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THE MONSTER THEORY OF RELATIVITY: TRIGGERING SUPERNATURAL
MONSTERS

by

Maggie Mercil

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Folklore

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The Monster Theory of Relativity: Triggering Supernatural Monsters

by

Maggie Mercil, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2022

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Department: English

Current monster scholarship examines monstrous bodies, how they represent our cultural fears, anxieties, or forbidden desires, and how monsters can guard, break, or blur the boundaries between us and Other. While examining the monsters themselves can provide a better understanding of ourselves and our culture, it is just as important to consider the conditions in which these monsters were able to manifest in the first place. This paper argues that it is through our own actions, whether intentional or not, that we effectively “trigger” the monsters into our narratives. There are three categories of “triggers” that this paper will explore: we either create the monster, we conjure the monster, or we discover and awaken the monster. Monsters do not already exist in our spaces, we manifest them by triggering their arrival, and then in turn blame them for triggering our fears in return. What can we learn by acknowledging and analyzing our own part in these monster narratives? My aim is to expand monster scholarship by offering a more in-depth examination on how monstrosity is relative and reveal this cyclical relationship that monsters do not start outside of us but are generated *by* us. Using supernatural horror films as case studies, I will explore the relationships between

us and the monsters we trigger into being and highlight these patterns to create a structural concept that can be applied and tested by future scholars.

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To my dad. You were there for every class, every paper assignment, all the tears of exhaustion, and all the tears of accomplishment. You are always with me. And I just wanted to let you know that you gave me the strength and the courage to do this. All my strength and courage comes from you. I love you so much and miss you beyond measure. This one's for you.

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CHAPTER I

Warning: You Are Triggering Monsters

In his chapter on the nature, structures, and biology of monsters, American philosopher Noël Carroll (2020) notes how monsters can trigger our fears and anxieties. While I agree with Carroll that monsters may inspire fearful reactions, I would like to turn his idea around and argue that the reason monsters are able to trigger us at all is because we triggered them first—in the sense that our own actions effectively brought them into existence. Dr. Victor Frankenstein (1818), for example, was famously responsible for the creation of his monster, and the human-made nuclear bomb was responsible for awakening and giving atomic power to Godzilla (1954). Science fiction and horror films are abundant with monsters, but we often overlook the fact that the main human characters in these films are usually the ones responsible for the monsters being there in the first place. Through our own actions we either *create* the monster, *conjure* the monster, or *discover and awaken* the monster from some remote location. These monsters did not already exist in our spaces; we brought them upon us. We triggered their reason for being, and then blamed them for triggering us in return.

My aim for this paper is to expand monster scholarship by offering a more in-depth examination of how monstrosity becomes relative when we take into consideration that monsters do not start out separate from us but are generated *by* us. There is a cause-and-effect relationship between us where our actions trigger monsters who in turn trigger our emotional or physical reactions. My goal is to shift the focus back onto us, not the monster, to uncover the root of our own monstrosity. While the idea that “we were the monsters all along” isn’t new, what is lacking is a deep dive into the mechanisms *behind*

that idea. Using supernatural science fiction and horror films as case studies, I will explore this relationship between humans and monsters to develop a cyclical structure for thinking about monstrosity.

Even though folklorists typically study word-of-mouth culture, I have chosen films as case studies because of their ability to portray the themes, tropes, motifs, and narrative structures that come out of folklore. Film and folklore scholar Mikel Koven explains how folklorists can study film narratives by describing zombie films as “narrative types” that have both the variation and continuity factors that define folklore: “Each film needs to be considered as a variant text in the larger zombie movie tradition” (91). Filmmakers, as storytellers, are aware of the narrative traditions in the monster genre and continue those traditions with their own unique interpretations. Popular opinion also supports monster films as credible resources of knowledge and ideas which then generate even more monster films. It is in keeping with Koven’s ideas that I turn to science fiction and horror films as case studies for this project. Popular culture provides us with a way to identify and focus on traditional patterns that have never stopped being used, and this particular narrative pattern of us generating the monster is too big a pattern to ignore.

The structure of this paper supports my goal of exploring the mechanisms behind the way that humans trigger the monstrous. First, I will provide some definitions of monsters and their biological structures, as well as extend those definitions to include the cultural frame of monster theory and highlight some existing scholarship on the relativity of monsters. The sections that follow will reveal the different ways in which we elicit or create monsters, using specific films as representative case studies for the different types

of triggers. I initially consider how we intentionally and unintentionally create the monsters in *Mimic* (1997) and *The Babadook* (2014), respectively, and then I move on to how we conjure the monsters in *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011). In the final section of case studies, I look at how we discover and awaken the monsters in *Alien* (1979) and *The Thing* (2011). Within each section, I will summarize the films and then I will consider who or what the potential monsters in the film are (including the monster itself and the humans that trigger it) and will describe the various ways that monstrosity is made relative. The three methods of “triggering” monsters discussed in this thesis are not comprehensive, and monster narratives are also capable of falling into multiple categories. While this paper does not provide the perfect key to all monster tales, it will, by the concluding section, reveal a significant pattern and create a structural concept that can be applied and tested by future scholars.

CHAPTER II

But First, More on Monsters

Before we dive into the monstrous abyss of these films, some definitions and theory on monsters are needed to lay the groundwork for what is to come. Many scholars have contributed to the classification of monsters. Some noteworthy contributors are philosopher Noël Carroll, monster scholar Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, cinema scholar Barbara Creed, anthropology professor David Gilmore, film critic Robin Wood, literature and film scholar Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, and philosophy scholar Stephen Asma. Monsters can manifest in many different shapes and forms. They can be human or non-human. They can be an exterior monster that exists in the outside world, or a monster of interiority, a term introduced by film theory scholar James Kendrick (2009) to describe monsters that lurk inside our minds (such as the popular nightmare monster, Freddy Kreuger). Monsters can be magnified (imagine a giant spider as big as a house) or they can be massified (imagine a million normal-sized spiders). They also can be both magnified *and* massified (which I don't even want to imagine with spiders). Fusion monsters, as described by Carroll (2020), occur when contradicting identities are fused together and exist at the same time, for example, a zombie that is both living and dead. Fission monsters occur when contradicting identities are split and exist at different times, such as werewolves that are human during the day and a beast during the night.

With all the different shapes and forms a monster can take, however, there is almost always more to the monster than the horrifying figure we see. A monster is never simply just a monster. In fact, monster theory suggests that it is our own "cultural fears and forbidden obsessions... that express themselves in the body and behavior of the

monstrous creature” (Boyer, 240). Monsters are empty vessels that we fill with our cultural fears, anxieties, and desires. Their different and Othered bodies stand on the opposite side of a boundary line drawn by society to keep out that which is not socially accepted as natural or moral. Monsters threaten to guard, blur, or break those boundaries, and their horrifying form is the manifested shock value we need to fully, and finally, confront our subconscious or repressed emotions and see them made flesh. Once we see our fears in hideous form, we can no longer deny them or pretend they are not there.

If monstrosity is defined by what is different or “Other” from social norms, then we must enter into the conversation the monster theory of relativity. The basic formula of this theory is that a monster’s body is only monstrous relative to other bodies: “What a monster is or what is defined as monstrous primarily hinges on perspective” (Boyer, 241). What is monstrous to one might not be monstrous to another; it all depends on perspective and individual morals and values. In Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel’s *Classic Readings on Monster Theory*, they claim that “we are all one another’s monsters. This is because monsters are relative to the culture that produces them” (xiv). I agree with these scholars that monstrosity is relative based on individual perspective and cultural influence, but a key component or subcategory to this idea is understanding where the monsters come from. The basic formula of comparing bodies to each other needs to be expanded to acknowledge that *both* bodies are in fact comparatively monstrous, just in different ways. In the five films that this paper will explore, the obvious monsters are the creatures whose physical bodies are culturally unacceptable, but the *other-Other* monsters, the non-obvious monsters with the non-threatening-looking human bodies, are often relatively more monstrous by association and intent. If “the

monster guards and punishes those that willingly and unwillingly stray over the invisible boundary” (Boyer, 250), then we must acknowledge the importance of the action itself of crossing over that boundary and how that action begets the monster’s own actions. Going beyond the generally accepted idea that humans are in fact the real monsters, this thesis considers the mechanisms that trigger this relative monstrosity.

CHAPTER III

You Created a Monster! (Spoiler: It's You. You're the Monster.)

The first method of triggering a monster is through creating the monster, whether intentionally or not, as illustrated in such as in the films *Mimic* (1997) and *The Babadook*¹ (2014). I selected these two films because the triggers occur in two completely different ways, while both exemplifying the unifying idea of the monsters' victims being the ones to create it in the first place. In *Mimic*, the monsters are giant insects that were scientifically engineered as normal-sized insects to stop the spread of a deadly disease transmitted by the common cockroach, but then uncontrollably massified and magnified into the size of humans. In *The Babadook*, a single mother unintentionally creates a monster of interiority when she loses control of her deeply buried repressed emotional trauma and the result is the manifestation of the frightening figure², Mr. Babadook. As both of these films will show, there are limits to what is in our power to control, and intentional or not, the harm done to the self or others in these films is a direct result of choices and actions taken by the main characters.

***Mimic* (1997)**

When New York City's child population is threatened by a deadly cockroach-spread disease and no cure nor vaccine can be found, the CDC enlists Dr. Susan Tyler, an entomologist, to help stop the disease where it began—with the cockroaches. Dr. Tyler engineers a new breed of insect called the “Judas breed,” a hybrid between a termite and

¹ Other examples: *I Am Legend* (2007), *The Fog* (1980), *Jurassic Park* (1993), and *The Fly* (1986)

² See folklorist John Widdowson's bogeyman article on frightening figures.

a mantis, to infiltrate the cockroach population and eradicate them. After successfully stopping the cockroaches and ending the spread of the disease, the Judases, who were designed to die after one generational cycle, survived and evolved to mimic its predator—humans. Now the human population is under a new threat as the Judases fight back against their creators.

Monster #1: The Judas Breed

These giant insects are an excellent example of magnification. They started out as regular-sized insects but quickly evolved to mimic their human predator. Their magnified bodies are the natural result of trying to control the uncontrollable. These monsters were created by Dr. Susan Tyler who, in her defense, did her due diligence in testing out her creations in the lab, but when released out into the world these insects proved more resilient than anticipated. As Carroll writes in *Nightmare and the Horror Film*, “Giant insects or reptiles are slumbering potentials of nature released or awakened by physical or chemical alterations caused by human experiments in areas of knowledge best left to the gods” (22). These monstrous insects are the consequences of biological meddling and proof that we do not hold all the secrets to controlling life or the evolutionary process. We cannot fault the Judas breed, then, for evolving and acting in their biological and predatory nature. Stephen Asma acknowledges that yes, our own struggles matter, and our despair is real, but from an evolutionary perspective monsters are not evil. They are not intentionally trying to be destructive or violent. They are just behaving naturally. “Human suffering, in this genre, is an unintended outcome of the predator’s natural survival and reproductive techniques” (199-200). Because of this, while the giant insects

are indeed monstrous bodies, their natural monstrosity is relative compared to the scientists who unnaturally played God and initiated their existence.

Monster #2: The Scientist

As we will see later on in this paper with regards to *Alien* (1979) and *The Thing* (2011), in which the scientists are driven by evil intentions or blind obsession, Dr. Tyler's motives are not so evil in nature. She created these insects to help save an entire generation of children who were dying from a disease. As soon as she found out about the evolution of her creatures, she immediately sought to destroy them rather than selfishly try to keep them alive in the name of science. As ecocinema scholar Robin Murray and film scholar Joseph Heumann state, "Tyler's role as a "mad scientist" is complicated in *Mimic* []when she and her partner, Peter (Jeremy Northam), decide to "undo" the monstrous genetic mistake she has produced" (30). Dr. Tyler even seeks out the guidance from one of her older colleagues, Dr. Gates, to try and make sense of the rightness or wrongness of her actions:

Dr. Gates: So, you think your little Frankenstein has got the better of you?

Dr. Tyler: I was hoping you could tell me. I really need to find some answers, Walter.

Dr. Gates: Dear Susan... Is it answers you want from me, or is it absolution?

Dr. Tyler: You still think making the Judases was wrong?

Dr. Gates: Three years ago, I would have called it unforgivable. But I have two grandchildren who are alive today, probably because of you. It would be a tad hypocritical for me to pass judgment.

Dr. Tyler: That's not an answer, Walter.

Dr. Gates: It's not an easy question. But, as to the Judases, I think it's likely some survived. Evolution has a way of keeping things alive.

Dr. Tyler: But they all died in the lab.

Dr. Gates: Yes, Susan. But you let them out into the world. The world's a much bigger lab.

Dr. Gates' character relativizes Dr. Tyler's monstrosity. On one hand he believes engineering a new insect was wrong and unforgivable, a monstrous act; but on the other hand he and an entire population of New Yorkers have children and grandchildren alive because of her. The rightness or wrongness is not easy to resolve, and so her monstrosity depends on individual perspective.

If we consider intent as a factor for measuring monstrosity, Dr. Tyler could have designed the Judases to remain alive, but she didn't. She chose to have her creation die after six months (one generational cycle). But, as Dr. Gates also points out, there are some things you cannot control. Releasing a new species into the world without knowing the repercussions, or believing you have full control, is reckless, but is that recklessness *monstrous*? Religious studies scholar Timothy Beal ponders the relationship between creator and monster: "By playing God, does one inadvertently end up playing monster? More radically, does being God end up being monstrous? Who is more monstrous, the creatures who must live through this vale of tears, or the creator who put them here?" (296). Both Dr. Tyler and the Judases are responsible for the death toll, and both are motivated by survival, but there is a difference between survival through natural and

biological means and survival through scientific means. “Manipulating nature, even for beneficial results, ultimately leads to destructive results” (Murray and Heumann, 22).

The Babadook (2014)

Amelia is a single mother whose husband died in a car crash the night their son, Samuel was born. Seven years have passed since that tragic night, and Amelia has yet to properly deal with her grief. Her son desperately seeks the love and attention of his mother, but Amelia is just going through the motions of motherhood and isn't capable of offering the love or maternal care that Samuel needs. One night, Samuel finds a children's book on his bookshelf called *Mister Babadook* and Amelia begins to read it to him at bedtime, in a perfect illustration of the performative nature of Amelia's motherhood. As she starts to read the book about a mysterious figure called Mister Babadook, the tone of the story quickly becomes sinister and terrifying as the dark figure of Mister Babadook threatens to haunt and possess the reader.

As the movie progresses, it becomes clear that the Babadook is the manifestation of Amelia's repressed trauma finally cracking to the surface. Writer and editor Adolfo Aranjuez recognizes this type of manifestation as a clear example of Sigmund Freud's concept of the 'return of the repressed,' claiming, “when an individual neglects to work through trauma, grief or some other negative emotions, instead burying it deep in the subconscious, it can resurface – sometimes in a stronger or more destructive form” (123). The Babadook's manifestation is the direct result and consequence of Amelia's buried grief. The horror this monster inflicts on both mother and son acts as both a warning and a threat, as the text from his book describes:

I'll WAGER with YOU

I'll MAKE you a BET

The MORE you DENY

The STRONGER I GET

You start to CHANGE when I get in

the BABADOOK growing right UNDER YOUR SKIN

Monster #1: Mister Babadook

The Babadook, as a monster of interiority, is only as terrifying as Amelia's current state of mind. The more she denies her grief, the stronger the Babadook grows. Finding broken glass in her bowl of soup, a photo of herself and her husband with their faces scratched out, flickering lightbulbs, windows and doors opening on their own, is all a progression of Amelia's mental state which worsens from paranoia into violent aggression. After becoming fully possessed by the Babadook, Amelia kills their dog and attempts to strangle Samuel. The Babadook himself isn't real though. He's a manifestation of Amelia's trauma.

Monster #2: Trauma

Denying the existence of her grief and trauma for so many years has become so unhealthy for Amelia that it triggered a monster as a manifestation of her deeply buried pain, but Amelia is not the only victim of her creation. While Amelia is faced with confronting her trauma, her son is also suffering the consequences of her long-term denial and his own trauma. Even before the appearance of the Babadook, Samuel already had behavioral problems that we can only assume are the result of years of emotional neglect

from Amelia and the loss of his father. Her grief and repressed anger had a direct negative effect on her child, additionally causing his own traumatic experience during the breaking of her sanity. Her trauma is like a disease that spreads and infects those closest to her. By the end of the film, Amelia is able to face the Babadook (her trauma) and confront her fears, but the damage has already been done. She faced her trauma-monster and is managing her trauma in a healthier way now, but because she took so long to face it, it is now a permanent part of her and Samuel's lives.

Monster #3: Society

Throughout the film we see instances where Amelia is being isolated and alienated by society. Her friends and family avoid acknowledging her pain and hush any conversations about her late husband because they don't want her suffering and connection with death infecting their *own* lives. Philosopher Shelley Buerger points out that "Amelia's alienation acts as a form of banishment from society" and she is "tainted in the eyes of others by her association with death" (36). Society didn't provide any resources or guidance for Amelia to heal from her trauma. If her friends or family had helped, maybe she wouldn't have let things get so bad. While it may be monstrous how Amelia handled her grief and the way it infected her son, she was essentially abandoned and Othered by society for her connection to death. Their fear left Amelia all alone as the shadow of her past continued to follow her, slowly catching up until it finally consumed her.

Analysis

Creating a monster, whether a biological nightmare or a subconscious shadow nightmare, requires an act of monstrosity. That act is the intentional or unintentional trigger that allows for the creation of the monster to happen. For Dr. Susan Tyler, that triggering act was scientifically altering the biology of insects without understanding the consequences. The Judases are physically terrifying because their giant, hybrid insect bodies go against nature, not to mention they are also man-eaters. In contrast, Dr. Tyler is a young, beautiful scientist who certainly doesn't look terrifying, but what she is *capable* of creating is what is terrifying. As for Amelia, she generated the Babadook by never dealing with her trauma or the negative feelings towards her son. All that repressed grief was not only unhealthy for Amelia but also caused psychological damage to Samuel.

In his book *On Monsters* (2009), Stephen Asma describes how monsters are the result of our own actions. "Human arrogance is repaid by chaos and destruction," as we see with Dr. Tyler in *Mimic* (257). "Godzilla is our own fault, just as 'the creature' was Dr. Frankenstein's fault. Just as global warming is our fault... Interestingly, doing something to ease the threats often requires an admission of our own complicity in bringing them about" (257). When we create monsters, however we trigger their existence, the monsters serve as the punishment for our behavior which requires, as Asma points out, acknowledging that we were the cause of that chaos.

It is also important to keep in mind that it is not just our physical actions that create monsters, but also how we handle our own mental and emotional health. Horror film and fiction scholar June Pulliam warns of the consequences of repression:

Repression is dangerous: the repressed always returns, in monstrous form, to wreak havoc on citizens of the society who have necessitated its banishment...

This return of the repressed then is more than retribution on the part of the monster; it is a warning about the dangers of disavowing certain knowledge or parts of the self. (230)

If the monster is a warning and a retribution, then the implication is that *we* did something to warrant its manifestation. When we trigger a monster, we are manifesting the dangerous consequences of our behaviors.

CHAPTER IV

Have You Tried...*Not* Conjuring a Supernatural Creature?

The second method of triggering a monster is by conjuring or summoning the monster, such as in *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011)³. Compared to creating monsters that do not already exist, in a conjuring situation, the monsters already exist but in a non-threatening space, just waiting to be invoked through a ritualized chant or reciting of words. In *Cabin*, a group of college friends inadvertently conjure a family of supernatural killers. Intentional or not though, the monsters were summoned as a direct result of the actions and decisions of the group, even though more sinister work is at play which will be revealed further on. The reasons behind the conjuring matter, and the social pressures behind those reasons are relatively more monstrous than the supernatural beings awaiting to inflict punishment.

The Cabin in the Woods (2011)

This horror film is riddled with monsters. The film has almost every horrifying monster ever imagined shown locked up in containment cells, but they are presented as simple pawns controlled and summoned by the other monsters hiding in plain sight. While the hideous-looking creatures might fit more closely into the role of “monster” by society’s standards, their monstrosity is relative compared to the other levels of monstrosity in the film. *Cabin* essentially has four levels of monsters. The first level of monstrosity, which is also physically the top level, is a group of college friends who unintentionally conjure up monsters while on a short getaway to a cabin in the woods.

³ *Candyman* (1992) is another good example of conjuring a monster.

The second level, which is physically in the ground beneath the cabin, are the supernatural creatures being held in containment cells, otherwise referred to as “the stable” by the third level which are the technicians working in a facility underneath the stable who are orchestrating a ritual sacrifice. The technicians observe the college friends and manipulate the environment as needed to steer the teenagers in the direction they need to get the desired ritual outcome. The fourth level buried deep within the earth are the Ancient Ones, the old gods who require the ritual sacrifice in order to remain asleep, otherwise if the ritual fails, they will rise up and destroy the world.

Exploring these levels of monstrosity will shift the focus away from the obvious monsters and place it on those who are actually in control of the narrative. For the technicians and the college friends, they have the ability to choose their actions and outcomes, whereas the monsters in the stable are not granted any choice but only granted access and temporary freedom (by their captors and conjurers) to perform their natural terrifying roles and behaviors. The supernatural monsters are only able to act out their violence because of the choices and actions of others who prompt their release from containment.

Monster #1: The College Friends

On the surface level (literally and figuratively) we have our five protagonists: Dana, Marty, Curt, Jules, and Holden. When they retreat to a cabin for a fun weekend adventure, they are not expecting to find a hidden cellar full of old artifacts and antiques. Each of them are drawn to different objects in the room and carefully pick up and examine their treasures. Unbeknownst to the young adults, the technicians are observing

from surveillance feeds waiting to see which of the friends will activate their ritual objects first to conjure the monsters associated with it. Against Marty's warnings, Dana reads from an old diary and recites a particular verse in Latin which unleashes the Buckners (a "zombie redneck torture family") who crawl out of the ground in the woods to inflict their punishment on the five friends.

While it is easy and even customary to feel sympathy for this group of friends who are being hunted and slaughtered, we shouldn't put all the blame on their supernatural killers. The teenagers, after all, are responsible for conjuring the Buckners. They made the choice, albeit in an incredibly rigged and manipulated environment, but still the choice was theirs to make. Science fiction scholar Gerry Canavan notes that because horror can take on so many different shapes and forms, as evidenced by the multitude of relics of evil in the cellar, it ultimately doesn't matter which monster the friends choose: the outcome would still be the same (26). The ritual requires them to choose so that they can then be punished, and if it wasn't the Buckners then it would have been a killer clown, or a werewolf, or whatever mysterious creature "Kevin" is as seen written on the Technician's white board. The deaths of these teens relied on them choosing the object of their own demise.

Monster #2: The Supernatural Beings

Let us put these frightening creatures' circumstances into perspective. All the monsters in the stable are being held against their will with no choice or means to ever escape (unless temporarily conjured and released by teenagers once a year). Once conjured, they simply do what is in their nature to do. But can we fault them for acting in

their nature when those in charge of running the facility are the ones who imprisoned them and use them specifically to murder young adults every year? As horror cinema scholar Ben Kooyman notes, these monsters are just “props employed by an organization that coordinates annual ritual sacrifices to higher beings to ward off the destruction of the Earth” (102). They are props and pawns used to accomplish a goal by a more orchestrated evil. The Buckners, or any other monster that could be conjured, are just the tools, but the hands that hold the tools carry the responsibility. The supernatural creatures in the stable have no choice in the matter. Yes, they perform the physical brutality, but these monsters are just “avatars to a more ancient nightmare” (Lockett, 127). We need to look past the physical monstrosity right in front of us and instead shift our focus to those who look safe but are hiding their monstrosity.

Monster #3: The Technicians

The technicians have one single goal to accomplish: complete the ritual sacrifice. What that involves is leading five young adults to a remote cabin, manipulating them and the environment in order to follow the rules of the ritual, getting the teenagers to conjure a monster (or a family of monsters) of their choosing, and then ensuring those monsters kill all of the friends (with the optional death of the “virgin,” Dana). If the ritual is successful, the Ancient Ones sleeping deep within the earth will be pacified until next year when they’ll once again demand more blood in order to remain asleep and not destroy the planet.

During the ritual, we see the two main technicians, Hadley and Sitterson, often joking and playing around and taking bets from the rest of the facility members on which

monster the teens will summon. Their goofing around during a job that requires bloodshed seems rather heartless. Christopher Lockett asserts that “[f]or all of the irreverence they display...to the gravity of their work generally, their laughter is not defiance but a façade seeking to mask their own monstrosity (137). They need to play in order to not feel the crushing weight of their monstrous actions, and mostly everyone in the facility participates in this behavior. Folklorists Martha Sims and Martine Stephens see this behavior as quite normal under the circumstances, claiming that “because ritual spaces are different from ordinary life, people can do and say things in a ritual that in their daily experience would be unusual, perhaps even inappropriate or unacceptable” (110). Even though the technicians know that the ritual is a necessary evil, they still have to be able to live with themselves, and so they mask their actions with laughter and blowing off steam.

Another way they are able to ease some of the guilt is by affirming that it wasn't *they* who actually brought forth the monsters, but the college friends. As Kooyman states,

The film asserts that it is important for the protagonists to ‘choose what happens in the cellar’, i.e. to choose which horror icon will be the agent of their demise, which provides a means for [the technicians] to alleviate themselves of the responsibility of actual murder. (112)

The technicians admit that they manipulate the system as much as possible, but they also point out to their colleagues that it is the teens who make the choice to conjure the monsters, not them, which allows them to feel a little better about their own level of monstrosity.

Monster #4: The Ancient Ones

The Ancient Ones are the old gods, the titans who hibernate deep underground and demand the blood of youth every year in order to allow human civilization to continue existing. Historically speaking, performing a ritual to “fulfill the will of the deity (thus maintaining equilibrium in this world)” was a common practice (Santino, 66). Human sacrifice was even considered a logical form of offering, as ritual studies scholar Catherine Bell notes:

[H]uman sacrifice can be seen as a simple extension of the logic underlying other forms of offerings. Whether the purpose is to avert evil, placate gods, [etc.], the offering of something—firstfruits, paper money, or human beings—has been a common ritual mechanism for securing the well-being of the community and the larger cosmos. Such offerings also redefine the culture’s system of cosmological boundaries—the human sphere, the sphere of the gods, the sphere of the ancestral dead, the sphere of malevolent demons, and so on—while simultaneously allowing the crossing or transgression of those very same boundaries. (195)

Common or not, accepted by society or not, the will of the old gods and what they require of humanity is still relatively pretty monstrous. They want to see the performance of youths sinning and then being punished for their sins, even though the youths are completely unaware of their participation and are heavily manipulated.

Analysis

Film and folklore scholar Mikel Koven describes monsters as “empty signifiers upon which we project our real fears” (124). A monstrous body would not be monstrous

if it didn't embody our fears. The vast quantity of supernatural creatures in the technicians' stable proves that there is definitely no shortage of fear. We filled that stable up with every nightmare we could ever imagine. They exist as monsters because they defy our comfortable social norms and values, and for that we projected our fears onto them, or more so infused into them. By doing so we defined their identity as a monstrous being, and so their monstrosity is really only the fault of our own. All they can do is lie in wait to be conjured upon by a group of curious teenagers playing with old relics and fulfill the role we gave to them.

As for the teenagers who are so drawn to the objects that will ultimately and inevitably harm themselves, how do we make sense of this curious nature? One of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seven theses on monsters is that our fears of the monster are actually a type of desire (49); the monster can attract as much as it can repulse. "This corporal fluidity, this simultaneity of anxiety and desire, ensures that the monster will always dangerously entice" (Cohen, 51). Marty is the only one who vocalizes not messing around with these strange artifacts, but the rest are too enthralled to heed his warnings. They all latch on to whatever object pulls at their desires, making the conjuring of the monster an inevitability.

Granted, the choice to conjure any of the monsters was in a manipulated situation where they didn't understand the consequences of their actions. However, by the end of the film, when the last two teenagers standing are Dana and Marty, their choices are very intentional with full knowledge of the consequences. First, when they find a way down into the facility and choose to hit the system purge button that releases every single supernatural monster from their containment boxes into the facility, "triggering carnage

of an epic scale” (Starr, 19). The second, when they finally learn from the facility Director that Marty’s death is necessary in order for the ritual to succeed and save all of humanity, and Dana and Marty choose to let the ritual fail and end the world. Film and science fiction scholar, Christopher Lockett understands the logic behind their decision where “a humanity that sacrifices select youths in order to survive does not deserve to” (122). Relatively speaking, initiating the purge sequence was pretty monstrous; lots of people died. Even more monstrous was the choice to let the ritual fail and have the Ancient Ones rise up and destroy all of humanity. But does Marty have a point that society has blown its chance and no longer deserves to exist if this is the way it has to be? Are their monstrous actions justifiable? The billions of lives on the planet about to die might say no.

According to Amy Pascale, author of the Joss Whedon biography, the technicians are “certainly the villains of the film, but they’re villains with an understandable belief system. They think that causing the deaths of five young people is a rational and proper action if it saves the rest of the human race from annihilation” (319). Metamodernism scholars Linda C. Ceriello and Greg Dember have a slightly different perspective, claiming that the technicians are “heroes with a morally complicated job of maintaining world order, albeit within a system that requires violence and suffering” (48). So, are the technicians monsters doing something rational and proper or heroes doing something violent and immoral? The conflict of labels makes their monstrosity relative based on individual perspective, but I believe we need to look deeper at what Pascale, Ceriello, and Dember are all saying. Heroes or villains, the technicians are operating under a *system* that is monstrous—the fact that society demands this type of necessary evil in the first

place. This is what Cohen means when he says that “the monster’s body is a cultural body,” because deep down it’s not about the monster itself but the culture that created it, the culture that necessitated it (38). Still, the technicians always have a choice, and they choose the least monstrous (albeit still monstrous) route every year.

The teens’ punishment and suffering is merely entertainment for the Ancient Ones. The gods have the power to destroy the world and they hold that power over the weaker beings, demanding monstrous acts for their own monstrous satisfaction. The college friends may have been the puppets to the technicians, but the technicians are the puppets to the Ancient Ones. The old gods are the ones ultimately pulling all the strings, and down the line all the puppets and pawns have played their parts until Marty and Dana finally choose to cut those strings. And then like children throwing a tantrum for not getting their way, the Ancient Ones rise up from the ground in a fit of anger to destroy the world.

Canavan makes an important comparison when he claims that the monstrosity of the Ancient Ones “is ultimately just our own; what finally rises from beneath the cabin is not some ghastly, otherworldly tentacle but a human fist” (207). Of all the different forms the old gods could have taken, as noted earlier in the paper, it wasn’t a squid-like creature or any type of reptilian or insect hybrid. Their shape was human in form, suggesting that the monstrosity of humankind, this thirst for violent entertainment, goes back to the beginning of time. Just as the technicians spectated the ritual and got some form of pleasure from the suffering inflicted upon the sacrificial youth, so too did their ancient humanoid gods take equal pleasure in the spectacle.

Literature scholar Noah Simon Jampol on his article on apocalyptic cinema states that this is a genre “revealing that which has always been there. Whatever waits on the other side of the veil has always been there, we just were unaware” (76). The word “monster” was originally derived from the Latin word “monstrum” which means to warn or reveal, and in *Cabin* our monsters (both supernatural and human) reveal the truly horrifying nature of humankind that has always been there. Through the physical bodies of the Ancient Ones as well what their cultural bodies represented as society’s desire for violent entertainment, *Cabin* reveals the dark side of human nature that has always been around.

There is definitely a hierarchy of authority that all connects together in order for the conjuring of monsters to take place. It is a system that has been ritualized and performed who knows how many times during the course of human existence. Another perspective would be to say that the Ancient Gods summoned the facility workers, who summoned the teenagers, who summoned the nightmarish monsters, all in a long string of triggers meant to complete a ritual in which pain equals entertainment and death equals survival.

The Ancient Gods are driven by the pleasure of watching human suffering. The facility workers, who are compelled to supply that suffering through manipulating the agency of the young adults, also take pleasure in watching the ritual events unfold. The college friends are drawn by their own desires and pleasures to select a ritual artifact that conjures monsters. And let us not forget the part where they release all the monsters and kill everyone in the facility shortly before they end the world. For the supernatural monsters, their place in the ritual narrative only exists because of the fulfillment of all

those previous pleasures and desires. It is important for the analysis of monsters and relativity to acknowledge the triggers and conditions that brought the supernatural monsters into the narrative space, thereby we identify the societal fears and desires that define our humanity (monstrosity?).

CHAPTER V

Curiosity Killed the Camp. Just Let Sleeping Monsters Lie.

The third level of triggering a monster is discovering and awakening the monster from some remote location, such as in *Alien* (1979) and *The Thing* (2011)⁴. The 2011 version is a prequel to John Carpenter's 1982 classic, and explains how the alien came to be. These films have many surface level similarities, but when we dig deeper into each of the narratives, we will see they each have their own unique monstrosities. Both films take place in isolated areas cut off from civilization: *Alien* takes place in outer space and *The Thing* in Antarctica. Both discover a dormant alien lifeform by intercepting and following a distress signal to its source, and both bring those aliens back to their spaceship or research facility. Both films also include the trope of the Final Girl, a concept introduced by film history and theory scholar, Carol J. Clover (1992):

She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril...She alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B). (35)

***Alien* (1979)**

After one of the crewmen from the United States Cargo Star Ship (USCSS) Nostromo, Executive Officer Kane, is attacked by an alien parasite that latches itself onto his face, Warrant Officer Ripley (played by Sigourney Weaver) refuses to let him back on board the ship because it would break safety protocol. She stresses that they

⁴ *The Descent* (2005) is another example; the monsters are discovered in a cave.

do not know anything about the parasite and letting Kane back onto the ship could endanger the lives of the crew. Science Officer Ash ignores her warnings and breaks quarantine by opening the door to let Kane and the other members of the team back on board. Skipping ahead to what has become the famous chest-bursting scene, a seemingly healthy Kane suddenly convulses and an alien bursts out of the cavity of his chest. The rest of the film revolves around the crew trying to kill the creature, and we also learn that Ash is a synthetic human who was given instructions from their employer⁵ to bring the alien back to Earth at any expense, including the lives of the crew. Ripley is able to defeat both Ash and the alien, and as the sole human survivor of the *Nostromo* (along with the ship cat, Jonesy), she puts herself into cryo-sleep until someone can come and rescue her.

Monster #1: The Alien

Modern fiction scholar Douglas Fowler describes the alien creature as a monster that “attacks with motiveless malignity” and “whose sole intent is to destroy [the crew of the *Nostromo*]” (16). That might be the more popular interpretation of the film, however I tend to agree with popular culture scholar Jeffrey Ewing who offers an alternative perspective in which the alien is more of a victim:

[W]hat looks like alien aggression might actually be alien self-defense, a refusal on the part of the Xenomorphs whose homes we invade, and whose bodies we try and take for science, to be hunted down or cornered as mere animals. We view the aliens as frightening because of our unfamiliarity, but consider this: the filmic

⁵ The Company’s name is later revealed in sequels as Weyland-Yutani

evidence suggests that each intelligent species they encounter has sought to use, degrade, or murder them". (213)

Ewing's article presents a clear image of the alien acting in self-defense. If we look at the actual circumstances of the film, the crew was responsible for bringing the alien on board their ship, and the creature was only acting in its own nature to try and survive against their attacks. Furthermore, it was the android science officer Ash who was following orders from The Company to acquire the alien for their own greedy capitalist purposes. The alien had no choice in the situation or the ability to escape, and so its only option was to defend itself.

Monster #2: The Android

Ripley refused to let Kane back on board with an alien parasite attached to his face, but Ash broke protocol and let him back in. Aside from Ripley, nobody was really upset at Ash for making that decision, but he ultimately broke the quarantine procedure and put everyone at risk. While the main reason for his actions was because he had direct orders from The Company, he also expressed to Ripley his own interest and admiration for the creature from a scientific standpoint. As we saw in *Mimic*, scientific curiosity can be a dangerous threat because it tends to cloud rational and moral thinking, but on top of being a scientist, Ash is also an android. According to cinema scholar Peter Fitting, Ash represents our fears of being betrayed by our own machines (285). So, while the alien is acting out of self-defense and self-preservation, the android is acting out of programmable malice for the monstrous intent of The Company. A machine cannot be

reasoned with, its betrayal is unpredictable, and our trust in it is at the hands of a higher controller.

Monster #3: The Company

The Company is what American literature and film scholar Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock would identify as an invisible monster. In his article, Weinstock recognizes that there has been a cultural shift in our anxieties towards monsters, where now it is less about physical difference and more about immoral values and behaviors. The monster isn't the big, slimy creature with sharp teeth, but something that "defies visual identification...[It] cannot be located, much less killed" (367-368). The Company in *Alien* tasked Ash with a secret objective to bring back the alien lifeform at any cost, even at the expense of the lives of the crew. The Company values the alien life (and the scientific opportunities it presents) more than their employees. So even though Ash let the alien on board the ship, he did so under the command of The Company, the representation of human ambition and the ultimate trigger and driving force behind all the destruction. The alien may have performed the killings, but the more threatening monster was the one we couldn't see coming, the one pulling all the strings and whose morally questionable ambitions were responsible for everything.

***The Thing* (2011)**

A research team in Antarctica discovers a spacecraft buried beneath the icy landscape, as well as its alien traveler frozen in the ground outside of the craft. After cutting out a block of ice surrounding the alien, they bring it back to their facility where they perform a few scientific tests to confirm their discovery. Similar to Ripley, young

female scientist Kate warns the team about messing with the alien, but the older male scientist, Dr. Halvorson, ignores her warning and berates her for questioning him. Soon enough, the block of ice melts just enough for the alien to break free and escape. The team is able to track down and kill the alien, but not before it eats one of their members. While everyone believes they are now safe, Kate soon realizes that the threat is far from over. She figures out that the alien, or whatever “thing” was inside of it, can infect organic cells and copy them, essentially imitating and replacing the host’s cells with its own so it can look like anyone it infects. It can’t imitate non-organic materials though, such as cavity fillings or metal plates used to set broken bones. Panic and paranoia ensue as more of the team become infected, and after several deaths and body horror scenes, the last one standing is Kate.

Monster #1: The Thing

The “Thing” is a conceptually terrifying creature, no argument there; the way it hides inside a human host and then rips its body open to expose massive teeth and tentacles would give anyone nightmares. In his article on body horror, biologist Ronald Allen Lopez Cruz describes the Thing as unnatural and impure because of how its biology goes against our own. Cruz explains that “an organism whose cells never commit to a particular structural and functional congruence is an abomination” (164). In other words, we fear the Thing because it goes against nature, specifically *our* nature. Our world has certain biological rules including the structural stability of our physical bodies, but whatever planet the Thing came from has its own rules and we can assume that its biology is the norm there. The alien has its own set of structures and functions, but

because it is different within our biological context, we label it monstrous. Granted, it also can also destroy our bodies, a threat that is clearly more physical than conceptual, but similar to the xenomorph, the Thing is simply acting in its own nature, using its own biological rules to survive the unexpected situation it finds itself in. Just because its biology is different from ours doesn't mean that it is a monster. The humans are the ones who brought the creature back to their facility, meddled with nature in the name of science, and disregarded the safety of their own, which led to the deaths of everyone but Kate.

Monster #2: The Scientist

In his article on the principles of terror, Douglas Fowler identifies a longstanding source of fear: “scientific curiosity as a destructive impulse” (17). The lead male scientist of the film, Halvorson, believed that as scientists they are “obliged” to study the creature, no matter how dangerous it could be or who gets hurt in the process. Additionally, he ignored Kate's early warnings about tampering with the supposedly dead alien body, and later, when she figured out the creature's ability to copy humans, he still didn't listen and accused her of just panicking everyone. His assumption that a young woman couldn't possibly know more than he does adds pride and arrogance to his monstrous impulses. His position of power and authority coupled with his hubris, blind determination, and scientific curiosity kicked off the monster's destructive path. He could have taken better precautions, listened to Kate, or put his team's safety ahead of his desires, but instead he reinforced our fears of the dangers of performing science at any cost, that just because we *can* doesn't mean we *should*.

Monster #3: The Team's Breakdown

Science fiction scholar Elana Gomel notes a traditional pattern in fairy tales in which the ugly thing almost always represents the bad thing, and the same is often true with science fiction films; if something *looks* evil then it must *be* evil (181). In the narrative of *The Thing*, there is a shift from this tradition where otherness becomes internalized and evil is ambiguous because no one knows who is human and who is monster. As Gomel explains, “Once monstrosity passes from the realm of the corporeal to the realm of the psychic, it can be neither defined nor rooted out” (182). As a result, the dividing lines between human and monster become blurred, which causes the team to turn against each other. Film critic Stephen Prince examines the similar loss of boundaries in the narrative of John Carpenter’s *The Thing* (1982)⁶, in which the creature both invades the human body like a virus, and invades the larger social order and meaning of community within the group: “Paranoia and suspicion are corroding the group and destroying the bonds of authority and friendship” (Prince, 127). If the creature isn’t invading your body, it can still invade your mind with fear and panic. We see this in the film when certain characters are too ready to kill their comrades simply for suspecting they may be evil, without having any actual proof. The cultural fear being revealed, then, is how fragile our sense of community really is when we feel threatened; the monster is social disorder. This film shows us that you don't have to contract a virus to still be “infected” by it. It’s a double whammy for Kate and her team, because not only do they

⁶ The 2011 film as a prequel to the 1982 version with the same alien monster infecting both camps.

have to worry about the alien trying to take over their bodies, they also have to worry about each other.

Analysis

If we choose, as we often do, to label certain bodies as monstrous simply because they look frightening and different from us, then the two alien creatures from this section would certainly fit the bill. They *are* monsters, as perceived and defined by those who have encountered them, as well as by those who watch the films. What this section highlights, though, is that these creatures are ultimately behaving as they evolved to do, trying to defend themselves using their own unique biological nature as their only weapon against alien lifeforms who wish to extinguish them. The creatures are literally fighting for survival in a space in which they had no control. They wouldn't have even been around to do harm if not for the choices and actions of the crew. Their existence in those spaces was generated by the other monsters, ones who are not defined by their level of threatening biology and physicality, but by their threatening behavior and values.

Before it was revealed that Ash was an android and following unethical orders by The Company, he simply looked like a regular member of the crew. His appearance was non-threatening, his demeanor calm and controlled, and his rank as a scientist held him at a higher and respectable level of authority from others on the crew. While we fear the monstrous alien creature and have a basic understanding of what it's capable of, the greater fear is the unknown monster hiding within the safety of the group and not knowing what *it* is capable of. Being able to easily determine who or what you should fear is far more comforting (relatively speaking) than *not* knowing who or what you

should fear. We also see this fear of the “danger from within” in *The Thing* when the crew doesn’t know who among them is a monster and who is still human. They all look human and act human, providing a false sense of security, until their bodies split open revealing the monster within in a decidedly monstrous way. The fear of the hidden monster creates a breakdown of trust, it fans the flames of paranoia, and then, like a self-fulfilling prophecy, it encourages “better safe than sorry” violent behavior that indeed proves how the monster was always within (whether one is infected or not).

CONCLUSION

As film critic Robin Wood states, “[a]ll monsters are by definition destructive, but their destructiveness is capable of being variously explained, excused, and justified” (130). I would also add that they can be explained, excused, and justified because their ability to be destructive was the result of a causal mechanism outside of their own control. When we consider the conditions and triggers that put the monsters in the spaces to be destructive, we put their monstrosity into perspective as well, especially relative to our own. Monsters are the consequences of *our* actions. Our monstrosity triggers their monstrosity. Monster begets monster in a continuous cycle that blurs all dividing lines between “us” and “other.”

Monster theory scholarship needs to hold space for identifying and acknowledging the trigger mechanisms in monster narratives. The monster itself is still incredibly important and worthy of analysis, but its monstrous body is only one part of the whole. We need to expand the analysis and actually back it up to the beginning of the narrative, and seek to understand our role in how the monsters came to be. Monsters do not already start outside of us; they start from within us, from our fears, anxieties, and forbidden desires which are then projected out and made flesh through the various triggers described in this paper. We can create, conjure, or discover and awaken monsters, but we rarely acknowledge our responsibility in doing so. If we can understand how and why we trigger monsters, we can learn how to *avoid* triggering monsters.

Another title for this paper could have been “How to *Not* Trigger Monsters.” Allow me to provide a helpful summary. Step one: don’t mess with the biology of any living organism (or any dead organism for that matter). Step two: don’t bury your

feelings. Repression will only equal pain. Step three: stay away from old relics and most definitely do not recite anything in Latin. Step four: if you find an alien, leave it the heck alone. Step five: don't be a robot. Step six: don't have questionable morals or dangerous ambitions. Just be cool. If you can do those things, then you are off to a great start. There are many, many more ways to trigger monsters though. Consider this your fair warning.

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