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Six lesser-known films referenced in Paul Schrader's 'NOTES ON FILM NOIR'

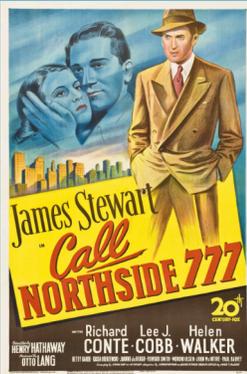
Compiled by Mark Steiner

In 1971, then-critic **Paul Schader** wrote the seminal essay **Notes On Film Noir**, published in *Film Comment* the following year. Though the noir era had effectively been dead for well over a decade, and in hindsight, pretty clearly defined in both style and substance, few Americans had paid attention to the genre that had been created unwittingly out of tight budgets and post-war angst. The gangster film and the whodunit had been replaced with a darker, more cynical hybrid, where you might have known who did it in the opening shot, and even rooted for that person at some point in the next 80 minutes or so. Schrader's essay mapped out the development of Film Noir, and effectively created a canon which gave the era a beginning (*The Maltese Falcon*, 1941) and an end (*Touch Of Evil*, 1958) and listed about 70 prime examples of films that fit into that canon. Most are by now well-known and synonymous with the genre (i.e. *Double Indemnity*, *The Big Combo*, *Laura*) but the fun thing about lists is that they can turn you on to new things. Here are six great, canonical film noirs (according to Schrader) that are not as familiar as the big ones but in a lot of ways are just as satisfying:



ACT OF VIOLENCE (1949, dir. Fred Zinneman)

Two decades before taking on big budget and prestige films like *A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS* and *DAY OF THE JACKAL*, Fred Zinneman cut his teeth as a contract director for MGM, using their ample resources to make earnest and stylish crime dramas like this one. Van Heflin and Robert Ryan are former POWs who have a score to settle on the homefront, and this film was one of the first to address the pain and moral decisions returning veterans were dealing with at the time. Schrader points out the "realistic urban look" of *Act Of Violence* and indeed the location shooting in and around Los Angeles, especially in a Skid Row sojourn that features seedy character actors like Berry Kroeger & Mary Astor, was a interesting counterpoint to the lush Technicolor musicals MGM was making back on their lots.



CALL NORTHSIDE 777 (1948, dir. Henry Hathaway)

Like *ACT OF VIOLENCE*, *CALL NORTHSIDE 777* was part of the wave of post-war realism Schrader pointed out in his essay. And not only was it filmed outside of the studio, it was based on a true story and filmed in the city (Chicago) where it took place. This was part of Fox and producers Louis De Rochemont and Mark Hellinger's campaign at the time to make documentary-style films, but the film is anything but dry and visually uninteresting. Jimmy Stewart plays a cynical reporter who investigates the railroading of alleged killer Richard Conte, and director Henry Hathaway, who'd been shooting "on location" since making a series of lean, mean Westerns for Paramount in the thirties, keeps the pace steady and the visuals constantly engaging.



ON DANGEROUS GROUND (1951, dir. Nicholas Ray)

Part of Schrader's "third and final phase of film noir," the era of "psychotic action and suicidal impulse," *ON DANGEROUS GROUND* is a fascinating, deep dive into the heart of darkness. Embittered and violent city detective Robert Ryan is dispatched upstate to cool his heels but instead ends up as a fish out of water and part of a vicious manhunt, forced to confront his own demons in a wintry landscape in contrast to the city streets. A terrific score by Bernard Herrmann and typically sensitive direction by Nicholas Ray, who had a knack for delving into stories of obsessive, self-destructive characters (i.e. *REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE* and *IN A LONELY PLACE*) and a recently restored Blu-ray from Warner Archive, make *ON DANGEROUS GROUND* a fantastic late-era noir worth rediscovering.