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Osher Lifetime Learning Institute  
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Beginning with the Gold Rush in the north and the Citrus Boom in the south, California was associated with fantasies of instant wealth, boundless opportunity, and self-reinvention in a land of sunshine, abundance, and natural beauty. Fed by images of Hollywood glamour, the idea of the “California Dream” solidified in the 1920’s and peaked in the period after WWII with the massive migration to California suburbs, the emergence of car culture, the opening of Disneyland, and the technology boom.

But by the late 1930’s, a shadow version of the sunlit California Dream was taking shape and definition, pointing to a dark nightmare reality beneath the surface of the dream. To use a term first coined by French film critics, “noir” named a sensibility and a way of being in the world. It was a critique, an attitude, a mood, a language, and an aesthetic of alienation where cynicism was part of a moral code and fatalism a part of democratic faith. Noir was expressed, developed, and tested at the margins of legitimate cultural discourse: in low-budget or Poverty Row Hollywood movies, pulp crime fiction, and TV police and detective dramas.

In this course, we will discuss some foundational noir movies and texts set in California and will end with two films that influenced and reframed noir for later decades. Throughout the course, we will think about how the landscape, culture and experience of California, particularly the LA area and San Francisco, influenced, defined and in many senses, gave birth to, NOIR.

**CALIFORNIA NOIR: The Dream and the Nightmare**

*"The air was thick, wet, warm, and larded with the smell of the Bay. The buildings across the street were shapeless blocks in the fog. A policeman passed Spade without seeming to see him. Spade walked slowly toward Kearny Street, moving with the lazy, half-erected gait of a man walking in the fog."* Dashiell Hammet, on the "crooked streets" of San Francisco, The Maltese Falcon

*"Twenty-four hours a day somebody is running, somebody else is trying to catch him. Out there in the night of a thousand crimes people were dying, being maimed, cut by flying glass, crushed against steering wheels or under heavy car tires. People were being beaten, robbed, strangled, raped and murdered. People were hungry, sick, bored, desperate with loneliness or remorse or fear, angry, cruel, feverish, shaken by sobs. A city no worse than others, a city rich and vigorous and full of pride, a city lost and beaten and full of emptiness..."* Raymond Chandler, on the "mean streets" of Los Angeles, The Long Goodbye

**FILMS** (Please see the movies in BOLD before our class meeting. Films in Roman text are "optional," but I will talk a bit about them and show clips in class.)

WEEK ONE: On the Road to Noir

***The Maltese Falcon* (Huston, 1941) and *Detour* (Ulmer, 1945)**

WEEK TWO: Defining a Style and a Tone

***Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944) *The Blue Dahlia*, Marshall, 1946**

WEEK THREE: Hollywood Noir: The Dream and the Nightmare

***Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950) and *In a Lonely Place* (Ray, 1950)**

WEEK FOUR: Cold War Noir

***Kiss Me Deadly* (Aldrich, 1955) and *D.O.A.* (Maté, 1948)**

WEEK FIVE: Noir's Hallucinatory Vision

***Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1958) and *Out of the Past*, (Tourneur, 1947)**

WEEK SIX: "You think you know what's going on...but believe me, you don't."

***Chinatown*, (Polanski, 1974)**

## NOVELS

Students will read ONE of the two following novels. Your choice. (Of course, you are encouraged to read both!)

Both of these are widely available, new and used, and on digital form in some libraries.

**Raymond Chandler, The Big Sleep, 1939**

**or**

**Nathanael West, The Day of the Locust, 1939**

**Short Stories--to be determined by our class**

We will make these available to you on your OLLI Dashboard.

Dashiell Hammett, "Fly Paper," 1929

James M. Cain, "Dead Man" 1936

Chester Himes, "Marijuana and a Pistol," 1940

Leigh Brackett, "I Feel Bad Killing You," 1944

Ross MacDonald, "Find the Woman," 1946

Hank Searls, "Let's All Die Together," 1950 sf

Mike Hammer, "The Screen Test of Mickey Spillane," 1955

Helen Nielson, "A Piece of Ground," 1957