

Film Noir Paper  
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Los Angeles is the epitome of American cinema. It is the home of the motion picture industry and a city where dreams and imaginations run wild. In fact, Hollywood, California has served as the premiere architect of American cinema since its inception. The genre of Film Noir is unique in that it utilizes the Los Angeles cityscape to convey its message, thematic purpose, and dark cinematic style. The employment of an urban setting contributes to the plot, character development, and film techniques such as lighting and location shooting. The two most prominent Film Noir examples, *Double Indemnity* and *Blade Runner*, present the setting in a similar way but with a different execution. The former takes place in 1944 and the latter is a futuristic take on the city, displaying a decaying L.A. in 2019. It is eerie how that “futuristic” year is vast approaching and, although the dystopia we inhabit is not as dreary as the one depicted in *Blade Runner*, there are jarring similarities to today’s problems. There are five aspects of Film Noir that catalyze its uniqueness and communicate the motif of moral corruption and urban alienation. Most prominently, the darkness that the films exude demonstrates not only the physical decay of the city but the violence and moral degradation of the characters. In almost every scene it is raining or hazy with little or no sunlight. It disproves the misconception that Los Angeles is always bright, beautiful, optimistic, and full of opportunity by depicting the same city as an evil facilitator of evil, darkness, and deterioration. Additionally, the inclusion of post-modern and modernist aesthetics adds to the films originality. The avant-garde modernist techniques of *Double Indemnity* are innovative especially during the 1940s. Conversely, the post-modernist architecture of the 1980s makes the Los Angeles setting more idiosyncratic and memorable. There are also significant uniform themes included throughout all Film Noir works including alienation, crime, corruption, and cynicism. The themes are not only defined by the dystopian city setting but are reaffirmed by the character archetypes and development of character relationships. Typically, Film Noir movies contain a male protagonist who is an antihero that compromises his morals at the hand of his love-interest and feminine counterpart, the femme-fatal. Finally, transcending just an audience perspective, from a filmmaker’s standpoint, the constructions of the cinematic experience make this genre notable. The cinematography techniques are revolutionary and purposeful from the nature of the acting, to the structure of the time frame, to the use of set design and positioning. The interconnection of all the Film Noir attributes work together to portray a message of dystopian ruin, the danger of sexuality, and the evil and corruption that spawns from this dark and dreary urban sphere.

*Double Indemnity*, directed by Billy Wilder, is a modernist take on the city of Los Angeles in the 1940s. The film centers on an insurance salesman, Walter Neff, who gets involved in an insurance fraud scheme. A beautiful woman named Phyllis leads him down a path of lies and destruction until his ultimate demise. Walter had previously been an ethically decent and upstanding man, but her highly sexualized nature and the corruption that the city offered, led to unsavory consequences. In contrast, *Blade Runner* is a science fiction film that relied on a post-modernist style through its architecture and character culture to reveal the degeneration of a future American city. In this film, an investigator and assassin of clones named Deckard falls in love with his replica target. Her beauty and enticement convinces him to go against everything he stands for to save her rather than carry out his duties as a blade runner.

The crime, the alienation of men, the violence, the corruption, and the turmoil of a dystopian Los Angeles are all represented through the dark setting and inclement weather. Evil is usually associated with darkness so it is no coincidence that most Film Noir movies feature shadows and rain in the majority of the scenes. Foremost, it is impossible to miss the darkness of *Double Indemnity*. When Walter first arrives at his office in the beginning of the film the lights are noticeably off. He also does not turn the light on in his apartment when it gets dark outside and even mentions in the narration that he is purposefully not going to turn the lights on because of his distraught temperament. The perpetual darkness reveals the director's dependence on strategically placed shadows. Film Noir also borrows formal elements from German Expressionism as evidenced by the Venetian blinds that cast dark shadows on the room. Both shadows and rain are incorporated during the tense final scene when Walter's shadow is glaringly outlined on the curtains in Phyllis' decadent mansion. Then in a dramatic statement he flings them open to expose the rain. Furthermore, all crime, and even most of the plot, occurs during nighttime. Richard Schickel author of *The Dark City and Film Noir: Los Angeles* defined the city in Noir as "usually shown at night and in the rain, and its inhabitants are morally corrupt and violent" (47). It is noticeable that Phyllis shuts the lights off before she hides her gun under the chair in a plan to kill Walter. It is as if she needed the solace of the darkness to have the nerve to shoot her former lover. He even closes the curtains right before he gets shot making the room even darker. The prevailing darkness is also a staple of *Blade Runner* through relentless rain. The rain serves as the dramatic glue of the film. During the fight scene when Deckard and the replica are in their final confrontation, the water is especially emphasized by the sudden flood-like stream dripping down the barrel of the gun. That is contrasted at the conclusion of the battle when sunlight finally peaks through the clouds. Before the replicant dies, he says: "All these moments will be lost in time like tears in rain. Time to die." Then, the tragically beautiful monster releases a white dove and takes his last breath. The sunlight and dove signify light and purity that the rest of the film lacked. This is the only time in the entire film when the gloom surrendered.

The common themes of Noir films exhibit all the things that can go wrong in cities. In fact, *Blade Runner* almost served as a threat or warning to a 1980s audience of the dangers of urbanization. Predominantly, cynicism saturated the plot. For instance, the most shockingly cynical moment in *Double Indemnity* is Keyes' interrogation of Phyllis, the newly widowed femme fatal and murderer of her husband, about his death. The dialogue displays an ironic combination of his moral correctness by punishing a criminal and moral corruptness of capitalism. However, he does not do this to offer justice for her late husband; his intentions are to swindle her out of her insurance claim. The revelation from this thematic cynicism is the reliance and greed of wealth of people in our urban society. Alternatively, cynicism is evident in *Blade Runner* when Deckard's associate retorts: "It's too bad she [Rachel] won't live, but then again who does." This statement exposes the pessimism of the human experience in 2019 and the robotic nature of life. These people were not actually living but surviving. The film also includes the dystopian interpretation of a horrendous future and the dangerous penalties of disturbing nature. The replicant, Zhora, who was made by man to be in essence, perfect, ends up finding his master and strangling him to death for cursing him with this artificial human condition. This is similar to the thematic lesson of *Frankenstein* in which a tragic monster kills his maker Victor because his wretched appearance makes him a dejected outcast. The exposition of this theme is very telling about the urban

decay we are imposing on our cities because when a person attempts to change the natural order and in essence try to “play God,” it leads to unprecedented and horrible consequences.

The development of the characters, the analogous archetypes, and the style of acting also promotes urban alienation and decay. It is difficult for the characters to have genuine and true connections because every relationship is laden with lies and deceit. Schickel describes Film Noir relationships in a similarly shameful manner: “families are incomplete and characters betray and double-cross each other” (47). The insincere relationships are promoted by the performances by the actors. This unorthodox and constrained nature of the acting adds to the aspect of alienation. The male character is unable to form a real connection with anyone since he is surrounded by false pretenses, lies, and treachery. “Film noir associates the city with a lack of emotion and an acting style developed according to which actors delivered their lines solely by moving their lips” (Schickel 49). The characters are also described as having a “blasé attitude” and nervous agitation in response to the pain and violence that surrounds them.

The archetype of the male character is that of an antihero. He is normally a cop or private detective with questionable morals. In *Blade Runner*, Deckard works for a police force to kill replicas, or genetically engineered, illegal human clones. Regardless of the profession of the protagonist, he is in a superior position of power and authority and is convinced to abuse that power at the advice or coercion of a lady. The action of straying from his moral conscience almost always leads Noir antihero to his demise and forces him to pay for his crime, like in the case of *Double Indemnity*, but not in every Film Noir picture. The man also represents human weakness. In fact, Walter is a compromised character the minute he arrives to Phyllis’ house, feeble to Phyllis’ relentless beauty and mystery. His weakness is evidenced by the reaction he receives from the housekeeper that can see right through her deceit and his *seemingly* upright ethics.

The archetype of the femme fatal character is the most interesting. She is the proprietor and instigator of the evil that drives the plot. The reason the male character abandons his morality is for a tarnished love affair with the forbidden woman. The innovation of the genre is evidenced by the femme fatal archetype because it counters the more traditional damsel in distress. It is her reliance on intensely carnal advances and the temptation of the forbidden sexual relationship that baits the man. In both films, the beautiful women are not what they seem because their exterior beauty is juxtaposed with inner turmoil. Her villainous nature also affirms the danger of sexuality. For example, the first time that Walter sees Phyllis she is scantily clad in a towel with a highly flirtatious demeanor. Her reliance on physical appearance is foreshadowing her evil intentions because she took advantage of his weakness through sex. The femme fatal character is developed the more and more evil she becomes. At first she is depicted in a positive and trustworthy light. Instead, her outer beauty distracts the viewer from her true, ugly character. Phyllis is more evil than Rachel, from *Blade Runner*, and her development is much more dramatic. Initially, she almost takes on the damsel in distress stereotype because she needs Walter to save her from a loveless marriage until her stepdaughter gives testimony to expose her character as evil with premeditated manipulations

The impressive cinematography is a characteristic of Film Noir that cannot be overlooked. The brilliant directors’ both strategically place light, objects, and angle of the camera to tie everything together. The misc-en-scene, or arrangement of the scenery and stage properties, proves the meaning of the film is in the surfaces. Nothing is placed in the frame accidentally; everything is decisively

calculated. Additionally, Film Noir is littered with elements of modernity and post-modernity. Schickel describes that the reasoning behind this is because Los Angeles is an “imaginary city without history, or haunted by its history” (52). *Double Indemnity* represents the modernist aesthetic and *Blade Runner* utilizes post-modern techniques. *Double Indemnity* is a classically constructed and developed specimen of 1940s Hollywood film. The intersection of the different layers of characters and the complex interaction of their relationships is indicative to classic Hollywood writing. However, *Double Indemnity* is intensely modern in its images and structure for the time period it was constructed. The revolutionary techniques of non-linear time frame and voice-over by the protagonist narrator were almost unheard of in film at this time. Also, it views the future of the city of Los Angeles in a utopian way which is the modernist perspective, in contrast to *Blade Runner*’s decomposing and rotten dystopian LA. Also, the architecture in *Double Indemnity* is modernist in structure with an exception to the gaudy Spanish ornamentation that decorate Phyllis’ mansion. Modernist architecture is primarily about functionality. Post-modernism, presented in *Blade Runner*, is a visitation of old elements. The art-deco inspired architecture is about handsome design and the fashion is retrofitted to resemble the past. The post-modern revolution was a time when people began to look to the past for references rather than meaning and adopted a new-found appreciation of old-fashioned styles, thus, meaning more or less collapsed upon itself. For example, a post-modern building could have a modern base with a fancy Corinthian-inspired top to attract people to its uniqueness and beauty. *Blade Runner* also uses parody, or borrowing of these old elements to use them in a contemporary, or in this case futuristic, setting. The postindustrial decay and disintegration is manifested through consumerism, waste, and the ornate costumes of the replicants, Pris and Zhora. For example, the fashion and accessories of the women in the bar scene seems inspired by old-fashioned designs. Significantly, in the bar there is a woman smoking a long cigarette symptomatically used by old movie stars like Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. Also, old fashioned music is contrasted with oddly futuristic sci-fi music depending on the scene. This film also includes a purée of different languages, cultures, and other worldly features.

Film Noir is a genre of film specific to a Los Angeles setting. The reliance on a city setting, character structure, and thematic development expose the dangers of urbanization and straying from ones morals. In films like *Double Indemnity* and *Blade Runner*, Los Angeles acts as a catalyst that stimulates the evil darkness of rain, the corruption and alienation of the antihero, the prevalence of crime and violence, the dangerous of feminine sexuality, and the dystopic cynicism of the future. The directors communicate their vision in such a unique way which makes Noir extremely popular through the innovative and modern constructions in cinematography and the brilliant and purposeful utilization of misc-en-scene. One cannot think of Noir film without thinking of Los Angeles and this dependence is significant in the genre’s success. The motion pictures of Noir changes the perspective that the audience views Los Angeles in an exceptionally dramatic and memorable way.