

American Sports Idols

From Early Physical Culture to the Super Bowl

Lecturer: PD Dr. Stefan L. Brandt, Guest professor

Basic information: Hauptseminar, 2 SWS, ECTS-Studium, ECTS-Credits: 7; application at KOS.

Room and time: AR-K 1-122/123, Thursdays, 14:00-16:00.

First session: October 18, 2007.

Modules: LCM-MA-M5.3 (Literatur-, Kultur-, und Mediensoziologie) ab 2; AmL-3 (Epochen und übergreifende Traditionsstränge) ab 4; ENG-GHR-M5.2 (Texte und Medien) ab 4; ENG-GYM-M7.1 (Literatur-, Kultur- und Medientheorie) ab 4; ENG-BK6.1 (Texte und Medien).

Short description: The cultural history of the American 20th century is also a history of sports idols – iconic figures who served as role models of the American way of life, and, not seldom, national identity. When Japanese war sympathizers demonstrated against the U.S. in the early Forties, they did not shout »Down with Roosevelt« but »Down with Babe Ruth« (referring to the legendary baseball player George Herman Ruth). To this day, sports heroes are often constructed by the media as role models for girls and boys. The fascination of athletes such as Muhammad Ali and Lance Armstrong is not unlike that of action stars and other film heroes. This course will investigate the cultural background of this obsession, beginning with the fitness craze in Victorian America and the cult of bare-knuckle prize-fighting around the turn of the century. Other sessions will deal with the constitution of baseball as an ›all-American sports,‹ ethnic masculinity and the construction of a black counter-imagination, the revolt of the white athlete in the 1990s, and the development of the ›body machine‹ in professional body-building. We will specifically deal with the question why some American sports seem qualified as vehicles of cultural (and national) self-formation and why some athletes are constructed by the media as role models (and others are not). Movies to be discussed in class include *Pat and Mike* (1952), *Rocky* (1976), and *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (2001), in which the status of the American sports idol is illuminated and, to some extent, put into question.

Credit requirements:

For 5 or 7 credit points: regular attendance, lively participation in class discussions, and at least 10 entries in the discussion forum before the session (30%), an oral presentation as part of an expert group (30%), and a final paper (10-12 pgs. / 17-20 pgs.) (40%). For 2 credit points: attendance, participation in class discussions, and 9 entries in the discussion forum before the session (50%), oral presentation as part of an expert group (50%).

Deadline for Final Papers: Friday, February 29, 2008. Note: There is no (!) extension of this deadline.

Syllabus:

- 18. Oct. Introduction: American Sports Idols**
- 25. Oct. American Sport Culture: The Social Dimension**
Michael Novak, »American Sports, American Virtues« (2002), 34-49.
- 01. Nov. No class (Allerheiligen)**
Relax and enjoy!
- 08. Nov. The Roots of American Sport Culture**
Harvey Green, »Muscular Christianity« and the Athletic Revival« (1986), 181-215.
- 15. Nov. Baseball – The All-American Game**
Jack Barwind, »Baseball is a Storied Game« (2002), 22-36.
- 22. Nov. Women and Professional Sports**
Pat and Mike (film, dir. George Cukor, 1952) *
- 29. Nov. Boxing – Race and Manliness**
Gerald Early, »The Black Intellectual and the Sport of Prizefighting« (1994), 5-45.
- 06. Dec. The »Greatest Athlete on Earth« Meets Hollywood**
Ali (film, dir. Michael Mann, 2001) *
- 13. Dec. Boxing and the American Dream**
Rocky (film, dir. John G. Avildsen, 1976) *
- 20. Dec. Basketball – Youth Culture and Black Masculinity**
Eva Boesenberg, »Who’s Afraid of Shaq Attack?« (1998), 681-91.
- Christmas break!**
- 10. Jan. Bodybuilding – The Cult of the Body**
Pumping Iron (film, dirs. George Butler & Robert Fiore, 1977) *
- 17. Jan. Tennis – Revolt of the White Athlete**
Kyle Kusz, »Image is Not Everything: Andre Agassi, Generation X, and White Masculinity« (2007), 17-41.
- 24. Jan. Women’s Bodybuilding and the Reconfiguration of Gender**
Lesley Heywood, »Hard Times: The Pornographic and the Pathetic in Women’s Bodybuilding Photography«, from *Bodymakers* (1998), 91-130.
- 31. Jan. Cycling – The Extreme Athlete as a Survivor**
Kyle Kusz, »Lance America: Interrogating the Politics of the National Fantasy of Lance Armstrong« (2007), 137-172.
- 07. Feb. Skateboarding – Class and Ethnicity in Contemporary America**
Dogtown and Z-Boys (film, dir. Stacy Peralta, 2001)