English 247: American Literature and Popular Culture  
10:00-11:20, TTh, DWE 3517, Winter 2012  
Prof. Victoria Lamont, HH226  
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Office Hours: by appointment (I can also usually be found in my office  
Tuesdays/Thursdays between 12:30 and 2:00)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will explore the intersections between American literature and popular culture through a survey of literature and film about Los Angeles.

Why Los Angeles? As the home of Hollywood, Los Angeles is at the heart of the history of American popular culture; most popular American films and television programs are made there if not set there. As a result, more American films and television has been made about LA than just about any other American city. More importantly, though, is the mythology that surrounds LA. American authors have been drawn there since the early days of Hollywood, when the demand for screenwriters attracted the likes of Raymond Chandler, William Faulkner, and Nathanael West to Hollywood to work as screenwriters. These and other writers found in L.A. a rich subject for literature.

Much LA storytelling focuses on its contradictions: On the one hand, it is a dreamland--the place where the America Dream is made, literally, in the form of films that celebrate American ideals of family, fortune, and independence. On the other hand, novels such as *Day of the Locust* and *Play it as it Lays* depict LA as a wasteland: a place defined by excesses of wealth and hedonism where the American Dream goes terribly wrong. Dominated for much of its history by the film industry, LA was defined early on by unreality. In Nathaniel West’s *Day of the Locust*, characters inhabit an environment dominated by film sets and actors, where nothing feels real or permanent. LA is also haunted by the many skeletons in America’s historical closet: the conquest of Mexico in 1848, in which half of Mexico’s territory, including LA, was annexed, leaving thousands of people caught between two nations, a history that Karen Tei Yamashita mines in her novel *Tropic of Orange*. As a city built upon a desert landscape, LA exists in perpetual conflict with the environment. Thus the film *Chinatown* exposes the corruption and environmental degradation that makes possible the lush gardens of LA’s wealthy. All of the novels and films explored in this course depict LA as a microcosm of American society. In particular, LA functions as a place where the rise of mass culture threatens to undermine American civilization through its emphasis on surface over substance, pleasure over morality, self over community.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Books are available in the bookstore. I prefer that you use the assigned edition so that you can follow along in class.
Films will be shown at a designated screening, date and time to be announced; however, you may want to have your own copy, especially if you wish to do an assignment on one of them. Both are available for purchase online at a reasonable cost. Chinatown is available for rental on itunes and for purchase on Amazon.ca. Magnolia is available for purchase from Amazon.ca.

Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*
Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*
Joan Didion, *Play it as it Lays*
Roman Polanski, *Chinatown* (film)
Paul Thomas Anderson, *Magnolia* (film)

Highly Recommended: *The Little Brown Compact Handbook*. For important information about writing, formatting, and citing English essays. (Note: all proceeds from the sale of the LB Compact Handbook are donated to the English scholarship fund).

**SCHEDULE OF CLASSES**
Please bring your texts to class.

**Week 1: Jan 3/5**
Tues: Introduction to Course
Thurs: *The Big Sleep* (please read at least the first two chapters)

**Week 2: Jan 10/12**
Tues: *The Big Sleep* (please read to end of the novel), in-class writing
Thurs: *The Big Sleep*

**Week 3: Jan 17/19**
Tues: *The Big Sleep*, in-class writing
Thurs: *The Big Sleep*, group seminar (for this and future student seminars, please prepare responses to questions submitted to the class by the seminar group)

**Week 4: Jan 24/26**
Tues: *The Day of the Locust*, group seminar
Thurs: *The Day of the Locust*, in-class writing

**Week 5: Jan 31/Feb 2**
Tues: *The Day of the Locust*, group seminar
Thurs: Test #1

**Week 6: Feb 7/9**
Tues: *Play it as it Lays*, group seminar
Thurs: *Play it as it Lays*, in-class writing

**Week 7: Feb 14/16**
Tues: *Play it as it Lays*, in-class writing
Thurs: TBA

***Screening of Chinatown: details TBA

**Reading Week: Feb 20-24**

**Week 8: Feb 18/Mar 1**
Tues: *Chinatown*, in-class writing
Thurs: *Chinatown*, Group Seminar

***Screening of Magnolia: details TBA

**Week 9: March 6/8**
Tues: Mid-term #2
Thurs: *Magnolia*, in-class writing

**Week 10: March 13/15**
Tues: *Magnolia*, group seminar
Thurs: *Magnolia*, in-class writing

**Week 11: March 20/22**
Tues: *Tropic of Orange*, group seminar
Thurs: *Tropic of Orange*, in-class writing

**Week 12: March 27/29**
Tues: *Tropic of Orange*, in-class writing
Thurs: Mid-term #3

**ASSIGNMENTS**
Mid Terms: 30%
Group Seminar: 20%
Essay: 30%
In-class Writing: 20%

1. **Mid Terms**: Questions (Essay, short answer, or a combination) will be based on the two previous novels studied, class lectures, and seminars. Each mid-term will be weighted equally.

2. **Group Seminars** (Groups of 3-4): Your group will lead a class discussion using your seminar topic as a starting point (see below for topics). In preparing your seminar, you should consult 3 relevant scholarly books and/or articles (this number does not include general reference works, biographical works, or encyclopedia entries). Make sure you orally cite borrowed material (e.g. “Joe Professor says that….”) in your presentation. You should spend about 20-30 minutes presenting your material, and the rest of class time facilitating discussion. To help facilitate discussion, prepare three open-
ended questions (i.e. can’t be answered by “yes” or “no”) and email them to the class by noon on the day before class.

Scholarly books mean those published by academic or university presses and written by recognized experts in the relevant field; most books in the UW library system are scholarly books.

Scholarly journal articles mean articles that have been peer-reviewed by experts in the relevant field. To find scholarly articles, use the MLA International Bibliography database, available via the UW library website (click on Research Databases).

The seminar topic is meant to as a starting point for your seminar; please feel free to direct discussion in any way you wish, so long as you remain focused on the text. You may divide tasks any way you wish, but all group members should contribute equally to the project. Any difficulties within the group should be brought to my attention early in the process.

After your seminar, please hand in the following:
1. An annotated works cited using correct MLA citation format: After each entry, include an annotation that briefly summarizes the source and explains how you integrated it into your seminar. Information about MLA format can be found in the Little Brown handbook.

2. Written notes and/or powerpoint presentations you used during your presentation. This will be used for reference purposes only and will not be evaluated.

3. A peer evaluation: Write a brief, constructive critique of each of your peers’ contributions to the project. Email it to me after your seminar. This will help me arrive at a group participation mark.

Evaluation:
Group Mark (50% of seminar mark): Quality and intellectual ambition of the content, research preparation and integration into seminar, clarity of delivery, facilitation of discussion.
Group Participation Mark (50% of seminar mark): Intellectual contribution, contribution to workload, cooperation with others, leadership abilities, availability for group meetings and/or by email.

Seminar Topics
Seminar sign-up will take place during first week of class.

The Big Sleep. Watch Howard Hawks’ film version of The Big Sleep (I will lend you my copy to use). What are some of the major choices that Hawks made in adapting Chandler’s novel to film, and what difference do they make to the meaning of the film vs the novel? Choose specific scenes to show and discuss in class.
The Day of the Locust. How does this novel function as a critique of American mass culture?

Play it as it Lays. Using The Day of the Locust as exemplar of the Hollywood novel, explain how Joan Didion reworks the Hollywood novel from a woman’s point of view.

Chinatown. Why Chinatown? Explain how references (visual, verbal, etc.) to China and the Orient contribute to meaning in Chinatown. (Hint: general works on orientalism in American culture might be useful).

Magnolia. Explain the significance of Judeo-Christian imagery and references in Magnolia.


3. Essay: 2000-2500 words, due April 16(by email as doc. or docx file)

Choose one of the following topics:
1. Compare and contrast two texts studied in this course. Your essay topic should address a concept and/or problem discussed in class lectures and presentations, in considerably more depth than covered in class. You should consult 4-6 appropriate, peer-reviewed secondary sources. You are responsible for developing your own topic and having it approved by me. One of your texts can be the same as the one studied for your seminar, provided you do not recycle substantial material from the seminar.

2. Write an essay on a film, television episode or series, or novel set in LA, published or broadcast within the last five years. Your essay should situate your target text in the context of the course by connecting in depth to a concept and/or problem emphasized in the course. You should consult 4-6 appropriate scholarly sources on LA fiction, film, or cultural history to contextualize and support your argument. You must meet with me in person at least once to discuss your topic and research strategies. I will not accept essays on topics not approved by me in a one-on-one meeting.

Evaluation: Quality and intellectual ambition of the argument; relevance to course content; clarity of expression; use and citation of supporting evidence (must follow MLA format); essay structure; grammar, spelling, and usage; format (as per Little Brown Handbook). A 5% bonus will be awarded to essays with less than three spelling or grammatical errors and correct MLA format.

4. In-Class Writing
Every week, you will be given 20 minutes to respond in writing to a question about the assigned text. The idea here is to help you focus your thinking about the text, facilitate discussion, and enable me to assess your preparation for class. Each response will be assigned a mark out of ten. You can miss one written assignment without penalty.
Policies

Devices: Laptops for taking notes only; otherwise please keep lids down. No texting in class. Turn cell phones to silent. Anyone whose cell phone rings in class must bring donuts for everyone to the next class.

Exams: Rescheduled only in the case of emergencies documented by a medical or mental health professional. For information on appropriate action and documentation in the case of illness see http://www.registrar.uwaterloo.ca/students/accom_illness.html. Student travel plans do not constitute a basis for accommodation.

Essays: Extensions will be granted if you approach me at least one week before the deadline and propose a reasonable alternative date. Otherwise, late essays will be penalized 3%/day.

Seminars: If an emergency arises, contact me and your group members as soon as possible so we can make alternate arrangements for the seminar. Appropriate documentation will be required.

Participation: You can miss three classes without affecting your participation mark. More than that, and I will need to see medical documentation.

I do not grant rewrites or extra assignments to boost marks. Absolutely no assignments accepted after the term has ended. No exceptions.

LEGAL STUFF

Cross-listed course: Please note that a cross-listed course will count in all respective averages no matter under which rubric it has been taken. For example, a PHIL/PSCI cross-list will count in a Philosophy major average, even if the course was taken under the Political Science rubric.

Academic Integrity: In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility.

Discipline: A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for his/her actions. A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about “rules” for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course professor, academic advisor, or the Undergraduate Associate Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under Policy 71 – Student Discipline. For information on categories of offenses and types of penalties, students should refer to Policy 71 - Student Discipline, http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm
**Grievance:** A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of his/her university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Read Policy 70 - Student Petitions and Grievances, Section 4, http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy70.htm

**Appeals:** A student may appeal the finding and/or penalty in a decision made under Policy 70 - Student Petitions and Grievances (other than regarding a petition) or Policy 71 - Student Discipline if a ground for an appeal can be established. Read Policy 72 - Student Appeals, http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy72.htm

**Academic Integrity website (Arts):** http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/arts/ugrad/academic_responsibility.html

**Academic Integrity Office (University):** http://uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/

**Note for students with disabilities:** The Office for Persons with Disabilities (OPD), located in Needles Hall, Room 1132, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with the OPD at the beginning of each academic term.