Studi sul cinema
Film studies
Laboratori interattivi
Interactive workshops

Film "noir"

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Section 1: Introduction	*Comments*

In this Worskhop *we will try to reflect on and discuss one of the most popular and lasting cinematic "genres", just as well as "westerns", "musicals", "horror" films, and so on: the film "noir".*

Let's start with your personal experience:

- *Do you remember watching any films that you would personally define as films* noir*? Do you remember their titles? Are they recent films or films that you watched some time ago?*
- *Are there any film directors and/or actors/actresses that you would particularly associate with this kind of film?*
- *Do you like film* noir*? Could you say why?*
- *When you think of films that you have recently watched in a movie theater, or on TV or that you have recently streamlined, do you remember any which has any aspect that you would consider "typical" of film* noir*?*
- *Still thinking about these recent films, do you remember whether you chose them for these very "typical" aspects or rather, without prior thinking, did you*

notice such aspects while you were watching the film?

Now compare your remarks with my comments on the right.

Comments Section 1: Introduction

Although we introduced film noir as a "genre", it is sometimes considered as a "movement" or a "stylistic/visual choice". This is because, as we shall soon see, many of the aspects which are usually associated with this kind of film are not just to be found only in the first and original "film noir" labelled in this way in the history of cinema (by and large, many American films of the '40s and '50s of last century), but are to be found also in recent or very recent films, without necessarily being labelled as "film noir", but as "gangster films", "science fiction", "thrillers" ... Many of us would define as noir many films which, on the surface, would not seem to belong to the same genre, like Chinatown (by Roman Polanski, USA 1974), Taxi driver (by Martin Scorsese, USA 1976), Blade runner (by Ridley Scott, USA 1982), and even Quentin Tarantino's films (for example, Pulp fiction, USA 1994) and even recent "gangster" or "mafia" movies from Hong Kong, South Corea or Japan.

What are, then, these recurrent aspects which allow us, today, to qualify a certain film as a film noir or, at the very least, as a "hybrid" film (i.e. a film of a different genre, but including some of the typical features of film noir)? It's what we are going to consider next ...

Section 2: The "typical" elements of film *noir*: a preliminary investigation

When you think of a film noir, *what kind of film do you have in mind? Let's concentrate for a start on the* kinds of stories *told by a film* noir. *Try to think of films, which you have actually watched, even if you remember only bits of them. Don't worry if you can't answer all the following questions! Make a note, if you can, of your answers. (If you really can't remember any films of this kind, go to* Section 3, *but still use the following questions.)*

a. Characters

- *What is the* social profile *of the characters that most often appear: men, women? Young, old, middle age? What social class do they seem to belong to, are they well-off, middle class or "bourgeois", or maybe destitute? Are they married or "single", have they got a family? What are their jobs? Do they work for a company, a public institution, or are they "freelance"?*
- *What is the* psychological profile *of these characters: are they satisfied or contented with their situation, or do they seem to have troubles? Are they optimists or pessimists? Do they believe in certain values or do they tend to be disillusioned or even cynical? Do they tend to be active or passive in their circumstances?*
- *What kind of* personality *do such characters exhibit: introverts/extroverts, "cold"/"warm-hearted", friendly or rather individualist? What kind of relationships do they entertain with relatives, friends, colleagues? What's their relationship with women?*
- *In particular, how do* male *characters appear in comparison with* female *characters? Is there attraction, "romance", mutual respect, conflict, trust o mutual distrust?*

b. Contexts and settings

- *In what kind of* contexts *do the stories unfold: in big cities, in small towns, in rural areas? More often inside a building or outside, "in the open air"? By daytime or by nighttime? In what sort of* settings *(e.g. luxury apartments, bleak flats, offices, night clubs, bars, city centre or suburbs, prisons, hospitals, etc.)*
- *How do the characters* move*: do they walk? Do they drive or use public*

*transport? Are there frequent scenes
linked to travel or movement?*

- *What kind of* weather *seems prevalent:
 sunny days, rainy days, cold, hot
  weather ...?*

c. The "stories" told by film *noir*

- *Do the stories seem to have a clear
  beginning, a development, a final
  resolution, and, in particular, a* well-
  structured line of events*? Or do
  several story strands, or narrative
  lines, seem to "pile up" or intertwine?
  How does all this impact on viewers?*
- *Are the characters moved by clear*
  motivations, *which prompt them to
  make decisions and take actions to
  reach a final* aim, *so that the story can
  move forward smoothly? Are the*
  relationships *between characters clear,
  and do these relationships develop
  throughout the story? Are the*
  cause/effect *relationships clear?*
- *Do the protagonists have clearly
  identifiable* antagonists*? Are the latter
  totally different characters, or do they
  somehow share aspects and problems
  of the main characters? Is there a clear
  distinction between "good" and "bad"
  characters?*
- *Does the story take place only in the
  present or are* flashbacks *frequently
  used?*
- *From which point of view are events
  seen and told? Are the points of view of
  different characters privileged?*
- *How would you describe, in a few
  words, the "atmosphere" of a film*
  noir*? Think of aspects like surprise,
  suspense, mystery, emotions, meanings,
 "happy endings" or dramatic closures
  ...*

**Section 3: The "typical elements" of film
noir: concrete examples**

To help you better focus on what you
remember from the previous section, in this
section you are invited to watch a few short

sequences from "classical" film *noir*. Go
through the questions in the previous section
and compare your notes with what you
actually see. If you can, add, correct, or
specify what you had already noted. (You can
obviously watch the same sequences more
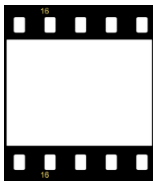than once, if you need it or feel like it!)
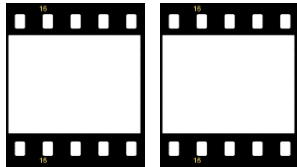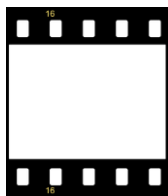
(From The Maltese falco*n, by John Huston, USA 1941)*
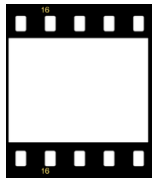
(From: Detour*, di E.G.Ulmer, USA 1945)*
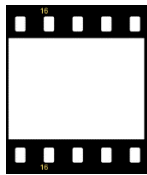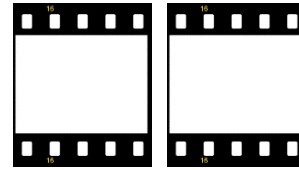
(From: D.O.A. *di R.Maté, USA 1950)*

(From: Double indemnity*, by B.Wilder, USA 1944)*

(From: The killers*, by R.Siodmak, USA 1946)*

*Then compare your remarks with my
comments on the next page.*

***Comments Sections 2/3: The typical elements of film* noir**

The Maltese falcon, which is considered by many to be the first real film noir, is at the same time one of the most accomplished and effective examples of this film genre, incorporating many of its typical elements. The protagonist is a private investigator, Sam Spade (here played by a film noir icon, Humphrey Bogart), a middle-age man, who works freelance but in a rather dreary, drab office, who finds himself caught up in the middle of a very intricate plot (the search for a gold statuette). In the course of time he will meet several types of characters, starting with an ambiguous woman (the so-called femme fatale - who we will turn to later), as well as other human types who are often violent, cynical, ruthless, and who are easily ready to corrupt or be corrupted. The first sequence shown here takes place at night, as often happens in film noir, where shadows, mysteries and suspicions seem to have found their ideal context. In the second sequence, the ambiguity of the situation reaches its climax. Although he loves her, Sam hands her over to the police (she is actually guilty), with a mixture of bitterness and cynicism ... and, in one of the most famous film endings of all time, he stresses the emptiness of so many situations and actions which are doomed to failure from the start: when he is asked, "What's (the statuette) made of?", Sam answers, "Well, it's the material dreams are made of".

Damico (Damico J. 1978. "Film noir: a modest proposal", Film Reader*, 3; quoted in Cook P. (ed.) 2007.* The cinema book, *British Film Institute, London) has suggested a very thorough synthesis of the narrative structure of film noir:*

"Either because he is fated to do so by chance,

or because he has been hired for a job especially associated with her, a man whose experience of life has left him sanguine and often bitter meets a not-so-innocent woman of similar outlook to whom he is sexually and fatally attracted. Through this attraction, either because the woman induces him to it or because it is a natural result of their relationship, the man comes to cheat, attempt to murder, or actually murder a second man to whom the woman is unhappily or unwillingly attached (generally he is her husband or lover), an act which often leads to the woman's betrayal of the protagonist, but which in any event brings about the sometimes metaphoric, but usually literal, destruction of the woman, the man she is attached, and frequently the protagonist himself."


In Detour, *which is narrated almost exclusively in flashback, the protagonist, a penniless and disillusioned musician, tries to hitch-hike (while addressing us, the audience: "Have you ever hitch-hiked? Mm ... it's not very amusing, believe me ... We never know what's waiting for us when we hear a car braking to a halt ..."). In the course of what he defines as "a terrible adventure", thus letting us know right from the start that it will end in tragedy, he meets a woman (another* femme fatale*) who tries to involve him in a cheat: a real venomous snake, whom he will eventually, but unvoluntarily kill, and for whose murder he knows that sooner or later he will have to pay. The film, which takes place for the most part in cars, often by night, in bleak bars and cheap road motels, is imbued with the darkest and most desperate pessimism towards oneself and the situations which we happen to be involved in. Narrated by the protagonist and thus from his own point of view, ii shows a vision of the world where fate (or chaos?) is paramount and the single individual, although having personal*

motivations to act, is often the victim of circumstances and destined to failure.
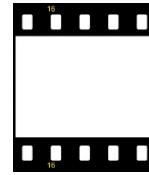
The initial sequence of D.O.A. (Dead on arrival), *accompanied by a sombre and dramatic musical score, takes places, once again, at night, and shows a man walking in the street and then within a bleak public building, until he reaches the door of the "Homicide Squad": he wants to report a murder ... the murder of himself! It is the story of a man who finds out that he has been poisoned and has only 48 hours to discover why and who did this. Once again, circumstances seem to corner the portagonist, who is forced to find the meaning of facts which seem to escape logical comprehension. (Curiously, the original title, which was translated into Italian with the acronynm D.O.A. (Due ore ancora (= Two hours left), is actually a medical term, meaning "Dead On Arrival", i.e. dead when the patient reached the hospital).*
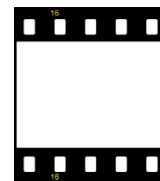
Double indemnity *is told almost exclusively in flashback by Neff, a dying insurance agent that, at the dawn of a bleak morning, records his confession on a Dictaphone. He addresses his boss, who since the beginning of the story had smelled a murder behind the plot conceived by Neff, who had fallen in love with a woman, his accomplice in the murder of her husband with a view to cashing in on the latter's life insurance. "I killed him ... I killed for money .. and for a woman ... And I didn't get the money ..,. and I didn't get the woman ... What a good deal!". And Jeff continues: "The man was married to a woman he didn't love ... and that I wanted at all costs". The*

woman actually turns out to be a skilled manipulator, and in a dramatic final sequence the two lovers shoot each other.

The killers, *from a story by Ernest Hemingway, is also the story of a man who, as the trailer says, "gambled his luck, his love, his life for the treachery of a girl's lips ... No escape from this kind of love! ... No retreat from this kind of danger!". The film starts in a drab hotel room, with the protagonist waiting for two killers to come and kill him. In this case, too, the films tells its story in a flashback, and at its centre there is, once again, the relationship with a* femme fatale. *There is a sense of bleakness in the air, a violent, cynical world in which cause and effect are not connected in a linear way, and the characters' motivations clash with the reality of an impending fate.*

In summary, film noir *is characterized by complex, non-linear plots, which are sometimes even difficult to follow, since they are often intricate and full of shocking turns of events, in which victims become culprits or viceversa, friends turn out to be foes, and all (or almost all) the characters are or can be corrupted or corruptors. Aims and motivations often change quite suddenly, which does not allow the viewers to anticipate the turns of the story, which, as we have just said, is unpredictable since it does not often follow a strict chronological order. The narrative, which often privileges several subjective points of view, can be unreliable, even though a sense of inevitable fate seems to dominate the development and, above all, the closure of the story. These are worlds where the dramatic, fixed patters of melodrama are missing, where emotions and morality are banished.*

Section 4: The *femme fatale* in film *noir*

Kaplan (Kaplan E.A. (ed.) 1978. Women in film noir*, BFI Publishing, London, quoted in*

Cook P. (ed.) 2007. The cinema book, *British Film Institute, London) summarizes quite effectively the role played by women in film* noir*:*

"The film noir world is one in which women are central to the intrigues of the films, and are furthermore usually not placed safely in ... familiar roles ... Defined by their sexuality, which is presented as desirable but dangerous, the women function as an obstacle to the male quest. The hero's success or not depends on the degree to which he can extricate himself from the women's manipulations. Although the man is sometimes simply destroyed because he cannot resist women's lures, often the world of the film is the attempted restoration of order through the exposure and then destruction of the sexual, manipulating woman."

However, this view of the femme fatale *has also been contested by remarking, not only that many women have been writers and scriptwriters of film* noir*, but also that sometimes this character is not present at all; besides, she does nothing but underline the other side of the coin - the male's crisis and the crisis of masculinity in general. These women are actually at the centre of the plot thanks to the fact that they are active, intelligent, dominant and careful to deal with their sexuality (even if, eventually, they usually pay for all this with their death or their submission to an otherwise "patriarchal" order). Being, as they are, only interested in themselves and in money as the source of their independence, they represent a powerful alternative to the classical Hollywood characterization of the woman as mother* vs *prostitute or as wife* vs *lover. In this sense* gender studies *stress the ambiguity of film* noir*, which can appear as extremely misogynous but also, at the same time, celebrate the woman's liberation from all those melodramatic situations in which tradition compels them, making them passive and submissive. In the film* noir*, on the whole, the woman can appear as a worthy antagonist of the main character, albeit often as a cynical, smart predator.*

Section 5: The *visual style* of film *noir*

Film noir *is defined, besides its narrative content and the attitudes and ideologies it conveys, for its particular* visual style*, which is easily discernible and has influenced, since its very beginning, a plethora of subsequent films.*

Watch the above sequences again and try to define what can be considered as typical elements of the noir*'s visual style. Focus your attention, for instance, on such aspects as:*

- the use of light and shadows in general;
- the way light is used for bodies and objects;
- the mise-en-scène;
- the depth of field;
- the use of voice-over;
- flashbacks and temporal ellipses.

Then compare your remarks with my comments on the right.

Comments Section 5: The visual style of film *noir*

We have already remarked the fact that film noir *often chooses urban night settings: scarcely lit streets, blind alleys, railway yards, dreary suburbs ... all settings that visually convey a sense of decadence, corruption and ambiguity. Even rooms are often scarcely lit, especially in scenes where violence breaks out and characters clash into each other - with particular reference to the protagonist and his* femme fatale*. Since the very first film* noir *and then widely used in a variety of this kind of film, the use of half-open venetian blinds has been a typical motif: they spread fragments of light onto the settings, and characters often watch a scene through them. This gives the impression that light reveals as many details as those that are left in the shade - if not fewer.*

The use of light is actually crucial in all these contexts. Highly contrasted lights create more marked shadows as well as stark contrasts (low key lighting)*. Also, the use of light from below the subject* (underlighting) *turn face*

features into masks. This use of light is often traced back to the expressionist *tradition, typical of German films of the '20s, which, with the aim to stressing the characters' convoluted psychology and their psychic instability, often gave priority, in the mise-en-scene, to twisted figures, oblique backdrops, unusual angles and scenic elements shown in diagonal perspectives. The same actors' bodies are often fragmented by light: faces are only partially lit, often showing a half-lighted profile, thus conveying the ambiguous nature of the characters themselves. The use of field depth, too, which allows to see a series of variously lit levels of depth, cooperates to create a "compositional tension" which well conveys the atmosphere of instability and anxiety in which the story takes place.*

The use of flashbacks, *very often associated with a* voice-over *introducing, narrating or commenting on them, helps to fragment narration, to introduce ambiguous points of view and "points of listening", and, in general, together with temporal ellipses causing time "jumps" and chronological disorders, does not enable the viewers to follow a coherent and predictable narrative path.*

Section 6: Origins and sources of film *noir*

Film noir *had its heyday in the '40s and '50s of last century: traditionally, its chronological limits are usually set by* The Maltese Falcon *(1941 - see above), on the one hand, and* Touch of evil *(by Orson Welles, USA 1958), on the other.*

Just think back to that period, to the historical events that took place then, to the corresponding economic and social conditions, and to the changes that Western societies were going through in those years. Can you get a hint of how film noir *were able, not just to be extremely successful at the box-office, but also to reflect in a certain way the period's society with its problems and anxieties? In other words, can the atmosphere, the plots, the characters of film* noir *sill have something to tell us something about one of the most complex and controversial periods of the '900s? Just try to*

think about it ... and then compare your remarks with my comments on the right.

Comments Section 6: The origins and sources of film *noir*

Every film genre is closely linked with the historical periods and the social situations during which it developed: in a certain way, films reflect the problems, anxieties and open questions that viewers recognize, more or less consciously, in the films that they choose to watch (and that the cinema industry is obviously ready to promote, by favouring the production of certain film genres).

Well before film noir *became the basic (if not main) genre in the '40s and '50s, we can trace back to the '30s the "marks" of that social and psychological uneasiness film* noir *would then give voice to: the shock following the end of the First World War, prohibitionism, the Great Depression starting in 1929 and continuing in the following years tended to favour a world view not longer so cheerful and light-hearted (despite a large number of comedies and musicals continued to be produced), but also more realistic and bleaker, and as such much closer to the actual contexts of real life. From this point of view, film* noir, *like all other film genres, was not born out of nothing but was anticipated by the "gangster", detective, thriller films which were already in wide circulation in the '30s.*

The Second World War, and even more the years immediately following it, however, became the real "turning point" towards the eventual success of the classical Hollywood film noir. *Men's conscription, and their substitution by women in workplaces, started a radical social revolution; and when the veterans came back home, they found a new world, where the role of family, and within it of women, seemed to have lost all stability and certainty. The relative independence conquered by women started a crisis in men's role and, more generally, in the very concept of "masculinity". "I feel dead inside. I am trapped in a dark corner and don't know*

who's attacking me", says a character in The dark corner *(by Henry Hathaway, USA 1946).*

The years following WWII were characterized by new and even more disquieting threats. The paranoic fear of communism and the initiatives which were taken to fight it, the clash with capitalism, the Cold War and its atomic nightmares, all this helped to put even more stress on this widespread feeling of insecurity, instability, generalized suspicion, loss of values and belief in the "American dream" and in the very identity of the nation. In a certain sense, many film noir *(as weel as several science fiction films of the same period, often centred on the invasion of aliens from outer worlds), testify the pressing and repressed needs of American society, and above all the need to reaffirm the traditional values of continuity through the family institution, the role of women, and the national identity perceived as under serious attack.*

The sources of film *noir*

As we have seen, the sociocultural roots of film noir *go back to well before the '40s, and this parallels with the fact that writers and scriptwriters who were the sources of film* noir*, especially at its very start, had published their works in the '30s (for example, Raymond Chandler, Dashiel Hammett, James M.Cain).*

We have also noted how the German expressionist *movement, which was very active at various artistic levels since the end of the First World War, influenced film* noir*'s visual style in remarkable ways, besides being one of the most important inspiration, from this point of view, for another major film of the '40s, which in turn had an outstanding influence on film* noir *itself,* Citizen Kane *(by Orson Welles, USA 1941). The wisdespread diffusion of expressionist aesthetics and techniques in American cinema was also due to to the presence of directors and cinematographers who, starting at the end of the '20s, emigrated from Germany and Eastern European countries to the U.S.A. (Several of them, among whom Fritz Lang,*

Joseph von Sternberg, Otto Preminger, Douglas Sirk, Max Ophuls, Billy Wilder, Robert Siodmak, would then leave an impressive mark on American cinema even in the following decades).

Another direct influence on the development of film noir *has been traced to the so-called "French poetic realism", illustrated by such directors as Marcel Carné, Julien Duvivier and Jean Renoir, who composed settings and contexts vastly different from the sophisticated, stereotyped comedies so frequently produced in those years, by exploring the dark and ambiguous side of the concrete life of the working classes.*

Curiously, the label "film noir" seems to have been used for the first time only in 1946, by the French critic Nino Frank in a review of some of the first (and most famous) American film noir *of the immediately previous years. The label "film noir" was probably inspired by the title of a famous French series of detective stories (the* Série Noire*). However, the decisive contribution to the knowledge and appreciation of the genre came a few years later, from a few French critics (who would eventually found the influential magazine* Cahiers du Cinéma*), and who would then themselves becomes influential exponents of the* Nouvelle Vague*, with particular reference to François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard.*

It was only at end of the '60s, however, that the term "film noir" started to be used in anglosaxon countries, also thanks to the widespread action of a famous critic (and director of film noir *himself), Paul Schrader.*

Section 7: The persistence of a genre: the *neo-noir*

We have already remarked that the film noir*, not just as a source of narrative material, but also and foremost as a visual style, has continued and continues to survive in a host of other films, even very recent ones, often combining with other genres, from horror to*

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science fiction, from thriller to fantasy-adventure.

Do you recall any films, either recent or past, which in some way and from a certain point of view combine aspects (first and foremost visual) of the film noir*? Could you say for whichh specific reasons you would associate these films to the "classical" film noir we've been discussing in this Workshop? Then compare your remarks with my comments on the right.*

Comments Section 7: The persistence of a genre: the *neo-noir*

Since the end of the '60s, when also a new generation of directors started to work (the so-called "New Hollywood"), film noir *has inspired a plethora of films, of quite different genres too. Paying homage to the tradition of the classical film* noir*, just think of* Klute *(by Alan Pakula, USA 1971),* The conversation *(by Francis Ford Coppola, USA 1974),* The long goodbye *(by Robert Altman, USA 1973), up to* Chinatown *(by Roman Polanski, USA 1974) and* Taxi Driver *(by Martin Scorsese, USA 1976).*

Later, several films have "contaminated" the noir *tradition, despite keeping aspects that refer to it more or less explicitly:* Body heat *(by Lawrence Kasdan, USA 1981), the fourth transposition of James Cain's novel* The postman always rings twice *(by Bob Rafelson, USA 1981),* Blade runner *(by Ridley Scott, USA 1982), up to* Pulp fiction (by *Quentin Tarantino, USA 1994),* Fargo *(by Joel and Ethan Coen, USA 1996),* Lost highway *(by David Lynch, USA 1997),* Memento *(by Christopher Nolan, USA 2000),* Drive *(by Nicolas Winding Refn, USA 2011), and even* Batman begins *(by Christopher Nolan, USA 2005).*

The femme fatale *has remained one of the most representative icons of film* noir*, in recent films too: recall at least* Blue velvet *(by David Lynch, USA 1986),* Fatal attraction *(by Adrian Lyne, USA 1987),* Basic instinct *(by*

Paul Verhoeven, USA 1992) and Femme
fatale *(by Brian De Palma, USA 2002).*

The influence of film noir *has spread across
continents and many other "world cinemas"
beyond Hollywood: from British cinema (*The
third man*, by Carol Reed, GB/USA 1949) to
the French Nouvelle Vague (*Pierrot le fou*, by
Jean-Luc Godard, France 1965), from the so-
called New German Cinema (*The American
friend*, by Wim Wenders, USA/France/German
Federal Republic 1977), to the various
"generations" of Eastern movies (Hong Kong,
South Korea, Japan).*

Section 8: Conclusion

Hirsch (Hirsch F. 1999. Detours and lost
highways: A map of neo-noir*, Limelight, New
York, citato in Phillips W.H. 2005.* Film. An
introduction*, Bedford/St.Martin's,
Boston/New York) has clearly summed up
and, at the same time, explained the ever-
lasting vitality of film* noir*:*

*"The private investigation quest; crimes of
passion and profit; stories involving
masquerade, amnesia, split identity, and
double and triple crosses continue to be the
genre's abiding concerns ... Noir endures,
but, inevitably, not in the same way as forty
and fifity years ago. Like any genre which
survives, it has had to adapt; and as a set of
narrative patterns, a repertoire of images, a
nucleus of character types, it has proven
remarkably elastic. Against the odds, and
after several premature obituaries, noir is a
mainstay of commercial narrative
filmmaking."*

Want to know more?

* From the *No Film School* website:
   - The stylistic elements of film noir, explained in one handy infographic
* From the *filmsite* website: Film noir
* From the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* website: Film noir
* From the *Jack's Movie Reviews* YouTube channel: Defining film noir
* From the *Filmmaker IQ* YouTube Channel: Origins of film noir
* From the *Otagon2488* YouTube channel:
   - The elements of film noir
* From the *British Film Institute* website:
   - Where to begin with neo-noir
* From the *Uber Movie* Youtube Channel:
   - The best neo-noir films of all time
* From *The Independent* webite:
   - The ten greatest neo-noir films

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