

## Chapter 3

### Progressive Producer in the Studio System: Film Noir and the Production of *Murder, My Sweet*

Scott and his aides, while not given a million dollar budget or patted on the back every day, had the kind of studio cooperation that enterprising film men like best. They were let alone in the making of *Murder, My Sweet*. It was their baby and they were free to do with it as they chose.

—David Hanna, July 19, 1945

Following the box-office success of *Mr. Lucky*, Adrian Scott became one of the studio's rising stars, and on December 14, 1943, RKO promoted him to the rank of producer, at a salary of \$500 a week, with the stipulation that he could be asked to write any film he was assigned to produce.<sup>1</sup> Scott was thrilled with his promotion. From his first days in Hollywood, he had chafed at the relative powerlessness of writers within the studio system and realized that in order to translate his political and artistic vision onto film he would need more autonomy and control over the filmmaking process. Though many of his left-wing friends turned to directing in search of greater creative control, Scott believed that the producer, who had a foot in both the business and creative sides of the film industry, held the real power in the studio system.<sup>2</sup> As a producer, he would make the key decisions that shaped the final film, choosing the source materials, working closely with the screenwriters and directors, overseeing casting and locations, and so on. As a producer, Scott would also be in a far better position to protect the political integrity of his projects against incursions by the powerful studio gatekeepers who monitored markets, profits, and the business of filmmaking.<sup>3</sup>

1

Though the move from writing to producing was somewhat unorthodox within the studio system, the fact that Scott was under contract at RKO worked in his favor in several ways. First, the wartime labor shortage forced smaller studios like RKO to scramble to recruit new talent, creating more opportunities for quick promotion and enabling Scott to make an end run around the traditional hierarchies within the studio system. Second, RKO was one of the only major studios without an entrenched and supremely powerful production head such as Darryl F. Zanuck or Louis B. Mayer. Frequent turnovers in high-level personnel and constant tinkering with management structures and strategies kept the production system at RKO unusually fluid, preventing the emergence of a clear "house style" and giving studio workers somewhat more autonomy. In the early 1940s, Charles Koerner replaced the notorious micromanager George Schaefer as head of production. Recognizing that his background in exhibition gave him little expertise in the nuts and bolts of film production, Koerner took a hands-off approach to running the

2

studio, relying on small production units that worked fairly independently. Koerner also returned RKO to an earlier policy of renting space to independent producers such as Orson Welles and David O. Selznick—providing an example of more independent filmmaking.<sup>4</sup> Thus, RKO was the ideal studio for someone like Scott, who hoped to translate his political vision onto film with minimum interference from the studio executives.

Scott's personality also played an important role in his successful negotiation of the studio system. Though Scott was certainly ambitious, he stood out for his quiet integrity and lack of affectation in an industry notorious for overblown egos, self-aggrandizement, and pretension. "Everyone loved Adrian," recalled Norma Barzman. He was an "extraordinarily lovely person. Very few people who are as good and sweet as Adrian are forceful and make an impression. Usually 'good' and 'sweet' mean 'weak.' But that wasn't so for Adrian." Actress Betsy Blair Reisz remembered Scott fondly as "such a well-spoken, polite, sweet man." Reisz and her then-husband, Gene Kelly, served on many of the same political committees as Scott and sometimes socialized with Adrian and his wife Anne. "He was the most charming man. He was like the doctor in a small town, a really gentle American fellow. Therefore, if you met Adrian at a dinner party or a meeting, you'd naturally invite him to your house." Even relative strangers shared the warm impressions of Scott's friends, including film historian Bruce Cook, who described Scott as "one of the most decent men I have ever met."<sup>5</sup> Film critic David Hanna wrote that "mild mannered Adrian Scott" didn't seem to be the type to have produced a violent, disturbing movie like *Murder, My Sweet*. Hanna juxtaposed the "gentle, soft spoken and apparently unexcitable" Scott with the "cigar chewing, loud voiced movie impresario" of the old days and suggested that Scott epitomized a new kind of Hollywood producer, thoughtful men "with a more objective attitude toward the screen's function—and consequently a more detached view of their own importance."<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Scott saw himself as a different kind of Hollywood producer, particularly in his relationship with screenwriters. For most writers, the producer was a nemesis, one of Paxton's front-office men. As Ceplair and Englund describe it, "It seemed that no matter where the writer wandered in the studio maze, the producer appeared to thwart his progress. He had to be dealt with and satisfied. So the writer had to learn early that it was the producer's idea of a good screenplay which mattered, not his own."<sup>7</sup> Despite having "crossed the line" into management, however, Scott had begun his Hollywood career as a screenwriter, and he remained a "writer's producer." Paxton thought Scott was a brilliant producer, with an unerring gift for "concepts and constructions," and credited him with many of the key plot points and stylistic innovations in his screenplays. Though he did not take screen credit for his script contributions, Scott worked

3

4

closely with his screenwriters and saw his role as inspiring, rather than harassing, frustrating, or intimidating them. Alfred Lewis Leavitt, a screenwriter who worked with Scott at RKO after the war, remembers:

Adrian Scott was the greatest producer who ever lived. He spoiled me for anyone else. Adrian would challenge every scene, challenge every line in every speech, every word in every line, and he managed to do it in such a way that you couldn't wait to get back to the typewriter to try it again. He was absolutely marvelous, a lovely person, a gentle man who was also capable of being very tough if he had to be, but never for very long. I thought all producers were going to be like him! I found out that I was wrong.<sup>8</sup>

As a writer-friendly producer, Scott brought Paxton into the collaboration in ways that were not common within the highly segregated studio system. For example, he consistently invited Paxton onto the set, not only to have him on hand for possible rewrites, but simply to watch the filming. He also invited Paxton to watch the rushes and introduced him to the actors. Paxton recalled a minor stir when Scott introduced him to Dick Powell during the filming of *Murder, My Sweet*. "I will never forget the look of alarm and confusion on the face of the star when Adrian presented me as the Writer. He was a talented and friendly enough man, this actor, but I don't believe he had ever met a writer before." Paxton fondly recalled being invited along on trips to scout locations. "This was exhilarating, to be out with the fellows, crowded into the back seat of a stretch-out [limousine], suffocated by cigar smoke." Paxton's memories suggest a sort of boy's-school camaraderie, and he clearly felt honored to be included in these masculine rituals, which were exalted by their intermingling of work and play. However, Scott dragged Paxton along to view rushes and scout locations not simply because he and Paxton were old friends and enjoyed spending time together. There was plenty of time to socialize outside of work, to play cards at each other's homes or to have cocktails across the street at Lucey's Restaurant, a popular gathering place for studio workers from RKO and Paramount. Scott included Paxton because he was trying to create a collaborative creative process, to break down the barriers enforced by the studio and to build a working *unit*. This creative—and political—agenda, this quest for a seamlessness between work and politics, reflected Scott's larger political commitments and the spirit of the Popular Front. Paxton makes clear that Scott's inclusion of him was unusual: "We [writers] had our place and we were expected to keep it. I might never have met a motion picture star if my friend, sponsor, and producer had not been Adrian Scott—a quite remarkable, and in his quiet way, a very radical man."<sup>9</sup>

5

### **Pulp Fiction and Hollywood Realism**

In his new position as an RKO producer, in the spring and summer of 1944, Scott

6

worked on two films almost simultaneously: one a labor of love, the other a job of work. One of the perks of his new position was that he was able to arrange a screenwriting contract at RKO for his friend John Paxton and to use him as the writer on both projects. The job of work had been assigned to him by the studio: *My Pal Wolf*, a "kiddy flick" about a little girl and her dog, for RKO's B-unit. Though neither Scott nor Paxton was particularly attracted to *My Pal Wolf*, they put their heads together, and by tailoring it to the war effort, they "found a way to do it so it wouldn't be a children's film."<sup>10</sup>

Scott's labor of love was *Murder, My Sweet*. In combing through the RKO vault in search of a project that would launch his producing career with a bang, he found Raymond Chandler's pulp novel, *Farewell, My Lovely*, which the studio had purchased in 1940. Scott loved hard-boiled thrillers, as did all his left-wing friends. Norma Barzman remembers that they "all read Chandler, Hammett, Ross McDonald, and adored them."<sup>11</sup> For Scott and his progressive cohort who wanted to "tell it like it is," pulp fiction held enormous appeal: the frank sexuality, lust, and passion; the colliding worlds of the mean streets and the mansions of Los Angeles, a collision that exposed a gritty underbelly of greed, corruption, and class politics. A hard-boiled hero like Chandler's Philip Marlowe grappled with his desire to be a knight-protector for the innocent and downtrodden, while cynically recognizing the sordid realities of both human nature and capitalist power relations. Hard-boiled fiction combined realism and idealism in ways that resonated deeply with the political and moral vision of the Popular Front.<sup>12</sup>

However, the very themes and issues that appealed so powerfully to Hollywood progressives made pulp fiction difficult to reconcile with the Production Code. Though a handful of films were adapted from pulp fiction in the 1930s, they rarely did justice to the original literary source. The series of movies adapted from Dashiell Hammett's novel *The Thin Man* (1934), for example, with their depiction of a very modern marriage and the sparkling, gin-soaked banter between Nick and Nora Charles (played by William Powell and Myrna Loy), are great fun, but certainly cannot be considered either hard-boiled or noir. Similarly, RKO's first adaptation of *Farewell, My Lovely*, entitled *The Falcon Takes Over*—it was one of a series of low-budget *Falcon* films starring George Brent—bore little resemblance to Chandler's novel. The realism encouraged by wartime filmmaking, however, opened the door for more faithful and "adult" film adaptations of hard-boiled fiction. The flurry of 1940s films adapted from the pulp masters—Hammett, Chandler, Cain—marks the beginning of what would be called "film noir" by French critics after the war, but during the war years was called the "red meat" film cycle by American critics. Early films foreshadowed a number of thematic elements that would come to define film noir: *The Maltese Falcon* (1940) introduced Humphrey Bogart as hard-boiled detective Sam Spade; *This Gun for*

7

8

*Hire* (1942) featured a hero who was also a psychologically disturbed hired killer. A noirish visual style can also be detected in such early films as Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1940) and the sophisticated horror films, such as *Cat People* (1942), produced by Val Lewton at RKO.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, the breakthrough film was, beyond a doubt, *Double Indemnity* (1944). James M. Cain's novel of adulterous lust and murder was first published in 1935, but plans for a film adaptation were immediately and vigorously quashed by the Breen Office in 1936 and again in 1943 (apparently a knee-jerk response, since Breen's March 1943 rejection letter was a verbatim copy of the 1936 letter). By this time, however, Paramount believed the situation had changed and forged ahead with a screenplay; when a partial outline was submitted for review in the fall of 1943, Breen cautiously pronounced that "the basic story seems to meet the requirements of the Production Code." Approved by the Breen office after much maneuvering both on the page and behind the camera by writer-director Billy Wilder and his cowriter Raymond Chandler, *Double Indemnity* set the bar for classic film noir. As Sheri Chinen Biesen argues, "*Double Indemnity* pushed the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 to its limit and paved the way for dark, controversial films to be produced in the future; when Joseph Breen approved, and condoned, this film, this initial Cain adaptation set the stage and the tone for how Hollywood film noir could successfully maneuver around the Code."<sup>14</sup> *Double Indemnity* definitively kicked off the "red meat" film cycle and created an enormous buzz in Hollywood.

Though *Double Indemnity* was not released to the public until August 1944, a Hollywood insider like Adrian Scott would have been aware of the film and Paramount's successful negotiations with the Breen Office well before that, certainly by April 1944, when he proposed a remake of *Farewell, My Lovely* that was true to Chandler's novel. The example of *Double Indemnity* no doubt helped him to convince the executives at RKO that *Farewell, My Lovely*, too, could be filmed essentially as written. Paxton leapt at the chance to work with Scott, but after reading the novel, he was, he admitted years later, "scared to death." However, working together closely on the script, they "finally whipped it into some kind of form." Scott was insistent that they use Chandler's narrative techniques and some of his marvelous imagery. Though Paxton recalled that it "was a great struggle to put the thing into dramatic form," he and Scott—as well as Chandler—ultimately felt they had succeeded.<sup>15</sup>

Next, Scott approached Edward Dmytryk to direct the film. Given Dmytryk's high profile at RKO following the success of *Behind the Rising Sun*, *Hitler's Children*, and *Tender Comrade*, as well as his involvement in progressive politics and recent recruitment into the Party, it is not surprising that Scott sought him out to direct

9

10

11

*Farewell, My Lovely*, or, as it was finally titled, *Murder, My Sweet*. Dmytryk was certainly impressed with the screenplay that Scott and Paxton had written and knew he could make a good film on the \$400,000 budget Scott had been allocated.<sup>16</sup> However, the production almost ground to a halt when RKO insisted that Scott use aging crooner Dick Powell in the lead role. Though a star with considerable box-office appeal, Powell was known primarily as a pretty-boy singer and dancer in 1930s Warner Bros. musicals—*Forty-Second Street*, *Footlight Parade*, *Dames*, and many others. Scott was aghast. He had been thinking in much grittier terms: Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon*, for example. Scott knew he could not hope to sign Bogart for his film, but he thought he might be able to get John Garfield for the role of Phillip Marlowe. Garfield, who was then under contract at RKO, had recently made a big splash playing a Spanish Civil War veteran in the tough antifascist thriller *The Fallen Sparrow*, but Scott was probably equally drawn to Garfield's political reputation. After leaving New York and the Group Theater, Garfield became active in Hollywood politics, and his path undoubtedly crossed with Scott's both on and off the RKO lot (both men were founding members of the Motion Picture Guild and had mutual friends with ties to the Group Theater). Nevertheless, drawing on a Gallup poll to buttress its decision, the studio vetoed Scott's choice of Garfield and decreed that Powell would play Marlowe in his film. According to Paxton, "Adrian almost left the studio over the decision to use Powell. He was horrified. I think he went home 'ill' for two or three days."<sup>17</sup>

Paxton later remembered that Powell himself was reluctant to take on the role, but that Scott and Dmytryk—once they had recovered from their dismay—convinced him that he could handle the part if he would just be himself. Paxton remembers that he was troubled by Powell's performance: "He did things with the part that were very fortunate, but that at first were a shock to me. I didn't see it as comedy; I didn't know there were as many laughs as he managed to get into it. But he did it with a kind of casual, off-beat type of playing, which was his defense against trying to be Bogart. . . . He developed a flip detective, which I hadn't intended at all and I don't think Chandler had ever intended."<sup>18</sup>

According to Powell, however, he was eager to break out of his insipid song-and-dance-man image. While under contract at Paramount, he had asked for the lead in *Double Indemnity*, but the studio executives turned him down flat. At RKO he continued to push for dramatic roles; when Scott pitched *Farewell, My Lovely* to studio head Charles Koerner, Koerner saw an opportunity to give Powell a shot at playing a tough guy. Once Scott came to terms with the casting of Powell, he brought him fully into the collaborative process; Powell remembered that Scott and Dmytryk "treated me as though I were as important to the business setup as they were, consulting me in the casting, in polishing the script

12

13

and, later, cutting the picture."<sup>19</sup> Powell's performance convinced Scott that his initial doubts about Powell had been misplaced, and in fact, Scott cast Powell again as the star in his next noir thriller, *Cornered*. He also offered a mea culpa to studio head Charles Koerner, who graciously replied: "This business of ours is more or less of a guessing game at best. If I happened to guess right on Dick Powell it is no sign that I cannot be wrong with my next brainstorm. However, it would have done your hearts good to see the manner in which *Farewell, My Lovely* was received at our Sales Convention, not only in connection with the work of Dick Powell but also with the all around excellent quality of direction, production and treatment."<sup>20</sup>

### **Hard-Boiled, from Page to Screen**

Much of the success of the movie that would be released as *Murder, My Sweet* lay in the screenplay written by Scott and Paxton. In adapting *Farewell, My Lovely*, they stuck closely to the novel. Chandler was famous for his evocative language and imagery, and *Farewell, My Lovely* is studded with hard-boiled one-liners like, "He looked about as inconspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food."<sup>21</sup> Seeing Chandler as a poet of urban modernism, Scott wanted to use as much of Chandler's writing as possible, telling Paxton, "If we can get some of the feeling and the atmosphere of this . . . then the hell with the whodunit aspect."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in the screenplay, as in the novel, the convoluted plot takes a back seat to language, mood, and characterization.<sup>23</sup>

14

The key narrative innovations in Paxton and Scott's screenplay are the use of flashbacks and voice-over narration. These became hallmarks of film noir, but in 1944 they were still rather innovative. As a screenwriter, Scott had used a flashback frame before in *Mr. Lucky*, but the flashback in *Murder, My Sweet* does more than just set the stage (as in *Mr. Lucky*); it also works to cast doubt on the reliability of the narrator. Thus, *Murder, My Sweet* opens in a police station, as Marlowe, eyes bandaged, is being grilled by the cops. This raises numerous questions for the audience: Is this guy in trouble? Is he implicated in a crime? Can he be trusted? The bright overhead light that casts shadows over the interrogation room, the barked hostile questions, Marlowe's bandaged eyes—all raise the specter of unknown, unexplained violence and immediately create a tense, unsettling mood.

15

Marlowe's world-weary voice-over bridges the shift from the interrogation room to his own seedy office, as he explains that he was hired to undertake two seemingly separate investigations. First, ex-jailbird Moose Malloy (played by Mike Mazurki) demands that Marlowe find his missing girlfriend, the "cute-as-lace-pants" showgirl Velma Valento. The trail leads from Florian's, the bar where Velma used

16

to work, to the run-down home of the widow Florian (played by Esther Howard). In this scene, Paxton and Scott demonstrate that they, too, can write "hard-boiled," when Marlowe describes Mrs. Florian as "a gal who'd take a drink, if she had to knock you down to get the bottle." Emerging from this encounter with a nearly empty bottle and a signed photograph of Velma Valento, Marlowe watches as a suddenly sober Mrs. Florian makes a mysterious phone call.

In the second case, Lindsay Marriott, an effete con man, hires Marlowe to protect him during the ransom exchange for a stolen jade necklace. The exchange goes bad, Marriott is killed, and Marlowe is blackjacked, but he comes back to consciousness in time to catch a brief but fuzzy glimpse of a woman. That woman (played by Anne Shirley) appears at Marlowe's office the next day, posing as a reporter investigating the Marriott killing, but the streetwise detective sees through her immediately. She admits that her name is Ann Grayle, that the stolen necklace belongs to her wicked stepmother, Helen, and that she herself got caught up in the web of deceit while trying to protect her cuckolded father. 17

As the scene shifts from the grubby proletarian milieu of Marlowe's office to the manicured grounds of the Grayle mansion, Marlowe's ironic voice-over narrates the class chasm: "It was a nice little front yard. Cozy. Okay for the average family. Only you needed a compass to go to the mailbox. The house was alright too. But it wasn't as big as Buckingham Palace." Inside, the cavernous foyer echoes, and Marlowe kicks up his heels (an ironic reminder of the "old" Dick Powell, perhaps) on his way to meet the parents. Mr. Grayle (played by Miles Mander) is a foolish but very wealthy old man, oblivious to everything but his priceless collection of jade. Helen Grayle (deliciously played by Claire Trevor) is a classic noir spider woman, as treacherous as she is beautiful; she immediately tries to seduce Marlowe, and he plays along (though by the end of the film it is clear that the straight-talking stepdaughter Ann is the woman he's truly fallen for). Softening up Marlowe with cocktails and kisses, Helen convinces him to stay on the case. She also reveals that she and the murdered Marriott were both patients of "therapist" Jules Amthor (played by Otto Kruger). Believing that Marlowe has the jade necklace, the suavely vicious Amthor hires Moose Malloy to bring Marlowe to his posh penthouse, where Malloy tries to throttle the truth from him. When that fails, Marlowe is held hostage at Amthor's "sanitarium," a front for his blackmailing ring, and drugged with a truth serum to get him to talk. Eventually making his escape, Marlowe hooks up with Ann, and together they pursue the investigation to the Grayles' beach house, where they run into Helen, and a catfight between the two women sends Ann off in a huff. Here things begin to get messy, as Helen explains to Marlowe that she was being blackmailed by Amthor for adultery and was to have given him the necklace as hush money, but it was stolen. Admitting that she's been "very bad," she throws herself at 18

Marlowe, begging him to kill Amthor so that she can finally have some "peace." Again, Marlowe appears to go along, and we wonder if he has finally succumbed, either to her personal charms or to the lure of her money. Eventually the two investigations come together when Moose doesn't recognize the woman in the photo given to him by Mrs. Florian, and Marlowe finally figures out that Helen is the missing Velma Valento.

The final showdown comes at the Grayles' beach house: while Moose waits outside for Marlowe's signal, Helen presents Marlowe with the jade necklace, coyly admitting that she faked the robbery. When she realizes that Marlowe has not fallen for her charms after all, she pulls a gun on him, and now also reveals that Amthor and Mrs. Florian were blackmailing her, not just for adultery, but for a far more sordid criminal past. She confesses that the ransom exchange was a ruse to get rid of both Marlowe, who was asking too many questions about her past, and Marriott, who had served his purpose and now knew too much. At this point, Ann and Mr. Grayle arrive to find Helen holding Marlowe at gunpoint; Mr. Grayle at first seems to be going along with Helen and takes Marlowe's gun, but then shoots Helen in the gut. Moose, alerted by the gunshot, arrives and tries to throttle Mr. Grayle; Marlowe steps between them just as Grayle fires another shot, and the scene shifts back to the police interrogation room. Marlowe, blinded by the muzzle flash, says he heard three more shots, but doesn't know what happened; the police explain that both Moose and Mr. Grayle were killed as they fought over the gun. Only Marlowe and Ann are left alive, and they end the picture in a romantic clinch, after Marlowe thoughtfully removes his gun from his breast pocket so it won't leave a bruise.

19

### **Edward Dmytryk and Noir Style**

Under Dmytryk's direction, aided by Harry J. Wild's stunning camera work, the film's visual style powerfully reinforced these plot convolutions and moral ambiguities and helped to codify the "look" of film noir. Innovative work by others on the RKO lot during the early 1940s undoubtedly helped to shape Dmytryk's emerging noir style in *Murder, My Sweet*. Orson Welles had filmed *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) there, and Harry J. Wild, the cameraman on *Murder, My Sweet*, had worked with Welles on the second unit for both films. European émigrés also were a strong presence at RKO. Hitchcock filmed the noirish psychological thriller *Suspicion* at RKO in 1941; Fritz Lang, an antifascist émigré whose early work in *Metropolis* (1927), *M* (1931) and *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933) virtually defined German expressionism, filmed *Woman in the Window* at RKO in 1944 (and went on to an illustrious career as a noir director). Another significant influence was the work of Val Lewton, producer of a series of brilliant, low-budget horror films at RKO throughout the 1940s,

20

beginning with *Cat People* (1942). Jacques Tourneur directed several films for Lewton before moving on to *Out of the Past* (1947), perhaps one of the best noirs ever made; Lewton's innovative B-unit also launched the directing careers of Mark Robson and Robert Wise, both of whom had strong ties to Popular Front politics and went on to direct both films noir and social problem films. Dmytryk drew on these examples in directing *Murder, My Sweet*, shooting from very low angles and relying on depth of field and lighting effects to distort the perspective and create dramatic shadows, producing a dark, disturbing mood.<sup>24</sup>

This is reinforced by the work of RKO art director Albert S. D'Agostino, in collaboration with Carroll Clark, and *Murder, My Sweet* is a textbook example of the importance of setting in film noir. Marlowe's adventures take him on a tour of the lounge spaces of Los Angeles, from the seedy bar where Moose and Marlowe first look for Velma to the campy Polynesian cocktail lounge, with its exotic Asian dancers, where Marlowe first realizes he's being played by Helen. Marlowe's dingy office and one-room bachelor apartment reinforce the perception of the detective as a man on the make, willing to do anything for a buck. From the dark streets of the city, whether lit by a single streetlamp or brazenly flashing neon signs, to the desolate coastline, where Marlowe is first blackjacked by an unknown assailant, there is no safe haven from disorder and danger. The investigation also leads Marlowe into the sleek, shiny world of the monied class, brightly lit sites of wealth that are invariably linked to corruption: the Grayle mansion; Jules Amthor's ritzy apartment and his high-toned "clinic" that conceals a blackmail ring; and the Grayles' moderne beach house, the site of Helen's adulterous liaisons as well as the film's deadly denouement, which leaves three bodies bleeding onto the plush white carpet.

21

RKO's strong technical and special effects departments also contributed significantly to the visual innovation in *Murder, My Sweet*. Special effects wizard Vernon L. Walker had earlier worked on *King Kong* (1933) as well as *Citizen Kane* (1941) and the very early noir, *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940), before collaborating with montage master Douglas Travers and Dmytryk on *Murder, My Sweet*. Special effects play a significant role in the film's innovative visual style, reinforcing the sinister settings and mood, but also making literal Marlowe's disorientation at key points in his investigation. In each of the scenes in which Marlowe is knocked out, he appears literally to be overtaken by unconsciousness as inky blackness oozes from the edges of the frame, closing in toward the center. "A black pool opened up," Marlowe narrates after being bludgeoned at the jewel exchange. "I dived in. It had no bottom. I felt pretty good. Like an amputated leg." As Marlowe regains consciousness, the camera slowly returns to focus.

22

Even more dramatic is the fabulously weird and psychedelic sequence of Marlowe on drugs. Injected with "truth serum" while being held at Amthor's sanitarium, Marlowe hallucinates falling into a spinning gyroscopic pit, the disembodied heads of Amthor and Moose looming over him; a series of shrinking doors that he scrambles through to escape the gigantic hypodermic needle that sends him deeper into oblivion; the "spiderwebs" that cover the camera lens and convey his disorientation as he struggles back to consciousness. It was this extended montage, in particular, in *Murder, My Sweet's* innovative visual style that prompted one film historian to call Dmytryk "perhaps the most underrated stylist of Hollywood's expressionist period."<sup>25</sup>

### **Negotiating the Production Code**

On April 13, 1944, Breen weighed in on the script for *Murder, My Sweet*, reporting that the "basic story seems to meet the requirements of the Production Code," but offering numerous suggestions for changes, particularly on issues of excessive violence and sexuality. Breen warns, for example, "There must, of course, be nothing of the 'pansy' characterization about Marriott," and insists, "Inasmuch as Helen is a married woman, the physical contact between her and Marlowe should be kept to a minimum. We suggest that they only actually embrace once in this sequence, omitting the later embrace on page 60." Scott's notes in the margins of this document include check marks, question marks, and the scribbled phrase, "will argue," suggesting that, like the producers of *Double Indemnity*, Scott hoped to push the envelope of the Production Code. Among the issues he planned to argue were Breen's request that he delete Moose's description of Velma as "cute as lace pants" and that he rewrite Helen's line, "Maybe you were just making love to me." Both lines appear in the final filmed version. Similarly, Breen requested that they "cut down the embracing and kissing between Marlowe and Helen," but the filmed scenes contain plenty of steamy physical contact between the two characters.<sup>26</sup>

Breen also requested that the violence in *Murder, My Sweet* be toned down, particularly the scenes in which Amthor hits Marlowe with the gun butt and in which Marlowe uses a bedspring to knock out his jailor at the sanitarium. Though Scott scribbled "done" in the margins of Breen's memo, both actions appear in the final film and do not seem to be "masked" as Breen had wanted. Interestingly, rather than invoking violations of the Production Code, Breen suggested these changes to prevent the violent scenes from being deleted by local censor boards. Indeed, the Ohio censor board did cut precisely these scenes, as well as the steamier segments from the love scenes between Marlowe and Helen. In other cases, however, Breen did request changes based on regulations in the Code. For example, responding to implications in early screenplay drafts that Mr. Grayle kills

himself after shooting his wife and Moose, Breen noted, "It will not be permissible to suggest that Mr. Grayle escapes punishment by committing suicide." Scott complied with Breen's request, and in the filmed version, Grayle is killed in the struggle for the gun—though Breen did have to ask twice before Scott and Paxton made the change.<sup>27</sup>

Significantly, when interviewed by film columnist David Hanna a year later, Scott recalled that he and his coworkers, in Hanna's words, "were left alone in the making of *Murder, My Sweet*. It was their baby and they were free to do with it as they chose."<sup>28</sup> This is not, however, exactly true, and *Murder, My Sweet* offers an interesting example of Sheri Chinen Biesen's argument that the Production Code had become more malleable under the pressures of "realism" in wartime filmmaking. In 1944 the Code was still in place: Breen and his staff read Scott and Paxton's screenplay, prepared detailed memos listing changes necessary to bring the script into compliance with the Code, and reviewed the completed film before giving their approval, without which the film could not be screened anywhere in the United States. When the completed film was viewed by the Breen Office on August 29, 1944, it "created extremely enthusiastic comment. The direction, dialogue and performance all came in for extended compliments for everyone present."<sup>29</sup>

In his dealings with the censorship office, Scott walked a fine line between accommodation and resistance. In some cases, he acquiesced to requested changes, but in others he seems to have simply ignored Breen and the Code. So, upon screening the final version of *Murder, My Sweet*, were Breen and his subordinates not aware that Scott and RKO had defied their edicts? Did they not hear the characters speak lines they had asked to have deleted? Did they not flinch when the gun butt plunged toward Marlowe's head—after they had specifically requested that the violent action be masked? Were they content with Dmytryk's "pulling his punch"—showing the sharp downward trajectory, but not the actual impact of weapon on skull? Or did they decide that what had appeared troubling on paper, in their review of the screenplay, was acceptable on-screen, or at least seemed appropriate to the unfolding of the dark, noirish narrative of *Murder, My Sweet*? Certainly, following the release of *Double Indemnity* and *Murder, My Sweet*, the trickle of tough thrillers became a torrent, as noir thematics and visual style became a leading strategy for conveying the shifting politics and mood of the postwar period. Or perhaps, as James M. Cain suggested, the Breen Office and studio executives simply had gotten "hep to the fact that plenty of real crime takes place every day and that it makes a good movie. . . . The public is fed up with the old-fashioned melodramatic type of hokum."<sup>30</sup>

## **Audience and Critical Response**

26

27

Certainly, American audiences seemed to agree that *Murder, My Sweet* was excellent entertainment. RKO held preview screenings at its Hillstreet Theater in downtown Los Angeles in early October 1944 and later that month at the Alex Theater in Glendale. The Hillstreet audience had come to the theater expecting to see *The Impatient Years*, a comedy about a couple trying to rebuild their marriage after the war. Signalling their exhaustion with war films, many in this preview audience remarked on the "newness" of *Murder, My Sweet*: "It's a relief to go and see a picture as witty as this one and no war in it," remarked one viewer, while a vet commented, "It had no war scenes and is just the type of picture I like as I am in the Navy and I see enough of war as it is." Others, however, remarked on the film's "newness" in terms of its difference from other mysteries, both in its humor and visual style. According to one viewer, "It was different than most of the other murder pictures in that there was more meaning to it. The plot was definite and carried through. Also I liked the comedy bits." Another enthused, "The dialogue is terse, fresh and well-adapted to the plot. The action is well-paced, but spotty. Three cheers for the photography which adds punch and originality to the story." Several commented specifically on the power of Dmytryk's direction, and one particularly noted the noir elements of the film's lighting and the preponderance of night scenes, complaining, "Photographic lighting not too good, and what happened to the days?" The complex plot threw a number of viewers, but most took it in stride: "Hard to follow but it's that sort of picture," reasoned one viewer, while another commented, "A very unusual film. The plot may be a little complicated for Mr. Average Moviegoer; it forces him to think. But is that bad? The photography was marvelous, and Powell will surprise his fans with a really fine bit of acting. I enjoyed the film as it stands and I hope that it won't be cut too much to suit Mr. Average Moviegoer." Significantly, a number of viewers connected *Murder, My Sweet* specifically with other noir films: "I used to think *The Maltese Falcon* was the best whodunit made but this is definitely better in every way," while another enthused, "A splendid picture in every department, acting, tempo, photography, casting, etc!! In spite of being an identical twin to *Double Indemnity* it is strong enough to survive and surpass it."<sup>31</sup>

Though the vast majority of the preview audience applauded the film, a small segment of the preview audience disagreed; their issues with the films are disparate and fascinating. One viewer, for example, was unimpressed with the special effects, sniffing, "Plenty of suspense but why all the doors and such? It's kind of a silly name, too." Another found the violence in the film too disturbing: "To [*sic*] many murders and near murders. It left one weak, the tension was so great. It took me three hours to relax after seeing it." Interestingly, some who liked the film itself had concerns about its "adult" nature and the potential impact on different audiences. One, for example, recommended the movie highly, but

added, "I don't think it's one for children to see." Another commented, "Yes, I liked it but do not approve this type of movie. Narrative was a little different but the type which tears down moral [*sic*]." (One wonders here if this viewer intended to say "morale" or "morals.")

There was almost universal praise for the "new" Dick Powell (as well as faint praise for the "old" Dick Powell): "Usually don't like Dick Powell but he was swell in this show," one viewer commented, while another reported, "After theater remarks all in favor of Powell without singing." Another weighed in, "Powell was marvelous as the detective. I don't believe I have ever enjoyed a picture of his as much. He should play characters of this type from now on." Others weren't convinced, arguing that Powell was "too weak for the part," especially compared to Bogart, while the viewer who needed several hours to recover from the violence in *Murder, My Sweet* admitted to preferring the singing Powell. Nevertheless, the role of Marlowe in *Murder, My Sweet* transformed Powell's film persona from a cherubic crooner into a legitimate tough guy and became one of the key selling points of *Murder, My Sweet* for audiences in the 1940s.

30

RKO's preview screenings for film exhibitors in late 1944 also pointed toward a positive public reception for *Murder, My Sweet*. Like the preview audiences, exhibitors loved the film, exclaiming, "Top honors must go to Edward Dmytryk for his superb and novel handling of an involved story which could have easily become a tangled chain of mysterious circumstances, but emerges instead as a directorial triumph in suspense utilizing the versatility of the motion picture camera to the utmost." Praising the film's "crisp and adult" dialogue, the reviewer from *Film Bulletin* noted, "Occasionally, the unusual photographic effects are given precedence over story continuity, but never to the extent of relinquishing interest, which is always held and often heightened to the point of breathless absorption."<sup>32</sup> The reviewer from *Showmen's Trade Review* agreed, describing the film as a "vital, passionately violent detective story of rapid action and swift pace that will delight all audiences except for a few of the more squeamish about life." He continued:

31

From start to finish it has an electric quality of tension and murderous directness. There is no waste[d] motion, not so much as a foot of film that could be cut out. As always, the delineation and presentation of men and women of evil who are strong in their craft and cunning, holds a fascination that is as hypnotic as the beady stare of the snake. Dick Powell, in the best role of his career, is strong, ruthless, bitter and yet on the side of the law. His counterpart is Claire Trevor, a lush and lustful woman who crushes anything that she can reach.<sup>33</sup>

Still, the film presented a number of challenges for exhibitors: "The film's chief handicaps, from the boxoffice standpoint, are the title, deceptive to all but the

comparatively few who have read the Raymond Chandler novel, and the minor marquee value of the cast." However, *Film Bulletin* predicted the film could be "a real 'sleeper' for the exhibitor" with strong marketing and word-of-mouth, while *Showmen's Trade Review*, praising the "earthy, hard glitter of reality about the picture," promised, "Unless your marquee requires more 'name' strength, figure this film to put over your show with a bang."<sup>34</sup>

When concerns about the film's "misleading" title emerged following the screenings for preview audiences and exhibitors, RKO turned to the Gallup Organization. Based on a survey of the data, including the sales figures for Chandler's novel, Gallup recommended a title change. Scott resisted this, arguing that Gallup had based their decision on total sales of 190,000, while the publisher Knopf reported nearly 700,000 books sold to date. Scott believed that there was a significant audience of pulp-fiction readers and that the draw of Chandler's name and original title would bring them into the theaters.<sup>35</sup> However, this was one battle Scott did not win. As he described the situation,

32

The title *Farewell, My Lovely* was bad. Everyone thought it was a musical. It was a fine picture, but it would gross only a million and a half if the title *Farewell, My Lovely* remained. The title was changed. And they guaranteed a gross of two million four hundred thousand—perhaps even more. The picture grossed one million seven hundred and fifty thousand, about five hundred thousand less than they predicted. The answer they give: It was Dick Powell's fault. People didn't expect to see him in this kind of picture. If we had some other star, there would have been a different result. Also, I might add, they originally recommended Dick Powell on the basis of his star value: There was a large following that he had that no one knew about. In other words, he was good for the picture.<sup>36</sup>

This experience encapsulated many of the frustrations Scott had with working within the studio system, and he later commented to his brother Allan, "I have had contact with the Gallup bunch and I must say that I loathe them. It's pseudo-scientific nonsense, geared for the palates of the guys who own motion pictures. It can accomplish any number of things which the owners want accomplished. But it chiefly is a weapon against innovation, against new ideas, any ideas. It is a device subscribing to the status quo of pictures—what they want is more of the same; whatever has been done, must be done again."<sup>37</sup>

*Murder, My Sweet*—under any title—was not "more of the same," as the critics unanimously agreed. Like the postwar French critics, American critics recognized that they were seeing something new out of Hollywood. Violence was one of the primary connections between these films. "The screen's recent vogue for violence" was evident to the critic at *Look Magazine* in films such as *Laura*, *Double Indemnity*, and *The Woman in the Window* as well as *Murder, My Sweet*, while

33

*New York Daily News* critic Kate Cameron noted: "Since Paramount's *Double Indemnity* became one of Hollywood's box-office hits last year, all the studios have gone in for making pictures based on realistic murder stories. The tougher and gorier they make these thrillers, the better, it seems."<sup>38</sup> "The vogue for hard-boiled melodrama reaches some kind of peak in the Palace's new movie, *Murder, My Sweet*," wrote Eileen Creelman of the *New York Sun*. Though noting that she was "still vague about who shot whom, and why," she felt the plot's confusion did not detract from the pleasurable "electric quality" of watching the film: "The picture captures the spirit of the Chandler thriller. You may not be at all sure what is going on; but you're excited about it, all the same."<sup>39</sup> For Edwin Schallert of the *Los Angeles Times*, "atmosphere" was *Murder, My Sweet's* leading virtue: "You get that mysterious, creepy feeling as soon as the production screening . . . starts, and it keeps right on permeating and permeating. Just as it begins in brooding shadows, so does the feature end practically that way in a lonely house on a cliff, where the identity of killers is revealed. One needs to pull the good old word 'eerie' out of the dictionary to describe much if not all that happens."<sup>40</sup> The newness of these kinds of films is also suggested by the reviewer for the *Hollywood Citizen-News*, who put quotation marks around key words in his commentary, suggesting either ironic distance or that he was still trying to get comfortable with the hard-boiled slang: "As a private 'eye' [Marlowe] becomes involved with a couple of blackmailers, a convict just out of 'stir,' and a pair of beauties . . . He gets 'slapped,' gun-whipped, slugged, choked, and 'hypoed,' and through clever special effects you understand exactly what he's going through. And it's not pretty."<sup>41</sup>

Several critics drew attention to the murky morality of the pulp genre and the complexities of a hard-boiled hero like Marlowe. Schallert remarked, "His position in this whole matter is so equivocal that when you first encounter him the police are investigating him rather than the rest of the culprits."<sup>42</sup> *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther, who recommended *Murder, My Sweet* as "a sure cure for low blood pressure," described Marlowe as "a private detective who would take a dollar from anyone, with no questions asked," adding that he is "just a shade above his clients, who might politely be called questionable characters. He is not a particularly shrewd operator as Dick Powell draws him, but he has persistence and capacity for taking a beating that is downright admirable."<sup>43</sup>

As might be expected, Dick Powell's performance received a great deal of attention and praise from the critics, who frequently drew comparisons with the ultimate tough guy, Humphrey Bogart. "It was evident that Dick's long and unexpressed desire to play straight dramatic roles is to be abundantly satisfied. He has the stuff. He acts the part of a 'private eye' in this thriller with the skill and persuasion of a Cagney or Bogart,"<sup>44</sup> argued reviewer Corbin Patrick, while

34

35

Kate Cameron felt Powell "surprises the audience by the slickness and assurance of his performance as the super-smooth dick. Humphrey Bogart, who is to represent Marlowe in Warner Bros. forthcoming production of Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, will have to stay on his toes in order to better the Powell characterization."<sup>45</sup> *Look* featured a photo of Powell looking hard-boiled, holding a drink in one hand and a gun in the other, with the caption: "Dick Powell, crooner of 1933's *42nd Street*, wins a future as a tough guy."<sup>46</sup>

Released in the summer of 1944, *Murder, My Sweet* earned a tidy profit for RKO and was a turning point for Scott: "From the position of a new, untried producer he graduated to the busiest man in the studio."<sup>47</sup> Scott, Paxton, and Dmytryk soon came to be seen as something of a team at RKO, making four films together in three years. Although all three men also worked on separate projects during this period, the films that they made together stand apart from the rest.<sup>48</sup> Scott was the driving force—both politically and creatively—behind this collaboration, and in producing Scott found his métier. Indeed, one friend remembered that, after the breakaway success of *Murder, My Sweet*, he was hailed as "the new boy wonder," and Norma Barzman remembers that "we all felt it was only a matter of time before Adrian was running the show at RKO."<sup>49</sup>

36

*Murder, My Sweet* also changed Adrian Scott's life on a very personal level. On the set, Scott met and fell in love with actress Anne Shirley. Born Dawn Evelyen Paris, she worked in her first Hollywood film at age five as Dawn O'Day, but after starring in the title role of Anne Shirley in *Anne of Green Gables* in 1934, she adopted the character's name as her own. Anne made a successful transition from child actor to ingenue to leading lady, appearing in nearly fifty films between 1922 and 1944. Despite her success in Hollywood—she was nominated in 1937 for an Academy Award as Best Supporting Actress in the role of Barbara Stanwyck's daughter in the tearjerker *Stella Dallas*—Anne hated acting and continued only under pressure from her dominating stage mother. Plagued by stage fright, she became so nervous at the prospect of appearing before the cameras that she vomited before each scene, and she retired from acting soon after marrying Scott in 1945. Though Adrian's close friend Norma Barzman thought Anne was "a very tortured woman," Norma also found her extremely bright, despite her lack of formal education:

37

She had a quality of knowing about her, as if she had absorbed the language and style of the *New Yorker* (without having actually read the magazine). She had a very sharp wit, and she had three smart, with-it girlfriends that impressed other people: Bubbles Schinasi, who was married to MGM producer Arthur Hornblow, Jr.; singing star Deanna Durbin; and Phyllis Cerf, wife of publisher Bennett Cerf.

Scott remained very close to the Barzmans after his marriage to Anne. The two couples frequently socialized together and often formed a sixsome with screenwriter Bobby Lees and his wife Jeannie. Every Christmas the Lees hosted a tree-decorating party for all their friends. And every Monday night Jeannie Lees made soup, and after dinner the group watched a movie or played cards together. Adrian loved to play cards, and he and Anne were serious poker players, along with old friends Edmund North and Lew and Edie Wasserman. As Norma remembers, "Adrian liked living with Annie. He liked the way she decorated their house on Beverly Drive. [Their life together] was *fun*."<sup>50</sup>

### **Radical Visions for Postwar America**

Amid the work and play, politics remained a central focus of Adrian Scott's life. 38  
Though filmmaking was in many ways his primary mode of political activism, he continued to work in several Popular Front organizations and to attend Party meetings. During this period Scott was part of a "special group" of Hollywood Communists that included director Francis Faragoh, John Howard Lawson, and Dmytryk. This was a small group of Communists, no more than eight or ten, with prestigious positions within the film industry, who met only occasionally to protect the anonymity of its members. First invited by Scott to attend a political discussion group at Faragoh's home in 1945, Dmytryk remembered that he "felt considerably out of place not being able to engage in the theoretical discussions which were under the leadership of John Howard Lawson." Dmytryk believed that "because of the fact that it was Scott who generally notified him of meetings together with the fact that Scott appeared to be a little better founded in Marxism than [*sic*] he was, he had always felt that Adrian Scott had preceded him in the movement and was more a student of it."<sup>51</sup>

Though Scott never developed the kind of friendship with Dmytryk that he had 39  
with John Paxton or Ben Barzman, he respected Dmytryk's skill as director, and the two men spent a great deal of time together both on their shared creative projects at the studio and in their political work in the world. Scott gave several guest lectures for the film classes Dmytryk taught at the People's Educational Center, and they both belonged to several of the same Popular Front organizations, particularly the Hollywood Democratic Committee (HDC).

The Hollywood Democratic Committee, the leading Popular Front group of the war 40  
years, was the reincarnation of an earlier group, the Motion Picture Democratic Committee, which had lost its political credibility in the wake of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. The revitalized liberal-radical solidarity of the war years provided the impetus for the HDC, which was founded in January 1943; over two hundred industry progressives attended the inaugural meeting at the Hollywood Roosevelt

Hotel. In 1945, the HDC affiliated with the national Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions, and changed its name to Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions (HICCASP), which became the leading progressive organization in Southern California in the postwar years. By 1945, film industry membership stood at nearly 3,000, and monthly contributions averaged a phenomenal \$13,000. Though the group's president, George Pepper, was a Communist, HICCASP was truly a Popular Front alliance of liberals and radicals, and many key leadership positions were held by liberals like Gene Kelly, Olivia De Havilland, Emmet Lavery, Edward G. Robinson, and Orson Welles.<sup>52</sup>

As the embodiment of the Popular Front in the war years, the HDC worked on a wide range of issues, from championing the cause of labor and civil rights to voicing support for the United Nations and the development of responsible postwar policies on nuclear weapons. However, as early as the summer of 1943, the HDC focused its attention almost exclusively on the campaign to reelect FDR to a fourth term—a goal that created remarkable unity among American progressives. As Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund point out, "Roosevelt's power as a rallying point against all the domestic forces of darkness cannot be overestimated. Centrist liberals and Communists alike shared the feeling that Franklin Roosevelt alone could stem the tide of domestic reaction and preserve the Grand Alliance in Europe."<sup>53</sup> Roosevelt's reelection in November 1944 coincided with dramatic military successes on the European front. Following the invasion of Normandy in August, the Allies drove the German Army steadily eastward toward the Rhine. Despite a last-ditch counteroffensive by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge, it was clear in the fall of 1944 that the tide had turned in Europe and the Nazis were on the run.<sup>54</sup>

41

However, on April 12, 1945, five months after his reelection and two months before the surrender of Germany, President Roosevelt died in office. Progressives throughout the world mourned his passing and feared that their world had just been turned upside down. A week after FDR's untimely death, the HDC sent a telegram to his successor, Harry S. Truman: "In this hour, our country needs unity more than ever. We of motion picture, radio and music solemnly pledge to work for the unity of all Americans behind your leadership for the carrying out of the principles of Franklin Delano Roosevelt as so eloquently stated in your moving address to Congress." Scott, Paxton, and Dmytryk, along with Scott's wife Anne Shirley and his close friend Ben Barzman, joined nearly four hundred other Hollywood luminaries in signing the telegram.<sup>55</sup> The incredible response by Hollywood progressives signified not only their tremendous respect and even adoration for FDR, but also their recognition that his death would fundamentally transform the political landscape. As Bobby Lees, a Communist screenwriter and

42

close friend of Scott's, remembered, after Roosevelt died "we played Earl Robinson's 'Lonesome Train' in our living room with a bunch of friends, all weeping. We sensed right then and there that this was the end."<sup>56</sup>

As it turned out, Lees's intuition was correct. The death of FDR truly marked the end of an era in American politics and society. Harry S. Truman was no Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the Popular Front would prove no match for the forces of reaction. Though Hollywood progressives had high hopes for continuation of the wartime alliance between liberals and radicals, the political tide was already turning against the American Left. First, Truman's ascension to the presidency and the conflicts over the postwar division of power in Europe marked the beginning of the Cold War and a significant shift in the American attitude toward Stalin and the Soviet Union. At the same time, the Communist Party of America, responding to changes in the international political line, summarily dissolved the Communist Political Association and replaced Party head Earl Browder with hard-liner William Z. Foster, which effectively signaled the end of the Popular Front. In Hollywood, right-wing activists banded together to form the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, a coalition dedicated to ridding the film industry of radicals and Hollywood movies of subversive ideas. And finally, the long-simmering tensions between the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), a conservative, mob-infiltrated craft guild, and the radical upstart Conference of Studio Unions (CSU) erupted in strike violence in the summer of 1945. Though the CSU was briefly successful, the strike proved extremely divisive, particularly within the Screen Writers Guild.<sup>57</sup>

Despite these ominous developments, Hollywood progressives greeted the end of the war with jubilation and foresaw a new era in filmmaking right around the corner.<sup>58</sup> Those who had served overseas returned to Hollywood with a new vision and with new technical skills that helped change the look of postwar films. For example, director Abe Polonsky remembered that in filming *Body and Soul*, cameraman James Wong Howe used "cameramen with experience at the battlefield, who had learned how to use hand-held cameras, in order to get some really unusual shots. That made *Body and Soul* kind of special for the time."<sup>59</sup> During the war a whole range of workers in Hollywood—writers, directors, actors, cameramen, cutters, and technicians—had experienced a "new exhilaration." They felt their skills were making a significant contribution to the war effort and that the medium of film was being put to its most important use ever. As left-wing director Irving Pichel argued, "Nobody laments that there are no more buzzbombs and V-2's and burning cities and gas chambers for us to dramatize, but we must grant that the universal tragedy, from Warsaw to Nagasaki, while it was being enacted, gave America a unified morality which in turn gave films a mandate for reality and purpose."<sup>60</sup>

43

44

Certainly, the war had given a new legitimacy to political themes in Hollywood films. Radical writers had had a taste of melding their art and their politics, and they wanted more. The depiction of American social problems—particularly the symptoms of racial unrest and discrimination, such as the internment of Japanese Americans, a wave of lynchings in the South, race riots in Detroit, the Zoot Suit riots in Los Angeles, an upsurge in anti-Semitism—long discouraged under the Production Code, was also taboo under the Office of War Information guidelines, for fear that a frank examination of domestic unrest during the war years would undercut the solidarity of the home front. With the defeat of fascism in sight, however, Hollywood progressives "assumed that the wartime moratorium on the social problem film . . . would come to an end. There was a belief that the wartime responsibilities of the industry, together with the realism of service documentaries, could be continued in post-war Hollywood filmmaking."<sup>61</sup> 45

The new openness of the Breen Office to hard-boiled "adult" thrillers like *Murder, My Sweet* suggested that the wartime realism had, indeed, had a fundamental impact on the film industry. Many in Hollywood believed that the war had also changed American moviegoers and their expectations of Hollywood films. Film historian Ronald Davis explains, "In the postwar period, with movie audiences becoming more sophisticated, Hollywood's approach began to look naïve and old-fashioned. Much of the mystery, adventure, and romance the big studios had provided was too simplistic for a more complex, less idealistic world to accept."<sup>62</sup> Darryl F. Zanuck returned from the war confident that the postwar audience would be open to films with more mature, adult themes, and he was ready to commit his studio to making them. As early as 1943, at a conference sponsored by the Hollywood Writers' Mobilization, Zanuck shared his belief that Hollywood must "begin to deal realistically in film with the causes of wars and panics, with social upheavals and depression, with starvation and want and barbarism under whatever guise."<sup>63</sup> 46

Adrian Scott certainly shared these sentiments, and during this period, he began work on a new film, an internationalist antifascist thriller entitled *Cornered*. Though this marked Scott's first opportunity to truly integrate his political and artistic visions, the project was in many ways an agonizing experience for him, testing the limits of his ability to work within the studio system and challenging his commitment to the Communist Party. 47

## Notes

**Note 1:** Bernard Dick, *Radical Innocence: A Critical Study of the Hollywood Ten* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 126.

**Note 2:** Scott's perception was shared by John Houseman, who himself straddled the roles of producer and actor: "Beginning in the late twenties with talking pictures and ending with the dissolution of the major studios in the mid-sixties, the producer was, in fact, the key

figure in the California filmmaking structure." John Houseman, *Front and Center* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 117.

**Note 3:** Barzman, interview with author, April 1999; Joan Scott, interview with author, April 1999.

**Note 4:** Richard Jewell, interview with author, July 20, 2004; Richard Jewell, *The RKO Story* (London: Octopus Books, 1982), 140–142.

**Note 5:** Barzman, interview with author, April 1999; Betsy Blair Reisz, interview with Patrick McGilligan, in Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 551; Bruce Cook, *Dalton Trumbo* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 281.

**Note 6:** Reisz, interview in McGilligan and Buhle, *Tender Comrades*, 551; article by David Hanna, in Scott Papers, AHC.

**Note 7:** Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–60* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 6.

**Note 8:** John Paxton to Kelly and Steinman, typed letter, July 1977, in Paxton Bio File, AMPAS; Alfred Lewis Leavitt, interview by Larry Ceplair, in McGilligan and Buhle, *Tender Comrades*, 453.

**Note 9:** Typescript funeral eulogy for John Paxton, n.d., in Paxton Bio File, AMPAS.

**Note 10:** J. D. Marshall, "The Greeks Had Another Word for It, Meaning—Exaltation—John Paxton" [interview with Paxton], in J. D. Marshall, *Blueprint in Babylon* (Tempe, Ariz.: Phoenix House, 1978), 259. Paxton actually wrote *Murder, My Sweet* first. The RKO production and script files at UCLA indicate that on May 12, 1944, Paxton began his assignment to *My Pal Wolf*, while his final script of *Murder, My Sweet* is dated May 8. The shooting schedules of the two films overlapped, however: *Murder, My Sweet* was shot from May 8 through June 30, while *My Pal Wolf* began shooting on May 22 and wrapped on June 23.

**Note 11:** Barzman, interview with author, 1999; Dick, *Radical Innocence*, 128.

**Note 12:** The literature on pulp fiction is extensive, and much innovative work has been done in the past decade. Books I have found particularly useful include: Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000); Erin A. Smith, *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), and Megan E. Abbot, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). A classic but still useful text is David Madden, *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968).

**Note 13:** Sheri Chinen Biesen, *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

**Note 14:** Breen quoted in Biesen, *Blackout*, 101; Biesen, *Blackout*, 98–102.

**Note 15:** Dick, *Radical Innocence*, 128; Marshall, "The Greeks Had Another Word" [Paxton interview], 259; Paxton, interview with Ceplair; Paxton, taped interview, 1977.

**Note 16:** Edward Dmytryk, *It's a Hell of a Life, But Not a Bad Living* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 58.

**Note 17:** John Paxton, taped interview [n.a.], 1977, Los Angeles. For details on John Garfield, see Robert Sklar, *City Boys: Cagney, Bogart, Garfield* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), and Wendy Smith, *Real Life Drama: The Group Theatre and America, 1931–1940* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), on Garfield's work with the Group Theater.

**Note 18:** Paxton, taped interview, 1977.

**Note 19:** Dick Powell, "The Role I Liked Best . . ." *Saturday Evening Post* (October 21, 1946), in *Murder, My Sweet* [hereafter, *MMS*] Production File, AMPAS.

**Note 20:** C. W. Koerner to "Dear Boys," August 3, 1944, in Scott Papers, B21-F12, AHC.

**Note 21:** Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely* (New York: Knopf, 1940; rpt. Random House/Vintage Books, 1976), 1.

**Note 22:** Paxton, taped interview, 1977.

**Note 23:** In writing *Farewell, My Lovely*, Chandler cannibalized his own work, piecing together three short stories published in *Black Mask* and other pulp magazines in the 1930s; as a result, the plot is sometimes very confusing. This seems to be a hallmark of Chandler's work, and he once allegedly admitted that he himself didn't know who had killed Sean Reagan in *The Big Sleep*.

**Note 24:** Richard Jewell, interview with author, July 2004; Jewell, *The RKO Story*; Biesen, *Blackout*, 115.

**Note 25:** Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 131.

**Note 26:** Joseph Breen to William Gordon, April 13, 1944, in Scott Papers, B21-F12, AHC.

**Note 27:** Joseph Breen to William Gordon, April 13, 1944; Breen to Gordon, May 1, 1944; Breen to RKO, February 6, 1945, all in Scott Papers, B21-F12, AHC. The Office of War Information also took issue with the violence in *Murder, My Sweet*, though reviewer Gene Kern was less concerned with potential conflicts with the Production Code than with making sure that the film was suitable for screening overseas. The chief issue for Kern was that the film might "project a picture of prevailing lawlessness in this country." Particularly questionable lines included "These are heist guys. They're tough—and smart. . . . These jobs are cased," and "The gang behind the holdup . . . a gang like that hates to hurt anybody—it isn't good for business." However, Kern believed that these problems could be solved by "toning down the references to gangsterism and avoiding casting gangster types." (Apparently, "personal" crime and violence was acceptable, but "organized" crime was out of bounds.) Kern thanked RKO for sharing "this script which I think is so unusual, despite the problematical subject matter, that it promises a film which may be excellent entertainment for audiences abroad." Gene Kern, Liaison Officer, Office of War Information, Los Angeles Overseas Bureau, to William Gordon, RKO, April 15, 1944, in Scott Papers, B21-F12, AHC.

**Note 28:** Article by David Hanna, in Scott Papers, AHC.

**Note 29:** Quinn Martin to Sid Rogell [Adrian Scott cc'd on memo], August 29, 1944, in Scott Papers, AHC.

**Note 30:** James M. Cain quoted in Biesen, *Blackout*, 102.

**Note 31:** *Murder, My Sweet* preview comment cards, October 5, 1944, in Scott Papers, B21-F12, AHC.

**Note 32:** [BARN], "'Farewell My Lovely' Gripping Suspenseful Mystery is ' Sleeper,'" *Film Bulletin*, December 11, 1944, in Scott Papers, B21-F14, AHC.

**Note 33:** "Farewell My Lovely" [review], *Showmen's Trade Review*, December 9, 1944, in Scott Papers, B21-F14, AHC.

**Note 34:** [BARN], "'Farewell My Lovely,'" *Film Bulletin*; "Farewell My Lovely" [review], *Showmen's Trade Review*.

**Note 35:** Scott to Charles Koerner, February 13, 1945, in Scott Papers, B21-F12, AHC.

**Note 36:** Adrian Scott to Allan Scott, May 28, 1947, in Scott Papers, AHC.

**Note 37:** Ibid.

**Note 38:** "Murder, My Sweet—An Adult Whodunit Does It for Dick Powell," *Look Magazine*,

April 7, 1945, in *MMS* production file, AMPAS; Kate Cameron, "Palace Again Offers a Thrilling Mystery," (*New York*) *Daily News*, March 9, 1945, in Scott Papers, AHC.

**Note 39:** Eileen Creelman, "A Hard-Boiled Thriller, 'Murder, My Sweet' . . ." *New York Sun*, March 9, 1945, in Scott Papers, AHC.

**Note 40:** Edwin Schallert, "'Murder, My Sweet,' Intriguing Thriller," *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 1945, in *MMS* Production Files, AMPAS.

**Note 41:** Lowell E. Redelings, "MMS a Topnotch Thriller," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, n.d., in Scott Papers, B21-F14, AHC.

**Note 42:** Schallert, "'Murder, My Sweet.'"

**Note 43:** Bosley Crowther, "*Murder, My Sweet* Arrives at the Palace," *New York Times*, March 9, 1945.

**Note 44:** Corbin Patrick, "Powell in Thriller: Dick Shows Stuff as Private Eye," no publication information, n.d., in Scott Papers, B21-F14, AHC.

**Note 45:** Cameron, "Palace Again Offers a Thrilling Mystery."

**Note 46:** "Murder, My Sweet—An Adult Whodunit."

**Note 47:** Article by David Hanna, in Scott Papers, AHC. Sid Rogell is credited as executive producer on a number of Scott's early films, including *Murder, My Sweet* and *Deadline at Dawn*, though not on *My Pal Wolf*, a "kiddie flick" that was Scott's first foray as a producer. Lower-budget films generally attracted less studio oversight, which may explain Scott's solo credit on *My Pal Wolf*. However, the extent of Rogell's contribution as executive producer is unclear, and by 1945, with the production of *Cornered*, Scott was producing on his own. One measure of the studio's faith in his abilities can be seen in the decision to send Scott and his production unit to England in 1946 to make *So Well Remembered*, the first postwar joint production between RKO and the Rank Studio.

**Note 48:** Scott produced *Deadline at Dawn*, written by Clifford Odets and directed by Harold Clurman, both leading figures from the Group. Dmytryk directed *Back to Bataan*, written by Ben Barzman, while Paxton scripted another thriller, *Crack-Up*.

**Note 49:** Marsha Hunt, interview with Glenn Lovell, in McGilligan and Buhle, *Tender Comrades*, 318; Norma Barzman, interview with author, April 1999.

**Note 50:** "Anne Shirley," in *The Film Encyclopedia*, ed. Ephraim Katz (New York: Perigee Books, 1979), 1054; Barzman, interview with author, April 1999.

**Note 51:** Report from Los Angeles office, June 24, 1946, in Adrian Scott FBI File; memo/report—Los Angeles SAC to Director, FBI, March 10, 1951, in Edward Dmytryk FBI File.

**Note 52:** Ceplair and Englund, *Inquisition in Hollywood*, 225–227.

**Note 53:** *Ibid.*, 228.

**Note 54:** John Patrick Diggins, *The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace, 1941–1960* (New York: Norton, 1988), 41–44. For an extended study of the last phases of the war in the European theater, see Stephen Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944–May 7, 1945* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

**Note 55:** Typescript of telegram, HDC members to Harry S. Truman, April 18, 1945, in Hollywood Democratic Committee [HDC] Papers, B7-F18, Wisconsin Historical Society [WHS], Madison, Wisconsin.

**Note 56:** Robert Lees, interview with Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, in McGilligan and Buhle, *Tender Comrades*, 424.

**Note 57:** Brian Neve, *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition* (New York: Routledge,

1992), 86–89. See chapter 8 for a fuller discussion of these issues.

**Note 58:** A particularly telling indicator of a new mood in Hollywood was the surge of independent filmmaking. By 1947 there were fifteen independent production companies for every one that had existed in 1940. Like Hollywood Davids taking on the studio-system Goliath, in Brian Neve's apt metaphor, a number of high-profile writers and directors, including Frank Capra, John Ford, Mervyn LeRoy, Preston Sturges, Dudley Nichols, William Wyler, and even actor Humphrey Bogart, broke ranks with the studios to found their own production companies. Neve, *Film and Politics*, 87.

**Note 59:** Polonsky, interview in McGilligan and Buhle, *Tender Comrades*, 485.

**Note 60:** Irving Pichel, "Areas of Silence," in *Thought Control in the U.S.A.: The Collected Proceedings*, ed. Harold J. Salemson (Hollywood, Calif.: Progressive Citizens of America, 1947), 313.

**Note 61:** Neve, *Film and Politics*, 75, 85.

**Note 62:** Ronald L. Davis, *The Glamour Factory: Inside Hollywood's Big Studio System* (Dallas, Tex.: Southern Methodist University Press, 1993), 369.

**Note 63:** Zanuck quoted in Neve, *Film and Politics*, 75. See also George F. Custen, *Twentieth Century's Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).