The spectacle known as the ‘media circus’ began with print capitalism’s obsession with the serial killer. Jack the Ripper, the Boston Strangler, the Night Stalker, the DC Sniper, these fear-mongering, sensational monikers are products of equally sensational media campaigns that have taken on lives of their own. By scrutinizing press coverage of chosen crimes from structural, ethical, and other perspectives, this course will situate the serial killer and its ensuing glamorization and commodification as being emblematic of what has been called ‘the modernist event,’ with the media no longer just reporting on these crimes, but arguably inspiring them.

Professor: Dr. Michael Arntfield, marnfield@uwo.ca

When & Where We Meet: Mondays 7-10pm in UC 220

Office Hours: Mondays 6-6:45pm in NCB 440 or by appointment

How This Course Fits into the MIT Program:
Students enrolled in MIT 2770 will:

1. Interrogate the theoretical, social, cultural, & economic circumstances that have given rise to the serial killer as an identifiable public figure, specifically the spectacularization and commodification of serial killers by the media as an intertextual promotional tool. (from MIT program objectives 1 & 6)

2. Survey and connect various media products such as film, television, music, and popular literature that both examine and exemplify the production and audience reception of “true crime” texts, as well as discourses related to serial killer celebrity. (objective 3)

3. Examine human-technological interrelations with respect to apprehending serial killers, including computer-enhanced criminal profiling, biometric identification, and crime tracking software programs such as ViCLAS and other geo-spatial software. (objective 4)

4. Gain an understanding of how the political economy & financial vicissitudes of the media induce a sensationalist reporting of murder & how these variables then suborn the commission of “copycat” crimes as part of a mediated circuit of mimesis. (objective 7)

Course Objectives:
Students who successfully complete this course will be able to:

1. Gain an advanced understanding of textual, semiotic, and discourse analysis by charting and comparing otherwise disparate media across a number of generations, beginning with daily newspapers in Victorian England through to the Internet blogs of current prison inmates.

2. Develop advanced research skills with respect to investigative reporting by accessing analogue media such as microfilm, microfiche, newspaper and government archives, etc. to excavate & scrutinize historical press coverage of serial murder cases and/or police investigations into still unsolved files dating back 100 years or more.

3. Learn to interpret “true crime” media products and the press coverage of serial killers generally as being socially, culturally, & economically constructed, as well as emblematic of what historian Hayden White has coined “the modernist event,” and thus ethically and factually debatable.
Evaluation:

**Attendance & Participation – 10%**
Regular attendance and impassioned, collegial, and active support of your peers in class discussions and debates is essential to your success in this course and the vector of the course itself. The topics and media explored in this course are often controversial, anecdotal, and disturbing, and are sure to promote spirited dialogue. You need to be here to get the full experience and voice your opinions, not to mention get your participation marks. In short, this is a course where you really will get out of it what you put in.

**‘Breaking News’ Story – 10% (due Jan 24)**
The commercial media make easy targets for criticism and derision, much of it deserved. The difference between informed criticism and uninformed criticism, however, is a matter of credibility, so in order to credibly criticize the way the media sensationalize murder cases in this course, you will first need to understand the stylistic conventions and expectations to which they are accustomed. This assignment therefore requires that you write a brief 3-5 page (750-1000 word) news article on a fictional murder investigation believed to be linked to an active serial killer as though you are writing for a popular daily press. The details of the case will be given to you in class one week prior to the due date, and will reflect the way reporters often glean their facts in high-profile murder cases, including through official police media releases, insider sources, and interview data. All of this will be given to you as a co-mingled package of information that you will need to vet, edit, and assemble as a coherent news story that, were it true, would put you and your newspaper in the national spotlight. As you’ll quickly find out, maintaining objectivity, balancing respectability and marketability, and winnowing sourced information from mere speculation are all often easier said than done, even in a fictional context such as this one. This project will also be a useful preparation for your group assignment.

**Film Analysis – 15% (due March 28)**
This course requires you to view a number of films spanning over 70 years. This particular assignment requires you to select two of these films from the mandatory viewing list found on this syllabus, and then a third film of your choice not on the list, all of which you will use to write a 5-7 page (1200-1500 word) analysis of how the three films fit together either directly or indirectly, and work in dialogue with each other over time. But here’s the catch: each of the three films selected needs to have been produced in a different decade. For example, one film from the 1960s, one film from the 1970s, and one film from the 1990s, and so forth. The decades represented do not need to run consecutively, although they can if you choose, and the purpose of this periodical distinction is to allow you to see and subsequently explain how your three films are connected in a multi-generational and organic context, working to maintain a canon with respect to the serial killer film as a specific genre that integrates general public fears of random violence with specific circuits of consumption. More on this in class.
Cold Case File – 30% (due according to assigned presentation week)

In the tradition of the elite Vidocq Society, MIT 2770 will become an ad hoc detective club and think-tank comprised of intellectuals boasting a variety of backgrounds and talents (I’m talking about you here!), all with the common goal of finding new leads in ‘cold’ murder cases using lateral, non-linear deduction and reasoning. The class will therefore be divided into equally sized groups (cold case squads) with each squad being assigned a real-life and still-unsolved serial killer case that while typically inactive, remains officially ‘open’ or otherwise unsolved with the FBI or some other significant law enforcement agency. Each squad will undertake considerable archival research and will engage in true investigative reporting by using a variety of media—both analogue and digital—ranging from original newspaper articles on microfilm and microfiche to archives now available online. Unlike the Vidocq Society, however, you will not have any police files at your disposal to assist you with what’s already been done, and will have to start from scratch. You will consequently sift through, categorize, prioritize, and synthesize a mountain of tertiary information including contemporaneous news stories, classified ads, meteorological data, census and survey results, birth and death notices, and a host of other information available mainly through the commercial media in order to develop a workable theory on your case, including hypotheses on possible patterns or motives. More advanced and thoroughly investigated reports may even offer a profile of the killer and/or theories as to their identity. The final report must be 25-30 pages in length complete with a DVD containing an investigative video log of your work, and each squad is required to present their findings in a one-hour presentation on their assigned week. Each squad will be graded as a single unit so learning to work prolonged hours as an investigative team will be integral to the credibility, and therefore the success, of your research and mediated sleuthing. The most convincing report will be forwarded by me to either the FBI’s behavioral sciences unit in Quantico, Virginia, or directly to the agency still in charge of the case, for further consideration and investigation. As the success of the Vidocq Society has shown, sometimes all a cold case needs is a fresh perspective and unbiased eye in order for the case to break. In other words, someone in this class could literally help catch a serial killer through this assignment! A list of unsolved cases is presented in detail towards the end of this syllabus and cases will be chosen according to the order of presentation/due date (ie: Group 1 has first choice, Group 2 has second choice, and so on). The squads and the presentation order will both be determined during the first lecture of the term.

Final Exam – 35% (date TBA)

The final exam will be closed book and will consist of short answers, definitions, and at least one essay question. It will be scheduled to run a maximum of three (3) hours and will cover material from the entire course as there is no mid-term exam. Building location, room number, date, time and other particulars will all be announced when available.
Course Texts:

- Custom course reading pack; edited by Mike Arntfield
- *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*. By Jeff Lindsay. Knopf Publishing Group, 2005

- *M*. Dir. Fritz Lang. Vereinigte (Criterion), 1931
- *Dirty Harry*. Dir. Don Siegel. Warner Bros, 1971
- *Badlands*. Dir. Terrence Malick. Warner Bros, 1973
- *Manhunter*. Dir. Michael Mann. MGM, 1986
- *Basic Instinct*. Dir. Paul Verhoeven. TriStar Pictures, 1992
- *From Hell*. Dir. Albert & Allen Hughes. 20th Century Fox, 2001

Note: The films cited here are texts as much as the books are texts, and are all mandatory viewing as they will weigh heavily in course content and on the final exam. It is expected that you will rent, borrow, purchase, or otherwise procure these films at your own discretion as, unfortunately, there will be no designated screening times either in or outside of class hours. The good news is that these titles are all easily locatable and I also have copies available for loan if need be.
Course Schedule:

WEEK 1: (Jan 3) INTRODUCTION: Course topics, expectations, key terms, & cold case squad selections. Readings: Schmid 1-30, Hickey “Introduction,” & Lindsay.


Films: From Hell & Psycho

WEEK 3: (Jan 17) PUBLISH OR PERISH: Murderous ultimatums & the ethical quandaries of printing the Zodiac letters & Unabomber Manifesto. Readings: Schmid 66-104, Kaczynski, & Leyton.

Films: Zodiac & Dirty Harry


Films: Monster & Basic Instinct. ‘Breaking News’ assignment due in class at 7pm


WEEK 6: (Feb 7) THE MODERNIST EVENT: An analysis of serial killer media coverage as being emblematic of Hayden White’s “modernist event.” The balance of the course builds on this theory by using a media profile/case study methodology. Readings: White, D’Acci, & Lindsay. Films: Halloween & Scream. Group 1 presents


WEEK 8: (Feb 21) Reading week – no classes.

WEEK 9: (Feb 28) MEDIA PROFILE 2: “The Vampire of Düsseldorf” (Peter Kürten). Readings: Seltzer “Murder & Machine Culture,” Lauer, & Lindsay. Film: M. Group 3 presents


WEEK 13: (March 28) MEDIA PROFILE 6: “The DC Sniper” (John Allen Muhammad). Readings: Schmid 244-257 & Lindsay. Film: Se7en. Group 7 presents. Film analysis assignment due in class at 7pm

WEEK 14: (April 4) CONCLUSION: Course wrap-up & review for final exam. Group 8 presents.

* Topics by week and/or date subject to change

NB (from the Latin nota bene, meaning Note Well!): It should come as little surprise that much of this course deals with extremely mature and frequently graphic subject matter. This course will engage texts, images, films, and discussions that encompass brutal violence, graphic sexual content of an often perverse nature, as well as profane language, illicit drug use, and topics relating to the occult. Some students may find much of the material—including their own research—exceptionally frightening, offensive, disturbing, or otherwise intolerable for any given reason. If you are squeamish and/or easily offended or upset, you may want to seriously reconsider taking this course. Unfortunately, material cannot be edited to suit individual tolerance levels, nor can it be vetted to accommodate personal, religious, ideological, or political beliefs. Note that this caveat is included only as a courtesy and that all add/drop deadlines still apply, as an aversion to the material is not a valid reason for absenteeism or withdrawal without penalty beyond the Registrar’s deadlines.
List of Serial Killer ‘Cold Cases’

 The Alphabet Killer
Between 1971 and 1973 at least three connected killings, also known in the media as the ‘double initial murders,’ occurred in the area of Rochester, New York. The young victims in these cases appear to have been targeted solely because of the alliterative nature of their names, each having a first and last name beginning with the same consonant. One-time Rochester resident Kenneth Bianchi was briefly considered a suspect after he moved to Los Angeles to commit the ‘Hillside Strangler’ murders but was eventually cleared of these crimes. The other prime suspect committed suicide in 1973 and was later cleared through DNA testing. The killer appears to have stopped after the third victim, although their *modus operandi* may simply have changed and they consequently remain unidentified, with no other linked victims at this time. Of note, this case was the basis for the critically panned 2008 film *The Alphabet Killer*.

 The Mad Butcher of Kingsbury Run
Between 1935 and 1938, at least twelve and as many as forty victims were beheaded in Depression-era Cleveland and surrounding towns by a psychopath known at the time as the ‘Cleveland Torso Murderer.’ Many of the victims were also dismembered, bisected, and/or castrated. Some investigators actually believe that the killer began as early as the 1920s and continued killing on into the 1950s, with crimes as far away as Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Youngstown, Ohio fitting the same *modus operandi*. Numerous suspects have since come to light, but no conclusive evidence exists to link any of them to these horrific crimes. The murders have recently gained renewed attention after their having apparently inspired a 2009 episode of the CBS series *Criminal Minds* where a copy-cat killer obsessed with the ‘Mad Butcher’ terrorizes modern-day Cleveland.
**The Frankford Slasher**

Between 1985 and 1990, the industrial neighborhood of Frankford in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania was terrorized by a serial killer believed responsible for as many as nine murders, with all of the victims having been followed out of bars while leaving alone late at night. While a man named Leonard Christopher was convicted in December 1990 of one of the nine murders, the other eight cannot be definitively linked to him and at least one of the connected killings was actually committed while Christopher was in police custody. While police and prosecutors dismissed this last murder as the work of a copy-cat killer, the fact that there was no evidence linking Christopher to any of the crime scenes or victims, and the fact that he didn’t match the police sketches or footprints obtained of the suspect, have led some to believe that Christopher was simply a patsy used to try and restore public calm at the time. Whatever the case may be, the remaining eight murders officially remain unsolved and it would appear that Christopher was at most an accomplice, and more likely a fall guy, with the real killer remaining out there to this day.

**The Phantom Killer**

Between February and May 1946, at least five people were killed and another three attacked and injured in isolated rural towns along the Texas-Arkansas border where the regional media dubbed the killer ‘The Moonlight Murderer’ and the ‘Texarkana Phantom.’ Using an unusual combination of both firearms and edged weapons, the murderer is now generally known as ‘The Phantom Killer,’ in part as a result of the 1977 film *The Town That Dreaded Sundown* that was based on this case, and which itself later influenced the interminable *Friday the 13th* franchise. While a possible suspect was identified at the time and was later imprisoned on an unrelated crime, he was ultimately cleared as a suspect in the ‘Phantom’ killings and the case remains not only unsolved, but arguably the best-known and most widely referenced open serial killer case in American history second only to the ‘Zodiac’ murders according to crime author William T. Rasmussen.
The Daytona Beach Killer
Between 2005 and 2007, the bodies of four confirmed victims, and possibly a fifth, have been found in wooded areas surrounding the popular resort city of Daytona Beach, Florida. All of the victims are adult females known or suspected to be involved in ‘at risk’ lifestyles, normally meaning reliance on prostitution and/or drugs. While police will not publicly disclose how the victims were murdered, they have confirmed that all of the deaths are connected and that a serial killer is operating in the area. While the case does not remain ‘cold’ per se, there are no suspects aside from evidence suggesting that it is the work of a young male-female partnership in the vein of Bernardo and Homolka—likely a boyfriend and girlfriend or husband and wife—working in tandem to lure victims to a waiting vehicle. As such, Florida police are profiling tourist couples and area motorists, often requesting voluntary DNA samples to submit for immediate comparison without warrant. Patrol officers are in fact presently carrying portable lab kits with them to allow for DNA testing at the roadside, though, as with the causes of death, it has not been revealed what form of DNA was left at any of the crime scenes. The limited release of public information in this case naturally raises political and ethical questions about which is more important to the local authorities and media: the economic well-being of the city through tourism and the need to make the area appear safe, or the physical and emotional well-being of its year-round residents who have been kept largely uninformed about an active serial killer living in their midst.

The Highway of Tears Murders
Between 1969 and 2002, as many as forty-three women have vanished without a trace, or have disappeared and later been found murdered, after being last seen walking, hitchhiking, or tree planting along the British Columbia section of the Trans-Canada Yellowhead Highway. It is an isolated stretch of road officially known as Highway 16, and unofficially as the “Highway of Tears” in light of these deaths. A Royal Canadian Mounted Police task force has confirmed that at least eighteen of these deaths and/or disappearances since 1974 appear to be related and are likely the work of a serial killer, or more likely a pair of serial killers. A composite sketch of two possible suspects was released in 1996, and in 2009 a farm near Prince George was searched for the remains of a tree planter missing since 2002, yet no firm leads have ever developed. Following the release of several documentaries, demands for a public inquiry, and a provincially funded anti-hitchhiking campaign, this case arguably remains the most controversial, political, and increasingly topical unsolved multiple murder investigation in Canadian history.
The Oakland County Child Killer
Over a thirteen-month period between 1976 and 1977, the metropolitan Detroit area was held captive by a serial killer known at the time as ‘The Babysitter.’ The offender abducted at least four and as many as six children aged ten to twelve from public places, cared for them for up to three weeks, and then bathed and fed them immediately before killing them and dumping their bodies throughout the county. This case is thought to have largely pioneered the proverb “don’t talk to strangers” as mass hysteria ultimately led to witch-hunts where accusations and suspicions were levied against friends, neighbors, and any outsider in the ensuing public panic. At the time the search for the killer marked the largest dragnet in American history, with local, state, and federal law enforcement following-up on nearly 20,000 tips, yet today the case remains tragically unsolved. The main suspect profile at the time, rendered with the assistance of both a forensic psychiatrist and calls from an anonymous tipster, as being a psychologically scarred Vietnam War veteran outcast from society could never be qualified or verified. Both the tipster and suspect seem to have disappeared after 1978, possibly being one in the same.

The West Mesa Murders:
In February 2009, a woman walking her dog made the horrific discovery of twelve bodies—eleven adult women and an unborn fetus—buried in shallow graves in the desert of the West Mesa, New Mexico. Most of the victims were known to police as either drug users or area prostitutes, and only one victim was an out of state resident. How they are all connected and how they were killed and their remains ended up in this mass grave, however, remains unclear. Since 2009, the killer remains at large and has often been tastelessly referred to in the press as the “West Mesa Bone Collector,” in reference to the equally dubious 1999 serial killer film The Bone Collector starring Denzel Washington. While no official suspects have ever been named, at least five males have been formally investigated, including Colorado serial killer Scott Lee Kimball and two other men who have since died, including one being murdered in an unrelated matter.
Boiler Plates, Fine Print & More...

BOILER PLATE RE: PLAGIARISM...

“Plagiarism: Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea, or a passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence (see Scholastic Offence Policy in the Western Academic Calendar).”

...AND ON MEDICAL-RELATED ABSENCES...

“Students seeking academic accommodation on medical grounds for any missed tests, exams, assignments or participatory components worth 10% or more of their final grade for the course must apply to the Academic Counseling Office of their home faculty and provide documentation in the form of a Student Medical Certificate. For work worth less than 10% of the final grade, the instructor will consider requests for academic accommodation on medical grounds made in a timely manner in writing or by appointment in office hours. Such requests need not be accompanied by documentation. The instructor may, however, decide to require documentation be submitted to the appropriate Academic Counseling office.”

...AND GRADING POLICIES...

“The FIMS undergraduate programs have implemented a policy requiring that the average final grades in most courses fall within prescribed ranges. This was done to curb grade inflation; a recent study found that average MIT course grades were significantly higher than those in other University of Western Ontario programs. Grade inflation harms students. Western academic transcripts list the average course grade alongside a student's grade in the course. Not surprisingly, people assessing such transcripts generally give more weight to a grade of 85% when the class average is 75% than when the class average is 85%.”

In light of this, the MIT program will adopt the following policy for courses offered in 2010-2011:

• All "1000" level courses (i.e. MIT 1200) will have a class average falling between 67 and 72%;
• All “2000” level courses (i.e. MIT 2410) will have a class average of between 70 and 75%.

...AND FINALLY, A WORD (GIVE OR TAKE) ON WIRELESS DEVICES & SOCIAL MEDIA...

Note that while the responsible use of notebook computers and PDA devices as learning tools in this course is certainly encouraged, and while I understand that Smartphones are increasingly integral to students’ social experience at UWO, it is expected that these technologies will be used appropriately in the context of the classroom. Please respect your professor and peers by refraining from SMS texting, BBMing, IMing, or using social media such as Facebook other than during the designated break times. Students who are found to be distracted by or routinely engaged in social media, or using wireless devices for personal business during the lecture or in-class screenings, will be deemed to be mentally absent from the class and will have their attendance and participation marks affected to the same degree as someone who has failed to attend entirely. Please don’t make this an issue. Use discretion. Use common sense.