

# Neo-Noir

*The New Film Noir Style from  
Psycho to Collateral*

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## Introduction

Film noir and neo-noir are cinema styles that date to as early as the 1940s and continue into the twenty-first century. *Noir* is a French word meaning “black,” and although “film noir” literally means “black film,” it refers to the mood of the films made between 1940 and 1959 on black-and-white film stock, in which a male protagonist is usually led to his destruction by a femme fatale and winds up getting neither the money nor the dame.

The French critic Nino Frank coined the term “film noir” in 1946, and the French authors Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumont, in their seminal (and recently translated) critical work *Panorama du film noir américain*, used “noir” to describe a particular sort of cinema produced in the United States from just before and after World War II until the late 1950s.

Some American critics cite *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) as the first real “film noir,” but I prefer to think of *Citizen Kane* and *Stranger on the Third Floor* (both 1940 productions) as the real start of American noir. Many pre-noir antecedents date back to the early 1930s, such as *Scarface*, and either *Odds against Tomorrow* or *Touch of Evil* (both 1958 productions) can be seen as noir’s terminal signpost. It must be said that no American director during that period ever used the word “noir,” nor did he or she set out to create a style or genre. It was the French critics who applied the term “noir” to this group of films that shared a similar photographic, artistic, and thematic style. Therefore, noir is not a genre, but an unconscious stylistic movement shared by many directors in 1940s and 1950s Hollywood.

It is also certain that societal influences contributed to the design of these popular films. Their thematic pessimism can be attributed to the post–World War II disillusionment of returning servicemen about a variety of issues, such as their replacement by women in the workforce and their lack of adjustment to postwar values. Coincidentally, there was a rise of acceptance of the new “hard-boiled” school of writers, whose escapist, masculine themes provided entertainment during the war years. The novels of James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, David Goodis, Dashiell Hammett, and Cornell Woolrich were widely read and provided the “raw material” for films noirs. Also, because of new high-speed film stock and the ease of photographing outside of the studio (on location), real people and streets were used in a great number of films of the period. And finally, many émigré directors from France and Germany, who filmed in Hollywood and on locations, brought with them a style of “expressionist” cinema that developed in Europe in the early 1930s and reached fulfillment in the films noirs of the 1940s and 1950s.

There are many qualities and characteristics of film noir:

1. Chiaroscuro lighting (or low-key lighting)
2. Screenplays set in urban milieus filmed mostly at night
3. Frequent images of water and reflections of street life
4. Inverted frames (cameras held diagonally and/or vertically, reflecting the inner thoughts of the protagonist)
5. Very complex and convoluted plots usually expressed in a voice-over by a central character, a detective, or a femme fatale who “flashes back” to the past

There is much violence and crime; eroticism and hetero- and homosexuality abound. Characters share obsessive behavior; males are generally untrusting and misogynistic, and become victims of their own paranoia. All of the aforementioned characteristics are framed in a pervasive darkness; photographers combine low-key lighting with deep-focus shots that provide a claustrophobic ambience. The viewer is constantly jarred by the editing of the film, always surprised by the asymmetrical compositions within the frame of the camera, the mystery of the plot, the xenophobia of the characters as they move through the darkness toward an unknown conclusion.

Neo-noir, the “new noir,” is a direct outgrowth of the film noir style. Although most American film critics feel that either *Harper* (1966) or *Chinatown* (1974) is the first signpost for the emergence of the new noir, I feel it is Alfred Hitchcock’s seminal film *Psycho* (1960) in which the reemergence of

film noir begins, but with several new spins. Still a style and definitely *not* a genre, neo-noir has the following qualities:

1. Color and the latest projection technology (CinemaScope and the like)
2. A less restrictive rating system, allowing for greater screen violence, nudity, and harsher themes on screen
3. Remakes from the old “hard-boiled” school of detective fiction
4. Instead of good/bad detectives, screenplays deal with good/bad cops
5. The emergence of the serial killer

Where film noir always deals with con artists, petty gangsters, and psychopaths, these characters have been upgraded to grifters, techno-noir gangsters, and sci-fi psychopaths in a variety of new noir labelings that boggle the mind, such as “future noir,” “agrarian noir,” “techno-noir,” “parody noir.” But all these new noirs contain many of the elements of the 1940s and 1950s films, updating them from the 1960s onward.

My mission in this book is not to redefine film noir but to come up with a definition of the neo-noir style as a transposition of art, sometimes from original films noirs. I also hope to provide along the way some entertaining perceptions of the films under consideration and to show how these two unique styles of peculiarly American cinema reflect changes in American social mores.

So, neo-noir is a style of filmmaking that began in the early 1960s and fiercely continues into the present, showing the dark side of American life and dreams. This style includes crime, suspense, and thriller movies and has been created by writers, photographers, composers, directors, and actors who have insistently sought to encode and reinvent the darkest moods and motives of the American character.

Neo-noir, or the “new noir,” is a film trend that is harsh and reflective of the cynicism of forty years of the Cold War, nuclear unrest, fiscal uncertainties, and the sexual revolution. Neo-noir tackles stories and themes not attempted by its stylistic predecessor, film noir: deeply corrupt cops, serial killers, psychopaths, and young fugitive couples running from the law, among other themes. Neo-noir contains doomed characters and presents melodramatic, psychological, detective, and western themes. It utilizes a vast variety of technical innovations that began in the mid-1950s with CinemaScope, VistaVision, and the use of wide screen and color. It also intensifies the violent aspects of earlier noir cinema and causes viewers to squirm, even flee the theaters.

The intense social climate in America of the 1960s and 1970s created a pregnant atmosphere for the emergence of neo-noir. A new generation began to question many traditional and prevalent values of American society. The highly unpopular Vietnam War was a great source of disillusionment. The Watergate scandal and the resultant impeachment of president Richard Nixon created an attitude of cynicism in the minds of most Americans. These events, among others, brought about a mood of hopelessness and resignation very much like the pessimism that reigned from 1941 to 1959, the peak period of film noir, neo-noir's immediate stylistic and thematic predecessor.

The neo-noir spirit boldly surfaces in entertainments such as *Psycho* (1960), *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *Chinatown* (1974), *Body Heat* (1981), and *Blood Simple* (1985). Among films of the 1990s, *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *Mulholland Falls* (1996), and *L. A. Confidential* (1997) carry forward an underlying spiritual pessimism regarding contemporary existence. The relationship of these films to the past is also crucial because the writers and directors make use of film noir models and moods, improving on them to help reinterpret and comment on the moral bankruptcy of contemporary America. A 1990s audience already had the sensibility to accept earlier film noir styles and ideologies, but the new films were in color and CinemaScope. We can assume today that viewers have a certain cultural advantage and have mastered film noir styles, so that they may read or decode modern noir or neo-noir films.

Like Spencer Selby's definitive work on film noir, this volume is divided into two sections: the first is an analysis of the thirty-two best neo-noir films beginning in 1960, elucidating the reasons why they indeed belong to this stylistic trend called "neo-noir." The second section consists of an alphabetical filmography and ratings of over 650 films made from the 1960s to the present. The filmography includes the film title, year of release, director, and a line or two about its essential plot and its pertinence to the neo-noir trend. Starred ratings after each title also enhance the reader's choices by indicating the very best neo-noirs, as well as some excellent, good, and even poor examples of the style.

When you write a "comprehensive" film book that steps into the murky territory of film style, and your intention is to guide readers through over forty years of American cinema and illuminate the cultural importance and broad appeal of this style of filmmaking, you always run into difficulties. The problem, particularly with neo-noir, is in selecting films that elucidate an in-depth approach and corroborate your views of those intriguingly dark aspects of the American psyche.

So, at the outset, let me state that the selection of films that this book encompasses is entirely personal. I have tried to acknowledge the “classics” as well as give brief nods to the popular films of the neo-noir style. Although Silver and Ward’s classic book *Film Noir* (3rd edition) served me well as a basic outline, and Todd Erickson’s master’s thesis is the best in-depth work I have ever read on neo-noir, I have used them as springboards to enhance my own critical analysis of these styles. Fortunately, no author has a monopoly on film criticism, especially as concerns noir, après noir, faux noir, the new noir, and neo-noir.

As this book was going to press, there were so, so many articles recently written about neo-noir as a conscious genre (about which I still cannot agree). J. M. Roberts in an Internet article makes the case that neo-noir is greatly affected by color technology and changes in production code. He divides the “conscious genre” (his words) into eight categories. Two of his categories are remakes (the hard-boiled type) and faux noir, in which the conscious auteur/director deliberately makes a film that can be classified as noir, tech-noir, parody noir, pastiche noir, new age detective noir, con artist/small time gangster noir, or serial murder/psychopath noir (often overlapping with the film dominated by a good/bad/indifferent cop). These films, Roberts claims, are all style and no substance. Roberts’s opinions deserve to be mentioned, though not necessarily adhered to. He also begins his appraisal with *Chinatown* in the 1970s and ends with *L. A. Confidential* in the late 1990s.

Also, in the summer of 1997, David Schwartz, film curator at the American Museum of the Moving Image curated a show entitled “Nouveau Noir,” showing some thirty films made for theaters and television that represent the new noir style. Moreover, noir critic and writer Forster Hirsch devoted a whole volume to the concept of the new noir style, *Detours and Dead Ends: A Map of Neo-Noir*. His subtitle supports my contention that neo-noir is an accepted critical signifier and identifier of many crime films post-1960 that embrace the former film noir style.

One last note: neo-noir continues to permeate international cinema as well. The Mexican *Amores Perros*, the French films *Crimson Rivers* and *With a Friend Like Harry*, the German *Run Lola, Run*, the Japanese *Audition*, and the Spanish *Mala Educacion*, among many others, deserve a volume unto themselves.

So I offer my readers this book of fascinating ideas by a cinephile who has watched film noir as a child and has grown up and matured with the eruption of the new noir, or neo-noir. My feeling is that neo-noir as a cinematic style trend will continue beyond the millennium. For as long as there are men and women involved in crime and seduction, noirs will endure.

## A Note about Ratings in This Book

Starred ratings for major films are as follows:

- \*\*\*\* Outstanding
- \*\*\* Excellent
- \*\* Good
- \* Poor

No stars: watchable but missable; for the die-hard noir  
and neo-noir fan only