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The Construction of the Monstrous
Super-Human and Sub-Human Identity
Holly Fleischer '02

Identity in our contemporary society has been established on principles of otherness. We study history to gain the knowledge of what we have surpassed as a society, and thus, we understand our modern society by knowing what we are not. However, the notion of examining our current society's ideologies and actions has been deemed a more complicated and intangible mode of study. This same concept may be applied to our postmodern construction and comprehension of identity. Our understanding of self becomes an understanding of what we are not, a mere establishment of a dichotomy that works to situate one identity against another. This notion of otherness has permeated the very foundations of our society. It has done so by establishing a hierarchical system that prioritizes one identity over another. Who, then, is subjected to being seen as an aberration or monster in this hierarchical system? When examining this ideology, the question arises as to how this hierarchical system is conceived. Who decides our culture's conception of normalcy and otherness and how has this ideology permeated into our everyday existence?

In the following pages, I will present my own understanding of the aforementioned questions that I have raised. After studying a variety of "monster texts," I have developed a generalized theory that demonstrates how the workings of our hierarchical society gives rise to two forms of monsters and an identity in the middle that is left in search of the dictated notion of normalcy. This dictated notion of normalcy is conceived by the super-humans in our society, those of the first monstrous descent. These super-humans live a life of privilege and power and create a notion of normalcy. This concept of normalcy is based on the attainment of middle-class economic status, the ability to exercise the standardized language, and staying in one's predetermined position based on racial and gender identity. Ironically, their own over-achievements and privilege ostracize the super-humans from society. The super-humans, from their conception of normalcy, create a second type of monster, one that I refer to as the sub-human identity. The sub-humans are the one's that cannot or will not fit into these notions of normalcy, and thus are left to exist in the margins of society. After these two monstrous identities, all that is left is the human identity; however my usage of the term "human" does not refer to the biological definition of humanity,

but instead, to a socially constructed definition. This definition is socially constructed by the super-humans, and the humans remain the only subjects who can and will carry out this ideology. In the following pages, I will thoroughly examine this theory. I will utilize various notions of monster theory from Jeffrey Cohen, Barbara Creed, and Michael Foucault, which aided my construction of this theory. Next, I will apply this hierarchical monster theory to two films. The first film that I will examine is *Thelma and Louise* and next I will analyze the construction of the monstrous in the film *Fight Club*.

The first monster that I would like to examine is the super-human. The super-human is the creator and the disciplinarian. He or she is the creator of normalcy, and thus the creator of otherness. These super-humans are the authors of the sub-human identity as an inferior being. Their own monstrous identity is conceived from the notion that they do not live the life of normalcy that they have determined. Instead, they live a life beyond their own notion of normalcy, attaining more than middle-class status and enabling themselves to secure positions of power over the human and sub-human persons. In a consumer culture, such as our modern society, the one who has the most buying power simply has the most status. Thus, the super-humans are able to sustain their power by continuing the existence of a consumer culture. Their dominance of the market is in contrast to their notions of normalcy, which includes the participation in, but not dominance over such an economic system. Thus, they are feared anomalies of the system, but ones who still attain positions of power and wealth. In order to secure this position of power and instill their notions of normalcy into the fabrics of society, they have developed a system of surveillance and discipline that resembles Foucault's understanding of Bentham's Panopticon. This system allows them to ensure the humans and sub-humans are not attempting to attain more than the status of normalcy.

Foucault chooses the Panopticon as a metaphor of restraint to express the power that resides over mass society, the humans and sub-humans, in order to attain a sense of control. He uses Bentham's notion of individual panoptic establishments, which reside in every institution of society. This "Panopticon" refers to a surveillance system which is organized architecturally, consisting of a circular building containing the humans

and sub-humans. In the middle of this circle is an observation tower where the inspectors are housed. This higher tower residing over the cells of the masses creates a feeling of an omnipresent spectator. As Foucault states, "The major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (470). Thus, the humans and sub-humans begin to monitor their own behavior and conform to standards that the super-humans have determined, so that they won't be caught committing acts of deviant behavior.

This panoptic model is utilized in a multitude of public institutions. For instance, one may want to refer to the public education system in America to understand how this surveillance system sustains the hierarchical notions that I have described. The state mandates a multitude of standards that teachers must implement in their classroom. The people who develop these standards are politicians, ones of the super-human identity. The teachers and students, who follow these standards diligently, play the role of the humans. The question is how does this system operate to ensure that the humans follow these rules. It does so, by implementing a fear in the teachers and students with a surveillance system similar to that of the Panopticon. The establishment of administrative positions, such as the principal and other authority figures, plays the role of reminding the teachers and students that they must follow the standards that the super-humans have decided are essential to a student's public education. It is those students and teachers who question the super-humans' notion of a public education that are given the sub-human identity and are treated as mere anomalies causing them to have subservient status in our society.

In this hierarchical system, it is the people who blindly accept the super-human's notion of normalcy that are deemed "human." The humans work the middle-class jobs, where they diligently follow the orders of their bosses, while not questioning their authority. The humans participate in the market system where they sustain the economy, while not dominating it. They establish their identities by what they own, and separate themselves from the super-humans with the dream that their diligence may someday allow them the buying power to be placed amongst the high status of the super-humans. They separate themselves from the sub-humans, with the knowledge that they are given power over the sub-humans. Humans remain in the status of mediocrity, and their existence is based on the dream of attaining more. Their identities are shaped and constructed by the super-humans, and put in contrast to the anomaly of the sub-human identity.

The second monstrous identity is that of the sub-human identity. This identity is found in the large masses of contemporary society, and yet they are given the lowest status in the hierarchy. The sub-human identity is the most fearful to the super-humans because it threatens the power structure through its large numbers, and its resistance or inability to conform to the constructed notions of normalcy. The sub-human's existence reigns as the abject. Barbara Creed defines the abject as

"The place where 'I' am not. The abject threatens life; it must be radically excluded from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self...Although the subject must exclude the abject, it must, nonetheless, be tolerated, for that which threatens to destroy life also help defines life" (38).

The sub-human's position as the abject allows the super-human and the human to define itself by what it is not, which is the sub-human. Thus, the sub-human identity is based upon an otherness that is given a subordinate value. As the super-humans are given the power to create and to see, the sub-humans are only created and seen. The super-human determines the sub-human's monstrous creation, in that the sub-human cannot attain or adapt to the notion of normalcy that the super-humans have conceived. In light of this sentiment, the human is many times transformed into the sub-human when he or she cannot uphold the positions that they are supposed to hold in society. For example, when a man is not attracted to a woman and does not fit into the super-human's notion of masculinity, his homosexuality is cause for his sub-human status, and consequent alienation from society.

As Cohen describes the sub-human's position on the margins of society, he says, "The monster is the difference made flesh, come to dwell among us" (7). Thus, the sub-human identity is one to be feared and desired. The sub-human is feared because he or she is unlike the standards of normalcy in the culture. He or she may be of a different race than the race of power or a different gender than the gender of power and not fit the molded stereotype that the super-humans have created for him or her. It is also possible that the sub-human might, at some point, reject the decreed normalcy and live under an altered value system, thus transitioning from a human identification into sub-human status. Regardless, this rebellion is perceived as a threat to the power of the super-humans. They fear that the sub-humans may rise up and take over their

positions of power. They also fear that more and more humans will renounce their standards and thus, their power would slowly be relinquished diminished. The sub-human can also be seen as desirable because of his or her ability to break free from the standards of society. However, the sub-human's freedoms are very limited, for the only true control they possess is over their own existence. Sometimes the sub-human takes the life of another in an attempt to gain control, only realizing that they are left to pay the price under the surveillance of the super-humans' Panopticon. Sometimes the sub-human establishes their own true control by taking their own life, which is referred to by Marx as "false freedom." Marx spoke about this notion in reference to the workers quitting their jobs or taking action that in reality jeopardized their own success, but felt as though it was an exercise in control.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in his article entitled "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" explains that a

Monster is born...as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them a life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. 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 (4).

In the simplest terms of applying this notion to my theory, what the super-human monsters have is too much, and what the sub-human monsters have is not enough. In order to understand contemporary American culture, it is necessary to look at society's allowance of those who have too much to reign, while disallowing those who do not have enough the ability to participate in the society as valued beings. It is also important to examine the role of humans, and their blind acceptance of the super-human's values, while being ignorant of the super-human's monstrous identity.

The first text to which I will apply this theory is the film *Thelma and Louise*. This film is easily understood, in light of the aforementioned monster theory. The two dominant sub-humans in the film are the title characters, Thelma and Louise. First, I will examine the creation of both Thelma's and Louise's sub-human monstrous identities. Thelma's creator, the person that causes her transition from human to sub-human status is her husband Darryl. Darryl is constantly treating Thelma like a child, expecting her to play the role of a submissive wife. At the beginning of the film, the au-

dience gets the sense that Thelma is slowly realizing that the way her husband treats her is unfair. On a micro-level of the monster theory, Darryl, playing the role of super-human, has constructed a notion of normalcy for his wife to follow. This notion includes her blind acceptance of his position of authority and her compliance to play the traditional female role as a subject to be viewed and valued for her submissiveness. Thelma takes the first step to defy her compliant human status when she decides not to ask him if she can go on a road trip with Louise.

The construction of Louise's monstrous identity is also attributable to the super-human males that she has encountered. These men have treated her as a secondary human. Her only reason for existence is to satisfy their needs. The super-human man, who created her monstrous identity, violently displayed his need for control over her when he raped her. This is alluded to throughout the movie as the primary reason Louise distrusts men. She gives men a second chance, in her relationship with Jimmy, but he demonstrates similar issues with control. Thus, after these experiences have demonstrated the male social construction of normalcy as the subservient female, she begins to defy this stereotype and move into the realm of sub-human. The primary action that moves her into sub-human status is the shooting of Harlan, the man who is raping Louise. In this scene, she uses the same mode of violent action that has been practiced against herself and Thelma. In this instance, she is displaying her ability to take violent, aggressive actions. The superhumans have historically constructed these kind of actions as "masculine." Thus, her resistance of the socially constructed norm of femininity creates her identity as a sub-human.

Thelma and Louise's existence as sub-humans is one of resistance and crime. After Louise shoots Harlan, Thelma urges her to go to the police and explain their predicament. However, Louise, recognizing the women's inferior status explains, "But we don't live in that kind of world. They saw you dancing cheek-to-cheek all night. No one will believe that you were raped." Louise recognizes the fact that, as a woman, she will be blamed for whetting the man's sexual appetite. Thus, they begin literally to run from the law, which is simultaneously a metaphor for their escape from the super-humans' chains. They begin to commit crime after crime in search of a means of survival. They also engage in this unlawful behavior as an act of revenge for all of the years they remained submissive, blindly following the super-humans' construction of femininity as weak, passive, and subservient, and an entity with

which to only "be seen."

Throughout the movie, *Thelma and Louise* begin to challenge the notion that women can only be "seen" and are restricted from engaging in the act of seeing. The irony lies in the fact that they are able to "see" themselves in the role of the abject only after they become sub-human. They are then made aware that their identities are defined by mere appearance and that they are alienated by society, as if they were put upon a wall to be forever gazed upon. At the commencement of their road trip, their appearances are adorned with make-up and jewelry. This is in contrast to the moment before their death during which there is the apparent absence of any jewelry and make-up; it is evident that they have transformed their appearances into asexual entities. At the beginning of the road trip, the film points to various moments when Thelma is looking at herself in the mirror. She is constantly looking to see how she is being seen. Immediately after she has killed Harlan, she gazes into the mirror and sees a spot of blood on her face. Upon this realization, she scrubs until the spot comes off. It is as if the actions that are important are only those that can be seen, thus, if she wipes the blood off of her face maybe she can ignore her mistake. As the film continues, the women begin to worry less and less about their outside appearances, and their eyes become more and more open to the world around them. This notion is best demonstrated when, at the end of the film, the cinematography captures the sweeping landscape encapsulating the two women's journey. The same car mirror that Thelma has used to inspect her appearance is utilized as a looking glass into the world around her. They are suddenly the ones who have their eyes open.

When Thelma and Louise become sub-human, they begin to reject the need to conform to the way in which the super-humans in the society want them to be seen. Throughout the movie, the two women are constantly being honked at while on the road; this is most often done by one truck driver who makes crude and demeaning sexual advancements towards them. The progression of their reactions to the truck driver is symbolic of their progression into sub-human status. The first time that the truck driver makes these crude motions, the two women are revolted and disgusted. The next time that they see him, Louise suggests that they just ignore him. However, the last time that they encounter him, they decide to teach him a lesson. They seduce him until he agrees to pull off onto a field on the side of the road. He mistakenly comes under the assumption that they have yielded to his advancements, and can't suppress their sexual desire for him. When

he arrives, the women engage in an intervention of sorts, explaining to him that his actions were crude and that, if he knew what was best for him, he should immediately apologize. However, he stubbornly refuses, so they blow up his truck. In this scene, they are demonstrating their refusal to exist for the purpose of being seen.

Unfortunately, as I have stated in my monster theory, the sub-humans may become aware of their own oppressive status and attempt to reject it, but in the end they are still subjected to the constraints of society. The women feel more and more free as they go against societal laws and the super-humans' constructed notions of normalcy, but in the end they are still subjected to the super-humans' rules and punishments. At the end of the film, the humans and the super-humans have caught up to Thelma and Louise, and they are ready to exercise any necessary disciplinary actions. Under the same gazing eyes that they had been escaping throughout their journey, they decide to exercise the sole mode of control that they have, and kill themselves.

Since I have discussed the role of the super-humans and sub-humans in the film *Thelma and Louise*, I would like to take a moment to focus on the human influence in the film. The main human identity that is found in the film is the detective. He is the man who is assigned to their case, after Harlan is murdered. He embodies the human identity because he is sensitive to the predicament of the women, but his actions are ultimately governed by the super-humans' constraints. He is genuinely concerned for the well being of the women, and he is convinced that their actions were determined because of the need for self-defense. The detective is the only one who treats them as human beings, even after their move into sub-human status. However, this sensitivity is clouded by his constant reference to the women as being "girls." As much as he is sensitive to the submissive and disrespectful manner that they have been treated, he is demeaning in his notion that that these "girls" should not be subjected to the same treatment as regular criminals. He holds the same notion of the weak female as predicated by the super-humans. He may be the only character who is sensitive to their condition, but he also remains in the super-humans' chains through his unwillingness to reject the super-human's authority and help the women as well as in his notions of femininity.

Next, I will apply this monster theory to a film entitled *Fight Club*. *Fight Club's* main character exemplifies the human's attempt to conform to the dictated notions of identity that the super-humans have constructed. The main character lives the human's

"middle of the road" life. He works in a good job and obeys his boss, and he fills his apartment with furniture from Ikea in order to build a respectable identity for himself. His only problem is insomnia. It is later in the movie that the audience understands that his insomnia is a symptom of his multiple-personality disorder. The difficulty in discussing the main character is that the film never grants a name to this character. The character creates names for himself to serve as various aliases. He does so, to disguise himself when he goes to the various help groups. He goes to these help groups in order to cry, and thus have a chance to sleep. His character's lack of name is appropriate symbolism for the human's faceless and nameless identity. The human merely follows orders from the super-humans, and he or she attains what he or she has been told will lead them towards living a happy life. In order to lessen the confusion, throughout the rest of this examination I will refer to his character under one of his aliases, Cornelius.

To the audience, it seems that Cornelius is living the ominous, human life, until he befriends a sub-human and super-human hybrid. However, at the end of the film, it becomes evident that Cornelius has subconsciously created this alter ego, referred to as Tyler Durdan, to escape the constraints of the human identity. Tyler's identity has been constructed at night, when Cornelius's mind shuts down from lack of sleep and allows for Tyler to take over. By creating another identity of the ultimate monstrosity, Cornelius is attempting to mobilize himself into super-human status. In this fashion, he becomes the creator or the super-human. Also, in his rejection of his role as the compliant human, he also becomes sub-human. The monster that Cornelius creates embodies "everything that he wishes he could be." Tyler is free in all of the ways that Cornelius wishes he was. Unlike Cornelius, Tyler does not feel the need to control everything in his immediate proximity because Tyler's identity is not being controlled by the super-human upper class. Tyler, embodies the sub-human by rejecting the people of power and the lifestyle they dictate, but at the same time he creates his own army of men that follow his own constructed notions of living, thus personifying the super-human.

Tyler is a man that has rejected all material possessions. He explains that, "what we own, ends up owning us" and he encourages Cornelius to "let that, which truly does not matter, slide." Cornelius is tired of simply being submissive to his material possessions and to his boss, and Tyler demonstrates that Cornelius has a choice in these matters. Cornelius's alter ego,

Tyler, has burnt down his apartment to show him that, contrary to what the super-humans say, the possessions that he owned did not construct his identity. It instead held his identity captive. Tyler lives in a broken down home that contains only what is necessary to survive on. In every element of Tyler's existence there is a rejection of the super-human's power and construction of normalcy. Tyler works the human's professional position, but in his every move, he is abusing the power systems. For instance, he excretes bodily fluids into the food he serves to the rich, and he implements frames into children's movies that are explicitly R-rated. Tyler is trying to get Cornelius to help him in his efforts to reject the super-humans. As time goes by, Cornelius increasingly becomes Tyler, and relinquishes his past banal, perfunctory, and submissive existence.

Not only is Tyler created as a sub-human, due to his rejection of the super-humans' socially constructed notions of normalcy, he also holds various attributes of a super-human. The other humans of the world begin to admire Tyler's rebellion. The humans are attracted to the establishment of his fight club. They are attracted to this raw, violent behavior because it makes them feel real. Their strength and identity is tested based on its raw and natural abilities. Thus, their worth is not measured by their buying power or their ability to fit into society. This notion is attractive to the humans who are accustomed to their human worth being measured merely by how much they produce or own. This "fight club" begins as a violent release of anger, and becomes a "fight" against the super-humans and against the capitalist system. Tyler starts by giving them homework assignments, and ends up building an army of resistance. Cornelius begins to "sleep longer" as Tyler takes over.

Tyler awakens the oppressed identities in the humans, and encourages them to use their otherwise insignificant existence for the greater good. He does not want them to see themselves as special, but instead, as a mere entity of the mass that is working towards ending the hierarchical system in society. This human awakening embodies all that the super-human fears. The movie contemplates the important, and yet devalued, role that the human plays in our society. For instance, Tyler and other members of his army harass the mayor until he agrees to call off the search for the culprits of the city's recent vandalism. While doing so he explains, "the people you are after, are the people you depend on." The film contemplates what would happen if "the all-singing, all-dancing, crap of the world" refuse to remain apathetic towards their inferiority. The army's ultimate goal towards destruction is to dissolve

the credit card companies, and allow everyone's worth to start at zero, disallowing people to have more based on mere privilege. Tyler explains, "If you erase the debt record, then we all go back to zero." However, before this destruction takes place, Cornelius begins to realize that Tyler is a mere self-created alter ego. Although Cornelius has been adapting to Tyler's ideologies and lifestyle, his conscious is still in place and he cannot allow Tyler to cause so much destruction. Finally, he decides to shoot himself, to rid himself of Tyler's influences. His wound is symbolic of the handicap that he will have to bear as he tries to "piece himself together" and reconstruct his identity. It is obvious that he will not be able to go back to human status, and instead he will remain in sub-human status. However, he has gained a clairvoyance that will allow him to survive and reconstruct his identity based on his natural being and not based on what he owns. In its simplest terms, the movie becomes a lesson to both the human and the super-human. To the super-human, it is a warning. To the human, it is a lesson that serves to invoke an illumination of their own lifestyle, subservience to those in power, and construction of identity.

The monster theory that I have laid out and applied to *Thelma and Louise* and *Fight Club*, is a generalized notion of the monsters that are created by our hierarchical consumer culture. The hierarchy that I have proposed is one where the super-humans create a notion of normalcy for the humans to blindly follow. The super-humans live a life of wealth and power beyond that of which they have prescribed as "normal" or human. This aberrance leads to their monstrous identity as super-human. However, the super-human identity

is ostracized because these people are placed on pedestals and given power over others. Those who follow the super-humans' construction of normalcy, are the humans. The human identity is one that is based on the participation in, but not dominance of the market system. The super-humans have deemed the material possessions that the humans own, as measures of their human worth. The only reason that the humans persist in this existence is because they dream of moving into super-human status. From the super-humans' creation of the norm, there grows a mass that I have termed the sub-human. These people cannot or will not fit into the constructed standards of normalcy, and thus are left as anomalies and consequently become alienated from society. The super-human fears this group most. The sub-humans are the ones with the ability to take the super-humans' power away. Thus, the super-human has permeated a deep surveillance system into every mass institution of the society. It is important to note that in this hierarchy each level contains its own system of hierarchy.

As Cohen suggests, looking at the monsters that have been created in any given society will allow for insight into the culture and values of that society. In the aforementioned system, it is obvious that the society values wealth and ownership. The texts that I have analyzed have demonstrated how a super-human can create an inferior, sub-human identity. The films have also shown how easy it is for the human to begin to open his or her eyes and reject the super-humans, thus placing himself or herself in sub-human status. In a hierarchical society, such as this, the people on top don't realize that their very existence as a person in a position of power is dependent upon those underneath them.

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