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Film noir (literally 'black film,' from French critics who noticed how dark and black the looks and themes were of these films) is a style of American films which evolved in the 1940s. Classic film noir developed during and after World War II, taking advantage of the post-war ambience of anxiety and suspicion. Film noir is a distinct branch of the [crime/gangster](#) sagas from the 1930s, but different in tone and characterization. The crime element in film noir is a metaphoric symptom of society's evils, with a strong undercurrent of moral conflict. Strictly speaking however, film noir is not a genre.

The primary moods of classic *film noir* are melancholy, alienation, bleakness, disillusionment, disenchantment, pessimism, ambiguity, moral corruption, evil, guilt and paranoia. Heroes (or anti-heroes), corrupt characters and villains include down-and-out, hard-boiled detectives or private eyes, gangsters, crooks, petty criminals, murderers, and *femme fatales* - duplicitous, double-crossing, predatory, tough-sweet, and desperate women. These protagonists are often from the dark and gloomy underworld of violent crime and corruption. Distinctively, they are cynical, tarnished, obsessive (sexual or otherwise), brooding, menacing, sinister, sardonic, disillusioned, frightened and insecure loners, struggling to survive.

Film noir films (often in black and white) show the dark and inhumane side of human nature with cynicism, and they emphasize the brutal, unhealthy, seamy, shadowy, dark and sadistic sides of the human experience. Film noir is marked by expressionistic lighting (reminiscent of German Expressionism), disorienting visual schemes, circling cigarette smoke, existential sensibilities, and unbalanced compositions. Settings are often interiors with low-key lighting, venetian-blinded windows, and dark and gloomy appearances. Exteriors are often night scenes with deep shadows, wet asphalt, rain-slicked or mean streets, flashing neon lights, and low key lighting. Story locations are often in murky and dark streets, dimly-lit apartments and hotel rooms of big cities. An atmosphere of menace, anxiety, suspicion that anything can go wrong, dingy realism, fatalism, defeat and entrapment are stylized characteristics of *film noir*. Narratives are frequently complex and convoluted, typically with flashbacks or voice-over narration. Revelations regarding the hero are made to explain/justify the hero's own cynical perspective on life.

The earliest film noirs were detective thrillers, with plots and themes often taken from adaptations of literary words - preferably from hard-boiled, pulp novels and crime fiction by Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain or Dashiell Hammett. Very often, a film noir story was developed around a male character [e.g., Robert Mitchum, Fred MacMurray, or Humphrey

Bogart] who encountered a beautiful but promiscuous *femme fatale* [e.g., Veronica Lake, Barbara Stanwyck, or Lana Turner] who used her sexuality to manipulate him into murder. After a double-cross, she was destroyed, but often at the cost of the hero's life.

One of the first detective films to use the shadowy, nihilistic noir style was the work of director John Huston in the classic ★[The Maltese Falcon \(1941\)](#), famous for Humphrey Bogart's cool private eye hero Sam Spade. Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake were paired in two film noirs in the same year, **The Glass Key (1942)** and **This Gun For Hire (1942)**, and were reteamed again in **The Blue Dahlia (1946)**. One of the quintessential film noirs of the early period was director Jacques Tourneur's ★[Out of the Past \(1947\)](#), with Robert Mitchum playing the doomed, double-crossed private eye with one of the best of all femme fatales - Jane Greer.

Raymond Chandler's gumshoe Philip Marlowe, often portrayed by different actors, was the main character in **Murder, My Sweet (1944)** (with Dick Powell), in the classic Howard Hawks film ★[The Big Sleep \(1946\)](#) (with Humphrey Bogart), in **Lady in the Lake (1946)** (with Robert Montgomery), **Farewell, My Lovely (1975)** - a remake of the 1944 film (with Robert Mitchum), and in Robert Altman's **The Long Goodbye (1973)** (with Elliott Gould).

Early classic non-detective film noirs include Fritz Lang's fatalistic **Scarlet Street (1945)**, one of the moodiest, blackest thrillers ever made, ★[The Third Man \(1949\)](#), and the nightmarish **D.O.A. (1950)**, the story of a poisoned and doomed protagonist.

Twisted, shocking melodramatic film noirs featuring deadly *femme fatales* on a path of romance and self-destruction (romance noirs) include Billy Wilder's adaptation of James M. Cain's novel titled ★[Double Indemnity \(1944\)](#), Michael Curtiz' melodramatic, mother-daughter noir classic [Mildred Pierce \(1945\)](#), the stylish and moody [The Postman Always Rings Twice \(1946\)](#) with Lana Turner as the libidinous, restless platinum blonde in a roadside diner, Orson Welles' [The Lady From Shanghai \(1948\)](#), Rita Hayworth's sultry performance as [Gilda \(1946\)](#), and the tabloid romantic/crime melodrama [Gun Crazy \(1949\)](#). Another of Welles' films with significant noir features was his expressionistic ★[Citizen Kane \(1941\)](#).

In menaced women noirs, the tables are turned and women are menaced by the men in their lives (often their husbands), as in [Gaslight \(1944\)](#), Otto Preminger's sexually obsessive [Laura \(1944\)](#), the unnerving and tense **Sorry, Wrong Number (1948)**, Nicholas Ray's **In A Lonely Place (1950)**, and in many of Hitchcock's earlier black-and-white works: ★[Rebecca \(1940\)](#), [Suspicion \(1941\)](#), [Shadow of a Doubt \(1943\)](#),

Spellbound (1945), and ★**Notorious (1946)**. In Fritz Lang's tense **The Woman in the Window (1944)**, a law-abiding college professor (Edward G. Robinson) suddenly found himself on the run with a beautiful model after unintentionally committing a murder.

Crime was the main focus of noir films of the 50s, such as in John Huston's **The Asphalt Jungle (1950)**, Fritz Lang's savage **The Big Heat (1953)**, Robert Aldrich's apocalyptic and violent **Kiss Me Deadly (1955)** - a fast adaptation of Mickey Spillane's novel about the hardened detective Mike Hammer, Stanley Kubrick's **The Killing (1956)**, and Orson Welles' border-town B-movie classic ★**Touch of Evil (1958)**. The only film ever directed by actor Charles Laughton, ★**The Night of the Hunter (1955)** starred Robert Mitchum as a psycho-crazed preacher stalking two children. In **Sweet Smell of Success (1957)** from a script by Clifford Odets and Ernest Lehman, Burt Lancaster played a ruthless, all-powerful and evil NYC gossip columnist in league with his sleazy press agent (Tony Curtis) - both engaged in a nasty smear campaign.

The term *film noir* has been more widely applied to other films too, for example, the film noir *westerns* of the 1950s (**The Gunfighter (1950)** and ★**High Noon (1952)**), the film noir *gangster* films (**They Drive By Night (1940)**, **Key Largo (1948)** and **White Heat (1949)**), non-genre dramatic films (such as **The Lost Weekend (1945)**, ★**Sunset Boulevard (1950)**, and Laurence Olivier's **Hamlet (1948)**), or the policeman-hero films of the 1960s and 70s.

Modern film noirs include Roman Polanski's noirish detective thriller ★**Chinatown (1974)**, the twisted, sexy noirish **Body Heat (1981)** - the directorial debut film of Lawrence Kasdan about a lawyer enticed to murder a woman's husband, Ridley Scott's sci-fi thriller ★**Blade Runner (1982)**, the feverish debut film of the Coen Brothers' titled **Blood Simple (1984)**, the 50s Hollywood crime drama **L.A. Confidential (1997)** with Kim Basinger as a Veronica-Lake look-alike, or the dark **The Last Seduction (1993)**, starring Linda Fiorentino as an amoral, evil femme fatale.

Selection of Greatest *Film Noir* Films:

Greatest of *Film Noir*:

★**Rebecca (1940)**
★**The Maltese Falcon (1941)**
Suspicion (1941)
The Glass Key (1942)
This Gun For Hire (1942)
Shadow of a Doubt (1943)
Laura (1944)

[★Double Indemnity \(1944\)](#)
[Gaslight \(1944\)](#)
Murder, My Sweet (1944)
[To Have and Have Not \(1944\)](#)
The Woman in the Window (1944)
Detour (1945)
[Mildred Pierce \(1945\)](#)
Scarlet Street (1945)
Spellbound (1945)
[★The Big Sleep \(1946\)](#)
The Blue Dahlia (1946)
Cornered (1946)
[Gilda \(1946\)](#)
The Killers (1946)
Lady In The Lake (1946)
[★Notorious \(1946\)](#)
[The Postman Always Rings Twice \(1946\)](#)
The Strange Love of Martha Ivers (1946)
[★Out of the Past \(1947\)](#)
The Stranger (1947)
The Big Clock (1948)
Key Largo (1948)
[The Lady From Shanghai \(1948\)](#)
Sorry, Wrong Number (1948)
[Beyond the Forest \(1949\)](#)
Gun Crazy (1949)
[★The Third Man \(1949\)](#)
[The Asphalt Jungle \(1950\)](#)
D. O. A. (1950)
In a Lonely Place (1950)
The Narrow Margin (1952)
[The Big Heat \(1953\)](#)
Niagara (1953)
Diabolique (Fr.) (1955)
[Kiss Me Deadly \(1955\)](#)
[★The Night of the Hunter \(1955\)](#)
The Killing (1956)
Sweet Smell of Success (1957)
[★Touch of Evil \(1958\)](#)
Greatest of Recent *Film Noir*:
[The Manchurian Candidate \(1962\)](#)
Madigan (1968)
[Dirty Harry 'series' \(1971-76\)](#)
[★Chinatown \(1974\)](#)
Farewell, My Lovely (1975)
[Body Heat \(1981\)](#)

[★Blade Runner \(1982\)](#)

Blood Simple (1984)

[Basic Instinct \(1992\)](#)

Red Rock West (1992)

The Last Seduction (1993)

Seven (1995)

The Usual Suspects (1995)

Fargo (1996)

L.A. Confidential (1997)