

Photography essays - monstrous imagery



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Chasing the Dragon: Capturing the Significance of the Monstrous

Chapter One: What is a monster?

There are perhaps two kinds of monster: the monster that sprung from our own hands and changed into something uncontrollable, and the monster that is experienced as alien, preternatural, generally an unfathomable creature, and frightening because of its mystery. It is impossible to decide which is more frightening, since both suggest an Other, something resistant to human power, and while the first kind draws attention to man's mortal limits and potential for self-destruction, the second highlights the extent of human ignorance and insignificance in relation to external forces. Both kinds of monster, however, share an ability to induce extraordinary fear, and both have a solid foundation in mythology, since man has always feared what he could not explain and has translated his fears into metaphorical shapes of fearful creatures since time began. Both man-made and alien monsters, too, share a self-referential semiotic structure in literature, art, psychology and mythology. In the history of the human subconscious, fears have always preceded monsters.

Monsters are representative. They are representative of all the things we are unable to control, and the uncontrollable fear that is generated by these things. They are representative, then, on more than one level, as they are simultaneously our fear *and* the object of our fear. All ("bad") monsters are synonymous with fear - *our* fear and as such the monstrosity we perceive in even "external" beasts like aliens, dragons, sea monsters and circus freaks, is something generated by us, the beholder. They are also representative of

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anything threatening, as Robert Thomas' definition in "The Concept of Fear," explains - "not only what is likely to threaten life, injure our bodies, cause physical pain, which is seen as 'dangerous' or 'threatening.'

The monster retains an almost unique power to represent, subjectively, something different to whoever beholds it. But its representative power operates on a universal level too: in Judith Halberstam's book *Skin Shows* (1995) she seems to suggest that the semiotics of a monster's meaning should maintain a certain fluidity, as its interpretation is so unstable, and contingent upon social, political and religious climates. Halberstam expounds on the role of literary and cinematic texts in channelling our fear of monsters, since "the production of fear in a literary text (as opposed to a cinematic text) emanates from a vertiginous excess of meaning" While one might expect to find that cinema multiplies the possibilities for monstrosity, the nature of the visual always, in fact, operates a kind of self censorship, whereby our visual register reaches a limit of visibility surprisingly fast. It is our imaginations that make the *invisible* nature of monsters, the very essence of their unknown-ness, so enduringly frightening. As Paul Yoder eloquently expresses it,

"What we cannot see frightens us most. Reason competes with imagination to establish boundaries around the external stimuli and, thus, clearly establishes a means of remaining separated from that which harms us. But reason will ultimately prove ineffective without a frame of reference grounded in a context of physical reality to establish a solidified boundary between the real and the unreal, the natural and the supernatural. Without this definitive context, reason is unable to mark the separation between two

modes of perception, so as an audience or a reader, we are forced to hesitate, resulting in a moment of suspense, the first stage in externalizing the feeling and producing an externally constructed emotion of fear.”

The monster walks the line between life and death, and the most terrifying monsters transform others into fearful beings too, removing their essence, or everything they cherished. Medusa, for example, had no natural animation herself, just wriggling snakes that performed a grotesque impersonation of the natural and winsome effects of wind through hair. In some ways she epitomises monstrousness, as her fearful power was an extension of her fearful quality – her deathly stillness. Medusa, of course, used petrification to turn others to stone, and inadvertently brought about her own end through the reflection of her enemy’s shield. Thus Medusa is a warning to all monsters: eventually, the supernatural force of the deadly stillness will be turned onto itself by the superior power of animated defences of the natural.

My aim in this study is to juxtapose the metaphorical “ monsters” that have permeated our language and mythologies with the visual interpretations of the monstrous, as it has been translated into photography and the assumptions of pop culture. The ultimate goal in this study is to arrive at some definition of “ monster” based on a societal interpretation of the outsider and examine how fear of the “ Other” is internalized. It is the manner that we, as a society, perceive our “ Other”, which will ultimately control the paths our visual representations of monsters take, as mythical archetypes within the horrors of our minds.

Chapter Two: Creating and defining the monstrous: the codes of photography

Monsters have long been obeisant to a certain visual code, albeit a very difficult one to define. Sometimes they are brightly coloured, sometimes scaled up or down, humanoid, hairy, toothy, slimey, legless, millipedal, whatever they look like, they look exaggerated, surprising, startling, unexpected. If we read about them, the mental image is a perplexingly blurry one; if we see them in horror movies, their most frightening moment is always just before they appear. Monsters vary so wildly in their representation because the visual properties of the monster are actually incidental to its fear-producing power. The monster can look like anything, the more surprising the better – a chair; a beachball; the Prime Minister – because the fear is our fear, and the fear *created the monster*: it was there first, deep inside us. The visual arrangement of the monster is merely a trigger to that primal fear.

It seems to me that the writer with the most monstrous pen is Herman Melville, and the photographer with the most monstrous eye is Ansel Adams. Both contrast light and dark incessantly: for Melville with his extraordinary white whale, pallor is something to be afraid or suspicious of, perhaps even suggesting the diabolical. Whiteness is both, “ the most meaningful symbol of spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian deity,” and “ the intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind”. In a world controlled by Christian orthodoxy, the whiteness of purity, the shroud, and death, lead to life everlasting. On the sea, however, white represents a loss

of hope, for it “ shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation.”

A photograph remains an abstraction, even in its most primitive state as a sort of document or record and Adams’s skill lies in his ability to conceal his role as contriver, abstracter, imaginist, within the rhetorical apparatus of scientifically objective reality. He shuttles, perpetually, between the reality of texture and the affectation of *emphasised* texture; his is a statement about the difference between something existing and something being noticed, which partly accounts for his famous privileging of black and white. When unnecessary distractions arise from ranges of colours are removed, the impact of an image can be multiplied.

In efforts to define- or perhaps *contain* it, the practice of photography has been laboriously distinguished from other visual forms and practices, particularly painting and film. Adams is interesting because he refuses the forces of classification, not static enough for photography, too theatrical and contrived for regular representational convention. In the article “ Looking at Photographs,” Victor Burgin writes:

“ The signifying system of photography, like that of classical painting, at once depicted a scene and the gaze of the spectator, an object and a viewing subject.... Whatever the object depicted, the manner of its depiction accords with laws of geometric projection which imply a unique “ point of view”. It is the position of point-of-view, occupied in fact by the camera, which is bestowed upon the spectator....”

Even more emphatically than painting, photography maps an animated, infinitely subjective and ever changing world into a two dimensional, static image of a finite moment. Classical and highly stylised black and white images, such as those that have made Adams most famous, take the abstraction one step further by removing all colour from our inescapably multicoloured world. What remains is one of two things which really amount to the same: an alien - monstrous - landscape, or our own landscape from an Other's point of view.

The use of colour in photography has been shunned repeatedly by many purists working to a realist agenda. Compared to black and white it is considered more superficial, crassly realistic, mundane, less abstract, ultimately less artistic. Altering light and shade in the darkroom enables a degree of artistic dishonesty. The camera may not lie, but the photographer very frequently does, especially the photographer with an artistic agenda. Whenever he dodges shadow detail and fires up highlights, increasing contrast or altering tone, Adams exercises and demonstrates a contrivance that amounts to a sort of visual poetry. Adams is on record confessing to severe manipulation of *Moonrise over Hernandez*, but more significant still is probably his interest in striking, unusual, dehumanised scenes and subjects which lend themselves so well to monochrome representation. These subjects I would characterise as "monstrous": their stillness the only feature protecting us from terror - the brink of fear kept just out of reach by the amazing stationary quality of the images. Monsters are frightening when they are animated, but this is also when they are at their weakest, as we

have seen. Adams' works have the frozen, petrified, feel of a final visual imprint of a paralysed, dying beast.

The night scene is extraordinarily affecting, partly because, as a genre, it is most famous for high contrast monochrome. It is the only time in our world really does seem black and white, so the image is almost an accurate representation, *but not quite*. It is the slightly alienating quality of this image, the slight lack of fit between representation and mental expectation, which makes it so beautiful. Many of Adams's images are arresting because they are tuned to the timing of our mental calculations: they are ready to predict and confound our expectations by subtle acts of artifice and they play constantly, and good-naturedly, on the moment of our realisation. The monochrome of Adams is not a symptom of self-aggrandising pride in his iconic "artist" status, but a device to play with emphasis and expectation, a way of forcing us to look at the world in different ways.

The British scientist and psychology pioneer, Sir Francis Galton (1822-1911), was responsible for many studies we might now associate with "monstrous" photography in a different sense. Galton generated controversy in many ways even in his own time; as an early eugenicist he was the first to study the 'nature-nurture' debate through the use of real pairs of twins.

Galton's Eugenics experiments in the 1870s had the ostensible aim of "improving" the human race by selecting individuals with desirable traits and encouraging them to breed, while simultaneously "to check the birth-rate of the Unfit." Perhaps his most famous means of studying behavioural traits across different social demographics was photography.

Galton aimed to surpass individual behavioural idiosyncrasies and arrive at generalisations about human behaviour, through a crudely arranging a number of photographs into a composite. His most famous study of this sort aspired to investigating criminal behaviour - and this was the study which most clearly demonstrated both a fear of and damaging assumptions made about Victorian society's " Other": the monstrous convict. Galton took a number of face-shots of men convicted of murder, manslaughter and other serious crimes, then carefully printed them all to the same dimensions. By photographing a number of them, then carefully aligning the images onto the same photographic plate, a composite photograph was assembled.

Rather than Galton's enabling him to produce a clear image of a criminal face, Galton's results produced pictures that of men with a generic kind of working class look. Galton's " monster" seemed to be created from the false confidence of new technologies and that afforded by the new shamanism surrounding his " science". His results seemed to show that any member of the ' lower classes' was a potential criminal and advised that selective breeding could be used to replace the lower classes by those from superior stock. An extension of the same reasoning and method, and extraordinary bias towards the visual, could come to the conclusion that some racial groups were inherently superior to others, and indeed this was what happened, as Eugenics, while starting as an attempt to scientifically improve the human condition was of course later used to support Nazi policies of extermination of Jews, gypsies and others.

Photography theory has traced something undeniably monstrous integral to the abstract, literary property of the photograph. After his father's death,
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Paul Auster was compelled to sort through the house full of the objects left behind. Despite the fact that all his father's artefacts, everything from an electric razor, to tools and cancelled cheques—bore a kind of ghostly trace of their owner, Auster prefers to focus on the photographs he finds stored in a cupboard in the bedroom. It is as if he hopes they might reveal some information about his father that unusually real, through their power to capture his image. Roland Barthes's work *Camera Lucida* affords Auster's grim quest with some context. After a determined effort to define photography "in itself," the second half of his book sees Barthes turning to a kind of personal dialogue with a photograph of his recently deceased mother. While sorting a stack of photographs of his mother, Barthes notices that "none of them seemed to me really 'right'" that is, although he "recognized a region of her face, a certain relation of her nose and forehead, the movement of her arms, her hands" Barthes can't "find" his mother's essential "being" in any of her pictures. Barthes's task then changes from sorting photos to "looking for the truth of the face I had loved" in the stack of images. There is something intrinsically *alien* about the meaning of photographs, and to this extent they are monsters to us, and our memories.

Auster, too, seems to be seeking "truth" in the photographs of his lost parent. He writes, "It seemed that they could tell me things I had never known before, reveal some previously hidden truth" Unlike Barthes, who is looking for something he knows about his mother but can't find in her images, Auster hopes that his father's photographs will betray some evidence of a private man, some part of his father that had been carefully

concealed from the world. The “very essence” of photography, according to Barthes, is that it shows what has been.

Chapter three: Reacting to monstrous imagery

Many spaces are terrifying to us, and soon become populated by “monsters” of the cosmic psyche. The arctic wasteland is crawling with yetis, every dark corner has a ghost, and every desert is thick with monstrous mirages, terrifying to the extent that they represent a void, a nothingness, at best, the fear of the unknown. They are alien landscapes- mammals struggle to survive, and the plants we do find in deserts barely seem designed to aid our survival. There is a certain security about filling the void with sign-posts, even if, in the ultimate post-modern irony, those signs only point to themselves. In this sense the iconography of the desert shares a metaphorical shape with Barthes’ self-reflexive definition of photography; it is as if the horrors of the desert, the horrors of the self-created metaphor, and the fearful void constructed by the photograph that signifies nothing are all connected and perhaps even the same. Auge’s words explain the problem of imaging the desert,

“If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity then a space which cannot be defined as relational, historical or concerned with identity is a non place.”

The spaces which negate are unbearable and must be somehow psychically redeemed. Laura Cinti attempts this by attaching hair to the spineless cactus, for the cactus itself has of course become yet another iconographic space of complicated nothingness. Cinti’s work, if it demonstrates or states

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anything, demonstrates or states the extent to which the desert symbolism has been anxiously harvested from the plant. What looks like nothingness is mere misunderstanding, and what looks like improvement and liberation is naïve, appalling, abuse.

Yet we are all guilty of some of this. None of us can bear the silence of the desert or make sense of the mute perpendicular. Michael Fried's work in *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration* makes much of the damaging and paradoxical symmetry that exists between the hand and the eye. That is, the way we see the world is affected by the way we recreate it, but the way we reproduce it damages the way we see it. The whole theory operates on a larger metaphor controlled by vertical/horizontal semiotics. The desert cactus image is always a vertical formation on a horizontal axis: the opposition of life and death is present visually and immediately. But the desert is unique, as a horizontal space. We would normally expect a great expanse of flat ground to be bursting with life and promise, to oppose and define the sky. The desert, however, rejects life. Those who think cacti ugly must perceive them as canker sores, signifiers only of scorched earth. The desert space is an inversion of all that we, as animals, have come to associate with health and life. The cacti in the vista, then, can be interpreted in two almost completely opposing ways. Either they are the anti-tree, the anti-life, *or* they are vegetation and water, albeit in a different form- and consequently just as alienated from the sandy plains as we are.

Despite the obvious oppositions, the desert is more like the sea than it appears. While the water reflects light, the desert reflects heat- and the art historian Michael Fried cites reflections as the connection between the inner

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and the outer. To the extent that they are concerned with reflections, indoor and outdoor scenes are treated as having the same character and affect. I feel sure the notion can equally be applied to a pair of iconographically opposing images. Interior and exterior scenes are, to Fried, clear metaphors for the inside and outside of the body, so perhaps the “ external” hostility of the desert might set alongside the “ internal” of the humane well-vegetated landscape. Perhaps the images represent a horizontality that reflect along a flat axis. The reflection must always be slightly imperfect for the object to be seen at all- and it is interference on the vertical axis that disrupts the reflection and reveals the illusion. In the desert, this interference is embodied by cacti, which are surely the most authentic part of the landscape.

Conclusions

We have seen how monsters can be created and destroyed, and discovered that it is more interesting to explore their legacy as metaphorical forces in our language and psyches. In closing, I would like to look briefly at the example of Narcissus, whose monstrous transformation into a flower is richly representative and relevant, and resonates with much of the discourse surrounding art and spectatorship today. Turning to ancient mythology, we often find a wealth of instances where *change* itself is the terrifying aspect of the monstrous. Ovid’s metamorphoses provide a catalogue of such stories, and, more interestingly, represent the different ways that the metaphors of monstrosity are used to generate fear and alienation.

Narcissus and Echo is a particularly rich example, among several in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, of a beautiful youth who died as a result of spurning sex. In Ovid's retelling of the myth, Narcissus is the son of Cephissus, the river god and the nymph Liriope. The seer Tiresias foretold that the child " would live to an old age if it did not look at itself." While many nymphs and girls fell in love with him, he rejected them all. One such nymphs, Echo, became so distraught that she withdrew to a lonely spot and faded until all that was left was a plaintive whisper. Meanwhile the rejected girls' prayers for vengeance reached the goddess Nemesis, who caused Narcissus to fall in love with his own reflection. He remained transfixed by his reflection until he died. It is possible that the connection between Echo and Narcissus was an invention of Ovid, since there do not seem to be any earlier instances of the Narcissus myth which incorporate Echo.

This myth lends itself to extensive and adventurous literary interpretation. When Narcissus eliminated the distance between his image and its reflection by touching the water with his face, the distance disappeared and took the image with it, as the water rippled and broke the reflected into pieces. The desire, however, remained, not disappearing with any distance covered by his attempts to escape it, and his difficulty with his passion for himself was not solved. The story is compelling to artists because it is about the power of sight, its dangers and its rewards. For Narcissus, salvation is possible as extension of distance, not as elimination of it. If he can cease to see his own image he will be saved but is precisely the need to see his face that is compelling and destroying him. As Angel Angelov writes,

“ Narcissus’ face is a metonymy of integrity, enraptured by its reflected self. The general paradox upon which the story is built comprises various details – in this case, the simultaneity of shapelessness and fixed contour – Narcissus’ image on the water surface was cut like chiseled Paros marble. Certainly, we can think about Alexandrian influence (getting petrified because of amazement) but also about the Roman practice of sculpting, creating firm outlines. However, the presence in a definite social environment considered eternal, is a characteristic that is contrary to the out-social transience of Narcissus’ reflection.”

In “ Narcissus: the mirror of the text.” Philip Hardie explores various ideas around Narcissus as a post-modern signifier. The surface of water, that fragile barrier, becomes a Lacanian mirror and operates as an interface between Self and Other, dividing reality and illusion, as Narcissus, just like the reader, confronts an image that can never be real, but representative only of the viewer’s unfulfilled desire. Hardie argues that the story of Narcissus and Echo is Ovid’s cautionary treatise on the dangerously deluding, deceptively subjective property of sight and sound. Narcissus as “ Lucretian fool” and “ Lucretian lover” will be the victim of “ simulacral delusions,” a frustrated lover situated ironically in a bountiful, pastoral landscape filled with false promise; inappropriately wistful even after his acknowledgement that the Other can only ever be a hollow reflection of the Self. According to this reading, all hope of something extraneous to the self, something objective, to love and life, is prohibited by this tale’s morality. The story is essentially tragic and ontologically didactic: indeed Ovid’s Theban histories are infused with the theme of empty signifiers and the dangers of

useless introspection. Indeed the story's equation of the bewitching power of sight with the sight of oneself has inspired recent writers to construct a kind of literary psychosis to describe the subjective subject,

“ The eye would be about the ‘ I,’ the subject, part of a monocular system perpetuating an illusion of wholeness, an Imaginary dyad, a tradition of the eye/’I’ that would move through Kant, Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty, while the ear would be aligned with the other, with a fragmentary existence cut across by the Symbolic, by having subjectivity determined by and through an other,”

It has been said that the product of every metamorphosis is an absent presence, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the Narcissus/Echo episode, a story irresistible to artists transfixed with the metaphysical paradoxes and word games.

One artist well known for his precocious interest in semiotics was Nicholas Poussin. Poussin's Echo and Narcissus depicts, unusually, a trio of figures in a triangular formation. Narcissus lies prone across the base, limp but muscular, his face a mask of sadness, his eyes empty. Echo behind him resembles a Greek statue, History, perhaps, again posing strangely in a balleric semaphor of sorrow. In fact, for all the story's appeal Echo and Narcissus poses an obvious challenge to artists: Echo is said to have wasted away until only her voice was left. But a voice is rather difficult to represent in painting. From the outset, then, the story demands that mimetic pictorial realism must be suspended. The story gives artists like Poussin free license to create symbolic, literary pieces, with figures whose bodies are sculpted

and whose faces are masks. We have seen how the image lends itself to ontological paradoxes, and it could be argued that the putti, the third figure in this image, is a kind of representation of the artist's presence inside his own artificial world. The putti carries a flaming torch, and stands next to a spear, clear indicators, Michael Fried would argue, of the artist's palette and paintbrush.

The art historian Michael Fried's writing synchronises very well with the Echo and Narcissus myth, as it could well be characterized as the doomed ambition to structure impossible desire. Poussin's works present a displaced metaphor for the mental and physical effort of painting. Thus Fried's theory takes the anti-mimetic definition of realism one step further- although painting does not have to relate to what it depicts, it will resist immediacy, but relate in specific indirect ways to the person who depicts it. For Poussin, the impossible, yet desired, merger is one of inscriber and inscribed; for Ovid it is one of reader and listener. An erotics of the word and image is then as inevitable as one of ear and eye, and we find the transformation that characterizes the monster has as much to do with desire as it has to do with fear.

This notion is borne out by Kristeva's definition of the abject. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines abject as " Brought low, miserable; craven, degraded, despicable, self abasing," describing abjection as a " state of misery or degradation," definitions which can be understood more fully through their expression: religious hatred, incest, women's bodies, human sacrifice, bodily waste, death, cannibalism, murder, decay, and perversion

are aspects of humanity that society considers abject. As Barbara Creed sees it,

“ The place of the abject is where meaning collapses, the place where I am not. The abject threatens life, it must be radically excluded from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self.”

Hence the abject is something we deliberately exclude to preserve our illusion of a meaningful world.

In *Powers Of Horror: An Essay On Abjection*, Kristeva identifies that we first experience abjection at the point of separation from the mother. This idea is drawn from Lacan's psychoanalytical theory as she identifies abjection as symptomatic of a revolt against that which gave us our own existence. As Samantha Pentony explains it,

“ At this point the child enters the symbolic realm, or law of the father. Thus, when we as adults confront the abject we simultaneously fear and identify with it. It provokes us into recalling a state of being prior to signification (or the law of the father) where we feel a sense of helplessness. The self is threatened by something that is not part of us in terms of identity and non-identity, human and non-human.”

Kristeva definition of the abject aligns it to what I have described as the “ Other”,

“ The object has only one quality of the object and that is being opposed to I.”

There will always be a connection between the object and the subject: they define one another. When we find ourselves flailing in the world of the object, we lose our sense of subjectivity, our imaginary borders disintegrate, and the object becomes a real threat because there is no exterior - no sense of reality or self - to neutralise the threat or remind us of its illusory nature. So Kristeva's theory of abjection is concerned with those suspended realms, changing forms, states of transition or transformation,

“ The object is located in a liminal state that is on the margins of two positions. This state is particularly interesting to Kristeva because of the link between psychoanalysis and the subconscious mind.”

Like Narcissus facing his reflection, or Medusa facing hers, we are attracted and repelled simultaneously by the object. It induces nausea in our bodies and fear in our hearts. For Kristeva, these feelings arise from memories, specifically the first memory of separation from our mother. There is a thrill about horror and the macabre, and monsters represent ourselves in a state of change - when Kristeva describes one aspect of the object as 'jouissance' she suggests that through exciting in the object,

“ One thus understands why so many victims of the object are its fascinated victims - if not its submissive and willing ones.” And furthermore, “ The object is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them,” The object, then, the

monstrous, is *metaphorically* powerful as a force of manipulation, even more sinister in its unknowable nature, because we suspect it is up to no good. Yet for all its subversion, perversion and fear, we are excited by the abject, drawn to the monstrous, and we always will be – because it comes from inside us.

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