



DEEP BLACK AND WHITE **3-D NOIR**

3-D Film Noir of the 1950s Ray Zone

The screening of pristine black-and-white prints at the World 3-D Film Expo in September 2003 and 2006 in Hollywood provided an opportunity to re-evaluate three *films noir* of the 1950s and to consider their effectiveness as stereoscopic narratives within the genre. The shimmering black-and-white prints were given optimum presentation; it's possible these 3-D films didn't look this good even on their first runs, way back when.

The short history of 3-D noir is one that has been buried in the wreckage of a short-lived technology that came and went with shocking speed in the early 1950s. As a result, there are only a handful of these films, but they are more than mere curiosities.

Man in the Dark

Edmond O'Brien was a recurring Everyman in film noir. In the 1950 (2-D) release *D.O.A.*, directed by Rudolph Maté, O'Brien portrayed Frank Bigelow, a small-town certified accountant who, on a vacation to San Francisco, is accidentally poisoned and finds that he has less than 48 hours to live. O'Brien acted up a storm in *D.O.A.* and parlayed the sweatier aspects of his performance into a series of agitated heroes—some of whom weren't particularly heroic.

After the first 3-D motion picture — Arch Oboler's *Bwana Devil* (1952) — was a surprising runaway hit, Columbia Pictures hurriedly put together its first 3-D film, *Man in the Dark*, which opened April 8, 1953, the second 3-D feature film ever released (one day before *House of Wax*). O'Brien was the perfect choice to portray Steve Rawley, a gangster who undergoes brain surgery to eliminate his criminal tendencies.

As the film begins, Rawley is an amnesiac in a hospital unable to remember his former life. The effect of the stereoscopic imaging in the early scenes provides an immediacy to the narrative which makes the audience readily identify with the baffled Rawley. This spatial and temporal impact pulls the viewer in, as Rawley's former gangster associates kidnap him in an effort to find the \$130,000 he has hidden before his operation.

When Rawley meets up with former girlfriend Peg Benedict (Audrey Totter), his memory starts to return. He escapes and, with Benedict's assistance, finds the hidden money. Periodically, an insurance investigator shows up, on the trail of the sequestered cash. Stereoscopic images of Rawley experiencing a dream on an amusement pier, in which his memory fully returns, are highly effective.

Flat rear-screen projection is combined with stereoscopic foreground imagery for a climax on a roller coaster in which Rawley exchanges gunfire with the gangsters. *Man in the Dark* was shot in just 11 days using a twin camera rig assembled by Columbia engineer Gerald Rackett and camera department head Emil Oster. The 3-D unit used two Mitchell cameras shooting straight-on without prisms or mirrors and produced pairs of stereo negatives that did not require subsequent reversal or optical treatment. The two Mitchell cameras were mounted side-by-side with one inverted to bring the lenses closer together. The film magazines for both cameras were mounted on top.

"In designing this camera, the need for good 3-D close-ups was considered of paramount importance," stated Rackett in a May 1953 article in *American Cinematographer* magazine. "As a result,



Edmond O'Brien is reacquainted with his criminal cronies, including the redoubtable Ted De Corsia (right) in *Man In the Dark*

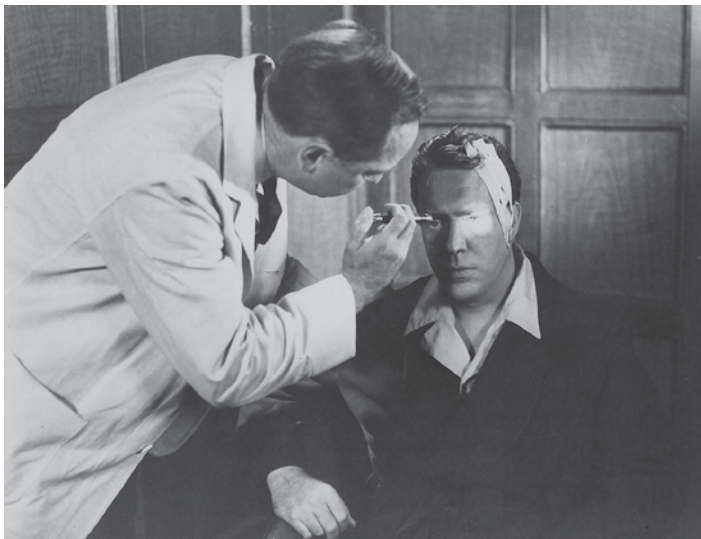
we are able to make individual head close-ups—chin to forehead—with ease and without any distortion."

Director Lew Landers, working with cameraman Floyd Crosby, shot exteriors for *Man in the Dark* on the Columbia lot using gangplanks and stairways to good 3-D effect. In thematically working through the protagonist's mood of paranoia and fatalism to his regaining of self-control, *Man in the Dark* is the narrative inverse of *D.O.A.* In the end, Rawley is redeemed, not doomed, and the stereoscopic imagery underscores this narrative progression.

Universal's 3-D Director

Jack Arnold was the 3-D director of choice at Universal-International and when Kathleen Hughes was cast in a very brief part in his *It Came from Outer Space*, released May 26, 1953, her few minutes of onscreen time were so torrid that she was subsequently cast as Paula Ranier in the 3-D noir mystery *The Glass Web*, released October 6, 1953, in a 2:1 cropped format the studio called "Wide-Vision."

"Paula was bad, beautiful and bold as sin," intoned the studio publicity, "and born to be murdered." Paula is a starlet involved with three different men who work on a true crime reality TV show. Scenes taking place on the TV sound stage provide a nice picture



Amnesiac patient Edmond O'Brien is examined by a doctor after brain surgery in *Man in the Dark* (1953)

of television production circa 1953. Good use of the stereoscopic effects was made in these scenes with a few well-placed microphones and camera movement through the sound stage. It's paradoxical to see a 3-D movie about television which, by 1953, was cutting deeply into the motion picture audience; TV was one of the threats that compelled the studios to make 3-D films in the first place.

When Paula turns up dead, her amorous involvement with the three men, Don Newell (John Forsythe), Dave Markson (Richard Denning) and Henry Hayes (Edward G. Robinson) becomes evident. Newell, after a brief fling with Paula, attempts to hide his involvement with her from his wife Louise (Marcia Henderson). In a clever self-reflexive twist, the show does a segment on Paula's unsolved murder. The real culprit, due to his obsession for detail on the TV program, slips up and reveals himself.

More a straightforward murder mystery than a noir, *The Glass Web's* use of 3-D does not call attention to itself except for one long segment in which Newell walks the city streets, narrowly missing being hit by a truck and struck by falling and sliding objects that fly dramatically in from off-screen. It's as if Jack Arnold attempted to dispense with all the 3-D gimmicks in a single extended passage, in order to concentrate on the mystery drama's closing act.

The Universal-International 3-D camera rig, similar to the Columbia setup, used two Mitchell cameras mounted side-by-side with one camera inverted to provide appropriate interocular distance. A Selsyn motor drove linked focus controls with no mirrors or prisms. Two different rigs were used on the set, one for medium and long shots, the other for close-ups.

Clifford Stine, who had filmed *It Came from Outer Space*, along with David Horsley,

Fred Campbell, and Eugene Polito assisted director of photography Maury Gertsman in producing fine stereoscopic cinematography.

Three Dimensions, Boiled Hard

I, the Jury, released by United Artists July 24, 1953, fits neatly into the film noir canon. It was based on the hard-boiled novel by Mickey Spillane which, in its Signet paperback edition (with a sexy cover), sold something like 20 million copies. Spillane's hard-hitting private investigator Mike Hammer, portrayed in the film by Biff Elliott, is a loose cannon in a trench coat, a broadly sketched throwback to the protagonists of the original hard-boiled *Black Mask* magazine, which included Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, and Cornell Woolrich, all of whose works formed the basis for original *films noir*.

What really makes *I, the Jury* a significant noir work is the 3-D cinematography of John Alton, the undisputed master of light and shadow who, with films such as *T-Men* (1948) and *The Big Combo* (1955) forever defined the chiaroscuro look of film noir. In his pioneering 1949 book *Painting with Light*, a practical but poetic textbook on motion picture lighting, Alton wrote about creating photographic depth using light.

"The illusion of three dimensions—photographic depth—is created by a geometric design of placing people and props, breaking up the set into several planes, and the proper distribution of lights and shadows," wrote Alton. In a chapter titled "Visual Music,"



Kathleen Hughes and Richard Denning play torrid lovers in *The Glass Web* (1953) directed by Jack Arnold

Alton addresses the third dimension. “In real life, the pleasure of visual music is enhanced by the third dimension. Fortunes have been and still are being spent to put third dimension in professional motion picture photography, but to my knowledge, the closest we have come to it is an illusion of depth accomplished by the proper distribution of densities.”

Four years later, with *I, the Jury*, Alton had an opportunity to render space both stereoscopically and with light and shadow. From the opening scenes, in which we see a killing take place in the shadows from the point of view of the murderer, to the finale, in which we witness Hammer’s vengeful slaying of one of the most complex femmes fatale in all of noir, Alton makes the most of the 3-D process. Pitch-black on the screen is synonymous with latent malign forces: a two-fisted assailant may suddenly leap out of inky darkness. Throughout the film, Hammer moves through a stereoscopic visual space that is dynamically joined to light and shadow, a mirror of moral progression or decay.

I, the Jury was filmed with a side-by-side dual-camera unit built by Producer’s Service of Burbank, which used variable interaxial from 1.9 inches to a maximum of 4.5 inches. Built by Jack Kiel and Gordon Pollock, 3-D consultant on *I, the Jury*, the twin camera unit allowed for convergence settings and featured interlocked f-stops and focus so that focus shots during filming were very precise.



Pitch black on the screen with *I, the Jury* -- latent with malign forces

3-D fans could take special delight in the scene where Hammer is made to look through a hand-held stereo viewer by a winsome blonde. The audience then views the pastoral scene in stereo at the same time as the private investigator.

In another scene, Hammer walks past a newsstand where copies of Spillane’s Signet paperback, *Kiss Me Deadly*, are prominently displayed. Director Robert Aldrich subsequently adapted this book into one of the greatest of all black-and-white films noir, with Ralph Meeker as the tough detective. Mickey Spillane himself was never happy with the casting of his hero, so he essayed the role himself in 1963’s *The Girl Hunters*.

As John Alton demonstrated, film noir can be eminently suitable for stereoscopic storytelling. Shadow recedes. Light projects. And there is a gray-scale universe of moral ambiguity in between. ■



Mike Hammer, as portrayed by Biff Elliott, cautions Charlotte Manning (Peggy Castle) in *I, the Jury* (1953)

Ray Zone is a film producer, an award-winning 3-D artist and the author of *3-D Filmmakers: Conversations with Creators of Stereoscopic Motion Pictures* (Scarecrow Press: 2005) and *Stereoscopic Cinema and the Origins of 3-D Film: 1838 – 1952* (University Press of Kentucky: 2007). Zone previously wrote for NOIR CITY about another 3-D noir, *Inferno*. His website is www.ray3dzone.com