

American Veteran Noirs: Investigating Exceptionalism and Its Post-World War II Trauma

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ABSTRACT

This essay looks at some of the American film noir that focus on traumatized veterans in the post-World War II era, up to the twenty-first century and argues that noir thrillers centering on mentally disturbed veterans of World War II allow for both commemoration and criticism of the global interventionism that American exceptionalism legitimized during the Cold War and the Wars on Terror. Paradigmatic noirs construct traumatized veterans to investigate their symptoms of amnesia and paranoia as responses to historical interventions. While the analysis of Fred Zinnemann's *Act of Violence* (1948) challenges idolizations of members of the Greatest Generation as morally superior immediately after their return home, that of Alan Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987) probes into how the projection of a Faustian tale upon amnesia connects a post-World War II identity conflict to an anti-communist climate ripe with social tensions. The third veteran noir, the post-9/11 film *Shutter Island* (2010) by Martin Scorsese, conclusively reveals how two paranoid narratives overlap in the films under scrutiny, aiming to deconstruct the patriotic trope of American heroism in their subtexts. (AG)

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The Puritan John Winthrop first preached to colonists aboard the *Arbella* in 1630 that they had been redeemed by God to build an exceptional “Citty upon a Hill” that would either be celebrated or judged for its moral standards by the rest of the world (Winthrop 303–04). Two centuries later, Alexis de Tocqueville first applied the term “exceptional” to the new American Republic in 1835 referring to its checks-and-balances system, in which even the President’s executive power could be limited by his own federal government (Tocqueville 205–06). In 2007, Donald E. Pease took a very different approach and defined American exceptionalism as “a multilayered academic discourse,” “an explanatory framework,” “a political doctrine,” and

“a regulatory ideal” that have especially guided how international scholars have approached the study of American identity since the onset of the Cold War, while affirming American nationalism and imperialism (Pease 108–09). At first, the so-called “Myth and Symbol” school of historians and literary scholars defined foundational tropes such as “the melting pot, the endless frontier, American Adam, Virgin Land,” which expressed the presumed exceptionalism of American culture to legitimize foreign and domestic policies (110). By the end of the twentieth century, however, scholars had replaced the notion of exceptionalism with that of globalization, as reflected in expressions that no longer privilege an American point of view, exemplified by the increasing frequency of the terms “borderlands” and “contact zone” rather than “frontier” and “melting pot,” respectively (111). Despite this paradigm shift in scholarship, Pease considered the discourse of American exceptionalism to be far from outdated and pointed to then-President George W. Bush’s justifications of global American interventionism as a divine mission (112). This essay takes its cue precisely from the fact that discourses justifying American interventionism with exceptionalism date back to World War II, and always came at a cost for veterans and the national psyche, as evidenced by the films to be discussed.

The belief traced by Pease to the Lovestoneite faction of the Communist International that the US is unique on the world stage, American exceptionalism indeed gained new tropes following the intervention to liberate Europe from the genocide and terror of the Third Reich (Pease 108–09). Formed around Jay Lovestone, this group was expelled from the Communist International in 1929 by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, because they suggested that, unlike European nations, the US was exceptional as it had avoided both a socioeconomic collapse and working-class rebellions (108). Rather than aspire toward social peace, Pease argues, Americans could since then unify missions to extend their culturally specific ideals of liberty and equality to embattled countries worldwide (109). Paradoxically, constructing the history of the US as the global redeemer required military violence abroad, which at times failed to implement the Western democratic system, for example, during the Vietnam War (1955–1975), Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003–2011), and Operation Enduring Freedom (2001–2021) in Afghanistan.

American interventionism has been viewed differently by Americans than by the citizens of, for example, European countries. Thus, it can be helpful to consider Marc Chenetier’s observations on the state of the discipline of American Studies in Europe as of 2008, which famously started

with the goal to redeem foundational republican-democratic values after World War II. While American Studies explicitly encouraged ideological imperialism in Europe and worldwide during earlier days of the discipline, debates have increasingly focused on domestic issues in the US (Chenetier 1). Yet, Chenetier suggests that American imperialism could persist in a type of European scholarship that still perpetuates American influence beyond US borders by amplifying American voices (6). Unlike their American counterparts, however, as Chenetier contends, Europeans have longer histories of approaching class hierarchies, as well as experience with alternative state forms, to the effect that European observers might be able to envisage social redemption by means other than internalizing American exceptionalist notions (4). In light of such divergent perspectives across the Atlantic, Chenetier recommends that in the future Americans should seek solutions to national issues by listening to Europeans rather than the other way around (8). Indeed, this suggestion could point to a shift away from an age when the exceptionalist concept of America promised redemption to global onlookers who sought inspiration for social change.

Considering the implications of post-World War II American exceptionalism for occupied peoples beyond Europe, Amy Kaplan highlights how anti-totalitarian agendas obscure the problem of global imperialism in research on American history (12). At this point, it should be noted that in this essay, reflections on American global imperialism take World War II as their starting point instead of focusing on the ongoing colonization of the Americas by European colonists and their descendants, which has affected Indigenous peoples there since 1492. Such historical blind spots, Michael Rogin suggests, allow the mainstream media to sensationalize the violence of, for example, the Iran hostage crisis (1979–1981) or the attacks of 11 September 2001 and demand retaliation rather than global commemorations of totalitarian histories from North America and beyond (527–28). Thus, the specific symbolism of American victimhood is highlighted, while potentially unifying similarities between experiences of military occupation go unaddressed. Instead, media images contribute violent tropes to the American exceptionalist imaginary, trying to legitimate the omnipresence of American soldiers worldwide; soldiers whom citizens expect to embody national virtues such as those of John Wayne's cowboy and soldier-types in post-World War II cinema (Barker 49–51). The personal qualities that Wayne brought to his roles can be assumed to have produced a stereotype that has

maintained its appeal across time. However, the production of the Wayne cowboy/soldier is less relevant than its contestations from the post-World War II years until the Wars on Terror.

In various noir films, investigators expose power asymmetries by detecting corruption, tyranny, and torture that counter foundational American values while reflecting totalitarianism. In this context, my argument that film noirs can challenge the hegemonic doctrine of American exceptionalism by reconsidering the legacies of World War II through the lens of veterans' trauma, follows social science scholarship, which unsettles any binary between America's home front and the war zones. Notably, anthropologist Joseph Masco attributed the work of conjuring up the same future that it seeks to prevent to the counterterrorist images of the US military. He blamed US counterterrorist technology and bureaucracy for facilitating surveillance of their own citizens and producing a "self-colonizing" domestic state (13–14). Masco puzzled over the question of "how to define [the] boundaries, battlefields, and home fronts" of a country, that is, the US, whose borders are increasingly eroded under potentially endless states of emergency (35). Yet, the 1950s saw Americans habitually imagining the destruction of their country in order to prepare for terrorist attacks (46). According to social scientists such as Masco, in this persistent cultural context, the three films discussed here can be understood to voice complex problems about the legacy of the global American empire that took shape during World War II but has increasingly been called into question as being morally flawed.

This essay's choice of films that deal with the aftermath of World War II is justified by the fact that both the American counterterrorist state and its superpower status actually date back to the early years of the Cold War just after America's victory over Nazi Germany. In his famous article in *Life* magazine, "The American Century," the American press magnate Henry R. Luce claimed that the dictators of the 1940s were already responding with aggression to the global popularity of American democratic ideals, which must not be equated with colonialism (Luce rpt. in *Diplomatic History* 167). As a self-declared internationalist, he dismissed any isolationist criticism of President Franklin Roosevelt's support for Great Britain as "Nazi propaganda about fighting somebody else's war" (164), since the worldwide spread of American influence represented an opportunity to him that the previous President Woodrow Wilson had failed to seize after World War I (166–67). On the one hand, Luce pointed out that American internationalism was already a reality due to the international popularity of "American jazz,

Hollywood movies, American slang, American machines and patented products” (169). On the other hand, Luce called on American readers “to seek and to bring forth a vision of America as a world power which is authentically American and which can inspire us to live and work and fight with vigor and enthusiasm” (169). He went on to list tropes of America’s global role that persist and have meanwhile come under scrutiny, such as “America as the dynamic center of ever-widening spheres of enterprise, America as the training center of the skillful servants of mankind, America as the Good Samaritan . . . , and America as the powerhouse of the ideals of Freedom and Justice” (171). In this context, Luce absolutely rejected the isolationist prediction that an American involvement in World War II would harm the country’s democratic system and economy to the point of the US becoming indistinguishable from the enemy (162). Thus, representations of the American experience of intervening in World War II, along with its aftermath, can reveal the ideological underpinnings of the nation’s imperial power on the world stage as well as its implications for veterans, who experienced both the military and the home front at this significant moment. Yet, rather than position itself for or against American interventionism in general, this essay is interested in the cultural work through which Hollywood films have critically reflected American exceptionalism since the second half of the twentieth century.

It is precisely this tension between national doubts and international pride that characterized the ideological climate of the American World War II in noirs that investigate the troubled minds of members of the Greatest Generation, who appear as heroes and perpetrators at the same time. Such politically subversive narratives unsettle the hegemonic tale of brave Americans drawn by a moral calling to offer personal sacrifices for their destined triumph over the evil Axis Powers. Although the three films discussed invoke these patriotic tropes when they introduce audiences to the veteran stories, moral flaws are also attributed to the metonymic American veteran characters. Rather than call into question the overall justice of America’s involvement in World War II, the noir genre allows the films to tell a political fable about the cost of war to individual veterans, whose integrity (or lack thereof) is constructed as representative of the state of national cohesion. Besides being veterans, the protagonists are “the object of” criminal investigations and are depicted in great psychological detail. Although this essay is primarily interested in the relationship between the veteran stories at the surface and the ideological critiques in the subtext of

the selected films, it should be mentioned that the resulting political fable can by no means be found exclusively in Hollywood noir cinema.

In fact, the figure of the traumatized American ex-soldier already invites challenges to the ideology of American exceptionalism. The condition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was itself only recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War with typical symptoms matching those of “shell shock” and “combat stress,” among others (Caruth 3). Yet, in the same way as the latter two terms which Sigmund Freud had already applied to World War I veterans, this psychological crisis relates not only to a particular wartime event, but to the survival thereof (9). By contrast, patriotic accounts of wartime experiences cast the survivor in the role of hero who came home a winner against all odds. Yet, as Cathy Caruth summarizes, PTSD constitutes a delayed response in the shape of “repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (4). Instead of appearing as heroes who recount memories, traumatized veterans embody vulnerability, since “[t]he traumatized . . . carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess,” in Caruth’s words (5). Besides the obvious changes in behavior, mood, and self-image that might make traumatized veterans appear post-heroic, however, the delayed resurgence of events for them means that they perpetually revisit history critically (8). Thus, although they are the ultimate historical witnesses of the recent past, they are unreliable narrators of the present, in which they are only partially rooted.

As an additional facet lending them socio-critical significance, traumatized veterans in the noir films discussed are engaged in criminal investigations. Of course, noir films belong to the genre of detective fiction which had been established by Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle, whose stories criticized social hierarchies in the Victorian era (Cawelti 348–49). However, since the 1940s, the character of the detective has undergone a transformation from an amateur investigator to an underdog professional, according to Tzvetan Todorov and Ulrich Schulz-Buschhaus (Todorov 59–60; Schulz-Buschhaus 125–26). In addition, Todorov distinguished the noir thriller as incorporating the subjectivity of the investigator to guide the narrative while the latter is placed at existential risk (60). Whether this risk emanates from suspects, the tortured psyche of the investigator, or society at large, noirs’ linkage of crimes on the home front to the aftermath of World

War II points to unfinished business. Furthermore, the flashbacks that the veterans experience erode the binary between the overseas warzone and the American home front. In any case, the traumatized veteran himself poses a serious threat to the ideology of American exceptionalism with its notion of the US as a redeemer.

Displaced rationale in the new world order: *Act of Violence* (1948)

Act of Violence by the Austrian Jewish documentary filmmaker Fred Zinnemann is an early noir that drew on the German Expressionist art movement by representing psychosis in surreal aesthetics but rejected rational solutions to moral conflicts (McDonnell 72). Such a view explicitly runs counter to the foundational American frontier spirit of the European settlers, which the historian Frederick Jackson Turner described as resourceful, pragmatic, and creative amid the perceived wilderness of the frontier (137–38). After the American veteran Frank R. Enley's (Van Heflin) celebration as a builder in Santa Lisa, California, on Memorial Day, his former fellow prisoner of war in Nazi Germany, Joe Parkson (Robert Ryan) resurfaces hunting for revenge and threatens Frank's wife, Edith (Janet Leigh). Presumably to depict Frank's memories and thus his interiority on screen, Zinnemann layered the sampled voices of characters referencing the past, for example, Frank's own words "Don't do it, Joe!" when he tried to dig an escape tunnel during captivity, as he flees from Joe into a tunnel and his vision blurs. The theme of confusion manifests as Joe's voice from the past emerges as being closer to Frank, whose view of Joe in the present is fleeting. Frank thus appears lost between past and present. The film's focus on interiority is aided by props such as Mary Astor's wardrobe assembled off-the-rack, the stains on her clothes, and her smudged makeup, giving the impression of Pat's character as a prostitute, as "'a poor alley cat'" (Astor qtd. in Dixon 43). Frank meets her in the bar he fled to from his builders' convention, and she introduces him to a gangster who suggests arranging Joe's assassination. Because Frank suffers from moral conflicts taking the center of the narrative, Pat primarily serves to embody poverty through visual clues—an early example of the camera's documentary gaze used as a storytelling subtext in noir (Dixon 46). Through this strategy, even minor characters like Pat can embody the social criticism of the filmmakers, although she herself lacks any backstory.

Act of Violence above all problematizes idolizing the Greatest Generation that just returned from World War II. The film does so by positioning Frank R. Enley as a metonym of the American dream, who

appears to have a perfect life after having survived his deployment to Germany and having served his country. The noir plays upon the literary roots of its genre with its lack of a hard-boiled detective; instead, it depicts Edith interrogating Joe and Frank. As part of a possible criticism of conservative gender roles after World War II, Edith could be seen as an underdog who, while lacking power herself, uncovers the secrets of men with power. Partly because Edith is a typical young, blonde housewife of the 1950s, who could be a gangster's trophy in hard-boiled fiction (Schulz-Buschhaus 128–29), and who could be accused of naïveté. For example, she does not protest like a feminist would when Frank literally tells her, “Edith, a lot of things happened in the war that you wouldn’t understand, not myself either” (Zinnemann). However, she glances up at Frank in confusion. Once again, the aesthetic of the noir film is imbued with a socio-critical gaze that is not explicated in words and could thus appear all the more realistic to viewers who must take note of visual cues themselves. When Edith raises a gun, like Grace Kelly’s character in *High Noon* (1952), to defend her husband, she further highlights how vulnerable even American heroes can become when they are threatened by outlaws from within their own nation (Cawelti 87–88), in this case, an embodiment of World War II guilt.

Still, the women of *Act of Violence* cannot prevent Frank’s assassination at the hands of the hitman he hired to shoot Joe, and hence the film uses the noir class-consciousness of the noir and the gendered gaze to interrogate the post-war US glory personified by Frank. After all, his appeal to them appears as a less powerful factor than the personal guilt toward Joe that entraps him. His work constructing suburban houses and his use of sophisticated technology, for example, when he escapes in his rowboat from Joe, highlight his privileged status but also link him to the materially superior Nazi SS colonels to whom he betrayed his fellow prisoners of war. He regrets this materialism when confessing his past to Edith:

The Nazis even paid me a price. They gave me food and I ate it. I ate it! I hadn’t done it just to save their lives. I talked myself into believing it that he’d [the Nazi SS colonel] keep his word [to “go easy” on the men]. But in my guts, from the start I think I knew he wouldn’t.

(Zinnemann; comments added)

Therefore, his plot to eliminate Joe and evade judgment equally reflects egoism and parallels the arrogance associated with Nazi élites in postwar popular culture (Beard 210). In the counter-communist context of the Cold

War, *Act of Violence* revisits World War II to focus on Frank's moral conflict and ask who truly deserves to be venerated as a war hero and be financially rewarded by contrasting the Enleys' spacious house with Joe's and his fiancée's miniscule suite. Not only is Joe's physical disability depicted, but also Frank's mental trauma through layered media, which suggests that he can yet become a martyr-hero like President Abraham Lincoln, whose assassination, Robert N. Bellah argues, established sacrifice as a virtue for any American leader ("Civil War and Civil Religion"). Immediately, Joe volunteers to announce Frank's death to Edith with his declaration seemingly redeeming his violent intentions and unveiling the suffering of the postwar American soul personified by the respected veteran builder for whom there was no escape from moral judgment. The dichotomy between Frank and Joe could reflect what Harold Bloom identifies as Jewishness in Freud's psychoanalytical interpretation of drives as either sadistic or masochistic, or either externally or internally directed forms of violence shaping the cultural memory of an exiled people for whom there is no means of reversing time (138; 143–44; 152). By this logic, had Frank returned alone to the US, he would still have remained forever connected with Joe because of their shared captivity in Germany. This helpless situation is highly symbolic within the American exceptionalist context that could have inspired *Act of Violence*. The Hebrew Scriptures, Bloom suggests, already reveal emotional trauma as a source of profound knowledge that has most probably influenced Freudian psychoanalytic discourse, for instance, with the idea that pain requires testimony, which surfaces—to provide but one example—when the prophet Jeremiah decides he must speak in God's name as a retribution for unjust temptation (140–41). His testimony is both his revenge and redemption because he refuses to live a morally flawed life and thus receives God's grace. *Act of Violence*, like the tale of Jeremiah, addresses revelation and disgrace, in this case of an American veteran and his self-sacrifice, because Frank taking the bullet ens Joe's desire for revenge and allows Frank to become a martyr and atone for his betrayal. In contrast to his actions in Germany, Frank finally assumes his assigned role as a leader who is guided by responsibility, instead of egoism. If this ending signifies the victory of humanity that the US claimed following World War II—despite their experience of isolation until the attacks on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii (1941) and domestic inequalities—*Act of Violence* documents interior tensions as a noir through a transatlantic lens. Yet, the transatlantic dimension connecting Frank and Joe is only referred to, rather than visually depicted, which in itself can allude to the dissociation that follows traumatic experiences. In addition, the paradox of temporal

proximity, despite spatial distance that is visualized by Frank's flashbacks to war scenes in Germany, explicitly represents his character as deeply fragmented, neither able to completely commit himself to his postwar life as a veteran nor return to the scene of his original crime and clear his conscience.

Amnesia and paranoia as legacies of “the American century”: *Angel Heart* (1987) and *Shutter Island* (2010)

When Luce proclaimed the American Century in 1941 and advocated global interventionism, his ideas invited the view of the US as the redeemer nation and glossed over internal turmoil, which remained politically unaddressed until the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s–1980s (Pease 111). As Pease points out, this timeframe during the Cold War saw the proliferation of contestations of American exceptionalism from the margins of US society, which inaugurated a paradigm shift in scholarship that proposed globalization instead as the goal (111). Since then, scholars of American culture have continued to seek diverse perspectives on American exceptionalism, which thrives, as can be seen in two more noirs, more recent than *Act of Violence*, through amnesia and paranoia connected to the nation's military interventionism. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Zinnemann's film staged moral conflicts that subtly suggested overlaps between American interventionists and the Nazis, but *Angel Heart* by Alan Parker and *Shutter Island* by Martin Scorsese ambivalently deduce morality from personal histories while associating the psychological suffering of American veterans with uncanny evil.

Whereas *Act of Violence* was produced immediately after World War II, in the 1940s, *Angel Heart* dates to the 1980s, and *Shutter Island* to the 2000s. Thus, more recent international conflicts, such as the Cold War and the Wars on Terror, are reflected in the producers' choices of plotlines as well as their storytelling practices. Unlike World War II—during which American soldiers were deployed to combat zones overseas and those who returned, or remained at home, might have viewed their wartime experiences with paranoia—the postwar institution of the Central Bureau of Investigations (CIA) during the Cold War and the Wars on Terror mobilized fears of nuclear attacks on ordinary Americans by foreign powers (Masco 9). However, ahead of America's victory in World War II, significant numbers of Americans had resisted their country's involvement (Luce 161–62), and afterwards domestic disputes revealed the systemic blind spots of American exceptionalism (Pease 111). Both of these challenges to the status quo could be interpreted as anti-American in a paranoid imagination that precludes the voices of traumatized

veterans who experienced both the war and its aftermath. Therefore, affected veterans are uniquely positioned to stand at the center of contemporary criticisms of American exceptionalism for denying shortcomings at home while commemorating heroic performances abroad (Pease 110). Unlike *Act of Violence* where Frank attempts to suppress but keeps recalling his dark secrets, *Angel Heart* and *Shutter Island* expand their projections of alleged American moral ambiguity beyond individual veterans by invoking the trope of amnesia.

Although the novel *Falling Angel* (1978) by William Hjortsberg is set in the year 1959, the British director Alan Parker decided to move the plot of his filmic adaptation *Angel Heart* into 1955 in order to strengthen the story's reference to World War II ("Audiokommentar mit Alan Parker" [Audio Commentary with Alan Parker]). At first glance, the story matches Parker's description of a "fusion of the two genres . . . : the detective story with the Faustian tale" because its underdog protagonist Harry Angel (Mickey Rourke) investigates the disappearance of the Blues crooner Johnny Favorite, who it is revealed possessed the former's body and soul ("Audiokommentar"). The two men's destinies became conflated during World War II when Johnny was deployed to North Africa as part of the Special Entertainment Services but returned with amnesia and wounded to the point of disfigurement. Since Johnny feared that in the event of his death, the devil would collect his soul, which he had sold to him for fame at the beginning of his career, he sought out Harry just after his own deployment when the latter was celebrating New Year's Eve in Times Square in 1943. Then Johnny transferred his amnesia to Harry with the effect that as a private detective, he accepted the request of the devil Lucifer masquerading as Louis Cyphre (Robert De Niro) to uncover his own fate and thus validate the Faustian bargain. At a second glance, the partial setting in New Orleans to invoke a "European sensibility" that would "not [be] American really," lends additional meaning to Parker's cited summary of "Raymond Chandler meets *The Exorcist*" in a reference to the author of paradigmatic noirs from the 1930s–1950s, and his own transatlantic horror franchise since the 1970s ("Audiokommentar"). Indeed, Parker has a magical realist approach when he explains his inclusion of the figure of the devil in his noir thriller as completely coincidental to the story and thus reflective of the postwar society he depicts ("Audiokommentar"). After all, in their final confrontation, Cypher admits to having secretly orchestrated the murders of several sources close to Johnny—whom Harry interviewed about his life and whom he killed but did not remember doing so—including Johnny's own illegitimate mixed-race daughter, Epiphany Proudfoot (Lisa

Bonet), with whom he, appearing as Harry, previously had incestuous sexual intercourse. Since Lisa Bonet was famous for playing the relatable teenage daughter of a wholesome middle-class African American physician on *The Bill Cosby Show* (1984–1992) prior to *Angel Heart*, her casting could imply that Epiphany's role as the amoral veteran Johnny's daughter is equally metonymic.

As a social commentary from the Cold War era, *Angel Heart* can therefore be understood to associate the moral state of a representative veteran, who embodies the American dream of success and sacrifice, with that of the devil himself. Like Lucifer in the Bible, who seeks to inversely mirror the love of the Christian God, Harry's violence in Algiers, New Orleans in *Angel Heart* could mirror the violence that Johnny exercised in Algiers, North Africa. Thus, violence is redirected to the American home front.

Here, the original German surname of Johnny, "Liebling," which he himself translated into his stage name "Favorite," along with Harry's comment about his birthplace, "That ain't Algiers in Africa. That's Algiers in New Orleans" (Parker) could invite associations with the Nazi occupation of Algeria during World War II. In fact, *Angel Heart's* portrayal of the persistence of racial segregation in New Orleans with the slogan "For colored patrons only" printed inside tram cars dismantles patriotic narratives of liberation during World War II, and mirrors the way Cypher cracks the shells of eggs to devour their insides that symbolize souls to him. During his life, Johnny can be assumed to have complied with the racial hierarchy of the Old South, suggested in how he schemed with his white fiancée, Margaret Krusemark (Charlotte Rampling) and how he abandoned his African American mistress, Evangeline Proudfoot, who died waiting for him. After his transformation into Harry, his double standard is reflected by his paranoia regarding an African American satanic church in Harlem and his dismissiveness towards the Voodoo rituals he secretly watches Epiphany conducting. Although Harry repeatedly justifies his atheism by saying "I'm from Brooklyn," he shares a passion for Satanism with Margaret during his life as Johnny to the point that she and her father Ethan aid him in choosing a person Ethan disparagingly calls "Just a boy. Just a soldier out celebrating New Year's Eve in Times Square," whose heart he would eat to dodge his pact with Lucifer (Parker).

Thus, Ethan and Margaret embody refinement and complicity with evil. With her dark red lipstick and matching long nails, Old Hollywood blonde wavy hairstyle, opulent pentagram choker, and tight-fitting tailored

suit, Margaret could appear as a classic femme fatale of the upper class. Besides having a Germanic surname, she could seem to be of European origin when she addresses her Black maid in fluent French or when she names herself “Madame Zora” and opens a fortune-telling shop on Coney Island, New York. Most importantly, Margaret is established as the opposite of her romantic rival, Epiphany. Unlike Margaret, Epiphany wears loose-fitting rags that accidentally reveal her body, and she dances with wild passion while she sacrifices a chicken during a Voodoo ceremony in the forest. On the one hand, when Epiphany is found in Harry’s bed, the police officer accuses him of miscegenation and suggests that his “n——” clean up his mess (Parker). On the other hand, after Margaret is found murdered with her heart cut out, the same police officer reprimands Harry for killing a woman “from a Louisiana money family, white money” as if this made her murder more deplorable (Parker). Paradoxically, Cypher subversively appears to level racial and class hierarchies like a Communist in a Cold War setting, since he presumably stole Margaret’s pentagram choker and impregnated Epiphany, as the gleaming golden eyes of her baby suggests and as she herself had claimed to Harry that the Voodoo Gods impregnated her. Unlike Margaret, who sought a relationship with the devil, Epiphany further cites her mother, a Mambo priestess like herself, as saying that “Johnny Favorite was as close to true evil as she [Evangeline] ever wanted to come” (Parker). Yet, the film frames Epiphany sympathetically, since her death by gunshot constitutes Harry’s/Johnny’s final crime, for which he will definitely be executed and will “burn” “in hell,” since he placed his military dog tags around her neck (Parker). Epiphany was only seventeen years old when a gun was fatally fired into her vagina when she was taught to mourn her father who had allegedly died in the war, and when she had told Harry that she preferred Voodoo to Christianity because “nailing a man to a cross ain’t so cute either” (Parker). At first glance, the murder of Epiphany symbolizes the irrational amorality of Cypher, who compelled Harry/Johnny to kill her, because she represents a guileless innocent victim. At second glance, her treatment by Harry/Johnny and Cypher is matched by the wealthy white Satanist Ethan’s statement of moral relativism, “Evil is a dunghill, Mr. Angel. Everyone gets on his own and speaks about someone else’s” after confessing to sacrificing Harry so that Johnny could escape his Faustian bargain (Parker). Apparently, Margaret was equally indifferent to American soldiers during World War II, since she helped Johnny choose a random soldier on New Year’s Eve on Times Square,

New York. Indeed, Harry might be betraying his identity as Johnny when he summarizes his deployment in casual, callous terms, without expressing any sympathy for the cause of America's intervention:

I was in for a short period of time. But I got a little fucked up, real quick. Excuse my language, you know. And they shipped me back home. And I sort of missed the whole shebang, you know. The war, the medals, and all. Nine yards. And I guess you could say I was lucky. (Parker)

Against the patriotic Cold War backdrop of *Angel Heart*, Harry's lack of American exceptionalist enthusiasm about World War II, combined with his treatment of Epiphany and his paranoia regarding Voodoo rather than actual Satanism, anticipate the revelation of his moral depravity. Fittingly, Parker chose to open his film with a night take of an abandoned alley in New York where an old woman's bloody corpse lies in the snow amid rats, to the sound of a saxophone improvisation ("Audiokommentar"). Parker justified his aesthetic choice with a reference to Cypher's rhetorical questions that could morally relativize his killings: "But what gives human life its worth anyway? Because someone loves it or hates it?" (Parker). In this sense, *Angel Heart* can be understood as requiring the historical backdrop of the immediate aftermath of World War II to voice its late Cold War-era social criticism, since the remembrance of American veterans' sacrifices serves as a barometer for morality, while indifference coincides with a willingness to accept ongoing racial inequality under domestic Jim Crow laws. In the case of Harry/Johnny, who is both an antagonist and the center of identification in the film, the trope of amnesia provides a bridge between Harry's past as a soldier, who was drafted to support America's intervention, and the present of Johnny, whose selfish theft of Harry's body and soul caused the depicted murders in the first place. Harry's/Johnny's metonymic identity conflict is illustrated by what Cypher tells him when he smashes a mirror with his fist after almost fatally choking Epiphany during sex: "However cleverly you sneak up on a mirror, your reflection always looks you straight in the eye," in contrast to Harry's/Johnny's futile insistence that "I know who I am" (Parker). In a 1950s setting, amnesia might suggest that America had just liberated Europe from Nazi racial policies, but still upheld racial segregation in its Southern states.

The early twenty-first century noir *Shutter Island* revisits the mode to criticize establishments in the US, which thrive on the politics of paranoia—a condition that the final film analyzed here weaves its plot around. Yet,

paranoia is sublimated through the trope of amnesia. The film's opening situates the plot in the Boston Harbor Islands in 1954, but according to Dana and Gerhard Poppenberg, Martin Scorsese connects four eras in American history, those of the Civil War, World War II, the Cold War, and the Wars on Terror (60). On a former Civil War base, ex-detective Edward "Teddy" Daniels/Andrew Laeddis (Leonardo DiCaprio), who liberated Dachau, is investigating counter-communist brainwashing experiments by Nazi psychiatrists. The film's subtext, however, could also contain more recent ideological criticism, since most of its musical score is from the time of George W. Bush's presidency (60). Dr. John Cawley (Ben Kingsley) finally persuades the ex-Marshall Teddy that he, together with his partner, "Chuck" Aule/Dr. Lester Sheehan (Mark Ruffalo), has staged an investigation into the disappearance of an inmate to realize that he (Teddy) is the missing inmate, and it was him who killed his wife after her infanticide. Cawley's prescription of a lobotomy for Teddy ambivalently ends the story, offering two equally coherent interpretations.

The first possible interpretation is that Teddy is captured, and his psychosis was fabricated by Dr. Cawley and Dr. Jeremiah Naehring (Max von Sydow) to use him as a test subject. In Teddy's conspiracy theory, Dr. Naehring is an ex-Nazi in hiding. As in the case of the underdog detective who fears for his survival, Teddy's enemies belong to an élite with refined tastes and the power to eliminate their opponents. In this reading, Teddy is disposable within multiple institutions, first as a soldier in the US Army, then as patient number 67 in Ashecliffe Hospital. While confined, Teddy empathizes with incarnations of bare life from corpses of concentration camp inmates in Dachau to the Communist psychiatric inmate George Noyce. Such characters represent bare life or the *homo sacer*, which was the status that excluded convicted criminals from being sacrificed in religious rituals in the Roman Empire, according to Giorgio Agamben (3; 12–13).¹ In his argument, Nazis used the same logic to justify why they would murder concentration camp inmates as if they were parasites (127). Paradoxically, the veteran Teddy suspects that after the end of World War II, a fugitive Nazi physician has continued to exterminate Communists at Ashecliffe Hospital in the US.

The second possible interpretation is that the psychiatrist, as Teddy suspects, does perform experiments to try to modify the inmates' social behaviors. Dr. Cawley, because of Teddy's rejection of surgery and pharmacology, stages a "radical, cutting-edge role play" for him to uncover that his pseudonym Edward Daniels and the name of the fugitive psychiatrist Rachel Solando are actually anagrams concealing his civil name, Andrew

Laeddis, and that of his wife, Dolores Chanal (Michelle Williams). Although flashbacks reveal that Dolores was mentally ill and drowned their children and Teddy confesses to Chuck that he deliberately ignored her instability, he still dreams of passionately embracing her and receiving her loving encouragement for his investigations. In his denial of the past, Teddy blames her death (which he actually caused) on a fire set by their building's maintenance man, who happened to be named Andrew Laeddis. Through his revisionist remembrance, Teddy attempts to suppress his regrets for having failed as a husband, who denied his wife's psychosis and then murdered her, as well as a father who neglected his children. The only healing possible for his metonymic psyche is to overcome amnesia through a personal acknowledgement of his guilt. When the plot shifts its focus to Teddy's family life as the center of the mystery, it personalizes criticism of American interventionism since World War II, which occurred at the cost of suppressing rather than resolving domestic conflicts, especially struggles for equal rights, for example, for men and women within the nation (Pease 110).

Set during the Cold War and abounding with performances of amnesia and paranoia, *Shutter Island* features transhistorical criticism of the Wars on Terror rhetoric as well. For instance, Masco recognizes that President Bush's response to 11 September 2001 mobilized American citizenry based on paranoia when he conjured up the images of an atomic "mushroom cloud" that had been circulated during the Cold War (72). Indeed, Dennis Lehane situated the paranoid character of Teddy as confined amid Communists in the 1950s in his novel *Shutter Island* from 2003—the same year that the US invaded Iraq. Teddy's paranoia further connects the Cold War to World War II, given his memory of how his participation in the war challenged his patriotic values of fair and equal treatment. He tells Chuck, "When we got through the gates at Dachau, the SS guards surrendered. . . . We took their guns. We lined them up. It wasn't warfare. It was murder" (Scorsese). In a flashback that visualizes both the paranoia and guilt that he is about to confront, Teddy sees his daughter standing in the snowy concentration camp of Dachau. His regrets are shown to further haunt him when he shrieks at a male nurse and pictures the identical man in a Nazi SS uniform lying wounded on the floor at Dachau while Teddy removes his suicide revolver so that he may die in pain. Significantly, Teddy reminisces to the music of Mahler's Piano quartet in A minor, which is also his psychiatrist's favorite composition. This stands out from the film soundtrack because it is the only non-contemporary musical piece which, in addition, was composed by a Jewish artist, who, as the Poppenbergs suggest, would be an unlikely

choice for any Nazi to play (64). Yet, to underline the Poppenbergs' understanding of *Shutter Island* as inconclusive about whether Teddy's symbolical paranoia masks his guilt or vice versa (65), Adorno's comment should be recalled that Nazi officials would have used any type of classical music to drown out the screams of tortured prisoners (Adorno qtd. in Felman 40).

Conclusion

Shutter Island deploys the noir mode to criticize post-World War II American dominance through military interventionism and its continuation during the Wars on Terror, as the contemporary audience is invited to join a member of the Greatest Generation investigating his own traumatized psyche. Thus, the film represents the most recent example of what this essay terms "American veteran noirs." Here, they center on members of the Greatest Generation who are confronted with moral guilt relating to their deployment, which is sublimated by the psychological conditions of paranoia or amnesia, which in turn allow the films to negotiate their contemporary political contexts. When writing about the genre, this is the feature the historian Saverio Giovacchini also stresses: "the 'veteran noir,' whose convoluted plot and visually deceptive atmosphere were particularly effective for rendering the contrasting commitments of the progressive Hollywoodians in regard to the former servicemen" (195). However, he limited his discussion to the immediate post-World War II context and representations of veterans as "rather positive—if embattled" (195). With a focus on the veterans' disillusionment as symbolic for American society just after World War II, Stanley Orr also referred to the "returning veteran's noir." (108) although he optimistically concluded that these films culminate in "the protagonist's successful reintegration, itself punctuated by the reconciliation of the veteran hero with a lover," since "the classical Hollywood narrative demands a conclusive kiss, embrace, or promise of commitment to the nuclear family" (109). In addition, he claimed that "[c]inematic returning veterans find both trauma and redemption in the realization that a fight for democracy will persist into the postwar universe" (111). By contrast, Jacob T. Sager identified "a left-influenced antifascist sensibility . . . in films noir with larger-than-life antagonists, films that warned of the resurgence of contemporary racism and anti-Semitism and touched upon the impact of the war on returning veterans" in films like *Act of Violence* from the 1940s (112).

Rather than politically positioning my findings regarding the exemplary films discussed, I argue that besides the noir-esque vulnerability of

veterans involved in professional or amateur investigations, their irresolvable traumas further allow them to serve as metonyms for the cost of military victory that hold a mirror to American exceptionalism in the decades following World War II. With its roots in social criticism, the noir mode enables the stories that target the moral fiber of America to reveal the emotional sacrifices this global intervention required. The tropes of paranoia and amnesia recur in veteran noirs since they constitute a strategy of making sense of the similarities between contemporary American society and its World War II-era antagonistic “others” the viewers see through the eyes of the protagonists. To cite another example beyond the films discussed in this essay, the theme of mental disorder also features in the subversive comparisons of the US with Nazi Germany in Philip K. Dick’s dystopic novel, *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), which is set in an alternative reality where the Axis Powers have won World War II. As the merchant of American memorabilia in Dick’s book, Robert Childan observes, “[I]t had taken two hundred years to dispose of the American aborigines, and Germany had almost done it in Africa in fifteen years” due to “science and technology and that fabulous talent for hard work” as well as “what the Nazis have which we lack . . .—nobility” (Dick 30). Paradoxically, Childan’s example for Nazi greatness is the genocide they committed. Meanwhile, the values of progress, industry, and sophistication that Childan attributes to the Nazis are also embodied by villains such as Frank in *Act of Violence*, Cypher and the Krusemarks in *Angel Heart*, and Dr. Cawley and Dr. Nachring in *Shutter Island*, in key scenes that invite paranoid questions as to their American-ness. In these film noirs, similarly to the postwar thriller *The Man in the High Castle*, sexual deviance functions as a symbolic threshold to threatening “otherness.” For example, Dick’s heroine Juliana Frink indicts Adolf Hitler’s sexual disorder when she concludes that “the present-day German Empire was a product of that brain. First a political party, then a nation, then half the world” (Dick 40). Considering anti-miscegenation laws that persisted into the 1960s in the US, it may appear ironic that Juliana’s description only mocks Nazi sexuality for its obsession with stereotypical Nordic features, and practices of amnesia towards white supremacy in the US that predated the fictional Nazi occupation. Significantly, performances of sexual perversion can be traced in Frank’s relationship with his barely adult wife in *Act of Violence*, Harry’s incestuous sex with his daughter from his past life in *Angel Heart*, and Teddy’s romantic hallucinations of his wife in *Shutter Island*. In a post-World War II context, these examples represent American irrationality precisely because they cannot be rationalized within any of the

political agendas of racial hygiene that characterized the era. Accordingly, the Nazi defector Baynes criticizes Nazi expansionism in terms of insanity in *The Man in the High Castle*:

Do they ignore parts of reality? Yes. But it is more. It is their plans. Yes, their plans. The conquering of the planets. Something frenzied and demented, as was their conquering of Africa, and before that, Europe and Asia. Their view; it is cosmic. Not a man here, a child there, but an abstraction: race, land. *Volk. Land. Blut. Ehre*. Not of honourable men but of *Ehre* itself, honour; the abstract is real, the actual is invisible to them.

(Dick 45; emphasis in original)

Besides victory in World War II, Baynes's words attribute cosmic conquests and ideological grandeur to the Nazis which inspire his conclusion that "[t]hey want to be the agents, not the victims, of history. They identify with God's power and believe they are godlike. That is their basic madness" (Dick 45). In reality, of course, it was the US and not Nazi Germany that ventured upon the "New Frontier" of outer space under President John F. Kennedy and expanded to a global superpower after winning World War II. Therefore, Baynes's description of Nazi insanity can be read as a critical inversion of American exceptionalism since World War II. Even if on an individual level, the films discussed in this essay all have characters at their center who are associated with Nazi-like amorality, but they would rather align themselves exclusively with the patriotic ideals of American heroism at which they ultimately fail. Frank hides from his guilt in the American suburbs in *Act of Violence*, Johnny tries to escape his deal with the devil as Harry in *Angel Heart*, and Teddy conflates his drowned children with those he found dead while liberating Dachau in *Shutter Island*.

In terms of generic features, it is useful to consider Martin Barker's advocacy for a Proppian reading of Iraq War films in terms of shared sequences that drive their formulaic plots (28). Analogously to Vladimir Propp's morphological approach to Russian folktales that Barker cited, Barker identified nine recognizable aspects of films about American soldiers' deployments in Iraq (42)—a framework that I could modify to describe post-World War II film noirs, in which veterans are haunted by their pasts as well. As for the first aspect of Iraq War films, according to Barker, "soldiers are authenticated by being shown as ordinary" (42), while in the American veteran noirs discussed, the protagonists are depicted as morally flawed, rather than heroes set to solve a dangerous, socially symbolical mystery. The

second aspect for Barker is that “the moment they [the soldiers] step out of their bases, they become naïve innocents, stunned by the hostility they encounter” (42)—a transformation that occurs in veteran noirs when the mysteries surrounding the protagonists begin to connect them to past deployments, thus revitalizing contemporary moral dilemmas. Barker identified the third aspect in the fact that “[r]eturning home to America, what they take back is the personal impact of that split, carried as stress and disconnection from civilian life” (43). This is applicable to post-World War II veteran noirs as well, when the metonymic protagonists become aware of how their experiences still impact their surroundings. As for Barker’s fourth aspect, “officers are presented as placement, driving their men cynically into terrible situations, but primarily concerned with protecting the military’s reputation” (43), which happens in veteran noirs too, with the exception that the threatened protagonists are themselves preoccupied with preserving their self-image. The fifth unifying aspect of Iraq War films produced during the Wars on Terror is that they “commonly show ordinary soldiers expressing confusion about the purposes of the war, sometimes directly challenging why they are there” (43), which can equally be applied to post-World War II veteran noirs, since their doubts in themselves mirror doubts in their country’s idealized image. Barker’s sixth aspect emphasizes that “[o]ften intruding without a diegetic role (for instance, on television screens), they (and we) catch glimpses of other forces in play—political, economic, bureaucratic—which are working behind their backs” (43). This strategy is also manifest in post-World War II veteran noirs, except that the omnipresent forces of evil are intricately tied to the protagonists’ identities. While Barker’s seventh aspect sees Iraq-bound “soldiers . . . bonding with each other, giving this as their first loyalty,” since “[t]hey are effectively alone, unwanted, sacrificial victims” (43), only emotional isolation and being misunderstood are shared by World War II veterans. Concerning the social criticism offered by noirs, both active-duty soldiers in Iraq and World War II veterans are equally “presented as struggling to hold on to values in the face of all that happens around them,” as is suggested in Barker’s eighth aspect (43). Nevertheless, the ninth property identified by Barker, namely that “special figures—perhaps representatives of minorities of one kind or another—will stand out, who can embody perfectly a new kind of soldier: the hero-victim” (43) in Iraq does not hold true at all regarding post-World War II noirs, since mentally disturbed veterans might well deliver retaliatory justice, but do not embody moral innocence or heroism.

Shutter Island follows in the footsteps of *Act of Violence* and *Angel Heart*. Significantly, all three films address military conflicts as subtexts of criminal investigations through the noir mode: in *Act of Violence*, a veteran is forever freed from his survivor's guilt; in *Angel Heart*, the devil himself applies retaliatory justice to a defector; and, in *Shutter Island*, self-doubt haunts a war criminal.

These noirs challenge American exceptionalist interventionism through their preoccupation with the themes of amnesia and paranoia as traumatic responses to suppressed moral conflicts. Unacknowledged secrets have also become the pillars of counter-communist and counterterrorist discourse by American officials, according to Masco, who views evocations of hidden knowledge by the Bush administration as their legitimization for warfare and espionage (140–41). He charts how vague prognoses about atomic and terrorist threats condition paranoia in citizens with the goal of creating the national cohesion necessary to support global military enterprises (166). In the noirs discussed, however, the fictional investigators neither inspire fear nor possess superior knowledge. Paradoxically, plotlines pointing back to American interventionist histories complicate any simplistic discourses of American heroism in line with the typical noir underdog status of detectives, who are themselves targeted. To the extent that the haunting of representative veterans by their actions during World War II takes on further pathological dimensions disrupting their identities, thus the social criticisms of contemporary American exceptionalism by veteran noir cinema gain virulence.

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Note

¹ Agamben draws on Roman jurisdiction to explain how such bare lives could be simultaneously excluded from religious sacrifice and declared as available for assassination by any citizen (10; 14).

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