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(Haunted) Talk Show: Performance Pedagogy for Large Lecture Courses

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FLC: Large Lecture Course
Assignment Write-Up

This document outlines a culminating activity for ENG 1120 Speculative Fiction: Science Fiction, Horror, Fantasy that weds out-of-class preparation, as well as in-class participation and literary role-playing: “Haunted Talk Show.”¹ It is a talk show-style performance featuring major characters from the various texts that we have read throughout the semester. In what follows, I will sketch out the following:

1. A brief outline of my potential ENG 1120 theme, units, and sample texts.
2. A more detailed discussion of the specific assignment including a general overview, more detailed steps for execution (for students and instructor), and an explanation of the activity potentially aligns with pedagogical best practices for a large lecture course.

Course Outline:

Course Number: ENG 1120 Speculative Fiction: Science Fiction, Horror, Fantasy

Themed Course Title: Haunted Media

Course Description:

Haunted books. Grainy camcorder videos. Cursed movie sets. Horror texts are profoundly interested in showcasing the media used to create them. These range from the shaky, found footage videos that jumpstarted the plot and style of *The Blair Witch Project*, to the closed circuit cameras that gave *Paranormal Activity* its eerie blue hue, to Kea Wilson’s novel, *We Eat Our Own*, which is fictionalized account of the infamous horror exploitation film *Cannibal Holocaust*. Books, televisions, recordings, and movie scripts even figure as characters in some stories, like the flickering TV of *Poltergeist* or the mysterious videotapes of *The Ring*. Why is horror so interested in depicting different forms of media? And what makes media haunted?

ENG 1120 Speculative Fiction: Science Fiction, Horror, and Fantasy is a survey of the history, theories, and art of horror across multiple forms of media, such as the novel, short story, podcast, film, and born-digital writing. Our theme is pretty “meta”: Haunted Media. This means that the texts we will enjoy are going to explore, center, and bring to life different types of media (as well as ghosts, vampires, and curses!), ranging from 1800’s letters to millennial tweets. In particular, we will be focusing on texts that are multimedia, which means that they will combine one or more forms of media. Through these texts, we will explore representations of not only media within horror as a genre, but also categories of identity like race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, humanity and inhumanity. Through our explorations of “Haunted Media,” we will honing our critical thinking and writing skills through in-class discussions (of all sizes!) and multimedia assignments that expand our visual, textual, and digital literacies. ENG1120 satisfies GE category C2. May be taken for up to 9 units as topics change, only three credits of which can be used for GE.

¹ My assignment is adapted from and inspired by Ralph Crane’s “Talk Show Host” from Diana Fuss & William A. Gleason’s *The Pocket Instructor Literature: 101 Exercises for the College Classroom*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

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Major Units

1. **Cursed Media:** this unit will focus on texts that have as its main characters cursed, haunted, or otherwise animate forms of media. Examples of possible readings and viewings include Victor Lavallo's *The Ballad of Black Tom*, H.P. Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu," Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead*, Hideo Nakata's *Ring*, Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook*.
2. **Experimental Media:** this unit will focus on texts that experiment with and (potentially) integrate multiple forms of media. Examples of possible readings and viewings include Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Jason Arnopp's *The Last Days of Jack Sparks*, Kea Wilson's *Eat Our Own*, Joel Anderson's *Lake Mungo*.
3. **Digital Media:** this unit will focus on texts that are born-digital writings and videos, and texts that adapt digital media. Examples of possible readings and viewings include Reddit's sub "No Fear," creepypasta, Tyler MacIntyre's *Tragedy Girls*, Leo Gabriadze's *Unfriended*.
4. **Media Circuses:** this last unit will feature a single case study (or two) of a supernatural occurrence (real or otherwise...) that (d)evolved into a total media circus. For this unit we will look at a number of different fictional (novels, movies) and purportedly non-fictional sources (documentaries, news articles, eyewitness testimonies, etc.) Examples of potential case studies would be Slenderman, The Amityville Horror, *The Exorcist*.

Assignment Description and Explanation: "Haunted Talk Show"

General Assignment Description:

What: "Haunted Talk Show" is an in-class and out-of-class exercise requiring students to select and role-play different characters (drawn from the various readings and viewing from throughout the semester) in a talk-show style format. The instructor has the ability to shape the tenor of the talk show, ranging from the subdued intelligence of shows like James Lipton's *Inside the Actor's Studio* or Chuck Todd's *Meet the Press* to the over-the-top scandalous sensations of tabloid talk shows, like *The Jerry Springer Show*, *The Maury Povich Show*, or *The Jenny Jones Show*

When : Designed to be cumulative exercise, the assignment will be introduced in the last month of the semester and performed one of the last days of classes.

Who:

- a. *Students* have one of two options: 1. They can play the parts of the guests (literary/film characters). Once students have chosen the available characters, the students will study up on their character, thinking carefully about their personality, motivations, connections to other characters, and hypothetical relationships to characters from other texts. *Or* 2. The students who do not wish to play one of the main characters will play the part of the audience, which will also actively participate by cheering, booing, asking questions, and offering comments
- b. *Instructor:* The instructor will play the role of the talk show host, organizing entrances and exits of characters, and coming up with sets of questions to ask the characters.

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Timeline:

This assignment works best as a cumulative one, either midterm or end-of-semester because you want multiple characters from different texts interacting with one another.

1. Week of November 9-13th: introduce the idea to students
2. Week of November 16th-20th: give students list of possible characters
3. Wednesday November 25th: deadline for signing up for a character
 - a. Hand out:
 - i. Character motivation questions
 - ii. Clips of older talk shows to give students a taste of what talk shows are like
4. Friday, December 4th: final day of class / in-class talk show performance

Description/Steps for Instructor:

Three Weeks Out:

1. Choose which texts & which characters you would like to work with. ****One way of going about this is to think about themes or threads of commonalities across texts to provide for good cross-textual discussions.**
 - a. Consider both main characters, and memorable supporting characters from the text (this will allow students) to get creative
 - b. If you have a student who is up to it, consider having one or two “experts.” For a horror class, these could be one of the authors (“Please welcome to the stage, Bram Stoker, who has been researching and writing on vampires for the last, well, 123 years...” or a psychic (“Tell us, Lorraine Warren, did you expect that answer from them?” “Where do you see our guests in the next twenty years?”)
2. Handout / discuss assignment prompt in class

Two Weeks Out:

3. Post character list on LMS and have students sign-up for characters
 - a. Also post character questions and talk show clips for students

One Week Out:

4. Once students have claimed characters, draft a skeleton of the topics and segments (I like to give my themes, such as “Battle of the Exes” or “Help! My (Undead) Teen is Out of Control!”)
 - a. Think about:
 - i. How you will introduce each character (I like to include a quote from the text)
 - ii. The order that you want characters to appear in
 - iii. How many characters you want on “stage” at once
 - iv. How you will ask characters to leave
 - v. How you will transition between topics
5. Draft questions for each character
 - a. Possible points to include:
 - i. **PLOT POINTS:** Have the character explain who they are, their involvement in the text: (“So, you claim to be a vampire, what is that?” “Why would people call you a vampire?”)

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- ii. *INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS*: how the characters relate to their main counterparts (“Lucy, Mina says you’re her best friend is that the case” or “Lucy, you had a lot of boyfriends in *Dracula*: Sir Arthur, Quincy, Dr. Seward, Count Dracula—what do you have to say for yourself”)
 - iii. *PSYCHOLOGY*: how did you feel in this moment? Questions (“Now that you heard Dracula bragging about sucking your blood, how do you feel about that?”)
 6. Once questions are drafted, write questions and cues on index cards and order them according to character entrances and exits
 - i. *INTERTEXTUAL CONNECTIONS*
 7. Plan the Room Setup:
 - a. How will use utilize the projector (talk show titles, commercials, character names and a couple-word descriptions)
 - b. How many chairs will you need?
 - c. Where do you want the entrances and exits to be?
 - d. **If you are planning a surprise guest (as in one planted in the audience) figure out where you might want them
 - e. Secure any potential props. (A house plant is a nice touch to make a faux stage)
 - f. If you want your audience members to participate with signs, make them
 - i. A great way to elicit widespread engagement is to ask yes or no questions the audience members can answer with a handheld sign.
 1. Example: Is Dracula a *real* vampire (“Yes, the Real Deal!” No, a Phoney Baloney”)
 8. Brief the students who will be participating
 - a. Tip: to preserve the element of surprise and the improvised quality, give only the barest directions (such as how to enter, or instructions if you have a secret guest in the audience)
 9. **The Day Of:**
 - a. Prepare the stage and projector (if using)
 - b. Prep the students who will be joining you first
 - c. Have at it!

Description/Steps for Students:

“Haunted Talk Show”

For our final in-class activity, we will be working together to stage a fictionalized—and horrifying—talk show. [Dr. Garascia], the instructor will be the host and you will be role-playing as some of our course’s biggest personalities. The host will ask you questions that are character-centered, as this assignment is designed for you to think about the complexity of horror characters in a new media format (the live talk show!)

Once and for all, our questions can be answered:
Did Count Dracula just want to make new friends?
Is Lorraine Warren an actual psychic?

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Is Ash from The Evil Dead really a hero? What was Cheryl doing locked in that cellar the whole time?

Did the Babadook make a haunted pop-up book just to cause DRAMA?(and where did he buy his hat?)

****Your options for participation:**

1. A talk show guest: a sign-up sheet with potential characters will be circulated next week and you will have the opportunity to become some of our course's characters.
 - a. ****we can be flexible with gender presentation, as well.**
2. An audience member: if you want to enjoy the talk show, but you're not interested in a starring part, you can be an active part of the studio audience;
 - a. Cheering and booing for your (least) favorite guests
 - b. Asking our guests questions
 - c. Giving your two cents to the characters you both love and can't stand

****If you sign up for a character, here is how to prepare:**

1. Reread through your text carefully, concentrating on *your* character specifically
2. Try to gather as much background information as possible (you can use the internet for this)
3. Identity, annotate, and analyze a passage (or two) that focuses primarily on your characters.
4. Answer the following questions about your character:
 - a. Who am I? Where am I from? Who is my family? What do I do for a living (if anything)? How old am I?
 - b. Who are my close friends, allies, confidants in the text? Who are my major enemies? Do I have any rivals?
 - i. If I could say one thing to any of these people, what would it be?
 - c. What are some key adjectives to describe my temperament or personality?
 - d. Do I have any secrets? Is there anything in the narrative that I *don't* know about/don't have access to? If I were to find out about these secrets, what would my reaction be?
 - e. Am I the victim? The hero? The villain? Misunderstood? Somewhere in the middle of all of these?
 - f. What characters from other texts would I get along with? *Not* get along with? Who am I most similar to? Most different from?

Once you have your character basics down, think about how you will bring your character to life:

1. What kinds of props will you need/if any?
2. What kind of costume might you wear?
3. What is your walk like?
4. How do you sit?
5. How will you interact with the audience

Bonus points: ****try to weave in quotes from the texts into your answers!!**

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The Day of Performance; be prepared:

1. To speak off-the-cuff
2. To answer questions for about 5-10 minutes; to be “on-stage” for about 20-25 minutes.
3. To cause some conflicts
4. To bring your characters to life!

Pedagogical Philosophy:

In terms of embodying best practices for teaching a Large Lecture Course, “Haunted Talk Show,” both literalizes and extends (to include students) Frank Heppner’s metaphor of large-lecture pedagogy as acting. To engage a large-lecture format, Heppner contends that that we, as instructors, need to think like actors, taking into consideration “character ... lines ... stagecraft ... theater ... and audience.” While these aims are implicit throughout the course, “Haunted Talk Show” renders these concerns explicit through embodied and performance-based pedagogy that asks us to think about character development, vocal delivery, bodily movement, and overall group engagement. Moreover, by involving students in the character-developing and show-making processes, “Haunted Talk Show,” effectively democratizes the “instructor-as-actor” position by extending it to students, as well. What results is a class-wide exploration of how to situate ourselves vocally, physically, and kinetically within a usually sedentary lecture setting. To account for different student personalities and learning styles that we will inevitably encounter in a large-lecture course, “Haunted Talk Show” offers a flexible model of participation, as it gives students the chance to be as visible as they choose to be. In addition to the art of presentation, “Talk Show Host” taps into and works with the affordances of the large lecture hall. What was once a potential challenge in terms of size, seating, “working the stage” (for lack of better phrase...) now becomes an asset. Lending increased verisimilitude to the exercise, the large format classroom works best for this assignment by capturing the feel of the live audience talk show, which typically take place in arena-style studios. (And, depending on how “meta” the instructor wants to get with this, a follow-up discussion explicating the mechanics/logistics of presentation in the large-lecture class could be had with the class.)

**While this exercise is geared toward ENG 1120 Speculative Fiction, it is flexible to work in any class.

Further Reading:

Fuss, Diana and William A. Gleason, editors. *The Pocket Instructor Literature: 101 Exercises for the College Classroom*. PPrinceton UP, 2016

Heppner, Frank. *Teaching the Large College Class: A Guidebook for Instructors with Multitudes*. Jossey-Bass Inc, 2007.