
THE MOB AND THE MOVIES: A CINEMATIC HISTORY OF THE ALL-AMERICAN CRIMINAL

Andrew Graves

Week 2: Dames with a Past...

Film Noir

- Cynical crime melodrama
- American – with European influences
- Low key productions
- Black and white
- Stylized and shadowy
- Low angle shots
- Unusual compositions
- Influenced by early German Expressionist productions
- Heavy European influence
- 'M' (1931) is an interesting crossover point

The Rules of Film Noir BBC Four

1. Choose a dame with no past and a hero with no future
2. Use no fiction but pulp fiction
3. See America through a stranger's eyes
4. Make it any colour as long as it's black
5. It ain't what you say, it's the way that you say it

The Femme Fatale

- Mysterious
- Seductive
- Manipulative
- Beautiful
- Morally bereft

The Maltese Falcon (1941)

- Directed by John Huston
- Screenplay John Huston
- Based on Dashiell Hammett's novel of the same name
- Was the second screen version of the story

"An intriguing piece of melodramatic entertainment, "Maltese Falcon" weaves swiftly through a series of attention-holding episodes to crack through to a most unsuspecting climax. To secure utmost in audience reaction, exhibitors can take advantage of the surprise finish by publicizing starting times of the picture, and advising patrons to get maximum entertainment by seeing it from the start. Extra advance exploitation to obtain first day patronage will roll up hefty momentum in the key runs."

Variety

The Maltese Falcon (1941) Cont...

“What a gallery of characters there was enmeshed in the baffling – but never mind – coils of plot centering on the hunt for possession of a priceless antiquity, the statuette of the Maltese Falcon itself.”

The Movie Treasury Thriller Movies
Lawrence Hammond

Double Indemnity (1944)

- Directed by Billy Wilder
- Screenplay by Billy Wilder and Raymond Chandler
- Based on the novel of the same name by James M Cain
- Cinematography by John F. Seitz

Billy Wilder (1906-2002)

- Was born Samuel Wilder in Sucha, Poland to Jewish parents
- His family moved to Vienna, Austria
- Eventually Wilder moved to Berlin where he became a screenwriter
- After the rise of Hitler, he moved to Paris
- He lost his grandmother and stepfather in the Holocaust
- Whilst in Paris he made his directorial debut
- Relocated to Hollywood in 1933
- Continued to work as a screenwriter
- His films lacked political tone or sympathies
- More interested in human nature
- Famously had little sympathy for those actors/writers/directors who were blacklisted

However...

- The parodies he created were derived from the politics that surrounded him
- He was opposed to the House of Un-American Activities
- Was one of only two directors who voted against the anti-communist oath of allegiance
- In general, he had a dislike for formula and genre films

The Hero with no Future...

Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray)

- Is afforded the kind of witty dialogue Chandler normally reserved for his hard-boiled detectives
- Though an insurance man, he may as well be a wise cracking private dick
- The film lets us know he is doomed from the beginning
- The reveal is not so much IF he will go down, it's HOW and by whose actions

The Dame with a Past...

Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck)

- Relies on her good looks and seductive allure to drag Neff into her spider's web of murder and deceit
- Stanwyck was placed in a fairly unconvincing wig for the role, though Wilder later said he regretted the decision, it acts as a symbolic reminder of the fraudulent nature of the pair's 'relationship' – one which is built on lust and greed, not love or companionship

The Post War Period

- World War II comes to an end
- The troops return home – often to wives they barely recognise
- The birth rate sky rocketed

The Rosie the Riveter Paradox

- Women were being coaxed back into the kitchen with a never-ending wave of advertisements, government propaganda, and media outlets, who sought to smash the independent feminist spirit which had developed during the labour short years of the Second World War.
- This situation – the ‘Rosie the Riveter paradox’ is best summed up by author, podcaster and film historian Karina Longworth:

“Women were expected to go to work when women were at war, and in so doing so they learned what it felt like to exchange their own labour for a pay cheque, and they learned what it felt like to not be dependent on a man for all of their material needs. Then, having had that experience, at the end of the war they were expected to revert back their previous roles often as housewives with no real purpose outside of the home and in some cases the genie couldn’t be put back into the bottle. The woman didn’t want to go back in time, back to a life of comparatively few freedoms. A life of comfort perhaps but also one of servitude. Once they’d been given a chance to have an identity outside the home, they couldn’t just give it up...”

The Kinsey Report

- Suggested half of America’s men had sex with women other than their wives
- Changing attitudes to sex meant the (Will Hays) Motion Picture Production Code seemed increasingly out of step
- Will Hays was made redundant in 1945 (\$1.5 million)
- The code remained in operation under director Joe Breen

Joseph Breen (1888-1965)

- Was recruited by Hays to head up the Production Code Administration (PCA)
- Unlike earlier attempts at censorship, decisions by the PCA became binding
- No picture could be shown without the PCA stamp of approval
- Producers attempting to do this could be fined \$25,000

The Motion Picture Production Code

- Writers and directors became increasingly frustrated by the MPPC
- Several films come along to directly challenge the code
- *Notorious (1946)* - the longest screen embrace
- The birth of the American Arthouse – introduced a new era of motion picture expression - Scandinavian and Italian neo realism.
- Stromboli/Bergman scandal

The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946)

Tay Garnett

- In early 1934, even before Cain’s book had been released, Merian C Cooper (RKO) submitted a rough synopsis to the MPPC
- The MPPC advised him not to take the project further due to its inclusion of murder and adultery – rendering it “unsuitable for motion picture production”

The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946) Cont...

- After the book was released, Columbia and Warner Bros expressed an interest in filming it
- However, Warner Bros decided not to continue fearing it would fall foul of the censors
- MGM though had bought the rights as early as 1934 but sat on the property
- But when *Double Indemnity* became a huge success, despite deliberately flaunting censorship regulations, they decided to greenlight the feature
- As with *Double Indemnity* (1944), this is a cynical tale of lust, love, greed and murder.

The Hero with no Future...

Frank Chambers (John Garfield)

- An affable drifter, he finds himself at the door of the Twin Oaks diner/service station
- Frank lands a job there after befriending Nick, the owner.
- However, Frank's head is quickly turned by Nick's much younger wife
- At first, he is reviled by Cora's murderous plans but soon he is part of the evil plan

The Dame with a Past...

Cora Smith (Lana Turner)

- After marrying Nick, Cora begins to regret her decision
- She begins to see Nick only as a means to gain some sort of independence
- When handsome outsider Frank arrives, she shows feelings for him and soon they cook up murderous plans
- It's about love, lust and betrayal
- Double cross leads to more deceit
- There are several rug-pulls, twists and turns
- We never quite know who to believe
- Like many movies of this genre it creates a spider web of plots and sub-plots, plans and secrets
- The final irony, where a genuine accident is classed as murder, leading to Frank eventually being charged for Nick's unlawful death is both tragic and cruel