Spectres of Reason: Promethean Horrors of Modernity in David Ashford's *A Book of Monsters*

A Book of Monsters: Promethean Horror in Modern Literature and Culture. By David Ashford. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024. Pp. 236. ISBN 9781526170866.

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David Ashford is an Assistant Professor of English Literature at the University of Groningen, with previous positions at City, University of London, and the University of Surrey. Earning his doctorate from the University of Cambridge, he has pursued research in various fields, including modernism, postmodernism, posthumanism, imperialism, cultural geography, and poetics. His extensive publication record includes three monographs and five poetry books, with contributions to Liverpool University Press, Bloomsbury, and Philip Tew's Milletae Press, as well as various academic journals. For over a decade, he has been the General Editor of the poetry press Contraband Books. Ashford's third monograph, *A Book of Monsters: Promethean Horror in Modern Literature and Culture*, is a collection of essays compiled from his previously published work and also expanding on it. It explores the cultural history of Promethean themes in the twentieth century across multiple fields and genres, including Gothic, fantasy, and science fiction literature and cinema, as well as linguistics, architecture, economics, and more. The central aim of the book is to investigate how postmodern writers have reimagined modernism's opposition to neo-gothic irrationality as a source of uncanny horror, contributing to an alternative Gothic tradition (11).

The opening chapter, "The Modern Prometheus: A Brief Introduction to the Horror of Enlightenment," begins by clarifying Victor Frankenstein's ambition, which is not to conquer death but to uncover "the cause of generation and life" (2). Ashford emphasises Frankenstein's early influences, quoting Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus, and identifies the monster as a homunculus, linking the novel to a Renaissance literary tradition he terms "Promethean horror: cautionary tales in which promises of vastly increased power over natural limits are countervailed by fears about being overwhelmed by the products of our own ingenuity" (8). Drawing on Kevin LaGrandeur's work,[1]

[1] Kevin LaGrandeur, *Androids and Intelligent Networks in Early Modern Literature and Culture: Artificial Slaves* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

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Ashford connects this tradition to early representations of humanoid servants in *The Iliad* and Aristotle's *Politics*, as well as to modern science fiction, including Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* (1950), and Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968, dir. Stanley Kubrick). He argues that the resurgence of Promethean motifs in nineteenth-century Gothic horror reflects a Romantic reaction against the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. *Frankenstein*, in this light, becomes Britain's contribution to a Gothic tradition that fears not the medieval past, but the perils of modernity and reason itself.

In the next chapter, "Architects of the Occult: London's Alternative 'Gothic' Tradition," Ashford expands on Guy Debord's concept of psycho-geography, identifying what he calls "paranoid psycho-geographical fantasies" in a range of twentieth-century fiction he categorises as anti-gothic, such as Iain Sinclair's poems, novels by Peter Ackroyd, essays by Stewart Home, and graphic novels by Alan Moore. He argues that while Hawksmoor's churches in Ackroyd's eponymous novel (1985) reflect neo-classical aspects of the Enlightenment; they are, in fact, bricolages that draw on elements from the ancient world, blending the rational and the occult, challenging the perception that the era is dominated by reason. Though fundamentally unlike Gothic architecture, these churches are reimagined within Gothic narratives, revealing a cultural tension between rationality and the uncanny. Ashford further examines this dynamic through the work of Christopher Wren and the reconstruction of London after the Great Fire. The chapter concludes by highlighting a shift in late twentieth-century English Gothic fiction, which increasingly engages with conspiratorial sources of uncanny supernatural terror, such as the Freemasons and the Illuminati, which were prominent in Germanic Gothic literature. This shift coincides with the emergence of postmodernist architecture, in which baroque elements and a deliberate embrace of inauthenticity expose deeper anxieties about form and function.

The chapter "Gorillas in the House of Light: Inter-war Modernism as Crisis Management at London Zoo" focuses on Berthold Lubetkin's Gorilla House at London Zoo as a critique of the Cartesian philosophy underlying modernist architecture. Ashford situates the building within what Jacques Derrida identified as a broader "crisis in humanism" (47). He elaborates on this crisis through depictions of gorillas in literature and film, such as *King Kong* (1933, dir. Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack) and *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932, dir. Robert Florey), which challenge the Cartesian divide between human and animal that is reflected in the Gorilla House, blurring the line between man and beast. Ashford further explores this drive to assert control over blurred boundaries in Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* (1917–1969), where in his reading the violent subjugation and display of Hanno's gorillas symbolise modernist attempts to impose order, reflecting broader themes of imperialism, knowledge, and power. The chapter proposes that modernism may be best understood as a synthetic

phase in a larger historical dialectic, attempting to merge the opposing intellectual frameworks of Marxist materialism and Freudian psychoanalysis.

In chapter four, "Orc-Talk: Spectres of Marx in Tolkien's Middle Earth," Ashford investigates Tolkien's role in the culture war between "two estranged philosophies that defined the era of High Modernism" (11). Helen Macfarlane's peculiar translation of the *Communist Manifesto*'s (1950) "spectre" as "hobgoblin" frames the chapter, with its broader cultural and philosophical implications. An argument is laid out that, while Tolkien's Orcs and their Black Speech might resist Marxist class allegory, through their philological and anthropological roots, they echo Marx's commodity fetish and Derrida's spectre, offering a lens to reinterpret the haunting forces of capital in modernity. A subchapter is dedicated to the conlang Black Speech, exploring its design to reflect evil and linguistic corruption, drawing on languages such as Hurrian and possibly influenced by the politically charged Soviet linguistics theories of the time, namely Nikolai Yakovlevich Marr's New Linguistic Doctrine and Josef Stalin's paper "Marxism and Linguistics" (1950). The chapter closes by returning to Macfarlane's hobgoblin as a symbol of peasant resistance and elite fear, tying together Marx's commodity fetish, Orcish art, and the Tlingit shame totem as satirical representations of despised powers.

The fifth chapter, "Pandora's Box: The Insidious Appeal of the Brutalist Dystopia," presents the post-war period from 1950 to 1975 as an overlooked "golden age" of modernist innovation (112). Ashford outlines four phases of postmodern critique of Brutalism and uses J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* (1975) to explore Brutalism's cultural and psychological effects rooted in the uncanny and societal anxieties. Drawing on Herbert Read's phrase "the geometry of fear," he interprets the Dalek City from the novelised adaptation of *Doctor Who* (1964) as a symbol of public unease, fascination, and discomfort with late modernist architecture (121). A case study is conducted on the origins, design, purpose, and later critique of "the house of the mad," otherwise known as Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseille (127). Ashford suggests that much of what is labelled postmodernism is deeply rooted in late modernist thought and proposes that the term postmodernism be more narrowly reserved for theory and practice shaped by the linguistic turn of the 1970s. He explores how Huxley's and Orwell's literary critiques reflect concerns about the Keynesian economic foundations of the Golden Age of Capitalism, later derided as voodoo economics by neoliberal critics, who saw it as wasteful and overly interventionist. The chapter concludes with a personal meditation on the rise and fall of postwar modernist buildings, drawing on Colm McCarthy's film adaptation (2016) of M.R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014), as it relates to social decay, generational change, and hope.

In "The Mechanical Turk: Enduring Misapprehensions Concerning Artificial Intelligence," Ashford unpacks Walter Benjamin's metaphors of the Angel of History

and the Mechanical Turk's deceptive system of mirrors to reveal how modern, postmodern, and neoliberal ideologies obscure the true workings of history by presenting catastrophe and progress as inevitable, masking the possibility of change in the present. He traces the symbolic and historical evolution of the Mechanical Turk through Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine to artificial intelligence, emphasising how these technologies provoke uncanny anxieties by blurring the line between animate and inanimate. Ashford clarifies common misunderstandings of Alan Turing's Imitation Game, asserting that it tests behavioural imitation rather than cognition or consciousness. The analysis also highlights the Turing Test's broader utility as a general framework for evaluating simulations beyond AI. Ashford critiques the systems that seek to reduce human behaviour to predictable equations through Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy* (1942-1953) and real-world economics, highlighting the tension between agency and determinism, warning about the reliance on computational models. He ends the chapter with a reflection on Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990) and its film adaptation by Steven Spielberg (1993), to critique neoliberalism's overengineered systems, which create seductive illusions of order and chaos in predictive models that limit human agency.

The final chapter, "The Promethean Altar: Prospects of Atonement in Twenty-First-Century Science Fiction," analyses the subversion of the Prometheus myth in Amiri Baraka's play *A Black Mass* (1966), the Earth's sentient rebellion in Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopaedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (2008), the transformation of Enlightenment materialism and Christian heresy into Promethean horror and Lovecraftian cosmos in Stephen King's the *Revival* (2014), and the connection between Donna Haraway's term the Chthulucene and Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014). His projection through these analyses is that "Promethean horror will continue to retain its purchase for as long as legacies of the Enlightenment remain contested" (200). The book closes with a reflection on the Prometheus myth itself, suggesting that the gift which once uplifted humanity may also lead to its undoing. Thus, Prometheus becomes a symbol not just of rebellion but also responsibility, calling for humility.

David Ashford's *A Book of Monsters* utilises Promethean horror as a lens for understanding modernity's uncanny tensions through a wide array of twentieth-century thought and art. A dense and theory-rich work, it illuminates how Enlightenment rationality breeds monstrous anxieties, challenging modernism's rationalist narrative. Ashford's interdisciplinary approach, spanning linguistics to urban design, offers insightful reinterpretations and challenges to mainstream perspectives on debated issues in modernism and postmodernism, revealing their lasting significance. The chapters on architecture could have benefited from further illustrations to offer additional support for the arguments through visual aids, and a formal conclusion would have helped to synthesise the findings and inspire further

research. Nevertheless, this monograph will appeal to a wide range of scholars, especially those interested in modernist and postmodernist literature and art, as well as researchers of the Gothic. By framing the story of Prometheus as a cautionary plea for responsibility, Ashford illuminates the enduring relevance of the Titan in today's discourse on human ambition and humility in the age of AI.