"TEEN NOIR"

A Study of the Recent Film Noir Revival in the Teen Genre

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PREFACE

In the late 1990s I started to notice how tv-series and movies picked up on common noir traits from the old classical noir movies, such as rain, darkness and more dystopian plots. In 2006 critics started paying attention to this particular trend in regards to teen movies and started to call them teen noirs. In my thesis I want to explore further what teen noir is, which movies it includes and why it has appeared now. In my first chapter I explore not only today's zeitgeist that has led to teen noir, but also the ones that influenced the classical noir period and neo noir. In my second chapter I will focus on the character type the good-bad girl, and in doing so I will also be looking at the homemaker, the femme fatale and the P.I. In my third chapter I will look more closely at what I consider the two main influences on today's teen noir, namely suburbia and the growing class differences in American society. Since there is almost no critical material or an established canon of films I have chosen movies I have found suitable. However both *Brick* and *Veronica Mars* are widely recognized as teen noirs. In my conclusion I will speculate on where teen noir is headed and which direction it will take.

Since the first film noirs appeared and the first critics labeled them there have been several ongoing debates concerning them. Most common are the debates concerning labeling, are they a genre, a style or a movement; what are the criteria for being called film noir and which movies should be included; and where do the noirs made after the classical period ended belong. I have chosen to discuss these films as if film noir is a

genre, as film critics Andrew Dickos and Foster Hirsch believe. That there has always been a debate concerning which films should be included as film noirs and which should not has made the genre harder to define and opened up for a wide range of movies to be included. In my thesis I have had a broad definition of the film noir criteria when it comes to the three periods that I discuss; the classical film noir period, the neo-noirs, and the teen noirs. I have also used Andrew Spicer's book *Film Noir* as my primary resource for the classical film noirs concerning character types and influences. I found this to be a good introductory book that included all the characters, while most film noir books only focused on one or two.

CHAPTER I:

HUMPHREY BOGART'S BACK – BUT THIS TIME ROUND HE'S

AT HIGH SCHOOL[1]

> I had what I thought was a cool notion about placing teens in a noir universe, but
> what am I saying, what does that mean? This idea that I was attracted to, and had
> been thinking about since I taught high school, was this vague notion about
> teenagers being desensitized and jaded and sexualized so much earlier than I feel
> like even my generation 15, 20 years before had been. That seemed like a perfect
> thing to try to shine a spotlight on. [That concept] was interesting to me when the
> protagonist was a boy, but when I started thinking in terms of a girl who had seen
> too much and experienced too much at too young of an age, it became even more
> potent to me. It just seemed that much edgier and more difficult to swallow, in a
> good way. (Salon)

The above quote is from an interview with Rob Thomas, creator of the TV series
Veronica Mars (2004-2007), where he is explaining why he chose to combine film noir
techniques and elements with a teen series, and why he chose a girl for the lead. However
the phenomenon of having teens portray jaded and world weary characters is not limited
to *Veronica Mars* alone, but it rather seems a trend within teen movies and series dating

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[1] This it the title of an article written by Sarah Hughes in the Guardian, it refers to both *Brick* and *Veronica Mars* as teen noir, and is the earliest reference to teen noir I have found dated March 26, 2006.

back to the late 1980s. The common denominators for these films seemed to be lead characters who were outside the popular circle, whether by choice or not, and who usually had problems, often of an existential kind, that far outweighed in gravity the problems of their peers. These movies had intelligent characters, street smarts being highly valued, and their endings were usually dark or indecisive leaving the viewer to decide, although the prospects usually looked bleak. These teens were clearly troubled and their problems were not such as could be dealt with and brought to a satisfactory conclusion or 'happy end' within the movie's or series' run time. This was a new development in the teen genre; problems had been touched upon in teen movies before, but were often either forgotten or resolved by the end of the movie. That James Dean's character Jim Stark in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) has a strained relationship with his parents and a difficult home environment is touched upon in the scenes with his father, but nothing much is said or done about it. Likewise in one of Hughes's famous 1980s teen movies *The Breakfast Club* (1985) all the students are revealed to have difficult home situations, ranging from physical abuse and neglect to academic pressure. However, after having shared various troubling confessions the students manage to overcome these very quickly and by the end of the movie neither one seems angst filled or troubled. It is interesting that although the students seem to form a friendship during their Saturday in detention, they are not prepared to change when they return to the real world, nor do they expect others to: "Brian: So, so on Monday...what happens? Claire: Are we still friends, you mean? If we're friends now, that is? Brian: Yeah … Claire: I don't think so." (*The Breakfast Club*). They blame society for viewing them as stereotypes, but are themselves unwilling to do anything to break with their image.

The teen movie genre in the 1980s had 'light' themes, often concerning prom parties, graduation, detention and skipping school, and elevated the seriousness of these problems which they then proceeded to treat in a light hearted way. These themes have however not disappeared entirely, and as Skye Sherwin suggests, they were rather moved from the big screen to the small screen: "In 2006, studio productions angling for the teen buck invest in the proven returns of horror, while fables of the prom and the last golden summer have been swallowed up by TV series such as Dawson's Creek and The OC, in which a sleekly homogenised version of teen is rolled out for the under-agers." (The Guardian).[2] This move opened up for a different kind of teen movie.

Although there had previously been made darker teen movies such as the dark comedy *Heathers* (1989) and *River's Edge* (1986), it was not until several movies produced around the same time in the late 1990s and early 2000s that critics started to take notice. As Sherwin puts it: "Teen movies used to be about growing pains, bunking off school and prom night. Now it's mental illness, apocalypse and suicide" (The Guardian). Movies such as *Election* (1999) and *Mean Girls* (2004) followed in the vein of *Heathers*, using the dark comedy approach. Fantasy, science fiction and the supernatural were also means of conveying a dark mood, as we see in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Angel* (1999-2004) and *Donnie Darko (2001). Ghost World* (2001), *Mean Creek* (2004) and *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) were all dramas while Gus Van Sant made his teen movie *Elephant* (2003) as if it had been a documentary. These movies, albeit with different plots and takes on the teenage life and problems all had in common a dark undertone, a suggestion of hopelessness. And while movies such as *Mean Creek* (2004) echoed the noir feel of being doomed no matter what actions you took, these

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[2] *Dawson's Creek* ran from 1998-2003 and *The O.C.* ran from 2003-2007.

movies did not have a category or a name and were still only loosely connected. That the tv-series had weekly mysteries or tasks the main characters had to figure out and solve still did not connect them to noir until *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007) and *Brick* (2005) were made. Both Rob Thomas and Rian Johnson had deliberately sought to capture the noir mood and use noir techniques and this finally caused critics to label the productions "teen noir." Both Veronica and Brendan were detectives, who had actual cases, and so many of the noir elements were used that they were hard to ignore, including voice-overs, femme fatales, and corrupt authority figures and legal system. By the 1990s teen movies were definitely changing and by the first decade of the 21st century critics had started using the term teen noir. While this term was used primarily about *Veronica Mars* and *Brick* it did not take long before they were connected to previously dark teen movies and the term teen noir was being used about movies such as *River's Edge* from 1986. This belated naming of the genre mirrors the process which both the classic noir period and the neo noir period went through, their movies being labeled everything from thrillers to crimes and mysteries before being considered noir, and before critics started referring to them as such.

However, while something was definitely changing and going on within the teen genre, these films did not have a lot of viewers. Very few were box office hits and most of them were independent low budget films. Rian Johnson worked on *Brick* for seven years before acquiring financial back-up for the movie and *Veronica Mars* struggled to get enough viewers and was always in danger of being cancelled.[3] Interestingly enough, despite this many of them, such as *Donnie Darko,* have already become highly acclaimed

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[3] After a change of network, from UPN to CW, and its third season being cut from 22 to 20 episodes, the last five with no story arc just individual mysteries, *Veronica Mars* was cancelled after its third season.

cult classics, earning shows like *Veronica Mars* the nickname of a critic darling. In addition these movies and series seemed to appeal to adults as well as teenagers, often being considered smarter and with quick well written dialog. Why noir has had a revival in the teen genre, and why it has retuned now are interesting questions, and judging by the subject matters that they take up and by the response of the viewers it is obvious that they are touching upon something in society. As briefly mentioned above teen noir shares with its classic precedent that it is named only retrospectively, this is only one of the many commonalities they share. I will here look closer at the classic noir period to try to understand the role and function of contemporary teen noir.

In the 1940s movie critics as well as the film industry itself started to notice the emergence of a new type of movie in Hollywood. These movies were dark, pessimistic and often had a tragic ending. These movies had many influences like 'Hard-Boiled' crime fiction, gangster films, the gothic romance, German expressionism, the urban thriller and émigrés. In addition they were also affected by the social settings of their time, like postwar readjustment, McCarthyism, existentialism and Freudianism. These movies were to be known as film noirs.

The term film noir was first coined by the French critique Nino Frank in 1946, when he wrote a review of the four films *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Murder, My Sweet* (*Farewell my Lovely*) (1944), *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Laura* (1944), which were simultaneously released in France after WWII. While France was occupied, Hollywood had continued to produce movies, and when American movies were again shown in Europe several films that were later to be known as film noirs had accumulated over the years. This lead to movies that were originally produced years apart being shown at the

same time, which made foreign critics pick up on commonalities and similar traits missed by American reviewers.

French critics saw that these movies had something in common and later more movies were added to the list, a list that today consists of over a hundred movies made between 1940 and 1959. The film noirs were dark, and had the loner/outsider as the main character, and thematic elements included were often alienation and fatalism. The choices the characters had to make were often difficult ones, and there were no clear cut/obvious decisions. Film noirs portrayed how everything is not absolutely right or wrong, but that there are many shades of grey in society. When film makers were making these films in the golden age the criteria for film noir were not established, they did not know their films had so much in common that they would form a category of movies: they thought they were making crime thrillers.[4] Many of the movies that are film noirs today were B-movies at the time, made on low budgets with short time spans. This is also thought to be a reason why many of the shots and lightings and scenes, now characteristics of film noir, were done the way they were. This is also a reason why so many of them were made, because they were cheap for the studios to produce and were shot on B studio lots.

Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton published their book on film noir *Panorama du Film Noir Américain* in 1955. While today many see noir as a style and not a genre, these early critics saw the films as a series:

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[4] The golden age of film noir or the classic film noir period is believed by many critics, amongst others Paul Schrader, Pam Cook, Sylvia Harvey, to begin approximately with *The Maltese Falcon* in 1941 and end with *Touch of Evil* in 1958. (Film Noir Studies)

A new 'series' had emerged in the history of film. A series can be defined as a

group of motion pictures from one country sharing certain traits (style,

atmosphere, subject matter…) strongly enough to mark them unequivocally and

to give them, over time, an unmistakable character. Series persist for differing

amounts of time: sometimes for two years, sometimes ten. To some extent, the

viewer decides on this. From the point of view of 'filmic evolution,' series spring

from certain older features, from long-ago titles. Moreover they all reach a peak,

that is, a moment of purest expression. Afterwards they slowly fade and disappear

leaving traces and informal sequels in other genres. (Silver, *Film Noir Reader*,

17).

However the debate about whether film noir is a style or a genre has led critic Andrew

Dickos in his book *Street with No Name* (2002) to say: "The dilemma of how noir cinema

should best be categorized has most often hedged toward its being named, however

unspokenly, a genre." (4). He later goes on to say that early critics "did not fully

recognize the ramifications of a technique that finally transformed a style into a new

narrative expression." (5).

According to Spicer, the perhaps most important influence on film noir is the

hard-boiled crime fiction, and 20 per cent of noir thrillers produced between 1941 and

1948 were direct adaptations of hard-boiled novels and short stories (5). Some of the

most famous authors of hard-boiled crime fiction are Dashiell Hammett, Raymond

Chandler and James M. Cain, many of whose plots were directly adapted to noir

screenplays. Hard-boiled fiction often tried to copy the vernacular style of its characters,

while promoting working class attitudes and values (Spicer, 6). While based on the 19th century dime novel, these stories also appeared in cheap magazines such as the *Detective Story Magazine* (established 1915) and *Black Mask*.[5] By the 1930, these fiction stories began to be published as inexpensive paperbacks, which became known as 'pulp fiction'.

Of the writers mentioned above, Hammett, is considered to be the 'father' of this writing tradition with his style of combining the old dime novel and a "more modern conception of an American society that is corrupt and alienated" (Spicer 6). His writing style was short and concise, and he wanted to say as much as possible with the least amount of words. The short sentences created a sense of speed in the hard-boiled fiction that along with the objectivity with which the story was told resembled reportage. His stories were often narrated by a main male protagonist. After writing for *Black Mask* Hammett moved into full-length fiction, under the encouragement of Joseph T. Shaw, the magazine's editor. Hammett's plots took place in the middle and lower classes of society, and served as a contrast to English detective stories which were more polite and refined. As Chandler said of Hammett: "Hammett took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley" in his essay "The Simple Art of Murder" (Literary History). Hammett's most famous male protagonist was the P.I. Sam Spade, and he is seen in the film noir adaptation (and novel) *The Maltese Falcon*, played by a world weary Humphery Bogart who trusts no one.

Raymond Chandler is another important hard-boiled crime fiction writer. When Hollywood started adapting their novels for movies many of the writers were hired to

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[5] *Detective Story Magazine*, established by 1915, was the first cheap magazine devoted to crime fiction. Although the most significant was *Black Mask* which, by the end of the 1920s, was almost entirely devoted to hard-boiled fiction. By the end of the 1930s paperbacks had begun to appear, and were taking over. Source: Spicer.

write the screenplays. Chandler wrote the original screenplay *The Blue Dahlia* (1946) and co-adapted Cain's *Double Indemnity* (1944) with Billy Wilder. The screenplay for Chandler's novel *The Big Sleep* was written by William Faulkner. The male protagonist in hard-boiled fiction was most famously the P.I. in Chandler's works, Philip Marlow. The cities are dark and corrupt, and Chandler became the "great chronicler of Los Angeles, *the* modern metropolis" (Spicer 6). The male protagonists are obsessed with women who are characterized as *femme fatales,* "overwhelmingly desirable but duplicitous" (Spicer, 7).

Many of the films were based on these dime novels and, as mentioned earlier, they were also influenced by the postwar readjustment, McCarthyism, Existentialism and Freudianism of the period. Returning war veterans who had a difficult time returning to everyday life could were often characters in film noirs. In *The Blue Dahlia* Chandler originally wanted Buzz to be the killer "blinded and desensitized by the brutalizing effects of the war" (Silver, *Film Noir An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, 37). Met with objections from the Navy Chandler was forced to rewrite the ending. McCarthyism effected not only the country by creating distrust and paranoia, but particularly so in Hollywood as prime targets of McCarthy's hunt for communists were people in the film industry especially those foreign born, as many of those involved in film noirs were. One of the most famous examples of this social and cultural phenomenon was the Hollywood Blacklist. That many of the characters in the film noir movies suffered from paranoia or other psychological disturbances were influences from Existentialism and Freudianism.

The classical period begins with *The Maltese Falcon* in 1941 and ends with *Touch of Evil* in 1958, and we see from this span that many of the films were made during World War II and in the post-war period. While the United States was at war the general feeling of hopelessness and anxiety for those who were fighting prevailed and found its way into the movies. After the war post-war depression and maladjustment for soldiers who had fought in the war could be found in the characters in film noirs. Returning veterans who underwent existential crisis along with the rouge cop, who was originally good but who had lived in the underworld for so long the lines were blurry, were common characters. These characters often became either the male victim or the rogue cop.

A typical specimen of a male victim can be found in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), where the femme fatale is not only his ruin but also the cause of his death. He can also be found in *The lady from Shanghai* (1947), although he does get to keep his life. The male victim can be divided into two categories. The first is simply a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. This character is often framed for a crime he hasn't committed. He is often a working class character, he will try to fight against what is happening and can show traits resembling that of a hero, such as energy, resilience and courage, or he may receive help (Spicer 85). An example of this kind of male victim is Alex Winkley in *Deadline at Dawn* (1946)

The second type is weak and passive or emasculated. As Spicer puts it, he is neither "admirable nor innocent but morally weak, apparently helpless in the throes of desire and attempting to escape the frustrations of his existing life." (85). This is the most

common of the two types, and he is hopelessly attracted to the femme fatale to the point where he can't see the consequences of his actions.

The male victim can moreover either be the main character or a supporting actor, and when he is the male protagonist he is most often the second type of male victim. When the male protagonist is the male victim the story is often told in voice over and with flash-backs, they want to tell their story "to explain if not excuse their actions" (Spicer 85). If he is a minor character we don't get to know his background nor his motives, and he often dies intentionally or accidentally at the hands of another character, but this is not of particular concern to the main characters and the plot continues as if nothing much has happened.

The damaged man is often a maladjusted war veteran or a rouge cop, and was an important film noir protagonist in the immediate post-war period between 1946-48 (Spicer, 86). The different types of damaged men are victim heroes, violent war veterans and rogue cops. The veterans suffer from a variety of social and psychological problems, including amnesia, which turn them into victim heroes in certain movies like in *Somewhere in the Night* (1946). On the other hand it can also cause them to be unpredictably violent. The war veteran type of damaged men are resentful, 'still psychologically organized for war' (Spicer 86), and an easy suspect for the murder of their views. The war veteran's nerves are shattered and his temper unbalanced. In *Crossfire* (1947) not only one, but a wide range of maladjusted veterans are portrayed. By the end of the 40's the maladjusted war veteran seems to be replaced by the rouge cop as the new damaged male character. Their commonalities include being trained to kill, cover their tracks, and are in varying degree being mentally unstable (Spicer, 86). Like the war

veteran he has, while being corrupt in a corrupt society, either a basic decency and tries to reform, or he is too far gone like Orson Welles's character Police Captain Hank Quinlan in *Touch of Evil* (1958). The third group of rouge cops become violently unstable through contact with criminals, whom they loathe uncontrollably.

The damaged man is furthermore a loner, and if he has a wife, like the returning war veterans mostly do, she has often been unfaithful or murdered. He is disillusioned and has lived so long in war and corruption or among criminals that he can't change his suspicious mindset. He may be edgy and have a furious temper, he lives in the city and can be seen chasing down dark allies after his prey. The rouge cop is not beyond beating confessions out of people, but takes no particular responsibility for his actions. As Jim Wilson says in *On Dangerous Ground* (1952) while beating up Bernie: "Why do you make me do it? You know you're gonna talk." (quoted in Spicer 87). This character can, however, find redemption through love, as Wilson does when he gets out of the city.

That more and more women were working outside of their homes to fill in for the men who were at war was also reflected in film noir's strong female characters, namely in the femme fatale and the good-bad girl. Although the femme fatale was an evil character, and was often punished by the end of the movie, her intelligence, the ability to think independently, and control others overshadowed society's demonization of her independence. Some of the characters in film noir that we still see in teen noir to day are the P.I., the good-bad girl and the femme fatale.

The femme fatale is a beautiful character whom the P.I. or male victim/male protagonist (ultimately) usually falls for. When this occurs one of four things will happen, she will either be his doom (*Sunset Boulevard*), she will cause her own

doom/death (*The lady from Shanghai*), the P.I. will get away (*The Maltese Falcon)*, or the male protagonist and the femme fatale will end up together at the end of the movie (*Gilda*), this happens in movies that have a happy ending, not a common ending for a film noir. The two other female type of characters in film noir are the homemaker or nurturer and the good-bad girl. The homemaker is a thoroughly good character, one of the few if only in film noir. She is often a relative, wife, sweetheart or secretary. The good-bad girl is combination of the two other female characters. While Gilda is characterized as a femme fatale by various critics such as Richard Dyer in "Resistance through charisma: Rita Hayworth and *Gilda*" and Karen Hollinger in "*Film Noir*, Voice-over, and the Femme Fatale" she is also viewed by other critics such as Spicer, Wolfenstein and Leites as the good-bad girl. I will come back to the differences between these three characters in chapter two and discuss *Gilda* further.

The P.I. is often the main character and always a man. He has his own P.I. practice and is his own boss. He sometimes has a partner, but he feels no moral obligation to him and when he dies it is not a cause for sadness like in *The Maltese Falcon*. While the main character in many film noirs, the P.I. is often left out completely, and is therefore not a mandatory character for a film to be labeled film noir. He is for instance not present in the famous classic film noirs like *Casablanca* (1942) or *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). He is generally known for working at night, in the dark or in the shadows, and for wearing a trench coat and a hat while smoking a cigarette. He has no family life and is a loner, he often falls for the femme fatale or good-bad girl but the relationship has no future and is often over before the end of the movie. He makes his own laws and rules and breaks the laws of society when it suits him. Because of the many shades of grey

involving the P.I.'s case it is hard to find a right and wrong way of doing things. Even if the P.I. breaks the law the audience is left wondering if this after all was not the right thing to do given his situation. In this case the audience is often in agreement with the P.I. and his decision, even if his actions are something they themselves would not do, nor condone in others. The P.I. is often an antihero, who is not physically strong or particularly decisive. In *The Big Sleep* Phillip Marlowe's height is mentioned more than once, also by himself: "Vivian: My, you're a mess aren't you? Marlowe: I'm not very tall either. Next time, I'll come on stilts," (*The Big Sleep)*.

After World War II American society once more wanted to promote domesticity and family ideals. Men returning from the war wanted their jobs back and the lives they were used to, however women had gotten used to working outside the home and were not equally convinced that returning to the old way of life was the right thing to do. The media took up this campaign, and commercials advertising for an easier life for the housewife flourished. This coincided with the invention of many machines and gadgets aimed at making household duties easier to perform. The 50s and 60s thus became a time where feminine ideals again were to stay at home and take care of the family, but even though magazines and the rest of the media gave the outward impressions that things were returning to a pre-war state employment of women outside the home actually went up in this time period.

It was also around this time that suburbs started to become more popular. They were centered around large cities and were large neighborhood with identical houses, often painted identically, too, each allotted exactly the same amount of land, and they had more or less the same looking gardens. The suburbs were promoted as better

environments to raise children, with more natural surrounding environment than in the city and with better schools. By placing them near the city people could commute to work. The women in the suburbs stayed home with the children while the men commuted to the city. Now that the men were not away at war they were again expected to be the sole provider of the family. With this being the case television and movies promoted male lead characters who were the head of their families, who always knew what to do and spent much of their time dispensing valuable advice to children and spouses alike. When television sets became more and more common in middle-class families television series became increasingly popular as well as more numerous. Many of the new shows were set in suburbia promoting the suburban ideals like "Leave it to Beaver" (1957-1963) and "The Donna Reed Show" (1958-1966). As Sharpe and Wallock put it: "The 'ideal' role of the suburban woman was most thoroughly charted in the situation comedies that originated in the 1950s, …. These series provided a 'natural' environment in which docile homemakers acted out prescribed rituals of social interaction and material consumption." (Sharpe, 20). While American society in the 50s and 60s was trying to recreate itself and recover after World War II, by promoting such ideals as family values, female subordinance and life in the suburbs there was not much room for angst filled single men trying to find themselves in the city, as the mass media was busy being both instigator and follower in the new trends. New masculine ideals were also coming into the media and there was a shift from the hard-boiled detective to the cowboy who was featured in many tv-series as television sets became more and more common in the average house hold. The cowboy talked much less than the detective and had a different view of the law. While the P.I. believed firmly in a vigilante version of justice in which

he himself decided who deserved what, the cowboy believed in the law, and the legal system.

While teen noir clearly has a lot in common with the classical noirs, the latter came out of a certain mood, zeitgeist, caused largely by World War II. It is harder to understand what particular incident or incidents caused this resurface of noir in teen movies. Teen noir has of course also done some changes to the original idea, replacing 30-40 year old single men with no family ties living in the city, deeply involved in its underworld with teenagers in suburbia. Why have these changes been made and what do they say about our current zeitgeits? To try and answer these questions I will first briefly look at the revival of film noir that precedes the current one, namely, neo noir.

The term neo noir came into use in the 1970s with films such as *Chinatown* (1974) and *Taxi Driver* (1976). The resurfacing of the dark mood of classic noir probably had roots in the contemporary period. As Hirsch puts it:

> If World War II, the Cold War, and the atom bomb 'underwrote' classic noir, the
> increasing cynicism evoked by Watergate and Vietnam, as well as the mounting
> tensions in gender politics and race relations, have produced a cultural soil
> particular rich in noirish implications. Absorbent and surprisingly mobile, noir has
> continued to be a reflection of the Zeitgeits –"(*Detours and Lost* Highways, 7).

While Watergate caused a distrust in political leaders and revealed the corrupt side of the country's internal politic, the Korean War (1950-53) and to a much larger extent the Vietnam War (1959-75) caused a distrust in how foreign affairs were managed. When returning soldiers talked about what they had experienced, and the prolonging of the war, it caused people to question the U.S. involvement in the war. It was also revealed that the

U.S. had supported Pinochet's overthrow of Salvador Allende's government in Chile. With questionable involvement in other countries' affairs; assassinations at home of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and John F. Kennedy; corrupt political leaders; the first OPEC-engineered oil shock; the nominal income decreasing compared to the real income; student protests resulting in deaths and the end of the gold standard, by 1973 many critics "of American domestic life and foreign affairs" came to the conclusion that "America was not as innocent and well-meaning as they has once imagined." (Conrad, *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, 179). Not surprisingly films started appearing around the early seventies that had much in common with the classical noirs, however since the noir period was considered to have ended in 1959, neo noirs went by numerous names including thrillers, before it was named. However while neo noirs were similar to their predecessors they had a new take on the genre; hence they were called neo. Dickos lists four differences that separate neo noirs from the classical noirs: the neo noirs are more violent and the violence depicted more graphic; the classical noirs are almost always contemporary while neo noirs can be either contemporary like *Taxi Driver* or set in the 1950s like *L.A. Confidential* (1997); the neo noir is much more "racially variegated and sexually complex." (Dickos, 240) than the classical noir could ever be; and finally neo noir alters the *femme fatale*, for with the change of gender roles "we are taken into new territory, found having to settle a new score over what female wickedness in a screen genre can be." (Dickos, 242). Neo noirs started appearing around the beginning of the seventies and since they are still appearing today this revival of the noir genre cannot be said to have a decisive end like the classical noir period, and film critics have not proclaimed it to have ended.

That noir is influenced by current events is obvious, and while it does not necessarily express what is going on or takes sides, it manages to capture the feel of its time period, especially in terms of feelings of angst, cynicism, and fear. When trying to explain why teen movies turned as dark and dangerous as they have, Sherwin offers two reasons:

Araki (Creator of *The Doom Generation* (1995)) and Clark (creator of *Kids* (1995)) caught a mood bookmarked by two bleakly significant events of the 1990s, which have coloured our perception of teen with a black indelible marker. The much chewed-over suicide of Kurt Cobain in 1994 marked an end of the purity of rebel teen spirit. The second is the Columbine high-school shootings in 1999." (The Guardian)

While these two events have influenced the teen movie, Deanna Carlyle refers to two other defining events. In her article "The United Sates of Veronica, *Teen Noir as America's New Zeitgeist*" she argues that America is currently feeling violated and abandoned. Both of these issues, she says, are taken up in *Veronica Mars*:

Just as 9/11 was the defining event for America's current sense of violations, the New Orleans flood was the defining event for America's current sense of abandonment. … The New Orleans debacle and *Veronica Mars* have this in common: they bring to the surface an American theme that has been psychologically denied and barely kept in check for much of the present decade –

namely, that many of our high-ranking authority figures, our political leaders, the 'fathers' and 'mothers' of our nation, may not truly care about protecting us, their citizen children, but may in fact be more interested in bending the truth and securing their own power base." (Thomas, 152).

While these events all influence the current situation in the United States, other and perhaps more subtle changes have also been taking place over the recent decades. One of the most important differences from the classic noir period to teen noir is the change of scenery, or setting, how the dark black allies and the big city underworld have turned into sunny suburbs. On the outside the suburbs seem to be a much happier place than the cities, but once the surface has been scratched they reveal as much of a dark side as the city ever could. However, the city was not always the backdrop for film noirs in the classical period, and there were films made about suburban living like *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1956). As Amanda Ann Klein, assistant professor of film studies in the English department at East Carolina University, shows, the underside of suburban living is not something new:

> This vilification of suburban living and the upper middle class accoutrement makes sense in the context of postwar America, when the concept of the man in the grey flannel suit driving to his nine-to-five job replaced a more romantic vision of America as agrarian, as a country built on the sweat of good, old-fashioned manual labor. Indeed, the seeming homogenization of American society was almost more frightening than the "big city," and the affluent, not the destitute,

generated distrust in the popular imagination, making suburban living a subject

ripe for exploitation in the 1940s and 1950s." (Thomas, 84-85).

This early portrayal of suburban living as something less than wholesome, although these

movies were few in number, gave later movies and series something to build on, and as

this type of portrayal became more and more common in the 1980s and 1990s viewers

became more used to it: "Today the conceit of the sinister, upper middle class suburb is a

familiar one in both film (*Blue Velvet*, 1986) and on television (*Desperate Housewives*),

and *Veronica Mars* banks on this familiarity." (Thomas, 85).

While suburban living was still something new in the 1940s and 1950s, by the

1990s second and third generations of suburbanites were growing up in these

homogenized neighborhoods, and having lived there their whole life their anxiety and the

pressure of conformity were felt that much more acutely, which explains why suburbs

have increasingly become a backdrop for the darkest movies, and why their numbers

increased in the eighties and nineties. There has also been a change in the suburbs

themselves. In the 50s they were predominantly residential areas that workers had to

commute to and from and were therefore always close to a city providing these jobs.

Today's suburbs have office buildings, restaurants and large shopping malls in addition

to the houses and schools they originally had. There has also been a vast increase in the

building of suburbs and the number of residents residing there. "In the last few decades,

the United States has become a suburban nation. Between 1950 and 1980 the number of

people living in suburbia nearly tripled, soaring from 35.2 to 101.5 million. By 1990,

almost half of all Americans called suburbia home." (Sharpe, 1). The majority of these

suburbanites belong to the white middle-class, and with regulations and building codes the inhabitants agree upon, entering this homogeneous society becomes all the more difficult, preserving the conformity of suburbia.

Another important change in American culture, and one that is often touched upon more directly in *Veronica Mars*, is the current situation of the middle class. When we are first introduced to Veronica and her school she tells us in voice-over: "Welcome to Neptune, California. A town without a middle class." ("Pilot") While Lawrence Watt-Evans, author, states that this is not literally true as we see school teachers and the like on the show the statement is still "uncomfortably close" (Thomas, 161). A drastic change has taken place in the economy of the middle class since the 1950s and 1960s when families could live on one income alone. In *Microeconomics* by Robert Pindyck and Daniel Rubinfeld they write that "In nominal terms, the minimum wage has increased steadily over the past 60 years. However, in real terms its 2003 level is below that of the 1970." (14). Coincidently nominal wages compared to real wages reached their peak in 1968, just before neo noirs started to be produced. In addition to this in the period that followed the short recession of 2000-2001 "for the first time in American history median *household* incomes went flat for five consecutive years." (Conrad, *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, 179).

Mortgage costs for families have, moreover, risen 70 times faster than a person's income over the past generation, and with expenses such as houses in good neighborhoods and college tuition middle class families are the ones who notice the change the most. Today a middle class family needs two incomes to get by, leaving them

with no safety net should something happen. As Elizabeth Warren, a Harvard Law

Professor puts it:

> During the past generation, the American middle-class family that once could
>
> count on hard work and fair play to keep itself financially secure has been
>
> transformed by economic risk and new realities. Now a pink slip, a bad diagnosis,
>
> or a disappearing spouse can reduce a family from solidly middle class to newly
>
> poor in a few months. (Warren quoted in Common Dreams, News Center)

Defaults and foreclosures are at the same time increasing due to the current mortgage

crisis in the United States. This has led to numerous articles and theories on the

disappearance of the middle class, creating a larger class divide than before, something

which is often a theme in *Veronica Mars*. I will discuss class and suburbia closer in

relation to *Veronica Mars* in chapter three. However I will first focus more on some of

the noir characters mentioned earlier, namely the femme fatale, the good-bad girl, the P.I.

and the homemaker and how these relate to teen noir.

CHAPTER II

THE GOOD-BAD GIRL

In their *Movies: A Psychological Study* first published in 1950, almost in the middle of the classic noir period, Wolfenstein and Leithes describe the good-bad girl as someone "who appears to be bad … The hero suspects that she is bad, but finally discovers this was a mistaken impression … and whom in the end he can take home and introduce to mother." (27)[6]. The good-bad girl is a character that is a combination of the homebuilder and the femme fatale, and who shares her world views and attitudes with the P.I. Although the good-bad girl was mentioned this early in film studies, she, like the homebuilder, is rarely discussed and never to such lengths as the femme fatale. Despite this the good-bad girl is a character worth noticing, and "her importance to the noir cycle is difficult to overestimate" (Spicer, 92). The good-bad girl introduced a new type of female character to the movies, and opposed the traditional movie roles for women which portrayed them as either good or bad. She was a complex and often ambiguous character, qualities previously only found in male characters. In addition background stories were often hinted at or explained by the good-bad girl herself, which made her actions more understandable and gave her character depth. Over the course of this chapter I will look more closely at the following film noirs from the classic noir period: *Gilda* (1946), *The Big Sleep* (1946) and *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), and explore how they represent the good-bad character. I will also look at *Heathers* (1989), *Veronica Mars* and *Brick* (2005) where

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[6] Many critics, amongst others Paul Schrader, Pam Cook, Sylvia Harvey, believe that the classic noir period began approximately with *The Maltese Falcon* in 1941 and ended with *Touch of Evil* in 1958. (Film Noir Studies)

I will look at the continuation of the good-bad girl in the first two and the teen P.I. in the two latter.

Exactly when the good-bad girl first started appearing on screen is difficult to say, but a study of a 100 films made in 1941 and 1942 showed that "eighty percent of films focusing on the love/hate problems of a man had a good bad girl as the main female character. In 50 percent of the films, the good bad girl successfully opposed a bad girl" (Geocities). By 1946 she was appearing regularly, and is a character still seen in movies and tv-series today like in *Veronica Mars*. In order to understand the good-bad girl further it is important to look at the two polar opposites that serve as the inspiration for this character, namely the homebuilder and the femme fatale.

The Good-Bad Girl and the Homebuilder or Nurturer

The homebuilder is a nurturer, the typical girl-next-door. She is a completely innocent character, to the point where she is almost asexual, the only one in film noir. The homebuilder often has such professions such as that of secretary, for instance in a detective office. If she does not have an occupation that ties her to the noir plot she is either a wife or a sweetheart, homebuilder. The secretary is not romantically linked to the P.I., but her opinion matters to him and in his world of good-bad girls, femme fatales, shady characters and the criminal underworld she is perhaps the only character (woman/person) he completely trusts. The homebuilder also serves as the salvation for the male protagonist or male characters. In *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) we meet her as the character Betty Schaefer, the sweetheart of the male victim Joe Gillis, who is recounting the story of his death in voice over. She tries to save him, and encourages him to end his

relationship with the femme fatale Norma Desmond. When he finally decides to tell Norma he is moving out she shoots him. Although Joe Gillis dies, the homebuilder has succeeded in changing his world views and convinces him to take responsibility for his own life. The homebuilder's role is one of solace and support for the man, which is why she is often the sweetheart or the wife. She is also the only noir character associated with daylight, unlike other characters who are usually depicted in darkness where most of the noir plot takes place. She furthermore possesses such uncharacteristic noir traits as faithfulness and forgiveness, in addition to loving security and being a good listener. Noir plots are generally sinister and dark, their plots do not center around stable characters and family life, which renders the homebuilder to always be a minor character. In *The Maltese Falcon* she is seen in the role of Sam Spade's secretary, whom he constantly refers to as angel, again emphasizing the general trait of innocence.

The good-bad girl shares with the homebuilder that she is essentially good and that she is on the hero's side. Despite this she does not necessarily show her support openly and when she does help him the male protagonist can not help but wonder if she has ulterior motives, which she sometimes has. She is a more independent character, and her manner is different from that of the homebuilder. She can be seen both at night and day, but usually in the dark, and unlike the homebuilder she is a part of the noir plot itself. When the male protagonist in *The Blue Dahlia*, ex bomber pilot Johnny Morrison returns home to find his wife cheating on him, he takes his things and goes out into the night. Standing on the road in the pouring rain he gets picked up by a woman who does not introduce herself, nor will tell him where she is headed.

> "Johnny: I thought you were going to Malibu? Joyce: I flipped a coin. Heads, I go to Malibu. Tails, I go to Laguna. Johnny: What happens if the coin rolls under the davenport? Joyce: We go to Long Beach. (Pause) Oh, you can smile. I was beginning to wonder." (*The Blue Dahlia*).

Joyce's unwillingness to disclose information and her independence, driving around at night not having any obligations all suggest that this is not a homebuilder. The conversation is also typical of the femme fatale/ good-bad girl banter with the male lead. The good-bad girl has no problem defending herself and her actions:

> "Johnny: You ought to have more sense than to take chances with strangers like this. Joyce: It's funny but practically all the people I know were strangers when I met them." (*The Blue Dahlia*).

Johnny Morrison however does not tell her his real name either, but since he is the protagonist and this is his story we do not see this as suspicious behavior, but rather as caution on his side since neither he nor the audience knows whom to trust. This becomes even more difficult to tell when Johnny's wife is murdered, and nobody knows who the killer is. Johnny who is the prime suspect decides to lay low for a while, while he himself tries to find the killer, whom he suspects is his wife's lover Eddie Harwood. The law, like everything else in film noir is corrupt, and unless he finds the killer himself he will never be found. Johnny is motivated partially by his own exoneration and to a lesser extent the desire to revenge his wife's death:

> "Johnny: I suppose you wonder why I don't let the police do that job. … They're looking for me. And if they catch me, they're not gonna worry about trying to pin it on somebody else. … That isn't all. Even if we weren't happy, Helen was my

wife. And the man who killed her isn't going to get away with it. He just thinks he

is." (*The Blue Dahlia*).

The good-bad girl, who we later find out is Joyce Harwood, Eddie's ex-wife, in the end

helps him when the police is after him and ultimately helps exonerate him by providing

him with an alibi. However her behavior and actions throughout the movie do not

resemble that of the homebuilder, but rather that of the femme fatale. When Johnny asks

her "Pick up many people like this at night?" she casually answers "Not Many. Only one

or two at a time." (*The Blue Dahlia*). Her quick answers to Johnny's questions and

accusations while keeping her distance by avoiding to answer them, establishes herself as

an independent character, answering in a way a homebuilder never would. Though

neither Eddie nor Johnny turn out to be the murderer, Joyce is constantly moving

between the two prime murder suspects; however, she is never nervous about this and

stays cool and laconic throughout the movie. She genuinely believes in Johnny's

innocence, but what she feels about Eddie is hard to say since she does not voice her

opinion on this, other than acknowledging that he seems a likely suspect. However, when

Eddie dies in the end she does not act visibly upset, nor does she seem to give his death

much thought at all. The capture of the real killer and Johnny being free from suspicion

of the police overshadow Eddie and his downfall. While her fundamental goodness is

what links the good-bad girl to the homebuilder, it is the way she acts and why she does

so that tie her to the femme fatale.

The Good-Bad Girl and the Femme Fatale

The femme fatale is an attractive and beautiful character, who is fully aware of this and has no moral scruples in using her looks to achieve her goals. She is also known and referred to as the spider woman, the figure of the deadly female. She may feign innocence, but when this is the case she often turns out to be the mastermind behind the plot, which will be revealed at the end. She often hires the P.I. and the movies often revolve around the case he is trying to solve for her. She is never completely truthful with him and he is often part of a charade she is trying to maintain. In the beginning she may be viewed as innocent but as the plot unravels it becomes more and more evident that she is not as clueless, and as much of a victim as it seems. As Jane Place sees her she is in fact the male protagonist's *Doppelgänger*: "The sexual, dangerous woman lives in this darkness, and she is the psychological expression of his own internal fears of sexuality, and his need to control and repress it" (*Women in film noir*, 41).

The femme fatale posed a threat to the post-war patriarchal American society, since she is not fulfilled by ideal women's roles such as those of wife and mother. The femme fatale is usually single, unattached, but she can also be married as she is in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) and in *Double Indemnity* (1944), where she is frustrated and married to older men. Her most characteristic role is that of the night club singer, perhaps a reason why Gilda in *Gilda* appears to be a femme fatale at the beginning of the movie. The femme fatale has her own agenda and uses the men around her to achieve what she wants done without them knowing what her plan is or even that she has one. She is often shot from angles that accentuate her body lines, and like most noir characters she lives in shadows. She is often 'emerging from darkness into harsh

light' (Spicer, 91). She is, as her name implies, a fatal character, sometimes causing the male protagonist downfall or death, and other times her own.

The good-bad girl shares the femme fatale's behavior and body language, and does not object to using people for her own personal gain; however, she usually has some reason or motive justifying her actions. Her opinion, like that of the P.I., is that doing bad in the name of good is justifiable. Unlike the femme fatale she does not cause the doom of the male protagonist; however, she sometimes causes her own like in *The Big Sleep*, where she will most likely end up in jail. She is also beautiful and intelligent, something the homebuilder might be, too, but this does not show in her character as her role is more one of support, without traces of being evil. The good-bad girl makes her own rules and breaks those of society when she feels like it, all the while staying true to some moral code of her own invention. This behavior and world view is quite similar to the P.I.'s. The world, and the city around her is corrupt, causing her to be jaded, distrusting and disillusioned when it comes to men and life. However she still maintains faith in humanity (a quality which can be brought out by certain characters). As Spicer sums her up she is "cool, laconic, sexually assured and independent, yet on the hero's side." (Spicer, 92). Her ambiguities and the way she embodies a combination of feminine and masculine qualities make the male protagonist feel more at ease with her.

In the already mentioned *The Blue Dahlia* we have an ambiguous good-bad girl and it is hard to tell until the very end whose side she is truly on. Joyce Harwood, as we have seen, is independent, intelligent, and is not afraid of doing what she thinks is right. She 'rescues' Johnny on three occasions, once out of the rain, a second time when warning him to get out of the hotel because the police are on their way, and finally when

she also gives the police his alibi. However she is never upfront about her motives or what she really knows about the case and tells Johnny she has to have her secrets:

> "Joyce: Who else could it be? Johnny: I wouldn't know. Would you? It seems you know more about it than I do. Joyce: Do i? … Johnny: You get around don't you? And your timing's good. … Or was it. I don't know anything. I don't even know your name" (*The Blue Dahlia*).

It is very clear from this dialog that Johnny starts to suspect that Joyce knows more than she is letting on, but like the femme fatal she feigns innocence, because it will not help Johnny's case at this point to reveal what she knows. And as Joyce herself says: "I have something so settle, too." (*The Blue Dahlia*).

In *Gilda* we meet Johnny Farrell, an expatriate American living in post-war Buenos Aires, where he meets Ballin Mundson. He quickly becomes Mundson's business partner and things are going fine until one day Mundson brings home a wife from one of his business trips. The new wife turns out to be Johnny's ex-girlfriend Gilda. An incident giving Gilda more depth beyond the femme fatale and pointing her in the direction of the good-bad girl is Gilda's rendition of the song "Put the Blame on Mame", which she sings on various occasions throughout the movie. In addition the instrumental versions function as a theme song, and "states the case against the way film noir characteristically constructs women" (Kaplan, 95). It is a satirical song about how all the trouble in the world is caused by women. Since the good-bad girl shares her behavior with the femme fatale it is often difficult to tell them apart, and the audience, much like the male protagonist, needs confirmation from another character that she is acting out of good intentions, or is not what he and we think she is. In *Gilda* we have that character in

the shape of a cop who tells Johnny at the end of the movie: "Gilda didn't do any of those things you've been losing sleep over. Not any of them. It was just an act, every bit of it. And I'll give you credit. You were a great audience, Mr. Farrell" (*Gilda*). This convinces both the audience and Johnny, and has more credibility than if Gilda herself had told Johnny. In *The Big Sleep* on the other hand we only have the good-bad girl's own word that she is on the P.I. Philip Marlow's side and that her actions were motivated by good intentions. Although the viewer along with Marlow has doubts about whose side she is on, as new information surfaces and her story keeps changing, we are inclined to believe her by the end when she saves his life. The movie ends with the two of them trapped in a house surrounded by gun men waiting for the police. Marlow having solved the case and found a culprit for the various crimes and murders committed leaves us with the impression that he will not reveal Vivian's involvement to the police. It also becomes clear that her actions were partly if not wholly motivated by trying to protect her sister. This is a completely opposite ending of *The Maltese Falcon* where Spade is in a similar situation with Marlow at the end. However here the main female character Bridgid is a femme fatale, which is proven by the way she murders two people in cold blood for her own financial gain. Though Brigid pleads with Spade to not to turn her over to the police he will not protect her and gives a list of reasons including "I will not play the sap for you" (*The Maltese Falcon*).

The femme fatal, and sometimes also the good-bad girl were often killed or jail-bound or otherwise penalized by the end of the movie to, as Spicer argues "demonize women's sexuality and to question the whole notion of the independent woman" (Spicer,

104). Even if this was the idea behind giving female characters depth, they still brought a new female character to audiences:

> feminists have begun to have a new view of film noir, suggesting that these films show women who are outside their standard role of femininity. Although they use their sexuality, they derive power from it and use their intellect to get what they want. The represent strong, active women and these virtues override the male-centered moral it is to enforce upon the audience. (Geocities).

Legacies of the Good-Bad Girl from *Heathers* to *Veronica Mars*

The good-bad girl did not disappear as a character after the classic film noir period ended and she can still be seen in movies. She has also become an important character in teen noir. Where she is often the main character, in the dark comedy *Heathers* (1989) we find her in the character Veronica. In Heathers the plot takes place in and around a high school, and the main characters are the three Heathers (Chandler, Duke and McNamara), and Veronica who form the schools most powerful/popular social group. Veronica is early on set apart from the other three, not just by having a different name, but also being the voice-over narrator of the movie, and therefore the one whose version of what happens we believe. When the Heathers send a false note to Martha, Veronica is the only one not laughing, although she is the one who wrote it. By Veronica's look of guilt as she watches the consequences of her note play out, the viewers immediately know that she does not consider her fellow classmates with the same disregard and contempt as her three companions. At the same time Veronica is not

completely a Heather counterpart, and even though she believes what they are doing is wrong she does not stop what is going on, nor her own involvement in it. At the same time there is no clear character who is morally in the right: when Veronica considers her betrayal of Betty Finn, Heather assures her that had it been Betty's chance to move a step up the social ladder she in turn would have betrayed Veronica just as easily. The Principal and the rest of the teaching staff are portrayed as out of touch with their students, and their campaign against suicide has the opposite of the desired effect. Veronica's parents immediately take J.D. side when he tells them Veronica is suicidal, choosing to believe a stranger over their own daughter. With J.D. and his father the roles of parent and child are often reversed and the two have whole conversations were they pretending to be each other. We also learn that J.D.'s father is in the demolition industry and that his mother died when she was trapped inside a building scheduled for demolition. It is never made clear whether J.D.'s father killed her or not, but it is made clear that J.D. has his fondness of explosives from him, if not his murderous streak as well.

When Veronica starts taking a stand and drifting away from the Heathers, whom she has come to realize she does not even like, she finds herself in a new friendship not much better. After inadvertently assisting J.D. in his first murder (that the audience knows of) she continues a downward spiral where she not only writes the suicide notes after the fact but starts assisting J.D. more actively in the murders. Although she claims innocence and ignorance up until the third victim these notions are shattered by J.D.'s claim that she knew all along and chose to ignore it.: "Look, you believed it because you wanted to believe it. Your true feelings were to gross and icky for you to face."

(*Heathers*). Although Veronica continues to argue the point the audience has begun to doubt her complete innocence. What keeps Veronica from being a truly bad character like J.D. and Heather Duke and Heather Chandler is her second guessing of her actions and the way she tries to excuse them to herself. We see this for instance after the death of Heather when she is praying at the funeral "I just want my high school to be a nicer place." (*Heathers*). Like many of the plots in teen noirs this one also centers around a high school, and portrays it as a darker more dystopian environment for teens than earlier teen movies. It also shows how Veronica sees her actions as motivated by good, not personal gain, which positions her character closer to the good-bad girl than the femme fatale, although she is an accomplice to murder.

The Good-Bad Girl Meets the P.I. in *Veronica Mars*

A year after Rob Thomas, a high school teacher from Austin, Texas moved to L. A. he had completed his first novel. After that an agent, a book deal and the production of two feature films he had written followed in quick succession. This was followed by seven years in which everything he wrote was published or produced. After the cancellation of Thomas' tv series *Cupid* 15 episodes into the show, and leaving David E. Kelly's show *Snoops* due to creative differences, Thomas went through a five year period where none of his pilots were picked up for television. While he did not have any shows to write, since networks and studios often dictate and regulate what a writer can and cannot do, he picked up one of his novel plots. This novel was about a teen detective called Keith Mars, an ostracized teenager who starts working in his father's detective agency. The teen boy turned into a girl, but the networks Thomas pitched his "teen

detective" idea to were not interested. Without a potential buyer Thomas decided to write the tv-series on spec[7], something he hadn't done since becoming a professional writer, and called the show *Veronica Mars*. But because this show was dark and edgy Thomas had no real hope of ever selling it to a broadcast network, that is until Maggie Murphy, the head of drama at UPN, wanted to take a look at it. She bought the show and the pilot aired for the first time in September 2004 on UPN. With almost no script notes from the network and none from the studio Thomas was allowed almost complete creative freedom when he made the pilot for *Veronica Mars*. Since its beginning the show has been on the air for three seasons and was cancelled in 2007. Although the show suffered from poor ratings from day one it quickly became a critic darling and has in its three short years established a cult status, which helped its renewal for season two and three despite not being a commercial success.

Veronica Mars is a blonde 16 year old girl growing up in the small California town of Neptune. Her father, Keith, has recently botched a murder investigation, or so the town believes when a former employee of Kane software confesses to the murder Lily Kane, daughter of the company's owner Jake Kane. While Keith still believes that Jake Kane is hiding something, whether he be the murderer or not, he keeps a low profile after he is run out of office as Sheriff, and sets up his own detective agency. Veronica who was Lily's best friend has been ostracized by her peers, abandoned by her alcoholic mother and when she goes to a party to show everybody at school that they do not get to her she is drugged and raped. Veronica continues despite being publicly shunned to stand by her dad, and starts working as his secretary after school. When word gets around that

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[7] On spec, means that you have not sold what you are writing. Therefore there are no parameters concerning plots, characters etc. This leaves a writer free to write what he/she feels like, while at the same time facing the possibility that what they are working on might never be published or produced.

Veronica is a detective students from all social classes of Neptune come to her for help. Charging her fellow students money for her services, she is like any noir P.I. usually short on cash, as we see from her response to praise from a fellow student she has acquired information for: "Jackson Douglas: I don't care what they say about you, Veronica Mars. You Rock. Veronica: Yes, I do. I also take cash." ("Silence of the Lamb" (1-11)).

The title character of *Veronica Mars* is well established as a P.I., working both cases for fellow students and doing more than secretarial work for her father's detective agency, as criminal lawyer Cliff McCormack points out:

Cliff: I'm happy out here chatting with you. Veronica: Like I said, my dad's with a client. Cliff: I heard you. But your dad's out tracking bail jumpers half the time and yet, somehow, all the cases that come in here still get handled. How is that? Veronica: We're efficient. Cliff: Very efficient. ("Pilot").

Late night stake outs in front of cheap motels with neon signs, having connections with everyone from firemen to biker gangs, jaded world-weary voice-overs and a moral code that would seem questionable in any other teen tv-show also contribute to making Veronica a P.I. character. However Veronica's actions are always motivated by a cause, a cause she deems worthy enough to break society's rules for. As discussed previously this moralistic reasoning is also used by the good-bad girl, and is one of the characteristics by which the audience can tell the difference between her and the femme fatale. Like the good-bad girl she usually knows more about the situation than she would ever let on, but

few characters see through this. However, Sheriff Lamb is an example of someone who genuinely distrust her no matter how many people in the society of Neptune and on his own staff believe her. When Duncan wants to kidnap his daughter (her mother Meg just died and her parents want to put her up for adoption, something Meg was against before her death), Veronica helps him set up a whole scheme in which he publicly dumps her. While Veronica is crying and acting upset, completely in the dark about Duncan's plans she is really the mastermind behind it. Veronica is able to completely fool everyone including her father and the audience along with him. The Sheriff's department and the outside agents on the case completely dismiss her and any involvement she might have as all they see is a heartbroken girl. By complying with the preexisting image the investigators have of how a teenage girl should behave they fail to realize that instead of helping them she is actually misleading them every way she can. Only Sheriff Lamb, who Veronica has on countless occasions outsmarted, suspects that she knows more than she lets on. However when he tries to warn the agents they ignore and laugh at him:

> Sheriff Lamb: Before we go in there you should probably know something about Veronica Mars. We need to be careful with this one, she's slippery. Agent Morris: Sheriff we have interrogated al-Qaeda members at Gitmo. I think we can handle a teenage girl. ("Donut run" 2,11).

Veronica often uses this innocent, ignorant teen girl persona to achieve everything from gaining access to her mother's safety-deposit box to getting her hands on interrogation tapes from the Lilly Kane investigation. As she muses to herself after having easily

infiltrated a hippie like cult: "Maybe I should play this needy, despondent waif card more often" ("Drinking the Kool-Aid" (1-9)).

Unlike the P.I. Veronica does not get into fist fights, and when she is in physical danger and her intelligence is not enough to get her out of a dangerous situation, she often has a male character come to the rescue. When Veronica suspects Logan of the murder of Lilly Kane she tries to avoid him, and when he finds her at school and follows her Weevil steps in to help her:

> Logan: Hey, Veronica. Hey, will you stop for two seconds? Weevil: See, when they run away like that, it's kind of a hint they're not interested. Logan: You do not wanna start with me today, Paco. Weevil: Are you sure? It was in my day planner under "goals." Logan: How is this your business? Weevil: I'm looking out for Veronica. ("A trip to the dentist" (1-21)).

This is one of numerous occasions on which Weevil helps Veronica as he is characterized as Veronica's "occasionally enthusiastic backup muscle" (Kaveney, 182) and comes repeatedly to Veronica's rescue "at the beep of a text message." (Thomas, 15). Weevil's loyalty to Veronica comes from her having rescued him on several occasions where her expertise has gotten him out of trouble with the law, most notably when Weevil was charged with credit card fraud and Veronica, not just being the only one who believed in his innocence, also traced down the real culprit in "Credit Where Credit's Due," (1-2). She also chooses not to turn him in when she finds out he stole the carnival money at the school fair in "Ain't No Magic Mountain High Enough," (2-13). A corrupt

teacher who skimmed off the top of the same carnival money and tried to frame her students, and an honor student who copied a test to win a scholarship were among the other unlawful behaviors Veronica uncovered in the same episode. The 09ers[8] who run the school, led by Madison Sinclair were planning on spending the senior class money differently than Veronica, Weevil and other students of their social and economic status wanted. By letting everybody think that Thumper spent what he had allegedly stolen on drugs, she not only ensured where the senior school trip was going (since there was not much cash left), she also let Weevil keep the money, something he would need more coming from a lower economic background than the 09ers. Weevil is however used more often as a potential threat to people she thinks might harm her, or when she wrongly believes that she is in danger, which turns out to be the case the times he protects her from Logan. When Veronica is in real physical danger, it is her father or Logan, her on-off again boyfriend who rescue her. When Veronica investigates her pregnant neighbor's disappearance in "The girl next door" (1-7), which culminates in a shooting, it is her father who shoots back and saves them. Veronica herself does not have a gun nor is she seen using one, although various characters her age are seen with guns. In the season one finale it is also her father who comes to her aid when she is alone with Lily's killer Aaron Echolls, Logan's father. In this scene we find Veronica trapped in a refrigerator which Aaron had then proceeded to set on fire. That the season ends with Veronica in a situation that she cannot escape from by her usual means of intelligence, and a life threatening

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[8] An 09er is someone who lives in the "prestigious 90909 zip code" ("Credit Where Credit's Due, " 1-2). The students who belong to the 09ers are sons and daughter of millionaires, following Veronica's description of the town in the previous episode: "This is my school. If you go here your parents are either millionaires or they work for millionaires. Neptune, California, a town without a middle class." The 09ers economic counterpart is the Latino motorcycle gang from the poor part of town the PCHers, which Weevil is the leader of. PCH stands for Pacific Coast Highway, which runs along the coast in the state of California.

situation that her father has to rescue her from at that is seen by Kaveney to be a "worrying drift away from the message" that Veronica can save herself (Kaveney, 184). However, Klock in his essay "Story Structure and *Veronica Mars*" sees it differently. He thinks that since Veronica survives this might be a revision of a trend[9] and that while Veronica is in the refrigerator "the men of *Veronica Mars* get down to fighting, but not at Veronica's expense." (Thomas, 31). He also believes that Aaron's comments about Joan of Arc while he is dosing the refrigerator with flammable liquid is an allusion to the destruction of powerful women, and may also point to this revision. Logan and Veronica are enemies from the start as he is the leader of the 09ers, her former clique, from which she is now an outcast. However, their animosity runs deeper than that between Veronica and other 09ers; he blames her for her father's wrongful accusations of Jake Kane as Lily's killer and because Veronica indirectly caused Logan and Lily's break-up.

The good-bad girl typically uses her looks to manipulate the characters around her into doing what she wants them too, and this is something we see traces of in Veronica. One such occasion is when she comes to ask Weevil for a favor and he tells her: "See, there you go with that head-tilt thing. You know, you think you're all badass but whenever you need something it's all, 'hey.'" Her answer reveals that this characterization is not surprising to her, nor something she tries to deny: "Just be glad I don't flip my hair. I'd own you."

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[9] The trend Klock is referring to is the death of women in comics. "In a 1994 issue of the comic book *Green Lantern* (No. 54), the writer Ron Marz (note the name), wrote a story in which the title character comes home to discover his girlfriend killed by a supervillain and stuffed in a refrigerator. In 1999, Gail Simone, one of only a handful of women working in superhero comics, coined the term "women in refrigerators" to refer to the fact that powerful women are often destroyed in comics in order to spur their male counterparts on to greater heights." (Klock, 30-31). Simone also made a web page called "Women in Refrigerators" which has a list of women destroyed in comics.

Male Teen P.I. vs. Female Teen P.I. in *Veronica Mars* and *Brick*

Rian Johnson wrote the original screenplay for the movie *Brick* in 1997, but it took him six years to fund the project so the film did not come out until 2005. The movie was even then a low-budget film resulting in the many creative ways to construct scenes such as the dream scenes. In *Brick* we meet a high school student who gets a call from his ex-girlfriend saying she needs help. The main character Brendan then sets out to find out if she, Emily, is in trouble. When he finally tracks her down by going through the various groups in school she says she is fine. When she later turns up dead Brendan starts his quest for the truth about her murder.

In *Veronica Mars* and *Brick* there are differences in their portrayal of noir elements, adults and parents, friends, violence and class differences. And while both approach noir very differently.

One of the main characteristics of the classical film noirs, besides the P.I. character, was the voiceover narration, by the alienated male character. This is something employed by Rob Thomas and he has stated that he wanted to write the most Chandler-esque voiceover he could "to reflect the spirit of Veronica" (Thomas, 34). In the opening scene of the pilot where the shot zooms in on a neon lit motel before sweeping to a car out front with Veronica on a stake out and we hear the voiceover[10]:

> Veronica: I'm never getting married. You want an absolute? Well, there it is. Veronica Mars, spinster. I mean, what's the point? Sure, there's the initial primal drive. Ride it out. Better yet, ignore it. Sooner or later, the people you love let you down. And here's where it ends up: Sleazy men, cocktail waitresses, cheap motels

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[10] I am here referring to the extended pilot on the season 1 DVD, since this opening was cut by the network before it aired on UPN.

on the wrong side of town and a soon-to-be ex-spouse wanting a bigger piece of

the settlement pie. That's where I come in forty dollars an hour is cheap compared

to the long time financial security sordid photography can secure for you, your

offspring, your next lover. But do us a favor if it's you in there, dispense with the

cuddling. This motel tryst, it is what it is. Make it quick. The person sitting in the

car across the street might have a calculus exam in five – make that four hours,

and she can't leave until she gets the money shot. ("Pilot," (1-1))

This is one of the many examples of Veronica's voiceovers, where she resembles the old

noir films and their style of talking. In *Brick* Brendan does not voiceover the action of the

film. I shall look at Evelyn Vaughn's theory about why voiceover works so well on

Veronica and why perhaps it does not exist in *Brick*. In Vaughn's essay "Veronica Mars:

Girl. Detective." she starts out by comparing Veronica's voiceovers to those of

Humphrey Bogart calling Veronica a "hard-boiled detective protagonist" and a "little

blonde California girl" in the same sentence (Thomas, 35). Her claim is that voiceovers

were very popular and commonly used in the prime of film noir and hard-boiled detective

films, but that when these very films were loosing popularity in the 50s another movie

and tv hero was on the rise: the cowboy. The cowboy, unlike the P.I., generally believes

in law and order and he does not talk much. "Cowboys were defined by how *little* they

talked. … the tougher a cowboy is, the more he leans toward understatement." (Thomas,

38-39). Vaughn claims that ever since cowboy movies had its prime men, who talk a lot

are not considered manly. She references this to several TV characters where the male

characters who are talkative are often in opposition with brooding, tough-guys who

communicate verbally as little as possible. Voiceover having been a movie and tv-series

convention for such a long time, it is today also used in a comedic, mocking way in for instance commercials and sitcoms. Voiceover narration in television has in the recent years experienced a rise, as it is employed by various characters. As Vaughn points out however, the voiceovers that are taken serious are those of women as, we see in drama series. While the voiceovers done by men are almost all limited to sitcoms where there narration, is, if taken seriously, not necessarily considered manly. One of the main reasons why voiceover therefore works on *Veronica Mars* is because male voiceover narration, the only kind in the classical noir period, had been around for so long it has been mocked and satirized to the point where an audience will not take it completely serious, Veronica can as a girl bring back the seriousness to the voiceover and because voiceovers have become more feminine. This is true as Veronica talks about everything from whom she suspects to be Lily's killer to her reputation to her old life. Another important way in which Veronica's voiceovers differ from that of comedic imitations of film noir voiceovers is the balance between the cynical and the serious "And this, *this* is where the sitcom dream sequences and the Aflac commercial get it wrong, and *Veronica Mars* gets it right. The merely derivative versions of hard-boiled voiceovers focus only on the *tough*, and not on the *earnest*. The narrative technique employed by Veronica focuses on both." (Vaughn, 44). Perhaps this distrust in male voiceover narration is why it is not used in *Brick*, which tends to employ more of the classical film noir techniques than that of *Veronica Mars*.

As illustrated previously, although violence exists in *Veronica Mars,* from child abuse to murder, Veronica herself is never in a fight if she can help it. Brendan on the other hand is from is first fight, which is fairly early in the film, onwards rarely seen

without blood dripping or drying on his clothes. Though often outnumbered or up against physically stronger opponents Brendan like Veronica uses intelligence to get himself out of dangerous situation. Although *Brick* uses many noir conventions such as low camera angels, stylized language resembling that of the classical film noirs, a faced paced plot, noir characters and capturing the disillusioned and alienated mood of film noir and *Veronica Mars* on the other hand has a main character with close ties to friends and family, references to contemporary society and popular culture and uses different noir elements such as voice-over the two main characters still are much alike. They both set on seeing justice served, Brendan for the death of Emily and Veronica for the death of Lily, they are not fazed by the resistance they meet and they have no moral problems with breaking the law to promote their case. Not surprisingly "Johnson and Thomas agree that the biggest appeal of this genre is the chance to create characters who aren't always doing the right thing." (The Guardian). While the elements and techniques Johnson and Thomas employ varies the two P.I.s themselves have much in common from their world weary views on life to their search for justice for which they will stop at nothing.

CHAPTER III

WEAPONS OF CLASS DESTRUCTION

In the first chapter I looked at reasons for the resurface of noir and which current factors in American society contributed to its revival in the teen genre. In this chapter I will look more closely at two of the reasons touched upon before, namely the rise of suburbia and the increasing class differences. Both of these issues are taken up in teen noir, and the changing of the setting from classic noir to teen noir serves as perhaps the most obvious alteration in a genre that relies so closely on its predecessor. As touched upon in the last chapter the view of suburbia has been transformed in teen movies from a utopian dream to a rather quite dystopian view of society seen through the eyes of the younger generation. While various teen noirs utilize different aspects and elements from the original movies, the city seems to be without exception the only noir characteristic that is never used. That all the teen noirs choose to have suburbia as their backdrop is an important alteration which begs the question of why this change occurred. I will explore this by looking more closely at the history of suburbia and how it has been represented in popular culture over the years.

The History of Suburbia and Its Representation in Popular Culture

The suburbs can trace their roots back to the early 19th century's commuter suburbs, placed around growing cities. In the early 20th century the position of these suburbs changed slightly and the suburb was now a place for the upper classes to establish their position as homeownership became "an ever more noticeable marker of

success" (Beuka, 24). These suburbs consisted of large houses and grounds giving the privileged a place between the urban and the rural so they could commute to their jobs in the cities. However following the Great Depression these early upper class suburbs more or less disappeared; as we see in *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* old larger houses were decaying, or descendants were unable to keep up the costly repairs and the land was instead sold to companies that would utilize the land much more and build more houses closer together. However by the end World War II with the return of the soldiers and the pressure to return the country to domesticity the suburbs were a perfect place for the middle class family to move to, away from the urban centers to a place built up around home and family life with the work sphere at a distance. In 1947 building on the town of Levittown began, and while this was not the first suburban environment it was the first of its kind of mass produced suburbs where every detail was planned. Although initially this was a matter of form following function, which was both economically advantageous and efficient, this type of development quickly grew in popularity. It caused people to adopt the idea of conformity not only as a building form but as a lifestyle. After Levittown mass produced pre-planned suburbs were rapidly built across the country outside of towns. These proto type suburbs were meant as commuter suburbs for middle class families so the husband could commute to the near by town for work. This is why these suburbs had little other than houses and schools to accommodate the housewives and their families, and lacked the characteristics that individualize the cities such as architecture, cultural centers and workplaces: they were made to meet the post war housing shortage. As Sharpe and Wallock put it "By stressing the infrastructure rather than the human element in defining cities, these writers minimize the social interaction

and cultural variety that are a crucial part of urban life."[11] (p.10). That these houses were mass produced also made them affordable to the middle class aspiring to be home owners, and with their fortunate geography of being between the urban and rural, the suburbs became the perfect place for the returned veterans of WWII to move with their families. That women had taken more and more jobs outside the home and taken over many positions previously thought of as male occupation caused a movement in the late 40s and early 50s in American society to return to the domesticity that had been the norm before the war. Suburbia became a tool in this campaign marketed as an ideal place to raise families and centered around the female sphere and domesticity to the point where women and children were its only inhabitants for most of the day. American society was at the same time a rapidly growing consumer society with numerous inventions and gadgets, previously only a luxury, but now affordable to the middle classes. This included those aimed at making not only the role of mother and housewife easier, but also more desirable such as the vacuum cleaner and the washing machine. The December 24 1956 issue of LIFE magazine entitled *American Woman* featured the suburban housewife as its main representative of women in America at the time. This shows how the media was trying to promote this life style as the ideal, the one to aspire to be for future generations, regarding this as the average woman of the time. Further proof of this is how commercials targeted suburbanites who were now the prime consumers, both because of their economic situation and their large number. A suburban housewife opens a 1950s Ford commercial as follows "Like so many people these days we live in the suburbs…". From 1950 to 1960 Americans still continued their migration to the suburbs and by 1960 the number of homeowners in the U.S. had gone up from 23.6 million in 1950 to 32.8

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[11] The writers Sharpe and Wallock refer to are Muller, Leinberger and Lockwood, Fishman, and Garreau.

million. However at the same time the development of new housing units were declining.
(Behind the Picket Fence). Included in the new technology and household gadgets that
were hugely popularized and made available to most middle class citizens was the
television, which brought another dimension of the public's perception of suburbia,
whether they lived there themselves or not. With the television becoming more affordable
tv-series were produced in a greater number and on a larger scale. Situation comedies
featuring everyday Americans in staged settings became increasingly popular and many
of them were set in the suburbs, such as *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-63), *The Donna Reed
Show* (1958-66) and *Father Knows Best* (1954-60). While the primary aim of these shows
was comedy the underlying message of promoting suburban ideals was not excluded.
These sitcoms presented the average suburban family as a white middle class family with
a working husband and a stay at home mom, who often had children. This was the image
of suburbia that these sitcoms were simultaneously promoting and catering to.

   Traditional gender roles were also the ones society at large favored. Especially the
role of housewife and mother was an important one and subsequently played a large role
in the sitcoms: "These series provided a 'natural' environment in which docile
homemakers acted out prescribed rituals of social interaction and material consumption."
(Shapre and Wallock, 20). Beth Haralovick also comments on how the sitcoms play into
suburban ideals of class and gender: "the suburban family sitcom indicates the degree of
institutional as well as popular support for ideologies which naturalize class and gender
identities." (p.20).However while the prevailing view/representation of suburbia in
popular media at the time was one of conformity with restricted gender and class
roles there were at the time contradicting views claiming that suburbia was not quite the

utopia it was made out to be and exposing its oppressive milieu. Among them were David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* (1960), and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). (Beuke, 6). That suburbanites had a hard time viewing themselves and their environment objectively can be seen by how Friedan first started out writing her book. She originally intended it as a response to the book *Modern Women: The Lost Sex* by Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg, which claimed that education was unnecessary for women because having an education and skills they would never use only made them unhappy and discontent in their role as mother and wife. Friedan, who had an education from Smith College, wanted to prove that this was incorrect and set out to interview women in the suburbs who had an education. What she found was that a lot of them were dissatisfied with their life of conformity and routine with no challenges, and her article turned out quite differently. At first none of the magazines would print it because it was not what they were looking for, and she decided to write a book instead.

In this same time period sitcoms were becoming increasingly popular and In *Leave it to Beaver* we are introduced to a middle class family who lives in suburbia with two sons, a picturesque view of suburban life very different from the one Friedan discovered. The youngest son Beaver gets into various rather harmless situations, and is often taught a lesson by authority figures such as his father. How they are dressed, like the mother always being dressed nice even if she was doing housework, was both a representation of the time the series was made in and a commercial ideal of how suburban living should be.

In the seventies the workplaces started to move out to the suburbs, making them less dependent on big cities and no longer merely 'dormitory' suburbs. Suburbia was still the ideal place to live even after contradicting and opposing views of suburbia had become more frequent and people continued to move to the suburbs. By the eighties, however a trend had started that placed horror movies in suburbia. This was not surprising considering that a vast majority of the American population by now lived in suburbia and that drawing on something familiar was a deeper source of fear than the unknown. Still, this seemed to suggest something about suburbia that had only previously been written about in novels: there was a dark underside, which could be every bit as frightening and sinister as that of the city. This became the dystopian counterpart to the sitcoms' utopia.[12] This decade showed that popular culture's representation of suburbia was changing, but it did not have an impact on the middle class citizens who still view suburban living as the ideal and continued to move there.

This is also the decade where we see the first cinematic representations of how suburban life styles of conformity is getting to the younger generations of suburbanites, in films like *Heathers* (1989)*, Welcome to the Doll House* (1995) and *Better off Dead* (1985). In the latter, a dark comedy, we are introduce to Lane who in various failed attempts tries to commit suicide, something that goes unnoticed by his mother whose sole interest is cooking and his father. That nobody seems to either recognize what is going on with Lane, nor view it as any fault of their own seems to represent society's disinterest in the state of younger suburbia. In the nineties, however, we saw movies emerging that parodied suburbia and its lifestyle though 50s style sitcom versions of suburbia and

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[12] On a side note it seems that suburbia's dark side was written about before it was televised the same way 'teen noir', teen angst and fear of conformity, was written about before it was televised. Cf. *The Virgin Suicides* by Eugenides Jeffrey.

exposing its faults like for instance *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville*. However as Beuka points out:

> while both films offer something of a corrective response to the fantasy vision of suburban community as it was envisioned in the situation comedies of the 1950s, the very fact that they both defer to the *Father Knows Best* image of suburbia in constructing their critiques suggests the continued cultural dominance of the televised image of suburbia from that bygone era. (Beuka, 14)

Recently the familiarity with the dystopian view has become so common in popular media that shows can rely on a viewer's knowledge of it and comedies and parodies of this life have become frequent. Shows like "Desperate Housewives" and "Veronica Mars" take this familiarity for granted. Especially in drama series this familiarity has become very popular and many of these now have the suburban housewife as their main character.

However, the take on this female character has changed drastically from that of the 50s housewife, whose husband was the head of the family, to the housewives on "Desperate Housewives" and "Weeds". Now the norm has become to represent suburbia in popular culture in a less than flattering light and viewers are far more used to seeing its sinister side on tv or in the movies than its utopian representations of yore. While the dystopian views of suburbia are followed up in this second decade of dark suburban movies we se more and more teenagers as the lead characters. They are the ones who feel conformity and the suppressing values of a suburban lifestyle the most acutely. As Hassenger says of the environment in which Veronica resides: "Veronica doesn't want to get out because Neptune is a dead-end town (though it is), but rather because it's an

actively unwelcoming environment, a depository for faded movie stars and smug software kingpins. It's a land of opportunity exclusive to those who don't need, or deserve, any additional breaks." (Thomas, 100).

Teen noir can be said to be the last trend within dystopian portrayals of suburbia. Teen noir does the same for teen suburbanites as the drama series do for adult female suburbanites; presenting their 'world' from their point of view. With this focus on suburbia by popular culture it is important to remember that suburbanites represent the main consumers in American society. With their middle class income and their large number they are the ones who buy the most. They are also the target audience of tv-series and movies. Suburbia is still mostly inhabited by the white middle-class. By the 21st century half the US population lives in suburbia and the most accepted and popularized version of suburbia in mass popular culture is that of a dystopian one. This does not seem to have any impact on the seemingly prevailing idea of suburbia as the utopian dream for the middle class making it in turn their American dream, a dream they can achieve by moving there, through upward mobility.

Others have taken the dream of suburbia one step further, deeming today's suburbs unworthy of their American dream and choosing instead to move into entire neighborhoods and towns constructed as 50s suburbs with the idea that this will also include old-fashioned morals and values that seem to have been lost in modern day society. What most of these communities fail to realize/take into consideration is that old fashioned values also include prejudices and suppression of others and were mostly meant for the white middle-class. An example of such a town is Celebration, Florida a town complete with schools, malls, post-office and all modern day conveniences so that

its residence never have to move outside the town borders. Suburbs have had a long trend

of keeping unwanted others out of their neighborhood through rules and regulations.

Sharpe and Wallock, referring to other scholars, say that:

> As Jon C. Teaford remarks, 'through the exercise of municipal zoning powers,
> each of these newly-incorporated communities could exclude whatever seemed
> obnoxious or threatening. Over the years, the suburbs have devised an array of
> defensive zoning measures, from the regulation of building lot sizes and
> construction procedures to prohibitions on multiple dwellings. 'Restrictive
> techniques of land-use control are both innumerable and interchangeable,'
> Richard F. Babcock and Fred P. Bosselman explained in the 1970s. 'If a particular
> device is invalidated it is often easy for the town to substitute a different device
> that has the same depressing effect.' (12)

Another fairly recent trend is that of gated communities, which in addition to zoning laws

keep out passers-by and others who might wander into the neighborhood. When looking

at the current conditions for women in the suburbs Sharpe and Wallock argue that while

they have become better compared to the 40s, they have not become significantly better

compared to men, which is what we should be comparing:

> In order to reach a more balanced and accurate understanding of today's cities and
> suburbs – where conditions are very different from those of the immediate
> postwar period – we need to devise a new paradigm that brings their interactive

relation back into focus while also considering the part played by vulnerable

exurbs. Currently, critics overlook the one sidedness of their analysis; they

discuss access without mentioning restriction, time without considering space,

women's opportunities without comparing them to men's, the planting of gardens

without the razing of forests. They forget that suburbia does not constitute a world

unto itself but a particular place and set of attitudes created in response to the

overall metropolitan context. (16)

But if suburbia is still a utopia and the symbol of the American dream, why are

suburbanites the main audiences for dystopian representations of their lives? As Beuka

argues, perhaps suburbia is better viewed as a heterotopia. The benefits of viewing

suburbia in this manner, he writes, is "that Foucault's formulation allows a way out of the

impasse of the utopia/dystopia binary that has characterized out perception of suburbia

throughout the latter half of the twentieth century." (Beuka, 7). Despite this most teen

noir movies portray a very dystopian view of suburbia, as for instance in the way class is

portrayed.

CLASS:

"Be cool soda pop" (Pilot)[13]

When the 1983 movie *The Outsiders* is quoted and referenced by name in the pilot

episode of *Veronica Mars* we know we are dealing with a show that is concerned with the

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[13] Sodapop is a character from the 1983 movie *The Outsiders*, and the book by S.E. Hinton which the movie was based on. The movie is about two opposing teen groups one poor and one privileged. At the end of the pilot of *Veronica Mars* the PCHers, the 09ers and Wallace and Veronica all confront each other, and Wallace turns and asks Veronica "I suddenly feel like I'm in a scene from *The Outsiders*" to which Veronica replies "Be cool, Sodapop" ("Pilot (1-1)).

class divides in American society. Already in this episode we have been introduced to a Latino biker gang, the PCHers; the upper class sons and daughters of software or movie star millionaires, the 09ers; and the various people and clicks in between. That a tv-series made almost twenty years later reference this movie shows the writers' self-reflecting concern with the class issue in contemporary American society and how it has not change much.

Arguably many Americans consider the United States to be a classless society where upward mobility is possible for all, citing this as one of the reasons so many immigrants chose to come there. Paul Fussel writes in his book *Class* about the failed 1970s show "Beacon Hill" a tv-series about a rich family and their servants based on the British show "Upstairs, Downstairs", that "Some Americans noted with satisfaction . . . comforting themselves with the belief that this venture came to grief because there is no class system here to sustain interest in it" (Fussel, 17). However the existence of upward mobility and its possibilities, albeit not as easy a task as popular myth, would have it and far from open to all, is not enough to claim that contemporary American society is a classless one. Although class is not so much decided by family history and cultural connections, although that point can also be argued by looking at lineage-based membership organizations such as Daughters of the American Revolution among others, it is one primarily built up around economy and economic status. Country club membership, the neighborhood you live in and your occupation establish which class you belong to. This makes upward mobility problematic, and increasingly so over the past decades. As one income is no longer enough to support a family, one-parent families suffer and have less opportunities to give their children. In addition families with two

incomes have no safety net to fall back on and saving money for their children's educations becomes an ever more difficult job. To ensure your child's education parents have to begin as far back as elementary school, sometimes even kindergarten, which has made finding the best neighborhoods a top priority among parents. Recent studies have shown that this is not because public schools do not have the same level of education, but rather that the quality of a public school is decided by the neighborhood in which it is situated. Public schools situated in the more expensive neighborhoods have a higher level of education and the poor inner city schools have a low level of education, which has caused education to be determined by economy even when the school system is run by the state. A poor education in a poor neighborhood decreases possibilities of going to college or university and upward mobility. A good primary and secondary education has become so important that parents who cannot afford to live within the boundaries of a certain school lie about their residency, a ploy that has become so popular that school officials now go to the extreme of going door to door and checking if the addresses are correct and if in fact the child in question lives there.

Another obstacle for moving up through the educational system is the costly university and college tuitions, leaving only scholarship options for those who cannot afford it. Taking up a second mortgage to afford to give a child a university education has become a new trend. This new emphasis on education is however not unfounded, as "Business leaders generally agree that whereas the entry-level qualification for most jobs used to be a high-school diploma, employers now generally expect at least two years of college." (Macqueen, 233). Considering the current mortgage crisis, the unstable position of the middle class and that one income is no longer enough to sustain a family

contemporary society is left with an economic elite, and unstable middle-class and an increasingly growing lower class.

By looking at how class is portrayed in television and in particular in the tv-series *Veronica Mars* we see that markers of class are often economy, occupation, neighborhood, accent, education and circle of friends. Class on television is often lightly treated or classes are elevated to higher financial status than they would normally occupy while remaining firmly within their class. The latter is most commonly found in sitcoms where product placement has a firm grip. Sitcoms are usually about middle-class families and target middle-class families as their viewers, the largest consumer group in the States. Therefore designer clothes, the latest model cars, gadgets and electronic accessories have become common props in these series. These products are often out of the price range of a middle-class family or normal individuals with the same jobs as the ones on tv. And while they are perhaps able to afford and save up for some of them depending on preference and prioritizing, the sitcom characters live beyond their means.

In addition to product placement, commercials breaks and TV sponsorships are other ways the networks finance and try to earn more money off their shows. These product placements, while achieving what they set out to do, often portray the middle-class as more affluent than it in reality is, causing the real middle-class viewers to want what their TV counterparts already possess in material wealth. As Sarah Bond puts it in her article "The Class Struggle and Reality on TV": "As a result, many middle class families, the audience for this kind of show, think that these material possessions are the kinds of things that they ought to own, and many families in this class range fall easily into credit card or other kinds of debt trying to keep up with the times." (Sarah Bond).

Although perhaps an exaggeration the increased consumer consciousness has caused

people to emulate the world around them, which often leads to material objects becoming

the markers of success.

Another popular way of portraying class on television is to focus the center of

attention on the upper class and showing their life style. This has become more and more

popular in recent years, a time when Christopher Hayes claims "our pop culture is

pathologically obsessed with wealth and the sheer fabulousness of those who possess it:

from NBC's 'The Apprentice,' to MTV's 'My Super Sweet 16" (In These Times). This is

where television series like "The O.C." comes in, while fascinatingly enough this series

starts out by transitioning a white lower class boy from Chino into the gated communities

of Newport, California. However once the geographical movement of the main character

has taken place the socio-economic ones seem to follow fairly quickly, aided by his new

foster parents. That "Veronica Mars" is in many ways in opposition to series like "The

O.C." and its spawned reality series featuring the 'real' lives of its Orange County

residence can be seen in how the two series have a very different portrayal of a similar

environment. As Mary Desjardins says in her article "'Back Where I Started From':

California in Some Recent Television Series": "Veronica Mars" "provides a

contemporary dystopic vision of Southern California and a (probably unintended)

response to these other series". (Flow TV). While Veronica resides in the fictional town

of Neptune, Southern California, much of its characteristics resemble that of Orange

County, such as for instance the gated communities.

In "Veronica Mars" class issues are constantly brought up and plays an important

part in many of the plots. The first episode in the second season revolves around the most

drastic plot occurrences where class is literally a matter of life or death. While on a school outing the rich 09'ers decide to take a limousine back to school instead of the school bus. All the underprivileged students, who do not have their own cars or an alternative mode of transportation, take the school bus which is blown up and subsequently drives off a cliff, with all the six students and the teacher dying. The bus crash, in addition to being the second season's story arc, served to establish to the audience once again that this was a show that concerned itself with class issues. As Anthony Letizia writes in his review of the season two DVDs: "As the season progressed, the bus crash became a metaphor for Neptune's social inequities" (Flak Magazine).

Another way in which the *Veronica Mars* touches upon the inequalities between the classes is by portraying the legal system in Neptune as corrupt and favoring the wealthier members of its society. When the millionaire movie star Aaron Echolls is charged with murder he is acquitted, as is his son Logan who is also charged with murder. That Aaron is guilty and Logan innocent makes no difference as the public find them both guilty and the legal system find them both innocent. Although Logan does not use his wealth on lawyers but instead chooses to be represented by a state appointed lawyer, Cliff McCormack, who calls himself a "if-you-cannot-afford-an-attorney attorney" (Rat Saw God, (2-6)), the legal system still has a hard time convicting him. A combination of name, wealth, fame and circumstantial evidence clears him. As *People Magazine* says about Neptune's favoring of the rich, "the show has definitely been flavored, consciously or no, by the nasty cultural down-trickle of real-life crimes of pampered West Coasters: the Billionare Boys Club, the Menendez brothers." (Sarah Bond).

Another way contemporary Californian society and class boundaries is reflected in "Veronica Mars" is when Woody Goodman mayoral candidate starts procedures for a campaign to incorporate Neptune. Incorporation has been done in several towns and in Neptune it would have the effect of legally bordering off the low-income parts of town, making Neptune a town for the upper classes. As Desjardins writes this has previously been done in Californian towns:

Incorporation had a long, convoluted, and important history in Southern California politics and development. Mike Davis has argued that incorporation became a way for California towns bleeding into the edges of L.A. or Long Beach to opt out of supporting those cities through tax revenues, while contracting their county services. Davis points out that incorporation (as well as caps on property taxes through Prop 13 and regressive tax revenues, such as sales taxes) has supported white and industry flight out of Los Angeles into Orange County and the 'Inland Empire' (on which Chino borders), increasing the strain of services available to non-white populations left in L.A. and other cities, while zoning policies favor single-family dwellings (not to mention the creation of gated communities). (Flow TV)

That incorporation is not to the benefit of all of Neptune's citizens, however much Goodman tries to mask it as such, is evident by Keith and Veronica's conversation when they find out the majority voted against incorporation: "Veronica: So Neptune has to keep us? Keith: What's a yacht without barnacles?" ("Look Who's Stalking," 2-20).

Apart from such major events that clearly position the have and the have-nots in oppositions to each other, in politics and in everyday life, there are constant small incidents at the school and in the lives of the teenage characters that show the class differences where the cliques of high-school often stand in for the class divide most notably the 09ers and the PCHers. One such occurrence is when the prom is cancelled and the 09ers have their own alterna-prom inviting only a select few of the graduating class.

The Kane Scholarship is another important social marker, for while many of Neptune's lower class students need it the most the scholarship is so coveted that middle and upper class students also compete for it. Head to head for the scholarship in season one is the son of an Asian immigrant working-class man, who in addition to keeping his grades up has to work at the family restaurant and an 09er girl who has had various benefits such as tutors and summer courses. When the 09er girl has problems studying due to being harassed Veronica is hired to find the culprit. That the culprit turns out to be the lower class boy's father who tries to give his son a better chance, leaves the boy with the choice of either forfeiting the scholarship or see his father prosecuted. The episode causes Veronica and the audience alike to wonder if the truth had better been left undiscovered. While the law is clearly on the side of the 09er girl such moral dilemmas are often broached in "Veronica Mars". That the 09ers do not stand as a uniformed group is exemplified by Jake Kane, the benefactor of the scholarship, who suggests that the two candidates split the scholarship, however these are terms the 09er girl refuses to agree to.

Unlike many shows that deal with class differences and social inequality the series seldom falls into the common pitfalls of stereotyping members of certain class.

Although the upper class usually comes out on top that is not to say they are all amoral egocentric members of society out to exploit their less privileged neighbors, nor are all the lower class representatives the moral compasses of the show or always the ones who have the audience's sympathy. As Hayes puts it:

> Of course, if the show was devoted exclusively to a sledge-hammer message about the perfidy of the ruling class, it would be boring propaganda, not art. But 'Veronica Mars' never settles for cartoonish, political stereotypes: The working-class insurgent candidate for class president turns out to be a snitch who falsely accuses Veronica of drug use; the charismatic, liberal history teacher who critiques U.S. 'imperialism' has an affair with a student and dumps her when she gets pregnant; and Duncan Kane, the ultimate icon of privilege, is unfailingly decent, compassionate and humane. (In These Times)

In "Veronica Mars" not only the major but also the minor characters are given depth, something which is unusual for a teen series. And while characters are not stereotypically defined by class neither do they remain static, causing one week's villain to be next week's hero. Lynne Edwards comments on the "moral dopplegangers" she describes in the show:

> Sure Veronica was threatened by the PCHers in the middle of the night, but it was a gang of 09ers who vandalized her car in broad daylight – a gang that was driven away by the PCHers. In another moral double take, the same surveillance tape

that almost sealed the PCHers' fate in court and Wallace's fate on the flagpole

also ended up sealing Wallace's position of power over the PCHers. (Thomas,

76).

That it is a show that strives to make all the characters be more than just one-dimensional

is shown by how a well established foil to Keith, Sheriff Lamb's back story of childhood

abuse is hinted at in "Nobody Puts Baby in a Corner" (2-7):

> As the abusive father protests, Lamb simply utters one sentence: 'Funny, I heard
>
> my father give that exact speech once.' And that one sentence, coupled with the
>
> sheriff's silent release of Veronica and Duncan a few blocks away, transforms
>
> Lamb from a mere caricature into a deeper, even sympathetic, character. (Flak
>
> Magazine).

However even though Lamb turns out to be more than just a one dimensional character

new information about him does not change his relationship with Veronica and Keith and

he continues to be portrayed as a foil throughout the series.

Class differences in "Veronica Mars" are also established through props and

geographical setting. While in school, the most neutral playing field where the different

classes intermingle, the lunch tables stand in for geographical location and everyone

knows who sits where and more importantly who is allowed to sit where. There is also a

system set up within the high-school that awards pirate points to student participation in

clubs and extra curricular activity although these points are limited to the groups most

populated by 09ers such as the student government. These pirate points give whoever has achieved them certain privileges such being able to order lunch from off campus. That these points are named pirate points imply stealing or acquiring something which is not justifiably yours. This awards system within the high-school mirrors how the upper classes are given special treatment in Neptune at large. Outside of school we are introduced to Veronica's motel-like apartment complex where she lives with her father, in flash-backs we see that when Keith was sheriff they lived in a house and the loss of his job contributed to their downward mobility, the ultimate taboo in American society (Hayes). This is put in sharp context to the gated communities Logan and the 09ers inhabit; the PCHers on the other hand are seldom seen in a home environment but rather driving around on the motorcycle.

How race is portrayed in "Veronica Mars" is another way in which the series separates itself from its other southern California counterparts. For while in many series that deal with the lives of Southern California residents these residents are mostly white, minority characters, if represented at all, are never main characters. This is something that statistically is shown to be a misrepresentation of the location. Desjardins describes the lack of Asian, African-American and Latino characters in series situated in Southern California as follows:

This is despite the fact that Orange County's Westminster has the largest concentration of Vietnamese anywhere outside of Saigon, and Santa Ana has one of the largest concentrations of Latinos in Southern California. From its first episode, *Mars* has been attentive to how 'othering' is and act with political

consequences – one that is engaged in, with uneven resources and efforts, by every group in the community, and that is behind, and subsequently reinforced by, legalized strategies of city planners, real estate developers, and politicians. (Flow TV).

However the idea of having a diverse ethnic cast also opens up to critique of how the different minorities are represented. When Rob Thomas was confronted with the idea that he painted ethnic minorities in a bad light his response was:

> Now while the PCHers were mostly (but not exclusively) Latino, and they certainly steal cars, I hadn't thought we had portrayed our minority characters in any negative light. Well, that's not quite true. I didn't think I had portrayed them any more negatively than our rich White kids. . . . And I never considered stealing cars any worse than organizing bum fights, or crossing the border for drugs, or setting fire to the community pool. (Thomas, 82)

That the negative actions of the white are ignored while the ones of the ethnic minorities highlighted is not the way to interpret the series. However, by making all classes and races have both good and bad characters, though mostly ambiguous, ones the show comes across as more realistic and a more accurate portrayal of contemporary society.

So, if class and race are represented and portrayed in different ways in "Veronica Mars" and differently from contemporary series with some of the same geographical location and subject matter, what is "Veronica Mars" attempting to do, and what is it

achieving? While it is established among critics that the series deals more with the growing class issue than most tv-series today do, and that this is very much an important aspect of the series, not all critics agree that it is helping the class struggle. In Hayes's article he refers to Veronica as a class warrior saying that "is the single most compelling exploration of class anxiety and class friction on the little or big screen today." (Hayes). While Hayes argues that Veronica's realistic portrayal of the class issues and the constant struggle of the poor helps the class issue and shows all sides of the issue Ron Kaufman does not agree. In response to Hayes's argument Kaufman in his article "How Television Fuels the Class War" says:

> Though Hayes may not realize it, *Veronica Mars* is yet another example of how television works to establish class distinctions. Though the character Veronica Mars may be happy with her middle-class social status, she doesn't stay solely within her social strata. What this program succeeds in doing is reduce issues regarding wealth to the individual's faults or problems and not comments on the overall system Veronica Mars works to improve her own situation, not find ways to enhance the greater good. (Turn Off Your Television).

Veronica never tries to hide the fact that she takes on cases from fellow students primarily for the money, which her family needs in addition to working for her father, is evident from conversations with clients for example "Student: I hear you help people out? Veronica: I do favors for friends. Student: I can pay. Veronica: Hello friend." She considers being a P.I. her job and like with most jobs she expects to get paid. While

Veronica does take on cases and help out those of the lower class and often empathizes with them more than she does with the other classes represented on the show and views them as her own class her primary objective when taking on a case is to disclose the truth. She seldom avoids exposing it even if it means hurting someone from the lower class.

Another point Kaufman makes is how a show with numerous product placement plays in today's commercialist and consumer society can still be said to be a show that is helping the class issue:

> For example, the previously mentioned *Veronica Mars* is really just another marketing tool by a huge corporation, in this case the CW Television Network/Time Warner Inc. The *Veronica Mars* website (pic) lists all the products placed strategically throughout the show so watchers can purchase goods to match the TV characters. The website breaks down all the stylistic commodities by brand, character, episode and product. Did you know Veronica Mars wears Lucky Brand Jeans and a trenchcoat form the GAP? (Turn Off Your Television)

That Veronica arguably has materialistic goods beyond her means, and that she is seen frequently with her Sidekick phone and her Nikon SLR and other expensive gadgets, shows that Kaufman's argument has some validity. However, viewers have made the counter argument that these gadgets, like her camera, are instrumental in her job and therefore prioritized when the family has money. This brings up the question whether the series is a political statement on current class issues or rather a vehicle for commercialism

and consumerism in society's ever growing fascination with wealth? And is the series
fueling the class war or rather observing it?

That a tv-series' main objective is to make money cannot be forgotten when, in
order to stay on the air it has to reach out to a large number of viewers so that it continues
to be a financially sound investment for the Network. The Networks in turn gets their
money from commercial spots in the show's running time, sponsorship and product
placement with the networks vying for viewership in today's competing marketplace
neither of these can be ignored. A tv-series has to ultimately bring in financial gain in
order to survive. However despite product placement and endorsements Thomas still
manages to work around these and represent more class and race issues than most other
tv-show. He has created in Neptune a more ethnically and racially diverse Southern
California than is usually shown on television. And while viewers try to copy the life
styles they view on tv, where marketing of life styles is done through product placement,
it is important to remember whose life style viewers want to emulate on *Veronica Mars*.
For while the wealthier students drive expensive cars, live in gated communities and have
a lot more material benefits than Veronica, it is Veronica who earns the admiration of its
viewers, and who they then in turn want to copy. For while Veronica wears clothes from
the GAP, this is a clothes brand a lot closer to the middle-class than the Prada and Luis
Vuitton showed on the shows representing the upper-class of Orange County. Another
point Hayes makes is that

> With an artfulness and pathos that no other show has quite pulled off, 'Veronica
> Mars' expresses the deep ambivalence that the working and middle classes feel

about the rise of a monstrously flush ruling class in our midst. In doing so, it

makes manifest both the deep-seated class resentment that makes a populist

political revolt seem so tantalizing possible and the Stockholm Syndrome-like

admiration that makes it so maddeningly unattainable. (In These Times)

That class is so heavily focused on in "Veronica Mars" is perhaps not so surprising when

taking into account the recent changes in the position of the classes and how in today's

consumer society who is and who is not in possession of material goods is acutely felt

especially among the teenage population.

      That the positions of the classes in American society are changing, especially that

of the middle class, has to first be recognized before something can be done about the

increasing problem. What makes this a difficult task is that many Americans still believe

they live in a classless society. As Bell Hooks says in her book *Where We Stand: Class-*

Matters: "I believe class warfare will be our nation's fate if we do not collectively

challenge classism, if we do not attend to the widening gap between rich and poor, the

haves and have-nots." (Hooks, 9). According to Wanda when running for school

president there is already a class warfare going on: "It's class warfare.…They're the

minority and they're corrupt….They have power. We're the disenfranchised but only

because we let ourselves be. It's time to take action!" ("Return of the Kane" (1-6)). That

Wanda turns out to equally corrupt as the 09ers she is talking about does not seem to

undermine the series attempt at raised awareness regarding class. Throughout *Veronica*

Mars class is an issue, and Veronica exclaims on more than one occasion on behalf of

herself or the people she helps that "life is unfair", in most of these situations class

politics and financial situations are at the root of this unfairness. With no clear answers or solutions the series still manages to portray a different view of race and class that most tv-series, especially those aimed at a teen audience.

CONCLUSION:

AND THE ROAD HAS ALWAYS LED WEST[14]

With teen noir it is difficult to say whether this is a new interpretation of film noir replacing the neo-noir, or if they are two sub-genres existing side by side. In his book *Detours and Lost Highways* Foster Hirch writes that:

'Neo' acknowledges a difference between now as opposed to then; but for how long can noir continue to be in a 'neo' phase? How long does a new period last in any style or genre? When the long and lengthening 'neo' phase is exhausted, as it may well already be, and noir, if it can, spirals into another regenerative mode, do we then enter a 'post-neo' era? (4)

When this book was first published in 1999 the term teen noir had not yet been coined. One could however speculate whether this might be the 'regenerative mode' noir has now spiraled into. However neo-noirs are still being made in a vide variety, so it does not seem that teen noir has replaced them. Some emulate the classical noir films as closely as possible, while others take the genre in new directions. An example of the former can be found in Stephen Soderbergh's *The Good German* (2006) where, "banned the use of sophisticated zoom lenses used by today's cinematographers, returning to the fixed focal-

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[14] This line is from the movie *Into the Wild*, where the main character Chris/Alex says in a voice-over: "It should not be denied that being footloose has always exhilarated us. It is associated in our minds with escape from history and oppression and law and irksome obligations. Absolute freedom. And the road has always led west."

length lenses used in the past" (IMDB), the movie was in black and white. The sound was only recorded with an old-fashioned hand-operated boom mike and the lighting was only incandescent lights causing the actors to talk louder and the light to be harsh and unnatural. The temporal setting was also that of a classical noir in a post World War II Germany. Further evidence of the movie's homage to classical noir films can be seen in its movie poster and in the final scene of the movie which are tributes to *Casablanca* (1942), another noir movie set in a foreign country.

Although placing the plot in the time period of the classical films is not the most frequent setting of neo-noir, it continues in the tradition of films such as *L.A. Confidential* (1997) and *The Black Dahlia* (2006). As previously mentioned other filmmakers choose to treat their neo noirs differently by placing them in a contemporary setting, which allows them to explore different interpretations of the genre. In the Coen brothers' film *Blood Simple* (1984) they have chosen a rural setting instead of the common urban one in film noirs. This is something they follow up in their most recent neo-noir *No Country for Old Men* (2007). Which won best motion picture of the year at the 2008 acadamy awards. It follows three main characters, a hired hitman, a local hunter, and a sheriff and is set in the borderland between Texas and Mexico. The movie includes such noir elements as voice-over, corruption, violence, neon lights and motels and night shots. Other recent neo-noirs include *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* (2007) where two brothers organize the robbery of their parent's jewelry store planning it to be violence free until one of their accomplices ignore the rules and *Eastern Promises* (2007) about organized Russian crime by director David Cronenberg who also directed the neo noir *A History of Violence* (2005).

Teen noirs, however, are set in the present day, like for instance the recent teen *Disturbia* (2007), where a teenage boy is confined to house arrest. With free time on his hands and nowhere to go he begins to study his neighbors and eventually becomes convinced that the bachelor next door is really a serial killer. However as a juvenile delinquent whose constraints limit his believability and his resources to expose the neighbor he feels powerless and trapped. The plot itself is a remake of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, a film noir form 1954, in which a wheel-chair bound photographer starts spying on his neighbors.

By looking more closely at the background influences to film noir, while having a broad definition of the film noir criteria, I have found that not only was the classical noir period a reflection of the current zeitgeist, but that both neo-noir and teen noir follow in the same vein. They also continue to serve, as Spicer puts it, as "a 'dark mirror' to American society" (19). That the film noir reflected their surroundings, whether in mood or in specific examples, helps explain why noir keeps returning, albeit in different modes, and also perhaps why it is today found in the teen genre. When looking closer at the issues associated with class and suburbia, arguably something that affects adults more than teenagers, we see that the characters in teen noirs are acutely aware of their surroundings and that class differences and residence is not only felt at home, but also at school. In for example *Veronica Mars* the high school students take on a hierarchy that all to well mirrors that of the town of Neptune.

Looking at noir characters, specifically the good-bad girl, the femme fatale, the homemaker and the P.I., I find that most of these characters can still be found in teen noir. With gender roles having changed from the 1940s and 50s, teen noir now has a

female P.I., something that did not exist in the classical period. However, this character closely resembles the good-bad girl, often the P.I.'s partner in crime, and apart from the actual label of P.I. this is the character that most closely resembles him. In chapter two we saw that while the teen noir opens up the space of the classical noir roles, the strong female character was also prevalent in the classical films and served as the inspiration for and continuation of female leads and heroines in teen noirs.

Even if the teen noir genre is very recent, my first source using the teen noir label dated April 2006, it seems to be taking on two different directions. One is that of capturing the mood of contemporary society, where dark dystopian views are often reflected without a single reference to contemporary society. In the 2004 *Mean Creek* a group friends who decide to get even with a bully invites him on a boat trip, but something in their plan goes wrong and the bully ends up drowning. This theme of innocent characters trying to cover up an accidental murder can be seen in classic film noirs such as *The Reckless Moment* (1949). In this movie it is the daughter Beatrice who commits the murder and her mother Lucia who covers it up. *Mean Creek* (2004) has a noir plot and the noir mood of guilt, pessimism, desperation, disillusionment and bleakness without the noir conventions like for instance character types, flash-backs or voice-overs. This type of teen noir is more connected to the mood of noir than to cultural references and comments on specific events in contemporary society. This direction is however exemplified best in Rian Johnson's *Brick* (2005) where the bleak fatalistic outlook of the characters is much like that of the classical period's main characters. The whole plot revolves around Brendan trying to find the murderer of his ex-girlfriend, and in the end realizing that this cannot bring her back. While the movie has created its own

world it still continues to reflect the mood of alienation, disillusionment and abandonment. That *Brick* was early accepted and given cult status, much like *Donnie Darko* (2001), show that this mood conveyed in the film was something audiences quickly picked up on. Nor did Rian Johnson's obvious noir inspirations go unnoticed, causing *Brick* to be one of the first productions labeled teen noir.

While *Brick* copies classical noir techniques such as camera angles, shadows, night scenes, femme fatale and the dark underworld of drug conspiracies *Veronica Mars* has a different take on teen noir. Here we find sunshine, popular culture references, and a tv-series that is very concerned with specific events going on around it. In the series issues such as school shootings, rape, class differences and politics are taken up in various plots. Though the series in typical noir fashion does not have happy endings and satisfactory solutions to these problems it still, as we saw in chapters two and three exemplifies them. As Lynne Edwards, associate professor of Media and Communications Studies at Ursinus College, puts it: "Neptune, it seemed, was a battleground for a race-class-gender war that had no clear villains or victors and no clear path to redemption." (Thomas*, 78). In "Weapons of Class Destruction" (1-18) Veronica deals with bomb threats at Neptune High, in "The Rapes of Graff" (2-16) she is trying to prove the innocence of Troy Vandergraff who is accused of a series of rapes, in "Look Who's Stalking" (2-20) the 09ers throw their own Alterna-Prom when the ordinary one is cancelled which is only one of numerous accounts where class differences can be seen in the series, the series also shows such political questions as incorporation, an issue that is debated throughout season two but finally voted against at the end of the season. By integrating these contemporary issues into the plots the, series is making the viewers

aware of them. However while Veronica never lets a crime go unsolved, the cases she takes on are usually those ignored by the law enforcement:

> In his choice of crimes for the episodic mysteries, Thomas reinforces our perception of a lawless Neptune by focusing on crimes that *are* routinely ignored, not just in Neptune but everywhere. Specifically he uses the old classics of race, gender and class to remind us in each episode how much we distrust the criminal justice system. (Thomas, 120)

While the classical film noirs sometimes took up contemporary issues such as the stifling environment of suburbia in *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* and *Pitfall*, or the difficulty of readjusting to society for returning war veterans as seen in *The Blue Dahlia*, the most common way of the classical film noirs was to have plots of crime and murder which through sinister and cynical characters who rarely experienced a happy ending, reflected the mood and the world weariness of the period.

Since the 50s the teen population has been the main target audience for moviemakers due to their "requisite income, leisure, and gregariousness to sustain a theatrical business" (Doherty, p.2). Coincidently almost simultaneously with this there has been a change in how movies view suburbia.

Setting in the new sub-genre of film noir has become very important and almost all are set in suburbia. *Brick*, *Veronica Mars* and *Disturbia* are all set in Californian suburbs, adding the sunny climate as another contrasting factor to the dark sides of life they expose. This seems to be no coincidence. Suburbia plays such an important part in

today's teenage culture that featuring it as the main setting in the new movie genre of teen noir does not come as a surprise. However, it brings up a rather disturbing view of suburbia's youngest generation. Lead suburbanite characters are perhaps the ones most teenagers can identify with today as over half the American population are residents of suburbia. Despite the mortgage crisis and the uncertain future of America's middle class, there has been no indication yet that the percentage of the population who now call suburbia home is going to change. That this is where the majority of the teen population lives reflects that this is where a lot of teen angst has found its source in forced conformity.

Since the genre is so new and not many critics have written about it yet it is hard to say where teen noir is going and exactly what criteria it has. If the two directions represented by *Brick* and in *Veronica Mars* will continue, or if one will become more prominent than the other, is hard to say. It is also important to remember that the neo-noir period never really ended and that these movies are also continually made, reflecting the same feelings of alienation and anxiety in adult characters as in the teenagers. That a teen genre has picked up on these feelings reflects a change in the American society, whether or not that is a change in the teen generation itself. It may indicate that teenagers have become more socially aware, feeling the shifts in economy, global affairs and internal politics more acutely than before, and that the teen movies reflect this. Or perhaps there has been a change in how society views teenagers, and so in turn there is a change in how they are represented on screen?

Teen movies that differ from the norm of light themes and mainstream characters, are still being made and with movies such as *Into the Wild* (2007) and *Juno* (2007) we are

introduced to main characters who have different takes on their surroundings than most teen leads. In the former we meet the newly graduated Chris who decides to leave his entire life behind to find himself and adventure. In the latter the main character Juno McGuff finds herself pregnant but not beyond dealing with things in her own way. The language and the attitude of the young lead have already caught critics' attention for its originality. "It's refreshing to see a movie about teens that does not have to do with cars, bikes, dancing, or fights while simultaneously marketing a soundtrack and other affiliated products." a reviewer said about the 2008 Oscar winner for best screen play *Juno*, a statement which closely echoes Skye Sherwin's sentiment in her article about the new type of teen movies from 2006. While this is not the first teen movie to have a different perspective it is perhaps the first that has been a blockbuster hit, and therefore made so many critics notice.

While dead-pan humor and a quick stylized language has always been a noir trademark, and something we see picked up on in both *Brick* and *Veronica Mars*, humor seems to be a very important ingredient in teen movies, both noir and otherwise. The blend of laugh-out-loud humor and more deeply-rooted issues of a dystopian view is perhaps best taken up in *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004). Like in *Napoleon Dynamite* however humor still plays an important part and teen comedies that balance its contents with existential problems can be found in the recent movie *Charlie Bartlett* (2007) which one critic says: "falls somewhere between noir teen flicks like *Donnie Darko* and more feel-good films like *Ferris Bueller*." (Premier). The title character in the movie has just started public school, after having been kicked out of numerous private ones, and in an attempt to become popular, ends up as self-appointed bathroom psychiatrist, his office

being one of the stalls, where he dispenses advice. A dark comedy, about teenage angst this movie has perhaps one thing different about it than other teen noirs namely the optimism of Charlie himself and the world-weariness of the surrounding adults. Although not lacking in teen angst from the many students who seek Charlie's help. However this movie seems to point to that teen noirs are still in production. Another teen noir slated to come out in 2009 is *NC-17* by director J. H. Wyman about 17 year old criminal masterminds, a plot that seems to take us back to the teen noir of *Brick* and *Veronica Mars*.

Both the neo noir and the teen noir genre seem moreover freer than the films from the classical period, perhaps because their movies are not so numerous in number as the classical ones, and hence restrictions are more lax. Their incorporations of elements form other genres, such as the rural of the western, the teen elements, and their variable temporal setting encourage a hybridity that can include more movies. In retrospect, while teen noir has included in its genre such movies as *Heathers* and *River's Edge*, it will be interesting to see, now that the genre has come so far as to actually include P.I.'s and the like, whether the generic criteria will also become more specific. With *Brick* and *Veronica Mars* there are so many noir conventions used, including the P.I., it is difficult to know if the genre has now set a new standard for itself or if it will be able to go back and make more movies like the earlier ones. It will also be interesting to see which movies will be included and excluded in the continuation of teen noir both in its productions and its critical material.

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