

FILMSTUD 127: Frankenstein and Film (Spring 2017)

Lecture:

Mon, Wed: 11:30am-12:50pm

Room: McMurtry 007

Professor: Shane Denson

Office: McMurtry 318

Office Hours: TBD

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Screenings (required):

Tues 7:30-9:20pm

Room: McMurtry 115

Teaching Assistant:

Lexi Johnson

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Discussion Sections (required):

TBD

Course Description:

When Mary Shelley "bid [her] hideous progeny go forth and prosper" in the 1831 introduction to the revised edition of her novel, she could scarcely have imagined how successful her tale would be in reproducing itself. It is estimated that over 200 film adaptations of *Frankenstein* have been produced, spanning from Thomas Edison's 1910 single-reel silent film to digitally-enhanced CGI spectacles like *Van Helsing* (2004) and *I, Frankenstein* (2014). The films seldom fail to say something about the social settings in which they were produced, and quite often they comment reflexively on the medium of film itself. The "monsters" depicted can thus be interrogated in terms of the social-semiotic processes by which certain subjectivities and bodies are constituted as the normative ideals of humanity while others are excluded as aberrations. On the other hand, the films offer a register of the historically contingent relations between humans and their technologies – not least among them, the relation of the spectator to the cinematic medium and apparatus.

In this course, we shall therefore investigate monstrosity on a number of levels: from the social level at which people are defined on the basis of gender, race, class, or disability in relation to privileged forms of embodiment and subjectivity, all the way up to the technological level at which human beings are arguably being reconfigured at present into cyborgs or human-technological hybrids. We will approach these and other questions by way of a selection of *Frankenstein* films, which we will view, read about, and discuss in detail. It will be important, though, that we not lose sight of the filmic nature of our "texts"; one objective of the course should therefore be a better understanding of the formal properties of the medium of film – *how* things are depicted, not just *what* is thematized.

Please make sure you are registered for the class on Canvas. Handouts and additional course material will be posted there.

Required Readings:

There are no required textbooks for the course. Students should read Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* prior to the beginning of the quarter. All additional readings (listed in the course schedule) will be made available via Canvas.

Course Requirements and Grading:

1. Regular attendance and preparation for class. This includes lectures, screenings, and discussion sections. Irregular attendance will negatively affect your final grade. Active participation will help improve your final grade. Readings are to be completed by the date listed on the syllabus.
2. Short written responses to the reading and viewing assignments each week. Questions or prompts will be announced in class or by email. Please be prepared to present or discuss your responses in class. Late assignments (i.e. assignments received after class and up to 7 days afterwards) will count as half-complete.

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Assignments received more than 7 days late will not be accepted. Collectively, these weekly assignments will count for 15% of your final grade.

3. Midterm paper (or, with prior approval, a comparably rigorous critical media project). This assignment will count for 35% of your final grade.
4. Final paper (or, with prior approval, a comparably rigorous critical media project). This assignment will count for 50% of your final grade.
5. Only one of the papers (midterm or final) may be replaced with a critical media project.

Guidelines for Papers:

Midterm papers (4-5 pages) are to be submitted by **May 5, 2017, at 5:00pm (electronic submission)**. Final papers (8-10 pages) are to be submitted by **June 14, 2017, 11:30 am (electronic submission)**. As a prerequisite for the final paper, a 1-page proposal will be due in class on **May 24**. In your proposal, you should outline the focus or object of your analysis, explain the specific method(s) of analysis, state your reasons for choosing this approach to the topic, and formulate a tentative thesis statement. The final paper should be written in a scholarly format, with a complete bibliography, and should consist of the following:

1. A brief introduction outlining your topic and stating – as clearly and precisely as possible – the thesis of your paper. This section should usually be no more than one paragraph long.
2. A short description of the film(s), artwork(s), or other object(s) of your analysis. Here you should provide any essential background that might be needed for the reader to understand your analysis. You should assume an educated reader, who is familiar with film and media studies but perhaps has not seen the works being discussed in your paper. If it is not relevant to your argument, do not engage in lengthy plot summaries. On the other hand, make sure that the reader has enough context (narrative or otherwise) to understand the more detailed analysis that follows. Overall, in this section you must find the right balance, which you can do by considering whether each detail is truly relevant and informative with respect to your argument. Anthropologist and cybernetician Gregory Bateson defined information as "a difference which makes a difference," and you can use this formula as a test for determining which details truly belong in this section. If, for example, providing a plot summary or details about production costs and box-office revenues of a film will make a difference with respect to your thesis (i.e. if a reader needs to know these things in order to process your argument), then this is clearly relevant and belongs in this section; on the other hand, if it doesn't make a difference to your argument, then it probably doesn't belong here. This section should usually be no more than 2-3 paragraphs long.
3. An in-depth analysis of the film(s), artwork(s), or other media object(s) under consideration. Your analysis should be interpretive and argumentative in nature. In other words, it is not enough simply to describe what you see on screen; you need also to persuade the reader that this is important, and that it has certain implications that may not be obvious at first glance. (If something is overly obvious, then it's probably not very informative and certainly not worth arguing.) You are not just describing things but providing a "reading" of them. Keep in mind that the analysis you provide in this section constitutes the main support for your thesis statement. Your analysis is the argumentation that you offer to back up your thesis, while the thesis statement should be seen as the logical conclusion of your argument/analysis. In other words, while you have already told the reader what your thesis statement is (in the introduction), it is through your analysis that you must now prove that your thesis is correct or plausible. Ideally, after reading the analysis in this section, the reader should see your thesis statement as the logical outcome. Keeping this in mind as the test of success, you again need to ensure that your analysis is relevant and informative with respect to your thesis statement (if it doesn't make a difference with regard to your thesis, then it can hardly prove it). In addition, you need to make sure that your analysis/argument proves your thesis *sufficiently*. This is a question of the scope of your thesis, and of your ability to prove it through your interpretive analysis. Have you claimed too much in your thesis? Not enough? Ideally, there should be a perfect match between what you claim in your thesis and what your analysis actually

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demonstrates. When writing this section, you may find that you have to adjust your thesis (and re-write your introduction accordingly) or look for stronger arguments to support it. This should be the longest section of your paper.

4. A brief conclusion. Try not to be too mechanical in summarizing and repeating what you've written, but do make sure that the conclusion demonstrates the paper's overall relevance and coherence. For example, you might return to a detail mentioned in the introduction and use it to highlight the significance of your argument: maybe the detail seemed rather unimportant before but has a very different meaning in the light of your analysis or interpretation. Foregrounding the transformative effect of your argument (i.e. the fact that it makes us see things differently) is a good way to demonstrate the overall importance of your paper, and the device of returning in the end to something mentioned at the beginning is an effective way of giving your paper closure. Obviously, though, it is not the only way to approach the conclusion. You might also demonstrate the relevance of your argument by opening up the scope even farther and considering the questions that your thesis raises for other areas of inquiry. Does your analysis suggest alternative readings for other films or media objects? Does it suggest the need to re-think various assumptions about cinema, about a given genre, or about some other aspect of media inquiry? However you decide to approach it, the point of the conclusion, generally speaking, is to take a step back from arguing for your thesis (you are supposed to be finished doing that by now) and to reflect, on a quasi meta-level, about the overall significance of your argument/thesis. This section should normally be one paragraph in length.
5. A full list of works cited, according to MLA style.

In addition to the above guidelines, consider consulting the Duke University Writing Studio's handout "Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy: Writing About Film" (<https://twp.duke.edu/uploads/assets/film.pdf>) when conceiving and writing your paper. The handout includes links to several other helpful resources, including similar handouts from Dartmouth and Yale. A more comprehensive guide is provided by Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*. Eighth Edition (Boston: Pearson, 2011).

If, in lieu of one of your papers, you plan to produce a critical media project of some sort (e.g. video essay, website, or other type of project that engages critically with the themes and ideas of the course), you will need to outline your idea in writing and receive prior approval from the instructor. The project itself should be accompanied by a short written statement outlining the significance and critical potential of the project with respect to the course and the theories and approaches we have explored. You may only replace one of your papers (midterm or final) with a project of this sort.

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://oae.stanford.edu>).

Course Schedule:

Week 1

04.03. Introduction: Frankenstein|Film

04.05. Mary Shelley's Novel and Critical Contexts of Monstrosity

READINGS: Fred Botting, "Introduction." (*New Casebooks: Frankenstein*. Ed. Fred Botting. London: Macmillan, 1995. 1-20.)

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Andrew Smith, "Introduction." (*Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*. Ed. Andrew Smith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 1-10.)

Week 2

04.10. What Is a Frankenstein Film? (And What is It Good For?)

READINGS: Shane Denson, "Introduction: Monster Movies and Metaphysics." (Chapter 1 of *Postnaturalism: Frankenstein, Film, and the Anthropotechnical Interface*. Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2014. 23-48.)

04.11. Screening: THE MOVIES BEGIN, VOL. 1: THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY AND OTHER PRIMARY WORKS (Films by Edwin S. Porter, Thomas Edison, Louis Lumière, Eadweard Muybridge, and others)

04.12. Early Film and Animation

READINGS: Shane Denson, "Frankenstein's Filmic Progenies: A Techno-Phenomenological Approach." (Chapter 2 of *Postnaturalism: Frankenstein, Film, and the Anthropotechnical Interface*. Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2014. 51-85.)

Week 3

04.17. Edison's *Frankenstein* (1910) and Transitional-Era Cinema

READINGS: Shane Denson, "Monsters in Transit: Edison's *Frankenstein*." (Chapter 3 of *Postnaturalism: Frankenstein, Film, and the Anthropotechnical Interface*. Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2014. 101-145.)

04.18. Screening: FRANKENSTEIN (James Whale, 1931)

04.19. The Iconic Monster and the Sound Transition

READINGS: Robert Spadoni, "The Uncanny Body of Early Sound Film" and "*Frankenstein* and the Vats of Hollywood." (Chapters 1 and 5 of *Uncanny Bodies: The Coming of Sound Film and the Origins of the Horror Genre*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. 8-30, 93-120.)

In-class screening: Shane Denson, "Sight and Sound Conspire: Monstrous Audio-Vision in James Whale's *Frankenstein*." (Video essay published in *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies* 2.4 (2016): <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/intransition/2015/12/29/sight-and-sound-conspire-monstrous-audio-vision-james-whale-s-frankenstein>)

Week 4

04.24. Interpreting the Iconic Monster I

READINGS: Michael Sevastakis, "*Frankenstein*: Are Men Not Gods?" (Chapter 4 of *Songs of Love and Death: The Classical American Horror Film of the 1930s*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993. 59-74.)

04.25. Screening: BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN (James Whale, 1935)

04.26. Interpreting the Iconic Monster II

READINGS: Marc Redfield, "Frankenstein's Cinematic Dream." (*Romantic Circles Praxis Series, Frankenstein's Dream*. Ed. Jerrold E. Hogle. 2003: <https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/frankenstein/redfield/redfield.html>)

Week 5

05.01. The Monstrous Bride

READINGS: Michael Sevastakis, "*The Bride of Frankenstein*: A Friend for the Enemy of God." (Chapter 6 of *Songs of Love and Death: The Classical American Horror Film of the 1930s*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993. 89-100.)

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05.02. **Screening: YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN (Mel Brooks, 1974)**

05.03. **Technology, Gender, Subjectivity**

READINGS: Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s." (Excerpted in *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*. Ed. Gill Kirup, Linda Janes, Kath Woodward, and Fiona Hovenden. London: Routledge, 2000. 50-57.)

Judith Halberstam, "Making Monsters: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*." (Chapter 2 of *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. 28-52.)

Week 6

05.08. **Monstrosity and Melodrama**

READINGS: Shane Denson, "Incorporations: Melodrama and Monstrosity in James Whale's *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein*." (in *Melodrama! The Mode of Excess from Early America to Hollywood*. Eds. Frank Kelleter, Barbara Krah, and Ruth Mayer. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007. 209-228.)

05.09. **Screening: THE CURSE OF FRANKENSTEIN (Terence Fisher, 1957)**

05.10. **From Hideous Progenies to Hideous Progenitors**

READINGS: Paul O'Flinn: "Production and Reproduction: The Case of *Frankenstein*." (*New Casebooks: Frankenstein*. Ed. Fred Botting. London: Macmillan, 1995. 21-47.)

Week 7

05.15. **Frankenstein Between Horror and Humor**

In-class screening: *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (Charles T. Barton, 1948)

READINGS: Caroline Joan S. Picart, "Frankenstein as Enduring *Cinemyth*" and "Postmodern Horror-Hilarity." (Chapters 1 and 5 of *Remaking the Frankenstein Myth on Film: Between Laughter and Horror*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2003. 1-11, 191-199.)

05.16. **Screening: FLESH FOR FRANKENSTEIN, A.K.A. ANDY WARHOL'S FRANKENSTEIN (Paul Morrissey, 1974)**

05.17. **Frankentrash**

READINGS: Patricia MacCormack, "Italian Perversions." (*Kinoeye: New Perspectives on European Film* 3.8 (2003): <http://www.kinoeye.org/03/08/maccormack08.php>)

Week 8

05.22. **Postmodern Frankensteins I**

In-class screening: "The Postmodern Prometheus" (episode 6, season 5 of *The X-Files*, 1997)

READINGS: Leanne McRae, "The Postmodern Prometheus: Collective Experience and the Carnavalesque" (*Transformations* 3 (2002): <http://transformationsjournal.org/issues/03/pdf/mcrae.pdf>)

05.23. **Screening: MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN (Kenneth Branagh, 1994)**

05.24. **Postmodern Frankensteins II**

READINGS: Bouriana Zakhariyeva, "Frankenstein of the Nineties: The Composite Body." (in *Frankenstein: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical, Historical, and Cultural Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. 2nd ed. Ed. Johanna M. Smith. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000. 416-31.)

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Week 9

05.29. **Memorial Day: No Class**

05.30. **Screening: EX_MACHINA (Alex Garland, 2015)**

05.31. **Towards a Post-Cinematic Frankenstein?**

READINGS: Daniel Mendelsohn, "The Robots are Winning!" (*The New York Review of Books*, June 4, 2015: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/06/04/robots-are-winning/>)

In-class screening: Allison De Fren, "EX MACHINA: Questioning the Human Machine." (Video essay published by Fandor Keyframe: <https://www.fandor.com/keyframe/video-the-human-machine-in-ex-machina>)

Week 10

06.05. **Frankenstein Beyond Film**

READINGS: Shane Denson, "Marvel Comics' Frankenstein: A Case Study in the Media of Serial Figures." (*Amerikastudien/American Studies* 56.4 (2011): 531-553.)

06.07. **Conclusion**