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Jackson Pollock's Noir Sensibility: Hans Namuth's *Pollock Painting* as Experimental Film Noir

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Hans Namuth's film *Pollock Painting* (1951), from its inception, remains ambiguously described as a documentary, utilized in large Pollock retrospectives as a visual aid for his canonical drip technique. This paper will argue that because Namuth produced his film after viewing photographs of Jackson Pollock in *Life* magazine, Namuth's filmic vision of the artist was not a vision of objective documentation, but rather was constructed photographically from Pollock's mass-media "action painter" persona. The photographs taken for *Life* magazine as well as Namuth's own photographs of Pollock served as templates for the creation of Pollock as a self-destructive noir protagonist. With the help of Paul Faulkenberg, a popular producer friendly with the Film Noir director Fritz Lang, *Pollock Painting* can be considered an early experimental film (in my paper I used Maya Daren as a parallel) that uses popular cinematic techniques found in the visual vocabulary of Film Noir. The use of the cinematic techniques of the flashback, object symbolism and the self-destruction of the protagonist in Hans Namuth's film *Pollock Painting* shows that a film noir sensibility explicitly utilized in noir popular culture films pervaded visual culture when Namuth filmed *Pollock Painting*. Namuth appropriated Pollock's "action" image from the mass media, including *Life* magazine, only to represent (and even allude) to Pollock's inevitable demise. Namuth's "noir sensibility," expressed through *Pollock Painting*, depicted "Pollock" as the troubled protagonist destined to violently self-destruct before the viewer's eyes. In *Pollock Painting*, Namuth filmed Pollock carefully painting on glass in sequence three, representing Pollock's dismissal of his infamous drip technique in exchange for delicate figuration. Paradoxically, this noir image of the artist reflected Pollock's life: unable to live up to his "action painter" persona Pollock returned to his favored alcohol addiction, abandoned his famed drip-technique, and violently self-destructed.

Table of Contents

Hans Namuth's (1915-1990) film of Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) *Pollock Painting* (1951), shot during Pollock's infamous "drip technique" stage, unarguably aided in establishing Pollock's iconic status as an action painter. As described by art historian Barbara Rose in her 1978 essay "Jackson Pollock: The Artist as Cultural Hero," Namuth's filmic record of the artist in action transformed Pollock's popular reputation as a cultural hero. Rose eloquently summed up her argument with a statement that stands today:

> Namuth's images of Pollock in action altered the popular conception of the artist; they have an importance for this reason that no previous documentation of an artist has ever had. The focus on the act – the process of art making – instead of on the static object changed the course of art criticism and even art history in a way Namuth himself could never have foreseen or intended.[1]

Rose explained the importance of images for the conception of artists. Pollock's image defined him as an "action" painter by defining his process of art making as something original to both his artistic persona and art production during the 20th century.

Namuth's filmic representation of the action painter as well as Pollock's representation within the pages of *Life* magazine in 1948 unarguably contributed to the mythification of Jackson Pollock as being "the original rebel without a cause."[2] By 1979 art historian Francis V. O'Connor defined Namuth's photographs and films of Pollock as "art historical documentation," arguing Namuth's images of Pollock are "visual records before they are works of art."[3] More recently, art historian Catherine M. Soussloff stated that since *Pollock Painting* was first shown at the Museum of Modern Art on June 14, 1951, "the film – although constructed, filmic, and highly performative as film – has

[1] Barbara Rose, "Jackson Pollock: The Artist as Culture Hero," printed *Pollock Painting*, ed. by Barbara Rose (New York: Agrinde Publications Ltd., 1978).
[2] Ibid.
[3] Francis O'Connor, "Hans Namuth's Photographs of Jackson Pollock as Art Historical Documentation," *Art Journal* Vol. 39, No. 1 (Autumn 1979): 48.

served as an illustration and document of what Pollock during his most important years as an artist did, and a key to what his work means." Soussloff continued to explain that the present exhibition practices of Pollock's work, large stills from Namuth's film became standard visual material.[4] Art historians used *Pollock Painting* more as a document to explain Pollock's process rather than a work of art in itself. However, when viewing the film *Pollock Painting*, it is important to examine how art history defined the film only as a documentary despite its "constructed, filmic and highly performative" status.[5] The cinematic techniques utilized in the production of the film *Pollock Painting* obfuscate its status as only a "documentation of an artist."[6]

Museums continued to use *Pollock Painting* as a documentary despite Namuth's artistic construction of the film. The Museum of Modern Art's 1998 retrospective *Jackson Pollock*, organized by art historians Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel, was a canonical example of how Namuth's film served as documentation of Pollock's work. As art historian Kenneth Minturn stated in his essay "Digitally Enhanced Evidence: MoMA's Reconfiguration of Namuth's Pollock," no less than three rooms of the retrospective were dedicated to Namuth's films and photographs. One room exhibited a continuous loop of *Pollock Painting* while another included a reconstruction of Pollock's studio on Long Island with Namuth's still photographs "inexplicably displayed on its walls (as if Pollock had looked at Namuth's photographs of himself painting as he

[4] Catherine M. Soussloff, "Jackson Pollock's Post-Ritual Performance: Memories Arrested in Space," *TDR (1998-)* Vol. 48, No. 1 (Spring 2004): 66.
[5] Ibid.
[6] In her essay "Jackson Pollock: The Artist as Culture Hero," Rose described the film as a documentation of an artist. *Pollock Painting* does consist of a series of shots of Pollock painting in his drip technique; however, it also includes a number of dramatized shots, confusing its definition as a documentary. Documentaries, in contrast to narrative films, lack dramatization and instead attempt to present a theme objectively. Namuth's film of Pollock, on the other hand, exaggerates Pollock's actuality as an action painter.

painted)."[7] As Minturn showed, Namuth's film of Pollock became a visual tool for art history to explain Pollock's work. Pepe Karmel exaggerated and digitally enhanced *Pollock Painting* and turned it into an experiential spectacle to aid in The Museum of Modern Art's blockbuster retrospective of the American action painter.

Solely using *Pollock Painting* as a documentary is problematic because people do not view the film as an artistic medium. Namuth's film *Pollock Painting* needs to be re-examined for its filmic qualities, rather than merely utilized for its equivocal existence as documentation, because the cinematic construction of the film resembles similar techniques used in popular culture *film noir* and experimental films during the late 1940s into the 1950s.[8] An examination of *Pollock Painting*'s formal techniques reveals that the film resembles the cinematic *noir* sensibility of this period. Namuth used the typical noir plot in *Pollock Painting*, one in which the likable protagonist falls victim to his own troubled psyche. Namuth adopted Pollock's heroic cultural image as an action painter for the protagonist of his film only to present Pollock's demise; under Namuth's suggestion, at the end of the film Pollock's "action" is lost in exchange for a careful pouring of paint onto glass. This inversion of his painting process, caused by Namuth's aesthetic suggestion of painting on glass, showed that Pollock's persona was no longer in control of his own artistic style and was inevitably destined for a noir-like destruction of the protagonist. This symbolic self-destruction of Pollock in *Pollock Painting* only foreshadowed Pollock's "inevitable" demise in real life; shortly after the film wrapped,

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[7] Kent Minturn, "Digitally-Enhanced Evidence: MoMA's Reconfiguration of Namuth's Pollock," *Visual Resources* Vol. XVII (2001): 142.

[8] Kent Minturn's "Digitally-Enhanced Evidence: MoMA's Reconfiguration of Namuth's Pollock" addressed the problems that arise from Pepe Karmel's use of Namuth's photographs as objective documentation; Karmel's process was discussed in his essay "Pollock at Work: The Film and Photographs of Hans Namuth," printed in exhibition catalogue (of the show he helped organize) *Jackson Pollock* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 87-138.

Pollock experienced critical backlash for his work before he tragically died in a horrific car crash.

This paper will argue that because Namuth produced his film after viewing photographs of Jackson Pollock, Namuth's filmic vision of the artist was not a vision of objective documentation, but rather was constructed photographically from Pollock's mass-media "action painter" persona. The photographs taken for *Life* magazine as well as Namuth's own photographs of Pollock served as templates for the creation of Pollock as a self-destructive noir protagonist: by the end of the film, Pollock's heroic persona as an American action painter no longer existed, visually represented through Pollock's drastically changed painting style. As I will demonstrate, the objectivity of Namuth's film was further undermined through his use of conventional cinematic techniques of the moment. The lines of investigation include experimental film, exemplified by a comparison between Namuth's film and Maya Deren's film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), and the popular culture movie, including *Double Indemnity* (1944, directed by Billy Wilder), *Laura* (1944, directed by Otto Preminger), *Phantom Lady* (1944, directed by Robert Siodmak) and *A Double Life* (1947, directed by George Cukor). The films can be categorized under the sensibility of film noir that included the cinematic techniques of the flashback, object symbolism and an inevitable self-destruction of the protagonist.[9]

A Noir Vision: The Formal Techniques of Film Noir

[9] Michael Leja's book *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940's* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992) and Kent Minturn's essay " Peinture Noire: Abstract Expressionism and Film Noir," printed in *Film Noir Reader 2*, edited by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Proscenium Publishers Inc., 1999): 271-309, both examined the affinity between Abstract Expressionism (as a painting style) and the popular film noir movies of the time. Leja's research also argued that the representation of Abstract Expressionist painters in popular media visually resembled film noir movies. My paper will examine Hans Namuth's use of film noir cinematic techniques in his representation of Pollock in *Pollock Painting*.

Film noir was characterized by shadowy, low-key lighting, sharp tonal contrast and disorienting, unbalanced camera work ranging from claustrophobic close-ups to deep focus shots.[10] The formal techniques used in film noir to elaborate a noir sensibility were: first person narration, temporal ambiguity through the strategy of the flashback, symbolic treatment of ordinary objects adding to character identification, subjective self-destruction and non-diegetic music.[11] Film historian James Naremore traced the history of film noir in his 1995 article "American Film Noir: The History of an Idea." Naremore explained that the term "film noir" is not a term labeled by American filmmakers about their films but rather used by French critics to describe the new cinematic techniques appearing in American films after WWII, techniques they believed to be rooted in the traditions of German Expressionism and French Surrealism.[12]

The term "film noir" originated from French critics in 1946 after a screening of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941, directed by John Huston), *Double Indemnity* (1944, directed by Billy Wilder), *Laura* (1944, directed by Otto Preminger), *Murder, My Sweet* (1944, directed by Edward Dmytryk) and *The Lost Weekend* (1945, directed by Billy Wilder).[13] Naremore used the book *Panorama du film noir americain* (1955), written by Raymond

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[10] Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and The Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 250.

[11] The cinematic techniques that comprise a film noir sensibility are adapted and summarized from four articles: Tom Conley, "Stages of Film Noir," *Theater Journal* Vol. 39 No. 3 (October 1987): 347-363; James Naremore, "American Film Noir: The History of an Idea" *Film Quarterly* Vol. 49 No. 2 (Winter 1995-1996): 12-28; Richard R. Ness, "A Lotta Night Music: The Sound of Film Noir," *Cinema Journal* 47 No. 2 (Winter 2008): 52-73 and Jean-Pierre Chartier, "Americans Also Make Noir Films," originally published in 1946, reprinted in *Film Noir Reader 2*, ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Proscenium Publications, 1999), 21-25.

[12] Hans Namuth was familiar with the stylistic characteristics of both German Expressionism and French Surrealism. Namuth (b. 1915) grew up in Essen, Germany. He first traveled to Marseille, France in 1934. Later, in 1939, Namuth joined the French legion only to be demobilized in 1940, in which he fled to Marseilles. After moving to the United States and joining the U.S. army in1943, Namuth was deported to Europe, in which he worked with the intelligence of France and Germany in 1944. Carolyn Kinder Carr, *Hans Namuth Portraits* (Washington and London: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), xiv-xv.

[13] James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 13.

Borde and Etienne Chaumeton (described as a benchmark for all later work on the topic) to describe the cinematic techniques of film noir. For Borde and Chaumeton, "the essence of noirness lies in a feeling of discontinuity, an intermingling of social realism and oneiricism, an anarcho-leftist critique of bourgeois ideology, and an eroticized treatment of violence."[14] They argued film noir attacked a number of film conventions, including, "logical action, an evident distinction between good and evil, [and] well-defined characters with clear motives."[15] Noir reversed cinematic structural norms to create a tension that disrupted order and in effect, heightened the distressed fatalism of the film.[16]

American movies facilitated this "essence of noirness" with improbable, confusing, or incoherent narratives.[17] Noir films did not follow a typical diegetic narrative in which the plot consisted of a chronological series of events. The time constructed within film noir did not follow a linear unfolding of present events into the future, but instead involved a continual juxtaposition between the past and present time. Noir films used a number of cinematic techniques, including black and white filming, extreme close-ups, flashback narration, and dissonant sounds in place of melodic music; all worked to obfuscate a clear linear reading of the movie.

Not only did the noir sensibility pervade mainstream movies but also experimental films. [18] Caroline A. Jones suggested the visual affinity of Namuth's

[14] James Naremore, "American Film Noir: The History of an Idea," *Film Quarterly* Vol. 49, No. 2 (Winter 1995-1996): 20.
[15] James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*, 21.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid, 18.
[18] Film during this time period was making its heed as a form of fine art. As Kent Minturn pointed out in his article "Peinture Noire: Abstract Expressionism and Film Noir," along with cultural institutions like The Film and Photo League, MoMA took a particular interest in presenting film as fine art. In June 1935, Alfred H. Barr opened MoMA's Film Department. As MoMA argued for the legitimization of fine art films, post-war audiences also flooded the theaters to view a plethora of film noir movies. As Minturn states, over 150

Pollock Painting with contemporary art films.[19] Namuth's film *Pollock Painting*, along with experiment films of the 1940s, all used the cinematic techniques of film noir. Of the experimental cinema in the United States during the 1940s, film historian Lewis Jacobs credited Maya Deren (1917-1961) as the pioneer both for her originality in the medium of film and her organizational ability to assure that her films were extensively exhibited.[20] Popular themes for experimental films of the time included a form of narcissus in chaos characterized by the destruction of subjectivity, a similar technique to the noir "destruction of the protagonist" used in popular film noir movies.[21] An example of the experimental film's interpretation of the film noir's "destruction of the protagonist" is Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). The cinematic techniques utilized by Deren in the production of the film point to the film noir sensibility that dominated the 1950s.[22]

Deren's film *Meshes of the Afternoon* used a number of noir techniques, including black and white filming, a non-chronological narrative and the inevitable destruction of the protagonist. Described by Lewis, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Maya's first film made in collaboration with Alexander Hammid, is a film "about a girl (acted by Maya Deren

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films saturated American culture between 1944-1948. These two types of film, the art film and film noir, characterized Namuth's visual culture during the time he produced *Pollock Painting*.

[19] Caroline A. Jones *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 72.

[20] Film historian Lewis Jacobs explained the renowned interest in post-war experimental film in his article "Experimental Cinema in America." Lewis credited experimental films popularity in the United States to the circulation of programs from the Film Library of The Museum of Modern Art. The Museum's collection of films went to hundreds of colleges, universities, museums and film-appreciation groups. These widespread exhibitions, along with the Museum's own screening room, exerted a major influence in the appreciation of experimental films. Deren's film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) won the Grand Prix Internationale for 16mm experimental film at the Cannes Film Festival in 1947.

[21] See Lewis Jacobs, "Experimental Cinema in America (Part Two: The Postwar Revival)," *Hollywood Quarterly* Vol. 3 No. 3 (Spring 1948): 278-292.

[22] Experimental films during the 1940s shared similar techniques to the film noir movie. James Lewis Hoberman in his Village Voice article published during the 1970s even described *Meshes of the Afternoon* as a commentary on film noir.

herself) who comes home one afternoon and falls asleep. In a dream she sees herself returning home, tortured by loneliness and frustration and impulsively committing suicide."[23] A cyclical narrative involving repetitious symbolic imagery complicates the film. While sleeping, Deren sees a mysterious figure (an allegorical figure of loneliness) walking the streets outside of her house. As Deren continually fails to catch the hooded figure, she re-enters her house with a key dropping to the cement each time. Deren's dream sequence, in which she attempts to catch up with the allegorical figure, happens three times in the film. Towards the end of the dream sequence, Deren does not meet the hooded figure, but instead comes into contact with her three previous dream selves. Sitting around the table, the dream selves foreshadow Deren's actual suicide, the closing scene of the film.

Maya Deren played the perfect noir protagonist in her film *Meshes of the Afternoon*: after realizing she would never catch the hooded antagonist continuously haunting her unconscious psyche, Deren inevitably self-destructs by committing suicide. Deren's film used a number of cinematic techniques utilized in film noir movies including: first person narration, symbolic juxtaposition of objects to aid in character development,[24] repetition which creates a non-linear plot progression that can be seen as a comment on the flashback (a popular film noir technique), and a thematic destruction of the protagonist.

The Noir Sensibility: A Product of the Post-War Context

A noir sensibility dominated the visual landscape by the time Hans Namuth shot *Pollock Painting* in 1950. Although a number of formal qualities defined film noir, art

[23] Lewis Jacobs, "Experimental Cinema in America," 279.
[24] A number of ordinary objects are given symbolic value through continual repetition in Deren's film, including a key, a telephone, a knife and a flower.

historians argue that the noir film is a product of the tumultuous social and political climate after WWII. Film historian James Naremore described the immediate post-war decades as "the period of Korea" and "the red scare."[25] These events, resulting from the traumatic stress of WWII, created an environment of anxiousness. Film theorist J.P. Telotte argued that the film noir mirrored the anxieties of subjects in society by exposing rather than sublimating the problems people faced during this period. Tellotte argued noir film's exposed societal anxieties through an "abrogation of the American dream's most basic promise of hope, prosperity, and safety from persecution."[26] Tellotte argued that Americans felt unsatisfied with the United States after the war, a climate "punctuated by rampant inflation, unemployment, labor strife, shifting social patterns, and the rapidly growing anxieties of the cold war."[27] American's uncertainties about the coming decades after WWII were visually represented in film noir.

The noir anxieties that mirrored the subjects of post-war modern society included an uncertainty and fear for the future and the loss of autonomy and control. Art historian Michael Leja defined the existential angst of the 1940s and 1950s as the "Modern Man discourse." As Leja argued, modernity is defined by catastrophe:

> World war, socialist revolution, political corruption, social conflict, economic depression, the rise of fascism, genocide, the development and use of nuclear weapons – all of these twentieth century phenomenon prompted mediation upon the makeup and situation of the human (white man) individual and what precisely within or outside him accounted for these tragedies.[28]

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[25] James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 23.
[26] J.P. Tellotte, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 2.
[27] Ibid, 5.
[28] Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 16.

Leja argued that the noir film visually exemplified the anxious state of post-war American culture. The Modern Man was no longer confident in his position in the world. Instead, he was constantly battling the exterior forces that pervaded his current situation. Losing his confidence, the Modern Man constantly questioned his surroundings. As psychoanalyst philosopher Jacques Lacan argued, "the unconscious of the subject is the discourse of the other."[29] In modernity, people lack autonomy and instead are forced to react accordingly to exterior circumstances and the people that surround them. Men are no longer the master's of their own universe, but instead frequently fall victim to their existential angst, generated by modernity's alienating circumstances. Film noir, the dominant film genre during the post-WWII period, best exemplified this pessimistic fatalism during this time-period.

Not only was film noir a product of post-war anxiety but, as Leja argued, Abstract Expressionism, produced during the same tumultuous climate as film noir, also mirrored the angst of the Modern Man. Modern Man's subjectivity was defined by Leja as "a site of heroic struggle between reason and unreason, control and uncontrol."[30] This loss of autonomy in subjectivity was at the root of Pollock's sense of self, ultimately creating a "film noir persona." Hans Namuth shot his film during this tumultuous post-war period, and ultimately presented Pollock as a film noir protagonist in his film *Pollock Painting* because of his own first-hand experience of this post-war climate.

The Noir Protagonist

Fatalism defined the post-war context of film noir. Film historian Maureen Turim has argued:

[29] J.P. Tellotte, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir*, 28.
[30] Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, 16.

> Fatalism pervades film noir. Not only is destiny unfavorable, not only do characters fall into impossible situations or meet with death, but these declines and demises are presented not simply as mere outrageous circumstances, but as fated. The aura of inevitability bathes the action.[31]

Noir fatalism was best exemplified through the thematic destruction of the noir protagonist. Film historian J.P. Tellotte argued that the noir protagonist longed "to possess and order the confusing pattern of his existence but invariably finds himself possessed and determined by all manner of forces."[32] The noir protagonist paralleled the existential confusion prevalent in post-war society.

In previous movie traditions characters were placed neatly in categories of protagonist and antagonist. However, in noir films characters transcend their categories by straddling between good and evil and changing their protagonist "hero" status by the end of the film. A major aspect of noir films involved the destruction of the noir protagonist. The noir protagonist was a typical anti-hero: he was eccentric and overtly individual who followed his own set of rules. These "bad boy" qualities would lead the protagonist to undergo a psychological transformation during the film, due to his characteristic blurring of the line between good and evil. By the end of the film, that protagonist would fall victim to his troubled psyche. The protagonist would lose his status as a hero by transforming into a troubled individual.[33]

James Naremore contended that Humphrey Bogart epitomized the noir mood. Bogart's persona was "tough, introspective, emotionally repressed and fond of whiskey and cigarettes." In *The Maltese Falcon* Bogart played an exceptional noir protagonist, the

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[31] Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 170.
[32] J.P. Tellotte, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir*, 41.
[33] The destruction of the protagonist exemplified the existential anxiety of the period. The production of noir films became popular around the ending of WWII. Art historian Erika Doss argued film noir was manifestation of postwar anxiety. Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 337.

private detective Samuel Spade. Spade was tough, hyper-masculine and on the side of the law, but inevitably fell victim to exterior circumstances that aided in his loss of self-control. Spade, the "good" guy, ended up getting involved in a murder spree with three different criminals, having an affair with his partner's wife (played by Gladys George), and even fell in love with the criminal temptress of the film, Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Mary Astor).

Spade was caught between the dialectical threshold of good and evil, reason and unreason, which historians argued, dominated the post-war climate and the film noir movie. This noir persona is not far from Jackson Pollock's representation in the mass media and the pages of *Life* magazine. Pollock was similarly presented as a tough, masculine man who drank and smoked heavily. However, like a characteristic film noir protagonist, his masculine image could not withstand the exterior forces that surrounded him. All noir protagonists lose control and fall victim to their troubled psyches. Pollock fell victim to his exterior circumstances by adhering to Hans Namuth's suggestion of painting on glass, a medium and style uncharacteristic of the action technique he adamantly favored. Namuth's documentation of Pollock's symbolic demise in his movie *Pollock Painting* only foreshadowed Pollock's actual self-destruction, including the critical backlash of his work and his untimely death.

The Making of a Noir Protagonist: Jackson Pollock in *Life* Magazine

Jackson Pollock played a troubled protagonist in *Pollock Painting* through his inability to live up to his constructed image as an action painter. Hans Namuth adopted the Pollock image constructed by mainstream-media, including *Life* magazine. Pollock's image was that of a masculine, heroic American action painter, exemplified through his

representation within the pages of *Life*. *Life* created and cemented a specific image of Pollock: an artist who did not follow the traditional conventions of artistic production and instead created his own category of "drip" action painting. Pollock laid a canvas horizontally onto the floor. Onto the canvas he dripped and splattered house paint using sticks. Pollock became synonymous with the action of painting rather than a painter of static objects. These images enforced Pollock's status as a rogue non-conformist who created his own set of rules for art production. A discussion of Pollock's photographs in *Life* magazine will show that Namuth filmed Pollock more as a noir protagonist, a likable character whose unconventional tendencies led to problematic ends, rather than an artist working in his studio.

Mass media representations of Pollock played an integral role in solidifying his iconic "action" status. By 1949, Pollock was proclaimed (or questioned as) the "greatest American Painter of all time" by *Life* magazine. His rise to the top occurred during a specific moment in history, the ending of WWII. The combination of an ideological need for an American style painting in the United States, plus the diminished art production overseas, shifted the capital of fine art from Paris to New York City. As Serge Guilbaut argued in his book *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, the symbolic destruction of Western culture caused by the fall of Paris to German troops on June 14, 1940 led to an ideological conviction on the part of some Americans that the United States needed to fill the intellectual void. Guilbaut stated,

> The United States was pleased to see that the title of the new capital of Western culture was within its grasp, though it had no clear idea what this title meant.

> Nevertheless, it was necessary to lay the groundwork for the transfer of the crown.[34]

The United States needed to establish an "American-style" painting by American artists. American publications bestowed upon Pollock the crown as the American icon of art by photographically representing him as an action painter.

Life magazine played an integral role in the status of Pollock as an icon of American art. Henry Luce (1898-1967), the publisher of *Life*, *Time* and *Fortune* magazine during this period, in an article unambiguously titled "The American Century," unabashedly proclaimed America's future role as the uncontested leader of the world.[35] *Life* understood that the difficult, critical language describing abstract Modern art of the time was problematically impenetrable, so the publishers created an extensive educational program to aid in popular understanding of Modern art.[36] *Life* Magazine first mentioned Pollock on October 11, 1948 in "Life's Round Table on Modern Art." *Life* invited fifteen distinguished critics to "clarify the strange art of today."[37] The intellectual panel judged a number of paintings, including Jackson Pollock's *Cathedral*, which the critic Clement Greenberg considered "one of the best paintings recently produced in this country."[38]

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[34] Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Abstract Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 54.
[35] Ibid, 60.
[36] For more on Pollock's relationship with *Life* magazine, see Bradford R. Collins, "Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948-51: A Historiographic Study of a Late Bohemian Enterprise," *The Art Bulletin* LXXIII (June 1991): 283-308. Collins argued in his article that the relationship of *Life* to Abstract Expressionism during the time was usually regarded as an antagonistic one. Collins argued "a review of *Life's* writings on art around 1950 reveals, instead, the magazines essentially supportive program on behalf of the vanguard tradition." However satirical and malevolent their articles seemingly are towards Jackson Pollock, one can think that even bad press is good press, and the image of Jackson Pollock as an American painter was mass disseminated through *Life's* continued engagement with the painter.
[37] Ibid, 286.
[38] Ibid. Pollock's cultural climb to the top and his representation in a popular culture magazines like *Life* (which reaches millions of readers across America) can be seen as an effect of his incessant appraisal by art

Pollock received his own four-page spread in the magazine less than one year after *Life* first introduced him in its round table discussion on Modern art. On August 8th, 1948 *Life* published the article "Jackson Pollock: Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?"[39] The main objective of the article was to explain Pollock's artistic genius that led to his success: his "action" painting process. To explain his process, the author Dorothy Seiberling used both an interview between herself and Pollock as well as statements by Pollock from a previous article in *Possibilities* magazine.[40] The quotations from *Possibilities* were of Pollock explaining his art production. Seiberling then elaborated on his process by providing her own interpretation of Pollock's painting style. More importantly, Seiberling's published article offered visual insights into his process: photographs of the artist at work shot by Arnold Newman and Martha Holmes. These photographs produced an iconic image of Pollock as an eccentric action painter because of the editing used by the photographers.

The photographers of *Life* magazine as well as Hans Namuth helped construct an image of Pollock as a noir protagonist similar to that of Humphrey Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon*. Hans Namuth would use a similar representation of Pollock in his photographic series of the artist shot in 1950. All photographers, Namuth, Newman and Seiberling, were interested in presenting a masculine, aggressive image of the artist, an image that mirrored his aggressive "action" painting technique.

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intellectuals like Clement Greenberg. Serge Guilbaut elaborated on the intellectual's grasp on Abstract Expressionism as a product of the heightened awareness of the United States as the new cultural capital. See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, specifically chapters 1-2.

[39] Collins included the *Life* article in its entirety in his essay, 290.

[40] Jackson Pollock, "My Painting," *Possibilities* I (Winter 1947-48): 78-83. The author distinguishes her interview from Pollock's previous statements.

The representation of Pollock in these media outlets as an action painter mirrored the media representations of Hollywood film noir protagonists. For example a photograph by Arnold Newman showed Pollock slyly positioned smoking a cigarette in front of his drip painting *Summertime* (1948). With his arms crossed in front of his body and his stance shifted to one side, Pollock visually resembled the non-conformist protagonist of popular culture. Pollock's image strikingly preceded the imagery used to represent the actor James Dean, who would later become the "rebel without a cause" after of course, "the original rebel without a cause" Jackson Pollock.[41] Pollock's nonchalant stance, serious facial expression and dangling cigarette resembled the media representations of nonconformist noir protagonists like James Dean or Humphrey Bogart popular during the post-war period.

Also presenting a noir-like image of Pollock as an action painter were two photographs by Martha Holmes positioned under the heading "How Pollock Paints."[42] Holmes used a number of techniques to create an image of Pollock as a noir protagonist. The image of Pollock in black and white added an extreme tonal contrast, creating a dark and mysterious setting. Through its unnatural black and white coloration, the unconventional situation reinforced the fact that Pollock's painting process existed outside of familiar norms of easel painting. Like Newman, Holmes represented Pollock's character as non-conformist by photographing him crouching close to the floor flinging paint onto a canvas with a stick. The photographs printed in *Life* magazine created Pollock's image as a swaggering noir protagonist, an individual who played by his own set of rules.

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[41] Ibid.
[42] Collins, "Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists," 289.

Before Namuth shot the film *Pollock Painting*, he first took a series of photographs of the artist in his studio in 1950. His images offer a striking resemblance to previous photographs of Pollock in *Life* magazine. Namuth was familiar with *Life's* layout because he began his photography career as a commercial photographer and had previously worked for *Life*, *Time* and *Newsweek*.[43] In 1950, Namuth was a working photographer for *Harper's Bazaar* and a student of *Harper's Bazaar's* art director Alexey Brodovitch at the New School for Social Research. One day in class, Namuth recalled Brodovitch stating his approval of Pollock's paintings, defining Pollock as "one of the most important artists around today."[44] At Brodovitch's suggestion, Namuth pursued Pollock as a subject for a series of photographs of the artist at work in his studio.

Hans Namuth's Photographic Series: A Reiteration of Pollock's Noir Persona

One year after the publication of Martha Holmes's and Arnold Newman's photographs of Pollock for the *Life* article "Jackson Pollock: Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?" Namuth journeyed to Pollock's studio in Springs, Long Island to photograph the artist. Namuth's representation of Pollock was strikingly similar to the images of the artist in *Life* magazine. There is an obvious resemblance between the seductive allure elaborated through the images of Pollock in his *Life* spread and Namuth's photographs.[45] Both show the artist diligently at work, ignoring the artifice of the camera apparatus, while simultaneously balancing a lit cigarette between his lips. The

[43] Calvin Tomkins, introduction in *Hans Namuth: Artists 1950-1981: A Personal View* (New York: Pace Gallery Publications, 1981).
[44] Namuth shot his series of photographs during the summer of 1950 with two Rolleiflex cameras with 80-mm lenses. Hans Namuth, "Photographing Pollock," printed in *Pollock Painting*, ed. by Barbara Rose (New York: Agrinde Publications Ltd., 1978).
[45] Namuth's photographs were first published in 1951 in *Portfolio*, a review edited by Alexey Brodovitch. They received broader circulation May 1951 when *Artnews* published a series of black and white photographs illustrating "Pollock Paints a Picture" by Robert Goodnough. Now, a number of Namuth's Pollock images can be seen reproduced in *Pollock Painting* (1978). Rose, "Jackson Pollock: The Artist as Cultural Hero," in *Pollock Painting*.

photographs are both black and white, adding to the seductive glamour of a seemingly mundane setting of a barn on Long Island. In both images Pollock is even compositionally positioned slightly right of center. The diagonal of Pollock's body causes the viewer to be more engaged with the action of Pollock's painting process despite the presence of his finished canvases in the background.[46] Namuth was not likely objectively documenting Pollock in and around his studio but rather unconsciously recycling compositional strategies utilized by mass media publications, because of his knowledge of Pollock's iconic action representation within the pages of *Life* magazine. As a result, Namuth's photographs, like those of *Life* magazine, symbolically represented Pollock as an action painter. However, like the noir protagonist, Pollock's action status would inevitably find its demise in Namuth's film *Pollock Painting*.

Pollock's action painter persona represented him as a masculine individual on the margins between control and uncontrol. Pollock controlled his brush strokes but at times gave way to an aggressive movement around the canvas, an extreme emotional trance that easily gave way to an uncontrolled state. The dialectic of control in Pollock's action painter persona mirrored the plight of the noir protagonist in the post-war period. As Michael Leja argued, the Abstract Expressionist persona presented in the media "reeked of noir." Leja argued that even the formal strategies of their public presentation, including Namuth's black and white photographic series of Pollock "overlapped

[46] Arguably, the viewer would be more drawn to the photos for their aesthetic quality over their documentary appeal. In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), Roland Barthes elucidated this claim by interpreting the difference between documentary photographs (which only include the *studium*) and photographs with aesthetic appeal (in which the *punctum* punctuates the *studium*). Although subjective, the punctum can easily be picked out, for example, through the sunlit haze that enveloped Pollock's body as he moved about in front of the camera. See Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 25-27. In addition to the aesthetic appeal, photography during this time was beginning to be interpreted as a fine art medium. For a discussion of MoMA's integral involvement with fine art photography, see Christopher Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography," *October* Vol. 22 (Autumn, 1982).

strikingly with conventions of film noir."[47] Namuth's photographic representation of Pollock mirrored the noir protagonist by representing Pollock as a man between extremes, residing on a delicate line between an autonomous man in control and a man about to lose his bearings to external forces surrounding him.

Filming the Noir Protagonist: Han's Namuth's *Pollock Painting* as Noir Experimental Film

Namuth came to his film project with an image of the painter already in mind. Pollock played the part of an "action painter," an image already constructed through his photographic representation in *Life* magazine. Namuth stated that making a film would be "the next logical step" in his representation of Pollock.[48] Namuth shot two films of Pollock. The initial black-and-white film was seven minutes of footage showing Pollock at work painting a picture. Namuth described this film as a "test film," which he took for assessment to his friend Paul Falkenberg, a successful film editor who worked with the popular film noir director Fritz Lang.[49] Faulkenberg and Namuth worked together in the production of his second film on Pollock, *Pollock Painting*. Throughout the filming, Falkenberg continually made "suggestions for close-ups needed for editing," suggesting his interest in an aesthetic construction over a raw, documentary feel. Both Faulkenberg and Namuth chose to use explicit editing techniques that resembled the cinematic genre of film noir.

Documentaries of artists existed before Namuth filmed *Pollock Painting*. Caroline A. Jones's book *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist*

[47] Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Painting and Subjectivity in 1940s*, 113.
[48] Calvin Tomkins, ed. *Hans Namuth: Artists 1950-81: A Personal View* (New York: Pace Gallery Publications, 1981).
[49] Fritz Lang directed a number of film noir movies including *The Woman in the Window* (1944), *Ministry of Fear* (1944), *Scarlet Street* (1953) and *The Big Heat* (1953).

chronicled the rise of art documentaries, both film and photographic, during the post-war period. Jones argued that these documentaries utilized an artistic aesthetic construction by the documentarian. Jones argued that Namuth's film presented the "image of Pollock," a representation of the artist as solitary creator, enforcing a powerful sense of solitude, and showing the painter "out there alone in the woods, doing his stuff."[50] Namuth's documentary of Pollock presented Pollock as a noir protagonist by adopting his action image popularized in mass media outlets like *Life* magazine.

In his essay "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued that an objective representation of an artist is problematic because of the use of technological mediation. Merleau-Ponty used the documentary *A Visit with Matisse* (1946) in his essay as an example, to argue that technological mediation does not mimic the effect of the direct human perception. The film documented the artist Henri Matisse in Paris. In the film the director showed Matisse painting a picture of a rose. The problem of documenting an artist predominantly existed in filming the artist at work painting. Merleau-Ponty argued that an aesthetic construction is inevitable when filming an artist paint. As Merleau-Ponty argued, the camera's "eye" should not be taken as truth about Matisse's painted gestures. The camera's lens acts as a technological tool that skews an objective and direct perceptual reading of Matisse's painting style. Representations of artists through technological media like film and video detract from a

[50] Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 57.

truthful documentation of an artist because of the ability to manipulate vision through editing and cinematic techniques.[51]

Namuth obviously used technology to his advantage; *Pollock Painting* utilized explicit editing and the cinematic techniques of film noir to document Pollock at work. Namuth's documentation of Pollock was an aesthetic construction of a representation of Pollock rather than an objective documentation. He stated, "I soon found out that a film, like a short story, needs a beginning, a middle and an end. It wasn't enough to show the painter painting."[52] Namuth continued to explain that the "main ingredient" that was missing was a full view of the artist at work. He concluded, "One evening it came to me: the painting would have to be on *glass* and I would film from underneath." Art historian Rosalind Krauss challenged Namuth's "eureka" moment, stating that in a previous documentary *Visit to Picasso* (1949), Paul Haesaert filmed the artist Pablo Picasso painting on glass. [53] Similar to the compositional strategies he borrowed for his photographs, Namuth borrowed cinematic techniques from films of the time period. The construction of Namuth's film can be described as conforming to the cinematic sensibility of film noir.

An analysis of Namuth's film compared to both the techniques of Hollywood movies and Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* shows the film noir mood and techniques dominating postwar visual culture in the United States. *Pollock Painting* is constructed into three parts. I have defined each segment of Namuth's film *Pollock Painting* in terms

[51] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," printed in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, edited by Galen A. Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 83.
[52] Calvin Tomkins, ed. *Hans Namuth: Artists 1950-81: A Personal View* (New York: Pace Gallery Publications, 1981).
[53] Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994).

of its noir strategy: part one (00:26-04:05) exposes the problems of visibility through temporal layering with the use of the *flashback*; part two (04:06-05:50) uses object symbolism as a stand in for character identification; and part three (05:51-09:39) explores the self-destruction of the protagonist. All of these categories conform to dominant film noir themes.

Pollock Painting and Noir Sound

Sharp, discordant noise plays throughout the film *Pollock Painting*. Morton Feldman, a student of the avant-garde composer John Cage, composed the music for the film. The sound in film noir movies did not follow the harmonious musical idioms of previous Hollywood movies. As film historian Richard R. Ness argued, "just as the noir films represented a challenge to the sanctity and security of home and family that had been reinforced in many prewar Hollywood productions, the musical scores for these darker works [Film Noir] emphasized this sense of displacement by defying the tonal tradition of classical Hollywood scoring."[54] In exchange for melody, noir scores emphasized dissonance and atonality, unusual instrumentation and experimental recording techniques. Using "medium-specific" noise rather than harmonious music served to define *Pollock Painting*'s status as a noir experimental film.

Sequence One: The Noir Flashback to create a Non-Linear Plot Progression

Pollock Painting opens to shots of Jackson Pollock gesturally writing his name in paint on a sheet of glass positioned over the camera. Sequence one begins with Pollock outside of his studio. The scene quickly fades out and transitions into a short view of Pollock's studio, panning right to survey the rural landscape of Springs, Long Island.

[54] Richard R. Ness, "A Lotta Night Music: The Sound of Film Noir," *Cinema Journal* 47 No. 2 (Winter 2008): 52-73.

Layered over the film's visual shots is a two-minute narration by Pollock, which begins with biographical information and ends with his description of his painting process. After surveying the site, the camera provides a sequence of shots of Pollock outside of his studio painting in his iconic drip technique.[55] Pollock in action is juxtaposed with ambiguous close-up shots of the objects surrounding him. After Pollock's narration stops, discordant sound serves as background noise.

Namuth layered the scene with a voiceover Pollock recorded before he began filming *Pollock Painting*. This reflective narration is similar to the noir technique of the *flashback*. Historian Maureen Turim defined the flashback as a "privileged moment in unfolding that juxtaposes different moments of temporal reference."[56] Turim argued that the flashback questioned "spatio-temporal" relationships by critiquing the classical narrative structure. As a cinematic device, the flashback technically skews the diachronic temporal reading of a film, detracting from the "reality effect" of the classical narrative structure. The flashback as a trope involves a certain assumption of chronological temporality and order that is embedded into the structure of classical narrative film.[57] Classical narrative film has an indexical quality, in which third person perspective dialogue along with *mise-en-scène* imagery create the illusion of an actual event happening in time, physiologically mimicking the first person visual eye of a subject in the world. The flashback, however, does not present a narrative through a linear unfolding of cause and effect. Instead, the flashback exposes multiple points in time simultaneously, ultimately reversing the linear progression of time in classical narrative

[55] The red canvas Namuth film's Pollock painting in this scene is now lost. Pepe Karmel, "Pollock at Work: The Films and Photographs of Hans Namuth," printed in *Jackson Pollock*, ed. by Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998), 91.
[56] Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History*, 2.
[57] Ibid, 13.

film, in which the present simply unfolds into the future, and instead the flashback shows a moment in the present that is quickly subsumed into the past.

The flashback is a form of temporal layering that presented multiple points of time simultaneously. In a flashback sequence, a character in the present movie time retells a previous event in his past. The scene then cuts to the actual past events being described by the character. The present is then submerged into the past, which in turn becomes the new illusionistic present of the movie. For example in the noir film *Double Indemnity* (1944), the film begins with the ending and the actual plot of the movie unfolds as the protagonist's flashback. In the opening sequence of the movie, the viewer is introduced to the protagonist Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) confessing his guilt of the murder of Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) into a Dictaphone. Then, the movie flashes back to their first meeting at Dietrichson's Los Angeles mansion. As Neff circles the room waiting to meet Dietrichson for the first time, the past scene is layered with Neff's present flashback confession into the Dictaphone. Within one scene of the movie two temporal spaces (the past and the present) simultaneously unfold: the real present time of Neff's confession shown at the beginning of the movie and the past time presently shown to the viewer alongside Neff's flashback. The past becomes the new present of the film.

The use of the flashback and temporal layering in noir films created a non-linear plot progression. As in noir, Namuth did not use classical narrative and *mise-en-scène* to create an illusion of real-time in which a sequence of events unfold diachronically. This temporal ambiguity is generated by Pollock's voiceover. The voiceover added another temporal layer to the sequence, mimicking the film noir technique of the flashback.

Pollock's voiceover is not part of the cinematic time constructed within the film. Rather, it is Pollock formerly recounting his process after he presented himself in (filmic) action.[58] This re-telling, existing within "real" time (outside of film time), layered over Namuth's cinematic time, distorted any potentially linear reading of the artist at work.

The temporal layering embedded in the structure of the flashback detracted from an illusionistic reading of the film as *mise-en-scène* by creating an ambiguous cinematic time. Namuth utilized explicit editing for a synchronic representation rather than a diachronic temporal structure to present Pollock's process. To further problematize a linear temporal reading of Pollock's process, in conjunction with Pollock's voice-over Namuth presented multiple fragmentary images of a single moment simultaneously to detract from a total reading of Pollock's drip technique. He juxtaposed shots of Pollock in action painting with surveying shots of the scene, distorting a linear vision of Pollock's actual act of painting. These distorted close-up shots include his shoes, paintings and materials, along with an intense detail of Pollock's face, showing him light a cigarette. Instead of a linear shot of Pollock painting, in which the present unfolds into the future, one is instead presented with a collage effect in which multiple presents happen simultaneously. This multiplicity of moments in time happening simultaneously is at the essence of the flashback. In a flashback the viewer is presented both the past and the present at the same time. Namuth showed different moments in time simultaneously when he juxtaposed close-up shots of Pollock's surrounding between Pollock's painting process and his voice-over. Namuth used film noir's interest in skewing a linear temporal

[58] The narration came from a compilation of earlier interviews and were edited by Pollock for the film. Soussloff, "Jackson Pollock's Post-Ritual Performance," 66.

reading of a scene through Pollock's voice-over flashback as well as his presentation of multiple moments in time simultaneously.

As a viewer, one is forced to see the sequence as piecemeal rather than see the sequence as a liner story about Jackson Pollock. In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, one sees a similar narrative structure to that utilized by Namuth, one in which time unfolds ambiguously rather than sequentially. The plot of the film is about a woman who takes an afternoon nap at her house. A dream sequence, repeated three times, takes over the rest of the film. In her dream, Maya Deren is plagued by a violent image of a hooded creature. Deren continually chases the allegorical figure within the film. The chase scene, looped three times, becomes the plot of the film. This repetition does not follow a diachronic linear plot in which a present continuously unfolds into the future. Instead, the plot of the film consists of the same present scene looped continuously. Both Pollock and Deren's filmic representation existed within an ambiguous cinematic time, similar to the temporal layering involved in a film noir flashback.

Sequence Two: Object Symbolism

Sequence two of *Pollock Painting* begins four minutes into the film. This sequence shows quick juxtapositions between Pollock's absence (revealed through the presence of his shadow) and close-up, fragmented images of his paintings. After surveying the paintings with the camera, Namuth shows Pollock's wife Lee Krasner nailing Pollock's painting to the studio wall. The remainder of the sequence is framed by still shots of a few of Pollock's paintings. Object symbolism is a popular technique used in film noir. In film noir, objects possess more meaning than their use value, and their

recurrence is key to the narrative structure.[59] As Marueen Turim argued, the circulations of symbolic objects form the "psychoanalytic narrative economy of the film."[60] Objects are injected with meaning in order to aid in character development. Turim continued her discussion of object symbolism by arguing that the recurrence of these objects engaged structures of repetition and return that contributed to the fatalism of the film.[61]

In film noir, a character's image was juxtaposed with inanimate objects. The objects were then used as stand-ins for the character himself. In *Laura* (1944), the absence of the (allegedly) deceased character Laura (Gene Tierney) was underscored by both the dominance of her portrait and the presence on the soundtrack of her leitmotif.[62] Not only do mundane objects stand in for the characters themselves, but they were also placed beside characters, adding to the identity of the character. In *Phantom Lady* (1944) for example, Jack Lombard (Franchot Tone), the delusional murderer of the protagonist Scott Henderson's (Alan Curtis) wife, is identified as a "mad artist" by Vincent Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (1889), which hangs in his studio. An ordinary object (a painting) adds another personality trait to the mysterious character (Jack Lombard).

Similar to the symbolic juxtaposition in *Laura* and *Phantom Lady*, Namuth juxtaposed Pollock's absent image (his shadow) with objects (in this case, Pollock's paintings) to aide in character development. In sequence two Pollock's absence was exchanged with his symbolic presence by juxtaposing Pollock's shadow with close-up images of his paintings. The behaviors of ordinary objects (paintings) take the place of

[59] Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History*, 147.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid, 148.
[62] Richard R. Ness, "A Lotta Night Music: The Sounds of Film Noir," 62.

defining Pollock's character. Even though Pollock was absent from the scene his presence as a painter was symbolically realized through his paintings.

The paintings replaced Pollock himself and took an active role in defining Pollock's character as an action painter. In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, objects were also used as replacements for the protagonist's body. The viewer sees Deren only in absence: either through the presence of her shadow or through her personified dream-self. Like Pollock, Deren's absence, visualized through her dream-self, was juxtaposed with ordinary objects, including a key, a telephone, a knife and a flower. As film historian Lauren Rabinovitz commented, "the relation of subject to object is reversed: the woman becomes passive while the objects act aggressively."[63] The looped shots of the dream-selves chasing the hooded figure were presupposed by an action of an object. For example, a key falls before the dream-self enters the house (this sequence repeats three times). This key symbolically represented Deren's main objective in the film: an attempt to unlock the figure's psychological purpose. Deren's body remains absent throughout the film, but her presence is symbolically shown through the repetition of objects. Hans Namuth used a similar plot construction in his film *Pollock Painting*. Similar to Deren's symbolic representation through objects, Pollock's (absent) body is symbolically represented through the presence of the objects that define him, his paintings. The paintings in *Pollock Painting* and the objects in *Meshes of the Afternoon* acted like the inanimate objects in film noir because the objects continued to define the protagonist's objective within the film despite the character's absence.

Sequence Three: The Destruction of the Protagonist

[63] Maria Pramaggiore, "Performance and Persona in the U.S. Avante-Garde: The Case of Maya Deren," *Cinema Journal* Vol. 36 No. 2 (Winter 1997): 29.

The third and final sequence begins six minutes into the film. The scene shows Pollock painting on glass positioned horizontally alongside the camera's lens. This was not Pollock's idea; Namuth suggested the scene to explore a different viewing angle of Pollock's process. Namuth chose to shoot from this angle in order to show the viewer an exciting perspective of Pollock flinging paint onto a canvas. However, there is nothing "Pollock" about this final scene: the viewer does not watch Pollock fling paint onto the glass aggressively, an act characteristic of his action technique, but instead watches Pollock's careful hand steadily pour paint onto the glass surface. Although Namuth's aesthetic suggestion of painting on glass presented an interesting visual effect, this final sequence only showed that the action painter image of Pollock is inevitably in demise. Similar to the noir protagonist, Pollock easily fell victim to his exterior forces by succumbing to Namuth's suggestion.

Sequence three exemplified the noir strategy of the destruction of the protagonist. The inevitable downfall of the protagonist was a popular theme in film noir connected to the genre's overall pessimism and fatalism.[64] Maureen Turim argued that the noir psyche was an "agent of evil, causing the destruction of self and of others."[65] Protagonists were usually depicted as strong, heroic figures that followed the conventional virtuous morals of civil justness. Their role within the movie stood in opposition to the villainous antagonist. There was an easily distinguishable opposition between good and evil: the virtuous protagonist defeated the unjust antagonist to symbolize the reign of good over evil in society. Film noir, on the other hand, applied the surrealist tactic of de-sublimation to invert the ideological construction of the "hero." In de-sublimation, instead of

[64] Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History*, 143.
[65] Ibid, 144.

transforming unacceptable morals into socially acceptable actions (sublimation), noir directors enforced and made visible the unacceptable character flaws usually hidden by the just actions of the "hero." Noir directors blurred the lines between good and evil and defined the protagonist as another degenerate character within the crowd. The protagonist was no longer the heroic savior of just society, but became another victim of the violence on the streets and more importantly, a victim even to himself.[66]

The noir protagonist not only fell victim to external social violence but also to violent anxieties within his own psyche. The destruction of the subject exemplified through the noir sensibility was shown through the protagonist's inability to bear his own actual existence. Self-destruction in film noir was schematized a number of ways, most evidently through an eroticized treatment of violence. As James Naremore described it, the film noir "revived the theme of violence" with a richly elaborated "ceremony of killing."[67] In *A Double Life* (1947), for example, the protagonist Anthony John (Ronald Colman), a celebrated stage actor, takes on the starring role in a stage adaption of *Othello*. However, John's psyche is unable to fend off the character he plays, and he himself begins to live as Othello.[68] In the end, John kills his beautiful mistress Pat Kroll (Shelley Winters), but pleads his insanity after he is unable to remember the actual act. Not only does the protagonist self-destruct, his destruction is also paired with an eroticized act of violence, as he slowly strangles his mysterious mistress to death.

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[66] Ibid, 19. Doss also talks about the anti-heroism of film noir characters in *Benton, Pollock and the Politics of Modernism*, 338.
[67] James Naremore, "American Film Noir: The History of an Idea," 19.
[68] In Shakespeare's play *Othello* (c. 1601-1604), the character Othello kills his wife after his servant tricks him into thinking his wife had an affair, only to find out she was innocent, in which he then commits suicide.

Namuth explored the film noir technique of the self-destruction of the protagonist in his final sequence of *Pollock Painting*. Like Anthony John in *A Double Life*, Namuth portrayed Pollock as a character who was unable to endure his role in life. Anthony John could not fulfill his obligation as an actor; instead, John's own self was subsumed by the role he played. This final sequence marked a moment of departure from Pollock's constructed image. Up until this point Pollock was presented in the media as an action painter. For the first time, Pollock's role is reversed: no longer an energetic, aggressive action painter, Pollock is instead presented as an unsure individual that second-guessed his painting style. Pollock abandoned his action style, defined by his aggressive drip technique revealed at the beginning of the film, and replaced it in sequence three with a style uncharacteristic of his own definition of painting. Pollock acted against his own better judgment of what successful art production constituted. This extreme inversion from an aggressively active performance to a delicate slow-paced style exemplified Pollock's noir self-destruction.

Noir protagonists' fatalism and his inability to escape a pessimistic trajectory are manifested not only in their actions, but also in their voiceover.[69] In Namuth's film, for example, sequence three begins with Pollock bending over a sheet of glass. As he begins painting, Pollock states, "This is the first time I'm using glass as a medium."[70] Shortly after he starts painting he begins sprinkling rocks over the sheet of glass. After about one minute of filming, Namuth cuts to Pollock erasing his signature from the glass. Pollock

[69] Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History*, 177.
[70] The fact that Namuth persuaded Pollock to uncharacteristically paint on glass, as well as the picturesque positioning of the camera also allude to the films non-objective status. Tom Flinn discussed the use of the tilted camera in his article "Three Faces of Film Noir," first published in 1976, reprinted in *Film Noir Reader 2*, 36. Flinn stated that the use of the tilted camera was popular in film noir movies, adding to the distortion of space, creating an unsettling effect for the viewer.

then states, "I lost contact with my first painting on glass and I started another one." Pollock deliberately erased his painting to start an entirely new project. The erasure of his painting is uncharacteristic of Pollock's own process. During his voice-over flashback narrative in sequence one at the beginning of the film, Pollock stated, "Sometimes I lose the painting, but I have no fear of changes, of destroying the image, because a painting has a life of its own. I try to let it live." Pollock's erasure of the painting in sequence three to start a new painting goes against his own ostensibly instinctual painting process in which he stated that he lets the painting have "a life of its own." Instead of allowing the painting to "live," Pollock destroyed it along with his own signature, symbolically showing his inability to maintain his intuitive painting process.

Hans Namuth's aesthetic suggestion of filming Pollock painting on glass caused Pollock to symbolically self-destruct in this last sequence because Pollock completely reversed the action painting process that characteristically defined him. Instead of witnessing Pollock's "action" persona, viewers were shown a painter delicately pouring paint and other materials onto a canvas. Following his symbolic self-destruction, Pollock began to paint a new picture on the glass surface.[71] However, his process was not characteristic of the "action" painting process at the beginning of the film, in which he stated that the "life" of the painting unfolded without the artist second-guessing its process.

Indeed, Pollock's glass painting in sequence three is the opposite of the painting process filmed in sequence one, where he aggressively moved around the canvas, quickly throwing paint onto its surface. Instead, in sequence three Pollock started his second glass painting with the meticulous layering of inanimate objects, including rocks, long wires,

[71] This work became Pollock's *Number 20* (1950).

and other random materials. He continued to re-arrange the materials for about one minute. When Pollock finally started to paint, the aggressive "action" of his drip technique shown in sequence one was replaced with a delicate pouring of paint from a small can onto the surface of the glass. Moreover, when he started to drip again rather than pour the paint, the sporadic, delicate splatters replaced the athletic extension of his arm in his drip technique. Pollock became a characteristic noir protagonist in front of Namuth's lense; Pollock fell victim to the exterior forces around him by abiding by Namuth's suggestion, resulting in his symbolic self-destruction through the visual loss of the action painter persona so forcefully represented by Namuth's previous photographs of the artist and in the pages of *Life* magazine.

Namuth's film *Pollock Painting* foreshadowed Pollock's demise in his career as well as his noir-like accidental death due to drunk driving. Michael Leja made this connection between the noir "rough and tough" personas presented in photographic documents like Hans Namuth and Abstract Experssionist artist's actual deaths and suicides.[72] Before his death, Pollock's art suffered critical backlash; he retreated from his drip-technique paintings and returned to black-and-white figural compositions. Indeed it is telling that Pollock's life spiraled down a noir-esque vortex after Namuth wrapped *Pollock Painting*. At the end of the last day of filming with Namuth in November 1951, and after four years of abstinence and action painting, Pollock drank a large glass of bourbon, started a fight with wife Krasner as well as their house guests, and angrily knocked over the dinner table, food and all. Pollock never stopped drinking until his fatal automobile accident on August 10, 1956.[73] Pollock's symbolic noir self-destruction in

[72] Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Painting and Subjectivity in the 1940s*, 114.
[73] Caroline M. Soussloff, "Jackson Pollock's Post-Ritual Performance: Memories Arrested in Space," 61.

Pollock Painting, in which he completely went against his "action" painting persona, foreshadowed Pollock's actual self-destruction.

Deren's self-destruction in *Meshes of the Afternoon* paralleled Namuth's presentation of Pollock in his film. The same looped narrative (consisting of Deren chasing after an allegorical figure of loneliness) happens three times within the structure of the film. During the last dream event, the third Deren dream figure comes in contact with her previous dream selves. As the three dream personas sit around the table, one inevitably attempts to kill the "real" Deren who sits sleeping in her living room chair. Although Deren eventually wakes up, the ending of the film shows a shot of Deren dead in her chair, pointing to her suicide. This "splitting of the ego" symbolically represented the destruction of the protagonist. Deren inevitably fell victim to her own subjectivity. Deren represented herself crumbling under psychological pressures. Namuth represented Pollock in a similar fashion: at the end of *Pollock Painting* viewers watched Pollock dismiss both his infamous drip technique and his aggressive dance around the canvas, in exchange for a delicate painting style foreign to the "action painter" persona that had previously defined Pollock as an artist.

Conclusion

The use of the cinematic techniques of the flashback, object symbolism and the self-destruction of the protagonist in Hans Namuth's film *Pollock Painting* and in the Maya Deren's experimental film *Meshes of the Afternoon* shows that a film noir sensibility explicitly utilized in noir popular culture films like *Double Indemnity* pervaded visual culture when Namuth filmed *Pollock Painting*. The noir sensibility probed the existential angst of the film's protagonist, who inevitably falls victim to his

own troubled psyche. So too, in a fashion, did Hans Namuth. Namuth appropriated Pollock's "action" image from the mass media, including *Life* magazine, only to represent (and even allude) to Pollock's inevitable demise. Namuth's "noir sensibility," expressed through *Pollock Painting*, depicted "Pollock" as the troubled protagonist destined to violently self-destruct before the viewer's eyes. In *Pollock Painting*, Namuth filmed Pollock carefully painting on glass in sequence three, representing Pollock's dismissal of his infamous drip technique in exchange for delicate figuration. Paradoxically, this noir image of the artist reflected Pollock's life: unable to live up to his "action painter" persona Pollock returned to his favored alcohol addiction, abandoned his famed drip-technique, and violently self-destructed.

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