

Exploring the Nuances of Neo-Noir: A Study of Graham Moore's *The Outfit*

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Abstract: The paper explores *The Outfit* (2022) within the neo-noir cinematic genre, examining its unique position within it. Through an analysis of its stylistic and thematic elements, the paper shall examine the film to understand the defining characteristics of film noir production. It will further examine how the film takes a distinct approach to depicting violence, thereby placing itself in a niche category of contemporary, constantly evolving film noir. *The Outfit* takes place in 1950s Chicago and centres on Leonard Burling, a British cutter who uses precision to disguise moral ambiguity, to demonstrate how Moore uses the compressed, claustrophobic environment of the tailor shop to create psychological tension rather than relying solely on overt spectacle. The analysis focuses on the presence of genre markers, such as the unreliable narrator, the reimagined femme fatale embodied by La Fontaine, and the use of sophisticated cinematography, including Dutch angles and low-key lighting to indicate existential dread. This paper investigates the representation of violence in *The Outfit*, in contrast to the explicitly graphic productions of traditional neo-noir films. *The Outfit* employs violence as a thematic tool to explore trauma and power dynamics.

Ultimately, the paper argues that while the film draws heavily on the 'black film' tradition, its focus on moral ambiguity and character depth encourages viewers to reflect on complex ethical dilemmas, fostering a sense of intellectual engagement.

Keywords: Neo-noir; Moral Ambiguity,]; Cinematography; Femme Fatale; Urban Crime; Psychological Thriller; Narrative Twists; Contemporary Cinema

Graham Moore made his directorial debut with *The Outfit* in 2022. The film is set in Chicago and centres on Leonard Burling, a British tailor, who finds himself drawn into the world of crime. *The*

Outfit offers viewers an engaging cinematic experience that explores the complexities of the underworld. This paper explores the film through the genre of “neo-noir.” Neo-noir originates from the French “film noir” in the late 20th century, meaning “black film” or “dark film,” a genre that encompasses crime dramas renowned for their dark, moody imagery. As noir evolved, filmmaking adopted techniques for a contemporary audience, and the neo-noir genre was born through stylistic innovation. It often features elements such as moral ambiguity, urban decay, complex characters, and stylised visuals. Neo-noir, according to Mark Conard, is “any film having noir themes and noir sensibility that comes after the classic noir period (1960s)”. Neo-noir films often revisit and reinterpret classic film noir genres in contemporary contexts. *The Outfit* takes familiar elements such as morally ambiguous protagonists, femme fatales, and shadowy urban landscapes and infuses them with modern sensibilities. By doing so, it updates and recontextualises these tropes for the contemporary audience.

The film is set in the emerging time from the shadows of World War II and the Great Depression, and it reflects the mistrust and despair of the time. A large number of initial noir films centred on American crime novels, which in turn drew inspiration from hard-boiled detective fiction. Noir films frequently use complex storylines, flashbacks, and unreliable narrators. Neo-noir, as opposed to traditional noir, usually makes use of colour film, and frequently uses dramatic colour contrasts or a washed-out palette to produce an atmosphere similar to the black-and-white originals. It addresses modern societal challenges, modified gender roles, and new ethical issues reflective of contemporary culture. By exploring the causes underlying criminal activity and frequently presenting its protagonists as severely flawed or ethically ambiguous, neo-noir films offer a psychological analysis of their characters. Also, technology that is used for spying in crime films is much more visible in neo-noir films; for instance, in the film, bugs or recording devices were used in the tailor shop for the FBI to spy on.

The Outfit features moody lighting, complex plot twists, and morally ambiguous characters. These are all hallmarks of the neo-noir genre. The characters in neo-noir negotiate with questions of

identity and morality. They are stuck in situations where they must make choices that blur the lines between right and wrong as they navigate the criminal underworld. The twists in the plot keep viewers guessing about the characters' intentions and the outcome of their actions. Leonard, a very observant character and the protagonist of the movie, played by Mark Rylance, exhibits anxiety throughout, particularly when he is entangled in a web of deception and violence. Leonard's character is portrayed as someone who wants to give up his criminal activity, but to do so, he needs to indulge in it. He is at a crossroads over the consequences of his actions, a trait often seen in neo-noir narratives. He exists as a grey character. This moral ambiguity is a sign of neo-noir protagonists, who often find themselves navigating complex situations. As the film progresses, his motivations, desires, and inner conflicts are gradually revealed, enriching his character.

La Fontaine, played by Nikki Amuka-Bird, is introduced as a femme fatale, a woman with beauty and intelligence who puts men into dangerous situations. La Fontaine's character is depicted in a visually captivating scene, adding to the film's overall neo-noir atmosphere through lighting and shadow. La Fontaine's wardrobe is carefully curated to evoke a sense of sophistication. Rather than confining herself to the identity the society has imposed on her, she leaps out of it by playing the role of an ambitious woman, who had all the power in her hands despite being a black woman in the times when Americans never wanted any kind of power with blacks.

In *The Outfit*, cinematography is also instrumental in creating a neo-noir atmosphere that is both visually captivating and thematically resonant. Scenes are bathed in shadows with pockets of light illuminating characters' faces in a way that enhances their mysterious and enigmatic qualities. Framing and camera angles are carefully chosen to evoke a sense of tension, unease, and existential dread. A Dutch angle is a camera angle used in film studies to convey uneasiness, psychological conflict, or turmoil in the psyche of characters, such as Richie and Francis, as they engage in criminal activities. A Dutch angle is also used to portray Mable wherever her safety and loyalty are jeopardised. Low angles are the camera angles positioned anywhere below the eye line, pointing upward, and off-kilter framing, where characters are not usually confined to the bottom third of the

screen, crammed in the corner, or placed right at the edge of the screen, looking offscreen, are employed to heighten the sense of disorientation that highlights the genre. *The Outfit's* colour palette reflects the neo-noir tradition of using rich, saturated hues to evoke mood and atmosphere. Deep blues, velvety blacks, and crimson reds dominate the visual landscape.

In neo-noir films, the exploration of violence goes beyond mere action. It serves as a thematic device to delve into deeper aspects of human nature, societal decay, and existential themes. The use of violence underscores the bleakness of the world portrayed in these films and the character's desperate search for meaning in a chaotic and indifferent universe. Violence serves as a tool for exploring power dynamics in neo-noir narratives. Neo-noir films often delve into the psychological impact of violence on both the doers and victims. Characters are haunted by their violent pasts, grappling with guilt, trauma, and the consequences of their actions. The exploration of psychological depth adds layers of complexity to the characters, making them more nuanced and multidimensional. *The Outfit* offers a critique of contemporary society through its portrayal of violence. For example, in the case of Leonard, the violence faced by him is his mental trauma of the past, for which he had to indulge himself again to get away from such a situation.

An atmosphere of intrigue and tension is created throughout the film through dialogue and the cramped environment of the tailor shop, rather than through explicit, direct displays of violence, a defining factor that puts the film in a distinct position among other commercial neo-noir productions. Conversations drive the intricate plot twists, and each character's motivations are disclosed slowly. For example, Mable intended to have her share of the money, leave Chicago at any cost, live peacefully in France, and chase her dreams, away from the underworld. These foreshadowing elements add depth and complexity to the narrative, building mysterious plots to a dark side as the story unfolds. The exposition would likely lay the groundwork for the complex web of relationships, motivations, and conflicts that drive the plot forward. The climax of the film marks the turning point at which the central conflict reaches its peak. In the film, this involves a decisive confrontation, a major revelation or a critical decision made by the protagonist that determines the outcome of the

story. Here, the climax is when Francis and Leonard are left alone in the shop, and Leonard reveals his tattoos, which tell that he was once a part of a gangster group like Richie and Francis and then stabs Francis with his pair of shears. In the end, loose ends are tied up, and the consequences of the climax are played out.

The film's exploration of these moral dilemmas in the underworld contributes to the ongoing conversation in neo-noir cinema about the nature of morality and ethics. While neo-noir films often draw inspiration from the visual style of classic film noir, they also incorporate stylistic innovations and modern visual techniques. *The Outfit* utilises elements such as moody lighting, atmospheric cinematography, and stylised production design to create a contemporary interpretation of the noir aesthetic. It stands well with audience expectations, introducing unexpected plot twists or unconventional character arcs that defy genre conventions.

A question that arises in the analysis of *The Outfit* as a neo-noir is whether it is possible to limit the film to a pure neo-noir. A significant characteristic that defines neo-noir and makes it distinct from noir is the explicit display of violence to represent chaos. In film noir, this chaos is represented through a display of violence that is more streamlined and central to the plot (e.g., *The Godfather*), whereas in neo-noir, violence takes the central stage (e.g., Quentin Tarantino's directorial work). As with both noir and neo-noir, the portrayal of chaos reflects the chaos of the times, whether the backdrop of World War II for the former or the rise of the underworld for the latter. Where, then, can one place *The Outfit*, as it is subdued in the display of violence, but violence is innate in the plot? Moore's film could be argued as an attempt to be placed in the 'contemporary neo-noir,' as it reflects a contemporary understanding of the times, a portrayal of chaos masquerading in a civilised society. With its distinct portrayal of chaos and careful treatment of violence, Moore also ensures that explicit violence does not overtake the plot as a dictating factor for commercial success, to attract the regular voyeur of violence, blood, and death.

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