

BEING HUMAN

English 6120

Fall 2025

3 credits

Monroe Hall
Tuesdays
5:10-7:00 pm

Alexa Alice
Joubin

Office Hours:
Tuesdays 3:00-3:30 pm
and by appointment

ajoubin@gwu.edu



What a piece of work is man.
— Hamlet

How has the human condition been re-defined throughout history from Plato and Aristotle through Ovid and Shakespeare to Michel de Montaigne, Mary Shelley, Franz Kafka, and science fiction?

As AI tools provoke rethinking of creativity and the human condition, it is all the more important to examine what it entails to be human, to construct the social spaces of humanity, and how we envision the relationships between human and non-human entities such as the machine, environment, animals, and objects.

This course examines how imaginative literature bears witness to the limits of the human, how literature depicts otherness through human and non-human entities such as monsters, machines, animals, and fungible objects, and why virtuality triggers anxiety.

Required Texts

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*
- Plato, *The Republic*
- Ovid, *Metamorphoses*
- Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*
- *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*

- Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*
- Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis*
- Em Liu, *The Death I Gave Him*
- Joubin's open access [Introduction to Critical Theory](https://criticaltheory.info), <https://criticaltheory.info>

Films

- *The Matrix*
- *Barbie*
- *Companion*

Requirements

- Weekly discussion posts
- Formulate open-ended and effective research questions
- Share your own speculative answers
- "Designer" final project that is the best of its kind — in a format and on a topic that are personalized and approved
- The project could be a traditional research paper, web-based curated digital exhibit, video, podcast, research poster, stakeholder interviews, practice as research (such as a piece of creative writing with a critical introduction), etc.

Being Human

Literary History

Tuesday, August 26 (New) Humanism, Anthropocentrism, Anthropomorphism

- *Nicomachean Ethics* by Aristotle, [humanity and rationality in Book I](#) (335-322 BCE)
- *The Republic* by Plato, [cave allegory in Book 7](#) (375 BCE)

Tuesday, Sept 2 Field trip to [Folger Library](#) to explore, during a **guided tour**, how book culture “defines” humanity

Tue, Sept 9 “Pygmalion,” *Metamorphoses* by [Ovid book 10](#) (8 AD)

- Starks, [Introduction](#) to *Violence, Trauma, and Virtus* (Palgrave, 2014), read only pp. 1-18
- Starks, [Intro](#) to *Ovid and Adaptation* (Edinburgh, 2019), read only up to section 3 (page 8)
- Optional: Starks, Lisa. “[Ovid’s Ghosts](#),” *Ovid and Adaptation*, ed. Starks (Edinburgh, 2019), 95-112
- Optional: Starks. “[Myth and/as Knowledge](#),” *Routledge Encyclopedia of the Renaissance World* (2024)

Guest speaker: Dr. [Lisa S. Starks](#), Professor of Literature, and Associate Chair at the University of South Florida. Zoom link <https://mit.zoom.us/j/99886157597>

Tue, Sept 16 Roland Barthes, “[The Death of the Author](#)” (1967); Michel Foucault, “[What is an Author?](#)” (1969); Michael Griffiths, “[Roland Barthes declared the death of the author, but postcolonial critics have begged to differ](#)” (2025)

Tue, Sept 23 [The Tempest](#) by Shakespeare (1610-1611) focus on discourses about Caliban as a “monster” in [act 1 scene 2](#) and [act 2 scene 2](#); *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, [excerpt](#) (1356); “[Of Cannibals](#)” and story of “[Marie Germain](#)” by Michel de Montaigne (1580)

Tue Sept 30 *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* by Mary Shelley (1818), read this [excerpt](#); for reference, not required: [Frankenstein](#), dir. Kenneth Branagh (1994)
Check out [Synetic Theatre’s production](#) in Arlington, Oct 31 – Nov 23

Tue, Oct 7 Fall Break

Synetic Theatre stages *Frankenstein*

☐

I’m not a robot



reCAPTCHA
Privacy - Terms

☐

I’m not a robot MYSELF, but I’m not judging those who are...

☐

Define robot

☐

I’m not a robot, but I know you are, so this feels a bit hypocritical

☐

I reject the binary assumptions underlying this statement

☐

I’m not a robot, but I’m willing to convert

- Tue, Oct 14 [*The Metamorphosis*](#) by Franz Kafka (1915); Donna Haraway, "[A Manifesto for Cyborgs](#)" (1985); optional: Jasbir Puar, "[I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess](#)"
- Tue, Oct 21 [*The Matrix*](#), dir. Lana and Lilly Wachowski (1999); Jean Baudrillard, [Simulacra and Simulation chapter 1](#); for reference, not required: [similarities between *The Matrix* and *Dark City*](#)
- Tue, Oct 28 [*Barbie*](#), dir. Greta Gerwig (2023)
- Tue, Nov 4 [*The Death I Gave Him*](#) by Em X. Liu (2024; [full text](#)); [*Hamlet*](#) by Shakespeare (1599-1601), focus on the ghost scenes of [act 1 scene 5](#) and [act 3 scene 4](#); Joubin, "[Specters of *Hamlet* and AI as Renaissance Technology](#)" (watch [video of Prof Joubin's talk here](#))
- Tues, Nov 11 [*Companion*](#), dir. Drew Hancock (2025)
- Tues, Nov 18 Final project draft presentation
- Tue, Nov 25 Thanksgiving
- Tue, Dec 2 No class, final project due

For reference, not required:

[*Metropolis*](#), dir. Fritz Lang (1927). [YouTube](#)
[*Modern Times*](#), dir. Charles Chaplin (1936)
[*Frankenstein*](#), dir. Kenneth Branagh (1994)
[*Dark City*](#), dir. Alex Proyas (1998)
[*A.I. Artificial Intelligence*](#), dir. Steven Spielberg (2001)
[*The Stepford Wives*](#), dir. Franz Oz (2004)
[*Air Doll*](#), dir. Hirokazu Koreeda (2009)
[*Moon*](#), dir. Duncan Jones (2009)
[*Her*](#), dir. Spike Jonze (2013)
[*Ex Machina*](#), dir. Alex Garland (2014)
Humans television series, [Channel 4](#) (2015-2018)
[*Okja*](#), dir. Bong Joon Ho (2017)
[*Blade Runner 2049*](#), dir. Denis Villeneuve (2017)
[*Ghost in a Shell*](#), dir. Rupert Sanders (2017)
Years and Years, mini-series by Russell T. Davies (2019), [Apple TV](#)
[*Finch*](#), dir. Miguel Sapochnik (2021)
[*Ich bin dein Mensch*](#) (*I'm Your Man*), dir. Maria Schrader (2021)
[*Don't Worry Darling*](#), dir. Olivia Wilde (2022)
[*Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio*](#) (2022)
[*Poor Things*](#), dir. Yorgos Lanthimos (2023)
