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AMERICAN CINEMA PROJECT/New York Center For Visual  
History

"FILM NOIR"  
Host narration open  
11/17/94  
1:20

Hello, I'm John Lithgow. Welcome to American Cinema.

The end of World War II in 1945 brought an era of homecoming, of re-discovering family, of re-building. That year, Hollywood premiered "The Best Years of Our Lives," a story of a returning veteran and his family that would win the Academy Award for Best Picture of the Year.

Another picture premiered that year that portrayed a different version of America. It was called "Detour," about a man who wandered from a life of little possibility to one of total doom. When the Motion Picture Association first reviewed the picture, they refused to give it a rating. It had broken a rule. The murderer was not brought to justice at the end of the story. Instead, he was left to aimlessly wander the highways of America.

For such stark stories, these pictures had their own look. Though they were uniquely American, French film critics came up with the name that stuck -- "Film Noir" -- which literally translates "black film." They were black and white, they were dark, and they were often raw. In this breed of film, the only law was the rule of fate; the only order, a kind of moral restitution where everybody dies at the end.

But these films were always seductive. Listen to Richard Widmark tell you. It is hard to refuse a story of sex, money, and murder as you will see... in "Film Noir."

THE NEW YORK CENTER FOR VISUAL HISTORY  
*AMERICAN CINEMA PROJECT*

**FILM NOIR**  
Continuity Script  
10/21/94

FILM CLIP - ARCHIVE

NARRATOR: It was the Forties. Right after the war. Going to the movies was like going to a candy store. Something for everybody.

FILM CLIP - ZIEGFELD FOLLIES

NARRATOR: Popular films were melodramas, romances, musicals. You've seen the big song and dance. But that's not my kind of movie.

FILM CLIP MONTAGE

KISS ME DEADLY  
POSTMAN RINGS TWICE  
CRY OF THE CITY  
ASPHALT JUNGLE  
KISS OF DEATH  
KISS ME DEADLY  
TOUCH OF EVIL  
KISS ME DEADLY  
TOUCH OF EVIL

FILM CLIP - SUNSET BOULEVARD:

It was all very queer, but queerer things were yet to come.

FILM CLIP - NYC/VH/NOIR

NARRATOR IN SHADOWS:

You could always find me in a theatre around the corner. I'm the audience that liked my pictures dark and mysterious. Most were "B" movies, made on the cheap. Others were classy models with "A" talent. But they all had one thing in common. They lived on the edge. Told

stories about life in the streets, shady characters, crooked cops, twisted love and bad luck. The French invented a name for these pictures -- Films Noir -- black film, that's what they called 'em. About a darker side of human nature. About the world as it really was.

MARTIN SCORSESE: As I growing, uh, these films were a part of my reality day by day. In other words, I didn't analyze them, I was affected by them.

FILM CLIP - FORCE OF EVIL

SCORSESE (VO)

I related to them emotionally.

Who is it?

Open up, the police.

SCORSESE (VO)

The first film that I can remember that had to do very clearly with what I knew on a daily basis, growing up on the Lower East Side was FORCE OF EVIL. Abe Polonsky's FORCE OF EVIL. It was about the numbers racket and it was about two brothers.

SCORSESE: It portrayed a world that I hadn't seen on film before. In a very honest way too.

FILM CLIP - FORCE OF EVIL:

Violation 974 of the penal code. Policy, the numbers racket.

SCORSESE (VO)

I grew up in a world that the images in film noir reflected. Night life, people drinking in bars. Gambling.

FILM CLIP - FORCE OF EVIL:

...you take the nickels and dimes and pennies from people who bet just like every other crook, big or

little in this racket. They call this racket policy because people bet their nickels on numbers instead of paying their weekly insurance premiums, that's why, policy.

ABRAHAM POLONSKY: You make the film according to your mood, the circumstances, the way the story is written. The influence of the writer on you, the actors on you and so on. And if they're reflecting this general sense of jeopardy in life, which is what exists in all film noir..

FILM CLIP - FORCE OF EVIL:

POLONSKY (VO)

..then it's a correct representation of the anxiety caused by the system.

You know sometimes you feel as though you're dying here and here, here: you're dying while you're breathing.

POLONSKY (VO)

And this is what this picture is about. How circumstances become more and more unendurable. And yet you must endure.

FILM CLIP - FORCE OF EVIL

ACTOR

Freddy, what have you done?

ERROL MORRIS (VO)

Great noir poses the question, why me? Why is this happening to me?

And the very dark answer that it provides..

MORRIS:

.. an almost unacceptable answer: for no reason. For no reason at all.

FILM CLIP - OUT OF THE PAST

ACTOR

Buddy you look like you're in trouble.

MORRIS (VO)

Because noir is concerned with error, with confusions.

FILM CLIP - OUT OF THE PAST:

--I think I'm in a frame.

--Don't sound like you.

--I don't know, all I can see is the frame. I'm going in there now and look at the picture.

MORRIS (VO)

It's the noir idea. We don't know what's going on, but we do know that something bad is out there controlling events.

FILM CLIP - DETOUR

MORRIS (VO)

To me the great noir films are films about fall guys. A person who finds himself caught in a net. The more he struggles, the deeper and deeper he becomes entwined in nightmare.

FILM CLIP - DETOUR:

Did you ever want to forget anything? Did you ever want to cut away a piece of your memory or blot it out?

PAUL ARTHUR (VO)

DETOUR really comes in the first wave of noir production. It lays out a blueprint for how the noir narrative works. There's a character who has a secure job at the beginning of the film. Has a secure relationship with a woman. The woman..

PAUL ARTHUR:

FILM CLIP - DETOUR:

ARTHUR (VO)

.. leaves to go to Hollywood. And this man goes to join her.

If only I had known what I was getting into that day in Arizona.

ARTHUR (VO)

And this initiates a journey in which he, in an almost myth-like fashion, is picked up by a kind of messenger. But this man dies under mysterious circumstances. The hero takes on the identity of a dead man, the most desperate thing you can do in film noir.

FILM CLIP - DETOUR:

I saw at once he was dead and I was in for it. Who would believe he fell out of the car?

KATHRYN BIGELOW (VO)

DETOUR is quintessential noir insofar as it's so raw, it's so exposed. There is nothing to comfort you.

Instinct told me to run, but then I realized it was hopeless.

BIGELOW:

You enter the heart of darkness, it is a descent into hell, both visually and ... and internally, from which you cannot escape until it's over with.

FILM CLIP - DETOUR

ACTRESS

I knew him better than you did.

ACTOR

O.k.

KATHRYN BIGELOW (VO)

Shortly thereafter, he picks up a woman, who coincidentally knows his true identity and traps him.

FILM CLIP - DETOUR:

--You got all the earmarks of a cheap crook.

--Now wait a minute.

--Shut up, you're a cheap crook and you killed him.

For two cents I'd change my mind and turn you in.

--Please open the door. Vera, open the door, don't use the phone, listen to me.

BIGELOW (VO)

It's a character who is on a downward spiral from which he cannot emerge. And the more he tries to eradicate the situation, the worse it gets.

FILM CLIP - DETOUR:

Listen to me, I'll do anything you say. I'll break the phone.

JEAN-PIERRE GORIN (VO)

There is some complete wackiness in a film like DETOUR. There's the wackiness of getting a murder scene with a phone cord and someone yanking the stuff and on that level it's part Three Stooges, part Marx Brothers, part completely surrealistic. It's sloppy, it's smelly.

JEAN-PIERRE GORIN: It's disreputable. That's what's nice about film noir it's that it's really disreputable filmmaking.

MARTIN GOLDSMITH: The last scene in DETOUR, they couldn't get a ... a ... a seal of approval on DETOUR.

FILM CLIP - DETOUR:

GOLDSMITH (VO)

It was all made. There is somebody who has actually killed somebody and what is he doing? He's hitchhiking around, he's not in jail or anything like that.

Some day a car will stop to pick me up that I never thumbed.

GOLDSMITH:

So I put in just a few lines.

FILM CLIP - DETOUR:

Yes, fate, or some mysterious force, can put the finger on you or me for no good reason at all.

GORIN:

I think, I think noir hit people so hard it's because essentially at the core of it all they're tales of survival, in a completely naked fashion.

POLONSKY:

A certain kind of hard film, full of difficult, emotional things. And explosions of ... of emotional drama and anxiety was popular in the sense that people went to the movies to see that kind of thing.

ARTHUR:

If you go back and look over the ... the ... the plots of film noir, you discover that more than a quarter of the total films have protagonists who identify themselves as war vets.

FILM CLIP - ARCHIVE

ARTHUR (VO)

And what he discovers when he comes from the war is not a secure place in society, but rather quite the opposite.

Multiplied and magnified, the insecurity of modern man has been tragically demonstrated in the catastrophe of total war.



One sees it ... in a sense as the continuing experience of wartime trauma ... in a domestic situation.

FILM CLIP - CROSSFIRE:

Now we start looking at each other again. We don't know what we're supposed to do. We don't know what's supposed to happen. We're too used to fighting, but we just don't know what to fight. You can feel the tension in the air.

OTTO FRIEDRICH (VO)

Psychiatry was just being discovered in this period. The refugee psychoanalyst coming from Europe ..

OTTO FRIEDRICH: .. came to Hollywood, spread the faith. And it sort of reached the ..

FILM CLIP - THE BIG COMBO:

FRIEDRICH (VO)

.. the filmmakers.

Please, please, I'm sick, can't you see I'm sick?

You're sick all right....

Cause it seemed to offer an explanation to things. It was newer then and people ... people thought that that's what drove people crazy.

ACTOR:

--You're perfectly sane.

ACTRESS:

--I'd rather be insane and alive than sane and dead.

FILM CLIP - NYC/VH/NOIR

NARRATOR: It started with Prohibition--the line between legal and illegal got fuzzy. Nightlife went underground. That made it even more seductive and dangerous. We could travel that

world safely in pulp magazines with writers like Raymond Chandler and their private eyes. And with a novelist like James Cain, we could find ourselves sucked into a twisted triangle of love, betrayal and murder. He called it the absolute seduction of crime.

FILM CLIP - THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI:

Here's to crime.

FILM CLIP - ASPHALT JUNGLE:

Crime is only a left-handed form of human endeavor. Experience has taught me never to trust a policeman. Just when you think one's all right, he turns legit.

EDWARD DMYTRYK: One of the things about detective stories let's say, murder stories, who-done-its, is that no matter how bad they are, I've never seen anybody walk out on one, because it's a riddle, it's a puzzle and you want to puzzle it out.

FILM CLIP - MURDER MY SWEET:

--Well it was about seven o'clock. Anyway, it was dark.

--What were you doing at the office that late?

--I'm a homing pigeon, I always come back to the stinking coop no matter how late it is. I'd been out peeking under old Sunday sections for a barber named Dominick, whose wife wanted him back. I forget why. Only reason I took the job was because my bank account was trying to crawl under a duck.

DMYTRYK (VO)

As far as the narration goes, I could have done that whole picture without narration and we discussed it at one time. But we wanted to get the flavor of Chandler.

DMYTRYK:

Chandler writes differently than any other writer ever wrote. He has, as he's become a ... a fad as it were, he's ... he has his own style.

FILM CLIP - MURDER MY SWEET:

We were watched. I didn't see anything, I felt it in my stomach. I was a toad on a wet rock, a snake was looking at the back of my neck.

ACTRESS:

Oh no not father.

DMYTRYK (VO)

He was the first one to say, I didn't mean it really, I was just trying it on for size.

I was just trying it on for size. A lot of things still don't fit.

DMYTRYK (VO)

"Trying it on for size," has become part of our language now, but he was the first one to ever write that line.

RON GOULART:

One of the things that came along in fiction was the private detective, the hard-boiled private detective..

FILM CLIP - MURDER MY SWEET:

RON GOULART (VO)

.. not part of the system. Is a kind of a loner, almost an urban cowboy.

ACTRESS:

Hmm, you've got a nice build for a private detective.

ACTOR:

It gets me around.

You can't bribe him. You can't corrupt him. You can't even seduce him in many cases.

ACTRESS:

You don't mind my sizing you up a little?

ACTOR:

Most of us are ex-cops. I worked for the D.A. got fired.

GOULART:

This private eye could take you anywhere. You could go down in the ghetto. You could go into the underworld.

Uh, but you could also go into the haunts of the ..

FILM CLIP - MURDER MY SWEET:

GOULART (VO)

.. rich and famous. He gave you access to almost any level of society.

It was a nice little front yard, cozy. Okay for the average family, only you'd need a compass to go to the mailbox. The house was all right too, but it wasn't as big as Buckingham Palace. I had to wait while she sold me to the old folks. It was like waiting to buy a crypt in a mausoleum.

ACTRESS

Mr. Marlow.

FILM CLIP - KISS ME DEADLY

GOULART (VO)

Another thing about the private eye is that he usually never got hurt. So he could take you into all these places that you were curious about and yet get out of it alive.

GOULART:

Well you have two groups and then they begin to cross back and forth. You have Hammett and Chandler who were the most successful ones who came out of the pulps. And then you have writers like James Cain who dealt with similar material, but who never really lowered themselves to writing for the pulps. I think Cain probably thought he was a ... a bit above that kind of writing.

FILM CLIP - DOUBLE INDEMNITY

GOLDSMITH (VO)

James M. Cain had an enormous influence, an enormous effect on all writers. He was basically a novelist. He wasn't the least bit interested in motion pictures at all, at first.

BARBARA STANWYCK

My husband. You were anxious to talk to him weren't you?

GOLDSMITH (VO)

Mostly other screenwriters were doing it, but from his books.

BARBARA STANWYCK

There's a speed limit in this state, Mr. Neff, 45 miles an hour.

FRED McMURRAY

How fast was I going, officer?

BARBARA STANWYCK

I'd say around 90.

FRED McMURRAY

Suppose you get down off your motorcycle and give me a ticket.

BARBARA STANWYCK

Suppose I let you off with a warning this time.

FRED McMURRAY

Suppose it doesn't take.

BARBARA STANWYCK

Suppose I have to whack you over the knuckles?

GOLDSMITH:

He wrote with a meat cleaver, is what it was - he wrote with a hatchet.

GOULART:

Uh, the classic Cain situation, always the triangle. The guy falling in love with the other guy's wife and ending up killing the woman's husband and then coming to no good end.

FILM CLIP - DOUBLE INDEMNITY:

ACTOR:

What are you doing that for? What are you honking the horn for?

FILM CLIP - NYC/VH/NOIR

NARRATOR:

Life's a dangerous game. Especially with a new breed of woman who's working all the angles. Making her own rules. Staying one step ahead of the cops. Film Noir had its own kind of cop--censorship--The Hayes Production Code. It was the law. Moral guidelines and ethical standards from a church social; the line you couldn't cross.

DMYTRYK: I'm going to surprise you, it had a very good effect, uh, because it made us think. In other words, if we wanted to get something across that was censorable, we couldn't do it openly, we had to do it deviously. We had to ... we had to be clever. And it usually turned out to be much better than if we had done it straight.

BIGELOW: It allows one's imagination to take over, where the material is not completely exemplified.

FILM CLIP - THE MALTESE FALCON:

BOGART:

Haven't you tried to buy my loyalty with money and nothing else?

MARY ASTOR:

What else is there I can buy you with?

FILM CLIP - PICKUP ON SOUTH STREET:

You look for oil, sometimes you hit a gusher.

FILM CLIP - THE BIG COMBO:

NICK CONTE

Susan tell me, come on, what's bothering you?

JOE LEWIS (VO)

The scene in the film, THE BIG COMBO, with Nick Conte kissing her on the eyebrow and then on the cheek and then on the chin and then on the neck and all the time the camera is moving in on her closeup. And of course by moving in you eliminate Nick Conte. The rest is up to the audience. Let them supply the emotions. Let them tell me where he went. Let them tell me what he's going.

JOE LEWIS:

They were a three-man board now if I recall correctly and the first man to talk was a rather youngish guy who immediately lit into me like a 75-millimeter howitzer, you know and said, how dare I shoot a scene as filthy as that. And what would I ... could have been thinking of and all that. And he accused me of everything. Of having a filthy mind and all. I let him talk. And at the end of it, I said, excuse me sir, I don't quite understand what you mean. I don't know what's wrong with dollying in to a head closeup of a young lady. Now please be more explicit. He says, well tell me, where did Richard Conte go? Where ... you tell me that, where did he go? I said, I haven't the vaguest idea. He may have gone off the stage for a glass of water, I don't know. What are you referring to? With my baby-blue eyes you know. Well they allowed it.

GORIN:

The sexiness of the noir film is precisely linked to the fact that those guys couldn't show this stuff. So you're obliged to..

FILM CLIP - CRY OF THE CITY

GORIN (VO)

.. charge the environment, to ... to play games. And on that level the noir films were very much attuned with the reality of desire.

Give me the key to that locker, Martin.

JANEY PLACE (VO)

What you really see in film noir is the emergence of a more psychological phenomenon, which is that men have always been endangered by a strong sexual female.



JANEY PLACE: They're extremely driven, selfish, ambitious characters which are generally characteristics associated with male characters.

FILM CLIP - KISS ME DEADLY:

ACTRESS

Kiss me, Mike. I want you to kiss me. Kiss me.  
The liar's kiss that says I love you.

PAUL SCHRADER: You know that black widow's sensibility comes up from the American male coming back from Europe and finding that the American female has changed her position in society.

FILM CLIP - ARCHIVE

SCHRADER (VO)

She's worked during the war. She's much more independent. She may have had affairs during war. And that's very you know, threatening to a lot of men.

Margaret will be giving up her job in a few months. Don't kid yourself, darling, I'll take the six weeks maternity leave and then Junior is going to have a nice nurse. You forget that you married a girl with a career.

PLACE: You can see it in art and iconography throughout the ages, that that's a dangerous figure. A powerful, sexual female is a very dangerous figure.

FILM CLIP - THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE

PLACE (VO)

And I think in film noir, what you see is the combination of things in a female that you don't see in ... in film, especially in American film very often. She's very smart. She's very powerful and she's extremely sexual.

JOHN GARFIELD

You dropped this?

LANA TURNER

Um hmm, thanks.

She uses her sexuality to get what she's after. And what she's after is not the man in the picture. He's another tool. What she's after is something for herself.

PLACE:

The spider woman of film noir is ... is identified a lot of real obvious ways. First, through her sexuality. they ... they tend to be characters who have long hair, tight clothes.

FILM CLIP - SUNSET BOULEVARD

PLACE (VO)

Long fingernails that are actually often composed as claws. They often smoke, which has always been the sign of the ... of the woman of loose morals.

FILM CLIP - DOUBLE INDEMNITY

PLACE (VO)

You often have examples of women controlling the composition by being shot in low angle and then you cut to a shot of a man shot from high angle, so that they have a visual dominance.

MARIE WINDSOR:

Now the classic femme fatale to me is some ... a woman that's usually getting the man into bed and then into trouble.

FILM CLIP - FORCE OF EVIL

WINDSOR (VO)

And I loved playing them because that's the kind of a character that people never forget. They love to hate me.

JOHN GARFIELD

What do you want? What are you waiting to see?

--What kind of a man you are, what you really are.

--Try it on your own man.

--I'm trying you.

WINDSOR: They also referred to my eyes as "bedroom" eyes. And that didn't fit very well for a goody-goody wife or a nice little girlfriend, somebody tending the home.

FILM CLIP - THE BIG COMBO:

ACTOR 1

What is there about a hoodlum that appeals to certain women?

ACTOR 2

Hoodlums, detectives, woman doesn't care how a man makes his living, only how he makes love.

BIGELOW (VO)

There's a certain kind of male fantasy..

BIGELOW: .. to this violent woman who is uncontrollable. Kind of like an untamed animal. And you know I think there's something very seductive about that.

FILM CLIP - GUN CRAZY:

ACTOR

So appealing, so dangerous, so lovely to look at, the darling of London, England, Miss Annie Laurie Starr.

BIGELOW (VO)

You know somebody tamed and compliant is less seductive. The fact that it's unobtainable, you touch it, it'll scratch

you, is very attractive. I think people like to play with fire.

LEWIS (VO)

I wanted a beautiful, innocent, lovable young lady..

LEWIS: .. who was a demon. Who was vicious and yet could charm you.

FILM CLIP - GUN CRAZY

LEWIS (VO)

I got the two of them together and I said, Peggy, you are a female dog in heat. And you, John, you're a male dog in heat. And you meet for the first time. Now you don't know whether one or the other is going to attack and so you size each other up. And I want all that desire to come out.

LEWIS: The only way that this picture in my opinion could succeed was to have a love story. A love story that could never, never work out, but yet have an audience rooting for them.

SCHRADER: I love the sense of doom in it and I love the sense of you can just see it coming.

FILM CLIP - GUN CRAZY:

ACTRESS

I want a guy with spirit and guts.

SCHRADER (VO)

That sense of romantic longing and obsession, and knowing that what you are doing is doomed and you can't stop from doing it.

FILM CLIP - GUN CRAZY:

ACTOR

Look, I don't want to look in that mirror and see nothing but a ... a stickup man staring back at me.

ACTRESS

You better kiss me goodbye, Bart, because I won't be here when you get back. Come on, Bart, let's finish it the way we started it, on the level.

SCORSESE (VO)

These people, they live right on the edge. And a lot of people identify ... a lot of people identify with that. It's something that you react to emotionally. Love in film noir usually takes the form of obsession. It's usually a perversional love so it becomes much more passionate and it becomes more deadly.

SCORSESE:

Everything is on the edge and therefore they burn it up faster. They burn up life faster.

FILM CLIP - DOUBLE INDEMNITY

FILM CLIP - OUT OF THE PAST

FILM CLIP - SUNSET BOULEVARD

FILM CLIP - ASPHALT JUNGLE

(REEL 2)

FILM CLIP - TOUCH OF EVIL

JOHN BAILEY (VO)

There's an element in film noir, the way light and shadow is used in such extreme contrast it is almost religious or spiritual or philosophical.

JANET LEIGH

See any better their way?

BAILEY (CONT'D VO)

The age-old Manicheist dialectic of light against dark, good against evil.

JANET LEIGH

You can't turn it off now buster. You're wasting your battery.

BAILEY (CONT'D VO)

And when you look at the film noir film, the lighting compliments that. Light sources themselves become part of the content of the scene.

CHARLTON HESTON

Susie, what are you doing in here in the dark?

BAILEY (CONT'D VO)

Very bright, hot sources and very deep, deep shadows.

CHARLTON HESTON

Well can we turn the light on now?

JANET LEIGH

No we can't.

BAILEY:

Because of all the things that had happened during the war, the development of faster film stocks, the development of you know, portable cameras, smaller dollies, more contained lighting units. It was possible to go out at night, on the streets....

FILM CLIP - TOUCH OF EVIL

BAILEY (VO)

...using the lights in a very controlled, dramatic way. The

sense of the frame, the world being essentially black, which it is at night. And what you see is what you choose to define and pick out with a little bit of light. And this became a signature of film noir. There's almost a giddy euphoria of being able to use lights and the dramatic use of lights in those late Forties, early Fifties films.

FILM CLIP - MONTAGE

FILM CLIP - MURDER MY SWEET

ACTOR

Turn on the light again, Cora, please.

DMYTRYK (VO)

We wanted to spend as little time with the mechanics, lighting a set, that kind of thing, setups, to give ourselves more time with the actors, to get the best possible scenes out of them.

With film noir what you did is you want it like that, throw a shadow on it. Get a gobolt, you know. And that's all, the shadow did it.

FILM CLIP - FORCE OF EVIL

BIGELOW (VO)

It's the perfect externalization of those characters, trapped, a trapped character. There is no light, there is no release, there is no escape.

BIGOLOW:

Things are very terrifying and mysterious if you can't see them. So your imagination is forced to take over which I think is probably the key to how noir material works on the subconscious.

FILM CLIP - KISS OF DEATH

ACTRESS

In here Walter.

FILM CLIP - DOUBLE INDEMNITY

BAILEY (VO)

A lighting technique that became a signature of the noir films was the use of the venetian blind, which was a very effective and quick way for the director of photography to create an interesting and unusual lighting pattern on an..

BAILEY: .. otherwise blank wall. And would create very interesting psychological effects, depending upon the way..

FILM CLIP - NYCVH/NOIR

BAILEY (VO)

.. they were slanted and adjusted. Almost universally in noir films you see a tremendous sparseness in the production design. Sets have very simple and functional furniture. The walls tend to be just painted flats. You have the visual environment to create a tremendous sense of dramatic isolation and alienation. And that was part of the whole conceit of noir, of using lighting techniques to alter the space psychologically.

SCHRADER: You can't underestimate the German influence in it all. And all the German expatriates who were um, filling the ranks of the Hollywood crafts and ... and as well as directors and writers.

BAILEY: And they brought with them uh, both a dramatic and a visual tradition that was very different from say, the more vaudeville or the more showman type tradition that had been reflected in American films of the time.

FILM CLIP - THE TESTAMENT OF DR. MABUSE



FILM CLIP - THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI

BAILEY (VO)

Fritz Lang did a trilogy of, I guess you could say, early gangster films, of the Mabuse trilogy which had a tremendous influence, not only in German cinema, but I think also in this country.

And even going back before that, THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI, the sets were built in false perspective. Tremendous sense of light and dark contrasts. Tilted angles, foregrounding of objects--these themes became very prominent I think in film noir.

POLONSKY (VO)

Objects are not things that happen to be in a room.

FILM CLIP - FORCE OF EVIL

POLONSKY (VO)

Objects are things that we deal with in living. So floors are objects. The position of people towards each other are objects.

POLONSKY:

When you make a movie you are ta ... paying attention to everything, all the time, or else you're not making a movie. What you're doing is just photographing something.

FILM CLIP - TOUCH OF EVIL

ACTOR

What are you trying to do?

ORSON WELLS

I'm trying to strap you to the electric chair.

ACTOR

We don't like it when innocent people are blown to jelly in our town.

BAILEY (VO)

Noir photography really was concerned with showing characters in environment.

FILM CLIP - TOUCH OF EVIL:

WELLS

I'm going to make you pay for that...

ACTOR

They're trying to railroad me. I don't know why, I never stole any dynamite.

BAILEY (VO)

So the deep focus, foreground and background focus being equally sharp and a tremendous, wide, visual field opening up behind the actors gave a tremendous sense of environment and became a very strong element in the noir vocabulary.

FILM CLIP - TOUCH OF EVIL:

WELLS:

Take him in and book him.

ACTOR

Let's go.

HESTON

You say you found this dynamite in the bathroom.

ACTOR

Yeah, well Pete found it. Show him the dynamite, Pete.

ACTOR

Can't you do something to help me?

FILM CLIP - NYC/VH/NOIR

BAILEY:

The deep focus was used in conjunction with wide angle lenses. It was also used as an economical way of staging a scene without having to do a lot of coverage. A foreground actor would appear quite close to camera, a background actor would come in. They might play a dialogue scene in one shot, the two actors, not looking at each other. Foreground actor looking out this way, the background actor looking at the back of the foreground actor's head. They really can't see each other, but they're playing a scene together.

FILM CLIP - ASPHALT JUNGLE

ACTOR

I'm here to arrest you.

BAILEY (VO)

It's fine for the audience because the audience can see both actors quite clearly.

And the conceit seemed to work. Of course it wouldn't work today because you'd want to see closeups, you'd want to see the actors turn to each other. But it was a quite common method of shooting sometimes a three, four-minute scene in one shot because they had very short shooting schedules.

ACTOR

Get the young lady.

DMYTRYK:

Anybody who was making a ... a B-picture wanted to make A-pictures. So what we were trying to do was to impress somebody, usually the executives at the studio. And you couldn't usually impress them with the subject matter, cause it was usually pretty trite. You couldn't impress

them with the acting which was not usually of the best. But you could impress them with setups for instance. I learned about setups on B-pictures primarily because I had to be inventive as hell. I wanted the executives who were looking at the rushes the next day to look and say, hey that guy's got ... you know that guy really knows where to put his camera.

FILM CLIP - GUN CRAZY

ACTRESS

I hope it's not too crowded.

DMYTRYK (VO)

Joe Lewis was wonderful with setups, absolutely wonderful.

LEWIS (VO)

They took a stretch-out Cadillac and they removed everything from the back of it and in it they laid down a 2 by 12 board. On top of that they put a little high hat and the camera. And then they put a jockey seat for the operator. The microphones were the first time they've ever used them were button microphones. We had them all over the place, inside, outside. And then strapped to the top we had two sound men with fish poles stretched way out with mikes.

ACTOR

I hope I won't be longer than I have to, okay?

LEWIS (CONT'D VO)

I got the two of them together and I said, you know what you're up to. You can run into town, look for a parking space. He's going to go in the bank, he's going to rob the

bank. A policeman's going to come out, you're going to knock him on the head and get away. That's all.

ACTRESS

That's right, stand right there, okay?

LEWIS (CONT'D VO)

Whatever dialogue you want between you, whatever comes up, that's how you react.

ACTRESS

Hi.

POLICEMAN

Well that's a nice getup.

ACTRESS

I like it.

POLICEMAN

Good-looking gun.

ACTRESS

Thanks.

POLICEMAN

That's English, ain't it?

ACTRESS

That's right.

POLICEMAN

What show are you with?

ACTRESS

Cheyenne Rodeo....

LEWIS (VO)

I was supposed to shoot that and had a four-day schedule.

We shot it in about three hours. And far better I'm sure than what was broken down in the script with the interior of the bank and the people laying down in the bank and the guy's holding their hands up and all that jazz. We left it entirely to the audience's imagination and suggestion.

WOMAN

Take off.

MAN

All right. I told you to stay in the car.

LEWIS (CONT'D VO)

The shot was so real that people on the street yelled, "They held up the bank!" And we kept on going, photographing as we went. The shot took two miles. Two miles and without a cut.

ARTHUR (VO)

A large portion of the Hollywood technical community had learned documentary technique working either within the United States, or for various branches of the Armed Forces and so they were just more schooled in how to shoot in a more raw, less studio-bound, less stylized fashion.

FILM CLIP - ARCHIVE

ARTHUR (VO)

And I also think that the experience of the American public with documentaries during the war led to a greater acceptance of semi-documentary or realist techniques in fiction films.

ANDRE DE TOTH:

Shooting on location, it's a must for film noir because film noir is reality. It's reality as is.

FILM CLIP - FORCE OF EVIL:

I just kept going down and down. It was like going down to the bottom of the world, to find my brother.

DE TOTH (VO)

No matter how great art directors you have you cannot afford to make it so used as a street is. It's impossible. Somehow you feel it, even if you don't see it. That's the magic of film and you never know how it happens but it does happen.

Of course it was against all the studio rules--we have the back lot, shoot it there. I spent two million dollars on that street, use it.

I found my brother's body at the bottom there, where they had thrown it away on the rocks, by the river, like an old dirty rag nobody wants. He was dead.

SCORSESE (VO)

It's incredible city poetry you know ..

SCORSESE:

.. this body there, lying there and you know I come from an area where sometimes you would see a body in the street that way.

ARTHUR:

It was important for film noir to represent real cities, not these vague constructions on a studio back lot.

FILM CLIP - KISS OF DEATH

NARRATOR

Christmas Eve in New York.

ARTHUR (VO)

But to use the look of the city as a part of its stylistic web.

GORIN (VO)

When you're in the city, you've got a ... a space which is immediately ..

GORIN: .. dramatic. And you ... and you've got immediately ...

FILM CLIP - PICKUP ON SOUTH STREET

GORIN (VO)

.. you're in a universe which is maze-like and claustrophobic. The characters are always like small fishes in a ... in an aquarium, where all sorts of stuff is happening.

Look at the first sequence of PICKUP ON SOUTH STREET. One guy, whose job is to steal purses, open purses, a pickpocket in a ... in a subway.

ARTHUR: The number of underground locations that we see in film noir is quite phenomenal. Underground garages and subways and sewer systems.

FILM CLIP - THE THIRD MAN

ARTHUR (VO)

It's a manifestation of the underworld, of this secret world. A kind of labyrinth where criminals can hide in the shadows is the image, representation of a modern hell.

SCHRADER (VO)

When you're dealing in a doomed world, you go for visual correlatives.

SCHRADER: It's kind of hard to do the story of ... of doom you know in a ... on a pleasant, sunny day.

FILM CLIP - NIGHT AND THE CITY

SCORSESE (VO)

The image of Richard Widmark running in the streets in



NIGHT AND THE CITY is a seminal image of film noir. You know you can't think of them without thinking of the image of a man running in the street at night.

SCORSESE: Something is more ... it's more dramatic. It's more dramatic and it's more ... the characters that ... that come out at night are ... are ... more fascinating I think. That's ... that's really what it's about.

FILM CLIP - KISS ME DEADLY

A.J. BEZZERIDES (VO)

I think our world is headed for chaos and not very many people seem to be shivering about it. We ought to be shivering in our boots right now.

A.J. BEZZERIDES: Well I'm so tired of gangster pictures by then, you know, I'd seen them all and so forth, that I thought the new ... feelings should be put into it and I made it more political.

FILM CLIP - KISS ME DEADLY

BEZZERIDES (VO)

I think writers shouldn't separate themselves from their reality. They should bring the reality to what they're doing.

FILM CLIP - KISS ME DEADLY:

ACTOR

How did you get that?

BEZZERIDES (VO)

At that time in the Fifties, the nuclear stuff was new and it was kind of frightening what was going on.

FILM CLIP - KISS ME DEADLY:

ACTOR

Manhattan Project. Los Alamos. Trinity.

BEZZERIDES (VO)

I was affected strongly by what I read in the newspapers, what I'd heard on the comments on the radio and television. And these somehow got into the story.

BEZZERIDES:

And I think a story of this kind should have that kind of feeling because we're living in a world, we're not living in a movie. And the movie should reflect the world, the motion pictures should reflect the world in some way and I tried to do that.

SCORSESE:

When I saw KISS ME DEADLY when I was ... when I was 12 years old I didn't get ... understand it. You know I had no idea what was happening in it. It was ... it was shocking and very strong, but to this day you know the end I don't quite understand, so it's ... you know.

FILM CLIP - KISS ME DEADLY

SCORSESE (VO)

But it's one of the pivotal films.

BEZZERIDES (VO)

At the very end, the girl wants it, boy, she wants it and then she flings open the top of the box. She doesn't know. She thinks it's something precious that's measured in dollars and cents. But it has to do with security and the future and man's existence.

SCHRADER:

Well it ... obviously ends with a holocaust you know. It ... this doomed character finally finds the bomb and ... and the world is over. And it's sort of the ... you know, it kind of prefigures STRANGELOVE, which you know carries that to the ... the same degree in a ... in a comic fashion. But you know ... you know it's just a matter of

these doomed characters, when are they finally going to ...  
explode and then take the world with them.

FILM CLIP - KISS ME DEADLY

SCHRADER (VO)

It's sort of the end of the line you know, you ... you can't  
go much further.

FILM CLIP - ARCHIVE:

Dominating one half the world, Communism stands  
solidly opposed to the western concept of  
democracy. With over 750 million people under  
Communist rule, nearly one-third of the population  
of the earth, Soviet Russia holds a commanding  
position in the future destiny of the world.

Communism in reality is not a political party, it is  
a way of life, an evil and malignant way of life. It  
reveals a condition akin to disease that spreads like  
an epidemic and like an epidemic, a quarantine is  
necessary to keep it from infecting this nation.

SCHRADER:

I guess HUAC is the transition. That's how America  
moved into the Cold War. You know, moved from the  
post-war era into the Eisenhower era. And ... and I guess  
the ... you know that critical period there from '52 to '54,  
where the shift occurred and where you started getting the  
Red scare movies and then where Communists started  
becoming the villains.

ARTHUR:

The noir cycle or series ends I think for a number of  
different reasons. The mood of the country shifts, from a  
... a dominant mood of anxiety. The Fifties key word is  
togetherness.

FILM CLIP - ARCHIVE:

The public has been told that television has finally emerged from the experimental phase. And curiosity alone is expected to sell thousands of receiving sets.

ARTHUR (VO)

The nuclear family, the turn towards a private suburban existence, away from the conflicts of modern man in the city.

NARRATOR:

Some say that was the end of film noir, but I don't see it that way. Film noir was a look, a tone, a feel. You can see the noir in some modern pictures. The shadows are still deadly, murder still stalks the streets, love and violence still share the same bed. And fate can still put the finger on you for no good reason at all. Life don't change, cause people don't change.

FILM CLIP - MEAN STREETS

AUDIO: "BE MY BABY"

SCORSESE (VO)

MEAN STREETS became a very clear attempt at doing a film noir in color.

SCORSESE:

What I was trying to do is blend what I knew as a reality with that style.

FILM CLIP - MEAN STREETS:

--What are you doing?

--What do you mean, what am I doing? What are you doing to me, huh?

--What do you mean?

SCORSESE (VO)

A theme of a young man trying to hustle money and being in conflict with some very powerful forces and not understanding the danger he's in until everything around him falls to pieces.

FILM CLIP - MEAN STREETS:

DE NIRO

What did he say? He said I didn't pay him? He's a fucking liar, where is he?

KEITEL

You paid him?

DE NIRO

Yeah, I paid him.

KEITEL

Last week.

DE NIRO

Yeah.

KEITEL

Last Tuesday.

DE NIRO

Yeah.

SCORSESE (VO)

I think of it as noir in that I love the noir film. In that as much as possible a homage--my version of a noir. But in reality it was ... I was trying to get as close as possible to my experience.

DE NIRO

Now wait a minute, wait a minute, Charlie.

KEITEL

What?

DE NIRO

Well you're right.

KEITEL

I'm right.

DE NIRO

Yeah, was it ... last Tuesday?

KEITEL

Yeah, that's the Tuesday, that was last week, that's before the one that's about to come up.

SCORSESE:

I guess I'm responding to ... hearing my uncle speak or my aunt or my father talk about certain films that they liked, but they said, oh they ... but that scene, he went inside, you know what they did. He said, no, but they'd never show that though. No, they would never show that kind of stuff. They'll never do that, you know. Or they'll never show the ... the real workings of ... of how these guys in organized crime deal with each other. Or, the real workings of somebody who really owes money and tries to get out. So my intention was always, why not? Why not really show it?

FILM CLIP - MEAN STREETS

DE NIRO

I borrow money from you because you're the only jerk-off around here that I can borrow money from without paying back, right? 'Cause ya know that's what you are - that's what I think of you, a jerk-off.

BAILEY (VO)

Color brings in a certain level of relationship to the real world. I mean the real world is in color. Film noir, black and white is inherently abstracted and more stylized.

DE NIRO

I don't give 2 shits for you or nobody else.

BAILEY:

I think there've been a number of color films that have certainly used noir elements, both visually stylistically and in terms of character and plot, themes. Arthur Penn comes to mind. BONNIE AND CLYDE, NIGHT MOVES. Certainly CHINATOWN, I think you know preeminently. Uh, Larry Kasdan's, BODY HEAT.

FILM CLIP - BODY HEAT

KATHLEEN TURNER

What's your name, anyway?

WILLIAM HURT

Ned Racine.

KATHLEEN TURNER

Maddy Walker.

WILLIAM HURT

Wow, you all right?

KATHLEEN TURNER

Yes, I'm fine. My temperature runs a couple of degrees high, around a hundred. I don't mind, the engine or something.

WILLIAM HURT

Maybe you need a tuneup.

KATHLEEN TURNER

Don't tell me, you have just the right tool.

WILLIAM HURT

I don't talk like that.

LAWRENCE KASDAN: When I started out I ... I didn't know if I would ever get to direct another film after BODY HEAT. So I wrote something that I thought I could get through and that would give me the license to go very stylish. I had never directed anything really, except for a few student films and I wanted to do everything with the camera that I could think of. So I picked a ... a form, a genre that gave you enormous license for that which was film noir.

FILM CLIP - BODY HEAT

WILLIAM HURT

That's it. That's it. We're going to kill him and I think I know how.

KATHLEEN TURNER

It's real then?

WILLIAM HURT

It's real all right. If we're not careful, it's going to be the last real thing we do.

KASDAN (VO)

I wrote a sort of standard film noir story, but it was really about something else for me. It was really about something that I was seeing in a lot of my friends, which was this desire to hit the big score very quickly.

KASDAN: And that's really the story for the central character. You know, he just sort of is impatient and things are not going as well or as pleasurably, as sensually as he would like.



And a woman comes into his life that seems to open the door for him, where he can have all those things he wants, immediately.

FILM CLIP - BODY HEAT

KATHLEEN TURNER

He has a gun.

WILLIAM HURT

Where?

KASDAN (VO)

The character of Ned Racine that Bill Hurt plays is not so very different from a lot of people that I know and a ..  
.. certain American type. In fact the ... the villainess, if she can be called that, has the same kind of drives. She's just a hardworking woman who wants to get it all.

KASDAN:

FILM CLIP - BODY HEAT

KATHLEEN TURNER

If you never trust in me again, you'd probably be smart. But you must believe one thing, I love you. I love you and I need you.

BAILEY (VO)

Violence and sexuality have become so much more graphic. And I think a key element in noir was that tension and almost repression. Filmmaking techniques have also become so much slicker. There's a lot more money available.

BAILEY:

We don't make B-movies really any more that deal with that kind of material. B-movies tend to be like slasher films and so forth. A-movies usually have a very ... very strong you know, production budget and design budget.

And film noir films inherently were done as B-movies, low-budget. And they had certain physical limitations and restrictions that became part of the filmmaking vocabulary. And I don't think we use those so much anymore.

SCHRADER: There's been a number of attempts to emulate that style. But that style was tied to a time and a place. And that time and place is gone.

BAILEY: If somebody really wanted to make a film using that kind of dialogue, that very terse, you know, Chandler, Hammett, Hemingway type dialogue, would it sell today? I don't know. I ... I don't think so.

SCHRADER: And I do really feel that this genre is a historical genre, you know. When you speak of German expressionism, you speak of ... of a specific time. When you speak of the nouvelle vague, that's a specific time. And ... and the film noir is a specific time. We don't make film noir anymore.

KASDAN: It's just semantics, you know what ... what makes noir? Who defines noir? Who defines American films? Who defines what's good and bad in American movies? The ... the dangerous thing is in any moment in history we have some ... some machine, some cultural, critical media machine working to define what's good and bad. But it's all up for grabs. You know, we'll know in maybe 50 years from now, we'll look back and see what stood the test of time.

DE TOTH: People didn't change in 40 years. So if you have seen life truly 40 years ago, it should stand up today. Of course some of the problems are slightly different, but basic human problems are still the same.

FILM CLIP - PICKUP ON SOUTH STREET:

Look mister, I'm so tired you'd be doing me a big  
favor if you'd blow my head off.

**END FILM NOIR**