

Glorification of violence in film noir research paper example

[Sociology](#), [Violence](#)



The influence of media on criminals and killers has been oft-publicized; regardless of the positions people take on the extent to which film, television and other mass media influences our collective unconscious, it is clear that certain genres or portrayals of sex and violence in popular culture heavily influence our personalities, attitudes and preferences (Seltzer 2007). To that end, the exploration of these types of media is an essential part of exploring the psychology of the killer, serial or otherwise. For the past century, film has become an important part of our new cultural mythology; movie characters become our role models as we take cues from their personalities, attitudes, and behaviors (Surette 2010). In order to understand the influence of media, particularly film noir, on violent offenders, it is vital to understand the psychological and filmic frameworks which result in media that glamorizes or fetishizes the act of violence - the casual and alluring depiction of violence that triggers our tacit acceptance of said acts as a normal behavior, given sufficient exposure and individual psychological condition.

Film noir is a genre of film that originated in the 1940s and 1950s which is characterized by extremely stylish cinematography, plots and scenarios involving crimes and murder, and overall pessimistic, sexually charged and cynical portrayals of the world around them. Film noir films tend to be comprised primarily of crime dramas that were produced in Hollywood during the Golden Age of cinema, and employs various cinematic techniques such as high-contrast lighting, Expressionist cinematography, and narrative bookends or narration (Naremore 2008).

Two of the most prominent examples of film noir in cinematic history are 1944's *Double Indemnity* and *Laura*, directed by Billy Wilder and Otto Preminger, respectively. In both works, murder is a primary subject for the film, whether it is being investigated or contemplated. Both films feature alluring, sensual and desired female leads (known in the genre as *femme fatales*), and masculine, aggressive protagonists. In the former film, an insurance salesman schemes with his female accomplice to murder her husband for a huge insurance payout; in the latter film, a detective falls for a murder victim who may not be as dead as she seems. These works explore the dirty world of high-class crime, showcasing decadent and sophisticated individuals who largely benefit from their crimes. The gritty details of the murders in each film are obsessed over by the characters, making the whole plot about the logistics and sensational nature of taking another life (Leitch 2002). Together, these films exemplify the quintessential elements of film noir, and could be said to make crime into a fascinating subject, which could inspire real-world killers to emulate this behavior (McNulty and Pulham 2011).

In this paper, I will argue that the rise of film noir in the 1940s inserted into the popular cultural consciousness the idea that the crime of murder is alluring, tempting and glamorous, emphasizing the modern world as a society of corruption, lewd desire and self-interest. For the purposes of this project, this argument will be explored through textual analysis of two major works in the film noir genre: the 1944 films *Double Indemnity* and *Laura*. By examining the various elements of plot, cinematography and character, not

to mention mood and mise-en-scene, one can discover the various aspects of the genre that glamorize violence. I will also rely on scholarship from the fields of psychology and philosophy, as well as film criticism, to provide learned and expert perspectives on the various aspects of film noir, and the connection between filmed violence and real-life violence.

The significance of this project largely relates to the understanding that we have regarding the influence of film and other types of popular culture on real-world crime and violence. Film noir, as some of the first, most prominent examples of fetishized, detailed violence on screen, can be said to be a huge influence on crime films and works of other genres in terms of style and subject matter. The huge success of film noir as a genre contributed to the continuation of the study of sex and violence into later films, creating a media culture that is steeped in the glamorization of violence. These same cultural attitudes are bred into the audience of these films through their exposure to such portrayals of violence, paving the way for the tacit endorsement or glamorization of murder.

This investigation will be performed in three different stages. First, the genre of film noir in and of itself will be defined through the eyes of film critics and historians. Secondly, the connection between filmed violence and sex and real-life attitudes toward those activities will be explored through various historians, critics and psychologists. Finally, I will compare these theories and attributes regarding popular culture and film noir to the films *Double Indemnity* and *Laura*. The overall purpose is to form connections between the beautiful and painful nature of violence as portrayed in those films to the

attitudes that lead to serial killing (or murder as a general practice). It is hoped that this project will form a better understanding of the connection between media and culture, as well as recognize this particular genre's role in that connection.

Film Noir

The genre of film noir is an expansion of the classic Hollywood genre of film known as the crime film. The crime film persists as one of the most popular and enduring of all types of Hollywood films - ever since the sound era, it has remained a particularly potent and popular genre (Leitch 1). Crime films typically depict scenes of criminal activity and violence, whether it be through the drug trade, murder, or other kinds of wrongdoing from which some characters have to step outside the law. Serial killers, mob bosses, crimes of passion and more are all the subject of these types of films, which present a genre unto themselves (though the various ways in which they are presented have changed over the years) (2). While the styles, cinematography, acting and editing over the years of crime films has changed, the overall subject matter remains the same.

Film noir began in the 1940s as a response to the German Expressionism that was rising in popularity in the previous decades. In Germany, many artists fled the country, given the rise of World War II, and settled in America, which is largely responsible for the influx of this type of art form into the United States (Naremore 4). Film noir, as a genre, is a particularly stylish type of crime film, which again shows criminal activity or its investigation through particular stylistic and cinematographic leanings. Film noir often

evades direct definition, but there are unique attributes to the genre that must be considered. Stories typically involve strong, stoic male protagonists wrestling with issues related to crime on either side of the law; some leads of noir films are detectives, others are criminals. Often, crimes involve murder of some kind, are tied in closely with the pursuit of money whether legal or illegal, and on occasion the mob or the drug trade is part of the story (Leitch 5).

The femme fatale is one particular hallmark of film noir that is particularly defining to its structure. This character archetype is a cold, strong and calculating female, often a love interest for the protagonists while having her own agenda. Instead of being a damsel in distress, she has a cool control over her demeanor and is often manipulating either the protagonist or other characters for her own ends. These characters are presented as dangerous, alluring and stunningly beautiful - they were an indicator in American culture of changing attitudes about women as more assertive and independent, a product of post-suffrage America (Naremore 20). In essence, the stories and character types of film noir evoke a certain "noir sensibility" that came out of the end of World War II; the decline of realism and naturalism in cinema erupted as a result of the desire to understand violence, romantic isolation and modernism - noir and its abstractions paved the way for this to occur (Naremore 13, 14).

Some of the most clearly defining traits of film noir lie in their dramatic and evocative cinematography. Much of the lighting is low-key, which means that there is not much diffusion to the light in the frame, creating stark shadows

and clear-cut contrasts between light and dark. (This thematic and subtextual obsession with the difference between light and darkness in noir will come into play later in the paper.) One noted example is the use of Venetian blinds to create a nickelodeon-like effect of strips of light across an actor's face or body, demonstrating the troubled nature of their actions or attitudes (Naremore 189). Compositions of shots are usually unbalanced, where a character or object in focus will be heavily on one side of the frame or the other, creating an uneasiness within the audience that befits the depicted situation. The Dutch angle (in which the camera is tilted to create a disorienting effect in the shot) is another hallmark of film noir (Naremore 80).

The 1944 films *Double Indemnity* and *Laura* both fit these criteria for qualification as film noir. Both are ostensibly 'crime films,' with events in the plot dealing primarily with murders or attempted murders. The protagonists of each film, Detective Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews) and Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray), respectively, are stoic, masculine men who are always calm and collected as they go about their business. Marlene Dietrichson (Barbra Stanwyck) and Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney) are the femme fatales of their respective films, presenting themselves as alluring women whose relationship with the protagonist is never what it seems. The cinematography of both films features the same concept of low-key lighting and skewed shot composition that embody the genre, and the themes of the conflict between good and evil are explored in the morally dubious actions of many of the characters. Through these various elements, a story and a world of ethical grey areas is formed, one which follows the genre of film noir.

However, given the right psychological inclinations, this same aestheticizing of violence can lead to a glorification of murder in and of itself, which will be covered in the next section.

The Influence of Film Noir on Real Violence

The aforementioned section outlined the various aspects of film noir that lead to their aesthetic beauty and common themes; in receiving this content through engaging with the material, people are privy to substantive effects on their psyche as a result of consuming violent media. Substantial research, as indicated in the following, has indicated that there are substantial connections and correlations between filmic violence and real violence. The genre of film noir, in particular, which revolutionized and popularized the glamorization and aestheticism of violence, connects those of the right mindset to a world of few consequences and the easy ability to murder.

When examining violent crime, it is absolutely necessary to examine the socioeconomic and moral status of the society to which such a person belongs (Palermo and Kocsis 2005). The presence of violence and murder in films such as those belonging to the film noir genre create a dehumanizing effect in those with criminal minds or those more prone to violence (Palermo and Kocsis 52). Media in general has a unique fascination with death and murder - shows often glamorize the scene of a crime, or the act of a murder, through procedural television shows and serial killer films. One perspective this creates in modern America is the "wound culture" - in this, we have a cultural fixation on trauma and the places where they happen. By watching this kind of violence or its aftermath on television, we experience what is

called " proxy witnessing and referred mourning" (Seltzer 170). Killers seem to have a positive response to this, as they see the effect they have on an " audience" provided by film and television, and seek out violence as a result.

The portrayal of killers and murderers in films offers a unique psychological effect on its audience - potentially resulting in the creation of or contribution to serial killers. The serial killer is often portrayed as being one step ahead of the police, as law enforcement is barely a presence in these types of films, film noir in particular (Packer 2007). The protagonists in these kinds of films are portrayed as rugged individualists with very loose morals; this creates a glamorous portrayal of those who kill, as they are doing so because they are given the right implicitly by the film. By presenting this type of violence in a casual, necessary light, the act of murder is thereby tacitly approved, and it becomes easier for the individual to imagine themselves murdering (Packer 2007).

The serial killer is a uniquely celebrated figure in film noir. Characters such as Peter Lorre's in *M* offer sophisticated, mercurial figures who are so far outside the norm the audience cannot help but admire or be fascinated by them (Simpson 2010). Influences from Gothic figures and other types of folklore contribute to the creation of the serial killer in film as a kind of wraith, a boogeyman that makes the occupation even more compelling to those who wish to emulate it. The " film noir outsider" in particular, the Humphrey Bogarts and Peter Lorres of the genre, are important cultural influences that contribute to the creation of modern-day serial killers, both in film and in reality (Simpson 2010). This is not helped by the implicit

assumption that the police, as an entity are useless, as the protagonists in film noir are typically private detectives or otherwise unique figures who can figure out what the killer is up to. As a result, the information being fed to the audience is that killers and murderers can easily elude law enforcement, making the act of violence easier to visualize getting away with (Surette 2010).

Media is shown to have a huge effect on how people perceive the world around them; in the case of those who are predisposed to violence, it can present them with a world in which killers are unique, intelligent individuals who can get away with their crime due to their own cunning and baffled law enforcement. The presence of copycat crimes, which sometimes emulate murders shown on films and in television, cements the notion that killers, serial or otherwise, can take their cues from films and film noir in order to satisfy their social aggression (Surette 2010).

The Glorification of Violence as it Pertains to Double Indemnity and Laura

Now that film noir has been defined, and the connection between this genre and others to real violence, the films *Double Indemnity* and *Laura* will be shown to be incredible examples of the film noir genre's ability to influence those with the right mindset to become killers. The glorification and aestheticizing of violence and murder, as portrayed through these films, offers a tacit endorsement of the kind of behavior shown by the characters.

The protagonists of both films provide either models for behavior as a murderer or the tacit acceptance of loose morality and lack of consideration

for human life. In the case of *Double Indemnity*, the type of crime that is the focus of the film - namely, that of an insurance-rated murder that is performed for commercial purposes - is well-documented among scholars and researchers of those who kill, serial killers in particular (Newton 186). Those who kill regularly often do so for specific reasons that benefit them in the future, not just out of spite or coldness. Those who kill for profit are known as comfort killers, and *Double Indemnity* demonstrates the cold potential of such a crime being carried out, with Walter Neff and Marlene Dietrichson killing to get money.

Walter Neff, despite arguably never doing anything like this in his life, finds himself attracted to Marlene Dietrichson, to the point where he would kill for her. With his knowledge of insurance fraud and the law, he hatches a calculated scheme in order to kill Marlene's husband and collect the insurance claim; the fastidiousness and the preparation of the crime is laid out in incredible detail, with the tension and suspense of whether or not they will manage to pull it off driving much of the narrative. By doing this, the film acknowledges that what they are doing is wrong, but that excitement places the audience in the place of the killers. Making Walter sympathetic and even enviable, through his easy charm and starkly lit face (another staple of film noir), makes the audience implicitly agree with Walter's doings.

In *Laura*, the protagonist this time is on the right side of the law - Detective Mark McPherson comes from the same school of protagonist as Neff, as film noir leads are "historically male, sexual, debonair, hard-boiled, and smart," and they often live "on the borderline between criminality and the law-

abiding" (Surette 99). He is cunning and wise, but still falls for the presumed-dead Laura Hunt. While he is much more of a good man than the film's villain, Waldo Lydecker, he is still considered a bad boy, and much far ahead of the case than the rest of his fellow policemen. The authorities are also equally inept in *Double Indemnity* as well - they are barely a presence in the film, most of the threat to Neff's murder scheme coming from his insurance investigator colleague Keyes (Edward G. Robinson).

The violence in both films is incredibly aestheticized, as is part and parcel of the film noir genre's ability to beautifully film the grotesque. Ominous figures in both films are framed in shadow, with long silhouettes creeping against walls. Venetian blinds allude to both sensuality and deadly purpose when framing the actor's eyes and face, providing a visual metaphor for the interplay between light and darkness that occurs in most individuals (Leitch 135). Revolvers, the weapon of choice for killers in film noir, are presented as the ultimate means of extracting power from a situation; when Marlene, Waldo or Walter present them, they suddenly have control over the situation (Leitch 136). This offers glorification of violence and murder, and connects the wielding of deadly weapons with power and control, all very desirable things in even the most mentally adjusted individual (Waller, Allhoff and Doris 95).

In *Double Indemnity*, Neff kills Marlene in the middle of an embrace, implicitly connecting death with sexual pleasure and intimacy. Waldo Lydecker, the killer in *Laura*, also kills for love - his final gun attack on McPherson's sergeants is filmed very kinetically, with the camera close in on

him in an action-hero stance, dollying back to track his murderous barrage of gunfire. Looking at these scenes from a purely aesthetic perspective, they are some of the most beautiful in the entire film - by connecting our senses of beauty with that of violence, we start to get closer to the "wound culture" that is now prevalent in America (Seltzer 170).

Conclusion

The influence of media on violence cannot be ignored - research indicates substantial connection between the images that we see on screen, or events we experience, and our own attitudes and actions (Surette 2010). Film noir, as a genre, is one of the most historical, influential, and aesthetically stylized genres of film to cover the subject matter of crime fiction (Leitch 126). Its combination of alluring, amoral characters provides an easy outlet for audiences to connect to and admire those for whom the life of others has little meaning. The inherent evil of man is a frequent topic of film noir, and it presents it through dark, stylized cinematography that presents the world of the noir killer as painterly and sophisticated. The police, all except for specifically unique and compelling detectives (if they are the leads, of course) are useless and simple to fool, making it look easy to get away with murder. The wound culture present in modern society is an extension of that; we are obsessed with filmed portrayals of violence, even in the aftermath (Seltzer 2007). Film noir provides an early and compelling example of the factors that led to the development of that culture. In *Double Indemnity* and *Laura*, violent acts are presented with incredible beauty, and perpetuated by handsome leading men, beautiful leading women, and sophisticated

supporting characters. (Waldo Lydecker, with his posh elegance and searing wit, very much matches the Peter Lorre formula for intriguing serial killers that is the hallmark of film noir.) These factors, having formed the basis for aesthetically pleasing violence in much of modern film, provide glorified portrayals of violence that absolutely have the potential to inspire others to act out the actions of its characters.

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