

## Morton Marcus: 'Sin City' a sign of Postmodern corruption

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Article Launched: 04/29/2005 3:00:00 AM PDT

The question is, Why?

Why make a film like "Sin City"?

As most of you know by now, the film depicts several interrelated stories occurring in a place called Basin City, and features arms and legs being chopped off, torture, mutilation, decapitation, cannibalism, women beatings and female heads hung on walls like hunting trophies — all to no purpose, except maybe to show the baseness of the human species and the misery and futility of life.

The film is the latest offering from Robert Rodriguez, who has given us such trifles as the Disney-esque "Spy Kids" films, the cartoonish "El Mariachi," "Desperado" and "Once Upon A Time In Mexico," and the far too over-the-top vampire spoof "From Dusk To Dawn."

All of Rodriguez's films are prime examples of style without meaning, style for its own sake. That he has found box office success points to the decadence and waste that has come to characterize this country in its social, economic and political life, and in its foreign policy as well — a decadence and waste Rodriguez's films exemplify.

"Sin City" is based on three graphic novels by Frank Miller, and Rodriguez, using a "green screen" technique, has been able to virtually reproduce the novels' startling drawings as both the backgrounds and camera angles of the film. It is for that reason he credits Miller with being the film's co-director.

In the end, the green-screen technique may have been Rodriguez's main reason for making "Sin City," since the film does not in any way try to shape the content or attempt to find meaning or order in its chaotic and continuous violence as, say, Stanley Kubrick most certainly would have.

Thus the film becomes an exercise in Postmodernism, with its concentration on collaging references from different areas of popular culture in a pastiche that alludes to comic books, TV sitcoms and old films and in the end is all style and no content.

Such undertakings are a marked contrast to Modernism, the dominant approach to art in the first three quarters of the 20th century, which sought meaning in the dehumanizing fragmentation of a civilization dominated by the machine and the rise of totalitarian regimes such as Fascism, Nazism and Soviet communism.



In further contrast to Postmodernism, Modernism referenced the literature, philosophy and science of the 19th century and the folkways and art of indigenous people, such as Africans, South Sea Islanders and Native Americans, and found anthropological and mythic archetypes from which to draw general ideas about the human condition.

Miller's graphic novels (for "graphic novels" read "comic books," as in Adidas "athletic shoes" one should read "sneakers") are Postmodern creations, collections of tales from a fictitious city that has run riot with crime and violence in all levels of society. They are about corruption incarnate, as if the city itself pulsed with evil.

However, Miller was not just exercising a morbid imagination in his stories but referencing and parodying film noir, the popular style and genre of American films of the 1940s and '50s.

But film noir wasn't a demonstration of empty style, despite its shadowy black-and-white images and its window blinds which lay prison cell silhouettes over its characters and their environments.

It was an expression of Modernism's urgent concern with coming to grips with the world and reflected the new-found consciousness of American GIs returning from World War II and their war-weary civilian counterparts, both segments of the populace aware as never before of the corruption, racism and violence at the heart of the country, if not the world.

It is not surprising, therefore, that film noir dealt with the perceived corruption at the core of American urban life and a veteran, private detective, ex-con or drifter, who must solve a mystery or crime that exposes that corruption, was film noir's protagonist.

Mentally or physically damaged by war or injustice, the protagonist is not heroic but disconnected from this environment, in many cases an outsider to it, and finds his ability to act in order to rectify the situation hampered by his disability, or he is so single-minded in his pursuit of justice that he does as much harm as the film's antagonist (or villain).

Most film noirs were directed by German émigrés who fled to Hollywood from Hitler's Germany in the

1930s where, in the 1920s, they had created a genre called *Kammerspiel* that depicted the pressures on (and disintegration of) lower middle classes in post-World War 1 German cities. Twenty years later, this genre became the foundation of film noir, retaining its dehumanizing urban setting as its symbolic focus.

The point of this little history lesson is to indicate that from the beginning film noir was not an expression of empty style but, like *Kammerspiel*, was propelled by social criticism as well as a vision of life. And if many *Kammerspiel* and film noirs ended ambivalently or the protagonist's victory was at best pyrrhic, there was an ironic sense of retribution at the end of the film — or of outright redemption for the protagonist by his having faced and understood his plight.

This same history lesson points to another problem with "Sin City" and with Postmodernism in general. The aspect of parody in Postmodernism does not communicate a vision, but rather references an already created interpretation of the world for the purpose of imitation.

"Sin City," with its over-the-top brutality and comic-book characters, shows how empty and meaningless many of our artists now find life, and the film's continued high place on box office charts illustrates America's love of the lurid, the perverse and the vicious in its entertainment — and that in itself is illustrative of the corruption festering at the heart of our nation.

*Morton Marcus is co-host of the TV film review program "Cinema Scene" on channel 27, at 8:30 p.m. every Thursday and Sunday.*

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