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Reservoir Dogs and the Noir Male

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Abstract

This thesis presents a study of the noir male – the protagonist from the body of films known as film noir. The purpose of the study is to show that a composite of the noir male character can be found constructed in Quentin Tarantino's 1992 directorial debut, Reservoir Dogs. This is achieved through a comparative study of film noir theory, especially as it relates to the noir male character, and Reservoir Dogs and it's characters.

There are three parts. First is the establishment of the theoretical approach of neoformalism, predominantly as defined by Kristin Thompson in her 1988 text, Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis.

The second part is an examination of the theory of film noir, in order to draw a clear picture of what constitutes the characteristics of the noir male and his supporting environment. This includes the origins of film noir and the noir male; visual style; the urban setting; chronology of noir; common themes; the femme fatale; the noir protagonist himself; and neo noir. It is a premise of the thesis that the nature of the noir male is encapsulated in, and reflected by, the common components of film noir films. This premise is supported in the discussion.

The third part is a reading of Reservoir Dogs, with a focus on the characters and their interaction with the film, and each other. This includes discussion of the social influences which mark the environment of noir; the popular culture influence; the way Reservoir Dogs and noir challenge the spectator; discussion of the chronological structure of Reservoir Dogs; the relationship of transgression, which characterizes the noir male's interaction with the femme fatale role; the urban setting; and the theme and mood of film noir.

Drawing together these parts it is possible to conclude that the characters of Reservoir Dogs, supported by the environment and relationships created in the film, form a composite representation of the noir male.
I.

Introduction
I always know the structure I am going to employ in advance, and all the whys and the wherefores of the story when I start writing, but there’s always some unanswered questions, ideas I want to explore. I don’t know how effective they’re going to be, but I want to try them out.

Quentin Tarantino (Reservoir Dogs xii)

The primary focus of this thesis, will be the protagonist of *film noir* – the *noir* male. The primary purpose of this thesis will be to show that this character is constructed in the Quentin Tarantino film, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992). This aim will be achieved through a comparative study of *film noir* theory, especially as it relates to the *noir* male character, and *Reservoir Dogs* and it’s characters.

Putting aside the literature review which follows this introduction, the thesis has a three-part structure. The first part is an examination of neoformalism, the theoretical approach with which the thesis will tackle the examination of *Reservoir Dogs* in conjunction with *film noir*. The discussion of neoformalism will focus predominantly on the work of Kristin Thompson in her book *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*. Thompson’s 1988 book is the most definitive work on defining neoformalism. It will be discussed further as a text in the literature review. This chapter should give the reader both an appreciation of the theory and an understanding of the concepts which will be applied in a practical context later in the thesis.

The second part of the thesis is an examination of the theory of *film noir*. The examination is predominantly text-based, but it will include discussion of, and reference to, a number of well recognized classical *film noirs*. The intent of the discussion is to draw a clear picture of what constitutes the characteristics of the *noir* male and his supporting environment. As part of this discussion it is necessary to look at *film noir* as a whole. It is one premise of this thesis that the nature of the *noir* male is encapsulated in, and reflected by, the common components of *film noir* films. This premise will be supported in the discussion, and will be important to the recognition of the *noir* male in *Reservoir Dogs*. The *film noir* chapter will discuss the origins of *film noir*, the visual style of *noir* and what it represents; the significance of *film noir*’s urban setting; the
importance of its chronological structure; the common recurring themes that can be found; the influence of the femme fatale role on the noir male; and the noir male protagonist himself. The discussion of film noir will also recognize the debate over the classification of film noir as either a genre, a style, or a historical cycle of films. However the thesis is not concerned with adding to the debate, and rather will focus on the well defined common characteristics of film noir, regardless of how they might be labelled. Finally, this chapter will consider the place of neo noir, and what this contemporary form of the noir film adds to the theory on film noir generally.

The third part of the thesis is predominantly a reading of Reservoir Dogs. In this third part the thesis will apply neoformalism and the theory of film noir as they were presented in the preceding chapters. The focus will be the noir male, however the discussion will also include more general reference to film noir in order to underline the existence of the conditions and the environment which supports the noir male characterization. This will include a comparative discussion of the social influences which mark the environment in which film noir flourishes, and an examination of the influence of popular or ‘low’ culture on noir, and which, as it will be noted, Quentin Tarantino appropriates for his films. The chapter will also discuss the way Reservoir Dogs challenges the spectator, comparing this to the reception of classical noir. With a basis which is consistent with film noir and the noir male environment having been established, the chapter will deal more specifically with the characters in Reservoir Dogs, noting how they, along with other complementing characteristics, present a composite of the noir male. This will include discussion of the chronological structure of Reservoir Dogs, and the influence on the characters; a discussion of the relationship of transgression which is played out by the noir male with the femme fatale role; the influence of the urban setting on the character of the noir male; and the theme and mood of film noir as it relates to the noir male as recognized in Reservoir Dogs.

This chapter on Reservoir Dogs will also include reference to one other film specifically, Stanley Kubrick’s The Killing (1956). The film has been selected for two particular reasons; first, it is a recognized film noir from what is considered to be the end period of the cycle of classical noir films from the forties and fifties; and second, it has often been cited as a particular influence on the production of Reservoir Dogs.
By drawing together the discussion as it has been outlined above, it will be possible to form the conclusion that the characteristics of the *noir* male are the defining character traits of the male characters of *Reservoir Dogs*. The establishment of this conclusion will complete the following thesis.