

NOIRANTINE

by [Sean Woodard](#)

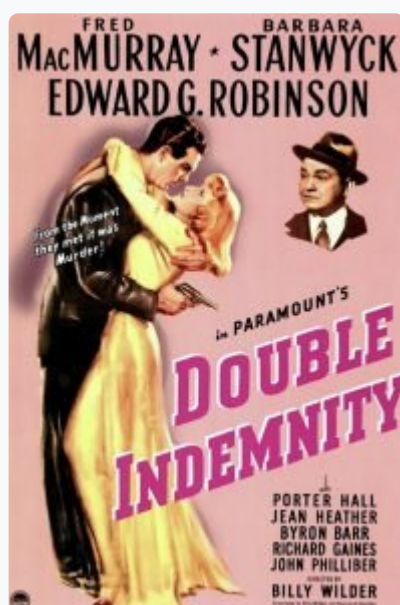
The onset of the COVID-19 quarantine left me with two things: too much time on my hands and a plethora of books and films to (re)discover. I found myself delving into crime fiction with James Ellroy's "L.A. Quartet" (*The Black Dahlia*, *The Big Nowhere*, *L. A. Confidential*, *White Jazz*), graphic novels (*Hit: 1955*, *The Fade-Out*), and my film noir collection on Blu-Ray.

When Frida Programming Director Trevor Dillon asked us to pitch blog post ideas, I automatically came up with the title: *NOIRANTINE*. It rolled off the tongue, sounded like a slant rhyme to quarantine, and possessed a witty charm to it, almost like a well-executed pun. Almost. Originally, my plan was to write about films that took place mainly in one location, but the shortlist was almost nonexistent. So, I expanded the idea to not just cover the "greatest hits" of the genre and decided to cover a wide-ranging list of classics, overlooked gems, and lackluster entries that still retain a degree of noteworthiness to merit inclusion on this list.

Some academics and film critics argue that *noir* is more so a medium or a distinct filming style than it is a genre. For those interested in an in-depth analysis of the subject, I highly recommend [Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir](#) by Sheri Chinen Biesen.

The following 12 films are presented in the order in which I viewed them; their placing does not indicate the level of repute each film has critically received.

"Remember, dear readers, you heard it here first, off the record, on the Q. T., and very Hush-Hush."



DOUBLE INDEMNITY (1944)

"Suddenly it came over me that everything would go wrong. It sounds crazy, Keyes, but it's true, so help me. I couldn't hear my own footsteps. It was the walk of a dead man."

James M. Cain burst onto the literary scene with *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, but his follow-up *Double Indemnity* solidified him as a mainstay of the crime genre. Adapted for the screen by fellow crime novelist, Raymond Chandler (*The Big Sleep*), Billy Wilder's film was nominated for seven Oscars, but lost to Paramount's other property, *Going My Way*, for Best Picture.

Double Indemnity may be considered the quintessential film *noir*, save for *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). This story of illicit love between insurance man Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) and Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) and their plot to kill her husband for the insurance money remains a critical favorite. Full of firecracker dialogue and strong performances — including James Cagney's powerhouse supporting role as Neff's associate Barton Keyes — this classic is not only an exceptional film *noir*, but arguably also one of the best films ever made.

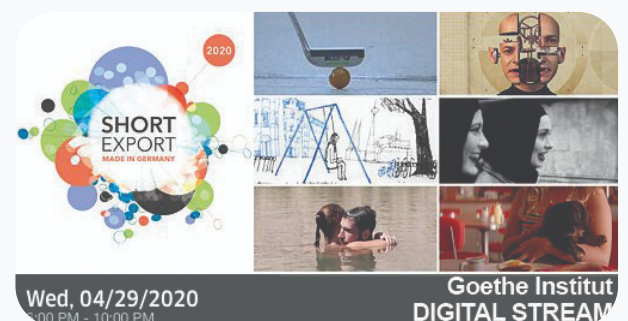
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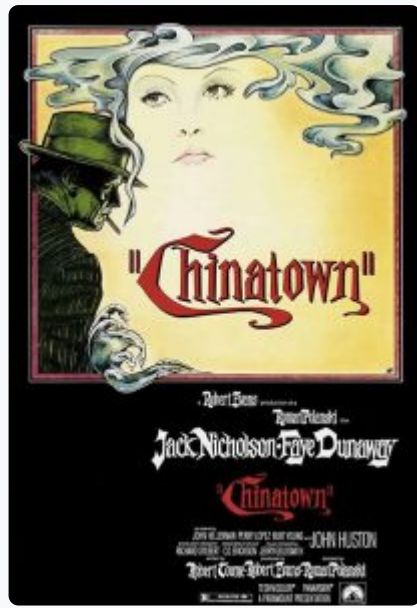
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CHINATOWN (1974)

"Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown."

What hasn't been said about Roman Polanski's *neo-noir*? Last year, the film celebrated its 45th anniversary. As of this writing, Sam Wasson's recent nonfiction book, *The Big Goodbye: Chinatown and the Last Years of Hollywood*, may be the final word on the subject.

While most of the acclaim focuses on Robert Towne's award-winning screenplay, John A. Alonzo's cinematography is outstanding. Combined with the impeccable period detail of post-WWII Los Angeles, the cinematography exudes the seedy underlying nature of the city and imbues *Chinatown* with the aesthetic qualities that define film *noir*, particularly the counterpoint between light and shadow that mirror the subject matter.



GANGSTER SQUAD (2013)

"You can't shoot me, you're a cop."

"Not anymore."

Gangster Squad is a film I turn on when I don't want to think and instead want to become enveloped in the action on-screen. While many elements are lifted from more successful crime flicks — it may even be considered a wannabe West Coast *Untouchables* — *Gangster Squad* remains relatively entertaining.

In particular, Sean Penn's portrayal of Mickey Cohen is worth the admission alone. The characters embodied by Robert Patrick and others are memorable, as well. The film also features good attention to detail, particularly clothing and dialogue, even if some of it doesn't ring familiar to modern ears. As a *neo-noir*, the lighting and color timing also creates a good contrast between neon colors of the historic popular Wilshire Boulevard staple Slapsy Maxie's and the drab, shadowed interiors of seedy hotel rooms and other locales.

While *Gangster Squad* presents nothing new, it still is an entertaining way to kill two hours. Plus, it has one of the funniest LA-themed running gags in recent crime films: "I always knew I'd die in Burbank."



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DETOUR (1945)

"Listen Mister, I been around, and I know a wrong guy when I see one. What'd you do, kiss him with a wrench?"

The Academy Film Archive and the Film Foundation's restoration of this long-lost *noir* classic is a definitive representation of the importance of film preservation. You can read more about the restoration [here](#). The Criterion Collection's disc is a must-own for any diehard film collector.

Edgar G. Ulmer's hard-hitting *Detour* is a 69-minute feature that follows a former nightclub pianist (Tom Neal) who inadvertently becomes involved in a murder and assumes the dead man's identity. Along the way, he runs into Vera (Ann Savage), who threatens to reveal his secret, lest he not split the money with her from a planned inheritance scheme. *Detour* is as gritty as they come. You can feel the vitriol coming from the screen as the two leads fight for dominance. The film also features a stellar score by composer Leo Erdody.



WOMAN ON THE RUN (1950)

"So Frank is a fugitive from the law . . . that's just like him!"

Thank the Film Noir Foundation and the UCLA Film and Television Archive for rescuing this Universal gem from obscurity. Set in the same San Francisco streets where detective Sam Spade searched for the fabled Maltese Falcon, *Woman on the Run* is a stellar film in the *noir* tradition. After her husband Frank goes into hiding when he witnesses a gangland execution, Eleanor (Ann Sheridan) sets out to locate him, aided by an alleged newspaper reporter (Dennis O'Keefe) who secretly happens to be the murderer. While the 78-minute feature meanders a bit in its storytelling, the conclusion features one of the most riveting sequences, with Eleanor trapped in a rollercoaster car unable to alert her husband of impending danger. The editing work effectively sustains suspense and emits the sense of hopelessness Eleanor feels in the moment.





MULHOLLAND FALLS (1996)

"This isn't America, Jack. This is L.A."

The detectives grow more cynical as they enter the atomic age in this 1950s-era *neo-noir*. Nick Nolte leads an all-star cast that includes Michael Madsen and Chazz Palminteri. As Max Hoover, Nolte's hat squad is tasked with forcefully cleaning the streets of the City of Angels, until they become involved with the murder of a beautiful woman (Jennifer Connelly) that has ties to the highest echelons of the US government and Hoover's past.

Full of conspiracy intrigue and period automobile eye-candy, the film sadly stumbles in its pacing. Featuring a noteworthy, understated cameo by John Malkovich and a stellar soundtrack, *Mulholland Falls* is engrossing enough to keep viewers engaged, but sadly fails to have a lasting impact. However, I've found that repeat viewings are rewarding in revealing little details that flesh out the story.



ODDS AGAINST TOMORROW (1959)

"It's one big play, our one and only chance to grab stakes forever."

Odds Against Tomorrow has got to be one of the most intense film *noirs* I've seen to date. With the plot racing along at a breakneck speed, this vehicle for singer Harry Belafonte, Robert Ryan, and Shelly Winters is a knockout. The plot focuses on a team of men — a disgraced cop (Ed Begley), a racist ex-con (Ryan), and a nightclub singer (Belafonte) who owes money for pressing gambling debts — who plan to rob a bank.

Racial tensions run high and blood boils in this hard-hitting flick that makes some of Quentin Tarantino's additional written dialogue in *Crimson Tide* look tame. In addition, Gloria Grahame intensifies the proceedings by cranking up the sexual tension between her and Ryan's character. Featuring one of the most tense bank robbery scenes committed to celluloid, the botched job leads to an explosive conclusion that rivals the ending of *White Heat* (1949). Olive Films and BFI have created stellar Blu-Ray packages of *Odds Against Tomorrow* in the US and UK, respectively. It would be a crime not to add it to your collection.





THE BLACK DAHLIA (2006)

"The basic rule of homicide applied: nothing stays buried forever."

To be blunt, Brian De Palma's adaptation of *The Black Dahlia* does not hold a candle to the 1987 James Ellroy novel. However, it doesn't deserve the mass critical malaise it received upon its theatrical release. The film version falters when it comes to its editing and pacing choices utilized to streamline Ellroy's plot. In addition, Hilary Swank was openly criticized for her portrayal of a *femme fatale*. In this case, ambition doesn't merit quality.

Has the passage of time been kind to the *Dahlia*? In some respects, yes. Vilmos Zsimond's cinematography definitely earned its Academy Award nomination. De Palma's penchant for visual flair also results in some of the most stunning sequences of his career — in particular, a sweeping crane shot that reveals the discovery of Elizabeth Shorts' body before panning to a nearby shootout and a dizzying fatal set-up that ends with a bloody fall into a fountain. Also, be on the lookout for a scene featuring musician K.D. Lang as a *longue* singer in a lesbian bar.

If you care to read a more in-depth analysis of *The Black Dahlia*, please let me refer you to my recent ["Finding the Sacred Among the Profane" film column](#) in the 2020 Pop Culture issue of *Drunk Monkeys*.



L.A. CONFIDENTIAL (1997)

"If we're going to figure this out, we need to work together."

"The Nite Owl made you. You want to tear all that down?"

"With a wrecking ball. You want to help me swing it?"

If I must choose between the best of the film adaptations, it would have to be Curtis Hanson's 1997 Oscar-nominated *L.A. Confidential*. There's impeccable storytelling and compelling characters abound in this period police procedural. From Guy Pearce and Russell Crowe to its supporting cast, the film excels at every level.

While the film took certain liberties in adapting the plot of Ellroy's novel, the changes still result in effective storytelling, culminating in a distinct vision to complement the original written narrative. As a *neo-noir*, it features a very compelling mystery. But as a film, it is one of the best in the past 30 years.





TOO LATE FOR TEARS (1949)

“Don’t ever change, Tiger. I don’t think I’d like you with a heart.”

The Film Noir Foundation and the UCLA Film and Television Archive also rescued this “lost” film *noir* after a five-year restoration process. The end result is spectacular. Lizabeth Scott as Jane Palmer, a married woman, who with her husband Alan (Arthur Kennedy), are accidentally on the receiving end of a \$60,000 payoff. They agree to not spend the money and hide it away for a week before going to the police. Soon after, the menacing Danny Fuller (Dan Duryea) shows up demanding his money. When her husband goes missing, Jane’s sister-in-law Kathy Palmer (Kristine Miller) and a mysterious stranger named Don Blake (Don DeFore) start their own investigation into his disappearance.

Full of twists and red herrings, *Too Late for Tears* is stellar film *noir*. The first 25 minutes alone are an exemplary example in sustained tension. Although the pacing slackens for the remainder of the film, the tension never abates until the final revealing moment. There’s even an endearing romantic angle between Kathy Palmer and Don Blake that lighten up the proceedings. But the chemistry between Lizabeth Scott as the conniving *femme fatale* and the Dan Duryea’s Danny Fuller carry the picture to its shocking conclusion.



THE BIG HEAT (1953)

“It’ll burn for a long time, Vince. It doesn’t look bad now. But in the morning your face will be like mine. Look at it. It isn’t pretty, is it?”

Fritz Lang’s *The Big Heat* earns the spot of my favorite film *noir*. The film starts with a bang and never lets up in its brisk 90-minute runtime. This story about homicide detective Dave Bannion (Glenn Ford) who battles police corruption and a crime syndicate is one of the most visually abrasive and compelling *noir* narratives written for the screen.

Long before the opening sequence of Brian De Palma’s *The Untouchables* (1987) showed that no one is safe, Fritz Lang’s film kills off Bannion’s wife in the first 30 minutes, setting him on a course for revenge. Also featuring Gloria Grahame as *femme fatale* Debby Marsh and Lee Marvin as mobster henchman Vince Stone, *The Big Heat* one-ups the classic James Cagney grapefruit-in-the-face visual from *The Public Enemy* (1931) with a boiling pot of coffee in one of the most shocking displays

of 1950's cinematic violence—not once, but *twice*!

The Big Heat is the film *noir* equivalent of a *one-two* punch to the gut.



THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI (1947)

"You need more than luck in Shanghai."

Orson Welles had several very interesting film projects over the trajectory of his career. One of the most memorable ones was a globe-trotting film *noir* called *The Lady from Shanghai*, which he agreed to adapt from a Sherwood King novel to pay off an exorbitant amount of debt. The film follows an Irish-American seaman named Michael Bannister (Welles), who falls for the married Elsa Bannister (Rita Hayworth with bleached hair). He agrees to a job aboard her husband's yacht, a decision that leads to a murder plot and double crosses.

Welles ran into trouble with Columbia Pictures over the film's production. Reportedly, the picture's budget ran over, due to multiple delays. Welles' initial rough cut clocked in at 155 minutes, which resulted in the picture being drastically cut by the studio to a theatrical runtime of 87 minutes. Much of the editing results in the confusion of the main narrative; Welles' attempt at Irish brogue — more painful than James Coburn's accent in Sergio Leone's *Duck, You Sucker!* — and voice-over narration do little to clarify the plot. However, the film has garnered a cult following, and contains many elements that work. Of note, the climactic chase sequence in a hall of mirrors funhouse is one of the most expertly edited sequences of all time. I highly recommend watching the film for that moment alone.

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