

Scene of the Crime: Crime Movies in American Cinema

English/Cinema Studies 371

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Pat Day Rice 114 ext. 8574 william.patrick.day@oberlin.edu

Office Hours: Th 2:30-4:30

& by arrangement

The problem in a course about American movies about crime is not what to put in, but what you can leave out. Particularly in the last 40 years, crime has become such a pervasive subject in American movies--and American culture in general--that the number of movies which can be called crime movies is almost overwhelming. This course thus not a survey of crime movies. Indeed, I've assumed that many of the people who would sign up for a course like this have seen a number of crime movies; this has lead me place many very famous crime movies on the 'additional' list and focus on some lesser known movies that I think are unusually good or interesting.

The course focuses on four types of crime movies. Three of these types are organized around the central characters in the movie: policemen and private detectives, mobsters & the mafia (that is, characters who consciously choose to be involved with crime, either punishing it or committing it), and what I call "ordinary criminals," characters who seem to simply fall into crime from what we would call normal life, or for whom crime is normal life. The fourth group of films is organized around a theme, the crime movie and the con, or more broadly, the problem of knowledge.

My central interest in these movies is not as a source of information about crime, though some are based on real events and all have some social information as part of their subject, Nor am I interested in them as a reflection of American society, some sort of cultural dreamwork through which we can discern the nature of America, though we will occasionally resort to some large-scale cultural generalizations in thinking about these movies. Rather I'm interested in them as reflections **on** American culture and on other, fundamental human issues. I'm interested in crime as a cinematic and thematic language (using that term pretty loosely) which allows filmmakers (by which I mean producers, writers, directors, actors, cinematographers, anybody who is involved in making a movie) to articulate both to their audience and themselves an understanding of the world. I'm also interested not only in what these movies "say" but what it means to watch them and learn to see not only the world but ourselves through this particular lens. Or, to put it more metaphorically, to what degree is the scene of the crime a scene out of our own lives?

Schedule of Viewings and Readings

Date	Primary Movies	Additional Movies	Readings
Watching the Detectives			
2/9			"Crimes of the Self" Thomas Friedman
2/16	The Big Sleep 1946 Kiss Me Deadly 1955	The Maltese Falcon 1941 Detour 1945	"Notes on Film Noir" Paul Schrader
2/23	The Long Goodbye 1973 Night Moves 1975	Bullitt 1968 The French Connection 1971 Chinatown 1973 Devil in a Blue Dress 1995 LA Confidential 1997	"Somewhere in the Night" John Belton
3/1	Dirty Harry 1971 Silence of the Lambs 1991		
The Mob			
3/8	The Godfather 1971	Little Caesar 1931 Public Enemy 1931 Prizzi's Honor 1985 Goodfellas 1990	
3/15	Across 110 th St. 1971 Miller's Crossing 1990	Scarface 1983 Casino 1995	
3/22			
3/29	Break Week		
Ordinary Lives of Crime			
4/5	Badlands 1973	Bonnie and Clyde 1967 The Honeymoon Killers 1970	
4/12	Hard Choices 1985 One False Move 1992	In Cold Blood 1967 River's Edge 1986 Mean Streets 1973 Light Sleeper 1992	
4/19	Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer 1986 To Die For 1995	Grosse Pointe Blank 1997 Fargo 1996	
4/26	The Grifters 1990	The Sting 1973 Road to Perdition 2002	
Criminal Knowledge			
5/3	House of Games 1987 Mulholland Drive 2001	The Usual Suspects 1995 Memento 2000	
5/10			

Showings for this course are on Sunday and Tuesday nights, 7-10. The first movie listed is shown on Sunday, the second on Tuesday. All movies, including the additional movies, are on reserve.

Mechanics of the Course.

1) I assume valuable things happen in class sessions. I take attendance; I expect you to keep track of your attendance too, because "I didn't realize I'd missed that many classes" is not an excuse. We only have 39 classes, less than 39 hours over the semester. More than 4 absences will affect your grade. The issue is not why you are absent but that you have missed class, which is an essential part of the course; missing class sessions is no different than not handing in written work. In the economy of your existence, some things may seem more important to you than attending class; I recognize that and don't take such choices personally, but you need to understand there are consequences to such decisions. You may get sick or have family emergencies, but the best way to deal with that is to make sure you come to class, so if those things happen, illness and emergencies won't affect your grade.

This also means showing up on time. I'm aware that things happen, but regularly strolling in 5 minutes after class starts is a very bad idea.

2) You have to participate in the class. Participation doesn't mean talking a lot, it means being engaged in the interchange among the members of the class: asking good questions, responding to other people's questions, thinking before you talk. Talking in groups such, as a class is a skill, every bit as much as writing is. It's a skill worth having, because in fact a lot of work in all institutions gets done in that way. Being able to talk effectively in a group is, as they say, an important "self-empowerment." I know that a number of people have trouble speaking up in class. You should feel as free to consult me on strategies and methods for doing that as you'd consult me about your writing.

3) You have to form, with other members of the course, a discussion group that meets outside of class once a week. Some groups prefer to meet before discussions and/or lectures, other prefer to meet after. Right after the showing of the movie on Sunday might be a good time to meet. That's up to each group to decide. Groups should be 4 or 5 people, maximum. . Each week each group to hand in a question/comment/disagreement you've come up with together to be posted on Blackboard.

Incomplete Policy

Academic or emergency incompletes are yours to take if you want, as long as you are in good standing in the course. You don't need to tell me the story, unless you want to; I trust that you wouldn't take an incomplete without a good reason. "Good Standing" means that you have completed all the work assigned for the first module and at least some of the work for the second.

The Honor Code

It should go without saying that I expect you to hand in your own work, not somebody else's. But in this course I expect you to read each other's writing and talk to each other

about your ideas. Having a real intellectual life does not mean hiding from other people's thoughts in hopes of staying "original" but instead responding imaginatively and creatively to the influence of other people's ideas. Thus obvious cheating--buying papers off the net, using somebody else's essay from another course, lifting unacknowledged sections from other people's writing--is plagiarism. You simply can't learn anything from this sort of thing, so it violates the whole point of education. If discussions with other people in the course or in the readings you do for the course or in other contexts influences your thinking to an unusual degree, you should acknowledge them.

Writing Assignments

- * Written work must be handed in on time.
- * Late essays will be accepted at the discretion of the instructor
- * All work must be handed in to get credit for the course.
- * Hard copies of essays must be typed, double spaced, stapled together, pages numbered.
- * Backs of previously used paper is fine for drafts; final version can be printed on both sides of the sheet.
- * Essays must have a title, though they don't have to have a cover sheet.
- * References should be in the following form: (Wordsworth, "Preface" p. 2) with full citation in end notes

Initial Assignment

#1. A 1-2 page essay explaining why you're taking the course, what specifically you want to get out of it, and what you think you know about American cinema. Posted to Blackboard by Tuesday, Feb 10.

Short Assignments & Responses

I'll assign each of you 2 days (one each module) on which you have a short essay due. Essays should be about 1000 words. These essays will be posted to Blackboard. I'll also assign each of you to respond to 2 essays (one each module.) The responses, about 500 words, will be posted on Blackboard.

Viewing Journal

Each of you should keep a notebook in which you record responses to the movies we watch. These responses need not be long; half a page would be fine. These entries can pose more questions than you answer, but entries should be made right after you see the movie. I'll collect these journals periodically during the semester.

Midterm Essay

#2. 1500 words. A medium length critical essay; this essay should be a synthesis of your thoughts on the course so far, and include some of the additional movies in your thinking. Due the week before Spring Break.

The Final Essay

A 3000+ word long essay on a topic of your choice. I am open to proposals for different kinds of final projects, though they will require a proposal, a progress report, and a final report/reflection on the project. The essay will be developed in three stages.

#1 Proposal. A brief 500 word explanation of what you think you want to write about and why you think this is important. Due week 11

#2 First Draft. Due week 13. I'll read and comment on this draft. It should be as complete as possible, but I don't expect a "finished" product.

#3 Final Draft. Due at the end of Reading Period.

How I comment on your written work.

The comments on your writing will be, as one former student put it, "ambiguous." I don't do much "this is good, that's bad" commenting. The comments I make will be directed to making you think about what you're writing about, raising issues you may want to consider in revising, or writing about in the next prep essay. For specific advice on how to revise, what to do with a particular argument, etc., we should set up a conference.

Grading

Though you will get comments and responses to your work, you won't receive any grades over the course of the semester. This isn't because the grade is unimportant (if it was unimportant we wouldn't give it, would we?) but because the work in the course is part of a process, rather than a sequence of discrete units. If I am trying to encourage you to use your writing to be experimental and speculative, leading to your final essay, it makes little sense to grade it along the way.

I also think that micro-evaluation becomes overbearing and keeps people from learning how to realistically evaluate their own work, which I think is a major goal of liberal arts education.

If you want a sense of how you're doing, you should feel free to come and speak to me about your work. I will be able to tell you if you are making what I see as reasonable progress, what things you may want to work on, what things you seem to be doing best. I won't be able to be extremely precise about a grade equivalent, however.

Occasionally students will ask about a response to an essay or a final grade by saying "I worked very hard on this essay." I assume, absent clear evidence to the contrary, that *everybody* works hard. I can't evaluate anything but what I can see and hear--the things you write, what you say in class, etc. The grade in a course can't really evaluate how hard you worked, just as it doesn't directly reflect what you have learned. It reflects my professional evaluation of the work you produced. This doesn't seem at all unfair to me--it is simply built into the grading system as it exists.

On a rough scale, though, I would say that if you are doing intelligent analysis of the works we consider and are able to state your own views clearly, that is C- to C+ work. If you are able to interpret the material we are working with, discuss not only what is "said" but what its significance might be, you would be in the B- to B range. If in addition you can demonstrate a capacity for self-reflective critical work (thinking about your own way of thinking and what it means to think as you do) you would be in the B+ to A range. So these are the kinds of mental activity you will be doing in the course: analysis & response, interpretation, and self-reflection.

I don't have any grade quotas--if everybody in the course does A work, I have no problem giving everybody an A. But I want to make clear that I consider B- or B to be a perfectly good grade; if you think that anything lower than a B+ is unacceptable to you, maybe you should consider taking another course.

The Quality of Your Writing

One thing which seems to define the arts is the inextricable relationship between what we say and how we say it. This is as true in cinema as in literature. I think this also applies to critical writing in the humanities. Each essay should be interesting to read not only for its ideas but how those ideas are expressed. Therefore, how you write is an important aspect of your essay and something I take into account when I evaluate it. I'm not talking here just about technical correctness (spelling, grammar, format, etc) though those things matter. I'm talking about the quality of style and form which gives the essay an individual voice and shape. The essays you write in this course shouldn't be just machines to carry ideas but should show a rhetorical awareness of the reader and an organization based on the specific argument you're making. I'm not asking for your essay to be particularly experimental or "artistic," just to be something I, or anyone else in the course, will actually enjoy reading.