

# THE CITY IN CRISIS

## URBAN NIGHTMARES IN U.S. AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

**Lecturer:** PD Dr. Stefan L. Brandt

**Room and time:** H-H-A 6118/19, Thursdays 16-18

**Course type:** Hauptseminar

**Modules:** Gym: M 7.3: Literatur und Kultur: Spezialisierung / Intra-und interkulturell kodierte Texte; Berufskolleg: M 6.2: Literatur und Kultur: Spezialisierung / Intra-und interkulturell kodierte Texte; Bachelor M 7.1 -Kulturtheorien und Gender Studies: Kulturtheorien

**First session:** April 15, 2010

**Course description:** This course investigates the history of ‘urban crises’ in U.S. American culture from the beginnings of the nation state to the postmodern era. Looking at representations of the American city as a site of terror, devastation, and moral disintegration, we will ask to what extent this ‘dark’ image of the American city has come to symbolize the abysses of the ‘American Dream.’ Why has the city been utilized in so many literary and cultural texts as such a suitable metaphor for the shortcomings and disappointments of the promises of America? Which lessons are to be learned by readers from these texts? Is the effect simply disillusionment, or do the authors deploy aesthetic and narrative patterns that lead to a more complex understanding of urban experience in the USA? In contrast to the majority of sympathetic depictions of the city as a sign of possibility and self-realization, these gloomy portrayals rather convey the impression of America as a nightmare. We will explore themes such as corruption, epidemic disease, immigration, social decay, and poverty in literary and cultural texts about American cities. Examples will include Upton Sinclair’s novel *The Jungle* and Jacob Riis’s photojournalist piece *How the Other Half Lives*. In later sections, we will deal with the American city during 1920s and 30s (*The Day of the Locust*) and New York City after 9/11 (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*). In addition to literature, we will also examine a number of photographs and especially works of cinema.

**Grading:** For 5 or 7 CP: regular attendance, participation in discussions, at least nine entries in the discussion forum (1/3), oral presentation as part of an expert group (1/3), and final paper (8-10/ 15-17 pages) (1/3). For 2 CP: attendance, participation in discussions, at least seven entries in the discussion forum (50%), oral presentation as part of an expert group (50%).

**Deadline for Final Papers:** Friday, August 31 (Tuesday), 2010. Note: There is no extension of this deadline. Please throw papers into my box (2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the AR-H building) or send them in postal form. Do not (!) send papers via email.

### Syllabus

#### **15 April Introduction: The City in Crisis**

Basic texts:

J.K. Hadden, L.H. Masotti & C.J. Larson, “Metropolis in Crisis” (1967).<sup>1</sup>

Lewis Mumford, “The Disappearing City” (1956).

#### **22 April Decay and Death – The City as a Source of Epidemics**

Main text (required):

C.B. Brown, *Arthur Mervyn, or, Memoirs of the Year 1793* (1799/1800), preface, ch. I, II, VII, XVI.

#### **29 April The Gothic City – Exploring the Dark Side**

Main text (required):

Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man of the Crowd” (1840).

Reference text (optional):

Herman Melville, “Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street” (1853).

#### **06 May The Ghetto – Immigration, Poverty, and Class**

Main text (required):

Jacob Riis, excerpts from *How the Other Half Lives* (1890).

Reference text (optional):

Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (1906), ch. 1, 2, 22.

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<sup>1</sup> All texts for this course are available on the BSCW server. <http://bscw.avmz.uni-siegen.de/>

- 13 May**      **Ascension Holiday (Christi Himmelfahrt)**  
*Relax and enjoy!*
- 20 May**      **Revising the American Dream – Hollywood as ‘Nightmare City’**  
Main text (required):  
Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust* (1939), ch. 1, 2, 14, 27.  
Additional materials (optional):  
*The Day of the Locust* (dir. John Schlesinger, 1975) & *Mulholland Drive* (dir. David Lynch, 2001).
- 27 May**      **The City as ‘Moloch’ – The Technologies of Alienation and Disembodiment**  
Main text (required):  
Allen Ginsberg, “Howl” (1955).  
Reference texts (optional):  
Jack Kerouac, *The Town and the City* (1950), ch. 3.  
David Leavitt, “The Crane-Child,” from: *The Lost Language of Cranes* (1986).
- 03 June**      **Feast of Corpus Christi (Fronleichnam)**  
*Relax and enjoy!*
- 10 June**      **The Noir City – Hardboiled Detectives and Gangsters in Pulp Fiction**  
Main film (required):  
*L.A. Confidential* (dir. Curtis Hanson, 1997).  
Reference texts (optional):  
*Asphalt Jungle* (dir. John Huston, 1950).  
Nicholas Christopher, “Night and the City.” From: *Film Noir and the American City* (1997).
- 17 June**      **The City as Psychological Frontier – Racism and Social Injustice**  
Main text (required):  
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952), prologue, ch. 1 & 20.  
Reference texts (optional):  
James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son” (1953).  
Robert Butler, “The City as Psychological Frontier” (1995).
- 24 June**      **Apocalyptic Cities – Fighting against the Underworld**  
Main film (required):  
*The Omega Man* (dir. Boris Sagal, 1971).  
Additional materials (optional):  
Richard Matheson, *I Am Legend* (1954), ch. 2, 20, 21 & *I Am Legend* (dir. Francis Lawrence, 2007).
- 01 July**      **Cities on the Edge of Time**  
Main film (required):  
*Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982).  
Additional materials (optional):  
*Dark City* (dir. Alex Proyas, 1998).  
Scott Bukatman, “Science Fiction in the City” (1997).
- 08 July**      **The Postmodern City – Consumption and Estrangement**  
Main text (required):  
B.E. Ellis, *American Psycho*: “April Fools”, “Dry Cleaners”; “Killing Child at Zoo”, “At Harry’s” (1991).  
Additional materials (optional):  
Mike Featherstone, “City Cultures and Postmodern Lifestyles” (1991).  
*Party Monster* (dir. F. Bailey & R. Barbato, 2003).
- 15 July**      **The Fragmented City – Violence and Social Tensions**  
Main film (required):  
*Crash* (dir. Paul Haggis, 2004).  
Additional materials (optional):  
*Do the Right Thing* (dir. Spike Lee, 1989).  
Hsuan L. Hsu, “Paul Haggis’s *Crash*” (2010), [english.ucdavis.edu/people/directory/hlhsu/Hsu\\_crash.pdf](http://english.ucdavis.edu/people/directory/hlhsu/Hsu_crash.pdf).
- 22 July**      **9/11 – Cultural Trauma and Renewal**  
Main text (required):  
Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005): pp. 34-44; 86-99; 234-259; 262-284.  
Additional materials (optional):  
*World Trade Center* (dir. Oliver Stone, 2006).  
Robin Morgan, “New York City: The Day After” (2001).