

# Freaks, Creeps and Cheats

Summer Session II 2019



COML 125.920  
GSWS 125.920  
CIMS 125.920  
RUSS 125.920

Tuesdays & Thursdays  
5:30-9:20

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This course analyzes erotic transgression in literature and film. We study how non-normative sex and sexuality is represented, interrogating the formal conventions for describing taboo desires, behaviors, and identities as well as the social values informing them. What can these forms show us (or not show us) about desire, gender, family and social obligation? With texts ranging from Shakespearean drama to feminist reappropriations of the Marquis de Sade, from impressionist painting to Jenny Hval's vampiric soundscapes, we seek to explore narratives of "bad," "kinky," and "sinful" relationships and sexualities in their social and literary context.

# Course description and aims

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In this course we will analyze representations of erotic transgression—including adulterous, violent, and "perverted" or non-normative sex and sexualities—in literature, film, literary theory, and on occasion music and the plastic arts. We will study how sex and sexual desire is represented, and think critically about the narrative conventions used for describing taboo desires, behaviors, and identities as well as the social values that inform them. The themes of desire, transgression, suspicion, and discovery lie at the heart of many classic narratives in drama, literature, and film, from antiquity to the present. Is there anything special, we will ask, about representing sex, especially "wrong" kinds of sex? What might these narratives and formal structures teach us about the way we read, think, and act in general? By supplementing classic literary accounts by authors such as Shakespeare, Tolstoy, von Sacher-Masoch (of "masochism" fame), and de Sade (of "sadism" fame), with films by such figures as Peter Greenaway and Pier Paolo Pasolini, we will analyze the possibilities and limitations of the different genres and forms under discussion. What can these forms show us (or not show us) about desire, gender, family, and social obligation? We will apply a range of critical approaches to address such crucial questions as well as to place narratives of "bad," "kinky," or "sinful" sexuality in their social and literary context.

The broad aim of this course is to excavate and interrogate accepted notions of what constitutes the "normal" and the "abnormal" in erotic life. We will identify the power relations involved in the separation and maintenance of such categories as well as the transgressive forces capable of disrupting them. In so doing, we will learn about, apply, and test the limits a range of critical approaches widely mobilized in humanist study, including:

- Genealogy and discourse analysis
- Psychoanalysis
- Feminist critique
- Structuralism and poststructuralism
- Queer theory
- Materialist critique

Tracing these analytical frameworks in relation to our primary texts, we will hone our understanding of both our subject matter as well as the contours of critical and literary theory.

# Content warning

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This course deals heavily with material that can be emotionally taxing and potentially triggering, particularly to those who have experienced certain kinds of trauma. The instructor will make efforts in class to flag intense content in upcoming readings and films. However, it is imperative that every student understand from the outset that discussions of graphic, often violent, sex will feature in our course materials nearly every week, and that rape, self-harm, domestic violence, racism, homophobia, and transphobic violence will come up in certain course materials and likely in class discussion as well. The syllabus tags general warnings for each week's selection so that students know what to expect. If any student is concerned about encountering anything specific that does not appear in the tags, please email the instructor. All email communications are always, of course, entirely confidential. While not ignoring the gravity of the materials we will engage with, we will do our best each week to make our classroom a space in which we can bravely, empathetically, and thoughtfully contend with difficult content.

If upon reviewing the syllabus you are concerned that a certain class meeting and/or reading is potentially retraumatizing, email the instructor immediately so that you may be assigned replacement materials, written work, and/or a personal meeting in order to continue to enrich the course.

# Support statement

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The University of Pennsylvania provides reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities who have self-identified and been approved by the office of Student Disabilities Services (SDS). Please make an appointment to meet with them as soon as possible in order to discuss your accommodations and needs. If you have not yet contacted SDS and would like to request accommodations or have questions, you can make an appointment by calling (215) 573-9235. The office is in the Weingarten Learning Resources Center (WLRC) at Stouffer Commons, 3702 Spruce Street, Suite 300. All WLRC services are confidential.

Please also be aware that counseling and therapy are available to students. Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) is the counseling center for the University of Pennsylvania. CAPS offers free and confidential services to all Penn undergraduate, graduate, and professional students. CAPS helps students adjust to university life, manage personal and situational challenges, develop coping strategies, and grow personally and professionally. CAPS' trained clinicians offer individual, group, and couples therapy. Students can access CAPS in a variety of ways, depending on their individual situation. CAPS hours are 9 to 5 Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, 9 to 7 Wednesday and Thursday. Simply walk into 3624 Market St. or schedule a consultation by calling (215) 898-7021.

## Materials required to rent or purchase

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### Film

- *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*, Peter Greenaway (Van Pelt DVD 009 299)
- *Saló, or the 120 Days of Sodom* or *Teorema*, Pier Paolo Pasolini (Van Pelt DVD 017 223; Van Pelt DVD 010 194)
- *Stranger by the Lake*, Alain Giraudie (Van Pelt DVD 024 110)
- *Cam*, Daniel Goldfaber

### Music

- *Blood Bitch* (album), Jenny Hval

\*\*\*All other materials will be made available on Canvas\*\*\*

## Assignments and responsibilities

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- 100-word (2- to 3-sentence) theses on readings marked with a “Δ” symbol. These must be posted on Canvas by NOON THE DAY OF CLASS.
- 3-page (minimum, excluding notes) close reading. This assignment is due by NOON, THURSDAY, JULY 25. Being as precise as possible, you are to provide an exegesis on a single passage of fiction or a single scene from a film.
- 6-page (minimum, excluding notes) final assignment. This assignment is due by MIDNIGHT, FRIDAY, AUGUST 9. You may choose one of the following:
  - An **ANNOTATED DISTORTION** of any fictional work addressed in the class. You may rewrite, extend, spoof, or otherwise reappropriate your chosen text/film, footnoting the reasoning behind your specific choices and creative strategies.
  - A **COMPARATIVE CRITIQUE** of any two theoretical approaches explored in the class. You may choose to place Angela Carter's approach of feminist reappropriation in conversation with Michel Foucault's genealogy of sexuality, for example—while not aiming to determine which is “better,” you will explore the relative affordances and limitations of each in the context of the other.
  - A **THEORETICAL APPLICATION** of any single theoretical approach explored in the class to any single fictional work, whether addressed in class or not. AKA the standard term paper option. You must confer with the instructor beforehand if you wish to write about a fictional work we did not address in class.

## Attendance/participation policy and grading breakdown

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### Policy

This is an intensive, five-week course that compresses the ~30 class meetings of a normal semester into 10 sessions. As such, *class attendance and participating in active discussion are the most important elements of this course*, with attendance comprising 50% of each student's overall grade and active participation comprising an additional 10% of each student's overall grade. To be clear, this means that missing a day of class without appropriate, institutionally-approved documentation (e.g., a doctor's note) will most likely result in a half-grade reduction of your overall score. If a class session conflicts with a religious holiday, notify the instructor within the first two weeks (as per Penn policy). In cases of emergency, notify the instructor as soon as possible and the instructor will confer with administration to determine how to proceed.

## Breakdown

- Attendance.....50%
- Participation.....10%
- Canvas theses.....10%
- Close reading assignment.....10%
- Final assignment.....20%



## Prefacing Transgression [tags: sexual violence, self-harm]

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### Tuesday, July 9 –Introducing the Class and the Meaning of Erotic Transgression

- “Part I: We Other Victorians” from *The History of Sexuality Vol. I*, Michel Foucault
- “The Bloody Chamber” from *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, Angela Carter

### Thursday, July 11 –Taboo and Transgression

- Δ *The Story of the Eye*, Georges Bataille
- Part One, Chapters I – V of *Erotism*, Georges Bataille
- “Preface to Transgression,” Michel Foucault

## Bad Form I: Foreplay [tags: domestic violence]

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### Tuesday, July 16 –The Family Drama

- *Three Contributions to the Sexual Theory*, Sigmund Freud
- Δ *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Leo Tolstoy

### Thursday, July 18 – Desire and Adaptation Beyond Fidelity

- Δ *Troilus and Cressida*, William Shakespeare
- *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*, (film) Peter Greenaway

## Bad Form II: Climax [tags: sexual violence, racism]

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### Tuesday, July 23 – Flipping the Script(?)

- “Part II: The Repressive Hypothesis” from *The History of Sexuality Vol. I*, Michel Foucault
- Δ *Venus in Furs*, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch

\*\*\*CLOSE READING ASSIGNMENT DUE THURSDAY, JULY 25 BY NOON\*\*\*

### Thursday, July 25 – Atheists Obsessed with God (and Revolution)

- “Part III: Scientia Sexualis” and “Part IV: The Deployment of Sexuality” from *The History of Sexuality Vol. I*, Michel Foucault

And choose between:

- Part 2, Chapters II-III of *Erotism*, Georges Bataille
- “Dramatis Personae” and “Day the First” of *The 120 Days of Sodom*, D.A.F. le Marquis de Sade
- *Saló, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, (film) Pier Paolo Pasolini

Or

- Part I, Chapter VIII, XI, and Part Two, Chapter V-VI of *Erotism*, Georges Bataille
- “Writing and the Novel” from *Writing Degree Zero*, Roland Barthes
- *Teorema*, (film) Pier Paolo Pasolini

## After the End: Fragments and Reconstructions [tags: transphobia]

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### Tuesday, July 30 – Feminist Reappropriation

- Either Selections from *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*, Angela Carter or “Must We Burn Sade?” Simone de Beauvoir
- Selections from *Sappho is Burning*, Page duBois

- Δ *Blood Bitch*, (album) Jenny Hval

## Thursday, August 1 – Structural(ist) Affordances and Limitations

Come to class prepared to discuss your and your classmates' final paper assignment idea(s)

- *S/Z*, Roland Barthes

## **Death and Life** [tags: sexual violence, homophobia]

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### Tuesday, August 6 – Presentation: Biopower and the Death Drive

- “Part V: The Right of Death and the Power over Life” from *The History of Sexuality Vol. I*, Michel Foucault
- Introduction and Part 1, Chapter XIII from *Erotism*, Georges Bataille
- *Stranger by the Lake*, (film) Alain Giraudie
- “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Leo Bersani

### Thursday, August 8 – Presentation: The Sacred and Profane

- *Madame Edwarda* (including its preface, Part 2 Chapter VII of *Erotism*), Georges Bataille
- *Cam*, (film) Daniel Goldhaber
- Introduction, “Sex,” and “Work” from *Revolting Prostitutes*, Juno Mac and Molly Smith

**\*\*\*FINAL ASSIGNMENT DUE FRIDAY, AUGUST 9 BY MIDNIGHT\*\*\***