ENGL 381-01, Tough Guys, Dangerous Dames, and Streets With No Name: American Film Noir, Fall 2008

TOUGH GUYS, DANGEROUS DAMES, AND STREETS WITH NO NAME:
AMERICAN FILM NOIR
ENGL 381.02

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Semester: Fall 2008
Class: TR 2:00-3:15
Room: 208 Palmer
Screening: W 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 its roots in German Expressionism and in hard-boiled detective fiction and explore how noir films deal with social tensions around urban life, gender roles and sexual

identities, race relations, and so on while complicating the success story of postwar America. During the second half, we will consider why the bleakness and disillusionment pervasive during World War II continue to resonate in American cinema and 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 three absences over the course of the semester, no questions asked, for extracurricular activities or medical/personal emergencies. After the third 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 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, leaves to go to the restroom, 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 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. You are expected to refrain from sending or receiving calls as well as text messaging. 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.

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.

Plagiarism: 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. Plagiarism is considered a serious breach of academic integrity and is a major violation of the Rhodes Honor Code; suspected cases will be referred to the Honor Council. If you are ever uncertain about whether something in your assignment constitutes a violation, please contact 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

Participation	20%	200 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: 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. From time to time, you will also be quizzed or asked to respond to specific short-answer questions on the week's film or reading. In-class writing is always unannounced, and it cannot be made up.

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 be given several prompts, which you will use to develop your own topic for the project. Before you begin writing your final paper, you will prepare a proposal that outlines your topic, your methodology, the films to be used, and so on. The proposal should also demonstrate the quality and quantity of research you have already done and explain how you plan to proceed. Based on the feedback you receive on your proposal, you will write a final paper on some aspect of film noir. You will be required to research your topic comprehensively. Your paper will be evaluated on the originality of your critique, 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 Neo-Noir*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2007. (PNN)
- Naremore, James. *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*. 2nd Ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 2008.
- Silver, Alain and James Ursini, eds. *Film Noir Reader 4: The Crucial Films and Themes*. Pompton Plains, NJ: Limelight, 2004. (FNR)

Course Schedule (subject to change)

Unit I: Classic Noir (Beginnings to 1958)

Week 1: What is Film Noir?

Wed., Aug. 27 Introduction to the Course

Thurs., Aug. 28 Clips: Hawks, *The Big Sleep* (1946); Singer, *The Usual Suspects* (1995)

Week 2: 1946: The French Invent American Film Noir

Tues., Sep. 2 Naremore, "The History of an Idea" (9-39)

Wed., Sep. 3 Screening: Huston, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)

Thurs., Sep. 4 Naremore, "Modernism and Blood Melodrama" (40-63)
Clips: Hawks, *Scarface* (1932); Curtiz, *Casablanca* (1942)

Week 3: World War II and a Distinctive American Cinema

Tues., Sep. 9 Saada, "The Noir Style in Hollywood" (FNR 175-89)
Clips: Wiene, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920); Preminger, *Laura* (1944); Garnett, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946)

Wed., Sep. 10 Screening: Wilder, *Double Indemnity* (1944)

Thurs., Sep. 11 Paris, "'Murder Can Sometimes Smell Like Honeysuckle'" (FNR 9-23); Naremore, "Modernism and Blood Melodrama" (81-95)

Week 4: The Late 1940s: American Dreams to American Nightmares

Tues., Sep. 16 Naremore, "From Dark Films to Black Lists" (96-114)
Clips: Capra, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946); Marshall, *The Blue Dahlia* (1946)

Wed., Sep. 17 Screening: Tourneur, *Out of the Past* (1947)

Thurs., Sep. 18 Erickson, "Fate Seeks the Loser" (FNR 25-31); Palmer, "'Lounge Time' Reconsidered" (FNR 53-65)
Clips: Ulmer, *Detour* (1945)

Week 5: The End of the Decade and a Bleaker Noir

Tues., Sep. 23 Humphries, "The Politics of Crime and the Crime of Politics" (FNR 227-45)
Clips: Huston, *Key Largo* (1948); Walsh, *White Heat* (1949)

Wed., Sep. 24 Screening: Lewis, *Gun Crazy* (1950)

Thurs., Sep. 25 Johnson, "*Gun Crazy*" (FNR 79-81); Martin, "Violently Happy" (FNR 83-85); Carter, "The War of the Sexes" (FNR 87-93)
Clips: Maté, *D.O.A.* (1950); Ray, *In a Lonely Place* (1950)

Week 6: The 1950s: Between Pulp Formula and Artistic Ambition

Tues., Sep. 30 Naremore, "Low Is High" (136-55)
Clips: Welles, *Mr. Arkadin* (1955)

Wed., Oct. 1 Screening: Aldrich, *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955)
Thurs., Oct. 2 Grost, "*Kiss Me Deadly*" (FNR 109-17)

Week 7: The Decade of Suburbia and Noir Psychodrama
Tues., Oct. 7 **Essay #1 Due**
Wed., Oct. 8 Screening: Kubrick, *The Killing* (1956)
Thurs., Oct. 9 Telotte, "Voices from the Deep" (FNR 145-59)
Clips: Shane, *Nightmare* (1956)

Week 8: 1958: The Death of Noir
Tues., Oct. 14 Naremore, "The Other Side of the Street" (220-33)
Wed., Oct. 15 Screening: Welles, *Touch of Evil* (1958)
Thurs., Oct. 16 Armstrong, "*Touch of Evil* (1958) and the End of the Noir Cycle" (FNR 133-43)

Unit II: Neo-Noir (1958 to the Present)

Week 9: Vietnam and the Return of the Repressed
Tues., Oct. 21 **No Classes: Fall Recess**
Wed., Oct. 22 Screening: Polanski, *Chinatown* (1974)
Thurs., Oct. 23 Naremore, "Old Is New" (196-219); Gilmore, "The Dark Sublimity of *Chinatown*" (PNN 119-36)

Week 10: The 1970s: Paranoia and Neo-Noir Cityscape
Tues., Oct. 28 Schuler and Murray, "'Anything Is Possible Here'" (PNN 167-81)
Clips: Coppola, *The Conversation* (1974)
Wed., Oct. 29 Screening: Scorsese, *Taxi Driver* (1976)
Thurs., Oct. 30 Abrams, "Space, Time, and Subjectivity in Neo-Noir Cinema" (PNN 7-20)

Week 11: Remakes and Remappings in the Reagan Era
Tues., Nov. 4 Verevis, "Through the Past Darkly" (FNR 307-22)
Clips: Kasdan, *Body Heat* (1981)
Wed., Nov. 5 Screening: Scott, *Blade Runner* (1982)
Thurs., Nov. 6 Barad, "*Blade Runner* and Sartre" (PNN 21-34)

Week 12: The 1980s: Fading to Black and Red Hot Sex
Tues., Nov. 11 **Essay #2 Due**
Wed., Nov. 12 Screening: Lynch, *Blue Velvet* (1986)
Thurs., Nov. 13 Naremore, "The Noir Mediascape" (254-77)
Clips: Lyne, *Fatal Attraction* (1987)

Week 13: The 1990s: Noir Returns with a Postmodern Vengeance
Tues., Nov. 18 Schwartz, "It's Déja Vu All Over Again" (FNR 287-305)
Clips: Stone, *Natural Born Killers* (1994)
Wed., Nov. 19 Screening: Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992)
Thurs., Nov. 20 Conard, "*Reservoir Dogs*" (PNN 101-16)
Clips: Fincher, *Se7en* (1995)

Week 14: Generation X Asks Why
Tues., Nov. 25 Palmer, "The New Sincerity of Neo-Noir" (PNN 151-66)
Clips: Scorsese, *Cape Fear* (1991); Coen, *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001)
Wed., Nov. 26 **No Classes: Thanksgiving Recess**
Thurs., Nov. 27 **No Classes: Thanksgiving Recess**

Week 15: The Present Moment: Everything is Noir

Tues., Dec. 2	Naremore, "Noir in the Twenty-First Century" (278-310) Clips: Lynch, *Mulholland Drive* (2001); Johnson, *Brick* (2006)
Wed., Dec. 3	Screening: Nolan, *Memento* (2000)
Thurs., Dec. 4	Smith, "John Locke, Personal Identity, and *Memento*" (PNN 35-46); Spicer, "Problems of Memory and Identity" (PNN 47-63)

Week 16

Tues., Dec. 9	Conferences for Research Paper
Wed., Dec. 10	Screening/Movie Night: TBD by the Class

Fri., Dec. 12 **Research Paper Due**