

COMM 3280: Drawing the Blue Line: Police and Power in American Popular Culture

Instructor: Murali Balaji (murali.balaji@asc.upenn.edu)

Office Location and Office Hours: 230 Annenberg (M W 12-1:30 pm or by appointment)

To book office hours: <https://calendly.com/prof-balaji/>

Course meeting time: M W 10:15-11:45 (ASC 500)

Course Overview:

The police are one of the most heavily imagined institutions in American popular culture. From *Cagney and Lacey* to *Colors*, *Law & Order*, *The Wire* and *The Watchmen*, evolving depictions of law enforcement help us to understand larger socio-cultural shifts that have occurred from the post-1968 riots to the dawn of the Black Lives Matter movement in the mid-2010s and police abolition in the early 2020s. Using case study and textual analysis approaches, students will examine how specific police procedurals, movies, and other cultural texts showcase police authority in relation to certain communities, and consider how these texts reflect, uphold and/or challenge prevailing views on law and order and criminal justice. Our explorations of how media and cultural industries have framed policing will pay particular attention to questions of power, race, gender, sexuality, class, and geography.

These explorations will also include learning about and learning to dialogue, given the diverse – and often contentious – views about policing in America. Students will have an opportunity to interact with speakers representing different positions that relate to mediated perceptions -- as well as lived experiences of -- policing. Class assignments and activities will enhance students' abilities to productively discuss complex issues that are frequently sanitized or homogenized within U.S. popular culture.

Required Texts:

[All readings available on Canvas.](#)

Course Requirements and Grading:

25% Attendance: Attendance is **required** at all scheduled class meetings. You should come to each class ready to discuss the readings. Because this class is largely participation-based, your attendance is a must. If you miss two classes, your grade will be adversely impacted. **NOTE: Students who are exposed to or test positive for COVID-19 must submit Course Absence Reports prior to class meeting time in order to be eligible for missed materials/class recordings.**

20%: Response pieces: Throughout the semester, you will conduct 1-2 page textual analyses of selected viewings using the assigned readings for the week. The rubric is posted on Canvas. These papers will showcase your understanding of and engagement with the readings.

20% Midterm paper (includes topic statement): Students will complete a 3-4 page proposal that will form the basis of their final research paper.

25% Final research paper: The final will be a 12-15-page paper on a student-selected case study using both primary and secondary sources. Assignment sheets that provide additional information about formatting and other details will be distributed in class.

10% Group Oral presentation and Dialogue: During the middle of the semester, class participants will break into groups and pick a topic related to police, media and popular culture, putting together a 15-20 minute presentation for the end of the semester. This group project will be assessed on the quality of the presentation visuals, bibliography, and delivery of the presentation by individual members, as well as the group's ability to facilitate a dialogue on policing, power and popular culture. More details will be shared prior to Fall break.

Assignments will be submitted electronically via Canvas

Procedural Items:

Late Assignments/Missed Work: I understand balancing coursework and other life obligations can be tough at times. If you have other things going on that require your attention, all I ask is that you give me a heads up if you need an extension. If you miss a deadline by a few minutes without giving me an advanced warning, I will give accept it as a one-off. However, additional late assignments will be given a zero.

My Email Policy: I will do my best to respond to emails from students within 24 hours during weekdays. However, questions that require lengthier explanations should be done in office hours. As a lifelong skill that will help you throughout any career, proper email etiquette should be used. Remember, your email reflects who you are as a person through your communication - use relatively formal style and language: salutation, spell check, signature, etc. (For example, please avoid using "r" for "are;" "u" for "you..."). **I do not reply to emails written in text lingo.**

On Classroom Mechanics: This class will be discussion based. Discussion may be passionate, but it may not be disrespectful, rude, or condescending. Most importantly, although you are encouraged to voice your disagreement with other students' or my comments, you may not be dismissive of them. Please ensure that your comments are well reasoned in the text, the course material, and your own experience. Please treat your fellow classmates, the TF, and me with respect, honesty, and an open mind; I will do the same.

Students with disabilities: Please go the following link for a list of academic accommodations:
https://www.vpul.upenn.edu/lrc/sds/academic_accommodations

(Scroll down to see "My Accommodation Request")

Plagiarism: Students caught plagiarizing may face either academic or disciplinary negative consequences. Instructors who determine that a paper includes plagiarized material can take academic measures, such as giving a failing grade for the paper. If the instructor decides that disciplinary measures should be taken, the case will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct. If the student is found responsible following formal procedures, the student may face a number of sanctions—including suspension. Whatever the sanction, academic integrity action by the Office of Student Conduct becomes a part of the student's permanent record and may have an adverse impact on future academic and career goals. For a full understanding of Penn's academic integrity policy, visit:

http://gethelp.library.upenn.edu/PORT/documentation/plagiarism_policy.htmlLinks to an external site.

WEEK-BY-WEEK SCHEDULE

Note:

1. The readings are subject to change. You will be given at least two weeks notice prior to any substitution, removal, or addition.
2. There is one mandatory class viewing each week, and you can choose to additionally watch either two TV/web episodes or one film.

Week 1 (1/12): Class overview and discussion of police, media and popular culture

Week 2 (1/19): Understanding perceptions of law enforcement in American society

No class on Monday, January 17

READING/ASSIGNMENT:

McGovern, A., & Phillips, N. D. (2017). Police, media, and popular culture. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*.

Powell, M. B., Skouteris, H., & Murfett, R. (2008). Children's perceptions of the role of police: a qualitative study. *International journal of police science & management*, 10(4), 464-473.

Wilson, C. P. (2000). *Cop knowledge: Police power and cultural narrative in twentieth-century America*. University of Chicago Press. (read chapters 1-2)

Week 3 (1/24-1/26): Policing and the benevolent state – media portrayals of police in the mid-to-late 20th century

READING/ASSIGNMENT:

Bruce, A. (2008). Children's media consumption and struggles for cultural authority in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Children and Consumer Culture in American Society: A Historical Handbook and Guide*, 3-25.

Inciardi, J. A., & Dee, J. L. (1987). From the Keystone Cops to "Miami Vice" Images of Policing in American Popular Culture. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 21(2), 84.

Response 1 due

VIEWINGS (mandatory marked with *):

The Andy Griffith Show - "The Christmas Story"*

Barney Miller - "[Ramon](#)"*

21 Jump Street - "My Future's So Bright I Gotta Wear Shades."

Week 4 (1/31-2/2): Police as instruments of backlash – the rogue hero cop and legitimizing vigilantism

READING/ASSIGNMENT:

Baker, A. (2012). Beyond the thin line of black and blue: movies and police misconduct in Los Angeles. *Bad: Infamy, Darkness, Evil, and Slime on Screen*, 55-64.

McKee, A. (2002). Textual analysis. *The media and communications in Australia*, 62-84.

Pautz, M. C. (2016). Cops on Film: Hollywood's Depiction of Law Enforcement in Popular Films, 1984-2014. *PS, Political Science & Politics*, 49(2), 250.

VIEWINGS (mandatory marked with *):

*Dirty Harry** (film)

Lethal Weapon (film)

Training Day (film)

Law & Order: SVU - "Pandora"

True Detective - "Form and Void."

The Shield - "Pilot"

Week 5 (2/7-2/9): Police, power and the arbitration of space in American popular culture

Dialogue 1

READING/ASSIGNMENT:

Davis, M. (2017). Fortress Los Angeles: the militarization of urban space. In *Cultural criminology* (pp. 287-314). Routledge.

Jackson, R. L., & Balaji, M. (2015). [Border Citizenry and the Arbitrary Civil Protection of Black Males. *Cultural Studies? Critical Methodologies*, 15\(4\), 242-247](#)

Oliver, M. B. (1996). Influences of authoritarianism and portrayals of race on Caucasian viewers' responses to reality-based crime dramas. *Communication Reports*, 9(2), 141-150.

Response 2 due

VIEWINGS (mandatory marked with *):

Crash (film)*

Fruitvale Junction (film)

Law and Order: SVU - "Community Policing"

City on a Hill - "From Injustice Came the Way to Describe Justice"

City on a Hill - "Bill Russell's Bedsheets"

Week 6 (2/14-2/16): Police and moral binaries in 20th century American popular culture

READING/ASSIGNMENT:

Bandes, S. A. (2021). From *Dagnet* to *Brooklyn 99*: How Cop Shows Excuse, Exalt and Erase Police Brutality.

Stark, S. D. (1987). Perry Mason meets Sonny Crockett: The history of lawyers and the police as television heroes. *U. Miami L. Rev.*, 42, 229.

VIEWINGS (mandatory marked with *):

Law and Order - “Marathon”

*Colors** (film)

Training Day (film)

New Jack City (film)

L.A. Confidential (film)

Miami Vice - “Walk-Along”

Week 7 (10/11-10/13): Police, race and moral ambiguity in 21st century American popular culture

Drop period ends Monday, Oct. 11

Topic statement due

READING/ASSIGNMENT:

Gilliam Jr, F. D., Valentino, N. A., & Beckmann, M. N. (2002). Where you live and what you watch: The impact of racial proximity and local television news on attitudes about race and crime. *Political Research Quarterly*, 55(4), 755-780.

Hancock, L. E. (2021). Expressions of American White Ethnonationalism in Support for “Blue Lives Matter.” *Geopolitics.*, 26(3), 946–966.

Ng, K. G. Y. (2002). Policing Cultural Traffic: Charlie Chan and Hawai'i Detective Fiction. *Cultural Values*, 6(3), 309-316.

Oliver, M. B. (1994). Portrayals of crime, race, and aggression in “reality-based” police shows: A content analysis. *Journal of broadcasting & electronic media*, 38(2), 179-192.

VIEWINGS (mandatory marked with *):

The Watchmen - “It’s Summer and We’re Running Out of Ice”*

True Detective - “The Hour and the Day”

True Detective - “If You Have Ghosts”

Two Distant Strangers (Film)*

Week 8 (10/18-10/20): “Just doing my job, ma’am” - Police and gender norms on television and film

READING/ASSIGNMENT:

Britto, S., Hughes, T., Saltzman, K., & Stroh, C. (2007). Does ‘special’ mean young, white and female? Deconstructing the meaning of ‘special’ in Law & Order: Special Victims Unit. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 14(1), 39-57.

Hust, S. J., Marett, E. G., Lei, M., Ren, C., & Ran, W. (2015). Law & Order, CSI, and NCIS: The association between exposure to crime drama franchises, rape myth acceptance, and sexual consent negotiation among college students. *Journal of health communication*, 20(12), 1369-1381.

Lavigne, C. (2009). Death wore black chiffon: Sex and gender in CSI. *Canadian review of American studies*, 39(4), 383-398.

Nussbaum, E. (2013). Trauma Queen: The Pulp Appeal of ‘Law & Order: SVU’. *New Yorker*, 10.

Scharrer, E. (2012). More than “just the facts”? Portrayals of masculinity in police and detective programs over time. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 23(1), 88-109.

Response 3 due

VIEWINGS (mandatory marked with *):

Law and Order: SVU - “Behave”

The Wire - “The Detail”

The Shield - “The Cure”

CSI - “After the Show”

The Closer – “The Last Word”

Mare of Easttown - “Miss Lady Hawk Herself.”

Mare of Easttown - “Sacrament.”

Week 9 (10/25-10/27): “Strong women” and the law – Women as police protagonists and affirmations of/challenges to patriarchy

Midterm due Wednesday, Oct. 27

READING/ASSIGNMENT:

Cuklanz, L. M., & Moorti, S. (2006). Television's “new” feminism: Prime-time representations of women and victimization. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23(4), 302-321.

Delanoë-Brun, E. (2019). From Cagney and Lacey to Rizzoli and Isles: feminist variations on female duets in mainstream TV cop shows. *Revue française d'études américaines*, (1), 29-52.

Zeck, S. (1989). Female Bonding in Cagney and Lacey. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 23(3), 143.

VIEWINGS (mandatory marked with *):

Cagney and Lacey – “A Fair Shake, Pt. 1”

Cagney and Lacey – “A Fair Shake, Pt. 2”

Castle – “Flowers for Your Grave”

Rizzoli & Isles – Boston Strangler Redux

The Division - “Spin Dry”

Week 10 (11/1-11/3): Protecting American “values” - mediating police’s role in the economic order

Dialogue 2

READING/ASSIGNMENT:

Brayton, S. (2017). Mental illness, late capitalism, and the socioeconomic “psychopath” in CBS’s *Elementary*. *Popular Communication*, 15(4), 283-295.

Salter, M. (2014). Toys for the boys? Drones, pleasure and popular culture in the militarization of policing. *Critical Criminology*, 22(2), 163-177.

Response 4 due

VIEWINGS (mandatory marked with *):

Robocop (film)

Judge Dredd (film)

Walker, Texas Ranger - “The Guardians”

Walker, Texas Ranger - “The Winds of Change.”

Week 11 (11/8-11/10): “Real cops love Jesus” - Law enforcement’s depiction as moral arbiter through portrayals of religiosity

READING/ASSIGNMENT:

Johnson, V. E. (2000). Welcome home?: CBS, PAX-TV, and "Heartland" values in a neo-network era. *Velvet Light Trap*, 40-56.

Perry, S. L., Whitehead, A. L., & Davis, J. T. (2019). God’s country in black and blue: How Christian nationalism shapes Americans’ views about police (mis) treatment of blacks. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 5(1), 130-146.

VIEWINGS (mandatory marked with *):

*Courageous (film)**

Law and Order – Dignity

Walker, Texas Ranger - “A Ranger’s Christmas.”

More viewings TBD

Week 12 (11/15-11/17): The Blue and Rainbow Line: LGBTQI+ identities in police procedurals

READING/ASSIGNMENT:

Caprioglio, T. (2021). Does 'Queer Narrative' Mean 'Trauma Narrative' on TV? Exploring Television's Traumatized Queer Identity. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 22(4), 452-464.

DeClue, J. (2011). Lesbian cop, queer killer: Leveraging Black queer women's sexuality on HBO's *The Wire*. *Spectator*, 31(2), 53-62.

Response 5 due

VIEWINGS (mandatory marked with *):

Law & Order: SVU - "Down Low in Hell's Kitchen"*

Law & Order: SVU - "At Midnight in Manhattan"

CSI - "The Accused is Entitled."

CSI - "Ch-Ch-Changes"

The Watchmen - "This Extraordinary Being."

The Wire - "Storm Warnings"

The Wire - "Reformation"

Week 13 (11/22): Notions of policing and the norms of "enforcing the rules" in American apocalyptic texts

Class will work on oral presentations on Wednesday, Nov. 24 in lieu of in-class meeting

READING/ASSIGNMENT:

Linnemann, T., Wall, T., & Green, E. (2014). The walking dead and killing state: Zombification and the normalization of police violence. *Theoretical Criminology*, 18(4), 506-527.

Proffitt, J. M., & Templin, R. (2013). Fight the dead, fear the living": Zombie apocalypse, Libertarian paradise. *Thinking dead: What the zombie apocalypse means*, 29-44.

VIEWINGS (mandatory marked with *):

The Walking Dead (television) - "Days Gone By."

Black Summer - "Prelude"

Night of the Living Dead (film)*

Land of the Dead (film)

Week 14 (11/29-12/1): Law enforcement depictions in the era of Blue Lives Matter, Black Lives Matter and “Defund the Police”

Dialogue 3

Group presentations begin on Wednesday, Dec. 1

READING/ASSIGNMENT:

Color of Change (2021). [“Normalizing Injustice.”](#)

Gallagher RJ, Reagan AJ, Danforth CM, Dodds PS (2018) Divergent discourse between protests and counter-protests: #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. PLoS ONE 13(4): e0195644.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0195644>

VIEWINGS (mandatory marked with *):

*Anderson .Paak (music video) - “Lockdown”**

Law and Order: SVU - “Guardians and Gladiators”

More viewings TBD

Week 15 (12/6-12/8): Group presentations and class wrap-up

Response 6 due

Final due Wednesday, Dec. 15