

Booze and Blackouts in Film Noir

Jake Hinkson

HUNGGOVER

"You drinkin' that stuff so early?"

"Listen doll, when you drink as much as I do, you gotta start early."

Cry Danger (1951)

Dan Duryea
on a bender in
Black Angel



On the distaff side, no one portrayed gin-soaked women quite as convincingly as Esther Howard, memorable as Jessie Florian (left) in *Murder, My Sweet* and Mrs. Kraft in *Born to Kill* (top right with Elisha Cook Jr.); bottom right: Elsa Lanchester also savors a bottle or two in *Mystery Street* (with Jan Sterling on phone)

Recall, if you will, the 1949 mystery *D.O.A.* It has one of noir's juiciest setups: after a hard night of drinking, an accountant played by Edmond O'Brien wakes up to discover that someone has slipped him a fatal poison. "I don't think you understand," explains a doctor with zero bedside manner—"You've been murdered." With such a gonzo plot, it's easy to overlook the importance of *D.O.A.*'s boozy first act, which follows O'Brien as he goes on a boisterous bar crawl looking for sex with a group of smashed out-of-town salespeople. These opening scenes set up an edgy world of free-flowing liquor and the dangerous temptations that accompany it. This is the place where many noirs begin, and while O'Brien's situation may be extreme, he's far from the only guy in a film noir who ever woke up wondering what the hell happened the night before.

In fact, because alcohol is as elemental to noir as chiaroscuro and cigarettes, this is a fairly common occurrence. Characters drink when they're doing everything from making love to hatching bank heists. They drink when they're happy and they drink when they're sad. Usually, the drinking itself is not seen in a negative light. It's just something people do. Occasionally, though, all this drinking carries a real cost.

Take, for instance, the familiar figure of the boozier. Always in his cups, and usually lost in some dream of long-faded glory, the boozier

helps establish an atmosphere of weakness and doom. Think of Robert Warwick's drunk thespian spouting off slurred pronouncements in *In a Lonely Place* (1950), or Jay Novello's disgraced alkie doctor cradling his dogs in *Crime Wave* (1954), or Ian Keith's drunken circus-show clairvoyant drinking his way to his doom in *Nightmare Alley* (1947). All these guys, and many more like them, establish the noir universe as a place where actions have consequences. A movie doesn't have to preach many sermons against alcohol with these living wrecks staggering around.

The boozier queen was undoubtedly Esther Howard. An accomplished comedienne (she was a near-constant presence in the comedies of Preston Sturges throughout the 1940s), in the dark world of noir she's best remembered for playing drunks like the tricky Jessie Florian in *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) and *Born to Kill's* (1947) boozy boardinghouse owner, Mrs. Kraft. Howard's gift in these brief roles is to be both broadly funny and yet somehow touching at the same time, bringing pathos to something that could have been played merely for cheap laughs. With her wasted stare and marbled voice, Howard always seems tethered to some ancient hurt. We know she's drinking to forget something. Or someone.

Of course, it wasn't all so dark. The glorious Elsa Lanchester steals *Mystery Street* (1950) away from stars Ricardo Montalban and Sally

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Regis Toomey and Dick Powell consider the astounding alcohol consumption of Richard Erdman in *Cry Danger*. Erdman's bourbon-fueled character was a self-parody of the film's screenwriter, William Bowers, who preferred working with adult libations at hand

Forrest as Mrs. Smerrling, the boozy boardinghouse owner turned blackmailer who disrupts the best-laid plans of both the police and the killer they're pursuing. Stashing her liquor bottles in drawers and snooping around in the lives of her tenants, she supplies this otherwise stolid procedural with a wickedly funny heart. While the film was designed as an early progenitor of the CSI-based mystery, Mrs. Smerrling unleashes a chaotic galaxy of tipsy eccentricity every time she shows up on-screen, supplying wit and energy to balance out all the deadly talk of fibers and bone fractures.

Hands down the funniest drunk in film noir is Delong, the one-legged ex-Marine played with dry martini wit by Richard Erdman in *Cry Danger* (1951). The bleary-eyed Delong tags along with freshly sprung ex-con Rocky Mulloy (Dick Powell) because he's hoping to get a piece of some missing loot, and also because he needs something to do between binges. Screenwriter William Bowers gives Mulloy and Delong enough snappy dialogue to fill two movies:

Mulloy: You're a pint ahead of schedule.

Delong: Only the blind can really see.

Mulloy: Well, you're only half blind.

Delong: I'll fix that.

Mulloy: You know, I had another friend once who had trouble with that stuff. He found a way to get off of it.

Delong: How?

Mulloy: He quit.

Delong: Thank you, Billy Sunday.

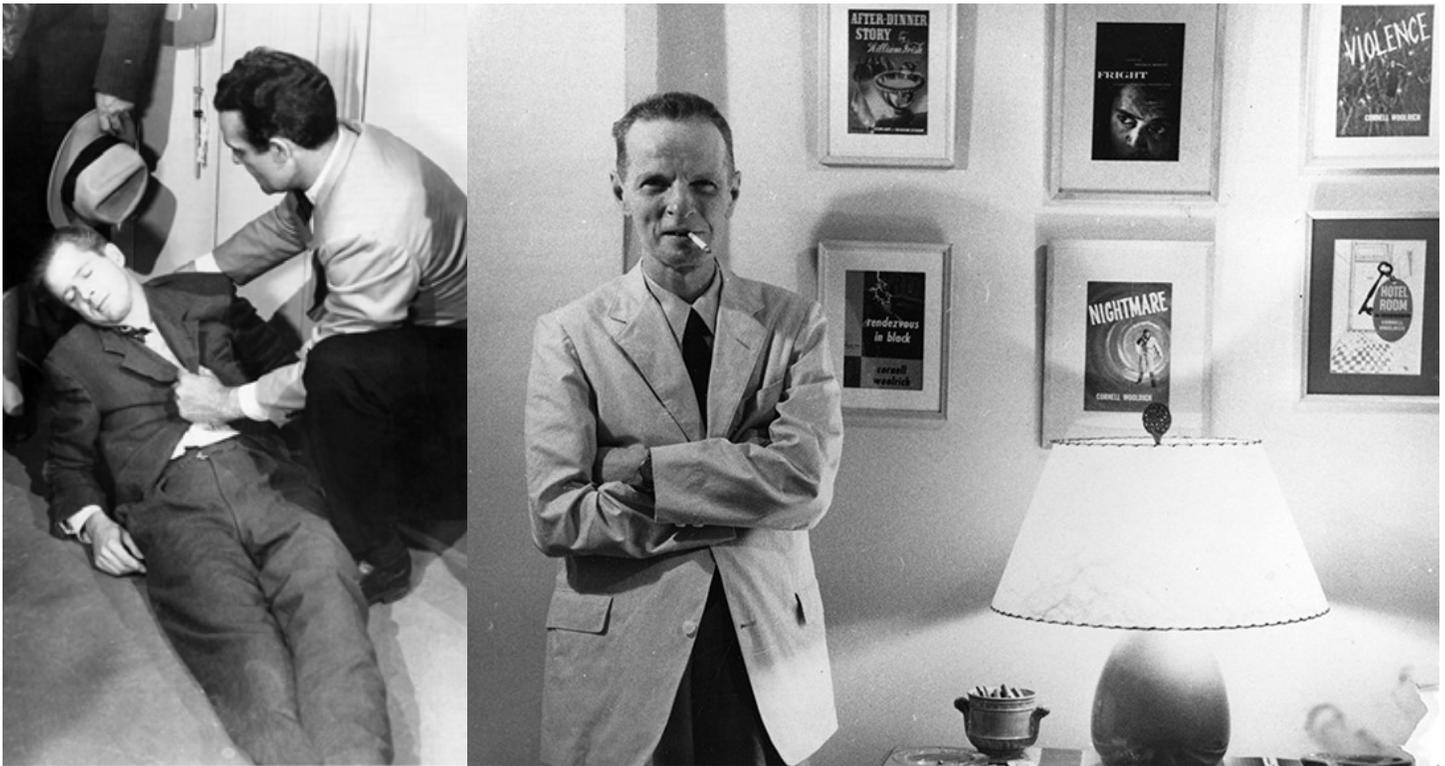
While noir storytellers didn't deliver a lot of temperance lectures, they did love repeating a winning formula, and they knew they'd found one in what we might call the

blackout noir. In these films, the boozier takes center stage and their troubled drinking drives the plot. Here, sweaty, disheveled drunks are forced to wrestle with the demon in the bottle, and booze isn't just a sexy prop in a seduction scene—it's the poison at the center of the protagonist's life.

The key blackout noir is 1946's *Black Angel*. We meet alcoholic songwriter Marty Blair (Dan Duryea) as he's trying to get into the apartment building of his duplicitous ex-wife Mavis (Constance Dowling). Bounced by a vigilant doorman, he hits the bars and gets blasted out of his mind. Later that night, Mavis is murdered. Her married boyfriend, Kirk Bennett (John Phillips), is convicted of the crime, but Bennett's forgiving wife Catherine (June Vincent) sets out



The lovely June Vincent tries to roust Dan Duryea from another of his booze-induced blackouts in the Cornell Woolrich penned thriller *Black Angel*



Left: Dan Duryea unsuccessfully tries to sleep one off in *Black Angel*; novelist Cornell Woolrich, himself a prodigious drinker, wrote a plethora of stories in which booze, guilt, and memory loss spurred the suspenseful plots

to find the real killer. She enlists the aid of boozy Marty, who tries to help her but ends up falling in love with her. When Catherine rejects Marty's declaration of love, he does what he does best—he goes out and gets hammered. This time, however, the binge *triggers* his memories, and in a gripping flashback it is revealed Marty is the one who murdered Mavis.

The predominant theme of the blackout noir is guilt. The guy coming out of his blackout is tormented by the creeping suspicion that he did something wrong, a powerful feeling even when it turns out to be baseless. *Black Angel* is notable because it's one of the few blackout noirs where this guilt is earned. Directed by Roy William Neill from a screenplay by Roy Chanslor, the film marked a departure for star Dan Duryea, who had just been thrust to fame playing unrepentant sleazes for Fritz Lang in *The Woman in the Window* (1944) and *Scarlet Street* (1945). Here, he's haunted, though he can't say why until it's too late. The sexy Dangerous Dan spark is gone, replaced by a heavier kind of charisma—the palpable aura of doom.¹

If we had to trace the blackout noir back to the psychosis (and drinking) of one man, it would be writer Cornell Woolrich. Alcoholic and deeply self-loathing, Woolrich was the source of the plot for *Black Angel* (based on his novel), as well as *Fall Guy* (1947) based on his story "C-Jag") about another drink-and-drug-fueled blackout. Importantly, though, he also practically invented the subgenre of amnesia noir (*Street of Chance* [1942], *Fear in the Night* [1947], and *Nightmare* [1956] where all made from his work). The plots of those films operate like metaphorical blackouts, the same sense of bewildered guilt covering everything like a fog. Men wake up covered in blood or haunted by visions of violence, always wondering the same thing, "What did I do last night? What did I do?"

One of the most important figures in the development of noir,

¹ Duryea would give one of his best performances as another tortured alcoholic in *Chicago Calling* (1951).

Woolrich had a worldview more despondent and disturbed than any crime writer of his era. After a disastrous marriage when he was young (it ended when he went missing for a few days and his wife discovered a diary in which he detailed his sexual encounters with other men), he took up permanent residence in a ratty hotel and churned out nightmare after nightmare, a decades-long avalanche of neurotic fiction. An obsessive writer, fixated on certain reoccurring themes rather than intricacies of plot, he seemed compelled to tell one particular story over and over again: a man awakens in a daze, unable to remember what happened the night before but plagued by a sick suspicion he has done something terrible.

How much of Woolrich's obsession with this nightmare scenario traced back to his own binge drinking and shadowy sexual life is anyone's guess, but the stories of his benders and disappearances are legendary. After Woolrich's death, the writer and editor Donald Yates would remember, "Back in the fifties ... he had this habit of disappearing from his hotel for months at a time. Few people had any notion where he went. When he came back, it was evident he hadn't escaped anything." Eventually, his capacity to write was washed away by the near-constant river of booze running through him. A slow, painful decline followed, and Woolrich fell into his final restful sleep in 1968.²

Of course, Woolrich wasn't the only writer who took a crack at the blackout noir. Screenwriter and novelist (*Detour*) Martin Goldsmith wrote *Blind Spot* (1947), which tells the story of Jeffrey Andrews (Chester Morris), the boozy author of much-respected but

² Starting in 2009, the blackout plot Woolrich pioneered served as the basis for the dark comedy *The Hangover* and its highly successful sequels. A trilogy about three friends who get hammered and wake up in progressively more horrific situations, the series grossed \$1.4 billion worldwide. One wonders what Woolrich would have made of this turn of events. Of all the variations of this plot he put into print, it never occurred to him to make it funny. Maybe that's because he didn't have a sense of humor (which he didn't), or maybe it's because in the Woolrich universe, you always wake up alone.



In *Blind Spot*, Chester Morris is a sodden scribe whose battle with the bottle rates a pitying look from Constance Dowling

little-bought “psychological novels.” When his publisher suggests he write a mystery to increase sales, Andrews boasts that he’d never write such tripe. Before he storms out of the office, though, just to prove that he could write pop fiction if he wanted to, he improvises a locked-room mystery in which a publisher is found murdered inside his locked office. Satisfied he’s made his point, Andrews saunters out and drinks himself into a blackout. The next morning, he awakens to the news that his publisher has been murdered exactly as he described. The driving force of Goldsmith’s blackout plot isn’t guilt as much as resentment, in particular the resentment of a working writer in Hollywood. *You have no idea*, the movie seems to be saying. *You’d drink, too*.

A much heavier work of booze and consequences is *Guilty Bystander* (1950) made by the husband-and-wife team of director Joseph Lerner and editor Geraldine Lerner. The film follows an alcoholic ex-cop named Max Thursday (Zachary Scott) as he searches for his missing child. *Guilty Bystander* must surely rank as one of the darkest noirs ever made. It’s a cheap affair, tossed together on a small budget in New York, but it has real bite, mostly because it refuses to see Thursday’s drinking as anything other than a plague on himself and his family.

The first stop on Max’s search to find his child leads to a creepy doctor. The doctor offers him a drink. At first, Max refuses. Then he has one. Then two. Then three. Then the next thing we know, he’s coming to in a jail cell. Fifteen minutes into his quest to find his missing child, our hero has gotten blackout drunk. This shame finally forces Max to clean up and get serious. Here, the blackout represents rock bottom, and the desperation of

Because he’s blacked out from booze, the protagonist not only can’t trust the world around him, he can’t even trust himself. Isn’t that what noir is all about?

these scenes helps make *Guilty Bystander* one of noir’s grittier looks at alcoholism.

Realism aside, the blackout plot serves two main functions. First, it sets up a mystery to be solved. In *Crossfire* (1947), a young soldier goes out drinking with his buddies on shore leave and blacks out. He awakens to find that a civilian has been murdered and all evidence points to him. In *Night without Sleep* (1952), a famous composer gone to seed on drink wakes up from a blackout with the unsettled feeling that he murdered a woman the night before. In *Blackout* (1954), an American ex-serviceman in London is getting blitzed one night when a pretty girl offers him 500 pounds to get married. Next thing he knows, he’s waking up with blood on his clothes.

In each of these movies, the blackout is the plot device that moves the mystery into place. What’s interesting, though, is the second function the blackout performs, which is thematic. Because the pro-



Zachary Scott shed his high-toned manners and sartorial splendor to play drunken dick Max Thursday in *Guilty Bystander*, with Mary Boland



A few too many Polynesian Pearl Divers put Anne Baxter in a vulnerable spot when she agrees to a nightcap in the bachelor pad of licentious lothario Raymond Burr in Vera Caspary's *The Blue Gardenia*, directed by Fritz Lang

tagonist doesn't know what he's done (or hasn't done), the mystery is one of fraught self-discovery. Not only can't he trust the world around him, he can't even trust himself. And isn't that what noir is all about?

Even more than most films from the classic era, the blackout noir tends to be male-centric. One important exception to this drunken hegemony is *The Blue Gardenia* (1953). Depressed because she's just received a kiss-off letter from her fiancé stationed overseas, Norah Larkin (Anne Baxter) agrees to go on a date with creepy commercial artist Harry Prebble (Raymond Burr). First, Prebble gets her drunk, telling her that the fruity Polynesian Pearl Divers he keeps buying her are "mostly ice and pineapple." Then he takes her back to his place for a "party" with some "friends" supposedly on their way. By this point, when Norah is almost blacking out, Prebble sexually assaults her. She grabs a fireplace poker, lashes out at him, then loses consciousness. Sometime later, she stumbles out of the apartment in the rain, makes it home, and passes out. In the morning, Prebble's body is found, and a search begins for the woman who was with him.

Based on the excellent short story "The Gardenia" by Vera Caspary (*Laura*), *The Blue Gardenia* is a #MeToo movie before its time, a pointed look at sexual violence and gendered double standards. Caspary, a feminist who ended her 1979 autobiography *The Secrets of Grown Ups* with the hope, "In another generation, perhaps the next, equality will be taken for granted," might be surprised

(or might not) to know how much her story and the film made from it feels like a headline from 2019. As the search for Prebble's killer splashes onto the front pages, Norah lives in a world of silent guilt, hiding what happened from her cheery roommates, racked with self-doubt. Was she responsible for what happened? What *did* happen? Will anyone believe her?

After a thematically satisfying conclusion, director Fritz Lang and his screenwriter Charles Hoffman fumble the epilogue with a clanking return to gender norms, cheerfully reestablishing the same lopsided order that has always enabled the Harry Prebbles of the world, both in Hollywood and beyond. Yet feminist critics and noirphiles have largely embraced the film for the way it takes the well-worn blackout murder trope and does something visceral and complex with it. Norah and her friends may be smiling at the end, but the film's unsettling vision lingers.

Ultimately, it's easy to see why so many intriguing noir plots have been based around drinking. The loosening of inhibitions is, after all, the place where most noir begins. The blackout plot, in particular, takes this notion a step further, asking what people are capable of once they lose all control. Untethered from whatever code of ethics we consciously adhere to, these films argue, the average person is capable of anything.

Have fun reflecting on these issues tonight over cocktails. Just be sure to drink responsibly and tip your bartender. ■

