

Film Noir: Syllabus

University of Jyväskylä
Prof. Paul Majkut, Ph.D.

September, 2009

All Lectures: Monday and Tuesday, 2:00-4:00 PM
All Film Viewings: Monday and Tuesday, 4:00-6:00 PM
All readings are in the Film Noir Reader

Required Text:

Film Noir Reader. Edited by Alain Silver and James Ursin. Limelight Editions. ISBN 0-87910-197-0

Required Film Viewings:

1. *Double Indemnity*, Directed by Billy Wilder, (1944)
2. *Confidential*, Directed by Curtis Hanson (1997)
3. *Out of the Past*, Directed by Jacques Tourneur (1947)
4. *Chinatown*, Directed by Roman Polanski (1974)
5. *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Directed by Tay Garnett (1946)
6. *Kiss Me Deadly*, Directed by Robert Aldrich (1955)
7. *Touch of Evil*, Directed by Orson Welles (1958)
8. *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Directed by Denzel Washington (1995)

SCHEDULE OF LECTURES, READINGS, AND FILMS:

I. September 7, Monday

Lecture 1: *Film Noir*: Genre, Style, Medium, Mode of Production
Lecture 2: Fatalism and Deathbed Confessions

Required Reading:
“Towards a Definition of Noir.”

Required Film Viewing:
Double Indemnity, Directed by Billy Wilder, (1944)

II. September 8, Tuesday

Lecture 1: Black and White Morality: Visual Characteristics of *Film Noir*
Lecture 2: Hard-boiled Detectives and Southern California—Sunshine and Sleaze

Required Reading:
“Some Visual Motifs of *Film Noir*.”

Required Film Viewing:
L.A. Confidential, Directed by Curtis Hanson (1997)

III. September 14, Monday

Lecture 1: *Femme Fatale*: Black Widows, Spider Women

Lecture 2: "Play It Again, Sam": The Return of the Past

Required Reading:

"Paint it Black: the Family Tree of *Film Noir*."

Required Film Viewing:

Out of the Past, Directed by Jacques Tourneur (1947)

IV. September 15, Tuesday

Lecture 1: The Hayes Code: Crime Doesn't Pay

Lecture 2: Left *Noir*, Right *Noir*: Taboos and the "Underside" of American Culture

Required Reading:

"Notes on *Film Noir*."

Required Film Viewing:

Chinatown, Directed by Roman Polanski (1974)

V. September 21, Monday

Lecture 1: The Hayes Code and Crime Doesn't Pay:

What Goes Around, Comes Around

Lecture 2: The Unreliable Narrator: Trust, Destiny, Love

Required Reading:

"No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the *Film Noir*."

Required Film Viewing:

The Postman Always Rings Twice, Directed by Tay Garnett (1946)

VI. September 22, Tuesday

Lecture 1:

Lecture 2: Self-Conscious *Noir* Comes to America

Required Reading:

"*Kiss Me Deadly*: Evidence of a Style"

Required Film Viewing:

Kiss Me Deadly, Directed by Robert Aldrich (1955)

VII. September 28, Monday

Lecture 1: French and American Critical Sensibilities: *Film Noir* or American Gothic?

Lecture 2: A Tale of Two Cities: San Diego and Tijuana

Required Reading:

“Out of What Past? Notes on the B *film noir*.”

Required Film Viewing:

Touch of Evil, Directed by Orson Welles (1958)

VIII. September 29, Tuesday

Lecture 1: In Hollywood, Crime Pays

Lecture 2: Black, White, and *Film Gris*

Required Reading:

“*Film Noir: A Modest Proposal*.”

Required Film Viewing:

Devil in a Blue Dress, Directed by Denzel Washington (1995)

General Considerations and Aspects of *Film Noir* to Consider:

This course is intended to provide terminology, theory and historical context for the study of *film noir*. It is intended as a course for the serious explorations of genre topics in film studies that elevates film commentary and the student above exercises in entertainment escapism. It is an academic project intended to give the student a more-than-surface understanding of *film noir*. The readings are at times difficult, the film viewing interpretive, and the work assigned penetrating. While the readings in the text are theoretical and difficult, they will help to put *film noir* in context. Please note that this course focuses on your ability to comprehend difficult essays, respond to difficult research questions in a rigorous academic manner, and present these responses cogently. By the conclusion of the course, the student should:

- understand and employ the terminology of *film noir*, the critical controversies surrounding its development, and the central directors, writers, cinematographers, and performers in the tradition;
- be able to grasp the historical continuity of *film noir* within the literary tradition of crime fiction;
- discuss *film noir* in terms of style, genre, and mood of production.

Here are some very general notes to consider as you read about the films we view in this course. They may help you put your ideas together in a coherent way.

Definitions

Definitions are as difficult as they are necessary. In the case of "film noir" we always begin with the question: What is it? But this is perhaps the wrong question. Perhaps we should ask a deeper question: Is it? In other words, is the word empty of meaning, that is, so general that in practice it is useless? Let us begin, then, not with what it is or even if it is, but trace its use. In the essay you have just read, you have discovered that the term

was invented by French film critics to explain something they saw in American films after WW II. Whether Americans saw what the French saw-and they didn't-is an important cultural point. French thinkers have a long history of attempting to understand America, beginning with Alexis de Tocqueville, whose visit to the US in the early 19th century served as the basis of his interpretations of the American national spirit. His work is no less controversial than the French film critics who "discovered" film noir. What are the elements of film noir, as the French see it? Is film noir a genre? Is it a style? Do the observations in this essay conform to your own understanding? Is it possible that there were film noir movies before this essay was written? Also, since this course on film noir is part of the Film Genre Studies sequence, it is essential that you have a hard-and-fast definition of "genre." Just what is a "genre"? How is a genre determined? What is a "form" and how are the two different? What is "style"?

Double Indemnity

DOUBLE INDEMNITY is sometimes considered the first "film noir," although the idea of which is first is rather foolish considering that the category was invented after the fact-that is, it is applied retroactively to films before the term was used. Of particular importance is the narrative quality of the film, the use of the dub over (the "behind the picture" narrator), the femme fatale, and the cynicism that prevails in the film. In this film, the narrator is dying. Later, Billy Wilder, the director, used a dead narrator in *SUNSET BOULEVARD*. What are the contributions to "film noir" conventions that Wilder made?

The Hayes Code

The fundamental question concerning "film noir" is one of sources. These sources are multiple. The US as well as international consumption of crime films remains unabated through the decades of the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. One of the American sources is the crime films of the 1930s, especially those dealing with gangsters. What are the elements of these films in terms of plot and characterization? What effect did the Hayes Code have on these films in terms of content and portrayal? If the artificial "crime must pay" ending requirement of the Hayes office is removed, as it was with the onset of World War II, are we in fact looking at the prototype "film noir"? In what ways do the hard-boiled detectives of pulp fiction spill over into crime drama of the period?

Expressionism

What in the term "film noir" qualifies it to be a type or genre? How does it differ from other genres especially the sub-genres of the crime genre: detective, gangster, mystery, murder, police drama, and so on? Paul Schrader is not only one of the living practitioners of film noir, but also one of the great film theorists of our time. What does he find to be the core of film noir, that is, what quality or aspect makes film noir film noir-that what does have that no other genre has? If this quality is the film noir style, then in what ways is that visual style different from German expressionism?

What is expressionism? Who were the great German expressionists? Of the great German directors in the silent and early talkies eras, who came to Hollywood as exiles from Nazi tyranny? Why can't we use the term "expressionism" to describe their work in Hollywood? What, if any, are the visual differences between expressionism and film noir?

Expressionism

Fritz Lang's silent drama, *M*, is considered one of the great expressionist films. If we think of more exaggerated examples of expressionism such as *THE CABINET OF CALIGARI* or *METROPOLIS*, then what stands out visually about this style of cinematography? Were similar visual conventions used in American films of the 1920s and 1930s, particularly horror films such as *DRACULA* and *FRANKENSTEIN*? Do expressionism and film noir lend themselves to black and white photography thematically? That is, do expressionism and film noir see the world in terms of good versus evil thematically, a moral or ethical view that lends itself to black and white visual representation? How so? Read the essay, "Film Gris, Film Noir," included in this course for a few ideas.

Motif

Your reading assignment again picks up on the visual quality of *film*. It does so in terms of "motif." What is a motif in music? In literature? In art and in film? Sometimes film noir has been said to be a "mood" or even a "motif" and not a style or genre. What are your critical opinions on this classification? Give visual examples from films viewed in this class up to and in this unit. What is *film gris* (gray film) and what does the term imply about visual style and moral ambiguity? What is it and how does it apply to the films we have seen thus far-and how does the notion hold up critically?

Dub Over

In many *films noirs*, the central character seems to be running from a past that eventually catches up with him or her. Often, characters are seen in cars, being chased or returning to places of a dark past that is hunting them. This, of course, is a perfect excuse for a flashback and dub over-and a very dramatic and convenient narrative shortcut-the central character tells us a first-person story with the overall story. What do your readings have to say about this convention?

What is the "modest proposal" offered in your readings? Where does the title originate? What does the title have to do with Jonathan Swift? Why was this title selected?

Your reading is concerned with the dub over (or "voice over") convention so common in film noir and the relationship of that convention with the femme fatale stock character. The femme fatale predates film noir. What is the history in American film of this type? Who are the three most famous of the Hollywood femmes fatales and how does each

contribute to the type and to film noir tradition? What are at least five characteristics of the *femme fatale*?

America's Dark Underside

Our readings are mostly concerned with formal questions rather than ideological or political questions. With the general description of *film noir* as a genre that deals with the "underside" of American society, do you see these films as representing a "law and order" political perspective or a "justice and fairness" ideology?

If we consider only the genre or pseudo-genre of film noir, many think that *OUT OF THE PAST* is the best of American *noir* films. Discuss the narrative structure of the film, its use of flashbacks thematically, and the unusual central character. Comment on the *femme fatale*.

American Film Noir Discovers Itself

What are a few of the most common narrative devices used in film noir? Discuss narrative point of view, memory and flashback, dub (voice) over, *femme fatale*, cynical and ironic point of view, the anti-hero, the hard-boiled detective, the stooge, the idiot policeman, the crime-never-pays ending, violence and anxiety. What does the author of your article on film-noir angst have to say about some of these conditions and conventions? How, in one sense at least, is *KISS ME DEADLY* a "perfect" film noir?

Noir: Left and Right

Two contending political arguments prevail concerning American film noir. The French view in general sees films noirs as politically on the left, progressive films that expose an unpleasant side of American society. The German critics, most notably Siegfried Kracauer in his important work *FROM CALIGARI TO HITLER*, on the contrary see "film noir" as politically on the right, as reactionary. In what ways do you see the films we have considered, as well as other examples of film noir that you may want to discuss, as either? Give examples and reasons. How does your reading concerning German expressionism fit into this discussion?

Fatalism

One of the most powerful *film noir* examples is *THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE*. Its narrative cynicism is chilling and its sense of doom frightening. Compare the two versions of the film, commenting on those aspects of it that qualify it as film noir. If you have time, include a third Italian version made by Luchino Visconti (*OBSESSIONI*). Does the color version add anything by showing explicit sexual passion? If so, why? In this case, please try to step aside from your own generation's tastes, whether you are a younger viewer of the Nicholson generation or an old viewer of the Lana Turner generation.

Evil

Sometimes *TOUCH OF EVIL* is considered the "last" of the genuine film noirs. This opinion does not consider "neo-noir" or "techo-noir" to be genuine film noir. Reread Shrader's essay that considers film noir as an historical event with a beginning and end date. But is it possible to give dates on a "period of history" that is merely a critical invention after the fact? Discuss the cinematography of the opening scene of *TOUCH OF EVIL*. Discuss the narrative, theme, and characterization.

Taboo

CHINATOWN brings film noir into the world of color. Is that possible-or must film noir, both for aesthetic as well as ethical considerations, be shot only in black and white? Explain your point of view with reference to films so far seen in this class. In what ways does *LA CONFIDENTIAL* adhere to the *film noir* rubric of conventions? If it does so, is it merely formulaic?