"I WANT TO BELIEVE"
CONSPIRACY THEORIES
IN AMERICAN CINEMA AND TELEVISION

Room and time: SR 34.D2 (Attemsgasse 25, Top Floor), Wednesday, 11:45-13:15

Time: Friday, 4:00-5:30 · **Course number**: 512.321

Lecturer: Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Brandt · **Office hours**: Thur, 4-6 (Moodle) · **Email**: stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at

Course tutor: Alexandra Pasca (alexandra.pasca@uni-graz.at)

Module: Module 3.1 of the Certificate "American Film and Television Studies"

Beschreibung/Description: Conspiracy theories have a long tradition in modern societies, permeating the ways in which a nation defines the limits between the factual and the unknown. The history of the U.S. republic in particular is filled with imaginative and sometimes crude theories about important phases and incidents, alluding to an alleged influence of the Freemasons and the Illuminati. These narratives have helped to explain some of the more terrifying aspects of American history, revolving around events such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 or 9/11 to the broad public. Even though extensive commissions and reports have been summoned to examine their backgrounds and contextual genesis, stories like these have continued to exert a strong fascination upon the public. According to recent polls, about 75% of Americans suspect that JFK's assassination in 1963 was the product of a conspiracy. One-third believes that the 2020 U.S. Presidential elections were stolen.

With the emergence of social media in the digital age, conspiracy theories can no longer be dismissed as the result of pathological developments on the political peripheries. In the wake of the Trump Era, philosophies that invoke sinister conspiracies concocted by powerful groups have moved into the mainstream, sometimes appearing more like a normality than an aberration. By means of their semi-fictional nature, these narratives resist falsification and reinforce circular reasoning. In the course, we will discuss the psychology of conspiracy theories, transformations in conspiratorial practices, the function of the Internet as well as the social and political impact of conspiracy theories upon cultural practice. We will discuss what attracts people to this rhetoric of fear regarding a clandestine government control and what conspiracy theories tell us about the groups and movements that produce them (for example, the Birther Movement, QAnon, and AltRight).

Films and television series that have dealt with, and sometimes cultivated, conspiracy theories span a wide range of genres, from political drama to science fiction, fantasy, and the mystery thriller. Examples include movies such as *The Red Menace* (1949), *JFK* (1991), *Conspiracy Theory* (1997), *The Matrix* (1999), and *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), as well as TV shows such as *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993-2002), *24* (Fox, 2001-2010, 2014), and *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-2020).

Teaching and Learning Method: This is an interactive course. Participation in group discussions as well as contributions to the discussion forums on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Students will organize *expert sessions* for each meeting, using questions, games, illustrations, video clips, and group work as didactic tools.

Materials: All films will be made available in the Department's Film Library (Heinrichstr. 18 / 1st floor) and via YouTube. Key theoretical texts will be uploaded on Moodle.

ASSESSMENT:

A.) *Regular attendance* (no more than 2 absences!), *active participation*, and at least seven substantiated entries in the *Moodle discussion forum* **(1/3)**;

B.) *Expert Session, Handout,* and *Revised Presentation* (to be held in class and then uploaded onto the Moodle course site) **(1/3)**;

C.) *2-page research proposal* plus *12-15-page final paper* (5,000 – 6,000 words, including title page, table of contents, and bibliography). Please use templates on Moodle! **(1/3)***.*

Note: You need to pass each section to pass the whole course.

A.) REGULAR ATTENDANCE, CLASS, PARTICIPATION, AND MOODLE DISCUSSION FORUM

Regular attendance and *active participation* in class sessions are crucial to the success of the course. *Absences* must be explained in writing, preferably prior to class. No more than two absences are allowed. You are expected to be present in our meetings, not only having read the assigned material, but also prepared to fully engage with the material, ask questions, offer perceptive interpretations, and even argue for your way of reading the text at hand. Note: There might be *pop quizzes* (i.e., unannounced tests at the beginning of a session) to check whether you have read the materials.

You need to *post at least seven substantial entries* in the *Moodle discussion forum***.** Make sure you are well informed *before* answering the three discussion questions: Read the required text. Conduct some *additional online research* according to your own research interests. When making an entry, refer to useful materials you found on the internet (clips, articles, etc.). Ideally, you would also *respond to other entries* already uploaded by other students.

B.) EXPERT SESSION, REVISED PRESENTATION, AND HANDOUT

As an expert, you will prepare *three short internet clips or images* on the topic of your session (e.g., a movie scene from YouTube or iconic images) for the *discussion forum* (to be uploaded 6 days in advance together with guiding questions). Students will then to pick one from these clips/images and analyze it with regard to *composition*, *background*, and *effect*. Add a short comment to the clips on Moodle to inform students what you want them to focus on. Discuss your clips with me 1 week before your session (or send links to me via email)!

In class, you can start with some *essential information* on the topic (look at the keywords on the syllabus first), then pose questions to trigger a *lively discussion*. Choose *examples* related to the topic of the session that you can discuss in class (for example, in group work; use the format of the 'breakout rooms'). Be *interactive*. Show images and clips, launch a game, pick up questions. Do not stick to your schedule *too much*!

Revise your presentation carefully after the session and *upload it* together with a *handout* (3 pages) on Moodle *within one week after the session*!

C.) RESEARCH PROPOSAL AND FINAL PAPER

A *research proposal* (2 pages) is due around mid-term. Look for the exact dates in the course agenda below. The form for the research proposal is available on Moodle.

The *final paper* (max. 15 pages, including title page, table of contents, and bibliography, 5,000 – 6,000 words) should be typed (12 pt Times New Roman, using one side of the sheet only, pages numbered). The paper should show your name, your student email address, the course title, the instructor's name, the date of submission, and the number of words. Primary and secondary sources need to be cited according to the Uni Graz guidelines for style and format.

The *deadline* for submission of the final paper is **Friday, February 11, 2022**. Keep in mind: A good paper is a finished paper. There is *no extension* of this deadline.
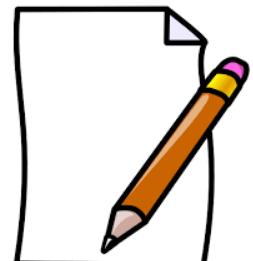
SYLLABUS

20 Oct.   **America as a Culture of Conspiracy – An Overview**
Basic texts:
   Michael Butter, "What Is a Conspiracy Theory?" (2020).[1]
   Michael Barkun, from *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (2013).
   Todor Hristov, *Impossible Knowledge: Conspiracy Theories, Power, Truth* (2019).
Keywords: Appearance; Connectedness; Conspiracy Theories; Knowledge; Plans; Power; Truth.

27 Oct.   **Film Theory and Analysis – An Overview**
Main text (reading required):
   Amy Villarejo, "The Language of Film" (2013).
Additional text (optional):
   Michael Ryan and Melissa Lenos, *Introduction to Film Analysis* (2012).
Keywords: Camera Movement; Color; Framing; Lighting; Mise en scène; Montage; Sound.

3 Nov.   **Infiltration, Paranoia, Schizophrenia**
Main text (reading required):
   Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (1964).
Additional texts (optional):
   Timothy Melley, "The Culture of Paranoia" (2000).
   James F. Broderick and D.W. Miller, "Freemasonry" (2008).
Keywords: Anti-Communism; Freemasonry; Infiltration; Paranoia; Red Menace.

10 Nov.   **Aliens, UFOs, and Invasion Rhetoric**
Main example (watching required):
   The X-Files, "The Erlenmeyer Flask" (season 1, episode 24, 1994.)
Additional text (optional):
   Michael Barkun, "UFO Conspiracy Theories" (2013).
   James F. Broderick and D.W. Miller, "Roswell/Area 51" (2008).
Keywords: Aliens; Area 51; DNA; Invasion; Roswell; UFOs.

17 Nov.   **Political Murder Conspiracy Theories**
Main example (watching required):
   JFK (dir. Oliver Stone, 1991). Check out movie in Media Archive, Heinrichstr. 18/I.
Additional texts (optional):
   Peter Knight, "Plotting the Kennedy Assassination" (2000).
   Timothy Melley, from *Empire of Conspiracy* (2000).
Keywords: Grassy Knoll; Jimmy Hoffa; JFK; Marilyn Monroe; Lee Harvey Oswald.

24 Nov.   **Independent Study Unit- Research Proposal**
No class! Create a 2-page research proposal for your final paper.

1 Dec.   **9/11, Terrorism, and Islamophobia**
Main text (reading required):
   Beáta Sáfrány, "9/11 Conspiracy Theories" (2013).
Additional text (optional):
   Charles B. Strozier, "Historical Perspectives on the 9/11 Conspiracy Movement" (2020).
   James F. Broderick and D.W. Miller, "September 11, 2001" (2008).
Keywords: 9/11; Anti-Semitism; FBI agents; *Homeland* (TV show); 'Inside Job'; Islamophobia.

DUE DATE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

15 Dec.   **Social Media, Information Management, and Surveillance**
Main text (reading required):
   Christopher Wylie, "Revelations," from *Mindf*ck* (2019).
Additional texts (optional):
   L.M. Sacasas, "How Facebook Deforms Us" (2018).

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[1] All print texts are available on Moodle.

Neil M. Richards, "The Dangers of Surveillance" (2013).
Additional example:
Black Mirror, "Nose Dive" (season 3, episode 1, 2016).
Keywords: Algorithms; Hate Speech; (Mis)Information; Social Media; Surveillance; Trolls.

12 Jan. **'Deep State,' QAnon, and the 'New World Order'**
Main example (watching required):
The Matrix (dir. The Wachowskis, 1999). Check out movie in Media Archive, Heinrichstr. 18/I.
Additional texts (optional):
Sophia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley, "QAnon" (2021).
Michael Barkun, "New World Order Conspiracies" (2013).
Additional films:
They Live (dir. J. Carpenter, 1988).
Zootopia (Walt Disney, 2016).
Keywords: Alternative World; 'Deep State'; Existentialism;
Free Will; Groupthink; Matrix; QAnon; Radicalization.

19 Jan. **'Fake News,' 'Stolen Elections,' and 'Post-Truth'**
Main text (reading required):
Kris Fallon, excerpts from *Where Truth Lies* (2019).
Additional texts (optional):
Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News" (2017).
Jeff Brand, "Politics, Projection, and Fake News" (2017).
James F. Broderick and D.W. Miller, "The Moon Landing" (2008).
Additional example from television:
The X-Files, "The Lost Art of Forehead Sweat" (season 11,
episode 4, 2018); esp. https://youtu.be/z-EfEaFWh3w?t=104.
Keywords: Alternative Facts; Fake News; Moon Landing;
New World Order; 'Post-Truth'; Trumpism.

26 Jan. **Covid-19, Pandemics, and the Fear of the Invisible**
Main example (watching required):
Contagion (dir. Steven Soderbergh, 2011). Check out movie in Media Archive, Heinrichstr. 18/I.
Additional text (optional):
John Bodner, et al.: "Conspiracy Theory 101: A Primer" (2021).
Keywords: 5G; Chemtrails; Covid-19; Kernel Narratives; Illness; Mask Wearing; Microchips;
Pandemics; Vaccination.

**FINAL PAPER
DUE DATE: February 11, 2022**