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CARNIVAL NOIR



NIGHTMARE ALLEY

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH *NIGHTMARE ALLEY*'s
GUILLERMO DEL TORO & KIM MORGAN

PAUL AUSTER TALKS WITH EDDIE MULLER

BRENT SPINER'S 5 Favorite Noirs



PAUL AUSTER

STEP RIGHT UP

THE WORLD OF CARNIVAL NOIR

By Brent Calderwood

For nearly two decades—from the early 1940s through the end of the 1950s—noir movies ingeniously exploited the public's fascination with carnivals and amusement parks as sites of vice and violence. To modern moviegoers weaned on squeaky-clean theme parks like Disneyland, the number of film noirs featuring fairground scenes can come as a surprise. But to mid-century audiences who'd lived through the Depression and two world wars, traveling carnivals were something else entirely: weird holdovers from America's not-too-distant agrarian past that shambled through town once a year, bribing local cops to look the other way as they pitched their Ten-in-One tents filled with freaks, cooch dancers, and other shady carry folk.

Amusement parks—the larger industrialized descendants of old-time carnivals—didn't fare much better in the minds of many city dwellers and suburban sprawlers. To them, places like New York's Coney Island and Santa Monica's Ocean Park were faded phantoms of their turn-of-the-century heyday, back when steel and electricity were enough to draw crowds. Now they were just the last stop on the streetcar for teens, pickpockets, and proles on the make, a littered gauntlet of dark alleys, fixed games, and dangerous rides.

Carnivals and amusement parks were perfect, in other words, for film noir.





Power play: Strongman Bruno (Mike Mazurki), electric girl Molly (Coleen Gray), and carny boss Clem (James Flavin) watch Stan (Tyrone Power) smooth-talk the town marshal (James Burke); Right: Zeena (Joan Blondell) lays down her cards

FREAKS, GEEKS, AND GRIFTERS

Nearly seventy-five years after its 1947 release, *Nightmare Alley* remains the gold standard for carnival noir. It's also widely considered one of the best—and darkest—noir films of all time. But it almost didn't get made.

Tyrone Power, desperate to graduate from dashing Zorro-type roles, essentially begged 20th Century Fox studio chief Darryl F. Zanuck to let him star in an adaptation of William Lindsay Gresham's bestselling 1946 novel about how fate and a spate of bad choices turn a handsome carnival talker¹ named Stan Carlisle into a screaming geek who bites the heads off live chickens in exchange for a nightly bottle and a place to sleep it off in.

The role was a radical departure for the studio's dark-haired golden boy, but Zanuck gave his consent with the proviso that screenwriter Jules Furthman put Power into almost every scene (he's in all except one) and tack on a quasi-hopeful ending. Fox spared almost no expense on the production, renting the Yankee-Patterson Carnival and constructing it on their back lot, with a hundred or so sideshow attractions spread over ten acres including performers such as the Fat Lady and the Thin Man. Thankfully for modern



¹ The carny terms are “talker,” “inside talker” (who works inside the Ten-in-One tent), and “outside talker.” Say “barker” around carnies and they'll know you're a rube.

"I've finally gotten a chance to play a character unlike any I've done before," Power told the press; *Nightmare Alley* would remain his favorite film

A black and white close-up portrait of actor Joaquin Phoenix. He has dark, spiky hair and is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. He is holding a dark sign in front of his chest. The sign has the words "MAKE UP" printed in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. Below a horizontal white line on the sign, the alphanumeric code "A336" is written in white, handwritten-style characters.

MAKE UP

A336



In contrast to Joan Crawford's exuberant publicity pose for *Flamingo Road*, carnival dancer Lane Bellamy can't wait to retire and settle down in Boldon City; milk-swilling sheriff Titus Semple (Sydney Greenstreet) doesn't like ex-carnies polluting his town, but guess who's staying anyway

sensibilities, the only sideshow performer who made the final cut (other than in crowd scenes) was the Fire Eater, Maurice Navarro.

Despite—or because of—its A-level budget, *Nightmare Alley* became the first Tyrone Power movie to lose money in the eleven years since he'd risen to stardom, ensuring that he never got such a dark, meaty role again.²

DIRTY DANCERS AND CORRUPT COPS

Besides *Nightmare Alley*, only one other big-budget noir dared to put an above-the-title star in the sideshow. *Flamingo Road* (1949) opens with a blonde Joan Crawford, as Lane Bellamy, swaying on a makeshift stage alongside two other carnival dancers in harem-girl garb who are hiding their yawns under veils and eyeing the sky for rain.³ It's a meta moment: Crawford felt she was miscast (the part had been previously offered to Ann Sheridan, who was eleven years Crawford's junior) but Lane feels miscast, too. Weary of carny life and worried about going to seed, Lane stays behind when Coyne's Carnival pulls out of Boldon City.

Flamingo Road is sometimes unfairly compared to *Mildred Pierce*, Crawford's previous noir collaboration with director Michael Curtiz, but viewed instead through the lens of carnival

2 If Fox honchos weren't impressed, it seems screenwriters were—Stan's "The Great Stanton" spiel was echoed almost verbatim by Edward G. Robinson's stage mentalist "Triton the Great" in *Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (1948); and in the B noir *Two of a Kind* (1951), where Edmond O'Brien's orphan-turned-carny seduces a fortune teller, then hooks up with Elizabeth Scott to con a wealthy elderly couple.

3 Fair-haired Scheherazades wiggle their midribs in several other excellent noirs (*Moonrise* [1948], *The Hunted* [1948], and *Gun Crazy*) accompanied by outside talkers inviting oglers to "step inside" to see more. One ultra-low-budget noir, *Girl on the Run* (1953), steps inside to see the racier paid show.

noir, it stands as a proto-feminist answer to *Nightmare Alley*. Robert Wilder's script about a woman who faces down cops and politicians to rise above her carny past (adapted from his critically praised 1942 novel with additional dialogue by Edmund H. North) crackles with clever repartee, especially in Crawford's confrontations with Sydney Greenstreet as Boldon's corrupt sheriff, Titus Semple. When Titus tells Lane he'll never forget she was a carny and won't be satisfied till she's drummed out of town, she coolly responds, "You know, Sheriff, we had an elephant in our carnival with a memory

“ Now carnivals were just the last stop on the streetcar for teens and pickpockets, a littered gauntlet of dark alleys, fixed games, and dangerous rides.



Guns and darts: Peggy Cummins's studded holster and fitted carnival duds add a playful edge to her sharpshooting show—and to *Gun Crazy*'s iconic bank robbery scene



like that. He went after a keeper that he'd held a grudge against for almost fifteen years. Had to be shot. You just wouldn't believe how much trouble it is to dispose of a dead elephant."

THE WILD WEST SHOW

Hot on the heels of *Nightmare Alley* and *Flamingo Road*, *Gun Crazy* (1950) is the last of the great noirs to focus on carnies trying to break out of the tent, and it achieved its greatness with a fraction of those films' budgets. Among the keys to its brilliance are director Joseph H. Lewis's inventive staging, virtuosic camerawork by Russell Harlan, and a smart script by Dalton Trumbo and MacKinlay Kantor; but *Gun Crazy's* biggest weapon is actress Peggy Cummins as carnival sharpshooter Annie Laurie Starr,⁴ who literally enters the film with guns blazing.

Gun Crazy is shot through with the carnivalesque, starting with Annie's kinky meet-cute with gun-crazy amateur Bart Tare (John Dall) in which the future partners in crime prowl a carnival stage like creatures in heat, lighting each other's fire in front of a tentful of voyeurs. In the film's iconic bank robbery scene, Annie and Bart are still wearing their tent-show getups. Later, flush with stolen cash and hubris, they go to an amusement park in their city-slicker duds, where they're spotted by the law; they've finally shed their carnival

costumes, but their attraction to the fairground, along with their addiction to guns and money, ends up being their fatal flaw.

CARNIVAL AS METAPHOR

Two of noir's greatest writer-directors weren't interested in carnies at all. Orson Welles and Billy Wilder, both influenced by German Expressionism, drew instead on the metaphorical possibilities of the fairground: a place where people are confronted with the unfamiliar and whirled around by forces they seemingly can't control, where hidden desires are made visible and sold for entertainment.

The bravura "Crazy House" sequence in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947) singlehandedly transforms Orson Welles's famously troubled production from a muddle into a minor masterpiece. Welles, playing sailor Michael O'Hara, spirals into a studio-set farmhouse of twisted monochrome chutes and distorting mirrors, then stumbles through trapezoidal hallways cribbed from Robert Wiene's carnival ur-noir *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). The "Crazy House" is Welles's overt metaphor for O'Hara's psychic disequilibrium. Equally metaphorical if less intentional, the climactic mirror-maze shootout reflects *The Lady from Shanghai's* labyrinthine, fractured plot and disfiguring cuts ordered by Columbia head Harry Cohn; in the end, though, it's also a master class in how a few glorious shots can snatch an otherwise flawed film from the jaws of obscurity.

In another now-classic noir that took decades to find its audience, Billy Wilder's 1951 film *Ace in the Hole* (aka *The Big Car-*

⁴ Annie Laurie Starr is named Antoinette McReady in Kantor's short story; the change is a screenwriterly nod to two famous gunwomen, Wild West show superstar Annie Oakley and gunned-down outlaw Belle Starr.



Kirk Douglas in *Ace in the Hole*, overlooking one of the largest sets Paramount had ever constructed: 1,200 feet wide, 1,600 feet long, and 235 feet high

nival), a giant fairground erupts on a bone-white stretch of desert outside Gallup, New Mexico, where cave-in victim Leo Minosa (Richard Benedict) lies trapped in an abandoned Native American cliff dwelling. Within days, a press tent goes up, then hundreds of rubbernecks arrive, and then an armada of trucks labeled “S&M Amusement Corp” hauls in concessions, a Ferris wheel, and a swing carousel. By day three, a cowboy-band anthem called “We’re Coming, Leo”⁵ is being hocked to gawkers as sheet music, and by day four it’s become a maniacal dirge played day and night by an unseen fairground organ. By the time Leo’s inevitable death is announced on day six, the big carnival has been transformed into a full-blown (if metaphorical) circus, complete with a ringleader and a sea of delighted onlookers.

SINISTER AMUSEMENTS

By 1940, urbanization and suburban sprawl had swallowed up much of the land where traveling carnival companies had once set up their tents, and more than a thousand amusement parks had shut down in the United States, unable to compete with newer amusements like automobiles, movies, and eventually television. The fun parks that made it through the war were often the most urban, and enticed locals and the bridge-and-tunnel crowd with nearby attrac-

tions like beaches, diners, penny arcades, bars, semilegal gambling establishments, nightclubs, dancehalls, recreational pools, Turkish baths, and cheap hotels—all of which showed up in film noir.

The 1947 hit *T-Men*, cinematographer John Alton’s first of five style-defining collaborations with director Anthony Mann, depicted an aging midway as a main artery in the heart of the Dark City. After the Schemer (Wallace Ford) leaves his grimy hotel, passing

“ The 1947 hit *T-Men* depicted an aging midway as a main artery in the heart of the Dark City.

⁵ The real-life Kentucky caving-disaster spectacle that partially inspired *Ace in the Hole* yielded a country record of its own, “The Death of Floyd Collins,” which sold three million copies in 1925.



a steam room and boxing gym, he walks along a stretch of game stalls and busted bulbs with a double Ferris wheel and shutdown rollercoaster looming overhead. When he pauses near the park's entrance before heading to a nightclub, flashing neon letters spelling "Ocean Park Pier" and "Entrance Amusement Pier" are reflected by the rain-slicked asphalt. This high concentration of noir settings and images was no exaggeration: the Ocean Park district of Santa Monica (a city nestled on the shoreline just west of downtown Los Angeles) was known by government agencies to have the "highest concentration of crime . . . in the city"⁶ with "skill bingo" gambling parlors that dotted the area from Ocean Park Pier two miles north to Santa Monica Pier (which had its own amusement park until the 1930s). Together, Ocean Park Pier and the nearby Ocean Front Walk comprised a "fun zone" that appeared in several noirs including *T-Men*, *Gun Crazy*, *Woman on the Run* (1950), *Dark City* (1950), *Man in the Dark* (1953), *The Dark Corner* (1946), *Quicksand* (1950), and Joseph Losey's *M* (1951).

Given San Francisco's atmospheric presence in film noirs from *The Maltese Falcon* to *Vertigo*, it's no surprise that its seaside amusement park, Playland-at-the-Beach, harbored its fair share of noir marksmen and marks. But as Playland was a day's drive away

6 Santa Monica Redevelopment Agency report from 1968.

and often shrouded in fog,⁷ Hollywood had Ocean Park Pier stand in for Playland in *Woman on the Run*. Thirty miles south of Ocean Park, the shooting gallery and dunk tank at Long Beach's Nu-Pike⁸ pleasure pier masqueraded as Playland in *The Sniper* (1952). Playland did get to play itself in establishing shots in the 1949 RKO Red Scare noir *The Woman on Pier 13* (aka *I Married a Communist*), where its shooting gallery is used as a Communist front (staffed by William Talman in his second screen role). The atmospheric gloom of the San Francisco park is captured best, though, in the final tracking shot of *The Lady from Shanghai*, in which Orson Welles strolls for fifty seconds across Playland's desolate off-season midway, finally looking toward the Pacific Ocean and the words "The End."

Across the Atlantic, two European amusement parks became hangouts for some of British author Graham Greene's most sinister characters. *Brighton Rock* (1948), adapted by Greene and Terence Rattigan from Greene's novel, fictionalizes the mid-1930s gang wars that proliferated in Brighton on England's southern coast. Key dia-

7 Non-California amusement parks are rare in noir. Coney Island and Chicago's Riverview Park are rear-projected in *When Strangers Marry* (1944) and *Native Son* (1951), respectively. *The Burglar* (1957) showcases Atlantic City's Steel Pier in several climactic scenes.

8 The Pike rebranded itself as "Nu-Pike" in 1950. Its indoor Plunge bathhouse and pool appear in *I Wake Up Screaming* (1941) and *He Ran All the Way* (1951).



In a studio-set Ferris wheel gondola with footage of Vienna circling behind him, Joseph Cotten learns that Orson Welles might be slightly cuckoo

logue and plot points rely on the funfair⁹ attractions at Brighton's Palace Pier, particularly an arcade recording booth and a ghost train that juts out into the English Channel. In Greene's even more highly acclaimed brainchild *The Third Man* (1949), the Prater amusement park is as much a part of Vienna's war-torn landscape as its sewers, cemeteries, and rubble-strewn streets. The park's most recognizable landmark, the Riesenrad (the giant Ferris wheel), towers over the city, providing Joseph Cotten and Orson Welles with a god's-eye view of the skyline and fairgrounds below, the other rides abandoned except for two unattended children on a merry-go-round.

STRANGER DANGER

A round up of carnival noir wouldn't be complete without a quick turn on the merry-go-round. A centerpiece of small carnivals and large amusement parks alike, their slow-moving ponies and old-timey tunes hide the naked, grasping capitalism of game stalls and sideshows behind a scrim of safety and innocence. No wonder a carousel shows up in so many carnival noirs, usually right before things go wrong. In *Gun Crazy* and *Daughter of Darkness* (1948), it's a romantic activity for young lovers before fate closes in on them. In

Pickup (1951), it's an excuse for femme fatale Beverly Michaels to ride sidesaddle and flash her mile-long gams in the hopes of picking up her next meal ticket. In *High Wall* (1947) and *Strangers on a Train* (1951), madmen see and hear carousels as they move in and

“ In *The Third Man*, the Prater amusement park is as much a part of Vienna's war-torn landscape as its sewers, cemeteries, and rubble-strewn streets.

⁹ “Funfair” is the British catchall term for amusement parks and traveling fairs; in UK English “carnival” retains its older meaning as a carefree festival such as the Argentinian carnival in *Gilda* (1946).

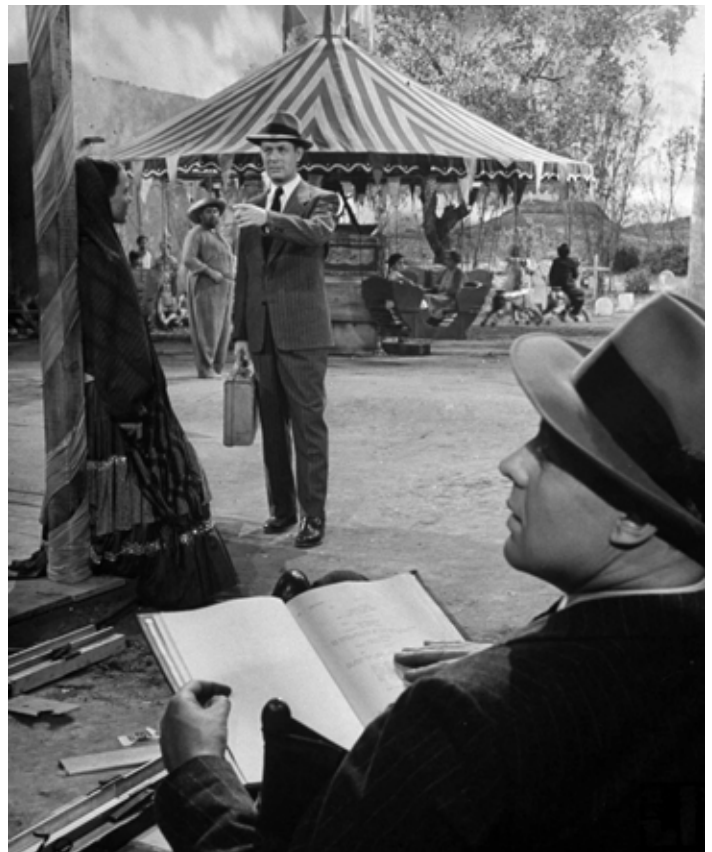


Farley Granger battles Robert Walker in *Strangers on a Train*—leave it to Alfred Hitchcock to direct the most gripping carousel scene in all of noir

out of fugue states. More than anything, though, merry-go-rounds are kiddie rides, and in carnival noir, they're the place where kids and criminals collide.

Leave it to Alfred Hitchcock to direct the most gripping and beautifully shot carousel scene to appear in any film noir—and possibly any film, period. In *Strangers on a Train*, a carousel spins madly out of control, leaving a murderer and a carousel attendant dead, and screaming parents searching for their kids in the wreckage. The tour de force finale was achieved through a combination of several effects. In addition to a full-scale carousel and amusement park that was constructed on a ranch thirty miles northwest of Warner Bros. studios,¹⁰ a toy carousel was filmed being blown apart by explosives. No children were harmed in the making of the movie, but as Hitchcock told François Truffaut, one element of danger was very real: “You know, that little man actually crawled under that spinning carousel. If he'd raised his head by an inch, he'd have been killed.”

A much humbler merry-go-round appears in *Ride the Pink Horse*, the fifth film noir produced by Hitchcock's former assistant and screenwriter, Joan Harrison. Adding gravitas to the 1947 picture (which coincidentally premiered one day before *Nightmare Alley*), Harrison had the real-life Tío Vivo (a Spanish synonym for “merry-go-round”) at the heart of Dorothy B. Hughes's novel transported from its home in Taos, New Mexico, to Los Angeles. In the film, the Tío Vivo with its titular pink horse becomes a magnet for violence, but it also winds up being a sanctuary where Robert Montgomery's character, Gagin, experiences a measure of healing and



Ride the Pink Horse: Robert Montgomery talks to Wanda Hendrix, with Thomas Gomez and Tío Vivo in the background

10 The Rowland V. Lee Ranch, including the Tunnel of Love lake, would later double for the Ohio River and river valley in *The Night of the Hunter* (1955).



Playland's Fly-O-Plane grounded by low attendance on a gloomy day in 1949; the San Francisco park would shut down for good in 1972

redemption (within the limits of noir). In real life, Taos' Tío Vivo (a hand-cranked children's ride properly called a "flying jenny" since its ponies swing free) had a fascinating redemption story of its own. Built around 1882, it toured the carnival circuit throughout New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona, but was eventually abandoned in a barn. Rediscovered in 1937, it was restored and brought out annually for the Taos Fiesta starting in 1939—Hughes, who lived in nearby Santa Fe, took her children to ride its horses—but was kept in storage during some of the war years, partly because of difficulty finding men to hand-crank the ride for a dollar per hour. Following its star turn, Tío Vivo became an annual Taos tourist attraction, was motorized in 1954, and is still operating to this day, making it one of the few real-world attractions from carnival noirs to make it into the twenty-first century.

THE END OF CARNIVAL NOIR

It would be unfair to say that Disneyland, which opened in 1955, brought about the end of the traditional amusement park; after all, amusement parks had been in decline since before World War II, giving them their noir-worthy patina. No, the two biggest nails in the coffin for traditional amusement parks were television and the postwar flight to the suburbs. Why drive an hour into the city for a rickety rollercoaster, many Americans wondered, now that there were miniaturized fairground rides in every park and schoolyard? (The same phenomena also took a toll on the audience for film noir: Why shell out dough for a babysitter and movie tickets when you could stay home and watch police procedurals on television?)

But Disneyland did supply the hammer that nailed the coffin shut. From 1955 through the end of 1959, nearly nineteen million visitors strolled through the park's gates and along its manicured avenues. During the same period, other amusement parks raced to imitate Disneyland,¹¹ called it quits, or both. Ocean Park Pier (which had appeared in more noirs than any other carnival location) launched a concerted Disneyfication effort, closing in 1956 and reopening in 1958 as Pacific Ocean Park, but shuttered for good in 1967; similarly, San Francisco's Playland-at-the-Beach closed in 1972, and Long Beach's Nu-Pike was demolished in 1979.

Traditional amusement parks and their carnival forebears may be a thing of the past, but they live on in film noir.¹² They might even live on forever, thanks to film preservation efforts and new generations of noir fans waiting to sit together again in a darkened theater. Up there, shadows from a gone world still glow on the screen. Peggy Cummins, ten feet tall in her cowgirl costume, is knocking out a cop with the butt of her gun and driving away. And Tyrone Power, reduced to a sunken-eyed half-beast, is howling for his hooch—something to quiet the nightmares, and wash the feathers down his throat. ■

11 Even New York City got into the act. Disneyland-style mouse-eared balloons were sold near the Central Park Zoo and Carousel, as seen in *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), the film most often cited as the last entry in the classic noir cycle.

12 Additional noirs and noir-stained films with carnivals and carnival attractions include *Ministry of Fear*, *Stage Fright*, *The Gangster*, *Suspense*, *Whistle Stop*, *House of Bamboo*, *The Breaking Point*, *The Reckless Moment*, *The Big Tip Off*, *The Tarnished Angels*, *The Red Menace*, *The Last Crooked Mile*, *Bad Blonde* (aka *The Flanagan Boy*), *Forbidden* (aka *Scarlet Heaven*), *The Glass Cage* (aka *The Glass Tomb*), *Le Dernier tournant* (*The Last Turning*), *Panique*, *Rosauro Castro*, and *Kirmes* (*The Fair*).

THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW: LAFFING SAL IN FILM NOIR

That face. That laugh. Laffing Sal may not be your typical femme fatale, but once noir fans get their first look—and listen—they're usually hooked. For some, the initial noir sighting is *Woman on the Run*, for others, *Man in the Dark*. Still others are lucky enough to see Laffing Sal in the papier-mâché flesh at an amusement park or museum, convulsing with laughter and making kids cry faster than a department store Santa.

The Santa comparison is an apt one: Sal's six-plus-foot design and barrel-chested frame were nicked from earlier Santa store-window figures, the ho-ho chortle replaced by a stack of 78s playing the outsized yuks of a woman named Tanya Garth. In the 1920s and 1930s, Sal was the most popular funhouse "animated ballyhoo figure" sold by the Philadelphia Toboggan Company (which specialized in roller-coaster toboggans). Although hundreds of Sals were produced, only about a dozen are known to survive.

Today, the two Sals who lived at San Francisco's Playland-at-the-Beach (one in the Fun House window, one kept as backup) may have the most devoted following, visited by thousands each year at the Musée Mécanique at Fisherman's Wharf and the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk two hours south. But locals who grew up near Playland before it closed in 1972 still recall falling asleep to her awful guffaws. Indeed, Sal contributed to many a bad dream, and it's that quality that got her cast in several noirs.

Ocean Park Pier's Sal stands in for her Playland sister in *Woman on the Run* (1950), where she gets her most screen and soundtrack time, laughing her head off throughout the tense climax and seeming to mock Ann Sheridan, who finds herself trapped on a rollercoaster; Sal even gets the closing fade-out. Meanwhile in *Man in the Dark* (1953, Columbia's first 3-D release), Sal's laughter unlocks Edmond O'Brien's amnesia on a trip to Ocean Park Pier; and in Joseph Losey's LA-based remake of *M* (1951), Sal screams from her window while David Wayne buys his newest victim a clown balloon straight out of the Fritz Lang original.



Laffing Sal unlocks Edmond O'Brien's amnesia, with assistance from Audrey Totter, in *Man in the Dark*

Playland's Sal almost made it into *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947): Orson Welles passes by Sal's window in front of Playland's Fun House, but it was filmed in the off-season and the curtain was drawn. Considering that the shattering death of Rita Hayworth's titular femme fatale occurred only seconds earlier, Sal's gap-toothed cackle might have spoiled the moody finale.



Playland's Sal, now at the Musée Mécanique

Nu-Pike's Sal guffaws in garish 3-D Technicolor in the 1954 noir/mystery/King Kong pastiche *Gorilla at Large*; in addition to being Sal's only 3-D Technicolor appearance, it's even more remarkable for packing so many noir stalwarts and heavy hitters—Lee J. Cobb, Raymond Burr, Anne Bancroft, Lee Marvin, and Cameron Mitchell—into one delightfully terrible movie.

An Imitation Sal—oversized, pigtailed, and less animated—stars in *An Act of Murder* (1948), laughing a bit more genteelly than Sal while Florence Eldridge gets trapped in a Wellesian hall of mirrors. The scene is well done and may satisfy Sal addicts in need of a fix, but like the shanghaied mirror-maze imagery, this pseudo-Sal's not quite as exciting as the real thing.

—Brent Calderwood