

Investigating Film Noir: Programme Notes & Sources

1. Defining Film Noir (6th October)

Michael Walker: 'The cycle of 'forties and 'fifties Hollywood films that retrospectively became known as films noirs seems at first sight to be rather too diverse a group to be constituted with any precision as a generic category. Nevertheless, various critics have sought different unifying features'. For example: motif and tone (Durnat, 1970), social background and artistic/cultural influences (Schrader, 1971), iconography, mood and characterisation (McArthur, 1972), visual style (Place & Peterson, 1974), the 'hard-boiled' tradition (Gregory, 1976), narrative and iconography (Dyer, 1977), representation and ideology (Kaplan, 1978), a master plot paradigm (Damico, 1978), conditions of production (Kerr, 1979), paranoia (Buchsbaum, 1986) and patterns of narration (Telotte, 1989).

Michael Walker, 'Film Noir: Introduction' in Ian Cameron, ed., *The Movie Book of Film Noir* (London: Studio Vista, 1992), 8.

Jon Tuska sees noir as 'both a screen style ... and a perspective on human existence and society.'

Jon Tuska, *Dark Cinema: American Film Noir in Cultural Perspective* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), xv-xvi.

James Naremore suggests that noir, 'has become one of the dominant intellectual categories of the late twentieth century, operating across the entire cultural arena of art, popular memory, and criticism.'

James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 2.

'It has always been easier to recognize a film noir than to define the term.'

James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 9.

'Let Revlon take you back to the days of Film Noir with our Ultra HD Lipstick'

Revlon advertisement (2015). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EETLELqRld8>

Carly Simon, *Film Noir* (Arista, 1997); *Songs in Shadow: The Making of Carly Simon's Film Noir* (Surreal Life Productions, AMC, 1997).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YAffycr4VE>

Billy Wilder: 'Film noir! ... I never heard that expression in those days.'

Quoted in Martin Scorsese and Michael Henry Wilson, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 110.

Ian Cameron: '[E]ven at the most rudimentary level of recognition, *noir* almost invariably has positive connotations: as a descriptive (or evocative) term, *film noir* carries an undertone of almost automatic approbation that, say, [the] western or musical do not.'

Ian Cameron, ed., *The Movie Book of Film Noir* (London: Studio Vista, 1992), 8.

R. Barton Palmer: 'Enthusiastic admirers of a cinema they thought more vital and lively than their own, many French critics were struck by what they perceived as a radical change in American crime films, a loose category encompassing several established genres, including gangster, detective, and police procedural films as well as crime melodrama.'

R. Barton Palmer, *Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir* (New York: Twayne, 1994), 7.

Nino Frank, 'Un nouveau genre "policier": L'aventure criminelle' ('A New Kind of Police Drama: The Criminal Adventure'),

L'Écran Français (August 1946), repr. in Alain Silver and James Ursini, eds., *Film Noir Reader 2* (New York: Limelight, 1999), 15-19.

Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, *A Panorama of American Film Noir, 1941-1953* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2002) trans. Paul Hammond. First published as *Panorama du film noir américain, 1941-1953* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1955).

Marc Vernet's quotation, 'the Americans made it and then the French invented', is taken from the following passage which is surely worth quoting in full:

'As it has come down to us through the decades, it is an object of beauty, one of the last remaining to us in this domain, situated as it is between neo-realism and the New Wave, after which rounded objects like these will no longer be made. It is an object of beauty because Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall are to be found there, because it is neatly contained in a perfect decade (1945-55), because it is simultaneously defined by its matter (black and white) and by its content (the crime story), because it is strange (see its relation to German expressionism and to psychoanalysis), because one cannot but love it (in contrast to its companion-objects, it is the only one that makes a place for affect and that functions as both a rallying cry and a point of exclusion), because it assures the triumph of European

artists even as it presents American actors, because it is a severe critique of faceless capitalism, because it prolongs the reading of detective novels while feeding comparatism, because there is always an unknown film to be added to the list, because the stories it tells are both shocking and sentimental, because it is a great example of cooperation – the Americans made it and then the French invented it – and because a book can be made of all these reasons, in which one would finally have the feeling of having it all. On the whole, *film noir* is like a Harley-Davidson: you know right away what it is, the object being only the synecdoche of a continent, a history and a civilization, or more precisely of their representation for non-natives.

Marc Vernet, '*Film Noir on the Edge of Doom*,' trans. J. Swenson, in Joan Copjec, ed., *Shades of Noir* (London: Verso, 1993), 1.

For further bibliographical information, see the Broadway course document 'Investigating Film Noir' (2025).

For further discussion of these issues and for extensive additional material, see Ian Brookes, *Film Noir: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), specifically the Introduction and Chapter One, 'Genre and the Problem of Film Noir'.

See also, James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (University of California Press, 1998), specifically the Introduction, 'This Is Where I Came In', and Chapter One, 'The History of an Idea'.