

Scene Comparisons on the films , Laura and Gilda

ENL 200.02 The Art of Film

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Laura: 1944,

Writers: Vera Caspary, Jay Dratler

Director: Otto Preminger

Gene Tierney - Laura Hunt

Dana Andrews -Det. Lt. Mark McPherson

Gilda: 1946,

E.A. Ellington, Jo Eisinger

Charles Vidor

Rita Hayworth – Gilda Farrell

Glenn Ford – Johnny Farrell

Developed in the 1940's and 1950's, film noir was known for its black and white visual style. Film noir or "black film" was heavily influenced on the hard-boiled novels. Movies in this genre often dealt with crime where justice did not always prevail in the end. Film noir was very unsettling for audience members at first. The story alone was not the only factor that created unease. The film noir genre contains several identifiable, timeless characteristics that all contributed to telling the story. High contrast lighting, tragedies, dark shots, and femme fatales are just a few traits that make up the genre known as film noir.

Lighting has proven to be very powerful in film noir. It can create shadows, intense, or softer shots. Lighting can also contribute to telling the story within movie. "Gilda," directed by Otto Preminger and "Laura" directed by Otto Preminger are two film noirs that use lighting to help depict the femme fatales. There is an underlying theme in both of these films that suggests light reveals the truth. In "Gilda," the femme fatale struggles with her feelings towards a lost friend who has now re-entered her life. She creates this façade to hide behind when he is around. But in one scene, the lighting highlights her expression, revealing her true feelings. The film "Laura" differs from "Gilda" in terms of emotions that are expressed through the lighting. Instead of portraying love to the audience, in "Laura," the audience experiences intensity and frustration. However, "Laura" shares similarities with "Gilda" in the fact that it uses lighting to reveal the truth.

Throughout the film, Gilda is the classic femme fatale. She is seductive, but also devious. Because of this, the audience does not often sympathize for her. In the scene where Gilda is playing the guitar however, lighting is used and the audience can't help to feel for Gilda.

The scene starts with a long shot looking down into a casino room. There are card tables, tall walls, columns, and elaborate room décor. Gilda is sitting on the table playing the guitar for one of the male employees. The employee looks love struck as he is taken in by the femme fatale's serenading. Gilda is wearing a shorter dress that is slightly revealing. It is after hours because Johnny was woken up by her playing in an earlier shot. Because it is so late, everyone else has gone to bed leaving Gilda and the employee all alone. Everything about the mise-en-scene in this shot enhances Gilda's already very sexy and seductive personality.

The camera moves in towards the characters and the audience becomes close to the intimacy between the two of them. Eventually the camera reaches a medium shot. Now the audience can observe both of their expressions. Like assumed, the employee looks like a puppy dog as he pines away for Gilda. Gilda however, looks somewhat distraught and almost emotionally tired of something. The song she is singing, "Put the blame on me," seems more than a coincidence and it suggests to the audience that something is in fact upsetting her.

There are some alternating close-ups of each of the characters. The close-up of the employee isn't too flattering. There isn't any light outlining him to make him stand out in the shot. It is a simple close-up. Gilda's close-up however is stunning. We see the side of her face singing. Her eyes are mostly covered by her hair leaving Gilda a mystery for the audience. The close-up seems to be softer and it highlights her hair and her face. The shot is beautiful and it leaves the audience in awe.

The camera cuts to a medium shot of just Gilda playing the guitar. Again, the light illuminates Gilda and gives her this remarkable glow. The camera cuts to another close-up of Gilda from another angle. The contrasting lights and darks are so effective in this close-up. There is light coming from the top left hand corner shining down on Gilda. Her hair is yet again lit up with the light and the audience is drawn right to her face. Again we see that look of sadness and exhaustion. The close-up reveals Gilda's sorrows. The darks in this shot enhance those depressing feelings. The right hand corner is completely dark, contrasting the white in the other. But what stands out even more in how dark the guitar is in the shot. Gilda is playing a depressing, dark song. The darkness of the guitar, one of the sources for the sad song, may have been placed in the shot purposely to help portray Gilda's sadness.

We cut back to a medium shot of both characters now. It is a very film noir shot because again there is high contrast lighting. Gilda and the employee seem to have the lighting directly facing them. It makes them both stand out in the shot especially because they are both wearing white. What also stands out in this shot however is Gilda's shadow. Her looming shadow suggests a past she cannot avoid. Gilda is no longer being seductive towards the employee. Instead, she seems lost in her emotions. However, she is interrupted by Johnny coming into the room. Because Gilda doesn't want to show her sorrows towards Johnny, she quickly gathers herself and puts on a façade to hide behind. That same medium shot shows her smile and she is no longer showing her true feelings.

The lighting in "Gilda" enriches the femme fatale's beauty. More importantly than displaying her beauty, it reveals her true feelings. In the close-ups, lighting is used around her to draw the audience into her face. The audience members can then see her feelings of heartache. Because the director chose to soften the shot through the lighting techniques, the audience

becomes compassionate towards Gilda. This sequence of shots is both powerful and important because it is not likely in film noir where the audience feels for the femme fatale.

Where Gilda was the typical femme fatale who stirred up trouble, Laura appeared to be the opposite. She often acted as the victim instead of the instigator. As the story progresses however, the audience becomes more suspicious of her “innocence.” At the same time the audience’s suspicion heightens, Detective McPherson’s does as well. McPherson in one scene decides to interrogate Laura in his office. Lighting is used again to reveal the truth. Differentiating from “Gilda,” however lighting is used to make the audience suspect one thing in the beginning through one form of lighting. As the scene continues, a different lighting is used and the audience finally discovers the truth.

The scene opens with a long shot taken inside a dark office facing a door that is opening. The mise-en-scene is very film noir in this opening shot. The desks, chairs, and walls are all in the shadows. When a police officer opens the door to let McPherson and Laura in, a diagonal beam of light brightens up the door way, the chair, and the desk Laura will be interrogated in. The beam of light also illumines the two lamps that McPherson will use when questioning her. The audience’s attention is led right to the table and we can assume what will happen next to Laura.

McPherson turns the light on and gestures towards the chair for Laura to sit in. She hesitantly agrees to do so. As McPherson walks behind his desk the camera moves in closer to him. The camera then moves above him looking down on Laura. Clearly, the director wants to show Laura’s inferiority in the situation. This shot is very effective because McPherson is also above her in the frame. Now we have another example where light is used to reveal the truth.

Unlike in *Gilda*, the use of light was intentional by the characters. McPherson turns on two lights facing directly at Laura. She is literally in the spotlight, only it is for the wrong reasons.

We cut to a close-up of Laura. On the very edges of the shot however, the lamp and McPherson are on each side. By having these subjects remain in the close-up, it reminds the audience that she is in trouble. If these subjects weren't in the shot, perhaps this would be a more intimate shot because all the audience is focusing on is a pretty actress. Unlike the lighting effects in *Gilda*, the lighting in this shot does not enhance Laura's beauty in any way. It is not highlighting her hair or shoulders; rather it is directly on her face. This makes the shot more intense as opposed to soft.

The close-ups alternate back and forth between the two characters. In the close ups of McPherson he is always looking down towards Laura. Contrary to that, Laura in her close-ups is always looking up. This again emphasizes Laura's inferiority.

We cut to a medium shot of McPherson standing up and moving towards the front side of the desk. The camera moves with McPherson and backs up to allow him to get to the other side. The camera's movement also shows McPherson's superiority by moving out of the way.

The next shot is of the two characters and McPherson is sitting above Laura. It is followed by another close-up of Laura and the audience sees her frustration. The camera does another moving effect in the next shot. We watch McPherson stand up and move behind Laura. As he is doing that, the camera moves from behind Laura to in front of her. McPherson is currently questioning her as he circles around her. When the camera follows these same movements, the audience feels as if they too are in the scene, circling and questioning Laura.

When Laura is difficult with McPherson, he gets frustrated and in her face. As he is doing this, the camera moves in closer and now the audience can feel the intensity.

There is a sequence of shots that involve that same circling camera movement. Again this technique is very effective because the audience feels like that they are a part of the scene. There are a few close-ups and medium shots that reveal both of the characters' frustrations and worries.

In the final shot, McPherson is back sitting on his desk above Laura. He has determined that Laura did not murder the other woman. In this shot, the lighting now shares similarities with that of "Gilda." Lighting is focused on her lips, hair, nose, and forehead. It is not nearly as intense and insensitive as the lighting was on Laura before. It is much softer and shows the audience Laura's beauty. There is even a final close-up of Laura that shows her twinkling, diamond earrings. The lighting, because it is gentler, makes the audience sympathize for the femme fatale just like they did in "Gilda." Amidst this lighting change, the characters confirm to the audience the truth which was that Laura did not kill the other woman.

Lighting is just one of the several classic trademarks of film noir. It can be used in so many different ways which provides the director various methods to telling a story. In both "Gilda" and "Laura" lighting is used to uncover the truth about the femme fatales. Through the lighting, the audience is led to suspect and then sympathize for the characters.