

# Film Noir: The Dark Side of American Culture

Dr. Ginny B. Schwartz  
Spring 2007 - FRPG 188W

## Course Description:

The emphasis of this course will be the film noir genre as it is expressed visually and thematically, and in particular the ways in which film noir represents and reflects the cultural conditions of the time in which it is produced. Unlike the upbeat movies that are more typical of the classic Hollywood style, noir is often described as portraying a more realistic view of life; perhaps more accurately, film noir reflects a gritty realism about the darker aspects of the human experience. This seminar will use fiction, essays, and films to examine the noir sensibility, including its literary, cultural, and cinematic origins. The classic film noir era, which occurred between 1941 and 1958 will be studied. Additionally, the recent reemergence of noir films will be examined, as well as the themes and issues that are emphasized in these recent films. Why has a genre that appeared for the first time during the period of post World War II disillusionment, suddenly become so prevalent in the 90s? Students will explore topics such as the origins of film noir including its literary, artistic, and political roots; the noir narrative and visual style; the cultural, historical, psychological, sociological, and gender issues that are typically reflected in noir narratives. Subsequently, students will research a particular topic related to film noir and write a research paper based on their findings.

## Course Texts:

### Non-Fiction:

#### Text:

Silver, Alain, and James Ursini. Film Noir Reader. New York: Limelight Editions, 1996.

### Fiction:

Cain, James M. The Postman Always Rings Twice. New York: Knopf, 1934.

**Essays: Course Pack (CP):** (arranged in the order you will read them)

**Belton, John.** "Film Noir: Somewhere in the Night." From American Cinema/American Culture. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994.

**Schatz, Thomas.** "The Hardboiled Detective Genre." From Hollywood Genres. New York: Random House, 1981.

**Flinn, Tom.** "The Big Heat and Big Combo: Rogue Cops and Mink-Coated Girls." Velvet Light Trap. 11, 1974.

**Chafe, William H. and Harvard Sitkoff, ed.** "Selected Readings." A History of Our Time: Readings on Postwar America. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

**May, Elaine Tyler.** "War and Peace: Fanning the Home Fires." From Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era. New York: Basic Books, 1998.

**Rainer, Peter.** "On Psychonoir." From They Went Thataway: Redefining Film Genres. Richard T. Jameson, ed. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1994.

**Hunter, Stephen.** From Ed Gorman, ed. "Kill Me Again: The Rise of Nouveau Noir." The Big Book of Noir. New York: Carroll and Graff, 1998.

**Place, Janey.** "Women in Film Noir." From E. Ann Kaplan, ed. Women in Film Noir. London: BFI, 1978.

**Krutnik, Frank.** "Masculinity and Its Discontents." From Frank Krutnik, In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity. New York: Routledge, 1991.

**Rich, B. Ruby.** "Dumb Lugs and Femmes Fatales." Sight and Sound. V. 5, November 1995.

**Strauss, Bob.** "Film Noir Seduces the '90s." The Sunday Boston Globe. April 23, 1995.

**Cobb, Sharon Y.** "Writing the New Noir Film." From Alain Silver and James Ursini. Film Noir Reader 2. New York: Limelight Editions, 1999.

"**Black Magic.**" Entertainment Weekly. December 21, 2001.

**Films:****Classic Noir**

Maltese Falcon (1941)

Scarlet Street (1945)

Detour (1945)

The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946)

The Big Heat (1953)

Kiss Me Deadly (1955)

Sunset Boulevard (1950)

**Neo-noir**

Taxi Driver (1976)

Body Heat (1981)

Chinatown (1974)

Red Rock West (1993)

Fargo (1996)

Pulp Fiction (1994)

Memento (2001)

Sin City (2005)

Brick (2005)

Who Framed Roger Rabbit (1988)

**Possible Research Topics:**

1. The Film Noir Family Tree: German expressionism, Italian neo-realism, pulp fiction, hard-boiled detective fiction; specific authors (Dorothy Hughes, James M. Cain, Dashell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Jim Thompson), specific directors (Fritz Lang, Alfred Hitchcock, Billy Wilder, John Dahl, Joel and Ethan Coen, Michael Mann, Quentin Tarantino, David Lynch, Martin Scorsese) etc.
2. The Noir Style: Narrative, dialogue, setting, visual style (lighting, camera angles, camera placement), techniques that are used to portray a sense of realism, realism vs. formalism, elements of form and content, etc.
3. Noir Psychological Themes: Moral compromise, obsession, obsessive love, neurotic and psychotic behaviors, relationship and sexuality issues, violence, hopelessness, fate, alienation, existential angst, relationship angst, post-war traumatic stress, post-war disillusionment, etc.
4. Noir Sociological Themes: Crime, violence, urban problems, police corruption, disillusionment with traditional American values, working class struggles, the criminal element in society, representations of the American family, etc.

Possible research topics continued

5. Noir Historical Themes: Classic noir—historical and economic issues of the 40s and 50s--Post World War II disillusionment, communism, nuclear threat, cold war, HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee), The McCarthy era, the red scare, etc. Neo-noir—historical and economic connections to issues in the 90s, etc.
6. Noir Gender Issues: Heroes, heroines, representations of women, representations of men, gender power struggles, the dynamics of male-female relationships, people in power vs. people on the margins, representations of marriage, representations of the family, parenting, etc.
7. Compare and Contrast: Classic noir and neo-noir, written text and film text, film remakes, noir films within different genres such as sci-fi, western, comedy, melodrama, animated films, etc.
8. Noir Beyond Film: Noir TV (Miami Vice, The X-Files, Twin Peaks), noir advertising, noir radio, noir music, noir video games, etc.
9. Connections to Cultural issues: How noir films or themes reflect the values, issues, beliefs, fears, or issues of the time the films were produced, compare and contrast selected elements of classic noir and neo-noir, how and why film noir connects to different decades, how and why film noir connects to different generations, why the reemergence of film noir in the 90s, why film noir connects so strongly with Gen-X Americans in the 90s, noir themes specific to certain decades, etc.
10. ???--Student initiated topic: (with permission of the instructor).

<b>FILM NOIR COURSE SCHEDULE SPRING 2007</b>
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<b>FILM NOIR: The Dark Side of American Culture</b>
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The Classic noir era is widely recognized to be from 1941 to 1958.

WEEK 1      T      1/23    Film Noir Introduction: A Walk on the Dark Side

TH    1/25    Film Noir Couples: Amour Fou  
**ALL:** Silver and Ursini p. 3-15, 17-25, and 53-63.  
**ALL:** Belton (CP)  
Scarlet Street (1945)  
 Film Reviews (CP)

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**Due: Friday January 26 by 4:00 p.m. in Whitman 161 B**  
**Research Assignment 1--Declaration of Research Topic**  
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WEEK 2      T      1/30    The Hardboiled Detective  
**ALL:** Silver and Ursini p. 37-51  
**ALL:** Schatz (CP)  
The Maltese Falcon (1941)  
 Film Reviews  
**Due:** Maltese Falcon Reaction Paper

TH    2/1    The Film Noir Style  
Detour (1945)  
 Film reviews (CP)

>>>>Silver and Ursini p. 65-75 Group 1  
 Noir Visual Style

Individual meetings will be scheduled during this week  
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WEEK 3 T 2/6 10:10 Library Research: Film Reviews—ODY Classroom

2/6 Seminar: The Noir Narrative: Hard Boiled Fiction to Film  
*The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946)

Film Reviews (CP)

**ALL:** *The Postman Always Rings Twice* James M. Cain

**ALL:** Silver and Ursini p. 47-48--# 7—Sexual Pathology

TH 2/8 Noir Sociology—Crime and Corruption in the Big City

*The Big Heat* (1953)

Film Reviews (CP)

**All--**Silver and Ursini p. 43-45--# 2--Gangsters

>>>>Flinn (CP)—Group 2

WEEK 4 T 2/13 Historical Influences on Film Noir

*Kiss Me Deadly* (1955)

Film Review (CP)

>>>>Chafe (CP) and May (CP) Group 3

TH 2/15 Psychonoir—the 50s

*Sunset Boulevard* (1950)

Film reviews (CP)

>>>>Silver and Ursini p. 77-93 and Rainer (CP) Group 4

**DUE: Monday 2/19 4:00 p.m. Research Assignment 2 in Whitman 161 B**  
**Film Review Research**

WEEK 5 T 2/20 10:10 Library Research—Scholarly Sources--ODY

TH 2/22 **Classic Noir Gloom and Doom and Angst Exam!!**

The Classic noir era is widely recognized to be from 1941 to 1958. After 1958 is typically recognized as the neo-noir era.

WEEK 6 T 2/27 Psycho-noir—The 70s

Taxi Driver (1976)

ALL: Hunter (CP)

ALL: Film reviews (CP)

TH 3/1 Gender Representations:

The Neo-Noir Woman and the Neo-Noir Man

Body Heat (1981)

Film reviews (CP)

>>>>Place (CP) and Krutnik (CP) Group 5

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DUE: Monday 3/5 4:00 p.m. Research Assignment 3 in Whitman 161 B  
Scholarly Research—Books and Journals

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### Neo-Noir in the 90s

WEEK 7 T 3/6 10:10 ODY Library Classroom  
Popular, Internet, and Alternative Sources

T 3/6 Seminar: The Neo-Noir Detective  
Chinatown (1974)  
Film Reviews (CP)

TH 3/8 Gender in 90s Noir:  
The Duplicitous Female and Dumb Lug with Integrity  
Red Rock West (1993)  
Film Reviews (CP)  
ALL: Silver and Ursini p. 307-329

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DUE: Monday 3/12 4:00 p.m. Research Assignment 4 in Whitman 161 B  
Popular, Internet, and Alternative Press Research

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WEEK 8    T    3/13   Noir Blanc?  
                                 Fargo (1996)  
                                 Film Reviews (CP)  
**ALL:** Silver and Ursini p. 331-338  
**ALL:** Rich (CP)  
**ALL:** Strauss (CP)

T    Seminar: Thesis, Outline, Intro, and Oral Presentation  
       Assignment Discussion

TH 3/15 Pulp Fiction (1994)  
                 Film Reviews (CP)  
**ALL—Cobb (CP)**

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**Due: Friday 3/16 4:00 p.m.    Research Assignment 5 Whitman 161 B**  
**Final Thesis Statement, Outline, and Introductory Paragraph**

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SPRING BREAK    March 16 to March 25

Best wishes for a non-noir break!

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### **New Millennium Neo-Noir**

WEEK 10    T    3/27    Memento (2001)  
                                 Film Reviews (CP)  
**ALL-Black Magic (CP)**

TH 3/29    **No Class: Prepare dress rehearsal presentations**

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WEEK 11    T    4/3    **Assignment 6: Individual Project Oral Presentations**

TH 4/5    **Assignment 6: Individual Project Oral Presentations**

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WEEK 12    T    4/10 **Assignment 6: Individual Project Oral Presentations**

TH 4/12 **Assignment 6: Individual Project Oral Presentations**

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WEEK 13 T 4/17 **Assignment 6: Individual Project Oral Presentations**

TH 4/19 **Assignment 6: Individual Project Oral Presentations**

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**DUE: Monday, April 23, 4:00 p.m. Research Assignment 7—Research Paper Draft: in Whitman 161 B.**

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WEEK 14 T 4/24 New Millennium Neo-Noir Continued  
Sin City (2005)  
Film Reviews (CP)

TH 4/26 More New Millennium Neo-Noir  
Brick (2005)  
Film Reviews (CP)

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**DUE: Writing Portfolio Friday, April 27, 4:00 p.m. in Whitman 161 B.**

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WEEK 15 T 5/1 Who Framed Roger Rabbit (1988)

TH 5/3 Film Noir: Summary Thoughts and Discussion

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**Due: Final Paper Due: Friday, May 4, 2007: 4:00 p.m: Whitman 161 B.**

**Due: Final Examination—TBA—Check the Registrar's web page**

## ASSIGNMENTS:

### RESEARCH PAPER ASSIGNMENTS

**(1) Select a topic for your research paper and propose preliminary questions:**

Select a specific topic which will be the primary focus of your research paper. Using this topic as a point of departure, write down three to five questions that you want to ask and answer in this paper. Lastly, in a few sentences, propose a preliminary thesis that reflects the argument you wish to make in your research paper. You may use the list of suggestions provided earlier in the syllabus for assistance, as well as the course texts and movies as a resource to help make this decision. **This assignment is due on Friday, 1/26.**

**(2) Film review research:**

The format of this paper should resemble a conversation between you and your instructor in which you discuss the film reviews that you have located. Start this paper by stating your draft thesis.

Select a film (if appropriate you can use two films) that you wish to use to illustrate your topic. Briefly summarize the narrative of this film. Then select three or four film reviews and summarize the main points of these reviews, particularly emphasizing the aspects of the reviews that most directly relate to your topic. Explain how this film addresses and/or illustrates your theme/topic/thesis. If applicable, select quotes and ideas from these sources to help illustrate and support your thesis and argument. Provide a bibliography and filmography of all sources utilized for this paper. The length of this paper should be two to four pages. **This draft is due on Monday, 2/19.**

**(3) Scholarly research: Books and Journals:**

The format of this paper should resemble a conversation between you and your instructor in which you discuss the film reviews that you have located. Start this paper by stating your draft thesis.

Select four to five scholarly sources, books and journals, that discuss the topic you have selected. Summarize the main points of these articles, particularly emphasizing the aspects of the articles that most directly relate to your topic. Select quotes and ideas from these sources to help illustrate and support your thesis and argument. Provide a bibliography of all sources utilized for this paper. The length of this paper should be four to seven pages. **This draft is due on Monday, 3/5.**

**(4) Popular, internet and/or alternative press research:**

The format of this paper should resemble a conversation between you and your instructor in which you discuss the film reviews that you have located. Start this paper by stating your draft thesis.

Select three to five sources in either the popular, internet, or alternative press that discuss the topic you have selected. Once again, summarize the main points of these articles, particularly emphasizing the aspects of the articles that most directly relate to your topic. Select quotes and ideas from these sources to help illustrate and support your thesis and argument. Provide a bibliography of all sources utilized for this paper. The length should be about three to five pages. **This draft is due on Monday, 3/12.**

**(5) Final thesis statement, outline of the paper, and introductory paragraph:**

- (a) Write a clear, concise, and debatable thesis statement. In a few sentences, clearly state what you will argue/prove/demonstrate in this research paper.
- (b) Provide an outline of your research paper that clearly identifies your main points as well as your supporting ideas.
- (c) Write the introductory paragraph that you intend to use to begin your research paper. **This assignment is due on Friday 3/16.**

**(6) Individual oral presentation based on your research**--This oral presentation should be 20 to 30 minutes in length, and will be presented to the seminar. This is your opportunity to teach the seminar about your research topic and findings. Describe your topic; relate your key findings; share your research discoveries; provide a summary of your work. You are encouraged to be creative in this presentation as well as to use audio-visual aids, such as film clips, to support and energize your presentation. Your presentation notes should be given to your instructor following your presentation. These notes should also be included in your portfolio. **The dress rehearsal presentation and outline is due on either 3/29, or 3/31 or 4/5 The final presentation outline is due on Monday 4/4, and formal presentations will be presented in class on either 4/7, 4/12, or 4/14.**

- (7) **Research paper draft and final paper**-- Review your thesis and take into consideration how your ideas have evolved and developed as you proceeded through the three previous papers. Review the information that you have gathered from your research, including the sources for the film reviews, the mainstream research, and the popular, internet, and alternative research. Using the information from your research, your thesis, and your outline, write a draft of your research paper. Whenever possible use specific examples of scenes and or dialogue from your film as well as information and quotes that support or demonstrate your key points. If you discover sources that disagree with your argument, be sure to address this dissenting opinion in your paper. Finally, write a conclusion that articulates your most important findings. Turn in this draft as well as a final bibliography and filmography. Use the MLA guidelines as described in Hacker for your bibliographic style. The length of this draft research paper should be about 12 to 14 pages. . Failure to turn in a final research paper will result in a failing grade for the semester. **This complete draft is due on Monday 4/18 and the final paper is due on Friday, 4/23.**

The final draft must have all rough drafts attached when you turn it in.

**Any component assignments that are not turned in will be recorded as a 0.0**

### C. **ORAL PRESENTATIONS**

(1) **Reading presentation groups**—Small groups of students will be assigned to teach the content of the readings for a specific noir topic. This presentation is due on the day the readings are assigned on the syllabus. Asterisks mark the readings that will be presented. Everyone must read the film reviews and readings marked "All." These groups are further described on the next to the last page of this course pack.

(2) **Small Group Presentation: Classic noir and its neo-noir revision**--the seminar will be divided into small groups that will design a presentation for the seminar on this topic. Each group will be assigned 2 films--one version that was originally produced during the classic noir period, and the other version, which has been more recently, remade. This presentation should provide insights into the more obvious similarities and differences between these two films. But more importantly, this presentation should provide an analysis of these two films by taking into consideration the context of the times in which they were produced. **Presentations should last approximately 30 minutes.**

**Always provide your instructor with a copy of your presentation notes following all oral presentations.** These notes should also be included in your portfolio.

### **3. Film Discussion Questions for Neo-noir films**

Each student will be assigned a specific neo-noir film, and required to develop at least 5 discussion questions related to this film and course content. These students will then facilitate class discussion about this film using these questions. The questions will be handed in at the end of class.

### **D. END OF THE SEMESTER REQUIREMENTS**

- (1) **Portfolio and Portfolio Response Essay**—For the portfolio, each student will write **5 film response papers, four films of your choice**, and one film assigned by the instructor. Additionally, these film response papers should be 2-3 pages in length. Your portfolio should contain all the work you have done for this course, including collected and uncollected response papers to films and events, quizzes, drafts of papers, notes from presentations, and any writing done for this class. This portfolio should be organized with a table of contents and an essay about your work in this class. This portfolio essay should also contain a personal examination and assessment of your writing and oral communication skills as they have evolved during this course. Failure to turn in a portfolio will result in a failing grade for the semester. **The portfolio is due on Friday, April 27, by 4 p.m.**
  
- (2) **Research Paper**-- the final paper is due on Friday, May 4. **in Whitman 161 B by 4 p.m.**
  
- (3) **Final Exam**—Wednesday, May 9, 2007 4:pm Whitman 161.

## Additional Course Information

### Ginny Contact Information

Office Location: Whitman 161 B

Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday--1:30 p.m. to 2:30 p.m,  
or by appointment.

Appointments: Call Ginny at 5678 or  
call Janet at 5964 or visit her office in Whitman 160

Office phone number: x5678  
Phone messages at x5678

Email: [gschwartz@stlawu.edu](mailto:gschwartz@stlawu.edu)

### Mentor Conor Contact Information:

Conor Welch  
Outdoor House at 58 Park St.  
Room 202  
CMR: 1259  
Phone: 6886  
Email: cpwelc03@stlawu.edu

### Class Meeting Locations:

Whitman 166 except when scheduled for the ODY classroom as noted  
in the syllabus.

Film noir class list Serve: [filmnoir@listserv.stlawu.edu](mailto:filmnoir@listserv.stlawu.edu)

**Note:** any note sent to the list serve will automatically go to  
everyone in the class.

**Movie Information:**

All films will be shown on the SLU television network. Check the network blue screen for times and channel locations. Whenever possible, films for the upcoming week will be scheduled for the previous weekend as well as the day/evening prior to class. A copy of all films can be signed out at Whitman 160 if you are unable to see the film at the times it is scheduled on the network.

Call 5770 for assistance if films do not play at their scheduled time. Then email Ginny so she is informed about the problem.

**Film review resources used in the production of this packet:**

Silver, Alain, and Elizabeth Ward, Eds. *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*. Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 1979.

Microsoft Corporation. *Cinemanía '95. The Entertaining Guide to Movies and Moviemakers*. 1992-1994. CD-ROM.

*Film Review Annual*. Englewood, NJ: J.S. Ozer, c. 1982.

The Internet Movie Database. Web address: [www.imdb.com/](http://www.imdb.com/)

**Course Grade Percentages:****Written Assignments**

Final Research Paper -- 20%

Component Assignments -- 20%

Portfolio 15%

(The portfolio includes all response papers, summary essay, drafts, final papers, etc.)

**Oral Assignments**

Individual Research Report -- 15%

**Other Graded Components**

Tests, Quizzes, and Exams 15%

Participation 15%

**Policies:****Attendance:**

The First-Year Program seeks to develop analytical and communication skills within a participatory community environment. You are the community, and you must come to class on time to participate. Attendance will be taken at each lecture, seminar, or other scheduled course-related meeting. We recognize that illness and unforeseen crises do arise; you may, with reason, miss four scheduled meetings during the semester without penalty. (This means four **total**, not four unexcused plus any excused.)

**Each absence over four will result in a .2 reduction in your final grade.** The crime of tardiness will result in a penalty. Three late arrivals will count as one absence. More than 10 minutes late counts as one absence.

If you are absent, you are responsible both for course content covered during class and for any new assignments, changes to the syllabus, etc., that may have been announced during class.

*Special note: This semester we will often employ less traditional forms of class Meetings. This includes study groups, presentation groups, library workshops, etc. These scheduled meetings **are** subject to the course attendance policy.*

**Reading, viewing films, and class participation:**

Complete assignments on time so that you can participate (in an informed and constructive way) in class discussion. Verbal class participation is expected of everyone.

**Papers:**

All drafts and papers must be typed, preferably by means of a word-processing program. Papers should be double spaced with a typing font size of 12 with 1 inch margins. You should save all files until the end of the semester so that anything misplaced could be easily reproduced.

If it is possible that an assignment will be late, talk to your professor ahead of time in order to negotiate an extension. Late papers will be penalized.

## Plagiarism:

According to *The SLU Student Handbook*, plagiarism is defined as "Presenting as one's own work, the work of another person -- words, ideas, data, evidence, thoughts, information, organizing principles, or style of presentation -- without proper attribution." This course will encourage you to collaborate and help each other in your writing and speaking. However, collaborative learning is never a viable excuse for plagiarism. Consult the *Student Handbook*, *A Writer's Reference*, or your instructors if you are unsure what constitutes plagiarism. Plagiarism will not be tolerated at SLU and can result in your expulsion from the university. Writing or rewriting another student's assignments for pay is a egregious example of plagiarism, as is contracting for such services. Internet paper mills often claim to provide "research assistance;" however, handing in as your work the product of such a service is plagiarism.

## Portfolios:

All film response papers, drafts, final papers, response papers, freewrites, worksheets, and exams should be Kept in a course portfolio. The portfolio is turned in as part of the final grade.

The Portfolio should:

1. Include an essay responding to the changes that you see in your academic work, including writing, research, and oral work over the semester.
2. Include the 5 graded film response papers
3. Include all of this semester's written work, both formal and informal.
4. Be neatly organized with a table of contents

Although the portfolio counts for part of your seminar work grade, failure to turn in a final portfolio will result in a failing grade for the course.

## Film Noir Reading Assignment Presentations

The goal of this assignment is to have a small group of readers teach the course readings for a specific topic to the rest of the seminar. This should be a detailed presentation which emphasizes the thesis, main points, and supporting points of the article. Especially important sections should be noted, explained, illustrated, and discussed. Whenever possible, references and connections to the film assigned for that topic should be noted; if possible, select specific scenes to illustrate the ideas of the author. Whenever possible, make connections to previous topics, discussions, or other noir films that have been used in this class. Handouts, which could serve as an outline or study guide, would be appreciated by your classmates.

Presentations should last between 20 and 30 minutes. Group members should read the article in advance, then meet to discuss the article, plan the presentation, and divide responsibilities. At least one practice session as a group is very important.

At the conclusion, one essay question that could be used in the exam is due from each person in the presentation group.

The groups, their assigned topics, and the presentation dates are listed below, but they are also noted in the day to day syllabus.

Group 1—**The film noir visual style**—due 10:10 am—Thursday, 2/1.  
Silver and Ursini--p. 65-75

Group 2—**Sociology and film noir**—due 10:10 am—Thursday 2/8  
Silver and Ursini p. 43—45 Gangsters and Flinn (CP)

Group 3—**Historical events and classic film noir**--due 10:10—Tuesday, 2/13  
Chafe (CP) and May(CP)

Group 4—**Psychological issues and film noir**—due 10:10—Thursday 2/15  
Silver and Ursini--p. 77-93 and Rainer (CP)

Group 5—**Gender issues and film noir**--due 10:10—Tuesday—3/1  
Place (CP) and Krutnik (CP)