

Writing the New Noir Film

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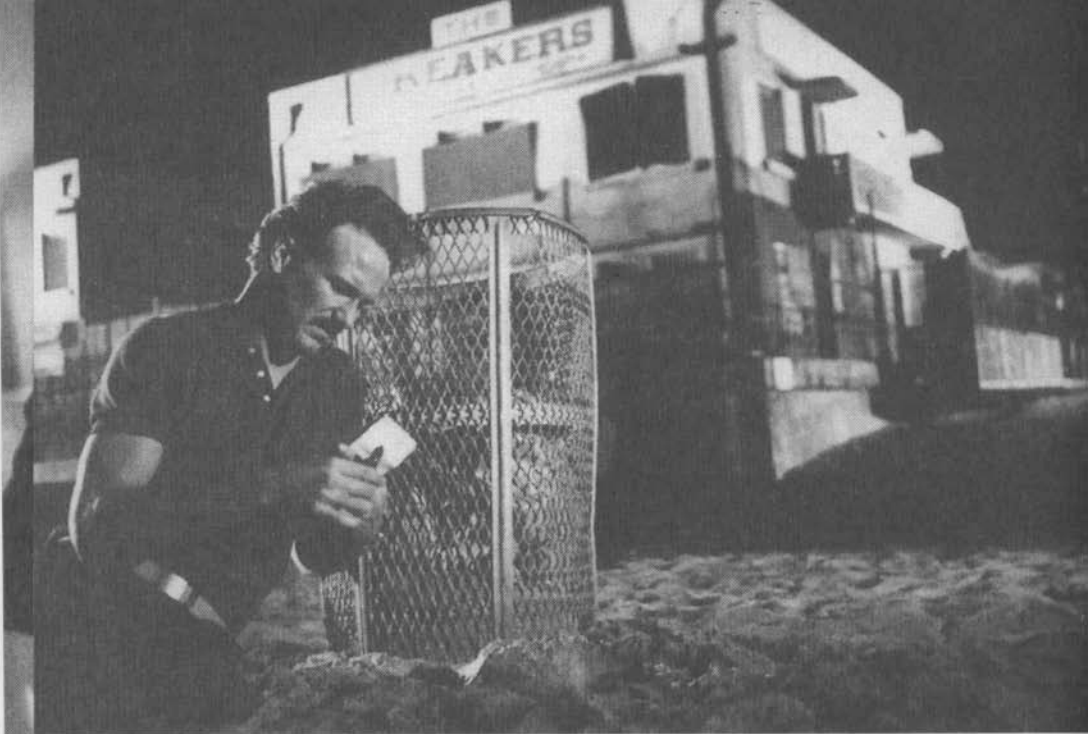
Wet streets at night. Flashing neon in the window of a seedy bar. Smoke-filled rooms. All images of desperation, alienation. All images of Classic *Film Noir* which many film historians believe began with *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and ended with *Touch of Evil* (1958). The term "Film Noir" is said to have been coined by Nino Frank in 1946 post-World War II Paris to refer to the release of a flood of American crime films. Other examples of Classic *Noir* are: *Double Indemnity* (1944); *Detour* (1945); *The Big Sleep* (1946); *White Heat* (1949); *DOA* (1950); *Gun Crazy* (1950); and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955).

With the release in 1992 of Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* and then his *Pulp Fiction* in 1994 has come a revived interest in stories about antiheroes, desperate characters and the criminal element. The commercial and critical success of *Pulp Fiction* has opened Hollywood doors to more edgy, dark stories and generated a renewed ability to produce films some label *New Noir*.

But if the period of Classic *Noir* ended in 1958, the real revival of *Noir* was launched by *Chinatown* in 1974. Other films that could be called New (or Neo) *Noir* due to their cinematic style or content include: *Raging Bull* (1980); *Thief* (1981); *Body Heat* (1981); *Blood Simple* (1984); *Jagged Edge* (1985); *Manhunter* (1986); *Blue Velvet* (1987); *The Grifters* (1990); *Basic Instinct* (1991); *Reservoir Dogs* (1992); *Love Crimes* (1992); *Final Analysis* (1992); *Gun Crazy* (1992); *Red Rock West* (1992); *Pulp Fiction* (1994); *The Last Seduction* (1994); *The Usual Suspects* (1995); *The Professional* (1994); *Fargo* (1996), and *L.A. Confidential* (1997).

Writing *New Noir* can be intriguing, especially since protagonists are primarily antiheroes and their motives are usually dishonorable. Capturing "the truth of the character" on paper is sometimes tricky due to the fact that many *Noir* characters are liars, at times even deceiving themselves.

Another challenge for writers is that *Noir* characters are "unsympathetic." In other words, the audience feels little sympathy for the characters and their situations because they are not likable personalities and they do forbidden things. If movie audiences can't feel sympathy for the characters, then they care little about what happens to them and cannot connect to the story on an emotional level. So, the keys to linking the audience to *Noir* characters are understanding and intrigue. A viewer may not especially like a *Noir* protagonist, but if there is enough under-



More "plots [that] revolve around betrayal on a personal basis" and manipulated men: above, Ned Racine (William Hurt) in *Body Heat*. Below, Roy Dillon (John Cusack) in *The Grifters*.



standing of why a character is the way he is, of how he got to this wretched place in his life, then the audience will be interested in what happens in the end. Another connection is fascination with intriguing characters. We may not choose to live our lives like the *Noir* protagonist, but we certainly are captivated by his big screen life of danger and sexual impulsivity.

In *L.A. Confidential* one of the protagonists, a never-by-the-rules cop named Bud, became a cop to "get even" after watching his father beat his mother to death. His anger takes the shape of revenge on any perpetrator of domestic violence that crosses his path. He's a violent man, but we understand the seed of his rage, therefore we see him in a somewhat more sympathetic light.

Understanding the New *Noir* genre and its idiosyncrasies is the first step to crafting a compelling *Noir* story. Using themes commonly found within the genre and developing desperate characters who drive the story forward with their reckless acts of deception all contribute to creating a fresh take on *Noir*.

The following are some of the elements essential to writing a good New *Noir* screenplay.

1. NEW NOIR GENRE

New *Noir* plots revolve around betrayal on a personal basis with one character betraying another, or more extensively when stakes are raised and betrayal has nationwide or even worldwide consequences. In *Body Heat* Matty convinces Racine to kill her husband, then double crosses him. The same plot was used in *Body Heat's* inspiration, *Double Indemnity*, which was released thirty-seven years earlier. In *The Grifters*, released in 1990, Lilly robs her gangster boss and also betrays her own son. Jerry Lundegard, William Macy's character in *Fargo*, betrays his father-in-law and his wife by staging the wife's kidnapping, hoping to collect ransom from the father-in-law, until things go very wrong.

2. NIGHTMARES & CRIME

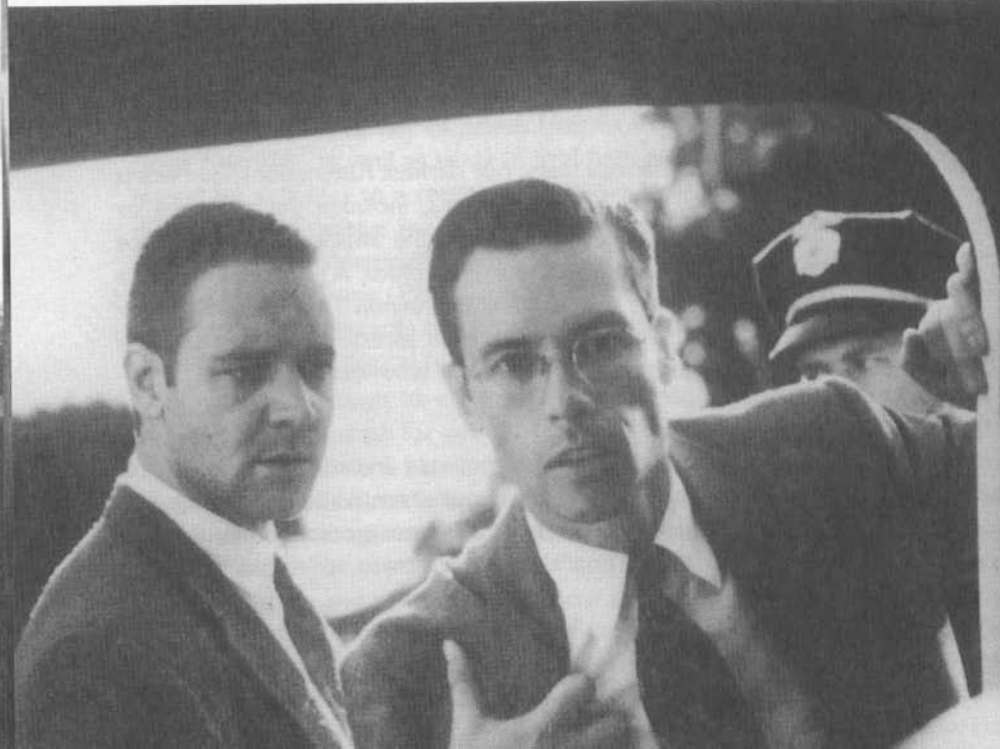
Noir stories symbolize our subconscious fears, our darkest ruminations, our worst nightmares. New *Noir*, as well as Classic *Noir* films, includes the presence or portent of crime. Dramatic tension is derived from the anticipation of violence from characters with little or no socially redeeming qualities. A good example of a film that uses this brand of suspense to the fullest is Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*. After a botched robbery, with one of the men bleeding to death and the police closing in, thieves clash as they try to figure out who was the "snitch."

3. GOOD VS. EVIL

In *Noir* good and evil are confused and sometimes indistinguishable. Moral ambivalence and complicated discrepancies in character motivation encourage the audience to feel the torment and insecurity of the protagonist. When Nicolas Cage's character in *Red Rock West* is mistaken for a hitman and hired by both a



Plots that revolve around *loyalty* on a personal basis: above, Anita (Drew Barrymore) and Howard (James Legros) in *Gun Crazy*. Below, Detectives Bud White (Russell Crowe) and Ed Exley (Guy Pearce) in *L.A. Confidential*.



husband and wife to kill the other, he crosses the imaginary line between good and evil. He justifies his actions. In *L.A. Confidential*, Bud stands by while his fellow police officers beat prisoners (evil), yet at risk of being suspended he won't testify against his partner (good or heroic). Most *Noir* characters do not think of themselves as evil or bad, and if the story is told skillfully, the line representing good and evil will blur for the audience as well.

4. PROTAGONIST IS ANTIHERO

The main character/s are not heroes at all, but the antithesis of heroic. They are desperate characters, with little hope of positive change in their lives. They live on the outskirts of normalcy, surviving as best as they can in a chaotic world both inner and outer. Their behavior is not courageous and is usually obsessive. The title of the film, *The Usual Suspects*, implies that the story is about criminals, and it is. Not only is the film about crime and criminals, the entire cinematic story is a lie made up by Kevin Spacey's character (whose real story identity in the film shall not be revealed for those who haven't seen this edgy film yet). *The Professional* was about a hitman (an unsympathetic profession) who risks his life to take in an orphan (an heroic act), but ultimately he is a cold-blooded killer.

5. CRIMINAL POINT OF VIEW

When the protagonist is a criminal, the story is told from his/her point of view. The narrative is manipulated so audiences will identify with him. In the films just mentioned above *The Usual Suspects*, *The Professional*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *The Grifters* the stories are told from the criminals' perspective. We may not agree with their lifestyles, but seeing the world through their eyes, seeing that they are human, somehow connects us with them, as if they represent a frightening, dark-side of ourselves. They are not heroes, but they are compelling to watch. Their stories deliver to us the thrill of danger, without the risk of the consequences.

6. NO REDEMPTION

Unlike other genres, the *Noir* protagonist rarely redeems himself in the end. He may regret being caught for his criminal, or even murderous, behavior, but he seldom learns from his mistakes and almost never performs some courageous, selfless act to redeem himself at the end of the story. Even when Jerry Lundegard in *Fargo* discovers that the orchestrated kidnapping of his wife has gone terribly wrong and his father-in-law has been killed, all he's worried about is covering up his own theft of the cars from the car lot that he manages, not the well-being of his innocent wife. An exception to this is found in *L.A. Confidential* when Bud saves Ed, a former nemesis, after their own fellow officers come to kill them.

7. ISOLATION

The *Noir* protagonist almost always experiences a sense of isolation, either physical and/or psychological, and this isolation and alienation is pronounced.

In *Fargo*, as Jerry Lundegard's scheme to con money from his father-in-law goes wrong, he becomes more and more withdrawn, isolated from the people around him. Another similar genre, the thriller, also counts on an isolated main character to heighten suspense and create a sense of danger and insecurity for the protagonist.

8. FEMME FATALE

In many *Film Noir* movies the main character's only source of hope may be a female character, the femme fatale, who is integral to the main plot of the story.

She represents a better life. She is usually wealthy, beautiful, intelligent and illusive. But the femme fatale always has her own agenda and after using the protagonist for her own gains, she will deceive him. An example is *Basic Instinct*. Nick (Michael Douglas' character) is attracted to Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone's character) and risks his life, knowing she's a murder suspect, to satisfy his obsession with her. Kim Basinger's character in *L.A. Confidential* is a "victim" of her own beauty who serves as a Veronica Lake look-alike call girl. She lures Bud into a sexual relationship, but then betrays him by having a sexual encounter with Bud's fellow detective, Ed, which is photographed by another character to use for blackmail.

9. NOIR SEX

The protagonist falls in lust with the femme fatale and becomes obsessed with her. The femme fatale turns up the heat by flirting and luring the protagonist into a sexual relationship. Many New *Noir* films feature highly erotic "love scenes" which leave the main character wanting more. His professional objectivity becomes increasingly compromised by obsessive thoughts of when his next sexual encounter will be with the woman of his fantasies. Again *Basic Instinct* is a prime example of this, with Catherine teasing Nick in front of the other detectives during questioning. *Body Heat* also features a classic femme fatale in Matty's character, seducing Racine, using him, then betraying him. As the title suggests, *Body Heat*, gives us a passionate, lustful relationship between the two main characters.

10. BETRAYAL & VIOLENCE

Not only will the protagonist be beguiled and betrayed by the female character but violence, in one form or another, will be a result of the two characters' alliance. Again *Basic Instinct* and *Body Heat* demonstrate the juxtaposition of high sexuality and potential or acted out violence. Sex and violence collide in this symbiotic co-dependence between the anti-hero and femme fatale.

11. FOR ADULTS ONLY

There are few children in New *Noir*, or Classic Film *Noir* casts. Children represent optimism and a potentially promising future, and since *Noir* symbolizes our worst nightmares, hope is out of place. An exception is *The Professional*, where the child is a next door neighbor who is orphaned after her entire family is murdered while she's out at the grocery store. The hitman takes her in (reluctantly) and she talks him into training her in the art of killing.

12. PLOT TWISTS & REVERSALS

Tension in *Noir* stories is generated as much by plot twists as it is from anticipated violence. *The Usual Suspects* is rich with unexpected twists and reversals of expectation. When we think we know what's really going on, we are deceived again. Complications and story direction changes makes *Fargo* both suspenseful and entertaining. Jerry Lundegard's plans go wrong, time after time, and when he thinks things can't get any worse, they do. In *L.A. Confidential* there are so many primary characters, subplots, plot twists and surprises that audiences must pay close attention to follow the story. And like a giant jigsaw puzzle, the pieces, which at first seem unrelated, fall together to create one big picture of deception in the end.

13. CINEMATIC STYLE

Evoking Classic *Noir* images—the wet streets at night, the dramatic contrast between light and shadow, the stark symbols of isolation—requires a discreet written narrative. Screenwriters are forbidden from “directing on the page” by specifying shot angles and details, yet by integrating *noirish* images into scene description, a writer can bring a *Noir* texture to a script. By choosing locations which emphasize *noir*-based themes a writer can vividly set the scene for a New *Noir* story. Some typical *Noir* locations are lonely bars, abandoned dark streets, and seedy motels, any place that arouses our feelings of isolation, fear, and warns of violence.

Not only have films used the *Noir* genre successfully, but television has also aired several series that could be considered *Noir*. Some people refer to this as Cable *Noir*, Pop *Noir* or TV *Noir*. Some classic examples are: *Dragnet*, *The Fugitive*, and *Peter Gunn*. More current TV *Noir* includes: *Miami Vice* and *Fallen Angels* (Showtime).

New *Noir* is an evolving genre and presents opportunities for screenwriters to redefine the genre as Hollywood's fascination with crime drama, antiheroes and violence grows. And movies about the sinister side of human behavior will always, like the femme fatale, lure audiences into dark theaters to safely experience their worst nightmares on screen.