

# Dead Man Talking

C. Scott Combs

*Scott Combs is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at St. John's University.*

*"He's dead now, except for he's breathing."*

*The Killers (1946)*

One way to introduce film studies as its own unique discipline is by sharing a part of my own research. As a graduate student at UC Berkeley, I wrote on some of the perdurable ways that American cinema has visualized the process of dying. Titled *Final Touches: Registering Death in American Cinema*, my dissertation studies how American movies see dying by focusing on key moments of technological shift within cinema history, like the transition to story films around 1908, or the transition to synchronized sound around 1928. My emphasis throughout is on "dying," not "death." Unlike the still images of painting and photography, the moving image records time. It would therefore seem more capable of apprehending the process between alive and dead, and thus of harnessing the death moment as something visible, certifiable, immediately recognizable to audiences. But exactly because it is so bent on showing process, the movie camera inherits the more general problem of how to determine when and whether death has occurred. The solutions cinema has improvised to fill this gap—to confirm and finalize death—have been under-theorized and deserve to be studied carefully.

Early filmmakers intuited the camera's potential for seeing dying, a fact supported by the very ubiquity of one-shot films made before 1905—in the US, France, and Denmark, mainly—that variously purported to show bodies at the moment they ceased to function voluntarily. Some of these bodies were beheaded, a good many others were hanged. A few were electrocuted. Despite the range of technique, filmed executions (both real and fake) introduced perceptual problems surrounding the confirmation of death. Though motions such as twitching, convulsing, and jolting could visualize the process of dying, only the immobile body could connote "lights out." Not moving was just not enough to convince us. Conviction was supplied by other figures surrounding the body—doctors, prison wardens, historic kings, policemen—who step in to check vital signs, occasionally looking at the camera as though to assure us dying has elapsed. I call these figures "registrants" to honor the service they perform for us absent and ever-curious spectators.

As cinema evolved, so too did this registration supplement. The emergence of fiction films brought with it more elaborate registration scenarios. In the early story films of D.W. Griffith, confirmation is fully relegated to those figures who are usually somewhere else when their friend or relative perishes and who now must return to behold a corpse, touch it, confirm its lack of vital signs, and gesticulate grief. The scene in which a living character passes through the cognitive stages of realizing someone's death was often shot separately from the scene in which dying occurs, as if to accommodate our need to register screen death not just once but multiple times, and not just in the body but outside it on some other mediating body or object.

Here I will pause to introduce in detail two further supplements of finality. First-person voice-over and flashback—those staples of classical Hollywood subjective narration—would further subsidize the scene of dying with testimony and orientation provided by the dying character's psychology. Both devices envisage a domain beyond the intractable border between us and the screen body: cinematic flashback manifests a past experience that weighs heavily on the dying man's conscience, and voice-over anchors us within the die-er's mindset. Let me set the stage with an example. Imagine a movie opens with a man staggering into a police station to report a murder. "Who was murdered?" inquires the homicide captain. "I was" claims our mysterious protagonist, whereupon his rejoinder sparks a flashback explanation of how he came to be fatally poisoned by a mysterious other.

Sadly, I did not make this up. This sketchy claim to be already dead begins Rudolph Maté's *D.O.A.* (1950). From this scene at police headquarters, Bigelow's story leads his interlocutors back into the past, to the story surrounding his fatal poisoning only hindsight helps him grasp. Diverting attention away from his present condition, Bigelow's flashback eventually returns to his present but still unfinished dying in the police chair. Or take Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), a film in which the protagonist Joe Gillis starts talking to us as a disembodied voice-over narrator, promising to tell us the whole truth about an unidentified body floating in an L.A. pool. That "whole truth" will come to include the fact that Joe Gillis is the floating corpse; at movie's end we realize with certainty that our voice-over narrator has been dead along. Whether from near-death (*D.O.A.*) or death (*Sunset Boulevard*), flashback alters the threshold of the body at the final moment—when Bigelow dies his flashback catches up to him, and when Joe Gillis is shot and stumbles into the pool we realize his death had already happened.

It is no accident that both of these films belong to that loosely defined movie genre known as film noir. The trend of subjective dying enters perforce with the film noir cycle of the 1940s and early 1950s, a genre known for expressionist style, detective plots, and lots of derailments from character centeredness. Noir stories concern male heroes fated to repeat some past destructive act. Passively waiting to die, The Swede in *The Killers* (1946) sums up the general predicament: "I did something wrong—once. Thanks for comin'." The genre is replete with men waiting to die. In one way, Bigelow's claim to have been murdered fits squarely within the tradition of noir's ensuing pasts: he has been poisoned, and soon the poison will catch up to him. In *Out of the Past* (1947), Jeff Markham tells his girlfriend the story of his sordid past while driving to Lake Tahoe to stop running. *Sunset Boulevard* goes all the way and posits the space and time of Joe Gillis's act of voice-over narration after life,

positioning him (in theory, if not in practice) as a posthumous and omniscient authority over all screen events.

As the protagonist narrates the screen action, his speech seemingly confers to him the power to control time, and by extension, the time of his own death. He wishes to die only after he has first gotten off his chest some portion of an incriminating past. What the dying have to say outweighs all the witty language of the living. Like us, Kitty knows the worth of a dying man's words in *The Killers*, begging her expiring husband Colfax to tell the police "Kitty was innocent." Lieutenant Sam Lubinsky intervenes: "Don't ask a dyin' man to lie his soul into hell." Dying seems to present the least interference of the censoring psyche, producing a speech act uncommonly trustworthy and binding. Like final words, stories told *in extremis* are particularly loaded, and for good reason, for the flashback can deepen death for beholders by arriving at the end of life via the detour of a personalized narrative. Death arrives only after the storyteller's expenditure of narrative energy. The die-er must give us something, and we him, for us both to participate meaningfully in the final instant. Catching up with the man who borrows narrative agency for the moment, death occurs "on time" rather than "too soon."<sup>1</sup>[1]

Experienced as the time compressed between two deaths (the claim to have been murdered and the actual somatic collapse), dying in *D.O.A.* takes the form of a desperate plotting of Bigelow's own life-before-death, its content the very absurdity of that plot. All past events are haunted by impending extinction. Though it begins clearly as Bigelow's speech, the flashback in *D.O.A.* (like so many others) drops his parent point-of-view and opts instead for a fuller view of his environs, a picture that fatally evaded him the first time around. At the Fisherman's Club, the camera finds his cloaked assailant clad in a striped scarf. As Joe tells the bartender to fetch him his drink abandoned at the bar's opposite end, the camera cuts to frame the mysterious figure as he replaces Joe's glass with another in his possession. Catching a glimpse of the villain at work, the camera objectifies the flashback well outside Frank's subjective recollection. The more omniscient camera moves outside his body and mind to capture this missing act of perception.

Just as the flashback shows more, it may also show less than the narrator knows. We don't actually see Bigelow finish killing his attacker Halliday. Instead, as gun shots are hastily fired, we twirl back to Bigelow in the present, interrupting this last piece of incriminating visible evidence. Typical of noir flashback, Bigelow's story refuses to indict him where his fault may actually be most palpable. From the beginning of the film, Bigelow maintains he is already dead, telling the police he was murdered. Particularly, his speech to Mrs. Phillips elegantly masks his present condition: "I'm not alive—sure I can stand here and talk to you, I can breathe and I can move, but I'm not alive because I did take that poison and there's

---

[1] Here as throughout, I refer to Linda Williams' work on the temporalities of spectator gratification in the body genres (weepies, slashers, and pornographic films), applying them to the camera's encounter with the moment of death. See Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Genre, Gender, Excess" in *Film Quarterly* 44 (1991), 2-13.

nothing I can do.”<sup>2</sup>[2] What he does not say, of course, is that he is *going* to die, that he is still *dying*. As such, Bigelow insists on an “on/off” switch model for what others—and we—see as a process, as though cinema here is staging a “debate” that has dogged its own history. Noticeably silenced by Paula’s questioning, he publicly behaves like a man for whom dying has become a horrible secret.<sup>3</sup>[3] Maureen Turim describes the noir voice-over as a weapon against full admission of guilt, if not an excuse for out and out lying: “In a sense, then, the confession serves to protect the hero, as it never exposes his psyche to examination nor allows for his own responsibility in desiring to kill off his rivals. In the name of self-revelation, it is a consistent disavowal, a psychoanalytical term for an indirect process of denial.”<sup>4</sup>[4] Certainly we do not see Bigelow’s assailant at the abandoned warehouse, firing shots at the running man; nor can we possibly believe that Bigelow recognizes the scarf on Halliday the way we do, for he did not see the man the first time around at the Fisherman’s Club. The flashback’s screening of the truth about mortality falls in line with this more general avoidance tactic. Bigelow’s stake in being already dead certainly allows him to evade the fuller truth that he also committed murder. “I’m not alive” covers over “I killed.” But, more importantly, it also covers over the future “I’m going to die.” It is easier for Bigelow to be already dead than to face his own near but unpredictable end. The flashback’s visuals do all the talking, and facing death, for him.

Projecting death onto the past keeps the emphasis away momentarily from the hero’s waiting for his future. The flashback bequeaths noir heroes more time, and specifically, more time to see their deaths coming.<sup>5</sup>[5] The approach was denied the protagonist the first time around—death’s appearance caught him unawares but by the time he is finished will appear the end of a predestined chain of interlocked incidents. In what seems an exercise in Freud’s notion of the compulsion to repeat, the noir flashback binds the prior traumatic events into a form of narrative digestion. Not only is the flashback a means by which the narrator tries to master the events of his past by repeating them, injecting into previous trauma an anxiety which could not then have been present, but it is also simply a temporary escape valve to secure more time before death. By gathering onlookers for his own end, the narrator injects more future into his demise, almost relishing the moments in his near-past that have yet to

---

<sup>2</sup>[2] Note the remarkable meta-cinematic quality of this statement. Bigelow is in front of us but not, ghostly in his presence, like all screen bodies. Even the poison extracted from his body for proof evokes the cinema—as the second doctor shows it to Frank, he turns off the light to let the liquid shine its fluorescence.

<sup>3</sup>[3] There is many an Ivan Ilyich in Classical Hollywood, Judith Traherne (Bette Davis) in *Dark Victory* being perhaps the finest example. Traherne refuses to submit to doctor’s orders or to hear her condition discussed. Suffering from a “glioma” or brain tumor, she sends everyone away from the house on the onslaught of her lazy-eye blindness, or “amblyopia,” so she can die in private; the camera shies away too, blurring out her final image as she approaches her death unseen.

<sup>4</sup>[4] Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 184.

<sup>5</sup>[5] One cannot help but recall the line, spoken by the warden, in Oshima’s *Death by Hanging*: “Death is real only if we can see it coming.”

turn into his future-death.<sup>6</sup>[6] As Vera says in *Detour*, “We all know we’re going to kick off someday, it’s only a question of when.”<sup>7</sup>[7] That question of “when” is exactly what worries many of our male narrators—and cinema more generally. The unknown end motivates the noir hero’s unremitting efforts to place death at the end of a story he expertly tells.

Though voice-over and flashback enable the die-er to comment from a safe harbor, mortal concerns are usually displaced onto the female body or some other agent of sexual threat. In *Detour*, Roberts notices Vera’s frequent coughing spells: “You’ve got a mean cough, you oughtta do something about it.” Vera: “I’ll be all right.” Roberts: “That’s what Camille said...nobody you know.” Vera: “Wasn’t that the dame that died of consumption?” Roberts, looking away, nods: “Yeah.” Plotting does something useful with time before death. It replaces the anxiety of a known but inexact future—a duration of dying that is uncontrollable—with a story that has its own start and finish, a story that often features a more explicitly culpable femme fatale.

Preparing for death through the detour of the flashback pins male anxiety onto the nearest female object. As she highlights the gender inequality of the voice in classical cinema, Kaja Silverman points out that male, not female, characters gain access to the elsewhere of both 3<sup>rd</sup>- and 1<sup>st</sup>-person disembodied narration. Losing the voice constitutes an exclusive privilege for the male; the female voice, by contrast, is usually contained by a framing device in the narrative “such as a painting, a song-and-dance performance, or a film-within-a-film,” or else it is made so theatrically present as to be an uncontrollable extension of the woman’s body.<sup>8</sup>[8] This only serves to remind us of how the recognition of male virtue in classical cinema usually functions as a homosocial exchange between men. For one thing, the sympathetic ear to which the confessor addresses his tale belongs to a man of higher symbolic power, such as a boss, mentor, or police sergeant, who supplies missing moral recognition in the nick of time—just before punitive forces step in. Second, this higher power of registration secures finality, as with the stamp of “D.O.A.” on the police report at the end of that film. And finally, because the spectator has been involved in the relay of the plot as well, the official registration delivers death to the spectator with the appropriate expenditure of plot. “On time” deaths tend to be social, whereas “too soon” deaths are rarely communal acts of passing and often demand replay and repetition for the living to absorb, perhaps

---

6[6] The general care taken by flashers-back in molding their stories certainly reminds us of Paul Schrader’s comments on film noir, especially that strand of noir Schraeder classifies as “Romantic.” See Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir,” in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 1996), 53–63.

7[7] The fear of death’s unknowability appears throughout *Detour*’s dialogue. While held hostage in Vera’s hotel room, Roberts compares morbid philosophies with his captor. Vera tells him to lighten up: “There’s plenty of people dying this minute. They’d give anything to trade places with you. I know what I’m talking about.” Roberts rebuts her claimed authority: “I’m not so sure. At least they know they’re done for. They don’t have to sweat blood wondering if they are.”

8[8] Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1988), 56.

vainly, the original occurrence. We should also note that in most cases, the flasher-back would otherwise die alone.

Hardly does the flashback's final image settle the mystery of Bigelow's poisoning. Once we return to the police station where he is finishing his story, Bigelow strains to say something intelligible about his girlfriend Paula and collapses behind the inspector's desk. Rather than be guided by the voice to the heart of the diegetic mystery, we get lost in the plot along the way. Writing of *D.O.A.* and another film noir *The Big Clock*, J.P. Telotte claims that "in such films time becomes not only the propelling imperative of the narrative, but its antagonist as well, a force that promises to shut it down, to end the individual's history before it can be fully written."<sup>9</sup>[9] For Telotte, all noir narration is a modernist design that foregrounds the "precarious nature of the individual human story."<sup>10</sup>[10] Plotting itself, especially when the product is labyrinthine, becomes a form of dying; putting together the pieces of his death is what Bigelow is doing at rapid speeds just moments before his time runs out in the police station. Spinning narrative webs to cover over the present is literalized in the aptly-named *Detour* (1945), in which Al Roberts is heard narrating his "future" capture as we see it occur right before our eyes.

The actual plot converts waiting for death into a release of energy through storytelling. For Peter Brooks, this conversion is the driving force behind all narrative. Readers strive to reach the story's death, its ending, expecting it to rhyme with, be similar to yet different from, the beginning that drew them in. For readers, the beginning promises to bring "final coherence" at the end in the form of "that metaphor" for the beginning "that may be reached through the chain of metonymies" offered by the plot. In fact, the middle pages of plot extend, and dilate, the difference between beginning and ending to enact the reader's desire to seize his/her own fulfillment of that initial promise: "We might say that we are able to read present moments—in literature and, by extension, in life—as endowed with narrative meaning only because we read them in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot."<sup>11</sup>[11] Brooks' point is that all plots ensnare us in the death drive, that they in fact "pre-enact" dying.

As the reader moves toward the climax of the story's finish, plot must provide enough metonymic question-and-answer relay to ensure the reader continue to seek the ending as the final revelation of the meaning of the plot, or life, that came before. While at the same time the plot must also guarantee enough local satisfaction to provide the illusion of progress. Walter Benjamin has observed that the protagonist's death allows for a cathartic encounter with mortality otherwise denied the reader in life; this is due in large part to the

---

<sup>9</sup>[9] J.P. Telotte, "The Big Clock of Film Noir," *Film Criticism*, Winter 1989-90, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup>[10] Telotte, "Clock," 2.

<sup>11</sup>[11] Peter Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot," *Reading for the Plot* (Boston: Harvard UP, 1992), 93-4.

narratability afforded life exclusively by death.<sup>12</sup>[12] Only when life is over can biography be narrated confidently toward its ending as destiny. With narrative, as Brooks points out, the ending structures the beginning throughout the mid-section. The ending in question does not need be, though often is, the literal death of a character. Bigelow's death at the end of *D.O.A.* must derail us from and return us to the police station to watch him die.

Brooks employs Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) to provide a model for how ends relate to beginnings. Freud draws on both the returning war veterans plagued by repeating traumatic dreams and the child's *fort/da* mastery of his mother's absence to describe the psychic work of the compulsion to repeat, a description that proves to be especially relevant to cinema. By repeating (not simply remembering), the patient produces the sense of being perpetually subject to the prior traumatic occurrence, even to "suggest pursuit by a demonic power."<sup>13</sup>[13] Because flashback brings memory to life, so to speak, and plays it out in real time, I feel especially drawn to Brooks's Freudian model as a way to apprehend near-death storytelling in movies.

Along narrative's route, says Brooks, plot repeats a central set of character relations or events. Each event takes meaning by virtue of its recall and variation of prior items from the fabula. For example, Bigelow's second encounter with the scarf-clad assailant triggers the spectator's memory of that scarf's earlier appearance, with the difference now that Frank believes he has learned that Halliday is the killer. Gathering its energies into usable bundles through repetition, the text delays and postpones the final discharge of energy, turning away from the momentary quick fix to ensure that the final discharge of energy (upon novel's or life's completion) will be more complete.

And more individuated. Brooks elaborates on Freud's claim that "the aim of all life is death" to tell us the organism must "follow its own path to death, to ward off any ways of returning to the inorganic which are not immanent to the organism itself."<sup>14</sup>[14] Plot must avoid the lure of reaching its goal too soon. Bigelow cannot tell Paula, or anyone else, that he's going to die, because he's saving that for us, later, when his death is imminent. In this vein, Brooks sees the pleasure principle and the death drive as overlapping, even grafted on top of

---

<sup>12</sup>[12] To quote but one of several passages: "The novel is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about." Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 101. For more explanation for why we never draw the warmth of death from our own fate, see pps. 93-4 from the same essay.

<sup>13</sup>[13] For one film version of this, see Alan Parker's *Angel Heart*, in which Harald Angel is haunted by flashback images that turn out to belong to another man whom Angel forgot he devoured in his earlier vain effort to escape the devil.

<sup>14</sup>[14] Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot," 102.

one another, much like a palimpsest: the plot is “beyond and under the domination of” the pleasure principle. Repetition serves two different functions for Brooks, both forward-moving operations.<sup>15</sup>[15] It provides the “sensible or audible” (cinematic) pulsations that keep us coming back to the text. But it is also a recurring blockade, for “repetition also retards the pleasure principle’s search for the gratification of discharge, which is another forward-moving drive of the text.”<sup>16</sup>[16] Brooks arrives at a dynamic model of reading plot similar to the conflicting drives toward pleasure and death: “The desire of the text (the desire of reading) is hence desire for the end, but desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour...which is the plot of narrative.”<sup>17</sup>[17]

This masterplot seems to apply to all genres—it is narrative’s general aim to put us through the process of anticipating the end. For Brooks, all plots are mini-dyings. But his model bears special relevance to the flashbacks from death. Such stories delay the final moment long enough to ensure that death arrives for the storyteller at the right time. Thus biography emerges from the throes of dying. Bigelow is invested in the compensatory work of the masterplot, driving toward his end through a detour back through his past. Whether fabricated or not, this is his past for his future death. Ending becomes contingent upon storytelling. The end of life, which threatened to come too soon, is put back in the future, where it belongs.

Or we could say that *D.O.A.*’s plot—the trail of events from Bigelow’s trip to San Francisco through his poisoning, diagnosis, coping and revenge—is *about plot itself*. The moment of death is placed at the end of the narrative that Bigelow helped write. Perhaps still a bit shy of a good death, Bigelow makes closure more plausible through his 80-minute metaphor of end for beginning. The shortest distance between two points may not be the preferable route to take.

Subsequently, American cinema has pursued noir’s double-death format both with and without voice-over flashback, and it is with both throngs of this later tradition that I would like to close. It seems the inspiring effect from *Sunset Boulevard*’s circuitous narrative is that strange moment—brief indeed—when we realize we have been aligned all along with a dead man’s perspective and have really gotten nowhere since the movie began. An element of the film—the voice-over—remains the same after death, truly unchallenged by bodily change. *American Beauty* (1999) repeats the noir idiom of a corpse’s belated narration but lets us know up front: “In less than a year, I will be dead,” Lester Burnham tells us knowingly. The opening aerial shots of Burnham’s hometown make at least implicit what the point-of-view of the dead offers cinema—namely, an intimation of some sort of afterlife or purgatory. No longer located behind the commissioner’s desk, purgatory has been placed

---

<sup>15</sup>[15] Brooks, “Freud’s Masterplot,” 102.

<sup>16</sup>[16] Brooks, “Freud’s Masterplot,” 103.

<sup>17</sup>[17] Brooks, “Freud’s Masterplot,” 104.



among the clouds. Whatever change the body undergoes on screen, the voice-over keeps the vital signs still going. The result is curious: separating voice from body realizes a fantasy of transcendence, yet the liberated voice remains stuck on rewind, in a state of perpetual revision.

More common are films that position a character in a kind of purgatory but do not employ voice-over or flashback. *The Sixth Sense* (1999) memorably features the protagonist Malcolm Crowe's own realization that he is already dead. This epiphany occurs at the movie's finale as a flashback sequence representing Crowe's suddenly glimpsed apprehension of preceding events. Here, the death moment occurs completely outside the body, rendered as it is through a precisely edited sequence of prior images. We are still within the general domain of noir's double-death, only now the realization moment occurs within the protagonist's mind. Because the film represents death as having already occurred, it moves the death moment closer to the apparatus itself and farther outside the body. So much for voice-over's potential to flesh out the interiority of dying.

*The Sixth Sense* is not alone: other films that perform a posthumous realization of death include *The Others* (2001), *Donnie Darko* (2001), and *The Jacket* (2005). It has become something of an American cinematic staple, a device we seem to tirelessly enjoy. There is good reason why cinema in particular takes to this form of the posthumous death. Talking dead men bring together the posthumous time they inhabit (whether their disembodied voice-over elsewhere or their ghost-like purgatory) with the actual screening time of projection. This secular afterlife's repetition toward death replicates the spectator's own reflex to go over the film again, sifting through its images for further embedded clues, an act of replay sponsored by these fatal, belated revelations. When watching such films, we become quite aware that all film plot is delayed, that the images before us originate from some other space and time not transparent to us. We are always watching cinema from a later position that is unusually commensurate with a posthumous one.

In virtually every case, one death is announced or occurs but proves inconclusive, triggering a second death to provide satisfying closure. The talking dead man movies his final bout with moral legibility away from the switch-like moment of death, turning that sudden switch back into a process always already in progress. Just a few breaths shy of actual transcendence, the dead man expires before getting the chance to fully relive his past. On the American screen, the footnote of death is becoming unmoored from its parent bodily text.

## Notes

1. Here as throughout, I refer to Linda Williams' work on the temporalities of spectator gratification in the body genres (weepies, slashers, and pornographic films), applying them to the camera's encounter with the moment of death. See Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Genre, Gender, Excess" in *Film Quarterly* 44 (1991), 2-13.

2. Note the remarkable meta-cinematic quality of this statement. Bigelow is in front of us but not, ghostly in his presence, like all screen bodies. Even the poison extracted from his body for proof evokes the cinema—as the second doctor shows it to Frank, he turns off the light to let the liquid shine its fluorescence.

3. There is many an Ivan Ilyich in Classical Hollywood, Judith Traherne (Bette Davis) in *Dark Victory* being perhaps the finest example. Traherne refuses to submit to doctor's orders or to hear her condition discussed. Suffering from a "glioma" or brain tumor, she sends everyone away from the house on the onslaught of her lazy-eye blindness, or "amblyopia," so she can die in private; the camera shies away too, blurring out her final image as she approaches her death unseen.

4. Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 184.

5. One cannot help but recall the line, spoken by the warden, in Oshima's *Death by Hanging*: "Death is real only if we can see it coming."

6. The general care taken by flashers-back in molding their stories certainly reminds us of Paul Schrader's comments on film noir, especially that strand of noir Schraeder classifies as "Romantic." See Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 1996), 53–63.

7. The fear of death's unknowability appears throughout *Detour's* dialogue. While held hostage in Vera's hotel room, Roberts compares morbid philosophies with his captor. Vera tells him to lighten up: "There's plenty of people dying this minute. They'd give anything to trade places with you. I know what I'm talking about." Roberts rebuts her claimed authority: "I'm not so sure. At least they know they're done for. They don't have to sweat blood wondering if they are."

8. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1988), 56.

9. J.P. Telotte, "The Big Clock of Film Noir," *Film Criticism*, Winter 1989-90, p. 3.

10. Telotte, "Clock," 2.

11. Peter Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot," *Reading for the Plot* (Boston: Harvard UP, 1992), 93-4.

12. To quote but one of several passages: "The novel is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about." Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 101. For more explanation for why we never draw the warmth of death from our own fate, see pps. 93-4 from the same essay.

13. For one film version of this, see Alan Parker's *Angel Heart*, in which Harald Angel is haunted by flashback images that turn out to belong to another man whom Angel forgot he devoured in his earlier vain effort to escape the devil.

14. Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot," 102.

15. Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot," 102.

16. Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot," 103.

17. Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot," 104.

---