Elizabeth Arnold  
Advisor: Elisa Glick

“Not a Comeback: The Persistence of Decadence in Film Noir”

My thesis argues that the decadent movement survives in twentieth-century America through noir films, or what I refer to as “noir decadence.” However, noir films make decadence more accessible to a wider audience through a change in perspective and more complicated depictions of class and gender. The first section of this thesis, “The Decadence of Film Noir,” compares and contrasts fin-de-siècle decadence and noir decadence through Billy Wilder’s noir film, *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). This section also discusses the shift in the narrator’s perspective to set up the discussion of narrative structure, characters, and how they come together to form a perspective that makes decadence accessible to mass audiences. “Narrative Structure,” the second section, examines the way fin-de-siècle decadent narratives are constructed and how that relates to noir decadence. The third section, “Primary Characters,” discusses the noir detective archetype, the fin-de-siècle decadent dandy, and the shared character of the “femme fatale.” Finally, the conclusion extends noir decadence into the twenty-first-century and examines the perseverance of decadence in neo-noir films. To do this, I look closely at Ridley Scott’s tech-noir, *Blade Runner* (1982).

This thesis focuses on the film *Sunset Boulevard*, but decadence exists in a wide range of movies of various genres. It spans across cinema’s many different genres and is present in films including noir films such Stanley Kubrick’s sci-fi drama, *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) to Tony Scott’s vampire movie, *The Hunger* (1983) to Baz Luhrmann’s recent adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* (2013). Though forms of decadence are apparent in films across multiple genres, the decadent interest in alienation, dark and garish aesthetics, elements of parody or satire, and distrust of women all especially resonate with film noir.

Despite similarities between fin-de-siècle decadent literature and noir decadence, there is a shift in narrative voice and archetypal characters that reflects the evolution of culture through time. Noir’s protagonist is often a private eye or someone performing a murder investigation, while decadent literature tends to follow a bored and alienated aristocrat. Such distance from decadence in the narration makes noir films more accessible to postwar consumers. The fin-de-siècle narrator is not present to the same extent of the noir narrator. Because of this, the fin-de-siècle narrator is closer to the story of the decadent antihero since the narrator is not telling a first person narrative in which they must account for their own story. Even though decadent noir films tell the decadent’s story from an outside perspective, the story of the decadent antihero—no matter the era—tends to be the same: seclusion, perversity, and luxury in excess.

Noir decadence is significant due to its ability to shock audiences, similar to the function of fin-de-siècle literature. Noir decadence is especially important because of its place in mass culture where art is mass produced and widely consumed. Through film noir, the
decadent movement continues to provide political and social criticism into the modern era.