This overview of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literatures is organized around the concept of “fascination.” Derived from the Latin fascināre, the term’s semantic range moves from “irresistibly attractive influence” and “enchantment” to the obsolete meanings of “witchcraft” and “sorcery” (Lat. fascinum) (OED). In its older denotation, it refers particularly to the kind of deadly, arresting magic that folklore deposits on the “evil eye”; fascination, that is, designates a specular capture by a malevolent other. Serpents are said to wield this magic in hypnotically immobilizing their prey; under this spell, the latter surrender to being eaten alive (think of Kaa in Kipling’s—and Disney’s—*The Jungle Books*).

With our texts, we will trace something like a “history of an idea” behind the term “fascination.” We will start by looking at the recent work of scholars who have excavated fascination’s circulation from Democritus to Kant to modern culture (and in whose work we may be seeing the emergence of something like “Fascination Studies”). Having familiarized ourselves with this genealogy, we will investigate a collection of sundry texts from Pauline Hopkins to Sigmund Freud, Edgar Rice Burroughs to Georges Bataille, James Baldwin to Clive Barker, Joseph Conrad to Julia Kristeva. Our nutty ambition is to have, by the end of the semester, preliminarily mapped a large and discohering field of literary and philosophical discourses where the term “fascination” suggests something crucial about Western modernity.