Film Noir: Style and Content

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The idea of an American film noir affords the analyst of ideology and culture an interesting definitional problem. The term itself is the invention of movie critics who hold the opinion that style is the sole vicinity in which meaning can be found in the cinema. And although these critics have done well in defining a consistent "film noir spirit," their work has been less than satisfactory in identifying precisely which movies this spirit fits. It is the argument of this study that the term film noir has been applied too loosely to give us an accurate definition of the subject. In the first section, an attempt will be made to prove this contention by reviewing the style-is-content literature on noir and then undertaking a metacritique of it. In the second section, a new interpretive method for looking at film noir will be proposed that uses style and content as interrelated principles that work in the films to create a totality of meaning. In this sense, a particular film cannot be defined as a film noir because it reflects one aspect or several aspects of the film noir spirit; it has to reflect every aspect of the film noir spirit or it is something other than noir.

The viewpoint projected here is that, although films noirs were supposed to be more nihilistic than the usual Hollywood films, they were still Hollywood films. In other words, a film noir cannot be defined adequately until the movie in question is evaluated as a complete work in which the themes develop from a plot that has the conventional beginning, middle, and end characteristic of Hollywood movies during the noir period.

Film noir means "black film," and it was a French appellation given to an unusually despairing group of Hollywood crime thrillers that began showing in France after World War II. These films had a dark style of visual presentation that combined gothic chiaroscuro lighting effects with an ambiguous and dislocated sense of space borrowed from the technical achievements of German Expressionism. Although the subject matter of film noir varied—it seemed to overlap into several previously established crime genres—the French saw in it strong affinities with a literary genre popular in their country called "série noire." Série noire literature included French translations of Gothic novels and what in America are called "hard-boiled" mystery novels. The world projected in film noir corresponded most closely to these latter works.
The American hardboiled mystery was an attempt to create a grittily realistic world of criminals and detectives, but its chief emphasis was on urban sordidness and melodrama. The hardboiled mystery novel fell into two categories. The stories of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler were about tough, outspoken private detectives. Heroes such as Phillip Marlowe and Sam Spade were interesting figures primarily because their creators gave them a sense of social justice and a certain amount of stoic virtue underneath their cynicism. The other category of hardboiled fiction—exemplified by the novels of James M. Cain and Cornell Woolrich—depended on a more faux naïf approach in which the writers delighted in showing ordinary people becoming embroiled in crime due to some unlucky accident or character fault. In Cain’s Double Indemnity, for example, an insurance salesman, Walter Neff, falls in love with one of his clients, an attractive housewife. The housewife, it turns out, is thoroughly despicable. She persuades Neff to kill her husband so they can cash in on his life insurance policy. In Woolrich’s The Window, a small boy who lives in a tenement sees his neighbors rob and murder a sailor. The boy has a reputation for lying, and no one believes his story except the killers themselves. Even after they make an attempt on his life, no one believes him. The killers are eventually caught, but it is by accident rather than human design.

In his 1970 article, “The Family Tree of Film Noir,” Raymond Durgnat suggests that an American film noir was usually preceded by a French version—La Chienne became Scarlet Street, La Bête Humaine became Human Desire. But one of the earliest critics to write about film noir, Jean-Pierre Chartier, viewed the American strain as far more nihilistic:

One speaks of a French school of black films, but at least Le Quai des brumes or Hotel du Nord had touches of revolt, love entered in the mirage of a better world. In these films, there was hope and even if characters were in despair they solicited our pity or sympathy. But here they are monsters, criminals, or sick people without excuse, who act as they do because of the fatality of evil within them.

Chartier does not, however, attempt to account for the pessimism of American film noir. The first critics to analyse motive in these productions were Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton. When their book-length study Panorama du Film Noir Américain appeared in 1955, the authors argued that film noir was a synthesis of three of Hollywood’s most popular genres, the gangster movie, horror films—such as Val Lewton’s style-conscious Cat People—and the private detective film. Borde and Chaumeton explained that these earlier genres contained the seeds of alienation and revolt that film noir was to later more sharply define. From the detective movie, film noir got its powers of observation and atmospheric detachment. From horror films, such as I Walked with a Zombie and Cat People, film noir gained a mise-en-scene of repulsion and dread. The
gangster film bequeathed to film noir its rebellious, gun-toting antiheroes. Borde and Chaumeton concluded that film noir, in its eclectic borrowing of generic influences, developed into a distinctive genre of social commentary. Film noir, according to Borde and Chaumeton, was expressing deeply pessimistic themes that were related to the aftershock of the Depression and the 1930s gangster era, America's involvement in World War II, and the social upheaval caused by the post-war readjustment to civilian life. The authors also suggested that the arrival in Hollywood of a large number of German directors—among them Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, Curtis Bernhardt—all of whom were refugees from Hitler, were the dominating force behind its gloomy expressionistic style.4

At this point, it should be pointed out that French film analysts were of the school of thought that "style is content" in the movies. This approach was not accepted in America in the 1950s—which makes American and French ways of reading films diametrically opposite during this period. For example, when the French critic Chartier saw Murder, My Sweet, he saw the private detective hero, Marlowe—as he searches for the missing girlfriend of the gangster Moose Malloy—getting repeatedly drugged and beaten against a dark, stylistic background of corrupt police and semmingly honest citizens deceiving one another.5 At the same time, in the United States, the American critic Clayton Henry, Jr., went to a screening of Murder, My Sweet, and, although he saw the same negative qualities Chartier saw, he realized that the plot tied together all these loose ends when Marlower saved the day and married the pretty heroine, Ann. Such factors led Henry to write, in the American publication Film in Review, that Murder, My Sweet was a film that "supported positive values."6

By the late 1960s, however, American film analysts had begun to come over to the French style method. It is beyond the scope of this study to account for this change, but the critics Charles Higham and Joel Greenburg laid the foundations for the American version of the style argument in their 1968 book Hollywood in the Forties. In their chapter "Black Cinema," concentrating on film noir's most provocative visual components, they provided a melodramatic description of its basic intention: to create a world without "a single trace of pity or love."7 For Higham and Greenberg, this pessimistic world view was defined by sensational visual imagery:

A dark street in the early morning hours, splashed with a sudden downpour. Lamps form haloes in the murk. In the walk-up room, filled with intermittent flashing of a neon sign from across the street, a man is waiting to murder or be murdered....8

These kinds of images, Higham and Greenberg explain, are what gives film noir its "specific ambience." In a remarkably colorful passage, they describe some of the ways film noir develops this ambience through the use of trains speeding through the night:
These trains, transporting their passengers on sinister errands, clank and sway through storm-swept darkness, their arrival at remote stations signalled by the presence of mysterious raincoated figures, while in the narrow corridors, the antiseptic, cramped compartments, assignations are made, and more often than not, a murder is planned.9

The authors suggest that such images have no other purpose than to employ romantic pessimism as a kind of slap in the face of American naivete and innocence. Higham and Greenberg state that film noir shows viewers “a world waiting to pounce in at the gates of the respectable, the jungle is already thrusting upwards.”10

It might be argued that American film critics were adding to their analysis of the film noir their own impressions of living through the calamitous 1960s and early 1970s. They were casting a cynical look back on the middle-class innocence of their post-World War II generation. The stylistic gloom of film noir afforded an appealing paradigm of disorder. At the surface of life, America reflected an innocent appearance, but this was only repression, which is a breeding ground for all sorts of irrationalities and fears. Higham and Greenberg’s metaphor of a “jungle thrusting upward” corresponds to Jung’s idea that when a man represses his evil side, it causes a shadow to be cast on his unconscious. If the individual fails to acknowledge his evil side, his repressive mechanisms cause the “shadow” to grow to the point where it will burst out into his conscious mind and overwhelm him.11

After 1970, all film noir criticism seemed to spring from this central idea. In an influential article written in 1972, the critic and screenwriter Paul Schrader suggested that the style of film noir consistently undermined traditional plot resolutions in which the hero triumphs over the forces of evil:

American film critics have always been sociologists first and scientists second: film is important as it relates to large masses, and if a film goes awry it is often because the theme has been somehow “violated” by the style. Film noir operates on opposite principles: the theme is hidden in the style, and bogus themes are often flaunted (“middle class values are best”) which contradict the style.12

Schrader believed that the film noir style was representative of a struggle for freedom within an otherwise repressive film form. Hollywood films had a classical or “Aristotelian” approach to art that attempted to imitate nature in such a way as to convince spectators that their religious and secular institutions corresponded to a universal order. In the final analysis, this universal order was regulated by principles of cosmic harmony—forcing the classical drama into a position where it was necessary for it to illustrate this concept by following a prosaic chain of causation from beginning, middle, to end.13 In Romeo and Juliet, for example, the
plot unfolds in a step-by-step fashion, like a series of carefully choreographed ballet routines designed to illustrate disorder and eventual reconciliation. For Schrader, the film noir style radically deconstructed the idealism of this formula by adding to it an underlying mood of tension and cynicism.

In their cumulative reference guide, Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style, Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward agree wholeheartedly with Schrader:

[These films] reflect a common ethos: they consistently evoke the dark side of the American persona. The central figures in these films, caught in their double binds, filled with existential bitterness, drowning outside the social mainstream, are America's stylized vision of itself, a true cultural reflection of the mental dysfunction of a nation in uncertain transition.¹⁴

The "existential bitterness" Silver and Ward refer to has been described by Robert Porfirio as "undercutting any attempted happy endings and prevents the films from being the typical Hollywood escapist fare."¹⁵ From Porfirio's point of view, film noir epitomizes a black vision of American life in which the only shared responses are fears and repressed impulses:

What keeps film noir alive for us today is something more than a spurious nostalgia. It is the underlying mood of pessimism... This...is nothing less than an existential attitude towards life. It places its emphasis on man's contingency in a world where there are no transcendental values or moral absolutes.¹⁶

By now, it should be clear that the spirit of film noir—as identified in the literature discussed above—was one of relentless pessimism and alienation. In an excellent series of articles that developed out of the British Film Institute Summer School in 1975—which was published in a short book, Women in Film Noir, edited by E. Ann Kaplan—this textual pessimism and alienation was viewed as a purveyor of dominant and repressed ideologies concerning the place of women in society:

Film noir is particularly notable for its specific treatment of women. In the films of another genre, the Western, women, in their fixed roles as wives, mothers, daughters, lovers, mistresses, whores, simply provide the background for the ideological work of the film which is carried out through men. Since the placement of women in this way is so necessary to patriarchy as we know it, it follows that the displacement of women would disturb the patriarchal system, and provide a challenge to the world view. The film noir world is one in which women are central to the intrigue of the films and are furthermore usually not placed safely in any of the familiar roles mentioned above. Defined by their sexuality, which is presented as desirable but dangerous to men, the women function as the obstacle to the male quest. It is largely because of this
interplay of the notion of independent women vis-à-vis patriarchy that these films are of interest to feminist film theory.  

The authors in *Women in Film Noir* talk more about story than analysts such as Silver and Porfirio. However, their discussions are necessarily subordinated to the question of domination and emancipation from the male gaze. The male gaze denotes a specific style of visual presentation in which the male is the subject and the woman is the object. All of the authors in the study agree that the *noir* world is defined in male terms. Women in *film noir* are viewed through the eyes of men who measure their worth according to sexist and oppressive standards. The contradiction rests in threatening women’s roles that victimize the male heroes and undermine the patriarchal order. The extent to which the hero becomes disenchanted with these roles and attempts to combat them illustrates the dialectical relationship between the oppression and empowerment of women as a group.

In respect to defining a general spirit of textual alienation and oppression, the style-is-content literature reflects a remarkable consistency. But how is this spirit applied to specific films and how does it operate? This question raises a fundamental problem with the style-is-content literature. None of the analysts mentioned—from Higham and Greenberg to Sylvia Harvey—ever explain in their studies how a particular film that supposedly reflects the *noir* spirit does so in terms of overall closure. At this point, some perspective is needed on what the critics have said and whether or not it affords an adequate definition of the subject. To be fair, their assessment of *film noir* is not altogether inaccurate. However, their tendency to construct generalizations based on the style of the films has caused them to overlook the way content is expressed. The critics, for example, never pinpoint specific points of view in the films. They never examine one film and then elaborate on the implications of its actual conclusion. This is because literal conclusions are wholly suspect in modern film criticism. They usually represent “bogus themes” that contradict the spontaneous purity of the style.

When critics make such artistic preferences, it is generally with good intentions: they desire to broaden the horizons of art. But problems develop when a certain preference becomes a mono-causal theory of reality. Its terms become “reified,” to use Max Weber’s expression; the theory seems to acquire a life of its own, and many people will follow its lead without questioning it. Because style has become something of a mono-causal theory in *film noir* criticism, it seems important to analyze the value of its approach.

The style-is-content argument in *film noir* studies touches upon the problem of values clarification in art criticism and scholarship. In America especially, movies were not considered an object of serious study until the late 1960s, when film courses began to be taught in community and four-year colleges. The teaching method in these courses was primarily descriptive. How was a film made? What
distinguished the cinema from other representational art forms such as painting and theatre? What were a film's textures, structures, and symbols? On campuses, key movements in film were discussed such as Nouvelle Vague, and individual movies were dissected—as if under a microscope—then relegated to the latest genre or subgenre the critics and analysts had discovered.

This emphasis on formal achievements was not as cold and reductionist as it might sound. It had an antecedent in the longing for freedom expressed in modern art theory in the 1930s and 1940s. Believing that fascism and Stalinist Realism were debasing art and culture, critics such as Alfred Barr and Clement Greenberg came to view style as the principal liberating factor in art. Content was dismissed because it implied a certain amount of reflection upon already existing norms, values, and beliefs. The purpose of art was not to reproduce old values—political, religious, ethical—because these values had become trivialized by mass culture. The fundamental purpose of art was to produce new forms in acts of spontaneous creation.19

During the same period that Barr and Greenburg were writing, Alexander Astruc was developing, in France, a similar line of reasoning that he applied to film: his important theory of camera-stylo (camera-pen). This approach argues that the theme of a movie is implicit in its visual style and that visual composition is more important than the meanings found in spoken dialogue. In the past, filmmaking had imitated literature and the play; this had been one of its biggest mistakes. Astruc stated that "the cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language."20

According to Astruc, the cinema was just as much an art as writing or painting, and one of its central aims was liberation from content. By the 1960s, Susan Sontag, in her essay "On Style," was calling for the limitation of the human content in art. One of the central purposes of art, she explained, was to "fend off tired ideologies like humanism or socialist realism which put art in the service of some moral or social idea."31 Sontag went on to formulate a philosophy of art as "dehumanized representation":

All works of art are founded on a certain distance from the lived reality which is represented. This "distance" is, by definition, inhuman or impersonal to a certain degree; for in order to appear to us as art, the work must restrict sentimental intervention and emotional participation, which are functions of "closeness." It is the degree and manipulating of this distance...which constitute the style of the work. In the final analysis, "style" is art. And art is nothing more or less than various modes of stylized, dehumanized representation.22
Sontag concluded that this act of distancing encompassed a language of possibility and liberation because it represented "movement...not just away from but toward the world." This point is restated in somewhat clearer fashion by Ernst Fischer in his 1967 book *Art Against Ideology*:

Art is now obliged to reveal the real world behind the apparent one, to drive men who are escaping into irresponsibility back into reality.... The fetishes of our time are objects of external life: mechanisms, institutions, clichés, "facts," phrases. To get rid of fetishes means to break through this substitute reality of connivance and to reveal the latent reality. But the fetish formations in a highly developed industrial society are so dense and strong that without the help of shock the imagination can scarcely hope to break through them into reality. How can art, using old methods, challenge if not defeat the barbarism which is establishing itself in the midst of our civilization? If art is determined to fight against the fetishes, it must adapt itself to the conditions of that struggle and risk breaking with the old categories of aesthetics.

Critics such as Barr and Greenburg, Sontag and Fischer, were using style as the basis for a heuristic theory of art in which the artist was supposed to make a clean break with traditional values. In 1970, in his book *Expanded Cinema*, Gene Youngblood explained how this metacritical conception of art could be applied to film. According to Youngblood, the purpose of film is to broaden our spiritual horizons by extending the technical and aesthetic possibilities of the medium into new, exciting frontiers. But Youngblood insists that before this can happen, the cinema must first do away with the traditional idea of the film as escapist entertainment:

Commercial entertainment works against art, exploits the alienation and boredom of the public, by perpetuating a system of conditioned response to formulas. Commercial entertainment not only isn’t creative, it actually destroys the audience’s ability to appreciate and participate in the creative process. To satisfy the profit motive, the commercial entertainer must give the audience what it expects, which is conditional on what it has been getting which is conditional on what it previously received, ad infinitum.

Art and film theories such as Greenburg, Barr, and Youngblood, in their conviction that representational art created a trivialized and debased mass culture, came to regard style as the aesthetic platform upon which to uplift society by making a break with popular forms of artistic expression and creating new ones. But as Stanley Aronowitz has observed, in *The Crisis in Historical Materialism*, their ideals backfired and created an elitist art criticism that "served to legitimate the production of an academic canon of high culture." This would have been less of a problem had the modernist and realist categories remained
mutually exclusive. However, inevitably, modernist standards of value descended into critical interpretations of so-called popular art as well. All of this discussion of movies as art and art as a tremendous liberating force had a definite impact on film and cultural analysts who came across the French work on *film noir*. When these analysts began to "discover" *film noir*, they were delighted that its modernist style seemed to propose a counter-cinema within the traditional narratives to which it was applied. Unfortunately, their use of an interpretive values model that worked independently from the specific historical contexts and values contexts, which made up the overall narration of *film noir*, made their assessments only half true.

At this point in our study, it is necessary to propose a new interpretation of the use of style and content in *film noir*. Where modern style-is-content analysts have been concerned with the cataloging of paranoid figurations, lighting techniques, and camera angles, they have used the elliptical language of style to support a normative criticism. If merely silent and disjointed sound fragments of the films existed, the logic behind drawing historical observations from incomplete evidence would be understandable enough. But *film noir* is not like a series of hieroglyphs in which only a few symbols have been translated. The films themselves are intelligible, complete works, that contain elements of plot, theme, and the conventional beginning, middle, end, common to traditional American films, novels, plays, and short stories. In believing they have discovered a Rosetta stone in the *film noir* style, modern critics have become stuck on form and neglected content. The Hungarian critic, Georg Lukács, sees an inherent fallacy in this—a kind of theoretical imbalance:

> Content determines form.... The distinctions that concern us are not those between stylistic "techniques" in the formalistic sense. It is the view of the world, the ideology of weltanschauung...that counts. It is the...attempt to reproduce this view of the world which constitutes "intention" and is the formative principle underlying the style.... Looked at in this way, style ceases to be a formalistic category. Rather, it is rooted in content; it is the specific form of a specific content.\(^{27}\)

Lukács' argument offers extremely important insights into the nature of *film noir*. The fact that analysts have made generalizations about *film noir* from its stylistic qualities does not necessarily invalidate their conclusions; it only forces them to take into account basic objections to their method. Bill Nichols, in his article "Style, Grammar, and the Movies," suggests that it is not as important to value content over style as it is to fuse them both into an integrated critical theory.\(^{28}\)

If style and content are viewed as working together in *film noir* as a kind of monad, it becomes possible to use this perspective as a way of qualifying some of the generalizations made by the style-is-content analysts. For these analysts, the idea of an American *film noir* is the idea that certain Hollywood films reflect a spirit of
alienation, nihilism, despair, loneliness, and dread. But these negative terms have been applied so loosely as to have lost all meaning. If we are to inquire into the precise nature of these terms, we must begin our inquiry with the film story itself. If the principal characters in a given film are unhappy and alienated, what are their reasons? If the protagonist is despairing and nihilistic, what does he do about it? If we follow the style-and-content approach, the "story" will tell us what he does. If the hero is able to reconcile these negative terms—learn something positive from his alienation and despair—then we are not dealing with a black film. If the hero suffers continually and never learns anything, then we are looking at a genuine film noir in the light of what James Agee called "the cruel radiance of what is."

NOTES

5. Chartier, "Films 'noirs'." p. 68.
9. Higham and Greenberg, p. 34.
10. Higham and Greenberg, p. 36.
18. Christine Gledhill, in Kaplan, Women in Film Noir, p. 11; cf., Sylvia Harvey, in Kaplan, Women in Film Noir, p. 33.


