Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen

How can something as horrible and terrifying as a monster be considered the object of desire? In this selection, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, as part of his larger work "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," examines the issue of desire. He considers the various ways in which we desire to be with the monster and — better yet — to be the monster ourselves. The Other that the monster represents is not bound by the same rules and conventions that ordinary people are, and thus the monster promises a freedom from convention that we can only imagine. Cohen is an English professor and director of medieval and early modern studies at George Washington University. His books include Monster Theory: Reading Culture *(1996),* Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages *(1999), and* Hybridity, Identity and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain: On Difficult Middles *(2006).*

The monster is continually linked to forbidden practices, in order to normalize and to enforce. The monster also attracts. The same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress° from constraint. This simultaneous repulsion and attraction at the core of the monster's composition accounts greatly for its continued cultural popularity, for the fact that the monster seldom can be contained in a simple, binary dialectic° (thesis, antithesis . . . no synthesis). We distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair.

Through the body of the monster fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space. Escapist delight gives way to horror only when the monster threatens to overstep these boundaries, to destroy or deconstruct the thin walls of category and culture. When contained by geographic, generic, or epistemic° marginalization, the monster can function as an alter ego, as an alluring projection of (an Other) self. The monster awakens one to the pleasures of the body, to the simple and fleeting joys of being frightened, or frightening—to the experience of mortality and corporality. We watch the monstrous spectacle of the horror film be-

egress: an exit; an act of going out.
dialectic: the juxtaposition of conflicting opposites; logical argumentation.
epistemic: relating to knowing; cognitive.

cause we know that the cinema is a temporary place, that the jolting sensuousness of the celluloid images will be followed by reentry into the world of comfort and light. Likewise, the story on the page before us may horrify (whether it appears in the *New York Times* news section or Stephen King's latest novel matters little), so long as we are safe in the knowledge of its nearing end (the number of pages in our right hand is dwindling) and our liberation from it. Aurally received narratives work no differently; no matter how unsettling the description of the giant, no matter how many unbaptized children and hapless knights he devours, King Arthur will ultimately destroy him. The audience knows how the genre works.

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Times of carnival temporally marginalize the monstrous, but at the same time allow it a safe realm of expression and play: on Halloween everyone is a demon for a night. The same impulse to ataractic° fantasy is behind much lavishly bizarre manuscript marginalia, from abstract scribblings at the edges of an ordered page to preposterous animals and vaguely humanoid creatures of strange anatomy that crowd a biblical text. Gargoyles and ornately sculpted grotesques, lurking at the crossbeams or upon the roof of the cathedral, likewise record the liberating fantasies of a bored or repressed hand suddenly freed to populate the margins. Maps and travel accounts inherited from antiquity invented whole geographies of the mind and peopled them with exotic and fantastic creatures; Ultima Thule, Ethiopia, and the Antipodes were the medieval equivalents of outer space and virtual reality, imaginary (wholly verbal) geographies accessible from anywhere, never meant to be discovered but always waiting to be explored. Jacques Le Goff has written that the Indian Ocean (a "mental horizon" imagined, in the Middle Ages, to be completely enclosed by land) was a cultural space

where taboos were eliminated or exchanged for others. The weirdness of this world produced an impression of liberation and freedom. The strict morality imposed by the Church was contrasted with the discomfiting attractiveness of a world of bizarre tastes, which practiced coprophagy° and cannibalism; of bodily

ataractic: tending to tranquilize.
coprophagy: feeding on dung; the use of feces for sexual excitement.

innocence, where man, freed of the modesty of clothing, rediscovered nudism and sexual freedom; and where, once rid of restrictive monogamy and family barriers, he could give himself over to polygamy, incest, and eroticism.

The habitations of the monsters (Africa, Scandinavia, America, Venus, the Delta Quadrant—whatever land is sufficiently distant to be exoticized) are more than dark regions of uncertain danger: they are also realms of happy fantasy, horizons of liberation. Their monsters serve as secondary bodies through which the possibilities of other genders, other sexual practices, and other social customs can be explored. Hermaphrodites, Amazons, and lascivious cannibals beckon from the edges of the world, the most distant planets of the galaxy.

5 The co-optation of the monster into a symbol of the desirable is often accomplished through the neutralization of potentially threatening aspects with a liberal dose of comedy: the thundering giant becomes the bumbling giant.[1] Monsters may still function, however, as the vehicles of causative fantasies even without their valences° reversed. What Bakhtin calls "official culture" can transfer all that is viewed as undesirable in itself into the body of the monster, performing a wish-fulfillment drama of its own; the scapegoated monster is perhaps ritually destroyed in the course of some official narrative, purging the community by eliminating its sins. The monster's eradication functions as an exorcism and, when retold and promulgated, as a catechism.° The monastically manufactured *Queste del Saint Graal*° serves as an ecclesiastically sanctioned antidote to the looser morality of the secular romances; when Sir Bors comes across a castle where "ladies of high descent and rank" tempt him to sexual indulgence, these ladies are, of course, demons in lascivious disguise. When Bors refuses to sleep with one of these transcorporal devils (described as "so lovely and so fair that it seemed all earthly beauty was

valences: the degrees of attractiveness an individual, activity, or object possesses.
catechism: a form of religious doctrine often put in the form of questions and answers.
Queste del Saint Graal: *The Quest for the Holy Grail.*

[1]For Mikhail Bakhtin, famously, this is the transformative power of laughter: "Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great internal censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, fear of the prohibitions, of the past, of power." *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 94. Bakhtin traces the moment of escape to the point at which laughter became a part of the "higher levels of literature," when Rabelais wrote *Gargantua et Pantagruel.*

embodied in her"), his steadfast assertion of control banishes them all shrieking back to hell. The episode valorizes the celibacy so central to the authors' belief system (and so difficult to enforce) while inculcating a lesson in morality for the work's intended secular audience, the knights and courtly women fond of romances.

Seldom, however, are monsters as uncomplicated in their use and manufacture as the demons that haunt Sir Bors. Allegory may flatten a monster rather thin, as when the vivacious demon of the Anglo-Saxon hagiographic° poem *Juliana* becomes the one-sided complainer of Cynewulf's *Elene*. More often, however, the monster retains a haunting complexity. The dense symbolism that makes a thick description of the monsters in Spenser, Milton, and even *Beowulf* so challenging reminds us how permeable the monstrous body can be, how difficult to dissect.

This corporal fluidity, this simultaneity of anxiety and desire, ensures that the monster will always dangerously entice. A certain intrigue is allowed even Vincent of Beauvais's well-endowed cynocephalus,° for he occupies a textual space of allure before his necessary dismissal, during which he is granted an undeniable charm. The monstrous lurks somewhere in that ambiguous, primal space between fear and attraction, close to the heart of what Kristeva calls "abjection":

> *There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, fascinates desire, which, nonetheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. . . . But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.*

And the self that one stands so suddenly and so nervously beside is the monster.

The monster is the abjected fragment that enables the formation of all kinds of identities—personal, national, cultural, economic, sexual, psychological, universal, particular (even if that "particular" identity is an embrace of the power/status/knowledge of abjection itself); as such it

hagiographic: relating to the lives of saints or other highly esteemed persons.
cynocephalus: a dog-headed being.

reveals their partiality, their contiguity. A product of a multitude of morphogeneses° (ranging from somatic° to ethnic) that align themselves to imbue meaning to the Us and Them behind every cultural mode of seeing, the monster of abjection resides in that marginal geography of the Exterior, beyond the limits of the Thinkable, a place that is doubly dangerous: simultaneously "exorbitant" and "quite close." Judith Butler calls this conceptual locus "a domain of unlivability and unintelligibility that bounds the domain of intelligible effects," but points out that even when discursively closed off, it offers a base for critique, a margin from which to reread dominant paradigms. Like Grendel thundering from the mere° or Dracula creeping from the grave, like Kristeva's "boomerang, a vortex of summons" or the uncanny Freudian-Lacanian° return of the repressed, the monster is always coming back, always at the verge of irruption.°

Perhaps it is time to ask the question that always arises when the monster is discussed seriously (the inevitability of the question a symptom of the deep anxiety about what is and what should be thinkable, an anxiety that the process of monster theory is destined to raise): Do monsters really exist? 10

Surely they must, for if they did not, how could we?

References

Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 22.

Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Honor: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

Jacques Le Goff, "The Medieval West and the Indian Ocean," in *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 197.

The Quest for the Holy Grail, trans. Pauline Matarasso (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 194.

morphogeneses: formations and differentiations of tissues and organs.
somatic: relating to the body.
mere: an expanse of standing water.
Freudian-Lacanian: based on the writings of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Jacques Lacan (1901–1981). Freud posited that the human mind repressed unacceptable wishes that were fulfilled symbolically in dreams; Lacan argued that the human sciences were inherently unstable because of humans' own complexity and limitations.
irruption: a rushing in, forcibly or violently.

Understanding the Text

1. According to Cohen, why is it important that our exposure to monsters, whether in books or movies or on television, be temporary?
2. How do monsters represent the "margins" (par. 3)? Explain at least one of the specific examples Cohen uses in his essay.
3. What does Cohen mean by the phrase "beyond the limits of the Thinkable" (par. 9)?

Reflection and Response

4. After running through a description of a typical horror narrative, Cohen states, "The audience knows how the genre works" (par. 2). How much does genre affect the expectations of the audience? In particular regarding monsters, what are those expectations? To what extent does genre limit monsters, and why might this be a good thing?
5. According to Cohen, the monster in some ways represents the expression of the repressed. In other words, it does what we cannot. In your opinion, to what extent do monsters incorporate the forbidden? Cite specific examples.
6. Cohen says that the "simultaneity of anxiety and desire . . . ensures that the monster will always dangerously entice" (par. 7). To what extent are desire and anxiety intertwined in monsters? Aside from monsters, are there other beings or phenomena that make people both desirous and fearful?

Making Connections

7. Cohen states, "The co-optation of the monster into a symbol of the desirable is often accomplished through the neutralization of potentially threatening aspects with a liberal dose of comedy" (par. 5). How do movies in popular culture reflect this tendency? Think, for example, of the Shrek movies (2001, 2004, 2007, 2010), the Teen Wolf movies (1985, 1987), and *Young Frankenstein* (1974), among others, that use humor to deflect the power of the monster.
8. Cohen cites an example from *Queste del Saint Graal* (*The Quest for the Holy Grail*), in which Sir Bors resists sexual temptation by "demons in lascivious disguise" (par. 5). To what extent is sexual desire a part of the allure of monsters? Refer to other monster stories either in this book or from outside research to include specific details in your answer.