

“A Darkness More than Night: Film Noir in the Late 1950’s, as Counter-Cultural as Ever.”

Mondays 1 p.m-2:30, September 14-October 19.

ZOOM

Instructor: Art Eckstein

The French film commentators who invented the term “film noir” defined it as those Hollywood films of the 1940’s and early 1950s which portrayed a world of violence, lust and crime beneath the placid surface of American middle-class life—a darkness always ready to burst into it. But most film scholars also argue that “Film Noir” as a Hollywood movement had run its course by 1955. The reason often given is the increasing prosperity of late 1950s America, and its increasing stern conformity.

The course will deny this. Rather, film noir continued as a powerful Hollywood movement throughout the late 1950s and into the early 1960’s; it changed and broadened its subjects, but it was still leftist in outlook, still (in one critic’s words) “tough on America”—still tough, too, on authority in general. That means our course isn’t just about Hollywood film culture. The persistence of great film noir movies in the late ‘50s says something important more broadly about American culture: the late ‘50s weren’t all prosperity and repression. Nor was opposition limited to a few poets in North Beach. “Film noir” was still powerful, and just as

“counter-cultural” as before. The Sixties didn’t come out of nowhere.

The Films for the course:

1. The ultimate standard: *Double Indemnity* (1944)
2. *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957: show business noir)
3. *Paths of Glory* (1957: noir in war)
4. *The Bravados* (1958: noir on the range)
5. *Some Like it Hot* (1959: noir comedy!)
6. *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959: noir and racism)

All six films are beautifully photographed, well-made, and well-acted. Four of them are widely recognized as great works in their own right: *Double Indemnity*; *Sweet Smell of Success*; *Paths of Glory*; *Some Like It Hot*. There are great directors here: Billy Wilder; Stanley Kubrick. And great actors: Barbara Stanwyck, Burt Lancaster, Gregory Peck, Marilyn Monroe, Harry Belafonte. I think participants in the course will find these films entertaining---but also illuminating when taken as a group.