Film Noir

The Genre That Never Sleeps…

James Reyshan Parker
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This thesis aims to look at the evolution of the Genre conventions of film noir and the overall esthetic from the classic era through the modern neo-noir era. By examining the historical context of its creation and the movements and trends that called for its multiple incarnations, I intend to widen the spectrum of its influence on the industry throughout the twentieth century, not only from an esthetic point of view but from a business perspective as well; then apply that knowledge to my thesis film *Noit.0 "the prologue"*.

Thesis Statement:

The Who, What, Where, When, and Why of Film Noir

Film noir has become an iconic movement in the history of filmmaking. Working its way into our society by encompassing the essence of the darker side of the American dream. This paper aims to look at the evolution of the genre conventions of film noir and the overall esthetic from the classic era through modern neo-noir era. By examining the historical context of its creation and the movements and trends that called for its multiple incarnations, I intend to widen the spectrum of its influence on the industry throughout the twentieth century; not only from an esthetic point of view but from a business perspective as well. The films I will be examining and breaking down include, *Double Indemnity, The Maltese Falcon, Detour, Chinatown,* and *Pulp Fiction.* I will then apply that knowledge to the creation of my thesis film entitled, *Noir.0 "the prologue"*.

I describe the feature film as follows: A classic/neo noir throwback from three different perspectives; The Good Girl's, The Detective's, and The Femme-Fatale's lives intertwine in a web of greed, deceit, and revenge. It is the story of David Brissel who, after inheriting a Detective agency from his recently murdered boss, meets Sandra Bloom, a Femme Fatale, who convinces him to blackmail her Congressman husband and kill his bookie; after getting away with both he is hired by the bookies wife Melanie to find her husbands killer. But when he falls for Melanie, Sandra gets jealous and tells her husband that she had hired a detective. The Congressmen out for revenge goes to kill David. Luckily Melanie is there to save him, or is she? As the two women hold David at

gunpoint, one last twist will settle everything in this classic noir throwback that will keep you guessing right up until the last shot is fired. My thesis film will be the precursor to the feature film.

The intent of my film is to create a uniquely cliché and inventive perspective on the film noir genre by incorporating most, if not all of the stylistic, cinematic, plot and story conventions of the genre and then taking them to a new level.   By examining films from the classic era and comparing them to modern neo-noir films I will attempt to create a combination of the two worlds, blending them into a modern noir throwback with a modern day twist.   The half saturation of color throughout the film creates the canvas for the middle ground, however colors will bleed through for each characters act; yellows for Melanie, reds for Sandra and blues for David. The film will become full color when the three collide in the final climactic scene bridging the world from a classic black and white noir to modern color neo-noir.

The film aims to embrace the long tradition of film noir, encapsulating and paying homage to all of its great predecessors. The film will combine the aesthetics and attributes that make film noir an ingrained part of our psyche; by incorporating the genre conventions from both the classic 1950's era and the later neo-noir era of the 1970's. The main goal of the project is to bridge the gap between the past and the future films of its kind. The film will epitomize a golden era of inventive filmmaking throughout the 20th century, while helping to preserve those that have influenced generations of filmgoers and filmmakers alike. The aim is to be worthy of its title "Noir" as a quintessential stepping-stone to the film noirs of the twenty first century.

Back to the Beginning:

The Inception of Film Noir

Long before Nino Frank ever coined the term "film noir" in 1946, its early influences were hard at work. To most film noir critics the style got its start with the German expressionist movement, beginning in 1904. The origins of German expressionism come from a place of discontent with the surrounding German society and social discomfort. Expressionism spanned the artistic domain encompassing all forms of art including, books, music, sculpture, painting, architecture, theatre, and film.

> [1] "In essence it was a philosophical and artistic critique of bourgeois rationalism; an attempt to express the distortions, alienation, fragmentations and dislocation, the 'irrationality', of modern life. Expressionism was concerned to represent subjective experience: states of mind, feelings, ideas, perceptions, dreams and visions, often paranoid state."

Like its future counterpart, the films of German expressionism dealt with the darker side of life. Some of the most notable influences on American noirs are, Robert Wiene's, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligori, (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari)* 1919, and *Der Student von Prag, (The Student of Prague)* 1926. These films created on low budgets set the tone for the innovations of American independent filmmakers of the 1940's. It can be said that it was not expressionism itself that influenced noir films but that is was the Wiemer cinema as a whole that was the actual connection between the two movements.

> [2]"Expressionism created an embracing *simmering* (mood) and texture, dependent on distinct visual style that used high contrast, chiaroscuro lighting where shafts of intense light contrast starkly with deep, black shadows, and where space is fractured into an assortment of unstable lines and surfaces, often fragmented or twisted into odd angles. Overall, expressionist cinema used a highly designed and carefully composed mise-en-scene that was anti-naturalistic."

Pushing forward, the emergence of the 'street film' and the Urban Thriller is where noir films really began to take the form we recognize today as a classic film noir. This was a

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[1] Spicer, 11

[2] Spicer, 11-12

departure from the Gothic like aesthetic that dominated the films of Wiemer, and a move towards a more urban representation of what the actual German populace was experiencing at the time. This came to be known as Neue Sachlichkeit or the 'New Objectivity'. This new form of filmmaking took audiences into the dark city at night. This alluring and provocative world surrounded by urban decay and shadowy figures began and were embodied by director Karl Grune, with his film entitle *Die Strasse, (The Street)* in 1923. The film took its respectable middle class protagonist and thrust him into this world of shadows and double dealings,

> "In these films one can perceive a proto-noir urban milieu consisting of deep shadows, rushing traffic, flashing lights and cast of underworld characters: black marketers, gamblers and con men, above all, the *femme fatale* who embodies the temptation and threat of illicit desire."[3]

This trend embodied in a myriad of works including but not limited to, G.W. Pabst's *Die Freudlose Gasse, (The Joyless Street)* 1923, Joe May's *Asphalt,* 1928, and Von Sternberg's, *Der Blaue Engel, (The Blue Angel)* 1930.

Fritz Lang, a noted director and filmmaker during this time, would play a large role in the movement of the street style to America. Having had great success with his series of urban crime thrillers, featuring a criminal mastermind named Dr. Mabuse, and scoring big with his best-known film *M,* which he paints the city as a labyrinth and forces his protagonist between the forces of the police and gangster. He allows the audience to experience the inner emotions and dilemma of the character through his use of the POV, "I use my camera in such a way to show things, whenever possible, from the view point of the protagonist; in that way my audience identifies itself with the character and thinks with him." [4] It was innovative approaches like these that earned him and his

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[3] Spicer, 12
[4] Bogdavitch, 85

contemporaries a reputation in the United States, where they would be greeted with open

arms.

When the Nazi's began their rise to power in 1933, many of the writers, directors,

art designers and cinematographers, such as Billy Wilder, William Dieterle, and Otto

Preminger, migrated to America in order to further their careers as the climate in

Germany was growing less and less safe for the free thinking invocative filmmakers. It is

here that the seeds for American film noir are born. As the new German filmmakers

mixed their style with the Hollywood model of industrious filmmaking, a hybrid began to

form.

> [5]"Rather then direct transplantation, one is looking at a process of diffusion and re-appropriation
> where a modified Expressionism could be superimposed over existing generic conventions
> through a mise-en-scene, chiaroscuro lighting, minimalist sets, mobile camera work, and the use
> of fractured narratives."

It is through this means that the expressionism collided with Hollywood. Expressionism

however is not the only influence on film noir. In order to fully understand the origins of

the style, a few more elements must be examined; French poetic realism and the great

American novel.

From the period of 1933 to 1939 the French put out a series of films that could be

seen as the stepping-stones between the German Expressionist films and what would

become American film noir. Seven films were made by French director Marcel Carne,

the two most notable being, *Quai des brumes, (Port of Shadows) 1938,* and *Le Jour se

leve, (Daybreak)* 1939.

> [6]"The effect of French Poetic Realism on film noir is less appreciated, but Ginette Vincendeau has
> provided a cogent and persuasive case for its stylistic and thematic influence, which she argues,
> 'filled the gap' between German Expressionism and classical Hollywood cinema."

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[5] Spicer, 14
[6] Spicer, 14

Not surprisingly, these films were pulled from novelists of the time, most notably, Georges Simenon. His novels were of the detective genre and managed to encapsulate a wide range of readers, all of who were enthralled with his plots of crime and moral questionability. It was Simenon who first adapted Cain's, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* in 1939, under the name, *Le Dernier Tournant* or *The Final Twist*.

 It is worth noting that before World War II, these films were actually reviewed by French critics who termed them as film noirs. At the heart of these films are the characters. The style of French Poetic Realism films focused less on the action of the plots and more on the actual psychological demeanors of its leading characters. Like the 'street films' of Germany, the French applied the character traits that are inherent in film noir,

> [7]"The dangers of desire were represented by the *femme fatale*, or 'lost girl', in her beret and shiny raincoat that transferred reflections of the night-time city onto her body as if she were all surface, without substance. The male protagonists tend to be confused, passive, divided and deeply introspective. The dominant actor was Jean Gabin, always marked as an outsider, romantic but possessed by self-destructive forces. Such was Gabin's stature that he created a of male hero, a modern Everyman who is complex and ambivalent, both sexually and socially. His tough masculine power is often outweighed by a 'feminine' sensitivity and vulnerability, a clear difference from his American counterparts, and his social status ambiguous or confused."

The characters portrayed by Gabin are not unlike the characters of American cinema. Embodied as a solder or blue collar worker who often finds himself in such fatalist circumstance that he cannot escape and always ends up dying at the end of the films, either by his own hand or that of another; making the French Poetic films much more heavy, gloomy and depressing compared to that of their American counterpart. However, lighting style, iconography and character motifs correlate to make a solid foundation for the American cinema of the 1940's.

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[7] Spicer, 16

Finally, we must look at the writing style of the American authors whose detective style novels where the precursors to some of Hollywood's most classic film noirs. The two most influential writers of the time were Dashiell Hammett, whose novel *The Maltese Falcon* would become a best selling classic around the world and especially in France. Hammett, would later be approached by one of Hollywood's hottest screenwriters John Huston, and in collaboration with Warner Bros, Huston would eventually come to direct the feature of the same title that now stands as an iconographic figure of the classic film noir canon. The other novelist of the time, Raymond Chandler, would be crucial in developing the noir styles popularity, especially in France.

> "A 1949 Chandler novel, *The Little Sister*, sold 17,000 hardcover copies in the United States and another 27,000 in the United Kingdom,, but achieved its highest figure in France with a total of 42,000. Chandler was also well received by French literary critics. *The Little Sister* was published in a cheap *Seerie Noire* edition, a series which included Dashiell Hammett and George Simenon. Chandler biographer Hiney states that 'It was from this hugely popular crime publishing venture that the term 'film noir' was derived'"

Indeed Chandler seemed to embody his style of writing. It is said that Chandler accomplished all of his work in an office not unlike those of his detective characters. Sitting in a dark room accompanied only by a bottle of scotch, he tirelessly pounded out the dramas of his leading detective character Marlow,

> [8]"The name is French, but the detective writer who inspired the concept was decidedly American, his prose marked by gripping realism from the seedy hotels, back alleys, dimly lit bars, main streets, country clubs, mansions, apartments, corporate board rooms and flophouses of America. Raymond Chandler was an author who scared people with his unnerving manner of peeling off the outer layer of societies veneer and digging into the uncertainties of modern existence."

His works may seem so real because he himself had walked the same streets, drank in the same bars and stayed in the same hotels as his illustrious characters. Therefore, film noirs are linked esthetically to reality by the locations in which they are based. A trend epitomized by Chandler himself.

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[8] Hare, 7

These writers played a key role in influencing societies pre-occupation with the crime genre. Without their preemptive works, the public would never have embraced the soon to come cinematic revolution in Hollywood. Directors and producers might never have realized the potential for such richly dark character driven plots that would weave their way into popular culture.

Film Noir:

As a Genre

The term "film noir" as a genre is an arguable point. Critics go back and forth on the subject of its exact definition. Arguing that it a style and not a genre. This is mainly due to its wide reach over other genres such as horror, thriller, drama, mela-drama, crime, the western, and of course mystery, however, there is a deeper level,

> [9] "Any attempt at defining film noir solely through its 'essential' formal components proves to be reductive and unsatisfactory because film noir, as the French critics asserted from the beginning, also involves a sensibility, a particular way of looking at the world. So noir is not simply a certain plot line or a visual style achieved by camera angles and unusual lighting. It also involves a 'way of looking at the world,' an outlook on life and human existence."

There must be essentially be a certain psychological empathy that is secreted to the audience.

The other side of the coin is that noir is a genre all of its own based on the mood, theme, tone and point of view of a film. I intend to prove that these conventions are precisely what categorize a film that can then be described in genre terms as a film noir.

> [10] "Noir deals with criminal activity, from a variety of perspectives, in a general mood of dislocation and bleakness which earned the style its name. Unified by a dominant tone and sensibility, the noir canon constitutes a distinct style of film-making; but it also conforms to genre requirements since it operates within a set of narrative and visual conventions. Noir tells its stories in a particular way, and in a particular visual style. The repeated use of narrative and visual structures . . . certainly qualifies noir as a genre."

These conventions include but are not limited to, the spider web of fate; the detective; the femme fatale; the good girl; unconventional story structure; voice over narration; low key lighting; smoke; the dark city; wet streets; corruption; greed; deceit; and revenge… these are the major elements that must come together in what can then be referred to as a film noir.

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[9] Conard, 11
[10] Conard, 10

To define exactly what is *genre,* Foster Hirsch says, "A genre… is determined by conventions of narrative structure, characterization, theme, and visual design".[11] This idea can be expanded as Thomas Sobchack says,

> [12]"The subject matter of a genre film is a story. It is not something that matters outside the film, even if it inadvertently tells us something about the time and place of its creation. Its sole justification for existence is to make concrete and perceivable the configuration inherent in its ideal form. That the various genres have changed, gone through cycles of popularity, does not alter the fact that the basic underlying coordinates of a genre are maintained time after time."

In terms of these definitions, it can easily be stated that film noir is indeed a genre. In order prove this, the conventions themselves must be explored in more detail.

Conventions of Film Noir

The spider web of fate:

This is where the a main character seemingly falls prey to an accidental occurrence that leads him or her down an unforeseen path, inevitably to the downfall of that character. The protagonist, usually a detective figure, is pushed and pulled in all the wrong directions, he is conventionally beat up at least once throughout the film, and traditionally ends up losing everything including his life.

The Detective:

Usually, but not always, the protagonist embodies some sort of detective like quality. Whether he be an actual detective or some poor shmuck who finds himself forced down a path of discovery, there is always a sense of mystery in the air surrounding him.

The Femme Fatale:

The femme fatale, a woman who's wicked cunning is instrumental in pushing the protagonist down the rocky path of the plot. Her influence is key in all classic noir films

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[11] Conard, 9

[12] Dickos, 1

as she usually embodies a powerful female archetype who has power over her male counterpart.

The Good Girl:

The Good Girl, who usually plays the part of the sweet and innocent woman, (the opposite of the femme fatale) a woman who epitomizes the classic 50's female whom her male counterpart can take care of, love and marry, a symbol of purity and family.

Unconventional Story Structure:

Unconventional plot and narrative structure is a major motif in film noir, involving flashbacks, flash-forwards and voiceover to disrupt and obscure the narrative flow of the film, creating an un-linear plot line that can twist and turn in and out of itself.

Voice Over Narration:

Voice over narration plays a key role in in film noir. Allowing the audience to get inside the head of the protagonists, there-by aligning themselves with the characters plight. It is also a useful way of pushing the plot forward, while keeping scenes simple and affordable.

Plot Conventions:

Plot conventions usually entailing the darker side of life are a very prevalent factor in creating a film noir. Usually encompassing crime, murder, deceit, and blackmail. It pulls from the criminal mind twisting and taking its characters to the breaking point of their moral ambitions.

Lighting:

The visual style is a major convention that reflects the mood and tone of a noir film. Incorporating low-key lighting, awkward camera angles, shadows and classically a

black and white color scheme. Color however, would take over later in the neo-noir era,

but the dark brooding mood of the lighting schemes would remain the same.

The Dark City:

The brooding city at night is usually the seedier parts of town, where neon lights

glow, and danger is felt lurking around every corner. The city's themselves become

characters in the films, laying the backdrop for the disorder and chaos.

Themes:

Corruption; greed; deceit; revenge; an all over sense of danger lurking around every

corner…

Film Noir:

A History of American Cinema

Now that we know where American film noir received its influences and what exactly is required of the genre, let's now take a hard look at how American filmmaking utilized this new style. "Critics tend to identify the classic noir period as falling between 1941 and 1958, beginning with John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* and ending with Orson Welles's, *Touch of Evil*."[13] In order to understand popularity of these films it is important to look at the social state of the country during film noirs rise to prominence. The country had been through many hard times leading up to this new surge in creative filmmaking, this can all be summed up as follows,

> [14]"The influx of German émigrés and the influence of expressionism; the influx of French émigrés and the influence of existentialism; Ernest Hemingway and the "hard boiled" school of writing; Edward Hopper and the "ash can" school of painting; Prewar photojournalism, wartime newsreels and postwar neorealism; the creators of Kane—Citizens Mankiewicz, Toland and Welles; the Wall Street crash and the rise of populism; the second world war and the rise of fascism; the cold war and the rise of McCarthyism . . . general American fears about bureaucracy, the bomb and the big city . . . the industrialization of the female workforce during the war and the escalating corporatism of American capital throughout the Forties."

It was a mixture of all these things that pushed the American Psyche to look at and accept this new darker reality, in which the dream of equality was not a reality. A place where the things we normally looked past in our naiveté needed brought forth to the big screen. A place where the underlying mood of the country could be viewed as outside of oneself, yet could still fully identify with the psychological undertones in relation to their own existence. Yet still having the reassurance that one could walk away from that world and feel better about the lives they were living.

The exact attributes of the classic era involve:

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[13] Conard, 1
[14] Martin, 3

[15]"1. Chiaroscuro lighting (or low key lighting)
  2. Screenplays set in urban milieus filmed mostly at night.
  3. Frequent images of water and reflections of street life.
  4. Inverted Frames (cameras held diagonally and/or vertically, reflecting the   inner thoughts of the protagonist.)
  5. Very complex and convoluted plots usually expressed in a voice over by a central character, a detective or femme fatale who 'flashes back to the past'"

These attribute were created and defined not only as artistic decisions but financial ones as well. After World War II studios flourished and were spending lavish amounts of money on their productions. So much so, that smaller studios could not compete with lavish production design, chorus lines, and musicals that Hollywood was cranking out. This led to the emergence of the "B" movies, which were produced by independent studios and where film noir flourished. Because of the basic structure and attributes of film noir's they were extremely cheap to produce and market.

> [16]"Since simplicity was the hallmark of such productions, mood pieces set against the darkened city streets, with illumination frequently provided by the flashing neon light of a cheap hotel or bar, studios could hold down budget costs and frequently shoot films entirely on the lot using cheap sets…. Noir vehicles provided an exciting *mano a mano* competition in which smaller studios could more readily compete against the giants."

It was due to these frugal expenditures that the smaller studios such as RKO were able to get by. They did this by mastering the noir model and creating "lean and mean" films that were filled with compelling characters and plot structures. Eventually the studios would take notice and other independent companies who made many of the low and modestly budgeted noirs would often contract their films out to larger distributers such as MGM and Universal.

> [17]"Between the end of the thirties and 1946 the number of independent production companies in operation had risen to in excess of forty, a number that was to escalate rapidly during the

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[15] Shwartz, x
[16] Hare, 14

[17] Martin, 13

following decade. This was due in part, at least in the early forties, to the free market provisions of the Consent Decree whereby each film, irrespective of budget, was now competing on an individual basis. There was a need in the lower budget end of the market "to carve out identifiable and distinctive styles" in order to differentiate the product from that of the established A feature production units at the eight big studios."

This is how actress, Ida Lupino, established herself as the sole female director in Hollywood during the late 1940s and 1950s. She directed, *The Hitch-Hiker* (1953), under her production company, "The Filmakers", that was then distributed by RKO. It is said to be one of the seven classic film noirs that was not produced by major studios and was selected for the United States National Film Registry. The others include a small-studio release, *Detour*, and four of the others were United Artists productions; *Gun Crazy*; *Kiss Me Deadly*; *D.O.A.* (1950), directed by Rudolph Maté; and *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), directed by Alexander Mackendrick. This was the heyday of the classic noir. It is estimated that over 400 film noirs were produced during this period.

It is important to note that the film noirs of the classic era were forced to work around the restraints employed by the Motion Picture Production Code, or more commonly referred to as The Hays Code. This was a moral code that restricted films from portraying certain types of behavior on screen, "The Production Code, under which classic films noirs were produced, severely limited what could be depicted, how it could be depicted, and perhaps most important, how it all came out in the end."[18] This lasted from 1930 until its abolishment in 1968 and consisted mainly of two separate parts. One dealt with general principles that focused on morality, while the other was more specific pertaining to particular applications that were basically a

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[18] Conard, 37

specific list of things that could not be depicted. This included the use of profanity; depictions of homosexuality; multi racial activity (especially concerning men and women); sexual relations outside of marriage could not be depicted in any favorable way; all criminal activity must be punished; authority figures had to always be shown in a favorable light. Essentially audiences had to be treated as children and shown that evil is always punished. This explains the endings and downfalls of our beloved anti-heroes. However, this did not stop filmmakers from finding creative ways around the code that in some respects may have been inspirational to their vision.   For example, there was a rule that kissing could not last more then three seconds. So, in a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's, *Notorious,* Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman kiss for not more then three seconds at a time and manages to create a two minute intimate encounter that goes far beyond any simple kiss that may have gone on for five seconds.   This was an obvious slight to the Production Code on the part of Hitchcock. The Production Code may have been an absurd sentiment on morality and what the public could handle, but it did manage to push filmmakers to think outside of the box and try things they would under different circumstances have never thought of.

Three films from the classic era stand out in terms of style and acclaim that deserve a deeper analysis, they are, *Double Indemnity, The Maltese Falcon,* and *Detour.*

Double Indemnity*,* directed by Billy Wilder and released in 1944, is one of the quintessential film noir's of the classic era. With a running time of 106 minutes, and based on James M Cain's novel, it was nominated for five Academy awards

including, best picture, screenplay, cinematography, soundtrack and a best actress

nomination for Barbra Stanwyck. In the end the film lost out to a now almost

unknown picture, *Go My Way,* directed by Leo McCarey. The irony is uncanny, as

Wilder's film is one of the most famous films of its time, while few even remember

Go My Way at all.

The story itself revolves around Walter Neff, (Fred MacMurray) an insurance

Salesman who meets femme fatale Phyllis Dietrichson the wife of a client. The two

end up having an affair and Phyllis eventually proposes killing her husband and

collecting the insurance money. Walter believing he is not only capable of getting

away with the crime, but of doubling the insurance claim, agrees to do the deed. The

police declare it an accidental death but Walter's boss, Barton Keys, thinks

differently and suspects Phyllis of the murder with the help of another man. Walter

in his death throws delivers a complete confession on tape, before exiting the

building and dying in Keys' arms.

The components that made *Double Indemnity* such a success are the

combination of the adaptation by Chandler and Wilder. Forced to work within the

restraints of the Hays Code, they took the novel and actually improved upon it. They

added the voiceover that drives the narrative and created an ending that was both

empathetic and tragic. The Cinematographer, John F Seitz, took his "no fill" lighting

techniques to near perfection with looming shadows and slanting shafts of light

perfectly accented the mood of the film. The acting itself was pure chemistry

between all the main characters, pushing the audience to align themselves easily

with the almost archetypical characters that spoke with exaggerated dialogue, but

were non-the-less captivatingly associable.

The scene I will examine from the film is the moment that Walter justifies his actions to his conscience. He has convinced himself that what he did was a sane and logical decision on his part. He is essentially explaining the *why* of his actions to the absent Keys.   The scene takes place in Keys office where Walter speaks through a microphone continuing the recording of his confession.   The film has transitioned from Walter's apartment where he and Phyllis have just finished discussing murdering her husband. Making the transition with Walter's voice over, "But I couldn't stop thinking about it," the edit dissolves from a dolly out of Walter and Phyllis on the couch of his apartment to a dolly in of Walter in the office. The "voice over" turns to live action as Walter continues talking, "because it was all tied up with something I had been thinking about for years," he continues explaining how all the tricks of the trade he had learned could actually allow him to get away with the murder and double indemnity.

The scene takes place all in one shot. Walter is center framed as the camera pushes into a medium shot. Only one light seems to shine down across him, leaving the background in shadows. It is a perfect picture of film noir. MacMurray's performance mixed with the lighting keeps what could be a boring scene very intimate. It is almost as if the audience is Keys and has no issues sympathizing with tragic character presented before us.   The scene ends with a dolly out to a medium shot, as Walter explains his sympathy towards Mr. Dietrichson and that he had never done anything to him except, "he was married to a woman he didn't care anything about," then dissolves back to the couple on the couch in a wide shot.

The scene is a genius way of incorporating exposition and genre conventions in a way that set the precedent for films that would follow. It manipulates time with a flash-forward and a flashback; it has voiceover, low-key lighting, simple shot design and stylized dialogue making it an almost perfect film noir scene.

The Maltese Falcon, directed by John Huston and released in 1941, was a 100 minute adaptation almost to the word of Dashiell Hammett's novel of the same title. Huston is credited with the adaptation, but after several failed screenplays, he was instructed by Howard Hawks to make the film exactly like the book. Huston actually had his secretary break down the book into basic shots using the novel word for word. The result was a perfect adaptation of Hammett's work.

The story is centered on a private detective named Sam Spade, (Humphrey Bogart) who is hired by femme fatale Miss Wanderly, (Mary Astor) to follow her sister. But when his partner Miles Archer (Jerome Cowen) is found dead in an alley Sam is caught between his desire and mistrust of Miss Archer. Discovering that she is surrounded by a plethora of dangerous men and shady behavior, he pushes her to reveal the truth about her intentions and the mysterious statue called, "The Maltese Falcon".   Twisting and turning his intentions by playing all sides of the investigation, Sam eventually gets the falcon only to have it be revealed as a fake.

The film was nominated for three Academy awards including best adaptation, best picture and best supporting actor for Sydney Greenstreet in the role of fat man, Kasper Gutman. The success of the film is seen easily through the popularity of the novel, excellent casting and the strong directorial prowess of Huston who sketched every set up in the film. He sidestepped the norm and shot the whole movie

sequentially, using unnerving medium shots in low angles, and playing in depth with his wide shots that hold the mood of entire scenes.

The scene I will examine takes place after Archer's murder. Sam has just returned home when there is a knock on the door and two cops come in to discuss the case. They play good cop bad cop at first as they ask for information. The conversation quickly turns accusatory as Sam begins to get defensive. The three finally reconcile their differences over a drink.

The lighting is low-key, relying on practical's to create fill and shadows, as Sam turns on lamps within his apartment. The scene opens in a long low angle pan right and dolly in on Sam entering his apartment. This cuts with the knock on the door, to a wide shot of the door and Sam entering frame to answer it. The shot then dolly's back and pans right with the characters as they move to the center of the room and sit. The shot settles into a medium tail-on three shot of Sam sitting centered between the two cops. Sam leans back on the bed to profile looking left to right at the opened faced cops. This is held for about a minute before the scene begins to become more dynamic jumping from shot to shot in rapid succession as the conversation intensifies. It goes to a profile two shot of the cops, back to the three shot tail on Sam, to a close up of the good cop, to a reverse head-on three shot on Sam between the two cops. This continues throughout the rest of the scene pausing on the original three shot composition to breath when the conversation's intensity lulls. Finally the scene ends in high angle over Sam to the cops, as they cheers, and fade to black.

The scene's dialogue is very stylized, and fast paced, which coincides with the

edit. Particularly, Sam's lines such as "turn the dump upside down if you want to, I wont squawk," "what's your boyfriend getting at Tom?" and "Sorry for getting up on my hind legs, but you fellas trying to rope me made me nervous," create a tone that is unmistakably film noir. There is no score or music overlaying the action so the dialogue and edit are used to create the sole rhythm of the scene.

Overall, it is a very complicated and well-structured three-character scene that carries a perfect arc from beginning to end, pushing the plot forward and entertaining audiences at the same time.

Detour, directed by Edgar G. Ulmer and released in 1945, was a 68 minute black and white masterpiece, shot in 6 days with a $117,000 budget. Ulmer's ability to run an efficient production under a tight budget while producing an amazing film with great characters and story is one of the key components to the success of the film. It was the first "B" movie chosen by the Library of Congress for its National Film Registry in 1992 and the first Hollywood "Noir" honored.

The films central story revolves around a piano player named, Al Roberts, (Tom Neal) who decides to hitchhike to L.A. to surprise his girlfriend. A traveling salesman named Charles Haskell picks him up, but suffers a heart attack along the way, hitting his head and leaving Al to assume that he will be accused of murder. Al leaves the body in a ditch and assumes Haskell's identity.   However, as fate would have it, Al picks up his own hitchhiker. A femme fatale named Vera, (Ann Savage) who seems nice enough at first, but turns out to have ridden with Haskell before Al. She blackmails Al into a series of events leading him to his unfortunate downfall and eventual arrest.

It contains all the key components of a successful "noir" film of the time. Compelling characters, especially a quintessential femme fatale, a heady strait forward dialogue that pushed the twisting fatalistic plot. A hearty voice over that is both untrustworthy and pessimistic leaving the audience with a foreboding and unease from the very opening of the film. The lighting design is filled with shadows influenced by Ulmer's expressionist days and complements the dark undertones of the story and the character's themselves.

One scene in particular stands out as a key moment in the film. That is the beginning of the second act, when Al first meets Vera at the gas station and offers her a ride. The inciting incident having already occurred with the death of Charles Haskell, the tables are now turned on Al. The scene begins innocent enough with a chance encounter but eventually leads to the reveal that Vera is actually the woman Haskell had mentioned as she accuses Al of murdering him. The scene is pushed forward via Al's voice over that is maintained throughout the scene.

The scene begins with Al pulling into the gas station in a wide establishing shot, the camera pans right with Al to reveal Vera standing by the road. The shot plays in-depth keeping Al in a medium shot and Vera in an extreme wide standing in the background. The camera punches in with a medium shot on Vera as Al comments, "there was a woman." Then back to the wide, then to back to her medium which tracks her as she walks to the car after Al offers up the ride. As she reaches the car, the edit returns to the original wide shot and pans left as Vera gets into the car leaving the two in a medium two shot, then panning right again as the car pulls away.

Once inside the car the scene is covered by four major angles, a head-on two shot, a tail-on two shot, a profile two shot from Vera to Al, and a reverse two shot of Al to Vera, with the exception of one profile close up of Vera looking from left to right as Al's voice over comments on Vera's appearance. The scene cuts between these two shots for the entirety of the scene.   The scene ends with a dissolve from the tail on two shot to a close up of Al at the bar where he is delivering his narrative voice over. The camera dolly's back to a medium close up as he finishes his monologue about fate. The motivation for the progression of two-shots is there to show that these two characters are going to be bound together as they are both trapped with one another within the frame. This metaphor holds true for the rest of the film as Al tries to get away from her but to no avail. Fate has put them together and that is how they will remain.

Neo-Noir

The neo-noir or new noir era is a little more difficult to define. Film critics argue between three different motion pictures being the quintessential beginning of the movement, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho,* 1960, Jack Smight's *Harper,* 1966, and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown,* 1974. Any of these three films could easily be argued as the starting point of neo-noir that has carried its way through to our modern era.

The cycle or trend of independent production companies turning out low budget hits re-emerges during the neo noir period. Now freed from the Production Code filmmakers took everything to the next level. The neo-noir era can be said to have built upon or updated the classic style with its own set of attributes or hallmarks,

[19]"1. Color and the latest projection technology.
   2. A less restrictive rating system.
   3. Remakes from the old 'hard broiled' school of detective fiction.
   4. Instead of good/bad detectives, screenplays deal with good/bad cops.
   5. The emergence of the serial killer."

This re-emergence of film noir opened up the doors for more creative freedom in terms of the style and ability to create even more reality based films that could now include a more graphic portrayal of characters and acts that had previously been taboos in the past. Sex became more graphic, as did the use of profanity. The "bad guy" took to becoming the anti-hero that audiences could root for, getting away with crimes in light of corrupt government and the notion of "the man" being out to get you.

> [20]That experimentation had been possible in the mainstream productions of the late sixties and early seventies was largely a result of the uncertainty that permeated the Hollywood studios in the aftermath of the collapse of the studio system. As the industry was restructured and stability returned in the wake of conglomeration and diversification, however, the standardized patterns of production and formularized narrative content traditionally associated with Hollywood cinema also reappeared, so bringing to a close the brief period of renaissance. In the wake of the fiscal uncertainty of the late sixties, the mid to late seventies was a period of retrenchment and restabilization in the American film industry, prior to a renewed spate of mergers and takeovers and the streamlining of existing conglomerates during the eighties and nineties.

The movies I will examine for this period are, *Chinatown, and Pulp Fiction,* two films that inspired their own eras and set the tone for what neo-noir was, and what it would become during their respective eras.

Chinatown, directed by Roman Polanski, and released in 1974, was a 131-minute tribute to its predecessors. With a Hammett inspired plot, and a Chandler like feel, the film was an inspiration to the neo noir movement throughout the 70's.

A detective murder mystery in the classic sense, the film's plot revolves around a classic private investigator character named J.J. Gittes, (Jack Nicholson) or Jake. He is

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[19] Shwartz, xi
[20] Martin, 27

hired by a phony Evelyn Mulwray (Diane Ladd) who suspects her husband of cheating, and gets on the case. But when Mr. Mulwray is found dead, Jake discovers the real Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) and a seething plot of murder, incest and corruption all involving the water supply of Los Angeles.

The film succeeded on many levels. The wholehearted rewrite that created the finite structure of the film by Polanski himself made the film a marketable piece of work from the convoluted original screenplay by Robert Towne. Polanski's decision to shoot the film in a 30's style, but from a 70's style perspective, put a new and modern twist on a classic format that worked well with audiences and put a new light on the city of Las Angeles itself.   Polanski's decision to replace cinematographer Stanley Cortez with a faster and more efficient John A. Alonzo, added to the overall style and feel of the film and created a faster production schedule, saving time, money, and the films esthetic. The film was nominated for eleven Academy awards including best art direction, best cinematography, best costume design, best director, best editing, best original score, best sound, best picture, Jack Nicholson for best actor, and Faye Dunaway for best actress. Ironically Robert Towne was the only one to walk away a winner with a best screenplay award.

The scene I will examine is the scene in which Jake confronts Noah Cross, (John Huston) with Mulwray's glasses that he found in Cross's pond. Jake accuses Cross of the murder and discovers the truth about his plans for Las Angeles and the water supply. The true plot of the film is revealed in this scene as Jake has essentially solved the mystery behind the murder. But Cross is so powerful there is nothing he can really do about the situation especially after he is strong-armed to give up the glasses.

The scene all takes place in one spectacular shot that plays in depth with the actors and camera's blocking. Starting out in a wide shot looking down into the living room of a Cross's mansion, Cross walks in depth into a medium shot as Jake enters frame left and the camera pans right into a medium two shot of both characters with Jake looking right to left at Cross standing open faced to the camera as he inquires about "the girl". The camera pushes into an over the shoulder of Jake to Cross, as he hands him the obituary from the newspaper, then rolls around to a profile two shot as Jake accuses Cross of Mulwray's murder and shows him the glasses. This is the major confrontation between the protagonist and antagonist. The camera language reflects this intention. Cross, tries to evade Jake by telling the story of how Mulwray was infatuated with moving water to the dessert. The camera follows him panning right and looking into an already set sun in the background. Jake walks back into frame to the left of Cross as he solves the mystery, then turns to him in another profile two shot as the confrontation continues. The majority of the reveal takes place here with Cross confessing his scheme. Cross then has his goon take the only evidence, the glasses, from Jake, as the camera pans left and pulls back to a medium three shot with Jake stuck in-between the two men. As the goon in the left of frame points a gun at Jake's head he finally decides to give up the glasses. The scene ends with Jake stuck between a rock and a hard place.

There is no music, only the sound of ambient night sounds, crickets, wind, etc. This keeps the intensity on the dialogue and allows the crucial information being revealed to take center stage as the camera language accents the beats of the scene.

Pulp Fiction*,* directed by Quentin Tarantino, was released in 1994 to rave revues and has since become a classic. At 154 minutes, the film manages to intertwine separate

stories that are all somehow interconnected. Tarantino's structure sets the film apart from all other non-linear plot structures up until this time. His use of narrative was original and a refreshing surprise for audiences of the time.

The plot actually revolves around several characters. There is Jules Winnfield (Samuel L Jackson) and Vincent Vega, (John Travolta) two hit men working for Marsellus Wallace (Ving Rhames) to retrieve a briefcase that has been stolen from him. Then there is Butch Coolidge, (Bruce Willis) an ageing boxer whom Marsellus pays off to throw a fight and who double-crosses Marsellus. There is Mia Wallace, (Uma Thurman) Marcellus' wife who is taken on a date by Vincent and who ends up overdosing on the hit man. The stories play out with a slight overlap that begins in a café, and ends in café, which is all really taking place on the first day of the action, while the rest continues throughout the next day.

The success of the film must really be placed with Tarantino himself. As the writer and director, he understood something about the new younger audience that other filmmakers at the time did not. He took huge risks with the narrative structure, the casting and the production design, all of which paid off big time in the end. Its overindulgent use of drugs, violence and creative dialogue gave the film an edginess that was perfect for "generation x" viewers. It was however, critically acclaimed as well. The film was nominated for seven Academy awards including, best director, best editing, best picture, John Travolta for best actor, Uma Thurman for best actress, and Tarantino and Roger Avery won for best original screenplay.

The scene I will examine is the third scene of the film, sometimes referred to as the "say what again!" scene. Jules and Vincent have found the thieves of Marcellus'

briefcase. Even though the two characters are hit men in the film, they still represent the

detective characters of old. They have solved the mystery of where the briefcase is, and

now they have arrived at the thieves' apartment to retrieve the case. We are net privy to

the actual events that lead them there, that it is not important. What is important is

showing who these characters are through the way in which they do their job. A dialogue

heavy scene that is compelling and sets the tone and the themes of the rest of the film,

violence, deceit, crime, power, mystery and murder are all rolled together here.

The scene opens with a close up two shot of the back of the hit men's heads as the

character of Marvin answers the door. Flipping to the reverse and revealing their faces as

they enter the apartment, then back to the original shot as they enter on Jules's line, "Hey

kids.", gives us all the information we need to know about who the people in the

apartment are. Once we are through the doorway the edit switches to a wide master as

the hit men move into the space of the apartment. Two other young men sit in the room,

one on the couch, "Flock of Seagulls" and the other at a table, Brad, about to eat his

breakfast. The scene then jumps into a series of medium close ups as Jules begins his

interrogation of the thieves. As he inquires about hamburgers the frame cuts between a

close up of Jules and a reverse medium close up of Brad as Vincent wonders in the

background behind brad rolling a cigarettes.   This shows the power of Jules over the

situation and also the feeling that the two men have the thieves surrounded; yet they are

nonchalant about the situation. It is obvious that they are in charge. The conversation

about the burger demonstrates just that, and is cohesive with the blocking and the camera

direction. The display of power is solidified as Jules downs Brad's sprite. Switching back

to the wide master of the room, the mood of the scene changes here. What was seemingly

a casual encounter now turns more threatening as Jules reveals why they are there and

orders "Flock of Seagulls", to tell him where the briefcase is. He tells him that it is under

the sink and Jules retrieves it. As he works the combination the edit cuts to a close up

revealing the combination to be 666. This may partly allude to the contents of the case,

but that is never actually revealed. All the audience knows is that a bright golden light

illuminates on Vincent's face as he opens it in a medium close up to peer in. The whole

scene revolves around an approaching and receding pattern of editing, as Brad tries to

explain himself to Jules, who then shoots "Flock of Seagulls" to make his point clear, the

drama intensifies. Here the scene has moved to its violent conclusion. The hit men are

there to kill them and there is no talking their way out of it. Now, the editing cuts

between close ups as it intensifies, then returns to its approaching and receding pattern,

close ups, two shots, wide, two shot, close up etc. as Jules takes action flipping the table

and yelling at Brad. The angles are low and dutch; reminiscent of noir's of the classic era

but with color making it far more violent and intense. This pattern continues as Jules

begins to give his Ezekiel speech to Brad. When he is finished he and Vincent both shoot

Brad multiple times. The edit cuts to reaction shots from Marvin and a new character that

is seen holding a large gun.   The edit cuts to a two shot of Jules and Vincent right before

flipping to a wide dolly on the man with the gun running out of the bathroom and

unloading his gun towards the camera.   The two hit men, unharmed by the attack raise

their guns and shoot the man dead. After which the two hit men end up in theoretical

conversation about divine intervention. As they argue, the two men who have differing

opinions on the matter are put into their own frame. Vincent frame right, looking left,

and Jules, frame left, looking right. This shows us that each man is of his own opinion by

separating them the camera language reinforces their individual viewpoints. Finally,

Vincent concedes and he, then Marvin, then Jules, each walk out the door in a medium

close up, closing the door behind them and ending the rollercoaster of a scene.

NOIR.0

"The prologue"

How my film stands up…

The comparison between the above successful films and my thesis film is very close. The film exemplifies the genre conventions of film noir in almost every aspect. From the character development, plot structure, dialogue, themes, sound design, musical score and shot design, I have created the beginning to a re-emergence of the genre for the 21'st century. I couldn't be more pleased with every aspect of the filmmaking process during the production phases, and in the final product.

The strongest scene in *Noir.0 "the prologue",* is the scene between the protagonist, David Brissel, and the "good girl" Melanie Diangelo. The scene takes place at an intimate bar table. Melanie has sought out David in an attempt to sway him into getting back at her husband, whom David owes one hundred thousand dollars. The scene's dialogue however does not follow a cliché pattern, as it turns intimate and personal and more about the characters then the real reason they are sitting together.

The acting in the scene is superb with both actors bringing their "A" game to the table. The character of Melanie pulls on the heartstrings of the audience, while David's un-sureness about Melanie's intentions keeps the scene in conflict.

The shot design, editing and lighting keeps true to the noir style, and a steady-cam shot opens the scene with medium shot on the bartender then pulls back to reveal David and Melanie getting their drinks. The camera pulls back with them as they take their seats at the table. David lights a cigarette as the shots very between close ups and mediums in

an approaching and receding pater depending on the emotional intensity of the moment.

The scene climaxes with a close up passionate kiss between the two lost characters.

The music is light, intense and almost curious all at the same time keeping with the mood and tone of the scene. Accenting the pacing and adding an overall esthetic to the scene, the music is noir in style with a modern twist.

Overall, the scene works on all levels.

Conversely, the weakest scene is the next to last in the film and takes place in an alley where Earl Jones attempts to blackmail the city councilmen, William Bloom. Though the scene works fine, it is lackluster in its build to the climatic murder or Earl. Adding to this problem is a lack of a two shot and a strait on close ups of both characters during the confrontation. The scene takes place in three setups; a wide behind Earl, an over the shoulder to William, and a profile close up on Earl. The sound, music and acting help to augment the visual's of the scene, hiding the poor camera language, and giving it the intensity that it needs. Overall the scene fails on some levels, but succeeds in others, either way it does its job.

I believe that understanding the genre conventions of movies aids greatly in any stylistic approach to a film. Whether it is in the combining of genre conventions or following the strictest rules of a genre. The influence of the specific conventions help to justify camera language, dialogue, and pacing, while allowing filmmakers an outline of possibilities and rules to either work with or break depending on the artistic vision of the film.

Film Noir:

What's yet to come?

The future of noir films has yet to be written, but one thing is for sure, as long as there is greed, corruption, enticing women, crime and a desire to make strong character driven films on a low budget, the genre is destined to continue and evolve.

> [21]"The classic noir has been pronounced dead so often that the humor of it equals that of the long-awaited announcement of a terribly aged and mean relative's passing that simply fails to arrive: it just never comes. I maintain that the film noir in its original appeal does not have bracketed self-consciousness and self-referencing. Despite the changes in production (almost always wide-screen color) and exhibition (Dolby sound), filmmaking has achieved a remarkable degree of democracy in style, and what was once considered dated always seems to return anew. The film noir, in its original fascination, still thrives in recent works."

[21] Dickos, 235

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