

Review: Maaheen Ahmed, *Monstrous Imaginaries: The Legacy of Romanticism in Comics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 235pp. ISBN 978-1-4968-2527-8, £24.99.

WILL KITCHEN

MAAHEEN AHMED'S *MONSTROUS Imaginaries: The Legacy of Romanticism in Comics* offers an exploration of the form and content of selected comic books in reference to various Romantic themes, including nostalgia and visuality. Between an introduction and a conclusion, this analysis is delivered across five chapters, four of which present expansive case studies of individual comic book texts.

The Introduction 'Charting Monstrous Territory' outlines the central themes and objectives of the book: the importance of the conceptual dichotomy between monstrousness and humanity; the important role played by the imagination across both Romanticism and monstrous fiction; and the persistence of Romantic tropes in contemporary cultural products. Ahmed demonstrates that themes such as these are of vital importance in terms of widening our contemporary understanding of otherness and modern cultures' varied historical legacies.

Chapter one, 'Romantic Monsters: A Brief History', undertakes an analysis of the importance of the monstrous as an aesthetic category. From the early popularity of 'freak shows', to the persistence of monstrous themes and graphic styles which form the prototypes for later comic books in the drawings of Goya and Blake, Ahmed even extends her analysis to the production methods used by each artist.¹ Also examined, are monstrous characters in literary fiction: Quasimodo from *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), the iconic monster from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), and Gwynplaine from Victor Hugo's 1869 novel *The Man Who Laughs*.²

Chapter two, '*Swamp Thing*. Patchworks and Panoramas in Monster Comics', interprets the saga of *Swamp Thing* (1971-) by extending and developing Romantic themes identified in the previous chapter. The adventures of the

¹ Maaheen Ahmed, *Monstrous Imaginaries: The Legacy of Romanticism in Comics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020) pp.27-36.

² *Ibid.*, pp.36-43.

antiheroic protagonist are read in reference to such concepts, including Burkean aesthetics of sublimity, narratives of resurrection, passion, dreaming, and the Romantic attempt to explore 'the limits of [...] consciousness'.³

Chapter three '*Monstre: Monstrous Fluidity*' centres around an analysis of the Baudelairien conception of 'ennui' in Enki Bilal's tetralogy: *Le Sommeil du monstre* (1993), *32 Décembre* (2003), *Rendez-vous à Paris* (2006), and *Quatre?* (2007). Concepts of amorphousness, fluctuation and fluidity are addressed, exploring the idea of beauty in the horrible, the unstable and the incomprehensible.⁴

Chapter four '*Hellboy: Nostalgia and the Doomed Quest*' draws on Svetlana Boym's concept of 'reflexive nostalgia' – an attitude towards remembering the past which calls into question the truthfulness of historical representation through creative remediation.⁵ The concept of Romantic liminality frames discussions of supernaturalism, Christian symbolism, folklore, and a reading of Nazism as a cultural referent for monstrosity.

Chapter five '*The Crow: Secularity and Emotionality*' brings the book to a close by analysing the emotional effect of fragments, visuality and the trickster figure. It brings into focus the monstrosity of the legitimate worlds that persecute comic book outsiders and, through the power such worlds wield to define and defend notions of normality, render the struggling protagonists of these comic book stories 'monstrous' in the first place.⁶

Ahmed's analysis of the relationship between Romanticism and comics is certainly not built upon an anachronistic hypothesis. Despite the fact that many decades separate the 'Romantic' period of European art from the supposedly 'Postmodern' era of comic books and graphic novels, Ahmed demonstrates that these two fields overlap concerning a variety of important thematic and aesthetic concerns including ambiguity, otherness, visuality and nostalgia. Ahmed's task consists of tracing where the very real and pertinent legacy of Romanticism is to be found in selected comic books. By so doing she seeks to fill another part of that

³ *Ibid.*, p.57.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.88-89.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.113.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.164.

often-overlooked gap in contemporary scholarship concerning the relationship between Romanticism and popular culture: '[t]o my knowledge', Ahmed states, 'the relationship between comics, especially comics monsters, and romanticism has rarely been explored in detail'.⁷

The comics and graphic novels explored by Ahmed in *Monstrous Imaginaries* are all products that have circulated since the mid-twentieth century – a moment when the market became increasingly heterogeneous.⁸ However, the persistence of tropes such as rebelliousness, violence, outsiders, nostalgia, solitude, a blurring of boundaries between past and present, good and bad, and a formal playfulness in representational methods, attest to the broader 'influence' of Romanticism on the art and stories to be found in comic books and graphic novels. In this respect, the monsters 'remediate' the 'romantic imaginary' by working-through various socio-historical trends and interests shared between different cultural epochs.⁹

In terms of monstrosity, or 'the monster' type as a category for aesthetic and cultural analysis, Ahmed draws upon existing research by figures such as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Fred Botting.¹⁰ As might be expected for a book focusing on comics and graphic novels, the theoretical background for the concept of Romanticism Ahmed employs is drawn mostly from mid-twentieth-century scholarship of the literary and visual arts, as opposed to contemporaneous sources. The commonly cited bulwarks of English Romantic literary scholarship are acknowledged: Northrop Frye, M. H. Abrams and Isaiah Berlin.¹¹ There is even fleeting engagement with the work of Morse Peckham (a still woefully underappreciated scholar whose idiosyncratic interpretation of Romanticism is yet to be fully explored for all its implications).¹²

Ahmed argues that the relevance of Romanticism to the study of comics can centrally be understood in reference to the idea of boundarylessness. She

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.9-10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.5-7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.19.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.46.

draws upon a standard discursive hypothesis which claims that Romanticism as a concept entails a philosophical exploration of the tensions that arise between competing categorical judgements: '[a]mbiguity, a staple of art, takes centre stage in many key works of romanticism through its destabilisation of established polarities, above all the binary of good and bad.'¹³ This important (and, in this context, highly relevant) idea is, of course, self-referential. Ahmed is sure enough of her subject to not attempt any totalising definition of Romanticism, but rather opts for a pragmatic appropriation of pertinent terms and ideas. The comic books selected for analysis in the central chapters are replete with textual and extratextual notions of moral ambiguity, formal ambiguity in multimedia practices, the breaking of boundaries between human and otherness, positive and negative cultural value, and a host of other ideas which have a bearing upon Romanticism, including solitude, nostalgia, otherness and rebelliousness.

The impressive thing about this selection of elements is that so many of them have a strong bearing upon the very 'heart' of the concept of Romanticism so inadequately (but not unjustly) served by the simple term 'ambiguity'. As Ahmed argues: '[t]he Enlightenment [...] assumption of the body and the mind as mirrors of each other is overthrown in romanticism, most blatantly by Hugo's protagonists [...] the monsters themselves are "getting harder to recognise"', leading to a condition in modern comics where 'the boundaries between monsters and humans are blurred'.¹⁴

Although Ahmed certainly justifies her proposition that "'Romantic outsiders" are in many ways the focus of this book'—a book which is populated with grotesque yet sympathetic creatures who emerge from brooding and picturesque swamps, netherworlds and hellscapes—there is perhaps a lack of deeper theoretical analysis which leaves certain of her conclusions lacking impact. Many varied secondary references are employed—from Michel Foucault to Friedrich Schiller—but very few are given sustained treatment in the construction of the arguments presented by each chapter.¹⁵

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.77. Ahmed is citing Alan Moore, with Stephen Bissette and John Totleben, *The Saga of the Swamp Thing*, Book 1 (New York: Vertigo, 2012) pp.8-9.

¹⁵ Ahmed, p.9.

Despite its occasionally limited conclusions, Ahmed's *Monstrous Imaginaries* offers one of the few sustained analyses of the Romantic legacy in the popular visual arts of the late-twentieth century. The monograph will doubtless make a significant contribution to the scholarly understanding of comic books and graphic novels, as part of an enduring and influential Romantic cultural heritage.



BIOGRAPHY: Will Kitchen is currently a postdoctoral researcher in Film Studies. His primary research interest is the contemporary relevance of Romanticism and its relationships with modern philosophy, aesthetics, culture and politics. He is the author of *Romanticism and Film: Franz Liszt and Audio-Visual Explanation* (Bloomsbury, 2020), a member of the editorial board for *Romance, Revolution and Reform*, and recipient of a Vice Chancellor's Award from the University of Southampton. He has also written about Jacques Rancière, Arthur Penn, Morse Peckham, Victor Klemperer, Lindsay Anderson and Alain Badiou.

CONTACT: williamkitchen002@gmail.com