FILM NOIR: THE MOST AMERICAN FILM GENRE

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO FILM NOIR

ROGER EBERT:

• “The most American film genre, because no society could have created a world so filled with doom, fate, fear and betrayal, unless it were essentially naive and optimistic.”
THE WORLD ACCORDING TO FILM NOIR

The following slides will give you some descriptions of the world as it is portrayed in film noir.

• Sam Spade (the detective) tells his client, Bridget O'Shaughnessy, an anecdote about a man named Flitcraft who one day suddenly went missing.

• Spade, hired by Flitcraft's wife, is unable to locate him. A few years later, quite by accident, he encounters Flitcraft in another town and then discovers what had caused his disappearance.
ON THE DAY OF HIS DISAPPEARANCE, FLITCRAFT, WALKING BACK FROM LUNCH, HAD ALMOST BEEN KILLED BY A FALLING BEAM. STRUCK SUDDENLY BY THE ABSURDITY OF HOW EASILY HIS LIFE COULD HAVE BEEN ENDED

• (“He knew then that men died at haphazard like that, and lived only while blind chance spared them”),
• he walks away from his job and marriage and all his responsibilities. He settles in another town and after a period of time, rebuilds his life in the same mold as before the incident with the falling beam.

• According to Foster Hirsch in *Film Noir: The Dark Side of the Screen*:

  “Like Flitcraft, Spade is clear-sighted --- pitilessly so, in fact --- proceeding as if the world makes sense and adds up to something when he knows it really doesn't. Like Flitcraft, Spade leads an ordered life, maintaining a sense of purpose in the face of disorder and irrationality.”
TO SUM UP:

• In Film Noir, characters learn (if they did not already know it) that the world does not make sense, does not add up and is marked by disorder and irrationality.
• Nonetheless, they soldier on.

IF YOU WANT ONE MORE DEFINITION OF THE WORLD OF FILM NOIR,

• here is about the most succinct one you will ever find and totally accurate...
“YOU’RE (EXPLETIVE DELETED)!”

- James Ellroy, American crime fiction writer (L.A. Confidential et alii.) and essayist, as quoted in THE DOCUMENTARY: “Film Noir: From Darkness to Light”

Each of the films we will see across the next six weeks will take us into “The World of Film Noir,” some moreso than others.

And those films are…
• **Shadow of a Doubt** (A Hitchcock) (1943), 108 minutes – Today!

• **In a Lonely Place** (Nicholas Ray), 1950, 94 minutes – Oct. 29

• **The Big Heat** (Fritz Lang), (1953), 90 minutes – Nov. 5

• **The Night of the Hunter** (C. Laughton), (1955) – 92 minutes – Nov. 12

• **Experiment in Terror** (Blake Edwards) (1962) – 123 minutes – Nov. 19

• **Cape Fear** (1962 original with Robert Mitchum, not Scorsese’s 1990 remake with DeNiro) – 106 minutes – Dec. 3
NOW FOR SOME INFO ON TODAY’S MOVIE

• WHICH IS...

![Image of movie poster](image-url)
THE DEVIL THUMBS A RIDE & OTHER UNFORGETTABLE FILMS

• By Barry Gifford

• “Hitchcock’s mastery of contrasts is never more evident than in this movie: into each life a little rain must fall, and afterwards everything seems fine again, but it never is.” (Emphasis mine)

FROM DARK CITY: THE LOST WORLD OF FILM NOIR

• By Eddie Muller

• Most of Hitchcock’s excursions down Blind Alley were vacation trips, pumped up with a few hair-breath brushes with disaster. But sometimes the journeys were laden with guilt. When he was able to adroitly combine the two, as in Shadow of a Doubt (‘43) and Strangers on a Train (‘51), Hitch produced masterpieces.
\[ \text{CONT.} \]

- *Shadow of a Doubt’s* Uncle Charlie is in many ways Hitchcock’s alter ego ---
- The charming dinner guest who unnerves a complacent family with straight talk about man’s innate evil.

- Hitchcock relished stories in which morally confused innocents were tortured by morally bankrupt predators.

\[ \text{CONT.} \]

- As screenwriter Arthur Lawrents noted: “…he (Hitchcock) had a strong sense of sin…his Victorian Catholic background still affected him deeply… He thought everyone was doing something physical and nasty behind every closed door --- except himself.”
The film is atypical as far as noir goes, too. Much of the genre takes place in urban darkness but *Shadow of a Doubt* (despite its title) is awash in wholesome sunlight. But the contrast between the superficially serene surroundings and the dark underbelly represented by Uncle Charlie is what gives the film its subversive heft.

Novelist and noir expert Jake Hiinson:

This is Hitchcock’s most wicked vision of America. Go beyond the manicured lawns and the loving family façade, Hitch seems to be telling us, and you’ll find neurosis and sociopathy and murder. This basically is *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch’s movie) 40 years early.
HITCHCOCK’S FAVORITE MOVIE

• Hitchcock often cited *Shadow of a Doubt* as his favorite movie. On occasion he named others. However, his daughter Pat, who was present as a teenager along with her mother, for the shoot always maintained that this was her father’s favorite film.

BEFORE THE MOVIE
TOMMARYBETH@VERIZON.NET

• I WILL PLACE THE SLIDES OF EACH CLASS ON OSHER’S WEBSITE AFTER EACH CLASS.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK (1899-1980)
• As Noir director
• Thornton Wilder, screenplay
• Santa Rosa
• Stories of average people undone, the night world invading the day world
• All potential criminals
• Doubleness within/without:
  • “We’re like twins.”
• Audience implicated
• Humor – “edge to the horror”

THINGS TO WATCH FOR IN THE MOVIE

• The two contrasting train scenes

• Stairs

• People’s hands

• The final scene: pay attention to both the upfront dialogue and the background dialogue. This scene sums up the entire movie.
AND LAST BUT CERTAINLY NOT LEAST...

• Look for Hitchcock’s typically brief cameo appearance in the film!

AFTER THE MOVIE
HOW WAS THE MOVIE RECEIVED?

• Unanimously positive reviews:
  • *The New York Times* loved the film;
  • *Time Magazine*: “superb”
  • The entertainment *trade paper The Film Daily* was yet another reviewer in 1943 that praised every aspect of the production.
  • Today, the film is still regarded as a major work of Hitchcock. Contemporary critic *Dave Kehr* called it Hitchcock’s "first indisputable masterpiece." Many other critics have agreed. *David Mamet* calls it Hitchcock.’s finest film.
  • In 1991, the film was selected for preservation in the United States *National Film Registry* by the *Library of Congress*, being deemed “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant”.

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SOME ANECDOTES

• First movie

• The autograph

• The dinner

PETER BOGDANOVICH’S

• (Film director, writer, actor, producer, critic & film historian)

• Alfred Hitchcock story!