

## **Violent Hollywood: The masculine investment in female victimhood**



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**‘This rotten town. It soils everyone.’**

- Nancy, Sin City: A Dame To Kill For (2014)

**‘This bloodstained physical dismembering is a curious thing: it’s both the catastrophe itself and the subsequent method of trying to understand.’**

- Melissa McCartney, Death, Sharks, Surfers (2019)

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This thesis contains spoilers for both Once Upon A Time.. In Hollywood (2019), True Confessions (1981) and Sin City (2009).

It also contains graphic forensic material that some may find disturbing. Discretion is advised.

## Introduction

In the summer of 2012, my stepmom hung herself. She had separated with my mom for almost a year then, but naturally, her premature death was a big shock to my family. I was eighteen at the time, and had just graduated high school. I vividly remember watching *Sin City* (2005) with my mom, just a few months after she had buried her former lover. Halfway through the film, Bruce Willis' character is strung up by his neck, and he just barely stays alive by tiptoeing on a stool. When the scene came up, my mom burst in tears and didn't stop crying for hours. It is perhaps no coincidence that I can still vividly remember this particular scene... its brutal violence amplified by the noir-inspired contrast and stark shadows.



*Figure 1: Detective John Hartigan (Bruce Willis) tiptoes for his life in Sin City (2005)*

During my teens, I mainly used films and videogames to escape from my dreadful home situation, in which an alcoholic and verbally abusing stepmom created a unsafe environment. The fact that I often fled to my room to watch films, helped grow my deep love for cinema; the thriller and horror genre in particular.

I didn't go to the funeral of stepmom in 2012, since she'd been the borderline terror of our household for many years, and didn't realised I should've gone, if only to support my mom. After the funeral, my sister described the visible marks she'd seen on her neck, which the mortuary had apparently rather unsuccessfully tried to cover up. Although I hadn't seen my stepmom's body, I could picture it easily. The image that formed inside my head were based on the numerous bodies I had seen laying in coffins and mortuary tables in detectives and horror films. Therefore, the 'reality' of death and violence had already mingled with the Hollywood images that exist inside of my mind.

The visual screen is a way for me to cope with the things that I find as fascinating as frightening. As a teen melancholiac, I would daydream about the beautiful girls in my class during the day, and watch disturbing horror films in which young women would get hacked to pieces with machetes, electric

drill machines and axes. Fictionalised crime helped me escape my personal horrors and perhaps even assisted in surviving it.

Popular crime writers like Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett gave rise to the so called ‘hard-boiled’ LA crime genre in the 1930s, in which rough private eyes shot their way through LA’s underbelly in order to get closer to the truth. Hollywood quickly caught on and morphed these dark stories into *film noir*. These gritty features were in high regard and their influence is still noticeable in contemporary cinema. *Sin City* (2005), which I mentioned earlier, is a fairly recent example of how Hollywood still can’t seem to let go of its noir past.

There is an obvious male phantasy at work in the detective genre, one that’s has progressed from the literary world to the silver screen and is still predominant in current media culture. When I went to therapy, years after my stepmom had died, my therapist asked me to describe the inner figure that lived inside of my head. I told her it was a he, and that this man was masculine and wore a classical raincoat and an old fashioned hat, reminiscent of Philip Marlowe, the moody, no nonsense detective often played by Humphrey Bogart. Behind this man was a tender boy, still hoping this scruffy man could offer protection and help him rationalize his fears. Much later I found out that Woody Allen wrote a film about an insecure man who seeks help from Philip Marlowe, much like myself at a younger age. This proves that, however Philip Marlowe popularity has long since faded, his masculine fantasy still lingers.



*Figure 2: Allan takes relationship advice from Philip Marlowe in Play It Again, Sam (1972)*

In this thesis, I want to explore how the Los Angeles hardboiled detective has come off the page and found his way into film. Furthermore, I want to show how true crime that occurred in Hollywood has fuelled masculine investment in female victimhood. This thesis is about men cutting up women. Literally, but also figuratively.

As case studies, I’ll dissect two pictures that are loosely based on too real murder cases, in which Hollywood plays a prominent role. The first one is *True Confessions* (1981), a neo-noir based on the infamous Black Dahlia murder. The second one is more recent ‘*Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood*’ (2019), which takes the Sharon Tate murder and turns the story upside down. In both of these violent

films, there is a female victim, but two men are starring. The female characters are beautiful vessels upon which the male fantasies are easily projected. Through exploring these two films, I hope to understand how the narrative trope works, and how it has influenced and shaped my work.

## CHAPTER I

### The 'hardboiled' LA crime genre in literature and cinema

#### Literature

Writers like Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain gave rise to a specific type of crime literature, known as the 'hard-boiled' crime genre, which often takes place in the Los Angeles of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Moore, 2006)

'The hard-boiled private detective is among the most recognizable characters in popular fiction since the 1920s--a tough product of a violent world, in which police forces are inadequate and people with money can choose private help when facing threatening circumstances.' (Moore, 2006) In most of these novels, that were in high demand over the course of the 1920s - 1950s, a male private eye [a freelance detective] is hired, often by a wealthy individual, to solve a problem or a crime. He is then caught up in all sorts of trouble as a result. The crime stories are action packed, contain explicit language and have easily recognizable and recurring characters; such as the femme fatale, corrupt cops and sleazy journalists. Raymond Chandler wrote that the 'smell of fear' generated by such stories was evidence of their serious response to the modern condition: 'Their characters lived in a world gone wrong, a world in which, long before the atom bomb, civilization had created the machinery for its own destruction and was learning to use it with all the moronic delight of a gangster trying out his

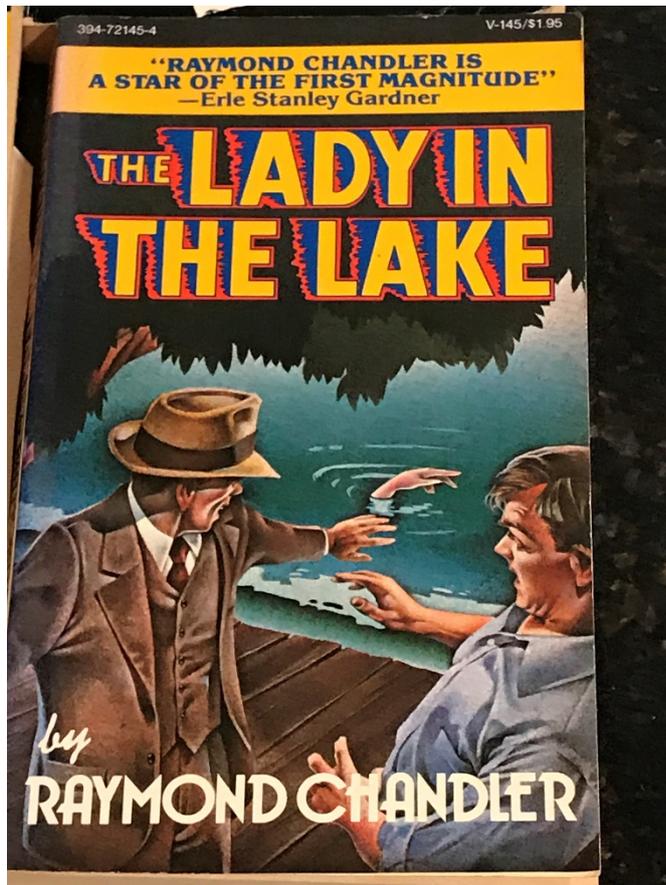


Figure 3: The cover of Raymond Chandler's 1943 classic 'The Lady in The Lake'

first machine-gun. The law was something to be manipulated for profit and power. The streets were dark with something more than night.' (Chandler,...) The best hardboiled crime writers used a recurring protagonist in their novels. The most famous example is Chandler's Philip Marlowe; the weary private eye that starred in over thirty stories and novels and was later famously portrayed by Humphrey Bogart in film versions. 'Marlowe, Chandler's virtuous and chivalrous "would-be-hero", finds himself violating his own knightly codex on his impossible quest for a better world. Thus, Chandler renews the detective genre by violating the rules of the knightly hero and disrupting social stereotypes.' (Biro) Before the 'hard-boiled' crime genre came into fashion around the 1920's, previous detective stories were constructed to follow the classic pattern established by Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, with the application of a heroic puzzle-solving detective like Poe's C. Auguste Dupin or Doyle's Sherlock Holmes.

Chandler's popular character Marlowe became a household name that broke with the classical, well-mannered British

detective established in the nineteenth century. Instead, the protagonist brushes shoulders with the Los Angeles' crooks and criminals, and uses violence and connections to get to the truth. 'Marlowe became a knight in a society where a code of honour did not apply, and Chandler's private eye is not only an anachronism in the detective genre but also deviates from our expectations concerning the

heroic. Chandler thus paradoxically violates both the norms of the detective genre and defamiliarizes our view of the society he is describing. [...] Marlowe moves through Los Angeles constantly searching for ladies to rescue, helping the common man or handing the unscrupulous a shot of old-fashioned justice.' In most of these 'hardboiled' stories, female characters are shallow victims that give the male protagonist something to do. The official premise of Chandler's 'The Lady In The Lake' reads as following: 'A couple of missing wives—one a rich man's and one a poor man's—become the objects of Marlowe's investigation.' (Chandler, ...) The wives are described as objects, since they are plot tools that give the hero a purpose. Earlier crime writers like Edgar Allan Poe and Conan Doyle established a narrative where evidence is isolated – set apart, dissected, disembodied, objectified. In their stories characters and the evidence become placeholders for a narrative, they produce a process of dissection and disembodiment. Although the hardboiled protagonist differs greatly from the well-mannered, scholar-like detectives in earlier crime novels, the process of forensic examination of evidence as a process of forensic dissection remained intact. The objectification and disembodiment of female characters are prominent in hardboiled crime genre, and often display quite literally. On the cover of *The Lady In The Lake* (Figure 4), note the hand, sticking out of the water.

A character like Philip Marlowe didn't age well. He is often homophobic, xenophobic, misogynist and racist. Many other stock characters that take a prominent place in the 'hardboiled' crime genre, such as the femme fatale, are now considered problematic stereotypes. The femme fatale, for example, is a one-dimensional, devious character that merely exist to create sexual tension and obstruct the main protagonist. 'Kill a guy, rob a bank — the femme fatale made me do it. These novels simmer with resentment over perceived encroachment and a desire to contain female power. [...] The femme fatale embodies a misogynist viewpoint, one that even fans like Abbott and me can't just brush off as a relic of the times in which Chandler wrote.' (...), (2018) The male protagonists in the 'hardboiled' crime genre are often living the heroic fantasies of the male audiences: playing into conservative ideas of masculinity and continuing narratives which there is little room for the female perspective.

In many of these stories, the glamorous and wealthy inhabitants of Los Angeles mingle with its crooks, reflecting on the city's dark heart; brooding with 'dope fiends', organised crime, gambling, and illegal prostitution. In many of these novels, the questionable history of the Californian Metropole is a viable part of the story. Shady deals, blackmail and political scandals get, in some way or another, in the way of the protagonist's investigation.

Perhaps this crime genre came into fashion because it's morbid and pessimistic undertone reflected a recognizable and part of American society, which struggled with poverty, crime and drugs caused by The Great Depression and World War II. 'These stories share a cold morality, a bleak view of a cruel world and guns,' (Jordison, 2014) The Guardian writer Sam Jordison stated while reflecting on Dashiell Hammett's work. 'Those novels and the subsequent movies were born of an especially downbeat era – an age characterised and shaped by first the Great Depression and then World War II. The spirit of those stories perfectly fit the zeitgeist and summed up – on the pages of pulp fiction and in the rolling reels of crime cinema – a real, resonant sensibility felt in both America and around the wider world.' (Clayton, 2014)

### **Film Noir**

*Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Big Sleep* (1946) and *In A Lonely Place* (1950) are just a few of the hardboiled film adaptations that used Los Angeles' dark side as their backdrop. The French called this particular type of American Film 'Film Noir' (Eggerston, 2019), which it earned for its dark subject matter and gloomy visual style. The cinematography of Film Noir is said to be derived from German expressionist films (Bergstrom, 2014) and mainly consists of grainy black and white imagery, stark contrasts, and a playful emphasis on shadows and light. It's stark aesthetics resonate with the sombre tone of the movies, which play out in seedy motels, dark back alleys and dusty gangster holdouts. Just

as the tradition of disembodied female characters and dissecting evidence from nineteenth century literature bled into 1930-40s crime fiction, hardboiled crime fiction easily translated to the silver screen. The editing techniques of film (cutting, splicing, assembling and disassembling images) closely resemble the procedures that the male protagonist uses in film noir narratives, in order to separate evidence from the flow of reality.

Film Noir existed in a time when the deeply conservative ‘Hays Code’ was still active. Between 1934 and 1968, American films had to abide to a strict list of moral ‘don’ts and be carefals’; which included the prohibition of scenes with ‘profanity’, nudity or an implied sympathy for criminals. (Adebowale, 2020) Over the course of its existence, the rules became less strict or were stretched. During the forties and early fifties however, the code still heavily influenced Hollywood and censored an industry that thrived on films in which sex and violent crime were key factors. Because of the Hays Code, most Film Noir films are relatively tame compared to cinema in our current day. These films lack explicit scenes, but often make use of cinematography and suggestive dialogue to imply explicit violence or sex. The camera is a participant tool that can only objectify that what it captures. Through close ups and the (re)assembling of these images, film noir ‘cut up’ and rearranged female bodies in the studio as well as the editing room.

Film Noir was one of the most prominent Hollywood genres of the forties and fifties. The numerous catalogue of ‘hardboiled’ crime novels, lend itself perfectly for filmmaking, prompting major Hollywood studios to release multiple noir productions a year. Many authors in the genre were also screenwriters at the time and became a vital part of Hollywood’s male dominated culture. The influence of Film Noir reached far and wide, and sparked successful European imitations, like Carol Reid’s *The Third Man* (1949) (Guardian Film)



Figure 4: A close up of Phyliss (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Double Indemnity* (1944)

In the late fifties, the golden age of film noir passed by with the rise of Technicolor and the end of the classical Hollywood studio system. 'Even so, the angles, aesthetics and beats that characterised those essential crime movies informed the genre films that followed in the post-studio system, post-Hays Code period. For example, John Boorman's *Point Black* is Lee Marvin and the American pulp tradition jiving to new wave rhythms in the sunshine of the 60s. The 70s produced a whole spate of fresh Chandler adaptations and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*.' (Clayton, 2014)

The 80s and 90s gave rise to a revival of 'neo-noir' films, in which the femme fatale was rediscovered and reinvented. According Paul O' Callaghan (...), the term was thrown around so liberally in pop culture criticism, that virtually any stylish modern crime film is liable to be branded as such. In this new era, movies like *Body Double* (1984) and *Basic Instinct* (1992) dominated box offices and continued many classical noir traditions, although often warping narrative expectations. After the turn of the century, neo noir had become a genre that stood on its own, thus passing on the legacy of the 'hardboiled' crime into a new millennium. Examples of recent noir pictures are *Drive* (2011), in which a Hollywood stunt man with criminal ties tries to protect his lover, and *Sin City: A Dame To Kill For* (2014).

The most remarkable thing about film noir is that it never seems to get out of fashion. 'The best noir stories could have been written today, even if they're 50, 60, 70 years old. Corruption and violence are hardly things of the past. Men in power taking advantage of the weak and getting away with murder – that's the stuff of headlines today,' (O'Callaghan, 2016) Every generation, the genre seems to reinvents itself, although the underlining power of the LA crime genre remains prominent; the genre that is able to reflect our dreads and anguish in an urban existence. 'Aside from the aforementioned aesthetic allure, film noir is all about dwelling in – or at least dipping your delicately painted toes in – darkness. This is the place where the audience's internal anguish, paranoia, alienation and unseemly yearnings find expression on screen.' (Clayton, 2014)

The LA 'hard boiled' tradition became popular in 1930s and 40s by re-establishing the flawed knight as a rough but intelligent private eye or detective, working in gritty Los Angeles. Still, most of its narrative structures and treatment of forensic evidence are rooted in nineteenth century detective stories. Hardboiled fiction then carried its traditions into the apparatus of film noir; a medium which editing techniques and narrative structures afford masculine investment in female victimhood by (literary and figuratively) cutting up the (female) body and objectifying elements of male desire.

## CHAPTER II

### The soiled city: murder in Los Angeles

According to the Los Angeles Police Department, the city's crime rate had declined over recent years, but throughout its history, LA has struggled with its fair share of murder (Yu, 2020). In this chapter, I'll discuss two murders that are high on the list of most prominent crimes that were ever committed in California.

#### The murder of Elizabeth Short

'On the morning of January 15, 1947, a mother taking her child for a walk in a Los Angeles neighbourhood stumbled upon a gruesome sight: the body of a young naked woman sliced clean in half at the waist. The body was just a few feet from the sidewalk and posed in such a way that the mother reportedly thought it was a mannequin at first glance. Despite the extensive mutilation and cuts on the body, there wasn't a drop of blood at the scene, indicating that the young woman had been killed elsewhere. [...] The young woman turned out to be a 22-year-old Hollywood hopeful named Elizabeth Short—later dubbed the "Black Dahlia" by the press for her rumoured penchant for sheer black clothes and for the Blue Dahlia movie out at that time.' (Federal Bureau of Investigation)



Figure 5: The Los Angeles Times reports that Elizabeth Short is identified by the F.B.I.

The murder would go down in history as one of the most notorious unsolved crimes in the history of the U.S. 'An ensuing media frenzy followed, thanks to the "brutal, misogynistic and ritual nature" of the killing. [...] The murder was never solved, only adding to the crime's mystique. There was also the connection to the glamour of the area. She lived in Hollywood, had aspirations to be an actress.' (Martin, 2017). The murder was one of the first American murders that garnered global media attention. 'The slaying of Elizabeth Short launched one of the most celebrated manhunts and crime-related media spectacles in history. The Black Dahlia case has come to symbolize a sordid and politically corrupt aspect of mid-century Los Angeles that coexisted, and sometimes commingled,

with the Hollywood wealth and glamour.’ (Nelson, Baybliss, (2006)



Figure 6: The body of Elizabeth Short was found in a vacant lot in near Leimert Park, Los Angeles.

‘Los Angeles had a rich newspaper and tabloid culture. All of these papers had underworld columnists... crime reporters. Crime was central entertainment in a pre-tv world, when people still got morning and evening newspapers.’ (Buntin, 2019) Because of the savage nature of the crime, early crime reporters from the Herald dubbed it ‘The Werewolf Murder,’ says Harnish (2006) as to further sensationalise on the gruesome details that slowly poured out. According to the 2019 podcast *Root of Evil*, there was a Black Dahlia cover story in the LA Times for 31 straight days. In his book ‘Hard-boiled Hollywood’, Jon Lewis claims that ‘the tragic and mysterious circumstances surrounding the deaths of Elizabeth Short, or the Black Dahlia, and [later that of] Marilyn Monroe ripped open Hollywood’s glitzy façade, exposing the city’s ugly underbelly of corruption, crime, and murder.’ The gruesome tale of Elizabeth Short symbolizes LA’s dark heart and has burned its vital place in American culture.

Steve Hodel, who worked as an LAPD homicide detective for years, wrote a book called *The Black Dahlia Avenger*, in which he claims that his own father – George Hodel – is Elizabeth Short’s killer. This book prompted writers Mark Nelson and Sarah Hudson Baybliss to further investigate the murder and its possible links to the surrealist movement; which had a long history of portraying women dissected at the waist or ‘in pieces’. Quite convincingly, they propose the theory that murderer was familiar with surrealist art and that the crime might have been a macabre version of an ‘exquisite corpse’; an artistic method of collectively assembling words or images.

### **The Tate–LaBianca murders**

On the night of August 8–9, 1969, four members of the Manson Family invaded the rented home of actress Sharon Tate and movie director Roman Polanski at 10050 Cielo Drive, Los Angeles. They murdered Tate, who was pregnant, along with three friends and a visitor. The murders were committed by Tex Watson, Susan Atkins, and Patricia Krenwinkel under the direction of Charles

Manson, who led a cultlike group of hippies. Through news media, the brutal murders had a significant impact worldwide and are often described as a symbolic end for the ‘Swinging Sixties’, a period of love, peace and sexual freedom... seemingly already overdue. Didion (1979) describes her recollection of the events in an essay in *The White Album*: ‘Many people I know believe that the sixties ended abruptly on August 9, 1969, ended at the exact moment [...] The tension broke that day. The paranoia was fulfilled.’



Figure 7: The Tate/Bianca murder was front page news.

The brutal murders and the long trials that engulfed after Manson and a part of his following were caught four months later in Death Valley, marked the end of the hippie era and gave way for more conservative political time. ‘In the wake of the Tate-LaBianca slayings, Southern California was thrown into a panic and fear against the hippie movement.’ writes Donaghey (...) for *Vice*. ‘The trust and idealism of the late 60s had curdled into paranoia, and the feeling carried well into the hangover of the early 1970s.’



*Figure 8: Charles Manson marked a cross on his forehead during his trial, which he later changed into a swastika.*

It turned out that Manson had told members of his ‘family’ to kill those residing in the house, after a producer, who used to live there, had declined to work with Manson. ‘For decades, Manson was the symbol of evil, a real-life bogeyman who loomed as the American conception of wickedness incarnate. [...] Manson achieved his goal, becoming so famous that his name replaced those of his victims. The crimes became known as the Manson murders.’ (McKeen, ...) Manson served a life sentence till his death in 2017.

Despite the many victims of the Tate/Bianca murders, actress Sharon Tate remains the best-known and most glamorized victim. The case even bears her name. At the time of her death, she was a fairly successful actress, who’d had by roles in a few major films. Before police zeroed in on Manson and his followers, Tate was the star of the sensational story and glamorous pictures of her were featured on newspapers. But it didn’t take long for Manson to take her place. The murder of Sharon Tate bears similarity to the Elizabeth Short murder because both victims lived in Hollywood at the time of their death and both women were young [in Short’s case; aspiring] actresses mostly admired for their looks. Both were targeted without a clear motive and both fell victim to brutal torture and murder. Both crimes were turned into sensational media spectacles. Aside from the era and it’s political and cultural environments, the big difference between the two crimes is the fact that Elizabeth Short’s killer remains unidentified, and Sharon Tate’s one [or the planner, if you will] became a cult figure. ‘If Manson didn’t live to memorialize his golden anniversary, the rest of us have, thanks to a Manson-industrial complex that has been working overtime. [...] In addition to comic books and multiple websites devoted to him and his groupies, jewelry, coffee mugs, and T-shirts displaying his image sell on eBay, Etsy, and Amazon.’ (Biskind, 2019)



*Figure 9: One of the bodies is rolled out of 10050 Cielo Drive*

‘Though America has had its history of cults and offensive behaviour, Manson's influence of dozens of people, along with his behaviour until his death—he tattooed a swastika on his head in prison—was utterly captivating and unrelatable for so many, it continues to make news, movies and more, maybe just to show the darkness of humans, and how it can impact an entire community and country.’ Kelly Wyne (...) wrote for Newsweek.

The beautiful Sharon Tate remained a symbol for female victimhood. Her tragic story is as sensational as it is American, for she was a marginally successful actress that found most of her fame in death. Her husband Roman Polanski went on to become a successful, Oscar-winning filmmaker, despite fleeing the United States after he was found guilty of the drugging and rape of a 13-year-old-girl in 1977.

### III

#### Case study #1: True Confessions (1981)

The 1981 thriller *True Confessions*, is centred on a LAPD detective Tom Spellacy (Robert Duvall) that tries to solve the case of woman that is found cut in half, while reconnecting with his brother Des (Robert DeNiro), an ambitious monsignor. The screenplay was written by John Gregory and Joan Didion, and was based on Gregory's novel of the same name. 'It is a Los Angeles more or less familiar from dozens of other movies [...] small town, really, where the grafters and the power brokers know each other' (Ebert, 1981)



Figure 10: The discovery of the body in *True Confessions* © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc.

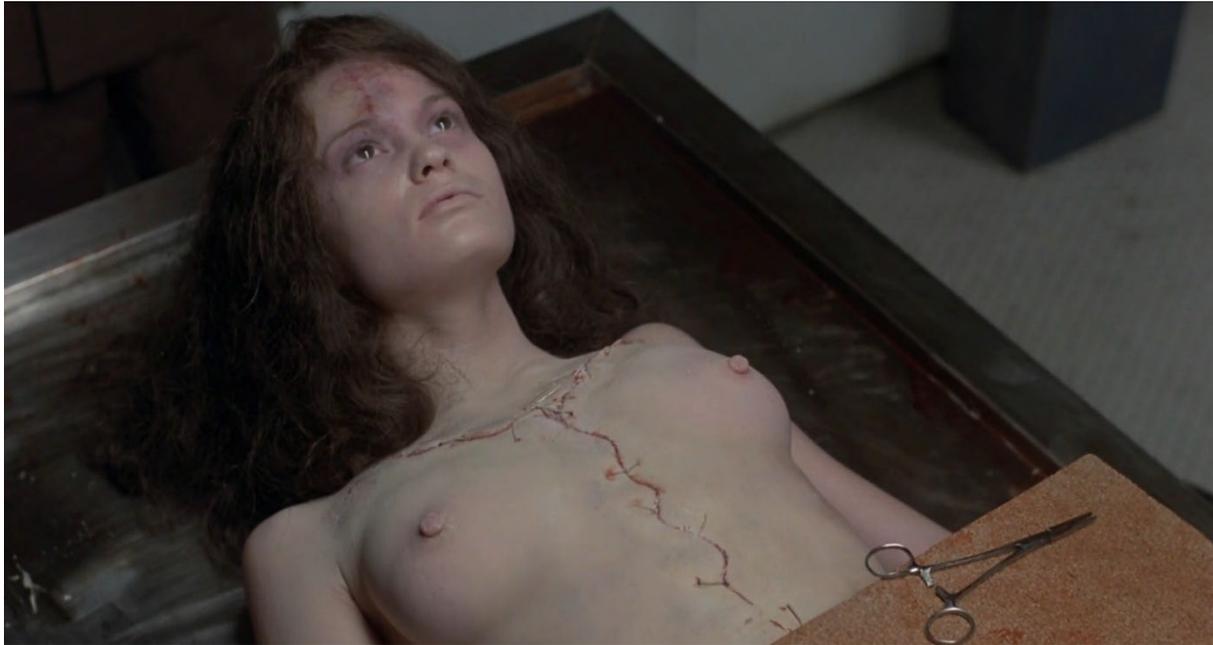


*Figure 11: A photograph taken after some time after the discovery of Elizabeth Short's body. Photographer unknown, 1947.*

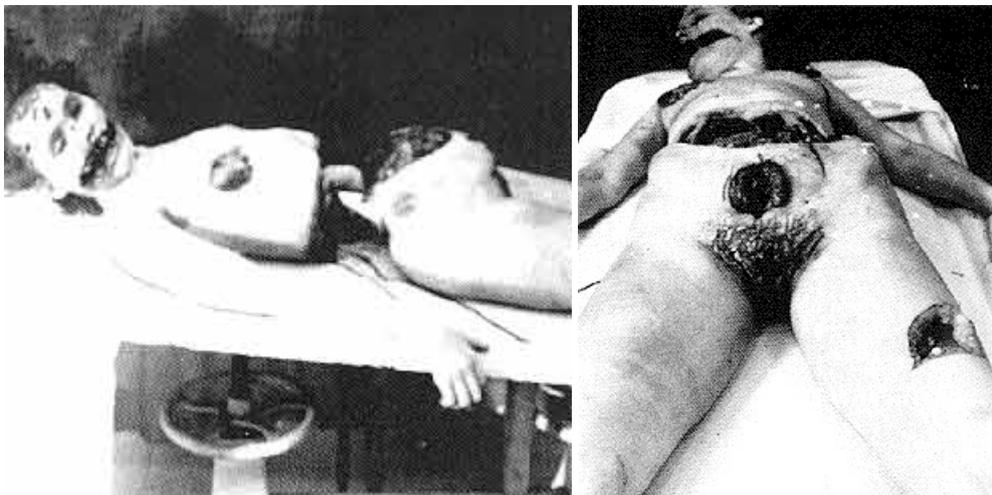
The scene where body is discovered, differs little from the real-life discovery. The body of the female victim (Lois Fazenda) is found in a vacant lot at the edge of a shabby LA neighbourhood, laying naked and torn in half, amidst rubbish. 'The [Elizabeth Short] crime scene was teeming with reporters, photographers, and a crowd of curious onlookers.' (The Black Dahlia Web) In the film, the discovery of the murder plays out in the exact same way.

Investigator Tom later visits the morgue to learn more from the coroner. The most striking difference between the forensic photos and fictionalised victim (portrayed by model Amanda Cleveland), is the absence of the facial wounds; especially the 'Glasgow smile'. The movie victim appears somewhat angelic, almost statue-like. Even the wound of her dissection is neatly stitched up and a table covers the part where her body is cut in half. The small bruise on her head is the only sign that violence was inflicted upon this young woman. The actual autopsy photos show a more graphic scene. In these gruesome images, Short's eyes are halfway closed, her face is heavily battered and there are several

deep cutting wounds visible on her breasts and lower body.



*Figure 12: Lois Fazenda on display on the coroner's table at the morgue in True Confessions. © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc.*



*Figure 15: Two actual photos made of Elizabeth Short's dissected corpse at the morgue. Photographer unknown, 1947.*

In the film, the press labels the victim named Lois Fazenda as 'The Virgin Tramp,' for they find out that she was a Catholic and a prostitute, turning the murder into a sensational case. Although Elizabeth Short was never proven to be a prostitute, the film victim is subtly blamed throughout the entire movie for hanging with the wrong crowd and exposing herself to danger. 'There's not a foolish line in it [the film], nor a bland character,' Canby (1981) writes in *The New York Times*, but he obviously forgot the dead girl. She, as a character, is hollow and almost functions like a prop; for the audience never learns anything about her personality or interests.

The detective eventually discovers that a sleazy porn producer is involved. Lois stars in the so called

‘stag film’ that is a recurring trope in the fictionalisations of the Black Dahlia case, despite the fact that such a film was never found. Aside from *True Confessions*, a (lesbian) porn film plays a vital role in Brian de Palma’s *The Black Dahlia* (2006), which was based on James Elroy’s bestseller of the same name. It was also a plot point the videogame *LA Noire* (2014), which featured the Black Dahlia case. The fact that many fictionalised stories based on the Black Dahlia case involve a porno, says something about the male fantasies that are so easily projected on this crime story, and link eroticism with murder.

After discovering the stag film, Duvall’s character follows up on a tip and discovers the bloody site where the victim was tortured and killed; an abandoned movie set. Tom opens a backdoor and finds a bloody mattress. A bloody trail leads to an even bloodier bathtub where the Dahlia was supposedly drained of blood.



*Figure 16: The mattress were Lois Fazenda was tortured and murdered, True Confessions (1981) © (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc.)*



*Figure 17: A trail of blood at the place where Lois Fazenda was tortured and murdered. True Confessions (1981) (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc.)*



*Figure 19: The bathtub in which Lois Fazenda was drained of her blood, as seen through a half opened door. True Confessions (1981) (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc.)*

Nor the camera nor the detective linger longer than necessary at the crime scene, and after we've seen the bathtub for only two brief seconds, the detective leaves the room and draws his final conclusions. Robert Duvall is horrified, and therefore the audience is. What's notable, is the fact that Tom finds this murder scene on his own. The scene is as an intimate dance between the man and the victim's ghost. In contrast to the crime scene at the beginning of the film, riddled with reporters and detectives, here there is no body; but just the physical manifestation of violence, the crusty red blood that trails from one horrific scene to the next. With visible anguish, Tom visualises what horrors occurred. The

audiences sees the man coming to terms with the violence that another man has inflicted upon an innocent young woman. What he sees is the rampage of a murderous beast and it reminds him a little of his short tempered self.

This cathartic scene intelligently borders on the thin line between discomforting realness and the notion that it's all just make-believe... Staged. And this is thin line is what's interesting to me, mainly because it is clearly rooted in a male fantasy. This particular scene has no basis in reality; the murder spot was never found. So the crime scene discovery is an addition that merely serves the redemption of the protagonist. He cracks the case through clever detective work, and therefore plays out the audience's fantasy of solving the murder.

*True Confessions* is not about the victim. It is about a hardboiled detective and a man of the cloth. Two clever but emotionally incapable men, both powerful in their own way, but each haunted and restrained by hierarchic powers and behavioural rules. While they clash, both brothers to have crises of conscience as each tries to attain redemption and regain self-esteem.

'True Confessions,' the film as well as the novel, owes a lot to a kind of 1940's, tough-guy, fringe-world Southern California fiction in which private eyes drink whisky instead of coffee for breakfast and calmly turn in their sweethearts on murder-one raps because, well, you can't trust a dame who shoots real bullets. She can kill you as easily as she burns toast.' (Canby, 1981) The most important conclusion to draw from this film is that *True Confessions* is not about a murdered woman, but about the relationship between two brothers. The poster resonates this message; the faces of the two leading men are positioned in the centre of the image. Over their faces, a black and white picture of a long, female leg in stockings represents sexuality. The victim in the film doesn't even wear stockings, but in the poster, they are added for effect; a clear association with prostitution. It is no coincidence that the poster shows a disembodied limb; dissects, cuts, disembodies the female figure. As mentioned earlier; the camera is used as a tool of violence and dissociation with the female victim.



Figure 20: True Confessions poster

I want to argue that the central murder in the film is a projection of sexual frustration and the masculine investment in female victimhood. The murdered woman itself isn't all that important; her leg on the poster resembles womanhood as perceived through the male gaze. No face, no body. Just a leg; an object of desire. Aside from being particularly attractive, she could basically be anyone. She is looked down upon and disrespected by several male characters and her murder is merely treated as a compelling puzzle for the male protagonist to obsess over. The only moment in which the brutal torture and violence that is inflicted upon her gains some momentum, is when Tom discovers the murder site. The place itself reminds him, as well as the audience, of the sheer brutality of the act. The blood, now crusty and dry, resembles violence, but not the victim. There is an absent space; namely the body... the main piece of evidence. The movie cuts the horror into digestible parts, but keeps the actual violence hidden.

## IV

### Case study 2: *Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood* (2019)

Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood* (2019) has all the familiar tropes that the director is known for: bloody violence, dark humour, extensive dialogue and meta movie references. Still, this film feels more evocative and subtle than his earlier work. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that it might be his most personal project. 'Tarantino was a boy of 6 in 1969, living far from the center of Los Angeles, and in a sense what he's done here is re-create the world he's imagined the adults were living in at the time.' Turan (2019) writes for The LA Times. 'The film toplines Leonardo DiCaprio and Brad Pitt as, respectively, TV star Rick Dalton and his stuntman Cliff Booth, long time best friends kicking around Hollywood in 1969 with Charlie Manson and company lurking in the background.' A good bit of the lengthy film focusses on the buddy-like relationship between Rick and Cliff. 'The relationship between Rick and Cliff is at the emotional heart of *Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood*, which openly pines for the carefree irresponsibility of youth.' According to Rife (2019). 'The pair function here a bit like Raymond Chandler's tarnished knights, doing good despite themselves, an association heightened by a bookstore scene reminiscent of one in Humphrey Bogart's "The Big Sleep." Turan (...) wrote.

Halfway through the film, aging stuntman Cliff Booth visits the infamous Spahn Ranch, in search for an associate producer. The neglected ranch was a movie set where the Manson followers lived and lured rich men into giving them money. After Cliff finds out that the has-been producer has become an apathetically victim of the Manson crew, he decides he can't do anything for him. After Cliff Booth leaves the grounds, a young female hippie he had encountered before confronts him. The camera pans up from her legs to her waist. We see her body in parts; the camera cuts off her legs and bottom; sexualising her presence. Cliff Booth walks past her indifferently, casually dismissing her. Just as Philip Marlowe didn't allow himself sexual diversions, Cliff doesn't fall for the beautiful trap that is this (underage) girl.



Figure 21: Cliff walks away from the ranch but is met by Pussycat (Columbia Pictures)

But then, he discovers that one of the hippies has stuck a knife in his tire. Annoyed, he stands in front of his car, looking at the grinning culprit. Brad Pitt's resembles legendary Robert Redford in his glory days. A tanned, blond cowboy, looking like an ancient advertisement of the ideal American white man. He stands in front of his boss' shiny Cadillac while Pitt sighs at the childish act and slowly takes off his glasses. The audience can feel the tension rising, perhaps there is even reason enough to feel a little scared, for confrontation is now inevitable. But Cliff Booth stands firmly in his boots and asks the hippie straightforward to replace the tire, using a rational argument to explain himself. The savage just grins and declines. Then, Cliff Booth promptly punches him in the face, knocking him to the ground. The audience can only quietly cheer him on because Tarantino makes sure the flawed hero offered a solution before the violence. Therefore, the beating is justified here, for one does not fuck with another man's car; an overused symbol of manhood and American freedom.



*Figure 22: Cliff stands in front of his bosses' car (Columbia Pictures)*

Halfway into the film, we see main protagonist Rick Dalton's neighbour Sharon Tate (Margot Robbie) in a long scene. The camera follows her legs as she casually heads towards the theatre in a sunlit Hollywood boulevard. Again; the camera is used as a tool of decapitation and disembodiment. The machinery of Hollywood cuts up Margot Robbie body into pieces; her legs are an obvious symbol of male desire. The audience then watches Sharon Tate as she casually watches her own film. She is magnificently played by Robbie as a naïve blonde; embodying the male phantasy of a movie starlet. As someone who knows what happened to Tate in reality, these scenes feel somewhat eerie... as a silence before the storm, or a way of setting up Sharon Tate as a childlike but sexual character, bursting with innocence and joy... She represents a clear male fantasy of the passive and harmless beauty.



Figure 23: Behind the screen footage of a cameraman closely following Margot Robbie as Sharon Tate (Columbia Pictures)

On a first watch, one can only look at these scenes with a sense of joy as well as a growing dread. But as the movie carries along, Tarantino subverts the expectations. Like he did in *Inglorious Bastards* (2009) where Adolf Hitler was brutally shot to death, he now warps history into his own fantastic reality. ‘This is Tarantino’s most personal film in decades, and the longings expressed in it flow from who he is as a person: an established middle-aged white guy confronting his own impending irrelevance. That exact prospect eats away at the film’s protagonist, Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio), a fading Western TV star whose diminishing celebrity has forced him to contemplate the unthinkable for an actor of his calibre: going to Rome to star in “Eye-talian” Westerns. Rick still lives the lifestyle of a man in his 20s, but now those blotto nights alone in his Hollywood bachelor pad leave him hungover, melancholy, and unable to remember his lines on the set of whatever B-grade TV show he’s guest starring on that week.’ (Rife, 2019)

‘Don’t misunderstand, the familiar Tarantino gut-clenching ultra-violence, especially against women, has hardly disappeared. But it has been in effect quarantined to several wrenching minutes near the end of what is [...] a tribute to both a bygone era and the kind of masculine charisma and camaraderie the movies have always specialized in.’ (Turan, 2019) In the final scene, the Manson hippies enter Rick Dalton’s home, where they encounter Cliff Booth, who just lit a LSD-tipped cigarette. The male hippie says something about the devil and his deeds and the intoxicated stuntman mocks him in response. One of the hippies request the intruder with the gun to shoot Cliff, but before he can, Cliff whistles and his loyal pit-bull sinks his teeth into the flesh of the intruder. A violent battle engulfs, in which Cliff and his dog inflict brutal violence on the home intruders. After the gunman is killed, a hippie is mauled by the dog while another attacks Cliff with a knife. He then slams her head repeatedly at several surfaces across the house, including a framed movie poster with Rick Dalton’s face on it.



*Figure 24: Cliff kicks in the head of Charles after he is mauled by his dog and stabbed with his own knife. (Columbia Pictures)*



*Figure 25: Cliff then proceeds to slam the red-haired hippie girl twelve times on several surfaces in the house until she is dead. (Columbia Pictures)*



Figure 26: Rick Dalton watches as the final hippie girl succumbs by flames after she is mauled, has fallen through a glass window. (Columbia Pictures)

The fictionalised violence finds his way into ‘reality’ of in the form of an actual flamethrower used as a prop that Dalton has kept as a souvenir. When the neighbour from the Tate mansion comes to check if everyone’s all right, Dalton casually replies; ‘Well the fucking hippies aren’t, that’s for sure.’ The twist in this film is not that the male protagonists have some stake in solving a case of a tragic dead woman. Instead, they are completely oblivious to the Manson threat. Nonetheless, the film eventually turns out to be an investment in female victimhood, as Sharon Tate is saved by the film’s flawed heroes. All the other women in the film are portrayed as dangerous and untrustworthy; there are ‘unwomen’. In Tarantino’s universe, the extreme violence inflicted by the old school Hollywood archetypes saves society from the harsh reality in which a pregnant, innocent woman and her friends were tortured to death. The climax of bloodshed in *Once Upon A Time...* creates a moment of catharsis for the leading men; through killing the hippies, the aging has-beens finally have found meaning again. The brutal killings are justified, for the audience knows that if the Manson hippies are inherently evil, for in real history, they did the worst imaginable. The scene is also symbolic for the relation between actor and stuntman; Cliff does all the hard labour and ends up in the hospital, but Rick Dalton still manages to steal the show by getting the most glorious kill; perhaps a comment on the fantasy of succeeding and fame without really working for it and staying relevant forever. The film is a captivating fairy tale for aging men, a celebration of over-the-top 60s filmmaking in which the flawed buddies save the beautiful and innocent female through the act of violence. Still, *Once Upon A Time* is Tarantino’s poignant love letter to Hollywood, as well as a clever and emotional dive into the masculine fantasies we construct for ourselves. The film is a construction of a male fantasy and strongly resonates with the way film noir and its narrative conventions of film use their power to disembody and objectify; even the graphic violence against women is seemingly justified by framing strong-willed and independent women as violent and dangerous. The corollary is masculine supremacy; the men in question are actually impotent and more or less useless, but through protecting their own fantasy, are redeemed.

## **V The Male Movie Knight – Masculine phantasies of female victimhood**

After carefully analysing two films in which I can conclude that despite their many differences, both pictures have a clear origin in Los Angeles hardboiled crime fiction. The first film, *True Confessions* (1981), takes a classical approach to the LA crime genre and successfully mimics late 1940s Los Angeles as depicted in hardboiled crime novels. The murder of Elizabeth Short is slightly altered and merely operates as a plot motif that drive the narrative forward. Robert Duvall' plays a classical 'hardboiled' detective. With his wit, temper and scruffy behaviour, he is quite reminiscent of the male movie knight from Raymond Chandler novels. The character functions as a flawed but righteous antihero through which the audience can solve the infamous Black Dahlia murder. In the end, the movie

*Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood* (2019) uses another prominent LA crime, the Tate/Bianca slayings. It cleverly uses the environment and the circumstances in which the crime would take place to tell a story about two aging friends that are slowly losing their significance in a place that changes too quickly for them to keep up. Still, in the final sequence, the films' heroes (although somewhat ignorantly) save the day. They never come to terms with their transience but instead cling to their roles in the Hollywood landscape, as well as traditional ideas of masculinity. Sharon Tate is portrayed as an allegory of innocence and beauty; an joyful actress at the beginning of her career that is the least to deserve. The film turns the tragedy of Tate into a phantasy in which the young woman lives happily after ever, saved by two aging relics of another time. It is not all that different of the ancient fairy tales in which knights in shiny armour save the female victim from dragons, isolated castles or villainous witches.

Both films are centred on the relationship between two men, which are played by famous Hollywood stars. In *Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood* (2019) they are friends that work together. In *True Confessions*, they are brothers, one detective, the other working as a monsignor. Furthermore, both films take place in Los Angeles and are centred on a high stake crime that had links to Hollywood and the glamorous world of showbusiness. The two films, both in their own way, alter historic events in order to fit their narrative.

### **'Ideal' masculinity and Female victimhood**

What's important in the fantasies played out in both films, is that the ideal masculinity is defined by a stoic rationality, defiance of rules and a resort to violence. Violence is projected as necessary and cathartic, while female victimhood is used a plot motif. In order to (re)gain relevance, the male characters have to save the female protagonist (*Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood*) or avenge the death of the victim. The protagonist can only be a phantasy when there is a savage, untamed men (often a murderous or sexual predator) that functions as an antagonist. This is the case in both analysed movies. In their own respective way, both pictures search for meaning and purpose into the real life tragedies in which (mostly) women were victimised, by warping them into a fictional narrative in which the male protagonist solves or prohibits the brutal violence that happened in reality. In *True Confessions*, the murderer is already deceased when the protagonist solves the case, but his crime gives the main character something to obsess over and thus redeems him. In *Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood*, the culprits are brutally and almost absurdly murdered by our heroes. The violent final scene is cathartic and portrays violence as the ultimate masculine act. The violence is justified because it prohibits violence committed against the innocent beauty. Film as a mechanism licenses violence against women through excluding, cutting and marginalising women. Real women don't exist in Film Noir; they are either dated stereotypes (such as the *Femme Fatale*) or objects that are disembodied or dissected in order to become forensic evidence.

## **The future**

In a Hollywood landscape that for a long time was almost exclusively dominated by male writers, directors and cinematographers, it is no surprise that the 'Male Movie Knight' is still a popular and widely used trope in the Western movie business. The crime genre is as popular as it is today, and movies have become even more violent in recent times. However, the post-metoo era challenges the all-too-familiar and somewhat overused portrayals of masculinity that stems from classical crime movies from Hollywood's 'Golden Age'. This development reflected in the 2020 cinematic landscape, in which many female moviemakers made films about toxic masculinity. Examples are Marielle Heller's *A Beautiful Day In The Neighbourhood*, in which a cynical journalist softens up when he is assigned to interview Fred Rogers; Chloe Zhao's *The Rider*, about a cowboy re-assessing his identity after a near-fatal accident; Lynne Ramsay's portrait of a former hitman in crisis in *You Were Never Really Here*. Some female directors are turning their gaze on traditional masculinity and its problems, while others are creating fresh perspectives on womanhood.

Now the movie industry is slowly but surely giving way to different perspectives under the pressure of feminism and diversity politics, the lingering hardboiled tropes and characters are re-examined, critiqued and replaced. But it isn't likely that films in which the masculine investment in female victimhood are key will completely be eradicated from the cinematic landscape any time soon. For the LA crime genre stems at the root of all Western films, and Hollywood's playground will always be tainted with crime and death and the camera a tool that allows and licenses the dissection and disembodiment of women.

## Conclusion

Over the course of the 1940s, the 'hardboiled' LA crime genre broke with the conventional crime fiction by introducing a new type of protagonist against a portrayal of Los Angeles as a sleazy and crime-ridden town. The rough but righteous private eye that starred these stories garnered enormous popularity. With the rise of 'talkies' in Hollywood, the character trope of the gumshoe detective quickly transcended from literature into cinema. Through Film Noir, the gumshoe detective became a Hollywood household name, turning the stories of hardboiled crime writers into crime movies with a stark and dark visual language, derived from German expressionist film. The stories on which these films were based, often took inspiration from sensational real life crimes that happened in and around Los Angeles.

The Film Noir genre reinvented itself over the years, but its source in the hardboiled literature genre is still easily noticeable. Tropes such as the male movie knight are still predominant in contemporary cinema. Through analysing two major motion pictures based upon infamous Los Angeles crimes, I proved that male phantasies as established in hardboiled fiction, were and are still prominent in cinema.

*True Confessions* (1981) took a conventional approach by using female victimhood (namely the brutal murder, torture and rape of an innocent young girl that is based on the murder of Elizabeth Short) as a plot device. The film is re-enacting a time when Los Angeles was a more seedy and violent place, as so often portrayed in hardboiled crime novels and Film Noir. The film carefully establishes post War LA as a metropole challenged by large scale corruption, morally ambiguous power figures and gruesome crimes on which media outlets sensationally report. Despite the murder of a young girl taking a central place in the film's narrative, it is a mainly a film about two clashing brothers. One of them is redeemed by solving the murder, providing him with catharsis.

*Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood* (2019) functions more as a literal fantasy. The movie explores an alternative reality, in which the audience follows a fading movie star and his stuntman/buddy, who eventually prevent the tragic Tate/Bianca slayings of 1969 by killing the Manson hippies. In comparison to *True Confessions* (1981), this movie seems to be more aware of its implications and the male phantasies that are work, thus functioning as a way for the director to come to terms with his age. It is also homage to classical Hollywood buddy trope, as well as a love letter to classic Hollywood. The foreknowledge of the murder of Sharon Tate is used in the film to create tension and subvert expectations. In *Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood* (2019), director Quentin Tarantino explores his own struggle with transience by playing out a phantasy in which two aging men, once more, save the female victim (Sharon Tate) from a tragic death.

In both these films, the male movie knight takes central stage. This classical character trope consists of a flawed but heroic man that saves a woman from horror that is inflicted by a savage male antagonist. This character is part of a larger phantasy, in which masculinity is defined by rationality, overcoming flaws, indiscriminate violent behaviour. In this phantasy, the male protagonist has a clear stake in protecting or avenging the female victim. Female victimhood is a plot motif and is mainly used to give the male narrative relevance and redemption.

With this thesis, I explored the hardboiled literature genre and how it transcended into a cinema. Through cinematic analyses, I have shown how tropes shaped by the hardboiled LA crime genre still linger on in cinema. I have discussed and elaborated on fantasy of 'Male Movie Knight' and its place in the landscape of Hollywood, in order to understand my own stake in this fantasy.



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