



## **Monstrous Encounters**

### **Feminist Theory and the Monstrous**

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## Introduction

# Monstrous Encounters: Feminist Theory and the Monstrous

BY LINE HENRIKSEN, MORTEN HILLGAARD BÜLOW  
AND ERIKA KVISTAD

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Nothing is closer to home than the monster: you first encounter it as a child, under the bed or in the closet. (Or, in one intense childhood memory from 1980s Norway, in the toilet; the murky depths of outhouses were said to harbour *dodraugen*, an undead, watery being with inexplicable tastes in habitat.) Maybe this is why the study of monsters tends to have a faint hanging-on sense of the frivolous and unacademic: by being interested in monsters we are in some ways going back to (regressing to?) our roots. In all their strangeness, monsters are always leading us home.

Home, for the three of us writing this, is the North: Oslo and Copenhagen. In our call for papers, we asked for monstrous perspectives from artists and scholars based in the Nordic countries, and/or for work on Nordic monstrosity itself. We wanted to explore academic and artistic work on the monstrous in a Nordic context, while at the same time recognising the monster as a fig-

ure that always tears at boundaries, including geographic and national ones. For this reason, we did not operate with a set understanding of ‘Nordic culture’ or ‘Nordic identity’ – terms that only grow more and more uncanny in the midst of, for instance, certain Norwegian as well as Danish politicians’ racist deployment of ‘protecting Norwegian/Danish values’ – but asked contributors to challenge and question the imaginaries of such constructs.

*“Hello”. I hear their footsteps across the kitchen floor, through the hallway, coming to a halt right outside my door. “Hello,” it echoes from the past, for they’ve been here before. “Hello,” it echoes from the future, for they return. There is no one there when I open the door. “Hello?” There never is.*

More ambitiously, we hoped for contributions that opened up the world of monsters, asking: What do monsters tell us about the fears and anxieties of a contemporary North? What do they tell of yearning and longing for the impossible and the fantastical? What warnings do they bring? And what kind of critical and imaginative work does the monster as a guide make (im)possible?

We hoped for specific and intimate work, and for wide-ranging and world-rearranging work, and we got it. The scholars and artists in this issue encounter the monsters in teaching, in weird fiction, in horror and writing, in live action role playing and zombie walks, and in mountains. And in all these places they always return to the question of how the world could be different – and how difference is haunted by the spectre of the monstrous.

But why think through the concept of the monstrous and the figure of the monster? And why now?

#### IN A TIME OF MONSTERS

“We live in a time of monsters,” American

medievalist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes in the introduction to his 1996 anthology *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (vii). Channel-surfing, Cohen flips past the dinosaurs of the first Jurassic Park film; breathless tales of red mercury; breaking news about serial killers; wars. Monsters and monstrous events seem everywhere, he says.

But it is not only the media culture of the 1990s that exemplifies a time of monsters. As Cohen and the contributors to *Monster Theory* go on to show, all times and all places have their monsters. Simply put, what is seen as monstrous in a specific, historical context shows the concerns and anxieties of that context. Within a western medieval context, for example, monsters stalked the edges of the world, warning travelers about the dangers of crossing borders and boundaries. They inhabited far-away lands, where Blemmyes – headless creatures with faces in their stomachs – the dog-headed Cynocephali and the single-legged Sciapods were counted among the so-called ‘monstrous races’ (Cohen 1996; Shildrick 2002); during the Renaissance, supposedly monstrous bodies were put on display in courts and country fairs alike (Braidotti 2011); and during the 19th century, the monster was enrolled by the scientific field of teratology, the forerunner of embryology. Teratology used to mean “a discourse of prodigies and wonders”, but by 1842 it was used to refer to “the studies of monstrosities or abnormal formations in animals or plants”. The contemporary use of the term refers more broadly to the study of monsters (Mittman 2013, 2, footnote 3).

What was different about the 1990s as a time of monsters was a growing academic interest in the concept of the monstrous, not least within the humanities and social sciences. This sparked the fields of ‘monster studies’ and ‘monster theory’ – which are more common terms than ‘teratology’ – as well as the field of ‘spectralities’, which re-

volves around the subjects of ghosts and hauntings (del Pílar Blanco and Peeren 2013). Spectralities and monster studies took shape as what might be seen as a response to the increasingly abstract structures of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. These are times marked by technological and scientific shifts that point to existences so far unheard of: in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, health sciences, for instance, increasingly looked at human entanglements with ecosystems, particles and microbes that both give rise to more entangled notions of the subject (Alaimo 2010; Barad 2007; Wilson 2015) as well as creating a spectral layer to existence (del Pílar Blanco and Peeren 2013; Sconce 2000).

*On a night drive in the countryside. From out of the darkness by the roadside, a round white face turns suddenly toward us and begins to float out across the road. We gasp at the wingspan now illumined in the car's headlights and then exhale our recognition: 'An owl!'*

At the same time, the fluidity of wireless telecommunication has increased with the omnipresence of digital media, and rapid developments within e.g. biotechnology and quantum physics keep describing new, ghostly aspects of reality (Barad 2012), both deep within the human body and deep into outer space. Such perspectives beg the question: what else do we share existence with that we simply do not – and may never – grasp? As such, technological developments, the supposed antithesis to the realm of monsters and the supernatural, have attributed to making the world more monstrous and 'haunted'.

#### A WORTHWHILE SUBJECT OF STUDY?

Yet, as mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, the subject of the monster tends to evoke the unacademic and even childish, which is something American medievalist Asa Simon Mittman has noted as

well. After a job-interview, he remembers a fellow scholar leaning on his desk and saying: "Listen, Asa, you've got to drop all this monster stuff and start doing real scholarship", prompting Mittman to wonder: "What is 'real scholarship?' What constitutes a worthwhile subject of study?" (Mittman 2013, 2).

*Is this person kind or malign? He is a doctor, but I feel sure that this conceals something, a secret purpose. As he steps forward with the pipette, his words are innocuous but the tone makes me recoil: "I am just going to put these drops in your eyes."*

French philosopher Jacques Derrida has wondered much the same thing, this time in connection to ghosts. "A traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts," he writes in *Specters of Marx* from 1994. "There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between (...) what is present and what is not" (Derrida 2011: 12). In this sense, both the monster and the ghost seem to fall outside the realm of 'real scholarship' and 'worthwhile subjects of study', and therefore outside the scope of academia. To both Derrida and Mittman, however, the answer is not to exorcise the ghost or banish the monster, but to challenge what can be considered a 'worthwhile subject of study' at all – not least when it comes to that which does not have a 'being' and 'existence' immediately recognizable within traditional western ontology.

Derrida suggests a rethinking of ontology through a *hauntology*, which is a pun on haunting and ontology. Hauntology suggests that all that can be said to exist – which according to traditional Western ontology means all that is immediate and present – is haunted by all that which it is not. In this sense, hauntology forms part of deconstructionism's argument that nothing enjoys a pure presence. Instead, 'day' is defined by not being 'night'; 'light' is defined

by not being 'darkness'; 'the self' is defined by not being 'other', and so on. This creates a series of devalued others (night is the negative of day, darkness the negative of light, and 'other' the negative of self) that nonetheless haunt the first and primary category, which cannot understand itself without its haunting opposite. In this sense, the concept of haunting and the figure of the spectre are crucial when it comes to grappling with the complexities and not least impurity of being and existence.

*"There is a bird over there. Have you seen the bird?" she asks, pointing to what I assume is the lamp further away in the nursing home. I smile and say no. "I thought as much", she replies, smiling, shaking her head.*

The argument that the ontologically uncertain should not be excluded from academic thought can also be found in the influential work on horror and abjection by feminist psychologist and philosopher Julia Kristeva. Related to Derrida's deconstructive point above, the process of abjection signifies the continuous establishment and production of normative (material/discursive) boundaries between same and other, normal and monstrous. As Kristeva and others describe, what is deemed a monster is inescapably tied up with the position from which it is (de)valued and judged. The monster/monstrous in this way functions as an *other* – as something which someone attempts to exclude or distance from the norm – but which can never be "completely externalized" (Shildrick 1999, 81; Braidotti 1996, 141) as it becomes part of the definition of a 'proper' subject, in the sense of being what this subject should not be (Kristeva, 1982). Through this process the distinction between self and abject is maintained; but at the same time, it is the abject's role in constituting and still-being-part-of the norm which points to the norm's frailty and threatens its definition (Shildrick 1999, 81; Bülow and Holm 2016).

Where hauntology takes the haunting figure of the spectre as its guide in order to imagine and engage with the spectral aspects of being (del Pilar Blanco and Peeren 2013), i.e. how what is not there affects us, monster studies is often about something materially present but uncontrollable, unknowable, or in other ways challenging the notions of proper embodied subjectivity – and therefore feared. Ghosts and other monsters point to notions about what it means to be human, and to the instability of what Shildrick calls the enlightenment notion of the subject. The human subject can no longer be seen as autonomous, independent and at the center of the world, but rather as always already part of that world without clear boundaries.

*Someone is living inside me, but I don't know who they are. I only see them in blue-black shadows on a screen, and all my thoughts about them can only be projections. Tennyson says that the dead are strange friends; so are the unborn.*

As with the spectralities scholars, however, monster theorists do not choose an exorcism, but wonder (as we do in this special issue) what monsters – whether the recent or the ancient – might be able to teach us about cultural anxieties, fears, desires, difference and scholarship. If being part of a complex, entangled world, which is not 'made for us', makes us both haunted and monstrous, then might this have more to do with unrealistic anthropocentric expectations about control than about monstrosity itself? If we are always already monstrous as part of our being in the world, then perhaps being haunted and monstrous is not as horrible as the traditional anthropocentric worldview would have it.

#### MONSTROUS EMBODIMENT AND FEMINIST THEORY

Considering its close relations with embodiment and otherness, it is perhaps not

strange that the monster has been taken up as a figure of critical thought by feminist scholars. As feminist philosopher and disability scholar Margrit Shildrick has noted, for example, the figure of the monster/monstrous can be related to Judith Butler's point from *Bodies that Matter* (1993), "that bodies, rather than being material and graspable from the start, are materialized through a set of discursive practices" (Shildrick 1999, 80). As such, Shildrick continues:

[t]he so-called normal and natural body is then an achievement, a model of the proper where everything is in its place and the chaotic aspects of the natural are banished. It is a body that requires unceasing maintenance and/or modification to hold off the constant threat of disruption: extra digits are excised at birth, tongues are shortened in Down's Syndrome children, noses are reshaped, warts removed, prosthetic limbs fitted, HRT [Hormone Replacement Therapy, eds.] prescribed. In short, the normal body is materialized through a set of reiterative practices that speak to the instability of the singular standard. (Shildrick 1999, 80)

As Shildrick and others have shown, the figure of the monster and the monstrous can be used as an analytical tool to address current concerns about disrupted, unstable or uncontrollable embodiment. This is especially the case when relating to precarious and vulnerable bodies, which should be understood in the broadest sense possible – we are, as feminist scholars continuously point out, all vulnerable, though some live in more obviously vulnerable contexts than others.

Dealing with monsters and the monstrous then also, importantly, involves dealing with the fears and frailty of the embodied self in its present contexts. The monster not only comes to eat you, it also threatens to make you a monster yourself – or worse: to bring out the monster that is already

there, haunting your very being. There is by now a well-established tradition within feminist research linking psychoanalytically inspired notions such as Julia Kristeva's theory of processes of abjection (see Kristeva 1982) with conceptualizations of monstrosity and the monstrous. Well-known feminist scholarship on monstrosity and the monstrous include, for example, work on female embodiment, pregnancy and motherhood (Braidotti 1994, 1996; Grosz 1991; Shildrick 2002), cancer (Stacey 1997), anomalous congenital embodiment and disability (Cohen 1999; Garland-Thomson 2005; Kritzman 1996; Shildrick 2002), racialization (Braidotti 1996), homo/sexuality (Braidotti 1996; Cohen 1999; Stacey 1997), transgender (Stryker 2006), and religion (Uebel 1996). And, to briefly signpost our own work, these have inspired more recent scholarship within feminist monster studies, dealing with topics such as ageing embodiment (Bülow & Holm 2016), pedagogy (Henriksen, Kvistad and Orning 2017) and digital media (Henriksen 2016).

By staying with the uncertainties and difference of the monstrous body rather than arguing for its banishment, monster scholars have argued that the monster as a figure of disturbance and difference is a useful if never fully controllable ethical figure through which one can reimagine this world and the creatures who live here. For instance, by not taking the hegemonic standards of 'normality' or 'the natural' as given, but as something materialized through practices, as achievements, this opens up the 'normal' and 'natural' for critical review and ethical reconfiguration. In this sense, the 'traditional scholar' that Derrida refers to is right when refusing ghosts a place in traditional academic objective research, which historically has seemed bent on defining and thus reifying the 'normal'. Yet a world in constant movement does not need more 'traditional scholars', but rather scholars who stay with the trouble, as Har-

away puts it. Feminist scholarship, we might say, has this as part and parcel with our very existence in academia: being hybrid, inter/post-disciplinary, and constantly moving in pursuit of boundaries, nuanced understandings of complexity, and social justice, we have an all too keen sense of the conventional boundaries that we may – letting loose the monsters – try to tear down or at least change for the better. The hybrid body of the monster is a reminder and a map of transformative potentials of relevance to an unstable 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY MONSTERS – IN THE NORTH

While all times have monstrous figures that are particularly their own, particularly expressive of some cultural fear or desire, so do all places. Over the last two decades, monster studies have flourished in the Anglosphere, not least in North America. But monsters emerge from under beds in other places and find expression in other languages as well, and it therefore seems worthwhile to make dedicated spaces for scholarly perspectives on monstrosity outside the Anglosphere. With this special issue, we wish to change the perspective slightly, asking: what monsters haunt the Nordic cultural imaginary?

*I didn't realize I was bargaining with Death, or rather, with Winter himself, ice crown and all; I assumed I was spending my last minutes on this white earth discussing theology with a hallucination. Survival didn't occur to me, even as I fought all the way.*

For they are there, the Nordic monsters, lurking in shadows, in literature, films, news and folklore, and we have asked a series of artists and scholars – some based in the Nordic countries, some engaging directly with issues of the North and the monstrous – to explore them with us. What do monsters tell us about the fears and anx-

ieties of a contemporary North? What do they tell of yearning and longing for the impossible and the fantastical? What warnings do they bring? And what kinds of critical and imaginative doors does the monster open? The scholars and artists in this issue engage with monsters in different, but always politically and ethically engaged ways.

## OVERVIEW OF ARTICLES

As part of this issue we have tried to work within the boundaries of the academic journal while also encouraging our contributors to cross textual boundaries and genres in their explorations. This has required hard work, not least for the peer reviewers and contributors, and the texts in this special issue therefore show perhaps greater diversity in form and content than other issues of this journal normally do. We have chosen this diversity in order to explore and investigate the ways in which the monster and the monstrous push the boundaries of academic inquiry as well as in order to perform rather than merely represent the ways in which the monster challenges forms and boundaries.

Marianne Gunderson begins this issue by introducing us to current discussions within posthuman theory and what might be called an ethics of the monstrous. Through an exploration of weird fiction which introduce an Absolute, nonhuman, other, the article *Other Ethics: Decentering the Human in Weird Horror* shows how the distinctions made within an anthropocentric worldview between human-non-human, culture-nature, mind-matter, might be disturbed and unsettled in weird fiction and weird horror. Gunderson thereby points to the transformative power and ethical implications of “imagining a perspective from which humans are not just insignificant, but irrelevant”, which, importantly, but not necessarily pleasantly, “makes us aware of the limitations and situatedness of human experience” (Gunderson, this issue).

Following Gunderson in both themes and, to some extent, genre, Maren Storlien Syltevik's article *footnotes and marginalia* takes its point of departure in a horror story about infectious reading and creates its own horror story, probing the back and forth between reader and text. A monstrous article in itself, this paper takes seriously how form and content interact in its deliberate genre-blurring, creative writing experiment. This experiment explores important topics such as what happens at the borders of academic inquiry, the relation between reading and embodiment, and how to approach the parts of our horizons we cannot look straight at.

Also dealing with embodiment and narratives is Kristina Stenström's article *Monsters Escaping the Screen: Embodied Narratives of LARPs and Zombie Walks*. In this article, Stenström puts Butler's work on performativity and becoming, and contemporary work on 'makeover culture', to work on participants doing live-action role-plays (LARPs) and zombie walks. The article asks how the people doing such LARPs and walks experience corporeal engagement with – that is, both performing and encountering – fictional monsters such as vampires and zombies in these settings, which in turn gives us an insight into contemporary discourses about corporeal change as well as how such corporeal transformation may be concretized, reenacted and renegotiated. What might we find, when we look at the embodied experiences of a story-world of monsters?

Another embodied experience is the act of writing and teaching. In Tom Muir's article *Three Views of a Secret: The "Monsterlig"*, academic patterns of writing and teaching are explored. In particular, Muir explores and contemplates the etymological connections between the English word 'monster' and the Norwegian word 'mønster' (pattern) – making the monstrous patterns of teaching, writing and teaching writing apparent, while also interrupting

these patterns. The article draws on three uncanny topics: prosopopoeia, monuments and repetition compulsion (suggested by the literary critic Barbara Johnson), which might help us release the warnings (Latin: *monere*) from the *mønstre* (patterns). Crafting a story of repetitions, talking graves, Freud and Derrida, Muir argues – and shows – that monsters allow us to make space for new kinds of writing and new languages of thought.

In this issue's final article *At the Mountains of Monstrosity: Reading Ontology in a Fjord*, we open our perspective up again and encounter other worldly connections to our surroundings when Daniel Otto Jack Petersen visits mountains and their 'eco-monstrous entanglements'. In this article Petersen delves into the vibrant and dark interiority of the mountains, taking with him various forms of ecophilosophy, monster theory, object-oriented ontology, and vital materialism. Again we encounter a blurring of boundaries and a critique of anthropocentrism, this time as an aesthetic-contemplative preface to an ecological ethics. The entanglements here encountered might challenge the reader (again), not least in the creative philosophical language of the ecophilosophies. Will the mountains speak to us, we wonder? The article and the mountains in question is joined by photos by Flannery O'kafka, providing moments of repose for contemplation.

This issue is also fortunate to include images by the Swedish based artist Mia Maki-la, whose uncanny work *Iceland* decorates the front cover. The Danish artist Don Kenn has provided suitable monsters for both back cover and the *Encounters* section within this issue. And maybe, just maybe, other monsters have responded to our call. One never knows when to expect a monstrous encounter.

## AN INVITATION

An encounter is always unexpected. Unlike a meeting, it is not planned and cannot be controlled. That is what makes it so strange and potentially monstrous, and it is also what makes it such a challenge to represent and even more of a challenge to facilitate. Across this introduction we have inserted a few monstrous encounters experienced and narrated by the editors and some of the contributors, in order to explore what an encounter may look like and how its disturbances and disruptions may be not just represented but performed. We hope that this issue will engender even more encounters: disturbing, wonderful and always unpredictable brushes with the other, the stranger, the monster. The monster may always be leading us home, but home is not unchanging and it is not stable. This issue is an invitation to embark on readings that may disturb the known and the homely, thereby suggesting that things could be different.

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