According to noted 19th Century author Henry James (1843-1916), novels are “large, loose baggy monsters.” The monstrous size and looseness of the genre demands serious adaptation to the time-bound scope of cinema, often by fusing several characters into one, eliminating major sections of plot, and crystallizing what elements remain, favoring dramatic moments over those more mundane. John Huston’s directorial debut is the exception to the adaptation rule in that it transfers nearly all of Hammett’s novel to screen with very little editing or rewriting. Except for the character of Gutman’s daughter and Spade’s existentialist monologue regarding the Flitcraft episode, Huston basically follows Hammett’s plot to a T, relying on the novelist to provide most of the dialogue. The only other glaring departure from the novel is the Shakespearean paraphrase Humphrey Bogart allegedly suggested to Huston for inclusion at the end of the film, in answer to Tom Polhaus’s question about the nature of the falcon. Spade,
misquoting Prospero from *The Tempest*, says it is: "The stuff that dreams are made of."

Many film historians point to Huston’s *Maltese Falcon* (the novel had been filmed twice before) as the first example of *film noir*. French film critics writing in *Les cahiers du cinéma* codified the genre-linked features of this particularly American creation, including the femme fatale, the existential perspective on the individual and fate, the hard-boiled tradition, and the stylistic use of light and shadow, dubbing the genre “black film” or *film noir*.

**Pirates!**

The film proper begins after the director’s credit, retaining the image of the shiny black falcon statuette as backdrop, over which scrolls down the superimposed legend of the Maltese Falcon set to Adolph Deutsch’s eerie non-diegetic theme that recurs during significant “falcon” moments throughout the film. In this case, the scrolling or “crawling” legend acts as a kind of moving “title card.” Before the development of audio technology, cinema aspired to the status of a universal language and it was often considered an admission of failure should a director resort to the expediency of the **title card**—a card with text printed on it, shot in close up and inserted into footage to either reveal dialogue or comment on the action. Silent films were never silent, they often had live music playing behind the images, from a single piano or organ to an entire orchestra, and there were early foley artists, people mimicking sound effects, and both practices of course continue into the Sound era. The legend reads: “In 1539, the Knight Templars of Malta, paid tribute to Charles V of Spain, by sending him a Golden Falcon encrusted from beak to claw with rarest jewels ~~~~~ but pirates seized the galley carrying this priceless token and the fate of the Maltese Falcon remains a mystery to this
day ~~~” Notice that while the 16\textsuperscript{th} Century “pirates” steal the falcon, the rapacious invading Knights of Templar were pirates themselves, and that 20\textsuperscript{th} Century pirates (Gutman, Cairo, O’Shaughnessy) continue to seek out the priceless, perhaps cursed, token.

You’ve got brains! Yes you have!

The movie begins with several lap-dissolved establishing shots of contemporary San Francisco with a final introductory dissolve to an interior shot of the inscribed commercial window of the “Spade and Archer” private investigation firm, ending with a tilt down from the window to Spade rolling his own cigarette. The attention paid to these office windows throughout this scene and its stylized conclusion invites analysis. As demonstrated in the \textit{Taxi Driver} chapter’s discussion of the contiguous connection made by means of the pan in the taxicab from the passenger-watching silhouette to Travis Bickle, so a contiguous connection is established via the downward tilt between this window and Spade.
Huston treats the audience to another stylized tilt down at the end of this opening scene. What follows Wonderly’s (O’Shaughnessy’s) departure from the office is a virtuoso-like combination of camera movement and spatial relationships. Once Archer enters the scene there is a kind of ballet of such actor placement. With the woman seated and the two men standing, in a dry and therefore mocking manner Spade relates Wonderly’s story to Archer. Archer looks her up and down, licking his lips and “grinning from ear to ear” (as Spade eulogizes later), and shoots Spade an equally condescending look over her head. This arrangement captures the gendered power differential with the men sharing a secret bond as they gaze from above upon the female spectacle. This spectacle is not unaware of itself however. The femme fatale actually orchestrates the entire scene. She is adorned not only with the mysterious shadow across her face, but with an animal fur draped over her left shoulder. Wonderly offers herself as spectacle and bait.
As suggested in the *Blue Velvet* discussion of the fetishized robe, drawing from the pathology of *Venus in Furs*, the garment made of animal hair signals the open sexuality of its wearer—a sexuality not lost on Miles Archer. Archer soon makes his way around Spade’s desk to join ranks with him, even appearing in a two shot with Spade, as the newcomer leans in to volunteer his services and “charm.”
Fig. 4 Archer joins ranks with Spade, appearing in a two shot with him as he leans in grinning ear to ear.

The supremely stylized and choreographed conclusion to this opening scene commences once Wonderly exits with a low angle shot of Archer inspecting the new client’s money, saying with hard-boiled swagger: “They’re right enough. They have brothers in her bag.” In what will become a single long take the camera dollies back to reveal more of the office as Spade crosses over to the right toward his centrally placed desk and larger windows, asking his partner: “Whatta ya think of her?” as Archer returns to his desk at
the extreme left. Archer responds: “Aw, she’s sweet! Ha-ha-ha, maybe you saw her first, Sam, but I spoke first.” At this point each actor is at the extreme ends of the office and the wide two shot emphasizes the great distance between the two men. We soon learn that Spade has been having an affair with Archer’s wife. As the two rivals for Miss Wonderly sit facing each other, the commercial windows dominate the scene. As Spade sarcastically responds to Archer saying, “You’ve got brains! Yes you have,” the camera of Arthur Edeson (director of photography) performs its spectacular tilt down to the floor to discover and hold in frame the shadow cast by another of the “Spade and Archer” commercial windows. This image remains for a moment and then there is a lap dissolve to “Bush St” where Archer meets his femme fatale fate. Spade’s sarcasm is directed at Archer’s impetuous play for Wonderly. The hard-boiled code dictates that the male must be wary of females and what Spade later calls O’Shaughnessy’s “schoolgirl act,” but Archer errs the way Emile Hupka will in Notorious, and is not long for this film noir world. The street sign suggests not only his impending “ambush,” or that he is about to be “bushwhacked,” but continues the fetishized and eroticized fur theme carried by his assassin, Miss Wonderly. Just as pointed out in the analysis of Blue Velvet, the tilt up on the street sign “Lincoln St” appears almost as homage to Maltese Falcon’s Bush St.
Fig. 6 Camera dollies back, a single long take, a spectacular tilt down shadow of sign, lap dissolve to “Bush St”

The authorial tilt down that concludes the scene graphically matches the movement from the window to Spade that opened it, emphasizing the importance of the window and what it signifies.
Another way Hammett and Huston conspire to strengthen and harden Sam Spade’s persona is through the “foils” with which they surround the detective. A foil is a minor character who contrasts or reflects the main character. This literary term derives from the Old French word “fueille” referencing the jeweler’s practice of setting a gem with metallic foil to enhance its shine and thereby, its worth, and may also reference the foil in fencing, as in the lighter of two swords. At the end of Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet,*
as the two rivals square off with words and swords, Hamlet says: “Ile be your foile
Laertes, in mine ignorance, Your Skill shall like a Starre i’th' darkest night, Sticke fiery
off indeede.” The demonstrably weak foil, Wilmer Cook (Elisha Cook, Jr.), betrays his
“femininity” by welling up teary-eyed as a result of Spade’s “riding” him and
successfully suggesting Gutman “sell him out.” Soon an open-mouth Wilmer will let
those emotions get the better of him as he ineffectively threatens Spade with his gun only
to be disarmed and knocked out.

![Image](image.png)

Fig. 7  I’ve taken all the riding from you I’m gonna take!

The two main males Spade encounters speak with “foreign,” that is to say, non-American
accents: Joel Cairo (Peter Lorre) with a vaguely German dialect and Kasper Gutman
(Sydney Greenstreet) with a decidedly British delivery. As America contemplates
entering the war in Europe at the time the film takes place, those who speak with these
accents are not to be trusted. When Spade (and the audience) first meets the kingpin of
the crooks, Gutman, Huston shoots him with a slightly low angle camera allowing
Greenstreet to take up nearly the entire frame, and in a stylized way the shot conveys the power Gutman holds.

![Greenstreet](image)

**Fig. 8** A stylized low angle conveys the power Gutman holds

**The Mickey Finn Shot**

In Spade’s next scene with Gutman there is a moment that students often mistake for stylized. Gutman “slips” Spade “a Mickey,” or a Mickey Finn which is the hard boiled term for a spiked drink with “knock-out” drops—any drink laced with chloral hydrate or other sedative that renders the drinker unconscious. We witness Spade getting drowsy as he raises his eyebrows and slurs his speech. He attempts to compose himself as he glances at Gutman and then Huston inserts Spade’s pov shot, which is severely out of focus. There is no question that this unfocused shot conveys Spade’s drug-induced wooziness just prior to his swooning unconsciousness, but it is functional rather than stylized. Students similarly wish to claim that moments in *The Big Lebowski* (Joel & Ethan Coen 1998) and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Gilliam 1998) are stylized because they depict drug-induced states. In the final analysis, however, such shots merely convey, in a functional way, the addled experience of Jeff Lebowski and Hunter
Thompson respectively and carry no metaphoric meaning beyond a drugged state of consciousness.
I demonstrate in the “What’s in a Name” section of the *Death of a Salesman* discussion just how significant names of characters can be, and the names in Hammett’s text and Huston’s film are no exception.

**Samuel Spade, Confidential Investigator**

The fact that the untrustworthy femme fatale begins with two aliases—we wonder about Miss Wonderly and draw a blank on Miss LeBlanc—should alert us to the other significant names in the work, whether its gluttonous, big gutted Gutman, the vaguely exotic Joel Cairo, the blue collar detective Spade who pulls up his sleeves and digs as if with a shovel through O’Shaughnessy’s belongings searching for clues, or the charmed Archer ready to strike the femme fatale’s too easy target with his phallic arrow.

“He was just dumb enough for that. He’d have looked you up and down, and licked his lips and gone, grinning from ear to ear.” Archer’s name and character stand for that eroticized element whose charm Spade just barely evades. As he announces to O’Shaughnessy that he refuses to “play the sap,” and that she is “taking the fall” for Archer’s murder, he allows her to kiss him several times, and in a speech even allows that “Maybe I love you” before dismissing it. That arrow makes a comeback appearance at the end of the film as O’Shaughnessy is “sent over” by Spade to Tehachapi prison. Caught and indicted by her own duplicity and failure to sexually ensnare Spade the way she had Thursby and Archer and who knows how many others, the final image of her being placed in the elevator is so richly stylized it adorns the cover of this book. As the protective elevator gate is pulled across her in mid shot replicating the bars of her future
jail cell, a curious shadow is created from that gate forming a downward arrow over her right eye. O’Shaughnessy’s sexual shenanigans and femme fatale duplicity are now inscribed on her face with Spade successfully inverting the excited arrow of Archer and Thursby so it points down to the Tehachapi hell to which she is headed as is the elevator. Spade descends as well, holding the worthless falcon perhaps to keep as a souvenir of this celebrated case (after serving as evidence at the trial), and he notably descends under his own speed, choosing his own route down the stairs. Spade’s success as a detective is enhanced by his ability to mingle easily, both with the crooks who surround the falcon (courted independently and as a group by O’Shaughnessy, Gutman, and Cairo) and law enforcement (who allow his access to the crime scene). In his conversation with his attorney, Spade seeks legal advice regarding his middleman status: “Hello Sid? I think I’m going to hafta tell a coroner to go to blazes, Sid. Say, can I hide behind the sanctity of my client’s identity? Secrets and whatnot? All the same priest or lawyer?” Holding key trial evidence in his hands as he descends the stairs in the film’s final tableau, Spade demonstrates his ability to successfully walk on both sides of the law, correctly choosing the honest route this time.
While it is true he returned Gutman’s $1,000 bill as evidence, and only earned a few hundred dollars and expenses from O’Shaughnessy, tomorrow’s headlines in *The San Francisco Post-Dispatch* and other newspapers will afford him the kind of under the radar publicity money could never buy. Positive word of mouth at the Belvedere hotel directed O’Shaughnessy to Spade at the beginning of the film, but the “next day” should bring high priced clients streaming to Spade’s office. *Maltese Falcon* is not so much a
love story, nor a mystery of foreign intrigue, rather it is the chronicle of a successful small businessman, and that insight is key to unlocking the significance of the windows. Although Spade loses a partner, it helps him shed the pesky widow in order to set his sights on a more attractive black widow, and to launch his business all on his own. He directs his secretary to: “Have Miles’ desk moved out of the office, and have ‘Spade & Archer’ taken off all the doors and windows and have Samuel Spade put on.” The small businessman is on his way.

Fig. 11 “Have ‘Spade & Archer’ taken off all the doors and windows and have Samuel Spade put on.”

You Kill Me!

As discussed in Chapter One, deferring emotion is the essence of the hard-boiled aesthetic. In Hammett’s second chapter, “Death in the Fog,” when Spade receives the two a.m. phone call that Archer has been shot, Spade deflects his emotion by methodically rolling a cigarette. Taking up the “brown papers and a sack of Bull Durham tobacco,” his
The diction of the prose is extremely impersonal, populated by “forefingers,” “thumbs,” and “tan flakes.” With its reduction of personal pronouns, it reads like a technical manual on how to roll a cigarette—a classic male shut down of emotion. If female hysteria is stereotypically an overt acting out of emotion characterized by the screaming at the top of the lungs, pulling out hair and an abundance of tears, then male hysteria is this “hard-boiled,” deflecting of emotion. The same scene in the film is handled quite differently with no resorting to tobacco. With its allusions to a typical vampire film, instead the camera stays fixed in a long take on Spade’s nightstand and in the background we see the open window with the curtain blowing gently in the breeze, accompanied by non-diegetic falcon music. The novel’s depersonalized effect is recreated in the film by the camera holding the single long take of the table and window while Spade grabs the phone out of the shot and speaks in clipped utterances off camera. Spade is as absent emotionally in the novel as he is visually in the scene.

The detective and his ilk consistently use hard-boiled language. He asks his attorney if he can tell a coroner to go to “blazes” rather than “to hell,” refuses to break the news to his mistress, Archer’s wife, about her husband’s death, preferring to “fry first,” or undergo electrocution in the “chair,” and he explains to Polhaus and Dundy that he “got up on his hind legs” because “you two birds” were “crackin’ foxy.” When his
secretary, Effie Perine (Lee Patrick), remarks on how attractive the femme fatale is waiting to see him, she says: “You'll want to see her anyway. She's a knockout!” Each of these lines is courtesy of Dashiell Hammett. Hard-boiled language is in full effect when discussing male/female relations—an attractive woman is a consciousness-ending punch from a boxer—and it is most extreme when used to describe the proscribed emotion of love. Consider the violence we inadvertently evoke when we say we have a “crush” on someone, or we “fell for” someone. American Movie Classics, when it was still a premium cable movie channel running uninterrupted, uncut films and original programming, produced a documentary on film noir aptly entitled You Kill Me!

_Hollywood & Film Noir_ (Len Morris 1989). When _Death of a Salesman_’s Miss Forsythe, Willy Loman’s mistress from Boston tells him in hard-boiled fashion, “You just kill me. You kill me, Willy!” and in a later flashback: “You know you ruined me Willy . . . . You ruined me,” Willy responds with “That’s nice of you to say that.”
Just as in the Western with its saloon hussies and schoolmarms, film noir typically displays two types of females, in this case the sexualized femme fatale, and the desexualized, motherly type played here by the secretary, Effie Perine. Although she sits on Spade’s desk in close intimacy and rolls him a cigarette, putting it to his tongue to lick, she does so scolding him as a concerned parent: “Look at me Sam. You worry me. You always think you know what you’re doing, but you’re too slick for your own good. Someday you’re going to find it out.” Even the actresses’ hair color signifies this film’s good/blonde-evil/brunette code.
When forced to confront emotion like the death of his partner, however conflicted and convoluted that emotion might be, Spade shuts down. When caught in his office with his mistress with whom his affair has apparently gone cold, he at first seems genuinely affected by her sobbing and her manipulating his sympathy. The hard-boiled male rises up quickly to turn this emotion-laden scene, first by confronting her with a laugh and a violent smack together of his hands as he pans her theatrical performance, repeating some
of her laughable script: “Ha! You killed my husband Sam. Be kind to me.” As she turns away in pain, however disingenuous, he realizes he needs to remove her from his office and his life, so with a priceless wince behind her back, characteristic of Humphrey Bogart’s larger-than-life persona, he lays on an act himself: the consoling lover who promises, with another wince and condescending voice, to come to her as soon as he can and we never see nor hear from her again.

Fig. 14 The hard-boiled male reacts to an emotional scene with combative mockery and a wince.
Regarding Bogart’s larger than life persona, he unwittingly lends his name to a particular attitude and activity having to do, in part, with all of those cigarettes.

**Don’t Bogart Me**

Cigarettes play an integral role in Hammett’s novel as they do in the film and in film noir in general. Although the office of the Surgeon General didn’t issue its first letter connecting cigarette smoking and lung cancer until 1957, and its first official warning about the hazards until 1964, evidence of its adverse health effects had been accumulating since *Tobacco nicotiana* was introduced to Europe in the mid 16th Century. There has always been something dangerous about smoking, which adds a level of irony to the motherly scolding by Spade’s secretary as she rolls and lights a cigarette for him. With the hot ember at the end of the cigarette and smoking’s implicit health hazard, smokers hold death in their fingertips and between their lips. There is something especially cinematic about the way the white cigarette smoke catches the light and dances in the air.
By the 1960s, Humphrey Bogart’s persona, particularly his Sam Spade, took on a life of its own. One of those critics writing about film noir in *Les cahiers du cinéma* was Jean-Luc Godard, and his brilliant 1960 New Wave tribute to Bogart, *Breathless* (*À bout de soufflé*) has main characters Michel and Patricia watching *Maltese Falcon* in a movie house, with Michel habitually rubbing his lips and smoking cigarettes as Bogart does. TV sit-coms from the early to mid 60s comically and lovingly recycled the Bogie persona from "The Dick Van Dyke Show" to "Get Smart" to "The Monkees." Mainstream spoofs like Rowan & Martin’s *The Maltese Bippy* (Panama 1969), the high-concept comedy troupe, The Firesign Theatre’s “The Further Adventures of Nick Danger, Third Eye” from their 1969 release *How Can You Be in Two Places at Once When You’re Not Anywhere at All*, and Woody Allen’s *Play It Again, Sam* (Ross 1972) each reproduce and revel in Bogart’s Sam Spade aura.
Fig. 16 A celebration of Bogart from Jean-Luc Godard, The Firesign Theatre, Rowan & Martin & Woody Allen
Tapping into the cultural cache of Humphrey Bogart’s hard-boiled Sam Spade iconography, the California band of hippy musicians calling themselves The Fraternity of Man wrote and recorded its counter-cultural cannabis anthem, later popularized by the soundtrack of *Easy Rider* (Hopper 1969), “Don’t Bogart Me” from their 1968 eponymous LP. Rolling together the tough guy persona and signature smoking of the famous detective, The Fraternity of Man added the verb “bogart” to our lexicon:

Ro-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o
Just like the other one.
You’ve been hanging on to it
And I sure would like a hit.

Don’t bogart that joint, my friend.
Pass it over to me.
Don’t bogart that joint, my friend.
Pass it over to me.

From “Don’t Bogart Me” (Martin Kibbee/Warren Klein/Ritchie Heyward/Elliot Ingber/Lawrence "Stash" Wagner) from *The Fraternity of Man* 1968

*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Eleventh Edition* lists two meanings for the transitive verb “[probably from Humphrey Bogart], *bogart*: 1: bully, intimidate; 2: to use or consume without sharing <bogart a joint>.” When Spade disarms Joel Cairo single-handedly, restrains him, and then knocks him out, he does so with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, neatly embodying both definitions.
When teaching this film face to face I often freeze an image of Samuel Spade smoking and discuss the nature of smoking in film noir, as I have just done above, and before moving on point out that Humphrey Bogart died in 1957 of esophageal (throat) cancer. I do the same thing the following week when analyzing *Stagecoach* by freezing an image
of a cigarette-lighting John Wayne (Ringo kid), who along with Bogart, was one of the heaviest smokers in Hollywood. Wayne’s five-packs-a-day unfiltered Camel cigarette habit resulted in a lung tumor the size of a “baby’s fist,” leading to the removal of the entire lung in 1964. The actor survived for fifteen more years, and two years following his death from cancer, the John Wayne Cancer Institute was founded in his name. A further odd, pop-music connection that spans both Bogart and Wayne comes from the legendary British punk band the Mekons. Once contemporaneous with the Sex Pistols, but still around making their own style of alternative country and punk-pop now based in Chicago, The Mekons have recorded both “The Flame That Killed John Wayne” (Retreat From Memphis 1994) and “Flitcraft” (Fear and Whiskey 1985), the latter title a direct reference to the noir-like existential nightmare (in the novel only) Spade relates to O’Shaughnessy in a rare moment of vulnerability.

![Image](image_url)

Fig. 18 The Mekons, “The Flame That Killed John Wayne” (Retreat From Memphis 1994) and “Flitcraft” (Fear and Whiskey 1985)