To Live and Die in L.A.:

UNDERSTANDING NOIR’S STATUS AS A FILM GENRE AND THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FILM NOIR AND NEO-NOIR.
Film Noir

MOST PEOPLE WHO WATCH FILMS ON A REGULAR BASIS HAVE SEEN FILM NOIR IN ONE FORM OR ANOTHER. WHAT EXACTLY IS FILM NOIR?
Is film noir a genre?

- What is a film genre?
- What is a film style?
- What is film noir?
- What is neo-noir?
- Is noir a genre, a style, a cycle, or something else?
- How *To Live and Die in L.A.* exemplifies neo-noir as a genre.
What is a film genre?

- shared characteristics of film form, film style, iconography, or content (textual focus);
- A Dictionary of Film Studies
- Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell
Examples of film genres

- Westerns
Examples of film genres

- Gangster films
Examples of film genres

- Science fiction
Examples of film genres

- And as we shall see, film noir
What is a film style

- Any distinctive, patterned, developed, meaningful use of techniques of the film medium, including mise-en-scene, framing, iconography, shot size, lighting, color, editing, and sound. A film’s style is the outcome of choices made by the filmmaker in these and other relevant areas at various stages of production, *pre-production, and post-production.

-A Dictionary of Film Studies

Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell
Film cycles

A film cycle is a group of genre films that enjoy significant popularity and influence over a defined period of time.

-A Dictionary of Film Studies
Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell

Some critics argue that noir could only have been produced during a specific time frame (circa 1941-1959) and thus is limited to that time frame.
What is film noir?

- French critics noticed a trend in American films during and after World War Two with dark overtones, in subject, tone, and look. These films were labeled “film noir” (“black film” or “dark film”) by French critic Nino Frank. French film critics explored the films but American critics did not take note of them until the early 1970’s.
What is film noir?

- Film noir incorporates narrative elements such as:
- a wrong turn leading an innocent person somewhere they normally wouldn’t go, usually leading to ruin or destruction.
- The city is often a vital element of noir with the city often being a corrupting force full of dangerous twists and turns.
- The character of the fatal woman or fatal man is seen, someone who leads a character to destruction.
- A protagonist who is a police officer, private detective, or innocent person.
What is film noir?

- Other narrative elements of noir include:
  - A voiceover
  - A story told as a flashback.
  - A surrealistic tone where all is not what it appears to be.
  - A theme of fatalism,
  - A bleak ending.
What is film noir?

- Film noir often has visual elements such as:
  - Shadows
  - Chiaroscuro
  - Venetian blinds
  - Fog
  - Rain
What is film noir?

- Film noir’s style was influenced by German Expressionisms so it comes as no surprise that noir features style such as:
  - Shadows, often exaggerated.
What is film noir?

- Film noir often has visual elements such as:
- Chiaroscuro- low-key lighting is used to create distinct areas of light and darkness.
What is film noir?

- Film noir often has visual elements such as:
- Venetian blinds - these often cast shadows, reminding the viewer of bars and that a character is trapped.
What is film noir?

- Film noir often has visual elements such as:
- Fog - some noir films were “B” films made on a small budget. Fog was used to hide shortcomings in set design. They also created a sense that characters were lost.
What is film noir?

- Film noir often has visual elements such as:
- Rain
- Rain was often a harbinger of doom.
Examples of film noir

- *The Maltese Falcon* is often cited as the first film noir (some critics point to *Stranger on the Third Floor* or even *Citizen Kane*). A private investigator meets a femme fatale seeking a priceless treasure.
Examples of film noir

- “Scarlet Street” - a respectable businessman takes a wrong turn through the city, leading to him meeting a femme fatale who destroys his life.
Examples of film noir

- *Double Indemnity*: An insurance salesman falls for a femme fatale seeking to murder her husband and collect his life insurance policy. The salesman alerts her to the opportunity of “double indemnity” and they hatch a murder plot.
The end of film noir

Many film historians believe noir ended with Orson Welles’ film *Touch of Evil*. The film was brutal and so stylized that some believe there was nothing further that could be done with film noir.
Film noir goes dormant

Although some historians believe film noir ended around 1959, noir-ish films continued to be made during the 1960’s and 1970’s.
Film noir goes dormant?

- *The Manchurian Candidate*
Film noir goes dormant

- Chinatown
Film noir goes dormant?

- *Taxi Driver*
Some film historians claim there was a new phase in film noir, neo-noir. The 1981 film *Body Heat* is sometimes listed as the first neo-noir film. The film had many of film noir’s elements but also incorporated new ones that reflected changes in film style and culture.
Body Heat and Neo-Noir

- *Body Heat* has noir elements such as:
  - The femme fatale
  - A wrong turn leading to someone taking a path to destruction.
  - Visual elements such as shadows, Venetian blinds, and ceiling fans.

> That was certainly true the first time, when I did *Body Heat*, the first movie that I directed. I was looking for a vessel to tell a certain kind of story, and I was a huge fan of Film Noir, and what I liked about it was that it was so extreme in style.

*Lawrence Kasdan*
Neo-noir elements

- Neo-noir added new elements not found in traditional film noir
- Films were in color
- Films were not restricted by the Production Code which meant that criminals could get away with crimes where before they had to be punished.
- Settings moved out of the city.
- Sex, which was previously implied, could be shown.
Neo-noir elements

► Ask yourself, are these new elements or the evolution of noir? We shall explore this at the end of our presentation.
To Live and Die in L.A.

- William Friedkin’s 1985 film is sometimes listed as a neo-noir film.
William Friedkin

- Friedkin is known for his hit films *The French Connection* and *The Exorcist*. His filmography includes many other films, such as *Sorcerer*, *The Brink’s Job*, *Cruising*, and *Deal of the Century*. 
A brief summary of the film is necessary to understand its noir elements and determine whether L.A. qualifies as neo-noir. The film deals with Treasury agent Richard Chance who pursues counterfeiter Eric Masters. Chance is out for revenge after Masters kills his partner Jim Hart. Chance’s new partner, John Vukovich, is slowly corrupted by Chance as Chance will do whatever is necessary, illegal or legal, to apprehend Masters. Both Masters and Chance destroy the people around them, ultimately dying due to their self-destructive personas.
Narrative Elements of noir in *To Live and Die in L.A.*

- The femme fatale
- The homme fatale
- The city as spectacle
- Rain as a prelude to disaster
- Long twisting roads
- Moral ambiguity
Visual style elements of noir in *To Live and Die in L.A.*

- Chiaroscuro
- Venetian blinds
- Shadows cast which resemble bars
Neo-noir narrative elements

- The femme fatale from a post-feminist approach
- The cop crosses the line
- Reflection of society (in this case, the 1980's)
Neo-noir style elements

- Use of color
- Fast cuts
- Use of contemporary music
To Live and Die in L.A. has a fatal woman, Bianca. Bianca works alongside Eric Masters. In this scene, she is attired like a fatal woman from classic noir. Unlike her intertextual colleagues in crime, she escapes the story with her life as well as financial security.
The femme fatale

Fatal woman Bianca leads corrupt attorney Max Waxman to his destruction. Note the classic noir symbol of the Venetian blinds, the heavy use of shadow, and the neon that casts a dirty light on the proceedings.
The homme fatale
“fatal man”

- While femme fatales are well known characters in film noir (and other genres), the homme fatale dates back to the genre’s earliest days with fatal man Johnny Prince in *Scarlet Street*. The fatal man serves the same purpose as the fatal woman, leading an innocent person to their doom.
The homme fatale

- *To Live and Die in L.A.* has fatal man Eric Masters. Eric Masters (Willem Dafoe) is a complex character. A counterfeiter, he uses his illicit gains to finance his paintings which he then burns. Masters is self-destructive just like his parallel character Richard Chance.
The homme fatale

- It can be argued that Richard Chance is a fatal man as well. While he is a federal agent, his self-destructive behavior brings down those around him, as well as himself. Chance seduces his by-the-book partner Vukovich into breaking the law to catch Masters. By the film’s end, Chance is dead but he lives on as Vukovich as taken on his bad habits.
The city as spectacle

- Film noir has a long tradition of the city as a character itself. The city is often seen as a corrupting labyrinth from which there is no escape. While the city is often seen at night, it can be equally dangerous during the daytime. This has been seen in films such as *Naked City*, *Chinatown*, and *To Live and Die in L.A.*
William Friedkin shot the film on location in Los Angeles (and the outlying region), capturing the city in its sunbaked sordidness. The city as spectacle is one of the film’s strongest noir elements.
Rain as a prelude to disaster

Agent John Vukovich (John Pankow) on stakeout. The heavy rain here foreshadows the destruction that is about to unfold.
Rain as a prelude to disaster

This long shot captures Vukovich's view as he stakes out the scene. The long shot is reminiscent of Hitchcock's use of long shots in *Rear Window* to capture L.B. Jeffries spying on his neighbors.
Although most of the film takes place in the city, this important scene shows agent Jim Hart driving through barren country, unaware that he is headed for destruction.
Another scene, this time showing the city at dusk as agent Chance drives to see the informant he is blackmailing. As Chance will learn, there is no clear path to the truth.
“Bizarre backgrounds encourage the splashy visual set-pieces that decorate the genre. Usually involving a chase, a murder, a showdown, a release of tension of violence, a moment of madness, the noir set-piece is a showcase for the kind of baroque sensibility that most American genres have little use for” –Foster Hirsch Lost Highways and Detours.
The set piece

- *To Live and Die in L.A.* features several set pieces.
- A scene where *Eric Masters* counterfeits money.
To Live and Die in L.A. features several set pieces. A ten minute car chase that culminates in the protagonists driving the wrong way on a highway.
To Live and Die in L.A. features several set pieces.

The film’s climactic showdown between Eric Masters and John Vukovich.
Moral ambiguity is central to *To Live and Die in L.A.* Treasury agent Richard Chance breaks the law in his efforts to capture Rick Masters. He blackmails an informant for sex and information. She in turn, gives him false information, hoping to profit from it.
The cop crosses the line to catch a criminal

There is further support for L.A. being noir if one agrees with Foster Hirsch that “Indeed for a policier to qualify as legitimately noir, the cop must be attracted to or in some way be complicit with the cry of the city at night. If he remains an observer who is not innocent of any transgression, the film is a crime movie that has not earned its stripes” (157). As we shall see, the film’s protagonist, Treasury agent Richard Chance discards the law in his pursuit of counterfeiter Eric Masters.
Noir reflecting society

- Critics have pointed to film noir reflecting social disruptions such as World War Two and the Red Scare of the 1950’s. This argument has been expanded to neo-noir and the fall-out from Vietnam and the Watergate scandal. *To Live and Die in L.A.* is a reflection of the “decade of greed” in the 1980’s. Director William Friedkin has stated that the film is about counterfeit people in a counterfeit world.
Noir visual elements in *To Live and Die in L.A.*

- Chiaroscuro’s use was expanded in film as color film became common. William Friedkin incorporates it into the film with dramatic effect. A common lighting technique is shown here that suggests the dual nature of the character, in this case, Richard Chance.
John Vukovich (left) argues with his partner Richard Chance (right) over Chance’s crooked policing methods. Note the shadows on the walls, hinting at the cage both men’s illegal activities have put them in, as well as the use of red lighting to hint at their tension.
Use of contemporary music

- The 1980’s saw the proliferation of film soundtracks. William Friedkin had the new wave band Wang Chung score the film without them watching it. Friedkin then took the music and inserted it throughout the film, enhancing the film rather than looking to profit off of a soundtrack.
Is Noir and/or Neo-Noir a Genre?

- What do you think? Are critics thinking too hard?
Is Noir and/or Neo-Noir a Genre?

Film Noir and Neo-Noir share narrative and style elements that make it a film genre.
Noir and Neo-Noir = Film Noir

- Film noir has distinctive narrative elements
- Film noir has distinctive stylistic elements
- Film noir is more than just a style
- Film noir is more than a cycle
Film noir vs. neo-noir

- I would argue that any distinction between film noir and neo-noir is unnecessary. Like all genres, it has evolved over time, reflecting changes in culture and film technology (such as color film).
Film noir vs. neo-noir

There is no consensus on film noir and neo-noir nor does there need to be. Film noir is a distinct genre that has changed with the times just as other genres have. A contemporary Western may be different than a Western from the 1930’s, but that does not make them two different genres (or sub-genres).
Film noir vs. neo-noir

- While it is useful to chart the evolution of noir, breaking noir up into film noir and neo-noir creates further problems down the road. What will critics say of noir twenty years from now? Will the noir films at that time be called post-neo-noir?
For more information on film noir and To Live and Die in L.A.


For more information on film noir and *To Live and Die in L.A.*

