



Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters

By Judith Halberstam

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In this examination of the monster as cultural object, Judith Halberstam offers a rereading of the monstrous that revises our view of the Gothic. Moving from the nineteenth century and the works of Shelley, Stevenson, Stoker, and Wilde to contemporary horror film exemplified by such movies as *Silence of the Lambs*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *Candyman*, *Skin Shows* understands the Gothic as a versatile technology, a means of producing monsters that is constantly being rewritten by historically and culturally conditioned fears generated by a shared sense of otherness and difference.

Deploying feminist and queer approaches to the monstrous body, Halberstam views the Gothic as a broad-based cultural phenomenon that supports and sustains the economic, social, and sexual hierarchies of the time. She resists familiar psychoanalytic critiques and cautions against any interpretive attempt to reduce the affective power of the monstrous to a single factor. The nineteenth-century monster is shown, for example, as configuring otherness as an amalgam of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Invoking Foucault, Halberstam describes the history of monsters in terms of its shifting relation to the body and its representations. As a result, her readings of familiar texts are radically new. She locates psychoanalysis itself within the gothic tradition and sees sexuality as a beast created in nineteenth century literature. Excessive interpretability, Halberstam argues, whether in film, literature, or in the culture at large, is the actual hallmark of monstrosity.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In this academic work of film and literary criticism, Judith Halberstam examines the monster as cultural object. She discusses classic gothic texts such as *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, and then looks at the impact of changing technology (horror movies with special effects) for depicting monsters. Her argument is that the gothic in its more lurid, unabashedly violent, and perverse forms may be more empowering to the reader/viewer than in its carefully articulated, understated, and sublimated forms. *H-Net Reviews* calls *Skin Shows* an "intelligent, well-informed, and provocative piece of writing" and writes that its "greatest strength ... is that it allows for other critics of the Gothic to proceed more self-consciously about the presuppositions that particularly psychoanalysis has introduced into the academic discussion." One caveat, though: the language is somewhat turgid, with awkward verbs such as "gothicize" and "metaphorize."

Review

"Halberstam's argument is elegant in its simplicity, but far-reaching in its implications. Providing a strikingly original account of the Gothic, she proposes through her work a cultural history of fear and prejudice and, thus, paves the way for a new scholarly enterprise."—Ann Cvetkovich, University of Texas, Austin

"*Skin Shows* is the Gothic book that many of us have been waiting for, and it is every bit as smart as we had hoped it would be. Halberstam's notion of monstrosity will change Gothic studies for good. The results are dazzling."—George E. Haggerty, University of California, Riverside

From the Back Cover

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Richard Bennett:

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