

Reseñas / Book Reviews

Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture. By ALEXA WRIGHT. London: I. B. Tauris, 2013, p. 214. ISBN: 987-1-78076-336-1. Reviewed by Lin Elinor Pettersson, Universidad de Málaga.

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Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture (2013) is written by the renowned visual artist Alexa Wright and offers an in-depth analysis of embodied otherness and the evolution of human monstrosity from the Middle Ages to the present. The scope of the book is to analyse how the monstrous human body stands a site of ideological inscription of values and norms, which mirrors the social attempt to control and correct deviance. Wright addresses the symbolic power of both physical and behavioural oddities to disclose the somatechnics of the human monster, i. e. the techniques (both *dispositifs* and hard technology) through which the body is formed and transformed. As the title suggests, the primary aim is to dislevel visual representations and interpretations of acceptable human identity by analysing how the

monster attests to the «materialisation of historically and culturally specific discourses and practices» (Sullivan, 2008: 3). Her examination of the concept of the human monster and its transition from corporeal to mental deviance bears on Foucault's critical thoughts on crime and the abnormal. The volume under review is richly illustrated and comprised by seven chapters that pay special attention to the legibility and illegibility of human monstrosity. Carefully structured and arranged in chronological order the chapters build on different but related topics evolving around the visualisation of the monster, which are synthesised through the societal anxiety regarding acceptable human identity and the power to control deviance.

Chapter one, «Monstrous Strangers at the Edge of the World: The

Monstrous Races», explores the symbolic meaning of popularised imagery of hybrid and transgressive illustrations of the Monstrous Races, and Wright (2013: 16) holds that «like all monsters, they reflect cultural values of «otherness»». The author brings Foucault's theories on the abnormal and Levinas' philosophical notion of the other to the forefront, sustaining that the Monstrous Races are far more complex than previously assumed. Contrary to the traditionally held view of representing the xenophobic misinterpretations of early Occidental encounters with distant and exotic cultures, late twenty- and twenty-first century critical readings affirm that it reflects the notion of transgression in terms of a political force; one that defines the self in relation to the norm.

The second chapter, «Blurring the Boundaries of Nature and Culture: Wild People and Feral Children», offers insight into how scientific explanation eclipsed the mythology that surrounded monstrosity in previous centuries. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, theories developed by scientist, such as Carl von Linnaeus, Georges Curvier or Charles Darwin, entailed new understandings of the human being and the categorisation of nature. Subsequently, the idea of the human monster altered. Wright delves into several case studies as she leads the reader towards the conclusion that, although feral children

do not fit the category of monsters, these secluded children «challenge the definition of what it is to be human» (2013: 29).

In chapter three, entitled «Bodies and the Order of Society: The Greek Ideal, the Monster of Ravenna and Physiognomy», the author explores the legibility of the body as it represents a site of cultural inscription of social order, which links the somatic to the social. The author pays special attention to the relationship between corporeality, normalcy, society and astronomy highlighting how the normal body, since the Classical Age, has been portrayed as proportioned and symmetrical. The alignment between the normal body and the natural body mirrors the social structure and order, and as Wright (2013: 52) states: «this image of perfected human being [is] designed to promote the idea of a similarly strong and organized society». In this context, visual forms of the deviant body turn the monstrous body into a signifier of chaos. Against this background, Wright affirms that the rise of physiognomy to decode the correspondence between physical appearance and character. This pseudoscience was assumed to reveal the truth of the inner, or secret self, of the object; an idea that has been systematically applied by scientists to alienate the racial other, and identify signs of criminal identity—ideas that still persist in the contemporary popular imagination.

Chapters four and five are concerned with the nineteenth-century freak show, and Wright illustrates how this peculiar popular entertainment marks the transition of monstrosity from grotesque corporeality to distorted conduct, which she explores in subsequent chapters. M. Tromp and K. Valerius (2008: 4) affirm, «freakishness is made, not just by biology, but with a social function in a social context», and it is highly significant to bear in mind how the freak show was set against the backdrop of industrialisation and imperialism and contemporary values of sameness and standardisation.

«Monsters in Proximity: Freaks and the Spectacle of Abnormality» undertakes the study of how the freak show turned from public spectacle to an institutionalised popular entertainment. Through an analysis of the highly mediated representation of grossly deformed bodies in human exhibitions and *carte de visites*, the author successfully demonstrates how the freak was both a bearer of meaning and signifier of monstrousness. The physiognomic tradition of reading corporeality continued and prospered in the freak show where the legibility and illegibility of the human monster were brought to the forefront. The readability of the freakish and monstrous body is studied in-depth in chapter five, «A Monstrous Subject: Representations of Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man», which

offers a case study of the career of Joseph Merrick. His progress from being a grievously abused human exhibit to be rescued by Frederick Treves who turned him into a medical curiosity and finally social subject. Nonetheless, Wright sustains that he did not escape the imbalance of power. Despite improved life conditions and enhanced human dignity, Wright's thorough analysis of visual representations of Merrick's body in medical photographs and *cartes de visites* reveals how the ambiguous scientific objectification of Merrick's grossly deformed body and subsequent attempts at his social normalisation actually reinforced his abject body.

The last two chapters of the volume build on the discrepancy between the apparently normal physical appearance of serial killers and their perturbed criminal behaviour. The aim of these chapters is to illustrate how the human image represents a «vehicle for expression and communication of social, political and religious beliefs» (Wright, 2013: 123). The chapter entitled, «Monstrous Images of Evil: Picturing Jack the Ripper and Myra Hindley» delves into mediated monstrousness and analyses two of the most famous serial killers in British crime history. The illegibility of the monstrous identity in conjunction with sensational narratives of hideous crimes that circulated in the press, demonstrate how visualisation encompasses the attempt

to contain monstrosity within certain parameters on the one hand, and, the visual significance of monsters in the cultural imagination on the other. This is made evident in chapter seven, «Modern Monsters and the Image of Normality: Ted Bundy and Anders Breivik», in which the author concludes that independently of physical or behavioural monstrosity, the human monster needs to be manifested by appearance. Even though the somatic monstrosity embodied by the Monstrous Races, the Monster of Ravenna or freaks has been relocated to conduct, the need for a tangible presence of the monster persists. Wright insists on how media plays a central role in attributing visually identifiable images to criminals. In this regard, monstrosity is both constructed and deconstructed by cultural and social criteria of normalcy. Through a comparison between media pictures and personal narratives of Ted Bundy and Anders Breivik, Wright contends that the cause of unease is the illegibility of the monsters as their indecipherable images stand in stark contrast to the murderers' personal statements. The unknowability and illegibility of monstrosity causes unease as it «blurs the boundaries between the monstrous “other” and the norm» (Wright, 2013: 155).

In the context of the current critical interest in physical deviance, subjectivity and representations of acceptable human identity in the Humanities and the Social Sciences, *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture* (2013) is a timely and welcome contribution to several disciplines. Up to the moment it has been well received by scholars as R. Garland-Thomson and G. Hainge,¹ with the exception of E. Coolidge Toker who calls for more background research and historical analysis in her review (2013: n. pag). Yet, this has previously been achieved by M. Schildrick in *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (2008).² In this regard, Wright's volume adds to the pre-existing bibliography on monsters. The range of topics that have been explored through the lens of monstrosity in the volume successfully demonstrates how the exceptional body in the popular visual imagination «probe[s] the contours and boundaries of what we take to be human» (Garland-Thomson, 1996: 1). This carefully indexed book serves as an accessible and useful critical tool for postcolonial studies, disability studies, the emerging field of somatechnics, Cultural Studies and literature, in particular, sensation fiction, Gothic and crime fiction.

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1. Reviewed in the journal *Somatechnics*.
 2. Schildrick carries out a close examination of corporeality and embodied selves against the backdrop of normalcy and deviance, applying the theories of Derrida, Levinas, Lacan, Foucault, Irigaray, Butler and Haraway.

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