

THE EVIDENCE

Cynical, fast-talking anti-heroes. Beautiful but cold-eyed femme fatales. A rainy, neon-lit city at night. The blaze of a .45 automatic. These are all things the average person thinks of when they hear the words ‘film noir’. But where did these ideas come from?

To start, they get their beginnings from German Expressionism film, with its dramatic lighting with dark shadows and pessimistic storylines. Many of these German directors, such as Billy Wilder and Fritz Lang emigrated to the United States following the Nazi takeover and brought their film styles with them. It’s also based on the ‘hard-boiled detective’ genre of novels that started in the late 1920’s, such as *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) and *The Glass Key* (1931) by Dashiell Hammett, *The Big Sleep* (1939) and *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) by Raymond Chandler, and *Double Indemnity* (1943) by James M. Cain. All these novels were themselves adapted into famous film noirs.

As these movies were mostly made for male audiences, post-war male fears of women in the workplace and the ‘moral degeneration’ of society were other things that helped fuel film noir. Many of the movies use the classic trope of a damsel in distress, who then later turns out to be black widow spider who has used her seductive powers to lure them into her web of crime and corruption. These films were, sadly, not very kind in their treatment of women (to say the least).

The term ‘film noir’ was not initially applied to these films (they would be called ‘melodramas’ at the time of their making) but was originated by French film critics in the 1930’s to describe movies about low-life characters, and later revived by French film critics Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier in 1946 to describe a series of 5 Hollywood films recently imported into post-war France. These films were *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Murder My Sweet* (1944), *Laura* (1944) and *The Lost Weekend* (1945). French Surrealism fans and film critics Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton cemented the term with their groundbreaking 1955 book *A Panorama of the American Film Noir: 1941-1953*.

CLUES

- DUTCH WIDE ANGLES TO DISTORT REALITY
- CYNICAL / ANTI HEROES
- DARK, LOW-KEY, CHIAROSCURO LIGHTING
- EXISTENTIALIST PHILOSOPHY
- MYSTERY
- INSPIRED BY GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM
- FEMME FATALE
- POST-WAR DISILLUSIONMENT
- FAST AND BRIEF DIALOGUES
- HIGH-CONTRAST MISE EN SCENE
- VOICE-OVER NARRATION

FILM NOIR *Festival*

The Maltese Falcon

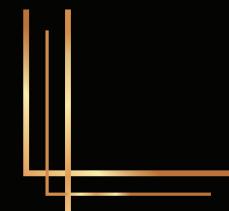
The Big Sleep

Double Indemnity

Murder My Sweet

Whatcom Community College
Auditorium

08.14.2023
1:30PM





THE MALTESE FALCON 1941

"What is it?"

"The uh, stuff that dreams are made of"

Some lists place this as the first true film noir, and for good reason. Based on the gritty novel by Dashiell Hammett and being the first movie directed by John Huston, this was the most accurate depiction of the book (there had been two previous attempts to film it). Things to look for are the excellent acting by Humphrey Bogart as the private investigator Sam Spade. His snappy dialogue and cynical worldview work as a template for most detective and noir films that followed. He lives in a lonely, morally grey world and works to stay on top of it. There is the dark story of murder, violence, and greed, with a delightfully twisty plot, another

foundation for the noir films to come later. Mary Astor as Brigid O'Shaughnessy makes an excellent femme fatale, constantly lying even though she knows perfectly well that Spade doesn't fall for any of it. Sydney Greenstreet as Kaspar Gutman and Peter Lorre as Joel Cairo play excellent foils to Sam Spade...both subtly and unsubtly threatening and willing to go as far as murder to get what they want. Other marks of noir are its high contrast lighting in some shots (particularly the end with the bars of the elevator showing dark shadows across Bridgid's face), its tight camera framing, and the morally ambiguous characters and ending. It also features one of the all-time great McGuffin's...the 'black bird' that everyone will kill for. This film serves as the pattern for all other noir films to follow.



MURDER MY SWEET 1944

**"I don't know what you talked him into.
Was it murder, or something serious?"**

From another Raymond Chandler novel (*Farewell, My Lovely*) featuring detective Phillip Marlowe, this classic detective story is one of the original 5 imports the French critics coined the term 'film noir' about. The movie was directed by Edward Dmytryk and stars Dick Powell, as Marlowe, Claire Trevor as femme fatale Helen Grayle, and Anne Shirley as Anne, Helen's stepdaughter. This movie sets the tone for many of the noirs of the late 40's and early 50's. From the opening credits, the film uses wonderful expressionistic lighting to set the mood for the story. The movie also uses Dutch angles for some of the shots to give the feeling of things being not quite right. The film features a labyrinthine plot that keeps you guessing until the very end. It features cynical but witty dialogue and a voice over narration by Marlowe. There's shots of seedy bars and a neon-lit city, used by many future noirs. And if you're looking for flashbacks in your noir, the entire movie is a flashback of the events that landed Marlowe in the hands of the police. Of note is a 'dream' sequence when Marlowe is drugged and knocked out that features nightmarish visions of larger-than-life villains, increasingly smaller doors, and, as Marlowe says, 'a grey web worn by a thousand spiders'.



THE BIG SLEEP 1946

Directed by Howard Hawks and based on the novel by Raymond Chandler. This is a very noir worthy plot...it's so convoluted and twisty that even Chandler wasn't sure who committed one of the murders! This movie stars Humphrey Bogart as detective Phillip Marlowe and Lauren Bacall as Vivien Sternwood. While this clearly falls into noir territory, there are things which this movie doesn't have in common with other noirs. Surprisingly there's no real femme fatale, though there's plenty of tension between Bogart and Bacall. It's still a definite noir though, with lots of high contrast and night lit scenes. There's plenty of fog, mist, and rain to give the film a proper noir look. This movie also pushes the Hayes code by featuring a plot showing the seedy underbelly of the city, with gambling and implications of drug use and pornography.

"My My My! Such a lot of guns around town and so few brains!"

DOUBLE INDEMNITY 1944

Regarded as one of the quintessential film noirs, this movie written by director Billy Wilder and co-written by Raymond Chandler features several film noir tropes to look for. There is a deep focus lens, letting the viewer see everyone in the frame to heighten the drama between characters. There is the voice-over narration by Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) that moves the plot along. Also look for an Oscar nominated performance from Barbara Stanwyck as Phyllis Dietrichson, one of the most sinister and conniving femme fatales to appear on the screen. Much of the plot takes place at night, with dark



shadows and high contrast lighting featuring heavily in several scenes (see the photo). And of course, there is the plot that is the very definition of noir, with murder, lies, and double-cross every step of the way.

"I killed him for money - and a woman - and I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman. Pretty, isn't it?"

THE SUSPECTS

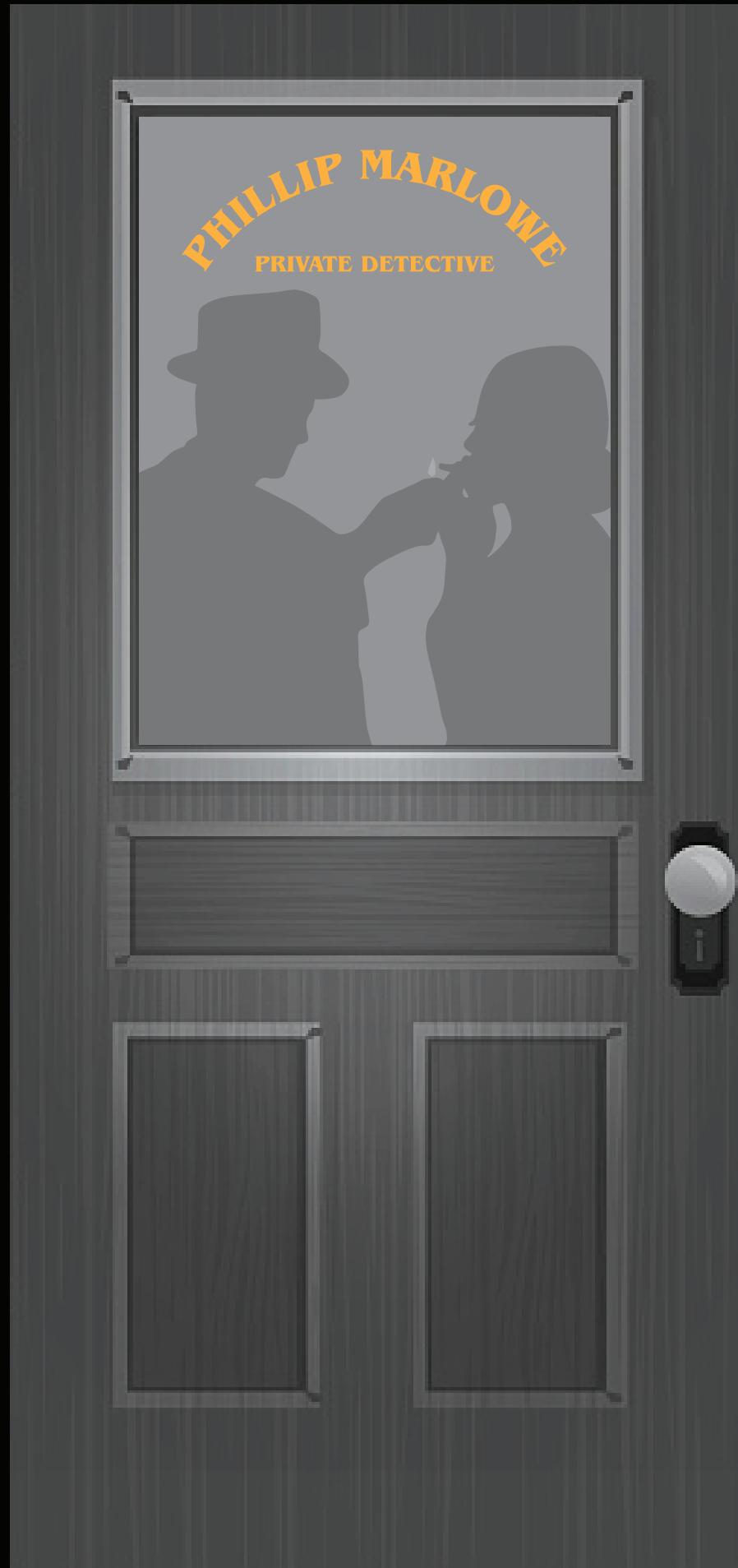
THE ANTIHERO

Frequently a detective, but can be other professions. They often smoke like a chimney, and drinks like a fish. Knows the city like the back of their hand. Fast talking with a dry sense of humor. Can solve problems with their fists, but would rather talk their way out of problems. A loner that doesn't like to be tied down by the world. Isn't afraid to explore the seedier side of the tracks. Can be a bit of a misogynist. Cynical and seemingly aloof, in it for the money, but often turns out to have a heart of gold underneath a tough exterior.



FEMME FATALE

Beautiful, but ultimately deadly. Can match wits with the anti-hero and leave him broken hearted. Has dark secrets that she's adept at keeping hidden. Often married, but only for the money. High society, but willing to go to a seedy bar (if someone else is buying). A black widow who lures in men with her seductive charms, and then leaves them dead. Occasionally...but rarely...has a change of heart. But since that heart is usually black as a rainy night on a dark street, don't count on it...



MOTIVE

There's no easy description for film noir. Many critics are unable to agree on exactly when film noir started, though most agree that *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) is one of the first 'true' film noir. They also disagree on what makes a movie a film noir. But there are certain elements that tend to appear repeatedly in most movies that are regarded as noir. They often use Dutch angles, camera tilts on the 'x' axis, which is a technique first used by the German Expressionists in the 1920's. These shots are used to give a sense of unease or danger. They also used a deep focus lens to capture all the action in the frame, both foreground and background. They feature some sort of investigation, usually into a crime, and most commonly into murder. They feature a character, usually an anti-hero, trying to unravel the mystery, who is often a private detective, but could also be any other profession (such as an insurance salesman in *Double Indemnity*, a drifter in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, or a reporter in *Citizen Kane*). They frequently feature a femme fatale who acts as a catalyst to lead the hero into trouble. The characters are motivated by money and will do anything for it. There is a fascination with sex (though always just implied!) and decadence. There are flashbacks to the past. There is a dark feeling of paranoia or alienation. The city is portrayed as a character, neon-lit but hiding sinister violence and seediness. There is often fog or rain to add to the aura of oppression. And finally, there is dark chiaroscuro lighting, helping to highlight the darkness that lies in the souls of the characters.

