

STIMULUS QUESTION:

In what ways do contemporary artists and designers challenge and reconfigure dominant constructions of the human subject through lenses such as feminist theory, posthumanism, queer critique, or psychoanalysis? How do such practices trouble the boundaries between self, other and machine.

STIMULUS RESPONSE:

How has the portrayal of the monster archetype evolved within storytelling in the context of contemporary filmmaking through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis

The unseeleie desire: How the Monster Archetype has evolved in filmmaking

Monster. A word that can be used to describe creatures big and small throughout history, from the most obscene otherworldly beings to the most real evil in the world. The word 'monster' has been integral in understanding creatures that we ourselves cannot put names to, to describe feelings and concepts that elude our conscious brain but are very very present in the deep sub conscious.

In this essay I'll be delving into how contemporary filmmakers use the monster archetype to create an anamorphic perspective that confronts an audience with their deepest selves and ontologically challenges viewers.

The anamorphic perspective allows for the conventional view of evil to be deconstructed, examining the monster instead as a projection onto which we banish the forbidden aspects of our unconscious.

Contemporary filmmaking no longer uses the concept of the monster as pure antagonists, no, modern auteurs ontologically challenge audiences with visually disturbing creatures and bending deep rooted assumptions of old folklore. In this essay we will be focusing on the theoretical framework surrounding the evolution of the monster. More specifically we will be focusing on the Vampire and its contemporary portrayal in SINNERS (2025)

I will show how the Monster Archetype has evolved from the basic storytelling mechanic of fear to a tool for deconstructing the human psyche and confronting the audience with their own desire and unconscious wants.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Before continuing, it is important to introduce you properly to our main theoretical subjects, Lacanian psychoanalysis and define what exactly we mean when talking about 'The Monster Archetype'

LACANIAN PSYCOANALYSIS:

Lacan Jacques was a famous french psychoanalyst who lived 1901-81. He most famously learnt and built upon the teachings of Sigmund Freud and wrote the book 'ÉCRITS' which is widely referenced to this day. With his various theories on the human psyche, and noted for his development of the mirror theory within infants when developing the sense of self.

Lacan theories are an important factor within this essay if we are to look at how the monster archetype affects the audience. As Frosh says on Lacan theory:

"Lacanian theory is both a comprehensive attempt to locate psychoanalysis as a rigorous and critical domain of knowledge, and a subversive exploration of the structure of unconscious activity. It centers around a group of concerns with language, fantasy, and representation, perhaps best summarized as an attempt to explore the way the unconscious makes unsustainable any notion of the 'mature', 'healthy', or integrated ego- or indeed of any autonomous and free identity" (Elliot and Ray, 2003, p. 191)

Within Lacan's works the most notable theory we will be using, which will be applied during this essay:

DESIRE

"Desire is a difference, forged out of the distinction between need and demand, between what is required by the human subject, what becomes translated into communicable symbols and what is left over, as an ache or gap between the hope and its realization" (Elliot and Ray, 2003, p. 192)

Lacan believes that desire is the feeling of absence; of something we believe we need. And that we will spend our entire lives searching for a way to get it.

DEFINING 'The Monster Archetype':

The anamorphic projection is essentially a way for filmmakers to control the view of an audience. Similar to how an anamorphic lens in cameras is used to slightly distort the image, the anamorphic projection can be used in the less literal and physical terms as a way to

describe how a filmmaker or an artist might use the audience perspective against them to force a singular view point out of them or change the narrative of a story.

A good example of this within storytelling is within the book *Alchemised by Sin Li Yu*. Split into the 3 acts the 2nd act of this book is a prologue to the first and includes details and revelations that, if you were to revisit the first act and read again, gives you a new perspective on the characters and story.

Another example of this in a visual aspect is the painting 'The Ambassadors' (Holbein, 1533) as seen below:



You'll notice immediately in the center bottom of the painting a stretched out skull, this is clever illusion that is a wonderful example of the anamorphic projection. where you can only see the skull in a regular form if you view the painting from a certain angle.

The anamorphic projection will be the incredibly important in tying together the praxis of how contemporary filmmakers use the concept of the monster, an already abstract and intangible shadow, to distort and force an audience member to view the world ecologically and themselves ontologically.

When I say the 'monster' in reference to the monster archetype; What does that mean? To explain this further we need to look at jungian psychology and the concept of the shadow. As explained by Jung the shadow is:

"Rotten vegetable rubbish that can be turned into compost; darkness contains light; depression contains the seeds for useful anger; aggression is by its very nature destructive but is also vital for survival and acts as a carrier for the innate potential of creativity." - (Taylor and Francis 2023)

Essentially the shadow is the uncomfortable aspects of ourselves we bury deep in our subconsciousness that we ignore. And yet others can see perfectly fine. And when confronted, as uncomfortable as it may be, can often lead to beneficial outcomes if you know how to navigate your own psyche. This idea of having buried and uncomfortable aspects of the self is intrinsically linked with the concept of the monster, especially within media and storytelling. The Monster archetype is a means for an artist to describe and convey the shadow of themselves, the story, or another character, in a digestible form for the audience; making the intangible fears a fully realised vision. No more is this idea fully capitalized on, than within filmmaking.

VAMPIRES: The Dangerous Desire

The evolution of how vampires came to transform from the lizard crawling, bat like monsters of past stories and myths to the modern day romance and sexual icons of the 21st century deserves an essay all on its own. But for this analysis we're looking specifically at the film SINNERS (2025) and how the vampires are portrayed within this story compared to the original telling of Bram Stoker's Dracula.

In SINNERS the vampires work with the old rules of needing to be invited in to enter any sort of building. This sets up the need for the vampire to portray themselves as an object of desire, whether that be familial, platonic, or sexual. This contemporary portrayal of the vampire differs from previous iterations by appealing not to the audiences conscious fears, but instead to the unconscious desire. As Frosh says on desire from Lacan:

"so every human subject finds her or himself looking for proofs of love, and standing in as the cause of the others desire; that is, each subject strives to arouse in the other recognition of the necessity of the subjects existence." (Elliot and Ray 2003 p. 192)

The vampires within SINNERS consistently present themselves as a need. An ultimate desire. Something you want to run too, not away from. They represent the taboo desire of an audience member and draws them in to experience and indulge in a desire of romantic, sexual or dynamic power.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary monster no longer reassures us through defeat, but unsettles us through recognition or redundancy. all of this to answer the original question "how has the monster archetype evolved?"

looking at the evolution of the vampire from your classic Dracula to your modern day twilight, It's safe to say that conscious view of the monster has developed into one more suited for attraction of an audience rather than the morbid curiosity of one, and not necessarily in an eroticised sense but in way of showing a mirror up to an audience member and allowing them to see their personal Id's and unconscious desires that they themselves may not have been privy too. In a modern era where people crave escapism and the taboo desires of their sub-conscious, it is far more effective for a filmmaker to entice an audience with a monster that can then be seen as the reflection of the desire. As Homer says:

"what psychoanalysis teaches us is that our desires are always inextricably bound to those around us" (Homer, 2005, p. 70)

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