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Film noir

Film noir is a cinematic term used primarily to describe stylish Hollywood crime dramas, particularly those that emphasize cynical attitudes and sexual motivations. Hollywood's classic film noir period is generally regarded as stretching from the early 1940s to the late 1950s. Film noir of this era is associated with a low-key black-and-white visual style that has roots in German Expressionist cinematography. Many of the prototypical stories and much of the attitude of classic noir derive from the hardboiled school of crime fiction that emerged in the United States during the Depression.

The term film noir (French for "black film"), first applied to Hollywood movies by French critic Nino Frank in 1946. Cinema historians and critics defined the noir canon in retrospect; before the notion was widely adopted in the 1970s, many of the classic film noirs were referred to as melodramas. The question of whether film noir qualifies as a distinct genre is a matter of ongoing debate among scholars.

Film noirs encompass a range of plots—the central figure may be a private eye (The Big Sleep), a plainclothes policeman (The Big Heat), an aging boxer (The Set-Up), a hapless grifter (Night and the City), a law-abiding citizen lured into a life of crime (Gun Crazy), or simply a victim of circumstance (D.O.A.). Though the noir mode was originally identified among American productions, films now customarily described as noir have been made around the world. From the 1960s onward, many pictures have come out that share attributes with film noirs of the classic period, often treating noir conventions in a self-reflexive manner. Such latter-day works in a noir mode are often referred to as neo-noirs. The tropes of film noir have inspired parody since the mid-1940s.

Definitions of film noir: oneiric, strange, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel

The questions of what defines film noir and what sort of category it is provoke continuing debate. "We'd be oversimplifying things in calling film noir oneiric, strange, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel": this set of attributes constitutes the first of many attempts to define film noir made by French critics Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton in their 1955 book Panorama du film noir américain 1941–1953 (A Panorama of American Film Noir), the original and seminal extended treatment of the subject. They emphasize that not every film noir embodies all five attributes in equal measure—one might be more dreamlike; another, particularly brutal. The authors' caveats and repeated efforts at alternative definition have been echoed in subsequent scholarship: in the more than five decades since, there have been innumerable further attempts at definition, yet in the words of cinema historian Mark Bould, film noir remains an "elusive phenomenon ... always just out of reach".

Though film noir is often identified with a visual style, unconventional within a Hollywood context, that emphasizes low-key lighting and unbalanced compositions, movies commonly identified as noir evidence
a variety of visual approaches, including ones that fit comfortably within the Hollywood mainstream. Film noirs similarly embrace a variety of genres, from the gangster film to the police procedural to the gothic romance to the social problem picture—any example of which from the 1940s and 1950s, now seen as noir's classic era, was likely to be described as a "melodrama" at the time. While many critics refer to film noir as a genre itself, others argue that it can be no such thing. While noir is often associated with an urban setting, many classic noirs take place in small towns, suburbia, rural areas, or on the open road; so setting cannot be its genre determinant, as with the Western. Similarly, while the private eye and the femme fatale are character types conventionally identified with noir, the majority of film noirs feature neither; so there is no character basis for genre designation as with the gangster film. Nor does film noir rely on anything as evident as the monstrous or supernatural elements of the horror film, the speculative leaps of the science fiction film, or the song-and-dance routines of the musical.

A more analogous case is that of the screwball comedy, widely accepted by film historians as constituting a "genre": the screwball is defined not by a fundamental attribute, but by a general disposition and a group of elements, some—but rarely and perhaps never all—of which are found in each of the genre's films. However, because of the diversity of noir (much greater than that of the screwball comedy), certain scholars in the field, such as film historian Thomas Schatz, treat it as not a genre but a "style". Alain Silver, the most widely published American critic specializing in film noir studies, refers to film noir as a "cycle" and a "phenomenon", even as he argues that it has—like certain genres—a consistent set of visual and thematic codes. Other critics treat film noir as a "mood", characterize it as a "series", or simply address a chosen set of movies they regard as belonging to the noir "canon". There is no consensus on the matter.
Background

Cinematic sources

Film noir's aesthetics are deeply influenced by German Expressionism, an artistic movement of the 1910s and 1920s that involved theater, photography, painting, sculpture, and architecture, as well as cinema. The opportunities offered by the booming Hollywood film industry and, later, the threat of growing Nazi power led to the emigration of many important film artists working in Germany who had either been directly involved in the Expressionist movement or studied with its practitioners. Directors such as Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, and Michael Curtiz brought a dramatically shadowed lighting style and a psychologically expressive approach to visual composition, or mise-en-scène, with them to Hollywood, where they would make some of the most famous of classic noirs. Lang’s magnum opus, *M*—released in 1931, two years before his departure from Germany—is among the first major crime films of the sound era to join a characteristically noirish visual style with a noir-type plot, one in which the protagonist is a criminal (as are his most successful pursuers).

By 1931, Curtiz had already been in Hollywood for half a decade, making as many as six films a year. His movies such as *20,000 Years in Sing Sing* (1932) and *Private Detective 62* (1933) are among the early Hollywood sound films arguably classifiable as noir—scholar Marc Vernet offers the latter as evidence that dating the initiation of film noir to 1940 or any other year is “arbitrary”. Giving Expressionist-affiliated moviemakers particularly free stylistic rein were Universal horror pictures such as *Dracula* (1931), *The Mummy* (1932)—the former photographed and the latter directed by the Berlin-trained Karl Freund—and *The Black Cat* (1934), directed by Austrian émigré Edgar G. Ulmer. The Universal horror that comes closest to noir, both in story and sensibility, however, is *The Invisible Man* (1933), directed by Englishman James Whale and photographed by American Arthur Edeson. Edeson would subsequently photograph *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), widely regarded as the first major film noir of the classic era.

The Vienna-born but largely American-raised Josef von Sternberg was directing in Hollywood at the same time. Films of his such as *Shanghai Express* (1932) and *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), with their hothouse eroticism and baroque visual style, specifically anticipate central elements of classic noir. The commercial and critical success of Sternberg’s silent *Underworld* in 1927 was largely responsible for spurring a trend of Hollywood gangster films. Popular movies in the genre such as *Little Caesar* (1931), *The Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932) demonstrated that there was an audience for crime dramas with morally reprehensible protagonists. An important, and possibly influential, cinematic antecedent to classic noir was 1930s French poetic realism, with its romantic, fatalistic attitude and celebration of doomed heroes. The movement’s sensibility is mirrored in the Warner Bros. drama *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), a key forerunner of noir. Among those movies not themselves
considered film noirs, perhaps none had a greater effect on the development of the genre than America's own *Citizen Kane* (1941), the landmark motion picture directed by Orson Welles. Its visual intricacy and complex, voiceover-driven narrative structure are echoed in dozens of classic film noirs.

Italian neorealism of the 1940s, with its emphasis on quasi-documentary authenticity, was an acknowledged influence on trends that emerged in American noir. *The Lost Weekend* (1945), directed by Billy Wilder, yet another Vienna-born, Berlin-trained American auteur, tells the story of an alcoholic in a manner evocative of neorealism. It also exemplifies the problem of classification: one of the first American movies to be described as a film noir, it has largely disappeared from considerations of the field. Director Jules Dassin of *The Naked City* (1948) pointed to the neorealists as inspiring his use of on-location photography with nonprofessional extras. This semidocumentary approach characterized a substantial number of noirs in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Along with neorealism, the style had a homegrown precedent, specifically cited by Dassin, in director Henry Hathaway's *The House on 92nd Street* (1945), which demonstrated the parallel influence of the cinematic newsreel.

**Literary sources**

The primary literary influence on film noir was the hardboiled school of American detective and crime fiction, led in its early years by such writers as Dashiell Hammett (whose first novel, *Red Harvest*, was published in 1929) and James M. Cain (whose *The Postman Always Rings Twice* appeared five years later), and popularized in pulp magazines such as *Black Mask*. The classic film noirs *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Glass Key* (1942) were based on novels by Hammett; Cain's novels provided the basis for *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), and *Slightly Scarlet* (1956; adapted from *Love's Lovely Counterfeit*). A decade before the classic era, a story of Hammett's was the source for the gangster melodrama *City Streets* (1931), directed by Rouben Mamoulian and photographed by Lee Garmes, who worked regularly with Sternberg. Wedding a style and story both with many noir characteristics, released the month before Lang's *M*, *City Streets* has a claim to being the first major film noir.

Raymond Chandler, who debuted as a novelist with *The Big Sleep* in 1939, soon became the most famous author of the hardboiled school. Not only were Chandler's novels turned into major noirs—*Murder, My Sweet* (1944; adapted from *Farewell, My Lovely*), *The Big Sleep* (1946), and *Lady in the Lake* (1947)—he was an important screenwriter in the genre as well, producing the scripts for *Double Indemnity*, *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), and *Strangers on a Train* (1951). Where Chandler, like Hammett, centered most of his novels and stories on the character of the private eye, Cain featured less heroic protagonists and focused more on psychological exposition than on crime solving; the Cain approach has come to be identified with a subset of the hardboiled genre dubbed "noir fiction". For much of the 1940s, one of the most
prolific and successful authors of this often downbeat brand of suspense tale was Cornell Woolrich (sometimes under the pseudonym George Hopley or William Irish). No writer's published work provided the basis for more film noirs of the classic period than Woolrich's: thirteen in all, including *Black Angel* (1946), *Deadline at Dawn* (1946), and *Fear in the Night* (1947).

Another crucial literary source for film noir was W. R. Burnett, whose first novel to be published was *Little Caesar*, in 1929. It would be turned into a hit for Warner Bros. in 1931; the following year, Burnett was hired to write dialogue for *Scarface*, while *Beast of the City* was adapted from one of his stories. At least one important reference work identifies the latter as a film noir despite its early date. Burnett's characteristic narrative approach fell somewhere between that of the quintessential hardboiled writers and their noir fiction compatriots—his protagonists were often heroic in their way, a way just happening to be that of the gangster. During the classic era, his work, either as author or screenwriter, was the basis for seven movies now widely regarded as film noirs, including three of the most famous: *High Sierra* (1941), *This Gun for Hire* (1942), and *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950).

**Classic period**

**Overview**

The 1940s and 1950s are generally regarded as the "classic period" of American film noir. While *City Streets* and other pre-WWII crime melodramas such as *Fury* (1936) and *You Only Live Once* (1937), both directed by Fritz Lang, are categorized as full-fledged noir in Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward's film noir encyclopedia, other critics tend to describe them as "proto-noir" or in similar terms. The movie now most commonly cited as the first "true" film noir is *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940), directed by Latvian-born, Soviet-trained Boris Ingster. Hungarian émigré Peter Lorre—who had starred in Lang's *M*—was top-billed, though he did not play the lead. He would play secondary roles in several other formative American noirs. Though modestly budgeted, at the high end of the B movie scale, *Stranger on the Third Floor* still lost its studio, RKO, $56,000, almost a third of its total cost. *Variety* magazine found Ingster's work "too studied and when original, lacks the flare to hold attention. It's a film too arty for average audiences, and too humdrum for others." *Stranger on the Third Floor* was not recognized as the beginning of a trend, let alone a new genre, for many decades.

Most of the film noirs of the classic period were similarly low- and modestly budgeted features without major stars—B movies either literally or in spirit. In this production context, writers, directors, cinematographers, and other craftsmen were relatively free from typical big-picture constraints. There was more visual experimentation than in Hollywood filmmaking as a whole: the Expressionism now closely associated with noir and the semidocumentary style that later emerged represent two very different tendencies. Narrative structures sometimes involved convoluted flashbacks uncommon in non-
noir commercial productions. In terms of content, enforcement of the Production Code ensured that no movie character could literally get away with murder or be seen sharing a bed with anyone but a spouse; within those bounds, however, many films now identified as noir feature plot elements and dialogue that were very risqué for the time.

Thematically, film noirs were most exceptional for the relative frequency with which they centered on women of questionable virtue—a focus that had become rare in Hollywood films after the mid-1930s and the end of the pre-Code era. The signal movie in this vein was *Double Indemnity*, directed by Billy Wilder; setting the mold was Barbara Stanwyck's unforgettable femme fatale, Phyllis Dietrichson—an apparent nod to Marlene Dietrich, who had built her extraordinary career playing such characters for Sternberg. An A-level feature all the way, the movie's commercial success and seven Oscar nominations made it probably the most influential of the early noirs. A slew of now-renowned noir "bad girls" would follow, such as those played by Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* (1946), Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), Ava Gardner in *The Killers* (1946), and Jane Greer in *Out of the Past* (1947). The iconic noir counterpart to the femme fatale, the private eye, came to the fore in movies such as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), with Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade, and *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), with Dick Powell as Philip Marlowe. Other seminal noir sleuths served larger institutions, such as Dana Andrews's police detective in *Laura* (1944), Edmond O'Brien's insurance investigator in *The Killers*, and Edward G. Robinson's government agent in *The Stranger* (1946).

The prevalence of the private eye as a lead character declined in film noir of the 1950s, a period during which several critics describe the form as becoming more focused on extreme psychologies and more exaggerated in general. A prime example is *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955); based on a novel by Mickey Spillane, the best-selling of all the hardboiled authors, here the protagonist is a private eye, Mike Hammer. As described by Paul Schrader, "Robert Aldrich's teasing direction carries noir to its sleaziest and most perversely erotic. Hammer overturns the underworld in search of the 'great whatsit' [which] turns out to be—joke of jokes—an exploding atomic bomb." Orson Welles's baroquely styled *Touch of Evil* (1958) is frequently cited as the last noir of the classic period. Some scholars believe film noir never really ended, but continued to transform even as the characteristic noir visual style began to seem dated and changing production conditions led Hollywood in different directions—in this view, post-1950s films in the noir tradition are seen as part of a continuity with classic noir. A majority of critics, however, regard comparable movies made outside the classic era to be something other than genuine film noirs. They regard true film noir as belonging to a temporally and geographically limited cycle or period, treating subsequent films that evoke the classics as fundamentally different due to general shifts in moviemaking style and latter-day awareness of noir as a historical source for allusion.
Outside the United States

Some critics regard classic film noir as a cycle exclusive to the United States; Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, for example, argue, "With the Western, film noir shares the distinction of being an indigenous American form ... a wholly American film style." Others, however, regard noir as an international phenomenon. Even before the beginning of the generally accepted classic period, there were movies made far from Hollywood that can be seen in retrospect as film noirs, for example, the French productions Pépé le Moko (1937), directed by Julien Duvivier, and Le Jour se lève (1939), directed by Marcel Carné.

Film Noir in France

During the classic period, there were many films produced outside the United States, particularly in France, that share elements of style, theme, and sensibility with American film noirs and may themselves be included in the genre's canon. In certain cases, the interrelationship with Hollywood noir is obvious: American-born director Jules Dassin moved to France in the early 1950s as a result of the Hollywood blacklist, and made one of the most famous French film noirs, Rififi (1955). Other well-known French films often classified as noir include Quai des Orfèvres (1947), Le Salaire de la peur (released in English-speaking countries as The Wages of Fear) (1953) and Les Diaboliques (1955), all directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot; Casque d’or (1952) and Touchez pas au grisbi (1954), both directed by Jacques Becker; and Ascenseur pour l’échafaud (1958), directed by Louis Malle. French director Jean-Pierre Melville is widely recognized for his tragic, minimalist film noirs—Bob le flambeur (1955), from the classic period, was followed by Le Doulos (1962), Le deuxième souffle (1966), Le Samouraï (1967), and Le Cercle rouge (1970).

Film Noir in England

Scholar Andrew Spicer argues that British film noir evidences a greater debt to French poetic realism than to the expressionistic American mode of noir. Examples of British noir from the classic period include Brighton Rock (1947), directed by John Boulting; They Made Me a Fugitive (1947), directed by Alberto Cavalcanti; The Small Back Room (1948), directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger; The October Man (1950), directed by Roy Ward Baker; and Cast a Dark Shadow (1955), directed by Lewis Gilbert. Terence Fisher directed several low-budget thrillers in a noir mode for Hammer Film Productions, including The Last Page (aka Man Bait; 1952), Stolen Face (1952), and Murder by Proxy (aka Blackout; 1954). Before leaving for France, Jules Dassin had been obliged by political pressure to shoot his last English-language film of the classic noir period in Great Britain: Night
and the City (1950). Though it was conceived in the United States and was not only directed by an American but also stars two American actors—Richard Widmark and Gene Tierney—it is technically a UK production, financed by 20th Century-Fox's British subsidiary. The most famous of classic British noirs is director Carol Reed's The Third Man (1949), like Brighton Rock based on a Graham Greene novel. Set in Vienna immediately after World War II, it also stars two American actors, Joseph Cotten and Orson Welles, who had appeared together in Citizen Kane.

Elsewhere, Italian director Luchino Visconti adapted Cain's The Postman Always Rings Twice as Ossessione (1943), regarded both as one of the great noirs and a seminal film in the development of neorealism. (This was not even the first screen version of Cain's novel, having been preceded by the French Le Dernier tournant in 1939.)

Film Noir in Japan

In Japan, the celebrated Akira Kurosawa directed several movies recognizable as film noirs, including Drunken Angel (1948), Stray Dog (1949), The Bad Sleep Well (1960), and High and Low (1963). Among the first major neo-noir films—the term often applied to movies that consciously refer back to the classic noir tradition—was the French Tirez sur le pianiste (1960), directed by François Truffaut from a novel by one of the gloomiest of American noir fiction writers, David Goodis. Noir crime films and melodramas have been produced in many countries in the post-classic area. Some of these are quintessentially self-aware neo-noirs—for example, Il Conformista (1969; Italy), Der Amerikanische Freund (1977; Germany), The Element of Crime (1984; Denmark), and El Aura (2005; Argentina). Others simply share narrative elements and a version of the hardboiled sensibility associated with classic noir, such as The Castle of Sand (1974; Japan), Insomnia (1997; Norway), Croupier (1998; UK), and Blind Shaft (2003; China).
Film Noir from 60s to 2000

The 60s:

- writer/director Sam Fuller's grim revenge noir-thriller *Underworld USA* (1961) starred Cliff Robertson as Tolly Devlin, who as a 14 year-old saw his father beaten to death by four gangsters; 20 years later, the ex-con sought uncompromising, nihilistic revenge.
- in J. Lee Thompson's *Cape Fear* (1962), Robert Mitchum - in a memorable villainous role - starred as a sadistic, sordid ex-con named Max Cady exacting revenge on family-man lawyer Sam Bowden (Gregory Peck) that sent him to prison, by assailing his wife and daughter [The film was remade by Martin Scorsese as *Cape Fear* (1991) with Robert De Niro].
- director John Frankenheimer's Cold War-era *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) was a complex, realistic depiction of brainwashing in a frightening, satirical psychological, noirish thriller; Korean war hero and Congressional Medal of Honor winner Sgt. Raymond Shaw (Laurence Harvey), controlled and manipulated by his spy-agent "Queen of Diamonds" ambitious *femme fatale* mother (Angela Lansbury) (the wife of right-wing, McCarthyite demagogue Senator John Iselin (James Gregory)), was behind the sinister plot to assassinate political enemies; the mind-controlled operative Shaw murdered his own wife Jocie (Leslie Parrish) and his father-in-law, liberal Senator Thomas Jordon (John McGiver); in the tense climax, Major Bennett Marco (Frank Sinatra) uncovered the programmed killer's fiendish plans to assassinate the presidential nominee [The film was remade by director Jonathan Demme in 2004, starring Denzel Washington as the Frank Sinatra character, updated as a Gulf War veteran, and Liev Schreiber as the Laurence Harvey character].
- director Sam Fuller's unorthodox, bold and raw, feminist B-film *The Naked Kiss* (1964), a treatise about the abuse and exploitation of women by perverse men, told about a reformed call-girl (Constance Towers) who learned of the hypocrisy of her fiancee - the most respected citizen of the community.
- director Arthur Penn's groundbreaking, controversial, stylish crime drama/romance, and road film *Bonnie And Clyde* (1967), similar to the earlier noir *Gun Crazy* (1949) (aka *Deadly Is the Female*), told about a 1930s Depression-Era bank-robbing couple Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow (Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty) and gang with easy-going, folksy flavor and bloody, graphically-violent shoot-outs; controversial when released because of its bullet-riddled ending, it marked the coming increase in visceral cinematic violence.
- director John Boorman's *Point Blank* (1967), a brutal and violent crime classic neo-noir based on the pulp crime novel *The Hunter* by Richard Stark (Donald E. Westlake), starred Lee Marvin as Walker, a double-crossed criminal on the path of relentless revenge to collect $93,000 due to him ("Somebody's gotta pay"); the film featured virtuoso, artsy, avant-garde editing techniques (i.e., flashbacks, time lapses, dream motifs, etc) in its elliptical tale.

The 70s:

- Alan J. Pakula's *Klute* (1971) starred Oscar-winning Jane Fonda as Bree Daniels, a victimized NYC streetwalker who became romantically involved with cop/detective Klute (Donald Sutherland) during his investigation of various murders in the noirish city.
- William Friedkin's Best Picture-winning crime thriller *The French Connection* (1971) was a realistic story of the obsessive pursuit of French drug kingpins (led by Fernando Ray) and a shipment of heroin by two unorthodox New York City police detectives (Gene Hackman as out-of-control, anti-bureaucratic, porkpie hat-wearing "Popeye" Doyle and Roy Scheider).
in Don Siegel's violent action film *Dirty Harry* (1971), Clint Eastwood starred as the intolerant, fascistic, magnum-packing, vigilante SF cop Harry Callahan on the trail of the elusive 'Scorpio killer' (Andy Robinson)

Terrence Malick's directorial debut film *Badlands* (1973), similar in plot to earlier "amour fou" (doomed lovers-on-the-run) noir films, was inspired and based on the murder spree of a killing, loving couple, Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate, in the late 1950's in Nebraska and bordering states; social outcast and misfit, James Dean look-alike ex-garbage collector Kit Carruthers (Martin Sheen) romanced a naive, lackadaisical, starry-eyed, celebrity magazine-addicted 15 year old teenager Holly Sargis (Sissy Spacek) (who narrated the film in a deadpan tone), killed her disapproving father (Warren Oates), and then embarked on a state-wide flight - and shocking, emotionally-apathetic and casual, homicidal, and image-conscious binge - into the badlands of South Dakota and Montana

maverick Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973) was a revisionistic update of Raymond Chandler's 1954 detective novel, with Elliott Gould as worn-out, ineffectual private eye Philip Marlowe in 1970s Los Angeles

Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973) with a rock and roll soundtrack explored the grim world of Little Italy in New York through the eyes of four small-time Italian hoodlums, including irresponsibly-violent Johnny Boy (Robert De Niro) and his ambitious punk cousin Charlie Calla (Harvey Keitel)

Roman Polanski's noirish detective thriller *Chinatown* (1974) was a masterful homage to noirs of the past; it starred Jack Nicholson as J.J. Gittes - an ex-LA cop turned Bogart-style PI, who became embroiled in a true-to-life land and water scandal and conspiracy, crimes including incest and murder, with a bleak and despairing climax on the streets of Chinatown; followed by the sequel *The Two Jakes* (1990)

Francis Ford Coppola's noirish conspiracy thriller *The Conversation* (1974) was the slowly-gripping, bleak study of electronic surveillance and threat of new technologies that was examined through the private, internalized life of a lonely and detached expert surveillance 'bugger' named Harry Caul (Gene Hackman)

director Robert Altman's remake *Thieves Like Us* (1974), based upon the same source as Nicholas Ray's *They Live By Night* (1949), was set in Depression-era Mississippi, and starred Keith Carradine (as Bowie) and Shelley Duvall (as Keechie) - an outlaw couple brought together during a series of bank robberies

director Dick Richards' retro-noir *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975), the third film adaptation of Chandler's 1940 novel *Farewell, My Lovely*, filmed with *Chinatown's* cinematographer, starred Robert Mitchum as Philip Marlowe

Arthur Penn's noirish mystery-thriller *Night Moves* (1975) featured Gene Hackman as doomed LA private eye Harry Moseby searching in the Florida Keys for a runaway teenaged nymphet step-daughter (a young Melanie Griffith) - and encountering lethal circumstances

Peter Hyam's little-seen and forgotten *Pepper* (1975) (*aka Fat Chance*), a semi-serious spoof of the 40s detective films, starred Michael Caine as Leslie C. Tucker - a trench-coated detective in LA commissioned to find a wealthy man's long-lost missing daughter (either Natalie Wood or Kitty Winn); the tagline stated: "Back in '47, a gun was a roscoe, a private-eye was a Peper, and murder was okay as long as nobody got hurt. In fact, anything was okay with this Peeper on the case because he wouldn't know who-done-it even if he done it himself"

Martin Scorsese's bleak and violent *Taxi Driver* (1976), one of his greatest films, examined the character of a volatile, alienated, unfocused, psychotic NYC taxi driver named Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) who was fatalistically disturbed by the squalid, hellish urban underbelly of pimps, whores, winos, and junkies; his fantasized one-man campaign/mission to clean up the streets focused on saving prepubescent child prostitute Iris (Jodie Foster); the film ended with a failed political assassination attempt, and a rage-filled, pent-up blood-bath massacre, including the killing of Iris' pimp 'Sport' (Harvey Keitel)
- Michael Winner's *The Big Sleep (1978)*, the second film adaptation of Chandler's 1939 novel of the same name, starred Robert Mitchum as Philip Marlowe

### The 80s:

- writer/director Paul Schrader's stylish and hip early 80s film *American Gigolo (1980)* starred baring-all Richard Gere as Julian Kaye - a high-priced, vain, and cocky-arrogant Beverly Hills hustler and gigolo, who was framed for the Palm Springs murder of a wealthy and sadistic client's (Tom Stewart) wife named Judy Rheiman (Patricia Carr)
- Martin Scorsese's noirish biopic *Raging Bull (1980)* was a magnificently visceral, vivid and real, black and white bio/docu-drama of the rise and fall of a violent, suicidally-macho prize-fighter; it told how hard-headed, animalistic, unlovable slum kid Jake LaMotta (Robert De Niro), based on the real-life LaMotta's autobiography, became a middle-weight champ, but also experienced bouts of domestic violence with brother Joey (Joe Pesci) and second, beautiful teenage wife Vikki (Cathy Moriarty), and slowly but predictably descended into fat, self-pitying slobbishness
- Lawrence Kasden's twisted, steamy, and sexy noirish *Body Heat (1981)*, his directorial debut film, bore a marked resemblance to *Double Indemnity (1944)* and to *The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946)* - it told about a short-sighted lawyer (William Hurt) who was enticed to murder a sultry femme fatale's (Kathleen Turner) husband (Richard Crenna)
- in Czech filmmaker Ivan Passer's twisting crime thriller and murder mystery *Cutter's Way* (1981), John Heard (as embittered, self-righteous, drunken, one-eyed, one-armed, one-legged, crazed and angry Vietnam vet Alexander Cutter) found a purpose in his life when his laconic yacht-salesman-beach-bum friend Richard Bone (Jeff Bridges) witnessed the dumping of a female corpse, compelling Cutter to ride heroically (and tragically) on a white stallion to his death to confront the killer
- Bob Rafelson's *The Postman Always Rings Twice (1981)*, a sexed-up version of the 1946 original, starred Jack Nicholson and Jessica Lange
- Ridley Scott's film noirish sci-fi thriller *Blade Runner (1982)* was set in a decaying, tech-noir LA society of the future (in the year 2019), with Harrison Ford as a futuristic, LA 'blade-running' private-eye detective intent on killing replicant-androids; the voice-over narration replicated the world-weary tone of many early noirs
- Taylor Hackford's *Against All Odds (1984)* attempted to loosely remake the classic *Out of the Past (1947)* with Rachel Ward as spoiled heroine Jessie (the Jane Greer role), Jeff Bridges as ex-football star Terry Brogan (the Robert Mitchum role), and James Woods as gambler/businessman Jake (the Kirk Douglas role); cast members from the original film in the remake included Jane Greer (now as the mother), and Paul Valentine (as a two-bit hood in the original, but now as Councilman Weinberg)
- the feverish, low-budget debut film of the Coen Brothers' was the neo-noir *Blood Simple (1984)* which told about a murder plot gone awry; with M. Emmett Walsh as an amoral PI hired to kill a honky-tonk bar owner's (Dan Hedaya) unfaithful wife (Frances McDormand) and her bartender lover (John Getz); the film featured sleazy characters, an endless murder scene, and double-crosses - all characteristics of classic film noir
- David Lynch's disturbing, absorbing and brilliant *Blue Velvet (1986)* told about the seedy and corrupt under-side of suburban Americana through the voyeuristic findings of college student Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan) and his girlfriend (Laura Dern) regarding sexual blackmail, drugs, immorality, sado-masochistic singer Dorothy Valens (Isabella Rosselini) and psychotic underworld sadist Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper); the unique film visualized the repulsive and twisted horrors that lurked behind ordinary small-town life - all stemming from the mysterious discovery of a severed human ear in a field by the naive college student

Neil Jordan's *Mona Lisa* (1986), set in a depraved London, was a gritty tale about a high-priced call girl (Cathy Tyson) and her ex-con chauffeur-bodyguard (Bob Hoskins)

Alan Parker's stylistic, occult post-noir *Angel Heart* (1987) (originally X-rated), based on William Hjortsberg's novel *Fallen Angel* - was a religious-themed film noir/supernatural horror mixture set in the world of New Orleans voodoo, corruption, and other devilish circumstances; it starred Mickey Rourke as a seedy, Mickey Spillane-type of 1950's Brooklyn private eye who was hired by a Satanic client Louis Cyphre (Robert De Niro) to search for a missing singer in New Orleans; it was more remembered for its notorious sex scene between Rourke and *The Cosby Show* star Lisa Bonet (in her film debut) than the plot

Bob Rafelson's *Black Widow* (1987) featured a murderous, psychotic but charming gold-digger *femme fatale* (Theresa Russell) who was pursued by federal sleuth Alexandra (Debra Winger)

Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction* (1987) was a suspenseful, melodramatic, erotic thriller about one-night stands, sexual games, and obsessive love (with Glenn Close as *femme fatale* Alex Forrest - a murderous jilted, stalking woman who terrorized her married man partner Dan (Michael Douglas) and his family)

writer/director David Mamet's first feature film, the moody *House of Games* (1987) dealt with the surreal world (a gambling den called "The House of Games") of con artists (Joe Mantegna as Mike) and its victims (including psychiatrist Margaret Ford, portrayed by Lindsay Crouse)

Roger Donaldson's *No Way Out* (1987) was based on John Farrow's classic *The Big Clock* (1948)

The 90s:

Stephen Frears' superb neo-noir *The Grifters* (1990) featured three lowlife con artists (John Cusack, his estranged mother Anjelica Huston, and his new sexy girlfriend Annette Bening)

another Coen Brothers masterpiece, *Miller's Crossing* (1990), was a rehash of Dashiell Hammett's crime novel *Red Harvest* and with many similarities to *The Glass Key*, featured Albert Finney as an Irish crime boss in the Prohibition era and Gabriel Byrne as his trusted lieutenant

and also the Coen's *Barton Fink* (1991), similar in plot to *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), told about an intellectual Jewish Broadway playwright (John Turturro) with acute writer's block after he sold out and came to Hollywood - a deal literally with Mephistopheles

Kenneth Branagh's *Dead Again* (1991), a complicated and puzzling Alfred Hitchcock-like, karmic tale with two parallel stories - the murder of a European composer's wife in 1940s Hollywood, and a modern-day private eye's search for clues to murder (including the use of hypnosis on his amnesia-suffering client)

Abel Ferrara's gritty and hardcore NC-17 rated *Bad Lieutenant* (1992), with a stunning and courageous performance by Harvey Keitel as a corrupt, addicted, and sleazy NYC police detective

Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* (1992), with Sharon Stone as ice-pick murderess suspect and bisexual *femme fatale* Catherine Trammell, tempting to ensnared SF cop Det. Nick Curran (Michael Douglas)

David Mamet's-penned *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992), a dark modern film noir about corrupt real-estate salesmen

Carl Franklin's low-budget neo-noir *One False Move* (1992), his directorial debut film, told about a group of coke-addicted, drug-dealing criminal killers (Billy Bob Thornton, Michael
Beach, and Cynda Williams) who fled LA for Arkansas, where they were confronted by local Star City sheriff "Hurricane" Dixon (Bill Paxton) and two LA cops

- Howard Franklin's *The Public Eye* (1992) was set in a 40s NYC; it was a modern *film noir* character study and crime thriller told from the perspective of Joe Pesci's character - Leon "The Great Bernzini" Bernstein
- John Dahl's quirky and suspenseful modern-day film noir *Red Rock West* (1992) starred Nicolas Cage as Michael Williams caught in a twisting plot; as a drifter with a bum leg, he wandered into rural Red Rock, Wyoming where he was mistaken for a hit man - "Lyle from Dallas" - and became embroiled in a wife-killing scheme involving Lara Flynn Boyle (as Suzanne Brown/Ann McCord) - and then the real 'Lyle from Dallas' showed up (Dennis Hopper)
- writer/director Quentin Tarantino's feature film debut, the brutal but dark comic-noir film *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) told about the aftermath of a botched diamond heist among a color-coded group of Los Angeles criminals, including the infamous ear-slicing scene
- also John Dahl's dark, erotic follow-up feminist noir thriller *The Last Seduction* (1994) starred Linda Florentino in a quintessential film noir role as amoral, evil *femme fatale* Bridget Gregory, a beautiful, sexy, brazen, and deadly seductress who victimized dumb, small-town guy Mike (Peter Berg), while on the lam with $700,000 of drug money
- the contemporary, twisting neo-noir *China Moon* (1994) starred Ed Harris as a straight Florida cop, *femme fatale* Madeleine Stowe as his unhappily-married, irresistible love interest, and Benicio del Toro as a rookie cop
- Oliver Stone's ultra-violent and trippy *Natural Born Killers* (1994) was assailed for its sensationalistic look at two psychopathic serial murderers Mickey and Mallory (Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis), a couple-on-the-run who fled down Route 666, while glorified by the media as folk heroes, especially by manipulative reporter Wayne Gale (Robert Downey, Jr.)
- writer/director Quentin Tarantino's modern-day classic film and black noirish comedy *Pulp Fiction* (1994) was composed of a trio of interwoven storylines in LA (including a twist dance contest and heroin overdose) and twelve major characters (including hitmen, mobsters, a downtrodden boxer, etc.)
- Michael Mann's epic crime film *Heat* (1995) famously brought together, in their first screen appearance, Robert De Niro (as gang boss Neil McCauley) and Al Pacino (as LA detective Vincent Hanna) on different sides of the law
- Steven Soderbergh's stylized noirish thriller *The Underneath* (1995) was a loose derivative of the film noir thriller *Criss Cross* (1949); it starred Peter Gallagher (in a dual role) as a man whose lust for his angry and vengeance *femme fatale* ex-wife (Alison Elliott) led to his downfall
- Bryan Singer's convoluted heist thriller *The Usual Suspects* (1995) was a cleverly-written, complex tale (with an Oscar-winning screenplay) and featured a Best Supporting Actor Oscar-winning performance by Kevin Spacey as a club-footed con man Roger "Verbal" Kint serving as an informant for cops about a dockside shootout - and the unseen, non-existent mobster Keyser Soze ("And like that, he's gone")
- the Wachowski's debut film *Bound* (1996), one of the first mainstream films to include a feminist lesbian relationship and love story, teamed ex-con butch neighbor Corky (Gina Gershon) with sexy mob moll Violet (Jennifer Tilley) in a plot to steal $2 million from her money-laundering boyfriend Caesar (Joe Pantoliano)
- the Coen Brothers' noirish *Fargo* (1996) was a murder tale regarding frustrated, defeated, and broke Twin Cities car salesman Jerry Lundegaard (William Macy) who hired two inept thugs (Steve Buscemi and Peter Stormare) to kidnap his wife for a ransom - but it ended in three deaths, and an investigation by largely-pregnant, clever, and doggedly-determined police chief Marge Gunderson (Oscar-winning Frances McDormand)
- Curtis Hanson's recreated early-50s Hollywood, Techni-colored, retro-noir crime drama of scandalous sex and corruption, *L.A. Confidential* (1997), had an Oscar-winning screenplay, and featured three antagonistic police detectives (Guy Pearce, Russell Crowe, and Kevin Spacey) in a
corrupt LAPD investigating a mass slaying at a diner; Kim Basinger had a Best Supporting Actress Oscar-winning role as a Veronica-Lake look-alike *femme fatale/prostitute*; this was a screen adaptation from several of James Ellroy's crime novels

- the Coen Brothers' clever comic-noir *The Big Lebowski (1998)* told a twisted story of complications that arose for a laid-back, paunchy, pot-smoking, obsessed-bowler named "Dude" Lebowski (Jeff Bridges) after he was mistaken for multi-millionaire Lebowski (David Huddleston); he became ineptly involved in kidnapping, embezzlement, and extortion

- writer/director Robert Benton's quirky neo-noir *Twilight (1998)* starred 73 year-old Paul Newman as aging, alcoholic, down-and-out LA private eye Harry Ross, completing one last job for cancer-stricken Hollywood movie star Jack Ames (Gene Hackman) and his sexy and sultry *femme fatale* wife Catherine (Susan Sarandon), involving murder, old secrets, and blackmail

**The 2000s:**

- in John Frankenheimer's *Reindeer Games (2000)*, ex-con Rudy Duncan (Ben Affleck), who impersonated his dead cellmate's identity for the man's *femme fatale* pen-pal-girlfriend Ashley Mercer (Charlize Theron), became ensnared in her brother's (Gary Sinise) plot to rob a Michigan casino on Christmas Eve

- writer/director Christopher Nolan's *Memento (2000)* was a confounding, mind-bending tale told in backward-jumping reverse; it featured a hero named Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) without short-term memory who was investigating the rape-murder of his wife (Jorja Fox), with Teddy (Joe Pantoliano) assisting and Carrie Ann Moss as potential *femme fatale* Natalie

- the Coen Brothers' semi-parody of *film noir* *The Man Who Wasn't There (2001)*, with impressive b/w cinematography from Roger Deakins, starred Billy Bob Thornton as a deadpanning, unassuming cuckolded barber Ed Crane, alongside his loveless marriage to scheming, unfaithful wife Doris (Francis McDormand)

- David Lynch's complex and unconventional *Mulholland Dr. (2001)* had two *femme fatales*, each with two personas: the light Betty Elms/Diane (Naomi Watts) and dark, enigmatic Rita/Camilla (Laura Elena Harring), both caught in a nightmarish, Los Angeles web of corruption and death after opening Pandora's Box

- Sean Penn's mystery thriller *The Pledge (2001)* told how on-the-verge-of-retiring Reno police officer Jerry Black (Jack Nicholson) pledged to a brutally murdered 8 year-old victim's mother (Patricia Clarkson) that he would find the killer; although mentally-handicapped, long-haired Native-American (Benicio del Toro) was accused of the crime, the increasingly haunted Black abandoned his retirement while suspecting a sadistic pedophile "wizard" and using a little girl named Chrissy (Pauline Roberts) as bait

- Antoine Fuqua's neo-noir *Training Day (2001)* starred Best Actor-winning Denzel Washington as corruptible, street-smart veteran black LA police officer/narcotics cop Alonzo Harris who was training rookie cop Jake Hoyt (Ethan Hawke)

- Ron Shelton's grim police thriller *Dark Blue (2002)*, based on a James Ellroy story about brutality, corruption, and racism, told about a 1992 investigation into a quadruple homicide that occurred in a Korean-owned convenience store; it starred Kurt Russell as hard-drinking LAPD elite Special Investigations Squad (SIS) member Sgt. Eldon Perry, his new partner Bobby Keough (Scott Speedman), and Keough's uncle - corrupt SIS head Jack Van Meter (Brendan Gleeson) who ordered the robbery that led to the killings

- Christopher Nolan's noirish psychological thriller *Insomnia (2002)*, a remake of the darker, original 1997 Norwegian film of the same name, starred Al Pacino as anti-hero LA homicide police investigator Will Dormer, under investigation himself by LAPD Internal Affairs and sent to Nightmute, Alaska for the case of a murdered female teen; sleep-deprived Dormer's prime suspect was local mystery writer-killer Walter Finch (Robin Williams); during the proceedings,
Dormer accidentally shot his own partner Hap Eckhart (Martin Donovan) - witnessed by Finch - and then attempted to cover up the slaughter by pinning it on his menacing, creepy suspect

- Jane Campion's *In the Cut* (2003) was adapted from Susanna Moore's 1995 noir best seller; it told about NY creative writing professor, Frannie Avery (Meg Ryan), who had an erotic affair with racist, offensive police Detective Malloy (Mark Ruffalo) investigating a dismemberment-murder in her neighborhood of a woman, while suspecting him of the murder

- Carl Franklin's plot-twisting neo-noir *Out of Time* (2003) starred Denzel Washington as small-town Florida police chief Matt Lee Whitlock who must solve a vicious double murder (of his lover Ann Merai (Sanaa Lathan) and her abusive ex-football player husband (Dean Cain)) when he became the prime suspect - while being investigated by his estranged wife Alex (Eva Mendes), an ambitious homicide detective

- Michael Mann's visually slick and stylistic LA urban noir *Collateral* (2004) told about a coy LA cabbie hostage named Max (Jamie Foxx) who was forced to drive contract hitman Vincent (Tom Cruise) from one execution to the next over the course of one night, to kill five people involved in an upcoming Justice Department trial regarding drug trafficking

- Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005) was a gritty and darker version of the super-hero comic book character Bruce Wayne/Batman (Christian Bale), set in the retro-futuristic world of Gotham City where he combatted mob boss Carmine Falcone (Tom Wilkinson)

- Rian Johnson's low-budget, mystery teen-noir *Brick* (2005), his directorial debut film, told about high-schooler Brendan Frye (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), who investigated the supposed murder of his ex-girlfriend Emily (Emilie de Ravin), and during his quest encountered a couple of *femme fatales* (Nora Zehetner and Meagan Good) and other suspects; the film was unusual in that the 21st century teenagers spoke in the hardboiled, detective-language style of Dashiell Hammett tales and adopted 40s styles (costumes, drinks, and music)

- Canadian director David Cronenberg's noir thriller *A History of Violence* (2005) told about married couple Tom (Viggo Mortensen) - a diner owner and his sexy wife Edie Stall (Maria Bello) living in a small Indiana town, whose lives were shaken when Tom became a local hero and his past life came back to haunt him in the form of a black-suited, scarred stranger named Fogarty (Ed Harris) - an Irish hood from Philadelphia who remembered him as Joey Cusack

- co-director Robert Rodriguez' monochrome R-rated, stylized *Sin City* (2005) with computer-generated visuals was based on Frank Miller's comic book tale about a corrupt seedy metropolis with rain-slicked streets, and all the noir requisites: a voice-over narration (by Josh Hartnett), a tough-guy hero/ex-con named Marv (Mickey Rourke), a sexy and manipulative *femme fatale* named Gail (Rosario Dawson), an aging policeman named Hartigan (Bruce Willis) protective of exotic stripper/dancer Nancy (Jessica Alba) - and more

- Brian DePalma's *The Black Dahlia* (2006) recreated the notorious unsolved murder of aspiring actress Elizabeth Short (Mia Kirshner) in 1947 - based upon James Ellroy's murder mystery novel, following the obsessive quest to solve the killing by LA cops Bucky Bleichert (Josh Hartnett) and Lee Blanchard (Aaron Eckhart)

- Best Director-winning Martin Scorsese's viciously-violent Best Picture crime neo-noir tale *The Departed* (2006) was a remake of Siu Fai Mak's *Infernal Affairs* (2002, HK), and told about reciprocally-planted 'moles' (or rats) within both the South Boston Irish-American mob (Colin Súllivan (Matt Damon)), led by mobster Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson), and the Massachusetts State Police Department (Billy Costigan (Leonardo DiCaprio))

- Allen Coulter's noirish mystery *Hollywoodland* (2006) retold (in flashback) the unusual circumstances surrounding the death of TV's *Superman* in 1959, George Reeves (Ben Affleck) through the investigation of down-and-out PI Louis Simo (Adrien Brody)
Characteristics of Film Noir

In their original 1955 canon of film noir, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton identified twenty-two Hollywood movies released between 1941 and 1952 as core examples; they listed another fifty-nine American movies from the period as significantly related to the field of noir. A half-century later, film historians and critics had come to agree on a canon of approximately three hundred movies from 1940–58. There remain, however, many differences of opinion over whether other movies of the era, among them a number of well-known ones, qualify as film noirs or not. For instance, *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), starring Robert Mitchum in an acclaimed performance, is treated as a film noir by some critics, but not by others. Some critics include *Suspicion* (1941), directed by Alfred Hitchcock, in their catalogues of noir; others ignore it. Concerning films made either before or after the classic period, or outside of the United States at any time, consensus is even rarer.

To support their categorization of certain movies as noirs and their rejection of others, many critics refer to a set of elements they see as marking examples of the mode. The question of what constitutes the set of noir's identifying characteristics is a fundamental source of controversy. For instance, critics tend to define the model film noir as having a tragic or bleak conclusion, but many acknowledged classics of the genre have clearly happy endings (e.g., *Stranger on the Third Floor*, *The Big Sleep*, *Dark Passage*, and *The Dark Corner*), while the tone of many other noir denouements is ambivalent. Some critics perceive classic noir's hallmark as a distinctive visual style. Others, observing that there is actually considerable stylistic variety among noirs, instead emphasize plot and character type. Still others focus on mood and attitude. No survey of classic noir's identifying characteristics can therefore be considered definitive. In the 1990s and 2000s, critics have increasingly turned their attention to that diverse field of movies called neo-noir; once again, there is even less consensus about the defining attributes of such films made outside the classic period.

**Visual style**

The low-key lighting schemes of many classic film noirs are associated with stark light/dark contrasts and dramatic shadow patterning—a style known as chiaroscuro (a term adopted from Renaissance painting). The shadows of Venetian blinds or banister rods, cast upon an actor, a wall, or an entire set, are an iconic visual in noir and had already become a cliché well before the neo-noir era. Characters' faces may be partially or wholly obscured by darkness—a relative rarity in conventional Hollywood moviemaking. While black-and-white cinematography is considered by many to be one of the essential attributes of classic noir, the color films *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945) and *Niagara* (1953) are routinely
included in noir filmographies, while _Slightly Scarlet_ (1956), _Party Girl_ (1958), and _Vertigo_ (1958) are classified as noir by varying numbers of critics.

Film noir is also known for its use of low-angle, wide-angle, and skewed, or Dutch, angle shots. Other devices of disorientation relatively common in film noir include shots of people reflected in one or more mirrors, shots through curved or frosted glass or other distorting objects (such as during the strangulation scene in _Strangers on a Train_), and special effects sequences of a sometimes bizarre nature. Night-for-night shooting, as opposed to the Hollywood norm of day-for-night, was often employed. From the mid-1940s forward, location shooting became increasingly frequent in noir.

In an analysis of the visual approach of _Kiss Me Deadly_, a late and self-consciously stylized example of classic noir, critic Alain Silver describes how cinematographic choices emphasize the story's themes and mood. In one scene, the characters, seen through a "confusion of angular shapes", thus appear "caught in a tangible vortex or enclosed in a trap." Silver makes a case for how "side light is used ... to reflect character ambivalence", while shots of characters in which they are lit from below "conform to a convention of visual expression which associates shadows cast upward of the face with the unnatural and ominous".

**Structure and narrational devices**

Film noirs tend to have unusually convoluted story lines, frequently involving flashbacks and other editing techniques that disrupt and sometimes obscure the narrative sequence. Framing the entire primary narrative as a flashback is also a standard device. Voiceover narration, sometimes used as a structuring device, came to be seen as a noir hallmark; while classic noir is generally associated with first-person narration (i.e., by the protagonist), Stephen Neale notes that third-person narration is common among noirs of the semi documentary style. Neo-noirs as varied as _The Element of Crime_ (surrealist); _After Dark, My Sweet_ (retro); and _Kiss Kiss Bang Bang_ (self-reflexive) have employed the flashback/voiceover combination.

Bold experiments in cinematic storytelling were sometimes attempted during the classic era: _Lady in the Lake_, for example, is shot entirely from the point of view of protagonist Philip Marlowe; the face of star (and director) Robert Montgomery is seen only in mirrors. _The Chase_ (1946) takes oneirism and fatalism as the basis for its fantastical narrative system redolent of certain horror stories, but with little precedent in the context of a putatively realistic genre. In their different ways, both _Sunset Boulevard_ and _D.O.A._ are tales told by dead men. Latter-day noir has been in the forefront of structural experimentation in popular cinema, as exemplified by such films as _Pulp Fiction_, _Fight Club_, and _Memento_. 
Plots, characters, and settings

Crime, usually murder, is an element of almost all film noirs; in addition to standard-issue greed, jealousy is frequently the criminal motivation. A crime investigation—by a private eye, a police detective (sometimes acting alone), or a concerned amateur—is the most prevalent, but far from dominant, basic plot. In other common plots the protagonists are implicated in heists or con games, or in murderous conspiracies often involving adulterous affairs. False suspicions and accusations of crime are frequent plot elements, as are betrayals and double-crosses. According to J. David Slocum, "protagonists assume the literal identities of dead men in nearly fifteen percent of all noir." Amnesia is fairly epidemic—"noir's version of the common cold," in the words of film historian Lee Server.

By the late 1940s, the noir trend was leaving its mark on other genres. A prime example is the Western Pursued (1947), filled with psychosexual tensions and behavioral explanations derived from Freudian theory.

Film noirs tend to revolve around heroes who are more flawed and morally questionable than the norm, often fall guys of one sort or another. The characteristic protagonists of noir are described by many critics as "alienated"; in the words of Silver and Ward, "filled with existential bitterness". Certain archetypal characters appear in many film noirs—hardboiled detectives, femme fatales, corrupt policemen, jealous husbands, intrepid claims adjusters, and down-and-out writers. Among characters of every stripe, cigarette smoking is rampant. From historical commentators to neo-noir pictures to pop culture ephemera, the private eye and the femme fatale have been adopted as the quintessential film noir figures, though they do not appear in most movies now regarded as classic noir. Of the twenty-three National Film Registry noirs, in only four does the star play a private eye: The Maltese Falcon, The Big Sleep, Out of the Past, and Kiss Me Deadly. Just four others readily qualify as detective stories: Laura, The Killers, The Naked City, and Touch of Evil.
Film noir is often associated with an urban setting, and a few cities—Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Chicago, in particular—are the location of many of the classic films. In the eyes of many critics, the city is presented in noir as a "labyrinth" or "maze". Bars, lounges, nightclubs, and gambling dens are frequently the scene of action. The climaxes of a substantial number of film noirs take place in visually complex, often industrial settings, such as refineries, factories, trainyards, power plants—most famously the explosive conclusion of *White Heat*, set at a chemical plant. In the popular (and, frequently enough, critical) imagination, in noir it is always night and it always rains.

A substantial trend within latter-day noir—dubbed "film soleil" by critic D. K. Holm—heads in precisely the opposite direction, with tales of deception, seduction, and corruption exploiting bright, sun-baked settings, stereotypically the desert or open water, to searing effect. Significant predecessors from the classic and early post-classic eras include *The Lady from Shanghai*; the Robert Ryan vehicle *Inferno* (1953); the French adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, *Plein soleil* (*Purple Noon* in the U.S., more accurately rendered elsewhere as *Blazing Sun* or *Full Sun*; 1960); and director Don Siegel's version of *The Killers* (1964). The tendency was at its peak during the late 1980s and 1990s, with films such as *Dead Calm* (1989); *After Dark, My Sweet*; *The Hot Spot*; *Delusion* (1991); and *Red Rock West*, and TV's *Miami Vice*.

**Worldview, morality, and tone**

Film noir is often described as essentially pessimistic. The noir stories that are regarded as most characteristic tell of people trapped in unwanted situations (which, in general, they did not cause but are responsible for exacerbating), striving against random, uncaring fate, and frequently doomed. The movies are seen as depicting a world that is inherently corrupt. Classic film noir has been associated by many critics with the American social landscape of the era—in particular, with a sense of heightened anxiety and alienation that is said to have followed World War II. In author Nicholas Christopher's opinion: "it is as if the war, and the social eruptions in its aftermath, unleashed demons that had been bottled up in the national psyche." Film noirs, especially those of the 1950s and the height of the Red Scare, are often said to reflect cultural paranoia; *Kiss Me Deadly* is the noir most frequently marshaled as evidence for this claim.
"You've got a touch of class, but I don't know how far you can go." "A lot depends on who's in the saddle." Bogart and Bacall in The Big Sleep.

Film noir is often said to be defined by "moral ambiguity", yet the Production Code obliged almost all classic noirs to see that steadfast virtue was ultimately rewarded and vice, in the absence of shame and redemption, severely punished (however dramatically incredible the final rendering of mandatory justice might be). A substantial number of latter-day noirs flout such conventions: vice emerges triumphant in films as varied as the grim Chinatown and the ribald Hot Spot.

The tone of film noir is generally regarded as downbeat; some critics experience it as darker still—"overwhelmingly black", according to Robert Ottoson. Influential critic (and filmmaker) Paul Schrader wrote in a seminal 1972 essay that "film noir is defined by tone", a tone he seems to perceive as "hopeless". In describing the adaptation of Double Indemnity, noir analyst Foster Hirsch describes the "requisite hopeless tone" achieved by the filmmakers, which appears to characterize his view of noir as a whole. On the other hand, definitive film noirs such as The Big Sleep, The Lady from Shanghai, and Double Indemnity itself are famed for their hardboiled repartee, often imbued with sexual innuendo and self-reflexive humor—notes of another tone.
Styles in Film Noir

Orson Welles and Film Noir:

Orson Welles’ films have significant noir features, such as in his expressionistically-filmed *Citizen Kane* (1941), with subjective camera angles, dark shadowing and deep focus, and low-angled shots from talented cinematographer Gregg Toland. Welles’ third film for RKO, the war-time mystery *Journey Into Fear* (1943), was one in which he acted and co-directed (uncredited) - it was set in the exotic locale of Istanbul. The film’s story was inspired by Eric Ambler’s spy thriller about the flight of an American arms engineer (Joseph Cotten) on a Black Sea tramp steamer where he was threatened by Nazi agents intent on killing him.

The complex *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948) - with its plot (from Sherwood King’s novel *If I Should Die Before I Wake*), told about a destructive love triangle between Irish seaman Michael O’Hara (Welles himself), a manipulative Rita Hayworth as the platinum blonde-femme fatale Elsa (or Rosalie), and her husband Arthur Bannister (Everett Sloane). Its final sequence in a San Francisco “hall of mirrors” fun-house was symbolic and reflective of the shattered relationships between the characters, exemplified by a wounded O’Hara’s last words: “Maybe I’ll live so long that I’ll forget her. Maybe I’ll die trying.”

Welles’ Mexican border-town B-movie classic *Touch of Evil* (1958) is generally considered the last film in the classic cycle of film noirs. It starred Charlton Heston as Vargas - a naïve Mexican-American narcotics cop, Janet Leigh as his imperiled, honeymooning wife Susan, and Welles’ own corrupt and corpulent local cop Hank Quinlan. The film also featured a comeback appearance by cigar-smoking bordello madam Marlene Dietrich, and a breathtaking opening credits sequence filmed in a single-take. Later, Welles’ expressionistic noir and psychological drama *The Trial* (1962) was an adaptation of Franz Kafka's classic novel, with Anthony Perkins as Joseph K - a man condemned for an unnamed crime in an unknown country.

Noirs with Raymond Chandler’s 'Philip Marlowe':

Raymond Chandler's gumshoe Philip Marlowe was often portrayed by different actors:

- director Irving Reis’ *The Falcon Takes Over* (1942) was based on Chandler's book, *Farewell, My Lovely*, and was the third installment in the *Falcon* series of films; it was based on novelist Michael Arlen’s 1940 fictional crime short story *Gay Falcon*, with the gentleman sleuth protagonist (portrayed by actor George Sanders) named Gay Stetson Falcon (later renamed Gay Lawrence) rather than Philip Marlowe
- singer Dick Powell starred as the down-and-out PI in Edward Dmytryk’s twisting story of intrigue *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) (aka *Farewell, My Lovely*, Chandler's book title) searching for ex-con Moose Malloy’s (Mike Mazurki) missing lover Velma/Helen Grayle (Claire Trevor) in wartime Los Angeles; the film was especially noted for its expressionistic lighting
- Humphrey Bogart, teamed with real-life wife Lauren Bacall, played the role of private detective Philip Marlowe in the confusing, classic Howard Hawks who-dun-it *The Big Sleep* (1946) involving blackmail, pornography, and murder in Los Angeles - it was based on Chandler's 1939 novel and adapted for the screen by co-writers William Faulkner, Leigh Brackett and Jules Furthman
- director/star Robert Montgomery was Philip Marlowe in *Lady in the Lake* (1946) - experimentally filmed from the protagonist's first-person point of view
- Elliott Gould portrayed the detective in Robert Altman’s spoof *The Long Goodbye* (1973) (based upon Chandler's 1953 novel) set in modern-day Los Angeles, in which the lone, unconventional sleuth investigated the murder of a friend's wife
- Robert Mitchum was in the role in director Dick Richards' *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975) - a remake of *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) and *The Falcon Takes Over* (1942); the film was set in Los
Angeles with Charlotte Rampling as the seductive Helen Grayle/Velma and Jack O'Halloran as Moose Malloy

- Robert Mitchum again starred as Marlowe in The Big Sleep (1978) - a remake of Howard Hawks’ 1946 film, with Candy Clark and Sarah Miles as the two Sternwood daughters, and Oliver Reed as corrupt gangster Eddie Mars

Romance Film Noirs with Great *Femme Fatales*:

Twisted, shocking melodramatic film noirs featuring deadly *femme fatales* on a path of romance and self-destruction (romance noirs) with the men in their lives included the following examples:

- Fritz Lang's second American film You Only Live Once (1937) with a framed-for-murder, doomed ex-convict Henry Fonda in flight to the border with loser wife Sylvia Sidney and child
- William Wyler's The Letter (1940) featured Bette Davis as a murdering wife whose professed innocence was compromised by a damning letter
- Billy Wilder's (and Raymond Chandler's) adaptation of James M. Cain's novel Double Indemnity (1944) included a persuasive, sinister brassy blonde (Barbara Stanwyck) who convinced a smart-talking insurance agent/lover (Fred MacMurray) to murder her unsuspecting husband so they could share ‘double indemnity’ insurance proceeds; also with Edward G. Robinson as a shrewd insurance investigator
- Fritz Lang's tense The Woman in the Window (1944) told about a law-abiding college professor (Edward G. Robinson) who became embroiled in a crime when he unintentionally committed a murder and suddenly found himself on the run from blackmail with a beautiful, strange model (Joan Bennett)
- Michael Curtiz' melodramatic, mother-daughter noir classic Mildred Pierce (1945) featured Best Actress-winning Joan Crawford as a suspected murderess who covered up for her beloved but venomous *femme fatale* daughter (Ann Blyth)
- the psychological, melodramatic noir Leave Her to Heaven (1945), one of the first noirs shot in color, highlighted a menacing, father-fixated, unstable *femme fatale* (Gene Tierney) who would stop at nothing (the drowning murder of her husband's younger paraplegic brother in a lake, and a deliberate miscarriage to kill her unborn child when she deliberately fell down stairs) to possessively hold onto the man she loved
- Edgar G. Ulmer's gritty, cheaply-made (“Poverty Row”), fatalistic, cultish crime film Detour (1945) was about the bleak twists of fate; in a flashback story cynically narrated, a world-weary, identity-stealing hitchhiker (Tom Neal) was haplessly involved in an ambiguous death during his thumbing trek to Los Angeles, and later became involved with a nasty hitchhiker - the film's blackmailing, vindictive *femme fatale* con Vera (Ann Savage) whom he accidentally strangled with a telephone cord through a closed door; [the film was remade as Detour (1992) and starred the son of the original ill-fated protagonist, Tom Neal, Jr.]
- Tay Garnett's stylish and moody The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946), from James M. Cain's novel, starred "sweater girl" Lana Turner as the libidinous, restless platinum blonde wife Cora Smith - who was stuck in a roadside diner and loveless marriage and convinced her illicit lover Frank Chambers (John Garfield) to murder her good-hearted husband Nick (Cecil Kellaway) in Lewis Milestone's The Strange Love of Martha Ivers (1946), Barbara Stanwyck's murderous past might be revealed by her alcoholic, unrespected attorney husband Kirk Douglas
- Rita Hayworth was featured in a sultry performance as the black glove-stripping Gilda (1946) to the tune of "Put the Blame on Mame" in Charles Vidor's classic film noir of a love triangle - the 'love goddess' portrayed the sexy, hedonistic red-headed wife of South American casino owner Ballin Mundson (George Macready) who became involved with her husband's abusive croupier (Glenn Ford) - her ex-beau; she became notorious for her much-quoted line: "If I'd been a ranch, they would have named me the Bar Nothing"
- Robert Siodmak's adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's 1927 short story of a twisting double-cross, The Killers (1946), featured Burt Lancaster (in his film debut as the doomed ex-boxer Ole "the Swede" Andersen) and the stunning Ava Gardner as the manipulative vixen Kitty Collins
(who was quoted as saying: "I'm poison, Swede, to myself and everybody around me"); it was noted for its exceptional beginning in which the Swede was assassinated by two professional killers - and accepted his death stoically; [this film was remade by director Don Siegel as the violent crime noir thriller The Killers (1964) with Lee Marvin, Ronald Reagan (in his last feature role), and Angie Dickinson]

- in director John Cromwell's Dead Reckoning (1947), an on-the-run WWII veteran's alluring Southern girlfriend (Lizabeth Scott) threatened military buddy Humphrey Bogart
- director Jacques Tourneur's quintessential, slick film noir Out of the Past (1947) (aka Build My Gallows High) of underworld intrigue was filled with complex flashbacks; it featured Robert Mitchum as the doomed, double-crossed ex-private eye Jeff Markham with a sordid past who fell for the icy femme fatale Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer) he was trailing for ruthless gangster Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas); Markham knew the dangers of falling in love with her ("You're like a leaf that the wind blows from one gutter to another"); [remade as Against All Odds (1984) with an older Jane Greer as her original character's mother]
- Nicholas Ray's doomed lover film They Live By Night (1949) starred Farley Granger and Cathy O'Donnell as fugitive, misfit criminals on the run [remade as Thieves Like Us (1974)]
- Joseph H. Lewis' tabloid romantic/crime B-movie melodrama Gun Crazy (1949) (aka Deadly Is the Female) - was another amour fou 'Bonnie and Clyde' tale with two disturbed and doomed protagonists/lovers on a crime spree - gun-loving Bart (John Dall) and blonde carnival sharpshooter (Peggy Cummins); noted for one unbroken take filmed in the getaway car during a bank robbery scene
- Billy Wilder's classic black comedy and film noirish drama Sunset Boulevard (1950) was a "behind the scenes" look at Hollywood and the price of fame, greed, narcissism, and ambition; down-on-his-luck B-movie hack screenwriter Joe Gillis (William Holden) spoke (in flashback with voice-over narration) beyond the grave as a dead man floating face down in a swimming pool in Beverly Hills, about his six-month struggle to produce screenplays to meet the demands of the industry and satisfy the thirsty illusions of immortality and comeback of aging, wapish, megalomaniacal silent film queen (and femme fatale) Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) in her decaying Sunset Boulevard mansion.
- Otto Preminger's Angel Face (1953) starred Jean Simmons as a psychotic 'angel of death' who talked chauffeur Robert Mitchum into a murder scheme
- Henry Hathaway's Technicolored noir Niagara (1953) provided the perfect star vehicle for curvy sexpot Marilyn Monroe as Rose Loomis, a sinfully-wayward, unhappily married woman (to unstable, WWII veteran George (Joseph Cotten)), in its tale of murder and sexual jealousy; one of its taglines proclaimed: "A raging torrent of emotion that even nature can't control!"

**Documentary-Style Noirs:**

There are numerous, pseudo documentary-style film noirs ("docu-noirs"), often set in dark, rain-swept, crime-ridden urban areas, made in a realistic, semi-documentary fashion and often filmed in actual locations of real-life events:

- Henry Hathaway's docu-drama The House on 92nd Street (1945) about Nazi spies scheming to learn the atom bomb formula, was based on actual FBI cases
- Henry Hathaway also directed the film noirish Kiss of Death (1947), was derived from Stoolpigeon - a story by Eleazar Lipsky (with a screenplay by Ben Hecht and Charles Lederer); Victor Mature starred as paroled robber Nick Bianco opposite chilling, sadistic gangster Tommy Udo (Richard Widmark in his stunning screen debut, noted for the scene in which he giggled hysterically while pushing a wheelchair-bound old woman down a flight of stairs)
- Call Northside 777 (1948) starred James Stewart as a Chicago reporter who uncovered a police coverup that sent a wrongly-convicted, innocent slum boy to jail for killing a cop eleven years earlier
- Crane Wilbur's crime drama Canon City (1948) - a re-enactment of a 1947 prison escape in Colorado
director Jules Dassin's great crime drama The Naked City (1948) featured Barry Fitzgerald as a New York City cop investigating a murder over six days, and climaxed with a suspenseful chase and shootout on the Williamsburg Bridge

Anthony Mann's documentary style crime noir T-Men (1948) told about two undercover US Treasury men (Dennis O'Keefe and Alfred Ryder) who infiltrated a deadly counterfeiting gang; in one memorable scene, one of the T-Men was executed while his partner watched

the little-seen Abandoned (1949), from director Joseph Newman, about a late 1940s LA newspaper reporter (Dennis O'Keefe) pursuing a missing girl, along with her sister (Gale Storm known for the TV series My Little Margie), into the sordid black-market baby adoption racket, while encountering a corrupt private investigator (Raymond Burr)

Alfred L. Werker's (and uncredited Anthony Mann) police procedural film noir He Walked By Night (1949) was the story of the capture of psychopathic killer Erwin "Machine-Gun" Walker; the film inspired actor Jack Webb to create Dragnet - first a radio show and then a TV cop show

also, Joseph Newman's moralistic urban crime drama 711 Ocean Drive (1950), told about the rise and fall of an organized crime kingpin (Edmond O'Brien as a telephone company repairman turned bad); the film capitalized on various book-making scandals at the time sensationalized and exposed in the newspapers; with on-location settings of L.A., Palm Springs and Nevada, particularly at Hoover Dam

Billy Wilder's The Big Carnival (1951) (aka Ace in the Hole), an insightful expose of the media, starred Kirk Douglas as a cynical and immoral newsman named Charles Tatum who exploited a 'human interest' story to the public by orchestrating a media frenzy around a man trapped in a Pueblo cliff dwelling tunnel collapse

Alfred Hitchcock's noirish, true-life story thriller The Wrong Man (1956) with Henry Fonda as a New York musician framed and wrongly-accused of committing armed robbery - and undergoing a nightmarish ordeal, including the mental breakdown of his wife (Vera Miles)

Prison Noirs:

Noirs have sometimes been set in prisons or jails:

in Mervyn LeRoy's I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang (1932), an innocent WWI veteran (Paul Muni) was wrongly imprisoned as a chain gang convict, and after two escapes faced life as a hunted fugitive; also the earlier RKO release by Rowland Brown, Hell's Highway (1932) - with a similar bleak view of a Southern chain-gang prison

Fritz Lang's message film Fury (1936) - his first American film - with Spencer Tracy as a falsely accused kidnapper who was threatened and nearly-lynched by a mob in a small Midwestern town

Jules Dassin's dark prison drama Brute Force (1947) - more harsh than noirish about the oppressive Westgate prison (headed by ruthless and sadistic chief guard Captain Munsey (Hume Cronyn)) with Burt Lancaster as an inmate seeking to escape to be with his critically-ill girlfriend

Menaced-Women Noirs:

In menaced-women noirs, the tables are turned and women are menaced by the men in their lives (often their husbands), as in these examples:

in George Cukor's Gaslight (1944), Ingrid Bergman was driven to near insanity by her menacing, mentally-cruel husband Charles Boyer

in Otto Preminger's hard-edged noir romance Laura (1944), a police detective (Dana Andrews) investigated socialite Laura's (Gene Tierney) murder until she reappeared - and was threatened a second time; the film contained troubling necrophiliac themes and sexual obsession by the hard-boiled detective for the dead woman; with a great supporting cast including Vincent Price, Clifton Webb, and Judith Anderson; Oscar winner for Best B/W Cinematography
• in Anatole Litvak’s unnerving and tense *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948), bed-ridden hypochondriac/heiress Barbara Stanwyck overheard a phone call plot that her weak husband Burt Lancaster planned to kill her

• in Nicholas Ray’s *In A Lonely Place* (1950), Humphrey Bogart portrayed a burned-out, troubled, hot-tempered, and near-psychotic Hollywood screenwriter and murder suspect while having an affair with neighboring, alibi-providing, aspiring blonde starlet Laurel Grey (Gloria Grahame) - their sexual attractiveness to each other was soon torn apart by jealousy, fear, and suspicion.

**Hitchcock’s Menaced Women:**

Many of Hitchcock’s earlier black-and-white works featured menaced women:

• **Rebecca** (1940) - in this adaptation of a Daphne du Maurier tale, a naive, unnamed newlywed (Joan Fontaine) was victimized by the tyrannical housekeeper (Judith Anderson) of her widower husband’s (Laurence Olivier) ex-wife Rebecca, in a Gothic noirish setting, until she fully discovered the strange events surrounding Rebecca’s death

• **Suspicion** (1941) - a wealthy wife (Joan Fontaine again) was suspicious of her fortune-hunting husband (Cary Grant) after the murder of a friend (Nigel Bruce)

• **Shadow of a Doubt** (1943) - Joseph Cotten starred as a rich widow-killer who threatened his suspicious favorite niece (Teresa Wright)

• **Spellbound** (1945) - Gregory Peck appeared as a young psychiatrist (actually a disturbed, amnesia imposter) who was accused of murder and counseled by psychiatrist Ingrid Bergman through dream analysis

• **Notorious** (1946) - Ingrid Bergman became the slowly-poisoned wife of a Nazi spy (Claude Rains)

• **Vertigo** (1958), one of Hitchcock’s greatest and most disturbing films, with James Stewart as retired police detective Scottie Ferguson who became obsessed with the disturbed enigmatic ‘wife’ Madeleine (Kim Novak) of an old friend, while suffering the effects of his fear of heights - and vertigo

• **Psycho** (1960) - this shocking and engrossing, most influential thriller-noir - a classic, low budget, manipulative, black and white film - included complex Oedipal themes and schizophrenia; it told about a loner - a mother-fixated motel owner and taxidermist (Anthony Perkins), who killed embezzling, blonde real estate office secretary Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) in the classic set piece (the ‘shower scene’); the psychotic, disturbed cross-dressing transvestite “mother’s boy” was dominated by his jealous ‘mother’, rumored to be in the Gothic house on the hillside behind the dilapidated, remote motel

**Imperiled Children Noirs:**

• in Ted Tetzlaff’s *The Window* (1949), a prone-to-lying slum boy (Bobby Driscoll) wasn’t believed when he vowed that he had witnessed a New York murder in an adjoining apartment - and his life was threatened by the killers

• in the masterwork *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), the only film ever directed by actor Charles Laughton, Robert Mitchum starred as a psycho-crazed, creepy preacher (with finger knuckles tattooed reading “L-O-V-E” and “H-A-T-E”) desperately stalking two children to learn their monetary secret

**Corruption and Crime Noirs:**

Crime and corruption were often the main focus of noir films, usually with tough police detectives in pursuit:
in Charles Brabin’s gritty pre-noir *The Beast of the City* (1932), gangsters were pursued by a serious police chief (Walter Huston).

- in director Archie Mayo’s *The Petrified Forest* (1936), Humphrey Bogart (in an early role) took Bette Davis and Leslie Howard hostage in a desert restaurant/service station.

- in Raoul Walsh’s gangster noir *High Sierra* (1941) based on W.R. Burnett’s novel, Humphrey Bogart (in his first starring role) performed as aging gangster Roy "Mad Dog" Earle with a heart of gold toward country girl Velma (Joan Leslie), who couldn't give up his life of crime and died while pursued in the Sierra Mountains.

- in Stuart Heisler’s *The Glass Key* (1942), Alan Ladd starred as Ed Beaumont, a right-hand man and political aide who attempted to save his politician employer (Brian Donlevy) from a murder rap, while Lake played the seductive fiancee of the boss.

- in Frank Tuttle’s *This Gun For Hire* (1942), marking the first teaming of Alan Ladd and peekaboo blonde Veronica Lake, Ladd starred as “angel of death” hitman Raven, an unsmiling San Francisco professional hit-man who became embroiled in a double-cross and went on the run from police.

- in Fritz Lang’s suspenseful wartime espionage thriller *Ministry of Fear* (1944), based on Graham Greene’s novel, Stephen Neale (Ray Milland), in possession of microfilm won in a carnival cake raffle, found himself on the run from both the Nazis and the authorities.

- in Robert Siodmak’s (and cinematographer Woody Bredell’s) expressionistic noir thriller *Phantom Lady* (1946), based upon Cornell Woolrich’s (pseudonym William Irish) pulp novel, an engineer (Alan Curtis) accused of murdering his wife (and sentenced to the electric chair) had an unbelievable alibi (involving a mysterious ‘lady’ with an ornate hat), causing a police inspector to race against time to prove his innocence.

- in Irving Reis’ *Crack-Up* (1946), a middle-aged art critic and forgery expert (Pat O’Brien) who blacks out must retrace his recent past to circumvent an art forgery conspiracy at a New York museum.

- in director Joseph H. Lewis’ cult film noir *So Dark the Night* (1946), a French investigating cop must solve murders committed while on vacation.

- director Roy William Neill’s (known for a series of 1940s ‘Sherlock Holmes’ films) murder mystery *Black Angel* (1946), based on the novel by Cornell Woolrich, was about an alcoholic piano player (Dan Duryea cast against type) who attempted to solve the murder of his estranged wife in Los Angeles when suspected of being the culprit; with a supporting cast of Broderick Crawford and Peter Lorre.

- director Robert Wise’s nasty noir *Born to Kill* (1947), based on James Gunn’s novel *Deadlier Than the Male*, starred Lawrence Tierney as a mean, cold-blooded double-murderer (“the coldest killer a woman ever loved”), and Claire Trevor as his bad-girl mistress.

- Edward Dmytryk’s noireish political drama *Crossfire* (1947) told about the social issue of anti-semitism prejudice, in its flashback story regarding an investigation (by Robert Mitchum and Robert Young) into the mysterious murder of a Jew by a bigoted GI soldier (Robert Ryan).

- in Henry Hathaway’s violent docu-crime noir *Kiss of Death* (1947), Victor Mature starred as paroled robber Nick Bianco opposite chilling, sadistic gangster Tommy Udo (Richard Widmark in his stunning screen debut, noted for the scene in which he giggled hysterically while pushing a wheelchair-bound old woman down a flight of stairs); [remade as the western *The Fiend Who Walked the West* (1958), and *Kiss of Death* (1995) with Nicolas Cage).

- in Edmund Goulding’s *Nightmare Alley* (1947), Tyrone Power starred as traveling carnival conman “The Great Stanton” who also claimed to be a spiritualist who could communicate with the dead - until exposed.

- Robert Siodmak’s fatalistic *Cry of the City* (1948) and the doom-laden *Criss Cross* (1949) both featured unreliable characters, tenuous relationships and twisting plots, with Yvonne DeCarlo in the latter film as a *femme fatale* enticing a love-sick Burt Lancaster during a heist gone wrong; [the film was remade by Steven Soderbergh as *The Underneath* (1995)].

- Fred Zinnemann’s *Act of Violence* (1948) starred Van Heflin as returning, ex-POW WWII veteran ‘war hero’ Frank Enley, who harbored the dark secret that he was a Nazi collaborator to survive, known only by vengeful sole-surviving ex-comrade Parkson (Robert Ryan).
• director John Farrow's suspenseful and complex thriller The Big Clock (1948), with a giant corporate clock as the film's centerpiece, told the flashback story of a media executive and Crimeways Magazine journalist George Stroud (Ray Milland) in a race against time to solve the murder of his tyrannical boss Earl Janoth's (Charles Laughton) mistress Pauline York (Rita Johnson) in 1940s New York - in an investigation that quickly showed himself as the framed prime suspect [the film was remade as No Way Out (1987) with Kevin Costner and Gene Hackman]

• in John Huston's intelligent, exciting, theatrical, but moody, downbeat crime drama/thriller (and melodramatic gangster-related film noir) Key Largo (1948), bullying, fugitive gangster Johnny Rocco (Edward G. Robinson), on-the-run with fellow mobsters and his alcoholic lush moll and ex-nightclub singer Gaye Dawn (Claire Trevor), found himself in a Florida Keys hotel in the off-season during a violent, tropical hurricane; he snarled while waiting for counterfeit money and held various residents hostage including returning war-scared veteran Frank McCloud (Humphrey Bogart), newly-widowed Nora Temple (Lauren Bacall) and her wheelchair-bound father-in-law and hotel manager James Temple (Lionel Barrymore)

• in director Nicholas Ray's first feature film They Live By Night (1948), bank robber Bowie (Farley Granger) was 'on-the-run' with eloped lover (Cathy O'Donnell)

• in director Robert Rossen's Best Picture-winning All the King's Men (1949), Broderick Crawford portrayed a power-corrupted politician based upon Louisiana's Huey Long

• in director Max Ophuls' domestic noir melodrama The Reckless Moment (1949), upper middle-class housewife Lucia Harper (Joan Bennett) covered up for her daughter's manslaughter of her seedy, older lover, and then fell in love with blackmailing, infatuated small-time crook Martin Donnelly (James Mason)

• director Robert Wise's last film for RKO, The Set-Up (1949) told of an aging boxer (Robert Ryan) betrayed by his trainers

• Raoul Walsh's film noirish gangster film White Heat (1949) starred James Cagney as unstable, mother-fixated, sadistic killer Cody Jarrett who blew himself up on an oil tank in the fiery climax, screaming: "Made it, Ma! Top of the world!"

• maverick director Nicholas Ray's In a Lonely Place (1950), a mature, bleak and dramatic film noir, told about a world-weary, acerbic, self-destructive, hot-tempered, depression-plagued, laconic Hollywood screenwriter and anti-hero Dixon Steele (Humphrey Bogart) who became the prime suspect in a murder case of a night-club hat-check girl Mildred Atkinson (Martha Stewart); his romantic relationship with a lovely neighbor/would-be starlet Laurel Gray (Gloria Grahame) in his housing complex grew stronger when she confirmed his alibi, but she became increasingly suspicious

• in black-listed director Jules Dassin's grim Night and the City (1950), Richard Widmark provided the lead performance as an ambitious, scheming, and self-deceiving London hustler

• in John Huston's classic heist film The Asphalt Jungle (1950) based on W.R. Burnett's novel, a group of criminals (including Sterling Hayden as Dix Handley) gathered to execute one last, ill-fated jewel heist caper for criminal mastermind Doc (Sam Jaffe) and crooked financial backer Louis Calhern appearing with his mistress Marilyn Monroe; the unsuccessful jewel robbery unraveled in the film's taut central scene - with the film's final great sequence of Dix' death in a Kentucky horse pasture [The film was remade three times as the western The Badlanders (1958) with Alan Ladd, a jewel heist flick titled Cairo (1963), and Cool Breeze (1972) with an all-black cast]

• in Otto Preminger's Where the Sidewalk Ends (1950) with a Ben Hecht script, raging, violent, and out-of-control NY cop Mark Dixon (Dana Andrews), whose father was a gangster, covered up the accidental death of a suspect by inadvertently framing local cab-driver Jiggs Taylor (Tom Tully), and became further entangled when he fell in love with the man's daughter Morgan Taylor-Paine (Gene Tierney)

• in Nicholas Ray's On Dangerous Ground (1951), embittered cop Robert Ryan - investigating a murder of a young girl outside the city - fell for the blind sister (Ida Lupino) of the prime murder suspect, her mentally-ill brother

• in Phil Karlson's hard-edged bank heist tale Kansas City Confidential (1952), ex-con Joe Rolfe (John Payne) was framed for a large armored car robbery job in Kansas City, and took revenge
by pursuing the criminal gang to Mexico, but complications arose when he fell in love with the law student daughter Helen "Punkin" Foster (Coleen Gray) of the gang's double-crossing boss Tim Foster (Preston Foster)

- in Fritz Lang's savage The Big Heat (1953), bereaving, unrestrained cop Glenn Ford was on a one-man crusade against corruption
- in writer/director Samuel Fuller's action-packed, raw thriller-noir Pickup on South Street (1953), Richard Widmark starred as tough-minded ex-con pickpocket Skip McCoy embroiled in the plot with femme fatale prostitute Candy (Jean Peters) after unknowingly stealing microfilm (bound for Communist spies) from her purse during a crowded subway ride
- in Andre de Toth's B-film crime noir Crime Wave (1954), Sterling Hayden starred as a confrontational, hard-nosed detective who despised a paroled San Quentin convict struggling to redeem himself
- Robert Aldrich's apocalyptic, jarring and violent Kiss Me Deadly (1955) was an adaptation of Mickey Spillane's novel of the same name; it told the quest tale of hardened and violent detective Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker) and sexy assistant Velda (Maxine Cooper) to learn about the deadly contents of the "Great Whatsit" box [Later films repeated the motif of the mysterious box, such as Repo Man (1984) and Pulp Fiction (1994)]
- in Stanley Kubrick's The Killing (1956), Sterling Hayden starred as a criminal involved in a doomed-to-fail horse racetrack robbery, and Marie Windsor portrayed the femme fatale
- in Fritz Lang's underrated crime noir While the City Sleeps (1956), Dana Andrews starred as ambitious newspaper reporter and TV host Ed Mobley who used all competitive methods possible to hunt for and discover the identity of a serial sex killer - "The Lipstick Killer" (revealed to be teenaged Robert Manners (John Barrymore, Jr.)); in order to gain the newspaper's editorship - even resorting to using his girlfriend/fiancee Nancy Liggett (Sally Forrest) as bait; in the conclusion, the killer was captured in an exciting subway tunnel chase and confessed to four murders
- in Alexander MacKendrick's Sweet Smell of Success (1957) from a script by Clifford Odets and Ernest Lehman, Burt Lancaster starred as ruthless, all-powerful and evil NYC gossip columnist J.J. Hunsecker (based on Walter Winchell) in league with his sleazy, hustling press agent Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis) - both engaged in a nasty smear campaign to prevent the columnist's young sister Susan's (Susan Harrison) marriage to a musician
- in one of the last true classic film noirs (and the first noir to include a black protagonist), Robert Wise's crime drama Odds Against Tomorrow (1959), a trio of bank-robbers (including Harry Belafonte as indebted nightclub entertainer Johnny Ingram) faced tensions (of racism and prejudice) within their gang

Cross-Over Noirs:

The term film noir has also been more widely applied to other categories of films. Some of the most interesting film noir derivatives were the film noir westerns of the 1950s:

- Pursued (1947)
- The Gunfighter (1950)
- High Noon (1952)
- The Halliday Brand (1957)

Non-genre dramatic films, such as Billy Wilder's drama about alcoholism titled The Lost Weekend (1945), Wilder's Sunset Boulevard (1950), and Laurence Olivier's Hamlet (1948) could also be considered cross-over dramatic noirs. Surprisingly there was even a noir musical, Michael Curtiz' Young Man with a Horn (1950).

There are at least a few distinctive 'women's' film noirs: Laura (1944), Mildred Pierce (1945), Leave Her to Heaven (1945), Max Ophuls' domestic melodrama The Reckless Moment (1949) and Robert Siodmak's The File on Thelma Jordon (1950) with Barbara Stanwyck.
Derivatives of Film Noir, and Post-Noirs:

Oftentimes, noir could also branch out into other genre-categories, such as thrillers (i.e., Samuel Fuller's *Pickup on South Street* (1953)), animations (i.e., *femme fatale* Jessica Rabbit in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988)), horror films (i.e., *Angel Heart* (1987)), westerns (i.e. *Pursued* (1947), *The Gunfighter* (1950), *Man of the West* (1958), *Unforgiven* (1992)), gangster-crime films (i.e., *Road to Perdition* (2002)), science-fiction (i.e., *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), see more below), superhero action films (i.e., *Batman* (1989), *Batman Begins* (2005)), musicals (i.e., the "Girl Hunt" in *The Band Wagon* (1953), *Carmen Jones* (1954), *Pennies From Heaven* (1981)), documentaries (i.e., *The Thin Blue Line* (1988)), and even film-noir tribute-parodies, spoofs or comedies (i.e., *Peeper* (1975), *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (1982)). It has been noted that a sub-category of film gris (or "gray film") exists, according to writer Jon Tuska, meaning film noirs that have happy denouements.

So-called post-noirs (modern tech-noirs, neo-noirs, or cyberpunk) appeared after the classic period with an attempt to revive the themes of classic noir, although they portrayed contemporary times and were often filmed in color. Tech-noir (also known as 'cyberpunk') refers specifically to a hybrid of high-tech science-fiction and film noirs portraying a decayed, grungy, unpromising, dark and dystopic future - similar to what was found in the low-life, underworld environments of hard-boiled 'pulp fiction' made popular by Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett.

Tech-Noirs:

Tech-noirs are modern-day noirs set in futuristic settings. 'Cyberpunk' was first popularized by William Gibson's 1984 book *Neuromancer*, and best exemplified in the late 70s-90s with the following cyber-noir films:

- Ridley Scott's dark horror film *Alien* (1979), set in outer-space, told about the crew of a deep space trawler named *Nostromo* that became infested with an extraterrestrial parasite from an alien spaceship on an uncharted planet.
- writer/director Peter Hyams' *Outland* (1981) starred Sean Connery, with a space-related science-fiction plot borrowed from *High Noon* (1952) - it was ridiculed as "High Moon"
- Michael Radford's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984), based on George Orwell's fearful tale of totalitarianism under Big Brother and filmed with de-colorized shades of color, told about Ministry of Truth worker Winston Smith (John Hurt) who fell in love with Julia (Suzanna Hamilton) with disastrous consequences.
- Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop* (1987), set in crime-ridden Detroit, told about cop Alex Murphy (Peter Weller) who was graphically executed in the line of duty, and brought back (resurrected) as a cyborg RoboCop to curb crime in the city led by gang member Clarence Botticker (Kurtwood Smith).
- Steve de Jarnatt's chilling apocalyptic film noir *Miracle Mile* (1989) told about a musician (Anthony Edwards) who intercepted a phone booth call outside a coffee shop from a panicked missile silo operator and accidentally learned that a nuclear war had just been initiated.
- Paul Verhoeven's *Total Recall* (1990), based upon a tale by Philip K. Dick, told about construction worker Douglas Quaid (Arnold Schwarzenegger) in the year 2084 who used the services of Rekall, Inc's travel agency to take a fantasy adventure trip (as a secret agent) to the planet of Mars through an implanted memory chip.
• German director Wim Wenders' haunting, sci-fi noir Until the End of the World (1991), partially a road film and love-triangle story, told about the end of the century in the year 1999, when nuclear war threatened (in the shape of a rogue, out-of-orbit Indian nuclear satellite); it told about young woman Claire Tourneur (Solveig Dommartin) who met a mysterious stranger named "Trevor"/Sam (William Hurt) while serving as a courier for a bank heist, leading her into a web of intrigue around the world

• the big-budget, cyberpunk film Johnny Mnemonic (1995), a derivative adaptation of scriptwriter William Gibson's own cyberpunk short story, and a Keanu Reeves-precursor to The Matrix (1999), told about the title character, a 21st century courier (Reeves) with downloaded information in his data-packed head who must transport the top-secret data from China to New Jersey in a race against time before his brain exploded (due to 'synaptic seepage') in 24 hours

• Kathryn Bigelow's film noirish, high-tech apocalyptic thriller Strange Days (1995), from a script co-written by her husband director James Cameron, was set on Millenium New Years Eve; it featured ex-cop hustler Lenny Nero (Ralph Fiennes) who was involved in marketing Virtual Reality discs (sexy and violent digital content or "clips") fed directly into the cortex of the brain; he uncovered a plot involving illicit 'blackjack' playback clips of murders (snuff films)

• Brett Leonard's cyber-age VR thriller Virtuosity (1995) starred Russell Crowe as computer-generated criminal mastermind named SID 6.7 (Sadistic, Intelligent, Dangerous) in near-future Los Angeles - a virtual reality killer originally to serve as a police-training tool - who broke free into the real world and was pitted against vengeful LA police officer Lt. Parker Barnes (Denzel Washington)

• New Zealand screenwriter Andrew Niccol's directorial debut film Gattaca (1997) about futuristic genetic engineering was set in the near future; it starred Ethan Hawke as Vincent Freeman - a naturally-born 'in-valid' working as a janitor at the aerospace company Gattaca, who posed as a genetically-engineered elite worker and future astronaut by borrowing the genes of a perfect specimen - he was threatened to be exposed when a murder in the company revealed the presence of a genetic inferior

• Alex Proyas' labyrinthine, visually-inspiring tech-noir Dark City (1998), a combination of science fiction (inspired by Metropolis (1927)) and crime melodrama, was set in a strange, futuristic, post-modern (40s style), dark urban locale; the story involved an underground, malevolent, pale-skinned alien race called the Strangers (led by Mr. Book (Ian Richardson)) who control human consciousness and memory, and the plight of amnesia-suffering, murder-suspect John Murdoch (Rufus Sewell) searching for his identity while eluding police detective Bumstead (William Hurt) and the Strangers, but who also found himself confronted by sinister psychiatrist Dr. Schreber (Kiefer Sutherland)

• David Cronenberg's cautionary, plot-twisting, game-related, alternate-reality, sci-fi horror film eXistenZ (1999) explored a 'virtual reality' (VR) game called Existenz to which players could become addicted; players with organic pods were connected by umbilical-like cords inserted in "biports" or orifices at the base of their spines; the deceptive plot was triggered by an assassination attempt during a demonstration of the game by game-master Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason Leigh)

• the Wachowski Brothers' popular, imaginative, visually-stunning science-fiction action film The Matrix (1999) and The Matrix Trilogy (1999-2003), began with the premise that all of humanity, in the year 2199, was inside a computer simulation dreamworld (The Matrix), that the actual Earth was scorched, and that everyone had been tricked into believing that the simulation was reality; it starred Keanu Reeves as "Neo" - a computer software company techie programmer and illegal hacker real-named Thomas Anderson - who was informed that he was the champion or chosen one to save Mankind from a malevolent, sentient machine race

• Josef Rusnak's tech-noir sci-fi, time-twisting and complex film The Thirteenth Floor (1999) told how falsely-accused murder suspect Douglas Hall (Craig Bierko) had to "jack into" the simulated virtual reality world of 1937 LA to discover the truth of the killing

• Steven Spielberg's cyber-noirish action film Minority Report (2002), from an adapted Philip K. Dick story, was set in the futuristic year of 2054; it starred Tom Cruise as Chief John Anderton of the DC's Department of Pre-Crime - a cop whose job was to prevent pre-committed murders
(using the psychic abilities of three "precogs"), until he was forced to flee and prove his innocence when he was identified as a killer, in advance
Femme Fatale in film Noir

Very often, a film noir story was developed around a cynical, hard-hearted, disillusioned male character [e.g., Robert Mitchum, Fred MacMurray, or Humphrey Bogart] who encountered a beautiful but promiscuous, amoral, double-dealing and seductive femme fatale [e.g., Mary Astor, Veronica Lake, Jane Greer, Barbara Stanwyck, or Lana Turner]. She would use her feminine wiles and come-hither sexuality to manipulate him into becoming the fall guy - often following a murder. After a betrayal or double-cross, she was frequently destroyed as well, often at the cost of the hero’s life. As women during the war period were given new-found independence and better job-earning power in the homeland during the war, they would suffer -- on the screen -- in these films of the 40s.

Femmes Fatales in Film Noir:

The females in film noir were either of two types (or archetypes) - dutiful, reliable, trustworthy and loving women; or femmes fatales - mysterious, duplicitous, double-crossing, gorgeous, unloving, predatory, tough-sweet, unreliable, irresponsible, manipulative and desperate women. Usually, the male protagonist in film noir wished to elude his mysterious past, and had to choose what path to take (or have the fateful choice made for him).

Invariably, the choice would be an overly ambitious one, to follow the dangerous but desirable wishes of these dames. It would be to pursue the goadings of a traitorous, self-destructive femme fatale who would lead the struggling, disillusioned, and doomed hero into committing murder or some other crime of passion coupled with twisted love. When the major character was a detective or private eye, he would become embroiled and trapped in an increasingly-complex, convoluted case that would lead to fatalistic, suffocating evidences of corruption, irresistible love and death. The femme fatale, who had also transgressed societal norms with her independent and smart, menacing actions, would bring both of them to a downfall.

The character type of femme fatale was derived from the anti-heroine vamps of early cinema, such as Theda Bara in A Fool There Was (1915). She was first introduced as an evil temptress with her character name: Vampire, and she spoke her most-famous line of all: "Kiss me, my Fool!" The full-bosomed Bara, dubbed the "Vamp," was the screen's first femme fatale, predatory vamp and first movie sex goddess. She was a Hollywood creation who mixed ruthlessness and dark erotic sexiness into her numerous roles. Flappers in the Roaring Twenties, helped along with the popularity of "It" Girl Clara Bow, and the German film Pandora's Box (1929) with Louise Brooks as the iconographic and erotic femme fatale, also contributed to the archetypal development of the character.

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Few examples of femme fatale in film noir

I Wake Up Screaming (1941) (aka Hot Spot)
d. H. Bruce Humberstone
Femme Fatale: Vicky Lynn (Carole Landis)
In this early film noir (with its story mostly told in flashback), waitress and aspiring buxom model Vicky Lynn (Carole Landis) was murdered (strangled) just before her departure for Hollywood, with fight promoter and recently-dumped publicity agent/manager Frankie Christopher (Victor Mature) accused of the crime; although innocent, he was intensely grilled by ruthless, dogged and vindictive NYC police detective Ed Cornell (Laird Cregar) who actually knew the real killer (revealed at the conclusion to be twitchy hotel switchboard operator Harry Williams (Elisha Cook, Jr.) who was rejected by Vicky), although he held Frankie responsible for the murder of his own budding protege during an unhealthy personal crusade to frame him; Jill Lynn (Betty Grable), slain Vicky's stenographer sister, aided Frankie in his flight and search for justice as she fell in love with him and believed in his innocence; Vicky's picture (or photograph) was frequently in the frame of view during the investigations - showing her power from the grave; by film's end, it was revealed that the obsessive detective's apartment was filled with pictures of the deceased femme fatale, with a shrine on his mantle as well; the fixated and hopelessly obsessed Cornell committed suicide with poison, rather than face prosecution for cover-up and for framing Frankie

The Maltese Falcon (1941)
d. John Huston
Femme Fatale: Miss Ruth Wonderly, Miss Leblanc, and Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Mary Astor)
In the start of this moody and early film noir, deceitful femme fatale Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Mary Astor) (with lots of alias names) shot and killed private investigator Sam Spade's (Humphrey Bogart) partner Miles Archer (Jerome Cowan), a surprise killing point-blank, on a dark San Francisco street; right from the start, Spade distrusted her sincerity act: "You're good. It's chiefly your eyes, I think, and that throb you get in your voice when you say things like 'Be generous, Mr. Spade'", but he was obviously attracted and allured to her anyway; he knew she was duplicitous: "The schoolgirl manner, you know, blushing, stammering, and all that... if you actually were as innocent as you pretend to be, we'd never get anywhere"; after seductively asking Spade what she could offer besides money, he brutally took her face in his hands and kissed her roughly - digging his thumbs into her cheeks, as she accepted his lingering kiss; she was involved with a trio of ruthless, shady treasure hunters led by Fat Man Casper Gutman (Sydney Greenstreet) who had spent many years pursuing the trail of the legendary "black bird" statue (or "dingus"), the fabled and bejewelled Maltese Falcon; in the finale, to save herself from the murder charge, Brigid attempted to throw herself at Spade once again, hoping that he would continue to protect her and conceal her crime; with a fluttery, bogus innocence, she wildly professed the existence of her love for him and begged him not to turn her in; however, she was arrested for the murder after Spade threatened: "Yes, angel, I'm gonna send you over" and she took "the fall"
Double Indemnity (1944)
d. Billy Wilder

Femme Fatale: Phyllis Dietrichson
(Barbara Stanwyck)

Billy Wilder's (and Raymond Chandler's) adaptation of James M. Cain's novel included a persuasive, sinister brassy blonde - a beautiful, shrewd, predatory and dissatisfied femme fatale housewife named Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) who convinced a smart-talking insurance agent/lover Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) to murder her unsuspecting, boring husband (in an emotionless marriage) so they could share 'double indemnity' insurance proceeds; she first appeared draped in a towel during sunbathing when he came to her door, and enticed Neff with her blonde bangs and gold anklet - later he confessed: "I'm crazy about you, baby"; in Neff's apartment, a kiss sealed the murderous pact between them - he grabbed her tightly and dug his fingers into her arm, while asserting: "There's not going to be any slip up. Nothing sloppy, nothing weak, it's got to be perfect...This has got to be perfect, do ya understand? Straight down the line"; they met surreptitiously, often talking over shelves stocked with groceries, to coolly discuss the complicated details of the planned murder and wait for the right set of circumstances to arise; the murder occurred as Phyllis drove her husband to the train station - Neff reached from behind and killed Mr. Dietrichson by breaking his neck; a camera close-up of Phyllis's unmoving and stony face staring straight ahead was all that was revealed during the murder that was brutally carried out on the seat next to her; the final scene occurred in the darkened Dietrichson living room, where Phyllis had concealed a shiny, metallic gun; Neff also had intentions to kill Phyllis, but she upstaged him with 'plans of her own'; she shot him once in the shoulder, but hesitated to kill him for some reason (because of her love for him, or because of her conscience?), admitting being "rotten to the heart"; Walter grimly shot her twice at point-blank range - during their erotic embrace

Murder, My Sweet (1944)
d. Edward Dmytryk

Femme Fatale: Velma/Helen Grayle
(Claire Trevor)

Edward Dmytryk's twisting story of intrigue starred singer Dick Powell as the down-and-out PI Phillip Marlowe searching for ex-con Moose Malloy's (Mike Mazurki) missing ex-lover Velma Valento/Helen Grayle (Claire Trevor) in wartime Los Angeles - she had sold him out 8 years earlier, although he still remembered her: "She was cute as lace pants"; during a murder investigation, he was brought for a visit to the Grayle mansion in Brentwood where he met Mr. Grayle (Miles Mander) and his much younger wife Helen (Trevor again), who was showing off her legs; she was associated with master-crook and blackmailer Jules Amthor (Otto Kruger) who was involved in setting up rich women as targets; the mysterious, flirtatious and slinky Helen Grayle also hired the detective to locate a stolen jade necklace (which she later revealed was not actually stolen); Marlowe navigated through a perilous world, becoming further entangled with and threatened by despicable high- and low-class criminals; the final showdown occurred at the Grayles' beach house, where Helen was killed by her husband and both Moose and Mr. Grayle shot and killed each other; the final shoot-out revealed that mysterious, flirtatious, gold-digging, exploitative, double-identity Mrs. Helen Grayle - also known as Velma Valento, had set up numerous individuals over the theft of jade jewelry, and was indeed a murderous femme fatale

Laura (1944)
d. Otto Preminger

Femme Fatale: Laura Hunt
(Gene Tierney)

Preminger's hard-edged noir romance might be called a psychological study of deviant, kinky obsession, because almost everyone in the cast loved the title character Laura, who was not a classic amoral femme fatale; while investigating socialite Laura Hunt's (Gene Tierney) murder, obsessed homicide police detective Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews) rummaged through Laura's bedroom drawers and lingerie, inhaled her perfume, and peered into her mirrored closets and then stared at the haunting, domineering oil portrait of Laura and fell in love with the dead woman in the portrait; the film contained troubling necrophiliac themes and sexual obsession by the hard-boiled
detective for the dead woman; celebrated, acidic-witted and homosexual columnist Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb) incisively described McPherson's obsession over the murdered bewitching woman (...'It's a wonder you don't come here like a suitor with roses and a box of candy...I don't think I ever had a patient who ever fell in love with a corpse'); Lydecker had also functioned as Laura's Svengali-like mentor and protective confidant in a platonic relationship, when he helped her become a successful advertising executive; womanizing, effete Southern playboy Shelby Carpenter (Vincent Price), whose marriage to Laura was recently called off, was also a prime suspect (he confessed later to being present at the murder scene when the off-screen shooting occurred); then there was the surprising scene when Laura suddenly walked into her own apartment - a murdered woman who mysteriously appeared over half way into the film - and the stunned look of McPherson who expressed shock when stirred from sleep as the "dead" Laura appeared and at first thought she was a ghost or figment of his imagination; she threatened to call the police: "What are you doing here?" - unaware of the news of her own slaying; Laura was horrified to realize that her was caught in the middle of a murder case; the murder victim was actually a young model named Diane Redfern in her negligee, in a case of mistaken identity; after reappearing, Laura herself became a prime suspect in the murder case, since it was possible that Laura killed Diane Redfern out of jealousy for her association with Shelby; another suspect was Anne Treadwell (Judith Anderson), Laura's wealthy, amoral spinster aunt who was neurotically in love with Shelby and decidedly defensive and jealous of the younger Laura, her engagement, and her possible forthcoming marriage to Carpenter

The Woman in the Window (1944)
d. Fritz Lang

Femme Fatale: Alice Reed
(Joan Bennett)

This tense film noir told about law-abiding, mild-mannered, middle-aged and married Gotham College Professor Richard Wanley (Edward G. Robinson) who met beautiful, strange painting model and femme fatale Alice Reed (Joan Bennett) - when she emerged as a reflection next to a painting in an art gallery window; invited back to her mirrored apartment where she was wearing a diaphanous dress, they sipped champagne; he became embroiled in a crime due to his unintentional self-defense murder (by stabbing his assailant to death in the back with a pair of scissors) when he was attacked by her burly and jealous boyfriend Frank Howard (Arthur Loft) who had accused her of infidelity, and then suddenly found himself on the run and ready to commit suicide; however, the entire plot was only a dream of his subconscious

Detour (1945)
d. Edgar Ulmer

Femme Fatale: Vera
(Ann Savage)

Edgar G. Ulmer's gritty, cheaply-made ("Poverty Row"), fatalistic, cultish B-film was about the bleak twists of fate; in a nightmarish flashback story cynically narrated with almost non-stop voice-over, a world-weary, fatalistic, self-pitying, down-and-out hitchhiker Al Roberts (Tom Neal) was hopelessly involved in an ambiguous death during his thumbing trek from NY to Los Angeles; after picking up a vulture, nasty and despicable hitchhiker Vera (Ann Savage), she revealed her knowledge of his true identity ("You're a cheap crook and you killed him") - she accused him of 'killing' ex-bookie turned businessman Charles Haskell (Edmund MacDonald) who had earlier picked Roberts up - although he had suffered a heart attack - stealing his car and adopting his identity while hitchhiking in Arizona enroute to Hollywood; Roberts commented upon fate and the blackmailing, castrating, exploitative, sadomasochistic and vindictive femme fatale con: "That's life - whatever way you turn, Fate sticks out a foot to trip you up"; her plan was to sell the car and also to claim a substantial inheritance from Haskell's dying father, by having them pretend to be Mr. and Mrs. Haskell; to make matters worse, he accidentally strangled Vera with a telephone cord through a closed door during a vicious argument when she threatened to call the police - a second disastrous twist of fate signified by the in-and-out of focus shots from the POV of Roberts in a deranged mental state as he wandered the highways like a hobo, and the imagining of his arrest (to appease the Hays Code censors of the time) in a tawdry diner ("Yes, fate or some mysterious force can put the finger on you or me for no good reason at all")
Fallen Angel (1945)
d. Otto Preminger

Femme Fatale: Stella
(Linda Darnell)

Handsome, smooth-talking, amoral drifter and con man Eric Stanton (Dana Andrews) became entranced in a small California beach town with sexy diner waitress Stella (Linda Darnell) at Pop's Eats, but she ignored the down-and-out guy; it was revealed that the manipulative and slutty sexpot was stealing money from the diner's till (stuffing bills in her bra); to assure her favor, black-hearted Stanton seduced rich, blonde church organist June Mills (Alice Faye), the town's pure-hearted spinster, and married her after one date (and then even spent his wedding night with Stella) to get her inheritance; he wanted to run off with Stella, but found her murdered and became the major suspect in the case investigated by Mark Judd (Charles Bickford) - who was ultimately found to be the killer.

Leave Her to Heaven (1945)
d. John Stahl

Femme Fatale: Ellen Berent Harland
(Gene Tierney)

This psychological, unsettling melodramatic Technicolored noir highlighted a menacing, father-fixated, unstable, and deranged, darkly alluring femme fatale named Ellen Berent (Gene Tierney) who vowed to her novelist husband Richard Harland (Cornel Wilde): "I'll never let you go, never, never," stopping at nothing to make the man she loved her exclusive possession; in one scene, she expressed to him after her father's cremation and the scattering of ashes: "I can't help it. It's only because I love you so. I love you so. I can't bear to share you with anybody"; she stopped at nothing, including the drowning murder of her paraplegic brother-in-law Danny (Darryl Hickman) in a lake as she calmly watched from a nearby rowboat; she also deliberately fell down a flight of stairs to cause a miscarriage and kill her unborn child, admitting: "Sometimes the truth is wicked"; finally, she committed suicide with cyanide, implicating her half-sister Ruth (Jeanne Crain) in the death (although she was found innocent) and sending Richard to jail for two years for withholding evidence.

Mildred Pierce (1945)
d. Michael Curtiz

Femme Fatale: Veda Pierce Forrester
(Ann Blyth)

This melodramatic post-war noir classic was a tale of greed and murder (told as a long flashback); before filling in the backstory, the film opened in a beach house with the shooting murder of Monte Baragon (Zachary Scott) by an unseen assailant, and the contemplation of suicide on a Santa Monica pier by Best Actress-winning Joan Crawford, playing suspected murderess Mildred Pierce-Beragon; possibly seen as the film's femme fatale, she set up business associate Wally Fay (Jack Carson) to return to the crime scene where her husband had been murdered; it was later revealed that Mildred - had an obsessive mother-daughter love for her venomous femme fatale daughter Veda (Ann Blyth), and had contributed to her daughter's spoiled, ungrateful, unappreciative and slutty behavior for a long time; Veda had been indulgently showered with gifts, nice clothes, and piano lessons, provided by Mildred's sacrificial
baking of pies and cakes, although Veda was embarrassed by her mother's occupation: "My mother - a waitress"; in a second major confrontation on a staircase, Veda slapped Mildred after brutally insulting her mother ("...you'll never be anything but a common frump, whose father lived over a grocery store and whose mother took in washing. With this money, I can get away from every rotten, stinking thing that makes me think of this place or you!"), after which Mildred threatened: "Get out before I kill you"; Veda's outrageous behavior went much further; she faked a pregnancy to extort money from her boyfriend's wealthy family, took a job as a singer/dancer in a sleazy nightclub, coerced her mother into marrying Monte Baragon (with whom she was having a semi-incestuous affair), and continued to treat her mother condescendingly; in the end, Veda was revealed to be the killer, when Monte confronted her: "You don't really think I could be in love with a rotten little tramp like you, do you?"; as Veda was led away at the police station, she asserted to her mother: "Don't worry about me, Mother. I'll get by"

Scarlet Street (1945)
d. Fritz Lang

Femme Fatale: Katharine "Kitty" March
(Joan Bennett)

Fritz Lang's steamy and fatalistic film was one of the moodiest, blackest thrillers ever made; it told about a meek, middle-aged cashier and unhappily-married, hen-pecked husband and amateur painter named Christopher Cross (Edward G. Robinson); he unwittingly fell into a cruel trap set by cold-hearted, amoral femme fatale gold-digger and Greenwich Village streetwalker Katherine "Kitty" March (Joan Bennett) and her abusive, slick and mercenary boyfriend-pimp Johnny (Dan Duryea); he first met Kitty when she was being beaten up by Johnny on a rainy night, and they got to know each other in a bar for a late-night drink - he was immediately entranced by the clear plastic raincoat-wearing sexy dame; she led Cross to commit embezzlement, impersonated him in order to sell his paintings, and was deceitful and cruel to him - causing him in a fit of jealous anger to murder by stabbing her with an ice-pick through her bed covers, after he proposed marriage and she told him: "Oh, you idiot! How can a man be so dumb?...I've wanted to go laugh in your face ever since I first met you. You're old and ugly and I'm sick of you. Sick, sick, sick!"; the film ended with Johnny being accused of the crime, and Cross suffering humiliating disgrace, haunting psychological torment and mental anguish (i.e., a failed suicide attempt by hanging and abject homelessness as he wandered the streets); the final image was his shuffling by a 5th Avenue gallery past the portrait he had made of Kitty

The Big Sleep (1946)
d. Howard Hawks

Femme Fatale: Vivian Sternwood Rutledge
(Lauren Bacall) also Carmen Sternwood (Martha Vickers)

Humphrey Bogart, teamed with real-life wife Lauren Bacall, played the role of private detective Philip Marlowe in this confusing, classic who-dun-it, involving blackmail, pornography, and murder in Los Angeles; Marlowe was called to the house of a new client - dying millionaire General Sternwood (Charles Waldron), where he was first confronted with the General's seductive younger daughter who threw herself at him - she was the troubled, errant, spoiled, sexually-perversion, thumb-biting/sucking, frequently doped-up nymphomaniacal heiress Carmen (Martha Vickers); she called Marlowe "not bad looking" and "cute"; Marlowe was asked by Sternwood to investigate
Carmen's ostensible blackmailer - suspicious porno "rare book" dealer Arthur Gwynn Geiger (Theodore von Eltz) on North Sunset, who was blackmailing Sternwood over "gambling debts" incurred by his youngest daughter [the exact nature of the blackmail was not clear, though it may be that it wasn't gambling debts, but that Geiger had illicit, nude, incriminating or obscene photographs of Carmen and threatened to circulate them]; on the way out, Marlowe also met Vivian Sternwood Rutledge (Lauren Bacall), the General's other daughter, who was suspicious of him but protective of her sister; within a short while, Marlowe found an incoherent, stupefied, drugged-up, Chinese-dress wearing Carmen sitting idly nearby a dead man - the dead blackmailer was probably taking pornographic pictures of Carmen in his home; returning Carmen to her home, he again met Vivian, who accused him of duping her: "You go too far, Marlowe" since she wanted Marlowe off the case because he might find something else suspicious [namely, gangster Eddie Mars' (Joe Ridgely) additional blackmailing scheme against Vivian regarding her sister]; at this point in the film, Vivian engaged in a famous, slyly flirtatious, sexy horse-race conversation with Marlowe in which she asserted: "A lot depends on who's in the saddle"; soon after, Vivian joined forces with Marlowe to turn the tables on Mars, end the blackmail scheme, and acquire treatment for her sick sister Carmen

The Blue Dahlia (1946)
d. George Marshall

Femme Fatale : Helen Morrison
(Doris Dowling)

Boozing, unfaithful estranged wife Helen Morrison (Doris Dowling) made her first appearance in the film kissing LA's The Blue Dahlia nightclub owner Eddie Harwood (Howard Da Silva) at a party she was hosting in her ritzy bungalow house; clad in a slinky trouser suit, she seemed unapologetic to her returning discharged WWII veteran and naval flier husband Johnny Morrison (Alan Ladd); Helen hinted that Johnny might now be violent: "Maybe you've learnt to like hurting people?"; she then admitted to him that their young son had been killed in a DUÍ accident while she was driving, causing him to angrily walk out on her while leaving his gun in her bungalow; soon, Johnny was accused of Helen's murder and became a fugitive, encountering Harwood's separated blonde wife Joyce (Veronica Lake) in a dreamy drive up the coast to Malibu

Decoy (1946)
d. Jack Bernhard

Femme Fatale : Margot Shelby
(Jean Gillie)

One of the most ruthless, mean, deceitful and manipulative femmes fatales in noir history was Margot Shelby (British actress Jean Gillie), who would use whatever means necessary to reach her selfish ends; this little-known cult B-film noir opened with betrayed and seriously-wounded Dr. Lloyd Craig (Herbert Rudley) washing his soiled and bloody hands and face in a grimy washroom sink (with broken mirror) at a gas station; after hitchhiking to San Francisco 75 miles away, he proceeded, Frankenstein-like, to the 6th floor apartment of Margot Shelby (who was preparing to flee town), fatally shot her for revenge, and then dropped dead; hard-nosed, tough-guy detective Sgt. Joseph "Jo Jo" Portugal (Sheldon Leonard) arrived too late to save her; as she died, she begged for a money chest to be brought to her ("Give it to me. I want it...It's mine. It's all mine now"), and explained what had happened in the lengthy flashback, beginning with: "I wanted money. Frankie Olins had it. He took it from a shiny red bank truck two days before Christmas. $400,000. Only, before he could take it, he had to kill the driver. Frankie was in jail now. The people of the state of California said he had to die. But only Frankie knew where the money was hidden"; at the Watchaprague State Prison, ex gun moll Margot visited convicted robber Frankie Olins (Robert Armstrong), who told her why he stole the money - it was for his own possessive reasons related to her ("I want you to be
beautiful for me"), but he wouldn't reveal the location of the $400,000; so Margot systematically schemed with gangster pal Jim Vincent (Edward Norris) to finance the plan (he had already provided thousands for Olins' lawyers) and provide support - becoming his girl, while also seeking the cooperation of idealistic Dr. Craig through the promise of romance; the scheme was to have the prison doctor inject Frankie's corpse (after he had expired in the prison's gas chamber from hydrocyanic gas) with Methylene Blue as an antidote within one hour and revive him, in order to learn the treasure's whereabouts; to carry out the plan, the morgue truck was hijacked, and one of Vincent's gunmen Tommy (Philip Van Zandt) killed the paid-off driver; they stole Frankie's corpse, and brought it to Dr. Craig's office where Olins was miraculously resurrected; convincing him that they needed the dough for expenses and for Olins' plastic surgery, he drew a map of the dough's location, kept one-half of the crude map, and gave the other half to Margot; when Olins tried to give Margot a "little welcome back kiss," Vincent shot him dead - and then kissed Margot; their kiss was witnessed by Dr. Craig, who realized that he had been swindled, was implicated in the crime, and was professionally ruined; back at her apartment, Margot was confronted by the detective who was checking up on her - he told her, in a classic line: "People who use pretty faces like you use yours don't live very long, anyway," to which she replied: "How do you think I should use my face...?"; Margot and Vincent (with the two parts of the map) took Dr. Craig as hostage on their late-night drive to the treasure's location, during which time Margot deliberately and sadistically ran over Vincent fixing their flat tire (she had let the air out); she also calmly handed her pistol over to Dr. Craig who had told her about his desire to kill her, but he didn't have the nerve to shoot her; she then had Dr. Craig do the dirty work by digging up the treasure box in a eucalyptus grove (he appeared to have an opportunity to strike her with a shovel, but again lacked courage); after telling him; "All our hopes, all our plans..." she exerted him with sexually-laced language: "Quickly, Lloyd, quickly! Dig for it! Deeper! Faster!", and explained how guilty they all were: "They killed for it. They all killed for it. Frankie, Vincent, I killed for it. And you. You, too! You killed for it!" - and then shot him twice, laughing hysterically and maniacally as he lay on the ground; she ran off with the strong box in her arms, cackling: "It's mine. It's all mine now!"; the film ended with a return to the present - the treasure box was opened as Margot died on her apartment's couch - where it was revealed as a decoy - with only $1 and a note from Frankie: "To you who double-crossed me, I leave this dollar for your trouble. The rest of the dough I leave to the worms."

Gilda (1946)
d. Charles Vidor
Femme Fatale: Gilda Mundson Farrell
(Rita Hayworth)
Rita Hayworth was featured in this dark and complex noir (of a love triangle) with her sleek and sophisticated eroticism, lush hair and peaches and cream complexion; the 'love goddess' portrayed the sexy, hedonistic, auburn-haired wife of South American casino owner Ballin Mundson (George Macready), who had recently hired gambling drifter Johnny Farrell (Glenn Ford) as his casino manager; in one of filmdom's best-known film entrances, she was introduced as Ballin's new exuberantly healthy American wife to Johnny (Mundson: "Gilda, are you decent?" Gilda: "Me?" (she gave a long, sensual look at Johnny, and pulled up one side of her strapless dress) "Sure, I'm decent") as she threw back her head and tossed her thick mane of hair, responding sexily; she was also the ex-wife of Johnny - who was entrusted with watching over her; with her lingering love for Johnny, Gilda served herself up to be the object of a tension-filled, love-hate relationship between the two sexual rivals, as Johnny expressed his obsessive love for her: "I hated her so, I couldn't get her out of my mind for a minute. She was in the air I breathed, the food I ate...": to torture and inflame Johnny's jealous passions, Gilda danced and flirted with another good-looking male escort Gabe Evans (Robert Scott) - and when dragged from the casino dance floor by Johnny, Gilda delivered her most famous one-liner: 'Didn't you hear about me, Gabe? If I'd been a ranch, they would've named me the Bar Nothing"; when Ballin mysteriously 'died,' Johnny assumed control over the casino business and treated Gilda with increasing sadomasochism and abuse after taking her as his wife; in the film's most famous scene, Gilda - in a strapless black satin gown slit up to her thigh - gave a sultry and bawdy performance as she stripped off her elbow-
length black gloves to the tune of "Put the Blame on Mame"; in an upbeat finale to satisfy the Hays Code censors, Johnny admitted how wrong he was and they reconciled with each other after many months of an explosive relationship.

The Killers (1946)
* d. Robert Siodmak
* Femme Fatale: Kitty Collins
* (Ava Gardner)

This classic, definitive film noir (a tale of robbery, unrequited love, and brutal betrayal in a twisting double-cross) - an adaptation of a 1927 short story by Ernest Hemingway, was told in eleven taut flashbacks after a bravura opening murder sequence; two professional hit men cold-bloodedly murdered doomed ex-boxer Ole 'Swede' Andersen (Burt Lancaster, in his film debut) who had been hiding out in a New Jersey town under an alias for six years; he was warned in a nearby boardinghouse to flee, but was indifferent to their deadly approach and passively awaited his death on his bed; the Swede accepted his death stoically because, as he admitted fatefully: "I did something wrong once," referring to the film's complex tale of crime and treacherous betrayal - all revolving around a beautifully-glamorous, mysterious, double-crossing, manipulative, vixenish femme fatale named Kitty Collins (Ava Gardner); at a swanky hotel party, the Swede first met and fell under the spell of gorgeous Kitty (wearing a sexy black dress and singing 'The More I Know of Love') and her sleazy underworld racketeering friends, led by gangster/boyfriend Big Jim Colfax (Albert Dekker) (who was absent and in jail at the time); the Swede first took a jail sentence rap in Kitty's place for stolen jewelry, and later, while planning a hat factory heist with Colfax, the Swede again fell under the allure of the treacherous Kitty; late one night just before the robbery, she duplicitously told him that he was being set up by the betraying Colfax, confessed her love, told him: "I'm poison, Swede, to myself and everybody around me", and then persuaded him to get revenge on Colfax by stealing the payroll; she lied to him, promising the Swede that the money would allow her to get away from her hated boyfriend Colfax; trusting blindly in Kitty, the Swede double-crossed the gang and robbed them of the payroll at the farm house, but then Kitty double-crossed him by stealing the money and ditching him; the film ended when she was revealed to be Colfax's wife and partner in crime; she knelt by her husband's body as he was dying and again expressed how heartless and selfish she was, by repeatedly begging her dying husband to lie for her (as the Swede once did) ("Say, 'Kitty is innocent. I swear, Kitty is innocent.' Say it, Jim, say it! It'll save me if you do"), to save her from serving prison time, and to declare her innocence about the hired killers - but Colfax, her potential fall guy, expired after asking for a cigarette; his silence criminally implicated Kitty and condemned her.

The Paradine Case (1947)
* d. Alfred Hitchcock
* Femme Fatale: Mrs. Maddalena Anna Paradine
* (Alida Valli)

Hitchcock's courtroom drama centered around a classic, beautiful and poisonous femme fatale, the film's title character Mrs. Maddalena Anna Paradine (Alida Valli), a seductive nymphomaniac and accused murderess who was responsible for the deaths of two men and the near destruction of another; in 1946, the attractive and glamorous foreigner widow was charged with poisoning her older blind retired WWI military husband Colonel Richard Paradine, presumably to obtain his wealth; she was put on trial in London, defended by soon-to-be-infatuated, obsessed and devastated barrister Anthony Keane (Gregory Peck); in order to obtain a 'not-guilty' plea in his client's case, the distinguished but bewitched trial lawyer Keane unquestioningly believed Anna's innocence from the start ("Anyone can see a woman of her quality couldn't do anything like that") although she was obviously guilty; the prosecution contended otherwise: "This is no ordinary woman"; overly-dedicated and lustful toward Anna, Keane
was determined to find the Paradine's mysterious Canadian servant Andre Latour (Louis Jourdan) guilty of the crime instead; under pressure, Latour killed himself - leading to the revelation that he was Anna's secret lover, the motivation for the original murder of her husband; she also admitted that she had washed and dried the burgundy glass that contained the poison; Keane's law practice and his marriage to his pretty, sympathetic blonde wife Gay (Ann Todd) were nearly destroyed from the emotional pressure and stress

**Force of Evil (1948)**  
**d. Abraham Polonsky**  
**Femme fatale:** Edna Tucker  
(Marie Windsor)  
In this uncompromising post-war film noir narrated in documentary style, ambitious and successful Wall Street attorney Joe Morse (John Garfield), due to corrupt dealings with numbers racketeer-client and crime boss Ben Tucker (Roy Roberts), was on the verge of making millions through a race-track betting scam; in this Cain and Abel tale, Joe's honest, estranged older brother Leo Morse (Thomas Gomez) remained in the Lower East Side slum neighborhood where they had grown up, maintaining a local "small numbers bank," and refusing to join his brother; Leo was ultimately killed by the mob (his body was dumped on the rocks under the George Washington Bridge); although she had only a few minutes on-screen, mob boss Tucker's sultry femme fatale wife Edna (Marie Windsor) was working behind-the-scenes to manipulate and torment Joe into supporting the downfall of his brother's racket; about 40 minutes into the film, she appeared in Joe's office to request an end to the wire-tapping on her husband's phone (indicated by picking up the receiver and hearing a "little click"), while personally inquiring about Joe himself - sexually taunting him about his manhood: "What kind of a man you are, what you really are...I'm trying you. What are you afraid of, to show you're afraid?...You're not strong or weak enough"

**Angel Face (1952)**  
**d. Otto Preminger**  
**Femme Fatale:** Diane Tremayne  
(Jean Simmons)  
Preminger's dark noir of murder, a love/hate relationship and betrayal (similar to The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946)) starred Jean Simmons as the gorgeous and sensual but insane Diane Tremayne, a psychotic 'angel of death' femme fatale, advertised with the film's tagline: "She loved one man ... enough to KILL to get him!"; the disturbed and spoiled heiress became infatuated with working class Beverly Hills ambulance driver Frank Jessup (Robert Mitchum) after she met him during a call to treat the mysterious gas poisoning of Diane's stepmother Catherine (Barbara O'Neill) at the Tremayne estate (was it suicide or attempted murder?); after sabotaging his relationship with his steady blonde girlfriend Mary Wilton (Mona Freeman) and hiring Frank as their family's chauffeur, Diane executed her diabolical scheme to murder her wealthy and controlling step-mother (and have her father Charles (Herbert Marshall) all to herself); the plan worked when a rigged car crash sent the Tremaynes in reverse over a cliff, but it killed both of them, causing Diane to suffer a nervous breakdown; to exonerate themselves from charges of murder, Diane manipulated a naive Frank to marry her, and they were acquitted; Diane remained jealous of Frank's continuing contact with Mary and threats to leave, and confessed to their tampering with the car's transmission, but the double jeopardy rule prohibited a re-trial; fatefully in the surprise bleak ending, as Frank was packing to permanently leave for Mexico and they drove together to the bus station, Diane accelerated their car in reverse over an embankment and killed them both
Niagara (1953)
d. Henry Hathaway
Femme Fatale: Rose Loomis
(Marilyn Monroe)

Hathaway's Techni-colored noir provided the perfect star vehicle for curvy sexpot Marilyn Monroe, who was compared to the famous falls in one of the film's taglines: "A raging torrent of emotion that even nature can't control!"; at a cabin near the famed vacation spot, tension quickly developed between unstable, shell-shocked WWII veteran George Loomis (Joseph Cotten) who was married to a beautiful and voluptuous younger blonde named Rose (Marilyn Monroe) - a sinfully-wayward, unhappily married woman and trashy femme fatale; she ignited the screen when she sang the song "Kiss" in a tight-fitting, low-cut pinkish-red dress; she was cheating on her husband and plotting his death with secret young lover Ted Patrick (Richard Allan) to collect on George's life insurance policy; when George suspected the plot, he killed Patrick in self-defense and then decided to "stay dead" to start his life over; in a suspenseful revenge scene, George pursued Rose and strangled her to death in a shadowy bell tower, and then told her corpse: "I loved you, Rose. You know that"; in the climactic conclusion, a desperate George went over the falls to his death.

High School Confidential! (1958)
d. Jack Arnold
Femme Fatale: Gwen Dulaine
(Mamie Van Doren)

Jack Arnold's exploitative juvenile delinquent ("wild youth") cult film featured drugs in a high school dope-pushing drug ring named the Wheeler-Dealers, lots of 50's slang words and hep-talk ("Don't flip your lid", and "If you flake around with the weed, you'll end up using the harder stuff"), Russ Tamblyn as an undercover cop posing as a new transfer student named Tony Baker at Santa Bellow HS, switchblade fights, drag races, platinum blonde sex-pot starlet Mamie Van Doren as Tamblyn's 'bad girl' nympho, cat-in-heat guardian-aunt Gwen Dulaine, and Jerry Lee Lewis singing the title song in its opening from the back of a flatbed truck. Mamie Van Doren sported a tight-sweatered, pointed 'bullet bra' covering her protuberant breasts, while vamping throughout the film when her husband was absent. In the film's most memorable scene, bath-robed, sexually-aggressive Gwen confronted nephew Tony in the kitchen and planted a kiss on him: ("Stop treating me like a stranger...Relatives should always kiss each other hello and goodbye, polite-like"). In another similar scene, the sex-starved seductress rolled around on the bed while Tony undressed behind his closet door.
**Selection of Greatest *Film Noir*:**

**Greatest of Early and Classic *Film Noir*:**
- I Am a Fugitive From A Chain Gang (1932)
- Fury (1936)
- The Letter (1940)
- Rebecca (1940)
- Stranger on the Third Floor (1940)
- Citizen Kane (1941)
- High Sierra (1941)
- 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)
- The Lodger (1944)
- The Mask of Dimitrios (1944)
- Murder, My Sweet (1944)
- Phantom Lady (1944)
- The Suspect (1944)
- To Have and Have Not (1944)
- The Woman in the Window (1944)
- Cornered (1945)
- Detour (1945)
- Fallen Angel (1945)
- The House on 92nd Street (1945)
- Leave Her to Heaven (1945)
- The Lost Weekend (1945)
- Mildred Pierce (1945)
- Scarlet Street (1945)
- Spellbound (1945)
- The Big Sleep (1946)
- The Blue Dahlia (1946)
- Cornered (1946)
- The Dark Corner (1946)
- Gilda (1946)
- The Killers (1946)
- Notorious (1946)
- The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946)
- The Strange Love of Martha Ivers (1946)
- The Stranger (1946)
- Body and Soul (1947)
- Brute Force (1947)
- Crossfire (1947)
- Dark Passage (1947)
- Dead Reckoning (1947)
- Kiss of Death (1947)
- Lady in the Lake (1947)
- Nightmare Alley (1947)
- Out of the Past (1947)
- Ride the Pink Horse (1947)
- T-Men (1947)
- The Big Clock (1948)
- Call Northside 777 (1948)
- Cry of the City (1948)
- The Dark Past (1948)
- Force of Evil (1948)
- Key Largo (1948)
- The Lady From Shanghai (1948)
- The Naked City (1948)
- Pitfall (1948)
- Raw Deal (1948)
- Road House (1948)
- Ruthless (1948)
- Sorry, Wrong Number (1948)
- Act of Violence (1949)
- Beyond the Forest (1949)
- Champion (1949)
- Criss Cross (1949)
- Gun Crazy (1949) (or 1950) (aka Deadly is the Female)
- The Set-Up (1949)
- They Live By Night (1949)
- The Third Man (1949)
- White Heat (1949)
- The Asphalt Jungle (1950)
- D. O. A. (1950)
- The File on Thelma Jordon (1950)
- In a Lonely Place (1950)
- Night and the City (1950)
- Panic in the Streets (1950)
- Sunset Boulevard (1950)
- Where the Sidewalk Ends (1950)
- The Big Carnival (1951) (aka Ace in the Hole)
- On Dangerous Ground (1951)
- Strangers on a Train (1951)
- Angel Face (1952)
- Clash By Night (1952)
- The Narrow Margin (1952)
- Scandal Sheet (1952)
- Sudden Fear (1952)
- The Big Heat (1953)
- Niagara (1953)
- Pickup on South Street (1953)
- Crime Wave (1954)
- The Big Combo (1955)
- The Desperate Hours (1955)
- Diabolique (1955, Fr.)
- Kiss Me Deadly (1955)
- The Night of the Hunter (1955)
- Beyond a Reasonable Doubt (1956)
- Crime in the Streets (1956)
- The Killing (1956)
- While the City Sleeps (1956)
- The Wrong Man (1956)
- Sweet Smell of Success (1957)
- Touch of Evil (1958)
- Vertigo (1958)
- Odds Against Tomorrow (1959)

- Greatest of Modern Film Noir (Post-Noir or Neo-Noir):
  - Shoot the Pianist (1960, Fr.) (aka Tirez Sur Le Pianiste)
  - Underworld USA (1961)
  - Cape Fear (1962)
  - The Manchurian Candidate (1962)
  - Shock Corridor (1963)
  - The Naked Kiss (1964)
  - Point Blank (1967)
  - St. Valentine's Day Massacre (1967)
  - Le Samourai (1967, Fr/It.)
  - Bullitt (1968)
  - Madigan (1968)
  - Dirty Harry series' (1971-76)
  - The French Connection (1971)
  - Klute (1971)
  - The Long Goodbye (1973)
  - Mean Streets (1973)
  - Serpico (1973)
  - Chinatown (1974)
  - The Conversation (1974)
  - Death Wish (1974)
  - The Parallax View (1974)
  - Farewell, My Lovely (1975)
  - Hustle (1975)
  - Night Moves (1975)
  - Three Days of the Condor (1975)
  - Taxi Driver (1976)
  - The Late Show (1977)
  - Atlantic City (1980)
  - The Long Good Friday (1980, UK)
  - Raging Bull (1980)
  - Body Heat (1981)
  - The Postman Always Rings Twice (1981)
  - Blade Runner (1982)
  - Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid (1982)
  - Hammett (1983)
  - Against All Odds (1984)
  - The Element of Crime (1984, Dan.) (aka Forbrydelsens Element)
  - Subway (1985, Fr.)
  - Blue Velvet (1986)
  - Manhunter (1986)
  - Angel Heart (1987)
- Black Widow (1987)
- House of Games (1987)
- Kill Me Again (1989)
- After Dark, My Sweet (1990)
- The Grifters (1990)
- The Hot Spot (1990)
- The Two Jakes (1990)
- Wild at Heart (1990)
- Dead Again (1991)
- A Kiss Before Dying (1991)
- Reservoir Dogs (1991)
- Basic Instinct (1992)
- Night and the City (1992)
- One False Move (1992)
- The Public Eye (1992)
- Red Rock West (1992)
- The Last Seduction (1994)
- Pulp Fiction (1994)
- Devil in a Blue Dress (1995)
- Se7en (1995)
- Strange Days (1995)
- The Underneath (1995)
- The Usual Suspects (1995)
- Bound (1996)
- Fargo (1996)
- Face/Off (1997)
- L.A. Confidential (1997)
- The Spanish Prisoner (1997)
- Dark City (1998)
- Memento (2000)
- The Man Who Wasn't There (2001)
- Mulholland Dr. (2001)
- Femme Fatale (2002)
- Insomnia (2002)
- Collateral (2004)
- Kiss Kiss Bang Bang (2005)
- Sin City (2005)
- Brick (2006)
- The Departed (2006)
Film Noir in a nut shell

1. Film noir is the French label for the "black film" genre that peaked in the 1944-1955 period. Its origins are the detective novels of Dashiell Hammett 1929-34 (Sam Spade played by Humphrey Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon* in 1941) and Raymond Chandler 1933-43 (Philip Marlowe played by Humphrey Bogart in *The Big Sleep* in 1946) and the femme fatale novels of James Cain 1934-42 (Phyllis Dietrichson played by Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity* in 1944). Noir has influenced films to the present day, such as the crime thrillers of Don Siegel (*Dirty Harry* in 1971), gritty scifi of Ridley Scott (*Blade Runner* in 1982), predatory femmes of Adrian Lyne (*Fatal Attraction* in 1987), and hardboiled cops of Curtis Hanson (*L.A. Confidential* in 1997).

2. The historical setting is the contemporary world that has been corrupted and lost its moral certainty. The prevailing cynicism of characters reflects the reality of the atomic bomb, Cold War, totalitarianism, propaganda, Hollywood blacklist, corrupting power of the government and press. World War II fragmented men, caused them to feel adrift, insecure, alienated, a feeling of having "gone soft" and lacking power to control their lives. The liberal movement was in crisis, due to powerful forces of communism and materialism, causing a loss of faith in progress and man's innate goodness.

3. The protagonist character is a loner, introverted, troubled, hard-boiled, pessimistic. He is not the conventional film hero, confident/exceptional/certain, but rather average and conventional, often a war veteran or detective, and is defined by his ability to survive and restore normality.

4. The seeker-hero is on a quest in the noir world. He is repeatedly tested, interrogated, attacked, persecuted and will either emerge safely, uncorrupted, strong or be killed. Things are not what they seem, people change identities, the plot has unforeseen twists and turns.

5. The noir world can be external or internal. The external world is usually the dark, mean streets of the big city, often Los Angeles with its beaches, apartments, palm-line streets. It could be the nightclub/cafe/police station haunts of the underworld/police/detective. The internal world is the violence/trauma/nightmares in the hero's mind.

6. The antagonist is a femme fatale, a dangerous female who lures/tempts/seduces the hero. She is glamorous with dark lips and long flowing hair. She usually already possesses another man, a wealthy older husband who is proprietal toward his wife,
representing an oedipal complex by the outsider seeking to destroy the powerful father figure to possess the woman.

7. The opposite of the femme fatale is the domestic woman, a wife or girlfriend associated with home/nurturing/rehabilitation.

8. The voice-over is a subjective/confessional narration who is telling the story out of a need to confess/purify/cleanse his conscience. The narration personalizes the experience, like a 1st person novel.

9. The visual style of noir is the hard/undiffused look of the tabloid newspaper with cluttered/claustrphobic/dark interiors framed or restricted by the camera frame, many night scenes, off-angle and deep focus camera shots, stark chiarascuro, low-key lighting, bleak/fatalistic overtones of despair and madness, "heightened" expressionistic scenes with elements distorted/nightmarish/grotesque/exaggerated.

10. The iconography of noir uses dark sidewalks, rain-drenched streets, flashing neon signs, fairgrounds and carnivals (associated with madness in German expressionism), the city as villain/dangerous/hostile, the border town or the casino, imagery of water and alcohol that represent merging and release rather than fragmentation and blockage. Media icons are frequent: the telephone ("a metaphor of desire" to overcome limitations and alienation and connect with others), voice recorders, newspapers.
References

• Schrader, Paul (1972). "Notes on Film Noir", Film Comment 8, no. 1 (collected in Silver and Ursini, Film Noir Reader [1]).