

Derrick Stolee

Dixon

Intro to Film History

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Crime Films: 1940-1949

Even the most law-abiding citizen can appreciate the fantastic spectacle of criminal activity. The medium of film allows a safe view into the exciting and mysterious life of fantasized crime. Crime films take ideas from actual crimes, detective novels, or even urban myth to show this world to the paying public. The 1940's were particularly infamous for this genre, leading to the advent of *film noir*, French for "dark films." Film Noir is more of a stylistic form using various lighting techniques and familiar plot elements, such as a *femme fatale*, but is frequently used interchangeably with crime films during this era. Whether or not they fit the stylistic nature of noir, crime films showed incredible amounts of danger and violence. The events depicted in these films are frequently exaggerations of actual events that occurred, but audiences just wanted more gratuitous violence and frequent deaths. One film known for its gruesome violence is Raoul Walsh's *White Heat* (1949). In it, the gangster gives a victim locked in the trunk of his car some "air holes" by spraying some bullets into the hatch. This is but one of many murders, becoming numerous to the point where they don't even register as meaningful. The bodies pile up and the emotional impact of each one lessens. In crime films, the more creative the death, the better it was received by the audience.

The plot of every crime film is motivated by lawbreaking of some sort, usually including the film's protagonist. Frequently, not a single character is innocent. Even private detectives are featured bending the law to get by. This is probably a commentary on the economic conditions brought by the still recent Great Depression and World War II. It also showed a sense of maturity in the film industry, as they experimented with dynamic characters that are not divided into good and evil, but are in the grey area between.

Many directors worked within this genre, either to make a big break by excelling in the style, or by

extending their expertise into another genre. Rober Siodmak directed several famous films in this decade, such as *The Killers* (1946), *The Spiral Staircase* (1946), *Cry of the City* (1948), and *Criss Cross* (1949). With these films, he almost defined the basic techniques for presenting the mysteries of the plot. In particular, his use of flashback to reveal facts as necessary is a major element in *The Killers* and *Criss Cross*. The hero, called “the Swede,” of *The Killers* is murdered in the first few minutes without a fight. The rest of the film shows a detective finding the reasoning behind this murder, including eye-witness accounts of several points in his life, including his last boxing match and his decline into crime that lead to his downfall. In *Criss Cross*, an elaborate scheme to rob an armored car is revealed and in mid-execution to present a motivating mystery that is explained through narration instead of detective work. This use of flashback can frequently present more questions than they answer, further complicating the plot.

John Huston became famous for managing plot complexity in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), influencing many others to adopt such complicated stories that the viewer is required to actively participate during the film. Raoul Walsh is another director famous for showing crime in *Background to Danger* (1943), *The Man I Love* (1947), and *White Heat* (1949). *White Heat* particularly featured a psychotically violent lead who led to finishing in a literal blaze of glory, a celebration of the violence that consumed his life. Frank Tuttle directed crime films away from the visual style of noir, including *This Gun for Hire* (1942), *The Glass Key* (1935), and *I Stole a Million* (1939). *This Gun for Hire* features a deranged hitman who is betrayed, becoming an antihero who brings down a traitorous corporation. The presentation of the film is presented in normal lighting and settings, contrasting the noir style. This is perhaps to show how well this disturbed killer blends with normal society, on trains and in shops, instead of limiting the crime to seedy bars and hideouts.

Two more directors in the genre are Billy Wilder and Howard Hawks. Billy Wilder’s submissions to the genre include *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Sunset Blvd.* (1950). According to Mark Cousins, crime films “picture America as a troubled and ambiguous place. They feature men whose lust for money or

women takes them beyond the borders of the so-called civilized world. Double indemnity defines this classically” (196). Howard Hawks contributed only one true crime film, but *The Big Sleep* (1946) was an important one. Again, Cousins thinks *The Big Sleep* “...would become the most influential of films noirs since *Double Indemnity*...” (197).

A frequent feature of crime films is a mystery to solve, which gives the viewer incentive to continue watching. The beginning always has a question to ask. These can be very simple, such as “Who committed this murder?” They can also be incredibly complex, asking “Why does this situation exist?” and “What relationships are at stake in this situation?” While constructing the answer, the film keeps the audience guessing until it is absolutely necessary to deliver satisfaction. That satisfaction needs to be available to the viewers, so care is taken to present the information clearly. These films must “make a valid cognitive representation of a given set of facts, thus solving a mystery...” (Grodal, 236). These “connect-the-dots” clues can be presented in a variety of ways. Frequently, a point in conversation reveals a clue. Then, the clue is recognized by a reaction shot. Sometimes an object in the scene can trigger a thought. This has a character notice the object, then the camera dollies to a close-up of the object, and the character makes a verbal confirmation of the connection to the mystery.

This notion of mystery is usually presented from the perspective of a detective. Noir is famous for its private investigators. This sometimes differs from normal detective works. According to Marty Roth, an expert on detective fiction, “The detective form will usually not venture beyond the point where the crime is identified and the criminal identified” (28). Sometimes the criminal is known and proven guilty, but requires a spectacular gunfight to finish the job. Both *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep* feature Humphrey Bogart in his signature P.I. role, deviating from “his second-from-the-left, blink-and-you’ll-miss-him, bad-guy image” of the 1930’s (Hughes, xv). Both of these films frequently put the protagonist in dangerous situations, especially *The Big Sleep*, where he is beaten up, knocked unconscious, and shot at throughout the film. The final moments of outwitting the gunmen and diverting

the police brings Bogart's character through some actions unnecessary to solving the case, but he does them for other motivations.

In *The Killers*, the main investigator is just a police detective who is detached from the crime. He only investigates it for the intellectual pursuit of a reason for such a strange murder. This detachment is particularly important to the cynicism of the film, because the prematurely murdered hero is a lost cause. Solving the mystery doesn't bring him back or improve his failed life. The ending "fails to provide the 'relief' common to most films of all genres" to keep this point clear (Shadoian, 111).

An exception to this pattern is in *This Gun for Hire*. Philip Raven, the protagonist, is actually a hitman, seeking revenge for being set up after performing a job. His search is not one for answers, but for payback instead. He just happens to cross paths with a woman, Ellen, who actually investigates the same man after being approached by the authorities. This female brings some familiarity to the plot, as she represents all the morality involved with the investigation. She also supplies an investigative interest in the very mystery of the main character: how did he become so detached from reality? Why does he mercilessly kill men, but feel sorry for cats and children? This hitman provides an important character arc. His desperation for survival is particularly interesting, as he even kills a cat he cares about to keep it from drawing attention to his hiding place. Eventually, the character's point of view is so common to the viewer that it seems like a redeeming, sacrificial act to *not* murder Ellen's detective fiancé.

In contrast, *White Heat*'s lead is a hard-nosed criminal who receives no such redemption. He is finally absorbed in his psychotic rage after his mother dies. His complex relationship with "Ma" is a central point in the film,

The character of Ellen is a great deviation from the typical *femme fatale* featured in many crime films. Normally, the female is "constantly talked about by men in the stories, toying with them and causing their downfalls" (Cousins, 198). Instead, Ellen provides a moral compass for Raven, acting as a positive role for him. However, she occasionally degrades into a damsel in distress. Raven rescues her for his own

benefit in exacting revenge instead of sexual desire.

Other films use this textbook example of the femme fatale. In *The Killers*, “Kitty Collins resembles many manipulative women of the period, women who seem cursed by their beauty, who cannot do anything but use it destructively” (Shadoian, 101). In Bogart’s role as private dick in *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*, he falls in love with such a beauty. However, his reaction is different in each case. In *The Maltese Falcon*, he turns his love in for the murder of his partner. While he would act like a criminal to deceive them, he would not actually break the law for his own benefit. In *The Big Sleep*, he puts himself in danger yet again to hide her guilt. He seeks to have her, even if it involves breaking moral code, something his previous role would not allow. In the end, he asks her “What’s wrong with you?” to which she replies “Nothing you can’t fix,” showing her manipulative nature continually at work.

America’s entry into World War II definitely had an effect in the film industry, particularly with the war film genre. However, the crime genre did not always have the same patriotic nature. The economic cutbacks and distant violence led to an increased level of pessimism in noir. This pessimism allowed for the frequent, gruesome deaths to be displayed in such detail. Another view of this pessimism can be seen in *The Maltese Falcon*. The entire plot is centered around the pursuit of an expensive artifact. After several murders and clever sleuthing, it is revealed that the statuette is a fake and the entire affair was worthless. This depressing view could be many people’s opinions on life during those difficult years. *The Killers* had a similar depressing mood, as the Swede was killed immediately, only to reveal through flashback that he was dead inside as soon as he lost that boxing match. *Gun for Hire* seems to be the exception for every rule, as Ellen gave Raven a lecture about supporting the nation and dealing with problems other than your own for the good of others.

These films represent the variety present in this genre. Crime films include everything from gangsters and hitmen to detectives and private investigators. The genre has been a staple since the creation of the film industry, and will continue as long as crime exists. That should be a while.

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