Yiyun (Leo) Yao

Professor Robert Fitterman

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A Critique on *Thunderstorm* (2021): Is It Film Noir?

Film noir is a genre of film that originated in the 1940s as a reflection of the post-war pessimistic society. Some great, acclaimed examples include *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Out of the Past* (1947), *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), *Touch of Evil* (1958), etc. Film noir films usually contain elements such as a dark tone, narrative of crime thriller with voice over and flashbacks, high contrast, black-and-white, etc. The complicated plot of film noirs usually unfold through interactions between the central, male anti-hero protagonist and the femme fatale - a beautiful yet duplicitous woman who seduces and traps the antihero, who is sometimes a criminal and sometimes a victim.

As a unique genre of American films, film noir has survived and evolved somehow into the modern 21st century film industry. Many classic film noir films are being remade into modern neo-noir film such as the 2021 thriller film *Kate* as a modern remake of *D.O.A.* (1949). On December 6th, 2021, the WREX#2 studio has just made the premiere of its own mock film noir film *Thuderstorm* (2021). But is it actually film noir? What kind of film noir is it?

*Thunderstorm* (2021) is adapted and recomposed from the Chinese tragedy play also named *Thunderstorm* by Yu Cao from approximately the same time period as the origin of film noirs. The WREX#2 studio tries something different from its last classic film noir film and uses a creative approach in the production of *Thunderstorm*. While the dark tone and twisting plot still echo with most other classic or neo film noirs, the focus of the plot and the character setup deviate from those of the most commonly seen film noir films.

The criminal, violent, misogynistic, hard-boiled, or greedy perspectives of anti-heroes in film noir's story conventions were a metaphoric symptom of society's evils, with a strong undercurrent of moral conflict, purposelessness and sense of injustice. There were rarely happy or optimistic endings in noirs(Dirks 2).

Indeed, in the tragic ending of *Thunderstorm*, only Jack lives and everyone else dies as a punishment for Jack’s moral wrongdoings in the past. Similar endings like this occur frequently in film noirs. For example, in *Double Indemnity* (1944), the anti-hero Walter is the only one living telling the story and waiting for the trial of justice in the end. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), Frank is the only one living and waiting for his execution to pay for his crime. However, unlike the characters in *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* who all die of murder by either the anti-hero or the femme fatale, nobody commits murder or is murdered in *Thunderstorm*. Instead, every dead character, in the end, dies of suicide. One major difference between *Thunderstorm* and other film noir films is that it does not contain heavy crimes like murder, rape, or robbery. The cast considers such a creative change as a contemporary adaptation because of the much lower heavy crime rate today compared to the post-war era. In fact, this adaptation in *Thunderstorm* intends to reflect the significantly higher love crime rate such as infidelity. The quality and loyalty of people’s love today in the rapidly changing world are incomparable to people from the past. People favor fast and furious love rather than virtuous, committed love. Though the cast is uncertain of the effect of such a change - whether *Thunderstorm* remains as film noir or not, it seems afterward that this approach works perfectly well and *Thunderstorm* is still a film noir that shows the dark side of human nature. Here Dirks elaborates a more thematic review of film noirs.

Film noir films (mostly shot in gloomy grays, blacks and whites) thematically showed the dark and inhumane side of human nature with cynicism and doomed love, and they emphasized the brutal, unhealthy, nihilistic, seamy, shadowy, dark and sadistic sides of the human experience. An oppressive atmosphere of menace, pessimism, anxiety, suspicion that anything can go wrong, dingy realism, futility, fatalism, defeat and entrapment were stylized characteristics of film noir. The protagonists in film noir were normally driven by their past or by human weakness to repeat former mistakes(Dirks, 9).

As Dirks writes, human weaknesses drive the acts of protagonists to repeat former mistakes in film noirs. *Thunderstorm* perfectly shows this pattern in a skillfully designed plot. Forbidden love drives Jackson to commit the same mistakes Jack has made in his early years. Similarly, love drives Dorothy to repeat Helen’s past. As one of the classic film noir elements, “doomed love” also appears in *Thunderstorm*. The love relationships between Jack and Helen, Jack and Catherine, Jackson and Catherine, and Jackson and Dorothy, respectively, are all doomed, tilted, inhumane love that has no good ends to it.

Another key difference between *Thunderstorm* and other classical film noir films is its character setup. In most film noirs, there usually exist one male anti-hero protagonist, one detective, and one femme fatale. However, in *Thunderstorm*, Jack, Jackson, Catherine, Helen, and Dorothy are all protagonists. And interestingly, Catherine and Dorothy are both femme fatale to Jackson, while Jackson is the homme fatale to them. Because of Catherine and Jackson’s attraction to each other, their love is incest. Similarly, Dorothy and Jackson commit incest without knowing their past. In this case, Jack and Helen can be considered as the “detective” since they are the ones unveiling the truth which leads to everyone’s suicide in the end.

Nevertheless, *Thunderstorm* still is a good film noir film through its application of various camera techniques commonly used in film noirs.

Film noir films were marked visually by expressionistic lighting, deep-focus or depth of field camera work, disorienting visual schemes, jarring editing or juxtaposition of elements, ominous shadows, skewed camera angles (usually vertical or diagonal rather than horizontal), circling cigarette smoke, existential sensibilities, and unbalanced or moody compositions. Settings were often interiors with low-key (or single-source) lighting, venetian-blinded windows and rooms, and dark, claustrophobic, gloomy appearances(Dirks, 10).

Throughout the film, all these techniques that Dirks lists above are implemented in *Thunderstorm*. For example, after Jack discovers Helen’s true identity, a close-up of Jack immediately follows up with ominous shadows behind Jack. And the lighting is sourced from behind the camera at an angle skewed 30 degrees. The same lighting is used when Jack sits by himself, after hearing everyone’s death which is similar to the ending scene of *Double Indemnity*, where Walter sits in the corner, emerged in heavy shadow. Street views like the beginning scene of *Double Indemnity* also appear in *Thunderstorm*, rendering a city-style pessimistic tone. All of these camera techniques help create tension and emphasize the characters’ emotional struggles. They perfectly help present “doomed love” as a theme of the film.

Overall, *Thunderstorm* (2021) is a modern film noir that is worth a try. It adds creative elements that some audiences who are familiar with film noir may have never seen before. Meanwhile, it keeps the most fundamental elements of film noir. It reflects the problems of unhealthy love relationships in modern society and the tragic ending evokes the audience to ruminate on the issue.

Epilogue

I just want to say thank you to everyone. Thank you, Dr. Fitterman, for giving us this wonderful opportunity to shoot our own film noir and for this whole semester’s experience we enjoyed together in the world of film noir. And thank you to all my fellow cast members and especially to our director Jelly, who put a lot of effort into writing the scripts and editing the film clips in the end. The filming experience was tough. On a Thursday, when we first gathered as a group to film, we struggled to find a proper classroom because people were having classes. Our classroom was occupied. So were the classrooms around. When we found an empty classroom and started filming, people would come in 10 minutes later telling us they have a class here. We were forced to move from one classroom to another, which wasted a lot of time and made the final film much like a B-noir since the background scenes keep changing. On Sunday, when we gathered again to film, all the classroom buildings and areas were closed except for Stern. We went there but every classroom was occupied. So we had no choice but to film in the lounge area. People opening and closing the doors as well as walking past us caused us a lot of difficulties as we had to refilm every time to eliminate their noises. The film experience was not enjoyable, but I cherished it. We were a good team and made everything work in the end. I am very proud of us. I admit that I am not acting well in some scenes but I have tried my best. I hope I can work with you all sometime in the future. Fortunately, I am able to continue working with you, Dr. Fitterman, in the spring. I anticipate it will be another exciting journey and can’t wait to see you back again in the spring!

Work Cited

[1] Dirks, Tim. “Film Noir.” Filmsite, Filmsite, https://www.filmsite.org/filmnoir.html.

[2] Sehayek, Marnie. “The Dark and Distinctive Elements of Film Noir.” Culture Trip, The Culture Trip, 18 Aug. 2016, https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/california/articles/the-dark-and-distinctive-elements-of-film-noir/.