

Film noir

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Towards a Definition of Film Noir (1955) In the excerpt Towards a Definition of Film Noir, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton address the problem of defining film noir. The main issue is the diversity and interrelationships across genres that make the task daunting. While the term film noir may have been coined by influential critics in France, the birthplace of the genre is Hollywood. Many adjectives come to mind when thinking of film noir, but any given film can contain any permutation of these qualities. For example, qualities such as night-marish, weird, erotic, cruel or ambivalent can readily be associated with the genre. Yet this list is not exhaustive. Thrillers such as *This Gun for Hire*, *The Big Sleep* and *The Lady in the Lake* are as much part of the genre as are the more experimental *Call Northside 777*, *The House on the 92nd Street* and *The Naked City*. Whatmore, compounding the problem of definition of film noir are the various renowned directors who have embraced the genre. Household names like Billy Wilder, John Huston, Otto Preminger, Robert Siodmak and Fritz Lang have all contributed to film noir. These luminous directors have not merely restricted themselves to film noir but have acquired fame for works in other genres. Hence classification on the basis of director groupings is also inadequate in defining film noir. Perhaps the only definitive quality is that the genre came into its own in the decade after the Second World War. It was an era of morose and confusion, as people (both in the United States and Europe) were grappling with evil tendencies in human nature – something film noir faithfully captures. In my opinion, authors Borde and Chaumeton do a commendable job of attempting to define the genre. They lay out the broader categories into which it falls, which incidentally complicate the problem. Finally, their definition of the

genre in terms of its emotional effects on the audience – the state of tension and a specific psychological alienation imposed on the spectator – is something I agree with.

Notes on Film Noir (1972) by Paul Schrader

The author begins by acknowledging the difficulties in defining film noir. Contrasting it with other established genres like horror or western, Schrader reckons that the differentiating quality of film noir is its subtle yet dark tone and mood. More than qualities inherent to the film, its periodic setting and its production in the forties and early fifties are better markers of the genre. There were four key socio-political conditions during this period which were instrumental in the birth of film noir. The first was war and post-war disillusionment. The second was the gaining popularity of post-war realism. Thirdly the German influence on Hollywood was getting traction. Finally, the growing prominence of “hard-boiled” school of writers within mainstream cinema. What also distinguishes film noir is its stylistic elements and themes. In terms of style, the dominant night scenes, elements of German expressionism, lighting emphasis on both characters and props, as well as the presence of compositional tension, are all unique to film noir. One can also add the complex chronological ordering of narration to the list. In sum, in my opinion, author Paul Schrader does a commendable job of getting to the heart of the cinematic genre. His systematic way of identifying and articulating characteristics unique to the genre is particularly impressive.

References:

Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton (1955), Towards a Definition of Film

Noir, excerpted from *Panorama du Film Noir Americain*), p. 17-25.

Paul Schrader, *Notes on Film Noir* (1972), *Film Noir Reader*, p. 53-63.