ANKARA SOSYAL BİLİMLER ÜNİVERSİTESİ
YABANCI DİLLER FAKÜLTESİ

WORLD LANGUAGE STUDIES

Cilt/Volume: IV, Sayı/Issue I, Haziran/June 2024 / E-ISSN: 2791-7770

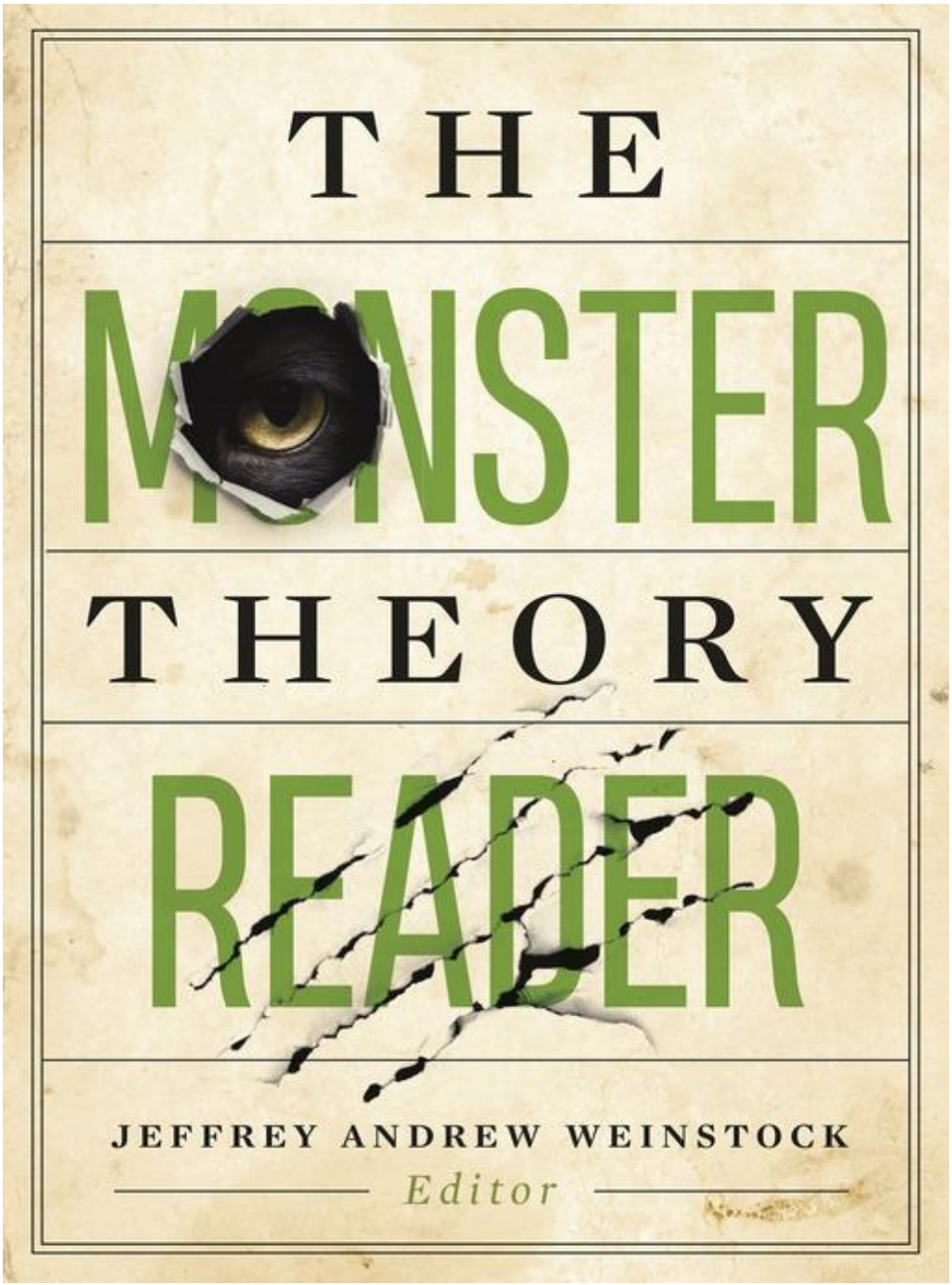
Weinstock, Jeffrey A., ed. (2020) *The Monster Theory Reader* (*Canavar Kuramı Derlemesi*). London: Minnesota UP; 1st edition, 600 p., ISBN:1517905257

Ulaş ÖZGÜN

Research Assistant Dr., Namık Kemal University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature, Tekirdağ, Turkey
ORCID: 0000-0003-3565-8059
Email: uozgun@nku.edu.tr

Teklif Tarihi/Offered:
03.01.2024
Kabul Tarihi/ Accepted:
29.06.2024

Kaynak gösterme/Citation:
Özgün, Ulaş (2023). "Review of *The Monster Theory Reader* (*Canavar Kuramı Derlemesi*)". *World Language Studies* (*WLS*), 4 (1): 119-127



Published by the University of Minnesota Press in 2020 *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, is a significant contribution to the field of monster studies. Its primary strength lies in its compilatory nature, as it brings together seminal articles that explore various manifestations and interpretations of monsters: "One difficulty confronting monster theory researchers, however, has been the dispersed nature of the scholarship – a difficulty exacerbated by the transnational and transdisciplinary nature of the investigation" (Weinstock, 2020, p. 1). As such, this anthology serves as an excellent entry point for academics new to the field and casual readers in providing a concise overview of the developments in the field of monster studies. The book is divided into four broad parts of unequal length and number of articles, aimed at encapsulating the spatio-temporal contexts in which monsters hold significance. These parts are entitled: "Part I. The Monster Theory Toolbox," "Part II. Monsterizing Difference," "Part III. Monsters and Culture," and "Part IV. The Promises of Monsters." This review aims to examine the book section by section and to provide an overview of the book's merits and downsides within the context of its current place in monster studies.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seminal essay titled "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" is aptly positioned between the introduction and the aforementioned chapters, whether consciously or unconsciously. This is because one of Cohen's theses asserts that monsters "Police the Borders of the Possible" (p. 45). For Cohen, the monster's cultural body always resists confinement and, historically, it thrives on notions of difference, fear, and desire, resulting in its continual evolution and inability to be fixed or located at any singular point (Cohen pp. 37-56). Despite the monster's reputation for eluding any definitive definition, each scholarly work is also cursed with the compulsion to present its own interpretation of monstrosity. In the introduction, Weinstock acknowledges that any attempt to define the monster will invariably fall short, lacking inclusivity of various aspects of monstrosity. Consequently, he summarises various approaches, encompassing a wide array of topics and perceptions historically associated with the monsters or those that deviate from conventional norms. These include topics of teratology such as monstrous births, accidents, and genetics; mythology such as monstrous races believed to reside in the peripheral world, mythical creatures, hybrid bodies of various combinations, and cryptids; or psychology which considers individuals who may not exhibit outward deviance but are mentally or

morally divergent from accepted norms (pp. 2-25). Weinstock's main approach to monstrosity, however, is not one of somatic deviance but of moral deviance:

> I would like to suggest that, from a contemporary perspective, human monstrosity is defined most immediately by a lack of sympathy on the part of someone committing or contemplating what are perceived to be physically and/or psychologically harmful acts by an observer who considers those affected as deserving of compassion – particularly if an individual is driven to commit harmful acts by either allegiance to ideology antithetical to that of an observer or sadistic desire. (p. 22)

As is clear, the definition of the monster is severed from their physical deviance, and Weinstock's definition covers monstrosity as a divergence from socio-cultural constructions.

The first section partially focuses on the compilation of articles that, while not directly aligned with monstrosity per se, are integral to the discourse surrounding it, making them essential reads. These include works such as Sigmund Freud's "The Uncanny," Masahiro Mori's "The Uncanny Valley" and Julia Kristeva's "Approaching Abjection." These works delve deeply into psychological, aesthetic, and philosophical aspects when examining the concept of the "other," thereby exploring the boundaries of human experience and perception. They serve as segways leading towards theoretical terminology that are indispensable to monster studies. These psychoanalytical articles are counterbalanced by three other articles that more directly engage with the concept of monsters. Noël Carroll, in his piece "Fantastic Biologies and the Structures of Horrific Imagery," categorises the physical bodies of monsters into distinct tropes: "Fusion, fission, magnification, massification, and horrific metonymy are the major tropes for presenting the monsters of art-horror" (p. 145). Robin Wood analyses monsters as representations of our repressed desires. Manifestations of monstrosity arising out of the conflict between internal and external aspects of humanity are also touched upon by Jack Halberstam who contends that "Victorian monsters produced and were produced by an emergent conception of the self as a body which enveloped a soul, as a body, indeed, enthralled to its soul" (p. 149). This bifurcated

relationship between soul and body influences one another, manifesting in characters such as Jekyll/Hyde and Dorian Gray, where deformed morals are reflected in deformed bodies.

The second section specifically focuses on culturally marginalised people and individuals who have been regarded as monstrous due to their divergence from dominant cultural norms. Consequently, the articles in this section analyse the process of monsterisation and its relationship with power, religion, politics, sexuality, and ideology. The contentious aspects of normality as a means of confinement, which limits the multiplicity of meanings, are scrutinised. Alexa Wright examines the marginalisation of monstrous races in medieval maps, positioning them on the peripheries. In a related vein, Bettina Bildhauer explores the portrayal of Jews in the Middle Ages, emphasising the role of blood – narratives concerning the mutilation of Christian bodies – in their monsterisation. Bildhauer extends this analysis to the perception of women, where menstrual blood and its excess were deemed monstrous: "menstrual blood…is one of the common explanations for 'monstrous births,' given here in a fifteenth-century German translation of the gynaecological treatise *Secreta mulierum*" (Bildhauer, p. 205). In a related context, Barbara Creed's article examines the monstrous perception of women in horror movies through the lens of Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection. Harry Benshoff and Annalee Newitz analyse queer identities and racial others, respectively, as society's monstrous others. Benshoff's article can be divided into two sections: the first deals with the homoerotic representation of vampires and monsters in movies, which he terms "homo-horror" (p. 231), and the second section traces this history back to the Gothic tradition. Annalee Newitz finds in "[z]ombies, vampires, and mummies…signs of great social injustice" and remnants of colonial discourse in these bodies (p. 243). Elizabeth Grosz primarily focuses on freak bodies, their bodily differences, and the various emotions these bodies evoke in both the observer and the observed.

The third section extends the examination of the socio-cultural perception of the monster. The demarcation from the previous chapter lacks substantive meaning as the section does not indicate any significant shift of perspective. The articles within this section continue to explore themes related to social norms and attitudes toward the self and the monstrous body, while also incorporating discussions on technology, migration, and terrorism. Stephen T. Asma posits that monsters captivate humanity because they "can stand as symbols of human vulnerability and crisis, and as such they play imaginative foils for thinking about our own responses to menace" (p. 290). In a sense, monsters can be seen as embodiments of our repressed moral sensibilities controlling us from deviation. Timothy Beal benefits from Freud's uncanny and analyses the monster's fluidity shifting otherness within sameness. Margrit Shildrick argues that monsters jeopardise the self's embodied figure as they "threaten to expose the vulnerability at the heart of the ideal model of body/self" (p. 310). Michael Dylan Foster examines the cultural transformation of Japanese *tanuki*, which mirrors Japan's broader cultural and technological shifts emblematised by the locomotives. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock discusses the crises that emerge when the self's proper body becomes indistinguishable from the monster's body. In contemporary narratives these crises can emerge in four distinct ways:

> through the psychopath (and his first cousin, the terrorist) who lives among us and could be anyone; (2) through the faceless corporation or government agency that finds its impetus in greed and corruption, and sends forth its tendrils into the cracks and crevices of everyday life; (3) through the virus that silently infiltrates and infects the body; and (4) through the conceit of the revenge of an anthropomorphized nature that responds to human despoilment of the environment in dramatic and deadly ways. (p. 359)

Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai delve deeply into the constructed relationship between terrorism and perverse sexuality, serving as a foil to heterosexual patriotism. Jon Stratton's article concludes this section by discussing the zombification of refugees, asylum-seekers and illegal immigrants in various media outlets.

The fourth section comprises four articles that primarily focus on the future of monster studies. These articles strive to dismantle the traditional association of monsters with otherness and instead link them with hope and entanglement, moving away from the connotations of fear and confinement. In this context, Erin Suzuki analyses monster movies set in the Pacific Ocean, advocating for an "openness to alien otherness and the potential for chaos" (p. 435). Anthony Lioi adopts an inclusive ecocritical approach to swamp life. Donna Haraway's seminal article deconstructs the entrenched binaries of self and other, urging a rethinking of what constitutes the monstrous. The final article by Patricia MacCormack examines monsters from a posthuman perspective, highlighting the ways in which monsters challenge and expand our understanding of what is considered human and nonhuman: "This mode of teratological experimentation in thought and practice does not need an actual element of alterity that is not human – animal, machine – but reminds us all that humanity is made up of its own elements of otherness that are repressed, denied, or cataloged" (p. 537). Consequently, the book ends with a vision of the monster characterised by a continuous process of becoming, reformation, and redefinition.

The book is a rich collection of articles that offers multi-faceted perspectives on the concept of the monster. By incorporating various theories and topics ranging from psychoanalytical to ecocritical and posthumanism, it effectively underscores the monster's flexibility and relevance to our evolving corporeal and intellectual tenets. However, the book's extensive coverage of diverse topics is also its weak point. Instead of featuring well-known articles by Freud or Kristeva, the limited space could have been better utilised for more essential and monster-focused articles, such as J.R.R. Tolkien's "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" or Michael Camille's "Rethinking the Canon: Prophets, Canons, and Promising Monsters." In addition, the sections lack an overarching theme, resulting in a fragmented focus. For example, the second and third sections are thematically repetitive, failing to offer fresh perspectives. While the book aspires to provide a comprehensive account of monsters in a timeless fashion, the topics of the articles often overlap, diminishing its effectiveness. Weinstock's suggestion list for further reading is relatively short for a book aiming at a compilatory book on monsters. It also omits significant scholars and their works, such as Lorraine Daston and John Block Friedman, among others. While this collection might serve as a good entry point for casual readers, scholars deeply

engaged in this subject might find more value in other compilations such as *Classic Readings on Monster Theory* (2018), edited by Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel.

REFERENCES

Asma, S. T. (2020). Monsters and the Moral Imagination. In J. A. Weinstock (Ed.), *The Monster Theory Reader* (pp. 289–295). essay, University of Minnesota Press.

Benshoff, H. (2020). The Monster and the Homosexual. In *The Monster Theory Reader* (pp. 226–241). essay, University of Minnesota Press.

Bildhauer, B. (2020). Blood, Jews, and Monsters in Medieval Culture. In J. A. Weinstock (Ed.), *The Monster Theory Reader* (pp. 192–211). essay, University of Minnesota Press.

Carrol, N. (2020). Fantastic Biologies and the Structures of Horrific Imagery. In J. A. Weinstock (Ed.), *The Monster Theory Reader* (pp. 136–148). essay, University of Minnesota Press.

Cohen, J. J. (2020). Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" . In J. A. Weinstock (Ed.), *The Monster Theory Reader* (pp. 37–59). essay, University of Minnesota Press.

Halberstam, J. (2020). Parasites and Perverts: An Introduction to Gothic Monstrosity. In J. A. Weinstock (Ed.), *The Monster Theory Reader* (pp. 148–173). essay, University of Minnesota Press.

MacCormac, P. (2020). Posthuman Teratology. In J. A. Weinstock (Ed.), *The Monster Theory Reader* (pp. 522–541). essay, University of Minnesota Press.

Newitz, A. (2020). The Undead: A Haunted Whiteness. In *The Monster Theory Reader* (pp. 241–272). essay, University of Minnesota Press.

Shildrick, M. (2020). The Self's Clean and Proper Body. In J. A. Weinstock (Ed.), *The Monster Theory Reader* (pp. 303–330). essay, University of Minnesota Press.

Suzuki, E. (2020). Beasts from the Deep. In J. A. Weinstock (Ed.), *The Monster Theory Reader* (pp. 423–439). essay, University of Minnesota Press.

Weinstock, J. A. (2020b). In J. A. Weinstock (Ed.), *The Monster Theory Reader* (pp. 1–37). introduction, University of Minnesota Press.

Weinstock, J. A. (Ed.). (2020a). *The monster theory reader*. University of Minnesota Press.

Weinstock, J. A., & Weinstock, J. A. (2020). Invisible Monsters: Vision, Horror, and Contemporary Culture. In *The Monster Theory Reader* (pp. 358–374). essay, University of Minnesota Press.