

MASS 424 – #21675
Asst. Prof: Jonathan Berman

Genre & Production Conventions: Film Noir
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Spring 2009
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Office hours: Craven 6127, Mondays 2-3PM & Wednesdays 2-3PM; other times by appointment
Class Location: MARK 102 Meetings: Wednesdays: 5:30-8:15PM

Course Description

Genre means type or category, with "mega" genres such as drama and comedy etc, and their subgenres (such as the war drama, or the romantic comedy) immediately discernable on screen. Genre films and media employ distinct, well-known patterns of story, familiar styles, and various other codes to create meaning. The genre film has always been controversial; a body of work derided by one critic as populist escapism might be heralded by another for visionary aesthetics or radical political power.

This semester we look at the most important and robust genre to emerge from the United States, film noir. Noir might more accurately be looked at as a virus that infects other genres. since it appears across genres in Westerns, gothic romances, and of course, in "hard-boiled" crime drama. *Genre & Production Conventions: Film Noir* traces the history of filmmaking and film genre, the multiple influences that created film noir, and the movement's relationships to economics, politics, gender roles, and philosophy.

Student Learning Objectives

- situate and critically explore film texts, demonstrating an understanding of the conventions and codes of film language through writing and informed discussion.
- explore media texts as living documents that change with each viewing, providing a fertile point to look at economics, politics, gender, and philosophy.
- become conversant in the art and philosophical trends of the 19th and 20th centuries that influenced the style.
- question and challenge dominant media through diverse theories of film and communication
- empower ourselves by, applying, bending and breaking genre conventions to lesser seen subjects and people, creating possibilities for new works and original representations.

Texts

Spicer, Andrew Film Noir (Inside Film)
(Longman, 2002)

Silver, Alain and James Ursini Film Noir Reader 1
(Limelight Editions, 1st Ed, 1996)

Other texts online throughout the semester, see schedule below

Evaluation (total of 1000 possible points)

Attendance and Participation	200
Journal	100
3 Assignments, 100 points each	300
1. Photos Due on the 9/16/09	
2. Short Essay Due on the 9/23/09	
3. Short Essay or Creative Work Due on	
Midterm Quiz, In-Class Oct 27th	200
Final Paper or Film on Film Noir	200

Attendance and Participation (150 points)

- Be prepared to discuss or write about the week's material.
- Have fun with it and contribute meaningful posts to the Web CT board, particularly in response to other classmates posts. Get a dialogue going that actually draws in some of the ideas and theories you have learned. Your participation on Web CT is a key component of this grade, and you should have at least 6-7 meaningful posts.
- No more than one unexcused absence. After that, you will lose 70 points (7%) of your grade for each absence. If you do miss a session, get the information on assignments, material, etc. from a classmate. Make sure you watch the films that were screened in class and take notes in journal.
- Three absences or more from this class will, except in unusual cases (illness or other verifiable event, etc) result in a failing grade.
- Come to each class with a question and ask about anything you don't understand.

Journal (100 points)

THESE ARE REACTIONS TO THE SCREENING, NOT YOUR NOTES ON THE LECTURE.

Get a standard black composition writing book, During the screenings write down:

- | | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| • what "hits" you on a "gut" level | • what you don't understand |
| • portrayals of identity in gender, race, or community | • key moments in the story pattern |
| • genres patterns and techniques in the "mis-en-scene" | • uses of hybrid genre styles |

You will use these notes for your essays. I will collect these journals at the end of the semester. These don't have to be perfect, but they should be legible. They are simply your raw material, thoughts, reactions, throughout the class. No computer use for writing, use a book and pen.

Assignments (100 points each, total of 300 points)

These are both critical and creative. The first assignment is a photo shoot that draws upon and updates noir imagery. The other two assignments are **2-4 page short essays or creative works**. Critical papers should respond to the readings and screenings. They should include reflection and analysis. Each entry should include a short summary of each screening's content and form. Do not simply re-tell the plot of the film or reduce all comments to: "I loved it; I hated it!"

Instead, include a discussion of the film's relationship to the themes of the class and our readings. While this is a very open assignment, all of these entries should address key questions. In order to write intelligently and critically, you should take careful notes in your journal during screenings.

For a creative submission, be sure to move the genre's attributes into today. Particularly welcome are stories, videos. etc/ that stretch noir into diverse communities and reflect upon the power structure.

Class Schedule

Note: Schedule may shift during the semester.

1. Sept. 2

COURSE INTRODUCTION

What is genre? Introduction to the course, syllabus.

Screening: *Detour (1945)*

ASSIGNMENT:

READ pp. 1 - 36 in the *Film Noir Reader* (referred to as Silver)

READ "An Introduction to Genre Theory" -- link is here:

<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/intgenre.html>

2. Sept 9

ON GENRE & WAYS TO "READ" A FILM

Discussion of *Detour*, Genre Theory Discussion, Partners.

Assignments and Evaluation Explained.

Aspects of a noir "mis en scene."

ASSIGNMENT

SHOOT: Shoot noir photos and bring to class. (100 points)

READ Silver pp. 37- 63

READ *Film Noir (Inside Film)* pp. 1–26. (referred to as Spicer)

3. Sept 16

IN SEARCH OF A NOIR STYLE

****ASSIGNMENT 1: PHOTOS DUE****

Surrealism: Excerpt from *Stranger on the Third Floor (1940)*

Semiotician Roland Barthes' Five Codes. Genres and auteurs.

Screening: *Double Indemnity (1944)*

ASSIGNMENTS:

WRITE: ASSIGNMENT 2 A critical essay, 2-4 pages on a film we have watched and its relationship to the genre. Choose a perspective to analyze the film from. (100 points)

READ Reader pp. 65 - 93

READ "Cinema and Film Industry in Weimar Republic" on Web CT

4. Sept 23

ROOTS OF NOIR: EURO EXPRESSIONISM & REALISM

German Expressionism: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*

French Poetic Realism: *Pepe Le Moko (1937)*

Italian Neo-Realism: *Rome, Open City (1945)*

Screening: Weimar Street Film: *M (1931)*

ASSIGNMENT

READ Spicer pp. 27- 44

REWRITE PAPER DUE ON SEPT 30

5. Sept 30

ROOTS OF NOIR: U.S.A. HARD-BOILED LIVES

****ASSIGNMENT 2: CRITICAL PAPERS DUE** (100 points)**

Literature: Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn
 American Detective Fiction: Hammett, Chandler and Cain.
 Gangster Films. Studios, and Production Codes.
 American Expressionism: Selections from Universal Horror films.

Screening: *Brick* (2005)

ASSIGNMENT:

READ Spicer pp. 44 – 83.
 READ Review of *Brick* from Pop Matters on Web CT:
<http://www.popmatters.com/film/reviews/b/brick-2005.shtml>

Assignment 3 Brainstorm with partner. This is a creative work that draws upon and expands noir into new realms. Due Oct 28th. (100 Points)

6. Oct 7

STUDIO WORKSHOP: NOIR LIGHTING

7. Oct 14

FURLOUGH DAY, NO CLASS

SHOCK CITY, USA: POST WW2

Excerpt from *The Long Night* (1947) or other works.
 Urban atomization, psychoanalysis, postwar readjustment.
 New "Isms" Existentialism, fatalism, and minimalism.
 Noir as a transgeneric idea: Section from *It's A Wonderful Life* (1947)

Screening: *In A Lonely Place* (1950)

ASSIGNMENT:

READ Silver pp.129-142 and pgs. 243-259
 READ Spicer pp. 84 – 104
 READ "Narrative Pleasure" by Laura Mulvey on Web CT

PREPARE/STUDY for MIDTERM QUIZ

8. OCT 21

****IN-CLASS MIDTERM QUIZ (200 points)****

GUN FOR HIRE? GENDER & SEXUALITY IN NOIR
 Discussion of Mulvey's theories on film and "the gaze."

Screening: *Gun Crazy* (1950) or *Phantom Lady* (1944)

ASSIGNMENT:

Reader pp. 307-338

9. OCT 28

BLANC ET NOIR: RACE, COMMUNITIES, AND THE OTHER

Discussion on genre and identity

****ASSIGNMENT 3 DUE (100 POINTS)****

- ASSIGNMENT: READ: "The Whiteness of Film Noir," Eric Lott on Web CT
- Screening: *Border Incident (1949)*
- ASSIGNMENT: READ Silver pp. 209-235
- ASSIGNMENT: Prepare for Final Paper!
10. NOV 4 POLITICS AND PARANOIA IN THE 50's
- **ESSAY OR CREATIVE WORK DUE (100 POINTS)**
- Semi documentary noirs, McCarthyism, the rise of the "Organization Man." Pulp heroes and gender roles in the 50's.
- Screening: *Kiss Me Deadly (1955)*
- ASSIGNMENT: READ Silver pp. 95-127
- RESEARCH studio visit: find a frame of a photo or a scene from a film that you love and would like to recreate or expand upon.
- NOV 11 NO CLASS, CAMPUS CLOSED FOR VETERANS' DAY
- ASSIGNMENT: RESEARCH & WRITE Draft of Final Paper
11. NOV 18 REBELLION RETURNS
- Screening *Naked Kiss (1964)*
- REWRITE Final Paper
- NOV 25 NO CLASS, CAMPUS CLOSED FOR THANKSGIVING FURLOUGH
12. DEC 2 LOVEABLE LOSERS: REFLECTIONS ON 70's NOIR
- Auteurs, rebellion, and revisionism.
- ***JOURNALS DUE*** (200 POINTS)**
- Screening: *The Long Goodbye (1971)*
- ASSIGNMENT: READ Silver, pp. 307-338
- READ Spicer, Chapter 8 "Neo-Noir 2" pp.??
- READ: NY Times review of Altman's *The Long Goodbye*:
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/11/arts/11iht-chandler.1.5233762.html>

13. DEC 9

THE NEO-NOIR 80's and 90's

Excerpts from the Big Lebowski
Mullholland Drive (2001)

*****FINAL PAPER DUE*** (200 points)**

There is no final exam in this class.

MORE ON ASSIGNMENTS

Papers should have a clear thesis that you develop. You won't develop your thesis until you research or explore your idea or film subject. Write the paper for someone who is not in the class, not your professor, someone who knows little about the topic. Write it as though it might be published in a magazine or journal.

Use at least one of our textbooks and another academic book, article, or source. (no wikis!)

Have a thesis and your paper is not just informational, have a point, argument or perspective!

FILM, GENRE, AND NOIR INFORMATION

Ideas on ways of "reading" or understanding a film:

- As a historic document of a particular time and political situation.
- As a reflection and discussion of philosophical ideas.
- Looking at the economic conditions of the production process.
- The portrayal of standard or deviant social norms.
- As a product of cultural forces, especially art movements.
- As an exploration of, and transgression of gender and sexuality
- A reflection of psychological conditions of persons, relationships, society
- Through archetypes and mythology

What are the cinematic translations of these ideas in shot, sequence, structure, performance, dialogue, lighting, etc.

1. Compare and contrast a classic film noir with a) a more modern film or b) another classic noir or c) another genre (the Western) d) a work in another medium like TV's *The Twilight Zone* or a novel like *Huckleberry Finn* d) the material from which the film is adapted (novel, story, etc.).

WAYS OF LOOKING AT NOIR

1. Aesthetic Influences: German expressionism, Italian Neo-realism, French Poetic Realism, etc.

2. Style: Narrative, dialogue, setting, visual style (lighting, camera angles, camera placement), techniques that are used to portray a sense of realism or expressionism.

3. Psychological Themes: Moral compromise, obsession, obsessive love, neurotic and psychotic behaviors, relationship and sexuality issues, violence, hopelessness, fate, alienation, existential angst, relationship angst, post-war

traumatic stress, post-war disillusionment, etc.

4. Sociological Themes: Crime, violence, urban problems, police corruption, disillusionment with traditional American values, working class struggles, the criminal element in society, representations of the American Family, etc

5. Historical Themes: Classic noir often reflects historical and economic issues of the 1940's and 1950s --Post World War II disillusionment, communism, nuclear threat, cold war, the HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee), The McCarthy era, the red scare, etc. Neo-noir "historical and economic connections to issues in the 1990s, etc.

6. Gender Issues: Heroes, heroines, representations of women, representations of men, gender power struggles, the dynamics of male-female relationships, people in power vs. people on the margins, representations of marriage, representations of the family, parenting, etc.

7. Noir and Art Movements: Surrealism, Neo-Realism, Modernism, and Post-Modernism.

NOTICES

Furlough Notice!

Due to the devastating effects of current budget crisis in California, I have been furloughed nine days each semester of this academic year, representing a 9.23% reduction in both workload and compensation. A furlough is an unpaid day off on a faculty member's regularly-scheduled workday. In order to satisfy legal and ethical requirements of the California Labor Code, I am required to submit formal certification that I will not work on my furlough days. I am prohibited from teaching, conducting scholarly research, consulting with students, responding to email or voicemail, providing assignment feedback, or participating in any CSU work-related activities on my furlough days. Furlough dates vary by professor; my Fall Semester furlough dates are [here or in the course syllabus schedule].

The CSU faculty agreed to take furlough days in order to preserve jobs for as many CSU employees as possible, and to serve as many students as possible, in the current budget crisis. The agreement that governs faculty furloughs acknowledges that "cuts of this magnitude will naturally have consequences for the quality of education that we can provide." Within the furlough context, I will make every effort to support your educational experience at CSUSM. Visit CSUSM Budget Central [<http://www.csusm.edu/budgetcentral/>] to learn about the state budget crisis and how it impacts your educational opportunities. To avoid the continued loss of higher education availability in California, exercise your right to voice an opinion. Contact information for state legislators and the governor are provided at Budget Central.

Academic Freedom

It is probable that we will watch, discuss, debate, and write about material dealing with controversial and adult subjects and use adult language. It is possible that the material may not be aligned with your religious or other personal beliefs. This s

ADA Statement

Students with disabilities who require reasonable accommodations must be approved for services by providing appropriate and recent documentation to the Office of Disabled Student Services (DSS). This office is located in Craven Hall 5205, and can be contacted by phone at (760) 750-4905, or TTY (760) 750-4909. Students authorized by DSS to receive reasonable accommodations should meet with me during my office hours in order to ensure confidentiality.

Academic Honesty

Students will be expected to adhere to standards of academic honesty and integrity, as outlined in the Student Academic Honesty Policy. All written work and oral presentations must be original work. All ideas/material that are borrowed from other sources must have appropriate references to the original sources. Any quoted material should give credit to the source and be punctuated with quotation marks. Students are responsible for honest completion of their work. Instances of Academic Dishonesty will be reported to the Dean of Students. Sanctions at the University level may include suspension or expulsion from the University.

All assignments must be done exclusively for this class. If you want to do work for two classes at the same time, you must explicitly request permission from both professors in writing (email is OK for this).

Grades are based on the following scale:

930 to 1000	A
900 to 920	A-
870 to 890	B+
830 to 860	B
800 to 820	B-
770 to 790	C+
730 to 760	C
700 to 720	C-
670 to 690	D+
630 to 660	D
600 to 620	D-
590 or below	FAIL