


FILM NOIR

WILLIAM LUHR



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Praise for *Film Noir*

“William Luhr is the intrepid sleuth of cinema studies, tracking down *film noir* under all the aliases – classic *noir*, pre-*noir*, neo-*noir* – that its infinite variety has produced. Writing with energy, clarity, and verve, Luhr explodes narrow conceptions of *noir* as conclusively as the Great Whatsit blew up postwar innocence in *Kiss Me Deadly*. Carry a copy of this timely, spirited book in your trenchcoat. It is a boon for film scholars, general readers, and movie buffs alike.”

David Sterritt, Chairman, National Society of Film Critics

“Informed by a rich body of previous scholarship, conceptually sophisticated, yet written with grace and clarity, *Film Noir* by William Luhr provides an ideal introduction for students and fans to the dark corner of American culture represented by these gloriously perverse crime films.”

Jerry W. Carlson, PhD, The City College & Graduate Center, CUNY

“William Luhr, who knows all the many questions raised by *film noir*, supplies lucid, elegant, provocative answers. His knowledge is deep, his comments far-ranging. This is an essential addition to the vast literature on the genre.”

Charles Affron, New York University

“Writing with broad expertise and deep sensibility, Professor Luhr heightens our nostalgic delight in *noir* films while also pointing to the lost spectatorial experience of *film noir's* once present tenseness.”

Chris Straayer, New York University Department of Cinema Studies

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FILM NOIR

William Luhr

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For Peter Lehman,
Who knows the darkness,
But has kept the music playing

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Chapter 1

Introduction



The ominous silhouette of a man on crutches approaching the camera that appears under the opening credits of *Double Indemnity* (1944) provides a prototypical image for *film noir* ([Plate 1](#)). Something is wrong - with the man's legs, with the man, with what will follow these credits - and the grim orchestral music accompanying the image reinforces this impression. The silhouette applies not to a single character but to three men in the film: one a murderer, one his victim, and the third an innocent man set up to take the blame for the crime. All three are drawn into this ugly vortex by the same seductive woman who exploits them and orchestrates their doom. The dark silhouette also menaces the viewer's space - it comes at us, it somehow involves us in whatever is to happen, and whatever it is won't be nice. Something is wrong.

[Plate 1](#) *Double Indemnity* - credits: Silhouette of a man on crutches approaching the viewer. © 1944 Paramount Pictures, INC.



This image appeared at the dawn of *film noir*, before the term was even coined. *Double Indemnity* establishes one, but only one, paradigm for the genre. It concerns an adulterous couple who murder the woman's husband for insurance money; in doing so, they generate their own doom. Everybody loses. The story is told mostly in flashback by the guilty man at a point just after he killed his lover and was, himself, shot by her ([Plate 2](#)). This retrospective storytelling strategy, heavily reliant on voice-over narration, was innovative at this time and shapes the viewer's response to the film's events in three significant ways. First, it presents the story not from an "objective" perspective but rather from its narrator's perspective, drawing us into his anxieties, moral failures, and feelings of entrapment. It makes our main point of identification not someone who conformed to contemporary Hollywood moral codes but rather someone who violated them. This eliminated traditional viewer security in presumptively identifying with the main characters. Even if such characters in traditional movies were doomed – as when, for example, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935) ended with Sydney Carton going to the guillotine – those movies presented that doom as heroic and uplifting. But the doom of many characters in *film noir* is

neither noble nor uplifting, and viewer empathy with such characters can be destabilizing.

Plate 2 *Double Indemnity*: Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) speaking into a dictaphone. © 1944 Paramount Pictures, INC.



This leads to disorienting situations such as one in *Double Indemnity* when the couple, having just murdered the woman's husband, prepare to flee the crime scene in her car. She turns the key but the car will not start. The two look tensely at one another since this simple, unexpected problem could lead to imminent discovery. She tries again and fails again, increasing the tension between them, as well as in the viewer. The scene is shot and edited in such a way as to draw us into their anxiety, to encourage us to want the car to start. Consequently, after having just witnessed the couple murder the woman's husband and then drag his body onto railway tracks to be mangled, we are suddenly maneuvered into fearing that these cold-blooded murderers might not succeed with their grisly crime. The investment of much *film noir* in an individual rather than “objective” point of view shifts the viewer away from the position of moral security that earlier Hollywood films tended to offer and disconcertingly toward sympathy for the devil.

A second effect of the retrospective narration is to undermine suspense concerning the story's outcome. As the film progresses, we watch not to see what will happen but rather to see what has already happened. We know from the outset that the couple's scheme (which comprises most of the film's storyline) is doomed because the guilty narrator reveals that it has already failed. However high the couple's hopes rise during the flashback story, we know all along that those hopes are fruitless ([Plate 3](#)). Traditional crime/mystery films had centered upon the solver of the crime, the one who acts to rectify the wrong done to society; they had not centered upon the person who committed that wrong. Such films generally moved their narrative in a forward direction, starting with the crime or its discovery and progressing to the detective's solution of the case, with the viewer uncertain as to the outcome until the conclusion; this film, to the contrary, moves us backwards, over what has already happened. This strategy does not seek to engage us either with the puzzle of figuring out "whodunit" (as with traditional murder mysteries) or with wondering whether or not the criminal will succeed (as with "caper" films); we already know the answers to those questions. Instead, the film entices us into voyeuristically dwelling upon the ugly specifics of the way in which these two people ruin their lives and those of others. We are watching what has already gone wrong.

[Plate 3](#) *Double Indemnity*: Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) enticing Walter into murder. © 1944 Paramount Pictures, INC.



A useful analogue to the viewer's position in such films is that of a reader of a tabloid newspaper. A cliché about “whodunit” mysteries is that the ending should not be revealed lest the reader lose all interest in the story. After all, why read on if you know the outcome? *Double Indemnity* and much of *film noir* operate on different premises. In a tabloid the headline and the opening sentence serve to grab the reader's attention but, at the same time, eliminate suspense. “Man Murders Lover and Her Husband, Confesses and Loses All!” And yet tabloid readers avidly read on, not to see how the story turns out, which they already know, but rather to voyeuristically learn more about the sordid details of the case.

A third effect of the narrational strategy is to infuse the narrator's dark mood into all that we see. He is in physical and psychological pain, grimly aware that he is probably dying and certainly ruined because of the failed activities he describes, and we are largely confined within his point of view. His voice-over narration runs throughout the film and becomes particularly disturbing during scenes that depict his younger self preparing for and committing his crimes. His somber, present-tense, narrating self provides a stark contrast to his earlier,

optimistic self, and that contrast destabilizes everything we see and hear. Further darkening his perspective is the fact that he is confessing his crimes to his mentor and boss, a friend he respects and has betrayed. He exists in an almost post-mortem zone, without hope or a viable future.

This narrative strategy underscores the centrality of point of view structures to *film noir*. Film after film concentrates upon the doomed plight of an individual as presented from that individual's perspective, so we get not *the* story but, rather, that person's perception of the story. This shift away from presumptions of pure objectivity was not unique to *film noir*; it was widespread and part of the cultural ferment of the times. It appears in presumptively factually based biographical films like *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), which presents George M. Cohan's life primarily through his retrospective description of it, and even documentaries. Frank Capra's seven *Why We Fight* films (1942-5), for example, while constructed primarily of documentary-style footage, made no attempt to conceal their propagandistic agendas. Although they present their images as having the status of "reality," those images are clearly organized to support the films' points of view. The increase in flashback sequences in Hollywood films of this time underscores the growing interest in exploring individual points of view. A wartime drama like *Passage to Marseilles* (1944) is famous for having flashbacks within flashbacks, something virtually unthinkable in Hollywood film a decade earlier. Furthermore, this shift away from presumptions of objectivity appears in many modernist art forms, from fiction and poetry to painting and sculpture, and modernism provided the dominant cultural context for *film noir*.

Much of *film noir* invites us to experience its stories from the inside out. Many films underscore their narrator's subjectivity with the soundtrack presence of that person's voice interwoven with scenes dramatizing events in that story; the subjectivity is further underscored by Expressionistic visuals evoking the narrator's nightmares, feelings of entrapment, and hallucinations. This focus upon interiority, particularly upon that of doomed people struggling to contain their own escalating panic, often foregrounds distortions of perception as well as states of paralyzing despair. This accounts for the preponderance of nightmares and of hallucinations in *film noir* and for the particular value that Freudian theory had not only in the conceptualizing of many of the films but also for the ongoing study of the genre.

In the *Double Indemnity* credits, the silhouette ominously approaching the camera resembles something from a nightmare. Its relentless movement toward the camera suggests that it will overwhelm us; it will draw us into it or itself into us. This is immediately followed by the appearance of the main character, who begins his confessional narrative. As one of the three men symbolized by the silhouette, he is bringing us into his darkness.

Much of the appeal of *film noir* involves its masochistic erotics of doom, its ability to draw viewers into nightmare-like, paranoid narratives of degeneration and failure. Where many genres, such as the Western, romantic comedy, or coming-of-age films, explore the prospect of a successful future for sympathetic characters, *film noir* tends to present flawed characters without a future and show how their past went wrong. It bucks the cliché that Hollywood films must end happily;

film noir cued its audiences in multiple ways to expect these films to end badly, very badly.

Film noir's allure resembles that of tragedy or the horror film, forms which invite their audiences to watch worst-case scenarios unfold. For their initial audiences, *films noirs* resembled nightmares in contemporary life. They were set in and about "today." Although they evoked the audience's deepest fears about all going wrong, they did not engage the supernatural as did horror films. *Film noir* invoked dark forces, from within individuals or from criminal conspiracies or social injustices, but rooted those forces in the everyday contemporary world of domestic or business antagonisms, psychic disturbances, criminal schemes, and political machinations. Within the growing hysteria of many characters, such forces often assumed mythic dimensions, and those fears infused the films with an atmosphere of unseen but malevolent presences. This environment of doom, evil, and failure paralleled the troubled subjectivity of many of the films. It generated the sense that the characters' deepest fears were becoming palpable. Even *films noirs* without a retrospective narrational structure, like *Scarlet Street* (1945) or *The Big Sleep* (1946), often establish an atmosphere of generic doom. Many of the movies, like *Mildred Pierce* (1945) or *Crossfire* (1947), resemble traditional mysteries in that they begin abruptly with an unexplained murder which the viewer can only partially see. The remainders of the films involve the unraveling of the mystery of who committed the crime. However, where the atmosphere of doom would dissolve in traditional mysteries (such as those featuring Sherlock Holmes, Lord Peter Wimsey, or Hercule Poirot) when the crime was solved, in *film noir* it lingers on, suggesting a world pervaded with ongoing, ineradicable forces.

Although this book concludes with detailed analyses of six exemplary *films noirs*, it also uses *Double Indemnity* throughout as a reference point for multiple perspectives upon *film noir*. For example, it is one of many films dominated by the point of view of a doomed character. These characters exist on the penumbra between life and death; although most of them are alive, they have resigned themselves to imminent death. Following this logic to an extreme, *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), directed by Billy Wilder six years after he directed *Double Indemnity*, is bizarrely narrated by a character who is already dead when the film begins ([Plate 4](#)). Although this strategy clearly violated realist conventions, the movie does not invoke any other fantastic, supernatural, or science fiction strategies. With this one glaring exception, it remains resolutely realist and the exception simply reinforces its grim, post-mortem tone.

[Plate 4](#) *Sunset Boulevard*: The film is narrated by the corpse of Joe Gillis (William Holden) as it floats face down in a swimming pool. © 1950 Paramount Pictures Corporation.



Not far removed is *D.O.A.* (1950), which opens with its central character reporting a murder. Asked who was murdered, he replies, “I was” ([Plate 5](#)). He has been

poisoned, has only hours to live, and spends the remainder of the movie desperately trying to discover how and why it all happened. He becomes a surrogate detective investigating his own murder, making this film one in which the detective and the victim are the same person. *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) is narrated by a character about to be executed for murder. All of these characters have led morally compromised lives that end badly, and that end is inevitable from the outset. *Film noir* frequently focuses upon central characters who, by traditional criteria, would have been villains and, at its inception, it deviated from Hollywood norms of narration, content, character construction, tone, representation, cinematography, and moral accountability. Its very break with/inversion of conventional practice has been cited as one of its generic hallmarks.

Plate 5 *D.O.A.*: Frank Bigelow (Edmund O'Brien) opens the movie by reporting his own murder. © 1949 Cardinal Pictures, INC.



Such deviations contributed to the aura of transgression that surrounded the films when they initially appeared and that continues to be associated with the genre. Some were based upon source material (such as James M.

Cain's "hard-boiled" fiction (*The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity*) that studios had earlier considered too racy, depraved, or downbeat to adapt; many of the films violated generic conventions and challenged contemporary censorship codes; some prominent actors such as George Raft declined parts for fear of tarnishing their star images with unsavory roles; reviewers commented upon heightened levels of immorality and brutality. Audiences could expect to see morally compromised characters doing the wrong thing; the underbelly of contemporary life.

Contemporary critics frequently acknowledged the transgressive appeal of the films, the pleasure of the wrong. While many registered their distaste for the films' moral transgressions, they simultaneously acknowledged how entertaining they were. *Time* magazine's unsigned review of *Double Indemnity* describes it as "the season's nattiest, nastiest, most satisfying melodrama. James M. Cain's novelette was carnal and criminal well beyond screen convention. Director Billy Wilder's casting is just as unconventional. . . . Scriptor Raymond Chandler . . . is himself no mean writer of hard-boiled melodrama. With his help Director Wilder and his players manage admirably to translate into hard-boiled cinema James Cain's hard-boiled talents" (*Time*, 1944). Bosley Crowther's *New York Times* review of that film opened: "The cooling-system in the Paramount Theatre was supplemented yesterday by a screen attraction designed plainly to freeze the marrow in an audience's bones" (Crowther, 1944)

Two years later, Crowther reiterated similar presumptions in his *New York Times* review of *The Blue Dahlia*.

To the present expanding cycle of hard-boiled and cynical films, Paramount has contributed a honey of a

rough-'em-up romance which goes by the name of "The Blue Dahlia." . . . And in this floral fracas it has starred its leading tough guy, Alan Ladd, and its equally dangerous and dynamic lady V-bomb, Veronica Lake. What with that combination in this Raymond Chandler tale, it won't be simply blasting that you will hear in Times Square for weeks to come.

For bones are being crushed with cold abandon, teeth are being callously kicked in and shocks are being blandly detonated at close and regular intervals. . . . Also an air of deepening mystery overhangs this tempestuous tale which shall render it none the less intriguing to those lovers of the brutal and bizarre. (Crowther, 1946a)

In closing, the review acknowledges the film's transgressive appeal: "The tact of all this may be severely questioned, but it does make for a brisk, exciting show."

The Longevity of Film Noir

Film noir is perhaps the most influential American film form as well as one particularly evocative of the socio-political fabric of the 1940s and 1950s. It emerged in the early 1940s and, with the collapse of the Hollywood studio system and the supplanting of black and white by color cinematography, among other things, died out as a commercially viable form around 1960. It reemerged by 1970 in a nostalgic mode, called *neo-noir* or *retro-noir*, and has remained potent ever since. Why? Most of the people making *neo-noir* films now were not even alive when the form they are memorializing appeared; they are invoking nostalgia for a form they never experienced first hand. But what is that nostalgia for? Is it for the American 1940s and 1950s, for Hollywood filmmaking practices of

the classical era (1930s through the 1950s), for black and white cinematography, for a lost style of masculinity and femininity, for the possibly simpler evils of a bygone age?

Why is there, in the twenty-first century, a *film noir* lipstick of a deep, rich red? Most of *film noir* was photographed in black and white so, with few exceptions, color did not exist in *film noir*. On one level, the idea of a richly colored lipstick evoking a form without color is preposterous; on another, however, if we consider not the actual films themselves but rather the ways in which those films and their era have been filtered through collective memory and historical association, there is a symbolic logic behind this, presumably seductive, lipstick color. The color is meant to resemble that worn by glamorous seductresses in *films noirs* and, by this indirect, symbolic path, recalls *film noir's* exotic, transgressive aura. Considered from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, memory and its distortions are important components of *film noir* as we have come to know it.

This informs the diverse and contested canons of *film noir*. Frank Krutnik has observed:

Many crime-films produced from the 1950s to the present day have become incorporated within the "genre" of *film noir*. In this regard I would advise a certain degree of caution, for such films need to be considered not only in regard to the *films noirs* of the 1940s but also in regard to the cinematic and cultural-ideological contexts in which and for which they were produced. For the conditions which "germinated" the *films noirs* of the 1940s were . . . specific to the 1940s. To generalize beyond this risks destroying the credibility of both the *films noirs* and the crime films *après noir*. (Krutnik, 1989, p. 329, cited in Butler, 2002, p. xv)