Film Noir
Genre Study

Literally ‘black film’

Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)
Background

- In the early 1940s a new form of cinema emerged in the United States. Dark and gloomy it reflected the anxieties of a country entering a new era and was a rejection of the Hollywood glamour of the 1930s.
- The early forties generated an economic boom as entered World War II. But after the war some became concerned by the clash between idealism and materialism.
- Add to this equation paranoia of Russia and communism and we have the climate of suspicion and unease.
- First: The Maltese Falcon (1941) Starring Humphrey Bogart as detective Sam Spade and the last in the classic period: Touch of Evil (1958) Orson Wells and starring Charlton Heston.
Atmosphere/ Mood – these words should appear in film notes and essays about Film Noir movies

- Melancholy
- Alienation
- Bleakness
- Disillusionment
- Disenchantment
- Pessimism
- Ambiguity
- Moral corruption
- Evil
- Guilt
- Paranoia.
The ingredients of classic film noir

#1

- Dark, shadowy, contrasting images filmed in black and white, often at night and usually in gritty urban settings.
Ingredients of classic film noir

#2

- Hard-boiled, cynical, disillusioned characters – who, nevertheless, are usually likeable.
Ingredients of classic film noir

#3

- **A male protagonist facing a moral dilemma and/or some kind of threat**

  He is usually a hard working, “brooding, menacing, sinister, sardonic, disillusioned, frightened and insecure man who is alienated from society” (Tims1996).

  He is a loner hidden in the big city who makes his way through desolate districts and other filthy and ghetto-like areas of his environment looking for possible hints/clues for his work.

- There is no place for happiness, he does not become rich or find happiness with a woman.

- It is through his eyes that the audience is shown a world dominated by corruption and greed, violence and crime where there is fine line between right and wrong.
The ingredients of classic film noir

#4

- **The femme fatale (deadly woman):** the one posing on the cover/poster with a gun, a cocktail glass and a smouldering cigarette.

- She’s gorgeous, unloving, predatory, unreliable, manipulative and desperate.

- She’s an alluring, sassy, independent and usually dangerous woman, who often suffers for her independence.

- She is sometimes a sexual predator who tempts and weakens a male protagonist and sometimes she actually initiates male aggression and gains male power.

- Unlike the ‘housewife’ the femme fatale’s independence, sexual prowess and ambitions jeopardise not only the protagonist, but the entire system.
Ingredients of film noir

#5

- Often a crime or detective story
Ingredients of classic film noir

#6

- Flashbacks – a wavering past and present, inextricably linked.
Ingredients of classic film noir

#7

- **A voice-over narration**
- A frame story
- The set-up
- Establishes POV
Ingredients of classic film noir

#8

- **Crisp, witty dialogue, sprinkled with great one-liners**

  "You're like a leaf that blows from one gutter to another."
  ~ *Out of the Past* (1947)

  "With my brains and your looks, we could go places."
  ~ *The Postman always rings twice* (1946)

  "When you're slapped, you'll take it and like it."
  ~ *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)

  "I have no memory. It's like looking in a mirror and seeing nothing but mirror."
  ~ *Spellbound* (1945)

  "I was born when she kissed me. I died when she left me. I lived a few weeks while she loved me."
  ~ *In a Lonely Place* (1950)
Ingredients of classic film noir

#9

- A healthy dose of paranoia or,
- at the very least, a strong sense of betrayal, insecurity or sense of being trapped.

Bogart in *The Big Sleep* (1946)
Ingredients of classic film noir

#10

- Angst, American style
- Anger
- Revenge
- Tension
#11

- No happy ending.
- A happy ending turns a film noir into *film gris* or a melodrama done in noir style.
Ingredients of classic film noir

#12

- Disorientating camera angles, distorted close-ups and lighting that fills the frame with shafts of light and shadow to create a world of claustrophobia and fear.