

Investigating Film Noir: Programme Notes & Sources

2. Visual Style (13th October)

- Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg, 'Black Cinema':

'A dark street in the early morning hours, splashed with a sudden downpour. Lamps form haloes in the murk. In a walk-up room, filled with the intermittent flashing of a neon sign from across the street, a man is waiting to murder or be murdered ... the specific ambience of *film noir*, a world of darkness and violence, with a central figure whose motives are usually greed, lust and ambition, whose world is filled with fear. ... A *genre* deeply rooted in the nineteenth century's vein of grim romanticism, developed through U.F.A. and the murky, fog-filled atmosphere of pre-war French movies. ... Standard lamps fallen on pile carpets, spilling a fan of light about the face of a corpse; interrogation rooms filled with nervous police, the witness framed at their centre under a spotlight, heels clicking along subway or elevated platforms at night; cars spanking along canyon roads, with anguished faces beyond the rain-splashed windscreen ... here is a world where it is always night, always foggy or wet, filled with gunshots and sobs, where men wear turned-down brims on their hats and women loom in fur coats, guns thrust deep in their pockets. ... And above all, shadow upon shadow upon shadow ... every shot in glistening low-key, so that rain always glittered across windows or windscreens ... faces were barred deeply with those shadows that usually symbolised some imprisonment of body or soul.'

Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg, 'Black Cinema' in *Hollywood in the Forties* (1968)

- Janey Place and Lowell Peterson, 'Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir' (1974)

'*Noir* lighting is "low-key." The ratio of key to fill light is great, creating areas of high contrast and rich, black shadows. Unlike the even illumination of high-key lighting which seeks to display attractively all areas of the frame, the low-key *noir* style opposes light and dark, hiding faces, rooms, urban landscapes – and, by extension, motivations and true character – in shadow and darkness which carry connotations of the mysterious and the unknown.

'Small areas of light seem on the verge of being completely overwhelmed by the darkness that now threatens them from all sides.'

Janey Place and Lowell Peterson, 'Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir' (1974)

- Paul Kerr, 'Out of What Past? Notes on the B *Film Noir*':

'... the influx of German emigrés and the influence of expressionism; the influx of French emigrés and the influence of existentialism; Ernest Hemingway and the 'hard-boiled' school of writing; Edward Hopper and the 'ash can' school of painting; pre-war photo-journalism, wartime newsreels and post-war neorealism; the creators of [*Citizen*] *Kane* – Citizens [Herman] Mankiewicz, [Gregg] Toland and [Orson] Welles; the Wall Street crash and the rise of populism; the Second World War and the rise of fascism; the Cold War and the rise of McCarthyism.'

Paul Kerr, 'Out of What Past? Notes on the B *Film Noir*,' *Screen Education* (1979/1980)

- John Alton, 'Criminal Lighting'

'Years ago, when in pictures we showed Jimmy Valentine cracking a safe, he usually carried the typical flashlight in one hand, while with the other he worked on the safe combination. In some scenes the flashlight was placed beside him on the floor. In either case the light source was established as a low one. To create an authentic effect, the cameraman lit the character from a low light which illuminated the face from an unusual angle. It distorted the countenance, threw shadows seldom seen in everyday life across the face. This light, which exaggerates features, became so popular that even in our films of today, when we want to call the attention of the audience to a criminal character, we use this type of illumination.'

John Alton, 'Criminal Lighting' in *Painting With Light* (1949)

- Foster Hirsch: Art and the City

'The image of the city as a place of terror and seduction, as a modern wasteland, an environment indifferent to people, a carnival edging towards disorder, has striking parallels in the world of artists of the twenties, thirties and forties. Anticipations and echoes of the *noir* city appear in the work of John Sloan, George Bellows, Franz Kline, Reginald Marsh, Edward Hopper, Martin Lewis. American artists who chose city scenes as their subject devised a style that blended American realism with Expressionism.'

Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen* (1981)

- Weegee (Arthur Fellig), *Naked City* (1945)

Films

Crossfire (Edward Dmytryk, 1947)

Fallen Angel (Otto Preminger, 1945)

The Maltese Falcon (John Huston, 1941)

Scarlet Street (Fritz Lang, 1945)

Kiss of Death (Henry Hathaway, 1947)

The Naked City (Jules Dassin, 1948)

Phantom Lady (Robert Siodmak, 1944)

The Big Combo (Joseph H Lewis, 1955)

Citizen Kane, Orson Welles (1941).

Out of the Past (Jacques Tourneur, 1947)

The Big Sleep (Howard Hawks, 1946)

Double Indemnity (Billy Wilder, 1944)

The Third Man (Carol Reed, 1949)

Touch of Evil (Orson Welles, 1958)

The Killers (Robert Siodmak, 1946)

This Gun for Hire (Frank Tuttle, 1942)

Stranger on the Third Floor (Boris Ingster, 1940)

Murder My Sweet (Edward Dmytryk, 1944)

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene, 1920)

Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans (FW Murnau, *Sunrise* (1927)

Die Strasse (Karl Grune, 1923)

Underworld (Josef von Sternberg 1927)

Germany Year Zero (Roberto Rossellini, 1948)

The Bicycle Thieves (Vittorio de Sica, 1948)

Art Works

Caravaggio, *The Taking of Christ* (c. 1602).

George Bellows, *Stag at Sharkey's* (1909)

Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks* (1942)

Edward Hopper, *Study for Nighthawks* (1941 or 1942)

Edward Hopper, *Night Windows* (1928)

Edward Hopper, *Office at Night* (1940)

Edward Hopper, *House by the Railroad* (1925)

Martin Lewis, *Chance Meeting* (1941-46)

Martin Lewis, *Relics (Speakeasy Corner)* (1928)

Martin Lewis, *Shadow Magic* (1939)