* (1966) (see figure 1.7). None of these later examples imitate a particular newspaper, as we saw with *Gang War.* And rather than asking moviegoers to lightheartedly assume the role of hot-news readers, the heralds for these later movies push audiences to guffaw at the tabloids' inanities, to see them as cheap entertainment, and to view them as literally anachronistic rather than sensationally provocative.

This anachronistic slant can be traced to the tail end of the 1930s. Press book materials for Warners Bros.' nostalgic gangster film *The Roaring Twenties,* for example, draw on tabloid features such as slang and hyperbole. Yet they do so to distance and sentimentalize the period when jazz journalism was the rage. "The heyday of the hotcha! The shock-crammed days G-men took ten whole years to lick," as one of the film's taglines puts it, were, of course, also the glory days of the *Daily News,* the *Graphic,* and the *Mirror.* Making the decade sound as if it were one hundred rather than just ten years earlier, the press book flattens the era into clichés. The authorial audience for this film no longer seems to be hot-news-loving shopgirls and stenographers. Instead, this press book implies an audience that will regard the tabloids as relics of a bygone era. Nostalgia replaces carnivalism.

Reading this shift rhetorically, it is not hard to surmise that the studios initially imitated tabloid tropes because they imagined an overlap between their target audience and that of the tabloids. But after the mid-1930s, tabloid allusions in the press books increasingly suggest that movie audiences are *not* tabloid readers. By 1953, MGM seemed to expect that

Julius Caesar's audience would simply giggle at the *Daily Chariot* herald, understanding it as a gag with no serious connection to the prestigious film.

Scholars may be right when they observe that popular texts are "resources to be used disrespectfully, not objects to be admired and venerated" (Fiske, *Understanding* 123). But we cannot help regretting such disrespect. Though "higher" cultural forms are forever aping "lower" ones, we do not always recognize this mobility because popular forms are so frequently ephemera. As Gaines notes, the transience of promotional materials like the press books has contributed to a long-standing, naïve perception of Hollywood movies as somehow "unencumbered by commerce" (39). From our vantage point, neglect has also done something else: combined with the tabloids' fragility, it has ensured that Hollywood's obvious debt to these papers can be only partially recovered. As a result, we are just now beginning to see how closely tabloid and celluloid were intertwined.

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C H A P T E R T W O

"Ripped Right Off the Front Pages"

Narrative Mobility and Warner Bros.' Headline News Policy

ACCORDING TO Hollywood lore, it was sometime in November 1930 when an anxious Jack Warner met with his production chief, Darryl F. Zanuck, to discuss a new direction for the studio. Movie attendance was declining because of the Depression, and the cinematic novelties Warner Bros. had pioneered—sound film and the cycle of musicals the new technology inspired—had lost their sheen. Unlike other studios crippled by the stock market crash, Warner Bros. in 1930 had "considerable power and resources but no real personality" (Schatz, *Genius* 135). As the brother who oversaw production, Jack Warner had come to depend on Zanuck, the wunderkind known for his creativity and chutzpah, to develop new ideas. The story goes that Warner sat in an armchair while a hyperkinetic Zanuck, pacing and yelling "It's a war out there!," pitched a "headline news" policy. Underlying it was the idea that, while other studios struggled along on escapist fare like musicals, Warner Bros. would boost its box-office sales with films whose subjects were "ripped right off the front pages."[1]

Although Zanuck was to leave for Paramount a few years later, his policy would inspire many Warner Bros. movies over the decade, including *The Public Enemy; Little Caesar; Star Witness* (1931); *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932); *The Mayor of Hell* (1933); *Bureau of Missing Persons* (1933); *G-Men, Special Agent* (1935); *The Petrified Forest* (1936);

Bullets or Ballots (1936); *Midnight Court* (1937); *Marked Woman* (1937); and *Racket Busters* (1938). Their common denominator was a basis in actual newspaper cases. Most critics consider these films among the best of the decade. As a result, the headline policy is regarded as the most effective example of Hollywood mobilizing newspapers for its own end. And the story of Zanuck's brainstorm in Warner's office is one of the great originating myths of American cinema, ineffably associating Zanuck's own outsized persona with the press.[2]

For Zanuck was, in the minds of many people, linked with the news sphere. As a 1934 article in the *New Yorker* phrased it, he was "primarily a great journalist using the screen instead of the printing press" (Johnston 23). In 1920, after moving to Hollywood hoping to write screenplays, he churned out short fiction for pulp magazines, including two owned by Macfadden. When Zanuck finally did land a scriptwriting job for Warner Bros. in 1923, it soon became clear that his talents lay in journalistic speed. By 1925, Zanuck was easily the studio's most prolific writer: that year he spun out nineteen screenplays, at least half of them box-office hits.[3] Like a great news editor, he could also turn other people's copy into gold. Nearly every scriptwriter with whom he worked, including John Steinbeck, praised his story sense and his skill at structuring film continuity. Meanwhile, Zanuck was renowned as an avid reader of the daily papers from Chicago and New York, which he had shipped to the studio. Given all this, it seems inevitable that he would be the man to marry newsprint to celluloid.

Yet, like many other originating myths, this one leaves much uncertain. To start with, even Zanuck's phrase is sketchy: what exactly *is* a headline news film? Scholars have tacitly assumed that these are cinematic adaptations of press stories, filmed with a gritty realism borrowed from urban journalism. But we would pose a more specific definition. Calling something a headline news film is not the same as indicating a genre (which would imply thematic and stylistic similarities across a long historical span) or a cycle (suggesting a thematically linked group of films produced in a short time to meet a market demand). Rather, to call something a headline news film indicates an operational approach. While many of the headline news films address social problems, those themes are not their defining feature. Rather, headline films are characterized by their exploitation of a current or recent "big news" event. Some of the films' plots follow the news coverage fairly closely (as in *Fugitive*); others rework the coverage, sometimes radically (*Finger Points, Marked Woman*); still others present themselves as a montage of various news events and figures (*G-Men, Little Caesar, Public Enemy*). Regardless of how flexibly it handles the

material, however, a headline film generally references news items that are sensational enough to have received substantial press time. The studio could therefore assume that its authorial audience would experience what Bill Nichols calls a "click of recognition" as the film reactivated familiar newspaper coverage.[4]

Given this definition, we must address the problem of how Warner Bros. actually pulled stories "right off the front pages." In this chapter, we do so by asking two basic journalistic questions. First, from *which* headlines did Warner Bros. "tear" its stories? Given the explosion in tabloid publishing in the 1920s and its ensuing competition with straight news, Warner Bros. had different types of headlines from which to choose. How did the studio select from among these? A quick glance at the headline films' topics—wrongful imprisonment, unwed motherhood, dead-end kids, gangsterism—indicates that Zanuck sought a particular type of narrative. Clearly, he wanted to beef up the studio's reputation and box-office intake by projecting serious social concern as well as the authority associated with the straight press. At the same time, though, he was not pushing scripts about labor unrest or the civil war in Spain, issues that dominated the decade's serious news canons. Rather, he was after what journalists in the 1930s would have termed "big news."

A contemporary of Zanuck, journalist Helen MacGill Hughes, defined big news as a shocking happening that typically has "no technical elements" and includes catastrophic events, scandals, and crimes that are unexpected and disruptive (62). Papers specializing in "big news" assume an authorial audience that wants ongoing, exhaustive coverage of the event. Editors dedicate their star reporters, their front-page display, and the bulk of the paper's space to covering its development. Ultimately, as Frederick Lewis Allen remarks, big news satisfies readers by making them feel they are "vibrating to the same chord which thrills a vast populace," a point that emphasizes the importance of big news to popular culture at large (164).

"Big news" was, of course, the bailiwick of the New York tabloids, which Zanuck read avidly (Clarens 52). But mainstream journalism sometimes trafficked in big news as well; in 1927, Silas Bent complained that mainstream papers such as the *Boston Globe* and the *Chicago Tribune* had succumbed to the "tabloid strategy of hurling an event at the public with such force and persistence that it was impossible to pass even one day without hearing of it somehow" (*Ballyhoo* 111). Bent's words suggest that, less than a decade after the tabloids' founding, the boundary between their coverage and that of the mainstream news was hardly rigid. The straight papers certainly complained about the tabloids' freehanded mixing of fact and fiction, but they were often sending reporters to the same scenes.

By the time Warner Bros. was implementing its headline policy, even the most conservative papers were milking the occasional "big" story, such as the St. Valentine's Day Massacre or the Lindbergh kidnapping. Given this, Zanuck could assume that interest in big news would drive both tabloid and mainstream papers to report on certain events long enough to make them part of America's cultural memory. And under his direction, the studio began using big news coverage from a mix of both straight and tabloid headlines.

Building on this observation, this chapter explores narrative mobility as a process whereby a studio—working in the cinematic medium that had recently escaped its own "lowbrow" origins—strove to pull narratives from differently valorized sources. Since Warner Bros. wanted its films to project an image of some gravity while still attracting box-office profits, it had to negotiate the often-porous boundary between sober and sensational news. This boundary was permeable not only because the mainstream press sometimes covered big news, but also because the *Daily News,* the tabloid from which Warner Bros. drew most heavily, was redefining its own image.

Warner Bros.' borrowing from both the straight press and the tabloids leads us to a second, practical question: *how* did the studio position its own products in relation to these journalistic media? In particular, how did it finesse the all-important issue of timeliness? Headlines are notoriously time-sensitive. As soon as any story hits the street, it must have its importance continually refreshed, or it grows old. Mainstream news had the advantage of being able to bring the words of public officials immediately to any event. Meanwhile, a tabloid like the *Daily News* could recast the same story quickly from different perspectives, blur fact and fiction, and balance text with a stream of new, lurid images to keep its stories juicy. But the relative sluggishness of cinema as a medium forecloses many of these possibilities. The whole concept of a headline news film, in fact, was oxymoronic. It implied that Warner Bros. could roll out a movie while its real-life subject matter was still sizzling. Yet even the speediest feature-length picture cannot literally meet journalism's promise to deliver news immediately. How, then, did the studio keep stories based on months-old news events from seeming stale?

Admittedly, these questions are complex. To rein in our discussion, we focus on the most sensational crime of 1930: the gangland murder of *Chicago Tribune* reporter Alfred "Jake" Lingle. We chose this case for several reasons. First, more so than other crimes we discuss in this book, it constantly crossed the boundaries between tabloid and straight journalism. That is, unlike the Snyder murder or the Hall-Mills homicide—whose

sexual and domestic intrigues were primarily the subject of exhaustive tabloid coverage—Lingle's assassination was covered at length by a spectrum of newspapers. Moreover, Lingle's killing received attention from all quarters because he was a reporter covering mob doings for a respected paper. The result was a dense knot of often-competing coverage. Warner Bros. had to compress and make coherent this obfuscating proliferation by offering its own version of the narrative. The resulting film, *The Finger Points,* was one of the top box-office hits of 1931. Yet despite being a textbook example of a headline news film, it has received virtually no attention from film scholars.

The movie and the news coverage on which it is based deserve our close attention, for they demonstrate the challenges in making a headline film. They also provide a fascinating case study in narrative mobility. Compensating for its disadvantage in timeliness and flexibility, Warner Bros. worked to mobilize the Lingle story into allegory. This consciously aestheticizing choice allowed the studio to gesture toward news coverage while elevating the case's temporal particulars into timeless symbols. Allegory was an appropriate choice for the Lingle events which, as we will see, illustrate profound ruptures in the press's ability to narrativize big news. Fredric Jameson discusses how allegory arises from just such ruptures: "Allegory," he writes, "is a narrative process precisely because it needs to tell the narrative of the solution to its representational dilemma. . . . [I]n allegory the crisis of representation and of meaning is conceived precisely as a dramatic situation that the allegorist is called upon to resolve in some way" (qtd. in Elliott 8). Allegorizing the Lingle case, in other words, allowed Warner Bros. to deal with a narrative crisis: on the one hand, the case's fissures and uncertainties seemed to render it unnarratable. On the other hand, neither the tabloids nor the straight newspapers could be stopped from spinning their distinct versions of the killing out to the last threads. Altogether, the Lingle case shows us three media competing at the same time to tell the story of a reporter's death.

Let us stroll back in time, then, to the summer of 1930. Jake Lingle has just set out for an afternoon at the races, but as we will see, someone is going to make sure that he never gets there.

A Moving Death: Framing Jake Lingle

All seemed quiet on the sunny afternoon of June 9, 1930. Lingle, a well-respected newsman at one of the nation's most important papers, was

walking toward Illinois Central Station to catch a 1:30 train to the racetrack. But as he entered the station tunnel, a nattily dressed man ran up from behind and, without speaking, coolly fired a round of bullets into the reporter's head. Lingle plunged forward, dead, and the gunman ran off.[5]

Roughly a dozen people witnessed the shooting, and the nation's newspapers immediately jumped on this brazen display of mob rule. Within hours, the Chicago and New York press had declared Lingle the "martyr" of a gangland execution, some of them even speculating that Capone himself had ordered the hit because the reporter had refused to intervene on his behalf with the Chicago police commissioner. A few days later, Lingle was buried with full military honors, his funeral taps accompanied by the clacking of typewriters that transformed every detail of the sendoff into print. Then, less than two weeks later on June 20, a sensational twist sent shockwaves across the country: the "martyr" acquired feet of clay as headlines disclosed that, for over ten years, he had actually been on Capone's payroll, exchanging "protection from the press" for hefty cash payments. His perks included a chauffeured limousine, a summerhouse, and even a diamond belt buckle similar to the one Capone himself wore. Taken together, these elements made the Lingle saga the criminal sensation of 1930.

Even this brief description indicates the high degree to which the Lingle case possessed what Paul Ricoeur calls "narrativity."[6] Narrativity refers to those characteristics—in this case, a brutal murder, a martyr figure, celebrity criminals, and the human-interest theme of public corruption—that make a new string of events easily translatable into a familiar story. The case also possessed "timeliness," which can be understood, in Michael Schudson's terms, as a "subtle and unspoken understanding among journalists about what events are genuinely 'new'" (82). In 1930, gang war stories dominated urban headlines throughout America, and Lingle's killing amplified a sense of panic. But, because this murder also involved a reporter for one of the nation's most powerful papers and, moreover, implicated that paper in withholding information, it offered a stunningly novel angle. In fact, despite the nearly five hundred and thirty gangland murders in Chicago since Prohibition had started, Lingle's assassination generated more media coverage than any other. "Not even the St. Valentine's Day Massacre had caused an outcry of such intensity," noted one Capone biographer (Bergreen 373). Much of this attention derived from the victim's profession: journalists, like women and children, were strictly *hors de combat* when it came to gangland warfare, and Lingle's slaying violated that assumption, shattering the illusion of

journalistic immunity. Lingle's ties to Capone, moreover, threatened cozy platitudes about journalistic objectivity and openness of the press.

The murder, occurring just a few months before Warner Bros. announced its headline news policy, provided exactly the kind of big news Zanuck wanted, and the studio quickly went to work on the film that would be released in April 1931 as *The Finger Points.* The movie remakes Lingle into Breckenridge Lee, an idealistic young reporter who comes to the "big city" and finds mob corruption rampant. He writes about gangland activities for a newspaper called the *Press,* an act that earns him a savage beating by two thugs. After several days in the hospital, he returns to work only to discover that his newspaper won't pay his medical expenses. This turn of events causes him to renounce his idealism and enter into a payoff arrangement with the city's most powerful mobster, referred to only as "Number One." Lee suppresses any reportage about the mob, allowing them to operate without public attention. However, Lee's girlfriend, also a reporter, persuades him to give up his underworld ties and leave town with her; in a dramatic redemption scene (accompanied by an explicit pre-Code sleepover), Lee agrees and proposes marriage. But he is gunned down the next morning after his best friend at the *Press* publishes an article on a casino the mob wished to keep secret. Not realizing what his friend was up to, Lee had failed to squash the story, thereby incurring Number One's wrath. The final scene shows Lee's girlfriend and friend watching a "martyr's" funeral, the bereaved woman alone aware that Lee is not the paragon he is believed to be.

The movie's straightforward plot belies the dramatic contest of information and counter-information that Warners Bros.' scriptwriters encountered when trying to tear the Lingle story from the headlines. Indeed, if we examine how the case appeared in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* and the *Daily News,* the two papers Zanuck and his scriptwriters were most likely to have followed, we find that mobilizing headlines into celluloid certainly meant more than simply pulling plot points from the news or adapting a journalistic narrative into a cinematic one. In this case, the studio was faced with a tangle of competing narrative frames, arising in part from the different cultural positions occupied by the *Tribune* and the *Daily News.*

As with any narrative, crafting a news event into a "story" involves framing. As Robert Entman explains, this means choosing "some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient . . . in such a way as to promote a particular problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the term described" (52). That is, writing about the news involves both the deliberate omission

of certain elements and the amplification of others. To determine how an event is being framed by a newspaper, we as readers pay attention to elements such as headlines, photos, captions, and lead articles. We probably also consider both the paper's sources and the way it incorporates data such as quotes, statistics, or graphs. Studying these elements is a way of becoming what Phyllis Frus calls "reflexive readers" who "pay attention to the way the message is expressed, analyzing its tropes as they support or contradict or distract [us] from the referential function" (32). In assuming the position of reflexive readers, we recognize that news events are framed in ways that are already understood and anticipated. Daniel A. Berkowitz concurs, noting, "Much of the mythical quality of news derives from 'resonance'—the feeling that we have written or read the same stories over and over again. The principle of consonance ensures that events that may actually be different are encoded into frameworks that are already understood and anticipated" (338). News stories, in other words, function by framing events within familiar, repetitive, and readily understood patterns. The event itself is secondary to the framework that embeds it, a fact that official journalism tries to repress.

Indeed, unlike tabloid reportage, mainstream reporting tends to efface itself as discourse. Instead, it presents its coverage as the "things themselves." For the most part, official journalists even today still hold to the notion that they simply reflect reality in their accounts, "that every story springs anew from the facts of the events being recorded" (Bird and Dardenne, *Myth* 66). In contrast, tabloids such as the *Daily News* deliberately exploited the tension between their referentiality and their highly stylized narrative modes. Fluidly denying any difference between the fictive and the factual, they not only set out to thrill their audiences but, in cases like the Lingle murder, also encouraged readers to recognize the instability of news and the artifice of reportage. While this was a byproduct of the tabloids' narrative flexibility rather than of any revolutionary agenda, its importance should not be underestimated. Through their violation of objectivity and contradiction of the "knowledge" circulated in official news, the tabloids challenged the authority of powerful institutions like the mainstream press.

Targeting a largely middle-class readership, the *Chicago Tribune* was one of America's most important media sources in 1930, and a prime exemplar of a mainstream knowledge base. "Even those who don't like it read it," reported *Fortune* magazine in 1934 (qtd. in Wendt 324). The *Tribune*'s authority rested on its quality production, substantial revenue, award-winning staff of writers, and close alliance with city government. With contacts in virtually all city offices, the *Tribune* enjoyed a privileged

position among Chicago officials, who trusted publishers Robert McCormick and Joseph Patterson not to malign them. Consequently, the *Tribune*'s editorials frequently voiced perspectives aligned with those who held local office.

Given its powerful position, the *Tribune* touted its expertise and objectivity. But it also knew how to craft a dynamic narrative, and it was definitely interested in big news events, especially when they were associated with gangland crime. Beginning in 1921, after the paper took an official stand against Prohibition as the leading cause of Chicago's rise in violence, the *Tribune* was known for dramatic coverage of racketeering. Throughout the 1920s, it furnished its readers with almost daily reports of gangland doings, fashioning itself as the leader of Chicago's "campaign" against underworld warfare. This stance allowed it to report on crime while presenting itself as a social watchdog. Compared to the stiffness and sobriety of the *New York Times,* moreover, the *Tribune* didn't shy away from visual impact. It regularly used banner headlines and color illustrations, while photographs and political cartoons punctuated many of its pages.

Rather than lessening its journalistic credibility, these elements of verbal and visual drama were encapsulated into crime narratives that emphasized unity, closure, and the moral authority of the paper itself. Indeed, what distinguished the *Tribune* from other newspapers was how well it played up the sensational aspects of gangland crime while maintaining authority throughout its reportage. Daniel H. Lehman argues that a nonfiction narrative's appeal for its readers is its ability "to create a fantasy of rupture accompanied by one of mastery," thereby allowing readers to feel "some power over the shock, the scandal, the formlessness or ambiguity of the past. Ironically, then, nonfiction can produce both a disquieting effect and a promise of formal control that releases that anxiety" (122). Such an appeal was certainly to be found in the *Tribune* as well; it differed from other mainstream newspapers in its dramatizing of gangland, and from the tabloids by its imposition of a controlling narrative framework.

Perhaps it was this pull between news and drama, order and disruption, that had prompted McCormick and Patterson to found the *Daily News,* the tabloid we might aptly describe as the *Tribune*'s renegade offspring. As the story goes, McCormick and Patterson started the *News* largely as a commercial investment for the extraordinary profits from the *Tribune*.[7] But history also suggests that the *News* functioned, for Patterson at least, as an outlet for the stylistic flamboyance in which his main newspaper could not indulge. By publishing this new venture as a tabloid in New York—a city associated in the popular imagination with Broadway theatricality and hyper-modernity—McCormick and Patterson gave it

license for a level of inventive reporting and ballyhoo toward which the more respectable *Tribune* could only nod. Yet, at the same time, many of those who worked for the *News,* including the founders themselves, still worked for the *Tribune.* The *News* also depended on its parent newspaper for a number of resources, including the *Tribune*'s AP wire service. Thus, the *News*'s narrative stance—transgressive as it appeared—was shaped to some degree by its ties to one of the most influential papers in the world.

As a tabloid, the *Daily News* did not have the same journalistic clout enjoyed by the *Tribune,* but its popularity was far greater; in 1930 it was the best-selling paper in the country.[8] A major factor in this popularity was its evolution from "the stenographer's gazette" to a paper that, by the late 1920s, was characterized by harder-hitting material and a more cynical tone. Influenced by the explosion in pulp fiction between 1921 and 1925, this reformulation allowed the *News* to distinguish itself from the *Graphic* and the *Mirror.* When contrasted with the mélange of health tips, Bible verses, and nudity that typified the *Graphic,* or the gossipy melodrama that steeped from Mark Hellinger's Broadway column into the *Mirror,* the *News* seemed the most serious, the most socially minded, and the most hard-boiled of the three tabloids.

We can trace this evolution between 1919 and 1930, observing how the *News*'s reportage and features, originally written in florid prose, shift into a more clipped style. Indeed, the overall tone of the *News* evolved from playful and exuberant—evidenced by a running ad in the 1919 issues that announced "I am the bright, breezy NEWS"—to skeptical. Correspondingly, we find increasing coverage of crime and declining attention to stereotypically feminine topics. Readers of the *News* in 1919 would have found fashion and romance-inflected headlines such as "Pretty Ankle Attracts Jury in Theft Case" (November 19, 5) and "Too Many Husbands Her Trouble" (November 22, 5). They would also have found fiction directed toward and written by women, including stories like "The Curse of a Thousand Kisses" (November 24, 1919, 17) and "His Kisses Left Her Cold" (April 11, 1921, 3). In addition, columns designed for a female audience—such as "For and By Business Girls" and "Real Love Stories"—make up a sizable portion of the paper.

By the later half of the 1920s, the newspaper increasingly projected a male authorial audience and tried to satisfy it with a focus on crime. Columnists Mark Hellinger and Sidney Skolsky began contributing features on underworld figures in the mid-1920s. Meanwhile, crime reporter John O'Donnell and night editor Gene McHugh developed close contacts with the mob and the police force, enabling the *News t*o scoop rival papers

in gang coverage. In 1928, the paper initiated a syndicated column by Ring Lardner called "Night Letter," which featured Lardner as a tough hero who roams New York's streets, exposing corruption. Romance fiction ceded to crime stories by writers such as S. S. Van Dine and John Dickson Carr. Stylistically, too, the *News* had adopted more laconic prose. Captions and headlines were no longer as whimsical, and the reportage was at times noticeably hardfisted. "Within the pages of the *News,*" writes Leo McGivena, "each new crime launched its own hard-boiled phrase" (196). And, according to McGivena, many of the jazzy locutions we now associate with crime fiction or gangster films—such as "trigger men," "gun molls," "on the spot," "muscling in," "gang slayings," and "death pacts"—originated in the *News.*

By 1930 the *News* was also covering police inefficiency and local corruption. Headlines like "Nude Dancers at Vice Cops Party" (March 26, 1931, 1), "Tammany Building Chief Quits Under Fire" (March 26, 1931, 1), and "All-Night Beach Party to Delay Mayor from Returning to Duty" (March 27, 1931, 3) appeared regularly. Again taking its cue from hard-boiled fiction, the *News* began to express increasing cynicism about the law.

In its pulp fiction form, this hard-boiled mode was at the throbbing heart of American popular culture, yet, because of its association with crime stories, it was also credited for its willingness to approach actual social problems. "From its first appearances in the pulp magazines of the 1920s," writes Sean McCann, "hard-boiled crime fiction emphasized its populist credentials. These were stories . . . with a privileged purchase on 'real life' and a fundamental antipathy to genteel fantasy" (39). Hard-boiled writing promised to deliver the stark truths of contemporary society, often linking this sensibility to an awareness of social corruption. As its writers and fans argued, showing the brutal truth of the day was not simply "pulp sensationalism"; rather, it was "part of a moral struggle against dishonesty" (39). And so, while the *News* was certainly not immune to charges of self-indulgence and frivolity, it nevertheless came closest of the tabloids to functioning as a populist watchdog, especially after 1929.

Both the *Tribune* and the *News,* then, were positioned to jump on the Lingle murder story, but from different angles. As Chicago's most powerful newspaper—and as Lingle's increasingly compromised former employer—the *Tribune* had a vested interest in framing the "official" viewpoints of the case, foregrounding the activities of the police and legal system, and its own professionalism in working with them. The *Tribune* therefore marginalized less-flattering perspectives and information; for a ten-day period after June 20, in fact, when Lingle's involvement with

Capone was revealed, the paper made no mention of its reporter's ties to the mob. Focusing its coverage on police activities and its own attempts to track Lingle's killers, the *Tribune* positioned the story as a tale of moral righteousness in the face of clearly demarked wrongdoing. In contrast, the *News* adopted a mobile perspective, shifting constantly among different standpoints and theories about the murder. This meant that the *News* could expand any story indefinitely by offering viewpoints counter to the official one. It also meant that the *News* could generate a mobile suspicion of authority, shifting its targets from story to story, sometimes even from day to day.

The Lingle case, in short, illustrates how the tabloids often subverted powerful institutions and their discourses, encouraging readers to recognize that "truth" is always a function of the way particular evidentiary and narrative elements are framed. Reading about a sensational crime like the Lingle case in the *News*, readers found a glut of plausible scenarios. This propagational approach, according to Glynn, allows the tabloids to circulate "a variety of popular counterknowledges and counternarratives that are typically relegated to the margins" of the mainstream press (67).

These differences between the two papers' approaches are clear when we look at how they initially framed the case. The *Tribune*'s authoritarian stance is visible on the first day of coverage, as is its desire to construct an action-oriented plot. On June 10, the day after the murder, it ran a front-page story titled "Gunman Slays Alfred Lingle in I.C. Subway" that summarized events alongside another article headlined "Officials Pledge War to a Finish Against Gangs." Effectively, this juxtaposition countered the tale of gangland violence with an immediate assurance of social restoration: as readers learned the facts of the killing, they could, just by glancing an inch to the left, see the promise of control. In fact, the *Tribune* positioned Lingle's death as a catalyst that would bring the city's officials together to wipe out gang activity completely. The county coroner, for example, was quoted as saying that "every law enforcement official will join wholeheartedly in the effort, and with such cooperation I believe we may solve the entire gang problem" ("Officials Pledge" 1). Seven other official statements reiterated that Lingle's killer would be quickly captured and Chicago's whole "gang problem" eliminated. Declarations and resolutions thereby shaped the case for *Tribune* readers as a social "crisis" while reinforcing the idea of powerful civic guardians who would restore order.

Given this focus, the *Tribune*'s version of events lauded the Chicago police, with coverage framing the "valorous actions" of the men in blue. Eleven articles appearing between June 10 and June 13 reported on sus-

pect roundups, detective raids, and the formation of special investigative squads. Within three days of the killing, Police Captain Stege was quoted assuring readers that "Chicago right now is rid of its worst criminal element" (June 12, 1930, 2). Similar articles on the same day continued in this positive vein, their headlines reporting, for example, that "Police Smash at Gangs Again; 664 Are Seized" (2) and "Instant Results Were Apparent. Hoodlum Leaders Vanished" (1). Extensive descriptions of Chicago's "clean up" plan detailed how the police efficaciously "rid this town of nearly every gang chief within the last forty-eight hours." Each article foregrounded the law's professionalism and speed.

Moreover, before Lingle's links to Capone were revealed, the *Tribune* managed to amplify its *own* importance in the crime sweep, positioning itself as a clarion of integrity. For the first three days after the killing, the paper ran front-page headlines announcing that it would give a $25,000 reward for discovery of Lingle's assassin. This bounty was accentuated by crusading rhetoric in a quarter-page editorial that declared, "It is war. . . . The challenge of crime to the community must be accepted. . . . Justice will make a fight of it or will abdicate" (June 10, 1930, 2). Reinforcing this polemic, the *Tribune* also published several articles detailing how other newspapers supported its anti-gang sweep. A "Resolution" signed by seven of Chicago's newspapers, for example, stated that Lingle's murder was "an especially significant challenge to the millions of decent citizens who have suffered the vicious activities, in defiance of law and order, of some paltry hundreds of criminal vagrants known as gangsters" (June 13, 1930, 1). Another article quoted the President of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, who remarked, "If the gangsters of Chicago have been so foolhardy as to attempt to intimidate a newspaper in its proper service of public interest, it is our duty and that of the entire profession, to accept and answer the challenge side by side with the *Tribune*" ("Newspapers," June 11, 1930, 4). In sum, the story that emerged from the *Tribune* within the first week after Lingle's death insisted on a united front of social forces, with the *Tribune* itself at the helm.

In contrast and true to form, the *News* turned the murder into a hard-boiled sensation with a host of potential connections. On June 10, for example, reporting on the possibility that Chicago gangsters were smuggling guns into New York through their girlfriends, one *News* article enticed readers with a description that could have been lifted right out of *Black Mask* magazine: "Four smartly dressed gun molls—trim ladies of the evening working as gun bearers for their gangster boyfriends—slipped in and out of Broadway hotels last night, their neat ankles always a few paces ahead of the heavier tread of Manhattan detectives" ("N.Y. Cops"

2). Insisting that the case was *not* under control and was linked by hidden channels to New York's own underworld, these images suggested the inevitable spread of crime—and, of course, of crime stories.

Another *News* article on June 10—"Gangster Kills Crime Reporter"—speculated that if Lingle "was slain because he knew too much, he was the second of that ilk to fall in recent months." The article went on to compare the case to another recent mob killing in which "revolvers spat death . . . to Julius Rosenheim, who had stayed too long in that dangerous half-world between the gangster and the tipster for the crime commission and the press" (4). The *News*'s penchant for drawing comparisons between apparently unrelated murders invited readers to regard single crimes as evidence of a larger network of illicit activity. At the same time, such linkage implied the episodic nature of crime stories: while a murder like Lingle's might be touted as the "crime of the year," its narrative implications stretched uncontrollably into other cases, other sensations.

Meanwhile, the prose style throughout the *News*'s coverage of the case could not have been more different from the *Tribune*'s officiousness. In the same issue on June 10, a lead article headlined "Jake Lingle Doomed for Knowing Too Much" began with a punchy description of how an "assassin's bullet canceled Alfred (Jake) Lingle's assignment as gangland reporter for the *Chicago Daily Tribune* today" (2). Whereas the *Tribune* positioned crime as something only to be abhorred, the *News*'s stylized prose made clear what official accounts suppressed or pretended to ignore: it is *enjoyable* to read about crime, and people read crime stories to be thrilled as much as enlightened.

And as the *News*'s language summoned the flavor of popular detective fiction, its reportage worked to disperse control over the story. First, it undercut the official voices valorized by the *Tribune.* By immediately comparing Lingle's killing to other gangland slayings, the paper not only highlighted the interconnectedness of crime narratives, but also brought attention back to *un*solved killings. These examples insinuated that, contrary to assurances, crime actually goes *un*punished. Indeed, the *News*'s framing flatly rejected the *Tribune*'s praise of Chicago police authority. Instead, it encouraged readers to regard the police as sloppy and potentially even corrupt. As a case in point, the *News* reported that detectives in a parallel mob investigation had "dallied about with theories" but ultimately "gained little headway" ("Gangster Kills Crime Reporter," June 10, 1930, 4). The paper tarred other civic authorities with the same brush, reporting, for instance, that a coroner's jury in another gangland death had handed out its "usual verdict—death at the hands of persons unknown" (June 10, 1930, 2). Overall, the officials and appointed groups praised for

their efficacy in the *Tribune* appear in the *News* as inadequate.

Instead of a single authoritarian voice, the *News* offered numerous viewpoints on the crime. Obviously, the paper multiplied perspectives via the extraordinary proliferation of its own coverage. Nowhere is this proliferation more evident than in the number of editions it issued during the first few days after the shooting, and it exemplifies the paper's practice in general: depending on the number of big news items it had to report, the *News* would run as many as six or seven editions on any day, including slightly different editions for Manhattan and Brooklyn. Such abundance was designed to create an insatiable desire in readers for more coverage, even though each edition basically contained the same material. But it also emphasized the subjective nature of "truth" by offering a highly flexible, rapidly changing, and visibly mobile form of news coverage.

Readers who followed the case closely in the *News* would have noticed that it literally "grew" in visual impact over subsequent editions. The front page of the June 10 "Pink" morning edition, for example, announces the murder in bold headlines but does not yet include any related photos. A later edition features photographs of four different crime scenes, each of relatively equal size; one of these is a grisly picture of Lingle face down in his own blood. A still later "Final" edition reduces the number of front-page photographs to three, enlarging the Lingle picture so that it occupies most of the space. And in a later "Extra" edition, the previous layout is retained, but the three pictures are now all related to the Lingle case. Alongside the crime scene photograph are two portraits: one shows Lingle alive; the other depicts the coroner examining the murder weapon. Visually, then, the Lingle story gains dominance as the day goes on, each edition assigning it greater space to indicate that, of the several crime narratives with which the day opened, it has evolved as the best of the big news. Moreover, though the newspaper may not have intended this effect, this visual growth perhaps illustrated for some reflexive readers how malleable news framing is. Some members of the actual audience might have come away with the sense that the *News*'s reportage was *producing* as much as it was *uncovering* a journalistic narrative.

Further complicating this framing is the fact that, in contrast to the *Tribune*'s quoting of official voices, the *News*'s lead articles include a cacophony of statements by random bystanders and nameless witnesses, stressing the crime as an uninhibited eruption into the social order. "I'm afraid to leave the house. The police are doing nothing," one Chicagoan interviewed by the paper complained ("Launch Brooklyn," June 10, 1930, 4). In addition to providing first-hand accounts of the murder, such passages also suggested that there was no tidy way to enclose an event that

FIGURE 2.1 The murder of Jake Lingle, *New York Daily News,* June 9, 1930. (Used by permission of the *New York Daily News;* copyright by Daily News L.P.)

generated such visceral emotions. Another article describes how one woman "ran plump into the fleeing murderer as he ran up the subway steps. She turned and followed, finally her screams, 'Get that man! Get that man!' reaching the ears of Traffic Policeman U. L. Ruthy, on post in the boulevard" ("Gangster," June 10, 1930, 4). Noticeably, the policeman is distant, the word "finally" emphasizing how delayed his response was. His summoning here signifies how the killing and its aftermath are a blow outside the jurisdiction of any official group.

In contrast to the *Tribune*'s authoritative perspective, the *News* went on to present the Lingle story as one that could best be told by various "insider" angles. Tips, rumors, and hearsay are the modes of discourse the paper consistently underscored: "Last week the gossip sifted down the line that Lingle was marked to go," one article notes ("Gangster Kills Crime Reporter" 4). Two days later, the paper reported how "it was whispered" in Chicago that police planned to use brutality to get evidence out of mob suspects ("Launch Brooklyn" 12). This insider rhetoric, typical of the tabloids in general, implies a political stance likely to have appealed

to the *News*'s readership. By vowing to reveal things "known and done by the socially powerful—that which takes place behind the scenes, as it were," the paper established an "immense resonance with readers who are routinely denied access to information by dint of the very structure of power relations" (Glynn 72). As a populist vehicle, the *News*'s behind-the-scenes angle guided readers to believe that while official accounts were obfuscated, its own channels of information were more reliable because closer to the source.

Providing a visual corollary to this insider perspective is the photograph of the dead Lingle, a crowd of witnesses surrounding him (see figure 2.1). With its black-and-white contrast, it is a startling image, a visual outburst. This picture never appeared in the *Tribune,* but it did appear in all three New York tabloids. Within the pages of the *News,* it ran daily from June 9 to June 13, working to sustain the jolt of the killing through the week. Historians have commented on how the publication of crime scene photos added a sensational element to news reportage that straight venues like the *Tribune* wished to avoid.[9] But it also suggested to readers that the *News* would let them see details that had been hidden from them by the police and the straight press.

In framing the case, the *Tribune* and the *News* also differed dramatically in their portrayals of the reporter, especially after the details of his financial ties to Capone were exposed by the *St. Louis Post Dispatch.* Capone, it emerged, had paid Lingle $65,000 a year—roughly twenty times his annual salary as a reporter—to cover up stories; for a decade, Lingle had provided Capone with information about police raids, investigations, and planned arrests. As the *Dispatch* revealed, the reporter had grown accustomed to luxury. Due to his fast living, he had amassed over $100,000 in debt to Capone. To clear himself, he planned to inform on Capone's rival, Bugs Moran. Moreover, as the investigation continued over the next month, it appeared that others high in the city's chain of command were incriminated: the tips Lingle gave to Capone came not only from his nightly rounds at the police station, but also from his friend the police commissioner, who was also reported to have been on Capone's payroll.

Clearly, Lingle was the center of the action. His initial valorization, followed by his downfall, were terrific narrative material. And until Lingle's connection to Capone was uncovered, the *Tribune* presented him as the epitome of virtue. During the first week of coverage the paper typically described him in glowing terms, either focusing on his role as a "devoted father" of two small children or emphasizing his professionalism. The day after the murder, for example, the *Tribune*'s lead article quoted one official who stated that Lingle was "a man of the highest character. He


POLICE, FIREMEN, SAILORS, AND LEGION POSTS TAKE PART IN LINGLE FUNERAL PARADE. The head of the funeral procession reaches One Lady of Sorrows church at 3121 West Jackson boulevard and the rest of the marchers strung out along West Jack onboulevard for several blocks. TRIBUNE Photo. (Story on page 1.)

FIGURE 2.2 Jake Lingle's funeral, the *Chicago Tribune*, June 12, 1930.

was honest to the core and a more faithful newspaperman never lived" ("Officials Pledge War," June 10, 1930, 1). Lingle, in short, was portrayed as an icon whose death catalyzed the city into action. Nowhere was this portrayal more prominent than in the *Tribune*'s coverage of his funeral. Featuring spectacular high-angle photos of an elaborate cortege, these articles provided an idealizing closure to Lingle's life (see figure 2.2).

Once the *Dispatch* revealed facts about the reporter's involvement with Capone, however, the *Tribune* remained conspicuously silent for nearly ten days as other newspapers rushed to publish every emerging rumor. When it did finally break its silence, the *Tribune* published a massive article under the heading "Flood of Reports are Reviewed in Connection with Lingle Murder." Justifying why the paper had avoided discussing its reporter's shoulder-rubbing with the underworld, the article opened by asking, "Who killed Jake Lingle and why? This question yielding to a myriad of answers, of rumors, innuendos, and gossip, has become the most absorbing topic of conversation in clubs, homes, town meetings, street corners, and in the press" (2). Implying that participation in the coverage would have constituted mere gossip-mongering, it went on to frame its silence as a courtesy to the legal forces: "The newspapers were urged to adopt a policy of printing only such news as was released by State's Attorney Swanson. So far, the only news given out has been a detailed

statement of Lingle's financial antics, and it has been announced that the release of news of the crime itself would prove of serious detriment to the investigation." Then, suggesting that the nation's other papers had all been resorting to tittle-tattle, it framed its own account as an objective overview of unsubstantiated chatter, stating that "the drift of the scandal concerning the activities of Lingle has gone so deep, without any of it having been officially sifted for the public to determine its truth or falsity, that a general review of the rumors and reports is herewith presented" (June 30, 1930, 2). Such an intervention clearly intended to corral other papers' coverage by casting it as unverified. This article is, moreover, the only one in the *Tribune* that gives any extensive treatment to Lingle's involvement with Capone; after this date, reportage is limited to police pursuit of various leads. Lingle's criminal past is thus frozen within the pages, a silenced topic upon which the paper refuses to comment.

Not surprisingly, the *News* jumped on Lingle's underworld connections, translating them into a tough-fisted narrative that was critical of authorities. Before the *Dispatch* broke the story of Lingle's criminal involvement, the *News* was already publishing unsubstantiated rumors to that effect, demonstrating how the tabloids encourage readers to participate in "skepticism toward the official view" (Glynn 75). Throughout the next several months, the *News* would continue to publish rumors about Lingle's mob ties. And once his relationship to Capone was made public, the *News* touted him as "an intimate alike of police chiefs and hoodlums," critiquing the police for setting up reporters as go-betweens ("Gangster Kills Crime Reporter" 4). One editorial, for example, observed that Lingle "became a hold card in that game of put and take which the police play with the crime world" ("Murder of Alfred Lingle," June 11, 1930, 23). The article went on to conclude that it was "little wonder that he now lies dead," effectively mobilizing blame against the very authorities the *Tribune* was lauding for their work on the case (June 11, 1930, 23).

But as sensational a light as it often cast on Lingle, the *News* was clearly outdone in this regard by the *Mirror.* Backed by Hearst's bottomless pockets, the *Mirror* outbid the *News* in acquiring the rights to serialize writer Fred Pasley's dirt-dishing biography of Capone, seven chapters of which focus on Lingle. One feature of these chapters is how they mythologized the ex-reporter as a leading figure in Chicago's underworld. Introducing him, for example, Pasley recounted that "Jake Lingle was Capone's friend, but this $65 a week reporter had a power in Chicago that was wholly removed from Capone" ("Lingle a Police Power," March 31, 1931, 23). Even more striking was Pasley's suggestion that Lingle's involvement with Capone was not just understandable but inevitable,

given the reporter's daily association with the criminal world. Echoing the critique of authority we find in the *News,* but leveling it specifically against the *Tribune,* Pasley remarked on the dangers to which crime journalism exposes the reporter. "His working hours are spent with the mentally deficient, the so-called scum of the city," Pasley argued, "and he has contact with graft and corruption. His sensibilities harden; his sympathies diminish; his judgment warps" ("Jake Lingle, Police Fan" 9). This line of argument dominated Pasley's writing, portraying the ex-reporter as a victim of his own profession and implying that mainstream newspapers like the *Tribune,* hell-bent on their crusades against gangsterism, recklessly endanger their workers' lives or morals by putting them in risky situations. "The *Tribune,*" concludes Pasley, "is as much at fault for Lingle's death as Capone himself. Maybe more" ("*Tribune* Declared War," March 31, 1931, 24).[10]

This type of pointed indictment against the *Tribune* is entirely absent in the *News*'s coverage. Such an absence makes sense, of course, when we consider how closely entwined the *News* and the *Tribune* were. Though the tabloid was more than willing to level accusations against Chicago's men-in-blue or the high-powered officials above them, it had to draw a line at what was, after all, its parent newspaper. Perhaps more importantly, as a paper specializing in gangland reporting itself, the *News* could not criticize the impulse behind such journalism too extensively, for fear that it would cast an ugly light on its own journalistic practices. In this regard, it was no different from any other paper reporting on Lingle; even the *Mirror,* despite its publication of Pasley's incriminating words, never once blames the larger practice of crime reportage.

Looking at issues of the *Tribune* alongside the *News,* then, we can see how the Lingle case was mobilized into very different narratives based on the cultural positions, and thus the authorial audiences, of the two newspapers. Yet as different as these narratives were, they shared one key characteristic: their understandable refusal to criticize the journalism industry for encouraging its reporters to fraternize with gangsters in order to acquire a story. This was the narrative angle waiting to be filmed.

Lingle Goes to Hollywood

Before we examine how Warner Bros. handled the Lingle case, however, it is important to contextualize the studio's headline policy more carefully. This policy is such a vital part of cinematic history—and as yet such a neglected one—that it deserves our attention. A close look at Warner Bros.'

policy allows us to see how "headline films"—with their aura of social relevance—helped bolster Warner Bros.' status, transforming it into the most influential studio of the Depression Era. Considering the individual films created under this policy, moreover, we can appreciate how much they varied in style, tone, and content while simultaneously sharing certain recognizable features. We will then return to the Lingle case later in this section, examining how Warner Bros. developed its own unique, narrative angle for *The Finger Points* while finessing the issue of timeliness. As we'll see, Warner Bros. deployed allegory for *The Finger Points*—as it did for so many of its "headline films"—in order to transform a timely event into the "timelessness" of "art."

In *The Genius of the System,* Thomas Schatz describes how Warner Bros. struggled throughout the 1920s to enter the ranks of the integrated major studios. According to Schatz, when Zanuck assumed the position of executive producer in 1930, he turned what had long been seen as the studio's liabilities—its tight budget and factory-like system of production—into a style. Shunning the glossy, well-lit world of MGM and Paramount films, Zanuck pushed Warner Bros.' pictures toward a bleaker worldview. But what Schatz and others have not accounted for was how much that style and that worldview were served by headline films, as a brief glance at contemporaneous reviews of these films suggests.

Though often violent or risqué, headline films garnered critical praise for presenting an ostensibly unvarnished slice of life. A *Variety* review of *The Public Enemy,* for example, says, "There's no lace on this picture," and goes on to praise the elevating influence of the studio on the gangster topic: "It's low-brow material given such workmanship as to make it high-brow" (January 1, 1931). *Marked Woman* was called a "hard-hitting yarn" whose stark depictions of underworld doings are important though they have "nothing pretty" about them (*Variety,* January 1, 1937). Earning the highest kudos, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* was heralded as "vital and arresting" by the *New York Times* (November 30, 1932). Based on a short piece in Macfadden's *True Detective Mysteries,* which itself had borrowed from newspaper coverage, *Fugitive* earned the National Board of Review's praise as "not only the best feature film of the year, but one of the best films ever made in this country" (148). Altogether, the headline films contributed to the studio's increasingly prestigious image in the 1930s.

Yet, it is important not to let this totalizing praise blind us to how different these films are from one another. Despite the critical truism that the studio specialized in a kind of factory-line method of production, each of the headline films bears its own distinctive stamp. They run the

tonal gamut from the violent yet funny (*Public Enemy, G-Men)* to the consistently somber (*Fugitive, Marked Woman*). They all allowed the studio to play up the "pulled from the headlines" angle. Some of them, though, were also promoted as being drawn from a headline-inspired novelization. Such is the case with *Little Caesar,* which the studio publicized as a movie both based on headline coverage of Capone and drawn from W. R. Burnett's novelization of that coverage. By identifying both sources, the studio could emphasize the name-value of Burnett's title while accentuating the headline truth of the film.

Within their diegesis, too, the films frequently gesture toward a recognizable outside reality. *G-Men* was noted for its detailed depiction of the actual shootout at the Little Bohemia Lodge. *Marked Woman*'s district attorney was famously modeled on New York prosecutor Thomas Dewey. *Racket Busters*'s protagonist was also drawn from Dewey; in fact, the studio received his permission to bill the film as "based upon the official Court Records of the Special Rackets Prosecution of the Trucking Racket in New York City" (Shindler 132). *Public Enemy* opens with documentary footage of Chicago, taken in 1909. These moments reminded audiences that the films participated in a real social dialogue about big news events.

And ads for headline films often invited viewers into that social dialogue as "insiders." As we discussed in chapter 1, press book materials fashion the filmmakers as specialists in hidden knowledge and the resulting movies as daring exposés of current affairs. An ad for *Little Caesar,* for example, foregrounds the bravado of its filmmakers who are "working behind closed doors . . . the entire cast sworn to secrecy . . . even the title disguised . . . because it exposes with graphic and hair-raising honesty what gangland has tried to hide for years" (ellipses in original). This exaggeration allowed the studio to accentuate the element of national crisis associated with the headlines and bring greater importance to its films' versions of events. Such films thus offered the pleasure of being what Lehman calls an "implicated" audience member: one, that is, who has lived in the "real" world the drama represents, who then watches the artistic depiction of that world, and who may also have seen competing depictions in other media (119). Indeed, Warner Bros. banked on an authorial audience that had such an inside/outside perspective. It wanted viewers who could understand the films' simultaneous claims toward social relevance and aesthetic elevation.

Given this emphasis on news-inspired veracity, it is curious that many of the headline films also display a hermetic quality, as we'll see more specifically when we turn to *The Finger Points.* Critics have noted the absence of a public sphere in the crime movies of this period, and some of the

headline films exhibit the same insularity. This is reinforced by a repetition of visual motifs. For example, at least three headline crime films—*Little Caesar, The Public Enemy,* and *The Finger Points*—contain scenes in which the gangster protagonist gets fitted for a new set of flashy clothes, his transformation symbolized via the sartorial spectacle. With such nods toward one another's motifs, some of the headline movies create their own field of reference, removing them from the outside world they purport to represent. While these films link their protagonists to headline figures on the one hand, they also suggest that these figures are archetypes. In other words, even as these films summon empirical reality, they overlay it with obvious fictionalizing—or, more specifically, as we'll see shortly, with *allegorizing*.

Key to such fictionalizing is the headline films' promise to resolve real world crises that had not been (or could not be) given closure in the press. We might think here of news as a *referential narrative,* which is, according to Dorrit Cohn, "verifiable and incomplete" while *nonreferential narrative*—that is, fiction—is "unverifiable and complete" (16). In transforming the referentiality of news into the nonreferentiality of fiction, Warner Bros. could "finish" the imaginative work left undone by the newspapers. In order to position its products as doing this work, the studio often created ads presenting the film as a completion of the newspapers' unresolved story. Advertising for *The Finger Points,* for example, touts the movie's ability to close the Lingle story after the press had failed. One ad announces that the film will provide "The Story No Newspaper Dared to Print!" Another ad promises immediacy and closure by announcing, "Here's the final chapter of a story that never reached the press." Such publicity insisted that audiences could find greater "truth" in a fictional film than in the more "factual" accounts of the newspapers.

At the same time, a number of headline films undercut the complete restoration of order we associate with Classical Hollywood Cinema. In fact, we might usefully employ the term "open story," coined by Richard Neupert, to describe how their endings function. According to Neupert, the "open story" is an aesthetic strategy that emphasizes the uncertainty of knowledge and the incompleteness of real life while relying on certain powerful termination devices to "close" its narration. Indeed, it is a combination of open-endedness and powerful termination that makes the conclusion of many headline news films so unforgettable. *The Public Enemy,* for example, relies on the spectacle of Tom Powers's mummified body to close its narrative, even as it leaves open the question of what impact Tom's death will have on his family or on the city's gang problem. At the end of *Fugitive,* the protagonist utters his famous closing line, "I

steal," in response to his girlfriend's question of how he survives. Such termination indicts the judicial system while leaving open the question of the hero's fate. And the ending of *Marked Woman* shows a small group of "taxi-dancers" receding into the night after giving testimony against a mob boss, facing an ambiguous future as the film's DA receives praise for the conviction. As the camera follows the women down a deserted night street, we are left to wonder whether their testimony has done them more harm than good; they have left mob protection only to become, literally, "streetwalkers." Yet, as open as these endings are, they allowed Warner Bros. to provide a degree of narrative closure that journalism often could not.

Now that we have surveyed some of Warner Bros.' most important "headline films," let us return to *The Finger Points.* This film illustrates all the elements discussed above while providing a fascinating example of how Warner Bros. positioned itself to cover a narrative angle inaccessible to the newspapers. And as we'll also discuss, *The Finger Points* constitutes what is arguably the most vivid example of how the studio relied on allegory as a means of circumventing the thorny issue of timeliness.

While the *Tribune* and the *Daily News* framed the case's ultimate mystery as "Who killed Lingle?"—and then fell into silence as no satisfying answer arose—Warner Bros. framed its narrative as an exposé of a far more incriminating question: How does a respected newspaper endanger reporters by misusing an anti-crime crusade? While the films produced under the headline policy often implicate the judicial, penal, or political systems, *The Finger Points* is unique in actually leveling its attack on mainstream journalism.

In order to frame its accusatory narrative, *The Finger Points* invites authorial audiences to recognize its despicable managing editor, Ellis Wheeler, as a version of *Tribune* publisher McCormick. In a direct reference to editorials McCormick published in the *Tribune,* for example, an early scene depicts Wheeler goading his staff by proclaiming, "the *Press* is going to expose every corrupt official. It's going to be war: a crusade to break up gang rule. You are more than reporters: you're crusaders!" Such a speech would surely have struck moviegoers in March 1931 as blustering rhetoric: after years of nearly identical declarations by the *Tribune* and other papers, it was only too clear that the press had *not* won the war against corruption.

Warner Bros. further guides audiences to look skeptically at newspaper crusades with the film's two other principal characters: Marcia, Lee's girlfriend, and "Breezy" Russell, Lee's pal and rival for Marcia's affections. Both Marcia and Breezy are entirely cynical about their editor's blowhard

crusading spiel and advise Lee not to take it seriously. And when Lee, lying in his hospital bed after being assaulted, asks, "How's the crusade?" Breezy laughs and tells him that he is "the only casualty. The rest of us don't stick out our necks." The justification for Breezy's detachment arrives in the very next scene, when the city editor nastily refuses to help Lee pay his medical bills—an act which, moments later, sends Lee into the underworld in search of financial assistance.

Also noteworthy is how the movie refuses to participate in the narrative trope of the "big scoop." With the exception of the "tabloid racketeer" movies we discuss in chapter 3, this trope dominates nearly every newspaper film of the 1930s. As newspaper films generally position it, a reporter-protagonist engages in a quest to bring in a big story that will solve a crime or other wrongdoing. Serving as a cathartic redemption for the reporter, the scoop brings closure to the larger narrative with its promise of a restored social order. Such closure is part of what Karen Johnston-Cartee calls a "newsgathering mythology" that insists that truth, revealed by the perseverance and resourcefulness of a journalist, will always win out.[11] Even in the most cynical newspaper films—*The World Gone Mad* (1933), *I Cover the Waterfront* (1933), and *Meet John Doe* (1941), for example—the scoop typically results in some resolution.[12] By recycling this trope in film after film, Hollywood studios aligned themselves with first amendment ideals of journalistic liberty and integrity, implying by extension that cinema could uncover truths and alter society for the good.

The Finger Points, however, turns the scoop convention on its head. Lee's first exposé not only initiates his descent into crime but also makes him the object of ridicule by his colleagues, all of whom—except the managing editor—regard the crusade as a joke. Near the end of the film, Breezy writes his own scoop—the one that leads to Lee's death—but he does so purely for romantic reasons: hoping to win Marcia's affections, he tries to prove himself a talented and ambitious reporter like Lee. Moreover, Breezy is an unheroic figure, a cynical "average Joe" whose big story is entirely overshadowed at the end of the film by the news of Lee's death. Indeed, Breezy's exposé has no effect whatsoever other than getting his best friend bumped off; the movie takes care, in a penultimate scene, to show the gangsters conducting their business as usual.

The movie insists that it is the news industry, embodied in the slick big-city paper, that is to blame if a reporter goes bad. Hyperbolically emphasizing that Lee is a goodhearted man, the film shows that he is forced into the mob's pocket by his employer's hypocrisy. For much of the film he is heroicized as an inverted Robin Hood figure, someone who, as he

explains to Marcia, uses his press connections to "terrorize the criminals" with the ever-present threat of exposure. Marcia responds sympathetically, remarking that while she does not want Lee in the mob's pay, she "can't *help* but admire" his courage. Warner Bros. thus positions audience sympathies with Lee by showing that he is taking payoffs from Number One in defiance of both the mob *and* the paper that let him down.

A good portion of the movie, in short, is an open attack on one of the most powerful newspapers in the country. In this, it boldly transgresses one of the key codes in Hollywood during these years: that films should show respect for societal bulwarks such as mainstream journalism. Such respectful treatment did not stem from naïveté or idealism, of course; it was based on an interplay of forces centered on the film industry's dependence on journalism for advertising and favorable publicity.

And it is probably in part because of this need to placate the Fourth Estate that, midway through, the movie drops its critique. The recent *Overlook Film Encyclopedia* complains that the film "lacks the strength of its convictions" and is undermined throughout by compromise (36). Contemporaneous reviews, while more enthusiastic, also noted screenplay inconsistencies. Writing for the *New York Times,* for example, Mordaunt Hall praised the movie's "savage" honesty, yet faulted the screenplay for a "narrative finger [that] points in so many directions that it ends by pointing in none" (March 28, 1931).

Yet the movie's waffling "narrative finger" also stems from artistic choices the studio made in order to compete with journalistic timeliness. Like other headline movies, *The Finger Points* was produced rapidly: just a month after Lingle's mob ties came to light in June, Zanuck contracted Burnett to write the screenplay; by December, Robert Lord's final script was being shot under the direction of John Francis Dillon; the picture was released in early 1931. And yet, no matter how breakneck the studio's pace, there was an irremediable temporal gap between headlines and the release date of a film based on those headlines.[13]

What Warner Bros. did have on its side, however, was cinema's ability to *condense* time and aestheticize it. As Ben Singer reminds us, one of narrative film's pleasures is its ability to "construct illusory time, to annihilate time, [and] to make hours go by like minutes" (qtd. in Allen 114). This "annihilating" approach allowed Warner Bros. to take an event whose newspaper coverage spanned months and compress it into a ninety-minute experience, streamlining a complex jumble of detail into a cohesive narrative. And in approaching the still-unsettled Lingle killing, Warner Bros. drew on allegory, a strategy that allowed it to offset the newspapers' superior time*li*ness with time*less*ness.

Film scholars have long noted the mythic and allegorical aspects of early gangster films.[14] But few have considered how these aspects conjoin with the headline dimension to these movies. Although Andrew Sarris remarks, for example, that gangster pictures were "born full-grown out of the union of mythology and sociology, literature and journalism," he doesn't pursue this important point (86). But of the many gangster films produced in the 1930s, those made under the headline policy are the most allegorical. Charles Higham makes the same observation, stating that "with its penchant for repetition dictated by a grueling production schedule, Warners specialized in converting headline news to allegory faster—and better—than any of its rivals" (*Warner Brothers* 23). We would argue, however, that Higham's cause and effect needs to be re-evaluated: Warner Bros.' allegorizing was not simply the result of tight budgets and fast production; rather, it was a response to its competition with the newspapers, which it could never win on the basis of speed alone. While Warner Bros.' rapid production schedule allowed it to scoop rival studios, bringing in the timelessness of allegory allowed its films to compete with the press for the final word on a headline story.

As Theresa Kelley and others have observed, allegory has received its fair share of criticism for being an outdated, "irrelevant," and highly artificial mode unsuitable for the concerns of modern writers. Consequently, it has functioned as an abjected "Other" to more realistic modes. Yet, as Kelley's study reveals, allegory often "makes unexpected alliances with historical and realist particulars to insure its status as a resident alien in modern culture" (3). More specifically, it enacts what we might think of as border raids on the very categories that have been represented as its contraries: "realism, mimesis, empiricism, and history" (2). Though not true in every case, we would argue that the Warner Bros.' headline films often functioned as important sites for such "unexpected alliances" of allegory and modernity.

And if this is true of headline films in general, it is especially apparent in *The Finger Points,* which is highly symbolic on numerous fronts. Immediately obvious is the film's absence of local specificity. Stripping the Lingle story of the Chicago setting that was so prominent in news coverage, the movie instead presents a vague urban space devoid of clear geographical markers. Press book publicity for the film, in fact, plays up this "it-could-be-any-place" quality while simultaneously directing viewers to connect the story with Lingle. One ad boasts that the movie "is laid in an entirely fictitious city, about a police reporter on an imaginary paper, but its similarity to the notorious case will not be missed by anyone who reads the papers or knows the news." This rhetorically shifty

plug embodies allegory's simultaneous gesturing toward the real and the symbolic; it pushes authorial audiences toward the "click" of recognition about the case while insisting on the film's power, as an "imaginary" creation, to transcend the merely temporal status of the specific crime.

The movie also presents the narrative's setting as an emblematically threatening city. When a mobster becomes indignant at Lee's demands for higher protection payments, for example, Lee remarks sarcastically that he is "just a little boy trying to get along in the big city." And in a scene where Lee attempts to justify his mob dealings to his girlfriend, he declares that "in this blood-splashed town, it's kill or be killed." This "notorious story," the film insinuates, could happen anywhere—and perhaps at any time.

Allegory functions on the level of character in the movie as well. Breckenridge Lee is the good and heroic outsider on a quest, an innocent who will be challenged by sinister forces. He is presented less as an individual and more as what Theresa Kelley calls an "exemplary allegorical figure" (30). Like medieval representations of the saintly virtues, he personifies the condition from which his name is derived. Lee's surname alludes to Southern history, while his first name suggests its possessor's qualities: he is like a "broken ridge," a high-minded man whose integrity will be snapped. Evoking the long-standing stereotype of the Southern boy who goes to the "big city," he is immediately portrayed as a classic naïf, someone separated from the more cynical or corrupt characters around him. Early on in the movie, Lee's girlfriend Marcia even matronizes him with the platitude that "[t]his town is no place for a nice southern boy."

The journey is one of the fundamental tropes of allegory, signaling to audiences that the protagonist will soon undergo a dramatic transformation. We meet Lee on such a journey, en route by train to seek work in the city. After focusing on a train's moving wheels, the camera cuts to a shot of Lee in his seat, looking out the window as he enters the city. The camera then cuts again to the train's wheels and, in a motif that would soon become a staple of newspaper films, dissolves into a shot of the wheels of a printing press, churning out copies of a newspaper. By linking the train with the press, the opening suggests that Lee's transformation—his shift from innocence to corruption—will occur as a consequence of the newspaper toward which he is being relentlessly driven. Yet linking the press to the journey also suggests that this tale is not simply a recasting of dated newspaper events, but a manifestation of an archetypal experience.

As much as it evokes Lingle's own connection to the *Tribune,* Lee's first encounter with his employer is also cast as a symbolic meeting between a vulnerable hero and a faceless power. A striking shot depicts Lee standing

in front of the towering skyscraper that houses the *Press.* Filmed from Lee's point of view, the low angle accentuates the power of the newspaper while conveying the hero's diminutive stature. Later shots emphasize how Lee is dwarfed by the managing editor's office and the newsroom. Though the mise-en-scène certainly evokes Lingle at the *Tribune,* the cinematography repeatedly emphasizes how the cinematic reporter, like the allegorical questing hero, is threatened by the powers around him.

In allegorizing Lee and his relationship to the *Press* this way, the scriptwriters completely rewrite the figure of Jake Lingle, who was born and bred in Chicago, knew the city intimately, worked on the *Tribune* for eighteen years, and was almost forty years old at the time of his death. The complicated jumble of newspaper story and counter-story revolving around Lingle's ties to Capone is simplified and eternalized, evidencing what Kelley calls "allegory's exceedingly odd traverse between what is human and what is abstract" (31). And by allegorizing the real headline figure into Lee, Warner Bros. turns the reporter's transformation into an altogether symbolic event. Refused financial assistance by the *Press,* Lee immediately signs on to work with oily mob lieutenant Louie Blanco, who functions as an allegorical "catalytic figure"(31).

When watching *The Finger Points,* we are struck by how compelling it is visually: lighting, mise-en-scène, framing, and editing are all masterfully handled. Upon the film's release, critics pointed out the cinematography's notable superiority to the screenplay. While this may be due simply to the cinematographer's talents, we might also consider how such focus pushes the movie toward allegory, which relies heavily on visual imagery to make its abstract principles concrete. We could, in fact, make this observation of all Warners Bros.' gangster films, which are punctuated by strikingly symbolic visual moments: think of scenes like Rico's death behind the billboard in *Little Caesar,* or the image of Rocky Sullivan's shadow on the wall as he is led off wailing to the electric chair in *Angels with Dirty Faces.* Likewise, the visual surface of *The Finger Points* is highly charged, asking us to read symbolism everywhere. The *Press*'s newsroom, for example, has its motto, "We Print the Truth Every Day," inscribed in huge letters on its walls, a reference that becomes increasingly ironic each time the camera catches it. And the set decoration of the gangsters' headquarters uses endlessly long hallways and giant doors as visual symbols to convey both Number One's supremacy and Lee's insignificance.

The most dramatic example of visual allegory, however, is the presentation of Lee's murder. As one of the film's only "outdoor" scenes, it calls attention to itself for its startlingly bright lighting. And not only is the scene overlit, but the few figures on the street, as well as Lee him-

self, are all costumed in glaring white. Distancing itself from the hyperactive bustle which the papers reported at the scene of Lingle's death, the film instead presents an otherworldly silence, a hypokinetic pause. Reinforcing the allegorical dimension, once Lee is shot he falls forward slowly, Christ-like, arms outstretched. Nothing in this visual allegorizing, in other words, recalls the newspaper photo of Lingle, flat in the dirt, his hat carefully positioned by onlookers to mask the gruesome wounds to his head.

As many scholars note, a key element of allegory is commentary upon the narrative from either an "outside" or an "inside" observer. The concluding scene of *The Finger Points* relies precisely on such encapsulating observations. After the camera slowly pans across a nearly empty newsroom, it focuses on Marcia and Breezy standing near an open window, looking down on the elaborate funeral march the city is giving Lee. The camera then cuts to a shot of Louie and his fellow gangsters, also observing the funeral from an open window. Louie remarks, "Martyr? What a laugh!" The camera then reverts to Marcia and Breezy. Entirely ignorant of Lee's criminality, Breezy comments on his bravery in the face of the mob, concluding with "He was one fellow money couldn't touch. . . . They couldn't buy him off. He knew too much. So they killed him. Isn't it a pity?" To which Marcia replies, "Yes, Breezy, it's a terrible pity." The camera then slowly dollies away from them as the scene fades to black. As it does so, we can hear the funeral dirge being played in the streets. This allusion to Lingle's own stately funeral is clear, and the scene seems to conjure how the reporter, until his mob connections were revealed, was mythologized in the press. Yet it also critiques that mythologizing impulse, implying both the paper's blindness and the power of the mob. And it moves the scene away from being simply the story of one crime, positioning it firmly in the iconic territory of an endless struggle between good and evil.

If we keep in mind Jameson's point about how allegory deals with a representational crisis by balancing reference with abstraction, then we can appreciate the struggle Warner Bros. had in making a headline film like *The Finger Points.* Ultimately, contemporary viewers may feel the film sacrifices the rich specificity of the Lingle case and leans too much in the direction of allegory. Yet it is likely that, because the Lingle killing was still so unresolved in the press, the studio worried about whether it could craft it into a contained narrative. Once the movie was in production, after all, the script could be updated only so much to accommodate any breaking news. And so Warner Bros. offset the threat of more proliferation by pushing its story toward myth. As it turns out, this was a prescient decision: on December 11, 1930, three days into the

movie's filming, papers broke the news that Lingle's alleged killer had been arrested.

Closing the Story

If Leo Brothers had not been tried for Lingle's murder, it's quite possible that the case would have remained unsolved, as police interrogation of over 600 suspects throughout the summer and autumn trickled away in futility. On the first day of filming *The Finger Points,* then, it seemed possible that Warner Bros. would have the last word, its interpretive stamp shaping public perception of the case. Facts outdid fiction, however, and in a triple-whammy of narrative timeliness, Brothers was arrested as filming began, tried while the movie was in production, and convicted just as the film opened in theatres nationwide. During the months of March and April 1931, then, Americans were treated to one of the most dramatic narrative contests ever between Hollywood and journalism as Warner Bros., the tabloids, and the mainstream newspapers each raced to put their final, authorial framing on the case. As Brothers's trial came to a close, with the *Tribune* pronouncing that gangland crime would end soon and the *News* debunking such optimism at every turn, *The Finger Points* debuted in theatres across America. Though coincidental, this timing could not have been better planned by Warner Bros. Not only did newspapers reference the movie in their coverage of Brothers's trial, but the film also acquired the aura of immediacy and social relevance the studio so desperately sought.

At the same time, the re-emergence of the case and the ongoing trial continually threatened to overturn Warner Bros.' own production, for the testimonies might have revealed information that would debunk assumptions on which the movie was based. While the press would thrive on such developments, Warner Bros. obviously could not remake the entire film. Imagine if new evidence had shown that Lingle was *not* actually on Capone's payroll but was in fact working with the *Tribune* to infiltrate and destroy Number One's operations? Or that Lingle's killing was the result of some personal spat utterly unrelated to the mob? Warner Bros. would have been left with a movie that seemed naïve or even absurd.

As it turned out, the studio was saved because the Leo Brothers events were, frankly, narrative duds. Though his arrest made front-page headlines in metropolitan newspapers, it quickly faded from coverage, probably because Brothers was such an unlikely suspect; with a strong alibi and no apparent motive, he seemed just one more in the numbing string of

suspects arrested since June. Though Chicago's district attorney decided he had enough evidence to prosecute Brothers, only half of the fourteen witnesses named Brothers as the assassin. Brothers himself refused to comment on the killing. And though the jury found him guilty on April 3, given the inconclusive nature of the evidence, he received the minimum sentence of fourteen years. The most exciting thing about Brothers, ultimately, was his defiance at his sentencing: "I can do that standing on my head," he jeered (qtd. in Boettinger 289). Predictably, the *Tribune* pointed to the sentence as a demonstration that justice had been done, while the *News* argued that Brothers was an unlikely suspect. *The Finger Points,* though, could reference both the outside world and allegory. Its allusion to the actual killing suggests that the problem of gangland crime will continue, while its allegory elevates Lingle's death beyond mere current events.

The Finger Points illustrates how often movies' fictionalized versions of events outlive more factual ones: without this film, how many today would remember Jake Lingle? And considered as a group, headline films remind us that Hollywood—under some circumstances—was eager to boast of its links with big news. As we move into chapter 3, we'll explore a cycle of films that exemplify precisely the opposite impulse.

C H A P T E R T H R E E

Trading Tommy Guns for Typewriters

Narrative Mobility and the Tabloid Racketeer Cycle

MAURICE MCKENZIE was worried. As executive assistant to Will Hays at the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), he was charged with vetting projects under consideration by the Hollywood studios and alerting them to likely censorship problems. In November 1930, United Artists submitted to the MPPDA its newly optioned script of the smash-hit play *The Front Page.* Penned by ex-Chicago newsmen Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, the story follows the exploits of wise-cracking reporter Hildy Johnson as he tries to quit journalism but is drawn back into it by his wily editor, Walter Burns. The play's salty dialogue contributed to its successful run on stages across the country, and United was eager to capitalize, though the studio had concerns about how the play's profanity would translate onto the screen. McKenzie, however, found bigger problems with which to contend. In a letter to the MPPDA's Hollywood office, he opined:

> I saw the stage play, enjoyed it just as you and thousands of others did, but when newspaper editors in the provinces see the picture on screen, I anticipate a complete deluge of ill-will against our business. I fear it has more potential trouble in the way of unfavorable newspaper criticism than would come from the worst possible sort of sex picture. (AMPAS, *Front Page,* November 11, 1930)

Others at the MPPDA picked up McKenzie's anxiety, triggering a flurry of correspondence between various studio executives about how to proceed. The main problem was the script's depiction of Burns, who thinks nothing of scandal-mongering to boost circulation. One MPPDA official advocated that the Burns character be changed to a crusader for good. But writer Lamar Trotti, consulted for advice, disagreed, believing that such an alteration would diminish the play's drama.

Trotti came up with two solutions for keeping Burns a scoundrel while getting around any blowback from the newspapers. He suggested that several Hearst reporters be consulted about the characterization. "It is most important for the Hearst people to be approached on this matter," he wrote, "as the two leading men are Hearst newspapermen." His other suggestion was that the movie be advertised as "A Newspaper play by newspaper men" (AMPAS, *Front Page,* December 12, 1930).

These correspondences and United's publicity for *The Front Page* reveal just how strained relations between Hollywood and the Fourth Estate in the 1930s could be. Although we saw in chapters 1 and 2 that studios were openly borrowing from newspapers, they were also cautious when it came to representing news professionals. Negative depictions of journalists might be fine on stage, but the industry feared that such characters would be more incendiary on screen. And, as we argued in chapter 2, even when Hollywood did portray the press in a negative light, it did so indirectly. Broadway playwrights seem to have had much more narrative license in their portrayals of news culture.

At the same time, this concern speaks to a claustrophobic intimacy between Hollywood and the newspapers. As Deac Rossell has remarked, Hollywood's publicity corps "were secure in the knowledge that any stunt or campaign [to publicize a film] . . . would receive full coverage on and off the [newspaper] movie pages. Motion pictures needed this exposure no less than newspapers needed the advertising and the readership it created. [This was a] . . . special partnership that the movies never achieved with any other mass medium" (18). Yet "special" as this partnership may have been, the studios were wary of upsetting the press. Meanwhile, Trotti's remark that Burns and Hildy are "Hearst newspaper men" points to the recognition that they are a particular type of journalist. Trotti understood the term to indicate reporters who would stop at nothing to get a hot headline. By labeling Burns and Hildy "Hearst men," United could exploit the narrative excitement of jazz journalism without openly appearing to condone its practices.

Trotti's suggestions for *The Front Page* worked, and the film was an immediate smash. It introduced screen audiences to scenes of pressroom frenzy that would become staples in countless other movies over the decades. It lodged Pat O'Brien in a role he would go on to inhabit many more times. It popularized characters that would become cinematic stereotypes: hard-boiled editors, claques of boozing newshounds, wry sob sisters, wisecracking reporters. And, central to our study, it was the first of many films to make tabloid news work its narrative subject. More specifically, *The Front Page* is the best-known of what we identify as a "tabloid racketeer" cycle produced between 1931 and 1933. We use the term "cycle" here to mean a group of films, produced within a short period (one or two years), that take advantage of a specific market condition or audience interest. In addition to *The Front Page,* the cycle includes nearly a score of lesser-known films such as *Five Star Final, Scandal Sheet, Sob Sister* (1931); *Scandal for Sale, Exposure, Blessed Event, Okay, America!, Love Is a Racket, Is My Face Red?* (1932); *The Famous Ferguson Case, The Strange Love of Molly Louvain* (1932); *Clear All Wires* and *The Picture Snatcher* (1933). In its equation of tabloid reporting with punchy bravado, *The Front Page* is lighter than most of the cycle's other movies, which generally condemn hot news.[1]

The cycle's narrative tropes—obvious when the films are viewed in the aggregate—guide audiences to understand that the newspapers depicted are tabloids. They portray their protagonists as racketeer types, ready to extort, bribe, or obstruct justice. The plots follow thuggish journalists, rumor-mongering columnists, law-bending editors, and reportorial cover-ups. Ranging from comedy (*The Front Page, Blessed Event*) to melodrama (*Scandal for Sale, Scandal Sheet*), the cycle is unified by its obsession with the moral and ethical conflicts of tabloid news practice. Typically, these movies follow a protagonist who engages in electrifying but unsavory journalism, becomes ethically compromised by the effects of his gossip-spreading, and finally rejects—or in a few cases is swallowed up by—the tabloid ethos. Rossell has remarked of the newspaper film in general that the journalist "was perceived as only interested in facts or in beating competitors" (15). Yet, unlike most movie reporters, the tabloid racketeer is concerned with illicit facts. As these films construe it, "facts" are a type of knowledge inevitably synonymous with secrecy, criminality, or unsavory revelations. And whereas other newspaper films associate facts with stories that could have either positive or negative impact, the tabloid racketeer cycle consistently presents facts as weapons used to bully the helpless.

What are we to make of the cycle's overt critique of jazz journalism, given that the studios were at the same time imitating the tabloids in their advertising? How do we interpret Warner Bros.' producing *Little Caesar,* a film that couldn't be more boastful about its narrative debt to hot headlines, within a year of *Five Star Final,* a film that depicts tabloid work as utterly degraded?

From the vantage point of genre criticism, one clear answer is that the cycle gave Hollywood a way of elevating the popular but risqué gangster protagonist at a time when he faced censorship. Indeed, gangster films came under the repeated threats not just of censure but of erasure; beginning with *Underworld* in 1927, moral and civic groups pressured the industry to remove all gangster references from film. Consequently, Hollywood in the early and mid-1930s worked to clean up its movie gangsters, shifting the criminal's toughness and brashness onto characters and into settings where they could be narrated as part of crime fighting. Recent studies have examined a wealth of crime pictures that abandon the classic formula of tracing the rise and fall of a gangster even as they retain some of the genre's themes or typological features.[2] Taking our cue from these critics, we consider the tabloid racketeer cycle as an example of narrative mobility in which some of the gangster's most dynamic qualities were elevated into a profession that was more reputable. "Reputability" here is relative; tabloid work in these films is presented as morally ambiguous at best. But it allowed studios to present protagonists who, whatever their failings, were at least generally within the letter of the law.

The upward mobility of the gangster into a tabloid worker also served a second purpose: it allowed Hollywood to reframe its relationship to jazz journalism as that medium's popularity began to decline. Though the movie industry continued to ape the tabloids in its advertising throughout the decade, it also castigated these papers within cinematic narratives. The cycle thus marks a point when Hollywood introduced tabloids as a subject in order to distance itself from their practices. Reflecting the vociferous rhetoric that had circulated through publications like *Commonweal* and the *Saturday Evening Post* since the early 1920s, the cycle depicts hot news as a social problem.

As this description suggests, Hollywood narrated "tabloidism" in much the same way it had gangsterism: in both cases, the studios crafted stories centered on a racy, controversial subject and then framed those stories as condemnations of a civic blight. But, as in the gangster genre, such denunciations of the hot press were simultaneously undercut by the sheer excitement of the resulting movies. Packed with big-news content, dialogue, and visuals, the tabloid racketeer films reveal a fascination with

the culture of jazz journalism, alerting us to the powerful allure these papers held for Hollywood, even as their popularity began to wane.

Mob Man to Tabloid Racketeer: Mobilizing the Gangster Figure

The Front Page is a useful film to return to here because it is the earliest example we have found of a character being elevated out of the crime racket and into the newsroom racket. The 1928 stage play did, in fact, include actual gangsters in an early draft. Carlos Clarens explains their presence by arguing that, to Hecht and many other writers in the 1920s, "gangsters were not just good copy, but legitimate heirs to the robber barons of the nineties, to be cultivated and enjoyed and not too reluctantly admired" (33). Gun-toting mugs presumably made sense to Hecht in this context not only because of his own familiarity with them, but also because of his success with the screenplay for *Underworld.*

Underworld narrowly made it into theatres because its subject—the rise and fall of criminal Bull Weeds—was initially seen by Paramount as too bizarre for popular consumption. Jesse Lasky, Paramount's cofounder, recalled that Hecht's screenplay "was so sordid and savage in content, so different from accepted film fare, that the sales heads were afraid that no amount of effort could drum up business for it" (qtd. in MacAdams 102). The studio considered shelving the movie but then decided to risk screening it. When *Underworld* opened, it was an instant hit, "the first gangster film to bedazzle the movie fans" (Hecht qtd. in MacAdams 102).[3] A year later, as Hecht and MacArthur raced to get *The Front Page* written for Broadway, it must have seemed good sense to plug another gangster into the plot for sure-fire appeal. When writer-director George S. Kaufman tightened the play's script in rehearsal, however, he cut the gangsters (MacAdams 109). The later film adaptation also left them out. Viewing the 1931 movie today, it is clear why mob men are superfluous: the press room rattles with typewriters rather than Tommy guns, the wailing of police cars is drowned out by the telephone's ringing, the bootleg product that Hildy traffics is not booze but news. And in trying to evade the law and get the scoop on rival papers, Hildy and Burns themselves are ruffians.

During the first years of the 1930s, the studios were increasingly pressured to placate vociferous complaints about the gangster films' violence and antisocial messages. One typical letter to Will Hays from a concerned citizen fumes, "Such pictures as 'Little Caesar' and other gang pictures are more destructive to the morality of the people and the civilization of our

country than any other single force today." Another letter, from the Chief Censor of the Province of Alberta, bemoans the difficulty gangster films add to his job. He writes that "it is a crime to have . . . [*Little Caesar*] broadcast upon our screens so that our young criminally inclined might learn how to organize themselves accordingly" (AMPAS, *Little Caesar*). Movie reviewers, too, joined the fray, complaining that the public "want[ed] no falsely romantic impressions about our vicious characters, no element which might contribute toward the building up of some future Napoleon out of the overemphasized power of some scum of the Chicago gutters" (AMPAS, *Scarface,* Percy, 1931).[4]

In the face of such outcry, the studios often added prefaces that positioned the gangster movie as a sociological commentary *about,* rather than a celebration *of,* crime: *Little Caesar* begins with a card bearing the biblical injunction, "He who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword"; *Scarface* includes a written prologue presenting the racketeer as a societal poison; *The Public Enemy* draws on social-problem rhetoric in a written preamble stating that its goal is to represent a dismal environment rather than "glorify the criminal." Regardless of how cynical we might find these prefaces today, the studios wanted to give authorial audiences a rationale for watching crime films.[5]

Thomas Schatz observes that the gangster film held the "briefest classic period of any Hollywood genre" because its "evolution was severely disrupted by external social forces" (*Hollywood Genres* 82).[6] But even if the studios had not succumbed to public pressures, bootlegger mob characters in movies had begun to seem outmoded by 1932. And the gangster's energy had moved into other genres. Such regrouping is normal: film genres evolve as narrative tropes migrate from one film type to another. In fact, noting how aggressively Hollywood films recycle generic elements, Rick Altman argues that we must consider any currently recognizable genre not as "the permanent product of a singular origin," but rather as a "temporary by-product of an ongoing process" ("Reusable" 6). As he demonstrates, Hollywood studios have had little investment in keeping genres static. Rather, as press books indicate, each studio wanted to turn out cycles that would draw the largest possible audience by quickly recasting elements of previous box-office hits (11).

As we watch the cycle now, it appears that audiences were encouraged to see the tabloid racketeer as an updated version of the gangster through the very basic device of what Barry Keith Grant calls "fluid associational potential": the same actor, cast in several movies, became a vehicle through which audiences recognized the different films' echoes and overlaps (121). Many of the actors who went on to play tabloid rack-

FIGURE 3.1 James Cagney as Danny Kean in *The Picture Snatcher,* 1933. (*The Picture Snatcher* © Turner Entertainment Co. A Warner Bros. Entertainment Company. All Rights Reserved.)

eteer figures were first typed as underworld characters. Perhaps the most obvious example is Edward G. Robinson. After his role as a hood in *Widow from Chicago* (1930) and his seminal performance as Rico in *Little Caesar,* Robinson set the standard for depiction of a snarling tabloid editor in *Five Star Final.* Warner Bros. also banked on James Cagney's ability to transpose his gangster brass from his starring role in *The Public Enemy* into a tabloid photographer in *The Picture Snatcher* (see figure 3.1).[7]

In *The Picture Snatcher,* Cagney plays Danny Kean, an ex-con who is turned away from one job after another because of his criminal record. Just when he despairs of finding work, he stumbles into a tabloid editor's office—the one employer who considers criminal skills actually advantageous. Immediately hired as a "picture snatcher," Kean's job is to grab photographs of victims by any means, a position that leads him into constant danger, even from other reporters. In what we read as a comic allusion to the notorious scene in *Scarface* where Tony Camonte picks up his first weapon and pretends to sign his name in bullets, Danny lifts his new camera, peers at it, and observes that it operates just like a gun. Whether or not audiences caught the reference, the larger connection between bullying with bullets and bullying with a camera was clear.

FIGURE 3.2 Lee Tracy as Alvin Roberts in *Blessed Event,* 1932. *(Blessed Event* © Turner Entertainment Co. A Warner Bros. Entertainment Company. All Rights Reserved.)

Numerous other actors also made the character migration from thug to reporter. George Bancroft, after a gangster part in *Underworld,* brought the same ox-like loutishness to his role as gossip editor Mark Flint in *Scandal Sheet.* Ricardo Cortez preceded his role as a Walter-Winchellesque columnist in *Is My Face Red?* with roles as a speakeasy owner in *Reckless Living* (1931) and a bookie in *Men of Chance* (1931). And the dynamic Frank Bellamy was also mobilized from gangster to newsman: appearing first

as a bootlegger in *The Secret Six* (1931), he went on to play a boozy editor in *The Picture Snatcher.* More than any other actor, though, it is Lee Tracy whose career was defined by the machine-gun dialogue he carried from the gangster/war picture *Born Reckless* (1930) into repeat performances as a newsman in *Blessed Event, Love Is a Racket, The Strange Love of Molly Louvain, Clear All Wires!,* and *I'll Tell the World*—often depicting some version of Walter Winchell (see figure 3.2).

If these actors were instrumental in the filmic migration of gangsters into the newspaper milieu, Winchell was the real-life figure who brought gangsters cheek-to-cheek with tabloid news in the popular imagination. In a career that spanned five decades, Winchell became the living epitome of the news racketeer. A tabloid columnist and radio personality, he navigated between gangland, hot headlines, and Hollywood with ease, making the connections between these three worlds appear seamless and inevitable. At least nine films were based on Winchell's career during the 1930s; five of them are part of our cycle—*Okay America!, Is My Face Red?, Love Is A Racket, Blessed Event,* and *Clear All Wires!*[8] But Winchell's influential mixing of tabloid and crime circles began a decade earlier in 1924, when he was hired to write a gossip column for the *Graphic* called "Your Broadway and Mine."

The column put Winchell at the heart of jazz journalism, where he thrived. In keeping with the *Graphic*'s agenda, he turned his column into a vehicle for exposing the seedier side of Broadway. Columns about Broadway had certainly existed before, but until Winchell, no journalist outside the entertainment trade papers had made it his absolute domain. "He is the most successful quintessence of the type known as New Yorker, or even more narrowly, Broadwayite," wrote a fellow journalist of Winchell in 1929 ("Town Gossip" 413). With the possible exception of Mark Hellinger, no other reporter had so valorized Broadway's customs: its slang, its trends, its stories; its eccentricities, complaints, and triumphs; and, above all, its celebrities such as nightclub owner Texas Guinan and bootlegger Johnny Costello. No one had, in all likelihood, because editors and publishers were uncertain whether readers across America would care about such a closed and alien society.

But editors were wrong, for stories about Broadway's underbelly soon became a staple of popular culture, thanks mainly to Winchell. Nowhere was this trend more apparent than in Hollywood movies. Broadway was, above all, a space easily narrated and theatricalized. It had recognizable types—chorines, hoofers, promoters, publicity agents, speakeasy hostesses, rum runners—and Winchell's column and broadcasts gave these types a plot. In 1931, a writer for *Scribner's* magazine observed of

Broadway, "The underworld has moved up, and the upper world has moved down. . . . [A]ll the cohorts of crookdom make the night club their happy hunting-ground . . . and Winchell writes about them all" (Wilcox 199).

Winchell emphasized that he himself, like the gangster, lived a nocturnal lifestyle, rising at 5:00 in the afternoon and beginning his work in the evening. He and his companions—Hellinger, Runyon, and hostess Texas Guinan—enjoyed a fashionable nightlife of expensive restaurants, theatres, and cabarets, as did the era's racketeers and bootleggers. Like both the criminals and the newsmen played by Cagney, Bancroft, and Robinson, Winchell had little education but possessed street smarts in abundance. Both Cagney's rapid-fire delivery and Lee Tracy's double-entendres and speedy patter were inspired by Winchell's radio performances, where it was estimated that "The Great Gabbo" spoke 200 words per minute. He made a healthy salary with that machine-gun mouth and, like Capone, was known for his disarming stylishness.

And though these alliances were often used in attacks on Winchell by his enemies, they also made him alluring as an entertainment personality.[9] "That the columnist is a power in the land no one can deny—and who wants to deny it?" wrote one commentator (Wilcox 199). Eager to make films that would sell as well as Winchell's column, Hollywood studios produced a string of movies—including *Broadway after Dark* (1924); *A Broadway Butterfly* (1925); *High Steppers* (1926); *Broadway Nights* and *Broadway Madness* (1927); *Dressed to Kill, Lights of New York, Broadway Daddies* (1928); *Broadway Babies, Broadway* (1929); and *Broadway Bad* (1933)—that took as their subject the denizens of the Great White Way whose stories he told.

Winchell's national fame was cemented in 1929, the year he left the *Graphic* and assumed the post of Broadway columnist for the *Mirror,* where he would remain a fixture until that paper folded in 1963. In fact, Winchell's column became that paper's most visible feature, generating a devoted following even as the overall popularity of the tabloids waned. Although he had enjoyed celebrity while writing for the *Graphic,* joining the better-funded *Mirror* boosted him squarely onto the national stage. He became a household name, recognized everywhere for his astonishing "slanguage," which made its way into the speech of millions of Americans. Writing about him in 1931, a rival journalist exclaimed that Winchell had "achieved the position of dictator of contemporary slang" (qtd. in Gabler 44). And if his association with underworld figures rubbed off on his own persona, this association went the other way as well. By 1930, a public-service booklet, *The Whole Truth about Racketeers,* was reporting on a new breed of Winchell-like gangster. "It is wise to remember that the

greatest asset to the modern crook is a charming personality," advised the guide. "Unlike his gorilla-like forbears in thugdom, he has abandoned his jimmy and his bludgeon for a winning smile and a suave voice. . . . [He] prefers donning slick attire, swinging a cane, driving a fast roadster, and trusting to his ingenuity and 'gift-o-gab'" (qtd. in Ruth 79).

Amplifying Winchell's underworld associations, advertisements for the *Mirror* described his columns in hyperbole that would have befitted a crime-film trailer: "With machine-gun rapidity and deadly accuracy he gives you the most amazing gossip that ever startled a great city," read one (*New York Times,* October 30, 1933). And to get that gossip, Winchell often relied on his mobster contacts. In 1932, for example, Winchell was involved in one of the most exciting underworld stories of the decade. Tipped off by Guinan, he predicted in his column that racketeer Vincent Coll would be killed that evening; four hours later, Coll was gunned down in a telephone booth. This prediction-turned-fact added to the fame that, as one *Vanity Fair* article put it, made Winchell the inspiration for "more burlesques of himself than any writer since Hemingway," effectively sealing his reputation as a journalistic gangster (qtd. in Gabler xii).

Winchell, then, was a character perfectly positioned for Hollywood narrative. And the tabloid racketeer films—both those based directly on his exploits and those with no overt link to him—emphasize a similar mobility between gangsterism and tabloid work. If movie journalists are broadly presented as indulging in the bottle, tabloid journalists in the racketeer cycle are instead depicted as ever-ready to slip into criminal circles, obfuscate police business, or manipulate the law without concern for anything but the headlines. In *Love Is a Racket,* for example, reporter Jimmy Russell hides the truth of a murder committed by his girlfriend's aunt; one scene shows him rolling a corpse off a skyscraper to make the death look like an accidental fall. *Scandal for Sale* opens with scenes of reporter Wardell entering a murder scene, posing as someone from the DA's office, and whisking away the murderess so she can give her story to his paper before the police get to her. *Is My Face Red?* shows columnist Bill Poster, who has been tipped off to an impending showdown between a local bar owner and a mobster, arranging for the bar owner to have a knife in hand as the mobster enters. An argument ensues, the bar owner stabs the mobster, and Poster runs an exposé on the murder. Thugs working for a tabloid in *Five Star Final* threaten a newsstand owner if he does not display their paper most prominently; when he fails to do so, they vandalize his stand.

Often, these films not only invest the tabloid worker with brash gangster vitality; they also suggest that the tabloid worker has actually ampli-

fied that energy. As Fran Mason has argued, the gangster figure represents the culture of mobility, and films about the gangster provided "a spectacle of pleasure and freedom otherwise unavailable" to most viewers (vii). Yet in this cycle, the tabloid reporter outdoes the mobster. When actual gangsters appear, it is usually to show that their vigor has been usurped by the news racketeer, the new modern man.

This usurpation is especially prominent in the Winchell-based films, where audiences were clearly expected to understand that the mobster's gat is no match for the columnist's gab. These films often introduce gangsters in minor roles, presumably to echo Winchell's real-life fraternizing with them. Generally, however, the mobsters are introduced as romantic plot twists, as minor agents in the exposition, or as comic elements. In a remarkable display of the tabloid racketeer stealing criminal vitality, for example, *Blessed Event* depicts motor-mouth columnist Alvin Roberts terrorizing dim-witted gangster Frankie Wells by showing him the infamous front-page photo of Ruth Snyder in the electric chair (see figure 4.1 in chapter 4).[10] Alvin spins a tale of how Frankie is headed down the same path to the death chamber—unless the mobster agrees to work for him. Surreptitiously recording Frankie's boasts about the crimes he's performed, Alvin uses the tools of the reporter's trade for blackmail, telling Frankie he'll turn him over unless the thug agrees to bring him information for his column. Throughout the cycle as a whole, the tabloid journalist's mission of getting a hot scoop vitalizes him, while it renders actual gangster figures into minor narrative detail.

This character mobility did not go unnoticed. Contemporaneous reviews explicitly remarked that tabloid reporters seemed to be going gangster. Reviews for *Okay, America!* observe that its story is "closely related to the movie gangster plots" (*New York Sun,* September 12, 1932). *Variety* called *The Finger Points* a "gangster-newspaper talker" (April 8, 1931), while a review of *Is My Face Red?* identifies the protagonist as a "news racketeer." The concentration of movies released in the two-year cycle seems to have triggered what Schatz calls an "equilibrium profile"—a recognizable set of tropes that reviewers, by 1932, had come to recognize as a new narrative type they were attempting to name (*Hollywood Genres* 10).

Tabloid Tropes

Though mobilizing the gangster's energy into the tabloid racketeer alleviated the problem of censorship, it created another minefield: how would the press respond to films depicting reporters as quasi-criminals? As we

observed earlier, United Artists dwelt on this problem when making *The Front Page.* That studio was not alone in this respect. One memo from the Breen Office to Warner Bros. during the production of *Five Star Final,* for example, insists, "Of first importance is the problem of dealing harshly with a newspaper—even though it is a tabloid. We believe you should make every effort to make it unmistakably clear that a tabloid is a paper quite separate and distinct from the usual newspaper" (AMPAS, *Five Star Final,* April 6, 1931). Likewise, the producers of *Is My Face Red?* were cautioned by Breen's office that their script would "probably be all right from a newspaper standpoint, provided that a clear line of distinction [was] drawn . . . between the Broadway figure who chronicles the day to day scandals of Broadway, and the editor, publisher, and newsgatherer of the legitimate, higher type newspapers" (AMPAS, *Is My Face Red?,* February 22, 1932). But how were studios to mark this "clear line of distinction" for authorial audiences? Given that a large portion of the movie-going public lived outside centers of tabloid production, the studios needed to provide some easy-to-read cues.

As a first defensive line, many studios used press book publicity to educate audiences about the difference between straight news and the tabloids. "Newspapers vary in different localities," one write-up for *The Front Page* announced. In some cities "muckraking and scandal are intensified in the nth degree. . . . Individual reputations are torn down without mercy for the sake of headlines." For *Blessed Event,* advertisements stated baldly that the film's protagonist is a tabloid columnist or "keyhole expert." Moviegoers who saw such ads presumably entered theatres knowing what to expect.

But, as we saw in chapter 1, the studios could never be sure which press book materials would be seen by actual audiences. And as angry press responses to *Five Star Final* indicate, audiences outside New York and Chicago perceived the tabloid racketeer films as maligning *all* newspapers. The most vociferously offended parties were straight papers geographically removed from tabloid centers. Roy J. Dunlap, managing editor of the *St. Paul Dispatch and Pioneer Press,* for instance, retorted that news workers "are not bootleggers, racketeers, or drunken sots as the pictures have shown them to be" (AMPAS, *Five Star Final,* November 18, 1931). Another editorial in the *Binghamton N.Y. Press* complained that "self-respecting American newspapers have been targets for what amounts to a campaign of inferential misrepresentation and vilification by the motion picture industry" (AMPAS, *Five Star Final,* October 2, 1931). And the *Tarentum, PA News* complained of *Five Star Final* that "[n]o publisher, no editor, would be guilty of such an infamous deed as that related in

the cinema story," unaware that the plot was based on the *Mirror*'s much-publicized re-investigation of an old murder case (AMPAS, *Five Star Final,* November 6, 1931). Warner Bros. compiled a list of the negative responses and, as further studio correspondence indicates, took care to heed the problem. Other studios appear to have gotten the message: in addition to advertising, each film needed to include easy-to-read cues that would indicate, even to the most provincial viewer, that the papers in question were tabloids.

One strategy was to base a film on a famous tabloid personality like Winchell. The Great Gabbo's dynamism made him an appealing subject, and centering a film on his activities made clear that the newspaper in question was a tabloid and that no reproach was intended toward the legitimate press. Yet there were clear perils with this approach: studios ran the risk of offending one of the most powerful men in journalism. Winchell, as everyone in the movie business knew, was happy to smear his enemies. Marlen Pew, a fellow journalist, reported that he had been "given a scallion" in Winchell's column for criticizing gossip writing. Pew warned the studio that he knew of "nothing more vicious in journalism than this former hoofer" (AMPAS, *Blessed Event,* March 24, 1932).

Nonetheless, by May 1932, *Variety* reported that MGM, Columbia, and Universal were all lobbying to get Winchell to star or at least appear in a movie. Ultimately, Universal cut a deal with Winchell for a film based on his career (Gabler 159). The title of *Okay America!* was drawn directly from the columnist's trademark broadcast greeting, and press book materials reference Winchell's "slanguage" as well as link protagonist Larry Wayne to the real columnist. Given its direct ties to Winchell, the film is one of the least critical of the columnist's activities. *Is My Face Red?* and *Love Is a Racket* also appear to have deflected flak from Winchell by valorizing the columnist's wit and dash, even while presenting some of his actions as questionable. *Clear All Wires,* meanwhile, renders its protagonist Buckley Thomas's antics, including trying to invade the Red Army, as sheer farce.

More complicated was *Blessed Event,* the play for which Warner purchased rights in March 1932. Decidedly the best of the Winchell scripts, it was also the most complicated to navigate because its main character, Alvin Roberts, emerges as a figure of less than sparkling qualities. Studio correspondence indicates that Warner Bros. consulted the Hays office for advice on how to handle the script's "particular problem": that "the character upon whom the play is founded is anathema in many newspaper offices, [and] we do not want to go wrong" (AMPAS, *Blessed Event,* March 18, 1932). A Warner Bros. memo expands on the possible complications of

producing a film so obviously tied to the columnist. The story, it notes, is based on "a well-known character who has originated a new and distinctive reporting manner, dealing with subject matter which, until recently at least, has been considered taboo by most conservative papers" (AMPAS, *Blessed Event,* March 22, 1932). The letter makes clear how gingerly the studios perceived they had to tread in order to avoid irritating Winchell, the straight press, or audiences.

Then, in a publicity coup, Warner Bros. sidestepped ire from Winchell by actually getting him to endorse *Blessed Event.* Though the columnist had been grudging about the play when it first appeared on Broadway, he went to see it at least twice and appreciated that it functioned as "the biggest advertisement he [had] ever had from someone else" (qtd. in Gabler 140). Gabler explains that, much as Winchell wanted respect and was ready to attack his enemies, he also "promoted his image as a wholly unscrupulous journalistic gangster" (140). Apparently, any uncertainties he may have had about bringing play to screen were swayed by the promise of more exposure, and he went as far as to provide a tagline. One press book poster features bold text announcing "Walter Winchell says:—'That "Blessed Event" flicker is something to thrill about. It's magnificent movie magic!'" Another press poster actually replaces images of the actors with a photo of Winchell, with the tagline written in cursive and signed with his autograph, as if issuing directly from his hand. "Okay Walter Winchell!" reads a caption at the top of the page. "Your columnist and mine hails the first real low-down on the greatest cradle-snitcher of them all!"

Other *Blessed Event* press book materials play up Winchell's supposed intimacy with the actors; one item, for example, reports that "When Lee Tracy, Warner Brothers' featured player, learned that Walter Winchell, a Broadway buddy, was ill, he was quick to send a typical Tracy telegram of sympathy from Hollywood." The text of Tracy's message is provided below the report, imputing the studio's bond with Winchell's column: "Sincerely sorry you are tuned out but old Alvin Roberts is ready to pitch hit *Blessed Events* if needed." Conflating the real-life Winchell with the fictional Roberts, the item also indicates Warner Bros.' efforts to promote the movie's cinematic experience as an extension of—or even a replacement for—the excitement of Winchell's column.

Emphasizing The Great Gabbo's approval for the film allowed Warner Bros. to capitalize on what Susan Lanser terms the "referential" rather than "fictional" aspects of the Winchell-derived character. Lanser studies how audiences, when faced with a first-person narrator, decode how "attached" the "I" voice is to the author: some text types, such as memoir,

invite readers to attach the "I" closely; at the other end of the spectrum, texts like road signs or advertisements are highly "detached" and do not imply any authorial presence (207). Though she focuses exclusively on first-person narrators in written texts, Lanser's ideas suggest ways of understanding how movie audiences, when facing a fictionalized version of a public persona, might be directed to read the character. Warner Bros. clearly expected that the audience for *Blessed Event* would know Winchell: both the advertising and many of Roberts' idiosyncrasies direct viewers to attach the fictional character to the actual man.

The other Winchell-based films are more circumspect in inviting audiences to attach the fictional character to the actual person—perhaps because they did not, as far as we can tell, receive the same degree of approval from the columnist. We might again borrow Lanser's terminology to think of these films as "equivocal texts"—texts, that is, which "rely for their meaning on complex and ambiguous relationships between the 'I' of the author [or in this case, the historical figure of Winchell] and any textual voice [or in this case, characterization]" (210). Though the protagonists in *Is My Face Red?* and *Love Is a Racket* are drawn from Winchell, they mix biographical and fictional elements liberally. And though press books for these pictures explicitly urged theatre owners to "[c]ash in on the tremendous publicity the scandal columnists are getting" and "[s]ell [the movie] as containing the spicy, tangy fare that makes the scandal columns the most eagerly read part of the newspaper," they do not mention Winchell's name. The studios clearly imagined an audience that would recognize the columnist but would also have no trouble oscillating back and forth between different degrees of attachment to the character.

Indeed, Lanser points out that readers of written texts frequently do "vacillate" and "oscillate" between referential and fictional readings of a character based on contextual cues. We would argue that Warner Bros. projects an audience capable of reading similar cues in film. Moments of extreme slanguage and rapid-fire speech, as well as the protagonists' hobnobbing with Broadway socialites and underworld mugs, would encourage audiences to attach the tabloid racketeer character referentially to Winchell. Other points in the plots—such as in *Okay, America!* when Larry Wayne is shot while presenting his radio program—directly contradict the fact of the "alive-and-well" Winchell and create more detachment between movie character and man. Reviews of the Winchell-based films indicate that viewers had no problem moving between these different levels of attachment.

Beyond direct treatment of well-known tabloid personalities, the cycle developed other iconography and dramatic tropes to cue audiences to

the differences between jazz journalism and mainstream reporting. While the significance of these moments might pass unnoticed to viewers who saw only one of the cycle's movies, in the aggregate these repeated cues function as what narrative theorists would term "rules of notice." Specifically, they remind us of what Peter Rabinowitz calls "basic gesture[s] of noticeability": readers are alerted that certain elements of a text are important when they recur frequently (*Before Reading* 54–55). Although Rabinowitz uses these terms to discuss single texts, we would argue that film cycles—because they are produced in such a short time, with the same studios often churning out several versions of a similar story—set up a representational web that invites audiences to recognize such cues and, once they do, to be on the lookout for others.[11]

This, we would argue, explains why the tabloid racketeer cycle, poised between the newspaper film and the gangster picture, has not been recognized by contemporary scholars. Reviewers between 1931 and 1933, exposed to a flurry of these movies in succession, recognized their repeated gestures as points of signification. And moviegoers, guided by reviews to see these films as "gangster-newspaper" or "newspaper-racketeer" films, were more apt to watch with a set of conventions in mind. Once the cycle had run its course, though, viewers were less likely to see the films in enough juxtaposition for the tropes to be apparent. Once we begin looking, however, we observe the frequency with which they appear.

The immediate trope we encounter is a streamer headline or front page, flashed on-screen within the film's first moments to signify the type of journalism the film depicts. This "news flash" technique is a cliché in many kinds of films; certainly, by 1932 it was already a standard device in the gangster genre. Yet, it appears in the tabloid racketeer films with a difference. In a gangster movie like *Little Caesar,* an on-screen headline blaring "UNDERWORLD PAYS RESPECTS TO DIAMOND PETE MONTANA," for example, signifies the importance of those events to the plot: it directly advances the action by delivering a condensed shot of expository information and filling in narrative gaps. In the tabloid racketeer films, such headlines generally do not advance the plot. Instead, they show that we are entering the terrain of tabloidia.

Several examples suggest how well these moments echo actual tabloid rhetoric. *Five Star Final* opens with a montage that superimposes the movie's title over the banner of the fictional paper, the *Evening Gazette;* headlines reading "Freed in Snake Murder" and "So Asks Heart Balm" fill the screen. *Scandal Sheet* likewise opens on an enormous front page reading "Love Nest Raided." Meanwhile, a headline announcing

"Hammer Murder Confesses" appears on-screen soon after *Scandal for Sale* opens. In each of these examples, the trope neither conveys a specific backstory nor thrusts viewers into a particular line of action, as it might in another type of film. Rather, the headline functions purely as an establishing shot, indicating that the story will take place in a setting framed by sexual escapades, bizarre murders, and criminal confessions.

The streamer headline is often paired, early in the films, with another visual trope designed to signify tabloid work. While journalism movies of the 1930s frequently include a dramatic "call to crusade" scene in which a virtuous editor or reporter exhorts his staff to stand up to some social problem, the tabloid racketeer movies instead present a circulation boost scene calling for more salacious stories. Making clear that the tabloids are uninterested in the "snooze news" purveyed by the mainstream press, these scenes insist on the unsavoriness of both hot news and its readers. Early in *Scandal Sheet,* for example, editor Mark Flint fires a photographer who has left out the face in the photo he's snapped of a woman involved in an illicit romance. "Just two things people want to see in a picture of a woman—the face and the legs!" Flint roars. The trope appears across the cycle's films, suggesting that both major and minor studios assumed an audience comfortable with the premise that tabloid readers simply want smut.

Scandal for Sale presents an extreme example of this gesture. Tabloid owner Bunnyweather, meeting to counsel his editor on what to publish, insists that "people are really interested in two things: sex and money, and in that order." In case audiences missed the cue, the script has Bunnyweather repeating himself as he coaches the editor to "give 'em the three M's: Murder, Mystery, and Muck." And once more for good measure, the editor replies, "That's what I want to get into this paper: sex and pictures, give them what they want." Such repetitive dialogue signals audiences to regard this tabloid ethos as a twisted application of the "give the customer what he wants" creed. While it implicates both men as mercenaries, it lays responsibility for tabloidism as a civic problem even more heavily on readers: the papers can't do anything but dish out scandal, it suggests, because that is what readers demand.[12]

In this way, the circulation-boost trope performs a moral deflection similar to that of the gangster film. *Scarface,* the most rhetorically charged of the era's crime pictures, posits itself as a social problem narrative via a prologue announcing that it is "an indictment of gang rule in America and of the callous indifference of the government to this constantly increasing menace." The film's goal, claims the prologue, is to "demand of the government: 'What are you going to do about it?'" Framing the story as a social problem got *Scarface* past the censors after a year-long delay by the

Hays office (Leitch, *Crime* 24–26). Possibly, Universal had a similar aim in mind with *Scandal for Sale*'s overt circulation-boost scene which, like the tamer versions in other films, serves as a didactic cue to audiences that they should regard the movie not as entertainment but as critique.

To frame tabloidism even more firmly as a social problem, the cycle's movies often include a pro-tabloid manifesto—a new age has dawned and the public demands a new kind of news—that is delivered early in the film. Frequently this "print the truth no matter whom it hurts" type of journalism is positioned as a warped version of populism. In the same way that some gangster films—*The Secret Six* and *The Public Enemy,* for example—give glimpses of a thug's rough background as a contributing factor to his degeneracy, a number of the tabloid racketeer films hint that scandal-mongering stems from a distorted search for truth. In a different environment, the trope implies, the tabloid racketeer's urge to tell all might actually be a public service. In the tabloid realm, however, it is simply a scourge. Jerry Strong, the editor in *Scandal for Sale,* defends his print-all principles by announcing, "I want to give New York a paper stripped of hypocrisy. . . . Stuff even a scrub woman'll get. I want to sit down on the curb with them." Strong's tactics are clearly brutish, but, suggests the film, they result from a misapplication of what might otherwise have been an honest crusading impulse.

The Picture Snatcher also suggests that a misapplication of truth-telling instincts leads the tabloids astray. When a jail warden complains that the photo of a woman's execution published on the front page is "unethical," the paper's editor responds vehemently:

> That's your ethics; this paper has them too, but they're a little different from yours. Last night you blabbered your mouth off about the will of the taxpayers—did the taxpayers ever see what it's like? Sure, we've written about it before—but that's not enough. The chair is supposed to be an instrument of crime prevention—but has the potential criminal ever seen anyone burn in that chair? No! well, we're showing them—we're showing the taxpayers what their will is like. We've created a new and greater force for crime prevention.

Despite the ambiguity of the diatribe—is the editor condemning or praising capital punishment?—his manifesto suggests that, while Warner Bros. wanted to position itself as critical of tabloid effects, it was also trying to account for their popularity. The papers are not easy to dismiss because they are motivated by some version of what most would consider a positive impulse. If the gangster's power-lust can be read as a twisted

version of American individualism, the tabloid racketeer's gossip-mongering is the dark antithesis to the newsman's desire to print the truth.

In case audiences were unsure how critically they should view the tabloid racketeer's methods, the cycle's films offer repeated versions of another trope we call the "pathetic plea." Here, some pitiful unfortunate—often a woman or an elderly person—comes forward to beg for privacy but is crushed by the machinery of publicity. In *Scandal Sheet,* Mark Flint's old high school principal appears and asks him to withhold a story about a relative that will cause him to lose his own job. Flint refuses the request, replying that to bury the story, even though it would spare a decent man and his family needless misery, would be a dismissal of his own news principles. Another version of the trope occurs in *Blessed Event,* where Roberts manipulates an unwitting chorine into telling him about her extramarital pregnancy. In a marvelously poignant scene, Alvin sends the girl onto his radio program to sing "Waiting on a Call from You" while he phones in her story as a hot gossip item. The camera crosscuts back and forth between the woman crooning her song and Alvin's weasel-like features as he plants her story as his lead item for the issue.

Several of the films also complicate their critique with a trope that parallels alcohol use and tabloidism, implying that hot news is an equally powerful addiction. While the boozing reporter is a hackneyed stereotype of the newspaper film in general, the films in this cycle often present the protagonist as a person under the physical thrall of hot news; sensationalism, rather than hooch, is the white lightning here. The Winchell-based films often play up this connection humorously, with the protagonist's loquacity amplified by gossip the way a drinker's charms are lubricated by a highball. Other films build the irony of a reporter so addicted to the thrill of gossip that he overlooks mundane facts staring him in the face. In *The Strange Love of Molly Louvain,* for instance, newsman Scotty Cornell is so taken with his reporting about an on-the-lam moll that he doesn't recognize that the stranger he's become romantically involved with is the missing woman. Elsewhere in the cycle, the parallel is made more gravely. *Scandal Sheet,* for example, presents a portrait of tabloid addiction and its destructive effect on a marriage. In an impassioned monologue, editor Flint describes to his unhappy wife the thrill tabloid work gives him, declaring that in his profession there's only one way to proceed—his way. "That's why I'm a success. And I love it," he gloats. Yet viewers know that Flint's wife has another lover, and it appears that she has strayed because Flint's work monopolizes his attention.

Cueing audiences to a more sinister thrall, some films show protagonists who wish to leave tabloidia but cannot break free. Recasting conservative

fears about alcohol in this way helped delineate tabloids from straight news, as it allowed for much dialogue by the protagonist about why he wished to quit peddling headlines. Hildy Johnson's inability to shake Burns, and his own attraction to the thrills of tabloid work despite all his pledges to his bride-to-be, are the comic wheels on which *The Front Page* rolls. Though *The Front Page* is the most madcap film of the cycle, its final scene implies that Hildy will never escape the tabloid life he's spent the whole film promising to leave. And if this film hints lightly at the addiction parallel, *Exposure* connects tabloidism and bibulousness hyperbolically. Journalist Andy Bryan, fired from his previous job for drunkenness, swears off the bottle at the urging of his new boss and romantic interest, paper owner Doris Corbin. Doris disapproves not only of alcohol consumption but also of Andy's tabloid methods, though they have increased her paper's circulation. Throughout the film Andy struggles with his urge toward whisky and tell-all news, and it is only when he finally does kick tabloid-style reporting that he is able to overcome his dipsomania. The trope implies that tabloidism, like alcohol, affects not just the addict but his intimates as well. With debate over Prohibition growing louder, the trope allowed studios to amplify the social problem aspect of tabloid films by implying that the issues they dealt with were as momentous as liquor abuse and control.

This "teetotalling" line against hot news is extended further in another trope, a denunciation scene in which a character takes center stage and excoriates sensationalism. With the exception of the Winchell-based plots, the majority of the cycle's films feature some version of this trope. The denunciation is never subtle. The most powerful example appears in *Scandal for Sale,* where a reporter leaves his editor a letter urging him to give up tabloid work. The letter's words, which we read on-screen, assume dramatic power since the reporter has just lost his life while performing a publicity stunt for the paper. "Take my tip," reads the missive, "get out of this yellow journalism. Go to work and make something of yourself. Give your wife a break. It's a letter from the dead."

More histrionically, the editor of a mainstream paper in *Exposure* criticizes journalist Andy Bryant, telling him, "Men like you are a menace to decent newspaper business. You live on scandal. You thrive on the misfortunes of others. . . . You're the type who would put your own mother on the front page if it paid enough to keep you in booze." In at least one of the cycle's films the denunciation is so excessive that it smothers the plot. A review of *The Famous Ferguson Case* observes that "[w]henever anything happens [in the movie], a veteran reporter of the better type gets up and makes a speech against the Yellow Press." Clearly, after the backlash

against *Five Star Final,* the studio overused the trope to make certain that the straight press could impute no possible insult.

Frequently in the cycle, the character who delivers the anti-tabloid denunciation is a woman romantically involved with the protagonist. It is compelling to note that while the newsman's tabloid work pushes him to act in a renegade manner, the woman's denunciation empties his acts of virility. Unlike the gangster figure, then, whose outlaw status invariably grants him a hyper-potency, the tabloid racketeer's actions end up ambivalently gendered. In fact, the female denunciations tend to suggest that, while scandal reporting appears to give the protagonist power, tabloid work itself is actually emasculating. Keen's girlfriend in *The Picture Snatcher,* for example, cuts him down before dumping him: "You're the lowest thing on the newspaper, a picture snatcher, stealing pictures from folks who are so down in the mouth they can't fight back," she snaps. Claire Strong berates her editor-husband in *Scandal for Sale,* accusing him of sending their friend Wardell to his death in an aviation stunt. The meek Wardell, she implies, is more a man than her husband, who dreamed up the stunt. *Scandal Sheet* makes the emasculating effect of tabloid work explicit: Mark Flint's wife tells him she hates his tabloid, then coolly rejects his sexual advances by feigning a headache, and soon after is in the arms of another man.

Despite Winchell's popularity with both men and women, and despite the *News*'s efforts to pitch its material more toward a male audience, the tabloids still bore associations of a working-class female readership. The studios clearly believed that their audiences would hold this impression. Regardless of how brashly masculine the reporter was, then, the racketeer films suggest that, to preserve his manhood, he must finally quit the tabloids. *Five Star Final*'s editor, confronted by the daughter of a woman he has driven to suicide, admits, "We did it—we killed your mother for circulation," just before telling off the paper's owner and quitting. Meanwhile, *The Picture Snatcher* shows Kean, reunited with his love interest, going on to a "real" job at a straight paper. *Scandal for Sale* and *Exposure,* too, use the denunciation scene to transition into a romantic ending, the energy the hero previously expended on tabloid work safely channeled into straight news and marriage. Of all the films, *Exposure* goes furthest to link the rejection of tabloidism with renewed potency. Andy Bryant's affections for Doris Corbin go unanswered until he has proven his liberation from both alcohol and "peeking through keyholes." The last scene, after Andy has sworn off tabloid debaucheries for good old-fashioned journalism, shows him arriving at Doris's bedside just as she has produced his "First Edition," a bouncing baby boy.

The denunciation trope, we argue, is crucial because it allowed the studios to maintain an equivocal response to the racketeer character. Audience members, cued to recognize that the film is part of the cycle, can enjoy the protagonist's deviousness because the tropes also generate the expectation that he will, in the end, reform. At the same time, the film's gripping plot pressed viewers to assume a narrative audience's position of suspense: the racketeer reporter is so mired in scandal, how can things possibly end well for him? Altogether, the audience's pleasure in these movies likely arose because each film delivered narrative involvement with the salacious tabloid setting while simultaneously signaling through conventionalized patterns that the racketeer, despite all his smut-scuttling, would finally be redeemed.

The denunciation trope is also interesting in light of the character affiliations it suggests between the gangster and the tabloid racketeer. "The ultimate conflict of the gangster film," argues Schatz, "is not between the gangster and the police; rather it involves the contradictory impulses within the gangster himself . . . between man's self-serving and communal instinct, between his savagery and his rational morality" (*Hollywood Genres* 85). The tabloid racketeer, as the denunciation scene shows, is ultimately pressed to choose between his will-to-power and his sense of decency, between his tell-all imperative and his respect for others' privacy. Yet if the gangster and the tabloid racketeer share the problem of a moral dilemma, the choices they make in response are diametrically opposite. The classic gangster inevitably chooses power; he dies alone, an outcast. The tabloid racketeer films, instead, use the denunciation scene as a gesture of what Schatz calls "integration," assimilating their outlaw protagonist into traditional social structures via romance. And so, unlike the classic gangster hero whom he resembles in other ways, the tabloid racketeer generally does end by claiming his place within normative social bounds.

Furthermore, as critics have noted, the classic gangster films typically present their heroes externally and sociologically. In films such as *Little Caesar, The Public Enemy,* and *The Secret Six,* we watch events shaping the gangster. While we are invited to sympathize with his early life and heroicize his brash fortitude, we see little or no inner sensibility. When there is a glimmer of self-understanding, it occurs at the film's end, in a moment that cannot outweigh the rest of the movie's impetus. Hence, Robinson's final words in *Little Caesar*—"Mother of God, is this the end of Rico?"—function as a lone flicker of reflexivity drowned out by a hail of bullets. And though *The Public Enemy* gives us a deathbed scene in which Tom Powers expresses remorse, it is dramatically overshadowed by the later image of the murdered Tom, bound like a mummy and dropped

on his mother's doorstep. Or consider *The Secret Six:* mob kingpin Louis Scorpio's story begins in the Chicago slaughterhouse where we initially see him swinging his killing sledgehammer. We follow his bloody rise through criminal ranks until he himself, locked in his prison pen, awaits the gallows. The film's only gesture toward exploring his consciousness comes as he is called to his hanging and his face shows, for a moment, a look of understanding: as the meat industry conveys cattle along a belt to market, the crime industry pushes men along to their own death.

In contrast, the tabloid racketeer's trajectory suggests a more internalized psychic conflict. While we do not want to overstate the case, the tabloid racketeer does go further than the gangster toward the kind of inner struggle that would be a hallmark of the film noir protagonist a decade later. Joe Salzman has remarked on the difficulty of creating a taxonomy of character types in journalism movies. "Dividing reporters into crimebusters or crusaders or scandalmongers creates a host of problems," he argues, because "often they are the same journalist who ends up being a combination of all three categories" ("Image" 32). A truism of the newspaper genre, Salzman's observation is even more pertinent to the tabloid racketeer who, for most of the film's narrative, is both newsman *and* gangster, transgressor *and* self-regulating authority.

Tabloid Traces

Once we are aware of the narrative conventions, it is easy to recognize the tropes by which studios cued audiences to identify tabloids. We can see that the studios imagined an audience that would feel satisfied when the protagonist rejects hot news work and goes straight. Yet the films also express fascination with the process of mobilizing actual events into news stories.[13]

Scenes of narrative-making in action recur: reporters jockeying to the phone, columnists barking out articles to waiting secretaries, columnists typing frantically, presses rolling.[14] This narrative-in-process often appears in a stylized way. *Exposure* and *Scandal for Sale,* for example, fill the screen with newspaper pages to reveal off-screen events. In each case, we see a sequence of articles—"Flier Crashes at Airfield!" or "Disaster Ends Race!"—intercut with film clips of the tragedies occurring, the montage juxtaposing actual event and news story. More hyperbolically, a dying reporter in *Scandal Sheet* phones in his scoop with his last breaths. Even as the reporter dies, the editor is summoning his "rewrite man" to get the story into print.

Elsewhere, these moments are treated humorously. *The Picture Snatcher,* for example, includes a comic scene in which Kean dictates his story of snapping a photo of an execution. Having just run into the news office chased by police, Kean gasps out incoherencies. Within seconds, the sob sister typing up his story reads back to him the melodrama she's crafted from his tale. Such feminized emotionality is formulaic for the tabloids, the scene implies. The reporter simply weaves in a few new threads and spins out the expected yarn.

Occasionally, sequences show news workers actually manufacturing current events. In his memoirs about working as Editor at the *Graphic,* Emile Gauvreau remarks that such fabrication was an acknowledged part of tabloid life, one whose imperatives increased the more successful the tabloid became (*My Last Million Readers* 114). Dramatizing this point, *Exposure* opens with a scene of a reporter holding a "maniac killer" at bay, pointing a gun at the criminal with one hand while phoning his paper with the other, the image emblematic of the journalist's position as half tough guy, half story inventor. *Scandal Sheet*'s dénouement, meanwhile, offers a detailed scene of narrative in the making as Flint calls his men to stop the presses. The camera lingers over pieces of machinery whining to a halt. This moment explicitly connects the newspaper story and the film's narrative; the printing slows just as the movie itself reaches its critical pause, a silent expectancy as Flint enters and reveals that he himself is the third party in a love-triangle murder the paper has been trying to break. As his last scoop, Flint stands before the stopped presses and tells his employees that he is the killer—and then orders the staff to start up the presses again to print the events he has just revealed.

As this last example suggests, while these movies denounce tabloidism, they sometimes imply connections between the newspapers' story-making practices and their own. *Five Star Final*'s ads say that the film will depict how "lives and loves [are] sacrificed to the Juggernaut of newspaper circulation," yet Mervyn LeRoy's direction suggests a more implicated connection. An opening montage flashes the film's title over the front page of the paper, the *Evening Gazette.* Soon a voice crying "Extra, Extra!" rises over the grinding sound of machinery while the names and faces of the actors appear superimposed on the image of the press in motion. The rolling press and these opening credits are inextricably bound, with LeRoy's editing suggesting that the movie not only is a drama about the tabloid business but is also interwoven with it. Later, Leroy employs a triptych screen that shows a close-up of a woman's face as she begs an editor and publisher not to print a story about her tragic past. Leroy sandwiches the woman's fearful expression tightly between the two men's as they talk on

the phone. This unusual framing device recalls a photographic stratagem often used by the tabloids to portray individuals involved in love triangles or crime stories.

Did the studios really expect audiences to see parallels between the two media? Like the newsroom, the Hollywood studio was often depicted—frequently with chagrin by the former journalists it employed—as a text factory where writers worked to crank out pages of dialogue on demand. And like the news office, the movie studio was portrayed as a site of power-grubbing. Both journalists and scriptwriters were presented as constantly working under deadline, getting little individual credit for their words, and having no control over how their writing would be edited. And if the reporter could be assigned to a breaking story at his editor's whim, the Hollywood scriptwriter could be plucked off of one project and set onto another at a moment's notice. Moreover, the working locations for both journalists and scriptwriters were popularly depicted as rough and chaotic. "Movies were seldom written," Hecht noted. "They were yelled into existence in conferences that kept going in saloons, brothels, and all-night poker games" (478). The locations Hecht recalls are telling, for of course they are the same haunts also populated by crime reporters.[15]

It seems the studios did expect that at least some audience members would recognize similarities between the practices of the movie industry and those of the tabloids. The fact that some of the racketeer films seem to highlight such similarities speaks to the way that Hollywood was hardly consistent in its moralizing. Of course, when we recall how openly the tabloid-celluloid ties were touted in advertising and in Warner Bros.' headline policy, it's not wholly surprising to see some allusion to those ties in the racketeer cycle as well. With such allusions, the studios could suggest parallels between making films and the exciting metropolitan energy of gathering hot news. At the same time, the tabloid racketeer's methods were presented as dodgy, and tabloidism was depicted as a social problem somewhere on the scale between alcoholism and organized crime.

Unholy Partners: Curtains for the Tabloid Racketeer

By mid-1933, tabloidism was fast becoming an anachronism. As the decade progressed, the sobriety of mood caused by the Depression and political events in Europe dictated more serious news coverage. As we have noted in earlier chapters, the *Graphic* folded in 1932, and by the mid-1930s, the *Mirror*'s circulation had declined considerably. The *Daily News,* mean-

while, retained its circulation only by toning down the material that had defined its early identity.

Newspaper films in general remained popular until the mid-1950s when, as Deac Rossell explains, "The glamour was going out of the [news] profession, and movie makers sensed it" (18). But pictures dealing specifically with tabloids after the racketeer cycle tend to take a nostalgic view of their subject. Just as *Angels with Dirty Faces* and *The Roaring Twenties* brought James Cagney back to the screen to revisit his old gangster role after the repeal of Prohibition, Hollywood's retrospective glances at jazz-age tabloidism present it as a whimsical feature of a distant past.

The most prominent example is *Unholy Partners* (1941). As if in homage to *Five Star Final* and the lost realm in which personal gossip was more inflammatory than world politics, MGM hired Mervyn Leroy to direct, and it cast Edward G. Robinson in what is essentially the same wise-cracking editor role he had played ten years earlier. The story opens in 1919 with Robinson in the role of Bruce Corey, a returning GI determined to start a tabloid in New York. Of course, 1919 is the year the *Daily News* was founded, and the film makes clear via Robinson's dialogue that the end of World War I has ushered in a tabloid age.

In fact, the film directly revisits tabloid racketeer cycle tropes and pushes them to often-comic extremes, functioning as a whimsical elegy for the tabloid age. In one early scene, for instance, Corey delivers a pro-tabloid manifesto, announcing, "There's no privacy left. As far as this generation's concerned, keyholes were made for looking through." Corey's insistent rhetoric of modernity, coupled with scenes of him in his doughboy uniform, conveys the film's message that the tabloids *were* the bees' knees—a quarter of a century earlier. References to the tabloids' unscrupulous practices abound, but these are treated with jokiness rather than the distancing tropes we find in the cycle itself. In a scene included to send up tabloid fakery, for example, one of the paper's female characters is shown posing as a corpse for an "exclusive" snapshot of a murder the paper will run. *Unholy Partners* depicts such fakery with a wink and a nod, as if the events recounted cannot really be taken seriously.

The film's conclusion is a eulogy for the tabloid age. It shows a heroic Corey, after killing a mobster, confessing to his love interest/assistant editor and then taking off on a transatlantic flight. The plane goes down at sea. The movie ends with the assistant, galvanized by her boss's death, dictating a story that functions as an obituary for both the editor and jazz journalism itself. "We want an editorial. Not a weepy one," she directs the

paper's staff. "Just say that he was born for the tabloid age and that the era he lived in has come to an end."

Indeed, the Golden Age of hot news was over. While a variety of media would borrow tabloid stories and strategies in the years ahead, the temporal distance between these media and the "heyday of the hotcha" means a narrative mobility that is more diffuse. As we move from part I to part II of this book, our synchronic study thus gives way to a diachronic one. And while we have focused till now on a close relay between tabloid and celluloid, our discussion of narrative mobility broadens to involve multiple media, mechanisms, and audiences.

STORY ON PA

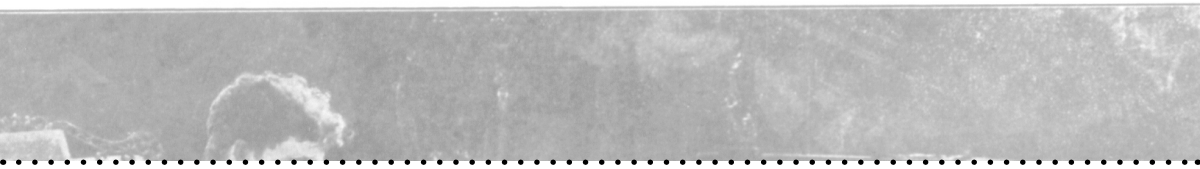
A Home Paper

DAILY RECORD

FIN EXT

l. V—No. 64 NEW YORK, AUGUST, 1928 CIRCULATION

GANGSTER LOVE LURE BEAUTY TO HER DEATH

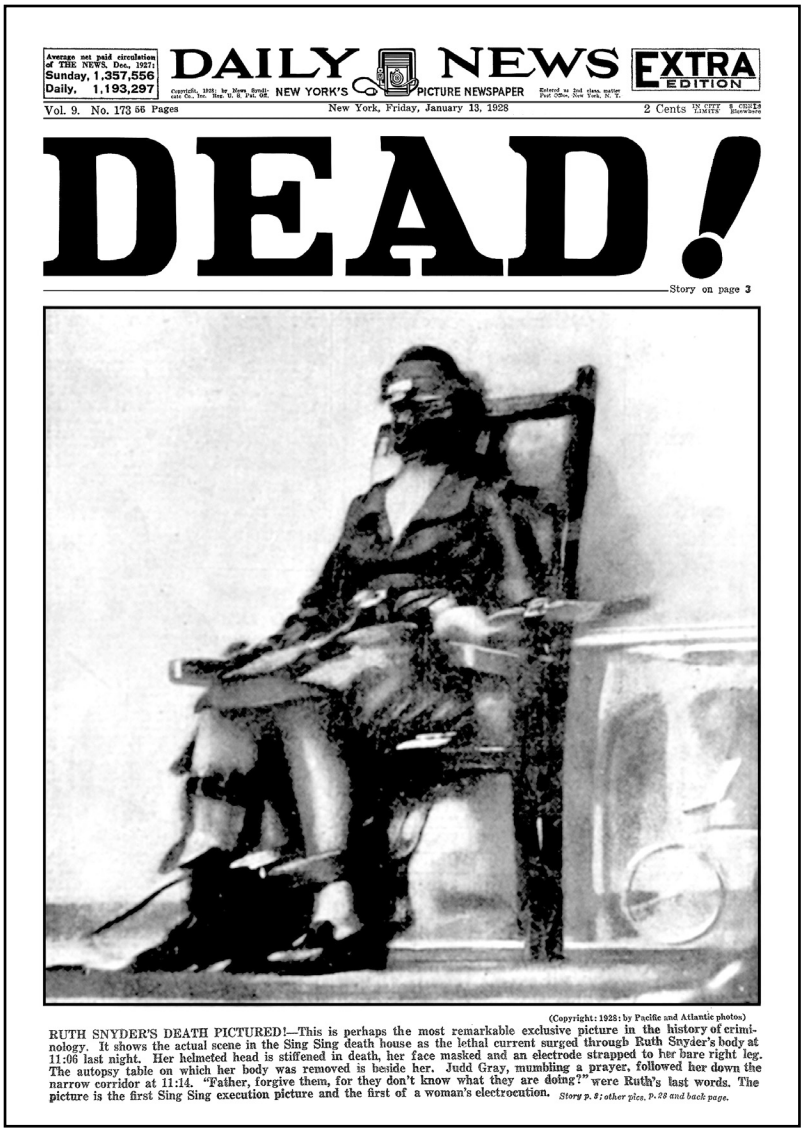


PART II

Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

LOVE LURES BEAUTY TO DEATH!—Grim reminder of Olive Gilmour's tragic visit to the Venetian Cafe, where it is a she was having love seance with Joe Magelli, famous gangster. Composograph depicts artist's conception of famous gang standing over dead body of his sweetheart. Magelli was also killed in this plane raid.

DIXIE BLUE'S ADVICE TO GIRLS—PAGE 3



Average net paid circulation of THE NEWS, Dec., 1927: Sunday, 1,357,556 Daily, 1,193,297

DAILY NEWS EXTRA EDITION

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

Copyright, 1928, by News Syndicate Co., Inc. Reg. U. S. Pat. Off. Entered as 2nd class matter Post Office, New York, N. Y.

Vol. 9. No. 173 56 Pages New York, Friday, January 13, 1928 2 Cents IN CITY LIMITS 3 CENTS Elsewhere

DEAD!

Story on page 3

(Copyright, 1928, by Pacific and Atlantic photos)

RUTH SNYDER'S DEATH PICTURED!—This is perhaps the most remarkable exclusive picture in the history of criminology. It shows the actual scene in the Sing Sing death house as the lethal current surged through Ruth Snyder's body at 11:06 last night. Her helmeted head is stiffened in death, her face masked and an electrode strapped to her bare right leg. The autopsy table on which her body was removed is beside her. Judd Gray, mumbling a prayer, followed her down the narrow corridor at 11:14. "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing?" were Ruth's last words. The picture is the first Sing Sing execution picture and the first of a woman's electrocution. *Story p. 2; other pics, p. 28 and back page.*

FIGURE 4.1 Ruth Snyder in the electric chair as shown on the front page of the *Daily News,* January 13, 1928. (Photo by Tom Howard, used by permission of the *New York Daily News;* copyright by Daily News L.P.)

CHAPTER FOUR

Multiple Indemnity

Tabloid Melodrama, Narrative Mobility, and James M. Cain

THE ORIGINAL conclusion to Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) depicted its protagonist entering the gas chamber for execution. Walter Neff, having helped Phyllis Dietrichson kill her husband for insurance money, has come to the end of the line to meet his own fate in a fog of cyanide fumes. According to the shooting script, the film's last scenes followed the facial expressions of Neff's friend and former boss, Keyes, who registered horror at the state-sanctioned death.

Unfortunately, scholars must rely on the shooting script, production file notes, and a few stills to picture this scene, for it was excised before the movie hit the theatres, and to this day it remains locked in the Paramount archives.[1] The disappearing death chamber scene graphically suggests a largely unacknowledged source for the film and the Cain novella on which it was based: the Snyder-Gray trial and execution of 1927 and 1928. That story was capped by one of the most famous photographs in media history: a picture of Snyder, bound and masked in the electric chair at the instant of her death, snapped by a journalist's hidden camera. Indeed, the gruesome photo is the erased text below Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity,* as well as the many cinematic versions of these fictions. For while the case sparked nearly a year of coverage and generated over 13 million words in the New York tabloids, what many people would come to remember about these sensation-headline sweethearts was the execution photo.[2] Accompanied by the headline "Dead!," it filled the front page of the *Daily News* in an edition that sold out within fifteen minutes (see figure 4.1, opposite).

While scholars agree that Cain borrowed some details from the case, they have discounted further tabloid influence. The author's own reticence to acknowledge any outside inspirations for his work has contributed to this gap. The reason, in part, is that his fiction, like that of many other hard-boiled writers, was beginning to reach a middlebrow audience by the 1930s. Meanwhile, the tabloids had declined in popularity. Adding to the critical gap, too, is the fact that an older generation of literary scholars has tried to elevate Cain's writing by positioning him as a modernist writer operating on the lone artist/creator model. As a result, mechanisms such as professional reviews, academic criticism, and canon formations have for decades marginalized the tabloids right out of any serious discussions of his fiction. And though excellent revisionist scholarship on the connections between modernist literature and popular culture is being done now by people such as Christopher Breu and Joseph B. Entin in the field of "new modernist studies," the tabloid-fiction nexus Cain occupied remains obscure.

In this chapter, then, we have two main goals. First, we consider the Snyder case itself. This case, we argue, provides a stunning example of how the tabloids both recycled stories and presented their material as "mobility-ready" for use by other media. We focus especially on the case's representation in the *Daily Mirror,* which of all three papers depended most heavily on melodrama. Doing so allows us to distinguish the *Mirror* from its rival papers while also examining the reconstituting, border-crossing nature of melodrama itself.

Our second goal is to consider Cain's mobilization of the case into fiction. Though Cain is typically classified as a hard-boiled writer, we propose that his writing is better described as employing a "hard-tabloid" style—one that combines melodrama and hard-boiled elements in a way characteristic of the tabloids. Cain borrowed not only specific details of the case from jazz journalism but also this style of storytelling. As in chapter 2, then, we draw on the concept of narrative mobility to trace how media of varying cultural prestige represented a murder case. But in this chapter we focus on issues of artistic reputability rather than narrative timeliness, emphasizing that Cain's oeuvre should be understood as the product of a culture where—despite critical efforts to position texts, authors, and media within clear cultural boundaries—the border between "lowbrow" and "highbrow" was increasingly porous.

By this point in the book, we have mentioned the Snyder-Gray crime so often that we imagine readers are panting for its details, to which we now turn.

"Their Fate Was Sealed": Mobility and Melodrama

Queens, New York. In the early morning hours of March 20, 1927, two killers entered the suburban bedroom of forty-four-year-old art editor Albert Snyder. Turning household objects into murder weapons, they bludgeoned Snyder with a window-sash weight and then plugged his nostrils with chloroform-soaked cotton before strangling him with a garrote made of picture wire. It was a lucrative killing: one murderer stood to inherit nearly $100,000 from a double-indemnity insurance policy taken out on Snyder's life without his knowledge. Friends of the victim expressed shock that a quiet, unassuming family man could be the target of such a brutal slaying—one that soon appeared to be the work of his own wife, Ruth, and her lover, Henry Judd Gray.[3] Although Ruth initially claimed she had been knocked out and bound while assailants murdered her husband and stole her jewelry, it took the police only a few hours to extract a full confession once they noticed that the widow suffered no wounds and her jewels were found tucked beneath her mattress. The ineptitude evident from her alibi was mirrored by her betrayal of Judd Gray: she quickly blamed him for their ongoing adultery and the murder itself. He in turn insisted that Ruth had been the seducer and plotter. The morning of the murder, the tabloids had only a grisly crime to report; within twenty-four hours, they had an archetypal love triangle of tawdry lust, avarice, and treachery that would keep the presses rolling steadily for nearly a year.

Indeed, from March 21, 1927, until the executions of Snyder and Gray on January 12, 1928, New York's tabloids reported on the case in minute detail. Spanning nearly a year, the coverage saturated each publication, with the *News* and the *Mirror* often running as many as eight articles a day on the case in various extra editions. Although straight newspapers such as the *New York Times* reported on the case as well, their coverage was far less extensive, as if with such reporting they risked violating the serious purpose typically associated with official journalism. In contrast, the tabloids employed most of the 130 reporters who covered the trial (Marling 149). Tabloid news didn't just report on the case, however; it molded public perceptions of it.

All three New York tabloids deconstructed, reconstructed, and multiplied aspects of the killing and its surrounding human-interest elements. While the *Daily News* was distinguished by its hard-boiled tone, and the *Evening Graphic* by its carnivalesque juxtaposition of the murder along-

side bran recipes, the *Mirror* operated as a melodramatic way station. It functioned as a transit point where Snyder, Gray, and other characters were cast in emotional terms and offered up as mobility-ready elements appropriate for use by other venues. Indeed, with its bevy of celebrity columnists and Hearst as its publisher, the *Daily Mirror* was the tabloid most closely connected to the culture of show business. As such, it gestured constantly toward popular fiction, Broadway theatre, and Hollywood in its textual operations, as if announcing that its coverage both resembled the entertainment value of these other media and also stood as ready material for them.

Of the tabloids, the *Mirror* was the one most typified by melodrama, which we define here as a popular mode spanning many genres and which Ben Singer calls a "cluster concept." Melodrama is notoriously difficult to describe; its criticism has been inconsistent and its genealogy hard to chart. Noting these problems, Singer argues that they have arisen because melodrama's features "have appeared in so many different combinations" (44). He urges us to think of melodrama as a term whose meaning varies from case to case in relation to different configurations of five basic features: 1) pathos, 2) overwrought emotion, 3) moral polarization, 4) nonclassical narrative structure, and 5) sensationalism. Melodrama's nature as a "cluster concept" means that its key characteristics can appear in any number of different configurations. Sometimes all five elements manifest themselves within the same text, but more commonly only a few combine to form a particular type of melodrama.

Certainly, we can see melodrama working its overwrought way through all the tabloids' coverage of the Snyder-Gray case, as each paper used various configurations of these five features at different times. The lovers' betrayal of one another once they had been arrested; the impact of the crime on their families; the "saintly" character of the dead husband; the lovers' emotional responses to their impending sentencing and execution; the retrospective confessions of the murderers; the "fiendish" nature lurking behind Ruth Snyder's suburban-housewife exterior; and, most importantly, the sordid details of her long-standing affair with Gray: all these narrative angles were amply detailed in the tabloids. Each is in keeping with the features of melodrama, especially melodrama's interest in pathos and overwrought emotion. But the *Mirror* was the tabloid that made melodrama its dominant mode.

Founded in 1924 by Hearst, the *Mirror* was originally envisioned, as its title suggests, as a reflection of the *News.* At first Hearst imitated the look and content of "New York's Daily Picture Paper." Most historians, unfortunately, have persisted in regarding the *Mirror* as simply a poor imitation

of its rival. But anyone who studies the tabloids can see how Hearst's paper developed its own distinctive style within just two years. Passion killings committed by betrayed spouses, rejected lovers, distraught mothers, and abusive fathers all filled the *Mirror*'s pages, framed in the language and tropes of melodrama. And as it read about these transgressions, the *Mirror*'s audience was also invited to enter the performative realm via the paper's other most distinctive feature: its intimate, informed columns on Broadway and Hollywood culture. Indeed, while all three tabloids conflated fact and fiction, the *Mirror* often did so by comparing real events to Hollywood screenplays or Broadway dramas.

Not surprisingly, then, while all three papers reworked virtually every piece of news to fit a preexisting narrative frame, one finds in the *Mirror*'s coverage repeated attempts to mold the Queens housewife and her lover into characters out of melodrama. As one reporter describing the *Mirror* put it:

> The tabloid has created for its public a great catalogue of tried and tested bromides. Every news story must fit into its proper niche, from which it emerges clothed in the proper adjectives. Dull characters are romanticized, sordid details are glamorized. A drab prostitute becomes a Midnight Moll or a Light O Love, and any young girl or boy who packs a gun is a Thrill Bandit, a Two-Gun Sally, or a Three-Gun Bill. Mrs. Michael Slatz, who kills her husband because she is tired of seeing him come home to her without a job, is a Hate Killer. A tired old man, who murders his bigamous second wife and burns her body to hide the evidence, is a Torch Fiend. (Gilman 139)

In other words, the *Mirror*'s adherence to preexisting narratives involved a reconstitution of the "ordinary" into the overwrought. "Torch Fiend," "Hate Killer," "Thrill Bandit": all of these phrases evoke melodrama's love of emotion, which Singer calls its "overcoming of repression in a supercharged climax of full articulation" (45). It is precisely this articulation that renders "ordinary women" like Mrs. Michael Slatz or Ruth Snyder into queens of melodrama.

As commentators outside the tabloid industry noted during the trial, the case's elements were quite mundane. Writing in *Outlook,* Silas Bent proclaimed, "Here was no master passion like that which has welled up in the greatest tragedies. . . . This brutal, inhuman murder was the product of . . . the pettiest, the most ignoble, kind of self-indulgence" ("Snyder Murder Mystery" 75). Elsewhere, Bent remarked that the couple "clumsily did the woman's husband to death. There was never any mystery about

it, the insurance involved certainly was not staggering, and the principals were of no social distinction" ("Scarlet" 563). Undeniably, Snyder led a life mirroring that of many female tabloid readers. A former stenographer, she had been married to her husband for nearly ten years and spent her days away from Judd Gray doing domestic chores in her suburban bungalow. The Snyder couple had one daughter, nine-year-old Lorraine. And Ruth's lover was hardly a cinematic lothario: the thirty-two-year-old corset salesman from New Jersey wore wire-rimmed glasses, spoke softly, weighed only 120 pounds, and taught Sunday school. He had a wife, Isabel, and a nine-year-old daughter as well.

But within the *Mirror*'s pages the affair quickly assumed all five constitutive features of melodrama. Tabloid writers glamorized Snyder by likening her to film stars such as Myrna Loy and Theda Bara, and they repeatedly analogized the case to a Hollywood box-office smash. One story fictionalized Snyder as a femme fatale: "After meeting Gray in a hotel room, she passed a movie theatre and paused before a flaming placard which announced the latest picture of the screen's most celebrated vampire. A cynical smile twisted the lips of this crowned conqueror of men" (Birdwell 28). The indeterminacy of the reference to the "conqueror of men" makes clear how much the tabloid construction of Snyder drew from Hollywood images. The *Mirror*'s Snyder was as much an invention as the Hollywood Bara, a projection created from conservative anxieties about the modern woman and the tabloids' ideas about what would sell.

References to Broadway pepper the *Mirror*'s coverage as well. In one article on the first day of the trial, for instance, a writer observed, "The door to the court is jammed with men and women. . . . An extremely sensational sex drama is going to be performed, and the court, which is its theatre, isn't going to be padlocked" (April 20, 1927). Alluding to the police's recent closure of three Broadway plays dealing with homosexual themes, the article encourages readers to view the Snyder case as another entertainment spectacle, emphasizing the tabloids' affinities to stage entertainment.

The *Mirror* also insistently linked the case to past crimes. In a bizarre conflation of the cheery and the eerie, cartoons appeared alongside the reportage, depicting "historical cases" of women who trapped men into murder. One cartoon picks up a particularly juicy detail: Snyder had allegedly tried to poison her husband several times by putting drugs into his tea. Serialized over several days, the cartoon introduces a woman named Elsie Whipple who in 1863 seduced a farmhand into killing her husband: "Lured by the woman into an intimate relationship, Jesse Strang lived in terror of discovery. . . . He sought to break with Elsie Whipple, but she

would creep into his little room at night and lure him with her love. She threatened to go to another man if he failed her" (April 5, 1927, 4). As this storyline suggests, the cartoon was meant to be read as yet another narrative in the tabloid cycle of murder coupled with sexual betrayal.

As mobility-ready sites, tabloids were also remarkable in how they commissioned reporters or guest novelists to author novellas of criminal cases that the papers were currently covering. This feature exemplifies how tabloids typically elide the difference between reality and representation, denying any difference between documentary and entertainment. As a case in point, "Ruth Snyder's Tragedy: The Greatest True Story Ever Written," a novella by Russell J. Birdwell, was published weekly in the *Mirror* as the killers were being tried. At least thirteen installments appeared between April 11 and September 9, crystallizing all the melodramatic elements evident in the *Mirror*'s reportage.

For the scholar interested in narrative, the novella's inclusion is significant because it insists that, less than a month after the crime, enough details had circulated that an entire literary work could be generated. Indeed, the couple's trial did not begin until April 18, one week *after* the novella's first issue appeared; the fictionalized account actually began its circulation before many of the real events had even gotten under way.

The Birdwell text shows just how swiftly the tabloids could recycle cases into fictional formulas. Picking up the detail that Snyder first met Gray on one of the fishing vacations she and her husband took together, for example, Birdwell expands to make the trips part of an imaginary (and overwrought) set of criminal motives: "Ruth Snyder threw some bacon into a skillet and held it over the fire while she watched the pieces of meat writhe and twist. . . . She didn't like these mountain trips. She hated them. She hated her husband, Albert, for bringing her to such a drab place. But that's what she got for marrying an old man. He was 39 then" (April 11, 1927, 24). As early as the first installment and only three weeks after the murder, Snyder emerges as the archetypal femme fatale: vain, selfish, and ready to blame fate for her unfortunate marriage.

And as this excerpt demonstrates, the novella also exploited melodrama's interest in situation, which Singer defines as a "striking and exciting incident that momentarily arrests narrative action while the characters encounter a powerful new circumstance" (41). Writers covering the case or fictionalizing it accentuated such moments. In imagining the start of her relationship with Gray, for instance, Birdwell writes: "Ruth looked up from her cooking just as Gray cast his eyes in her direction. Their eyes met; their fate was sealed" (April 11, 1927, 24).

This novella also raises the issue of how tabloids and their narratives

construct what Daniel H. Lehman calls an "implicated" audience. Beginning with its subtitle, "The Greatest True Story Ever Written," Birdwell's novella presents itself as literary nonfiction, which, according to Lehman, "allows us to get 'inside' the narrative, while at the same time [understanding] that the narrators and subjects . . . live 'outside' the narrative as well" (3). Literary nonfiction constantly reminds us that what we are reading involves "narrational operations on an actual body or bodies rather than on imaginary characters" (3, 9). Audiences feel particularly "implicated" when they encounter characters in a narrative they know have died (or, in the case of Snyder and Gray, are likely to die). Those reading Birdwell—aware that the "story" he was crafting involved actual people being tried for a capital offense—were positioned to experience the narrative on an emotionally intense, multireferential plane.

The tabloids' capacity to recast news events as entertainments involved more than fictionalizing strategies, however. It also depended on manipulating photographs, those signifiers of the real and authentic, into narrative elements. For all their purple prose, the tabloids nevertheless prioritized pictures over written text. And photographs in this setting were constantly doctored. "Within tabloid coverage," observes Karin Becker, "we see the 'original' image repeatedly manipulated and altered with irreverent disregard for the standards that guide the elite press" (150). This was most obvious in the *Graphic*'s composographs, but it was true of the other two papers as well.

Arguably, no other criminal event up to 1927 generated as many photographs and other visual images as the Snyder case. By our count, the *Mirror* published at least 107 photographs and 55 illustrations in conjunction with it, while the *News* printed at least 182 photos and illustrations combined. Regarding this surfeit, we can appreciate Becker's observation. What we see here is rarely the work of a photographer alone, for virtually every photo appears to have been changed dramatically. Extreme sizes, both large and small, and shapes that deviate from the photo's original rectangular proportions are routine. Graphic elements are frequently imposed over the photographs, while montages and retouching are common.[4] Shadowing was used particularly with the photographs of Snyder in order to make her look either beautiful ("before" the murder) or haggard ("after" the murder), as in the spread from the *Mirror* shown in figure 4.2. Even more evident was the effort to link these images as part of a sequential visual experience. Photographs and drawings were frequently grouped together, creating a visual narrative that emphasized different facets of the case or its characters, as shown in figure 4.3.

FIGURE 4.2 Ruth Snyder, "Before and After," from the *Daily Mirror,* April 1927.

FIGURE 4.3 Ruth Snyder, "Striking Studies," from the *Daily Mirror,* April 1927.

FIGURE 4.4 Ruth Snyder, "Many Called, One Chosen," from the *Daily Mirror,* April 1927.

The *Mirror* encouraged readers to see the people involved in the case as melodramatic archetypes or Hollywood celebrities. Albert Snyder was depicted through formal headshots captioned by texts that make him appear a "Soul of Kindness" who "Greatly Loved [his] Faithless Wife" (April 4, 1927). Other images highlight the "star quality" of the participants. In one layout, for example, shown in figure 4.4, four photos of Ruth Snyder appeared on the front page. Each photo, the caption tells us, is included to illustrate how Ruth in the courtroom exhibited a "fascinating panorama of emotion" (April 20, 1927, 1). Even more flamboyant than the sequencing here is an illustrated filmstrip drawn around the image. Violating the supposed objectivity of news photography, the strip cinematizes Snyder and insists on her celebrity status, the performative aspects of her testimony, and the epic nature of her trial. It also implies, heavy-handedly, that the story is ready to be mobilized by Hollywood.

All three tabloids, but especially the *Mirror,* used photography to prioritize physical appearance over language as an index to a character's inner nature. After the statements made by Snyder and Gray at the trial, little analysis was given as to whether what they said was plausible. Instead, readers were encouraged to dwell fetishistically on photographs, making

inferences from how Snyder and Gray looked. Reports by phrenologists and other "experts" occasionally accompanied these images, explaining that the intelligent viewer could locate guilt in Snyder's "voluptuous figure" or "cold hard mouth."

The *Mirror* also inundated the public with pictures of Snyder. Indeed, her image dominated tabloid coverage as the femme fatale's would come to do fifteen years later in film noir. Often, a single page would devote itself to five or six photographs of Snyder so that readers could analyze her different expressions, poses, and gestures and thereby try to "see behind" the emotionless mask for which she was famed. This kind of studied attention to her face and physique is in keeping with Peter Brooks's observation that the "melodramatic body" is one "seized by meaning. Since melodrama's simple, unadulterated messages must be made absolutely clear, visually present, to the audience, bodies of victims and villains must unambiguously signify their status" (18). At the same time, these sensual, expressive images aim to captivate readers with Snyder's physical being. In this way, the photos often counter the narrative thrust of the text, which castigates Snyder for committing adultery in the first place. Tabloid image and text here share a striking parallel with film noir, in which, as Janey Place argues, "we observe both the social action of myth which damns the sexual woman and all who become enmeshed by her, and a particularly potent stylistic presentation of the sexual strength of woman which man fears" (153).

This multimedia drama was by no means one-sided, as the papers invited participation from readers. This was one of the characteristics that made the tabloids such an important part of popular culture. Pierre Bourdieu argues that while more elite forms of entertainment rely on "aesthetic distancing," popular ones depend on a "deep-rooted demand for participation" and a "desire to enter into the game, identifying with the characters' joys and sufferings, worrying about their fate" (32–34). As they had done with other big news events, the tabloids and especially the *Mirror* used the Snyder case to generate audience response. Polls were taken regularly, allowing the man on the street to register his opinion about whether Mrs. Snyder was really attractive, whether Judd Gray had any sex appeal, and whether the two should receive the death penalty.

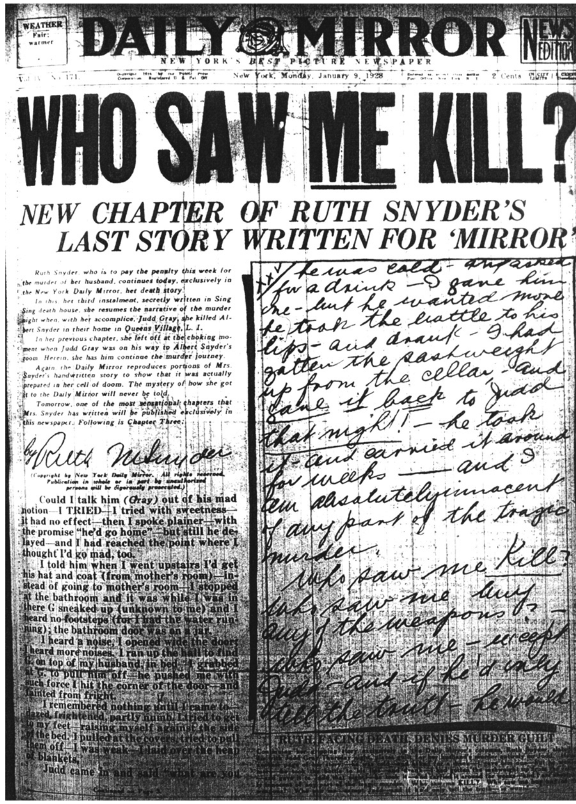
Creating a subcultural formation much like that of a fan community, this group participation gave readers the opportunity to craft their own versions of the saga. Readers wrote in, constantly producing updated narratives about their favorite characters or reframing the crime and its cultural importance. Predictably, responses published in the *Mirror* often gave a sentimental slant. Take, for example, this passage on the fate of

Snyder's child: "The worst of all of this, and a point that few have given any attention to, is the damaging effect [the crime] will produce on little Lorraine. She will no doubt grow up to be scarred for life by her mother's deadly betrayal. You can already see the bitterness in her eyes" (April 29, 1927, 28). As this letter indicates, readers chimed in to communicate what they perceived as neglected viewpoints. In doing so, they themselves contributed to the *Mirror*'s melodramatizing.

In keeping with the newspaper's spotlight on show business, Hearst also employed celebrity writers to comment on the case. Included in this coterie were Broadway playwright Samuel Shipman, actress Peggy Joyce, Valentino's ex-wife Natacha Rambova, and director D. W. Griffith. Hearst reportedly paid each of these authors $10,000 for their input. Not surprisingly, each compared the case to a Hollywood drama or Broadway play. Shipman, whose play *Crime* was running on Broadway as the case was being tried, wrote a series of commentaries in which he attempted to dissect the couple's motivations, as if in these "reports" he were working out a script. Novelist Thyra Winslow, on the other hand, flatly claimed, "If I were writing a short story now, I would never choose either Ruth Snyder nor Judd Gray as possible characters. . . . There is nothing appealing in this selfish, scheming, cold woman and this passionate, dirty-minded, semi-educated corset salesman" (May 17, 1927). Despite Winslow's dismissal, her statement and others like it suggest that it was only natural to imagine how a crime story like this might be used by other media.

Along with the readers who devoured every word about them and then added their own, Snyder and Gray both contributed their own perspectives on the murder. Early on in the case, Gray agreed to be interviewed by the *News,* while Snyder kept silent. Consequently, his version of events dominated the *News*'s account. Indeed, while Snyder's visual image far outweighs Gray's within that paper's pages, his voice powerfully shapes the *News*'s view of her. "She would place her face an inch from mine," Gray told reporters, "and look deeply into my eyes until I was hers completely. While she hypnotized my mind with her eyes she would gain control over my body by slapping my cheeks with the palms of her hands" (April 1, 1927, 3). As this passage exemplifies, Gray uses melodramatic tropes to present his naïveté in the face of Snyder's overpowering, femme fatale sexuality.

Given Snyder's silence, Gray's perspective initially allowed the *News* to claim a clear narrative advantage over the *Mirror,* as it gave readers an "inside" perspective on the case. In a startling turnaround, however, the *News* lost that advantage shortly before the couple's execution. At that point—only days before her death promised to silence her voice once



WEATHER Fair; warmer

DAILY MIRROR

NEWS EDITION

NEW YORK'S BEST PICTURE NEWSPAPER

New York, Monday, January 9, 1928 — 2 Cents

WHO SAW ME KILL?

NEW CHAPTER OF RUTH SNYDER'S LAST STORY WRITTEN FOR 'MIRROR'

Ruth Snyder, who is to pay the penalty this week for the murder of her husband, continues today, exclusively in the New York Daily Mirror, her death story.

In this, her third instalment, secretly written in Sing Sing death house, she resumes the narrative of the murder night when, with her accomplice, Judd Gray, she killed Albert Snyder in their home in Queens Village, L. I.

In her previous chapter, she left off at the choking moment when Judd Gray was on his way to Albert Snyder's room. Herein, she has him continue the murder journey.

Again the Daily Mirror reproduces portions of Mrs. Snyder's handwritten story to show that it was actually prepared in her cell of doom. The mystery of how she got it to the Daily Mirror will never be told.

Tomorrow, one of the most sensational chapters that Mrs. Snyder has written will be published exclusively in this newspaper. Following is Chapter Three:

by Ruth M. Snyder

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Could I talk him (*Gray*) out of his mad notion—I TRIED—I tried with sweetness—it had no effect—then I spoke plainer—with the promise "he'd go home"—but still he delayed—and I had reached the point where I thought I'd go mad, too.

I told him when I went upstairs I'd get his hat and coat (from mother's room)—instead of going to mother's room—I stopped at the bathroom and it was while I was in there G sneaked up (unknown to me) and I heard no footsteps (for I had the water running); the bathroom door was on a jar.

I heard a noise, I opened wide the door; I heard more noises. I ran up the hall to find G. on top of my husband, in bed—I grabbed at G. to pull him off—he pushed me with such force I hit the corner of the door—and fainted from fright.

I remembered nothing until I came to—dazed, frightened, partly numb. I tried to get to my feet—raising myself against the side of the bed. I pulled at the covers, tried to pull them off—I was weak—I laid over the heap of blankets.

Judd came in and said "what are you

he was cold—and asked for a drink—I gave him one—but he wanted more—he took the bottle to his lips—and drank—I had gotten the sashweight up from the cellar—and gave it back to Judd that night!—he took it—and carried it around for weeks —— and I am absolutely innocent of any part of the tragic murder.

Who saw me Kill?

Who saw me buy any of the weapons?—

Who saw me—except Judd—and if he'd only tell the truth—he would

RUTH, FACING DEATH, DENIES MURDER GUILT

FIGURE 4.5 Ruth Snyder's "Document of Doom," from the *Daily Mirror,* January 9, 1928.

and for all—Snyder decided to sell her account to the *Mirror.* The paper's headlines capitalized on this reportorial coup, announcing that it would "EXCLUSIVELY" print "Ruth Snyder's last story, written by herself in her own handwriting and published in this newspaper without one word of editing. The fact that the *Daily Mirror* was able to get this remarkable Document of Doom out of Sing Sing prison's deathhouse created a sensation yesterday" (January 7, 1928, 1). This verbiage emphasizes the authenticity of the handwritten tale, its fatefulness as a last "Document of Doom," and its mobility-ready status as a "story." To reinforce these characteristics, the *Mirror* published excerpts of Snyder's cursive account alongside its own transcription (see figure 4.5). The intent was to add realism and further personalization to the text. But by publishing these handwritten pages with the typeset account, the paper achieves the effect of instant mobility from an almost indecipherable letter, complete with ink blotches and misspellings, into a more polished product.[5]

Given its hard-boiled proclivity, it makes sense that the *News* directed so much attention to Gray. Within the newspaper's pages, he emerges as a protagonist much like Cain's Walter Neff, a character whose narration insists on the femme fatale's guilt. And the *News* shaped Snyder into a figure of extraordinary evil and sexuality, one who never showed signs of remorse. Almost immediately, she was described in the paper as the "woman of glacial composure" and the "frosty blonde murderess." She is also repeatedly described by the *News* as "oversexed" and overly interested in "power and authority."

In contrast, the *Mirror*'s publication of Ruth's "own story" adds to that paper's general portrayal of Snyder as an ordinary housewife whose dissatisfaction with an older, supposedly "coarse and boring" husband motivated her to kill. In this context, Snyder appears more sympathetically than she does in the *News,* her unhappy marriage a possible point of identification with readers, her choice to kill an expression of self-determination, desire, and power. In true melodramatic fashion, her narrative is designed to call out to female audiences, asking them to identify with the plight of a woman who, neglected by her husband and disappointed by her lover, resorted to desperate measures. Writing of melodrama, Singer observes, "The genre is paradoxical in that its portrayal of female power is often accompanied by the spectacle of the woman's victimization. The genre as a whole is animated by an oscillation between contradictory extremes of female prowess and distress, empowerment and imperilment" (222). Certainly, the *Mirror* capitalized on such a paradox by inviting Snyder to explain her seeming "cold-blooded ruthlessness" to readers through the lens of victimization.

We would argue that the *Mirror*'s ability to turn crime into melodrama made the newspaper a particularly vital site for narrative mobility. While still carrying connotations of being a working-class entertainment, in actuality melodrama cuts across all taste publics and all class levels, making it what Christine Gledhill calls a "protean" type of narrative, easily reconstituted and shifting between forms, cultures, audiences, and centuries (3). Linda Williams goes even further in implying melodrama's inherent narrative mobility, suggesting that "melodrama should be viewed . . . as what most often typifies popular American narrative in literature, stage, film, and television, however broadly we define 'popular'" (qtd. in Singer 7). And Martha Vicinus states that "melodrama is best understood as a combination of archetypal, mythic [elements] and time-specific responses to particular cultural and historical conditions, responses that appeal to audiences of varying interests, backgrounds, and education levels" (qtd. in Singer 143).

Thus, melodrama became a tool that allowed the *Mirror* to produce myriad variations on the Snyder-Gray story, with coverage exploiting different tonal appropriations, diverse perspectives, and multiple forms. In turn, media of varying cultural prestige were able to mobilize various aspects of the case into their own narratives. Sophie Treadwell, for example, adapted the story for her expressionist play, *Machinal,* which premiered on Broadway in 1928 with Clark Gable cast as the lover. A critical success, it ran for ninety-one performances and was widely heralded as a "unique, artistic achievement for sophisticated audiences" (Murphy, *Cambridge* 81).

Yet, for as much hyper-narrativity as the case produced, it's interesting to note that it was just one of numerous murder cases during the 1920s that were emplotted as tales of a deadly woman and her feckless lover. In 1924, *Chicago Tribune* reporter Maurine Dallas Watkins covered the separate trials of Beulah Annan and Belva Gaertner for the murder of their lovers, casting each woman as scheming, lascivious, and smart. Watkins's articles were so well-received that she recycled them into the smash Broadway play *Chicago* in 1926; a year later, Cecil B. DeMille adapted the play for his silent film of the same title. And as these versions circulated, psychologists, social commentators, and a host of other professional writers penned their thoughts on the murder cases.

And so the Snyder-Gray story was actually part of a much larger narrative—an archetypal drama about a deadly woman and the poor men she ensnares—that was both centuries old and, during the 1920s, newly reinvigorated for a culture seemingly consumed by sex, violence, and uncertainty about women's changing roles. And that reinvigoration continued well beyond the 1920s, not just in Cain's novels and Wilder's film but also in numerous other adaptations of the archetype. These adaptations include Fred Ebb and Bob Fosse's smash-hit 1975 musical, *Chicago;* its 1996 revival, which holds the record—over 5,000 performances as of November 2008—for the longest-running musical revival on Broadway; and the Academy Award–winning film version of the musical released in 2002. Brian A. Rose would thus call a narrative like the Snyder-Gray story a "tracer-text," a "seed" story that contains motifs, themes, and images of archetypal importance and that is adopted for "repeated use in performative and nonperformative modes, utilizing the dominant as well as descendant media of that culture" (2). Possessed of their own inherent narrative mobility, "tracer-texts" eventually produce "culture-texts"—texts that come to figure so heavily in the popular imagination that they are regarded as belonging more to a "culture" than to a single author. And melodrama, we find, is central to the production of culture-

texts, as evidenced by the sheer number of them—*Oliver Twist, Jane Eyre, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* and *Dracula*—that depend on melodramatic strategies and whose adaptations do so as well.

The Postman Always Rings Twice and *Double Indemnity,* we would argue, are also culture-texts. They draw on an age-old story that was recharged by a variety of media exploiting melodrama's narrative mobility during the 1920s, a decade obsessed by questions of taste and class boundaries. Amidst this cultural climate, a climate endlessly recasting narratives vis-à-vis the tabloids and other media specializing in sensation, we turn now to Cain's fiction, which has itself been marked by boundary confusion.

James M. Cain and Hard-Tabloid Style

Cain, more than has been acknowledged, mobilized narrative details directly from the tabloids for *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity.* More importantly, we find that his characteristic style as a novelist—what we might think of as a "hard-tabloid" style—was influenced by the hot headlines where the melodramatic and the hard-boiled met.

Before we turn directly to Cain, though, we must define what we mean by "hard-boiled." Like "melodrama," the term has been used in various contexts to indicate a genre, a mode, a style, and even a sensibility. In fact, the difficulties in defining "hard-boiled" are so similar to the problems Singer identified that we have adopted his "cluster concept" to frame our definition. We think of the hard-boiled as a mode whose meaning varies by context based on different combinations of key features: 1) a cynical or "hard-bitten" sensibility, particularly in relation to figures of authority; 2) language characterized by ironic understatement, terse description, or wisecracking; 3) moral ambiguity; 4) emphasis on physical action, particularly violence; 5) interest in "lowbrow," gritty, or transgressive situations, settings, and characters and a corresponding mistrust of the socially elevated; and 6) pronounced assertion of a tough masculine stance. Not all of these features need be present at the same time; in fact, some of the characteristics, such as wisecracking language, may be powerful enough to produce a hard-boiled flavor by themselves. These characteristics are sometimes—but certainly not always—presented alongside tropes such as a femme fatale, a morally compromised yet self-knowing loner hero, or an urban setting.

As this definition suggests, the hard-boiled is, like melodrama, a mobile concept. Our definition also indicates that it provides a counterpoint to

some features of melodrama, such as pathos and moral polarization. Yet rather than repelling each other, the melodramatic and the hard-boiled often work in tandem, as we see in all three tabloids. That is, as much as the *Daily News* tended toward the hard-boiled, it did not eschew melodrama's sensationalism. Meanwhile, the melodramatic excesses of the *Mirror* by no means precluded a fascination with physical violence or a gritty setting. Rather, much as the tabloids mixed fact and fiction, they gleefully blended melodramatic and hard-boiled writing.

When we consider the intersections between tabloid coverage of the Snyder case and Cain's fiction, we find similarities at the level of both plot and narrative style. Cain himself was cagey about acknowledging that the tabloids had any influence on his work. According to him, it was merely a chance anecdote about Ruth Snyder, narrated by his friend Vincent Lawrence, which inspired the murder "love-rack" pattern he reworked many times. Beyond this, Cain never discussed a connection. But his writing, more than that of the other crime novelists with whom he is frequently grouped, often employs a tabloid-like pastiche of the melodramatic and the hard-boiled.

Cain was immersed in New York news culture while the case unfolded, and obvious correspondences to the tabloids' coverage are prominent in both *Postman* and *Double Indemnity.* At the level of character, Cora Papadakis in *Postman* and Phyllis Nerdlinger in *Double Indemnity* are both sexually aggressive women unhappily married to much older men, and they are easily read as versions of the tabloids' vampish Snyder. Indeed, in his depiction of Phyllis, Cain uses melodramatic imagery nearly identical to that portraying Ruth in the tabloids. At one point, for example, he writes of the "one big square of red silk" Phyllis wraps around herself before her symbolic "marriage" with Death—an image right out of the *Mirror*'s coverage, which described Ruth as donning a "flaming red" kimono while waiting for her lover to appear (Cain 114; April 13, 1927, 23). As for the men who fall under the wiles of his femmes fatales, Cain's doomed protagonists Walter Huff and Frank Chambers are both ensnared by a violent eroticism that echoes Gray's claims of being rendered helpless by Ruth's animal magnetism.

At the level of plot, too, Cain's stories parallel the tabloids. The insurance twists in both stories directly summon the double-indemnity policy that Snyder took out on her husband. Then the tabloid coverage devoted much space to dramatizing how Snyder and Gray were at one another's throats within hours of the killing; likewise, Cain creates psychological drama by having both his couples turn on each other immediately after they commit murder.

Linguistically, moreover, *Postman* and *Double Indemnity* include phrasing pulled directly from tabloid articles following the Snyder case. Hyperbolic headlines such as "Ruth and Judd Drank Til Dawn in House of Death" and "'A House of Death,' Neighbor Calls Snyder Bungalow" abounded in the tabloids' early coverage (*Mirror,* March 22, 1927, 4; *Daily News,* March 24, 1927, 2). Cain, in turn, has Walter Neff remark that the newspapers have termed his murderous lover's residence a "House of Death" (3). In another instance, when mercury poison was discovered in a whiskey bottle in the Snyder house, the tabloids picked up on the implication that Ruth had earlier attempted to eliminate her husband. The *Mirror* began calling her "the bottle killer" (April 16, 1927, 29). It is possible that Cain's readers who had followed the tabloid trial would notice that in *Postman,* Cora is also pictured in a newspaper with a caption calling her "the bottle killer" (60). These allusions, bracketed in each Cain story within references to the press, achieve a double function. Like the close-up shots of newspaper pages so popular as expository devices in films of the 1930s and 1940s, these references emphasize that Cain's story is *other* than a newspaper yet is capable of encapsulating the paper's content and style. At the same time, the allusions function as fuses that reignite memory of a well-known media event. Cain may well have hoped that some of his readers would experience the "click of recognition" that comes when, as we discussed in chapter 2, a reader or viewer recalls the actual events on which a text is based.

We might also read Cain's unswerving insistence on his characters' doom as a response to an observation made about the Snyder drama by his friend and mentor H. L. Mencken. In a review published in *The American Mercury,* Mencken dissected Gray's confession, which was published in book form as *Doomed Ship,* shortly after the trial. The real dilemma for Gray, declared Mencken, was his devout Presbyterian upbringing, which trained him to see all moral backsliding as equally sinful. Once Gray had consummated his lust for Snyder, he saw himself as already bound for damnation. Killing was just another step on the path to Hell. Although there is no record of Cain remarking on Mencken's review, he followed his mentor's writing closely and would certainly have seen the review when it was published. His fiction dramatizes the aspect of Gray's confession Mencken has singled out, narrating murder from the point of view of a man who has been predestined, "straight down the line," to kill from his first kiss.

Apart from these correspondences, one other distinctive aspect of Cain's fiction—the killer's confession—seems directly adapted from the tabloids.

Confession played out dramatically in the Snyder-Gray case because of the competing testimonies Gray and Snyder sold to rival papers. Cain is likewise fascinated with the idea of narrating a story from a murderer's admissions. Describing this point of view, he remarked that crime "had always been written about from its least interesting angle, which was whether the police would catch the murderer" (qtd. in Scaggs 109). Doing away with the detective-narrator, Cain brings readers directly into the minds of ordinary men driven by petty urges toward violence. This device is chiefly what makes him so much grittier than Chandler or Hammett, where we always view criminal activity through the buffering lens of the private eye. Retelling murder through the guilty protagonist's voice, Cain created a narrative slant that was widely noted when *Postman* was published in 1934, and it became a stock-in-trade that he would recycle in *Double Indemnity* and many other works.

Cain had shown interest in this confessional device as early as his first story, "Pastorale," which appeared in the *American Mercury* in March 1928. It is easy to read the tale as an Appalachian-gothic adaptation of the Snyder-Gray crime. Burbie, a bumpkin whose "watery blue eyes what kind of stick out from his face" recall Gray's much-noted myopic squint, plots with his good-time girl about how to free her from her elderly spouse (291). Burbie connives with an unwitting accomplice, Hutch; they kill the old man and, in a gruesome twist reminiscent of the mutilation of Albert Snyder's neck, cut off the victim's head with a shovel. Burbie then escapes suspicion when Hutch accidentally dies and is assumed responsible for the murder. But the climax of Cain's story comes when Burbie, unable to resist telling someone about how clever he's been, confesses to the constable. In jail awaiting his hanging, Burbie enacts his testimony repeatedly for audiences. Notably, Burbie's confession reiterates that drink and women ruined him, echoing Gray's own moralizing confession. According to Roy Hoopes, Cain began writing "Pastorale" in late 1927 (179–80). The time frame of its creation and publication seems too close to the Snyder-Gray trial to be entirely coincidental. It appeared two months after the killers were executed, within a year of Gray's exhaustive tabloid confession.

Positing that this confessional point of view may be Cain's most distinctive trait, Paul Skenazy attributes it to the author's Catholic boyhood. Yet one of the more likely and immediate sources for this "short, intense, first person narrative in which the male protagonist confesses his sins, allowing the reader to peek indiscreetly at his immoral life" are Gray's own words, blazoned on headlines and hawked daily on every corner by newsboys (12–13). In fact, the remarkable thing about both the tabloid

confessions and the device as Cain uses it is that no one claims active volition. Confession in the Catholic context, of course, depends upon accepting responsibility for the commission of sins. Yet the ethos of Cain's confessions is recycled right from the tabloids, where responsibility gets shifted onto the impossibly seductive woman or crooked fate.

If an interest in confession is one of Cain's characteristics as a writer, so too is his penchant for manipulating readers. According to W. M. Frohock, Cain's reader is "tricked into taking the position of a potential accomplice" with his criminals (125). David Madden is more circumspect about whether any manipulation in this regard is entirely negative. He suggests that the "serious reader" is aware that Cain is employing a concept of a "popular reader"; the "serious reader" is simultaneously drawn in by the story and distanced by the rhetoric. In other words, Cain's "manipulative" point of view can be read as a conscious literary device meant to call attention to his authorial control (125). Such an interpretation suggests that the experience of reading Cain is analogous to a process Joseph Valente identifies in the tabloids. Tabloid journalism, in Valente's view,

> not only traffics in transgressive pleasures, but maintains its own rhetorical police force that marks them as such. Although the disapproval this induces in the reader works to assure him of his moral superiority to those making a spectacle of themselves, it also cajoles him to disapprove, to a degree, of his own voyeuristic consumption. . . . Not only is the tabloid the thing you hate to love, a source of "displeasure in pleasure," it insistently reminds you of this paradox. (16)

Like the tabloid audience, Cain's reader experiences a paradoxical sense of being *in* the text as a suspenseful "accomplice" while also remaining *outside* enough to be aware of how his emotions are absorbed by the fast-paced plot.

Despite these many congruencies, there has been little real consideration of Cain's work in relation to the tabloids. While his writing has often been called "tabloidish," that term has been used in a broadly condescending manner rather than in a way that defines exactly what it means to have such qualities. Frohock, for example, called *Postman* a "tabloid tragedy, the cheap slaughter that makes the inside pages of the thriller-press" (96). Likewise, a reviewer in 1965 remarked that "[f]or thirty years, novelist James M. Cain has worked a literary lode bordering the trash heap of the tabloids" (qtd. in Madden 123). Even in cases where critics intended the term "tabloid" less pejoratively, it appears as code for sensationalism or ham-handed writing. A *Newsweek* reporter commenting on

Cain's work, for example, praised the "rancid air of authenticity which Cain obtains by screwing down his competent microscope on a drop of that social seepage which discharges daily into US tabloids and criminal courts" (qtd. in Madden 39). All of these reviewers bestow praise on the novelist for writing in a hard-boiled manner about what was, to their eyes, essentially smut.[6]

Like these critics, Cain also refused to acknowledge any serious connection between his work and jazz journalism. Indeed, he was notorious for discounting *any* influence on his writing, including that of other hard-boiled writers. Greg Forter argues that Cain, more than the other "poets of the tabloid murder," as Edmund Wilson called them, fought "an eternal war with his doubles ('Hammett,' 'Hemingway,' 'Chandler') over the absolute sovereignty and independence of his 'voice'" (282). When Alfred A. Knopf, understandably trying to capitalize on the impact of *Postman,* promoted him as a "tough guy writer," Cain complained:

> I wish you would stop advertising me as tough. I protested to the New York critics about their labeling me as hard-boiled, for being tough is the last thing in the world I think about, and it's not doing me any good to have such a thing stamped on me. Actually I am shooting for something different and plugging me as one of the tough young men merely muddles things up. (qtd. in Hoopes 256)

"I belong to no school, hard-boiled or otherwise," Cain wrote in another statement. "Writing a book," he continued, "is a genital process and all of its stages are intra-abdominal; it is sealed off in such fashion that outside 'influences' are almost impossible" (Bloom 619). While we may find Cain's groin and gut imagery ironically hard-boiled in this context, we can appreciate his artistic desire to see his work respected on its own terms rather than lumped together with others' writing as part of a trend.

Given his desire to "shoot for something different" from the other tough-guy writers, Cain was ambivalent about the mass popularity he had achieved with his fiction. As Hoopes's biography recounts, Cain despised both the high art of the contemporary literary elite and what he saw as cheap entertainment purveyed by the mass media. According to Sean McCann, this unease haunted all the dominant hard-boiled writers, who were anxious about being regarded merely as hacks. "Driven by ambitions that they felt certain could not be realized," McCann argues, "the major hard-boiled writers became, in effect, pulp avant-gardists" (4). Caught in this difficult position, writers like Cain, Chandler, and George Harmon Coxe became understandably reticent about their links with the

sort of popular culture exemplified by the tabloids.

Thoughtful consideration of how Cain's fiction may have adapted tabloid elements has also been hampered by the fact that for many years hard-boiled literature itself held a marginal position. It teetered uneasily between mass popularity and the avant-garde; more damningly, its origins and mass readership aligned it uncomfortably close to the tabloids. In 1920, only several months after the *Daily News* was founded, *Black Mask* began operation under Mencken and George Jean Nathan. Describing the circumstances around the magazine's inception, historian William F. Nolan remarks, "No grand vision inspired the creators of *Black Mask.* In fact, litterateur H. L. Mencken and drama critic George Jean Nathan despised their brainchild and refused to allow their names to be included on its masthead" (19). In large part, as Erin Smith observes, *Black Mask* and the other pulps of the 1920s commanded so little respect because their readers were held to be socially and economically negligible (23). According to a study Smith documents, the average reader of pulp fiction magazines was "a young married man in a manual job who had limited resources and lived in an industrial town" (23). Like the tabloids, pulp magazines depended for readership on working people who might otherwise not have had the resources or time to participate in any sort of literary exchange. In staking out a claim for hard-boiled fiction as *literature,* therefore, critics have been reticent to connect it in any way with the tabloids.

Against this backdrop of class and genre issues, it is also important to remember that Cain's own critical reception has been more divided than that of the other writers with whom he is often grouped. As Forter puts it, "Cain seems somehow always to be cheating, to be playing dirty; the goods he delivers evaporate behind their thin glitzy wrappers, leaving only an overpowering scent of sulfur and sleazy sex; his effects grip and seduce us, sometimes even to furious abandon, but they also invariably muss us up since they are, in the end, dirty little effects, cheap and sensational tricks, shams—by no means the real thing at all" (277). Forter here is satirizing the attitude of many critics, who, while valorizing Cain, frequently use terms like "sleazy," "dirty," and "cheap" to describe his characters or settings. According to this thinking, acknowledging that Cain's novels employ tabloid strategies would run the risk of actually condemning his work as trashy and sensational. To compensate, many critics who want to praise Cain avoid any mention of tabloid qualities and instead elevate him to the status of an important modernist writer comparable to Hemingway, Flaubert, Zola, and Tolstoy. Even as astute a critic as James Naremore participates in this high-browing of Cain's fic-

tion, which, Naremore claims, "specialized in Dostoyevskian narratives of criminal psychology, transposed into lower-class American" (*More than Night* 83). No wonder, given all this, that Cain's tabloid connections have been left unexamined.

Instead, critics who wish to elevate his work have focused on purely aesthetic issues, bringing to mind Bourdieu's remark that the hallmark of bourgeois taste is an "oddly impeccable formalism" (11). This formalist emphasis typifies the majority of criticism on hard-boiled writing, in fact. Smith agrees, commenting that "most of the existing scholarship on detective fiction comes out of a formalist or structuralist tradition that attends to texts as sign systems without attending to the social and economic worlds in which they are written and read" (5). According to many scholars, then, it is Cain's techniques—his use of language, tone, and structure especially—that legitimize his novels and compensate for his choice of sensational subject matter. Madden, Cain's most prolific scholar, has famously used the term "pure novel" to describe his subject's work. In Madden's view, all of Cain's "creative energy is directed toward getting the story told as briefly and as forcibly as possible; and it is its own reason for being. The novel should raise and answer its own questions and depend as little as possible upon anything beyond the bounds of its own immediacy" (159). A textbook example of New Critical thinking, Madden's assessment assumes that literary value inheres only in the text and that considering the novel as adaptation of anything beyond its own parameters is fruitless.

But what critics generally do not consider is the possibility that Cain's writing is a conscious reworking of the narrative content and style of the tabloids, which were mixing hard-boiled and melodramatic characteristics in an exciting way. Cain mobilized his fiction from the New York newspapers because they inevitably shared a range of representational strategies, some of which Cain masculinized. Andreas Huyssen writes of the "powerful masculinist mystique" both explicit and implicit in the modernist modes embodied in hard-boiled fiction. These modes, all of which we can see in Cain, include a flamboyantly "experimental" stance, a sense of the work as an encounter with the possibilities of language, and an adversarial stance to the bourgeois culture of everyday life (54). Such a mystique, Huyssen argues, "must be related to the persistent gendering of mass culture as feminine and inferior" (55). Tabloids were perceived by many as the supreme exemplars of mass culture. A story like the Snyder-Gray case thus posed a challenge for the modernist writer who wished to adapt it, since it was so heavily associated with the form against which he needed to define his work.

Given this, we might see the combinatory "hard-tabloid" mode deployed by Cain as a modernist adaptation of the tabloids' mixing of hard-boiled and melodramatic styles. While the *Mirror* unapologetically indulged in domestic melodrama, foregrounding the perspective of a woman and her downfall, Cain's writing modified the mode to produce what Graham Greene termed "blood melodrama" (qtd. in Naremore, *More than Night* 45). If domestic melodrama focuses on pathos and overwrought emotion, "blood melodrama" tends more toward sensationalism, especially violence, and foregrounds male actors and stereotypically masculine activities.

Yet we must not forget that Cain's fiction, more than that of the other tough-guy writers, combines hard-boiled language with extreme melodrama in a flamboyantly self-conscious way, as in the end of *Double Indemnity* where the protagonists meet their deaths by agreeing to jump into shark-infested waters. Taking his cue from Cain himself, Naremore likens these moments to a highbrow musical form, noting that Cain's melodrama was that "of a certain kind of grand opera, in which the players are swept along on currents of violent desire" (*More than Night* 83).[7] We would say, however, that this flashy combination of melodramatic action with hard-boiled prose was much more characteristic of the tabloids.

Resuscitation; or How Many Times Did That Postman Ring?

The tabloids don't like to let stories die. No anecdote better illustrates this than the *Daily News*'s procuring of a writ of *habeas corpus* from Ruth Snyder's mother so that, after Snyder's electrocution, her body could be rushed to a waiting doctor and jolted back to life with a dose of adrenalin. Unfortunately, as *Daily News* reporter Florabel Muir recounts, the resuscitation scheme turned out to be too outlandish even for the tabloid.[8]

But we might see the narrative mobility we have traced throughout this chapter as a far more successful type of resuscitation. Theorists such as Jameson and Baudrillard have famously observed how a hyperabundance of images and discursive output creates a built-in obsolescence to certain news stories. This condition, which they see as symptomatic of postmodernism, was clearly at work in the tabloid representation of the Snyder-Gray case, whose voluminous coverage created overkill within months. Writing for *Outlook* magazine in 1927, Silas Bent complained that "[a]ll the essential facts and a multitude of unessential details in the case are publicly as well known as if the crime itself with its vile preliminaries had

been committed in full view of the world" (74). *Dramatic Crimes of 1927*—a book that ironically extended yet more attention to the Snyder case even as it denigrated the tabloids for their relentless coverage—declared, "All America had seats for a bloody circus during the year 1927. The performance began one chill March night and stretched cruelly and interminably through until the early days of the new year. . . . [but now] the circus is over and done" (Mackaye 290). By 1928—at least according to the middlebrow sources cited above—no one wanted to hear the names Snyder and Gray ever again, and those who did write about the case betrayed a fascinating insistence on transforming it into "history."

Yet as we have seen in our day, outworn tabloid events are often remobilized in more "respectable" media such as television docudrama or popular nonfiction, where the most compelling narrative aspects are gleaned from them and then cleaned of overtly "trashy" overtones. Published several years after the Snyder case had ended, at a safe distance from the case's tabloidization, Cain's *Postman* and *Double Indemnity* allowed the American public to revisit the "synthetic blonde murderess," as the *Daily News* called her, from the vantage point of the mid-1930s, when the newspaper industry's love of sensationalism had been tamed by the Depression and hysteria over the tabloids' supposedly pernicious influence had died down. Perhaps more importantly, though, Cain's fictions were published at a time when hard-boiled literature had begun to step out of the pulp pages of magazines like *Black Mask* and into hardback respectability. Certainly, Cain's publisher, Knopf, was a long way from the *Mirror.*

Altogether, Cain turned the Snyder-Gray "love rack" into a play, a screenplay treatment, and multiple short stories and novels. Indeed, like the tabloids, Cain's work is typified by an extreme degree of remobilization. In general, critics who have discussed this trait have expressed disapproval. Richard Schickel remarks, "Maybe he was not quite practicing self-plagiarism, but certainly there was—in the eight-part serial [of *Double Indemnity*] he sold to *Liberty* magazine for $5,000 for publication in 1936—more than a mere echo of his previous work" (20). Not only can *Postman* and *Double Indemnity* be read as middlebrow versions of tabloid coverage, then, but *Double Indemnity* can be read as a reiteration of *Postman,* which itself remakes aspects of "Pastorale." Such active remaking is, as we have seen, typical of the tabloids. It is thus worth considering how much Cain's strategy of resuscitating and remobilizing his own writing may have been influenced by the tabloids' practice.

Cain insisted that he never wrote stories with any idea that they might be mobilized into the movies (Madden 49). This claim seems dubious given Cain's seventeen years on and off studio payrolls in Hollywood

and given that eight of his fictional works were made into films between 1931 and 1948.[9] Regardless of his intentions, though, filmmakers could not resist resuscitating versions of Snyder and Gray as well. When problems with the Production Code kept the story from being filmed in the United States, the narrative moved abroad. Pierre Chenal's *Le Dernier Tournant* appeared in France in 1939, with Cain given credit as the story's author. In 1943, Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione,* based on Cain's *Postman,* was released in Italy. Then Wilder's film version of *Double Indemnity* was released in the United States in 1944. One review praised it as "the most fascinating little case history of red-hot passion, conscienceless killing and needle-nosed detection that has come along since the Snyder-Gray case" (*PM* review qtd. in McManus 20).

While the story's mobilization from tabloid newspapers to hard-boiled fiction to film noir certainly implies an upward mobility, it is important to point out that the narrative trajectory took at least one downward detour. In September 1945, *Apology for Murder,* starring Ann Savage and Hugh Beaumont, debuted in theatres. Directed by Sam Newfield, *Apology* was so overtly a knockoff of Wilder's film that one scriptwriter quipped it should have been titled *Single Indemnity* (qtd. in Muller 24).

Not surprisingly, *Apology for Murder* is a B-film, produced by the Poverty Row studio PRC. As such, this movie bears all the features of its class. Like most B-films, it was made on a tight schedule and shoestring budget (at one point in the film, someone closes a door and the set shakes). And though Savage is now a darling among film noir buffs, thanks to her performance in *Detour,* and Beaumont achieved some fame as the father on *Leave It to Beaver,* both actors at the time of the movie's release were no-names. The music is out of sync with the narrative, and the dialogue is delivered with ferocious rapidity so as to keep the film down to seventy-one minutes. With its cheap look, flimsy props, and grim lighting, the entire feel of *Apology*—like many a B-movie—is film noir, a point Murray Pomerance extends when he wryly remarks that "PRC was itself a noir construct, the last stop before the gutter" for many in Hollywood (43).

As the poor relations of Hollywood features, B-films are roughly analogous to tabloids, judged "inferior" to their mainstream rivals. Like the tabloids, B-films often visit subject matter that their mainstream counterparts avoid. B-films are also notorious for recycling visuals, plots, and situations. In fact, *Apology*'s director, Sam Newfield, was so prolific that even PRC was embarrassed about his output, forcing him to adopt two aliases (Peter Stewart and Sherman Scott).

But even for a B-film, *Apology* is an audacious piece of plagiarism. It

lifts its material directly from Cain's *Postman* and *Double Indemnity* and, more daringly, poaches from Wilder's movie. It centers on three characters: a femme fatale married to a wealthy, older man; the sucker boyfriend—a reporter in this case—who helps her whack her husband; and the boyfriend's boss who sees right through the femme fatale. The plot follows Wilder's *Double Indemnity* almost exactly. *Apology* even copies key scenes, including the lovers' initial meeting and banter on the stairs; their tryst at the sucker's apartment; and a conclusion in which the sucker, shot and dying, staggers to his office in the middle of the night in order to type up his confession.

And the similarities continue. *Apology* also borrows visually and linguistically from its predecessor, with recycled images and lines popping up everywhere. Apparently, Paramount's close-up on Barbara Stanwyck's anklet in the first few minutes of *Double Indemnity* appealed so much to PRC that *Apology* showcases Savage's ankles not just once but five times. And Fred MacMurray's recurring use of "baby" as a hard-boiled term of endearment is parroted almost as often by Beaumont. (Neither man quite pulls it off.)

The parallels between *Apology for Murder* and *Double Indemnity* are so close that one has to wonder whether PRC produced its picture with a wink-and-a-nod, parading its disregard for originality just as the New York tabloids did. In fact, one of the aspects that so delights us about this awful movie is its transformation of the sucker into a reporter, as if suggesting that, like those zany tabloids, it also specializes in narrative mobility.

But Paramount wasn't laughing. The studio threatened to sue PRC, and *Apology* was pulled from theatres before most moviegoers got to appreciate Savage's ankles. It seems curious that a powerful studio like Paramount worried about this low-rent riff on its own far superior film. Perhaps the studio just wanted to flex its muscles, or perhaps Wilder—always guarding his artistic status—helped instigate the threat. What *Apology* does make clear is that narrative mobility is by no means one-directional. Quickly and with ease, a sensational narrative like the Snyder-Gray story could traverse taste borders in either direction.

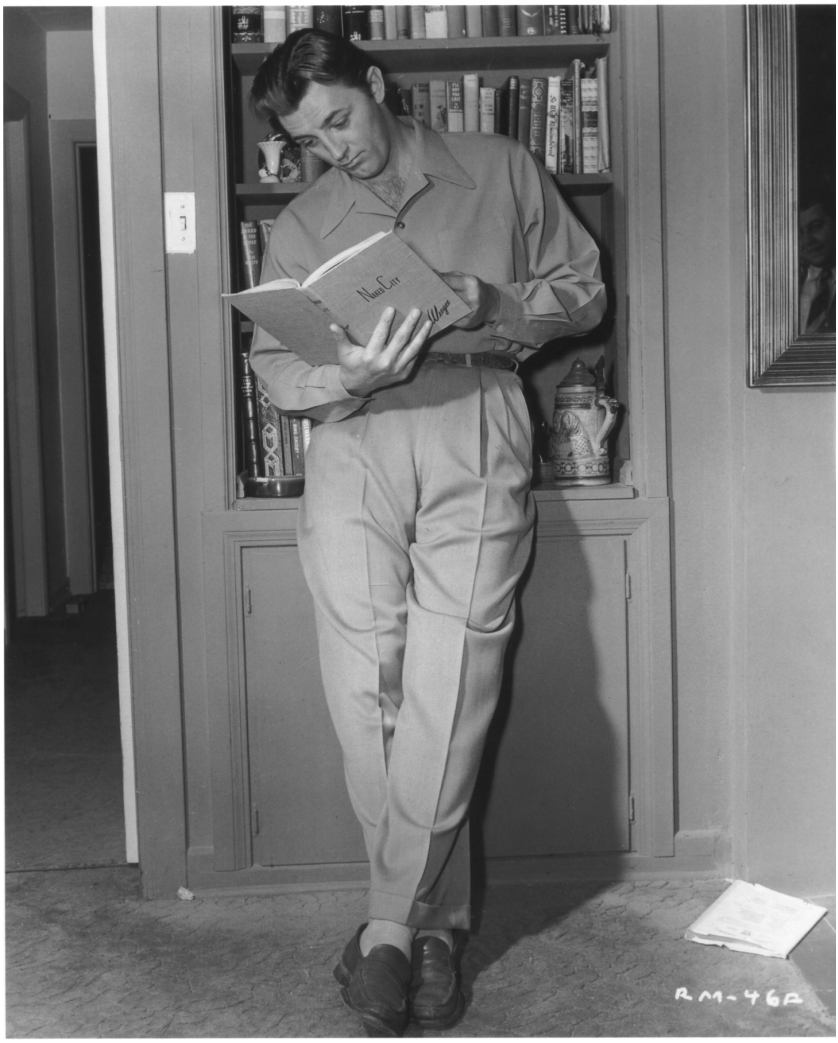


FIGURE 5.1 Robert Mitchum reading a copy of Weegee's *Naked City,* 1948. (Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. © RKO Pictures, Inc. Licensed by Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All Rights Reserved.)

CHAPTER FIVE

"Crime Is My Oyster"

Weegee's Narrative Mobility

IN 1948, RKO took a photo of Robert Mitchum, shown in figure 5.1 (opposite), as part of a series promoting the studio's new "leading star of hard-fisted crime dramas." Publicity photos are designed to advance or confirm a star's image. It is noteworthy, then, that the book Mitchum is reading is *Naked City*, the photo-essay by crime photographer Weegee, who documented murder and attendant vices in New York in the 1930s and 1940s. Published in 1945 to critical plaudits, Weegee's book seems to function here as a prop to stage Mitchum's "hard-fisted" masculinity even amidst the genteel setting of his library. For us, however, this publicity shot's interest arises from what it reveals about the trajectory of Weegee's photographs as they traveled from the smudgy newsprint of the tabloid editions to more culturally respectable realms.

Even in recent photography criticism and cultural studies, Weegee is often still viewed as photography's loner hero. With few exceptions, scholars generally ignore the newspaper context in which many of Weegee's images originally appeared, isolating them as purely artistic documents. These photographs are now reproduced in sleek coffee-table books whose high-toned look could not be further removed from the messy clutter of the tabloids. And repeatedly, these books liken Weegee's work to the visual style of film noir, a comparison that lends this cigar-chomping cameraman from the Bronx the same stylish aura now granted to the genre.

But we gain a better appreciation of Weegee's work if we approach it as part of a dynamic exchange, developed over twenty-five years,

among tabloid photography, autobiography, hard-boiled narrative, museum culture, and film noir. Weegee's self-creation evolved over a period that saw both a retrospective fascination with the culture of tabloid news work and an extensive remasculinization of the news photographer. Over these decades, hot headlines lost the readership that had made them one of the country's most popular venues. Yet, as their circulation plummeted, tabloids emerged as a site of aesthetic fascination for middlebrow audiences. As a result, by the 1940s, the culture of the tabloids was available for a distanced—we might say almost anthropological—retrospection.

Also crucial to Weegee's self-fashioning was the fact that by the late 1930s and 1940s, the photojournalist in general had emerged in popular literature and film as an icon of rough-edged masculinity. Weegee exploited this image for his own self-advancement. In addition to his visual talents, he was superbly skilled at textual self-fashioning. He also excelled at boosting his photographs out of their ephemeral status as newspaper illustrations and upward into more esteemed positions. As a result, by World War II, this salami-snacking newshound from the Bronx had become a darling of the art world.

Within the pages ahead, we provide a three-pronged approach to narrative mobility. To begin, we consider the masculinizing uses of autobiography by surveying a number of texts written by male photojournalists in the 1930s and early 1940s. Second, we address Weegee's *Naked City* itself as a hard-boiled autobiography, arguing that it allowed the crime photographer to craft his own narrative and simultaneously advance the artistic status of his images. And third, we consider the mobility of Weegee's photographs, tracing the different narrative functions they have assumed in different contexts. Situating *Naked City* in Mitchum's oversized hands, the publicity photo that opens this chapter confirms that the photographer's local popularity had, by the mid-1940s, expanded all the way to the West Coast—indeed, right to the actor's library. *How* it arrived there forms the central question of this chapter.

Tabloid Tough Guys

As the portrait in figure 5.2 from *Naked City* attests, by 1945 Weegee himself was established as an American cult icon. While his photos of gangland murders had splashed across New York tabloid pages in the 1930s, a decade later his own face appeared regularly in the papers. In fact, Weegee's career provides one of the rare instances in the history of press

FIGURE 5.2 Weegee's author mugshot from *Naked City*, ca. 1945. (Weegee (Arthur Fellig)/Premium Archive/Getty Images.)

photography in which the figure *behind* the camera achieved as much notoriety as his pictures.

Weegee's larger-than-life persona and the narratives he crafted about himself often overshadowed his individual images, and if we step around the corpus of scholarship valorizing him as a naïve psychic-savant with a Speed Graphic, we find that his success depended in large part upon a calculated mobilization of hard-boiled tropes into various forms of self-promotion. To a twenty-first-century viewer familiar with hard-boiled literature, gangster films, and film noir, the look Weegee affects in this photo seems comically over-determined. He exudes the meaty nonchalance of film noir's homelier men. His unshaven mug is punctuated with a cigar; his hand is unburdened by a wedding ring. Straight ahead he stares, his own Speed Graphic set with a flash attachment and ready to shoot.

Indeed, the resemblance between Weegee and the protagonists of American crime literature and film were part of a much larger cultural trend of masculinizing the news photographer during the late 1920s through the 1940s. Writing about what he terms "hard-boiled masculinity," Christopher Breu has argued:

> The fictional hard-boiled male first emerged in the pulp magazines of the nineteen twenties and thirties and quickly became an icon of modern American masculinity. Initially linked to a specific genre, the hard-boiled detective story, the conception of masculinity represented by this fictional tough guy quickly spread to other sites within American culture: first to the ostensibly high-cultural writings of American modernists and then, after the beginning of World War II, to the silver screen, yielding the tough guy of film noir. (1)[1]

This hard-boiled masculinity extended to other sites as well, including photojournalism, which—beginning with the Snyder execution photograph—quickly adopted a tough-guy aesthetic as a dominant mode of production for many of its images.

Certainly, the Snyder photo exemplifies how hypermasculine activities were, by the late 1920s, narrated as a part of news work. The *Daily News*, eager to get a picture of Snyder in the Sing Sing death chamber where cameras were banned, brought in Chicago photographer Tom Howard. Howard entered the prison with the rest of the press corps, a small hidden camera strapped to his ankle. When the executioner pulled the electric switch, Howard extended his leg, pressed a shutter threaded through his trousers on a long cord, and snapped his shot.

The Snyder photo set off a furor over tabloid transgressions and also triggered a roughly twenty-five-year period during which public focus on press photography shifted from the photographer's images to his words. For the first time, elaborate narratives were generated about the act of acquiring pictures, and audiences were encouraged to be as interested in the story *behind* the news photo as in the image itself.

By our estimate, well over one hundred hard-boiled accounts of news photographers' careers—varying in length from short feature articles to newspaper columns, from photo-essays to book-length autobiographies—appeared between 1927 and approximately 1950. Among those who penned some form of self-narration during this period were Norman Alley, Bill Davidson, Mark Finley, John J. Floherty, Sammy Shulman, Morton Sontheimer, Robert Van Gelder, and Weegee. Some of these men worked for straight newspapers; others, including Davidson, Van Gelder,

and Weegee himself, shot for the tabloids. Crossing the border from photography into authorship, Weegee and his contemporaries crafted stories of virile prowess that might have emerged right out of crime fiction and film. This mobilization of tough-guy style became a means of legitimizing the male news photographer's activities, image, and profession. On a larger scale, these narratives worked to transform the field of photography itself into an arena for a variety of masculine postures.[2]

As Barbie Zelizer has demonstrated, the news photographer of the 1920s and 1930s faced a host of liabilities: he generally received scant pay, was given little or no formal training, and was the frequent object of professional and public antagonism. Reporters generally regarded journalism's increasing dependence on photographs with ambivalence, recognizing that images enhanced news appeal while at the same time fearing they had the potential to circumvent the power of the word. Consequently, photojournalists of the period often had to work in embattled environments.

If these hardships were true for news photographers in general, they were especially so for the crime photographer who, as David J. Krajicek so colorfully puts it, has always been regarded as "the catfish of the newsroom" (93). Indeed, Weegee was part of a group of news workers with a reputation for being the "roughest" subculture within the industry. An occupation that required being on call twenty-four hours a day and frequenting places such as bars and whorehouses, crime photography had a reputation for appealing only to those who could not find employment elsewhere in the journalism profession.[3] To compound this, crime photography was integrally associated with the tabloid industry.

Yet as these newsmen-cum-autobiographers learned from popular media, such hardships could be associated with manly agency. As we described in chapter 3, the tabloid news worker was often cast in the movies as possessing gangster-like power. Meanwhile, a wealth of newspaper films depicted how effective the reporter's beat could be for framing crime stories. Movies such as *Case of the Missing Man* (1935); *Bank Alarm* (1937); *Time Out for Murder, Exposed, While New York Sleeps* (1938); *Double Exposure* (1944); and *Crime of the Century* (1946) all valorize the rough-and-tumble activities of the newsman on assignment.

Other entertainment media in these decades associated crime photography with dangerous professions like police work and detection. In 1936, *Black Mask* published "Murder Mix-up" by George Harmon Coxe. Featuring news photographer "Flash" Casey, the story celebrates both Casey's ability to get photos on his own terms and his refusal to be bossed around on the job. Casey went through a number of incarnations in different media, appearing in the 1938 film *Here's Flash Casey* and then later

in *Casey, Crime Photographer,* a popular radio program that aired nationwide in 1943. Meanwhile, Coxe went on to publish novels about another crime photographer, Kent Murdock. An employee of the *Boston Courier-Herald,* Murdock moonlights as a detective. A stereotypical tough guy, he possesses a "lean hardness of body" and a "solid, angular jaw." And although "well mannered, intelligent and well educated, he could talk the language of cops and bookies and gamblers and circulation hustlers as though he understood them" (*Triple Exposure,* 168, 208–9).

Special-interest magazines such as *Minicam Photography, U.S. Camera,* and *Photography* also cashed in on the appeal of the punch-throwing picture man. One article, titled "The Hard-boiled School of Photography," narrates the "legend of Skippy Adelman, *PM*'s Picture Ace." Described as having a "tough wiry figure" and the "hands of a boxer," Adelman embodies all the traits of the street-smart protagonist. Much is made, for example, of his childhood poverty: "The early years of Skippy Adelman's life made him sick and unhappy, then coldly, bitterly furious. He started taking pictures simply as a means of earning a living, and then suddenly discovered his camera was a graphic instrument" (Mathieu 80). According to the tenets of hard-boiled fiction, the protagonist's knowledge of the city stems from a working-class childhood that serves as a first-hand introduction to urban violence.

Some news workers were probably provoked into writing book-length autobiographies by the ambivalent representations of journalism they saw in other entertainment media, such as the tabloid racketeer films. Negative imagery appears to have prompted cameramen to "correct" that impression in their books; several of them, for example, pointedly stress to their readers that the days of questionable newspaper practices like picture-snatching and composographing are gone for good. Part of the motivation behind these autobiographies, then, seems to have been a desire to mitigate the scandalous image of the tabloid news photographer circulating in popular culture since the late 1920s.

Surprisingly—given autobiography's assumed basis in reality and a unique life story—these narratives are replete with allusions to fictional and cinematic treatments of the photographer's profession. Such allusions illustrate the dialogic nature of autobiography. Drawing on Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic imagination, critics such as Susanna Egan and Sidonie Smith have argued that the traditional perception of autobiography as a genre inhabited by singular, autonomous voices is, in fact, a gross misperception. Rather, they argue, dialogism is a recurring feature of autobiography. It is evident both in the dynamic and reciprocal relations between the autobiographical text and its social context and in the omnivorous

use by the autobiographer of other genres. The "I" in any autobiography is therefore always polyvocal, reminding us that the construction of an individual is always a collaborative, social activity. Certainly, the hard-boiled autobiographies penned by news photographers bear these observations out, blending as they do stories about personal experiences with the tropes and techniques of hard-boiled literature.

These narratives also reinforce how autobiography is, in fact, a vehicle for storytelling. Recent criticism has focused on this dimension, insisting that autobiographies can neither offer an unmediated reconstruction of a historically verifiable past nor capture a fixed and "true" self. Not surprisingly, then, we find that these photographers' texts are punctuated by hyperbole, each experimenting with a variety of masculine postures and situations adopted straight from the pages of pulp fiction. Borrowing from writings by Chandler, Cain, and Horace McCoy, each tests what Diane Bjorklund calls a "vocabulary of the self" (9). Their appropriation of hard-boiled tropes is certainly in keeping with what critics writing on autobiography identify as a common impulse to use novelistic techniques (such as flashbacks and fictional characters) as a way of translating personal experience into narratives that will make sense to readers. But there may be a more specific reason for this autobiographical "play" as well—for if, as we've demonstrated throughout this book, the tabloids delighted in traversing the line between fact and fiction (and if they were part of a "big news" culture where straight papers also periodically trafficked in sensationalism), then it seems plausible that some photojournalists would have been inspired to model their own writing on this traversal.

The hard-boiled mode offered a special attraction to male news workers because it helped construct an autobiographical self who could flaunt his sense of adventure while also claiming allegiance with the "common man." Sean McCann points out that hard-boiled literature has always emphasized its "populist credentials" (39). For journalists and photographers employed by the tabloids, the hard-boiled mode was appealing because, as we discussed in the last chapter, it suited much tabloid content perfectly. Sharing the tabloids' interest in urban life, transgressive behavior, and wisecracking language, hard-boiled writing nevertheless lent these autobiographers more masculinized legitimacy than the tabloids themselves could, given the papers' popular association with a female readership.

And if hard-boiled prose helped legitimize tabloid journalists, autobiography allowed cameramen an unprecedented degree of control over the words surrounding their images. In the first half of the century (and to a large extent even today), the news photographer generally had no say

over the captions that accompanied his photographs. Nor would he have been allowed to voice an opinion about any other aspect of his images' utilization. Typically, his photos were enlisted to illustrate "good stories": stories about crimes of passion, revenge, and love betrayed or restored. Consequently, according to A. D. Coleman, press photos are "likely to be stereotypical and ephemeral. Their most logical vehicle, thus, is the ephemeral publication, particularly the daily newspaper" (17). Writing accounts of his life and work, then, promised a photographer some durability: if his photographs were destined for the trash bin, his writing, in book form, might remain on readers' shelves.

A number of features consistent within these autobiographies clearly situate them within the hard-boiled mode. Most obvious is a valorization of a masculine realm unsullied by feminine activity. Each of these autobiographies is composed of two types of narratives: those in which the photographer works or travels alone, and those in which he engages aggressively with male colleagues and members of stereotypically masculine professions such as prizefighters, police, military men, and gangsters. Little mention is made of female reporters, editors, or columnists, and, when women do appear, they are generally wives and mothers or, alternatively, "dolls" and "cupcakes." This omission is particularly interesting in light of the fact that, though press photography itself was dominated by men, nearly one-third of those who worked in other areas of the tabloids during the 1920s and 1930s were women.[4] Hollywood made much of that fact in its own representations of tabloid journalism. Sob sisters populate many a newspaper flick, often symbolizing the sentimentality, shamelessness, and melodrama for which the tabloids were so derided.

Instead, like their contemporary pulp novelists who, as Erin A. Smith puts it, were trying "to wrest control of a specific section of the literary marketplace for men and manly fiction from the women who had dominated the field," these autobiographers aggressively staked out territory in a genre that, because of its associations with subjectivity and intimacy, could be construed as womanly (*Hard-Boiled* 40). Even though autobiography has certainly attracted both male and female authors, an essentializing link between it and femininity has persisted since the mid-nineteenth century.[5] Consequently, many of these photojournalists overtly insist on separation from feminine company, which is presented as stultifying and claustrophobic. Norman Alley's *I Witness* (1941), for example, is dedicated to "the five who stayed at home—my mother, my wife, Dexter, Noreen, and Janet." These words invite us to see the author as a male adventurer away from the crowded, girlish household. Sammie Schulman's dedication in *Where's Sammy?* (1943)—"To Gertie, who let me out of the house,

so that some of these things could happen"—performs the same function. In these books, news work and autobiography are cagily defined and defended as a sphere for *men.*

It is interesting to note, too, that many times these texts flagrantly aggrandize the work of the photographer as being much blunter, and therefore manlier, than that of his reporter colleagues. Take, for example, Schulman's explanation of how a reporter is able to gloss over the messiness of life:

> A reporter can write around a story; a reporter can soften a blow by a simple twist of his typing finger. He can surround with the luster of adjectives and fine writing an individual or event that has no intrinsic luster. He can make a bum out of a great person, and vice versa. That's because the human mind is so much more versatile, and inexact, than is the camera. When you pull the trigger on a news picture you are recording the unadorned truth. You get the works; there's no way to change things, or pretty them up or make them worse. There's no "x" key on a Speed Graphic. That black box we wield is a terribly revealing weapon. (12)

According to this description, reportorial writing is not only a feminized practice (it "softens," and, like a woman's furniture polish, adds "luster" when needed); it is also dishonest. Ignoring common practices such as touchups and cropping, Schulman presents photography, on the other hand, as possessing all the brutal facticity of death.

Akin to this dismissal of written reportage is the tendency of these photographers to downplay elite influences or formal education while simultaneously advancing photo shooting as the ideal site for streetwise learning. Smith remarks that hard-boiled writing "often ridiculed high culture, pointing to the superiority of practical knowledge possessed by working men" (*Hard-Boiled* 131). Like the hero of pulp fiction, the photographer-author insists that he gets his knowledge of the city first-hand. This anti-intellectual, naïve stance toward photojournalism is, in fact, one of the dominant traits of Weegee's writing. It ensures that the reader understands both the photographer and his work as authentic, untainted by literary or academic concerns.

Many of these photographers also adopt a pose of wry irony toward all they survey, including themselves. This detachment suggests an unwillingness to acknowledge the emotional and psychological demands of the profession. Schulman, for example, explains, "Early in my career I had to learn to choke off all thought of personal consideration, of myself or the

subject to be photographed" (12). When Schulman introduces his story about watching a suicide victim stand on a ledge for nearly twenty-four hours only for him to "hit the pavement with a thudding crash that was sickening to hear," he describes the victim in typical hard-boiled language as a "nice looking guy with a bad case of mopes" (105). Furthermore, as an extension of this distancing effect, these authors rarely allow any expressions of self-pity or complaint. As a case in point, after a twenty-one-hour shift, Alley writes: "Night work, for a newsreel grinder, is all in the day's work. I decided to call it a day as I yawned, put on my hat through a fatigue-fog, and headed for my own little Shangri-la" (121). In prose parroting Chandler or Hammett, the news photographer describes how he, like the private detective, ends his workdays in the middle of the night, heading for the marginal space of his bachelor apartment as a temporary retreat.

The "picturesque line of vernacular and professional lingo" that one critic in 1929 observed in Hammett's fiction makes full appearance in these autobiographies (qtd. in Smith, *Hard-Boiled* 1). Choppy syntax and slang abound, and figurative language tends to be wisecracking. Alley, for instance, opens his chapter on China by describing Shanghai as "wrapped up like a cheap gift in cellophane" (224). Schulman says that he "felt like a chained homing pigeon" and at another point remarks, "There was a war coming. Even the dogs in the street knew it" (230, 12). Furthermore, each of these autobiographies exemplifies Greg Forter's observation that hard-boiled description moves "from object to object with a certain restless but alert rapidity. . . . It quickly exhausts the thing that it sees, takes it in at a glance, and swallows it whole" (*Murdering Masculinities* 20). Schulman's details of a bordello are a case in point: "There was a special section set aside for the Japanese whores. The odor of spices, sandalwood, and cheap incense overhung it. A long line of red and white lanterns marked its location" (107). Many of the descriptions in these autobiographies aim for objectivity that one might describe as an attempt to mimic a camera's direct and seemingly neutral operations.[6]

Formally, these autobiographies utilize an episodic, picaresque structure, their narratives shaped by dramatic accounts of how the author managed to get—or occasionally lose—difficult pictures. Rarely are the merits of any photographs themselves mentioned, nor are photographic techniques much discussed; what matters instead is the photographer's sense of enterprise and courage. And yet, for all this apparent attention to his actions, there appears to be an even greater emphasis—as there is in detective fiction—on how the photographer's insight and sheer physical presence enable him to procure what he wants. Stephen Knight identifies

this trait in Chandler, observing that his detective's "personal value, not his active detection, is the structural focus" (151). Nowhere is this more evident than in Weegee's notorious promotion of his supposed ability to predict impending accidents, fires, and murders.

Finally, these autobiographies often end with an absence of closure, encouraging us to read the conclusion as the opportunity for the photographer to get back to the "real" work of picture-taking. John Sturrock remarks, "Autobiography is written in times of respite from an immediate experience of the world, the autobiographer having found a provisional asylum from the gross intrusions on his consciousness of both history and humankind" (65). Yet the news photographer implies at the end of his autobiography that writing has been a somewhat painful respite, since it has distracted him from the more active, manly work of photography. At the end of his autobiography, Schulman catalogues a list of over twenty photographic projects he wants to make, finalizing his book with the question "Who's going to stop me?" Weegee ends *Naked City* with a chapter on photographic tips, as if the act of writing an autobiography should be legitimized by a return to practical matters of photography.

Yet, as far as work goes, it is interesting to note that those autobiographers associated with tabloids—Davidson, Van Gelder, and Weegee—avoided details about the actual newspaper culture in which they worked. Unlike their colleagues at the straight papers, who detailed the insider aspects of what it meant to be a news cameraman, Weegee and his tabloid contemporaries instead emphasized their individual acts of masculine bravado and creativity. Rather than spotlighting the culture of these declining papers, then, photographers like Weegee kept themselves at center stage.

Such avoidance differs from what we see in another cluster of autobiographies produced by a different group of former tabloid workers. The autobiographies of Emile Gauvreau and Louis Weitzenkorn, former managing editors of the *Evening Graphic,* and of Mark Hellinger, who wrote Broadway columns for both the *Graphic* and the *Daily Mirror,* recount in painstaking detail the culture of their respective newspapers. Significantly, each of these authors writes in a confessional mode, conveying a sense of shame at his tabloid work that stands in stark contrast to the self-aggrandizing boasts of authors like Weegee and Schulman.

Gauvreau, Weitzenkorn, and Hellinger each recount the milieu of 1920s tabloidia: the intense energy of the *Graphic*'s newsroom, the pressures for increasing circulation rates, and the guilt employees felt at exposing the private lives of their subjects. Narrating the environment allows each author to "confess" the tabloid sins he enacted there and to partially

"atone" for them by presenting his sense of shame. Gauvreau, for instance, described the remorse he felt when learning that his child died of pneumonia while he was busy putting the *Graphic* to bed one night. He then deprecates himself as "part of that strange race of people aptly described as spending their lives doing things they detest" (*Last* 193). Weitzenkorn, who replaced Gauvreau as the *Graphic*'s managing editor in 1927, confesses his conflicting emotions as he tried to interview a couple whose child had been brutally murdered. And Hellinger recounts with surprising honesty his sense of failure as a writer. However widely read, the stories he penned for his columns in the *Graphic* and *Mirror* were generally criticized as melodramatic sob stories, and Hellinger himself said disparagingly, "Somebody would slip me a story about real people and I'd blow it up and fictionalize it and put an ironic twist at the end. I knew people liked to be sad and have their hearts squeezed" (*Ten Million* 3).

As we've seen throughout this book, there seems to have been a recurring insistence, once the tabloids began to dwindle in popularity, to locate the culture of "hot news" as the product of a bygone era. Within the realm of press autobiography, this distancing gesture allowed for several responses from those who had worked for the tabloids. For those who had high-profile associations with jazz journalism—Hellinger, Wietzenkorn, and Gauvreau—such distancing and deprecating allowed the author to suggest his own cultural evolution up and away into higher authorial spheres. The "narrating I" could present himself as able to look back in remorse at his earlier transgressions because he had now, at the time of narrating, achieved a higher plane of understanding as well as performance. Conversely, press photographers who had to struggle even to get a credit on a photo depicted press work, including tabloid work, as a site of rough-and-tumble activity in order to create a valorized protagonist or "narrated I." Tabloid work, in other words, prompted those who narrated within the genre of autobiography at least two very different types of an "ideological I" to embody the text's value system or thematics.[7] While the confessional tabloid autobiography tends toward *self-exposure,* autobiographies by Schulman and his counterparts are clearly in the realm of *self-performance.* And none of the other hard-boiled autobiographers topped Weegee at self-performance.

Cleaning Up Crime

Allene Talmey's description of Weegee introduces the photographer by way of pulp clichés: "He used his camera not to celebrate the people

he photographed, but to make a living, a narrow, spare living. What he wanted was the freedom to be Weegee: some fame, some money (but not much) and women were the triple peaks of his desires" (5). John Coplans similarly isolates and valorizes Weegee's singular vision: "There is a frantic edge to Weegee's imagery. He worked at a pointblank range and at a desperate pitch, the better to catch people in the raw. . . . His own tawdriness led him to where few other photographers were willing to go" (6). And Weegee's editor and friend, Louis Stettner, claims that "most of Weegee's photographs were taken as single accomplishments and were meant to be viewed independently of other photographs" (19). Such statements utterly remove Weegee's work from the highly charged and competitive environment he navigated as a crime photographer operating in the country's tabloid heart.

Moreover, some of these statements are simply incorrect. A glance at the online *Daily News* archive or the photos in Hannigan and Sante's *New York Noir* shows that, in fact, from the 1920s through the 1940s, news photographers were flocking to the same type of crime scenes Weegee covered; in some cases, they were circling the very same corpse.[8] Indeed, if a reader actually examines the archived photographs of Weegee's lesser-known colleagues, she will find images that in composition, lighting, and subject matter resemble his. This is not to say that Weegee's images are not powerful. But it is crucial to recognize that the photos Weegee and his colleagues took have roots in a mode of picture-taking engendered by the unregulated synthesis of tabloid and police photography during the 1920s and 1930s.

Talmey's and Coplans's romanticizing is typical of the decontextualization that surrounds Weegee's career. No doubt this tendency is due largely to the fact that, as Hanno Hardt has argued, "journalists have never acquired a collective sense of themselves" and journalism as a field still suffers from a profound and deeply ironic "lack of historical consciousness" (5). Media critics, biographers, and autobiographers have generally glossed over the conditions of news work in the interest of presenting it either as a celebration of media institutions or as a dramatic account of star reporters and photographers. This is particularly true of tabloid news work, which, on the rare occasions when it is mentioned at all in relation to Weegee, is downplayed. Notable exceptions are essays by Anthony Lee and Richard Meyer, which provide expansions to points we introduced in our earlier work on Weegee. What is also interesting is an insistence on disassociating photographs from narrative, a distrust of language that perhaps explains why virtually no attention has been given to Weegee as an author. This omission is surprising, since he not only

wrote or co-authored several full-length books, but also penned articles and surrounded his photos, whenever possible, with garrulous text that worked to determine their meaning.

Given that much criticism about Weegee emphasizes his status as a *sui generis* visionary, it is easy to forget that he spent nearly a quarter-century in New York City as a news professional. He began his career as Arthur (or Usher) Fellig, a part-time darkroom assistant for the *New York Times,* in 1921. There he dried prints for the paper and its syndication service, Wide World Photos. Later that decade, he landed a job as a full-time darkroom operator for the Acme news agency, a source of photographs for the *Daily News,* the *World Telegram,* and the *Herald Tribune*.[9] He worked at Acme for roughly ten years, often substituting, during his last five years there, for staff photographers who refused to work late-night shifts covering murders and other crimes. Though he embarked on a career in freelance photography in 1935, he continued to take crime photographs for the newspapers and, in 1940, was hired as a special contributing photographer for the progressive tabloid *PM Daily,* where he was employed until it closed in 1948.

We bring up these stages in Weegee's employment in order to stress that this "forceful photographer with a unique style and personality" was squarely situated within the highly visible and gendered sphere of New York news culture, which taught him not only how to photograph but also how to define, describe, and promote himself through storytelling (Coplans 5). In fact, we argue that what truly distinguished Weegee from many less-recognized photographers was his skill in mobilizing a hard-boiled narrative about himself through a variety of media. Years before he published his official autobiography, *Weegee by Weegee* (1961), he was presenting stylized accounts of his picture-taking. These run the gamut: he gave many interviews and appeared in publicity photos; he wrote numerous articles and crafted elaborate captions for his photos; and he made short self-referential films. In his essay "Weegee's World," Miles Barth remarks that Weegee's photographs function as "part of an autobiographical project" (12). Barth's comment implies that this "project" encompasses more than just the photos, and certainly Weegee outdid the other pen-wielding newsmen of his era in his self-narrational scope and volume.

With the lessons he learned from the tabloids about hyping a story and using images and text in combination to create dramatic appeal, Weegee was ideally positioned to narrate a bravado persona in a variety of social settings and across multiple media. "Weegee was always busy creating Weegee," remarked Stettner (36). One of Weegee's first moves toward creating this "bigger and better" self was to drop the name Arthur Fellig and

begin selling his photos under his punchy nickname, which worked as a singularizing gesture. He also carefully commodified his own physical image in the early 1930s, appearing in well over one hundred publicity shots. Showing him in his seedy apartment, in paddy wagons, and on dark streets, these images not only recall the lighting and composition of his own work but also function as literal illustrations of the hard-boiled yarns he was always spinning about himself in interviews and articles.

In 1935, Weegee left the Acme news agency and became a freelance photographer, thereby capitalizing on the associations between masculinity and a mode of work that signified adventure and independence. As a freelancer, he could portray himself more aggressively as a maverick, and he gained a clear publicity advantage over other news photographers who worked for major newspapers and whose personalities were always subsumed by their corporate affiliation. As a freelancer, too, Weegee could also insist that his photos be credited to "Weegee the Famous." His new mobility led to his (self-generated) reputation for knowing New York City better than other crime photographers who were either chained to a news desk or a wife; unlike them, he boasted, he spent literally all his time walking and photographing the city's streets.

An important dimension to his freelancing persona, moreover, was his physical mobility. Several publicity photographs depict Weegee operating out of the car that he purchased in 1938 to gain more maneuverability as a freelancer. This car became integral to the myths he circulated about his success: the only news photographer to actually have a police radio wired into his automobile, he boasted constantly about the "shiny, new 1938 maroon-colored Chevy coupe" (*Weegee by Weegee* 51). Like the gangsters of his time period who kept their cars fully equipped with machine guns and other tools of their "trade," Weegee loaded his with his own ammunition: "My car became my home. . . . I kept everything there, an extra camera, cases of flash bulbs, extra loaded holders, a typewriter, fireman's boots, boxes of cigars, salami, infra-red film for shooting in the dark, uniforms, disguises, a change of underwear, and extra shoes and socks" (52). And so, while his personal appearance bespoke a marginalized lifestyle, Weegee's flashy automobile was meant to announce that there was nothing shabby about his freelance accomplishments.

Between 1937 and 1942, Weegee began to appear as the subject of feature articles in such magazines as *Good Photography, Popular Photography,* and *Life*.[10] His hard-boiled persona clearly shaped the tone of these articles, which unabashedly glamorize his independence. One piece reports, for example, that "for more than a year now, [Weegee] has been speaking before New York Camera Clubs and writing newspaper and magazine

stories on the tricks of the trade that enable him to gross more than $100 a week"—a figure that, if true, would have been somewhere between four to eight times as much as the salary of a staff news photographer of the decade (Lipton 134–35).

Another decisive step in Weegee's career, as mentioned above, was his securing a position as a staff photographer for *PM* in 1940. A progressive paper, *PM* was founded, its editor William McCleery explained, as "an experiment in journalism to see if independent journalists, operating without any restriction but the limits of their own consciences, could do a better job of getting to the truth about the news" (qtd. in Barth 22). Though much more reputable than the *Daily News* or the *Mirror, PM* was generally regarded as a tabloid publication because of its deliberate departure from straight journalism. Featuring relaxed and often sarcastic prose, numerous photos, and an overt political and social agenda, *PM* flaunted its disregard for neutrality. It also specialized in addressing the various economic and social problems plaguing New York City in the 1940s, such as a record number of unemployed workers and a dramatic increase in crime. It was because of this specialization, maintained McCleery, that *PM* frequently published crime scene photos.[11]

Crucial to Weegee's increasingly visible persona were the words that *PM* allowed him to present alongside his images. *PM* gave him the credit line he did not always get with other venues. It also allowed him to craft his own captions for the photos, and sometimes to write accompanying articles. The captions, headlines, and articles he penned to accompany his images tend to foreground his own presence at the scenes of murders and disasters, a quality that gives his pictures the air of serving as illustrations of his exploits. These *PM* spreads indicate the degree to which, given the chance, Weegee used written narrative to shape the meaning of his images.

In 1941, Weegee's increasing visibility led to a solo photographic exhibit, breezily titled "Murder Is My Business," at the Photo League in New York City. Rejecting the League's socially committed stance, Weegee capitalized on tabloid visual sensibility in setting up this exhibit. He presented his images unframed and unmatted, clustered in a messy assemblage that also included paper cutouts of illustrated images such as a handgun. The display emphasized the photos' association "with the throwaway culture of cartoons, graphics, and tabloid photography" (Lee and Meyer 30–34). In a startling echo of the tabloids' promise of immediate insider revelation, Weegee even included a blank frame with the caption "This Space Reserved for the Latest Murders."

What does it mean that in 1941 this tabloid rhetoric entered the exhi-

bition space of the museum? While Weegee's installation insisted on the pictures as tabloid images, it also removed them from that context: no matter how impromptu their presentation on the walls, they were no longer being viewed on wood-pulp pages. More importantly, the fact that the socially conscious and aesthetically elevated Photo League took an interest in Weegee's work also suggests that cultural perceptions of the tabloids themselves had changed. *PM*'s status as a paper with a leftist agenda meant that New York audiences now had an example of a far more sober type of tabloid than in earlier years, and Weegee's new association with *PM* suggested an elevated status for his images. Meanwhile, the *Daily News* continued in its trend of more serious reporting as the war approached. Tabloid excess was increasingly linked with "the heyday of the hotcha," an era that was now being nostalgized as long-gone past.

By 1943, Weegee had gained enough mainstream visibility to appear as the subject of a *Saturday Evening Post* article, which referred to him as "New York's greatest and least inhibited free-lance photographer" (Wilson 37). The increasing prestige of both his photos and his persona is suggested by the fact that the articles written about him between 1937 and 1942 make no mention of his years working uncredited for Acme. Instead, they are peppered with snappy quotes from Weegee recounting his physical stunts, his meetings with criminals, and the perilous schemes he bragged of undertaking while working alone. He quips, for example, that he has "covered everything from debutante balls to hatchet murders" and that most of his job is "just sitting around waiting for some baby doll to toss a knife into her daddy" (Reilly 22). At every occasion, Weegee narrates the autonomy and lack of domesticity that link him to his pulp heroes and distinguish him from other photographers. "I have no wife," he states in one interview. "No family. No home. . . . Sure. I'd like to live regular. Go home to a goodlooking wife, a hot dinner, a husky kid. But I guess I got film in my blood" ("Tabloid Nights" 23). With every such statement, Weegee aligns himself with the hard-boiled protagonist who, as Dean MacCannell notes, is "typified by a lack of allegiance to a particular space and can thus slip into any environment" (294).

At the same time, Weegee's mobility tells us something about the changing status of tabloids and tabloid imagery in the 1940s. The *Saturday Evening Post* article mentioned above is a useful case in point. Author Earl Wilson clearly wants to represent Weegee's picturesquely seedy experiences shooting for the tabloids, while simultaneously cleaning them up for mainstream consumption. Wilson spices up his article with quotes in which Weegee details his presence at murder scenes and in decrepit locales. At the same time, though, Wilson tends to encapsulate Weegee's

hard-boiled words within his own milder paraphrases. Elsewhere, Wilson comments in a comic yet somewhat patronizing tone on the photographer's looks and habits. For example, noting that at murder scenes Weegee is sometimes taken for a criminal because of his sloppy appearance, Wilson writes, "Despite all this, Weegee thinks of himself as something of a dandy" (37). This approach typifies the middlebrow response of the 1940s to the crime photographer. Fascinated by the tabloidesque narrative he presented as well as the uninhibited vitality of his photos, venues like the *Saturday Evening Post* nevertheless framed and tamed his more outré aspects.

In 1943, the Museum of Modern Art also acquired five of Weegee's images, which were shown in a group exhibit of "Action Photography." These five remain among Weegee's most famous, and three of them show crime-related scenes: "Booked on Suspicion of Killing a Policeman, 1935"; "Brooklyn School Children See Gambler Murdered in the Street, 1941"; and "Harold Horn, Knocked Over Milk Wagon with Stolen Car, 1941." Glorified accounts of Weegee's career by Talmey and others insist that the aesthetic force of Weegee's photographs inevitably led curators to recognize their genius. Yet if we view the museum in a larger historical context, MoMA's acquisition of crime pictures originally shot for the sensation papers is more complicated. As Daniel J. Sherman observes, the perception that museums "drain life from art" recurs throughout the history of the museum (123). While the museum can undeniably fill a valuable historical and educational function, its impulse to collect and categorize has unpleasant associations with the morgue where artifacts are labeled and filed away as evidence of past activity. It removes objects from their daily use and relocates them in what art historian Carol Duncan terms a "ritual space" (2). For his tabloid crime photos to make their way into MoMA, an elite museum whose ritual space established "the core narrative of the western world's premier collection of modern art," was certainly a career apotheosis for Weegee (Duncan 103). What it signals about the tabloids' cultural position is more ambivalent.

Safely away from the hectic forum of the tabloids, his photographs could now be studied with the detachment, aesthetic emphasis, and self-reflexivity valorized by modernism. Just as the most abstract twentieth-century painting emphasized the surface of the canvas rather than its subject, Weegee's flash lighting, obscure angles, extreme close-ups, and other "primitive" techniques were now subject to a kind of formalist scrutiny that would never have occurred if they had remained documents within the sphere of the daily news. But while the exhibits at the Photo League and the Museum of Modern Art were crucial in elevating Weegee's photos

to the status of cultural relics, an even more permanent elevation came from the photographer's own autobiographical masterpiece, *Naked City.*

Naked Autobiography

Despite his populist self-presentation, Weegee was eager to take advantage of the artistic cachet the Photo League and MoMA exhibits lent his work. So in 1945 he published *Naked City,* a collection of 225 photographs of New York with accompanying text. *Naked City* promised a more discerning audience for his news pictures—one that might view him as an accomplished creative mind rather than, as one critic in 1939 called him, "a mere hack peddling his gruesome wares for a living."[12] The book was a commercial success and was praised in journals including the *Saturday Review of Literature, Time,* and *Life.* By December 1945, it had gone through six printings.

By mobilizing his pictures into a book-length photo-essay, Weegee took advantage of a new form that had achieved popularity in magazines such as *Look* and *Life* during the 1930s. The photo-essay proved the perfect medium for his narrative impulse. Though *Naked City* was much longer than the short spreads presented in these magazines, it partook of the same impulse to employ visual sequencing and text as part of an extended meditation on serious subjects. Associated with renowned, socially concerned photojournalists such as Eugene Smith, Helen Levitt, and Robert Capa, the photo-essay depended on the same interplay of text and image that the tabloids had popularized. Yet its controlled aesthetic was a far cry from their manic energy.

And, while the text in the photo-essay was not typically autobiographical, there was no reason it couldn't be; the form was still novel enough in 1945 that its parameters were flexible. Probably because the photographer did eventually publish *Weegee by Weegee, Naked City* is not generally regarded as autobiography. But it is so subjective and self-referential that it begs to be considered as such. We disagree, therefore, with Lee and Meyer's assessment that there is "no overall story or driving narrative in *Naked City*" (3). Rather, we read it as one of the earliest examples of the autobiographical photo-essay. An episodic whole, it employs images both striking and banal to present its narrator as a man of the people while also pressing his claims for recognition as an artistic master.

The book falls into eighteen chapters on different subjects, with photos and text clustered thematically, building up narrative tension and release in cumulative bursts. While few of the shots are linked in the way that we

traditionally think of a "photo-sequence"—that is, with one photograph taken after another in progression at the same scene—their arrangement in the book, as well as Weegee's accompanying text, emphasizes that we should read them consecutively as parts of a whole, or as elements in what Roland Barthes would call a larger "concatenation" ("Rhetoric" 25). For the most part, the chapters of *Naked City* open with a page of text meditating upon the photos, followed by sequences of images. The textual passages insist that we must imagine Weegee himself not simply as a reporter but as an active participant in the depicted scenes. The clusters of photos thus serve as moments in a story about a man's intimate relationship to the city, a reading further directed by McCleery's foreword, which metaphorizes the city as a bride that Weegee, "in sickness and in health," finds beautiful (*Naked City* 6).

Often, Weegee's image/text pairings ask to be read as objective correlatives for the photographer himself. In the first chapter, "A Book Is Born," Weegee says, "I caught New Yorkers with their masks off . . . what I felt I photographed, laughing and crying with them" (19, italics in original). Yet the only photograph in this section is a portrait of Weegee alone, posed with his camera. The text and single image imply that the scenes we are about to witness are as much a reflection of Weegee's self as they are urban documents. Moreover, they suggest that we must consider the book's narrator, the "I" behind that camera, to be as important as any individual shots of America's grandest city.

As in the autobiographies by Adelman and other news photographers, much of *Naked City*'s text underscores Weegee's working-class background. It implies that the book's grittier images are illustrations of the photographer's own life as much as of New York's down-and-outs. A series of pictures of homeless men from the Bowery, for example, is paired with text in which Weegee declares, "Not so long ago I, too, used to walk on the Bowery, broke. . . . I didn't have a nickel to my name. But I was a Free Soul . . . with no responsibilities. . . ." (11, italics in original). Consciously written as a survival narrative, this passage emphasizes how *Naked City* often adopts characteristics of what William Howarth calls "dramatic autobiography," a mode characterized by an author who is "unpretentious and impertinent, viewing life as a staged performance that he may attend, applaud, or attack as he pleases" (97).

As is obvious here, the text of *Naked City* adheres to Chandler's and Hammett's dictates that language must be direct, simple, and American in tone. As part of this "anti-gentility," Weegee consistently adopts prose coded as lowbrow. Slang phrases such as "bumped-off," "high-class," "go for," and "cutie" abound. So do misspellings and idiosyncratic depen-

dence upon ellipsis. Weegee flaunts such literary freehandedness as a sign of his book's tough-guy authenticity. Yet by the time Weegee published *Naked City* it would have been difficult to swing a stick without hitting some mainstream author writing in this mode. Thus, while *Naked City*'s prose affects tabloid punch, the linguistic roughness in this attractive monograph actually suggests how far hard-boiled prose had moved up in the world.

What is groundbreaking about *Naked City,* though, is the way Weegee manages to keep hard-boiled language, autobiography, and photography in balance throughout. As W. J. T. Mitchell details, the demands for success in the photo-essay are somewhat paradoxical: there must be *equality* and *collaboration* between text and images, yet the two media must be *independent* of one another (290–91). Given Weegee's insistence in *Naked City* that we read the photographs as objective correlatives for their photographer, we might expect the images to be reduced to mere illustration. But Weegee employs several strategies that allow both text and image to function autonomously.

In some cases, Weegee uses what we call "floating captions," blocks of text printed on a page apart from any images. Such captions often invite multiple readings: Can we apply these comments to all the photographs? Or should we apply them to the flanking photographs only? Are they really captions in the traditional sense, serving as attachments to the photos? Or do they have a more independent purpose, asking us to pause for a moment before moving back into the images? Even when the floating caption includes Weegee's highly self-reflexive language, it leaves it to the reader to decide how tightly to tie it to the photographs.

As we noted, Weegee includes shots that do not necessarily hold intrinsic interest but do serve to advance a storyline. The narratives in several chapters are extensive. Text and photos combine to suggest a melodramatic epic, with exposition and rising action leading to a climax before falling to a resolution. Chapter 3, "Fires," is a particularly good example. This chapter opens with a page of text that establishes the setting by describing New Yorkers' propensity to risk their own lives to save their pets during fires. The second paragraph shifts into a detail of how death by fire is dealt with by the police. Weegee emphasizes the autobiographical nature of events by introducing himself in the subjective "I" voice, and he makes his personal stance clear by noting that photographing fire deaths "always makes me cry . . . but what can I do . . . taking pictures is my job" (52, ellipses in original). In the third paragraph, the tone of concerned witness shifts to bravura as Weegee declares, "Also at the fires there are rescues . . . different fireman will take credit for such rescues . . . my photos

decide who did make the rescue and settle all disputes" (52, ellipses in original). We can see Weegee as authorial persona here adjusting his tone to suit the gravity of the chapter's theme.

The photos that follow build a plot that demands a growing emotional response from the reader. The first picture functions as a sort of visual pun, asking us to smile wryly at the image of a burning hotdog factory that bears a sign reading "Just Add Boiling Water." The photo is shot from a distance, emphasizing the height of the "Highgrade Frankfurters" billboard atop the building and ensuring that we are kept far enough away from any human figures to avoid sensing panic or grief.

To establish the rising action, a series of rescue photos follows, featuring citizens descending ladders or being escorted from danger by firefighters. One photo even shows a young man grinning broadly at the camera as he descends a ladder's steps.[13] Many of these photos have no margin captions, and so we are encouraged to read them as episodes in the story of a single fire. These human rescues are followed by two photos of saved pets. While they border on kitsch and are visually uninteresting in themselves, such pictures emphasize the degree to which Weegee selected each moment here as part of an unfolding drama rather than for single effect.

Weegee then arranges a sequence of photos to establish that fire is both tragic and democratic. We see a Jewish man rescuing the Torah from a synagogue, a white woman on a stretcher, an Asian woman holding her baby, and a shocked couple staring at their burning building. Jokiness and the sense of relief conveyed by the earlier images give way to a growing sense of horror, and indeed the next images show the tragedies of fire. Rows of body bags in two photos lead up to one of Weegee's most famous images, depicting a pair of women watching helplessly as a relative burns to death in an apartment. The photo is captioned in its margin with the words "I Cried When I Took This Picture." Weegee's insistence on inserting his own response into the caption asserts his place as a participant in the city's story. In fact, we might read this caption as an obvious moment where Weegee prioritizes his own personal response to an event over that of its actual occurrence, making it part of his drama rather than vice versa. The image is one of the most arresting in all of Weegee's oeuvre, and its position here makes use of our conditioned response that the rising action of this section must result in a climax.

Readers of *Naked City* cannot help noticing that, as the book reaches its conclusion, it becomes increasingly text-oriented. By the last two chapters, its subject is no longer the city but the art of photography itself. Reading *Naked City* as autobiography, we understand these final chapters as the stage on which Weegee positions himself as a genuine master, a man

who remains true to his working-class background while emerging as the legitimate heir to the title of high modernist artiste.

The book's penultimate chapter, "Personalities," features portraits of two photographers: Pat Rich, "Staff photographer of the *Police Gazette*" and "Virtuoso of the Cheesecake (leg) photo"; and Alfred Stieglitz. Rich is shown accompanied by a bejeweled showgirl and wielding his camera, clearly in the midst of life's bustle. Weegee's portrait of Stieglitz, on the other hand, is surely one of the most unflattering pictures of the master ever published: despite his dapper costume, the aged Stieglitz looks positively cadaverous. Both images are accompanied by full-page meditations on the role of the photographer in 1945. Rich, whose girlie pictures have to be censored by "an artist who paint[s] panties over the tights," embodies a populist gusto that Weegee clearly relishes and employs in his own work (237). On the other hand, while the text calls the 81-year-old Stieglitz a "failure," Weegee imagines himself taking on the artistic crown once worn by the elderly master. "I thought of a lecture which I recently gave at the Museum of Modern Art . . . and the questions which were asked of me there. I thought perhaps Stieglitz would have the answers," Weegee writes (235). But, he continues, Stieglitz is barely able to pay the rent on his tiny apartment, let alone influence a new generation of photographers.

The effect of this chapter, by depicting these two opposing figures on the photographic continuum, is to suggest a middle ground, a new territory where Weegee the artist will marry Rich's raw energy with Stieglitz's status. As his self-aggrandizing nod to the Museum of Modern Art indicates, Weegee wants readers to see him as an artist, recognized and consulted by the esteemed cultural venues. To cement his claim to the position of aesthetic expert, his final chapter is a text-only guide to "Camera Tips."

Naked City's popular acclaim led to a national book tour and a contract for a second monograph the following year. By 1948, *Naked City* was in Robert Mitchum's hands in Hollywood. And Weegee, with no reason to believe that his artistic career was heading in any direction but up, would migrate westward soon thereafter.

Narrative Mobility to Narrative Stasis

Most scholars agree that the publication of *Naked City* marked the pinnacle of Weegee's professional development. But there is a darker way to read the book's widespread reception. As Weegee's photos became more tied to middlebrow manifestations of what James Olney calls the "autobiographical imperative," he increasingly cut himself off from the very

FIGURE 5.3 Brooklyn school children see gambler murdered in the street, ca. 1941. (Weegee (Arthur Fellig)/Premium Archive/Getty Images.)

context that had determined his success.[14] The publication of his works in a glossy monograph meant that his tabloid photographs were transferred from their "trashy" and "offensive" contexts to new arenas that, while affording him artistic legitimacy, arguably initiated the end of their narrative mobility. By fixing these images as autobiography, they were made to function primarily as symbols of their creator's artistic vision. Weegee's self-mobility—what John Sturrock, in a wonderful turn of phrase, calls the "autobiographer's gratifying advance into conspicuous selfhood"—came at the price of his *photographs'* mobility (131).

As evidence of this observation, we might take one of his most famous photographs, which features a group of children who have just witnessed a murder (see figure 5.3). When Weegee's photograph first appeared in *PM,* it was accompanied by the headline "Brooklyn School Children See Gambler Murdered in Street." The headline seems designed to draw readerly attention to the problem of neighborhood violence in New York. The accompanying caption is very specific, identifying the particular section of Brooklyn in which the murder occurred as well as detailed information about the victim and his relatives. Headline and caption thus work together to construct this photograph as a documentary index of New York. But the page on which the photo is featured broadens and complicates its status as a record of local violence. Directly below the photograph, for example, is a review of a book titled *Bombs and Bombing* whose first sentence reads: "As the photograph above reminds us, murder is frequently enacted on city streets with a knife or a gun, but it can now be carried out with the supreme technique of mass murder: a nuclear bomb." This interactive use of photo and book review mobilizes Weegee's photograph outward; it enlists the image both to confirm what *PM* sees as a local crime problem while also positioning that problem within a global violence conditioned by war.

For the Museum of Modern Art exhibition, Weegee labeled this photograph with the caption "Their First Murder." The title's wry irony is, of course, in keeping with the language of hard-boiled literature and film noir. For *Naked City,* then, Weegee eliminated the original *PM* caption and replaced it with one that states, "A woman relative cried . . . but dead-end kids enjoyed the show when a small-time racketeer was shot and killed" (29). The phrase "dead-end kids" clearly alludes to the celebrated young actors who starred in various crime films such as *Dead End* and *Angels with Dirty Faces*. Weegee's description of the killing as a "show," moreover, redirects *PM*'s emphasis on murder as an urban problem into Weegee's emphasis on murder as an urban entertainment. With this new caption, Weegee also draws viewers' attention to the act of *watching*—thereby

aligning the spectators in the photograph not only with moviegoers but also with Weegee himself. Thus, this photo, originally intended to function as evidence of street violence in New York, becomes, within the pages of his autobiography, a self-reflexive photo about the artistic pleasures and dangers of looking at crime. It also invites (and implicates) us as part of the show.

If the museums and the monograph halted the narrative mobility of Weegee's tabloid photos, this stultifying influence was reinforced, ironically enough, by one of the most important noir films to emerge that decade, *The Naked City* (1948). In 1946, hoping that it would benefit his book's sales, Weegee sold the movie rights to *Naked City* to Mark Hellinger for $3,000. Two years later, the film was released to both critical and popular acclaim. Arguably the most famous of the crime docudramas of the period, *The Naked City* was among the first feature films to be shot on location on the streets of New York.

It is also the only film to be based on a 1923 murder case that made front-page headlines in the tabloid newspapers. On March 15, at approximately 11:00 A.M., a maid found fashion model Dot King (a.k.a. Jean Dexter) slain in her West Fifty-Seventh Street apartment. All three New York papers portrayed King as an embodiment of the greed and lasciviousness underlying American culture in the 1920s. And as they presented their coverage of the case, they depicted New York—particularly Broadway—as a place seething with transgressive energies. Revisited by the noir docudrama twenty-five years later, this tabloid narrative is diluted and disciplined. Although Hellinger's film also suggests that King's death was a consequence of "high living," King/Dexter herself—her love interests, criminal connections, and beauty—functions merely as a backdrop to the film's larger interest in police investigation. Indeed, whereas the tabloids expended enormous energy on how many furs and lovers King possessed, the film devotes much of its time to depicting the details of forensic police work, such as vacuuming for hairs. And though the movie's publicity boasts of how Hellinger presents New York as a place of tremendous vitality, the film actually offers a surprisingly sanitized view of the city. Ironically, a major factor in this cleaned-up portrait of New York is Hellinger's and cinematographer William Daniels's appropriation of Weegee's *Naked City*—an appropriation that involved obfuscating the film's debts to the photographer.

The film opens with a voice-over by Hellinger which, in its tone of wry affection for the city, closely echoes the introductory text of Weegee's book. Visually, moreover, the film shadows the book's photos in its early shots.

One image, showing the New York skyline at 1:00 A.M., repeats a nearly identical image that serves as the frontispiece to the monograph. Brief segments of film, each lasting only a few seconds, then present "typical" New Yorkers in settings that closely imitate Weegee's photos: a solitary man tosses on a bed next to a fire-escape, a cleaning lady drudges her mop across an endless expanse of floor, a crowd of myriad ethnic citizens boards a subway car. In their brevity, framing, and sense of stasis, these clips have a photo-like quality: movement in each is minimal, and attention is focused instead on character details such as striking facial features and the composition of bodies against background. Anyone familiar with Weegee's *Naked City* would easily recognize these moments as cinematic references to the photos.

Besides these visual references, the film also develops a distinctive mix of wisecracking, pathos, romantic sentiment, and astute social detail that closely adapts the tones and themes played out in Weegee's photo-essay. It is interesting to note that, while Hellinger's film focuses on the police investigation of a starlet's murder, it borrows far more from Weegee's tender domestic, social, and occupational images than it does from his hard-boiled crime scenes. Moments of broad comic relief are provided by Barry Fitzgerald as the salty but humane Detective Lieutenant Dan Muldoon. The murdered model's parents look like weathered denizens of Weegee's Lower East Side. The wife of novice cop Jimmy Halloran sports a shorts playsuit that recalls the bathing beauties in Weegee's Coney Island photos. Location shots pan across diverse blue-collar crowds, and many of the small character roles are played by New York actors, including Molly Picon of the Yiddish Theatre, who appears briefly in an uncredited role as a street soda-fountain vendor. Each of these character actors might have just emerged from the pages of Weegee's *Naked City,* and cinematographer Daniels frames many shots to emphasize the diverse physiognomy of the cast.

Meanwhile, the fascination with urban childhood so extensively documented in Weegee's photos is visualized through shots of kids bathing in a hydrant, jumping rope, swimming in the East River, and roller-skating; in fact, unlike almost any other film in the crime genre, nearly every outdoor scene in *The Naked City* features children prominently in the background. As in Weegee's photos, the repeated presence in the film of children at home against a harsh concrete backdrop is as ominous as it is uplifting: these are not innocents, and the boy in the movie who discovers a floating corpse in the river is excited rather than fearful. Yet the tone of the whole movie, as with Weegee's photo-essay, is one of tolerance for the vicissitudes of New York life.

FIGURE 5.4 Weegee and poster for Mark Hellinger's movie, *The Naked City*, 1948. (Weegee (Arthur Fellig)/Premium Archive/Getty Images.)

Nonetheless, the film departs from the monograph in several deeper ways. As one of the first representatives of the noir docudrama, Hellinger's film strives to adopt—despite its momentary dips into sentimentality and comedy—an aura of authoritative sobriety. Given this, the film rejects much of the hot-headline melodrama and hard-boiled punch that is so pronounced in Weegee's image/text pairings. Instead, it offers a much cooler, drier, and more programmatic treatment of crime. This difference is

telling, for it announces how both the hectic visual aesthetic of the tabloids and the wisecracking he-man style of hard-boiled literature had, by 1948, ceded popularity to a new interest in a documentary approach to crime.

More surprising is the fact that Weegee himself is utterly erased from the film's publicity. He is mentioned nowhere in the credits, a shocking omission given how openly *The Naked City* uses his title and gestures toward his images. And while the movie's press kit features publicity stills of crowds, children, and architectural landscape that resemble Weegee's work, we can only speculate that he, in his capacity as the film's "photographic consultant," shot them, for his name is nowhere on them. These photos suggest how the aesthetic vision of "Weegee the Famous" was conveniently rendered anonymous, pressed into service to showcase the directorial and cinematographic artistry of Jules Dassin and William Daniels, respectively. In fact, aside from a few studio memos, the only extant evidence of Weegee's connection to Hellinger's project is the publicity image of him standing in front of a poster advertising the film (see figure 5.4). Clearly designed (perhaps by Weegee himself) to acknowledge his contribution to *The Naked City,* the photograph's intended use is undercut by the poster's blaring announcement of the movie as a "Mark Hellinger Production." As title, story, and artistic project, *The Naked City* is, within the space of the poster at least, clearly Hellinger's alone.

At first it seems surprising that Hellinger would purchase the rights to Weegee's book and then not allude to more of his sensational crime scenes; after all, Weegee's grimmer images would have been thematically in keeping with the film's crime narrative. Upon reflection, however, we can see that, *tonally,* Weegee's crime photos would have unsettled *The Naked City*'s documentary surface by interjecting visual—and visceral—doses of tabloid sensationalism. And so the film alludes to those Weegee images, shot mainly in the daytime, that offer a less startling look at New York by focusing on the vitality of its neighborhoods, the various ethnicities of citizens, the loneliness of its inhabitants, and the pastimes engaged in by "ordinary" New Yorkers.

The film's "emptying out" of tabloid material—and, by extension, the sensational history of New York in the 1920s—was, in fact, key to Mark Hellinger's success in Hollywood. Within just a few years of leaving his position at the *Mirror* to become an associate producer at Warner Bros. in 1937, Hellinger earned the reputation of being "Hollywood's tough-fisted storyteller about Broadway"—someone who looked back on his days at the tabloids as reckless and irresponsible yet, at the same time, full of narrative potential. His cinematic specialty, then, would be to bring to the screen the New York of days gone by. His method—suitable for a

producer employed by Warner Bros.—would be to eliminate much of the sensationalism he had specialized in as a columnist, replacing it with a more "realistic," "he-man" approach to the material. Once he became an independent producer in the 1940s, this reputation only strengthened. And so one way of reading Hellinger's appropriation of Weegee's photographs is to see it as part of the producer's *own* self-fashioning.

Another way to understand this appropriation is by considering the photos' newfound status as symbols. In his book *Between Film and Screen*, Garrett Stewart considers the ways that movies gesture toward still photography. He posits two typical methods. First, a movie can "quote" photos, positioning them as objects within its diegesis. Second, a film's cinematography can evoke photographs by using stop-action or freeze frames (9–15). We agree with Stewart, but, as our discussion suggests, we posit that a third method is possible: movies can also allude to well-known photographs. Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), for example, opens with snapshots that clearly recall the images of Walker Evans. Meanwhile, the frames of D. W. Griffith's *Musketeers of Pig Alley* reveal a studied attention to Jacob Riis's photos of New York tenements. By alluding to such photographs, these films—like *The Naked City*—elevate their own status as social and artistic records.

In order for this elevation to work, however, the photographs must have achieved enough symbolic status so that viewers can recognize, as we have done here, the photography embedded in the cinematography. By 1948, Weegee's photographs certainly *had* achieved such status. Their apotheosis ensured that they could now be exploited as a kind of visual archive, open to borrowing by Hollywood directors. Although we cannot know how many audience members recognized allusions to Weegee's photos in the film, it is likely that those who did so would have identified them with the museum exhibitions or the monograph, both of which had raised the images' iconic status.

Hellinger's film, we suggest, ultimately had an immobilizing effect on the photos. Earlier in this chapter, we speculated that the museum exhibitions and Weegee's publication of the monograph removed images from the dynamic, participatory mass circulation that characterizes tabloid culture. Likewise, we posit that Hellinger's film stopped the images' mobility by appropriating them as symbols whose meaning had been fixed. For Weegee, of course, the literal flexibility insisted on by the tabloids—which might crop, enlarge, alter, or write on his images—was not an obvious artistic boon. He understandably sought a venue where his work would be granted permanence. But the negative aspect to such high cultural stability is that his images, removed from their loud origins, were now

isolated. Their multiple meanings were refined, and their messy populist appeal was cordoned off for a select few.

Posthumous Cool

On December 27, 1968, the *New York Times* published an obituary for Weegee that quoted him as having once said, "You're as good as your last picture. One day you're a hero, the next day you're a bum" (30). In spite of the *Times*'s extensive write-up, it seems safe to say that Weegee, dying alone of a brain tumor in Park West Hospital after two decades of frustrated efforts to rekindle his career, must have felt that the American public had relegated him to the latter category.

During 1947, the year he went to Hollywood to act as consultant on Hellinger's film, Weegee exchanged his Speed Graphic camera, which had essentially been part of his body for two decades, for a 35mm camera. Many of the stylistic features associated with Speed Graphic images, such as grainy resolution and stark black-and-white contrast, are visually linked with tabloid aesthetics. By shifting to 35mm, with its higher resolution and its ability to capture tonal ranges that the Speed Graphic simply washed out, Weegee seemed to be readying himself for an entirely new set of subjects and look.

But the work Weegee did in Hollywood lacked the energy of his New York pictures, and, though he authored or co-authored several more books, he never in his life regained the status he had in 1945. Ironically, as he slipped further and further away from public attention, the one forum that still occasionally featured him was the tabloid magazine. In the 1950s and 1960s, when middle- and highbrow venues no longer displayed any interest in him, Weegee was sometimes heard from in a variety of other tabloids besides the ones we've studied here, including the *National Enquirer* and the *Sun,* whose headlines mocked him even as they took advantage of his garish images. A 1957 *National Enquirer* interviewer, for example, describes Weegee with disgust. "Weegee himself looks like an old bum yanked out of the police heap and photographed with his own magical Nikon camera," remarks the author. "I sat on the sagging bed in his $24.15 a month room. It was the room of an old man living on a meager social security check, or a rum pot who works a panhandling route" (5). Most telling about the author's disdain is how the same characteristics that had once signified the noir hero—the rumpled suit, cheap room, and lack of concern for domestic niceties—here turn Weegee into a bum. Weegee's words to the interviewer echoed the sense that he had

outlived his cultural moment: "I feel out of place, like a Chock Full O' Nuts at the rush hour. I belong to a different age," he complains (5).

Sixty years later, however, Weegee has once again emerged as an American icon, enjoying more celebrity now than he did even at the height of his career. His photographs have been featured in at least ten major exhibitions since 1995. At least ten collections of his images, including reprints of *Naked City, Weegee's People,* and *The Village,* have been published within the last twenty years, each accompanied by a newly written or revised introductory essay on the photographer's cultural relevance. *The Public Eye,* a feature film based on his life, was released in 1992. Directed by Howard Franklin, the film stars Joe Pesci and Barbara Hershey and features Weegee's photos prominently throughout. Meanwhile, the Museum of Modern Art's gift shop now sells sets of Weegee postcards and other knickknacks, including notebooks and even T-shirts. If the trajectory of his career parallels the rise of hard-boiled sensibility during the 1930s and 1940s, this newer cultural cachet reinforces how that sensibility has made a serious comeback.

Part of this resurgent attention to Weegee is due to the explosion, since the late 1970s, of critical interest in photographic history and theory. Yet more importantly it is a reflection of our culture's fascination with film noir, as Naremore and others have detailed. Paula Rabinowitz, for example, argues that film noir is a key "context" of American culture, a leitmotif running through the twentieth century whose "plot structure and visual iconography make sense of America's landscape and history" (14). If this is so, we must ask what the current fascination with noir allows us to "make sense" of. What picture of crime and urban decay does this retrofitted film fantasy allow us to frame?

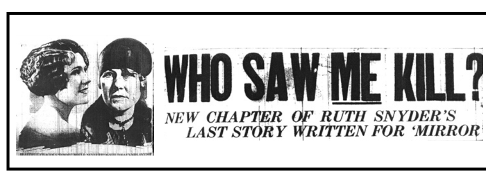
One answer is that neo-noir is a backlash against the tabloids' hyperbolic representations of crime, which have seen a second wave of popularity. This wave began to swell in the 1960s but crested in the 1980s as the tabloid industry expanded from the page onto the television screen, achieving an expansive presence in our media environment with programs such as *A Current Affair, America's Most Wanted,* and *Cops.* These programs targeted working-class viewers with garish crime reports featuring offenders subdued by teams of paramilitary-weapon-bearing police. Film noir, in contrast, dishes up crime coolly, inviting viewers into the minds of underworld figures who are martini-dry and awfully good-looking. At this historical distance, hard-boiled literature and noir style present crime gentrified for an ironic middlebrow sensibility, a trend likewise evident in the current popularity of vintage crime photography. In addition to the fascination with Weegee, consider the recent spate of art books based on

other grim pictures from his era. Boasting titles such as *New York Noir; Evidence; Sins of the City: The Real L.A. Noir;* and *Shots in the Dark: True Crime Photos,* these expensive editions remove crime pictures from their original contexts on tabloid pages or forensic files and reprint them for the coffee tables of affluent consumers.

By distancing hard-boiled style and film noir from the tabloids, however, we lose sight of their relationship with a medium that has historically challenged the hegemonic dominance of mainstream culture. As Kevin Glynn notes, "the feminization of tabloid media by . . . the well educated in general is evidence of the social forces working to reinscribe and police certain boundaries that have been reconfigured by both multiculturalism and post modernity, including those between 'serious' and 'frivolous,' 'high' and 'low,' 'truth' and 'fiction[,]' . . . the 'hard' and the 'soft'" (229). It is a commonplace of media scholarship to credit hard-boiled literature and film noir as subversive modes, and to note how their edgy depictions of urban decay undercut positivist fantasies of the American dream. Yet despite its recent flashback to cultural prominence, film noir style is fated to become simply a historical artifact in the museum of dead things unless we acknowledge its connection to the still living, breathing—and at times even panting—tabloids. Ultimately, as Weegee and his lesser-known contemporaries demonstrated, hard-boiled cool is hardly antithetical to effusive tabloid sensationalizing. Rather, crime film and fiction share a longstanding exchange with the tabloids, one that press photographers of Weegee's era expertly manipulated as they shaped the stories America would tell about its darker dreams.


DRAMATIC STORY OF "SCARFACE"

HOWARD HUGHES
Presents
"SCARFACE"
A Howard Hawks Production
United Artists Picture
By Ben Hecht


WHO SAW ME KILL?
NEW CHAPTER OF RUTH SNYDER'S LAST STORY WRITTEN FOR 'MIRROR


Million Mobsmen Take Tribute From Business All Over United States

Public Pays Toll

(Feature Story)

Racketeering in all its ramifications, particularly that branch which centers its activities in the illicit liquor traffic, is forcibly pictured in "Scarface," the Howard Hughes epic which will come to the .... theatre on ....

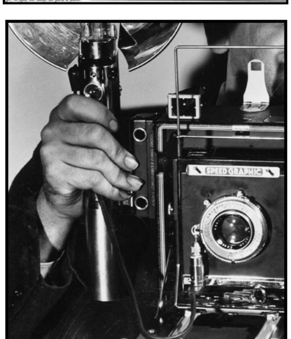
The result is a vehicle which for sheer dramatic power has seldom been equalled upon stage or screen, as has been attested by stage and

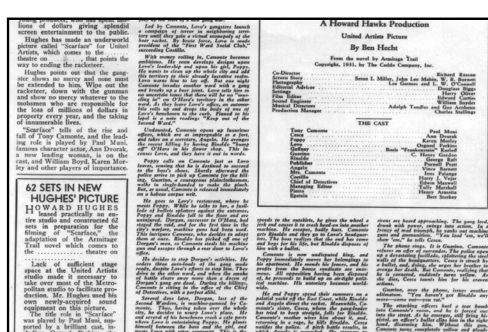
FACING THE END

HOLLYWOOD'S latest Cinderella, Ann Dvorak, had to go to court to have her first film contract legalized, because she is only 19. The court gave the stamp and approval to Miss Dvorak's long-term contract with Howard Hughes, president of the Caddo Company.

Miss Dvorak, for the past three years, had been a dancer and bit-player at the M-G-M studios. But she was virtually unrecognized until she was selected by Producer Hughes for a leading role in "Scarface," which comes to the .... theatre on ....

TROUBLE AHEAD




lions of dollars giving splendid screen entertainment to the public.

Hughes has made an underworld picture called "Scarface" for United Artists, which comes to the .... theatre on ...., that points the way to ending the racketeer.

Hughes points out that the gangster shows no mercy and none must be extended to him. Wipe out the racketeer, down with the gunman and show no mercy whatever to the mobsmen who are responsible for the loss of millions of dollars in property every year, and the taking of innumerable lives.

"Scarface" tells of the rise and fall of Tony Camonte, and the leading role is played by Paul Muni, famous character actor, Ann Dvorak, a new leading woman, is on the cast, and William Boyd, Karen Morley and other players of importance.

62 SETS IN NEW HUGHES' PICTURE

HOWARD HUGHES leased practically an entire studio and constructed 62 sets in preparation for the filming of "Scarface," the adaptation of the Armitage Trail novel which comes to the .... theatre on ....

Lack of sufficient stage space at the United Artists studio made it necessary to take over most of the Metropolitan studio to facilitate production. Mr. Hughes used his own newly-acquired sound equipment on this picture.

The title role in "Scarface" was played by Paul Muni, supported by a brilliant cast, including Osgood Perkins, the original "Walter Burns" of "The Front Page."

Led by Camonte, Lovo's gangsters launch a campaign of terror in neighboring territory until they gain a virtual monopoly of the beer racket. By brute force, Lovo is made president of the "First Ward Social Club," succeeding Costillo.

With money rolling in, Camonte becomes ambitious. He soon develops designs upon Lovo's leadership and upon his girl, Poppy. He wants to clean up the whole city and add this territory to their already lucrative realm. Lovo warns him to lay off. But one night Camonte invades another ward with a gang and breaks up a beer joint. Lovo tells him in no uncertain tones that there will be no "muscling in" on O'Hara's territory in the other ward. As they leave Lovo's office, an automobile rolls up and drops the body of one of Lovo's henchmen to the curb. Pinned to his lapel is a note reading: "Keep out of the Second Ward."

Undaunted, Camonte opens up luxurious offices, which are as impregnable as a fort, and takes on a secretary, Angelo. He avenges the recent killing by having Rinaldo "bump off" O'Hara in his flower shop. This incenses Lovo, and they have it out in words.

Poppy calls on Camonte just as Lovo leaves, sensing that he is destined to succeed to the boss's shoes. Shortly afterward the police arrive to pick up Camonte for the killing. Guarino, a courageous plainclothesman, walks in single-handed to make the pinch. But, as usual, Camonte is released immediately on a habeas corpus writ.

He goes to Levy's restaurant, where he meets Poppy. While he talks to her, a fusillade of bullets splatters against the entrance. Poppy and Rinaldo fall to the floor and are uninjured. Dorgan, successor to O'Hara, had staged the raid, and for the first time in the city's warfare, machine guns had been used. This intrigues Camonte, who decides to adopt them at once. Rinaldo has picked off one of Dorgan's men, so Camonte steals his machine gun and escapes through a rear door to Lovo's office.

He decides to stop Dorgan's activities. He orders three auto-loads of the gang made ready, despite Lovo's efforts to stop him. They drive to the other ward, and when the smoke of battle clears away more than a dozen of Dorgan's gang are dead. During the killings, Camonte is sitting in the office of the Chief of Detectives, with a perfect alibi.

Several days later, Dorgan, last of the Second Warders, is machine-gunned by Camonte. Thus, having taken over the whole city, he decides to usurp Lovo's place. He and several of his henchmen crash a cafe party where Lovo is entertaining Poppy. He plants himself between the boss and the girl, and treats Lovo with utter contempt. This is the last straw for Lovo, and he plans to have his lieutenant taken for a ride.

A Howard Hawks Production
United Artists Picture
By Ben Hecht
From the novel by Armitage Trail
Copyright, 1931, by The Caddo Company, Inc.

Co-Director	Richard Rosson
Screen Story	Seton I. Miller, John Lee Mahin, W. R. Burnett
Photography	Lee Garmes and L. W. O'Connell
Editorial Advisor	Douglass Biggs
Settings	Harry Oliver
Film Editor	Edward Curtiss
Sound Engineer	William Snyder
Musical Directors	Adolph Tandler and Gus Arnheim
Production Manager	Charles Stallings

THE CAST

Tony Camonte	Paul Muni
Cesca	Ann Dvorak
Poppy	Karen Morley
Lovo	Osgood Perkins
Gaffney	Boris "Frankenstein" Karloff
Guarino	C. Henry Gordon
Rinaldo	George Raft
Publisher	Purnell Pratt
Angelo	Vince Barnett
Mrs. Camonte	Ines Palange
Costillo	Harry J. Vejar
Chief of Detectives	Edwin Maxwell
Managing Editor	Tully Marshall
Pietro	Henry Armetta
Epstein	Bert Starkey

speeds to the outskirts, he gives the wheel a jerk and causes it to crash head-on into another machine. He escapes, badly hurt. Camonte gets Rinaldo and they go to Lovo's headquarters. The boss realizes that the end has come and begs for his life, but Rinaldo disposes of him with a bullet.

Camonte is now undisputed king, and Poppy immediately moves her belongings to his apartment. He mends his fences, and his profits from the booze syndicate are enormous. All opposition having been disposed of, he proceeds to build up an air-tight political machine. His notoriety becomes world-wide.

He and Poppy spend their summers on a ...

sirens are heard approaching. The gang lord, drunk with power, swings into action. In a frenzy of mad triumph, he yanks out machine guns and ammunition. "You load 'em, we'll show 'em," he tells Cesca.

The phone rings. It is Guarino. Camonte refuses an offer of surrender. The police open up a devastating fusillade, splattering the steel walls of the headquarters. Cesca is struck by a bullet, and, dying, she urges her brother to avenge her death. But Camonte, realizing that he is cornered, suddenly turns yellow. As she dies, Cesca taunts him for his craven actions.

Guarino, over the phone, issues another ultimatum. "You haven't got Rinaldo any ...

Clockwise top to bottom: Joy of Living. *Weegee (Arthur Fellig)/Premium Archive/Getty Images. Ruth Snyder's "Document of Doom," from the* Daily Mirror*, January 9 1928.* Scarface *press book, courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Author mugshot from* Naked City*, ca. 1945. Weegee (Arthur Fellig)/Premium Archive/Getty Images.*

C O D A

JULY 1957, New York City. *Sweet Smell of Success* is premiering at the Loews State Theatre on Times Square and bears all the signs of a box-office hit. Starring Burt Lancaster as a Broadway columnist and Tony Curtis as his press agent flunky, the film features a screenplay by Ernest Lehman and Clifford Odets, as well as James Wong Howe's cinematography. Its producer, the recently formed Hecht-Hill-Lancaster Company, is still riding high after winning an Oscar the previous year for *Marty.* But appropriately, given its topic, the strongest indicators of *Sweet Smell*'s promise are rumors circulating about it in the press. For weeks, the public has been reading about how the movie offers a "dirty lowdown" on the journalistic underworld of Broadway.[1] According to Hollywood scuttlebutt, Lehman—on whose novella the film is based—so feared the repercussions of his exposé that he collapsed while working on the screenplay and had to be replaced by Odets.[2] Also at the forefront of gossip is the film's suggestive treatment of sex and incest.

But the most tantalizing scoop is that the main character, J. J. Hunsecker, is based on Walter Winchell, who happens to be lurking across the street. Attired in his signature fedora and trench coat, Winchell has just sent his long-suffering press agent, Irving Hoffmann, to scout details about the movie. And the news is not good. Hunsecker, portrayed as a scandal-mongering monster, bears unavoidable resemblance to the columnist.[3]

Sweet Smell of Success, so the story goes, was the final nail in Winchell's coffin. Once an American kingfish, he had become more and more of a scourge since turning his attention toward politics in the 1940s. By the early 1950s, as he aligned himself with the Red-baiting conservatism of

Joe McCarthy, he was widely reputed to be a "poisonous" and "paranoid" man who had lost all touch with his once populist leanings. Standing outside Loews on *Sweet Smell*'s opening night, he was well down the road to oblivion, alienated from his former friends and dismissed as a crackpot.

Because of the way *Sweet Smell* invests tabloid journalism with the aura of criminality and gives Hunsecker the traits of a syndicate gangster, the film gestures back to the tabloid racketeer cycle of the early 1930s. But whereas those movies had depicted tabloid workers as salvageable even if morally dubious characters, *Sweet Smell* denies its journalist any redemptive qualities. And whereas the earlier films, no matter how much they may have denounced the tabloids, demonstrated an undeniable fascination with the energy of scandal sheet culture, *Sweet Smell* exudes nothing but disdain for the industry. Indeed, it treats tabloid journalism itself as a crime.

A columnist for a newspaper called the *New York Globe,* Hunsecker, like Winchell, has recently expanded his sphere of influence to include television and radio. Hunsecker, in ways glaringly reminiscent of the "Great Gabbo," exploits these venues in order to destroy the reputations and livelihoods of those he arbitrarily identifies as his "enemies." His destructive influence seems to reach everywhere, making nightclub owners, rival columnists, and even congressmen his victims. Hunsecker's main target, though, is jazz musician Steve Dallas, the boyfriend of his beautiful but passive sister, Susie. Incestuously guarding her, Hunsecker sets his sycophantic and amoral assistant, Sydney Falco, to the task of destroying Dallas's reputation by planting marijuana on him and arranging a police pickup. When Susie learns of her brother's machinations, she leaves him in order to wed Dallas; the film's final shots depict Hunsecker standing alone on his balcony, watching helplessly as his sister exits their apartment building to enter a new life with his nemesis.

As this summary suggests, no real crime occurs in *Sweet Smell of Success.* And yet the film smolders with an air of foreboding as it gestures toward illicit activity and makes an ever-present threat of violence the center of its diegesis. Well-dressed, tyrannical, and utterly impenetrable, Hunsecker clearly evokes the syndicate gangsters of 1950s crime films like *The Enforcer* (1951), *New York Confidential* (1955), and *The Brothers Rico* (1957). In these contemporaneous movies, we rarely see underworld bosses perform acts of violence; instead, they have murder committed for them, just as Falco executes whatever nasty plots Hunsecker concocts. "My right hand hasn't known what my left hand has done in years," the columnist boasts. But whereas syndicate films tend to feature graphic

stagings of murder and torture, even if not enacted by the bosses themselves, the most violent act we see in *Sweet Smell* is a slap on the face.

At every turn the movie suggests—via its mise-en-scène, characters, editing, and dialogue—that criminal violence lurks in the next moment. Yet the expected eruption never occurs. As David Denby observes, this "narrowness of compass is the movie's genius. *Sweet Smell of Success* hangs an entire noir style, a set of thuggish characters, and a deadly atmosphere, on the petty self-interests of a relatively trivial character" (44). Critic and screenwriter Stephen Schiff notes that the film's cinematography imbues this flavor of criminality, with Wong's low angles "knifing up through the air, poised for the kill" (qtd. in Kashner 418). Sam Kashner concurs, pronouncing "Winchell's special brand of nastiness . . . the evil heart of *Sweet Smell of Success*" (418). The film's most extraordinary feature, in fact, is the way it generates the usual emotions produced by a crime movie—fear, suspense, repulsion—without delivering any of the generic elements that typically arouse such feelings. In this way, it resembles the gossip industry it castigates. Its *modus operandi* is insinuation, threatening what it ultimately never delivers.

Why, we might ask, does the film so insistently link tabloid journalism with criminality? It is certainly true that Winchell's lifelong obsession with scandal-mongering had earned him the reputation of possessing what one commentator called "the morals of a gangster" (qtd. in Gabler 211). And yet, by 1957, Winchell had become an object of ridicule, as had the tabloid for which he worked. About whom and what, then, is the film really registering anxiety?

The real target of *Sweet Smell of Success* is the Hollywood scandal sheets of the 1950s.[4] Robert Harrison, formerly a publisher of cheesecake magazines and known as the "King of Leer," pioneered the scandal magazine industry in 1952 with *Confidential.* This publication's popularity soon led to imitators, including *Hush-Hush, QT, Top Secret, Whisper, Censor, Rave, The Naked Truth, Lowdown, Suppressed, Uncensored, Anything Goes, Exposed, Dynamite,* and *Inside Story.* These titles tell the whole story: the scandal magazine empire insisted on a voyeur's view of Hollywood culture and, in particular, of those stars most promoted by the industry's publicity machine. Several of these magazines employed literally hundreds of people as writers, tipsters, or private investigators. As Mary Desjardins explains, informants for *Confidential* ranged from prostitutes and ex-spouses of stars to disgruntled Hollywood employees seeking revenge (214). Detectives used state-of-the-art surveillance equipment for both audio and visual "proof" of scandalous behavior, including small wrist microphones that could "pick up a sigh at 60 paces" ("Putting the Papers

to Bed" 61). These elaborate personnel and technological systems indicate how seriously scandal magazines took the business of exposure—hence their boastful slogans promising to deliver "the story behind the headlines" (*Whisper*), the "stories the newspapers won't print" (*QT*), and all that was "uncensored and off the record" (*Confidential*).

Picking up any issue of these magazines, the reader discovers that its contents are almost exclusively focused on star culture. A sampling of *Confidential* issues from 1954 to 1957, for example, turns up the following titles: "Hollywood, Where Men Are Men—and Women, Too!" (January 1954); "Does Desi Really Love Lucy?" (January 1955); "Gary Cooper's Lost Weekend with Anita Ekberg" (March 1956); "What Makes Ava Run for Sammy Davis Jr.!" (March 1955); "Mae West's Open Door Policy for Muscle Men" (November 1955); and "When Lana Turner Shared a Lover with Ava Gardner" (March 1957). As these titles reveal, scandal magazines portray Hollywood as a lascivious and incestuous community where an ethos of deceit prevails. In so doing, they position their "lowdowns" against the supposed falseness of studio publicity, as in this opening to a *Confidential* article about Jack Palance: "Although his studio and press agents have done a superb job of convincing the world that the ruthless killer of *Shane* and the homicidal maniac of *Sudden Fear* is as gentle as a lamb in real life, the real lowdown is quite another story" (Williams 36). The article then insinuates that this "homicidal maniac" raped a starlet in a Los Angeles motel. Similarly, another *Confidential* article implies that Hollywood's promotional campaign of Kim Novak as an ingénue belies the "true story" of her sordid, sinful past: "There must have been half a dozen Hollywood wolves who choked on their highballs while reading such malarkey about the chesty, little Czechoslovakian cutie they knew back in the good old days" (Sharry 32).[5]

Such writing is markedly different from the kind of gossipy chatter in which Winchell and other columnists of the 1920s and 1930s tabloids specialized. As Neal Gabler argues, the earlier form of gossip—while sometimes harmful to the individuals it targeted—had a communal purpose and effect. "As the twenties transformed America from a community into a society," Gabler observes, "gossip seemed to provide one of the lost ingredients of the former for the latter: a common frame of reference. In gossip everyone was treated as a known quantity; otherwise the gossip was meaningless. In gossip one could create a national 'backyard fence' over which all Americans could chat" (81). Certainly, much of the success of the *Daily News, Mirror,* and *Evening Graphic* during the jazz age depended precisely on their awareness of this familiarizing dimension to gossip.[6] Moreover, the tone of these tabloids—while ranging from insou-

ciant to crude to hyperbolic—showed very little *meanness.* Horrors were reported with gleeful abandon, but the reader returning to these papers today is never left with a feeling that the paper is maliciously targeting its subjects. Even during an event like the Snyder-Gray trial, condemnatory moments were undercut by the sympathetic counterpoints of various columnists and letter-writers.

Scandal magazines of the 1950s, by contrast, produced a much more divisive and cruel form of gossip. They aimed to shame and even damage their individual subjects, constructing in the process a Hollywood that was defined precisely by its aberrance from the lifestyles and values of "ordinary" Americans. As such, they were roundly attacked by magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time,* which described them as using an "up-from-the-sewer journalistic formula of sex and sin" ("Lid on the Sewer" 74).

Given the time periods in which these two different modes of gossip flourished, such divergence seems inevitable. Arguably, the gossip produced by the jazz-age tabloids, while vilified by many high-minded commentators, possessed an air of breezy irreverence because it circulated in an age reveling in newfound freedoms. Everyone and his neighbor, it seemed, was indulging in "sin" of some kind. Certainly not all were "kiss-and-kill sheiks," bootleggers, or participants in "love nests," but the boundaries between what was newly permitted and what remained taboo were under active interrogation. The tabloids expected their readers to feel an interested sympathy, as well as titillation, in the dramas they presented.

Coming out of the more conservative culture of the 1950s, on the other hand, the gossip produced by the scandal magazines possessed all the aura of criminality because it postulated—however hypocritically—the moral superiority of its readers over its subjects. "In many cases," observes John B. Thompson, "scandals are not just about actions which transgress certain values or norms: they are also about the cultivation or assertion of the values or norms themselves. Thus the making of a scandal is often associated with a broader process of 'moralization' through which certain values or norms are espoused and reaffirmed" (41). Fomenting, extorting, and circulating rumor and innuendo all thrived in cold-war America because conventional "morality," despite the uncertainties gripping the country, was being asserted more vigorously than ever. And so scandal magazines depicted those who shattered social taboos—particularly personalities who might otherwise be subjects of admiration—as deviants deserving the reader's scorn.

By 1957, these magazines had achieved enough notoriety that many anxious commentators were labeling them a "national crisis." Indeed, as

Will Straw explains, they became an "object of moral panic" (122). Various professional groups had organized a boycott of them; the Post Office had demanded residents to indicate "prior approval" of the magazines before mail deliverers could leave them on doorsteps; and, most damagingly, the accumulated lawsuits against them—including a major trial for libel held in California—had drained nearly all their resources.[7]

It seems altogether plausible that *Sweet Smell of Success,* in its ostensible exposure of Winchell, was actually exploring this current "crisis." Just as the tabloid racketeer cycle had done twenty-five years earlier, the film seems to be asking its audience to recognize scandal as a serious social problem. But whereas those earlier movies manage to distance themselves from tabloid journalism even while capitalizing on its sensation, *Sweet Smell of Success* puts no distance between itself and what it condemns. Indeed, in its allusions to Winchell's actual breaches of ethical behavior—allusions that authorial audiences in 1957 would most certainly have picked up on—the film traffics in the same invidious insinuations as *Confidential* and *Hush-Hush* themselves.

What makes these magazines an especially sad end to the history of tabloid culture we have charted here is the poverty of their narratives. As Desjardins notes, the methodology of these magazines involved the practice of replaying and recombining story material (211). In fact, Desjardins identifies the articles in *Confidential* magazine as "composite-fact stories"—stories that recycle material from previous articles published in a range of venues. As we have shown, the *Daily News, Mirror,* and *Graphic* also specialized in narrative recycling. But whereas those newspapers often spun their tales in new and exciting ways, the "composite-fact stories" of *Confidential* were designed to guard the magazine against lawsuits; Harrison believed that the more resources from which an article drew, the harder it would be for an injured party to identify the original source of the slander. The writing in these scandal rags, moreover, lacks the wit, wordplay, and allusion that make the early tabloids so appealing. As its slogan suggests, *Confidential*'s narrative energy is fueled only by the supposed disclosure of incriminating information: "You've heard the whispers—now hear the facts," Harrison blared all over his pages. As a consequence, photographs appear merely to offer "evidence" of wrongdoing. Articles do not offer stirring stories; they simply provide bare-bone accounts of a celebrity's alleged activities.

If, as we have argued throughout this book, a variety of entertainment media owe much of their richness to the narrative mobility of the early tabloids, we might speculate that the temporary decline of some of these media—specifically crime movies and hard-boiled fiction—was related

to the end of that mobility. The American crime film hit its nadir in the late 1950s, with the more prestigious studios producing biopics of gangsters like Capone and Dillinger as B-studios floundered in the excesses of "camp noir." Uncertain of its future direction, the crime film genre during this period seems burdened by an almost self-reflexive awareness of its narrative exhaustion. The same observation is true of hard-boiled writing, which temporarily hit its own end of the road at this time. "The cardboard figure of the breezy shamus had," by the 1950s, "punched his way through a thousand paperback novels, a thousand scenarios," explains Geoffrey O'Brien (79). And *Sweet Smell of Success*—a post-crime film, we might call it—gestures explicitly toward the dying corners of tabloid culture.

N O T E S

Introduction

1. Readers wanting information about the history of the tabloids in Britain should consult Conboy's work, as well as Horrie's *Tabloid Nation.*

2. See McGivena's "Finding the Factual Sweeney" in *The News.* As he notes, "Many *News* readers were status conscious and unwilling to disclose that they read a tabloid" (164).

3. See Fiske's *Understanding Popular Culture, Reading the Popular,* and *Media Matters;* Glynn's *Tabloid Culture;* Conboy's *Tabloid Britain;* Biressi and Nunn's *Tabloid Culture Reader;* Fox and Van Sickel's *Tabloid Justice;* Gamson's *Freaks Talk Back;* Langer's *Tabloid Television;* and Debrix's *Tabloid Terror.*

4. George Douglas dismisses today's supermarket tabloids as "much more banal and insipid than the daily tabs of old" (230).

5. These supermarket tabloids appear to have been the inspiration for the virtual tabloid *Avastar,* launched recently in Second Life (http://secondlife.com/?v=1). The *Guardian* reports that this online weekly paper is "designed to sate the virtual population's appetite for news and gossip."

6. See Jenkins's *Fritz Lang, the Image and the Look* and Gunning's *The Films of Fritz Lang.*

7. Two texts that discuss film noir's affinity with tabloid photography are Hannigan and Sante's *New York Noir* and Bergala's "Weegee and Film Noir."

8. One exception is Ruth's *Inventing the Public Enemy,* a fascinating study of what Ruth calls "the media gangster." Another is De Stefanos's *An Offer We Can't Refuse.*

9. Gunning's first use of this term appears in "The Cinema of Attractions." Since then, Gunning has refined his concept in other publications, including "Primitive Cinema—A Frame-Up?"; "Now You See It, Now You Don't"; "Tracing the Individual Body"; and "The World as Object-Lesson." Hansen has also developed these ideas in her work on early film spectators, *Babel and Babylon.* See also Staiger's *Perverse Spectators,* chapter 2.

10. See Singer's *Melodrama and Modernity,* Kirby's *Parallel Tracks,* and the essays in Charney and Schwartz's *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life.*

11. See Van Every's *Sins of America* and Gene Smith and Jayne Barry Smith's *The Police Gazette.*

12. Inspired by the London newspaper of the same name, the *Graphic* was published

until 1889. It is no relation to the later *New York Evening Graphic.*

13. Our thanks to Tom Gunning for directing us to some of these titles.

14. Another borrowing from the pre-tabloid sensational papers is Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), which drew on newspaper reports of gang wars on New York's Lower East Side.

15. Among the many excellent books that discuss New York in the 1920s, see Douglas's *Terrible Honesty;* Adler's *On Broadway;* Oja's *Making Music Modern;* and Dumenil's *The Modern Temper.*

16. Originating in 1896 with *Argosy,* these magazines flourished during the 1920s. For further discussions of these magazines, see Robinson and Davidson's *Pulp Culture;* Smith's "Ragtag and Bobtail"; Bloom's *Cult Fiction;* McCracken's *Pulp;* and Breu's *Hard-Boiled Masculinities.*

17. Until 1935, the *Daily News* focused on local events. McGivena reports, "A week could easily go by without anything from abroad being published other than the tiny news items on the second page." See McGivena, 219–20.

18. For further discussion of the 1920s as the apex of newspaper journalism's popularity, see Schudson's *Discovering the News* and Douglas's *Golden Age.*

19. For more on this Hollywood migration, see Hecht's *A Child of the Century;* Prover's *No One Knows their Names;* Wilt's *Hardboiled in Hollywood;* Hamilton's *Writers in Hollywood;* McGilligan's *Backstory;* and Fine's *Hollywood and the Profession of Authorship.*

20. A study by the *Daily News* in the early 1920s suggests that readership was broad. Of sales before 9 A.M., 50.53% were to women, while the balance tipped toward men in the afternoon. The same study showed that at least 30% of *News* readers were from the professional or business classes. See McGivena, 145–46.

21. These biopics include *Baby Face Nelson* (1957), *Machine Gun Kelly* (1958), *The Bonnie Parker Story* (1958), *Al Capone* (1959), *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond* (1960), and *Pretty Boy Floyd* (1960).

22. For discussion on the decline and reconfiguration of the crime genre in the 1950s and 1960s, see Clarens's *Crime Movies;* Leitch's *Crime Films,* chapters 2 and 3; Yaquinto's *Pump 'Em Full of Lead,* chapter 6; Rafter's *Shots in the Mirror;* and Mason's *American Gangster Cinema,* chapters 5 and 6.

23. Critics like Naremore, Ray, and Stam have called for a more dialogic approach to adaptation, and some excellent work has been done recently in this area. See, for example, Naremore's introduction to *Film Adaptation;* Ray's "The Field of 'Literature and Film'"; Stam's *A Companion to Literature and Film* and *Literature and Film;* Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation;* Leitch's *Adaptation and Its Discontents;* Elliott's *Rethinking the Novel/Film;* and Sanders's *Adaptation and Appropriation.*

24. Since Vernet's essay appeared, many scholars have taken up his call to historicize film noir. The most notable example is Naremore's *More than Night.* Yet, despite its excellence, the book contains no mention of tabloid journalism. Dimendberg's *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* is a brilliant study of noir's relation to urban spaces; Paula Rabinowitz's *Black, White, and Noir* locates noir within the discourses on poverty and welfare; and Biesen's *Blackout* grounds the genre in the details of production and urban history. For an illuminating discussion of why scholarship on film noir remains underhistoricized, see Paul Young's "[Not] the Last Essay on Film Noir."

25. We are aware of how totalizing a statement this is, but as a generalization, this difference between gangster films and film noir is helpful.

26. For useful period criticism of the rise in gangster films in the 1920s, see "Films of the Post War Decade" in Jacobs's *The Rise of the American Film,* first published in 1939. Among the pre-1930s underworld pictures Lewis notes are *Black Shadows* (Howard M. Mitchell, 1920), *The Girl in the Rain* (Rollin S. Sturgeon, 1920), *Outside the Law* (Tod Browning, 1920),

Partners of the Night (Paul Scardon, 1920), *Kick In* (George Fitzmaurice, 1922), *One Million in Jewels* (J. P. McGowan, 1923), *Boston Blackie* (Scott R. Dunlap, 1923), *Dollar Devils* (Victor Schertzinger, 1923), *The Big City* (Tod Browning, 1928), *Tenderloin* (Michael Curtiz, 1928), *Chicago After Midnight* (Ralph Ince, 1928), *The Drag Net* (Josef von Sternberg, 1928), *The Docks of New York* (Joseph von Sternberg, 1928), *The Racket* (Lewis Milestone, 1928), and *Alibi* (Roland West, 1929).

27. See, for example, Ness's *From Headline Hunter to Superman;* Saltzman's *Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist;* Zynda's "The Hollywood Version"; Manvell's "Media Ethics"; Ehrlich's *Journalism in the Movies;* Leonard's *News for All;* Vaughn and Evensen's "Democracy's Guardians"; Langman's *The Media in the Movies;* and Good's four books: *The Drunken Journalist, Girl Reporter, Journalism Ethics Goes to the Movies,* and *Outcasts.*

28. There are several outstanding exceptions, including Pizzitola's *Hearst over Hollywood* and Cook and McLean's edited collection, *Headline Hollywood.*

29. The four libraries containing significant holding of the *Evening Graphic* are the University of Missouri-Columbia; the University of California-Irvine; The Ohio State University; and the New York Public Library.

Chapter 1

1. Civic outcry, voiced in large part through the newspapers, led to interventions. The first motion picture censorship ordinance was passed in Chicago in 1907, and in 1915 the issue reached the national level when the Supreme Court declared state censorship constitutional; seven states had censorship boards by 1921. See Maltby, "Production," 42. In response, the movie industry from the 1910s through the 1930s self-censored its films with a variety of measures. See Maltby's "The Production Code and the Hays Office" and Leff's *The Dame in the Kimono* for fuller discussions of censorship.

2. Macfadden lived into his late 80s, outlasting the *Graphic* by several decades. For more on his life, see Oursler's *The True Story of Bernarr Macfadden;* Macfadden and Gauvreau's *Dumbells and Carrot Stripes;* and Ernst's *Weakness Is a Crime.*

3. All three New York tabloids exploited tactics to involve readers. The *Daily News* paid readers $1 to $5 for submitting captions, jingles, and proverbs. Meanwhile, in 1925, the *Daily Mirror* ran a contest to find New York's "homeliest girl." The prize went to an Italian seamstress who aspired to be an opera diva; her prize was free plastic surgery and an audition. See Stevens's *Sensationalism and the New York Press,* 129–35.

4. See Maltby's "Sticks, Hicks and Flaps" and Stokes's "Female Audiences of the 1920s and Early 1930s," in *Identifying Hollywood Audiences,* edited by Maltby and Stokes. Balio notes that "Hollywood assumed that the motion picture audience was mostly female, although the industry never collected the empirical evidence to substantiate this claim" (235).

5. Though as we discuss in chapter 2, the *Daily News* evolved a more cynical tone throughout the 1920s and 1930s, it continued to invite female readership by featuring women authors and emphasizing their friendliness and accessible writing style.

6. See especially Marchand's chapters "Keeping the Audience in Focus" and "Advertisements as Social Tableaux."

7. See Rabinowitz's "Truth in Fiction." Rabinowitz eventually dropped the term "ideal narrative audience" from his paradigm when the article was incorporated into his book *Before Reading,* finding that it had little practical use. Phelan recuperates it, discovering the concept salient in second-person narration, where it helps define a role somewhat different from the more widely used "narratee" role proposed by structural theorists. See Phelan's "Narratee, Narrative Audience, and Second-Person Narration." For our purposes here, the

distinction between *narrative* and *ideal narrative* audiences is crucial. The tongue-in-cheek detail in the herald is effective precisely because some readers will situate themselves in the tabloid reader/narrative audience role while simultaneously recognizing and enjoying that they are *not* actually the gullible ideal narrative audience.

8. Warner Bros. and MGM both termed their product "pressbooks" or "press books," Twentieth-Century Fox called its compilations "Exhibitor's Campaign Books," and Universal preferred "Showman's Manuals." See Miller's *Promoting Movies in the Late 1930s,* 148.

9. Under the block booking system in place until the mid-1940s, the studios tried to sell independent theatres a complete package of films for a year. Typically, films would be described only by number or as a picture featuring a specific star. The manager often had little information about what he was renting until the press book arrived. See Gomery's *Shared Pleasures,* 68.

10. Staiger points out that, once film distribution channels regularized in 1909, film companies created publicity materials. But these were seen as another product to be *sold* to exhibitors; since films at this point were rented for a flat fee, actual ticket sales were irrelevant to the manufacturer and distributor. See Staiger's "Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals."

11. This chapter is indebted to Miller's exhaustively researched dissertation. The few other studies that address press books in an extended way are geared toward a popular audience. See Sennett's *Hollywood Hoopla* and McGee's *Beyond Ballyhoo.* For a short discussion of press books alongside other movie publicity after World War I, see Gomery's *Shared Pleasures,* 69. Staiger mentions early press books with movie trailers, fan magazines, and movie industry trade magazines, in "Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons."

12. During the late 1920s and 1930s, the major Hollywood studios each produced an average of fifty pictures a year, with a press book for each.

13. See Attwood's "A Very British Carnival"; Conboy's "Carnival and the Popular Press"; and Fiske's "The Carnivalesque," all in Biressi and Nunn's *The Tabloid Culture Reader.*

14. Useful work in reception studies includes Gomery's *Shared Pleasures;* Hansen's *Babel and Babylon;* Klinger's "Digressions at the Cinema" and *Beyond the Multiplex;* Kuhn's *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger;* Mayne's *Cinema and Spectatorship;* Stacey's "Textual Obsessions"; and Staiger's three books: *Interpreting Films, Perverse Spectators,* and *Media Reception Studies.* See also *The Place of the Audience,* edited by Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings.

15. For more on narrative image, see Ellis's *Visible Fictions.* Especially useful is his chapter "Cinema as Image and Sound."

16. For more on these variant readings, see Miller, 111–12; Altman's "Reusable Packaging," 9; and Staiger's *Perverse Spectators,* 71.

17. Fuller's *At the Picture Show* discusses how press books interacted with other promotional media, as does Barbas's *Movie Crazy.* In relation to extra-cinematic information and its impact on alternative readings of a film, see chapter 5 of Staiger's *Perverse Spectators.*

18. With gangster films, this no doubt stemmed from the studios' desire to avoid censorship. Studios advertised gangster films as love stories, social problem films, quasi-documentaries—genres, in other words, which did not bear the taint of crime. See Grieveson's "Gangsters and Governance in the Silent Era."

19. In contrast, an average daily issue of the *New York Times* in 1930 ran between twenty to twenty-five movie ads and articles in its entertainment section.

Chapter 2

1. For more information on the policy, see Higham's *Warner Brothers,* 85–86; Custen's *Twentieth Century's Fox,* 133–53; and Mosley's *Zanuck,* 105–17.

2. One biographer singles out "tabloid rhetoric" as Zanuck's major contribution to film. See Custen, 2, 3.

3. Zanuck penned so many screenplays that he was forced to write under three different pseudonyms. See Harris, 29.

4. We distinguish between headline news films and later "docudramas" (such as *Call Northside 777, Boomerang,* and *The House on 92nd Street*) that attempt to *reenact* a well-publicized actual occurrence. Unlike these later films that strive for veracity, headline news films borrow news stories to take advantage of their sensational nature. As a result, even when the headline films present a social problem, they tend to be highly stylized.

5. For the most comprehensive discussion of the assassination, see Boettinger's *Jake Lingle.*

6. See *A Ricoeur Reader,* 287–303.

7. McGivena provides a detailed history of the founding of the *News* in his opening chapters.

8. For information on circulation rates, see Bessie's *Jazz Journalism.* The circulation rates of the *Tribune* are reported in Wendt's *Chicago Tribune.*

9. See, for example, Sante's *Evidence,* Evans's "Looking Crime Squarely in Its Disturbing Eye," and Buckland's "Witness to Crime."

10. Serialized between January and May, 1931, Pasley's story ran during the last few weeks of the film's production.

11. See Johnston-Cartee, chapter 4.

12. For further discussion of this strategy in newspaper films, see Ehrlich's *Journalism in the Movies,* Salzman's *Frank Capra,* and Good's *Outcasts.*

13. Anecdotes abound regarding the ability of the *Daily News* to beat its rivals to the street. At the sensational death of Legs Diamond, for example, the city editor crashed into the newsroom at 8 P.M., announcing that a rival gang had killed the mobster. In just thirty-five minutes, new copy for an Extra edition was rolling off the presses. See McGivena for other, similar anecdotes.

14. See Warshaw's "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" for an oft-cited early example of this trend.

Chapter 3

1. Though these films have not previously been considered together as a cycle, scholars have addressed some of them as examples of either the crime or newspaper film genre. See Clarens's *Crime Movies;* Barris's *Stop the Presses!;* Ness's *From Headline Hunter to Superman;* Langman's *The Media in the Movies;* and Ehrlich's *Journalism in the Movies.* Ghiglione and Salzman briefly address the "scandalmonger" newsman in their "Fact or Fiction." A bibliography on representations of journalists in film is available at *The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture* Web site (http://ijpc.org/.

2. See the essays in Sonnet et al., eds., *Mob Culture,* for more on this theme.

3. See Clarens for an excellent discussion of the picture's importance within the history of the crime film. Grieveson's "Gangsters and Governance" also provides an interesting discussion of *Underworld* in the context of social rhetoric about gang control.

4. A letter from the Hays office to Universal's R. H. Cochrane, dated October 14, 1931, indicates how seriously most studios were taking censorship threats. The letter commends Universal's decision to postpone work on gangster pictures, saying, "It is best wherever possible to veer the course of production away from gang pictures at this time, since difficulties, already alarming, are bound to increase." This correspondence is held in the *Scarface* file at AMPAS.

5. See Maltby's "Why Boys Go Wrong," 42.

6. Schatz here regards the gangster film as the product of a single decade only. His assertion that the genre's "narrative formula seemed to spring from nowhere in the 1930s" has been adjusted because of recent scholarship. For more on gangsters before the "classic" period, see Sonnet et al., eds., *Mob Culture.*

7. Richard Maltby points out that, even though after *The Public Enemy,* Cagney "did not play a gangster—that is, a character making his living through organized crime—until *Angels with Dirty Faces* in 1938," he starred through the 1930s as a series of characters "who behaved very much as gangsters behaved—gamblers, con artists, ex-gangsters, and reformed criminals." See Maltby, "Why Boys Go Wrong," 56.

8. Other movies based on some aspect of Winchell's career, featuring a Winchellesque character, or starring Winchell himself, include *The Bard of Broadway* (1930); *Broadway through a Keyhole* (1933); *I'll Tell the World* (1934); *Wake Up and Live* (1934); and *Love and Hisses* (1937).

9. Winchell inspired plenty of enemies as well as admirers. The most blatant example is probably Emile Gauvreau, who painted a deliciously spiteful portrait of Winchell in his 1932 novel *The Scandal Monger.*

10. It is worth noting that the shooting script of *Blessed Event* specifies that the paper with which Alvin threatens Frankie is the *Daily News* issue with the Snyder photo on its front page. In the movie, Snyder's picture is visible, and Alvin describes her electrocution in vivid detail. Not surprisingly, this scene worried the censors. Originally, Jason Joy suggested that Warner Bros. edit it because, as he said, when the Snyder photo appeared in 1928, it "caused such a rumpus in newspaper circles . . . that it has become recognized as the lowest example of tabloid journalism" (AMPAS, *Blessed Event*). The studio risked leaving the scene in, presumably because it helped clarify the fact that Alvin is involved in tabloid rather than straight news reporting.

11. For more discussion of how expectations shape reading (or, in this case, film viewing), see Rabinowitz's framing of genre as a "package of rules" that readers bring to the text (*Before Reading,* 177). Schatz makes a similar point when he observes that filmic "narrative patterns come into focus and the viewer's expectations take shape" more easily once the viewer has seen other instances of similar narrative types. See *Hollywood Genres,* 11.

12. The film's insistence that readers as much as editors are responsible for tabloid content is understandable, given that Emile Gauvreau penned the script and was presumably eager to deflect criticism from his own role as tabloid editor.

13. Not surprisingly, the tabloid racketeer films often recycled actual press sensations into plot elements. Nearly half the cycle's films depict actual personalities, like Winchell or Gauvreau, or allude to events covered by the tabloids. For example, *Scandal for Sale,* based on Gauvreau's *Hot News,* recasts events from Gauvreau's time as editor of the *Graphic.* In particular, the film borrows from a tabloid drama in which the *Mirror*'s managing editor, Phillip Payne, reporting on an early overseas flight, was killed in a crash. Meanwhile, *Blessed Event, The Famous Ferguson Case,* and *The Picture Snatcher* all make direct reference to the *Daily News*'s coverage of the Snyder execution. And elements of *Scandal Sheet* are drawn from the life of prominent yellow news editor Charles E. Chaplin who, after a successful career on Pulitzer's *New York Herald,* killed his wife and ended up serving twenty years in Sing Sing, where he ran the prison's inmate newspaper.

14. The one other product that films of this period often show being made is bootleg alcohol. *The Secret Six,* for example, uses several wonderful sequences of liquor being distilled and bottled to illustrate the ascendance of the main gang. The bootleg still and the tabloid printing press both function as visual icons for the larger web of illicit trade.

15. See Schatz's *The Genius of the System* for discussions of working conditions for

scriptwriters at the different studios. Hamilton's *Writers in Hollywood* also provides a detailed overview of the dynamics between scriptwriters and other studio workers.

Chapter 4

1. For further discussion of the excised conclusion, see James Naremore's chapter, "Modernism and Blood Melodrama," in *More than Night.* Also useful is Don Hartack's essay, which notes that Paramount spent $150,000 on the gas chamber set where Wilder shot for five days before deciding to change the ending.

2. The case also kept returning after its conclusion—a point that testifies to the tabloids' constant recycling of material. During the Leo Brothers trial associated with the Lingle murder, a sidebar story followed up on what one of the jurors from the Snyder case was then doing. Later, in April 1931, the *Evening Graphic* ran a teaser headline: "Sheik Admits Shooting in Snyder-Gray Amour." But the news article actually covered a *new* crime, one that the *Graphic* billed as a "replica—in many respects—of the Snyder Gray tragic epic." Three years after its conclusion, then, tabloid readers were still expected to have the Snyder-Gray crime's "epic" qualities in mind.

3. Exhaustive details of the case can be found in Engel's *Crimes of Passion;* Jones's *Women Who Kill;* Kobler's *The Trial of Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray;* Mackaye's *Dramatic Crimes of 1927;* Quinby's *Murder for Love;* and MacKellar's *The Double Indemnity Murder.*

4. One composograph from before the trial concluded shows a picture of two actors seated in electric chairs, with the faces of Snyder and Gray superimposed over the actors' heads.

5. MacKellar details that Jack Lait—"journalist, editor . . . muckraker, and man about town" (240)—was actually the one who *wrote* Snyder's story. It was arranged that he would craft her memoir, exercising his artistic license, and that she would read over it and add anything she considered important. The *Mirror*'s reproduction of her handwritten text was Lait's idea. He smuggled his pages into the jail through Snyder's mother. Snyder would transcribe Lait's story into her own handwriting and then smuggle them back out the same way.

6. Other examples of this critical trend include Benét's "Hard-Boiled Jellyfish" and Oates's "Man under Sentence of Death."

7. This reference to opera is not accidental; opera is central to understanding both Cain's life and career. The son of an opera singer, Cain hoped to become a musical performer and was crushed to learn—from his mother herself—that his voice wasn't strong enough. Cain made use of his love of music and of the opera in particular in at least three of his novels: *Serenade, Mildred Pierce,* and *Two Can Sing.* More interesting for our purposes here, opera became for Cain a means by which he could elevate his novels artistically: drawing on operatic tropes, characters, plots, and other elements, he infused his lowbrow fiction with an aura of highbrow performance. Indeed, one 1936 critic called *Serenade* a "tabloid opera." For more on the relationship between opera and Cain's work, see Peter Rabinowitz's "'Three Times Out of Five Something Happens': James M. Cain and the Ethics of Music."

8. See Muir's *Headline Happy,* 52–54.

9. For a complete Cain filmography, see Skenazy, 195.

Chapter 5

1. We would argue that the hard-boiled tough guy appears on-screen in the gangster film long before World War II.

2. For discussion of the evolving image of the photographer before this period, see Green-Lewis's *Framing the Victorians,* especially chapters 2 and 3. See also West's "Men in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." For information on Kodak's feminization of amateur photography, consult West's *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia,* chapters 2 and 4. We are also deeply indebted here to Vettel-Becker's *Shooting from the Hip.* Yet while Vettel-Becker focuses on Weegee in her chapter on street photography, she addresses only his visual images, not his written narratives, and she locates her discussion within postwar discourses on masculinity and photography. While her argument is both well researched and politically astute, it strikes us as problematic to confine Weegee's work to the postwar period, since he took the majority of his street photographs in the 1930s and early 1940s.

3. Although several women earned widespread popularity as news photographers during the 1930s and 1940s, it was a field dominated by men. See Plotnick's "Newscamera-Girl."

4. We are indebted to Patricia Vettel-Becker for this information.

5. See, for example, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader.*

6. For more discussion of how hard-boiled prose mimics the operations of the camera, see Thomas's "The Dream of the Empty Camera."

7. We borrow these terms from Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson.

8. Compare, for example, the image captioned "On the Spot" in *Weegee's New York* (76) and the shot of the same murder by *Daily News* photographer Willard published in Hannigan and Sante's *New York Noir* (43). Although the Willard photo is dated December 9, 1939, and Weegee's is "ca 1940," they are clearly the same corpse photographed from the same angle.

9. As Barth notes, the exact year in which Weegee began working at Acme is uncertain. Such chronological blurriness is typical of his autobiography.

10. For an extensive bibliography of feature articles on Weegee published during this period, see Barth's *Weegee's World,* 253–55.

11. For an extended discussion of the role of *PM* in shaping Weegee's work, see Lee and Meyer.

12. In his "Human Interest Stories," Richard Meyer echoes this point, which we introduced in our 2004 essay on Weegee and hard-boiled autobiography. See Pelizzon and West, "'Good Stories' from the Mean Streets."

13. While the sequence in this chapter asks us to read the man's expression as relief at his rescue, a 1942 essay notes that Weegee often re-posed scenes, asking the subject to repeat his "escape" until a satisfactory image resulted. See Reilly's "Free-Lance Cameraman," 77. Although documentation about the circumstances of Weegee's images is sketchy at best, we surmise that a number of photos which show people smiling at bizarre moments—such as in a photo of a girl giving the camera a bright grin while her drowned boyfriend is being given artificial respiration—may well have been re-posed.

14. See Olney's *Memory and Narrative* for a compelling discussion of life writing. Olney devotes a significant portion of his book to Beckett, whose works are not generally thought of as autobiography. Olney's thinking about how other types of texts may be part of an "autography" or "periautography" is relevant to our interest in reading Weegee's various works in different media as part of a larger life narrative.

Coda

1. Indeed, the film was originally advertised as "The Motion Picture That Will Never Be Forgiven—or Forgotten." Campaign ads also boasted that the film "reaches as far and wide as the famed columnist himself."

2. Lehman first published this material as a short story entitled "Hunsecker Fights the World" in *Collier's* in 1948; as Sam Kashner notes, "It was Lehman's attempt to expiate his guilt for being one of the little guys feeding the big columnists the stuff that made Walter Winchell more powerful than presidents" (418). Lehman then extended the story into a novella, which was published in a 1950 issue of *Cosmopolitan* under the title "Tell Me about It Tomorrow." According to several accounts, Lehman's fears of repercussion from Winchell so disabled him physically that he could not finish the screenplay. See, for example, Kashner's "A Movie Marked Danger" and Hoberman's "Once Upon a Time's Square."

3. Indeed, the parallels seem almost overdetermined—even though Lehman insisted repeatedly that he had not based Hunsecker directly on Winchell. The *New York Globe* is clearly modeled on the *Daily Mirror.* Like the *Mirror* did, the *Globe* uses trucks with signs that have an enormous portrait of the columnist pasted on their sides. Like Winchell, Hunsecker is a gossip columnist who traffics in scandal about prominent people and who has also branched out into television and politics. Hunsecker's secretary is clearly modeled on Rose Bigman, Winchell's tough and efficient assistant; Falco closely resembles Irving Hoffman, who was a press agent for whom Lehman worked. A rival columnist says of Hunsecker that he has the "morals of a gangster." Winchell's form of journalism was frequently denigrated by many people as "gangster journalism." Steve Dallas, Hunsecker's victim, calls Hunsecker a "national disgrace"—the very phrase used repeatedly about Winchell by his enemies. Hunsecker sits at 21, a clear analogue for Winchell's favorite nightclub, the Stork Club. Like Winchell, Hunsecker talks quickly and sharply. *Sweet Smell* is also filled with wonderful phrasing—such as "Match me, Sidney," as Hunsecker turns a command for Falco into a humiliating assertion of power—that recalls Winchell at his best.

4. This reading gains credence when we consider that the mid-1950s bore witness to a spate of films—including *The Great Man* (1956), *A Face in the Crowd* (1957), and *Slander* (1956)—about the scandal industry; *Slander* even takes as its subject a thinly veiled fictional treatment of *Confidential*'s methods and its publisher, Harrison. Taken together, this cluster of films—each of them characterized by an almost volatile cynicism and bitterness—suggests that Hollywood was tapping into a national concern about the pernicious effects of scandal magazines at this time.

5. See Williams, "Shh! Have You Heard the Latest about Jack Palance?," and Sharry, "What They Forgot to Say about Kim Novak."

6. For extensive and fascinating discussions of gossip, see Dunbar's *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language,* Goodman and Ben-Ze'ev's *Good Gossip,* and Spacks's *Gossip.*

7. For more information on the lawsuits brought against these magazines, see the following articles: "The Woes of Confidential"; "Cat-o-Nine Tale"; "Lid on the Sewer"; "The 'Exhausting' Juror"; "*Confidential* Clean-Up?"; "Judge and a Witness"; "Reader Response"; "Success in the Sewer"; "Sewer Trouble"; "*Confidential* vs. the U.S."; "*Confidential* Revisited"; "Sin, Sex, and Sales"; and Williams's "Ssh!." The sheer number of these articles, all published between 1955 and 1956, testifies to how much national concern scandal magazines generated.

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