



Our Monsters, Ourselves

“We live in a time of monsters.

Monsters provide a key to understanding the culture that spawned them.”

—Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*

The word monster can mean many things. It can mean the liminal, the in-between, the transformed—vampires, zombies, the undead. It can mean people who have gone too far, transgressed our most closely held beliefs, people who have committed crimes so great we don’t want to view them as one of us any longer. It can mean the other, the stranger, the alien—what we don’t want to see ourselves as, but what keeps trying to come inside, what we fear lurks just beyond the conscious. And it can mean the beasts, the things that go bump in the night, the fears we feel for nature, technology, the unknown, what might really be out there, and what all these things mean for our survival and identity.

This course will explore all these versions of the monstrous. What do our imaginary monsters—the undead, the cryptids—teach us about ourselves? Starting with Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* at the turn of the last century down the mutants of the atomic age, we’ll explore what these creatures have meant to culture. From Humbert Humbert to Woody Allen, we’ll ask together: what do we do with art that centers the monstrous? How ought we to engage with great art made by terrible people? How has the monstrous been depicted in art, and is it worth the cost to the artist or audience?

Why is it so tempting to label the other, the foreign, the different as monstrous? When something or someone refuses to be contained, how does culture respond to these ruptured categories? As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen says, “Monsters ask us how we perceive the world. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them.” This semester, we’ll ask ourselves the same.

Texts (subject to change)

Woody Allen. *Manhattan*.

Octavia Butler. *Bloodchild and Other Stories*.

Ishiro Honda. *Godzilla*.

Carmen Maria Machado. *In the Dream House*.

Vladimir Nabokov. *Lolita*.

Yeon Sang-ho. *Train to Busan*.

Safiya Sinclair. *Cannibal*.

Bram Stoker. *Dracula*.

James Whale. *Frankenstein*.