

From German Expressionism to Film Noir

The term Expressionism has a deep resonance in the history of the cinema. As Thomas Elsaesser explains in 'Weimar Cinema and After', it is not just a stylistic term for some of the films from the early 1920s, but "a generic term for most of the art cinema of the Weimar Republic in Germany, and beyond Germany, echoing down film history across the periods and genres, turning up in the description of Universal horror films of the 1930s and film noir of the 1940s."

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The journey of German Expressionism from art cinema to the Hollywood mainstream began with the exile and expulsion of many film producers, directors, writers, actors, and music composers from Germany after Hitler came to power in January 1933. Settling in California, these German emigres had a significant artistic influence on Hollywood filmmaking. This influence was most clearly felt, Thomas Elsaesser writes, "in the existence of that famous 'Expressionist' genre, the film noir, combining the haunted screen of the early 1920s with the lure of the sinful metropolis Berlin of the late 1920s (the femme fatales, Louise Brooks and Marlene Dietrich) mixed with the angst of German emigres during the 1930s and 40s as they contemplated personal tragedies and national disaster."

The term film noir was first coined by French film critics in August 1946 to describe a daring and stylish new type of Hollywood crime thriller, films such as *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, *Laura* and *Murder, My Sweet*. Standard histories describe film noir as a synthesis of hard-boiled crime fiction and German expressionism. The term is also associated, James Naremore writes in 'More Than Night: Film Noir and its contexts', "with certain visual and narrative traits, including low-key photography, images of wet city streets and romantic fascination with femme fatales." Most commentators locate the period of film noir as beginning in 1941 with *The Maltese Falcon* and culminating in 1958 with Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil*. Some commentators believe that noir began much earlier and that it has never gone away.

The hard-boiled private eye stories of authors Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain and Cornell Woolrich provided the narrative source for many classic film noirs. John Huston began the trend of crime novel adaptations with his 1941 version of *The Maltese Falcon*. This was quickly followed by *Double Indemnity* (directed by German émigré, Billy Wilder who went on to write and direct *Sunset Boulevard*), *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Mildred Pierce* and the Raymond Chandler adaptations, *The Big Sleep* and *Murder, My Sweet*. Other classic film noirs that feature an investigative narrative structure include *The Killers*, *Out of the Past*, *The Big Heat*, *Kiss Me Deadly* and *the Big Combo*.

A direct connection between the crime films of the German Expressionist cinema and the American private eye movie is made in the work of Fritz Lang, the German émigré director who fled into exile in 1933. Lang brought the dark vision of criminality of his Expressionistic classics, *Dr Mabuse*, *the Gambler* and *M* to Hollywood and became one of the most prolific directors of the noir genre. His films include *The Woman in the Window*, *Scarlet Street*, *The Big Heat*, *The Blue Gardenia*, *The Secret Beyond the Door*, *While the City Sleeps* and *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*. Lang's special subject was the paranoid mentality. According to Martin Rubin, "No filmmaker has conveyed more powerfully than Lang a sense of overwhelming entrapment, of a world whose every circumstance, every twist and turning, every corner and corridor, seem to conspire against the individual and draw him or her more deeply into a spider's web."

It is the visual style of film noir, rather than story or character type, that is seen as its defining characteristic. The noir look was created by cinematographers, costume designers, art directors and production designers. Its enduring influence on all genres of Hollywood filmmaking can be seen today in films as diverse as *Bladerunner*, *Seven*, *Barton Fink* and *Sin City*.

The visual style of film noir, James Naremore writes, "is characterised by unbalanced and disturbing frame compositions, strong contrasts of light and dark, the prevalence of shadows and areas of darkness within the frame, the visual tension created by curious camera angles and so forth. Moreover, in film noir, these strained compositions and angles are not merely embellishments or rhetorical flourishes, but form the very substance of the film."

The noir world is corrupt, threatening and violent. French film critics saw the typical noir narrative as an existential nightmare from which the protagonist can never awaken. He is a doomed figure journeying through an underworld of crime and deception until the final betrayal by the femme fatale that he has fallen for. Expressionist lighting schemes and camera angles convey a sense of entrapment as the hero makes his way through an often labyrinthine plot.

In film noir, Expressionism found a worthy subject in the archetypal American anti-hero as film scholar Janey Place explains: "The visual style of film noir conveys the dominant mood (male psychological instability and moral uncertainty, paranoia, claustrophobia, a sense of doom and hopelessness, etc) through expressive use of darkness: both real, in predominantly underlit and night-time scenes, and psychologically through shadows and claustrophobic compositions which overwhelm the character in exterior as well as interior settings. Characters (and we in the audience) are given little opportunity to orientate themselves to the threatening and shifting shadowy environment. Silhouettes, shadows, mirrors and reflections (generally darker than the reflected person) indicate his lack of both unity and control. They suggest a doppelganger, a dark ghost, alter ego or distorted side of man's personality that will emerge in the dark street at night to destroy him. The sexual, dangerous woman lives in this darkness, and is the psychological expression of his own internal fears of sexuality, and his need to control and repress it."

A Personal Journey through American Movies: (02:06:36 - 02:28:00)

The BFI DVD 'A Personal Journey through American Movies', contains a 22 minute dedicated to film noir. Martin Scorsese discusses the work of key émigré directors such Fritz Lang

The American Cinema television series (available on video)

The second volume in this series contains a 50 minute programme on film noir. A dedicated section of the programme explores noir lighting techniques.