ENGLISH 344: Film Theory and Criticism  
Winter 2014  

Film Theory Through Film Noir  

Instructor  

Dr. Liahna Armstrong  
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Office hours: Tu 2-3; W 11:30-12:30; and by appointment  
Class meets: MW 2-3:40 in L & L 307 + Viewing Lab W 3:45-5:45 in L & L 422  

Texts  

Required: Spicer, Andrew, Film Noir (Longman Press), 2002  
Blandford, et. al, The Film Studies Dictionary  
Handout and postings (Abbreviated as HO)  

Course Films  

Double Indemnity (1944), dir. Billy Wilder  
Out of the Past (1947), dir. Jacques Tourneur
Angel Face (1953), dir. Otto Preminger

Touch of Evil (1958), dir. Orson Welles

Chinatown (1974), dir. Roman Polansky

Body Heat (1981), dir. Lawrence Kasdan

A Perfect Murder (1998), dir. Andrew Davis

Memento (2001), dir. Christopher Nolan

The Night Listener (2006), dir. Patrick Stettner

**Course description**

This course is designed to provide students with an understanding of the major theoretical concepts in film theory, and practice in writing theoretically informed film criticism. Our objective is to understand how film (specifically Hollywood film) works on viewers, how it imposes ideological values important to American culture on spectators. We will use classic film noir as our test genre through which to examine theory and engage in critical practice.

We will view nine films over the course of the quarter, some in viewing lab, and some on your own. Students will be expected to view every film in a timely manner and be prepared for discussion and written work on each film.

DVD copies of each film will be on reserve in the library for 4-hour checkout. Most are available on Netflix DVD and Amazon streaming rental; some are on Netflix streaming. You MUST view each film.

**Assignments and projects**

- A weekly short paper called a “note”: 1-1½ pgs in length

- Periodic (graded) posts on Blackboard Discussion Board.

- A midterm exam.

- A final oral project on an assigned film, using clips, with an accompanying summary essay of your key findings.

**Learner Outcomes**
• Become familiar with film as a textual system, master a critical vocabulary of cinematic theory, and be able to employ it for critical analysis.

• Develop a comprehension of the genre and historic evolution of *film noir* and an ability to discuss its chief stylistic features and thematic issues.

**Evaluation Criteria:**

- Attendance/participation/discussion 20%
- Written short papers and Blackboard posts 40%
- Midterm 20%
- Final Project 20%

**Expectations:**

- Regular attendance is required, at both class meetings and film viewing sessions. Please be on time, with *cell phones and electronic devices turned off*.

  If for any reason you must miss a film viewing lab, please notify me in advance. You will need to secure a copy of the film and view it on your own by the time we discuss it in class.

- The screenings will be in a small room. Please refrain from blurting out comments or loud laughter during viewing. Respect spectator silence.

- Bring syllabus, course notebook, and reading materials to class daily.

- Readings should be prepared carefully and must be completed by the day designated for discussion.

- Thoughtful involvement in class discussions is expected. We want to encourage an open atmosphere where issues can be explored provocatively, without making people feel pressured or silenced.
• Written assignments may be submitted either in hard copy in class or by email. Electronic submissions must be sent before the class in which they are due. E-mail submissions should be with the subject line: Theory

• You will need to consult the Blackboard site regularly, as announcements, assignments, and other class materials will be posted there.

TOPICS AND READINGS

Week One  (Jan 6, 8)

Lecture: Introduction to film theory and film noir

Reading:  Spicer, 1-44

Viewing:  Wed 1/8: *Double Indemnity*

Writing:  Note on *Double Indemnity* due Mon 1/13

Week Two  (Jan 13, 15)

Discussion:  *Double Indemnity*

Reading:  Spicer, 45-83

    HO on *Double Indemnity*

Viewing:  Wed 1/15: *Out of the Past*

Writing:  Note on *Out of the Past* due Mon 1/22

Week Three  (Jan 20 [No class: MLK Day], Jan 22)

Discussion: *Out of the Past*
Reading: Spicer, 84-104
    HO on *Out of the Past*

Viewing: Wed: *Angel Face*

Writing: Note on *Angel Face* due Mon 1/27
    Blackboard post due 1/29

**Week Four:** (Jan 27, 29 [No class: Faculty Development Day])

Discussion: *Angel Face*

Reading: Spicer, 123-129
    HO on *Angel Face*

Viewing: **On your own:** *Touch of Evil*

Writing: Note on *Touch of Evil* due Mon 2/3

**Week Five:** (Feb 3, 5)

Discussion: *Touch of Evil*

Reading: HO on *Touch of Evil*

Viewing: Wed 2/5: *Chinatown*

Writing: In-class midterm Wed 2/5

**Week Six:** (Feb 10, 12)

Discussion: *Chinatown*

Reading: Spicer, 130-148
    HO on *Chinatown*
Viewing: Wed 2/12: *Body Heat*

Writing: Note on *Chinatown* due Mon 2/10  
Blackboard post due Wed 2/12

**Week Seven:** (Feb 17 [No class: President’s Day], 19)

Discussion: *Body Heat*

Reading: Spicer, 149-174  
HO on *Boy Heat*

Viewing: Wed 2/19: *A Perfect Murder*

Writing: Note on *A Perfect Murder* due 2/24

**Week Eight:** (Feb 24, 26)

Discussion: *A Perfect Murder*

Reading: HO on *A Perfect Murder*

Viewing: Wed 2/25: *Memento*

Writing: Note on *Memento* due 3/3

**Week Nine:** (Mar 3,5)

Discussion: *Memento*

Reading: HO on *Memento*

Viewing: Wed 3/5: *The Night Listener*
Writing: Blackboard post due Mon, 3/10

**Week Ten:** (Mar 10, 12)

Discussion: *The Night Listener*

Presentation: First set of Final Project oral presentations on Wed Mar 12

**Week Eleven:** (Mar 8, Tuesday)

12-2 PM: Second set of Final Project oral presentations