



CRIME AND THE MOVIES

Taught by Nat Kernell

We have an embarrassment of riches here. This course will be a mixed bag of true crime, literary fiction, topics “ripped from the headlines” and, above all, film. Hard telling where we'll end up (truth in advertising here), but we will begin by studying actual crimes and movies inspired by them. The Snyder-Gray murder plot and *Double Indemnity*, Charles Starkweather's rampage and *Badlands*, the Rosenberg case and *The Book of Daniel* are at the top of my list. But wait, there's more. Many of the best movies are not based on actual crimes, and many of the “best” crimes have no movies made about them. What if the class wrote a film script about a “neglected” murder case from the past, like that of the East Side Boys or Charles Becker? Cinematic masterpieces like *Scarlet Street* and *Chinatown* have no real-world equivalents. Others are based on works of literary fiction, *The Maltese Falcon* and *A Place in the Sun*. If I decide it will not provoke a mutiny, I may have the class read Theodore Dreiser's *American Tragedy* or a large piece of it. Dreiser's writing style is god-awful, but he has a Dostoevskian way of getting under the skin of characters. Both authors were Scorpios, by the way, explaining their depth perception in matters of motive.

A sidebar topic in this course may be a study of the film genre known as *film noir*, “dark film,” whose normal subject matter is abnormal, with a heavy emphasis on crime. The term is adapted from *roman noir*, meaning an American-style detective novel, and much film noir in fact concerns the voiced-over case files of tough-guy detectives like Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe. But film noir also evokes a style and a mood, as you know if you have watched examples like *Dark Passage* or *Night and the City*. Shown on page, Barbara Stanwyck as Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* and Ruth Snyder, her real-world counterpart. Both were evil vamps who schemed to kill their husbands and pin the murder on their weak-willed lovers. Phyllis got shot by her intended fall guy; Ruth was treated to an indoor cookout in Sing Sing Prison. We'll start here and take it from there.