



BOOK REVIEW:
The Monster Theory Reader

T. S. Miller

Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew, ed. *The Monster Theory Reader*. U of Minnesota P, 2020. ISBN 978-1517905255.

The Monster Theory Reader reprints 24 essays selected from the last hundred years of our collective critical interrogation of the figure of the monster, although the majority of the pieces do date from the 21st century. The editor, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, is a former student of likely the most famous monster theorist in the business, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, whose own 1996 edited collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* Weinstock cites in this book's introduction as having named the field: "and the naming of a field or subdiscipline can exert a powerful gravitational effect, allowing dispersed scholarship to coalesce around its banner and start to form into something coherent" (2). After having circumnavigated the more than 500 pages of this weighty volume and witnessed for myself the dog-headed peoples and bloodsuckers and serial killers that dwell at the edges of the known and the normal, I find myself impressed by the perceptiveness of the individual contributions, but also dubious that monster theory, as a propositional field of its own, has quite become "something coherent".

Of course, one might counter that monster theory must necessarily reflect the characteristics of the subject matter itself, and several contributors to this volume acknowledge the hybrid, even diffuse nature of work done under the banner of monster studies or monster theory, including Weinstock himself: "Like the monsters it theorizes, monster theory transgresses categorical boundaries" (2). Even so, *The Monster Theory Reader* contains superb essays but ultimately strikes me as something of a missed opportunity, seeming merely the sum of its parts rather than an indispensable affirmation of and

introduction to the field and its history. With the caveat that the editor might have done more to add to the value of these individually excellent chapters, I would still highly recommend the volume for use in a graduate or advanced undergraduate humanities course dedicated to monsters and the monstrous, of which there are many. The book will also work well for students of horror more specifically, as it is dominated by human or humanoid monsters as well as the genre of contemporary Anglo-American horror (both literature and film), to the point that it might almost be able to moonlight under the title *The Horror Theory Reader*.

What is most sorely missing from *The Monster Theory Reader* is simply a sense of context and connection: the volume would have benefited enormously from editorial headnotes, even brief ones, that could have introduced each chapter and explained its place in the constellation of texts we might place in the category of “monster theory”. Moreover, several of the chapters are not standalone essays but rather excerpts chosen from important monographs: editorial contextualisation would therefore provide additional benefits here in familiarising the target audience of such a “theory reader” with the complete work and its significance. In fact, the simple absence of original publication dates at the beginning of each chapter became a continual source of frustration for me as a reader, with that frustration compounded by the tendency displayed by so many of the authors to speak to the specific temporal context of their own writing: “The most significant development – in film criticism, and in progressive ideas generally – of the past few decades has clearly been the increasing confluence of Marx and Freud” (Robin Wood 108); “Though ecocritics have been asking ourselves what methods and canons constitute the field for as long as the field has existed, the last five years offer signs that this questioning has entered a peculiarly intense phase” (Anthony Lioi 440).

Even Cohen’s 1996 essay, though often quoted as if it utters timeless observations, reminds us to pay attention to the context of its own production and original publication, specifically addressing the “sacred dicta of recent cultural studies” and “cultural studies today” (37). Ironically, this book, which emphasises the imperative to understand what monsters mean to and in their specific cultural contexts, is constituted of chapters that have been presented chronologically shuffled and without context; many of the images included in the text as figures also inadequately indicate their provenance. Of course, the original publication information for each chapter does appear near the back of the volume, but as if tucked away in a dusty attic: even parenthetical dates of publication in the table of contents would have helped mitigate the disorientation that a reader can feel, especially when reading the essays in their non-chronological sequence. For instance, while the earlier pieces do tend to be clustered earlier in the book, a note at the end of Elizabeth Grosz’s chapter, positioned in the center of the collection, reveals it to have been originally written in 1986, while sandwiched between a 2006 book chapter by Annalee Newitz and a brief and arguably undertheorised 2009 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article by Stephen T. Asma.

Weinstock does contribute a substantial enough editorial introduction, subtitled “A Genealogy of Monster Theory”, in which he might also have better contextualised the chapters in relation to the history of monster theory. Instead, this introduction primarily seeks to accomplish what its subtitle promises: Weinstock usefully charts the pre-prehistory of monster theory by exploring the

appearance of the monster throughout human history and the responses it has provoked in myth, the Middle Ages, medicine, and more. It makes for a fine introduction but includes only roughly three pages (pp. 25–28) on the history of contemporary monster theory; this largely takes the form of a précis of Foucault, necessary because no excerpt from Foucault’s foundational work has been included in the volume. The standard chapter-by-chapter description of the volume’s contents does appear at the end of the introduction, but here Weinstock restricts himself to one-sentence summaries of the authors’ theses rather than the broader contextualisations that I am proposing may have been more helpful. As with any book review, in the end one cannot complain too much about what this volume might lack, because it does contain such an abundance of monstrously sharp analyses.

Weinstock reasonably chooses to use Cohen’s snappy and widely cited essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” to lead the volume, although the move risks causing monster theory to appear a mere pendant on Cohen’s work. Immediately following are some essays that, in proper Borgesian fashion, retroactively generate a handful of appropriate predecessors for monster theory: Freud on the uncanny; Kristeva on abjection; and then selections from Robin Wood, Noël Carroll, and Jack Halberstam on the Gothic tradition and/or the horror film. Weinstock groups all of these essays into a first part entitled “The Monster Theory Toolbox”, along with roboticist Masahiro Mori’s brief but influential 1970 essay, “The Uncanny Valley”. (I was very surprised to learn that this last essay has only seen a single printing – “often cited in discussions of dolls and automata, this essay has never been reprinted” (29) – although this characterisation might be somewhat misleading, as *The Monster Theory Reader* reprints its 2012 republication in English translation.) There is finally no truly unified monster theory here, but, if I had to quickly communicate a sense of what “monster theory” might look like based on this toolbox and the generally more narrowly focused chapters that follow, I would describe it as fairly recognisable cultural studies built on a solidly Foucauldian and/or at least loosely psychoanalytic substrate that happens to take monsters or monstrosity as its subject of investigation.

The book’s second part, “Monsterizing Difference”, collects chapters that examine different concepts of normality and deviations from it that monsters may represent, including an examination of the so-called “monstrous races” conventionally placed on medieval world maps by visual artist Alexa Wright, as well as Bettina Bildhauer’s memorable essay “Blood, Jews, and Monsters in Medieval Culture”, which contains many enviable close readings of multiple kinds of cultural artifacts; for example, a deft unpacking of the proximity of monsters to Christ’s world-spanning body in the 13th-century Ebstorf *Mappa Mundi*: “Christ here embodies the dilemma of all medieval mapmakers and historiographers: what to do with monsters, how to justify their existence in God’s creation, and more generally what to include and what not” (198). The other chapters in this section examine very different kinds of monsters and often from additional theoretical perspectives, ranging from queer theory (Harry Benshoff on “The Monster and the Homosexual” in horror film) to disability studies (Elizabeth Grosz’s “Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit”) to critical race theory (in Annalee Newitz’s particularly commendable contribution on Lovecraft, black horror, and American colonialism, “The Undead: A Haunted Whiteness”).

The title of the book's third part, "Monsters and Culture", could function well enough as the title of the entire volume, and here we find monster theory multiplying into even more disciplines, from religious studies in the excerpted introduction from Timothy Beal's *Religion and Its Monsters* to a trenchant critique of terrorism studies in Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai's "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots", one of the more distinctive inclusions for its analysis of the imbrication of monstrosity and the discourse on terrorism in the early 21st century. The final essay in this section, Jon Stratton's "Zombie Trouble: Zombie Texts, Bare Life, and Displaced People", feels all the more urgent today although it was published almost a decade ago. Part IV, "The Promises of Monsters", curiously groups Erin Suzuki's "Beasts from the Deep" – a fascinating analysis of neoliberalism in the Pacific and three recent monster movies, and also the most recent and arguably most self-contained piece in the volume – with three much more broadly theoretical broadsides: Anthony Lioi's "Of Swamp Dragons: Mud, Megalopolis, and a Future for Ecocriticism"; Patricia MacCormack's "Post-human Teratology"; and Donna Haraway's "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others". Depending on one's definition of monster theory, any of these more abstract pieces – and particularly the essay by Haraway – could be either the most or least central chapter in the volume. Defining monster theory in relation to one of these texts, rather than Cohen's, as foundational would make for a very different field. Haraway, for example, uses the word "monster" infrequently across the 62 pages of her essay, and she is much less concerned with, say, Universal Horror and slasher films than many monster theorists, while even so retaining a crucial shared theoretical orientation with Cohen and those, like Weinstock, who have sought to build up monster studies as a field after him.

Indeed, Weinstock has himself published extraordinarily widely on monsters, and also edited prolifically in the aspiring field that, by now, he has perhaps done as much as Cohen to define: by virtue of its loaded title alone, *The Monster Theory Reader* attempts to advance monster studies one step closer to institutional recognition as a coherent field. Its successes and failures in this ambition remind me a great deal of Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle's 2012 edited collection *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, a comparable project that also could be seen to suffer from an excess of eclecticism for a supposedly field-defining work (the books even share two of the same essays, including Weinstock's additional contribution on "Invisible Monsters: Vision, Horror, and Contemporary Culture"). The major difference between the two is probably that *The Monster Theory Reader* skews contemporary in its coverage of specific monsters and works, while the *Research Companion* places more emphasis on the premodern. The latter is also significantly not a reprint volume. By contrast, several of the authors included in *The Monster Theory Reader* do not understand themselves to be doing monster theory as such, but rather film studies, cultural studies, psychoanalytic criticism, perhaps horror studies, and so on. Regardless, a volume like this provides a useful service in critical canon formation, and above all will make for a suitable companion for advanced students and newer researchers of monsters and monstrosity, even if also regrettably representing a minor missed opportunity to contextualise and document the history of the field with additional editorial commentary and framing.

Biography: T. S. Miller (millert@fau.edu) teaches science fiction and fantasy literature as Assistant Professor of English at Florida Atlantic University. Originally trained as a medievalist, he has published articles on both later Middle English literature and various contemporary authors of speculative fiction. His current major work explores representations of plants and modes of plant being in literature and culture.