

Film Noir

The name film noir (French Black Film) derives from the French-published detective novels (Serie Noire—The Black Series), which include such authors as Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. French movie critics apply the modified term film noir to a group of dark and cynical American crime movies which emerge in the first half of the 1940s.

Noir movies are almost invariably set in an urban environment and display high-contrast lighting which produces hard and unfriendly shadows. Characterized by the sense of impending disaster and utter fatalism, these pictures find their roots in the German cinema of the 1920s and the early 1930s.

Film noir contains a set of archetypical characters:

- the hero is often an outlaw, a misfit, or a jaded gumshoe (all usually emotionally perturbed)
- femme fatale—a mysterious woman whose seductive behavior foreshadows the hero's inevitable doom
- bad girl—dispensable and often abused woman

The stylishly murky settings of *The Maltese Falcon* (dir. John Huston, 1941) and *This Gun For Hire* (dir. Frank Tuttle, 1942) anticipate the more pessimistic outlook of such film noir classics as *Double Indemnity* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1944) and *Out of the Past* (dir. Jaques Tourneur, 1947).

The pronounced negativism of *Double Indemnity* is accentuated by the theme of moral corruption and adultery—vices never before presented on the American screen with such relentless accuracy.

Out of the Past shatters all illusions of human loyalty and trust, throwing its hapless hero into the abyss of multiple betrayal.

The low-budget *Detour* (dir. Edgar E. Ulmer, 1945) remains true to the noir aesthetic in its persistent adherence to the subject of nihilistic and predetermined fate.

In *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (dir. Tay Garnett, 1946) and *The Lady From Shanghai* (dir. Orson Welles, 1948), femmes fatales fulfill their murderous destiny with unprecedented premeditation.

The criminal world is portrayed with honest brutality in such noir movies as Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946) and *Cry of the City* (1948) and Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night*.

James Cagney returns to his gangster film roots in *The White Heat* (dir. Raoul Walsh, 1949), portraying a psychopathic fugitive with a death wish.

Jules Dassin's masterful study of gambling addiction, *The Night and the City* (1950), takes place in the sweaty underbelly of London.

The corrupted world of boxing serves as a metaphor for good vs. evil in two excellent noir pictures—*Body and Soul* (dir. Robert Rossen, 1947) and *The Set-Up* (dir Robert Wise, 1949).

In *Force of Evil* (1948), Abraham Polonsky (b.1910), the author of the *Body and Soul* screenplay, directs John Garfield in one of the most characteristic noir performances in the genre. The movie's dramatic plot serves as an indictment of the corroded capitalist society.

The generally negative feel of film noir counteracts with the self-deluding attitudes of the postwar American society. The great international appeal of these movies proves that mendacity is quite a universal phenomenon in a world trying to shake off the all-too-recent memory of war.

On the other side of the American film spectrum, Preston Sturges (1898-1959) directs *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), a shrewd, satirical film dealing with the social dynamics of the prewar years.

In *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944), Sturges questions the American stereotypes of patriotism in a playful and superficially innocent manner.

Another allegorical satire on the American perception of life is Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1947). Despite its overtly comedic tone and a sentimental happy ending, the film's central section offers a very disturbing alternative vision of evil America.

John Ford's classic western *My Darling Clementine* (1946) analyzes the foundations of frontier community in a personal and poetic fashion.

Two years after his twisted film noir, *The Big Sleep*, Howard Hawks makes another brilliant western of the era, the epic *Red River* (1948). This spectacular and superbly acted picture focuses on the rivalry between a father (John Wayne) and his adopted son (Montgomery Clift) during the great cattle drive of 1865.

John Huston directs his father Walter in the superior *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* (1949), a depression-era picture which singles out avarice as the main source of human decay.

Charles Chaplin's second film of the decade is *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), a bitter

and cynical satire whose central character, played by Chaplin, is a misogynist serial killer. It is by far the most cinematically advanced and intriguing of all Chaplin movies, but its lack of “chaplinesque” qualities results in a dismal box-office performance.

In George Cukor’s *Adam Rib* (1949), one of the more sophisticated comedies dealing with sexual double standards in the contemporary world, Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy prove that a woman and a man can develop a mutually respectful relationship.

Alfred Hitchcock recruits Salvador Dali to design a surreal dream sequence for his first postwar thriller, *Spellbound* (1945).

His next project, *Notorious* (1946), is a beautifully photographed spy movie set against the backdrop of Rio de Janeiro. In the intense *The Rope* (1948), Hitchcock experiments with single-take moviemaking. Shot in one room, the film contains no editing, and the necessary cuts, motivated by the length of film reels, are shrewdly masked by the actors blocking the camera’s view.

William Wyler’s outstanding drama *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), produced by Sam Goldwyn, touches on a difficult but timely problem of WWII veterans trying to claim their place in postwar society. The movie features mature, believable characters involved in realistic situations—a precedent by Hollywood standards. Gregg Toland provides the crisp deep-focus photography.

The first Hollywood picture to deal with race issues is *Home of the Brave* (dir. Mark Robson, 1949), a black WWII veteran story adapted from a stage play.

In 1948, after the commercially disappointing *The Lady From Shanghai*, Orson Welles is forced to accept the services of a lesser studio, Republic Pictures, in order to produce, direct, and star in his expressionistic adaptation of *Macbeth*. This highly theatrical movie (it uses some of the decorations and props from Welles’ stage production of the play) is cut by almost half an hour for its release, and the original Scottish accents replaced by the standard English soundtrack. Disillusioned, Welles goes into exile in Europe.