

Film noir and its criminal influence 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.

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