

Title of the Module:

Film Noir

Cinema is a social institution and each movie is a cultural product. The sociopolitical contexts within which a cultural product or an artistic artifact is manufactured have to be understood in order to comprehend the various layers of semantic and philosophical significations generated by that particular piece of work of art. Therefore, the knowledge of the political, cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts within which a movie is produced will be highly helpful for an effective and focussed decoding of the semantic and symbolic meanings encoded in the movie. Similarly, a movement or a trend in cinema at a particular historical period can be understood better if one contextualizes such a cinematic movement or trend in cinema in the larger realms of politics, history, philosophy, and everyday life of the time. No movement in art, and for that matter in cinema too, erupts out all of a sudden on a fine morning, and disappears sans any imprint another evening. A Movement in art will have its historical background, a period of peak creation and appreciation, and will have its imprints in future works of art too. Film Noir was a movement in cinema, very visibly manifested in American cinema, which had its peak period of creation and appreciation in the fourth and fifth decades of the 20th century. Generally, the label, Film Noir is used to describe a distinct bunch of American movies, released from 1941 to 1958, which follows certain formal, narrative, semantic, idiomatic stylizations and aesthetics. The *Maltese Falcon*, the 1941 American black and white movie produced by Warner Bros., and written and directed by John Huston, based on a 1930 detective novel of the same title written by Samuel Dashiell Hammett, is generally considered to be the film that officially inaugurated the Film Noir movement. The *Maltese Falcon* has all the basic ingredients of a noir-film: multiple murders and criminal investigations, an intrusive private eye, digressive frequent flash-backs, dim-lit night cityscapes, an alienated male (anti)hero and a femme fatale. *Touch of Evil*, a 1958 Hollywood black and white film, written and directed by Orson Welles, based on the novel *Badge of Evil*, written by Whit Masterson, can be considered to be the last film of the American Film Noir movement. Controversies are still alive among film scholars on whether to consider Film Noir as a distinct movement or genre in film, or is it just a different style in filmmaking. However, noir films often worked outside the Hays Code or the Motion Picture Production Code of Hollywood cinema.

Learning objectives of the module are:

- a) to historically contextualize the origin and development of film noir
- b) describe the characteristic features of film noir
- c) to familiarize the students with the major noir movies and noir directors
- d) to introduce a bunch of noir codes to comprehend a noir film
- e) to provide some critical perspectives to understand the stylistics of noir film

Film-Noir can be understood as a cinematic counterpart to the literary genre of crime fiction. The term 'noir' is derived from French which means 'black' or 'dark'. Therefore, the phrase 'film-noir' literally means 'black-cinema' or 'dark-movie'. The phrase film-noir invariably suggests the predominant visual code of the noir-movies, that of frames filled with various tints of darkness, low-key lighting and shadows. Nino Frank (1904-1988), a French cinema scholar used the term 'film-noir' for the first time in the context of film studies in his article published in the critically acclaimed cinema journal *L'Ecran Francais* (The French Screen) in August 1946. The title of his article is "Un nouveau genre policier: L'aventure criminelle" (A New Police Genre: The Criminal Adventure). The French cinema audience had to wait till 1946 to watch American movies released during WW II, because they were banned in the Nazi occupied France. Nino Frank used the term film-noir to refer to the WW II-era American movies like *The Maltese Falcon*, *Murder My Sweet*, *Double Indemnity*, etc. as they are significantly different from ordinary detective films. However, the credit for giving film-noir its first titular occurrence, is given to another French film critic Jean Pierre Chartier's article "Les Americains aussi font des films 'noirs'" (The Americans also make 'black' films) which was published in the film journal *Revue de Cinema* (Review of Cinema) in November 1946. These French critics used the word 'noir' to refer to the American films under consideration because of their common feature of low-key lighting. Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton's French book, *Panorama du film noir americain* (A Panorama of American Film Noir), published in 1955, is the first book-length academic study of the genre. Andrew Spicer says that, "film noir is quintessentially those black and white 1940s films, bathed in deep shadows, which offered a 'dark mirror' to American society and questioned the fundamental optimism of the American dream" (quid. in Mayer and Brian 3).

What are the various historical, political, philosophical and technological factors which collectively contributed to the origin and development of Film Noir? The Great Depression of the 1930s and the Second World War, McCarthyism and Cold War, Existentialist Philosophy, arrival of faster and more light sensitive film stock, and the availability of portable light-weight hand held camera were the major contributive factors that laid the foundation of noir-cinema. The Depression prompted Hollywood studios to restrict the number of big budget films, urging filmmakers to make low budget films, the WW II brought in disenchantment on the security of human life, Cold War always reminded people of the possibility of atomic annihilation of human species, Existentialism brought in an all pervading cynicism, more light-sensitive film stock promised a more detailed realignment of black and white shades on film and light-weight portable cameras made shots more penetrative into narrow spaces and such cameras made it possible to take longer shots with various types of camera movements.

While looking from a historical perspective on cinema, there were two immediate artistic developments in the 1920s and 1930s which significantly influenced American Film Noir of the 1940s and 50s. The first one is the German Expressionist films and the second one is the arrival of hard-boiled popular crime-novel and thriller-fiction in America from authors like Dashiell

Hammett, William Riley Burnett, Raymond Chandler and so on. With its tilted camera angles, distorted sets, low-key lighting, and ghostly movements, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, a 1920 German Expressionist film directed by Robert Wiene, foretells the visual idiom appropriate for noir-films of dark claustrophobic urban milieu. The immediate possibility of a catastrophe awaiting a well-ordered but alienated city-life as depicted by Fritz Lang in his 1927 film *Metropolis* also provided the noir-cinema the clues for creating tension and suspense, especially through flashbacks.

There are at least a dozen films released in America during 1941 to 1958 which can be brought under the umbrella term film noir. Many consider *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) as the first film which fulfills the protocols of a film-noir. This film is primarily about a treasure hunt, or a chase for a jewel-coated falcon statuette. Humphrey Bogart does the role of Sam Spade, a private detective and Mary Astor does the role of Ruth Wonderly who seeks the help of private detectives to get her missing sister back. What follows is a series of murders, stealthy chases, gun shots, bargains for the falcon statuette and the unrevealed mystery.

This Gun for Hire (1942), directed by Frank Tuttle, based on a novel by Graham Greene, foregrounds the theme of double-crossing and murderous greed of human beings during wartime. The plot is set in the metropolis San Francisco involving the stealing a chemical formula which can be used as a military weapon. The film features Robert Preston (as Philip Raven) and Veronica Lake (as Ellen Graham) in the lead roles.

Scarlet Street (1945) directed by Fritz Lang, *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), directed by George Marshall and written by Raymond Chandler, *The Lady From Shanghai* (1948) directed by Orson Welles are some of the well-appreciated noir-films of the 1940s. With the release of *Touch of Evil* (1958) many film historians believe that Film Noir as a movement came to an end. *Touch of Evil* is about the cross-border political tensions involving the USA and Mexico. Followed by a car bomb explosion in the US territory, a slew of police and political measures ensue to find out the responsible persons behind such explosions. Orson Welles also appears in the movie as an important supporting star.

We can have a better understanding of Film-Noir by approaching the body of films under this category from the following angles:

- a. Visual Code
- b. Thematic Code
- c. Character Code
- d. Societal Code
- e. Narrative Code
- f. Cinematographic Code
- g. Editing code

h. Acoustic Code

Visual Code

The primary visual ambiance of film noir is the predominance of dark, gray, dim, low-key and stark-lit frames and sequences. It was such visual stylistics of high-contrast lighting and frequent play of dark-gray-white on the frame that prompted the critics to label such films as noir-films. “Classic images of noir included rain-soaked streets in the early morning hours; street lamps with shimmering halos; flashing neon signs on seedy taverns, diners, and apartment buildings; and endless streams of cigarette smoke wafting in and out of shadows” (Britannica). As mentioned earlier, more-light sensitive film stock and portable cinematographic camera made on-location outdoor shooting possible. Narrow, claustrophobic corridors and lean city inner pathways, dim-lit chambers of private detectives, dark prison cells, stuffy abandoned dark garages etc. create a visual space of alienation, pessimism, fear, violence and crime in noir films. For instance, in the noir-film *Double Indemnity* (1944), directed by Billy Wilder, to claim double life insurance payout, Walter Neff (played by Fred MacMurray) an insurance agent participates in killing Mr. Dietrichson and dragging the dead body onto the railway tracks at night on the insistence of Mrs. Phyllis Dietrichson (played by Barbara Stanwyck). (47:38)

Thematic Code

Thematic universe of noir films is compatible with the everyday life during the years of depression, world war and cold-war. Moral corruption, mega theft, cross-border terrorism, treasure hunting, international smuggling, serial murders by psychopaths, political double-crossings, land-grabbing, misogynistic male sexuality, inter-gang rivalry, cover-ups, sadistic desires etc. are frequently employed in noir films. *Kiss Me Deadly* is a 1955 noir film directed by Robert Aldrich. It features a series of murders, in the process of possessing a mysterious fortune box. Kidnapping, custodial torture, murder, hostage taking, hot chases, double-crossing are distributed all over the body of the film here. The greed for fortune finally kills or maims each one of the characters. All are losers here, a typical film noir conclusion.

Character Code

A heightened sense of purposelessness exhibited by the alienated disenchanting lead male character, often an anti-hero, signifies the general sense of loss, especially among the youth of the day. Such a cynical youth with a history is easily driven to the world of kidnapping, murder, theft and all kinds of criminal activities. Somewhere during his adventures, he meets the femme fatale, a hypersexual, seductive woman with a past. This sort of combination of a jailbird and an unreliable but tough and manipulative woman takes the narrative forward in noir film. Along with them both governmental and private detectives, underworld bosses, petty criminals and corrupt officers join the hot chase for the murderer, or thief, or treasure hunter or the absconding psychopath. Gumshoes, fedora hats, dark suits, smoke pipes, guns, visible injury marks on face are some of the stereotypical apparel codes of the (anti) heroes in noir films. A tall, seductive

brunette in high-heel shoes and a well-made up look with thick lipstick and sparkling eyebrows constitutes the femme fatale of noir films. Characters with high morality and strong ethical values are almost absent in noir films. Almost every character is villainous in noir films; only the degree of their villainism differs.

Societal Code

Social units portrayed in film noir range from an isolated, alienated individual with a sense of loss and no hope of future, broken families where members think of eliminating others for the sake of wealth, local community life full of petty crimes in everyday life and a big crime committed at present, political establishments rooted in corruption and immorality, bureaucratic network with unholy nexus with the underworld, remote localities of stealthy arms-trading between nations, cross-border network of terrorists, international web of human organ traders, cosmic-scale nuclear substance smuggling localities etc. are the spatial markers of noir films. Mutual distrust and perpetual conflict between the characters is a norm in noir films. The collapse of a value system in a world of despair and consequent paranoia leaves everyone to fend for themselves. However, at the end, their hot chases, and their big dreams of possessing fortune go in vain with their inevitable deaths, often during shooting encounters. William Luhr says that noir films “revealed changes in moral presumptions about social organization. The postwar image of the city as the ‘great bad place’ not only influenced the widely publicized middle-class flight from the urban to suburban areas but it was also one indication of the failure of modernist aspirations for urban life as the locus for civilization’s ‘progress’ into a technologically advanced future” (21).

Narrative Code

Noir films generally follow a broken, discontinuous, jerky narrative stylistics with frequent disorienting flashbacks. Often the plot begins with the end of the story. Flashbacks within flashbacks are not exceptions in the film noir narrative mode. Dana Polan elaborates on the peculiar narrative style followed in film noir as, “The films play on sudden reversals, unexpected shifts of narrative logic, breakdowns of temporally forward movements of the story. Undoubtedly, the most powerful of such techniques of narrative complication is the Noir use of the flashback; the Noir flashback literally disrupts narrative flow and causes narrative development to be read under the influence of an already known ending” (79). Noir film follows a complex plot with each of the main characters having their own version of the events to reveal. The employment of an omnipresent narrator to put together the broken pieces of the narrative adds to the secretive atmosphere of noir films.

Cinematographic Code

Noir films make use of maximum possible unfamiliar camera positions, angles, and movements. Tilted angles, jerky movements with handheld camera, imaginative repositioning of camera add to the distorted, disillusioned narrative ambiance of noir films. Repetitive use of completely dark

frames, capturing distorted close-ups of people, blurry visuals, extra-fast motions convey a sense of terrifying and insecure space occupied by hapless human beings. The logic of cinematography in film noir is so simple: camera cannot smoothen a world which is in shatters. The penetrative visual idiom of cinematography followed in film noir is perfectly compatible with the narrative logic of noir films where eavesdropping, snooping and spying are prevalent throughout. Such cinematographic decisions are augmented further with an equally disturbing editorial decisions like frequent cross-cutting, disturbing juxtapositions, multi-frames and so on. Wide angle photography, depth focus, hallucinatory dissolves, dream montages, strange camera angles are some of the signature stylistic idiom of film noir according to William Park (55).

Acoustic Code

The auralcape of noir films contributes a great lot to the overall effect of the movie. The general level of volume in noir film ranges from absolute silence to deafening explosions. Along with an eerie background track, heavy thud of heavy metals, sounds of gunshots captured from point blank, exploding pub songs; inaudible whispers too form the acoustic code in noir films. Unmanipulated sync sound captured on location during shooting also contribute to the raw air or film noir soundscape.

Apart from America, the noir style filmmaking has been followed in many other cinematic traditions around the world. The Hindi film *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012), directed by Anurag Kashyap and the Malayalam film *Kammatti Paadam* (*The Kammatti Field*, 2016), directed by Rajeev Ravi are some of the notable examples of neo-noir films produced in India. The noir style or movement of filmmaking still flourishes in different forms in different parts of the world.

References:

Britannica Encyclopedia. "Film Noir". <<https://www.britannica.com/pring/article/206993>> Accessed on 10 Sept. 2019.

Film Noir. Filmsite.org. <https://filmsite.org/filmnoir.html>

Polan, Dana. "Film Noir." *Journal of Film and Video*. 37:2. Sexual Difference (Spring 1985), pp. 75-83.

Mayer, Geoff and Brian McDonnell. *Encyclopedia of Film Noir*. Greenwood Publishing Group: London, 2007.

Park, William. *What is Film Noir?*. Bucknell University Press: Lewisburg, 2011.

Luhr, William. *Film Noir*. Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford, 2012.

Web Links:

<https://www.britannica.com/art/film-noir>

<https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/lists/10-great-american-film-noirs>

<https://www.filmsite.org/filmnoir.html>

<http://www.filmnoirfoundation.org/filmnoir.html>