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Film Genres – Film Noir

To what extent can the films Minority Report, Dark City, *and* Blade Runner *be*

considered part of the film noir genre?

Introduction

The question of what, exactly, makes a film *film noir* is an extremely complex and

difficult one to answer; there is even debate as to whether *film noir* can be considered a

genre in its own right. As a result, determining whether or not a particular film is a *noir*

piece is a somewhat nebulous affair. Any given picture can display nearly all of the

stylistic elements commonly associated with *noir* and remain entirely independent from

the genre (such as *Citizen Kane*), just as easily as a film can display relatively few of

those elements while being one of the genre's defining icons (such as *The Maltese*

Falcon). Although the genre emerged rather organically and wasn't even named until

1946 when the French film critic Nino Frank decided on "*film noir,*" it was most

identifiably a genre during the early period of the 1940's and 50's[1]. In the years since,

there have been a few films that clearly embrace the spirit of *noir*, but there have been far

more films that seem to look and feel like *film noir* without actually being part of the

genre. This is because *noir* as it originally was has almost disappeared into the trappings

of nostalgia and marketing. Modern audiences tend to appreciate noir as an allusion and a

style more than they appreciate the films that truly embodied *noir* as a genre, and studios

have learned to accommodate. Therefore, a careful analysis of the formal and stylistic

elements in the films *Minority Report*, *Dark City*, and *Blade Runner* will show that

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[1] Frank Krutnik, <u>In A Lonely Street</u> p.15

although these films share many traits of *noir* pictures, they remain unsurprisingly but noticeably distinct.

The Evolution of Noir

Film Noir has undergone a curious and unique evolution among Hollywood genres. Although many critics argue that *noir* is best understood as a style of film rather than a genre, I think that it is impossible to capture the essence of *noir* films in something as little as a set of stylistic elements. It is perhaps best to describe *film noir* as the genre that is no longer. As a result of the Hollywood genre system, *noir* has become a nostalgic sales package and an echo of its former self. In this sense, *noir* is in fact a genre, but not as it exists in today's films. The difficulty in defining *film noir* as a genre comes from the fact that "it has always been easier to recognize a film noir than to define the term."[2] When asked to define *film noir*, more often than not I will decide it is best to simply list examples of iconic *noir* titles and a few of the more recognizable stylistic elements that accompany the films. This is also probably why many believe *film noir* to be a style rather than a genre; it is far easier to identify a *noir* film with its lighting, costumes, and setting than by any other method. Clearly, however, the original films of the 1940's and 50's (usually ending with Welles' *Touch of Evil*) form a genre through their combination of visual style, cynical moods, and introspective storylines. Of the elements contributing to a film's *noir* status, no single thing can be considered to be the most important. Instead, as Krutnik observes in <u>In A Lonely Street</u>, "the 'noir style' tends to be a more disparate series of stylistic markings which can be seen as *noir* when they occur in

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[2] James Naremore, <u>More Than Night</u> p.9

conjunction with sets of narrative and thematic conventions and narrational processes."[3] In the history of *film noir* as a genre, only the films produced in the classic early periods seem to be indisputably within the genre. Although critics seem unable to pinpoint the exact element which grants a film its *noir*-ness, they nevertheless all seem to understand that this elusive element exists, and defines films such as *Double Indemnity, The Maltese Falcon,* and *The Big Sleep* as difinitive *noir* pictures. As such, despite the fact that these original films were never packaged and marketed as *film noir* within the Hollywood genre system, they are ironically the most recognizably legitimate examples.

In fact, the advent of a more market-driven Hollywood, operating increasingly within the scope of the genre system (and in turn, the mainstream American audiences) is what has driven *film noir* away from its clearly identifiable category and more and more into a widely dispersed set of stylistic elements. In many ways, *film noir* itself emerged from technical experimentation and new narrative studies of the more pessimistic nature of human sexuality.[4] Now, these production techniques and narrative elements have dispersed themselves to influence countless other films in separate genres, and rarely do they combine themselves in the ways that they did originally. As a result, modern genres have assimilated many *noir* elements and used them as a sales package and a marketing technique to exploit one of the oddest phenomena in film audiences: the nostalgic desire for what people think is *film noir.* Some combination of the romanticism of old cinema and the way in which the *noir* label seems to legitimize the issues with which these films deal have convinced modern audiences that *noir* is something they want to see. The 1994 film *Exterior Night* echoes this in its narration, as the main character Steve says that he

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[3] Krutnik, p.19
[4] Bruce Crowther, Film Noir: Reflections in a Dark Mirror p.61

was "caught up in the nostalgia for a memory [he] never had."[5] The film itself is a cast-back modernized version of *noir*, and even more recent films such as *Sin City* are sold on their *noir* stylistics, though they often over-emphasize the gritty, action-thriller aspects that current audiences respond to. Through this cycle of redevelopment and response (audiences influence the ways in which films are made by their movie-going habits) *film noir* has all but disappeared as an independent genre, and has been increasingly incorporated into films of all other subjects. These modern pictures echo familiar and often overly-stylized aspects of *noir* that ironically serve to further dichotomize the subject matter and visual style that gave birth to the genre in the first place.

Minority Report

Of the three pictures I have chosen, *Minority Report* is probably the most difficult to link with *film noir*, precisely because the majority of the film does not share all of the extreme and iconic stylistic elements associated with *noir*. There are, of course, several scenes marked with high-contrast lighting and extremely angular shots, but the majority of the film focuses on a fairly light-intensive motif, serving to separate and highlight the duality of the film's environment. Though the scenes of subterfuge, deceit, and industry are marked with a certain *noir*-ish visual style and contribute to the overall relationship, they don't stand out enough on their own to warrant a comparison. Instead, *Minority Report* draws its *noir* influence largely from narrative structure and characterization. Many of the classic *noir* pieces focused largely around hard-boiled detective and thriller storylines, at the time largely because of the way in which the storylines complimented

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[5] Naremore, p.195

the stylistic choices being made.[6] Similarly, *Minority Report* is structured around a narrative that emphasizes both thriller and detective aspects, as the main character John Anderton is through the nature of the plot a detective in search of the answers to both his own predicament and the corruption of the pre-crime establishment he has worked so hard to serve. In the process, Anderton is forced to examine the ways in which his life had previously been structured (this metaphor of re-examination is reinforced by the physical replacement of his eyes) in the same way that classic *noir* films tended to study the responses of characters thrown outside the normal structure of their lives. Often this involved placing characters in extraordinary situations and questioning classic gender roles through the abnormally powerful women who are often responsible for the horrible situations *noir* protagonists find themselves in. A parallel to this *femme fatale* icon can been seen to a certain extent with the female psychic in *Minority Report*—she is powerful through her foresight, is not accidentally the most powerful of the three psychics, and she is also in a way responsible for the dangerous situation in which Anderton finds himself.

Despite the narrative similarities, however, *Minority Report* remains clearly separate from the *film noir* genre. In fact, it's an almost conscious separation within the film itself. Throughout the film there are two distinct stylistic sets, reserved for the different "worlds" in which Anderton operates. In general, while he is either outside the city or working with pre-crime (in other words, acting in a relatively legitimate environment), we experience scenes that are generally well-lit, technologically advanced and crisp. In contrast, the scenes set in Anderton's apartment, when he purchases his drugs, or when he is getting his eyes replaced, we have a world of stark shadows and high-contrast lighting, gritty environments that, though scattered with technological

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[6] Krutnik, p.22

advances, have the slightly abandoned and cold look that mirrors both Anderton's inner

state and the *noir*-ish themes they refer to. In fact, at the beginning of the scene where

Anderton's eyes are exchanged for someone else's, there is a short clip from the movie

House of Bamboo, a *film noir* piece from 1955, clearly indicating the intentional use of

noir-like lighting and stylistic parallels. These obvious references are not, however,

present throughout the entire movie. Scenes outside the pre-crime area, such as the one at

Anderton's wife's house, are practically anti-*noir*, intensely lit and almost dream-like

(due, undoubtedly, to the point halfway through the film, at Anderton's incarceration, that

suggests the rest of the film may actually *be* a dream). In short, though *Minority Report*

shares many features with classic *noir* films, they operate more as allusions and

throwbacks than actual defining characteristics.

Dark City

　　　Dark City is the closest of the three films to *noir* in theme, content, and style; in

fact, in some ways, it is hard to find what separates it from *film noir*. As can be guessed

from the title, the film is by its very nature characterized by darkness. The vast majority

of the movie is shot in a night environment, and scenes are beset by stark shadows and

hidden corners. The shadows are so prevalent, and the setting so dramatic, that it almost

seems over-emphasized; a caricature of *noir* lighting used to underline the film's main

motif of darkness. The reference to *film noir* is hardly incidental: the opening scene

begins with a brooding voice over narrative, a dark and sinister cityscape, and the murky

outline of a man wearing the classic trench coat and fedora. This heavy-handed approach

continues throughout the film, as the audience is introduced to John Murdock, a man who

is in search of his own identity, and in a way that is slightly more than metaphorical, his humanity. In addition, the story is structured around mystery—a detective tracks Murdock's path as he searches for his lost identity, and a mad psychologist holds the key to understanding the reality of the Dark City, a secret kept until the end of the movie. The brooding atmosphere throughout the film provides a clear link to *film noir*. Due to the generous use of stylized lighting and costuming, *Dark City* looks and feels like *noir* throughout most of the movie.

However, the similarities seem to end at the surface of the film. The style and basic content of the film are highly related to *noir*, but the film diverges from that template in its actual story and setting. One of the fundamental aspects of *film noir* stories is that the main character is "often foredoomed and, aware of his ultimate fate…faces it with stoic resignation."[7] Though shrouded in shadow and isolated from society because of his ability both to "tune" and to resist the mind control forces of the aliens, Murdock is nonetheless more classically a hero than any main character in *noir*. He shares the *Matrix*-like prodigality of a man who was essentially "born" to rescue dark city from the inhumane experimentation of the aliens that control it. In this, and in that he succeeds in doing so, *Dark City* is fundamentally a story about success and the importance of the human spirit. *Film noir* features storylines of inevitable doom, the anti-hero who grimly goes to the death he knows awaits him, unable to do otherwise even if he wanted to. The main character is often paradoxically an example of human weakness, of how the spirit can be broken, of how a man can be forced outside of society and normal life by internal struggles either from events beyond his control or from a past that catches up to him. *Dark City* is also very science fiction in its setting. On the surface, the city is the perfect

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[7] Crowther, p.10

set for a *noir* picture, but as the film progresses it becomes clearly a fictional world. The city itself floats somewhere in space among the stars, and this along with the presence of the aliens is enough to destroy the urban illusion. Morphing the city landscape on a nightly basis and flying around the city as they please, the aliens arrange things almost as though they were *deus-ex-machina* from ancient Greek theater. Altogether, the film is a tale of a man who finds himself and overcomes the obstacles set before him in an alien landscape—despite its stylistic similarities, *Dark City* is clearly not a *noir* film.

Blade Runner

More than anything else, *Blade Runner* focuses on the journey of the main two characters, Rick Deckard and Roy Batty, as they search simultaneously for their humanity. The visual design throughout the film is excellent, and allusions to *film noir* can be found in the lighting and mise-en-scene from the very beginning. Deckard is introduced in a scene wherein the camera descends slowly through a cascade of neon signs and comes to rest on a figure (Deckard) reading a newspaper, cloaked in shadow. The lighting and costume combine to suggest a *noir*-ish aspect to both the film and Deckard's character in particular. In fact, Deckard himself is one of the most *noir*-like aspects of *Blade Runner*, as a character of moral ambiguity faced with a problem derived from a past life he has clearly tried to reject. Wherever he goes, the shadows seem to follow him, (and indeed his is literally followed by a mysterious cop) trapping him into the life he doesn't want to lead, and ensuring that he completes the task he does not want to complete. Like in *Dark City,* metaphor from original *noir* seems to have been taken more literally in *Blade Runner*, and Deckard is in pursuit of what is essentially a

reflection of himself. In this sense, he is engaged in the classic pursuit of his humanity, tied inextricably to a woman he cannot resist, all the while trying to escape from a past he thought he had already left behind.

Again, however, the story and setting are the aspects that clearly separate *Blade Runner* from its apparent *noir* heritage. The story of Deckard's search for himself is ultimately a story of redemption, culminating in the rooftop chase scene near the end of the movie. He is also released from his past (signified by the origami piece) and allowed to make an entirely new life. Redemption and release are hardly features of a classic film noir climax. In addition, *Blade Runner* explores a kind of "dual protagonism" – Roy is best understood as Deckard's foil, both of them seeking to escape the limitations of their "humanity" and their past, looking for a way out of the lives in which they find themselves trapped. In the end of the film the two come together, and Roy realizes his own salvation when he saves Deckard's life, at the same time releasing Deckard from his literal descent towards death. Once again, in a somewhat sci-fi tradition, it is reminiscent of the Greek *deus ex machina* tradition of a godlike figure on (or in this case *being*) a machine reaching in to save the main character from an apparently inextricable quagmire. Also, *Blade Runner* is set inarguably in a science fiction future. Unlike many other sci-fi films, it focuses far more on the characters (although several of them are robots) than on the technology. This does not make the world it creates any less important, however. The setting of *Blade Runner* is extremely prominent in the film, and has an important significance throughout. It is therefore impossible to ignore the fact that despite the *noir-*like character elements, *Blade Runner* is definitively a science fiction film.

Conclusion

Although it is easiest to define *film noir* in terms of the formal and stylistic elements that it entails, *noir* is somehow more than the sum of its parts. *Minority Report*, *Dark City*, and *Blade Runner* all contain many elements of *noir* style and plot, and yet in each case these features are overshadowed by the overarching science fiction narratives. These films, therefore, are perfect examples of how *noir* has dispersed as a genre and become more and more a set of visual stylistics and surface-level plot allusions to add a certain allure to films in more popular genres. This is a result of both the difficulty inherent in defining *noir* in the first place and the migration of the Hollywood audience towards a different type of entertainment. Because *noir* is such a difficult genre to pinpoint, it became far easier and more profitable to make movies within more classically defined genres (not that those are flawlessly defined, either) that contain various elements drawn from classic *noir* pictures. In other words, even though numerous films exhibit many of the stylistic and plot elements found traditionally in *film noir*, they still fit best into their respective classic genres. In this tradition, *Minority Report, Dark City,* and *Blade Runner* are all science fiction films that carry a heavy influence from *film noir*.

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