



Movie Club

The Evolution of Noir 1: The Maltese Falcon (1941)

Discussion Questions

1. Film Noir developed in the early 1940s, combining popular 1930s cinematic styles—the gangster flick, the horror film, and the detective film—as well as French “poetic realist” directors and German Expressionism. The shift was away from comedies and melodramas, looking instead for a form where “ambiguity and ambivalence penetrated the psychological drama” (Dinerstein, [“Emergent Noir’: Film Noir and the Great Depression in ‘High Sierra’ \(1941\) and ‘This Gun for Hire’ \(1942\)”](#), *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3, Film and Popular Culture (Dec., 2008), p.416). Although there was a desire for “ambiguity and ambivalence” and a darker tone and subject matter, films were restricted by the Motion Picture Production Code. The general principle was “no picture shall be produced that lowers the moral standards of those who see it” (Lewis, [Hollywood v Hard Core: How The Struggle Over Censorship Created the Modern Film Industry](#), p.303). This restricted levels of violence and sexual conduct, but also put restrictions on the success of criminals. Films from the era became adept at balancing the line between hinting at depravity while not explicitly showing and getting the full heft from it. Despite these restrictions, darker themes were presented and compelled audiences. In *The Maltese Falcon*, this is clear with all the characters: Spade is cold hearted and has sexual links with two of the three female characters; Gutman and Cairo are greedy; and O’Shaughnessy is willing to do whatever is needed to keep herself alive. Even the police have a corrupt streak (happily drinking along to Spade’s toast “success to crime”). How does this “ambiguity and ambivalence” connect with the Production Code? Is it a product or result of the strictures as well as audience demand?
2. Spade has an uneasy set of morals. A prime example is his investigation of his partner’s murder: he did not like him and was having an affair with his wife, but still feels compelled to “do something about” his murder. After the murder Spade also discards the widow, trying to remove her from him as well. And later in the film, when the truth is revealed about O’Shaughnessy and she pleads with him not to get the turn her in, he coolly admits that he loves her, but that he can’t turn a blind eye to her actions. In the end, his morals come out on top. This partly to do with the Production Code, but does reveal interesting moral discussion about Spade and his society. What does this say about his character, his code of ethics? What does it say about the society willing to tolerate bending of laws, but that holds others against any transgression?

3. The 1930s and 40s saw many great cinematic epics that explored national myths: [Gone with the Wind](#) and southern myth; [Stagecoach](#) and the frontier myth; [Mr. Smith Goes to Washington](#) and Mid-west "heartland" myth of virtue; [The Wizard of Oz](#) looked at technology and innocence; and even [Citizen Kane](#) which combined several of these. Film noir, such as *The Maltese Falcon*, focused "instead [on] the mundane experiences of Depression-era Americans" (Dinerstein, "[Emergent Noir](#)", p.419). Given the dark subject matter, how accurately does noir depict these 'mundane experiences'? What does it reveal about the period to you? Does this focus occur in opposition to these grand myths? What does it reveal about Depression-era America(ns)?
4. One national myth that is present in the film is that of individualism. Many of the characters are removed from families, pasts, history. We see shades of it with O'Shaughnessy as well as Gutman and Cairo. But Spade is the clearest indication of this, being removed from all others, with even his partner dying, leaving him alone in his investigation. We also see this in his lack of allegiance to anyone (with the exception of Perrine) and his distrust of the police, traditional authority structures. Why would this myth be preserved given the disinterest in the others mentioned above? Does the film condone this stout individualism (think of the corruption of all other parties)? How strongly is this linked with his masculinity (Take for example, the contrast with the *femme fatale* O'Shaughnessy, the other lone character)?
5. What do we make of Gutman and Cairo? They are clearly depicted as Europeans in their dress, mannerisms and accents. Note, for example, the flamboyance of their clothes in comparison with everyone else, and the emphasis put on Cairo's fragranced calling card and handkerchief. The latter also gives a hint of homosexuality to their characterisation (Cooper, "[Sex/Knowledge/Power in the Detective Genre](#)", *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Spring, 1989), p.26). This is especially the case when contrasted with the ultra-masculine Spade, whose sexual prowess has conquered two women as well as physically dominating all other male rivals (he beats Cairo and outmatches Gutman's henchmen Wilmer). What role do they play in the story and the myth of individuality? What is gained in presenting them as less masculine than the films lead? What role do they play in the Depression-era experiences of the society they seem to be plundering? (For an interesting comparison, think about the relation of [Citizen Kane](#)—also released in 1941—with Europe, where Kane attempts to plunder the statues and objects to build and decorate Xanadu).
6. O'Shaughnessy is singled out at the end as the worst perpetrator, with her crime more heinous than those of her male counterparts in the film. Spade, although flawed, is still a hero for solving the mystery, and Gutman, although temporarily detained, will be able to continue his search. But O'Shaughnessy potentially faces execution. What does it reveal about the role of women in this society/world? Think, for example of the first encounter between O'Shaughnessy and Spade, where she spins the tale of a missing sister and he, admitting later he was aware of her act, perpetuates it by going through the professional procedures. This is an "imbalance of consciousness", where Spade is aware of the game whereas O'Shaughnessy is trying her best to operate within the framework over which she has no control (Cooper, "[Sex/Knowledge/Power](#)", p.24). How does this create the image of the *femme fatale*, the image of a seductress who uses men for her aims? How successful is she

(it is worth noting that she fooled three men—Archer, Thursby and Captain Jacobi—with her act with fatal consequences)?

7. The sexual dynamics are also revealed with Spades secretary Effie Perrine. He calls her “a good man”. She is the only person he has anything good to say about, and his praise has a confused sexuality, wherein she gains his approval with “the ultimate phallogentric compliment” (Cooper, [“Sex/Knowledge/Power”](#), p.26). Perrine even dresses in a masculine fashion, wearing a black suit and no noticeable jewellery, whereas the two other female characters dress more femininely (O’Shaughnessy in dresses, delicately placed hats and furs, and Archer in her widow’s dress with pearls). There is an element of the virgin/whore dichotomy, where Spade views the women as either sexual beings that deserve contempt (O’Shaughnessy & Archer) or as noble beings (Perrine) that he, as a heterosexual male, would not sleep with. Are the men subjected to the same strictures (think of the femininity of the dandified Gutman and Cairo)? How is Spade’s praise of Perrine reconciled with his calling her angle and sweetheart?