



Is Film Noir a Genre, or a Style?

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ABSTRACT

Most of the authors in film studies agree on the sources of film noir. It is based on German Expressionism, pre-code Hollywood movies, French poetic realism, and the pulp fictions of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Cornell Woolrich. In addition to those, who seem to know what film noir movies mean. According to Nathaniel Rich, film noir, which is a film genre, tells someone who is pushed to be anti-hero with the distinctive filming techniques (light-shadow contrast) and narrative features in a degenerated world.

The authors, studying film noir, do not come to consensus whether film noir is a genre or not. Most of them bring different approaches to the issue, and it is hard to define film noir notion in this perspective. This study is based on the arguments of the views of Foster Hirsch, James Damico, Raymond Durnat, Paul Schrader and James Naremore. Some of those authors argue that film noir a genre is; some argues film noir is a style. The aim of this study is to analyze what the genre or the style of film noir is through the films.

Keywords: film noir, genre, style

INTRODUCTION

This is the age of film noir. Though the genre dates from the late 1930s and early 1940s, its concerns of hopelessness, failure, deceit and betrayal are in many ways more prescient in the twenty-first century than they were at their inception. Then, too, most definitions of noir films are, it seems to me, excessively narrow. The classic archetypes of the lone protagonist in a dark, rainy alley, accompanied by an omnipresent voiceover on the soundtrack, of doomed lovers on the run from the police, or hard-boiled detectives unravelling labyrinthine mysteries with cynical assurance represent only one manifestation of this pervasive film genre. Film noir is the cinema of paranoia, of doubt and fear and uncertainty, which blossomed in the wake of World War II, as the Allies'



victory was purchased at the cost of the spectre of instant annihilation by forces seemingly beyond our comprehension (Dixon, 2009).

What is film noir? Most of the authors, studying films, agree on the sources of film noir. It is based on German Expressionism, pre-code Hollywood movies¹, French poetic realism, and the pulp fictions of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Cornell Woolrich. The reasons of this are related to the results of the World War II: the gloom of war, discount products, entrance of women into professional life, extreme anxiety which caused by war, increasing suburbanization in the post-war era, the threats of new war, reactions about communism, discomfort stage with the constraint of *production code*² and declining film production of studio system in cinema, seventh art, are the basic elements behind the emergence of film noir.

In addition to those, many people seem to know what film noir movies mean. According to Nathaniel Rich, film noir, which is a kind of film genre, tells about someone who is pushed to be an anti-hero with distinctive filming techniques (light-shadow contrast) and narrative features in a degenerated world.

Huston's adaptation of Dashiell Hammet's novel, starting with starring Maltese Falcon, ending with Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* in a golden age of film noir (Özdemir, 2011: 23)

¹Pre-code Hollywood films refer to the era of American films introducing to the voice by the end of 1920s.

²The production code is a kind of censorship between 1930 and 1967 in the American film industry. The American Motion Picture Association (MPAA) put it into rule mandatory in 1937, and canceled in 1967. According to the code which aims to protect film quality of the audiences in the American films (Hayes, **The Production Code of the Motion Picture Industry (1930-1967)**;

- Ferocious murder is forbidden.
- Alcoholism, and drug trafficking scenes should be avoided as much as possible.
- Sex scenes do not have to be used. Kissing and having sex with desire are not shown in the films.
- Tempting, raping and seducing are not shown in the films.
- Representing the birth scenes are forbidden. Sexual organs of children are forbidden.
- Impolite, abusive dialog are forbidden.
- Unrespectful images to the God and the Prophet are forbidden. The facts of religious are forbidden as shown as comic.
- Nudity is forbidden.
- Dancing as calling sexual desire is forbidden.
- American flag has to be used in the films. The people, who are dedicated to the nation, must be shown good and impartial.



differs from time to time. The critics do not agree whether film noir is genre, or not. Many critics offer different ideas, and this makes it difficult to make a definition of film noir.

FILM NOIR: GENRE OR STYLE?

This study is based on arguments of Foster Hirsch, James Damico, Raymond Durgnat, Paul Schrader and James Naremore. Foster Hirsch states that film noir is a genre. Hirsch (cited Conard, 2006: 10) emphasizes that the genre has the similar narrative structure, issues, character and visual features. According to this definition, the borders of film noir seem to be crossed out. There are many film noir movies which have a narrative with flashbacks, an alienated anti-hero, femme fatale, light-shadow contrast. *Double Indemnity* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1944), *Murder, my Sweet* (dir. Edward Dmytryk, 1944), *Out of the Past* (dir. Jacques Tourneur, 1947) are the films which have a narrative with flashbacks, alienated anti-hero, femme fatale, light-shadow contrast.

James Damico is another reviewer arguing that film noir is a genre. Damico states that film noirs have a particular narrative template, and this is why film noir has to be characterized as a genre. According to the narrative template of Damico, protagonist finds oneself in violence, and is ridden for a fall by femme fatale (2006: 103-105). The difference of Damico from Hirsch is that he does not mention unity in the visuality of film noirs. There are many film noirs confirming the definition of Damico. *The Postman Rings Always Twice* (dir. Tay Garnett, 1946) is the best example of his definition. The protagonist (Frank) is fooled by Cora, and he kills her husband. There are many film noir movies which do not fit to the definition of Damico. *Brute Force* (dir. Jules Dassin, 1947) has only flashback, but does not include a woman character. It tells about the story of the prisoners and the sadistic manager of the jail. *D.O.A.* (dir. Rudolph Mate, 1950) is another film that does not fit to the definition of Damico.

Desperate Hours (dir. William Wyler, 1955), *High Sierra* (dir. John Huston, 1941), *Pick up on South Street* (dir. Samuel Fuller, 1953), *Shadow of a Doubt* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1943) are other films which do not have any femme fatale character. Although *Pick up on South Street* is as such classical film noir, it is irrelevant to the issues template presented by Damico. As seen in the examples, the film noirs without any femme fatale are also available.

On the other hand, femme fatale character is not intrinsic to film noir. There are movies which are not film noir, but have these characters. Martha Wolfstein and Nathan Leites state in their work *Movies: A Psychological Study* that women characters that are namely



femme fatale, are "fancy woman". As they use this label for Kitty in *Scarlett Street* (dir. Fritz Lang, 1945), they also use "fancy woman" for Miss Macomber in *Macomber Affair* (dir. Zoltan Korda, 1947) which is not categorized as film noir (Neale 2000: 163). Michael Renov separates women characters in Hollywood films in his *Hollywood's Wartime Women* study. The first type is mysterious woman. The past, the aims, and the struggles of this type of woman are understood by men. Another type is devil woman. The women of this type are completely evil minded. Renov emphasizes the women characters in film noir movies such as *Laura* (dir. Otto Preminger, 1944) and *Gilda* (dir. Charles Vidor, 1946) as mysterious women. He also analyses that women characters in comedy and western movies, such as *Balls of Fire* (dir. Howard Hawks, 1941) and *The Ox-Bow Incident* (dir. William A. Welman, 1943), as devil woman (Neale, 2000: 163). With those examples, femme fatale characters are not intrinsic to film noir. Therefore, it is not enough to theorize film noir as a genre through femme fatale.

British critics Raymond Durnat states in his *Paint It Black: The Family Tree of the Film Noir* work, that film noir is not a genre such as western or gangster movies. According to Durnat, film noir can be classified with the subject and psychology. Durnat determines 11 titles of film noir: These are *gangster, escape, private detective, middle-class murder, double personality, sexual pathology, psychopath, hostage taking, Nazi, horror and fantasy, crime as social criticism* (2006: 37-52). The model of Durnat enlarges the borders of film noir. This also causes new problems (Selby, 1984: 2). Gangster movies in 1930s, *King Kong* (dir. Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933), and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1968) and many crime movies and other different movies of different genres of movies can be included into the classification of Durnat.

In his *Notes on Film Noir* study (1972), Paul Schrader claims that, film noir is not a genre. According to Schrader, it is hard to say what film noir is, but it is easy to say what film noir is not (2006: 53). Herein, Schrader underlines that Raymond Durnat's *The Family Tree of Film Noir* work assists for film noir and genre discussions. He states that it is not defined, as are the western and gangster genres, by the conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood. It is a film "noir", as opposed to the possible variants of film grey or film off-white (2006: 53-63). Film noir can be described with its dark atmosphere and psychology. Paul Schrader says that film noir is also a specific period of film history, like German Expressionism or the French New Wave. In general, film noir refers to those Hollywood films of the Forties and early Fifties which portrayed the world of dark, slick city streets, crime and corruption (2006: 53-54).



Robert Porfirio supports, in his *No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir* (1976), Paul Schrader's ideas. In his opinion, it is true that Schrader minds psychology and visually of film (Porfirio, 2006: 78-83).

As another critic, James Naremore, claims that film noir is not a genre. According to Naremore, film noir is intergenre. Naremore places film noir metaphor, metonymy and similarity in time (1998: 5-6). He also argues that even though film noir is evaluated in cinema, dark tone, jazz music, hard-boiled literature in film noir and in many different fields can show oneself (1998).

Foster Hirsch says: "A genre . . . is determined by the conventions of narrative structure, characterization, theme, and visual design." And, as one of those who argues that film noir is indeed a genre, he finds that film noir has these elements "in abundance":

Noir deals with criminal activity, from a variety of perspectives, in a general mood of dislocation and bleakness which earned the style its name. Unified by a dominant tone and sensibility, the *noir* canon constitutes a distinct style of film-making; but it also conforms to genre requirements since it operates within a set of narrative and visual conventions. . . . *Noir* tells its stories in a particular way, and in a particular visual style. The repeated use of narrative and visual structures . . . certainly qualifies *noir* as a genre, one that is in fact as heavily coded as the western (Conard, 2006)

So film noir is a genre, according to Hirsch, because of its consistent tone and storytelling and the visual conventions running through the films of the classic noir period. We see all these features, for example, in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, as mentioned above: the tone of dark cynicism and alienation, the narrative conventions like the femme fatale and the flashback voice-overs, and the shadowy black-and-white look of the movie. James Damico likewise believes that noir is a film genre—and precisely because of a certain narrative pattern. He describes this pattern as the typical noir plot, in which the main character is lured into violence, and usually to his own destruction, by the femme fatale. Again, this is exactly the pattern of *Postman*: Frank is coaxed into killing Cora's husband and is ultimately destroyed by his choices and actions. Damico, unlike Hirsch, however, denies that there is a consistent visual style to the films: "I can see no conclusive evidence that anything as cohesive and determined as a visual style exists in [film noir]." (Conard, 2006).



Those who deny that film noir is a genre define it in a number of different ways. In the earliest work on film noir (1955), for example, Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton define noir as a series or cycle of films aiming to create alienation in the viewer: "All the films of this cycle create a similar emotional effect: that state of tension instilled in the spectator when the psychological reference points are removed. The aim of film noir was to create a specific alienation." Andrew Spicer also identifies noir as a cycle of films that "share a similar iconography, visual style, narrative strategies, subject matter and characterisation." This sounds a good deal like Hirsch's characterization, but Spicer denies that noir can be defined as a genre (or in most other ways, for that matter) since the expression film noir is "a discursive critical construction that has evolved over time." In other words, far from being a fixed and unchanging universal category, like one of Plato's forms, film noir is a concept that evolved as critics and theorists wrote and talked about these movies and were applied retroactively. Further, in arguing against Damico's version of noir's essential narrative, Spicer points out that "there are many other, quite dissimilar, noir plots" than the one Damico describes. Classic examples might include those of *High Sierra* (Raoul Walsh, 1941) and *Pickup on South Street* (Samuel Fuller, 1953), neither of which includes a femme fatale who coaxes the protagonist to commit a violent act against a third man. In *Pickup*, for example, the pickpocket *Skip McCoy* (Richard Widmark) steals classified microfilm from a woman, *Candy* (Jean Peters), on the subway. She's carrying it for her boyfriend, who is—unbeknownst to her—passing government secrets along to the Communists. The story, then, concerns the efforts of the police to get McCoy to turn the film over to them, which would mean admitting that he's still picking pockets, thereby putting him in danger of becoming a three-time loser; and it concerns the efforts of the conspirators to retrieve the film from McCoy by any means necessary, including killing his friend and information dealer *Moe* (Thelma Ritter). This is a classic example of a film noir, but it doesn't follow Damico's narrative pattern. Spicer goes on to say: "Any attempt at defining film noir solely through its 'essential' formal components proves to be reductive and unsatisfactory because film noir, as the French critics asserted from the beginning, also involves a sensibility, a particular way of looking at the world." So noir is not simply a certain plot line or a visual style achieved by camera angles and unusual lighting. It also involves a "way of looking at the world," an outlook on life and human existence (Conard, 2006).

In addition to its character as a series or cycle of movies, film noir is often identified by, or defined as, the particular visual style, mood, tone, or set of motifs characteristic of the form. Raymond Durnat, for example, says: "The film noir is not a genre, as the western and gangster film, and takes us into the realm of classification by motif and



tone." The tone is one of bleak cynicism, according to Durgnat, and the dominant motifs include crime as social criticism, gangsters, private eyes and adventurers, middleclass murder, portraits and doubles, sexual pathology, and psychopaths. Paul Schrader likewise denies that noir is a genre. He says: "[Film noir] is not defined, as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood." He thus rejects Durgnat's classification by motif and focuses his definition on the important element of mood, specifically that of "cynicism, pessimism and darkness." He continues: "Film noir's techniques emphasize loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, insecurity; then submerge these self-doubts in mannerism and style. In such a world style becomes paramount; it is all that separates one from meaninglessness." In a classic essay, Robert Porfirio says that "Schrader was right in insisting upon both visual style and mood as criteria." The mood at the heart of noir, according to Porfirio, is pessimism, "which makes the black film black for us." The "black vision" of film noir is one of "despair, loneliness and dread," he claims, and "is nothing less than an existential attitude towards life." This existentialist outlook on life infusing noir didn't come from the European existentialists (like Sartre and Camus), who were roughly contemporaneous with the classic American noir period. Rather: "It is more likely that this existential bias was drawn from a source much nearer at hand—the hard-boiled school of fiction without which quite possibly there would have been no film noir." The mood of pessimism, loneliness, dread, and despair is to be found in the works of, for example, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, and David Goodis, whose writings were a resource for and had a direct influence on those who created noir films in the classic period, as I mentioned above. I'll have more to say about Porfirio and the existentialist outlook of noir films below. Finally, R. Barton Palmer likewise rejects the definition of noir as a genre, calling it instead a "transgeneric phenomenon," since it existed "through a number of related genres whose most important common threads were a concern with criminality . . . and with social breakdown." The genres associated with noir include "the crime melodrama, the detective film, the thriller, and the woman's picture." In other words, whatever the noir element in a film noir is, it can be expressed through a number of genres—melodrama, thriller, etc.—and so film noir is not itself a genre. It's "transgeneric." (Conard, 2006).

Almost every critic has her/his own definition of film noir, and a personal list of film titles and dates to back it up. Personal and descriptive definitions, however, can get a bit sticky. A film of urban night life is not necessarily a film noir, and a film noir need not necessarily concern crime and corruption. Since film noir is defined by tone rather than genre, it is almost impossible to argue one critic's descriptive definition against another's. How many noir elements does it take to make a film noir?



Genre, at its most narrow, can include setting, costumes and even types of musical cues but at its deepest, genre is about how a story is told and the atmosphere, or feeling, of that method. Film noir, which includes many features of genres, has not been named with the aim of marketing by the studio system. Genre is a notion which attracts the audiences to the movie houses. For instance, one who watched a horror movie and liked it, may want to watch other horror movies. Popular films are categorized into the genre with the aim of attracting the audience. Genre in cinema refers to having the similar topics, characters and narratives (Abisel, 1995).

The features of cinema genre are popular and commercial; having the similar themes, social and psychological conflicts and narratives; having the basis and stable characters; telling the particular historical era in the particular places in the way of time and place; having shorthand and décor, costume and accessories particular to the genre in the way of visual description (Oluk, 2008).

Film noir covers all of these features above except popular and commercial. Indeed, film noir was accepted a genre later, and analysed. Film noir was used by French critic Nino Franks. Film noir is the only one genre which was named by the critics. Film noir was constructed with the similar features in the ways of themes and visual in the American films by the French cinema critics. On the other hand, the cinema industry did not contribute whether film noir is genre, or not (Uzel, 2004).

Conclusion

The movements in arts firstly arise in the painting and literature, and then are related to the cinema. A movement may be directly arisen in cinema. Filmmakers need to produce the similar films for the movement to be able to be born. These features are not seen in film noir. Film noir belongs to America, however the examples of it are seen in many other countries such as in France, England, Japan, Italy. The language of film noir was formed according to both social and artistic factors. Thus, we can not claim that film noir is not a movement. Paul Schrader accepts that film noir is a style and he says; "Almost every critic has her/his own film noir definition. However, personal and descriptive definitions are a little biased. A film, which is about a city, can not be considered as a film noir; it is also not about crime and corruption". Film noir is described as a style rather than a genre. How many do 'black' features become film noirs as film noir? Thus, it is important to degrade cultural and stylistic features to describe film noir. Indeed, film noir has all genre, movement and style. Every critic urges some assertions. It seems that the problem of categorizing film noir can continue for a long time. Film noir can not accord with the other artistic events because of its complex features.



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