

The Macabre

FINA 533

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Description

Suddenly and without warning I saw a tall old woman climbing upon my bed, which greatly shocked me. She so terrified me that I could neither speak nor ask anything of her. In her hand she bore a scythe and she carried a wooden coffin and then she put one of her feet on my chest to restrain me. Deguileville, Pèlerinage de la vie humaine

The face is not in front of me but above me; it is the other before death, looking through and exposing death. Emmanuel Levinas

Nat: What the hell is that? (Climbing awkwardly through the window is a somber, caped figure. The intruder wears a black hood and skintight black clothes. The hood covers his head but not his face, which is middle-aged and stark white. He is something like Nat in appearance. He huffs audibly and then trips over the windowsill and falls into the room.)

Death (for it is no one else): Jesus Christ. I nearly broke my neck.

Nat (watching in bewilderment): Who are you?

Death: Death

Nat: Who?

Death: Death. Listen—can I sit down? I nearly broke my neck. I'm shaking like a leaf.

Nat: Who are you?

Death: Death. You got a glass of water?

Nat: Death. What do you mean, Death?

Death: What's wrong with you? You see the black costume and the whitened face?

Nat: Yeah.

Death: Is it Halloween?

Nat: No

Death: Then I'm Death. Now can I get a glass of water---or a Fresca?

Nat: If this is some joke

— Woody Allen, *Death Knock*.

The Macabre figure of Death, such an all time favorite disguise and representation at Halloween, was a creation of the Later Middle Ages in northern Europe. Even the word macabre has its origins in a work of art, the Dance of Death, painted in the Hospital of the Holy Innocents (a charnal house) in Paris c. 1425 and later popularized in a series of woodcut prints with accompanying poem by Guyot Marchant, titled *La Danse Macabré*. This seminar will explore the significance of the Late Medieval development and fascination with the spectre of death as represented by a grisly, partially decomposed cadaver, moreover, very often an active, living, even speaking corpse. While the macabre figure of death shares some features with the demonic of the early medieval devil, especially in its emaciated body and grimacing face, it is not, as is the devil, an exterior evil agent. Rather the macabre figure of Death confronts the viewer with an image of its own self at the point of the decomposition of the body. The growth of the macabre seems to indicate an anxiety over the body's loss and a significant change in subjectivity. It is this theme the seminar will investigate through readings and a close consideration of a variety of representations from art, poetry and theatre.

Readings and Discussion

In class seminar work is for the most part based on a discussion of weekly readings that have been carefully prepared by students prior to the class. Oral participation in class discussion is essential. Marks for class participation will be based on both amount of participation and quality of commentary that displays evidence that students have made thoughtful and critical readings of texts. However, students should never hesitate to call attention to aspects of readings that were unclear or not understood. Pointing these out will be very helpful for the class discussion as a whole.

Activities, Reports and Image Analysis

Periodically, students will be asked to carry out an activity in relation to the seminar

study. One task of the seminar will be in the early stages to develop a set of questions we would like to pursue in relation to the theme of the Macabre. The issues will then be divided amongst the students and each will be responsible for compiling brief notes in relation to that theme(s) taking care to cite authors and/or record developments from discussions in class. Close looking and discussion of images in relation to readings and general inquiry will be part of class work.

Discussants

Students will periodically share the week's responsibility for presenting the readings. **Research Paper** Students are responsible for developing a topic in relation to the theme of the seminar for their own individual research and analysis. Student work should display full command of material discussed in readings during the course of the seminar in order to push questions a little further and/or to explore issues more closely in relation to particularities of specific images. Making use of new kinds of theoretical questioning that might open up debates or observations is strongly encouraged. Students will present an oral version of the paper towards the end of the term. This will be evaluated by the class as a whole and students are expected to address criticisms or any valuable suggestions that may have been offered in order to improve the final paper.