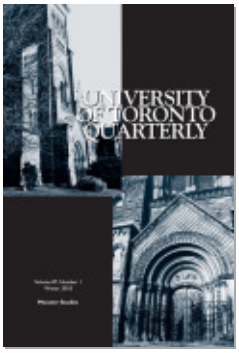
The Difference between Heroes and Monsters: Marvel Monsters and Their Transition into the Superhero Genre



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University of Toronto Quarterly, Volume 87, Number 1, Winter 2018,
pp. 110-135 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press

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ABSTRACT

The monster is an amorphous and ambiguous manifestation of social values, representing fear and revulsion of a cultural Other while engendering escapist power fantasies. The monster era of Marvel Comics from the late 1950s to the early 1960s created a new mediation of the monster based heavily on the comic book industry's desire for a model of mass producible creative content. Graphic narrative's hybridization of verbal and visual rhetoric captures the cultural fluidity of the monster by using multimedia signifiers of ambiguity and reiterating popular visual archetypes. However, Marvel monster categories are as much a result of economic and visual limitations of the comic book medium. Marvel monster rhetoric, in turn, transformed the dichotomy of fear and desire at the heart of the monster into a new superheroic archetype. This article explores the verbal and visual rhetoric of the monster era and what rhetorics transferred to Marvel's silver age superheroes of the 1960s.

KEYWORDS: graphic narrative, visual rhetoric, superhero, cultural studies

INTRODUCTION

Many of today's iconic superheroes like Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America date back to a period in comic book history known as the Golden Age of Comic Books, which started roughly in the late 1930s and ended in the mid-1950s. Shortly after the end of World War II, interests in superheroes waned, with comic book companies like DC Comics, Timely Comics (now Marvel), and EC Comics shifting to new genres like horror, westerns, and crime. From 1959 to 1963, Atlas Comics, a division of Timely, established a niche combining horror, science fiction, and fantasy with comic books like *Journey into Mystery*, *Strange Tales*, *Tales to Astonish*, and *Tales of Suspense*.[1] These comics repeatedly

1 This study focuses primarily on a survey of the following five comics: *Amazing Adventures* #4–6 (1961), *Journey into Mystery* #57–78 (1960–1961), *Strange Tales* #73–95 (1960–1962), *Tales to Astonish* #7–34 (1960–1962), and *Tales of Suspense* #9–27 (1960–62).

 DOI: 10.3138/UTQ.87.1.110

depicted humans encountering extraterrestrial, subterranean, and aquatic creatures that would later be called "Marvel monsters." These new things and creations quickly dominated the comic book industry, giving this time period of the late 1950s and early 1960s the name "the monster era" in the comic book industry.

Marvel's monster era served as an important transition stage between the golden age of superheroes of the 1940s and the silver age of the 1960s, one that helped revitalize the comic book industry. Many silver age superheroes bear a remarkable resemblance in name and appearance to earlier Marvel monsters. As *Fantastic Four* #1 – the first superhero comic of Marvel's silver age – hit the newsstands in 1961, its members included Mr. Fantastic, the Invisible Girl, the Human Torch, and, most importantly, the Thing. Named after a monstrous epithet that was popular among dozens of Marvel monsters, the appearance of this new Thing also borrowed elements of visual design from his monstrous predecessors. Similarly, the popularity of the Marvel monster known as the Hulk influenced a more widely known superhero called the Incredible Hulk. Both Hulks are gigantic with odd-coloured skin and lurching postures, while the new Incredible Hulk took on the popular monster era theme of the transformation of ordinary humans into brutish monsters. The archetype of the spider monster was refined into the now iconic superhero the Amazing Spider-Man, while the ambiguous signifier "X" designated a new generation of misfits and outlaws known as the X-Men, many of whom took on monster-sounding names like Cyclops, the Beast, and Colossus.

Given these connections between monsters and superheroes, analyzing the superhero genre requires a firm understanding of its monstrous predecessors. The monster era of Marvel Comics created a new mediation of the monster figure based not only on graphic narrative's hybridization of verbal and visual rhetorics but also on the comic book industry's desire for a model of mass producible creative content. Similarities between the Marvel monster and Marvel silver age superheroes originated in the shared rhetorics of comic book production and in the lingering of techniques appropriated from the monster era into the silver age in hopes of continued artistic and financial success. Of these techniques, the most important of the monstrous qualities was a tendency toward amorphism and category crisis, which allowed monsters to transform or shift into superheroes, easing the reader, who was already familiar with the monster as a character, into identifying with these newly framed monsters turned superheroes. The monster era was not just a threshold between the golden and silver ages of Marvel Comics but also a transmogrifying frame between the two.

In considering the transition from monster era characters to silver age superheroes, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Monster Theory* (1996) lays out the

 DOI: 10.3138/UTQ.87.1.110

basic characteristics – what Cohen calls his "theses" – of the monster with which one can compare monsters and heroes. According to Cohen, monsters are cultural manifestations created out of the fears and needs of individual societies, constantly transmogrifying to fit changing sociologies. Monster archetypes perpetually vanish and reappear in new, but familiar, forms. While every culture has its own types of monster, the nature of the monster, according to Cohen, is to defy categorization, existing as a hybrid of polarities – something not only outside of humanity but also composed from humanity's basic instincts and urges. Its body and nature, thus, are ambiguous and undecipherable. The monster is Other, often racialized or sexualized, but still something too close to home. Most importantly, Cohen adds, "[f]ear of the monster is really a kind of desire. . . . The same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; . . . This simultaneous repulsion and attraction at the core of the monster's composition accounts greatly for its continued cultural popularity" (16). The Marvel silver age superhero refines this haziness between fear and desire by embodying the monster into a less horrific, but just as ambiguous, form, reinventing the superhero as a figure of fear and desire. Marvel's silver age of superheroes is essentially a filtration of the superhero archetype through the monster era, with characteristics of the Marvel monster redefining the silver age superhero or, conversely, the silver age Marvel superhero refining the monstrosity of the Marvel monster into a more desirable form. Not every monster, however, is redeemable, and certain aspects of their name or archetype cannot be transferred because of the disagreeable connotations that are tied too much to the revolting power of the monster/hero dichotomy – too bestial a name, too amorphous a shape, or an archetype that was too traditionally founded in monstrosity.

Although the monster is a figure of categorical "crisis," attempts at taxonomy are frequent and vital to the comic book monster. In the conclusion to *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (2012), Peter J. Dendle describes the modern status of the monster as a commodity rather than a danger or nightmare: "[Monsters] are catalogued, controlled, and introduced into consciously created imaginative realms for amusement" (438). While elements of monstrosity may become watered down in categorization, this same taxonomical formation is important to iterative production – that is, to create more monsters. Monsters can be classified into an almost endless variety of groups, but when applied to comic book narratives, categorization becomes an important rhetorical device for the mass production of weekly monster tales.

Cohen states directly that "the monster always escapes. . . . its threat is its propensity to shift" (4–5). The monster must eventually find new form, adapting its polymorphous body to new cultural meaning. The transformation of the Marvel monsters into Marvel superheroes is an

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inevitable side effect spawning from the ambiguity of the monster archetype. Within the ambiguity of the monster is a complex dichotomy of emotions that one sees as a defining characteristic of Marvel's silver age superheroes – their very nature as outsiders, enacting a superhero power fantasy but not reaping its social benefits. Stan Lee's X-Men are "sworn to protect a world that hates and fears them," while his Incredible Hulk just wants "puny humans to leave Hulk alone." The Amazing Spider-Man is deemed a menace to society by *Daily Planet* newspaper editor J. Jonah Jameson, while Benjamin J. Grimm, one of the first superheroes of Marvel's silver age, is described by bystanders in the first issue of *Fantastic Four* as a "monster" (Lee, Kirby, Klein, and Rule 4), "a living nightmare" (5), and "some sort of thing" (12).

In considering monster comics, one must look at the characteristics of the monster and the mediation of these characteristics specifically in graphic narrative. The categorization of the monster is heavily dependent upon the medium in which the monster exists. If, as Cohen argues, the monster is "an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place," it is constantly represented according to the conventions of its cultures: "A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the monstrum is etymologically 'that which reveals,' 'that which warns,' a glyph that seeks a hierophant.... Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself" (4). The monster is more than read and deciphered – it is constantly re-reified into new languages and media that seek to expand and re-encrypt the monster's cultural meanings. The Marvel monster is another mediation of this embodiment, specifically in the intermediality of the serial graphic narrative medium that expresses the monster's form in a particular hybrid language of words and images. Marvel monsters are formed by their artists out of geometric shapes and colours specific to the comic book medium; this visual rhetoric is reinforced by the verbal headlines and bylines of newspaper/serial mass production.

Built upon the rhetorics of the monster era, the silver age Marvel superhero adopted many of the characteristics of the Marvel monster. The heroic monster and its transformation from human form to something else inspired many of Marvel's anti-heroes and outsiders who assumed monstrous names and epithets to reinforce their uncanniness and incredible-ness. The appearance or identity of many Marvel silver age superheroes was likewise influenced by visual rhetorics and archetypes of the monster era, particularly in colour and shape designs inherent to graphic narrative. However, the silver age Marvel superhero was not a verbal-visual verbatim appropriation of monster era rhetorics. Rather it is an entity that emerges in the liminal space between two periods in comic book history when Marvel popularized the silver age superhero with a rhetoric of monstrosity through popular names, dramatic poses, colour

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schemes, and visual archetypes, to name a few monstrous conventions. The rhetorics of the Marvel monster that originally captured the iterative tendency of the monster came to galvanize a new age, not of monsters but, rather, of superheroes.

"HIS VERY NAME MADE MANKIND TREMBLE!": THE VERBAL RHETORIC OF MARVEL MONSTERS

A monster's name is often one of its first attributes that the reader encounters (along with the monster's image, which is to be discussed later). Naming a monster, then, needs to be taken into careful consideration, with the medium of the monster influencing the creation of its name. Writing about film, for instance, Dendle comments that "[s]ome [film] titles require nothing more than the animal's name itself to bring out an uneasy relationship with the natural world: frogs, piranha, orca, scorpion, the birds" (441). The Marvel monster was, more often than not, only a guest in comic book titles, including *Journey into Mystery*, *Tales to Astonish*, and *Strange Tales*, sharing the comic book with two or three other short stories. The monster, however, would be frequently given top billing, prominently displayed on the front cover (even when it was the last story in the anthology), commonly headlined with exciting one-liners, like on the cover of *Tales to Astonish* #19: "Rommbu! His very name made mankind tremble!" (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Rommbu" cover). When not adorning the cover, interior captions like in *Tales to Astonish* #9 would use a similar effect, depicting the name of the monster as something "Hideous! Nightmarish! There are no words to adequately describe it! … For this was the grimmest time of our lives! This was the time of Droom!" (Lee and Heck, "Droom" cover). The name of the Marvel monster is one of its defining rhetorical properties, with specific aural approaches producing a monstrous effect.

A great portion of Marvel monster names fall into particular linguistic patterns that suggest monstrosity, either to a general Western culture or to monster era creators like Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. Of the sixty-five monster names from Marvel's monster era sampled for this article, fourteen monsters contained *k* and *g* sounds (called plosives, which block airflow when speaking), including Goom, Googam, Groot, Krang, and Rorgg. These plosives produce a violent guttural tone that is connected to choking or gagging as the flow of air is blocked in the throat when pronouncing the monster's name. Other plosive consonants like *p*, *b*, and *t*, for example, with Bruttu, Grottu, Groot, and Rommbu, are even more monstrous in their phonetic properties as they not only constrict airflow and force it through the throat, but they also build up a sonic force as airflow is blocked at the lips and then explosively released. The rhotic *r* consonant is also common to Marvel monster names, producing a bestial

 DOI: 10.3138/UTQ.87.1.110

growling from the throat. In terms of vowels, the long *oo* [u] is the most common, appearing in nearly a dozen names – Bruttu, Groot, and Rommbu, for example – with the dipthong əʊ (pronounced like *oh*) present in a third of Marvel monster names, including Gorgolla, Orogo, Orrgo, and Rorgg. The [u] and [əʊ] phonemes are often seen in moans, especially those of ghosts, and in groans, becoming synonymous with fear and pain. Monstrosity, then, is as much a linguistic tradition as it is about the monster's appearance.

In addition to monstrous phonetics, many Marvel monsters have special epithets based upon rhetorical indistinction. The monster's name avoids description because it exists outside conventions of human knowledge and experience. Cohen writes: "[T]he monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond – of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within" (6–7). Monstrous epithets likewise rely upon emphasizing the monster's nature as an outsider, but these epithets rarely refer to distinct origins; instead, they seek to confound origins. For example, Orogo is from Beyond – an exact reflection of Cohen's thesis – Gruto is the creature from Nowhere, and Groot and Goom are from Planet X (Lee and Heck, "Orogo"; Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Gruto"; "I Challenged Groot"; "Goom"). These epithets are not meant to give more insight or meaning into the monster's true nature but, rather, further confound this understanding. Related to this indistinction, another type of epithet that repeatedly shows up is the "unbelievability" of the monster – that it is beyond intellectual fathom. Readers see monsters like the unbelievable menace of Moomba, Zog the Unbelievable, Krang the Unbelievable, and Thorr the Unbelievable. These epithets take the already monstrous sound of the Marvel monster name and enhance it with markers of negation.

Similarly, a large percentage of Marvel monsters rely upon signifiers of what Cohen calls "category crisis"; the monster is inherently fluid, amorphous, and polymorphous, constantly changing and acclimating to specific cultures and time periods. Thus, as a result, the Marvel monster name is in many instances less a proper noun and more an aversion of distinct identity. There is X the Thing that Lives and Robot X. There is the Thing on Bald Mountain and the Thing on the Moon and the Thing in the Black Box and the Thing that Crawled by Night. Roughly twenty out of sixty-five sampled Marvel monsters have names or epithets including "thing" or "it." Such names make the first impression of the Marvel monster nebulous and vague, like a riddle – or, in Cohen's words, a glyph – that requires decoding. The tagline of many Marvel monster comic books promises the reader insight into the monster's true nature, but because the monster always escapes, the reader's urge for understanding is always thwarted. Cover titles and blurbs include "I Alone Know the Dread Secret of Gor-Kill, the Living Demon!" on the cover to

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Tales of Suspense #12 (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers), "I Learned the Dread Secret of the Blip!" from *Tales to Astonish* #15 (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers), and "Only one man on Earth knows the incredible secret of the Two-Headed Thing!" in *Strange Tales* #95 (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "With My Own Eyes"). Category crisis and ambiguity, then, become rhetorical manoeuvres to draw in readers; while the reader seeks to move toward states of understanding, every clue or signifier as to the monster's true nature only makes the monster more indecipherable.

Such blurbs and taglines also reinforce the reiterative tendencies of the monsters. As Cohen argues, the monster always escapes and always returns. While one can look into the various metaphors for this return – the return of the repressed or cultural transformation or fear of contagion, among others – the Marvel monster's return is a self-fulfilling rhetoric, whereby blurbs and taglines announce the monster's return often in circumstances where the monster makes its first appearance. For example, the tagline to *Journey into Mystery* #56 reads "I Brought Zog the Unbelievable Back to Life!" (Lee and Heck, "I Brought Zog" cover), while the tagline to *Tales of Suspense* #10 reads almost identically: "I Brought Cyclops Back to Life!!" (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "I Brought the Cyclops" cover). With both of these taglines, the first-person point of view creates a surrogacy with the reader, placing responsibility for the resurrection of the Marvel monster on the audience who continually reads these monster comics. A speech balloon on the cover of *Tales of Suspense* #10 reinforces this reader responsibility as an anonymous man and woman struggle to free the Cyclops from his icy tomb: "We'll never be able to free him!" (Lee and Heck, "I Brought the Cyclops" cover). Conversely, the tagline to Zog's return from the ice is accompanied by a speech balloon expressing abject fear: "We're too late! Zog is free!! Free to destroy us!" (Lee and Heck, "I Brought Zog" cover). The speaker here is offstage, portraying the audience of an unseen reader. The difference in reactions between the Cyclops and Zog symbolize the ambiguity of the reader's response as the monster is both desired and feared (see Figure 1). Whether the monster is loved or feared, the effect of such taglines is to embed the monster – however novel it is – into the iterative discourse of a frightening monstrous re-presence and commodified mass production where the audience desires to engage in an ambiguous emotional interaction with the comic book monster.

"WHAT SORT OF MONSTER IS THAT??": VISUAL TROPES OF THE MONSTER ERA

Similar in ambiguity to the verbal rhetoric of the Marvel monster is the first of the monster's visual conventions: its form or shape or, rather, its lack of form or shape. In *I Was a Cold War Monster* (2001), Cyndy Hendershot writes that in 1950s culture, "horror speaks to an amorphous

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Figure 1: (left to right) Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Oog Lives Again" (*Tales of Suspense*, 1962); Lee and Heck, "I Bought Zog Back to Life!" (*Journey into Mystery*, 1960); Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "I Bought the Mighty Cyclops Back to Life" (*Tales of Suspense*, 1960). © 2018 MARVEL.

fear" that is commonly represented by the category of the formless monster popular in the 1950s and 1960s, which has numerous variations to keep the archetype fresh (1). For example, the Molten Man-Thing in *Tales of Suspense* #7 is one of the first Marvel monsters to capture the visual anatomy for the amorphous monster – vaguely humanoid, made out of some type of fluid material, with distorted facial features (Lee and Ditko, "I Fought"). Similarly, other Marvel monsters that followed are composed of formless substances like mud, water, and sand – even electricity. Those materials with negative connotations are more commonly used when re-inventing the amorphous monster archetype. For example, Taboo and the Glob from *Journey into Mystery* #72 are both made of mud (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Taboo"; "The Glob"). Taboo's reappearance in multiple issues further testifies to the rhetorical appeal (or aversion) to his murky substance ("The Return of Taboo"). Conversely, Gor-Kill, made of water, invokes both a life-preserving substance as well as a fear of the ocean or drowning. His appearance, much like the electricity-made Blip, is even more amorphous than creatures like Taboo or the Glob, as his monstrous form is in many cases drawn as formless lines ("I Alone"). As an important final example, the Sandman is made from sand but takes on multiple forms, including an amorphous Molten Man-Thing-like monster and a humanoid appearance ("The Sandman"). Here, the distinction between monster and man diminishes, if not disappearing entirely. The formlessness of the amorphous monster not only allows for a wide range of experimentation in monster appearance based upon a

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Figure 2: (top left clockwise) Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "I Learned the Dread Secret of the Blip!" (*Tales to Astonish*, 1961); Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "The Glob!" (*Journey into Mystery*, 1961); Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Taboo! The Thing from the Murky Swamp!" (*Strange Tales*, 1960); Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "The Sandman Cometh!" (*Journey into Mystery*, 1961); Lee and Ditko, "I Fought the Molten Man-Thing!" (*Tales of Suspense*, 1960); Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "I Alone Know the Dread Secret of Gor-Kill, the Living Demon!" (*Tales of Suspense*, 1960). © 2018 MARVEL.

single archetype, but it also makes the monster incomprehensible – inhuman but constantly encroaching on human form (see Figure 2).

To visualize a "thing," however, is to give it concrete existence and to minimalize or negate the rhetorical effect of its name, which allows it to hold infinite forms in a viewer's imagination. To compensate, monster era comics deliberately prolong or subvert the thing's appearance to maintain visual ambiguity and to create an atmosphere of suspense and

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Figure 3: (left to right) Lee, Heck, and Ayers, "The Thing on the Moon" (*Strange Tales*, 1960); Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Monstro the Menace from the Murky Depths!" (*Tales of Suspense*, 1960); Lee, Kirby, and Sinnott, "I Was Trapped by Titano, the Monster that Time Forgot!" (*Tales to Astonish*, 1960). © 2018 MARVEL.

mystery that is a prerequisite to the mechanics of the monster genre. For example, the Thing on the Moon on the cover of *Strange Tales* #79 is depicted as reaching out to grab a hold of solid ground as it climbs out from a subterranean abyss (Lee, Heck, and Ayers, "Thing on the Moon"). Only the top of its head and one eye (along with his arms) are visible. This visual motif is present in roughly thirty out of the sixty-five covers sampled in this survey (see Figure 3). Similar techniques utilizing this rhetorical ambiguity are used in interior art as artists use the comic book narrative to slowly reveal their monstrous creations. As an example in both cover and interior art, only the back of its head and the arms of the Thing in the Black Box from *Journey into Mystery* #74 are visible as it reaches out from its black box (Lee and Kirby, "Thing in the Black Box" cover). On the first page of the issue, a little more is revealed – an eye and wings. Later, it appears fully as a reddish monster with elephantine skin and oval head with wide mouth and no nose. "What sort of monster is that??" an observer asks in astonishment (Lee and Kirby, "Thing in the Black Box" 4–5; see Figure 4). It is a Marvel monster, a particular visualization of monstrous characteristics unique to the Marvel monster genre.

In addition to rhetorical ambiguity, many Marvel monsters are based upon iterations of classical archetypes, whereby a popular monster category (for example, the dragon) is used for its mass appeal in popular culture, with which readers are familiar and often pleased when such archetypes are deconstructed (see Figure 5). For instance, the Marvel

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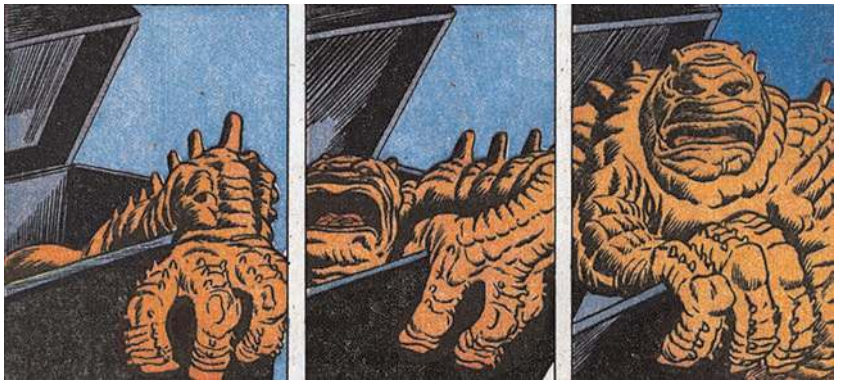

Figure 4: Lee and Kirby, "Thing in the Black Box" (*Journey into Mystery*, 1961). © 2018 MARVEL.

Figure 5: (left to right) Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Gorgolla!! The Living Gargoyle!!" (*Strange Tales*, 1960); Lee and Heck, "I Saw Droom the Living Lizard!" (*Tales to Astonish*, 1960); Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Fin Fang Foom!" (*Strange Tales*, 1960). © 2018 MARVEL.

monster Gorgolla is a classic gargoyle, a monster that Cohen describes as having the function to "record the liberating fantasies of a bored or repressed hand suddenly freed to populate the margins" (3). The stone gargoyles that populated medieval Europe existed with such frequency that they demanded an archetype for mass production that allowed for infinite variations, each variation displaying the artist's handiwork. The artistic inspiration behind the Marvel monsters bore a similar creative burden – mass production with variation. Droom, for example, is depicted

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Figure 6: (left to right) Lee and Benulis, "The Spider Man!" (*Uncanny Tales*, 1954); Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "I Dared to Battle Rorgg, King of the Spider Men!" (*Journey into Mystery*, 1961); Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Where Will You Be When, the Spider Strikes!" (*Journey into Mystery*, 1961). © 2018 MARVEL.

in the typical Western dragon form of a giant lizard, compared to the popularity of the re-occurring Chinese – that is, Communist – dragon Fin Fang Foom (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Gorgolla"; Lee and Heck, "Droom"; Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Fin Fang Foom"). Archetypes, then, allow for a familiar representation that can also be infinitely mutated, creating many monsters from one mould.

The arthropoid is another foundational archetype for the Marvel monster (see Figure 6). The first of the arachnid Marvel monsters was actually a subversion. The tale of "The Spider Man!" in *Uncanny Tales* #26 misleads the reader into presuming that some half-human/half-spider monster lurks in the pages (Lee and Benulis). The monster is just an old man with some large spiders. Created from the same archetype, Grottu, King of the Insects, and Krang the Unbelievable were almost identical in appearance: giant, red-orange ants with human-ish eyes. Insect-like monsters following Grottu and Krang deviate from the standard giant, odd-coloured arthropoid (Lee, Kirby, and Everett, "Grottu"; Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "I Created Krang"). Rorgg, King of the Spider Monsters, is orange-red on the cover and blue-purple in the interior art, but he has six appendages – four legs and two arms – with webbed, four-fingered hands. His skin is scaly and segmented, and his face a grotesque combination of insect eyes and gaping maw (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "I Dared"). Similarly, the Spider is rendered as a caricature of an arthropoid archetype; rather than having a realistic anatomy like Grottu or Krang, the Spider's body is composed of geometric shapes. His body

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is almost plump – a circular body with long spindly legs and arms, and a circular head with large "dot in a white circle" eyes. His skin is covered in what looks like red fur, exaggerating the hair-like sensory organs covering larger spiders like the tarantula ("Where Will You Be"). This caricatured appearance contrasts with the fairly realistic depiction of insectoid anatomy with Grottu and Krang, but these ant-monsters in their unusual colours are still influenced by the visual rhetoric of the Marvel monster.

In addition to the dragon and spider, the man-brute was another popular Marvel monster upon which the transformation sequences common to silver age Marvel superheroes was based. The Brute that Walks appears much like a giant gorilla on the front cover, but in the interior art, he is a giant monster with fringe-like hair running down his arms and distorted facial features: large ears, an over-sized and distorted mouth, a piggish nose, hairy unibrow, and semi-domed forehead with wild Einstein-like hair. The Brute that Walks is a scientist who uses a special growth formula to, in his words, "transform me from the thin weakling I am, into a tall powerful bruiser!" (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "I Am the Brute" 6). The almost identically named Bruttu has a similar origin, where a malfunctioning machine transforms a cartoonist into one of his creations named "Bruttu!" (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Beware of Bruttu"). Bruttu is another giant. His face is more deflated, like a pinhead, with large lips and drooping eyes. He is covered in thick fur, wearing the remnants of his shredded human pants (see Figure 7). While the Brute that Walks is drunk on power and immediately stalks his girlfriend, Bruttu conversely exemplifies the benign Marvel monster: the transformation makes him mute so that he cannot identify himself as his scared neighbours attack him. The Brute that Walks and Bruttu share the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde theme of transformation that connects the monster with latter superhero stories.

Marvel monsters that are not heavily based on earlier archetypes have their own visual tendencies influenced by the comic book medium. Many Marvel monsters are creatures of shapes; common visual features include geometrically shaped heads, circular eyes of varying sizes, and large elongated mouths that fill in and complete the facial features of the monster. For example, Rommbu and the Monster at My Window have oversized rectangular heads, while Goom, Googam, and the Space Beasts all have circular heads. Conversely, Orrgo has his head merged with his body. Eyes also differ in shape and size. Orrgo and Rommbu have large white eyes, while Goom's and Googam's are disproportionately small (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Goom"; "Beware of Googam"; "A Monster"; "When the Space Beasts"). The form of different Marvel monsters is essentially drawn from variations in basic geometric shapes – mainly circles

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Figure 7: Tier 1: Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Beware of Bruttu" (*Tales of Suspense*, 1961); Tier 2: Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "I am the Brute" (*Journey into Mystery*, 1961). © 2018 MARVEL.

and squares – that compose the body of the monster. This shape composition allows for uniformity as well as variation in monster design. The visual overlap between Orrgo, Goom, and the Monster at My Window, for example, is marginal, creating a spectrum of overlapping and altered characteristics (see Figure 8).

More importantly, Marvel monsters tend to fall into prominent colour schemes. Out of sixty-five sampled Marvel monsters, thirty of them are coloured in some shade of red or orange, with additional colours including purple, yellow, blue, and green. While colours like red have symbolism related to anger, blood, or Communism, having multiple Marvel monsters share physical features and colours creates a taxonomic system that not only groups the monsters together into a semi-homogenized category but also identifies them as culturally or racially distinct from the humans they terrorize (or try to save). Cohen comments: "Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but

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Figure 8: (left to right) Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Orrgo the Unconquerable!" (*Strange Tales*, 1961); Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Goom! The Thing from Planet X!" (*Tales of Suspense*, 1961); Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "A Monster at My Window" (*Tales to Astonish*, 1962). © 2018 MARVEL.

for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, *racial*, economic, sexual" (7, emphasis added). Colour of skin is a common racial marker, and bearing skin colour not possessed by any human further marks the Marvel monster as inhuman. This distinction is especially important with man-brutes who shift from man and monster; an immediate sign of this shift is a colour change from normal human pigment to a radically different and monstrous colour. Their skin now dehumanizes them even before their bodies fully distort.

The comic book medium itself necessitates a more practical reason for the colour categorization of Marvel monsters, through a four-colour process to produce its images. Comics rely upon the CMYK system, a combination of four colours – cyan (blue), magenta (red), yellow, and black (referred to as "key") – through a pixilation of ink dots that can lower the vibrancy of the colours from 100 per cent solid colour to ratios of 25 per cent or 50 per cent colour. Stuart Grais explains that colourists are given "a palette of 64 possible colors to use in the books, though most used no more than half of them. . . . Limiting the palette to 64 colors kept printing costs down, and were about all what would easily reproduce on the cheap newsprint paper used for comics" (n. pag.). Marvel monsters, then, possesses certain colour schemes as a reflection or expression of limitations by CMYK colour processing. In the least, monsters of conventional colours, like a green dragon or a black ant, could be re-coloured into more unusual, but more economically convenient, colours, resulting in monstrosity from the contrast between conventional creature archetypes and colour processing. Ironically, though, the same productive

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techniques enabled by colour categorization also limited Marvel monster diversity – while the monster always returns, it could only return in a 64-colour palette.

In response to CMYK limitations, many Marvel monsters are coloured in ways that distinguish them from their surroundings. Orrgo on the cover to *Strange Tales* #90 is a crimson red that contrasts with the yellow tones of a circus scene behind him and the shadowy foreground of audience members fleeing in terror (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Orrgo"). His pure white circular eyes stand out starkly against the crimson of his body. Similarly, the red-orange arthropoid monsters Krang and Grottu are both climbing or attacking greystone buildings on their respective covers (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "I Created Krang"; Lee, Kirby, and Everett, "Grottu"). Because most ant species are black, the black-on-grey colour scheme would de-emphasize the monster. The monsters must be re-coloured so they dominate the cover (and terrify the audience with their enhanced presence). When monsters are coloured in darker tones, the coloration is at times symbolic – Taboo and Diablo are darker colours to represent muddy and brackish elements – but, just as often, it is a necessity for monster-background contrast (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Taboo"; "I Saw Diablo"). The Blip, Vandoom's Creature, and Goom, for example, are all grey on the cover but differently coloured on the inside – the Blip is yellow and Vandoom's Creature and Goom the standard red-orange ("I Learned"; "Vandoom"; "Goom"). The grey scale in cover art is required to create a negative space from the fiery backgrounds of ominous sunsets or flaming ruin. When these backgrounds are removed, the Marvel monster resumes its usual unusual colour.

"THIS MONSTER UNMASKED!": SHARED RHETORICS OF MARVEL MONSTERS AND SILVER AGE MARVEL SUPERHEROES

Cohen argues in his theses that fear of the monster is really a type of desire. While the monster generates conflicting responses of revulsion and attraction within the reader, in its purest form, it still lingers around the pole of revulsion. As themes in Marvel Comics slowly moved from the monster era into the silver age of superheroes, comic book creators had the task of forming a middle ground that humanized the monster, so that the superhero became a reflection of Marvel monster rhetoric that revolved more around the pole of attraction. As the monster transforms into superhero, the audience likewise transforms in their desire for the monster.

This monster-as-saviour figure appears in multiple media during the 1950s. In *Paranoia, the Bomb, and 1950s Science Fiction Films* (1999), Hendershot notes that this theme in 1950s science fiction resulted from the cultural impact of the atomic bomb. The scientists who produced

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such terrible weapons of war represented a "tension between destroyer and savior" (24) and a "division of the world into heroes and villains" (27). The 1950s science fiction monster embodied a similar ambiguity as dichotomies arose within the same monstrous figures, with an irresolution between what was heroic and what was monstrous. Scientists who worked on the atomic bomb did so under the justification of militarily preserving and spreading American values – winning the war – but, at the same time, the horror and destruction wrought by atomic science traumatized world culture. The silver age of superheroes slowly redeemed or stabilized these conflicts.

In many cases, the Marvel monster ends up not being a monster at all but, rather, a victim of the prejudices of a society all too ready to commit violence against that which it does not understand. In *Journey into Mystery* #67, Gruto, for example, scolds his attackers: "I was sent to earth to give you this knowledge [of advanced technology] … to teach you our secrets! But you humans have shown me you are not worthy of our gifts! You are cruel barbarians who deserve no better than what you have!" (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Gruto" 18). Similarly, Oog rebukes the angry and hostile crowd that has surrounded him: "Why do you fear what you do not understand? … We of outer space will never invade you! You have nothing we want! You have only cruelty, savageness, and fear!" (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Oog Lives Again" 8). The story of Vandoom's Creature is even sadder, as the monster, after suffering the stings of mob pitchforks, saves his attackers from an alien menace. The attackers lament the creature's death: "We were wrong, so terribly wrong! The monster never meant us any harm! We attacked him without mercy and never once did he retaliate! He spared us all!" (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Vandoom" 15). These "monsters" reverse positions with the audience as the human audience is revealed as a monster and the monster as saviour.

The ambiguity of the Marvel monster carries over into numerous silver age Marvel superheroes who share names with Marvel monsters. In this name sharing, the monster becomes more connected to humanity, repurposed to serve the needs of mankind, although ambiguously still an outsider. In turn, the superhero takes on the rhetorical power of the already established monster. For example, signifiers of ambiguity popular among Marvel monsters included "X" and "thing," from which silver age Marvel superheroes like the X-Men and the Fantastic Four's Thing take their code names. "Hulk" likewise is a synonym for "X" or "thing," gaining additional power from the popularity of the original Hulk (referred to in this article as the "monster Hulk," with the superhero Hulk referred to as the "Incredible Hulk"). In "Cover to Cover: Hauntingly Familiar Marvel Monsters," Mark Engblom comments: "A few years before Bruce Banner transformed into the (then) grey-skinned Incredible Hulk, the name gets a 'test drive' in both *Journey into Mystery* #62 (1960) and #66 (1961), making

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the Hulk one of the rare pre-Marvel monsters to earn itself a sequel" (n. pag.). Certain Marvel monster names proved successful, resulting in an iterative trend, while other monster names did not transfer well. There are no superheroes named Googam, Goom, or Gorgilla because such names do not mimic humanity or invoke heroism. They are guttural and bestial and, thus, pure monstrosity.

In addition to monster names, visual models of monstrosity proved just as inspirational to silver age superheroism, forging a connection between monster and superhero based on visual similarities. Monsters and superheroes begin to resemble one another to the point that they are almost interchangeable. For example, the appearance of the Fantastic Four's Thing is inspired by the visual thingness of numerous Marvel monsters. In "Marvel's Mighty (and Modest) Monsters," Engblom writes: "As a founding member of the Fantastic Four, the Thing served as sort of a 'bridge' between Marvel's monster-centric past and its superhero future" (n. pag.). The orange elephantine hides of monsters like Sserpo from *Amazing Adventures* #6 and the Thing in the Black Box became a visual basis for the superheroic Thing's rocky complexion (Lee and Kirby, "SSERPO!"). The gaping maw and hollow eyes of the Thing in the Black Box also serve as a model for the facial features of the Fantastic Four's Thing. As a final component in this integration, the superhero Thing possesses shared characteristics of Sserpo, the Thing in the Black Box, and Bruttu – orange-red colour, hulking physique, and a gaping maw and distinct eyes. Bruttu's transmutation from human into monster also adds a characteristic of man-brute Marvel monsters that is vital to the superheroic tradition: the transformation sequence (see Figure 9). This transformation from human to monster defines the pathos of desire and disgust imbued in the new silver age superhero, borrowed from its Marvel monstrous roots.

While the superhero Thing incorporates many visual aspects of other Marvel things and monsters, the primary connection between the monster Hulk and the Incredible Hulk is their name. Visually, the two are separated by just as many differences as there are similarities. Looking at the monster Hulk on the cover of *Journey into Mystery* #66, he resembles more of a Yeti, the Tibetan monster similar in appearance to a white Bigfoot or Sasquatch – a furry face with his torso covered in fur like a pelt and long slender arms, oversized hands, and short stout legs (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Return of the Hulk"). He also has a bald skull cap. The original version of the Incredible Hulk, as depicted in *The Incredible Hulk* #1, is a brutishly large and muscular man with grey skin, a bowl haircut, and tattered clothes (Lee, Kirby, and Reinman 1). However, there are some visual similarities between the two Hulks in their initial appearances: they are both gigantic and grey in colour, both lurching with a similar

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Figure 9: (clockwise) Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Beware of Bruttu" (*Tales of Suspense*, 1961); Lee, Kirby, Klein, and Rule, "The Fantastic Four" (*The Fantastic Four*, 1961); Lee and Kirby, "Thing in the Black Box" (*Journey into Mystery*, 1961); Lee and Kirby, "SSERPO!" (*Amazing Adventures*, 1961). © 2018 MARVEL.

gait with one foot forward, one hand grasping the air as the other is flexed and positioned in preparation to strike or grab (see Figure 10). This pose is a visual motif of Marvel monsters that occurs in roughly fifty out of sixty-five sampled covers; while the monster and the superhero may not always resemble each other, they can still share visual conventions like postures, gestures, and positions that demonstrate the influence of monstrous paradigms on the new generation of superheroes.

In addition, both Hulks, as well as other Marvel monsters, are noted for colour changes resulting from problems in mass-producing graphic narrative. The monster Hulk is originally depicted as russet red in *Journey into Mystery* #62 (Lee and Heck, "I Was a Slave"). On the cover to *Journey into Mystery* #66, he is grey, while in the interior art, he is again red (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Return of the Hulk"). After the monster Hulk reappears in *Marvel Feature* #3, fighting the Incredible Hulk, the monster Hulk is coloured white (Roy, Andru, and Everett). Other Marvel monsters like Fin Fang Foom also underwent colour changes. He is coloured orange in his original appearance in *Strange Tales* #89 and re-coloured green when he reappears in *Astonishing Tales* #23 (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Fin Fang Foom"; Isabella, Kirby, and Ayers, "Conquerors"). Like many Marvel monsters, the Incredible Hulk also underwent colour changes, specifically because of production problems with inking, as Grais explains:

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Figure 10: (left to right) Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "The Return of the Hulk" (*Journey into Mystery*, 1961); Lee, Kirby, and Reinman, "The Hulk" (*The Incredible Hulk*, 1962). © 2018 MARVEL.

> When Stan Lee and Jack Kirby brought the Incredible Hulk to life in the early 60's, their vision for this character was that of a muscle-bound giant with deathly grey skin. As the comics came off the press however, it soon became apparent that getting just the right shade of grey was difficult. Sometimes the Hulk came out looking pale and dull, like dishwater, at other times he was almost black. With the 2nd issue, it was decided that the Hulk would become an easy to reproduce shade of green. (n. pag.)

The Incredible Hulk's new green-and-purple colour scheme gives him an uncanny (or, rather, incredible) resemblance to the Thing on the Moon (see Figure 3). Because visual techniques can affect monster characterization – for example, the orange of Fin Fang Foom contrasted too much with the monster's dragon archetype – colour addition needed to be fine-tuned to produce optimal receptive response from audience members. Inconsistencies in colour presentation reduced any rhetorical awe that could be generated by the new Incredible Hulk. To stabilize this new character, colourists returned to pre-existing colour combinations, like green and purple, which were familiar (and cheaper), and, thus, more acceptable, to audiences (and the publisher). Monstrosity, then, becomes a chromatic

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continuum as readers sort through archetypes based on monster colour conventions to determine who or what is a real monster.

While monsters and superheroes may share names or resemble each other, the ultimate connection between the two occurs when humans literally become monstrous, as Cohen explains: "A mixed category, the monster resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a 'system' allowing polyphony, mixed response" (7). Fear and desire exist together in the Marvel monster and Marvel silver age superhero in different proportions, resisting a clear-cut distinction between superman and monster. The visual resemblance between the Thing and Bruttu establishes the man-brute or man-to-monster archetype as an important influence upon the silver age Marvel superhero, where the differences between man and monster dissolve. To demonstrate this dissolution, characters like the Thing and the Incredible Hulk are noted for transformation sequences that render the change from man to monster. The transformation typically occurs over the course of three panels, the first providing the original form of the man, the third panel the final form of the monster, and the second a liminal in-between stage between man and monster. This middle panel is important since the man-brute is not a man, nor is he a monster, but, rather, an ambiguous combination of the two, defying dichotomous categorization. The front cover of *The Incredible Hulk* #1 directly presents this ambiguity as a blurb asks: "Is he man or monster or is he both?" (Lee, Kirby, and Reinman).

The transformation sequence of the Marvel monster and the Marvel superhero combines both visual and verbal effects. With Bruttu's change from human into monster in *Tales of Suspense* #22, Panel 1 of the transformation sequence shows Bruttu's human face, captioned with a dramatic verbal actualizer of the metamorphosis: "And then the impossible happened!! I began to change" (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Beware of Bruttu" 4). In Panel 2, Bruttu's face turns orange and distorts like it is being stretched, so that by Panel 3, his face is completely transformed, with a minimalized nose, gaping maw, and white eyes that contrast with his now deep red skin. The caption in Panel 2 reads: "I slowly turned into …" with Panel 3 completing the verbal and visual transformation sequence: "Bruttu!" (4). The transformation of the Brute that Walks in *Journey into Mystery* #65, is almost completely verbal (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "I Am the Brute"). In Panel 2, the caption reads: "I can feel my muscles expanding! I'm starting to grow!" (6). In Panel 3, his interior monologue continues: "But I soon noticed other changes … changes I hadn't counted on." His speech balloon takes over: "My skin – it's growing hard like an animal! And my face is changing – becoming distorted!" (6). The accompanying panel illustrations, however, are deliberately rendered in shadows until the big reveal in Panels 4 and 5 as the reader sees the monstrous face of the Brute that Walks.

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Figure 11: Tier 1: Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "Beware of Bruttu" (*Tales of Suspense*, 1961); Tier 2: Lee, Kirby, and Ayers, "I am the Brute" (*Journey into Mystery*, 1961); Tier 3: Lee, Kirby, and Reinman, "The Hulk" (*The Incredible Hulk*, 1962). © 2018 MARVEL.

The Incredible Hulk uses a similar style of transformation sequence. In *The Incredible Hulk* #1, when Bruce Banner undergoes his first transformation into the Incredible Hulk, Panel 1 of the transformation is his human self. In the next panel, Banner's appearance has not changed much

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outside of minor clothes tearing, but his speech bubble announces the transformation: "What's happening??" "What's happening???" he repeats in Panel 3, as he bends over, his skin greying and his clothes ripping (Lee, Kirby, and Reinman 5). The reader does not see Banner's final form until Panel 4 of the transformation sequence, a subversion that characterizes the visual rhetoric of ambiguity of the Marvel Monster (see Figure 11).

CONCLUSION

One of the most important moments in the history of Marvel's silver age was the rescue of golden age superhero icon Captain America from a block of ice in *The Avengers* #4 (Lee, Kirby, and Roussos). As with the Cyclops and Zog, the visual motif of ice is crucial to depicting Cohen's thesis on the inevitable escape and return of the monster, but it also becomes a symbol of the rise of a new generation of superheroes. The tagline on the front cover of *The Avengers* #4 is pulled straight from Marvel monster cover blurbs: "Captain America lives again!" His superheroic pose, one arm forward, one arm back, even resembles a monster's lurching (see Figure 12). The rhetorics of the Marvel monster that originally captured the iterative tendency of the monster now kickstarts a new age, not of monsters but of superheroes.

Figure 12: Lee, Kirby, and Roussos, "Captain America Joins … The Avengers!" (*Avengers*, 1964). © 2018 MARVEL.

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Given the rapid production rate of Marvel monster comic books – sometimes as many as a dozen new monsters a month – the Marvel monster's verbal and visual characteristics were heavily influenced by a commodity culture. To produce a new monster each week requires a template of success, a mould upon which the assembly line is based. This mass production does not mean, however, that the Marvel monster does not possess traditional monstrous traits, as Cohen outlines in *Monster Theory*. The Marvel monster is an amorphous, ever-changing thing from outside and beyond human experience, coming and going in continuously new forms but always sharing some resemblance to other members of the monster family. What the Marvel monster adds to discourse on monster theory is a new mediation of Cohen's theses – monstrous manifestations unique to graphic narrative and, more specifically, to the monster era of Marvel Comics. Verbal patterns show such models, while the appearance of monsters and their various visual depictions provides another form of categorical commodity. Monsters share traits that best enact a rhetorical effect upon the reader – to consume in weekly or monthly instalments, always coming back for more. If the monster always escapes and always returns, it is because it has been designed that way. In truth, it is the reader who returns, not the monster.

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