

**M.A. Seminar**  
**Confidence Games**  
**Thursday 16.15-18.00**  
**Prof. Elisabeth Bronfen**

At the heart of the American Dream is the notion of perpetual self-invention. As Thoreau notes, the American subject is one that walks steadily toward his or her dream. What counts is how successfully one is able to project the image one has created for oneself by turning it into a lived reality, whether the basis for this self-presentation has any ground in reality or not. Indeed, Emerson sees in self-reliance a particularly vibrant goal of American philosophy. Yet literature and film has also explored the dark inversion of this self-confidence, notably in the figure of the confidence man and his feminine counterpart. At issue is persuading others to trust in the image of oneself one has created, in a life scheme that is a swindle. This seminar will explore the fascination that the American cultural imaginary has had with confidence games, starting with American Romanticism and moving to 21st century cinema. We will examine these individual psychological portraits as negotiations of the American Dream and its toxic underbelly. At the same time at issue is how, because all aesthetic enterprise relies on trusting in a fictitious projection, confidence games also emerge as poignant markers of literary self-reflexivity.

(1.) 17 Sept – Introduction. Lindberg “Introduction”\*, Emerson “Self-Reliance”\*

American Tricksters

(2.) 24 Sept – Steven Spielberg. *Catch Me If You Can* (2002)

(3.) 01 Oct – Martin Scorsese. *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013)

(4.) 08 Oct – Edgar Allan Poe. "Maelzel's Chess Player" (1836)\*, "Hop Frog" (1845)\*

(5.) 15 Oct – no class. Read Melville!

(6.) 22 Oct – Herman Melville. *The Confidence Man* (1857)

The American Dream

(7.) 29 Oct – F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby* (1925)  
Willa Cather. "Paul's Case" (1905), optional

(8.) 05 Nov – Patricia Highsmith. *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955)  
Anthony Mingella. *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), optional

### In Confidence: Love and Justice

(9.) 12 Nov – William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*

(10.) 19 Nov – Ernst Lubitsch. *Trouble in Paradise* (1932)

(11.) 26 Nov – Preston Sturges. *The Lady Eve* (1941)

### Crossdressing Race and Gender

(12.) 03 Dec – Nella Larsen. *Passing* (1929)

(13.) 10 Dec – Woody Allen. *Zelig* (1983)

(14.) 17 Dec – Gillian Flynn. *Gone Girl* (2012)

David Fincher. *Gone Girl* (2014), optional

Alfred Hitchcock. *Vertigo* (1958), optional

Texts marked with an asterisk (\*) will be made available as pdfs on Olat. Please buy your own copies both of all the other novels and short stories, as well as of the films.

### Requirements for the class:

- All students must prepare a **one page preliminary discussion for each class**, to be posted on Olat (course forum) by Tuesday, 9 a.m. of the respective week. This can entail a thesis, a series of questions, comments or associations; it will facilitate class discussion and allow me to see in what directions you have been thinking while preparing for the class sessions. This will also count towards your class participation and, thus, is compulsory for each session (no more than two misses will be tolerated otherwise you will fail the seminar).
- All students must compile written minutes (*Sitzungsprotokolle*) for one of the class sessions (to be sent to Hannah Schoch [hannah.schoch@es.uzh.ch](mailto:hannah.schoch@es.uzh.ch) one week after the respective session at the latest).
- Students taking the class for 9 KP must write a research essay, to be handed in by February 15, 2016. It is wise to use the class discussions to test your ideas for this written assignment.
- Lehramt students must write an evaluation of each session with a focus on how they will be able to apply/transfer what we have done in class to their high school teaching (approx. 1 page for each class), to be handed in by February 15, 2016.

## **Bibliography**

The following secondary texts will be made available on the Präsenzgestell. Students are asked to at least consult these volumes in preparation for class.

De Grave, Kathleen. *Swindler, Spy, Rebel: The Confidence Woman in Nineteenth-Century America*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1995.

Hattunen, Karen. *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 1982.

Lenz, William E. *Fast Talk and Flush Times: The Confidence Man as a Literary Convention*. Columbia: Missouri UP, 1985.

Lindberg, Gary H. *The Confidence Man in American Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 1982.

Mihm, Stephen. *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007.

Schwanebeck, Wieland (Hrsg). *Über Hochstapelei. Perspektiven auf eine kulturelle Praxis*. Berlin: Neofelis, 2014.

Schwanebeck, Wieland. *Der flexible Mr. Ripley: Männlichkeit und Hochstapelei in Literatur und Film*. Köln, Böhlau Verlag, 2014.

Wadlington, Warwick. *The Confidence Game in American Literature*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1975.