

**“Monsters and Monstrosity”  
2012/2013 ArtsOne Cluster Proposal**

Cluster Contact: Craig McFarlane  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
craig\_mcfarlane@carleton.ca

November 28, 2011

**Cluster Description**

This cluster considers the philosophical, sociological and cultural importance of the monstrous, monstrosity and monsters. For the purposes of this cluster, the monster is understood as the counterpart to the normal; that counterpart which must be repressed, denied, and, often, eradicated. As a result, monsters are both real and fictional: they are zombies and vampires, but also murderers and deviants. Monsters touch upon our fears, both rational and irrational—we fear monsters in full knowledge that we know they cannot and do not exist. This cluster will study the monstrous through film, novels, short stories, comic books, and the like, supplemented by contemporary theoretical approaches in sociology, film and literary theory, and cultural studies.

Students will take one of:

FYSM 1004      Literature, Genre, Context  
FYSM 1506      Selected Topics in the Study of Societies  
FYSM 1509      Special Topics in Art History and Film

The “Monsters and Monstrosity” learning community will be organized and delivered at the level of the First Year Seminars, supplemented by suggested introductory lecture courses. In order to form a community, the cluster will meet as a whole on at least a monthly basis for lectures, discussions, skills development, and the like.

As proposed, the cluster does not intend to integrate lecture courses into the delivery of the cluster. However, in our view, students would benefit from the following lecture courses:

ANTH 1001      Introduction to Anthropology  
ANTH 1002      Introduction to Issues in Anthropology  
ARTH 1100      Art and Society: Prehistory to the Renaissance  
ARTH 1101      Art and Society: Renaissance to Present  
FILM 1000      Introduction to Film Studies

**Organization**

The cluster is organized at the level of the First Year Seminars and the learning community will be formed through (at least) monthly common sessions where the cluster (students and faculty alike) will meet as a whole. The planning and organization of the cluster will involve the following elements:

1. A number of initial planning sessions through the summer to identify common themes and texts to be studied by students and to identify the ways in which these themes can be integrated into the monthly common sessions.
2. Monthly instructor meetings during Fall and Winter semesters.
3. Monthly common sessions where the cluster will meet as a whole, which will feature at least one lecture by each seminar leader along with guest lectures, panel discussions, and academic skill development.
4. Common texts and assignments, such as a “monster ethnography” assignment in October at the height of the zombie-walk season.
5. A final event in April where students will be given the opportunity to present their final projects to one another (e.g., posters, thematic panel discussions, or oral presentations).

Because we intend to screen movies in class and to have common sessions where the entire cluster can meet at the same time, we request that the First Year Seminars be scheduled in a single three hour block rather than in the usual hour-and-a-half blocks; we request that the First Year Seminars be scheduled at the same time; we request that a room with AV capabilities large enough for all of the students and faculty in the cluster be made available to us monthly on a monthly basis (e.g., the humanities lecture room or the arts faculty lounge); and, finally, we request that the courses are *not* scheduled on Monday or Wednesday mornings as André Loiselle has a prior commitment to attend FGPA meetings.

Due to the work involved in organizing a cluster at the level of the First Year Seminar, we request that each instructor receive an additional 25% teaching credit.

### **Courses We Propose to Offer**

FYSM 1004—Literature, Genre, Context

Topic: “Literary Monsters from Grendel to Zombies”

Aalya Ahmad aalya\_ahmad@carleton.ca

As readers, our love affair with fictional monsters goes all the way back to the classics—Grendel and his mother in *Beowulf*—as well as to Greek and Roman mythological creatures, and the many texts influenced by these mythologies. Anglo-American literature has also fashioned its monsters by borrowing freely from the folklore of many different world cultures, including the *nosferatu* (vampire), the werewolf and the zombie. Scholars of horror note that horror fiction seems to rise in popularity in “cycles” where monsters are remade anew to de-monstrate current social, political and cultural fears. Monstrous embodiments of our anxieties are also gendered, racialized and classed in intriguing ways.

Drawing on short stories, novels and comic books, this course examines the figure of the monster throughout English literary history, introducing students to basic concepts of literary exegesis and critical theory. Students will be asked to keep a written journal of their responses to monsters in texts as part of the coursework. The course will familiarize students with

certain monsters appearing in such classic works as *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Faerie Queen*, *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Paradise Lost*. Most of the course will focus on more contemporary monstrosities, beginning with Anne Radcliffe's Gothic novels in 18<sup>th</sup> century literature, then ranging over Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Edgar Allan Poe's grotesques, Victorian ghosts, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Robert Louis Stephenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Students will then be introduced to an abundance of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century monsters in the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, E.F. Benson, M.R. James, Shirley Jackson, Ray Bradbury, Fritz Leiber, Harlan Ellison, Alan Moore, Poppy Z. Brite, Suzy McKee Charnas, Kathe Koja and others. Katharine Dunn's novel *Geek Love* and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* will be read as examples of the play of "normal" and "freakishness" in the depiction of contemporary monsters. Finally, students will be asked to consider the monstrosity of the figure of the zombie as it appears in *World War Z*, *The Walking Dead* and selected short stories.

Students will also read excerpts from various studies of horror fiction, including Stephen King's *Danse Macabre*, Noel Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror* and Judith Halberstam's *Skin Shows* in order to understand how our "technology of monsters" (Halberstam) constructs some of our most compelling narratives.

FYSM 1509—Special Topics in Art History and Film

Topic: "Movie Monstrosity: A Creepy Fascination with the Abnormal"

André Loiselle (andre\_loiselle@carleton.ca)

Monsters have appeared on film for more than 100 years. Since 1902 with the "Selenites," the monkey-like insectoid aliens that populate the lunar landscape of Georges Méliès's "A Trip to the Moon," monstrous creatures have terrified and fascinated movie goers. From the gothic monsters of 1930s Universal and 1950s/60s Hammer Studio productions to the uncanny ghosts of J-Horror and the sadistic villains of recent slashers, cinematic tales of terror have showcased fiends of all shapes and sizes. But monstrosity on film is not limited to aliens, vampires, zombies and masked killers. If, as Robin Wood has famously suggested, the horror film can be summarized as "normality is threatened by the monster," then any cinematic figure whose abnormality challenges our banal reality can be defined as a "monster." Aberrant physicality, anti-social behavior, irrational violence, unorthodox sexual practices, disregard for accepted values and dominant ideologies—these are all facets of movie monstrosity.

Using a wide variety of examples ranging from well-known horror movies, such as "The Bride of Frankenstein" and "Psycho," to more esoteric titles such as "Freaks" (1932) and "Audition" (1999), as well as non-horror films that project a different type of monster, such as the bio-pic "Monster" (2003), this seminar will explore various kinds of monstrosity to encourage students to develop a critical perspective on notions of normality and aberrance. In the process, students will acquire the ability to decipher social constructs. They will learn to read against the grain of prevailing discourses. And ultimately, they might come to creatively resist governing practices of marginalization that always equate the Other with the Monster.

FYSM 1506—Topics in the Study of Societies

Topic: “The Sociology of the Weird and Apocalyptic”

Craig McFarlane (craig\_mcfarlane@carleton.ca)

Famous horror and “weird tale” author, H.P. Lovecraft, observed in his essay, “Supernatural Horror in Literature” (1925-7) that “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.” José Monleón, in his study of the fantastic, *A Specter is Haunting Europe* (1990), observes “The dream of reason brings forth monsters.” Stephen Asma, in his recent study *On Monsters* (2009), claims—referring to Charles Darwin’s experiments with monkeys and fake snakes at the London Zoological Gardens—“The monkey cannot fully confront the snake, but he cannot leave it alone either. He is repelled *and* attracted.” What goes for the monkey, goes for the human, too. Psychologists and sociologists—this time I am referring to actual social scientists employed by actual universities—along with their students have had a nearly universal obsession with criminal deviants, sexual perverts, and evil psychopaths (witness the popularity of courses on the sociology of deviance and abnormal psychology).

Horror, monsters and the weird are not just an occasional weekend pastime for movie-goers and readers of genre fiction: the monstrous is the very stuff of our culture, both popular and academic. By attempting to explain the weird and normal, we attempt to domesticate and tame it—to make understandable that which cannot be understood. Indeed, it is strangely paradoxical that horror is at once vulgar, violent, and sexual while at the same time being extremely conservative, almost reactionarily so. This course will horror stories, weird tales, and science fiction along side sociological theory, using one to explain the other and vice versa. Among other topics, students will be asked to consider racism and classism in H.P. Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness*, how the determination of what can be seen and what cannot be seen structures society in China Miéville’s *The City & The City*, how anxieties about strangers and science are projected onto bodies in the various incarnations of the zombie trope, how legal rights for vampires (and, implicitly, humans) are tied to consumption, and our apocalyptic desire to see world burn for no good reason at all, such as in the Terminator movies or the television series “Battlestar Galactica.”