

Colgate
University

CORE 152 IJ
Challenge of Modernity

Prof. Gregory
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Notes on *Film Noir*

violence and eroticism
physical, psychological, social, and moral darkness/blackness
jeopardy, instability, anxiety, ambiguity, uncertainty, claustrophobia, paranoia
irrationality, contradictions in motivation and action

Plot:

- Crime viewed from within; point of view of criminals (unlike police documentaries)
- Violence, plot twists create narrative anxiety
- No omniscient narrator, characters deceptive toward each other (often the main character or voice-over narration is not entirely to be trusted), so the viewer is subject to deception as well; result is uncertainty as to actions and motivation
- Lack of clear resolution to the plot, lack of clear explanation of certain actions, leads to confusion, instability
- Shifting alliances among characters, shifting pecking order among characters, results in a sense of instability
- Often no clear moral structure to the narrative, moral ambiguity, resolutions questionable
 - Police, courts often not clearly good, sometimes clearly bad
 - Criminals are sympathetic, we identify with them (to varying extents), but also have unsavory traits or engage in despicable behavior
 - Characters themselves often unsure of or conflicted about their moral status, or ignore it altogether

Character:

- Often feel caught in a net, entrapped by fate or their own desires and flaws
- "Protagonist"
 - Male (with a few exceptions), to some degree alienated or obsessed
 - Absorbs a lot of punishment with potentially little gain, often destroyed
 - Often a private investigator or war veteran; the PI is an alienated figure, neither a citizen nor an officer of the law, street-smart, aloof, and at home with criminals, but also deals with the rich and famous-the veteran is also alienated, he has killed without sanction, seen the horrors of war, and returned home to a greatly changed situation-they occupy an unstable position both within and outside of society, they are not part of the normal societal construct, and so can move freely within it, willing to break the law
- *Femme Fatale*-deadly woman
 - Beautiful and dangerous, both predator and prey, feared and desired, sexually strong and smart
 - Driven, independent, selfish, shows traits which in men are considered positive
 - Gets the protagonist "into bed and then into trouble"
 - A strong woman, but limited by being defined in opposition to and so in terms of male obsession and male dominated social structures and sexual expectations, often a male-centered caricature of female power
- Criminals
 - Often sympathetic, subject to fate and circumstance
 - Or, driven by perverse desires which they do not fully understand
- Victims
 - Often not innocent themselves, perhaps even deserving of their fate
- Police, Judges
 - Often given an ambiguous moral status

Visual Motifs:

- Use of opposition of light and shadow to visually externalize peril, instability, claustrophobia, entanglement, imbalance
- Low-key lighting-ratio of key light to fill light is high, generating stark shadows on face and walls-shadows tend to dominate backgrounds-sometimes highlights are used to accentuate objects or features (e.g., the eyes or hands or mouth)
- Anti-traditional light placement, deviating from three-point light placement (key light above, below, and at

odd angles, extreme backlighting) used to achieve and accentuate the effect of imbalance, uncertainty and doom

- Shadows of Venetian blinds, bars, grates, create a chiaroscuro effect, suggesting entrapment, small wedges of light creating vast dark areas
- Use of shadows, mirrors, portraits (especially of women, e.g. *Woman in the Window*, *Laura*) to suggest duality, deception, alienation, detachedness, dominance
- Night-for-night shooting requiring artificial illumination of selected objects, creating high contrast, dark sky
- Use of greater depth of field (deep focus) so that foreground and background equally focused, allows for shot compositions in which foreground figures can dominate smaller background figures, background figures or environment can menace or dominate the foreground, spatially isolated figures can be given visual importance, background action can unbalance foreground action, allows three-dimensional aspect to shot composition
- Use of wide angle lens to accentuate bulk or grotesqueness of figures and faces, in close-up accentuates facial expressions of terror, greed, gluttony, draws viewer into scene, making event more immediate
- Foregrounding of objects or figures to restrict or divide the frame, create imbalance, balance, claustrophobia, foregrounded objects often assume an atypical importance
- Use of oblique and vertical lines in composition can create imbalance or (again) restriction of frame (Huston's use of architecture in *Falcon*) high- and low-angles to accentuate size differences, dominance of one figure or object over another, suggest entanglement, threat, vulnerability, alienation, doom
- Cutting between different angles, including extreme close-up, high, low, adds to imbalance
- Camera movement is spare, usually motivated by the characters' emotions, often small movements designed to upset the balance of the scene (though see the bank robbery scene in *Gun Crazy*)
- The city as a dark (and usually rainy) labyrinth, externalization of dread, desire, decay, entanglement

Often Cited "External" Factors:

- Influence of German Expressionism, especially via German expatriates in Hollywood (Lang, Preminger, Wilder, Siodmak, Dieterle, Ophuls)
- Influence of "hard-boiled" detective fiction and pulp magazine authors (Hammett, Chandler, Spillaine, Cain) both on novels and screenplays, the general style of story and dialogue
- American male returning from trauma of war to find a different America, especially a different role for women
- The Hays censorship office and the Production Code
- Cold war politics, fear of the bomb, and McCarthyism/House Un-American Activities Committee (later noir)

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