



Film Noir

by Gary Morris

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Scholars disagree on precisely when film noir began or what particular movie deserves recognition as "first film noir." Some have suggested Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), with its expressionist intensity, reigning darkness, and "perverse" subject matter. More frequently cited is John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), which presents a gallery of double-crossing molls, fey gangsters, and other grotesques familiar to readers of pulps and policiers but less so to moviegoers.

Serendipitously, perhaps, these films are also linked by queer or queer-coded characters, and more specifically an actor, Peter Lorre, often identified with perverse and otherworldly characters whom attentive viewers have come to recognize as gay. In *M*, Lorre plays the tormented child molester; in *The Maltese Falcon*, he is a mincing criminal.

This connection between two seminal works classified as film noir is more than a rhetorical convenience; queer and queerish characters were a crucial component of the noir landscape, part of the genre's challenge to the complacent America of Currier and Ives and Norman Rockwell.

Film noir's literal darkness provided a hiding place for an assortment of misfits whose presence was disquieting, if not downright disturbing, but also seductive: femmes fatales (or women not domestically minded), weak males, wronged innocents. But it was especially welcoming, if often in subtext, to "perverts."

The latter, already viewed by society as "shadow creatures" hiding from its disapproving eyes, were a perfect fit for a style of film in which vice can trump virtue, all kinds of social norms are routinely ruptured, and the universe is out of control.

The Maltese Falcon and Gilda

The Maltese Falcon is a veritable feast of perversity, though typically the film clouds some of the gay elements. Dashiell Hammett's book was clear about the homosexuality of Joel Cairo (Peter Lorre) and that of the youthful killer Wilmer Cook (Elisha Cook, Jr), derisively called a "gunsel" by straight detective Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart). "Gunsel" is Yiddish-derived slang for a young gay thug. Wilmer's "patron" is the portly aesthete Casper Gutman, played with arch authority by Sidney Greenstreet.

The film is typical of other noirs from the period that present gay characters as criminally minded dandies who are ultimately tamed by a more manly male. This taming does not occur without some tension around the issue of queerness.

In one of the rare scenes where Spade loses control, he screams at Gutman to stop Cook from following him. His agitated "I'll kill him!" points to emotions beyond the story proper, the fear of a homosexual pursuer that unhinges even an unflappable character like Spade.

The 1940s would seem to be the last place to look for queer male couples, but the elegant gangster Ballin Mundson (George Macready) and his protégé Johnny Farrell (Glenn Ford) in Charles Walters's *Gilda* (1946) can hardly be read otherwise. Johnny is literally a pickup by Ballin, who rescues him from a sailor he has duped.

The script is rife with homo-romantic dialogue, as when Johnny says to Ballin, "I was born last night when you met me in that alley" or when Ballin remarks, "Quite a surprise to hear a woman singing in my house, eh Johnny?"

Even the actors were in on the joke, which indicates that the closet door was often slightly ajar even before the modern era of gay liberation. According to John Kobal (quoted by Richard Dyer), Glenn Ford said flatly: "Of course, we knew their relationship was homosexual."

Noir Lesbians

Lesbians, and certainly lesbian couples, were less evident in noir, just as they were paid less attention to in the culture by those individuals and groups in the medical, social science, and religious fields who were puzzling over the question of homosexuality. When they did appear, they often took the form of the lesbian predator.

In Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950), a butch masseuse roughly, almost sadistically, handles her female customer and plays to cultural expectations of destructive homosexuality by insidiously undermining the film's major, already troubled, heterosexual relationship.

Another such case is in Michael Curtiz's *Young Man with a Horn*, made the same year. The audience squirms when neurotic bisexual Amy North (Lauren Bacall) tires of her macho musician boyfriend Rick Martin (Kirk Douglas) and brutally abandons him for a willowy young woman.

Some films even had two lesbian predators. John Cromwell's women-in-prison drama *Caged* (1950) divides the queerness between sadistic matron Harper and an aging, lascivious moll who calls the other women "cute tricks." Despite the film's half-hearted attempts to heterosexualize them (via vague mentions of men in their lives), there is little doubt of their lesbianism.

Gay Lovers

By the mid-1950s, and in spite of that decade's reputation for repression, queer motifs were coming into focus. In Joseph H. Lewis's *The Big Combo* (1955), gangsters Fante (Lee Van Cleef) and Mingo (Earl Holliman) are clearly indicated as gay lovers, working (as gangsters) and relaxing together, even sleeping together in the same bedroom.

When the inevitable comeuppance occurs via an exploding box of cigars that kills them both, Mingo's anguished last cry is "Don't leave me, Fante!"

Lewis was also responsible for the noir classic *Gun Crazy* (1949), which featured gay actor John Dall as a vulnerable sharpshooter done in by a femme fatale.

Noir's Queer Victims and Villains

Noir's queer victims and villains served several purposes in these films. They indicated a world in which the basic building block of society, the heterosexual couple, was in question. They made visible, if only in half-light, characters who were treated as invisible in society.

(A good example of the erasure of the homosexual in films is offered by the transformation of Richard

Brooks' novel *The Brick Foxhole* [1945], about a victimized gay man, which became Edward Dmytryk's *Crossfire* (1947), a film about a victimized Jew.)

Queer characters also helped give film noir a knowingness, a hip cachet, by challenging the status quo with controversial characters, creating the frisson of a "walk on the wild side" for straight audiences and a sense, however qualified, of empowerment for queer and perhaps other marginalized viewers.

Noir's sometimes indiscriminate doubling of queers with sadists and lunatics (as with *Caged's* psycho matron Harper, for example) may seem deplorable to modern viewers, but this was a reflection of cultural anxieties around homosexuality and can be consigned to the period. Despite their often baroque treatment, gay characters also helped noir achieve a sense of realism that was crucial in connecting the genre with viewers.

Neo-Noir

These comments have drawn on classic film noir, often identified as having ended by the late 1950s with Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958), which featured Mercedes McCambridge as a scary leather-clad biker dyke. By the 1980s and 1990s the genre had shrunk to its modern variant, the minor form known as "neo-noir."

In 1996, Andy and Larry Wachowski's neo-noir *Bound* decisively reversed the trope of queer as sinister-comic decoration or disquieting-titillating subtext. The film's lesbian lovers were also its stars, indeed its heroines. The fact that it was both a critical success and a mainstream hit showed the culture's readiness for images of gay people out of the shadows, even in a shadow-drenched genre like film noir.

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