

High Noon as Film Noir

Marvin SMITH

Introduction

The label *film noir* designates a cycle of films that share a similar iconography, visual style, narrative strategies, subject matter and characterisation. Their iconography (repeated visual patterning) consists of images of the dark, night-time city, its streets damp with rain which reflects the flashing neon signs. Its sleazy milieu of claustrophobic alleyways and deserted docklands alienates with gaudy night-clubs and swank apartments. The visual style habitually employs high contrast (*chiaroscuro*) lighting, where deep enveloping shadows are fractured by shafts of light from a single source, and dark, claustrophobic interiors have shadowy shapes on the walls. The decentred, unstable compositions are furthered by the use of odd angles and wide-angle lenses; fog or mist obscures the action and characters' faces are often lit with strange highlights or partially shadowed to create hidden and threatening spaces. *Noir's* highly complex narrative patterning is created by the use of first-person voice-overs, multiple narrators, flashbacks and ellipses which often create ambiguous or inconclusive endings. *Noir* narratives are frequently oneiric (dream-like), where every object and encounter seems unnaturally changed. (Spicer 2002, 4)

Based on this partial description of *film noir*, the 1952 Western film *High Noon*, set in the harsh desert sunlight of a small western town in the late 1800s and presented in strict chronological order, would scarcely seem a candidate for anyone's list of *film noir*. I would argue, however, that these surface differences belie a fundamental connection to *film noir*. *High Noon* is, in fact, *film noir*. It is the purpose of this paper to set forth the reasons.

In the first part of this paper, I will describe various aspects of *film noir*. I will begin with its antecedents: the German Expressionist cinema, the hard-boiled detective stories of the 1920s and 1930s, and the popularization of Freud's psychoanalytic theories. Next, I will discuss the major historical trends or styles in *film noir*. While *film noir* did maintain a basic coherency throughout the years, the settings, subject matter, and themes did evolve through recognizable patterns and trends.

Examining the evolution of these trends will help to shed light on *High Noon*'s place in the *film noir* canon.

In the second part of this paper, I will discuss *High Noon*. First, I will give a brief overview of its 1952 reception and then a plot outline. Finally, I will give an overview of the major recognizable features of *film noir* and explore to what extent *High Noon* exemplifies these.

The Antecedents of *Film Noir*¹

Introduction

In very simplistic terms, *film noir* in its most typical form is a murder mystery set in a modern city, but the story itself is secondary to the atmosphere and psychological repercussions of the events in the story. The story as a rule centers around the actions and thoughts of one hero (sometimes hero/victim) as he tries to solve the mystery and/or disentangle himself from a life-threatening situation. Disorienting camera angles and *chiaroscuro*² visual techniques reinforce the mood — dark, confining, and fatalistic. The story, often told in clipped, dry voice-over narration with frequent flashbacks, largely focuses on the psychological condition and motivations of the characters. There is often a strong aura of suppressed or misdirected sexuality. The mystery is usually solved, but even then we are left with a feeling of despair when, for example, we discover, as in *The Maltese Falcon*, the hero/detective must turn in his lover for murder. *Film noir* rarely ends happily.

The heyday of *film noir* is generally considered to be bordered by John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) on one end and Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958) on the other.³ During this period, Hollywood produced hundreds of *film noirs*, but, while Hollywood supplied the vast majority of these films, the origins of *film noir* lie outside of Hollywood — principally in [1] the German Expressionist films of the late 1910s and 1920s, [2] the hard-boiled American detective fiction of the 1920s and 1930s, and [3] the popularization of Freud's theories of psychoanalysis

¹ Much of this section is adapted from my earlier paper, "In a Lonely Place: *Film Noir* and Social Comment." See Smith 1995, 30-32.

² Italian for *clear* and *dark*, this refers to the technique of employing light and shade in pictorial representation, or the arrangement of light and dark elements.

³ This period was *film noir*'s golden age, but *film noir*, now often dubbed *neo-noir*, is still made. Some examples are Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* (1981), and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). See Hirsch 1999.

during the early part of this century. *Film noir* drew upon each of these in turn to supply the materials and inspiration that could be used to forge its unique, powerful blend of cinematic technique, atmosphere, plots, character types, symbolism and themes.

German Expressionism

The first major influence on *film noir* was German Expressionist cinema. This cinema was a natural extension of the Expressionist painting which flourished in Germany from about 1910 until the middle of the 1920s. Expressionist painters concentrated on personal, inner truths rather than on external reality. Artists such as Kandinsky, Kirchner, and Beckmann produced works that were angular, chaotic, and hallucinatory. Images of night, death, and psychic imbalance predominated. German cinema of the late 1910s and 1920s, in films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), borrowed heavily from the earlier Expressionist painting:

Countering the mimetic tradition that dominated American silents, the German Expressionist dramas were set in claustrophobic studio-created environments where physical reality was distorted. Stories about the loss or the impossibility of individual freedom dominated the “haunted screen.” Images of death, of a relentless fate, and of the divided soul appeared with insistent repetition. To convey their dark themes, the films developed a distinct vocabulary consisting primarily of *chiaroscuro* and distortions of time and space. Mood (*stimmung*) was all important, as the films’ shadow-filled, artificial settings and theatrical high-contrast lighting, which dramatically divided the image into criss-crossing shafts of light and dark, gave intense visual expression to negative stories. Space in the high German Expressionist film is fractured into an assortment of unstable, zigzagging, splintery lines, of spinning circles and twisted angles. (Hirsch 1981, 54)

German directors, such as Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, and Billy Wilder, who all migrated to Hollywood during the 1930s, brought to American film (and *film noir*) many of the visual and thematic characteristics of German Expressionist film.⁴

⁴ Some of their *film noir*: Fritz Lang, *Scarlet Street* (1945); Robert Siodmak, *The Killers* (1946); and Billy Wilder, *Double Indemnity* (1944).

Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction

The second major influence on *film noir* was the hard-boiled detective fiction of the 1920s and 1930s. Two writers in this field stand out in their influence on *film noir*: Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Both of these writers gained prominence from their contributions to *Black Mask*, a popular detective magazine during the 1920s and 1930s. These writers, along with those who followed — such writers as James M. Cain, Horace McCoy, and Cornell Woolrich — set a new trend in detective fiction. Before them, most detective fiction had been of the ‘parlor-room’ variety, murders committed on a country estate and solved in a proper, dignified fashion.⁵ With these new writers, the world of detective fiction was transformed in several ways.

First of all, the **setting** for the story moved from the ethereal world of country estates and yachts to the dirt and filth of a modern city. The city was generally a somber place with much of the story taking place at night or in the rain. The city’s inhabitants were not gentlemen and ladies of leisure and their servants, but criminals, mobsters, bookies, conniving women, and down-on-their-luck detectives. The atmosphere was threatening and dark; the line between good and evil, blurred.

The **detective** ceased to be a cool, sophisticated intellect who solved mysteries by the power of his ‘little gray cells.’ He was rather a man living a precarious existence in a dangerous world. He solved crimes by ‘getting his hands dirty.’ He was often rewarded for his efforts by being knocked out or drugged. While his immediate job might be to find a murderer or locate stolen property, his more important job was to maintain his own integrity — to fend off attacks from mobsters and temptation from *femmes fatales*; i.e., to get through life with his ‘code’ intact.⁶

The **language** of classical detective fiction reflected its milieu: it was the language of educated gentlemen and ladies. The language of hard-boiled detective fiction reflected its circumstances as well: it was matter-of-fact, earthy and cynical. In a world of shifting truths, language — swift, simple and concrete — isolated and protected people from both the world and each other. Terse banter replaced meaningful dialogue, such as in this exchange from the film based on Raymond Chandler’s novel *The Big Sleep*:

⁵ Of course, I am referring to the mystery writing of such writers as Edgar Allan Poe, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Agatha Christie.

⁶ This ‘code’ — a personal set of rules or values — is the central motivation for actions and decisions for many *film noir* heroes/victims. It is this code that leads Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* to decide to allow a woman to go to prison for killing his partner in spite of the fact that he loves her.

“Tall, aren’t you?” she said.

“I didn’t mean to be.”

“Handsome, too,” she said. “And I bet you know it.”

I grunted.

“What’s your name?”

“Reilly,” I said. “Doghouse Reilly.”

“Are you a prizefighter?” she asked...

“Not exactly. I’m a sleuth.”

“You’re cute,” she giggled. “I’m cute too.”

While the **goal** of classical detective fiction was solving crimes — finding out whodunit — this newer detective fiction didn’t concern itself with the answer to a question so much as the psychological state of the hero. Often, in fact, the detective didn’t clearly know what the question was, other than the general query, “What is the truth and what are the lies?” This sorting out the truth from the lies and half-truths provided the backdrop and catalyst for the psychological reactions of the hero/detective.

The **point of view** of classical detective fiction was usually the third person, but, in keeping with their psychological bent, most hard-boiled detective stories were told in the first person. This meant that the reader knew only what the detective/hero knew and no more. Stories often moved forward in a series of personal flashbacks.⁷

Classical detective fiction treated **women** no differently than men. The newer detective stories, however, had a decidedly misogynistic vein. *Femmes fatales* appeared in story after story, luring men into danger or into betraying their principles. Sex, or often the promise of sex, was their weapon, a loaded gun ready to go off.⁸

All of the writers mentioned above played significant roles in the development of *film noir*, writing stories or novels that were adapted to the screen and/or working as screenwriters. To a large extent, the world of hard-boiled detective fiction became the world of *film noir*.

⁷ Some films — Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity*, for example — were just one long flashback.

⁸ The phallic metaphor is intentional. The *femme fatale* was often an emasculating influence.

Freud

The third major influence on *film noir* was the popularized version of Freud's psychoanalytic theories. While this popularized version was not perhaps a faithful reflection of Freud's theories, it did preserve, in a somewhat simplified form, many of their elements. From the standpoint of *film noir*, the following were the most important:

As far as popularized Freud goes, the most important of his tenets was the **theory of the unconscious**. According to the popular version of the theory, the unconscious was the reservoir of various memories and associations which the conscious mind was not aware of and which often 'compelled' people to do apparently irrational things. The unconscious was seen to operate under different laws than the conscious mind, 'thinking' in images rather than abstract concepts. The principal window to the unconscious was dreams, which offered the simplest path for bringing the content of the unconscious out into the light of consciousness. Once the conscious mind could become aware of the memories and association hidden in the unconscious, the compulsions and irrational behavior these had fostered would disappear.

Freud's **theories of sexuality**, in the simplistic popular form, seemed to amount to something like, "Sex is dirty; sex is hidden; sex is everywhere and in everything." Besides offering theoretical justification for such character types as the *femme fatale*, this opened the door to suggesting what could not be shown. Since Hollywood of the 1930s and 1940s was under strict censorship in the form of the Hays Code, Freud supplied a way to express what were otherwise unacceptable ideas or relationships.

In the end, there's a certain cynicism in the views of Freud that accords well with the moral decay of the series (*film noir*). Psychiatry no longer believes in traditionally defined good and evil. It knows that criminal behaviour patterns often hide self-destructive reactions or guilt complexes, while moral conscience (the superego) is linked to instincts it represses by means of an entire network of complicity. (Borde 2000, 19-20)

Historical Trends

According to Spicer, *film noir* passed through four different phases during its heyday period of 1940 to 1959.

- **The Experimental Period: 1940-3.** During this period *film noir* took on a coherent and recognizable form. Films such as *The Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940) and *This Gun for Hire* (1942), with their odd angles and dream-like, surrealistic elements, clearly reflected the influence of German Expressionism. *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) was the first Hollywood movie to bring the cynical world of the hard-boiled novel to the screen. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) combined Gothic romance with psychological depth.
- **Studio Expressionism: 1944-7.** This period saw a series of in-studio productions that extended and solidified *film noir*'s place in Hollywood. *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) were in the hard-boiled vein, while *Laura* (1944) was "a Hitchcockian romance-thriller that explores sexuality in a complex and quite daring way through the suggestiveness of décor." (Spicer 2002, 53)
- **The Location Period and Semi-Documentary: 1947-52.** During this period, *film noir* moved out of the studio with such works as *Out of the Past* (1947). As an extension of location shooting, films such as *Kiss of Death* (1947) and *The Naked City* (1948) were presented in semi-documentary style, adding an air of realism to the stories. While having documentary elements, these films were still *film noir*. "*Kiss of Death*'s hybridity, its slippage between realism and Expressionism, is typical of the way the semi-documentary developed." (Spicer 2002, 59) Many of the *film noirs* of this period dealt with social issues, such as crime, poverty, and racism. Not surprisingly, though, since this was the period of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and Hollywood blacklisting, most films, on the surface at least, tended to support the government and the status quo. However, some films took a more critical look at what was happening to the United States during the era of the Communist witch hunts. As we shall see later, HUAC played an important part in the shaping of *High Noon*. Both in this and the following period, there was a preoccupation with Cold War issues. Films concerned with spies and/or atomic bombs were common.
- **Fragmentation and Decay: 1952-1958.** "The characteristic 1950s *noir* is the pared-down, tautly-scripted crime thriller, which focuses on organized criminals in their battles with authorities. Expressionistic stylization is downplayed or avoided altogether in many 1950 *noirs*, which assault the viewer rather than evoking an atmosphere." (Spicer 2002, 59-60.) Orson Welles's highly expressionistic *Touch of Evil* (1958) was quite atypical of 1950s *film noir*, and many view it as the last classic *film noir*.

High Noon

Every five years or so, somebody — somebody of talent and taste, with a full appreciation of legend and a strong trace of poetry in their soul — scoops up a handful of clichés from the vast lore of Western films and turns them into a thrilling and inspiring work of art in this genre. Such a rare and exciting achievement is Stanley Kramer's production, "High Noon," which was placed on exhibition at the Mayfair yesterday. Which one of several individuals is most fully responsible for this job is a difficult matter to determine and nothing about which to quarrel. It could be Mr. Kramer, who got the picture made, and it could be scriptwriter Carl Foreman, who prepared the story for the screen. Certainly director Fred Zinnemann had a great deal to do with it and possibly Gary Cooper, as the star, had a hand in the job. An accurate apportionment of credits is not a matter of critical concern.

What is important is that someone — or all of them together, we would say — has turned out a Western drama that is the best of its kind in several years. Familiar but far from conventional in the fabric of story and theme and marked by a sure illumination of human character, this tale of a brave and stubborn sheriff in a town full of do-nothings and cowards has the rhythm and roll of a ballad spun in pictorial terms. And, over all, it has a stunning comprehension of that thing we call courage in a man and the thorniness of being courageous in a world of bullies and poltroons. (Crowther 1952)

The quotation above is from the July 25, 1952 *New York Times* movie review of *High Noon*. The film was widely acclaimed and went on to be nominated for seven Academy Awards: Best Picture (Stanley Kramer), Best Director (Fred Zinnemann), Best Screenplay (Carl Foreman), *Best Actor (Gary Cooper), *Best Film Editing (Elmo Williams and Harry W. Gerstad), *Best Music/Original Song (Dimitri Tiomkin and Ned Washington) and *Best Music/Scoring of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture (Dimitri Tiomkin). It received Academy Awards in the four '*' categories.

High Noon was not without controversy or dissent, however. From the beginning it became a target for those wary of leftist leanings in the movie industry. Many

took offense at the ‘message’ of the film.⁹ While most Hollywood *film noir* of the post-war era tended to be quite conservative politically, many recognized *High Noon* as an allegory of those in Hollywood who would stand up to HUAC. This view was reasonable considering the producer and writer. The independent producer Stanley Kramer was responsible for bringing *High Noon* to the screen. The hallmarks of Kramer’s approach to producing movies was “a low-budget ethos¹⁰, combined with liberal social values.” (Drummond 1997, 15) Also, Carl Foreman’s screenplay, based loosely on the short story “The Tin Badge” by John Cunningham, admittedly reflected his own troubles with HUAC.

The Story

It’s around 10:30 a.m. on a Sunday morning in the small western town of Hadleyville. It’s retiring sheriff Will Kane’s wedding day. Just after the Justice of the Peace finishes the ceremony, the telegraph operator rushes in with the news that the recently pardoned murderer Frank Miller is arriving on the noon train. Already three of Frank’s gang members are at the train station waiting for him. It’s clear that Frank is coming back to get even with the man responsible for sending him away — Sheriff Will Kane.

All of the town elders at the wedding ceremony suggest that Will and his new bride Amy should flee town. After all, a new sheriff will arrive in town the next day. This is no longer Will’s concern, they argue, and, besides, with Will gone, there will probably be no trouble anyway. Will and Amy hurriedly board a wagon and set off at a brisk pace. Not too far out of town, Will has second thoughts about running away, and despite Amy’s protestations, he stops the wagon, turns around, and returns to the town.

Back in town Will goes about trying to prepare for Frank and his gang. He thinks the townsmen will stand by him just as they had five years ago when they helped him get Frank Miller and ‘clean up the town.’ But times have changed. First of all, five years ago, Will had six regular deputies. Now he has just one, Harvey Pell. But Harvey Pell is angry because he has been passed over for the new sheriff’s position. Will goes all around town — to his friends’ homes, to the saloon, to the church — searching for people to help him. No matter where he goes or who he talks to, he is turned down. Not even his new Quaker wife supports him. The rea-

⁹ In fact, it is widely accepted that John Huston and John Wayne were so upset by *High Noon* that they made the 1958 Western *Rio Bravo* as an answer.

¹⁰ *High Noon* was budgeted at \$749,000 and shot in just 28 days.

sons for refusing to help are many, but they all lead to Will's having to face Frank Miller and his gang alone.

Noon comes and the train arrives with Frank on it. In a cat-and-mouse chase about town, Will, with Amy's last minute help, manages to kill all the gang. As soon as the last villain falls, the townspeople come rushing out to congratulate Will. Disgusted, Will throws his sheriff's badge to the ground, boards the wagon with Amy, and rides out of town.

Conclusion: *High Noon* as *Film Noir*

While there were of course many sources of influence, three — German Expressionist film, hard-boiled detective fiction, and the popularized versions of Freud's theories — played a dominant role in shaping what came to be known as *film noir*. As *film noir* evolved over the years, it did change, but there were certain elements that can help us to determine if films fall within the *film noir* tradition. Not every *film noir* had each of these to the same degree, but, to be considered as *film noir*, a film should clearly contain most of these. Let's look at these elements and see to what extent *High Noon* fits.

Cinematic Technique: *Film noir* used camera and lighting to establish and maintain the mood of a film. Shots from disorienting angles reinforced the psychological imbalance of the characters. Shots from above the characters underscored their insignificance, their subjugation to fate. Close-ups of characters implied restriction. Lighting stressed shadows — especially shadows cast in the shape of jail bars — providing a sense of uneasiness, uncertainty, confinement and doom. Mirrors were often employed to indicate a person's dual nature or the conflicting tendencies within him/her.

As for camera work, *High Noon* is filled with examples of low and high camera angles and close-ups. One of the most memorable shots of the film is the pull-back crane shot showing an isolated Will Kane standing alone in the middle of the street. Close-ups of both clocks and faces serve to increase the tension as the movie progresses. The lighting in *High Noon* is, at first glance, almost the antithesis of *noir* — rather than the typical *chiaroscuro* shadows, we are presented with a washed-out, barren, arid whiteness. This whiteness, though, serves the same purpose as the more typical shadows: it reflects the psychological state of the hero.

Setting: As mentioned earlier, the general setting for most *film noir* was the modern city. This city was usually dark, impersonal, and menacing, with lots of concrete, confining walls, shadows and rain. This was the general setting, but much of *film noir* was actually shot indoors showing confining interiors intersected with shadows. Stairs were used either to show superior-inferior relationships or to imply psychological imbalance.¹¹

Although most early film noir was set in shadowy cities, after 1947 much film noir was filmed on location. This was true of High Noon. Even so, the settings were chosen to establish and reinforce moods and psychological states. As mentioned earlier, in High Noon the stark white environment and narrow main street serve to underscore Will's feeling of isolation and entrapment.

Symbolism: Closely related to cinematic technique and setting was the use of symbols in *film noir*. A cigarette is never just a cigarette. With its roots in German Expressionism and Freudian theory, it's not surprising that *film noir* was rife with symbols: some of them sexual in nature and some of them psychological. Much of the use of symbols was, of course, due to the censorship of the Breen Office:

Hollywood in the 1940s always depicted sexual intercourse through symbolism and ellipsis. In the *Maltese Falcon*, Spade bends over to kiss Brigid, who is lying seductively on the couch, and the camera moves past him toward an open window, showing the "gunsel" Wilmer on the street outside; the image fades, time passes and when Spade and Brigid meet a day or so later, they embrace and call each other sweetheart. In *Possessed*, David Sutton (Van Heflin) and Louise Graham (Joan Crawford) have obviously just been in bed together, even though they are shown fully clothed and at opposite ends of the room: David smokes a cigarette and plays Schumann on the piano ("making love" to the instrument, as he says) while Louise moves about ecstatically and contemplates going for a swim in a moonlit lake that we can see outside the window. (Naremore 1998, 99)

In High Noon the three recurrent symbols have nothing to do with sex. Rather, they serve as mirrors of the hero's psychological state. The first is the long straight converging line of railroad tracks that stretch out into the distance. These, of course, are the tracks that will bring the noon train and, with it, Frank Miller. Each shot of these tracks is a reminder of the approaching danger. Next, there are the clocks that remind us of the approach of noon. There are frequent shots of

¹¹ Both Robert Siodmak's *The Spiral Staircase* (1946) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) make stairs a central element of the story.

*clocks as time passes. The urgency of the passage of time is underscored by the camera: as noon approaches, the camera pulls in for closer shots of the clocks and the swinging pendulums swing ever more slowly. The final symbol is Will Kane himself, an isolated black figure moving against the harsh, white background of the street and sky, penned in by the cold, featureless buildings that line the narrow main street. These symbols act to create a sense of urgency and inevitability to the action. The bulk of the action of **High Noon** before the arrival of the noon train centers around these three symbols.*

Narrative Techniques: Narrative techniques fall into three general categories: [1] the language used, [2] the viewpoint adopted, and [3] the timeline followed. As mentioned earlier, the language used in *film noir* tended to be terse, earthy, and full of banter. The story was usually told from the limited standpoint of the protagonist rather than from an all-seeing third person outlook, often using the voice-over narration of the hero. Finally, while the story sometimes flowed in a simple, straight path from the present into the future, the timeline often wound through a series of flashbacks that gradually brought the story up to the present.¹²

*The language used in **High Noon** was certainly not the same as Sam Spade's hard-boiled patois, but terse cowboy lingo could easily be considered something of a 19th Century precursor. There is no voice-over narration, but, just as in most **film noir**, the point of view adopted in telling the story is the hero's. Finally, **High Noon** is famous for the fact that the screen time very nearly parallels real time and everything happens in straight chronological order with no flashbacks.¹³ That seems to be quite unlike typical **film noir**, but there is one aspect of time that is the same. Much of **film noir**—**Out of the Past**, **The Killers**, for example—revolved around a hero's having to deal with his past. All of the action in **High Noon** stems from events that happened five years in the past.*

Plot Line: There were several common plot patterns in *film noir*. In each of them the hero would inevitably become entangled in some kind of treachery or grief while pursuing his goal, but the plot would vary depending on the goal. In the first plot pattern, the hero tried to discover the identity of a murderer or the answer to some mystery. The key distinction of this plot variation was that the hero was not initially directly involved with the crime or mystery: he was an outside agent. In another kind of plot, the hero/victim would try to extricate himself from some dif-

¹² Flashbacks, by looking into the past to tell a story, stressed the inevitability of the story's outcome, the unchangeability of the hero's fate.

¹³ Actually, there are a couple of tiny auditory flashbacks as we hear Frank Miller at his trial five years before threatening to come back and get revenge.

ficult, compromising, or criminal situation. In this kind of story, the hero was not a bystander but rather a vitally concerned party. The third common plot variation was similar to the second, but it was such a common pattern that I think it should be treated separately. In this plot pattern the hero/victim attempted to make up for, escape from, or rectify something from his past. Often *film noir* plots contained elements from more than one of these patterns.

The plot in High Noon clearly follows the third variation as Will Kane tries to deal with the repercussions of his actions of five years in the past.

Worldview: To say that *film noir* had a pessimistic view of life would be a gross understatement. As mentioned earlier, happy endings were rare.¹⁴ The world was generally dark and threatening, with traps and pitfalls for even the best of men. Even the best of men had their ‘tragic flaws.’ In fact, it was a common theme — harking back to Freud — that the roots of our doom lay within us. Again and again in *film noir*, men stumbled because they gave in to some inner compulsion: it was sometimes greed and sometimes sexual attraction to a *femme fatale*. Whatever it was, it was irresistible and inescapable: it was fate.

The world of High Noon is a world in which Will Kane, driven by a sense of duty, of conscience, or perhaps just a sense of pride,¹⁵ must face Frank Miller and his gang alone with no help from those ‘good citizens’ he has served for so many years. At the end of the movie, Will has played out the hand that fate has dealt him. He throws down his badge and leaves town in disgust.

Character Types: There were several recurring character types in *film noir*, and films often revolved around their relationships. The three main types were [1] (male) hero,¹⁶ [2] *femme fatale*, and [3] domestic woman. The hero could be a seeker of the truth, a victim trying to escape some terrible fate, or a combination of the two. The *femme fatale* was typically a sexually-provocative ‘woman with a past.’ The domestic woman was a steadfast, supportive invitation to a ‘normal’ family life. The hero’s fate was often determined by whether, in the end, he chose (or couldn’t escape from) the *femme fatale* and was destroyed — or chose the domestic woman and was ‘saved.’

¹⁴ John Tuska, in fact, refuses to call any film with a happy ending *film noir*. He calls it melodrama, even if it has all the other elements of *film noir*. (See Tuska 1984, 149-198.)

¹⁵ In the movie, Will offers contradictory statements as to his motivation.

¹⁶ In keeping with *film noir*’s misogynistic leanings, female heroes are basically unheard of.

*In the movie **High Noon**, Will Kane is clearly the ill-fated **film noir** hero, and Amy is the domestic woman. In a reversal of the normal **film noir** pattern, it is Amy, not Will, who makes the choice. She chooses to support Will in his fight against Frank's gang and literally saves Will's life. Although there is no fully developed **femme fatale**, Helen Ramirez, the Mexican owner of the bar and a former lover of both Will and Frank, hints at it.*

In the end, in spite of the seeming incongruity of a Western *film noir*, *High Noon* falls within the *film noir* tradition. While it doesn't contain some of the more famous *film noir* embellishments such as dark city streets, private detectives, *chiaroscuro* lighting, and rampant sexual innuendo, it is also clear that historically *film noir* has never been limited to films that contain these. Moreover, *High Noon* does offer us these elements of *film noir*: camera techniques, character development, plot line, use of symbolism, and, most importantly, a pessimistic worldview.

Bibliography

- Borde, Raymond & Chaumeton, Etienne (2002) *A Panorama of American Film Noir 1941-1953*, San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- Cameron, Ian (ed.) (1992) *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, London: Studio Vista.
- Christopher, Nicholas (1997) *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City*, New York: The Free Press.
- Copjec, Joan (editor) (1993) *Shades of Noir*, London: Verso.
- Crowther, Bosley (July 25, 1952) "High Noon", *New York Times*: <http://www.nytimes.com/1952/07/25/arts/high-noon-oscars.html>.
- Cunningham, John (2000) "The Tin Star", *A Century of Great Western Stories*, New York: Ton Doherty Associates.
- Drummond, Phillip (1997) *High Noon*, London: BFI Publishing.
- Hirsch, Foster (1981) *Film Noir: The Dark Side of the Screen*, New York: Da Capo Press.
- Hirsch, Foster (1999) *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir*, New York: Limelight Editions.
- Kaplan, E. Ann (ed.) (1980) *Women in Film Noir*, London: British Film Institute.
- Krutnik, Frank (1991) *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, London: Routledge.
- Naremore, James (1998) *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Selby, Spencer (1984) *Dark City: The Film Noir*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.
- Silver, Alain & Ward, Elizabeth (eds.) (1992) *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press.
- Silver, Alain & Ursini, James (1996) *Film Noir Reader*, New York: Limelight Editions.

- Silver, Alain & Ursini, James (1999) *The Noir Style*, Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press.
- Smith, Marvin (1995) "In a Lonely Place: Film Noir and Social Comment", *Journal of Humanities [Language and Culture]*, Vol. 1, Iwatsuki, Japan: Mejiro University.
- Spicer, Andrew (2002) *Film Noir*, Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited.
- Stephens, Michael L. (1995) *Film Noir: A Comprehensive, Illustrated Reference to Movies, Terms, and Persons*, London: McFarland & Co.
- Tuska, John (1984) *Dark Cinema*, London: Greenwood Press.