

FIL 1001, SPRING 2003 TERM
Introduction to Understanding Film
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Film Noir
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Film noir has been regarded as a genre by some historians, while others disagree, considering it more as a mode that makes the audiences feel uneasy, and regarding it as a “purely *affective* phenomenon; that is, it does things to people” (Belton, 187). Most of the initial film noir movies use a post-WWII atmosphere, and for the viewers at the time it was shocking to see on screen the cruelty of life, rather than the dream world they aspired to, in their desire to escape reality. To viewers of our times, film noir doesn’t appear shocking at all. As a matter of fact, in original film noir movies, shocking facts such as incest, crime, and corruption were merely portrayed on screen, and visualized only mentally by the viewers, unlike in the pseudo-noir movies made 30 and 50 years later.

In the movie, *Mildred Pierce*,” romantic voice-over narration is an important part of the movie, where as in the pseudo-noir movies this is rarely used, being replaced by a linear narration. There’s no need to cover up the reality of a crime scene by only seeing what a character wants to remember. In *Chinatown* a strangled man is pulled out of the water, while in *L.A. Confidential*, blood, dead bodies, and shootings are brutally depicted for the viewers. In film noir viewers can only sense the psychological drama of the characters, while in pseudo-noir films there’s no need to sugarcoat it: characters act on their impulses, on screen, and they curse, fight, and kill right in front of the viewers.

The post-WWII films noirs couldn't display nudity, racist remarks, and corruption the way pseudo-film noir made after 1968 could, when the Production Code was abandoned. This code didn't allow nudity, homosexuality, interracial sexual activity, incest, rape, abortion, excessive violence, profanity, and drugs to be displayed on screen. In *Mildred Pierce*, incest is only insinuated, confirmed through a kiss and an ambiguous admission, while in *Chinatown* there's a clear admission. In *L.A. Confidential* we hear racist remarks such as "Mexicans" and "Negro," and their prosecution is clearly portrayed on screen. While in *Mildred Pierce*, the cops are the good guys who never make mistakes and are even compassionate toward criminals, in *L.A. Confidential*, the hard-boiled cops are corrupt, make the headlines, and they are even prosecuted. In *Chinatown*, the detective gets kicked most of the time, while in *L.A. Confidential* the hero crosses over to the dark side in order to obtain justice. Any action is justifiable, as long as he gets his revenge. In *Mildred Pierce*, the viewers only get a glimpse of the ugliness of show biz. 50 years later, in *L.A. Confidential*, the actors have plastic surgery, and their desire for fame and glory proves deadly. The Hollywood dream is demystified: beauty is not always natural, and people do crazy things to obtain fame and glory. Being "up there" with the stars is not something to aspire to, anymore.

We can say that film noir was only the beginning of the portrayal of darkness. The darkness was born, but only later generations would fully witness it on screen. It took years of mental preparation for generations—both Hollywood and the viewers—to accept the cruel realities of life on screen, and today it's the viewers' choice to watch these types of movies. They may not be better movies—because they lack the ingenious methods used in film noir to approach taboos subjects—but they reveal or enhance the "what is," even if it's something disturbing or even hard

to imagine. If in film noir you hear someone shooting or you get a glimpse of the dead, in pseudo-noir movies you see it happening on screen in full details; if in film noir you guess that someone is having an affair, in the pseudo-noir film you see it happening on screen.

There's nothing exciting about witnessing the murder happening in *Mildred Pierce*—at least not for viewers of this day and age. Exciting are the events that take place after that and how the characters interact, react, and tell their story. You can't see any blood, and when the body is found, you can hardly see it, because the idea of someone being murdered was scary enough for viewers of the time. In pseudo-noir movies, there's much more violence. In *Chinatown* you can clearly see the characters being shot at; and when a body is found, you can identify the cause of death by just looking at the body—in Hollis Mulwray's case, strangulation. There are also some forensic elements included in the movie, that further aid in the clarification of the case. *L. A. Confidential* goes even further. Not only do you see how the murder was committed, by participating in the cruel events from beginning to end, but you can also see and sense the devastating effects—blood, putrefaction, bad smell, and so on. There's a forensic team who helps to identify the unknown body, and that involves going to the morgue and seeing the dead bodies. We can see that there's a gradual improvement in movies of how to present a crime and its scene on screen. It's not necessarily a good thing, but it tells a lot about how taboos and points of view change over time.

Another way to experience the different approaches of film noir and pseudo-noir film is to look at how the police conduct interviews. In *Mildred Pierce* they are friendly and helpful, and their intelligence is not questioned on screen. In *Chinatown*, the police are not very clever, the

exception being the detective who is always on the right track and who sometimes crosses over to the dark side—but only when provoked. In *L.A. Confidential*, the police can be smart, dumb, corrupt, or honorable. There's a fine line between the bad, the good, and the ugly, and their motivations change according to their feelings at the time—this is definitely a more complex picture which adds new dimensions and depths to these characters. They're not just good or bad policemen, but individuals motivated who are motivated by different goals and desires.

There's a certain charm about film noir that confers staying power to these types of movies. Generation after generation will come back to them, because they reveal the unknown deepness of the human subconscious in ways that later movies don't, even if they approach the truth in a direct manner. Viewers today can only feel fortunate that they can witness the progression of the American Cinema through time and space, in its attempt to reach maturity.

Works Cited

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