

The Spectacle of Monsters: Crime, Deviance, and the Media in American Culture

From western outlaws and public enemies of the Great Depression to the war on drugs and mass incarceration of racial minorities: Crime and punishment have long-since occupied a central position in the socio-cultural fabric of the United States. This seminar investigates criminality and social deviance by asking about their representations as pleasure or spectacle in various media formats. We will work with a diversity of theoretical approaches and sources, including Truman Capote's non-fiction novel *In Cold Blood*, racialized representations of perpetrators and victims in police photography (mugshots), the psychology of 'missing white woman syndrome,' as well as true crime podcasts and investigative journalism. Introducing an additional analytical level, the seminar will survey actual cases that will help us to understand how race, class, and gender dynamics inform representations of criminality.

Course Objectives

This seminar is meant to open up and deepen students' familiarity with important aspect of US literature and culture with the goal

- to understand and productively discuss the social, political, cultural, historical, and literary dimensions of criminality and/as entertainment products
- to develop an appreciation for various analytical approaches and perspectives as part of the methodological plurality of literary studies
- to develop research interests and pursue them in academic research, writing, and presenting

Requirements & Grading

The seminar consists of a topical phase from April 4 to June 20 and a subsequent project phase during which I offer optional online consultations for your presentation and essay. To earn credit for the seminar, you are expected to:

- **attend** class on a regular basis
- **prepare** the readings for each session and bring the assigned texts to class
- **participate** in discussions and exercises
- **pass** the *Prüfungsvorleistungen (PVL)*
- **pass** the *Prüfungsleistung / Projektarbeit*

Prüfungsvorleistungen (PVL)

Reading responses to the upcoming session's readings:

- Out of our 11 topical sessions (not counting the introduction), chose 5 sessions for which to write a reading response.
- Responses of 1–2 paragraphs should discuss aspects you find interesting, (dis)agree with, and questions you feel should be discussed in class.
- Responses are due **Sunday at 11am**, i.e. 24 hours before class via Moodle where they will be available for all participants to read and comment.
- Responses should only contain your own ideas.
- Summarizing readings will lead to failing the PVL.
- Make sure to keep track of your completion rate during the semester to ensure you have 5 responses by the end.

PVL are graded on a pass/fail basis and must be passed to be eligible for the *Prüfungsleistung*. Late submissions can only be accepted in cases of sickness verified by a doctor's certificate.

Prüfungsleistung

Your LC-II module grade is based on a lecture exam (*Klausur*, 50%) and a seminar project (*Projektarbeit*, 50%) in one seminar. The *Projektarbeit* consists of:

1. **Presentation** (30%) due by **July 13**: 10 minutes, discuss your research project for the essay but not the topic itself; use PowerPoint slides or similar format with built-in audio and optional video recording, uploaded to Moodle
2. **Essay** (70%) due by **August 24**: 10 pages, MLA 8 style, 12-point Times New Roman, 1.5 spacing, 1.0 inch margins, .doc(x) or .odt, uploaded to Moodle

Both parts of the *Projektarbeit* must be completed regardless of individual grades. Students must choose in which seminar to prepare their project by **June 13**. Write a brief email to the respective instructor or inform them personally. This should also include a short description of your project idea.

Code of Conduct

The seminar enforces the American Studies Leipzig code of conduct (see https://americanstudies.uni-leipzig.de/curriculum/code_of_conduct). You are strongly encouraged to freely share your opinions and ideas in class. Academic practice in the humanities thrives in a culture of open discourse among peers with diverse perspectives and opinions.

Course Materials

The novels *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote (1965) and *Whatever* by Michel Houellebecq (1994) must be purchased. Movie screenings will take place via Zoom. If you cannot make it to a screening, you must buy/stream the respective film yourself. All other materials are available on Moodle.

General Trigger Warning

This seminar deals with matters of crime and delinquency, hence materials may generally include depictions of violence and/or abuse. Checking potentially distressing content ahead of time (e.g., on services like [Does the Dog Die?](#)) is your own responsibility. If you do not wish to be confronted with any of the above topics please consider choosing another seminar.

Syllabus

1	Apr 4	<i>Introduction: Media & Crime</i>	Jewkes and Linnemann, "Theorizing Media and Crime" (2017) <i>Seminar overview, requirements, introductions, Q&A</i>
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2	Apr 11	<i>Framing Criminality</i>	<p>CASE FILE: KYLE RITTENHOUSE</p> <p>Seltzer, "Murder/Media/Modernity" (2007)</p> <p>Homans, "Kyle Rittenhouse and the New Era of Political Violence," https://nyti.ms/34olqSf (2021)</p> <p>Baker, "Kyle Rittenhouse and the Left's Terrifying Assault on Due Process," https://on.wsj.com/3Gc4axI (2021)</p> <p>Dave's Lemonade, "Kyle Rittenhouse and the Kenosha Incident," https://youtu.be/5KAgYmFM0xs (2021)</p>
	Apr 18	<i>No class (Easter Monday)</i>	
3	Apr 25	<i>Fact / Fiction / Faction</i>	<p>CASE FILE: CLUTTER FAMILY</p> <p>Capote, <i>In Cold Blood</i> (1965)</p> <p>Derrida, "The Signifier and Truth" (1967)</p> <p>Jensen, "Writing History: Capote's Novel Has Lasting Effect on Journalism," https://bit.ly/3zvTHL9 (2005)</p>
4	May 2	<i>Minority Delinquency & Moral Panic</i>	<p>CASE FILE: CENTRAL PARK JOGGER</p> <p>Burns, <i>The Central Park Five</i> (2012)</p> <p>Welch et al., "Youth Violence and Race in the Media: The Emergence of 'Wilding' as an Invention of the Press" (2004)</p>
5	May 9	<i>True Crime Podcasts</i>	<p>CASE FILE: MICHAEL PETERSON</p> <p>BBC Radio 5 Live, "Beyond Reasonable Doubt?" https://bbc.in/3sVARvz (2017)</p> <p>Boling, "True Crime Podcasting – Journalism, Justice or Entertainment?" (2019)</p>

6	May 16	<i>Rage Against Capitalist Machines</i>	<p>CASE FILE: TED KACZYNSKI</p> <p>Kaczynski, “Industrial Society and Its Future” (1995)</p> <p>Taylor, “Religion, Violence and Radical Environmentalism” (1998)</p> <p>Weiner, “Cabin 3 – The Unabomber Meets Thoreau at MIT” (2002)</p>
			<p>Note: With 5 topical sessions left, make sure to double-check your PVL completion rate.</p>
7	May 23	<i>White Victimhood & The Less Dead</i>	<p>CASE FILE: GABY PETITO</p> <p>Finn, “Picturing the Criminal: Photography and Criminality in the Nineteenth Century” (2009)</p> <p>Liebler, “Me(di)a Culpa?: The ‘Missing White Woman Syndrome’ and Media Self-Critique” (2010)</p>
8	May 30	<i>Digital Delinquency</i>	<p>CASE FILE: LUKA MAGNOTTA</p> <p>Lewis, <i>Don’t F**k with Cats: Hunting An Internet Killer</i> (2019)</p> <p>Bogost, “Political Processes” (2007)</p>
	Jun 6	<i>No class (Pentecost)</i>	
9	Jun 13	<i>Misanthropic Rage</i>	<p>CASE FILE: ELLIOT RODGER</p> <p>Houellebecq, <i>Whatever</i> (1994)</p> <p>Kelly, “The Red Pill: The New Men’s Rights Rhetoric” (2020)</p> <p>Deadline: Decide in which seminar you want to do your research project and notify the instructor.</p>

10	Jun 20	<i>Disturbia and the Nuclear Family</i>	<p>CASE FILE: CHRIS WATTS</p> <p>Popplewell, <i>American Murder: The Family Next Door</i> (2020)</p> <p>Murphy, “Welcome to Disturbia” (2009)</p> <p>McCarthy et al., “Danger in the Safety Zone: Notes on Race, Resentment, and the Discourse of Crime, Violence and Suburban Security” (1997)</p>
11	Jun 27	<i>Spectacles of Violence</i>	<p>CASE FILE: AMERICAN SOCIETY</p> <p>Stone, <i>Natural Born Killers</i> (1994)</p> <p>Fraser, “Road Sickness: The Case of Oliver Stone’s <i>Natural Born Killers</i>” (2008)</p>
Project Phase			
	Jul 4	<i>Consultations (online, no class)</i>	
	Jul 11	<i>Consultations (online, no class)</i>	
	Jul 13	<i>Presentation due date</i>	Upload your PowerPoint (or similar format) to Moodle
	Aug 24	<i>Essay due date</i>	Upload your essay (.docx or .odt) to Moodle