

# BISHOP'S UNIVERSITY

## English 284 Film Noir

Spring 2004  
N5

Prof Gary Evans  
Tuesdays/Thursdays 9:00am-noon

### OBJECTIVES

This course will survey the evolution *film noir*, literally “black [or dark] film.” Today the term is used to describe a **mood** or **style** more than a type (**genre**) of film such as western, melodrama, musical, science fiction, etc. Students will learn why today, post-noir reflects a postmodern style that pays homage to, and evokes nostalgia for the past. Yet, echoing its predecessors, film noir today helps viewers to focus on many of contemporary society’s dysfunctional elements. By course end, students should be able to carry on an intelligent discourse distinguishing film *noir* yesterday and today.

### CONTENT

Historically film *noir* was France’s way of referring to Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s that featured detective stories about crime and corruption. The examples we have chosen, from then until the present, will show how *noir* has changed. Screenwriter and director Paul Schrader summed it best when he referred to *noir* ‘s” passion for the past and present, but also a fear of the future.” One interesting element about film *noir* persists: it maintains somber tones and pessimistic moods. *Noir* characters (heroes and villains alike) tend to be cynical, disillusioned, and often insecure or impotent loners. Yet many contemporary *noir* films contain elements that recognize feminist discourse, postmodernism, and/or semiotics. Why film *noir* continues to attract viewers is one of the important social questions that will be addressed.

There will be no single text for the course, but a series of essays (listed below) that will orient students and help explain the films or selections that will be screened. These articles should be read before coming to class.

### FORMAT OF CLASS

Activities revolve around lectures, readings, discussions and screenings.

### ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

The course meets twice per week. Attendance will be taken at each class. No grade will be given for attendance, but frequent absence will affect a student’s mark as follows:

7 absences or more: the student cannot achieve a grade higher than D

6 absences: the student cannot achieve a grade higher than C

5 absences: the student: cannot achieve a grade higher than B

Note: It is the student’s responsibility to sign the attendance sheet each class.

### EVALUATION

There will be a midterm worth 50%. The midterm will take place in the first half of class on

June 8 and will be based on readings, lectures and visuals covered from the beginning of term. There will be a journal, worth **50%**, due June 10.

### HOW TO DO THE JOURNAL

For each class, the student will write a response to the material covered that day. One section should be a ***comment on what you have read*** (It is not necessary to summarize what you have read, but to demonstrate that you have thought about what you have read and viewed.). A second section should be a ***reaction to the visual material***, including the class discussion. The in-class material will be handed out normally in the class before it will be covered in lecture.

Total suggested length for that day's response material: 300-600 words. The journal entry should look something like this:

#### ***Date of Assignment:***

**Part 1** *Title of assigned reading (paragraph to follow for each assigned reading)*

**Part 2** *Reaction to the visual material (paragraph{s} to follow)*

Taking notes on the screenings is a useful activity to help write the journal. Students may discuss the material together, but each person should write his/her own entry. All submissions must be computer generated. The journal is due on June 10. After that, the late penalty is 5%/day. Any late submissions must be sent to my Montreal address: G. Evans, 4007 Harvard Avenue Montreal, QC. H4A 2W8

## Screenings and Readings

**May 4, 2004:** Introduction and Background The debate begins with *Double Indemnity*, Billy Wilder dir. 1944.

Alain Silver "Introduction" 3-15; *Film Noir Reader* Alain Silver and James Ursini, eds. NY:Limelight Editions, 1998.

Frank Krutnik "The Criminal-Adventure Thriller" 137-147 *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* NY: Routledge, 1991

Claire Johnston, "Double Indemnity" (Easthope, Antony, ed. *Contemporary Film Theory*. New York: Longman, 1993.

J.P. Telotte "The Double Indemnity of *Noir* Discourse" 40-55 *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir* UrbanaIL:U Illinois Press, 1989.

**May 6: American Cinema, Film Noir** (Bishop's Media Centre)

Material is to be read before class meets!

James Naremore "The History of an Idea" 9-39; *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* Berkeley, CA:U of California, 1998.

Pam Cook, ed. "*Film Noir*" 93-97 *The Cinema Book* New York: Pantheon, 1985

Paul Schrader "Notes on *Film Noir*" *Film Comment*, V.8 No.1 Spring,1972 (8-13)

**May 11:** *The Postman Always Rings Twice* Tay Garnett dir (1946) and Bob Rafelson dir (1981)  
Material is to be read before class meets!

Karen Hollinger "Film Noir, Voice-Over, and the Femme Fatale" 243-258 *Film Noir Reader*  
Alain Silver and James Ursini, eds. NY:Limelight Editions, 1998.

Frank Krutnik "The Masculine Hero" 86-91 *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*  
NY: Routledge, 1991

**May 13:** *Killer's Kiss* Stanley Kubrick dir (1955) and/or *Kiss me Deadly* Robert Aldrich dir  
(1955) (Excerpts)

Robert Porfirio "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the *Film Noir*" 77-93 *Film Noir Reader* Alain  
Silver and James Ursini, eds. NY:Limelight Editions, 1998.

J.P. Telotte "Noir Narration" 12-36 and "Talk and Trouble: *Kiss Me Deadly's* Apocalyptic  
Discourse" 198-215 *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir* UrbanaIL:U Illinois  
Press, 1989.

Alain Silver "Kiss Me Deadly: Evidence of a Style" 209-234 *Film Noir Reader* Main Silver and  
James Ursini, eds. NY:Limelight Editions, 1998.

**May 18:** *A Touch of Evil* Orson Welles dir. (1958) (Excerpt)

David Thomson, *Touch of Evil* 335-349 (In *Rosebud, The Story of Orson Welles*. New  
York:Knopf, 1996.

Jonathan Munby, "From Gangster to Gangsta" 221-226 *Public Enemies, Public Heroes*  
*Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil* Chicago: University of Chicago  
Press. 1999

**May 20:** *Mean Streets* Martin Scorsese dir (1973)

Robert Kolker, "Expressions of the Streets: Martin Scorsese" 175-196 *Cinema of Loneliness*  
New York:Oxford 2000.

**May 25:** *Chinatown* Roman Polanski dir (1974)

Richard Martin, "Seventies Revisionism" 63-75 *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls, The Legacy of*  
*Film Noir in Contemporary American Cinema* Lanham,MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997.

Richard T Jameson, "Son of Noir" 197-205 *Film Noir Reader 2* Alain Silver and James Ursini,  
eds. NY:Limelight Editions, 1999.

Daniel Goulding, ed. "Polanski: *Chinatown*" 143-155. *Five Filmmakers* Bloomington, IN:Indiana  
U Press, 1994.

**May 27:** *Taxi Driver* Martin Scorsese (1976)

Robert Kolker, "Expressions of the Streets: Martin Scorsese" 218-243 *Cinema of Loneliness*  
New York: Oxford 2000.

Richard Martin, "Seventies Revisionism: *Taxi Driver*" 80-89 *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls, The*  
*Legacy of Film Noir in Contemporary American Cinema* Lanham,MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997.

**June 1:** *Reservoir Dogs* Quentin Tarantino (1992)

Peter Brooker, and Will Brooker "Postmodernism: Tarantino's affirmative action" 89-99  
*Postmodern After-images*. New York: Arnold, 1997.

Todd Erickson "Kill Me Again: Movement Becomes Genre" 307-326 *Film Noir Reader* Main  
Silver and James Ursini, eds. NY: Limelight Editions, 1998.

Richard Martin, "Nineties Irony: *Reservoir Dogs*" 116-122; 126-131 *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls, The Legacy of Film Noir in Contemporary American Cinema* Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997.

Jeff Dawson, "*Reservoir Dogs*" 43-63 *Quentin Tarantino: Cinema of Cool* New York:  
Applause, 1995.

**June 3:** *Blood Simple* Joel Coen dir (1984)

Carolyn Russell, "Blood Simple" 7-26. *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen* Jefferson,  
NC: McFarland, 2001.

Richard Martin, "Eighties Pastiche: *Blood Simple*" 104-110 *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls, The Legacy of Film Noir in Contemporary American Cinema* Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997.

**June 8 :** Midterm first half of class, then Film Theory on the subject of Fascination as it applies  
to *The Killers* Robert Siodmak dir (1946)

Oliver Harris, "Film Noir Fascination: Outside History, but Historically so" *Cinema Journal* 43,  
*No. 1*, Fall 2003 (3-24) (This material will not be on the midterm exam but may be useful for  
answering an essay question)

**June 10:** *L.A. Confidential* Curtis Hanson dir (1997) (Excerpt) Journals due today.  
(Article to come...)

**June 15: To Be Announced**