

# True Detective: A Case for Neo-noir

by Alicia Berdan

Retrospectively, the film industry now looks back on a period of cinema from the 1940s to the early 1950s as the golden age of film noir. Film noir is defined as a period of film history that “portrayed the world of dark, slick city streets, crime, and corruption.”<sup>1</sup> These films were released in American theaters during WWII, but were not released outside of the U.S. until after the war. In the wake of the post-WWI atmosphere, members of the younger French generation, such as Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, helped elevate American film noir through the study of the films’ intellectualism and existentialism.<sup>2</sup> The term “film noir” means black film, which is indicative of the heavy shadows used in these films and also as a description of the darkness of their storylines and characters. For the cinema industry, the influence of the French helped to bring these films into the world of fine art.<sup>3</sup> The classical noir films not only defined a decade in film history, but also inspired the continuation of noir-influenced films through the next 70 years. The classical film noirs were created out of a response “to a certain kind of emotional resonance” that was relative to the viewers of that era.<sup>4</sup> Neo-noirs use the elements of classical noir films, but present them in a context that is relatable to contemporary viewers.

In the 1990s, the world saw another change in the art form of film, the television series. For many, the idea that a television show could be understood as a work of art was unbelievable. But over the past decade the critics of the film industry have moved towards being comfortable viewing a television series as a work of art.<sup>5</sup> In Christopher Anderson’s article titled “Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television,” he argues that HBO can be seen, in some respects, as the lead in turning American

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Silver and James Ursini, *Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), Kindle edition, 819.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Borde, Étienne Chaumeton, Jame Naremore, and Paul Hammond, *A Panorama of American Film Noir: 1941-1953* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2002), ix.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones, *The Essential HBO Reader* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2008), 24.

television into a cultivated expectation.<sup>6</sup> Anderson furthers his argument by stating that HBO gives television viewers an “aesthetic disposition”, which is usually reserved for historical and contemporary fine art. HBO has worked to supply their viewers with television shows that captivate the minds of the intellectual and of those who can appreciate the thought and principles that went into creating their television series.<sup>7</sup>

The change in “aesthetic disposition” in the film industry has seen the rise of artistic creativity in television that reflects characteristics of film noir. Film noir set up the future of cinematic creation with “timeless narratives about the darker side of the human condition.”<sup>8</sup> One of the few contemporary television series that has incorporated aspects of film noir into the show’s characters and setting is the series, *True Detective*, by Nic Pizzolatto. *True Detective* sets itself apart from other contemporary detective dramas by incorporating many of the classic noir techniques, story characteristics, and flawed characters.

There were many film noirs made during the genre’s span of two decades, but when trying to understand the characteristics of film noir there are a few films that take the spotlight. Some of the greatest early classical noir films are *Citizen Kane* (1941), *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), and *Double Indemnity* (1944). At the end of the era, films such as *Touch of Evil* (1958), *Kiss me Deadly* (1955) and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) left a lasting impression on film history. When the young French generation analyzed these films, and other noirs, they defined a set of characteristics and features that would define a movie as a film noir. These characteristics included dark fatal storylines, flawed characters, complicated time structures, and people’s obsessions and vices. The fatal storylines of film noir often saw the dark side of a hero and most often his demise. Major characters are often the Noir male, a corrupted individual with vices but also a moral code, and the Femme Fatale (fatal female), who is a seductive woman who uses her feminine wiles to often gain money or position. Orson Welles’ film *Citizen Kane* (1941) is a prime example of a classic noir with a complicated time structure that uses flashbacks but also tells the story non-chronologically. The dark landscapes of the classical noirs film were due to more than just wartime shortages; they were also a reflection of political and cultural turmoil. The use of these noir characteristics in films after the end of the 1950s is what classifies them as a neo-noir. Some of the notable neo-noir films are *The Manchurian Candidate*

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>7</sup> Edgerton and Jones, *The Essential HBO Reader*, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Martin, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls: The Legacy of Film Noir in Contemporary American Cinema* (Lanham: Scarecrow, 1997), 6.

(1962), *Body Heat* (1981), and *No Country for Old Men* (2007). With the rise of intellectual television series there is now a chance to critically view TV shows as neo-noirs.

*True Detective* is an 8 part neo-noir television series produced by HBO, which follows the lives of two detectives during a hunt for a serial killer in the swamplands of Louisiana. The show navigates the memories or flashbacks of two former Louisiana criminal investigation division (CID) detectives. The flashbacks revolve around a case relating to what Gardner has phrased as "an occult murder of a young woman in 1995."<sup>9</sup> The two former detectives are being consulted on the details of their former case from '95 as well as the details of each other's character. The case and their partnership are seen "through the refining lens of the past, revealing thoughts and events [the detectives] have long kept hidden from the world, and sometimes, themselves."<sup>10</sup> Both detectives are being asked to re-tell the details of the case because of the loss of case files due to Hurricane Rita. The two interviewers are CIDs who are working a recent murder case that is almost identical to a previous occult murder the former detectives worked in '95. The flashbacks generated by the retelling of the '95 murder case also examine the lives and the relationship these two detectives had with each other and how it led to their falling out as partners. Once both detectives have finished relaying the details of the old case, they partner up again as independent detectives to catch the serial killer and clear their debt of responsibility. The show takes on a psychological depth as it examines the two main detectives and their vices.<sup>11</sup> Woody Harrelson's character, Marty Hart, is the common detective who has "predictable demons", like women and alcohol, which challenge the character's "normality."<sup>12</sup> On the opposite end, Matthew McConaughey's character, Rust Cohle, brings forth a deeper psychological struggle that deals with his past and his obsession with solving the murder. As the show progresses, the viewer gains insight into Rust and Marty's relationship, and how their lives change over the course of the investigation.

Classic film noirs often used a flashback that intersected with the present timeline in order to help the characters "to reconstruct the past, combing it for clues, facts, answers."<sup>13</sup> These flashbacks are often in "non-

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<sup>9</sup> Caleb Gardner, "Case History," *The Lancet* 383, no. 9922 (2014): 1030.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (Cambridge: DeCapo, 1981), Kindle edition, 1259.

chronological order” and deal with a “fractured time sequence.”<sup>14</sup> One famous noir film that used flashbacks was *The Big Clock* (1948) by John Farrow. *True Detective* as a series deals overall with several classic noir aspects. The story of the show is driven by a series of flashbacks from the present in 2012 to a previous investigation in 1995. The flashbacks in *True Detective* are a crucial part of the story in order to help two CID detectives understand the past murder case. They also appear to want to see if they can weed out Rust as the possible killer. There are often large amounts of time skipped over in the flashbacks to bring forth major events that affected both the case and the lives of the detectives. There are short interview scenes that take place in the present time which are used to help create a sense of foreshadowing for events, details, and the state of Rust and Marty’s relationship. Skipping between the present interviews and the flashbacks in the show creates a mood and sets a tone of psychological mystery. The classic noir film, *The Killers* (1946), dealt with a similar concept of using fragmented flashbacks in order to understand the motive of a murder and its characters.<sup>15</sup> Many flashbacks in classic film noirs also used voice-overs that were meant to penetrate “into the past of a central male character as well as into this character’s psyche in order to arrive at a fundamental truth.”<sup>16</sup> In *True Detective*, the flashbacks are used as a way to show the viewer the true story, whereas what Marty and Rust tell the two interviewing CIDs are often riddled with white lies.

Classic film noir of the 1940s brought about the introduction of psychology into crime and detective films.<sup>17</sup> Film noir went beyond just representing a crime and discovering its motive; it brought about the “psychological repercussions of the criminal act” in film.<sup>18</sup> Classical noir films often portrayed the protagonist losing their self-control and becoming a subject “to darker, inner impulses.” These impulses would often lead into conflict with the law, due to a “fatal flaw within themselves.”<sup>19</sup> The protagonist in the film *Gun Crazy* (1950) has an innocent obsession with guns but is driven into a world of greed and murder by the woman he loves. As a neo-noir, *True Detective* also encompasses a psychological take on its’ characters and on American society. The series often comments on the state of humanity and human consciousness as a collective, which often leaves the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen*, 1259-1278.

<sup>16</sup> Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader*, 3323.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1991), 46.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, 47.

viewer confused or reaching for higher meaning.<sup>20</sup> Classic noirs often dealt with the darker side of humanity's conscious and violence in subtle ways that left the gruesome details to the viewer's imagination. *True Detective* visually shows more violent details than classic noir, but the series also deals with some artful suggestions that are more noir-esque.<sup>21</sup> In the series Rust steals a mysterious videotape from one of the Tuttle family homes and when he plays it for Marty the tape is displayed in a way that preys on the imagination of the viewer. The videotape is shown to two different people within the series and their facial expressions are enough information for the viewer to imagine the unspeakable violence that is happening on the videotape.

Rust's character more often than not is the spearhead into psychological discussions within the show. Marty is often the receiver of Rust's odd psychological comments and has to act much like a defense lawyer for humanity's consciousness. "For a guy who sees no point in existence, you sure fret about it an awful lot" is one of the many responses Marty has to Rust's negative outlooks on humanity and religion.<sup>22</sup> Rust's character is not a straightforward good or bad person; there is a duality in his personality.<sup>23</sup> He seems to linger between the two, just as he lingers between upholding and breaking the law. There is an underlying fatal flaw in many of the noir males of the classic 40s films that make it difficult for them to see the parameters of the world.<sup>24</sup> The effect of Rust's background of being an undercover cop with almost free reign for four years is indicative of how he works to get justice as a CID in Louisiana. Rust often pushes his partnership with Marty to work outside of the usual restrictions of their job and the law. In the series, when Rust and Marty discover the location of the possible murderer(s), Rust pushes Marty to take down the killers on their own without police back up. This action causes a sequence of events that spin out of control and forces the two detectives to form a cover story explaining their actions to their superiors.

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<sup>20</sup> Alessandra Stanley, "Seeing a Killer and a Benign Universe," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2014, accessed September 3, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/10/arts/television/true-detective-finds-philosophical-answers-by-seasons-end.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/10/arts/television/true-detective-finds-philosophical-answers-by-seasons-end.html?_r=0).

<sup>21</sup> Borde et al., *A Panorama of American Film Noir*, 17.

<sup>22</sup> *True Detective*, season 1, directed by Nic Pizzolatto and Cary J. Fukunaga, aired in 2014 on HBO (Louisiana: Home Box Office, Inc.).

<sup>23</sup> Matt Z. Seitz, "Seitz: the 7 Things That True Detective Was About," *Vulture*, March 10, 2014, accessed October 29, 2014, <http://www.vulture.com/2014/03/true-detective-finale-7-things-it-was-about.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, 47.

Rust's character is portrayed with a dark inner psychological conflict that often deals with his mysterious past. The show gives us small views into the haunted past of Rust's time before CID, but much of it remains a mystery. The retention of mystery among Rust's past is indicative of a classic film noir characteristic.<sup>25</sup> Rust's past as an undercover narcotics cop and the death of his daughter both act as an inhibitor and positive contributor in the investigation of the '95 murder case. We watch Rust's inner demons unfold as the show progresses, and we see more and more of his darker side. Like many noir detectives, Rust seems to fit in better with criminals than with a regular crowd. At one point in the series Rust meets with two prostitutes in a tavern to find out information about a missing woman who is possibly linked to their murder case. While interviewing the prostitutes, Rust gives the viewers an insight to one of his' character flaws that is a result of his past:

Rust: You get pills pretty easy?

[Lucy's Face twists in panic]

Rust: Relax. I want some.

Lucy: Speed?

Rust: No. Quaalude. Anything barbital.

Lucy: Uppers are easier to get. Last longer, too.

Rust: It's not like that.

Lucy: What's it like?

Rust: I don't sleep.

Rust's confession to Lucy that he needs drugs to help him sleep brings light to an internal struggle that might be caused by his past in narcotics or by the details of the murder case. Rust's conversation later in the episode reveals the unfortunate death of his daughter and how heavily it weighs on his conscious.

The psychological depth of both the case and Rust's personality make it plausible that *True Detective* took inspiration from Alfred Hitchcock's film, *Rope* (1948).<sup>26</sup> *Rope* is not technically a noir film, but its "spellbinding sadism" links the film to the noir genre.<sup>27</sup> Alfred Hitchcock is often heralded as the greatest director of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and his influence on contemporary film is still seen today.<sup>28</sup> Hitchcock's films *Rope* (1948), *The Paradine Case* (1947), and *Notorious* (1946) are the three most closely linked to film noir

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<sup>25</sup> Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen*, 1259.

<sup>26</sup> Borde et al., *A Panorama of American Film Noir*, 73.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> John Orr, *Hitchcock and Twentieth-Century Cinema* (London: Wallflower, 2005), 185.

because of their characters and storylines.<sup>29</sup> Hitchcock used noir techniques in his films but “only retained those elements compatible with his favorite themes.”<sup>30</sup> Film noir contributed more than just visual style to film; it also brought an essence of something deeper that can be seen in both Hitchcock’s works and *True Detective*.<sup>31</sup> Both the plot and narration of film noir deal with a deeper essence of “the nature of crime in the American way of life.”<sup>32</sup> *True Detective* stays parallel to the criminal ambitions of classic film noirs, but changes the desire of the criminal. The desire in *True Detective* is not for wealth or fame, but for appeasement to the “Yellow King” in the afterlife.<sup>33</sup>

In classical noirs, it is often noted that the “psychopath constitutes an extension of the protagonist’s own identity, an external projection of his darker self.”<sup>34</sup> The inspiration taken from *Rope*, is evident in Rust’s character. Rust’s methodology of finding the killer and understanding morality is similar to the way Rupert unfolds the mystery of the murder victim’s location and the reason for the murderer’s odd dinner party. In *Rope*, the murderer remarks of Rupert that “[he] could have invented and he could have admired, but he never could have acted,” which appears much in how Marty views Rust.<sup>35</sup> The idea that Rust could have been the murderer is representative of this statement in *Rope*. Rust is pegged by the two CID interviewers as being the murderer due to his obsession with the case. The two CIDs try to convince both Marty and the viewers that Rust is a most likely candidate for both the ‘95 and the 2012 murder. This deepens the complexity of the series and asks the viewers to question Rust’s actions. The viewers are given a chance to make their own judgments in either condemning Rust as a suspect or relating to him on a tragic level. In the end, the series forgives Rust for his odd ways and proves that he is not who the detectives thought he was. For both Rupert and Rust, murder is an act that they view as a part of life, and despite their interest in the violent act, they neither have the capacity for murder.<sup>36</sup>

*True Detective* applies an unusual film technique that was common during the time of noir. The six-minute single take seen in the fourth episode of *True Detective* creates a climactic moment in the case. The use of this long

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<sup>29</sup> Borde et al., *A Panorama of American Film Noir*, 72.

<sup>30</sup> Borde et al., *A Panorama of American Film Noir*, 77.

<sup>31</sup> Orr, *Hitchcock*, 154-155.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>34</sup> Martin, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls*, 67.

<sup>35</sup> Donald Spoto, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock: Fifty Years of His Motion Pictures* (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1976), 188.

<sup>36</sup> Spoto, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock*, 188.

single take is a reference and homage to Hitchcock's film *Rope*, which consists entirely of ten-minute single takes.<sup>37</sup> Despite that Hitchcock's films are not always classified as noir; his 1940s films run parallel to many of the classic noirs.<sup>38</sup> Many of Hitchcock's films also influenced the neo-noirs of the twentieth century such as *Body Heat* (1981) and *Blue Velvet* (1986).<sup>39</sup> *True Detective's* one extended length single-shot follows Rust and a few members of a motorcycle drug gang as they raid a stash house of a rival gang. The camera follows Rust into the stash house, out the back door, through a neighbor's home, and out into the streets of the neighborhood and ends with Rust and a gang member being picked up by Marty. The single-shot brings the viewer into this high pace dangerous moment with Rust. The use of this technique is arguably inspired by Hitchcock's ten-minute shots in his movie *Rope*. The extended single-shots in *Rope* allowed:

[the] camera to draw the film-goer into the scene and explore the action at close range, [Hitchcock] was in effect making the viewer feel as if he were another guest at the dinner party, and not simply a remote observer watching the action from a distance like a spectator at a stage play.<sup>40</sup>

The tension of the investigation in *True Detective* is brought to a peak with the use of the six-minute shot, much as the final ten-minute take of *Rope* did.<sup>41</sup> *Rope* was to originally consist of a single shot, in order "to maintain the sense of continuity in both time and space."<sup>42</sup> *True Detective* consistently throughout the show deals with an underlying philosophical notion of time being a flat circle, which is doomed to continuously repeat itself. *True Detective's* use of a single-shot scene might have been possibly used to link form and story at a peak point in the show. The slum, in which the single-shot take is filmed, is one of the many dark places that *True Detective* allows the viewer to explore.

Classic film noirs are often recognized for their "harsh uncomplimentary look at American life."<sup>43</sup> Different, but not unlike the dark city streets of classic detective noir films, *True Detective* sets the series' story

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<sup>37</sup> Calum Marsh, "10 Movies That Influenced True Detective," *Esquire*, February 20, 2014, accessed September 3, 2014, <http://www.esquire.com/blogs/culture/true-detective-influences>.

<sup>38</sup> Orr, *Hitchcock*, 152.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>40</sup> Gene D. Phillips, *Alfred Hitchcock* (Boston: Twayne, 1984), 110.

<sup>41</sup> Borde et al., *A Panorama of American Film Noir*, 85.

<sup>42</sup> Éric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol, *Hitchcock, The First Forty-Four Films* (New York: F. Ungar, 1979), 90.

<sup>43</sup> Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader*, 810.



in the realistic jungle of swamps and the barren towns of Louisiana. *True Detective* takes the viewer through the diverse landscapes of Louisiana and into the very realistic isolated lives of the poverty in America. Film critic Jeff Jensen of *Entertainment Weekly* established a connection between *True Detective* and the noir genre by starting off his critique with "The wasteland noir of *True Detective* is many things at once..."<sup>44</sup> The inhabitants of the small towns in *True Detective* "are typed as narrow-minded, conservative, ignorant, self-righteous, and distrustful of outsiders."<sup>45</sup> In classical noirs, the city was often "a powerful and inescapable presence."<sup>46</sup> Despite the lack of a cityscape in *True Detective*, the show depicts the swamplands of Louisiana like an inescapable prison for the characters. The world of filth that is populated by victims in *True Detective* is almost reminiscent to the world of *Touch of Evil* (1958). Orson Welles' film *Touch of Evil* is set in a dark and filthy border town in which "garbage becomes a reflection of the human condition and the material embodiment of the evil we live with."<sup>47</sup> Directions to many of the places visited in *True Detective* are not found on a map, but have to be beaten out of crime-ridden locals. This sense of isolation in the show is reflected in *True Detective* by Rust's comments on the people and the landscape: "People out here, they don't even know the world exists. Might as well be living on the fucking moon."<sup>48</sup> The locals of the empty homes and cities are poor, gritty, and worn down. Their homes are falling apart, their lawns are overgrown, and the towns never seem to have more than a gas station. *True Detective* unveils the lives of a countryside that the world tends to forget. The multiple locations in the series range anywhere from the secluded meth houses of child molesters to drug dealing biker bars, to off the grid drug parties in abandoned chemical plants. The ending of *True Detective* takes the viewers into the decrepit hoarder home of the serial killer, Errol, which is situated in front of an old 19<sup>th</sup> century fort. The fort embodies the ritualistic world of Errol's fantasies and is the location of his timely demise.

Classic noir was often influenced by the everyday reality of America that dealt with "local police corruption, the connections between the underworld and politics, large-scale drug trafficking, widespread prostitution, and the all-powerfulness of organized gangs."<sup>49</sup> The series also

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<sup>44</sup> Jeff Jensen, "True Detective," *Entertainment Weekly*, January 17, 2015, accessed May 6, 2015, <http://www.ew.com/article/2014/02/05/true-detective>.

<sup>45</sup> Imogen Sara Smith, *In Lonely Places Film Noir Beyond the City* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), 83.

<sup>46</sup> Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen*, 291.

<sup>47</sup> Eric M. Krueger, "'Touch of Evil': Style Expressing Content," *Cinema Journal* 12.1 (1972): 57.

<sup>48</sup> *True Detective*, episode 1, "The Long Bright Dark," directed by Cary Fukunaga, aired January 12, 2014 on HBO.

<sup>49</sup> Borde et al., *A Panorama of American Film Noir*, 20.

deals with a crime ring that is weaved into the lives of the public through a corrupt family. *True Detective* touches on every single one of these corrupt American realities. At the head of the crime in Louisiana is the Tuttle family. The Tutttles have woven themselves and their corruption into the police department, the government, and the schools. The Tuttle family is a representation of the “corruption in the highest echelons of government” which was a motif in the noir genre and continues to be a concern of the American people.<sup>50</sup> Rust seems to be the only character in the show that can clearly see the corruption of the family and rebels against those who seem to follow blindly in the power of the Tutttles. The Tutttles act much like a mafia in which they do not hesitate to “take care of” any person who jeopardizes the family and its’ occult traditions. At the end of the noir era, Orson Welles’ *Touch of Evil* deals with several detectives who are blind to the moral corruption of their highly regarded lead detective, Quinlan.<sup>51</sup> The Mexican detective, Mike Vargas, in *Touch of Evil* sees the corruption in Quinlan, much like Rust sees the corruption in the Tutttles.

*True Detective* deals with parallels and double lives on several different levels. Classic film noirs often dealt with characters that “assume several identities.”<sup>52</sup> At a macro level the show parallels the future and the past with a connection of a murder in 2012 and a murder in 1995. The landscape and settings often reflect or mirror the case that Rust and Marty are trying to solve. The case is complex and begins without any solid leads, which forces Rust and Marty to expand their investigation to other possible murder and missing person cases. They continue to come upon dead ends and twists in their information that often parallels with the confusing and changing backdrop of the Louisiana landscape. It is possible to point out that much like the noir film *Edge of Doom* (1950), Rust’s internal obsessions and ideas are reflected in the landscape and grotesques of the series.<sup>53</sup> Rust’s outward appearance through the show continues to degrade in parallel with the frustration of finding their killer. The show progresses with a comparative look between Rust of the past and Rust of the present. Even Marty lives a double life; he has his “ideal” family home but a mistress on the side. *True Detective* uses the ironic humor of classical noir in a way that plays out parallels in the show.<sup>54</sup> The show is filled with dark humor, and perhaps is at its best when Rust goes undercover in a violent drug bike gang.

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<sup>50</sup> Martin, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls*, 36.

<sup>51</sup> Paolo Mereghetti, *Masters of Cinema: Orson Welles* (Paris: Phaidon, Inc., 2011), 76.

<sup>52</sup> Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen*, 1259.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 1383.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 1626.

He is asked to help with a raid in which the gang members are going to go undercover as cops. The double lives merge at that point, and even Rust finds humor in it.

German Expressionism heavily influenced many of the classical noir directors and “they naturally brought their American assignments a predilection for chiaroscuro and for stories in which brooding and solitary characters struggle against hopeless odds.”<sup>55</sup> Rust Cohle, as one of the two main characters of *True Detective*, can be defined as a noir male. The noir male character is a development of the cynical views of the directors of the noir era.<sup>56</sup> The dialogue about Rust and his actions in the show, function to show his alienation from the world and his obsession with the murder case. Rust’s character is often molded by the views of other minor and major characters in the show. The first set of dialogue in the series is important in setting not only the tone of the series, but casting a mysterious doubt on Rust’s “good” character. The second scene and first set of dialogue in episode one, dives right into Marty Hart’s thoughts on Rust:

[Interview]

Interviewer 1: What’d you think? You, paired up with him?

Hart: What’d I think? Well you don’t pick your parents and you don’t pick your partner.

[Pause]

Hart: You know they use to call him the taxman for a while. He come out of Texas, and nobody knew him. Seemed a bit raw boned to me, edgy. Took three months till we got him over to the house for dinner. Around our big 419. That’s what Ya’ll want to hear about, right? Dora Lange? Kids in the woods?

Interviewer 1: Yeah, sure. But, ah, talk about Cole, We heard some stories.

Interviewer 2: Kind of a strange guy huh?

Hart: Strange, uh... [chuckles]... Yeah. Rust, pick a fight with the sky if he didn’t like its’ shade of blue.

Rust’s first appearance in the series sets him up to physically reflect many of the other character’s comments about Rust being a “weird” character. During the interviews he appears shabbily dressed, a bit unkempt, and perhaps a bit on the unhealthy side. This appearance is almost immediately contrasted against the well-dressed handsome image of himself that is shown in the flashbacks.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 1617.

This contrast between the Rust of the past and the Rust of the present, clearly distinguishes his recession from the world and his alienation from society. Like several classical noir characters, Rust is a man who seems to be completely removed from society and full of anger, which erupts, in philosophical comments.<sup>57</sup> His philosophical points of view often make him truly alienated and ostracized from all those around him.<sup>58</sup> The apartment, in which Rust lives, during the '95 case, also depicts his alienation. His home is an unfurnished apartment that's only decoration is detective textbooks and a mirror small enough for one eye. Rust's apartment changes slowly with the case, and becomes a home for his evidence and obsession with the killer. Classic film noirs, such as *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Scarlet Street* (1945), often portrayed the noir male's obsession with an unavailable woman.<sup>59</sup> For Rust, the case is his obsession and the killers are the "unavailable women". Rust's obsession with the murder case reaches a point that even Marty openly tells him that he is obsessed. Like the fated men of classic noir, Rust is a character that is focused on "psychological obsession and derangement."<sup>60</sup> The two interviewing CIDs try to incriminate Rust as the killer by pointing out his obsessions. Rust's obsession does not lessen in the series; instead he feels he has a debt to finish the case and catch all the killers involved.

Rust's character is often contrasted against that of his partner, Marty, who could be described as the prescription male. Marty is much more of the stereotypical "good man" despite his hypocritical nature. Of the two detectives, Marty is categorized as "the friendly one, the family man, the Christian, found in church every Sunday."<sup>61</sup> Marty is the only character that keeps Rust protected from both his superiors and his colleagues. Despite being a family man, Marty is complicated by the need for something outside of his wife and family. Like many of the good men in film noir, Marty's weakness is sex.<sup>62</sup> His downfall in the show is his lust for "crazy" younger women and his tendency to drink heavily. The two younger women destroy Maggie's trust in Marty and ultimately cause the failure of their nuclear family. At the end of the series, Marty's personal life is shown as an empty shell of what he used to have; he's alone, eating microwaved dinners, and

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 3102.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 1626.

<sup>61</sup> Dale Archer, "True Detective: The Psychology of Hart and Cohle," *Psychology Today*, January 26, 2014, accessed October 22, 2014, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/reading-between-the-headlines/201401/true-detective-the-psychology-hart-and-cohle>.

<sup>62</sup> Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen*, 2912.

trying out online dating. Like many of the classical Mr. Nice Guys of film noir, Marty's life became a victim to the allure of the noir women.<sup>63</sup>

One of the few major character types that *True Detective* seems to be missing is the femme fatale. A femme fatale is defined as a "wicked woman who destroys every man she meets."<sup>64</sup> In *True Detective* there is not a woman who fits this role exactly, but several of the females in the show are used as a femme fatale for a pivotal change. Marty's wife is most likely the closest femme fatale there could be in the show. Maggie is not riddled with greed for money but she is ambitious to have her family life the way she wants it. Her defining moment is when she uses Rust as her weapon against Marty and his infidelities. Her actions cause the great rift between Marty and Rust as well as the dissolution of their partnership. Maggie shows no regret for what she has done, she does not apologize for her actions, and she views her hurtful actions as a necessity. Even ten years later, when she is given a chance to explain Marty and Rust's falling out, she does not feel the need to share the truth or to show any guilt for her part in it. Her absence of guilt is perhaps her one true femme fatale quality.<sup>65</sup> Lisa, Marty's first girlfriend in the show, also goes into a rage when she does not get what she wants. She projects an image of herself as if sex and men were her only objectives and goes into an angry rage when she feels demeaned.<sup>66</sup> Lisa's action set in motion a downhill journey for Marty and his family.

In noir films there are often lesser characters, called grotesques, which are often deformed or have an unsavory personality. *True Detective* is riddled with a variety of grotesques from drug addicts to prostitutes to mentally handicapped religious enthusiasts. Riding high above all the prostitutes, junkies, and drug dealers, Errol Childress takes the lead as the main grotesque and as the true killer to be found. Errol is a character with irrational criminal motivation that goes as far as a self-serving need for an imaginary end.<sup>67</sup> Errol depicts an inner preference towards sadism that affects his mentally ill half-sister and other women and children he comes into contact with.<sup>68</sup> For Errol, the entire purpose of killing in a ritualistic fashion is to create sacrifices for his transcendence. He is "a monster in the grip of compulsions like the title character of Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), another child murderer who likes to whistle."<sup>69</sup> Errol's character might have also

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>65</sup> Orr, *Hitchcock*, 159.

<sup>66</sup> Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen*, 2335.

<sup>67</sup> Borde, *A Panorama of American Film Noir*, 19.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Seitz, "The 7 Things That *True Detective* Was About."

been influenced by Robert Mitchum's character Harry in *The Night of the Hunter* (1955). Errol is linked to children and the church throughout the series, much like how the deranged preacher seduces both women and children in *The Night of the Hunter*.<sup>70</sup> Both Errol and Harry also seem to use their belief in a higher power as an excuse for their violent actions. *True Detective* makes another reference to Hitchcock's influence on the show by having *North by Northwest* playing on Errol's television in the last episode. Ironically, Errol takes on a vocal impersonation of Phillip Vandamm, the murdering foreign spy. His way of going from personality to personality creates an odd grotesque character for *True Detective*. Errol seems to have learned to live separate lives, between a general grounds keeper and a psychotic killer, which has helped to keep him under the radar, at least until Marty and Rust find him. The hoarder setting of Errol's home acts as a reflection of his troubled past that he himself couldn't let go of. Errol is much like the veterans depicted in classical noir films, who "went wrong" in the war and they can't seem to reverse the awful things that have occupied their minds.<sup>71</sup> His need to keep his father's body tied up in a small side cabin seems to symbolize his own hate towards the physical and emotional damage his family has done to him.<sup>72</sup> In a more black and white view, Errol symbolizes in the show the epitome of evil that is "beyond cure and perhaps beyond explanation."<sup>73</sup>

For classic noirs, the ending often provided a last bleak moment for a hero. A true noir ending maintains the same pessimism that is depicted throughout the film.<sup>74</sup> For the French critics of the classical noir films, they attributed these cynical endings to "a shift in the national psyche."<sup>75</sup> The endings represented a darker mindset of Americans and a loss of belief in American ideals.<sup>76</sup> *True Detective* does not end with the classic tragic noir ending, but has a "last-moment lurch into optimism" that sometime appear in noir films.<sup>77</sup> *The Night of the Hunter* ends with a "timeless triumph of love over hate."<sup>78</sup> For Marty and Rust, the end of the case was almost an end to both of their lives. The ending of *True Detective* leaned more towards the idea

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<sup>70</sup> Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen*, 2512.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 3111.

<sup>72</sup> Seitz, "The 7 Things That *True Detective* Was About."

<sup>73</sup> Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen*, 3111.

<sup>74</sup> Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader*, 1116.

<sup>75</sup> Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen*, 201.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Smith, *In Lonely Places*, 215.

<sup>78</sup> Moylan C. Mills, "Charles Laughton's Adaptation of the *Night of the Hunter*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 16.1 (1988).

of “good” rising above evil than letting the heroes of the show die at the hands of the killer.<sup>79</sup> Perhaps in contrast to the cynical mindset of the 1940s, *True Detective* was trying to do the opposite by re-affirming a positive outlook of triumph over evil in the American society.

The French critics of classic film noirs helped to show Americans how to view their films with a more artistic critical eye. In doing so, the critics helped to bring out and define the wealth of techniques that were used in noir film.<sup>80</sup> By doing this, the techniques of film noir became available for other filmmakers to incorporate into their works. Since this dark era in film, neo-noirs have sprouted up in many different film genres, but all still paying tribute to style and characteristics of their classical ancestors. With the much more contemporary rise in intellectual television, it is almost predictable that these shows would look back at film noir for influences. In everything from setting to characters, *True Detective* can find precedent for the techniques used in classical film noir.

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<sup>79</sup> Seitz, “The 7 Things That *True Detective* Was About.”

<sup>80</sup> Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen*, 210.