

The Identity of a Monster in the Movie *The Greatest Showman*

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KH.HS.P2ENG200

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to analyze social perception on a monster character, using Jeffery Jerome Cohen's Monster Theory. Even though there have been studies done on the monster several times, it is the first time monster has been differentiated into categories to make them easier to understand. Here an attempt is made to examine the movie The Greatest Showman (Dir. Michael Gracey, 2017, US) in the light of Cohen's seven theses of Monster Theory. The study focuses on questions of identity, the abnormal features of the monster, the carnivalesque aspect involved in its presence as a kind of displacement from the natural and, the cultural significations of such entities.*

Keywords: Monster, social perception, identity, Cohen's theory, abnormal, carnival, culture, displacement

The very idea and image of a monster raises a series of questions in our mind even at the outset: What actually is a monster? What is its identity in society? How do we distinguish it? What makes it different from us? Are such entities actually real monsters? All these and a search for an explanation do impinge on the social perception on a monster character.

Identity is an important factor for us human beings. And anything out of order or different is considered a 'monstrosity'. This paper is an attempt to analyze the movie *The Greatest Showman*, from the perspective of the Monster Theory of Jeffery Jerome Cohen.

Monster Theory is introduced by Jeffery Jerome Cohen in 1996. Cohen did not invent monster theory; however, he did name it, and his essay establishes a clear set of boundaries for what monsters are and how they work, which has guided or informed later monster research. (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 29). He characterized monsters into seven categories to make a clear idea of what a monster is. Even these seven theories, brought in a wide range of classifications to explore the monster's body and they broke the already existing system of classification. St. Augustine's idea of a monster is to 'teach', but for Cohen it is what a monster 'mean'. '...he uses these earlier ideas to discover and communicate something completely new in monster theory—an articulation of heretofore unspoken, disparate ideas into a cohesive theory'. (Mittman, xii)

According to Timothy Beal in his work *Religion and Its Monsters*, the name monster is derived from the Latin word *monstrum*, or *monstrare* ('show' or 'reveal') and *monere* ('warn' or 'portend') (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 2). 'In the early fifth century, Saint Augustine (354-430 C.E.), a Christian bishop of the North African city of Hippo used a series of puns to characterize the nature of the monster. He believed that they take their name in order to demonstrate something that we can learn from' (Mittman, x). Stephen Asma says that the monster is an indication of gods

displeasure, before being a 'cultural category' (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 2).

'Monsters have been around as long as humans since they define us by stalking our borders and mirroring our traits'. (Mittman, xiii).

Inside every monster lurks a human being. Peel back the fur, the scales, the spikes, the slime, and beneath the monstrous hide, there we are, always and inevitably. This is because all monsters are human creations. They exist because we create or define them as such. We, therefore, owe them our care and attention. (Mittman, x)

The study done by students after watching Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* concludes that:

"Monster is a victimized child, mistreated and misunderstood, or the Monster is evil." (108)

We are all charmed by the monster's own narrative of his yearnings, trials, and traumas. We feel that of the two characters, creator and creation, we would far rather spend time with the creation. He is kinder, more loving, and more poetic than his creator. The tragedy of the book is so transparently the way the world deforms and embitters him. If he is a monster, it is the society that made him so. He is, then, only a metaphor of a monster. (108)

...the monster is an abandoned child who needs his father's love resituates the monster as son, secures him within the category he "should" have been in, and so reinstates the "happy family" narrative as the norm rather than asking why, in this novel, that narrative disintegrates. (109)

Asa Simon Mittman says that emphasis on monstrosity being "rooted in the vertigo of redefining one's understanding of the world" is useful for thinking about why the same thing can be regarded differently by different individuals and groups and at different times. It also helps to

explain the anxiety that monsters provoke above and beyond any physical threat they present and the hyperbolic response that that which is considered monstrous provokes.

The “intolerable ambiguity” of the monster, to reference the title of Elizabeth Grosz’s inclusion in this volume, compels two types of responses: to understand it and find a category to contain it—that is, to assimilate it into an existing or altered epistemological framework—or to stamp it out of existences. (Weinstock, “Monster Theory”, 3)

In 1975 Michel Foucault gave lectures on the concept of “abnormal.” In an essay published in 1962, Georges Canguilhem returns to the belief that monsters are disruptive beings in the normal world. He says that the monsters by being the disruptive beings they are, show the fragility and vulnerability of the world. (Mittman, xi).

A new way of thinking questioned the universality of Enlightenment ideals—the notion that the world can be understood through careful, scientific examination and rational thought, and that doing so would lead to the betterment of society—and rejected traditional canons of cultures and philosophies. (Mittman, xi)

They are placed in a “carnavalesque” setting, as illustrated by Mikhail Bakhtin in his work *Rabelais and His World* (1947/1965), which shows monsters in a positive atmosphere in which they are the bringers of laughter which is used to defeat the idea of monstrous fear. (Mittman, xi). In the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth century, individuals presented as human-animal hybrids were stock features of freak shows. Robert Bogdan notes that from approximately 1840 to 1940, “the formally organized exhibition for amusement and profit of people with physical, mental, or behavioral anomalies, both alleged and real, was an accepted part of American life.” Such exhibitions would include a variety of non-normative body types, ranging from the excessively hairy (bearded women and “dog-faced boys”) to the extremely tall or short to those with physical deformations. (Weinstock, “Monster Theory”, 9-10).

Monster theory transcends categorical bounds, spreading across other disciplines. Philosophers, theologians, psychologists, physicians, and cultural critics have debated what monsters are, where they originate from, what they mean, and what cultural work they do. As a result, the monster hypothesis is a global undertaking—one that must tread carefully when making sweeping generalizations, keeping in mind-altering cultural norms and expectations. (Weinstock, “Monster Theory”, 1).

Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock in his essay, “A Genealogy of Monster Theory”, focuses first on the scholarly approach to monstrosity; theorization of monstrosity from antiquity to today has tended to divide into three: ‘teratology, the study of “monstrous” births; mythology, the consideration of fantastical creatures; and psychology, the exploration of how human beings come to act in monstrous or inhuman ways. Teratology and psychology are more immediately connected to what we may think of as the “real world” than mythology,

which often has to do with fantasy or dream; however, all three divisions find their grounding in the human experience of overlaying meaning upon existence.’ (Weinstock, “Monster Theory”, 4)

Augustine writes in book X of *City of God* that “monstrous births” are “arranged and appointed by Divine Providence.” When the so-called human gives birth to something that is ‘physiologically abnormal’ it is considered a message from God. (Weinstock, “Monster Theory”, 6) These kinds of birth are considered to be a catastrophe for the entire community or region. In some cases, they are the indications of ‘divine disapproval of the personal actions that had been committed as a sin (sodomy, bestiality, adultery, incest, and “impure thoughts” and “unnatural desire”’) (Weinstock, 6). Monstrous births could also reflect the other side of the theological divide: not God’s will but diabolical intervention. (Weinstock, “Monster Theory”, 8)

Theorization of part-human, part-animal offspring as the consequence of bestiality or copulation with a supernatural creature points us toward a second prominent teratological explanation: hybridization or the “mingling or mixing of seed” of different species, which can function as an explanation for monstrous birth even outside of the frameworks of divine punishment and moral disapprobation. (Weinstock, “Monster Theory”, 8)

In the sixteenth century the French surgeon Ambroise Paré forcefully described monsters that transgressed the boundary between human and animal as unnatural expressions of evil:

There are monsters that are born with a form that is half-animal and the other [half] human, or retaining everything [about them] from animals, which are produced by sodomists and atheists who ‘join together’ and break out of their bounds—unnaturally—with animals, and from this are born several hideous monsters that bring great shame on those who look at them or speak to them. (Weinstock, “Monster Theory”, 9)

Surekha Davies explains,

that a shift began in the late fifteenth century such that monstrous births were regarded less as “portents of general misfortune” and more as “signs of particular crimes and impending divine retribution for a range of failings indicating wrongful political and religious allegiances.” (Weinstock, “Monster Theory”, 6)

For Aristotle, monstrous births were not omens or signs. Their monstrosity inhered in their being “contrary to Nature,” but this was indicative only of a natural process thwarted, not of the gods’ displeasure. Monstrous births were not augurs of things to come but only indications of a process thwarted or incomplete. (Weinstock, “Monster Theory”, 12)

In the literary world, Katherine Dunn’s celebrated novel *Geek Love* (1989) is concerned with a married couple who induce birth defects in their children using various drugs and

radioactive material to create a freak show for their travelling carnival. (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 13)

At what point does a human being violate culturally specific expectations to such an extent that he elicits the kind of epistemological vertigo marking monstrosity proposed by Mittman? At what point does deviance make someone a monster? Context is of course key here because there are few universal human taboos— although prohibitions against cannibalism, murder of group members, and certain sexual practices (necrophilia and incest, chief among them) prevail in the majority of societies, nowhere is the idea of monstrosity being in the eye of the beholder more apropos than in considering human monsters. (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 22)

Cohen says that he had observed that in some cultures the monsters are represented to make the acts justified in the name of heroics and this kind of activity is seen throughout the history of mankind (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 23), thus making people believe that they are the true villains in society. And this kind of action is brought in as an act of good interpretation but in truth, it is the man who does it.

The human monster, according to Foucault, violates both the laws of society and the laws of nature (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 26). A complete genealogy of monster theory would need to be expanded to include a range of works that explore how the public is manipulated to achieve a social or political end. (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 25)

Augustine believes that the actions of monsters are to learn from them, but Cohen says that each action has meaning behind it. "Monsters are metaphors of our own anxiety," asserts Richard Kearney, who adds in a pithy formulation that,

Without them we know not what we are. With them we are not what we know. The monster tells us what we hope or imagine we are not, as well as what we fear deep down we are or may become. We are intimately familiar with monsters, therefore, because they are our own. Monsters are not finally absolutely other—foreign and unknowable. (Weinstock, "most interesting people", 3)

As anthropologist Mary Douglas says that this hybridization and categorization confuse the human system of classification and on a level, it is a categorical violation. (Weinstock, "most interesting people", 2)

Nowas regards applying Cohen's theory in the movie, *The Greatest Showman*, the following points, as defined in his 'seven theses' become clear:

1) The Monster's Body Is a Cultural Body.

Cohen believes that a monstrous body is a purely cultural body. According to him, a monster is a being that shows a cultural aspect of that time period or that place. Thus, derives its meaning as "that which reveals". It represents something else that is in society.

The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural

moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 38)

No matter at what times the monsters represent the fears and fantasies of society. They are in a way representing people in their unexpected level of life. It 'reveals' the hidden meanings in society that is plain as day but are easily missed.

In the movie, the unusual beings represent the times of change. This was the start of a new culture. They brought forth many beings that are hidden in the dark into light and gave them life. In a place where there is still the class distinction the life of Barnum who has begun in the streets has taken a new turn of events with his ideas of representing beings that are 'exotic' or 'extraordinary'. Cohen says, 'like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again' (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 38). These extraordinary beings which have been hidden in the deserted places or behind curtains are the epitome of all the things that are different in a society that has been rejected throughout their life. Being brought into the light they are gaining independence that has been denied to them throughout their life.

2) The Monster Always Escapes.

Cohen says,

No matter how many times King Arthur killed the ogre of Mount Saint Michael, the monster reappeared in another heroic chronicle, bequeathing the Middle Ages an abundance of morted' Arthurs. Regardless of how many times Sigourney Weaver's beleaguered Ripley utterly destroys the ambiguous Alien that stalks her, its monstrous progeny return, ready to stalk again in another bigger-than-ever sequel (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 38).

Throughout ancient history, we have seen monsters appear and disappear to come forth in another place at another time. From the giant to dwarfs has appeared in many parts from ancient text to the recent movies and these texts prove the belief in the immortality of monsters as a whole. These monsters are created due to the 'matrix of relation' (Weinstock, 39) that they have with society. Let it be social, cultural, sexual, and physical relations it generates the being that is monster.

In the movie, we see a wide variety of unusual creations. From dwarfs to the giant to a man, with a body full of hair to the heaviest man. These beings, even though they are a creation of some kind of intervention, are seen throughout the ancient texts but still, they are not accepted as they are the minorities spread in various parts of the country. But when they are brought together, they become beings of atrocity, because they are beings that bring forth a change.

3) The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis. 'The monster always escapes because it refuses easy categorization.' They are beings that with their forms threaten to smash distinction. Monsters appear at the time of problems and turn them into extremes. They escape the sealed path and explore new ways of exploring the world. Due to this they break apart old traditions and bring forth new ways. 'In the face of the monster, scientific inquiry and its ordered rationality crumble' (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 40).

Cohen says that,

"... they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration." (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 40)

In the movie, there have been instances where these 'freaks' or monsters have been verbally and physically abused. They were seen as the bringers of crisis or bad luck. Before they were brought together, they had hidden as they believed that they do not belong to this world. As they started to come out of their closets, they have to face the difficulties of acceptance and achievements. There has been the influence of media where they are addressed as 'help' 'fraud' 'freaks' 'humbug' etc. At the end of the movie we can see that the circus has been burned down during the fight between the public and these so-called freaks. In a sense, these monsters have created a new wave of change in society. This new adventure was not easily accepted by a society which led to protests, fights, and later on burning of the circus.

4) The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference.

A monster is a being that is totally different from us. They are the Other or third term supplement. The difference in monsters' bodies tends to differ in different circumstances. One kind of a difference leads to another making them a part of a Venn diagram to make them seem different. Making this difference makes them less guilty in their action in the name of exterminating the monster.

Cohen says that,

By revelling that difference is arbitrary and potentially free-floating, mutable rather than essential, the monster threatens to destroy not just individual member of a society but the very cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted and allowed. (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 45)

The same goes in the movie. Being the Other they are treated totally differently from the normal society. In this society where they are unnatural, treating them cruelly is seen as a part of heroics in which they believe they are protecting the society from these monsters. Even Barnum who is brought up in society is considered an Other as he indulges with these monsters. It is the social aspect of life that is affected. By revealing that these differences are normal in a sense they are making a legacy to format a new history. They believe themselves to be warriors and they are glorious.

5) The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible.

Monsters stand as a warning for exploring the unknown. They are best to be contained in the isolated and domestic

sphere rather than abroad. These beings are born for different purposes in their life.

... monsters born of political expedience and self-justifying nationalism function as living invitations to action, usually military (invasions, usurpations, colonizations), the monster of prohibition polices the borders of the possible, interdicting through its grotesque body some behaviors and actions, envaluing others. (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 48)

The monster embodies those sexual practices that must not be committed, or that may be committed only through the body of the monster. She and Them!: the monster enforces the cultural codes that regulate sexual desire. (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 47)

These warnings are given with the image of a monster born with such a character. They become the rule that should not be crossed.

In the movie, these monsters are beings that are used to hide their children from. They become the epitome of something that needs to be feared about. The monster is the only nature that society sees. They are the beings that cause destruction and throw off society. In the movie, it creates a rebellion against the circus as they are the coming together of all these beings together. The first classification of monsters is towards the class difference in which any kind of relationship with a lower class being is considered a crime. Then comes the unnatural beings. Their life as a whole has been unnatural as it comes.

6) Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire.

The same monster that makes us fear is also a kind of desire. They are the element of 'escapist fantasies' (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 49).

'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' (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 49). Monsters become the beings that awaken the pleasures of the body, which were considered the most frightening. They are the beings that are said to be born from the innermost desires of humans. 'The monstrous lurks somewhere in that ambiguous, primal space between fear and attraction...' (Weinstock, "Monster Theory", 51). Monsters are beings that enable the formation of all kinds of identities- personal, national, cultural, economic, sexual, psychological, etc.

In the movie, even though the monsters are affected by society they become the reason for their true happiness. Coming together, finding a space for themselves to call home they are free from all the expectations of society. They are free to be who they are within the walls. They were handcuffed by society before but soon they found the keys to their happiness even though with reluctance. It is their happiness that is spread throughout the movie. Society does not accept such beings to be happy because it is what they

can never be. They are the ‘normal’ people in their own way.

- 7) The Monster Stands at the Threshold... of Becoming. ‘Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return.’(Weinstock, “Monster Theory”,52)

No matter how we try to hide these beings in the dark they are the ones who would come back with their own strength. At that time, we the ‘humans’ are the ones who have to answer their questions, as they have the knowledge of our history, human knowledge, and discourse on their own self. They question the already existing cultural aspect in the society and how they have misinterpreted it.

In the movie, they are able to stand on their own feet and build a home that is of their own beings. They make sure they have a place in society as they are beings that have lived the life of humans and a monster. These people have much more knowledge about life even though they have been rejected by their own families. They never question their creation but accept it and live with it in their life. They are the bravest people that we have witnessed.

Conclusion

Studies on the movie under analysis have not focused in understanding the monsters in terms of true human values. Therefore it is called ‘a celebration of humanity’. Being a monster is from the perspective of others; never does a person become a monster by himself. Monsters turn into true monsters as they are cornered into doing the unexplained. It makes them bringers of crisis and so dangerous to society. They become the beings of fear. The movie *The Greatest Showman* is quite amenable to a social and cultural analysis using Cohen’s theory.

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