Films mentioned

As you work your way through this chapter you will need to watch at least the first two of these films in full and short sequences from the other two:

- The Big Combo (Lewis, 1955)
- Seven (Fincher, 1995)
Further noir films are mentioned throughout the chapter and it would be useful to have access to at least short clips from some of these films.

**General features**

Film noir was a term initially used by French critics (literally ‘dark’ or ‘black film’) to describe Hollywood films of the 1940s and early 1950s characterized by cynicism and pessimism and set within an oppressive urban world of crime and corruption. The ‘heroes’ are usually disillusioned men who face an uncertain future alone, friendship is difficult and only possible at a certain distance, love is most usually perverted in some way, and innocence cannot survive in such a world. The boundaries between good and evil become uncertain within a murky underworld experience typified by blackmail, bribery, murder and continual deception.

In style the films are dark, stark and bleak, with sets dominated by shadows of various depths that seem continually to threaten the main protagonist, and frames that often contain black or fog-bound or smoky spaces that threaten to engulf not only the characters but the film itself and the society it presents for our attention (as a classic example see the ending to *The Big Combo* (Lewis, 1955) with the blinking, uncertain light offering only a faint possibility of hope for the future). Although the key examples usually referenced are gangster/crime films, the style is also found in other genres such as melodramas and westerns. (Work such as that of the director Carol Reed and cinematographer Robert Krasker in Britain on *Odd Man Out* (1947) and *The Third Man* (1949) also, incidentally, shows that this style, and thematic outlook on the world, was not confined to Hollywood.)

**Activity**

Should film noir be seen as a genre or a style of filmmaking? As you set out to study these features watch a few clips from classic noir films from the 1940s and 1950s and jot down your initial thoughts on this question.

**Influence of German Expressionism**

The trend towards film noir in the post-war period is often seen as having been influenced by the influx of immigrant filmmakers from central Europe and disillusionment caused by the Second World War. It has also been suggested however that it was economically driven by the cutbacks in sets and lighting made during
the war and more feasibly the desire to produce low-budget movies with good percentage profit margins.

Certainly there is a strong sense in which these films, both in terms of cinematic style and bleak thematic content, echo German Expressionist film of the 1920s, a movement that may also be seen as having been influenced by the traumatic experience of the First World War. Filmmakers arriving in Hollywood after having fled from Europe would have had the experience of watching and perhaps contributing to German pre-war films. They would also have an intense awareness of the trauma experienced in Europe, not only during the war but from the time of Hitler’s coming to power in Germany in the early 1930s.

German Expressionist films used darkness and shadows in such a way as to create intensely threatening atmospheres. They often featured some monstrous embodiment of evil hanging over human society, and were more interested in conveying psychological states of turmoil and alienation than in achieving some sense of photographic realism. These films are seen as heavily influencing the horror genre (see Nosferatu (Murnau, 1922) for an example of a very direct influence) but noir films are, of course, also concerned with precisely this, the horror that exists within everyday life beneath only a very thin, superficial veneer of civilized manners.

**Reflecting the period**

Movies of this sort from Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s tended to be cheap B-movies about life on the streets that investigated the darker side of human nature. This is an area of life that Hollywood mainstream films have, it could be argued, tended to ignore other than in some unrealistic romanticized fashion. The central character in noir films is caught in a nightmare experience, and is often trapped by a seductively alluring woman. Is this the continuation of wartime trauma in a domestic situation? Was there a sense of the world as a doomed place during this period? Is this, in some films at least, anything to do with the Cold War fear of communism? Is this the nightmare of filmmakers caught up in the McCarthyite era when anyone with socialist sympathies was liable to be ostracized? Psychoanalytically, is this a representation of the male fear of the emerging ‘new woman’? Or, is this simply an economically driven transposing of popular pulp fiction to the screen motivated by the realization that if pulp fiction sold there would also be a market for pulp film?

**ACTIVITY**

Research the background of Fritz Lang, the director of The Big Heat (1953), which is a film noir with a somewhat similar narrative trajectory to that of The Big Combo studied later in this chapter. Lang directed Metropolis (1926), one of the most famous films to come out of Germany in the 1920s.
Technically, faster films, portable cameras and button microphones made it increasingly possible at this time to film on the streets and at night (see, for example, the bank heist and chase sequence in *Gun Crazy* (Lewis, 1949)).

Classic film noirs from the period, some of which you might like to research for yourself, include:

- *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston, 1941)
- *Shadow of a Doubt* (Hitchcock, 1943)
- *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944)
- *The Big Sleep* (Hawks, 1945)
- *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Garnett, 1946)
- *Out of the Past* (Tourneur, 1947)
- *Night and the City* (Dassin, 1950)
- *The Big Heat* (Lang, 1953)
- *Kiss Me Deadly* (Aldrich, 1955)
- *The Night of the Hunter* (Laughton, 1955)
- *Touch of Evil* (Welles, 1958)

**Activity**

1. Watch the opening to *The Big Combo* and one modern neo-noir of your choice, perhaps *Sin City* (Miller/Rodriguez/Tarantino, 2005). Make notes on the ways in which these films announce their genre to us.

2. As always do try to discuss your ideas with others, if possible.

More recent examples

There was a revival in this style in the 1980s and early 1990s in films such as *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), *Jagged Edge* (Marquand, 1985), *Blue Velvet* (Lynch, 1986), *The Usual Suspects* (Singer, 1995) and *Seven*. Perhaps it would be worth considering what social and political factors could be reflected in this renewal of interest in the darker side of man (if indeed this is not simply something that is always there in storytelling and is just expressed in slightly different ways in different periods).

**Activity**

If you have seen the whole of *Sin City* how does it fit into this picture? Should it be correctly seen as a further addition to the noir genre? If so,
Approaching noir films

For films in the classic noir or neo-noir mode it is always worth considering:

- the psychological exploration of the darker side of humankind that takes place
- the social exploration of the darker side of society that takes place
- the urban ‘realism’ that often sees modern life as a labyrinthine hell
- the use of light and shadow as representations of good and evil/danger
- the use of sparse sets that could be seen to represent the bleak psychological world in some way
- the use of psychological and actual violence, often within relationships and particularly within the sexual dimension of male–female relationships.

Case Study

**SEVEN (1995)**

(Director: David Fincher. Screenwriter: Andrew Kevin Walker. Cinematographer: Darius Khondji. Music: Howard Shore. Cast: Brad Pitt (David Mills); Morgan Freeman (William Somerset); Gwyneth Paltrow (Tracey Mills); Kevin Spacey (John Doe)).

[Image of Seven (1995)]
The relationship between two central characters

In Seven we have the classic detective genre combination of the older, hard-bitten professional and the younger, less cynical prodigy. This is a combination often used in other genres of course such as the western. What it allows for is the classic confrontation and need for reconciliation between old age embodying experience of life and youth embodying enthusiasm for life. Of course, what we also have at work here is a potential father–son relationship and the working out of the tensions and joys to be found in that relationship. (Furthermore, we also have the now often favoured Hollywood combination of lead actors: black and white.)

Use of film noir style

What is very clear from the continual murky gloom and rain of the city to the dark central thematic idea of the Seven Deadly Sins is this film’s noir heritage. Outside we are frequently positioned in such a way as to be
surrounded by bleak, grey city buildings that tower over us, or we see things
from behind fences that seem to cage and enclose. Inside we find ourselves
in dark corridors and box-like rooms, and always the intrusive sounds of the
city remain inescapable. The city is this terrifying place where Tracey, the
Ophelia-like embodiment of innocence, shudders at the thought of bringing
up a young child and where even the perverse logic of the serial killing John
Doe contains a horrifying element of truth. Notice the way in which even
the calm, ordered, learned and apparently highly civilized Somerset has this
midnight habit of throwing a switchblade at a dartboard. For Somerset, if
Mills is his younger self with a belief that with others he can contribute
towards bringing about change for the better, then Doe is almost his alter
ego, an other self whose thinking as a result of his own world-weary cyni-
cism he is able to understand only too fully.

Dark themes and outlook

Anything that is good cannot live in this world of darkness, and so the fate
of Tracey and her unborn baby, as with Ophelia in Hamlet, is entirely to be
expected. Notice how we do not see her death and even when John Doe
talks about it the details are left to our imagination. See as well the way in
which it is not simply the death of Tracey that is at stake here but the death
of hope and faith in humanity and confidence in the future (see what
happens ultimately to Mills).

The evening meal scene in which we initially come to identify with T racey
also serves to set up her relationship with Mills as the ideal high school
romance. They are, in their ‘young love’ relationship, in many ways the
embodiment of ‘the American Dream’, and of course this is what is also
therefore destroyed in the resolution phase.

The woman here is not the femme fatale of classic post-war film noirs but
much more like the embodiment of innocence that has often had to sacrifice
itself to save others in horror movies; only this time the sacrifice is pointless
and fails to defeat evil. It is perhaps in this dimension of the film, as much
as in the central often commented upon triangular relationship between the
male characters, that the way in which this film reflects a late twentieth-
century perspective may be seen most clearly.
Analysis of a scene

The brothel scene in which the detectives investigate the ‘lust’ murder would serve as an excellent example of this film’s style. We descend from the dark, chaotic streets above, following the detectives down into the red hell-like depths of the brothel. We are confused by the noise, which makes it difficult to pick out what is being said, and by the editing that works to further disorientate us as we struggle to get our bearings. The overall feeling is one of being enclosed in claustrophobic tunnel-like spaces, which is not relieved when we come into the dark boxed space of the room in which the murder occurred. Here we are placed in such a position as to be unable to make out exactly what has happened; in other words, we are left with further uncertainty and confusion. Only gradually in the interview session that follows are we permitted to piece together bit by horrifying bit the gruesome details of the murder. Shots such as that of the close-up of the male visitor to the brothel who has been forced to carry out the murder compel us to confront the full extent of the horror. The blank grey background and the white blanket framing his face only serve to make doubly sure that we concentrate on the actor’s facial performance. And isn’t it a powerful cameo performance?

ACTIVITY

- Which parts of this film did you find most shocking? Why? Write down your ideas.
- If possible, compare your thoughts with those of other people. Were there any similarities or interesting differences in your ideas?

ACTIVITY

Watch these two successive scenes and discuss with others the ways in which elements of film construction work to create a specific impact on the audience.
The Christian context

Sin is the concept of human faults that offend a God who embodies all good. These faults, or evil, bring with them a sense of guilt for any being with a conscience (and guilt of course carries connotations of the need for punishment). According to Christian teaching the Seven Deadly Sins are anger, lust, gluttony, sloth, pride, envy and avarice.

ACTIVITY

Construct a flow chart showing the narrative structure of this film in terms of these seven sins, illustrating how they relate to different elements of the plot.

The existence of sin in the world brings with it the need for a Redeemer or Saviour, in Christian terms Christ, who is seen as having died for our sins, making himself a sacrifice that we might be forgiven. Without this sort of basic knowledge of the Christian religion it is difficult to fully appreciate Seven, but with it you begin to see the way in which John Doe could be seen to believe himself to be some sort of Messianic figure, perhaps even a divine agent sacrificing himself in order to provide a message/lesson for humanity.

ACTIVITY

1. After you have watched the whole film, return to the opening sequence.
2. How has your reading of this section of the film changed?
3. What images and sounds seem significant now in ways that they did not to begin with?
**ACTIVITY**

1. Analyse a sequence (no more than ten minutes) of your own choice from this film in terms of its genre and narrative structure.
2. Make notes on your chosen sequence and then, if possible, discuss your ideas with somebody else, or several others, who are working on the same exercise.
3. Write an analysis (1,000–1,500 words) of the ways in which genre and narrative structure create meaning and generate audience response in your chosen sequence. Give your piece a title in the form of a question:

   How do genre and narrative structure create meaning and generate audience response in the (name or timing of scene) scene in *Seven*?

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**Case Study**

*THE BIG COMBO (1955)*

(Director: Joseph H. Lewis. Screenwriter: Philip Yordan. Cinematographer: John Alton. Music: David Raksin. Cast: Cornel Wilde (Leonard Diamond); Richard Conte (Mr Brown); Jean Wallace (Susan Lowell); Helene Stanton (Rita); Lee Van Cleef (Fante); Earl Holliman (Mingo); Brian Donlevy (Joe McClure); Helen Walker (Alicia Brown).)

**ACTIVITY**

- Watch the opening sequence from the opening shots of the city through as far as the point at which Fante and Mingo have caught Susan.
The central character

*The Big Combo* employs the classic central character of the isolated detective. The idea of the loner who has to confront evil is, of course, not confined to noirs and this type of male hero is often found in other genres, especially perhaps westerns. On the face of it he is the morally upright embodiment of higher social values who is driven to ‘nail’ the mob chief for no other reason than it is the right thing to do. But he is also in love with Mr Brown’s girl, Susan Lowell, and knows he is capable of himself being...
hard and heartless (see how he describes the way in which he has used Rita). It often seems that he is a creature of the night, working late and in his element on dark streets and around sleazy bars, essentially existing within the same world as the gangsters.

### Activity

- What is the nature of heroes within recent films that you know? Do they have dark sides to their character or parts of themselves with which they are not comfortable?
- Does Diamond have anyone who could be seen as a partner who works with him? If so, how does he treat this person? Trace this relationship and the role of this partner through the film.

### Use of film noir style

Notice the way in which in the opening to the film we are taken down into the city and within a short time find ourselves within a maze of corridors, uncertain who is chasing who and for what reason, and disorientated in the sense that we are unsure which is the way out of this complex of spaces in which we find ourselves. If you consider the composition of shots, you will find that characters are often alone within large spaces, or characters within the frame are separated from each other by being placed at different depths within the space. Actors’ bodies are also often carefully orientated towards or away from each other, or towards or away from the camera. This often seems highly staged but is also visually suggestive; for instance, see how Susan is enclosed or entrapped by the flanking bodies of Fante and Mingo when they catch her in the opening sequence.

### Activity

- Working with a group of other people, try to replicate a few scenes of your own choice from *The Big Combo* in which the positioning of actors within the framed space seems to you to be interesting in some way.
Dark themes and outlook

If the noir world is a place in which death is an ever present possibility, it is also a hell-like experience within which individuals are punished on a daily basis and an assassin lurks around every corner. When Diamond catches up with the old man Bettini, we have a powerful medium shot of his face and upper body as he lays his head on a pillow (turned away from what he assumes to be a hit-man hired to kill him and directly towards us), and asks for a clean end. When the seemingly confident Dreyer leaves his shop and closes the door behind him we have only the sound effect of a shooting to signal his death off screen.

ACTIVITY

List the deaths and how they take place in this film.
Are there further characters (such as Bettini in the assumed narrative years before Diamond knocks on his door) who in a sense have been living their lives as ‘deaths’?

ACTIVITY

Experiment with changing the set-ups in order to see if this potentially alters the meanings being conveyed to the audience and, if so, in what ways.
You may like to film retakes of your chosen scenes with altered set-ups of the actors and then play these to other people in order to gauge their responses to the changes.

Discuss with others the ways in which lighting, camera angles and editing seem to be used in the film. Try to refer to specific scenes and discuss why you think these elements of construction have been used in particular ways in these scenes.
So, even if you are ‘alive’ in this world, often you essentially seem to exist only as a shadow or a shade waiting for the final moment. For Brown, ‘first is first and second is nobody’; and we might do well to consider that term ‘nobody’ in relation to this film. For instance, has Alicia chosen to live her life in the sort of ‘half-way house’ type of space that might be implied by such a term? Furthermore, on several occasions characters are rendered unconscious or semi-conscious, reduced to a state that in some ways resembles death. Characters are placed in a prone position on screen or fall into a prone position for a variety of reasons. On several occasions bodies are placed across the front of a shot with Diamond behind them.

** ACTIVITY **

List the times when characters are positioned in unconscious, semi-conscious or semi-delirious states.

** INFORMATION BOX – DELIRIUM **

‘Delirium’ is defined as a state that often results from or is a symptom of disease. It is said to be characterized by a wandering mind, light-headedness and/or temporary insanity. Notions of disease and madness/insanity can be highly fruitful areas of investigation as regards the underpinning thematic concerns of film noir.

The role and place of women

Noir films from the 1940s and 1950s are often seen in terms of the attempt to define or control central female characters. Some are so clearly out of control as the deadly femme fatale leading man to his doom that they can only be dealt with through death; see, for example, Annie Laurie at the end of *Gun Crazy* where the full extent of her madness is revealed. Others like Mildred at the end of *Mildred Pierce* (Curtiz, 1945) can be made to see the error of their ways and brought back to their senses. In this film the male police detective, it has been suggested, acts as a sort of psychoanalyst, taking Mildred back through her family’s past and towards an understanding
Often the central female character is strong, assertive and intensely aware of her sexuality, so that the dominant image that comes through despite the taming of this potentially dangerous creature that occurs at the end is of a powerful woman, newly empowered perhaps in Western society.

**ACTIVITY**

- How would you read the three female characters in *The Big Combo*? Is Susan the ‘good bad-girl’; that is, somebody who has been attracted to evil but has been caught up in it without being fully aware of what has taken place and now wants to find a way out (even if it means taking her own life)? Does she come across as being weak or strong, or fluctuating from weak to strong at different moments? How would you read the final scene with respect to Susan? Who does she ally herself to during the action? How would you interpret the final moments as she moves towards Diamond, he waits for her and then they move off together?
- What about Rita, and Alicia? In what ways and at what points would you see these characters as either weak or strong? How do they compare to Susan in terms of their sexuality and the display of that sexuality?
- Do these seem to you to be particularly male notions or understandings of women?
- If possible, try to compare your ideas with those of other people.

**ACTIVITY**

- When you first watched this film, did you find any parts shocking in any way?
- When you began to analyse the narrative in more detail, did you begin to find more sections shocking or disturbing?
- If possible, compare your thoughts with those of other people. Were there any similarities or interesting differences in your ideas?
Analysis of a scene

The final scene appropriately involves only the three key characters of Diamond, Brown and Susan, the love triangle. Conte’s performance is in strong contrast to his easy confidence in previous scenes. The hesitations and repetitions, and the rise and fall in the delivery of the lines, immediately give a sense of his mounting fear and vulnerability. He slips several times during the scene as he attempts to run and uses physical violence against Susan, in both cases performing the sort of actions he has previously never needed to engage in. When Diamond finally moves in close the fact that Brown is much shorter than his adversary is revealed for the first time. Diamond’s footsteps as he moves ever closer to Brown through the darkness echo his steady, unrelenting detective work through the rest of the film: and in relentlessly pursuing Brown with the spotlight Susan takes back control of her life and prepares the way for her final movement towards Diamond. The scene, of course, parallels the earlier scene in which McClure has been killed and in doing so reveals Brown’s own ultimately pathetic nature; so much so that in the end he is dismissed by Diamond as nothing more than a ‘hoodlum’.

ACTIVITY

Watch the two scenes in the aircraft hangar and discuss with others the ways in which elements of film construction work to create a specific impact on the audience in both scenes.

ACTIVITY

- Construct a flow chart, or alternative diagram, showing the narrative structure of The Big Combo. You should include as much detail as possible but in as succinct a fashion as possible so that the diagram remains easy to read and understand.
- Compare your flow chart/diagram with those of other people and take note in particular of any differences.
In what ways are *Seven* and *The Big Combo* similar and in what ways are they different? Both of the main characters, Diamond and Mills, set out to confront and defeat evil. Both have an older partner who they work with on the case. Both have love interests within the narrative who are killed. Are these superficial similarities or important ones? What other similarities in characters or character relationships could be made? Would the differences in these areas be more important than the similarities?

If we were to consider the narrative structure, what similarities and differences would we note? The resolution phases seem to be rather different; would this be a reflection of the different periods in which the films were made? Do both function as a detective mystery in which various pieces of information have to be carefully pieced together by the audience as well as by the central character(s)? Although they might end differently, are both narratives essentially set up as the effort or quest of one man to ‘make a difference’? Both would seem to use one villain as the embodiment of evil. And both villains would seem to be immensely self-assured and confident not only in themselves but in their (almost philosophical) understanding of the world. To what other similarities or differences in narrative structure would you draw attention?

Thematically, both films are obviously about the struggle between good and evil. Both see the city as a dark, threatening place. But the two films would seem to use women in very different ways; although it is true that as the embodiment of innocence Tracey in *Seven* can have no place in this world and the one thing that is never seen in *The Big Combo* is the idea of innocence or purity. The American Dream, in other words, has no place in either film world. Would you agree, or disagree? What other themes would you emphasize?

What about style? Which elements of film construction would you see as constituting similarities or differences between the two films? And then, finally, are the similarities substantial enough for these two films to be justifiably classified within the same genre?
ACTIVITY

1 Prepare an argument either for or against seeing these two films as part of the same genre.
2 If possible, compare your argument with that of somebody else who has tried to argue the contrary case. Have you used different ideas and different scenes to make your cases, or have you used essentially the same points and scenes but with a different emphasis? Were there points you were consciously trying to avoid in order to make your case as strong as possible?
3 Would it be possible to argue both for and against within the same response, and, if so, how would you handle the conclusion?

ACTIVITY

1 Compare and contrast two short sequences of no more than five minutes each, one from Seven and the other from The Big Combo. You can choose these for yourself but make sure you think carefully about the choice you are making. You should have clear reasons as to why you feel these two sequences will enable you to make useful comparisons.
2 Make notes on your chosen sequences and then if possible discuss your ideas with other people working on the same task.
3 Write an analysis (1,000–1,500 words) comparing the ways in which genre and narrative structure create meaning and generate audience response in your chosen sequences.

References and Further Reading

Duncan, P. (2000) Film Noir, Pocket Essentials, Harpenden
Useful Websites

www.brightlightsfilm.com
www.imagesjournal.com
www.germanhollywood.com
www.moderntimes.com