Madman Angels and Beautiful Minds
Fictions of Insanity
from Edgar Allan Poe to Lady Gaga

Lecturer: Priv.-Doz. Dr. Stefan L. Brandt, Gastprofessor
Room and time: AR-K 122/23, Thursday, 16-18
Course type and number: Hauptseminar (1032300032)
First session: October 14, 2010


Course description: “The only people for me are the mad ones,” Jack Kerouac writes in On the Road (1957), “the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time.” The celebration of the madman in Beat literature (Kerouac, Ginsberg, Kesey) signals a paradigm shift in the portrayal of ‘insane’ behavior in American culture and literature. Whereas in 19th century romantic literature, madness was often seen as a dangerous, yet fascinating deviation from normality, postmodernity has become literally obsessed with the ‘mad Other,’ valorizing its emancipatory and empowering qualities. The course will begin with descriptions of mad, or insane, behavior in Gothic writing (especially Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” from 1843), then move on to stories such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). What function does madness have in these texts? What does it signify and what relationship between the reader and the ‘mad’ protagonist is established in them? 20th century literary texts on madness to be discussed in class will include writings by the Beats (On the Road from 1957) and Margaret Atwood (“Polarities” from 1977), just to name a few. As to visual negotiations of the theme, we will discuss important films such as Now, Voyager (1942, dir. Irving Rapper), The Dark Mirror (1946, dir. Robert Siodmak), One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (1975, dir. Miloš Forman), and Pi (1998, dir. Darren Aronofsky). How can the fascination of mainstream Hollywood fiction with issues of deviation be explained? What function does the ‘mad Other’ have for a culture that accentuates individuality and rejects any form of conformity? In addition to these texts, we will take a brief glimpse at the negotiation of eccentricity as a liberating personal trait in American television series (Monk, Ally McBeal) and in music (Lady Gaga). Our observations will be backed by theoretical approaches by Michel Foucault (Madness and Civilization), Shoshana Felman (Writing and Madness), and Jürgen Link (Versuch über den Normalismus).

Grading:

2 CP: active participation in class discussions, expert session plus handout & at least nine entries in the discussion forum before the session;

5 CP: competent & lively participation in class discussions, expert session plus handout & at least ten entries in the discussion forum before the session & a 5-page summary of one important primary or secondary text (to be made accessible to the class);

7 CP: competent & lively participation in class discussions, expert session plus handout & at least ten entries in the discussion forum before the session & final paper of ca. 15 pages on a seminar-related topic with a close reading.

Note: Poor attendance or class participation will negatively affect your final grade!

Deadline for Final Papers: Friday, March 31 (Thursday), 2011. Note: There is no (!) extension of this deadline.

Syllabus

14 October Introduction: “Are you mad? Or what are you?” Fictions of Insanity Then and Now
Basic texts (recommended):
Michel Foucault, preface from Madness and Civilization (1965).¹
Shoshana Felman, “Madness and the Literary” (from Writing and Madness, 2003).

21 October Rationality vs. Irrationality – Madness in the Age of Reason
Main text (required):

¹ All main texts for this course are available at Moodle: https://moodle.uni-siegen.de. All these texts are also available in the form of a course reader (for those who like to have everything printed out already). Copy write, Weidenauer Str. 248 (behind the police station), phone: 0271-45416.
28 October  Gothic Madness – Abysses of the Human Mind
Main text (required):
Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843).
Background text (optional):

04 November  Going Mad – The Insanity of ‘Separate Spheres’
Main text (required):
Background texts (optional):

11 November  ‘Building’ the Neurotic – Normativity, Social Control, and Psychoanalytic Therapy
Main example (required):
Now, Voyager (dir. Irving Rapper, 1942)
Background text (optional):
Mary Ann Doane, “The Clinical Eye: Medical Discourses in the ‘Woman’s Film’ of the 1940s” (1985).

18 November  Noir Madness – Psychosis as Cinematic Construction
Main example (required):
Background text (optional):

25 November  “The only people for me are the mad ones”: Madness as Spiritual Awakening
Main text (required):
Jack Kerouac, from On the Road (1957).
Background text (optional):

02 December  The Mental Institution and the Making of Lunatics
Main example (required):
One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (dir. Milos Forman, 1975).
Background text (optional):
Thomas H. Fick, “The Hipster, the Hero, and the Psychic Frontier in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” (1989).

09 December  Autobiography and Mental Disorder
Main text (required):
Sylvia Plath, excerpts from The Bell Jar (1963).
Background text (optional):
Marjorie G. Perloff, “‘A Ritual of Being Born Twice’: Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar” (1972).

16 December  The ‘Complexities of Ordinary Life’ and the Logic of Insanity
Main example (required):
“Polarities” (from The Atwood Stories, Canadian Television, 2003).
Background text (optional):
Margaret Atwood, “Polarities” (from Dancing Girls, 1977).

13 January  The Mad Genius – Intellectuality and Suffering
Main example (required):
Background text (optional):

20 January  Schizophrenia as Narrative
Main film (required):
Background texts (optional):

27 January  ‘Slightly Mad’ – Amiable Eccentricity and Popular Television
Main examples (required):
Background text (optional):

03 February  Madness as Pop Culture – The ‘Lady Gaga’ Hype
Main examples (required):
Additional text (optional):
Derritt Mason, “Rah, Rah, Ah-Ah-Ah (Ro-Ma, Ro-Ma-Ma): Lady Gaga, Hysteria, Commodity Fetishism” (2010).