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Film Noir: (Re)Constructing the Definition

Introduction

Almost every scholar has her/his own definition of film noir as well as meticulously selected cinematic works which constitute a very personal list of film noir productions. However, such individual definitions may be rather imprecise and inexplicit, as not every film about a night life is a film noir and film noir does not necessarily have to depict a murder or corruption (Schrader: 70). Film noir is one of the best described phenomena in the history of cinema, and yet, despite the amplex of critical works, it still remains extremely enigmatic. On the one hand, its genesis has been carefully traced and established, on the other hand, it has never been ultimately defined.

Although the academics interested in this subject seem to use this term quite abundantly, especially when referring to its contemporary equivalent, neo-noir, film noir's definition is still vague and disputable. Therefore, the lack of proper definition renders creating a unified group of such films almost impossible. The author of *Dark City: The Film Noir*, Spencer Selby accurately notices that film noir is “perhaps the most slippery of all film categories” (Selby: 3). The critical, frequently quite contradictory, works devoted to this phenomenon which have been written throughout the last decades have conceptualised film noir so diversely and broadly that the emergence of one and final definition is something that we may never witness.

Frank Krutnik points out yet another important consequence of not defining film noir: “The problematic identity of *film noir* serves to intensify its highly bankable and ‘seductive’ mystique: when a new film is labelled ‘*noir*’ this serves as a promise of quality, that the film in question is more than just a thriller” (Krutnik: 16). Film noir, thus, appears to be a very flattering term, which may encourage the producers to advertise their movies using such a label. However, as Phillips correctly notices, one cannot misuse the term, for it loses its significance: “One must be aware that a film must meet certain standards to be considered among the classic film noirs. Otherwise one can nominate biker movies and slasher movies as film noirs” (Phillips: xi). Therefore, it is very important to at least attempt to define film noir and establish certain criteria which would help to ultimately decide whether a film can or cannot be categorised as film noir. In this article I review the most common definitions of film noir and explain why it is *not* a genre.

The Origins of Film Noir

In 1946 a French film critic, Nino Frank used the term *film noir* for the first time to name a new trend that had been emerging in Hollywood cinema. Frank’s coinage of the term was a response to the release of five American films screened in Paris during the summer of 1946: *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Laura* (1944) and *The Woman in the Window* (1944). Frank and other film critics believed that these films “signify a series of narrative, stylistic and thematic departures from Hollywood cinema of the prewar years” (Krutnik: 15). It was also in France that the first film-critical work about noir was published, namely *Panorama du film noir américain 1941–1953* by Raymonde Borde and Etienne Chaumeton. Interestingly, the directors associated with the trend maintained that in the first decade of noir’s existence, they never felt that they were producing works that had something in common (Porfirio et al.: 102).

The cut-off dates of the trend were conventionally set by the premieres of precisely John Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and Orson Welles’s *Touch of Evil* (1958). During this period, according to Nicolas Christopher’s calculations, over three hundred films were produced (Christopher: viii). Although the

birth of film noir is most often assumed to be the year of *The Maltese Falcon's* premiere, this work did not initiate an immediate and intense movement in the cinema. Thomas Schatz writes that *The Maltese Falcon* can be treated as a prototype of a film noir trend which, in the early 1940s, was only just taking shape (Schatz: 126). *The Maltese Falcon* introduced the plot and characters typical of hard-boiled fiction, but it did not bring visual and narrative innovations, so typical of noir.

It was the premieres of *Murder, My Sweet* and *Double Indemnity* that truly introduced the trend, as these two films contained the defining elements of film noir, so intrinsic to hard-boiled literature, with which this trend is most strongly associated. Billy Wilder, whose *Double Indemnity* played such an important role in defining the trend, claimed that as a filmmaker he was never aware of any patterns. They appeared naturally and unconsciously, like handwriting (Porfirio et al.: 101). Noir became a symptom of collective thinking about the world. Wilder's statement, illustrating the fact that film noir lacked identity in the first years of its existence, is an important element in considering the role of literature in shaping the cinema.

The issues depicted in film noir are closely related to the mood prevailing in the United States during and after the Second World War. A noirish anti-hero is an alienated tough guy on the verge of the law accompanied by a beautiful and dangerous femme fatale who usually stands in his way. The inspirations for film noir can be traced to several sources. These include hard-boiled fiction, German expressionist cinema, psychoanalysis and existentialism. What characterises these concepts are the realism, detailed descriptions of crimes and heroes from various social strata using colloquial language, often slang, struggling with fate and looking for their own identity.

Derived from hard-boiled fiction, film noir embodies various fears, especially fears caused by the proliferation of crime. In addition to the intensification of violence, although shown indirectly due to the Motion Picture Production Code, the most important elements that appear in film noir are the triumph of evil and the atmosphere of corruption. Moreover, the crime is no longer reserved for representatives of the criminal world; it could be committed by any apparently law-abiding citizen.

Many critics assumed that apart from hard-boiled fiction, it was German expressionism that had a decisive influence on the aesthetics of film noir. This association was imposed due to the type of shooting techniques used in film noir, such as chiaroscuro, unusual camera angles, diagonal composition of frames, image deformation, as well as the fact that many directors, such as Fritz Lang, were also painters specialising in expressionism. So popular in the United States and strongly present in film noir, although in its simplified form, is also yet another German invention, i.e. psychoanalysis. According to psychoanalysis, the character of femme fatale is, even today, analysed in terms of a woman who “castrates” and focuses on the destruction of the male ego.

(Re)Constructing the Definition

A particular conundrum related to film noir is its definitional elusiveness caused, among other things, by the fact that noir is often used to describe images as different from each other as, e.g. shot in colour *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945), Gothic in the mood *The Spiral Staircase* (1946), and rather traditional, non-expressionist *The Big Sleep* (1946). Researchers still argue whether film noir is a style, a time-bound aesthetic and thematic trend, or, simply, a genre. Nicolas Christopher describes noir as follows: “Noir” has been used to describe everything from political movements and fads of dress to artistic trends and subversive impulses. Mercury-like, it slips easy definitions (Christopher: 36). Consequently, since the term has not been clearly defined, the list, even of the classic films representing noir, is inexhaustible. Depending on whether one classifies it as genre or a cycle, a style characterised by certain visual techniques or a narrative convention constructed around a particular plot, one can argue that sometimes quite divergent films have in fact noirish qualities.

As it was mentioned in the introduction, film noir can mean many things, but since probably the most disputable and frequently mentioned is its classification as a genre, the following analysis starts with this concept. A genre is characterised by, among others, a certain distinctive narrative structure, particular motifs and a typical visual design. Foster Hirsch, a proponent of the idea that film noir is a genre claims that it contains all the representative elements:

Noir deals with criminal activity, from a variety of perspectives, in a general mood of dislocation and bleakness which earned the style its name. Unified by a dominant tone and sensibility, the noir canon constitutes a distinct style of film-making; but it also conforms to genre requirements since it operates within a set of narrative and visual conventions [...]. Noir tells its stories in a particular way, and in a particular visual style. The repeated use of narrative and visual structures [...] certainly qualifies noir as a genre, one that is in fact as heavily coded as the western.

(Hirsch: 72)

Hirsch emphasises that even the titles of the noir films are characteristic of generic identification, since they serve as a cue for the audience and shape its expectations, suggesting “the thematic and tonal similarities among the films” (Hirsch: 10). Frank Krutnik distinguishes four reappearing elements present in noirish titles:

- (i) the recurrence of ‘key words’ such as ‘street’ (e.g. *Street of Chance*, *Side Street*, *Scarlet Street*); ‘city’ (e.g. *The Sleeping City*, *Cry of the City*, *Night and the City*); and ‘dark’ and ‘night’ (e.g. *The Dark Corner*, *Night Has 1000 Eyes*, *So Dark the Night*);
- (ii) the use of expressions from the ‘hard-boiled’ crime idiom (as with *Framed*, *Decoy*, *Fall Guy*, *Raw Deal* and *The Setup*);
- (iii) the suggestion of a fatalistic or ‘existential’ thematic, or ‘moods’ of despair and paranoia (e.g. *They Won’t Believe Me*, *Cornered*, *I Walk Alone*, *Criss-Cross*, *Desperate and Fear*);
- (iv) the promise of a delirious combination of violence, death and sexuality (as in *Kiss of Death*, *Kiss the Blood of My Hands* and *Murder, My Sweet*) (Krutnik: 18).

Paul Kerr informs that in the 1930s and 1940s film titles were quite often reviewed with audiences before the films were even produced (Kerr: 53). Just like Hirsch, James Damico also maintains that film noir is a genre, yet he refuses to embrace it as a style, as Hirsch does. He claims: “I can see no conclusive evidence that anything as cohesive and determined as a visual style exists in FN [film noir]” (Damico: 105). Damico states that film noir is a genre due to a certain narrative pattern that can be observed in it. He sees this pattern “as the typical noir plot, in which the main character is lured into violence, and usually to his own destruction, by the femme fatale” (Conard: 10).

However, many scholars disagree with the opinion that film noir meets the requirements to be classified as a genre. Krutnik questions even the definition of a genre itself, pointing out that “a genre cannot simply be defined in terms of the elements it contains” (Krutnik: 8). Leo A. Handel argues that “a picture is never a hundred per cent *western*, *mystery*, or *comedy*, but it usually includes many other basic story types. A *western* picture might, and often does, include elements such as mystery, romance and so on” (Handel: 45). Krutnik states that generic labels are rather vague as they “tend to be very loose, demarcating broad and at times far from contradictory parameters” (Krutnik: 8). He then explains that when one takes, for instance, a comedy into consideration, one notices that there are many different subtypes of this genre. On the other hand, certain generic labels are used interchangeably to describe the same film, e.g. mystery, thriller or suspense film (Krutnik: 8). Interestingly, Janet Staiger maintains that Hollywood films “have never been pure instances of genres” (Staiger: 185).

Therefore, the question that arises concerns the definition of a genre itself. If we understand it as a set of formal patterns that provides a film with an individual generic label or identity and distinguishes it from a broader group of films, then film noir should not be considered in terms of genre, as some films which have always been included in the corpus of film noir differ significantly and would not meet this requirement, as Krutnik states: “A central problem with regarding *film noir* as a genre is that it will never incorporate all of the films which have been included within the *noir* corpus [...]” (Krutnik: 18). However, if we accept the fact that films that are frequently classified as strictly generic, can, even so, contain transgeneric elements, in such a case film noir can be considered a genre. Nevertheless, even if one acknowledges film noir as genre, one has to face yet another issue regarding the filmmakers’ intentions of producing a noir film in this particular genre. In *Film Noir: Hard-Boiled Modernity and the Cultures of Globalization* Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland aptly convince that regarding film noir as a genre can be problematic as:

Hollywood directors in the 1940s did not set out to make a “film noir,” but rather a “melodrama,” a “thriller,” a “mystery,” a “red meat crime picture,” or a “detective story.” Instead, [...] it was the postwar generation of French critics who, viewing these pessimistic American films in very specific historical circumstances, gave them the label that still sells today – “film noir.”

(Fay, Nieland: 125)

Looking at this problem from such a perspective, one cannot really speak of genre with reference to film noir, as a concept of a film noir as a genre did not exist when the first films were produced. The fact that the films shot in the 1940s' America comprise elements that are somehow distinctive was purely coincidental, as the directors themselves claim. Nevertheless, perhaps the inception of every new genre involves touching the unknown, creating something novel and breaking an old convention.

Some critics propose that film noir should be considered as a trans-generic phenomenon rather than a strictly defined genre. Palmer denies film noir a generic status as he claims that film noir has existed "through a number of related genres whose most important common threads were concern with criminality [...] and with social breakdown" (Palmer: 30). Just like Fay and Nieland, Palmer argues that films regarded as noir productions are usually classified differently in terms of their generic categories, such as "the crime melodrama, the detective film, [or] the thriller" (Palmer: x). Hence, this mystique sublime substance that film noir contains cannot be its generic identity, for the phenomenon in itself is transgeneric, as it relates to many genres.

Moreover, there is yet another argument which illustrates why film noir is not a genre, namely its temporality. Genres tend to be timeless, they are not bound by periodicity. They may change over time, but they are not limited to any particular period. Film noir, however, is most often associated with the 1940s American B-movies. Certainly, the phenomenon is still present in contemporary cinema and has undergone a revival, yet the modern equivalent is actually considered to be a neo-noir or sometimes retro-noir, not film noir per se which most of the time serves as a brand name for American film classics of the 1940s and 1950s.

Thus, the theory conveying the idea that film noir is a genre seems rather flawed. However, an assumption that film noir should actually be considered a style is highly supported and quite popular. Some critics investigate noir as a visual style, others underscore its significance as a periodic style. All in all, the phenomenon of 'film noir' frequently appears in combination with the word 'style.' An American scholar Thomas Schatz claims that "Film noir was itself a system of visual and thematic conventions which were not associated with

any specific genre or story formula, but rather with a distinctive cinematic style and a particular historical period” (Schatz: 112).

In *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, Frank Krutnik provides a reader with an interesting comparison proposed by a writer and a filmmaker Edgardo Cozarinsky. He claims that in film noir it is precisely the style, not the narrative that matters. Cozarinsky states that noir style serves as a “kind of performance where the story is just as necessary, and important, as the libretto to an opera, a *pre-text*, whether for music or for a more concerted play of sounds and images” (Krutnik: 19). Such an approach conclusively rejects the generic identity of film noir, as in any genre, the plot is by far at least as important as a style.

Nevertheless, a further problem arises concerning the question of importance of the narrative in film noir. It is doubtful whether one can define film noir disregarding its narrative aspect altogether. It could possibly be helpful, since based on their plots some classic film noirs differ significantly, hence it is difficult to define noir in terms of its narrativity; however, when disjunct from the plot completely, film noir loses a huge part of its identity. Furthermore, if one overlooks noir’s narrative, the stylistic elements, such as *chiaroscuro*, which are supposed to be distinctively novel and specific to its style, are really just borrowings, indicative of other artistic conventions. Krutnik argues that

Descriptive accounts of the ‘noir style’ tend to be highly generalised – highlighting sets of features which are by no means specific to *film noir*. It is doubtful that one could convincingly show that *noir* is actually characterised by a unified body of stylistics – rather, it seems to be the case that what is referred to as the ‘noir style’ tends to be a more disparate series of stylistic markings which can be seen as *noir* when they occur in conjunction with sets of narrative and thematic conventions and narrational processes.

(Krutnik: 19)

William Park seems to have alleviated the conflict between the supporters of the idea that film noir is a genre and those who claim it is a style: he simply admits it is both, “the only Hollywood genre that is also a style” (Park: 6). He elaborates saying that:

In this case the genre depends more on the situation and actions of the protagonist, while the style consists of dark cities, night clubs, detectives, femme fatales,

expressionist camera work and chiaroscuro. When a writer refers to film noir, he may be referring to the genre or the style, for of course in the classic period the two accompany one another and cannot be easily separated.

(Park: 7)

It is interesting that many scholars seem to understand the term *film noir* similarly and focus on the same elements, yet their nomenclature differs. Perk underscores the importance of narrative elements and visual style in film noir, arguing that it can easily be considered both a genre and a style. Andrew Spicer also emphasises the significance of all constitutive elements such as the plot and visual elements, but he applies yet another term when defining film noir, which is a *cycle* of films, claiming that neither genre nor style convey the complex idea behind film noir.

Spicer maintains that film noir, as a cycle of films, is characterised by “a similar iconography, visual style, narrative strategies, subject matter and characterisation” (Spicer: 4). Furthermore, he claims that film noir cannot simply be defined as a style or genre, as such terms would not reflect the main aspect of film noir, which is the way of looking at the world: “Any attempt at defining film noir solely through its ‘essential’ formal components proves to be reductive and unsatisfactory because film noir, as the French critics asserted from the beginning, also involves a sensibility, a particular way of looking at the world” (Spicer: 25). A Norwegian critic and noir specialist Henrik Gustafsson also asserts that perceiving film noir only as a genre or a style is quite constraining and one should perhaps “steer away from stable epistemological categories such as genre, iconography or period style toward the more elusive phenomenological notions of atmosphere, affect, and encounter” (Gustafsson: 64). In fact, in one of the first critical texts investigating the classic film noir written in 1955, the French film historians Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton also employ the term *cycle* to describe a class of films which ignite a peculiar feeling of anguish in the viewer:

the moral ambivalence, the criminality, the complex contradictions in motives and events, all conspire to make the viewer co-experience the anguish and insecurity which are the true emotions of contemporary *film noir*. All the films of this cycle create a similar emotional effect: *that state of tension instilled in the spectator when*

the psychological reference points are removed. The aim of film noir was to create a specific alienation.

(Borde, Chaumeton: 25)

Thus, the term *cycle* stands for a collection of films which are distinguished by more than a generic identity and a visual style; it describes cinematic artefacts that embody this inenarrable quality of film noir: the mystical entirety with its narrative elements and stylistic devices which, in combination, enchant the viewer and evoke the feeling of alienation.

However, some critics, who also acknowledge the existence of a certain unspeakable darkness and pessimism in film noir, prefer a different term. When defining film noir, they do not focus on a particular group, or cycle of films, but they understand film noir as a tone and mood. Paul Schrader writes: "Film noir is not a genre [...]. It is not defined, as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood" (Schrader: 8). Nonetheless, one has to consider whether it is advisable to try to define one eerie term, such as *film noir*, applying terms which are also quite vague. Frank Krutnik also discourages from explaining film noir in terms of tone and mood, stating that the terms are "in themselves quite complex and often loosely defined" (Krutnik: 19).

Before concluding what film noir actually is, it is necessary to recapitulate what it is not. Even though Foster Hirsch and James Damico try to prove it is a genre, the corpus of film noir includes films that are so generically different that defining film noir as a genre would not be the most appropriate option. R. Barton Palmer's idea that film noir is a transgeneric phenomenon is probably more suitable, yet quite broad and not enough precise. Thomas Schatz's theory that noir is in fact a style points to the visual aspect of the films, which is by all means crucial. However, one cannot ignore the fact that as regards its origin, film noir has its roots in expressionism, from which it has inherited its stylistic elements, but it also harks back to hard-boiled fiction, which permeated to its narrative. It is important to underscore that film noir cannot be regarded only in terms of its narrative elements or its visual style. It is an entity in which both these elements have a profound effect on the viewer. Moreover, what Andrew Spicer calls "a particular way of looking at the world" (Spicer: 25), or Henrik Gustafsson defines as "atmosphere, affect, and encounter" (Gustafsson: 64) is

indeed an elusive and quite subjective quality of film noir. One could say that it is precisely this mysterious mood of film noir that makes it impossible to define; however, film noir is more than just a mood, so defining it as one is not enough either. Claiming that it is a cycle of films does not fix the problem of deciding whether another possibly noirish film can be included within this cycle if one cannot objectively say why the films that constitute the cycle are in it.

When trying to (re)construct the definition of film noir, one encounters numerous problems, as by now the concept has been described in so many ways by critics who have focused their attention on particular aspects of this phenomenon instead of the bigger picture. If one scrutinizes film noir's narrative and defines it as a genre, one neglects to include many a films that could be included in the cycle, but are more characteristic of different genres, or are too transgeneric to fulfil the definition of film noir genre. If one focuses only on the style, the narrative, which is by all means very important as it reflects societal problems and attitudes, loses its importance. However, defining the concept as a whole seems futile.

James Naremore claims that film noir cannot be defined. He states:

The fact is, every movie is transgeneric or polyvalent. Neither the film industry nor the audience follows structuralist rules, and movie conventions have always blended together in mongrelized ways. [...] Thus, no matter what modifier we attach to a category, we can never establish clear boundaries and uniform traits. Nor can we have a "right" definition – only a series of more or less interesting uses

(Naremore: 6)

In fact, every critic sees something different in noir and has their own "unstated agendas" (Naremore: 6). Especially considering the fact that people do not define things objectively, simply by grouping similar concepts according to their qualities; but they "create networks of relationship, using metaphor, metonymy, and forms of imaginative association that develop over time" (Naremore: 5). Since apart from distinctive hard-boiled narrative and expressionistic visual elements, film noir consists of such indescribable concepts as "phenomenological notions of atmosphere, affect, and encounter" (Gustafsson: 64), which are quite subjectively constructed, every viewer, even an educated one, experiences film noir subjectively and hence defines it differently. In *Noir Affect*, Christopher Breu and Elizabeth Hatmaker aptly claim

that “noir is elusive. While all critical categories are characterized by debate and disagreement, noir as a category seems particularly prone to fractiousness, dissension, and divisiveness” (Breu, *Hatmaker*: 1). Therefore, (re)constructing the definition of film noir in such a way so as to satisfy all critics and scholars is rather doubtful.

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Summary

Throughout the last 80 years, scholars and film critics have tried to define film noir and come up with various theories. Some claim film noir is a genre, others classify it as a style. The definition of the phenomenon appears to be rather elusive. In consequence, some films are classified as noir or neo-noir even though they seem not to meet the necessary requirements to be categorized as such. The following article examines the most popular theories on film noir and explains why it is impossible to construct one and final definition.

Keywords: film noir, genre, style, tone, mode, cycle, transgeneric, definition

Słowa kluczowe: film noir, gatunek, styl, ton, moda, cykl, transgatunkowość, definicja