

# COMS 633: Crime, Media and Culture

Fall 2006

Wednesdays 2:30-5:30pm

Prof. Carrie A. Rentschler

Department of Art History and Communication Studies

Office: W-115A Arts Building

Office Hours: By appointment (I am often in my office on Mondays and Wednesdays, 12-2pm)

Email: [carrie.rentschler@mcgill.ca](mailto:carrie.rentschler@mcgill.ca)

Office Phone: 398-4932

**Course Description:** It has become a truism today to say that we live in a “culture of fear,” a “risk society” or as neo-conservative critic Charles Sykes has proclaimed, “a nation of victims.” Such discourses of fear and risk are deeply indebted to the politics of crime, particularly of the punitive, racist variety that emerged through the U.S. war on crime and more recently in Canadian “tough on crime” political discourse. But what does it mean to live in a culture of fear? *Whose* fears, of *which* crimes (if crimes at all) are being represented in claims about a fear-stricken social order?

This seminar critically examines the social constructions of crime, fear, criminality, victims, victimization, and punishment in modern media culture – paying particular attention to the ways that the politics of punishment and retribution have achieved such visibility and apparent dominance in U.S. and Canadian culture, while other means of politicizing crime and victimization remain under-represented. Seminar participants will explore these topics through analysis of powerful cultural narratives and media portrayals of crime and punishment, and readings in recent political and social theories of punishment, victimization and citizenship. Special emphasis will be placed on the ways crime has been linked to the emergence of several emergent media forms and their conventionalized formats, from daily newspapers in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and photography in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to present-day reality television programming and closed circuit television surveillance systems.

Seminar time will be divided between short lectures, class discussion, and media demonstrations. Students will help lead class discussion, provide media examples for discussion, and write one short essay and one longer seminar paper. Assignments are described in more detail below.

**Course Readings:** A packet of readings has been prepared for this course. In addition to the photocopy packet, four required books have been ordered and will be available for purchase at Paragraph bookstore (on the corner of McGill College and Sherbrooke St.).

**Books to Purchase/Borrow:**

Stanley Cohen (2004). *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition

Michel Foucault (1979). *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage.

Steve Macek (2006). *Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right and the Moral Panic over the City*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Carol Stabile (2006). *White Victims, Black Villains: Race and Gender in U.S. Crime News*. London: Routledge.

**Course Assignments and Grading Weight:** The following writing and presentation assignments constitute the whole of required work over the seminar.

**Participation (10% of final grade):**

I expect everyone to participate regularly in class discussion and to show up for every seminar meeting. Come to seminar prepared to discuss and ask questions of the readings every week. I will establish a listserv for the course and I encourage you to post there with additional comments on the course materials, and to make other contributions. When evaluating student participation in seminar, I distinguish between the quantity of comments made and their quality – quality matters more.

See the session on discussion etiquette on p. 4 of the syllabus for more information on my expectations for class interaction. Take note: good discussion is a skill we learn, and it requires practice.

**In-Seminar Discussion Leading (10% of final grade):**

Student-led discussion will comprise a good portion of our seminar time over the semester. Each seminar participant, including auditors, will lead class discussion one time during the semester by presenting to the seminar 3 significant passages from the text(s) we have read for that day (roughly a short paragraph in length each) and 3 well-developed and finely crafted discussion questions. The goal of this exercise is to grapple with important and/or difficult passages in the texts we read, and to discuss the texts more broadly through specific, directed questions the discussion leader has prepared. Questions can probe the meaning of particular textual passages, ask us to consider the relationship between previous readings and the ones currently under discussion, and offer different ways of thinking about concepts and objects of study our readings address, among other things. The more grounded in the texts your questions are, the better they will foster discussion of them. Our collective ethos in discussions should be directed toward open and respectful conversation and to understand the concerns and assumptions underlying each reading.

The discussion leader must email the passages and questions to everyone in the seminar (including me) by 5pm on the Tuesday before seminar. All seminar participants must print out their own copies to bring to seminar. Please prepare for this in advance to ensure that seminar can begin on time.

Sign up for presentation days will be held at the first seminar meeting. If you run into a scheduling problem around a presentation date, it is your responsibility to find another seminar participant with whom to switch presentation dates.

**Media Demonstration (10% of final grade):**

In our seminar meetings we will also have a “viewing/reading” of a media document presented by one of our seminar participants. This will not be the same person who leads discussion; each seminar participant will do one demonstration over the term. The goal of the media demonstration is to offer further material for discussion, in very concrete form. The best media demonstrations are those in which the presenter has put careful thought into the choice of a media document. During the demonstration, the demonstrator will introduce the media object to us, explain why it has been chosen for demonstration, and offer a

question about the media object that engages with the issues/ideas in one or more of our week's readings. Examples can be drawn from your own research, if you'd like, as long as it can be brought to bear in a meaningful way on the day's readings. Examples include film or television clips, news stories or news photography, alternative print publications, websites and online materials, and radio stories, among other media documents or practices. Please keep the audiovisual materials you will demonstrate to no more than 10 minutes, so that we have adequate time for discussion.

**\*\*Please note:** if you have any particular AV needs for your demonstration, contact the audiovisual coordinator in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies, Matt Dupuis, to check out the particular technologies you will need. His email is [matthew.dupuis@mcgill.ca](mailto:matthew.dupuis@mcgill.ca).

Sign up for demonstrations will be held at the first seminar meeting. If you run into a scheduling problem around a demonstration date, it is your responsibility to find another seminar participant with whom to switch demonstration dates.

**Short Commentary Paper (20% of final grade):**

On **Wednesday October 18**, seminar participants will turn in a 5-6 page short response paper on two readings from the course. The goal of this essay is to synthesize your thoughts and criticisms of two readings from the seminar (up to and including the 18<sup>th</sup> of October). The commentary piece can be used as a first try at an idea or critique you want to develop more fully in the final seminar paper.

**Seminar Paper (50% of final grade):**

The course will culminate with a 20-25 page seminar paper. Seminar papers should not greatly exceed this page limit. If you are thinking about writing a longer paper, you must consult with me first. The seminar paper will be due on **Wednesday December 18**, in hard copy only. Emailed papers will not be accepted. Please include a self-addressed envelope so that I can mail my comments to you.

I expect your essay to be polished, reflect serious thought, and have gone through revision. It should also use a recognized scholarly reference system, such as Harvard, Chicago, MLA, or APA.

I encourage you to meet with me to discuss your seminar paper at any point throughout the semester.

There are two options for the seminar paper.

**Option #1: Commentary Paper.** This paper would constitute a commentary piece on media studies of crime, and/or political theories of criminalization, fear, victimization and media. In this option, your task is to trace a critical path through the materials we've read over the semester, advancing your own argument and extending the arguments of a set of texts we've discussed over the term. You will likely need to conduct some additional literature reviews for this option, but the goal here is not to write a straight-up review of literature. Instead, what I'm looking for is your own critical take on some issue/ set of theoretical concerns/ ways of theoretically and/or politically constructing the problems of crime, victimization and fear and their dramatization in media representations. The commentary essay should not consist only of negative critique – consider, instead, how you might use and advance the ideas we've

discussed toward a new theoretical take on crime in the media, or a new set of research questions about crime and media. For some good examples of commentary pieces, check out *Media, Culture & Society's* commentary pieces, and other academic journals that commission extended review essays (of 10-25 journal page length).

**Option #2: Application Paper.** In this option, your task is to choose a set of media representations, media practices, or other set of objects and “apply” a set of concepts we have addressed over the seminar. Unlike a literature review or a commentary essay, you will not be expected to do a full work-up on an area of scholarly literature, but you will be expected to: 1) do additional outside reading, 2) analyze your chosen set of representations/practices/other objects, and 3) comment on the course readings and their theoretical and methodological approaches as a result of your application and analysis of their concepts.

**NOTE: Seminar participants will be making short presentations on their in-progress seminar paper projects in November.**

**Expectations and Policies:** There are several expectations that I have of you as participants in a graduate seminar. I expect that you will: attend every seminar meeting and come prepared to discuss each of our readings, do all of the readings and have something to say about them, turn in your seminar work on time, and openly communicate about anything of concern to you in the course (e.g. if you know you will have trouble meeting a deadline or if there is anything that will prevent you from fully participating in the seminar).

**Discussion Etiquette:** Discussion makes up a great percentage of our time in class. Following a few basic discussion guidelines will help insure that this time is productive, enlightening and, dare I say, fun.

1. Work to create a shared climate of friendly and lively discussion. Please try to avoid personal attacks, jabs, and grand-standing behaviors as much as possible.
2. Disagreements are natural and welcome in scholarly discussion. So are arguments. But arguments are not contests. Please grant your fellow seminar participants courtesy and respect, whether you agree with what they say or not.
3. Avoid purely negative critique in your comments. Our goal in discussion is to understand the texts we read and how they might be useful to us -- in addition to using our well-honed skills in critique.
4. Wait your turn – do not interrupt others.
5. You do not have to express your own opinion on a subject. You are also free to change your mind on any topic at any time.
6. You each bring interesting experiences to the classroom, and you are encouraged to bring up your experience when it is relevant to class discussion (and when you feel comfortable doing so). Everyone’s personal experience deserves respect. But if you bring up your own experience in class, please recognize that it becomes a public topic for discussion. Others may interpret your experience differently than you do, and they are free to respectfully disagree with your interpretation. Please recognize that experience and anecdote are not the same thing as evidence.

**Grading:** As a student at McGill (or Concordia), you have the right to turn in work that is written in French. If you plan on using French for your written work, please notify me with enough advanced warning that I can locate a translator, because my French is very rusty. All lectures, seminar discussions, presentations and demonstrations will be conducted in English.

Your final grade for the semester will be based on the quality and clarity of your performance in presentations, demonstrations, and your written work. If you turn in work late, you may not receive written comments from me and your grade could be reduced. If I deem your work unsatisfactory, I may ask you to do it again. Taking an incomplete or “K” grade for this course is greatly discouraged, unless you have a truly exceptional reason that can be supported by documentation.

### **How to Interpret Graduate-Level Grades:**

A:	Good work
A-:	Satisfactory
B+:	There is a problem with what you submitted
B:	There is a substantial problem with what you submitted
B-:	Lowest possible passing grade in a graduate course; indicates a major problem but not a failure
C+ or lower:	Officially considered a “fail” by the Graduate Studies Office.

**Auditors:** If you would like to audit this class, I expect the following: that you will follow all the policies and etiquette explained here and that you participate in class discussion.

**Statement on Academic Integrity:** McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offenses under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) for more information).

## **Schedule of Readings**

### **Capitalism, Crime and Fear**

#### **Wednesday September 13: Capitalism and the Crime Story**

Ernest Mandel (1984). *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story*. London: Pluto Press.

#### **Wednesday September 20: Media Constructions of the City and Urban Criminality**

Philip Howell (1998). “Crime and the City Solution: Crime Fiction, Urban Knowledge, and Radical Geography” *Antipode* 30:4, 357-378.

Steve Macek (2006). *Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right, and the Moral Panic over the City*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota (Introduction, Chapters 4-6).

#### **Wednesday September 27: Geographies of Crime and Fear**

Philippe Bourgois (1998). “Just Another Night in a Shooting Gallery,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 15(2): 37-66.

Jimmie Reeves and Richard Campbell (1994). *Cracked Coverage: Television News and the Crack Crisis*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press (Chapters 5 and 6).

Nan Ellin (1997). “Shelter from the Storm or Form Follows Fear and Vice Versa” In *Architecture of Fear*, ed. Nan Ellin. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, pp. 13-45.

Phil Hubbard (2004). “Revenge and Injustice in the Neoliberal City: Uncovering Masculinist Agendas” *Antipode*: 665-686.

Carrie Rentschler (2003). "Designing Fear: How Environmental Security Protects Property at the Expense of People." In *Foucault, Cultural Studies and Governmentality*, eds. Jack Bratich, Jeremy Packer and Cameron McCarthy. Albany: SUNY Press, pp. 243-272.

Recommended:

Peter Shirlow and Rachel Pain (2004). "The Geographies and Politics of Fear" *Capital & Class* 80, 15-26.

Neil Smith (Winter 1998). "Guilani Time: The Revanchist 1990s" *Social Text* 16:4, 1-20.

**Wednesday October 4: A Culture of Fear?**

Barry Glassner (1998) "Crime in the News: Tall Tales and Overstated Facts" In *The Culture of Fear*. New York: Basic Books, 21-50.

Elizabeth Seaton (2001). "The Commodification of Fear" *Topia* 5: 1-19.

Mark Neocleous (2000) "Against Security" *Radical Philosophy* 100: 7-15.

Sara Ahmed (2004). "Affective Economies" *Social Text* 79, 22(2), 117-139.

Murray Lee (2001). "The Genesis of 'Fear of Crime'" *Theoretical Criminology* 5(4): 467-485.

**Wednesday October 11: The Moral Panic Paradigm**

Stanley Cohen (2004). *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. London: Routledge (Prefaces to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> editions, chapters 1 and 2).

Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, Brian Roberts. (1978). *Policing the Crisis: The State, Mugging, and Law and Order*. London: MacMillan (chapters 1, 2, 8 and 10).

Carol Stabile (2001). "Conspiracy or Consensus? Reconsidering the Moral Panic," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 25(3): 258-278.

Mark Fishman (June 1978) "Crime Waves as Ideology" *Social Problems* 25:5, 531-543.

**Wednesday October 18: Punishment and the Portrayal of Law and Order**

William Connolly (1995). "The Desire to Punish" In *The Ethos of Pluralization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 41-74 (in packet).

Austin Sarat (1997). "Vengeance, Victims and the Identities of Law" *Social & Legal Studies* 6(2): 163-189.

Elayne Rapping (2003) "Signs of the Times: *Oz* and the Sudden Visibility of Prisons on Television" and "The Politics of Representation: Gender Violence and Criminal Justice" in *Law and Justice as Seen on TV*. New York: NYU Press, 71-102, 138-168.

**\*\*SHORT (5-6 page) RESPONSE PAPER DUE (Short Presentations of Papers in Seminar)**

## **Constructing Criminals and Victims**

**Wednesday October 25: Race, Gender and Power in the History of U.S. Crime News**

Carol Stabile (2006). *White Victims, Black Villains: Race and Gender in U.S. Crime News*. London: Routledge.

**November 1: What is a Criminal?**

Ian Hacking (1986/1999) "Making Up People" In Mario Biagioli (ed.). *The Science Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 161-171.

Michel Foucault (1988) "The Dangerous Individual" In L. Kritzman (ed.). *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*. London: Routledge, 125-151.

- Anita Biressi (2001). "Histories of True Crime" and "Figure in a Landscape: The Dangerous Individual in Criminal Biography" In *Crime, Fear and the Law in True Crime Stories*. Hampshire: Palgrave, 41-72, 164-194.
- Mia Consalvo (2003) "The Monsters Next Door: Media Constructions of Boys and Masculinity" *Feminist Media Studies* 3:1, 27-45.
- Caroline Joan S. Picart (2006). "Crime and the Gothic: Sexualizing Serial Killers" *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 13(1), 1-18.
- Michael Dorland and Priscilla L. Walton (1999). "Untangling Karla's Web: Post-National Arguments, Cross-Border Crimes, and the Investigation of Canadian Culture" In Lynne Van Luven and Priscilla L. Walton, eds. *Pop Can: Popular Culture in Canada*. Scarborough, ON: Prentice Hall Allyn and Bacon Canada, 195-206.

Recommended:

- Ray Surette (1994). "Predator criminals as media icons." In Gregg Barak (ed.). *Media, process, and the social construction of crime: Studies in newsmaking criminology* (pp. 131-158). New York: Garland Publishing.
- Elayne Rapping (1999/2003) "Aliens, Nomads, Mad Dogs, and Road Warriors: Tabloid TV and the New Face of Criminal Violence" In *Law and Justice As Seen on TV*. New York: New York University Press, 48-70.

**November 8: Where There's a Criminal, There's (sometimes) a Victim**

- Richard Quinney (1972). "Who is the Victim?" *Criminology*, 10, 314-323.
- Deborah Jermyn (2003). "Photo stories and family albums: imaging criminals and victims on *Crimewatch UK*" In Paul Mason (ed.) *Criminal Visions: Media Representations of Crime and Justice* (pp. 175-191). Cullompton, UK: Willan Publishing (in packet).
- Anna Williams (1993). "Domestic Violence and the Aetiology of Crime in *America's Most Wanted*," *Camera Obscura* 31, 97-117.
- Laura Marcus (2000). "Oedipus Express: Trains, Trauma and Detective Fiction" *New Formations* Autumn: 173-188.

## **Visibility and the Politics of Surveillance and Detection**

**November 15: The Panoptic Principle, Discipline and Punishment**

- Michel Foucault (1979). *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage Books.

**November 22: Forensic Media and the Visible Evidence of Criminality**

- Deborah Jermyn (2004). "'This is About Real People!': Video Technologies, Actuality and Affect in the Television Crime Appeal" In *Understanding Reality Television*, ed. Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn. New York: Routledge, 71-90.
- Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn (August 2003). "Video Justice: Crimes of Violence in Social/Media Space" *Space and Culture* 6:3, 276-291.
- Martha Gever (2005). "The Spectacle of Crime, Digitized: CSI Crime Scene Investigation and *Social Anatomy*" *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 8(4): 445-463.
- Neil Websdale and A. Alvarez, (1998) "Forensic Journalism as Patriarchal Ideology: The Newspaper Construction of Homicide-Suicide," in *Popular Culture, Crime and Justice*, ed. F. Y. Bailey & D. C. Hale, Belmont: West/Wadsworth Publishing, pp. 123-142.

Recommended:

- Alison Young (1996). "The Bulger Case and the Trauma of the Visible" In *Imagining Crime: Textual Outlaws and Criminal Conversations* (pp. 111-145). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Sue Tait (2006). "Autoptic Vision and the Necrophilic Imaginary in *CSI*" *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9(1), 45-62.

**November 29: The Photographic Production of Criminality**

Allan Sekula (1986). "The Body and the Archive" *October* 39: 3-64.

John Tagg (1989). "A Means of Surveillance: The Photograph as Evidence in Law" In *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 66-102.

Karen Beckman (2004). "Dead Woman Glowing: Karla Faye Tucker and the Aesthetics of Death Row Photography" *Camera Obscura* 55(19): 1-41.

Claudine Brown (1994). "Mug Shot: Suspicious Person" In Deborah Willis, ed. *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*. New York: New Press, 136-143.

**December 6: The Detection of Gender and Sexuality**

**\*Special Guest Lecturer: Andrea Braithwaite, Ph.D. candidate in Communication Studies, McGill University.**

Julie D'Acci (1997). "Nobody's Woman? *Honey West* and the New Sexuality" In Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin, eds. *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*. New York: Routledge, 73-93

Yvonne Tasker (1998). "Investigating Women: Work, Criminality and Sexuality" In Yvonne Tasker *Working Girls: Gender & Sexuality in Popular Cinema*. London: Routledge, 89-113.

Toby Miller (2001). "James Bond's Penis" In Peter Lehman, ed. *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture*. New York: Routledge, 243-256.

Danae Clark (1990). "Cagney & Lacey: Feminist Strategies of Detection" in *Television and Women's Culture: The Politics of the Popular*, ed. Mary Ellen Brown. London: Sage, 117-133.

Andrea Braithwaite (under review). "'That Girl of Yours—She's Pretty Hardboiled, Huh?': Detecting Feminism in *Veronica Mars*" In *Watching Teen TV: Text and Culture*, eds. Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Stein.

Recommended: Linda Mizejewski (2004). *Hardboiled & High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture*

**Monday, December 18: SEMINAR PAPER DUE, Prof. Rentschler's mailbox, Department of Art History and Communication Studies**