Film Noir: Films Of Trust And Betrayal

“An extraordinary, horrible war. Concentration camps, slaughter, atomic bombs, people killed for nothing. That can make anybody a little pessimistic.”

- Abraham Polonsky

When I think of Film Noir, I think of stillness and silence. I think of a pure black screen with tiny pinpricks of white trying to break through. The image is of the central character thinking. He is thinking about all the bad things that are about to happen to him. He is not happy. He knows that shit happens, but why does it have to happen to him? Film Noir gives him the answer: Why not?

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This Pocket Essential is designed to be an overview of Film Noir. After defining the different types of Film Noir, there is a short history of its antecedents and development over the years. A few films are examined in depth and then a filmography lists over 500 Films Noirs. Finally, there is a reference section which lists books about Film Noir.

Definition

The usual relationship in a Film Noir is that the male character (private eye, cop, journalist, government agent, war veteran, criminal, lowlife) has a choice between two women: the beautiful and the dutiful. The dutiful woman is pretty, reliable, always there for him, in love with him, responsible - all the things any real man would dream about. The beautiful woman is the femme fatale, who is gorgeous, unreliable, never there for him, not in love with him, irresponsible - all the things a man needs to get him excited about a woman. The Film Noir follows our hero as he makes his choice, or his choice is made for him.

The reason the femme fatale meets the male character is because she has already made her choice. She is usually involved with an older, very powerful man (gangster, politician, millionaire), and she is looking to make some money from the relationship. She needs a smart man (who is also dumber than her) to go get that money, and take the fall if things go wrong. Enter the male character.
The story follows the romantic/erotic foreplay of their relationship. The male character is often physically and mentally abused in this meeting and separating of bodies. Sometimes, he ends up doing very bad things.

What is most surprising about Film Noir, and the reason I suspect it has become so difficult to categorise and pigeon-hole, is that the focus of the films can be from the point of view of any of the characters caught in this relationship. For example, we can follow the femme fatale’s story or, as is more often the case, the dutiful woman’s. (The timid, unknowing woman who learns about the dark side of life harks back to the Gothic novel of the 19th century, which is where Noir fiction came from.) This is because all the characters are equally interesting - they are all either obsessed with something they desire (money, power, sex), or compelled to do what they do because of their nature, or the physical or social environment they live in.

The Film Noir follows a number of discernible frameworks within which the characters clash and collide. To show the workings of the police and government agencies, we had the Documentary Noir. Many film-makers worked with army documentary units during World War Two, and discovered the freedom of movement the new, lightweight cameras afforded them. Audiences back home also got used to seeing them, so they found it easier to accept the rough style when it was presented to them as a feature film. The Docu Noir invariably had an authoritative voice telling us the facts (time, place, purpose) of the case, and we followed the investigation through to the end. The first one was The House On 92nd Street (1945) directed by Henry Hathaway, who did several in this style. Others of note include Call Northside 777 (1948), The Naked City (1948) (which spawned a TV series), Joseph H Lewis’ The Undercover Man (1949) and The Enforcer (1951). In the 50s, this style was subverted and reinvented by Alfred Hitchcock in his magnificent The Wrong Man (1956). In this film, instead of glorifying the law, we see a man and his family becoming victims of the police procedure – in the end his wife has a mental breakdown.

The Docu Noir ran for about 5 years, and was superseded by the Heist Noir – the meticulously planned robbery that goes horribly wrong. The most well-known of the early ones is probably John Huston’s The Asphalt Jungle (1950), although Criss Cross (1949), directed by Robert Siodmak, preceded it. Others of note include Armoured Car Robbery (1950), The Killing (1956), Plunder Road (1957) and Odds Against Tomorrow (1959). In each case, it is a flaw in one of the characters which results in the ultimate comeuppance of the crimi-
nals. For example, Johnny Clay in *The Killing* is the professional robber in a
gang of novices, yet he loses the money because of his lack of professionalism -
he bought a defective case instead of a sturdy one, which leads to the case
snapping open on a runway and the money swirling about his getaway plane.
(Irony plays a large part in Film Noir.)

The Amnesia Noir, where the central character has no memory of their past,
allowed the audience to discover, with the character, what happened in the past.
For example, *Street Of Chance* (1942), *Crossroads* (1942), *Two O'Clock Cour-
age* (1945), *Somewhere In The Night* (1946), *Fall Guy* (1947), *The Crooked
Way* (1949) and *The Long Wait* (1954). Associated with this were the Night-
mare Noirs. This is usually the story of a fish out of water, about somebody
whose whole life disintegrates in front of their eyes, who watches helplessly as
the ground falls away from beneath their feet. Often, the nightmare is com-
bined with a race against time to prove innocence before something really bad
happens. Examples include: *The Fallen Sparrow* (1943), *Ministry Of Fear*
(1944), *My Name Is Julia Ross* (1945), *Detour* (1945), *Escape In The Fog*
(1945), *Crack-Up* (1946), *The Chase* (1946), *Deadline At Dawn* (1946), Des-
*Side Street* (1950), *Cause For Alarm* (1951), *Nightfall* (1957). Madness can
take many forms. Duality is one of the major themes of Film Noir, and it is
sometimes explored through the Doppelgänger, or double, in films like *Dark
Mirror* (1946), *The Guilty* (1947), *Hollow Triumph* (1948) and *The Man With
My Face* (1951).

The 1941 Gangster Noir *High Sierra* (1941) marked a turning point in the
representation of the gangster because Roy 'Mad Dog' Earle was seen to be
coming to the end of his time. From that moment on, we saw the mental disin-
and *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* (1950). The emphasis was on the sadism of these
powerful men. The Psycho Noir took the idea one step further - the central
character really completely bonkers from the start! One of the most well-
known is *The Sniper* (1952), but check out *Hangover Square* (1945), *Dial 1119.*
got psycho, the story was always much more unpredictable, as can be seen in
Psychological Noirs like *Dark Waters* (1944), *Guest In The House* (1944), *Pos-
sessed* (1947) and *The Red House* (1947). It was rare for a Film Noir to be
shown from the point of view of the Femme Fatale, but Gene Tierney had per-
haps her greatest role in *Leave Her To Heaven* (1945), in which she killed her
stepson and her unborn child to keep the man she loved.
Love was not always obsessive in Film Noir. Runaway Noir began with Fritz Lang’s *You Only Live Once* (1937), when two lovers go on the run because one of them is a criminal. For these youngsters, the purity of their love transcends all the bad things they do. You can follow this thread through to *They Live By Night* (1948), and *Geo Crazy* (1950). And then from *Bonnie And Clyde* to *Wild At Heart*.

The purity of unconditional love is a theme that also often runs through Gothic and Victorian Noirs like *Rebecca* (1940), where *Jane Eyre*-like, the timid woman blossoms into a confident beauty to win the heart of an initially aggressive master. Or rather, this traditional form is subverted in *Film Noir*. In *Moss Rose* (1947) a woman blackmails a country gentleman. In *So Evil My Love* (1949) a woman is transformed into a cold-blooded murderess over the course of the story.

But still, in many Films Noirs, the woman remained in danger. *Suspicion* (1941) was one of the first, and best of the Woman-In-Distress Noirs which included *Experiment Perilous* (1944), *Gaslight* (1944, a man tries to drive his wife mad), and the classic *My Name Is Julia Ross* (1945). Not content with putting women at risk. Film Noir also enjoyed imperilling children in films like *The Window* (1949), *Talk About A Stranger* (1952), and *The Night Of The Hunter* (1955). It is very rare indeed that a child dies – in fact, the only example I can think of is young Stevie being blown up in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Sabotage* (1936).

*Film Noirs* are stories about doomed love set in a criminal or degrading world. From the beginning, we know that things are going to end badly, so the stories take on a tragic dimension. The only question to be asked is how the characters get to that final, horrible moment that we dread.

**History**

With the end of World War Two, French publisher Gallimard decided to launch a new imprint to publish the English and American Hard-Boiled novels they could not publish during the war. In August 1945, Série Noire was born. As well as meaning The Black Series the name was also a play on words because “une série noire” means a succession of bad events. The first 30 titles included works by Raymond Chandler, Horace McCoy, W R Burnett, Dashiell Hammett and others.
Film Noir was discovered by French cinéaste Nino Frank in 1946. It was the name he gave to describe all the American crime and detective films from the early 40s which had just been released in France. He noticed how dark the films were and Film Noir seemed an appropriate sister term to Série Noire. For many years, Film Noir was a term only used by French film critics, most notably in Panorama Du Film Noir Américain (1955) by Raymond Borde & Etienne Chaumeton. The first short survey of these dark films in English was in a chapter of Hollywood In The Forties (1968) by Charles Higham & Joel Greenberg. Raymond Durgnat tried to define categories in his article Paint It Black: The Family Tree Of Film Noir (Cinema (UK), August 1970), and then Paul Schrader presented his definitions in the article Notes Of Film Noir (Film Comment, Spring 1972). Since then, many books about Film Noir have been published with lists and definitions for every taste.

The problem, or joy, of Film Noir is that it is not a genre which can be easily defined, but it is a matter of tone and mood, as both Durgnat and Schrader point out. Generally, a Film Noir is pessimistic in tone and reflective in mood, often presented with a voice-over, and a series of flashbacks. The visual image is often made up of layers of black and grey. The characters are obsessed, or are compelled to act in the way they do.

A combination of 30s influences helped create Film Noir: the German Expressionists; the French Poetic Realists; Hollywood Gangsters; Tough Guy writers.

The look of Film Noir can be traced back to the German Expressionist cinema of the 20s and 30s. Although the ‘ultimate’ example of this cinema is The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari (1919), d Robert Wiene) with its surreal settings and caricatured people, the emphasis on graphic design: weird angles, montage, forced perspective and other technical innovations was to play a major part in the formation of Film Noir. Also, the Germanic culture paid more attention to the psychology of the characters, and was preoccupied with analysing their actions. They wanted to know what was happening inside people. Fritz Lang’s M (1931), for example, shows us the points of view of police, criminal underworld and child-killer.

Many film directors and their creative personal escaped Hitler’s Germany and hoofed it to Hollywood. These included Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Robert Stodmak, Fred Zinnemann and Edgar G Ulmer. What is not generally acknowl-
edged is that most came via France. Many of the themes and settings of Film Noir can be seen in films of the Poetic Realists of the 30s.

Poetic realism is a term first applied to French literature of Emile Zola, Francis Carco and their ilk. It was first applied to films with Pierre Chenal’s La Rue Sans Nom (1933). These books and films looked at the outside forces affecting people’s lives. They used real settings (the city), real people in a social context (the proletariat or lower middle classes) and showed that crime came from physical and mental oppression. The weak-willed protagonist would find himself trapped in a situation created by society, surrounded by a romantic aura of doom and despair.

German film-makers who visited Paris before heading for Hollywood include Robert Siodmak, Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Max Ophüls, Jacques Tourneur and Curtis Bernhardt. Some French directors soon followed (Jean Renoir, Julien Duvivier, Jacques Tourneur). And there is one British director, who served his film apprenticeship in Berlin, who made his way to the City of Angels in 1939: Alfred Hitchcock.

It is not surprising then, that these directors later took the opportunity to remake French and British crime films as Film Noir: La Chienne (1931, d Jean Renoir) as Scarlet Street (1946, d Fritz Lang); La Bête Humaine (1938, d Jean Renoir) as Human Desire (1954, d Fritz Lang); Pépé Le Moko (1936, d Julien Duvivier) as Algiers (1938, d John Cromwell) & Casbah (1948, d John Berry); Le Jour Se Lève (1939, d Marcel Carné) as The Long Night (1947, d Anatole Litvak); Pièges (1939, d Robert Siodmak) as Lured/Personal Column (1947, d Douglas Sirk); Le Dernier Tournant (1939, d Pierre Chenal) as The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946, d Tay Garnett); Le Corbeau (1943, d Henri-Georges Clouzot) as The Thirteenth Letter (1950, d Otto Preminger).

Many of the milieu, characters, icons, actors came from the Hollywood Gangsters. In Depression-era America of the 30s, the activities of the gangsters were front-page news. They were attractive figures because of their money, power, clothes, status symbols, women. Hollywood put them on the silver screen in Little Caeser (1930, d Mervyn LeRoy, n W R Burnett, c Edgar G Robinson), The Public Enemy (1931, d William A Wellman, c James Cagney) and Scarface (1932, d Howard Hawks, sc Ben Hecht, c Paul Muni, George Raft). These were coded warnings. They were often exaggerated rags-to-riches stories about how money and power corrupt people. This was an especially ironic statement because of the lack of money in Depression-era America.
The public outcry from the Legion Of Decency and others over the deluge of gangsters portrayed as heroes led to a new twist, the actors playing the gangsters gave the same tough, brutal performances but this time on the side of the law. So audiences hoping that James Cagney was playing a Gangster-Mun in *G-Men* (1935, d William Keighley) soon found out he was a Government-Man. Then films like *Dead End* (1937, d William Wyler) and *Angels With Dirty Faces* (1938, d Michael Curtiz) went one step further and showed that crime originated in the slums. The criminal iconography and setting were now firmly imbedded in the minds of the American public.

With the European and American directors in Hollywood, what were they to film? Hollywood primarily films the best-selling books of its time and in the late 30s and early 40s these were Hard-Boiled novels by likes of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. This was a macho fiction where tough guys passed moral judgement on an immoral society. As the 40s progressed, Noir Fiction novels by James M Cain, David Goodis and Cornell Woolrich emerged. These were about the weak-minded, the losers, the bottom-feeders, the obsessives, the compulsives and the psychopaths. Noir shows these people sliding down into the abyss or, if they happen to be in it already, forever writhing aware of the present pain, aware of the future pain to come.

This was the raw material the directors mined for their work. As luck would have it, many of the Hard-Boiled and Noir Fiction writers lived in Los Angeles and liked making money writing film scripts. The best-known were Daniel Mainwaring (aka Geoffrey Homes, *Build My Gallows High*), Steve Fisher (*I Wake Up Screaming*), Jonathan Latimer (*Solomon’s Vineyard*), Horace McCoy (*They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?) and W R Burnett (*Little Caesar, High Sierra, The Asphalt Jungle*).

It should be recognised that the ‘gothic’ lighting style of Film Noir, and the Expressionist angles, were much in evidence during the silent era. The films of Sergei Eisenstein in Russia, and Tod Browning’s horror films in Hollywood, for example. The night-time and location shooting which were common for silent films was impossible with the advent of sound because the equipment was too bulky and noisy. Consequently, the 30s were a relatively fallow period for dark cinema.

When advances in technology meant that cameras became lighter and more mobile, the cinematographers explored every possibility. Many of the cinema-
Photographers (Nicholas Musuraca, George Barnes, Joseph A Valentine, Hal Mohr, John F Seitz, Joseph La Shelle etc) were veterans of the silent era, having begun work in the 1910s and 20s. So they were at the height of their skills when asked to layer light and shadows like they had during the silent days. A quick look at Rebecca (1940), for example, shows the camera prowling around Manderley like a wild animal hunting for blood.

In addition, the sparse, single-source lighting style of cinematography which became the norm for Film Noir arose out of necessity. The advent of World War Two meant the sales market for Hollywood movies shrunk enormously. As a result, budgets were reduced, and dark shadows were employed to hide the fact that there was no set. This was certainly the case for B-pictures photographed by John Alton, George E Diskant and others.

Critics argue about which were the first and last Films Noirs of the Classic Period (Rebecca (1940) & Vertigo (1958), Stranger On The Third Floor (1940) & Odds Against Tomorrow (1957), Citizen Kane (1941) & Touch Of Evil (1958), and even argue about the length of the Classic Period (1940-1960, 1945-1955). I let them argue it out and spend the time watching another Film Noir on TV.

During the optimistic 60s, there was no concerted Film Noir movement to speak of. Hollywood was more interested in worldwide spies and sword & sandal epics. A film like Point Blank (1967) came out of nowhere. It wasn’t until the early 70s, when the industry allowed itself to be revitalised by new talent after the success of Easy Rider, that we saw Dirty Harry (1971), Klute (1971), The Friends Of Eddie Coyle (1973), Serpico (1973), Bring Me The Head Of Alfredo Garcia (1974), The Parallax View (1974), Chinatown (1974), The Conversation (1974), Death Wish (1974), Three Days Of The Condor (1975) and Night Moves (1975). These are stories about people who expected more from the world and were disappointed by it. All these films share a certain sense of paranoia, cynicism and pessimism which paved the way for Neo-Noir.

The heavily coded political content of Film Noir arose from both the sensitivity of the German film directors to feelings of oppression, and from the left wing origins of many of the Hard-Boiled writers. Recent Films Noirs, often called Neo-Noir, have been made by film directors who seem to have no political or sociological standpoint, and seem more interested in style over content. For example, as entertaining as the films of Quentin Tarantino are, they are no more than a collection of references to other films and books. If you look at the
work of John Dahl (Kill Me Again, Red Rock West, The Last Seduction) they are reminiscent of Farewell My Lovely, Double Indemnity and other bygone films. Some films, like Devil In A Blue Dress and LA Confidential retain the historical setting. Heat is Docu Noir. Face/Off is Gangster Noir. The Talented Mr Ripley is Psychological Noir. Wild At Heart is Runaway Noir. Basic Instinct is Femme Fatale Noir. Henry: Portrait Of A Serial Killer is Psycho Noir. There is subtext in many of these films, but as the storytelling techniques become more sophisticated, it becomes more difficult to find out what the coded messages mean.

With the republication of Noir Fiction by Jim Thompson, David Goodis, Cornell Woolrich and others during the mid-80s, many of these books were snapped up by film producers. As a result, there was an explosion of Neo-Noirs in the early 90s. Film-makers have since discovered modern Noir Fiction writers like James Ellroy (LA Confidential) and Edward Bunker (No Beast So Fierce, Animal Factory), and are busy adapting their novels for the big screen.

* It is still and silent. The pure black screen has tiny pinpricks of white trying to break through. The central character is thinking. He is thinking about all the bad things that have happened to him. He is not happy. He knows that shit happens, but why did it have to happen to him? He smiles, because he is alive. If he doesn’t get killed today, he’ll consider it a lucky day.
Double Indemnity (1944)

Cast: Fred MacMurray (Walter Neff), Barbara Stanwyck (Phyllis Dietrichson), Edward G Robinson (Barton Keyes), Porter Hall (Mr Jackson), Jean Heather (Lola Dietrichson), Tom Powers (Mr Dietrichson), Byron Barr (Nino Zachetti), Richard Gaines (Edward S Norton), Fortunio Bonanova (Sam Garlopis), John Philliber (Joe Peters)


Trustee: Walter Neff

Traitor: Phyllis Dietrichson

Story: A car races through foggy streets. A man stumbles out of the car, goes up to his office at the Pacific All Risk Insurance Agency and begins dictating a memo to Barton Keyes, dated July 16 1938. This is Walter Neff, insurance agent. He tells his story, obviously in pain from a gunshot wound. We go back in time... Neff dropped in on the Dietrichson house to make sure their car was “fully covered” although Mrs Dietrichson was only wearing a towel when he said this. The sexual energy between them was heightened when they talked/flirted, making reference to Phyllis Dietrichson’s anklet. When they next met it became obvious that Phyllis wanted to insure her husband, kill him, and collect on the money. Neff walked out, but is caught and knows it. Phyllis came
to him, kissed him, told Neff about how mean her husband was to her. He turned the murder into a challenge - part of his job as an insurance agent was to work out how to buck the system/crook the house, for the good of the company.

Neff knew that the insurance company paid out double (double indemnity) if certain unusual accidents happened, and worked out a plan. This was how it went down... First they tricked Dietrichson into signing the accident insurance. He broke his leg and was in a cast. But he was going away on business. Neff established his alibi and hid in the back of the Dietrichson car. Dietrichson and Phyllis got into the car and drove to the train station. Phyllis honked the horn to signal for Neff to break Dietrichson’s neck. Neff took the crutches, put a bandage on his leg, got aboard the train, went to the observation deck in the end carriage, and jumped off when the train slowed for a corner. Phyllis was waiting. They arranged Dietrichson’s body on the tracks and left. They could not see each other for a long time, so that they would not be suspected of being together on this.

The head of the insurance company, Norton, did not want to pay out. He told Phyllis that he thinks her husband had committed suicide, which reduced the pay out. Neff’s best friend in the company is investigator Barton Keyes, who has a ‘little man’ inside him which tells him when there is something wrong with a claim. There was something wrong with the Dietrichson claim, he thought, because why would a man with a broken leg not put in a claim when he had accident insurance? Answer: because he did not know he had accident insurance. In addition, Keyes thought that Phyllis had arranged this with a lover. Keyes could not find the solution because Neff arranged the insurance and was trusted completely.

Neff started seeing Dietrichson’s daughter Lola, who was suspicious of her stepmother. Lola told Neff that Phyllis was originally her mother’s nurse, and that Phyllis had deliberately left windows open etc. to hasten her mother’s death. Then Phyllis had moved in on her father for his money. In addition to this, Lola had split with her hot-headed boyfriend Nino Zachetti, who was now seeing Phyllis.

Taking all this into account, Neff said that, “We did it so that we could be together, but it’s tearing us apart.” Thinking that Phyllis was persuading Zachetti to kill him, Neff tried to frame Zachetti for her murder. He met Phyllis and she shot him. He told her to shoot again, to finish him off, but she could not because she loved him. He shot her point blank. Twice.

We then flash forward to Neff in the office, telling his story. Keyes listening incredulously in the background. Neff stumbles to the elevator. Keyes lights a match for Neff and they wait for the police.
Subtext: There are constant references to the heart, honey, and trains in this complicated and layered script. At the very beginning, the porter explains to Neff that he cannot get insurance and it is “something about my heart.” This prefigures Neff’s insurance problem—he loses his heart to a femme fatale. And Phyllis’ last words to Neff are, “I’m rotten to the heart.” At one stage Walter Neff says, “I never knew that murder could smell like honeysuckle.” This is interesting because he calls Phyllis “Honey” on several occasions. As for trains, in a key (sic) speech Keyes says, “They’ve committed a murder and it’s not like taking a trolley ride together where they can get off at different stops. They’re stuck with each other and they’ve got to ride all the way to the end of the line and it’s a one-way trip and the last stop is the cemetery.” When Neff and Phyllis talk, they say several times that they have to go “all the way” and “to the end of the line” as if they know that it is all going to go wrong. The train metaphor is developed further when Neff and Phyllis pretend that Mr Dietrichson died by falling off a train.

Neff has no morals. He knows the system and wants to break it, so his crime is a sort of game for him. He is rebelling against Keyes, who is his father figure and who follows the rules precisely. Keyes treats Neff like a son, and even offers him a position as his assistant. But Keyes is inflexible (to the point that he had his fiancée checked up before their marriage and found dirt on her) and so Neff cannot reason with him. The only way Neff can communicate is by committing a crime and telling his ‘father’ about it in the dictated memo. At several points, Neff says to Keyes, “And I love you too,” because Keyes can never say/admit it. Also, Neff is always lighting matches for Keyes (who thinks it dangerous to carry matches because they can always go off unexpectedly). At the end, with Neff wounded, Keyes lights a match for Neff and we see that perhaps he feels sympathy for the criminal for the first time.

Neff is emulating Keyes by being suspicious of his girl Phyllis (although Neff probably has more reason to be on his guard). This brings up an interesting parallel. Keyes says that he carries a ‘little man’ around inside him that tells him when something is wrong. Could Neff be carrying a ‘little Keyes’ around inside him? (Walter Neff: “Where would the living room be?” Maid: “In there, but they keep the liquor locked up.” Walter Neff: “That’s okay. I always carry my own key!”)

Neff takes over the position of father to Phyllis. Mr Dietrichson is dictatorial to both Phyllis and Lola, treating them like wayward daughters. Neff treats Phyllis the same way, ordering her about, and calling her “baby.” They even meet by the baby food in Jerry’s supermarket. Neff also takes on a fatherly rather than romantic role with Lola after her father’s death.
Doubling appears throughout the film. As well as the obvious physical doubling (Neff pretending to be Mr Dietrichson on the train) there is also a psychological doubling - Neff and Zachetti both have relationships with both Phyllis and Lola. And some of these characters are double-crossing each other.

**Dark Visions:** Venetian blinds. Fog.

**White Noise:** Voice-over.

**Dangerous Ideas:** Flashback. Identifying with the murderers. Doubles. Fedora.

**Background:** Billy Wilder had a lot of trouble getting *Double Indemnity* made. First of all, his usual writing partner Charles Brackett was too disgusted by James M Cain's novel to consider working on it. Cain himself was working with Fritz Lang on Western Union, so Wilder turned to Raymond Chandler, who had had 4 tough guy novels published and had never worked in film before. After a week, Chandler submitted his first attempt to Wilder, who said, "This is shit, Mr Chandler," and threw the screenplay across the room. They worked together, with Wilder mainly concentrating on plot/structure and Chandler supplying great dialogue. After a little while, the mature, reserved Chandler had problems being in the same room as brash, young, vulgar Wilder - they agreed to collaborate from a distance. The result was a great screenplay, nominated for an Academy Award.

Casting also proved a problem. George Raft did not understand the story because there was no good guy, and other leading actors did not want to be the seedy, immoral lead. Wilder eventually persuaded Fred MacMurray, who was previously known for his lightweight roles. MacMurray experienced a beneficial change of image, like Dick Powell did after he played Philip Marlowe in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1944). *Double Indemnity* also propelled Barbara Stanwyck into the public eye as a domineering femme fatale - she appeared in about a dozen Films Noirs.

Walter Neff was originally named Walter Ness, but when it was found that there was a real insurance salesman in Beverly Hills named Walter Ness, the name was changed to avoid a lawsuit for defamation of character. In fact, Cain had based his novel on a real murder case - in 1927, Albert Snyder was killed by his wife Ruth and Judd Grey to collect Snyder's insurance money.

Filming began on September 27 1943 and ended 4 weeks later on November 24. At the end of one day's filming, Billy Wilder could not start his car. He decided to add this incident into the story - after the murder, Neff and Phyllis cannot start their car. An execution scene was shot for the end of the film, where Keyes watches as Neff makes his way to the gas chamber, but it was cut. When Neff says, in his voice-over, "Suddenly it came over me that everything would go wrong. It sounds crazy, Keyes, but it's true, so help me. I couldn't
hear my own footsteps. It was the walk of a dead man” this seems like it was a lead-in to the execution scene.

*Double Indemnity* is the film that launched a million imitators throughout the 40s and 50s. Even in recent years, you can see that *Body Heat* (1981) and *The Last Seduction* (1994) are just modern reworkings of the basic premise. It was remade for TV in 1973, directed by Jack Smight (*Harper* (1966)) and written by Steven Bochco (*Hill Street Blues*, *NYPD Blue*), starring Richard Crenna (*Neff*), Lee J Cobb (*Keyes*) and Samantha Eggar (*Phyllis*). Woody Allen also featured a clip from *Double Indemnity* in his Film Noir homage *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993).

**The Director:** Billy Wilder, bless him, has co-written and directed some of the bleakest films Hollywood ever made, like *The Lost Weekend* (1945, alcoholic on binge), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950, dead screenwriter tells how an ageing movie star killed him) and *Ace In The Hole* (1951, reporter puts man at risk to prolong story and make himself famous). An émigré writer/director, his rapid dialogue writing style makes him sound like he assimilated to American culture. However, the content shows that he hates hypocrisy, capitalism and selfishness. His films express his moral outrage.

**The Writer:** James M Cain, Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett are considered the holy trinity of the tough guy school of writing. However, whereas Hammett and Chandler portrayed hard men fighting an immoral world, Cain was more interested in exploring the immoral people that made up that world. We follow bad people doing bad things. From *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) to *Mildred Pierce* (1941) and beyond. Cain portrayed women as predatory animals (he used wild cats as a metaphor in *Postman*) who were quite prepared to use their sexual chemistry as a catalyst for controlling men.

**The Photographer:** John F Seitz began his career as a cinematographer in 1916 and worked on 110 movies, including *The Four Horsemen Of The Apocalypse* (1921), *This Gun For Hire* (1942) and films for Preston Surges, before *Double Indemnity*. He was a master of the beautiful/dynamic composition made from layers of black. The camera rarely moved, but when it did, it was unobtrusive and completely served the story. His other notable contributions to Film Noir include *The Big Clock* (1948) and *Night Has A Thousand Eyes* (1948).

**The Verdict:** This template for hundreds of Films Noirs is still the best. Sparkling dialogue, allusive references, exciting characters, dark photography. 5/5
Notes on Film Noir (Paul Schrader, 1995)

THE HARD-BOILED TRADITION. Another stylistic influence waiting in the wings was the “hard-boiled” school of writers. In the Thirties authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Horace McCoy and John O’Hara created the “tough”, cynical way of acting and thinking which separated one from the world of everyday emotions—romanticism with a protective shell. The hard-boiled writers had their roots in pulp fiction or journalism, and their protagonists lived out a narcissistic, defeatist code. The hard-boiled hero was, in reality, a soft egg compared to his existential counterpart (Camus is said to have based The Stranger on McCoy), but he was a good deal tougher than anything American fiction had seen.

When the movies of the Forties turned to the American “tough” moral understrata, the hard-boiled school was waiting with preset conventions of heroes, minor characters, plots, dialogue and themes. Like the German expatriates, the hard-boiled writers had a style made to order for film noir; and, in turn, they influenced noir screenwriting as much as the German influenced noir cinematography.

The most hard-boiled of Hollywood’s writers was Raymond Chandler himself, whose script of Double Indemnity (from a James M. Cain story) was the best written and most characteristically noir of the period. Double Indemnity was the first film which played film noir for what it essentially was: small-time, unredeemed, unheroic; it made a break from the romantic noir cinema of (the later) Mildred Pierce and The Big Sleep.

(In its final stages, however, film noir adapted then bypassed the hard-boiled school. Manic, neurotic post-1948 films such as Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye, D. O. A., Where the Sidewalk Ends, White Heat, and The Big Heat are all post-hard-boiled: the air in these regions was even too thin for old-time cynics like Chandler.)

STYLISTICS. There is not yet a study of the stylistics of film noir, and the task is certainly too large to be attempted here. Like all film movements film noir drew upon a reservoir of film techniques, and given the time one could correlate its techniques, themes and causal elements into a stylistic schema. For the present, however, I’d like to point out some of film noir’s recurring techniques.

------The majority of scenes are lit for night. Gangsters sit in the offices at midday with the shades pulled and the lights off. Ceiling lights are hung low and floor lamps are seldom more than five feet high. One always has the suspicion that if the lights were all suddenly flipped on the characters would shriek and shrink from the scene like Count Dracula at noontime.

------As in German expressionism, oblique and vertical lines are preferred to horizontal. Obliquity adheres to the choreography of the city, and is in direct opposition to the horizontal American tradition of Griffith and Ford. Oblique lines tend to splinter a screen, making it restless and unstable. Light enters the dingy rooms of film noir in such odd shapes-jagged trapezoids, obtuse triangles, vertical slits—that one suspects the windows were cut out with a pen knife. No character can speak authoritatively from a space which is being continually cut into ribbons of light. The Anthony Mann/John Alton T-Men is the most dramatic but far from the only example of oblique noir choreography.

------The actors and setting are often given equal lighting emphasis. An actor is often hidden in the realistic tableau of the city at night, and, more obviously, his face is often blacked out by shadow as he speaks. These shadow effects are unlike the famous Warner Brothers lighting of the Thirties in which the central character was accentuated by a heavy shadow; in film noir, the central character is likely to be standing in the shadow. When the environment is given an equal or greater weight than the actor, it, of course, creates a fatalistic, hopeless mood. There is nothing the protagonist can do; the city will outlast and negate even his best efforts.
------Compositional tension is preferred to physical action. A typical *film noir* would rather move the scene cinematographically around the actor than have the actor control the scene by physical action. The beating of Robert Ryan in *The Set-Up*, the gunning down of Farley Granger in *They Live By Night*, the execution of the taxi driver in *The Enforcer* and of Brian Donlevy in *The Big Combo* are all marked by measured pacing, restrained anger and oppressive compositions, and seem much closer to the *film noir* spirit than the rat-tat-tat and screeching tires of *Scarface* twenty years before or the violent, expression actions of *Underworld U. S. A.* ten years later.

------There seems to be an almost Freudian attachment to water. The empty *noir* streets are almost always glistening with fresh evening rain (even in Los Angeles), and the rainfall tends to increase in direct proportion to the drama. Docks and piers are second only to alleyways as the most popular rendezvous points.

------There is a love of romantic narration. In such films as *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Laura*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Out of the Past* and *Sunset Boulevard* the narration creates a mood of *temps perdu*: an irretrievable past, a predetermined fate and an all-enveloping hopelessness. In *Out of the Past* Robert Mitchum relates his history with such pathetic relish that it is obvious there is no hope for any future: one can only take pleasure in reliving a doomed past.

------A complex chronological order is frequently used to reinforce the feelings of hopelessness and lost time. Such films as *The Enforcer*, *The Killers*, *Mildred Pierce*, *The Dark Past*, *Chicago Deadline*, *Out of the Past* and *The Killing* use a convoluted time sequence to immerse the viewer in a time-disoriented but highly stylized world. The manipulation of time, whether slight or complex, is often used to reinforce a *noir* principle: the how is always more important than the what.

**THEMES.** Raymond Durgnat has delineated the themes of *film noir* in an excellent article in *British Cinema* magazine (“The Family Tree of Film Noir,” August, 1970), and it would be foolish for me to attempt to redo his thorough work in this short space. Durgnat divides *film noir* into eleven thematic categories, and although one might criticize some of his specific groupings, he does cover the whole gamut of *noir* production (thematic categorizing over 300 films).

In each of Durgnat's *noir* themes (whether Black Widow, killers-on-the-run, dopplegangers) one finds that the upwardly mobile forces of the Thirties have halted; frontierism has turned to paranoia and claustrophobia. The small-time gangster has now made it big and sits in the mayor’s chair, the private eye has quit the police force in disgust, and the young heroine, sick of going along for the ride, is taking others for a ride.

Durgnat, however, does not touch upon what is perhaps the most over-riding *noir* theme: a passion for the past and present, but a fear of the future. The *noir* hero dreads to look ahead, but instead tries to survive by the day, and if unsuccessful at that, he retreats to the past. Thus *film noir's* techniques emphasize loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, insecurity; then submerge these self-doubts in mannerism and style. In such a world style becomes paramount; it is all that separates one from meaninglessness. Chandler described this fundamental *noir* theme when he described his own fictional world: “It is not a very fragrant world, but it is the world you live in, and certain writers with tough minds and a cool spirit of detachment can make very interesting patterns out of it.”