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:

Main example:
*Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles, 1940)
Basic reading materials:

27. Oct.  The Age of Anxiety – Isolation and Self-Destruction
Main reading (required):
Additional text:

03. Nov.  Shadows of the Great Depression
Main example (required):
The *Grapes of Wrath* (dir. John Ford, 1940).
Additional text:

10. Nov.  The Threat of Fascism
Main reading (required):
Additional material:
17. Nov.  **Film Nazis**
Main example (required):
Additional example:
*The Great Dictator* (dir. Charlie Chaplin, 1940).

24. Nov.  **Dark Comedies**
Main example (required):
*Arsenic and Old Lace* (dir. Frank Capra, 1944/45).
Additional text:

01. Dec.  **The Art of Alienation**
Main reading (required):
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):
Additional film:

22. Dec.  **Postwar Recovery**
Main example (required):
Additional materials:

12. Jan.  **Spectacular Fiction**
Main reading (required):
Mickey Spillane, ch. 1-3 & 13 from *I, the Jury* (1947). [Blackboard](#).
Additional film:

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):
Additional text:
Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940).

02. Feb.  **Enter the Enemy Within – ‘McCarthyism’ before McCarthy**
Main film (required):

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*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!*