Teaching is an evolutionary practice. Our training tells us that and our experiences in the English classroom reinforce that judgement. Here is the story of one evolution that moved between postmodern thinking, the details of filmic schlock design and the weight of Russian realist fiction. In case you are worrying, at some level this unit of work emerged gradually. It didn't spring, fully formed, into monstrous being.

Why consider teaching ‘the classics’ in the contemporary classroom? And what might our students think of this material? Here is a statement from a sixteen-year-old student called Owen that merits some attention:

Classical literature: felt that I needed to know/learn about Russian literature as a knowledge of it is important since it carries weight in our society.

I think it is hard to ignore Owen's premise.

Before I go any further, it is important to acknowledge the context in which this evolution took place. I work in an all boys Catholic independent college in regional NSW. This school is one of a rare breed, combining boarding and day students without any selective criteria. All of the external testing seems to affirm that we have a ‘normal’ distribution of student abilities. While the school has a remarkably monocultural student grouping in comparison to city schools, it does have a wide range of students in terms of their literacy skills and their cultural exposure. Set in a regional centre, some students have decidedly rural interests and aspirations while others have a degree of broader cultural savvy. In other words, some boys live lives not unlike Tom Sawyer, shooting pigs and fishing, while others watch David Lynch films and write experimental scripts for fun. I am sure that many of you recognise this range of individuals when you consider your own classes.

The unit of work I am about to detail was presented to, and shaped by, a Year 11 class. Given the recency of the new HSC in NSW, this is only the third time I have taught the Preliminary Advanced English Course. The class has nineteen students who range from gifted writers and readers through to boys who have sound literacy skills and a degree of personal drive – in the previous syllabus at least half of the students would have made solid General English candidates.

The objectives of the Preliminary Advanced Course focus on the students developing knowledge and understanding of the purposes and effects of a range of textual forms in various contexts. The skills students are expected to develop involve responding to and composing a range of complex texts, and using individual and collaborative learning in imaginative, critical and reflective thinking. In terms of values, students are expected to also appreciate a diversity of language and literature. Essentially the course outcomes encourage students and teachers to plunge into the ocean of textual diversity that exists in our culture. ‘Explore’, they say. ‘Enjoy’, they say. I decided to take the Syllabus at its word.

The unit was named ‘Transgression and Monstrosity: A Study of Alien’. ‘Not a lot of wide reading in that’, I can hear you murmur. And, when this program was first devised and taught in 2000 to the guinea pigs of the new HSC in NSW, this is only the third time I have taught the Preliminary Advanced English Course. The class has nineteen students who range from gifted writers and readers through to boys who have sound literacy skills and a degree of personal drive – in the previous syllabus at least half of the students would have made solid General English candidates.

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The unit was named ‘Transgression and Monstrosity: A Study of Alien’. ‘Not a lot of wide reading in that’, I can hear you murmur. And, when this program was first devised and taught in 2000 to the guinea pigs of the new HSC, much of the unit focused on effectively teaching the skills of filmic analysis at a senior level. I know this must sound odd to readers outside of NSW, but film texts were new to the teachers of English at the HSC level. Given that there was (and still is) resistance to this notion – let alone its practice – from the more conservative elements of education and the media, students and teachers approached the film texts with a combination of wariness and illicit pleasure.

Why choose to focus on ‘transgression and monstrosity’ for the Preliminary course? Why select Ridley Scott’s Alien as a core text? Several years ago I co-lectured and tutored a course on gothic fiction at tertiary level and I found that transgression, one of the standard interrogatory practices of postmodernity, was most easily appreciated by students when it was figured in textual bodies. While transgression can take many abstract forms, if students can ‘see’ a body that challenges or distorts the culturally constructed sense of what might be ‘natural’, they can begin to grasp firstly that these cultural norms exist and, secondly, that breaking these cultural taboos is textually and critically policed by distinct cultural practices. Transgression can be yoked easily to the monstrous. What this pairing also affords is the opportunity to work through the valuable but perhaps under-utilised technique of etymology. When students realise that ‘monstrosity’ can be traced through to the Latin term for divine portents
or warnings, then they have a new tool for reading the monsters they encounter in texts: what is the warning embedded in this monster? Scott's Alien is, in my opinion, one of the classics of postmodern generic hybridity. Its monster spawned a multitude of imitations, both in its own franchise and in schlock-busters like Predator. The script is tight, the design combines the labyrinthine with the visceral, and the contextual field is rich. More pragmatically, in the Year 12 HSC course we were planning to focus on Scott's next film, the film noir / science fiction hybrid Blade Runner. Looking at Scott's previous film allowed students to gain some insight into his dystopic visions.

The ideological framework of 'transgression and monstrosity' was not really highlighted when the unit was first taught. Certainly excerpts of supplementary texts were incorporated, such as A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Films (1995 British Film Institute – ABC Video 1997) and scenes from The Cat People (1942; Director: Jacques Tourre), but the focus was primarily filmic. Many students, pursuing their own interest, watched the rest of the Alien quartet. Unsurprisingly, many of the students began to argue for the merits of James Cameron's Aliens. (For those of you who have seen Scream 2 © a discussion of sequels by teenage males seems to be strangely scripted by Hollywood itself.) Other wide reading material had a non-fiction bias, with commentaries on Alien by David Thomson (1998; Bloomsbury Publishing, London), biographical accounts of the career and filmography of Ridley Scott (especially Ridley Scott by Paul M. Sammon, 1999; Orion Books, London), and contemporary reviews of the film from Sight and Sound and other specialist journals. Excerpts from Marina Warner's No Go the Bogeyman (1998 Chatto and Windus, London) encouraged students to see how horror and monsters can be theorised.

As you can see, almost all of the 'wide reading' was related to the core text of the unit. This unit was taught to the two Advanced classes simultaneously and my colleague and I wondered whether we were really meeting the intent of the Syllabus. Certainly the breadth of non-fiction material was thought provoking and many of the students became adept at discussing the way that Alien, as a hybrid text, borrowed filmic techniques from the genres of the thriller film and the horror film. Others could discuss the sexually transgressive nature of the designs of Hans Giger and link this to the creation of meaning by and for audiences. Students began to understand how the frame of the film positions the audience to respond to characters and make judgements about their actions. In the assessment task, students took on roles as people involved in the pre- or post-production of Alien, talking to the Fox Studio executives about the film and its potential impact on audiences. In this task students imaginatively and critically inhabited the mindset of director Ridley Scott or writer Dan O'Bannon or designer Hans Giger. Apart from dressing up in some seriously funky seventies suits that they found at Vinnies or in their fathers' wardrobes, the students were able to incorporate their knowledge of the film and its construction into their presentations. While we were happy with the way that the students developed a metalegacy for analysing film, we could see that there was room for encouraging them to engage further with the ideas underlying monstrosity and transgression.

In the second year that we taught this program we supplemented it with three traditional literary texts: 'The Masque of the Red Death' by Poe (1842); excerpts from Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818/1831); and the chapter entitled 'Henry Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case' from Stevenson's The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886). Of course, timing is all. The students read these texts at the end of the unit, after the assessment tasks had been completed. Apart from responding with the horrified frisson that Poe's little tale still conjures, most of them promptly forgot that they had ever read these stories.

So. Take Three. This year I decided to reverse the sequencing of the program and open with the etymology of 'transgression' and 'monstrosity' in an effort to highlight the theoretical threads connecting the texts. Students then read the Poe story and the extracts from Frankenstein and Jekyll and Hyde. In each case the students began to map the theory over the texts. The Poe proved to be the most powerful in that it offers layers of transgression. Students identified the way that the disease itself transgresses the boundaries of the body – first in that it attains some approximation of a bodily form and second in that its symptoms involved blood seeping through the boundary of the skin itself. The embodied figure of The Red Death manages to pierce the aristocratic enclave with its 'gates of iron' and fatally infect all of the hedonistic revellers inside Prince Prospero's 'castellated abbey'. In discussion the students began to focus on the dimension of class critique embedded in the text. Could the text be a criticism of an aristocracy that abandons its common population to a deadly disease and seeks safety in quarantine? Could the fact that Poe is an American have a bearing on this positioning of the aristocracy? With a little prompting students began to explore the political transgressions as well as the tropes of bodily transgression figured in the text. With the excerpt from Frankenstein (the scene where Victor narrates the animation of the creature) students began to connect the idea of horror to the actual practice of hybridity, where the creature's discrete parts were perfect but when reassembled, a freak that warranted rejection was the outcome. Here students could also explicitly focus on the element of 'warning' to be derived from both Victor's actions and the actual constitution of the creature. The excerpt from the Stevenson story lends itself to the examination of collocations (noun groups) that morally code the monstrous as a dangerous threat to civilised society and to the integrity of the masculine subject.

Once we had worked through some of the ideas raised by these literary texts, we went into the work on Alien. Students were not only able to develop a competent metalanguage for their analysis of the film; they were also able to apply the theoretical issues to the text and its creation of meaning. The in-role presentation was still used as the assessment task. What was also added was a thirty-minute writing task in exam conditions that asked students to compare the film to one of the written texts. This was not completed as successfully as I would have
liked, but what was interesting was the way some students were able to select an element such as the monster as a warning against hybridity and read that idea across Victor's creature and the alien in Scott's film. I would like to develop this activity next year.

I also asked my students to compose a narrative that explored the notion of transgression and / or monstrosity. In the brief for this task I encouraged the students to try to be experimental in their writing as well as consider the content of their text. Some of the students certainly took me at my word. The narratives included a couple that tried fairly radical versions of stream of consciousness. Two others were multi-voiced texts and one displayed a sense of the macabre that only comes from watching Mulholland Drive and Eraserhead once too often. This latter effort was a physically fragmented text, where reading was deliberately disturbed by an attempt to literally ‘splice’ the page together. It opened thus:

_I couldn’t tell exactly when I had woken up, nor how long I had been out for. I do remember sitting up, the sickly sweet taste of blood heavy in my mouth, and my head feeling like it weighed a thousand kilos. I searched my pockets for a wallet, card, piece of paper, a clue, anything that would have told me who I was, or what I was doing on a train. Nothing … empty like my memory, or the carriage I had been born into._

Two of the more successful pieces took off in very different directions. One of the students has been taking himself through a canonical reading list and discovered Tolstoy in his travels. His narrative combined the military detail of War and Peace with a chameleon-like spectre that apparently fed on the death and violence. While this is not an original concept, the marriage of traditional realism and gothic conventions demonstrated the ability of the student to create links between his own reading and the material he had encountered in class. Another narrative began with an urban scene, obsessively observed, only to finish with an ambiguous and ghostly vengeance. A measure of the control the writer was exercising over his material can be seen in this excerpt:

_He gazes out the window as he dresses for the day. No shower for Evan, he showered before bed, as always, just before he carefully laid out the clothes he would wear today, as always. Today's ensemble consists of brown trousers, neatly pressed, a starched pale yellow shirt and a dark green necktie. He carries a grey tweed blazer over his left shoulder as he descends the stairs for breakfast. In his right hand is a large attaché case. Evan's curtains are always open. There are no mirrors in his room._

Here the finely observed visual detail that Ridley Scott brings to films like Alien is reworked to convey a sense of psychological disturbance operating, at this point in the narrative's orientation, as a low level frisson for the reader.

So where did we go then? Well, this was the big step into new terrain. After the students and I had dissected the strengths of their experimental narratives and the flaws in their comparative essays, I simply asked the students what they would like to investigate next. And the odd answer was ‘Russian literature, miss.’ Obviously among any group of teenage boys the social pecking order is powerful. In this particular class three or four of the more dominant personalities had been reading Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky themselves. My instinct is that they wanted to share this reading experience with their peers, perhaps show off a little, and also have a chance to clarify their own thinking about texts that still carry high cultural value. My role was to foster this genuine curiosity and yoke it to the pedagogical assumptions underlying the new Syllabus.

That evening I fossicked through my bookshelves at home, trying to find examples of Russian literature that could fit loosely – and you will see how loosely – into the rubric of ‘transgression and monstrosity’. I finally made a decision based on the formal conventions of narrative structures and chose to provide the students with two complete short stories and the opening chapters of three other texts.

We began with a discussion of the issues connected with literature in translation generally and then moved to identify the broad differences between English and Russian in terms of vocabulary and grammatical structures. From there we launched into Pushkin's gothic romance The Queen of Spades'. A tale of obsession, class distinctions and perhaps the supernatural, the students began to tease out its threads of romanticism, nationalism and realism. The students were guided through a traditional close analysis and finally a whole class interpretation was arrived at, combining a reading of genre, imagery and thematics. Using the whole class work as a model, groups of students were then given the opening chapter of either Turgenev's On the Eve (1860; translation 1950), or Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment (1866; translation 1951) or Solzhenitsyn's The Gulag Archipelago (1973; translation 1973). Some research was required to identify relevant contextual issues that might have fed into each of the texts. The groups were then asked to present their own reading of their chapter, with some reference to concepts of monstrosity or transgression. With more good luck than good management some students could see that the Turgenev ‘transgresses’ the expectation of traditional masculinity, with the languid young men passively musing about love on the banks of the Moscva River. Others could see that Dostoyevsky's opening chapter begins to suggest that Raskolnikov is radically out of step with the society around him. A few students could read in the opening chapter of the Solzhenitsyn memoir a presentation of the psychology of oppression where political rights are being ‘transgressed’ by a totalitarian regime. While the final presentations were far from polished, the students had the chance to consider texts that, for most of them, would usually operate outside their cultural parameters.
The final task I set the students was to be completed over the mid-semester break. This was a two-step job which asked them, first, to read Tolstoy's long short story 'Master and Man' (1895; translation 1960) and second, to explain how this narrative could be 'translated' into film. As you probably realise, in this final composition I was hoping to see some integration of the work from earlier in the term on filmic technique with this new literary material.

What the students produced ranged from traditional Merchant/Ivory style conceptualisations through to quite radical appropriations. The Tolstoy story itself is a realist text that vividly recreates the class strictures of peasant life and the cruelties of a Russian winter. All of the detail in characterisation is, however, ultimately subservient to a parable of self-sacrifice. One of the more interesting appropriations adapted the story to modern-day America where the two Russian characters trekking through a snowstorm would become two criminals who have been involved in a spree of bank robberies across the country. Mr Baker would be the senior partner who represents the greedy guild merchant Vasili Andreevich of the original story and Jimmy would be the younger of the robbers who represents Tolstoy's peasant, Nikita. Essentially this student turned a Tolstoy story into a Hollywood road movie. The student completed his presentation thus:

The film focuses on their relationship throughout the escapade, rather than the robberies. This takes away from the glorification of the skills of Mr Baker and adds to the empathy felt for Jimmy as the lack of value Mr Baker sees in him is accentuated. A lot of scenes are midshots and close-ups; a lack of two-shots symbolises their lack of unity and at the finale a two-shot is significant because it symbolises them coming together in a mutual relationship.

This passage demonstrates the student's attempts to grapple with the meaning communicated through filmic conventions and it also shows his willingness to play freely with a canonical text, while reflecting some grasp of the values operating in Hollywood productions.

So what did the students think of this journey from Edgar Allan Poe through *Alien* to Tolstoy? Here are excerpts from three of the students' evaluations of the term's work. As you can see, students' responses to the epic voyage of the term were as varied as you might get from any class.

*The term began with a study of three gothic texts and analyses how monstrosity and transgression fit into them. This, I felt, was a good way to identify, early, how the themes can fit into texts. It was a good segueing into *Alien* ... The best process of the learning for me came from reading the *Alien* stimulus booklets and researching for the *Alien* assignment. Using the large range of texts ('classic lit', film, theory) made the term infinitely more interesting.*

*It has been a particularly interesting, enjoyable and fruitful term, that has covered a wide range of subjects and mediums. ... One thing that worked particularly well was the introduction of the topic on Russian literature. As it was something I was just beginning to develop an avid interest in, I found it very enjoyable and actually assisted and expanded my own readings of the Russian texts I was into.*

*The move to Russian literature really came out of left field for me, but I am pleased that we are studying more well known texts and I hope to study more 'classics' in the future.*

What I find interesting is that some students consider studying 'classic lit' as culturally important. Surely that means that we need to find ways to bring it into our classrooms in an integrated and challenging way. Then it can mean something to them rather than remain, walled up and inaccessible, a preserve of the cultural elite.

If we are serious about the affective domain in our pedagogy, if we are serious about encouraging our students to explore the layered world of representations, then we need to find ways to bridge the gap between our view of culture and their *Simpsons*’ sensibility. Don’t just tell them that Homer references nineteenth century literature. Give them a framework through which to access the ‘original’ and make their own informed judgements. While you might not want to take this particular journey from Ridley Scott to Leo Tolstoy, I hope my experience shows that such a journey is both possible and rewarding.

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**Bibliography**

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*The Cat People* (1942; Director: Jacques Toureur)


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