Department of Art History and Communications Studies
COMS 354 (CRN 10681) / ARTH 353 (CRN 7969)
"The Visual Culture of Crime"
Winter, 2010

Instructor: Dr. Will Straw
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Class Times: Mondays, 2:25 -- 5:25, Arts W-215
Office Hours: Wednesdays, 3:00 – 5:00, other times available by appointment

Teaching Assistant for the course: Caroline Bem

Description of the course

The category of Avisual culture@encompasses the range of images which circulate within our social and cultural worlds. AVisual culture@may include prestigious forms of image-making, such as high art painting, or less respectable forms, such as the popular cultural imagery of advertising and television. Painters and photographers have used images of crime for a variety of purposes: to Aprove@prejudices about the criminal personality, to aestheticize the contemporary city, to raise metaphysical issues of life and death, to transgress cultural norms of tastefulness and acceptability and so on. These various uses of crime within visual forms will be a central focus of the course.

In this course, we will be looking at a wide range of images. Some of these will be in the form of "moving" images: films or television programs. Others will be "still images": photographs, paintings, drawings, newspaper and magazine covers, maps, etc. . Whenever possible, all images will be posted to Web-CT.

Please note that there are no tutorials/discussion groups for this class.

Readings
Readings for the course will be available in an course-pack available at the McGill bookstore.

Grading and Assignments:

The final mark for the course will be based on the following:

Visual Analysis 1: Still Image	**30%**
Visual Analysis II: Moving Image	**30%**
Final Exam:	**40%**

Explanation of Grading and Assignments

You are asked to write two essays for this course. Each requires that you choose an example of visual imagery involving crime. The difference between the two essays is described below. For these essays, you may choose any example that interests you; these may be historical examples or

contemporary ones. While the choice is open, you must receive approval of your choices from the instructor. You may visit me during my office hours or communicate with me by email, but **you must get approval for your choice of image.** Essays for which the topic has not been approved may not be accepted.

While each essay requires that you provide an analysis of visual imagery, a successful essay will also involve some research into the genre or style of the artefact which you are analysing. **Each visual analysis essay should be approximately 5 double-spaced pages in length**, or approximately 1500 words**.** It should contain bibliographical references for any sources quoted or used to support arguments. Lists of references are in addition to the five pages of text required for the essay.

PLEASE NOTE THAT I PREFER TO RECEIVE ESSAYS ELECTRONICALLY, AS EMAIL ATTACHMENTS, SENT TO William.straw@mcgill.ca I WILL PROVIDE MARKS AND COMMENTS BY EMAIL.

First assignment: For the first assignment, you must choose a still image. This may be a painting, photograph, advertisement, drawing, map piece of comic art or any other kind of still image. (You may, for example, choose a film poster, but not the film itself.) Your analysis should make connections between the example you choose and a particular tradition in the visual culture of crime. It should suggest some of the issues raised by the image, and discuss it in terms of some of the conventions of crime imagery as discussed in class or in readings. A good essay is one which combines analysis of the *topic or content* of an image, on the one hand, and its *style or form* on the other. Unless it is absolutely impossible, you should include a copy of the image with your paper. **You must receive approval of your topic for this essay by October 4th. This essay is due at 5pm on October 18th. One percentage point will be deducted from the mark for each day on which the paper is late, unless a medical certificate or other document has been used in advance to obtain an extension.**

Second assignment: For the second assignment, you must choose a film or televisIon program which deals centrally with crime. Here, again, you may choose freely from all available films or television programs, though your choice must be approved by me. Your analysis should deal primarily with the ways in which crime is visually represented in your example. In other words, do not analyse plot and character unless these clearly have to do with the visual representation of crime. Your essay might answer questions like the following: *What are the stylistic features of recent forensic crime shows on television, (like the CSI programs)? How do French gangster films of the 1960s or 1970s represent the criminal underworld in visual terms?* **This essay is due at 5pm on November 29th. One percentage point will be deducted from the mark for each day on which the paper is late, unless a medical certificate or other document has been used in advance to obtain an extension.**

Final Exam: This will be held during the regular exam period after the final class. The exam will contain both short-answer questions and essay questions, and will involve the showing of images previously used in class. More information on the exam will be provided later in the course.

All assignments may be completed in English or French.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University¹s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Special Needs and Concerns

Students with special needs or concerns that may affect their course work should make an appointment to discuss this with the instructor as soon as possible.

Plagiarism and Student Conduct

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the code of student conduct and disciplinary procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity for more information).

L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le site http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity/).

Schedule of themes and readings:

September 13 Mug Shots, Police Photography and the Fingerprint: Official Images of Crime

Allan Sekula. AThe Body and the Archive,@ **October**, no. 39 (Winter, 1986), pp. 3-64.

September 20 The Detective I

Reading: Charles J. Rzepka. "Race, Region, Rule: Genre and the Case of Charlie Chan." PMLA, vol. 122, no. 5 (2007), 1463-1481.

September 27 Film Noir

Reading: James Naremore, AFilm Noir: The History of an Idea,@ Film Quarterly, vol. 49, no. 2 (Winter 1995-1996), pp. 12-27.

October 4 The social fantastic, surrealism, and French culture

Reading: Robin Walz. AThe Lament of Fantömas: The Popular Novel as Modern Mythology.@ In Walz, **Pulp Surrealism**. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, pp. 42-75;

October 11 -- Thanksgiving: no class

October 18 Pulps and the true crime magazine

Reading: Will Straw, "Introduction," **Cyanide and Sin: Visualizing Crime in 50s America.** New York: PPP Publications/Andrew Roth Gallery, 2006.

October 25 Photo journalism, Weegee, Sensationalism

Reading: V. Penelope Pelizzon and Nancy M. West. AGood Stories=from the Mean Streets: Weegee and Hard-Boiled Autobiography.@ Yale Journal of Criticism, vol. 17, no. 1 (1994), pp. 20-50.

November 1: Guest lecture

November 8 Police and the Procedural

Reading: Philip Howell, "Crime and the City Solution: Crime Fiction, Urban Knowledge, and Radical Geography," **Antipode** 30:4, 1998, pp. 357–378

November 15 The city and the labyrinth

Reading: David L. Pike. "Urban Nightmares and Future Visions: Life Beneath New York." **Wide Angle**, vol. 20, no. 4 (October, 1998), pp. 8-50.

November 22 Vice and the night

Reading: William Sharpe, ANew York, Night and Cultural Mythmaking: The Nocturne in Photography, 1900-1925,@ **Smithsonian Studies in American Art**, vol. 2, no. 3 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 2-21

November 29 The Gangster and the Serial Killer

Reading: Paul Gormley, "Trashing Whiteness: pulp fiction, se7en, strange days, and articulating affect **Angelaki,** Vol. 6, no. 1 (2001), pp. 155-171.