

TCF 112 Motion Picture History and Criticism

Class Notes: Film Noir

(Literally, "black film")

Mostly defined by style

But also: content--narrative & theme

Noir *Visual Style*

([See illustrations](#))

- Rooted in German expressionism
 - Many noir directors were German exiles
 - 1930s emigration, to escape Nazis
 - E.g., Douglas Sirk, Robert Siodmak, Fritz Lang (Austria) Edgar G. Ulmer (Olmütz, Mähren, Austria-Hungary [now Czech Republic]), Billy Wilder (Sucha, Austria-Hungary [now Poland]),
 - Stylization expresses inner state
- Mise-en-scene
 - Lighting
 - Low-key lighting
 - High contrast
 - Opposite: high-key lighting
 - Night-for-night shooting
 - Opposite: day-for-night
 - *Le nuit Americaine*
 - Setting
 - Urban setting: back alleys, cheap
 - Bars/hotels, waterfront dives
- Cinematography
 - Black-and-white film stock
 - Unconventional camera angles
 - Extreme low-angle
 - Extreme high-angle
 - Extreme deep focus
 - Dutch angle

Noir *Thematics*

- Fatalism
 - Indiscretion in past closes off future
 - E.g., *Out of the Past* (1947)
- Moral ambiguity
 - Evil/Good blurred
 - Guilt/Innocence blurred
 - E.g., *In a Lonely Place* (1950)
- Alienation
 - Cynical, paranoid
- Misogyny
 - Distrust/hatred of women

Narrative Elements

- Conventional characters
 - Men
 - Protagonists
 - Morally ambiguous, alienated, fatalistic, cynical
 - Trapped/fated/doomed
 - Ending is predetermined/fated
 - Destroyed by:
 - Inner desires
 - Social forces

- Women
 - Evil woman, *femme noir*
 - "spider woman"
 - Lures the hero to his doom
 - Strong, independent, capable
 - Redemptive woman
 - As redeemer
 - Offers to save the hero
 - E.g., *The Big Heat* (1953)

History of the Film Noir (1945-60)

- Antecedents:
 1. Poetic Realism (France)
 2. Gangster Genre (US)
 3. Expressionism (Germany)
- "film noir" coined by Nino Frank (1946)
 - 1st applied to poetic realist films
- Ended around 1960
 1. Cheap color film
 2. End of the B-film
 3. Crime changes, becomes more corporate and business-like
- Latter-day film noir
 - E.g., *The Matrix*

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