

Blade Runner as Film Noir

The term *film noir* literally means ‘black film’. It is generally known as a visual style used in films and is often characterised by the following

Crime, usually murder, is an element of almost all film noirs; A crime investigation—by a private eye, a police detective (sometimes acting alone), or a concerned amateur—is the most prevalent, but far from dominant, basic plot. In other common plots the protagonists are implicated in heists or con games, or in murderous conspiracies often involving adulterous affairs. False suspicions and accusations of crime are frequent plot elements, as are betrayals and double-crosses...

Film noirs tend to revolve around heroes who are more flawed and morally questionable than the norm, often fall guys of one sort or another. The main character of noir are described by many critics as “alienated”; “filled with bitterness”. Certain characters appear in many film noirs—hardboiled detectives, femme fatales, corrupt policemen, jealous husbands, intrepid claims adjusters, and down-and-out writers...

Film noir is often associated with an urban setting, and a few cities—Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Chicago, in particular—are the location of many of the classic films. In the eyes of many critics, the city is presented in noir as a “labyrinth” or “maze”. Bars, lounges, nightclubs, and gambling dens are frequently the scene of action. The climaxes of a substantial number of film noirs take place in visually complex, often industrial settings, such as refineries, factories, train yards, power plants...in the popular (and, frequently enough, critical) imagination, in noir it is always night and it always rains...”

Worldview, morality, and tone

“Film noir is often described as essentially pessimistic. The noir stories that are regarded as most characteristic tells of people trapped in unwanted situations (which, in general, they did not cause but are responsible for exacerbating), striving against random, uncaring fate, and frequently doomed. The movies are seen as depicting a world that is inherently corrupt...

The tone of film noir is generally regarded as downbeat; some critics experience it as darker still—“overwhelmingly black”

Visual Style

“Film noirs tended to use low-key lighting schemes producing stark light/dark contrasts and dramatic shadow patterning. The shadows of Venetian blinds or banister rods, cast upon an actor, a wall, or an entire set.

Characters’ faces may be partially or wholly obscured by darkness—a relative

rarity in conventional Hollywood moviemaking...

Film noir is also known for its use of Dutch angles, low-angle shots, and wide-angle lenses. Other devices of disorientation relatively common in film noir include shots of people reflected in one or more mirrors; shots through curved or frosted glass or other distorting objects (such as during the strangulation scene in *Strangers on a Train*), and special effects sequences of a sometimes-bizarre nature. Night-for-night shooting, as opposed to the Hollywood norm of day-for-night, was often employed. From the mid-1940s forward, location shooting became increasingly frequent in noir."

Film noir films (mostly shot in gloomy grays, blacks and whites) thematically showed the dark and inhumane side of human nature with cynicism and doomed love, and they emphasized the brutal, unhealthy, seamy, shadowy, dark and sadistic sides of the human experience. An oppressive atmosphere of menace, pessimism, anxiety, suspicion that anything can go wrong, dingy realism, futility, fatalism, defeat and entrapment were stylized characteristics of film noir. The protagonists in film noir were normally driven by their past or by human weakness to repeat former mistakes.

Film noir films were marked visually by expressionistic lighting, deep-focus or depth of field camera work, disorienting visual schemes, jarring editing or juxtaposition of elements, ominous shadows, skewed camera angles (usually vertical or diagonal rather than horizontal), circling cigarette smoke, existential sensibilities, and unbalanced or moody compositions. Settings were often interiors with low-key (or single-source) lighting, venetian-blinded windows and rooms, and dark, claustrophobic, gloomy appearances. Exteriors were often urban night scenes with deep shadows, wet asphalt, dark alleyways, rain-slicked or mean streets, flashing neon lights, and low key lighting. Story locations were often in murky and dark streets, dimly-lit and low-rent apartments and hotel rooms of big cities, or abandoned warehouses."

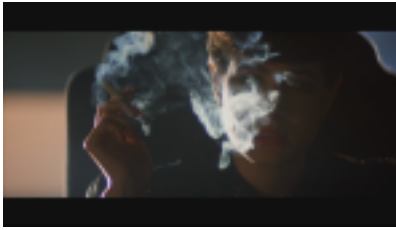
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film_noir#Approaches_to_defining_noir)

How is Blade Runner influenced by film noir?

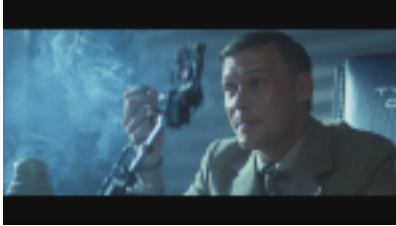
By now it would have become fairly obvious how *Blade Runner* was influenced by film noir.

The film is set in an urban city, and it always seems to be night - it is always dark and raining. In a large number of scenes we see a strong contrast between deep shadows and brighter light. Often the faces of characters in close ups are half-obsured by shadow, with a strong white rim light around the edge of their head. Deckard is basically a hitman that is used as a tool by the police force, and he is clearly alienated and may have a questionable moral character. The whole society seems to be corrupted - status, power and wealth are still prevalent, prime examples being Taffey and Eldon. Crime and murder play

prominent roles. Lastly, the overall tone of the film is cynical (apart from perhaps the 'happy' ending in the original cut).



Rachael - the mysterious femme fatale



Holden's interrogation is full of noir-style lighting and smoke



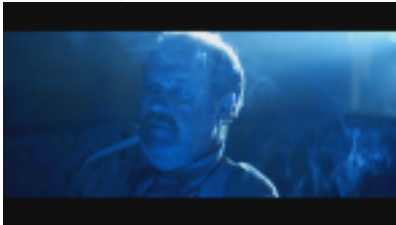
Although he only makes a brief appearance, Taffey represents a typical shady criminal nightclub owner



A look of confusion from Deckard - by this point he is deeply questioning his role as a blade runner and his conception of replicants



Deep shadows and a budding (taboo) romance between two confused characters, Deckard and Rachael



Here we can see the white rim lighting in contrast to the shadow, along with a smoky atmosphere



Another questionable murder, this time of Pris



Shadowy characters late at night on a dark, smoky and rain-soaked urban street



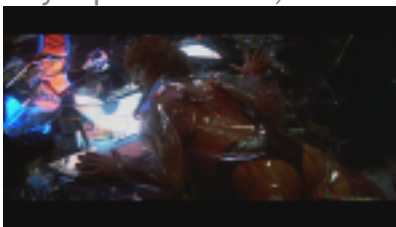
Deckard entering Captain Bryant's office - notice the style of clothing that both Deckard and Gaff are wearing



Deep shadows, mysterious silhouetted character, smoke, old-fashioned fan: this is a noir-style shot



Deckard in the old-style police office, drinking a shot of whiskey



The murder of Zhora the female replicant - a morally complicated action?



Deckard as an alienated character - notice the bar shadows, red front lighting, and the whiskey...



This is a 1974 classic starring Jack Nicholson



'Reservoir Dogs' is the 1992 debut film from director Quentin Tarantino



'Dark City' is a 1998 cult film



'The Usual Suspects', a 1995 crime/mystery film



The three matrix films are a popular example of neo-noir



Typical example of noir shadows and the bar blind effect



Humphrey Bogart as the flawed private investigator Sam Spade roughing up shady businessman Joel Cairo in the 1941 classic 'The Maltese Falcon'