



## Movie Club

### The Evolution of Noir 2: L.A. Confidential (1997)

#### Discussion Questions

1. Critics have argued that film noir, true film noir (e.g. [The Maltese Falcon](#)), is linked to a temporal and geographic location—1940-50s USA and more specifically L.A. / Hollywood—and that it is “characterized by its fractured narrative, its characters caught in a downward spiral, its sense of a mysterious past that cannot be explained, its ‘surrealistic atmosphere of violent confusion, ambiguity, or disequilibrium’” (Scruggs, “[The Power of Blackness’: Film Noir and Its Critics](#)”, *American Literary History*, Vol. 16, No. 4 [Winter, 2004], p.676-677). Later films, like *L.A. Confidential*, are not true film noir, as they are aware of the genre, aware of the past films, and thus use symbols and allusions from “true film noir” to create another layer of meaning. To add to this, others have argued that the “noir is not a genre, but an unconscious stylistic movement” and that “new noirs contain many of the elements” (Schwartz, R., [Neo-Noir: The New Film Noir Style from Psycho to Collateral](#). [The Scarecrow Press Inc: Maryland, Toronto, Oxford], 2005, p. ix; xi). However, others have linked these modern neo-noirs with the classic period films, as well as considering noir “a resurfacing of a Gothic tradition that emerged ‘entwined’ with the republic itself” (Scruggs, “[The Power of Blackness’](#)”, p. 677; 683). Where do you stand on this demarcation? Is film noir simply a style or a genre linked with place and time? What characteristics of “true film noir” does *L.A. Confidential* utilise? What is different (for example, *L.A. Confidential* is not only in colour, but boldly uses that colour, and refrains from the angled shots that often occur in traditional film noir, the three leads as opposed to a lone P.I.)? What elements can you identify that are similar or different to [The Maltese Falcon](#)? Given that the makers are aware of this style or genre, how conscious or unconscious is the use of these elements in *L.A. Confidential*? Does it feel forced, or does it allow the narrative to unfold? How do these differences enhance or alter the genre or style?
2. [The Maltese Falcon](#), like many classic noirs, was under the Motion Picture Production Code (Lewis, [Hollywood v. Hard Core: How The Struggle Over Censorship Created the Modern Film Industry](#), [New York: NYU Press, 2002], p.303). This meant that although seedy activities were hinted at, they were never shown on screen. *L.A. Confidential*, which was made after the New Hollywood period and like other neo-noirs “takes a darker perspective on the American scene” (Scruggs, “[The Power of Blackness’](#)”, p. 677), was not under such restrictions and takes a more visceral approach to its depictions of vice and violence. The violence is explosive, the results are highly visible through blood and bruises, and sex plays a vital role within the plot. In particular, the intensity of violence seems intentional and

somewhat out of place for its period, as even contemporaneous critics remarked about its harshness (Turan, "[Noir for the '90s](#)", Review of *L.A. Confidential*, *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 1997). What are your impressions of this? Do you feel that subtlety of story has been lost along with subtlety of visuals, or does this add another dimension to the story? Does it make the work more or less ambiguous?

3. Film noir "has been valued by successive critics for its supposed challenges to or disruptions of the stylistic, narrative and generic norms of the 'classical' system of film-making (Frank Krutnick, quoted in Fluck, "[Crime, Guilt, and Subjectivity in 'Film Noir'](#)", p. 381). How well do even the classic noirs like [The Maltese Falcon](#) challenge or disrupt generic norms (for example, think about the representation of women)? How well does challenge or disruption hold up with neo-noir films where they intentionally utilise stylistic and narrative conventions? Do they subvert these conventions, or do follow them, or subvert them by following them? Is it a case that "something has to be done, but nothing too original, because hey, this is Hollywood", as Sid Hudgens writes? Consider, for example, the focus the film has on image and how it subverts the images it is presenting: colour is not only present but bold (Dudley: "Do you follow my drift?"/ White: "In Technicolor, sir."); Vincennes' television counterpart "doesn't walk and talk like" him because "America isn't ready for the real me"; we see mottos like "A Great Force in a Great City" on billboards and constant talk of the "New LAPD" (with all their ambiguity); Exley is told to "lose the glasses"; and prostitutes are "cut" to look like film stars. Even when trying to do something right it is more about image (the negotiations after "Bloody Christmas" and Exley's deal at the conclusion). The film even opens with a positive, upbeat introduction to the city that shifts its gaze to the crime world, yet this shift in content is contrasted with the continuation of the upbeat tone. It is, after all, narrated by a gutter press journalist who relies on these corrupt and criminal elements for his livelihood, where their motto is "off the record, on the QT, and very hush-hush".
4. We saw with [The Maltese Falcon](#) that sexuality plays a prominent role. Where women are concerned this falls largely within the virgin/whore dichotomy, best displayed by Effie Perrine and Brigid O'Shaughnessy, respectively. In particular the *femme fatale* has gone through several developments through the history of noir. Originally the target of the male paranoia that permeated much film noir (Fluck, "[Crime Guilt, and Subjectivity in 'Film Noir'](#)", *Amerikastudien/ American Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 3, Popular Culture [2001], p.382) because of her desire for economic independence (Boozer, "[The Lethal Femme Fatale in the Noir Tradition](#)", *Journal of Film and Video*, 51.3/4 [Fall 1999], p.21), her role shifted from seductress to victim in the New Hollywood era, best illustrated in [Chinatown](#) (1974). "And if she is no longer to be represented as the aggressive scapegoat of disruptive libidinal forces, then she can serve as a sympathetic victim of them. In the 1960s and 1970s, she continues to carry the marks of sexual economic repression, but now she becomes the conscious focus of this repression" ("[The Lethal Femme Fatale in the Noir Tradition](#)", p. 24). How has this developed in the neo-noirs of the 1990s like *L.A. Confidential*? Are they fatal or victims? Think of Lynn Bracken: is she alluring, vulnerable, independent, a combination of some or all of these, or different things at different parts of the film (consider her being both loved by

White and hit by him, or her willingness to remain a tool of Patchett and Hudgens)? Has the “virgin” survived into neo-noir? Why, why not?

5. “Hollywood portrayals of male detectives are at some level preoccupied with ‘detecting’ men themselves—that is, with investigating the nature of the detective hero, a character whose portrayal hinges on the unstable codes that define masculinity at particular historical moments” (Jones, [“Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film”](#), Review of *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film*, by , Philippa Gates, *Clues* 27.1 [Spring 2009], p.112). Consider the masculinity of the three males leads White, Exley, and Vincennes. White is blunt and brutal, always able, and willing, to fight his way through. Exley is more bookish, opting for strategy and politics, yet still becoming “Shotgun Ed”. Vincennes is cool and calm, able to play those around him and the media system. How do these different representations question the current definition of masculinity? How stable are these codes or definitions? Are any of them redeemed or upheld?
  
6. As well as questioning definitions of masculinity, detective films are of interest as they question how these “models of ‘heroic masculinity’ intersects with questions of community morality, social values, law, and order” (Jones, [“Detecting Men”](#), p.112). [The Maltese Falcon](#) hinted at the corruption of society, including traditional authority figures. In *L.A. Confidential* this becomes one of the key plot concerns, with the three detectives having to deal with this reality of corrupt officials and unscrupulous media. Some have pointed out that “as a form of social or political criticism, film noir hardly ever goes beyond the sweeping premise of a completely corrupt society and the romance of painful non-conformism” ([“Crime, Guilt, and Subjectivity in ‘Film Noir’”](#) p.382). In different ways, the three leads are these “painful” non-conformists, attempting to implant their own masculine morality on this corrupt system. White has the most straight-forward ‘morality’, although this is by no means unproblematic, particularly his “adherence to violence as a necessary adjunct to the job”. Exley has a highly principled, intellectual approach, although this does not prevent him from acting in his own self-interest. Vincennes is more complicated, where he works so heavily within the unscrupulous media and faulty police system, although avoiding complete corruption. These questionable ethics are best revealed in the three lead’s reasons for becoming cops. White never explicitly states his reason, only that it might be to “get even” after witnessing his mother’s murder at the hands of his father (Bracken’s words, not White’s). Exley has intellectualized it, giving it a name (Rollo Tomasi), some “personality”, and an ethos “to catch the guys who thought they could get away with it”. Jack, in a sombre reflection on his career, responds simply with “I don’t remember.” How deeply does the film explore the corruption of society “beyond the sweeping premise”? Are the three lead “models of ‘heroic masculinity’” any kind of solution? What flaws are there in their approaches? How would you compare them with Sam Spade from [The Maltese Falcon](#), who likewise struggles in a world of crime and corruption?