

English 230

John Lamb, ENGL 230, Spring 2004, Film Studies

English 230: Film Studies--Film Noir

T/Th 10-11:15

Dr. John Lamb (jlamb2@wvu.edu)

424 Stansbury Hall

293-3107, ext. 432

Office Hours: Tuesday 11 :30-12:30 or by appointment

Texts:

Kaplan, *Women in Film Noir* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000)

Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* (NY: Vintage, 1992)

Caspary, *Laura*

Plus additional articles and essays to be provided by instructor.

Films: (Subject to Availability)

The Maltese Falcon (1941)

Out of the Past (1947)

Double Indemnity (1944)

Murder My Sweet (1944)

Laura (1944)

Gilda (1946)

Dead Reckoning (1947)

Kiss Me Deadly (1955)

Big Heat (1953)

Touch of Evil (1958)

Blood Simple (1983)

While film critics debate whether film noir represents a particular genre, a unique style, or merely a group of films from a specific historical period (usually the 1940s and 1950s), there is common agreement that the noir cycle occupies an important place in American film history, and that, as a body of films, film noir presents a cohesive vision of America. It is, as Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward point out, "a self-contained reflection of American cultural preoccupations in film form."

In this course, we will study film noir in both its cultural and historical setting, concentrating on the particular vision of America it portrays. Among other things, we will investigate the landscape (usually the city) and characters of noir (private eyes, petty criminals, and dangerous women); its preoccupation with crime, violence, and sexual obsession; its portrayal of the "crisis" of masculinity; and its diagnosis of post-war disillusionment and cold war anxiety. In addition we will attempt to determine its recurring themes and stylistic features.

REQUIREMENTS:

Written requirements:

A. Scene Readings: each student is required to complete at least six short (250-500 words) analyses of a significant scene for the films covered during the semester. The student may elect to analyze important scenes from additional films as well. The student is free to choose what films he/she will focus on, but three of the readings must be on films studied in the first half of the semester and three on films from the second half.

B. Essays: each student will be required to write two 1000 word essays on films from the syllabus during the semester.

C. Take-home final exam (1000 to 1500 words) All written assignments must be typed (single spaced for scene readings, double spaced for essays and exam) and must be submitted on the day due. Late assignments will be penalized.

Class participation: You are encouraged and, indeed, expected to participate in class and group discussions. In order to facilitate that discussion, you are required to do any assigned reading and to view and study the films assigned prior to coming to class. Any student who fails to complete such preparation may be counted as absent.

Your grade for the course will be determined according to a 1000 point scale: scene readings = 200+ pts; essays = 200 pts each; final exam = 200 pts; and class participation and group work = 200 pts.

Attendance Policy

Any student who misses more than four classes will be penalized 2% of their final grade for each additional absence (ex. If you have an 86 average but have 3 additional absences, your grade will be reduced to an 80).

Honor Code

You must be familiar with WVU's policies on academic honesty. It is your responsibility to learn the rules and conventions of citing sources in your papers. If you have any questions about academic citations

please consult the West Virginia University Guide to Academic Writing and Research or see me during office hours.

Learning Environment

West Virginia University is committed to social justice. I support that commitment and will work with you to ensure that learning environment is based on open communication, mutual respect, and non-discrimination. Please feel free to share with me your ideas for the maintenance of such an environment.

Film Collectives

Students will be organized into film collectives (usually 5-6 students) for the purpose of purchasing and viewing films. Videotapes of the films on the syllabus are available through Amazon.com or Facets.org

Tentative Class Schedule

Jan. 14 Introduction

Motifs

Jan. 16 Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir" and Porfirio, "No Way Out"

Jan. 21 Place and Peterson, "Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir"

Hard-boiled Crime Fiction and Film Noir

Jan. 23 Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*

Jan. 28 Hammett, cont. and Huston, *The Maltese Falcon* (film)
Scene Reading #1 due

Jan. 30 *The Maltese Falcon* (film)

Cinematic Origins

Feb. 4 German Expressionism and Italian Neo Realism

Censorship and the Production Code

Feb. 6 Copy of Hays's Code, Excerpt from Chandler's *Farewell My Lovely*
Murder My Sweet (scenes with Lindsay Marriott)

Classic Noir

Feb. 11 Out of the Past
Scene Reading #2 due

Feb. 13 Out of the Past

Femme Fatales

Feb. 18 Double Indemnity; Place, "Women in Film Noir" in Women in Film Noir, 35-67,
Scene Reading #3 due

Feb. 20 Double Indemnity; Harvey, "Woman's place: the absence of family in film noir"

WFN, 22-34 and Johnston, "Double Indemnity" WFN, IOO-111.

Feb. 25 Gilda; Dyer, "Resistance through charisma: Rita Hayworth and Gilda"
WFN, 91-99.

Scene Reading #4 due

Feb. 27 Gilda; Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (tbp)

Homme Fatales

Mar. 4 Caspary, Laura

Mar. 6 Laura (film); Dyer, "Postscript: Queers and Women in Film Noir" WFN, 123-129

Scene Reading #5 due

Mar. 11 Laura

Essay #1 due

Noir Spaces

Mar. 13 Urban spaces and noir interiors

Mar. 18 **Spring Break**

Mar. 20 **Spring Break**

Masculinity in Crisis

Mar. 25 Murder My Sweet

Scene Reading #6 due

Mar. 27 Murder My Sweet

A Soldier's Story

Apr. 1 Dead Reckoning

Scene Reading #7 due

Apr. 3 Dead Reckoning

Cold War Noir

Apr. 8 Big Heat, Ward, "Creativity and Evolution: Two Film Noirs of the Fifties" (tbp)

Scene Reading #8 due

Apr. 10 BigHeat

Apr. 15 Kiss Me Deadly

Silver, "Kiss Me Deadly: Evidence of Style" (tbp)

Scene Reading #9 due

Apr. 17 Kiss Me Deadly

Apr. 22 Touch of Evil

Scene Reading #10 due

Apr. 25 Touch of Evil

Neo Noir

Apr. 29 Blood Simple

Scene Reading # 11 due

May 1 BloodSimple

Essay #2 due

May 5 **Final due**