How to use this book to teach a class on Film Noir

I created this book when I was teaching a 15 week course on Film Noir. My students were all undergraduates, mainly film production majors, but also students from a wide variety of majors who were interested in mystery films. I couldn’t find a single source book that covered both the most basic and important aspects of film noir and the Hollywood studio system that created it. So I created my own and posted the chapters on web-campus. I used a course website provided by Blackboard and required students to post their answers to the discussion points on a message board as we only had time in class for a short introductory lecture and screening of a film. So the discussion after the screening was all online. I also assigned them viewings of other films as homework, which they needed to watch in order to answer the questions and discussions.

The Film Noir Teacher’s Guide is a suggestion of how to use this book to teach a standard 15 week introductory course on Film Noir. I have included basic lecture notes of what I covered in the introductory lectures and the discussion questions assigned to students each week. I have also included a sample midterm. Feel free to use this as is or change it in any way that suits your needs and wants.

Pedagogical methods:

Some teachers believe that the reading of a text should be after the lecture, as a review and deeper look into the subject.

However, some teachers believe that when students read the assigned chapter first, they can have more of a dialog with the teacher instead of a lecture.

This book can be used in either method, as each chapter introduces the movie about to be shown without giving too much away. If you decide to try the latter method, my suggestion is to assign the first two chapters after the first class. My experience has been that students will rarely read an assignment before the first class meeting.
**Film Noir Teacher’s Guide**

**Class 1: Noire comes to Light (The Maltese Falcon)**

Intro the studio system, B movies, black mask magazine, pulp mystery writers, origins of the term film noir, public life in the States during World War II.

Watch The Maltese Falcon in class.

Reading homework: Read Chapter 1 (Each reading will be necessary to answer online discussion questions).

Online homework discussion questions

- The original ending of the film had Sam Spade coming into to his office and Effie reading the paper about Shelia Wonderly’s arrest. Why did they change it – to what emotional effect?
- Does this story have a happy ending? Support your argument.

**Class 2: The Noir Hero (Murder My Sweet)**

Intro the concept of the hard-boiled lone protagonist with their own code of ethics – the American detective as an everyday man as opposed to the European super sleuth. Chandler wrote “Down these mean streets a man must walk who is himself not mean”. What did he mean by that? Look for how that is reflected in Murder My Sweet.

Watch Murder My Sweet in class

Reading homework: Read Chapter 2

Online homework discussion

- Compare and contrast the noir heroes Sam Spade to Phillip Marlowe. How do they treat their respective customers, how tough are they? Who would you rather hire? Why? Why would you rather spend time with? Why?
- Watch Farewell My Lovely 1975 and compare it with Murder My Sweet. Compare the portrayal of Marlowe, the photography, and the endings.

**Class 3: The Noir Anti-Hero (This Gun for Hire)**

Intro the concept of the anti-hero and the noir loser. Why do Americans always seem to root for the underdog? Discuss the Hayes Office, Joseph Breen and the Hollywood self imposed Production Code. Notice how the Production Code office made sure the guilty always paid the price at the end.

Watch This Gun for Hire in class. Suggested pause point and note during movie: The scene in the train yard is an early attempt by Hollywood to make the bad guy understandable and
relatable. It introduces psychology and the effect of socialization on an individual – very unusual for a B movie or any Hollywood film in fact.

Reading homework: Read Chapter 3

Online homework and discussion.

- Who are the “bad guys” in this film? Support you answer.
- Who is the hero of the picture? Make a case for them.

Class 4: The Femmes of Noir: they aren’t always fatale (Double Indemnity)

Intro the role of women in film noir – not always bad, but always strong, independent, sexy and knowing how to use it. Intro the role of women in the states during war time America – working the factories, driving the cabs, doing men’s roles for the first time. How is that reflected in Film noir? Female noir producers Joan Harrison & Virginia Vann Upp and writers Vera Casper (Laura novel) and Leigh Brackett (The Big Sleep, The Long Goodbye)

Watch Double Indemnity in class

Reading homework: Read Chapter 4

Assign students to watch the film Body Heat.

Online homework discussion

- Compare Double Indemnity to the movie Body Heat. What are the similarities and differences between the two femme fatales? What are their motives, how are their personalities different, what happens to them in the story, etc.
- Compare how much sway/control they had over the ant-heroes. Support your answers with examples.

Class 5: Directors and Studios: a Noir relationship (Laura)

Further discuss the Hollywood film factories - how everyone was on contract and the sheer number of films being made very year by so many studios. There was no TV, internet, etc. Intro Darrel Zanuck and 20th Century Fox. Discuss what the director actually does as the leader of a team of artists that make a movie together. Intro the power of the studio executive to over rule and have the last word on every aspect of every film.

Watch Laura in class

Reading homework: Read Chapter 5

Online homework and discussion.

- Who do you feel had the most influence on the success of the film “Laura”, Darrel Zanuck, Otto Preminger or the first director? – support your arguments.
Class 6: The Noir Cast (The Big Sleep)

Intro the power of the Hollywood Star in the film factory era and the lack of male stars during the war – Dick Powell, Alan Ladd and Bogart all getting roles they might never have been considered for as a result. How film noir helped change star careers – changing the audience perceptions of Bogart, Dick Powell, Fred McMurry, Barbara Stanwyck and reviving the careers of Joan Crawford and Edward G Robinson. No film can survive with only stars – every story needs good supporting players such as Bendix, Cooke, Greenstreet.

Watch The Big Sleep.

Reading homework: Read Chapter 6

Online homework and discussion.

- How does Bogart’s performance of Marlowe in “The Big Sleep” compare to Dick Powell’s Marlowe in “Murder My Sweet”? How did they play them similar and different?
- What kind of relationship is displayed between the Bogart and the Becall characters and how was this achieved cinematically?

Class 7: Noir Themes (Macao)

Reoccurring noir themes include being a loner, a disrespect for the wealthy, mistaken identity, even the good lie, justice wills out no matter who it might burn, etc. Discuss the noir themes present in Macao – how the Breen office wanted derogatory dialog towards Asians removed, Hughes always replacing people and asking for reshoots. Robert Mitchum and Jane Russell.

Watch Macao

Reading homework: Read Chapter 7

Online homework and discussion.

- What Noir Themes are evident and hidden within Macao?
- What Noir elements does Jane Russell's Julie display?
- What noir themes are in the Robert Mitchum character?

Class 8 – midterm

Show “Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid” after test. Just for fun and for them to see clips from all those famous films.
**Class 9: Noir Style; Music, costumes and art direction (My Favorite Brunette)**

Music, sets and costumes are storytelling tools. Jazz was the innovation of the day. Night club songs even when the female lead was dubbed by another singer. Music and its effect on the audience’s experience watching the film. Composers and jazz.

Noir films often used left over sets redressed. Seldom shot on location, as it was easier and faster to shot in the sets and sound stages owned by the studio. Costumes were elegant and reflected the wealth and character. The origin of the trenchcoat and why it become a symbol of noir detectives.

Watch My Favorite Brunette

Reading homework: Read Chapter 8

Online homework and discussion.

- What were all the Noir attributes used in the film? Look at the costumes, sets, storytelling devices, etc. How did they contribute to the storytelling?

**Class 10: Noir Imagery: Lighting and Cinematography (The Big Combo)**

What does a cinematographer actually do – camera framing and lighting. All shot on 35mm Kodak black & white film. No one knew how it would look except the cameraman and all would see the “dailies” the following day evening. New more sensitive film stock, new self blimped camera the BNC and the new smaller solar spot lights from Mole Richardson all allowed the film to be shot fast and look the way it did. Stories were all set in alleys, nightclubs and night so the style and look were required by the story. Films were shot by highly experienced Hollywood trained cinematographers who all grew up in big cities – contributing to the shadowy look. American realism was the art movement of the day and the directors wanted realism – not German Expressionism, which is the opposite of realism. Harry Wild, John Seitz and John Alton.

Show The Big Combo

Reading homework: Read Chapter 9

Online homework and discussion.

- How does Alton’s lighting help tell the story? Give specific examples.
- Why do you think Lewis only showed the girlfriends hand when she’s killed – to what dramatic effect does it have on the viewer? Would it have been more effective to actually show her getting shot? Support your reasoning.
Class 11: Noir Speak: dialog & first person narrative (Kiss Kiss Bang Bang)

The noir stories were almost all from pulp mystery fiction novels or short stories that featured first person narrative and snappy sarcastic dialog. Voice over narration and two films in first person subjective camera. Writers were usually assigned by producers before directors were hired. Writers became producers such as Joan Harrison, Dorey Schary and Darryl Zanuck. Noir became a way for writers to become directors – John Houston, Billy Wilder, David Mamet, Shane Black.

Watch Kiss Kiss Bang Bang

Reading homework: Read Chapter 10

Online homework and discussion.

- Who has the snappy dialog? Are they noir prototypes or wannabes? Support your reasoning with examples from the film.
- How does Black use Voice Over narration that makes it different than classic noir?

Class 12: Noir’s Rebirth & Neo Noir (House of Games)

The 1970s rediscovery of film noir but updated for the negative anti-war and anti establishment period with Chinatown, Farewell My Lovely, The Long Goodbye and remakes of other noir classics.

Watch House of Games

Reading homework: Read Chapter 11

Online homework and discussion.

- Who is the story’s femme fatale character? Why do you think so?
- Mamet’s dialog – is it too poetic? Why did he write it this way? What effect does it have on the viewer – other characters?
- Is it a “happy” or “sad” ending? Is justice served at the end? Support your answer.

Class 13: Cross Genre Noir & Noir Influence (Brick)

Discuss the influence Noir has had on future filmmakers – the snappy dialog, the loner character, the imagery. Filmmakers such as the Coen Brothers and Brian DePalma. Angel Heart mixes horror with noir Blade Runner mixes Sci-Fi with Noir Who Framed Roger Rabbit mixes cartoons with Noir Brick mixes teen drama with Noir
Watch Brick

Reading homework: Read Chapter 12

Online homework and discussion.

- What are the noir equivalents in this high school setting?

Class 14: Open

Some possibilities to pick from:

- Discuss film noir theory and criticism that began in the late 1950s but became major in US in 1970s
- Have students make a presentation on a “noir” film they watched and make a case for it being Noir, neo-noir or not noir and why.
- Review for the final
- Watch a film of the teachers choosing
- Screen a film students vote on to watch (from a selection brought to class)

Class 15: final

While a test is certainly an option, another consideration is to have a creative final project which would relate the major attributes of film noir and then have students make presentations in class. My students did all of the following.

- A poem
- A short story
- A short film
- An ad campaign including lobby cards, poster, opening night souvenir book
- A rap song
- A role playing game
1-Where did the term FILM NOIR come from?

2 – What was a B-picture?

3-What was Block Booking?

4- What was the Production Code?

5-What was The Black Mask?

6-Which film is commonly named as the first Film Noir movie?

7-Who wrote and directed it?

8-What are four traits of that the typical Noir heroes all share?
9- Who played the first Noir hero and what was the character’s name?

10- What makes a main character into a Noir Anti-Hero and name two films that feature them?

11- How did Noir films represent women in their stories?

12- The film “Murder My Sweet” was based on the novel “Farewell My Lovely”
   a) Who wrote the novel?
   b) Why did they change the name of the film version?
   c) Who was the film’s star?
   d) Who starred in the remake?

13- Who was Philip Marlowe?

14- What made “This Gun for Hire” so significant to film noir?
15 - Who were the stars in the noir film “The Big Sleep” and what about them made the film so special?

16 - Who were John Seitz and Harry Wild and what were their contributions to film noir?

17 - Who was Raymond Chandler, James Cain, Dashell Hammet and Vera Casper and what did they have to do with Film Noir?

18 - What was the major twist halfway through the movie “Laura” and what effect did it have on the main characters?

19 - Film Noir is often broken down in three periods – what were they?

20 - Two noir pictures were nominated for numerous Oscars in the same year, 1944.
   a) What were the movies?
   b) Who directed them?
c) Who starred in them?
d) How did they differ?

21- Who was Darrel Zanuck and what did he have to do with film noir?

22 – Name four story themes that often appear within noir stories.

23 – Who was Veronica Lake, Lauren Bacall and Jane Russell, what did they have to do with film noir and why were they important?

24- Name four noir films not already mentioned above (so excluding “Murder My Sweet”, “Farewell My Lovely”, “Laura”, “This Gun for Hire” and “The Big Sleep”).

25 - Who were Walter Neff and Keyes and what was their relationship?