



# 100 FILM NOIRS

BFI SCREEN GUIDES

**Jim Hillier & Alastair Phillips**



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## 100 Film Noirs

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## Introduction

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*Film noir's* popularity with cinema audiences, film enthusiasts and film scholars has remained unabated since postwar French critics began discerning a new trend in American film with the release of such stylish and atmospheric crime features as *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Murder, My Sweet* (1944). But what exactly *is film noir* and what makes it an object of such enduring appeal? This is a question that critics and historians have pursued with vigour, relish and no small amount of controversy over the years. We certainly hope users of this BFI Screen Guide, after reading our discussion of a representative selection of 100 titles, will be aided in coming to their own conclusions. This introduction aims to stake out some of the critical territory in relation to the question of *film noir's* formation. It then surveys some of the more important trends in *film noir* criticism before concluding with some explanatory remarks outlining our selection criteria and the various formatting decisions we have taken in the preparation of the book.

In his important study of the phenomenon, James Naremore (1998) argues that *film noir* is 'an ideological concept with a history all its own, it can be used to describe a period, a movement, and a recurrent style'. Although American film critics noted a new tone of violent pessimism in films at the time, a key idea here is that *noir* should largely be seen as a retrospective category, deployed in the first instance by French critics such as Jean-Pierre Chartier (1946) and Nino Frank (1946) to describe the backlog of dark American films released in Paris immediately after the Occupation. Chartier, in particular, noted similarities between this cinema and aspects of the 'French school of *film noir*' from the 1930s (such as *Le Jour se lève* [1939]), but claimed that recent Hollywood titles were

marked by a greater level of violence and despair. Later, in 1953, two French writers, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, published their influential book on *film noir* – *A Panorama of American Film Noir 1941–1953* – that sought, for the first time, to propose a chronology for a form that was especially marked in their eyes by its dystopian conflation of screen violence, sexuality and narrative ambiguity. As Marc Vernet (1993) has astutely noted, the French thus initially invented *film noir* as an object of critical fascination because it served the specific purpose of allowing non-American cinephiles the pleasure of loving American culture while at the same viewing it through a negative lens.

Borde and Chaumeton's history dates the emergence of *film noir* from John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). By the time Paul Schrader wrote his seminal article on the topic in 1972, he was able to suggest that by 1958 it had come to its natural end with the release of Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*. Schrader defined classical American *film noir* in terms of a tripartite model, noting that initially it had had a polished studio phase, exemplified by films such as *This Gun for Hire* (Frank Tuttle, 1942) and *Laura* (1944), before turning to the streets of American cities, in films like *Call Northside 777* (1948) and *Force of Evil* (1948), to achieve a greater degree of narrative authenticity. Films such as *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) marked *noir's* final phase in their effort to rework conventions and address the new social realities of the 1950s.

More recently, this relatively neat teleology has been disrupted in a number of ways. If it can be agreed that *film noir* was not a stable film 'genre' in the sense of being, like the Western or musical, part of the way individual films were marketed and received as part of a preconstituted continuum, why not countenance the significance of elements already present in American cinema before the beginning of World War II? Michael Walker (1993), for example, has drawn attention to the correlation between elements of *film noir* and the cycle of hard-hitting social-problem and gangster films produced by Hollywood before 1934. Vernet has also argued that *noir's* so-called 'expressionist lighting'

was visible in numerous American detective and mystery dramas going back to the teens.

What then are the principal components of *film noir's* narrative style? Frank Krutnik (1991), like many, has noticed the way in which many *film noir* titles particularly embody the expressive qualities of America's hard-boiled fiction tradition. Films such as *Side Street* (1950), *Cry of the City* (1948) and *The Dark Corner* (1946) suggest the significance of potentially perilous urban milieus while *Cornered* (1945) and *Criss Cross* (1949) convey a recurring sense of fatalism and despair. *Film noir's* abiding interest in violence, death and sexuality is signalled by features like *Murder, My Sweet* and *Kiss of Death* (1947). For Schrader, these themes became directly translated into a readily identifiable narrative and visual grammar often marked by the deployment of a complex flashback structure and a distinctive sense of compositional tension. Janey Place and Lowell Peterson (1974), in a further influential article, developed this hypothesis by arguing that *film noir's* visual style was specifically defined by a unique combination of framing and compositional strategies and lighting set-ups that, in turn, helped exemplify the psychological focus of the form. American *film noir*, they suggested, captured the malaise of American society through the way it looked. Thus, we see a prevalence of irregular camera angles, claustrophobic framings and disruptive mirror images to indicate the unstable background and subjectivity of the typical *noir* protagonist. *Film noir's* marked use of low-key lighting added to the distilled sense of underlying menace and threat. For many critics, these elements have perfectly suited the underworld, lowlife locations of conventional *film noir* narratives with their recurring populations of small-time crooks, nightclub singers, prostitutes, casino owners and various corrupt politicians and/or police officers.

Looking at classical American *film noir* today, especially in the light of the films we have chosen for this BFI Screen Guide, it is clear that *noir* style is a far more heterogeneous phenomenon than these views on *film noir* style would imply. As Naremore has argued, elements of style noticed by Place and Peterson in fact occur across many different forms

of Hollywood production and there is no single means of defining their attributes. As well as cinematographic aspects such as lighting and framing, it also makes sense to consider costume, set design and the relationship between *film noir* and the broader visual culture of the time. Several of the book's entries attempt to do just this.

*Film noir's* determinants are equally varied, pointing to a range of nationally specific and transnational factors. From a technological point of view, many of the characteristics defined by Place and Peterson were specifically enabled by changes in the quality of film production in the 1940s, ranging from the development of faster film stocks and coated lenses to more powerful lights and a more extensive use of wide-angle lenses. Importantly, as Sheri Chinen Biesen (2005) has also pointed out, 'the *noir* aesthetic derived from wartime constraints on filmmaking practices' as well as 'a response to an ... anxiety about war, shortages, changing gender roles and [the appearance of] "a world gone mad"'. Cities such as Los Angeles were literally 'blackout' during night-time while urban populations at the same time found themselves encountering new sensations of the night with the advent of round-the-clock shift patterns in munitions factories. A further significant influence is the gradual change in censorship patterns, especially as the war progressed, permitting new and franker representations of mortality and violence in response to the personal experiences of many of the country's citizens (and filmmakers).

There is a transatlantic dimension to seeing the emergence of *film noir* as a reaction, in part, to the pressures of wartime conflict for it is undoubtedly true that many of *noir's* most skilled practitioners, such as the directors Robert Siodmak, Fritz Lang, Curtis Bernhardt, Billy Wilder and Edgar G. Ulmer, and the cinematographers Eugen Schüfftan, Rudolph Maté and Franz Planer, all arrived as émigrés from Germany and Central Europe in the years following Hitler's coming to power. Whereas conventional *noir* history posits the idea that these film-makers simply imported something loosely termed 'German expressionism' to Hollywood, recent work in the field has argued that, much like the

nature of *film noir* itself, the question of European influence is more dynamic, unstable and multifaceted than that. Certainly people like Siodmak brought the significant experience of working in the sophisticated German studios with them, but they also brought a temperamental disposition – what Thomas Elsaesser (2000) calls ‘a double perspective on American society – one of admiration and the other a hyper-critical view, both *vying with one another*’. A film like Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* is a perfect example of this kind of cultural force field in which a certain benign interest in popular American culture is matched by a wary, rueful distance from its many evident excesses. Once again here, *film noir* is as much about a state of mind as a single set of stylistic signs.

Over the years, since the emergence of a spate of important writings in the field in the 1970s, *film noir* has been subjected to continued intense critical scrutiny. Indeed, it is not too much of an exaggeration to claim that *film noir* has played a leading role in the development of ideas related to film criticism in general and contemporary Film Studies in particular. Perhaps the most significant topic that has been addressed is that of gender since often pernicious assumptions about the conventional codes of both masculinity and femininity permeate any number of key *film noirs* from *Dead Reckoning* (1947) and *Scarlet Street* (1945) to *Gilda* (1946) and *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947). In particular, critics from the 1970s onwards, influenced by the impact of second-wave feminism, have been fascinated with the unconventional figure of the *femme fatale*. On the one hand, some have seen *noir* being primarily a male fantasy in which femininity is exclusively defined in terms of straight male fears and desires. According to this logic, the figure of the *femme fatale* presents a dangerous threat to social stability that must be resolved by punishment so that the male hero may settle for stable heterosexual domesticity. On the other hand, others such as Elizabeth Cowie (1993), have sought to define the *femme fatale*, if only in limited terms, as a mildly progressive form of the liberated female. Her dominance of the film frame may, in this case, suggest a literal and metaphorical degree of

cultural freedom permitting the notion that *film noir* might provide as much a feminine fantasy of dangerous sexuality as a masculine one. The point here though is that no matter how powerful it might be for the *femme fatale* to be designated excessively feminine, it still remains an ambiguous proposition. As Richard Dyer (1998) has neatly put it, 'If (some) women ... participate in the construction and performance of femininity, is that seizing the opportunity afforded by male desire or colluding in it?'

As we have already seen, the concept of *film noir* – or 'dark film' – was initially largely defined as a foreign object of fascination. It is not surprising then that another important category underlying the critical discussion of Hollywood *film noir* is that of race. Just as *noir* problematised American cinema's 'usual generic or gendered distinctions', to use Naremore's phrase, so it also underlined many of the negative racial assumptions prevalent within the wider sphere of American culture at the time. From the very beginning, for example, *film noir* was unable to define a coherent and detailed African American social space that was inhabited by the same kind of immersive subjectivities afforded to white protagonists. Almost the only black characters we see in *Double Indemnity*, for instance, are the cleaners in the desperate opening pre-flashback scenes of the film. Perhaps following the implicit logic of the term, *film noir* instead favoured the construction of whiteness by aligning what Dyer (1997) calls the 'elimination of shadow' with the 'desire for visibility'. Hence, Eric Lott's (1997) fundamental perception that if subversive desires drive the narratives in *film noir*, it is by criminalising these desires 'and utilizing racial norms coded in moral terminologies and visual devices [that *noir* ultimately] preserves the idea of a whiteness that its own characters do not [fully] uphold'.

Having said this, it is also noticeable, as Naremore has pointed out, how unstable many of *film noir's* narrative spaces actually are. Partly this must be due to the enormous influence of the generation of artists, writers and film-makers affected by the legacy of Roosevelt's New Deal culture in the 1930s who came into their own in Hollywood at the very

time that *film noir* emerged as a major cultural form. Indeed, it was the prominence of liberal and left-minded personnel such as Edward Dmytryk (*Crossfire* [1947]) and Abraham Polonsky (*Force of Evil*) that led to the political censorship activities of the HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) in the latter part of American *noir's* first decade. How then did *film noir* represent the contours of the American social landscape? As Mike Davis (1998) has observed, several of the early *noirs* such as *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity* and *The Big Sleep* (1946) were based on crime novels and short stories that emerged during the Depression. Written by the likes of Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain and Raymond Chandler, many of these tales tended to feature detectives struggling with the injustices of class amid a milieu of lazy, corrupt and idle wealthy West Coast suburbanites. In the postwar period, in films like *The Big Heat* (1953), attention shifted to a more oblique critique of social polarisation with a tougher and more vicious realism depicting a deeper level of collusion between official corruption and gangsterism.

The most important site of narrative action was, of course, the American city and one of the interesting aspects of this book is its coverage of a number of seminal New York and Los Angeles *noirs*. These include several undervalued films such as *Criss Cross* and *Odds against Tomorrow* (1959). In his definitive study of the relationship between the metropolis and American *film noir*, Edward Dimendberg (2004) notes the shift from the early 'centripetal' *noir* such as *Scarlet Street*, which presents a relatively reassuring fabric of local neighbourhoods and familiar urban landmarks to the 'centrifugal' *noir* such as *Kiss Me Deadly*, where new urban locations are increasingly demarcated by the flow of images seen through the windscreen of an automobile.

An ancillary aspect of *film noir's* urban setting is the recurring atmospheric iconography of its various faded boarding-houses, seedy bars, disreputable supper clubs and louche gambling dens. As Vivian Sobchack (1998) has pointedly demonstrated, these transitory, even



criminal, spaces served the function of providing not just an allegory of the various economic and social crises of the time, but also a very real sense of what it was like to lose the emotional security of one's domestic life. *Film noir* is populated by characters who have lost direction and very often have no real place left to go. Many people have understood this quality of psychological dislocation as being an indication of the lasting trauma of the US's experience of World War II and, although this schema might seem overly deterministic, the figure of the war veteran nonetheless featured repeatedly in a number of *noirs*, such as *Crossfire* and *Cornered*, made just after the war.

So far this introduction has largely concentrated on the defining period of classical American *film noir* production lasting from the early 1940s through to the late 1950s. This is still the phase in *noir*'s multifaceted history that most people call to mind when asked to visualise the qualities of *film noir* in their cultural imagination. One of the major arguments we wish to propose in this book, however, is that not only has *noir* continued to mutate and regenerate in the US – from modernist films in the 1970s such as *Night Moves* (1975) and *The Long Goodbye* (1973) through to the emergence of 'neo-noir' productions such as *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) – but that there is a still neglected international tale to be told. The attentive reader will therefore uncover accounts of various important European *film noirs* such as *Quai des Orfèvres* (1947) and *Brighton Rock* (1947) which, although made at exactly the same time as other films from the heyday of American *noir* production like *Out of the Past* and *Born to Kill* (also 1947), embody a different modality or sensibility more germane to locally specific traditions of cultural representation. With this in mind, we have also tried to diversify the field even further and include examples of *film noir* film-making from countries as wide apart as India, South Korea, Japan and Brazil. In other words, there is no such thing perhaps as a *film noir* but rather many forms and variations of a sensibility that alters and shifts according to culture, place and time. At the very least, there is a debate to be had. Read on and take part.