

Phantom Lady as Rite of Passage

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Philippa Gates describes *Phantom Lady* as a “maritorious melodrama.”¹ She deems the film melodrama due to excesses portrayed in a number of scenes. Gates terms *Phantom Lady* “maritorious” because, unlike female detectives of the 1920’s and 1930’s, the protagonist takes on the role of sleuth for the sole purpose of saving the man she loves.² Gates attributes the “phasing out” of female detectives and subsequent shift to maritorious melodrama to the “repolarization of gender roles” following World War II.³ Though Gates’ conclusions are accurate, *Phantom Lady* also operates at a deeper, symbolic level. I argue that *Phantom Lady* reflects Carol Richman’s rite of passage from single young female to marriageable adult woman, thinking consistent with Gates’ observation that this film focuses on female identity. Interpreting the film as ritual process also speaks to Gates’s larger observation that America’s involvement in World War II prompted repolarized gender roles and “a desire for introspection.”⁴ Applying ritual theory to *Phantom Lady* bolsters the understanding of films noirs because it reveals a liminality to female characters as yet understudied. Such analysis also enhances our understanding of film’s role in the establishment and maintenance of societal norms.

The first step in considering *Phantom Lady* as rite of passage is to define ritual and establish its function. I begin my analysis with a brief overview of ritual theory and how it applies to female *film noir* characters generally. Next, I apply the rite of passage “template,” if you will, to Carol Richman’s experiences through *Phantom Lady*. I proceed by enlarging the discussion to parallels between rites of passage and the United States’ experience during the early twentieth century as it is reflected in film noir. Finally, I address film genre’s ritual-like function in the formation of social norms.

¹ Gates, Philippa. “The Maritorious Melodrama: Film Noir with a Female Detective.” *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (Fall 2009). 29.

² Gates, 29.

³ Gates, 26.

⁴ Gates, 26, 28.

Ritual's essential function is to bring order to chaos.⁵ Imposing system on disorder begins with separation, purification and demarcation. A semblance of order can only be created by exaggerating distinctions such as above or below, male or female, with or against. According to anthropologist Mary Douglas, the "unclear and contradictory (from the perspective of social definition), is regarded as ritually unclean."⁶ Consequently, objects, ideas or people that confuse or contravene established principles and classifications are seen as polluting.⁷ This is reflected in Kathleen Gregory Klein's explanation for why the female detective "[had] to fail" despite being created "to fill a well-defined fictional role:"

Like the criminal, she is a member of society who does not conform to the status quo. Her presence pushes off-center the whole male/female, public/private, intellect/emotion, physical strength/weakness dichotomy.⁸

In keeping with Douglas's observation that "a polluting person is always in the wrong," because she transgresses the social system's internal lines, the female detective is likened to a criminal.⁹ Such is also the case with the *femme fatale*, who utilizes her sexuality for purposes other than fulfilling maternal duties or the socially acceptable "companionate" role.¹⁰ The *femme fatale* crosses a line that (according to societal norms) she should not have crossed, and the subsequent displacement "unleashes danger for someone."¹¹ The *femme fatale* is situated as evil because she

⁵ Stortz, Martha Ellen. "Ritual Power, Ritual Authority: Configurations and Reconfigurations in the Era of Manifestations." in *Religious and Social Ritual: Interdisciplinary Explorations*. Edited by Michael Bjercknes Aune and Valerie M. Demarinis. New York: University of New York Press, 1996. 122.

⁶ Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 5; Turner, Victor. "Betwixt and Between." *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation*. Edited by Louis Carus Mahdi, Steven Foster and Meredith Little. LaSalle, Ill: Open Court Publishing Company, 1987. 7.

⁷ Douglas, 45.

⁸ Klein, Kathleen Gregory. *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre*. 2nd edition. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998. 4 as cited in Gates, 25..

⁹ Douglas, 140-150.

¹⁰ Gates, 25.

¹¹ Douglas, 140.

signifies loss of stability. Her punishment or death, typical outcomes for the *femme fatale*, re-establishes the threatened male's control and therefore the status quo.¹²

Realizing that “the unclear is unclear” is certainly important, but knowing how to avoid ambiguity is critical, especially bearing in mind ethnographer Arnold van Gennep's astute observation that “the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another.”¹³ By indicating the transition from one culturally recognized age to the next, rituals demarcate degrees of maturation. However, ritual does more than simply acknowledge changes in chronological age. Unlike ceremony, which merely confirms what has already been accomplished, ritual is transformative. For example, experiences within Sudanese Bemba and Shilluk rites of passage are said to “grow” girls into women, and Aboriginal Kuringal boys can only be “made men” through ritual procedures.¹⁴ Once the ritual is consummated, the initiate is expected to behave according to societal norms, ethical standards and clearly defined rights and obligations of his/her new social position. Such rituals exist in all societies and are known as *rites of passage*.¹⁵ As stated above, I argue that the film *Phantom Lady* reflects Carol Richman's rite of passage from single young female to marriageable adult woman.

As Gates observes, the demise of a (polluting) *femme fatale* sets *Phantom Lady*'s plot in motion.¹⁶ Marcella Henderson refuses to fulfill her wifely duties, yet will not grant her husband a divorce. Never seeing her in person (only her painting) reflects the fact that she is not a “real” wife, that she is Scott Henderson's spouse in name only. Mrs. Henderson is therefore a contradictory character, neither wife nor single woman. Her impurity is signified by her hair

¹² Doane, Mary Ann. *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1991. 2-3.

¹³ Turner 1987, 7; Van Gennep, Arnold. *Rites of Passage*. Translated by Monika B. Vizedoma and Gabrielle L. Caffee. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960. 2-3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Turner 1987, 4-11.

¹⁶ Gates, 28.

dragging the floor as her body is carried out of the apartment she shared with her husband.

Marcella's death restores order, paving the way for the new "family order" noted by Gates.¹⁷

The viewer first sees Carol Richman as she arrives at work the following morning. Upon her arrival, she establishes herself as appropriately feminine by checking the seam in her stockings. The inability to keep her stockings straight and bobby pins off the floor (as Scott mentions a few minutes later in the film) marks her womanhood as immature. As the plot unfolds, Scott is found guilty of Marcella's death. Carol visits Scott in jail and the scene is literally set for her rite of passage to begin. The *mise en scène*, comprised of jail cells and staircases, is chaotic, indicating a move toward the noirish (see figure 1). During a brief conversation, Scott discloses that he will not appeal his case, and asks Carol if she plans to return to Wichita. This reference to her hometown indicates that her social status is still tied to her childhood. Carol reaches the conclusion that she is Scott's only hope, and as they say their good-byes, she is poised to set out on her ritual journey.¹⁸

Van Gennep has revealed that rites of passage consist of three stages: "separation, margin/liminal and aggregation."¹⁹ The first period, separation, signifies the initiate's detachment from (in this case) her earlier social position. During the liminal phase, the essential act of acquiring *gnosis* occurs, arcane knowledge that changes the initiate's "inmost nature," inscribing her with the characteristics of her new status.²⁰ The third stage confirms the passage, and the neophyte returns to a stable environment.²¹ Van Gennep further indicates that passing through a doorway symbolically expresses entry into a new realm.²² Figure 2 captures *Phantom Lady's* depiction of this ritualistic turn of events. The barred door separates Carol from her past

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹ Turner 1987, 5.

²⁰ Turner 1987, 11.

²¹ Turner 1987, 5-11.

²² Douglas, 141.

(signified by Scott who is still smoking the cigarette she helped him light), as she departs through the doorway to her right. The film dissolves to a night-for-night scene of Anselmo's Bar and Grille, the place where Scott first encounters the un-named woman. The viewer has crossed into *film noir* territory, and Carol has passed into the liminal stage of her rite of passage (see Figure 3).

During the liminal phase, the initiate is “neither one state” (in this case, a single young lady) “nor the next” (in this case, a marriageable adult woman).²³ She is “betwixt and between,” and as such, ambiguous.²⁴ Consequently, like the *femme fatale*, she is dangerous. However, because her ambiguity stems from a state of transition, with no rights over others, she is also susceptible to danger.²⁵

Carol's transition begins as she situates herself at the bar where Scott first encounters the “phantom lady.” She commands a deep focus scene with an aggressive and disconcerting stare meant to intimidate the bartender into admitting the mysterious woman exists (see Figure 4). Her transition deepens, as she returns to the bar night after night. Carol's reflection in the mirror on a particularly crowded evening indicates her entry into an alternate realm. Unlike past evenings at the bar, the scene is noisy and visually “busy.” The *mise en scène* is also more heavily shadowed than in past depictions of the bar, with deeply shadowed patrons occupying the lower third of the frame. The most interesting aspect of this scenario however, is that the viewer's perspective is from behind the customers. This means we are looking into the backs of their heads, and only see their faces reflected in the mirror. In effect, the clientele only become people (rather than merely silhouettes) in the mirror's alternate reality (see figure 5a).

²³ Turner 1987, 5; Douglas, 119.

²⁴ Turner 1987, 7.

²⁵ Douglas, 119-120; Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982. 27.

Carol is no longer the fresh-faced beauty from Wichita who “[tries] not to think about it” as she waits for Henderson’s call. Neither is she dressed in light-colored clothing, nor glowingly lit with high-key lighting (see figure 5b). Now, as she declares to Jack Marlow, she “can’t think of anything else.” Her direct gaze indicates a contentious, take-charge resolve typically associated with masculinity, and her dark clothing signifies the *noirish* realm she has entered (see figure 5c). Finally, one evening after the bar closes, we see Carol in a deliciously noir environment (shot night-for-night, complete with rain, in-framing and deep focus), wearing a trench-type raincoat. As she lifts her eyes from a newspaper, Carol echoes male *film noir* detectives, and her submergence into liminality is complete, as she sets out to tackle the undertaking Marlow explicitly refers to as “a man’s job” (see figure 6).

Carol is now ambiguous, and therefore, dangerous. She has already so un-nerved the bartender that a bottle slips through his fingers and crashes to the floor. She follows him after the bar closes one evening, and he is visibly shaken as he pauses to listen for her footsteps, coming ever-closer behind him. Located in a deserted section of the neighborhood, the bartender is apprehensive to the point of snapping. The most interesting thing about this typically noir scene, however, a night-for-night shot with wet pavement and echoing footsteps, is the place where he stops. The bartender stands in front of a brick archway, the source of a dim shaft of light and otherworldly fog, transition symbolism, indicating that we are in liminal time (see figure 7a). The bartender finally confronts Carol, but he does so in an area populated with people out on their stoops. When he attempts to clutch her arm, the bystanders intervene. The bartender is in such a frenzied state that, in an effort to free himself from the crowd, he runs out into the street and is killed by an oncoming car. Though this incident is technically an accident, the image of the bartender’s hat lying in the gutter at Carol’s feet says it all. The bartender’s death was the result of his proximity to Carol (see figure 7b). In regard to the danger associated

with Carol's liminal state, Cliff (the drummer from the theatre) fares no better than the bartender. Aware that Carol has contacted Cliff, Marcella's killer strangles him, in order to ensure that he is unable to disclose any incriminating information. Once again, though Carol does not commit the act herself, Cliff's death is a direct result of contact with her.

As mentioned above, the "liminal *persona*" is also susceptible to danger, a condition visually expressed by the train station scene.²⁶ The station is literally a liminal space. (Passengers are in transit, neither "here" nor "there," but somewhere in between.) The shot utilizes deep focus, and is framed to include the night-time skyline jutting above the deserted train station, creating an eerie otherworldliness. Having followed him to the station, Carol stands waiting for the train, with one eye on the bartender as he contemplates pushing her onto the tracks. The one-point perspective draws our eye to the spot where Carol would land if/when the bartender pushes her. The expanse of the scene combined with Carol's diminutive size, precarious placement and juxtaposition to the barber, evoke a feeling of vulnerability (see figure 8). The aforementioned danger is underscored by the incident in Cliff's apartment that is triggered by his discovery of police information in Carol's handbag. As Carol struggles to free herself from Cliff's grip, the single lamp lighting his apartment is knocked to floor. The gravity of the situation is expressed through the scene's near total darkness as Cliff hisses "wait until I get you"(see Figure 9).²⁷

During liminality, rights, obligations, and habits of thought and action associated with initiates' former social status are suspended, so their social order may seem upside down. Consequently, the liminal stage contains an element of reflection. Non-verbal forms that utilize symbolic patterns and structures, such as dancing, masking, or painting, are employed as a means

²⁶ Turner 1987, 6; Douglas, 119.

²⁷ *Phantom Lady*. Director, Robert Siodmak. Universal, 1944. Film.45:51.

for initiates to consider their cosmos, contemplate their society and think about “the powers that generate and sustain them.”²⁸ Elements of these symbolic constructs are withdrawn from their usual context and recombined in often “grotesque” and “fantastic” patterns, grotesque because they are combined by possible rather than experienced combinations.²⁹ The fantastic nature of these reconfigured symbols startle the initiates into thinking about persons, relationships and aspects of their society they have taken for granted up to this point.³⁰

The after-hours jazz club where Cliff takes Carol represents this aspect of the liminal state. Unlike elsewhere in the film, we enter the scene from Carol’s point of view. The door opens into a cramped, windowless room that is packed with sweaty musicians, and lit by a single bulb, hanging from a claustrophobically low ceiling (see figure 10). The camera tracks with Carol’s footsteps, settling briefly on an extreme close-up of the trombone player as we are accosted by the sound of his instrument. As raucous music plays, the camera pans from the frantic motion of one musician to that of the next, interspersed with uncomfortably close shots of Carol and Cliff. This is the only scene that utilizes canted framing (see figures 10b and 10c) and extremely low angles, intensifying its disorienting, disconcerting atmosphere (see figure 10d).

Though mirrors come into play elsewhere in the film, Carol actively engages the one that hangs in this jazz club. Unlike the mirror in Anselmo’s Bar and Grill, we see Carol see herself. We also see her try to clear her head, as “Jeannie” (her undercover alter-ego) returns her gaze (see figure 10a). Carol has been removed from her usual straight-laced context and imbedded into the fantastic scene reflected behind her. The duality represented by this mirror parallels initiates’ suspension of former “habits of thought and action” during the liminal phase.

²⁸ Turner 1982, 27; Turner 1987, 14.

²⁹ Turner 1982, 27; Turner 1987, 14.

³⁰ Turner 1987, 14.

Liminality also explains how this fresh-faced young lady from Wichita could summon the grotesque energy loosed in the infamous “sex by drum” episode.

Rites of passage typically include an ordeal, or trial of some sort. The ordeal, in part, signifies destruction of the initiate’s previous state. However it also, and perhaps more importantly, prepares the initiate for her new social status.³¹ Carol’s ordeal, of course, is to locate the phantom lady, and Detective Burgess functions as the elder who shepherds her through the process. He supplies Carol with information helpful to her investigation, accompanies her to the theatre the evening *Chica-Boom-Boom* closes, and arrives on the scene in time to thwart Marlow’s attack. Most importantly, he declares Carol ready to assume her new role, signified by his presence in Scott’s new office, where he announces that the examination surrounding Marlow’s demise is “only a formality.”³²

As mentioned above, the essential aspect of the liminal period is the acquisition of arcane knowledge. Esoteric knowledge is commonly conveyed to initiates through the use of costumes, masks and statues. Turner notes that natural and/or cultural features represented on sacred articles, such as Ndembu masks, are rendered as either disproportionately small or large. Exaggerated importance of heads, noses or phalluses, for example, is also found on figurines. Frequently, appropriate shape and proportion is maintained, and relevant features are emphasized with color. As with the recombined symbols discussed in the section of this analysis pertaining to the jazz club, the point of such caricature is to convert the exaggerated feature into an object of reflection.³³ Not so ironically, Jack Marlow fulfills this function, his hands of course, the exaggerated feature (see figure 11). Though Carol has carried out her ordeal of locating the

³¹ Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1969. 103.

³² *Phantom Lady*,

³³ Turner 1987, 11-13.

phantom lady, only Marlow knows what transpired the night of Marcella's death. As such, he is the source of secret knowledge necessary for Carol to complete her rite of passage.

The third stage in a rite of passage, aggregation, confirms the initiate's passage and returns the neophyte to a stable environment. This is symbolically expressed as Carol steps over the threshold into the new office of Scott Henderson, Inc. The high key lighting and sunshine streaming through the windows, indicate that she has indeed returned to a stable environment. Carol is seemingly precisely where she started, her place of employment. A couple of subtle indicators, however, signal that such is not quite the case. Ruthy is no longer the receptionist. Rather, a new secretary, Mary, greets Carol as she enters the office. More importantly, Mary refers to her as "Miss Richman," rather than "Carol," as Ruthy had done. Mary's salutation is less familiar, reflecting Carol's changed status. Also, Carol refrains from checking the seam in her stockings as she did before (one of the habits that marked her as immature), but crosses the reception area with confidence. She enters the business' inner sanctum, as it were, to find Scott and Burgess carrying on a pleasant conversation. After Scott departs for a day of business meetings, Burgess fulfills his duty as elder, informing Carol that the investigation surrounding Marlow's death is merely a formality and she need not attend. In other words, her job is done, and her transformation is, therefore, complete. Upon Burgess's departure, Carol listens to the Dictaphone messages Scott mentioned, communications she assumes contain nothing more than mundane instructions. However, she is pleasantly surprised to discover what has typically been interpreted as a proposal, an invitation to dinner—every night, with the message skipping, stuck on the phrase "every night."

Carol seems so confident and ready to take on the world, one must ask whether her rite of passage was preparing her to take on the man's world of business, rather than marriage to Scott. Today's audience would likely interpret it that way. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, rites of

passage reflect societal expectation. Gates' observations indicate that the social climate of the day was characterized by repolarized gender roles. In addition, her remark that Carol's efforts serve to clear her (soon to be) husband's name, thereby "return[ing] permanence to the bourgeois household" reflects ritual's essential function of bringing order to chaos.³⁴ Therefore, bearing in mind the societal expectations during this period, and the return to stability a marriage to Scott brings about within that context, Carol's rite of passage could only have been marriage-directed. However, the question of why, and more importantly how, today's audience would interpret Carol's experience as a passage to "confident independent woman," will be addressed, as my analysis unfolds.

Viewing *Phantom Lady* as rite of passage not only expands our understanding of female film noir characters, it also reflects the historical trajectory of film noir, up to and including the "phasing out" of female detectives and the repolarization of gender roles noted by Gates. The trademark *chiaroscuro* lighting (a result of German *émigré* directors), hearkens back to trauma surrounding World War I. So does film noir's emphasis on psychological states and paranoia over corrupt authorities.³⁵ The damaged masculinity portrayed in film noir is typically linked to the war experience. However, Philip Hanson, scholar of twentieth-century literature and film, notes that damaged masculinity is also a symptom of the same socio-economic environment that facilitated strong female roles, like Torchy Blane. During the depression, more women sought employment out of necessity than in years past. This diminished male dominance, which, when combined with a concomitant gain in female power generates a resentment that culminates in the *femme fatale*.³⁶ Finally, servicemen returning from World War II were confronted with

³⁴ Gates, 29.

³⁵ Hanson, Philip. "The Arc of National Confidence and the Birth of Film Noir, 1929-1941." *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3, (Dec. 2008). 387-414. 388.

³⁶ Gates, 25; Hanson, 407-408.

“unemployment, alienation, degradation, disablement and broken homes.”³⁷ As Gates observes, many of these issues were contributed to changing gender roles and female independence.³⁸ The first half of the twentieth-century to date had been nothing less than chaotic, and order must be re-stored.

Due to its use of chemical gas, tanks, and planes, World War I is regarded as the first modern war, and as such, functions as Van Gennep’s “separation” stage. The chaotic period delineated above constitutes liminality, a dangerous period, where boundaries between men’s and women’s roles have become blurred. The close of World War II establishes the return to stability, and America’s new status as capitalist engine and “world power.”

Were repolarized gender roles a byproduct of the “return to stability?” Clearly, yes, given Gates’ reference to them, which brings us back to her observation about World War II sparking, not only repolarized gender roles, but also “a desire for introspection.”³⁹ While Gates applies America’s self-reflection to phased-out female detectives and the emergence of film noir, I link it to liminality. (Once again, while Gates is not incorrect, I am looking beyond the practical.) According to Turner, the recombination/introspective aspect of ritual’s liminal state is not limited to preparing the initiate for her new status. Turner maintains that, like ritual itself, society is a process. Also like ritual, society oscillates between preoccupation with boundaries and order, and searching for discovery and innovation.⁴⁰ He contends that liminality functions as the “seed bed of cultural creativity.”⁴¹ Turner further states that newly formed constructions and symbols ultimately feed back into the “‘central’ economic and politico-legal domains and

³⁷ Gates, 28.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Gates, 26.

⁴⁰ Rawlyk, George A. *Champions of the Truth: Fundamentalism, Modernism, and the Maritime Baptists*. Québec: Centre for Canadian Studies, 1990. 26.

⁴¹ Turner 1982, 28.

arenas, supplying them with goals, aspirations, incentives, structural models and *raisons d'être*.”⁴²

To bring things full circle, Turner notes that industrialization has triggered a societal shift from a communal to an individualistic paradigm. Consequently, the communal foundation for shared symbols and experiences is fractured. Leisure has become the primary “neither-this-nor-that” domain. This development fundamentally changes social interaction “at the level of expressive culture.”⁴³ Symbolic action has been separated from its ritual context and becomes an “independent mode of expression” that Turner terms “liminoid.”⁴⁴ Though not ritual *per se*, genres of industrial leisure, in this case film, provide liminality’s functions.⁴⁵ Film supplies us with information we need to navigate societal norms. For example, the typical outcome of the *femme fatale* informed women during the 1940’s and 1950’s that a female who uses her sexuality for purposes other than fulfilling maternal duties or a companionate role crosses a line that should not be crossed. And films like *Phantom Lady* informed a similar audience that a woman can be ambitious only if her ambition is used to (as Gates describes it) “return permanence to the bourgeois household,” otherwise she may end up like Marcella Henderson.⁴⁶ Fortunately, film also fulfills liminality’s recombination function, so experiences like Carol’s can be planted in Turner’s “seed bed of cultural creativity.” Otherwise, we would not have characters like *G.I. Jane*’s Jordan O’Neill, or the women they inspire, such as Ann Dunwoody, America’s first female four-star general.

⁴² Turner 1969, vii.

⁴³ Turner 1982, 30.

⁴⁴ Turner, Victor. *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985. 237 cited in Rowe, Sharon. “Modern Sports: Liminal Ritual or Liminoid Leisure?” *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*. Edited by Graham St. John. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008. 132; Turner 1982, 32.

⁴⁵ Turner 1982, 40.

⁴⁶ Gates 29.

Figure 1:



Figure 2:



Figure 3:



Figure 4:



Figure 5a:



Figure 5b:



Figure 5c:



Figure 6:



Figure 7a:



Figure 7b:



Figure8:



Figure 9:



Figure 10:



Figure 10a:



Figure 10b:



Figure 10c:



Figure 10d:



Figure 10e:



Figure 11:



Figure 12:

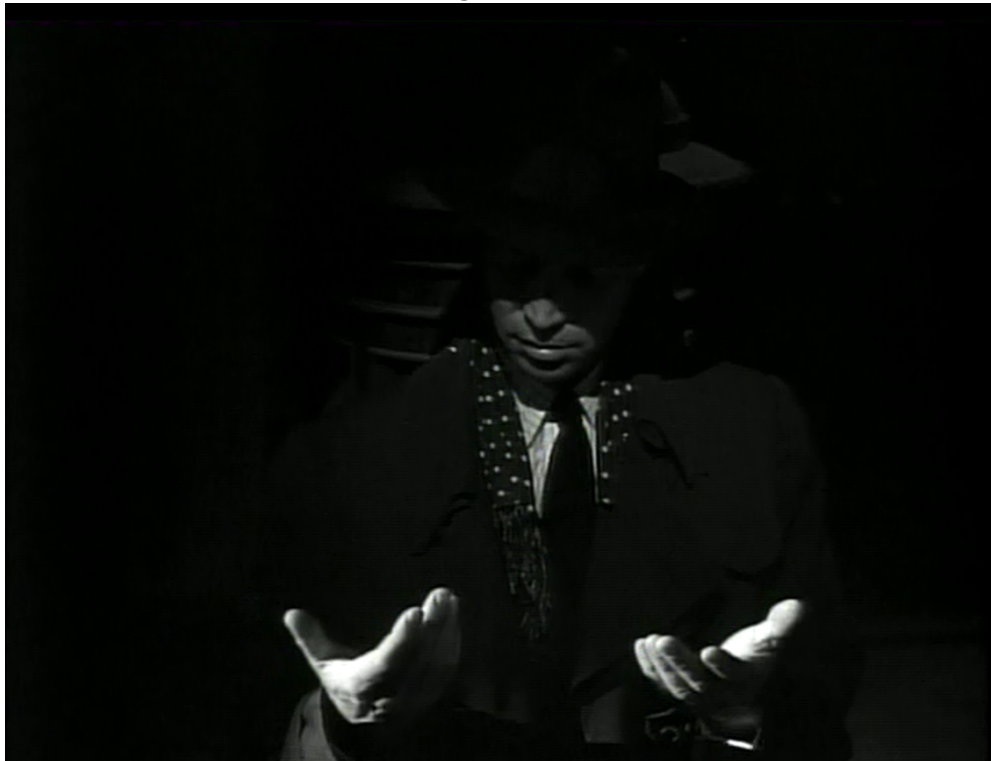


Figure 13:



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