

## Film Noir: The Trouble with Genre

### History of Criticism

§ Ever since the publication of *Panorama du Film Noir Americain* by Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton in 1955, there has been a dispute about the genre's precise cultural source and critical status. Borde and Chaumeton's study covers the years 1941-1950, yet was published in 1955, therefore raising the question of the retroactive status of the term *film noir* – no director during 1941-1950 ever consciously decided to direct a *film noir*, precisely because the term didn't exist at the time. Rather, Borde and Chaumeton's book sought to delineate a set of "essential traits" that characterizes what Nino Frank referred to as "dark film." The first chapters of *Panorama du Film Noir* begin with *film noir's* literary and cinematic precursors, but Borde and Chaumeton go on to propose that *film noir* is Hollywood's "synthesis of three types of films which at the time had developed such an autonomy that each studio had its own specialties from among them; the brutal and colorful gangster film, whose style carried over to other productions at Warner Bros.; the horror film over which Universal acquired a near-monopoly; and the classic detective film of deduction which was shared by Fox and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer." It wasn't until the 1970's, however, that other full length studies of *film noir* began to appear and make an impact on defining *film noir* as a genre. Overall, *film noir* has a controversial status as a genre. Unlike the gangster or western genre, *film noir* is not defined in terms of its content, character, setting or plot, rather *noir* films are often defined in terms of style, mood and tone.

### Social and Cultural conditions

§ **War and post-war disillusionment:** The disillusionment many soldiers, small businessmen and housewife/factory employees felt in returning to a peacetime economy was directly mirrored in the sordidness of the urban crime film. Examples: *Cornered*, *The Blue Dahlia*, *Dead Reckoning* and *Ride the Pink Horse*. In these films a serviceman returns from the war to find his sweetheart unfaithful or dead, or his business partner cheating him, or the whole society something less than worth fighting for. The war continues, but now the antagonism turns with a new viciousness toward the American society itself.

§ **Post-war realism:** Shortly after the War every film-producing country had a resurgence of realism. The realistic movement suited America's post-war mood; the public's desire for a more honest and harsh view of America would not be satisfied by the same studio streets they had been watching for a dozen years. Henry Hathaway's *Kiss of Death* proudly proclaimed, "Every scene was filmed on the actual location depicted." Examples: *House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street*, *Call Northside 777*, *The Killers* and *Brute Force*

§ **The German Influence:** Hollywood played host to an influx of German expatriates in the Twenties and Thirties, and these filmmakers and technicians had, for the most part, integrated themselves into the American film establishment. Expressionist lighting has always been beneath the surface of Hollywood films, and it is not surprising that, during the Forties, many German and Eastern Europeans began working in *film noir*: Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, Billy Wilder, Fanz Waxman, Otto Preminger, John Brahm, Anatole Litvak, Karl Freund, Max Ophuls, John Alton, Douglas Sirk, Fred Zinnemann, William Dieterle, Max Steiner, Edgar G. Ulmer, Curtis Bernhardt, Rudolph Mate.

§ **The hard-boiled tradition:** In the Thirties, authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Horace McCoy and John O'Hara created the

“tough,” cynical way of acting and thinking which separated one from the world of everyday emotions. The hard-boiled writers had their roots in pulp fiction or journalism, and their protagonists lived out a narcissistic, defeatist code. When the movies of the forties turned to the American “tough” moral under-strata, the hard-boiled school was waiting with preset conventions of heroes, minor characters, plots, dialogue and themes. Raymond Chandler is an example of the cross-over between hard-boiled fiction and Hollywood screenwriting

## Stylistics

- § **The majority of the scenes are lit for night/low key lighting/shadows** – Gangsters sit in the offices at midday with the shades pulled and the lights off. Ceiling lights are hung low and floor lamps are seldom more than five feet high. Main action set in shadowy rooms, dingy offices, over-lush apartments and rain washed streets.
- § **As in German expressionism, oblique and vertical lines are preferred to horizontal** – Obliquity adheres to the choreography of the city, and is in direct opposition to the horizontal American tradition of Griffith and Ford. Oblique lines tend to splinter a screen, making it restless and unstable. Light enters the dingy rooms of *film noir* in odd shapes – jagged trapezoids, obtuse triangles, and vertical slits. No character can speak authoritatively from a space which is being continually cut into ribbons
- § **The actors and setting are often given equal lighting emphasis** – An actor is often hidden in the realistic tableau of the city at night, and, more obviously, his face is often blacked out by shadow as he speaks. These shadow effects are unlike the famous Warner Brothers lighting of the Thirties in which the central character is likely to be standing in the shadow. When the environment is given an equal or greater weight than the actor, it, of course, creates a fatalistic, hopeless mood. There is nothing the protagonist can do; the city will outlast and negate even his best efforts
- § **Compositional tension is preferred to physical action** – A typical film noir would rather move the scene cinematographically around the actor than have the actor control the scene by physical action. The beating of Robert Ryan in *The Set-Up*, the gunning down of Farley Granger in *They Live by Night*, the execution of the taxi driver in *The Enforcer* and of Brian Donlevy in *The Big Combo* are all marked by measured pacing, restrained anger and oppressive compositions, and seem much closer to the film noir spirit than the rat-tat-tat and screeching tires of *Scarface* twenty years before.
- § **Flashback / complex chronological order is frequently used to reinforce the feelings of hopelessness and lost time** – Such films as *The Enforcer*, *The Killers*, *Mildred Pierce*, *The Dark Past*, *Chicago Deadline*, *Out of the Past* and *The Killing* use a convoluted time sequence to immerse the viewer in a time-disoriented but highly stylized world. The manipulation of time, whether slight or complex, is often used to reinforce a noir principle: the how is always more important than the what.
- § **Arrangement of space within the frame is often irregular/ Use of low and high camera angles/Virtual elimination of establishing long shot and the personalizing close-up**
- § **Voice-over**

## Themes

Raymond Durgnat has delineated the themes of film noir in his article “Paint it Black: The Family Tree of Film Noir”. He divides film noir into eleven thematic categories: Crime as Social Criticism; Gangsters; On the Run; Private Eyes and Adventurers; Middle Class Murder; Portraits and Doubles; Sexual Pathology; Psychopaths; Hostages to Fortune; Blacks and Reds; Guignol, Horror, Fantasy.

Paul Schrader, in his “Notes on Film Noir,” divides the thematic elements of film noir into three broad phases:

- § The wartime period, 1941-1946 approximately, was the phase of the private eye and lone wolf, of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and Graham Greene, of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake, classy directors like Michael Curtiz and Tay Garnett, studio sets, and, in general, more talk than action. The studio look of this period was reflected in such pictures as *The Maltese Falcon*, *Casablanca*, *Gaslight*, *This Gun For Hire*, *The Lodger*, *The Woman in the Window*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Spellbound*, *The Big Sleep*, *Laura*, *The Lost Weekend*, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, *To Have and Have Not*, *Fallen Angel*, *Gilda*, *Murder My Sweet*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Dark Waters*, *Scarlet Street*, *So Dark the Night*, *The Glass Key*, *The Mask of Dimitrios*, and *The Dark Mirror*.
- § The second phase was the post-war realistic period from 1945-1949. These films tended more toward the problems of crime in the streets, political corruption and police routine. Less romantic heroes like Richard Conte, Burt Lancaster, and Charles McGraw were more suited to this period, as were proletarian directors like Henry Hathaway, Jules Dassin and Elia Kazan. The realistic urban look of this phase is seen in such films as *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street*, *The Killers*, *Raw Deal*, *Act of Violence*, *Union Station*, *Kiss of Death*, *Johnny O’Clock*, *Force of Evil*, *Dead Reckoning*, *Ride the Pink Horse*, *Dark Passage*, *Cry of the City*, *The Set-Up*, *T-Men*, *Call Northside 777*, *Brute Force*, *The Big Clock*, *Thieves’ Highway*, *Ruthless*, *Pitfall*, *Boomerang!*, and *The Naked City*.
- § The third and final phase of *film noir*, from 1949-1953, was the period of psychotic action and suicidal impulse. The psychotic killer, who in the first period been a subject worthy of study (Olivia de Havilland in *The Dark Mirror*), in the second a fringe threat (Richard Widmark in *Kiss of Death*), now became the active protagonist (James Cagney in *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*). There was no excuses given for the psychopathy in *Gun Crazy* – it was just “crazy.” James Cagney made a neurotic comeback and his instability was matched by that of younger actors like Robert Ryan and Lee Marvin. This was the phase of the “B” *noir* film, and of psychoanalytically-inclined directors like Nicholas Ray and Raoul Walsh. The forces of personal disintegration are reflected in such films as *White Heat*, *Gun Crazy*, *D.O.A.*, *Caught*, *They Live by Night*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, *Detective Story*, *In a Lonely Place*, *I the Jury*, *Ace in the Hole*, *Panic in the Streets*, *The Big Heat*, *On Dangerous Ground* and *Sunset Boulevard*. This final phase of *film noir* was the most aesthetically and sociologically piercing. After ten years of steadily shedding romantic conventions, the later *noir* films finally got down to the root causes of the period: the loss of public honor, heroic conventions, personal integrity, and, finally, psychic stability. The third-phase films were painfully self-aware; they seemed to know they stood at the end of a long tradition based on despair and disintegration and did not shy away from the fact. The best and characteristically noir films – *Gun Crazy*, *White Heat*, *Out of the Past*, *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, *D.O.A.*, *They Live by Night* and *The Big Heat* – stand at the end of the period and are the results of self-awareness. The third phase is rife with end-of-the-line noir heroes: *The Big Heat* and *Where the Sidewalk Ends* are the last stops for the urban cop, *Ace in the Hole* for the newspaper man, the Victor-Saville-produced Spillane series (*I the Jury*, *The Long Wait*, *Kiss Me Deadly*) for the private eye, *Sunset Boulevard* for the Black Widow, *White Heat* and *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* for the gangster, *D.O.A.* for the John Doe American.