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IAH 207: Monstrosity

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Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s work, “Monster Culture”, describes seven theses that aid in the discussion of monstrosity. Here, we’ll focus on the fourth of seven with the longhand, ‘The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference’. It goes on to describe how ‘monstrosity is difference made flesh’. What defines the monster, in this case, is its difference from the norm; it’s alterity. As characteristics of the monster are illustrated, truths about the culture in which it originated come to light. When the other is hypersexualized, it implies a normal range of sexuality. In the lens of this thesis, monsters are painted with a brush of alterity, and in the definition is the implicit description of the non-monstrous that can generally be understood as culturally normal. In this way, differences are leveraged and sometimes exaggerated to further marginalize the objects of description.

In David Cronenberg’s 1986 remake of the film The Fly, the protagonist Seth Brundle is a scientist who invents a way to teleport inorganic—then organic—matter from one ‘telepod’ to another. Everything goes horribly wrong when he attempts to teleport himself but gets genetically assimilated with a fly that had wandered into the teleporter with him. In time he morphs both physically and mentally into that of a horrific fly-like humanoid, but before it becomes apparent how physically abject his body is going to get, there’s an instructive 8-minute sequence where we’re shown ways in which Seth is becoming increasingly different. Starting at about 41 minutes in, we see him perform an impressive gymnastics routine that showcases his extraordinary fitness that ends in shared looks of awe by both Veronica and himself. Then at 44 minutes in, you see them both visiting a coffee shop on holiday. It’s apparent he’s losing impulse control as he exhibits compulsive talking to the point of talkaholism. At about 45:30 minutes, Veronica is exhausted from what appears to have been a fairly lengthy marathon of sex, she can no longer satisfy his libido. Finally, at 47 minutes in, his impulsiveness and agitation begins to culminate as he attempts to force Veronica to try teleportation for herself, and rants madly about his mythic level of wisdom in an interesting reference to Alexander Pope’s “An Essay on Criticism”. Illustrations of his alterity continue but become less subtle and intertwined with a visibly abject physical state. It’s clear from this sequence that there is a limit to what is considered normal in terms of physical strength, self-control, sexual appetite, and social etiquette: Seth Brundle, or ‘Brundle-fly’, is clearly outside of those culturally understood limits. It is this difference from cultural norms that defines Brundle-fly’s monstrosity as much as it does the norms themselves. This is what Cohen meant by dwelling at the gates of difference, Brundle-fly’s monstrosity exists at the opposing end of these differences.

In H.P. Lovecrafts, “Call of Cthulu”, a man traverses the world to discover what the significance is of strange artifacts and stories, eventually leading him to a first-hand account of a mythical beast named Cthulu, However, there are depictions of black peoples as monstrously different and other throughout the story. They’re referred to as half-casts and pariahs, relating to their lower socioeconomic status compared to the typical white. They’re described as practicing voodoo, which by itself would be insignificant, the monstrous quality of it is that it’s expressly not what the average white person would have practiced. At one point an account is given by an Inspector Legrasse who had been called on to investigate word of voodoo worship deep in the woods of Louisiana. Nearly every description in this account is an attempt to define them as other, as different, and thus the protagonist and the inspector himself—whites—as normal. The locals were described as sex crazed animals. Pairing these descriptions with these people help to marginalize them; their differences made monstrous in these depictions.

Though each case I spoke of has some truth, I think my description of H.P.Lovecraft’s work through the lens of Cohen’s fourth thesis is less thorough than it could be in a more exhaustive analysis. And the examples used for The Fly don’t, in fact, express the height of difference—the height of Brundle-fly’s monstrosity—seen later in the film. But his physical appearance seemed almost too easy—too flat—so I chose to focus on examples that preceded his more visually grotesque depictions. The goal here was to point out how differences are used to place someone or something as other, and how that otherness defines not just the monster, but—implicitly—cultural norms of the society which constructed it.