

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Film Noir

Interview with Nicholas Christopher, author of Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City, April 2013.

You cite the image of the city as labyrinth as a central element in film noir. It is a mysterious and dangerous place. How has our image of the city changed since movies like *D.O.A.* and *Kiss Me Deadly*?

It has not changed in that each city, psychically and topographically, remains a labyrinth. What has changed is that American cities have become so homogenized, and architecture so vapid (at best) that there is a sameness to our cities that saps them of the individuality that endowed with charm and charged them with menace. We travel between identical airports and stay in faceless hotels. As a writer who has gone on book tour, I have often felt as if I have been in the same city for a couple of weeks and read in different (often identical looking) venues. Without individuality, there is not much basis for the noir sensibility.



Gloria Swanson In Billy Wilder's "Sunset Boulevard"

How have the female characters changed?

Become more powerful, as criminals, cops, you name it. Many women were empowered in noir in that they were far more perceptive and intuitive. Female characters are varied now, as they should be. Some are victims, some are perpetrators, others are bystanders, others are simply part of a faceless crowd. Just as it is in so-called real life.

Paul Schrader points to technical innovations of black and white film as an influence on film noir. Have there been subsequent technical innovations which have influenced our telling of the basic noir model?

No. Sophistication in lighting, cinematography, chiaroscuro all have been built upon, honed. Pyrotechnics and computerized action in recent films is something I enjoy; but it has little to do with influencing the "basic noir model."

The period 1942-1957, which gave rise to this movement, was a time of very specific and powerful social forces—immigration, urbanization, young men returning from the horrors of

World War II to unfamiliar cityscapes, and more. Has that made it impossible to recreate film noir in subsequent times?

We have had men and women returning from far more horrific wars, in some ways, in Iraq and Afghanistan, with inconceivably destructive weapons turned upon them (and which they have had to use in battle). Political corruption, a staple of noir: we had a presidential election stolen in 2000. We have a Supreme Court that plays games with voting rights and corrupting money pouring into politics. We have outright racism reaching a fever

pitch with our first African-American president being elected and reelected. And of course we have 9/11, in which, aside from Pearl Harbor, US soil was directly attacked. Our most important city and our capital were attacked, using our own aircraft. The threat of terror seems omnipresent. One can be blown up in a subway, a mall, a public park for no reason except that some murderous fanatic is sending a message of some kind or expressing a supposed grievance. I would say the elements that create true noir are omnipresent and will be used in neo-noir films, but not in a cheapened or sensational way.



Poster for The Maltese Falcon (1941)

Remakes like *Cat People* and movies like *Sin City* seem like almost a parodies of film noir – all style but little of the underlying substance. Is there a basic noir sensibility that you see today?

They are parodies. And not very interesting ones. The basic noir sensibility that I see I (partially) refer to above, in the previous question.

Influences from other fields—notably Expressionism—could be seen in the early noir films. Have other arts had similar influences on films?

Jazz, theater, poetry, the list goes on. All the arts influence one another. Film noir has many sources and spawned many other forms—fiction, poetry, painting. Edward Hopper is one my favorite examples. A film buff, he supported himself as an artist by painting movie posters. His art was nourished by film, by watching and studying film. The art he was creating at the time were paintings that would soon influence the art directors and cinematographers and directors of film noir. Images from his paintings were directly lifted from, and featured in, countless films noirs. Take a good look at the house on the hill in *PSYCHO* or any of the countless diners and gas stations in various noir films: in *THE KILLERS* alone, we see great examples of this phenomenon. And then there is science—a lot of scientific influences in film noir. And technical innovations. My favorite: the first film depiction of a telephone answering machine appears in *KISS ME DEADLY*. The hero, Mike Hammer, has a reel-to-reel tape recorder mounted on his wall that records his phone messages. It's a thing of beauty.