

“The Child of Fear”: Race, Censorship, and America, Today and Past

Ava Brenden*

Abstract

As film noir developed, the role of race within the genre has varied tremendously. In early classic noir, which emerged in the 1920s and gained traction in the 40s to the 60s, race is entirely excluded from the stories and characters portrayed, with film productions going so far as to exclude non-white characters that are in the original source material of adaptations, as seen in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. In contrast, at the height of neo noir throughout the 1980s and 1990s, race was often at the forefront of the plotlines, and films featured non-white protagonists, like in *Devil in a Blue Dress*. In between these eras was a slow but certain shift within society. The genre rooted in the grit and nihilism of post-war America became a cynical genre exploring race relations and gender dynamics. What began as a socially influenced censorship of race portrayal evolved with the cultural landscape in America, reflecting the public sentiment. From the recovery period following World War II through the Civil Rights Movement and into the turn of the century, noir has grown alongside the culture it reflects, with race at the center. Through this evolution in noir, the nature of censorship is illuminated: the prevailing culture is a mirror, not a product, of censorship as we understand it.

1. Race in Film Noir

The cultural zeitgeist is one of the most important considerations for contextualizing a story. As society progresses and shifts, so too does the media produced at that time. This constantly fluctuating culture produces a variety of central themes and topics explored in the media. One concept reflected in today's media is the notion of inclusion, a commonplace expectation of today's cinema and literature. Going back in the history of Hollywood films elicits fewer examples of comprehensive representation, and it can be simple to dismiss this lack of diversity as due to the times, discriminatory as they were. Inclusion is often considered a relatively new movement, but

with deeper examination, it becomes clear that the lack of diversity was not due to a lack of effort by filmmakers and activists, but rather a reflection of the acceptable social standard in society. In the case of film noir, this is best exemplified in comparing adaptations in noir as opposed to neo-noir. In general, noir films are staunchly white and underlyingly racist, largely due to the production code at the time known as the Hays Code. This moral code that movies abided by was present through the rise of noir and was reflected in the classic noir movies of the 40s, 50s, and early 60s. In studying the noir narratives of the middle fifty years of the twentieth century, a pattern emerges: racial censorship was prevalent, and the gradual deviation from this exclusion mirrors the

*Ava Brenden (abrenden@uoregon.edu) is a third year Human Physiology student at the University of Oregon in the Clark Honors College. Though she is not formally studying in English, she has always had a love for writing and has previously written for her high school's newspaper and won the Doris Wirtz Nielsen scholarship for English. Following graduation, Ava plans on attending medical school and perhaps one day publishing a book.

cultural changes that were occurring simultaneously.

While noir is notoriously difficult to define, it generally refers to a specific style of film that often contains similar characters and plotlines that were produced in the same era. The focus on reality, grit, and fate was emphasized and, in conjunction with aesthetic and tonal consistencies, gave way to what is now considered film noir. The peak time frame for noir films was between the 1940s and 1960s, though some of the later films produced in the 1960s could arguably be considered neo noir. It was also a heavily filtered genre, which can be attributed to the recovery period the American public was in following the war, as well as residual racial tensions stewing throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century. Noir as a genre was the direct result of post-World War II cynicism, as well as the German-led expressionist movement, an artistic movement centering emotional representation over photorealism that utilized distortion to convey such imagery.

To understand the genres of noir and neo-noir, historical context is important to grasp the cultural scene at the time of cinematic changes, which can illuminate why and how certain themes and characters are explored. While the roots of noir can be traced back as early as the 1920s, many of the classic noir films known today were released in the 40s, 50s, and early 60s. This emergence is largely credited to the post-World War II state of the country; a previously robust, thriving population was devastated by a worldwide war that reframed their concept of safety, security, and freedom in more than one way, and this was aptly reflected in the media produced at the time. In the article, "Moody Decade: The 1940s Revisited," Christine Kleinegger explains that "moody film noir anti-heroes acted out Camus's dictum that 'at any street corner the absurd may

strike a man in the face'" (131). In other words, what was once an understood assurance of security became a distinct uncertainty and fear. The American public no longer trusted itself to be safe and prosperous. This disrupted the linear succession of American exceptionalism that had become understood generally, which Kleinegger notes coincides with the narrative introduction of non-linear storytelling (133). World War II, in many ways destroyed the American view on the linearity of its existence: women were in the workplace, not at home; young men were dying before their parents in the war; and more than one million African Americans fought alongside White soldiers in a previously segregated society (Bamford, "African Americans Fought for Freedom at Home and Abroad during World War II"). America, as it was previously understood, was effectively destroyed, as was the enlightened view of it.

Segregation throughout the mid-twentieth century was an important aspect of the cultural atmosphere. Segregation refers to the separation between different racial groups, and in America, it was based on the separate but equal ideology of the Separate Car Act of 1890, which was challenged in the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 (Duignan, "Plessy v. Ferguson"). Though this case occurred well before the 1940s, this was the governing sentiment regarding overt racism towards African Americans in a post-slavery America. Separate but equal implies an air of progress and equality, though racism was still deeply ingrained in American culture; segregation, by definition, was still in place, and Jim Crow laws and sentiments still proliferated in American culture. This is important to consider within the context of media and production, and what the majority of white America desired in entertainment. Race existed as a social separator, and the idea of exploring race as a theme rather

than a fact was not widely considered in standard noir media.

The censorship that occurred in film noir is mainly attributed to a film organization known as the Production Code Administration (PCA) and its self-inflicted Hays Code. Established in 1934 and ending in 1968, the Hays Code served to regulate film production and content (Tew, *Cinema & Censorship: The Hays Code*). The Code regulated the relationships portrayed on screen, explicitly regarding race. The Hays Code prohibited interracial relationships from being depicted on screen, known as miscegenation (Courtney, *Picturing Race*). While other rules restricted sexual content and violence being depicted, the ban on interracial relationships was the only explicitly racial rule enacted, aside from vague protection against outwardly hateful content towards a particular ethnic group (Smith, 159).

Given the historical context and the introduction of the Hays Code, it can be concluded then that censorship in media is a more accurate reflection of the culture during a time period rather than arbitrary measures enacted by higher-ups in corporations. While the code was enforced by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, later known as the Motion Picture Association (Courtney, *Picturing Race*), these codes were enacted because the public, as the consumer, was dissatisfied with the product being produced. There were cultural factors that contributed to this attitude at the time; interracial marriage itself was not legal until 1967. Further, people longed for a return to normalcy. An aversion to sex, race, and violence was all indicative of the era following the disruption of their status quo, and these attitudes were reinforced by those in power in Hollywood at the time. The purpose of the codes, while advertised as moral standards, were

fundamentally parameters to produce a desired product, one void of inclusion and authenticity.

This bottom-up influence is exemplified in the noir classic, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. The movie, directed by Tay Garnett, is based on a novel of the same title written by James M. Cain. The story follows an affair between the main character, Frank, and the femme fatale, Cora, a pretty and fair white woman married to an older man named Nick Smith, also a white man. In the book, her husband is Nick Papadakis (not Smith) and is a Greek man. Together, Frank and Cora plot to kill Nick in order to be together and frame it as an accident to inherit his money. This plan, in noir fashion, brilliantly backfires on them, and through a series of events, they manage to kill Nick, but the police are suspicious of their involvement. Though they are eventually cleared for the murder, this, along with Frank having an affair, drives a wedge in their relationship. Eventually, they patch up their relationship, and it seems that they may survive the ordeal together, but Cora and Frank suddenly get into a car accident that kills Cora. Frank is sent to prison, found guilty of Cora's murder, and put on death row. Though it was an accident, he finds his fate fitting and accepts it, given his role in Nick's death, for which he was never punished.

While the source narrative remains the same, the explicit racism in the book is completely excluded from the movie. In the book, Frank is Greek, not white. In the book, Nick is often referred to as "the Greek," a term meant to be derogatory, given the distinction of race in America throughout the twentieth century. Similarly, they refer to him as "greasy," a stereotype associated with Greek people, and Cora contrasts this with praise of Frank's cleanliness, which is associated with his whiteness. Race is such a factor for Cora in the source text that it is made out to be part of the motivation for her

dissatisfaction in her marriage, and that she went as far as to consider herself not white because she is married to her Greek husband (Cain, 7). There are similarly racist intonations to the book's description of Cora, who has darker features and is told she could pass as Mexican, which deeply offends her. This was all excluded from the film due to the Hays Code.

As time progressed, the cultural focus shifted away from the war, although the ideas that emerged in this era evolved rather than vanished. Considered a turning point in history, the 1960s brought about rapid and radical change to American society and social norms. In the summer of 1964, the Civil Rights Act was enacted, outlawing "discrimination in hotels, motels, restaurants, theaters, and other public accommodations" (Ware, 1091). For the first time in American history, Black Americans were legally afforded the same freedom and human rights as White Americans, though the emphasis on legal is important. A legislative change one day does not change public sentiment immediately. Black people remained discriminated against, and many still fought for the treatment of Black Americans to improve. Police brutality, redlining, gentrification, and voting access were just some of the modes of discrimination used against Black people, which continues to this day. Another landmark case from the 1960s was *Loving v. Virginia*, which reversed the laws in the U.S. that banned interracial marriage (Duignan, "Loving v. Virginia"). Again, though legal, this remained a point of contention between politicians and the public, and even today is challenged by those who disapprove of it.

The period of radical change and social movement in progress was intertwined with the ever-evolving cultural landscape. In the late 1960s and early 70s, a new subcategory of noir emerged, known today as neo noir. Neo noir is

distinguishable from classic noir by its themes and characters. Though neo noir stories often follow similar plot beats and share archetypal characters consistent with classic noir, they are typically more explicitly violent and sexual (Ostberg, *Neo-noir*). Neo noir stories also have a stronger emphasis on race, something that classic noir narratives distinctly lack. The era of neo noir, or modernized noir, is generally understood to encompass the 1970s to the 90s (Ostberg, *Neo-noir*).

To contrast the themes of classic noir versus neo noir, a good example is *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), directed by Carl Franklin. The story follows Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins, a down-on-his-luck Black homeowner in the 1940s, who is offered a job investigating a missing woman named Daphne Monet by DeWitt Albright, a white man. Daphne is Todd Carter's fiancée, the mayoral candidate. Her disappearance has caused Carter to drop out of the race. Easy finds himself embroiled in a massive political scandal. Daphne had discovered that the opposing candidate, Terrell, had pornographic photos of children, which she had bought to ensure that Terrell would not tell the public that Daphne was half-white, half-Creole, which would have ended her relationship and her fiancé's mayoral bid. After a violent confrontation between Easy, Easy's friend Mouse, and DeWitt and his men (in which DeWitt and all his men end up dead), Easy secures the photos of Terrell and gives them back to Carter, who is reunited with Daphne. While the photos are enough to secure his victory as mayor, Carter is unwilling to be with Daphne, knowing her heritage. Easy observes, "Cause even though we had fought a war to keep the world free, the color line in America worked both ways, and even a rich white man like Todd Carter was afraid to cross it" (Franklin, *Devil in a Blue Dress*).

In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, the central themes and ultimate twist in the story hinge upon the

underlying racial tensions throughout the film. The tension between Easy and DeWitt is also racial, and though DeWitt defends Easy from racist beratement by the public, DeWitt reveals himself to be a racist character in his own right, making racist remarks to Easy and disrespecting the privacy of Easy's home, a racially significant violation of a Black man's property. This contrasts the character of Todd Carter, who plays the role of the sympathetic racist, as Dan Flory coins in his article, "Disgust, Race and Ideology in Carl Franklin's *Devil in a Blue Dress*." Daphne's insistence throughout the movie that her race will not matter to Carter and that her primary concern is his public reputation proves to be wishful thinking, as he ultimately betrays her, unwilling to risk his career and livelihood for their relationship. Flory describes him as a coward, which fittingly explains the more subtle and common type of racism that plagued both the 1940s (when the movie is set) and the 90s (when the movie premiered). This focus on an interracial relationship and the struggles that came with it would have directly violated the Hays Code's miscegenation ban and was just one of the facets that neo noir expanded upon to evolve the genre of film noir in negotiation with the modern zeitgeist. Race and racism are primary motivators in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, and multiple characters, both as victims and perpetrators of racism, promote an explicit anti-racism sentiment, ultimately leading the audience to sympathize more with Easy and internally regard their own biases in the process (Flory).

The abandonment of the Hays Code was due to the cultural swing towards racier, more provocative content in cinema. Movies that challenged the old standards, such as *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), were increasingly popular, and the movies that were strictly abiding by the rules were, in turn, less popular. Though the executives

could enact whatever rules they deemed fit, the response from the people ultimately drove the business decisions. And the people had spoken: the age of cinematic chastity was over.

The direct contrast in the approaches to race is clear: where classic noir excludes race entirely because of the heightened racial tensions at the time, some neo noirs chose to center it, giving a voice to characters that were previously shunned entirely from the genre. These choices—both the inclusion and the exclusion—were the direct reflections of the eras in which they were produced rather than the products of censorship. The censorship itself arose from what was demanded of the culture in the relevant era, which happened in part due to the concurrent historical events. By this logic, censorship itself is the result of the culture and a reflection of the time in which it occurs. Media is a mirror of society, and the filters on this mirror are there because society desired a filter in the first place. At a time when racial tensions were high, uncertainty was palpable, and America was disillusioned, a product lacking violence, sex, and race was the logical and temperate conclusion.

This is not to say that no films blurred the lines between classic and neo noir, attempting to promote themes of inclusivity. A well-known example of this is *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), directed by Robert Wise and starring Harry Belafonte. This film follows David Burke, a former policeman who recruits a racist ex-con (Slater) and a Black nightclub singer in debt (Ingram) to help him carry out a robbery, ensuring them a financial cut for their help. The racist, initially spurned by being forced to work with a Black man, refuses, but is eventually swayed by the money. The racial tension between the two is palpable throughout the film, and it comes to a head when the two are essentially left to their own devices when Burke is killed after the robbery goes wrong. This

culminates in an all-out fight between the two while they are trying to escape the police, where they end up in a fuel storage warehouse, shooting at one another. This ignites the fuel tanks, exploding the warehouse. When the police arrive at the scene, both Ingram's and Slater's bodies are found, symbolically indistinguishable from one another, with the medic asking, "Which is which?"

Despite the limitations, there were films that premiered during the Hays Code that challenged the boundaries of censorship, as *Odds Against Tomorrow* did. This largely occurred due to one of the stars, Harry Belafonte. Belafonte was a household name at the time, despite the challenges faced by Black actors. Belafonte was an active participant in the Civil Rights Movement and advocated throughout the filming of *Odds Against Tomorrow* for fair and proper treatment of his character, and he is credited as a producer on the film. It is also pertinent to consider the year this film came out, 1959. On the precipice of the Civil Rights Movement, filmmakers were increasingly interested in telling stories in which race played a role, like the reality people faced in the real world (Broughton, "Harry Belafonte Fights Racism in Film Noir 'Odds Against Tomorrow'"). Though this film does center on race in its narrative, it is not able to cover the same thematic territory as neo noir. The film is limited by its time, even on fronts not involving race. The film is unable to address racial tensions in or around relationships. Ingram's estranged wife is Black in the movie, and their relationship is glossed over. The race struggle is reserved exclusively between a white and a Black man. The Hays Code would have prevented further thematic exploration, even if there was narrative merit to it. The Hays Code is involved in the portrayal of violence as well; the movie is relatively tame given its subject matter and brutal demise of all three main characters.

The argument that censorship begins from the bottom up is limited to film noir and neo noir in this context, but can be expanded and applied to other, more modern topics. The idea that censorship reflects rather than governs culture prevails today, specifically in the current hot topic of book banning in the United States. The United States presidential election of 2024 demonstrated a swing to the right; in fact, the margin of Americans identifying as conservatives is the highest it has been since 2011, at 37% (Brenan, "U.S. Political Parties Historically Polarized Ideologically"). This statistic is consistent with the election of current President Donald Trump, who won the 2024 election by a surprisingly large margin. Across the nation, progressive bills are being challenged and upended, and much of the forward social progress observed over the last decade has been rapidly reversed.

Parallel to what the Hays Code represented is the active participation in book banning across America, specifically in the education system. According to the American Library Association (ALA), book banning attempts increased by 65% between 2022 and 2023, reaching the highest number of censorship attempts ever recorded by the ALA. Specific to race, 30% of the 874 books PEN America included in its banned book index included characters of color or discussed race in some way. According to EveryLibrary, a nonprofit organization dedicated to combating book banning, Trump cut funding for public libraries, challenging free and public access to literature and media.

While it could be concluded that these bans are occurring because of the observable right swing America is currently experiencing, I argue that the bans are a reflection of the current time period, just as the Hays Code was in the 1940s through 60s. Censorship, both today and

historically, does not function as a means of completely controlling access to ideas. The Hays Code was not put in place to act as though race, sex, and violence were not part of the lives of Americans. The Code was implemented to hone the cinema produced at the time to the target audience: white, upper to middle class, family-oriented Americans. While censorship, both racial and otherwise, allows for the proliferation of exclusive thoughts and ideals, we cannot fully blame the system without looking internally first and observing the morality and ideologies prevalent in society. Book banning follows the pattern of banning media that does not suit the target audience of the Christian, white, and conservative ideologies. Though it is no longer the 1940s culturally or politically, there is a startling trend of centering media for the common target audience. Censorship is perpetrated by the audience itself, and the government is responding. For instance, when looking at a state such as Florida, which banned 2,304 books in the 2024–2025 school year, it is easy to blame the school districts and their conservative government. But what may be more important is the rallying cries of the parents from the school districts, who are outraged by topics of race, sex, or gender being accessible to their child in school, and spur these policies into action. While this is not an excuse for letting off the hook governing bodies engaging in censorship, this illuminates an important component of censorship in certain movements and what they indicate about culture, past and present.

Throughout the solidification of the genre, film noir distinctly lacks a racial component, largely due to the PCA and the Hays Code enforced at the time. This intentional ignorance was the result of the cultural perspectives at the time, or as Flory says, “the color line as it existed in post-World War II

America.” While attempts, successful and unsuccessful, were made to breach the standard set, the reality of the representation, or lack thereof, was apparent in film noir. This eventually led to the birth of neo noir, the subgenre that tackled subject matters that classic noir could not. Paralleling the development of the portrayal of sexuality and race was the American culture, and together the two coincide to create an understanding of modern and historical society we understand today. Though the story of noir is one primarily set in history, the concept of censorship and the deep influence it has on media echoes today, as government agencies and communities attempt to recut art to fit into the political narrative they desire. In contrast to the claim often made that censorship drives culture, I have found the opposite can be true. As Laurie Halse Anderson said when speaking on banned books, “Censorship is the child of fear and the father of ignorance.” Censorship—born of fear, ignorance, or perhaps both—continues to provide a clear reflection of society and is usually enacted by those who already have censored themselves.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Ulrick Casimir for his confidence in my work and his continual support in my academic endeavors in this project and others. I would also like to thank my previous English teachers, Mrs. Wray, Mr. Dennis, and Mrs. Leben, who always encouraged me to continue to pursue English and who believed in me at the very start. I would not be the student or scholar that I am without any one of these individuals.

References

American Library Association. "Book Ban Data." Banned Books, 2024, www.ala.org/bbooks/book-ban-data.

- Bamford, Tyler. "African Americans Fought for Freedom at Home and Abroad during World War II." The National WWII Museum, 1 Feb. 2020, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/african-americans-fought-freedom-home-and-abroad-during-world-war-ii>. Accessed 19 March 2025.
- Bastien, Angelica Jade. "On Being Black in Film Noir." British Film Institute, 6 Nov. 2020, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/features/black-faces-film-noir>.
- Black, Gregory D. "Hollywood Censored: The Production Code Administration and the Hollywood Film Industry, 1930-1940." *Film History*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1989, pp. 167-89. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3814976>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2025.
- Brenan, Megan. "U.S. Political Parties Historically Polarized Ideologically." Gallup News, 16 Jan. 2025, news.gallup.com/poll/655190/political-parties-historically-polarized-ideologically.aspx.
- Broughton, Lee. "Harry Belafonte Fights Racism in Film Noir 'Odds Against Tomorrow.'" *PopMatters*, 7 November 2016.
- Cain, James M. (1934) *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, New York: Knopf.
- Courtney, Susan. *Picturing Race: Hollywood's Censorship of Miscegenation and Production of Racial Visibility through Imitation of Life*. University of Colorado, Boulder, 1 May 1998, <https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive1998-2013/1998/05/01/picturizing-race-hollywoods-censorship-miscegenation-and-production-racial-visibility.identities.media>.
- Devil in a Blue Dress*. Directed by Carl Franklin, Sony Pictures, 1995.
- Duignan, Brian. "Plessy v. Ferguson". Encyclopedia Britannica, 21 Feb. 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Plessy-v-Ferguson-1896>. Accessed 19 March 2025.
- Duignan, Brian. "Loving v. Virginia". Encyclopedia Britannica, 11 Jan. 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Loving-v-Virginia>. Accessed 20 March 2025.
- EveryLibrary. EveryLibrary, 2025, www.everylibrary.org.
- Flory, Dan. "Disgust, Race and Ideology in Carl Franklin's *Devil in a Blue Dress*." *Film- Philosophy*, vol. Volume 26, no. 2, June 2022, pp. 103-29.
- Kleinegger, Christine C. "Moody Decade: The 1940s Revisited." *American Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 1, 1992, pp. 129-35. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2713185>. Accessed 1 Mar. 2025.
- Lewis, Maria. *Early Hollywood and the Hays Code*. ACMI, 14 Jan. 2025, <https://www.acmi.net.au/stories-and-ideas/early-hollywood-and-hays-code/>.
- Lott, Eric. "The Whiteness of Film Noir." *American Literary History*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1997, pp. 542-66. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/490180>. Accessed 25 Jan. 2025.
- Murphet, J. "Film Noir and the Racial Unconscious." *Screen* (London) 39.1 (1998): 22-35. Web.
- Odds against Tomorrow*. Directed by Wise Robert, United Artists, 1959.
- Ostberg, René. "neo-noir". Encyclopedia Britannica, 26 Dec. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/art/neo-noir>. Accessed 8 February 2025.
- Smith, Marvin. "The Postman Always Rings Twice." *White University Humanities Research*, no. 4, 2008, pp. 157-69.
- Tew, Sarah. "Cinema & Censorship: The Hays Code." *The US Caribbean & Florida Digital Newspaper Project*, 21 July 2023, <https://ufndnp.domains.uflib.ufl.edu/cinema-censorship-the-hays-code/>. July 2023.
- The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Directed by Tay Garnett, Loew's Inc., 1946.
- Ware, Leland. "Civil Rights and the 1960s: A Decade of Unparalleled Progress." *Maryland Law Review*, vol. 72, no. 4, 2013, pp. 1087-95. <http://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/mlr/vol72/iss4/4>