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3. Rififi, the American Soldier and their aesthetics of the Film-Noir

The cinematic aesthetics in both Jules Dassin's [Rififi](#) (1955) and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *American Soldier* (1970) both reference the iconography of the American film noir genre. The term 'noir' means 'black' or 'dark' and was applied in 1946 by several French critics who referenced the term towards several American films made during World War II. Much of the gloomy fatalistic style of the film noir derived from American hard-boiled detective novels from the 1920's, involving gritty social themes such as moral corruption and masculine ideals, which were written by authors Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain.

And yet the roots of the film noir began much earlier, with many theorists suggesting its birth began all the way from Europe, in Germany's silent film period of the 1920's. [German Expressionism](#) is a style that was largely confined to Germany due to the isolation the country experienced during World War I. Its style usually involved bizarre architecture, off kilter lighting and shadows and geometrically distorted sets, making it a fascinating contrast to its twisted themes of psychology, madness, and murder. Most films that helped categorize German Expressionism include silent films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), *Nosferatu* (1922) and *Metropolis* (1927).

The style of German Expressionism immigrated to Hollywood (along with several of their German filmmakers like Fritz Lang) when the Nazis gained power, ultimately incorporating itself into the Pre-code American gangster films of the 1930's. Much of noir's key elements like lighting, shadows and the tragic fatalism of its characters began with the American gangster films of *Public Enemy* (1931) *Little Caesar* (1931) and *Scarface* (1932); films which derived much of its social themes from the time like Prohibition, the Great Depression and organized crime. After the strict enforcement of the Production Code began to take hold in the late 30's, the genre of the gangster film began to quickly taper off, allowing once again for its style to change and evolve.

Finally the movement found its official mark with John Huston's private eye classic the *Maltese Falcon* in 1941. Not only did the film establish and popularize many of the conventions of the film noir genre, it also made legendary actor Humphrey Bogart into a major star. The formulaic conventions of the film noir included various flawed male detectives or criminals, filled with conflicted feelings of self-doubt, pessimism and a cold, detached view of the world. The women in the films (femme-fatales) are usually sexually manipulative and treacherous characters, purposely luring the men into danger or death, all for their own selfish reasons. Much of these iconic conventions spawned several noir films of the era; many looked at today as cinematic classics, most famously *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Out of the Past* (1947) and *The Third Man* (1949).

Many critics believe the film-noir movement officially began with the *Maltese Falcon* and ultimately came to an end with Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* in 1958. Since *Touch of Evil* (1958) there have been various other films which many critics label as neo-noir, noir-like films that either pay homage or even parody the conventions of the film noir genre. Besides the later

more famous neo-noirs like *Chinatown* (1972), *Blood Simple* (1984) and *L.A. Confidential* (1997), there was also Jules Dassin's earlier French heist film *Rififi* (1955) and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's flamboyant German film *The American Soldier* (1970). I would like to explore three key noir elements which both *Rififi* and *The American Soldier* recreated; the mise-en scene, the iconographic images of the city, and the cynical relationships between the characters.

The most formal noirish element that completely stands out in both *Rififi* and the *American Soldier* is the mise-en scene, which when translated from French means "the placing on the stage." Mise-en Scene refers to everything that occurs in foreground, mid-ground and the background of the camera lens. Most of the photography in *Rififi* and especially *the American Soldier* conveys an overt exaggeration of distortion and manipulation to the viewer. They incorporate stylized cinematography and image composition, which involves high contrast in lighting, shadows and the distorted angles in its shots, which all help to create the moody tension and alienated despair for its viewers. But it's the constant motion of smoking and drinking, mostly smoking, that immediately stands out with the world of the noir; as almost every character in *Rififi* and the *American Soldier* seems to be either smoking, lighting up, or asking someone else to light it for them.

Rififi and the *American Soldier* contain various different noirish elements, but one of the most obvious components is its iconography in the various locations and environments. The visual settings in *Rififi* and *the American Soldier's* are composed of wet alleyways, dim bars or foggy streets, while many of the visual planes help effectively create such a fatalistic and claustrophobic atmosphere. Jules Dassin for instance was known for being a director who loved to shoot on real life city locations, like his other film *Naked City* (1948) which is famous for its semi-documentary footage of New York. In *Rififi*, its nighttime shots are equally as stunning and

Dassin filmed using everyday locations which include construction sites, back alleys, train stations, diners, smokey gambling houses and dance clubs. The dance club (which is called *L'Age d'Or* in homage to the Luis Bunuel surrealist film) and its interior with beautiful exotic dancers singing and dancing are quite entrancing.

Rainer Werner Fassbinder was a huge admirer of classic American cinema, and most of the stark black and white images in the *American Soldier* seemed to purposely be a slight exaggeration of the isolation integrated within the noir world. To express the character's highly alienated world, Fassbinder brilliantly uses several geometric figures, including the tight restriction of the camera frame. The use of tight hallways, sharp corners and cramped entrance ways leading into various back rooms feel claustrophobically enclosed and condensed. These restrictions also give the feeling as if it is trapping its characters in their unhappiness and misery, while emphasizing on their lack of privacy, extreme loneliness and existential despair.

The last noir element I found fascinating in both *Rififi* and the *American Soldier* is the tragic bleakness and cynicism found in the characters. The noir genre is famously known to include despicable and unlikable anti-heroes, characters who clearly have three things on their mind: sex, greed and murder. Most of the men nonchalantly strut through the formula of a routine murder plot or thrilling crime drama; constantly using cold sex play and stoic mannerisms while spouting out tough talk and macho attitude. Both Tony in *Rififi* and Ricky from *the American Soldier*, two aging experienced veterans (one from crime and one from the war) both know the code of the streets, and both get sexually involved with women who complicate the jobs they've been hired to do. Much of the violence in *Rififi* is off-screen (most famously the belt beating scene that Tony does to his ex girlfriend Mado) but it only makes the

gritty violence much more effective. In the *American Soldier* the characters in the story seem to be extremely flamboyant or absurdly macho and the sex is much more explicit.

In one of my favorite scenes of *American Soldier* Ricky and a call-girl named Rosa are laying in bed nude together and a suicidal hotel maid (filmmaker Margarethe von Trotta) comes in and sits on their bed. The maid then recounts a lengthy story on how an elderly German woman married a young Turkish man. Interestingly enough this is the essential plot to what would be for many Fassbinder's greatest film, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974). Even though Fassbinder was famously known to love the melodramas that came out of the Golden Age of Hollywood (he has stated on several occasions that Douglas Sirk was his favorite filmmaker) you can tell by the aesthetic craftsmanship of the *American Soldier*, Fassbinder also adored the noir genre as well.

Unlike *Rififi* which felt like more like a perfect European companion to the noir genre of American cinema, Fassbinder instead used the iconography and style of the *American Soldier* to simply parody it. Much of the story and characters seem to be purposely mocking and exaggerating (affectionately of course) the key components that make up a noir. There is a kind of male absurdity and arrogance on how cruelly the characters treat one another and yet the film slips into a beautiful blend of poetry and machismo; all because of Fassbinder's flair and gusto to the material. In the end both *Rififi* and the *American Soldier* represent just another artistic stage in the continuing evolution of the film noir. The genre continues to remain fresh and alive all these decades because of its various aesthetics that are incorporated within the history of the movement. Whether it is the elements of German Expressionism, Gangster or Neo-Noir, the spirit and essence of the noir continues to successfully thrive not only within the cinema but in all forms of literature and art as well.