

**Non-Urban Noirs:
Rural Space in *Moonrise, On Dangerous Ground,*
Thieves' Highway, and *They Live by Night***

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Despite the now-traditional tendency of noir scholarship to call attention to the retrospective and constructed nature of this genre— James Naremore argues that film noir is best regarded as a “mythology”— one feature that has rarely come under question is its association with the city (2). Despite the existence of numerous rural noirs, the depiction of urban space is associated with this genre more consistently than any other element. Even in critical accounts that attempt to deconstruct the solidity of the noir genre, the city is left as an implicit inclusion, and the country, an implicit exclusion. Naremore, for example, does not include the urban environment in a list of the central tenets of film noir that he calls into question: “nothing links together all the things described as noir—not the theme of crime, not a cinematographic technique, not even a resistance to Aristotelian narratives or happy endings” (10). Elizabeth Cowie identifies film noir a “fantasy,” whose “tenuous critical status” has been compensated for “by a tenacity of critical use” (121). As part of Cowie’s project, to revise the assumption that noirs are almost exclusively male-centered, she cites character types, visual style, and narrative tendencies, but never urban spaces, as familiar elements of noir that ought to be reconsidered. If the city is rarely tackled as an unnecessary or part-time element of film noir in discursive studies, it is often the first trait identified by critics in the kind of formative, characteristic-compiling studies that Cowie and Naremore work against.

Andrew Dickos opens *Street with No Name: A History of the Classic American Film Noir* with a list of noir’s key attributes. The first item is “an urban setting or at least an urban influence” (6). Nicholas Christopher maintains that “the city is the seedbed of film noir. [...] However one tries to define or explain noir, the common denominator must always be the city. The two are inseparable” (37). Though the tendencies of noir scholars— both constructive and deconstructive— might lead readers to believe otherwise, rural locations figure prominently in a number of noir films. I will show that noir genre is, indeed, flexible enough to encompass many films set predominantly or partly in rural locations. Steve Neale, who encourages scholars to work with genre terms familiar to original audiences, would point out that the rural noir is an academic discovery not an industry term, or one with much popular currency (166). Still, this does not lessen the critical usefulness of this subgenre, or its implications for noir scholarship.

While structuralist and post-structuralist modes of criticism dominated film genre criticism in the 1970s and 80s, as Thomas Schatz has pointed out, these approaches often sacrifice close attention to film texts, for more abstract, high-stakes observations: “while there is certainly a degree to which virtually every mass-mediated cultural artifact can be examined from [a mythical or ideological] perspective, there appears to be a point at which we tend to lose sight of the initial object of inquiry” (100). Though my reading of these films sidesteps attention to social and political concerns, this article performs the no-less-important task of clarifying the textual features of this sub-genre. To this end, I will survey the tendencies of the rural noir more generally, mentioning more than ten films that fit this subgenre, before

narrowing my analysis to a reading of *Moonrise* (Frank Borzage, 1948), *Thieves' Highway* (Jules Dassin, 1949), *They Live By Night* (Nicholas Ray, 1949) and *On Dangerous Ground* (Nicholas Ray, 1952).

Robert Mitchum tries to escape his criminal life by settling in a small, mountain-side town in *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947). A foggy marsh provides a dramatic setting for the Bonnie and Clyde-like demise of lovers on the run in *Gun Crazy* (Joseph Lewis, 1950). In *The Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950), Sterling Hayden longs to return home after he is forced to abandon his childhood horse farm for a life of organised crime in the city. Rob Ryan plays a cop unable to control his violent impulses in *On Dangerous Ground* (Nicholas Ray, 1952). He is re-assigned from New York City to a rural community up-state in hopes that a less chaotic environment will have a curative effect. The apple orchards of *Thieves' Highway* are no refuge from networks of criminal corruption. In *They Live By Night*, a pair of young lovers, try to leave their criminal lives behind, hiding out in farmhouses, cabins, and other pastoral locations in the American South. Finally, the location of prisons explains a number of sequences set in spare, road-side locations such as those in *The Killer is Loose* (Budd Boetticher, 1956), *The Hitch-Hiker* (Ida Lupino, 1953), and *Raw Deal* (Anthony Mann, 1948).

What are some common tendencies of the rural noir? First, they usually feature both rural and urban settings, which allows the portrayal of one to be measured against the other. What we see of the city structures the definition of the country, and vice versa. Second, the lead character moves between these two locations by driving. For criminals, the car is more essential for survival in the country than in the city, so nearly all rural noirs are also road movies. Third, nature often figures as a redemptive force for urbanites steeped in lives of crime. Fourth, the curative quality of the country is usually tied to a love interest in this location: the “nurturing woman” as defined by Janey Place, who encourages the protagonist to forsake his criminal life (60). Fifth, the country is never fully crime-free. In *The Killer is Loose*, for example, an escaped convict’s first victim is a farmer, whom he clubs before stealing his truck. The convict (Wendell Corey), then, easily slips through a motorcade with the farmer’s identification. Here, the sprawling countryside provides an effective cover for the killer. This farmland is not an innocent locale, but the criminal’s safety-net. In films where a well-intentioned lead attempts to put his criminal life behind him by moving to a remote location, urban associates have little trouble tracking him down. While the country often appears, to protagonists like Jeff in *Out of the Past* or Bowie in *They Live By Night*, as an ideal place to escape from crime, as these films unfold, violence reaches the countryside.

If these are similar points, what are some differences among rural noirs? First, there are many differences by degree among the common elements listed above. For instance, some rural noirs present their location with unabashed romanticism, while others critique the idealisation of these locations; some “nurturing women” are complicit with criminal activity, while others are entirely innocent. Second, while noir films are commonly known for treating similar urban locations, Los Angeles in particular, these films feature a wide variety of locations: *Out of the Past* and *Thieves' Highway* take place in California, the most common setting for rural noirs, but *On Dangerous Ground* is set in northern New England, *They Live by Night* takes place in the Depression-era South, *Moonrise* in Southern swampland, and the most dynamic scene of *The Asphalt Jungle* is in rural Kentucky. Third, these films also vary considerably in the balance of settings. If the three typical locations of the rural noir are the country, the city, and the road, the distribution of these three locations

varies widely across these films. The location of *The Asphalt Jungle* matches the title until its dramatic conclusion. *The Hitch-hiker*, arguably a rural noir, is set in travelling cars, with just brief stops in the barren landscape outside. Two of the films I analyse, *They Live By Night* and *Moonrise* are set entirely in the country; a remarkable exception to the majority of films in this subgenre.

There are only two other critical essays on the rural noir. In “*Shadows in the Hinterland: Rural Noir*,” Jonathan F. Bell contextualises the rural noir in terms of post-war transformations of the American landscape. He argues that these films express a forlorn faith in the agrarian myth while the U.S. was becoming increasingly developed and suburbanised. That is to say, the rural noir simultaneously reflects anxiety over the loss of rural land, but also the stubborn belief that the countryside will always exist, if the urbanite needs it as a refuge. Garry Morris suggests the following equation as the shortest way to state the thematic interest of this genre: “Noir = industrialisation + (thwarted) spirituality.” He attributes much of the malaise of noir protagonists to the inhospitable urban environment, “far from [society’s] pastoral and romantic and spiritual origins.” Where Bell focuses on nine films—*Detour* (1945), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), *Out of the Past* (1947), *Key Largo* (1948), *Gun Crazy* (1949), *On Dangerous Ground* (1952), *The Hitch-Hiker* (1953), *Split Second* (1953), and *Killer’s Kiss* (1955)— Morris’s much shorter article includes just *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) and *Gun Crazy*. Of the four films I discuss, only *On Dangerous Ground* has previously been treated as part of this subgenre, though it has never been discussed alongside Nicholas Ray’s other rural noir. To further the development of the project that these authors have started—the formation of a rural noir corpus—I propose the inclusion of three additional films in this subgenre: *Moonrise* (1948), *They Live by Night* (1949), and *Thieves’ Highway* (1949).

With both *On Dangerous Ground* and *They Live by Night* to his credit, Nicholas Ray has the distinction of being the most prolific director of rural noirs. In *They Live by Night*, two young lovers, Bowie (Farley Granger) and Keechie (Cathy O’Donnell), attempt to escape from their established criminal lives. Twenty-three year old Bowie has just been released from juvenile prison and finds rural Texas refreshing: “Out here, the air smells different,” he says. He meets Keechie through her father, a small time criminal organiser who would be happy to keep her secluded for life. When one of Bowie’s accomplices, Chicamaw (Howard DaSilva), shoots a policeman after a robbing a bank with Bowie, the young couple is forced to run. Foster Hirsch calls *They Live by Night* “a genre rarity, a sentimental noir” (34). The naïve blissfulness of their affection is associated with the primitive settings they navigate. Though Bowie and Keechie are the most sympathetic protagonists of any rural noir, this is no safeguard against an inevitable, characteristically noir demise. Janey Place writes, “the young lovers are doomed, but the possibility of their love transcends and redeems them both, and its failure criticises the urbanised world that will not let them live” (63). As indicated here, the country offers the young lovers refuge for some time, and their bond is depicted as wonderfully strong, but it is doomed by the stronger force of the law.

Raymond Williams discusses how different characteristics are associated with urban and rural spaces:

On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved center: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a

place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. (1)

They Live By Night breaks down these dichotomies, showing the persistence of crime rooted in rural areas.

Bowie desires to “get squared around” and live a more natural life with Keechie. Williams’ country adjectives— “peace, innocence, and simple virtue”— describe the nature of this relationship perfectly. Yet, criminal activity, usually associated with the city, has an overwhelmingly strong presence in this region and their lives. Bowie, following the doomed logic of many a crime film character, plans to launch a new, more honest life with cash raised in a heist. Keechie recognises the contradictions in this plan: “Fine way to get squared around, teaming with them. Stealing money and robbing banks. You’ll get in so deep trying to get squared, they’ll have enough to keep you in for two life times.” For Bowie, crime and the pursuit of love are inseparably bound, refuting the illusion of the pure and innocent countryside personified by characters like Mary Malden in *On Dangerous Ground* and Ann Miller in *Out of the Past*.

In Ray’s other rural noir, *On Dangerous Ground*, a lonely, angry, and otherwise burned out cop, Wilson (Rob Ryan), finds both love and peace in his time away from the city. While on his up-state assignment, Wilson meets Mary Walden (Ida Lupino), a blind woman who lives a secluded life miles away from this already desolate, rural community. Mary has a calming influence on Wilson, and fits well within Janey Place’s notion of the archetypal nurturing woman in film noir: “The redemptive woman often represents or is part of a primal connection with nature and/or with the past, which are safe, static states rather than active, exciting ones, but she can sometimes offer the only transcendence possible in film noir” (63).

If, as Colin McArthur observes, Ray’s characters frequently seek redemption in rural locales — “[protagonists] may reject progress and modernity; they may choose to go or are sent into primitive areas. [...] The journeys which bring them closer to nature may also offer them hope of salvation” (124) — the conclusions of *On Dangerous Ground* versus *They Live By Night* offer two markedly different resolutions to this narrative. Where Bowie and Keechie’s life on the lam cannot be sustained, *On Dangerous Ground*, against the wishes of its director, portrays a much more romanticised version of pastoral life. According to Andrew Dickos, “Ray wanted to end the film on the ambivalent image of Jim Wilson returning to the bleak city,” after he had restored order up-state (132). The actual ending is more sentimental. Jim rushes back north to be with Mary. They passionately kiss in close-up, cueing an exuberant orchestral score as *The End* appears over a slow tracking shot of the majestic, snow covered landscape. In this way, *On Dangerous Ground* overturns the usual temporal associations of rural versus urban spaces. As Raymond Williams identifies, “The common image of the country is now an image of the past, and the common image of the city an image of the future” (297). For Wilson, by contrast, city life was no longer sustainable and rurality offers his best means for a future. Leo Marx noted in a variety of American pop culture, from Mark Twain to TV westerns and magazine advertising, a “yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, and existence ‘closer to nature,’ that is the psychic root of all pastoralism— genuine and spurious” (Marx 6). Where most rural noirs expose the agrarian myth as a fantasy and a sham, *On Dangerous Ground*, exceptionally, perpetuates it as actual and effectual. Here, a bad cop is made good with a few days spent in a sparsely populated area and with a woman shaped by her rural upbringing.

As opposed to *On Dangerous Ground*, where the protagonist's movement from city to country matches his split identity as a formerly corrupt man wishing to be pure, Frank Borzage's B-film *Moonrise* (1948) is located entirely in rural or small-town locations. Set in the fictional Southern town of Woodville, which spans swamps, lushly wooded streets and aging Antebellum mansions, the lead character finds good and bad within the same rural location and himself. Dan (Dane Clark) struggles to escape his legacy as the son of a murderer. This conflict is irreparably heightened when Dan kills a man (who had repeatedly teased and bullied him) in self-defence. The instability of Dan's moral compass is expressed in the way he treats innocent elements of the natural world: flies, dogs, and, recalling *Out of the Past*, a local deaf boy. He is alternately cruel and kind. Dan is finally redeemed after seeking the advice of a black hermit, Mose (Rex Ingram), who lives in a ramshackle cabin by the swamp. He counsels Dan with the advice that men turn evil from "being lonesome," not for having "bad blood." When Dan, eventually, decides to confess to his crime, the sheriff finds him tenderly holding a search hound against a bucolic, rural backdrop. His complete comfortability with the landscape and its creatures finally allows Dan to reconcile the film's opening opposition. He is no longer torturously in between good and evil, but openly recognises his wrongs and commits to do good in the future.

If I had to select just a single shot to illustrate that noirs are set in rural locations more often than most scholarship would have us believe, it would be the opening sequence of *Moonrise*. From the first shot, this film associates rural locations with criminal elements. The credit sequence juxtaposes pooling water with an ominous brass score. In this disorienting opening, the camera travels from an image of water, to a group of men framed from the knees down. The camera dollies out and pans left, showing that these men, trudging solemnly, are another's legal executioners. The frame tilts upward and we see a man hung in silhouette. This dense shot is followed by an image of a baby in a crib, also shadowed, the water again, and finally the execution scene. If this sequence is a thematic montage, it can also be discussed, more simply, as a series of establishing shots: a series of images that, seemingly, could not be more opposed— a baby, a universal symbol of innocence, set against the ominous execution, cruel experience— are paired together by virtue of their common location. The montage continues, showing that the baby is the son of the condemned man. As Dan struggles with the legacy of his father throughout the film, this opening shot continues to inform our reading of this character, split between the potential for good or evil.

What a baby is to *Moonrise*, or, to cite a more familiar reference, what the insurance business is to many a James M. Cain *roman noir*, produce distribution is to Jules Dassin's *Thieves' Highway* (1949). The apple, often a part of wholesome American myths, is at the centre of this story about corruption. Here, a distribution network that brings Americans this hearty, simple product is connected with criminal activity and violent abuses of power more commonly portrayed in connection with cinematic staples of organised crime such as bootlegging or robbery. This film portrays bad apples in the apple business, showing that no profit driven enterprise— no matter how traditional or rural— is beyond the reach of corruption.

Fitting the nature of this subject, numerous scenes in the Dassin film take place in the daylight (in addition to darkness), and in the countryside (in addition to the city) as we move between wine and apple country to the market districts of San Francisco. But if the subject and setting of *Thieves' Highway* are unusual for a noir, the behaviour of its characters is not.

Spare, bright country landscapes form the backdrop for prototypical noir behaviour: predatory competition for money and power.

As one would expect of a film noir, the subject of apple distribution is portrayed with dynamic violence. In the most exciting scene of the film, a truck careens off the road after a long pursuit from rival sellers. Apples scatter across a hillside as the truck bursts into flames. This scene is held in a long-shot, as unscrupulous thugs gather the produce for sale while the unfortunate driver burns to death.

Here, the reputedly innocent American apple is subject to cold-blooded, profit-maximizing calculations as much as the more typical topics of noir such as blackmail, fraud, or murder. Passages on desolate roads and at apple orchards qualify *Thieves' Highway* as a rural noir; the dark, cynical manner in which capitalist enterprise is treated is resonant with nearly all film noirs.

Thieves' Highway follows a common narrative pattern amongst rural noirs to gradually reveal rural spaces as connected to criminality in urban locations. Typically, this disillusioning fact is narrated from the perspective of a lead character who first has a greater sense of safety in rural settings but learns, over the course of the story, to be more wary in all locations. In *Thieves'*, Nick's hope that apple-delivery might earn an honest dollar (he is the only driver to treat the orchard owners fairly) gradually gives way to an awareness of the inevitable corruption that has taken over this enterprise at all levels of production, from farmer, to trucker, to wholesaler, and thus, at all locations, the country, the road, and the city.

Between this essay, and the previous work of Morris and Bell on the subject, we are developing a more complete survey of the rural noir. Where Bell's and Morris's essays focus more resolutely on rural noirs that relied on the contrast of the city versus the country—which, significantly, was the first tendency of this subgenre that I observed—*Moonrise and They Live By Night* demonstrate that this genre can work entirely apart from the city. From start to finish, these films take place in small towns and rural locations. As opposed to *Out of the Past*, *On Dangerous Ground*, or *The Asphalt Jungle*, characters are never pulled back to, nor flee from, an urban life of crime. Instead, vices that are commonly associated with the city have a free-standing life in the rural locations that are often thought of as a refuge from these harsh elements. If both Bell and Morris study the way that rural noirs draw differences between the city and country, two of the three films I add to the subgenre constitute more complete rural noirs, films that work wholly outside urban locations, not just in contrast with it. Bell, like me, notes considerable variety in rural noirs locations, “desert landscapes, farms, mountains, and forests all qualify as settings for consideration,” but he also notes that “Diverse as these landscapes are, this set of films uses them in surprisingly like-minded fashion to achieve a counterpoint to the ubiquitous noir city” (219). In Bell's analysis, all nine films he studies, feature significant urban segments. He is, in fact, so inclusive as to discuss Stanley Kubrick's *Killer's Kiss* as a rural noir even though it does not contain a single frame shot or set outside of New York City. Rurality is evoked only as a possibility, as alienated urbanite Davy (Jamie Smith) receives letters from his horse-farm-running relatives. Reading these letters offers Davy brief moments of respite from drudgerous city spaces such as the subway and his cramped apartment. In its emphasis on the centrality of rural locations, my project is more similar to David Bell's work on the rural in horror films than to Jonathan F. Bell's work on the rural noir. David Bell analyses the way that contemporary horror films work against a “long tradition” of the “idyllic rural” in many Western texts (95). As opposed

to works “from Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman to contemporary television shows like *Northern Exposure* and films such as *A River Runs Through It* or *Grand Canyon*” in which the rural is positioned as “a restorative to urban anomie,” David Bell analyses films such as *Deliverance* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* that depict “a series of anti-idyllic visions of the rural” (95). *Moonrise* and *They Live By Night*, like these horror films, portray the crime and the country as coexistent spheres at the same time that the majority of other popular culture, including noirs like *Killer’s Kiss* or *On Dangerous Ground*, portray them as mutually exclusive.

To use a mode of generic analysis developed by Rick Altman, the rural noir, while preserving the dominant *syntax* of other noirs, presents a remarkably different *semantic* element (31). Consider the following description of the genre, from the introduction to *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference Guide*: “The darkness that fills the mirror of the past, which lurks in a dark corner or obscures a dark passage out of the oppressively dark city, is not merely the key adjective of so many film noir titles but the obvious metaphor for the condition of the protagonist’s mind” (Silver and Ward, 4). In this instance, the narrative elements, or syntax, of film noir outlined by Silver and Ward do not require revision, but the urban location, a semantic element, does. *Moonrise* and *They Live By Night* demonstrate the sustainability of the aforementioned syntactic elements— the dark, psychological experience of the leads and their inescapable criminal past— apart from the familiar semantic element of the city.

The rural noir must also cause us to reconsider— beyond rural representations or film noir— more generally pitched genre theories. Consider the importance of place to film genre, the majority of which are defined by a typical setting: for melodramas, it is the family home, for Westerns, the American west, and for musicals, the stage. Thomas Schatz separates American genres according to their setting, between genres which deal with “determinate” versus “indeterminate” space:

There is a vital distinction between kinds of generic settings and conflicts. Certain genres [...] have conflicts that, indigenous to the environment, reflect the physical and ideological struggle for its control. [...] Other genres have conflicts that are not indigenous to the locale but are the results of the conflict between the values, attitudes, and actions of its principal characters and the ‘civilised’ setting they inhabit. (26)

Schatz discusses noirs, along with detective films, as films which trade in “determinate” settings, limited to the space of the city. The rural noir slips between Schatz’s dichotomy, moving past the space of the city, but not into the civilised, tame settings of the genres of “indeterminate spaces.” It is only fitting that a genre whose very definition lies in its disruption of Hollywood norms— trading high- for low-key lighting, effectual male protagonists for helpless ones, and a confident, coherent worldview for a more paranoid, unstable one would, finally, be able to accommodate a variation— the rural noir— that would seem to upset one of its central tenets, an urban locale. Considering the long list of Hollywood standards that film noirs violated, according to two of its original explicators, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton— “a logical action, an evident distinction between good and evil, well-defined characters with clear motives, scenes that are more spectacular than brutal, a heroine who is exquisitely feminine and a hero who is honest”— it should, perhaps, not be so surprising that the genre is flexible enough to accommodate the existence of the rural noir after all (14).

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