EMERALD INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNEXIONS

INTERDISCIPLINARY ESSAYS ON MONSTERS AND THE MONSTROUS

Imagining Monsters to Understand our Socio-Political and Psycho-Emotional Realities

EDITED BY

M. Susanne Schotanus

Interdisciplinary Essays on Monsters and the Monstrous

Emerald Interdisciplinary Connexions

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Interdisciplinary Essays on Monsters and the Monstrous: Imagining Monsters to Understand our Socio-Political and Psycho-Emotional Realities

EDITED BY

M. SUSANNE SCHOTANUS

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About the Editor

M. Susanne Schotanus is the Director of Publications for Progressive Connexions and in that position is currently involved in the production of a range of books for the Emerald Interdisciplinary Connexions series. She's one of the co-founders of the Inter-Connexions publishing house as well as a freelance editor for both fictional and academic text. Her work is marked by a passion for interdisciplinarity and knowledge production, especially on those topics that have traditionally been considered taboo.

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Woodrow Hood, Director of Film and Media Studies at Wake Forest University, is a Director, Sound Designer and Producer. He has presented his scholarship at

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Megan Johnson (she/her) holds a Master's Degree in Popular Culture from Brock University. Her work focuses on feminist and queer representations in the media, with the intent of introducing more nuanced and accurate views on these often marginalised people into public discourse. In addition to her academic research, which aims to secure more safe and powerful positions for feminist and queer communities, she also works as an academic advisor. She is an Ontario Graduate Scholarship recipient and has been honoured with awards in the field of Social Sciences by Brock University.

Francesca Lopez is a PhD student in Comparative Literature at The Graduate Center, CUNY. Her background is in Communications (bachelor's) and Film (master's). She taught Communications and Media, Sociology, Advertising Communications, and Gender and Media Studies at Roma Tre University. Specialised in Gender and Media studies, her research is based on the analysis of the representation of lethal gendered violence in crime TV series, in the horror genre and in pornography with a focus on female corpses. In the last few years, she started focusing also on dissident bodies like monsters and mutants. She authored and co-authored several publications on gendered violence and its representation. Outside academia, she has experience working with NGOs, CAV (antiviolence centre) and several organisations fighting against all forms of gender violence. She is also an activist, author and writer. Actually, further her PhD, she teaches remotely Gender and Media at Roma Tre University in a master's programme (Gender and Politics).

Russ Martin (he/him) is a Writer, Editor and Scholar. He holds a Master's Degree in Popular Culture from Brock University, where his thesis work considered the impact of *RuPaul's Drag Race* on Toronto's drag scene. His journalism has been featured in the *Toronto Star*, *Flare*, the *National Post*, *Xtra* and *The Walrus*. Russ recently contributed to *Canadian Theatre Review*'s drag-themed issue (vol. 185) and has contributed to a forthcoming volume on *Drag Race* from McFarland. He is an Event Producer with the Circus and its Other research project and a Producer and In-house Researcher for Toronto's online drag bar, Speakeasy TV. Russ currently teaches journalism at Ryerson University.

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online platforms not only as a means of sharing personal ideologies and frameworks of discourses, but amplifying marginalised voices as well. Continuing to channel these interests post-graduation, she currently acts as an on-air personality and reporter for YourTV Cogeco, and as a freelance social media strategist for fashion, food and lifestyle based companies in both Niagara and Toronto.

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No book comes together through the efforts of one person alone. As they say: it takes a village. In the case of this book, the village was a global one and various village elders have dedicated time and effort to make this volume happen.

Many of the authors first met at the inclusive, interdisciplinary conference on Monsters, organised by Progressive Connexions in December 2019, in Prague. Without the unending efforts of Seán Moran, who was the leader of this event, and the Progressive Connexions team consisting of Teresa Cutler-Broyles, Lorraine Rumson and Elif Çakmak, the first seeds of this book would not have been able to sprout. Cristina Santos helped us round out the list of contributors: drawing from her own impressive network, she found authors who could help us explore those topics related to monstrosity that made this book the well rounded and inclusive volume it is today.

But that is not where the contribution of the Progressive Connexions network to this book ends. As a pioneering inclusive network, Progressive Connexions does more than any other organisation to create spaces where interdisciplinarity can be born and thinkers on wide-ranging subjects can meet and flourish. Rob Fisher's vision of an inclusive, transdisciplinary and international web of connections not only allowed the conference to happen, but has also encouraged us to rethink the nature of interdisciplinary publishing. His insistence that this vision also find its way into the Tables of Contents of books in the Emerald Interdisciplinary Connexions series – for which he is one of the series editors – inspired us to round out each section with a discussion between authors, which has lifted this book to a whole new level.

Seeds and ideas are great things but they do not make a book. That aspect of the process was taken on by Emerald's friendly, supportive and open-minded team – Ramya Murali, Kristy Woods, Sangeetha Rajan and the fantastic Katy Mathers – who saw the radical topic and unique structure of this book and said: "yes, let's do it!" In a publishing world that's becoming increasingly conservative and selective, this Emerald team is a beacon of hope for those people who envision an intellectual world without borders.

But most of the credit, of course, goes to the absolutely amazing contributors to this volume: Elena Apostolaki, Melissa Blackie, Gerard Gibson, Woodrow Hood, Megan Johnson, Francesca Lopez, Russ Martin and Chloë Olivio. Work on this book began right at the start of the COVID pandemic and despite countless barriers, emotional events and an ongoing global crisis, they have managed to deliver on their promises and more. Throughout the process, the

authors in this book have shown grit, perseverance, intellectual brilliance and compassion – qualities which, though not often discussed in this context, are essential in bringing together an edited volume of this quality.

Introduction: Monsters and the Monstrous

M. Susanne Schotanus

When we talk about the monster, we talk about threat, fear, about that which is Other. Though fear must be as old as time (indeed, it has been credited as one of the affects that has guaranteed human survival), it is only in the past decades that scholars have started to pay attention to the nature and potential of the fear experience through interdisciplinary explorations. What they've discovered is this. Fear disrupts your worldview. You no longer feel you can predict the way reality works.[1] Instead, you're thrown into your body in a state of heightened awareness. Your senses become keener, your heart pumps more oxygen to your organs and the adrenaline increases your physical strength. Something has undone your world, but your fear response gives you all the tools you need to recreate it. You can no longer rely on your assumptions. Instead, you are forced to focus on what's happening around you, use your improved senses to assess the situation, and your increased strength to take action.

Yes, the monster is a fear-inducing creature. It features in stories told by campfires, both during a school trip and in the midst of a war. It has served as entertainment as well as a political tool and achieved both objectives through the experience of fear. As the fear-response is what makes the monster, it's helpful here to look more closely at the affect, and turn to Aristotle's Rhetoric for some classic insights:

(1) Let fear [phobos] be [defined as] a sort of pain and agitation derived from the imagination of a future destructive or painful evil; for all evils are not feared […].
(2) If this is what fear is, such things are necessarily causes of fear as they seem to have great potential for destruction or for causing harms that lead to great pains. Therefore, even the signs of such things are causes of fear; for that which causes fear seems near at hand. […]
(3) And injustice [is such a sign] when it has power; for the unjust person is unjust by deliberate choice (Aristotle, 2006, pp. 128–129).

We fear those, and call those monsters, who we imagine to have the power to cause destruction or pain in our (near) future. Even in Aristotle injustice is specifically mentioned in relation to fear: those who are unjust cause fear, and are

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therefore monstrous. But it's not all doom and gloom; according to Aristotle, there's another affect connected to fear:

> [For fear to continue,] there must be some hope of being saved from the cause of agony. And there is a sign of this: fear makes people inclined to deliberation, while no one deliberates about hopeless things.
>
> (Aristotle, 2006, p. 130)

This is the insight which holds the key to grappling with this book: analyses of fear, imagination, injustice and the hope that we can be saved from the cause of our agony. For a social critique is only relevant when there's hope that a better world is possible.

The monster serves as a stand-in for that which is Other. As such, it stands in opposition to the norm, the self and feelings of comfort. The Other is monstrous because it challenges what we take for granted. It holds up a mirror and asks, 'but what if..'? It destabilises a fixed worldview by showing there's an alternative way of looking, doing and being. The study of the monster, therefore, is a study of society. By looking at relations of othering through the figure of the monster, we learn about the things that have become invisible to us through habit. The norm can be hard to pinpoint, normativity difficult to deconstruct. But when we look at the limits of the norm, force our gazes to the point where normality seems to fail, when we make the periphery the focus, we can see the systems through which we move. The recognition is destabilising: it threatens the fabric of reality and it causes fear. But the monster is more than that: it allows us to see the world we inhabit, take it apart and rebuild it. That is exactly what the chapters in this volume aim to achieve.

The monstrous, most of all, is a multiplicity. There is no one Other, no one threat. When the authors discuss the racial Other, the gendered Other, the non-human or even the monster that resides in your own house – they discuss monstrosity, and therefore society, in all its complexities. When we focus on the monster, it becomes more familiar, less monstrous. And with every monstrous 'Other' that gets disseminated this way, the norm becomes smaller until we realise that that which has served as a standard – white, cis-male, heteronormative, human, middle class, able bodied, neurotypical… – is not a norm or a majority at all. Until it, in turn, comes to be seen as the monstrous, it starts lashing out in anger, and becomes a threat to the reality we've so carefully created.

Imagining Monsters

Aristotle suggests that fear, and therefore the monster, relies on imagination for its existence: we fear what we imagine to be a threat. But the relation between imagination and the monstrous goes further than that.

The monster itself is an unstable figure, as becomes clear early on when in the first section the authors discuss the topic of 'Imagining Monsters'. Gerard Gibson

shows in his first chapter 'Malign By Design: Imaginatively Visualizing Lovecraft and the Aesthetics of Monstrosity', that the monstrous only works when it is abstract or undefined enough that we can project our own fears onto it, but recognisable enough that we can imagine its agency and intent. The monstrous is partially constructed through the observer's own imagination, it needs imagination as much as it needs a hero to serve as its antagonist. Its abstraction makes the monster unfixed and therefore highly adaptable. Lovecraft's monster Cthulhu, here, is taken as an example of one of the most successful monsters in literary history; its adaptability and changeability proven by the wide variety of ways in which the monster has been imagined by the artists inspired by it. It is especially in Gibson's dissemination of the relationship between the visual and literary, the descriptive and imaginative, that we see how the figure of the monster has the power to break down barriers and functions at its optimal when it is least understood. Imaginative engagement with a monster offers the observer new perspectives from which to analytically engage with the world. In Lovecraft's short story *The Call of Cthulhu*, Gibson shows, this leads anyone who observes the monster, or even a depiction of it, to commit suicide. The monster, and the fear it induces, calls into question all previously accepted knowledge and understanding, eroding ontological boundaries and subverting distinctions between object and subject. For the characters in Lovecraft's story, this shift is more than they can bear. But for us, people interested in observing the world and society through the lens of the monstrous, it points to hope, to the potential of breaking out of our fixed worldviews and constructing the world anew.

A different exploration of the monster's adaptability and potential to change the world is found in Elena Apostolaki's chapter 'Racial Terror and the Struggle for Freedom in the HBO Series *Lovecraft Country*'. Her study of the tv show *Lovecraft Country* shows a reversal of the familiar racial (and gendered) Other. Though historically it is the Black person and the Black body that have been constructed as monstrous, in this tv show it is the white men in Jim Crow America who become the monsters. By blending historical facts with Lovecraftean fiction, and by situating Black protagonists squarely within this hostile world, the showrunners have created a framework which allows them to reimagine categories of norm and Other, comfort and fear, humanity and monstrosity, by equating fictional creatures with institutional racism and sexism to present a systematic societal critique. She deconstructs the way in which the concept of the monster is employed in this show to shift or overturn hegemonic relationships of power, linking Lovecraftean monsters specifically to the local police, who, as members of a white supremacist supernatural cult, form a threat to the Black protagonists that is as real as the shape-shifting shoggoths who hide in the woods. But it's not just the 'Other' who inhibits the monstrous qualities of prejudice, sexism and racism, as we see when one of the male Black protagonists is confronted with the harmful way in which he's been treating his wife due to sexist prejudice, already pointing to the final section in this book which deals with domestic monsters.

From Lovecraft's fiction, in the third chapter we shift our attention to real-world people who are portrayed as monsters. By analysing the media

representations of the crimes committed by Karla Homolka and Paul Bernardo in the early 1990s in Canada, Melissa Blackie's chapter 'Media Makes the Monster: Battered and Abused to Monstrous Killer' takes the concepts of Othering, imagination, the visual, gender roles and racism introduced in the first two chapters to show how each played a role in media coverage of the resulting trial. Visual markers combined with gendered and racial assumptions led the media to first portray Homolka as an innocent victim of the monstrous Bernardo. Drawing on these perceptions, she was able to acquire a plea deal for the sexual assault and murder of her sister and two other teenage girls. This deal was coined 'The Deal With the Devil' when a year into the trial video tapes emerged that showed her as an active participant in the sexual and violent acts. Here, media representations had to overcome another dilemma: how to make sense of a violent white woman? The deviation from gender norms this represents, invited them to introduce into their narrative the concept of monstrosity: emphasizing her threatening Otherness, intelligence and non-normative sexuality. This chapter showcases the image of the monster as a rhetorical and political tool in our societies, capable of protecting a system built on notions, prejudices and stereotypes associated with race and gender from radical deviations from the norm.

In the fourth chapter, Gibson, Apostolaki and Blackie engage in a conversation with one another to explore links between their chapters through the lens of the fear caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The relationship between humanity and the monstrous Other is explored, as well as the way the monster represents that which is outside of our control. It explains through the cases introduced in the first three chapters how an inhuman(e) monster confronts us with our shared humanity, strengthening bonds of kinship through the confrontation with something radically antithetical. The authors here suggest that the practice of imagining monsters might create potential for accepting as human those Others who have traditionally been excluded from the category. This first section, then, shows how imagining monsters allows us to make sense of, reimagine, and reconstruct the world.

Gendered Monsters

Though in the second and third chapters we have already been introduced to some contexts in which gender and monstrosity are intertwined, the chapters in the second section more explicitly deal with their conceptual relationship. The reason why gender is such a pressing and fascinating area in which to discuss the monstrous is that it is one of those concepts which, in the cultural imagination, was experienced as fixed, stable and comfortable for most of human history. Gender, as a social construct, was experienced as something natural, something innate and to be trusted. It was an organisational principle, used to make sense of society, government and the family. In the last century, however, it has seen significant shifts in understanding, meaning and political potency, resulting in strained relationships between certain groups of people. By challenging gender roles, stereotypes and the (binary) nature of gender itself, the collective worldview got disrupted, just as happens when one experiences fear. Some people have

benefitted from this, finding more freedom to express who they are outside of traditional norms. Some people have had a progressive response: the disruption of their worldview leads them to (attempt to) leave their biases behind and use their senses to take in the world, relearning what it means to be human. There is a further category of people: those who have had a fear response to this disruption, feeling, in Aristotle's terms 'a sort of pain and agitation derived from the imagination of a future destructive or painful evil'. The gendered monster, then, is a productive site of analysis to learn not only about gender and monsters but also about society, prejudice, humanity and transformation.

This is explored in-depth in the fifth chapter, when Chloë Olivio discusses 'Femicide on the Frontier: Analysing Motives Behind the Femicide Crisis in Ciudad Juàrez'. Touching on extreme forms of gender roles – toxic machismo and marianismo – this chapter explores the harrowing femicide crisis in the Mexican region Chihuahua. With Diana Russell (2011), Olivio defines femicide as 'the killing of females by males because they are female' and goes on to untangle the major societal changes that most likely have led certain men in Chihuahua's capital Ciudad Juàrez to abuse and murder women who, in their eyes, deviate from the gender norm. She describes how the gender roles available to these women are those of virgin, wife and mother, all of which stand in a relationship of subjugation to men. Consequently, working women, women who have multiple sexual partners, or independent and self-asserting women, are seen as deviant. But this is taken a step further in the case of femicide. Though there's no actual proof of the motivations of the people committing femicide, Olivio convincingly argues that deviation, here, is equated with monstrosity and poses a threat to established power dynamics and societal structure, undermining the man's self-image. Though perpetrators have not been found, even here there's hope: the final section of this chapter points to some local and international forms of activism that aim to support 'deviant' women in the area and demand political action.

Russ Martin's sixth chapter deals with 'Dragula and the Expansive Queerness of the Drag Supermonster', taking deviation from gender norms that was a major theme in preceding chapters and turning, once more, to the extremes. His analysis of the monstrous drag pageant tv show *Dragula* treats both the concepts of the monster and of gender as fluid, exploring how a positive reclaiming of the category of the monstrous allows for a transformation of negative experiences into more positive values such as strength and entertainment. By contextualizing the images and references employed in the drag performances, Martin's analysis shows how monstrosity in the context of drag performance exacerbates those ideas that were already present in Judith Butler's discussion of drag as a frame to explore gender as performative in their 1990 monograph *Gender Trouble*. In their Preface to the 1999 edition of this same volume, they write: 'Is the breakdown of gender binaries, for instance, so monstrous, so frightening, that it must be held to be definitionally impossible and heuristically precluded from any effort to think gender?' (p. viii) Though many chapters in this volume lead one to answer with a tentative 'yes?', it is in both Martin's object and analysis that we can see possibilities to move beyond this standstill, acknowledging how monstrosity and fright might lead to a freeze response, but could just as easily be used to generate spaces

with untapped potential for transgressive and transformative discussions, or – where definition and discussion are (as of yet) impossible – to 'think gender' radically through performance. It's especially when in the third season the show becomes inclusive of people on various points of the gender spectrum that the social potential of the concept of monstrosity comes to the fore.

In the seventh chapter, entitled 'X-Men: The Normative System Disguised as Mutant', Francesca Lopez similarly looks at ways to subvert the gender binary. Even in the hyper-gendered Italian language, the non-gendered term mutant, she argues, opens the concept up to radical ways of thinking about monsters and bodies that go beyond the gender binary as well as the Anthropocene. Drawing from Paul B. Preciado's insights about the term, she analyses the X-men movie franchise through the lens of this radical potential – only to conclude that the mutants in this franchise fail to put into question normative ideas about gender, instead reinforcing not only the binary but also its associated roles and dynamics of power and control. Her analysis suggests that we can accept a supernatural hero in a story, but only as long they adhere to cis gendered heteronormative values. Having scrutinised the way the concept of gender is treated in these movies, she goes on to make a case for using the radical potential of the non-human, the mutant and, in the context of this book, the monster, to break through human conceptions and reimagine a new discursive order.

In the eighth chapter, the three authors in this section engage in a discussion that highlights the different ways in which their individual chapters complicate and investigate the gender binary. They address the fear the subverting of the binary produces, causing individuals to be called monstrous. But they also explore the element of hope we found in Aristotle. Though most authors who criticise a lack of representation leave it at that, using the concept of 'queer worldmaking' the authors here explore what representations beyond the binary might look like. They attempt to use the world-building potential generated by the figure of the monster, calling for acceptance, inclusivity and a move beyond xenophobia, towards understanding.

Domestic Monsters

In this third section, we will explore further the monstrous potential to disrupt the familiar and domestic. Though we've touched on similar themes when discussing the problematising of the gender binary, we go a step further by focussing on the home. The Monster, as fear-inducing Other, stands as antithesis to the domestic. In a way, we could say that monstrosity and home seem polar opposites, maybe even mutually exclusive. And that is what makes the monster under your bed such an evocative figure: how can we feel comfortable and sleep when there's evil lurking just beyond view? How do we make sense of the world when the monstrous and the domestic collide and the familiar poses a threat?

In Chapter 9, 'Mothers, Monsters, and Media: Examining the Parallel Between Motherhood and the Monster', Megan Johnson explores this question by investigating two case studies in which mothers were suspected of having

murdered their toddlers. Building on insights in Cultivation theory, she shows how media continue to shape and reinforce hegemonic values concerning motherhood. Building further on insights in the previous chapters on tradition gender norms, she shows how ideas about gender result in ideas about motherhood. And when mothers diverge from these norms, they're called 'monstrous', meaning they're capable of anything: even including murdering their own young, blonde, pretty and feminine daughters. What's more, the monstrous mother is a figure of fascination, exemplified by the many '20-year anniversary' documentaries that followed one of the cases Johnson explores. We're led to conclude from her analyses that domestic monsters are the most powerful, entertaining and sensational creatures, especially when they concern women and motherhood.

Woodrow Hood's 'Extra-diegesis, Domesticity, and the Uncanny in the Transnational Films of Guillermo del Toro' takes a completely different approach to the theme of domestic monsters. He discusses the way in which Guillermo del Toro in his horror films *Cronos*, *The Devil's Backbone* and *Pan's Labyrinth* uses sound to collapse the boundary between the world of the film and the world of the audience. As these movies are inspired by Gothic horror, they take place in homes or domestic dwellings. As Hood says 'what should be a safe space has been invaded by preternatural evil and decay', causing an uncanny effect. Del Toro's use of extra-diegetic audio – sound that's partly part of the filmic world, something that can be heard by the film's characters, yet isn't quite that, clearly altered for the audience's benefit and eerily unnatural – causes this breakdown of the boundary between filmic and real world. Consequently, the filmic monsters and their accompanying sounds invade the domestic on two levels: both the domestic spaces in the film and the familiar space in which the viewer consumes the movies. Hood's analysis of the films, and especially the ways sounds are employed within them, therefore sketches a strong framework from which to think about domestic monstrosity.

Note

1. See e.g. Hanich (2019, p. 32): 'fear generally brings about a gradual, sometimes sudden metamorphosis of ourselves and our taken-for-granted relation to the world. This transformation marks a breach – an inter-ruption – in the continuity of our experience, colouring the world differently and thus standing out from the more uneventful flow of life'.

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