

The Bizarre and the Grotesque in Literature, Art, and Film: Honest Looks at a Mad World

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As suggested by the working title, this seminar will explore representations of the grotesque and bizarre in visual and literary media, particularly distorted depictions of the human form and condition. We would center the discussions around these distortions as honest appraisals of an outlandish contemporary culture.

In contemporary culture, people seem to lust after a phantom “normal.” This idolatry of the normal is both degenerative and ironic, taking the form of propensities and practices which exaggerate and come to define our society’s grotesquery. The seminar would organize such grotesquery within three interrelated categories:

- 1.) The medicalization of physical and mental distortion, which is evident in both the eager and flippant prescription of various legitimized drugs and a thriving plastic surgery industry. While illicit drugs may also be of interest to group members, the acceptability of psychosomatic psychopharmacology is more relevant to the normalization of distortion which is at issue. What are we to take from a world in which products and services which alter our chemical composition and even our physical structure are viewed as a normative standard? Why, on the whole, do such practices elicit few ethical protests? Here I might like to consider television (“Reality TV” in particular) as an invasive surgery on our perceptions and standards. This medium, I will suggest, exposes us to warped human forms and conditions, and in so doing creates an atmosphere of widespread acceptance for the practices associated with such warping.
- 2.) Artistic, literary, and historical engagement of the grotesque. How have the arts viewed these strange characteristics of our culture and responded to them? Bizarre and gruesome depictions of violence are relevant here, as they reflect a willingness to disrupt and disfigure the human form. Can we map our own impression of the contemporary world onto artistic and critical pieces, and how much overlap is there between our responses to these representations and what we can reasonably claim to be the intentions of the artists?
- 3.) Representations in film. A great number of films provide us with imagery of the bizarre and grotesque figure, and comment on our obsession with a normal.

Many of the same issues of artistic response to distorted normative standards will surface here as well.

Chronology is not implied in the above; interplay between the three areas is the objective. Our discussions will consider both ethical and critical responses to such cultural practices and artistic representations of them. We must ask: to what extent are our readings of the artists' representations colored by our own values and norms? Is our bafflement at the normalization of what we consider to be grotesqueries in any way more grounded or legitimate than the practices themselves? By being involved in a given culture, one is often desensitized to its oddities. Considering norms and values in varied contexts, we will create discussions that move beyond more polemic rants about cultural decadence, or an obsession with constructing homogeneity.