

ENGL 381-01, Tough Guys, Dangerous Dames, and Streets with No Name: American Film Noir, Spring 2011

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Tough Guys, Dangerous Dames, and Streets with No Name: American Film Noir
ENGL 381

Professor Rashna Richards

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Semester: Spring 2011

Class: MW 3:00-4:15

Room: 206 Palmer

Screening: M 7:00-9:30

Room: 34 Barret

Course Description



A telephone rings in darkness. With only partial lighting from the back of the frame, objects slowly materialize on a bedside table: an old stand-up telephone, a pouch of tobacco, a dusty ashtray, an alarm clock balanced on the edge of a book, a newspaper turned to the racing section. Curtains sway ominously from the night breeze in the background, while in the foreground a fumbling hand reaches in to grab the ringing telephone. A private detective has been shot dead, the caller informs, by the crook he was shadowing. No one cares. This is a bleak world--of tough guys, dangerous dames, and streets with no name. This is the world of American film noir.

In 1946, French critic Nino Frank used the term "film noir" to describe the existential, expressionist, and erotic crime thrillers being produced by Hollywood at that time. The gritty look, cynical mood, and scathing tone of films such as John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*, Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, Edward Dmytryk's *Murder, My Sweet*, and Otto Preminger's *Laura*, he argued, marked the emergence of a new trend in Hollywood cinema, one that undercut George Bailey's optimism and exposed the dark side of the American dream. Since then, film noir has been variously regarded as a style, a genre, and a movement, expressive of the fears, desires, and anxieties of mid-century America.

In this course, we will examine the noir phenomenon, from its beginnings during World War II to its explosion in postwar America to its recent postmodern revivals. In the first half of the semester, we will trace noir's roots in German Expressionism and in hard-boiled detective fiction; explore how noir films deal with social tensions around urban life, gender roles and sexual identities, race relations, and so on; and investigate how they complicate the success story

of postwar America. In the second half, we will consider why the bleakness and disillusionment pervasive during and after World War II continue to resonate in American cinema; we will also analyze how neo-noir films both honor and parody classic noir.

Standard of Work: This is an advanced film studies course and is not recommended for students who are unfamiliar with rigorous film analysis. The readings are intellectually challenging, as are the films. Some films are black-and-white, and some are subtitled. You will need to take careful notes on the films, readings, and in-class discussions. In addition, assignments will expect you to engage critically with complex issues in film history and criticism and employ them in your writing. Therefore, you are encouraged to think seriously about your commitment to the course.

Course Policies

Attendance: You are required to attend all classes and screenings. You should not email me about your absences. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to get information and/or handouts from a classmate. You are allowed two absences over the course of the semester, no questions asked, for extracurricular activities or medical/personal emergencies. After the second absence, each subsequent absence will result in a deduction of 20 points from your final course grade. After six absences, you will fail the course.

Tardiness: You are required to be on time. Habitual tardiness, even if it's only a couple of minutes, will hurt your participation/professionalism grade.

Late Work: I do not accept late work. If you do not plan on being here when an assignment is due, it must be in my mailbox before the deadline. You will receive a zero on an assignment if it is not turned in when it is due. Please note that you are required to complete all assignments in order to receive a passing grade.

Class Participation: You are required to come to class prepared with the assigned reading for that day. I expect constructive verbal contribution to each class meeting. A student who disrupts class, interrupts another student's presentation, or in any way creates a hostile environment will be subject to disciplinary action. A student who reads the newspaper, chats with a neighbor, or simply dozes off should expect a low participation grade even if they have contributed to class discussions on other occasions. I will likely say nothing at the time of the incident, but disruptive behavior will adversely affect your participation/professionalism grade.

Screenings: We will view a wide variety of films in class. You may find these films intellectually challenging or troubling. Learning how to watch and analyze them critically will be an important part of our discussions and assignments.

Electronic Devices: You should turn off all electronic devices before class begins. Do not allow cell phones, pagers, or any type of beepers to go off in class. Sending or receiving calls as well as texting are expressly forbidden. A laptop may be used for taking notes. However, instant messaging, gaming, or surfing the web is prohibited.

Food or Drink: I don't mind if you bring something to drink, but please avoid bringing any food into the classroom.

Consultation: I'll be happy to talk with you about any questions or concerns you have about the class. Feel free to stop by during my office hours. If those times don't work, I can make an appointment to meet with you at a time that is mutually convenient. If you have questions about an assignment, do not wait until the last minute. Remember, I want you to do well in the class and am always willing to work with you.

Email: It is always preferable to meet in person to discuss any questions or concerns, since the impersonal medium of electronic communication is a poor substitute for a genuine face-to-face conversation. However, I'm available by email for simple queries (expect a response during business hours: 9am-5pm Monday-Friday). Please regard email correspondence as formal communication. It is always best to ask specific rather than general questions in an email and abide by rules of professional etiquette. It is not advisable to email me the evening before an assignment is due asking for help because there is very little I can do at that point; besides, last-minute emails are very unprofessional. Email is absolutely not the medium for negotiating special requests, addressing grade concerns, or discussing ideas for assignments; those issues must be handled in person.

Format of Assignments: All written assignments need to be typed and double spaced, in 12 pt. font, using Times New Roman, with one-inch margins on all sides. The format and citations must conform to MLA specifications, or the assignment may not be accepted. You do not need a title page; instead, include your name, my name, course name/number, and date in the top left corner of the first page. Be sure to number and staple your pages; also, proofread your work before printing up the final draft. I do not accept any assignments via email. A paper copy is expected at the beginning of class on the day the assignment is due.

Intellectual Honesty: All work is assumed to be the student's own and produced exclusively for the course in which it is submitted. Papers written for one course, even if revised, are not to be submitted in another without prior approval. Borrowing of ideas or language from other sources (including published material, other student papers, the internet or other electronic resources, etc.) must be carefully documented. You are advised against posting your work on the internet, since doing so may lead to suspicion of plagiarism. You are also advised to save drafts of your work to verify its originality. Cases of suspected plagiarism will be referred to the Honor Council, and, if convicted, the student will receive an F in the course in addition to sanctions assigned by the Council. Carelessness in documenting sources, even if not technically plagiarism, will be penalized as appropriate. If you are uncertain about how or whether to document sources, please consult me.

Disability Issues: Students with documented disabilities may be entitled to specific accommodations. Please contact the office of Student Disability Services for more information. In every case, it is your responsibility to provide me with an official letter from SDS.

Course Evaluation

Grade Distribution

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|-------------------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Participation/Professionalism | 10% | 100 points |
| Viewing Responses | 10% | 100 points |
| Essay #1 | 20% | 200 points |
| Essay #2 | 20% | 200 points |
| Research Paper | 40% | 400 points |
| Total | 100% | 1000 points |

Assignments (Additional guidelines will be provided when each assignment is introduced.)

Participation/Professionalism: You are required to contribute comments and questions that further class discussion. Simply agreeing or disagreeing with your classmates and/or the readings is not enough. You are expected to add thoughtful ideas to the debate by engaging with the texts in a sophisticated manner. Participation will be evaluated in terms of quantity and quality. Failure to follow any course policies or guidelines will hurt your professionalism grade.

Viewing Responses (1 page x 5): Over the course of the semester, you will write five responses to the screenings. Prompts will be provided.

Essay #1 (4-5 pages): For the first essay, you will be given several critical statements about film noir's relationship with mid-century American culture. You will choose one of those statements to write an analytical essay about the role of classic noir in postwar America. No research is expected for this paper.

Essay #2 (4-5 pages): For the second paper, you will assess neo-noir cinema's ongoing fascination with classic film noir. Your essay will offer a comparative analysis of two noir films made at least twenty years apart. Research guidelines will be provided.

Research Paper (12-15 pages): The final project for the class is a research paper. You will write either a traditional research essay, choosing one of several prompts provided, or an experimental research essay, drawing on the approach we will define as cinephiliac historiography. You will be required to research your topic comprehensively. Your paper will be evaluated on the originality of your approach, the rigor of your analysis, and the thoroughness of your research.

Grading Guidelines

A = 100-94; **A-** = 93-90

B+ = 89-87; **B** = 86-84; **B-** = 83-80

C+ = 79-77; **C** = 76-74; **C-** = 73-70

D+ = 69-67; **D** = 66-64; **D-** = 63-60

F < 60

A range (100-90): Excellent work; exemplary in argument and organization; professionally presented; free of mechanical errors.

B range (89-80): Good, solid work; substantive in argument and organization; meets all requirements, but needs some revisions; no more than five mechanical errors.

C range (79-70): Satisfactory work; addresses the assignment adequately, but requires some significant revisions of content and/or mechanics.

D range (69-60): Below average work; misses one or more central aspects of the assignment; inadequate focus and/or development; awkwardly written; requires extensive rewriting.

F range (< 60): Unacceptable work; fails to meet the requirements of the assignment; incomplete or irrelevant material; lack of focus or development.

Course Materials

- Conard, Mark T., ed. *The Philosophy of Film Noir*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2006. Print. (PFN)
- ---. *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2007. Print. (PNN)
- Naremore, James. *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*. 2nd Ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 2008. Print. (MTN)
- Additional essays--handouts will be provided (*)

Course Schedule (subject to change)

Unit I: Classic Noir

Week 1: Introductions

Wed., Jan. 12 Introduction to the course

Week 2: What Is Film Noir?

Mon., Jan. 17 No classes: Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

No Screening

Wed., Jan. 19 Naremore, "The History of an Idea" (MTN 9-39)
Clips: Preminger, *Laura* (1944); Singer, *The Usual Suspects* (1995)

Week 3: The French Invent Noir

Mon., Jan. 24 Naremore, "Modernism and Blood Melodrama" (MTN 40-63)
Clips: Wiene, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920); Hawks, *Scarface* (1932); Welles, *Citizen Kane* (1941)

Screening Huston, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)

Wed., Jan. 26 **Viewing Response #1 due**
Knight, "On Reason and Passion in *The Maltese Falcon*" (PFN 207-21)
Clips: Hawks, *The Big Sleep* (1946)

Week 4: Tough Guys and Dangerous Dames

- Mon., Jan. 31** Cantor, "Film Noir and the Frankfurt School" (PFN 139-61)
Introduction to Essay #1
Clips: Ulmer, *Detour* (1945)
- Screening** Wilder, *Double Indemnity* (1944)
- Wed., Feb. 2** Naremore, "Modernism and Blood Melodrama" (MTN 81-95)
Bronfen, "Femme Fatale"*
Clips: Dmytryk, *Murder, My Sweet* (1944)

Week 5: American Dreams to American Nightmares

- Mon., Feb. 7** Naremore, "From Dark Films to Black Lists" (MTN 96-135)
Clips: Marshall, *The Blue Dahlia* (1946); Dmytryk, *Crossfire* (1947)
- Screening** Tourneur, *Out of the Past* (1947)
- Wed., Feb. 9** Jarvie, "Knowledge, Morality, and Tragedy" (PFN 163-85)
Clips: Siodmak, *The Killers* (1946); Capra, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)

Week 6: Disillusionment and Paranoia

- Mon., Feb. 14** Conard, "Nietzsche and the Meaning and Definition of Noir" (PFN 7-22)
Clips: Garnett, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946); Lang, *The Big Heat* (1953)
- Screening** Lewis, *Gun Crazy* (1950)
- Wed., Feb. 16** **Viewing Response #2 due**
Woolfolk, "The Horizon of Disenchantment" (PFN 107-23)
Clips: Lang, *Clash by Night* (1952)

Week 7: Between Pulp Formula and Artistic Ambition

- Mon., Feb. 21** **Essay #1 due**
Introduction to Essay #2
- Screening** Aldrich, *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955)
- Wed., Feb. 23** Naremore, "Low Is High" (MTN 136-55)
Clips: Hitchcock, *Rear Window* (1954); Welles, *Mr. Arkadin* (1955)

Week 8: Lost in the Maze

- Mon., Feb. 28** Wilshire, "A Left-Handed Form of Human Endeavor"*
Clips: Huston, *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950)
- Screening** Kubrick, *The Killing* (1956)
- Wed., March 2** Abrams, "From Sherlock Holmes to the Hard-Boiled Detective in Film Noir" (PFN 69-88)
Clips: Reed, *The Third Man* (1949)

Week 9: The Death of Noir

- Mon., March 7** Naremore, "The Other Side of the Street" (MTN 220-33)
Clips: Daves, *Dark Passage* (1947); Welles, *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947)
- Screening** Welles, *Touch of Evil* (1958)
- Wed., March 9** **Viewing Response #3 due**
Sanders, "Film Noir and the Meaning of Life" (PFN 91-105)
Clips: Maté, *D.O.A.* (1950); Hitchcock, *Vertigo* (1958)

Week 10: Spring Break**Unit II: Neo-Noir****Week 11: The Return of the Repressed**

- Mon., March 21** Naremore, "Old Is New" (MTN 196-219)
Clips: Godard, *Breathless* (1959); Altman, *The Long Goodbye* (1973)
- Screening** Polanski, *Chinatown* (1974)
- Wed., March 23** GSS Symposium

Week 12: Vietnam and the Crisis of American Power

- Mon., March 28** Gilmore, "The Dark Sublimity of *Chinatown*" (PNN 119-36)
Schuler and Murray, "'Anything Is Possible Here'" (PNN 167-81)
Clips: Coppola, *The Conversation* (1974)
- Screening** Scorsese, *Taxi Driver* (1976)
- Wed., March 30** **Viewing Response #4 due**
Holt, "A Darker Shade" (PFN 23-40)
Fuchs, "'All the Animals Come Out at Night'"*
Clips: Cimino, *The Deer Hunter* (1978); Kasdan, *Body Heat* (1981)

Week 13: Sci-Fi Noir

- Mon., April 4** **Essay #2 due**
Naremore, "The Noir Mediascape" (MTN 254-77)
Introduction to Research Paper
Clips: Lyne, *Fatal Attraction* (1987)
- Screening** Scott, *Blade Runner* (1981)
- Wed., April 6** Barad, "*Blade Runner* and Sartre" (PNN 21-34)
Clips: Wachowski Brothers, *The Matrix* (1999)

Week 14: Parody and Pastiche

- Mon., April 11** Workshop for Research Paper
- Screening** Lynch, *Blue Velvet* (1986)

Wed., April 13 **Viewing Response #5 due**
Pfeil, "Revolting Yet Conserved"*
Clips: Cameron, *Terminator 2* (1991)

Week 15: Noir with a Postmodern Vengeance

Mon., April 18 Palmer, "The New Sincerity of Neo-Noir" (PNN 151-66)
Clips: Hanson, *L.A. Confidential* (1997); Coen, *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001)

Screening Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992)

Wed., April 20 Conard, "Symbolism, Meaning, and Nihilism" (PFN 125-35)
Conard, "*Reservoir Dogs*" (PNN 101-16)
Clips: Tarantino, *Pulp Fiction* (1994)

Week 16: Fade to Black

Mon., April 25 Naremore, "Noir in the Twenty-First Century" (MTN 278-310)
Clips: Johnson, *Brick* (2005); Miller and Rodriguez, *Sin City* (2005)

Screening Nolan, *Memento* (2000)

Wed., April 27 Smith, "John Locke, Personal Identity, and *Memento*" (PNN 35-46)
Spicer, "Problems of Memory and Identity" (PNN 47-63)
Clips: Lynch, *Mulholland Drive* (2001)

Fri., April 29 Optional conferences

Week 17

Mon., May 2 **Research Paper due by noon (leave in box on my office door--308A Palmer)**