

“THE HITCH-HIKER”: *FILM NOIR* IN THE MIDDLE OF DESERT DAYLIGHT

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With more than 400 films made in and around Lone Pine, California to choose from, you are bound to have a few favorites. For me, one of those is *The Hitch-Hiker* starring Frank Lovejoy, Edmund O'Brien, and William Talman and directed by possibly the most prolific female director in the 1950s Ida Lupino, whose career through the postwar period and beyond bordered on miraculous. I know *Hitch-Hiker* is considered a classic film noir, but that style as *film noir* I have always associated with dark nights, shadowy figures, mysterious alley ways, criminals, and the city in a kind of expressionistic, distortionary style for the viewing audience.

Then I realized I had greatly underestimated the diversity of *film noir*. I had also not worked out in my head a good definition of what made a film of the 1940's and 1950's *Film noir*. Today we take on the debate on film noir as genre vs. cinematic style, and what actually is a good, working definitions for this type of film category. It does not require a setting of the dark city right off the bat.

To help me with this exploration I will rely on author and film historian Imogen Sara Smith in her challenging book “In Lonely places: Film Noir Beyond the City.” Smith reveals her focus even in the subtitle of this book “Film Noir Beyond the City.” She quotes Nicholas Christopher from his critical description of film noir, in his book “Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City,” However one tries to define or explain noir, the common denominator must always be the city. The two are inseparable.”

Eddie Muller, because of his work and hosting on Turner Classic Movies has associated himself with everything cinematically noir, writes, “One way or another, noirs are all about people’s struggle to survive in what [Lewis Mumford] calls the megopolis.” Smith goes on to explain “that Muller suggests the city provides not only theme and setting but also structure: film noir, he writes often features ‘a storyline in which the structure resembles the city itself.... The blueprint for noir seems to have been drafted by a demented urban planner.’”

These critics and academics are not alone, but Professor Smith offers compelling information to both demonstrate *film noir* is a style more than a real genre, and that cities, darkness, and shadow actually belie the perception of film noir as “city bound.” She offers that westerns take place in the West, and war pictures take place in the war. Member films that gain the categorization of belonging to a genre, in this case “western” and “war” must fit into a location or a theme. She continues to argue that *film noir* is too diversified to be so easily categorized. She sees them categorized not by one but several characteristics including “mood, stance, and attitude.” That leaves them to be declared noir by content, style and theme. Smith suggests using a grading system based on four attributes to demonstrate if the film is noir.

She offers 1. Crimes present; 2. Narrative method; 3. Techniques of Expressionism, and 4. tone of film content. Crime includes the “seven Deadly sins,” human endeavor gone wrong, and some of the other sins such as: adultery, violence, betrayal and corruption.

Professor Smith offers even more detail on the power of the film and directorial style. Narrative method characteristics include convoluted, ambiguous, disorienting cinematic methods that leave

the audience uneasy, disturbed and confused. Narrative strategies include authoritative and omniscient narrators but sometimes the narrators, are confused, or intentionally avoiding the truth behind the event they are describing.

Frequently less than fully honest, speakers are sometimes unreliable narrators. Psychological elements can dominate the plot and the characters' history or motivation. The director can use the method of flashbacks in minds of troubled characters. Smith quotes from what is probably the first critical book on film noir written by Raymond Borde, and Etienne Chaumeton's in 1955 called "*Panorama du Film Noir*":

"The aim of film noir was to *create a specific alienation.*"

Expressionism, particularly German expressionism, including film, prose, and art also had a profound effect on defining film noir style. Some elements that Smith identifies include: "Dark, slicing shadows, *Chiaroscuro* lighting, distorting camera angles labyrinthine, off-kilter spaces, menace and mystery, and the power of black and white cinematography." For me, expressionism is a wonderful, sometimes scary, and seductive presence in most American film noir. This style also appeared in other non noir films, so effective and attractive did it prove to the American audience mid-century. This also bleeds into the final and perhaps most important content in the American crowd viewing of style.

The film content is one of enveloping pessimism, cynicism, disillusionment, and paranoia. This might seem surprising because the United States had basically won WW2, the economy was beginning to strengthen in peace time, and the way ahead should have seemed rosy. But materialism, changing roles within the family, that feeling of alienation, fatalism, and particularly moral ambiguity, social boredom, and ennui permeated the plot.

In our culture today, we have grown almost callous to the slaughter of families by a serial killer. So many movies have been made on the subject in the last ten years that such plots seem only appropriate for direct-to-video, low budget films. But it was not that way in 1951.

Billy Cook (William C.) kidnapped two hunters and held them captive for eight days in Baja. Before that, he had murdered five members of a family, including three children. He had killed a traveling salesman as well. All this earned him three hundred years in Alcatraz. Ida Lupino, the only female director of any significance working in the 50's, decided she wanted to make a film based on Cook's life. In a moment we will explore why this story drew her in.

But in the 1950's the Production Code forbade the depiction of notorious living criminals. Ida Lupino was not one to be easily dissuaded, and once having gotten both the kidnapped hunters' permission, and even Billy Cook's rights to do the film, she continued to work on the project. *The Hitch-Hiker*, made in Lone Pine's Alabamas, went on to become known as her best film as a director, and certainly one of Lone Pine's more interesting non-westerns. (Or is it a *noir western*?) But the road to that success was challenging for Ida Lupino who had already achieved fame in another Lone Pine film ten years earlier.

Ida Lupino was a very interesting film artist: first a platinum blonde bombshell actor at 16. Then a *film noir* director, the first female director mid-century. She was one of the few female directors in

the 1950's. She ended by being the most prolific American female director when you add in all her television work, which began in earnest soon after "The Hitch-Hiker."

Ida was born in London on February 4, 1918, a member of a family of entertainers for many generations. Her father Stanley was a very famous stage comedian, her mother Connie an actress as well. From a very early age, against her family's wishes, Ida worked very hard to become an actress. She was picked by visiting American film director Allan Dwan for a part her mother had attempted. After several minor roles, Ida came to the United States to play in *Alice in Wonderland*. She was simply too mature and sexy at 16 and the studio decided to create another Jean Harlow, platinum hair and all.

We continue our critical examination of the "why" of a film made almost entirely in the daytime desert. It was a product of Lupino's experience, film skill, and media savvy. With severely rural settings, including rocks, sand, and open sky it warrants "The Hitch-Hiker" to be labeled *film noir*.

We examine Lupino's life and career, and how the various characteristics of noir are observed in exact detail in this film.

Ida came from a show business family in England. She was a teenager when she broke in to show business.. She came to the States to play Alice, of "Alice in Wonderland" before the cameras. The producers realized she was too mature for the role, and they recreated her as a platinum blonde like Jean Harlow. Ida was never happy with the parts she was given, even though she experienced a lot of popularity with film fans.

When she was cast in *High Sierra*, it was her big break. At that point Humphrey Bogart was a lesser-known actor than she. It was while she was working in Lone Pine, and the mountains leading up to Mt. Whitney that she first became familiar with the local locations. She also had a serious case of measles but apparently that didn't diminish her esteem for Lone Pine locations that she would eventually use to such variety while making *The Hitch-Hiker*. It is one of the advantages of filming here that depending on the time of day, time of year, the camera angle, the lighting, and staging that the same location could be used in so many ways, without the audience any wiser.

When she refused a role she was assigned she was put on suspension. She used that time to visit directors she knew or even had worked with. Most liked her and they would take time to teach her as they worked. Therese Grisham and Julie Grossman in their wonderful and helpful book "Ida Lupino, Director: Her Art and Resilience in Times of Transition" as saying, "Our editor on this picture ("Not Wanted") quoted Lupino

"Our editor on this picture ('Not Wanted') happened to be Alfred Hitchcock's' editor for 'Rope,' William Ziegler, I would run to the phone every five minutes and say, 'Bill, listen, I want to dolly in and I think I'm reversing myself.' On the first picture he helped me out. He would come down to the set.'

Why was Ida drawn to dark film, and challenging women's storylines? Grisham and Grossman spend quite a bit of time on this puzzle. First, she was dissatisfied with her acting career. She founded "The Filmmakers," a film company, with her husband, although they were divorced by the time *Hitch-Hiker* went before the camera, they were divorced but remained close friends.

They wrote their “Declaration of Independents:” for their production company.

We are deep in admiration for our fellow independent producers--men like Stanley Kramer, Robert Rossen, and Louis de Richemont. They are bringing a new power and excitement to the screen. We like independence....The struggle to do something different is healthy in itself. We think it is healthy for our industry as well. That is why we independent producers must continue to explore new themes, try new ideas, discover new creative talents in all departments.

Ida was one woman in a field dominated by men. She was, as an artist, one creative person who wanted to make topics Hollywood wouldn't touch. As we said she worked with top-notch directors, who dared to make films with controversial material. Ida was not afraid to refuse parts which ended up leaving her without work. She couldn't work anywhere else. She told directors on set that she wanted to learn technical aspects. But Ida herself stressed that these styles of famous male directors did not influence her styles as demonstrated in films she directed.

In 1949 another big break was brought to her by fate. Elmer Clifton was just about to start directing “Unwanted” when he suffered a heart attack. Lupino took over and completed the film, but she never earned a credit. Still she was ready to become a full time female director.

The Filmmaker films directed by Lupino had a focus in environment. They went out and filmed on the actual locations whenever possible. This gave the films a sense of reality and documentary. Grisham and Grossman comment on the films they made in 1953 by emphasizing the changes in society. First the films leading up to “The Hitch-hiker” were no longer dominated by women. “All the films Lupino directed up to this point focus on women struggling with social expectations and psychological pain caused by the rift between their desires and their treatment by society or the limits they confront as they try to find fulfillment and happiness.” They continue, “The films are set in depressing postwar milieux—usually a generically named town or anonymous urban landscape that represents the narrow prospects offered these women.” In the two films of 1953, “The Hitch-hiker” being one, have a sense of being trapped although now men figure in this problem. In “The Hitch-hiker” there are no significant female characters present. The focus now are three men: kidnapper, serial killer Emmet Myers and his two latest victims.

The critics note that this film is almost entirely set in the compact desert area of the Alabama Hills, standing in primarily for Mexico. By the way, Lupino treats the Mexican actors not stereotypically as was common. They seem to be real people, and when they speak in Spanish, no subtitles are offered, emphasizing a sense of authenticity. Grisham and Grossman comment, “All the films Lupino directed for The Filmmakers grew out of her and Collier Young's desire to make independent films about ordinary people traumatized in the postwar social environments, ‘films that had social significance and yet were entertaining.’”

Her interest had been captured by the story of the serial kidnapper William “Billy” Cook, whose vicious, senseless murders dominated the news when Lupino had gone to Palm Springs to receive an award. She met with Forrest Damron, one of the characters kidnapped. But he was a hunter and in the film he and Jim Burke, the other actual victim were hunters. Many changes lay ahead dictated by the censors so Lupino could make the film. She had confronted the Production Code

already in the making of “Not Wanted,” and now the code dictated no films made about real killers.

Lupino couldn't approach the censors like a male director would have. Instead she had to “butter them up.” She had at first been more interested in script writing, rather than directing, but now she was totally engaged in this project from all sides. Lupino was successful in her strategy and got Breen from the PCA on her side by the end of the negotiations. But she had to get permission from the real Hitch-Hike killer to use his story. Lupino tells her story of meeting this demented psychopath. “I wanted to see Billy and tell him I was making a film about him...I entered San Quentin under strict security. I was allowed to see Billy Cook briefly for safety issues. I found San Quentin to be cold, dark and a very scary place inside.

“I needed a release from Billy Cook to do our film about him.” Her company paid his attorney \$3000 for exclusive rights. “I found Billy to be cold and aloof. I was afraid of him. Billy Cook had ‘Hard Luck’ tattooed on the fingers of his left hand and a deformed right eyelid that would never close completely. I could not wait to get the hell out of San Quentin.”

Billy Cook was executed on December 12, 1952, before the film was finished and released. The movie premiered in Boston on March 20, 1953 after the real murderer had been executed.

William Talman, even after the reduction of the number killed by the real Hitch Hike killer, and other changes in the story was able to fully capture Cook in his portrayal of the character and mannerisms of the real killer in Emmett Myers. Cook had a terribly sad youth. All his siblings were put up for adoption and were given new homes out of the abusive family they had been born into. Not Billy Cook. He had an angry personality, was ugly and his eye deformity made him seem like a monster, which he turned out to be. So he was placed in an orphanage, seemingly unloved by anyone.

The script was challenged angrily at first by the censors. Lupino had already dealt with them over a previous film so she knew how to get around them. Geoffrey Shurlock of the PCA wrote to her, “that any such attempt to glorify this wholesale murderer could not receive Code approval.” Ida and Collier defended their script, using the example of their previous films and their reputation as proof. Cook would be a “symbol of evil—an enemy of society. We at no time apologize for Cook's conduct, nor do we attempt at any point to glorify his criminal activity. The obvious reasons for portraying living people on the screen is that we specialize in the documentary film and have found when dealing in facts we can produce pictures of greater import and impact.”

Lupino was determined to make the picture as accurate as possible to the terrible facts of the story but also get it distributed. The PDA officials recognized this artist's determination and the picture upon release that the compromises forced on Lupino in no way diluted the story. The facts and the impact of the Hitch hike killer's persona, grievous acts, and the fears of a postwar nation.

Gwendolyn Audrey Foster in “Disruptive Feminisms : Race, Gendered, and Classed Bodies in Film” writes of Cook and Emmett Myers

Myers is anyone who is made pathological by forced consensus and conservatism of the 1950s. He has developed a brutal, survivalist personality to cover up his own frail nature

and insecurities, but the film is concerned with the broader picture of postwar America, a country that celebrated atomic weaponry, a country that tried to send women back to the kitchen, a country obsessed with the pleasure of excess consumption, and a country that felt it owned the world and that the world was for the taking. There is no way to miss the fact that Lupino adeptly dismantles the heterosexual white American dream....

I cannot ignore the issue of whether Lupino was a proto-feminist auteur or a feminist auteur. Much has been written although the debate has seemingly subsided about whether a person, usually the director, is the “author” of a film. Lupino was definitely an artist of film, with unique visions and strategies. Since her death, Lupino and her films and her and their stature have been intermittently promoted then minimized, a veritable academic roller coaster. I will leave it that she made “Lupino noir” with critics settling on her modernist noir sensibility rather than settled on a final prescription of her style being feminist auteur. It is certain that Ida publicly never saw herself as a feminist and the fact of how she got her male crew to do what she wanted supports that. The fact that she called herself mother, and her director’s chair declared ‘Mother to all’ also suggests she did not focus on being a feminist.

I will spend the rest of this essay on the film itself. It was filmed almost entirely in the Alabama Hills and in Big Pine. Locations were used creatively, and they appear different because the angles, lighting, and exposure she corrected made them appear quite different. This is one of the tributes many location scouts, Director, and art directors have commented on the diversity of the locations.

The story focuses on the three characters: The Hitch-hiker serial killer, and his two victims. The film begins with a few victims, suggested by the director of photographer rather than rubbing the audience’s nose in blood and gore. This of course only makes these scenes that much more effective and stimulating to the viewer’s imagination and fear. Emmett Myers is the serial psychopathic killer, played effectively by William Talman who most remember from the Perry Mason TV show. Talman tells the story that he was cruising down a main road in Hollywood when he stopped at a red light. The man next to him asked, “Aren’t you that Hitch-Hiker guy?” the actor was pleased he was recognized for that role, when the guy jumped out of his car, ran over and punched Myers (Talman) in the nose. The attacker jumped in his car and sped off. Talman said he guessed that was better for an actor than any Oscar he NEVER got.

The two fishermen were played by Edmund O’Brien (Roy Collins) and Frank Lovejoy (Gil Bowen). We learn much about them as the film unspools. After all they are trapped in a car with a psychopath, gun in hand in the back seat. Myers does not hesitate to threaten them. It seems likely at some point he will take advantage the gun gives him; he mocks the two men that they are nothing without guns. While Lovejoy is the more serious, stable character, O’Brien is slowly unravelling during the ordeal. Ironically, he is becoming more and more like Myers. It is difficult to understand Lovejoy and O’Brien as friends as they are not only different emotionally, they also come from two different economic classes. They have not spoken of such but Myers mocks them about this difference. So much so is O’Brien becoming like Talman, near the end of the film they switch clothes under the bridge. Theoretically Myers hopes the Mexican police will mistake who’s who but the director is indicating what we have already noticed that Roy Collins is becoming more and more like Emmett Myers.

Both fishermen are at least trying to get away from homes and wives for a little down time. Roy has no kids and seems more desperate to get away from his responsibilities than Gil. This serves Lupino's purposes about social pressures and family conflicts after World War 2 in our country. In the end Myers is more interested in playing games with these two fellows than just shooting them. He begins to get to know them, feels superior to them, and curious about their lives, at least for a psychopath with a lot of sociopathic characteristics.

With the wide-open spaces in the Alabama's and the rocks pushing people together fostering violence. and perhaps, half the film taking place in the tight confines of the car, the physical contrast emphasizes the psychological and social situation around them. These three are literally and figuratively trapped. Trapped is another of the attributes critics, psychologists, and sociologists have identified in the postwar culture and society of America.

Finally, we will look at some of the locations which are featured in "The Hitch-Hiker." Chances are you have seen the film recently where it was shot and if you're lucky will visit some of these locations. It is difficult to give you directions to find them, but I will suggest some way, with location pictures in hand, you might be able.

I will talk about some of them not chronologically in the film, but in geographic locations instead. Many of the places are real, but in the case of buildings, of which there are only a few, they are now vanished.

The gasoline station was at the south end of Lone Pine, the town which you can see in the distance. Where they are forced to stop to fix the radio on the hill off Tuttle Creek Road. There are two dirt roads going south up the road. The first one to the east is the one they used. They stopped about halfway up, where you can still a parallel turnout off the road which is where the car was. This can all be identified because of the north side of Tuttle Creek Road there is an old corral. This scene allows them to hear some fake police bulletins. Coming down the hill is a Mexican peasant and a burro driving home that they are now in Mexico.

The "whoop ti do" rolling Road is no longer used. It parallels Horseshoe Meadow Road. It is the only place in the Alabama's that such a rolling road is found. My children always called by that name. I'm not positive how to spell it. Roads are significant in 1950s USA and in this story. Often, they are dusty stressing the desert landscape. Often, they are scene at night, the headlights appearing like animal eyes. There is a lurking feeling like a predator searching out its prey.

What we call Cattle Pocket is used several times, showing their car, or a potential victim's car. The pocket of rocks illustrates, demonstrates, or emphasizes their dead-end element of their lives. They are trapped in society and trapped by this minster. These are sometimes called "box" or "boxed" canyons because there is only one way in and out. The "corridors," narrow entrances are to the north right next to the Cattle Pocket. The men lean on their elbows and watch a car that we assume ion which Myers may kill the driver and steal. That might mean he may have to kills Roy and Gil. Neither happens.

One of my favorite locations is the mine which almost looks like a well. To find the locations, it is very close to the location of the house and barn in "Yellow Sky." There is a pile of mine tailings

still there and an indentation in the ground where the prop mine was located with a small wooden superstructure now gone) of wood. Its best if you use a reference photo to see how it worked. The car has driven up to it in the film, so there must be a short dirt road there as well.

The “can” shooting scene is one of the purposefully tensest thanks to Emmett Myers. The location is in the northern part of the rocks, and because of a ditch, it must be walked to. It is perhaps 500 feet away. What surprised me the most, tight behind where Roy is forced to stand there is a big drop off. So not only is he a target and facing a nervous Gil, he is straddling rocks, so he does not slide into what looks like a large arroyo, but now filled with brush and trees. Again, a reference photo helps, or better “grabs” from the movie leading up to the scene. I want to give credit to Don Kelsen one of our primo location spotters for helping us find it.

Finally the “piece de resistance” is the bridge that the characters hide under, and where Roy changes clothes and identity with Emmett. When I first moved to Lone Pine 48 years ago, I remember the bridge for it was obvious. Folks called it “the Beveridge” bridge” because the road passing over the Owens River leading on to a hard climb/ hike to the Beveridge town and mine. It’s claim to fame was there was a Model A car on the main street. How someone got it there Remains a mystery. I must admit I never challenged this rough trail to see the place. Greg Parker, another location locator extraordinaire went out with me while I was writing this essay to check final details. He brought several photographs, all showing parts or the whole structure from perhaps six or seven different movies. Although it had change some and deteriorated over the years, it left me with no doubt this was the original bridge you see near the end of “The Hitch-hiker.” What amazed me was it is seen in the first film made here, *The Round Up*” in 1920. What was more amazing there was a house located to the west and north of the bridge. Greg even showed me the gate that led to the house, although it was gone.

The bridge shows up with John Wayne riding across it in “Man from Utah” and Randolph Scott walking across it in “The Nevadan.” There are many more if you care to look for them. Greg tells me he has a picture of another film at the bridge and in the background are various road equipment and earthmovers, and they are not props. It is “Last of the Duanes” 1941. He is sure this is when the new road and new bridge were put in place. From several pictures, it was time to replace the aging Beveridge Bridge. The date was about 1940. Research continues of the film history of the bridge. Greg think there is one more appearance for the old wooden bridge.

There are many reasons that I urge you seek out “The Hitch-hiker” for viewing. It is well-made, it is classic film noir, you probably haven’t seen it, it was made by the only important female director working in the 1950s. If nothing else it is a modern, suspense-filled, and entertaining film based on a story “ripped from the headline.”

Warning: because for a while it was public domain, there are many partial and poor-quality versions. Be sure to get the Kino Lorber blue-ray version, a fabulous transfer. You won’t regret it.

