

Whodunit?

It's a world of scheming vixens, lonesome gumshoes and wheedling informers. Someone's to blame for film noir, but who? Matthew Sweet lines up the suspects

Matthew Sweet The Guardian, Saturday 22 August 2009

Blame the French ... Kiss Me Deadly.

The hero who's on the way to the gallows, and knows it. The dame with the automatic pistol slipped in her garter. The creepy informer with the leering smile and eyes like two hard-boiled eggs on a plate. The private dick who wouldn't recognise gentility if it criticised the way he drank bourbon from a teacup. When we see these guys on the screen, we know we're in the world of film noir, that most unmistakable of movie genres.

It's a monochrome, moral-free world that flourished between the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the fall of senator Joe McCarthy. It's a world populated by women who love manicures more than husbands, and by men who are so world-weary that they're surprised by nothing, except a client who tells the truth at the first interview. It's the world conjured just by the titles of these pictures: *Farewell My Lovely*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Build My Gallows High*. But who can we nail for inventing the genre in the first place? Who summoned its conventions into existence? Who unleashed all that darkness upon Hollywood? Let's line up the suspects. In it up to their necks, all of them.

The French

We don't talk about *American Pie* as a *brut-dehors* comedy. We don't think of Laurel, Hardy and Harold Lloyd as the kings of *bâton-de-claque*. So why do we do we do the Gallic bottom-lip thing when we speak of a genre that's full of characters whose idea of continental sophistication is a few extra onions on their hot dog? Film noir was born in California, but the christening was held in Paris. The credit for the coinage customarily goes to Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier, a pair of critics for a left-leaning, pointy-headed movie mag called *L'Ecrain Français*.

In 1946, French audiences were busy catching up on all the Hollywood pictures that they'd missed during the Occupation: in a few short weeks they saw Barbara Stanwyck seduce Fred MacMurray into killing her husband for cash (*Double Indemnity*), Dick Powell's Philip Marlowe taking punches and syringes and falling into a "crazy coked-up dream" (*Farewell My Lovely*) and Bogey snogging the face off a lying no-good two-faced Mary Astor (*The Maltese Falcon*).

A new genre was suddenly more visible in France than it had been to anyone on the other side of the Atlantic. Frank and Chartier took their inspiration from the roman noir - French detective fiction that was always published under sinister dark covers. It's appropriate that they did: if the Americans had named the genre for themselves then they would have been forced to call it *Black Cinema*, and there weren't many in 1940s Hollywood who wanted to go there ...

Dashiell Hammett

Dash wrote the pulp fiction that Hollywood juiced for noir plots. They were stories

about cheap detectives and cheaper crooks; people who weren't so comfortable in rooms with carpets. Hammett had been a Pinkerton detective, so he wasn't faking it. But it took a while for Hollywood to produce an adaptation that preserved the toxic cynicism of his writing.

The first screen version of *The Maltese Falcon* was a good-natured lark - more interested in sex than intrigue. The second was a Bette Davis comedy called *Satan Met A Lady*. Then in 1941 John Huston cast Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade - not the blond Mephistopheles of Hammett's imagination, but a world-weary guy who's seen enough to know that what seems to be good and true is just a lie waiting to be exposed. And that's the essence of noir.

Hitler

Creating the conditions for a new kind of American cinema wasn't one of Hitler's policy aims; you won't find a pitch for *The Postman Always Rings Twice* anywhere on the pages of *Mein Kampf*. But the darkness that Nazism brought to Europe is the same darkness that cloaks the characters of film noir. You'll find the evidence in the biographies of the émigré talents who shaped the genre. Billy Wilder fled Berlin the week that the Reichstag burned.

A year later Fritz Lang was called in for a meeting with the propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, who told him that the Führer loved his work and wanted Lang to become the film-maker-in-chief of the Nazi state. The director made his excuses and left for America, though not quite as quickly as he claimed in his memoirs. Robert Siodmak, director of *The Killers*, was a refugee from Nazism, as was the composer he employed on the film, the Hungarian Miklós Rózsa, who had encountered the Führer in person.

He once watched a Nazi dad push his eight year-old into Hitler's presence with the words, "This is the greatest moment of your life." The boy burst into tears and refused to salute. The father slapped his son in the face and dragged him away. *The Killers* begins with a pair of trench-coated hitmen arriving in a small town; they're working for a mobster, but their silhouettes suggests they might easily be from the SS.

Nosferatu

Film noir used shadows and bars of light to carve up the frame almost to the point of abstraction. Like fear and paranoia, that expressionist technique is something that came from Europe in the baggage of émigré film-makers - developed in the 1920s at the German film studio UFA. Watch the first true noir, *Stranger On The Third Floor* and you'll see the heritage on display: Peter Lorre, former UFA star, creeping around a shabby boarding house where the lighting gives him *Nosferatu* talons.

The vice admiral

Chuichi Nagumo was leader of the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, after which California declared a state of emergency. A blackout was imposed; Hollywood was plunged into darkness; materials and electricity were rationed. And in this twilight imposed by the actions of the admiral, film noir thrived; not just because it was attuned to the times, but because light was in short supply.

Rosie the Riveter

The femmes fatales we meet in noir - Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*, Mary Astor in *The Maltese Falcon*, Ava Gardner in *The Killers* - were also a product of war. For women in the audience they were images of empowerment. Rosie the Riveter showed her muscle and yelled, "We can do it!" from a thousand propaganda billboards. Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was a poster girl for independence of a different kind.

She plays a sun-worshipping housewife who has made an ill-advised wartime marriage to a much older man, but maybe the new mechanic (a grease-smearing sex monkey played by John Garfield), can fix things? How many women, sitting in the darkened cinema with their desires and their ice-cream tub, thought about solving their own problems in this way?

Jack Warner

Boss of the studio that produced some of the best noirs, Warner was the man ultimately responsible for one of the greatest, *The Big Sleep*. Halfway through filming the picture, its star, Humphrey Bogart, found himself puzzling over the death of a character called Sean Regan. Someone had bumped him off, but he couldn't work out whodunit. The script didn't seem to say. So he asked the director, Howard Hawks. Hawks couldn't give him an answer. So Hawks began firing off telegrams to the writers who had been hired to adapt Raymond Chandler's novel.

All that came back down the wire were shrugs. Then came a furious communication from Jack Warner. Not to express his disgust that three screenwriters and one director had managed to film a story with a dirty great hole in it, but to complain that they were all spending too much money on 10-cent telegrams. His ruling established one of the defining qualities of film noir: what matters is that there is suspicion, betrayal, paranoia, carnality, blackmail, murder and lies; who is responsible is a whole lot less important.