

Germany in Hollywood

Film Noir, a continuation of Weimar Cinema?

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Film Genre

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Introduction

Technically film noir is not a genre, but a generic term for films that more or less have the same features. Films noir can have different genres, like thriller or drama. During my research I will treat film noir as a genre, but a critical note has to be addressed. Films from the film noir genre are Hollywood films that date from the 1940s. Weimar cinema can be seen as a predecessor of the film noir genre, that is what I am trying to find out in my research, is film noir simply a continuation of Weimar cinema and its features in a different period of film history? This is why I am going to compare these two 'genres' in a separate section, from Weimar to film noir.

In my opinion we cannot just assume that film noir is a continuity of Weimar cinema. This is why I will discuss the differences between the two. The notion of continuity will be a central point in this section. I include this issue in my research so we can see the differences and similarities between Weimar cinema and film noir. This is helpful to find an answer to my research question. This way I can see if there are more differences than similarities and what they mean for film noir as a continuation of Weimar cinema.

When the genre at itself has been made clear, film noir and the fascination with it is discussed. Film noir, a genre that has its origins at the early 20th century may be seen as an experience, rather than just a genre. There is a certain fascination with film noir, also with film critics. This fascination with film noir might explain why it is still a heavily discussed subject by film scholars. I will discuss this fascination in association with the *femme fatale*, a common feature in film noir.

The genre at itself, the comparison with and the influence of Weimar cinema and film noir as an experience have been discussed so far. These aspects of the film noir genre will hopefully give more insights in what film noir actually is in contrast to Weimar cinema.

The structure of my research will be as addressed above. At first I will give an explanation of the film noir genre and add a critical note to the perception of film noir as a genre. This should make film noir more clearly to the reader. Then Weimar cinema and how it might be a predecessor of film noir is discussed. This gives an impression of how film noir has come into being. When the genre film noir is fully treated, my research will take a turn to the aspect of fascination. Critics and their fascination with film noir will be discussed. These different sections of my research will eventually lead to an answer to my question if film noir is simply a continuation of Weimar cinema and its features in an other period of time.

From Weimar to Film Noir

The term film noir itself continues to be confusing and often contested.¹ That is why I have to describe how film noir came to be and how I will approach the term film noir in my research. My main concern is the connection between and the influence of Weimar cinema on film noir. With this chapter I hope to be able to find these aspects of Weimar in film noir. I am not going to give the whole history of film noir, but just what I found to be interesting for my research.

The term film noir was invented in France, not in America, which might be seen as strange, because film noir was most popular in the United States. Throughout the forties and fifties the period in which film noir was an insistent presence in American cinema, the term film noir was more or less unknown in America. The films were not labeled film noir. People chose them by a genre in which these films were categorized.² It was in 1946 when Nino Frank, a French critic used the term for the first time in print. He identified different films as black or dark films, film noirs. Although he used the term for the first time in print, Frank never claimed that he had invented the term.³

This use of the term by critics may be a reason for the problems with defining film noir as a genre. Film-makers did not use the term until it was well established as a feature of academic writing. Film noirs are not so much artifacts as it is a discourse, a loose, evolving system of arguments and readings, helping to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies.⁴

The sole justification for the existence of a genre is to make concrete and perceivable the configuration inherent in its ideal form. Film noir can be seen as identifiable by its look and iconography, but in other aspects film noirs can be different. So there might be no ideal form and thus no justification for the existence of a film noir genre. Although film noir is recognizable, there always seems to be a sense of ambiguity. Film noir is mostly recognized by its distinctiveness in stylistics. It transformed the conventions of the crime drama into those peculiar to film noir. It is a convergence of dramatic particulars like eroticism, violence, psychological ambivalence and unusual plots, these created the certain style that is film noir.⁵

Whether or not film noir is actually to be called a genre is still under discussion, but what is certain is that the term is applied to a number of films, mostly from the 1940's and 50's in Hollywood. The films that are called film noir were mostly popular in the

¹ R. Barton Palmer, *Perspectives on Film Noir* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1996), 3.

² *Ibidem*, 6.

³ *Ibidem*, 5.

⁴ James Naremore, "American Film Noir: The History of an Idea" *Film Quarterly* 49.2 (1995): 12-28, 14.

⁵ Andrew Dickos, *Street With No Name: A History of the Classic American Film Noir* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 1-5.

middlebrow public of America. These films had a narrative, which were based on, and adaptations of detective and crime fiction. It is said that these narratives are representative of the uncertain social conditions in America after the Second World War.⁶ Film noir as a reaction to the situation after a world war can be associated with Weimar cinema, for Weimar cinema was a reaction to the situation in Germany after World War I. This might also be because directors out of the Weimar Republic escaped Germany at the beginning of World War II to America, like F. W. Murnau and Fritz Lang. Film noir used a modified and more refined chiaroscuro lighting to express the anxieties felt during wartime and postwar society. The fatalism from film noir derives from these anxieties and loss of self in the modern world. We can see a parallel with demoralized Germany twenty years earlier.

So, film noir films borrowed aspects of the German expressionism style. A style inspired by the innovative staging and lighting techniques of the producer and director Max Reinhardt and the artistic movement expressionism. Expressionism as a movement is the extreme expression of romanticism subsumed by the despairing and alienated anxiety of the soul longing for the ecstasy of spiritual knowledge. Expressionism offered more vital emotions and more dynamic powers of description were extolled, a creation from within, an intense subjectivity which had no reluctance in destroying the conventional picture of reality in order that the expression could be more powerful.⁷

This style contained dark visual style, which was perfect for the pessimistic nature of the film noir narratives. These more stylistic and dark films, which were called film noir, represented the dark side of life in post-war America.⁸ In the German expressionist cinema, low-key lighting with the effective contrast of chiaroscuro to delineate shadows of people, buildings etcetera was a characteristic. Weimar directors created a *stimmung*, an aura of shimmer of mood resonating from the object that was filmed. It gave an emotional connection between subject and object, suspense, and helped define the emotional resonance of the city as an exciting place to both body and mind. It also created the *umwelt*, the unique and protective rays of light generating a recognition of objects and characters clustered in their discretely intimate environment, apart from the environment and fears, apart from what is 'out there'.⁹

In the exterior settings this type of lighting often showed distorted outsized shadows, menacing and paranoiac in the mind of the characters who, for example, are being hunted in the plot of the film. Buildings, lampposts and alleyways show the same distortion. The street became a metaphor for the urban drama. Some of these 'street films'

⁶ Palmer, 4.

⁷ Dickos, 12.

⁸ Palmer, 5.

⁹ Dickos, 9-10.

represented the excitements and hardships experienced in the Weimar cities. The lighting in interior settings have the same distortions as the exterior, but in the interior setting we have a feeling more of entrapment than pursuit. So, this use of lighting in Weimar cinema is a particular to make us experience certain emotions as pursuit, menacing and paranoiac in exterior settings and entrapment in interior settings. Streets and cities were important for film noir as well, Weimar films echo in the noir cinematography by revealing the street, the neighborhood, and the city as the philosophical summation of their characters' existence. This is another connection between Weimar cinema and film noir. The transplantation of the Weimar streets to urban America twenty years later could be all that is needed to suggest a noir story.¹⁰

When we describe film noir, it commonly invokes the stylization of painterly and theatrical expressionism. This stems from the émigré directors as I have mentioned above. These directors came from Weimar Germany to the USA and many of these participated in Weimar cinema. Obviously, they are associated with the chiaroscuro and melodrama of Weimar cinema, and this leads to the association of film noir with Weimar cinema. Weimar directors incorporated light and dark to express sensational and often irrational feelings that illustrated the context of German society after its defeat in World War I.¹¹

Film Noir, a unique type of cinema?

Recent scholarship has increasingly challenged the assumption that a uniquely German cinematic aesthetic can be discerned in film noir and that distinctive expressions of German cultural or national identity inflected the film cycle and its development during the 1940s. Weimar cinema as being the roots of film noir can be contested. One of the connections between the two were the émigré directors. However, these directors came to Hollywood on a different time. Ulmer, for example, arrived their in 1927, Lang in 1934 and Bernhardt in 1940. From 1927 till 1940 is a long time period in which the directors and their careers have evolved. Ulmer was longer in Hollywood and may have been influenced by American cinema, while other directors worked longer in European cinema. Also, the implication that Weimar cinema represented the feelings of German society during the Weimar Republic period and that these representations were taken over in film noir, only then the American society, may not hold. German directors, who came to Hollywood, came in a thirteen-year time period. There is no single common experience of the Weimar directors, because they left Germany at different times. This common

¹⁰ Ibidem, 5-10.

¹¹ Ibidem, 5,10.

experience cannot have been a reason for Weimar cinema to be seen as the roots of film noir. From the 62 directors who made film noirs during the 1940s only fifteen were German or Austro-Hungarian.¹²

Thomas Elsaesser might give another explanation about the prominence of German directors in American cinema, and how they came to effect film noir:

“The prosaic answer, then, to the question about the prominence of German directors in the film noir cycle is that the Germans were film professionals, that they came from a mature, developed film industry, which is why they could adapt themselves so well to Hollywood, and could leave their mark on so many different genres, cycles, and modes, while none of this per se implicates their personal conviction, their desire for self-expression, or indeed the questions of what typically German traits are conveyed in their films... Film noir would then be one of the splinters in the sometimes sharp-edged and sometimes soft-focused but always ironically broken wall of mirrors the émigré cinema put before its American public, confirming Germany’s central place in the cinema’s historical imaginary.”¹³

Elsaesser states that film noir does not derive directly out of the émigré directors, but it is one of the effects the émigré directors had on American cinema and its audience. The émigré directors were professionals, just as in Hollywood, and could easily adapt to the Hollywood system. They were directors that could make well-received films in America as well, this does not mean that they wanted to show the American audience the expressionist cinema of the Weimar Republic. The Weimar film industry seems not to be too different from Hollywood. It also had divisions of labour and management practices, markets and exports, diversification of services and product differentiation, advertising and distribution an infrastructural investment in plant and new technologies, just like Hollywood. The similarities outweigh the differences, which made it easy to adapt for the émigré directors.¹⁴

Film noir challenged the conventions of Hollywood, much like Weimar cinema was unconventional in the time it came to be. Film noir used unorthodox narration, it

¹² Edward Dimendberg, “Down these Seen Streets A Man Must Go: Siegfried Kracauer, ‘Hollywood’s Terror Films’, and the Spatiality of Film Noir” *New German Critique* 89 (2003): 113-143, 121.

¹³ Dimendberg, 115.

¹⁴ Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and after: Germany’s Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), 5.

resisted sentiment and censorship, it demonstrated the ambiguity of human motives and it made the commodity culture seem as a wasteland.¹⁵

The reason for the directors of the Weimar Republic does not have to be a political one. As other directors became successful with their export material and the films they made in Hollywood, others could just as easily have followed because of the success. Of course there were political reasons as well, mainly for the Jewish directors, but the aspect of success is another argument for directors to go to Hollywood. When we think of this, the continuation of Weimar cinema in film noir because of the émigré directors can be contested. They were popular and therefore went for success in Hollywood. The film industry is alike, this does not have to mean that film noir has its roots in Weimar cinema.¹⁶

So far I have discussed examples of film noir deriving from the expressionist cinema Weimar Germany. According to this, we might see that film noir is not derived from an expressionist style, Elsaesser states that Weimar cinema does not derive from it as well: “The German cinema of the Weimar Republic is often, but wrongly identified with expressionism.”¹⁷ The most prominent films of this golden age of the silent cinema came from the studio UFA, the Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft. This was the one studio that was thought to be able to compete with Hollywood. According to Elsaesser, this cinema takes its cue more from commerce and industry than art.¹⁸

For the émigré directors that do had to flee because of Nazism, came in a culture much similar to the one they had. In capitalism as well as Nazism, the commercial culture and the administered culture, the arts had been appropriated and pillaged in the form of a masquerade. The forms of entertainment were busy producing cunningly seductive simulacra of every style, every ideology, every pleasure or value, and treating these styles as commodities. This means that it was no big transition from the one culture to the other. According to Elsaesser, these Weimar exiles are credited with having found their most existential self-representation in a American film genre, held to be ‘German’ and ‘Expressionist’. Film noir, a genre that is not one, and a style perhaps refuses and resists reference as cunningly as the great Weimar classics.¹⁹

In the use of lighting, which made expressionist and Weimar cinema so well known, there is, according to Marc Vernet, no characteristic reserved for Weimar cinema directors. These expressionist techniques were used in American films as early as 1910

¹⁵ Naremore, 24.

¹⁶ Elsaesser, 6.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 2.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 9.

and were developed independently from German cinema, since there were no émigré directors in America during this time. Thus, another argument against the notion that certain aspects of Weimar cinema were the roots of film noir.²⁰

Besides the stylistics of film noir, film noir is more. It is not simply a certain plot or visual style achieved by camera angles and unusual lighting. It is also a way of looking at the world, life and human existence. The characters were seen as more or less immoral. Especially women, who are portrayed as being driven by the most reprehensible and deplorable vices. According to Christopher Orr, film noir can be divided in different subgenres. These are the detective/thriller, or crime genre and the erotic crime genre. The erotic crime genre has as key feature the femme fatale. Here, the generic dominant is the causal relationship between desire and criminal activity.²¹

Sex is the weapon and yet, because the censor doesn't allow the filmmaker to accord sexual attraction its full importance, all the characters including the men, are portrayed as driven toward evil.²² Because of all these dark elements in style and narrative, film noir, in all senses of the word, are seen as films of death.²³

Film noir in the 1940s with the characteristic of the femme fatale in the narrative, were made before this time. Before the circumstances of the American society of WWII, the political turmoil and the alleged forced return of women to domesticity. With this I mean that women were a huge asset in wartime, for example working in factories, now had to return home, because the men were coming back for their jobs. Many critics believe that this postwar context has led to a certain representation of gender relations in film noir, the femme fatale. The femme fatale as one of the trademark features of film noir, was used as early as 1927, by Murnau in his film *Sunrise*. The narrative feature of film noir, the femme fatale does not, in this way, have to define film noir.²⁴

All the components of noir style are designed to disorient the spectator. It moves away from the conventions of the cinema. At the cinema, the public has become accustomed to certain conventions like logical actions, an evident distinction between good and evil, well defined characters with clear motives and scenes that are more spectacular than brutal. Film noir reverses the conventional norms, and thus creating a specific tension which results from the disruption of the conventional order.²⁵

These arguments do not simply reject the idea of Weimar cinema as the predecessor of film noir. But it does give some problems regarding the time period in

²⁰ Palmer, 115.

²¹ Christopher Orr, "Genre Theory in the Context of Noir and Post-Noir Film" *Film Criticism* 22.1 (1997): 21-38, 22.

²² Palmer, 7.

²³ Palmer, 59.

²⁴ Dimendberg, 116.

²⁵ Naremore, 19.

which the key features of Weimar cinema were seen to be the roots of film noir. Film noir's Golden Age was in the 1940s and 1950s but features were seen much earlier than this time period. It seems here, that a certain decade to explain the Americanization of German directors is not needed to explain the traits of Weimar cinema in film noirs of the 1940s and 1950s.²⁶

A continuity from Weimar cinema to film noir is not what determines the film noir. Considering the fact given above, the number of émigré directors and such, indicate that there were encounters between the two types of cinema well before the Golden Age of film noir. So, instead of arguing for a continuity or discontinuity between the two, we might see them as parallel representations of urban modernity. In this way, the origin is less important.²⁷

Both Weimar cinema and film noir emphasize space, metropolitan space albeit in different ways. Although they both treat the metropolitan space, as I have mentioned above (the urban spaces which are an important part in both types of cinema), each of these two types of cinema treat it differently. Both have different historical and cultural dynamics with their own characteristic spatialities. The dark alleys and deserted streets we see in Weimar cinema have other social and historical referents than film noir.

The film critic Siegfried Kracauer wrote a book about Weimar cinema, *From Caligari to Hitler* in 1947, and an essay about film noir as well, *Hollywood's Terror Films: Do They Refelect an American State of Mind?* in 1946. In his essay, the term film noir is not mentioned, but he does treat many of the same films and its traits, which are associated with, film noir. What he calls terror films, can be seen as film noirs. His essay proposes a fruitful alternative narrative of the film noir cycle's relation to Weimar cinema. He also states that the two periods in film history are not connected through the continuity of film personnel.²⁸

He does see a similarity between the shots of street life in Weimar cinema and what he calls, terror films. He thinks that they both emphasize the psychic destabilization and representation of threatening urban spaces during cultural crisis accompanying postwar demobilization. This is what unites the two cinemas. The Hollywood terror films are not remakes of the expressionist Weimar cinema, but they have a similar structure.²⁹

He also explains the violence and paranoia in these films. Violence and paranoia were associated with the war, but became emblematic for the social pressure in postwar society. Just as Weimar cinema emerged alongside the social dislocations and traumas following the military defeat of WWI, political unrest, the cultural modalities of Fordism,

²⁶ Dimendberg, 117.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 122.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 126.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 126-127.

and rapid postwar urbanization, Kracauer claims that the Hollywood terror film dealt with the effects of WWII and the Holocaust, as well as the ongoing political tension between a society rooted in democracy and one rooted in totalitarianism. Both cinemas respond to the experience of sustained military conflict.³⁰

In this way, terror films do not reiterate Weimar cinema and Weimar cinema is not a predecessor of film noir. There are formal features of the same traits that are altered and repeated throughout history. These traits can be an ideal description of the spatiality that is manifested in both periods of film history. The representation of the metropolis and streets serve as signifiers for the transmission and representation of cultural anxiety.

Kracauer sees a relationship between cinema, urban space, and the psychic and cultural mood of society. The films he discusses in his essay about terror films, all represent urban spaces, which are identified with violence. These urban spaces, especially the street, are used to express the inner thoughts, memories, desires and anxieties. This is a common trait in Weimar cinema as well as film noir. Each cinema seeks to bind and master cultural anxiety through representations of spatiality

If Weimar cinema and film noir evoke one another, they do so through their shared evocation of urban spaces that maintain a certain psychic primacy in the production of anxiety. The characters at odds with their environment are allegories for the experience of exile and occupation because of the war. The parallel features of both types of cinema do not mean that one generates the former, and so, there is no common origin or goal.³¹ If the terror films of Weimar cinema and American film noir comprise historically parallel formal sequences, this is less because of their visual and iconographic similarities than a parallel historical imperative. The urban spaces in both cinemas can be similar, but one can never step into the same street twice.³²

Film noir is a problematic category. Film noir is not a genre but rather a body of films from a specific culture and historical period that can be divided among several related but distinct genres.³³ This notion can be related to what Kracauer has proposed. Film noir is not the continuity of Weimar cinema but the idea that it can be divided into several genres, explains why they might have similar traits. In a text-based approach, the thing that distinguishes film noir from other genres is the vulnerable and alienated male protagonist embroiled in a dangerous criminal world. Again, the aspect of violence is clearly present in this approach to film noir.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 127 – 132.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 133.

³² *Ibidem*, 143.

³³ Orr, 22-23.

Fascination with film noir: The femme fatale

Film critics have one thing in common when they discuss film noir, that it is fascinating. Film noir is a conceptual back hole; it is a critical and cultural fantasy. What I will discuss here is the certain gaze of the ‘other’, the mythic spectator from the 1940s. If we accept that film noir itself is a fantasy, we are also able to identify the precise status and appeal of those films that foreground fascination. “When fascination is involved in cultural and political theory, it is most often disparaged as a state of illusion and passivity, characterized by the loss or suspension of the critical faculties”, this quote of Ackbar Abbas shows how the theory of fascination is applied within film theory.³⁴ I incorporate the fascination with film noir and one of its main features, the femme fatale, in my research, because it gives a clearer view of the typical film noir.

Fascination names an obscure attraction, an experience we can capture only in the process of being captivated. Noir pursues knowledge that lies behind the truth of the visible and beyond narrative telling. This means that we can find the fascination with film noir in its process. Not by what we see, because it lies behind what we see and experience. And, because we are captivated by what we see, we might not see this underlying truth.³⁵

Film noir in this way, is seen as a cinema of anxious fixations, it is a symptomatic disturbance of classical Hollywood’s American narrative. It has recurrent visual, narrative, plot, and character motifs. It forms a nightmare that comes back both within individual films and keeps coming back across dozens of them. A lot of films have the same features, so that it feels as if we are watching the same thing all over again. All these films have a traumatic sub-feeling of some kind that cannot be named, but causes this feeling of repetition because it is in most films noir. What causes this feeling are, again, the effects of WWII. These effects then created sexual and social anxieties in postwar America, which embodied the primary locus of film noir, the femme fatale.³⁶

The femme fatale functions as a screen within noir cinema, as both herself and the bearer of a projected image. Thus, the noir negotiates between two versions of fascination: the inherent property of a certain object, eliciting the gaze, or as relational and fantasmatic, projected by certain subjects. In film noir it is always one man who is fascinated by a woman, which will be fatal for him. The femme fatale embodies a type of cinematic experience, a certain relation to the image.

³⁴ Oliver Harris, “Film Noir Fascination: Outside History, but Historically So” *Cinema Journal* 43.1 (2003): 3-21, 1-5.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 6-7.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 7-8.

Conclusion

Is film noir a continuation of Weimar cinema? This is the question I asked at the beginning of my research. First I discussed the aspects that might explain that it is. Some examples are the anxieties they both represent after a certain period in history, the stylistics such as use of lighting and émigré directors. This chapter was mainly focused on the art movement called expressionism, with which Weimar cinema was highly connoted and its connection to film noir.

In the second chapter I tried to give examples of the opposite, that film noir is no continuation of Weimar cinema, but a unique type of cinema. Here I contested the notion of the émigré directors and that it would be an example of a continuation, the stylistics, spaces and the narrative.

The third chapter is about the gaze and the femme fatale of film noir. I discussed this, because in my opinion these are some of the key aspects of the uniqueness of film noir. It might have helped explain why film noir is not a continuation of Weimar cinema.

In the end, I think that the question I asked will be a question that can be asked much more often. There is something to say for both the possible answers to this question. There are similarities, but differences as well between the two cinemas of film noir and Weimar. I believe this is to be found in all film genres, that there are always similarities and differences. In my opinion, film noir has enough traits of its own and are typical for its genre. If I had to give a yes or no answer to my question, I would say no.

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