Harvey Canter

Woolrich into *Noir*:
A Study in Filmic Possibilities

> Nelson pushed through the revolving door (of the automat) at twenty to one in the morning, his squadmate, Sarecky, in the compartment behind him. They stepped clear and looked around. The place looked funny. Almost all the little white tables had helpings of food on them, but no one was at them eating. There was a big black crowd ganged up over in one corner, thick as bees and sending up a buzz. One or two were standing up on chairs, trying to see over the heads of the ones in front, rubbering like a flock of cranes.
>
> The crowd burst apart, and a cop came through. "Now stand back. Get away from this table, all of you," he was saying. "There's nothing to see. The man's dead—that's all."

These are the two opening paragraphs of "Murder at the Automat." a story by Cornell Woolrich, one of the premier "pulp" writers of the Depression and war years. This brief passage captures the quintessence of the Woolrichian world view, and contains the seeds of his most predominant and consistent themes. It is also a scene so well conceived that it cries out for translation into film, specifically into a *film noir*. The object of this study will be to give an overview of the themes present in a specific set of short stories by Cornell Woolrich and to show the affinity between these themes and themes common to *film noir* in general. I will also try to demonstrate the acute visual perception of Woolrich, that his narrative gracefully lends itself to filmic interpretation in the style that is distinctly *film noir*.

The picture presented in the opening of "Murder at the Automat" is typical of narrative patterns in Woolrich. His is a world of darkness, where morality is buried in the shadows of

a depraved, pernicious urban environment. Woolrich pulls us face first into an oblique tableau of a world where things are askew, awry, disjointed, crooked and wrong. "Almost all the little white tables had helpings of food on them, but no one was eating." A man lies dead over there, slumped over a table "a white streak on his chin, and a half-eaten sandwich under his face." He has been unexpectedly poisoned, his life abrogated by a doctored bologna sandwich. Every night for six months he had been coming to this automat and had purchased the same sixty-cent sandwich, and now this. "There's death in little habits," says Nelson later on. The crowd pushes around the table of death, but they don't care about the man any more than the cop does, the cop who dismisses the sudden tragedy with the indifference of a man snubbing out a cigarette-butt with the heel of his shoe. The man's death has meaning only for Nelson who, bound by duty, must find the killer.

To classify formally the themes present in the Woolrich stories examined in this study ("After Dinner Story", "The Night Reveals", "Marihuana", "Rear Window." "Murder Story", and "Murder at the Automat"), we might say that the predominant characteristic is the disintegration of normative values and expectations. Instead of a reliable, stable and moral world, we are presented with a universe governed by coincidence, unpredictability and a blurred sense of good and evil. Woolrich takes a fundamentally pessimistic view of human nature; even his "heroes" are unpure. Though the bedridden Hal Jeffries uncovers a murder in "Rear Window", we can still honestly say that he is a nosey neighbor, a certified Peeping Tom. Even Nelson in "Murder at the Automat" can only arrive at the truth by himself poisoning the murderer. At best, the protagonists in a Woolrich story are characterized by their ability to function in the world with a lesser amount of viciousness than most people. There is a sort of justice in the actions of Jeffries and Nelson, but it is not the clean cut of justice that we would like to see; it is justice pared with a dull blade. The police in a Woolrich story are depicted as brutal and corrupt, or just plain stupid. By making the "good guys" so loathsome, Woolrich merely increases the sense of moral

ambiguity.

Fate takes a heavy hand in any Woolrich scenario. "After Dinner Story" is a perfect example in which seven men are arbitrarily involved in an elevator accident that kills two of them. One of the two, however, was murdered after the crash by one of the other unlucky riders; the police, for lack of any other evidence, figure the death to be a suicide caused by stress. Fate will continue to act on the group until the murdered man's father exacts his revenge a year later. The point is that if any of them had not gotten on that particular elevator, he could have been free of Fate and its after effects. As one man whines on the elevator, "I wish I hadn't come back after that damn phone call. It was a wrong number, and I could've ridden down the trip before this." MacKenzie, the protagonist of the story, immediately has the answer. "You guys talk like a bunch of ten year olds! It's happened; what's the good of wishing about it?" Woolrich then comments, "(MacKenzie) wouldn't have described himself as a brave man, he was just a realist." Characters in Woolrich either accept or struggle with Fate, but all are powerless to affect it.

People's lives in these stories are reduced to a series of daily habits that seal their fate. Hal Jeffries is able to diagnose a murder strictly by observing behavioral patterns in his rear window neighbors; in "Murder Story" a man dies because of his own vanity and hypochondria; and in "Murder at the Automat" Avram dies because of his stinginess. For Nelson, finding the murderer will be merely a process of finding the man to fit the habits described by the witnesses.

> The public at large thinks detective work is something miraculous, like pulling rabbits out of a silk hat. They don't realize that no adult is a free agent— that they're tied hand and foot by tiny, harmless little habits, and held helpless. This man has a habit of taking a snack to eat at midnight in a public place. He has a habit of picking his teeth after he's through of lingering on at the table, or looking back over his shoulder aimlessly from time to time. Combine that with a stocky build, a dark complexion and you have

him! What more d'ya want, a spotlight trained on him?

By crystallizing life into habits, Woolrich levels out humanity in the face of Fate. He seems to be saying that we all victimize ourselves, that we are all individually responsible for where we are at any given moment. It is only left for Fate to decide if, at that moment, it will choose to flatten us with a careless backhand blow. Paranoia in a Woolrich story often materializes into just another machination of Fate, paranoia grown out of fear, fear grown out of helplessness, helplessness to change anything about ourselves that can alter our destiny.

Just because we are reading the penny-a-word stories of a notorious "pulp writer", one of Edmund Wilson's "Boys in the Back Room", it does not change the fact that Woolrich is expounding a fundamental and profound brand of Existentialism. In these stories, life ends suddenly, without warning, without apparent meaning—and no one cares. When Avram's wife is told of his miserly husband's death at the automat, her first question is can she turn on the lights now that he is gone. Life is cheap in Woolrich's world, and its purpose is often moot.

In "The Night Reveals" and "Murder at the Automat" Woolrich's protagonists take the high road of Existentialism and decide to take positive action in the face of a seemingly meaningless existence. It is a lonely road, one strewn with obstacles and dead ends; often its travellers are abused by those who no longer care to try and affect their own passage. The good man in a Woolrich story takes responsibility for arriving at justice and truth, even though he must often employ shady means to achieve these objectives. Moral absolutes disappear. Truth, at best, becomes a mirror covered with a thin layer of steam—but at least the good man tries to assimilate the image of truth. Truth and justice walk a very fine line between injustice and no justice.

> Nelson wasn't the kind of a dick that would rather
> have had a wrong guy than no guy at all, like some of
> them. He wanted the right guy, or none at all.

Woolrich has a way of wreaking havoc with our day to day security. Time and again, for character after character, an everyday, mundane existence is turned into an upside-down, nightmare world of crime, entered seemingly without effort and often on the basis of a momentary misconception. As William Tucker says of himself at the outset of "Murder Story," "I wasn't one of those people things happen to, that you read about in the papers. I was part of the scene." But Tucker nonetheless becomes a murderer out of his own petty vengefulness—once he is presented with the right opportunity. MacKenzie of "After Dinner Story" is a water filter salesman, but this does not prevent him from becoming involved as a witness to a murder, and a possible victim of a begrieved father's perverse sense of justice. For all his efforts, Hal Jeffries is nearly murdered himself.

Misconceptions serve to doom several of Woolrich's characters. Harry Jordan, the humble fire inspector, takes it on heresay that his son has perished in a fire set by his pyromaniac wife. Jordan is literally beside himself at the scene of the fire.

> Somebody was hollering "My kid! my kid!" right
> next to him until he thought he'd go nuts. Then, when
> he turned to look, it was himself.

In this moment of what Francis Nivens calls "feverish emotionalism" Jordan returns to his apartment and shoots his wife, only to have his son walk in—alive—from the next room.

A stoned King Turner in "Marihuana" believes that he has stabbed a friend. He flees, seizing a revolver along the way. In his mad attempt to escape, Turner kills a cop and his estranged wife. Turner dies after a shootout, falling from a window ledge onto the street below. At the end we discover that he had never stabbed his friend at all—that it was a sight gag pulled off to make fun of his drugged condition.

The tone of Woolrich's writing lends strength to his thematic concerns. He is cool and detached, but can never resist the opportunity to inject sardonic, black humor into the action. His caricatures of newsboys and counter-people

provide comic relief and a much needed buffer from the break-neck pacing and nail-biting tension that are the hallmark of his writings. In theme and temperament Woolrich is a perfect match for the consciousness that later would typify *film noir*. The situations and conditions present in his work are a natural mates for a film style that constantly seeks to deal with characters who are almost always helpless in their own dealings with a dark and polluted world.

The visual *mise en scène* in a Woolrich story reinforces his somber notion of humanity. Woolrich has a natural feel for a dark world and the play of light—literally and figuratively—within that world. His acute cinematic sense is evident in "After Dinner Story" when workmen cut the accident victims out of the dark elevator with a blowtorch.

> A spark materialized eerily through the ceiling. Then another, then a semicircular gush of them. A curtain of fire descended halfway into their midst illuminating their faces wanly for a minute . . . the sparks kept coming down like waterfalls . . .

The stories usually move at a fast pace through a varied maze of city scenes and dingy, claustrophobic rooms. The city streets are usually deserted, as in "The Night Reveals" where Harry Jordan tracks his pyromaniac wife down empty, tenebrous sidewalks and into darkened doorways. "The blackness of its yawning entryway seemed to suck her in . . . it was like trying to peer through black velvet." A man must tread cautiously through these dimly lit urban alleyways and corridors that serve as landscape in a Woolrich episode. The city at night is a jungle of unknown quantities, and death waits in shadows of danger.

Woolrich also has a penchant for describing specific spots within a cityscape, such as newsstands, candystores and this description of a Hopper-esque diner in "Marihuana":

> . . . (it was) a long narrow lunchroom with a dozing vagrant or two nodding in the one-armed chairs, and no employee any nearer than the counter far at the back.

Characters in Woolrich must also move through cryptic hallways and stifling stairways and rooms. In another section of "Marihuana," King Turner has been taken by a group of "friends" to a "weed ranch" (not as picturesque as it sounds; it is a cheap building in the seamy part of town) to smoke reefers and forget his problems. Woolrich's narrative speaks for itself.

> There were stairs ahead, lit–or rather hinted at–by a single bead of gaslight, the size of a yellow pea, hovering over a jet sticking out of the wall . . . They tiptoed up (the stairs) Indian file. They had to go that way, the rickety case was too narrow to take two of them abreast . . . (then) they were standing at the end of a long "railway" hall that seemed to go on indefinitely into the distance. A solitary light bulb overhead was made even dimmer with a jacket of crepe paper . . .

It takes only a short step of the imagination to see the filmic possibilities inherent in such vivid description. Woolrich's concentration on tepid light fixtures automatically implies the strong shadows that are part and parcel of any *film noir* presentation.

Stairs are a favorite *film noir* motif and appear with varying degrees of importance in each of these stories, but they appear nonetheless. Stairs suggest inevitability, repetition and claustrophobia, and offer endless filmic possibilities that need only directorial imagination in camera and light placement to create further suggestion and mood. In a film, claustrophobia can be suggested by tight camera shots, but Woolrich must rely on building it into his surroundings. The elevator entrapment in "After Dinner Story," the confinement of Hal Jeffries in "Rear Window," and the refuge of King Turner in a darkened phone booth in "Marihuana" all seem to suggest that caged-in feeling that so often plagues characters in the world of *film noir*. Again, good camera work in these situations can only serve to enhance the masterful work of Woolrich.

We have amassed quite a case for the fluid translation of

Woolrich's writings into the *film noir* style on a thematic and visual level. Other Woolrich themes, such as the race against time and the erosion of love and trust (detailed by Nivens in his introduction to *Nightwebs*) are a large part of the body of Woolrichian and *film noir* concerns, but were simply not a major factor in these selected stories. The writings of Woolrich were indeed ripe territory for the *noir* school, as the several films made from his writings can testify.

Woolrich has a way of making a man's life and the "choices" that influence it about as significant as a single grain of sand on a vast expanse of beach. Think about that the next time you sit down to eat a bologna sandwich.

◊