

Film Noir?

The term *film noir* describes a type of film that is very dark in its outlook. The word *noir* is French for 'black', and it was during the 1940s that film noir came into its own. The term was coined by film critics just after World War II.

After the war, French film critics noticed a change in US films. A lot of the films were no longer of the sunny, optimistic fare that was prevalent before the war. The films seemed to be darker and more pessimistic in outlook. It was as if Hollywood had woken up to the harsh realities of the world and the horrors of war. For some filmmakers, it jarred to be making light-hearted romantic comedies after the atrocities of the war.

Film noir was the flip side of life. Doomed heroes, manipulative people and hidden personal and political agendas were around every corner. The lighting used in film noir was very dark, creating long shadows and claustrophobic atmospheres that pervade the films. The characters in film noir of the 1940s always seemed to be set in dark, smoke filled rooms, like flies trapped in spider webs.

Fatalism played an important role in the plots of film noir. The heroes or ant-heroes seemed set on a path that would ultimately lead to their downfall. Usually, they were ordinary people who were ensnared in grave or unfortunate coincidences. A large number of these fatalistic incidents were instigated by the *femme fatale*.

The femme fatale was a portrayal of women as they had never been seen before. She was the exciting, illicit desire of the male protagonist. She could lure a man to commit murder for her own purposes. The murder would usually be that of the man's wife. In film noir, the gender roles had changed; the woman was usually the stronger character and sometimes the villain.

The femme fatale was impossible to resist. She destroyed the notion of family values within the structure of society. She was there to bring excitement and danger. The femme fatale showed that surface values were not to be trusted; underneath the surface, as in life, dark things lurked.

Film noir went through a decline in the late 1950s. People's outlooks became sunnier, and films reflected this. The American economy was booming, and the dark films were no longer in vogue. Television was in, and film noir was thrown out for comedy series and Elvis musicals.

From the seventies onwards, a revival in film noir was beginning to take place. Feminism was on the rise, and governments were once again being portrayed as entities that could not be trusted. Vietnam and the Watergate Scandal had brought out the questioning instinct in the public, and films began to reflect this.

People were dismayed and distrustful of the government, and many felt a sense of alienation and confusion. A good example of the revival of film noir can be seen in Martin Scorsese's 1976 film, *Taxi Driver*. Other more recent examples of film noir include *Chinatown*, *Body Heat*, *Bladerunner*, and more recently, the excellent *The Last Seduction*.

From: <http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-film-noir.htm>