



# Whodunit?

## MURDER MYSTERIES in American Literature, Film, and

### Television

**Room and time:** Seminar Room (Attems-gasse 25, Top Floor), Wednesday, 15:15-16:45

**First session:** October 14, 2015

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**Course number:** 512.312

**Lecturer:** Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Brandt · **Office hours:** Thursdays, 4-6 p.m. (Room DG-0036) · **Email:** [stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at](mailto:stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at)

**Description:** The term 'whodunit' (literally for: 'Who [has] done it?') was first used in the mid-1930s by journalists working for *Variety* magazine. The first documented usage of the term goes back to the *Variety* edition from August 28, 1934, in which the film version of the crime play *Recipe for Murder* was referred to as a 'Whodunit.' It has since been used to describe an intricate form of the detective story centering on the processes of investigation and solution of a murder mystery. A typical 'Whodunit' will appeal to our curiosity and involve us in the process of finding the murderer. Early examples from U.S. American literature include Dashiell Hammett's crime novel *The Thin Man* (1934). The figure of the eccentric, but likeable private detective reappears in crime television shows such as *Murder, She Wrote* (CBS, 1984-96) and *Monk* (NBC, 2002-2009). In a variation of the theme, the extremely successful *CSI* drama franchise (incl. *CSI: NY* and *CSI: Miami*) encourages audiences to delve into the crime scene (illustrated by the typical zoom shot). There is also a number of subgenres of the 'Whodunit,' including crime parodies such as *Murder by Death* (dir. Robert Moore, 1976) and horror mysteries such as *Scream* (dir. Wes Craven, 1996).

**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, illustrations, video clips, and group work. The most relevant facts will be conveyed in a short information block (or, alternatively, a fact file on a handout). Experts upload their questions 6 days in advance!

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

**Aims:** The course will familiarize participants with the key features (composition, background, effect) of 'Whodunit' films, TV shows, and literary narratives.

**Assessment:** **A.) regular attendance** (no more than 2 absences!) and **active in-class participation** as well as **9 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** of 2 pages and **final paper** of 10-12 pages (1/3). You need to pass each section to pass the whole course.

**Deadline for Final Papers:** Wednesday, January 27, 2016 in class. There is no (!) extension of this deadline.

## Syllabus

### 14 October Whodunit? - The Reader as Detective and Accomplice

Basic texts:

Howard Haycraft, excerpts from *Murder for Pleasure* [Moodle]

Dennis Lehane & Rosemary Herbert, forewords to *Whodunit* (2003). [Moodle]

### 21 October Tales of Ratiocination – Early Detective Fiction

Main text (reading required):

Edgar Allan Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841). [Moodle]

Additional text (optional):

Christopher Rollason, "The Detective Myth in Poe's Dupin Trilogy" (1988). [Moodle]

Keywords: Detective Fiction; Gothic; Locked-Room Mystery.

### 28 October Murder Mysteries as Moralistic Tales

Main text (reading required):

Melville Davisson Post, "The Doomed Mystery" (1914) [Moodle]

Additional text (optional):

Otto Penzler, "Introduction" to *Locked-Room Mysteries* (2014) [Moodle]

Keywords: 'Death of Evil Figure'; "Impossible Murder"; Locked Room; Magic; Moralism; Religion.

### 04 November The Classical Whodunit – Screwball and Chinese Wisdom

Main example (watching required):

*Charlie Chan at the Circus* (1936, dir. H. Lachman): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89MMEVNBxg>

Additional examples (optional):

*Charlie Chan's Secret* (1936, dir. G. Wiles): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OB16-tmRgAE>  
Keywords: Aphorisms; Asian American; B Movies; 'Charlie Chan'; Circuses & Carnivals; Screwball; 'Warner Oland'.



**11 November Noir Points of View – The Dark Side of Crime Fiction**

Main example (watching required):

*Lady in the Lake* (1947, dir. Robert Montgomery) [Watch in the Department's Media Archive!]

Additional text:

C. Williamson, "You'll see it..." (1996): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/20688109.pdf?acceptTC=true>

Keywords: *Chinatown* (film); Film Noir; Neo-Noir; Subjective Camera.

**18 November Crimes on Demand – Postwar Magazine Stories**

Main text (reading required):

Kelley Roos, "Murder among Ladies," from *American Magazine* (1950). [Moodle]

Additional text (optional):

H.W. Roden, "Crime on the Pegasus," from *American Magazine* (1947). [Moodle]

Keywords: 'Husband-and-wife team'; Lowbrow fiction; 'Perry Mason'; *The Thin Man* (novel & film).

**25 November Suspense Cinema and the Emergence of the 'HowDunit'**

Main example (watching required):

*Rear Window* (1954, dir. Alfred Hitchcock). [Watch in the Department's Media Archive!]

Additional text (optional):

C. Mag Uidhir, "Suspense Realism" (2011): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/42635473.pdf?acceptTC=true>

Keywords: Confinement;; Howdunit; "Icy Blonde"; Point of View; Suspense; Silent Film Techniques; Sympathy with Criminal; Voyeurism.

**02 December "Hush... Hush!" – Horror Film and the Criminal Mind**

Main text (watching required):

*Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (1964, dir. Robert Aldrich). [Watch in the Department's Media Archive!]

Additional text (optional):

Stephen Farber, "New American Gothic" (1966): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1211159.pdf>

Keywords: Dementia; Gothic; Horror; Insanity; Recluse; *Scream* (1996, movie); Southern Belle; Slasher Film.

**09 December Die Laughing – Whodunit Spoofs and Intertextuality**

Main text (watching required):

*Murder by Death* (1976, dir. Robert Moore). [Watch in the Department's Media Archive!]

Keywords: Country-House Whodunit; Fictional Sleuth Spoofs; Horror Comedy; *Scary Movie* (2000, film); Parody;

**16 December Serialized Crime – Primetime Murder Mysteries**

Main text (watching required):

*Murder, She Wrote* (1984-1996, CBS), epis. 1, "The Murder of Sherlock Holmes." [Watch in Media Archive!]

Additional text (optional):

J.R. Kjelstrup, "Challenging Narratives" (2007): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/20688547.pdf>

Keywords: Comedy & Crime; Criminology; 'Miss Marple'; Mystery Writer/Amateur Detective; *Monk* (TV series).



**Deadline Research Proposal TODAY, December 16!**

**13 January The Long Shadows of America's Past – History, Genocide and Crime**

Main text (reading required):

Sherman Alexie, *Indian Killer* (1996); ch. I.1-2 & 19; II.4-5 & 17-19; III.6 & 25-31. [Moodle]

Additional text (optional):

N. van Styvendale, "Trans/Historicity of Trauma" (2008): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/29533868.pdf>

Keywords: Columbus; Ethno-History; Genocide, 'Interracial Murder'; Trauma; *Wolfen* (film).

**20 January Mind-Tricking Narratives – Postmodern Crime Film**

Main example (watching required):

*Memento* (2000, dir. Christopher Nolan). [Watch in the Department's Media Archive!]

Additional text (optional):

Jamie Skye Bianco, "Techno-Cinema" (2004): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/29762978.pdf>

Keywords: 'Mind-tricking Narratives'; Postmodernism; *The Prestige* (film); *The Usual Suspects* (film).

**27 January Coroners and Killers – Television and the Microcosm of Murder**

Main text (watching required):

*CSI: New York* (2004-2013, CBS), first episode: "Blink" (2004). Watch in Media Archive!

Additional text (optional):

N.J. Schweitzer et al, "The CSI Effect" (2007): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/29762978.pdf>

Keywords: Autopsy; 'Extreme Close-Up'; Forensics; Investigation; Medical Drama; Police Drama.



**FINAL PAPER DUE TODAY**