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DARK VISIONS: CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES IN MODERN NEO-NOIR FILMS

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Abstract: In his seminal contribution to Ursini and Silver's 1996 Film Noir Reader, Erickson embarked on a journey to elucidate the intricacies of "neonoir" cinema, exploring its nuances from three distinct perspectives. This essay, in alignment with Erickson's exploration, delves into the core of one of these perspectives: the technical advancements facilitated by color film stock. Focused on the evolution of cinematography, this study aims to dissect the transformative technical changes that accompanied the emergence of "neo-noir." The concept of "neonoir" represents a critical juncture in cinematic history, marked by a departure from the traditional film noir aesthetic. Erickson's examination of this phenomenon in relation to technical innovations, particularly the utilization of color film stock, serves as a springboard for this analysis. The study seeks to unravel the profound impact of these advancements on the visual language of neo-noir cinema, shedding light on how technical evolution played a pivotal role in shaping the aesthetic and thematic dimensions of this cinematic genre. As the essay navigates through the intricate web of technical changes, it traces the birth of "neo-noir" alongside the evolution of cinematography. The exploration extends beyond the theoretical framework, aiming to illustrate the practical implications of these technical advancements in the visual storytelling process. By dissecting the nuances of color film stock utilization, the study aims to discern the subtle and overt shifts in cinematographic practices that defined the neo-noir landscape. The interplay between technological progress and cinematic artistry unfolds as a central theme, unraveling the symbiotic relationship between the technical and narrative facets of neo-noir cinema. Through this investigation, the essay contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay between technological innovation and cinematic evolution, casting a spotlight on the birth of "neo-noir" as a transformative chapter in film history.

Keywords: Neo-Noir, Cinematography, Technical Advancements, Color Film Stock, Film Aesthetics

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INTRODUCTION

In his contribution to Ursini and Silver‟s 1996 *Film Noir Reader*, Erickson sets out to define the concept of "neonoir" cinema from three different points of view. One of those – the technical advancements made with color film stock (Erickson, 1996) - are at the heart of this essay that aims to look at the technical changes in the field of cinematography that were part of the birth of "neo-noir".

While much has been written on the theoretical and film-historical evolutions that were important for the ascent of "neo-noir", few scholars have pursued a more empirical technological approach that would take into account technological elements as part of the rise and subsequent demise of "film noir" and the advent of "neonoir". While one should be mindful of Guerra (2014:141)‟s warning that "the technical development of cinema alone does not represent the privileged way to sketch out a faithful history of film", it is undeniable that the technological aspects that undergird certain developments in film noir‟s (both classical and neo) visual style, have received relatively modest attention.

Drawing from the work of Keating and Salt, this article will incorporate technological evolutions (mainly in the field of film stocks and lenses) from the sixties, seventies and eighties and assess how these contributed to the demise of the "noir" genre from the late fifties onwards and the return of "noir" in a new form in the seventies and eighties.

Technical changes are at the heart of Keating‟s and Glitre‟s recent research that positions „noir‟ as a visual category, rather than a combination of themes, moods and storylines. The author will test their claims against the evolution of film stocks and lenses that led to the demise of "noir" and eventually the advent of "neo-noir", while also addressing the suggestion put forward by some authors that „true‟ neo-noir only came about at the start of the 1980s, rather than with a more generally acknowledged cycle of films from the early 70s. As the author summarizes below, periodizing both „classical noir‟ and „neo-noir‟ has always been mired in contrasting views and we believe using a visual and technological approach can clear up some of these discussions. As the author argues, looking at technological limitations and subsequent new developments that determined visual style, offers a solid model for charting the demise of classical "noir" and later rise of "neo-noir", without having to resort to discussions about thematic or narrative specifications that may or may not be present in every "noir" or "neo-noir".

The look of Noir

In "Kill me Again: Movement becomes Genre", Erickson‟s contribution to the *Film Noir Reader*, Erickson suggests three distinctive evolutions that led from the demise of the so-called "classical noir" to the ascent of the "neo-noir" genre. Two of those focus on the content, noir tropes and themes and changes in society.

The third one – "Technical Advancement made with Color Film Stock" – has its focus on a field of research that has received much less attention when it comes to studying "noir‟" and "neo-noir".

A more technical empirical approach has however, been somewhat applied to the study of classical "noir"[1], usually serving as a basis to distinguish what "neo-noir" is not (without quotation marks for further reference). An influential 1974 text by Place and Peterson, sums up most of the perspective on the visual style of classical

[1] I am sidestepping the discussion here if noir is a "genre" or a "movement" and what that means for delineating the period of classical noir, instead using the more or less conventionalized time frame (see eg. Hirsch 1999) of 1944 – 1958 as the period for classical noir. Engaging with this discussion would mean to engage with contemporary genre theory which would be an unnecessary digression for my approach and merits a full article of its own.

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film noir: it juxtaposes "high key" (low contrast) three point lighting, day-for-night, shallow focus, normal length lenses and mise-en-scène and camera movements of the
"classical system" with noir‟s imbalanced lighting schemes, use of low key, deep focus and wide lenses, as well as the use of extreme angles and "dissymmetrical mise-en-scène" (Place and Peterson, 1974). This statement suggests that differed in significant ways from the classical continuity system that was the default mode for filmmaking in the 1940‟s Hollywood studio system (Bordwell et al.,1985).
Among others, Keating (2010), Bordwell (2017) and Vernet (1993) have convincingly argued however, that noir was by no means anti-classical and was in fact just another modus of the "classical Hollywood studio system" and part of more general evolutions within 1940‟s American films.
As Keating points out – using the work of John, one of film noir‟s most prolific directors of photography (DP) – what is generally perceived as being the distinguishing factor in noir cinematography, is much more embedded within more general use of lighting within the Hollywood tradition than it might appear at first sight (Keating, 2010:245-264). Keating‟s arguments make the case that noir‟s visual style is much more a matter of emphasis and gradation within the existing modes of practice, rather than a set of genre-defining visual assets. Bordwell argues along the same lines regarding noir‟s thematic, narrative and visual structures (Bordwell, 2017), Mark goes even further, pushing back against the generalization that many of noir‟s visual tropes were introduced by émigré directors (Vernet,1993) who brought the Expressionist style from Germany to Hollywood, and made it one of the defining elements of the noir genre. According to Vernet, noir naturally emerged from the Hollywood style of the 30s, with films like Fritz Lang‟s *You Only Live Once* (1937) and *Blind Alley* (Vidor, 1939) paving the way for the style of the 40s.
Although Vernet‟s approach has been controversial[2], we do believe this set of arguments at least demands a revision of existing scholarship regarding the visual style of classical noir, as most of these arguments are supported by a close viewing of several key films that preceded classical noir. One does not have to look much further than James Wong Howe‟s cinematography for William K. Howarth‟s *The Power and the Glory* (1933) to see the validity of Keating‟s arguments, while Vernet‟s case – noir‟s expressionism grew as much out of regular Hollywood practices as out of any other supposed influences - is strengthened by earlier "expressionist" images in films like the *Blind Alley* or *You Only Live Once*.
The same observations hold true for noir‟s prolific use of tilted angles, wide angle lenses and deep focus cinematography. Cinematographer Gregg is historically credited with being one of the key figures in introducing these elements into the vocabulary of the Hollywood studio film (*American Cinematographer [AC]* December 1938, 488-489/ *AC* October 1940, 434) but in the wake of his work on *The Long Voyage Home* (Ford, 1940) and the highly influential *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941), these innovative new visual elements were adopted by other genres just as much as by crime dramas (the standard term for noirs before French critics coined the term "film noir"). Melodramas such as *The Little Foxes* (Wyler, 1941) or *The Best Years of Our Lives* (Wyler, 1946) may not

[2] Vernet‟s claim rests on arguments about a "proto noir" style already being very much embedded within Hollywood practices in the thirties. However, Vernet seems to deny any influence from European cinema and émigré directors, while still referring to studio films by Fritz Lang, who was one of the most prolific émigré directors. While I believe Vernet makes some very astute points, I also think he pushes some of them too far and in the Silver & Ursini volume several authors offer more nuanced views

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have been held in high regard by the French critics that introduced film noir to the world (Chartrier, 1946), but they showcased a lot of similar visual strategies to the films that would later be labeled film noir.

While these arguments shed a different light on Place and Peterson‟s rather outdated account of noir‟s defining visual elements, Bordwell illustrates in *Re-Inventing Hollywood*, that noir‟s proclivity for flashbacks and the use of (Freudian) psychology and dream sequences was also part of a general tendency in narrative structure in the forties, prominent in melodramas such as *Our Town* (Wood, 1940) and thus definitely not restricted to crime dramas (Bordwell, 2017). The same was true for noir‟s visual palette that grew out of the broader visual experimentation in Hollywood films in this decade.

What then to make of this elusive set of very loose genre-defining elements that are supposed to tie together the concept of film noir? If neither the visual elements, nor the narrative structures and themes were unique to film noir, what element then holds together the cycle of very different films made between 1944 and 1958 as being noir? One answer has been to look at socio-cultural phenomena that undergirded noir‟s downbeat world view (Porfirio, 1976). Another has been to try determining which of noir‟s visual tropes was different enough to be singled out as being instrumental in the visual concept of film noir. As noted above, these ideas have mainly focused on noir being anti-classical vis-à-vis contemporary American films (Place and Peterson, 1974), a notion that has been heavily challenged since and is ready for reevaluation.

While enough scholars have convincingly argued that noir was but one among many modes of studio practice, this does not invalidate the fact that film noir did have a preference for the use of a certain kind of imagery. Even if those images were to be found in other genres as well, it is undeniable that stark contrasts in lighting, deep focus cinematography, the use of wide-angle lenses and tilted or heavily angled camera positions, tended to be more present in films noir. As Keating puts it: “noir is Hollywood mannerism, it takes the widely accepted ideal of expressivity and extends it to new extremes”. In this way, classical noir is indeed embedded in long standing traditions of Hollywood cinematography, while at the same time being a genre that pushed those traditions to new extremes, something that Keating defines as a “modulating” style (Keating, 2010:244-249).

Another salient key observation is that these are all possibilities (apart from the “Dutch” or “Tilted” angle (Salt, 1997:177) that had been around for a long time) that grew out of technical developments in the late thirties and early forties (Cousins, 2004:178-181). The deep focus cinematography and the sharp chiaroscuro that started to dominate American cinema in the forties, were brought about when Gregg, Bert and a few other notable DPs, started experimenting with the use of Kodak and Agfa‟s new film stock (Salt, 1997:216), opening the possibilities for a new kind of cinematic style that gained a foothold in the early forties. Obviously other factors are at work here too, but the use of „faster‟ negatives was a key element. Drawing from Keating‟s argument, one might contend that film noir‟s visual arsenal was one that used these possibilities to an extreme degree, thus conforming to Keating‟s thesis that the visual style of noir was more a matter of emphasis than exclusivity. This thesis gains plausibility, when we turn to the literature that charts the road from classical noir to neo-noir. Erickson (1996), Glitre (2009) and Hirsch (1999) have all argued that classical noir de facto disappeared from American filmmaking in the late fifties and early sixties, due to the switch to color film in regular studio practices that robbed film noir of much of its expressive capabilities: Glitre states “We need to reflect on the centrality of black-and whiteness to critical arguments about noir”. She adds: “The use of chiaroscuro lighting is frequently

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commented on, but it is less often noted that such lighting is particularly suited to black-and-white film" (Glitre, 2009:12).

According to these authors then, technical advancement in color film stock subsequently allowed for color film to return to the visual style of black and white noir, giving birth to neo-noir[3] - a thesis this essay will address. By positioning the visual style of noir as a main determining factor, author believes it is possible to solve some of the ongoing discussions about periodizing both noir and neonoir.

From this perspective, the technical possibilities of Eastman-Kodak‟s "Super XX" film stock in particular, were at the heart of the visual developments in forties‟ Hollywood studio system and film noir‟s visual style. Put differently: without those technical advancements, the particular visual style of film noir would have been impossible and noir – even though other genres used them as well – pushed these possibilities to extremes, by resorting to unusually stark contrasts, night-for-night shooting and extremely expressive use of lighting. An example taken from Keating‟s work illustrates this idea: the way John stages a key scene in Anthony Mann‟s *TMen* (1947) by creating a whiteout using steam as a contrast for the dark silhouette in the foreground (Keating, 2010:261) puts the possibilities of faster film stock on full display. This is but one example of noir‟s tendency to maximize certain visual elements that – while present elsewhere – could be pushed to heightened levels in order to create the unstable and "unheimlich" (uncanny) filmic worlds that have been put forward as noir‟s defining element (Place and Peterson, 1974).

This perspective offers a possible approach for mapping the way in which film noir largely disappeared during the fifties and sixties, being reborn as neo-noir in the late seventies and eighties. In this way one can chart technical advancements that either support or undermine the claims that neo-noir‟s emergence required cinematographers to find the "color equivalent" of the visual language that noir had in black and white. Keeping in mind, however, that some scholars (Glitre, 2010, 2009) even seem to suggest that neo-noir only really came about in the early eighties, because the seventies counterparts – save for some exceptions - did not in fact reproduce this visual vocabulary to the same degree and that it was only the eighties film noir that started pushing the possibilities to the same extremes as the forties and fifties predecessors did. Indeed, this point is addressed when Glitre talks about the need for stark tonal contrast in color cinematography and its use in eighties neo-noirs (13).

The paragraphs below will use a methodology that looks at a detailed set of technical advancements throughout the 60s, 70s and 80‟s – mainly focusing on film stock, lighting and lenses – to highlight decisive changes that either prove or disprove the claim that technological changes were instrumental in both the demise of classical noir and the rise of neo-noir. If a correlation can be found that matches technical advancements to the proposed evolution from noir to neo-noir, the question will also be addressed of when exactly this shift occurred and whether films of the eighties – the ones Glitre upholds as the first "true neonoirs" – did indeed push the technical possibilities to the same extremes as classical noir did, resulting in an equally extreme visual palette as their forties and fifties counterparts and thus for the first time creating a style that could be labeled as noir again (Glitre).

The 1950s

Glitre and Keating have linked the decline of film noir in the late fifties to Hollywood‟s switch from black and white to color that was all but complete by the early sixties. The question arises, however, if color film stock had

[3] Obviously, John M. Stahl‟s Leave Her to Heaven (1945) is always the exception to the rule, along with a few lesser examples – but as a genre or cycle, film noir is definitely tied to the use of black and white film stock.

not yet been developed to such a degree that it allowed for the same expressive use as black and white stock. Another question is why the influence of European art cinema, and most noticeable, the French "Nouvelle Vague", did not spur a renewed interest in black and white filming or even a revival of classical film noir, a group of films that was heavily championed by French criticism as being one of the most interesting and artistically viable American formats.

To chart the main technical changes throughout the decades that are relevant for this text, we will draw largely from Barry Salt‟s *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* from issues of *American Cinematographer*. Salt‟s extensive study famously does not contain any footnotes and thus provides a wealth of detailed information, without ever citing the exact sources. Throughout several editions of his work however, it has become clear that these sources include trade press, AC, technical manufacturer‟s manuals and studio archives. Moreover, throughout the years Salt‟s book has become a source for several authors and scholarly articles (Keating), basically transforming the non-footnoted or annotated work into a fairly reliable source for technical information that has been widely acknowledged and contains very little technical information that has been challenged at this time.

In her contribution to the 2009 volume on neo-noir, Glitre strongly reaffirms the scholarly perspective in film noir studies that ties the classical cycle of noir to black and white cinematography, stating that the tonal scale of black and white, its possibilities for chiaroscuro lighting, extreme contrasts and use of shadows (Glitre, 2009:12), are particularly suited to visualize noir‟s narrative themes and somber world view. Glitre links the decline of film noir in the late fifties to the fact that black and white film stock disappeared from the majority of American studio productions and claims that film noir needed to„rediscover‟ the same expressive possibilities in color film stock before neo-noir could really become a viable option.

The technical evidence at the very least does support the almost complete switch to color film stock in the late fifties and early sixties and the vast difference between lighting possibilities for color and B/W film stock: In 1956 Angenieux marketed a new ultra-wide-aperture lens (25 mm) that vastly improved upon earlier similar lenses allowed, in combination with the fastest black and white film (250 ASA), DPs to shoot under about any lighting conditions. The Super XX B/W film was the preferred stock allowed for any kind of contrast or lighting the filmmakers saw fit. At the same time, even the fastest new color film stocks that appeared near the end of the fifties had at best a speed of around 100 ASA (Salt, 1997:267- 271) which drastically reduced the lighting and contrast possibilities for color films[4]. In 1953 Eastman Kodak devised a new intermediate duplicating negative[5] (267-268) that allowed for some color correction in the final print, but even with these technical advancements, the argument stands that the expressive possibilities as far as contrast, chiaroscuro and lighting are concerned, were indeed much more limited for color cinematography than they were for B/W. Still, it does seem to be the case that the possibilities to circumvent these limitations were available when really needed: For *Moby Dick* (Huston, 1956), John and cinematographer Oswald had the laboratory manufacture an extra intermediate B/W negative that was combined with the color negative for the final print, in order to add extra deep blacks (268).

[4] ASA (or ISO) codes give a relative number to the light sensitivity of the film stock. The lower the number, the less sensitive the film is to light (commonly referred to as „slower‟ film stocks). The new B/W stocks that came on the market in the late thirties allowed for filming under low light conditions and use of deep focus cinematography in a way that was impossible with older film stocks. Color negatives at this point were noticeably slower.

[5] A somewhat faster 125 ASA Ektachrome negative was also available, but this was a very low-contrast film that was meant for reversal stock master material instead of actual projection or finished product (Salt 1997, 268)

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Moby Dick was, however, an extremely high budgeted production (Steinhart, 2019: 56-69) and while it is a misconception that the majority of films noir were low budget affairs (Naremore, 1998) the possibility of going through this expensive extra process was probably only an option for the most prestigious high budget titles and even then, it was through use of B/W negative that this effect was achieved.

A special mention is needed for Technicolor, which became the dominant color process for American film production in the early fifties. Between 1950 and 1955 the process only allowed for stock use between 50 and 100 ASA but with the use of the improved Eastman color negative from 1955 onwards higher contrast and deeper blacks could be obtained. The Hazeltine Color Analyzer that was introduced in 1959 would further improve color filming even though the "speed" of the color negatives remained considerably lower than the B/W counterparts (Salt, 1997:268-69). Nevertheless, strictly speaking it would have been more or less possible for studios and directors to aim for somewhat of a "colored" equivalent of the film noir style, but all evidence suggests that with the original cycle of B/W noir only coming to an end in the late fifties, this did not seem to be a feasible or even desirable option, cementing the argument that it would take further technical development before filmmakers would start considering color as a viable noir element.

Glitre adds to this that Technicolor consultant‟s emphasized restraint and the need for the technology to complement narrative in a conventional way (Glitre, 2009:13). Despite this convincing argument, one needs to take a hard and close look at Technicolor as possibly throwing a wrench in the construction of the technical inhibition argument for the disappearance of noir. Looking at the films by prolific directors like Vincente Minnelli (*An American in Paris* – 1951, *Lust for Life* – 1956) or Douglas Sirk (*All That Heaven Allows* – 1955, *Written on the Wind* – 1956), it is very clear that despite the technical challenges posed by Technicolor and the general tendency to use it with restraint; rich saturation, deep blacks and expressive use of color were somewhat within reach. Still, the use of these elements never reached the extremes of eg. Jacques Tourneur‟s or André De Toth‟s explorations of high contrast B/W cinematography in *Nightfall* (1956) and the „western-noir‟ Day of the *Outlaw* (1959) respectively. The use of Technicolor gave way to very different filmic worlds than the stark and grim B/W contrasts of film noir and the technical limitations of Technicolor do line up with Glitre‟s argument about the switch to color film stock curtailing the technical possibilities that defined film noir.

The conclusion for this section on the fifties can thus be summarized as stating that the evidence does indeed support the claim that the technical possibilities of color film stock were limited to such a degree that they did not allow for the same kind of more extreme expressive cinematography that B/W did – at least not to a degree that would suit a genre that tended to maximize these possibilities and that was at that time still completely associated with the kind of particular photographic options that B/W film stock offered. If one subscribes to the argument that film noir‟s visual palette did require exactly those stylistic possibilities, it is clear that with the switch to color in the late fifties, film noir was robbed of one of its core elements.

An interesting aside here is Naremore‟s brief address of the association between 1940‟s B/W imagery and "realistic" rendering of the world, and the link he sees with contemporaneous B/W street photography (Naremore, 1998:171-172). In his 2005 essay on street photography *Caleidscopen met Bewustzijn / Conscious Caleidoscopes* (my transl.) art and film historian Steven Jacobs, points out the link between the B/W street photography of Weegee, Lisette Model and Robert Frank and contemporaneous film grammar – a photography that mainly depicted inner city urban life and the seedier parts of town (Jacobs, 2005). From this point of view, Naremore‟s

observations clearly make sense: The grim, urban reality of inner-city life was tied to a B/W aesthetic, a tie that was re-enforced in film noir aesthetics of the forties and early fifties. In this way the switch to color not only robbed film noir of technical possibilities that were at the heart of its expressive visual language, but also of its gritty "aura" that was tied to its themes and narratives and cityscapes. As a salient aside, it is interesting to note how in the visuals of neo-noir, color also brought with it a new set of "noir landscapes" (Glitre, 2009:21) that shifted away from big city realism and ventured into the openness of archetypical Americana (This openness does appear in classical noir, but is usually there to be juxtaposed with the city world: an example would be the finale to John Huston‟s noir classic *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) that depicts its anti-hero‟s final demise in the "unspoiled" countryside he longed for).

The next section will look at the sixties and address the technical advancements of that decade in the light of the argument that whatever noir or neo-noir was produced in this period, does not bear the same expressiveness – John Boorman‟s *Point Blank* (1967) being the noticeable exception here – as its predecessors, strengthening the line of argument that technical inhibitions limited the possibility of a resurgence of noir and the advent of neonoir.

The 1960s

Erickson states that by the late 1950s "The overall mood of the nation was in a vibrant upswing" (Erickson, 1996:310) and this contributed to a more overall optimistic kind of cinema that did not fit a film noir environment. The author strongly disagrees with such a "zeitgeist" based view[6] (for every film with a somber tone in the 40s, there was an optimistic counterpart as well, the box office charts for the 40s and 50s do not exactly read as a list of titles with a proclivity for pessimistic subject matter[7]) but does subscribe to Erickson‟s general observation – backed up by the evidence above – that "noir sensibility was barely decipherable in the American cinema by the early 1960s" (311).

While the technical evidence for the 50s supported these claims, an overview of the technical advancements for the 60s does require more nuances.

Glitre correctly observes that early sixties films tock produced some "would be" noirs that have a striking lack of chiaroscuro – once again emphasizing the visual aspect as the true defining element of noir (Glitre, 2009:15). A major development in film stock in the later parts of the decade was the release of Eastman Kodak‟s new Type 5251 color negative, that drastically improved definition and color rendition (Salt, 1997:285). *Point Blank*, the only film that is generally acknowledged as a proto- neo-noir (Glitre, 2009:15-16), used an even newer version of this films tock (Eastman-Kodak 50T 5251) for its striking use of color contrasts. The new development processes of the sixties – using higher temperature development baths – also allowed for films to be "pushed" to a higher speed in development. This enabled DPs to shoot color with less light required, correcting this in the final print through the development process. A downside was the loss in saturation and hues, which made high contrast color cinematography, still a continuous problem (Salt, 1997:285). (Incidentally, this makes *Point Blank*‟s achievements even more exceptional).

[6] When talking about how films "reflect" society at a given time, critics and scholars alike tend to forget that they are singling out only a small fraction of total production (see also David Bordwell‟s blog entry "zip zero zeitgeist" at davidbordwell.net). Noir represents only a limited number of productions even in the late 40s and the box-office champions in this period were not films noir at all. Claiming that noir represented a general "zeitgeist" is distorting the factual evidence of the full landscape of film production during this period.

[7] https://www.ultimatemovierankings.com/1940-top-grossing-movies [8] Coutard hid small lighting units in the ceiling, bouncing light off the walls and ceiling, creating a regular soft spread of light, that allowed him to shoot under less than ideal circumstances – he first used the influential technique on the indoor sets of Jean-Luc Godard‟s *Le Petit Soldat* (1963) (Salt 1997, 289290)

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Another technical advancement that aided in obtaining photographic effects closer to the sharp contrasts of B/W‟s chiaroscuro effects that were part of classical noir‟s core visual language, was the development in 1964 of Colortran‟s new Quartz-Iodine Multibeam Light units that allowed for sharper shadows, returning a somewhat lost layer of expressive cinematography to color film‟s visual grammar.

The latter development ran counter to the European influenced lighting style of the French Nouvelle Vague that saw Raoul Coutard use "bounced light"[8], a lighting style that would prove to be very influential and started to inspire Hollywood DPs to do the same, actually moving further away from high contrast imagery (Salt, 1997:289). Generally speaking then, there was a tendency towards a desaturation of colors: Conrad used fog filters and controlled development in order to heavily desaturate the color palette of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Roy-Hill, 1969) and controlled development also was at the basis of the remarkable color desaturation in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (Huston, 1967) (AC, May, 1970:434) – a tendency that totally shunned the high contrast images of the B/W photography of classical noir.

The question does arise, however, as to why the influence of European (French) art cinema did not lead to a resurgence of B/W classical film noir. By the advent of the sixties, film noir had been firmly established as a revered category of American film tradition and the cinematic homages to its style in films by French New Wave directors like Jean-Luc Godard (*Á Bout de Souffle*,
1959), Louis Malle (*Ascenseur pour L'Échafaud*, 1957) or Jean-Pierre Melville (*Deux Hommes dans Manhattan*, 1959), found their way into American art theatres during the bloom of what Balio has coined as the "Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens". Still, as Balio points out, apart from a few exceptional cases that found their way to the American audience at large, such as *La Dolce Vita* (Fellini, 1960), *Z* (Costa-Gravas, 1969) or *Elvira Madigan* (Bo Widerberg, 1967), most of these films – and definitely the French Nouvelle Vague outings - were limited to art houses audiences in big cities (Balio, 2010:154-156).

While film studies and film criticism have (rightly) emphasized the Nouvelle Vague as a watershed moment in film history, its contemporaneous resonance with the American film audience was limited enough (the French films that did do better in the US tended to be more frivolous and less experimental Brigitte Bardot pictures – 114-116) that even the most adventurous American producer refrained from using the association between these foreign films and classical noir as a reason to bring back a by now outdated format (or genre). While a film like *Point Blank* did incorporate elements of the European New Waves, it did so by bringing new temporal filmic modes into the fabric of the genre, rather than by completely returning to older noir tropes the way for example Godard‟s *Á Bout de Souffle* did. Films like *Blast of Silence* (Allen, 1961) or the ones by Samuel Fuller we will briefly discuss below, may have some noir elements, but were films outside of the mainstream and in general Erickson‟s argument about the disappearance of noir is firmly undergirded by empirical evidence.

Not surprisingly then, films shot in traditional B/W that did openly pay homage to the noir style, were either fullblown foreign productions (the films of Jean-Pierre Melville or Seijun Suzuki‟s *Branded to Kill* from 1967) or international co-productions such as *Once A Thief* (Nelson, 1965) a Franco-American co-production that was clearly inspired by the French New Wave.

The conclusion then is, that while the technological means for a return towards noir‟s visual palette were more or less available, strictly speaking, Erickson is probably right in suggesting that film noir had disappeared from the American cinematic landscape to such a degree that no studio or mainstream producer in the midst of a rapidly

changing film culture, would have considered reviving film noir or have a director experiment with adapting the genre to color cinematography. That claim is supported by the fact that the few films that actually ventured into that direction – the remake of *The Killers* (Siegel, 1964) being a prime example – were never considered to be actual noir by contemporaneous critics (Glitre, 2009:15).

What is required here is a mention of the films that Samuel directed in the sixties, as Forster positions them as early neo-noirs (Hirsch, 1999:17). The author slightly disagrees with Hirsch‟s take here – at least in light of Keating‟s or Glitre‟s approach to noir‟s visual style. Fuller‟s films from this period certainly incorporate noir elements, but they are visually eccentric and much more anti-classical than noir ever was, putting them more in line with European art house influences than with classic noir. While *Pickup on South Street* (1953) fits into the noir category and clearly maximizes these visual traits, later films like *The Naked Kiss* (1964) or *Shock Corridor* (1963) use framing and editing in a way that is extremely idiosyncratic and makes these films much more anticlassical and "avant-garde". They incorporate visual strategies from European "New Waves" and combine those with Fullers own peculiar sensibilities, which themselves were influenced by his background as a tabloid reporter. While some scenes do have a noir "sensibility", Fuller uses them to create a very different kind of film. Even if one would be willing to categorize *Shock Corridor* as a very late noir, it would still align with Glitre‟s argument insofar that Fuller‟s early 60s films are all B/W.

The 1970s

While most studies tend to agree on the absence of noir in the 60s, the 70s is where accounts start to differ widely. Glitre addresses 1970‟s neo-noirs, subtly implying that the true equivalent of classical noir‟s visual style only emerged in the early eighties – calling it the "modernist" phase of noir (Glitre, 2009: 15-25). Other scholars already consider the canonical films within the genre from the seventies – *Night Moves* (Penn, 1975), *The Long Goodbye* (Altman, 1973) - as a clear shift into neo-noir and situate the advent of this new concept in the early parts of this decade, albeit based more on thematical grounds than visual arguments (Silver, 1996).

Before approaching this discussion from a technical point of view, we will again first map out the most important technical changes in the seventies in the fields of film stock, lighting and lenses.

One of the most notable changes was situated in laboratory work and was a continuation of a practice that started in the second half of the previous decade: "preflashing" the negative before it was used for shooting, became a widely used technique and was mostly used to lower the contrast of the negative and the color saturation. The widespread use of this film stock manipulation, led to a typical "washed-out" visual palette with a low saturation in films like John Boorman‟s *Deliverance* (1972) (Salt, 1997:306-307).

This method was also used for some of the very first films that some scholars labelled as neo-noir: *Night Moves* and *The Long Goodbye*, the latter film using the older Kodak T100 5254 negative and pre-flashing it to obtain very low color saturation[8]. As noted in the chapter on the 60s, this technique actually ran counter to the high contrast look of classical noir and its results were further enhanced by the regular use of fog filters (308). This tendency lines up with the suggestion that the real advent of "true" neo-noir should be situated at the start of the next decade, when new technical advancements would actually lead to a "color version" of classical noir‟s distinctive visual palette. In this way, Keating‟s "mannerism" is less present in the seventies, than it is in the

[8] The same holds true for Dirty Harry (Don Siegel, 1971), The Friends of Eddie Coyle (Peter Yates, 1973) and The French Connection (William Friedkin, 1971) but while these titles are sometimes included as neo-noir, that is by no means a generally accepted idea and most studies do not include them as such.

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eighties. The 70s films drawing from noir‟s idiom are actually nostalgic, rather than noir. They emulate noir themes and stories – often quite literally – and inject them with new sensibilities (the private eye is now even more of an outsider in a corrupt world he barely comprehends, marked by disillusionment and war/Vietnam) but the visual style of noir is barely noticeable: Michael Winner‟s remake of the *The Big Sleep* (1978) has little to do with noir, apart from being based on the same material as the 1946 film.

It should be noted that the desaturated colors of this cycle of seventies films within the contested concept of 70s neo-noir (there is a salient omission here, that we will turn to below) perfectly matched the changing filmic landscapes of these films. No longer were the urban jungles of northern American cities (New York obviously being chief among those) the dominant world of noir, as the preferred cityscapes now shifted to the Sunbelt states (Glitre, 2010:21). Florida‟s pastel-colored light or the subdued hues of the California skies and landscapes perfectly suited the desaturated color palette that was obtained by pre-flashing the negative. This dichotomy between city and non-city and private space, has always been an important part of noir‟s themes and once again some of these elements can be linked to tendencies in other contemporary visual media and even the changes in the idiom of seventies architecture. Steven observes the same move outwards from the city in the eerily empty street photography of Bernd and Hilla Becher, Ruscha and Thomas. The anonymous urban wastelands outside the city always functioned as some kind of liminal space for film noir (Jameson, 1993). Yet, they become the focus of noir‟s filmic space in neo-noir, losing both its moral and humanistic side as street photography did and complicating the idea of "civitas" (Jacobs, 2005) by completely blurring the lines that separated the traditional city both morally and spatially from its surroundings (Colomina, 1996:21). It is this idea that materializes both in seventies narrative structures and undergirding themes, as well as in the visual style, a style that was perfectly served by the technical change that was brought along by pre-flashing and desaturation.

While this peculiar style and confuse status that Erickson labels "noired" (Erickson, 1996:308) fuels the discussion on the „intermediate‟ neo-noir status of several films – at least adhering to a strictly visually oriented argument – this move towards desaturation was countered by another cinematographic „movement‟ that opted for a radically different approach.

Gordon, Vittorio, and – somewhat later - Vilmos, gradually took to underexposing their negatives, while insisting on a regular development, which resulted in a slightly reduced definition, but markedly higher color saturation. For *The Godfather* (Coppola, 1972) Willis exposed the 100 ASA Eastman Color 5254 negative at 250 ASA, while only "pushing" the development by one stop, thus underexposing the final print by half a stop (Salt, 1997:309). This move towards higher saturation gained in popularity as the decade wore on and led to a completely new form of pre-flashing that would become instrumental in the changing aesthetic preferences for the late seventies and early eighties and that would eventually evolve into Glitre‟s "neon rainbow" that she defines as neo-noir‟s most salient visual element (Glitre, 2009). The move towards a high contrast look in color and lighting was also present in one of neo-noir‟s first major titles: Roman Polanski‟s *Chinatown* (1974). In order to get the desired "retro look" for the film, Polanski and his DP John Alonzo used a then brand-new technique invented by the British cameraman Gerald Turpin, called the "Turpin Colorflex System" (later called "Lightflex"). The technique reflected light from a colored filter into the camera lens that was coated with a half silvered flat and for *Chinatown* extra browns and beiges were added (Salt, 1997:310-311) resulting in starker contrasts and a "retro feel" to the overall imagery of the film. The result is a film that does indeed look strikingly

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different from contemporaneous crime films and that might be categorized – following Erickson‟s and Glitre‟s arguments – as the very first "true" neo-noir from a strictly visual perspective, albeit by using exceptional techniques that were certainly not mainstream at the time. While other films opted for a visual style that was different from that of classical noir, *Chinatown* did return to the high contrast look and its expressive use of color was arguably the very first "translation" of classical noir‟s visual style into a neo-noir color version. This means that any account of neo-noir being "born" in the eighties, based on visual claims, will always have to grant *Chinatown* an exception status, based on these same arguments.

As a side note, it is worth mentioning that the return to film noir (from a visual or other perspective) also fits well with the emerging "New Hollywood", colorfully characterized by film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum by its "(…) inability – for better and for worse – to view history as anything other than a reflection of film history, rather than the other way around" (quoted in Jim Hoberman, 2019:316). While Rosenbaum exaggerates the case, he is right about the inherent tendency of "New Hollywood" to recycle film history, and neo-noir perfectly fits that mold. The true question here is whether one should consider the relatively scarce examples from the 70s that do not really adhere to classical noir‟s visual scheme – *Chinatown* being an exception - as the real advent of neo-noir or make the argument that the early eighties and its drastically changing visual aesthetics, created the necessary (technical) environment for the real birth of neo-noir.

In the next section we will maintain that these arguments by Erickson and Glitre definitely make sense from a technological point of view, with cinematography building off technical advancements in the late seventies that would prove to be highly influential and instrumental in creating the look of neo-noir.

The most important technical change in this regard is the elimination of color corrections that were used to counter the anomalies caused by the difference between natural and artificial lighting on film sets.

While traditional cinematography corrected these spectrum variations in the final print, the seventies saw a growing tradition of consciously eliminating such corrections, resulting in the glare of fluorescents lights being visible in films like *The French Connection*, *The Sugarland Express* (Spielberg, 1974) or *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976) (Salt, 1997:311). This tendency became even more important when cinematographers like William and Andrew started to combine this lack of correction with expressive use of colored gels, giving birth to the "neon" look of the eighties in *Exorcist II – The Heretic* (Boorman, 1977), *The Warriors* (Hill, 1979) or Hill‟s *The Driver* (1978), a film that stands out as a notable predecessor to the visual look that Glitre defines for 80s neo-noir. In her account of lighting in neo-noir, Glitre seems to overlook this broader frame of changing film aesthetics, which slightly weakens her overall argument. The author is right in singling out these characteristics for the visual style of neo-noir but does not address the fact these are in fact part of a general tendency in the American cinema of the decade. As Salt points out, by the late seventies and early eighties, even rather modest dramas tended to use the same techniques (308-311), rendering the point that neo-noir also resorted to them, more or less moot. The question then is not so much whether neo-noir in the eighties adheres to the lighting tendencies Glitre rightfully singles out, but rather whether these films did indeed signal a return to the "mannerism" of the classical noir by equally pushing accepted traditions of expressivity to extremes. In the last section this text will argue that technical changes did result in neo-noir‟s use of visuals coming full circle with its classical period‟s counterpart. As far as Keating‟s approach is concerned – noir not being anticlassical, but a style that maximized the use of some of the available conventions to a very high degree – the new films noir that emerged out of the eighties were arguably

the first ones to really fit that mold once again, strengthening the idea of the seventies noirs being somewhat of a transitional phase, an argument that Glitre does not explicitly make, but that she somewhat seems to suggest in her reading of eighties noir.

The 1980s

Hirsch observes that neo-noir is sometimes coined as an impossible or purely imaginary concept based on the argument that classical noir‟s visual style was tied to such a degree to B/W cinematography, that no color version could ever be considered its true heir (Hirsch, 1999:11). We have mainly sided here with Glitre‟s arguments, stating that the switch to color and its attendant limitations facilitated noir‟s disappearance from American film in the fifties and sixties and that subsequent technical advancements slowly brought about a re-emergence of noir‟s visual style.

Despite the claim above, Hirsch still acknowledges that "postclassic" noir has evolved a distinctive color code, as stylized in its ways as the high-key black and white of old‟ (12). Mapping the technical advances throughout the decades, shows that near the end of the seventies this tendency is very outspoken, and the technical factors had aligned to allow for such an evolution.

An important technical change that brought about neonoir‟s definitive visual palette was the introduction in 1980 of Fuji‟s 250 ASA Type 8518 negative, which offered fine grained, wide exposure latitude negative that was especially fit for outdoor shooting under low light conditions (AC, Dec, 1980: 1254). In the next few years, Kodak followed suit with a range of similar improvements, culminating at the end of the decade in a new negative emulsion that contained silver halide crystals (T-Grains) that enhanced the already high sensitivity to light (Salt, 1997:324). Fuji‟s 8518 film was especially important in the early eighties (eg. Hill‟s *48 hrs,* 1982) and with the added possibilities of the "Panaflasher" (the "Lightflex" now in-camera) and the technique of enriching final prints with extra blacks and silver by running them through the developer a second time (eg. *Top Gun*, Scott, 1986:323325), color negative‟s expressive possibilities had finally completely caught up with black and white film stocks of the forties in their ability to be used for any kind of expressive use directors and DPs saw fit.

Another important evolution was the aforementioned ever-increasing use of colored light in cinematography. Salt states: "while at the end of the previous decade the use of colored light had still been somewhat limited (…) now this effect came to be pushed much further in many films" (Salt, 1997: 324). Some influential cameramen like Lachman, infused a colored version of "noir sensibility" into the New York New Wave scene of the early eighties, and this use of strongly saturated colors and lighting was influential for the broader visual style of the decade (325). The use of colored light is central to Glitre‟s list of features that define the look of neo-noir (Glitre 2009, 1721). As stated earlier, Glitre could have positioned this aesthetic within a broader general frame, but I do not think this lacuna invalidates the core of her argument. The author only seems to overemphasize neo-noir‟s unique claim to a certain visual style, when she talks about the use of colors in *Manhunter* (Mann, 1986) or *Blood Simple* (Coen, 1984), because approximately the same statements could be made (admittedly to lesser degree) about John Hora‟s cinematography for *Gremlins*

(Dante, 1984) or Matthew Leonetti‟s for *Commando* (Lester, 1985) – contemporaneous films situated in completely different genres.

Finally, circling back to Keating‟s arguments, what does hold true is the claim that like classical noir before, neonoir maximizes these tendencies and pushes the techniques to extremes. A salient example would be Michael

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Mann‟s *Manhunter* but the lighting schemes in that film would warrant a text of their own, so we will limit ourselves to three brief examples from other films, the last one being the perfect counterpart for the aforementioned example in *T-Men*, described in Keating‟s text (Keating, 2010:260). The first example of neo-noir‟s tendency to maximize certain visual trends would be Friedkin‟s brilliant neo-noir *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985). Belgium‟s most prolific film critic (and later artistic director for the Ghent Film Festival) Duynslaegher, praised the film for the way in which „every frame is set up as a cover for an aggressively marketed rock album and the whole film is a rhapsody of decadent aesthetics, sublime lighting, postmodern editing and overwhelmingly powerful images of male bodily power and destruction‟ (Duynslaegher, 1993:499 – my transl). Duynslaegher rightly observes the way in which certain visual tendencies of the decade are pushed to almost absurd extremes, adhering to the same processes at work in classical noir: “Alton is an expressivist, willing to sacrifice various functions in the pursuit of an intensely atmospheric mood” (Keating, 254,260; Glitre, 20-21). Both of these thus being keen examples of pushing for maximum expressiveness. Like Alton before him, *To Live and Die in L.A*.‟s DP Robby Müller does not sacrifice *every* rule in the book of lighting, becoming anti-classical, but manages – as Duynslaegher observes - to push the envelope and does so in much the same way as Alton did. While one might argue that the same could be said about a uniquely baroque contemporaneous example like Peter Greenaway‟s *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989), no other genre tends to go for this approach like neo-noir does. Kasdan‟s *Body Heat* (1981) and *Streets of Fire* (Hill, 1984), the latter superbly photographed by Andrew in pure noir style, are similar examples of this trend to maximize reigning visual trends (Duynslaegher once again nailed this, writing about *Streets of Fire*: “in this purely filmic arena, Hill evokes a furious ballet of chases, cars, motorcycles, embraces in the photogenically pouring rain, fires in the night, sweaty torsos in torn T-shirts and symbols of the noir tradition” –
Duynslaeger, 1993:475 – my transl). This same approachto a neo-noir aesthetic can also be found in other visual arts, such as the “New Figurative Art” of Eric Fischl, whose painting Bad Boy (Oil on Canvas, 1981) looks like a neo-noir scene frozen in time (and bears a striking resemblance to To Live and Die in L.A. „s aesthetic).

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Figure 1. T Men steambath scene.
Source: Mann (1947).

A prime example, in which neo-noir adopted the same visual palette as classical noir, can be found in the comparison between a scene from the aforementioned *TMen* and one from *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982). Salt especially mentions Cronenweth‟s work on *Blade Runner*, talking about the way the DP uses lots of backlighting in several key scenes (the first interrogation being one, but also the discussion in Deckard‟s office and several scenes with the replicants). Like John before, Cronenweth creates a white-out and a blurred wall of light, that underexposes the actor in the foreground (Salt, 1997:327-328) and pushes the concept of light completely dictating the scene to its extremes (Figures 1 and 2). Salt largely misses the point that this is exactly the same effect John Alton aimed for in Anthony Mann‟s *T-Men*, albeit with the use of different techniques.

Keating‟s description of the "steambath" scene in that film would also fit the *Blade Runner* scene perfectly: "Alton can create a sense of mystery by using light tonalities just as easily as he can by using dark tonalities" (Keating, 2010:261). The speed of B/W film stock in the forties allowed this kind of extreme contrast use, as did in this case the fine grain and high sharpness of the improved Eastman 5247 stock, allowing for an equally extreme use.

In this way, the arguments mounted by Glitre and Erickson turn out to be valid, albeit in a slightly more nuanced way: it was the act of maximizing stylistic traits that returned neo-noir to its noir status (whatever narrative, thematical or symbolic traits that might also be at work in the switch from noir to neo-noir). From a strictly visual point of view, neo-noir only came about in the early eighties, when the technical possibilities that became commonly available allowed noir to regain its status as a genre (or movement, although in its "neo" stage it has definitely evolved into a genre) that pushed stylistic traits to their limits.

Neo-noir, thus, like classical noir, once again became, as Keating put it, a form of "mannerism" and "modulation". Like its historical predecessor, neo-noir in the eighties did not completely become anti-classical in rejecting the well-established traditions of Hollywood lighting but used new technical developments to create a (this time a very self-conscious) style that pushed those traditions to extremes in trying to emulate the look of the earlier noirs.

Conclusion

The aim of this text was to map the evolution from classical noir to neo-noir, from a visual perspective. The technological changes that were mapped to led the demise of noir in American cinema of the fifties and sixties and subsequently looked at the new developments that started to take away the technical inhibitions that largely prohibited the advent of true neo-noir from a visual perspective. Using Keating‟s approach as a basis, the author argued that it was only in the late seventies and early eighties, the technical developments allowed for a commonly accessible way to similarly maximize stylistic traits that the black and white film stocks had permitted in the forties, echoing arguments mounted by Glitre and Hirsch. It remains an open question as to what that means for the cycle of films from the seventies that revisited and re-envisioned noir and how we can assess them historically: as a transitional phase or as true neonoirs, with Polanski‟s Chinatown always bound to be an exception. Tracing the visual style of noir and the technical changes that undergirded the shift away from classical noir and towards neo-noir, does, however, provide a model for reassessing the periodization of noir. On a more fundamental level, the aim of the essay was also to advocate for a further integration of technically oriented research within the

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accounts of aesthetical evolution in film style. While major technical (r) evolutions are readily acknowledged, less spectacular pivotal moments and ongoing processes tend to go overlooked as a (co)defining factor in the evolution of film aesthetics. This text singled out one of these "background" processes -fully acknowledging that it is but one of many factors that led to the advent of neo-noir – as a plea for a generally more inclusive view towards technical studies within film analysis.

Figure 2. Blade Runner Deckard's office Source: Ridley (1982).

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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