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


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 (2nd 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).¹
   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.

¹ 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):**

27 May  The City as ‘Moloch’ – The Technologies of Alienation and Disembodiment
   **Main text (required):**
   **Reference texts (optional):**
   Jack Kerouac, *The Town and the City* (1950), ch. 3.

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):**
   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):**
   **Reference texts (optional):**
   James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son” (1953).

24 June  Apocalyptic Cities – Fighting against the Underworld
   **Main film (required):**
   **Additional materials (optional):**

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):**
   **Additional materials (optional):**
   Mike Featherstone, “City Cultures and Postmodern Lifestyles” (1991).

15 July  The Fragmented City – Violence and Social Tensions
   **Main film (required):**
   **Additional materials (optional):**

22 July  9/11 – Cultural Trauma and Renewal
   **Main text (required):**
   **Additional materials (optional):**
   *World Trade Center* (dir. Oliver Stone, 2006).