

# THE EXPRESSIONISTIC LABYRINTH OF URBAN NIGHTMARES IN THE NOIR CITY<sup>1</sup> SPACES OF HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

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**Abstract:** Film Noir remains one of the persisting genres of cinema. The noir city space of cinema frequently challenges the popular notion of city space. Hollywood movies demonstrate city spaces as dark and centre of illegal activities whereas the constructed virtual spaces of metropolis remain scary in such movies. Cinematic construction of the urban spaces especially in the context of film noir is constituted by remorseless violence. The spaces like gambling casino and the urban bar, labyrinths of city function as sites for narrative turning points in most of the films. These spaces generate suspense, anxiety, and they function as clues in detective stories.

**Keywords:** Noir City, film noir, Urban Space, Dark cinema, crime thriller, Cinematic landscape, cinematic city, urban phobias. Hollywood Cinema.

Film noir is a cinematic term used primarily to refer to the style of filmmaking of the Hollywood crime dramas, particularly the films that depict the images of the dark side of life. The films of this category are associated primarily with urban spaces. In most of the Hollywood films of 1940s and 1950s cities are being represented in dark shade, as places of horror, crimes etc. These films are mainly crime thrillers that usually narrate the stories of the battles between the characters representing good and evil, creating fear and curiosity among the audience.

The usual themes of the films that belong to the category of film noir are alienation, isolation, danger, moral decay, and suppressed sexuality; City is represented as containing all these elements. The alienation of characters finds expression in their lonely movements through

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Geoff Mayer, *Encyclopedia of Film Noir* (London: greenwood press, 2007).

the urban space and their chance encounters with other lonely characters. Film noir associates the city also with the lack of emotion. The characters interact with each other without expressing emotions, and, as pointed out by many, an acting style was developed according to which actors delivered their dialogues solely by moving their lips. Streets and alleys, shown primarily at night and in the rain, are the more explicit urban settings of film noir. They contribute much to the thematic content of the films by providing the environment for alienated characters, chance encounters, the chases, which in turn motivate narratives of mystery and detection. Interior spaces are represented in dark shades, and they often portray the seedy but extravagant underworld of the city.

Illegal activities and sexualized encounters are represented in these films as the integral aspects of life in the underworld. The construction of the 'underworld' has been an invariable part of the cinematic construction of the urban space, especially in the context of film noir. The gambling casino and the urban bar function as sites for narrative turning points in most of the films. These spaces generate suspense, anxiety, and they function as clues in detective stories. They are the spaces that represent the alienation of the urban population, where the strangers meet, exchange with each other, their encounters often crossing boundaries of class, gender and race. They function as sites of anonymous encounters and immoral behaviors, and as the favorite transitional space in film noir.

Richard Dyer observes that the basic structure of the film noir "is like a labyrinth with the hero as the thread running through it. The labyrinth is shaped not just from the convoluted complexity of narrative maneuverings, but also from the persistent use of representational apparatuses, such as flashback, voice over, simulated dreams, optical point of view, hallucinations and nightmares, that bound up the drama in a subjective over determination" (qtd. in Clarke 95). Those who travel through this expressionistic labyrinth of urban nightmare are being blocked continually by the unmappability of the world 'out there' (Clarke 95).

Haunted by the over presence of the unconscious, the streets of noir city are often curiously empty- the public, social world overwhelmed by privatized traumas. The enclosedness and interiority that were vital to the atmosphere of Hollywood's dark city were intensified by the practice of studio filming; even during the post-war vogue for location shooting, the display of 'authentic' city spaces in urban crime thrillers tended to be combined with chiaroscuro styling of noir studio productions. (Clarke 95-96)

The term '*Film Noir*' is not concerned with only the modern American city. Generally, the Noir canon includes road films such as *Gun Crazy* (1950), *They Live by Night* (1948), *Detour* (1945), *Gilda* (1946), *Touch of Evil* (1958) and small-town dramas such as *The Reckless Moment* (1949), *Beyond the Forest* (1949) and *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943). A considerable number of noir films are produced outside U.S, such as in Japan. *Tokyo Drifter* (1966), *Branded to Kill* (1967), *A Colt is My Passport* (1967) are some of them that narrate the stories of alienation, murder and so on. Directors like Takeshi Kitano and Takashi Miike have taken forward the Noir genre to contemporary times. Bollywood also produces films that represent the above said features of Noir genre. These films include *Baazi* (1951), *Kohraa* (1964) *Who Kaun Thi*(1964), *Satya* (1998), and *Company* (2002). Latin American films such as *Victims of Sin*, (1951), *In The Palm of Your Hand* (1953), *The Black Vampire*, (1953), *Never Open That Door*, (1952) are also examples of the film noir.

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, Hollywood produced many films that were slightly different in style but following the film noir-pattern. *Blade runner* (1982), *China Town* (1974) and *The Long Goodbye* (1973) are some of the examples. The dark city continued to be the central image of the films produced during this period. The films of 1080s and 1990s explicitly narrated the dark side of the city-life. *The Hot Spot* (1990), *Blue Velvet* (1986), *One False Move* (1992) and *Red Rock West* (1993) are only some of these films. The film critic Robert Warshow elucidated the urban space of Hollywood's 1930s gangster films, which mainly projected the darkness of the city, as an aspect of the prevailing cultural imagination (Hammel

128). Contemporary Hollywood-noir films also could be understood in terms of the dynamics of the new forms of cultural imagination prevalent in the Western psyche.

In the noir films, the landscape of the cinematic city is constituted by remorseless violence. This is particularly evident in the films like *Sin City*. The film produces the image of city as the space of sin. The ease of killing constitutes the core of the narrative. The filmmaker uses certain dark colours for purposes of invoking intense feeling. Certain properties in the film such as clothes, bed and puddle of blood are deep red in colour, which appear more reddish against a black and white background. The red colour is used carefully only in some scenes, for instance, in chase-scenes, where the police siren flashes a bright red colour, and in murder-scenes. Use of deep colours is important in noir films as it contributes much to the stylistic visualization of the evil.

Another version of the genre of film noir includes films that focus on the futuristic city or the android city. The much-celebrated film *Blade runner* falls in this category. It contains lots of noir elements; the key focus is cyber phobia. Androids are represented as super-humans as they can do immensely difficult tasks that are humanly impossible. They simulate human beings, but they are physically stronger and their actions are determined by artificial intelligence.

It can be argued that the image of android is a representation of the notion of sin that is embedded in the cultural memory of the West. The very concept of creation associated with the dominant religious traditions of the West is coupled with the idea of the original sin committed by Adam. According to the Biblical narrative, everything was indeed perfect in the Garden of Eden, but, in a sense, there was an element of noir there. The act of Eve, who encouraged Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, brought the awareness of good and evil. Though humans fell into the dark world, they broke away from all heavenly connections and ruled over the world. It is humans who created androids, just as God created man. So the fear emerges as part of the cultural memory

that once they are free from the human control and can rule over man, then the world may go beyond the control of man and he would become a mere slave to the machine.

Androids are represented in cinema as super-intelligent machines that work in a far superior manner than the human beings. They work without the human disadvantages of laziness and tiredness and so on. It is obviously the desire to produce a tirelessly working machine without human limitations that is realized in the creation of the androids. An android works without addiction, emotion, and is able to use any language. The element of fantasy associated with the image of android is that it covers up in 'the lack' in being humans, but, at the same time, it defeats man. It is this fantasy that is being reproduced in the contemporary android-films. The fear that 'the city befalls to the world of machines' is reflected in many contemporary Hollywood films, especially of the Noir genre. In science fiction dystopias such as *The Terminator* series (1984, 1991, 2003, 2009, 2015), robots are represented as controlling the city and harming mankind. These films envision the android city as future-city.

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