Mean Streets: The Detective and the City

What would Sherlock Holmes be without London, Philip Marlow without Los Angeles, Jimmy McNulty without Baltimore? From what was arguably the first instance of detective fiction, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” the "mean streets" of the city have been crucial to the formation of the genre. The detective moves between different social spaces within the city, with access to both expensive high-rise apartments and crack dens, and the city itself becomes a kind of character in the novel – alternatively helpful, seductive, sullen, and dangerous.

Using short stories, novellas, TV shows and films set in London, Baltimore, Johannesburg, Berlin, Kolkata, New York, Paris, Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro, and other world cities, we will both examine the art of detective writing and trace the narrative complicity of the detective and urban space. Alongside the fictional texts, writings by practitioners of crime fiction as well as urban and cultural critics will provide us with the theoretical scaffolding for our investigation.

One of the authors we’ll be reading, Paul Auster, argues that “[t]he detective is the one who looks, who listens, who moves through this morass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them. In effect, the writer and the detective are interchangeable.” In learning about detective fiction, we will thus also be sharpening our own writing skills, working out how to most effectively express that one idea that pulls everything together. Shorter writing assignments during the course of the semester will focus on developing specific writing skills, with a longer, literary critical essay as the final assignment.
Course Objectives:

- To develop and practice the skills necessary to analyze and critically evaluate both fictional and theoretical texts, including the city as a ‘text’ in itself.
- To demystify the process of academic writing, allowing you to develop your own unique voice as a skilled, confident academic writer.
- To enable you to discuss and compare texts in various media (short stories, novels, poetry, films, TV series, theory) using appropriate critical vocabulary.

Grading:

30% Participation (in class and online)
35% Shorter Writing Assignments (3)
35% Final Paper

Attendance: Attendance is mandatory. Missing more than two classes without genuine and documented reasons will severely affect your final grade. You should come to class having prepared all the readings for that day, and you must have the assigned texts with you. Classes will start on time; three instances of tardiness will be counted as one absence.

Participation: Active participation, both physically and virtually, is a must in this class. You must come to class having not only read but thought about the readings assigned for that day. You must bring a printed copy of each session’s reading with you to class – if you do not have the reading with you, it will be counted as a half-absence. Furthermore, you have a responsibility towards your colleagues to articulate helpful, thoughtful critiques and suggestions in the workshop sessions, or when you’re paired with a writing partner. If at all possible, make sure you attend all workshops – you will receive invaluable feedback on your writing.

Blog Posts: In order to exercise your writing muscles we will be keeping a class blog on Blogger. A blog post on that day’s readings will be due each week on Monday
at noon, except during weeks when essays are due. Active blog participation –
commenting on other posts, tailoring your post as a response to a previous post,
and posting links to interesting events or websites – is highly encouraged. Your
blog posts can take various forms throughout the semester but will generally run to
about 300 words a week. Posts will not be anonymous and you are expected to take
full intellectual responsibility for your responses and comments. The blog is not
open to the public. You will not receive a separate grade for each blog post, but they
will factor into your participation grade. You are expected to submit a total of five
posts, which means you can skip two weeks over the course of the semester without
being penalized (this does not apply to posts 1, 4 and 7, which are required).

**Technology:** In accordance with recent research on electronic devices in the
classroom, I have decided not to allow laptops or other electronic devices in class
(unless specified otherwise). I’ll post any slides I use on NYU Classes.

**Office Hours:** My office hours are Thursdays 11-1, in 1 Washington Place room
431. Please use the Googledoc I’ll distribute to schedule office hours to avoid double
bookings. I’d like everyone in the class to come to office hours at least once during
the semester.

**Papers:** This is a writing seminar, and as such the focus of the class will be on
developing your writing skills. You will submit a draft and final version of every
paper for this class. We will be workshopping draft versions in class, so be prepared
to share your writing with your colleagues. On workshop days, you must bring **two**
copies of your draft to class.

Paper 1 will be a close reading of a fictional text (2pp, 8%)
Paper 2 will be an analytical assignment, in which you dissect how a theorist
constructs his/her argument (3pp, 12%)
Paper 3 will be a compare/contrast assignment, using either fiction or theory (4pp,
15%)
Paper 4 (the final essay) will be a literary critical essay in which you combine the
skills you have developed in the earlier assignments (8-9pp, 35%)

All papers will be submitted through NYU Classes. Late submission of papers will be
heavily penalized, and late papers may not be accepted. **Failure to submit any paper**
will lead to a failing grade for the class.

Final versions must be formatted in the following way: Double-spaced, 12-point
type, 1.25-inch margins. Put your name, the course name, the date, and, most
importantly, the title of your essay, on a separate title/cover page.

**Citations:** We will be using MLA (Modern Language Association) style for writing
and formatting papers in this course. Please include your Works Cited as a separate
page at the end of your essay. Spend some time on the Purdue University OWL
(Online Writing Lab) MLA style guide to familiarize yourself with MLA conventions:
https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/. From the second paper
onwards, incorrectly using MLA style will lower your paper grade.

**Academic Honesty**: I take plagiarism extremely seriously. As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html] for a full description of the academic integrity policy.

**Accommodation**: If you have a documented disability and require accommodation, please inform me immediately.

**Required Texts** (Available at the NYU Bookstore):

Other readings will be posted on NYU Classes.

**Course Schedule:**

**History and Theory of Detective Fiction:**

**Week 1:**

M 9/1: No Class (Labor Day)

Robert Knox: “Decalogue” (10 Rules for Detective Fiction) – NYUC

**Week 2:**

*Blog Post 1: Intellectual autobiography (required)*

W 9/10: Sophocles: *Oedipus Rex* (NYU Bookstore)
THE CLASSIC WHODUNIT

Week 3:
Franco Moretti: “Clues” – NYUC

W 9/17: J.M. Coetzee: “What is Realism?” – NYUC

**Paper 1 Draft due**

THE CITY:

Week 4:
M 9/22: Michel de Certeau: “Walking in the City” – NYUC
A.D. King: “The Postcolonial City” - NYUC

W 9/24:
Michel Foucault: “Panopticism,” from *Discipline and Punish* – NYUC

**Paper 1 Final due**

HARDBOILED/NOIR CRIME FICTION

Week 5:
Dashiell Hammett: “The Assistant Murderer” – NYUC

Week 6:
M 10/6: Kurt Vonnegut: “How to Write with Style” – NYUC

**Paper 2 Draft due – in-class workshop**

W 10/8: Roman Polanski: *Chinatown* – Film; watch before class

Week 7:
M 10/13: Fall Recess – no classes

W 10/15: Franz Fanon: “On Violence” from *The Wretched of the Earth* – NYUC
Rubem Fonseca: “Mandrake,” “The Blotter” – NYUC

**Paper 2 Final due**
THE METAPHYSICAL DETECTIVE STORY

Week 8:
M 10/20: Paul Auster: City of Glass – NYU Bookstore
Blog Post 3

Jorge Luis Borges: “Death and the Compass” – NYUC
Edgar Allen Poe: “The Importance of the Single Effect in a Prose Tale” – NYUC

Week 9:

W 10/29: Fritz Lang: M – Film; watch before class
Tom Gunning, “M: The City Haunted by Demonic Desire” – NYUC

F 10/31: Peer feedback on paper 3 draft due.

THE POLICE:

Week 10:
Ed McBain: “Sadie When She Died” – The Longman Anthology of Detective Fiction (NYU Bookstore)


Paper 3 Final due

JOHANNESBURG: CITY OF CRIME

Week 11:
M 11/10: Lauren Beukes: Zoo City, Part 1 (NYU Bookstore)
Blog Post 4 (collaborative – required)

W 11/12: Lauren Beukes: Zoo City, Part 2 (NYU Bookstore)
Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttal: “Afropolis” – NYUC

URBAN DECAY:

Week 12:
Ben Quinn: “Anti-homeless spikes are part of a wider phenomenon of 'hostile architecture’” – NYUC
Malcolm Gladwell: “The Crooked Ladder” – NYUC
Blog Post 5

W 11/19: The Wire, Season 1, Episodes 1-3 – Film; watch before class

Week 13:
M 11/24: Johnnie To, Ka-Fai Wai: Mad Detective – Film; watch before class

Blog Post 6

W 11/26: No class

New York City, as Text
Week 14:
M 12/1: Paper 4 Draft due: in-class presentations/workshop

Presentations/Workshop cont.

Week 15:
M 12/8: James Baldwin: "Sonny's Blues"
Presentations/Workshop cont.

W 12/10: Conclusion
Blog Post 7: Final Reflections (required)

Fri 12/12: Paper 4 Final due