Infanticide in 1780, crimes of passion in 1900, and serial killers in the 90s, what do they have in common? Each of these crimes was the obsession of public attention at certain points in history. This course will examine why certain crimes draw such attention while others do not and how those crimes relate to the values and institutions that organize a society. What is the immense attractiveness of bad behavior? We will address the fascination of crime by focusing on those crimes in each historical period which were seen as notorious by their contemporaries, including crimes related to gender, race, belief, and psychological states, and will end with our contemporary situation in the US, examining representations of terror in the media. The course will connect with many of the opportunities from the Themester 2012 “Good Behavior. Bad Behavior. From Molecules to Morality.”

This includes discussions of what bad behavior is, how it changes over time, and why we seem to be constantly thinking about it, even lionize it in various media. It also includes participating in campus events and producing a final project in form of a public poster display that can be integrated into the Themester calendar. Often, these notorious crimes did not actually occur more often than others, but became infamous through the specific way in which they were presented in works of literature or in movies. Thus, we will discuss the significance of these presentations and the extent to which the notorious crime can serve as a negative mirror of its society. For this purpose, we will develop our own method of “close reading” of literature and texts in general.

This course is designed for students who want to combine analytical and creative skills. The idea of the class is to involve participants (students and professors) in an active process of discovering things by themselves from the beginning. Instead of starting with intensive historical lectures for each period, we will work like archeologists who start with one fragment and try to (re)construct a whole society out of this one fragment, the notorious crime. The course enhances students’ critical thinking ability by having them create their own methodology. We will start by discussing witchcraft in the 1500s and move step by step to contemporary crimes as presented in books (B.E. Ellis’s American Psycho), films (such as Silence of the Lambs or Seven), and the mass media. In regards to examining terrorism, we will focus on attempts to justify terrorism (9-11 and environmental terrorism).

The objective of this class is to impart a critical “archeological” perspective on the representations of society. You should learn to see human actions (such as the act of committing a crime) not only as an individual action but as an expression of a collective mind set. We will use a variety of guided creative exercises in which you will have to “invent” a society fitting the characteristics we have observed in the presentation of a crime. These tasks will be both individual and group assignments and will be presented orally or in written form. In the first week, we will discuss the method of the class and give you a step-by-step plan (see: Method Sheet) Also, some sessions will include hints on basic college skills, ranging from essay writing to college survival and study groups. Please read the introduction of the course reader for the content of this course.

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