

Power and Paranoia

The Literature and Culture of the American Forties

Seminar, LV-Nr. 050694, 5 CP, Optionalbereich
M.A.-Studiengänge und Lehramt (alt)

Lecturer: PD Dr. Stefan L. Brandt

Room and time: GBCF 05/703 (Süd), Tuesdays 14-16

Short description:

The American 1940s were marked by two main events which permeated the fabric of U.S. society to the marrow: the horror of World War II and the emergence of a modern consumer culture. It is from the tension of fear and hope, death and rebirth, that the Forties have developed their iconic character. The decade produced experimental masterpieces such as Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1940) and Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) as well as mass-compatible movies like *Casablanca* (1942), *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and *Samson and Delilah* (1949). The era was strongly influenced by the new aesthetics of consumerism, celebrated in popular lifestyle magazines and photography. A blossoming advertising culture lured the masses into the pleasures of consumption. In American literature, social realism in the mould of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), John Steinbeck's *The Moon Is Down* (1942) and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) experienced its heyday. Another key influence was the emergence of a *noir* aesthetic with its dire visions of lonely individuals at the abyss. Edward Hopper's famous painting *Nighthawks* (1942), which we will also discuss, epitomizes this atmosphere of disillusionment, alienation, and abjection.

Course requirements and grading:

If you are taking this course as a *Seminar*, you have to a.) participate regularly and lively; b.) be part of an expert session (and develop a 1-page handout to be distributed in class); c.) write a final paper of ca. 17 pages. Grading: Competent participation in class discussions 1/3; expert session 1/3; final paper 1/3.

If you are taking the course as an *Übung*, you have to a.) participate regularly and lively; b.) be part of an expert session (and develop a 1-page handout to be distributed in class). Grading: Competent participation in class discussions 1/2; expert session 1/2.

Note: In any case, poor attendance or class participation will negatively affect your final grade.

Deadline for Final Papers: Monday, March 15, 2010. Note: There is no (!) extension of this deadline.

Syllabus:

20. Oct. Introduction: The Paranoid Style of the American Forties

Main example:

Citizen Kane (dir. Orson Welles, 1940)

Basic reading materials:

D. Polan, from: *Power and Paranoia* (1986). [Blackboard](#).

W.W. Dixon, "Timeline, 1940s" (2006). [Blackboard](#).

W.W. Dixon, "Movies and the 1940s" (2006). [Blackboard](#).

27. Oct. The Age of Anxiety – Isolation and Self-Destruction

Main reading (required):

Carson McCullers, "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud" (1942). [Blackboard](#).

Additional text:

Carson McCullers, "The Jockey" (1941). [Blackboard](#).

03. Nov. Shadows of the Great Depression

Main example (required):

The Grapes of Wrath (dir. John Ford, 1940).

Additional text:

James Agee & Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1940). [Blackboard](#).

10. Nov. The Threat of Fascism

Main reading (required):

John Steinbeck, ch. I & VIII from *The Moon Is Down* (1942). [Blackboard](#).

Additional material:

Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) & film version (dir. Sam Wood, 1943).

- 17. Nov. Film Nazis**
 Main example (required):
Casablanca (dir. Michael Curtiz, 1942).
 Additional example:
The Great Dictator (dir. Charlie Chaplin, 1940).
- 24. Nov. Dark Comedies**
 Main example (required):
Arsenic and Old Lace (dir. Frank Capra, 1941/44).
 Additional text:
Monsieur Verdoux (dir. Charlie Chaplin, 1947).
- 01. Dec. The Art of Alienation**
 Main reading (required):
 Charles W. Millard, "Edward Hopper" (1981). [Blackboard](#).
 Additional examples:
 Online materials on Edward Hopper, especially on his painting *Nighthawks* (1942).
- 08. Dec. The United States at War – The Patriotic Subtext**
 Main film (required):
Saboteur (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1942)
 Additional text:
Yankee Doodle Dandy (dir. M. Curtiz, 1942).
- 15. Dec. Fabulous Forties Femme Fatales**
 Main example (required):
Double Indemnity (dir. Billy Wilder, 1944).
 Additional film:
Detour (dir. Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945).
- 22. Dec. Postwar Recovery**
 Main example (required):
It's a Wonderful Life (dir. Frank Capra, 1946).
 Additional materials:
The Best Years of Our Lives (dir. William Wyler, 1946).
The Atomic Cafe (prod. J. Loader, K.&P. Rafferty, 1982), available online.
- 12. Jan. Spectacular Fiction**
 Main reading (required):
 Mickey Spillane, ch. 1-3 & 13 from *I, the Jury* (1947). [Blackboard](#).
 Additional film:
The Postman Always Rings Twice (dir. Tay Garnett, 1946, based on the novel by James M. Cain).
- 19. Jan. Going behind the Facade – Fear and Death in Postwar Society**
 Main reading (required):
 Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery" (1948). [Blackboard](#).
 Additional text:
 Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (1949).
- 26. Jan. Before the Civil Rights Movement**
 Main film(required):
Pinky (dir. Elia Kazan, 1949).
 Additional text:
 Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940).
- 02. Feb. Enter the Enemy Within – 'McCarthyism' before McCarthy**
 Main film (required):
I Married a Communist (dir. Robert Stevenson, 1949).

For films, please go to the 'Mediathek', GB 03/33 (Nord). The 'Mediathek' is open Tue, 11-14, Wed, 12-16, Thur, 12-16 during the semester. Important note: Films can be checked out only over night (!) or over the weekend. Make sure you return the film the next possible weekday at 12:00!