

A Structural Model of Classic Film Noir Within the SLP Framework: A Systematic Content Analysis of the Interaction Among Visual, Narrative, and Character Structures

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ABSTRACT

Classic film noir is one of the most influential stylistic movements in the history of cinema, distinguished by visual darkness, complex narrative structures, and morally ambiguous characters. Although this genre has been widely examined, much existing scholarship has treated its visual, narrative, and character dimensions separately, with limited attention to the systematic interaction among these structural levels. This study proposes a preliminary structural model of classic film noir within the SLP framework and examines the co-occurrence of visual style, narrative logic, and characterization. Methodologically, the study adopts a quantitative-analytical design based on systematic content analysis. The research population consisted of classic American film noir productions from the 1940s and 1950s, from which 100 prominent films were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through direct observation of the films and binary coding of indicators related to visual style, narrative logic, and characterization. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa coefficient ($\kappa = .81$). The findings showed that characterization indicators had the highest mean presence (66.2%), followed by visual style (63.7%) and narrative logic (60.6%). High-contrast lighting, narrative suspense, and the presence of the antihero were among the most frequently observed indicators. Phi correlation analysis indicated that several pre-defined indicators appeared in clustered co-occurrence patterns. These results suggest that classic film noir may be understood as a multilayered system shaped by the association of visual, narrative, and character elements. The proposed model is therefore interpreted as an exploratory content-analysis model rather than as a fully validated causal or computational model.

Keywords: *Classic film noir; SLP framework; visual style; narrative logic; characterization; structural genre analysis; film noir cinema*

1. Introduction

Classic film noir is one of the most influential stylistic movements in the history of cinema. Emerging in American cinema during the 1940s and 1950s, it developed into a durable cinematic model for representing

psychological darkness, moral instability, and the identity crises of modern human beings (Dickos, 2002; Smith, 2024). Noir is not defined only by its narrative concerns or thematic preoccupations; it is also shaped by a distinctive organization of visual elements and character structures that together produce a complex system of aesthetic and

semantic meanings (Rodriguez Martinez, 2022). In classic noir, visual darkness, morally ambiguous characters, and narratives marked by fatalism and social anxiety are interwoven to construct a cinematic world in which the boundary between good and evil becomes profoundly unstable (Dorval, 2024). Despite the extensive body of scholarship on this genre, a central question remains insufficiently addressed: how do visual, narrative, and character structures interact systematically in classic film noir, and how does this interaction produce a coherent generic identity?

A substantial part of previous research has examined noir through separate analytical dimensions. Some studies have focused primarily on visual style, emphasizing features such as high-contrast lighting, shadow-based composition, oblique framing, and dark urban spaces (Porter, 2025; Zhang, 2024). In this line of interpretation, noir is often understood as a visual aesthetic partly rooted in German Expressionism, where light, shadow, and spatial distortion function not merely as stylistic devices but as expressive tools for externalizing psychological and moral tension. Other studies have concentrated on narrative organization, examining features such as nonlinear narration, first-person narration, flashbacks, and fatalistic narrative patterns as central components of the noir form. A further group of studies has focused on character types, particularly the cynical detective, the femme fatale, the defeated man, and the antihero, as recurring figures through which noir articulates suspicion, desire, failure, and moral ambiguity (Brammer et al., 2025; Shetley, 2026).

Although these studies have contributed substantially to the understanding of noir, they often treat visual, narrative, and character elements as separate dimensions rather than as mutually dependent structural layers. This separation creates a theoretical gap in genre analysis. Noir cannot be adequately defined only through visual darkness, complex narration, or morally gray characters. What gives the genre its internal coherence is the interaction among these dimensions. In other words, noir operates as a system in which visual style, narrative logic, and characterization continually reinforce and transform one another. This point has been emphasized in more recent genre-oriented discussions, which argue that cinematic genres should be understood not as fixed collections of features but as dynamic systems of relations among formal, narrative, and cultural structures (Vanden Bossche, 2023; Zhou, 2022). From this perspective, the identity of noir is produced not

by isolated conventions but by the patterned interaction among different cinematic layers.

The SLP framework provides a useful analytical basis for examining this interaction. As a layered structural approach, SLP assumes that cinematic texts are composed of several structural levels, each with its own internal logic, while meaning emerges through the relations among these levels. Within this model, visual structure, narrative structure, and character structure are not treated as independent units but as interrelated layers within a complex system. Their overlap and synergy produce the generic identity of the work. Such a perspective is particularly suitable for the analysis of classic film noir, because noir is a genre in which atmosphere, plot, and character psychology are deeply entangled. The genre's visual darkness is not merely decorative; it is linked to narrative uncertainty and to the internal instability of the characters. Similarly, narrative complexity is not simply a formal technique; it often reflects the fractured subjectivity, moral confusion, and psychological crisis of noir protagonists (Hockley, 2021; Markhaichuk et al., 2021).

From this standpoint, the visual style of noir is best understood as an active structural element rather than as a passive aesthetic surface. Low-key lighting, intense shadows, narrow spaces, and urban nightscapes often function as visual expressions of moral pressure and psychological dislocation (Murphy, 2019). The dark visual atmosphere reinforces the sense of distrust, fatalism, and existential anxiety that shapes both the narrative and the characters. For example, high-contrast lighting may visually externalize a character's divided moral condition, while restricted framing can intensify the feeling of entrapment that is already present in the narrative structure. Thus, the visual layer does not merely accompany the story; it participates in the production of meaning.

Narrative logic also plays a central role in this multilayered system. Classic noir narratives frequently rely on suspense, delayed revelation, flashback structures, unreliable narration, and fatalistic progression. These narrative strategies create a sense of uncertainty and inevitability, drawing the viewer into a world where truth is unstable and moral resolution is often impossible. Yet these narrative mechanisms are closely connected to characterization. The use of flashback, for instance, often reflects the protagonist's fragmented memory or troubled subjectivity. Similarly, narrative suspense is frequently intensified through the presence of characters whose motives remain uncertain, especially the femme fatale and

the antihero. In this sense, noir narrative is not simply a sequence of events; it is a structure through which character instability and moral ambiguity are organized.

Characterization forms another decisive layer in the noir system. The femme fatale, for example, is not merely a seductive female type; her presence often redirects the narrative, destabilizes the protagonist, and transforms the visual organization of scenes (Wager, 2017). She may be associated with specific lighting patterns, framing strategies, and camera movements that generate both visual and narrative tension (Antoniak, 2020). Likewise, the antihero is commonly represented as isolated, cynical, and trapped within social and psychological forces that exceed his control. His placement in dark, fragmented, or threatening urban spaces visually mirrors his inner condition and reinforces the existential logic of noir (Duan et al., 2023). Therefore, character types in noir function not only as thematic figures but also as structural agents that organize the movement of narrative and image.

The main problem addressed in this study emerges from these theoretical considerations: how do visual, narrative, and character structures interact within classic film noir, and how can this interaction be modeled through the SLP framework? More specifically, can a structural model be proposed to show how visual elements guide narrative development, how narrative logic shapes characterization, and how character structures influence the spatial and visual organization of the film? Addressing this question is important because it moves noir analysis beyond the description of separate genre features and toward an explanation of the structural mechanisms that produce noir as a coherent cinematic system. Recent approaches to genre theory have emphasized that genres are not static categories but dynamic formations produced through recurring interactions among aesthetic, narrative, and cultural codes (Dennon, 2017; Pazdrijan, 2018). Accordingly, the present study seeks to conceptualize classic film noir as a multilayered structural system in which meaning is produced through the continuous interaction of visual style, narrative logic, and characterization. By proposing such a model, the study aims to contribute to genre studies, film theory, and interdisciplinary media analysis.

2. Methods and Materials

This study was designed to develop and preliminarily evaluate a structural model of classic film noir by examining the interaction among visual, narrative, and

character structures within the SLP (Structural Layered Pattern) framework. A quantitative analytical approach based on systematic content analysis was adopted. Content analysis is appropriate for investigating recurring structural and stylistic patterns in audiovisual texts because it enables systematic examination of observable characteristics and statistical comparison among categorical variables (Krippendorff, 2019; Neuendorf, 2017).

2.1. Research Population and Sample

The research population consisted of classic American film noir productions released primarily during the 1940s and 1950s. Candidate films were identified using the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) in combination with academic literature on film noir. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 100 films that collectively reflected the defining characteristics of classical noir. Purposive sampling is appropriate when researchers seek information-rich cases that best represent the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). The absence of the complete corpus list is acknowledged as a limitation because it reduces the independent reproducibility of the sampling procedure.

2.2. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework was based on the SLP model, which conceptualizes genre as the interaction of multiple structural layers rather than as a collection of isolated stylistic features (Hockley, 2021). Three principal analytical dimensions were investigated.

In the present study, SLP is treated as an operational layered framework for organizing Style, Narrative Logic, and Persona/Characterization indicators. This framework is used to structure the analysis of co-occurrence patterns among visual, narrative, and character elements rather than to establish a fully validated causal model.

The first dimension, Visual Style, included six indicators: low-key and high-contrast lighting, shadow-based composition, camera angle, camera movement, dark urban production design, and noir costume design. These indicators were selected because previous studies have consistently identified them as core components of the visual identity of film noir (Murphy, 2019; Porter, 2025; Zhang, 2024).

The second dimension, Narrative Logic, comprised six indicators: narrative structure, flashback, narrator, narrative suspense, criminal conflict, and tragic or ambiguous

endings. These variables represent the principal storytelling mechanisms that distinguish noir from other cinematic genres and have been repeatedly emphasized in previous scholarship (Dorval, 2024; Rodriguez Martinez, 2022).

The third dimension, Characterization, focused on five indicators: the antihero, pessimistic psychological traits, the protagonist's social position, the femme fatale, and complex interpersonal relationships. These recurring character patterns have long been recognized as defining characteristics of both classical and neo-noir cinema (Brammer et al., 2025; Shetley, 2026; Wager, 2017).

2.3. *Data Collection and Coding Procedure*

Data were collected through repeated direct viewing of each selected film using a standardized coding instrument developed for this study. Each indicator was operationally defined before data collection to improve conceptual clarity and coding consistency. Every indicator was recorded using a binary coding system, where 1 indicated the presence of the characteristic and 0 indicated its absence. Several indicators, such as camera angle, narrative structure, and complex interpersonal relationships, remain relatively broad; therefore, the lack of a full coding sheet limits external verification of the frequency results.

Two trained coders independently analyzed the films. Prior to the main analysis, both coders participated in calibration sessions during which the operational definitions and coding procedures were refined. To assess intercoder reliability, 20 randomly selected films were independently coded by both coders. Reliability was evaluated using Cohen's kappa coefficient, which is appropriate for nominal categorical data (Cohen, 1960; McHugh, 2012). The overall kappa coefficient was $\kappa = .81$, with $\kappa = .84$ for Visual Style, $\kappa = .79$ for Narrative Logic, and $\kappa = .78$ for Characterization. Because the manuscript reports aggregated reliability values rather than indicator-

specific coefficients, the reliability evidence are interpreted as a general estimate of coding agreement.

2.4. *Statistical Analysis*

Data analysis was conducted at two complementary levels. First, descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were calculated to determine the prevalence of each structural indicator across the sample. Second, relationships among the coded binary variables were examined using the Phi (Φ) coefficient. Phi coefficients were used descriptively to identify co-occurrence patterns among visual, narrative, and character indicators. Because statistical significance levels, confidence intervals, and corrections for multiple testing are not reported, the findings are interpreted as exploratory associations rather than as evidence of causal or fully validated structural relationships.

3. **Findings and Results**

After completing the coding process, the total frequency of indicators was calculated for each dimension of the SLP framework. The results showed that the total frequency for the Style dimension was 382, for the Narrative dimension was 364, and for the Persona dimension was 331. Based on the mean percentage of indicator presence in each dimension, Persona had the highest mean presence in classic noir films (66.2%), followed by Style (63.7%) and Narrative (60.6%). This finding indicates that although dark visual style is one of the most recognizable features of film noir, the generic identity of noir is largely shaped through specific types of characters and their relationships. In other words, the noir world is defined not only by visual darkness but also by the moral and psychological complexity of its characters.

Table 1

Comparison of the Three Dimensions of the SLP Framework

Analytical Dimension	Number of Indicators	Total Frequency	Mean Indicator Presence (%)
Visual Style (Style)	6	382	63.7
Narrative Logic (Narrative)	6	364	60.6
Characterization (Persona)	5	331	66.2

Six indicators were examined in the Visual Style dimension. As shown in Table 2, high-contrast lighting had the highest presence, appearing in 82% of the analyzed

films, and can therefore be considered one of the most important elements of noir visual identity.

Table 2

Frequency of Visual Style Indicators

Indicator Code	Indicator	Frequency	Percentage
S1	High-contrast lighting	82	82
S2	Frame composition	67	67
S3	Camera angle	61	61
S4	Camera movement	48	48
S5	Dark urban set design	71	71
S6	Noir costume design	53	53

The Narrative Logic dimension was also assessed using six indicators. As presented in Table 3, narrative suspense had the highest frequency, appearing in 79% of the films.

This finding highlights the importance of tension, ambiguity, and uncertainty in noir narratives.

Table 3

Frequency of Narrative Logic Indicators

Indicator Code	Narrative Indicator	Frequency	Percentage
L1	Narrative structure	72	72
L2	Flashback	65	65
L3	Presence of narrator	49	49
L4	Narrative suspense	79	79
L5	Criminal conflict	63	63
L6	Bitter or ambiguous ending	66	66

The Characterization dimension was evaluated using five indicators. As presented in Table 4, the antihero (78%) and the femme fatale (74%) were the two most frequently occurring character types, confirming their central role in the dramatic structure of classic film noir. Pessimistic

psychological traits and complex interpersonal relationships were also common features, emphasizing the moral ambiguity and psychological instability that characterize the genre.

Table 4

Frequency of Characterization Indicators

Indicator Code	Characterization Indicator	Frequency	Percentage
P1	Antihero	78	78
P2	Pessimistic psychological characteristics	64	64
P3	Character's social position	52	52
P4	Femme fatale	74	74
P5	Complex interpersonal relationships	63	63

To investigate the interaction among structural indicators, Phi (Φ) correlation coefficients were calculated. The strongest relationships are presented in Table 5. High-contrast lighting showed a strong positive association with dark urban production design ($\Phi = .61$) and frame composition ($\Phi = .54$), indicating that these visual components frequently co-occur to construct the distinctive visual atmosphere of noir. Within the narrative dimension,

narrative structure demonstrated substantial correlations with flashback ($\Phi = .58$) and narrative suspense ($\Phi = .52$), reflecting the central role of nonlinear storytelling and suspense in noir narratives. Among the characterization variables, the antihero exhibited the strongest relationship with the femme fatale ($\Phi = .63$), while its association with moral tension was also considerable ($\Phi = .56$). Furthermore, the relationship between the femme fatale and

narrative suspense ($\Phi = .47$) suggests that this character type plays an essential role in generating narrative

uncertainty.

Table 5

Major Phi (Φ) Correlations Among Structural Indicators

Structural Indicators	Φ Coefficient
High-contrast lighting – Dark urban production design	.61
High-contrast lighting – Frame composition	.54
Narrative structure – Flashback	.58
Narrative structure – Narrative suspense	.52
Antihero – Femme fatale	.63
Femme fatale – Narrative suspense	.47

Overall, the correlation analysis indicates that the structural indicators tend to appear in interconnected clusters rather than in isolation. The findings demonstrate that the defining characteristics of classic film noir emerge through the interaction of visual, narrative, and character structures rather than through any single dimension independently.

To provide a concise representation of the exploratory findings, an integrated structural model based on the SLP

framework is proposed. As shown in Table 6, characterization has the highest mean indicator presence, visual style establishes the threatening atmosphere, and narrative logic organizes crime, suspense, and ambiguity. The model is therefore understood as a descriptive synthesis of the coded indicators, not as a statistically validated causal model.

Table 6

Structural Model of Classic Film Noir Within the SLP Framework

Analytical Dimension	Mean Presence (%)	Structural Function
Visual Style	63.7	Establishes a dark and threatening atmosphere
Characterization (Persona)	66.2	Forms the dramatic core of the genre
Narrative Logic	60.6	Drives crime-oriented and suspenseful storytelling

Based on this structural model, classic film noir can be understood as a multilayered cinematic system in which visual style, narrative logic, and characterization continuously interact to construct the genre's distinctive identity. Rather than functioning as isolated components, these structural dimensions reinforce one another to produce the aesthetic, psychological, and narrative coherence that defines classical noir.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study proposed and preliminarily evaluated a structural model of classic film noir by examining the association among visual style, narrative logic, and characterization within the SLP framework. The findings suggest that these structural dimensions do not appear only as isolated features; rather, several indicators co-occur across the corpus. Although film noir is traditionally

recognized for its distinctive visual aesthetics, the descriptive results indicate that characterization had the highest average presence among the coded indicators. This finding suggests that the psychological and moral complexity of characters may play an important role in defining noir, although this conclusion should be treated as exploratory.

The predominance of characterization supports previous theoretical arguments that regard film noir primarily as a character-driven genre in which psychological conflict and moral ambiguity determine both narrative progression and visual organization (Dorval, 2024; Smith, 2024). The frequent occurrence of the antihero and the femme fatale further confirms their central function in constructing the dramatic identity of noir. The strong association identified between these two character types indicates that they should not be understood as isolated narrative devices but

rather as complementary structural components that generate conflict, uncertainty, and moral instability. These findings are also consistent with the observations of Wager (2017) and Brammer et al. (2025), who argued that recurring character archetypes constitute one of the defining characteristics of both classical and neo-noir traditions (Brammer et al., 2025; Wager, 2017).

The analysis of visual style similarly demonstrates that high-contrast lighting remains the dominant visual characteristic of classic film noir. However, the present findings indicate that lighting acquires its full cinematic significance only through its interaction with narrative and characterization. Strong positive associations between lighting, production design, and frame composition reveal that noir aesthetics function as integrated visual systems rather than collections of independent stylistic devices. These results reinforce previous interpretations that associate noir visual style with German Expressionism and emphasize the symbolic role of light and shadow in representing psychological instability and ethical conflict (Murphy, 2019; Porter, 2025; Zhang, 2024). Accordingly, visual darkness should not be regarded merely as an aesthetic convention but as a structural mechanism that externalizes the internal condition of noir characters.

The findings concerning narrative logic also highlight the structural importance of suspense, flashback, and nonlinear storytelling. Narrative suspense emerged as the most frequently occurring narrative indicator, while strong correlations between narrative structure and flashback confirm that temporal fragmentation is one of the principal mechanisms through which noir generates uncertainty. Rather than serving only as stylistic devices, these narrative techniques reinforce the unstable psychological condition of protagonists and encourage viewers to reconstruct fragmented events throughout the story. Similar conclusions have been reported by Rodriguez Martinez (2022), who argued that narrative complexity constitutes one of the essential structural foundations of the noir genre (Rodriguez Martinez, 2022).

A useful contribution of the present study lies in drawing attention to possible associations among the three structural dimensions. The results indicate that visual, narrative, and character indicators may operate as mutually reinforcing components within a multilayered system. For example, low-key lighting may intensify the psychological isolation of the antihero, while the presence of the femme fatale may be associated with narrative suspense and visual composition. These claims, however, require stronger

empirical support through full correlation reporting, significance testing, and transparent coding materials.

The proposed structural model may contribute to contemporary genre theory by offering an organized way to examine how narrative, visual, and character conventions co-occur in classic film noir. However, because the present analysis is based on descriptive frequencies and selected Phi correlations, the model is not presented as fully validated. Future studies can test the model on an explicitly listed corpus, provide the complete coded dataset, and compare the SLP model with alternative genre-analysis frameworks.

Overall, the findings suggest that classic film noir can be examined as a multilayered cinematic system in which meaning emerges from the co-occurrence of visual, narrative, and character structures. This integrated perspective may extend previous scholarship by moving beyond descriptive accounts of noir conventions. Nevertheless, the present study is framed as an exploratory content-analysis study rather than as a definitive computational validation of a structural model.

4.1. Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, the complete list of the 100 films included in the corpus is not provided, which limits reproducibility. Second, the coding manual and detailed operational definitions of the indicators are not included, which restricts external verification of the coding procedure. Third, Phi correlations are reported selectively and without significance levels or confidence intervals. Fourth, the proposed SLP model is interpreted as an exploratory descriptive model rather than a fully validated computational model.

Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization: Seyed Amirreza Hashemi, Ehsan Shahghasemi; Methodology: Seyed Amirreza Hashemi, Ehsan Shahghasemi; Data Collection and Coding: Seyed Amirreza Hashemi; Formal Analysis: Seyed Amirreza Hashemi; Interpretation of Results: Seyed Amirreza Hashemi, Ehsan Shahghasemi, Mohammad Reza Hosseini; Writing - Original Draft: Seyed Amirreza Hashemi; Writing - Review & Editing: Ehsan Shahghasemi, Mohammad Reza Hosseini; Supervision: Ehsan Shahghasemi, Mohammad Reza Hosseini. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Declaration

Artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted tools were used to improve the linguistic quality, readability, and grammatical accuracy of the manuscript. The authors retained full responsibility for the study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, and final content. All AI-assisted outputs were reviewed, verified, and edited by the authors before submission. No AI tool was used as an author of the manuscript.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

This study involved the systematic content analysis of publicly available cinematic works and did not involve human participants, animals, or access to confidential or identifiable personal data. Consequently, approval from an institutional ethics review board was not required under the applicable research regulations. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles governing research integrity, including transparency in data collection, objective coding procedures, accurate reporting of findings, and appropriate acknowledgment of all sources. Every effort was made to ensure methodological rigor, reproducibility, and impartial interpretation throughout the research process.

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