

Existentialism and film noir

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Existentialism and Film Noir Existentialism and its worldview are believed to have derived from Nietzsche's provocative and controversial statement "God is dead". The underlying meaning to Nietzsche's controversial statement is that empirical natural science has replaced metaphysical explanations of the world. As a result of this, according to Nietzsche we no longer have any sense of who and what we are as human beings.

He concludes that no foundation exists anymore for the meaning and value of things. Nietzsche's philosophy shines light on what film noir is. That is, an artistic response to, or recognition of, this alteration in our understanding of the world. To emphasize the existentialist attitude in film noir, various stylistic and thematic techniques are used.

Common techniques or characteristics of film noir that we see in both *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Killers* include: unconventional or non-classical narrative patterns, opposition of light and shadow, disorientation of the viewer, incoherent plot lines, inversion of traditional values and its corresponding moral ambivalence, non-chronological ordering of events, and characters whose actions are not motivated or understandable in any rational way.

The similarities of characteristics between existentialism and film noir are prominent; for example, Siodmak and Huston distinguish the alienation and disorientation of a post-Nietzschean world, one without transcendent meaning or value. The constant opposition of light and shadow as seen in *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Killers*, helps communicate the dark characteristics of a post-Nietzschean world. For instance, when the swede

peacefully awaits his assassins, we get a sense of estrangement and lack of sense and meaning.

This lack of sense and meaning is further emphasized when the room goes dark and you see him from the neck down in light, but the face is in total shadow. A sense of despair is created through this camera technique by showing that no one else is in the room, leaving him hopeless to escape. A common characteristic of film noir that we see in both *The Maltese Falcon*, and *The Killers*, is the use of unconventional or non-classical narrative patterns. The use of non-classical narrative patterns emphasizes the cynical characteristics of a post-Nietzschean world.

For instance, in *The Maltese Falcon*, Miss Ruth Wonderly initially claims to Spade and Archer to be searching for her sister, however her true intentions were to implicate Thursby her unwanted accomplice by killing Archer. Miss Ruth Wonderly's contemptuous behavior coincides with the pessimistic view about the nature and purpose of human life. Non-classical patterns are established through various stylistic techniques. Such as the non-chronological ordering of events, often achieved through flashbacks. An example of this technique is seen in *The Killers*, when flashbacks are used to tell the story leading up to Ole Andersen's death.

The use of flashbacks and complicated sometimes-incoherent plot lines, as in *The Maltese Falcon*, are examples of the stylistic techniques that are used in film noir to communicate the mood and sensibility. A final common technique that is used in film noir is portraying characters whose actions are not motivated or understandable in any rational way. For example, why does Miss Wonderly lie about her name and objective in the beginning of *The*
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Maltese Falcon when she is sure to get caught at some point? By portraying the characters in this manner, Huston leaves the viewer with unanswered questions, leading to the disorientation of the viewer.

It has been argued that film noir cannot be defined, therefore has no essential characteristics. That being said, considering noir as a response to the death of god helps explain the commonality of elements that philosophers have recognized in noir films. Moreover, the directors of *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Killers* use of thematic and stylistic characteristics in their films make them two of the best examples of film noir. They clearly depict a world of the post-Nietzschean period in their films, that is one of despair, alienation, and paranoia, which is essentially an existential attitude towards life.