

The figure of the journalist in early film noir. *Stranger on the third floor* (1940, Boris Ingster)

La figura del periodista en el nacimiento del film noir. *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940, Boris Ingster)



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Abstract:

This article summarises the results of an investigation into the figure of the journalist and the importance of journalism in early film noir in the United States. To this end, we analyse the film *Stranger on the Third floor* (1940, Boris Ingster), a low budget feature (a so-called B-movie) produced by RKO. This film should be considered the first full-blown example of the US film noir genre and in it, the press and the character of the journalist are key to understanding its plot, internal narrative, and even the structure of the film. Here, we propose a three-fold analysis encompassing the historical context, plot, and form of the film to examine how Boris Ingster and the RKO cinematic production team succeeded in making *Stranger on the Third Floor* into a stylistic model for US film noir in which journalism plays a key role.

Keywords:

Film noir; Boris Ingster; journalist; film; press.

Resumen:

El presente artículo es un resumen de una investigación que aborda la figura del periodista y la importancia del periodismo en el nacimiento de film noir estadounidense. Para ello se analiza el filme *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940, Boris Ingster), largometraje de bajo presupuesto (categoría B) de la productora RKO. Esta película debe ser considerada como el primer ejemplo completo de dicho género y en ella la figura de la prensa y el reportero son claves para entender la trama, la narrativa interna y hasta el aspecto formal de la obra. Planteamos un triple análisis –histórico, argumental y formal para analizar– cómo Boris Ingster y el equipo de cineasta de la RKO lograron en *Stranger on the Third Floor* crear un modelo para la construcción estilística del film noir donde el periodismo resulta clave.

Palabras claves:

Film noir; Boris Ingster; periodista; cine; prensa.

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1. Introduction

1.1. *Film noir's "origine mythique" and the figure of the journalist*

In 2012, Jean-Pierre Esquenazi published a defence of the “origine mythique du film noir” (2012, 337), or, more precisely, the enigmatic yet epic or legendary nature of the inception of *film noir* as a genre. His reflections addressed the complexities of identifying this North American genre that endured for a mere decade, from 1940 to 1950. In particular, Esquenazi cited the important contributions of his fellow countrymen, Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier, both critics, the former also a journalist. These authors are responsible for two seminal texts on the topic, Frank’s (1946) celebrated article: “Un nouveau genre policier: l’aventure criminelle” published in August 1946 and Chartier’s (1946) work, “Les Américains aussi font des films noirs” which appeared in November of the same year.

As Esquenazi reminds us, neither Nino Frank nor Jean-Pierre Chartier could ever have imagined the impact their articles would have on world cinematographic history. Their brief texts –or critiques– are best described as specialist journalism, rather than as academic or historical analyses (Esquenazi, 2012: 340). However, at the same time, these short works achieved one important goal, specifically, they offer, without doubt, the best explanation of the features distinguishing *film noir* from the *thrillers* or crime films of the past –or the future:

Their originality derives, primarily, from how they classify the films they deal with: Frank and Chartier “create” the category of film noir: firstly, to distinguish these films from ordinary thrillers; secondly to indicate their moral decadence in opposition to French film noir (Esquenazi, 2012: 349)¹.

Although Frank (1946) and Chartier (1946) differ in their opinions on certain aspects of *film noir*, above all, concerning questions of morality in this genre, together, their articles offer a successful classification of the genre. Essentially, to qualify as *film noir* a work must be not only feature length and North American but also produced in Hollywood; it should have a crime-based plot; it should be subjective and have a prominent central character; and finally, its visual conventions should be highly expressionistic. The unquestionable merits of their authors’ ideas concerning *film noir's* “origine mythique” have, however, given these two brief articles an exaggerated authority. Indeed, until the nineteen eighties, *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941) was taken to be the first example of *film noir* purely because it was the oldest film cited in Nino Frank’s (1946) classic text. Nevertheless, while the contributions of these two journalist-critics are extremely relevant and unquestionably valuable, both Frank and Chartier completed their analysis without access to the full range of US filmography. These two French writers based their work solely on their recollections of the films released in France and did not consult –as might have been desirable– any Hollywood film archives. Thus, these two articles cannot be used as the only sources of information to identify either the origins of *film noir* or, indeed the seminal film from which the genre grew –if, in fact, such a work exists. Anthony J. Steinbock (2023) claims that H. Bruce Humberstone’s *I Wake Up Screaming* (1941) initiated the *film noir* genre, while other scholars such

1 Translated to English from the original French: Leur originalité réside évidemment dans leur façon de classer les films dont ils parlent : Frank et Chartier “inventent” la catégorie de film noir, le premier pour distinguer ces films des films policiers ordinaires, le second pour signaler leur décrépitude morale en les opposant au film noir à la française (Esquenazi, 2012: 349).

as Eddie Robson (2005), Miklitsch (2014), and the authors of the present article, would suggest instead that Boris Ingster's *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940) is its inaugural work.

In this article we propose two areas of discussion: first, we intend to reassert the originality and foundational nature of Boris Ingster's *Stranger on the Third Floor* in the canon of classic US *film noir*; and secondly, we shall demonstrate how the figure of the journalist and journalism itself constitute the two fundamental pillars of the film's narrative proposition. As we will explore, the journalist is a prominent figure in US *film noir* from its inception, or "origine mythique"; and, alongside the detective, is one of the iconic characters, or archetypes, of the genre.

Of course, as both Rick Altman (2000) and Alain Silver (2013) have discussed, identifying the first film noir feature –or indeed the first of any genre– could be seen as an unproductive, even absurd, task:

To answer in kind, "So what?" *Did* the first audiences for *The Great Train Robbery* or *Nosferatu* congratulate themselves on attending the first Western or the earliest adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*? The best answer to anyone's assertion that filmmakers of the classic period never specifically decided to make "a film noir" is still cinematographer John Alton's evocation of the noir milieu in his book *Painting with Light*: "The room is dark. A strong streak of light sneaks in from the hall under the door. The sound of steps is heard. The shadows of two feet divide the light streak. A brief silence follows. There is suspense in the air" (Silver, 2013: s/p).

Despite this, we think it could be potentially revelational to identify the film that might properly be considered as a bridge between the crime films of the nineteen thirties and *film noir*. As we shall discuss, *Stranger on the Third Floor* could be such a film and, as the lead role is played by a journalist rather than a detective this work also allows us to explore our second aim of demonstrating the narrative importance of journalism and the journalist within the framework of this film and *film noir* more generally.

There is ample literature analysing the figure of the journalist in various cinematographic eras and genres. With respect to Spanish cinema, this topic has been addressed in the work of, among others, María Cristina San José de la Rosa, Mercedes Miguel and Alicia Gil Torres (2020), concerning Argentine cinema we should cite work by Giacomelli (2020), while there is a huge breadth of work relating to the role of journalism in classic Hollywood *film noir* (for a review of this area see, Spicer and Hanson, 2013). The present article discusses how the central character in *Stranger on the Third Floor* is defined and explained by his work as a reporter and how Boris Ingster gives journalism and journalists a key role in the search for truth. This quest is an essential ingredient in the classic thriller and, in *Stranger on the Third Floor*, there would be no narrative on the truth without the presence of the press in its plot and as part of its setting.

2. Method: a triple analysis

Although academic debate concerning the existence or otherwise of *film noir* as a specific genre has been settled for some time, there is still some divergence of opinion among researchers. Before we outline our own analysis, we would like to start with the words of Foster Hirsch:

Noir deals with criminal activity, from a variety of perspectives, in a general mood of dislocation and bleakness which earned the style its name. Unified by a dominant tone and sensibility, the noir canon constitutes a distinct style of film-making; but it also conforms to genre requirements since it operates within a set of narrative and visual conventions [...] Noir tells its stories in a particular way, and

in a particular visual style. The repeated use of narrative and visual structures ... certainly qualifies noir as a genre, one that is in fact as heavily coded as the western (Hirsch, 1981: 72).

Interestingly, the aspects of the genre that Hirsch identifies here coincide –although not identically– with several of the defining elements highlighted by Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier. These can be synthesised, in the words of Conrad (2006b:10), as: “the tone of dark cynicism and alienation, the narrative conventions like the femme fatale and the flashback voice-overs, and the shadowy black-and-white look of the movie”.

Thus, for the purposes of this research, we intend to search for evidence of these defining elements in *Stranger on the Third Floor* using three layers of analysis to cover each of the main factors influencing cinematic genre: first we examine the film’s creation and reception system, that is, make a historical analysis of its production, distribution, showing, and impact; second, we analyse the film’s plot; and third we explore the film’s structure. For this triple analysis we propose the following objectives:

First analysis: Production

Objective 1. To give a historical context to the film’s production.

Objective 2. To explore the impact of the film’s release and re-release in non-celluloid formats. Second analysis: Plot

Objective 3. To describe the narrative elements of *film noir* contained in the film.

Objective 4. To demonstrate the impact of journalists and journalism in the film’s plot

Third analysis: Structure

Objective 5. To demonstrate that the film conforms to the visual conventions of the *film noir* genre.

Through these five objectives we seek to justify the assertion that *Stranger on the Third Floor* (Boris Ingster, 1940) constitutes the first example of the *film noir* genre and demonstrate the prime importance of journalists and journalism in this US film.

2.1. Production analysis: historical context and impact

According to the records of the film’s production company, RKO, *Stranger on the Third Floor*, is a B-movie, or low-budget film and while it was not totally unknown, when first released in 1940 –first to the US domestic market and later to the remainder of the English-speaking world– it reached only a small audience and had little impact (RKO Archive 1940-1941). At the time the film was being made in RKO’s Hollywood studios, the second world war was raging, and naturally, this impeded the commercial success of the film outside US borders, particularly in Europe and its colonies.

RKO’s archives, held at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA), in their Library Special Collections, include the working notes for *Stranger on the Third Floor* and provide details about the film’s production (RKO Archive, 1940-1941). However, no information exists –or has been archived– concerning the film’s release and distribution on the world stage. What is available are various newspaper articles about the film’s reception in the United States, for instance one by Bosley Crowther (1940), which we shall return to later, another by Douglas Churchill (1940) for the *New York Times*, and Staf’s (1940) article for the *Variety Review Database*. In addition, despite the ongoing conflict in Europe, the film was released in London as recorded in an article that appeared in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* (Anonymous, 1940).

Before *Stranger on the Third Floor*, Boris Ingster was an emerging screenwriter and this film, a small production as far as RKO was concerned, is his debut feature film. The Yiddish-speaking Ingster, born in 1903 in Riga (at that time part of the Russian Empire), formed part of an important, and numerous, group of Jewish immigrants, largely of Ashkenazi descent, that came to be known for its contribution to the initial flourishing and consolidation of *film noir* (Brook, 2009). Originally named Boris Mikhailovich Azarkh, Ingster had collaborated with his brother Alexei Mikhailovich Granovsky in Mosco in the 1920's where he also met and worked with the celebrated director Serguéi Eisenstein (Ingster, 1951). Ingster emigrated to the United States in the 1930's and came to Los Angeles where he wrote screenplays for romantic comedies such as *Dancing Pirate* (Lloyd Corrigan, 1936), *Thin Ice* (Sidney Lanfield, 1937), *I'll Give a Million* (Walter Lang, 1938) and *Happy Landing* (Roy del Ruth, 1938).

At the time of its release, there is nothing to suggest that RKO considered *Stranger on the Third Floor* to be in any way important in their production schedule or commercial strategy. In the words of Palmer, the film was: "A B production (only 64 minutes in running time) that was hardly intended by RKO executives to be groundbreaking in any sense," (Palmer, 2013: 125). There is, in fact, only one element in this small, low-budget project that stands out, an element that would be key to establishing *film noir* in Hollywood: the presence of the popular actor, Peter Lorre. This artist, also a European Jew of Yiddish background, dedicated the last two days of his RKO contract to filming two scenes for Boris Ingster's *Stranger on the Third Floor*. Despite his brief appearance, Lorre became the commercial face of the film and was pictured in all the original publicity posters and press releases (RKO Archive, 1940-1941). As might be expected, his name also appears in the largest typeface in the film's initial credits. Thus, when Lorre signed with Twentieth Century Fox, the journalist Douglas W. Churchill, writing in the *New York Times*, recalls Lorre as the "star" of *Stranger on the Third Floor* (Churchill, 1940).

In the context of the second world war, the low-budget nature of the film meant that its distribution beyond the English-speaking world was very poor. In the Spanish-speaking world, *Stranger on the Third Floor*, like many classic titles, is subject to cataloguing errors due to the many different ways in which the title has been translated. In Spain alone, for instance, the film's title was translated as both *El extraño del tercer piso* and *El desconocido del tercer piso*. While in Mexico and Argentina, the film was released as *El misterio del tercer piso*. This diversity of translations into Spanish arises because Boris Ingster's film was fully on commercial release in the early 1940's and thus, the feature only became more widely known many decades later -in the 1980's and '90's- when copies became available in formats other than celluloid: VHS, DVD's and Blue-ray, and could thus be seen outside of cinemas.

Nevertheless, and despite its low profile throughout the 1940's, from the end of the 20th and into the first decade of the 21st century, significance of *Stranger on the Third Floor* both in terms of its structure and as a seminal work of *film noir*, began to be recognised. As Dixon notes, *Stranger on the Third Floor* "is often cited as one of the first unadulterated film noirs, and in its unrelentingly bleak and hallucinogenic structure" (Dixon, 2009: 9).

Notwithstanding its low-budget, B-movie status, now, in the second decade of the 21st century, *Stranger on the Third Floor* is considered to be one of Boris Ingster's masterworks. In fact, rather than a minor work by a great Hollywood studio, it is better described as an experimental film that took advantage of all that a major studio could offer. Robert Miklitsch interprets the film thus:

... but it's easy to appreciate [...] the collective brilliance of the creative personnel surrounding him [Boris Ingster], including cinematography (Nicholas Musuraca), art direction (Van Nest Polglase), music (by Roy Webb), and, last but by no means least, sound recording (Bailey Fesler). Not only is RKO's "house sound" distinctly audible in *Stranger on the Third Floor* (in, for example, the film's pervasive recourse to an echo chamber), but Michael Ward's (John McGuire) interior monologue sets the precedent for one of the defining features of classic noir: first-person voiceover narration (Miklitsch, 2014: 204).

As a result, while RKO may have produced *Stranger on the Third Floor* as a B-movie, this is no reason to dismiss the film as an irrelevance. Quite the reverse, the first of Boris Ingster's feature-length films, it boasts not only a solid narrative structure and but also all the requisite elements of *film noir*. The low-budget nature of this work meant that Ingster had to innovate and take risks with the filming. Most of the department heads involved in *Stranger on the Third Floor*, the use of narration, the visual conventions, and even the sound of this film, however, seem to indicate stylistic choices on the part of its producer, symbols of an identity that the cinematographers involved would go on to impose on their own *noir* productions. Of course, at the same time RKO's role is far from irrelevant –of all the large Hollywood production companies it gained by far the most artistic and commercial success with this particular genre.

2.2. Plot analysis: the journalist in action

We begin this strand of our research by providing a brief summary of the film's plot, with particular attention to the ending. As the narrator tells us, this is the story of Michael Ward (John McGuire), a reporter, the fictitious *New York Star*² and his fiancé, Jane (Margaret Tallichet), who intend to be married as soon as he gets the promotion he has been waiting for. We also learn that Ward has recently witnessed a murder and now needs to testify in court, events that are shown being reported in the press. The film opens with a scene in a café in which Jane asks her fiancé if he is sure he saw the accused, Joe Briggs (Elisha Cook Jr), commit the crime. For the first time, Ward doubts himself and, later, in court, he testifies only to having seen the accused touch the body explaining that he was not present when the murder itself took place. Ward mentions that, a few days before the crime, he saw, the accused, Joe arguing with the murder victim, Nick, who happens to own the diner where he was found dead. Ward also relates how he heard Joe vowing to kill Nick. Joe is convicted and condemned to death.

In the solitude of his room, Ward reflects on Jane's words and realises that he may have been mistaken and, in fact, he himself has also publicly expressed a desire to kill someone: his neighbour (Charles Halton) whom he hates. Ward recalls several episodes with this man and fantasises about, how, if this neighbour were murdered, he himself might be accused of the crime. He imagines being vilified and hounded by the press as Joe was. At that moment, Ward notices that he hasn't heard anything from his neighbour for a while and his apartment seems strangely silent. He goes out on the third-floor corridor and sees a stranger (Peter Lorre) leaving the neighbouring apartment. His neighbour really has been murdered and Ward, terrified, considers fleeing; but, in the end he calls the police. Just as he feared, the chief of police suspects the young journalist of this new murder.

2 There was, in fact, a real-life *New York Star* in print between 1868 and 1891, and another paper of the same name between 1948 and 1949, however these are not related to the paper depicted in the film.

To prove her fiancé's innocence, Jane begins her own investigation to find the stranger. Alone, she scours the streets of New York until she finds the murderer in a bar. The man, realising he has been found out, tries to kill Jane but she manages to escape: the murderer pursues her down the street he gets hit by a truck before he can catch her. As the murderer lies dying at the scene of the accident, he confesses his crimes to the crowd that has gathered.

In the film's closing sequence, shot in the same café as the opening scene, Jane and Ward celebrate their happy ending. Ward has got his promotion at the newspaper and they can finally get married. At the very end, on the way to their wedding, the happy couple meet Joe who, absolved of the crime he did not commit, is now working as a taxicab driver.

The first and final scenes of the film demonstrate a circular construction centred on journalism (Figure 1); both take place on a New York street where, visible in the background, in large, capital letters is the word: *NEWSPAPERS*.

Figure 1. Stills from the opening and final scenes of *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)



Source: Internet Archive

In the still from the beginning of the film only the word *NEWSPAPERS* is visible, however, in the last scene we get a slightly wider view allowing us to see the name of the newspaper vending kiosk: *Out of Town*. Journalism is clearly an important theme in the film. It is no coincidence that the film's opening and closing scenes are set on hustling streets where the presence of the print media is highlighted. These scenes clearly intend to show the journalistic –the events that might make the news. Indeed, according to Palmer, the film contains a certain semi-documentary element in its approach to journalism creating a self-reflexivity that is almost in the mould of an audiovisual essay. Although this may seem to be taking things a little too far, we would agree with Palmer's contention that:

What may be most interesting about the film, however, is that its story features a “dark passage,” a self-reflexive turn toward a morally vexed interiority away from the dramatically oriented objectivism hitherto characteristic of the standard Hollywood product of the era, in which the narrative is advanced by exterior forms of representation, that is, by dialogue and action (Palmer, 2013: 126).

The semi-documentary or self-reflexive nature of the film referred to by Palmer, is contained in the lead character's profession as a reporter and the fact that he must himself testify to the things he has seen. Thus, the film and its plot present an intriguing variation of the *noir* genre: in the canon of films where the hero is a detective –a retired police officer or private detective, perhaps– it is the testimony of others that must be verified; however, in *Stranger on the Third Floor*, the reporter must verify his

own testimony. It is he himself, thanks to Jane, who must deduce that his original interpretation of events –Joe standing over the body of the man he was known to hate must mean he was the murderer– followed a false logic and, as a result led to a false conclusion. That is, while Ward knew that Joe hated the victim and had seen him at the scene of the crime these facts alone did not make Joe the murderer.

The premise of the whole film revolves around the journalistic process; the hero is not only a reporter but he is also the news as the key witness in a murder trial (Figure 2). Furthermore, if Ward questions his own testimony, his dreams of being promoted at the (fictitious) *New York Star* might be dashed. Nevertheless, he cannot hope to become a good journalist, or, indeed, citizen, if he is unable to uncover the truth about the murder.

Figure 2. Stills from *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)



Source: Internet Archive

The role of Ward's fiancée is also key to the film's plot. Jane's character is a powerful contrast to the stereotypical *femme fatale* so beloved of *film noir*. She is, in fact, its complete opposite in that not only does she commit no crime but also becomes the detective who saves the day –and the hero. Many scholars see Jane's role as incontrovertible evidence that this film should not be included in the *film noir* cannon. However, there are several other films of this genre featuring female characters who assist in the solving of crimes. Philippa Gates, for instance, cites at least twenty classic *film noir* features in which a woman takes on a minor, or indeed more significant role (2014: 21) as a detective or in unravelling a mystery. Indeed, *Stranger on the Third Floor* is among the titles mentioned by this author for its relevance in this regard. Of course, twenty films is not a great many of the total *film noir* output; however, it does challenge the idea that a film should be excluded for use of this particular narrative device.

The film theorist, Miklitsch discussed the importance of the female sleuth (Miklitsch, 2014: 205) making a clear distinction between the female characters appearing in the first two films of the *noir* genre: *Stranger on the Third Floor* and *The Maltese Falcon*. Thus, far from devaluing Boris Ingster's film, Jane's character is contextualised within the wider movement in which women do investigate and do collaborate in the solving of crimes.

The most striking difference between *Stranger on the Third Floor* and *The Maltese Falcon*, however, may well be the films' respective figuration of femininity. Whereas Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Mary Astor) in *The Maltese Falcon* is a classic *femme fatale* (the first, 1932 adaptation of Hammett's novel was titled *Dangerous Female*), so much so that whatever redemptive qualities accrue in the end to

Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) derive almost entirely from his knight like renunciation of her, Jane (Margaret Tallichet) in *Stranger on the Third Floor* anticipates the female sleuths in *Phantom Lady* (1944), *Black Angel* (1946), *The Dark Corner* (1946), and *I Wouldn't Be in Your Shoes* (1948), intrepid women who actively assume the private-investigative mantle in order to come to the rescue of their distressed male partners (Miklitsch, 2014: 205)

Other critics have expressed reservations about the film's *noir* credentials due to its optimistic ending. For these authors, this kind of 'happily ever after' is in direct opposition to the very essence of *film noir* and, indeed, distinguishes it from the journalist-centred films of the previous decade. Nevertheless, exactly as with the objection to the concept of a woman detective and the absence of a femme fatale, here again there are a significant number of *noir* films that also have happy endings. To name but a few examples from the 1940's, consider *Laura* (1944) and *Fallen Angel* (1945), both by Otto Preminger, *The Big Sleep* by Howard Hawks (1946), *Gilda* by Charles Vidor (1946) and *Dark Passage* by Delmer Daves (1947). In this way, Jane's role in *Stranger on the Third Floor*, while unusual within the film noir genre, is not the only case nor indeed that unusual. Furthermore, her sleuthing in combination with the film's happy ending serve to reinforce the figure of the journalist, in this case, a man who is prepared to admit an error despite the risk of losing his promotion at the *New York Star* and, worse, getting accused of murder himself.

2.3. Structural analysis: representations of journalism

Without doubt, Boris Ingster's most successful gamble as a debut director lies in the structure of *Stranger on the Third Floor*. Since the appearance of Nino Frank's and Jean-Pierre Chartier's articles in the French press, film noir has been associated with photographic expressionism and, in this respect, Ingster's first film is one of the best examples. The first true, perhaps the greatest, *noir* cinematographer, according to Quim Casas (2021) was the Italian, Nicholas Musuraca, known for his "narrative of shadows". Working together on *Stranger on the Third Floor*, Musuraca and Ingster make masterful use of shadow and light keeping large sections of the set in darkness while others are starkly lit to create startling visual contrasts. The result is a deeply sinister atmosphere.

Lighting effects are especially exaggerated in certain scenes, specifically, those where journalism comes to the fore. One such scene is the first time we see the press office. First, we see a close-up of a plaque indicating that this room is a place reserved for journalists, then, through this door, we enter a crowded room and encounter a highly charged, hypermasculine atmosphere (Figure 3). The camera then shows us a panoramic view of the room illuminated, brightly and directly, by light filtering through the slats of a venetian blind.

Figure 3. Stills from the first scene showing the press office in *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)



Source: Internet Archive

The next time the press office makes an appearance, everything is much darker (Figure 4). Our hero, the reporter, is beginning to doubt himself, realising that he may have been mistaken about his interpretation of the murder scene. Ward rings his fiancée, Jane, on the telephone; she happens to be home and, across the distance separating them, they converse. The press office is no longer a busy space filled with activity but one of refuge: dark and solitary. It is now more a space for the conscience or even the subconscious and in the press office and in Jane's apartment alike, the shadows formed by the chairs make sinister shapes. In this way, the expressionism of Musuraca's cinematography is similar to that of European, particularly German, expressionism.

Figure 4. Stills from the second scene featuring the press office in *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)



Source: Internet Archive

It is in the central sequences of the film, however, that Ward fully comes to understand how wrong he has been and, at this point, he dreams that he is the accused of murdering his neighbour (Figure 5). As the nightmare unfolds, the hero finds himself persecuted by other reporters and later, when the story hits the press, all the front-page headlines read "MURDER". This is when Jane reads about it and screams in horror across a phantasmagorical city. Next, hundreds of newspapers spin in the centre of the screen and then we see a group of reporters proudly reading their damning articles about Ward. The nightmare continues and Jane visits Ward in prison where they argue. The flurry of newspapers appears again and, finally, in a gloomy, mostly empty room, Ward sits alone on a prison cot, the immense shadows of gaol bars looming over him. Then, Ward's lawyer comes to tell the prisoner he has been condemned as an evil murderer. Finally, Ward wakes from his nightmare.

This sequence demonstrates the brilliance of Musuraca and Ingster. Indeed, due to its visual construction, many scholars point to this central section of the film as the true birthplace of *film noir* –or at least where its fundamental aesthetics came into being. The importance of journalism in this key moment is evident in various ways, firstly, the hero is a reporter, but secondly,

he stands accused not by the police or a judge, but by his colleagues: other reporters and the media. The effect is all the more terrifying because Ward knows he has no defence. Journalism becomes the essential, causal mechanism of his nightmare.

Figure 5. Stills from the dream sequence in *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)



Source: Internet Archive

As a final example of how the film's structure foregrounds journalism in *Stranger on the Third Floor*, we would point to the three images used in the initial credits (Figure 6). Here are three images of the hero silhouetted against a window engaged in three different activities each one prototypical of "the journalist" as portrayed in films from the 1930's and 40's: smoking, using a typewriter, and making a telephone call. In this way, these images anticipate the core narrative of the film: how the stranger –the murderer– on the third floor will be unmasked by a reporter and his fiancée.

Figure 6. Set of stills showing the images used in the initial credits



Source: Internet Archive

3. Conclusions

As we have attempted to demonstrate with this three-stranded analysis, there is no reason not to consider *Stranger on the Third Floor* as the first *film noir* feature. Its reduced distribution outside the United States due to the Second World War, as well as its status as a B-movie led to its exclusion from the seminal analyses of this topic authored by the French critics and journalists, Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier.

Nevertheless, this film meets all the requirements to be considered as part of the *film noir* genre, both in terms of its production and its structure. Thus, *Stranger on the Third Floor* features a hero who must solve a crime and face a deep moral dilemma drawing the audience into his own subjective experience and while the film lacks a femme fatale, she is substituted by the somewhat less common yet no less authentic *noir* character of the female sleuth. Furthermore, the film contains all the essential expressionist elements in terms of its staging and structure to qualify as *film noir*.

Finally, the role of journalism in this film is highly relevant, indeed crucial to the film's narrative and plot. Firstly, the *film noir* concept has been closely connected to journalism from its origins, indeed, as we have explained, this style of cinema was first conceived in the French press. In the specific case of *Stranger on the Third Floor*, the hero is an ambitious young reporter on his way up in the paper he works for, but he imperils his career by questioning his own testimony in a court case. Journalism thus emerges as the voice of a society capable of condemning the innocent on the basis of a mistaken conclusion. Like the members of a jury or the police, the journalists in *Stranger on the Third Floor* are held responsible for finding the truth even if this defies the apparent evidence of their own eyes and their initial gut instincts.

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5. Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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