

## Film

# After The Maltese Falcon: how film noir took flight

Ushering in an uneasy world of femmes fatales and shady sleuths, *The Maltese Falcon* marked the beginnings of film noir. Seventy-five years on, how can this genre speak to our times?



Humphrey Bogart and Mary Astor in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). Photograph: Allstar/Warner Bros.

**Phil Hoad**

@phlode

Friday 28 October 2016 15.00 BST

“I’m so tired. So tired of lying, making up lies, not knowing what is a lie, and what is the truth.” There, in 10 seconds of *The Maltese Falcon* – Mary Astor still gaming as she “comes clean” to **Humphrey Bogart**, he swooping in to kiss those lying lips, but distracted by the gunman waiting outside – is the whole of film noir. The femme fatale and the detective. An untrustworthy universe etched in melodramatic two-tone: sex and death.

It is the 75th anniversary of the John Huston classic, released across the US on 18 October 1941 and often deemed the first real noir. And there’s more of the black stuff around than ever, from the chilly Nordic variety to David Lynch’s return to *Twin Peaks* next year. How did a genre with such a pessimistic and oppressive worldview come to rule the roost?

*The Maltese Falcon* – in which Bogart simultaneously redefined his own screen persona and gave us the benchmark shady PI, Sam Spade – deserves much credit for sending the genre steadfastly out into the night. But they didn’t even call it film noir at the time; besotted critics referred to Huston’s thriller as the most successful example yet of the hardboiled style.

Warners’ third attempt in a decade at filming Dashiell Hammett’s story, after the 1931 version of the same name and 1936’s *Satan Met a Lady*, was the one finally true to the author’s spirit. Dense, conspiratorial and with a sadistic gleam in Bogart’s eye, the film minted a new American screen sensibility, one in which the compromised hero, beset by dark machinations, got by on attitude alone. “Are you getting this all right, son, or I am going too fast for ya?” Bogey asks the district attorney’s stenographer during a pause in another preening monologue.



Laura Haring and Justin Theroux in *Mulholland Drive* (2001). Photograph: Allstar/UNIVERSAL

Like the enamelled “black bird” everyone’s lusting after, there’s much to scratch at beneath the surface of

*The Maltese Falcon*. It was the first mainstream hit to bring noir's active ingredients together, but several had appeared in isolation in earlier films: the so-called "proto-noirs". *Stranger on the Third Floor*, a 1940 RKO B-production, had arresting expressionist dream sequences – the off-kilter visual style that German emigres brought to Hollywood and which was beginning to filter out of horror pictures into what became noir. (As its killer, it also had [Peter Lorre](#), expressionism made flesh, and hypnotic as Joel Cairo in *The Maltese Falcon*.)

*Blind Alley*, in 1939, flirted with suffocating psychological torment in its tale of a gangster who invades the home of a shrink. But, laborious in its Freudian explanations of the source of the ne'er-do-well's troubles, it wasn't ready for a true noir downer, and pulled back from the brink. Unlike the following year's *They Drive by Night* – which after looking innocuous enough, plunged over it. Bogart and the man he later supplanted as Sam Spade, George Raft, are a pair of struggling truck-driving brothers in a cornball Hollywood drama. Then frustrated trophy wife Ida Lupino murders her husband and comprehensively loses her marbles in an extraordinary final stretch that is surely a femme-fatale dress rehearsal.

The disillusioned mood in Hollywood's output at the end of the 1930s marks a belated reaction to the great depression

These premonitory outbursts suggested the US had something on its mind. The second world war is commonly cited in film studies as noir's driving demon, with the troops returning to a different, more troubled world. But the pulp fiction that provided the bedrock for noir emerged after the first world war, the streetwise gumshoes and petty hoods marking a shift from the patrician, gentleman-sleuth crime fiction that had gone before. Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M Cain and, the man who provided more direct story material for film noir than anyone else, [Cornell Woolrich](#), were all already in full flow by the late 30s. The marginalised lives and lyrical sensitivity of French poetic-realist directors such as Marcel Carné and Jean Vigo provided another noir influence, as did the flood of Nazi-regime escapees – including [Billy Wilder](#), [Fritz Lang](#), Robert Siodmak and Edgar G Ulmer – who filled out its ranks. As well as cinematographic flair, a sense of paranoia and helplessness in the face of malignant institutions was their gift. The disillusioned mood creeping into Hollywood's output towards the end of the 30s seemed more like a belated reaction to the great depression, rather than to a war the country wasn't involved in yet.



Marlene Dietrich in Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958). Photograph: Allstar/UNIVERSAL

The war, though, undoubtedly crystallised the genre's appeal. Hollywood soft-soaping no longer washed for the battered veterans and the housewives who had experienced a taste of employment. Noir, entering its high phase, was ready to cater. If not with stories directly touching on demobilisation – such as 1947's *Crossfire* and *Dead Reckoning* – then with a sardonic and jaded worldview that coloured the genre fedora-downwards. That certainly summed up *Double Indemnity*, directed by Billy Wilder and, in 1944, noir's first major box office hit. It was one of five films – alongside *The Maltese Falcon*, *Laura*, *Murder, My Sweet* and *The Lost Weekend* – that went on show in Paris at a special catch-up exhibition of Hollywood fodder two years later. The darkening mood of American cinema didn't escape anyone's attention; critic Nino Frank's writeup in *L'Écran Français*, using the term for the first time, finally gave film noir a name.

And the biggest marketing come-on? It turned out misanthropy and fatalism were dead cool. As [James Ellroy](#) later summed the whole business up: “A righteously generically American film movement that explicated one great theme, and that theme is: you're fucked.”

Chinatown feasted on the rotten heart of LA and spiced it up with graphic violence, which was previously forbidden

Noir, according to the official ledger, was done by 1958 – the narrative possibilities wrung out, shinier postwar consumerism, including television, on the ascendant. That year, [Orson Welles](#)'s late masterpiece *A Touch of Evil* was its epitaph. But it wasn't away long, even if you ignore the French, Japanese and British imitators that kept it alive during the interregnum years. A mere 16 years, if you count *Chinatown* (debatable) as the start of the “neo-noir” revival. More grandiose than the first wave, Roman Polanski's film feasted on the rotten heart of Los Angeles, and spiced it up with niceties previously forbidden under the Hays Code: graphic violence, incest and the unshakable conviction that the house always wins. But the essential dynamic between Jake Nicholson and Faye Dunaway – arousal and aggression in terse tango –

was unchanged from Bogart and Astor three decades before.

In noir's Venetian blind-lit vale of tears, though, they could be any guy and any dame. Mood is the constant. Noir is as much a sensibility as a fixed genre, which perhaps explains its longevity. It has become a kind of cinematic Instagram filter that can – and has – been applied to almost any locale to add murky ambience and moral relativity. Like romanticism or hip-hop, it has been triumphantly international: away from the well-trodden side streets of the Nordic and French varieties, we've had Bollywood noir (*Satya*, 1998), Japanese noir (*Branded to Kill*, 1967), Australian noir (*Lantana*, 2001), Indonesian noir (*Kala*, 2007), German noir (*Phoenix*, 2014). In the neo-noir phase, the all-pervading-web-of-corruption narrative perfected by Ellroy in his LA quartet of novels has become common operating practice, even exported to places where there seems to be limited scope for such skulduggery. The idea of North Yorkshire Police, in David Peace's *Red Riding* trilogy, operating a death squad always seemed laughable.



Harrison Ford in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). Photograph: Allstar/Warner Bros.

Its smoky contours apparent after 75 years, noir is well placed to reinvent itself. Yes, the likes of Lisbeth Salander, Sarah Lund and Saga Norén have gender-swapped the genre, usurping the tough-talking men. But 40s noir also subverted expectations and reflected shifting gender roles, with slack-jawed patsies such as *Detour*'s pianist Tom Neal prey for women such as the peerlessly terrifying hitchhiker Ann Savage – demonised projections of newly liberated and assertive femininity. Maybe the recent appearance of the “homme fatale”, like Joel Edgerton's creepy neighbourhood caller in last year's *The Gift*, will spark corresponding calls of misandry.

But noir ultimately stays wedded to the past – not a surprise given the inescapable Romantic undertow from the off, the doomed hero's thoughts constantly drawn back to prelapsarian times. That can leave some modern noir as little more than an excuse for a retro love-in, as in the last *Sin City* or *LA Noire*, the

note-perfect simulation of 50s Los Angeles from *Grand Theft Auto* publisher Rockstar Games.

If we're lucky, noir's backlight works with greater discernment, illuminating how cinema works on us – our consumption and internalisation of past styles, postures and attitudes. In *Blade Runner*, Harrison Ford is probably a replicant, so his future-Marlowe act is literally by design, another facet of Ridley Scott's exquisite assemblage of noir textures. Everything is artificial, including identity. Everyone is putting on a front, too, in Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, recently voted [the best film of the 21st century](#). But with the opposite effect. Naomi Watts's starlet comes to LA and relishes her first acting job, playing sleuth for her new amnesiac friend fatale Laura Harring. As she embraces her roles and zeroes in on the mystery, noir becomes a conduit to something vital and authentic. Something live to the touch.



Noomi Rapace as Lisbeth Salander in the film adaptation of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Photograph: Knut Koivisto/Publicity image from film company

*The Maltese Falcon* was already playing cat-and-mouse with appearance and reality 75 years ago. Its dissembling hoodlums and kingpins scratch at the surface of the trophy, desperate for it to be the real thing. It never is. In an inauthentic world, style is the only recourse – a cornerstone of Bogart's screen persona – but it masks real pain and desire. That contradiction is 24-carat noir. The modern version, if it isn't going to become a box of fossilised tropes, has to continue locating its own heart of darkness.

Documentary has sometimes managed to swivel the spotlight towards noir to interrogate it under reality's harsher glare. In his 2012 film *The Act of Killing*, Joshua Oppenheimer asked former regime executioners for Suharto to reenact their deeds in genres of their choosing. Tough talk and moodily lit bureaus was how they dressed up torture and genocide, fiction infiltrating the world and turning rogue – a noirish proposition if ever there was one. The black bird flies on.

[More features](#)

## Topics

[Humphrey Bogart](#) [Film adaptations](#) [Crime Thriller](#) [Double Indemnity](#)

---

[Reuse this content](#)

[View all comments >](#)

## popular

### UK

[education](#)

[media](#)

[society](#)

[law](#)

[scotland](#)

[wales](#)

[northern ireland](#)

### politics

### world

[europe](#)

[US](#)

[americas](#)

[asia](#)

[australia](#)

[africa](#)

[middle east](#)

[cities](#)

[development](#)

### sport

[football](#)

[cricket](#)

[rugby union](#)

[F1](#)

[tennis](#)

[golf](#)

[cycling](#)

[boxing](#)

[racing](#)

[rugby league](#)

[US sports](#)

### football

[live scores](#)

[tables](#)

[competitions](#)

[results](#)

[fixtures](#)

[clubs](#)

### opinion

[columnists](#)

### culture

film	tv & radio	music
games	books	art & design
stage	classical	
business		
economics	banking	retail
markets	eurozone	
lifestyle		
food	health & fitness	love & sex
family	women	home & garden
fashion		
environment		
climate change	wildlife	energy
pollution		
tech		
travel		
UK	europa	US
skiing		
money		
property	savings	pensions
borrowing	careers	
science		
professional networks		
the observer		
today's paper		
editorials & letters	obituaries	g2
weekend	the guide	saturday review
sunday's paper		
comment	the new review	observer magazine
membership		
crosswords		
blog	editor	quick
cryptic	prize	quiptic
genius	speedy	everyman
azed		
video		

Email address

- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [membership](#)
- [jobs](#)
- [dating](#)
- [modern slavery act statement](#)
- [Guardian labs](#)
- [subscribe](#)
- [all topics](#)
- [all contributors](#)
- [about us](#)
- [contact us](#)
- [report technical issue](#)
- [complaints & corrections](#)
- [terms & conditions](#)
- [privacy policy](#)
- [cookie policy](#)
- [securedrop](#)

© 2016 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.