

DIGITAL HORROR

Monster Talks: a Monster Network Podcast

The Monster Talks Jingle:

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Line Henriksen:

So when I was a kid, I would race up to the top of the stairs as fast as I could, like it was some sort of silly game. Well, I must have been about five or six at the time, I'm not sure, but I know I was very little. Somewhere along the way, a voice at the top of the stairs started to whisper to me. It would make bets with me, such as "I bet you a penny you can't make it to the top of the stairs." I don't really think there was a certain amount of time or anything. As I said, I was very little, so I probably didn't have any counting abilities anyway. I recall just sitting at the top of the stairs, having conversations with this voice about the betting, of course.

Eventually the voice (it was like a whisper of a man's voice, not my own voice in my head) started to bet me my life. Instead of pennies, it would say "I bet you your life, you can't make it to the top of the stairs."

As I got older, it stopped. I never really thought about it at all. I never mentioned it to anyone. Until one night, I was sleeping over at my brother's place. I was about 18, he was 22. We were talking about spooky stories. Out of nowhere, I brought up the voice at the top of the stairs, and my brother got all quiet and weird. Before I even mentioned the betting aspect, he said, did it make bets with you too?

The story about the voice on the stairs is called *There is Something on the Stairs* and is written by an author with the username: Snarkychu. The story was originally posted on the online magazine Jezebel in 2013 as part of the magazine's annual scary story contest. The contest, which takes place every October in time for Halloween, is fairly simple. Post a scary story, the only rule being that it has to be true. Jezebel's annual scary story contest is something I look forward to every year, but it's not the only source of creepiness and horror online.

On the contrary, the web is an excellent place to find stories of monsters, ghosts and ghouls. I invited digital horror expert Erika Kvistad to discuss the connections between digital technologies and the supernatural with me. Erika is a literature researcher who writes about sexuality and horror separately and in combination; and works as an associate professor of English at the University of Southeast Norway. At the moment, she's writing about digital haunted houses.

A few disclaimers. In this conversation with Erika, I say that someone is described as being in their 80s, even though what I meant to say was that they were in their 20s. And then I proceed to call the university a technology. Sorry. The day was cursed.

Erika Kvistad:

I think my favourite stories are, I mean, I think that the thing I like about online horror, digital horror, whatever you want to call it. In general, is that it sort of makes the storytelling format so much a part of the horror. The scary thing is not just what's actually happening in the story, but the fact that you're able to read it at all. It has this kind of fan footage element in that sense.

An early favourite of mine from the early 2000s is *Dionaea House*, which is a series of interconnected websites. It's a live journal, a blog and some posted emails that all sort of collectively tell the story of what seems to be a house that can appear in lots of different places at once. And that when you go inside it kind of eats you. It eats you and spits you out as this sort of hollow, kind of almost zombie-like being, like a Venus flytrap.

Something I really like about rereading that now is that it's a much earlier part of the internet. This is 2002 to 2004 or something like that. It's pretty social media. It's a different way of telling stories.

Line:

I know you know a lot about haunted houses. Also, they interconnect with the digital and you've been studying the *House of Leaves*. I remember you also were the one who told me about *Anatomy*, another haunted online that will swallow you. Could you say a bit more about all these haunted houses and perhaps how they interconnect with digital media?

Erika:

Absolutely. I love haunted houses. Aside from storytelling itself, I think my favourite horror trope is the haunted house or the house that there is something wrong with, in some way. I almost feel like part of it, I'm just interested in houses in general. I like interior design. I guess that sort of translates into feeling that your home, your domestic space is the scariest possible space. If something happens to your home, there's nothing more viscerally unsettling than that.

House of Leaves is quite possibly my favourite scary story, which I always feel like people think that...or people now see it as quite a pretentious and silly book. Everyone says the ideas are interesting but the writing is terrible. I've never found that. I mean, obviously, *House of Leaves* is not an especially conventional novel, but it is an analogue text. But I think that it kind of prefigures, it's from 2000, is that right? Something like that?

Line:

I don't remember, I'm just looking around if I have it, you're probably right.

Erika:

So it kind of prefigures creepypasta, I feel like. There's something about the way that story plays with this kind of found footage format, the idea that you would find a narrative and try to decipher its clues. It also plays with the idea that some part of this text might be authentic, or might not be. And it's impossible to know whether it's real or a hoax. I think all of that is part of what is so entrancing about horror on the internet.

Line:

I guess the horror on the internet has the ability to play into this feeling of found footage in a way that, for example, novels, films and TV shows cannot do in the same way because they rely on a very specific platform. If you were finding something on social media or if you find something because you come across it, somebody sent it to you, or you just are browsing the internet or doom scrolling at midnight again and you come across something. The foundness, I guess, takes a different role than, for example, if you read about it or you watch it on, for example, the *Blair Witch*.

The *Blair Witch*... I'm just thinking of *Blair Witch* now because that would then have been a year before.

Erika:

Yes, something like that, it's late nineties, isn't it? Ninety-eight maybe?

Line:

Something along those lines. Again, in the early, early days of also trying to do viral marketing using the internet and trying to stir up this feeling of the foundness as an actual foundness— I found it.

Before that, we had the TV shows like *Ghostwatch* on BBC, which also created a quite stir. I think, in the mid-nineties or early nineties. This TV show, which was like a Halloween special and journalists being sent into a haunted house. Supposedly, it was a live TV show, but it was not. Actually, it was pre-recorded and everything went wrong, obviously, because you cannot control or contain haunting on TV, especially not live. You have this history and development of the found footage; and the role of the reader and the viewer as some kind of a witness and co-finder when it comes to these genres.

Erika:

Yeah, I watched *Ghostwatch* for the first time this year. And yeah, there is something really deeply chilling about the way this kind of... You know, the BBC format that you're used to, the sort of early nineties or whatever time period it is, you know, quite sort of jolly, very sort of safe and normal tone and how that just disintegrates completely over the course of the show. It's so interesting because as you say, *Ghostwatch* was really, really controversial and the *Blair Witch Project* was controversial.

I think it's almost something like when you're the first person doing (I mean, I don't want to say they're necessarily the first people) but the earlier you do this kind of found footage type thing in your genre, or the earlier you do this sort of pretending to authenticity thing in your genre, the more effective it is because people aren't expecting it.

Line:

I guess the whole idea of what counts as authenticity these days has also changed a lot. And before we started recording, you talked about honesty. I think that's kind of an interesting take on these genres. Then we started talking about the differences between something like the Jezebel competitions, the Halloween competitions, and something like for example, the creation of Slender Man, which is a traditional creepypasta figure. Lots of

people, when they talk about creepypasta, which is this almost stereotypical horror genre of the web, it's the copy-pastable folklore legend that you can pass on to other people through social media, through any kind of digital platforms. So you have something like Slender Man being created on something awful in a thread from 2009, somebody saying: Let's see if we can trick people into believing in monsters. And then you have something like Jezebel, which is a different kind of genre, but at the same time, they're overlapping where they say every Halloween: Tell us your true stories about hauntings. If it's not true, if we don't believe it, then we cannot win the competition. But, ultimately, it's a gentleman's agreement. You cannot know.

But this was actually along the lines of your point. I'm just stealing your thunder here. What do you think about earnestness?

Erika:

As you say, we were talking a little bit about Slender Man earlier. And of course, that's probably the first thing people think about when they think about horror on the internet. It's one of those things where I think a lot of people probably aren't aware that its first appearance was in this thread where the prompt was: you Photoshop, a scary figure.

So it was very much implied when the person who created Slender Man posted it, that this is meant to look authentic. It's meant to be scary and real seeming if it's taken out of context, but in its context, it very clearly isn't real and it's not pretending to be real. It's then the fact that it wasn't so much the originator of these images who tried to present Slender Man as potentially real. It was more other people who saw these images and kind of picked them up and ran with them and made them a kind of collaborative art project.

Line:

Yeah. It's a big collaborative art project. That's a good way to put it.

Erika:

I know, it almost felt like a kind of summoning in a way. This isn't real, but we can make it real.

Line:

I also believe that, at least, when it comes to the Slender Man mythology, there are all these theories about the supposed Tulpa theory concerning Slender Man, that you can call something into being by simply wanting it enough and being enough people who want it enough. There is really this summoning and the question of the performative.

Erika:

Yeah, I personally don't find Slender Man especially scary, but I do find that idea somewhat scary. But you were saying about earnestness. I was trying to think what is the difference between something like a Slender Man or a slightly more, I want to say standard creepypasta, for instance, the stories that pop up on the No Sleeve Reddit thread, or subreddit, which are deliberately trying to be frightening. They are trying to seem real but there is this sort of kind of half sense that they probably aren't really real.

Then there are the kind of stories that people post in response to the Jezebel open threads. And I've also read sort of similar stories. For instance, sometimes I'll go on Reddit and I'll just search for "creepiest thing that ever happened to you" and read 3000 comments about the creepiest thing that ever happened to various people. I never really find myself doubting that the person writing them, at least, believes that this happened and maybe that it actually did happen. They don't seem to be written with the intention to fool anyone. There's this earnestness of purpose in a way.

Line:

Ultimately we simply don't know. I think that's also at the heart and the crux of this digital online storytelling that, obviously, there's always this tension of uncertainty. That we do not know if this has happened to other people, but that's the name of the game. Whenever you hear somebody tell a story, you never know. Maybe, that's also not the point. The authenticity, in the sense of: really did this happen? is perhaps not really what's interesting here. It is this sense of connection and storytelling and creation, perhaps what is being created in these coming together and having these various prompts that is either: let's see if we can tell a story that is so authentic looking that we can fool other people if they come across it, or is the prompt of tell me a story that is true. And then you have to tell that story, at the end of the day, you don't know. I know in Jezebel, sometimes, they are looking at stories and saying this one is so obviously not true that it shouldn't be able to win. Some contestants have been kicked out because people didn't believe in the story. That's also kind of interesting sometimes, what is then the authentic? What is the aesthetics of that?

Which is initially being considered true and then it becomes almost... there's something that gives it away, that makes people not believe in it.

Erika:

Exactly! And the interesting thing is, I think, there isn't necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between a story actually not being real and a story being told in a way that makes it seem unreal. I sometimes think it's just people's storytelling skills, that they get the genre wrong in some way and their horrifying true story comes off sounding fake.

Line:

There is some genre-specific ways, that you have to tell your story for it to be recognisably real, even if it's not real.

Erika:

Yeah, exactly. I implicitly believe all of this stuff. I guess if we try to look at sort of what it is that makes these stories seem real or unreal... I don't know if you've noticed any common threads in the stories that people call out as being fake. But for me, it often feels like the prose is trying to be scary. The prose is sort of trying to drive up the tension. The authentic scenes in stories don't do that at all really. They try to tell it really as neutrally as possible. There's also having a kind of twist ending or having an ending that's too clear, an ending that's too narratively complete.

Line:

I think it has to be almost like you would be told the language has to mirror spoken words almost to some extent. If they were sat down by the computer and just spoke into the screen, which again doesn't really speak to whether people experience this or not. But there are some genre expectations. That's why I also think that there are these clear overlaps between, for example, more traditional creepypastas coming out of 4chan or coming out of something awful; and then something like Jezebel. There's this idea that it has to be almost like somebody sat down and told it without paying too much attention to the aesthetics. There is an aesthetic of the "I don't care about the aesthetic."

Erika:

Yeah, exactly! The aesthetics of “I don't really care to make this make sense. I'm not trying to fit this into an existing narrative that works and I'm not trying to be literary in any way. I'm just trying to put down very clearly what happened.”

Line:

Yes.

Erika:

I find it so interesting that you... Because my immediate thought was that the Jezebel stories are very interesting, but I don't think they're creepypasta. I think your immediate response was: this is creepypasta, it falls within the genre. I actually think you're right now. I think these stories play with authenticity more than I really realised. And as you said, they're also anonymous, which is another genre feature of creepypasta.

Line:

Yeah, sometimes and sometimes not. I think that's also because at this point, I tend to still think about creepypasta as this emerging genre that's still in the making and it's so new, but it's quite old. It's been around for a long time. And some of my old favourite creepypastas stem from 2007. In internet years, it's a long time. So I think that what can be defined as creepypasta has also changed and it varies according to the platform.

Before we recorded, we started talking about: what are the next platforms that are going to create creepypasta? Or create their own sense of creepypasta? We talked about TikTok.

Erika:

I'm sure it's on TikTok.

Line:

Exactly.

Erika:

We're never going to know about it because of the similarities.

Line:

I don't think we can physically knock onto TikTok. They will be stopped at the gate. But I would also suggest that I don't think, I don't see creepypasta perhaps so much as a (I don't know if this makes sense because I'm just trying to put it into words on the fly.) complete genre in itself. It's a mode of telling stories that in some ways both reflect and challenge what we are already doing using telecommunication in general, but especially digital media where you can copy and paste so easily and pass things around. I think creepypasta, and these anxieties about authenticity, about ownership, about the movement of information online, is something that you also find in news articles or people's tweets or blog posts. I think it's a mode of telling stories. When you point to a creepypasta, that's obviously scary, you can see it's almost condensed, but, obviously, the copy-pasteable ability and the anxieties at stake in these stories is at stake in other means and other ways of telling stories, both online and offline.

Sometimes it's perhaps not finding, sometimes the interesting part is to find a creepypasta in stuff that you wouldn't necessarily call a creepypasta.

Erika:

Oh, I love that. I think what you say about it being a mode of storytelling rather than a genre; and also what you said about it being an emerging genre or a genre that you still see as emerging. I think that is because it is still emerging and if it stops emerging at any point, it's going to stop working. We were saying at the start of this conversation that there's something about when you tell an authentic-seeming story in a new medium, people seem to believe it more. Then they get used to those kinds of authentic-seeming stories being told in that medium and they stop believing in it so easily. I think that's happening. We can see that happening now. Creepypasta sort of has to continually find new territories to invade in order to stay, in order to keep its illusion of authenticity. I feel you could see this really clearly with the idea of horror storytelling on Twitter, which I feel is one of those things that just over the last few years became this little mini-genre; initially, it had this very kind of powerful horror impact on a lot of people, probably a lot of people who hadn't really read much creepypasta before that as well. I feel like it very quickly became seen as kind of a storytelling cliché: "oh you're telling one of those Twitter horror stories or this is a typical Twitter horror story." People are getting used to new mediums very quickly, almost.

Line:

I think it's also important to state, as I know that you have done in a lot of your research, that this way of playing on authenticity and playing on the experience of the found footage is also happening analogue and it has a long tradition when it comes to novels, for example. I know you know about cursed literature because we've been talking a lot about curses, both when it comes to digital media and supposedly cursed digital material, but the curse and this anxiety of becoming contaminated by this seemingly authentic piece of supernatural material is something that's happening outside of the internet as well and pre-existed what we today would call creepypasta.

Erika:

Yeah, I think that that's absolutely true. I think the central fear in creepypasta, and its predecessors in both oral culture and in you know earlier in text culture, that the fear, as you say, is that there is something in this story that's able to reach out and put its hooks into me. This story has a kind of interactive element somehow and hearing it is almost in itself a threat and, of course, that can be very direct like in chain letters that sort of threaten that you know if you don't pass this on something terrible is going to happen to you, the ring effect.

An obvious sort of oral culture predecessor to creepypasta is urban legends. They seem to to be viral, to be spreadable. When you hear them you feel threatened; you feel you don't just feel like you've heard a scary story; you don't feel like you might feel if you finished reading Dracula and you're like "oh that was a real meditation on human sexuality" you feel oh there might be somebody with a hook coming to get me with their hook. It's much more, it's a story that wants to do something to you. It's very direct and it's a deal.

Line:

But there's perhaps also these anxieties about who is watching you online. These anxieties about digital surveillance and there is somebody constantly watching. Your sense of self is being distributed across various platforms. Your data is being harvested and mined and sold and so there is something that can contaminate you or steal parts of you or take over parts of you or so. This fragmented sense of self online this constant anxiety about, who is watching from my webcam right now? Who is reading my data? What did I just agree to do, because I didn't read the entire agreement to use this app? These anxieties as well.

So I have a former colleague called (**unclear name**) who is researching creepiness and the internet. She says that creepiness is that feeling that somebody is looking at you. There is

this anxiety about who is looking when not being able to fully understand the media that you are looking at that you're engaging with; and this leakiness she calls creepiness leakiness, between self and others when it comes to the medium of digital. I think that ties really nicely into these anxieties connected to creepypasta and digital. But also keeping in mind that these leaky boundaries have a longer history, as you point out. These anxieties about what might affect my mind, what might affect my body boundaries.

Erika:

Yes. As you say, the idea that the written material can have a directly harmful effect on us. That's something that dates back, at least, as far as the kind of anxieties about women's novel reading, in the late 17th hundreds. They really warp your mind.

I think there's something about that the internet in particular. This is an interface that has two sides, of course, you can say, when you're reading an analogue text you're always actively part of constructing the meaning of that text, it can still do things to you. The leakiness between a person on one side of the screen and whatever is on the other side of the screen is so direct. You can contribute so directly and as you say you could be being watched. I'm looking at my webcam light right now, that's always there like an eye looking at you.

Line:

We are on Zoom right now, we have no idea who could be listening in at this point in time. Or even what's going to happen to our data. There's been so many issues about the security and the privacy of Zoom.

We also have some very specific stories, that we have been looking at for today, from Jezebel. This is a collection of stories that has been in play through the past, I think dating back to 2014. There was one of them that you pointed out, that you kind of liked: *The Aviator Glasses*.

Erika:

Yes, *The Aviator Glasses*. This is a story that again has this sort of extremely prosaic, extremely sort of straightforward storytelling quality. It's about a woman who is alone in the house when someone comes to the door looking for her boyfriend who is not in at the time.

It's interesting when I tell it in this way it sort of immediately becomes narrativised. It sounds like the start of *Scream* or something but that's not how it reads. It reads as real.

She opens the door to this woman. There's this quite detailed description of what she is dressed like, what she looks like. She had frizzy hair like a perm gone wrong, all of her style choices looked like those of a stereotypical grandmother, and the only break with her style was shiny black aviator sunglasses. I guess this is a story where the sense of creepiness kicks in very strongly because the narrator immediately gets the sense that there is something wrong, but it's very hard to put her finger on exactly what it is. Indeed, after a little while, she realises that this person is just repeatedly asking the same questions almost without really listening to her responses. A little later, she talks to some of her neighbours about it, and they tell her to never let that thing in or to not answer the door if that thing comes back. That feels like the key to the story to me. The description of this whatever is on the doorstep as a thing. I think that's an interesting word.

Line:

"Back in the early 2000s I moved in with a now ex-boyfriend. He lived in a bungalow style house in one of the neighbourhoods of a large midwestern city. This happened when I was taking a personal day from work after moving in to finish getting things arranged and unpacked.

It was midafternoon when the doorbell rang. Through the peephole, I saw a conservatively dressed woman. My guess was Jehovah's Witness so I planned to say no thanks and get back to unpacking.

I opened the door and got a better look. The woman was about my age, late 20s, and she had frizzy hair like a perm gone wrong. It was a nondescript brownish blond and looked dry and damaged. All her style choices looked like those of a stereotypical grandmother. She wore a lightweight tan jacket, a white turtleneck that looked like it had been washed many times, a long khaki skirt that buttoned up the front, and loafers styled like moccasins. She was underdressed for a late November day. The only break with her style was shiny, black aviator sunglasses. I couldn't see her eyes.

I opened the door but left the screen door closed. "Hi! Is Scott* home?"

I started to say he wasn't home but then my instincts started to kick in. I asked what she needed and she held out a paper plate wrapped in foil. "I made these for Scott. He helped me out the other day and I wanted to thank him." That almost made sense. Scott was a firefighter and he'd had a call to a house recently but...why would she bring them to his house? How did she find his house? Why was I instantly uncomfortable and panicked once I opened the door?

I told her she'd have to give it to him at work. She asked if he was at work, I said she'd need to talk to him later at work, she asked when he'd be home, I said she'd need to speak to him, she'd ask if he was home, it was an endless loop. I noticed she had a jerky manner of talking, like she had to move physically to speak. Finally, I broke the loop and said I couldn't talk to her anymore and she'd have to leave. As I closed the door she slammed her hand on the screen door and screamed, "No!"

I closed and locked the door quickly. Almost instantly, there was knocking at the back door. That didn't make sense - the backyard was fenced and we kept the gate locked. The lot was long and narrow so along with the locked gate it took a little time to go from the front to the back. I ran to the back and peeked out. She was there and now she was yelling that she knew he was home and I had to let her in. I looked at her out the backdoor. She clearly had a problem and I didn't know if 911 was the best way to help or not.

The doorbell rang as I looked at her. Hopefully, it was someone else. I went and looked out the peephole. There she was again. She gave me a big grin and the knocking started in back. I marched to the phone. There were two of them so I was sure this was a crime and she was putting on an act. 911 was my best bet. As I reached the phone it rang. I expected it to be her but it was our neighbours across the street. They were older but not too much. He (Jim) was a retired cop, she (Jenny) worked an office job in the city. She was off today and was just wondering if Scott and I would like to come for dinner.

I cut her off, panicked, and asked if anyone was at my front door. She said no and I begged her to double check. She asked me why and I explained. Immediately she got Jim on the phone. Jim told me he'd be right over and to go to the interior of the house away from the windows. All this time, the bell rang in the front and there was knocking in the back. Eventually, it stopped. Jim yelled at the front door it was him and I could open up. He asked me a lot of questions and then we had the following conversation I've never forgotten:

“If that thing ever comes back again don’t open the door.”

“Jim, if she ever comes back I’m calling the police. Wait...what do you mean that thing?

I don’t know what religion you are but you should get something for protection and hang it by the door. Don’t talk about it again, ever.”

Scott was as confused by it as I was and didn’t recognise her from my description. At first, we talked about it but then I noticed after he was talking to Jim one day he didn’t want to discuss it any more. He was raised Catholic and a few days later he hung a crucifix near the door. He insisted it was just something from his grandma’s house he’d had a long time and it reminded him of her.

I lived there for a little over a year and nothing else happened. About a year after I moved out Scott called me at work. He thought I’d want to know Jim had died. During the call, we talked about old times and Scott talked about how Jim had been so concerned about me after the incident. The same thing had happened to Jenny late one night when they’d just had their first child. I tried to take it beyond Jim’s concern but Scott said Jim had asked him never to talk about it and he wanted to respect that. Since then I’ve lost touch with Jenny and Scott.

It wasn’t until a few days after the call I realised it. Jim and Jenny were my parents age. Their first baby is a few years older than me. That means the same thing happened to her in the 1970s. I still don’t understand it.”

Erika:

I still don’t understand it. Actually, It’s certainly this is one of the relatively few of these sort of Jezebel-type stories where you get that somewhat satisfying gothic kind of loop back to the past, because the the neighbours, who have warned her against this entity, turn out to have had similar experiences you say in the 70s. It’s a little bit like that moment where you know you have a someone, who is experiencing a haunting, and they go to the library and look up their houses history on microfilm and it turns out it was indeed that terrible fire; and it explains everything. It ties in thematically with all of the horrifying stuff that’s been happening and that’s quite unusual. In fact, here I don’t think the effect is... it doesn’t do that, obviously. But I feel like in most of these stories part of the effect of the endings is that they usually don’t have any explanation at all.

Line:

Indeed, we never told what is the aim of this creature—the thing. We just know that it warps time and space. Apparently, it can be both at the front of the house and in the back of the house simultaneously. There's something about time, that it doesn't adhere to. You never really find out what it wants, how it wants it.

Then, there is also the the anxiety at stake in these stories because you never know you. You also haven't received or ended up at a resolution yet. What this creature wants is still up in the air and it is still something that has to happen at some point. It's also opening up again to a future, an uncertain future, about perhaps next time I open the door: it's me! She's going to be misting and saying: Scott home? You're going to say no, he is at work come back later. She's gonna say, Scott home? And you have and then you will go forward in this loop.

There is this anxiety again that since the creature apparently didn't get what it wanted, the loop ended. When it is the creature, the points in the loop simply just being replaced by others such as the potential reader.

Erika:

Yeah, I think that's exactly right. It's when a story isn't finished it can potentially still include anything, including the reader. I know that, to sort of go on a little bit of a tangent, both of us have been listening to the podcast: *The Magnus Archive*. Which is a set of horror stories. Each episode is built around a horror story and gradually these start to form a larger cohesive narrative. We both really like this. We both think it's very good. But I think we also both think that it got a lot less scary. The more cohesive the narrative became and the more the various horrible things that happen get fitted into a kind of cosmology or a kind of pattern, that you know is still horrific but that makes sense. It hangs together and has an internal object. I think it's almost impossible to thread that needle as a horror writer of actually starting to explain some stuff while still retaining the same sense of inexplicable horror.

Line:

We have seen a renaissance and recurring interest in the genre of the weird. Which is the sub-genre of horror and speculative fiction. I think, to me, at least, what defines the weird is that it really does dabble in: there are no solutions, there are no explanations, it doesn't

come together in a neat bow in the end. That is why it's constantly open-ended and constantly evolving and pulling in the reader. I think that is my own sort of take on it. In the anglophone world at least Europe, the US, the UK right now there is these anxieties about big immense catastrophes that are beyond our cognition and understanding. Like climate change, global warming, shifts in political political stage, on the political scene with Brexit, for example. Things happening at a rate and a speed and, supposedly, allies leaving and take the companionship of big corporations.

Things are happening, also right now we just have the pandemic. How do we imagine the pandemic? What even is the ending of the pandemic? I think there is a lot of uncertainty. There's a lot of struggling to find out what even the problem is. How do I solve this issue? Because it's so open-ended I don't know how to make this person not come back and knock on my door. I don't know how to solve climate change. These stories, I think, may be ways of trying to make sense of the nonsense while not solving the nonsense by giving it a neat solution. Because that would also be dissatisfying. You have to continue living in this mess. These stories, to me at least, tap into that sense of trying to find ways to live in the mess without solving it.

Erika:

Yeah, I think that's right. The connection to the weird is really interesting because I think I always tend to think of the weird as horror that isn't on a human scale or horror that seems to be almost uninterested in human concerns or seems to be kind of outside of the human perspective. As you say, it feels like a lot of the things happening at the moment are outside human scale. I care about human perspectives and that's one of the things that's so unsettling about it.

It's interesting, I would never have initially thought to think of these as weird stories in that sense. But I can see that they kind of actually are in that they open this window to not really a haunting or anything like that it's a little bit more easily comprehensible, but just to something that we can't fully conceptualise. I think that's why I was so struck by the word "thing" to describe this being. This is a word that comes up in in other true or apparently true horror stories that I like.

One of these stories has been in a way kind of a legendary story for you and me. I told it to you at one point and I think I kind of miss retold it. I then just was never able to find it actually

written down anywhere on the internet because the person who told it: Nicole Cliffe deletes her tweets a lot. She told the story on Twitter. I always think of this as the thing over the car story. This is something that happened to some relatives or friends or relatives of hers. It's a story about a woman getting a call from her brother basically reminding her of something that happened when they were much younger.

Many decades ago, he says, do you remember back in a random year in the 1970s, how you and I and a couple of friends drove out to a house party in the country? The woman vaguely remembers this. Then her brother says, Patty, do you remember the thing over the car? and Patty immediately sits down on a kitchen chair and says, "oh my god there was a thing over the car." He says, "tell me what you remember." Patty says, "you were driving out to Bath for a house party, and the car was full, and there was a thing over the car. You were driving and you started to look, and I got out too and I looked, and our friends didn't get out and didn't pay attention and kept talking and then we got back in the car and drove to the party." Her brother says, "do you remember when we got to the party? Patty said "it was over the barn and you and I looked at it and then everyone went inside and it was a normal party." We drove home and Patty was like "Jesus Christ, Michael, this is insane. Why am I only now remembering this?" Michael, her brother says "well Patty that's the strange part, I call you about once a year and ask you if you remember the thing over the car and each time it's like the very first time I've ever asked you about it.

I mean I'm getting goosebumps now. I was eventually able to actually find a copy of this. I find this spooky for all sorts of reasons but one of the reasons is the kind of incommensurability, in a way, of the word, what the word "thing" seems to suggest here. The thing over the car. It's completely impossible for me to even imagine what that refers to. There's this kind of conceptual blank in the middle of the story that seems to match the fact that this woman can never quite keep it in her mind. She can never quite remember it. It can't be contained. It's a narrative.

Line:

When it comes to this, about "it" I'm reminded of Freud. This theory about in German you say *aspooked*. He refers to this sense of agency and of doing that does not have a subject. There you have the uncanniness that something does something but it does not have a subject, at least, not in an understanding that we would say: this person does this thing.

There was just an “it.” There is nothingness that does something and there you have the haunting, you have the uncanny.

I think, to me, that's why is at stake in doing some of these stories about the agency of that which is so non-human. That it can never be understood as a subject in the traditional sense of the human subject, for example.

Erika:

“It” can't even quite be the subject of a sentence. It can't even be entirely contained in language.

Line:

Indeed. I think it's just sort of fun when we talk about these online stories and you have this ‘aspoaked’ and this “it-ness” and you look at something like information technology which is “it”. And I work at the IT technology of Copenhagen and “it” is everywhere.

So anything that you can use to pun in, you can use it. “It” is everywhere. It's all over the whole place and every time I see it I just think is so uncanny. I have to write about some point. I think that this “it-ness” is actually inherent to some of the ways that social media and technologies have a sense of agency but not a sense of subjecthood, that we would otherwise ascribe to it. That's part of their uncanniness.

Erika:

Yeah, agency without subject. I think that's exactly right.

Line:

Today's episode featured stories by Snarkychu and Melwithoudiner5 as well as sound art by KRISTIANKULTA, Acclivity and sjturia, among others. You can find links to the stories and the sound art in a description of this episode.

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