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The Big Sleep Meets The Big Lebowski

Film noir is a genre based more in an idea then in a actual style developed in the nineteen-thirties and forties.  The idea that film noir exist as a genre came out France after the fall of Germany when thousands of American films flooded the European markets. French film critics saw the films of Howard Hawks, John Huston and Fitz Lang among others  and saw the same themes of corruption, anti-establishment, and the darker side of the American dream all rolled up in circo lighting, black and white film and no truly happy ending.

Looking at the Howard Hawk’s detective movie *The Big Sleep,* based on the Raymond Chandler pulp fiction novel of the same name, and the Joel and Ethan Cohen’s  comedy *The Big Lebowski* as exemplars of how the elements of noir are used in a story not necessarily written as a film noir, but where the elements are used to now define what the genre of noir implies.

Thomas Schatz writes in his article *Film Genre and the Genre Film* the genre in which the film takes place is the “unspoken” agreement between the audience and the film they are watching, their willing suspension of disbelief.  The audience is expecting certain formulas and conventions such as the white hat hero and black-hat villain of the western, or the outsides forces that keep the double-hero apart in a musical. These agreements are what makes the “ language” of the films to be processed by the audience (Schatz 454).  In the case of film noir the formulas and conventions binding the films of the classic era into a noir grouping are especially important to noir as genre.  Traits of  film noir included, but are not limited to: never misleading the audience into thinking the film will have a happy ending;  women are loose with no morals, or too smart for their own good with no morals; there is never a female character in Noir who is going to be waiting at home with slippers and a pipe, and if a female character seems to exist in the world of Noir she will likely meet an untimely demise (such as Katie Bannion [Jocelyn Brando] in Fitz Lang’s *The Big Heat);* lastly, and what Thomas Schatz would argue is the most important, is the locations of noir as a genre.  All locations, even during the day seem like they are permeated with night and shadows. Action takes place in apartment buildings, both upscale and downtrodden, bars filled with unsavory characters and alleys filled with backdoors leading to lower rings of society, all taking place in Los Angeles (of course).  In his article, *Chinatown and Generic Transformations in Recent American Films*, John G. Cawelti writes about the how a myth is patterns in narrative stories being shared throughout culture and presented in different stories by different storytellers. The ambiguous location of the modern American city is the setting for the hard-boiled detective to have his quest for justice  is in that sense important American myth (Cawelti 499). Noir literature and film was primarily centered in, or around, the city of Los Angeles, ironically, the City of the Angels.  A dubious honor, as the Los Angeles of noir tradition was filled with devils, demons, and fallen angels.  The fact that even in the 1920s-1930s, Los Angeles still held a lawlessness that caused people to see it as dingy outpost held over from the frontier.  A slightly modernized, somewhat lawless, “Wild West”.

In the film *The Big Lebowski* the Coen Brother’s have made the film’s protagonist,  Jeffrey Lebowski (Jeff Bridges), or The Dude as he preferred to called, into  a amateur bowler who sends his days at a bowling alley in the San Fernando Valley, a suburb of Los Angeles. The bowling alley, which comes equipped with a bar and a cast of colorful characters, addresses two requirements of the noir setting.  In making The Dude a bowler, the Coen brothers have placed their “hero” in a constant “alley” in which the action can take place. The final scene of the film is a perfect example of how the elements of noir work into *The Big Lebowski* is the final confrontation between The Dude, Walter Sobchack (John Goodman), Donny Kerabatsos (Steve Buscemi) and the German nihilists (Peter Stormare, Torsten Voges, and Flea) which takes places outside of the bowling alley . The “fight” that ensues  leaves the nihilists in ruins and Donny in the midst of a fatal heart attack, laying in the “alley” fading away. The Coen Brother’s pan out from the scene and fade to black, leaving the neon lights of the alley glowing in the darkness, completing the mythical hero-quest. How is this “noir”? Clarify Looking to Cawelti once again, he writes how the myth is invoked in different ways, “Its setting in Los Angeles in the 1930’s is very much the archetypal  ‘hard-boiled’ setting...the California city setting of Hammett and Chandler and the approximate time of their stories, memorialized in the period furnishing, visual icons...have become for us the look and the temporal-spatial aura of the hard boiled myth.” (Cawelti, 499). While *The Big Sleep* is based on a Chandler novel set and filmed in the 1940s, *The Big Lebowski* is set in 1999, yet the film itself evokes a sense of nostalgia.  The film opens up with a voice over narration by The Stranger (Sam Elliott); the voiceover soliloquy being a tactic often used in classic noir.  The bowling alley dates backs to the 1950s. The Dude’s apartment building and the home of Jeffrey Lebowski (David Huddleston), the “Big Lebowski” the film is named after, are from the 1940s. The musical soundtrack is from the 1970s, but this in and of itself calls back to a “simpler” time, at least in the minds of the audience.  Add in to that the  over the top Busby Berkeley  musical number after The Dude has been drugged (which harkens back to the scene in the RKO noir *Murder My Sweet*, starring musical star Dick Powell as Marlow who is also drugged and have a “ trippy” dream sequence). The sole reason for the inclusion of this scene would seem to be a tongue-in-cheek homage to the overlooked RKO film and they all add up to Cawelti’s point of visual cues and setting are what the audience “reads” to tell them the myth and genre they are watching. The Coen brothers are purposefully placing a feeling of nostalgia on the film. Placing the film in a “vacuum” of noir timeless.

In his essay *Kill Me Again:Movement Becomes Genre*, Todd Erickson writes of noir as a genre, “Although *noir* found its best avenues of expression in the detective and the gangster genres, as a movement it cut across all generic lines. That’s why social drama’s...and other genre films...were affected and transformed by stylistic elements and thematic concerns of *noir.* Of course, these genre films were not *film noir*. To use a hybrid expression, they were *“noired”.* (Erickson,308).  While *The Big Lebowski* acknowledges the story uses plot points from *The Big Sleep*, it is not a film that is truly a neo-noir in the same manner that *Chinatown* or even *Bladerunner* can claim. *The Big Lebowski* is comedy using the tropes of noir to tell its story. Similarly, noir used techniques and darker storytelling elements from German expressionism to define its style. Thus “noir” is both a genre and the tropes which comprise it. In this sense, *The Big Lebowski* is indeed a noir film, using the required tropes.

The *The Big Sleep,* being made in the film noir era, is the epitome of the classical noir style, using all the standard tropes. The scene when Philip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) arrives at the home of Gwynn Geiger (Theodore Von Eltz) who is the head of the “gambling” ring blackmailing General Sternwood (Charles Waldron) with photos of his daughter Carmen Sternwood (Martha Vickers) is a location filled with tropes which signal to the audience they are in a noir-filled world.  As Marlow stakes out the home, the camera POV is of the rain soaked windshield and a hard flash of light filling the screen like lightning.  A woman’s scream is heard and the camera moves to outside the car to a fog-filled, starless night as Marlow runs, jumping over the bushes and into the home to find a “drugged” Carmen propped in a chair and Geiger dead at her feet.  Placing the camera to show the viewpoint of the protagonist is a method used in noir to place the audience right in the action, to allow them to experience the shady and dark underworld from the safety of their theater seat.

 It is interesting to note in the original novel Geiger is the head of  a pornagraphy ring, and in *The Big Lebowski*  Jackie Treehorn (Ben Gazzara) runs a pornagrapy company. The Coen Brothers were able to add this sordid element back in their parody of the original because they no longer had to deal with the pesky issue of the production code.  The Big Lebowski being a “noired” comedy places it under the banner of a neo-noir in many respects, the advantage neo-noirs have to their classical noir forefathers was the implementation of the rating system after the production code fell to the wayside. As Erickson writes, “The American cinema’s ongoing quest for greater realism was assisted by the  Motion Picture Association of America’s institution of a rating system in 1966, which permitted more explicit acts of sex and violence to be depicted on the screen.” (Erickson 311).  The addition of television to American homes opened a window to the events happening in the outside world. The Vietnam War was raging and the country was divided into pacifists against the war and pro-war “agitators” both of  whom were watching the war and the body count on their nightly news cast.  This call for more true to life storytelling is what led realism taking greater presidents in films. David Bordwell writes in his essay *The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice* about the art film as any film that goes against the classical Hollywood structure of storytelling of defined characters with a goal to get from point A of the film to point B and then adding elements of realism into the plot. Bordwell writes, “The art cinema motivates it narratives by two principals; realism and authorial expressivity. On one hand, the art cinema defines itself as a realistic cinema. It will shows us  real locations (Neorealism, the New Wave) and real problems (contemporary “alienation”, lack of communication etc.) Part of this reality is sexual; the aesthetic and commerce of the art cinema often depend upon eroticism that violates the production code” (Bordwell 561).  In *The Big Lebowski* The Dude is a stoner throwback the ‘60s who was against the war and what it stood for.  Another “reality” is Walter yang, a Vietnam vet who still lives in the horror of the past but who is played for comic effect. Even though *The Big Lebowski* is a comdey it is dealing with the issues of realism in presenting real world issues into the narrtive. Having The Dude’s philosophy of pacifism against Walters  “warmongering” set in 1999, while George H.W. Bush is seen on television talking of operation Desert Storm, is a mixing of the “real” world with “reel” one being shown in movie houses. While *The Big Sleep* was under the scruntiny of the code, the screen writers William Faulkner, Leigh Brackett, and Jules Furthman found ways to sneak in the “real” world into their screenplay, mostly in the form of innuendo filled conversations and small, suggestive moments of sexual chemistry between Marlowe and Vivian.  For example, in the scene whereupon entering his office, Marlowe finds Vivian waiting for him. After they exchange barbs, she sits on his desk trying to nonchalantly scratch an itch on her leg in a “lady like” manner, until Marlowe tells her, “Go ahead and scratch”.  This scene works on two levels.  To work the sexual contexts into the film, it allows a reason for Vivian to “expose” her thigh to Marlowe, and the innuendo of the sexual desire the two characters have for each other to be discussed in terms of a physical “itch” that Marlowe acknowledges and encourages Vivian to satisfy by “scratching”, a not-so-subtle metaphor for a sexual invitation.  This  emphasizes Marlow’s sexual prowess and appeal, while still getting  around the Hays Code rules.

*The Big Sleep* and *The* *Big Lebowski* are two films that  are an examples of how noir is a genre made of visual and “language” cues that signal the style of film and story the audience is going to be experiencing. Both classical and neo-noirs have touches of realism added in to darken the tone and mode of the story.

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