

Issue Editor's Note and Introduction to the Special Thematic Block *The Engulfing Self and the Self Engulfed: Transformative Monstrosity in the Anthropocene*

Issue Editor's Note: The Monster with a Thousand Faces

HJEAS

“A screaming song is good to know in case you need to scream”—goes a line from legendary children’s author Ruth Krauss’s *Open House for Butterflies* (1960). Although intended for children as lighthearted words of wisdom, it certainly seems that we are all living in an era when it is a good idea to have a few “screaming songs” up one’s sleeves. However, instead of a one-off instance of screaming in panic—an immediate reaction to some external threat—our contemporary cultural climate appears to be one of constant whimpering. “The motivation associated with behaviors in response to potential, signaled, or ambiguous threats” (Blanchard, Griebel, and Nutt 3) is not fear, but rather anxiety, which seems to be the underlying condition shaping the first decades of the twenty-first century.

As the 2014 manifesto of the Institute for Precarious Consciousness declares, “We Are All Very Anxious,” arguing that anxiety is the dominant affect of our late capitalist era. For the authors, it is mostly due to our social-technological embeddedness, which facilitates constant surveillance and voluntary online self-exposure, along with a myth and expectation of productivity and personal growth that prompts us to strive for unattainable standards. Since Margaret Thatcher famously asserted that “there is no such thing as society,” the individual has often been framed as solely responsible for their triumphs and disasters alike. This can be traced in the “management discourse” (Institute for Precarious Consciousness 6) that offers *self-help* solutions to everything from decluttering your home to parenting hacks to time management against distractions and most recently, “glowing up” (Orleans-Lindsay), that is, turning yourself from an ugly duckling to a beauty queen and documenting the change on social media.

However, this desire and illusion of being able to control the relatively private aspects of one’s life indicates that an acute display of anxiety at an individual level is set against the background of the grand scheme of things that we are unable to control, producing what we might call “anxiety culture.”

Concerns are proliferating around aspects of our living conditions that seem to be spinning out of control: climate change, . . . the stability of ecosystems;

... massive population migration and the ensuing disturbances in social and political orders, most recently seen in the Russia-Ukraine war, ... drastic technological changes with regard to our forms of communication, commerce, and employment; spiraling inequalities within and between nations; a building legitimization crisis in democratic societies and the attendant rise of populism, nationalism, and militarism; terrorism, mass shootings, ... the post-COVID-19 reality, with the global pandemic already having shown a powerful capacity to manifest and then fray the fragile social fabric of national and global culture. (Allegrante et al. 1)

As this editor's note is being written in the early days of 2025, some of the songs that Krauss suggested seem to be very timely picks for our day-to-day musical repertoire. It is not surprising, therefore, that the authors of the present issue, albeit differently and sometimes implicitly, seem to be preoccupied with various manifestations of the poly- or permacrisis period that we inhabit: monsters of sorts. As Gaia Giuliani contends, "[w]e' are living in a time of monsters and catastrophes, as if propelled into a never-ending dystopian loop" (1). What we mean by "monster," however, varies. As Nina Auerbach famously states, each socio-cultural period gets "the vampire it needs," or, rather, the one that it deserves (145): much like the Campbellian hero, our monsters also have a thousand faces. While pandemic representations, newly escalating war scenarios, Anthropocene concerns and populist discourses are equally invested in a clear distinction of "in" and "out," us and others, our respective monsters are not only at the gates, at the other sides of the fences, but are already breaking in. Radical alterity comes with radical transgressions, too.

The five essays of the special thematic block in the first half of the issue, edited by Ildikó Limpár, tackle monstrosity in the shape of actual monsters in speculative genres, both on the screen and on the page. Approaching the end of the Anthropocene, the collection suggests, our monsters of choice change just as much as our relationship to them does. The boundary between human and nonhuman gets blurred, threatening the humanist subject with the ultimate dissolution of being devoured, as the first case study on Camille DeAngelis's *Bones and All* (2015), a cannibal-themed young adult romance, by Anna Kérchy demonstrates. The second essay of the thematic block, by Annamária Hódosy, retains a utopian core within the dystopian setting of *The Walking Dead* (2010–2022) television series, exploring how the show presents various solarpunk utopian experiments against the backdrop of a zombie apocalypse that threatens to eliminate human corporeality and human communities alike. The subsequent paper by special

block editor Ildikó Limpár turns back to the figure of the vampire in the Netflix miniseries *Midnight Mass* (2021) to connect the monstrousness of the vampire with religious and political fanaticism. Vera Benczik again takes account of the political implications of encountering the radical alterity of a plant-based life form in Ursula K. Le Guin's "Vaster than Empires and More Slow" (1971), proposing "voluntary vulnerability" to bridge the seemingly unbridgeable gap between humans and their others. Finally, Mónika Rusvai's exploration of Robert Holdstock's *Mythago* novels proposes a potential "contact zone" and means of reconciliation between "man and all beings that he once labeled monstrous: women, animals, plants."

While Ildikó Limpár's essay details how the vampire can be read as a symbol of demagoguery and manipulation, in the context of the US administration monsterizing various groups of people, the sixth essay of this issue, by Priyadarshini Gupta, takes account of one such instance of post-9/11 processes of demonization: that of the American Muslim population. After 2001, Gupta contends, everyone who is even adjacently connected with the Muslim faith was regarded with suspicion, and hence "the ideal Muslim" is praised as someone who wishes to erase their Muslim identity in favor of embracing a secular, American one: "an American first and a Muslim second." By analyzing Ayad Akhtar's 2013 *American Dervish*, Gupta maps out various, nuanced strategies of actual American Muslims to balance societal pressure on the one hand, and intrinsic spiritual demands on the other. Instead of looking at religion as an ideologically monolith entity in the novel, the essay explores the day-to-day religious practices of Mina, Akhtar's female protagonist.

Where Gupta's essay scrutinizes ways for post-9/11 Muslim communities in the US to resist what could be regarded as an imperative of self-erasure to avoid being marked as a monstrous and potentially destructive other, the next paper, by Yi Zhang, extends the inquiry into identity formation through the lens of Afro-American Eurasianism. By tracing the journey of Langston Hughes and other Black intellectuals into the Soviet Union, Zhang connects the two most monstrous others of the American Dream ideology: the human rights abuses against the Colored population on the one hand, and the menacing shadow of Soviet communism, on the other. Although, as the essay concludes, Hughes did find a sense of kinship and a hopeful perspective within the "Brown" people of Soviet Central Asia, his experience ultimately revealed that the promise of racial solidarity was dimmed by "the practical limitations of ideology."

Getting back to the idea of monstrosity as the transgressing of boundaries that were previously believed to have been rigid and impenetrable, the anxieties surrounding contamination—a direct result of not being able to keep “them” “out”—gained an obvious momentum during and after the coronavirus pandemic. Andrea Virginás’s essay takes up this theme by examining a number of pandemic-themed disaster films from the 1970s to the present day, analyzing contagion as both a physical and a mediated phenomenon. Virginás identifies a fundamental shift in the site of contamination: from the physical encounter and exchange of breath or bodily fluids that was typical in the 1970s, to screens as media of infection, hence destabilizing boundaries between infected and observed, real and mediated, physical and virtual.

Building on the tension between the real and the mediated, the next essay turns to a digital landscape—specifically, one in the immensely popular video game *Minecraft*—as a site where longstanding ideological constructs about nature and humanity are both reinforced and reimagined. This idealistic setting that Stefano Rozzoni examines through the lens of pastoral aesthetics in the game is in fact surrounded by monsters: as the night falls, the revenants of the *Minecraft* universe force the player to take shelter and economize their resources. If the pandemic film demonstrates a monstrous collapse of bodily and mediated experiences, the video game pastoral, as the paper suggests, exposes another form of monstrosity: the persistence of dualistic thinking. Furthermore, it critically engages with how *Minecraft* landscapes uphold or challenge anthropocentric and exploitative perspectives on the nonhuman.

When the boundary between us and them, actual and imaginary, human and nonhuman collapses, it is often our sense of reality as we know it that is threatened—which obviously leads us back to anxiety being the most prominent affect of our age. In times of crisis, the old ways, the traditional distinctions just will not work. But maybe that is the antidote to the impending catastrophe: the Archimedean point that shows a fresh angle is not necessarily on the outside, but on the margins of our conception. Monsters in speculative fiction are definitely aligned with what Darko Suvin famously calls cognitive estrangement: “an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (7). The last essay of this issue, Giulia Annuzzi argues, presents another instance of such a device: an ancient ruin that embodies the failed potential of a stillborn future. The study maps the evolution of this tool for imagining different futures (and pasts) from early Modern imagination to yet another destabilizing idea from the fringes: twentieth-century speculative archeology or “fringe archeology.” In the case

of Peter Kolosimo, the Italian example of a largely Anglo-European narrative, the menacing specter of lost civilizations and hyper-evolved beings does not signal decline or catastrophe. Instead, much like the monsters of speculative fiction, these ruins invite us to rethink the limits of our historical consciousness, unsettling dominant narratives to make space for new possibilities.

“In the Anthropocene, we are all ‘monsters’—not discrete, independent actors, but things enmeshed with other things in various constantly shifting networks. The human is always entangled with the nonhuman; ironically, what makes us human is that we are not fully human”—writes Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock in his *Gothic Things* (27). Then, even if this monstrosity is logically framed as a source of anxiety, it is also a means of transformation—disrupting the familiar so that novel ways of seeing, knowing, and conceiving might emerge. Perhaps, then, what seems monstrous at the margins is not a harbinger of collapse, but an opening to futures we have yet to imagine.

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Introduction to the Special Thematic Block

The Engulfing Self and the Self Engulfed: Transformative Monstrosity in the Anthropocene

Ildikó Limpár

HJEAS

Heroes are natural foci of narratives: when we read a story, we follow the protagonist and look at their adventures from their perspective. Joseph Campbell's publication of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in 1949, republished several times, brought a renewed critical interest in the heroic quest and confirmed a perspective that was dominant for decades. Nearly half a century later, however, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seminal essay on monster theory, published in 1996, directed scholarly attention to the narrative element that is often inseparable from heroes: monsters. The monster's function often complements that of the hero but may not be limited to being an embodiment

of a threat that can be defeated by a heroic figure; the manifold—in fact, gradually increasing—roles that monsters play in our stories thus naturally have captured academic interest and allowed for a new critical field, that of Monster Studies, to emerge and thrive in the past three decades.

I started this introduction with mentioning these two seminal theoretical works because they curiously indicate how cemented our anthropocentric view still seemed until the end of the twentieth century, as we were very much fixated on the man (and less frequently, the woman) as a heroic figure in our narratives/world. It also demonstrates how, at the very end of the century, we shifted focus and moved to exploring the monstrous that defines our world, having realized that we may be the protagonists of the Anthropocene but surely not the heroes of the narrative that we are living in. Mapping the monstrous dimensions of our existence in both art and scholarship did not reduce the role of heroic narratives; the better understanding of our monsters has, in fact, generated fiction with new kinds of fictive heroic quests besides the more traditional ones, while it also urged the reevaluation of what *human* and *heroic* both mean in our age. The Anthropocene and our growing awareness of living in it has brought about a new trend of fantastic fiction, in which distancing from an anthropocentric mindset and developing posthuman ethics (Braidotti 48) are presented as the necessary prerequisites for evolving into the new human who may survive the Anthropocene or Capitalocene. This proposition understands the human of the post-Anthropocene as one who acknowledges companionship with all cohabitants of the biosphere (Haraway 17) and has the potential of heroism to fight against the apocalyptic forces generated by a humanity lacking bioempathy.

Similarly to how monsters, in general, embody our fears and desires alike, in narratives where anthropocentrism is positioned as the hindrance to a positive futurity, merging with the other may appear both as a fear and a desire. Becoming part of the Other, the threat of being devoured is an existential threat; and in an apocalyptic scenario, it is also a social threat, where the individual tragedy shows, synecdochally, humanity's role either as a consumer destroying (thus metaphorically devouring) its own habitat; or as the punished sinner, who is being consumed by an unstoppable power that is usually triggered by mankind itself. Yet the threat of being consumed often manifests as a desire for finding a solution for the artificially created binary opposition between man and nature, restoring ecological harmony to mend what Timothy Morton called "Severing"—the split between mankind's anthropocentric narrative and the ecological reality that renders the human

species an integral part of the biosphere shared by nonhuman others instead of placing us above others.

Not accidentally, then, consumption as an act of consuming or the state of being consumed has taken central stage in the most diverse imaginative narratives that prompt us to think about our status in the world and the futurity we have ahead. This phenomenon is demonstrated by the thematic block of the present *HJEAS* issue: we invited submissions on monstrosity and received papers where the monstrous, in each case, is linked to real and/or metaphorical consumption. As a result, we now may present a most exciting thematic block, in which the articles engage in dialogues with each other in a productive manner, all addressing ways in which we may navigate in our falling world.

Cannibalism, one of the most tabooed activities related to consumption, is the main topic of the first piece in the block, titled “*Bones and All*: Cannibal Romance and the Ethics of Eating Well.” Anna Kérchy discusses the implications of monstrosity as cannibalism in Camille DeAngelis’ *Bones and All* (2015), a disturbing coming-of-age apocalyptic dark romance, which put a spin on how interspecies YA romance fantasy portrayed the “romanticized cannibalistic engulfment of the self.” Basing her analysis partly on posthumanist theory, Kérchy emphasizes how interspecies novels express “a desire to connect with other lifeforms” and how this novel, particularly, “slyly introduce[s] the radically alien perspective of the animal gaze within the anthropocentric visual economy to enact the meatification of the human subject, and to trouble the ordered system from within.” Scrutinizing the ethical dilemmas of our carnivore culture, Kérchy interprets the novel “as a fictional reformulation of philosopher Jacques Derrida’s ‘ethics of eating well’ (1991).”

Closely related to cannibals are two monster types that are also naturally linked to the theme of consumption: the zombie and the vampire. But while the cannibal in *Bones and All* may be read as the cultural signifier of the Eremocene (the age of loneliness), the zombie and the vampire discussed in the next two papers are cultural signifiers of the Anthropocene and thus are directly linked to apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic processes.

Annamária Hódosy’s essay, “Wellbeing in the Necrocene: *The Walking Dead* as a Solarpunk Eco-Utopia,” examines one of the best-known zombie TV series, understanding the zombie-infested world as standing for the Capitalocene (Moore) or the Necrocene (McBrian). However, Hódosy does not only explore the various ways zombies signify the present state of the world but also aims to extend this analysis and demonstrate how this

filmic association between zombiism and capitalism may affect the readership's attitude to the capitalist structure they live in. Even though such a series may be expected to generate solastalgia (Albrecht) and by that a desire to cling to the capitalist exploitative culture, Hódosy argues that *TWD*, in fact, manages to project "solarpunk" visions of the future, offering viable social practices to reduce energy consumption proactively (that is, before falling into an irreversible apocalypse represented by zombification). The postapocalyptic, dystopian world of *TDW* thus reveals its undeniably "ustopian" (Atwood) feature in highlighting the utopian idea that wellbeing (understood as happiness) must be prioritized before economic prosperity.

The next essay, "Vampirism as Apocalyptic Hypocrisy in *Midnight Mass*," puts the relationship between consumption and apocalypse into a new light. Ildikó Limpár interprets the figure of the vampire as standing for monstrous fanaticism, which sucks out cognitive capabilities and morality linked to critical evaluation from people, leaving religion as an empty shell, represented by the soulless human bodies that burn to ashes in the sunlight and ignite the whole world. The emptied spirituality, in this reading, is directly linked to people's focus on the superficial and the physical; Limpár, accordingly, posits that the materialism masked by religiousness is embodied by the vampire who, stripped by its humanity, violently triggers an apocalypse when blind faith suppresses all critical evaluation.

The last two papers in the block delve into encounters with and engulfment by the radical Other in two earlier SF works that are timelier than ever, as the scholarly work done in Eco-Criticism and Critical Plant Studies in the past decade has highlighted the importance of narratives in which an anthropocentric position is successfully challenged by the radical—most often vegetal—Other.

While earlier Hódosy linked the Gaia-theory (Lovelock) to the zombie attack, in Vera Benczik's essay vegetal otherness may be interpreted as the embodiment of the said principle. "Here There Be Trees: Radical Otherness in Ursula K. Le Guin's 'Vaster Than Empires and More Slow'" examines the sublimity of the "monstrous frontier" (Limpár), the undertones of postcolonial criticism and the expression of ecological concerns in Le Guin's story. Benczik argues that the non-normative human may be de-otherized, de-monsterized via an encounter with the radical alien; but while this experience underlines the human–nonhuman ecological connection, it is facilitated and affirmed by the non-normative human, who then merges with the vegetal planet sentience in the end. This trajectory shakes the rest of the human characters' anthropocentric view and partially accomplishes the de-

otherization of the monstrous frontier, too, but the radical other's unattainability remains as firm as at the beginning of the encounter, and peaceful encounter demands sacrifice.

Mónika Rusvai's essay also centers around the engulfment of the self by the radical—vegetal—other, but her approach highlights how SFF may be able to break down the human–nonhuman dichotomy and affirm a positive non-anthropocentric view. Using Dawn Keetley's theses of plant horror as her primary theoretical framework, Rusvai focuses on vegetal "deathlessness" to discuss Robert Holdstock's Ryhope Wood in his *Mythago Cycle* (1984-2009). In her argument, she highlights that "Holdstock consciously brings the plant body into focus and offers a revised definition of the human through the corporeal re-integration of the monstrous vegetal," which results in understanding "the human as a creature that is inseparably linked to the more-than-human world."

To conclude the thematic block introduction with this notion, we *are* inseparable from our biosphere, we *are* interdependent units in our ecosystem. Only by acknowledging this truth may we regain some of the heroism and lose some of the monstrousness that defines our present conduct. Monsters of our imagination guide us in this direction if we listen to them. Either as menacing warnings or as visions of positive transformations (in perceptions and/or attitudes and actions), the fantastic narratives discussed in this special block on monstrosity offer us valuable revelations, knowledge to rethink our present and future position in (and hopefully, after) the Anthropocene. Let us consume this delicious—but perhaps hard-to-digest—block to avoid being consumed by what we have monstrously created.

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