Film Noir

Hollywood crime dramas

- Film noir is a term that is used to describe Hollywood crime dramas
- And often they focus on cynical attitudes and sexual motivations
- The classic noir period is from the early 40s to the late 50s but there are modern noirs as well.

But difficult to define

- There is debate about what actually defines film noir
- Some are identified as dreamlike, some as strange, erotic, cruel or morally ambivalent
- Others identify a particular visual style – often in black and white
- They embrace a variety of genres from gangster films to gothic romance and social problems
- Some have a private eye or detective as well as the femme fatale
- Others don’t have these main characters
- Some suggest that noir is more of a mood that you find in films where the heroes are often morally questionable

Later works neo-noir

- Rethinking the genre in colour
- E.g. Taxi Driver capture the dark expressionist of original film noir with its urban landscape and paranoia of its main character.
- Some scholars believed that film noir never ended but transformed
- Modern noirs might include Mulholland Drive 2001 and film such as Kiss Kiss Bang Bang (2005)

Women in film noir

- It has been suggested that although these films are dominated by women, they are still men’s cinema
- Film noir dwells on the manipulation and exaggeration of femininity - highlighted in the extreme artificiality of the femme fatale’s look.
- The women in these films, particularly the femme fatale – tend to be defined by their sexuality and also in relation to men
- The eroticization of the femme fatale’s body is important for establishing the subjective male look
- Femininity also becomes a surface for male fantasies to be imposed upon
- They adopt a female image that is compatible with the most stereotypical male fantasies
- Women in this genre are mysterious and femininity is unknowable – a mystery.
• The Femme fatale is often destroyed at the end, so cancelling out her potential danger
• A woman is more likely to be read through the way she looks than her male equivalent
• A woman’s dress and her demeanour is judged

**Clothing**
• The clothing of the femme fatale often keep in with the light and dark of the film – which indicates deception
• In later film noirs the audience is compelled to identify with the main female lead in a reversal of the 40s film noirs
• The mirroring of female characters has emerged as a consistent feature of modern noirs – good and bad women (e.g. Killing Eve perhaps)?
• In film noirs the femme fatale may be signified by bleached hair, boldly coloured sexual clothes, heavy make-up, cigarettes
• Whilst their good counterparts possess a more natural look – minimal make up

**Crime capers**
• Capers are a subgenre of crime fiction
• They involve one or more crimes that are perpetuated by main characters
• The actions of police/detectives to prevent or solve crimes are not the main focus of the story – although they might be chronicled
• It is different from the straight crime story – because of elements of humour, adventure, unusual, cleverness or audacity.
• The subgenre, though, was a bit short lived
• They tend to have strong female roles that parallel the collapse of the traditional female roles in the spy films of the 60s
• Men tend to be thwarted in their attempts to force female accomplices or love interests into perceived appropriate behaviour
• At the beginning of the sexual liberation era, western cinema allowed for more sensual women on screen and also the suggestion that the female might be deadlier than the male
• The spy genre, and its satires depicted women who were capable of anything from sexual aggression to world domination, but at the same time the traditional cinematic norms were enforced

**Crime caper comedy**
• The crime caper comedy sought to highlight the bad girl, who was sexually aware and also had criminal intent
• The femme fatales of film noir set the ground work for an ambivalent representation that didn’t fit into traditional categories
• The caper films glamorised crime as stylish adventure, complete with fashion, romance and sex – to function as a challenge to the usual representations of women
• Often they had existentialist rather than moralist semi-closures
• So that the morality is rather ambiguous
• The female character in the caper films of the 60s welds together the Hepburn like French couture alongside the strong independent women such as found in Hitchcock’s to Catch a Thief
• This provided a safety net for audiences that might be uncomfortable with the amorality and gender role destructions - The female leads in these films, tend to have no female friends and prefer isolation to socialisation
• But the female leads escape their outlaw status and the characters are semi-liberated

Masculinity in film noir

1. Often alienated and anti-social loners, subject to existentialist angst
2. Their environments are often bleak with desolate buildings
3. Their worlds are dominated by crime, corruption and often cruelty
4. They tend not to show much emotion – and seek meaning in activity
5. They become obsessed with the femme fatal and this tends to destroy him
6. They are flawed characters
7. In neo-noirs masculinity in crisis is highlighted and there can be upheaval of gender roles