

“IN THE PULL OF MEMORY”:
NOIR’S LEGACY OF AMNESIA IN
TOUGH GUYS DON’T DANCE

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GEORGE TAYLOR, THE PROTAGONIST IN JOSEPH MANKIEWICZ’S 1946 FILM NOIR, *Somewhere in the Night*, sums up the predicament of all noir amnesiacs when he muses that he’s “really alone in the whole world—a billion people, every one of them a stranger—or what’s worse, not a stranger, somebody, maybe, who knows you, hates you, wants you to die.” The condition of amnesia injects a ready-made identity crisis into noir narratives that makes self-investigation brutally necessary. The protagonist discovers any number of unwanted details about himself or the self he thought he was and knew—a literal loss of self-metonymizing figurative angst. It is into this noir pattern that Norman Mailer draws the character of Tim Madden in *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*. If Madden had appeared in 1940’s films like *Phantom Lady* or *Deadline at Dawn*, he would be described as suffering from “Korsakoff’s psychosis,” a.k.a. alcoholic amnesia—the character knows who he is, but had a blackout and cannot remember the events during a finite period of time. It is during these blank periods of time that the abyss of possibility yawns before him. For Madden, this gulf is both attractive and repellant, but above all, inevitable. His predicament plants the film squarely in the classic noir tradition, particularly in its desperation to assert heteronormative masculine truths.

The plethora of the film’s critical pans, some of which were justified, often focuses on the difficulty of fixing the film’s purpose and genre. It is darkly humorous in parts, and Mailer himself had called the film above all a horror film, and noir’s influence on both his writing and directing are unmis-

takable. In his *Washington Post* review of the film, Hal Hinson argues that “the film’s macabre comic tone feels like an afterthought; it’s as if Mailer wanted to make a film noir and, failing that, settled for a noir comedy.” Perhaps Mailer was trying to make a horror noir, but it seems clear that, whatever the result, noir was a driving force in both the book and the film. In a 1987 interview, responding to Michael Ventura’s assertion that *Tough Guys* is a contemporary film noir, Mailer proclaims, “every dream is a film noir. If you think about it. Because every dream is utterly unsentimental. A film like any of Bergman’s films . . . They’re not film noir, but they have that implacable, impervious edge of the dream. No mercy in the dream.” Film noir’s often dreamlike, surreal qualities have merited critical focus ever since Borde and Chaumeton wrote the first study of the cycle. It is particularly relevant to *Tough Guys*, however, because what are often perceived as the film’s shortcomings may be interpreted as Mailer’s presentation of a particular kind of dream—absent emotional depth, ruthless, and absolutely self-contained.

From the film’s opening sequence, the viewer experiences the first of many instances of defied expectations that contribute to the film’s dreamlike surreality. The title shots of Provincetown’s off-season seaside landscape, overlaid with Angelo Badalamenti’s sweetly melancholy score, deliver three and a half leisurely, seemingly nostalgic minutes that end with a black-and-white photo of cottages on the coast, only to launch into a narrative of perversity, desperate sex, and florid violence. What could be more nightmarish than the exploration of what happens to an art-loving, seductive tourist town, when the weather turns cold? The only people left are the year-round residents, who are like the undead, ghosts who are searching for meaning in the frigid island landscape, or criminal transients, who are more vampires than spirits, restlessly seeking to feed off the ones left behind, using the already used-up bars and houses and beaches for their parasitic purposes. Christopher Busa points out how Mailer “created bizarre connections” in the novel, focusing on the “‘spookiness’ that is pervasive in the aftermath of Dionysian summer excess, evaluating the mood with Kierkegaardian nuances of fear, dread, anxiety, and vertigo” (174). This anxiety-filled transition that becomes symbolic of Tim’s own existential dread is what Mailer described as the “subtle kind of horror” he hoped to achieve in the film, the kind of inescapable dread that pervades the dream experience.

The film’s production design, while critically panned, seems oddly appropriate in this context. Every scene seems to have a soft-focus filter over

it, at once parodically grotesque in dialogue while dulled and muted visually, like a fetid and faded copy of something that was once bright and crisp. The set dressing, often derisively referred to in reviews as straight out of low-budget 1980's television, is so bad that it creates hyperbolic stereotyping, rather than heightened authenticity, that suggests a conscious embrace of surrealism. While somewhat frustrating to the viewer, the *mise en scène* actually heightens the dreamlike state in which Tim stumbles around during the entire film, in which actions occur and people wander in and out of the frame, but logic eludes, and events become more and more exaggerated and fantastic. Hugh Manon characterizes the film similarly, as a "short-circuited *noir* amnesia narrative, which at the same time suppresses all of the stylistic excesses of *noir*, in effect subverting subversion itself" (584). For instance, a long shot flashback of Tim and Jessica's fellatio scene, as a still, cuts sharply to Patty Lareine's séance scream, neat as a dream and with a dream's twisted logic. Tim's description of the fellatio scene in the novel aligns with this visual representation: "Now I cannot say whether this was a recollection or a dream, for if it had all the clarity of the real event, the logic seemed to belong to that theater of sleep where only those impossible actions take place which are too incisive for the day" (114). Where memory and consciousness are absent, the space is filled with phantoms and succubi who haunt and prey upon Tim's weakening identity and masculinity.

Part of Tim's struggle to regain his memory involves remembering this masculinity. His sexual exploits in the film are belied by Ryan O'Neal's blond aging boyishness, and only a few minutes into the film, he is asserting his lack of homosexuality—both in prison and out—to his father. Classic noir amnesia narratives regularly present male characters who lack conventional masculine bravado onscreen as a systemic element of their memory loss—for instance, Burgess Meredith's Frank Thompson in *Street of Chance* (1942, Jack Hively), Bill Williams' Alex Winkler in *Deadline at Dawn* (1946, Harold Clurman), and DeForest Kelley's Vince Grayson in *Fear in the Night* (1947, Maxwell Shane), to name a few. It may be no coincidence at all that a lion's share of these and other noir amnesia stories originally arose with Cornell Woolrich, and further arguable that Woolrich's own tortured psyche, including his repressed homosexuality, might account for the predicaments of such characters, who may not *be* guilty, but perhaps *feel* guilty . . . and worse, may not have the aggression needed to power through these predicaments. Ashley Donnelly argues that the film "is an aggressive engagement

with masculinity, as all of Mailer's works are aggressive in their interrogative nature. He seems to march forward through the narrative as both writer and director advancing to battle with his own former and present ideology of manhood, not in necessarily the self-reflective way that most critics seem to assume, but as a man driven to solve a puzzle or tackle a mountain of ideas that remains untamed" (176). Mirroring Mailer's own determined quest for meaning, the immediate puzzle for Tim is the source of the murders, but the larger conundrum is the longer-held mystery of his own manhood.

The gaps in Madden's existence are progressive and appear to increasingly encroach on his conscious life. Indeed, Tim admits to his father, Dougy (Lawrence Tierney), as he's trying to sort out his culpability regarding the blood in his car and the severed head in his marijuana stash, that he has been having these episodes for some time: "I didn't do it. . . . I don't think I did . . . but my head's been peculiar lately . . . I have blackouts, I hallucinate." These holes in time necessitate the speculation on what his "other" self was doing without the consent of his waking, conscious self. The "absent selves" that such noir protagonists seek resemble uncanny doubles, "others" that the main character must find and either assimilate or destroy in order to reach psychological wholeness. Thus, the literal possibility of identity loss emblemizes the dangers of psychic loss in an uncertain world. Tim is drifting deeply in his life when this incident occurs, and it seems unsurprising that he would have this black hole of memory. However, he is simultaneously drawn back into the vortex of a tortured remembered past, signified by an extended flashback within a flashback of his life with his ex-lover, Madeline (Isabella Rossellini); Tim muses in voice-over, "I felt myself in the pull of memory . . . that is as strong a pull as a magnetic field." The fresh tattoo in the present bearing Madeleine's name is his most significant visual marker of this excursion into this abyss, as he in panic asks Stoodie, "Did you do this one? Why can't I remember?" The fresh tattoo bearing the name of his ex-lover Madeleine (Isabella Rossellini) is his most significant visual marker of this excursion into this abyss, as he in panic asks Stoodie, "Did you do this one? Why can't I remember?" A non-amnesiac, but still relevant, noir tattoo connection occurs in the 1950's *The Tattooed Stranger*, directed by Edward Montagne. In this relatively successful B-noir, the murder of an unidentified woman with a distinctive USMC tattoo sends detectives on a hunt for the tattoo artist as the key to her identity, since her face was obliterated by the killer. In the same way that the detectives must search for the

one who made the mark on this Jane Doe in order to follow the thread back to her killer, Tim attempts to trace back his actions, to restore what has become his missing “face,” by fixating on the origin of the marker on his flesh. Ironically, the hunt for this killer in *The Tattooed Stranger* ends in a shootout in the yard of a cemetery monument company, reinforcing the idea that death leads to death. And for Tim, like the mark of Cain, the physical imprint on his body of the possible transgression gnaws and itches at him, ironically an external record of an internal absence, refusing to allow him to ignore the gaping hole in his mind.

And then there are the heads, the other physical signs that cannot be ignored. The severed head that Tim initially finds in his stash burrow is symbolically his own head—his memory separated from his body and consciousness, only showing the merest grim clues of how it got that way. The exchange between Tim and Dougy regarding the heads, perhaps the most brilliant piece of the adaptation and a clear indicator of the film’s influence on Quentin Tarantino, underscores the close discomfort Tim feels when facing these truths. He cannot bear to hear the word “head” to which Dougy quips, “Well, there’s no substitute.” Indeed, Tim realizes that there is no substitute for his own consciousness and memory—that is, despite the desperate attempts at recollection and his imagination’s gruesome speculations on what could fill that void. Although the film does not emphasize this fact as much as the novel, Tim is a writer, a fitting ultimate profession for someone who is continually trying to reinvent himself and the world around him. Madeline argues with him about the way that he writes about her, and Jessica quips that he reminds her of “one of those method actors who plays a killer.” Thus, the importance of the process for piecing together his memory is not unlike the creative process of writing. In the novel, once Tim hears the shocking news from the manager of the Widow’s Walk that Lonnie and Jessica’s car is still in their parking lot, he begins what becomes a continual process of building and rebuilding his consciousness: “I began the work, and it was equal to labor, of recomposing myself. How many mornings had I gone from a quarrel over breakfast into my small room on the top floor where I could look on the harbor and try to write, yet each morning might inhibit writing that day . . . ‘Do not attempt to recall what you cannot recall’ was a rule I had long kept. Memory was equal to potency” (60). Likening the struggle of trying to remember something that had elusively slipped away to the failure of an erection, Tim recognizes that the power of mem-

ory, as key to identity, is the definition of true potency, as a man and as a writer.

The amnesiac fictionality of Tim's entire experience as presented in the film's diegesis is framed in this creative process, from the dizzying layered flashbacks to seemingly random conversations. For instance, in the pot-smoking police station scene, in which Wings Hauser's portrayal of Regency and his tale of deviant sex and violence begins to climb the sheer face of surrealism, he asks Tim, "Does my story turn you on?" Tim replies, with a wry smile, "You didn't tell it well enough." Who we are and what turns us on is therefore dependent on the construction of our own narratives, rather than any supposition of objective truth. Tim's response hearkens back to a moment in Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950), in which writer Dixon Steele, played by Humphrey Bogart, is a murder suspect but eludes police scrutiny by spinning a tale conducive to his own interests. Treating the incident as a tangential plot point in his own life, he explains to his anxious agent that the captain almost had him, "but it was his story against mine, and I told my story better." Tim's growing anxiety for his own fate is that he cannot construct a story that will allow him to resolve the deep fear that he is indeed capable of decapitating two people, one of whom may be his own wife.

It is not surprising that the one person who can help Tim out of his amnesia-dream labyrinth is Dougy Madden, with Lawrence Tierney invoking the collective cinematic memory of one of the toughest guys in all of classic film noir. Scott Duguid argues that Tierney's "persona ideally fitted a taste for postmodern recuperation of less canonized classic stars, but he could also produce performances of genuine weight which could be comic but were never in themselves campy. As Dougy, he is the calm stoic moral center of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, and a counterpoint to the hysterical masculinity of the rest of its male performances. It often feels like he's acting in a slightly different film." In his more mature self, Tierney now finds himself as still tough, but a wise sage, almost like the benevolent psychiatrist figures in classic amnesia noirs, sorting out the various twists and turns of his troubled son's mind. He pushes Tim to talk about what has happened to him, insisting, "There's something wrong in this house . . . there's something going on, I can feel it . . . let's have all of it." In his authenticity, Dougy almost seems an accident in the film, appearing like a phantom in Tim's dining room, his bald head and dark sweater against the pale peaches and whites of the scene almost reminiscent of the evolving Dave Bowman in Kubrick's *2001: A Space*

Odyssey. Indeed, Dougy may well hold the secrets of the universe for Tim, who has nowhere else to turn than on his own self in this form of his progenitor. There is no substitute for reality for Dougy, a man who “just deep sixed two heads” and will do even more in the service of laying to rest his son’s demons. Dougy counters Tim’s squeamishness with no-nonsense treatment that would be at home in any film noir: “You look at me and see a crude man; I look at you and see a sitting duck.” In the novel, Tim ironically realizes that the more bizarrely incriminating the facts against him seem, the closer he comes to exonerating himself: “How curious that the more likely it would seem to others—including my father—that I had killed at least one of these women, the more certain it seemed to me that I had not” (203). It is almost as though real murder and crime would be a lot more subtle and a lot more sinister. Foster Hirsch argues, that the entrapment of noir “wrong man” amnesiac characters “may spring from guilty *thoughts* more than guilty deeds, and from an unconscious masochism” (9). And indeed it is the failed potentiality of transgression and the realized potency of memory that fuel Tim’s eventual release.

In a final consideration of where *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* finds its place in the history of noir amnesia narratives, some attention should be paid to its parallel place in postmodern neo-noir trends. Classic noir amnesia narratives are anchored in identity crises arising from WWII cultural fallout—not only literal experiences of veterans, but also broader redefinitions of masculinity and power against changing gender roles and other social flux. Classic noir amnesiac protagonists, almost exclusively male, are struggling to discover their new identities in a world that doesn’t remember their former selves. The resurgence of noir in the 1980s, particularly in direct remakes of classic noirs—*The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981, Bob Rafelson); *Body Heat* (1981, Lawrence Kasdan); *Against All Odds* (1984, Taylor Hackford); *No Way Out* (1987, Roger Donaldson), to name a few—reflects a similar assertion of traditional masculine power politics and representation against the threat of forces that seek to undermine that power. This conflict is suggested in the early party conversation between Tim and Regency, who asks, “Were you in Vietnam?” Tim says no, to which Regency responds, “Why do I get the feeling you were there?” By way of answer, Tim states, “I’m an ex-con.” Duguid argues that *Tough Guys* is part of a succession of “macho” 1980’s films that reflected an attempt to undermine 1960s liberalism: “it is this spirit of conservative retribution that is at the heart of this drama of buried heads

in the marijuana patch. Vietnam is key here: Regency is a veteran where Tim is a 1960s liberal and ex-con.” What deepens this already compelling view of the film is the comparison of culture war issues of the 1980s compared to the post-war classic noir era—defining traditional masculinity and power against forces of gender equality and social change in an era of economic prosperity and conspicuous consumption. What haunts *Tough Guys*, however, is its aforementioned “hysteria,” perhaps driven at the root by the key difference between WWII and Vietnam: heroic triumph vs. humiliating failure. Mailer’s film valiantly tries to anchor itself in the former, but becomes mired in the latter.

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