

## Son of Noir:

### Neo-Film Noir and the Neo-B Picture

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The "Classic" period of American *Film Noir* encompasses several hundred motion pictures from *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) to *Touch of Evil* (1958) produced by scores of different filmmakers between roughly 1940 and 1960. While that *noir* cycle of production never formally concluded, the attempts to sustain its viewpoint were few in the 1960s and 1970s. Particularly near its end, however, the decade of the 1980s brought a significant resurgence of interest in the themes and protagonists that typified classic *film noir*. The 1990s so far have added scores more to the titles of the preceding decade. If there is a most significant difference between then and now, it is in what motivates the creation of the films.

At the height of the movement individual *noir* films transcended personal and generic outlook to reflect cultural preoccupations. From the late 1970s to present, in a "Neo-Noir" period, many of the productions that recreate the *noir* mood, whether in remakes or new narratives, have been undertaken by filmmakers cognizant of a heritage and intent on placing their own interpretation on it. David Mamet put it most succinctly regarding *House of Games* (1987): "I am very well acquainted with the genre, both in print and on film, and I love it. I tried to be true."<sup>1</sup>

*Guncrazy* (1992) is not a remake, but a mixture of fugitive couple and "kid *noir*" concepts. The film does echo classic period titles, particularly the visual imagery of Joseph H. Lewis' 1950 original *Gun Crazy* in scenes of the couple locked in a parody of embrace while they shoot at cans and bottles. The ingenuous dialogue is more in the manner of Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1947). Because the characters themselves, Howard and Anita, are much more like Ray's Bowie and Keechie than those in Robert Altman's aimless, direct remake, *Thieves Like Us* (1974), they naively romanticize their sordid dilemma, epitomized when they break into a house and dress up for a candle-lit dinner.

*Guncrazy*, like its namesake and many recent productions, is also a low-budget picture. In the classic period, *film noir* may have been disproportionately involved with productions done on limited means. The original *Gun Crazy*



Above, Drew Barrymore as Anita and James Legros as Howard, juvenile fugitive couple in *Guncrazy*, recalling characters from both the original *Gun Crazy* and *They Live by Night*.

as well as *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), *D.O.A.* (1950), *Detour* (1945) and scores of others were all made on limited budgets and shooting schedules, which seemed to mesh well with the spare, ill-lit locales that typified the *noir* underworld. In many ways, the resurgence of interest in the *noir* style by low-budget filmmakers represents a return to the roots of the cycle. The "B-film" or "programmer," the less costly productions of the 40s and 50s from the major studios, such as *Thieves' Highway* (Fox, 1949), *Scene of the Crime* (MGM, 1949), or *Black Angel* (Universal, 1946), whose second-tier actors, writers, and directors were featured on the bottom-half of double bills, has transformed itself into the limited release and made-for-video efforts of the 80s and 90s. The low-budget feature, made at a cost ranging from less than \$500,000 to \$3 or 4 million cannot be financed based on U.S. theatrical prospects alone but must follow the dictates of the foreign, video, and cable markets. Not only do those markets still prize the "action" picture or "thriller," whose spare narratives translate more easily for non-English speaking audiences, but the violence and

compulsive sexual behavior that has always been part of film *noir* are more "saleable" than ever. Since many productions of the classic period were criticized at the time for their violence and unsavory themes, this is just another aspect of neo-noir's return to its roots.

Like *Guncrazy*, many films like the three 1990 adaptations of Jim Thompson's novels, from *The Grifters* and *After Dark, My Sweet* at the high end to *The Kill-off* at the ultra-low end have worked within the range of limited budget and successfully evoked the *noir* tradition. In fact, in the worst of neo-noir, the failing is seldom because of monetary restrictions. *Hit List* and *Relentless* (both 1989) are two low-budget examples by the same director, William Lustig. What imbalances the former picture are the performances, with Rip Torn, Lance Henriksen, and Leo Rossi acting at one level and Jan-Michael Vincent and Charles Napier at another. While *Hit List* turns on the concept of the wrong address, the *modus operandi* in *Relentless*, where the killer chooses his victims by opening a page at random from the telephone directory, is even more arbitrary. Although Judd Nelson's portrayal of the psychopath brought the picture much opprobrium, his manic interpretation works within the context much as did Richard Basehart's performance in the classic *He Walked by Night* (1948). The ironies of the displaced cop (Leo Rossi) trying to prove himself and the old veteran (Robert Loggia) dying because of his carelessness are reinforced by the iconographic context of prior work, particularly Loggia's in *Jagged Edge*. In this sense, *Relentless* maximizes the impact of its limited means. While the flashbacks to the killer's abused childhood at the hands of his police officer-father may seem an "antique" device, it economically fulfills a necessary narrative function. Both films use actors with big-budget credits both to mask their limited means and to exploit the audience awareness of screen personas.

Sean Young's androgynous, "hysterical" performance in *Love Crimes* (1992) is part of this same low-budget tactic. In pop-critical jargon, director Lizzie Borden takes a cinematic ax and gives her audience forty whacks. The net effect, however, is a more direct statement about social patriarchy and prejudice against women in law enforcement than in similarly themed pictures with bigger budgets such as *Blue Steel* and *Impulse* (both 1990).

Not only is such economy the key in "neo-B," it helps generate a higher percentage of films that are rooted in the *noir* tradition without overwhelming it, like such self-conscious, high-budget efforts as *Shattered* (1991) or *Final Analysis* (1992). In copying *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Body Chemistry* (1990) must circumvent the obstacles of short schedule and less celebrated actors; and it certainly had no budget to re-shoot endings after test screenings. Despite that, the result is both stark and affecting. Without the clutter of freight elevators or operatic arias, *Body Chemistry* focuses relentlessly on the central premise; and when its "hero" is gunned down it arrives literally and figuratively at a very dif-

ferent conclusion. *Mortal Passions* (1990) takes types from the hard-boiled mold of James L. Cain. Its plot turns fraternal loyalty into betrayal, literally buries bodies in the back yard, and has a would-be *femme fatale* fall in love with a prospective victim. In its final sequence it recalls more than anything Cain's ending to *Double Indemnity*, the novella.

Cain is not credited here, of course, nor even in *Kiss Me A Killer* (1991), which is an "unauthorized" Latino version of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. The high-budget 1981 remake with Jack Nicholson and Jessica Lange in the John Garfield/Lana Turner roles restored the impulsive sexuality but little of the determinism of Cain's original or the 1947 adaptation. *Kiss Me A Killer* borrows sub-plots liberally from other classic films from Siegel's *Crime In the Streets* (1956) to Hitchcock's *I, Confess* (1953) but centers on the Mexican-American wife of a white bar owner and a guitar-playing drifter named Tony who helps transform the place into a salsa hot spot. Like Visconti's 1942 *Ossessione*, this unsanctioned adaptation of the novel emphasizes the loutish qualities of the husband to build empathy with the killers and captures Cain's obsessive and fateful mood better than its costlier counterparts.

The \$1 million-budgeted *The Killing Time* (1987) and *Jezebel's Kiss* (1990) both feature youthful revenge seekers. Both use actors such as Beau Bridges, Malcolm MacDowell, Wayne Rogers, and Meredith Baxter-Birney to mask

Below, Tom Berenger (left) as the amnesiac real estate developer in *Shattered* with Corbin Bernson as his partner.



their fiscal origins. The key to both stories is revealed in flashback: they have returned to obtain reprisal for the death of a parent which they witnessed as children. As it happens both films are situated in small California coastal communities, and the deaths are tied to land swindles. For both films, the location and the limited cast allow production values to be maximized. *The Killing Time*'s protagonist murders and takes the place of the small town's new deputy sheriff and features a performance by Kiefer Sutherland that evokes Jim Thompson's Deputy Lou Ford. *Jezebel's Kiss* has a title character who rides into town on a Harley, and a lead performance that is best left undescribed.

More recent, modestly-budgeted pictures, which consider the issue of criminal "professionalism," *Diary of a Hitman* and *Reservoir Dogs* (both 1992), use stylized performances to create a *noir* ambience. Dekker, the title character of *Diary of a Hitman*, is a throwback and the film's narrative style follows suit. The story unfolds as a flashback, a message which Dekker is leaving on his "booking agent's" answering machine, and his voiceover narration is used heavily throughout. Forest Whitaker's portrayal of Dekker, who early on confesses to being troubled by his work and maintaining the illusion that "it's not personal," recalls Mark Stevens in *The Dark Corner* (1946) or *Cry Vengeance* (1954) in the best "B" manner.

Dekker's key comment is "I was a pro. A pro is a pro, right?" The answer from Mr. Pink in *Reservoir Dogs* is "a psychopath ain't a professional." From the perspective of the classic *noir* style and narrative, *Reservoir Dogs* is pointedly aware of a relationship to those conventions. The sociopathic "Mr. Blonde" might well be alluding to *Point Blank* when he confesses to being "a big Lee Marvin fan." The plot of *Reservoir Dogs* derives from the caper film. An organizer brings a group of otherwise unrelated criminals together for one job and keeps their true identities from each other with "colorful" names. The botched robbery itself is never seen, only its aftermath as the survivors come to the rendezvous point and argue over what happened and what to do now. Flashbacks within flashbacks economically create narrative layers that are both "traditionally" *noir* and enddistance the modern viewer from identification with the criminal protagonists. Equally enddistancing are slow motion optical effects and moments of grisly humor. While it shares the multiple points of view of writer/director Quentin Tarantino's later, more expensive, and much more celebrated *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Reservoir Dogs* is a more tightly constructed and ultimately much darker film.

In *Genuine Risk* (1990), *Delusion* (1991), even *Femme Fatale* (1991), the titles are completely unambiguous and the budgets even lower. Equally remarkable is how well these pictures succeed in the *noir* tradition. *Femme Fatale* is the most complicated, recalling elements of *The Locket* (1947) and *Chicago Deadline* (1949), in which a man marries a woman who turns out to be someone



else or, more accurately, someone suffering from a multiple personality disorder. Like the reporter in *Chicago Deadline*, her husband pieces her other lives together through a succession of leads, while dodging some street hoodlums whom another of her personalities swindled. In the end the protagonists survive only because of a whim of these hoodlums.

The plot of *Delusion* owes even more to Al Robert's "mysterious force" in the classic *Detour* or to the chance events in Ida Lupino's *The Hitch-hiker* (1953). Embittered over his longtime employer's sale of the company, George O'Brien has embezzled a million dollars and is driving to Las Vegas with the cash in his trunk. He stops to help a young couple, Patti and Chevy, in a car that has swerved off the road, and they abduct him. O'Brien does not realize that the young tough has not been planning to kill him and does not know about the money, until Chevy kills someone else. Now O'Brien is a witness;

Below, neo-noir *femme fatales*: left, Katherine Barrese as the revenge-seeking, motorcycle-riding, and possibly amnesiac title character in *Jezebel's Kiss*. Right, Jennifer Rubin as the opportunistic Patti, who sings "These boots are made for walking" at the close of *Delusion*.



and they dump him in the desert. He survives; but by the time he tracks them down, Patti has found the money and is preparing to go off on her own.

Stylistically both of these films benefit from the isolated or seedy locales, which permit a spare and stark visualization in the manner of *Border Incident* (1949) or *On Dangerous Ground* (1952). As in *After Dark, My Sweet* or *Kill Me Again* (1990), the desert locations in *Delusion* permit an arrangement of figures in a landscape that create a sense of otherworldliness or mirage (the film's original title), of acting out a bad dream without having recourse to optical effects or mood lighting. At the victim's trailer site or in a rundown motel at the aptly named Death Valley Junction, the isolated environment underscores the narrative tension in the classic *noir* manner. The last shot literally drives off from O'Brien as he stands looking at the wounded Chevy lying in the dusty driveway, and it continues moving away down the road as the end credits roll, figuratively abandoning the protagonist to his fate.

*Genuine Risk* may be the most self-conscious neo-noir and neo-B of these three films, as locations, lighting style, and art direction constantly underscore the sordidness of the milieu. The script is outrageous and features lines like "A racetrack is like a woman...a man weathers so much banality in pursuit of the occasional orgasmic moment." What distinguishes *Genuine Risk* is the offhandedness of its violence, where people are beaten or die painfully, abruptly and without reason in stagings that capture the disturbing tone of videotapes of real events from surveillance cameras. It also has some wryness and novelty in its plot and casting, most notably Terence Stamp as a 60s British pop-star turned petty mobster. Although deceived by this mobster's wife, the "hero," a hapless petty criminal and compulsive gambler named Henry, survives. And while just about everyone else perishes, he goes back to the track for another play.

The plots of these pictures, all budgeted at under a million dollars, take only what they can afford from the classic tradition; but that is a considerable amount. All have enough money for a *femme fatale*, a hired killer or two, a confused and entrapped hero, an employer ripped-off, a shakedown. Two have flashbacks, two have gang bosses, and one a psychiatrist. The locations vary from Los Angeles to Las Vegas, from Death Valley to Big Bear Lake, but two have mansions, two cheap motels, and two isolated rural locales where killers take their proposed victims. Like its antecedent, neo-noir and neo-B in particular makes few if any extravagant demands in terms of production value.

From television to comic books, *film noir* has exerted and continues to exert its narrative and stylistic influence. It has been a while since *Dragnet*, *Naked City*, *Johnny Staccato*, *The Fugitive*, *Run for Your Life*, and *Harry-O* were on network; but movies-of-the-week and cable originals frequently explore the *noir* terrain on a limited budget. While both were given after-market theatrical re-

leases, such recent and extremely self-conscious neo-noir projects as John Dahl's *Red Rock West* (1992) and *The Last Seduction* (1994) originated as made-for-cable movies. After the short-lived, animated cop series *Fish Police*, can it be long before an angst-ridden Bart Simpson puts on a fedora and skateboards down his own mean streets?

The resurgence of interest in the themes and styles of *film noir* in recent years has benefited filmmakers at all budget levels. If *film noir* is no longer the American style, certainly no other movement has emerged to replace it. Unless and until filmmakers discover another mirror to hold up to American society, none ever will.

## Notes

1. Mamet quoted in Todd Erickson, *Evidence of Film Noir in Contemporary Cinema*, p. 168.

Young guns: left, a childlike pose by Anita (Drew Barrymore) holding her .357 magnum in *Guncrazy*. Below, Chevy (Kyle Secor, right) prepares to execute Larry (Jerry Orbach) in *Delusion*.

