



# **The beauty of monstrosity**

**Monster theory: what is it, and what does it say about my films?**

William Fikaris

Bachelor's Thesis

Film and Media: Directing & scriptwriting

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Arcada University of Applied Sciences: Bachelor's in film and media: Directing & Scriptwriting, 2025.

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## **Abstract:**

The beauty of monstrosity: what is it, and what does it say about my films? Presents the relatively new discipline of monster theory and then the application of monster theory to my own cinematic work. The thesis examines how monsters, as cultural and psychological symbols, manifest human fears, desires, and societal anxieties. Drawing on the foundational concepts of monster theory proposed by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and further developed by scholars such as J.A. Weinstock. The thesis delves into how monsters reflect cultural taboos, social boundaries, and identity crises. I analyze my own short films: *Murder of Crows* (2023), *Agape* (2023), *The Soul in the Crystal* (2024, and *Dead Man's Gold*, (2025) through the lens of monster theory, to see if they share similarities on the subject of monsters. The analysis demonstrates that the monsters in my films are not solely a representation of evil but serves as a metaphor for inner conflict and personal growth. The thesis argues that monsters are not merely antagonists but dynamic agents of change that challenge societal norms and personal fears, ultimately leading to moments of reconciliation and acceptance. Through this introspective and theoretical approach, the thesis not only contributes to the understanding of monster theory in cinema, art and culture, but also sheds light on the personal and creative motivations behind my storytelling choices.

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# 1 Introduction

VAMPIRES, WITCHES, GOBLINS AND GHOULS. TROLLS, WEREWULFS, MUMMIES AND GHOSTS. SORCERES, ZOMBIES, DEMONS AND DEVILS. They exist on every continent. They live in every city. They may take on different shapes and names, but everyone knows them. MONSTERS. Why do they lurk in every corner of the world? Why do they dwell in the shadows of our mind? Why is it no matter how many times we kill them, they just keep coming back!?

In my short career as a filmmaker, I have written and directed a few short films. The first about a birdwatcher who is chased through the woods by a crow like being trying to kill him. My second film was about a catholic mother whose daughter becomes a vampire. After that I made a fantasy film where the heroin must kill an evil cave dwelling demon. And most recently I wrote and directed a western of a cowboy who faces off against a hoard of undead zombies together with his family. Looking at my filmography it is clear that I have some small obsession with monsters. Each of my films features some sort of entity, demon or ghoul. I ask myself “why do I use monsters?”. I enjoy a good horror movie or monster flick as much as the next person, but I wouldn’t say it is my favorite genre. But something about writing about monsters fascinates me and I want to know why.

I believe what we consume in the media is crucial to the advancement and wellbeing of a society. In today’s western world we spend hours of the day staring at screens. The things we see shape and form us. As a filmmaker I see it as my duty to understand what I am putting out there into the world for people to watch. I want to put monsters on screen, I want to know why.

In this text I will explain monster theory. A relatively new discipline that examines monsters in our cultures. I will also be looking at my own work of monster cinema and analyze why I chose monsters to tell my stories. This will answer the questions: What is monster, and what does it say about my films?

## 1.1 Theoretical and conceptual framework

Monster theory is used in a wide range of disciplines, such as: literary and film studies, cultural studies, psychoanalysis, queer and feminist theory. Monster theory shows monsters to be complex symbols that teach us something about ourselves and the societies we've created.

Monster theory reaches its tentacles into any theory concerning human beings. For this thesis I have focused on the work of J.J. Cohen and J.A. Weinstock on monster theory.

The concept of monstrosity is so deeply ingrained in human culture and has shaped so much history that almost every discipline concerning humans and culture has something to say about monstrosity. This thesis will present and focus on monster theory which is a relatively new theory created by Jeffery Jerome Cohen in his 1996 book 'Monster Theory: Reading Culture' in which he presents seven theses that work as the foundation of monster theory. Cohen builds upon works of historians, philosophers and psychologists to engage in discourse about their theories and how they can be applied to the concept of monstrosity. The *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* provides a theoretical framework for understanding monsters in culture. Cohen argues that monsters are manifestations of our fears, desires and contradictions. His work is more abstract and theoretical, influenced by the works of Foucault, Freud and Lacan and using historical and literary examples to develop a basis for monster theory.

In 2020 Jeffery Andrew Weinstock expanded on Cohen's work with his book 'The Monster Theory Reader' where he reexamines Cohen's work and builds on it. Weinstock's work is more interdisciplinary and draws from a broader source of influences such as race theory, queer and gender theory, postcolonial studies and film theory.

## **1.2 My research questions**

Most people have never heard of monster theory, so I wish to use this thesis to present it and answer the first question: What is monster theory?

I want to look at my work as a filmmaker through the lens of monster theory and see what it says about me as an artist. I wrote my films before knowing about monster theory, so I want to compare my monsters to the theory and see if there are similarities, and if so what does monster theory say about my monster films.

## **1.3 Methodology**

I knew I wanted to write about monsters in cinema, but I did not know exactly what. Thoughts about ideology, culture and art felt important to me, so I started by gathering books that talk about two or all three of these subjects: monsters, cinema and ideology. I would take notes about anything pertaining to monster history, cultural significance of monsters and monsters in cinema. After my readings I realized nobody, I know has ever heard of monster theory, so I decided to use this thesis as an introduction to monster theory by summarizing what Jeffery. Jerome. Cohen, the founder of monster theory tells us in his book *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* and J.W. Weinstock in his continuation of Cohens work in *The Monster Theory Reader*

The method I used is literary review as explained by Hannah Snyder in *Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines*, *Journal of Business Research*, Volume 104, 2019.

After writing my summary on *Monster Theory* I examined my own films featuring monsters to see if I could find Cohens theory present in my monsters, which I created before knowing about monster theory.

## **2 Monster Theory**

Monster theory is a critical approach that analyses the cultural, historical, and psychological meaning of monsters and monstrous figures in literature, art, film, and society. It investigates how monsters symbolize human fears, anxieties, desires, and the limits of cultural identity. One of the most influential works in this field is Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*, featured in his 1996 book *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. This text establishes a framework for understanding how monsters both mirror and influence societal values and norms.

### **2.1 Seven theses from *Monster Culture***

To understand monster theory, we must first examine the groundwork done by J.J. Cohen. This would be his seven theses on the topic published in his 1991 book '*Monster Theory: Reading Culture*'.

In this chapter I will shortly summaries the seven theses by J.J. Cohen. These seven theses are the theoretical framework for monster theory and hold the basic ideas of monster theory. In later chapters I will expand on them when I talk about history, psychology and ideology.

### **2.1.1 The Monster's Body is a Cultural Body**

The first thesis Cohen argues that monsters are products of their times. For example, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* reflects 19<sup>th</sup> century concerns over the advancement of science, hybrid of man playing God and the disregard towards nature.

A medieval dragon could symbolize religious or moral struggles while a modern zombie can reflect fears of pandemics or societal collapse. Monsters reflect the fears of the time. They are not simply creatures of awe and horror, but products of deeply seeded history, anxieties and values of the society that creates them. They are mirrors reflecting cultural fears, taboos and desires, often tied to political social and ideological tensions of the time. (Cohen, 1996)

### **2.1.2 The Monster Always Escapes**

As long as sexual taboos and a fear of the "other" exist, then so will Dracula, in some shape or form. The monster cannot be killed because they escape easy categorization. Monsters are illusive, they refuse to be pinned down as simply good or evil, man or beast, natural or unnatural. This fluidity is a reason why they persevere; it allows them to adapt and reappear in a new cultural context. Monsters cannot be destroyed. Just as history repeats itself, the monster comes back from the dead, maybe different in appearance, but the same in wickedness. Cohen argues that the monster is an inescapable presence in culture. Monsters are immortal in the cultural dreams and imaginations, continuously adapting to new contexts and evolving over time. The Vampire, for example, has been reinvented over and over again for centuries, from ancient folklore to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in 1897 to modern iterations like *Twilight* (2008) or *What we do in the shadows* (2014).

The reason monsters never die, is that the fears and anxieties they represent never truly die. They might shift and take on new shapes but remain embedded in society. (Cohen, 1996)

### **2.1.3 The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis**

Monsters exist at the boundaries of classification, challenging labels like human or animal, civilized or primitive, natural or unnatural, dead or alive. They defy categorization, and as a species that loves order, this means chaos for us.

Monsters, like the werewolf, blur and transgress our established borders and categories and destabilize the frameworks through which we understand the world. They reveal the fragility of our boundaries and labels, forcing us to rethink critical questions, like what it means to be human, natural or civilized, and they reveal the underlying fears that shape cultural systems of classification. (Cohen, 1996)

Cohen (1996) states the value this brings, however, is that monsters also present an opportunity to rethink and reimagine how we understand the world.

### **2.1.4 The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference**

Monsters are often constructed as the “other” and used to mark differences in race, gender, sexuality, religion or societal norms. They symbolize the differences that are to be threatening or abnormal to the viewer. (Cohen, 1996.)

Cohen (1996) explores here how monsters are often used to mark cultural, social or physical differences, reinforcing boundaries between “us” and “them”. Monsters frequently represent marginalized groups and by labelling these groups as “monstrous”, dominant cultures throughout history have been enabled to dehumanize and exclude them. Just as the witch hunts of early Europe, demonized women who defied gender roles, casting them as monsters that needed to be controlled or eradicated. By constructing the monster as the “other” they serve as examples of what is okay and not okay, what is moral and immoral, normal and abnormal. Monsters are created to establish and enforce boundaries, making them a powerful tool that can lead to horrible consequences when placed in the wrong hands. Cohen (1996) urges us to question who or what society has labelled as a “monster” and why.

### 2.1.5 The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible

This thesis explores how monsters act as guards, policing social norms and enforcing societal constructs.

Monsters serve as cautionary tales, warning us about the dangers of deviating from the status quo. Encountering or becoming a monster often follows a transgression and monsters are frequently punished, telling us the consequences of acting against moral, societal or natural law. Monsters guard the edges of the unknown and warn against exploring the forbidden. Medieval maps often depicted monsters at the edge of maps warning people from traveling beyond civilization. (Cohen,1996)



Marine map of Scandinavia, drawn up at Venice in 1539 (Here Be Dragons, Five real places to see the winged legends of medieval Europe. by Meg Neal July 13, 2017. Atlasobscura.com)

This thesis highlights how monsters function as cultural tools for maintaining order and holding boundaries. By studying monsters in this way, Cohen (1996) says that monsters reveal the anxieties and values that societies deem important and the ways they enforce conformity. At the same time, Cohen (1996) challenges us to question if these boundaries are justified or even necessary.

### **2.1.6 Fear of the Monster is Really a Kind of Desire**

Like doctor Jekyll allowing Mr. Hyde to come out, just like love and hate, fear and desire are two sides of the same coin, and the monster brings to light the tension between societal norms and the forbidden. Monsters embody the impossible, in this way they open the door to a world of possibilities and invite us to imagine a world without constraints.

Our relationship with monsters is not one sided. We do not simply fear and hate them; we are endlessly fascinated and drawn in by them. The monster is created from our fears and anxieties but also our repressed desires, be they social, political or sexual. Monsters embody the forbidden, the unknown and the taboo. The monster story gives us a thrilling but safe space where we can explore the possibilities of acting on our impulses, breaking the rules or pushing the limits, digging into the deepest darkest parts of ourselves. (Cohen, 1996)

### **2.1.7 The Monster Stands at the Threshold of Becoming**

Monsters are shapeshifters, always changing, evolving or shifting. They represent change and uncertainty, be it physical, societal or psychological, and the fears and anxieties that come with that process. The fear of losing oneself, the world as we know it or alienation and becoming a Kafkaesque roach is a deeply rooted fear we humans have had since our creation. Cohens' seventh and final thesis emphasizes that monsters are not static figures of horror but dynamic agents of change and transformation.

By standing at the threshold of becoming, monsters also represent the new possibilities that comes with change, the opportunity for new ways of being. They signal both destruction and creation. Monsters push us to confront change, be it personal or collective. By confronting the monster, we confront the fear of change. In this way monsters embody both the terror and desire to evolve. (Cohen, 1996)

## **2.2 Definition of a monster**

The concept of monstrosity is inherently subjective and vague, but since it has shown itself to be an integral part of human history there has been no lack of scholars trying to define what it is. The nature of the monster being so elusive and fluid creates a lot of questions as to what exactly a monster is. Are monsters always imaginary? Is it still a monster if we believe in it

and categorize it, would a troll be a monster if we grew up with them as a natural part of our world? Are serial killers not monsters? Do monsters need to pose a physical threat? Fears and phobias are subjective to all, so can one man's beast be another man's beauty?

The word “monster” comes from the Latin “**monstrum**” which is related to the verbs “**monstrare**” (show or reveal) and “**monere**” (warn or pretend). This would suggest that for the ancient greeks at least, a monster meant some kind of omen or maybe sign of the god’s displeasure. (Weinstock, 2020)

Weinstock (2020) refers to Asa Mittman, who in his 2012 book *The Ashgate Research Companion To The Monsters And The Monstrous*, proposes an answer that a monster is that which unsettles, or challenges established cognitive categories and interpretive strategies.

*” Above all, the monstrous is that which creates a sense of vertigo, that which calls into question our epistemological worldview, highlights its fragmentary and inadequate nature and thereby asks us to acknowledge the failures of our systems of categorization.”*

*(Mittman 2012,. As cited in Weinstock. 2020, p14)*

Mittman's (2012) definition highlights the relativity of the monster; the thing that in a normal context, from a normal perspective, should not be, but is. It threatens one's understanding of the world, oneself and the relation between the two. Mittman (2012) also changes focus from the object to the subject, from the qualities of the monstrous to the subject doing the considering.

The monster comes into being once the viewer's world view is challenged by it and creates a sense of epistemological vertigo. The monster only exists in relation to us, in other words, it’s only a monster once we call it a monster. (Weinstock, 2020)

Monsters are often hybrids, a mix of two things that should not go together: Man and beast, dead and living, beautiful and evil. “The monster is the harbinger of category crisis” as Cohen (1996) puts it.

The refusal to take part in rules and norms set by man is part of the monster. Disturbing hybrids, with ontological liminality, have the potential to evoke the epistemological vertigo proposed by Mittman. (Weinstock, 2020)

Not being able to label and define the monster is part of what scares us, there is nothing more terrifying than the unknown.

Weinstock (2020) refers to Noël Carroll, who offers some insight into the nature and functions of monstrous creatures in his 1981 book 'Nightmare and the Horror Film: the Symbolic Biology of Fantastic Beings' and later in his 1990 book 'the Philosophy of Horror or, Paradoxes of the Heart'. Focusing on what Carroll (1981) calls "art horror" representation of monsters in art and stories, Carroll states that the categorical ambiguity of the monster creates an impurity that as a consequence evokes disgust within us. In some cases, this impurity is because of fusion, an unnatural combination; the "living dead", minotaur being man mixed with beast or Frankenstein's monster being pieced together from different corpses. The opposite works as well with fission, taking something unified and splitting it; doppelgangers, alter egos, split personalities. Another cause can be distortion, take a spider, a crab or an ape and make it huge; you got a monster.

Carroll (1981) agrees with Cohen (1996) that monsters are essentially ontological liminality. Neither this nor that - or both this and that. As Mittman (2012) suggests this frustrates our epistemological strategies for making sense of the world. (Weinstock, 2020)

### **2.3 History of monstrosity**

The scholarly approach to monstrosity seems to have focused primarily on three tracks: The classical era that saw a teratological approach, studying "monstrous" births, deviations from nature; the medieval era focused on mythology, accepting fantastical beasts and monsters as part of our world reassures us in the existence of God, a belief the Christian church considered most important; and the modern era that focuses on psychology and ideology, questioning why human beings come to act in monstrous ways and also what the mythical monsters represent for us. (Weinstock, 2020)

### 2.3.1 Classical era

As long as humans have had the ability to imagine, monsters have been a part of human culture. Some of the oldest examples go back to ancient times. Weinstock refers to a 1981 book, 'The monstrous races in medieval art and thought' by J.B. Friedman.

Friedman (1981) tells us how tales of weird men and extraordinary creatures fascinated the ancient world and the existence of such beings was speculated extensively in the works of several authors, most notably Ctesian in the fifth century B.C, Megasthenes in the fourth century B.C, and Pliny the Elder in the first century A.D as well as works commissioned by Alexander the great in the fourth century B.C. Ctesias, Megasthenes, Pliny, and Alexanders work include an array of mythical creatures including also some actual races, such as Pygmies and dark-skinned Ethiopians. Their work sometimes generalizes individual differences as characteristics of race, such as the Androgini, who have both male and female sex organs, and Speechless Men, who communicate by gesture. (Weinstock, 2020)

More fantastical races are for example; the Astomi, who lack mouths and live by smell; the Blemmyae, who lack heads and necks and whose faces are on their chests; the Cynocephali, who have the heads of dogs; the Panotii, whose ears reach to their feet and can serve as blankets; and the Sciopods, who have one leg and a giant foot that they use to shade themselves against the sun. There likely are explanations for most of these beings, even the more improbable races such as perceptual errors, like ornamented shields, for example, could have inspired the belief in men with faces on their chests, and baboons or apes may have been mistaken for dog-headed men. Miscommunication and cultural differences giving birth to monsters.



**Astomi**



**Blemmyae**



**Cynocephali**



**Panotii**



**Scipods**

(Depictions from The Nuremberg Chronicles (1493) and Physica Curios (1664))

The general Greco Roman accounts of monstrous races, however, establish an ethnocentrism that makes the observers culture, language and appearance the standard to which to compare others. Friedman (1981) also notes that while most of the sources for these monsters can be traced and their descriptions are often imaginative, poetic and meant to entertain, they also filled a psychological need.

*“fantasy, escapism, delight in the exercise of the imagination, and—very important—fear of the unknown... If the monstrous races had not existed, it is likely that people would have created them.”*

*(Friedman, 1981, as cited in Weinstock, 2020, p14)*

Weinstock refers to Margrit Shildrick and her work in her 2001 book ‘Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self. Shildrick (2001) says, Aristotle defined ‘monstrosity’ as anybody suffering from excess, deficiency or displacement, and not just bodies that share these attributes due to disease, accident or birth, but any being that deviates from the common course of nature. As he put it in Generation of Animals-

*“Monstrosities belong to the class of things contrary to nature, not any and every kind of nature, but Nature in her usual operations”.*

*(Aristotle, 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. as cited in Shildrick, 2001, as cited in Weinstock, 2020, p20)*

Since Aristotle also marked deficiency and excess in a person as moral failings, his definition of monstrosity implies that it is not just a matter of bodily imperfections but also of one's being.

Aristotle however viewed any deviation from the ‘normal’ male body to be a monstrosity - he characterized the birth of females as the most common form of deformity. For Aristotle monstrosity was not so much a reflection of the human soul, but a common biological flaw. (Weinstock, 2020)

The Aristotelian view that such beings are simply odd parts of nature, rather than opposed to it, was widely reflected in other texts, but it does not block a parallel history in which monstrosities are understood as prodigies, as marvelous signifiers of God's will, the ominous markers of good or ill to come. The Latin roots of the word monster bare a lot of associations suggesting both monstrare-to show, and monere-to warn, for the most part it was these connotations that were the focus of scholarly interest. (Shildrick, 2001)

Aristotle's definition remained influential; however, Cicero omitted a collection of synonyms to monstrosity: “**monstra**” (monster), “**ostenta**” (point out, declare, display), “**portenta**” (omen, sign) and “**prodigia**” (sign from gods, prophecy), which bears meaning in later ages and privileges a teleological approach rather than an aetiological one. What Cicero firmly believed was the existence of a monster signified the coming of social or political calamities, or as a commentary on contemporary mores. (Weinstock, 2020)

### **2.3.2 Medieval & early modern era**

While scholars seek to understand the monster, the politician would seek to first create it and then destroy it.

*“Philosophers, theologians, and academics seeking to explain monsters—what they are, where they come from, what they mean—and those in or aspiring to positions of power deploying the rhetoric of monstrosity as a tool to manipulate opinion and promote specific political agendas.”*  
(Weinstock, 2020, p4)

A lot of works from the Middle Ages aimed to create a sense of wonder and excitement. The eleventh century Wonders of the East and John Mandeville’s Travels in the fourteenth century featured the old familiar Sciapods, Panotii and Cynocephales as well as dragons, phoenixes and cannibals. Tales of strange creatures, odd beings from far faraway lands continued to live on in the Renaissance. Weinstock (2020) refers to Surekha Davies who in her chapter of ‘the Ashgate research companion to monsters and the monstrous’ titled ‘The Unlucky, the Bad and

the Ugly: Categories of Monstrosity from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment' Davies tells says-

*“During the first two centuries of printed books beings such as apple-smellers, troglodytes, anthropophagi, and Sciapods, who had sniffed, huddled, chomped, or hopped their way across medieval manuscripts of The Marvels of the East and Pliny the Elder’s Historia Naturalis, continued to pass through the hands and minds of European writers, readers, and viewers.”*

*(Davies, 2012 as cited in Weinstock, 2020, p16)*

What changed in these stories of creatures far faraway, however was the “far faraway” part. Until the sixteenth century these creatures were imagined at the very edge of the world. That world began to shrink when Christopher Columbus and other explorers sailed across the seas, hauling their predisposition and expectations with them along with the precious cargo of Christianity.

Columbus recorded an encounter with cannibals as well as anecdotal accounts of other kinds of monstrous races, including the Cyclops and cynocephali. Davies (2012) notes, characterizing indigenous populations as monstrous had significant implications for European colonial enterprises. (Weinstock, 2020)

*“The relationship between monstrosity and what might be deemed natural was one which greatly exercised the classical mind, and later the Church fathers for whom the problem was how to account for the unnatural in a God-given universe”*

*(Shildrick, 2001 as cited in Weinstock, 2020, p20)*

Both Aristotle and Cicero's approach to monstrosity were scholarly used moving into medieval and renaissance Christian Europe, to offer social, political and religious comment. Thus, great deviations from the norm were not only horrifying, but also marvelous, both signs of God's power and natures fecundity. (Weinstock, 2020.)

This results in differing definitions of monstrosity such as Albertus Magnus in the thirteenth century stating monsters “are created for the adornment of the universe” and then Ambroise Paré writing his 13 causes for monstrosity, in the 15 hundreds.

*The first is the Glory of God.*

*The second, his Anger.*

*The third, Excess of Seed.*

*The fourth, too little Seed.*

*The fifth, the Imagination.*

*The sixth, the Narrowness or Smallness of the Womb.*

*The seventh, the indecent Posture of the Mother during Pregnancy; when she has sat too long with the her Legs crossed, or pressed against her Womb.*

*The eighth, as a result of a Fall, or Blows struck against the womb of the Mother, being with Child.*

*The ninth, through hereditary or accidental Illnesses.*

*The tenth, through rotten or corrupt Seed.*

*The eleventh, through mixture or mingling of seed.*

*The twelfth, through the Artifice of wicked Beggars.*

*The thirteenth, through Demons and Devils.*

*(Ambrois Paré, 1573, as cited in Weinstock, 2020, p15)*

About 100 years later John Bulwer's encyclopedic *Anthropometamorphosis* (1653) deals with monstrous appearances and the potential contaminants of other races. Bulwer acknowledges the traditional reasoning of God's influence and man's sin, but with a more naturalistic approach. (Weinstock J.A. 2020)

*“these apparitions that be contrary to Nature, happen without the providence of almighty God... not but man hath a hand in these monstrosities; for inordinate lust is drawn in as a cause of these events, whereby the seed of man is made weak and imperfect.”*

*(Bulwer, 1653, as cited in Shildrick, 2001, p21)*

### **2.3.3 Modern era**

At the end of the nineteenth century people of different races became more familiar with one another. Differences in skin tone and build were normal, and it was clear that nobody had dog heads or faces on their chests. The appeal of monsters was locked away into art, literature and

later film. New genres of science fiction, fantasy and horror allow writers and artists to explore any and all fantasies. The monsters in these fantasies will however often still reflect real life stereotypes of people and races, showing just how deep rooted these prejudices can be.

With modern philosophy and psychology, the concept of monstrosity started to take an introspective look, asking not where do they come from but why have we created them?

Freud and Foucault have several theories that compliment, share or speak to monster theory. This is why in this chapter I have decided to give each of them their own sub chapter, to fully incapsulate their work that relates to monster theory.

### **2.3.3.1 Freud**

Cohen engages in Sigmund Freuds theories and how they relate to monster theory, particularly Freuds concepts of the uncanny and repression. Freuds theory on the subconscious and how repressed desires, memories or fears can manifest in surprising ways gives a psychological framework that Cohen uses to explain why monsters both terrify and fascinate us. Monsters reveal what is locked away deep inside of us. For this text I have written a breakdown of Freuds theories and how they relate to monster theory.

#### **Return of the Repressed**

Freud theorizes that suppressed memories, desires or fears that have been denied by the conscious mind can reemerge in our lives disguised as dreams or symbols. Similarly, monsters can represent suppressed sides of our culture, society and psyche such as fears, taboos or desires. Even though we try to keep them hidden, they still play a role in our behavior and thinking. (Cohen, 1998)

Monsters bring these repressed fears and desires out of the shadows and that is why they can be both fascinating and terrifying.

#### **The Uncanny**

The eerie feeling you get when something familiar suddenly feels unfamiliar is called the uncanny, one of Freuds more known concepts. This feeling occurs when something that has been repressed returns, emerges from the deep, but now different, changed into something alien

and disturbing. Cohen connects this concept to the idea that monsters in fact embody the uncanny.

Monsters blur the line between fact and fiction, human and non-human, familiar and strange. Monsters often live in the world of contradiction, dead yet living, human and beast, beautiful but dangerous. They are simultaneously recognizable but hold disturbing traits of “otherness”. The monster is an uncanny creature. (Cohen, 1998)

### **The Oedipal Complex**

Probably Freud's most known theory, albeit for the scandalous themes in its Greek origin, is the Oedipus complex. The Oedipus complex theory simply states that any given child will have a repressed desire to replace their father and possess their mother. The father often symbolizing any authoritarian power in the child's life, and the mother symbolizing any source of nurture. This comes from a want for control over one's own life. Cohen suggests that monsters can sometimes be born from Oedipal dynamics, representing repressed tension within the family or societal dynamic, particularly concerning control and order.

The monster in this case can represent anxieties of an unfulfilled or denied Oedipal desire. It can be a fear of a son's desire to displace their father or a more generalized breakdown of societal order. (Cohen, 1998)

### **Metaphors for Repressed Sexuality**

Freud believed that sexual desires, those deemed unacceptable or unnatural, could become locked away in the unconscious mind. Monsters often represent repressed sexuality, often seen in their taboo breaking behavior or embodiment of lust or desire. (Cohen, 1998)

The vampire is a classic symbol of repressed sexuality. Their bite, a promiscuous act and their victims often innocent young women, symbolizes the fear of sexual corruption and seduction. The fear of the vampire is then the fear of uncontrolled repressed sexual desires being unleashed.

### **The Monster as the Symbol of the Ego's Fragility**

Freud highlights in his work the push and pull between the conscious mind (the ego) and the unconscious mind, where all the repressed desires, memories and fears lie. Here the monster can embody the fragility of the ego.

The ego tries to maintain control over itself, but the monster, once emerged, invites chaos. The monster represents the destruction of identity, putting the egos vulnerability on show for all the hidden, repressed and suppressed forces to see. (Cohen, 1998)

Through Freud, Cohen frames monsters as both symbols of societal anxieties and psychic repression. With the theories of the uncanny and repression Freud gives us a psychological Lense through which we can see how monsters are manifestations of our suppressed feelings, be it sexual desires, family tension or fears of change. For Cohen this makes monsters the embodiment of human desires and societal taboos. Through monsters we can examine our suppressed psyches and confront our fears in a metaphorical way and learn valuable truths about ourselves.

### **2.3.3.2 Foucault**

In Cohen's (1996) thesis, *The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible*, he talks about Foucault's theories on power, control and societal norms and the role monster theory plays in them. He explains how monsters are not just symbols of our inner workings but how they help shape society by creating boundaries and enforcing norms. The following is a breakdown of Foucault's theories and how they relate to monster theory.

#### **Power Structures**

Foucault says that power is not something that only falls from top to down (government and rulers) but circulates through society and is created through everyday interactions, practices and norms. Cohen believes monsters are created in the same way.

They are the societal fears and anxieties that tell us what is deemed unacceptable or threatening to the construct of our society. In this way the monster is always the "other" that threatens our way of being. Monsters manifest when power structures try to define what is normal and acceptable. (Cohen, 1998)

### **Surveillance, Discipline and Social Order**

In his work on disciplinary societies, Foucault explains how we maintain order over ourselves not just with laws and enforcement but with subtle, sometimes pervasive acts of control that shape how we think, act and define ourselves as individuals. The Panopticon is Foucault's idea of a prison where the guards can see all the inmates without being seen themselves, this creating control over the inmates that never know if they are being watched or not. Cohen compares this to how monsters are used to hold societal order, serving as surveillance by warning individuals about breaking the rules and boundaries we have built.

Monsters teach us what is right and wrong so we can observe it in others. Monsters show us the consequences of disobedience. Much like the panopticon, just the mere thought of meeting a monster, or maybe becoming one, keeps people in line. (Cohen, 1998)

### **Mechanisms of Social Control**

Cohen (1996) compares the historical and cultural use of monsters to Foucault's analysis of institutional control such as the prison, asylum or mental hospital. Cohen (1996) also draws on Foucault's idea that deviance from the norm is often labeled as a medical issue. In today's world a serial killer is described as mentally ill instead of just "a bad person". In this context the monster is a product of medicalization and pathology, which in turn decides how society defines and reacts to people who do not conform.

Monsters can serve as scapegoats for societal anxieties about behavior that cannot be easily categorized into existing labels or boxes. They are punished or exiled so that the desired norms can be reinstated, just as individuals who deviate from our norms are subjected to legal, social or even psychological control and often anguish. (Cohen, 1998)

### **The Monster as a Site of Conflict and Resistance**

While monsters seem to serve to enforce the status quo, Cohen (1996) suggests that monsters can also challenge the power dynamics in certain contexts. Just as Foucault says that power and resistance are intertwined, sometimes a monster represents the resistance to the controlling forces.

For example, in Marie Shelley's classic novel, Frankenstein's monster is shunned from society for being unnatural, thereby upholding the status quo, but Shelley challenges the power in her society by criticizing and warning about scientific advancements of the time.

Through Foucault, Cohen (1996) shows that monsters are not just symbols of fears and desires but also integral parts of the inner workings of society, serving as cautionary tales, contributing to the upholding of norms and rules. Power surveillance and regulation, the way Foucault describes it makes the monster a formidable guard, a powerful seer, always watching and a strict teacher, showing us what is ok, and what isn't, and more importantly what the consequences will be if we go against the rules.

## **2.4 Monsters and Cinema**

In more contemporary times, monsters come to life and live in the cinema. Cohen (1996) states that cinema has become a significant medium through which societal fears and anxieties are expressed and dramatized. He argues that cinema plays a crucial role in bringing the monster to life, and it is through the medium of film that monsters have found they're most enduring and influential form. Cinema, like any art form, is a mirror of society. Cinema often showcases the concerns of its time. As we have discussed, monsters represent deep-seated fears, repressed desires and social anxieties.

The emergence of monsters in any film marks a historical and cultural moment in time, monsters only come out at times when societies are grappling with political instability, cultural change or advancements in technology. (Weinstock, 2020)

The horror genre quickly arose to popularity, with some of the first ever films created featuring ghosts and the devil himself such as *The House of the Devil* (1896) by Georges Méliès being known as the first horror movie. This genre has become the cinematic home of the monster. The horror genre has evolved with society as our understandings of fear, power and identity have changed. The monster often emerges on the silver screen in specific genres to explore themes of marginalization, repression and transformation.

Horror films featuring monsters tend to explore the boundaries between the human and non-human, the known and un-known, which are central themes in monster theory. Just like the

stories and books before, monsters in cinema act as a safe way for audiences to confront and engage with the fears and desires they possess, be they societal, physical or psychological. (Cohen, 1996)

Cinema simply enhanced the engagement of the reader, creating a stronger illusion of reality, heightening our senses, putting us visually face to face with the beasts. The advancement of special effects has played a pivotal role in keeping the monster alive. The same magicians who created the horror genre in film also crafted the illusions and effects still used today to create fantastical beasts on screen. With computers and VFX these illusions became all the more impressive, and the monsters, all the more real.

Monsters in cinema resonate with Cohen's (1996) thesis of monsters standing on the threshold of becoming. Monsters embody chaos, rebellion or subversion of the norm (epistemological vertigo). Cinema amplifies this quality with VFX, storytelling and the tropes of the horror genre to present the breaking of boundaries. Monsters in films often emerge when characters act out of line, break rules or confront dangers of transgressive behavior. With these tools of technology and storytelling, cinema manages to capture the audience's interest and trap them, forcing them to face their fears while simultaneously being captivated by the creature's power, mystery and violence. The monster on the big screen is both hideous and intriguing. We don't dare to watch, but we can't look away.

For Cohen (1996), cinema is a major platform for the cultural expression of monsters. It creates a space where monsters can be fully realized visually and conceptually, telling stories that hold themes to societal fears, anxieties and desires. Because cinema is so immediate and accessible it helps bring ideas of monstrosity into public consciousness. In this sense, cinema doesn't just show monsters it shapes how we understand them on a symbolic and metaphorical level. Cinema has transformed the monster from a simple creature of horror to a complex figure that engages with deep cultural concerns, from gender and sexuality to political oppression and scientific ethics. Monsters in film are powerful agents of cultural expression, capable of symbolizing both dangers of the unknown but also the potential for change and transformation. (Weinstock, 2020)

### **3 What Monster Theory says about my films**

#### **3.1 Murder of crows**

Murder of crows was my first short film. It was an independent project that I wrote and directed, the story follows an old man who suffers from Parkinson's, Peik. Peik travels to an island to see a rare bird. On his trip, however, instead of a pretty bird, through his binoculars he witnesses a murder. The murderer, a person covered in a black plague doctors' uniform from medieval times. Throughout the film Peik is hunted by this dark figure, who seems to appear and vanishes at a whim. Peik has the choice to leave the island but decides to instead fight the plague doctor to achieve what he came to do, see the rare bird. After a short battle, that proves the plague doctor immune to pain or damage, Peik achieves his goal of seeing the beautiful bird, right before having the plague doctor gently sit next to him, holding a scythe, and admiring the bird with him. The movie ends, implying this was Peik's final moment before dying.

Murder of Crows creates a very clear story with a classic theme of man vs death. Peik is a sick man, he knows death is coming. Suddenly he starts seeing death all around him and ultimately death sets his sights on him. But with the life he has left Peik decides to fulfill his dreams and, in the end, meet death as a friend. Death reciprocates this gesture, while also fulfilling his duty.

I would argue the fear of death is the original inspiration for all stories, imaginations, dreams, religions and customs. So much human behavior can be traced to the simple fact that we are all going to die, and we all know it, and part of us is afraid. Ironically, the one and only certainty in LIFE is DEATH. When I wrote this story I gathered the wishes of the other members of the team, things they wanted to practice or try in the film, but the unfolding of events and overarching theme was up to me. At the time I was going through a tough chronic illness. This illness had changed my perspective of myself. I was no longer immortal, I would no longer stay forever young, my body had given the first sign that it will decay, death was coming for me. So, the story of Peik coming to terms with and accepting death is a direct mirroring of my own grieving process, leading to myself trying to accept the idea of death.

Looking back on the film now, after learning about monster theory, I can see how the plague doctor is an agent of change as explained by Cohen's (1996) thesis, *The Monster Stands at the Threshold of Becoming*. Death is a natural part of any fear, but my illness was not a death

sentence but changed my life completely. New diets, new regiments, new clothes, new schedules, new medication, operations, restrictions, pains all changed life as I knew it. I was in the middle of a metamorphosis and the plague doctor embodied those anxieties and fears. As Cohen (1996) says in his thesis, change presents both fear but also opportunity. Just as Peik gets motivated to see his mission to the end, to see the bird, no matter what, because he knows he is going to die, I too made a similar choice in my life. I decided I was going to give everything I have to making films, not settle for anything, until I've made my dreams come true. Because death will come either way, we can only decide what to do while we're living. Confronting the monster, through the process of writing and directing, helped me get through the changes I was going through and it led me to a new path in life, that led to many other wonderful things.

### **3.2 Agape**

Agape is a short story of a Christian orthodox mother, Christina, who finds out her daughter, Johanna, is a vampire. Christina seeks the help of father Christodouloupoulos to help make her daughter "normal" again. The father comes over and performs a ritual to banish the evil from Johanna. Hearing disrespectful and hurtful words the father is chanting on her daughter; Christina decides to kick out the father and accept her daughter as she is.

The story was initially inspired by my memories of growing up with two older brothers with a single mother. It can be very hard to differentiate monsters from teenage boys. They like to stay in the dark, they only come out at night, their bodies change in weird ways, their voices become deep and heavy, they eat like animals and smell even worse, and they can lash out at any moment. I wondered to myself how it must have felt for my mother to raise three of these beasts at the same time. So, I thought it would be funny if I created that scenario but have the teenage child be a literal monster, like a vampire. Somewhere on the way while writing I noticed my story had a lot of similarities with queer teenagers trying to come out of the closet to their parents, so I leaned into that and made it a story about a mother accepting her child as she is.

This story also has themes of acceptance and change. It also holds to the belief that family and love are more important than religion or societal pressure. Looking at it through the lens of monster theory the themes of taboo and repressed sexuality that vampires are often associated

with are clear, in this case the vampire is the moral good, they are not monsters in the end. This is something that has happened in modern media, we humanize and empathize with the monsters. With studies and disciplines as gender, feminist and queer studies we have come to realize why these monsters existed in the first place. Realizing the monsters we created throughout history were mostly manifestations of our own shortcomings have stripped away the monsters power, making them relatable and empathetic. There is nothing evil anymore about the “other”, sexuality is celebrated, and differences are respected. What made the vampire a threat back in the day are now some of its most popular attributes. Movies like *Renfield* (2023) and *What we do in the shadows* (2014) make the vampire comedic for this very reason. But I do believe in Cohen’s (1996) theory that the monster is immortal, and the vampire will continue to resurface in different shapes and forms, regardless of how our prejudices change.

For me the film still stands as an ode to my mother, who witnessed and experienced many changes through the years of raising three small children. The word ‘agape’ is Greek for undying love, the kind a mother has for her children, even if the child is a monster, and that is what I wanted to showcase with the film.

### **3.3 The Soul in the Crystal**

The Soul in the Crystal is a short film I wrote and directed. It follows the characters of Thyra and her brother Arn in a fantasy world filled with magical monsters, creatures and ghouls. Some years ago, Arn was in critical condition, to save his life Thyra made a deal with the magical Soul Collector to trap Arns soul in a crystal ball until Thyra can find him a new body. In return Thyra is to do the Soul Collectors bidding, mainly bringing him souls or bodies of magical creatures. Now, after some years of servitude the duo are tired of obeying the soul collector, he gives them a choice. In a cave far away dwells a dangerous creature. Thyra can either capture the creature’s soul and bring it to the collector, this will free Thyra from her servitude. Or she can kill the creature and bring back its body, this will give Arn a new body, but Thyra will stay a slave to the collector. Thyra accepts the task in order to get Arn a new body. Arn objects, because he knows the body he will receive will be that of the monster, Thyra does not see this as a problem. Once they arrive at the cave to confront the monster, they realize it is not simply a freakish ghoulish creature with long nails and fangs, it is in fact a young boy that has been possessed by a demon. Thyra has a choice now to sacrifice the young man to give her

brother a body. Or exercise the demon, trapping it in Arns crystal, but in turn releasing Arns soul into the afterlife. The crystal can only hold one soul at a time after all. Arn persuades Thyra to let go of him and save the boy. Thyra releases Arns soul, traps the demon in the crystal and frees the young boy. She returns the soul to the collector, and though she has now lost her brother for good, she is now free.

When writing this story, I was once again expressing themes of acceptance, this time the acceptance of the passing of the ones we love. Reexamining this story, I realize it holds strong themes of bodily autonomy. Thyra is in debt to the collector, and he uses her body to do his bidding. Arn has lost his body and is trapped in a crystal ball with no physical form, only his voice. The young man's body has been overtaken by the demon. In the end, however, all three of them find some form of freedom from these shackles. In his thesis, *The Monster Stands at the Threshold of Becoming*, Cohen (1996) talks about how the monster represents change, and how that can be both terrifying but also an opportunity for new, good, things. The struggle that Thyra faces is saying goodbye to her brother, and the monster she faces in the cave is her grief. These are the beasts each of us will have to face some day. Be it the loss of a loved one, an opportunity or one's own mortality, grief is a part of life, an immortal monster, but facing it is the only way of coming out of the cave and seeing the light once again.

### **3.4 Dead Mans Gold**

Dead mans gold tells the story of a cowboy who is out in the wild of an unforgiving world, desperate and hungry he comes across a young man, enjoying a loaf of bread. Feeling little to no choice the cowboy shoots the young man for his bread. While looting his corpse, the cowboy finds a bag of gold on the young man's person. He quickly scurries away with the gold. Returning home we learn the Cowboy has a family, a wife and a daughter suffering from sickness. The Cowboy has used the gold to buy food and medicine for his family. While providing for his family, the Cowboy can not get over feeling of guilt for killing the young man and throws away the pistol he used to kill him. The next morning the family awakes to the food that the Cowboy had bought has gone rotten, and through their window they see an undead corpse walking towards their house, first one, then a hundred. The family starts boarding up their windows and grabbing their firearms. The wife pressures the Cowboy to tell her what is happening, persisting that he knows something, and the gold has something to do with it. The Cowboy tries to save face and insists that there is no problem, and he will take care of it. The

wife tries to convince the Cowboy that the zombies want the gold, and he should give it back, but the Cowboy refuses to give back the gold. The Cowboy runs out alone to meet the undead with an axe, chopping them up one by one. Luckily, he gets the help of his wife and daughter, picking off zombies with their guns from the window, even though he insisted that he can fix this himself. The sun rises the next morning, and every single zombie has been hacked to pieces. The family rests, until the door slams open, one more undead is left. The young man the Cowboy killed in the beginning, now holding the Cowboys own gun towards him. The Cowboy finally breaks down and agrees to give back the gold. The gold has turned to sand, only the Cowboys life will be enough to repay the young man. The Cowboy agrees to give his life to end the curse and bring his family some peace. The Cowboy and the young man walk outside to the end of the ranch to end the Cowboys life. The wife and daughter, however, did not agree to this. They rush outside, with a slingshot the daughter fires a piece of dynamite towards the young man, and he explodes into a million pieces. The family collects themselves by the horse, and agree to solve their issues together, from now on, and ride off to the sunrise looking for new opportunities. An ominous severed hand follows them.

Writing this film, I was still thinking about death, and the burden of it. This time the weight of having one's life in your hands. The Cowboy kills a man, this lays the guilt of death on him. But he also has a sick child at home; this puts the responsibility one's life in his hands also. Death is in his home long before the undead arrive. It was this feeling of battling against our doom, playing chess against death, that I was trying to express with this film. Looking back on it now through the lens of monster theory I can recognize some theories that Cohen (1996) talks about. As Cohen (1996) talks in his thesis, *The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible*, monsters guard and enforce social norms and laws. In this film I condemn the act of murder, even if the ends may be justified. But I also state in my film that family is more important than morals. At the end of the film the family has decided to not make the morally right decision of sacrificing the father but doubling down and murdering the young man, again. However, the family in my story does feel justified, to me at least, maybe because the world they live in is so cut throat and harsh, it's all they have and the only way for them to survive is to stick together, no matter what.

The zombie has always represented social concerns. Where most monsters can embody the fears of individuals, the zombie is part of a collective, a hoard, and naturally so embodies the fears of the collective. From its Haitian roots to the first zombie film, *White Zombie* (1932), to

dawn of the dead (1978) and to *The Last of Us* (2024) the zombie has represented societal worries such as slavery, racism, capitalism and climate change. I realized at some point after shooting the film, that the root of my zombie film was a fear of responsibility and the capability of providing. I am entering an age where my responsibility is growing, both for myself and others. My parents are getting old, I will need to take care of them. I am in a long-term relationship, I would like for us to have a comfortable life, in the case of a child it will be my responsibility to provide for that child. *The Cowboy* is out looking for a way to care for his family. He finds the solution, gold. But he makes the mistake of robbing another person's life for it. He wields his power unjustly and is punished for it, but the true punishment for him is that he is outed as an incompetent man, who cannot provide for his family. A ridiculous fear that no person should hold. This is why in the end I speak against this mindset and have the family work together and come together. My message is that no person should need to go it alone, accept help from the people that love you.

## **4 Conclusion and recommendations**

### **4.1 Conclusion**

#### **What is monster theory?**

Monster theory, developed by Jeffrey, Jerome, Cohen, examines the psychological, cultural and ideological need for monsters in human culture. It observes that monsters are powerful tools in keeping social order in society, working as cautionary tales of how to and how not to act. Monsters are born from our deep-rooted fears, anxieties and desire, these can relate to, among other things, feelings towards foreigners, social taboos and changes in society. Monster theory states monsters are “immortal”, as Cohen (1996) puts it, an integral part of our culture and psychology, there will always be monsters in our tales and society, they can change shape and names, but they will never go away. Monster theory tells us that monsters create an opportunity for us confront our fears in a safe space such as books or movie theaters, helping us slay the monsters within. But besides being horrid embodiments of our deepest and darkest feelings, the monster really represents opportunity. The monster symbolizes something impossible, something that should not exist but does, or the mix of two things should never go together, creating epistemological vertigo. Accepting that something as impossible as a

monster can exist opens the door to anything being possible: Magic, greatness, Heaven, peace. The monster is scary at first but once you overcome it you will find peace. The monster symbolizes change, both bad and good.

### **Why do I use monsters in my films?**

When writing my films I used monsters as a physical embodiment of my fears. Those fears often being related to me losing my way of life that I had become used to. But the way the stories go, after my characters face the monster, they find peace. And it's hardly ever through slaying the monster that they find peace; it's realizing their inner conflict and coming to terms with the reality that faces them. They cannot change what's been done, although they desperately try, they can only choose what to do with the life that's been given to them. Change is a scary thing. But if monster theory has taught me anything, it's that you need to face the scary thing, and then embrace it. When reviewing my work, I realize there is an arc of growth throughout my films. *Murder of crows* I come to accept my mortality and make a statement of living life to the fullest. *Agape* I reflect on the person who gave me my life in the first place, my mother. *Soul in the crystal* I realize acceptance means letting go and it is time to move on to a new chapter. *Dead man's gold* I am learning about my new life that I have chosen. What it means to live and provide not just for myself, but also for others.

Making art is therapeutic and when dealing with GREAT feelings, a writer must write GREAT drama. And GREAT drama requires GREAT conflict. And GREAT conflict demands a GREAT enemy. And there is no GREATER enemy than the MONSTER. That is why I use them.

## **4.2 Recommendations**

If you wish to learn more about monster theory, or educate yourself on the topic of monsters, here are some readings I recommend.

**The Monster Theory Reader**, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Dana A.

Weinstock, is a comprehensive anthology that brings together key essays from the field of monster studies, expanding on the foundational ideas of Cohen's

Monster Theory. The collection includes a wide range of perspectives, from literature and film to cultural studies and philosophy, exploring the role of monsters as metaphors for societal fears, boundaries, and otherness. This provides a rich selection of critical essays that examine how monsters function as symbols of cultural anxiety, identity, and resistance.

**The Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self** by Margrit Shildrick offers an exploration of how the figure of the monster disrupts traditional notions of identity, selfhood, and embodiment. Drawing on feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and postmodern philosophy, Shildrick examines how monstrosity reveals the fragility and permeability of the human self.

**Foucault's Monsters and the Challenge of Law** by Scott Sharpe is an analysis of Michel Foucault's exploration of monstrosity and its implications for legal and social systems. Sharpe examines how Foucault's concepts of monsters challenge conventional understandings of normativity, legality, and governance, offering a critical lens on how societies define and regulate deviance. The book deftly connects philosophical theory with real-world legal frameworks, highlighting the tension between societal order and the disruptions posed by the monstrous.

**Barbarian, Monstrous, and Wild, edited** by Jackie Sage and Maria Boletsi, presents an examination of how the concepts of barbarism, monstrosity, and wildness have been constructed and used across cultures and historical periods. Through an interdisciplinary collection of essays, the volume investigates the ways these notions have been used to portray boundaries between civilization and its perceived "others." With literature, philosophy, and cultural theory, the writers offer fresh insights into the enduring power of these categories to define and destabilize identities.

**The Metaphor of the Monster: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Understanding the Monstrous Other in Literature**, edited by Keith Moser and Karina Zelaya, is a stimulating collection that investigates the figure of the monster as a powerful metaphor across literary traditions and genres. The essays use perspectives drawn from philosophy, psychology, and cultural studies, to explore how monsters symbolize societal fears, marginalization, and "otherness."

**We Are All Monsters: How Deviant Organisms Came to Define Us** by Andrew Mangham is an exploration of how deviance and monstrosity have been used to define human identity and societal norms. Drawing from history, literature, and science, Mangham traces the cultural and biological frameworks that have shaped the concept of the "monster," examining how it reflects fears about the body, health, and morality.

**Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader**, edited by Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui, is an anthology that examines the evolving role of monsters in contemporary society. The essays explore how monsters serve as cultural metaphors, reflecting anxieties surrounding technology, politics, race, gender, and more in the modern era.

**Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors** by David D. Gilmore is a compelling investigation into the universal presence of monstrous figures across cultures and history. Drawing from anthropology, psychology, and mythology, Gilmore examines how societies have imagined and interpreted monsters, exploring their symbolic roles, morality, and the unknown

**Imagination and Fantasy in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Time: Projections, Dreams, Monsters, and Illusions** by Albrecht Classen is an intricate exploration of the cultural and intellectual dimensions of fantasy and imagination during a transformative period in history. The book delves into how medieval and early modern societies conceptualized and expressed dreams, illusions, and monstrous creations, providing rich insights. Through a

collection of essays, Classen ties literary, artistic, and philosophical analyses to broader societal concerns, revealing the era's imaginative power and its influence.

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