Owning It: Dashiell Hammett, *Martha Ivers*, and the Poisonous Noir City.

By Matthew Asprey Gear

*The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (Lewis Milestone, 1946) emerged during a period of radical filmmaking before the McCarthyist crackdown on left-wing elements in Hollywood. This film noir melodrama exposes the murderous political, legal, and economic foundation of (the fictional) Iverstown, Pennsylvania, said to be ‘America’s Fastest Growing Industrial City.’ The power nexus is an arranged marriage between the city’s industrial heiress and an alcoholic District Attorney. Sam Masterson, a war veteran and drifter, is the unwitting catalyst for the self-destruction of this corrupt political order.

This paper examines the foundational influence of Dashiell Hammett’s hardboiled urban vision on the archetypal ‘poisonous noir city’, of which Iverstown is an outstanding example. Hammett’s novel *Red Harvest* (1929) is set in the mining town of Personville or Poisonville (based on Butte, Montana) following the defeat of a worker revolt organised by the Industrial Workers of the World. The physical spaces of Personville are mapped as we follow the Continental Op’s malicious interference with the fluxing alliances of political and criminal power. In its employment of what Dennis Broe calls the ‘outside–the–law fugitive protagonist’, *Martha Ivers* maps the postwar urban landscape of Iverstown through Sam’s attempts to negotiate with the city’s corrupt power nexus.

If *Red Harvest* dramatizes a brief moment of criminal anarchy in the aftermath of the violent suppression of a workers’ revolt, *Martha Ivers* updates the poisonous noir city to an era of capitalist triumph. Taken together, the novel and film present a grim chronology of workers’ fortunes under twentieth century industrial progress.

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In the film noir melodrama *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946), Sam Masterson (Van Heflin) and Toni Marachek (Lizabeth Scott) step into the Purple Peacock nightclub opposite the Iverstown bus terminal.

SAM
(Looking around) Classy – blue lights, music and everything.
TONI
(Drumming her fingertips to the tempo with juke box music; laughing) A cafe –

SAM
When I lived in this town, there was nothing but Saloons – my father used to live in them.

TONI
Mine, too.

SAM
We're related.

(Rossen 2003, 33-34)

It is 1946 and Iverstown has changed. Prohibition ended long ago. Sam had fled the city in 1928 on a circus train, the threat of reform school hanging over him. Now a veteran of World War II, a gambler and a drifter, he is stranded in Iverstown because of a car accident: “The road curved – but I didn’t” (24). Things seem to have improved in Iverstown. Sam has learned that his childhood friend, Martha Ivers (Barbara Stanwyck), has inherited her aunt’s role as the city’s industrial capitalist; Martha’s husband, Walter O’Neil (Kirk Douglas), once a “little scared kid on Sycamore Street” (26), is now District Attorney. And yet as Sam is forced to negotiate with the Martha-Walter power nexus to save Toni from police persecution, he discovers that in this postwar boom town authoritarian power has become ever more entrenched.

Greil Marcus has written of “the most emblematic noir location” as:

a small, vaguely Midwestern city. It is Midwestern culturally even if not exactly geographically…it’s Dashiell Hammett’s Poisonville, his barely disguised Butte, Montana; the grimy, striving spot where Jim Thompson liked to set his murder novels; the sort of town that in the movies appears in The Big Heat or The Asphalt Jungle. In the Twenties you would have found it in the cities where the first, vagabond professional football leagues appeared and disappeared….the vaudeville circuit, or, as the noir historian Eddie Muller once put it, each stop ‘a town trying to be bigger than it is in all the wrong ways.’ It was the pretentious, provincial city with its fancy nightclub and rough roadhouse, imitation mansions and true flophouses, where the most respectable citizen is always the most criminal, a town big enough to get murders written up as suicides and small enough that no one outside the places cares what happens there. (Marcus 2006, 158)
Marcus also includes the Iverstown of *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* in this tradition. Of course the film noir canon offers up a range of urban archetypes. At this darkest extreme – what I shall call the ‘poisonous noir city’ – the urban landscape is the material setting for a quasi-feudal power network in which all are subservient to a single corrupt capitalist or boss politician. While such totalitarian cities probably did exist in postwar America, with roots in the quashing of industrial disputes of earlier decades, the poisonous noir city essentially exists in the sphere of myth. It is the imagined site of some of America’s darkest postwar visions, influenced by both historical events and ideas about the direction of the modern city. As Richard Slotkin says

> The history of a movie genre is the story of the conception, elaboration, and acceptance of a special kind of space: an imaged [sic] landscape which evokes authentic places and times, but which becomes, in the end, completely identified with the fictions created about it… The genre setting contains not only a set of objects signifying a certain time, place, and milieu; it invokes a set of fundamental assumptions and expectations about the kinds of events that can occur in the setting, the kinds of motive that will operate, the sort of outcome one can predict. (Slotkin 1993, 233)

Dashiell Hammett’s fiction was foundational in the development of the poisonous noir city so epitomised by the fictional Iverstown. Perhaps to some extent the mirror of bourgeois anxieties about the evils of the modern city (Harring cited in Heise 2005, 497), perhaps also an unflinchingly realistic depiction of industrial violence in the prohibition era (Herron 2009, 23), Hammett’s novel *Red Harvest* (1928) is a key book to consider.

Thomas Heise writes of Hammett “plotting a social geography of criminality” in *Red Harvest*. Hammett also illustrates “the methods by which law organises urban space by suppressing underworld criminality, policing working class leisure and crushing industrial labor action” (Heise 2005, 490). This is achieved by Hammett’s dramatization of the Continental Op’s investigation of the shifting alliances of criminal power in the mining city of Personville (aka Poisonville) – or rather the Op’s wilful, malicious “stirring things up” (Hammett 1965, 57). The result of the Op’s interference is that the competing criminal forces destroy each other in the streets, speakeasies and safehouses of the city. There are no gangsters left standing. With the city finally under the protection of a federal police force, the nexus of power returns to mining entrepreneur Elihu Willsson, who imported the gangsters in the first place to defeat a workers’ uprising.

If the Op’s actions can be interpreted as a brutal implementation of “progressive social reform” – the destruction of the criminal element in the city – it also suggests that the ultimate beneficiary of this reform is the “industrial capitalist who reaps the profit of a cowed and disciplined citizenry” (Heise 2005, 501-502). Iverstown, appearing on screen in 1946, brings to mind the “sweet smelling and thornless bed of roses” (Hammett 1965, 142) from which the Op departs with little sense of triumph. Martha Ivers’ omnipotent
power in her city is identical to that returned to Elihu Willsson; the citizenry of Iverstown certainly seem “cowed and disciplined”. Whereas *Red Harvest* dramatizes a brief moment of prohibition-era criminal anarchy in the aftermath of the mob’s violent suppression of a workers’ strike, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* portrays a similar small industrial city in a state of post-World War II capitalist supremacy. Taken together, the novel and the film present a grim chronology of workers’ fortunes under twentieth century industrial progress.

By “plotting” this “social geography of criminality”, *Red Harvest* consequently maps in prose the actual physical spaces of small grim Personville. Iverstown is equally vivid as imagined through the medium of film, challenging the commonplace spatial metaphor of the noir city as labyrinth. *Martha Ivers* maps the urban landscape through Sam’s (unintentionally destructive) attempts to negotiate with the corrupt power nexus of Martha and Walter. We follow Sam down Iverstown’s streets and into its rail yards, to its bus depot and nightclubs, out to the highways and surrounding wilderness, as well as into the Ivers’s family mansion and industrial plant. Although created almost entirely in a Hollywood studio, the urban topography of Iverstown is convincingly coherent: an urban centre dissected by a rail-line that winds past a factory complex sprawling alongside a river. The studio staging creates a strange paradox in that Iverstown manages to appear both an archetypal anyplace in the poisonous noir city tradition as well as a concrete small Pennsylvanian city with vivid idiosyncrasies.

*The brutal crushing of unionization and strikes was a crucial factor in the shaping of the power relations of the modern American industrial city, and most significant in the shaping of the poisonous city archetype.*

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies) played a prominent role in ongoing attempts to unionise workers across the USA. The IWW was founded in June 1905 in Chicago, and was involved in a series of momentous and violent industrial confrontations through the 1910s and 1920s (Renshaw 1999). Before his career as a crime writer, Dashiell Hammett famously worked as a Pinkerton private detective. This may have included a stint as a strike-breaker in Butte, Montana, in 1917 against local IWW organising at the Anaconda Copper Company. According to his mistress Lillian Hellman, Hammett claimed to be one of several Pinkerton operatives who turned down the job of murdering IWW labour leader Frank Little. Little was subsequently lynched by unknown vigilantes and, by some reports, castrated (Johnson 1984, 20). Hammett’s precise activities as a Pinkerton operative in Butte have never been successfully tabled, but Jack Crowley concludes from available evidence that Hammett was probably present in 1920 and possibly in 1917 (Crowley 2008).

Butte was a vibrant mining centre. Crowley writes that Butte “had grown from the typical, raw western mining camp that it had been in the 1860s to a western metropolis with a population between 85,000 and 100,000 and all the features of a large eastern
city...like other major cities in the early 20th century, Butte was served by several railroads that connected it to points east, west, north, and south...Butte also had a reputation as a ‘wide-open town’...where saloons, brothels, and gambling dens proliferated” (Crowley 2008). It was also the scene of brutal industrial violence. The Miners’ Union Hall was dynamited and martial law was imposed in 1914. In 1917, less than two months before the lynching of Frank Little, a fire in the Spectator and Granite Mountain Mines killed 168 workers. Butte’s copper production was crucial for the allies during World War I, but the large Irish worker population created “fears of possible work stoppages and sabotage by the Irish miners to undercut the British war effort” (Crowley 2008). As Don Herron points out, the extreme violence of Red Harvest – approximately thirty murders – was not necessarily far from the reality of industrial violence in the IWW era (Herron 2009, 23).

Butte is universally recognised as the model for Personville. Yet for all its apparent realism, Red Harvest has also been described as the “mirror” of bourgeois anxiety about urban change; citing Sidney L. Harring’s study Policing a Class Society, Thomas Heise describes a “middle-class imaginary” in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America with visions (in Harring’s words) of “dark, unknowable ... [and] working class” urban space (Heise 2005, 497). Slotkin’s theory of the formation of space in film genre is equally applicable to space in prose fiction. Drawn from Hammett’s experience of Butte’s industrial strife, perhaps also reflecting bourgeois fears of the modern metropolis – and reviving the lawless Wild West town for the 20th century – Personville established a precedent. Dennis Porter declares the Hammett city “a model for the hard-boiled genre, whether subsequent writers shared his radical tendencies or not” (Porter in Metress 1994, 4).

Hammett’s imagined cities have been put into the category of

perverted fiefdoms of the owners of capital and of those strong-arm men who support them and live off their greed. And the victims are ordinary citizens who have recourse neither to their political leaders nor to the law because both politics and law enforcement are part of the corrupt system. (Porter in Metress 1994, 4)

The extent of the mining entrepreneur’s control over Personville is established early in Red Harvest:

For forty years old Elihu Willsson...had owned Personville, heart, soul, skin and guts. He was president and majority stockholder of the Personville Mining Corporation, ditto of the First National Bank, owner of the Morning Herald and Evening Herald, the city’s only newspapers, and at least part owner of nearly every other enterprise of any importance. Along with these pieces of property he owned a United States senator, a couple of representatives, the governor, the mayor, and most of the state
legislature. Elihu Wilson was Personville, and he was almost the whole state. (Hammett 1965, 7)

When the Continental Op arrives in town he scopes the landscape:

The city wasn’t pretty. Most of its builders had gone in for gaudiness. Maybe they had been successful at first. Since then the smelters whose brick stacks stuck up tall against a gloomy mountain to the south had yellow-smoked everything into uniform dinginess. The result was an ugly city of forty thousand people, set in an ugly notch between two ugly mountains that had been all dirtied up by mining. Spread over this was a grimy sky that looked as if it had come out of the smelters’ stacks. (Hammett 1965, 3)

In the novel we meet the small industrial city in the aftermath of the suppression of working class organising. The plot of Red Harvest is well-summarised by Freedman and Kendrick:

The workers at the Personville Mining Corporation, owned by Elihu Willsson, had been represented by the IWW, but the union local was crushed during a strike [in 1921] and the tough Wobbly leader, Bill Quint, was defeated. To beat the union, however, Elihu Willsson had enlisted the help of several gangster leaders and their thugs, and since their victory they have refused to leave and have insisted on taking a share in running the town. As the novel opens, an operative of the Continental Detective Agency has been summoned by Donald Willsson, Elihu’s son and Personville’s reform-minded newspaper editor. When Donald is killed before meeting with the Continental Op, Elihu himself hires the detective to “clean up” the town, that is, to remove the gangsters who have usurped much of Elihu’s power and profit. The main action of the novel concerns the Op’s successful efforts to carry out his charge. He consults with Bill Quint, forms a useful friendship with the community’s leading courtesan, Dinah Brand, and, in general, acquires pertinent information about the structures and personalities of the town. Working his way into the highest levels of the gangster establishment, he eventually succeeds in setting the different gangs (one of which is technically the local police force) murderously against one another, with the result that the major gangster leaders are killed and their hold on the town destroyed. (Freedman & Kendrick 1991, 209-210)

Red Harvest conveys a non–ideological vision of urban power. Despite Hammett’s later radical politics – he would be imprisoned in 1951 for refusing to testify in court about a
Hammett’s hardboiled fiction was a major influence on the development of film noir. This is even true on the level of photography. Hammett’s fiction describes lighting and shadows that are consonant with the German Expressionist film tradition so important to the shaping of the visual style of noir. As John Walker writes, “Hammett’s interiors, perfectly appropriated by noir film, are defined by their angular composition and harsh dark and light contrast” (Walker 1998, 130).

That said, Hammett’s influence was more fundamental through direct adaptation. After a series of films based on Hammett novels and stories through the 1930s (including the Thin Man comedies), Hammett’s hardboiled narratives were ideally suited to the emerging noir style. John Huston’s third version of The Maltese Falcon (1941) is canonical and often cited as the first film noir. The second version of The Glass Key (Stuart Heisler, 1942) is a well-adapted murder story whose sentimental moments do not mitigate the shock of its violence; the brutal beatings have been described as “the most disturbingly violent scenes in any Hollywood picture of World War II” (Naremore 2008, 63). The very characteristic Hammettesque power structure around the nexus of political boss Paul Madvig in an unnamed city modelled on Baltimore (Layman 1981, 117) is transferred almost intact from the novel.

Part of the success of the Huston adaptation of the Maltese Falcon, in particular, seems to come from Huston’s recognition of the proto-cinematic qualities of Hammett’s terse prose style. Hammett’s narratives are presented in a sequence of scenes with lots of dialogue, exterior observation of minute physical qualities and action, but little interiority or reflection, even when told from the first person point-of-view, as in Red Harvest. James Naremore cites Huston’s recognitions that “Hammett’s novels were already virtual scripts” (Naremore 2008, 63). So Hammett’s work proved easily translatable to cinematic language. That said, no version of Red Harvest was made in the film noir period.\(^1\)

\(^1\) Later films made outside Hollywood such as Akira Kurosawa’s Yojimbo (1961) and Sergio Leone’s A Fistful of Dollars (1964) used the Red Harvest plot (Naremore 2008, 321). Walter Hill’s Last Man Standing (1996) is ostensibly a remake of Yojimbo but more closely modelled on Red Harvest. The Coen brothers’ Miller’s Crossing (1992) is indebted to both Red Harvest and The Glass Key; their earlier film, Blood Simple (1984), takes its title from a line in Red Harvest.
Of course there were numerous influences beyond Hammett on the shaping of the archetypal urban landscape we find in film noir. From the literary realm Nicholas Christopher cites Poe, America’s “first poet of the industrialized, extended city.” Then there are the dark cities of German Expressionist film in which studio sets were made, through lighting, to look “more grittily realistic and forbidding than the real thing.” Many German and Austrian directors (Lang, Wilder, Preminger) emigrated to Hollywood and directed noir pictures, bringing their expressionist tendencies with them (Christopher 1997, 13-14). But considering the repeated use of Hammett’s source material for noir scripts, and his pre-eminent position as a widely-read crime writer, it is not surprising that his uniquely grim dark vision of the city, with its legacy of industrial violence, would be a foundational influence on noir. Not only “a model for the hard-boiled genre” (Porter in Metress 1994, 4), it was also clearly a model for one archetypal city of film noir, hardboiled fiction’s cinematic younger sister. Furthermore, Hammett’s city vision endured beyond the short reign of what Dennis Broe calls the “dissident lawman” or private detective orientation of the first noirs of 1941-45 (Broe 2009, 1) which were often directly adapted or otherwise influenced by Hammett’s detective stories. Even during the immediate postwar period when Hammett’s stories were not being adapted by Hollywood, the poisonous noir city continues to appear – perhaps reaches its apogee – after noir’s shift to the “outside-the-law fugitive protagonist” era (Broe 2009, xvii), perhaps most spectacularly in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*.

*Martha Ivers* was based on an apparently unpublished short story named ‘Love Lies Bleeding’ by John (Jack) Patrick. This story supplied the events of the prologue (Neve 2005, 58). The film begins with a title announcing the year 1928\(^2\). The script describes the opening shot:

> Moving along the ledge of a roof we see a small industrial city, typical of many of its size in Eastern Pennsylvania – black smoke from the stacks darkening the already dark sky. Through the smoke we catch glimpses of signs atop the buildings. It doesn't take long to reveal the fact that this town is dominated by one name, for on each sign whether it be a foundry, power house, hotel, etc., the name E. P. IVERS appears. (Rossen 2003, 1)

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\(^2\) The shooting script by Robert Rossen, dated 1946 and titled *Love Lies Bleeding* after Patrick’s story, does not specify a date at this early point. It later uses a 1928 Herbert Hoover campaign poster to imply the pre-Crash setting.
Sneaking through the shadows, the working class teenager Sam Masterson brings food to his friend Martha Ivers. She is hiding in a boxcar in the freight yards near the Ivers factory while waiting to hop a circus train with Sam. They are apprehended by the police. Sam escapes. Martha is taken back to the mansion of her aunt, Mrs Ivers, and the two argue.

MRS. IVERS
This is the fourth time you've tried to run away [...] Each time you were brought back here. No matter how far you got, you were brought back here.

MARTHA
You don't own the whole world.

MRS. IVERS
Enough of it to make sure that you'll always be brought back here. Do you understand that?
Martha’s original surname was Smith, and her father was a local mill hand. Now an orphan, Martha has lately been refusing to submit to her aunt’s authority.

There is a power shortage at the mansion. Sam sneaks into the house and plans another escape with Martha later that night. When Mrs Ivers finds Martha’s beloved cat on the dark mansion staircase, she beats it with her cane. Martha takes the cane, strikes her aunt in anger, and sends her tumbling down the staircase. When the lights come back on, Sam has escaped into the storm and Mrs Ivers lies dead. Martha claims that a prowler is responsible for the murder. Her story is confirmed by the only witness, Walter O’Neil, the son of Martha’s tutor. Walter’s father, eager to ingratiate Walter into the Ivers fortune, either believes them or simply plays along with the story.

The 1928 sequence ends with Sam hopping the circus train and leaving Iverstown. The narrative transitions to 1946. We see the adult Sam driving through the outskirts of Iverstown, now ‘America’s Fastest Growing Industrial City.’ Preoccupied by the town’s welcome sign, Sam crashes his car into a tree. He pulls into Dempsey’s Garage in Iverstown for repairs and discovers via a campaign poster that Walter O’Neil is now the city’s District Attorney. Walter is “a sure bet” (27) for re-election, says the unfriendly Dempsey. Sam also discovers that Walter has married Martha, who is heard making a radio address on her husband’s behalf.

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3 Mr O’Neil is depicted as an unambiguous accomplice in the shooting script, removing fingerprints from the murder weapon (19). This sequence was not used in the film.

4 The shooting script again diverts from the final film by explicitly setting the main events of the story during the 1944 election campaign and hence during the Second World War. (22)
After (apparently) checking into the Gable Hotel, Sam wanders the streets of his original hometown. On the steps of his former residence, now a boarding house for women, Sam meets Toni Marachek. Toni is on her way home to nearby Ridgeville. After a brief chat Sam is offered a taxi ride across town to the bus depot. The taxi is held up at the rail crossing and Toni misses her bus. She isn’t too unhappy about it. Sam and Toni have a drink at the Purple Peacock and discover their mutual heritage as working class outcasts with drunkard fathers. At curfew, Sam offers to take Toni with him on his journey west once his ‘Stanley Steamer’ is repaired.

Meanwhile, Martha Ivers has come home from her radio address to find Walter drunk. We learn that an innocent man was eventually executed for the murder of Mrs Ivers, and Walter himself acted as the public prosecutor in the case. The marriage was essentially arranged by Walter’s ambitious father, now dead; the secret of their crimes keeps Martha and Walter together. Guilt has led Walter to alcoholism.

Back on the other side of the rail line, Sam checks Toni into an adjoining room at the Gable Hotel. He introduces her to the phenomenon of the Gideon’s Bible and gently tucks her in when she dozes off. The next morning Sam is woken by two cops who reveal Toni is in jail. She has violated her parole by cashing in her bus ticket to Ridgeville and remaining in Iverstown. She had used the excuse that Sam hired her as his employee. The cops don’t buy it. After the cops leave, Sam spies Walter’s picture in The Iverstown Register and decides to capitalise on their childhood association.
At the D.A.’s office, Walter is spooked when long lost Sam arrives to ask for a favour – to spring Toni from jail. When Martha turns up at the office, she is delighted to reunite with Sam. But after Sam’s departure, Walter voices his suspicion that Sam has returned to blackmail them. Sam must have witnessed the murder of Mrs Ivers. Martha is less sure.

Later, at the Ivers Mansion, Sam and Martha reminisce. An early sexual history is implied. Martha tries to determine Sam’s motives and the extent of his knowledge of the events of September 27, 1928. When it seems clear that Sam has no interest in blackmail, Martha asks Sam to kiss her “for old times’ sake” (74). He does so – well aware that Martha is not in love with her husband – and leaves the Ivers mansion.

Meanwhile, without Martha’s knowledge, Walter has ordered an unnamed police detective to investigate Sam. Walter quickly discovers that Martha has used her influence at Dempsey’s Garage to delay the car repairs and detain Sam for another day in Iverstown, presumably out of romantic interest. Walter then requests Toni be brought to his office from prison. In a scene not included in the shooting script, Walter and the unnamed police detective threaten to throw out Toni’s probation and jail her for her full five year sentence if she does not help them.

We next see Sam waiting for Toni outside the jail. Toni is released later than expected. She is downcast. During dinner at Farone’s Café, a nearby Italian restaurant, Sam and Toni are accosted by a man pretending to be Toni’s husband. The man is determined to fight Sam. But this is just a ruse by operatives of the unnamed police detective to lure Sam to a mass beating. Sam is dumped bleeding and unconscious in a ditch by the highway twenty-five miles outside Iverstown. Regaining consciousness, Sam discovers in his fist a badge torn from the shirt of one of his assailants. The badge reads ‘Private Detective’.
Sam immediately returns by bus to Iverstown. He finds Toni at the bus depot (on her way, again, to Ridgeville) but ultimately sympathises with her powerless predicament. Rather than strike her, he says, “You ain't got anything coming kid, except a break” (86). She will stay in town with Sam, who is determined to get revenge on Walter:

**SAM**

I don't like to be pushed around. I don't like people I like to be pushed around. I don't like anybody to be pushed around.

(86)

Sam goes to the Ivers mansion and slugs Walter, who says weakly, defeatedly: “We are ready to listen to the current quotation on blackmail” (90). But Sam still knows nothing of Martha and Walter’s role in Mrs Ivers’ murder. It is only when, at Toni’s suggestion, he goes to the *Iverstown Register* archives to look up death notices – to discover the fate of his father – that he learns about the events of September 27, 1928, and the subsequent trial and execution of an innocent man for the crime under Walter’s prosecution.

Sam visits Martha at her executive office at the factory. She reveals the extent of the city’s growth under her tenure: from three thousand to thirty thousand workers, and an expansion of the industrial plant to the city’s river. Sam reveals that his newly discovered knowledge of her crime has given him “a gimmick” which is “an angle that works for
you to keep you from working too hard for yourself” (100). Sam wants half of her assets. Martha is not necessarily opposed to giving it to him; she sees him as a potential replacement for Walter. Sam returns to the Gable Hotel and tells Toni of his expected jackpot. After he kisses her, Martha walks in and, jealous, makes denigrating comments about Toni’s clothing. Martha has been able to let herself into the room because “I have special privileges in this hotel, Sam – I own it” (104). Her power in the city seems far-reaching, particularly because she says a few moments later, “I’ve never been in a hotel like this before”. “I’ve been in to many,” Sam replies (106).

Sam and Martha go to a up-market (unnamed) nightclub to dance and discuss the details of their mooted partnership. One scripted sequence (not used in the film) riffs on the motif of Toni as Sam’s employee:

MARTHA
Who is she really?

SAM
She works for me - a loyal, hardworking employee. It was my duty to protect her.

MARTHA
Hasn't she got a union?

SAM
She was in arrears.

(107)

This is an interesting metaphor for Sam and Toni’s relationship that simultaneously throws a note of criticism at the city’s failings for workers under the Ivers’ rule. Sam and Toni’s class alliance is also revealed by their mutual experience of “Taxi cabs and hotels. And Bibles….And we don't like some of the same people and places” (108)

On their way out of the nightclub, Sam takes the opportunity to beat up the thug who had earlier posed as Toni’s husband. Martha watches his violence with pleasure. Sam seems a likely co-regent in Iverstown. On a hillside overlooking the city, Sam tells Martha not to look behind her with an explicit reference to the story of Lot’s wife – the first implied comparison of Iverstown to Sodom and Gomorrah.

SAM
From here, it don't even look real.

MARTHA
It's real. It's very real. Owning it gives you a sense of power – you'd know what I mean if you had it.

(110-111)
Martha insists on figuratively looking back, reminiscing about their childhood and their missed opportunity to be together. When Sam finally reveals that he was not a witness to the murder of Mrs Ivers, Martha attempts to strike him with a burning log. Sam disarms her and forces himself upon her. The script explains that his “kiss is a sudden impulse to assert his strength against hers – it is a deliberate insult” (115). It is implied that Sam’s violent action leads to consensual sex. Sam is dropped off outside the Gable Hotel. From her window Toni sees Sam and Martha kiss. Sam then explains to Toni his confusion and indecision.

Walter calls Sam from the Ivers mansion and invites him over. This leads to a final resolution of the blackmail plot. Walter is drunk and distraught over his imminent removal from the power nexus. He reveals that Martha has had a number of affairs and leaves Sam with an ultimatum, a promise of death: “It'll have to be you or me […] And unless you do it now – it'll be you” (128). Walter then falls drunkenly down the stairs. Martha encourages Sam to finish the job: “Now, Sam, do it now – set me free – set both of us free” (129). But Sam does not succumb to the temptation to usurp Walter’s position. He admits he has killed, but only in self-defence: “I’ve never murdered” (131). Martha does not repent for killing her aunt or helping to frame the executed man.

MARTHA
What were their lives compared to mine?
What was she?

SAM
A human being.

MARTHA
A mean vicious, hateful old woman who did nothing for anyone. Look what I've done with what she left me – I've given to charity, built schools, hospitals – I've given thousands of people work – What was he?

SAM
Another human being.

MARTHA
A thief, a drunkard – someone who would have died in the gutter anyway […] Neither one of them had a right to live.

SAM
You didn't think Walter had either […] I'll be on my way now.
Although Martha holds a gun on Sam, he bravely walks out of the mansion. Walter and Martha are left alone:

WALTER
Don't cry. It's not your fault.

MARTHA
(Sobbing) It isn't, is it, Walter?

WALTER
No, nor mine, nor my father's, nor your Aunt's. It's not anyone's fault – it's just the way things are – it's what people want and how hard they want it and how hard it is for them to get it.

With this pop-Marxist explanation of the mess of their lives, Walter turns the gun on Martha. She decides to help him pull the trigger (her suicidal role in her death is not mentioned in the shooting script). Immediately after she is shot (insisting on her maiden name Smith) Walter turns the gun on himself. Sam and Toni leave Iverstown – the Lot’s Wife motif recurs when he tells Toni not to look behind her – and there is the implication the two will get married.

* In his Marxist reading of the noir canon, Broe says of Hollywood in the 1945-50 period that “in one genre [i.e., noir] ideas of the left were hegemonic, […] they formed the core of the genre” (Broe 2009, xxiv-xxv). There would eventually be a move from this period’s ‘outside-the-law fugitive protagonist’ to more traditional law enforcement protagonists in the noirs of 1950-55 as reactionary forces asserted control in Hollywood.

Broe’s study illuminates the labour history of the noir era. Factory workers across the USA had postponed demands for improved working conditions and pay during the Second World War in the name of loyalty to the war effort. As Broe recalls, “the period of the birth of film noir is the greatest strike period in American history. From September 1945 until April 1946 nearly every major industry in the country was hit with a strike” (Broe 2009, xviii). The strikes also occurred in the film factories of Hollywood. Although the postwar strikers of America had popular support, “arrayed against them were the forces of business, government, and for the most part their own union leaders” (32). Broe suggests that the result of the strikes – a direct passing on to consumers of the costs of wage increases – was in some ways responsible for the election of the 1946 Republican Congress committed to removing striking power (33). Soon the Taft-Hartley Act (1947-48) made strikes illegal and the activities of the House Un-American Activities
Committee purged ‘communists’ from various industries as, Broe insists, a “cover for an attack on militant labor” (xvii).

*Martha Ivers* screenwriter Robert Rossen was a member of the Communist Party from 1937 until about 1947. Rossen’s early film scripts have been characterised by a concern with themes of “class and the experiences of proletarian lives; social and other constructions of the ‘gangster’ and racketeer; and anti-fascism” (Neve 2005, 54). *Martha Ivers* is also in this tradition. Although the production of *Martha Ivers* coincided with Rossen’s disillusionment with the Party, the film was attacked by the Motion Picture Alliance for containing “sizable doses of communist propaganda” (Neve quoted in Broe 2009, 64). At the time Rossen was an active striker. He joined the pickets at Warner Bros studios in October 1945 (contemporaneous with the filming of *Martha Ivers* at rival Paramount), protesting the “outrageous violence perpetrated by hired thugs and police” at Warners (Rossen quoted in Neve 2005, 58). Rossen was blacklisted as a result of theHUAC hearings to which he finally, in 1953, testified, verifying the names of Party members (Casty 1966-1967, 7).

To Broe, *Martha Ivers*, which emerged from this period, is “an overarching critique of postwar America and an assessment of how class oppression had hardened since the Depression by contrasting two pairs of star-crossed lovers, each from different classes” (Broe 2009, 64). It also updates Hammett’s original urban vision to postwar America. If in reality worker discontent was erupting in strikes across the USA, *Martha Ivers* suggests no such dissent. In fact the film suggests, by its absence of worker representation, the very “cowed and disciplined citizenry” (Heise 2005, 501-502) we find in *Red Harvest*. As we shall see, there may have been censorship reasons for this. Or perhaps the film simply operates in accordance with the established generic conventions of film noir space: part of that “set of fundamental assumptions and expectations about the kinds of events that can occur in the setting, the kinds of motive that will operate, the sort of outcome one can predict” (Slotkin 1993, 233).

The extent of the Ivers’ power in the city is reinforced repeatedly throughout *Martha Ivers*. In a shooting script sequence set in 1928 and not used in the film, Mrs Ivers tells Martha’s tutor, Mr O’Neil, that Martha will be sent away to school. Mr O’Neil, anxious not to lose the influence which he hopes will insinuate his son into Mrs Ivers’ family, insists “this school will expel her in a week.” “Rebellion can always be put down,” replies Mrs Ivers (Rossen 2003, 7). If *Martha Ivers* never discloses the history of the Iverstown factory worker, never really attempts to directly represent the Iverstown working class, this line of deleted dialogue hints that Mrs Ivers’ power has only been maintained by suppressing revolt. And why should we not assume the necessity to stamp out worker revolt in Iverstown as it was suppressed in so many other Pennsylvanian industrial cities?

Perhaps the history of Iverstown resembled that of Personville/Butte, or perhaps that of the real McKees Rocks, an industrial company town just outside Pittsburgh on the Ohio River. In McKees Rocks a strike was called in 1909 by immigrant laborers against the Pressed Steel Car Company as a protest against poor pay and conditions. The work was
so dangerous there was purportedly a daily fatality (Pitz 2009). The immigrants were initially joined by skilled American labourers in their protest. Much of the immigrant housing was owned by the steel company, a precarious position for the strikers, who were eventually evicted. The company had its own police force as well as the services of the Pennsylvania State Police or ‘cossacks’ as they were known. The cossacks protected the scab workers brought in by the company. When the American labourers settled with the company, the immigrant workers continued striking with the help of IWW representatives. On August 22 the immigrant strikers attacked strikebreakers. This led to an all-out fight between the strikers and various police forces. At least a dozen people died in the battle. The Wobblies’ simultaneous efforts to organise strikes in nearby New Castle and Butler were a total failure (Dubofsky 2000, 114-121).  

In the 1928 sequences of *Martha Ivers*, the police are subservient to Mrs Ivers. They are careful not to harm Martha when they catch her in the boxcar. “Don’t rough her, you chump” (Rossen 2003, 4), says one detective named Mathewson in the shooting script (for some reason Longdeen in the final film). Returning Martha to the Ivers mansion, Mathewson instructs the butler Lynch:

POLICEMAN:  
The name is Mathewson. You'll tell Mrs. Ivers the name of the Policeman who caught her is Mathewson.

(8)

Mrs Ivers’ power in the city extends to the point where she can say of Sam:

MRS IVERS  
He'll be kept away from [Martha]. When they catch him, he's going to a reform school where he belongs.

(7)

Sam, the son of an alcoholic widower and occasional mill hand in the Ivers plant, is left free to run around town. His activities threaten the stability of Iverstown class relations. The threat of hypergamy, made real by the hints at Sam and Martha’s sexual relationship, seems to motivate Mrs Ivers’ ruthlessness. Martha is herself a product of mixed classes. Orphaned as a girl, her name had been changed from ‘Smith’ to her mother’s maiden name. “Your father was a nobody – a mill hand – the best thing he ever did for you was to die,” says Mrs Ivers (10). Mrs Ivers profits from her authoritarian control of the working class spaces of the city while seeking to rid Martha of working class vestiges:

MRS. IVERS  
(To Martha)  
When will you understand that I'm doing all this for you. That I'm trying to wash

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5 The industrial strife at McKees Rocks was the subject of Lester Goran’s 1985 novel *Mrs Beautiful*.  

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the dirt and grime off you – make an Ivers out of you again.

(9)

As indicated earlier, Sam and Toni find common ground (and class solidarity) drinking at the Purple Peacock in 1946. They both have alcoholic fathers (“we’re related”). Sam recalls the days when Iverstown had nothing but saloons. This evocation of the prohibition era brings to mind the speakeasies of Personville in Red Harvest – and hints again at the hidden history of Iverstown.

Harring observes that in a turn of the century American atmosphere of urban growth and increased ranks of immigrant workers, “middle-class reformers, urban sociologists, and representatives of manufacturing and commercial interests combined forces to regulate the spaces of working-class leisure – especially the saloon – which were thought to dissipate workers’ energies into nonproductive consumption, to undermine middle-class social and religious mores, and to ‘inflame the radical tendencies’ among the working class”. The saloon was a crucial place of working class socialising, and under the powers granted by prohibition the forces of law placed these spaces under surveillance.

Prohibition created the “underworld of organised criminal networks on the municipal, and eventually, national level” (Harring summarised in Heise 2005, 497). The smashing of the gangster power structure by the Op in Red Harvest can be seen as an instance of the assertion of bourgeois law over working class leisure. The result of the Op “stirring things up” under the employ of Elihu Willsson is not only to remove the competing gangsters – which returns Willsson to prominence – but to “stamp out the illegal working-class pleasures of drinking and gambling” in the prohibition era (Heise 2005, 487).

What glimpses we have of prohibition-era Iverstown – the long 1928 prologue and a few references to Sam’s alcoholic father – are grim. Early death seems to be the fate for the Iverstown worker. Sam’s father seems to have barely outlived prohibition. In a scene that was not used in the film, Sam reports on what he discovered of his father’s fate at the Iverstown Register morgue:

SAM
Oh, yes yes, sure – I found out about my father. He died in ’33 – accident.

TONI
Drunk?

SAM
The Market Street bridge one night. The tracks below – a train hit him.

(97)
As I’ve said, one striking feature of the film’s urban representation is that not one of the thirty thousand factory workers mentioned by Martha is a character in the film (several generically working class characters can be spotted in the background at the Purple Peacock or passing in shadows on the city streets). Nor is the product of their labour ever named. The 1946 Iverstown is depicted as a strangely frictionless working class city. The two working class characters, Sam and Toni, are not Iverstown locals (in Sam’s case, he is returning to the city after many years away). Here Martha Ivers bears a similarity to Red Harvest, where the non-criminal working population is also excluded from representation. Red Harvest has been said to “heighten the sense of working class life as criminal”, conflating working class leisure spaces with criminal spaces (Heise 2005, 497,500). Martha Ivers’ post-prohibition narrative does not share this criminalization of working class space, although there are repeated allusions to the immorality of Sam’s ‘set-up’ at the lowdown Gable Hotel. Martha Ivers has far fewer characters than Red Harvest, burying the working class in the shadows. The locals we do meet are complicit in Martha Ivers’ rule – see the eagerness of the garage owner Dempsey when Martha needs his help to keep Sam in town. As Neve says, “Iverstown is presented as a company town where everybody is party to the deceit and false values on which power rests” (Neve 2005, 59).

The routine persecution of the working class in Iverstown is suggested by Toni’s imprisonment for the theft of a fur coat:

   TONI
   ‘Where'd you get the fur coat, Toni?’ the judge asked me. I met a guy, I told him, he said he was in love with me. He gave me the coat. ‘A likely story, Toni,’ he said – It's true – every word of it. I tried to pawn it because I needed the money – ‘Where's the man?’ he asks. I don't know – He took a powder, he blew, he flew to the moon – ‘You don't fly, Toni’ the judge says, ‘the charge is theft, you do one to five –’

(80)

Elsewhere Walter says, “It's quite a thing in a small city like this to be a District Attorney. You get to feel like God” (92). By ignoring the workers under the corrupt rule of Martha Ivers, the film suggests nothing less than a population of obedient serfs in a quasi-feudal state. This is particularly striking in the context of the widespread worker agitation at the time of the Martha Ivers production.

One possible explanation is studio censorship. As Broe says, in this period “the studio heads were adamant that no trace of working-class activism would be allowed to reach the screen”. This very suppression of content is argued by Broe to have created, in Raymond Williams’ expression, a ‘structure of feeling’ that helped create the film noir
(Broe 2009, xvi-xvii). The working-class war veteran/drifter Sam, an ‘outside-the-law fugitive protagonist’, is no revolutionary but instead an *unwitting* catalyst of the self-destruction of the corrupt power nexus. Sam’s arrival pushes the arranged Martha-Walter marriage to its end. The couple only fall from the pinnacle of power because of their guilt and greed and paranoia, not because of any real opposition to their rule.

The Ivers factory grounds are briefly seen in daylight through Martha’s executive office window – smoke stacks (familiar from the skyline in the 1928 prologue), rail lines, and multiple signs referring to E. P. Ivers. But there are no establishing exterior shots of the factory. There is a painted mural – a “photo montage” (99) in the shooting script – of tumultuous factory activity on one wall of Martha’s office above a luxurious leather lounge. The mural shows two workers on a factory floor, smoke stacks behind them.

MARTHA
It catches it, doesn't it? The feeling of a factory.
[...]
SAM
[...] When your aunt owned this place I couldn't get past the gate.

(99)
Martha has transformed the industrial landscape and doesn’t stop there. As she gives Sam a guided tour of the Ivers Mansion, there is a sequence of dialogue that was not used in the film:

**MARTHA**
That tree outside the window – I first saw it miles from here – I transplanted it.

**SAM**
What nature could do if she had money.

(71)

It also seems that Martha has the Iverstown news media under her command or paid off – or perhaps she simply owns the news like Elihu Willsson. The local radio station does not hesitate to declare its partisan stance in the coming election: “We interrupt this program of dinner music to bring you a special broadcast in the interest of the re-election of District Attorney, Walter P. O’Neil” (my italics) (26). The Iverstown Register trumpets Walter’s campaign promise to rid Iverstown of vice. And while the librarian at the Register morgue acknowledges the curiosity of Walter serving as prosecutor in Mrs Ivers’ murder trial – a murder to which he was a witness and in which the victim was the
In addition to the small changes already noted, larger alterations were made to the shooting script during the process of filming with the effect that the more radical elements in Rossen’s script were toned down, particularly those that emphasise the extent of corruption in the Iverstown Police. In *Red Harvest* the police are just another private army under the leadership of one of the gangsters; the *Martha Ivers* shooting script shows the Iverstown Police operating as a private army under the authority of corrupt D. A. Walter O’Neil.

The power of Rossen’s vision of police corruption is tempered by one scene that evidently was added to the film after the submission of the shooting script. Wandering down the street shortly after his arrival, Sam has a whimsical conversation with an old Irish cop on patrol outside a tailor shop. “Hello, Gallagher,” Sam says. “Hey, wait a minute! Do I know you?” replies the cop. “Sure – I’m the guy who tossed a rock through that window once. And you’re the guy who chased me.” “If I chased you I’ll bet I caught you!” They laugh, and on a moment’s reflection, Sam says to himself: “Come to think of it, I believe he did!”
It is not clear whether Rossen interpolated this new scene after submitting the shooting script, or if it was written by another hand. Coupled with Miklos Rozsa’s lyrical score, the brief moment soon after Sam’s return evokes an incongruously friendlier past, Iverstown as small town America, something from a Frank Capra film rather than the grim industrial wasteland suggested by the 1928 prologue.

The shooting script boldly places the police station on ‘Ivers St’ (76) – another reminder of Martha’s hold on the town – but in the film the police station is clearly on West 54th Street.

Then there is the pivotal scene where Sam is lured away from Farone’s Café by the thug posing as Toni’s husband. Climbing out of a ditch outside Iverstown, Sam realizes that he is clutching something in that right hand. He opens it slowly and there on the palm of his hand is a bright shiny police badge. Instantly Sam's face mirrors his understanding of the whole frame-up – Police – Toni – her alleged husband – the other guys who have jumped him in the alley – all of them – Police – but why? There can be only one answer – Walter O'Neil. (83)

This is a powerful moment that reveals so much about Iverstown. The badge in the film as shot, however, reads PRIVATE DETECTIVE, recoiling from the suggestion of an entirely corrupt political order extending down through the Iverstown police force. Interestingly, the unnamed police detective working for Walter is explicitly shown orchestrating the kidnapping and beating of Sam, whereas in the shooting script the ringleader is simply “a man”. Perhaps this is a way of implying the beating as the actions of a renegade police detective with a private squad of hoods. However, by replacing cops with private dicks, the film corrects an inconsistency that occurs later in the script when Sam throws the badge at Walter and says “Private dicks. Don't you trust your own cops?” (89). Perhaps this bleak depiction of police corruption was a contentious plot element during the making of the film, and the shooting script reflects the unresolved question of corruption’s reach.

The film also changes the following scripted image – which in style seems like a fantasy of Soviet Social Realism – when Sam returns to Iverstown after the beating and reconciles with Toni:

They PASS THE CAMERA. IT PANS AROUND and catches them walking away from us up the street. Two small figures against the immensity of the background. The sky is beginning to streak with the red of dawn. Somewhere o.s. a factory whistle can be HEARD. (87)
The ‘red of dawn’ was hardly going to work in black and white, anyway. Instead we see Sam and Toni walking towards the mundane background of the Purple Peacock, its neon dormant, claustrophobically framed by concrete pillars. The same angle appeared earlier in the film.

*Martha Ivers* as shot removes explicit references to the Pennsylvania location of Iverstown. For example, a bus route ‘Iverstown Pittsburgh’ is depicted in the script (83) but not on screen. As Harries points out in his discussion of the Lot’s wife motif, the back-projected city vista which Sam and Martha look back on from the hillside is recognisably Los Angeles (the Chateau Marmont is visible) (Harries 2007, 62). Apart from several of these back-projections, there are few shots in the film that were not obviously shot at Paramount Studios. And yet the film is so vividly conceived that Iverstown has topographical consistency. Through Sam’s attempts to negotiate with the city’s power nexus, we encounter a coherent urban landscape. Still, the anytown quality pushes Iverstown into the guise of archetypal poisonous noir city, less grounded in a peculiarly Pennsylvanian industrial urban history, more powerfully a bleak postwar evolution from Dashiell Hammett’s dark urban visions.
Bibliography


**DVD**