THE PHILOSOPHY OF TV NOIR

Edited by
Steven M. Sanders
and Aeon J. Skoble

THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY
2008

An Introduction to the Philosophy of TV Noir

Steven M. Sanders

Television is the definitive medium of popular culture. With its mass audience, TV has become indispensable for transmitting the legacy of film noir and producing new forms of noir. *The Philosophy of TV Noir* was conceived in the belief that the themes, styles, and sensibilities of film noir are preserved even as they are transformed in a variety of television series from the mid-1950s to the present.

No doubt readers can identify the principal characters and describe numerous episodes of many of the television series discussed in this book. But while one's knowledge of TV noir may be extensive in this respect, it may be less so when it comes to understanding the philosophical ideas presupposed and reflected by such programming. For, in addition to its importance as a cultural phenomenon, noir television is particularly valuable in dramatizing situations and experiences that raise philosophical questions about how to live, what kind of person one should be, and what, if anything, gives meaning to life. This is where philosophical explanations are most helpful. The essays in this volume were written to stimulate and engage intelligent nonspecialist readers and to enliven discussion about such themes as alienation, nihilism, personal identity, and autonomy. These topics will be timely as long as crime, freedom, heroism, and anxiety are part of the human condition. In this introductory essay I want to discuss the nature, scope, exemplary instances, and philosophical dimensions of TV noir and to provide an overview of the volume.

From Film Noir to TV Noir

Television noir is historically and conceptually related to *film* noir, and it has long been a matter of dispute whether the latter is best described as a

remarkable cycle that began in the early 1940s and lasted until nearly the end of the 1950s, a distinctive visual style with roots in German expressionist cinema and French surrealism, a highly fatalistic sensibility and point of view reflecting American hard-boiled fiction, or all of these. Various "noir wars" or controversies over the definition of film noir have dominated academic discussions for decades, and the concept of TV noir itself bears the inherited scars of this battle over noir's elucidation.[1] Obviously, if there are disagreements about the concept of film noir, they will to some extent infiltrate what contributors to this volume say about the application of that concept to television. TV noir does not constitute a period or movement in the way that classic film noir does. Nor is it simply a programming trend like reality television. Instead, it represents an ever-changing adaptation and extension of the themes and styles of its influential film predecessors, updated, to be sure, by technological innovations. Its multiple associations with police procedurals, crime dramas, private detective series, psychological thrillers, espionage and foreign intrigue serials, and science fiction programs prevent a reduction to a single genre.

Much of the style and many of the themes of the TV noir programs discussed by philosophers, film historians, and other scholars in this volume have a source in, and trace out the implications of, those noir movies from the classic period of the 1940s and '50s that introduced us to a postwar world of crime and violence, alienation, estrangement, and existential crisis. Angst, absurdity, dread, and death—these were central to the existentialist philosophy that swept across Europe and came to America in the aftermath of World War II, and to the noir filmmakers, many of whom (like Billy Wilder, Otto Preminger, and Fritz Lang) were Austrian or German émigrés. They went into the studio and produced gripping dramas with a psychological edge and at least some element of crime, either actual or imagined.[2] Some were meditations on anguish; others, like *The Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950) and *The Killing* (Stanley Kubrick, 1956), chronicled robberies, heists, criminal capers, and big scores; still others provided an anatomy of those shadow figures of the noir demimonde: the killers and con artists, misfits and outsiders, femme fatales, corrupt cops, and bought-and-paid-for politicians, the criminal types who menaced, and the police detectives and private eyes who tracked them down.

By the 1960s, American filmmaking was increasingly involved "in creating the unique or spectacular," writes R. Barton Palmer. "One of the casualties of this revisionism was the film noir." Nevertheless, "popular taste

for noir narrative has never waned since its advent in the 1940s."[3] Some of the more noteworthy achievements of the neo-noir period dating from the late 1960s include films as dissimilar from one another as *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), *Point Blank* (John Boorman, 1967), and the unjustly neglected *Pretty Poison* (Noel Black, 1968). These and other neo-noir films modulated classic noir themes into new frequencies. *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), and *Night Moves* (Penn, 1975), three of the most accomplished examples of the mid-1970s phase of neo-noir, externalized the violence and turned up the volume. Subsequent phases, beginning in the late 1980s, include *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986) and *Mulholland Drive* (Lynch, 2001), *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1995), and *L.A. Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997). What is evident in these productions is that the elements of the human condition that provided the classic noir novelists and filmmakers with their philosophical grounding were still aesthetically viable, whether they were period pieces, as in *Chinatown*, updated remakes of noir classics, such as *No Way Out* (Roger Donaldson, 1987), a remake of *The Big Clock* (John Farrow, 1948), or reappraisals of familiar noir characters, as Robert Altman's deconstructed Philip Marlowe in *The Long Goodbye* (1973).

Film noir functions as a counterweight to the Hollywood blockbuster mentality that reached its apotheosis in the 1970s with the *Star Wars* franchise and is with us still, with big-budget films and massive marketing campaigns. The fact that film noir, a modest movement or genre, managed in its barely fifteen-year cycle to become what Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward have called "the American Style" speaks to an extraordinary legacy.[4] That legacy can be found not only in the neo-noir productions to which it gave rise but also in the TV noir of today

The Through-Line of Film Noir

Film noir was always about more than tilted camera angles, chiaroscuro lighting, voice-over narration, and flashbacks, though the presence and significance of these elements of visual and narrative style cannot be denied. Certainly the pervasive theme of crime—its planning, execution, investigation, and consequences—figures prominently in both film and TV noir, as do the themes of the influence of the past on the motivations and actions of the principal characters, and the familiar made unfamiliar through the

point of view of the noir antihero, whose alienation invariably reflects his estrangement and distorts the narrative. Noir is distinguished as well by its discontinuities, its distancing from conventional norms and sensibilities. TV noir's use of style in the service of point of view reflects a dedication to the "through-line of film noir," in the words of Philip Gaines, without overlooking the importance of storytelling and the constraints of a weekly format.[5]

After classic film noir had run its course, producers, directors, and scriptwriters, including those who had already made important contributions to movies and would continue to do so, like Blake Edwards, Robert Aldrich, and Don Siegel, turned to television. The classic TV noir programs were broadcast from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s, and included police procedurals (*Dragnet*), urban melodramas (*Naked City*), suspense stories (*The Fugitive*), and tales of espionage and foreign intrigue (as in the British import, *Danger Man,* known in the United States as *Secret Agent*). In the 1970s, television noir was rare; it did not come into its own again until the mid-1980s, with *Miami Vice* and *Crime Story.*[6] From the 1990s to date, noir narratives and visual styles have appeared in a wide variety of genres and forms, from weekly series to the made-for-television movie format.

TV noir, like film noir, is patterned with so many shadings of ambiguity, criminal violence, alienation, and paranoia that no single generalization about its nature is likely to do justice to its multiple dimensions. TV noir represents a match of style with dark and psychologically compelling themes. But since each of these has numerous facets, there can be significant variation from noir program to noir program. For example, *Secret Agent* points to political hypocrisy and corruption, whereas *The Fugitive* does not, and the visual style of *Miami Vice* is appropriate for a program shot in South Florida in the 1980s but would be curiously at odds with other types of noir television programs with their own narrative needs. Even within a single program there are dramatic alterations in style and theme. Virtually all the examples of TV noir discussed in this volume reflect variations, modifications, and innovations made necessary by changes in both the cultural climate and the medium itself. As the essays demonstrate, the transition from film noir to TV noir is not merely an extension of classic noir to the small screen. Rather, the noir television series themselves establish the autonomy of TV noir as an art form in its own right.

The extensive range in television noir programs represented in this volume by more than a dozen contributors with their own ideas about noir means the imposition of a single definition is out of the question. Nevertheless, distinctive stylistic and thematic elements permeate TV noir, and contributors have found it helpful to stress these in their explanations of how they understand TV noir. Typically, they have identified salient features of film noir and noted the presence of these features in the TV series they are discussing. For example, characters in film noir are often thrown into crisis by unresolved conflicts in their troubled pasts. We can find this thematic element in such noir classics as *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (Lewis Milestone, 1946), *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), and *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949). One can then argue, as Kevin L. Stoehr does in "*The Sopranos,* Film Noir, and Nihilism," as Eric Bronson does in "*Carnivàle* Knowledge: Give Me That Old-Time Noir Religion," and as I do in "*Noir et Blanc* in Color: Existentialism and *Miami Vice,*" that key episodes of *The Sopranos, Carnivàle,* and *Miami Vice,* respectively, illustrate this pervasive noir theme, making them good examples of TV noir. Throughout, contributors show how thematic elements and stylistic patterns found in exemplary models of film noir turn up in television genres as unlike one another as police procedurals, espionage dramas, and science fiction, and this provides an indication of how well noir has stood up in the nearly seventy years since the first noir films began to appear. To be sure, all this film noir material is *aufgehoben,* as the great nineteenth-century German philosopher Hegel might have said: preserved and transcended in TV noir, but not negated. The pervasiveness of noir themes, styles, and moods in noir television indicates that film noir managed to transcend its own time even as it mirrored it. Like its film predecessors, TV noir is edgy and unsettling and communicates something of philosophical substance about ourselves and the condition of our lives.

Realism and Relativism

The technique of bringing both foreground and background objects into focus contributed to the realism of classic film noir by allowing the audience to see actors and their reactions in a single frame. Without this technique—called "deep focus" and associated with Greg Toland, the cinematographer on *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1940), a film whose noir style is found in countless subsequent films—the camera had to show one actor, then cut to another for a reaction shot, then cut back to the first. With deep focus, filmmaking achieved greater realism, reproducing the way we actually perceive space and heightening the emotional impact of whatever was depicted. This

technique, together with the tendency among noir filmmakers to emphasize canted angles and low-key lighting in which grays and darks predominate, and the irregular, off-center placement of figures in the frame, greatly enhanced the means of visualizing those emotions so characteristic of the noir world. In the words of the film critic Andre Bazin, "the stretching of the image in depth . . . produces . . . an impression of tension and conflict," while the walls, window frames, ceilings, and other narrowing imagery emphasize confinement and entrapment and preclude any escape, an important noir motif.[7] With the use of handheld-camera techniques in the late 1960s to convey realism, immediacy, and spontaneity, however, deep focus fell out of favor, an indication of a significant departure of neo-noir and TV noir from classic film noir. And with its fast cutting, television departed even further from the more fluid style of many classic film noir directors.

This may be the place to point out that a television series is by its very nature a collaborative enterprise. Its unique character is rarely, if ever, attributable to a single individual. One might mention Jack Webb, Michael Mann, Chris Carter, and David Chase as auteurs who put their distinctive stamps upon the influential and highly successful series *Dragnet, Miami Vice, The X-Files,* and *The Sopranos,* respectively. Even here, however, their inspiration required many hands (writers, directors, editors, set designers, and actors) to turn their visions into program realities. For this reason, contributors to this volume for the most part have not taken an auteurist approach to the discussion of TV noir.

These contributors include distinguished veterans of the academic noir wars to which I referred above, as well as emerging scholars who have begun what promise to be outstanding careers. They combine an appreciation of noir television with the expertise to explore issues in ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics, theory of knowledge, and social and political philosophy raised by TV noir programs. Their philosophical approaches are primarily interpretive and analytical, though they by no means overlook the importance of the historical development of noir television. In "*Dragnet,* Film Noir, and Postwar Realism," R. Barton Palmer provides a richly allusive account of the landmark TV noir series and its film noir lineage. His essay is particularly useful for its depiction of the postwar context out of which *Dragnet* and other noir television programs emerged in the 1950s. Palmer illustrates important ways in which TV noir reversed polarities, as it were, placing noir protagonists, especially in police procedurals but also in private detective dramas, on the side of law and order, unlike many of their film

noir analogues at the margins. Of course, Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, and Jake Gittes had codes of honor by which they lived. If Joe Friday, Sonny Crockett, and Gil Grissom are not idealists and dreamers, neither are they amoralists or nihilists.

Nor are they moral relativists, though, as Robert E. Fitzgibbons argues in "*Naked City:* The Relativist Turn in TV Noir," the transition from the moral absolutism of 1940s film noir to the relativism that characterized the cinema and television of the 1960s and 1970s can be seen in various episodes of *Naked City.* In relativism, one finds a fatal conflation of the notions of moral and immoral with those of normal and abnormal. Once one equates the two or assimilates behavior that is commonly thought to be immoral to behavior that is said to be (merely) abnormal, the former is drained of its normative import, as the passages from the anthropologist Ruth Benedict cited by Fitzgibbons confirm. Viewers of television programs in which this equation occurred were then left to question whether any behavior really was morally wrong because morality became identified in many viewers' minds with socially approved habits, and such matters are relative to culture. Thus, Fitzgibbons writes, by the end of many of *Naked City*'s episodes one was left to wonder whether a person's choices—which were wrong, judging by conventional moral standards—"might not have been right in some way. This conflation of the normal with the abnormal, of the moral with the immoral, and the promotion of relativism, permeated *Naked City.*"

Questions of diagnosis aside, Fitzgibbons advances an interpretation at odds with conventional thinking about both film noir and noir television in two respects. First, there is his idea that a strain of absolutism permeated much of classic film noir. This would be denied by those critics who claim to find ambivalence, ambiguity, disorientation, and radical ideas and techniques in film noir. Second, there is the sense, well expressed by James Ursini, that in television shows "safe bourgeois values most often emerged victorious by the final frames no matter what had preceded." As Ursini points out, such subjects of controversy as sex, drug addiction, corruption in institutions, and violence in American culture "had to be soft-pedaled in order to gain the omnipotent advertiser's imprimatur."[8] Fitzgibbons's analysis, however, suggests that subtle ways of undermining these constraints were at work in *Naked City.*

As for the relativist position itself, this has been a concern of philosophers since at least the time of Plato. Whether contemporary relativism is a defensible position depends in part on how successful relativists are in

formulating a version of the view that avoids the many objections that have been raised against it, including those in Fitzgibbons's essay.

An Unreasoning Annihilation

Film noir protagonists often seem to fear mere existence itself, which, as Schopenhauer says, makes each of us a victim of the metaphysical force he calls the will to live. The classic noir protagonist is, in the words of James Ursini, "bound by his compulsions."[9] The grim determinism against which the existentialists, for example, were in open revolt was a dominant motif in classic film noir in the form of a preoccupation with the troubled pasts of its protagonists, who often felt doomed to repeat the very mistakes that had given rise to their troubles in the first place. The remnants of a fated destiny hang over events in film noir like a dense fog from which one cannot emerge without being unalterably changed. This accounts for the haunted character of so many noir protagonists in their doomed quests. Exaggerated lighting effects, ominous soundtracks, and cynical one-liners convey the noir atmosphere of desperate characters too occluded by anxiety to seize the opportunity to get past the disruptions in their lives. If we look back to classic film noir and try to identify a noir protagonist who achieves personal transformation in which his fractured, fragmented identity is rendered whole, his self unified, we may be surprised at the lack of plausible candidates. Not the Robert Mitchum characters in *Out of the Past* or *Where Danger Lives* (John Farrow, 1950), William Holden in *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), or James Stewart in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958). Not Fred MacMurray in *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), and not Humphrey Bogart in *In a Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray, 1950).

Film noir features convoluted and often bizarre plots, symbols and shadows, urban angst, and cat-and-mouse dialogue. The special art of noir is a style that delivers us from the contortions of plot and makes us care as much about individual characters as the relations between them, which are in any case often revealed in voice-over narration and flashback and thus subject to all the distortions in the consciousness of the troubled protagonist. Often our interest is less in understanding than in observing the protagonist's descent into crisis or immersion in dread. The most uncompromising film within the classic noir tradition to exhibit this theme is *D.O.A.* (Rudolph Maté, 1950). As R. Barton Palmer has noted, *D.O.A.* suggests that "the real problem life poses is . . . that an unreasoning annihilation may crush dreams

and hopes at any moment."[10] No TV noir protagonist suffers a fate quite as extraordinary as that film's doomed Frank Bigelow, who faces imminent death from luminous poison slipped into his highball at a waterfront jazz club in San Francisco. But *The Fugitive*'s Richard Kimble, in his quest to establish his innocence and get out from under the death sentence that hangs over his head, runs him a close second. So does *The Prisoner*'s Number 6, who struggles to understand where he is, why he is being held captive in the Village, and who is responsible for bringing him there.

Alienation and Moral Ambiguity

Tales of alienated antiheroes can be found in numerous noir television series. Mike Hammer (*Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer,* 1956–1959), Johnny Staccato (*Johnny Staccato,* 1959–1960), Fox Mulder (*The X-Files,* 1993–2002), Mike Torello (*Crime Story,* 1986–1988), Sonny Crockett and Ricardo Tubbs (*Miami Vice,* 1984–1989), and Jack Bauer (*24,* 2001–) recapitulate the dark destinies of their classic film noir forbears. Music, realistic location footage, and flashbacks are used to establish the disconnection between the otherwise mundane lives of the noir protagonists and the emotionally wrenching nature of their predicaments.[11]

Classic noir espionage films such as *Ministry of Fear* (Fritz Lang, 1944) and *The Third Man* are precursors to TV noir espionage series whose most conspicuous and distinguished example is *Secret Agent.* The mid-1960s series pits British agent John Drake, an independent-minded antihero who masquerades as artist, writer, travel agent, and milquetoast teacher against spies, terrorists, blackmailers, and assorted denizens of the international criminal underworld. Its black-and-white episodes were stylishly directed (some by Peter Yates, who would go on to direct the noir textured Steve McQueen hit *Bullitt* [1968], and others by Don Chaffey, who would also direct episodes of *The Prisoner*). Sets simulating such locales as Paris, Vienna, Singapore, Beirut, and Hong Kong achieved verisimilitude with admirable economy.

Sander Lee argues in his essay, "John Drake in Greeneland: Noir Themes in *Secret Agent,*" that moral ambiguity characterizes many of the situations Drake must face, including one in which it appears that Drake has been betrayed by an arm of the government whose actions are morally equivalent to those of its own adversaries. Another situation involves a typical noir couple, pulled into a web of duplicity and betrayal by the complexities of Cold War politics that Drake is powerless to alter. The episode titled "Colony

Three" prefigures the dilemma of the British espionage agent depicted in *The Prisoner* and highlights the cynical and sinister side of an intelligence agency of the British government. The psychological territory of *Secret Agent* is thus, in Lee's words, a landscape "void of meaning, haphazard, and morally indifferent."

In "Action and Integrity in *The Fugitive*," this volume's coeditor, Aeon J. Skoble, takes a close look at the noir protagonist type with his confusion, bewilderment, and paranoia, his vulnerability in a hostile and often violent environment. Skoble's focus is the popular 1960s series starring David Janssen, whose other TV noir roles include private detectives Richard Diamond (*Richard Diamond*, 1959–1961) and Harry Orwell (*Harry O*, 1974–1976). Skoble challenges the standard view of noir as involving moral ambivalence and ambiguity. The characterization of film noir and its protagonists by terms such as "ambivalence," "morally ambiguous," and "amoral" can be found in the early and highly influential work of critics Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton and is repeated by subsequent commentators on film noir. For example, Jeremy G. Butler writes that moral ambiguity is one of the three principal themes in film noir.[12] This familiar refrain is also expressed by Mark T. Conard, who speaks of "the inversion of traditional values and the corresponding moral ambivalence" in film noir, by Jason Holt, who writes that "one of the most distinctively realistic features of noir is the role (or lack thereof) that values play in the characters' lives" which are depicted on a continuum that goes "from the morally ambiguous to the completely amoral" and by the present author, who writes that "film noir presents us with moral ambiguity, shifting identities, and impending doom."[13]

Skoble argues that *The Fugitive* is a counterexample to this standard view: it demonstrates moral clarity insofar as Richard Kimble "is consistently shown making tough decisions about what (to him) are clearly defined standards of right and wrong." Kimble's actions should be seen as expressions of his moral integrity and assertion of himself while at the same time he seeks to preserve his safety.

Given a certain amount of vagueness in the key notions, and a characteristic looseness in their employment, it is not altogether clear that there is a substantive disagreement between those who maintain and those who deny that moral ambiguity characterizes noir cinema and television. No doubt there are moral realist features of the noir protagonist that even the staunchest partisan of noir's ambiguity would not deny, and even scholars use terms like "ambivalence" and "ambiguity" somewhat loosely, so we should not be surprised to find some imprecision in their application. But the theme of the noir protagonist's predicament and the use of visual motifs (low-key lighting, unconventional angles, dark and narrow interiors, night-for-night exterior photography) together convey the idea that appearances are deceptive and mask a highly unstable reality. In TV noir, ambiguity is typically found in the morally compromised position of its protagonists, from the police detective who fails to inform the subject he is interrogating of his right to an attorney, to the undercover cop who is implicated in unlawful activity in order to achieve his goals. The principal characters of *Miami Vice*, *Crime Story*, and *24*, for example, often use morally questionable measures to gain information. Although these tactics are designed to expose those whose factual guilt is a foregone conclusion, viewers are sometimes left wondering whether their loyalties should lie with the law enforcement official who is carried away by such zeal. In the most complex and interesting cases, uncertainty about a character's guilt as well as the shifting identities, oblique loyalties, and tenuous alliances contribute to the sense of ambiguity found frequently in both film and TV noir. Whether there is an irreducible core of moral ambiguity in noir and whether this is in some sense definitive of noir remain open questions.

Morally ambivalent or not, there is an important difference between the angst-ridden antiheroes of classic film noir and the TV noir protagonists of the present day. As Jeremy G. Butler argues, "Broadcast television's lack of [narrative] closure undercuts" the "arch fatalism" of film noir. "Narrative closure is critical to *film noir* because it fulfills the doom that is prophesied implicitly at the film's start."[14] Since a television series typically requires recurring principal characters, it can never achieve complete narrative closure until the series finale. Even then, the need to make the series an appealing prospect for syndication can dictate an upbeat ending or at least an ambiguous one (as in the case of *The Fugitive*, *The Prisoner*, and *Miami Vice*) that permits interpretation along vaguely optimistic lines.

Sunshine Noir

From classic film noir, television took over the idea of the noir city. A noir subtext runs through the depiction of Los Angeles in *Dragnet* and New York in *Naked City*, where sequences are filmed on location in the city streets, whose authentic character is enhanced by documentary-style photography. By the time we get to *Law & Order* and *CSI*, the representa-

tions, often using the increasingly popular handheld camera style, implicate the cities themselves as buzzing hives of criminality and corruption, places whose disruptive and destructive elements can only be partially contained but not avoided.

For a time in the 1960s, site-specific programs were the vogue, in the manner of *77 Sunset Strip* (Los Angeles), *Hawaiian Eye* (Honolulu), *Surfside Six* (Miami Beach), and *Bourbon Street Beat* (New Orleans). When *Miami Vice* premiered in 1984, this format returned to television with an array of stunning visuals, cinematic production values, a scintillating soundtrack, and a noir sensibility I have called "sunshine noir."[15] The series showcased Miami as the paradigmatic sunshine noir city, evoking images of tieless men in guayaberas and pastel art deco hotels on Ocean Drive. After several decades of viewing cops in ill-fitting suits driving undistinguished government-issue cars, it was an unexpected pleasure to see Sonny Crockett in T-shirts and linen jackets, at the wheel of what was soon to become a TV noir icon, his black Ferrari Daytona Spyder.[16] An acute chronicle, *Miami Vice* captured the mid-1980s Miami milieu of tropical location sites, New Urbanism architecture, Grand Prix race-car driving, Cigarette boats, and jai alai.

But Miami is also a place where criminal activity is carried out on a massive scale, with the accompanying danger and fear that effectively contrast with the beautiful location photography. Many episodes of *Miami Vice* exhibit the characteristic existential motifs that Robert Porfirio has found in film noir, including alienated antiheroes who must perforce confront the absurdity and meaninglessness of life.[17] Paranoia is present throughout, owing to the need of its two principal characters to maintain their undercover identities. Yet even the most outlandish plotlines of its paranoid episodes are dramatized in ways that lend themselves to a disconcerting realism—as, for example, when Crockett and Tubbs investigate a Haitian master criminal with a penchant for the occult in "Tale of the Goat." Political conspiracy paranoia can be found in episodes such as "No Exit" and "Baseballs of Death," which appear to suggest that law enforcement's war on drugs in fact consolidates the power of the South American drug cartels because it was planned that way. And the linkage between drug trafficking and corporate interests is disclosed when Crockett and Tubbs are told in no uncertain terms by a New York City banking executive that there is no way that he and his colleagues in the financial community are going to let the South American governments default on their massive loans, even if that means turning a blind eye to their largest cash crop, cocaine.

Existentialism, Crisis, and Revolt

Questions about the meaning of life and doubts about its point enter into the central preoccupations of many of TV noir's principal characters, even if they themselves do not always articulate their concerns this way. These questions reflect and are reflected by existentialist philosophy.

The existentialists were by temperament and life choice not only philosophers but also authors of essays, novels, and plays upon which much of their reputation depends. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, precursors of the existentialist movement, had already produced works of literary distinction a century before Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre won Nobel Prizes for literature with work that was, as philosopher Hazel E. Barnes would put it in a book of the same title, a "literature of possibility."[18]

Their status as novelists and playwrights as well as members of the Resistance against the German occupation of France during World War II gave Sartre and Camus undeniable cachet. Both men were concerned with questions of what to do and how to live in an absurd world. The most philosophically significant aspect of the human condition and the one to which both Sartre and Camus give pride of place is our experience of freedom. Accordingly, they place great emphasis on spontaneity, chance, and contingency, as well as the more somber experiences of absurdity and revolt. For both thinkers, the existential recognition of the contingency and absurdity of life by no means involves a passive acceptance of its limits, accompanied by disillusion and defeat. On the contrary, it calls for engagement (Sartre) and defiance (Camus), thereby illustrating how various styles of existentialism contrast with the typical passivity of the classic noir protagonist. Camus, however, emphasizes the centrality of revolt in a less strident and radical way than Sartre, who called for the use of revolutionary violence in the Algerian war of independence from France. Camus, far more conciliatory and moderate, was an ardent champion of social justice without, however, the rhetoric of the firebrand.

The essays by Jennifer McMahon and Eric Bronson as well as my own offer interpretations of three of TV noir's existentially oriented programs. In "*Noir et Blanc* in Color: Existentialism and *Miami Vice*," I discuss episodes that dramatize Sonny Crockett's existential crisis. In the final season of the series, Crockett's identity has been merged with his undercover persona, Sonny Burnett, and Crockett must come face to face with the killer inside him. I introduce the views of Kierkegaard and Sartre in the interpretation

of such existentialist ideas as freedom, crisis, and recognition. In addition, I discuss two episodes in which Bruce Willis and Ed O'Neill, in guest-starring roles, portray noir protagonists whose predicaments illustrate familiar existentialist themes.

In "*24* and the Existential Man of Revolt," Jennifer McMahon subjects Jack Bauer, the protagonist of the long-running series *24*, to an analysis of the protagonist as existential hero using categories from the writings of Camus. McMahon highlights the theme of absurdity in Bauer's attempts to deal with critical challenges to order and stability, and subsequent fears of loss of meaning, caused by terrorist threats. In terms of the qualities of character found in the existential hero, she argues that Jack Bauer, particularly by virtue of his lucidity and courage, fills the bill as a Camusian man of revolt.

In response to these essays, however, it may be questioned whether existentialism, at least as it was espoused by Sartre and Camus, is any longer a viable political philosophy or prescription for action, or, for that matter, even a reliable diagnosis of the human condition. Understood in Sartrean terms, existentialism places an almost perverse emphasis on the darkest and most conflicted aspects of human relationships and holds these up as representative of the whole. This may account for the affinity between existentialism and film noir, but by reducing human relationships to sadism, masochism, or indifference, it is difficult to avoid concluding that Sartre has reduced the position to absurdity. Sartre himself, it should be noted, virtually abandoned existentialism when he embraced Marxism in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960).

Whatever else may be said for it, the moderation of Camus has not in fact been the way oppressed peoples have responded to their felt political and economic desperation, which of course makes its small influence all the more lamentable. In thinking about the absurd, Camus writes that "there is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn."[19] But it might be argued that he does not give entirely convincing grounds for recommending this attitude toward the absurdity of our lives. As the philosopher Thomas Nagel writes: "absurdity is one of the most human things about us: a manifestation of our most advanced and interesting characteristics." If it is true that nothing matters, then the fact that life is absurd does not matter either, and, in Nagel's words, "we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism and despair."[20]

Many viewers were surprised when they turned to *Carnivàle* to hear Brother Justin, a defrocked Methodist minister, despairingly say: "I lost my God." The series proceeded to dramatize all the moral ambiguity, existential angst, and unresolved struggle associated with film noir but presented from a traditional Christian framework. In "*Carnivàle* Knowledge: Give Me That Old-Time Noir Religion," Eric Bronson cites both *Diary of a Country Priest* and *The Third Man* as films noirs that use old-time religion to highlight classic noir conflicts and struggles, to which we might add *Red Light* (Roy Del Ruth, 1950), whose film noir elements atypically accommodate a religious message.[21] Situating *Carnivàle* in this tradition, Bronson writes that *Carnivàle*'s "spiritually foreboding storylines appeal to viewers not because they seek easy answers but because it asks them difficult questions."

Nihilism, Noir, and *The Sopranos*

The nearly irremediable darkness of *The Sopranos* is redeemed by moments of piercing light into the moral psychology of its recurring characters. Its darkness comes from its nihilism. Film noir and, by extension, TV noir, is anchored in nihilism, a "values-denying and life-negating vision" that has cast its shadow upon modern Western culture since at least the nineteenth century and most conspicuously in the postwar years of the twentieth century. The view that nothing matters, that meaning and value have collapsed, is given dramatic expression in the activities of the show's protagonist, Tony Soprano, and his henchmen in organized crime. In the essay "*The Sopranos*, Film Noir, and Nihilism" (from which this characterization of nihilism comes), Kevin L. Stoehr sees perspectivism as the cause or ground of our loss of belief in objective truth. "The idea of perspectivism, the belief that all knowledge and experience results from our subjective and personal viewpoints," he writes, "leads to a subsequent rejection of our belief in objective, universal truths and our conviction in values that are intrinsic or valid in themselves, apart from merely subjective interests and preferences." Of course, the adoption of perspectivist views of meaning, truth, and value may be a consequence of the loss of belief in universal truths and objective values, and not the other way around. That is to say, the acceptance of perspectivism may be the effect rather than the cause of our declining belief in universal truth and objective values. What is more, the perspectivist thesis itself can be brought under closer scrutiny. For even if perspectivism is the cause of the loss of belief in objective reality and values, we still want to know whether the perspectivist position is itself justified. Is it just another position that might be rejected in favor of

a non-perspectivist one? This complex question lies at the heart of recent philosophical discussions of relativism and objectivity.

Of even greater interest in the present context is the question of whether nihilism and perspectivism are even coherent positions. If to say that something matters is to express one's concern with that thing, then to say that "nothing matters" is presumably to express one's unconcern about absolutely everything. To say, with the nihilist, that "nothing matters, not even oneself" would seem to express one's unconcern with everything, including those merely subjective interests and preferences that give content to the perspectivist approach in the first place. Tony Soprano is not a nihilist in this sense, for he is very much concerned with his own interests and preferences: he wants power and the respect that power brings; he wants success in his criminal enterprises; and he wants the pleasures of good food and sex. This is by no means all there is to Tony's complex psychological makeup, as Stoehr shows in his illuminating section on animals and animosity. But on any ordinary construal of meaning and value, the annihilation of values has not happened to Tony Soprano.[22]

Postmodernism and *Crime Story*

As *Miami Vice, 24, Carnivàle,* and *The Sopranos* illustrate, a number of the styles and themes found in TV noir extend the models found in classic film noir in their indebtedness to existentialism. But *Miami Vice* also departs from the existentialist model and can be classed with other series that are determinedly subversive because they owe something to the influence of postmodernist philosophies.[23] And just as *Miami Vice* is noteworthy for its visual realization, showcasing a tropical deco palette in its wardrobe and set design, *Crime Story* (1986–1988), a series not covered in the essays included in this volume, vividly recalls early-1960s Chicago and Las Vegas. *Crime Story* combines its site-specific format with a radical postmodernist critique of government power and corruption. The series begins its first season in Chicago where police detective Mike Torello battles his own demons and his personal nemesis, Ray Luca. The master narrative of *Crime Story* is a Manichean one of the struggle between the forces of criminal darkness and of law and order. The forces of criminal darkness are represented by Luca, a low-level Chicago thug who has earned a reputation for his success at putting down scores. As he works his way up through the organized crime subculture, his ruthlessness and uncompromising approach earn him the

attention of mob bosses and the undying enmity of Torello. Luca is answerable to no one except Miami-based mob boss Manny Weisbord, a fictional character modeled on alleged organized crime figure Meyer Lansky. Once Luca leaves Chicago and moves to Las Vegas, Torello and his team form a federal task force whose sole mission is to regroup in a demonic Las Vegas, no longer merely vulgar and trashy, kitschy and campy, and set up surveillance on Luca with the objective of putting him out of business once and for all. But time and again, Luca bests Torello and his task force.

Crime Story can be viewed on one level as a series that hews rather closely to reassuringly conventional American values. In a contest between good and evil, the former prevails, at least in the sense that criminal violence is shown to have enormous personal and social costs. On this viewing, *Crime Story* has not surrendered its commitment to American values: not everyone is a criminal sociopath like Ray Luca; not all human relationships are marked by exploitation and betrayal; not all institutions are corrupt. But on another level, *Crime Story* is deeply subversive in the way the foundational rules and systemic practices that give shape to American institutions and values are exposed as being nothing more than disguised expressions of criminal and governmental power, often operating in tandem. It is this philosophical critique, associated with postmodernist thinkers such as Foucault and Lyotard, that gives *Crime Story* its purchase on post-1980s developments in TV noir.[24]

The dominant narrative for film noir was a hard-boiled sensibility that projected itself into stories about those misfits, losers, loners, and marginal figures in the shadows who are moved by envy or ambition on the cheap.[25] This constellation of sensibilities and themes was itself the product of the political and cultural assumptions of the early hard-boiled novelists who accorded a certain moral superiority to the oppressed. These assumptions can be found in many episodes of *Crime Story,* especially those set in Chicago, where the corruption of institutions and the social ills of poverty and racism are dramatized. Of course, one does not need to accept the politics of the postmodern left to follow the events that take place in *Crime Story.* But it clearly helps to know that its creators are intent on doing more than telling a story. They are also delving into the power relations that constitute the network of acknowledgments of organized crime in Las Vegas in the early 1960s. In one sense, Manny Weisbord and the mob control the grand narrative: individuals are required to follow the party line of the mob, to whom all loyalty is owed. By the end of the decade, however, the mob's

stranglehold over the casinos, the profit-making sectors of the Vegas resorts, has collapsed. As some postmodern theorists would argue, with the weakening of the old grand narrative comes a new authoritarian grand narrative of the multinational corporation. *Crime Story*, however, takes this conspiracy-oriented approach one step further, forging links among Ray Luca, the U.S. government, and an ambitious Mexican *generalissimo* who stays in power at the dispensation of a cocaine cartel. When Luca travels south to oversee his massive international drug operation and Torello and his crew go after him, the corrupt nature of U.S. involvement is in danger of being exposed, and Torello must go.

The significance of *Crime Story* lies in its restaging of classic film noir's conventions and preoccupations on the foundations of capitalism and government power as a means of exposing the dark and corrupt side of the United States, depicted as a racist, imperialist state with ambitions of empire. The censorious reception that *Crime Story* must have met in the executive boardroom at NBC may help to explain why the series was cancelled at the end of its second season, leaving the principal characters quite literally up in the air in an abrupt cliffhanger with many loose ends. As noir as anything one could find on network television at the time, *Crime Story* established a benchmark of what TV noir could achieve but rarely did.

Paranoia, Detection, and Crime Scene Investigation

In film noir, paranoia is part of the atmosphere and everyone takes it in, like the air they breathe. But paranoia is more than a mood. It is also a way of thinking, and it helps to explain why so many noir protagonists give expression to the thought that "whichever way you turn, Fate sticks out a foot to trip you up" (*Detour* [Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945]). Paranoia takes other forms as well, but in film noir it is typically combined with, or a component of, this notion of fate or determinism that is central to the conception of a fragmented, divided, and therefore inefficacious agency or will. The ineffective will, the inability to prevail against something from out of the past that exerts a kind of constraint, is a noir idea because the response to the dark force against which all attempts are doomed to failure is to fear it, and such fear can become paranoid.[26] In this respect, TV noir series as apparently unlike one another as *The Fugitive*, *The Prisoner*, *Crime Story*, and *The X-Files* share the noir paranoia of dark forces, whether they are the one-armed man, Number 1, Ray Luca (as in "Lucifer"), or the vast conspiracy to conceal the truth about extraterrestrials. There is a significant difference, however, between the paranoia of fate in film noir and its TV noir analogue, in which paranoia can be mitigated by modern technology. The dark forces of TV noir can be studied empirically. They can be investigated.

The television crime investigation franchise programs, such as *CSI* and *Law & Order*, pick up some of those features of noir cited by French critics who emphasized the indebtedness of film noir to surrealism with its concept of *amour fou*. However, the eroticized treatment of violence in *CSI* and *Law & Order: CI*, for example, should not, however, lead us to overemphasize their affinity with surrealism-based film noir. There is, significantly, enough dramatic closure in each of the episodes in these series to ensure a measure of coherence or narrative rationality that was anathema to the surrealists. And the emphasis on death in surrealism is, for the most part, not the raison d'être of most of these programs. Unlike the surrealists, who saw film noir as turning bourgeois values and morality upside down, there is a fairly conventional sense of right and wrong among the principal characters in *CSI* and *Law & Order*. These programs also tend to emphasize the investigations themselves. The backgrounds and characters of the detectives, forensic scientists, and district attorneys who investigate the crimes and bring the guilty to justice are often merely narrative conveniences on which to hang the plot or storyline. With this updating of the police procedural, noir television gives us a closer look at the methodology of crime scene investigation, portrayed in all its clinical detail in *CSI*.

Two essays about key philosophical issues in the methodology and epistemic status of detection and crime-scene investigation provide invaluable guides. The original *CSI* is itself investigated in "*CSI* and the Art of Forensic Detection" by Deborah Knight and George McKnight. Their essay addresses the film-historical roots of, continuities with, and departures from, classic film noir and neo-noir. They argue that the process of reading the evidence is part of a strategy of constructing a convincing explanatory narrative of the motives and actions of suspects. According to Knight and McKnight, "detection works from evidence to narrative explanation by means of good guesswork and the testing of competing hypotheses." Their essay can be seen as an attempt to give some content to the notion of explanation, and as such it raises questions about "explanatory bestness." The crime-scene investigators in *CSI* presumably seek the best explanation, the one that accounts for as much of the evidence as possible and ties up loose ends that are otherwise inexplicable. But in the end, what is it for one explanation to be the best ex-

planation? Philosophers have given alternative and even conflicting answers to this question, reflecting ongoing philosophical debates.

In their essay, "Detection and the Logic of Abduction in *The X-Files*," Jerold J. Abrams and Elizabeth Cooke describe and develop "the logic of guessing," what the founder of pragmatism, C. S. Peirce, called "abduction," and what most philosophers refer to as inference to the best explanation. This process is epitomized by the procedure of FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, who investigate cases of the paranormal. There is an ambivalent attitude in *The X-Files* over Mulder's convictions and inspired guesses about the paranormal versus Scully's equally insistent rationalism, and this ambivalence is explored in this essay. Abrams and Cooke quote Mulder approvingly when he asks Scully: "You tell me I'm not being scientifically rigorous and that I'm off my nut and then in the end who turns out to be right like 98.9 percent of the time?" But they also say that "Mulder, in his search for truth, needs Scully and her . . . extreme caution in the search for the evidence." Is this the program's attempt to have it both ways? If Mulder really is right almost all of the time and if Scully sees, in their words, "with her own eyes hard evidence of the truth that Mulder has long known about aliens, conspiracy, and the end of the world," it is difficult to see what contribution Scully's extreme caution makes to Mulder's nonscientific way of knowing. Of course, Mulder does not *know* but only guesses, and the fact that his guesses often turn out to be right does not establish the legitimacy of guessing, since the fix is in thanks to the scriptwriters for *The X-Files*. If Mulder comes up with an explanation that turns out to be better than Scully's, that is because the scripts are written so that he does. We should no more accept this as proof of the superiority of his methods than we should conclude that Columbo is a brilliant detective because he always manages to entrap the murderer no matter how cunning and resourceful the murderer is.

Espionage, Science Fiction, and Realism

Some of the most creative efforts within TV noir have extended the noir sensibility beyond the stock images of Chandleresque private detectives, urban architecture, and shadow-filled streets into the less familiar vicinity of espionage, science fiction, and mixed genre series. It is instructive, of course, to watch the oneiric episodes "The Ubiquitous Mr. Lovegrove" from *Secret Agent*, with its noir iconography of doors, windows, staircases, mirrors, and clocks, "Shadow in the Dark" from *Miami Vice*, and "Pauli Taglia's

Dream" from *Crime Story*. These idiosyncratic instances within their respective series are earlier examples of the multifarious forms TV noir took and how it manifested itself in unexpected and sometimes bizarre ways. But the viewer who wants to see more recent TV noir in some of its nonstandard forms must look beyond the private detective series and police procedurals to see the ways noir bleeds into other genres. Much of what is extant as TV noir reconfigures noir elements in what Andrew Spicer calls a "complex generic mix."[27] This should come as no surprise. It would be simplistic to identify TV noir with just one genre, the police procedural, for example, or the detective series. Going back to classic film noir, the noir sensibility can be found in a variety of genres, including melodrama, horror, espionage, and science fiction.[28] As *The Prisoner*, *The X-Files*, and *Twin Peaks* show, the development of TV noir extends to programs that share an affinity with these forms found in classic film noir.

Three key questions epitomize the enigmas at the core of three nonstandard TV noir programs: "Who is Number 1?" (*The Prisoner*), "Who can I trust?" (*The X-Files*), and "Who killed Laura Palmer?" (*Twin Peaks*). With reference to these questions, each of the series is radically underdetermined, for there is more than one answer with which its episodes are consistent. In fact, each series ends on a highly ambiguous note.

NOIR AND THE WORLD ORDER

The fact that noir style is value-free means that it can show up in almost any genre and can serve just about any ideological interest, from the anticapitalist critique of material values of *The Asphalt Jungle*, *Night and the City* (Jules Dassin, 1950), and *The Prowler* (Joseph Losey, 1951) to the affirmation of conventional values of *T-Men* (Anthony Mann, 1948) and the Cold War anticommunism of the science fiction noir *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956).[29] Nevertheless, it may seem more than coincidental that progressive themes find natural expression in noir films. In its determinism and depiction of the squalor of predatory capitalism, the prewar, Depression-era proletarian writers (James M. Cain, Dashiel Hammett, Horace McCoy) and their postwar literary legatees (Jim Thompson, Charles Willeford) portrayed a sordid life unredeemed by initiative or action.[30] Many of the hard-boiled novelists from whose material noir films derived were critics of bourgeois values in general and capitalist America in particular. Still, politics in TV noir takes many forms, from the law-and-order conservatism of *Dragnet* to the libertarianism of *Millennium* to the leftist

postmodernism of *Crime Story* to the paranoid/conspiracy extremism of *The X-Files* and *24*.

In the same way that *Ministry of Fear* and *The Third Man* lie somewhere in the prehistory of *Secret Agent, The Prisoner* is a precursor to *The X-Files*. This is not because of any supernaturalist motif in the former, but, rather, it is because the thread of anxiety that runs through these films and series reflects the conviction that the authenticity of life can be affirmed only by dramatizing our desperations and dreads, our deepest fears of loss of identity, autonomy, and individual liberty. Michael Valdez Moses treats these themes in detail in "Kingdom of Darkness: Autonomy and Conspiracy in *The X-Files* and *Millennium*." With its use of some of classic liberalism's most important philosophers, Moses's essay provides theoretical grounding for the all-important question of autonomy in an age of conspiracy and crisis. In the course of their investigations, Fox Mulder, Dana Scully, and Frank Black come face to face with conspiracies that undermine their confidence that the agents of good and evil—whether these are governments, business organizations, religious institutions, or even supernatural forces—can be either practically or theoretically distinguished. All they can be sure of is that such forces of darkness pose an unprecedented threat to individual freedom, autonomy, and democracy.

The law enforcement noir protagonist's isolation and estrangement that, in "*Noir et Blanc* in Color," I attributed to the cultural vacuum in which he works and lives, is explained by Moses in a somewhat different fashion, but the two accounts are complementary. The principal characters of *The X-Files* and *Millennium* show those indications of alienation so typical of the noir protagonist because this is the price that must be paid by those who seek truth and justice in the modern state. This conclusion was also strongly suggested in the discussion of *Crime Story* in this essay. But is it obvious that those who seek truth and justice must wind up this way? Is the state necessarily to blame for their alienation and isolation? Readers who cannot come up with counterexamples of those who have at least a neutral, if not a benevolent, relationship with the state may have to concede that Moses is on to something.[31]

The problem of reconciling government's protection of national security with individual autonomy has led many theorists in our own time (on both the political right and left) to prefer clear rules with few exceptions for fear that civil liberties will suffer severe erosion if government is given a freer hand. Still others prefer a procedure where some such reconciliation ideally should achieve some sort of balance between the expansion of security and the contraction of individual liberty. Events in the United States dating from September 11, 2001 can be seen as object lessons in the complexity and importance of debates over individual liberties in an age of international terrorism.

INFLECTIONS OF MEANINGLESSNESS

Can one develop a noir television series around inflections of meaninglessness?[32] *The Prisoner, The X-Files*, and *Millennium* answer this question affirmatively, each in its own way. From *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926) to *Invaders from Mars* (William Cameron Menzies, 1953) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the theme of personal identity and its fragmentation, partial recovery, and ultimate loss is crucial to film noir and is given new expression in TV noir series where the effect of science and technology—to say nothing of visitations from extraterrestrials—on human identity has terrifying results. Science fiction series like *The X-Files* and *The Prisoner* complement noir visuals with literate dialogue to dramatize the experiences of the angst-ridden Fox Mulder and the alienated Number 6. They consistently deploy noir themes: paranoia in *The X-Files*, as Mulder and Scully investigate paranormal phenomena and seek confirmation of a national conspiracy; the precariousness of autonomy and personal identity in *The Prisoner* as Number 6 struggles with his incarceration in "the Village" and attempts to discover the identity of his captor, Number 1.

In *The Prisoner*, a man—unnamed but widely believed by devotees of the series to be John Drake from *Secret Agent*—resigns from a high-level government job, passes out when he is gassed by an unidentified abductor, and wakens in a hermetic community known only as "the Village." He is given the moniker "Number 6" and housed in a bungalow that duplicates his London flat down to the last detail. He spends seventeen episodes trying to escape from the Village and to determine the identity of Number 1, while alternating Number 2s and their accomplices make every effort to find out why Number 6 resigned. Each episode finds Number 6 back at the Village, a return that signifies the inescapable Village-as-prison aspect of his existence. Try as he may, for sixteen episodes he never learns the identity of Number 1 or succeeds in escaping without being recaptured. In the series finale, "Fall Out," the mysterious Number 1 turns out to be, to all appearances, himself! The prisoner's role in his own narrative of imprisonment is thus rendered far more ambiguous, to say the least.

Having ended in narrative chaos, the final episode supports, and perhaps even requires, a variety of interpretations. Given the heavy emphasis in film noir on the need for redemption, a noir interpretation of "Fall Out" might take a theological form: Number 1 is God, and Number 6's discovery of His identity is a discovery of that aspect of Him in himself. If the Village is seen as the place to which the sinner, John Drake, has been consigned while he works out his redemption, Number 6's struggle to learn the identity of Number 1 is his struggle to come to know God, and in the end he returns to London, a redeemed man. On the other hand, it can be argued, no doubt even more plausibly, that *The Prisoner* shows that totalitarian systems cannot have a redemptive effect through their attempts to radically transform human nature.

Whatever the merit of such approaches, Shai Biderman and William Devlin are well aware that the surrealistic finale is a massive obstacle to anyone who tries to provide a unified interpretation of *The Prisoner*, theological, political, or otherwise, as their essay "*The Prisoner* and Self-Imprisonment" makes clear. Rather than attempt to paper over this difficulty, Biderman and Devlin confront it head-on with a bold reinterpretation of the series, exploiting the French postmodernist philosopher Michel Foucault's notion of the socially constructed self. Since the series examines the psychology and moral character of a British agent within the constraining atmosphere of a place with all the devices of a sophisticated prison, Biderman and Devlin apply Foucault's parallelism between prisons and society and the mechanisms for surveillance and control employed by each. A central feature of the Village is that one is always being watched by a type of Orwellian Big Brother. Against such a background, the standard Village expression, "Be seeing you," takes on an ominous meaning. Biderman and Devlin call attention to some of the central ways the administrators of the Village, chiefly Number 2, use confusion, apprehension, and ambiguity—themselves features of the noir world—to break Number 6's resistance. Conversely, they illustrate Number 6's use of wit, sarcasm, and irony as defense strategies. But they are determined not to reduce Number 6 to a symbol through sheer allegorical ardor, and they ask: What is the correct thing to say about selfhood in *The Prisoner*, once we know that Number 6 and Number 1 are the same person? They argue that "there is no completely independent individual; rather, people are dependent upon society in forming their personal identity." However, this seems to leave the main issue begging for an answer. The fact that one forms his or her identity in relation to others does not mean that one does not have an individual personal identity; additional premises are required to establish that point. Ultimately, the Foucauldian position adopted by Biderman and Devlin raises a difficult question that readers must ask themselves: Is the supposition that the Prisoner is Number 1 coherent in any literal sense? If it is not, then the vehicle of that incoherence, the script by Patrick McGoohan—or the episode that instantiates it—is an unforgettable but nonetheless undeniable travesty.

A KIND OF REALISM

As a mixed genre program, *Twin Peaks* inevitably takes on some of the characteristics of its constituent genres. If it is not unadulterated noir, it nevertheless can be characterized as noiresque with its darkness and corruption on full display, convoluted plot and subplots, grotesque minor characters, and a protagonist, FBI special agent Dale Cooper, with a troubled past. For these reasons, *Twin Peaks* qualifies as near-noir if not full-fledged noir, and in the end we may be inclined to accept the bizarre series as something old (a crime drama), something new (a Lynchian postmodernism), something borrowed (its noir source material can be traced to the self-parody of *His Kind of Woman* [John Farrow, 1951]), and something blue (as in Lynch's disturbing neo-noir film *Blue Velvet*).

Construed as a philosophical meditation on interpretation, with *Twin Peaks* his paradigm example, Jason Holt argues in "*Twin Peaks*, Noir, and Open Interpretation" that to classify *Twin Peaks* as noir may actually limit its aesthetic possibilities. In this connection, Holt argues that because noir is a type of realism, to designate a series "noir" is to limit the possibilities that are interpretively open to it. He claims that the central question of *Twin Peaks*—"Who killed Laura Palmer?—is interpretively closed to several alternative answers if we take the series to be a kind of realism. To argue, as some do, that the killer is BOB, necessitates a departure from the very realism that lies at the heart of noir. Nevertheless, Holt makes a case for the aesthetic desirability of radically open interpretations—of *Twin Peaks* and anything else worthy of the honorific "art."

The reader may wish to ask whether Holt's characterization of interpretive openness applies not only to the case of *Twin Peaks* but to others as well. Holt himself applies it insightfully to both *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Prisoner*, but in doing so he may have inadvertently weakened his own case. For if we accept his claim that the motivations of Sam Spade are multiply interpretable, what are we to make of his earlier claims of Spade's "underly-

ing nobility," that he is a "noble hero"? That seems to assume that various debatable matters about Spade's character are already settled. There is also Holt's claim that the interpretive openness of *The Prisoner* enhances rather than compromises the aesthetic appeal of the series, making it more, not less, aesthetically rewarding. This may come as a surprise to the angry viewers who jammed the network switchboards following the broadcast of "Fall Out" in 1968, but Holt might reply that an aesthetically rewarding experience is not always a psychologically comforting one.

The Ambiguous Perspective on Life

This volume traverses the distance from the realism of *Dragnet* and *Naked City* through the existentialism of *Miami Vice* and the nihilism of *The Sopranos* to the realms of darkness and the unknown of *The X-Files* and *Millennium*. In the end, the noir way of looking at things translates into a way of being in the world, and as such it implies, at the very least, vulnerability if not actual jeopardy. The philosopher and film theorist Irving Singer writes, "The price one pays for the ambiguous perspective on life is a lack of security, recurrent doubt about one's mettle and the goodness of what one has achieved."[33] The ability of producers, writers, directors, and the rest to create the noir television series that the essays in this volume address almost certainly reflects their awareness of this ambiguous view of the human condition.

It would be folly to attempt to predict the future of TV noir. But its pervasiveness and the tenacity of its hold on the imagination suggest the vitality of what might be called the noir dimension of human experience and the relevance of that dimension to questions of who we are and how we are to live.

Notes

I would like to thank the authors of the essays in this volume whose correspondence contributed so much to my understanding of the issues with which this introductory essay deals. I am particularly grateful to Aeon J. Skoble and Christeen Clemens for our many conversations about philosophy, film noir, and TV noir.

1. *The Philosophy of Film Noir* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006) and *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), both edited by Mark T. Conard, clarify and extend these controversies and also challenge key

assumptions about the meaning and nature of film noir, as do many of the essays found in Alain Silver and James Ursini, ed., *Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight, 1996) and *Film Noir Reader 2* (New York: Limelight, 1999).

2. See Robert Porfirio, "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the *Film Noir*," in Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader*, 78.

3. R. Barton Palmer, *Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir* (New York: Twayne, 1994), 167, 168.

4. Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, ed., *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style* rev. and exp. ed. (1979; Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 1992).

5. Philip Gaines, "Noir 101," in Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader 2*, 341.

6. James Ursini, "Angst at Sixty Fields per Second," in Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader*, 286–87.

7. A valuable, nontechnical discussion of the contributions of Gregg Toland to cinematography can be found in Hilton Als, "The Cameraman," *New Yorker* (June 19, 2006): 46–51. The Bazin quote is from Andre Bazin, *Orson Welles: A Critical View* (Los Angeles: Acrobat, 1991), 74–75. The significance of noir visual motifs is given succinct explanation by Palmer, *Hollywood's Dark Cinema*, 38–39.

8. James Ursini, "Angst at Sixty Fields per Second," 275.

9. See Irving Singer, *Three Philosophical Filmmakers* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 230–31; James Ursini, "*Noir* Science," in Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader 2*, 227.

10. Palmer, *Hollywood's Dark Cinema*, 87.

11. On this and other aspects of the noir protagonist, see R. Barton Palmer's perceptive account of *D.O.A.* in *Hollywood's Dark Cinema*, 83–92.

12. Jeremy G. Butler, "*Miami Vice:* The Legacy of *Film Noir*," in Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader*, 289.

13. The relevant essays by Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, Robert Porfirio, and Jeremy G. Butler can be found in Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader*, 17–25, 77–93, and 289–305, respectively. The quotes from Conard, Holt, and Sanders are taken from essays in Conard, *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, 1, 24–25, and 92, respectively.

14. Butler, "*Miami Vice*," in *Film Noir Reader*, 296.

15. I use the term to refer to crime drama that combines a noir sensibility with South Florida locales and high-toned production values.

16. "The car, for instance, has virtually lost its capacity to convey nuances of character and event, to participate in anything like the sleek ripple and jagged surge of the old *noir* textures." See Richard T. Jameson, "Son of *Noir*," in Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader 2*, 200. Crockett's black Ferrari was destroyed by a shoulder-launched stinger missile in the first episode of season 3 and eventually replaced by a white Testarossa.

17. Porfirio, "No Way Out," 83–86.

18. Hazel E. Barnes, *The Literature of Possibility: A Study in Humanistic Existentialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959).

19. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus,* trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 90.

20. Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd" (1971), reprinted in Nagel's *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 23.

21. See the entry on *Red Light* by Bob Porfirio in Silver and Ward, *Film Noir,* 241.

22. R. M. Hare provides an interesting account of the impossibility of "the annihilation of values" in "'Nothing Matters,'" reprinted in his *Applications of Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 32–47.

23. In "Sunshine Noir: Postmodernism and *Miami Vice,*" in Conard, *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir,* I provide a postmodernist interpretation of three episodes, including "Heart of Darkness," which I interpret existentially in my essay in this volume. This is not inconsistent, since I am not *endorsing* alternative conflicting interpretations, but rather putting them forward for the reader's consideration.

24. Michel Foucault's appeal to intuition rather than analysis, his emphasis on dream experience, and, in the words of Allan Megill, his "call for a descent into the 'infernal' depths of human psychology" have an obvious affinity with noir themes and motifs. Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 221.

25. As James Naremore puts it, "No doubt movies of the noir type have always appealed strongly—but not exclusively—to middle-class white males who project themselves into stories about loners, losers, outlaws, and flawed idealists at the margins of society." Naremore, *More Than Night, Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 276.

26. Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 108.

27. Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education, 2002), 150.

28. For noir science fiction, see James Ursini, "Noir Science," in Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader 2,* 223–41. For noir horror films, see Eric Somer, "The Noir-Horror of *Cat People,*" in *Film Noir Reader 4,* ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 2004): 191–205. For the noir western, see Ursini, "Noir Westerns," and Robin Wood, "*Rancho Notorious* (1952): A Noir Western in Color," in Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader 4,* 247–59 and 261–75, respectively.

29. Interpretation and discussion of films on various points of the political spectrum can be found in Grant Tracey, "*Film Noir* and Samuel Fuller's Tabloid Cinema: Red (Action), White (Exposition) and Blue (Romance)," in Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader 2,* 159–75, and Reynold Humphries, "The Politics of Crime and the Crime of Politics: Postwar Noir, the Liberal Consensus and the Hollywood Left," in Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader 4,* 227–45.

30. See David Cochran's absorbing discussion of Thompson and Willeford in

America Noir: Underground Writers and Filmmakers of the Postwar Era (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 19–52.

31. I am grateful to Aeon J. Skoble for suggesting this point.

32. I am unable to identify the source of this phrase, but I suspect that it comes from the art critic Robert Hughes or the film critic Stanley Kauffmann.

33. Singer, *Three Philosophical Filmmakers,* 234.