**'When attraction turns to obsession, moral certainty to ambiguity, and the clear light of day to the murk of corrupted night, then we are in the world of the "noir" movie'. Consider this statement in relation to any two films from the list given at the beginning of this term. How are these elements of 'noir' given filmic expression?**

The term film noir was coined by Nino Frank in 1946, a French film critic who identified a new trend in the Hollywood crime field. In this new 'genre' of cinema, emphasis was place on criminal psychology, violence, misogyny and the breaching of a previously steadfast moral system. Reasons for why film noir emerged are vast and varied. Some believe that with the advent of World War II, a new mood took over America and its media. An atmosphere of disillusion and a sense of foreboding set in, giving many 1940's films "a dark quality that derived as much from the characters depiction as from the cinematographer's art"[1]. Boundaries were pushed and challenged between fantasy and reality, and the lines between 'good' and 'evil' were blurred. Others think that due to the high crime rate that overtook American communities[2], alongside the emergence of the vastly popular detective crime thriller novel (labelled by James Naremore as 'hard-boiled writers'[3]), there was enough scope and interest for both filmmakers and viewers to make film noir popular.

The Depression of the 1930's was also a key influence. American (and European) citizens were perhaps disillusioned by the financial and moral state of society – police could not be depended on, and to 'make it on your own' became a widespread notion. There was anxiety about the future, due to the horrors of

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[1] *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale, Routledge 2000, p. 151
[2] Cited in *More than night – film noir in its contexts*, James Naremore, University of Californian Press, 1998, p. 37
[3] *More than night – film noir in its contexts*, James Naremore, University of Californian Press, 1998

the warring past, and the discontentment with the present. Women were attempting to gain more power within the workforce, and the previous patriarchal order was threatened. Whatever the reasons for film noir's emergence, it is certain to state now, as it was then, that "the [current] 'tough' movie presents a fairly accurate reflection of the neurotic personality of the USA in the year 1947"[4].

However there is also considerable debate about the categorisation of film noir – do films that fall into this specific category comprise a genre? Or are they simply films that adopt specific cinematic techniques, themes and styles which can also be applied to other genres throughout history, such as the classic Western, Gothic cinema, or the gangster movie? The word 'genre' comes from the French (and originally Latin) word for 'kind' or 'class'[5]. However contemporary media genres tend to relate more to specific forms than to the universals of tragedy and comedy, for "a genre is ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world", as noted by Jane Feuer (1992, 144)[6]. If a genre is a body of works that share similar content, stylistic meanings and styles, then film noir cannot be classed a genre like a Western, perhaps, is. There is a lack of consistency between the separate films that make up the film noir phenomenon. Yet there *are* certain themes, actions and formats that make up what is generally referred to as the 'phenomenon' of film noir – "a phenomenon that is culturally, aesthetically, ideologically or historically accounted for"[7]

Film noir, then, evidently existed. The films that make up this phenomenon share certain elements, which can be summed up as such: "Traditionally the film noir of the late forties and early fifties depicts a dark world of contending, sometimes ambiguous, moral forces, in which deception, treachery, and murder are commonplace. Dialogue is frequently abrasive, and the style is usually characterised by night shooting, dark shadows, sharp lighting contrasts, askew

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[4] Producer John Houseman (1947: 161) cited in *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale, Routledge 2000, p. 155
[5] *Introduction to Genre Theory*, Daniel Chandler – see www.aber.ac.uk/media/documents/intgenre/intgenre.html for details.
[6] Cited in ibid.
[7] *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale, Routledge 2000, p. 152

camera angles, symbolic environments and convoluted narratives…These films frequently feature detectives who operate on the edge of the law as hard-bitten loners only marginally able to relate to women (who are frequently the source of evil). The films usually expose corrupt wealth and power; crime and business often seem interchangeable"[8]. There are many definitive films of the period, noticeably Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), described as "arguably the definitive film noir of the 1940's"[9] and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1954) directed by Robert Aldrige. With all the elements that are inextricably linked to most films noir, nothing is more noticeable than the issue of attraction and obsession.

Film noir opens for ordinary people (or 'passive victims') a gateway for which their innermost desires can be explored and projected into screen. With the aftermath of World War II and the general disgruntled anxiety embedded within the period, there was an increasing feel of people identifying what they want, and then stopping at nothing to get it. Being more in tune with personal needs encourages one to cease thinking and working as a team, such as Walter Neff does in *Double Indemnity*, as he works against his insurance company and attempts to dupe them. Thus, one person is at the centre of film noir, and practically always a male. The male viewpoint is projected and through psychological exploration the crisis of masculinity, of moral obedience or destruction, and his personal lusts and desires are made paramount to the film. Krutnik agrees, echoing Dyer in his comment, "film noir is characterised by a certain anxiety over the existence and definition of masculinity and normality"[10]

Of course, since the masculine is the protagonist of most films noir, it is important to understand what he aims to be, and what he is attracted to. The ideal noir hero is psychologically passive, masochistic, morbidly curious; physically he is "often mature, almost old, not very handsome – Humphrey Bogart is the type"[11]. Interestingly, it seems that film noir has as much an

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[8] *Camera Politica: The politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988
[9] *More than night – film noir in its contexts*, James Naremore, University of Californian Press, 1998, p. 48
[10] Krutnik, 1978, p. 91, cited in *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale, Routledge 2000, p. 161
[11] Ibid, p. 20

obsession for the male protagonist it is intent on depicting, as the characters have for the worldly temptations that face them. Film noirs "reveal an obsession with male figures who are both internally divided and alienated from the culturally permissible (or ideal) parameters of masculine identity, desire and achievements"[12].

One of the elements of desire that pervades film noir is women and their place in the world as sexual beings. Women are not only sexually attractive and alluring (giving her the label of femme fatale) but are also liberally sexually attracted to others, in a way that was scandalous at the time. This opened up a wealth of gender politics that had previously been silenced or quelled somewhat. The question, Should women be made or expected to go back into the home to be first and foremost the domesticated mother and wife[13]? Women, after the war, having been placed in the workforce as a substitute for men whilst they were at war, no longer felt a dependency on men for their income – they had proved their competency in the workforce, and in the family.

Women shunned the notion that they were objects simply there to gratify male needs and desires – they were presented rather as changeable, active objects, capable of good and evil, manipulating men's weak desires for their own benefits, as Phyllis does in persuading Neff to kill her husband. The femme fatale disturbs men's patriarchal order more than any other character in a film noir. "Often the work of the film is the attempted restoration of order through the exposure and the destruction of the sexual manipulating woman"[14]. For Neff this is certainly true. He is attracted to Phyllis from the start, noticing her ankle bracelet, seeing her in her bathrobe, making flirtatious comments, and being interested in her living room and all the artefacts it contains that give us a clue about her life and family. Once Phyllis has her hold on him she will not let go until she achieves what she wants – making sexual promises to Neff she keeps him enticed whilst her evil plans of murdering her husband take place. Neff, ultimately, becomes more concerned with the disintegrating relationship between

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[12] Krutnik, 1991, p. 88. Cited in Ibid, p. 161
[13] See: Gledhill, 1978, p. 19 for an extended study on this debate
[14] Kaplan, 1978b, p. 3. Cited in *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale, Routledge 2000, p. 160

himself and Keyes as he gradually realises firstly Keyes' potential to discover and destroy him, and more importantly how much Keyes actually means to him as a mentor and father figure.

The sexual attraction between Phyllis and Neff ultimately provides for Neff's downfall. This attraction can often take a turn towards the perverse, as attraction becomes more intense, and obsession begins to rule the lives of the noir protagonist. Desire is ultimately connected with death, or the perverse in film noir, "for it is with noir that American cinema finds for the first time a form in which to represent desire as something that no only renders the desiring subject helpless, but also propels him or her to destruction". The investigator in *Laura* is obsessed with the dead woman herself, and falls in love with her portrait. This in itself is a morbid twist on ordinary sexual attraction, and his obsession with the woman, although dead, is almost sinister, and disturbing. He touches her underwear, clothes, smells her perfume and reads her private letters. In essence, he is attempting to 'know' Laura, although he and the audience think that she is dead. When it turns out she is alive after all, a series of questions about one's own identity follow. "Are you Laura Hunt?" the investigator asks, as he simultaneously confirms, "I AM the police". This questioning of identity is central to film noir, and mirrors, reflections and doubles play a large role in highlighting this. This will be explored in due course.

There is also material attraction and power, which has a corrupting influence on moral standing, since obsession for ones own financial gain becomes the centre around which all other considerations – such as the law, love, or character - pivot. Money for Neff goes hand in hand with his moral destruction, and as he becomes more obsessed with acquiring large sums of money his means of achieving it become more risky. If Mr Dietrichson is killed falling off a train, the money paid out by the insurance company is doubled. This leads Neff to cook up an elaborate murder plan, and stages a doubling act whereby he pretends to be Mr Dietrichson (who has already been strangled) and when no-one is looking, he jumps off the train and places Mr Dietrichson's body on the tracks. This murder plan is risky, and more liable to be discovered by

Keyes, yet the obsessive desire for money is too great to turn down such a risk-laden plan in order to settle for a more conventional, believable murder.

The truth is also attractive, and can become an obsession, such as is to the investigator in *Kiss Me Deadly*, who wishes to find out what happened to the girl who died on the highway. Even though his life and safety is endangered by this quest, and there is constant opportunity to hand it over to the police, Mike Hammer chooses to take the task on alone, and face the consequences of doing so, so great is his thirst for truth and knowledge.

This thirst for truth is evident in the very question of character identity. Many of the noir heroes attempt to define themselves by monetary or material worth, or by women they conquer or attach themselves to. There is a feeling of being lost, unsure of oneself, and who they are in relation to who they should or claim to be. This is true for every noir hero. In *Double Indemnity*, Neff is an insurance salesman, working for a large company. Instead of being a loyal worker however, he attempts to cheat the system – and ultimately his friend Keyes – for his own benefit. Similarly, the investigator in *Laura* is hired as a detective to solve the murder of who is thought to be Laura herself. However, as he falls more and more in love with her and her portrait, when she shows herself as well and living she is instructed not to leave the house as, the investigator states, "I wouldn't like anything to happen to you". It is unclear to the audience, and to the character no doubt, whether this statement is spoken as a detective or as a potential lover for Laura.

Evident in film noir is the realization that there is no safe ground for morals to sit upon – even supposedly grounded morals are thrown into question. As can be seen with Neff and the investigator, and even Mike Hammer in *Kiss Me Deadly*, who cheats the law in his obsession for truth – even morally upstanding citizens are challenged in the face of temptation, making their past values and morals ambiguous.

Why ordinary people are susceptible to moral decline in film noir is unclear. It may be linked to the Existentialist movement – with no God, there are no values or morals to abide by except those that the state provides. With all the

disillusionment with the American government in the 1940's-50's, it becomes understandable how many people defied a system and series of morals that they no longer felt were applicable, or as 'sinful', such as adultery, lust, greed, or even murder. The state and legal system is often made to look weaker than the individual, as in *Kiss Me Deadly*. The police want to take the case of the girls murder off of Hammer's hands, however Mike Hammer believes he knows better, and feels it would be more profitable if he worked alone, for himself, at finding out the truth of her death. If existentialism is "intertwined with a residual surrealism, and surrealism is crucial for the reception of any art described as noir", as James Naremore believes[15], then this proves that existentialism had considerable effect on the production of noir characters, themes and motives – including the moral vacuum that many noir characters seem to fall into. At the same time, this view is criticised by Schrader and Durgnat, who link film noir to German Expressionism in style, but state that "noir did not involve an overt or even implicit commitment to a political or aesthetic programme" and go on further to argue that, "to imply that it did misrepresents the divergent attitudes of noir filmmakers and noirs precise industrial production content"[16].

Whatever the reasons for this sudden moral ambiguity, it is clear that noir heroes can rarely resist the blandishments of sex and money. This is not so true in *Kiss Me Deadly*, however, as Hammer provides a refreshing resistance to the charms of women, especially Thelma, who literally throws her availability and desire for him at his feet. For many noir movies, especially Double Indemnity, it is certainly true that, "the hero's success or not depends on the degree to which he can extricate himself from woman's manipulation"[17]. Women usually provide an obstacle to the male quest – as in Thelma who at once aids Hammer yet also jealously hampers his investigation into the girls death. Women, as previously mentioned, are desirable yet dangerous.

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[15] *More than night – film noir in its contexts*, James Naremore, University of Californian Press, 1998, p. 18
[16] Schrader & Durgnat. Cited in *The Cinema Book*, Pam Cook, British Film Institute 1985, p. 93
[17] Ibid, p. 94

Money is also morally challenging to noir characters. Their desire for money places them in difficult situations, and many a noir protagonist would blindly chose the path to their own destruction if they believed it would instead lead them to financial and material prosperity, defying their own beliefs, moral views, and betraying their friends, as Neff does. The moment Neff becomes passive in his morals, is the moment that they can quickly turn. If one is not working for good, one can quickly become entangled in 'evil', as Copjec explains, "the moment that Neff stops 'watchin' the customers to make sure they don't crook the house' he gets to thinking how he could crook the house himself and 'do it smart'"[18].

As previously stated, knowledge and the truth is an irresistible attraction that can easily lead to moral discrepancy. Truth however can also be masked – lying pervades both *Double Indemnity* and *Kiss Me Deadly*, whether the hero is attempting to uncover the lies that block the truth (as does for Mike Hammer – who also lies to the police about what he knows) or if the hero is the one trying to prevent others from glimpsing the truth, as Neff does with Keyes and the other insurance company workers. Phyllis lies to Neff about her love for him, using her sexuality as a weapon in order to achieve her aim – even though the made a pact that they'd be "straight down the line" with each other. Keyes must withhold the truth of his suspicion of Neff until he cannot fight it off any longer. Truth and lies are themes that pervade film noir from the very beginning, and once a lie begins, it snowballs to create a tangle of mistrust, uncertainty, betrayal and ultimately, immorality.

It is unsurprising that films noir depict a world of uncertain morals, however. Whether the reason was due to Existentialism, or the desire to make it big on ones own, it is certainly true that, "The darkest, most downbeat of American film genres traces a series of metaphors for a decade of anxiety, a contemporary apocalypse bounded on the one hand by Nazi brutality and on the other by an awful knowledge of nuclear power"[19]. Men are at the centre of this

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[18] *Shades of Noir*, Joan Copjec, Verso 1993, p. 180
[19] *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale, Routledge 2000, p. 154

anxiety, featuring as the protagonist in most noir films. With the patriarchal order corrupted, and placed under threat of elimination by women (especially the femme fatale, but also the 'good' and loyal wife and mother, who could potentially domesticate the male, thus threatening his manliness and his 'tough' image), it is unsurprising that the moral world is shaky, and insecure. Femme fatales must evidently be destroyed before they destroy the male world. Neff murders Phyllis, despite her attempt at redemption (which may be real or a pretence).

Hammer adopts a prevention, rather than a cure. Thelma is never allowed to be a femme fatale since her desires and sexuality is not adhered to, or acted upon by Hammer. Thus she is continually knocked back throughout the film in order to keep her from swaying Hammer's resolve to solve his investigation. In this way Neff in *Double Indemnity* may be seen not as simply trying to get rid of Phyllis for her treachery, but "is rather taking an active stance against women's threat to the patriarchal order"[20]. The film finishes, upon her elimination, with a brief reestablishment of a homoerotic relationship / male unity between Keyes and Neff, signified by their affectionate ritual with Neff's last cigarette. Note that whilst Phyllis is punished by Neff for her lawlessness, the film leaves one of the amoral characters to be punished by the law, in order for the world to right the wrongs that were created, allowing justice to be done.

Justice, however, is rare in these dark films. The word 'noir' gives its English translation as Black Film – descriptive, indeed, but also containing a pejorative connotation with the word 'black' – often associated with evil. These dark movies are stylistically different in visual style than any other films of this period, being much blacker, with more shadows, and using night-for-night filming instead of the habitual day-for-night. Place and Peterson claim that "nearly every attempt to define film noir has agreed that visual style is the consistent thread that united the very diverse films that together comprise this phenomenon"[21].

Lighting is a major attribute to the make-up of noir's style. "Noir lighting is 'low-key'. Ratio of key to fill light is great, creating rich, black shadows. Unlike the

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[20] *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale, Routledge 2000, p. 154
[21] 'Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir', Janey Place & Iowell Peterson, cited in Ibid p. 172

even illumination of high-key lighting which seeks to display attractively all areas of the frame, the low-key noir style opposes light and dark, hiding faces, rooms, urban landscapes – and, by extension, motivations and true character – in shadow and darkness which carry connotations of the mysterious and the unknown"[22]. However, even though these elements are essentially intertwined with films noir, others believe that they are not exclusively so – for example, Krutnik believes that these techniques were employed by other 'arty' films of the period[23]. The use of angle, especially, takes its influence from German Expressionist cinema, with its fascination for the strange in art and in life. "Expressionist lighting is placed low on the set (often on a horizontal axis). It sets off a dark space in the upper part of the frame. There is an absence of sun or moon, it is partial, and lights up only a part of the space and of the human figure"[24]. The lighting created stark shadows, dark corners, and helped draw the audience's eye to what the director wanted them to see.

Actual night was used for night shots, so the sky was jet black, causing a much darker feel and even stronger, more defined shadows. This is in contrast to the greyish sky that was created by the special filters used in day-for-night shots that were previously the norm at the time – the difference between these two techniques in creating a night scene is remarkable, and would have been very noticeable in the period.

An urban landscape, which is often the norm, enhanced the darkness of noir films, due to the industrial pollution and the tall buildings that blocked the sun or moonlight, and created further shadows, dark corners and suspect alleyways. Nothing appears clean, or clear – it is 'murky' and truth is hidden behind this murk. There are constant references to industry in *Double Indemnity*, with Neff claiming on committing the murder, "the machinery had started to move and nothing could stop it". Looking back on the crime he claims that fate had "thrown the switch" and that the "gears had meshed". The 'industrial' world is also offset by the public world, and the actualities of packaged leisure and lifestyle. When

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] *Shades of Noir*, Joan Copjec, Verso !993, p. 9

Walter Neff realises that Phyllis wants to kill her husband, he drinks a beer in his car at a drive-in restaurant, then retreats to a bowling alley where he bowls alone in an enormous room lined with identical lanes. Similarly, when plotting the murder in Jerry's supermarket, the hold sotto voice conversations across aisles filled with baby food, macaroni, beans, tomatoes – seemingly anything else that can be packaged and arranged in neat rows. They are in public, but the big store makes them anonymous – virtually invisible to other shoppers. Weather also adds to the general downbeat feel of a noir movie – the down trodden detective with rain beating on him, in *Laura*, or on windows, as in *Double Indemnity*. The dark, cold, windy first shot of *Kiss Me Deadly* as Hammer drives in his car creates the perfect noir mood also.

It is evident that "as Hollywood lighting grew darker, characters became more corrupt, themes more fatalistic, and the tone more hopeless"[25]. The lighting and darkness, the 'murk of corrupted night' in effect reflects the uncertainty, anxiety, and amorality that resides in the noir protagonist's heart and mind (as it does for Neff in *Double Indemnity*). It also represents the evil in the world that the Noir hero must discover, and then quell, as Hammer attempts to in *Kiss Me Deadly*. Joan Copjec agrees, claiming that, "the darkness that fills the mirrors of the past, which lurks in a dark corner or obscures a dark passage out of the oppressively dark city – is not merely the key adjective of so many film noir titles, but the obvious metaphor for the condition of the protagonists mind"[26].

The symbolic nature of the darkness that pervades film noir is evident. The shadows could represent an evil double or conscience, the way it does with Neff (especially in the offices, ironically), giving everyone the capacity to commit treacherous crimes. In this way it suggests all that is possible from the previously mentioned moral wavers. The murkiness and corruptness of people's hearts is laid bare in the visual dark style of the phenomenon, and follows on from the war aftermath – it suggests a lack of faith in people, and a deep belief in the evil capabilities of the most innocent person.

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[25] Schrader, cited in *More than night – film noir in its contexts*, James Naremore, University of Californian Press, 1998, p. 28

[26] *Shades of Noir*, Joan Copjec, Verso !993, p. 132

The word night is connected with film noir, as it sets not only the visual style of the films, but also their themes. Nocturnal activity is rampant, and there is a sense of secrecy and deceit lurking behind closed doors when everyone is asleep. Many of the exchanges between Neff and Phyllis take place at night, and their brief kisses that seal the bond of murder do also – indeed, the murder itself took place at night, as did the staging of the murder on the train. In *Kiss Me Deadly*, the film opens to the cold blustery night, and a young girl, who has escaped from an asylum, is murdered down the quiet dark road. With fewer people around, night time provides the ideal opportunity for crimes and immoral deeds to be committed. It is a sexually charged time, and proves to be erotic for the characters on screen, since when it is night most people are inclined to sleep in a bed, and of course this is also the traditional site for sexual activity.

The nightmarish quality of the films is enhanced by their dark mood, and criminal activity is committed, or admitted. It is at night that Neff reveals his guilt into a Dictaphone, and when Hammer visits Lily in her apartment for more information. Borde and Chaumeton admit that, "in this incoherent brutality there is the feeling of a dream"[27]. There are obvious links to Hell and the Underworld with the dark mood that so engulfs films noir. Even when the set seems well lit, the majority of the time the camera movement and lighting seems to pull the camera (and the hero's gaze with our own) irresistibly with them as they move. Whilst the reality of the set is that it is light, symbolically the audiences gaze is focussed on the deceit, darkness and danger that is often embodied within the femme fatale.

Whilst these elements of film noir, obsession, moral ambiguity and darkness of set and theme can be found in other screen media of the time, it is fair to say that they are an integral part of film noirs existence. Other films that are not described as within the borders of film noir may also include these elements, such as *Taxi Driver* (1976), or even whole genres such as the gothic film. Indeed, some say that it never existed until later in the 20th century; "Film

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[27] Cited in *More than night – film noir in its contexts*, James Naremore, University of Californian Press, 1998, p. 21.

Noir did not becomes a true Hollywood genre until the Vietnam years, when production such as *Taxi Driver* appeared with some regularity"[28]. Others, such as Steve Neale, claim that, "as a single phenomenon, noir, in my view, never existed"[29].

It is hard to classify some films under film noir, even if they have many of the elements previously mentioned. It is difficult to understand why this style of film emerged, and if it was the initial reception or low financial budget available that ensure many films noir were automatically reverted to 'B' list status. Perhaps the economic snobbery of many Parisian film critics in the 1940's accounts for the initial lack of enthusiasm for the films. It is certain, however, that film noir opened the way for many other great films to be developed. It also enables the classic detective / crime story to take on a psychological stance, and the shift in narrative structure from previous films of this period is marked. Whilst the term is still questioned, it gives a sense to the kind of film it encapsulates, and goes a long way to identifying and describing them. Film noir is, and will continue to be, highly debatable, controversial, and unmarketable – but above all, for audience members past, present and to come, extremely enjoyable as a form of screen media entertainment, creating a 'golden age' in Hollywood post-war cinema.

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[28] *More than night – film noir in its contexts*, James Naremore, University of Californian Press, 1998, p. 32
[29] *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale, Routledge 2000, p. 173