



The dark city and film noir: Los Angeles



You could charge L.A. as a co-
conspirator in the crimes . . .

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Learning objectives




- To understand the definitions of film noir
- To position film noir in the urban post-Second World War context of the United States




- To discuss the aesthetic, topical, and biographical connections between Weimar cinema and film noir
- To decode the politics of gender in the representation of film noir's urban space




Introduction



This lesson continues the threads introduced in last lesson: the importance of cinema and cities for the modern world. The cycle of films addressed here, the black-and-white private-eye films made in 1940s Hollywood and set primarily in Los Angeles – called film noir by French critics – continued the aesthetic and topical features of the Weimar city film.




Several of the important film noir directors were German or Austro-Hungarian and had fled Hitler's dictatorship in Europe; consequently, this chapter, and particularly the case study of Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), investigates the continuation of and breaks between the aesthetic and topical representation of the Weimar city film and film noir.




Parallel to the last lesson, here I discuss Los Angeles as an allegory for modernity and also continue examining the ways in which gender functions in city films: the flâneur and the prostitute in the Weimar city film are reincarnated in the private detective and the femme fatale.




Defining film noir




Aesthetically film noir emphasizes the black-and-white qualities of light and shadow that create space and mood through low-key and chiaroscuro lighting. Skewed camera angles and lonely characters in empty, urban spaces evoke a sense of urban alienation.




The city is usually shown at night and in the rain, and its inhabitants are morally corrupt and violent. Often voice-over narrations tell the story in flashback. Families are incomplete and characters betray and double-cross each other. The crisis of masculinity coincides with the presence of the femme fatale, a sexualized, double-crossing, dominant female character who is ultimately punished for her transgressions.




The Hollywood studio system also affected the production of film noir, especially the star system and the artistic division of labor according to which screenwriting, producing, and directing became separate functions undertaken by different people. Actors, directors, and screenwriters were employed for a certain number of films or years with a studio such as Paramount, Universal, MGM, Samuel Goldwyn, Twentieth-Century Fox, Warner Brothers, or United Artists.



Because of the division of labor and because the studio's overall goal was to turn a profit, the studio system favored developing and reproducing genres, generic conventions, consistent cinematic styles, and film cycles.




Los Angeles as a setting for film noir reflected pragmatic production considerations but also imbued the real city of Los Angeles with a symbolic dimension of alienated urban space. As Edward Dimendberg has carefully outlined, Los Angeles in the 1950s shifted from a centripetal organization of urban space to a centrifugal organization and experience of urban space. Film noir preferred transitional spaces, such as hotels and train stations, streets and alleys.




Despite its wide and frequent use by academics, cinephiles, lay people, and those working in the film industry, and although it seems obvious which films can be so labeled, 'film noir' is highly contested in literature on the topic. While a certain number of films put out by Hollywood within a particular period that look a certain way are identified as film noir, there is disagreement about what kind of systematic category organizes these films: is film noir a genre, a cycle, or a style?

I suggest that the rather academic controversy results from the birth of the term, in France, years after the first films were made, thus with a temporal and geographical gap. During the Second World War, Europeans were unable to watch American films, and afterwards, when they saw the films made in Hollywood during the war, they were struck by the homogeneity of their style and content, and what they perceived as a darkness that sharply differentiated these from American films as they had known them.







In 1955, French critics introduced and coined the term 'film noir,' which Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton elucidated upon in the same year in their groundbreaking, book-length study *Panorama du film noir américain (1941–1953)* (*A Panorama of American Film Noir 1941–1953*), which was then reprinted with an expanded filmography including selected films from a more expansive time period, 1915–74.



Following the time-lag from the French invention of the term and the American acceptance of and recourse to that definition, American writers in the 1970s began to discuss it in a “cross-referenced series of essays” and Hollywood used the term “as a marketing tag for films earlier labeled as ‘melodramas,’ ‘thrillers,’ or even psychological chiller-dillers” .




In 1983, Foster Hirsch defined film noir with reference to two representative films associated with two representative cities: *Double Indemnity*, which takes place in Los Angeles, and Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* (1945), which takes place in New York City. Hirsch claimed that these two films are "as representative of the genre as *Stagecoach* is of Western or *Singin' in the Rain* of musicals"




Hence Alain Silver in his 1996 Film Noir Reader prefers the term “noir cycle,” because film noir is set apart from other Hollywood films by “the unity of its formal vision”. Dimendberg agrees, following Borde and Chaumeton, who defined it as “a historically circumscribed group of films sharing common industrial practices, stylistic features, narrative consistencies, and spatial representation”




The urban spaces of film noir




Film noir associates the city with alienation, isolation, danger, moral decay, and a suppressed but very present sexuality. The alienation of characters finds expression in their repeated movement alone through the urban space and their chance encounters with other lonely characters.




One striking example is found in the opening of Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), and it motivates the film's narrative. The film begins with a full minute showing a screaming woman running up an unidentified street towards the camera. A man in a sports car picks her up.




Soon thereafter, the police stop them, looking for an escapee from an asylum. The strangers pretend to be a married couple, turning bourgeois marriage into a charade employed to pass the law. A second sudden encounter, this time with gangsters, leads to the torture and murder of the mystery woman and the man being left for dead at the side of the road.




The narrative develops from these opening chance encounters, when it is revealed that the main character is detective Mike Hammer, who then searches for the secret behind the mysterious encounter on the highway into Los Angeles.




Film noir associates the city also with a lack of emotion, and an acting style developed according to which actors delivered their lines solely by moving their lips. The link between the city, alienation, and emotional detachment continues Georg Simmel's notion of the metropolitan type resulting from "the intensification of nervous stimulation".




Simmel's description of the “blasé attitude,” a psychic phenomenon “unconditionally reserved to the metropolis”. In his explication of that type, Simmel followed a turn-of-the-century model of “nervous stimulation” that could lead to nervous collapse and was associated with feminization: “A life in boundless pursuit of pleasure makes one blasé because it agitates the nerves to their strongest reactivity for such a long time that they finally cease to react at all”.




It is therefore not surprising that often femmes fatales personify the blasé attitude. In Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* (1946), for example, the two daughters Vivian and Carmen Sternwood display the blasé attitudes of those who have indulged in so much pleasure that they have become simultaneously immune and addicted to it, particularly in relation to the pain and murder that goes on around them.




Streets and alleys, shown primarily at night and in the rain, are the more obvious urban settings of film noir. They provide the environment for alienated characters, chance encounters, and chases, which in turn motivate narratives of mystery and detection. Interior spaces often portray the seedy but extravagant underworld of the city.



The important settings of film noir where illegal activity and sexualized encounters could take place had to be integrated into the narrative and their attractiveness disavowed by it. The gambling casino and the urban bar function as sites for narrative turning points, revelations, and clues in detective stories.




The bar is the urban space, above all others, where unattached members of the city meet, exchange with each other, and then go their separate ways, their encounters often crossing class, gender, and racial lines. Whereas bars, casinos, and hotel lobbies are sites of anonymous encounters and immoral behavior, and are important in delineating characters, the hotel room is equivalent to the domestic space of the home and is thus another favorite transitional space in film noir.




Since film noir is associated primarily with urban spaces, the narratives seldom venture into suburbia; however, in the late 1940s and early 1950s Los Angeles began to move towards suburbanization and decentralization – changing the Los Angeles “bodily experience” and “valoriz[ing] speed”. As a result, in the late 1940s urbanity lost “its former monopoly as the dominant spatial mode of the film [noir] cycle” , and southern California became the model for “centrifugal identity”.




Los Angeles as setting




Even though other famous American cities – New York City, San Francisco, Chicago – feature in individual films noir, the setting of Los Angeles is central to the cycle because of its position between modernity and postmodernity. Los Angeles appears as an imaginary city without history, or haunted by its history as in *The Big Sleep*.




Dimendberg proposes that “the Californian subset of film noir is but a key chapter of its more expansive treatment of late modernity, a process of reconfiguring place and identity that exceeds a single geographic locus”.




Typical of film noir is the establishing, identifiable shot or sequence of shots of Los Angeles, usually at or near the beginning of the narrative. City Hall may be identified through a voice-over or by the characters, or there may be a shot of an identifying sign, such as the plaque that reads “Hollywood Public Library” introducing the second setting of *The Big Sleep*.




The opening of Criss Cross shows us the Los Angeles skyline before the camera pans down into a parking lot in front of a bar and stops in a medium close-up midway through an intimate conversation between a man and a woman. From there develops a story of betrayal, murder, double-crossing, victimized men, and a femme fatale that is also the story of a return to the seductive and destructive facets of Los Angeles



An ironic variation of the establishing shot can be found in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), which begins with the name of the street "Sunset Boulevard" and a tracking shot showing us just the asphalt of the street: the famous Los Angeles street is named, but the glamor associated with it is completely withheld.




Certain buildings – like Union Station, a recognizable, impressive, modernist building – reappear in several films, such as Criss Cross, Russell Rouse's D.O.A. (1950), Anthony Mann's T-Men (1947), and the neo-noirs Hickey & Boggs (Robert Culp, 1972) and Heat (Michael Mann, 1995).




Los Angeles is central to film noir in two senses: on the one hand, films emphasize the postmodern quality of Los Angeles to portray alienation and rootlessness; on the other hand, noir narratives and aesthetics also create Los Angeles as an alienated, transitory, postmodern city.




Film noir and gender




French theorists after the Second World War were struck by the extreme gendering of film noir, and many feminist critics, particularly in film theory, continue to emphasize film noir's staging of the crisis of masculinity, the femme fatale, and the incomplete family.



Much of this discussion relies on psychoanalysis as a methodology, in part because the films themselves popularized Freudian psychoanalysis. Frank Krutnik sees the psychology of crime as an indicator of the increased importance of psychoanalysis in film noir, noting that interest in criminal psychology, the motive, and the psychological effects of a crime led to the narratological conventions of the voice-over and flashback.




The RKO B-film *The Stranger on the Third Floor* (Boris Ingster, 1941), one of the first films noir of the 1940s, includes “several flashbacks, voice-over narration, and an extended dream sequence which was seen at the time as influenced by the German Expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919)”




Several of the directors of film noir had fled Hitler, including Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Robert Siodmak, Otto Preminger, Curtis Bernhardt, and Edgar Ulmer. Krutnik points out that the film's dream sequence relies on a "distorted mise-en-scène" that symbolizes "the hero's psychological destabilization".

According to Krutnik, film noir also substitutes psychological innuendo for explicit sexual representations because of the Hays Code restrictions, which resulted in linking “Freudian psychoanalysis and hidden or illicit sexuality” in the mind of the public. While Krutnik focuses on the crisis of masculinity, many feminist discussions about gender and film noir center on the femme fatale.







Jans B. Wager argues that both Weimar street film and film noir “assume and address a female spectator”. Wager suggests that the femme fatale in both periods offered an independent pleasure to female spectators as a transgressive character who is recontained in the last reel.




She traces the connection between the Weimar street film and film noir through the femme fatale via the urban environment and the historical context of postwar conditions – be it the First or the Second World War – when public opinion turned against working women.



The femme fatale is associated with aesthetic choices that differ from Hollywood's traditional conventions for photographing female characters, such as soft-focus or diffused lighting. In contrast, "noir heroines were shot in tough, unromantic closeups of direct, undiffused light which create a hard, statuesque surface beauty that seems more seductive but less attainable, at once alluring and impenetrable".




The femme fatale and the city are mutually constitutive, reinforce one another, and can stand in the one for the other: both are shiny, surface creatures without moral depth, who seduce men into their hold. Ultimately, both are unreliable and destructive.




While this image of femininity is a particularly coherent version of older tropes that can be traced back via the Weimar city film to nineteenth-century conceptions of woman, the conflation of the femme fatale and the city is characteristic of the postwar depiction of Los Angeles in film noir.



Traces of Weimar cinema




Discussions of film noir aesthetics link the cycle to Expressionist cinema and interpret the presence of so many European immigrants in Hollywood as proof of that continuity. However, if we look closely, most of the directors of film noir in Hollywood who had made city films in the Weimar Republic – Robert Siodmak, Fritz Lang,




Billy Wilder – had been indebted to New Objectivity and not Expressionism. John Willett defines the former as “objectivity in the sense of a neutral, sober, matter-of-fact approach, thus coming to embrace functionalism, utility, absence of decorative frills”, quite a contrast to the “passionate distortions of Expressionism”.



But why did Expressionist aesthetics emerge in post-Second World War Hollywood among artists who had not participated in the Expressionist movement in Weimar Germany before they left?




I suggest that it is not a linear development from Weimar city film and Expressionism to the Hollywood studio system and film noir. Instead, directors who embraced New Objectivity for the realist depiction of the city in Weimar cinema moved to Expressionism to depict American urban spaces in film noir.




Expressionism was the artistic response to the trauma of the First World War and emphasized the artist's inner vision, while New Objectivity's realism included optimism towards urbanity and technology.


Expressionism distorts perspective, emphasizes gesture and types, and articulates an iconographic language for the subconscious.




The Expressionist cinema of the Weimar Republic, exemplified by Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919), depicts a universe of unconscious desires and anxieties. The traces of Expressionism in post-Second World War Hollywood are based on several interlocking factors.




The repression of sexuality requires a cinematic language that translates the desires into a non-realist representational system; also, the cinematic language of Expressionism allowed German-speaking exiles to access and translate their own trauma and relationship to the alien city into a language of archetypes. Consider the relationship of the exile directors to Europe at the time.




Their departure, for the most part in 1933, was initiated by the exclusion of Jewish and left-leaning directors in the film industry, and they were desperate to survive in Hollywood. Some of them, including Billy Wilder, embarked on successful careers at the very time when the true extent of the horror of the “Third Reich” was slowly revealing itself, creating a paradoxical situation for those directors.



According to Ed Sikov, “Hitler led his troops into Vienna, annexed Austria in a flash of military might, and immediately supervised the systematic torture of Vienna Jews. With ghastly precision, the Anschluss occurred during the very week in which Billy ought to have been enjoying the release of his first major American film”



Expressionism as a cinematic language is fed by the trauma of the past even when it is forward-looking (as in the left-wing politics of revolutionary drama, prose, and poetry). At a time of intense trauma in the lost homeland, directors employed a language that expressed their present through their past.



Cinematic language, particularly if it finds a way to translate the unconscious, needs no translation. The Expressionism of the Weimar Republic remains a recognizable trace in film noir but is not entirely the same. The Expressionist style of film noir creates an alienating effect in conjunction with realist depiction of urban spaces; we never doubt that we see Los Angeles.

The setting captures realist representation; it is primarily the lighting that creates the Expressionist effect. Studio-driven film production mainstreamed an artistic vision into a cinematic, reproducible, and recognizable style. According to Sikov, Wilder saw himself as part of an industry and was not opposed to its economic underpinnings: he said, “We are an industry. There’s nothing wrong with that, when you know you’re commercial and aren’t under any illusions of doing something else”.

