

FILM NOIR'S VISUAL STYLE

1. Scenes are typically set at night or indoors, connoting a nocturnal, claustrophobic world.
2. Oblique and vertical lines preferred to horizontals.
3. Actors and settings are often given equal emphasis (sets and objects "speak" and comment on action).
4. Compositional tension is preferred to physical action.
5. Attachment to water: glistening streets, rain, docks, and alleyways.
6. Stark opposition of light and dark areas.
7. Often bizarre, off-angle compositions of figures placed irregularly in the frame, creating a world that is never safe or stable.
8. Claustrophobic framing devices abound: doors, windows, stairways, bed frames, shadows.
9. Objects sometimes push their way into the foreground of the frame, assuming human proportions.
10. Framed portraits and mirrors take on ominous and fetishistic importance. On a symbolic level, they suggest fragmented egos, divided selves, or idealized images.
11. Directors often use unsettling variations on traditional shot breakdown: establishing shots are often withheld; the viewer has no spatial orientation; extreme close-ups or canted shots are obtrusive and troubling.
12. Archetypal noir shot is the extreme high-angle long shot, an oppressive and fatalistic angle that looks down on helpless victims as if they were rats caught in a maze.
13. Editing often features extreme changes in angle and shot scale to create jarring juxtapositions (e.g. cut from a huge close-up to a high-angle shot of a man being chased through dark streets).
14. Camera movement tends to be sparing. Noir productions tend to be low-budget ("B-films"), hence the lack of expensive and time-consuming tracking or crane shots. Films of Lang and Preminger, though, do have short and subtle tracking shots that insinuate, and thus undermine stable composition.
15. Lighting tends to be low-key, often with slicing effect of Venetian blinds across a face or a room.

You Know It's Noir if . . .

- Someone is drinking black coffee in a roadhouse.
- A neon sign blinks on and off, perhaps with one letter missing.
- Everyone is wearing hats.
- A ceiling fan slowly revolves, even in the dead of winter.
- A hero spills his guts in voice-over narration.
- People smoke unfiltered cigarettes; ashtrays overflow.
- There's a hard-bitten dame named Velma.
- A guy drinks whisky (straight) in a barroom during the day.
- A woman smokes, drinks and sings — all at the same time.
- Streets are wet and glistening, even when there's no trace of rain.
- A muted trumpet moans plaintively in the night.
- Everyone wears trench coats, and men have pocket handkerchiefs.
- A body lies face down in a pool of blood.
- Tabloid headlines scream about a crime wave.
- Shadows stretch the length of an alley.
- Venetian blinds etch striped shadows across people, and on walls.
- Faces are seen in shadowy close-ups.
- Scenes dissolve in foggy fade-outs.
- Street lamps cast pockets of light.
- A character emotes in front of a mirror.
- Light shines through a winding wooden staircase.
- Oblique camera angles make the world appear to be tilting.
- The movie seems to be in black and white — even if it's in color.

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