

## Some Visual Motifs of *Film Noir*

### Janey Place & Lowell Peterson (1974)

A dark street in the early morning hours, splashed with a sudden downpour. Lamps form haloes in the murk. In a walk-up room, filled with the intermittent flashing of a neon sign from across the street, a man is waiting to murder or be murdered... shadow upon shadow upon shadow... every shot in glistening low-key, so that rain always glittered across windows or windscreens like quicksilver, furs shone with a faint halo, faces were barred deeply with those shadows that usually symbolized some imprisonment of body or soul.

Joel Greenberg and Charles Higham.

*Hollywood in the Forties*

Nearly every attempt to define *film noir* has agreed that visual style is the consistent thread that unites the very diverse films that together comprise this phenomenon. Indeed, no pat political or sociological explanations—"postwar disillusionment," "fear of the bomb," "modern alienation"—can coalesce in a satisfactory way such disparate yet essential *film noir* as *Double Indemnity*, *Laura*, *In a Lonely Place*, *The Big Combo* and *Kiss Me Deadly*. The characteristic *film noir* moods of claustrophobia, paranoia, despair, and nihilism constitute a world view that is expressed not through the films' terse, elliptical dialogue, nor through their confusing, often insoluble plots, but ultimately through their remarkable style.

But how can we discuss style? Without the films before us it is difficult to isolate the elements of the *noir* visual style and examine how they operate. Furthermore, while film critics and students would like to speak of the shots and the images, we often lack a language for communicating these visual ideas. This article is an attempt to employ in a critical context the technical terminology commonly used for fifty years by Hollywood directors and cameramen, in the hope that it might be a good step toward the implementation of such a critical language. The article is not meant to be either exhaustive or exacting. It is merely a discussion—with actual frame enlargements from the films—of some of the visual motifs of the *film noir* style: why they are used, how they work, and what we can call them.

## The "Noir" Photographic Style: Antitraditional Lighting and Camera

In order to photograph a character in a simple, basic lighting set-up, three different kinds of light, called by some cinematographers the "key light," "fill light," and "back light," are required. The key light is the primary source of illumination, directed on the character usually from high and to one side of the camera. The key is generally a hard direct light that produces sharply defined shadows. The fill light, placed near the camera, is a soft, diffused or indirect light that "fills in" the shadows created by the key. Finally, the back light is a direct light shining on the actor from behind, which adds interesting highlights and which has the effect of giving him form by differentiating him from the background.

The dominant lighting technique which had evolved by the early Forties is "high-key lighting," in which the ratio of key light to fill light is small. Thus the intensity of the fill is great enough to soften the harsh shadows created by the key. This gives what was considered to be an impression of reality, in which the character's face is attractively modeled, but without exaggerated or unnatural areas of darkness. *Noir* lighting is "low-key." The ratio of key to fill light is great, creating areas of high contrast and rich, black shadows. Unlike the even illumination of high-key lighting which seeks to display attractively all areas of the frame, the low-key *noir* style opposes light and dark, hiding faces, rooms, urban landscapes—and, by extension, motivations and true character—in shadow and darkness which carry connotations of the mysterious and the unknown.

The harsh lighting of the low-key *noir* style was even employed in the photography of the lead actresses, whose close-ups are traditionally diffused (by placing either spun glass or other diffusion over the key light, or glass diffusion or gauze over the camera lens itself) in order to show the actress to her best advantage. Far removed from the feeling of softness and vulnerability created by these diffusion techniques, the *noir* heroines were shot in tough, unromantic close-ups of direct, undiffused light, which create a hard, statuesque surface beauty that seems more seductive but less attainable, at once alluring and impenetrable.

The common and most traditional placement of lights, then and now, is known as the "three-quarter lighting" set-up, in which the key light is positioned high and about forty-five degrees to one side in front of the actor, and the fill is low and close to the camera. Because the attractive, balanced, harmonious face thus produced would have been antithetical to the depiction of the typical *noir* moods of paranoia, delirium, and menace, the *noir* cinematographers placed their key, fill and back light in every conceivable variation to produce the most striking and off-beat schemes of light and dark. The elimination of the fill produces areas of total black. Strange highlights are introduced, often on the faces of the sinister or demented. The key light may be moved behind and to one side of the actor and is then called the "kick light" Or it can be moved below or high above the charac-

ters to create unnatural shadows and strange facial expressions. The actors may play a scene totally in shadow, or they may be silhouetted against an illuminated background.

Above all, it is the constant opposition of areas of light and dark that characterizes *film noir* cinematography. Small areas of light seem on the verge of being completely overwhelmed by the darkness that now threatens them from all sides. Thus faces are shot low-key, interior sets are always dark, with foreboding shadow patterns facing the walls, and exteriors are shot "night-for-night." Night scenes previous to *film noir* were most often shot "day-for-night"; that is, the scene is photographed in bright daylight, but filters placed over the camera lens, combined with a restriction of the amount of light entering the camera, create the illusion of night. Night-for-night—night scenes actually shot at night—required that artificial light sources be brought in to illuminate each area of light seen in the frame. The effect produced is one of the highest contrast, the sky rendered jet black, as opposed to the gray sky of day-for-night. Although night-for-night becomes quite a bit more costly and time-consuming to shoot than day-for-night, nearly every *film noir*, even of the cheapest "B" variety, used night-for-night extensively as an integral component of the *noir* look.

Another requirement of *noir* photography was greater "depth of field." It was essential in many close or medium shots that focus be carried into the background so that all objects and characters in the frame be in sharp focus, giving equal weight to each. The world of the film is thus made a closed universe, with each character seen as just another facet of an unheeding environment that will exist unchanged long after his death; and the interaction between man and the forces represented by that *noir* environment is always clearly visible. Because of the characteristics of the camera lens, there are two methods for increasing depth of field: increasing the amount of light entering the lens, or using a lens of wider focal length. Obviously, because of the low light levels involved in the shooting of low-key and night-for-night photography, wide-angle lenses were used in order to obtain the additional depth of field required.

Beside their effect on depth of field, wide-angle lenses have certain distorting characteristics which, as *noir* photography developed, began to be used expressively. As faces or objects come closer to the wide lens they tend to bulge outward. (The first shot of Quinlan in *Touch of Evil* is an extreme example.) This effect is often used in *noir* films on close-ups of porcine gangsters or politicians, or to intensify the look of terror on the hero's face as the forces of fate close in upon him. These lenses also create the converse of the well-known "enddistancing effects" of the long, telephoto lenses: wide-angle has the effect of drawing the viewer into the picture, of including him in the world of the film and thus rendering emotional or dramatic events more immediate.

## The "Noir" Directorial Style: Antitraditional Mise-en-scène

Complementary to the *noir* photographic style among the better-directed films is a *mise-en-scène* designed to unsettle, jar, and disorient the viewer in correlation with the disorientation felt by the *noir* heroes. In particular, compositional balance within the frame is often disruptive and unnerving. Those traditionally harmonious triangular three-shots and balanced two-shots, which are borrowed from the compositional principles of Renaissance painting, are seldom seen in the better *film noir*. More common are bizarre, off-angle compositions of figures placed irregularly in the frame, which create a world that is never stable or safe, that is always threatening to change drastically and unexpectedly. Claustrophobic framing devices such as doors, windows, stairways, metal bed frames, or simply shadows separate the character from other characters, from his world, or from his own emotions. And objects seem to push their way into the foreground of the frame to assume more power than the people.

Often, objects in the frame take on an assumed importance simply because they act to determine a stable composition. Framed portraits and mirror reflections, beyond their symbolic representations of fragmented ego or idealized image, sometimes assume ominous and foreboding qualities solely because they are so compositionally prominent. It is common for a character to form constant balanced two-shots of himself and his own mirror reflection or shadow. Such compositions, though superficially balanced, begin to lose their stability in the course of the film as the symbolic Doppelgänger either is shown to lack its apparent substantiality or else proves to be a dominant and destructive alter ego. Similarly, those omnipresent framed portraits of women seem to confine the safe, powerless aspects of feminine sexuality with which the *noir* heroes invariably fall in love. But in the course of the film, as the forces mirrored in the painting come closer to more sinister flesh and blood, the compositions that have depended on the rectangular portrait for balance topple into chaos, the silently omniscient framed face becoming a mocking reminder of the threat of the real women.

In the use of "screen size," too, the *noir* directors use unsettling variations on the traditional close-up, medium and long shots. Establishing long shots of a new locale are often withheld, providing the viewer with no means of spatial orientation. Choker close-ups, framing the head or chin, are obtrusive and disturbing. These are sometimes used on the menacing heavy, other times reserved to show the couple-on-the-run whose intimacy is threatened or invaded. The archetypal *noir* shot is probably the extreme high-angle long shot, an oppressive and fatalistic angle that looks down on its helpless victim to make it look like a rat in a maze. *Noir* cutting often opposes such extreme changes in angle and screen size to create jarring juxtapositions, as with the oft-used cut from huge close-up to high-angle long shot of a man being pursued through the dark city streets.

Camera movements are used sparingly in most *noir* films, perhaps because of the great expense necessary to mount an elaborate tracking or boom shot, or perhaps simply because the *noir* directors would rather cut for effect from a close-up to a long shot than bridge that distance smoothly and less immediately by booming. What moving shots that were made seem to have been carefully considered and often tied very directly to the emotions of the characters. Typical is the shot in which the camera tracks backward before a running man, at once involving the audience in the movement and excitement of the chase, recording the terror on the character's face, and looking over his shoulder at the forces, visible or not, which are pursuing him. The cameras of Lang, Ray, and Preminger often make short tracking movements which are hardly perceptible, yet which subtly undermine a stable composition, or which slightly emphasize a character to whom we then give greater notice.

The "dark mirror" of *film noir* creates a visually unstable environment in which no character has a firm moral base from which he can confidently operate. All attempts to find safety or security are undercut by the antitraditional cinematography and *mise-en-scène*. Right and wrong become relative, subject to the same distortions and disruptions created in the lighting and camera work. Moral values, like identities that pass in and out of shadow, are constantly shifting and must be redefined at every turn. And in the most notable examples of *film noir*, as the narratives drift headlong into confusion and irrelevance, each character's precarious relationship to the world, the people who inhabit it, and to himself and his own emotions, becomes a function of visual style.

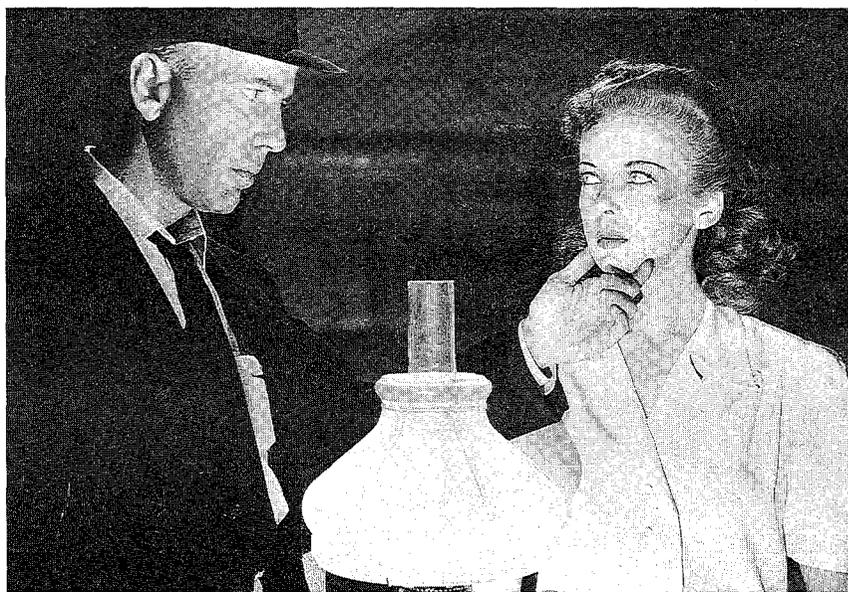
Below, the "normalcy" of this typical couple in love in *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* is undercut by their unsettling positions in an unbalanced frame.





*The Big Heat*: Above left, high-key lighting to convey normalcy, the everyday, Glenn Ford's bourgeois wife. Above right, low-key lighting of a dame who inhabits the "other world." Shadow areas hint at the hidden, the unknown, the sinister.

Below, Bogart finally realizes it is Lupino he loves in *High Sierra*. The low-placed key light creates a stark lighting in which interior feelings of the characters are finally exposed and laid bare.



Below left, hard direct lighting on an unmade-up face creates an unpretty close-up of a bitter and cynical Cathy O'Donnell at the beginning of *They Live by Night*. Below right, the same actress in softer light shot through a heavy diffusion filter over the camera lens. The sense of intimacy is further conveyed through use of choker close-up.





Left, a strange high-light under Bogart's eyes injects a sinister, demented quality into his mock description of his part in the murder in *In a Lonely Place*.

Right, Barbara Stanwyck under the rich, black sky of a night-for-night shot in *Double Indemnity*. Each illuminated area in the shot required that an artificial light source be brought in.



Below, one of the very few traditionally balanced two-shots of these two characters in all of *In a Lonely Place*. Bogart and Grahame experience a rare moment of safety and security. This shot cuts to this upsetting two-shot at right as the policeman who has been trailing the couple walks into the bar. Two characters each in tight close-up convey intimacy being invaded.





Above, *Night and the City*: left, bold, architectural lines carried in sharp focus over the large depth of field of a wide-angle lens minimize Richard Widmark's compositional importance. Right, as the night-club owner makes the decision to "get Harry," this low, wide-angle close-up distorts his already grotesquely fat face. Strong cross-light from the right throws unusual shadows on the left side of his face, carrying connotations of the sinister and evil.



Left, Dana Andrews framed behind a cabinet in *Laura*. The powerful foreground objects seem at once constricting and symbolic of a precarious situation which threatens at any moment to shatter to the floor.

Below, extreme framing devices: left, differences in lighting and screen size, and action played on different planes in depth separate a man and woman in *Night and the City*. Right: lonely characters isolated by framing devices in a composition of constricting vertical and horizontal lines manage to bridge the distance between them with a dramatic diagonal of exchanged glances from *In a Lonely Place*.





Above, a low-angle shot expresses the menace of Grahame's Lesbian masseuse in *In a Lonely Place*.

Top right and right, a short track-in to close two-shot expresses the fear and claustrophobia felt by Grahame in *In a Lonely Place*.



*The Big Heat*: right, Ford and Gloria Grahame are linked in space by the shadow area on the wall, which creates a bridge between their looks. Below, kick-lighting of the first shot of Lee Marvin immediately establishes him as a heavy threatening to erupt into violence. The restriction of depth of field and the turning of his head towards the camera give his figure power and control of the frame





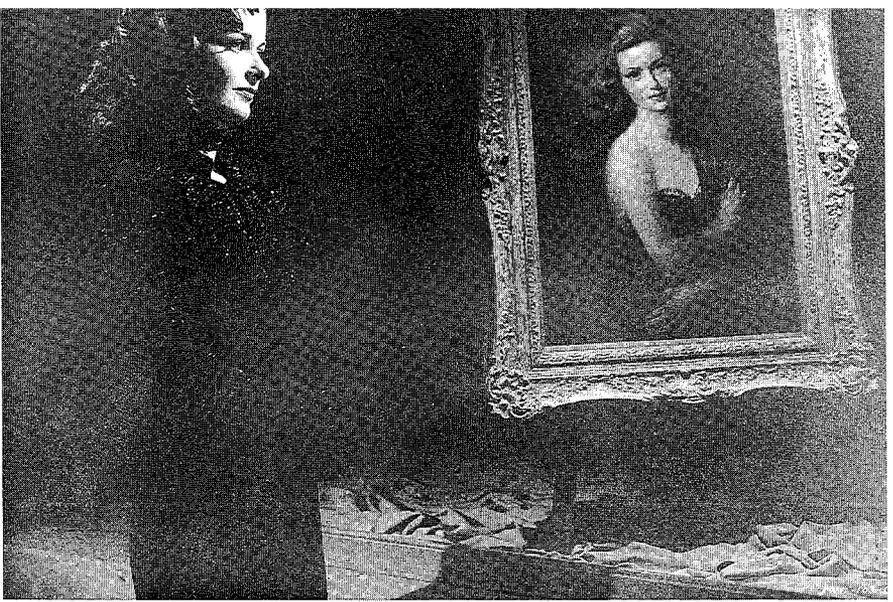
Above left, a choker (extreme) close-up emphasizes the grotesque face of Howard da Silva in his last scene in *They Live by Night*. Right, an extreme close-up of Bogart's eyes, framed by the isolating darkness of night and the city in the credits of *In a Lonely Place*.

Below, Edmond O'Brien's shadow in *The Killers* suggests an alter ego, a darker self who cohabits that frame's space. This and the frame enlargement at bottom page left are actually "two-shots" of only one character.



Below left, the many mirror reflections of Gloria Grahame in *The Big Heat* suggest her "other side" which during the course of the film is revealed. Right, isolated by labyrinth staircases in an extreme high-angle long shot from *Kiss Me Deadly*.





Above, an ominous portrait, emphasized by its dominant compositional function in making a balanced two-shot, stares out over the proceedings of *Woman in the Window*. The constant mirror reflections of Joan Bennett and the other characters subtly hint at their alter egos, revealed at the end of the film when the protagonist wakes up to discover it was all a dream. Below, two policemen form a dark, vertical mass not counterbalanced by the smaller, lighter horizontal figure of the punk hoodlum upon whom they are about to administer the third degree in *On Dangerous Ground*. The cops' downward looks, the position of their bodies, and the line of the bed frame create a heavy top-left to bottom-right diagonal in a precarious and unbalanced composition.

