

The
FRIDA ZINEMA
presents...



Happy
Noir
Year!

ISSUE #5



XOXO

January 2025

For the first edition of The Frida Zinema in 2025 we're ringing in the New Year with an issue all about Film Noir! We are showcasing art and writing covering a wide range of topics, from classic Hollywood, to modern "neo-noir," to international entries in the genre, created by our wonderful SoCal artists and writers who participated this time around!

Going into this New Year, we have many plans in the works, and we could not have done any of this so far without the amazing creatives who have participated in this and previous issues, as well as the readers

who have graciously given us their support throughout 2024. We hope to bring more quality and expand upon what we've accomplished last year, and we also hope that you'll all stick around for this next year as well!

- The Frida Zine Team



Contextualizing the Film Noir of the Black Trilogy: Japanese Postwar Sensibility in the Films of Yasuzo Masumura

By Brian Ly



Media studies and the arts as a whole in Japan are inextricably divided by World War II as a defining cultural point, where there is a certain sentiment and personality that is in transition from the militaristic imperial ideology to a modern democracy. Film noir in Japan is rather interesting in terms of genre studies, where you can see it's particularly defined by the postwar disillusionment of structural and institutional powers of society as a sort of framework by which to interpret these contradictory ideas of a country completely stripped of its power with the military occupation and the subsequent *Anpo jōyaku* and continued military base operation and the burgeoning economy in a hypergrowth state and the exponential advancements in technology that had made the country an innovator across the automotive and electronics industries. Though the classical executions of the genre mirrored that of its Western counterpart, concerned with the moral ambiguity of crime, it's the golden age of film noir in Japan that is particularly

concerned with this dichotomy in society, grappling with the individual Japanese identity in complete removal from prewar values, interpreting the world purely in its modern iteration with a healthy skepticism of the optimism of an economic state that clearly couldn't last (as later proven by the burst of the Bubble Economy in the 80s), regardless of where they stood financially as reflected in their respective social classes. In a way, film noir is a broader genre that finds itself manifest in two distinctly Japanese subgenres, with the Sun Tribe films and yakuza films.

The Sun Tribe films are a uniquely Japanese invention, reflecting the youth culture with a range of aesthetics from the more working-class pugilistic amateur boxer brawler type to the upper-class summer villa vacationers obsessed with rockabilly music, all of which have been exhibited in roles played by the Japanese equivalent to James Dean at the time, teen idol heartthrob Yujiro Ishihara, the brother of arguably the textual origin of the genre turned later Tokyo Governor

(there's so much to unpack here that's an entire topic of its own), Shintaro Ishihara. While generally portrayed as largely harmless miscreants in the grand scheme of things, as with any sort of youth culture movement, disaffected youth are known to get into a little bit of trouble when things get carried away that could escalate to something much grander, and the natural evolution of these tribes, for those who didn't otherwise transition to the expectation of society in a white-collar salaryman job or trade, was in the form of more formally organized crime, the yakuza. Though the yakuza genre as a whole tends to reflect a more heightened version of the real-world crime syndicates, from the early iterations of the genre as the modern versions of samurai films to the clearly postwar action turf conflicts in Kinji Fukasaku's epic series *Battles Without Honor and Humanity* to the modern meditative existential character studies in the neo-noir yakuza films of Japanese comedian Beat Takeshi, better known in the West as art house director Takeshi Kitano, they

still very much capture this common disillusionment with the establishment in reflecting a fringe governmental structure not unlike mobster films in the West. Though not all Sun Tribe and yakuza films fall under the film noir umbrella, they are inextricably tied in how they relate to this sort of postwar unease with the state of a country that's in clear flux while being completely divorced from any nostalgia from the prewar imperialism.

One particular director that acolytes of auteur theory have had a hard time pinpointing is Yasuzo Masumura, a prolific studio director who worked for Daiei Film with no clear defining work with films across multiple genres and movements in his multi-decade career. Jonathan Rosenbaum had attempted to articulate his particular curiosity in the director in his essay "Discovering Yasuzo Masumura: Reflections on Work in Progress," where he buckets his works into a number of different categories, including but not limited to "anti-capitalist films," "anti-war films," "kinky sex films," "films about strong women," "yakuza films," and "youth films." A distinct omission from his survey of the director, whom he compares directly to studio directors in the West that have slight auteurist bents and common thematic concerns throughout their films, such as "Samuel Fuller, Nicholas Ray, Douglas Sirk and Frank Tashlin," is the informal Black trilogy, crime thriller films that explore corporate espionage, corruption, blackmail, and conspiracy within white-collar crime in corporate Japan. He has since discussed these films more recently in a piece written for the Arrow Video release of two of the three films of the trilogy. It goes without saying that Masumura is a rather peculiar director in the Japanese film canon, little discussed in the West outside



Giants and Toys (1958)

of deep cinephile spaces while still being a representative director with a rich body of work and a distinct reputation as a genre chameleon, differentiating himself from other studio directors and journeymen who have not been quite as canonized to the same degree that he has been despite his overall relative obscurity in the West.

To better understand what Masumura was trying to convey thematically in the Black trilogy, probably the best place to start is in an early film of his that satirizes corporate culture, *Giants and Toys*. The film is immediately defined by its striking visual style, a gorgeous technicolor palette to reflect the vibrant colors used in marketing material for the advertisement of candy as competing candy manufacturers compete with one another with increasingly complex and involved promotional campaigns that culminate in pure maximalist decadence. We see the beginnings of the concerns that Masumura would approach in a different manner in his later films, with these desperate corporate executives all engaging in corporate espionage and other unscrupulous means to try to find out what their competitors are doing and try to get a leg up by rolling out their marketing strategies and advertising campaigns before the other

gets a chance. On a more micro level, we begin to see a new way of success in a country that is just barely in its infancy as a postwar democracy in terms of corporate culture arise, as an alternative to the traditional method of career advancement through arranged marriage, schmoozing, and company loyalty, where you work hard, kiss ass, and keep your head down as you slowly move up the ranks, and instead you can fast-track and accelerate your progress by riding the waves of modern trends in a dynamic capitalist ecosystem, where you utilize what you know and who you know to carve your own path to the top instead of relying on the already archaic mechanisms of meritocracy to reward you. The film is very much a reflection of a burgeoning democratic country in flux, fueled by this period of extreme economic growth while still struggling with the immense transition from its imperialist roots while dealing with a youth population entering society without having ever lived in the prior context, all having to work together in harmony. It's no surprise that this has developed a culture by which people are incredibly susceptible to bright colors and flashing lights, and this sort of fast-paced way of life has very much defined the flavor of capitalism in Japan, centered around wacky advertisement, quirky brand identity, and limited-time offerings. It's only in the

contemporary contraction of the economy that Japan began to slow down a bit as concerns of death by overwork and living a more fulfilled, minimalist lifestyle defined by freedom and autonomy starting with *yutori* education and other alternative ways to buck the convention of the excessive working conditions that have broken many a generation in the sheer amount of economic growth that occurred within a span of just a few decades in a country that has continually grappled with its strong adherence to tradition and its unique positioning in approaching modernity with a fresh start in the postwar reset. Masumura perfectly captures this sort of chaos in this film, and though the tone of the film is fairly lighthearted in spite of some pretty abhorrent things happening in the background, it's in direct contrast to the true darkness of white-collar crime that is to be more explicitly explored and presented in his later works.



Afraid to Die (1960)

The film noir of Masumura could be understood by charting his career trajectory from his debut as a director in the 1950s, where his films could probably be best described as having a maudlin quality to them, at the very least on the surface level, as they are films that depict teenage love and a

sort of cottagecore sensibility in the picturesque illustration of the lives of upper-class families that were early adopters of Western lifestyles. A film that is a marked shift in his career is the Yukio Mishima (yes, *that* Yukio Mishima) starring vehicle *Afraid to Die*, which is by all means a rather slight film in his oeuvre, but it's perhaps his first film that more explicitly engages in the more unscrupulous parts of society in the form of *yakuza*, where we see the acclaimed author play an almost autobiographical yet heightened version of himself as a man completely out of his element attempting to play the role of a *yakuza* boss, where it's clear that his external bravado does little to disguise the tortured man with a complex relationship with his sense of humanity and masculinity. In direct contrast, perhaps the most influential and enduring of his films is *A Wife Confesses*, a more traditional execution of film noir in the form of a legal procedural surrounding a young wife on trial after having been accused of murdering her husband, who has fallen in a climbing accident in the mountains. If this sounds like two critically acclaimed films that were released just this decade, I'm sure it's no coincidence, with Park Chan-wook himself notably citing Masumura as a director he's increasingly fascinated by.



A Wife Confesses (1961)

It's an interesting exercise to consider where exactly the Black trilogy fits in the canon of Japanese film noir, as they sort of straddle no man's land with a throwback visual quality while contemporary in their thematic preoccupations. If early Japanese noir is defined by more classical genre trappings regarding the moral ambiguity in crime procedurals with a sort of heightened sensibility, then the Black trilogy is markedly not that, as they are more inherently concerned with the unambiguously dark nature of humans in the space of white-collar crime in capitalist society. As a clear departure from his earlier films, the technicolor vibrance is shed away in favor of high-contrast black and white, and no longer do we have the lighthearted romance and comedy elements or the whimsical satirical tone to match the visual quality, with the films reflecting the harsh darkness of society and almost entirely dealing with the muck of backroom dealings and unscrupulous corporate tactics by cold men who have zero interest beyond their own personal gain. So from a visual standpoint, they are absolutely at home with the film noir tradition. In terms of thematic concerns, it's a clear evolution that takes the bleakest parts of film noir and presents them in the most pessimistic and cynical worldview possible, deeply informed by the socioeconomic and cultural context of the dichotomy between the blind optimism in a time of economic prosperity and the crumbling moral fabric that occurs in a hypercapitalist ecosystem that rewards exploitation and debased behavior.



Directly concerned with the corporate espionage in the automobile industry, Masumura's first film in the *Black trilogy*, *Black Test Car*, illustrates unbridled capitalism at its finest, where two rival companies spy on one another to discover their respective trade secrets as they anticipate a car launch, and as expected, every trick in the book is employed, from wiretapping, sexual favors, blackmail, bribery, and just straight-up, bold-faced lying in order to get what you want. Nothing is off-limits when it comes to the advancement of corporate interests, where there is an inherent need to succeed by any means necessary, and failure is not an option. The film represents the true degradation of the human condition into complete and



absolute depravity, resulting in a constant downward spiral as successive transgressions on a large scale ultimately take down everyone in the process. It's a pure breakdown of society in this microcosm of contrived corporate realities, to the point that the characters even make a self-referential comment when

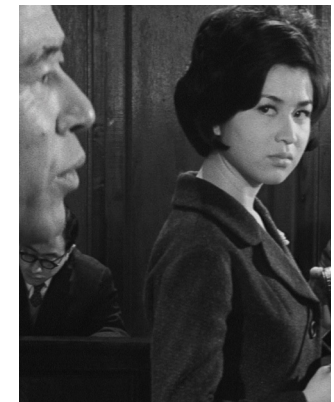
they question what exactly a company even is. The sort of camaraderie from the collectivist nature of prewar Japan shifts to these microgroups that tirelessly attempt to destroy one another with a crabs-in-a-bucket mentality.



In his second jaunt in the Black trilogy, Masumura takes a more straightforward approach to genre in *The Black Report*, which, while it is a film that in its setting involves the murder of a company president, is in its execution more of a standard crime procedural and legal drama in the film noir tradition. It is distinctly Japanese in how the case plays out, where there's a clear establishment of exactly how the events transpired in the investigation process, yet everyone is found to be acting in their own self-interests and unwilling to corroborate the facts when

called to the stand, made out to be unreliable witnesses bearing a tatemae that will always hide the truth and present a version of reality that is convenient for the given circumstance, even if it requires backtracking and shifting the narrative. Though the prosecutor holds out for a sort of moral justice and a hope that the system works with the intent of absolving the innocent, which in itself is tied to his own career advancement should he succeed, he finds his noble efforts pale against bribery and personal gain, showing that everyone can be bought for a certain price. Amidst the decorum, there is an

endless amount of chicanery that serves only to cloud the truth, with things ultimately ending up exactly the way that those with power and money would want them to. What this film reveals in contrast to more conventional executions of film noir is the corruptible nature of humans, morally bankrupt and unconcerned with justice in the modernity of postwar cynicism in a society more concerned with economic gain over values.





of modernity, it is this film in particular that is more explicitly concerned with the real-world circumstances surrounding the construction of the Shinkansen, the high-speed bullet train system in Japan, in time for the Tokyo Olympics as a symbol of Japanese excellence and prosperity following the postwar rebuild but was really just the beginning of the irrevocable transformation into an increasingly cruel and brutal corporatist society. The film ends on a rather sobering note, as a sort of begrudging acceptance of this new Japan.

results in this observation is a country devoid of emotion and feeling, left only with the cold reality of unrelenting progress by any means unnecessary, leaving a trail of blood in its wake, not in the form of bodies that might be exhibited in the violence of traditional Japanese genre films in the organized crime and sort of vigilante warrior spirit of yakuza and samurai, respectively, but rather in the destruction of society and its very moral core through the white-collar crime in the Black trilogy.

Perhaps the film that most closely approximates what is to develop in the neo-noir of the New Hollywood era in the next decade, particularly in where it shares thematic qualities with films like *Chinatown*, *Superexpress*, also known as *Black Superexpress*, the third film in Masumura's the Black trilogy, centers on a corporate conspiracy that essentially aims to exploit the goodwill of small-time landowners who are out of their property for pennies on the dollar, or well, sen on the yen, for an alleged public good that is ultimately privately owned. One man takes this extremely personally and makes it his sole life mission to expose the truth behind this conspiracy. In true film noir fashion, he finds himself entangled with a woman and loses sight of what is truly important as he too is inevitably consumed by a desire for money. The corporate machine is proven to be too powerful to stop and too big to fail, where the supposed target of his ire is proven to be little more than a tiny cog in the larger machinations of it all, and the rich only get richer, untouched and unrelenting, never having to face the consequences of their actions. As the most direct contemporary commentary in the trilogy, of which all films are concerned with the values

Notably absent from these films is the great Ayako Wakao, the muse of the director, who can be seen peppered in films through the early days of his career to just prior to his later period before he does seemingly random projects with long gaps in between in many different modes outside the studio system. There's a certain muskiness in the air to the films of the Black trilogy, as this new form of masculinity is explored in a markedly asexual form of male ambition, not quite bordering on the self-hating homoerotic tendencies that were explored in the Mishima film but rather something more concerned with the human condition as reflected by the changing financial landscape in a Japan inherently defined by its relationship with its own postwar identity grappling with the values by which it defines itself. What



Ayako Wakao in *Manji* (1964) [TOP] and *Two Wives* (1967) [BOTTOM]





By Jen McLean (@jenni.flower)

Love in Neo-Noir - How Romance Paints the World of *DECISION TO LEAVE* BY DANIEL NGUYEN (@KIYOZORA17)

Noir as a genre represents films that reflect a world painted in black. While traditionally defined through a world of crime in the night, the genre has since evolved into neo-noir, with filmmakers and directors finding new ways to color their films in shades of black. And what better way to smear the world in black than through the lens of a romance. In *Decision to Leave*, Park Chan-wook tells the story of Song Seorae, whose husband was recently found dead, and Jung Haejun, the married investigator on the scene of the crime. Through their continued interaction, Park Chan-wook shows how it's not the crime but the romance that makes his film truly Neo-noir.

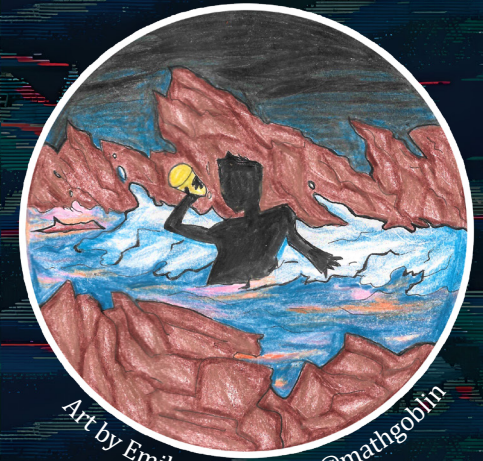
In Roger Ebert's "A Guide to Film Noir", he writes of how film noir is "Women who would just as soon kill you as love you, and vice versa." and "Relationships in which love is only the final flop card in the poker game of death." We see this manifest

itself through many film noir with its depictions of femme fatales, such as in *Sunset Boulevard*, *Gilda*, and *Out of the Past*. We primarily see love in these films explored through romantic love, with passion, eros, and sexual desire being in the forefront. However, romance in these films is primarily used to accentuate the main focus of the film, the crime itself. It is the crime that envelops the world of noir in the night. Romance adds in the edges to the film, but it is rarely the primary factor that makes a film feel Noir.

In contrast, in *Decision to Leave*, the crimes depicted in the film are actually straightforward. There is no ambiguity that Seorae committed the crime of killing her first husband, and the crime itself does not impart to the viewer any sense of unease. Instead, it is the romance between Haejun and Seorae that creates the darkness needed in a noir or neo-noir film.

Haejun and Seorae's relationship highlights the nuances that are found in East Asian romance films. The complexity of their romance comes not from classical western elements of love filled with eros or sexual desire, but instead from longing and desire for the other, and obsession - in fact the sexual relations we see between Haejun and his wife highlight the a weak romantic relationship. We see this more nuanced romance reflected in various elements, from the fact that Seorae is Chinese while Haejun is Korean, to the voyeuristic interactions as Haejun stakes out her residence, with his true thoughts only expressed through voice recordings. Additionally, we see it reflected through Haejun's obsession with crime and murder. In an almost Stockholm syndrome relation, his cases haunt him. He keeps photos of unresolved cases up in his apartment, and is obsessed with them. It is only Seorae that eventually overtakes it.

It is this romance between the two leads that creates the feeling of darkness in *Decision to Leave*. The world of the film is darkened by the interactions and romance between the two characters, culminating in Haejun's decision to cover up for Seorae's crimes and Seorae's decision to give Haejun an unresolvable crime. Without this romance, the film would not be a Neo-noir film.



Art by Emily Applewhite @mathgoblin

Love is one of the most fundamental human emotions. And while we typically associate it with positive experiences, love itself is often the source of humanity's darker side. How often are crimes committed out of love? How often do we say that we would do anything for love? When we have doubt of the extent of love, how often does it drive one insane. When love is broken, how quickly does it shade one's world black. While traditionally in noir film, it is only used to accentuate other elements of the film, in *Decision to Leave* we see a masterclass in how romance itself can make a film Noir.




FEAR X

A Neo-Noir Thriller

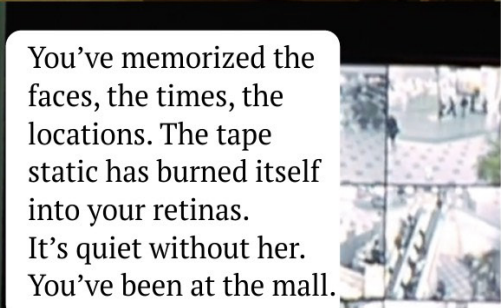


Rewind the tape. Watch it again. Rewind the tape. Watch it again. Rewind the tape.

You consume them without end. No one escapes your gaze. You've been at this for hours.



You've memorized the faces, the times, the locations. The tape static has burned itself into your retinas. It's quiet without her. You've been at the mall.



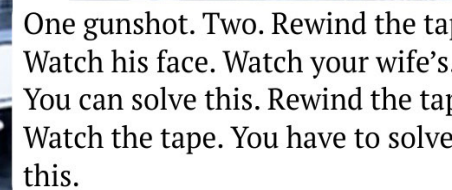
You've been in the parking garage. The exact point where it happened. No one could shake your dedication. You've been at this for years.



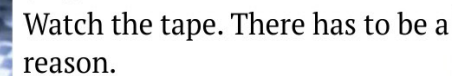
Steel yourself. Unload the tape. Breathe.



Load the tape. The first tape. Watch it.



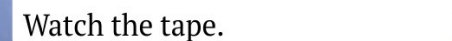
One gunshot. Two. Rewind the tape. Watch his face. Watch your wife's. You can solve this. Rewind the tape. Watch the tape. You have to solve this.



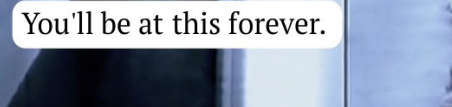
Watch the tape. There has to be a reason.



Watch the tape. There has to be someone to blame.




Watch the tape.



You'll be at this forever.





When I think of my favorite genre of film, a recurring theme always occurs: neo-noirs. The drama, the visuals, the storyline. All key components that make a perfect movie.

what's in front of me. For some of these movies too they can leave the viewer with lots of unanswered questions, and that's part of the beauty of neo-noirs. They aren't these love stories where the characters end up happy and in love, noirs can leave you with a bad taste in the end having you searching for answers and clues with every re-watch. But that's the beauty of it. That's what makes me have such a profound appreciation for neo-noirs.

In my eyes there are a couple perfect neo-noirs. Knives Out, Old Boy, and No Country for Old Men. These films are so drastically different from one another. A mystery of trying not to get caught while trying to discover the truth, a story of a man with a goal of vengeance against those who've wronged him and taken everything away from him, and a game of cat and mouse set in the scenic backdrop in the small towns of Texas.

All these films have had such a big impact on me, and have made me have more appreciation for film in general. The way these storytellers tell tales of violence and vengeance combined with visually stunning shots are what fascinates me. As a viewer, I can be horrified by the content, but I'm pulled in by what I'm seeing and I can't stand to look away from

A great example of this is No Country for Old Men. A film about a game of cat and mouse. Filled with violence and thrill through every scene. Javier Bardem's Chigurh is a menacing villain that will stop at nothing till he completes his goal of taking what's his. Chigurh can be considered one of the scariest psychopaths in the 21st century. Through the movie we see Chigurh be a ruthless killer with the beautiful scenery of Texas as his background. The combination of the violence with the visual scenery make this film a perfect neo-noir.

Neo Noir-ism
by: Megan Huynh

Billy Wilder

IS THE MASTER OF FILM NOIR

by Andrew Linde (@PodcasterAndrew)

Out of all the classic Hollywood film directors, Billy Wilder is the master of film noir. One of the first Billy Wilder films I watched was *Sunset Boulevard*. I had always heard it was an outstanding film (and it is!) but it took me years to appreciate how Wilder and fellow screenwriters Charles Brackett and D. M. Marshman Jr., approached telling the story of the struggling writer Joe Gillis and past-her-prime silent film actress Norma Desmond.

Anyone who has even seen the first five minutes of *Sunset Boulevard* has to be shocked by the narrator being a corpse floating in a pool. Dead men tell no tales, after all. But the writer is ever-so-glad to be regaling the audience with the series of events that led to his demise. His narration takes on the aspect of a man at the end of his rope as he dodges repo men and desperately applies for any job, just to be turned away. This could easily be mistaken for the typical downtrodden detective in most film noirs. By accident, he stumbles into the home of Norma Desmond, played by actual former silent film star Gloria Swanson. There she confuses him for a funeral worker, as she is looking for a coffin to bury her monkey in. Yes, she had a pet monkey in 1950!

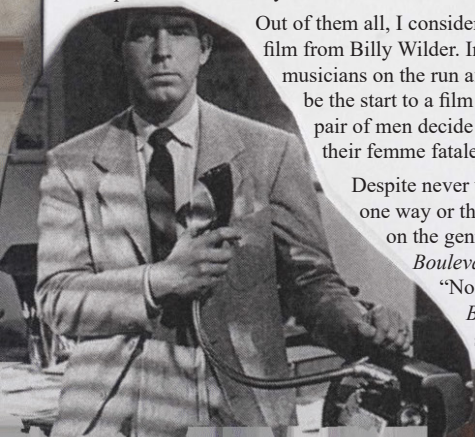
Desmond is not the typical femme fatale, but she earns the designation as the film goes on. A femme fatale is usually a blonde, between the ages of 18 and 26, and seduces the hero of the film with her wicked ways. Desmond nails that last part in spades, but the first two she couldn't be farther from. This is where Wilder works his magic, playing off of the memories of cinema's recent past to paint Norma Desmond in a whole new light. Actors today complain there are no roles for "older" women, but Gloria Swanson blew everyone out of the water with her performance. There's a reason why "I am big. It's the pictures that got small." is one of the most famous lines ever spoken in film history.

After *Sunset Boulevard*, I dove deep into Billy Wilder's filmography, watching his comedies *The Apartment* and *Some Like It Hot*, often imitated courtroom drama *Witness for the Prosecution*, darkly romantic *Sabrina*, and even his other famous film noir *Double Indemnity*. Wilder had a varied selection of genres he worked in, but he didn't like classifying them. *The Apartment* won Best Picture - Musical or Comedy at the Golden Globes in 1960, but star Jack Lemmon even considered that odd as it is the story of an affair that almost kills a woman!

What makes Wilder the master of film noir is his darkly comedic sensibilities. We can be shocked by Norma Desmond's monstrosities because she is so extreme. As an audience, we shouldn't take her seriously, she's clearly a woman so far retreated into her silver screen persona that she'll never live in the real world again. But that's what makes her so terrifying! What makes *The Apartment* so funny is that you can feel how badly Jack Lemmon's Buddy wants a raise and a promotion. It's only when he sees the human cost that he regrets it all.

Out of them all, I consider *Some Like It Hot* to be the funniest film from Billy Wilder. In it, Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis play musicians on the run after they witness a mob hit. That could be the start to a film noir, but it dials up the comedy when the pair of men decide to disguise themselves as women. And their femme fatale is none other than Marilyn Monroe!

Despite never wishing for his films to be categorized one way or the other, Billy Wilder had an iron-grip on the genre of film noir. When asked if *Sunset Boulevard* was a black comedy he once replied, "No, it's just a picture." Well, *Sunset Boulevard* is one picture that never got small.



Film Noir-t Showcase

(Noir + Arts)



Double Indemnity by @rxzorface



Maltese Falcon by Arin Priest
(@ironhoofstudio)



Photography inspired
by Akira Kurosawa's
Stray Dog (1949)

by Diego Crespo
(@diegocrespograms)



Front cover art by Haley Harmicar (@haleyharmicartaccount)
Back cover art by Jesse Camacho (@candycolorclown)



The Frida Cinema is a gathering place for movie lovers of all kinds. The lobby is a place of film discussion and friendly gathering, a venue of its own where perspectives from all backgrounds are welcomed and engaged with. We have started the Frida Zinema to replicate this experience in printed form. We welcome all who love film to submit their artwork, writings, and thoughts, and to connect to other artists in a space of creativity and understanding. We love films, and we love people who love films. Please, share your thoughts and artwork, and enjoy the ones within.

