

From *Caligari* to *The Big Heat* and Beyond: European Influences on Classical American Film Noir

RALUCA MOLDOVAN

Noir: problems of definition

FILM NOIR is one of those enduring cultural phenomena that seem to have survived many historical hardships, from the demise of the studio system towards the end of the 1950s to the transformations affecting the American cinema in the age of the 21st century blockbuster. However, film noir—and its contemporary manifestation, the neo-noir—remains an elusive concept that has many a time escaped definition and stirred up controversy among film critics and scholars. Nevertheless, I believe that an attempt to answer the question “what is film noir?” is essential to the argument I am putting forward in the present article.

For many uninformed filmgoers, it is certainly easier to recognize a film noir rather than to define it—but does this mean that film noir is a genre, in the traditional sense of the word in which, for example, the musical or the western are cinematic genres? Is film noir a coherent body of productions characterized by a well-defined set of conventions regarding plot, style, themes, mode of production? The answer to these questions is anything but straightforward, especially considering that the very label of film noir was applied post-factum to describe a category of films produced in Hollywood roughly between 1941 and 1958.¹ None of the directors or writers involved in the production of these films ever considered, at the time, that they were making films noirs—or that they were shaping a new cinematic genre, for that matter.

The difficulty in defining film noir has been acknowledged by many well-reputed film scholars; among them, the authors who wrote the definitive book on Hollywood’s classical mode of production during the studio era, a period to which film noir chronologically belongs: David Bordwell argues that film noir has in turn been labeled as a genre, a style, a movement, a cycle, even a tone or mood; he does not consider film noir to be a genre, because “nobody set out to make or see a film noir in the sense that people deliberately chose to make a Western, a comedy, or a musical.” (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 2002: 75) I believe Bordwell is right in referring to film noir, following Ernst Gombrich’s suggestion (Gombrich 1966: 88), as a “non-classical style,” because—like in the case of the Gothic or the Baroque—this term was used to denote a repudiation of

a traditional norm; in other words, at the beginning at least, the term was used less to define and more to differentiate this kind of films from the mass of contemporary mainstream Hollywood productions. According to Bordwell, there are four major “patterns of nonconformity” in the case of film noir: a subversion of the rules of psychological causality, in the sense that film noir presents us with attractive killers, weary, unheroic protagonists, repellent cops and gratuitous violence; the presence of a sexually alluring, yet dangerous femme fatale who exerts an often deadly influence on the main male character; an attack on the traditional happy ending of classical Hollywood cinema and, last but certainly not least, the breaking of production conventions such as balanced composition, three-point lighting, studio shooting, linear causality, etc. (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 2002: 76; Harris 2003: 7; Neale 2000: 147–49). If film noir is not a genre *per se*, it certainly borrows from several established genres, primarily from the crime/gangster film, as Andrew Dickos and Richard Maltby remark (Dickos 2002: 2; Maltby 2003: 91–92). Moreover, as William Park points out, film noir can be defined by a subject, a locale and a character: “Its subject is crime...its locale is the contemporary world, usually a city at night. Its character is a fallible or tarnished man or woman.” (Park 2011: 25)

One of the most influential film noir scholars, Paul Schrader (who, in addition to authoring the seminal 1972 article “Notes on Film Noir”, also wrote the script for one of the definitive examples of neo-noir cinema, Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver*), also argues against film noir being a style (Naremore 2008: 167–168); instead, it is “defined by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood” (Schrader 2003: 230) and it constitutes a distinctive period in film history, not unlike the French new wave or Italian neorealism. The diversity of attempts to define film noir and explain whether or not it represents a cinematic genre is simply too great to review in the limited space of the present article; however, what one should bear in mind is the fact that, despite critical ambiguities in defining film noir, film scholars seem to have a considerably easier time putting together a canon of films noirs that includes *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, *Crossfire*, *Murder, My Sweet*, *The Killers*, *The Spiral Staircase*, *The Big Sleep*, *Out of the Past*, *Laura*, *The Woman in the Window*, *The Big Heat*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Vertigo*, or *Touch of Evil*. Many of these films are analyzed by French authors Borde and Chaumeton in their 1955 study of America film noir, observing that the aim of all these productions was to create a specific sense of *malaise*: “...moral ambivalence, criminal violence and the contradictory complexity of situations and motives combine to give the audience a genuine sense of anxiety or insecurity, and this is the hallmark of film noir in our era...The vocation of film noir was to create a *specific malaise*.” (italics in the original) (Borde and Chaumeton 1955: 15). This sense of anxiety, as Thomas Schatz argues, derived from the darker visual style of these productions and from the more pessimistic and brutal presentation of the American society, in comparison with, say, the gangster films of the 1930s (Schatz 1981: 112).

Noir: influences, conventions, and periods

WHILE THE problems of defining film noir have often divided film critics and scholars, there seems to be almost unanimous agreement in what concerns the conventions of noir and the external and internal influences that have shaped the look and content of noir. I would like to begin this section by discussing the latter aspect, referring both to external (i.e., non-American) and internal factors that brought their contribution to the cultural phenomenon of film noir. Without a doubt, probably the most visible of these influences is the impact of the cinematic style of German expressionism on the generic look of American film noir (Langford 2005: 216–17; Schatz 1981: 113). As well-known film critic and historian Siegfried Kracauer shows in his definitive study of Weimar cinema, “the German screen exerted world-wide influence....In a characteristic expression of respect, Hollywood hired all the German film directors, actors and technicians it could get its hands on. France, too, proved susceptible to screen manners on the other side of the Rhine. And the classic Russian film benefited from the German science of lighting.” (Kracauer 2004: 4). Kracauer’s observation is correct; however, it does not explain why so many members of the German film industry chose to abandon this growing and influential national cinema: those who created the look of German expressionism, those who shaped the conventions of this style were forced out of Germany beginning with 1933 because of the rise of the Nazi regime and its radical position towards Jews working in any branch of the German (and later, Austrian) economy. Without exception, this group of remarkably talented individuals, from Fritz Lang to Robert Siodmak, from Billy Wilder to Fred Zinnemann, from Otto Preminger to Curtis Bernhardt and from Edgar Ulmer to Max Ophuls were Jewish émigré directors who arrived in Hollywood in the 1930s, coming directly from Germany or Austria, or—as in the case of Robert Siodmak, for example, from France; their films noirs are now part of the definitive canon of American film noir. While I do not necessarily share Vincent Brook’s point of view that it was precisely the Jewishness of these directors that was instrumental in shaping the themes and visual style of American film noir, I could not ignore either the Jewish contribution to the rise of German expressionism (from the part of literary and artistic figures such as Frank Wedekind, Ernst Toller, Fritz Lang, Robert Wiene, Karl Freund, Hans Dreier, Kurt Richter and many others) or the influence exerted by the Jewish émigré directors in the development of film noir in Hollywood, an influence infused by their experience working for German film studios in the 1920s (Brook 2009: 3–4; Koepnik 2002: 166). German films made during the “golden age” of Weimar filmmaking (roughly between 1920 to 1933)—*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), *Nosferatu* (1922), *The Golem* (1920), *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* (1922), *Joyless Street* (1925), *Metropolis* (1927), *M* (1931), *People on Sunday* (1929)—established many of the visual characteristics of later American films noirs. The first of these would be the use of chiaroscuro lighting, described as “frontal light, low-key lighting (sometimes) contrasted with high-key lighting, and close shots...The German filmmakers, aided by the expressionist stylistics affecting all their arts, stylized these technical effects to male melodramas of spiritual isolation, anxiety, and fear. They created the *stimmung* (the aura or shimmer of mood resonating from an object filmed) and the *umwelt* (the uniting the protective rays of light generating a recognition of objects clustered in their discretely inti-

mate environment, apart from the unknown and feared, apart from what is ‘out there.’” (Dickos 2002: 9–10) This stylization of expressionism is the basis for the visual iconography of the noir urban landscape, probably the most instantly recognizable element of film noir, which is largely borrowed from the predominant genre of Weimar cinema, the street film. Let us also not forget the figure of the femme fatale, a key ingredient of noir, whose prototype seems to be Lulu (Louise Brooks) from *Pandora’s Box* or Lola Lola (Marlene Dietrich) from *The Blue Angel*. The undeniable epitome of German expressionist cinema is *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, a film that was initially supposed to have been directed by Fritz Lang (Kracauer 2004: 65, 72), the most prolific author of American noirs. *Caligari’s* highly stylized sets, with many diagonal lines cutting the frame, its imbalanced compositions and chiaroscuro lighting forming dark, lugubrious shadows were influential in creating the visual style of American expressionism, whose chief example was film noir: commenting on expressionistic elements in Wiene’s film, Paul Coates writes: “*Caligari* is thus exemplary of the strategies that expressionist artwork employs in allowing us both to partake of delusions and to step outside them: on the one hand we see what the central protagonist is seeing, but on the other we see that protagonist himself as potentially unreliable.” (Coates 1991: 157) The German influence on film noir can also be found in the construction of the characters, their paranoia, amnesia and disorientation, elements that were often found in the Weimar films I have mentioned earlier (Dickos 2002: 16–17; McDonnell 2007a: 72). Paul Schrader is not mistaken in observing that “On the surface the German expressionist influence, with its reliance on artificial studio lighting, seems incompatible with postwar realism, with its harsh unadorned exteriors [an influence, I would argue, coming from the postwar Italian neorealism—see also Pramaggiore and Wallis 2008: 326], but it is the unique quality of film noir that it was able to weld seemingly contradictory elements into a uniform style.” (Schrader 2003: 233) This style—a point to which I shall return in the following paragraphs—was characterized by deep focus cinematography, a particularly mobile camera, often used to convey the subjectivity of the characters, oddly arranged shots, an emphasis on chiaroscuro lighting with angular wedges of light and darkness and an atmospheric use of shadowy mazes, vehicle headlights, and a patina of fog and mist (McDonnell 2007a: 72).

Another European influence on film noir comes from France, in the form of a cinematic style known as the French poetic realism of the 1930s. Although less powerful in terms of visual impact than German expressionism, French poetic realism marked film noir primarily as far as the construction of characters is concerned. As Andrew Dickos points out, “[this realism]—named ‘poetic’ by various film directors, critics and historians—was revealed in a body of work that was at heart deeply romantic and often naturalistic. From Marcel Carne and Jacques Prevert, Jean Renoir, Julien Duvivier, and Pierre Chenal came films in which technique itself was a poetic product that represented the social realities of love and betrayal, poverty and crime, and the dark mood of despondency in fog and mist that complemented the brooding nights and shadows of German cinema.” (Dickos 2002: 42) Although French cinema itself in this period was influenced by elements of German expressionism (most likely introduced by former Weimar directors who sought refuge in France before finally making their way to Hollywood, such as Robert Siodmak), what strikes the viewer in the case of poetic realist productions—something that will later show up in film noir as well—is the

fatalistic edge, bordering on ineluctable tragedy, often born out of the social forces that corrupt society. In fact, the émigré directors making films noirs in the United States were quite familiar with these French productions, fact proven by Lang's remake of Jean Renoir's 1931 film, *La Chienne*, entitled *Scarlet Street* (Brook 2009: 105–07; Duncan 2006: 18). *La Chienne* is the story of a femme fatale, Lulu (Janie Mareze) who destroys the life of the main male character, played by Michel Simon—a storyline often present in American film noir. Other emblematic poetic realist films of the 1930s—such as Marcel Carne's trio, *Le jour se leve*, *Quai des brumes* and *Hotel du nord*—share with the future American noirs a depressing urban landscape, enveloped in rain and mist, and populated with characters who are mere pawns of fate, accepting their lot with fatalistic resignation and becoming victims of their own passion and greed. As Andrew Dickos, in his influential history of film noir in America points out, “It is fair to speculate that without the melancholy and despair, without the conventional prohibitions discarded and the private rebellions enacted on screen, the scenarios that ended without sunshine would have remained trapped in a discrete period of film history. Instead, this vision became ensconced in a style that portended the irrational, the nightmarish and violent, elements that would be found in the American film noir and become those dark forces that certainly bear an affinity to the fatalism of the best French cinema of the 1930s.” (Dickos 2002: 51; McDonnell 2007a: 73) James Naremore, a film scholar well-known for his interest in film noir, formulates a rather curious argument, to my mind: he claims that indeed, noir was born in Paris, but not in the 1930s, but in the period between 1946 and 1959, arguing that “The end of World War II in Paris gave rise to what might be called a noir sensibility.” (Naremore 2008: 11; Naremore 1995: 14). Even if one agrees with this point of view, what is one then to make of classics of American film noir such as *Double Indemnity*, made in 1944, so before the period invoked by Naremore? His main argument for placing the birth of noir in Paris has to do with the fact that it was here, in 1946, that the first writings about film noir appeared.

If the external influences on American film noir come from Germany and France, the internal, specifically American factors that led to the emergence of film noir include: the disillusionment brought about by the end of World War II, the revelation of wartime horrors such as the extermination camps, as well as the alienation felt by many returning soldiers; the changing role of women in society and their growing independence; the dark crime films of the 1930s, such as *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy* or *Scarface*; the resurgence of postwar realism, visible not only in cinema, but also in literature; and last, but certainly not least, since this is probably the key element, the American tradition of the hard-boiled detective novel by authors like Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain or Dashiell Hammett, whose works provided the basis for the script of many films noirs belonging to the classical canon, such as *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Killers*, or *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Schrader 2003: 230–34; Duncan 2006: 19; Mayer 2007: 3–4; Brook 2009: 14).

So—what is the result of this blend of internal and external forces shaping film noir? In other words, what are the narrative and visual conventions of these films? Some of its recurring elements, according to Paul Schrader, include the fact that the majority of scenes are lit for night (although this style of lighting might have arisen out of necessity rather than as a calculated means of creating an ominous atmosphere, given the

need for cuts and rationing imposed by wartime conditions); as in German expressionism, oblique and vertical lines are preferred to horizontal lines; such lines tend to splinter the screen, resulting in unsettling compositions; the actors and settings are often given equal light emphasis, which creates a fatalistic, hopeless mood; compositional tension is preferred to physical action; a complex chronological order is used to reinforce the sentiments of hopelessness and lost time; therefore, almost all noirs display a passion for the past and the present and an almost organic fear of the future (Schrader 2003: 235–37; Conard 2006: 7; Park 2011: 55–57; Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 2002: 77). The visual motifs of noir include slants of light (the Venetian blinds effect), frequent portraits, nightclubs and bars, dark city streets and cars racing along these streets, run down store fronts and apartment buildings, tunnels, basements and sewers. In terms of the most frequent narrative devices, films noirs boast voiceover narration, and the use of flashbacks, both of which run counter to the conventions of the classical Hollywood narrative style. Some other distinctive elements of noir consist of a lack of comic structure (although the dialogue in many films noirs includes a distinctive sarcastic note), a denial of traditional social and domestic happiness by many of film noir's main protagonists, and an assertion of individuality defined by murder. One of the most enduring figures of film noir is undoubtedly that of the femme fatale, and her male counterpart, the homme fatal, both of whom display unbridled sexuality and contempt for convention (Pramaggiore and Wallis 2008: 382–83). For Thomas Schatz, it is the noir visual style that determines substance, while mood overwhelms plot, emphasis is shifted from the “what” to the “how” (Schatz 1981: 115–17). The author also argues that the majority of noir style elements are prefigured by Orson Welles's 1940 *Citizen Kane*. However, many of the elements mentioned can be found in many Hollywood-produced films in the 1940s and 1950s, and the examples range from westerns to horror films and from romances to musicals, to the point where William Park rightfully argues that noir was indeed the dominant *period style* (Park 2011: 72–83).

But what is the period of film noir? Most film noir scholars adhere to Paul Schrader's periodisation: he divides the history of classic noir into three temporal segments, the wartime period (1941–1946), the phase of the private eye borrowed from Chandler's and Hammett's fiction featured in films like *The Maltese Falcon*, *Gaslight*, or *This Gun for Hire*; the postwar realist period (1945–1949), when films dealt with the problem of street crime and political corruption (see *The Killers*, *Act of Violence*, or *The Naked City*); the period of psychotic action and suicidal impulse (1949–1953), when the noir hero became increasingly neurotic and tormented in films like *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* or *Sunset Boulevard* (Schrader 2003: 237–239). However, a different periodisation was put forward by Robert Porfirio, who identified four stages of noir: the early experimentation period (1940–1943), the “studio-bound” period of the private detective (1944–1947), the “location” period of the semi-documentary noir (1947–1952) and the final phase of fragmentation and decay (1952–1960) (Porfirio 1979: 9).

In the following sections of my article, I will analyze three examples of representative noirs (one of each of Schrader's periods), in order to see how the conventions of the noir style apply to these particular cases: Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946) and Lang's *The Big Heat* (1953).

Classic noir style in *Double Indemnity*, *The Killers* and *The Big Heat*

SPEAKING ABOUT the impact of Billy Wilder's 1944 film, Paul Schrader points out that "*Double Indemnity* was the best written, the most characteristically film noir of the period. *Double Indemnity* was the first film which played film noir for what it essentially was: small-time, unredeemed, unheroic." (Schrader quoted in Phillips 2010: 53). Indeed, perhaps no other classic film noir has been more discussed than this adaptation by Raymond Chandler of a 1935 James M. Cain novel inspired by real-life events; many authors consider it the first complete noir (McDonnell 2007a: 77; Brook 2009: 15). In it we can find all the key ingredients of noir style: a dark, sinister tone, emphasized shadows, ever-present Venetian blinds, the down-and-out hero who falls for the venomous femme fatale, voice-over narration and flashbacks (Naremore 2008: 280). The film opens in typical noir fashion, with a speeding car running a red light on a dark city street (a scene reprised in the opening of Siodmak's *The Killers*, two years later); the car stops in front of a tall, equally dark building and we are introduced to the protagonist, insurance salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray), who narrates the story in voiceover, dictating his confession into a dictaphone. We learn that Neff has committed murder "for money and for a woman" and ended up with neither. The plot unfolds typically for Cain's fiction: an alluring femme fatale, Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), married to a dull older man, seduces a younger man and persuades him to participate in a plot to kill her husband for a big insurance payout. The murder is carried out, "straight down the line" (a line that features as a leitmotif of the script), but the end result is not the one anticipated: both the femme fatal and the homme fatal pay for their transgressions with their lives, each dying at the hands of the other.

The visual style of the film is reminiscent of Lang's *M*, which results in a "fast-paced, dynamic and realistic film in the American idiom [which] draws on expressionism to evoke a deep and ominous threat amid everyday Los Angeles, in which the streets seem to swallow Neff as he walks home after the murder." (Spicer 2010: 78). His voiceover narration is detached, objective, with the fatalistic air of a man who accepts that he is beyond redemption—something prototypical of many noir characters. Wilder arranges many scenes according to the conventions of German expressionist cinema: diagonal lines cutting the frame (in the form of cables, blinds or staircase banisters) segment the cinematic space and disorient the viewer, while the characters often find themselves figuratively imprisoned by bar-like shadows that symbolize the prison of their doomed universe: for example, the scene of the last confrontation between Neff and Phyllis is played out in almost complete darkness, while the shadows from the window blinds throw their shadows onto the bodies of the two protagonists; similarly, the car scene when they embrace after committing the murder contains a slant shadow that literally separates the lovers' heads from their bodies, perhaps in anticipation of their tragic demise. Wilder also makes use of startling contrasts: the scenes in which the two conspirator lovers plan the details of their crime are set in the brightly lit interior of the supermarket; this environment, populated with peaceful shoppers and neatly stacked goods,

contrasts sharply with the tone and content of the discussion between the two (Dussere 2006: 19–21). The naturalistic style of the film is also reminiscent of the French naturalistic traits present in the 1930s films; this kind of documentary realism, present in films like *La Chienne*, was achieved by Wilder by filming on location in several seedier LA neighborhoods (Phillips 2012: 20). All these elements, typical of film noir style, prove both the emergence and establishment of a set of conventions present in many films of the period, and the influence of earlier German and French styles in Hollywood; as Paul Duncan argues, “*Double Indemnity* is the film that launched a million imitations in the 1940s and 1950s. Even in recent years, you can see that *Body Heat* (1981) and *The Last Seduction* (1994) are just modern reworkings of the basic premise.” (Duncan 2006:36).

Robert Siodmak, one of the celebrated directors in the noir canon, directed *The Killers* at the height of his Hollywood success; in the space of a few years, he directed some of the best-known and most influential noirs of the classic canon, such as *Phantom Lady* (1944), *Christmas Holiday* (1944), *Cry of the City* (1948) or *Criss Cross* (1949); these films make him “the most decisive example of the German expressionist-inspired film artist to find work in the American film industry.” (Dickos 2002: 34) Given the fact that Siodmak also worked in France before coming to Hollywood, his works show the influence of French poetic realism, especially in his noir protagonists fatalistically resigned to their fate. And perhaps no better example could be found from this point of view than his 1946 *The Killers*, whose script is loosely based on a Hemingway novella. A film with a rather complicated plot structure, somehow inspired by Welles’s *Citizen Kane*, and punctuated by no fewer than eleven flashbacks, *The Killers* tells the story of the “Swede”, (Ole Anderson, played by Burt Lancaster in his screen debut), a one-time boxer turned small crook and of his involvement with one of the screen’s most emblematic femmes fatales, Kitty Collins (Ava Gardner). Few images in the history of noir have been so enduring as the opening scene of this film: a car speeds along a dark street, the only light comes from the car’s headlights, while the screen is cut by large diagonal shadows, instilling in the viewer an impending sense of doom; the camera is placed in the back seat of the car, and the viewer is forced to share its perspective and, in a sense, tag along for the ride (Harris 2003: 9; Jarvie 2006: 171). The unnamed killers of the title are introduced to us in a well-lit diner (which stands in sharp contrast to the dark street of the opening scene), and the dialogue by which they announce their intention of murdering the Swede has many surreal notes to it. But perhaps the most puzzling element of the film, the one that drives the plot, is the Swede’s passivity: he shows no reaction to the news that he is about to be killed, he merely stares empty-eyed into the cinematic space and accepts his fate with the typical fatalism of many noir heroes; he believes that he deserves his fate because he “did something wrong, once.” From this point forward, the film takes the form of a detective story in which insurance investigator Riordan tries to find out the reasons behind the Swede’s murder (Harris 2003: 11); as it turns out from the flashbacks narrated by various characters, what he did wrong was not taking part in a very profitable robbery, but falling under the spell of the femme fatale Kitty Collins (Schatz 1981: 140). It is Riordan’s task to piece together the various pieces of the puzzle and reconstruct the portrait of the elusive Swede, whose figure appears somehow two-dimensional, as the only information the viewer knows

about him is reflected through the eyes of other characters. Siodmak employs all the conventional noir elements—diagonal lines segmenting the frame, interplay of light and darkness, mirrors, bar-like shadows cutting the faces and bodies of protagonists—but adds to them with his cinematic mastery visible, for instance, in the robbery scene, a continuous three-minute long take crane shot (McDonnell 2007b: 243; Spicer 2010: 159); in addition—something that proves once more the influence of German expressionism—some scenes in the film (like the scene when the robbery is planned) give the viewer the feeling that he is watching a *kammerspiel* film, a chamber drama with cramped interiors and tight framing. The film includes a number of visual motifs common to many films noirs of the period: staircases, mirrors, bars, imbalanced compositions, unusual high-angle shots, wide-angle, deep focus cinematography; *The Killers* also takes its inspiration from its forerunners, *Double Indemnity* (the opening scenes of the two films present many similarities) and *Citizen Kane* (in addition to plot structure, the green handkerchief with golden harps in Siodmak's film plays the same role as the Rosebud motif in Welles's masterpiece).

The last example that I would like to discuss here belongs to one of the most prolific noir authors, “the absolute moralist of noir cinema”, Fritz Lang (Dickos 2002: 20). *The Big Heat* (1953), one of Lang's last noirs, an emblematic example of noir's last period, focuses on an urban criminal underworld in order to explore the darker side of human existence (Pramaggiore and Wallis 2008: 36). Fritz Lang, owing to his long-time involvement with Weimar expressionist cinema, had first-hand experience with the cinematic language developed in Germany in the 1920s, in whose emergence he had been instrumental: four of his films made before he came to Hollywood, *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*, *M*, *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* and *You Only Live Once* exhibit many of the features and themes present in his later American noirs: the theme of persecution, central to his view of world injustice, and the idea of cruelty and paranoia caused by such persecution, which infects his characters with fear and the expectation of doom, the only certainty in his cinematic universe (Dickos 2002: 22). In *The Big Heat*, one of his most powerful and highly praised noirs, Lang returns to some of the ideas explored in his *Mabuse* films: the social structures that prefigure tragedy (Brook 2009: 102; Spicer 2010: 16). One of the central elements in the film is the portrayal of a “frightened city” in the grip of a crime lord, Lagana (Alexander Scourby), a mobster modeled after the urbane, civilized type epitomized by Al Capone. Although the film, unlike *Double Indemnity* or *The Killers*, does not include voiceovers or flashbacks, it still displays many of the noir characteristics which, by this late period, had reached maturity and had become familiar to critics and audience alike: diagonal lines, staircases that divide the frame, Venetian blinds, unusual low-angle shots, low-key lighting, imbalanced compositions, the good cop turned rogue and an atypical femme fatale in the person of Debbie Marsh (Gloria Grahame). The film plays with the contrasts and the difference between appearance and reality: detective Bannion's (Glenn Ford) serene family life is juxtaposed with the seedy world of mobster Lagana and his sadistic thug Vince Stone (Lee Marvin) (McDonnell 2007c: 104) and with the double life led by policeman Duncan, whose suicide in the opening scene provides the engine of the plot; Duncan's widow, Bertha (Jeanette Nolan) tries to pose as respectable and grief-stricken, when, in fact,

she is the true femme fatale of the film and, in the end, is made to pay for her transgressions by the apparent femme fatale, Debbie, whose sense of justice eventually triumphs over her moral ambiguity and vanity (McDonnell 2007c: 104). However, she is not redeemed in the end: after being disfigured by Stone, she is shot dead in his apartment, while trying to protect Bannion (Dickos 2002: 32). Thus, Lang's fatalistic view of the world comes full circle: nobody escapes the grip of fate, not even a morally sound character like Bannion: he escapes Lagana's plot to kill, while his wife is killed by mistake and he is forced to live with this guilt for the rest of his life.

The portrayal of the city appears slightly different in *The Big Heat* by comparison with the other two noirs discussed; in my view, this transformation is a clear sign of the times: instead of narrow, dark streets, Lang shows us tall, well-lit buildings in the background of many scenes (which contrast with some of the dark, cramped interior spaces; but this apparent triumph of architecture and light houses a seedy underworld of corruption and violence that shows the underside of the American dream. Thus, *The Big Heat*, with its subtle spectrum of black and white photography, from bright shots evoking domestic bliss to low-key nighttime scenes, proves that film noir does not necessarily have to be dark in order to be powerful (Dickos 2002: 33). Lang emphasized the idea that the restoration of social order can only be achieved by human sacrifice (Schatz 1981: 142); *The Big Heat* is his "most seamless fusion of personal torment generated by actions taken in battle with corrupt society...Lang succeeded in transforming such topicality into a morality play, a noir myth, about the personal toll exacted in violence, pain, and death by those who confront such evil. In *The Big Heat*, an uncompromising, scrupulously composed, and elegant film, each scene follows with a logic and dramatic rigor that increases the story's emotional power as it reinforces its moral vision." (Dickos 2002: 30–31).

In lieu of conclusion: the enduring noir

ALTHOUGH MOST film scholars agree that the age of classic noir came to a close at the end of the 1950s, the phenomenon of noir is far from extinct; the best proof is the rise of a new type of films at the end of the 1960s, labeled as neo-noir. Moreover, the influence of classic noir on some notable European film trends and authors—and the French New Wave and Jean-Luc Godard are the first examples that come to mind (Dickos 2002: 222–27). There are a number of explanations for this resurrection: as Naremore points out, if the first phase of noir was mostly a product of talent and influences from Europe, neo-noir is indebted both to the "Hollywood renaissance" of the 1970s and to imports from the French and German New Waves, as well as to the Italian tradition of philosophical noirs made by Antonioni or Bertolucci (Naremore 2008: 203). Young American directors, such as Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, or Quentin Tarantino, who were clearly familiar with the look and content of classic noir, adopted many of its conventions and themes and transformed them to suit the changing tastes of contemporary moviegoers. In its broadest sense, neo-noir describes "any film coming after the classic noir period that contains noir themes and the noir sensibility." (Conard 2007: 2). What would then be the differences between noir and neo-

noir? Considering the fact that the Production Code was replaced in 1968 by the ratings system, neo-noir filmmakers can get away with a lot more than their predecessors, especially in representing violence and sensibility; as they are no longer forced to put a moral twist on their story, the villains sometimes escape punishment. The look of the neo-noir sometimes differs sharply from that of noir: some neo-noirs—even those which were conceived as tributes paid to the golden age of noir, like Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) (Naremore 2008: 205–06), Hanson's *LA Confidential* (1997), Nolan's *Memento* (2000) or Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), are shot in bright color; others still employ the lighting and compositions conventions of the classic noir (Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), Fincher's *Se7en* (1995) and *Fight Club* (1999), or Rodriguez's *Sin City* (2005). However, what is retained from the classic noir is the sense of fatalism and doom, the alienated hero, the moral ambiguity and inversion of values and the disorienting effect they have on the viewer. In fact, elements of noir are still so present in contemporary culture that they form what Naremore has termed "the noir mediascape": "a loosely related collection of perversely mysterious motifs or scenarios that circulate through all the information technologies, and whose ancestry can be traced at least as far back as ur-modernist crime writers like Edgar Allan Poe or the Victorian 'sensation novelists... This phenomenon is especially evident in the postmodern environment, where dark Hollywood pictures of the 1940s and 1950s provide motifs, images, plots, and characters for every sort of artifact." (Naremore 2008: 255)²

The existence of this noir mediascape proves that noir is much more flexible, pervasive and durable style than it is commonly considered; far from being an historical "oddity", the enduring noir has provided contemporary audiences with some of the most remarkable and critically acclaimed films Hollywood has ever turned out—and, for what it's worth, I believe it will continue to delight audiences for many years to come. □

Notes

- 1 Actually, the term was coined in 1946 by French film critic Nino Frank, in an article reviewing some American films which were being screened in France for the first time since the end of the war, among them, *The Maltese Falcon* (John Houston, 1941), *Double Indemnity* (William Wilder, 1944), *The Woman in the Window* (Fritz Land, 1944), and *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1946). He noticed the distinctively darker look of these films, as well as the cynical characters they featured and the fact that they broke many conventions of the classical Hollywood style to which European audiences had been accustomed (clarity, unity, happy end, etc.). Frank recognized in these films some similarities with a cycle of French films made in the late 1930s, also called films noirs, including *Pepé le Moko* (Julien Duvivier, 1937) and *Quai des brumes* (Marcel Carne, 1938). The first serious in-depth study of American film noir was written by French critics Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, *Panorama du film noir américain (1941–1953)*.
2. To give but one small example of the way in which noir elements permeate contemporary culture: even a cinematic genre that would normally be very far removed from the influence of noir, animation, fell under its spell: Hanna-Barbera studios produced in 1992 an animated series called *Fish Police*, which seems taken straight out of a classic hard-boiled detective noir of the 1940s.

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Abstract

From *Caligari* to *The Big Heat* and Beyond: European Influences on Classical American Film Noir

Many film critics tend to believe that film noir, alongside the western, is *the* quintessential American genre – one that was born in the America of the late 1940s out of specific circumstances reflecting contemporary American realities. In fact, film noir – which I consider to be a *film style*, rather than a *film genre* – is the result of various European influences, from the German expressionism of the 1910s and 1920s to the French poetic realism of the 1930s and even to the Italian neorealism of the mid-1940s. Moreover, it was a number of brilliant European émigré directors' arrival in Hollywood in the inter-war period that defined and transformed American film noir, giving it its distinctive aesthetics. The following paper will try to demonstrate how these cinematic European influences travelled to America, breathing new life into the conservative Hollywood film tradition of the studio period, and resulting in the creation of true masterpieces of film noir, from *The Maltese Falcon* to *Double Indemnity* or from *The Killers* to *The Big Heat*, defining a cinematic aesthetic that will, in time, profoundly change the face of American cinema.

Keywords

German expressionism, film noir, film style, French poetic realism, film aesthetics