Syllabus
V.55.0750: Film Noir as Expressive Culture

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As the U.S. moved in the 1940s from a war-time experience to a new, postwar context, works of popular culture expressed both the hopes and fears that came with that transition. For example, a series of postwar films such as the well-known It's a Wonderful Life used magic figures who descended to earth to help lost and bedraggled protagonists find their way again in the confusions of the moment. But the way in which George Bailey's American dream so quickly can become a nightmare suggests an underside to 1940s optimism. In this respect, film noir, a trend of films that started during the war but really exploded in the postwar moment, expresses a bleaker, more bitter and downbeat vision of the historical moment. Here, heroes turn into confused losers or loners caught in the labyrinths and dead ends of the city. Noir expresses tensions around urban life, around sexual roles and identity, around work and success, and so on. This course will examine noir both thematically and stylistically to pinpoint its expressive commentary on social trends and tensions. The course will also attend to the ongoing fascination with -- and frequent revival of -- noir style and subject-matter to study how the social concerns of film noir continue to express complications in the success story of America as a nation.

Readings:
Emile Zola, THERESE RAQUIN
Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, PANORAMA OF AMERICAN FILM NOIR
James Naremore, DARKER THAN NIGHT: FILM NOIR IN ITS CONTEXTS
Richard Schickel, DOUBLE INDEMNITY
Raymond Chandler, THE LITTLE SISTER
E. B. White, HERE IS NEW YORK
Philip K. Dick, TIME OUT OF JOINT
William Gibson, NEUROMANCER

Requirements:
1. regular attendance at lecture and in sections: unexcused absences may affect your grade
2. regular participation in discussion section (25% of grade);
3. a weekly journal (2-3 pp.) on the films screened in class (20% of grade);
4. a short paper (5 pp.) due 9 February (10% of grade). Topic to be handed out later.
5. a final paper (15 pp. approx, 30% of grade; DUE THE DAY OF FINALS – Thurs. May 4) to be preceded by a final paper proposal (2 pp. due: 2 March; 5% of grade) and then by a progress report (5 pp. due 13 April; 10% of grade)

Schedule (subject to change)

19 January: Introduction

26 January: Film Noir and the Culture of War-Time America
screening: Double Indemnity (Billy Wilder, 1944)
reading: Borde/Chaumeton, 1-51

2 February: Classic Conventions of American Film Noir
screening: Scarlet Street (Fritz Lang, 1945)
reading: Richard Schickel, Double Indemnity
Naremore, 81-95

9 February: American Dreams and American Nightmares
screening: It’s a Wonderful Life (Frank Capra, 1946)
Naremore, 9-39
SHORT PAPER DUE

16 February: Film Noir as Critique of the American Dream
screening: Thieves’ Highway (Jules Dassin, 1949)
reading: Borde/Chaumeton, 53-81

23 February: Other Versions of the 1940s: The Female Gothic Film
screening: Gaslight (George Cukor, 1944)
reading, Emile Zola, Thérèse Raquin

2 March: Noir Meets the Gothic: the Late 1940s
screening: In a Lonely Place (Nick Ray, 1950)
reading: Raymond Chandler, The Little Sister
FINAL PAPER PROPOSAL DUE

9 March: Noir Romance and Postwar Maladjustment
screening: Gun Crazy (Joseph H. Lewis, 1949)
reading: Naremore, 96-135

23 March: New York as Noir City
screening: The Naked City (Jules Dassin, 1948)
reading: E. B. White, Here is New York
30 March: The Explosion of Classic Film Noir  
   screening: Kiss Me Deadly (Robert Aldrich, 1955)  
   Borde/Chaumeton, 83-126

6 April: 1960s Paranoia  
   screening: Seconds (John Frankenheimer, 1966)  
   reading: Philip K. Dick, Time Out of Joint

13 April: Noir Meets 1960s Amorality  
   screening: The Killers (Don Siegel, 1964)

20 April: 70s Paranoia and the Reinvigoration of Film Noir  
   screening: Chinatown (Roman Polanski, 1972)  
   reading: Naremore, 167-219

27 April: Neo-Noir and its New Cultural Contexts  
   screening: Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982)  
   reading: William Gibson, Neuromancer
   Naremore, 254-77