

MISFITS

NON-CONFORMISM, REBELLION, AND DISABILITY IN U.S. AMERICAN FILM AND TELEVISION

Course number: 512.325

Room and time: Online, Wed, 11:45 - 1:15 p.m.

UniMeet link: <https://unimeet.uni-graz.at/b/bra-mnk-ppd-xuw>

Lecturer: Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Brandt · Email: stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at

Office hours: Thur, 4-6 p.m. · <https://moodle.uni-graz.at/course/view.php?id=24980>

Course tutor: Volker Lang (volker.lang@uni-graz.at)

Short Description:

Join us for a captivating exploration of non-conformism, rebellion, and disability in U.S. American Film and Television. This seminar delves into the portrayal of characters who defy societal norms and expectations, and the impact of their stories on American culture. From classic films to modern television series, we will analyze important works that challenge the status quo and celebrate diversity.

Our journey begins with the iconic Disney animation *Dumbo* (1941), a tale of a courageous elephant challenging societal norms. We'll then delve into *Rebel Without a Cause* (dir. Nicholas Ray, 1955), featuring James Dean's legendary role in teenage rebellion. Next, we'll analyze the groundbreaking film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (dir. Milos Forman, 1975), exploring the lives of psychiatric patients challenging societal norms. Our exploration extends to diverse works, including *Breaking Bad*, *The Elephant Man*, *Glee*, *Avatar*, *The Shape of Water*, and *American Horror Story*, celebrating narratives that defy conventions and contribute to the rich tapestry of American culture.

Assessment:

A.) Regular attendance (no more than 2 absences!), active participation, and at least six (!) substantiated entries in the Moodle discussion forum (1/3) (not including your own session);

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

C.) 2-page research proposal plus 12-15-page final paper (around 5,000 words all in all, including bibliography, but excluding title page, table of contents). Please use templates on Moodle! (1/3).

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

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

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

Regular attendance and **active participation** are crucial for success in this course. You're allowed a **maximum of two absences**, so notify us in advance if you'll be absent. Merely reading assigned material isn't enough; come ready to engage fully by asking questions, providing interpretations, and presenting your viewpoints. **Pop quizzes** may be given to assess your familiarity with the materials.

In the Moodle discussion forum, make at least **six substantial entries**. Anything less will lead to a 'Fail' in the class. Before addressing the three discussion questions, ensure you're **well-informed** by reading the required text and conducting **online research**. Reference any helpful materials found online, like video clips or articles, and ideally, respond to your peers' entries.

B.) EXPERT SESSION, REVISED PRESENTATION, AND HANDOUT

As an expert, prepare **three discussion questions** (focus on composition, background, and text impact) for the forum, to be uploaded six days prior. **Share questions with the instructor a week before the session or via email.**

In the classroom, start with essential information using the **keywords**. Pose questions for lively discussion, incorporating relevant examples. Encourage **interactivity** with images, clips, games, or thought-provoking questions. Be flexible with the schedule to adapt to class dynamics.

After the session, **revise** and **expand** your presentation, addressing raised questions. Upload the revised presentation and a **3-page handout** on Moodle within one week.

C.) RESEARCH PROPOSAL AND FINAL PAPER

Submit your **2-page research proposal** outline by **May 29th, 2024**, using the form on Moodle. **Refer to secondary texts provided on the course website.**

The **final paper**, limited to **15 pages** (including bibliography), with a word count of 4,500 to 5,500, is due on **July 15th, 2024**. Upload it to the designated Moodle forum, including an **editable Google Docs or OneDrive version**. Insert the Google Docs link in the forum's **comment section**, **not (!)** within the document. Include your name, email, course title, instructor, submission date, and word count in the final paper. Cite sources according to Uni Graz guidelines. **No extensions will be granted.**

Important: Generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, are allowed for the following activities:

- Exploring and modifying ideas, perfecting research inquiries.
- Acquiring general information on the subject (ensure thorough verification of all sources and information).
- Creating an outline to structure thoughts.
- Reviewing grammar and style.

The use of generative AI tools is strictly prohibited for the following:

- Composing an entire draft of a writing assignment.
- Generating complete sentences, paragraphs, or papers to fulfill class assignments.
- Impersonating you in classroom contexts, like composing discussion forum entries or chat content.
- *Note: Failure to comply with these regulations will result in disqualification from the class.* For more details, see <https://lehren-und-lernen-mit-ki.uni-graz.at/en/for-students/>.

Important: Thoroughly researching, reading, reviewing, and processing scholarly sources—specifically academic articles and books—is essential for any academic work and cannot be replaced by AI!

SYLLABUS

Session 1 (March 13): Misfits – Outsiders, Underdogs, and Rebels in American Culture

Session Tasks: Explore expressions of non-conformism, rebellion, and disability in American culture; understand the cultural impact of misfit characters in various media; discuss course objectives and expectations.

Keywords: Cinematic Outsiders; Cultural Impact; Difference (Shildrick); Disability; Media Representation; Non-Conformism (Emerson); Rebellion; Societal Diversity.

Session 2 (March 20): Decoding Film Language and Theory

Main Text (reading required): Amy Villarejo, “The Language of Film” (2013)

Session Tasks: Provide an overview of film theory and analysis; examine fundamental elements of film language (camera angles, lighting, editing techniques).

Keywords: Film Theory; Camera Movement; Cinematic Language; Color; Framing; Lighting; Mise en Scène; Montage; Sound; Theoretical Framework.

Session 3 (April 10): Disney and the Dynamics of Identity and Diversity

Main Film (viewing required): *Dumbo* (dir. Ben Sharpsteen, 1941)

Session Tasks: Explore the themes of individuality and ostracism in *Dumbo*; analyze societal treatment of outsider characters in animated storytelling; discuss the impact of *Dumbo* on animated representation.

Keywords: Animated Storytelling; Circus; Cultural Diversity; Disability; Inclusive Narratives; Individuality; Representational Impact; Societal Treatment.

Session 4 (April 17): James Dean and 1950s Teenage Rebellion

Main Film (viewing required): *Rebel without a Cause* (dir. Nicholas Ray, 1955)

Session Tasks: Analysis of James Dean's portrayal of teenage rebellion; exploration of the societal challenges faced by teenagers in the narrative; discussion of the film's influence on the representation of youth culture.

Keywords: Cinematic Adolescence; Iconic Youth; James Dean; Juvenile Delinquency; Rebellion Narratives; Societal Challenges; Teenage Rebellion; Youth Culture.

Session 5 (April 24): Challenging Psychiatric Norms – Madness and Abjection in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Main Film (viewing required): *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (dir. Miloš Forman, 1975)

Session Tasks: Analyze the portrayal of psychiatric patients in the film; explore challenges to societal norms within a psychiatric setting; examine the film's impact on perceptions of mental health.

Keywords: Abjection (*Kristeva*); Dark Comedy; Madness; Mental Health Representation; Psychiatric Norms; Psychiatry in Film and Literature; Societal Challenges.

Session 6 (May 8): Beauty in Difference – David Lynch and the Representation of Deformity

Main Film (viewing required): *The Elephant Man* (dir. David Lynch, 1980)

Session Tasks: Examine the portrayal of physical deformity and societal treatment in *The Elephant Man*; discuss the character's resilience in the face of societal norms; explore the film's impact on perceptions of physical differences.

Keywords: Beauty in Difference; Biography; Historical Drama; Human Diversity; Physical Deformity; Resilience; Societal Treatment.

Session 7 (May 15): Disability and Resistance in Science Fiction Blockbusters

Main Film (viewing required): *Avatar* (dir. James Cameron, 2009)

Session Tasks: Explore challenges faced by a paraplegic character; analyze the representation of disability in a sci-fi context; discuss broader themes of acceptance and purpose.

Keywords: Acceptance; Blockbuster Cinema; Cinematic Diversity; Eco-Science Fiction; Disability Representation; Inclusive Futures; Purpose; Sci-Fi Narratives.

Session 8 (May 22): Harmony in Diversity – *Glee* and Musical-Comedy Television

Main Example (viewing required): *Glee* (created by Ryan Murphy et al., 2009-2015)

Session Tasks: Examine how *Glee* celebrates diversity through its characters; analyze the show's portrayal of issues such as sexuality, race, and disability; discuss the impact of *Glee* on high school drama representation.

Keywords: Character Diversity; Cultural Harmony; Diversity Celebration; Glee Club; High School Drama; Inclusive Entertainment; Music as Universal Language; Musical Comedy; Queer Television; Ryan Murphy; Social Bonding.

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Session 9 (May 29): Chemistry, Crime, and the Transformation of the Anti-Hero in *Breaking Bad*

Main Example (viewing required): *Breaking Bad* (created by Vince Gilligan, 2008-2013)

Session Tasks: Explore the transformation of the main character from teacher to criminal; analyze the moral implications of the series; discuss the impact of *Breaking Bad* on the portrayal of antiheroes in television.

Keywords: Anti-Heroes; Crime Narratives; Character Transformation; Ethical Dilemmas; Morality in Television; Television Crime Drama; Transformative Narratives.

Session 10 (June 5): Beyond Norms: Disability and Counter-Normativity in *The Shape of Water*

Main Film (viewing required): *The Shape of Water* (dir. Guillermo del Toro, 2017)

Session Tasks: Analyze the film's unconventional love story challenging societal norms; explore how disability and misfit characters navigate relationships; discuss the cultural significance of narratives that challenge normative expectations.

Keywords: Cultural Impact; Disability Representation; Norm-Challenging Narratives; Romantic Fantasy; Societal Boundaries; Unconventional Love.

Session 11 (June 12): Monsters Among Us: Misfits in *American Horror Story*

Main Film (viewing required): *American Horror Story* (dir. Ryan Murphy, 2011 - Present)

Session Tasks: Explore how *American Horror Story* redefines horror conventions through its portrayal of misfits; discuss the series' exploration of identity, societal expectations, and subversion of traditional horror tropes; examine the use of symbolism, narrative structures, and character development.

Keywords: Anthology; Cultural Commentary; 'Freaks'; Genre Evolution; Horror; Narrative Deconstruction; Storytelling; Subversion of Horror Tropes.

Week 12 (June 19): Final Paper Preparation – Research Design and Paper Structuring

Session Tasks: Discuss various research methodologies; formulate effective research questions to guide your investigation; design a cohesive thesis structure and outline; prepare for the final paper by gaining a comprehensive understanding of the requirements.

Keywords: Academic Research; Paper Structure; Research Methodology; Thesis Design; Scholarly Writing; Thesis Outline; Topic Selection.

Week 13 (June 26): Final Paper Workshop and Enhanced Feedback

Bring a revised version of your research proposal to this session!

Session Tasks: Conduct small-group workshops for final papers, offering constructive feedback to peers; discuss paper structure, content, and research methodology; feedback sessions with peers and the instructor; revise research proposals based on insights gained.

Keywords: Peer Feedback; Paper Revision; Proposal Refinement; Scholarly Writing.

DEADLINE FINAL PAPER: MONDAY, 15 JULY 2024