

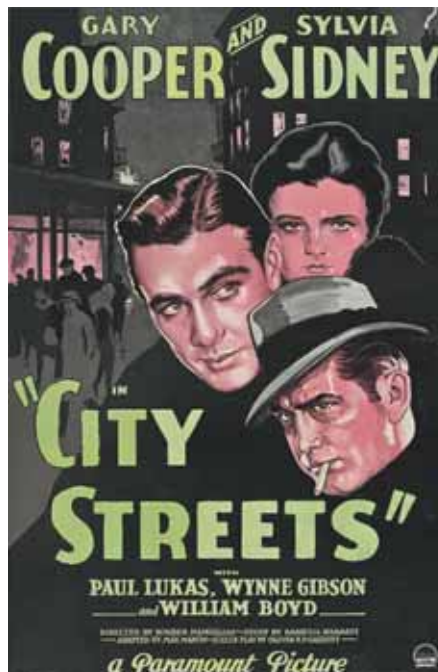
INTRODUCTION

When post-War audiences went to see a “film noir,” they certainly did not refer to the movie by that term. Nonetheless they knew what kind of movie they were going to see. They might have called it a thriller, mystery, action movie, or even psychological melodrama. Whatever the sobriquet, advertising displays that boldly announced titles that were “coming soon” with expressive icons and menacing catch phrases evoked the noir cycle’s dark and deadly vision and told them exactly what to expect. As Arthur Lyons suggested in *Death on the Cheap*, in some ways “film noir did not originate as a genre but as a faddish way of packaging the crime film.” In short, these film noir graphics promised a movie ride to a world where danger lives.

In every era of Hollywood including the classic period of film noir, guys with chiseled chins and dames with curves were easy enough to cast for minimum salaries. From 1940 to 1960 film noir was a staple product from the major studios to poverty row. Consequently A-list actors might sometimes share a marquee with faded idols from past decades or up-and-comers, who never made it past the first-rung on the ladder to stardom. Republic, Monogram, PRC and still lower-grade releasing companies could all manage to come up with a few extra dollars and buy some decent poster art. It might not be a level playing field in most respects, but as with certain black-listed writers, directors, and even actors, the work of some talented graphic artists could be had for a price.

The King Brothers, who are probably best-known for *Gun Crazy*, made all their pictures on a shoestring and had various releasing companies. Even Monogram could ship *Suspense* to theaters accompanied by the eye-catching one-sheet opposite. Just as the style and content of classic period film noir were influenced by such varied

Below, the worried looks in the 1931 gangster sagas *The Public Enemy* and *City Streets* subconsciously color the more romantic pose in Fritz Lang’s bleak 1937 pre-noir *You Only Live Once*.

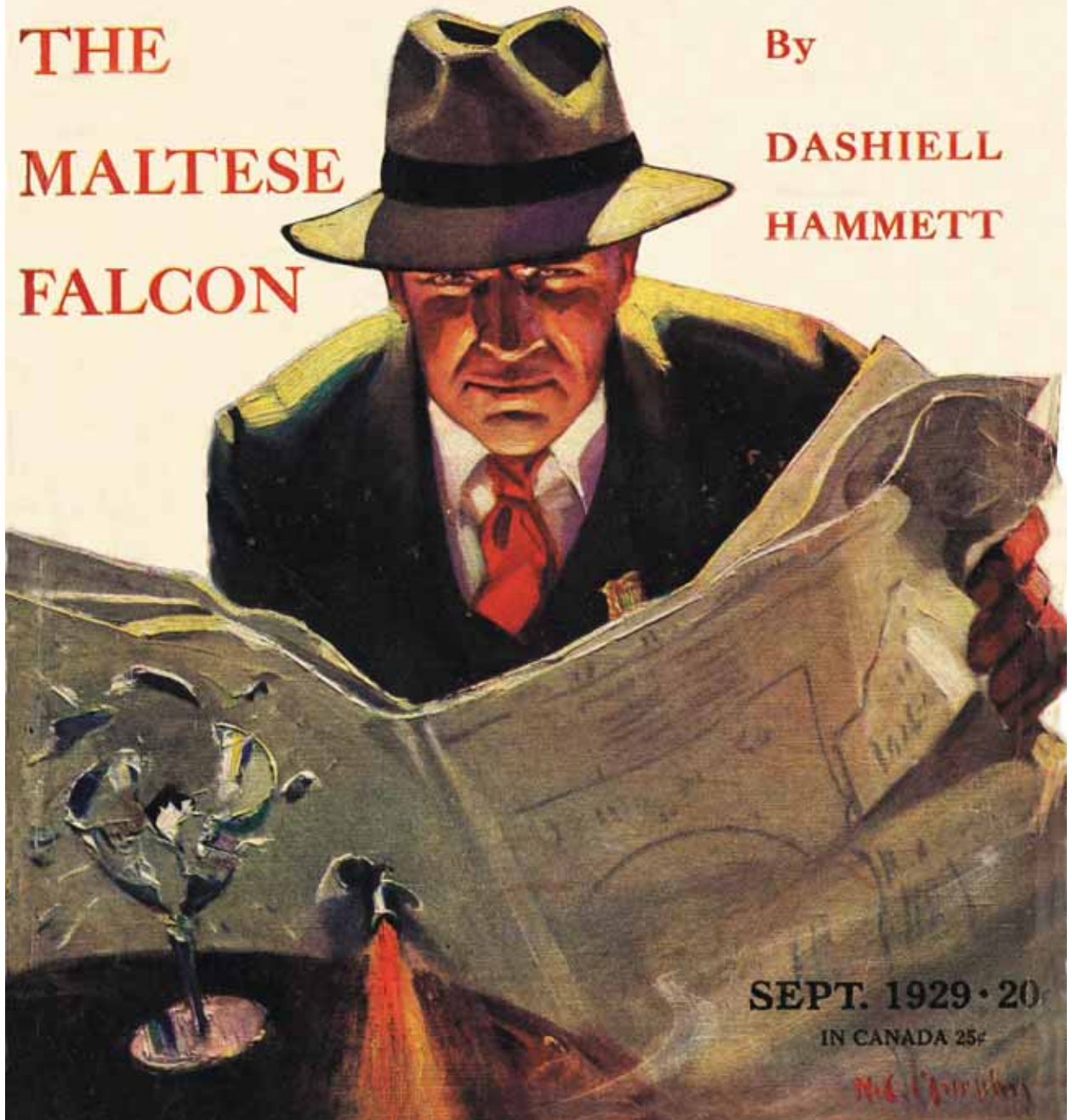


WESTERN, **DETECTIVE** & ADVENTURE STORIES

★ **BLACK MASK** ★

**THE
MALTESE
FALCON**

By
**DASHIELL
HAMMETT**



SEPT. 1929 • 20¢

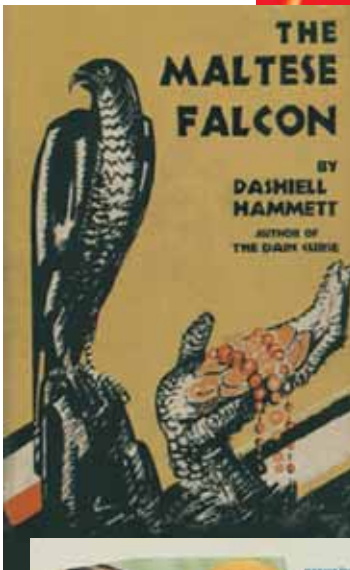
IN CANADA 25¢

McClure & Co.

Opposite, 1929 pulp cover

Right, graphic for the 1931 film version of Maltese Falcon

Below, the dust jacket of the first edition of the novel.



Evolution of the femme fatale: below Bebe Daniels in the 1931 version and Bette Davis (bottom and right) as the same character in the 1936 *Satan Met a Lady*.



antecedents as hard-boiled fiction and gangster movies of the early 1930s, film noir graphics adapted elements from proto-noir sources. When Dashiell Hammett's novel was serialized in "Black Mask" Magazine, it was sold by using the sensational and violent art seen two pages back. The hardcover book from Knopf adopted a more restrained approach, one befitting "serious" literature, for its dust jacket. From that cover the first adaptation in 1931 lifted the elements of the Falcon and the stylized hand.

As the lobby card for the 1931 adaptation suggests, the top-billed Bebe Daniels—sex kittenish star of such silent movies as *The Campus Flirt*, *She's a Sheik*, and *What A Night!*—does not portray Miss Wonderly as much of a femme fatale. Five years later, the pose struck by Bette Davis as Valerie Purvis (Wonderly) in *Satan Met A Lady* is more seductive and more menacing. In case there was any doubt about her potentially lethal character, in the vibrantly colored insert card, she's the one holding the gun.

Whether from book or movie, nothing in these graphics contains the explicit violence embodied in the 1929 pulp cover.

The cover from late 1935 at left garishly combines the detective with a gun and a languid siren in a red dress.

Below a 1941 pulp cover goes even further: the man is neither a smooth-shaven nor smoothly handsome but considerably more hard-bitten. The woman also has quite an edge, plus a wound on her arm





not to mention an oversized revolver.

The next adaptation of *The Maltese Falcon* is generally accepted as the first major release of a film noir during the classic period. It also defines the elements of many film noir graphics to follow over the next two decades. The key figure is now male and the top-billed Bogart combines elements of the men on all three pulp covers. He has the fedora and the automatic, of course, and the clear-eyed expression is not placid but subtly focused. Mary Astor as the latest Wonderly—here named Brigid O’Shaughnessy—is noir’s first femme fatale. Like the “Black Mask” tart she also wears a red dress and leans back but not into a man’s shoulder. More importantly she looks straight ahead, charming, beckoning, and, as the viewer will discover, scheming.

In the early 1930s Warner Bros. was the key studio for the gangster genre. While

Robert **TAYLOR**
& Lana
TURNER

They're Dynamite in
**JOHNNY
EAGER**

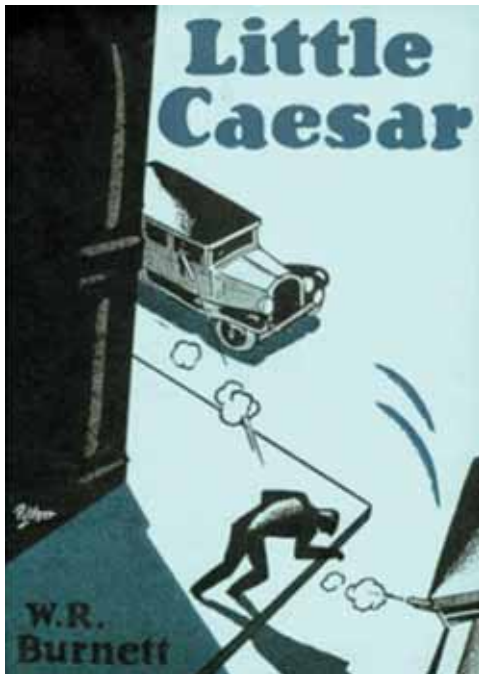


A
Mervyn **LEROY**
Production

with **EDWARD ARNOLD**
Van **HEFLIN**
Robert **STERLING**
Patricia **DANE**
Glenda **FARRELL**
Henry **O'NEILL**
Diana **LEWIS**

SCREEN PLAY BY JOHN LEE HARRIS AND JAMES EDWARD TRACY
Directed by MERVYN LEROY
Produced by JAMES W. CONSIDINE, JR.

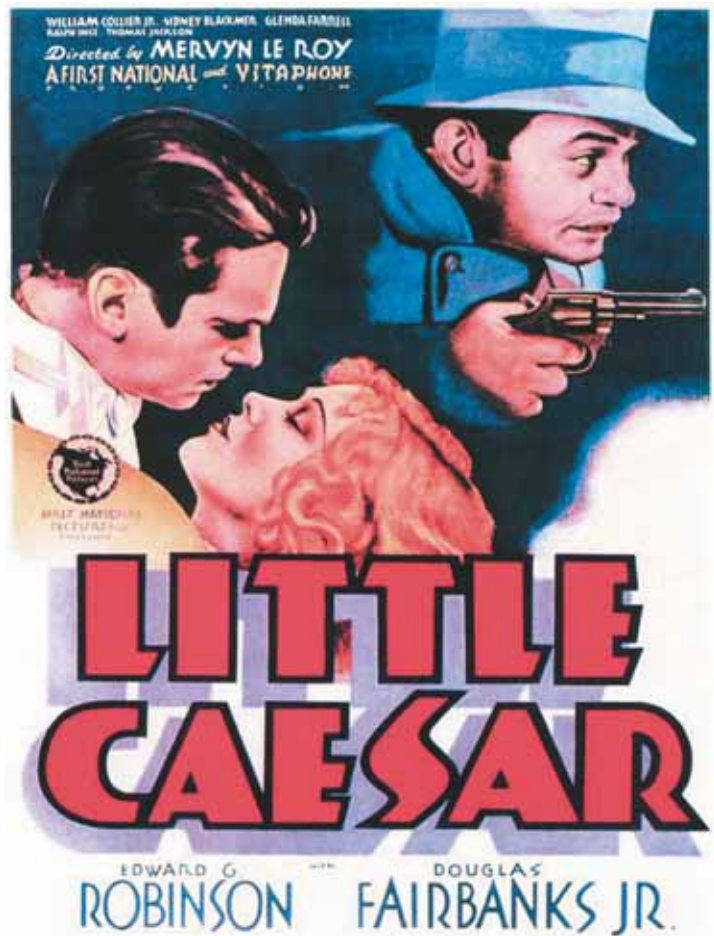
A Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer PICTURE



not entirely embracing the pulp approach, the one-sheet for the Warners adaptation of *Little Caesar* moves from the stylized violence of the book jacket—again from Knopf, which overlaid a literary patina onto the grisly content of the novel—into an explicit association of sex and guns. The couple who stare longingly into each other’s eyes and the thug in a hat with a gat are equally prominent. It’s a small step from there to the poster art for the 1941 *Maltese Falcon*.

Mervyn Leroy, who directed *Little Caesar* for Warners, also produced *Johnny Eager* for MGM. Although released the year after the Bogart/Astor *Maltese Falcon* the poster on the opposite page is a slight throwback. The smaller figures with guns blazing recall the dust jacket for *Little Caesar*. Although the black-and-white version of Robert Taylor as the title figure in the lower left certainly has a noir tinge, the key element is the couple, which romantized the sexual double entendre in the “TNT.”

As the noir movement modified the elements from various antecedents to define its own set of graphic connotations and key iconic indicators, there was a reciprocal effect. With its slick-haired ethnic Rico pointing his piece at some unseen antagonist, the noir influence is quite visible in the 1945 cover for the Avon paperback of *Little Caesar* at right. On the next page, the caricaturish art

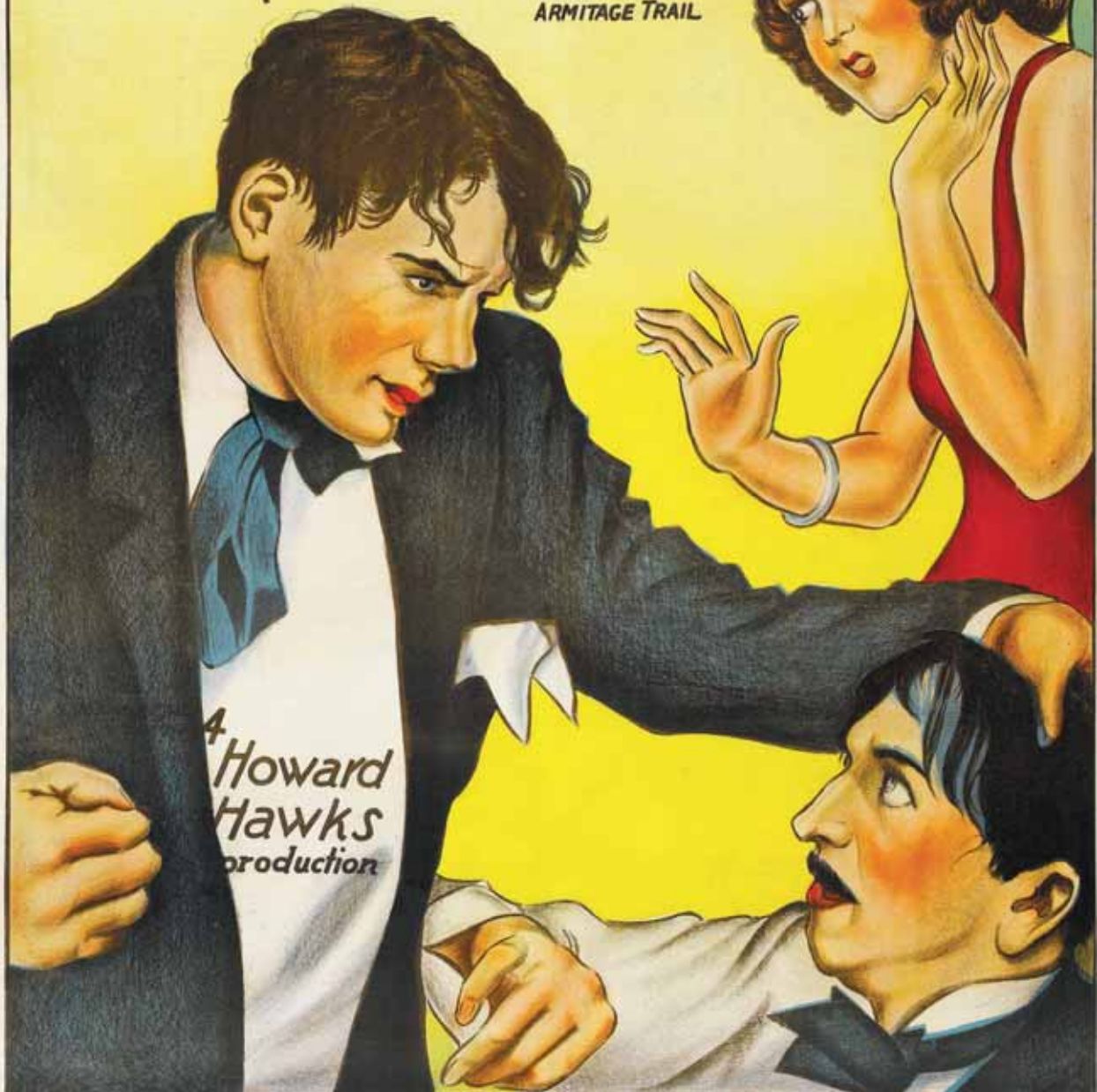


HOWARD
HUGHES
presents

SCARFACE

Paul Muni - Ann Dvorak - Osgood Perkins
Karen Morley - Boris "Frankenstein" Karloff

by BEN HECHT
From the novel by
ARMITAGE TRAIL



A
Howard
Hawks
production

found on the original one sheet of *Scarface* somewhat mitigates the violence. The art rendering of the title figure is somewhat recognizable as actor Paul Muni; but Ann Dvorak hardly seems the inspiration for the shocked female figure. Compare that to the poster below used for the 1947 reissue at the peak of the classic period.





As the chapters that follow will detail, there are obvious and esoteric links between film noir graphics and their



antecedents. Some are strikingly similar such as the claw-like hands depicted on the pulp cover and a poster for Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*, at left. There are also the more subtle effects like the diagonal slash of red graphics and the shadowed face common to the title lobby card from the silent *Underworld* (1927) and twenty years later in the six sheet for the proto-typical noir *The Dark Corner* (1946)

