Assignment 2: Use a discussion of 1-2 neo-noir films of the 1970s or 1990s to cast light on what aspects of noir have survived into more recent times. How does this help reflect back on the significance of noir?
2 or 3 things I know about Noir
- and a style analysis of David Fincher's Se7en (1995)

What keeps film noir alive for us today is something more than a spurious nostalgia: It is the underlying mood of pessimism (...). This (...) is nothing less than an existential attitude towards life. It places its emphasis on man’s contingency in a world where there are no transcendental values or moral absolutes.¹

This whole world's wild at heart and weird on top.²

1. Introduction: The Legacy of Nino Frank – The Big Picture

Andy Warhol’s painting of the snub-nosed .38 brings a sensation of nostalgia and retro feeling towards an American black/white mythology set in an eternal 1930s Los Angeles. But in the discussion of noir nostalgia, film historian James Naremore wants us to ask: Nostalgia for what? “A good deal of postmodernist noir involves a conservative, ahistorical regression to the pop culture of the 1950s, or to a glamorous world before that, where people dressed well and smoked cigarettes” (1998:211). Much has been said about the origin of neo-noir original Chinatown (Roman Polanski, 1974) and the revitalization of film noir in the 1970s’ “schizophrenic alternation between a developing irony and a reactionary nostalgia” (Ray 1985:261). The revived interest in noir sensibility, absurdly stylized retro artifacts and stories fraught with antiheroes and criminal elements made Richard Jameson exclaim: “In 1974, film noir is still possible” (1974:205). Was it possible in the 1990s? This essay will try to make certain elaborations on this subject. It will also treat Chinatown as a starting point for the more modern attempts to catch that noir quality.

David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, in their book Film Art, assert that: “The low-key approach was revived in the 1980s (...) and continued in the 1990s in film noirs like Se7en [David Fincher, 1995]” (2008:130). Inspired by this statement, I have selected it as the kernel film for close reading in this analysis of style in modern noirs. I want to explore whether Se7en is a prime example of modern Hollywood’s tendency to put style over substance (being a so-called superficial noir) or not. Also, should we consider the neo-noir film as a continuation of film noir conventions or, in general, as Naremore proposes, just a post-modern, ahistorical pastiche? I suggest that Se7en – obviously nostalgic through the use of visual and thematical motifs – uses genre principles but also revises them in unsettling ways: Reworking noir conventions through visual style for its own motives. Moreover, considering that many regard film noir as nothing but a movement or a series of tropes, is it possible to call neo-noir a genre at all? I will try to answer these questions by conducting a style

² A line uttered by David Lynch’s character Lula in the neo-noir Wild at Heart (1990).
analysis, focusing mostly on the visual aspects of the opening and ending of Fincher’ film and looking for genre-related principles. Though, “all of this is more than just visual style: it is inherently a part of storytelling, an integral narrative device,” Blain Brown notices in his handbook for cinematographers (2002:160). Naturally, I will most certainly tread upon various additional conventions, other than the purely visual, that are used to convey the story of Se7en both stylistically and narratively.

2. Definitions: Filmed in Low-key – *Classical and Intensified Continuity in Noir*

Low key or high contrast lighting; imbalanced side-light; night-for-night shooting; deep focused, wide screen focal length; extreme low, high and canted angles; foreground obstructions; psychological and subjective camera; montage and composition in subjective forms to distort reality. Listing up forties *film noir’s* technical traits may not say much about their function. It is best described by what it creates: Dark, desperate, alienated mean streets of cities with shadowy alleys laden with unknown danger, blinking neon lights through the windows of seedy jazz bars reflected on rain-soaked pavement and all of the mystery and menace of the city after dark. This is the sensational iconography and mise-en-scène of *film noir* that makes it so attractive to viewers, creators and critics. Here the contrast between light and darkness becomes something more than a tool. It becomes a visual metaphor. In these films we find a narrative perspective fraught with “the impossibility of a single, stable point of view, and thus [limits] all seeing and knowing (…) – what is unseen in the shadows may be as significant as what is seen in the light” (Brown 2002:160).

Leaning so heavily on choreography makes its thematics hide in style. Of course, *film noir* relies on a huge array of sources. It is on the one hand a prodigy of the classical Hollywood style, a paradigm that contains and expresses seamless temporal and spatial coherency, consequence, clarity, causality and continuity. This tradition denotes and reveals central information about the narration to its audience; it tries to express or stir emotional quality among its viewers; it creates attractive formal and technical patterns; and it uses symbolism to formulate abstract and conceptual ideas or themes (based on Bordwell et.al. 1985). On the other hand, *film noir* was a style that was born out of the period’s post-war reality and disillusionment, thematically influenced by the hard-boiled ‘pulp fiction’ tradition of Dashiel Hammet, Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain, and cinematographically by the German expats Wilder, Curtiz, Lang, Dmytryk, Siodmak, Tourneur, Ulmer – who where themselves influenced by the modernistic movements of expressionism and impressionism in Europe. Robert B. Ray observes that “[a]s a result of this odd pairing, a *film noir*’s visuals often seemed to operate at an entirely different level of intensity, conveying anxieties not suggested by the stories themselves” (1985:160). Film theorist and screenwriter Paul Schrader, in his seminal essay “Notes on Film Noir”, draws up this quick history of the phenomenon: First, it is “defined by tone rather than genre” (1972:54). Secondly, Schrader thinks of it as a specific period of
film history, like the French new wave: “[F]ilm noir can stretch at its outer limits from The Maltese Falcon (1941) to Touch of Evil (1958)” (ibid: 54). Lastly, that “color cinematography was, of course, the final blow to the ‘noir’ look” (ibid: 61) – incidentally quite paradoxical since he would later provide the screenplay for one of colored ‘new’ noirs’ most famous candidates, and certainly an inspirational source for Se7en, Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese, 1976).

Fast forwarding to 1980s and 90s contemporary film history, Bordwell and Thompson notes that “[t]oday’s editing practices abide by the principles of continuity but amplify them in certain ways. (…) Partly because of the faster editing, scenes are built out of relatively close views of individual characters, rather than long-shot framing.” (2008:246). They call this occurrence for ‘intensified continuity’. In this style, the filming of dialogue features little movement by the actors on the set. They stand or sit, delivering their lines in visually static isolated shots. This is compensated by much faster and much more cutting, a camera that tends to move frequently, the use of telephoto lenses and in-depth staging with tight or medium close-ups, rack focus and mobile framing all in the same scene, utilizing modern wide-screen formats, but making establishing shots less common. I propose that in the neo-noir of my choosing, both this intensified continuity and the more slower editing of the forties merge in an interesting pattern. What’s more, it’s interesting to look at the average shot length (ASL) of different segments of the film, and finding that they reflect the action in the scenes. An opening build-up can use long takes to give a feeling of a meditative experience. A closing showdown can use faster cutting to convey the erratic feelings of its characters. Stressing opening and closing segments, I measure that the opening sequence’s point of view is a tableau of the narrative by displaying a sequence of signs that is understandable and coherent by the viewer. It literally ‘carries’ us, loll’d – not kicking and screaming, into the film’s world. The ending, on the other hand, need not be served on a silver plate. It can justifiable be shocking and abrupt as well as tranquil and brooding when the screen goes to black.

3. Background: Hard-boiled Wonderland – Leaving Weimar Republic for Basin City

The question is a cliche, but is hard to come around it: What is neo-noir? The awareness of the term, according to Todd Erickson can “be attributed to haphazard movie critics, who, seemingly anxious to show-off their cinematic IQs, assign the term to virtually any contemporary motion picture favoring dark, wet streets and/or a central character in jeopardy” (1995:307). Here’s a subject containing every favorite field in film criticism: Aesthetics, auteurs, psychoanalytics, sociology, politics, chronological disruptive narration, and continuation of the Hollywood style. The list is endless. Pick a field, among the noirs you will most certainly find it. The problem lies in determining its boundaries. The biggest dichotomy, nevertheless, stands between film noir as a mood, according to Schrader, and neo-noir as a possible genre. Erickson lends both an ear to this latter argument and
appear to oppose Schrader when he states that film noir and its offspring, from a historical overview, can mutually be classified “not only as a movement, but also as a genre, which developed within, and emerged from, the movement itself” (1995:308). Certainly, on the outlook of things, it is more of the same: There is still the opposition between light and dark; still disorderly balance in the composition of scenes and frames. From a thematic point of view, there is still a sense of moral ambiguity, defeat, fragmentation; focus on the nature of humans, corruption of justice, confusion, identity and memory problems; suffering and salvation. And yet, in spite of this obvious excess, there is also a higher emphasizing on existentialist antiheroes, films where dream and reality mingle, where apathy or nihilism becomes a major postulation.

[T]hese films still are noir films; yet a new type of noir film, one which effectively incorporates and projects the narrative and stylistic conventions of its progenitor onto a contemporary cinematic canvas. Neo-noir is, quite simply, a contemporary rendering of the film noir sensibility (ibid 321).

Neo-noirs are different on another level too, since they do not have to conform to the censorship values of the Production Code of the Hays’ office (abandoned in 1968 in favor for the Motion Picture Association of America rating system), and can afford to be more real and honest, but at the same time more sinister, brutal, sexually violent and sadistic than its predecessors. Jameson claims that while film noir had its own post-war cynicism and self-imposed screen optimism to spin off, this is something neo-noir was lacking, and as such seems only to continue film noir’s style, more than its foundation: “If the film noirs (or noir descendants) of today are any sort of response it must be of a markedly different kind” (Jameson 1974:200). Erickson, writing from a better vantage point, asserts that the noirs of the 70s, the left-right cycles, and the corrected pictures was born out of a range of incidents from “post-Vietnam War disillusionment to the Feminist movement, and an alarming wave of international terrorism” (Erickson 1995:312). It might be added that Jameson had seen little of what was yet to come.

In addition, Erickson, in his essay “Kill Me Again”, lists certain requirements of a film to achieve authentic noir sensibility. This virtual checklist seems comparable to the stylistics catalogue Paul Schrader puts forward. Schrader’s list, though it originates from his 1972 essay, is still interesting, since it blends the noir epic with the newer noir tendencies of the films of his time. Schrader asserts that in the noir film: “The majority of scenes are lit for night”; “oblique and vertical lines are preferred to horizontal”; “[t]he actors and setting are often given equal lighting emphasis”; “[c]ompositional tension is preferred to physical action”; “[t]here seems to be an almost Freudian attachment to water [in that the] empty noir streets are almost always glistening with fresh evening rain (even in Los Angeles)”; “[t]here is a love of romantic narration”; and a “complex chronological order is frequently used to reinforce the feelings of hopelessness and lost time” (1972:56-58).

Erickson, on his side, observes that since we are burdened with a modern sensibility, which it is
impossible to divorce ourselves from, there cannot be a modernized noir, only a new kind of genre (1995: 322). He illuminates the necessity of these noirs to be “voiced” properly; that “characters and dialogue [need be] believable”; that there is a “plausible plot that enhances the suspension of disbelief”; including stylistics as “subjective camera, first-person sound effects and extreme visual perspectives”; not to forget noir iconography, plausible casting and a music score that “highlight character nuances, emotions, plot points and overall mood shift” (ibid: 323). “[I]f all of these elements come together in a single production,” Erickson contends, “there’s a good chance the picture will provide the viewer with a vicarious experience of the nightmarish world of noir” (ibid).

On a similar note, Alain Silver, editor of the Film Noir Reader volumes, points out that, analogous to those films by the 70s directorial ‘Brat-pack’ – film buffs who grew up within a filmic paradigm (Coppola, Lucas, Spielberg and Kubrick among others), “many of the productions that recreate the noir mood, whether in remakes or new narratives, have been undertaken by filmmakers cognizant of a heritage and intent on placing their own interpretation on it” (1992:331). Treating, for simplicity sake, noir films (as opposed to noired films) as a genre, this statement of Silver further hints to Thomas Schatz’ thesis on genre evolvement. In his “Hollywood Genre” he lists four different evolutionary states of a given genre. The first, the experimenting phase, is where conventions are created, tried and tested. The second is the classical stage, where both directors and audience has become confidential with the conventions. In the third one, we are witnessing a refinement of the genre, where noticeable weight is given to the subjective artistic or aesthetical expression (this is where the auteurs or film authors really began to shine, according to French film critic Francois Truffaut). The fourth and last genre stage has become to such an extent so baroque or self-reflexive that it draws attention to itself as the centre of interest. The genre itself, in this phase, amounts to the kernel thematical concentration – more so than any given film’s content. In light of this, it is possible to see differences and dynamic continuity in the film noir and neo-noir films.

This process of evolutionary development seems to be an almost natural feature in the history of any form – whether that of a single genre or of Hollywood cinema as a whole (...). As a form is varied and refined, it is bound to become more stylized, more conscious of its own rules of construction and expression (1981:149).

As Erickson points out: “It’s a matter of ontology. When a being is aware of itself, it becomes a different being” (1995:323). The truest neo-noirs tries to emulate the source that those movies came from rather than the movies themselves.

4. Analysis: Flowers of Evil – Sons of Noir

“But, Mrs. Mulwray, I goddamn near lost my nose. And I like it. I like breathing through it. And I still think you’re hiding something”. When Jack Nicholson’s detective jester and matrimonial peeper
extraordinaire Jake Gittes delivers this line in *Chinatown*, one feels compelled to laugh in spite of the sincerity of his words. We are already slightly aware of that, by this point, he is by no means a thoroughly outdrawn (or outspoken) hero. When he, towards the end, sees Evelyn slumped over the wheel of her Packard, “her eye exploded by a bullet; the daughter screams, while Noah Cross embraces her and tries to shield the view (...) a boogeyman swallowing a baby,” there is no offering “possibility of meaningful action, not even flight” (Naremore 1998:209-10). Gittes’ only comment, “Still, it’s possible...” – its meaning up for discussion – is by no means a heroic statement: “At this point, the only consolation anyone might have would be in opium dreams” (Naremore 1998:210). What I try to distill here is the point that in contemporary *noirs*, the main protagonists are not heroes. Not even an outlaw or reluctant one. They are only the kernel focal point for the stories’ motives. They are characters at a complete loss at a disorienting society they cannot come to grips with. “People don’t want a hero, they want to eat cheeseburgers, play the lotto and watch television,” Morgan Freeman says in *Se7en*. Also, there’s a discrepancy in the old clear-cut opposition between good and evil: “the old generic system was «exhausted» and on the verge of transformation into pictures «more directly related to the second half of the twentieth century». (...) American pop culture was undergoing a renewal, bringing it closer to «the mainstream of postmodernist literatures” (Naremore 1998:210).

Reflecting on Erickson’s point about haphazarded film critics, why, then, do we call films as diverse as social-reality flicks, police thrillers and sci-fi films *neo-noir*? We call them by that name because they are: a) visually or b) thematically and in terms of narrative alike the films born out of the movement in 1940s-50s Hollywood; or c) both. On the one hand, there’s nostalgic period-*noirs* like that of the aforementioned *Chinatown*, but also James Ellroy adapted *L.A. Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997), who do no try to get that *noir ‘feeling’, but rather try to ‘be’ noir*. In the case of the latter, one is inclined to see it as not being ‘about’ anything more than “wide-angle lenses, low-level compositions, tracking shots, and the monochromatic look of masculine rooms with leather upholstery and parquet flooring,” as Naremore describes *Miller’s Crossing* (Joel and Ethan Cohen, 1991) – “It is ‘about’ smoking a cigarette in the dark while sitting next to a black telephone,” a description which applies to Hanson’s film as well (1998:215). On the other hand, there is also *cinema du look*-ish films like *Twelve Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995), over-the-top cinematographically experimental like *The Matrix* (Larry and Andy Wachowski, 1999), excessively comic-styled like *Sin City* (Robert Rodriguez, 2005), tongue-in-cheek like *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (Shane Black, 2005) and superhero action like *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005), where the choreography doesn’t seem to embody anything of the content of substance, or the content is just an excuse for some

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3 This, and other direct quotes from films, will not be having its sources cited by any other means than mentioning what film it is transcribed from.
really cool mise-en-scène “filled with comic-strip villains, loud explosions, and dialogue that consists mainly of «Fuck you» and «No, fuck you!»” (ibid: 266). And then there are the self-conscious neo-noirs of Tarantino, Lynch and Cronenberg, where style and content merge into a fruitful collaboration and the noir iconography is played on for its own purposes. In what category, then, do Se7en belong?

4.1 Se7en: To Become Immortal and Then to Die – Photographic Reality

Only in a world this shitty could you even try to say these were innocent people and keep a straight face. But that’s the point. We see a deadly sin on every street corner, in every home, and we tolerate it. We tolerate it because it’s common, it’s trivial. We tolerate it morning, noon, and night. Well, not anymore. I’m setting the example. What I’ve done is going to be puzzled over and studied and followed... forever.

Ultimately, Se7en is ‘about’ the plot device of the seven deadly sins – gluttony, greed, sloth, lust, pride, envy, wrath – and their manifestations to structure an unsound and gruesome modern gothic-horror story. In the above quote, serial killer John Doe (Kevin Spacey) seems to imply that his ‘vigilantism’ is a product of a higher moral conduct that should be commonly aspired. However, the question Doe seems to ask us (which is further enhanced by stylistic elements like the opening and closing credits): In the right conditions, is there not an affinity between killer and cop? It is essential an existential question: You cannot have crime without law enforcers, and vice versa. Eloquent, educated, methodical, patient, manipulative, ruthless, insane and completely psychopathic – Doe is more than a cut out stereotype, but that is because we have created his character as something more than skin deep in our own head, picturing the kind of man who could have done such atrocities. As Morgan Freeman’s character Somerset remarks: “If we catch John Doe and he turns out to be the devil, I mean if he’s Satan himself, that might live up to our expectations. But he’s not the devil. He’s just a man.” And he’s right. In the end, Doe is nothing but a deeply, darkly disturbed character – as when he hints to the kinship between the murders he’s committed and the creation of art – and as such he seems to be a symbol of the decaying civilization the film portrays. Not necessarily a civilization comparable to our own, but more like an excess of our deepest, darkest and most disturbed sides. The murders are ominous but obscurely sadistic, the killer nightmarish grotesque (maybe not visually), and the innocents not wholly innocent. He is a monster without excuse and according to the fatality of, what he thinks is God’s righteousness, within. On the contrary, Somerset notices and tells him, it seems he is enjoying himself a bit too much doing God’s dirty work: “The Lord works in mysterious ways,” Doe smiles back at him. Though given these observations, it is important to maintain that exceedingly political (law and corruptness) or religious (sins and God’s agent), Se7en is not. Actually, we are rooting for John Doe – ‘nasty stuff’ and exploitation of suffering is a tried and tested postmodern trademark of our time. It is because of him that we are partaking in these hideous sensational but at the same time cathartic murders: “We
want to witness the nightmare, so to speak, but we want to do it from a safe perspective” (Erickson 1995:317). Though arguably, Se7en has more in common thematically with Silence of the Lambs (Jonathan Demme, 1991) and even Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) – both of which are not considered particularly noir, but has debatably been influenced by noir ‘mentality’ in that there’s a human darkness, “the dark undercurrent that served as a thematic constant of the noir cycle” (Erickson 1995:325), prevailing in them. A point possible made for Se7en as well.

One of the major themes the film seems to embody is the essence of photography and the way it is situated in the world: Doe’s photo lab, the picture-series of the ‘sloth’ victim, the portrait of the ‘pride’ victim hanging over the bed, the polaroid of the sword-dildo strap-on, the multitude of crime scene pictures, the picture of the ‘greed’ victim’s wife in the frame, the journalist’s camera that Brad Pitt’s character Mills tosses down the staircase (unknowingly that the photographer is the killer), and the picture cut-outs of abused people in John Doe’s notebooks. Not to mention the illustrations in the books of Dante and Chaucer that stars in the film, and the la nouvelle vague-ish picture of the Brigitte Bardot look-alike prostitute that ultimately becomes the ‘lust’ victim. Se7en has a feeling of a 70’s film noir like Taxi Driver – an apathetic world, interspersed with a 70’s cop show feel. There is a significant focus on ambience. A threat that can come out of the darkness at any one time, making common objects threatening. It’s a modern noir, but literally blacker than just a homage or continuity of that style. It builds upon it in an original way. Where there is some light (formally and thematically) in film noir, here there is hardly any. The excessive, over-worldly, near-polluting rain in the film emerges like an all-encompassing force majeure, which do not actually stop until Doe seemingly turns himself in.

Characterization. Somerset is dressed conscientiously retro with a black pencil tie, tweed jacket over white shirt with suspenders underneath a brown trench coat, inclusive a complementary fedora hat. He’s the more stoic, meticulous and thoughtful one, but at the same time worn down, to the point that he needs a metronome to calm his mind by the end of the day. He is ‘old school’, shoots with a .38 as opposed to Mills’ 9mm and carries a jack knife. His logic and educatedness and controlled behavior make him a sort of doppelganger to John Doe. Paradoxically, Somerset represents in a way the social decay and apathy he himself tries to escape: “I don’t understand this place anymore,” he despairs. Mills is more hip, chewing gum, sports colorful ties, unfolded shirt under a black leather jacket, and a ladies man haircut. He likes to tell stories. Bursting with confidence. The jokingly kind with a colorful language: “Fucking Dante... poetry-writing faggot! Piece of shit, motherfucker!” He is impulsive and reacts faster than Somerset, but at the same time is out of control, gets angry easily, and becomes ominously wrath-like. Though he do really love his job and his wife Tracy. He seems able to believe that he can make a difference, and though the cliché of a do-
gooder cop in a bad city first only slightly bemuses Somerset, he soon gets sneakily infected by Mills’ positivity. Mills tells him:

I don’t think you’re quitting because you believe these things you say. I don’t. I think you want to believe them, because you’re quitting. And you want me to agree with you, and you want me to say, «Yeah, yeah, yeah. You’re right. It’s all fucked up. It’s a fucking mess. We should all go live in a fucking log cabin». But I won’t. I don’t agree with you. I do not. I can’t.

He is the Dante to Somerset’s Virgil. And their adventure through the city of sin is Purgatory. Tracy is his Beatrix. And John Doe, as he himself states, is just a messenger, like the black animal that chases Dante through the dark hole in the beginning of “La Divinia Commedia” (Dante Alighieri, 1308-21).

4.1.1 “Did the kid see it?” – opening segment, 0:00:00 – 0:03:43

Before the openings credits (o.c.), there is a segment that introduces us first to Somerset (business as usual) and then Mills (the complication). Murder investigator Somerset, in his last week on the force, wakes up in his apartment, meticulously readies and steels himself for work, goes to a crime scene where a domestic family dispute has turned bloody. The moral ambiguity of the law enforcers in this city appears when Somerset, seeing the children’s drawings on the refrigerator, asks if kid saw it, and provokes this reaction from his current partner: "«Did the kid see it?» Who gives a fuck? He’s dead, his wife killed him (...). Neighbors heard them screaming at each other, like for two hours, and it was nothing new. Then they heard the gun go off, both barrels. Crime of passion”. Somerset retorts: "Yeah, just look at all the passion on that wall”. He may not care much about the kid. It might be just something he can say to himself; making him feel the eminent guilt he endures every day.

Mills, Somerset’s future replacement, turns up to introduce himself to Somerset, and they team up so that he can learn his replacement the gropes ‘in this town’. The intro ends with Somerset going ominously to sleep in his apartment again. After the o.c., we are shown Mills in his apartment, waking up with his wife and going out to work. Next we see him outside the crime scene of the Gluttony victim. The segment (up till o.c.) lasts 3.43 minutes, has 19 shots, and an ASL of 11.7 seconds (but one hefty long tracking shot racks up the average). This gives it a slightly television show feel, and helps to contrast the o.c. which are shown in an isolated sequence. It is also worth mentioning that it’s quite an extraordinary o.c (see appendix A) in the way it is photographically created; how it connotes certain things, both thematically and formally; and focuses on minute details. The crime scene is showed in a more intensified continuity, quicker cut, than the overworldly scenes from the city. The city is a grittier, darker, New York-like and different blend of west coast eras’ (30s-70s) underworlds. The iron bars on the closed shop behind Somerset and Mills in their lengthy conversation after Mills is introduced, seem to imply that the detectives are locked inside this unsafe metropolitan environment (where no one escapes unscathed). Somerset is surprised that Mills fought to get transferred to a city where heinous crimes prohibits you (or at least
Somerset) from sleeping at night: “Now, I wasn’t standing around guarding the taco-bell, alright? I worked homicide for five years,” Mills defends. “Not here.” Somerset interrupts. This place is somewhere far nastier, gruesome, gritty, Murnau-esc than any other city in the land (of human evilness). There is sin and murder and pain and suffering in every condo, on every street corner. It is (photographic realistically) darker and blacker than any other noir city we’ve seen till now. Somerset presses on: “[O]ver the next seven days, Detective, you’ll do me the favor of remembering that”. This actually not only plays on the seven sins Doe will manifest, but referring to the seven days it took God to create the world (and the seven days for Doe to end it, or recreate it, regenerate it through violence). Furthermore, it is time and again implied that Somerset wants out of this city, to the wilderness, to a cabin in no mans land, where he is safe from the threats of urban criminal life (but when they do get out in the wilderness by the end of the film, it is no more safer than the city, as we will see).

Cinematography. There is a bluish tint in every scene of Somerset’s apartment and the city, interspersed with greyer, blacker and dirtier colors in the crime scenes (especially in the ‘gluttony’ victim’s house). Overall, the director David Fincher uses a palette of cold, muted and monochromatic colors and dark light to dampen the mood. The opening segment tries to give a feeling of natural lighting – outside the film is mostly lit by natural daylight since the rain is added by a rain machine – but interior design is actually lit by every way except natural lighting, with neon lights, incandescent, strobe lights, flash lights held by the actors, and other unnatural sources. The lighting is furthermore imbalanced and sparsely, giving the film an even darker feel. Shadows play on Somerset’s face in his apartment, and Freeman and Pitt are lit differently to heighten their differences. Low angle shots are preferred, so the characters seem more menacing (larger than life). This is combined with some truly spectacular shots, in the opening best described by the slow zoom on Somerset when he sits with his night gown on in bed, back from the day’s work, at the end of the intro. Fincher also positions characters on opposite sides of the screen in the opening few shot/reverse shots, making our eyes travel from one end of the screen to the other. The camera movements are slow and few, and close-ups are used sparingly, showing characters mostly total or half total. This more photojournalistic way of filming gives that feeling of gritty realism that arguably 90s neo-noirs contest.

Mise-en-scène. The dialogue is rather natural, and lines delivered in a significantly less reduced and choreographed way than Chinatown, or The Big Sleep (Howard Hawks, 1946) for that matter. Somerset’s morose, serious tone is interspersed with Mill’s jokingly real life attitude: “He’s fuckin’ with us! [Mills bends over a desk]. See this? This is us” (Bogart, Pitt is not). The settings of the crime scenes are darkly lit and claustrophobic, with punched in holes in the walls and revealed

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It is worth noting that especially made photographic film for catching more contrast in spite of fewer light sources was used in the filming of Se7en, according to the DVD commentary track.
ruinous wooden pillars. The film actually tries illustrating the smells, the dirt and nastiness (with complementary cockroaches) that seem to embody this underworld. The commissioner’s office, on the other hand, looks like Gittes’ office in *Chinatown*. There seems to be a blueprint for how law enforcers and PIs decorate their office, no matter what time period. There is also a sense that the police in *Se7en* is not well equipped to catch the criminals terrorizing the streets, with archaic 70s-80s computers. The buildings (library, police station, apartment housing where Somerset and Mills live) and the production design in general are a pastiche of styles – combining 1920s architecture with more modern and gloomy (70s-90s) interiors. The nameless ruinous city surrounding Mills and Somerset could in all probability be a near future, dystopian L.A. It brings a metaphysical mood to the film that does not leave even when we travel out in the wilderness. The short segment before the o.c. opens and closes in Somerset’s apartment: He’s doing daily chores (dishwashing), preparing to go to work (dressing, packing his police/personal artifacts), trying to sleep against his mental suffering, dwelling with the metronome. It reflects the restlessness of Somerset, and in a later sequence in the movie, disgusted and tired of playing cat and mouse with John Doe, he tosses it to the ground and breaks it when trying to sleep. Blending with the sounds of his apartment, the noise of the city can be heard outside: The obvious and everlasting rain, police sirens, car alarms, garbage trucks, the barking of dogs, the violent shouting of drunks. There is no nondiegetic musical soundtrack during the opening sequence, nothing to easier loll us into this world. In the o.c, on the other hand, you can hear a Nine Inch Nails song (hardly the jazzy tunes we are used to hear in *Noirs*, but still progressive like only improvised jazz can be) – mostly an instrumental track which ends with the hauntingly sentence: ‘You get me closer to God’, which somehow plays on John Doe’s religious sentiment. For people acquaint with the lyrics to the original song, there is a significant affinity between the film’s plot and the message and content of the song.\(^5\)

4.1.2 “Her pretty head...” – *closing segment, 1:52:27 – 1:56:51*

The ending, which is rather long, is in my opinion most interesting from the point Somerset opens the paper box delivered to him from a delivery boy (1:52:27), and finds surprisingly out that it’s the severed head of Tracy, Mill’s wife. This is after they’ve driven John Doe out to the dessert for him to show them the last bodies: “California, tell your people to stay away. Stay away now, don’t – don’t come in here. Whatever you hear, stay away! John Doe has the upper hand!” Somerset yells to the

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\(^5\) The lyrics go like this: “Closer To God / You let me violate you / You let me desecrate you / You let me penetrate you / You let me compromise you // I broke apart my insides / I've got no soul to sell / The only thing that works for me / Help me get away // I wanna fuck you / I wanna taste you / I wanna feel you / I wanna be you / Just like an animal // You can have my isolation / You can have the hate that it brings / You can have absence of faith / You can have my everything // You tear down all my reason / You see through what I hide / You make me perfect / Help me get inside / I wanna fuck you / I wanna taste you / I wanna feel you / I wanna be you”.\(^5\)
SWAT helicopter while he sprints over to where Mills’ got John Doe at gunpoint. Before he gets
there, Doe confesses to Mills his envy for him: “I visited your home this morning after you’d left. I
tried to play husband. I tried to taste the life of a simple man. It didn’t work out, so I took a
souvenir… her pretty head,” where upon Mills, after Somerset returns to try and calm the situation
and with Doe egging on “[s]he begged for her life and the life of the baby inside her” (something
which is revealed to Somerset earlier in the film, but which comes as lightning from clear sky for
Mills), he shoots Doe right in the head – thereby becoming the last sin: Wrath. We hear the reaction
from the helicopter (which cannot land because of the electric wires – see appendix A) and Mills and
Somerset goes each other’s way, waiting for back-up to arrive. What happens next plays on both the
ending Chinatown, in which they have to drive off the shocked Mills in the backseat of a police car,
and Casablanca (Michael Curtiz, 1942), in that Somerset and his superior walks into the dusk
sunshine – both cops of a different era than Mills. Thoughtfully, Somerset quotes Hemmingway:
“«The world is a fine place and worth fighting for.» I agree with the second part”. The ending
matches the pessimism of Polanski. The film has become, in the words of the French, among the film
plus foncé que le noirs – darker than black films, though arguably there’s that little spur of hope in
Somerset’s final sentence, as if the whole experience has changed him somehow to the better.

Cinematography. The colors in the ending segment look brownish/yellowish in combining the
blue hue of the film and the color of the desert landscape. To an extent, they appear over-natural,
in that they seem more vivid in some places and more toned down in others than in real life.
Positioning the cinematographic lens directly against natural direct sunlight darkens the images
significantly where the sun collides with the focal objects (see appendix A) – not to mention the long,
deepest shadows the characters cast. Even in daylight there is darkness. As opposed to the beginning,
where shadows played on the character’s faces, here the sunlight plays on their faces, giving richer
contours to their expressions. The twilight sun gives light that looks like fire. The sequence
mentioned above lasts 4.24 minutes, has 79 shots and an ASL of 3.3 seconds. The editing is more
frantic, utilizing shorter cuts interloped with the musical background: A cut for every beat; many
shot/reverse shots and close-ups of the characters’ faces, looking for reactions, facial expressions;
placing all three the characters in the screen at the same time; and showing the dialogue through
rack focusing, jump cuts and other techniques of intensified continuity. A couple of seemingly
improvised swish-pan shots during the showdown – a dizzying way of filming if done wrong –
heightens the suspension, looking first, from a total-shot distance, at Somerset and John Doe (right),
then a hurried movement to Mills (left), frantically waving his gun, bending over shouting: “Oh God!
No! No”. The 180-degree axis is frequently broken, but because of the character’s position and color
(Doe sitting on his knees in orange prison overalls, Mills pacing around in his black leather jacket,
waving a gun, Somerset standing with his trench coat and hat and black African-American skin tone),
and because of the conventional eyeline matches (Doe’s bald, glistening head, closing his eyes, and the cut of Mills’ gun seemingly going off in his face), we are never uncertain of the continuity. No steadicam is used when the actors get hysterical or in chase scenes. The filming gets highly subjective and out of focus with hand held cameras, exemplified by Somerset running (see appendix A) and Mills loosing control. We are given a third view: The flying helicopter overseeing the action from a top down view, framed through binoculars – this works as the establishing shot (see appendix A). What’s more, here also the film prefers low angles, filmed upwards so that the characters, and especially John Doe, seem more intimidating. The two-frame cut of Tracy when we look at the crying Mills seems to be the subjectively catalyst for his choice to slaughter Doe.

*Mise-en-scène.* Doe’s voice is unaffected, calm and serene and such a contrast to what he says. He knows just what buttons to push, and plays Mills like a violin. Mills is in shock and off his hinges, looses control, and shouts and screams manically – a natural reaction to any man hearing your wife’s head’s been cut off. Somerset is first desperate, than gets more composed: “If you kill him, he wins”. The raining has stopped just a bit earlier. They are in a dessert – the complete opposite of water – with many high electrical towers with threatening long and big wires. The towers looking like skeleton high rises similar to the painted backgrounds in German expressionist *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920). The scenes are open-ended, but still claustrophobic because of the wires and the multitude of facial close-ups. This derelict western frontier-like landscape is in full daylight but in no way any more optimistic. The off-putting musical score is looming, with slow and hard hits, putting a beat on every time the shot changes, every syllable John Doe utters. There are no noises from the environment (the helicopter can only be heard when we have the helicopter’s point of view), and the final releasing gunshots are received with such heavy hitting clarity that it almost hurts the audio speakers.

4.1.3 “I’m setting the example” – visual cue during dialogue

The dialogue between John Doe, Somerset and Mills in the police car, driving towards the desert, makes evident certain forebodings for the final showdown (see appendix B). Notice that the shot/reverse shots of Somerset and Doe always appears with a shot of either character looking at each other in the rear-view mirror. Between Mills and Doe, however, every shot is filmed through the chicken wire separating the front and back seat, thereby sealing their destiny vis-à-vis Somerset’s. From the way the dialogue goes – Mills’ wrath-like reaction to Doe’s smugness – one gets an impression of that there’s a form of internal communication between Doe and Somerset every time there’s a cut of them looking at each other in the mirror. Like Somerset knows that Doe is playing on Mills’ anger. This further plays on their slight doppelganger affinity.
4.1.4 “Excuse me, Sir. Are you, by any chance, a serial killer?” – final observations

Noir tropes and motifs is a common denominator in director David Fincher’s filmography. His films are about conflicts in mood and the uncertainty in being caught between lightness and darkness. In addition to Se7en, he has also made the 1992 sci-fi noir Alien³, the psycho-noir Fight Club (1999) and arguably neo-noir thriller Panic Room from 2002. His based-upon-real-story Zodiac (2007) is possibly seen as an unofficial follow-up to Se7en, a period film in which a pair of journalists tracks down a serial killer in a 70s San Francisco (though this movie is considerable less visual dark and sinister than Se7en). His personal style is especially seen in the opening credits of Se7en that shows the meticulousness of John Doe’s ‘work’ (as well as his psychopathic tendencies): the planning of his evil doings (photographs of anatomy, autopsies, disfigurement), the painstakingly written notebooks, the cutting off of his fingertips, etc. In the end credits Fincher plays on this artistry, making the end credits look like police files but at the same time familiar to the opening credits, connoting the affinity between Doe’s ‘work’ and the police’s work that seems to envelope the whole of the movie.

The only character who achieved anything in the end is John Doe, regenerating himself through violence – he even made a killer out of a do-gooder cop. He understood that he himself, like Michel in À Bout de Souffle (Jean-Luc Godard, 1960), had to die to become immortal. In any case, he went down in movie history as one of the more interestingly serial killers ever portrayed on the silver screen. There exist however one small error in the film’s plot: Upon busting in on John Doe’s apartment and finding a picture of himself in his photo lab, why didn’t Mills think about putting his wife under protective care? This does not seem like one of the ill-judged convictions or traits of his personality. It appears more to be a narrative necessity for the story to move forward, and as such makes the final ‘resolution’ seem near impossible coincidental. But that’s movies for you.

Interestingly, Sharon Cobb, in “Writing the New Noir”, proposes a list for writing a neo-noir screenplay that reflects both Paul Schrader’s and Todd Erickson’s aforementioned points, (though the emphasize here is on narrative as opposed to visual style). This list seems, on some levels, to hit the mark on an array of point what Se7en is concerned when all is analyzed and said and done: New noirs “symbolize our subconscious fears, our darkest ruminations, our worst nightmares” – symbolized by rolling wives’ heads, and the other personifications of the deadly sins; “good and evil are confused and sometimes indistinguishable” – as when Mills, the law enforcer, chooses the morally corrupt action of executing an unarmed man; “[t]he main character/s are not heroes at all, but the antithesis of heroic” – evident by both Somerset’s and Mills’ unheroic utterings and actions; also, “the Noir protagonist rarely redeems himself in the end” – Pitt’s character is hardly given a choice; and the main characters “experience a sense of [pronounced] isolation” – as is distinguishable by Somerset’s loneliness in the opening shots of the movie; Cobb observes also that “[t]here are few children in New Noir” – much why the last Doe victim, Tracy, is pregnant, and that
there’s a kid involved in the domestic shooting in the opening segment; and that the “[t]ension in Noir stories is generated as much by plot twists [as] it is from anticipated violence (…) and reversals of expectation” – which only goes to show that in a neo-noir like Se7en, we should have expected such and intelligent narrative rollercoaster ride that Fincher takes us through towards the end (Cobb: 1998:209-213): “If John Doe’s head splits open and a UFO should fly out, I want you to have expected it,” Somerset speaks to the mirror, Mills, and effectively to us, the audience, towards the end of the film. We might all have been unprepared.

5. Conclusion: A Left-handed Form of Human Endeavour – Neo-noir Confidential

In 1972, Paul Schrader alleged: “Film noir is equally interesting to critics (…) [as it brings] newer questions of classification and transdirectorial style” (1972:53). I think this is true for today as well. Robert B. Ray, as a part of his thesis in A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, notes that: “If the stylistic independence of film noir represented the postwar period’s characteristic discrepancy between intent and effect, the more typical disjunction operated at the thematic level” (1985:160).

In Se7en, how does this continuation of transdirectorial noir style help illuminate its own thematic level? Do we see Se7en as a reflection of social reality, or purely as an aesthetical endeavour? Being a contemporary noir, it needs for reasons tangible a bit of reinventing. There’s a difference between then – the forties noir period – and now in what motivates the creation of a film. Se7en was arguably motivated by an interesting serial killer story, analogously to Dante’s “Divina Commedia”, but perhaps most so by a way to visually, and arguably kinetically, taking its audience through a cathartic or cleansing ride. Schrader ended his 1972 essay by reiterating noir’s affinity between style and sociology: “Because film noir was first of all a style, because it worked out its conflicts visually rather than thematically, because it was aware of its own identity, it was able to create artistic solutions to sociological problems” (1972:63). The sociology of Se7en is as simple and dull as it is over-used. Serial killers are among a favorite past-time subject for the American people – as is the “fascination with crime drama, antiheroes and violence” (Cobb 1998:213) – evident by the interest for a huge array of media sources on the topic. The concept of serial killers or fugitive outlaws has a sort of attractiveness to it, and has possibly become a part of modern American mythology (this is, after all, the country where most of the stories and fascination with them occur). It arguably takes the idea of

6 Truman Capote’s book “In Cold Blood” (1966) and Bret Easton Ellis’ “American Psycho” (1991); the massive media whirlwind around the case of mass murdering sociopath turned pop-icon Charlie Manson; the TV-series Dexter (2006), in which a police forensics investigator doubles as a morally just serial killer by night, and the serial homeless killer spoof used as plot point in the fifth season of The Wire (2002); in comics like the Jack the Ripper epic “From Hell” by Alan Moore (1999), and Sandman’s “Doll House” (Neil Gaiman, 1989), in which America’s most famous serial killers gather to a serial convention (thereby playing on the words serial ‘comics’ and serial ‘killers’); and not to forget the enormous popularity of such modern epic movies as already mentioned Psycho, Silence of the Lambs, Natural Born Killers (Oliver Stone, 1994), and most recently Fincher’s own movie, Zodiac.
fronterism or opposition to civilization’s structure, like the left movements of the 70s, to an obvious extreme (though in no way politically or religiously fuelled). But as I’ve pointed out, Se7en isn’t totally divorcing its themes from its style: “[B]ecause the noir film communicates to us about our fears and desires more realistically than any other film formula,” and these being “ambition, corruption, redemption, greed, lust, and loyalty” (Erickson 1995:325-6), equally “the loss of public honor, heroic conventions, personal integrity, and, finally, psychic stability” (Schrader 1972:59), it is hard picturing Se7en and its impact as possible without the conventions of film noir. Keeping in mind Thomas Schatz’ theory of genre evolution, this influence reflects back on the period these conventions were created as the birth of contemporary noirs’ possibility both to exist and to work among its audience. As such, Se7en is not a piece of nostalgia tripping (Jameson 1974:200), at least not visually or stylistically. It exceeds the style of the film noirs, but also ricochets off the themes inherent in the same films, thus being something more than over-stylized, superficial entertainment. Case in point: “The theme of universal guilt and sexual malaise is typical of classic noir” – represented by Somerset and John Doe accordingly – gives Se7en, as other films of the film noir era, “a decadent, voluptuous pace and a subterranean horror” (Naremore 1998:207).

What’s more, the commercial and critical success of such films as Se7en has arguably “opened Hollywood doors to more edgy, dark stories and generated a renewed ability to produce films some label New Noir” (Cobb 1998:207). Se7en can thus be seen as not only an example of 90s neo-noir, but also as a catalyst for more productions like it. Talking about this renewed ability, it is important to raise the issue if this renewal has funneled these New Noirs into a form of genre. Having a better vantage point than both Jameson and Schrader, I am inclined to regard film noir, seemingly against Erickson, as a wave or movement because of its hugely dissimilar and elaborate heritage. Neo-noir, on the other hand, is in my opinion more similar to a genre definition – although a modern, newer, self-conscious and factious genre not easily described with few words, but with points of examples and connotations: the neo-noir thriller (L.A. Confidential), the neo-noir action movie (Kiss Kiss Bang Bang), the neo-noir superhero flick (Batman Begins), the neo-noir psychological drama (Wild at Heart), the neo-noir sci-fi (Twelve Monkeys). “From television to comic books, film noir has exerted and continues to exert its narrative and stylistic influence,” Silver concludes his ending chapter in Film Noir Reader (1992:337). Confused? Well, if you aren’t a bit confused, you’ve probably misunderstood. Let me recap: Film Noir never was a genre. No producer would incidentally meet a director in a 1940-50s Warner Brothers studio back-lot, hollering: ‘Hey! So I hear you’re thinking about doing a noir for your next movie?’ They might today.

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7 That John Doe sees himself as a messenger from God is caused by his faulty religious view. He’s a religious extremist, so to speak, uncannily alike a still very contemporary conflict with outermost views on all sides.
Appendix A: Captions from *Se7en*.

Objects in the foreground help frame Somerset doing domestic chores in the beginning of the film. Vertical and horizontal lines flatten the image. Notice the blue tint.

The iron bars in front of the closed shop and behind Somerset and Mills seems to imply the congestedness of the city. The two characters is completely different (visually) represented.

By the end of the day, Somerset is back in his apartment, and a slow zoom shows us this worn out hero, apathy in his eyes, to the point that he needs the metronome to calm him down.

Images of obscure anatomy becomes the *objet trouvée* in this photographic experimental opening credits, implying the same meticulousness between the serial killer and the police.

A low angle shot of John Doe seem far more menacing than his innocent posture would imply. Lighted from behind by direct, natural sunlight gives him an aura of divinity.

The helicopter view is intercut with the ground action. It serves as an establishing shot. The orange tint of the desert is a change from the original blue muted coldness of the city.

A subjective, hand-held camera shot as we run panic-stricken with Somerset towards where Mills holds John Doe at gunpoint. The focus is off and the shot angled and jumpy.

An eyeline match to where Mills has just gunned down John Doe. The viewpoint originates from John Doe. The high electrical tower separates Mills from Somerset, looking off-screen left.
Appendix B: Excerpts from police car dialogue in *Se7en*.

John Doe: It's more comfortable for you to label me as insane.
David Mills: It's VERY comfortable.

(...)

David Mills: I've been trying to figure something in my head, and maybe you can help me out, yeah? When a person is insane, as you clearly are, do you know that you're insane? Maybe you're just sitting around, reading "Guns and Ammo", masturbating in your own feces, do you just stop and go, "Wow! It is amazing how fucking crazy I really am!? Yeah. Do you guys do that?

(...)

John Doe: Realize detective, the only reason that I'm here right now is that I wanted to be.
David Mills: No, no, we would have got you eventually.
John Doe: [Sarcastically] Oh really? So, what were you doing? Biding your time? Toying with me? Allowing five innocent people to die until you felt like springing your trap? Tell me, what was the indisputable evidence you were going to use on me right before I walked up to you and put my hands in the air?
David Mills: I seem to remember us knocking on your door.
John Doe: Oh, that's right. And I seem to remember breaking your face.

(...)

David Mills: Wait, I thought all you did was kill innocent people.
John Doe: Innocent? Is that supposed to be funny? An obese man... a disgusting man who could barely stand up; a man who if you saw him on the street, you'd point him out to your friends so that they could join you in mocking him; a man, who if you saw him while you were eating, you wouldn't be able to finish your meal. After him, I picked the lawyer and I know you both must have been secretly thanking me for that one. This is a man who dedicated his life to making money by lying with every breath that he could muster to keeping murderers and rapists on the streets!
David Mills: Murderers?
John Doe: A woman...
David Mills: Murderers, John, like yourself?
John Doe: [Interrupts] A woman! ...so ugly on the inside she couldn't bear to go on living if she couldn't be beautiful on the outside. A drug dealer, a drug dealing pederast, actually! And let's not forget the disease-spreading whore!

(...)

David Mills: You're no messiah. You're a movie of the week. You're a fucking t-shirt, at best.
Sources

Works cited


Films
