

Humphreys College

NEWSLETTER SUPPLEMENT

WINTER QUARTER

MARCH 2008

OUR INTERVIEW WITH DR. HOWARD LACHTMAN HUMPHREYS INSTRUCTOR HOSTS LIBRARY FILM FESTIVAL

Adjunct Professor Howard Lachtman has been selected by the Stockton-San Joaquin Public Library to host and lecture on film noir classics scheduled for presentation this spring at the Cesar Chavez Central Library. The film series is offered as part of the Big Read, a community involvement program that focuses on a classic American novel and aids readers with displays, discussion groups, educational materials, field trips and guest speakers. In the following interview, Professor Lachtman answers questions about this year's Big Read novel and films.

What is the idea behind the Big Read?

The Big Read is a federally funded program, an initiative from the National Endowment for the Arts. Stockton is one of 127 participating cities. Our library received a \$10,000 NEA grant to match the amount raised by local support groups such as The Friends of the Public Library. The program is designed to revitalize the role of reading and appreciation of literature in American culture.

What is the reading selection for this year?

Dashiell Hammett's "The Maltese Falcon"-- the classic "hardboiled" detective novel and a landmark in American fiction. Hammett was a former private detective writing about the shadow world of a private detective and challenging his reader to match wits with him. The success of the novel took him to Hollywood and New York, to money and fame. Removed from San Francisco, where he thrived, he wrote less and less and went into a creative decline. Which is why, as the criminal mastermind of his novel says, "There's only one Maltese Falcon."



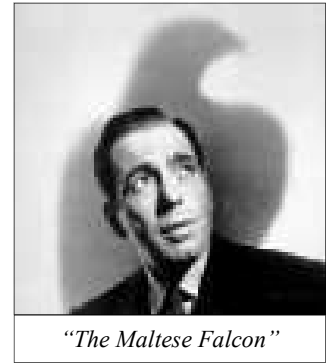
As far as I know, the 1941 film version of the novel was not the first one.

There were two forgettable film versions of the novel in 1931 and 1936. But in 1941, Warner Brothers decided to allow young John Huston to try his hand at directing a third version. The film launched his career and made a star of Humphrey Bogart whose Sam Spade is the nonpareil tough guy-- smart, suave and dangerous when he has to be. "The Maltese Falcon" is often cited as the genesis of American film noir, though a good case can also be made for "Citizen Kane." Both movies appeared in 1941. It was a very good year.

(Continued on page 2)

If there were earlier versions of “The Maltese Falcon,” why did this one succeed where others failed?

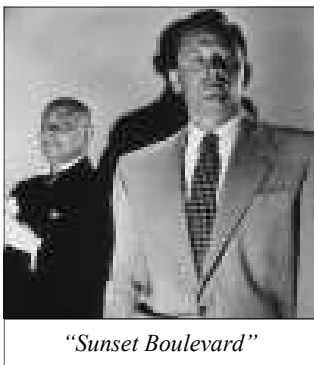
Huston knew a good thing when he saw it. He stayed rigorously faithful to the Hammett text and found ideal performers to bring it to life. He loved the novel and adapted his film with reverence for its snappy patter, lethal personalities and unexpected humor. His direction of an excellent cast—Sidney Greenstreet, Peter Lorre, Elisha Cook Jr., and Mary Astor—created some of the most delightfully unsavory characters who ever walked across a screen.



Although he lived and wrote in San Francisco, did Hammett ever visit Stockton?

He said he did. In a preface to the 1934 Modern Library edition of “The Maltese Falcon,” Hammett revealed that he had come here in his role as a Pinkerton Detective Service operative. His assignment: put a halt to a one-man crime wave by a criminal who stood so close to the ground that he was called “The Midget Bandit.” I have searched the newspapers of the era for any reference to this pint-sized stickup artist, but never found any. Hammett said that the character of Wilmer, the “gunsel” gunman of the novel, was modeled on the tiny terror of Stockton. If so, he must have seen him at close range. We will have to take his word for that--as we do for so much else.

What do “film noir” classics such as “The Maltese Falcon,” “Shadow of a Doubt,” “Double Indemnity,” “Laura,” “The Killers,” “D.O.A.,” and “Sunset Boulevard” tell us about American popular culture?

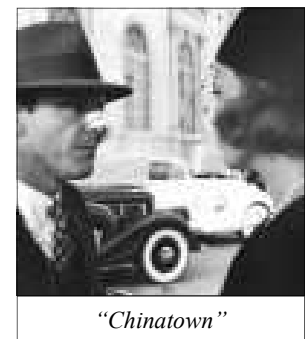


A great deal. Like the Western, film noir is a readily identifiable and hugely popular cinematic style. Its distinctive heroes and villains, slang and stereotypes are recognized (and emulated) by filmmakers the world over. American crime and detection films of the 1940s are the gold standard of noir. They have stylistic and technical characteristics in common, but there is something even more telling than their creative use of black and white photography, innovative camera angles and other techniques. Perhaps the chief distinguishing characteristic is an inevitable unfolding of tragic destiny. The typical noir character is running from the past, the law, the mob, a pursuer bent on revenge. He or she wants a new life, a fresh start, a clean slate. We Americans are an optimistic people who see no reason why we can't have it all. The pessimism and fatalism of noir reminds us that the American Dream has a dark side even for a smart operator like Sam Spade. He finds a way out

of his dilemma, but in the process loses (as he says in the film's memorable exit line) “the stuff that dreams are made of.”

What other films will be offered in the series?

We start with “Chinatown” (1974), the film that made Jack Nicholson a star and gave John Huston another history-making opportunity, this time playing the grandly villainous Noah Cross. I will not reveal what Cross is stealing except to say it connects with one of our major ecological concerns at present in San Joaquin County. We follow “Chinatown” with “Sunset Boulevard” (1950), the ultimate Hollywood noir about a struggling screenwriter hoping to enjoy a debt-free life as writer-in-residence for a silent film star plotting her big comeback. Our contemporary gem is “The Man Who Wasn't There” (2003), a terrific tribute to noir master James M. Cain from the Coen Brothers, this year's Oscar winners for “No Country for Old Men.”



(Continued from page 2)

This one touches all the noir bases but does so in a satire of small town life whose center is a barbershop. The Coens pay tribute to the classics of noir by creating an offbeat and unique classic of their own.

Where are the films shown and what does it cost to attend?

All films are free of charge to the public and shown at 7 p.m. in the Stewart-Hazelton Room (community events room) of the Cesar Chavez Central Library. The series begins April 21 with "Chinatown" and follows with "Sunset Boulevard" (April 29), "The Man Who Wasn't There" (May 6), "The Cheap Detective" (May 13) and "The Maltese Falcon" on May 30 at the Bob Hope Theatre.



"The Man Who Wasn't There"

How would you describe your interest in film noir?

It is both artistic and nostalgic. I started going to the movies just after World War Two. I was lucky enough to see the first theatrical releases of noir classics such as "The Postman Always Rings Twice," "Key Largo," "D.O.A.," "Sunset Boulevard," and "The Third Man." These films are timeless but also the products of their time. Unlike modern movies, there is little violence, no profanity and no sex. Despite censorship, their impact was powerful. They were more daring and unconventional than mainstream movies. They probed a world of moral ambiguity and uncertainty. They walked us down the mean streets that lurk behind a sunny Main Street. They made us think twice about crime and punishment. We were intrigued by their use of California locales—San Francisco and Los Angeles chiefly—as we had never imagined them. We realized that the California mystery story was essentially noirish.

Clearly, your interest in this genre got started in your childhood.

It came with the territory. I remember as a kid walking out of the Alexandria Theater with my mother after seeing the first-run of "Sunset Boulevard" in 1950. She had lived in Los Angeles during the 1920s when the film colony reached the apex of glamour and stars walked the earth like gods and goddesses. She had seen Chaplin, Valentino and other film luminaries of the Jazz Age. Their limousines, mansions, fashions, and love affairs were the talk of the town. She was very upset with "Sunset Boulevard" for the way she believed it demeaned Gloria Swanson, one of her film idols. The role of Norma Desmond called for Gloria to be victim and victimizer, a prisoner of narcissism and a relic of history, ready for a comeback that never arrived. "She was crazy!" mom complained bitterly. "Who wants to see that?" As it turned out, many did—not only the superb Billy Wilder film, but the later Broadway musical that made Norma a star all over again, just as she would have wished. "I'm still big," as she declared indignantly to the writer who remembered her as a name from the past. "It's the movies that got small."

~S. Perkner



April 21



April 29



May 6



May 13



May 30

FILM REVIEW

A FILM TO SEE: THERE WILL BE BLOOD

By Jesus A. Becerra, Library Assistant



The first twenty minutes of *There Will Be Blood* is raw in its screen presentation. You scratch your head as to where the dialogue is; all that is heard is grunts, the clicking of the pick against rock, and a loud explosion that leads to the discovery of oil in southern California a century ago..

Ultimately, the characters find their way on the screen; however, the film itself is the main character: the landscapes and lighting so raw that you feel as though you stepped into the frame of Vincent van Gogh's *Potato Eaters*, the smell of oil, the naturalistic sounds, and the images of greed—all are crude and real. This movie just jumps at you with its raw cinematography, dark contrasts of color, and the natural sounds of mining for oil in 1911 California.

The characters include Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis), an emotionally empty oilman with a mind for business, his adoptive son H.W. (Dillon Freasier and Russell Harvard) - at times Plainview's right-hand man and eventually the damaged child. Then there is Plainview's nemesis Eli Sunday (Paul Dano). Both men know what they want and will sell their own family just for the pursuit of power.

Director, writer, and producer Paul Thomas Anderson was inspired by Upton Sinclair's famous novel *Oil!* (1927), the latest of many American films inspired by the oil boom, including *The Fighting Texans* (1933), *The Oil Raider* (1934), *Boom Town* (1940, starring Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy, Claudette Colbert, and Hedy Lamar), *Apache Rose* (1947), *The Big Gusher* (1951), and *Giant* (1956, starring James Dean).

Anderson (born 1970), who grew up in the San Fernando Valley, began his career as a television production assistant. In 1992, he screened his first film *Cigarettes & Coffee* at the Sundance Festival. Four years later, he completed his first full-length feature, *Sydney* (re-titled *Hard Eight*). His *Boogie Nights* (1997) was praised by some critics as the "best film of the year, if not the decade." Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999) received three

Academy Award nominations: for Best Actor in a Supporting Role (Tom Cruise), Best Original Song, and Best Original Screenplay.

Anderson is known for working with the same actors such as Philip Seymour Hoffman, Philip Baker Hall, John C. Reilly, Melora Walters, Luis Guzmán, or Julianne Moore. *There Will Be Blood*, however, with a few exceptions, does not feature any of his favorites. This time, he chose Oscar-winning Day-Lewis (Best Actor in a Leading Role in *My Left Foot: The Story of Christie Brown*, 1989) for the first time. Day-Lewis (born 1957) accepted roles in only four movies during the last decade. After starring in *The Boxer* (1997), he settled in Italy, before Martin Scorsese cast him – after five years of actor's semi-retirement – as Bill the Butcher in *Gangs of New York* (2002). After *Gangs*, Day-Lewis appeared just in *The Ballad of Jack and Rose*, written and directed by his wife Rebecca Miller in 2005. Two years later, he emerged in *There Will Be Blood*.



Day-Lewis's performance won the Oscar at this year's 80th Academy Awards, for Best Actor, while Robert Elswit won for Best Achievement in Cinematography. The movie missed two prestigious awards, Best Picture and Best Director. Awards aside, the film left an iconic imprint on me as well as millions of others who watched it. The movie is also a departure for Anderson, whose work is often set against more modern-day situations—with dysfunctional, self-absorbed Californians. *There Will Be Blood* is quieter in its approach, but loud in its critical message of greed and corruption.

There are very few films where the director of photography paints with a natural eye that is both raw and evocative, as does Robert Elswit, who has worked with Anderson as the cinematographer since his *Hard Eight*. (A year ago, Elswit was nominated for Best Cinematographer for *Good Night, and Good Luck*.)

In the middle of watching *There Will Be Blood*, I found myself jotting down in my iPhone the first thoughts that came to mind. Because



(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 4)

the film jumped at me, this was how I first saw it: “there will be blood... mad men on oil and twisted promises.” I found this movie iconic in every sense of the word. While it marveled like the great films of the Studio Era of the 1920s-1960s, it was modern in its usage of color and light. To be blunt: if your attention span needs words and some storyline right away, refrain from watching, but if you are patient and allow the picture to tell its story, you will be immersed in this masterpiece.



The film bears many elements of film history in its storyline, wide-open cinematography, ear-numbing explosions, and a respect for the silent-film era, when a facial image was worth a thousand words.



LIBRARY & LEARNING CENTER

LIBRARY HOURS

Monday–Thursday 8:00 a.m.–9:30 p.m.

Friday 8:30 a.m.–8:30 p.m.

Saturday 8:30 a.m.–2:30 p.m.

For more information contact

Humphreys College & Learning Center

Phone: (209) 235-2933, (209) 235-2907

Email: AskYourLibrarian@humphreys.edu

www.humphreys.edu/library



Humphreys

COLLEGE

www.humphreys.edu

Main Campus

6650 Inglewood Avenue

Stockton, CA 95207

209.478.0800

Fax 209.478.8721

Branch Campus

3600 Sisk Road, Suite 3-A

Modesto, CA 95356

209.543.9411

Fax 209.543.9413

Humphreys College Newsletter *Supplement*, March 2008

Stanislav Perkner, Editor, sperkner@humphreys.edu

Cynthia Becerra, Co-Editor, cbecerra@humphreys.edu

Leslie Walton, Executive Editor, lwalton@humphreys.edu