



Review of *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader*

Shane Brown

University of East Anglia, S.Brown@uea.ac.uk

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Abstract

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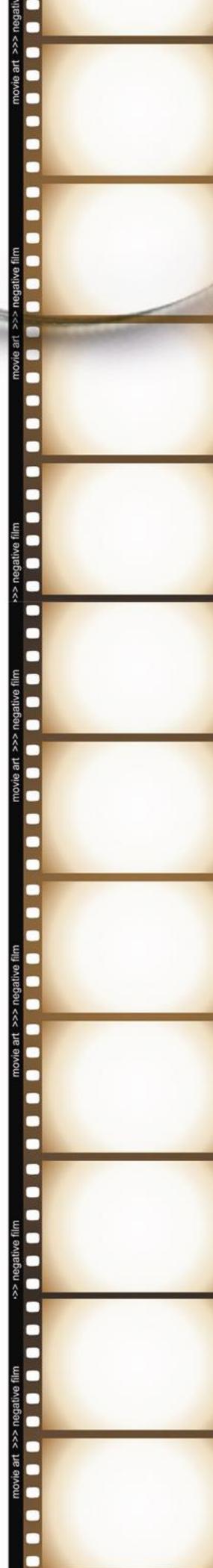
Keywords: Horror film, gender, sexuality, monsters in cinema



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Review of Marina Levina, Diem-My T. Bui Eds., *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. xix + 323 pp, ISBN 9781441178398 (hbk).

Reviewed by: Shane Brown, University of East Anglia, UK

At the beginning of their introduction to *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader*, Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui argue that monstrous narratives of the first decade of the 21st century “represent collective social anxieties over resisting and embracing change” and are a “response to a rapidly changing cultural, social, political, economic, and moral landscape” (pp. 1-2). The essays in this new edited collection are, therefore, designed to address how monstrosity has come to represent the fears that the new century has brought with it, from terror threats through to changes in our identifications with race, gender and sexuality. Together, the essays argue that images of monstrosity, and monstrosity itself, are required in order to help society move forward through this period of change, fear and flux.

The book is divided into three distinct sections. The first of these, *Monstrous Identities*, examines monsters as representations of Otherness within race, gender and sexuality. Susana Loza’s chapter, *Playing alien in post-racial times*, contains perhaps the most straight-forward argument, and yet also commands the reader’s attention. Her reading of *District 9* as representing the racial issues at play both in the Apartheid *and* Post-Apartheid era in South Africa is intriguing, as is the suggestion that “we are still re-enacting settler myths” (p64). Interestingly, Florian Grandena also talks about regressive attitudes in his discussion of the *Twilight* films, making for a rather neat and somewhat compelling (if perhaps unintentional) link between these two key chapters.

The second section of the book, *Monstrous Technologies*, consists of a more disparate group of chapters that don't hold together quite as well. There seems to be no central theme or methodology at play here. Whereas the first part of the book focuses on the psychoanalytical and representational approach, this second section not only widens the types of approaches, but also moves beyond film and television to also include the internet, video games, and the "zombification" caused by mining for minerals in the Congo that are then used in the production of digital technologies. Each separate chapter works well, in particular Jaroslav Švelch's chapter on video games, but the themes are too disparate to work well as a cohesive whole.

In contrast, the final part, *Monstrous Territories*, works better, dealing with "anxieties and fears over physical, economic, and political boundaries in the globalized world" (p10). Here, then, are chapters linking the monstrous to issues ranging from the financial crisis (in Ryan Gillespie's *Monstrous Capital*) to, inevitably, 9/11. Mark K Bloodsworth-Lugo and Carmen R Lugo-Lugo's chapter on American anxieties in a post-9/11 world is key here as it explores the notion of the monster being "among us" and yet unrecognisable in the movies *Flightplan*, *Lakeview Terrace* and *The Brave One*.

If there is a fault with this collection of essays, then it is that it tries to cover too much ground and yet fails to comment on many key texts. The *Monstrous Technologies* section in particular moves away from traditional film and television texts, and includes chapters on the internet, video games and even the production of digital technologies. Perhaps this is hardly surprising as it is becoming more and more obvious that "film and television studies" will continue to morph into "media studies" as technologies continue to overlap. However, this all-inclusiveness has resulted in a collection which dwells too much on some texts or genres, but

avoids others completely. For example, there are numerous chapters dealing with key works featuring zombies and vampires, and yet there is nothing here about the monsters at the heart of the torture porn cycle of films that were so popular and influential in the second half of the 2000s. Likewise, television seems particularly under-represented here, especially key shows such as *Jericho* (2006-2008), *Supernatural* (2005-) and *Dexter* (2006-2013), all of which deal with monstrosity in very different ways.

These issues aside, there is much to recommend here. While the ambitious scope of the collection means it stumbles and falters occasionally (especially for an audience purely interested in film and television), at least it *is* ambitious. The book does itself an injustice by calling itself a “reader” when, in fact, it is more than just a collection of articles bundled together as a one-stop book for students who want to carry one tome home from the library instead of a dozen. The editors have clearly worked hard to present a collection of essays in such a way that the book has a through-narrative, and for that they should be congratulated.