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Critical Disability Theory

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“From an *It* to an *I*.”

The Golem Through Time

The monstrous and grotesque are prolific motifs throughout religion and folklore. For centuries, humans have created monsters to channel cultural fears into tangible forms. Meant to evoke fear, monsters are typically described and depicted with disabilities. The golem in Ashenazi Jewish tradition is no different. ¹

Golem is the Hebrew word for shapeless mass. In Jewish folklore, the golem, a large humanoid, clay or mud figure, is often disabled: speechless and somnambulist. As a response to fear or threats, the golem is formed out of lifeless substances such as dust or earth. They are then brought to life by ritual incantations and sequences of Hebrew letters. Under the supervision of their masters, golems protect the Jewish community from anti-Semitic attacks and perform difficult physical tasks, such as carrying loads.

Iterations of the tale date back to the Eleventh century. However, the most famous story about a golem comes from the 16th century Prague, where a rabbi named Judah Loew ben Bezalel created a golem out of clay to protect the Jewish ghetto from harm. According to the legend, the golem was brought to life by writing the Hebrew word for emet "truth" on a piece of parchment and placing it in the golem's mouth. The golem was said to be extremely strong and invulnerable to harm, but also mindless and unable to distinguish friend from foe. The golem ran

¹ I do not capitalize the word golem, because traditionally it is not capitalized. I want to respect Jewish practices and culture.

amok and threatened innocent lives, so Rabbi Loew removed the Divine Name - rendering the golem lifeless. A separate account has the golem running away.

Golems are built for a specific purpose with no autonomy or control of their futures. They must conform to the wishes of their masters or face their wrath. When the golem ultimately determines their own purpose, they are destroyed. The nature of the golem wakes itself up as it “searches for the path from being an *It* to an *I*.”

There are many variations of the golem story in Jewish folklore, and the concept of a creature made of clay brought to life by magic has also appeared in other cultures and myths. In modern popular culture, golems have appeared in a variety of media, including books, movies, and video games.

This exhibit reflects the golem’s journey from an *It* to *I*. A central theme in the golem story involves the monster breaking free from their master’s control. As the golem searches for autonomy, the golem no longer obeys its controller’s wishes. Each piece in the exhibit reflects this transition. Placed in no specific order, the art documents the monster’s journey for self-determination and agency. The artwork is accompanied by descriptive wall text and how the curator connects it to the theme.



Moidele Bickel created *The Golem* for Robert Wilson's play, *Death, Destruction, and Detroit II*. *The Golem*, a paper mache figure with Chinese and Japanese newspapers. Originally Wilson designed this piece to be worn in his 1987 production. In the scene, the golem appears onstage clothed in the overcoat and hat. The pieces would have been held together by laces in the back. A rabbi, wearing traditional Eastern European Jewish regalia, would cut the laces and remove the costume. Once the set piece is cut, the actor-as-golem is dressed in the same hat and overcoat.

Wilson's signature style involves rearranging and juxtaposing words with disparate objects to extract new meanings and connections. *Death, Destruction, and Detroit II* was inspired by the work of Franz Kafka, a novelist from Prague, Rabbi Loew's hometown. Rather than follow a simple narrative, the drama plays out on nine separate stages connected by similar text and images. The play itself is centered around themes of creation and civilization. In the play, the golem articulates God's ability to create human life. During the show, the golem's movements are guided by its human creator. As the play continues, the playwright forces the audience to consider the effect of choice, impacts and influences of those choices, and its reflections of free-will.

In the context of this interpretation, Wilson's representation makes us think about our own autonomy. Since the golem breaks free from its mold, are humans able to do the same? The ideas presented in this multi-modal piece lead us to question our own agency, perfectly culminating the exhibit. Are we, *its* or *Is*? Do we get to choose?



{This image is from X-Files episode I would want to play}

In Jewish mysticism the Golem rises to protect Jewish people in times of crisis. The golem appears in *Kaddish*, an episode of *The X-Files*. During the show, Isaac, a Jewish man, is murdered by antisemites. Soon after, one of the assailants is strangled to death. Agent Mulder suspects that the golem is behind the deaths, avenging the murder. In the middle of the episode, a tape reveals that the golem, with features similar to Isaac, killed the remaining attackers. Tracking the golem down, the detectives discover that Isaac's wife, Ariel summoned the golem for holy matrimony, but lost control resulting in the death of the three killers. As the golem moved from *It* to *I*, it endangered the lives of others and strayed from its purpose instead protecting the community from further harm. However, the golem's good intentions resulted in its own demise, since Ariel had to destroy it in the end to protect herself and others from further harm.

As the golem evades the control of its master, it poses a threat to society. Part of the golem's evolution involves making its own decision. When the golem is free, it is free to hurt others. This agency is empowering and simultaneously disempowering, because the golem will ultimately be destroyed for its dangerous choices. Each golem saga ends with the master regaining control and returning the creature to dust.



Riva Lehrer, a Jewish disabled artist, painted this self-portrait titled *Circle Story #4: Riva Lehrer*. Composed of two separate canvases the artist designed the art installation with the intention of pairing the paintings together to make a set. The top panel is placed five feet from the floor with the bottom picture placed at the floorboard. Lehrer intends for the figure in the painting to be four feet nine inches tall: her exact height.

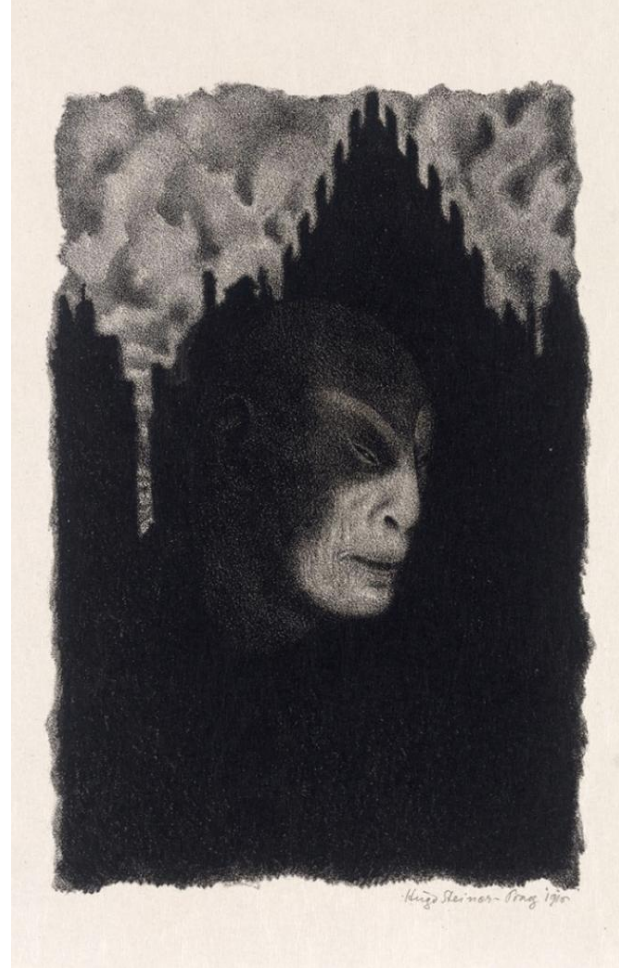
The top painting features Lehrer's head. She wears silver spectacles with her hair styled with a "dyke-style" braided tail. Pink Hebrew letters aleph, mem, tav decorate her forehead. The word spells אמת. This word is transliterated as *emet*, meaning truth in English. In the golem epics, the master writes this word on the monster's forehead to summon the spirit. When the aleph is erased, the word takes on a new meaning, death. Meanwhile, the bottom painting captures a pair of feet clad in black boots and orange socks. The feet are rooted on solid dirt, the lifeblood of the golem.

This painting is Riva's truth. Through her self-portrait, the artist reclaims her perception and determines her status by telling her story. Instead of waiting for others to label her, Riva decides to crown herself as the monster, the *It*. Thus, Riva transforms herself and claims her agency, as a disabled artist. She depicts herself in a manner that best represents her identity reclaiming harmful stereotypes and showcasing her personhood.



Fritz Ascher created his oil painting *Golem* in 1916, during the First World War. In his depiction, the golem rises above the crowd of figures like a grim Messiah. The artist presents the golem with a complex expression. Both fierce and sad, the Golem towers over three individuals. In comparison to the three people below him, the golem looks the most human. While the golem looks straight-ahead at the viewer, the three humans divert their eyes. They cannot see the audience. The center figure, presumably Rabbi Loew, is surrounded by two younger assistants who guide him through the night. As they move, the three human characters assume ghost-like-expressions showcasing their limited teeth and large hands. Their ghoulish looks could be in response to a threatening figure out-of-sight of the viewer. Art historians theorize that the men are facing Antisemites or another anti-Jewish force. This interpretation assumes that the golem protects the men from the outward force.

Positionality and expression influence the viewer's understanding and interpretation of art. The golem's humanistic features and characteristics transform the monster from an *it* to an *I*. The golem's crossed-arms are not stiff or static in fact they imply that the golem can move, respond, and react on their own accord. This portrayal of a more human-like or benign monster incentivizes the viewer to sympathize with the golem. A master is not necessarily enforcing or influencing their posture or positionality. Thus, granting the golem some autonomy.



Although Rabbi Loew's story of the golem was first recorded in the sixteenth century, the myth did not become widespread and well-known until the late nineteenth century. The story's popularity is attributed to the story's translation into German and Yiddish. These charcoal renditions accompany Gustav Meyrink's translation. Meyrink's illustrator, Hugo Steiner Prag, depicts the golem for the accompanying chapter book.

In the selected illustrations, Prag portrays the golem as a dark and dreary sight. This vision captures the golem as a true monster capable of wreaking havoc and causing mass destruction. Prag's choice of color and artistic vision dehumanize the golem capturing the "it" essence. Playing into the monstrous stereotypes, Prag draws the golem as gangly, tall and looming. Even when the golem asserts agency over itself, it continues to travel through Prague like it did before only without its master exercising control over its movements and whereabouts. This shift in power does not impact the golem's actions or reshape the golem's exterior appearance. Prag does not draw the golem as an empowered character, instead he captures the unsettling aspects of its existence. In fact, Prag almost wants to make the golem look more demonic and uncouth.



Christian Boltanski welded *Golem* in 1988. This face is made from found objects in everyday life. The jagged edges and craggy cut holes in the piece cast intentional shadows on the built environment. Both the shapes and shadows are intentional parts of the exhibit. The sculpture is powered by a tiny motor and backlit by a flashlight. A shadow of the monster's face creates a caricature on the wall, reminiscent of the parable of Plato's cave.

The artist's role as a welder and transformer of regular materials is similar to the title of Golem-maker. In his practice, Boltanski gains inspiration from the golem legend. For visual artists, the myth serves as a metaphor for their own struggles to create art. Once the sculptor finishes their piece, the mask is no longer under the influence of the artist. Interpretation is reserved for the relationship between the mask and the audience. The artist's sway is over, and the mask takes on a life of its own. This switch in agency and self-determination embodies the theme of the exhibit, "From an *It* to an *I*."



Josh Abernal created this outsized golem sculpture for a special exhibit about golems at the Berlin Jewish Museum. The sculpture is made out of wooden Hebrew letters, alternating mems and tavs. A chain is tied around the figure's neck. The Hebrew letter aleph is attached to the chain. The figure lays prone with its limb outstretched.

The components of the sculpture are significant. When the Hebrew letters mem and tav are put together it transliterates to met or מת. In English this means death. However when the Hebrew letter aleph is added to the word, the meaning changes entirely. אמת means truth in English. Traditionally, the master writes אמת somewhere on the golem to awaken the monster. The golem will disintegrate when the aleph is erased.

In the context of this exhibit, Abernal's sculpture symbolizes the death of the *I*. At this point, the golem has metamorphosed "From an *It* to an *I*." Once the master has lost control of the golem the only way to regain a calm is to kill the monster. The master must return the golem to dust to restore order. Therefore the golem loses all semblance of liveliness and transitions back to the earth.

The final part of the exhibit is geared towards more actively engaging the viewer. From my experience, engagement increases when visitors can actively participate or contribute to an exhibit. I really appreciate when art museums incorporate activities and other non-traditional modes of interacting with the art.

For this section, I want to incorporate a tactile element. I would love to commission a life size model of a golem for visitors to touch. The golem is described as being made of dirt. This art piece would be textured with grains of sand or dried mud. I would love for this sculpture to portray the golem breaking out of its shell. I am inspired by Bickel's set piece. I think a textured version of this design could be really fascinating. The exterior layer would be a hard and hollow shell. The interior layer would include a statue or figurine covered in muddied clothes.

I intend for this section to be a space for the outside world to visualize my interpretation of the exhibit. The uniting theme, "*An It to an I*" embodies the humanization of the golem. When the golem gains agency, it is able to act on its own volition and escape harmful stereotyping and exploitation. This is necessary for the golem's safety and the security of the rest of the community.

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