

SEM7. Monstrous bodies: Deviance, transformation, and belonging in contemporary British fiction

13 September h. 8:30-11:00, S6 Moro

Convenors

Luca Baratta (Università degli Studi di Siena) luca.baratta@unisi.it

Michela Compagnoni (Università degli Studi Roma Tre) michela.compagnoni@uniroma3.it

Abstract

This seminar will explore how contemporary British fiction (2000–2025) portrays monstrous or deviant bodies as sites of cultural anxieties and resistance. The works of authors such as Ian McEwan, Jeanette Winterson, Ali Smith, Julian Barnes, Zadie Smith, Guy Gunaratne, Mohsin Hamid, and Deborah Levy often challenge and redefine humanity's boundaries, examining intersections with disability, gender, queerness, race, and social marginalization. They also engage with disembodiment and transformation through emerging technologies, the metaverse, and cyborg identities.

Building on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seminal *Monster Theory* (1996), which frames monstrosity as a cultural construct reflecting societal fears and desires, the seminar will focus on how British fiction reimagines these ideas in response to sociopolitical and technological changes. These shifts disrupt traditional understandings of embodiment and reshape human interaction, creativity, and labour. The notion of monstrosity, often associated with the othering of bodies and identities, is reconfigured amidst evolving cultural anxieties. Theories by Donna Haraway, Lennard J. Davis, Rosi Braidotti, and Avtar Brah underpin the examination of monstrosity's intersections with migration, displacement, diasporic identities, and disability.

The seminar also addresses how contemporary British fiction interrogates the impact of Brexit and UK immigration policies on cultural narratives of belonging and exclusion, critiques evolving definitions of humanity, and examines how 'new monsters' emerge in an era of globalization, technological disruption, and ecological crisis.

Possible topics include:

- Brexit, migration, and diasporic displacement
- Monstrosity, agency, and resistance
- Representations of physical and cognitive disabilities as they intersect with monstrosity
- Gendered and queer embodiment as resistance or marginalization
- Posthuman transformations: cyborgs, digital bodies, and virtual identities
- Monstrosity and ecological crises as human failure narratives
- Empathy and compassion in depictions of deviant bodies
- Reworking classical monstrous archetypes

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SEM7. Papers

13 September h. 8:30-11:00, S6 Moro

- *Spectral app-aritions, prosthetic compositions: Jeanette Winterson's Night Side of the River* (Andrea Raso, Università di Roma Tre)
- *Monstrous others, posthuman selves: Challenging boundaries and rethinking identities in Machines Like Me by Ian McEwan* (Irene Montori, Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II)
- *Monstrous bodyscapes: Queer(ing) complex embodiments in Michel Faber's Under the Skin (2000)* (Giuseppe Capalbo, Tor Vergata Università degli Studi di Roma)
- *"I'm not a monster": Deviant bodies as resistance in Mohale Mashigo's Intruders* (Marta Fossati, Università degli Studi di Milano)

SEM7. Abstracts

Monstrous bodyscapes: Queer(ing) complex embodiments in Michel Faber's *Under the Skin* (2000)

Giuseppe Capalbo (Tor Vergata Università degli Studi di Roma) giuseppe.capalbo@students.uniroma2.eu

This paper explores Michel Faber's *Under the Skin* (2000) by bringing Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Monster Theory* (1996) into dialogue with Tobin Siebers's theory of complex embodiment (2017). Set in Scotland, the novel follows the life of an alien, Isserley, as she searches for hitchhikers to abduct and send to her planet, where "they have to serve as meat for the alien elites" (Monticelli 2019, 7). In doing so, Faber seems to draw a monstrous bodyscape, that is "a cartography of the body" (Federici and Parlati 2018, 7) which challenges and redefines humanity's boundaries: from Isserley's alien body – surgically altered to appear human – to the commodified bodies of the many men she procures for consumption. In line with the consistent body of scholarship which sought to analyse the novel from a variety of viewpoints (e.g. Dillon 2011; Monticelli 2019; Fishova 2023; Jha 2024), this paper seeks to read the way(s) in which the complexity of Faber's bodies unsettles – queers – normative borders of species, gender, and class.

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"I'm not a monster": Deviant bodies as resistance in Mohale Mashigo's *Intruders*

Marta Fossati (Università degli Studi di Milano) marta.fossati@unimi.it

If much of South African apartheid-era fiction is characterised by a realist – almost testimonial – style, functional to an indictment of the injustices of the segregationist regime, South Africa's literary landscape in the new millennium is marked by an opening and broadening of themes, genres, and styles. In particular, genre literature such as speculative fiction has witnessed a boom in recent years, which testifies to South Africa's participation in transnational and world literary trends. Starting from these considerations, my paper aims to discuss the short-story collection *Intruders* (2018) by South African-born writer Mohale Mashigo. Even though Mashigo herself opposes generic labels such as 'speculative fiction' and 'Afrofuturism', her short-story cycle *Intruders* imaginatively investigates the life of marginalised South African characters – the eponymous 'intruders' – who are marked by monstrosity and therianthropic transformations. By exploring Mashigo's representation of the deviant bodies of her liminal characters – for the most part, Black South African women – this paper argues that *Intruders* powerfully interrogates the new South African predicament thirty years after the end of apartheid. By transforming her gendered and racialised protagonists into 'monsters' such as winged creatures and modern-day mermaids, Mashigo endows her characters with a transformative agency that resists and writes back to normative narratives of Black South Africans. Ultimately, this paper seeks to foreground *Intruders*' subtle interplay of the local and the global since Mashigo recasts the depiction of deviant bodies – a staple thematic concern of speculative fiction – into a markedly local and contemporary South African urban frame.

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Monstrous others, posthuman selves: Challenging boundaries and rethinking identities in *Machines Like Me* by Ian McEwan

Irene Montori (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II) irene.montori@unina.it

In *Machines Like Me and People Like You* (2019), Ian McEwan reimagines the classical trope of *hybris*—where the creature defies its creator, from Lucifer to Prometheus—within the context of the human encounter with Adam, a hyper-realistic humanoid endowed with autonomous intelligence, emotional complexity, and moral reasoning. Through the figure of Adam, McEwan explores the disruption of creaturely boundaries posed by both the human protagonist, Charlie, and the humanoid itself, presenting it as a dramatic and simultaneously parodic articulation of the posthuman sublime. No longer rooted in the Romantic imagination of vast natural landscapes as vehicles of transcendence, the posthuman sublime in this narrative emerges through technological alterity and ontological disorientation. The encounter with the human-like machine provokes not elevation but a sense of epistemic and affective decentering—a vertiginous confrontation with the limits of the human. In this sense, Adam is a monster in the etymological meaning of a portent—a being that signals a rupture in the balance of human order. At the same time, he serves as a warning (*monstrum*, from *monere*), embodying the latent perils inherent in the relationship between the human and the non-human. Through Charlie’s fractured perspective—oscillating between fascination, anxiety, and cognitive dissonance—*Machines Like Me* dramatizes the ethical and symbolic instability produced by techno-human hybridity. Adam, as a hybrid entity, embodies the posthuman sublime: at once a Promethean figure and a monstrous other, the humanoid becomes a contested locus of cultural projection, ethical ambiguity, and ontological unease (Cohen, 1996).

Building on Fredric Jameson’s theorization of the “hysterical sublime” (1991), and reframing it through posthumanist perspectives such as those articulated by Rosi Braidotti (2013) and Francesca Ferrando (2019), this paper investigates the convergence of monstrous identities and the posthuman sublime in McEwan’s *Machines Like Me*, situating the novel within contemporary British fiction’s broader engagement with cultural anxieties surrounding technological embodiment, subjectivity, and the shifting boundaries of existence and ethics.

Rather than resolving this crisis through dystopian closure, McEwan’s narrative enacts a form of posthumanist reflexivity. It is through its metafictional and self-conscious discourse that the novel performs what Francesca Ferrando calls “posthuman awareness” (2024): a mode of self-inquiry that engages with non-human alterity not as a threat to be subdued, but as a generative site for rethinking subjectivity, embodiment, and relationality beyond the human.

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Spectral app-aritions, prosthetic compositions: Jeanette Winterson’s *Night Side of the River*

Andrea Raso (Università di Roma Tre) andrea.raso@uniroma3.it

In *Night Side of the River* (2023), Jeanette Winterson rediscovers spectrality to navigate the ontological consequences of AI systems, which curb the monopoly of biology on what it means to be human and alive. The post-digital ghost, which Winterson describes as a “post-human visitation” (17) and “app-arition” (21), still reigns in our popular imagination as we flirt with the possibility of digital immortality. Indeed, the hauntological spectral turn of Derridean legacy is being repurposed to address “what it means and takes for a spectral body to make itself present” as well as to “re-imagine performativity through this troubling of conventional categorizations of the ontological” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, 17). Thus, ghosts are not mere symbols of absence, but paradoxical manifestations of the virtual, defined by Shields as the “presence of absence” (2003, 212), which, by hinting at the dispossession of materiality, limits any claim to human exclusivity.

However, in Winterson, the bodily dimension is not deleted, but reassessed as part of the mind-body nexus, as a tangible surface whose malleable essence is lived vicariously through numerous devices, so that the wholeness of the human(ist) body is fragmented, substituted by phantom ‘limbs’ that complicate the notion of selfhood by means of a prosthetic logic, “which suggests that the forms in which we know ourselves are always at a remove from us, that we are not identical with our manifestations” (Boxall, 2020, 14). To this end, the Spinozist embrained bodies/embodyed brains are

recuperated by Winterson, for whom haunting is sensory: “Motor neurons carry information from the brain to the body. The link is the spinal cord – the pathway from brain to body and body to brain. It’s physiology, not phantoms. I think I am being haunted, and so my body is clenching in fear, and returning this fear to my brain” (2023, 31). In fact, the prosthetic molecularization of bodies does not aim to deny the affective matrix of embodiment (cf. Shildrick, 2002, 126), but to demolish, along a material-semiotic continuum, the centrality of the western logos (cf. Shildrick, 2022, 12).

As this paper will attempt to demonstrate, Winterson’s ghost stories offer an exploration of the dis- and re-appearance of bodily paradigms to counter the normativization of non-normative bodies, which are actively silenced in epistemically violent narratives (see Leder, 1990). Then, the Foucaultian connection of body and power emerges again thanks to Winterson’s critically posthuman evaluation of both the de-naturalization of bodies through technology and the non-essentialist re-naturalization brought about by new materialism, two approaches which, Braidotti reminds us, in the posthuman context intersect since they “agree on the basic point that there is no uncontaminated matter nor naturally born humans” (2019, 152).

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