Film Noir

SUMMARY:

1940s and 1950s Hollywood saw the emergence of “film noir,” a cycle of fatalistic crime thrillers, often produced as “B” movies and distinguished by its narrative experimentation, expressive visual design, and stylized dialogue. Noir cemented the now-familiar archetypes of private detectives and femme fatales as well as techniques like flashbacks and first-person narration. Noir’s roots are wide-ranging, including hardboiled American crime fiction and cinematic movements like French Poetic Realism, Italian Neorealism, and German Expressionism. In subsequent decades, new generations of “neo-noir” filmmakers would approach these conventions self-consciously, signaling a deliberate retooling (or even subversion) of the classical molds. Today, neo-noir is visible across a variety of genres, such as science fiction and superhero films, and features in the works of numerous acclaimed filmmakers.

MAIN ENTRY:

“Film noir” (French for “black film”) is the term used to describe the stylized thrillers and crime dramas popularized by Hollywood cinema in the 1940s and 1950s. Often drawing from the hardboiled crime fiction of American authors like Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Cornell Woolrich, films in the noir tradition frequently take place in urban settings and feature plots about murder, blackmail, and double-crosses. Owing to this common set of narrative and character tropes, some characterize noir as a genre. Others argue that noir – while associated most with mystery and crime – is best described as a *style* that can be applied to a range of genres, settings and storylines, including comedies like *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944) or *My Favorite Brunette* (1947), Westerns like *The Man from Colorado* (1948) or *High Noon* (1952), and, more recently, comic book adaptations like *Batman* (1989) and *Sin City* (2005). Traditionally, noir is known for its low-key lighting schemes, convoluted stories involving first-person narration and flashbacks, bleak worldview, and pulpy dialogue.

The period of classical noir follows the popularity of both 1930s gangster films and the boldly erotic melodramas of Josef von Sternberg, which together revealed the public’s appetite for provocative subject matter. Furthermore, noir departed from the optimistic and propagandistic melodramas produced by Hollywood during wartime, reflecting a strain of postwar cynicism and disillusionment, offering grittier (and arguably more complex) portrayals of society: the world of noir is filled with corruption, financial and sexual opportunism, and dangerous power relations. Likewise, noir’s persistent tone of paranoia and portrayals of seductive, manipulative women (the *femme fatale*) point to social unrest emerging from the Red Scare and shifting postwar gender dynamics, respectively.

Noir’s most archetypal characters include the jaded private detectives Sam Spade, played by Humphrey Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), and Phillip Marlowe, played by Dick Powell in *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) and Bogart in *The Big Sleep* (1946); iconic portrayals of femme fatales include Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity* (1944), Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* (1946), and Jane Greer in *Out of the Past* (1947). Despite these famous examples, however, many film noirs were actually “B” movies, produced by the studios at low cost and generally without marquee stars. Although such films were compelled to abide by the Production Code, Hollywood’s self-censorship guideline, particularly its stipulation that murderers must pay for their crimes, smaller financial stakes allowed for greater degrees of narrative and formal experimentation than was customary of their “A” counterparts. Owing largely to these flexibilities, classical and post-classical noirs could also be comparatively more risqué and violent.

Stylistically, noir is influenced by several cinematic sources, such as German Expressionism, an artistic movement prominent in the 1910-1920s that inspired the visual textures of noir’s menacing alleyways and dingy nightclubs. Seen in seminal silent works like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, 1920), German Expressionist cinema used unrealistic, heavily distorted set designs, high-contrast lighting, and skewed compositions to convey the conflicted, sometimes deranged inner realities of its characters. Hollywood’s adoption of these tropes was partially facilitated by the emigration of Expressionist filmmakers like Fritz Lang, director of *Metropolis* (1927) and *M* (1931). The impact of Expressionism was far-reaching, influencing the noir-ish qualities of films by Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles as well as the visual style of horror/monster films produced by Universal Studios, including *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* (both 1931).

# Another significant cinematic determinant was French Poetic Realism from the 1930s, exemplified by directors like Jean Renoir, Jean Vigo, and Pierre Chenal. Films of this movement typically featured highly aestheticized representations of life. While they did not necessarily gravitate toward crime narratives, Poetic Realist films placed their focus on alienated protagonists (such as criminals or members of the working class) and on recurring themes of disillusionment and existential despair, which coincided with noir’s fatalistic tendencies. Another influencing factor was social realism, seen in the documentary-like styles of classical Warner Bros. films like *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) and later, postwar movements like Italian Neorealism, whose main works include *Rome, Open City* (*Roma, città aperta*, 1945) and *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948). Despite the seeming aesthetic incongruity between realism and Expressionism, the emphasis among these movements on societal marginalization and human vulnerability against unsympathetic institutions was consistent with the thematic priorities of noir.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many films advanced the traditions of classical noir. Others, dubbed “neo-noir,” engaged them subversively and with modernist self-awareness; examples include Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* (*À bout de soufflé*, 1960) and Robert Altman’s *The Long Goodbye* (1973). Neo-noir distinguishes several important works by the New Hollywood directors, such as Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974) and Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), and would continue into subsequent decades with films like *Body Heat* (1991), *Basic Instinct* (1992), and *L.A. Confidential* (1997). Today, influences of the plotlines, characterizations, and overall sensibilities of noir are evident in the diverse screen careers of writer-directors like David Cronenberg, Christopher Nolan, Quentin Tarantino, David Lynch, David Mamet, and the Coen brothers. In the era of neo-noir, the occasional hybridization with dystopian science fiction narratives is also noteworthy; this type of crossover is identified perhaps most famously with *Blade Runner* (1982). Noir can also be seen in the works of celebrated international auteurs like Godard, Jean-Pierre Melville, and Henri-Georges Clouzot from France; Carol Reed and Mike Hodges from England; Suzuki Seijun and Kitano Takeshi from Japan; Wong Kar-Wai from Hong Kong; and Park Chan-Wook from South Korea.

Further reading:

Borde, R. and Chaumeton, E. (2002), *A Panorama of American Film Noir, 1941-1953*, translated by Hammond, P., San Francisco: City Light Books.

Hirsch, F. (1999), *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir*. Pompton Plains, N.J.: Limelight.

Naremore, J. (2008), *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, 2d ed., Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.

Silver, A., et al. (eds.) (2010), *Film Noir: The Encyclopedia*, New York: Overlook Press.

Tuska, J. (1984), *Dark Cinema: American Film Noir in Cultural Perspective*, Westport, Conn., and London: Greenwood.

Wager, J.B. (2005), *Dames in the Driver's Seat: Rereading Film Noir*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

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**Please hyperlink the following terms and titles:**

**[Main Entry, Paragraph 1]**

First use of “Film noir”: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5cPDEZi5\_Y

Dashiell Hammett: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dashiell\_Hammett

Raymond Chandler: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond\_Chandler

Cornell Woolrich: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornell\_Woolrich

*Arsenic and Old Lace*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0036613/

*My Favorite Brunette*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0039645/

*The Man from Colorado*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0041625/

*High Noon*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0044706/

*Batman*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096895/

*Sin City*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0401792/

**[Main Entry, Paragraph 2]**

1930s gangster films: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gangsters\_films

Josef von Sternberg: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0903049/

**[Main Entry, Paragraph 3]**

Sam Spade: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsv0WkFTiUw

Humphrey Bogart: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000007/

*The Maltese Falcon*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0033870/

Dick Powell: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0694090/

*Murder, My Sweet*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0037101/

*The Big Sleep*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0038355/

Barbara Stanwyck: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001766/

*Double Indemnity*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0036775/

Rita Hayworth: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000028/

*Gilda*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0038559/

Jane Greer: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0339452/

*Out of the Past*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0039689/

Production Code: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motion\_Picture\_Production\_Code

**[Main Entry, Paragraph 4]**

German Expressionism: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German\_expressionism

*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0010323/

Fritz Lang: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000485/

*Metropolis*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0017136/

*M*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0022100/

Alfred Hitchcock: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000033/

Orson Welles: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000080/

Universal Studios: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal\_Studios

*Dracula*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0021814/

*Frankenstein*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0021884/

**[Main Entry, Paragraph 5]**

French Poetic Realism: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poetic\_realism

Jean Renoir: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0719756/

Jean Vigo: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0897118/

Pierre Chenal: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0155469/

Warner Bros.: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warner\_Bros.

*I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0023042/

Italian Neorealism: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian\_neorealism

*Rome, Open City*: www.imdb.com/title/tt0038890/

*Bicycle Thieves*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0040522/

**[Main Entry, Paragraph 6]**

“Neo-noir”: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-noir

Jean-Luc Godard: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000419/

*Breathless*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0053472/

Robert Altman: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000265/

*The Long Goodbye*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070334/

New Hollywood: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\_Hollywood

*Chinatown*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071315/

Martin Scorsese: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000217/

*Taxi Driver*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0075314/

*Body Heat*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082089/

*Basic Instinct*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0103772/

*L.A. Confidential*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119488/

David Cronenberg: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000343/

Christopher Nolan: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0634240/

Quentin Tarantino: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000233/

David Lynch: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000186/

David Mamet: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000519/

Coen brothers: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001054/

*Blade Runner*: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083658/

Jean-Pierre Melville: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0578483/

Henri-Georges Clouzot: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0167241/

Carol Reed: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0715346/

Mike Hodges: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0388198/

Suzuki Seijun: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0840671/

Kitano Takeshi: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001429/

Wong Kar-Wai: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0939182/

Park Chan-Wook: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0661791/