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Cinematic Review

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Film Noir

Neo-noir, also known as new film noir, is a complex genre of film. This particular style utilizes a number of different conventions and techniques to form a unique revival of classic film noir. The genre of neo-noir is best described as dark, but this definition is not limited to stylistic or generic factors. In fact, it encompasses both aspects and uses each to highlight the story. Clear trends/ similarities can be found in each neo-noir film. As such, the films *Klute* (1971,) *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985,) and *Deep Cover* (1992) provide vivid examples of these trends. By examining the similarities and differences between each of these films, one will better understand the underlying themes and content of neo-noir style films.

As previously mentioned, darkness is an underlying quality of neo-noir films. This darkness can be interpreted in several ways. The most obvious, however, is lighting. Each of the three films listed above consistently use shadows, dimly lit locations, and the cover of night to set the scene of the film. Shadows played a key role in *Klute.* In several scenes, viewers can clearly see that Bree Daniels, the female lead, is being watched. It was not uncommon to see a man standing in the shadows, shrouded by darkness. Shadows even appeared in the more exciting club scenes. Upon leaving the dance floor, Bree would often gravitate towards figures far from the light of the flashing lights. These figures would be in a dimly lit area and their faces would often appear to display shadows. The menacing appearance of these characters (combined with the literal shadows) would represent another form of darkness in the film.

Hence, a film can appear to be dark in terms of the plot and theme. Initially, a film might appear to contain happiness and light. However, this typically does not last long. Rather, many characters experience something that inspires some form of a personal vendetta or mission. For example, in *Klute*, Detective John Klute is first seen at a gathering of friends enjoying a meal together. The mood of the film quickly shifts when his dear friend is murdered in New York City. As such, the film takes on a darker tone. Parallel to the previous examples, each criminal act and character represents the generic, more straightforward darkness of the film entirely. However, this is not limited to the villains. The protagonists of each film have their own dark tendencies. These complex characters are obsessive, unstable, stubborn, and can be seen as blurring the lines between good and evil.

Accordingly, dark protagonist characters play pivotal roles in the plot development of neo-noir films. The concept is a bit uncomfortable for those who gravitate towards generic stories of good vs. evil as depicted in action or superhero films. In *Deep Cover*, for instance, the main character finds himself thrust into the world of drug dealers and criminals. The main goal of Russell (or John, as his other persona is called,) was to infiltrate the drug world and capture a criminal. However, his determination ended up placing him in a much more intense situation than previously imaginable. Rather than taking down the allotted drug dealer and shutting down certain dealings across the city, John decided to go after the top-tier drug distributors. Although he succeeded and was viewed as a hero, he ended up “pocketing” a large sum of the drug money for himself and his new family. The same happens to Klute when he enters relations with a prostitute and recklessly endangers the lives of others to achieve his goal of avenging a friend.

Once again, just as Klute did, Richard Chance from *To Live and Die in L.A.,* also criminalized himself for the sake of vengeance. While in pursuit of the man responsible for his partner’s death, Chance endangers the lives of his girlfriend, new partner, and several others. In fact, he actually ended up getting an F.B.I. agent killed. Furthermore, Chance corrupted his good-hearted partner along the way. John Vukovich, Chance’s new partner, was the one to kill the man responsible for the death of Chance’s original partner. This was especially remarkable because not only did John take on Chance’s role as the blurred hero, but he managed to do so despite being completely “by the book.” John was adherently opposed to almost everything Chance did up until his death. Ironically, the death of his partner is also what brought him to that point.

The blur between good and evil is not limited to main character, however. The films all included a government official, legal figure, or police officer that was corrupt. By including this element, neo-noir becomes a notably paranoid genre through the form of conspiracy. Multiple examples of this can be found in each film. As stated by Covey in the Journal of Film and Video, “the Drug Enforcement Agency is as dirty as any of the drug kingpins he is trying to take down” (62). In *Deep Cover*, John Hull discovered that the D.E.A. was, in fact, protecting the head of the drug operation because he was a diplomatic figure. Furthermore, this situation is worsened by the knowledge that the President of the United States was golfing and enjoying outings with this individual. In addition to this, one of the main villains (David Jason,) is a lawyer who works the legal system to free his “clients.” Similarly, Bob Grimes, a lawyer in *To Live and Die in L.A.,* would work for the highest bidder, regardless of their actions. Grimes ended up selling out the police officers to the criminals. Another example exists in *Klute,* John Klute’s boss and prominent figure is the murderer. Each of these figures is supposed to represent good and justice when, in fact, they could be perceived as the true evil of each film.

Additionally, this conspiracy and paranoia has long been a defining factor in neo-noir. These obscure conspiracies and paranoia-based themes can even fall back on realistic fears and suspicions. According to Hanson many of these films were “centered upon the experience of either suspected or real conspiracies and unfolded through suspense narratives in which the main protagonists are increasingly overwhelmed by faceless institutions or corporations” (45). Adversely to other neo-noir movies, the three movies discussed in this essay all provide the corporation or agency with a face. Otherwise, the conspiracies in each film will appear to be realistic or relatable. As such, the situations discussed with the D.E.A. and lawyers could be based in reality and are not new to the world of noir.

Color is also a key element of neo-noir films. Each film seems to create a color theme in addition to the more obvious themes of the plot. These colors represent certain emotions and situations as they occur on screen. For instance, *Deep Cover* uses blues and reds to convey mood. Blue hues surround Hull and Betty while they’re outside of the shop. This was a very tender, romantic moment that was also a bit tragic. Things between them were set to come to an end. *To Live and Die in L.A.* also uses color as a device for storytelling. Observant viewers would notice the importance of green, orange, and even red throughout the film. In fact, one of the first shots of the film is a sunset laden with shades of bright orange. The paintings of Masters contained orange and green as well. When burned, the paintings would then become red (from the flames.) This coloring foreshadowed the fiery doom of Masters and his work at the end of the film. The element of color helped setup the environment of the film.

However, environment is not complete without a setting. Settings are important aspects of every neo-noir film. Most neo-noir movies are set in cities. This urban setting is often perceived as negative. In *Klute*, John called city-dwelling individuals “pathetic.” Urban areas are typically framed to be dark, crime infested places. However, most neo-noir films (such as *Klute* and *To Live and Die in L.A.*) are located in the slums of the city. *Deep Cover* takes place outside of “Skid Row” and in the exciting, bustling part of L.A. In this case, the city is a fantastical, romanticized location. It contains sex, drugs, and money still, but it is framed in a more appealing way. For example, David Jason and the other dealers are all very rich. In one scene, the dealers were eating dinner at a fancy restaurant while a private show was occurring. This contrasts greatly from the locations Klute and Bree visit. Also, both Bree and Klute live next to a funeral home in the city. Living near that much death is not pleasant or appealing.

Setting is more than just location, however. Another unpleasant factor could be poor weather. Rain is not uncommon in neo-noir films. The most powerful example of rain in the three noir films would have to be from *Deep Cover*. A particularly heartbreaking scene involves John Hull killing a man for the first time. Noticeably, it is raining in the background. This rain could be representative of tears, but it also sets the scene’s somber tone and acts as a pivotal point in the film. Yet again, setting proves to have quite an impact on the ambience and story of a film.

In further regards to ambience, music is another defining element of neo-noir. *To Live and Die in L.A.* uses pop music and leitmotifs to accent characters and scenes. This is unique because classic noir films were jazz based. Instead of using jazz, the pop music fit the time period and the setting of the film. The exciting, loud music matched the exciting progression of the film and the location of the city. In contrast, the leitmotifs, or character themes/ songs, were common to each film. Bree (from *Klute*) had a theme that combined the classic element of jazz and female vocals. The spooky, chant-like vocals would crescendo (swell or peak,) when an intense event was occurring. For example, the music was very loud and shrill when she approached the shadowy man at the end of the film. Jazz music would even play during the more romantic scenes between Klute and Bree, but it was a much smoother progression. This opposed the chaotic and clashing chords heard when she faced the killer or received a call from him.

Music is also important to *Deep Cover,* but in a more unique fashion. Just like the pop music in *To Live and Die in L.A.,* rap music provided a narrative outlet for characters in *Deep Cover.* The character most impacted, however, was John Hall. John’s periodic raps were poetic in nature. They told his perspective of the story while rhythmically matching his inflections and words to the situation he was faced with. As stated by Covey, Hull’s raps were given through a “hip, monotone voice-over narration” (62). A monotonous voice disassociated Hull from his words, but through interpretation, the audience can clearly distinguish Hull’s feelings. In this way, the unique musical elements in this film link it to past noir films. Themes of paranoia, conspiracy, pain, and a personal mission can all be uncovered from the raps.

Likewise, the personal mission of the main characters in each film has also been a key component of neo-noir. The protagonist of *Deep Cover* will stop at nothing to take down the drug trade. This all falls back on his past. A personal vendetta exists between John and the world of drugs. At the beginning of the film, a young John can be seen with his addict father. Suddenly, tragedy strikes when his father is gunned down after stealing to supplement his addiction. His father pointedly tells him not to be like him and John takes that to heart. Incidentally, a similar situation happens in *Klute* and *To Live and Die in L.A.* As previously mentioned, Klute must avenge is friend and both Chance and John blindly seek vengeance for their fallen partners. Each protagonist displays unyielding and obsessive dedication to a cause.

Accordingly, another recurring element of neo-noir, sound, relies on music and obsession to supplement the story. Sound is heavily used during the scenes such as the car chases in *To Live and Die in L.A.* However, sound is perhaps most important to the story of *Klute*. In the film, recording devices are key and representative of the constant paranoia of characters. Phone calls and recordings of Bree are pivotal to the story, crimes, and investigation. As stated by Hanson, “the credits sequence of *Klute* features a small reel-to-reel tape recorder of replaying th voice of sex-worker Bree Daniels as she negotiates with a client” (47). This recording in one example of the many recordings of Bree’s voice that, along with the music of the film, being to unravel the crime and reveal the criminal. Bree’s voice is almost a siren’s call to Klute and it represents seduction.

Undoubtedly, this seduction is even a recurring theme in neo-noir films. Regardless of the gender, each of the three films has at least one femme or homme fatale. A femme fatale is a woman who is “deadly,” attractive, and seductive. Femme fatales typically bring some form of disaster upon the male protagonist of a noir film. Bree, a more obvious femme fatale, seduces and uses Klute throughout the film. Despite the ending (Klute and Bree leaving her apartment together,) it is never quite clear if she intends to stay or leave. Bree is also dangerously seductive because, after all, it is her job. Similarly, Ruth from *To Live and Die in L.A.* is also a femme fatale. She is very attractive and seductive to Chance. Meanwhile, it appears as though she is being manipulated by him. This gives viewers the illusion of Chance being an homme fatale. However, Ruth is responsible for Chance’s death. It was her tip that proved fatal for him. Finally, a less obvious example of a femme fatale occurs in *Deep Cover.* Betty was a weakness for John whether she intended to be or not. She is also incredibly seductive and appealing to John. Interestingly, *Deep Cover* also has an homme fatale. The ever dangerous, cunning, and attractive villain, Jason, proves to be a weakness for John as well. Jason is even a playboy. It appears as though he is incredibly unfaithful to his wife (another victim of his homme fatale personality.) These dangerous characters provide a link between the narratives of each neo-noir film.

Further links between these films, however, are the camera angles and overall occurrences. Dutch angle shots are tilted shots that make the actions appear to be occurring out of place. This shot is used in each of the films to give viewers an uneasy or tense feeling. The first shot of the “weasel” in *Deep Cover* was taken using a dutch angle of his car. Other shots, such as aerial shots (used during car chases in *To Live and Die in L.A.*) and more are also tailored to set the scene for film noir. The basic happenings of a film can even operate as strong links between neo-noir movies. As discussed by Gallafent, major character death is also typical of noir because “the classical noir hero often dies despite his intelligence- these figures dies as a direct result of their incompetence” (85). This death could be literal, such as Chance in *To Live and Die in L.A.,* or representative of the death of a lifestyle, such as John in *Deep Cover*. Simple themes like this can be overlooked while observing neo-noir, but these similarities are no less important than their more complex counterparts.

All in all, the genre of neo-noir is not simply defined by a few basic words. Instead, several unique concepts and conventions work together to form a complex style. The films *To Live and Die in L.A., Deep Cover,* and *Klute* all possess similar qualities that distinguish them as neo-noir. Their music, characters, themes, lighting, settings, crimes, and more all cooperate to form an incredibly unique and thrilling genre of film.

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