



A review of
**The Monster
Theory Reader**

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In the more than twenty years of its existence, monster studies has generated enough publications to compile a Theory Reader. The big question, however, remains whether studying 'monsters' shines light on them collectively, or even individually. Is 'monster' a useful category? This reader brings together 24 articles, some of which are actually chapters from other books, written by 14 men, 10 women, and one person using 'they/them' pronouns. One of the chapters is co-authored. There are 14 Americans, four inhabitants of England, two Australians, one Japanese roboticist, one French psychoanalyst, as well as another psychoanalyst from Austria. Two of the contributors have passed away. After Jeffrey Jerome Cohen named the field 'monster culture' in the late 1990s, it still bears the signs of its inventor's gender: White male Americans are clearly in the majority; apart from one Japanese contributor and one from London with a South Asian heritage (the last with an American co-author from a similar ethnicity), all contributors are white. The relevance of this becomes clear in the chapter by Annalee Newitz, in which she describes the film *From Hell* (2001; released 2002 in the UK) as 'the first-ever whitesploitation movie' (266), or in Donna Haraway's article on 'inappropriate/d Others'. The preponderance of white authors in this volume also relates to the relevance of monster studies as a (sub-)discipline.

Monster studies developed at the end of the 1990s, although the expression 'monster movies' is much older and most of the authors will have grown up with it. Some of the contributions were written long before they were published in this volume and obviously not with 'monsters' in mind. This is the case with the non-US authors, such as the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori, the French author Julia Kristeva, or the Viennese psychoanalyst. Only one of these, Margrit Shildrik, is an exception; she has written *Embodying the Monster*.

The products of this gathering of authors are like a box of goodies, to be savoured one by one, carefully chewed and then spat out so as to not dull one's critical taste buds for the next sample. The reader can then proceed to read whole books and other works by any of these contributors; or even delve into other monster volumes such as Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle's *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*

(2012), which is the source of two contributions in the present volume. Other examples are Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui's edited collection *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader* (2013), or the *Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters* (2014) by the same editor as this volume. I will not review the whole field here but only point to what I see as some basic flaws.

What are monsters anyhow? As I prefer my monsters to be tangible, I looked at the monsters in the *Theory Reader*, as it is advisable to always relate the theory to the practice. The monsters, then, can be described as basilisks, blobs (after a 1958 film of the same title), cyborgs, demons, devils, dragons, ghosts, ghouls, golems, incubi, krakens, manticores, phoenixes, succubi, trolls, vampires, wendigos, werewolves, witches and zombies. Some of these are only briefly mentioned in the introduction. Eleven authors of 12 chapters, however, refer to vampires. They occur most frequently, followed by the devil featuring in 10 chapters, and ghosts in nine. These monsters derive from literature or films, and created in what I have called 'single author' works. There is barely any discussion about local folklore 'monsters' which are more or less traditional, related by multiple narrators and circulating among wide stretches of the population in general. Devils, ghosts, werewolves, and witches belong to the latter category. It implies that even in the case of 'monsters' with a folkloric background, their cinematic or literary manifestations prevail. Vampires, as presented in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* or in cinematic manifestations are another good example; in an alien country, they are far removed from any folkloric origin. Of course, everyone is entitled to their own monsters, but by not looking at folklore, students of film and literature miss the chance to compare individual creations and more common notions, or to trace how they influenced each other.

Take witches for example. Traditionally, neighbours accused them of bewitching their victims with their decrepit bodies. In this *Theory Reader*, however, they are associated with monstrous births; this is based on a 16th-century document which is misleading as the witches appear in a list of 'monsters' with whom 'direct copulation' would have caused these births (8), whereas a witch only caused births to go wrong in her role as crone. Nevertheless, a link to the film *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987) is established in which the babies are anything but monstrous, even though their mothers had been impregnated by a devil. In another place witches appear as the denizens of another world. In a subsequent chapter, the witch is a figure of abjection, 'one of whose crimes was that she used corpses for her rites of magic' (215). The last is in a discussion of horror films, which in itself presents the clue to the particular reading of the 'witch' here. The same author, Barbara Creed, however, also cites a mythologist to illustrate that a 'witch' with long fingers and nose can figure as a 'phallic mother', thus evoking the image of the fairy-tale witch. In Jon Stratton's discussion of the film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), the Haitian witches appear as agents who turn individuals into zombies – again, a highly circumscribed occurrence. The variety of these mostly 'single-authored' witches is also made clear by including a reference to

Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, or to a spawning of a poisonous spider; or a swamp providing a stage for witchcraft.

Noël Carroll writes that werewolves 'violate the categorical distinction between humans and animals' (139). I would argue against this, since 'werewolf' used to be a label to categorise a particular kind of human criminal. The historical werewolf on which my definition is grounded, however, needs to be seen as completely different from the werewolf in 19th- and 20th-century literature or in films. This is another reason to separate the two categories and to consider the present-day 'monster', as confined to contemporary popular culture, as is the case with the witches.

In conclusion, the collected theories in the *Theory Reader* have one purpose, namely theorising a constructed category of 'monsters', and this runs the risk of becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy. The question of whether 'monster' is a useful category can thus not be answered in the affirmative. Monster studies here seem to be reserved mainly for present-day, white, Anglo-Saxon scholars. The inclusion of single contributions on the Japanese *tanuki* and another on much older monstrous races does not dispel this impression but only confuses the issue. While monsters maybe an entertaining subject for students, without information about the viewers or readers in all their diversity (or the lack of it, whatever may be the case), it is hard to conclude anything meaningful about the role of 'monsters' in these cultures in which they operate today. Yet they may be fun on a university course.

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