

# BEYOND BELIEF?

A Cultural History of the 'Confidence Man'  
from P.T. Barnum to Donald Trump

**Room and time:** Seminar Room (Attems-gasse 25, Top Floor, SR 34.D2), Wednesday, 15:15-16:45 · **Course number:** 512.312

**Lecturer:** Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Brandt · **Office hours:** Thur, 4-6 p.m. (Heinrichstr. 18, 1<sup>st</sup> floor) · **Email:** [stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at](mailto:stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at)

**Description:** The 'confidence man' has been an archetype of American literature and culture since the early republic. A trickster and clever manipulator of people's wishes and desires, the 'con man' (or 'con artist') has fundamentally influenced the American imagination, becoming a target of both (secret) admiration and outright contempt. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, businessman P.T. Barnum attracted millions of Americans to his circuses, freak shows and beauty contests, promising sensational entertainment and shocking revelations. Herman Melville's 1857 satire *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* exposes the fascination this manipulative figure holds over ordinary citizens. More recently, U.S. President Trump has been termed a 'con artist' by his opponents, mainly due to his public persona and the role of 'alternative facts' in his rhetoric. The course looks at a variety of key texts about – and by – so-called 'confidence men' (and, in a few cases, women). How did the con artist become such a significant figure in American cultural practice and political life? How is this figure represented in literary texts and film? Primary works will include (in addition to Melville's novel) books such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) as well as a few films (e.g., George Roy Hill's *The Sting* from 1973, Woody Allen's *Zelig* (1982), Paul McGuigan's *Lucky Number Slevin* from 2006, and Christopher Nolan's *Inception* from 2010). In our discussions, we will approach the phenomenon of 'con artistry' from a Cultural Studies angle and examine its aesthetics and socio-political function(s).

**Teaching and Learning Method:** This is an interactive course. Participation in group discussions as well as contributions to the discussion forum on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Each meeting will be held by 'experts' who organize the session by means of questions, games, video clips, and group work. The most relevant facts will be conveyed in a short information block. The experts will upload their questions for the discussion forum 6 days in advance!

**Materials:** All texts will be made available on **Moodle**. Please watch films in the **Media Archive**!

**Aims:** The seminar sheds light on the historical background and cultural relevance of the 'con artist.' It is the goal of the course to understand the function and aesthetics of the trickster figure in the U.S. cultural imagination from the beginnings until today.

**Assessment:** **A.)** regular attendance (*no more than 2 absences!*) and active in-class participation, as well as **seven** (!) substantial entries in the discussion forum (1/3); **B.)** presentation as part of an expert session plus 3-page handout and online questions (1/3); **C.)** research proposal (2 pages) and final paper (10 pages) (1/3). You need to pass each section to pass the course.

**Deadline for Final Papers** (including declaration of honesty): Friday, July 13, 2018. *There is no (!) extension of this deadline.* Please indicate on a **post-it** attached to the paper if you would like detailed feedback! Upload a digital version on Moodle!

## Syllabus

<b>14 March</b>	<b>Introduction – The Confidence Man in American Literature and Culture</b> Basic texts: William J. Jackson, excerpts from <i>American Tricksters</i> (2014). [Moodle] Warwick Wadlington, <i>The Confidence Game in American Literature</i> (1975), ch. 1. [Moodle] E. Ammons, "Intro" to <i>Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature</i> (1994). [Moodle]
<b>21 March</b>	<b>Founding Fathers and Imposters – The Con Artist as Self-Made Man</b> Main text (reading required): O. Henry, "The Chair of Philanthromathematics" (1908) [Moodle] Companion text (optional): Benjamin Franklin, excerpts from <i>Autobiography</i> (1790 [1784]). [Moodle] Keywords: Confidence Man, Philanthropy, Self-Made Man, Surprise Ending, University.
<b>11 April</b>	<b>Funhouses, Mermaids, and Bearded Ladies – The Trickster as Showman in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America</b> Main text (reading required): P.T. Barnum, <i>Autobiography</i> [Moodle] Companion text (optional): Terence Whalen, "P.T. Barnum and the Birth of Capitalist Irony" (2000). [Moodle] Keywords: Capitalism, Circus, Commercialism, Hoaxes, Illusionism, Minstrel Shows, Sensationalism, Showman.
<b>18 April</b>	<b>Donald Trump and the American Character</b> Guest Lecture: Dan Shanahan (Charles University), "The American Character and Culture and the Rise of Trump"
<b>25 April</b>	<b>The 'Confidence Man' as Literary Figure – Melville and the American 1850s</b>

Main example (viewing required):

Herman Melville, excerpts from *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857). [Moodle]

Companion texts (optional):

Stephen Matterson, "Introduction" to Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (1990). [Moodle]

Keywords: April Fools' Day, Cynicism, Economic Materialism, Emerson, Irony, Morality, Religiosity, Transcendentalists.

**02 May The 'Con Man' as All-American Hero – Socialites, Gangsters and Parvenus in the 'Roaring Twenties'**

Main example (reading required):

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925). [Moodle]

Companion film (optional):

*The Great Gatsby* (dir. Jack Clayton, 1974).

Keywords: American Dream, Flapper Culture, Jazz Age, Parvenu, Popularity, Prohibition, Roaring Twenties.

**09 May Film Screening**

*Zelig* (dir. Woody Allen, 1982).

**16 May Trickster Celebrities – The Myth and Magic of 'Con Artistry' in Western Culture**

Main examples (reading/watching required):

*Zelig* (dir. Woody Allen, 1982).

Peter Cooper & Simon Patterson, "The Trickster" (2001). [Moodle]

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, Branding, Chameleon, Disney, Gender, Heroes, Magic, Parody, Trickster.

**23 May Independent Study Unit- Research Proposal**

Stay at home and create a 2-page research proposal for a potential final paper to be handed in on May 30.

**30 May Rabbits, Swindlers, and Frauds – The 'Friendly Trickster' in Animated Cartoons**

Main example (reading required):

*Southern Fried Rabbit* ('Looney Tunes,' dir. I. Freleng, 1953) <https://archive.org/details/Southern-Fried-Rabbit>.

Joel Chandler Harris, excerpts from *Nights with Uncle Remus* (1883). [Moodle]

Additional texts (optional):

*High Diving Hare* (Looney Tunes, dir. I. Freleng, 1948). <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2kyv6t>

Keywords: Brer Rabbit, Bugs Bunny, Ethnic Trickster, 'The Old South', Uncle Remus, Warner Brothers.

**06 June The Dark Side of the Con-Man: The Trickster as Killer**

Main example (reading required):

Bret Easton Ellis, excerpts from *American Psycho* (1991). [Moodle]

Companion film (optional):

*Lucky Number Slevin* (dir. Paul McGuigan, 2006)

Keywords: Brand Fetishism, Mind-Tricking Narratives, NY, Performance, Postmodernism, Superficiality, TV Culture.

**13 June Tricking the Mind – The Con-Artist as Architect of Imaginary Space**

Main example (watching required):

*Inception* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2010). [Watch in Media Archive!]

Companion texts (optional):

Andrew Young, "The Oneiric Intruder and the Architecturalism of Space" (2011). [Moodle]

Keywords: Architecturalism, Dreaming, Imagination, Oneiric, Reality/Fiction.

**20 June Selling the American Dream – Donald Trump, the Reality Show**

Main example (reading required):

Donald J. Trump & Bill Zanker, excerpts from *Thing Big! Make It Happen in Business and Life* (2007). [Moodle]

Companion text (optional):

Norman Vincent Peale, excerpts from *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952). [Moodle]

Keywords: Business, Instincts, Passions, Positive Thinking, Preparation, Stamina, Success.

**27 June Selling the Presidency – Donald Trump, the Archetypal Confidence Man?**

Main text (reading required):

Donald J. Trump, *Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America* (2016). [Moodle]

Companion film (optional):

*The Wolf of Wall Street* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 2013).

Keywords: Belief, God, 'Nicknames for Enemies', Patriotism, Presidency, Reagan, Roosevelt, Rhetoric, Winning.

**DEADLINE**  
**Research Proposal TODAY!**

**FINAL PAPER DUE ON JULY 13**