

Noir

American Gangster Films of the 1940s and 50s

Course instructor: Prof. Dr. Stefan L. Brandt

Course number: 512.313

Room and Time: Seminar room, Attemsgasse 25, 3rd floor

Basic information: **Wed, 3:15 pm – 4:45 pm**

Short description: The genre known as *film noir*, namely of 'dark' and 'sinister,' low-budget crime 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 *L.A. Confidential* (1997), *Sin City* (2005), *Departed* (2006), and *Bound* (1996) have extensively utilized these aesthetic patterns and created memorable images of their own. But where does the aesthetic of *noir* originally come from? The course looks at a number of **classic noir tales and movies**, from James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) and Cornell Woolrich's *The Black Curtain* (1941) to cult films such as *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Detour* (1945), *The Big Sleep* (1946), *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948), *Asphalt Jungle* (1950), and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1954). The course will examine the **key settings** and **plots** of these texts/films as well as their main figures, the *femme fatale* and the *hardboiled detective*. In addition, we will investigate the distinct **visual aesthetic of noir** (low-key, black-and-white visual style, innovative techniques of narration) and discuss the cultural ramifications leading to *neo-noir*.

Reading Material: There will be a course reader.

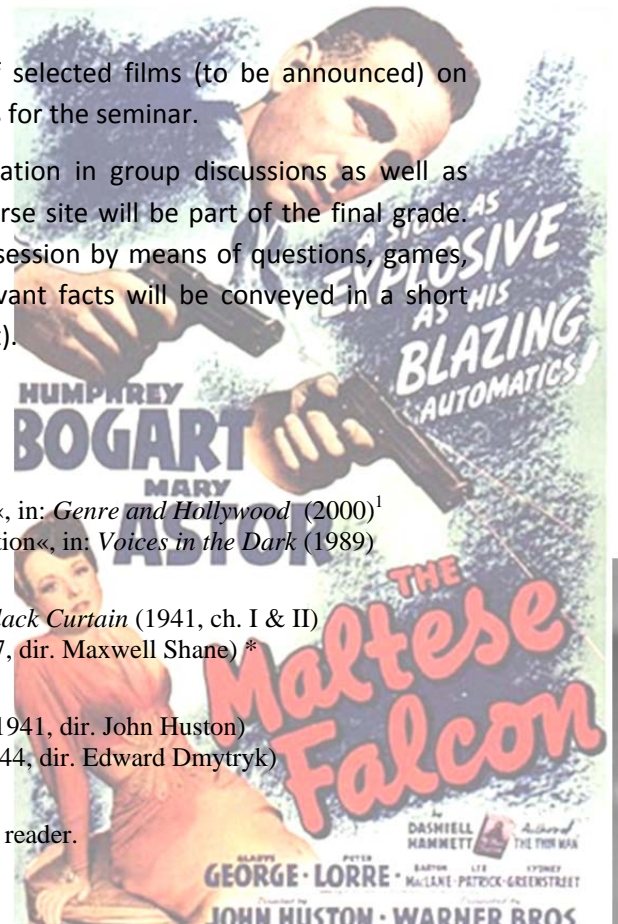
Extra-screenings: There will be a few »extra-screenings« of selected films (to be announced) on Wednesdays, 5-7 p.m. Keep in mind to watch all **main** films for the seminar.

Credit requirements: 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, a fact file on a handout).

Syllabus

Oct. 8	Introduction: What is Film Noir?
	<i>Main text:</i> Steve Neale, »Film Noir«, in: <i>Genre and Hollywood</i> (2000) ¹
	<i>Additional text:</i> J.P. Telotte, »Noir Narration«, in: <i>Voices in the Dark</i> (1989)
Oct. 15	Noir Aesthetics – The Essentials
	<i>Main text:</i> Cornell Woolrich, <i>The Black Curtain</i> (1941, ch. I & II)
	<i>Additional film:</i> FEAR IN THE NIGHT (1947, dir. Maxwell Shane) *
Oct. 22	The Private Eye
	<i>Main film:</i> THE MALTESE FALCON (1941, dir. John Huston)
	<i>Additional film:</i> MURDER, MY SWEET (1944, dir. Edward Dmytryk)

¹ All relevant texts for this seminar can be found in the course reader.



Oct. 29 **The femme fatale**
Main film: DOUBLE INDEMNITY (1944, dir. Billy Wilder)
Additional films: GILDA (1946, dir. Charles Vidor)
 THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI (1948, dir. Orson Welles)

Nov. 5 **The »B« Noir – Paranoid Visions**
Main film: DETOUR (1945, dir. Edgar G. Ulmer) *
Additional films: OUT OF THE PAST (1947, dir. Jacques Tourneur)
 SUDDENLY (1954, dir. Spencer Selby) *

Nov. 12 **Postwar Neurosis – Memory and Trauma**
Main film: THE BLUE DAHLIA (1946, dir. George Marshall)
Additional films: THE GLASS KEY (1942, dir. Stuart Heisler)
 SHOCK (1946, dir. Alfred L. Werker) *

Nov. 19 **Guilty 'Til Proven Innocent**
Main film: BLACK ANGEL (1946, dir. Roy William Neill)
Additional films: IMPACT (1949, dir. Arthur Lubin) *
 THE BIG CLOCK (1948, dir. John Farrow)

Nov. 26 **Hardboiled Couples**
Main film: THE BIG SLEEP (1946, dir. Howard Hawks)
Additional films: QUICKSAND (1950, dir. Irving Pichel) *
 THE MAN WHO CHEATED HIMSELF (1950, dir. Felix E. Feist) *

Dec. 3 **Noir Visual Strategies – The Camera as an Active Participant**
Main film: THE LADY IN THE LAKE (1947, dir. Robert Montgomery)
Additional film: DARK PASSAGE (1947, dir. Delmer Daves)

Dec. 10 **Fatal Dénouements – All plots move deathwards**
Main film: DEATH ON ARRIVAL (D.O.A.) (1948, dir. Rudolph Maté) *
Additional film: THE KILLERS (1946, dir. Robert Siodmak)

Dec. 17 **The Psychology of Noir**
Main film: SORRY, WRONG NUMBER (1948, dir. Anatole Litvak)
Additional film: DARK MIRROR (1946, dir. Robert Siodmak)
 THE RED HOUSE (1946, dir. Delmer Daves) *

Jan. 7 **The City Noir II – The Underworld**
Main film: ASPHALT JUNGLE (1950, dir. John Huston)
Additional film: SCARLET STREET (1945, dir. Fritz Lang) *

Jan. 14 **Noir Suspense – Strong Women**
Main film: SUDDEN FEAR (1952, dir. David Miller)
Additional film: LAURA (1944, dir. Otto Preminger)

Jan. 21 **Noir Gangsters – Justice and Revenge**
Main film: THE BIG HEAT (1953, dir. Fritz Lang)
Additional film: KANSAS CITY CONFIDENTIAL (1952, dir. Phil Karlson) *

Jan. 28 **Pulp Noir**
Main film: KISS ME DEADLY (1955, dir. Robert Aldrich)
Additional film: THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE (1945, dir. Tay Garnett)

Neo Noir
Main film: L.A. CONFIDENTIAL (1997, dir. Curtis Hanson)
Additional films: CHINATOWN (1974, dir. Roman Polanski)
 MEMENTO (2000, dir. Christopher Nolan)

DEADLINE FOR FINAL PAPERS:
MONDAY, MARCH 2, 2009.
THERE IS NO (!) EXTENSION
OF THIS DEADLINE.



Films marked with an * are available online at www.archive.org.

