

# A Touch of Evil

## American Film Noir and Neo-Noir

**Course instructor:** Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan L. Brandt  
**Course number:** 512.325  
**Room:** Seminar room, Attemsgasse 25, top floor  
**Time:** Fri, 4:00 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.  
**Course tutor:** Katie Neubert ([katie.neubert@uni-graz.at](mailto:katie.neubert@uni-graz.at))

**Short description:** The genre known as *film noir*, namely dark and sinister low-budget gangster films produced by Hollywood in the 1940s and 50s, has been enormously influential in American cultural history. We are all familiar with its basic settings: murky rooms with light coming in through venetian blinds, lonesome alleys littered with garbage, gloomy detective bureaus adjacent to busy streets. More recent 'neo-noir' films such as *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988), *Bound* (1996), *Departed* (2006), *Drive* (2011), and *John Wick* (2014), have extensively utilized these aesthetic patterns and created memorable images of their own. Where does the aesthetic of *noir* originally come from?

The course looks at a number of classic film noirs, from *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Double Indemnity* (1944) to *The Big Sleep* (1946), *Asphalt Jungle* (1950), and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1954). The course will examine the key settings of film noirs (gloomy districts of modern cities), their visual style (dark imagery, low-key shots), themes and characters (crimes and investigations, tough men, deceitful women) as well as their narrative strategies (flashbacks, temporal ellipses, ambiguous endings). We will also investigate the general social and historical background of *film noir* (cynicism, war *angst*) and the aesthetics of *neo-noir* movies.

**Teaching Method:** This is an interactive course. Participation in group discussions as well as contributions to the discussion forum on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Each meeting will be held by 'experts' who organize the session by means of questions, games, illustrations, video clips, and group work. The most relevant facts will be conveyed in a short information block (or, alternatively, in a fact file on a handout).

**Materials:** All films are available at the Media Archive of the Department of American Studies (Heinrichstr. 18, 1<sup>st</sup> floor) on a reserve shelf and can be checked out for one working day.

### Assessment:

**A.) Regular attendance** (no more than 2 absences!), **active participation**, and at least seven substantiated entries in the **Moodle discussion forum (1/3)** (not including your own session);

**B.) Expert Session, Handout, and Revised Presentation** (to be held in class and then uploaded onto the Moodle course site) **(1/3)**;

**C.) 2-page research proposal** plus **12-15-page final paper** (5,000 – 6,000 words, including title page, table of contents, and bibliography). Please use templates on Moodle! **(1/3)**.

*Note: You need to pass each section to pass the whole course.*

## **A.) REGULAR ATTENDANCE, CLASS, PARTICIPATION, AND MOODLE DISCUSSION FORUM**

**Regular attendance** and **active participation** in class sessions are crucial to the success of the course. *Absences* must be explained in writing, preferably prior to class. No more than two absences are allowed. You are expected to be present in our meetings, not only having read the assigned material, but also prepared to fully engage with the material, ask questions, offer perceptive interpretations, and even argue for your way of reading the text at hand. Note: There might be **pop quizzes** (i.e., unannounced tests at the beginning of a session) to check whether you have read the materials.

You need to **post at least seven substantial entries** in the **Moodle discussion forum**. Make sure you are well informed *before* answering the three discussion questions: Read the required text. Conduct some **additional online research** according to your own research interests. When making an entry, refer to useful materials you found on the internet (clips, articles, etc.). Ideally, you would also **respond to other entries** already uploaded by other students.

## **B.) EXPERT SESSION, REVISED PRESENTATION, AND HANDOUT**

As an expert, you will prepare **three short questions** for the discussion forum, focusing on composition, background, and effect in the main text (to be uploaded 6 days in advance), potentially together with links to **clips** or **images**. Show your discussion questions to me 1 week before your session (or send them to me via email)!

In class, you can start with some **essential information** on the topic (look at the keywords on the syllabus first), then pose questions to trigger a **lively discussion**. Choose **examples** related to the topic of the session that you can discuss in class (for example, in group work). Be **interactive**. Show images and clips, launch a game, pick up questions. Do not stick to your schedule *too much*!

**Revise your presentation** carefully after the session and **upload it** together with a **handout** (3 pages) on Moodle **within one week after the session**!

## **C.) RESEARCH PROPOSAL AND FINAL PAPER**

The **research proposal** (2 pages), containing a basic outline for your final paper, is due around mid-term. Look for the exact date in the course agenda below. The form for the research proposal is available on Moodle. You need to upload it, together with an **editable Google Docs version** (of that same research proposal), in the 'upload section' for research proposals on Moodle.

**Important:** Insert the **link** to the Google Docs version in the **comment function** to your posting on Moodle. Do not (!) put the link somewhere in the document itself!

The **final paper** (max. 15 pages, including title page, table of contents, and bibliography, 5,000 – 6,000 words) should be uploaded (together with an **editable Google Docs version**) in the respective forum on Moodle.

Insert the **link** to the Google Docs version in the **comment function** to your posting on Moodle. Do not (!) put the link somewhere in the document itself!

The final paper should show your name and email address, the course title, the instructor's name, the date of submission, and the number of words. Primary and secondary sources need to be cited according to the Uni Graz guidelines for style and format. The **deadline** for submission of the final paper is **Monday, 18 July, 2022**. Keep in mind: A good paper is a finished paper. There is **no extension** of this deadline.

# Syllabus

<b>11 March</b>	<b>Introduction: What is Film Noir?</b> Main text: Steve Neale, "Film Noir," in: <i>Genre and Hollywood</i> (2000). Additional texts: Martin Rubin, "Film Noir," in: <i>Thrillers</i> (1999). William Park, "Film Noir: The Genre Defined," in: <i>What Is Film Noir?</i> (2011). Keywords: Crime; German Expressionism; Male Fantasy; Oneiric; Roman Noir; Stark Lighting.
<b>18 March</b>	<b>Film Theory and Analysis – An Overview</b> Main text (reading required): Amy Villarejo, "The Language of Film" (2013). Additional text (optional): Michael Ryan and Melissa Lenos, <i>Introduction to Film Analysis</i> (2012). Keywords: Camera Movement; Color; Framing; Lighting; Mise en scène; Montage; Sound.
<b>25 March</b>	<b>Essential Noir – The Tradition of Crime &amp; Detective Fiction</b> Main film: <i>The Maltese Falcon</i> (1941, dir. John Huston) Additional films: <i>Murder, My Sweet</i> (1944, dir. Edward Dmytryk) <i>The Big Sleep</i> (1946, dir. Howard Hawks) <i>Out of the Past</i> (1947, dir. Jacques Tourneur) <i>The Narrow Margin</i> (1952, dir. Richard Fleischer) <i>Touch of Evil</i> (1958, dir. Orson Welles) Keywords: Cynicism; Detective Fiction; Dreams; Existential Philosophy; Masculinity.
	<b>1 April    The Classical Period: Hard-boiled Aesthetics and the Femme Fatale</b> Main film: <i>Double Indemnity</i> (1944, dir. Billy Wilder) Additional films: <i>The Killers</i> (1946, dir. Robert Siodmak) <i>The Lady from Shanghai</i> (1948, dir. Orson Welles) <i>Criss Cross</i> (1949, dir. Robert Siodmak) Keywords: Death; Deceit; Doppelgänger; Femme Fatale; Hard-boiled; Insurance; Money; Voice-Over.
	<b>29 April    Noir Suspense: Visuality and the Art of Storytelling</b> Main film: <i>Shadow of a Doubt</i> (1943, dir. Alfred Hitchcock) Additional films: <i>Strangers on a Train</i> (1951, dir. Alfred Hitchcock) <i>The Third Man</i> (1949, dir. Carol Reed) <i>Sunset Boulevard</i> (1950, dir. Billy Wilder) <i>Notorious</i> (1946, dir. Alfred Hitchcock) <i>The Wrong Man</i> (1956, dir. Alfred Hitchcock) Keywords: Doubling; MacGuffin; PoV; Suspense; 'Wrong Man'.
<b>6 May</b>	<b>'B' Noir – Raw Noir and 'Poverty Row' Productions</b> Main film: <i>Detour</i> (1945, dir. Edgar G. Ulmer) Additional films: <i>Inner Sanctum</i> (1948, dir. Lew Landers) <i>The Big Combo</i> (1955, dir. Joseph H. Lewis) <i>Please Murder Me</i> (1956, dir. Peter Godfrey) Keywords: Car-Motif; Fallen Man; Foreshadowing; Naturalism; Raw Noir; Road Movie.
	<b>13 May    The Noir Eye – Subjectivity and Visual Aesthetics</b> Main film: <i>The Lady in the Lake</i> (1947, dir. R. Montgomery) Additional films: <i>Dark Passage</i> (1947, dir. D. Daves) <i>In a Lonely Place</i> (1947, dir. Nicholas Ray) <i>Death on Arrival (D.o.A.)</i> (1948, dir. R. Maté) Keywords: Gaze; Mirror Scene; Narration; Subjectivity; Whodunit.

20 May

**Postwar *Angst* – Psychological Melodrama, Innocence, and Guilt**

Main film: *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948, dir. Anatole Litvak)  
Additional films: *Dark Mirror* (1946, dir. Robert Siodmak)  
*The Blue Dahlia* (1946, dir. George Marshall)  
*Nightmare Alley* (1947, dir. Edmund Goulding)  
*Too Late for Tears* (1949, dir. Byron Haskin)  
*Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950, dir. Otto Preminger)  
Keywords: Conflict; Disability; Irony; Psychology; Murder Plot; Suspense.

3 June

**Urban Noir – The Flipside of the American Dream**

Main film: *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950, dir. John Huston)  
Additional films: *Scarlet Street* (1945, dir. Fritz Lang)  
*The Naked City* (1950, dir. Jules Dassin)  
*No Way Out* (1950, dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz)  
*City That Never Sleeps* (1953, dir. John H. Auer)  
*The Killing* (1956, dir. Stanley Kubrick)  
*While the City Sleeps* (1956, dir. Fritz Lang)  
Keywords: Corruption; Heist Films; Low-Key Lighting; Neorealism; Racism; Urbanity.

10 June

**Noir Women – Gender and Empowerment**

Main film: *Sudden Fear* (1952, dir. David Miller)  
Additional films: *Cat People* (1942, dir. Jacques Tourneur)  
*Laura* (1944, dir. Otto Preminger)  
*Mildred Pierce* (1945, dir. Michael Curtiz)  
*Gilda* (1946, dir. Charles Vidor)  
Keywords: Blackmail; Empowerment; San Francisco; Thriller; Woman-in-Distress.

17 June

**Pulp Noir – Cultural Pessimism, Sexuality, and the Apocalypse**

Main film: *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955, dir. Robert Aldrich)  
Additional films: *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1945, dir. Tay Garnett)  
*The Big Heat* (1953, dir. Fritz Lang)  
Keywords: Apocalypse; Borders; Cold War; Eroticism; Good/Evil Duality; Hard-Boiled Masculinity; Post-war Era; Sexuality.

24 June

**Neo-Noir – Taboo-Breaking and Subversion**

Main film: *Bound* (1996, dir. The Wachowski Sisters)  
Additional films: *Klute* (1971, dir. Alan J. Pakula)  
*Chinatown* (1974, dir. Roman Polanski)  
*Taxi Driver* (1976, dir. Martin Scorsese)  
*Blade Runner* (1982, dir. Ridley Scott)  
*L.A. Confidential* (1997, dir. Curtis Hanson)  
Keywords: Homage; Innocence; Lesbian Desire; Mafia; Oppression; Power; Queerness; Subversion; Visual Symbolism.

**1 July Neo-Noir and Postmodernism**

Main film: *Memento* (2000, dir. Christopher Nolan)  
Additional films: *Pulp Fiction* (1994, dir. Quentin Tarantino)  
*Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988, dir. R. Zemeckis)  
*Reservoir Dogs* (1992, dir. Quentin Tarantino)  
*Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (1982, dir. Carl Reiner)  
*Sin City* (2005, dir. Frank Miller & Robert Rodriguez)  
Keywords: Betrayal; Black-and-White Scenes; Consciousness; Dramatic Monologue; Pastiche; Narrative Memory; Non-Linearity; Postmodernism.

DUE DATE  
RESEARCH PROPOSAL

FINAL PAPER  
DUE DATE: 18 July, 2022