ENGLISH 129 - The Grotesque: Aesthetics of the Bizarre and Unnatural

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Description:

What purpose does the disgusting, or the shocking or the sordid – in short, the Grotesque – have in art? Despite theories of aesthetics that try to demonstrate and promote that which is beautiful, why do authors, filmmakers and artists so frequently return to themes, descriptions and motifs that are designed to shock or repel the audience? In this course, we will investigate a history of the grotesque in Western European literature, art and film from the eighteenth century until today. What kinds of messages or ideas can be better conveyed by the grotesque than by the beautiful? What techniques and tactics have been developed by authors seeking to shock or surprise us? And why are we, as an audience, attracted to representations of objects or events which are designed to repel us? To explore these questions, we will examine a variety of media and theories that explore the place of the grotesque in art.

The readings for this course will trace the development of the grotesque from the Renaissance until the present day. Together we will read literary renditions of the grotesque, from E.T.A. Hoffman’s The Sandman, to Poe’s Tales of the Grotesque to the Grimm’s fairy tales. We will also study a variety of interpretations of the grotesque in films from the twentieth century (for example Murnau’s Nosferatu or the expressionist films of Lang). To aid our discussion, we will also include a number of theoretical works, including excerpts from Nietzsche, Freud, as well as readings from Bakhtin’s Rabelais and His World.

Course Outcomes:

Students in this course will investigate the Grotesque as an aesthetic effect. Students will learn the place of the Grotesque within the history of Western Art and Literature since the Renaissance. Students will also be taught to historically contextualize aesthetic theory within the socio-cultural framework of different objects. Similarly, students will learn the role of the aesthetic in the shaping of cultural and social development.

Texts (available at the Stanford Bookstore):

Rabelais: Gargantua and Pantagruel
Heinrich von Kleist: Selected Writings
The Brothers Grimm: The Complete Fairy Tales
Friedrich Nietzsche: The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music
Bram Stoker: Dracula
Angela Carter: Nights at the Circus
Philip Roth: The Breast

Additional readings will be supplied via coursework
**Work and Assignments:**

1. Participation (online and in class) 15%
2. Presentation 15%
3. Two Short assignments 20%
4. Term Paper 30%
5. Final Exam (take home) 20%

**Attendance and/or Late Policy:**

There is no required attendance for this course; however, it is strongly encouraged. You should keep in mind, however, that participation forms a full 15% of your grade and this includes participation both in class AND online: if you aren’t in class to participate, you forfeit a portion of this grade.

Papers are due on the date indicated, unless otherwise changed. Late papers will have grades deducted at a rate of 1% per day; however, extensions are certainly available on a case by case basis as long as you discuss this with me BEFORE the due date itself.

**Participation:**

Participation in this class not only consists of in-class comments and questions (although these certainly are important and will count towards your grade), but also is dependent upon your participation in the online component of this course. On the course website we will create the “Grotesquepedia”, a wiki-style collaborative database that archives a catalogue of the strange, bizarre and fascinating from across the internet in a variety of media. While I have populated this archive with a few preliminary examples, it is your responsibility to continue adding to it throughout the term. As we explore together just what the grotesque in art and literature might be, you will each be required to add examples to this database, while explaining for each why it can be labeled as “grotesque.” In addition, you are also encouraged to edit any or all of the entries.

**Presentation:**

Throughout the term, we will be reading works by many different authors and thinkers, who, in many cases, have very divergent ideas of what exactly the grotesque is. Unfortunately we will not have time to cover all of the possible ways in which the grotesque is used in the texts that we will study. Fortunately, your presentations will cover this gap. Each class, we will have one to two presentations that, with the assistance of outside examples drawn from your own experience, will help explain what the grotesque means to the authors we are reading that day and how it works within their texts.

**Written Assignments:**

You will have two short assignments due in class throughout the term. The subjects and expectations for these papers will be explained as class progresses; however, one of the two assignments will require you to contribute to the Grotesquepedia, explained above.
Term Paper

You will have a paper or project of between 8 and 10 pages due on the last day of class. More details on this assignment will be given later in the term; however, being that our class is constructed around the meaning of the grotesque as an aesthetic experience, your final project will require you to critically explore this experience.

Final Exam:

Your exam will include short answer questions and essays covering the topics we have discussed throughout the term.

Students with Documented Disabilities

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae).

Honor Code

The Honor Code is the University's statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates University expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work:
The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:
1. that they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading;
2. that they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.
3. The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code.
4. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.
## Class Schedule

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reading</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22-Sep</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>29 Sep</td>
<td>François Rabelais - <em>Gargantua</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Oct</td>
<td>Mikhail Bakhtin - <em>Rabelais and his World</em> (Chapter 5)</td>
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<td>8 Oct</td>
<td>Heinrich von Kleist – “An Earthquake in Santiago”; <em>Amphitryon</em></td>
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<td>13 Oct</td>
<td>The Brothers Grimm – Selected <em>Fairly Tales</em></td>
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<td><strong>Short Paper 1 Due</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>20 Oct</td>
<td>Sigmund Freud - <em>The Uncanny</em></td>
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<td>22 Oct</td>
<td>Friedrich Nietzsche - <em>The Birth of Tragedy</em></td>
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<td>29 Oct</td>
<td>Franz Kafka – “The Metamorphosis”</td>
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<td>3 Nov</td>
<td>Bram Stoker – Dracula</td>
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<td>5 Nov</td>
<td>Dracula (continued)</td>
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<td><strong>Short Paper 2 Due</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>10 Nov</td>
<td>F.W. Murnau – <em>Nosferatu</em></td>
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<td>12 Nov</td>
<td>Angela Carter – <em>Nights at the Circus</em></td>
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<td>17 Nov</td>
<td><em>Nights at the Circus</em> (Continued)</td>
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<td>19 Nov</td>
<td>Julia Kristeva - <em>The Powers of Horror</em> (Chapter 1)</td>
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<td>1 Dec</td>
<td>Philip Roth – <em>The Breast</em></td>
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<td>Charlotte Roche – excerpts from <em>Wetlands</em></td>
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<td>3 Dec</td>
<td>Conclusion and wrap-up</td>
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<td><strong>Term Paper Due</strong></td>
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