

WHY THE MONSTER AND WHY NOW?

Monster Talks: a Monster Network Podcast

Ingvil Hellstrand:

This part we've called Monster Talks. As we've heard about Frankenstein's monster... I think the question about *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is very telling for how the figure of Frankenstein is a symbol for the not-quite-human: an untraditional body with perhaps then unconventional agendas.

It could also be in that sense a thinking tool about what it means to be human. And also about who gets to define what not just being human is, but what being is in general. As you've talked a lot about with the life spark and what kind of nature.

But this Monster Talk panel, even though we acknowledge that Frankenstein has become a figure for the monstrous and the not-quite, all the people in this panel have also embraced the monster as something that it's important to keep thinking with.

My name is Ingvil Hellstrand and with me here I have Line Henriksen from the University of Copenhagen, Christian Beyer from Tromsø affiliated with the Arctic University of Norway Siv Frøydis Berg from the Norwegian National Library.

Line and Christian, you're both part of two different editors' collectives that have published or are in the process of publishing two special issues on the Monster and the Monstrous. This is again perhaps not a coincidence when we are celebrating the legacy of Frankenstein as has been done all over the world in 2018. There's also something really interesting that this happens in different places in sort of parallel processes.

As a start, I was wondering if you could introduce the special issue and then say something about the motivation for choosing the monster as a theme or as a figure. It could be those, but it could also be other things. Christian, would you like to start?

Christian Beyer:

I will start with showing you something, and if this is a podcast, I unfortunately also have to describe it afterwards. I brought something to you.

Ingvil:

Oh, an artefact! Very exciting!

Christian:

I brought a Russian doll picturing a monster, a monster of international relations. The funny thing about these dolls is you can always open them and adapt them to the issues that you just raised.

We just talked about Frankenstein in Baghdad. This one is Saddam Hussein, the leader of the Ba'athist party in Iraq. In the past, this monster died already. The other monster died also. And all these other monsters, and I could easily continue, died because they were considered the monsters of international relations by the Empire. There is always an empire. This one doesn't have to be anti-Americanist argumentation, but whenever something is not really fitting in the political sphere, of course, we easily talk about regime change. We try to get rid of these problems of these monsters in that case.

We need structures also in international relations and foreign affairs. It's kind of interesting to note that the world seems to be full of monsters that got personified. We had Gaddafis; we had Ahmadinejads; we had Saddam Husseins and so on and so on. This one would only be my issue talking about monsters connected to my own history in research coming from Iranian studies in that case.

That was only me. And I happened to read your nice introduction and editorial, and then you made use of the slogan: I am also a we, which depicts a TV series that I'm not aware of, but I really like this issue, I am also a we. Today I am also a we because I'm sitting here as a representative of a group of people.

I do have a handout for you. I'm sorry, this handout cannot be transmitted into the podcast. What you see on these leaflets here was the style of the course that we developed at the University. When we began in 2015 - 2016, we were four scholars and we began our PhD studies at the university. We thought it was kind of sad that we always had to take old courses and try to teach them, using already used PowerPoint presentations or other

material. We really fought hard to design our own course for master students in the subjects of peace and conflict studies and documentation and media science. That was the hard goal, because I more or less described to you my own field, but you can imagine that at a very small university in Tromsø, the PhD students, within 'humaniora', have quite different fields of investigation. So another student of ours tried to focus on Tirpitz representations, the battleship of the Second World War. She ended up with the notion that this Tirpitz (battleship) was always described as the beast by Churchill. We had another scholar who worked a lot with video game representations of minorities. Suddenly, he ended up with the notion that these minorities, the others, also get represented as monsters.

That was the thing, the starting point when we thought that we have to find an upper umbrella, and that would be our umbrella: the monster. I really like to integrate the issue of manufacturing consent. I don't know if you're aware of this term, Herman and Chomsky, 1988. We had this monster issue. So what we made out of it was just combining the two: manufacturing monsters. And then we googled the term and we thought, it was sad that we're not the first ones inventing this manufacturing monsters thing. But there was actually a special issue in 2000 already with the title *Manufacturing Monsters*, also with articles by Said, Herman and Chomsky. The moment we integrated this special issue into our compendium, we also thought that one day we want to make our own issue. And that was the whole thing.

Ingvil:

Would you tell us when your issue is out and which journal?

Christian:

It's *Nordlit*. It is a journal from the University of Tromsø. We are still working on it. We're in the second review phase right now. It'll take approximately four to five months from now. Maybe six.

Ingvil:

Thank you very much. Line, you are also from another Editorial collective?

Line:

Indeed. I was so fortunate to be part of the editorial collective of the Monster Network. With Ingvil Hellstrand, Sara Orning, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Donna McCormack, who

unfortunately couldn't be here today. We wanted to do a special issue based on a conference we organised here in Stavanger in 2016, which was also called *Promises of Monsters*. Our special issue, which we were very fortunate that there was someone at *Somatechnics* that wanted to pick it up, is also called *Promises of Monsters*. We wanted to look at what it even means to engage with the promise of the monster. What does the monster promise? And as Aino-Kaisa also touched upon yesterday, at the final panel of this workshop, the monster to us has to do with questions of categories and that which exceeds categorisation; that which troubles categorisation; that which basically troubles us.

We wanted to work with these troubling of the categories. Both when it comes to the workshop that we've been doing today and yesterday, as has been mentioned by Ingvil and Sara when we engage with the monster, we want to try to trouble categories. Especially between academia, especially between the arts and the sciences. So we also invited artists to participate in this special issue in order to bring in art as a way of telling stories about monsters.

And we wanted to look at the ethics, especially, and the politics and the poetics of the monster to see what happens when we start talking about ethics through these troubling figures of the monster. We have various kinds of writers and artists participating in this special issue, writing on everything from ageing bodies to technologies to bio art and disability studies. That's kind of where we wanted to take it, to see how we can discuss some of the things that are happening in our time politically and ethically when it comes to bodies through the figure of the monster. I think we did a really good job of it. All the people who participated did an excellent job of it. So feel free to go out there and read it. The introduction is open access and hopefully, at some point, the entire issue will be open access. But so far you can read the introduction, which is called *Promises, Monsters and Methodologies: the Ethics, Poetics and Politics of the Monstrous*. It's right out there for you to read. So please do it.

Ingvil:

Thank you very much. This is very interesting to hear from both Christian and Line. What is striking is that Siv Frøydis, as a Frankenstein expert, you have told us that Frankenstein is driven away. He is outcast, as Gayatri Spivak also makes a point, he vanishes from the text as well as from the world. As to get rid of the problem. And there was something also about

getting rid of the problem that you talked about, Christian. But at the same time, you are foregrounding the monster. You're making it centre stage in a way.

Siv, would you say something about how that translates as a legacy from Frankenstein? Is the monster more appreciated than it was as a figure?

Siv Frøydis Berg:

I think it's important to think about, or I personally like to think about the monster as a historical category as well. It's got long connections before Frankenstein just as much as after. It's visual and it's geographical placed on old maps, for instance. If you have seen the wonderful map called the Hereford Map, it's a huge Mappa Mundi where you have the rivers as a T, you have Jerusalem in the centre and you have the Garden of Eden at the top. But you also always have these monsters at the outskirts of the centre. There we have these figures without heads, with different legs, many legs, all kinds of wonderful visual monsters. But they're always there: outside, somewhere else, placed at the frontiers of civilisation. I like to think of it as a category of that who it's not possible to categorise.

The Latin word for it is monstrare, it comes from monstrare or demonstrate. It has a message, it tells something. I think the monstrosity of the monster is much more interesting than the monster itself. Because it's always, I believe, as a historian, connected to the situation the story is told. So the Frankenstein story is absolutely connected to the 1800 context. But still, you have these kinds of themes that are later developed. So that is the form. But the monstrosity which I was talking about now is, of course, not the same monstrosity 50 years later. But still, Frankenstein as a myth has been very vivid through these 200 years. It started with these theatre plays. But also in the 1920s, scholar John Turing labelled Frankenstein as a myth, the Frankenstein myth about modern biotechnology.

Especially these themes about runaway science; science out of control; the hubris; the mad scientist and the body engineering. There are so many threads that could be in a way picked up here. But these threads have been there long before Frankenstein. The one thing that Shelley did was, in a way, use a new raw material and a particular science at a particular time. It's not the first time they have been thinking about how to create an artificial human being.

Ingvil:

Thank you very much for that. And you said it was thought of as a ghost story. And it is about science and knowledge and nature.

Siv Frøydis:

And horror.

Ingvil:

And horror, yes. But has the monster gained more popularity? What would you say, Christian?

Christian:

It's a very hard question to answer for me. Because you already realise that my connection to the monster is rather artificial in that case. I would like to come back to this point, that it's beyond categorisation. I more or less delivered the counter-example. I tried to phrase it as the categorisation within international relations that directly predicts the monster as evil and so on and so on. Then we do have a clear category that, of course, is a meta category beyond categorisation, if you want to put it like that. But it directly relates to the rogue state, to the axis of evil, to everything that is connected to tyranny, tyrants, dictators, and so on and so on.

If it's more fashionable to speak about the monster, as I said, I'm not the monster expert. But well, it was very easy to find you. You pop up if I use the World Wide Web. And so you're not the only one. Yesterday we just talked about another, yet another special issue on monster studies. Having never studied monster studies, I just came across this so-called foundational article within monster studies, Cohen 1996. And trying to read a little bit through it, he says the following: "The monsters," that is his last statement even in this article, "they ask us why we have created them."

If we talk about any development and if we ask the question: is it more important now than ever to focus on the monster? That would be my answer. Yes, it is connected to this Cohen quote.

Ingvil:

Yes, and that's precisely why I ask you if the monster has gained more popularity. Because it pops up not only as a physical being or present or horror, it also pops up as a political tool to monster certain countries, certain people.

Line, you were talking also about the ethical implications of invoking the monster. What would you say about it, I call it popularity, it's the monster in fashion?

But there is something, the monster pops up everywhere in popular culture, in fiction, but also in political rhetoric, in drawing of maps, evil territories. So there is something at stake for the monster at this moment in time.

Line:

I really agree. And I think the way that I see it at the moment if there is a growing interest in what I would understand as a kind of purity. It's all about growing, really making sure that there are proper borders and boundaries between countries, between bodies, between categories, and that always ends up being incredibly hierarchical; there are some who are worth more than others. And that's why we get discourses that are very heavily about otherness as something incredibly bad, and sameness as something very good. Especially since I'm from Denmark, I'm from a Scandinavian context. I see this politically, especially, that sameness is being valued over otherness, and the production of otherness is sort of leaping into hyper-speed right now. So there is a monsterisation process going on with really horrible consequences for those who do become monsterised, those who are understood to be not fit, within this mould of sameness. So invoking the monster can be fun and playful and interesting as a political tool, but it also has some very serious consequences. Especially, if you want to, as I sometimes have a tendency to do, invoke the monster as a fun, kind of playful category. It's not everybody who can call upon the monster as a figure of themselves or as a figure of expressing their subjectivity or their otherness. Because some people are so monsterised, to begin with, that you cannot sort of bring it upon yourself as a kind of a fun exercise because you cannot leave it behind afterwards. You are forcibly monsterised. So that is what I tend to remind myself.

At the same time, I'm really inspired by what you say, Siv, when you say there's a difference, that's how I understood it, between the monster and the monstrous. Because I think you can invite in the monster and you can point to something and say there is a monster, but the monstrous to me is that which always slips away from the moment when you point towards

something and say here we are, here is a Dalek, for example, which is one of my favourite monsters, or here is Frankenstein. As soon as you can point towards it, then you have defined the monster. The monstrous is that which slips away from that definition. I think there is also an interesting ethical challenge. How do you approach that which you cannot categorise? which you cannot point towards? How do you stay open towards a world where there will always be that which escapes your understanding?

I think ethics to me is also about this relationality with that which you cannot fully understand or grasp or point towards, and I think that is monstrous because you cannot categorise it. But when you talk about the monster, you have to have that extra kind of ethical dimension that is also problematic in many ways.

Does that answer your question?

Ingvil:

Yes. It leads very much to the next question, which is why? Because we are all here because we do invoke the monster and we use it as a thinking tool. You have already said a lot about why it can be an important thinking tool. But I would like to hear what both Christian and Siv have to say about that. Siv, would you like to start? Why is the monster a good thinking tool? Why do we use it even if it's monstrous to use in a way as well?

Siv Frøydis:

I think it's especially because it is both a historical category and a tool used for all kinds of examinations that there is something unknown, something that is within categories, it is always liminal in a way between one state or another. It is a place that in a way is disturbing. There is something uncanny or unheimlich about it, something that creates a kind of, we talked about it yesterday also, feeling that this is something you really can't grasp. So there is something going on where the monster is in a way, the monster as a category, pinpoints exactly these tensions between what's going on, where we have this unease. So that is a place to look in a text or in an analysis, political analysis. There is for me the first place I would look. What does not fit in? Where does it in a way blur? What are the disturbing feelings about this or that? Before I know what I'm looking for, there is something, I'm always looking after that something that in a way gives me the creeps.

I think that is where you can find perhaps a question or a message or something. So it's a starting point. I do totally agree when you have discovered it, the monster is gone. Cohen, the article you referred to, that is one of his monster theses: the monster always escapes. I think in a way to keep it alive, it's important for us as scholars.

Ingvil:

Christian?

Christian:

Well continuing this monster reading here to my left and to my right, I would just say it challenges our sense-making system.

Ingvil:

Yes, because this is what I was thinking as well. It is then about knowledge production and unease and perhaps doubt, which is very contrary to a traditional scientific system. But also knowledge production systems. But is there a danger that if the monster becomes too domesticated, it loses this power to continually be at the edges in a way?

Christian, do you want to say something?

Christian:

Well of course, and maybe that's a good thing because we have the monster theory to the left and to the right. And what I tried to do in the beginning was just my personal grasp on the monster within international relations, which I consider to be quite the opposite. In advanced terms, what we just figured out is that the monster figure is ungrasped, it goes beyond definition, goes beyond category. The moment we try to catch it, it already slips away and so on and so on. The challenges are a meta-structure system, everything that makes sense. God makes sense, nations make sense, capital makes sense, and so on and so on. And suddenly everything is frustrating. What I related to would be the counter-monster as the product of a speech act by a certain agent who calls someone or something a monster.

In other words, monster studies should challenge such speech acts that make it all too easy to call someone or something a monster with a well-defined category. In that case, it would

be: I define the monster to be like this and that and that and that, for example. It opens in both directions, monster and counter-monster.

Siv Frøydis:

I think perhaps one of the problems with all the monsters presenting around us, there are so many and it's of course very sellable for the popular industry. By using the term monstrosity, it's necessarily perhaps not personal. You have to in a way define your own monster. There is an unease with other people's monsters as well. When this category is disturbed by these labels of the monsters, then there is the monster, not the monstrosity.

I'm not even sure if I like the word monster because it's so flattened. When I come to others and say that I'm writing about monsters, it sounds silly. And it's not silly. So I wish it could be another word, but I can't find another word. But it is that category that in a way should be open and the sum of it, the amount of it, it's making it not personal.

Did that make any sense?

Ingvil:

Yes, definitely. But it is everywhere. But why is it everywhere? And why now? It's my next question. Line?

Line:

Well, it's a good question. I think it has to do with this rapid othering that's going on at the moment. I think that's why. I think when it comes to the field of monster studies, as Christian has already mentioned, during the 1990s, we have this rise in monster studies as kind of a field along with other kinds of popular-culture-oriented areas where it becomes more and more legitimate to actually find popular culture and this sort of low bravo genres to be exciting and to have something to say about our current time and a given era, a given place and space.

I think that's when things started to really get going for the monster studies. Perhaps it becomes more legitimate. Also as we see this legitimisation going on with science fiction, as we also discussed. I'm starting to see that these areas have something to say about the period that gave birth to them basically and also perhaps about the future. I think since you mentioned Siv that you're not so happy with the word monster, I can go on record and say I

kind of like it. I like to be able to say I study monsters. I think it does tap into people's own experiences. I think most people have some kind of relationality with monsters, perhaps they have some kind of childhood monster that they remember.

As you also already talked about Siv, the etymology of the monster that is that which demonstrates, but it also comes from warning. The monster warns. I think that it points toward a future yet to come that might be dangerous. It might warn us about something yet to come, but it might also be a promise as we discuss in our special issue Promises of Monsters. In that sense, I think the monster is so full of potential because it's both here, you can point to it and say here's a monster, but the monster is already pointing away and says there's something to come. We need to think about it. We need to speculate what's going to come.

Yesterday at the final panel, we talked about being haunted by the past, but perhaps you're also haunted by futures yet to come. And the ethics of the monster is to start thinking about what is to come, what do they warn us about? What do they also promise us might come? So that's why I think perhaps that the monsters are being taken up now, they're becoming more legitimate, but there's also really interesting critical work being done on the monster because they're so full of potential. That would be my response, I think.

Ingvil:

Siv, you raised your hand, and then Christian afterwards.

Siv Frøydis:

I've been writing about how to create artificial human beings and it's not only the category of the monster, but it's also the category of the human being that's under pressure as we talked about in Oslo a few weeks ago.

After Frankenstein creates the human being of biology, that is the first time you really start to think of this possibility. And later, a short time later, it is possible to change body parts, to mix body parts from animals and humans and to imagine the possibilities of cloning, to harvest body parts, to sell body parts. And what again is left of the human being? And that is one of the oldest existential questions. What is a human being? What is it to be a human being? And without a body, what kind of human being are you then? Because you need to

be in a body. So it's a very old question. It's old, but it's threatened by the new technology and the new possibilities that we have.

It's not at all strange that the monsters appear more and more in the 19th century. Of course, mirrored effectively popular culture, and that's the genius of popular culture. Because they always are very fast in a way, grab the important things and put them at stake. But you also have it in science. In the mixture of these things; science and popular culture, that's where you find the monsters occurring.

Christian:

It's a hate-love beyond categorisation

Siv Frøydis:

Yeah, I think so. It's monstrous.

Christian:

To my right, there was the slogan old. To my left, there was the slogan new. We already had the question regarding the development and now it got rephrased. I always need a lot of time to answer such questions, especially when I'm not an expert in the field of monster studies.

I would just reformulate your answer and take it as mine as well. I do, subjectively, as an outsider, have the feeling that there is something developing: the academic sphere, the focus on monsters, monster studies, to establish it as a field filled with very inspiring and passionate researchers, as I can see.

At the same time, old technology and so on. We are not talking about something that suddenly developed, or we are approaching a climax and suddenly there should be a focus on monsters or they are being used. It's always been the case. You just mentioned the 19th century. Yet again, a subjective voice speaking, but I would also try to go 10,000 years into the past. I think people at the time had the same monster discourses, but they may have not been phrased in terms of monster studies. That's maybe the new development here.

Ingvil:

I think that monster studies, if anything, having it as a discipline, as a field, is also a way of trying to capture and caging the monster. If it is to be a discipline and if it is to have experts, it needs to have a very dynamic definition of such. In that sense, there are no experts here and we are all experts in a way. I think that's quite important because it's easy, with the enthusiasm around the monster, to catch it and to capture it. Interestingly, you just mentioned this technological moment in time which is in a way ghosted by your talk about how Mary Shelley's time. It was also one of those moments in time where all the possibilities were there and which was perfect for making horror.