



**AMERICAN
STUDIES
LEIPZIG**

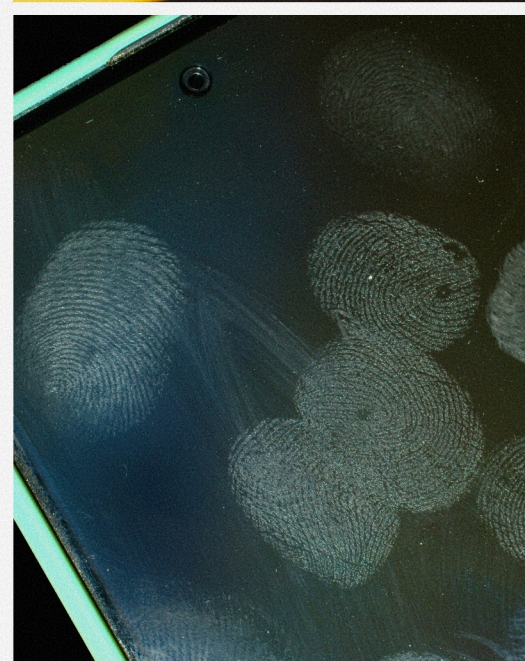


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SUMMER 2026

KILLER CONTENT

**CRIME AS SPECTACLE
IN AMERICAN MEDIA**

MEDIA, SOCIETY, AND CULTURE
(04-038-2006)

SEMINAR – THU 11AM-1PM – NSG 320

DR. STEFFEN WÖLL



MOODLE

**Media, Society, and
Culture**

Summer 2026

Seminar

Thursday 11am–1pm
NSG 320

Dr. Steffen Wöll

[Moodle](#)

Office Hour
Friday 4–5pm
([via Zoom](#))

Killer Content: Crime as Spectacle in American Media

This seminar examines crime as a spectacular media form in the United States. Rather than treating criminality as a purely social issue, we explore how deviance, violence, and threat are produced, framed, aestheticized, and circulated across media—from early police photography and newspaper sensationalism to TV trials, true crime podcasts, and live-streamed violence.¹

Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as spectacle (Debord), wound culture (Seltzer), racialized surveillance (Browne), affect theory (Ngai, Berlant), and platform logics (Gillespie, Roberts), we will analyze how media make crime consumable, whose suffering gains attention, and how race, gender, and class structure dynamics of attention and (in)visibility.

Through case studies including racialized victimhood, parasocial intimacy, manifesto circulation, documentary ethics, and the commodification of trauma, students will develop analytical skills across several short assignments and assemble their work into a coherent research portfolio.

¹ This seminar does not aim to resolve cases, assess guilt, or provide legal judgment or advice.

Objectives

This seminar aims to:

- **Analyze** how crime is framed and circulated across different media using relevant theoretical frameworks.
- **Apply** concepts such as spectacle, surveillance, affect, and platform logics to media artifacts and contemporary cases.
- **Develop** research-oriented analytical and writing skills.

Requirements

To successfully complete the seminar, you are expected to:

- attend class regularly (university policy applies)
- complete the assigned readings and bring the texts to class
- actively participate in discussions and group work

Graded Examination (Prüfungsleistung)

If you choose to complete your module examination in this seminar, you have two options:

Option A: Research Portfolio

Complete **five short assignments** over the course of the semester, each corresponding to a different academic format. You may choose in which weeks to complete each task, but **all five must be completed by the end of the semester**.

A. Comparative Reading Response (400–500 words)

Compare two theoretical texts. Identify key concepts, points of tension, and their relevance for the seminar and/or your own research.

B. Visual Media Analysis (300–400 words)

Analyze a visual media object (e.g., film scene, TikTok clip, bodycam footage, mugshots, documentary trailer) using one theoretical concept from the seminar.

C. Bibliographic Mapping (600–800 words)

Compile a short research dossier on a chosen topic that maps key scholarly debates, relevant sources, and emerging questions.

D. Theory Transfer (300–500 words)

Explain one theoretical concept and connect it to a contemporary media case or example, emphasizing analytical insight and critical engagement.

E. Poster Presentation (5–7 minutes; final session)

Give a brief in-class presentation based on your planned term paper topic. Use one slide or poster and bring a one-page handout summarizing your preliminary thesis and research questions.

Option B: Term Paper

Due: September 7, 2026. Carefully read the guidelines attached below.

Code of Conduct

This seminar follows the American Studies Leipzig Code of Conduct. Academic practice in the humanities thrives on open debate among diverse perspectives. Respectful academic engagement is expected at all times.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism means submitting the work of others as your own. While academic writing regularly builds on existing scholarship, using such work without proper citation constitutes fraud.

Generative AI

Generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini) may be useful for idea generation or initial research. However:

- do not rely on AI-generated text without verification.
- do not submit AI-produced writing as your own.
- cite and document any use of AI tools.

American Studies Leipzig uses detection tools for both plagiarism and AI-generated content.

Submitting AI-generated text without proper attribution will result in automatic failure of the course component and may have serious academic consequences.

Content Warning

This seminar includes materials related to crime, violence, and trauma. If you feel that this may negatively affect your wellbeing, consider forgoing this course.

Schedule²

1	Apr 9	<p>Crime as Spectacle: Key Concepts</p> <p><u>Case</u>: Depp v. Heard</p>	<p>Be prepared to introduce yourself and your research interests. Ask yourself what you expect from the seminar.</p> <p>Guy Debord. <i>The Society of the Spectacle</i>. 1967. Theses 1–34.</p> <p>Mark Seltzer. <i>Serial Killers</i>. 1998. Introduction.</p> <p>[Optional: Jean Baudrillard. “The Precession of Simulacra.” In <i>Simulacra and Simulation</i>. 1994.]</p>
2	Apr 16	<p>Bodies / Surveillance / Evidence</p> <p><u>Case</u>: Rodney King</p>	<p>Jonathan Finn. “Picturing the Criminal.” In <i>Capturing the Criminal Image</i>. 2009.</p> <p>Simone Browne. “B[®]anding Blackness: Biometric Technology and the Surveillance of Blackness.” In <i>Dark Matters</i>. 2015.</p> <p>Eyal Weizman et al. <i>Forensic Architecture</i>. Selected cases. Website.</p>

² Real-life or fictional cases serve as analytical stress tests for the theoretical frameworks discussed. Students are expected to independently familiarize themselves with basic facts and media discourses of each case.

3	Apr 23	<p>Platforms & Datafication</p> <p><u>Case:</u> PredPol / COMPAS</p>	<p>Ruha Benjamin. "Default Discrimination." In <i>Race After Technology</i>. 2019.</p> <p>Virginia Eubanks. "The Allegheny Algorithm." In <i>Automating Inequality</i>. 2018.</p>
4	Apr 30	<p>True Crime & Emotional Consumption</p> <p><u>Case:</u> Scamanda</p>	<p>Kelli S. Boling. "True Crime Podcasting." <i>Radio Journal</i> 17(2). 2019.</p> <p>Sianne Ngai. "Anxiety." In <i>Ugly Feelings</i>. 2005.</p> <p>Lauren Berlant. "Cruel Optimism." In <i>Cruel Optimism</i>. 2011.</p>
5	May 7	<p>Race & Victimhood</p> <p><u>Case:</u> Gabby Petito</p>	<p>Carol M. Liebler. "Me(di)a Culpa?: The 'Missing White Woman Syndrome' and Media Self-Critique." <i>Communication, Culture & Critique</i> 3. 2010.</p> <p>Robert M. Entman. "Blacks in the News." <i>Journalism Quarterly</i> 69(2). 1992.</p> <p>[Optional: Michael Welch et al. "Youth Violence and Race in the Media: The Emergence of 'Wilding' as an Invention of the Press." <i>Race, Gender & Class</i> 11(2). 2004.]</p>

	May 14	No class (Ascension Day)	
6	May 21	Rage / Misogyny / Inceldom <u>Case:</u> Elliot Rodger	Casey Ryan Kelly. "The Red Pill: The New Men's Rights Rhetoric." In Apocalypse Man. 2020. Jia Tolentino. "The Rage of the Incels." The New Yorker. 2018.
7	May 28	AI Crimeworlds <u>Case:</u> Robocall Deepfake Biden	Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen. "Excavating AI: The Politics of Images in Machine Learning Training Sets." 2019. Website. Ruha Benjamin. "Engineered Inequity: Are Robots Racist?" In Race After Technology. 2019. [Optional: Nadia Naffi. "Deepfakes and the Crisis of Knowing." UNESCO. 2025.]
8	Jun 4	Platform Governance <u>Case:</u> TikTok Suicide Algorithm	Sarah T. Roberts. "Understanding Commercial Content Moderation." In Behind the Screen. 2021. Tarleton Gillespie. "The Myth of the Neutral Platform." In Custodians of the Internet. 2021.

9	Jun 11	<p>Sleuthing & Trolling</p> <p><u>Case</u>: Idaho 4</p>	<p>Whitney Phillips. This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things. 2016. Introduction & "LOLing at Tragedy"</p> <p>Clay Shirky. "Everyone Is a Media Outlet." In Here Comes Everybody. 2008.</p> <p>[Optional: danah boyd. "Did Media Literacy Backfire?" Medium. 2017.]</p>
10	Jun 18	<p>Pseudo-Events</p> <p><u>Case</u>: O.J. Simpson</p>	<p>Hunter S. Thompson. Hell's Angels. 1967. pp. 1-49; 131-142</p> <p>Daniel Boorstin. "From News Gathering to News Making." In The Image. 1961.</p>
11	Jun 25	<p>Scripted Violence</p> <p><u>Case</u>: Joker (2019)</p> <p>[Screening: Jun 24, 8PM via <u>Zoom</u>]</p>	<p>Theodore J. Kaczynski. "Industrial Society and Its Future (ISAIF)." In Technological Slavery. 2010.</p> <p>Mark Seltzer. "Wound Culture." In Serial Killers. 1998.</p>

12	Jul 2	<p>The Trauma Consumption Industry</p> <p><u>Cases:</u> Dahmer (Netflix) or The Jinx (HBO) or The Staircase (Netflix)</p>	<p>Linda Williams. "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary." <i>Film Quarterly</i> 46(3). 1993.</p> <p>Jason Mittell. <i>Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling</i>. 2015. Introduction.</p>
13	Jul 9	<p>Final Reflections</p>	<p>Student Presentations (Research Portfolio)</p>
<p>Term paper due September 7, 2026</p>			

Term Paper Guidelines

Deadline: Submit via Moodle by **September 7, 2026**.

Late submissions can only be accepted under specific, documented circumstances.

Choosing a Topic

Your paper should build on the analytical frameworks we developed throughout the semester. It should:

- analyze one primary source (in some cases, using two or more primary sources may be justified); you may (but are not required to) choose a text discussed in class
- engage closely with your primary material.
- relate your analysis to key seminar themes

Secondary Sources

Include scholarship relevant to your topic. Use peer-reviewed academic sources to frame and support your argument:

- Leipzig University Library
- JSTOR, Project MUSE, ResearchGate, Google Scholar
- Sources and bibliographies in seminar readings

Writing Standards

Your paper should:

- present a clear thesis in the introduction
- develop your argument paragraph by paragraph
- analyze, not summarize

Formal Requirements

- Length: 5,000 words ($\pm 10\%$; excluding bibliography; footnotes count toward the total)
- Format: Times New Roman 12pt; 1.5 spacing; 1-inch margins
- Citations: Chicago Manual of Style or MLA
- Structure: Include an introduction, conclusion, and bibliography/works cited
- Thesis: State your central argument clearly, usually around the start or the end of the introduction
- Submission: Upload as single PDF with signed Plagiarism & AI Disclaimers

Optional (Recommended)

- Use chapter headings to improve orientation
- Offer reader guidance that signals what is to come and/or outlines how your paper is structured
- Include a table of contents for more complex papers

Plagiarism

Always cite any idea, term, or phrasing that is not your own—whether quoted or paraphrased. Failure to do so is plagiarism and can have serious consequences.

You must use quotation marks and provide full attribution when:

- quoting or borrowing three or more consecutive words,
- referencing a distinctive term, or
- discussing an original concept coined by another author.

Proper citation applies to all formats, including print, digital, audiovisual, and AI-generated sources.

Final Tip

Start early, stay curious, and do not hesitate to reach out for feedback.

Good luck on your research journey!