

RTF 331R unique #  
An **ACTLab New Media** course

# POSTMODERN GOTHIC: Cyborgs, Monsters, Dreamstates, and Desire

Instructor: Sandy Stone (sandy@actlab.utexas.edu, phone 695-6732)  
Office hours by appointment

[Sandy's personal webpages](#)

Teaching Assistants and Theory Wranglers: Joseph Lopez (jtl133@mail.utexas.edu) and Brandon Wiley (brandon@blanu.net)

Class meets in the ACTLab (CMB 4.110) Mondays, 3:00-6:00

**Summary:** Theory, technology, and art collide in this course's final presentations, held on or after the last day of class. We'll think of this as a more or less public event titled *The Promises of Monsters*. In order to do it, we'll need a working knowledge of monsters -- the place of the monstrous in history, how defining "monster" works to stabilize the definition of "human", how defining sexuality, gender, and ethnicity works in similar fashion; how monsters and machines are gendered; how the idea of the monstrous relates to rationality and delirium; how these themes are inflected to stabilize "normal" and "abnormal"; and in general the complex ways in which That Which is Different comes to be That Which is Evil (and sometimes Powerful, and sometimes Savior, and sometimes...?). Using film, video, sound, and other media, we will compare modern representations of the monstrous with a few of the postmodern, to gain an appreciation of how the idea of the monster has changed in that transition, and what the changes imply for our own ideas of bodies, subjectivity, and desire.

Class is in **studio** and **discussion** format. This means that your active participation is a requirement of the course. During the semester we expect you to contribute your own ideas and arguments to the discussions, and to be willing to take the responsibilities and risks such contributions imply.

There are no written exams. Instead you will use the theories and tools you acquire during the semester to **make stuff** about some aspect of postmodern gothic. What you make can be in any form: sound, installation, video, computer animation, collage, sculpture, assemblage, performance -- you name it. You will do this in stages, starting with simple projects and moving to more complex ones, using humor, irony, uncommon approaches, and bizarre techniques.

**Take risks! Amaze us!** In ACTLab courses we assume a high level of motivation on your part and your willingness to self-start, set your own goals, think independently, collaborate with others, seek help when you need it, and take risks. Let's make it an interesting semester!

**Readings and Resources:** All class readings are available on the [Resource](#) webpage. Some of the resources are there for you to browse as you feel the urge. Also, remember your best resource is always your own curiosity, and Google or Clusty or other search engines are your best tools. Experiment with keywords and see what happens. When you find something interesting, share it, either in person or via the class mailing

list.

**Tutorials:** During the semester, Joe and Brandon will offer a number of tutorials on the use of the software you need in order to do better projects and get your webpages working. They will announce the schedules for these at various times during the semester. It's a really good idea to take advantage of them. Some folks don't, and then find themselves helpless when projects are due. Because a few diehards inevitably wind up in this situation, we provide this disclaimer: *The scheduled tutorials are the only ones we are obligated to provide.*

**Other ACTLabbies are your greatest resource.** A number of people in this class have taken ACTLab New Media classes before, and understand the way we do things. (We call them repeat offenders.) They can be your best resource for how to approach and complete your projects and documentation (see the documentation requirement below).

**Mailing list:** Outside of class time we keep in touch via the pomogoth class mailing list. Use it to swap ideas, ask questions, get and give alerts of schedule changes, share weird urls, and whatever else you can think of. Most of you have already been subscribed to the list, but we didn't have email addresses for a few. Be sure to give us your email address the first day of class.

**Equipment:** The ACTLab equipment (in cmb 4.110) is there for you to use, play with, and experiment with. A lot of it is state-of-the-art. Don't waste the opportunity to stretch your creative skills in the digital domain. We have computers, DJ turntables, a mixer, a quadraphonic sound system, and other stuff. We also have some gear that we've never used yet, and we invite you to play with it and see what you can make it do.

#### **Things you'll need:**

Stuff to construct masks or puppets, such as scissors, glue, construction paper or board, for later in the semester (we'll talk about this in class). Anything else you stumble on or think might be useful to make evocative objects about PoMoGo. Loose clothing that you can get dirty. If we do narrative or sound work in the dark, remember the ACTLab floor is hard; so if you decide to listen while lying down on the floor, bring something soft to lie on.

#### **Documentation requirement:**

In addition to your project you must submit **documentation**, i.e., a thorough, articulate description, photographic record, sound files, etc., of the project, ***in the form of a set of web pages***, uploaded to the ACTLab server. Don't slight this step, because a spectacular web page significantly raises your visibility in the professional world. No grade will be issued until your web site is up and working -- i.e., no broken links, all animations or Flash movies actually run, etc. To keep all of us sane, final presentations and web pages are **not** due on the same day...there is some time built into the course schedule after final presentations for you to finish your web pages.

Experienced Labbies say: One of the worst mistakes you can make is to leave the documentation for the last minute. Start thinking about your web site from the very first class day. Keep notes about your ideas for it,

so you'll have a good supply as you build the pages.

**Films:** We'll see several films in class, but only a few are scheduled here. We'll choose the rest in class, based on what we think would be useful or interesting or fun or all of the above. The current list of possibilities (plus whatever we decide to add) includes:

The Fly (David Cronenberg)  
 Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (Kenneth Branagh)  
 Dracula (John Badham)  
 Freaks (Tod Browning)  
 Zelig (Woody Allen)  
 Blade Runner (Ridley Scott)  
 Alien 3 (Ridley Scott)  
 Terrorist She-Freaks of Texas (Holly Lewis)

### **Grading:**

Participation in discussion 15%  
 First mini-project 15%  
 Second mini-project 20%  
 Final project 25%  
 Documentation 25%

Total 100%

### **Course Schedule:**

**[NOTE:** Due to the Labor Day holiday and the caprices of the gods, our first class meeting isn't until September 12. Because of this, I'll probably arrange for some of the usual administrative stuff we normally do on the first class day to be done online via our class mailing list instead, or we'll schedule an unofficial class meeting outside normal class time to get that stuff done.]

**Monday, Sep 12:** Liftoff. Administrative biz - add/drop, who's on/not on the class mailing list, your ACTLab account, exchange phone numbers, etc. Introduce ourselves. Discuss the course description, syllabus, online resources. What I expect from you, what you expect from me. How to get an A. Loosening up. What is Postmodern Gothic, anyway? What is a postmodern cyborg? How do dreamstates fit in?

Introduction to the ACTLab space. What other actlabbies have done. Review of available software and other technical stuff. What can we do in here? How can we best use this space for pomogoth work? Or should we hold presentations somewhere else? The dreaded website requirement and how to breeze through it.

**Introductory reading assignment, to be discussed Sep 19:** Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for In/appropriated Others" (on Resources webpage). A key essay. It's long, and you may find it tough; it's also smart, poetic, and hits all the buttons hard. Take your time. If you find it too tough going, email or phone me and we can walk through it.

### **What we expect you to do for a reading assignment:**

1. Do the reading!
2. When you come to something that intrigues or excites you, make a note about it.
3. When you come to something that puzzles you, make a note about it.
4. When you come to something that drives you up the wall, make a note about it.

**After the first class meeting:** If you've been admitted but haven't received any mail from the class mailing list, sign up by surfing to [the pomogoth list maintenance page](#).

**September 19:** Discussion: "Promises of Monsters".

**Here's what we expect from you during discussion:**

1. Ask or talk about the parts of the text that you made notes about.
2. Participate. Talk. Ask. Argue. Laugh. (some of the readings are ludicrous.) None of this stuff is holy, none of the opinions are cast in concrete.
3. Bring in stuff -- maybe text, maybe just stuff -- that you feel relates to the reading. Throw it on the table, say why it's there, and see what happens.
4. My main job during discussion is to listen. My role is to make an opening or framing statement to start from. I'll guide when necessary, and clarify tough points. Discussion time gives me my best sense of how you're thinking about the theoretical part of our work together. Joe and Brandon tend to be more interventionist in their approach -- they may engage you more actively and directly during the discussions. Different styles, same purpose.

Participation is one of the keys to success in this class. You can't participate in discussion in a real way unless you've done the reading. Consequently Rule Number One is: Do The Reading! There are things in Haraway's essay that you may not understand. Make notes about them. Then ask about them during discussion. A key to reading Haraway is to understand her love of language and the careful way she assembles scholarly and scientific language in an almost poetic manner. So read her as if you were reading a Gothic story, in which the words not only convey information but set atmosphere and mood. Read it as much for the flavor of the language as for the factual material. Let the words walk around in your head a bit. Give them room to stretch and breathe.

**Film:** "Freaks" (Tod Browning, 1932)

**Reading assignments (4) For discussion on September 26** (All of these are on the Resources webpage):

Monsters in Literature and Film. Good resource on monsters and meaning.

Basics of Postmodernism.

Postmodern Images and a Basic Quote or Two.

Postmodernism For Students By Students.

A lot of reading, but you have five days to do it.

**September 26:** Discussion: Monsters and the Monstrous; Postmodernism, Postmodernity. Transgender in a PoMoGoth perspective. Urban Primitivism and the Gothic sensibility.

Intro to Making Stuff: Materials: Construction cardboard, glue, scissors, random stuff (to be clarified in class).  
Developing a timeline. Project exhortations: Review of How to make a Killer Project (on the Resources webpage). Intro to making a webpage.

**In-class Tutorial (if appropriate):** Dreamweaver.

Reading assignment: Elements of Structuralism, Theses on the Situationist International, paragraphs 1-20 (on Resources webpage) for discussion on October 3.

**October 3:** Discussion: Elements of Structuralism, Situationism

**Video:** Museum of Jurassic Technology (8 minutes).

**Discussion:** What are those nuts up to? Irony and the collapse of categories in the postmodern imaginary.

**Developing a timeline.** Working on the timeline in relation to your own project and its documentation. What's important to those folks out there in industry, and how (and why) to think about what they think when they see your work.

In-class activity: Play with and discuss the Postmodern Essay Generator on the Resources page.

**In-class Tutorial (if appropriate):** Photoshop.

**Film:** Dracula (John Badham, 1979; Vampire as sexy raconteur)

**Equipment needs:** If you need special equipment such as video cameras, lights or mics for your first presentation on October 10, be sure to talk to Joe or Brandon today and familiarize yourself with the Equipment Checkout online scheduling procedures.

**Reading assignments (3) for discussion October 17:**  
Hakim Bey, T.A.Z. (on Resources webpage). Read until you've had enough. Be sure to also read "Communications of the Association for Ontological Anarchy", Communique #1, Part II: "Some Poetic-Terrorist Ideas Still Sadly Languishing in the Realm of "Conceptual Art", on the T.A.Z. main page (scroll down to find it). Also read at least three chapters (choose any three) of "Dracula" the book, (on Resources) for comparison with the Badham film in terms of pace and style. Note the multiple viewpoints in the book, and think about what we've discussed about when and why multiple viewpoints arose in textual production.

**OCTOBER 10: FIRST IN-CLASS PRESENTATION.**

**October 17:** Discussion: How did you feel about your first project? Crit and self-crit. What about the next one -- what have you learned, what would you do differently?

**Discussion of readings:** T.A.Z., monstrosity and language. Dracula as text and film: Different worlds. Why'd they do that? The monstrous as an act of showing forth. A few words about Gestalt psychology. Why indistinctness can be an advantage. The power of Near-Legibility: almost-heard sound, almost-seen images, and how to use them in projects.

**Tutorials:** Final Cut Pro.

**Making Stuff:** Geeks and proto-geeks: Hit those computers! Browse for resources. Practice with your apps of choice. Ask for help and help each other. Sample/simple project due in class (we'll discuss this carefully first). Crit and self-crit (two minutes each). Physical object folx: Discuss what's doable in the time frame. Do you need/want to partner up with a geek, or vice versa?

**Reading assignment:** Gothic Architecture, Gothic Literature (on Resources webpage), for discussion on October 24.

**October 24:** Discussion: The Gothic sensibility in architecture and literature. Gender, femininity and the monstrous. Desire and technology. (Yeah, I wrote a book by that name, and this is my golden opportunity to act like a Professor and yap about it.)

**Equipment needs:** If you need special equipment such as video cameras, lights or mics for your presentation on November 7, be sure to talk to Joe or Brandon today and be ready to use those Equipment Checkout online scheduling procedures.

**Film:** *Ghost in the Shell*. Discussion to follow, focusing on William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and the idea of virtual life forms and inhabitable spaces.

**Readings for October 31:** To be announced.

**October 31:** Remember the four workpoints: Theoretically informed, Historically situated, Daring, Authentic.

It's time to get in shape for the long pull by practicing good project habits for the November 7th project. When we did time budgeting, you most likely found that you can't finish your project using only class hours. For the last few days before due date, most Labbies work around the clock. Remember to take breaks and keep hydrated. Drink lots of water or fruit juice. Soda tastes great but doesn't do much for your electrolyte balance. And remember the floor is cement and there are only two couches, so it's a good idea to bring some kind of bedroll for that 3 a.m. nap.

**Film:** *ExiStenZ*. Discussion to follow, focusing on the oneiric, delirium, and the uncanny.

### **NOVEMBER 7: SECOND IN-CLASS PRESENTATION.**

**November 14:** Studio work. Plenty of time to complete your project if you bear down and concentrate now. At this point the whole key to success is your ability to recognize where you are on your project timeline, adjust your academic and personal priorities accordingly, and to trust yourself (and us) enough to ask for help. No matter whether you think your project is going well or badly, the important thing is that it's yours, that it comes from inside you and monstrates with your voice.

**November 21:** Two weeks to go! Are you suffering enough yet? Project updates. Check timelines. Joe, Brandon and I will be meeting with you individually during class, checking on how you're coming along and making suggestions now and then. We'll also be on the alert for places where you might get stuck, but we're not psychic--so even though you know you're shy, please try to ask for help when you need it.

**Film:** *The Fly* (Future tech out of control produces pomo monster, and what's particularly pomo about this monster? Discussion to follow.

**Equipment needs:** If you need special equipment such as video cameras, lights or mics, or additional stuff we don't usually provide for the mini-projects but do try to help you scrounge up for the final projects, such as projectors or additional sound equipment for your presentation on December 5, be sure to talk to Joe or Brandon today.

**November 28: Studio work.** Last class day before final presentations! Are you ready? Of course not. But you will be by next week. Drink lots of fluids. Order pizza. Take breaks, walk around, get outside. Take a nap when necessary.

**Film:** *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. Not a great film, but closer to Shelley's intent than Whale's film (the one with Karloff) was. We'll discuss in some depth the background of these two films and what was (and is) at stake in dramatic representations of the monstrous.

**DECEMBER 5: FINAL PRESENTATIONS.** Crit, review. Wrapup and farewells. Have a great holiday break!

**DECEMBER 18: DROP DEAD DATE FOR WEB SITE.** My grades are due in the RTF office on the 19th. You know what that means.

#### **The Fine Print:**

This syllabus is V.1.1, updated 20 August 2005. May be further updated as necessary.

**Regarding Scholastic Dishonesty:** The University defines academic dishonesty as cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, falsifying academic records, and any act designed to avoid participating honestly in the learning process. Scholastic dishonesty also includes, but is not limited to, providing false or misleading information to receive a postponement or an extension on a test, quiz, or other assignment, and

submission of essentially the same written assignment for two courses without the prior permission of the instructor. By accepting this syllabus, you have agreed to these guidelines and must adhere to them. Scholastic dishonesty damages both the student's learning experience and readiness for the future demands of a work-career. Students who violate University rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University. For more information on scholastic dishonesty, please visit the Student Judicial services Web site at <http://www.utexas.edu/depts/dos/sjs/>.

**About services for students with disabilities:** The University of Texas at Austin provides upon request appropriate academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. For more information, contact the Office of the Dean of Students at 471-6259, 471-4641 TTY.

**About the Undergraduate Writing Center:** The Undergraduate Writing Center, located in the FAC 211, phone 471-6222, offers individualized assistance to students who want to improve their writing skills. There is no charge, and students may come in on a drop-in or appointment basis.

**Warning:** This class may contain explicit descriptions of, or may advocate simulations of, one or more of the following: Nudity, satanism, suicide, sodomy, incest, bestiality, sadomasochism, adultery, murder, morbid violence, catholicism, paedophilia, bad grammar, true love and affection, deviate sexual conduct in a violent context, the use of illegal drugs or alcohol, or offensive behavior. But then again, it may not. Should your sensibilities be offended at any time, you are free to leave the classroom without penalty provided that you notify either the instructor or teaching assistant when you do so.

**Fragile:** Do not bend, fold, spindle or mutilate. May be hazardous to your health. Not recommended for children. Do not purchase if seal has been tampered with. Not responsible for direct, indirect, incidental or consequential damages resulting from any defect, error or failure to perform. May be too intense for some viewers. Batteries not included. For recreational use. An equal opportunity employer. Some settling of contents may occur during shipping. Use only as directed. No other warranty expressed or implied. No postage necessary if mailed in the United States. Substantial penalty for early withdrawal. Slightly higher in California. Keep away from fire or flame. Any rebroadcast, reproduction, or other use of this game without the express written consent of Major League Baseball is prohibited. Please keep your hands and arms inside the car while ride is in motion. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. Contestants have been briefed before the show. Do not write below this line.