***DRAFT***

***English 4820: Film Noir***

Course Instructor: Dr. Nancy M. West, Professor, English Department

Office: 208 Tate Hall

Office Hours:T, TH, 11:00-2:00, and by appointment

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**Required Readings**

Coursebook (available at University Bookstore)

Hirsch, Foster. *The Dark Side of the Screen*

*Watching Movies*

**Course Description**

This course will examine a wide-ranging body of films designated as “film noir” (literally “black film” or “black cinema”). Broadly speaking, film noir refers to movies that typically take crime as their subject, presenting a world marked by menace, cynicism, and violence. Unlike the gangster genre, however, film noir tends to be deeply psychological. Through its compelling antiheroes and femme fatales, it explores emotions such as paranoia, despair, greed, sexual desire, fear, and mistrust. It also possesses a much more complex visual style and narrative structure than the gangster genre.

The first part of the course will focus on the “classic film noir” period, which is generally regarded as stretching from the early 1940s to the late 1950s. As we will see, film noirs encompass a range of plots—the central figure may be a private eye, an insurance salesman, a screenwriter, a law-abiding citizen lured into a life of crime, or simply a victim of circumstance*.* Film noir of this era also tends to use a [black-and-white](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black-and-white) visual style that has its roots in [German Expressionist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Expressionism) [cinematography](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinematography). The prominent themes of these films are the inescapability of fate; police corruption; the duplicitous nature of women; the dangers of sex and sexual desire; the fragility of marriage and the family; the failure of capitalism; and the perversion of the American dream. Products of their age, these films reflect the pessimism brought on by WWII, McCarthyism, and the Cold War.

Though film noir largely disappeared from American screens in the late 1950s and 1960s, it returned with a vengeance in the 1970s. The second part of the course will look at the resurgence of interest in film noir sparked by Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* in 1974—an interest that has continued throughout the decades and has resulted in a wide body of films and TV series we now term “neo-noir.”

The films we will study include *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931), *The Maltese Falcon (*John Huston, 1940*), Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *In a Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray, 1950), *The Night of the Hunter* (Charles Laughton, 1955), *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1957), *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), *Mystic River* (Clint Eastwood, 2004). We will study these films closely but we will also discuss such important contexts as the censorship code, the rise and decline of hard-boiled literature, the surprising number of Jewish émigré filmmakers associated with film noir, and the phenomenal popularity of film noir in the 1990s.

As many critics have recently observed, noir has become much more than a film style or genre; according to film scholar James Naremore, it now belongs to “the history of ideas.” *Why* and *how* this is also forms a central question of the course.



***Course Mechanics***

Course materials

In addition to the two required books, course materials include a syllabus, handouts, assignments, and additional readings. These are posted on Canvas.

Attendance.

I take attendance. Anyone missing more than *six classes* will have their final grade by a full letter; and anyone missing more than *eight classes* will be automatically dropped from the course. Please note that this attendance policy applies regardless of the reasons—except for serious illness or a death in the family-- for missing a discussion class. Students who miss discussion classes are responsible for the material covered in those classes.

Assignments and grade breakdown

1. Writing Exercises. Often when a reading is scheduled, we will have a 5-minute writing exercise on the material and ideas covered in the text/s or films. 10%
2. Participation/Preparation. 10%
3. Weekly responses. Weekly essays of about 250 words to a question central to that week’s films and/or readings. 20%
4. Midterm Historical Project. A critical essay on a “forgotten” noir (from the 1940s-1950s) of your choice. 40%
5. Final Creative Project. A screenplay treatment of your own film noir. 20%



## Note on Academic Dishonesty

The faculty and administration of the University of Missouri-Columbia recognize the necessity of encouraging procedures that assure to the extent possible an academic environment in which each student has an opportunity to be evaluated fairly on the basis of their own performance. The maintenance of such an environment requires that both faculty and students have access to these regulations regarding academic dishonesty and that early in each term the instructor provide the class any expectations unique to that course.

Any formal report of academic dishonesty will be made in writing to the department chairperson and the office of Provost. The report, which will be prepared without delay, will contain a detailed account of the incident, supporting evidence (if appropriate), and any disposition taken by the instructor.

Notice of violations and action(s) taken will be handled in accordance with Section 6.01 of the Collected Rules and Regulations of the University as published in the MBook. When disposition of a case of academic dishonesty is made, a report is to be submitted to the instructor and the Dean of the school or college in which the student accused of academic dishonesty is enrolled. Academic Integrity is expected of all students in a University community. A charge of academic dishonesty is a serious one and can have serious consequences if guilt is established. Discipline ranges from a warning to expulsion from the University. In addition, the instructor may award a failing grade in the assignment, a failing grade in the course, or may adjust the grade as deemed appropriate.

*Note on Disabilities*

Note: The information in this syllabus is available in alternative forms upon request. If you have a disability and need accommodations, please notify your instructor. You may also contact the Access Office, A048 Brady Commons, 882–4696.



***Class Schedule***

*Week One: Overview*

W Jan. 23 Introduction to Course

Screening: *Scarlet Street* (Fritz Lang, 1945)

F Jan. 25 Topic: Defining Film Noir

Reading: Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen*, Ch. One, “The City at Night;” James Naremore, “The History of an Idea” (Coursebook)

*Week Two: Noir and German Expressionism*

M Jan. 28 Topic: German Expressionism and Noir Style

Reading:Hirsch, Ch. 3, “The Cinematic Background: From Expressionism to Neo-Realism

W Jan. 30 Topic: The Basics of Film Viewing

Reading: *Looking at Movies*, Chs. 1-3

Screening: *M* (Fritz Lang, 1930). 117 min.

F Feb. 1 Discussion of *M*

Reading: Review of *M,* Roger Ebert (Coursebook)

*Week Three: Noir Binge*

M Feb. 4 Special Collections

W Feb. 6 Double Feature*: The Big Clock (*John Farrow, 1948, 94 mins.)and *Detour* (Edward G. Ulmer, 1945, 68 mins.)

F Feb. 8 Visiting Session with crime writer Laura McHugh

*Week Four: Noir and American Hard-Boiled Fiction*

M Feb. 11 Topic: Hard-Boiled Style and Sensibility

Reading:Hirsch, Ch. 2, “The Literary Background: the Boys in the Backroom”

W Feb. 13 Topic: Film Genres

Reading: Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, Ch. 3, “Where Do Genres Come From?”(On Canvas)

Screening: *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1940). 101 min.

F Feb. 15 Discussion of *Maltese Falcon*.

Reading: Review of *The Maltese Falcon*, Roger Ebert (Coursebook)

*Week Five: Double Indemnity as the Classic, Classical Film Noir*



M Feb. 18 Topic: *Double Indemnity* as Culture-Text

Reading:Nancy West and Penelope Pelizzon, *Tabloid, Inc*., Ch. 4, “Multiple Indemnity” (On Canvas)

W Feb. 20 Topic: Film Genres Continued

Reading: *Looking at Movies*, Ch. 3, “Types of Movies;” Altman, Ch. 4, “Are Genres Stable?” (On Canvas)

Screening: *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944). 107 min.

F Feb. 22 Discussion of *Double Indemnity*

Reading: Thomas Leitch, *Crime Film*, Ch. 6, “Double Indemnity and the Film Noir” (On Canvas)

*Week Six: Noir Narration*

M Feb. 25 Topic: Noir Narratives

Reading Hirsch, Ch. 7, “Down these Mean Streets”

W Feb. 27 Topic: Elements of Film Narrative

Reading: *Looking at Movies*, Ch. 4, “Elements of Narrative”

Screening: *Sorry, Wrong Number* (Anatole Litvak, 1948). 89 min.

F Mar. 1 Discussion of *Sorry,Wrong Number*

Reading: J.P. Telotte, “Tangled Networks and Wrong Numbers” (On Canvas); Spicer, “Themes and Narrative Strategies” (Coursebook)

*Week Seven: the Femme Fatale*

M Mar. 4 Topic: The Femme Fatale in History

Reading:Julie Grossman, “Rethinking the Femme Fatale” (Coursebook)

W Mar. 6 Topic: Film Melodrama

Reading: “Melodrama” in *An Introduction to Film Genres* (On Canvas)

Screening: *Leave Her to Heaven* (John Stahl, 1945). 110 min

F Mar. 8 Discussion of *Leave Her to Heaven*

Reading:Review of *Leave Her to Heaven, Slant* magazine (Coursebook)

*Week Eight: the Noir Actor*

M Mar. 11 Topic: Noir’s Bad Boys

Reading:Hirsch, Ch. 6, “The Noir Actor”

W Mar. 13 Topic:Acting

Reading: *Looking at Movies*, Ch. 7, “Acting”

Screening: *The Night of the Hunter* (Charles Laughton, 1955), 92 min.

F Mar 15 Discussion of *The Night of the Hunter*

Reading: Review of *The Night of the Hunter*, Roger Ebert (Coursebook)

*Week Nine: the Noir Director*

M Mar. 18 Topic: Noir Directors

Reading:Spicer, Ch. 6, “The Noir Auteur;” (Coursebook) Hirsch, Ch. 5, “The Noir Director.”

W Mar. 20

Th. 21 Topic: Last-Minute Essay Conferences

Screening: *In a Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray, 1950), 94 min.

F Mar. 22 Discussion of *In a Lonely Place*

Reading: Review of *In a Lonely Place*

Mar. 21-24**Critical Essay Due**

*Week 10: The Noir Cinematographer*

M Apr. 1 Topic: The Evolution of Noir’s Visual Style

*Reading:* Spicer, Ch. 3, “Noir Style” (Coursebook); Hirsch, Ch. 4, “The Crazy Mirror”

W Apr. 3 Topic: Cinematography

Reading: *Looking at Movies*, Ch. 6

Screening: *The Sweet Smell of Success* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1957), 91 min.

F Mar. 22 Discussion of *Sweet Smell of Success*

Reading: Review of *Sweet Smell of Success,* Roger Ebert

*Week 11: Hitchcock and Film Noir*

M April 1 Topic: “The Nightmare Vision of Alfred Hitchcock”

W April 3 Topic: Editing

Reading: *Looking at Movies*, Ch. 8

Screening: *Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1942), 128 min.

F April 5 Discussion of *Shadow of a Doubt*

Reading: Review of *Shadow,* Roger Ebert (coursebook); David Sterritt, “Shadow of a Doubt” in *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock* (On Canvas)

*Week 12: Neo-Noir*

M Apr. 8Topic:“The Rise of Neo-Noir”

Reading: Spicer, “Neo-Noir 1” (Coursebook)

W Apr 10 Topic: The New Hollywood and Film Noir

Reading: “The New American Cinema,” *Looking at Movies*, pp. 447-451

Screening:*Chinatown*(Roman Polanski, 1974), 131 min.

F Apr. 12 Discussion of *Chinatown*

Reading: Leitch, “Chinatown and the Private-Eye Film” (On Canvas)

*Week 13: Noir and Post-modern Nostalgia*

M Apr. 15 Topic: “Noir and Popular Culture”

Reading:Spicer, “Neo-Noir 2”

W April 18Topic:FilmAdaptation

Screening:*LA Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997), 138 min.

F Apr. 20 Discussion of *LA Confidential*

Reading: Review of *LA Confidential*, Roger Ebert

*Week 14:*

*Noir and the New Television Drama*

M Apr. 23 Topic: The New Golden Era of Television and Film Noir

Viewing: Watch *Mildred Pierce*, original film, and the HBO mini- series, on your own

W Apr. 25 Discussion of *Mildred Pierce,* film

Reading: Review of *Mildred Pierce*, Roger Ebert

F Apr. 27 Discussion of *Mildred Pierce*, miniseries

*Week 15: Presentations*

*Week 16: Presentations*