Film Noir: Overview

From Collingham College, London

http://collingham.wordpress.com/category/film-a-s/fm2-film-noir/
"I killed him for money – and for a woman. I didn't get the money. And I didn't get the woman."

*Double Indemnity* (1944)
Film Noir: What is it?

- "A term coined by French critics to describe a type of film that is characterized by its dark, somber tone and cynical pessimistic mood." (The Film Encyclopedia, Third Edition, by Ephraim Katz).
- Literally means “black film”
- Films of the 40’s and 50’s that portrayed the world of dark, slick city streets, crime and corruption.
"Film noir is not a genre... It is not defined, as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood. It is a film 'noir', as opposed to the possible variants of film gray and off-white."

writer and director Paul Schrader

Its primary interest to us today – apart from the intrinsic pleasure of the films – is the powerful influence they have had on a significant number of modern directors and cinematographers.
Q: Is *film noir* a genre?

A: No, it’s a STYLE of filmmaking commonly found in crime, mystery, or thriller genres.

Rather than PLOT being supreme, it is TONE and MOOD:

- cynicism (selfish motivation/assigning blame)
- pessimism (looking to the past)
- darkness
- corrupt characters and systems (crooked cops, double-crossers)
- fatalistic themes
- hopelessness

... which led to a harsh uncomplimentary look at American life.
film noir is a style of film-making that is largely dependent on light for its effects.

Humphrey Bogart in The Maltese Falcon
Influences

I. War and Postwar Disillusionment
II. Postwar Realism
III. German Expatriates
IV. The Hard-Boiled School of Writers
Influences – Part 1

I. War and Postwar Disillusionment
   A. Depression movies kept spirits up
   B. Need for war propaganda
   C. After the war– sardonic mood to be tapped
Influences – Part 2

II. Postwar Realism

A. affected every country involved in WWII
B. on-location shooting
C. suited America’s mood and desire for more harsh honesty
III. The German Expatriates

A. Left Germany to escape Nazi control
B. John Alton, Fritz Lang, Otto Preminger, Billy Wilder, Robert Siodmak
C. Expressionist lighting – “chiaroscuro”
Influences– Part 4

IV. Hard-boiled Tradition

A. Tough, cynical  ➔ “romanticism with a protective shell”
B. Writers from pulp fiction or journalism
C. Protagonists lived out a narcissistic defeatist code
D. Ernest Hemmingway, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain
The Hard-boiled Detective

- Calvin & Hobbes – “Tracer Bullet”

MY CIGARETTE SMOKE MIXED WITH THE SMOKE OF MY .38. IF BUSINESS WAS AS GOOD AS MY AIM, I’D BE ON EAS! STREET. INSTEAD, I’VE GOT AN OFFICE ON 49TH STREET AND A NASTY RELATIONSHIP WITH A STRING OF COLLECTION AGENTS.

Yeah, that’s me, tracer bullet. I’ve got eight slugs in me. One’s lead, and the rest are bourbon. The drink packs a wallop, and I pack a revolver. I’m a private eye.

Suddenly my door swung open, and in walked trouble. Brunette, as usual.

Take your hat off at the dinner table, Calvin. It’s not polite.

She was a pushy dame, but she had a case...
3 Phases

- Wartime (1941-1946) – private eye and the lone wolf
- Postwar realistic– crime in the streets, political corruption
- Psychotic action & suicidal impulse (1949-1958) ➔ root causes: loss of public honor, heroic convictions, personal integrity
- END– McCarthy, TV, color
Visual Motifs– Part 1

I. Lighting
   A. low-key
   B. hard undiffused on female leads (less soft focus)
   C. unique, various angles (shadows thrown)
   D. no fill
   E. “night-for-night” ➔ highest contrast
   F. actors and setting often given = emphasis ➔ fatalistic, hopeless mood
Low-key Lighting

- Out of the Past (1948)
- The Big Combo (1955)
low-key lighting schemes produce stark light/dark contrasts (chiaroscuro) and dramatic and ominous shadow patterning.

two silhouetted figures in *The Big Combo* (1955)
Unique angles (shadows)

- Out of the Past (1948)
No Fill Light

- The Big Combo (1955)
“Night-for-night”

- Scarlet Street (1945)
- Night and the City (1950)
Equal Lighting on Setting and Char.

- Out of the Past (1948)

**Clip: Call Northside 777**
Visual Motifs– Part 2

- Cinematography
  - Greater depth of field ➜ Each char. equally hopeless
  - Wide angle lenses for distorted image ➜

Clip: Touch of Evil
Deep Focus

- Undercurrent (1947)
- The Lady From Shanghai (1947)
deep-focus camera work}

The Third Man
Mise-en-scene

- Designed to unsettle
- Compositional balance w/in frame is often off
  - World is never stable or safe
  - Figures placed irregularly in frame
  - Claustrophobic framing devices (doors, windows, metal bed frames, shadows)
  - Objects in foreground
  - Objects take on importance by creating stable composition with actors
  - Oblique vertical lines (buildings, city streets, Venetian blinds) > horizontal \(\Rightarrow\) anti-Griffith & anti-Ford
  - Water
Internal Framing/Masking

- Touch of Evil (1958)
- The Killing (1956)

- Claustrophobia/ entrapment
Internal Framing/Masking (cont.)

- Second Chance (1953)
Internal Framing/ Masking (frames)

- Fallen Angel (1945)

- stability vs. instability
Compositional Balance with Objects

- Laura
- Sleep, My Love (1948)

- Unfair emphasis on femme fatale in portrait
Compositional Balance with Mirrors

- Kiss Me Deadly (1955)
- Lady from Shanghai

- Welles’ balance with fragmented “self” (id vs. ego) and femme fatale
Oblique Angles

- D.O.A. (1950)
- Raw Deal (1947)

- Never “on the level”
III. Framing, Angles, & Editing

A. Often withhold est. shots ➞ spatially disorienting
B. Choker close-ups juxt. with extreme high angle ➞ fatalistic “rats in a maze” effect
C. Juxt. extreme distances and angles
D. Dutch angles
E. Camera movement is minimal ➞ $$$ set-ups
Unconventional Camera Angles

- Touch of Evil (1958)
- Lady From Shanghai (1948)
Unbalanced or moody compositions.

The Fifth Horseman is Fear

Double Indemnity
Disorienting visual schemes:
Jarring editing or juxtaposition of elements:
Skewed and canted camera angles:
Dutch Angles

- Pickup on South Street (1953)
Effects of Visual Motifs

- No character has firm moral base
- Right & wrong become relative (both in shadow)
- Moral values constantly shifting
Technologies Developed during WWII makes it all possible:

- Fast film
- Lighter, hand-held cameras
- Fast film
- Magnetic stock for sound
Story Essential Motifs

- Love of romantic narration (voice-over)
  - “temp perdu” – irretrievable past
- Complex chronological order
  - hopelessness and lost time
  - *Out of the Past, Double Indemnity, Memento, Pulp Fiction*
- Flashback ➔ denies effect of progress
- Flawed leading man
- “Femme fatale”
  - woman who lures protagonist from stability to lawless disorder
Themes

- Upwardly mobile forces of the 30’s have ended; frontierism has turned to paranoia and claustrophobia
- Passion for the past and present, but also a fear of the future
- No one can be trusted
- The world is unforgiving and hopeless
Here’s what you’re looking for:

What Elements can you identify from this clip from *Double Indemnity*?

- Lighting
- Cinematography
- Framing
- Story essentials
- Mise en scene
- Themes
- Characters
Important films to check out:

- The Maltese Falcon
- T-Men
- The Big Sleep
- The Big Combo
- Double Indemnity
- Touch of Evil
- The Postman Always Rings Twice
- Out of the Past
- In a Lonely Place
- Sunset Boulevard
The Naked City (1948),
In a Lonely Place (1950),

Gloria Grahame & Humphrey Bogart
Kiss Me Deadly (1955)
Out of the Past (1947) has many of the hallmarks of noir:

- A cynical private detective as the protagonist,

- A femme fatale,

- Multiple flashbacks with voiceover narration,

- Dramatic chiaroscuro (light and dark) photography,
and a fatalistic mood leavened with provocative banter:

"Oh Jeff, you ought to have killed me for what I did a minute ago." "There's still time."

"It was the bottom of the barrel, and I was scraping it."

"She can't be all bad. No one is." "Well, she comes the closest."

"He couldn't find a prayer in the Bible."
Though most of them were low budget 'B' movies, some have achieved the status of classics:

*The Maltese Falcon* (1941),
Laura (1944),
Double Indemnity (1944),

Fred McMurray, Edward G Robinson and Barbara Stanwyck
The Big Sleep (1946), Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart
The Third Man (1949)
One of the best – the quintessential *noir* thriller – is British director Carol Reed's tense tale of treachery set in post-war Vienna,

with the memorable character of black market racketeer Harry Lime (Orson Welles)

It ends with a climactic nine-minute shootout in the city's underground sewer.
Orson Welles’ *A Touch of Evil* (1958) is considered the last of the classic noirs.
Quinlan: Come on, read my future for me.
Tanya: You haven't got any.
Quinlan: What do you mean?
Tanya: Your future is all used up.
Settings were often interiors with low-key (or single-source) lighting, Venetian-blinded windows and rooms, and dark, claustrophobic, gloomy appearances.

Joan Blondell and Tyrone Power in *Nightmare Alley*
Exteriors were often urban night scenes with deep shadows, wet asphalt, dark alleyways, rain-slicked or mean streets, flashing neon lights, and low-key or high contrast lighting.

*The Third Man*
Story locations were often in murky and dark streets, dimly-lit and low-rent apartments and hotel rooms of big cities, or abandoned warehouses— and, of course, police stations.

Dana Andrews and Gene Tierney in *Laura*
The shadows of Venetian blinds or banister rods, cast upon an actor, a wall, or an entire set, are an iconic visual in *film noir*.

Characters' faces may be partially or wholly obscured by darkness – a relative rarity in conventional Hollywood moviemaking.

Laraine Day and Robert Mitchum in *The Locket* (1947)
"That's life. Whichever way you turn, Fate sticks out a foot to trip you."

*Detour* (1946)
While these movies were edgy, often violent and always entertaining, they could also be great fun.

The dialogue was often racy and crackled with banter, never more so than in *The Big Steal* (1949), with Robert Mitchum and Jane Greer.
"I'm the kind of guy who doesn't like to turn around, Chiquita. Besides that there's a guy behind me with a gun. Remember?"

"What I like about you is you’re rock bottom. I wouldn’t expect you to understand this, but it’s a great comfort for a girl to know she could not possibly sink any lower."

_The Big Steal_ (1949)
While black-and-white cinematography is considered by many to be one of the essential attributes of classic noir, there are a few color films that can be regarded as noir.

Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) is one of them

James Stewart and Kim Novak
Films made since 1958 are generally referred to as **neo-noir**.

They include the superb *Chinatown* (1974), which has one of the best movie posters of all time;

Jack Nicholson and those blinds again
Basic Instinct (1992);  

Sharon Stone

Blue Velvet (1992);

Isabella Rossellini

Sharon Stone
and the sci-fi classic *Blade Runner* (1982)
The influence of *noir* style and effects can be seen in many modern movies:

such as Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994)
and their black and white homage to *film noir The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), with Billy Bob Thornton
Perhaps the best neo-noir since Chinatown is Curtis Hansen’s L.A. Confidential (1997).
The influence of *noir* can been seen in the films of British-born director Christopher Nolan:

in *Memento* (2000);

Carrie-Ann Moss and Guy Pearce
Batman Begins (2005);
and especially *The Dark Knight* (2008)

Gary Oldman

Heath Ledger
Another British director Sam Mendes made much use of *noir* lighting in his beautifully lit and shot *Road to Perdition* (2002), with Tom Hanks and Paul Newman.
Ron Howard's Oscar-winning *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) includes a large segment shot in *film noir* style.

As John Nash (Russell Crowe) becomes more paranoid, the *noir* features intensify.
until he sees even his wife (Jennifer Connelly) in that way
David Cronenberg’s *A History of Violence* (2005), with Viggo Mortensen and Naomi Watts, is an excellent neo-noir.
*Sin City* (2005), directed by Robert Rodriguez, was made in extravagantly stylised black and white with the odd bit of colour.
Heavy shadows and low key light create an atmosphere of threat and foreboding in the *noirish* *V for Vendetta* (2005)
Natalie Portman as Evey; her nervousness is emphasised by the typically *noir* chiaroscuro
And, finally, another homage to the 1940s *noir* was Steven Soderbergh’s *The Good German* (2006), filmed in black and white.
FILM NOIR

Stylistics, Codes
& Conventions
Film Noir: Cinematography 1

Film Noir cinematography is often distorted, skewed and uncomfortable to look at, to put the viewer at unease. This reflects the tone of noir.

- Low & High Angles
Film Noir: Cinematography 2

- Extreme Close Ups

- Deep Focus (depth of field)
Film Noir: Cinematography 2

- Reflections, views & faces obscured through objects

- Use of Dutch tilts or irregular framing of shots
Film Noir: Mise-En-Scene 1

Film noir locations used the everyday urban settings to make what was happening seem even more real to the viewer. Moved from crime movies only happening at the wrong end of town and dodgy areas to everyday locations.

- Rain and damp streets
Film Noir: Mise-En-Scene 2

- Low Key Lighting (Chiarascuro) Use of venetian blinds
- High contrast images. Dark blacks & whites (few greys).
Film Noir: Mise-En-Scene 3

- Everyday urban locations
- Downbeat hero often downbeat performances & scruffy
Film Noir: Sound

Film Noir sound was used to complement the feeling of pessimism and foreboding that was reflected in the films.

- Melancholy downbeat music (Jazz)
- Heavy breathing
- Use of quiet and silence
- Often discordant and grating music
- Sudden noises
- Voice over of protagonist
- Sound effects and ambience of the city & suburbia
Film Noir: Editing

Film Noir editing follows many of the traditional crime characteristics but they are generally told non-linearly.

- Non-linear start at the end, then tell story in flashbacks
- Often shot day for night using filters. Cheaper
- Use continuity editing generally. Some montage
- Can and did use jump cuts and jarring juxtaposition
- Occasional use of CU then move out to reveal action
Film Noir: Narratives

“Which ever way you turn, fate sticks out it’s foot to trip you up”

- Crooks
- Amnesia
- Black widow
- Psychological
- Heists
- Double Crosses
- Gangsters

- Sin and punishment
- Downward spiral
- One wrong decision
- Murder
- Drugs
- Whodunnit
- Sexual obsession
Film Noir: Characters 1

Two Film Noirs characters that appear with regularity are the down at heel Private Eye and the deadly Femme Fatale.
Film Noir: Characters 2

Film Noirs have a variety of characters but here are some that appear time and time again in film noir.

- Detectives
- Sam Spade/Marlowe
- Gangsters
- Millionaires
- The “Fall Guy”
- Henchmen/Thugs
- Beautiful women
- Police
- Corrupt politician/govt
- Crooked police