

*Nordlit 42*

# Manufacturing Monsters

*Edited by*

Christian Beyer

Juliane C. Bockwoldt

Emil Lundedal Hammar

Holger Pötzsch

## Nordlit's Special Issues so Far

The *MaMo* editors invite their readers to also have a look at previous *Nordlit* issues and consider the themes in bold—most of which deal with bordering and othering—as of especially significant to their own. ‘God fornøyelse!’

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<i>Nordlit</i> 42 (Autumn 2019)	[420 p.]— <i>Manufacturing Monsters</i> (2018)
<i>Nordlit</i> 41 (Spring 2019)	[107 p.]— <i>Kino i 100</i> (2016)
<i>Nordlit</i> 39 (Autumn 2017)	[115 p.]— <b>Russian Space: Concepts, Practices, Representations</b>
<i>Nordlit</i> 38 (Spring 2016)	[225 p.]— <i>Hamsun i Tromsø VI</i> (2015)
<i>Nordlit</i> 37 (Autumn 2015b)	[122 p.]— <i>Living the War: Part One</i>
<i>Nordlit</i> 36 (Autumn 2015a)	[314 p.]— <i>Berørt av bygninger: Festskrift til Ingebjørg Hage</i>
<i>Nordlit</i> 35 (Spring 2015b)	[246 p.]— <i>Arctic Modernities: Festskrift til Fredrik Chr. Brøgger</i>
<i>Nordlit</i> 34 (Spring 2015a)	[536 p.]— <i>Ibsen and World Drama(s)</i> (2012)
<i>Nordlit</i> 33 (Autumn 2014c)	[408 p.]— <i>Rara avis in Ultima Thule: Festskrift til Synnøve des Bouvrie</i>
<i>Nordlit</i> 32 (Autumn 2014b)	[180 p.]— <i>Narrating the High North II</i> (2013)
<i>Nordlit</i> 31 (Autumn 2014a)	[174 p.]— <b>Border Aesthetics</b> (2012)
<i>Nordlit</i> 30 (Autumn 2012)	[210 p.]— <b>Medier, kultur og samfunn</b> (2012)
<i>Nordlit</i> 29 (Spring 2012)	[328 p.]— <i>Narrating the High North</i> (2011)
<i>Nordlit</i> 28 (Autumn 2011)	[274 p.]— <i>La Décadence ou une Esthétique de la Transgression</i> (2010)
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<i>Nordlit</i> 24 (Spring 2009)	[336 p.]— <b>The Cultural Production and Negotiation of Borders</b> (2008)
<i>Nordlit</i> 23 (Spring 2008)	[440 p.]— <i>Arctic Discourses</i> (2008)
<i>Nordlit</i> 22 (Spring 2007b)	[273 p.]— <i>Arktiske Diskurser</i>
<i>Nordlit</i> 21 (Spring 2007a)	[341 p.]— <b>Centre-Periphery: The Avant-Garde and the Other</b> (2006)
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<i>Nordlit</i> 1 (Spring 1997)	[240 p.]— <i>Writing and a Sense of Place</i> (1996)

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Since 1997, forty-two *Nordlit* issues have been published. Thirty of these issues appeared as special issues, including the one in hand. In the list above, brackets behind the titles indicate the years of related symposia. The spring issues of 1998–2001 and 2011, the autumn issues of 2002–2006, as well as the issues of 2010 and 2018 appeared as twelve open issues.

Twenty-two years ago, *Nordlit* was launched by researchers at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Tromsø—primarily as a publication channel for working papers in literature. After numerous fusions and re-structuring processes, and the subsequent re-branding of departments, faculties, and Tromsø's university as a whole, the journal is currently affiliated with the Department of Language and Culture at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. The Times They Are a-Changin'.



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# Manufacturing Monsters

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# Manufactur

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Nordlit 42—Autumn 2019

## Manufacturing Monsters

Edited by Beyer, Bockwoldt, Hammar, Pötzsch

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“Being  
an extreme form of the other,  
the monster is far more than  
a threatening apparition implicitly justifying  
its own confinement or eradication”

—the editors, on page 11.

“When taken as a social optic  
relevant not due to whatever frame it instantiates,  
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these processes of construction make palpable,  
the monster becomes a veritable black mirror  
throwing back at us the creatures of our making  
and remorselessly exposing the inherent monstrosity  
of our own beliefs, attitudes, and actions”

—the editors, on page 13.

“[...] this special issue intends  
not only to *see monsters*,  
but also to see *with, through, and as* monsters”

—the editors, on page 16.

## SEEING (WITH, THROUGH, AND AS) MONSTERS— AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Christian Beyer, Juliane C. Bockwoldt,  
Emil Lundedal Hammar, and Holger Pötzsch


### The Meanings of Monsters—On Monsterization and Its Consequences

Monsters, it seems, are currently ‘en vogue’ again. The Frankenstein year of 2018 marking the 100th anniversary of the first publication of Mary Shelley’s story about a man-made monster demanding both fear and empathy (2003 [1818]) brought the role of monsters in literature and other fiction high on the agenda again and directed renewed attention to figures of the monstrous, the strange, the abject, the uncanny, and more. Questions of how monsters relate to—and possibly recalibrate—issues of otherness, alterity, identity, marginalization, and violence have been treated in manifold ways by many scholars before. Waldenfels (1990), Haraway (1992), Cohen (1996b), Shildrick (2001), Ahmed (2006), Butler (2009), or Asma (2012 [2009]), just to mention a few, have all addressed ways through which dynamics of self and other, order and chaos, inclusion and exclusion have played out across cultures and histories at collective and individual levels—with monsters and practices of monsterization playing key roles in these processes.

Being an extreme form of the other, the monster is far more than a threatening apparition implicitly justifying its own confinement or eradication. The monster might appear a harbinger of destruction, but always also emerges as productive. It becomes implicitly constitutive of identities and the boundaries shaping these, and always also reflects something about those who created it. Hence the key assertion made by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996a: 20) in his seven theses on monster culture, “they [the monsters] ask us why we have created them”. The monster, it seems, is not only limiting and a source of individual or collective ruin, but also constructive and renewing. It enables reflection and critical introspection. Through its workings, the monster carves out a space from which alternatives can emerge and assert their presence—it is inherently transgressive and enables a recalibration of received orders and frames.

Our endeavor to approach the roles and functions of monsters in their various forms and shapes by means of an interdisciplinary collection of contributions is, of course, neither the first nor the last attempt to gain a better understanding of the theme at hand in this manner (see, for instance, de Valk 2011–2014 [2015]; Mittman/Dendle 2012; Paradiso-Michau 2017; Koenig-Woodyard/Nanayakkara/Khatri 2018; Mittman/Hensel 2018; Presterudstuen/Musharbash 2019; Erle/Beckley/Hendry 2020, just to mention a few recent examples). Three such collections stand out for us as they have served as both inspiration and benchmark for our own project. First of all, we owe our understanding of the manifold ways through which monsters are formed, can be analyzed, and assert their contingent effects to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s seminal work *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996b). Secondly, a publication we share the title of our project with, Julian Petley’s special issue ‘Manufacturing Monsters’ that was put out in *Index on Censorship* (2000) emphasized the significance of monsters for politics

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and in particular for the role economic frames play in processes of propagandistic monsterization. Finally, the activities of our colleagues from ‘The Monster Network’ and their recent special issue on the ‘Promises of Monsters’ in the journal *Somatechnics* (2018)—co-edited by Ingvil Hellstrand, Line Henriksen, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, Donna McCormack, and Sara Orning—made palpable to us the importance of connecting monsters to issues of gender, embodiment, technology, and lived practice (see also Hellstrand/Henriksen/Berg/Beyer 2019).

These and other works show that the construction of monsters is more than aesthetic figuration. The cultural creation and dissemination of monsters have profound political implications as these practices are key to processes of othering that shape and frame certain groups or individuals as de-humanized, demonic, incomprehensible, and posing an immediate threat. As among others Michael Parenti (1992 [1986]), Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (2002 [1988]), Judith Butler (2009) or Cherian George (2016) have shown, when it comes to monsters, fiction and fact, entertainment and news, aesthetics and politics are closely intertwined, as are the interests and positions of power of hegemonic forces that activate such frames. As Johan Galtung (1969) among others has established, the use of direct or structural violence against other living beings requires a profound cultural apparatus of legitimization—cultural violence in Galtung’s terms—that draws upon existing systems of knowledge and representation to form tacit horizons of plausibility for discursive acts of demonization, marginalization, victimization, invisibilization, or exclusion that, in utmost consequence, justify murder.

Seeing monsters from the vantage point of contemporary politics also forces us to engage with the economic and militarist practices of contemporary imperialism spreading across much of the planet. By means of established and ‘new’ media, these policies shape or reinvigorate imaginations of various mundane monsters that pose apparently immediate threats to ‘stability’, ‘human rights’, ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’ and general wellbeing at a global scale. From Gaddafi in Libya, Assad in Syria, Kim in North Korea, and Maduro in Venezuela to always suitable ‘Iranian fanatics’ or the ominous ‘Russian threat’, complacent mainstream media, incompetent pundits, and anonymous sources have created an impressive meshwork of imagined threats that further fuel an already palpable hysteria of ‘Western’ policy circles regularly targeting such alleged demons with both verbal accusations and concrete missiles causing havoc for the many in the process. On the other side, similar demagogues present ‘racialized’ immigrants, queer people, women, or certain ‘non-believers’, just to mention a few categories, as suitable scapegoats for whatever ill in need of explanations that can promise quick fixes of complex structural issues.

What all these often-violent endeavors of naming and framing have in common is the fact that they are mostly based on fictions. Almost all of the nightmarish creatures we apparently need to be defended against turn out as chimeras in the end, mere constructs with little to no connection to the ‘real’ world. By then, however, ‘our’ allegedly necessary interventions, sanctions, bombardments, proxy wars, deportations, hate crimes, and shock-and-awe dissolutions of state structures and institutions have already destroyed the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people, in the process creating the very hopelessness and hate crystallizing into the very threats these measures originally were framed as saving us from. What we see is a deliberately initiated and perpetuated vicious circle of monsterization where the other becomes both a victimized

object in need of protection and a grotesque, inhumane creature threatening 'our' lives and well-being without apparent reason.

Most of the mundane monsters, who we are allegedly threatened by, are—at least in a positivist sense—fictions. Their construction, however, entails real consequences for millions of people who for instance happen to live at the receiving end of 'the West's' self-righteously deployed virtuous violence, or who happen to be chauvinistically framed as located outside whatever norm system cynical political actors believe need to be reified by violent exclusions of the chosen identity-marker of the day. From Elizabeth Catte (2018) who viciously and eloquently opposes the simplifying demonization of Appalachia and its residents in US-American mainstream liberal discourse, via Cherian George's (2016) analyses of how religious offence is instrumentalized to both vilify others and frame oneself as victim of oppression and harassment to Alan MacLeod's (2019) attempt to address the biases of 'Western' media reporting on Venezuela, many scholars have engaged with such politically inflected instances of othering and demonization from critical vantage points. In addition, Butler's (2009) distinction between 'grievable lives' and 'ungrievable lives' (see also Mehr 2009), as well as Herman and Chomsky's (2002 [1988]: 37–86) differentiation between 'worthy victims' and 'unworthy victims' (see also Edwards/Cromwell 2018), point to the importance of mediated images for the framing of the other in the name of wars and violent interventionism. As Barry Buzan, Jaap de Wilde and Ole Wæver (1998 [1997]), Michael Merlingen (2008) and Sybille Reinke de Buitrago (2012) among others have shown, this has relevance for international relations and processes of securitization.

Monsters, the various threatening constructions we live by, and the containment of which promises order and security, may serve yet another purpose, though. When taken as a social optic relevant not due to whatever frame it instantiates, but due to the very practices, interests, and power relations these processes of construction make palpable, the monster becomes a veritable black mirror throwing back at us the creatures of our making and remorselessly exposing the inherent monstrosity of our own beliefs, attitudes, and actions. Monsters may therefore tell us more about the cultures and individuals that shaped them, than about themselves or the world. From this vantage-point, the monster becomes our feared and excluded twin—a refracted mirror-image showing us something out there but also always exposing us to an often-uncanny and frightening picture of our real selves.

As our "dialectical other" (Cohen 1996a: 7) the monster projects our suppressed fears and anxieties. In all its menacing nature, it also elicits desire not only threatening with death and destruction but, implicitly, also promising freedom and something new. As such, the monster marks a border that, for the sake of both ontological and political stability and the sustaining of a hegemonic order, must not be crossed—or, in terms of a progressive politics of change indeed *needs to be crossed*. Most importantly, however, as Cohen concludes, "monsters are our children" (Cohen 1996a: 20). They are made by us and, therefore, serve as constant reminders of who and what we are, revealing to us aspects of ourselves we might not want to see or acknowledge. In essence, his argument goes, monsters harbor not only destruction but also correction, change, escape, and potentially necessary renewal.

In our view, monsters and their ‘humane’ counterparts belong together. The one cannot exist, or be properly understood, without the other. Islands of order need a sea of chaos from which they can emerge and without which they would lose their meaning. In political terms, what becomes decisive, then, is not an attempt to avoid or end such contingent processes of ordering an inherently chaotic world by means of drawing largely arbitrary and temporary dividing lines across whatever categories currently at hand. Without such alterity, neither collective order nor individual identity would be possible. It is crucial, though, to maintain constant awareness of the contingency of such divisions (they can and will change over time creating new configurations of in/exclusion) and of the implications such divisions have for the involved individuals and groups (both exclusions and changes need to be non-violent and adaptable).

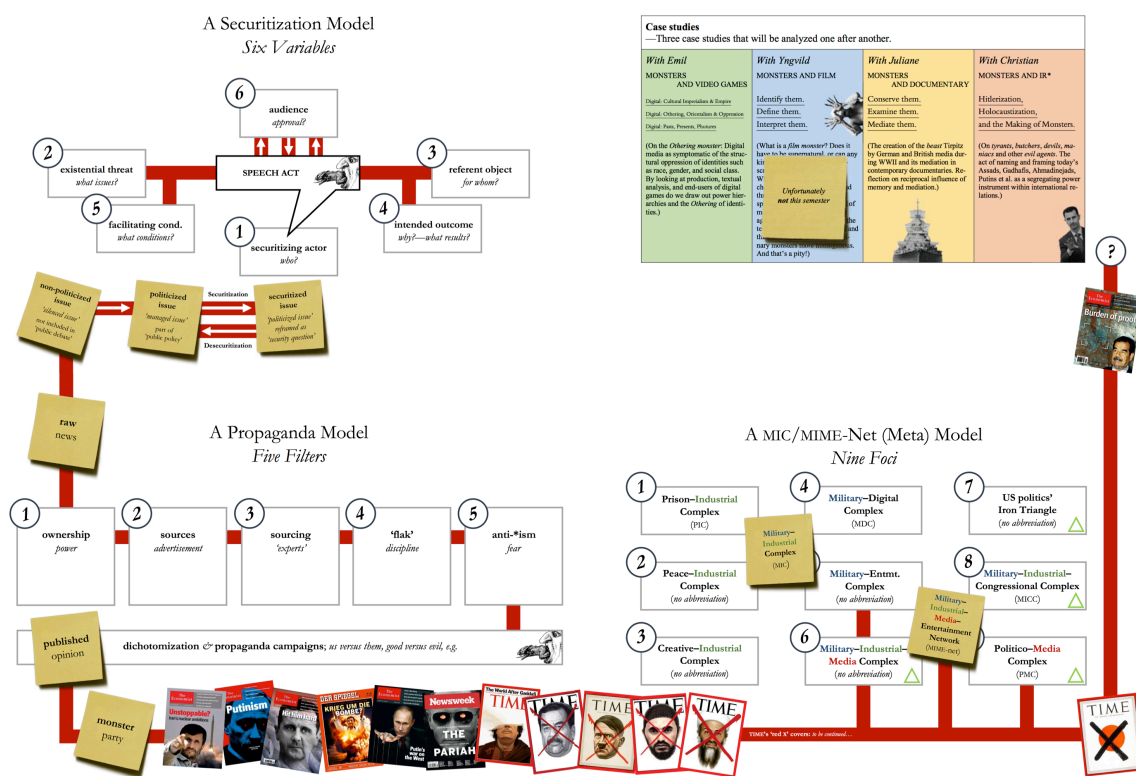
Problems arise once contingent and dynamic processes of objectification (of particular identities or relations) sediment into static regimes of objectivity that suppress nonviolent change and reify a specific constellation as an allegedly natural and therefore timeless and unquestionable order. This order, then, implies a need for violent defense against the onslaughts of various possible others excluded or marginalized by hegemonic frames. Under this condition, the other as a necessary partner in constant and inevitable mutual adaptation and change is reconstituted as a monster—a unanimous and immediate threat to an order that is reified, perceived as without an alternative, and as beneficial for everyone deemed relevant by dominating forces. Under such conditions, necessary peaceful change is replaced by destructive campaigns for stabilization that translate into violent struggles for hegemony, supremacy, and an allegedly timeless order.

Also, we need to remember the monsters we have created and the true consequences of our violent struggles against them. In mainstream discourses, the catastrophic ramifications—societal, cultural, economic—of our past wars are quickly forgotten; brushed over by new challenges and discursive moves constantly luring us into the same trap: to perceive yet another group, leader, state, or denomination as a rightfully eradicable, mere threat. In these cases, our ‘Western’ collective and cultural memories suffer from a very short span. *We monsterize, intervene, kill, and forget*, in that order, and let others pick up the pieces of what we self-righteously wiped away allegedly in the name of peace, security, and prosperity. Once the ‘mistake’—the ultimate unreality of the assumed threat—is realized, we say sorry and move on. Then, however, our actions have already created the devastating facts on the ground that keep the spiral going.

The memories that could force us to stop, to think and to regret, that could help us to learn and to break out of this vicious circle of monsterization, find little resonance in the echo chambers of contemporary mainstream media. We have seen this logic materialize again and again—the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the babies thrown out of their incubators and left to die on cold Kuwaiti hospital floors, the weapons of mass destruction deployable within 45 minutes, Viagra given to ‘regime troops’ to make them rape more, the monster gassing his own people; the new Stalins, the new Hitlers, and so on. These are just a few examples of a sheer endless row of irresponsible rhetorical moves that lead us from war to war—wars in which *we* never die. We have to guard against not the monsters allegedly responsible for these fictitious cruelties, but against those telling these lies, conveying them to us, inserting them into political discourse for their own

cynical motives. They are the ugly face hiding behind the smooth and well-meaning mainstream façade of ‘Western’ foreign and economic policies—conveniently covered by consumer-friendly, colorful, cuddlesome multimedia mass entertainment.

Our work grew out of the interdisciplinary master’s course ‘Manufacturing Monsters’ (*MaMo*) that runs at UiT The Arctic University of Norway each spring term (for more details on the development of the course, see Beyer 2019). Many ideas that come to the fore in our collection had their origin in teaching and discussions connected to this course. Several of the contributors have been involved as either teachers or students. After a yearlong process of working on the journal, it is wonderful to see its monstrous outcome and to be able to close the circle: Soon, the collection will come back to class again and will be utilized as compendium literature for the *MaMo* seminars to come.



**Figure 1.** Mapping the *MaMo* course’s interdisciplinary core. This visualization can be read as a theory roadmap. It depicts The Copenhagen School’s ‘securitization’ approach (Buzan/de Wilde/Wæver 1998 [1997]) and Herman and Chomsky’s ‘propaganda model’ (2002 [1988]), highlights a conceptual transition from Eisenhower’s 1961 term ‘military–industrial complex’ to Der Derian’s 2001 concept ‘Military–Industrial–Media–Entertainment Network’, and gives an overview over the case studies as taught in the course’s first round in 2017. Later, Edwards and Cromwell’s ‘anatomy of a propaganda blitz’ (2018) was added to the course compendium. Illustration by Christian Beyer.

The present special issue is dedicated to inquiries along all the dimensions mentioned above; and many more. Firstly, it interrogates the figure of the monster in a variety of media and genre ranging from literature and the fine arts via film and comic books to video games, directing attention to both factual and fictitious discourses in historical

and comparative perspectives. Secondly, some of the articles collected here interrogate the processes through which monsters are created and which implications such creations can have for individuals and groups that are subjected to these discourses and practices. Thirdly, then, some contributions also look at the monster as an analytical lens that makes visible important aspects of the political systems, the cultures and societies, or the economies that create and circulate them. Consequently, this special issue intends not only to *see monsters*, but also to see *with, through, and as* monsters.

### Taming the Monster Issue—A Section-by-Section Summary

An interdisciplinary special issue on the theme of monsters and the way they are manufactured for political or other purposes allows for submissions from a variety of fields and academic disciplines. Ordering the huge variety of contributions we have received—taming the *MaMo* monster, if you will, and making it fit certain frames—has posed some challenges. How could these varied contributions be ordered? Would they fit together at all? After having tried out various alternatives, we opted in the end for a division with regard to the media in which the monsters under scrutiny appeared. Therefore, the special issue is comprised of the following interrelated sections: [1] *Literature and the Fine Arts*, [2] *Cinema and Television*, [3] *Video Games and Play*, and [4] *News Media and the Public Sphere*. In addition, we included a separate section on *Book Reviews* and conclude the issue with an appreciation of the numerous reviewers who helped realize this project, a contributors' list, as well as some bibliographical bridges. Now, we will introduce the contributions to each section and connect them to the wider frames of the issue.



**Figures 2a–2g.** Taming *MaMo*: All section headers are marked by color. On each header's back page, you will find selected 'monster quotes' from the texts that follow. Realization by Christian Bayer.

#### Summarizing Section 1—Literature and the Fine Arts

Comprising texts about fine arts, literature, and graphic novels, this first section engages with issues such as posthumanism, eco-criticism, the Anthropocene, and diversity in cultural expressions. Tracing monsters, monstrosities, and de-monsterization in the works of Patricia Piccinini, H. P. Lovecraft and new weird literature, as well as the Marvel universe, the articles collected here reflect the volatile nature of monsters and their shifting roles and functions in cultural dynamics.

[1a] The contribution opening this issue, Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia's 'Loving Monsters—The Curious Case of Patricia Piccinini's Posthuman Offspring', takes recourse to Donna Haraway's and Rosi Braidotti's posthuman aesthetics and ethics to



interrogate issues of motherhood and reproduction at play in a selection of Patricia Piccinini's works. Discussing an impressive range of art objects and installations, Biscaia shows how Piccinini uses imageries and objects often described as at once disturbing, grotesque and monstrous, and as compelling, cute and beautiful otherwise to drive home the idea of an inherent ambiguity of categories such as humans or monsters and their shifting relations to each other. Highlighting issues of love and care imbued in these relations, Biscaia shows how Piccinini's "anti-Frankenstein story" (43) makes the apparently monstrous appear as vulnerable and a possible partner.

[1b] In the second article, "Age of Lovecraft"—Anthropocene Monsters in (New) Weird Narrative', Gry Ulstein draws parallels between early 20th century cosmic horror fiction of H. P. Lovecraft and the genre of contemporary weird narrative. She shows that both cultural currents are linked through the types of monsters that inhabit their stories—usually faceless and often-inexplicable, supranatural forces beyond human influence or control. Connecting key figures and tropes of the two genres to contemporary thinking about a dawning Anthropocene and its various invisible threats seemingly implying a lack of human capacity to adequately react, Ulstein urges us to actively engage "new weird monsters" (62) and reposition ourselves in relation to various non-humans forms of agency.

[1c] Shifting focus to the popular graphic novel, Anja Borg Andreassen looks into issues of identity and marginalization in Marvel's superhero universe. Her article 'Yes, We Khan—Diversity and De-Monsterization of Muslim Identities in *Ms. Marvel* (2014—)', investigates the latest iteration of the popular superhero Ms. Marvel who takes the form of a young Muslim woman for the first time in the series. Locating the graphic novel in a 'Western' discursive environment characterized by steadily increasing Islamophobia and related culturally-fueled fear mongering, she shows how the new Ms. Marvel "de-monsterizes" (79) Muslim identities and helps to diversify the traditionally masculinist and conservative superhero genre. Consequently, Borg Andreassen argues, the graphic novel enables a productive questioning and potential subversion of received social and political frames of othering and exclusion.

### *Summarizing Section 2—Cinema and Television*

Comprising a total of eight contributions, the second section of this special issue—on the theme of monsters in cinema and television—is the most extensive one. The included articles range from analysis of memory-making potentials of historical documentaries via issues of adaptation as well representation and marginalization in mainstream films to analyses of witches, vampires, and the political economy of film production. Directing attention to productions from Finland, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, Denmark and the United States in particular, the assembled contributions interrogate and critique imaginaries of monsters and processes of monsterization across genres and media.

[2a] In the first article, 'Exotic and Primitive Lapland—Othering in *The Earth Is a Sinful Song* (1973)', Kaisa Hiltunen adopts a post-colonial perspective to trace practices of othering of Northern indigenous populations in Finnish mainstream film since the 1920s. She uses Rauni Mollberg's motion picture *The Earth Is a Sinful Song* from 1973 as an example to sketch out how the inhabitants of the Arctic region of Lapland have been denigrated and ridiculed in much of Finnish mainstream audio-visual culture.

Arguing for a transformation of geographical into “mental distance” (85), she exemplifies the role of film in inherently exclusive processes of nation building and shows that also works that have been lauded for a gritty social realism tend to reproduce colonial stereotypes and prejudices.

[2b] Changing the theme, the following two contributions interrogate a specific type of screen monster—the vampire. In ‘Tamed Monsters and Human Problems in Cinema’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1994)’, P. Stuart Robinson uses a reading of Neil Jordan’s film *Interview with the Vampire* to show the transgressive and therefore potentially subversive aspects of film monsters. The article shows that received frames for what counts as human are not only challenged by the monstrosity of the other, but also by the slow humanization of the allegedly non-human opponent and by a gradual adaptation of human actors to non-human conditions. Creating a “disturbing ambivalence” (103; 118), argues Robinson in a way similar to Biscaia, the vampire-framed human becomes a way of questioning the received preeminence of a reified liberal humanist subject.

[2c] Adopting remediation as a theoretical lens, the next article, Alexander Lehner’s ‘Vampiric Remediation—The Vampire as a Self-Reflexive Technique in *Dracula* (1897), *Nosferatu* and *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000)’ examines connections between the figure of the vampire and the characteristics of specific media technologies. Starting with the observation that the original novel, through its epistolary form, draws attention to its own mediality, Lehner argues that later screen adaptations of the novel retained focus on such issues of mediation and mediality. Offering two examples, he shows how *Nosferatu* treats the figure of the vampire as a “personification of film” (123; 129; 137), while *Shadow of the Vampire*’s fictitious making-of-documentary further plays with the nature of film and its relation to vampirism and ‘new’ media. In essence, Lehner claims, film refashioned the figure of the vampire as a “self-reflexive technique to speak about the medium is it depicted in” (123).

[2d] The following contribution, ‘Kon Satoshi and Japan’s Monsters in the City’, relocates attention to Japanese television and Kon Satoshi’s series *Paranoia Agent*. Chris Perkins reveals here how the series’ ambiguous monsters Shōnen Batto and Maromi can (also) be read as a response to “fatalistic discourses on Japan’s decline that have emerged since the bursting of [its] economic bubble in the early 1990s” (141). His article conducts a careful reading and contextualization of the two characters and connects their perceived monstrosity to received notions of social monsters in Japan; yet at the same time draws attention to alternative understandings of social responsibility and humanism underlying their actions and articulations. Developing a dialectical understanding that connects searches for monsters with processes of political adaptation and social change, the contribution is a good example for the usefulness of embedding screen monsters within wider socio-political frames.

[2e] The next article was written by one of our co-editors. In her contribution ‘Exploring Cultural Memory Through Political Economy—Manufacturing History in the Documentary *The Battle for Hitler’s Supership* (2005)’, Juliane C. Bockwoldt expands upon Astrid Erll’s theory of memory-making media by bringing this framework into dialogue with Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky’s critique of a political economy of mass media. Combining a formal analysis of the documentary *The Battle for Hitler’s Supership* with attention to structural conditions predisposing its

production, Bockwoldt traces how factors at the level of economy and funding can impact upon aesthetic form and facilitate the emergence of ideologically biased historical representations, also highlighting the impact of “anti-isms” (168).

[2f] The next contribution retains focus on the material conditions of film making but shifts attention to the genre of Hollywood action movies. Written by another of our co-editors, the article ‘A Tale of Two Versions—*I Am Legend* (2007) and the Political Economy of Cultural Production’ by Holger Pötzsch compares cinema version and director’s cut of Francis D. Lawrence’s 2007 screen adaptation of Richard Matheson’s novel *I Am Legend* (1954). The article identifies ideological differences between the two versions. Taking recourse to Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky’s propaganda model and Lee Artz’s critique of global capitalist media production, Pötzsch explains the adoption of a conservative and reactionary storyline for cinematic release with profit focus of the film industry that reverts to hegemonic frames for the sake of securing returns-of-investments. The article shows that techniques such as pre-screenings with test-audiences are not neutral endeavors, but “intrinsic mechanisms” (173) that filter out challenging and progressive political positions and worldviews.

[2g] The following article “‘How Lucky You Are Never to Know What It Is to Grow Old’—The Witch as Fourth-Wave Feminist Monster in Contemporary Fantasy Film’ by Rikke Schubart interrogates the role of the witch as prime female monster in the cinematic fairytale adaptations *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* (2013), and *Maleficent* (2014). Using feminist and ageist approaches as theoretical lenses, Schubart firstly conducts critical readings of the three films’ female monsters presenting them as nuanced and ambivalent characters, before she connects the recurring trope of the ageing witch to discourses of gender, power, ageism, and feminist waves. The article argues that, in the three movies, the older women’s evil acts result from “refusal to be sidelined in a world obsessed with youth” (191; 192) and offers a good example for the polysemic nature of cinematic representations always offering material for both dominant and oppositional readings.

[2h] The second section is closed by a dialogue between two scholars, Tess Sophie Skadegård Thorsen and Mira Chandhok Skadegård. Written by a mother and her daughter, their exchange of letters bridges generational divides as they engage in a co-authored reckoning with misogynistic tendencies in contemporary Danish culture. Arguing in a similar direction as Kaisa Hiltunen’s criticism of race-based forms of denigration in Finish mainstream film that opened the present section, this contribution relocates focus to issues of gender and denounces the way women are audio-visually framed as abnormal, strange, or indeed ‘monstrous’. Investigating a wide array of media representations, the authors argue that the widespread assigning of monstrous characteristics to women becomes a “particularly oppressive gendered gesture” (207) that reduces and undermines female agency. Finally, in a reparative reading not unlike Rikke Schubart’s attempt to ambiguate the role of female witches in mainstream Hollywood fairytale movies, the article identifies a potential for empowerment and agency dormant in the monstrous.

### *Summarizing Section 3—Video Games and Play*

Today, video games constitute an important segment of global cultural production. The games industry can be seen as a focal point of global power dynamics in which

multinational companies produce fetishized entertainment products enabling a construction of consumer identities and a commodification of culture and play—also, and especially, when it comes to essential issues of waging war and writing history. In conjunction with their increasing proliferation, video games have attracted increasing scholarly attention over the last three decades. So, too, in the present special issue that dedicates a specific section to the themes of monsters and processes of monsterization in video games and play.

[3a] The third section opens with the article ‘The Broodmother as Monstrous-Feminine—Abject Maternity in Video Games’. Here, Sarah Stang investigates how commercially successful and critically acclaimed video games frame female monsters as abject maternal creatures. Analyzing the antagonists Broodmother and Mother from two iterations of the *Dragon Age* series, Stang draws upon the works of Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed to show how the two games connect monstrosity with maternity and force players to enact “symbolic violence against transgressive female bodies” (233). The games, Stang argues, align to the horror genre and its tradition of presenting female anatomy and birth as abject, threatening, and repulsive. Offering the counter-example of the character Sarah Kerrigan from the *StarCraft* series to balance her account, Stang maintains that most mainstream games convey misogynistic norms and values and narrowly frame the agency and positioning of apparently powerful female characters.

[3b] In the second contribution of this section, Jaroslav Švelch examines how monsters are manufactured in video games using the influential first-person shooter *BioShock* (2007) as a case study. Drawing data from interviews with developers and official background material from the design process and combining this with an analysis of the narrative framing of the zombie-like creatures opposing the player, Švelch’s article ‘Always Already Monsters—*BioShock*’s (2007) ‘Splicers’ as Computational Others’ offers a balanced account of monsters in the game. Developing the term ‘computational other’ to account for the media-specificity of games that also use algorithmic procedures and mechanics to convey meaning, Švelch argues for the necessity to not only focus on the monsterization of humans in the medium, but also to direct attention to how and why games “fail to make monsters human” (257).

[3c] In the last contribution collected in this section, ‘Manufacturing Consent in Video Games—The Hegemonic Memory Politics of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015)’, co-editor of this issue Emil Lundedal Hammar returns to Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky’s propaganda model to explain how structural conditions of global capitalism and colonialism predispose game developers to create products that “rearticulate hegemonic memory politics and suppress subaltern identities” (279). Conducting an analysis of the title *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* and its context of production as a case study, Hammar argues that the manufacture of mnemonic hegemony in games is not an exclusively ‘Western’, but a global phenomenon that can be explained with reference to the political economy of a global games industry. In conclusion, he proposes an update of the propaganda model offering available technologies and the suppressed role of alternative identities as additional filters. As such, his article complements the advances made by Juliane C. Bockwoldt and Holger Pötzsch in the second section of this issue.

*Summarizing Section 4—News Media and the Public Sphere*

The last section of this issue moves from questions of cultural representation in various media and genres to analyses of how monsters are (re-)produced and (re-)presented in news and 'new media'. The three articles collected here offer insights in Norwegian news coverage of war, policy-making on issues of immigration, and the roles and functions of rumors at the contemporary moment of history.

[4a] The first article of the fourth section, Rune Ottosen's 'Norway's New(s) Wars—Syria in the Norwegian Mass Media' is based on an original contribution to the *MaMo* symposium 'New(s) Media? Political Economy, History, and Technology of News Making in Germany, Turkey, and Norway' arranged at UiT The Arctic University of Norway on September 11–13, 2018. In his contribution, Ottosen presents a case study on the framing of legal aspects of the current war in Syria in Norwegian news media. Reporting on a negligence towards critical aspects of Norwegian involvement in the country, the text points to practices of "self-censorship among Norwegian journalists" (303) that led to a silent support not only for an undebated military interventionism, but also for a tacit fundamental recalibration of Norwegian foreign and security policies. Ottosen argues that this significant change has gone virtually unnoticed by the Norwegian public and warns of the problematic consequences such lack of critical journalistic engagement has for contemporary democracies.

[4b] In the second contribution to this section, Søren Mosgaard Andreassen scrutinizes research reports on immigration and integration produced on behalf of the Norwegian government (NOU reports). Analyzing one specific report as a case study, his article 'The Costly and Demanding—Exploring Solution-Based Othering of 'Non-European Immigrants' in Norwegian Policy Recommendations' identifies a series of tacit ideological positions conveyed in the document that among other things constructs non-European immigrants as a mere cost factor and potential threat to the Norwegian welfare state. Using discourse theory as an analytical tool, Andreassen investigates how the report establishes mutually exclusive binaries and assigns negative connotations to one side. He argues that these discursive strategies invite a problematic form of social distancing that he conceptualizes as "solution-based othering" (338).

[4c] The article 'Macht, Manipulation und Miteinander—Medienräume des Gerüchts' (written in German) concludes this section. Arguing for the importance of narratives for political legitimacy and power, Katharina Sturm interrogates the significance of rumors for individuals, politics, and society. In her text, she asks whether the rumor is simply an entertaining story, a tool for progressive politics, or a potential monster, before she shows how its emotional appeal and affective power make it ambivalent—an effective tool of mobilization and persuasion that can be used for either good or ill. Taking a historical outlook, her inquiry ends with observations regarding new participatory media technologies and their specific affordances implying both democratic promise and new forms of manipulation.

*Summarizing the Book Reviews*

Two book reviews present recent publications we perceive as relevant for the theme of this issue. Initially, Holger Pötzsch presents a critical summary of the first edition of Uwe Krüger's book *Mainstream: Warum wir den Medien nicht mehr trauen* (2016) and offers insights into both context and aftermath of this much-debated book on the state of

German news media. Secondly, Frank Hordijk critically interrogates content and discursive environment of *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine* (2017)—Anne Applebaum's political intervention into the writing of the history of the 1932–1933 Soviet Ukrainian famine widely known as the Holodomor.

## **Conclusion**

We believe that the representation, construction, manufacture, and exclusion of monsters across genres and media is an increasingly pressing issue for individuals and civil societies on a global scale. The widespread use of exaggerated frames presenting a variety of others as mere threats has deadly consequences for many people—worldwide. And, 'Western' liberal democratic elites urgently need to acknowledge their own role in such processes as the current construction of 'Monster Assad' as a Hitler-esque tyrant intending to 'gas his own people' or the continuing framing of Iran as 'a nuclear threat to world peace' led by 'nuke-building, apocalyptic mullahs' are equally irresponsible and dangerous acts as the presentation of 'non-normative' persons as a menace to cultural and societal stability or the assumption that certain people are simply born as terrorists. We believe that as researchers, students, employees, workers, pupils, retirees, and others—in sum: as citizens—, we must be aware of such discursive moves of othering and exclusion and learn to identify these, connect them to underlying interests, and then resist and subvert them to avoid more killings in our or others' names. This is our responsibility especially as contemporary global crises intensify bringing with them the need for ever new scapegoats to explain away the real contradictions underlying these relentless challenges.

As stated above, the manufacture of monsters for cheap political gains is not something only experienced by populations living under so-called oppressive 'regimes', but is an equally well-used tool for democratic 'governments'. Neither are these practices in any way new or unique to the present moment in history. We hope that this special issue can contribute to raise awareness of the intricate dynamics of othering and exclusion at play in the manufacture of monsters and that the articles collected here can facilitate critical thinking and conscientious political practice. As President Dwight D. Eisenhower put it in his farewell address in 1961, "only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry" can "guard us against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by a military–industrial complex" (*NARA* 2006 [1961]; see also *C-SPAN* 2017 [1961]) and, as one might add today, against its willing accessories in editorial offices and the culture industries (Andersen 2006; Der Derian 2009 [2001]).

Almost 60 years have passed since Eisenhower's warning, but his speech still retains its initial urgency. In the Global North as well as in the Global South and everywhere in-between, we are exposed to complex institutions and mechanisms that relentlessly conjure up new enemies for particular economic and political interests. Since Eisenhower, the drive of the powerful towards war has never ceased. Because they know that, in the wars and oppressive 'regimes' they propagate, neither they nor their children or grandchildren will ever suffer or die. As such, we must not forget that inequalities in the distribution of wealth, influence, and power constitute a base-line problem that needs to be addressed and changed if democratic rule is to materialize in a form that deserves its name.

Finally, a word of gratitude. We could not have realized this issue on our own. Without our students, contributors, reviewers, various other helpers, and of course you, dear readers, our attempts to set the manufacture of monsters on the academic and political agenda would have been impossible. So, we cannot thank you enough and sincerely hope that the collection presented here will prove as rewarding and stimulating for you as it has been for us.

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*Section 1*

Literature and the Fine Arts

*Monsters have been a part of our narratives  
since we began telling stories.  
[...] they live, mutate and thrive in ever new expressions,  
inspiring new monsters to spring forth*

—Borg Andreassen, on page 69.

“What is a monster?”

—Biscaia, on page 34.

“Monsters, both old and new,  
are in attendance”

—Biscaia, on page 42.

“In spite of their manufactured origins,  
their destiny is now theirs alone.  
The age of the monster  
has well and truly arrived”

—Biscaia, on page 43.

“In engaging with the new weird monsters,  
audiences are challenged to reposition  
themselves in relation to multiple forms of  
nonhuman subjectivities and to question  
their own degree of agency  
in the Anthropocene age”

—Ulstein, on page 62.

“In such a world, *Ms. Marvel* asks,  
who are the real monsters [...]?”

—Borg Andreassen, on page 75.

# LOVING MONSTERS—THE CURIOUS CASE OF PATRICIA PICCININI'S POSTHUMAN OFFSPRING

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**Abstract:** *Patricia Piccinini's work has been described as disquieting, compelling and grotesque. Other adjectives often used include disturbing, visceral, monstrous, chimerical but also cute and beautiful. The reason for the encounter of such descriptions which are typically found in separate realms is precisely that Piccinini seeks to fracture unitarian conceptualisations of humanness as she strives to materially debate issues of posthuman ethics. Her concerns relate to issues of breeding, mutation, biotechnology, motherhood/childhood, eco-philosophy and speciesism. In this paper, I will set off from the works of Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti to discuss Piccinini's posthuman aesthetics and ethics. I propose to investigate the affirmative posthuman predicament which she has creatively designed for the art gallery space, reflecting the technocultural fabrications of our natureculture continuum. I will focus my attention on three posthuman propositions as they relate to the discourses of motherhood and reproduction: the cyborgian realities of the human and the animal; the organism and the machine; as well as the human, the animal and the vegetable. Piccinini's reconfigurations are created into a world of tenderness and imbued with an ethics of care as she, unlike Victor Frankenstein, aims to love her creatures.*

**Keywords:** *Patricia Piccinini; Donna Haraway; posthumanism; motherhood; reproduction; care.*


## Introduction

The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience [...]. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion (Haraway 1991: 149).

The scene is set at Hosfelt Gallery in San Francisco in the bicentennial year of Mary Shelley's famous work. A birthday party is being thrown for her world-famous monster. It is only fitting that Patricia Piccinini, a modern day Dr Frankenstein of sorts, is among the panoply of international artists. Over the past two decades she has lovingly crafted monsters with a common characteristic: ontological and bodily fluidity. It would have been remiss of Piccinini to come empty-handed and she has not disappointed, bringing two pieces evocative of her creations: *Egg/Head* (2016) is a hairy, fleshy egg, complete with belly and penis-like formations, and *The Struggle* (2018) is her most recent contribution to materialisations of animalised scooters: a predator and its prey, both shiny and mechanised, engaged in a struggle for survival.

Since the 1990s, Patricia Piccinini has steadily established herself as one of Australia's most celebrated artists. Her participation in the 2003 Venice Biennale with the exhibition *We Are Family*, of which *The Young Family* was the centrepiece, brought her definitively into the international limelight. Piccinini's exhibition *ComCiência* (both

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*Consciousness and With Science*), staged at Cultural Banco do Brasil in Rio de Janeiro during 2016, was attended by more than 1.4 million people, making it one of the most visited contemporary art exhibitions worldwide that year. In 2018 Piccinini held *Curious Affection* in Brisbane, her biggest solo exhibition in Australia to date, where old and new wondrous monsters mesmerised a myriad of curious onlookers.

This artist's work brings valuable insight into the present and the future of human bodies, suggesting a bio-transformation into more animal-like selves and connections based on relations established at profound levels. Her posthuman animal-like families invite reflections on the origins of their unexplained transformation: whether it was achieved by an evolutionary process towards an animal state or was the product of genetic manipulation.

### **Loving Monsters—The Curious Case of Patricia Piccinini's Posthuman Offspring**

In this paper, I propose to focus on the artist's treatment of posthuman aesthetics and ethics, critical posthumanism as well as posthuman feminist affects. I will focus my attention on three posthuman propositions: (i) the cyborgian realities of the human and the animal; (ii) the organism and the machine; (iii) as well as the human, the animal and the vegetable. In doing so, I will study the evolutionary process of the artist's construction of posthuman beings as they realise Piccinini's vision: an obligation to care for those that are created. In sum, an ethics of caring for the monster, a mission Piccinini has been pursuing in exhibitions such as *Tender Creatures*; *Fairy Tales, Monsters and Genetic Imaginations*; *The Future is Not What It Used To Be*; *Nature of the Beast*; *Call of the Wild*; *Post-Humanist Desire: Sexuality and Digitality in Contemporary Art*; *Like Us: Patricia Piccinini*; *Menagerie*; *Beautiful Beast*, as well as more recently in *ComCiência*; *Patricia Piccinini: 'We feel, conceive or reason, laugh or weep'*; and *Curious Affection*. I propose to investigate the affirmative posthuman predicament which she has creatively designed for the art gallery space, reflecting the technocultural fabrications of our natureculture continuum, to use Donna Haraway's concept, and the place of the monster in it.

Beyond shame, disgust and fear, Piccinini proposes the construction of an affirmative posthuman predicament through affect; though some might find her work 'disturbing' and 'visceral', she claims "[c]onnection and empathy are at the heart of my practice. [...] I like to think my work is 'sanguine', an interesting word meaning cheerful or hopeful" (Piccinini/Johnson 2014: online; without page). Indeed, her work engages with Rosi Braidotti's "social horizons of hope" and represents posthuman femininities as liberating impulses from negative contemporary biopractices such as intensive farming and animal slaughter (Braidotti 2013: 122). Piccinini explores the manifestations of an economy of death through themes such as breeding, mutation, genetics, motherhood, and childhood. I will discuss instances of Piccinini's work that are related to motherhood and reproduction and which materially and creatively provoke our perceptions of the posthuman and of the monster.

Donna Haraway's (1991) formulation of the ironic myth of the cyborg is central to Piccinini's art. Dismantling a unitary conceptualisation of humanness referred to as fractured identity (Haraway 1991: 155–161), Haraway defends our cyborgian fluidity against a construction of identity based on taxonomies and naturalism. Indeed, she proposes resistance to the temptation towards unitary essentialism through affinity, not

through identity (Haraway 1991: 155). Cyborgs exist in the shared space (*a*) between animals and humans, (*b*) organisms and machines, (*c*) physical and non-physical (technological). Thus, while a cyborg dwells in the realm of fiction, it is also a social and bodily reality. Likewise, Piccinini argues that in her work she, in fact, purposefully exerts containment because what science and technology can create today is stranger than the marvellous creatures of her imagination (Piccinini/Fernandez Orgaz 2007). Still, these are not creatures of tomorrow; these are creatures of the present, a world where alternatives of subjectivity abound and binarisms have been dismantled. Just as Haraway's cyborg, Piccinini's beings could be described as condensed images of both imagination and material reality.

Materiality has also been at the heart of Rosi Braidotti's (2011 [1994]; 2013) concept of embodied subjectivity, namely when linked to feminism and technoscience. Additionally, Braidotti sees critical engagement with the present as a necessary move towards an affirmative vision of the world. In this respect, critique must be combined with creativity so as to generate positive healing and connect generations. As she argues in the chapter 'Mothers, Monsters and Machines' in *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (Braidotti 2011 [1994]), she is compelled to appeal to "passionate engagement in recognition of the theoretical and discursive implications of nomadic subjectivity" (Braidotti 2011 [1994]: 213). Braidotti proposes a move towards post-anthropocentrism and posthuman ethics. This is what she says in *The Posthuman*:

A posthuman ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism. [...] The posthuman recomposition of human interaction that I propose is not the same as the reactive bond of vulnerability, but it is an affirmative bond that locates the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others (Braidotti 2013: 49).

Along the lines of both Haraway and Braidotti, Piccinini does not recognise in her work "a distinction based on the usual organic/inorganic or natural/artificial distinctions" (Piccinini/Fernandez Orgaz 2007: online; without page). The chief differentiation for her is between caring and being indifferent. Piccinini's ultimate aim is to visually critique "the conceptual or the ethical issues [as they are] transformed by emotional realities" (Piccinini/Fernandez Orgaz 2007: online; without page). Again, this connects directly with Haraway's stance that the argument underlying 'A Cyborg Manifesto' is one of "*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* for their construction" (Haraway 1991: 150; italics in original). Piccinini does not assume her position to be anti-progress and prefers instead to talk about customisation as a positive force; just as industrial customisation (mass-produced commodities) can be turned into something personal (as it happens with cars), genetic or organic customisation, as she conceives and materialises it, can be positive whilst necessarily carrying a high level of ambiguity. Failures are equally positive, but above all Piccinini emphasises responsibility towards the outcomes (including failures): "My main interest is between the creations, their creators and the world. I believe that with creation—be it parenthood, genetic engineering or invention—comes an obligation to care for the

result” (Piccinini/Fernandez Orgaz 2007: online; without page). Piccinini intently becomes the new Victor Frankenstein who, unlike Mary Shelley’s doctor, is an engaged parent with an acute sense of responsibility towards her offspring.



**Figure 1.** *The Young Family* (2002). Silicone, fibreglass, leather, human hair, plywood. 85cm × 150cm × 120cm approx. Photo: Drome Studio. Courtesy of Roger Moll.

*The Young Family* is compositionally conventional, a Madonna and her children (Goriss-Hunter 2004: 550), a mother fatigued by labour and children being fed and playing. However, despite her status as a new mother, she is old (Michael 2003). Her body language and countenance convey a profound sense of sadness which is recreated in *Big Mother* (2005). Indeed, she has an air of “fatalism” (Piccinini/Fernandez Orgaz 2007: online; without page). Science does, in fact, allow women in their sixties to become mothers. It has also allowed animal industry to force the non-human animal body to reproduce repeatedly, wearing it out to the point of misery.

In this piece, the family lies not on a cosy bed, but on a vinyl type viewing platform. Their human traits are multiple: eyes, hair, eyebrows, mouths, folds of flesh, nipples, hands, fingers and toes. But beyond mere anatomy there are hints of humanness in the creation of tenderness, playfulness as well as a sense of modesty the mother displays at her own nakedness before our eyes. The hands and especially the feet suggest a more extreme emotion which makes her cringe.

Besides having been described as sow-like, the family has also been called dugongesque, a combination of ape and human (Goriss-Hunter 2004: 543) and even platypus-like (Michael 2003). Michael has also referred to it as “the unclassifiable”

(Michael 2003: online; without page). The pig and the dugong references seem particularly apt, pointing in complementary directions: on the one hand, the question of extinction and, on the other, of bio-engineering. In fact, the suggestion is that the long-eared, fleshy transgenics could be bred to replace sick human organs (McDonald 2012: 13). The already existing proliferation of transplants and implants is, in Rosi Braidotti's opinion, a "Frankensteinian fantasy" (Braidotti 2002: 223). Complicating matters, Piccinini admits that, were her own children's lives at risk, she would sacrifice the duty of love and affection she feels towards the porcine mother of *The Young Family* (McDonald 2012: 13; Piccinini/Fernandez Orgaz 2007). This too reinforces Braidotti's reading of the discourse on monstrosity:

We all have bodies, but not all bodies are equal: some matter more than others, some are quite frankly disposable. The monstrous body, which makes a spectacle of itself, is eminently disposable. The monster is the bodily incarnation of difference from the basic human norm: it is a deviant, an a-no(r)maly; it is abnormal (Braidotti 2011 [1994]: 215–216).

In 'Speculative Fabulations for Technoculture's Generation', Donna Haraway writes that *The Young Family* "provoke[s] the onto-ethical question of care for the intra and inter-species generations that is not asked often enough in technoculture, especially not about its own progenitors and offspring. The important question is not found in the false opposition of nature and technology. Rather what matters is who and what lives or dies, where, when, and how? [...] What is the heritage for which technocultural beings are both accountable and indebted? What must the practices of love look like [...]?" (Haraway 2007a: without page). Piccinini herself draws attention to the question of care when she writes in 'In Another Life': "I am particularly fascinated by the unexpected consequences, the stuff we don't want but must somehow accommodate. There is no question as to whether there will be undesired outcomes; my interest is whether we'll be able to love them" (Piccinini 2006: online; without page). There is no way of telling what this young family has become, or better yet, is still becoming. The installation is a speculative fabulation<sup>1</sup> of natureculture, a natureculture continuum, where frontiers between technology and culture are not sought. We are invited to "dedifferentiate in

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<sup>1</sup> I am adopting here Haraway's terminology in relation to Piccinini's work. Haraway approaches Piccinini's creatures from the speculative science fiction tradition. She sees these creatures as visual and sculptural narratives coming out of naturetechnical worlds which need to be addressed through care and are populated by critters that simultaneously disturb us and strike us as familiar (2007a). Speculative fiction promotes genre hybridisation and, equally important, the creation of worlds of wonder and awe. In this context, speculative fiction is a "mode of thought-experimenting" at a time when our sense of humanity is changing in the face of globalising trends (Oziewicz). It thus aligns with other modes of resistance to imperialistic, androcentric Western thought such as those elaborated by feminists and postcolonialists. Indeed, if one was to identify a purposeful moment when speculative fiction started to be produced, it would be the 1960s and 1970s by the hand of New Wave feminist authors. In relation to the concept of speculative fabulation, it recovers the crucial study by Robert Scholes, *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on the Fiction of the Future* (1975). Finally, a useful distinction between Critical Posthumanism and Speculative Posthumanism should be made as it is relevant to this discussion on Piccinini. Critical Posthumanists debate the topic in terms of cultural and political conditions whereas Speculative Posthumanists focus their attention on the technological processes and beings. This is referred to as "wide descent", that is, posthumans deriving from biological evolution and/or technological advancements (Roden 2018: 398–399).

order to risk bio-engineered redifferentiating as part of a queer family whose members require us to rethink what taking care of this country, taking care of these generations might mean” (Haraway 2007a: online; without page). Their ‘naturalness’, their humanity or animality is beyond the point. As Piccinini has said, once created you have a duty to love them.

If we consider the dugong as a possible source of Piccinini’s inspiration, its endangered status becomes relevant, now that the dugong has been mostly restricted to the Australian waters of the Torres Strait and the Great Barrier Reef. The use of the dugong would then be a manifestation of Piccinini’s environmental and animal preoccupations. The dugong, a fish-shaped marine mammal, is used as inspiration again in *The Long Awaited* (2008), where a little human boy embraces a mermaid-like creature, possibly waiting for her to expire (McDonald 2012: 115). This is a powerful installation in terms of eco-philosophy and posthumanism, but also in its comment on age and gender relations. It conveys an affectionate embrace between the unclassified species and the human, and even though, as Donna Haraway has theorised, we have never been human (Haraway 2007b), the embrace carries Braidotti’s point of transgenerational responsibility. A sophisticated approach allows an interpretation regarding the boy’s accountability towards the old, dying creature, and not a mere representation of an affectionate moment between the grandmother and her grandson. In other words, of accountability of humans towards non-humans.

Consider as well *The Leather Landscape* (2003), a family of eco-guardians (the meerkat mutants), and *Bodyguard (for the Golden Helmeted Honeyeater)* (2004), the imagined helper species of the real-life Victorian bird. Honeyeaters have a symbiotic relationship with possums; as the latter’s numbers decrease so do the numbers of the former. This bodyguard is created to serve a possum’s function. These examples reveal Piccinini’s preoccupations regarding human interference in the environment, the interaction between the human animals and the non-human animals in it, and transgenerational accountability. Though her reflection on ecology can be specifically Australian, the focus is a gateway to more general issues to do with ecology (for instance, species and habitat loss) and subjectivity (such as the source and consequences of good intentions) (Piccinini/Fernandez Orgaz 2007). Piccinini’s anti-humanist and environmentally inclusive views coalesce with Rosi Braidotti’s critical posthumanist project with an explicit environmental concern:

I define the critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is, a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable. Posthuman subjectivity expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building (Braidotti 2013: 49).





**Figure 2a.** *Surrogate (For the Northern Hairy Nosed Wombat)* (2005). Silicone, fibreglass, leather, plywood, human hair. 103cm × 180cm × 306cm approx. Photos: Graham Baring. Courtesy of Roger Moll. See also figure 2b on next page.

Patricia Piccinini also introduces the concept of surrogacy in the context of ecological conflict. *Surrogate (For the Northern Hairy Nosed Wombat)* (2005) is a critter created to protect and nurture the endangered wombat, an iconic and much-loved Australian marsupial. In her 'Speculative Fabulations for Technoculture's Generations' (published in a shortened form in *When Species Meet*), Haraway openly admits that the series *Nature's Little Helpers* (*Surrogate* is a part of this series) created her favourite Piccinini critters and that she had fallen in love with Piccinini's "speculative fabulated progeny" (Haraway 2007a: online; without page). One witnesses 'multi-species' reconciliation: wombat joeys peeking out from pouches spread across the shell-like back of the creature genetically engineered to host and nurture one of Australia's most endangered species. The critter's body is both shelter and womb to the animal which human activity has endangered.

Though some of the features of Piccinini's creatures are recognisable, it is hard to definitively classify them. The mother-sow is some sort of a surrogate, but to what end? Surrogacy, as used by Linda Michael in this context, is the location of replacement and displacement, of our own fear, but also of desire. We actually do not know how this creature, whose vulnerability invokes cultural constructions of generous motherhood (Michael 2003: 10), was able to reproduce. She was created to serve a medical purpose by humans (a body under control) and yet, once created, her body developed an ability which is beyond human interests and knowledge (a body out of control). Anxiously (for the human spectator), she is located beyond 'natural' reproduction and towards

Haraway's cyborgian ability of replication. But nurture is as intensely represented as grotesqueness and monstrosity. The questions are ominously there. Where do babies come from? What happens to them next? Is it death? Who are 'we'? What is a family? What is a posthuman? What is a monster? Rosi Braidotti attempts an answer:

The monster is a process without a stable object: it makes knowledge happen by circulating [...]. As such, it persists in haunting not only our imagination but also our scientific knowledge claims. Difference will not just go away. And because this embodied slab of difference moves, flows, changes, [...] because it evades us in the very process of puzzling us, you will never know what the next monster will look like, nor can you guess where it will come from (Braidotti 2011 [1994]: 243).



**Figure 2b.** *Surrogate (For the Northern Hairy Nosed Wombat)* (2005). Silicone, fibreglass, leather, plywood, human hair. 103cm × 180cm × 306cm approx. Photos: Graham Baring. Courtesy of Roger Moll—left. See also figure 2a on previous page.

**Figure 3.** *Big Mother* (2005). Silicone, fibreglass, leather, human hair. 175cm × 90cm × 85cm approx. (including satchels; dimensions variable). Photo: Graham Baring. Courtesy of Roger Moll—right.

In tune with the concept of natureculture, a “theoretical construct of cultural theory that attempts to circumvent the conventional duality of the two terms that make it up [...] suggesting continual interpenetration and mutual constitution of the human and non-human worlds” (Garrard 2012: 208), Piccinini points out the interconnectedness of all life on Earth. Nonetheless, our understanding of the world is premised on the idea of the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’. ‘Like us’ is a statement about the continuum, interconnectedness and dedifferentiation.

*Big Mother* is based on Piccinini’s own experience. When she worked on this installation, Piccinini had recently given birth to her son, Hector, whom she used as the inspiration for the baby. Born in Sierra Leone, Piccinini then lived in South Africa. At the time, one of her South African friends reported how her sister had been abducted by a grieving baboon mother once. Female baboons are known for carrying their dead babies and snatching living babies (non-human and, according to the story, human) from other mothers. The long arms, hunched posture and apish outlook give the *Big Mother* an unmistakably simian appearance. This is, however, also a composite of Piccinini’s own features and, in a way, a self-portrait of her empathy with the baboon mother. The mother looks into the distance, though engaged in feeding the human baby. Dwelling where empathy and loss meet, where (and when) species meet, Piccinini introduces the idea of surrogacy, an affective place of healing:

Surrogacy, which is the subject of *The Surrogate...* 2004, as well as *Big Mother* 2005, *Library*, 8.45 2011 and others, is a process whereby the ‘necessary’ relationship between mother and child is disrupted. For me it doesn’t diminish the idea of motherhood, it expands it. It suggests that motherhood is about the relationship that is created rather than biology; a choice or a process, rather than a status (Piccinini/Johnson 2014: online; without page).

Whereas Piccinini’s earlier works such as *Surrogate (For the Northern Hairy Nosed Wombat)* created a critter from a speculative world to protect the endangered wombat, in 2014 she advanced the stance of surrogacy with *Tender* (directed by Peter Hennessey) where a human family (and, specifically, the body of a white, non-Aboriginal woman linked to the endangerment of the species) became a surrogate to the speculative creature fashioned by humans. The video is approximately five minutes long and its pace is quite slow, even sluggish. It is a reflection of suburban Australia, where a young couple displays the contained joy and nervousness typical of any young parents. This mood is set from the moment they meet, and they kiss rather clumsily. They happily cross the small inner yard, immersed in each other’s presence, and seemingly unaware of a vaginal, menacing-looking flower blooming in one of their flower pots. It is *Metaflora (Stone Mountain)* which Piccinini has also created in 2015. For a brief moment, the outline of this fleshy flower is mirrored by the Rorschach-like stain on the man’s T-shirt (which appears to be a human skull). Chickens roam around, adding a very lively, conventionally natural element to the oddly banal scene.



**Figure 4.** *Tender* (2014). Five-minute long video. Screenshot taken by the author—left.



**Figure 5.** *Metaflora (Stone Mountain)* (2015). Silicone, bronze, fiberglass, human hair. 120cm × 60cm × 60cm approx. Photo: Drome Studio. Courtesy of Roger Moll—right.

At first, the viewer assumes that the woman is ill. She has bags under her eyes; she is dressed casually, wearing a robe and comfortable Ugg boots; she drinks a hot beverage; the young man brings her some medicine and what seem like containers of vitamins. But a large pack of baby wipes is also retrieved from his backpack. One wonders if the containers were pregnancy supplements after all. He puts the shopping away and washes the dishes. Then they head towards the bedroom. Are they going to have sex? Are they going to take a sneak peek at their baby? As the woman sits on the bed, the conversation suggests pregnancy. She lifts up her top to show a slit on her stomach where their baby is going to be born from. Finally, the viewer is shown three babies wriggling on the side of the bed, roast piglet-like but lacking the cuteness of the long-eared pups in *The Young Family*, or of the smiley pig and seal-like creature in *The Listener* (2012) and of the hairy babies in *Litter* (2010). They are, in a way, more monstrous because the evocation of consumption is more visible. *Tender* is, obviously, a revisit of *The Young Family* but now the human body is penetrated (symbolised by the man's finger touching the woman's vaginal-like stomach slit) and opened up for the benefit of posthuman forms. Throughout, there is a feeling of secrecy and the need to hide these naturally artificial monsters. It is as if interspecies intimacy and tenderness are wrong. Though the baby creatures are something other than human, interspecies technocultural, posthuman even, they are the family's creation and there is undeniable tenderness and affection for the critters and serene anticipation for the one(s) to come. Is she a mother or a surrogate? The natureculture practice is heightened in this instance where the viewer does not know whether maternity is biological or surrogate. This is an anti-anthropocentric posthuman experience which Linda Michael had already identified in *The Young Family*: "The oddness of these creatures, the knowledge that humans have played a part in their creation and the conflict in us between sympathy and self-interest combine to create unease" (Michael 2003: 13). I would suggest that beyond oddness there is monstrosity in the cyborgian sense: the babies have escaped the oedipal curse of humanity and do not pertain to any idea of original unity or wholeness (Haraway 1991: 150–151). Because "[c]yborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate", they are supreme



myths of resistance (Haraway 1991: 154). But where there is tenderness, there is its haunting affect. Fear, for instance, of being consumed or exploited. Notice how in other languages ‘surrogacy’ is translated into: ‘barriga de aluguer’ or ‘maternidad de alquiler’ (‘rentable belly’ and ‘rentable maternity’).

Piccinini has replicated the subject matter of surrogacy in different forms following *Big Mother*. Each instance conveys different speculations of bodies in transit between human, animal and also machine. In *The Comforter* (2010) she tackles the discourse and representation of disability. A young girl with hypertrichosis holds in her arms an uncategorised round, chubby baby. Its smoothness bears a sharp contrast with the girl’s skin. For a split second, the furry girl appears more animal-like and the baby more human. But quickly one realises that this is not a human baby. It has no legs, no head and, in fact, not even a face. Fingers come out of its torso, feet and toes from its bottom. Nonetheless, this glossy creature has a welcoming mouth which it extends outwards. The girl’s head is lowered towards it. They seem to have been captured in the moment before a tender kiss. The nature of their relationship is obscure, but undoubtedly marked by affection. Likewise, the origin of this illegitimate cyborg remains hidden. It could be that it was created in the process of looking for a cure for the girl’s condition. Whatever the case, they are now bonded together and the girl loves him like a child.



**Figure 6.** *The Comforter* (2010). Silicone, fibreglass, steel, fox fur, human hair, clothing. 60cm × 80cm × 80cm approx. Photo: Graham Baring. Courtesy of Roger Moll—left.

**Figure 7.** *The Bond* (2016). Silicone, fibreglass, human hair, clothing. 162cm × 56cm × 50cm approx. Photo: Drome Studio. Courtesy of Roger Moll—right.

In *The Bond* (2016), Patricia Piccinini makes her own body a part of the installation. She pertains to her more human self than in *Big Mother* and now it is the baby who is less human. This time, despite its human face, the transgenic baby is an illegitimate offspring revealing human, animal and mechanical features. The mother holds it tenderly whilst the baby snuggles in her arms, curled up in a ball. It is only when the viewer looks closer at its back it becomes clear that its spinal column has the

indentations of a sandshoe. The baby embodies a natureculture continuum as it was able to develop characteristics revealing deep connections between animals and, in this case, the human environment. Walking with Piccinini through *Curious Affection*, she identifies four elements of her work which can be found in *The Bond*: wonder, ambiguity, relationships and fertility (videos available via *Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art* 2018a; *Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art* 2018b). This creature's wondrous trait lies in that s/he must be the first of its kind. There are familiar elements but there is also a newness to it. The baby is ambiguous because its origins remain hidden, unknown. The human onlooker cannot grasp why it has this appearance or what its purpose is. The relationship in question is that of mother and child which thrives in a world where bodies are understood as not evolved or presented in a finished form, but instead continuously metamorphose in specific manners nurtured in a specific relationship. Made possible because of biotechnological advancements, bodies are now more protean than ever.



**Figure 8.** *Kindred* (2018). Silicone, fibreglass, hair. 103cm × 95cm × 128cm approx. Photo: Drome Studio. Courtesy of Roger Moll—left.

**Figure 9.** *Nest* (2006). Fibreglass, automotive paint, leather, plastic, metal, rubber, mirror. 197cm × 186cm × 104cm approx. (variable). Photo: Drome Studio. Courtesy of Roger Moll—right.

A different stance is taken in *Kindred*. This particular installation approaches the notion of motherhood beyond any essentialist human construction. But as the name indicates, humans are represented: this is still our family. Like orangutan and human mothers, this mother protects and educates her children. This family blissfully exists in a “continuum of greater or lesser animalness” and, by the same token, of greater or lesser humanity (*Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art* 2018a). However, this mother, unlike the *Big Mother*, seems to be looking confidently ahead, possibly into a future she controls. The reason must be that differences are disavowed in favour of a powerful affective sense of connectedness:

The force of Piccinini's work lies in its ability to register the emotional power of ambivalence as it occurs in a multitude of dynamic situations and moving encounters. In doing so it records the tensions and affects of *being* in time and place. Since being involves a potent conflict between reason and emotion, Piccinini conveys this [...] through evocation and allusion to a multitude of interpermeating affects and meanings. [...] Caring and responsibility involve drawing emotions towards the well-being of others (McDonald 2012: 13).

If in *Big Mother* the viewer's response might be along the lines of the abject and the visceral, the mother also strikes a chord in terms of grief and surrogate motherhood. The artist takes the natureculture non-division further in *The Lovers* (2011), *The Stags* (2008) (which reintroduces the species element), *Nest* (2006) and *Thicker Than Water* (2007). *Nest*, which invokes Rosi Braidotti's concept of 'meta(1)morphosis', depicts yet another Madonna and child scene, but in this work human and even non-human animality appears *materially* absent (Braidotti 2002: 212–263). These are two beautifully shiny scooter-like creatures, mechanical creations for human use. However, they have agency and they exclude the viewer (the human) from their intimate relationship. Human and non-human animals only haunt the scene as far as emotion, on the one hand, and body expression on the other, are concerned. The mother's eyes (the speedometers) look at her child as lovingly as a machine can, lowering her head; the child looks lovingly back. The mother's mirrors and handles (antlers and ears) are attuned to the child's movements (the back light is the tail, the seat is the hump and the wheels are the arms and legs). The mother lies as most mammals would, protecting her child. The child rests on its own body, in full recognition of the protection and love her/his mother bestows. Piccinini does not want to necessarily associate organic or even mechanical motherhood to female bodies, also in line with Haraway's conception of a post-genderised, post-oedipal cyborgian subjectivity (Haraway 1991: 150): "illegitimate cyborgs, not of Woman born" (Haraway 1991: 177). Piccinini taps into the ideas of anthropomorphisation and animalisation, marked by function and exploitation (McDonald 2003: 19). In this human–animal–technology intertwining, or as Başak Doğa Temür has put it "nature rendered in mechanical form", by "extend[ing] the concept of artificial intelligence to artificial emotion", healing occurs through affective machine intimacy (Temür 2011: online; without page).

*Thicker Than Water* (2007) re-enacts the same principles with the family lying closer, as if threatened (by humans?), mother and child brought closer together by fear. The following year (2008), *The Stags* heightens the idea of conflict as two stag-scooters engage in aggressive interaction characteristic of male deer but, also in a broader (allegoric) sense, of human relations (Michael 2003: 19). As Piccinini has said herself, maybe a cow is not just a machine to produce milk and meat, and maybe these scooters are not merely usable vehicles (Temür 2011). As Donna Haraway aptly writes:

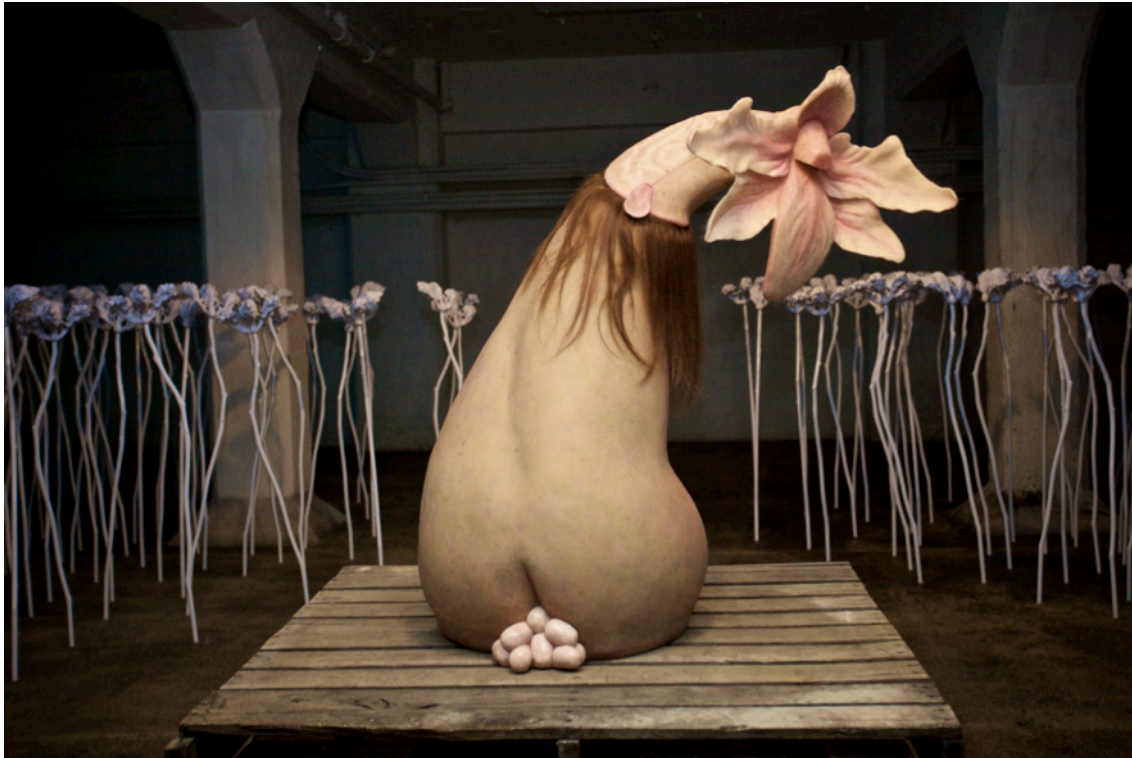
A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end [...]. One is too few, and two is only one possibility. Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshipped or dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an

aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; *they* do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are they (Haraway 1991: 180; italics in the text).

*The Stags* is just one example of how Piccinini expands the concept of eco-customisation towards the reinvented realm of automobile customisation and car culture. What she has called mechanical fauna can also draw on hegemonic ideas of Australian masculinity. An example would be *Waiting for Jennifer* (2000), a photomontage showing a suburban white male wearing a singlet (popularly known as 'wife-beater'), whilst waiting for his girlfriend or child to come out of school. Next to him lies a pinkish, unclassifiable pet. S/he is clearly also family. The creature makes several appearances that year. In *Social Studies* and *Kick Flip Ollie*, s/he is in a car park playing with children. There is no aggressiveness among them and curiosity is shared by all. But in 2001, s/he is shown in her/his infancy in some science lab. The several photographs constituting *Science Story* show her/him as a baby. Was s/he a lab creation? *Cyclepups*, for instance, are hybrids, customised bodies between tadpoles and possibly cars. They embody tenderness, but also organic customisation which has been made possible by biotechnology. As Braidotti has remarked, the "manipulation of life through genetic engineering has allowed for the creation of new artificial monsters in the high-tech labs of our biochemists, in human, animal and vegetable realms" (Braidotti 2011 [1994]: 214).

I shall refer to two other examples of digital photography, *Thunderdome* (2005) and *Roadkill* (2005) as cases in point. In the first case, we are in a universe where genetic diversity has been fully developed and accepted. Genetically modified simians share the same environment as human beings; the hybrids do not seem to cause any feeling of strangeness in the humans. However, this reading is changed when *Thunderdome* is considered alongside *Roadkill*. The hybrid simian is run over by a car (one assumes being driven by a human) but s/he only gets help from a member of her/his own species. In this instance, human-simian hybrid interaction results in death and very clearly in indifference. Despite what *Thunderdome* suggests, speciesism is prevalent and these two photographs as well as others that constitute the series, heed a warning: "The ambivalent sentiment that prevails in these works points to the fact that we can never really know, any more than Frankenstein knew, how the monsters we create will develop" (McDonald 2012: 63). I believe that Piccinini's recent work, such as *ComCiência*, reinforces this point. There is no doubt that Piccinini is appealing to one's sense of responsibility ('conscience'/'be conscientious') when one deals with science ('com ciência'). It is from this exhibition that I will take my final example: *Boofflower*.





**Figure 10.** *Bootflower* (2015). Silicone, fiberglass, human hair. 103cm × 100cm × 60cm approx. Photo: Drome Studio. Courtesy of Roger Moll.

Piccinini has been working on the human–animal–plant construct in a meaningful form since 2012. In 2015 alone she produced *Car Fungus*, *Fruiting Bodies*, *Metaflora*, *Meadow*, *Seedling* and *Bootflower*. However, *Curious Affection* announces a shift in her work where plant-like forms receive more emphasis. In this exhibition, Piccinini combines *Meadow* and *Bootflower* with original pieces, including *Kindred* and the magnetising *The Pollinator* (2017). The setting is *Meadow*, a field of pale, ovary-shaped flowers from which the other installations emerge. Together, all the installations form *The Field* (2018). In *The Pollinator*, a hybrid child seems to have encountered an utterly new form of being which displays animal and plant traits covered by a pink, human evoking, skin. The child stands on her/his toes to peek inside a hairy pouch, curiously investigating its potential. The pouch exudes the possibility of reproducing either by being pollinised or by cocooning an egg. But it is *Bootflower* which stands out in the field. This flower is made of leather, symbolising the transformation of an animal into an object which is simultaneously a plant. It is a laying egg-flower which displays the inherent desire to reproduce and, therefore, to survive. This assertive flower seems to be an evolutionary step-up from *Metaflora* (*Stone Mountain*) which is also included elsewhere in the exhibition. How has it been able to travel from a flowerbed in suburban Australia to this space? *Bootflower* is bigger, more terrifying and more magnificent as well. The flower looks defiantly at the viewer. How have the “hybrid uterine-crab-flowers” around it multiplied so that they now act as a protective army for this bigger, more magnificent flower form (Monteith 2018: online; without page)? As in *The Young Family* and *Tender*, how can reproduction take place so successfully and autonomously?

As Helen McDonald has remarked, humans cannot know “how the monsters we create will develop. We do not know how they will feel or whether they will continue to be hostile, friendly, useful, or destructive, once they become independent agents in the world” (McDonald 2012: 63). This boot flower clearly seems to be rebellious whilst menacingly taking over your territory (your body even, as possibly in *Tender?*). Or is it human resistance to affirmative posthumanness? After all, the *Bodyguard* (hence the name) is a protector; the monster in *The Welcome Guest* (2011) is not attacking the child (she is welcoming her/his beauty), the meerkat creatures look after the unafraid baby in *The Leatherscape* and in *Embrace* (2005), despite appearances, an embrace is just that (the woman is Piccinini/any woman who was once surprised by an overexcited child leaping towards her). Stephanie Monteith emphasises the need in Piccinini’s art to make “[t]he connections between the maker and the monsters. Where are aberrant bodies allowed to live? Where should they be seen? What will we allow ‘inside the house?’” (Monteith 2018: online; without page). These are key questions because as the cyborg determines our ontology, therefore it determines our politics (Haraway 1991: 150). In Piccinini’s work otherness, vulnerability and affection (both proffered and expected) require a reformulation of the politics of gender, the body, reproduction, the animal, home, ugliness, and monstrosity.

### **Conclusion**

On the other side of the world, another party is being thrown. At Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art, Patricia Piccinini holds a film festival in parallel with her *Curious Affection* exhibition. Monsters, both old and new, are in attendance. Among films such as *The Shape of Water* (2017) and *Okja* (2017), she has also included *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival* (2015). Patricia Piccinini has been described by Donna Haraway as her sister in technoculture (Haraway 2007a). It seems that by creating critters that only exist in the creative space of an art gallery, Piccinini is giving life to the cyborg which, Haraway and by now undoubtedly all of us know, exists in natureculture, in the continuum between art spaces, culture, technology and nature. Piccinini extracts the cyborg from the realm of science labs, those remote domains alien to most us, in order to intervene affirmatively by, for instance, problematising motherhood not in terms of reproduction, but of replication and surrogacy. Her message, unlike Victor Frankenstein’s, is that the creator must be aware of the duty to care; hence the title of the exhibition *Like Us*. ‘Us’ does not have to be human-centred nor does it even have to be human; *Like Us* is also a reminder to those human animals of their responsibility to like, and to care for non-humans. Her “naturally artificial world” is a “technological bestiary” where progress is not fought against but is throughout permeated by tenderness (Piccinini/Fernandez Orgaz 2007).



**Figure 11.** *The Couple* (2018) in *Curious Affection*. Linen, silicone, hair, fiberglass. 42cm × 168cm × 65cm approx. Photo: Drome Studio. Courtesy of Roger Moll.

One of the stars of the *Curious Affection* show is *The Couple* (2018). Piccinini observes what a bad parent Victor Frankenstein was (Jefferson 2018). In this installation she aims at telling an anti-Frankenstein story, a visual narrative which circumvents tragedy. Being a better parent, one assumes, Piccinini gives the monster a partner and maybe they are the last of their kind. They lie affectionately in bed, sheltered but also isolated from the rest of the world. Their home is a caravan, a temporary, nomadic home. They also carry with them the possibility of reproduction and, therefore, of a future outside human control. In spite of their manufactured origins, their destiny is now theirs alone. The age of the monster has well and truly arrived.

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### **Biographical Note**

Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia holds a doctoral degree in Literature (2005). She is the author of the book *Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque: Texts of Contemporary Excess* (Peter Lang, 2011) as well as co-editor of the collection of essays *Intercultural Crossings: Conflict, Memory, Identity* (Peter Lang, 2012). She is part of the international project 'Bodies in Transit 2' which addresses how bodies have been historically transformed through social relations, discourses, and technologies, by drawing from feminist, queer, postcolonial and posthumanist theories of the embodied self. Currently she is teaching at the Universities of Beira Interior and Aveiro, Portugal.

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# ‘AGE OF LOVECRAFT’?— ANTHROPOCENE MONSTERS IN (NEW) WEIRD NARRATIVE

Gry Ulstein (Ghent University)

**Abstract:** *This paper considers whether the twenty-first-century resurgence of H. P. Lovecraft and weird fiction can be read as a conceptual parallel to the Anthropocene epoch, taking Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock’s The Age of Lovecraft as a starting-point. The assumption is that the two ‘ages’ are historically and thematically linked through the ‘monsters’ that inhabit them; monsters that include—but are not limited to—extensions, reproductions, and evolutions of Lovecraft’s writings. Preoccupied with environmental issues such as global climate change, the twenty-first-century imaginary has conjured monsters that appear to have much in common with early twentieth-century cosmic horror stories. Considering the renewed interest in Lovecraft and the weird, such developments raise the question: what can (weird) monsters tell us about the Anthropocene moment? This paper maps the ‘monstrous’ in the discourses emerging from the Anthropocene epoch and ‘The Age of Lovecraft’ by considering (new) weird narratives from contemporary literature, graphic novels, film, TV, and video games. Mindful of on-going discussions within ecocriticism, philosophy, and critical theory, the paper discusses a handful of unconventional texts to investigate the potential of the weird for expressing Anthropocene anxieties and for approaching nonhuman realities from new angles.*


**Keywords:** *Anthropocene; ecology; cosmic horror; Lovecraft; new weird.*

## Introduction—The Anthropocene’s Weird Shadow

Howard Phillips [H. P.] Lovecraft’s contribution to and development of weird fiction in the early twentieth century introduced a storyworld of ancient, alien monsters that dwell in the earth’s depth, and whose mere existence is enough to drive Lovecraft’s characters insane. During his time (1890–1937) Lovecraft was relatively unknown outside of his close circle of devoted followers. In recent years Lovecraft’s work has seen a revival in popular culture and among writers and artists. The ‘old’ weird associated with Lovecraft and others (such as Algernon Blackwood, August Derleth, and Arthur Machen) has been given a resurgence by ‘new’ weird writers (like China Miéville and Jeff VanderMeer). The renewed interest in the weird can also be observed in contemporary cultural criticism and philosophy, picking up on the destabilisation of human significance and agency at the core of weird narrative. Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock argue that the weird’s revival is comprehensive enough to talk about ‘The Age of Lovecraft’, a “cultural moment in which the themes and influence of Lovecraft’s writings have bubbled up from the chthonic depths of 1930s pulp writing to assume an unexpected intellectual and cultural influence” (2016b: 3).

The weird typically confronts its audience with monstrous events or objects that appear instinctively and empirically “wrong” (Fisher 2016: 15), yet exist and persist in the weird storyworld. Inspired by the subversive quality of the weird, Timothy Morton introduces “weird ecomimesis” as a useful conceptual tool for ecological thought in the

Nordlit 42: *Manufacturing Monsters*, 2019. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.7557/13.5004>.

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Anthropocene (2016: 63); and refers directly to Lovecraft's most famous monster by arguing that hyperobjects such as global warming are "Cthulhulike" (2013: 64).<sup>1</sup> The term 'Anthropocene' was coined by Eugene F. Stoermer and Paul J. Crutzen in 2000 and refers to the geological epoch during which human influence on the earth's environment has become statistically significant in relation to other geological agents (Waters et al. 2016: 137). But in spite of its ubiquitous cross-disciplinary usage, the Anthropocene has still not been formalised as the name of our current age.<sup>2</sup> Accelerated by the adoption of the concept by influential scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty, Bruno Latour, and Morton, however, the Anthropocene has gained traction particularly in the humanities, although it does not sit well with everyone. Jason W. Moore argues that the concept melds together all humans ('Anthropos' is Greek for 'man') and thereby glosses over "the multi-species violence and inequality of capitalism" (Moore 2018: 239). In this paper, the Anthropocene should be understood in terms of what Timothy Clark calls a loose "pseudo-geological concept", one used to "mark a threshold in human historical self-understanding" (Clark 2019: 21).

Whether they subscribe to the Anthropocene or not, several humanities scholars retain a monstrous conceptualisation of the current times in their work—and sometimes the monsters evoked have clear ties to the weird. Haraway has suggested that 'Chthulucene' is a better name than 'Anthropocene' to describe the current age, but she explicitly distances herself from Lovecraft's Cthulhu due to the problematic regressive ideologies associated with Lovecraft (Haraway 2016: 2).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, there is something distinctly weird about how Haraway describes the Chthulucene as "symchthonic, wound with abyssal and dreadful graspings, frayings, and weavings" (Haraway 2016: 33). 'Cthulhu' (no matter how it is spelled) would most likely retain its Lovecraftian connotations anyway, because of the strong cultural presence it already possesses. 'Chthulucene' therefore, inadvertently, strengthens the conceptual link between 'The Age of Lovecraft' and the Anthropocene—but there are other monsters besides Cthulhu that tie the two 'ages' together.

In a paper discussing the emergent geological agency and conflicting individual passivity of the human species, Latour notes how nature has "unexpectedly taken on [the role] of the active subject! Such is the frightening meaning of 'global warming': through a surprising inversion of background and foreground, it is *human* history that

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<sup>1</sup> 'Hyperobjects' are defined as events and objects that are massively and unfathomably distributed in time and space (Morton 2013: 1).

<sup>2</sup> In July 2018 the *International Commission on Stratigraphy* formally declared that, stratigraphically, we are living in the 'Meghalayan' age: approximately the last 4200 years and the third of three parts of the Holocene Epoch (Amos 2018). See also Zalasiewicz et al.'s 2017 review of on-going critiques of formalising 'Anthropocene' (205–226).

<sup>3</sup> The extent to which Lovecraft's misogyny, racism and xenophobia are traceable in his work (and how this ought to be dealt with by his readers and critics), has been a point of contention over the past decade. As a result of the discussion, Lovecraft was removed as the model for the *World Fantasy Convention's* World Fantasy Award trophy from 2016 onwards (Flood 2015).

<sup>4</sup> According to Haraway, it is the arachnid *pimoid cthulhu* that inspired her 'Chthulucene' (2016: 173–174). She acknowledges the biologist Gustavo Hormiga, who, in number 549 of *Smithsonian Contributions to Zoology*, reports that *pimoid cthulhu* is "[n]amed after H. P. Lovecraft's mythological deity Cthulhu, akin to the powers of Chaos" (Hormiga 1994: 39). However, Haraway takes "the liberty of rescuing [her] spider from Lovecraft for other stories" (174). Such conscious decapitation of Lovecraft is still a debated issue within weird scholarship—see Mackintosh (2018), Sperling (2017), Mayer (2016) and Weinstock (2016).



has become frozen and *natural* history that is taking on a frenetic pace” (Latour 2014: 13). This inversion prompts a shift in the way humans view nonhumans, argues Latour, and a move towards distributing agency “as far and in as differentiated a way as possible—until, that is, we have thoroughly lost any relation between those two concepts of object and subject” (Latour 2014: 17).<sup>5</sup> In ‘Love Your Monsters’ Latour considers the human-nature agency inversion in terms of ‘Frankenstein’s real sin’: Just like Mary Shelley’s [Victor] *Frankenstein* (2003 [1818]), we have engineered monsters, but ours are industrial, fossil-fuelled—the ‘real sin’ that we have forgotten to care for them, with disastrous consequences (Latour 2011). Just like *Frankenstein*’s creature, Anthropocenic crises muddle the preconceived role division between actor and acted-upon.

The plot of *Frankenstein* takes place during the latter part of the eighteenth-century, which is one of the suggestions for the start of the Anthropocene epoch (Crutzen 2002: 23). Seeing this historical and thematic link to the Anthropocene, Jed Mayer posits *Frankenstein* as the first weird novel, because it “offers us a longer and more substantial history for this seemingly marginal subgenre and further emphasises the genre’s ongoing relationship with the emerging ecologies of the Anthropocene” (Mayer 2018: 239). The monstrous in *Frankenstein* is scaled down in size and cosmic deliberation compared to Lovecraft’s weird. However, Mayer argues, the weird can be traced in the ways that Shelley’s novel conflates “fantasies of technological progress” and imparts “a sense of humility towards the alien other” (2018: 234, 237). Consider, for instance, Dr Frankenstein’s fear that his creation “might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror” (Shelley 2003 [1818]: 170–171). Compared to the opening lines of ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, the anxiety conveyed is comparable, but more cosmic and inevitable:

[...] [S]ome day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age (Lovecraft 2008 [1928]: 201).

Although I would hesitate to call *Frankenstein* the first weird novel, there is certainly something to be said for reading *Frankenstein* in dialogue with for instance Lovecraft in terms how horror narratives can express environmental anxieties. *Frankenstein* and ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ both present monsters that challenge the reader’s capacity for large-scale thinking and warn against becoming passive in the encounter with the monstrous. Likewise, the monstrosity of Anthropocene issues emanates in their sudden revelation as human-caused, but larger in scale, faster-paced, and more out-of-control than humans seem adequately equipped to deal with.

Cthulhu and Frankenstein’s creature are both iconic monsters in the twenty-first century. While Shelley’s monster has become an over-appropriated symbol of the

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<sup>5</sup> Andreas Malm is highly critical of the tendency within ecological discourse to propagate hybridity and dissolution of Cartesian dualism. According to Malm, such rhetoric paradoxically erects other binaries (for Latour the binary is ‘*the Moderns* against everyone else’), producing a “performative contradiction, one that seeks to ruin as much analytical equipment as possible”, and ending up with “prose evacuated of meaning” (Malm 2018: 186–187). It is valuable to keep this critique in mind also when exploring weird expressions of ecological anxieties.

temptation and dangers of technology, Cthulhu is supposed to be scary because its existence marks a break with all the rules that humans have wrapped comfortingly around themselves. This is why the idea of Cthulhu works so well for, for instance, Morton's hyperobjects and Haraway's Chthulucene. However, as Stephen Shapiro points out, Cthulhu has suffered a similar fate as Frankenstein's creature, and typically "does not inspire cosmic anxiety, but fan camp admiration" (Shapiro 2016: 257). In a Google image search, 'Cthulhu' is just as likely to produce results of collectible *Pop!* dolls, cute Cthulhu plushies with large cartoon eyes, humorous comic strips and fan-made mash-ups of the Cthulhu mythos with other storyworlds, or even children's picture books such as *C is for Cthulhu: The Lovecraft Alphabet Book* (Ciaramella 2014). The appropriation or evolution of Lovecraft's storyworld thus has (at least) three directions in contemporary culture: kitschy pop culture, philosophy and ecological thought, and new weird. But is that enough to suggest that we are living in 'The Age of Lovecraft'? Bearing in mind Mayer's suggestion of *Frankenstein* as the first weird work, might it be more useful to talk about Anthropocene monsters in relation to a broader conceptualisation of the weird?

In this paper I take my cue from Anna Tsing et al. (2017), who argue that monsters "are useful figures with which to think the Anthropocene, this time of massive human transformations of multispecies life and their uneven effects" (M2). Anthropocene monsters are figures conjured by the cultural imagination to give shape to the many sources of anxiety brought on by the urgency of surfacing environmental issues such as plastic pollution, oil spill, deforestation, extreme weather, and forest fires. Cthulhu can be interpreted as one such Anthropocene monster, among other Lovecraftian creations, but as this paper will suggest, more recent evolutions of the weird express Anthropocene anxieties using new monsters in new formal representations. Sederholm and Weinstock maintain: "Although our contemporary monsters may not resemble those in Lovecraft's imagination, we nevertheless live today with the very Lovecraftian awareness of the looming spectre of sudden apocalypse" (2016b: 34). Accordingly, I wish to explore the ways in which Anthropocene issues like global warming become monsters within this spectral apocalyptic awareness; this weird reality where Cthulhu can be at once a madness-infusing alien god, a hyperobject, a collectable *Pop!* doll, a species of spider, and the potential namesake of a geological epoch. What is it about the weird monster figure that seems to fit Anthropocene discourse like a ghostly glove?

### **'A Relative Bleakness'—New Weird Transmediality**

Haraway's Chthulucene seems like an ideal parallel to Sederholm and Weinstock's *The Age of Lovecraft*, but Haraway is adamant about her term's divestment of anything Lovecraftian. Many storytellers of the new weird generation also consciously divest themselves of Lovecraft's weird, and they often incorporate ecological themes in their narratives. Coined by M. John Harrison in 2003, the 'new' weird is largely a twenty-first century phenomenon, though it can be traced back to writers such as Clive Barker and Thomas Ligotti in the 1980s (Noys/Murphy 2016a: 119). Jeff VanderMeer and China Miéville are seen as spearhead writers in the new weird movement, and their monsters are radically different from Lovecraft's. VanderMeer marks a clear break with the traditional weird in *The Southern Reach* (2014), as observable in the trilogy's

narrative perspective, style, and characterisation.<sup>6</sup> VanderMeer's later novel *Borne* (2017a) and novella *The Strange Bird* (2017b) likewise challenge the traditional weird monster figure in the lab-grown, failed experiments of nonhuman creatures that roam a post-apocalyptic wasteland. VanderMeer's stories explore the strange space where empathy and defamiliarisation reinforce each other, encouraging readers to resist simplistic views of the nonhuman. Where VanderMeer's weirdscapes involve technologically or organically enhanced nonhumans, Miéville's work often has something postcolonial as well as nonhuman about its monstrosity. *The City and the City* (Miéville 2009a) for instance, presents two impossibly fused cities in which the residents of either must actively 'unsee' (avoid and ignore) the other, lest they evoke a terrible force called 'Breach'. By playing with levels of artificiality and authenticity of mental and physical borders, Miéville's weird exposes and destabilises the compulsion of the human gaze to colonise its surroundings.

The differences between old and new weird will be discussed in more detail below. For now, it is interesting to note the feature that ties weird stories together across history, genres, and media: they tend to undermine human subjectivity via encounters with monstrous, impossible events that violently encroach upon reality. This defining feature can be outlined transmedially across multiple established or minor genres such as science fiction, horror, and fantasy; cyber-punk and detective noir. Examples from contemporary fiction, besides Miéville and VanderMeer, include works by Laird Barron, Octavia Butler, Mark Z. Danielewski, Neil Gaiman, Thomas Ligotti, and Kelly Link, as well as films such as Joss Whedon's *Cabin in the Woods* (2012), Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* (2016) and Susanne Bier's *Bird Box* (2018). Simon Donaldson's *Fortitude* (2015–) and the Duffer Brothers' *Stranger Things* (2016–) are TV series with clear weird heritages; others are David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990), Ryan Murphy's *American Horror Story* (2011), and Baran Bo Odar and Jantje Friese's *Dark* (2017). Board and card games like *Call of Cthulhu* (2008), *Mansions of Madness* (2011), and *Pandemic: Reign of Cthulhu* (2016) ensure the continued pop-culture fame of Lovecraft's storyworld, while video games such as *Fallout* (1997), *Bioshock Infinite* (2013), and *Anatomy* (2016) explore and expand the weird in interactive game narratives.<sup>7</sup> This paper will, after elaborating on the influence of Lovecraft, discuss and compare several examples of weird texts in order to demonstrate this genre-hopping and the transmedial quality of the weird.

The texts mentioned above could all be analysed in terms of their explicit or implicit Lovecraftian inheritance, even though they reinvent and often diverge pointedly from traditional weird tales.<sup>8</sup> In sum, however, a large number of contemporary artists, philosophers, and critics—whether they wish to position their work in relation to Lovecraft or not—have embraced the weird as a way to engage with the Anthropocene.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the third book in the trilogy, *Acceptance*, switches from first- to second- to third-person narration; the style jumps from nature writing, via scientific journal entry, to impressionistic passages, and even stream of consciousness; one of the main characters is a gay vicar and another is the nonhuman doppelgänger of the main character from the first book. These are sharp contrasts to the excessively allusive style and perpetually male, first-person narrator associated with Lovecraft's stories.

<sup>7</sup> In *Fallout 4* there is an underground location named 'Dunwich Boreers'—a reference to Lovecraft's story 'The Dunwich Horror'.

<sup>8</sup> For a more complete historical overview of the weird, see the two edited collections by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer: *The Weird: A Compendium* (2011) and *The New Weird* (2008).

With this paper I address the relatively new interest in the weird as an aesthetic strategy for expressing Anthropocene anxieties, and ask to what extent Lovecraft is part of this resurgence. Miéville suggests that Lovecraft's work deals with "the impossibility of being a human in deep time" (Weinstock 2016: 236). In the context of the Anthropocene, Miéville argues, this theme speaks to the "relative bleakness of the past few years, [...] a sense of the impossibility of human agency" which has to do with the millennial-turn "collapse of certainties" (236–237; ellipsis added). The weird pokes and prods this relative bleakness, shaping unease into monsters that stress the difficulty—and therefore the importance—of multi-scalar, deep-temporal thinking. Miéville suggests that the old weird from the early twentieth century opened up a "proliferation of hitherto unseen monstrous figures in a startlingly short space of time"; figures better suited to "express the *total*, systemic crisis of modernity" (Noys/Murphy 2016b: 209). This proliferation of new monsters forms the basis for the resurgence of Lovecraft and the beginning of a new weird narrative mode in the twenty-first century.

### Something Old, Something New...

Before Mayer's suggestion of a weird *Frankenstein*, the origins of weird fiction have (by among others Lovecraft himself) been traced back to Edgar Allan Poe in the first part of the nineteenth century, but its formation as a genre category truly started with the first issue of the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in 1923. Lovecraft's old weird emphasises atmosphere over plot: for Lovecraft the weird must evoke a sense of cosmic dread in the reader. He defines cosmic dread in the essay 'Supernatural Horror in Literature':

A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint [...] of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space (Lovecraft 2011 [1927]: 1043; ellipsis added).

The passage above resonates in Miéville's observation that the weird "impregnates the present with a bleak, unthinkable novum", which Miéville reads as "an expression of upheaval and crisis" (2009b: 513). The traditional weird, Miéville notes, was at heart a reaction to the crisis of capitalist modernity at the turn of the twentieth century, a crisis which gave a sense of having "no stable status quo but a horror underlying the everyday, the global and absolute catastrophe implying poisonous totality" (2009a: 613). Miéville's novum moreover captures what traditional weird and new weird have in common: the modes express upheaval and crisis by destabilising the category of the human in relation to the monstrous and the supernatural—often via Lovecraft's favourite register of cosmic horror. Yet there are several other aesthetic registers associated with this kind of destabilisation, which warrants a brief distinction.

*The uncanny* is related to the weird as a register that responds to encounters with the unknown, but more specifically negotiates the unsettling experience of recognising something unfamiliar as familiar or something familiar as unfamiliar, through for

instance repetition or doubling (Freud 1966 [1919]: 220).<sup>9</sup> Roger Luckhurst notes that in contrast to the uncanny, the weird “veers away to invoke a dread that is irreducible, that cannot be reductively interpreted, translated or returned” (Luckhurst 2017: 1052). Fisher accordingly emphasises the weird’s intrusive, external ‘wrongness’ in opposition to the familiar, internal strangeness of the uncanny (2016: 10). Fisher draws yet another distinction between the weird and *the eerie*: the latter is related to more subtle, disturbing absences rather than overwhelming presences (2016: 15, 61). Although comparisons between the weird and *the sublime* can be drawn, there is a distinction in affect: where the (Kantian) sublime evokes awe and wonder, the weird mainly evokes dread and anxiety. Or as Mayer usefully phrases it: “If the Kantian sublime produces ‘enjoyment with horror’, the weird might be said to offer *horror with benefits*, among them a heightened awareness of, and respect for, the more-than-human world” (2018: 237; emphasis in original). Lastly, Tzvetan Todorov’s *fantastic* is defined as a moment of hesitation between belief and disbelief: the “duration of [the] uncertainty” experienced when narrative encounters unfold beyond laws of nature (1975 [1970]: 25). This uncertainty also pertains to the weird, but the weird is more disruptive than the fantastic; as Fisher notes, where the fantastic tends to naturalise other (supernatural) worlds, the weird “de-naturalises all worlds” (Fisher 2016: 29).

It can be difficult to distinguish these registers from one another, and—as will become clear from the cases further down—the weird frequently dances between them. In fact, the weird is often categorised by its refusal to fit neatly into categories, it “seeks crabbed, difficult prose, transgressive or evasive content, genre slippage and elusive authors as emblems of aesthetic resistance to the market” (Luckhurst 2017: 1046). This weird hybridity has developed since (and no doubt through) Lovecraft’s storyworld, but is perhaps more manifest in the new weird than in the old. However, there are certain aspects that more clearly separate old from new weird narrative. The new weird does not necessarily require cosmic horror, it involves a reaction to and movement away from traditional fantasy, and typically favours a distinctly urban or modern setting (VanderMeer/VanderMeer 2008: xvi). As both Luckhurst (2017) and Brad Tabas (2015) have noted, the emphasis on forbidden zones and threshold spaces where time and space themselves are warped and weirded, is shared by both old and new weird, but the perceived agency of the environment changes.

In Lovecraft there is a tendency to focus on the vast, incomprehensible cosmos, ancient history, and non-Euclidean geometry as spatio-temporal background of which creatures like Cthulhu serve as maddening reminders. Even when the setting of Lovecraft’s stories is more limited, like a house or a village, Lovecraft’s weird spatiality “is dedicated to disrupting our normal sense of being at home in the world” (Tabas 2015: 15). In Lovecraft there is usually a sense that the monstrous has always already been there in the background, but hidden or imperceptible. Lovecraft’s weird involves impossible, “terrifying vistas of reality” flashing into the foreground of his characters’ perception (Lovecraft 2011 [1927]: 208). VanderMeer and Miéville also blast background into foreground and vice-versa, but in more stylistically playful and thematically intrusive ways that grant the environment and space itself unsettling

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Weird’ and ‘uncanny’ are often used interchangeably. Morton, for example, describes ecological awareness as “weird: it has a twisting, looping form”, but goes on to tie it to “the uncanny feeling that there are all kinds of places on all kinds of scales” in the same chapter of *Dark Ecology* (2016: 7–10).

agency. The environment inside the borders of Area X in VanderMeer's *Annihilation*, for example, becomes just as monstrous as the weird creatures it engenders in how it infects the characters and slowly colonises their bodies to become part of the weird ecosystem. Besides more explicit agentive overturns, however, the perhaps greatest difference between old and new weird has to do with the latter's movement away from nihilism.

Unaccompanied by—or completely uninterested in—strategies for how to dispel the horror and metabolise the weirdness, Lovecraft's cosmic dread is often dismissively anti-humanist. More recent forms of weird narrative attempt to rework this existential dread into something productive, even when the root of the anxiety cannot be understood. The Netflix-hype *Stranger Things*, for instance, offers a mainstream, crowd-pleasing extension of the weird with its Lovecraftianesque monsters from the ash-filled, desolate dimension called 'Upside Down', who threaten a small 1980s American town through a gash in the fabric of reality. Instead of giving in to the madness of the shadow dimension, however, the town community, led by a group of *Dungeons & Dragons*-playing kids, bravely picks up the fight in the typical vein of fantasy epics. More experimental new weird narratives reimagine the weird monster figure altogether—without relinquishing the weird atmosphere. Miéville's short story 'Covehithe' (Miéville 2011) challenges the nature of the weird monster *and* questions the nature of the Anthropocene by turning old oil rigs organic: they scuttle up on beaches to lay eggs like rusty, giant turtles. No explanation is offered as to how or why this has come about scientifically, but the story reads more like an invitation to think differently, weirdly, about Anthropocene problems such as the fossil fuel industry. And certainly, the very idea of little oil rig babies hatching is mesmerizingly bizarre. VanderMeer's novella *The Strange Bird* is written from the perspective of a genetically manipulated bird-human-squid chimera. Set in the same postapocalyptic world as the novel *Borne*, the story follows the tortured life of a lab creature who questions her painful existence and curses her creator much like Frankenstein's creature. But *The Strange Bird* does not stipulate that the world presented is necessarily worse or better than the primary world. Rather, it offers an unorthodox space for reflecting upon what it means to be human—and attempting to grasp what it means to be anything else than human—in the Anthropocene moment.

Contemporary expressions of the weird are, like older weird, fraught with unbearably entangled thresholds and gaps—recalling Haraway's "dreadful graspings, frayings, and weavings" of the Chthulucene. However, as the three examples above suggest, there is a move in the new weird towards negotiating environmental anxieties by playing with different perspectives and with surprisingly affirmative ways of communicating the Anthropocenic intrusion of the global into the local or individual, of monstrosity into normality. Noys and Murphy suggest that new weird stories can offer "a new sensibility of welcoming the alien and the monstrous as sites of affirmation and becoming" (2016a: 125). This new weird ecological ethics implies a responsibility to engage with the monstrous rather than become passively consumed with dread, as the old weird often entails. The new weird displays an interest in monsters that create space for environmental anxieties to be dissected, readjusted, and used to rethink the position of the human in the time of the Anthropocene.

Morton tries to explain Anthropocene anxieties in terms of the ‘weird loop’ he calls ecological awareness: “Ecological awareness is disorienting precisely because of these multiple scales. We sense that there *are* monsters even if we can’t see them directly” (Morton 2016: 41–42). Morton uses the weird as a mode to come to grips with Anthropocene issues like global warming—or, as he refers to it: ‘Global weirding’: “In the term *weird* there flickers a dark pathway between causality and the aesthetic dimension, between doing and appearing, a pathway that dominant Western philosophy has blocked and suppressed” (2016: 5). This weird pathway might be what humanities scholars try to manoeuvre as they turn to Lovecraft and the weird to find expression for the increasing awareness that humanity has become a ‘hyperobject’. However, the attribution of Cthulhu-like qualities to hyperobjects like global warming might also discourage political engagement because the perceived threat, on the one hand, demands new habits and long-term thinking completely adverse to the way humans are used to thinking about and planning their existence. On the other hand, by extension, the perceived threat is so all-encompassing and inevitable that taking action can seem (is often referred to as) not only uncomfortable, but redundant. Moreover, the Anthropocene-via-Lovecraft is in danger of ascribing monstrosity to the human species as one undifferentiated whole.

Jason W. Moore’s alternative to the Anthropocene, the ‘Capitalocene’, encourages, he argues, a more nuanced historical outlook on the current environmental crises, focusing on the ecological, social, and political implications of capitalism rather than the species-hierarchical implications of being human. According to Moore, the Anthropocene discourse reflects “a poverty of historical thinking”, guided by a philosophy which still “locates human activity in one box, and the rest of nature in another”, which reinforces the myth of human exceptionalism and moreover obscures issues of human “intra-species differentiations” such as “inequalities of class” (Moore 2018: 603). Perhaps it is precisely this tendency in Anthropocene discourse to gloss over structural differences that makes Lovecraft’s sweeping, cosmic dread seem like a fitting aesthetic expression of Anthropocene crises. This, in addition to the weird’s unproductive response to cosmic dread, should give pause when contemplating analogies between Lovecraftian monsters and anthropogenic climate change. As Miéville notes, no matter how aptly Lovecraft represents the difficulty of “being a human in deep time”, it should not lead us to think of “Lovecraft *as* a philosopher” (Weinstock 2016: 239). On the other hand, perhaps Moore’s gripe with intra-species differentiation is precisely the challenge that the Anthropocene poses for humans—necessarily implying *all* humans: to start practicing thinking at species level.

### **Something Borrowed...**

How effective is cosmic dread at stirring people to action? Can Cthulhu mobilise as well as paralyse? As noted several times in this paper, Lovecraft’s monstrous is typically expressed through the sanity-depriving collapse of boundaries between the human protagonist and the intensely nonhuman antagonist, which can quite easily be read in terms of early-twentieth-century overwhelming changes. Mayer, accordingly, suggests that “the weird is a genre uniquely suited to narrating climate change, offering neither hope of transcendence nor surrender to abjection” (Mayer 2018: 229). Like Cthulhu, the plights of the Anthropocene seek articulation in language and images, but emerge at the

collapse of categories, certainties and rules. Where the old weird might too easily succumb to paralysis or denial, however, the new weird more consciously and critically engages with this collapse, sometimes by reappropriating the old weird's monsters in playful ways.

The enthusiasm with which Lovecraft's contemporary devotees developed and expanded his storyworld created a devoted writer's imitation society which grew over the decades after Lovecraft's death. It is unlikely that Lovecraft had reached such fame if his work did not lend itself so well to literary imitation (Joshi 2015 [2008]: 22). This is one of the reasons that currently, in the twenty-first century, "Lovecraft not only seems to be everywhere, but his presence has seeped across generic boundaries, creating fertile new terrain for analysts of popular culture to consider" (Sederholm/Weinstock 2016b: 23). Some contemporary, new weird writers still purposefully situate their narratives in Lovecraft's storyworld, explicitly referring to Lovecraft's monsters. They experiment with ways of dispelling the Lovecraftian sense of helpless nihilism and escape into madness, while maintaining the focus on vast, monstrous bodies of impossible knowledge trying to squeeze into the limited space of the human mind.<sup>10</sup> Tsing et al. note that monsters "point us to forms of noticing that crosscut forms of knowledge, official and vernacular, science and storytelling. They show us co-species practices of living", which is why "following monsters are different ways to know the terrors of the Anthropocene" (2017: 176; ellipsis added). Following Lovecraft's monsters in new weird writing sometimes reveals playful experimentation that undresses cosmic horror and suggests an interest in different ways of knowing the fears and hopes of the Anthropocene.

Neil Gaiman's 'A Study in Emerald' (2011 [2003]) is a Sherlock Holmes pastiche set in a Lovecraftian version of Victorian London. Gaiman thus merges two of the most popular fictional universes for imitation and fan fiction in literary history in a witty noir detective story where the world's nobility is infiltrated by the Old Ones.<sup>11</sup> The humans in Gaiman's story have long since accepted and succumbed to the rule in a dark reversal of Doyle's universe where the narrator is not Holmes, but major Sebastian Moran, and his detective companion is Holmes' arch enemy, Moriarty. The plot follows the pair's investigation into the mysterious figure of 'Sherry Verne' (Gaiman's version of Holmes), who is leading a group of terrorists scheming to overthrow the Old Ones—whose monstrous rule in fact seems perfectly peaceful and orderly. The narrator in 'A Study in Emerald' is very similar to Lovecraft's favoured scholarly narrator, displaying the same reluctance to describe the mystery, but rather due to his fear of not doing it justice, as he claims that he is "not a literary man" (220). Certainly, his hesitance is not for the sake of guarding the reader against the monstrous Old Ones—they are, after all, accepted as rightful rulers.

The merging of Lovecraft and Doyle, as Jessica George argues in her discussion of Lovecraft's "literary afterlives", creates a "hybrid text" (2016: 180) in which it is suggested that "other, more advanced species of extraterrestrial beings may in fact be better than humans" (George 2016: 171). Gaiman's story suggests that humans and the Old Ones can live together, and makes the human more "arbitrary, as open to change,

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<sup>10</sup> For an overview, see Sunand Tryambak [S. T.] Joshi's *The Rise, Fall, and Rise of the Cthulhu Mythos* (2015 [2008]).

<sup>11</sup> The 'Old Ones' is a common denominator for Lovecraft's primordial monsters.



since there is now nothing specifically human about human beings” (George 2016: 171). Gaiman experiments with the uncanny more than with cosmic horror, as can be seen in his use of Holmes’s and Watson’s doubles, the feeling of wrongness when these famous literary heroes appear to be happily serving the terrible Old Ones, and the mashup of styles that gives the writing itself an uncanny touch. The story is an obvious tongue-in-cheek reference to the first Sherlock Holmes novel *A Study in Scarlet*: the Old One whose murder is the focus of the plot has emerald-coloured blood. Holmes and Watson are revealed as radical ‘Restorationists’, who wish to end the rule of the Old Ones and “would see the old ways restored—mankind in control of its own destiny, if you will” (233). Gaiman’s pastiche contains layers of double-play, turning the tables and making Holmes and Watson the potential antagonists. Gaiman’s story can thus also be read as a flippant suggestion similar to Anna Tsing’s: that real-world humans might learn a thing or two from *Lovecraft’s* monsters about ‘co-species practices of living’; what if realising that the Old Ones exist is not such a bad thing after all?

The examples of new weird narrative addressed in this paper show their Lovecraftian heritage in how they represent the monstrous as something essentially elusive, absurd, impossible, but at the same time desperately urgent and claustrophobically all-encompassing. Where they depart from Lovecraft’s weird is in their attribution of agency to the environment itself, and their more affirmative outlook on human entanglement in nonhuman realities. But the contemporary stories discussed so far (with the exception of *Stranger Things*) are all similar to Lovecraft’s in their formal expression. The final part of this paper will look closer at three formally unconventional examples of articulating Anthropocene monsters via the weird mode: the graphic novel *Nameless*, the computer game *Anatomy*, and the novel *House of Leaves*.

### **...and Something Grew—Leaving Humanity at the Threshold**

Brad Tabas argues that Lovecraft’s “extreme attention to place and setting” allows him to transgress the “boundaries of our perception, vaguely hinting to us the details of an outside or ultimate reality, while at the same time rendering us acutely aware of the finitude of our grasp on the real” (Tabas 2015: 7). In a letter from 1927 Lovecraft states that one of the goals of writing a weird tale is to “achieve the essence of real externality” (quoted in Joshi 2015 [2008]: 17). For this to happen, the writer must “forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all”; when crossing “the line to the boundless and hideous unknown—the shadow-hunted *Outside*—we must remember to leave our humanity and terrestrialism at the threshold” (Joshi 2015 [2008]: 17). Old weird spatiality is riddled with such paradoxes. As Timothy Jarvis notes, the old weird is “largely concerned with the vast gulfs of time and space opened up by the new abstract sciences, and largely orientated outwards at an alienating and meaningless cosmos” (Jarvis 2017: 1145). However, this loss of individual control can come across as detached and distant, even silly, precisely *due* to the vastness of unplumbed space. Old-weird cosmic horror is trapped, argues Brian Stableford, in “a series of contrasts, incessantly stating what it is not—because what it is remains intrinsically beyond the reach of ordinary experience” (2007: 71). As noted above, new weird writers often experiment with the old weird conventions in order to facilitate communication of ecological awareness and human entanglement in

nonhuman realities. This is demonstrated in, for example, the unconventional monstrosity of the disturbingly cute oil rigs in Miéville's 'Covehithe' (2011). Other new weird tales experiment with different formal expressions of cosmic horror.

Grant Morrison's and Chris Burnham's graphic novel *Nameless* (2015) twists the cosmic horror of old religion and occult practices to criticise human abuse of powers they do not understand. Interestingly, the authors of *Nameless* explicate in the afterword how they wanted to create a weird universe divested of Lovecraft's storyworld. The themes, motifs, and setting of the story, however, are very Lovecraftianesque in expression. *Nameless* follows a set of characters as they seek to thwart ancient, malign forces and the seemingly inevitable apocalypse. Reverberating jarringly through the narrative is the question: "What is human?" (Morrison/Burnham 2015: n. pag.). This question is explicitly repeated throughout the text, but also vividly communicated by the illustrations. The monstrous events around which the plot revolves are violent expressions of the weight and tension that the question carries. Chapter five of *Nameless* begins with a cynical attempt by the main character to respond to the question, though the remaining plot neither rejects nor endorses the statement further: "The purpose of creation is to humble and *destroy* us. Humankind is a *disease*, a malignant *mistake*. The natural world seeks to *purge* its blissful, ignorant *Eden* of our contagion" (2015: n. pag.; emphasis in original). This anti-humanism is traceable throughout Lovecraft's oeuvre as well as *Nameless*, and philosophers such as Eugene Thacker (2011; 2015a; 2015b) and Graham Harman (2012) argue that weird nihilism can be productive for thinking about existence precisely because of the humility it inspires. The problem with this anti-humanist outlook is the sense of paralysis and apathetic passivity it might generate besides humility.

The frames of *Nameless* display, in gory detail, bloody mass murders and mutilated, barely alive bodies infested with alien parasites, but the perpetual implication is that the psychological horror experienced by the characters is worse than any physical atrocity that befalls them. *Nameless* complicates cosmic horror by cramming it into the limited space of the human body, which, scattered across the panels, festers and decomposes in response. In their attempt to harness powers too great for them, the characters are driven insane. The claustrophobic tension resulting from this impossible embodiment of omnipotence is reinforced by the mere fact of the graphic novel's visual power. Recalling Lovecraft's wordy style, the weirdness of *Nameless* arises in the excessive, almost exultant display of madness and physical suffering coupled with its deliberate failure to communicate the cosmic dread of the treacherously simple question: 'What is human?'

The graphic novel as a whole reiterates anxieties found in Anthropocenic discussions of human agency as it disrupts the idea of humanity as a species in charge of its own grand narratives of control, colonisation, and cultivation. It suggests that ultimately, the question 'what is human?' is at once the most important *and* the wrong question to ask because 'human' has become an unstable category in need of evolution. This is reinforced at the end of the story: "*Human* is that which comprehends the pointless horror of its own wretched condition" (Morrison/Burnham 2015: n. pag.). The medium in which *Nameless* unfolds allows the powerful illustrations to express a deep, visceral horror about being human which still fails to convey the vast scope of the plot's apocalyptic deliberations. In a way, therefore, the anti-humanism in *Nameless* risks

becoming overwhelming rather than critical, and the story loses some of the new-weird affirmative potential for deliberating the terrors of the Anthropocene. As Alexa Weik von Mossner reminds us: it can be risky to rely on emotions such as fear, sadness, regret, or anger to communicate environmental issues, because “an overload of negative emotions might either lead to debilitating pessimism or to various forms of denial” (2017: 163).

In *Nameless*, the human is belittled and ridiculed by tearing down spatial, temporal, and psychological boundaries between human and more-than-human, monstrous realities. This is also the case in the computer game *Anatomy*, an independent, first-person exploration game developed by Kitty Horrorshow (2016). The horror of the game narrative, as the title suggests, relies on a disturbing conflation of the human body and the architecture of a house. *Anatomy* takes the player through the dark hallways of an empty house collecting cassette tapes from various rooms and listening to them using a tape recorder. In the first playthrough the recordings reveal an androgynous voice that speaks of the existential and historical importance of ‘the house’ as a safe dwelling for humans, explicitly comparing the house to a human body. Each room has its comparable body part. The game has three levels of nearly-identical play and must be restarted three times before the final level is ‘unlocked’. With each playthrough of collecting cassettes, unsettling changes are added to the structure and objects of the house and the recordings become distorted. Increasingly, the player gets the sense that the house has a kind of malevolent agency. By the second playthrough it is clear that one of the new voices on the tapes belongs to the house itself, and it speaks of ‘teeth and bones and sinew’ in a guttural, vicious-sounding voice. The eerie horror of the game is strengthened by the perpetual darkness, solitude, and silence. There is no music, and sound effects are limited to the creaking of floorboards and opening or closing doors, before an oppressive sort of rasping hum can be heard throughout the second and third playthrough. The game questions the stability of the human body by deconstructing it and mapping it onto the anatomy of the house, presenting a house ‘body’ that becomes more real than the human body.

Where *Nameless* largely operates within the registers of the weird and cosmic horror, *Anatomy* plays with tensions closer related to the uncanny and the eerie. Insisting on the similarities between human and house anatomy and psychology, the malevolent presence of the house is at odds with the absence represented by the disembodied character who performs the commands of the player. There are no hands in sight, no body parts to be located as the cassettes are inserted into the tape recorder; directing the game view on the mirrors reflects only a muted sphere of light. Whether this light comes from an intuitive source like a flashlight, a phone, or a video camera is uncertain, but hugging the walls helps guide the player through the gloomy house because the weak light reflects off objects and obstacles from up close. This hugging of the walls also adds to the choking feeling of running from a horror hiding in plain sight. The monstrous in *Anatomy* is, paradoxically, and in contrast to *Nameless*, embodied in the *absence* of familiar bodies, eerily granting the house a stronger physical and psychological presence than the player—and the human.

It is almost impossible not to compare *Anatomy* to Mark Danielewski’s novel *House of Leaves* (2000), where the house can also be read as a main character around which the plot—and the narrative structure itself—revolves. The reference to Martin

Heidegger's description of the uncanny as '*das Nicht-zuhause-sein*'—translated as "not-being-at-home" (Danielewski 2000: 25), is an appropriate (and no doubt carefully selected) in-story interpretation of Freud's *unheimlich*. Just like *Anatomy*, *House of Leaves* suggests that buildings can retain memories, that walls hold grudges, and that houses can defy basic laws of geometry. The architecture, or indeed: the *anatomy* of the house changes with each chapter of the book, just as it alters with each playthrough of *Anatomy*. The uncanny monstrosity of *House of Leaves* and *Anatomy* is mired in the realisation that the house, the home, a human's essential safe dwelling, can turn against its occupants.<sup>12</sup> Read as Anthropocene allegory, 'the house' becomes a metaphor for Earth: another dwelling the human, scaled-up to species level, has taken for granted until nature, in the words of Latour, turned the tables and took on the role of acting subject.

*House of Leaves* gives the reader the similar feeling of disembodied presence as *Anatomy*, because the storyline is structured in several layers of footnotes to notes on a film manuscript. The very structure of the story, it turns out, is at the mercy of the house, which interferes on all levels of the narrative, until eventually paragraphs, sentences, and words disperse, cluster, and disintegrate across the pages in a progressively invasive manner. The feeling it provokes is claustrophobic and antagonistic in much the same way as *Anatomy*. The similarity between the two texts is particularly apparent towards the end of *House of Leaves*, when the reader follows the main character through the house in pieces of writing squeezed ever tighter together in the middle of the pages as if an impossible corridor of empty space—the body of the house itself—were closing around the narrative:

On the other / side, we find / a narrow cor / ridor sliding / into darknes / s. [...] Excep / t the futhe [*sic*] / r he goes, t / he smaller t / he hallway (Danielewski 2000: 443–445; ellipsis added; see figure 1).

Taking the reader through an uncanny labyrinth both at the level of diegesis and at the level of form, Danielewski makes the act of reading itself weird.

This weirding of narrative form via the monstrous intrusion of trusted spatial structures can also be recognised in the violent crescendo with which *Anatomy* ends. The game ends in the basement, as white shapes soon identifiable as gigantic teeth start protruding from the floor. All the while the disembodied voice of the house drones on about its abandonment and hunger. The house turns organic; the player is absorbed into its belly, deprived of all agency. *House of Leaves* and *Anatomy* might, like *Nameless*, risk simply reinforcing the anxieties they examine.<sup>13</sup> The ending of *Anatomy*, in particular, does not leave much space for reflection beyond the wrath of the house; *House of Leaves* at least ends with one of the protagonists asserting (however perfunctorily): "Somehow I know it's going to be okay. It's going to be alright. It's going to be alright" (Danielewski 2000: 515). Nevertheless, Horrorshow and Danielewski bring an edge to their representation of monstrosity by way of formal

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<sup>12</sup> Whedon's *Cabin in the Woods* also plays with the idea of the earth turning monstrous, but in a more pointedly satirical way. (The movie ends with the protagonists choosing the apocalypse over adhering to horror tropes.)

<sup>13</sup> See also Christy Tidwell's description of 'ecohorror' (2018: 115–117).

experimentation; by inviting the reader to succumb to weird ways of engaging with the narrative, as the narrative itself becomes monstrous.

On the other  
side, we find  
a narrow cor-  
ridor sliding  
into darknes-  
s. "These w-  
alls are actua-  
lly a relief,"  
Navidson co-

ments after  
he has been  
walking for a  
while. "I ne-  
ver thought t-  
his labyrinth  
would be a p-  
leasant thin-

g to return  
to." Excep-  
t the futhe-  
r he goes, t-  
he smaller t-  
he hallway

gets, unti-  
l he has t-  
o remove  
his pack  
and crou-

**Figure 1.** Danielewski 2000's "*On the other / side, we find / a narrow cor / ridor sliding / into darknes / s. [...] Excep / t the futhe [sic] / r he goes, t / he smaller t / he hallway*". Reprint of the section's visual appearance; as printed on pages 443–445. Scanned by the author.

*Nameless*, *Anatomy*, and *House of Leaves* all reciprocate Lovecraft's demand to leave humanity at the threshold. The 'threshold' of the two latter is disturbingly literal. Stepping over the threshold in *Anatomy* and *House of Leaves* reveals houses that are haunted, not with the ghosts of humans, but with a terrible nonhuman fury whose monstrous agency chokes human subjectivity. Besides demonstrating the transmediality of the weird mode in the twenty-first century, they reimagine the monstrous as a deeply physical human absence which complements the overwhelming nonhuman presence.

Dancing between the registers of cosmic horror, the uncanny, and the eerie, they represent a void in which nonhuman voices express their fear and anger at having been ignored, silencing the human through the weird mode. As Latour writes: “The return of [environmental] consequences, like global warming, is taken as a contradiction, or even a monstrosity, which it is, of course, but *only according* to the modernist’s narrative of emancipation [from the natural world]” (2011: 26; emphasis in original). Rupturing this false grand narrative of emancipation from nature by unwrapping and challenging its implicit human anxieties about the nonhuman, is one of the main ambitions of the new weird. Bearing Moore’s critique of the Anthropocene discourse in mind, however, it can be worth questioning what narratives like *Anatomy* and *Nameless* suggest is the alternative to this grand narrative. Might their anti-humanism culminate in a disempowering, undifferentiated release of responsibility in the face of ecological crisis?

### Conclusion—Weird Times Call for Weird Tales

Exporting and ridiculing the human individual or species for its cosmic insignificance remains one of the key themes of the weird. In its contemporary form the weird also introduces storyworlds in which that insignificance, and the feelings of anxiety with which it often goes hand-in-hand, may be dissected. The shared conceptual space of contemporary academic research and weird narrative suggests a need to incorporate the vast scale of the monsters of the Anthropocene into a sustainable framework, and (re)situate humanity in relation to them. New weird Anthropocene monsters may not all be as similar to Cthulhu as Morton suggests in *Hyperobjects* (2013) or as Sederholm and Weinstock argue in their *The Age of Lovecraft* (2016a), but they are perhaps *more* similar than Haraway would care to admit for her Chthulucene. Nevertheless, the twenty-first-century critical engagement with weird tropes suggests that the cosmic spectres of Lovecraft still haunt the cultural imagination in the confronting context of the Anthropocene. This paper should be read alongside Sederholm and Weinstock as a call for more academic attention towards (new) weird narrative as an aesthetic platform with potential for addressing and undressing Anthropocene issues by moulding them into monsters. In engaging with the new weird monsters, audiences are challenged to reposition themselves in relation to multiple forms of nonhuman subjectivities and to question their own degree of agency in the Anthropocene age.

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## Biographical Note

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*'Age of Lovecraft'?*

**YES, WE KHAN—  
DIVERSITY AND DE-MONSTERIZATION OF MUSLIM IDENTITIES IN  
MS. MARVEL (2014–)**

**Anja Borg Andreassen (Tromsø Public Library and City Archives)**

**Abstract:** *In 2014, Marvel comics introduced a new character to take over the mantle of the superhero identity Ms. Marvel. The new heroine is Kamala Khan, a 16-year-old girl born and raised in New Jersey. Khan is Marvel's first Pakistani-American, Muslim superhero to headline her own comic book; as such, she represents a move towards diversification in a historically conservative, white and masculine genre. In addition, Kamala Khan comes into existence in a political and social context where the 9/11 attacks, the 'War on Terror', and Islamophobia continue to reverberate. This article explores how the Ms. Marvel comic functions as a critique of the ways in which social norms, stereotypes and prejudices have monsterized multicultural, Muslim identities, especially in the years following 9/11. Conducting analyses of Khan's conflicted relationship to her own identities and issues concerning visibility and concealment, I explore how these negative framings affect her self-perception, and in turn her self-representation. Lastly, I aim to illustrate the ways in which the comic challenges monolithic and monstrous representations of Islam through its depiction of diverse, multicultural, Muslim identities.*

**Keywords:** *comic books; superheroes; identity; monsters; Muslim-Americans; de-monsterization.*

## **Introduction**

For a long time, comics were regarded by the academic field as a mass-produced form of easy entertainment. During the last decades however, the medium's potential to tell complex literary and visual stories has caught the interest of academics and readers alike. Today it consists of a diverse array of genres and artistic styles, with the superhero genre still being one of the most persistent presences within the comic book field. The genre has since its genesis been predominantly white, male, and heteronormative with regards to characters, authors, artists and editors, and there has consequently been a lack of—as well as problematic—representation of minorities (Duncan/Smith 2009; Lendrum 2005; Strömberg 2011). In 2014, Marvel took a step towards an increase in the diversity of their superheroes by re-launching *Ms. Marvel* (Wilson/Alphona 2014). As the previous title-bearer Carol Danvers had taken on the mantle of Captain Marvel,<sup>1</sup> a brand-new protagonist was created and introduced as Ms. Marvel. The heroine is Kamala Khan, a 16-year-old girl born and raised in New Jersey, who suddenly finds herself endowed with regenerative and shape-shifting powers. Khan is Marvel's first Pakistani-American, Muslim superhero to headline her own comic book. The creators of the new character are Sana Amanat, a Pakistani-American who grew up in New Jersey, and writer G. Willow Wilson who is herself a Muslim.

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to Carol Danvers as Captain Marvel, see for instance *Earth's Mightiest Hero Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight*, volume 1 (De Connick/Rios/Soy 2012).

The introduction of Kamala Khan comes at a point in contemporary American history where the collective trauma of 9/11 still reverberates. More than a decade of increased surveillance targeting Muslims has created an atmosphere of fear and insecurity for many Muslim-Americans (Shams 2018: 74). Issues of Islamophobia have not abated noticeably; the current political discourse continues to foster a climate of suspicion and hostility through anti-Muslim rhetoric (Bridge Initiative Team 2018).

It is against the backdrop of anti-Muslim sentiments and negative framings in the political and media discourse that I examine Kamala Khan's assumption of the superhero mantle. Drawing on theories of the monstrous and images of Muslims following 9/11, I look at how the comic functions as a critique of the ways in which social norms, stereotypes and prejudices have monsterized multicultural, Muslim identities. Through analyses of Khan's conflicted relationship to her own identities and issues concerning visibility and concealment, I explore how these negative framings affect her self-perception, and in turn her self-representation. Furthermore, I aim to show how the *Ms. Marvel* comic works to deconstruct the categorization of 'Muslims' as a homogenous group. Through the extended cast of characters, the narrative promotes diverse, nuanced and complex representations of multicultural identities and expressions of faith. The conscientious subversion of monstrous tropes related to Muslims furthers the comic's process of de-monsterization.

### **Superheroes, Conventions and Representation—A Brief History**

Comics as a medium have a rich history across the world. For a long time, however, the connection to mass production and notions of 'easy entertainment' did much to exclude it from becoming an academic discipline in and of itself. It was arguably with Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) that academic research truly took hold. Since then, it has branched out significantly, exploring historical and global aspects (Harvey 1994; Harvey 1996 [1994]; Mazur/Danner 2014; Duncan/Smith 2009), ideological aspects (McAllister/Sewell/Gordon 2006), as well as explorations of different genres. Much research has for example been done on specific non-fiction works such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (Ewert 2000; Kruger 2015), Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (Warhol 2011) and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (Chute 2008; Malek 2006). The superhero genre has been studied at length through works by Robbins (1996), Robinson (2004), Hatfield, Heer and Worcester (eds. 2013), Regalado (2015) and Bahlmann (2016), to mention a few. Since her appearance in 2014, Kamala Khan has also gained scholarly interest, see for example Loeffert (2016) and Kent (2015). I look at these studies in more detail later in the article.

*Ms. Marvel* is a comic book firmly placed in the superhero genre. It is a genre that has come to be the beacon of comic books, for good and for ill, since Superman made his appearance in *Action Comics* #1 in 1938. According to Reynolds, many of the character definitions and genre conventions of superhero comics were cemented already with the first published Superman stories; the god-like powers, the devotion to justice, the secret identity or alter-ego, the patriotism (1992: 12–16)—and, I will add, the idealized masculine (and eventually feminine) form. With the notable exception of Wonder Woman, early female superheroes were uncommon; women were, as pointed out by Steinem, limited to "sitting around like a Technicolor clothes horse getting into jams

with villains, and saying things like, ‘Oh Superman, I’ll always be grateful to you’” (204).

Eventually, new female heroes entered the stage. The first issue of *Ms. Marvel* was published in 1997, with Carol Danvers as the first to assume the identity. Two others followed: succeeding Danvers were Sharon Ventura and Karla Sofen, before Danvers again took over the mantle. *Ms. Marvel*, as a superhero identity, is full of history and conventions; similar to heroes like Supergirl, She-Hulk and Spider-Woman, Ms. Marvel was created as a female counterpart to Captain Marvel/Mar-Vell<sup>2</sup>—a beautiful, white, blond and muscular alien hero dedicated to protecting mankind. The moniker thus represents one of the most persistent tropes in the superhero genre, which is the establishment of a female version of a male superhero. From her genesis, Ms. Marvel was as such a female spin-off of the hegemonic masculine identity—the white, heterosexual, male hero, written and drawn by white men.

It is perhaps not surprising that the superhero genre has been notoriously lacking in terms of representation. American comics have historically employed detrimental stereotypes and tropes in portrayals of race, nationality, sexuality and gender. For instance, depictions of black superheroes have relied on tropes of hypermasculinity and primitivism (Lendrum 2005), as well as an inclination towards physical violence (Cruz 2018). The portrayal of female superheroes has a long history of impossible anatomies and poses.<sup>3</sup> There has moreover been a tendency to rely on overly sexual and orientalized tropes regarding race, multiculturalism, and gender (Strömberg 2011). One of the darkest tropes in comics is the killing of female characters in order to further the male hero’s storyline.<sup>4</sup>

Curtis and Cardo have found that “[t]here has been a noticeable change” in the superhero genre over the last decade or so (2018: 381) with an increase in positive representation of gender, sexuality, race, and religion. As superhero comic books have seen a rise in the number of superheroes of color, queer superheroes, female-led titles, and female writers and artists (381), research on these themes has increased and enriched the theoretical field. The introduction of Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel in 2014 can be seen as part of the movement towards greater diversification and a break with the status quo of superhero comics.

### **Imagining the Monster—Media Conceptions of the Monstrous**

Monsters have been a part of our narratives since we began telling stories. The Snake of Eden; Scylla; Medusa; Grendel; Dracula—these creatures, and variations thereof, are born from ancient mythologies, religions and tales; they live, mutate and thrive in ever new expressions, inspiring new monsters to spring forth. Etymologically, the word ‘monster’ stems from the Latin ‘monstrum’, meaning something dreadful or repulsive (often an omen of evil or of bad times). The modern meaning of the word has stayed

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance *Essential Captain Marvel*, volume 1 (Lee et al. 2008), for an introduction to the original Captain Marvel. The collection also includes the first appearance of Carol Danvers in the Marvel universe.

<sup>3</sup> Examples include a compilation by Donovan 2015, Astonishingblow 2017—and Marvel’s *Ms. Marvel* #5 [Carol Danvers] cover from 2006 (see Reed/Delatorre/Cho 2006).

<sup>4</sup> The trope is referred to as ‘Women in Refrigerators’, coined by comic book writer Gail Simone as a title for her website created in 1999 (see Simone 1999–). It contains a list of female characters that have been depowered and murdered to further the plotline of a male character.

true to its root. The monster, a dictionary entry will tell us, is the abnormal; the deviate; the unusual; the unnatural—words that at their core signify an aberrance from what is considered to be the norm, the natural way of things. As representations of our fears, anxieties, traumas and desires, monsters are, as Jeffrey Cohen (1996) notes, the offspring of culture; they are embodiments of certain cultural moments (4) and represent various aspects of “the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generates them” (5). In his fourth thesis of monster culture, Cohen connects the monstrous to the notion of the Other: “[t]he monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other [...] the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond” (7). History is rife with examples of the exaggeration of difference—political, ideological, racial, religious—into monstrosity (8–11); one example is the multifarious Nazi propaganda against Jews; another, the framing of people in African countries as primitive savages in order to justify imperialist expansion.

One of the main catalysts for the establishment of the monstrous Other is arguably war, and the anxieties and traumas in its wake. David J. Skal explores this subject in his book *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (2001 [1993]), where he looks at some of history’s most enduring monsters. He defines four major, monstrous icons throughout history: Dracula, Frankenstein’s monster, the dual nature of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and the sideshow freak. These archetypes are ingrained into the cultural images of the monstrous and keep coming back; “they mutate and evolve, the better to hold our attention” (2001 [1993]: 19). Skal moreover emphasizes the view that media expressions of the monstrous spring forth and adapt as responses to and reflections of war as an omnipresent cultural trauma (2001 [1993]: 35, 229–230).

The creation of a monstrous Other may also be seen in relation to war-time acts of constructing an image of ‘the enemy’. Indeed, this was the case for several of the earliest superhero comics, as the genre was closely intertwined with world war two propaganda (Duncan/Smith 2009; Scott 2007). Cord Scott notes that these comics relied on heavily stereotyped images of American enemies, particularly of German, Russian and Japanese nationalities (2007: 326–327), and at times there was little or no effort to separate them from each other. The Japanese were drawn with “rat-like features, and a general tone of underlying treachery”; sometimes all Asian enemies were grouped together as “sinister looking Orientals” (327), and one Captain America storyline portrayed him fighting “Giant Asian zombies” (334). This era also produced the Nazi villain Red Skull (a man who literally looks like the flesh has been burned from his body), who remains a presence in Marvel comics and films to this day.<sup>5</sup> Such superhero comic book portrayals of US enemies illustrate Cohen’s concept of the monstrous Other and the matrix of categories (political, racial, cultural) that can intersect in the creation of “monstrous difference” (7).

The concept of the monstrous Other is moreover relevant to another, still-ongoing ‘war’ that continues to impact not only a specific religious group, but also people of specific ethnicities: it is the nebulous ‘War on Terror’. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, ‘Muslims’ and ‘Arabs’ were particularly visible as media coverage surged in US and

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance the collected volume *Avengers: Red Zone* (2010) or *Uncanny Avengers*, volume 4 (2017). Red Skull appeared as the main antagonist in the 2011 movie *Captain America: The First Avenger*. [External reference, therefore not listed in the bibliography.]

international media discourse. Ahmed and Matthes note an increase in detrimental images of Muslims in this period, finding that several widely read and recognized US newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* relied on negative stereotypes in their representations of Muslims and Islam, “with a common theme being Muslims are ‘terrorists’, ‘extremists’, fundamentalists’, ‘radicals’, and ‘fanatics’” (2017: 231). Descriptions like these promote images of Muslims as a monstrous, homogenous group, while others quite literally echo Cohen’s notion about the monster as “difference made flesh, come to dwell among us” (7). Examples include references to Western countries as ‘breeding grounds’ for terrorists (Steuter/Willis 2010: 157), and public officials like congressman Peter King referring to American-Muslims as “the enemy living amongst us” (quoted in Steuter/Willis 2010: 154). Steuter and Willis’s analysis of dominating Western media discourses post 9/11 finds notable patterns of metaphors describing Muslims, specifically connected to animals, vermin and diseases (159–162); two notable sub-categories are the beast and the monster (157–158). The hostility seems not to have abated since the time of these analyses, and the present political reality is still one in which security measures signed into law are largely targeting people who are, or are suspected to be, Muslim. A recent example is the so-called ‘travel ban’ ordered by the sitting US president, which affected entry rights mainly for Muslim-majority countries (Lichtblau 2016). It illustrates that the stigma towards specific ethnic and religious groups has not abated.

The ways in which cultural, political and religious differences have been constructed as monstrous Otherness across different media, are of relevance in a critical reading of *Ms. Marvel*. Just as other genres and media, the superhero comic explores issues of contemporary society; it is a platform where the conflicts and questions of the real world may be reflected, opposed, negotiated and discussed.

With its introduction of a multicultural, Muslim-American, female superhero in 2014, *Ms. Marvel* has become a channel through which the voices of individuals belonging to much exposed and debated minority groups can be represented in alternative ways. It provides a space to reflect on and explore the post-9/11 American society from the point of view of a Muslim-American, and the ways in which this collective trauma has negatively impacted the psyche of people whose ethnicity or religion are still being associated with monstrous images of extremism and terror.

### **The Monstrous Metamorphosis of Kamala Khan**

The theme of otherness has been one of the most central points to previous analyses of *Ms. Marvel*’s main character, Kamala Khan. Both Kent (2015) and Loeffert (2016) discuss issues connected to a perceived necessity of making Kamala relatable to a non-multicultural audience. Kent identifies the narrow focus of relatability in the reception of the comic book; Loeffert argues that the creators of *Ms. Marvel* have used temporary whitewashing and the pinning of Islamic values against American norms to privilege whiteness, and to make the character more “palatable to non-multicultural readers” (38). While the theme of otherness is central to my reading, I look at it specifically in connection to the notion of the monstrous, drawing on Cohen’s theory. Furthermore, I explore how *Ms. Marvel* challenges, negotiates and subverts notions of the monstrous Other in a process that can be regarded as a de-monsterization of multicultural, Muslim identities.

The first volume edition of *Ms. Marvel*, entitled *No Normal*, introduces readers to Kamala Khan: a 16-year-old girl who spends her days gaming, obsessing over comics, fanfics and the *Avengers*, and spending time with her family as well as her best friends, Nakia and Bruno. However, a prominent aspect of the first volume is also Kamala's awareness of the ways in which her looks, her Pakistani heritage and her faith make her very visibly different from many of her popular peers at school. Her wish to fit in is constantly negated by microaggressions from people like Zoe, the white, blonde, blue-eyed and popular girl at school. When Kamala sneaks out to join a party down at the waterfront, Zoe exclaims: "I thought you weren't allowed to hang out with us heathens on the weekends! I thought you were, like, locked up!" (Wilson/Alphona 2014: [9]).<sup>6</sup> The statement reveals an immediate association of Kamala's Muslim faith with notions of dominance and control, which are common tropes especially in the portrayals of Muslim men; they are the capricious and irrational oppressors of women (Khoja-Moolji/Niccolini 2015). Zoe then goes on to point out: "Ugh, Kamala—no offense, but you smell like curry. I'm gonna stand somewhere else" ([10]).

While Zoe's racist remarks may be a caricature of hegemonic identities' ignorance, they feed into dominating, negative stereotypes and aggravate Kamala's conflicted relation to her own cultures, beliefs, and her sense of self-worth; "I can never be one of them, no matter how hard I try. I'll always be poor Kamala with the weird food rules and the crazy family" ([13]).

As she walks home, she is enveloped in a mysterious mist that unlocks her superpowers. Her desire to feel 'normal' simultaneously catalyzes a physical metamorphosis; when she exits the mist, Kamala Khan has assumed the physical form of her great hero, the blonde, blue-eyed and white Carol Danvers (the previous Ms. Marvel).

The first frames succeeding the transformation depict a disoriented Kamala/Carol, while Kamala, as the first-person narrator, tries to make sense of it: "okay, so I passed out in the fog and had a dream that I asked Captain Marvel to make me like her. Apparently she took me literally" ([22]). Throughout the series, yellow text boxes are narrative tools that indicate the thoughts and considerations of the main protagonist. The first-person perspective is usually an intimate type of narrative technique because it gives the readers access to the character's thoughts and feelings. The first text box in the sequence highlighted above stands out by being neutral and summarizing; Khan remembers the event and tries to understand what happened. The attempt to gain control fails rapidly, however. As chaos reaches a climax at the bottom of the page, the dominating image depicts a body in anatomical uproar, one abnormally large hand covering the mouth in an attempt to keep from vomiting. Kamala's dark brown hair battles with Carol's blonde; one eye is blue and the other one brown. The speech balloons, the comic's form of direct discourse, reflect and build onto the chaos established by this image. Throughout the metamorphosis sequence, Kamala's speech is repetitive and short, often consisting of sounds only. Words and phrases are incomplete or uncertain, emphasized by the use of several full stops or hyphens. The direct

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<sup>6</sup> Due to lack of page numbers in the collected editions of *Ms. Marvel*, pages are counted starting from the first page after the issue cover page. Page numbers are bracketed, in accordance with guidelines by the Comic Art and Comics Area of the Popular Culture Association.



discourse reflects the lack of control as the protagonist struggles to keep it together—which, visually, she cannot, as she throws up herself from the body of Carol Danvers.

The climactic image of two bodies in battle in itself seems somewhat monstrous; it depicts a being in a liminal state, not one thing or another, and it represents a complete, albeit momentary, loss of agency for Kamala. As such, the image is one in which the monstrous archetype of the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde duality resonates. The intertextual echo is an apt one, firstly because it emphasizes the human mind's recurring battle with itself regarding who we are and who we long to be. Secondly, the Jekyll/Hyde duality is at its core a negotiation (or perhaps a battle) between visibility and concealment, between the conscious and the unconscious desires/anxieties of the self. This negotiation carries very different implications for Kamala Khan, however. While Dr. Jekyll is outwardly perceived as a man abiding by the norms and rules of his society, he may live out his darker desires as Mr. Hyde, whose acts become more atrocious for every metamorphosis. Kamala Khan, on the other hand, feels like she literally has to hide in another body in order to gain accept. To be 'thoroughly' Western is to be white; as her brown-skinned, brown-haired self she seems to be viewed by her peers not as an individual, but as part of something weird and foreign in their midst despite having lived all her life in New Jersey.

Loeffert (2016) reads Khan's metamorphosis as an expression of the creators' 'particular agenda' to establish "an atmosphere in which Kamala is able to reject whiteness by privileging it" (38). The temporary whitewashing, Loeffert argues, becomes a way to "minimize her ethnicity so that she may be more relatable to white readers" (33). The thesis draws on Kent's analysis of the media reception of *Ms. Marvel*, where the critics' narrow focus on the character's relatability is criticized. Kent argues that this insistence on relatability will ultimately "erase individual experiences of marginalized peoples, suggesting that any reader who has ever felt marginalized *should* be able to relate to the book when, in reality, every individual experiences difference differently" (2005: 525).

Loeffert's argument is interesting. Her analysis of the metamorphosis narrative seems to rest on the assumption that the momentary whitewashing for the sake of making Khan relatable and accessible to a non-multicultural audience, is a primary goal of the comic book. "Conscious of the difficulty of promoting a minority character, the creators of *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* dilute the otherness of Kamala Khan in order to make her as accessible as possible to the majority of readers" (21).

This may have been the case and it may not; but there are nevertheless other possible readings of the metamorphosis narrative. The chaotic abnormality of limbs and faces that highlights Kamala's change may also be read through the lens of Cohen's notion that monstrous bodies are "pure culture [...]. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself" (4). The Kamala/Carol 'monster' arguably functions as a visual comment on the limited racial parameters of success in society, and on the historically rigid, normative categorizations of what it means to be a 'proper' superhero. As such, the comic discusses the implicit notion that in order to get somewhere and be someone of consequence, you have to be a white, non-Muslim American. The transformation may be read as a critique of this hegemony exactly because of its monolithic nature and its consequences for minority groups, rather than being read as an appeasement of a non-multicultural audience.

The narrative technique is a central element to the way in which the comic exposes the rigidity of these societal expectations and parameters of success. By focusing on Kamala's experiences, both visually and through the first-person perspective, the narrative reveals the tension between how she (and readers) perceives herself as an individual—with her quirks, interests, thoughts and worries—and the ease with which her white, non-multicultural peers tend to categorize her through harmful stereotypes based on the intersections of her identity. The process of metamorphosis visualizes the collision between these perceptions. It appears almost as a reversion of the strange case of Dr. Jekyll; he concocts an alter-ego that allows him to distance parts of the self from that monstrous Other, which really originates from within (Cohen 1996: 7). For Kamala Khan, it is the outer stereotypes, racism and rhetoric of difference that commence to bleed into her as an internalized monster of racism, ignorance and prejudice.

What the metamorphosis narrative manages to convey through the intimate perspective of Kamala herself, is the notion that the real monster is neither Kamala Khan, nor Carol Danvers or the unruly amalgamation of the two. Rather, it is the matrix of social, cultural, racial and religious norms that works with such a force upon Khan. Carol represents a hegemonic femininity, for Kamala and society in general; as a white, blonde, blue-eyed, successful and conventionally American superhero Danvers is everything that Kamala Khan feels she is not, growing up in a society where racism and Islamophobia are real, recurring aspects of her life. The rigidity and narrowness of these parameters of acceptance become the monstrosity that the metamorphosis of Kamala Khan is rooted in.

### **“The NSA Will Wiretap Our Mosque”—The Fear of Visibility in a Post-9/11 Society**

The tension between visibility and concealment that runs through the metamorphosis narrative in *Ms. Marvel* speaks to Kamala's internalized perceptions of the conflict between her own identities and a larger, social acceptance. This tension may also be said to extend to matters of surveillance and security. As noted earlier in the article, media representations of Muslims in the wake of 9/11 saw a rise in negative stereotyping and visibility. Shams furthermore notes that the events of September 11th “amplified the fears, hostility, and suspicion towards Muslims as a national security threat”, eventually resulting in “surveillance programs specifically targeting Muslim immigrants” (2018: 73). The discourse of Muslim immigrants as foreign threats continues to this day (74).

Issues of surveillance, national security and vigilante justice have been a recurring theme in American superhero comics.<sup>7</sup> In some instances, acts of enforcing ‘justice’ based on superheroes’ own convictions have involved pre-emptive strategies eerily similar to profiling,<sup>8</sup> or may have led to mass destruction and the death of innocent people. I mention the history of these thematic issues in order to point out the significant difference between security and surveillance as overreaching ethical themes

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<sup>7</sup> The most famous example is perhaps Marvel's *Civil War* story arc (2006–2007). [External reference, therefore not listed in the bibliography.]

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Marvel's *Civil War II* story arc (2016). [External reference, therefore not listed in the bibliography.]

related to many superheroes' modus operandi, and the specific experience of Kamala Khan as a Muslim-American superhero, in the context of the metamorphosis narrative.

As previously noted, Khan's physical change can be read as a comment upon the racial parameters of success. Loeffert explores the subject by remarking that although Kamala returns to her natural form, she keeps transforming into Danvers several times when a rescue is needed. It is a choice that reveals Khan's assumption that a 'real' and successful superhero is white (35). The continued transformation extends beyond her assumptions, however; that she keeps returning to the shape of Carol Danvers also speaks to her fear of being revealed as herself—including her name, her family, her ethnicity, her culture, her Muslim faith—and the potential repercussions thereof. The clearest example is to be found in one of Kamala's earliest acts of superheroism. Upon witnessing an ongoing robbery at the local Circle Q, Kamala (as Danvers) attempts to stop the culprit, and in the process is shot in the abdomen. Her best friend Bruno immediately tries to call the ambulance, but Kamala—now reverted to her own form—intently refuses: "I have to hide. The police—they can't know it's me. My parents will freak, the NSA will wiretap our mosque or something, and then they'll sell me to science!" (Wilson/Alphona 2014: [67]).

The outburst is humorous, but with dark implications. It illustrates that the post-9/11 American society of surveillance is an implicit yet ever-present aspect of Kamala Khan's life. While her comment following the shooting is somewhat tragicomic in its juxtaposition of her major fears at that moment (her parents and the NSA), it simultaneously reflects her conviction regarding how society will react upon finding out that someone 'like her' has acquired superpowers. It reveals an instinctive anxiety about her own hypervisibility—heightened further by her new superpowers—and its potential consequences. Furthermore, it is a fear that extends beyond Kamala as an individual; not only would she pose a threat, but the NSA would wiretap her family's mosque, presumably scanning the place for potential terrorists. Her assumption echoes Cohen's argument that in the process of constructing monstrous Others, "the boundaries between personal and national bodies blur" (1996: 10), because this can be seen in relation to religions and racial 'bodies' as well. As Shams notes, the categorical homogenization of 'Muslims' results in an institutionalized mentality that holds a large group of different people collectively responsible, for instance in the event of a terrorist attack (2017: 77).

Through this scene, the comic continues to extend beyond the fictional narrative and into the reality of post-9/11 American society, where racial and religious biases affect a number of ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse individuals. It is a society in which, if your skin is brown or your surname is Khan, your visibility fosters a strange, paradoxical matrix of suspiciousness and ignorance. You are picked for 'random' security checks at the airport<sup>9</sup> and if, in a fictional rendering of this society, you happen to be a superhero, the fear of visibility could be momentarily greater than dying. In such a world, *Ms. Marvel* asks, who are the real monsters—those who live under the gaze of suspicion, or the invisible observers?

The metamorphosis narrative in the first volume of *Ms. Marvel* works on several levels regarding notions of the monstrous and the process of de-monsterization. It may be seen as a visualization of the ways in which Kamala Khan has internalized society's

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<sup>9</sup> As illustrated in *Ms. Marvel: Civil War II*, volume 6 (Wilson/Miyazawa 2016), when Kamala travels alone to Karachi to visit her grandparents.

perceptions of her based on her multicultural and religious identity, often relying on detrimental stereotypes. It also reflects Khan's assumptions about who can be an American superhero, exploring her anxieties about her own superhero identity in the context of security and surveillance issues specifically related to the image of Muslims as potential extremist monsters.

Simultaneously, however, the narrative works to deconstruct these harmful stereotypes, firstly by illustrating the crude racism and ignorance they are built on (as exemplified by Zoe), and secondly by not shying away from the divergencies and complexities of Kamala's own emotions. Her desire to be like Carol Danvers implies a radical and conflicted wish to shed her own self for the sake of an uncomplicated whiteness that relieves her of her visibility; such a transformation would mean freedom from racism, cultural ignorance, and the fear of being perceived as a threat based on her ethnicity and religion. A testament to the ways in which the rigid parameters of convention and success seem to dominate Kamala's psyche, is the fact that her main superpower manifests itself as shape-shifting—a power that Carol Danvers never possessed. The metamorphosis may in this way be read as Khan's attempt to demonsterize herself based on who she feels she should be according to society, with regards to ethnicity, cultural belonging and religious belief.

That these are Kamala's conflicts does not necessarily mean to indicate, as Loeffert suggests, “a presumed inner conflict of any multicultural reader” (33); however, it would not be strange should someone find themselves familiar with aspects of Kamala's struggles. That she wishes to be like Danvers while simultaneously concluding that “being someone else isn't liberating, it's exhausting”, is a dialectic that explores the oftentimes contradictory aspects of identities. As Renegar and Sowards (2009) argue, “[c]ontradiction is not just a statement of opposition, but rather functions as a transcendent term that includes a myriad of other strategies such as ambiguity, paradox, multiplicity, complexity, anti-orthodoxy, opposition, and inconsistency” (6). Through such a view of identity one may challenge “traditional notions of identity” (6).

Lastly, and importantly, the metamorphosis narrative ends with Khan's decision to be “the best version of Kamala” ([93]), because as her Abu tells her, she is perfect just the way she is. In fact, posing as someone else is dangerous, as illustrated symbolically by the fact that her regenerative force—enabling her to heal from a fatal bullet wound—works only when Kamala Khan reverts back to her own body. Confronting societal racism and phobia and conquering her own fears, Kamala Khan eventually realizes that the true monstrosity nevertheless lies in being someone else.

### **Dismantling the Monolith—The De-Monsterization of Muslims**

In addition to portraying Kamala Khan as she comes to terms with a new part of her multi-faceted identity, the comic also works to deconstruct the categorization of ‘Muslims’ as a homogenous group. Through the extended cast of characters, *Ms. Marvel* disrupts common tropes of Islamic faith and culture along the intersecting axes of race, gender, age and religious expressions. Some central figures in this respect are Kamala's brother Aamir and his wife Tyeshia, the Khan parents Yusuf and Muneeba, as well as Kamala's best friend Nakia.

One of the strengths of the *Ms. Marvel* character gallery, as argued by Kent (2015), is the diversity of their expressions of faith, contributing to the notion that “Islam is not

merely a monolith” (524). Kamala’s initial struggles with herself in many ways find their contrast in her brother Aamir. He is dedicated to his faith, spends a lot of time with the community at the mosque, and feels proud of the life he leads. In the fourth volume of *Ms. Marvel* (Wilson/Alphona 2015) Aamir is confronted with the manifestation of superpowers brought on by a forced mutation, and his immediate reaction is anger and rejection. When asked how he could possibly be happy the way he was, Aamir interrupts: “I’m a what? A religious freak? An MSA<sup>10</sup> nerd? A Salafi? Yeah, I’m all of those things. And I’m not ashamed of any of them” ([48]). While he is happy with his life as it is, he constantly has to defend the choices he has made. He does it in volume eight, when confronted by biased policemen who try to frame him as an illegal immigrant and a potential terrorist (Wilson et al. 2017: [22–26]), and he has to do it when faced with the discontent of his father regarding his lack of a steady job. Nevertheless, he persists: “I do my own thing. I go to the mosque. I volunteer. I read books. Why doesn’t anybody believe I’m happy the way I am?!” ([59]). Aamir’s contentedness with his own identity emphasizes that belonging to a minority does not need to “indicate a presumed inner conflict of any multicultural reader”, as Loeffert (2016) suggests.

Yet another aspect of the diversification of Muslim identities in *Ms. Marvel* relates to the representation of the other female characters. In her analysis, Kent highlights the comic’s careful attendance “to familiar topics with regards to women, Islam, and race” (2015: 524). The deconstruction of stereotypical representations of these issues are significant advances in the process of de-monsterizing Muslim identities. Connected to de-monsterization is the notion of de-victimization, specifically regarding the image of the veiled and silent Muslim woman as a victim of oppression from the monstrous, angry and irrational Muslim man (Khoja-Moolji/Niccolini 2015: 25–26). Myra Macdonald argues that the Western “obsession with the veil” as an example of the “problems of Islam” has pervaded media coverage also prior to 9/11 (2006: 8). *Ms. Marvel* ridicules this kind of obsession through the character Zoe, who at the beginning of the first volume (2014) shamelessly asks Nakia (who wears a hijab): “nobody pressured you to start wearing it, right? Your father or somebody? Nobody’s going to honor kill you?” (Wilson/Alphona 2014: [2]). The blatant ignorance of the remarks is evidenced by the reactions: Kamala hides her face in embarrassment while Nakia counters that her dad wants her to take it off, thinking it is just “a phase” ([3]). This short sequence is the only place in the *Ms. Marvel* series to date where the issue of veiling is brought up in connection to such a rhetoric. The wearing of different types of veils, or the lack of veiling, is otherwise seldom brought up verbally, while still being a natural part of the visual narrative. More importantly, when it is brought up, it is on the female characters’ terms. A particularly powerful scene in volume five (2016) shows Nakia and Tyesha debating the use of the hijab and whether or not its religious value has been damaged by the younger generations’ use of it as a more of a secular symbol for justice. While they discuss this, the two women are walking the streets as the leaders of a group of political protesters. The scene exemplifies the way in which both Nakia and Tyesha are portrayed throughout the series: as intelligent, funny, critical and actively engaged in their community. Nakia continues to wear her hijab and Tyesha

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<sup>10</sup> Muslim Students’ Association.

wears the longer chador;<sup>11</sup> the former sees it as a combination of faith, pride and as a social statement, while the latter cherishes it as a symbol of faith. Kamala Khan, on the other hand, does not cover her head except when she attends the mosque. In this way, the *Ms. Marvel* comic manages to depict female characters whose expressions of religion through clothing are neither overshadowed by didacticism, which has been a tendency previously in comics (as noted by Strömberg 2001), nor reduced to symbolic discourses regarding freedom of choice versus oppression.

As noted earlier, negative images and stereotypes of Muslims and Islam have according to Ahmed and Matthes (2017) been a dominating part of the public discourse post 9/11 (235–236). Morey and Yaqin (2011) further note that even though nuanced portrayals are attempted (213–214), the dominant images are still simplistic and thus fail to convey the “unwieldy and complex realities” (19) of Muslim identities. *Ms. Marvel* attempts to disrupt these images by dismantling one-dimensional expressions of identities in the protagonist as well as the supporting cast of characters. An additional aspect of this process is the comic book’s conscientious portrayal of its Muslim characters as flawed and sometimes prejudiced, creating psychological nuance and depth. In volume five of *Ms. Marvel*, the Khan parents Muneeba and Yusuf display a somewhat limited acceptance of difference upon first hearing the news that Kamala’s brother Aamir plans to marry Tyesha (Wilson et al. 2016). She is an African-American woman raised by Christian parents, but she decided to convert to Islam at some point before readers meet her. The initial reaction of the parents is one of shock and dismay—Muneeba laments the news loudly: “I could have gotten an excellent rishta<sup>12</sup> with a Karachi girl who wouldn’t mind having a penniless husband who is too pious to have a bank account or get a mortgage!” ([75]). The reaction is immediately countered by Aamir, exclaiming “[w]hy don’t we just admit what this is *really* about?” He sarcastically continues: “[Y]ou would *never* reject a rishta with a smart, beautiful, honorable woman because of some outdated idea that a good bride looks like a circa-1989 Bollywood commercial for Fair and Lovely.<sup>13</sup> Right?” ([75–76]). Yusuf and Muneeba’s racial bias is shown to be related to their perception of the familiar versus the foreign; Muneeba speaks of “people like us” and “the right background” in relation to Aamir’s marriage ([76]), implicitly constructing Tyesha as Other. Tyesha is visibly uncomfortable, holding a pillow against her body in a protective manner. This shift in the perspective of Othering is a fascinating twist on the ways in which Kamala, earlier in the narrative, is treated by her classmates.

The exploration of the Khan parents’ racial prejudices shows that while the narrative works consciously to disrupt monolithic and monstrous tropes of ‘the Muslim’, it does not shy back from displaying flawed characters. There is something inherently human in prejudices, and in this scenario the comic book shows how issues of culture, religion and race intersect in a variety of ways across different groups in society. Importantly though, *Ms. Marvel* also explores the ways in which personal biases may be overcome and conceptions changed. Yusuf and Muneeba quickly realize that they have a lot in common with Tyesha. When they meet her parents, Yusuf’s reflections on generational and cultural changes brought on by their children reveal a multidimensionality in his

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<sup>11</sup> A long garment covering the body and the head. It may or may not cover parts of the face.

<sup>12</sup> Marriage proposal.

<sup>13</sup> “A skin-lightening cream popular in Asia” ([76]).

character that contrasts considerably with the previously discussed media images of monstrous Muslim men. The contrast to their initial reaction of this ‘Other Muslim’ girl is great as he concludes the meeting stating he will treat Tyesha “as my own flesh and blood” ([101]).

The family and friends of Kamala Khan are important to the *Ms. Marvel* narrative, not only as pieces of the puzzle that is Kamala’s life, but as fully formed, rounded characters in their own right. Through portraying their relations to each other, their multi-faceted religious expressions, their strengths and shortcomings, the comic further de-monsterizes the monolithic, stereotypical images of Muslims and minority identities.

## Conclusion

As with many superhero comic books before it, *Ms. Marvel* is to a large degree about standing out, about being different—about being, as the first volume title emphasizes, ‘no normal’. In addition to dealing with the extraordinariness of superpowers however, *Ms. Marvel* reflects on notions of normality and monstrosity by questioning dominating, negative stereotypes of Muslims in US political and media discourse. By visually and verbally portraying how these public, monsterizing discourses affect individuals like Kamala Khan both physically and mentally, the comic critically examines the repercussions of issues like Islamophobia, media visibility and targeted surveillance in the wake of 9/11. The comic connects Khan’s exposure to racial, cultural and religious bias to the rigid, normative parameters of acceptance and success in society. These norms, fueled by some of her peers, become monstrous as they continue to eat their way into Kamala’s conflicted psyche, eventually catalyzing a metaphor-laden physical metamorphosis.

My contribution has attempted to show that *Ms. Marvel*’s nuanced and diverse representation of characters like Kamala Khan, her family and her friends, may function as a de-monsterization of very visible minority identities that are often associated with the monstrous, especially relating to fundamentalism, violence and terror. Through Khan, *Ms. Marvel* has further potential to become a powerful text in the discussion of representation of multi-faceted, female identities; but as Kent argues, in order to realize its potential, it is important to focus on “the specificity of Kamala’s female-teen-American-Muslim subjectivity” (2015: 524). What critics have tended to concentrate on is how Kamala’s experiences “fit into their experiences” (524); upon its release, her relatability became the overarching theme for many critics, and the notion that she is ‘just like you and me’ was according to Kent a refrain in the initial receptions of the comic book. It is problematic that the specific experiences of marginalized, multiple identities seem to have been ignored; it moreover underlines the need for critical examinations of these themes in a medium with the range and power of voice such as the comic book. It would be interesting to see further explorations of these topics.

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*Section 2*

Cinema and Television

*Just as monsters are  
the product of categorical breakdown,  
our dispositions towards the monster  
also defy simple categorization*

—Perkins, on page 144.

“[...] processes of othering have been,  
and continue to be, at work here”

—Hiltunen, on page 88.

“Simply put, the monster  
is a living being [...]”

—Robinson, on page 107.

“[...] outside the rules of  
space, time, and causality”

—Lehner, on page 131.

“[...] indeed it is science itself  
that produces a monster [...]”

—Perkins, on page 142.

“[...] the monster  
that has to be fought?”

—Bockwoldt, on page 159.

“[...] in reality he himself had acted  
like the legendary monster [...]”

—Pöttsch, on page 185.

“‘Monster’ can be seen as a  
dynamic site of meaning-making [...]”

—Schubart, on page 195.

“[...] the monster  
is both *other* and *self*”

—Thorsen and Skadegård, on page 218.

## EXOTIC AND PRIMITIVE LAPLAND— OTHERING IN *THE EARTH IS A SINFUL SONG* (1973)

Kaisa Hiltunen (University of Jyväskylä)

**Abstract:** *This article contributes to postcolonial cultural criticism by analyzing how since the 1920s, Lapland and its residents have been portrayed as exotic Others in Finnish feature films that are set in Lapland. The roots of the othering of Lapland go back to the nationalist aspirations of the Finns. The geographical distance of the northern region has bred mental distance, because of which Lapland has remained a source of exoticism for filmmakers, who almost invariably come from the South. Lapland can be seen as Finland's spatial and cultural Other, an "internal Other" (Jansson 2003). This article asks what kind of strategies of othering are used in Rauni Mollberg's film *The Earth Is a Sinful Song* (1973), which is the extreme example of othering among films that are set in Lapland. The film is based on Timo K. Mukka's novel of the same name and it caused a sensation to contemporary audiences because of its harsh and naturalistic way of depicting life in a poor northern village in the late 1940s. The article analyzes the cinematic techniques and style that are used to represent the characters as primitive, over-sexed and uncivilized. It also places *The Earth Is a Sinful Song* in a continuum of 'Lapland films', showing that othering has taken many forms both before and after it.*

**Keywords:** *Finnish cinema; Lapland; Lapland films; the Other; othering; exoticism; *The Earth Is a Sinful Song* (1973).*

### Introduction

Since the 1920s, Lapland and its residents have been exoticized and portrayed as Others in Finnish feature films (Lehtola 2000; Toiviainen 2000; Hiltunen 2014). Several of the films that are set in Lapland suggest that there is something different, uncontrollable, or unexplained about Lapland and its inhabitants. In feature films, Lapland, the northernmost province of Finland, has served as a setting for events that could not take place anywhere else in the country.<sup>1</sup> While earlier films conjured up romantic and mythical visions of Lapland, recent films have been more humorous in their portrayal of the region, which, viewed from the Helsinki metropolitan area, where most of the filmmakers come from, is quite peripheral. It seems that for Finnish filmmakers Lapland has been the most fascinating source of exoticism and adventure inside the country's borders.

This article asks how Finnish feature films that take place in Lapland, 'Lapland films', represent the region and its inhabitants as exotic Others. Rauni Mollberg's film *Maa on syntinen laulu* (*The Earth Is a Sinful Song*, 1973) is analyzed as the main example. Mollberg adapted Timo K. Mukka's novel of the same name into a gritty portrayal of poor people living in a secluded village in southwestern Lapland in the years after the Second World War. The film was criticized for its cruel, naturalistic

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<sup>1</sup> Lapland is defined here broadly as encompassing areas both north and south of the Arctic Circle, belonging to the province of Lapland.

style, but was at the same time praised for its authenticity (Koivunen 1999). The article argues against this claim to authenticity and asks what strategies of cinematic expression contribute to the sense of othering in *The Earth Is a Sinful Song* (hereafter *The Sinful Song*). Sexuality and religiousness emerge as the main areas where the characters are portrayed as Others. The article argues that the film concentrates on those aspects of the novel that were experienced as the most sensational, disregarding its poetic elements.

Mollberg's film is not the only Lapland film that portrays the local characters as primitive and as behaving in an excessive manner, and it is not the only film that links such behavior to sexuality and a perceived enthusiasm for religion and spirituality. These themes and similar representations have come up in several other films since 1920s. This article gives a concise overview of other such films in order to show that *The Sinful Song* is not the only film where such practices of othering can be found, although, as I will argue, it is the most extreme one.

By critically analyzing how differences are constructed in Lapland films the article contributes to what might be called postcolonial cultural criticism in a Finnish context (c.f. Ridanpää 2005: 27–37). This criticism draws attention to inequalities in power structures and to the way these structures are reflected and reproduced in cultural discourses. Analysis of representations of Lapland means analyzing representations of otherness constructed mainly by artists coming from the South. As Ridanpää (2005: 27–28) points out, postcolonial research always needs to be located in a specific context. Therefore, there is no single theory of othering that this research draws from, but a few important contributions need to be highlighted.

Othering, understood as a process of differentiation, devaluation, exoticization and exclusion and discussed by Edward W. Said especially in his study of 'Orientalism' (2003 [1978]; 1994 [1993]: xxviii), has taken various forms in the course of Finnish film history. It reflects the power inequalities and tensions between the North and the South of Finland, and it is underpinned by postcolonial attitudes especially as far as the Sami, the indigenous population of Finland, are concerned (Koivunen 1999; Kuokkanen 2007; Pietikäinen/Leppänen 2007; Saarinen 2011). This article argues that even the non-Sami inhabitants of Lapland are often portrayed as not being quite equal to the people of the South. In this context, the Other emerges as either a Finn or a Sami living in Lapland, with the main focus being on the non-Sami part of the population.

This article considers the Lapland films as discourses that construct an imaginary, exoticizing, image of northern Finland (Naskali 2003: 27). Exoticization is understood as the aspect of othering that emphasizes fascinating differences in the Other. Said's (2003 [1978]) analysis of the way Western writers contributed to the creation of the Orient, an exotic version of the East, is the paradigmatic example of this kind of approach. Literature scholars Juha Ridanpää (2003; 2005) and Anne Heith (2016) have drawn inspiration from Said's method, Ridanpää in his analysis of the construction of the North (as opposed to the South) in Finnish literature, for example in the short stories of Rosa Liksom; and Heith in her research on Laestadianism's role in contemporary Sami and Tornedalian cultural texts. Referring to Said, Ridanpää (2003: 108) points out that when criticizing representations of the Other, there is always the danger of repeating "the same models of totalizing structures and theories which the work was eventually supposed to be criticizing". Indeed, this article emphasizes that not all

Lapland films exoticize in equal measure. It also emphasizes that these films do not constitute a genre: the films are diverse in terms of content and style. The term ‘Lapland films’ is used as a thematically guided shorthand to refer to this heterogeneous group of films.

‘Lapland films’ have received little scholarly attention, although Lapland has been a conspicuous presence in Finnish cinema. Previous research merely mentions some relevant films (Naskali 2003) or concentrates on analyzing individual films (Hiltunen 2014; Koivunen 1999; Saarinen 2011). Jorma Lehtola’s (2000) research on the role of the Sami in Finnish cinema is an exception, but many Lapland films have been produced since then. A comprehensive analysis is not possible here, either, but this study intends to pave the way for future research on Lapland films.<sup>2</sup>

The article first characterizes the relationship of Finland to Lapland and then presents an overview of the ways of othering in key films made before the premiere of *The Sinful Song*. It then analyzes Mollberg’s film in terms of style, depiction of sexuality, religiousness and colonialist attitude, and looks at the film’s reception. Finally, the conclusion points out how similar practices have continued in later films and sums up the findings.

### Lapland as an ‘Internal Other’

The relationship of Lapland to the rest of Finland, or the South, is fraught with tensions. This relationship can on the one hand be approached as the negotiation of the self-identity of people living in the North and the South. This means that definitions of the North and the South are many and the categories are symbolic and subjective rather than objective and clearly defined (Suopajärvi 1999: 18–19). The same can be said about the cultural discourses, which are largely symbolic and imaginary. On the other hand, the relationship needs to be considered on the national level. It has been argued that the othering of Lapland, and of the Sami in particular, has been connected to the self-definition of Finns. In this process, Lapland has been in the position of an underdog (Hautala-Hirvioja 2011: 184, 192; Saarinen 2011: 74–164). The condescending attitude of Finns towards the Sami, which is reflected in films as well as in other cultural products, dates back to previous centuries and Finland’s determination to become a civilized European nation: Finns wanted to distance themselves from the Sami, whom they considered a backward, physically inferior people (Lehtonen/Löytty 2007: 109–110; Saarinen 2011: 36–44).

In Finland, the colonization of the areas belonging to the Sami, the Sápmi, is a controversial issue, in the first place because not all historians agree that colonization has indeed occurred (Kuokkanen 2007: 146). According to Tuija Hautala-Hirvioja (2011: 184), “Finnish pioneers settled Lapland as early as the sixteenth century” (about the colonization of the Sami, see also Kuokkanen 2007). Ulla Vuorela (2009: 21) argues that “we [Finland as a nation] have slowly come to accept the view that we have practiced ‘internal colonisation’ through the ways in which we gradually made the Sámi people retreat towards Lapland from their earlier abodes in the South”. Lapland and its inhabitants have never posed a threat, except perhaps an imaginary one, to the nation or to Finns as an ethnic group. This means that the cinematic representations of

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<sup>2</sup> Sami films, that is to say films made by the Sami, are not included in the analysis, because the focus is on differences constructed by filmmakers that come mainly from outside Lapland.

Laplanders<sup>3</sup> and of the Sami cannot be described as enemy images. While it may also be an exaggeration to talk about *monsterization*, it is undisputable that processes of othering have been, and continue to be, at work here.

Geographically speaking, Lapland has been vital to the nation. Its fells and rivers were considered part of the Finnish national landscape and used in the construction of the nation and its self-image (Hautala-Hirvioja 2011; Saarinen 2011: 113–115), and its beauty has been used to attract tourists to the country. The northern lights and the midnight sun have been presented as a part of Finland's national heritage (Hautala-Hirvioja 2011: 195). Since the early 20th century, the relationship between Lapland and the rest of the country has been one of mutual gain, because Lapland has benefited economically from tourism. In cultural products, othering has persisted even though Lapland is no longer uncharted. Together with other cultural products, films have contributed to the creation of Lapland as a culturally specific and fascinating place. Those aspects of Lapland that set it apart from the rest of the country have been emphasized, and this has usually meant concentrating on selected characteristics such as fell landscapes and colorful Sami costumes.

Geography is one aspect in the process of othering, although films are not always very specific about the geographic limits of Lapland. Films have contributed to the construction of a mythical Lapland by, for example, omitting place names, as happens in *The Sinful Song*, or by mixing local cultures, as is the case in *The White Reindeer*, where the filmmakers picked the most exotic elements of different Sami groups in order to produce an impressive representation of the indigenous population (Lehtola 2000: 139–140). Of later films, Jalmari Helander's *Rare Exports* (2010) and Jussi Hiltunen's *Armoton maa (Law of the Land, 2017)* were shot in Norway, partly for economic reasons and also, in the case of *Rare Exports*, because of the more impressive landscape (Kinnunen 2010). According to Tommi Römpötti (2019), in several Finnish films in the 2000s, Finland is divided into two parts in a way that implies a class division: in this geographical and economic polarization, the poor, working-class North is considered subordinate to the wealthy South, usually meaning the relatively small capital city area of Helsinki.

The othering that takes place in cinematic representations can be seen as a case of 'internal Orientalism', a term that David R. Jansson (2003) uses to theorize the relationship of the United States and its South on the basis of W. J. Cash's book *The Mind of the South* (1941). According to Jansson, the South is represented as an internal spatial Other and he argues that these representations play a part in the construction of a privileged national identity in the US. The term 'Orientalism' originates with Said (2003 [1978]), who argued that Europe used the Orient to define itself by constructing the Orient as different and in opposition to itself. Said (2003 [1978]: xii) emphasized that "neither the term Orient nor the concept West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other". He thereby argues that the 'Orient' is a result of imagination, just like every other attempt to define others. The case of Lapland and the rest of Finland may be a slightly milder version of 'internal Orientalism', but it is recognizable nevertheless.<sup>4</sup> However, it needs

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<sup>3</sup> This term refers to the non-Sami Finns living in Lapland.

<sup>4</sup> Australia may offer another, somewhat similar case. Jane Stadler, Peta Mitchell and Stephen Carleton (2016: 77–80) have taken inspiration from Jansson's term and characterized the role of the Australian



to be remembered that in Finnish films set in Lapland, the Sami have played a lesser role than the Finns. The Sami have rarely been seen as main characters.

Another borderland and a fringe of civilization familiar from cinema is the American West. Lapland has played a somewhat similar role in a couple of Finnish films as the Wild West in American films: both are depicted as regions apart, where different rules apply, and in both types of film a prominent role is given to majestic landscapes. Even a few Westerns have been set in Lapland. The *Villi pohjola (The Wild North)* trilogy (1955, 1963, 1963) by Aarne Tarkas presents a utopian vision of a pristine indigenous people who look like a mixture of the Sami and American Indians (Salmi 1994: 149–150). The influence of the Western can also be seen in Mika Kaurismäki’s apocalyptic *The Last Border* (1993) and the masculine revenge story *Law of the Land*.

What Jansson (2003: 295) says about the role of positive aspects in the othering of the American South applies to representations of Lapland, too: “While I would suggest that overall, the negative representations have outweighed the positive, even positive representations reinforce the idea that the South is different and to that extent strengthen the role of the South as an internal Other”. Emphasizing the beauty of the North can likewise be seen as an example of positive exoticism, but the way the habits and gestures of the local people are portrayed often falls under the category of negative exoticism. *Umur* (Lehtinen 2002), in which the northern people are weird and strangely inarticulate, is a case in point (Hiltunen 2014: 72–73). When Lapland is represented in films, the representation is never neutral. The fact that the story takes place in Lapland is always highly significant and the expectation is that something out of the ordinary is going to happen. Why this might be the case and what such extraordinary events are, will be considered in the next section.

### **The Mythic and Romantic Lapland of the Early Films**

The weight of history and the tradition of cultural expression together with the fact that film production is South-centered and filmmakers bring an outsider’s perspective to the task help continue the practices of othering in Lapland films. There are not many filmmakers with roots in the North and who would be inherently interested in the area. That may explain why the stories are usually only loosely connected to local contexts and why people are portrayed as funny, strange or quirky. In the story-world, too, the point of view in many films belongs to a character who is a stranger to the community (for example, *Umur* and *Kaikella rakkaudella [Things We Do for Love, Ijäs 2013]*). This sense of looking at Lapland from an outsider’s perspective seems to be one of the defining features of these films.

During the first half of the 20th century, the region was still physically separated from the rest of the country: the lines of communication between the North and the rest of Finland were poor and under-developed. Lapland was out of reach for most people and therefore it continued to be an object of wonder. It was not until the late 1960s and after the increase in private car ownership that travel gradually became possible for ordinary people (about the beginning of tourism in Lapland, see Mäkinen 1983). The romantic, exotic representations provided by films also began to attract people to the region (Lehtola 2000: 9). Many of the Lapland films took part in the construction of Finnish

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Tropical North as “a marginalized internal Other”, an anxiety-inducing borderland in Australian cinematic, literary and theatrical narratives (Stadler/Mitchell/Carleton 2016: 77).

national identity by producing imagery considered appropriate for that purpose. The films featured beautiful, untouched landscapes (Toiviainen 2000: 82) and Sami culture, suggesting that Lapland is worth a visit.

In cinematic representations, Lapland continues to be looked at with a superficial tourist gaze and certain stereotypical views persist. Päivi Naskali (2003: 27) observed that “[b]ecause Lapland is far away, for those living in Helsinki it is mentally further than the cities of Europe, it exists as an imaginary image that can be filled with mythical stories”.<sup>5</sup> Although some of the filmmakers were interested in Lapland and even conducted research on Lapland and the Sami, as the makers of *The White Reindeer*—Erik Blomberg and Mirjami Kuosmanen—did, most of the early films display naïve exoticism (Lehtola 2000). All the Sami characters, for example, were played by Finns (Salmi 1994: 150), which suggests that the films were not so much an insider’s as an outsider’s vision of Lapland.

Among the first Finnish feature films to portray Lapland is the horror drama *Noidan kirot* (*The Curse of the Witch*, 1927; translated by the author); directed by Teuvo Puro. It deals with a curse that a male Sami witch put on the area occupied by Finnish settlers after they first blinded and then killed him. Later, when the film’s male protagonist asks his bride to come and settle with him in the North, his blind sister warns the bride of the curse. The bride’s misfortune soon begins, when she is raped by a logger. The film is an adaptation of the northern writer Väinö Kataja’s novel from 1914, in which a witch tries to protect the land against Finnish colonists. However, in the film the situation has been reversed: the Sami witch becomes the bad guy and the Finns finally manage to take over the lands belonging to the Sami (Lehtola 2000: 43–45).

Witchcraft is the key story element also in *The White Reindeer*, a visually outstanding film that set the pattern for later films. According to Heli Saarinen (2011: 114), the film’s mythic Lapland is based on a long tradition of Lapland imageries. It is this mythic quality of Lapland that later films have mimicked, not the story or the film’s style, which are quite unique. *The White Reindeer* was made for an international audience and its release was calculated to occur during the Olympic Games that took place in Helsinki in 1952. In the story, a spell cast by a shaman makes a young woman take the shape of a white reindeer that lures men on and leads them to their death. The Sami, and particularly the enchanted woman, are represented in *The White Reindeer* as commanding mystical forces, as being close to nature and as possessing sexual power. This is not the only case where a female character crystallizes what is different and exotic about Lapland. The tradition continues in *Umur*, where the female character is associated with a white owl; she too is a tragic figure, whom the male protagonist desperately pursues (Hiltunen 2014). Sexuality, in romantic and more carnal versions, but also in connection with wrongdoings, is a recurring theme in the early films.

Romantic encounters between northern women and southern men, as well as darker elements such as mystical rituals and death, were already present in Jack Witikka’s film *Aila—Pohjolan tytär* (*Arctic Fury*, 1951) and in *Maaret, tunturien tyttö* (*Maaret, the Mountain Maid*, 1947) directed by Valentin Vaala (Saarinen 2011: 51). The exotic elements and sinister occurrences resurface in later films, sometimes in a markedly

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<sup>5</sup> As translated by the author. Original text in Finnish: “Koska Lappi on kaukana, helsinkiläiselle henkisesti kauempana kuin Euroopan kaupungit, on se olemassa imaginaarisena kuvana, jota on helppo täyttää myyttisillä tarinoilla” (Naskali 2003: 27).

different register. Teuvo Tulio's last, intentionally tasteless, *Sensuela* (*Sensuella*, 1973) is a campy story of one Sami woman's moral ruin at the hands of a German soldier. In *Sensuella*, excessive behavior is linked to sexuality, as is the case also in *The Sinful Song*, which will be analyzed in detail in the following section.

### **The Wretched Others in *The Earth Is a Sinful Song* (1973)**

*The Sinful Song* offers a completely different view of Lapland than the earlier films, particularly in terms of film style, but also in terms of content. At the time of its production, in the early 1970s, the hard years of the post-war reconstruction were over and the country's economy was developing fast. The basis of the welfare state was being built and differences in income were growing smaller. A lot of people had already moved into cities as part of the urbanization process (Roos 1999: 17). *The Sinful Song* takes the viewer back to the immediate post-war years. The film does not explicitly situate the story in the late 1940s and the reconstruction time, but this is the period that Mukka's novel, on which the film is based, depicts. The reconstruction of Lapland began later and proceeded more slowly than in the rest of Finland (Tuominen 2015: 64–70), and therefore Lapland was particularly vulnerable during this historical period. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a lot of people emigrated from northern Finland to Sweden in search of work.

This article analyzes *The Sinful Song* in the context of Lapland films, although in terms of style a more likely context might be socially conscious films, such as Risto Jarva's *Työmiehen päiväkirja* (*A Worker's Diary*, 1967) and Mikko Niskanen's *Kahdeksan surmanluotia* (*Eight Deadly Shots*, 1972). *The Sinful Song* breaks the image of Lapland as beautiful postcard scenery, but it offers a different kind of exoticism through its naturalistic depictions of people and landscapes. It portrays its characters as uncivilized and primitive, animal-like in their instinctual behavior—a vision that shocked many contemporary viewers, standing as it did in such stark contrast to the atmosphere of progress prevailing elsewhere in the country (Koivunen 1999).

The film's setting is an unnamed village in Lapland. As far as the storyline is concerned, the film adapts quite faithfully Timo K. Mukka's (1944–1973) first novel, which was published in 1964. Mukka lived most of his short life in the municipality of Pello, in the valley of the River Torniojoki. According to literary critic Olavi Jama, Mukka was the first northern writer who, albeit with great difficulty, gained recognition as one of the foremost Finnish writers of his time. Jama points out that in literature, Lapland was tied to exoticism until the 1950s and that Mukka was one of those who managed to detach himself from that tradition (Jama 2010: 154). Mukka, whose life was marked by poverty, illness and existential and religious crises, found the inspiration for his first novel, which he finished at the age of nineteen, in his immediate surroundings. The novel is set in a fictitious village called Siskonranta, which appears to be like one of the villages in the area of Pello.

In the film, the actors—most of whom were amateurs from the region—speak the local dialect. The scenery suggests that the setting is further north, and as the National Audiovisual Institute announces on its website (KAVI 2013), the film was shot in the village of Kittilä, about one hundred kilometers north of Pello. The film portrays sickly, wretched people, whose lives revolve around trying to meet their most basic needs. Birth, death, desire, sickness, and violence are the main elements of the narrative, at the

center of which is the 18-year-old protagonist Martta and her awakening sexuality. She lives with her parents and grandfather in a small house in an isolated community, where life is cruel, filled with endless toil and hardship. With the exception of the love-struck Martta, everyone looks tired and unkempt; quite indifferent to their overall appearance.

The tale of awakening sexuality is framed with ever-present death. Early in the film, a migrant worker is stabbed to death at an open air dance. It is the first in a series of six deaths that the film includes. Next to die is a calf, which Martta's father chops to pieces in its mother's womb because it was in the wrong position. The film shows events in close-ups as the father puts his hand inside the cow and draws out a piece of the calf's leg. Thirdly, a single mother, Aino Liinukorpi, bleeds to death after a miscarriage while her four children, who sleep in the same room, watch and cry. Later, the grandfather dies of poor health, Martta's lover dies by drowning in the icy water after having been chased there by Martta's father, and close to the film's end the father hangs himself behind a shed. The film's last scene, which follows immediately after the father's suicide, and in which Martta, who has given birth to a baby, walks across the yard carrying the child, leaves the impression that life in the village will continue as it has done until then: children will be born and they will continue to grow up and live here as previous generations have done, struggling to stay alive. The film evokes the impression that Martta resigns to this fate.

### **Poor Laplanders Under a Magnifying Glass**

The lack of contextualization in the film contributes to the impression that the film is about Lapland in general and consolidates an image of the region as a mythic place, somehow outside of time. Because the film is vague about the geographical and temporal location of the story, the narrative has the feeling of a timeless struggle for survival. Jama (2010: 154) observes that, historically, in Finnish fiction Lapland has stood in for a past, lost world, and this is also the impression that Mollberg's film creates. The lack of spatial coordinates as well as of an outsider's point of view within the story world enhance the feeling of oppressive inwardness and seclusion. Mollberg does not make the point that the depicted poverty is a consequence of the war. As a result, the events lack historical contextualization and the film seems to state that primitive conditions are a natural state of things in these areas. The connection must have been obvious to a contemporary audience, but some of the negative criticism suggests that, nevertheless, his vision was considered racist and essentializing. This is also the reason why Mollberg's project appeared ethically questionable to some critics at its time (see, for example, Toiviainen 1973; Tuuli 1973).

The feeling of exclusion dominates *The Sinful Song* as a cinematic experience for another reason too: to this feeling contributes, somewhat paradoxically, the voyeuristic camerawork. The intruding camera does in fact represent an outsider's point of view, but this outsider remains outside the story world and thereby only enhances the feeling that something exotic and distant is being observed here. The poor villagers are placed under a harsh light and the cold, arrogant eye of the camera. The actors often utter their lines with too much pathos, creating the impression that the filmmaker feels no empathy with the protagonists.

It appears that Mollberg was not interested in recreating Mukka's poetic expression, and some critics saw this both as the main difference between the novel and the film and

as the film's major flaw (see, for example, Toiviainen 1973: 10). The film's set designer, Ensio Suominen, has made the same observation (as can be seen in an interview that was included in the film's later DVD release). Jama points out that Mukka described existential pain not according to the tradition of realism but by venturing outside the rational world, and that the writer's tortuous relationship to religion was an essential part of this style. According to Jama (2010: 150–153), Finnish modernism and Arctic Laestadianism meet in Mukka's style, which he terms 'Laestadian existentialism'. This existentialistic aspect of Mukka's worldview present in the novel is virtually nonexistent in the film.

The film's naturalistic style is exemplified in the way the camera invades private spaces and zooms in on unpleasant details such as the characters' ragged clothes, greasy hair and bad teeth. One scene begins with a close-up of Martta's sickly mother with a weary look on her face and continues with a panning shot that reveals the miserable interior of the family's house: cheap utensils containing disgusting looking leftovers lying on the rickety tables. This is an example of how the voyeuristic gaze operates in Mollberg's film (see figures 1a–1b).



**Figures 1a–1b.** Voyeuristic camera reveals miserable details of life at Martta's home, where life is constant struggle for her sickly mother [0:15:21–0:15:40]. Screenshots taken by the author.

The narrative shifts swiftly from one scene to another, and the lines spoken by the characters are short. Especially during the first third of the film, the narrative shows the characters' daily toil in short scenes without an apparent plot structure. The corporal acting style and the haptic quality of the images add a sense of exaggeration and poignancy to the cinematic expression. It is almost as if the actors were performing on a theatre stage. The film's first scene illustrates this abrupt style. Martta is on a foggy lake in a rowing boat with her grandfather when they meet another vessel with men on board. The parties comment on their poor catch and start to laugh excessively, for no apparent reason. The boisterous laughter is emphasized by fast cuts into close-ups of the laughing faces. Such excessive and apparently unmotivated reactions recur throughout the film (see figures 2a–2b).



**Figures 2a–2b.** By making the characters react excessively, the film emphasizes their primitiveness [0:00:49–0:00:58]. Screenshots taken by the author.

The film gives the impression that in these severe conditions, people behave cruelly to one another. Their talk is crass and their gestures abrupt, in some scenes obscene. Without considering his son's feelings, the grandfather accuses him of having chosen a sick, worthless wife. The mother scolds Martta for sleeping naked and says she will turn out like Aino Liinukorpi, who 'sells her ass'. The grandfather kicks the dog and chases it with an axe in a manner that looks painfully real on the film. The landscape remains in the background for most of the time and when the camera does pick out and linger on something beautiful in the landscape, the human presence clashes with its beauty. When Martta's father returns from a visit to Liinukorpi, the autumn landscape is at its most colorful, but the mood of the scene is as black as the father's mind: he has had a dreadful night trying to save the calf and his father has spoken cruel words about his wife.

According to Helena Mäkelä-Marttinen, ballad and naturalism are the two dominant genres intersecting in Mukka's works. In his narratives, sublime and grotesque styles of narration repeatedly alternate. The sublime is reserved for expressing the sensitive inner world of the characters, while the grotesque style is used for descriptions of the external social world. Naturalism also shows in the deterministic structure of Mukka's narrative, in its inevitable progression towards a tragic end, while the ballad form emerges occasionally as an individual's cry for help (Mäkelä-Marttinen 2008: 13–14, 20–24, 95). Mäkelä-Marttinen describes the ballad as a moment of beauty and relief from the ugly reality expressed through the characters' voices. According to Mäkelä-Marttinen, Mukka uses these two stylistic devices to express the characters' liminal situation; the demarcation between the spiritual and the corporal (Mäkelä-Marttinen 2008: 24).

Unlike the novel, the film has only the external narrator and its objectified point of view. In the film, elements of the ballad have been suppressed and only the naturalistic, at times grotesque, style remains. The beauty of moments that the characters could experience is not foregrounded in any way. In Mukka's works, morbid sexuality and sadism are an allegory of the evil world (Mäkelä-Marttinen 2008: 387), while in Mollberg's film these are naturalistic aspects of the life of the secluded community.

### **Over-Sexualization as an Act of Othering**

The film represents its characters' sexual activity in a very unpleasant way. The figure of Martta continues the tradition of dark, sensuous northern women, but she is more down-to-earth than the women in the earlier films. In the course of the narrative, she develops into a force of nature, craving more experiences; it is as if she could not help herself once she has started (c.f. Lehtola 2000: 138). Everything that happens to Martta is very straightforward: no aura of mysticism is created around her. She gets pregnant after her first sexual experience, but keeps it a secret. According to Toni Lahtinen, in Mukka's novel, Martta is likened to nature, but this does not mean that she is subjugated: she is represented as an independent sexual agent, whom men cannot control (Lahtinen 2008: 176–177). In the film, she is a relatively independent sexual agent too, but she is also a victim of circumstances in the sense that she is exposed to the power of men in her everyday life. Old men grope her and even her grandfather behaves intimidatingly. When Martta cries during the night after her first sexual experience, her grandfather, who sleeps in the same room, comments that it is cold in the house and comes closer to her. Martta asks him to come and sleep by her side to make it warmer, to which he grunts: 'What would happen if I came? I screwed a lot of women when I was young. You need to know that'.

Sexuality is one of the main areas where the characters are marked as Others. The characters are depicted as over-sexualized, as is often the case in representations of strange cultures (see Hall 1997). The villagers are presented as having double standards. Martta is scolded for promiscuity and for sleeping without any clothes on, and her mother accuses her of sleeping with Kurki-Pertti, the man who made her pregnant. Her sexual behavior is monitored, but most of the time this appears to be a lame attempt at control in a community where sexual morals and mores otherwise are loose. The fact that the villagers are religious does not prevent them from indulging in drink and sex. Alcohol takes away their inhibitions and they are content to make out with the person closest to them; old or young. Sex frequently comes up in talk. When Martta asks her friend Elina what she should do when she desires a man, Elina answers that she should read the Bible. Later, Elina confesses her sins to the preacher who has come to the village to arrange a religious gathering.

Human intimacy is depicted as an act limited to the satisfaction of primal desires: there is hardly any tenderness in the encounters between men and women. When Kurki-Pertti starts to persuade Martta to have sex with him, she is brushing a cow. In order to excite her he tells her about the breeding of Martta's cow, describing how their bull 'put some good into her [the cow's] ass'. Soon after this, Martta experiences her first sexual act, among hay stacks, with the heavy man panting on top of her. In another scene, Aino Liinukorpi offers sex as payment for help with the cow, and when she goes to bed with one of the village's young men, the bloody water beside the bed reminds us of what happened a moment earlier with the cow.

The revivalist version of Lutheranism, Laestadianism, represented in Mollberg's film is an integral part of Mukka's novel. According to Ilpo Pursiainen, Mukka was critical of Laestadian preacher institution, but this criticism was pushed aside by some commentators who were close to the religious movement. They suggested that Mukka might in fact be referring to Korpelianism (named after the preacher Toivo Korpela), a radical religious movement which detached itself from Laestadianism and which was

active for a short period in the 1930s in the Tornio valley, particularly on the Swedish side of the border. It is well known that in this movement, religious hysteria was channeled into sexual behavior and that several members of the movement were sentenced to prison for sexual harassment of minors (Pursiainen 1999: 76; Pursiainen 2001: 80). This is in fact what happens in the film during the religious gathering. The preacher talks at great length about the sins of the villagers, saying that the sins of their long gone predecessors are still upon them. When he tells them to ask for forgiveness, the congregation becomes visibly stirred. Awe turns into sexual desire and even the devout Elina is lured into a sexual act with the preacher himself. Pursiainen (1999: 76) commented that the aggressive, manipulative sexuality of the preacher is something that could happen within Laestadianism as well, and that Mukka was not portraying Korpelianism.

Whatever the name of the specific sect, the film can be said to portray religious hysteria. Literature scholars count Mukka among those writers who have expressed what is called Arctic hysteria, characteristic of which are, on the one hand, exaggerated physical expressiveness and, on the other, withdrawal and depression. Such dichotomies are typical of northern literature, as Pirkko Puoskari explains, citing Markku Itonen (1999; cit. in Puoskari 2016: 8–13). It is no exaggeration to state that this applies to many Lapland films, too. In *The Sinful Song*, ecstasy and misery alternate in everyday life.

Within this community of Others, the Sami are portrayed as doubly Other. They are eye-catchingly attractive in their traditional outfits in the film's otherwise gloomy world. Martta falls in love with Oula Nahkamaa, who has come to the reindeer round-up, which is depicted as an exciting spectacle.<sup>6</sup> The butchering of the reindeer is shown in graphic detail and a lot of time is devoted to it, as if in an ethnographic film. The heroes of the sequence are men dressed in gákti, the bright blue Sami costume, but it appears that not all of them are Sami but men from the village can also be seen among them. In his gákti, Oula, whose skills the sequence stresses, looks like a good alternative to the shabby local men, but there are obstacles to Martta's happiness. Her family considers Oula a bad choice, claiming that he has fathered children with several different women, and her father determines to kill the man. This is an example of depicting someone who is different as over-sexualized. Within the story this negative opinion is represented as belonging to Martta's grandfather and father. Close to the end of the film, the father chases Oula to a frozen lake, where Oula falls through the thin ice and drowns. The role of the Sami and their culture in the film illustrates the claims of Lehtola (2000: 9–17) and Salmi (1994: 150) that in cinema, Sami people have been used as exotic attractions or curiosities rather than as full human beings. Lehtola points out that reindeer herding is used in cinema to typify the Sami, even though only one fourth of the Sami own any reindeer (Lehtola 2000: 262–263) (see figures 3a–3b).

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<sup>6</sup> According to Lehtola (2000: 204), this is the first time in Finnish film that a Sami man is desired by a non-Sami woman.





**Figures 3a–3b.** Martta’s lover Oula is portrayed as a stereotypical Sami, skillful at handling the reindeer, and as an over-sexualized Other [0:41:27–0:41:50]. Screenshots taken by the author.

### Colonialist Viewpoints and the Film’s Reception

The film’s reception makes clear the ideology according to which Lapland is a world apart, different from the rest of Finland. In the public response to the film, there were many examples of colonialist and racist attitudes, ignorance and naiveté—that is to say, practices of othering on many different levels (Koivunen 1999). To the film’s director, Rauni Mollberg, who was born and lived most of his life in southern Finland, it was “the first true film about Lapland”. He considered that Lapland and its people were closer to nature than people in the South and not as estranged from their emotions as southerners were (Lehtola 2000: 201–202). Many critics shared his opinion that the film was an authentic depiction of life in the North (Savo 1973; Talaskivi 1973). According to one critic, the film enlightened viewers about the conditions of life in Lapland, indicating the belief that not much had changed since the post-war years (Talaskivi 1973). Bengt Pihlstöm (1973) supposed that for people in the South, the film’s events might seem scary and gloomy but that viewers in Lapland would see them as everyday reality. He emphasized the otherness of Lapland by arguing that there is a bigger difference between Helsinki and Lapland than between Helsinki and Paris.

At the time of its release the film appeared to some as fresh, powerful and different from contemporary films. It was praised by many for its naturalistic style (Savo 1973; Talaskivi 1973). Other voices were more critical, arguing that the film demeaned northern people by representing them as primitive and brutal (Suominen 1973; Tuuli 1973). Some critics commented that the film did not help generate proper discussions about Lapland and its problems. At least two critics compared it adversely with Niskanen’s *Eight Deadly Shots*, arguing that Mollberg’s film had no social relevance because it concentrated on exhibiting the misery of just one family. (Toiviainen 1973: 10; Tuuli 1973.) Some were worried that such a hopeless vision would only do harm to Lapland. Despite the divided opinions, of all Finnish feature films, *The Sinful Song* had the biggest audience during the period 1971–1980 (Uusitalo 1999: 26).

Anu Koivunen has analyzed the film and its reception, detecting a colonial gaze both in the film and in the criticism. A widely shared opinion was that the film portrayed the people of Lapland as ‘authentic’ and living close to nature; they were considered to

have something that other Finns had lost. She lists expressions in which colonialist attitudes were implicit or that referred to the film's problematic nature: 'authenticity', 'realism', 'naturalism', 'primitive', 'exoticism' and 'ethics'. Koivunen considers it racist to represent the way of life of the northern people as idealistically natural and essentially different. (Koivunen 1999: 189–190.) She concludes: "*Sinful Song* was also regarded as a kind of an anthropological peep-hole opening into another world, where there was no lack of exoticism" (191).<sup>7</sup>

Part of the audience seemed to watch the film as a documentary and take it for granted that the South and the North are two separate realities. Northern commentators who were more familiar with the actual situation in Lapland were slightly more critical. However, the dominant view that comes through in the reception of the film was that it was the South looking at the North in the film and that it saw something that was at the same time both fascinating and repulsive. Now it seems clearer that it was the style of the film that made the characters seem to be like creatures in a laboratory—a human laboratory: the people living in Lapland were observed from close range like they were exotic creatures. This same idea can also be read between the lines in many of the critiques. By not situating the events anywhere in particular the film strengthens the impression that Lapland is a great unknown—a terra incognita. In this 'wherever' where everything has come to a standstill, northern people can be portrayed as primitive, reduced almost to the level of animals.

### **Conclusion—The Continuation of Exoticization**

This article has analyzed how processes of othering operate in *The Earth Is a Sinful Song*, on the level of film style and on the level of content. As far as film style is concerned, a central finding is that an intruding voyeuristic gaze that emphasizes misery and ugliness together with an exaggerated acting style serve to other and exoticize the film's characters. In the film several categories of othering intersect: the othering occurs on the basis of race, class and gender. Female characters represent in many of the Lapland films, also in the case of *The Sinful Song*, what is different and exotic about Lapland. The same can be said of the Sami characters.

*The Sinful Song* exemplifies several of the strategies used in colonialist discourses that Pietikäinen and Leppänen (2007: 181) list in their article discussing the power of language to construct the imagery of the Sami, who are Others in Finnish culture. Their list is a summary of the ways that various colonized people have been portrayed all over the world. Although the non-Sami inhabitants of Lapland have not been colonized in the strict sense of the word, the list can be applied to the film's representations of them as well. The characters are used as 'objects of melodramatic entertainment', they are 'ruined' and 'dirty', 'lacking culture', 'followers of the rules of nature instead of the rules of culture', and they are 'irrational' and 'eroticized' hypocrites. Just like language, cinema constructs otherness by using conventions and expressions that may on the surface seem natural.

The article has also sought to place the film in the context of other Finnish 'Lapland films' in order to show that othering and exoticization have taken place in both earlier

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<sup>7</sup> As translated by the author. Original text in Finnish: "Syntistä laulua katsottiin myös eräänlaisena antropologisena tirkistysaukkona toiseen maailmaan, josta ei eksotiikkaa puuttunut [...]" (Koivunen 1999: 191).

and later films. Although exoticism never quite reaches the same pitch as in Mollberg's film, it is present in different forms. The aim has been to show how earlier films, most importantly *The White Reindeer*, have set up models for later films to follow. Arguably, *The Sinful Song* too has been such a model. Therefore films such as *Umur, Mosku—lajinsa viimeinen* (*Mosku—The Last of His Kind*, Suominen 2003) and *Kättilö* (*The Midwife*, Jokinen 2015) continue to represent Lapland as mystical, wild and excessive. Marja Pyykkö's *Kekkonen tulee!* (*Kekkonen Is Coming!*, 2013; translated by the author), which is based on the northern writer Pia Pesonen's collection of short stories *Urho Kekkonen Strasse* (2011), is a recent, humorous variation on the theme of Arctic hysteria. In this farce, a small town is fanatically preparing for the expected visit of the president, Urho Kekkonen, in the early 1970s. Some people go out of their way to welcome Kekkonen, believing that a meeting with the president will change their lives for the better. Eventually the president's motorcade arrives, but it drives straight through the village without stopping. As an example of Laplanders' primitive sexuality, a pregnant woman has had herself tied to a cross because she is not sure she could resist 'Kekkonen's flesh'. The humorous trend continues in *The Lapland Odyssey* trilogy (*Napapiirin sankarit*) directed respectively by Dome Karukoski (2010), Teppo Airaksinen (2015) and Tiina Lymi (2017), in which manic activity alternates with melancholic, even suicidal feelings.

Throughout its history, Lapland and its inhabitants have been represented as exotic, strange, mystic, uncivilized, primitive, crazy and comical in Finnish cinema. In Lapland films, filmmakers coming from southern Finland have defined and characterized Lapland according to their own needs, creating imaginary versions of Lapland. These films are examples of how the collective imagination repeats itself. *The Sinful Song* is the only Lapland film that has aroused heated discussion among Finnish audiences, and this is partly because it was based on a well-known novel that was already a sensation. The article's discussion of the film's reception shows that despite the divided opinions the various critiques agree on one thing: the film represents the North as markedly different from the South. The fact that little attention has been paid to the processes of othering in the other Lapland films may indicate that such representations have become habitual and invisible. It is therefore important to continue to question the ideological underpinnings of the representations of Lapland in Finnish cinema.

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## Biographical Note

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## TAMED MONSTERS AND HUMAN PROBLEMS IN CINEMA'S *INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE* (1994)

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**Abstract:** *What can the taming of the monster reveal about its construction and the potential and limits of change? Modernist, individualist qualities of Western culture and society have shaped the construction and deconstruction of the monster in popular culture in general and film in particular. The idea of an historically emergent human nature and its associated norms is key to the construction of the monster as transgressive. Less obvious but nonetheless apparent is the constraining role this Western construction of human nature continues to play in recent cinematic attempts to approach the monster more closely. These are explored through a consideration of vampire movies within the horror genre, with a focus on Interview with the Vampire (dir. Neil Jordan, 1994), as arguably both influential within and emblematic of a more general trend. The film dismantles the conventional monster figure of the vampire, humanising her by detailing her transposition from a natural, human setting to something otherworldly. Human (read as Western) qualities are reinforced and salvaged from the disturbing ambivalence of conventional monstrosity, as we observe the logic of 'human' adaptation to alien conditions. In this way, both the paradoxical model of freedom as conformity to nature and the naturalising reification of contingent social groupings are re-affirmed.*

**Keywords:** *modernism; humanism; nature; film; monsters; vampires.*

### Introduction

Louis de Pointe du Lac looks out of the hotel window, suited and ponytailed, his back to the foregrounded young journalist who prepares to tape their conversation, arranging those cumbersome late-20th-century accoutrements of documentation. Imagine the impression of the scene, or perhaps remember it: the opening encounter of *Interview with the Vampire* (dir. Neil Jordan, 1994). “What do you do?” is the routine question. “I’m a vampire”, is Louis’s deadpan reply, simple but facetious. Realisation—conventions invoked and recalled—precedes the sight of his face, creating the requisite dramatic tension. Then he turns. Thus revealed is the rising star, Brad Pitt, already instantly recognisable, and thus a cipher for an ordinary acquaintance who now looks ominously different—pale, unwholesome, brittle. On one level, this is a rehearsal of an old convention, of the horror genre per se and the vampire narrative specifically: the shock of the familiar turned alien and threatening. On another, it is the dismantling of such conventions. The monster is a key feature of horror. It creates the desired affective response (fear, disgust or at least surprise and excitement) by balancing proximity and familiarity with just enough distance and under-specification to evoke mystery and menace. What could be more normalising and thus disruptive of this affective balance than something so mundane as an interview, for the vampire to put an end to all uncertainty and tension by explaining everything? It is this wilful wrongness that lends the film the quality of surprise, discernible from the first scene onwards. What makes it

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noteworthy is the trail of similarly ‘dysfunctional’ approaches in its wake. A recent example, *What We Do in the Shadows* (dirs. Jemaine Clement and Taika Waititi, 2014), tells the tale, documentary style, of vampire housemates with the difficult task of keeping the place nice while slaking their thirst for human blood. Hence, Jordan’s work forms the focus of the following analysis on the grounds of its disruption of conventional monstrosity. The goal is not to argue directly for its originality but that it in any case marks a kind of turning-point in the cultural ‘stream’. It thus highlights popular culture’s changing constitution of the monster.

The trend towards the dismantling or demystification of the monster is of particular analytical interest because of its political implications. It raises questions about the social and political context of the monster as a widely recognised figure of otherness. It can hardly be doubted that the constitution of the other is a matter of some importance and even urgency in light of contemporary political developments. A populist, xenophobic reaction to the perceived threat of outsiders, especially those on the move, appears to be spreading like a hysterical epidemic across a host of disparate countries. The following analysis presupposes a connection between the realm of culture, on one hand, and social and political relationships on the other. Insofar as Westerners make enemies of migrants, the resilient literary and cinematic trope of the monster plausibly provides relevant permissive conditions. Any consideration of such a connection can only, in this context, provide a measure of educated speculation. This is not unusual. Opinion will probably always be divided on the reactionary versus progressive impact of the 19th century rise of the Gothic novel, for example, as escapist and/or transgressive in relation to the emerging bourgeois values of early capitalism (Kilgour 1995: 10–11). Such questions are as important as they are immune to empirical proof. The specific connection following from a focus on the shift described above concerns the potential political effects of the new currency of positive, even amicable and conciliatory, depictions. Such a question focuses attention on a challenge to conventional monstrosity: an effort to reach out and *understand*, an apparently liberal gesture opposing the conventional practices of flight, destruction and demonization.

What follows are hermeneutical reflections on *fin-de-siècle* developments in the moving-image depiction of a particular recognised form of monster, as the basis for their political-philosophical interpretation. Formal analysis of the language of cinema will be considered only insofar as it contributes to the construction of meaning and stimulation of the spectator’s affective response. The approach, in other words, is phenomenological, reflecting an epistemological concern with spectator effects rather than the craft of filmmaking per se (Sobchak 1992: 3–50). Such effects can then be placed in the broader frame of social and political relationships, in their reproduction and mutation over historical time. This implies an historicising investigative strategy, and, given the presupposition of a connection between culture and politics, that this is bound to work both ways. Popular genre tropes as purveyed by such industry giants as Hammer Film Productions, and paid ironical homage by more recent movies like *Mars Attacks* (dir. Tim Burton, 1996) and (arguably) *Starship Troopers* (dir. Paul Verhoeven, 1997), resonate, at any rate, with the political rhetoric of ‘evil empire’ or ‘axis of evil’.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> US President Ronald Reagan famously declared the Soviet Union a godless ‘evil empire’ before the National Association of Evangelicals, in Orlando, Florida, in 1983. George W. Bush echoed him in a State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, dubbing North Korea, Iraq and Iran the ‘axis of evil’.



In other words, they have a loose affinity with broadly conservative-communitarian, lately ‘neo-conservative’ perspectives (Hoffman/Graham 2006: 186–207; Heywood 2012 [1992]: 55–96). More specifically, what can the monster *tamed* reveal about its construction and the potential and limits of change? A variety of movies from the late 20th century onwards, from *ET* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1982), through *Monsters Inc.* (dir. Pete Docter, 2001) and its prequel, *Monsters University* (dir. Dan Scanlon, 2013), to some of the latest examples of the vampire genre, self-consciously depart from earlier generic conventions. The departure, however fresh and innovative, has a surprising tendency to offer little more than an alternative way of obliterating difference, sharing, as it does, a deep-seated cultural attachment to a simplifying and at times simplistic dichotomy. Hence, one might mystify the Other and thereby make more palatable the prospect of doing it literal or metaphorical violence. Alternatively, a curiously similar albeit less violent obliteration is achieved through its *de*-mystification, which ‘humanises’ it in keeping with the Western model, and ‘ethnically’ cleanses it of all meaningful complexities or other marks of distinction. The movement from demonisation to humanisation, most conspicuous in the recent TV series, *Lucifer* (created by Tom Kapinos, 2016–), thus illustrates a more general oscillation in Western culture between the binary (and hierarchical) oppositions of Subject and Other (Wood 1985; Walker 1993: 176–179; Leavenworth 2014: 692; Cohen 1996: 7–8).

### **The Monster as Other**

#### *The Modern Western Other*

Consideration of monstrousness and othering inevitably raises questions of subjectivity, modern or postmodern, human or post-human. The binary of self and other cannot be considered in isolation from its contemporary context of profound changes to understandings of subjectivity operative in the cultural field, and their broader embedding in a new kind of global—or at least globalising—social space (Jameson 1984). Such changes undermine the subject’s sense of self, in terms of both internal coherence and orientation in her historical-social context. The oscillation between annihilation and colonisation can be read as a dialectic, in the manner of neo-Marxist or critical-theoretical thinkers such as Fredric Jameson (1981; 1984) and Robert Cox (1981), whereby scholarship can be understood not only as social interpretation but also *intervention*. Cox highlights the dialectical role of immanent critique as the motor—actual or potential—of change. The intrinsic tensions of social formations, and especially the ‘intersubjective meanings’, which support them discursively—more or less concealed as they may be—are nonetheless vulnerable to speech-acts of revelation, which can lead to both critical enlightenment and social resistance of the hegemonic order (1981: 136).<sup>2</sup> The humanisation of the outsider or sub- or quasi-human is best understood—and addressed—in its hegemonic context, how Western society in general and the Enlightenment in particular have constituted a sense of the modern human and political subject. Such humanity can only be intelligibly constituted in contrast and opposition to a notion of what is *less than* or *barely* human (and politically disenfranchised). Hence, as Judith Butler puts it, interpretative frames, especially in these times of war, continually shape our level of affective identification, rendering

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<sup>2</sup> Here, Cox draws on the work of Theodor W. Adorno (1976 [1969]).

some lives more precarious and, moreover, less grievable (2009: 33–62). The recurring trope of the monster can be understood as symptomising and reinforcing such framing.

The idea, exercising enormous influence in Western culture from at least the time of the Enlightenment, of an historically emergent, benign universal nature opens up a cultural space for conceiving otherness in an extraordinarily imperious way.<sup>3</sup> While every bit as universalising as Judaeo-Christian divine purpose, a tension nonetheless arises within the diachronic view of a nature gradually developed and revealed. Some human subjects—or even whole societies—might fall outside the operative domain of humanity and nature, subject to the dictates of convenience and temporal perspective. They in any case become subordinate as less fully human and not entirely natural, their humanity not negated as such but suspended on the grounds of being historically incomplete or unfulfilled. Such a view shaped Victorian justifications of imperialism, like those of one of the East India Company's most illustrious employees, John Stuart Mill (Bell 2010; Campbell 2010). More recently, even a renowned moderate like Michael Walzer (2000 [1977]: 86–101) supported, in most instances, the self-determination of a 'developing' nation-state over intervening to protect human rights. His justification rests on the presupposition of liberal-humanist development-in-progress, which will need to run its course in its own, less than humane way. Such readily imperial habits of thought reflect the paradoxical normalising effect of an individualistic frame of mind, which represents the broadly liberal core of Western society and culture. It also constitutes the central ideological mechanism, which, first, casts the system of limited, representative government as enabling citizens' self-determination and, second, the concentration of capitalist economic power as enabling their self-determination as producer-consumers. To summarise briefly, adequate for the following analysis, such a core is constituted by widespread beliefs in the relative equality and similarity of humans as rational deliberators, whose reasoning powers, properly harnessed by their liberation—paradoxically—form the motor of progress, both material and ethical. The adoption of the abstract individual as reference-point<sup>4</sup> is a strangely mixed blessing. It is the source, on the one hand, of an egalitarian consciousness emerging from the strict hierarchy of the medieval political order, and, on the other, of a powerful normalising tendency, a problematic equation of freedom with submission to the law, which lays the very foundations of the totalitarian mindset. Hence, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, posits that the rational principles of collective political life—best for all—are discoverable by means of rational deliberation. Individual reflection is therefore ultimately the path to comprehending, actualising and applying the 'general will', understood, not as an aggregation of individual goals, but rather the enlightened recognition of the common good (1968 [1762]: Book Two).

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<sup>3</sup> The idea is traceable to Aristotle's account of latent qualities constituting the immanent potential of human nature, which requires the polis for activation, just as the deceptively simple material of the seed requires the right environment to bring forth its nature as a fully developed plant (Sabine 1944: 119–120).

<sup>4</sup> Social contract theorists like Thomas Hobbes (2009 [1651]) and John Locke (2003 [1689]) made the good of the undifferentiated individual axiomatic to an implicit—rational—covenant to submit to sovereign power. For Immanuel Kant, the individual is the sacrosanct and irreducible end of ethical and political life (2002 [1785]).

*The Monster in Art-Horror*

Though the cultural roots of the monster figure clearly run much deeper, it has taken a certain form and role within Western society, which reflect the normalising tendencies described above. Simply put, the monster is a living being, which is in some way held to be wrong, to deviate from the norm. As such, monster figures are inherently diverse (Bordwell/Thompson 2008 [1979]: 330). They might express physical abnormalities, for example, awakening feelings of disgust, such as the corpse reanimated by unknown means and transformed into a zombie (Canavan 2011; Vint 2011: 165–166). Alternatively, they might express attributes considered *morally* objectionable. Deviant morality is the signature of an unpalatable alien nature—all the more appalling for being relatively hidden—exemplified by science fiction’s ‘fake human’.<sup>5</sup> Certain archetypal features can nonetheless be distinguished that make one monster more definitively *monstrous* than another, and thus exert its psychological-emotional leverage: the power of its transgressive qualities to affect the onlooker. Hence, though any poorly categorised creature might qualify as a monster, it is one with distorted *human* characteristics that is most likely to be perceived as *monstrous* and awaken the requisite repulsion or abhorrence. Its crucial reference-point then is a notion of normality. Its upsetting violation is thus the hallmark of the horror genre, as theorised by Noël Carroll (1990). ‘Art-horror’, emerging as a variation on the popular Gothic narratives of the 19th century, distinguishes itself, like *some* others—suspense and mystery for example—as a genre defined in terms of the desired affective response (13; Kilgour 1995: 3–10). As such, it raises two ‘paradoxes of the heart’: first, how the reader or spectator can be frightened by something known to be make-believe and, second, why the reader or spectator would seek out and set store by such an experience (Carroll 1990: 8). The first testifies to the power of human imagination (79–88), the second to the complex workings of human desire (158–195).

Social order, the more or less closely managed regularity—and predictability—of human conduct, depends on a core of shared beliefs, values and norms. The most important are likely to have been almost corporeally internalised and subsequently adhered to more or less automatically. They are the paradigmatic, unquestioned working assumptions of everyday life,<sup>6</sup> ‘intersubjective meanings’, which form the bedrock of any *hegemonic* order (Cox 1981: 136).<sup>7</sup> These taken-for-granted discursive premises are distinct from but also frame the more consciously and readily contestable ‘collective images of social order’ through which ideological tensions are actively expressed and political debate takes shape.<sup>8</sup> The work of Fredric Jameson is useful in this regard, in its similar focus on the workings, through history, of hegemonic power relationships, seen (in keeping with the views of Cox) as having critical roots in the social organisation of

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<sup>5</sup> The ambiguous figure of Starbuck in *Battlestar Galactica* (created by Glen A. Larson and Ronald D. Moore, 2005–2009) is a recent example (Leavenworth 2014).

<sup>6</sup> The seminal work on the epistemology of paradigms is Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970 [1962]). The social, self-reinforcing role of paradigmatic thinking among scholars has at least as much analytical purchase on the everyday workings of ‘common sense’.

<sup>7</sup> Cox draws the idea of hegemony from Antonio Gramsci’s classic exploration of the cultural conditions of institutional stability in capitalist society (Gramsci 1973 [1971; 1929–1935]).

<sup>8</sup> Consider the almost universal assumption of the state as the only possible institutional ground for any political order, which limits political adversaries to disputing its proper role in society: Should it be the economic liberals’ limited night-watchman or the socialists’ active interventionist?

production, but with a particular focus on how these play out in the cultural field (1981; 1984). The oppressive aspects of social existence are mediated or, more properly, repressed by the governing ethos of the age, for example, a broad movement in the cultural field in the late 20th century described by Jameson—as well as others—as postmodernism (1984). Such repression is never total, however. Social dynamics are experienced, at the very least, on an unconscious level, and leave their mark—quite literally—in the symbolic traces of desire. The proper role of cultural interpretation, according to Jameson, is to uncover aspects of the imprint of evolving social-psychological conditions upon the cultural fabric. The process is a kind of ‘negative dialectic’, identifying the limits associated with the necessary partiality of what is known and idealised (1981: 281–292). This is effected by reading literature or film, for example, in that crucial—historically grounded—context.

The more or less conscious project of normalisation, which generates faithful producer-consumers and loyal subjects, suffers from an innate discursive weakness. In order to prepare the conceptual ground for adherence to unquestioned beliefs and associated rules of conduct it is necessary to draw attention to their alternatives. Paradoxically, what is normal has to be questioned in order to become—ultimately, hopefully—unquestioned and even unquestionable because the norm has to be understood before it can be internalised and forgotten (at least on a conscious level). It is this intrinsic self-limiting potential of discursive power in operation, which leads Judith Butler, for example, to highlight the vulnerability of interpretative frames in their very circulation, as necessitating reproduction and hence potential disruption (2009: 12). The paradoxical cultural-political role of monsters can be seen more clearly in such terms. By setting the limit and the boundary, the realm of monsters must also run the danger of offering a kind of escape-route or site of resistance: “*Cave! Hic Dragones!*” The ideal of beauty is contrasted with the monster’s ugliness, wholesome nature with its unnatural, hybrid deformity, and moral probity with its dangerously unfettered, evil and/or brutish caprice. In this way, the monster reminds us of who we are or at least who we *should* be. At the same time, in its abnormality and strangeness, the monster depends upon and inevitably animates the human imagination, with its associated feelings—from empathy to desire—the natural enemy of the conservative, individualist order. The threat is evidenced in the widespread fascination with monsters, the curiosity piqued by their strangeness and not least the desire awakened by such symbols and embodiments of transgression (Lestel 2012). The latter is apparent, not least, in the vampire genre, with its associations of eroticism, metamorphosis and death. So how is the threat to be contained? The unexpected, unusual and out of place tends to simultaneously attract and repel. The typical viewer’s social-cultural background, with its binaries of natural and unnatural, good and evil, nevertheless tends to enhance the latter reaction.<sup>9</sup> The ancients, for example, considered a disfigurement to be a mark of divine displeasure and hence an evil portent (Beagon 2002: 114). In entertaining such an idea one’s curiosity and desire will more likely give way to fear and disgust, and thoughts turn from the investigation of otherness to the practicalities of self-preservation or at least reassurance. This is key to understanding the portrayal of the monster in popular culture—especially its variations.

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<sup>9</sup> See Mary Douglas’s classic exploration of the logic of human disgust (2002 [1966]).

*The Vampire as Other*

Rather than track the monster across the gamut of popular culture, the following discussion will concentrate—largely but not exclusively—on what is arguably an especially illustrative genre, horror, emphasising the subgenre of the vampire, as purveyed in one especially illustrative medium, film. Arguably, this is the archetypal *popular* medium and hallmark of the industrial age, most immediately accessible, most seductive and least literary. Its central place in Western culture is a product of the importance attached to visualisation and the image, with deep roots in Europe's early Judeo-Christian history (Mitchell 1986: 7–46), as well as emerging mechanisms of commercialism between the world wars (Ewan 1977), and late-20th-century globalisation as a kind of cultural imperialism (Barber 1996; 2008: 3–37). *Vampire* film specifically grew out of Bram Stoker's seminal reworking of folkloric myths (2013 [1897]), which was itself a development within the already highly popular format of the Gothic novel (Carroll 1990: 13). The vampire movie-genre exemplifies the monster's depiction as simultaneously fascinating and repellent. Moreover, its narrative management exemplifies the identified normative and normalising practices, reflected in certain formal conventions, whereby the rank outsider, the dangerously different, becomes, above all, a problem to be solved. It will be useful to examine such conventions a little more closely before considering the reworking and disruption wrought by *Interview with the Vampire*.

From its early-20th-century infancy the movie industry generated vampire narratives, including the German silent-era classic, *Nosferatu* (dir. Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, 1922) and the early 'talky', *Dracula* (dir. Tod Browning, 1931), reaching a peak in the heyday of Hammer Film Productions. In the late 1950s and through the 1960s, 'Hammer Horror' became a highly recognisable brand, in both cinema and television, with vampires a notable speciality. *Dracula* (dir. Terence Fisher, 1958), adapting Stoker's novel, was a particular box-office success and spawned a string of sequels. It was arguably pivotal in distilling and dispersing the cultural archetype of vampirism and the operative conventions of an increasingly consolidated horror subgenre (Bordwell/Thompson 2008 [1979]: 329–332). The figure of Dracula, as featured in this movie and its sequels, is thus a kind of archetype. What follows is not an exhaustive account or formal analysis of this particular example or the genre as a whole, but an attempt, more specifically, to distil from 'vampire practice' a kind of model of the monster, its treatment and intended effects, as a strategy of entertainment. The focus is on Terence Fisher's take on the infamous Count as exemplifying the visual-narrative mechanisms at work.

A distance and alienation from the monster is established long before its monstrosity reveals itself. Dracula is introduced as an aristocrat in a distant foreign country, occupying a remote labyrinthine mansion. The distancing effect is both spatial and temporal. We find ourselves in the 19th century with its more conspicuous trappings of what was—even then—an aristocratic time gone by. His nobility adds to the dissonance of the malignant atmosphere of scarcely concealed desire and aggression. The Count is a veritable paragon of civility. The idea of a beast lurking beneath the surface of the conventions of polite society is a powerful one. Monstrosity is nurtured not only by difference but also by the terms of its appearance, by being conspicuously out of place

at the moment of revelation.<sup>10</sup> Apprehension of Dracula's difference—his *deformity*—is meant to shock, from the instant of the first baring of his signature fangs. Small differences, which earlier aroused a vague unease, such as his unwholesome pallor, are revealed as the hallmarks of an inhuman reality. He is actually a kind of supernatural creature, once human but now caught in a horrifying immortal limbo, neither alive nor dead, invisible in reflection, vulnerable to sunlight, and wholly dependent upon a macabre parody of nourishment: to feed on human blood. The unexpected, erotic yet murderous bite of the Count, or the temptress masquerading as his prisoner, threatens death or, worse, inculcation into their own parasitic limbo, to share the fearful plight of the undead. The narrative's emergent problematic is how to ascertain who remains one of us and who has been transformed into one of *them*. Curiosity about the nature of the transformation and its creature is tantalisingly stimulated, only to be checked by the terror and intellectual challenge of deciphering the codes of ab/normality, in order to safely isolate and eliminate the threat. The character and narrative role of such ambiguity illustrates a key characteristic of monsterhood.

As noted above, the monster simultaneously, and paradoxically, tends to prompt both positive and negative reactions. The mechanisms of desire are not hard to decipher. They reflect the double quality of social norms and constraints as part safe haven, part prison. Hence, one may long for escape as much as one fears it. The sexual—and gender—overtones are complex none the less. The connotations of a vampiric desire, which by nature entails no distinctions, and certainly not with respect to gender, express a clear 'queer' undercurrent in a broadly heteronormative culture (Haggerty 1998; Lau 2018). The ambivalence gains its purchase on an even deeper level, beyond the constrictions of society to the very cage of mortality. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes:

The same creatures who terrify [...] can evoke potent escape fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint. This simultaneous repulsion and attraction [...] accounts greatly for its continued cultural popularity [...]. We distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair (1996: 16–17).

The roots of the contradictory reaction may run deeper still, in aspects of the human condition per se. Dominique Lestel maintains that the monster expresses innate and/or emergent human characteristics taken to their logical limit:

Whereas living beings are all biological monsters, humans could be further qualified as *meta-monsters* [...]. They are *meta-monsters* in their ability to beget monsters and also because they dwell in monstrosity by searching for human status *outside the realm of their species* [emphasis in the original] (2012: 262).

Lestel's observations echo Hannah Arendt's (1958) about the peculiarities of human self-consciousness, especially vis-à-vis mortality: to be a product of nature, with its

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<sup>10</sup> As Van Leavenworth argues, drawing on Jacques Derrida, it is what is unrecognised (at least initially), which creates the suitably shocking effect (2014: 692).

cycles of life and death, but disposed to work against their grain, expressed in a complete inability to ‘act naturally’ (as idealised by Rousseau in his extraordinary imaginary of an idyllic, beast-like state of nature [1968 (1762)]). These aspects of the human condition tend to be a source of anxiety and object of repression, however, as the onerous trappings of displacement, alienation and unstable identity. Through repression, what really comes from within may appear to belong exclusively to the hostile external foe. The repressed subject displaces the monster within or, in Freudian terms, projects it onto the monster without (Murer 2009: 117). This may entail a kind of ‘abjection’, where a rigid boundary is drawn, placing the strangely familiar ‘other’ irrevocably beyond the pale as an object of unconditional contempt (115–117). Following Jameson (1981: 17–23), the reaction to the monster is the contradictory effect of internal conflict between habituated acceptance of social norms and sublimated alienation as potential grounds for their rejection.

The relationship between culture and politics is resistant but not immune to social scientists’ favoured narratives of cause and effect. Hermeneutical connections are reflexive, subterranean relationships, the stuff of memory and conjecture. We can speculate but hardly verify, for example, that the atmosphere of Cold-War enmity generated cultural expressions of anxiety, heightened mortality, and fatalism, themes the novelist Martin Amis explored at the time in the essay, ‘Thinkability’ (1987). Such an atmosphere plausibly fuelled the resurgence of the vampire trope, which, in turn, could have helped heighten and consolidate the transnational attitudes of hostility, which formed its background. Commentators argue persuasively that the advent of atomic-cum-nuclear weapons directly influenced popular culture’s post-war monster fixation, in science fiction (Hendershot 1999) and especially as expressed in a film like *Godzilla* (dir. Ishirō Honda, 1954) (Miyamoto 2016). Noël Carroll goes further, to speculate that the intimate experiences of many with outsider status through the hardships of the Great Depression correlated with relatively sympathetic portrayals of the monster, while relative prosperity combined with Cold-War enmity stoked its demonization in the 1950s (208–209). The relevance of such connections has hardly waned. Current public fascination with monsters is exemplified by the continued success of the ‘Alien’ franchise, in the form of Ridley Scott’s prequels *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017), and the huge popularity of television’s continuing zombie-apocalypse hybrid, *The Walking Dead* (created by Frank Darabont and Angela Kang, 2010–). Such pop-culture preoccupations dovetail with and connect to a global political turn to the nationalist, jingoist right in the wake of economic and military crisis. Other impulses are nevertheless observable, intriguing inflections to the traditional narratives. While not exactly unprecedented, they nonetheless show a marked shift of emphasis and, in some cases, a pronounced determination to disrupt or unravel the familiar monster figure, be it a visitor from another planet, a folkloric beast or our old friend—or enemy—the vampire. That they persist into a period of extraordinary and apparently ever-growing global political tension is a curiosity deserving further consideration.

## **Taming the Monster**

### *The Switch of Perspective*

Arguably, the coherence and functioning of the trope depends on maintaining the delicate tension between what is both strange and familiar in the figure of ostensible otherness. As such, the monster is an inherently vulnerable form, susceptible to the vicissitudes of generic over-familiarity, for example. Moreover, there is the risk (and opportunity) of curiosity or desire overcoming the limits imposed by fear. Curiosity and desire are in themselves potentially self-limiting, however, threatening to dissolve the monster and replace it with something else entirely. Determined correction may eliminate otherness as categorically as any stake through the heart. The following example of just such ‘de-othering’ is situated at the conventional limits (or beyond) of the horror genre and partly reflects earlier developments appearing in literary form. Indeed, the film, not unusually, is adapted from a novel.<sup>11</sup> As noted earlier, the domestication or even humanisation of monsters is not exactly new. Ancient folklore threw up the occasional gentle giant in contrast to the fearful ogre, and no consideration of modern horror can overlook the place of curiosity and empathy in Mary Shelley’s iconic monster (2012 [1818]), something not entirely lost in the swathe of cinematic adaptations to follow. The inimitable pathos of the ultimate misfit is invariably preserved, not least in the classic Universal Pictures version.<sup>12</sup> What is interesting about recent changes wrought in the construction of monstrosity is not so much their novelty as their illustration of the *enduring* possibilities and limitations of the Western encounter with otherness.

A clear *fin-de-siècle* trend nevertheless emerges: to abandon the conventional dynamic tension requiring a certain distance, and rather get up close and personal, even to the point of a categorical shift of perspective—the story of the monster as told by the monster. The precursors came from Hammer itself as their usual offerings lost favour. *Dracula AD 1972* (dir. Alan Gibson, 1972) and *The Satanic Rites of Dracula* (dir. Alan Gibson, 1973) sought to reinvigorate the genre with a touch of self-parody and a more contemporary, everyday setting. However unsuccessful, they were an intriguing sign of things to come. A more significant turning-point was the release of Neil Jordan’s *Interview with the Vampire* in 1994, with screenplay by Anne Rice, author of the novel by the same name (1976). A host of vampire stories transposed to contemporary settings ensued, most notably the irreverent hit TV series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (created by Joss Whedon, 1997–2003). The temporal shift is important in narrowing the distance between spectator and monster, but the *perspectival* shift is more decisive in practically uniting them. In *Interview with the Vampire* it is the creature himself who tells the story, drawing the spectator deep into his own monstrous world. A number of succeeding works replicated such a perspectival change in some form and to some degree, including: *Modern Vampires* (or *Revenant*) (dir. Richard Elfman, 1998); *The Little Vampire* (dir. Uli Edel, 2000); the animated film, *Blood: The Last Vampire* (dir. Hiroyuki Kitakubo, 2000); the short film, *Coming Out* (dir. Kim Jee-woon, 2000); the hugely successful ‘Twilight’ series of romantic fantasies—*Twilight* (dir. Catherine Hardwicke, 2008), *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* (dir. Chris Weitz, 2009), *The Twilight*

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<sup>11</sup> Inquiry into such literary-cinematic connections is beyond the scope of the present study.

<sup>12</sup> *Frankenstein* (dir. James Whale, 1931).



*Saga: Eclipse* (dir. David Slade, 2010), *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn—Part One* (dir. Bill Condon, 2011) and *Part Two* (dir. Bill Condon, 2012); and, last but not least, the mockumentary *What We Do in the Shadows* (dirs. Jemaine Clement and Taika Waititi, 2014).<sup>13</sup>

In light of such developments, *Interview with the Vampire* would appear to be a pioneering example or, in its prominence, at least a pivotal one. It tells the story of the vampire ‘in his own words’—for the benefit of an incredulous journalist. Louis recounts—and the film shows—how the vampire Lestat attacked and transformed him, and how he subsequently adapted to his new ‘life’ and its extraordinary demands. From the outset, Jordan employs expressive cinematography to evoke the sense of a very alien kind of perspective:

[...] [A] swooping camera surveys the nocturnal cityscape as it descends from on high. At ground level, the camera floats and glides on its quest through the crowd, a detached yet observant vampiric vision seeing wider and deeper than mortal eyes can (Powell 2008: 93).

Further devices consolidate the effect as the self-proclaimed vampire draws us into his world, evoking:

the nostalgia of memory via period *mise-en-scène* in a pale, washed out palette of blues and greys. Both landscape and surrounds have been bled, their élan vital being absorbed by the vampires’ own. The contrast of pallid background and opulent foreground figures limits actuality to a mere vampiric backdrop. The real is rendered virtual for the vampire, whose actuality is otherwise (ibid.).

Moreover, some judicious editing suggests a compression of time consistent with immortality (96), hence Louis’s surprise—albeit conventional—reappearance to startle his interviewer, but this is only a prelude to their narrative transition to another world.

### *The ‘Human’ Narrative*

What follows is the ‘how to’ of becoming a vampire, not as a conventional ‘fate worse than death’ but an unpacking of the logic and practical—albeit horrific—steps entailed, and the strange, inhuman existence, which awaits. So it is, from the moment the vampire Lestat de Lioncourt sucks Louis’s blood and shares some of his own, thereby transforming him, that the genre slippage begins, as Jordan henceforth uses the conventions of fantasy or science fiction, where the key to an engaging verisimilitude is the internal consistency of a well-observed imagined universe. The film aims to stimulate a morbid fascination with the imaginary condition of the vampire in her (super)natural state. Its horror derives less from the shock encounter with the other, the genre’s stock-in-trade, and more from how *being* other is—shockingly enough—experienced. Having deliberately breached the barriers of fear, customarily containing

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<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Jordan’s prototype spawned its own spinoffs: the sequel, *Queen of the Damned* (dir. Michael Rymer, 2002) and the *Vampire Chronicles* television series (created by Anne Rice and Christopher Rice, 2020–) now in the pipeline.

the viewer's imagination, Jordan takes us on an unpleasant journey to the Conradian "heart of an immense darkness" (Conrad 1998 [1899]: 43). What is entailed in this departure from the traditional standpoint of dehumanising what is too disgustingly or frighteningly ambiguous in its humanity? There is certainly something refreshing and promising about such a fearless engagement with the monster, to seek understanding and reconciliation over antagonism, redolent of that definitively liberal aspiration not to recoil from difference but to embrace it. There is nevertheless an ambivalence to this encounter, which illustrates the vices as well as the virtues of liberal praxis.

The embrace of the monster hides a multitude of, if not sins, then at least difficulties. The spectator is encouraged to get close to Louis but is liable to do so with gritted teeth, figuratively if not literally. Out of curiosity, he is *tolerated* and accompanied on his gruesome journey. Toleration has a long pedigree in liberal thought, connected to arguments for guaranteeing minority rights for example. Its practical applications nonetheless risk a paradoxical relinquishing of moral responsibility, on the one hand to allow any violation that is not one's own concern or, on the other, to dismissively repudiate what one patronisingly *allows*. Isaiah Berlin, among others, identifies the fundamental lack of respect for the (barely) tolerated other contained in the standpoint of toleration (1969: 184). There are obvious connections between a morally ambivalent British culture (and theory) of tolerance (Locke 2003 [1689]: 211–256) and the moral questionability of British imperialism, for example.<sup>14</sup> It should nevertheless be acknowledged that the film's overall effect is to encourage not just toleration but *identification* with the vampire's condition and perspective, to put herself, as it were, in her shoes. Perhaps nothing is more inclined to pique the spectator's morbid curiosity in this regard than the character of the child, Claudia, who Lestat transforms and thus freezes in her immaturity. The proverbial innocent, she is less troubled than Louis by what her new nature commands her to do, that is, to satisfy her thirst for human blood. Her childish yet precocious ferocity, brilliantly portrayed by Kirsten Dunst, provides some of the film's most powerful moments. The case of Claudia also illuminates a key aspect of the film's portrayal of the other. As the story unfolds and Louis's hold on human values weakens, his tolerance of the havoc wrought by, first Lestat, then himself (against his better judgement) and, finally, Claudia, turns to acceptance. He embraces what his nature dictates, however heavily it may weigh on his conscience, and it is through Claudia that we can read most clearly the impetus behind this change of heart. What Louis—and the spectator with him—are learning as witnesses to Claudia's plight are the dictates of nature or super-nature. They learn to live with what super-nature demands: to drink human blood and, in Claudia's case, to grow older in terms of experience while trapped in the body of a child. The figure of the child has an interesting function in this regard as embodying an innocence, which implies minimal agency or responsibility. Her conformity to nature paradoxically legitimises Louis's adult *choice* to follow its dictates, read essentially as self-interest. She holds up the example of necessity; he may thus embrace and justify a paradoxical freedom as

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<sup>14</sup> This becomes especially clear in the light of specific examples of British imperial tolerance, and the persistent patterns thus generated. Hence, the toleration of slavery in the colonies in contrast to the metropole, as documented by Domenico Losurdo's groundbreaking 'counter-history' of liberalism (2011), can be traced to the post-colonial tributary order, the Commonwealth, which consolidated exclusive welfare provisions and other racially charged privileges for the metropole's workforce *only* (Bhambra/Holmwood 2018).

necessity. It is acceptable because it is necessary; it is good because it is the object of his free will.

Frank Grady reads Rice's 'Vampire Chronicles' series (whose first episode led to this film adaptation) as a metaphor for and mediation of capitalism. Marx's notion of capital as accumulated 'dead labour' (Grady 1996: 225) suggests parallels between the parasitic existence of vampires and those who control the means of production. Though the film too can certainly be 'read' this way, there is more to be gained from focusing on how this particular vampire tale expresses still deeper aspects of modern, capitalist society, in terms of the very construction of the human subject. In this regard, the dictates of nature, with which Louis is doomed to wrestle, are especially revealing. Lestat implores him to 'do what it is in your nature to do', to throw off moral qualms that belong to the human world they have left behind: "Evil is a point of view. God kills, indiscriminately, and so shall we" (*IMSDb* 2010).<sup>15</sup> What is 'natural' is an imagined analogue of the 'real world', a novel framework with a number of effects worthy of attention. One is a perverse re-naturing of the monster, whose distinguishing characteristic has been a disturbing categorical ambiguity. The iteration of a new category cannot extinguish that ambiguity altogether. Its residue is preserved in the protagonist's continued inward moral dialogue, as he struggles to negotiate his sense of self between the mutually contradictory poles of human and vampire. In this way, ambiguity increasingly cedes place to dilemma and paradox, however. Thus, an important and dangerous message emerges implicitly from the vampire's condition as portrayed: the categorical difference of the other, and its inherent incompatibility with our utterly different world.

There is nonetheless a paradoxical familiarity to the vampire world. Though portrayed as incompatible with 'our own', implicitly Western, one, ironically enough it nonetheless mimics it in important respects. The vampires' struggle is less with horror's conventional metamorphosis, more with adaptation, as they respond to their radical change of circumstance as humans qua modern subjects. The narrator essentially humanises the monster, even as he regards himself as dehumanised by the monstrous process to which he has succumbed. Though the three central figures handle the situation in different ways, they are all learning how to deal rationally with their new conditions of existence, to identify their own intelligible individual goals, and pursue them systematically. The film readily presents choice as necessity, for example: to live rather than die, to consume human blood and thereby thrive rather than make do with animal substitutes, which promise to undermine the vampire's quality of 'life'. The narrative betrays a clear individualist centre of gravity. Others are of value, but wholly in reference to the subject, as ultimately exchangeable companions, or objects of desire—often murderous. The individual's *modus operandi* is the classic rational-actor model of neoclassical economics. Its narrow, instrumentalist frame of reference is the systematic pursuit of self-serving goals. As widely held norm and self-serving prophesy,

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<sup>15</sup> The full quotation from Anne Rice's 1976 novel reads: "Evil is a point of view. We are immortal. And what we have before us are the rich feasts that conscience cannot appreciate and mortal men cannot know without regret. God kills, and so shall we; indiscriminately. He takes the richest and the poorest, and so shall we; for no creatures under God are as we are, none so like Him [*sic*] as ourselves, dark angels not confined to the stinking limits of hell but wandering His earth and all its kingdoms" (Rice 1991 [1976]: 88–89). The full quote from Neil Jordan's 1994 film adaptation reads: "Evil is a point of view. God kills, indiscriminately, and so shall we. For no creatures under God are as we are, none so like him [*sic*] as ourselves" (*IMSDb* 2010).

it is axiomatic to Western culture and its dominant, liberal ideology. The dubious assumption of *autonomous* goal-seeking ensures that the goals themselves, and their extraordinary conformity to the dictates of a thoroughgoing commodification of both work and pleasure, are never questioned. The hypocritical vision of benign cynicism does not express the horrors of the vampire world, but rather of capitalist society itself. The movie reflects and reinforces the paradoxical individualism at the heart of Western society and culture. It is paradoxical because it heralds freedom as choice and turns choice into natural necessity. The film thus reproduces the ‘intersubjective meanings’ of producer-consumer society, where all choices of any value—to find the work you can and consume the goods you must—are predetermined by the working assumptions of Protestant work ethic and materialist aspiration.<sup>16</sup> These may appear symbolically as natural necessities but they are the product of what Jameson terms “ideological closure” (1981: 49). An historically grounded account of symbolic expressions can be understood in terms of what is structurally active but textually absent: ‘the political unconscious’. These are the fundamental social relations constituted by the mode of production as experienced, repressed, and/or resisted by the active subject (41–49). Kimberly J. Lau identifies the vampiric dimension of resistance lying in its inherent non-productivity, in its challenge to the reproductive heterosexual norm as well as life per se as a linear, *accumulative* process of moving “upward, onward, forward” (3) in favour of the reverberating repetition of an immortal limbo. The ideological *contradiction* this entails should be emphasised, however. Individualism forms the ideological core of capitalist society, in constant, uneasy tension with those norms of reciprocity needed to hold the fabric of social relationships together, not least the dictates of law, human and natural. *Interview with the Vampire* expresses that tension in a hedonistic fantasy of release, deeply rooted in the figure of the frightful, wilful villain, so lovingly nurtured by the Gothic novel (Kilgour 1995: 12).

Furthermore, for all its liberal associations, the film expresses the *political* dimension of Western subjectivity in a way that further reinforces the divide between subject and other. We learn, as the vampiric ‘social order’ takes centre stage, that killing humans is a natural necessity while killing a *vampire* is tantamount to an ‘immortal’ sin. Santiago warns, “[t]here is but one crime... among us vampires here. It is the crime that means death to any vampire—to kill your own kind” (*IMSDb* 2010). Such ethical partiality, depressingly familiar in the history of ethnic groupings, provides the finishing touch to an unearthly analogue of the Western episteme. Freedom as conformity with the necessities of species nature is complemented by a further natural law, that is, loyalty to the natural collective to which each individual necessarily belongs. Logically, the analogue is not a perfect one, in creating an imaginary divide between qualitatively different beings, but as such it takes Western values to a further, and not unheard of, extreme, to equate national-judicial difference with a kind of racial one. A genuine universalism disappears from this picture in favour of separate racial-species universes unto themselves. R. B. J. Walker (1993) identifies how the discourse of national citizenship regularly betrays a kind of doublethink in invoking universal values as the uncompromising grounds of national ones, selectively ignoring their territorial-bio-political partiality. Though few would be likely to suggest explicitly that one’s specific

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<sup>16</sup> Max Weber famously analysed the role of the former in capitalist society (2001 [1930]), while Stuart Ewan explored the roots of contemporary consumerist materialism in interwar America (1977).

national values monopolise and exhaust the possibilities of a universal humanity, one might nevertheless become habituated to behaving as though it were the case. This helps explain liberal political theory's traditional concentration on the territorial entity as its utopian project (15–21), as well as the invocation of necessity to protect the territorial ground of such projects, as *realpolitik*'s "reason of state" (104–124). Hence, it might also help explain the resort to the logic of the natural divide between vampire and human. The contradictions entailed are the natural focus of Gramscian 'immanent critique' or Jamesonesque 'negative dialectic'. The critique highlights contradictions, which cannot be entirely eliminated. They persist in the disquiet of the 'political unconscious', a latent resource for the purposes of insurrection and self-enlightenment (Jameson 1981: 17–22). This casts light on the rich heterogeneity of expressive responses to social conditions, that the continuing 'Vampire Chronicles' coexist with a burgeoning war on terror, just as a film like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (dir. Robert Wise, 1951) did with an escalating Cold War.

The focus has been on one, seminal case, which heralds a trend in the constitution of otherness reaching well beyond the realm of the vampire—within limits: the conventions of the zombie as a body stripped of consciousness, for example, resist such a move.<sup>17</sup> There is nevertheless plenty of evidence of such a trend in a variety of contexts. The inversion of perspective in the treatment of vampires is alive and kicking (however unfortunate the expression) in the mockumentary *What We Do in the Shadows* for example. Otherwise, the TV series *Lucifer* provides fresh perspective on what is arguably the ultimate monster figure of the Judeo-Christian tradition—provoking hostile reactions from religious groups (Richter 2015). Science-fiction antecedents in films like *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Solaris* (dir. Andrei Tarkovsky, 1971) and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (dir. Nicolas Roeg, 1976), paved the way for a more categorical change in later works like *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982), its sequel, *Blade Runner 2049* (dir. Denis Villeneuve, 2017), *ET* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1982), *Total Recall* (dir. Paul Verhoeven, 1990), and the TV series *Battlestar Galactica* (created by Glen A. Larson and Ronald D. Moore, 2004–2009). It remains a question for further inquiry whether such work equally falls prey to the tendency to humanise, individualise and westernise the monster, and thus foreclose the expression of genuine difference or *mutability*. The preceding argument, that the tendency is deeply embedded in long-standing Western cultural practices, at least suggests that the question is worthy of further consideration, without attributing a misleading determinacy to such practices. Initial consideration of *Lucifer*, for example, suggests that the imagined encounter between fallen angel and human, however flippant, is surprisingly nuanced compared to *Interview with the Vampire*. This raises the question of the continued, constraining influence of the conventions of the vampire subgenre, a line of inquiry also meriting further attention.

## Conclusion

Modernist individualist qualities of Western society have shaped the construction and deconstruction of the monster in popular culture in general and film in particular. The idea of an historically emergent human nature and its associated norms is key, not

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<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the scope for interpreting—and reinventing—zombies as a mute symbol of the desperate revolt of oppressed hordes (Canavan 2011) or, for that matter, of unreflective, commodity-fetishistic consumers, raises more possibilities than we might initially suppose.

surprisingly, to the construction of the monster as transgressive. What is less obvious is the constraining role this Western construction of human nature continues to play in recent cinematic attempts to approach the monster more closely. The example of *Interview with the Vampire* is arguably both influential within—and emblematic of—a more general trend, especially in the way it dismantles established monster conventions. By detailing its conditions as a transposition from a natural, human setting to something otherworldly, it is effectively humanised. In this way, human—read as Western—qualities are reinforced and salvaged from the disturbing ambivalence of conventional monstrosity. The spectator observes—and is encouraged to identify with—the logic of human adaptation to alien conditions. Thus reaffirmed is the paradoxical Western model of freedom as conformity to nature (Hobbes 2009 [1651]; Locke 2003 [1689]; Rousseau 1968 [1762]). Beyond the individual subject, collective or political subjectivity is likewise reaffirmed through the idea of a natural order proper to vampires, which mirrors that of humans. The vampires’ *supernatural* moral universe prohibits taking another vampire’s life. The ambiguity of this injunction is a curious echo of that at the level of world politics. Universalism makes all human life sacrosanct but insofar as such universalism falls short, through practical organisation into nation-states for example, it can be inverted. The failure of some actors (at least provisionally) to meet the criteria of full humanity means the sanctity of human life can become to all intents and purposes the sanctity of the life of the citizenry (ours) to be protected by all means possible, whatever the cost to others. The most conspicuously modernist feature of the humanised vampire—and most important failing—is that its nature, though emergent, is essentially fixed. The power of the monster trope to symbolise and illustrate the transformative potential of pliable *humanity* is ironically lost in the very act of a normalising humanisation. For all its vices, the monster is a powerful symbol of transformative change but it will take sensitivity and imagination to make it a *progressive* cultural force. The key may lie in contemporary cultural impulses challenging the anthropocentrism of the humanist tradition of thought. The imaginative potential of the monster to represent humans as embedded in—but not unrealistically determined by—nature resonates with ‘posthumanist’ ideas challenging deeply ingrained liberal assumptions of autonomy and exceptionalism (Hayles 1999). What the preceding analysis illustrates, however, is the robust constraining effect of powerful humanist ideas whose ideological role we are obliged to continue to take seriously (Badmington 2003).

*Cave! Hic dragones.*

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### **Biographical Note**

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**VAMPIRIC REMEDIATION—  
THE VAMPIRE AS A SELF-REFLEXIVE TECHNIQUE IN *DRACULA*  
(1897), *NOSFERATU* (1922) AND *SHADOW OF THE VAMPIRE* (2000)**

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims at describing the self-reflexive functions of the vampire through the lens of remediation. First, I will describe remediation as the central form of representation used in the novel Dracula (1897). Its epistolary form remediates various contemporary high-tech media that are compiled as typewritten pages: It uses a hypermedia strategy. Dracula, the creature, mirrors this technique, since he and his abilities are an amalgamation of the characteristics of contemporary media. Dracula tries to remediate itself (that is to rehabilitate) in the shifting media-landscape of the outgoing 19th century and self-reflexively addresses this through the vampire's connection to media. Second, Nosferatu: Eine Symphonie des Grauens (dir. Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, 1922) deviates from this hypermedia strategy and argues for film's immediacy. However, it also self-consciously addresses its state as an adaptation of Dracula and clearly acknowledges its medium when vampirism is involved within the film itself. Nosferatu connects vampirism with cinema and its techniques and, consequently, presents its vampire, 'Count Orlok', as a personification of film instead of an amalgamation of different media. Shadow of the Vampire (dir. Edmund Elias Merhige, 2000), then, is a refashioning within the medium: it is Nosferatu's fictional making-of. Here, the borders between cinema and vampirism and between medium and reality collapse, as Shadow of the Vampire not only borrows the style and story of Nosferatu, but also incorporates the history and the myths surrounding the production of this seminal vampire movie. Consequently, it argues for film's failure as a medium of immediacy facing the new hypermedia-landscape of the beginning 21st century. These three iterations of the vampire and remediation demonstrate how the vampire has been functionalized as a self-reflexive technique to speak about the medium it is depicted in, be it on the brink of a changing media-landscape, at the beginning of movies as the medium of immediacy, or its existence as an established art form at the emerging digital age.*

**Keywords:** *vampire; remediation; self-conscious[ness]; Dracula (1897); Nosferatu (1922); Shadow of the Vampire (2000); meta-cinema.*

## **Introduction**

I will use the concept of remediation as conceived by Bolter and Grusin in their monograph *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000 [1999]) to demonstrate that the vampire has been used as a self-reflexive technique to reflect on the media it is been portrayed in and how media represent themselves in a shifting media-landscape. Taking Stoker's *Dracula* (1897)<sup>1</sup> as a starting point, I argue that this novel utilizes a hypermedia strategy by remediating contemporary high-tech media via a typewriter:

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations taken from *Dracula* (1897; here: Stoker 1997 [1897]) will be indicated by a [D], followed by the page number.

They are transcribed and compiled as the novel the reader holds in their hands. On the one hand, this hypermedia strategy causes a multiplication of mediation that resembles the medial life of the contemporaries and therefore a form of reality (cf. Bolter/Grusin 2000 [1999]: 53). On the other hand, the transcription is an eradication of the elements that connect the texts to their authors' life, like handwriting, imperfections, and canceled words. The hypermedia strategy causes the novel to rest in a state between life (resembling the media-reality) and death (drained from markers of life). Additionally, the 'creature Dracula' mirrors this technique, since he and his abilities are based on the novel *Dracula's* media. The novel's hypermedia strategy and the vampire, here, become techniques to speak about the novel's necessity to remediate new media to rehabilitate the medium of the novel and to prepare it for the emerging media-landscape.

However, when the vampire enters cinema, the creature becomes a method through which movies self-reflexively speak about themselves. I will demonstrate this with my first filmic example—*Nosferatu: Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922)<sup>2</sup>. *Nosferatu* portrays film as prime example of immediacy by self-consciously addressing its predecessor *Dracula*, using real settings, different forms of remediation, and hypermedia strategies. Further, the vampire is connected to cinema through metaphor and filmic strategies. This chapter also includes a section that briefly discusses a plethora of vampire movies and their self-reflexive interpretations. Therefore, the vampire as a self-reflexive technique is by no means limited to the special cases analyzed in this article.

In *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000)<sup>3</sup>, then, this separation of medium, reality, and their corresponding logics collapses in a refashioning of 'film in film'. As a fictional making-of it uses the film-within-a-film structure. It addresses the shifting media-environment at the beginning of the new millennium and the failure of (filmic) immediacy by devaluing *Nosferatu's* aesthetic core.

However, I limit myself to these three iterations: [i] the original novel *Dracula*, [ii] *Nosferatu* as its first adaptation and [iii] *Shadow of the Vampire* as decidedly meta-fictional re-iteration. Whereas this study could also include Herzog's *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht* (1979), I refrain from including this movie. I chose those three texts because they mark turning points in their respective media-landscapes that are aesthetically discussed in these works: [i] the novel rivaling different high-tech media (*Dracula*), [ii] the beginning of movies as the medium of the 20th century (*Nosferatu*), [iii] and the appearance and rise of digital hypermedia that create a new sense of experiential reality by multiplying the forms of mediation (*Shadow of the Vampire*).

### ***Dracula*—Opus and Creature of Media**

In terms of structure and content, the novel *Dracula* (1897) contains various forms of media technology that resemble the supernatural powers of the 'eponymous monster'.<sup>4</sup> Since *Dracula* is an epistolary novel, it is a collage made from textual forms such as

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<sup>2</sup> In English, the translation *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* is common. Quotations taken from *Nosferatu* (1922; here: Murnau 2007 [1922]) will be indicated by an [N], followed by the run time.

<sup>3</sup> Quotations taken from *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000; here: Merhige 2002 [2000]) will be indicated by an [SV], followed by the run time.

<sup>4</sup> The connection between technology and the supernatural can also be found in the mind-set of the contemporaries of the novel *Dracula* (cf. Abbott 2007: 37–38).

journal entries, memos, or letters. Alongside these traditional forms there are contemporary media included as well, like telegrams and newspaper articles. Also, high-tech means of media-production like the phonograph and the typewriter feature prominently. The texts are compiled and transcribed by Mina into machine-written pages: “[I]n all the mass of material of which the record is composed, there is hardly one authentic document; nothing but a mass of type-writing” (*D*: 326). The conventional interpretation of this passage would be in terms of evidence. Through the typewriter’s remediation of the original documents, they have become mere copies and lost their former authenticity (Page 2011: 110): “[T]he typewriter is the technology through which all other technologies in the novel (stenography, phonographic records, and telegraphed messages) are produced and made accessible [...] to the reader” (Page 2011: 109). In connecting this with Kittler’s claim that “mechanized writing [reduces] the very forms, differences and frequencies of its letters [...] to formulas” (Kittler 1999 [1986]: 16), one can also ascertain the lifelessness of writing produced via a typewriter that Kittler calls a “lack of expression of individuals or the trace of bodies” (*ibid.*). The typewriter drains earlier forms of writing from their “traces of the author’s body” (Page 2011: 110) and therefore creates analogies between vampirism and the typewriter as the central mode of mediation in *Dracula*: both drain something that was alive before from their markers of life and create the undead.

Here, I propose an interpretation of this structure in terms of remediation that adds to this notion. Bolter and Grusin describe remediation as “the representation of one medium in another” (Bolter/Grusin 2000 [1999]: 45). By remediating various media within the novel and transcribing them via typewriter, *Dracula* actually utilizes a hypermedia strategy to create realism. As Bolter and Grusin state, “digital hypermedia seek the real by multiplying mediation so as to create a feeling of fullness, a satiety of experience, which can be taken as reality” (Bolter/Grusin 2000 [1999]: 53). The novel *Dracula* uses a similar approach, as it recreates the media fullness and experience at the end of the 19th century by using a prototypic hypermedia method. A similar claim has already been made by Kittler, who sees Mina and her typewriting abilities as an ‘Interface’ between specific streams of data, i.e. the different media forming the novel: handwritten diaries, phonograph-records, newspaper-clippings, telegrams, files and logs (Kittler 1995 [1985]: 450). However, this does not undermine the traditional interpretation in terms of authenticity but rather contributes to the ambiguity of Mina’s statement: Where it drains formerly authentic documents from their markers of life, the novel recreates the media experience of its contemporaries and, consequently, a form of reality.

This prototypic hypermedia strategy and the documents drained from markers of life situate the novel in a state of limbo between life and death and, thus, connect this structure to the vampire. Additionally, the typewritten pages also connect to the vampire’s immortality. They are finished products that cannot be changed, contrasting hand-written text, in which canceled words and alterations belong to the process of creation. Therefore, the typewritten pages in their drained and inauthentic form can potentially carry on the same content forever and make the conveyed story of *Dracula* virtually immortal.

This connection between vampirism and media is also apparent in the character of Count Dracula himself. Kittler considers him a being of media: “Dracula, as he pertains

under technological conditions alone, is merely the stochastic noise of the messaging-channels themselves”<sup>5</sup> (Kittler 1993: 50; transl.). Wicke discusses this phenomenon in her article ‘Vampiric Typewriting’ (1992) which reads *Dracula* as a “chaotic reaction-formation in advance of modernism, wildly taking on the imprints of mass culture” (Wicke 1992: 469). She claims that “*Dracula*’s individual powers all have their analogue in the field of the mass cultural; he comprises the techniques of consumption” (Wicke 1992: 475). Wicke goes on to connect the phonograph to him calling from afar and without being bodily present, the telegraph to his telepathic ability, the circulation of *Kodaks* (photographs) without the depicted object to the circulation of his blood without him present, the ubiquity of advertising to him vitiating space, and the mutability of mass culture itself to the count’s ability to change into a bat or mist at will (cf. Wicke 1992: 475–476).

This integration of mass media personified in the ‘creature *Dracula*’ highlights the interdependence of the novel *Dracula* and the then new media. As Bolter and Grusin state, there is no such thing as an isolated medium; they all influence each other: “What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media” (Bolter/Grusin 2000 [1999]: 15).

*Dracula* tries to situate its medium, the novel, in a shifting media-landscape that anticipates the technological hypermedia-reality of today (Galini 1986: 4). Kittler sees *Dracula* as a story of technical media’s final victory over the vampire (Kittler 1986: 135; Kittler 1999 [1986]: 86) which could be considered a victory over the novel in this constellation. I would argue that *Dracula* rather should be categorized in Bolter and Grusin’s terms as remediating newer forms of media: “Our culture conceives of each medium or constellation of media as it responds to, competes with, and reforms other media. [...] No medium, it seems, can now function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning” (Bolter/Grusin 2000 [1999]: 55). The vampiric structure of the novel and its personification through the ‘creature *Dracula*’ in the novel acknowledge this fact and try to reform its medium (cf. Bolter/Grusin 2000 [1999]: 56, 60–62) by sacrificing the media borders of the novel. Consequently, the vampire becomes a self-reflexive technique to speak about the situation of the novel in the emerging media-world of the ending 19th century.

In this chapter, I have addressed the remediation of the contemporary high-tech media within the structure of the novel *Dracula*. The typewriter has been characterized as a vampiric technology of mediation that comprises different media within the body of the novel but drains them from their markers of life. However, the novel also creates a prototypic hypermedia structure, creating a resemblance of the media reality. Especially the ‘creature *Dracula*’ shows the mutual interdependence of media and becomes a self-reflexive technique to rehabilitate the novel in a shifting media-environment.

In movies, however, the vampire is not associated with media in general anymore but film. One of *Dracula*’s first adaptations, Friedrich Wilhelm [F. W.] Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922) addresses this shift through techniques of remediation and by deploying the logic of transparent immediacy. Here, another rhetoric of remediation as reform is employed

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<sup>5</sup> As translated by the author. Original text in German: “*Dracula*, wie er unter technologischen Bedingungen einzig überdauert, ist nur noch das stochastische Rauschen der Nachrichtenkanäle selber” (Kittler 1993: 50).

using the vampire as a self-reflexive technique, stating that film has become the (alleged) epitome of immediacy. Here, I will address two issues: First, how *Nosferatu* reflects on its state as an adaptation and, second, how cinema and vampirism are connected in *Nosferatu*.

### ***Nosferatu* as Self-Reflexive Adaptation and Plea for Film's Immediacy**

*Nosferatu* (1922) addresses its connection to the novel *Dracula* with a note of warning: “Nosferatu—doesn't this word sound like the cry of a bird of the dead? Beware of saying it, otherwise the images of life fade to shadows, ghostly dreams emerge from the heart and feed on your blood”<sup>6</sup> (*N*: 0:03:00; transl.). Here, the process of adapting *Nosferatu* from *Dracula* is alluded to and connected to film's potential for immediacy. Therefore, *Nosferatu* represents remediation as reform (Bolter/Grusin 2000 [1999]: 59–62). This becomes apparent with Bolter and Grusin's explanation of the term ‘remediation’: “We have adopted the word to express the way in which one medium is seen by our culture as forming or improving upon another. [...] The assumption of reform is so strong that a new medium is now expected to justify itself by improving on a predecessor” (Bolter/Grusin 2000 [1999]: 59). *Nosferatu* (‘a film’) tries to medially overcome its predecessor, *Dracula* (‘a novel’), and self-reflexively addresses this in this opening note.

First there is *Nosferatu* as a word—an allusion to the textual *Dracula*. Next, this word shifts into images of life. The former text of *Dracula* becomes the chosen set of the film that exists in reality. Filming on actual locations is especially noteworthy, since German Expressionism heavily relied on studio productions (cf. Ruthner 2006: 29–54; Abbott 2007: 51). Then, the images of life fade to shadows; the images are shot on location and made into film.

In this textual insert, the steps of adapting *Dracula* to *Nosferatu* are alluded to and also qualified by the level of immediacy. Whereas the word just sounds like the cry of a vulture, the shadows (representing early film) actually suck the audience's blood. By using real settings and qualifying the viewing-experience as almost real, film is portrayed as a medium that uses the logic of transparent immediacy that tries to (and, in the aesthetic argumentation of *Nosferatu*, almost succeeds to) erase its own medium.

Before this insert appears, *Nosferatu* starts with the literal adaptation of a book into the medium film: a form of remediation as absorption. Bolter and Grusin describe this form of remediation as follows: “[T]he new medium can remediate by trying to absorb the older medium entirely, so that the discontinuities between the two are minimized” (Bolter/Grusin 2000 [1999]: 47). *Nosferatu* does this by absorbing the entirety of the book as a medium.

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<sup>6</sup> As translated by the author. Original text in German: “Nosferatu—tönt dieses Wort nicht wie der mitternächliche Ruf eines Totenvogels? Hüte Dich es zu sagen, sonst verblassen die Bilder des Lebens zu Schatten, spukhafte Träume steigen aus dem Herzen und nähren sich von Deinem Blut” (*N*: 0:03:00).



**Figure 1.** This still from *Nosferatu* shows how real settings were used in the production of the film (*N*: 0:20:30); screenshot taken by the author.

*Nosferatu* presents itself as “[t]he account of the Great Death in Wisborg anno Domini 1836”<sup>7</sup> (*N*: 0:02:50; transl.). This text is presented as a real book and not as a conventional textual insert. It is integrated into film, as described by Bolter and Grusin in the quotation above. This also adds to the self-reflexive allusion to *Nosferatu* as an adaptation from literature, since this book becomes the very origin of the movie: It is the source of the narrator and renders *Nosferatu* a kind of manuscript fiction. Other texts embedded in this filmic structure are the book *Of Vampires, Terrifying Ghosts, Sorcery and the Seven Deadly Sins*<sup>8</sup> (*N*: 0:16:42; transl.), Hutter’s journal (*N*: 0:30:10; *N*: 0:51:40), a newspaper article about the plague epidemic (*N*: 0:54:40), the log of the ship’s crew, and a note about the curfew (*N*: 1:14:50). Consequently, the camera acts similar to the typewriter in terms of remediation—but rather than to compile the different texts as typed pages, the film captures them on celluloid. The difference, however, is that film can show the documents in their typographical as well as medial characteristics (excluding haptic feedback); the markers of life, despite not being completely intact, can be shown in filmic representation. Nevertheless, *Nosferatu*’s

<sup>7</sup> As translated by the author. Original text in German: “Die Aufzeichnungen über das Große Sterben in Wisborg anno Domini 1836” (*N*: 0:02:50).

<sup>8</sup> As translated by the author. Original text [‘book title’] in German: *Von Vampyren erschrecklichen [sic] Geistern, Zauberreyen [sic] und den sieben Todsünden* (*N*: 0:16:42).



camera also differs from the typewriter in that it is never the center of attention in the movie: “Dracula movies [were] [...] merely a form of controlling the audience’s attention, which distracted with all their might [...] from the noise of the apparatus. What’s never in the frame were Mina Harker’s typewriter and Dr. Seward’s phonograph. That’s how solidly united they are running with the film-projector”<sup>9</sup> (Kittler 1993: 56; transl.). The film itself never acknowledges the technologies used in *Dracula* nor does it acknowledge its own media of technical reproduction: the camera and the projector. It tries to erase its mediation to create immediacy.

Through remediation as absorption, *Nosferatu* creates an aesthetic argument about the supremacy of cinema in terms of immediacy. It (predominantly) integrates textual media and surpasses the typewriter when it comes to reproducing the markers of life. The film enhances the absorbing component of the typewriter with the ability to remediate while preserving their visual authenticity. However, I have not addressed how cinema is connected to vampirism. The next section will therefore discuss the connection between vampirism and cinema on a metaphorical level and the film’s connotation of hypermediacy with the vampire.

### ***Nosferatu*—Cinema and Vampirism**

In this section, I will demonstrate that Hutter’s journey into Count Orlok’s realm is portrayed as a symbolic journey into the realm of cinema, connecting vampirism and film through diegetic remarks. This connection also extends to the level of style, as the logic of transparent immediacy is contrasted with sequences deploying the logic of hypermedia. These portray at the same time Count Orlok’s abilities and render him a personification of film itself.

In his 1896 report concerning the presentation of Lumière’s *Cinématographe*, Maxim Gorky speaks of the *Kingdom of Shadows*: “Last night I was in the *Kingdom of Shadows*. [...] It is no life but its shadow, it is not motion but its soundless spectre” (Gorky 1996: 5). He describes attending a cinematic presentation as a form of entering the world of ghosts, since the images appear to be just lifeless revenants of their real counterpart.

The ghostliness of attending cinema in Gorky’s descriptions is already adapted in the beginning of *Nosferatu*, as Knock assigns Hutter his task: “Travel fast, travel well, young friend, into the land of ghosts”<sup>10</sup> (*N*: 0:09:24; transl.). Hutter repeats this description of Transylvania as he informs Ellen of his forthcoming journey: “I travel far[-]far away into the land of thieves and ghosts!”<sup>11</sup> (*N*: 0:09:45; transl.). The ghosts of this country seem to be such a peculiar element, that the actual name of the destination does not need to be mentioned. As Hutter travels into the country, he has to cross a bridge at sundown, which marks the border between his world and the realm of ghosts. The narrator comments: “As soon as Hutter had crossed the bridge, uncanny visions

<sup>9</sup> As translated by the author. Original text in German: “Draculafilme [waren] [...] nur eine Aufmerksamkeitssteuerung, die mit aller Macht [...] vom Surren der Apparatur ablenkte. Was nirgendwo ins Bild kam, waren Mina Harkers Schreibmaschine und Dr. Swards Phonograph. So solidarisch mit ihnen läuft der Filmprojektor” (Kittler 1993: 56).

<sup>10</sup> As translated by the author. Original text in German: “Reisen Sie schnell, reisen Sie gut, junger Freund, in das Land der Gespenster” (*N*: 0:09:24).

<sup>11</sup> As translated by the author. Original text in German: “Ich reise weitweit [*sic*] fort in das Land der Diebe und Gespenster!” (*N*: 0:09:45).

took him over, of which he had often told me”<sup>12</sup> (N: 0:21:40; transl.). The bridge acts as a kind of portal to the spirit realm. Together with the beginning of the night and the sudden appearance of apparitions, it seems to simulate a night at the movies: the audience enters the cinema, the lights are turned off, and illusions on the silver-screen begin. Additionally, leaving the cinema is metaphorically mentioned in *Nosferatu*: “As soon as the sun rose, the shadows of the night vanished”<sup>13</sup> (N: 0:27:48; transl.). The shadows leave Hutter, like the illusions of the cinema vanish, if the light is turned on again. Nevertheless, when the lights vanish, the next movie will be played, just like the shadows inevitably haunt Hutter after sunset: “The ghostly light of the evening seemed to revive the shadows of the castle again”<sup>14</sup> (N: 0:31:54; transl.). This last commentary moves this discourse even further into the realm of the cinema: Not the darkness casts the shadows, but the ghostly light of the evening. Thus, the light awakens the shadows in *Nosferatu*’s realm, as the projector revives the dead images on celluloid.

That cinema is the realm of the vampire also becomes clear by the plethora of vampire movies that connect vampirism to cinema, films, and their production. In Zulueta’s *Arrebato* (1980), the camera of a frustrated horror-filmmaker appears to produce red frames, drains its subjects from their life-force, and gains life on its own. In *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992) by Francis Ford Coppola, film features prominently on a fair the Count visits and is shown side by side with its technological predecessors like the phantasmagoria and shadow plays. Gelder notes in this respect that “filming Stoker’s novel about Dracula also involves filming the beginnings of film itself” (Gelder 1994: 89). Jordan’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1994; [ed.] see also Stuart Robinson’s article in this *Nordlit* issue) features the present as a world, where vampires can experience (electrical) light and even a sunrise in the movies: The protagonist Louis watches *Sunrise: A Song of two Humans* (1927) by F. W. Murnau (of course famous for his own vampire film) and describes this as a sublime experience (cf. Butzer 2015: 25–26). Recent films still connect cinema and vampirism. Lee and Prowse’s found-footage horror film *Afflicted* (2013) shows the two directors filming for their traveling-blog ‘Ends of the Earth’. Here, Lee is infected by a vampire and eventually accepts his new vampiric nature by using his powers and his hunger against those who deserve to die (which is a take on the typical origin movie of a superhero-franchise). Kölsch and Widmyer’s *Starry Eyes* (2014) depicts the movie-industry as a kind of satanic cult, turning a young actress into a fabulous, blood-sucking vampire queen of a production company called *Astraeus*. The vampire becomes a method of self-reflexively speaking about cinema via movies themselves, with *Nosferatu* as the first movie that connects vampirism with cinema (cf. Keppler 2006: 14–23; Gelder 1994: 87–90).

However, until now I have only read *Nosferatu* on a metaphorical level that connects cinema and vampirism. Nevertheless, this connection can be and has already been made also on the film’s formal level, since filmic techniques show the vampiric traits of this medium (Weinstock 2012: 50; Butzer 2015: 24–26). Abbott, for example, creates a genealogy of the filmic process that “was informed by nineteenth-century technologies

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<sup>12</sup> As translated by the author. Original text in German: “Kaum hatte Hutter die Brücke überschritten, da ergriffen ihn die unheimlichen Gesichte, von denen er mir oft erzählt hat” (N: 0:21:40).

<sup>13</sup> As translated by the author. Original text in German: “Sobald die Sonne stieg, wichen auch von Hutter die Schatten der Nacht” (N: 0:27:48).

<sup>14</sup> As translated by the author. Original text in German: “Das gespenstische Licht des Abends schien die Schatten des Schlosses wiederum zu beleben” (N: 0:31:54).

that bridged the gap between the scientific and the supernatural and were absorbed into the film language of *Nosferatu* to become a defining part of the vampire film's cinematic heritage" (Abbott 2007: 45).

I would read the vampire in terms of 'remediation'. This means that whenever *Nosferatu*'s strategy shifts from immediacy to hypermediacy, the vampire is present and, therefore, connected to film. This shift from the logic of transparent immediacy to the logic of hypermedia is a precursor of the Hollywood style, in which "transparency is mental balance, while hypermediacy is mental dysfunction" (Bolter/Grusin 2000 [1999]: 152). Similarly, the vampire as deviant here is characterized by hypermediacy and, thus, a disruption of *Nosferatu*'s logic of transparent immediacy.

Before Hutter travels to Count Orlok, the film only used simple fade-ins and fade-outs. This, however, changes to an excessive use of the medial potential of film. Most peculiar are the filmic effects that display the Count's abilities. His carriage moves with supernatural speed, which is realized through a lesser framerate (cf. Weinstock 2012: 80). Further, Hutter's entrance into the realm of shadows is illustrated by cutting in negatives that invert the film's colors (cf. Abbott 2007: 52; Butzer 2015: 25): Hutter travels from the bright world of light into the dark world of shadows. Furthermore, the Count has no spatial boundaries as he disappears once with his carriage and reappears seconds later in front of Hutter. Even though this ability is not clearly named, it shows the power of the filmic cut that allows Orlok to teleport himself (cf. Abbott 2007: 53–54). Similar cases are the autonomously opening and closing doors. *Nosferatu* hides the real cause of these movements through pre-planned shots and the doors seem to be moving on their own.

Consequently, the powers and abilities of the vampire depend on the technical circumstances of film. The act of watching a film (and creating worlds through visuals composed by cuts and framing) differs from the real act of everyday seeing, as the monstrous creature of the vampire deviates from reality: both movie and vampire act outside the rules of space, time, and causality (cf. Keppler 2006: 17). Count Orlok only exists in this form because of these circumstances that render him a purely filmic-technical entity (cf. Weinstock 2012: 82). The vampire, thus, contradicts the logic of transparent immediacy and marks moments of hypermediacy within *Nosferatu*.



**Figure 2.** ‘Count Orlok’ emerges from the dark, simulating the beginning of a film’s projection (*N*: 0:22:35); screenshot taken by the author.

The most famous image of *Nosferatu* is that of his shadow (cf. Weinstock 2012: 81). It is a creation of Murnau himself and cannot be found in the original novel (cf. Joslin 2006 [1999]: 17), but it adapts Dracula’s lack of corporeality (cf. Ruthner 2006: 42). The shadow directly illustrates the connection between vampire and cinema (Kaes 2014: 38; Butzer 2015: 24), since it is only the projection of a body on a white surface as the cinema is only a projection of light (cf. Weinstock 2012: 81–82). An addition in comparison to the novel is the inevitable destruction of the vampire through sunlight (Joslin 2006 [1999]: 17). This characteristic connects Orlok directly to cinema and its material form: celluloid is instantly destroyed, if overexposed to direct sunlight (Gelder 1994: 97).



**Figure 3.** In *Nosferatu*, the ‘Count’ transforms into a shadow. This is one addition to the vampire compared to *Dracula* and highlights the vampire’s self-reflexive potential concerning film (*N*: 0:32:50); screenshot taken by the author.

The destruction of the creature is closely associated with what Bolter and Grusin call a contact point: “The common feature of all these forms [of immediacy] is the belief in some necessary contact points between the medium and what it represents. For those who believe in the immediacy of photography [...] the contact point is the light that is reflected from the objects on to the film” (Bolter/Grusin 2000 [1999]: 30). Film’s point of contact is also light. *Nosferatu* is destroyed by his contact to reality, as a personification of the logic of hypermediacy. This perspective renders *Nosferatu*’s death a strong rejection of hypermediacy in favor of film’s potential for immediacy. The vampire (as a personification of the medium film) must eventually vanish for filmic transparency and immediacy to prolong. It is an almost literal erasure of the medium.

*Nosferatu* stages the act of going to the cinema as a journey into the realm of shadows and ghosts created through the film and directed according to its rules. The vampire himself is presented as a technical-filmic entity, which gains and defines its existence through the technical circumstances of the medium film. The parallels between Hutter’s journey and cinema combined with the portrayal of vampirism by hypermediacy (making the audience aware of the medium film) render film deeply connected to vampirism. An awareness of the medium, however, is characterized as deviant by

association with the vampire and, through the final destruction by sunlight, rendered an irrelevant logic (at least in the argumentation of *Nosferatu*).

In the next section I will address a vampire movie situated in an emerging hypermedia environment: *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000). This movie acknowledges that contemporary hypermedia-structures seem to form a reality on their own. However, it uses the form of a fictional making of—a remediation within the medium that “does not violate the presumed sanctity of the medium” (Bolter/Grusin 2000 [1999]: 49). Hypermedia strife for the real in “the viewer’s experience [...] by multiplying mediation” and create an experience that resembles being in a hypermedia world (Bolter/Grusin 2000 [1999]: 53). However, in opposition to *Dracula*, *Shadow of the Vampire* does not try to remediate itself. Rather it deconstructs *Nosferatu*’s implied claim of immediacy and reflects on the changing relation between media and reality in the 21st century.

### ***Shadow of the Vampire* as Reflection on *Nosferatu*’s Immediacy**

*Shadow of the Vampire* (2000) is a remediation “within a single medium—for example, when a film borrows from an earlier film [...] or when a painting incorporates another painting” (Bolter/Grusin 2000 [1999]: 49). *Shadow of the Vampire* borrows, most obviously, from *Nosferatu*: its storyline, its rendition of Murnau’s aesthetics, and the characterization of Murnau and Schreck based on extra-filmic discourses. Here, *Shadow of the Vampire* self-reflexively addresses *Nosferatu*’s claim for immediacy and devalues it by mixing historical facts (the production of the movie *Nosferatu*) with fiction (*Nosferatu*’s actual plot, aesthetics, and the myths surrounding it).

First, *Shadow of the Vampire* adapts the story of *Nosferatu* into the story of its production. Here, Murnau is the central figure and functionalized as a version of *Nosferatu*’s Knock (cf. Houswitschka 2005: 65). Murnau initiates the journey to Czechoslovakia and thus acts like Knock who initiates Hutter’s journey to Transylvania. They are also parallelized through their similar travels: they change from train to horse-carriage, like Hutter did in *Nosferatu*. Since the film-team shoots on real substitutes for the actual settings, they are always situated on the same location as their fictional characters. This parallel becomes apparent through the scenes in the hostel. It is not only a setting, but also a shelter for Murnau’s team; it is functionalized similarly to the diegetic world of *Nosferatu* (cf. *SV*: 0:16:00). Further, Max Schreck’s role resembles Orlok’s, for they are both vampires pretending to be humans. Consequently, *Nosferatu*’s story also transforms into the (fictional) story of its production and they become almost indistinguishable within *Shadow of the Vampire*’s diegesis.

Second, *Shadow of the Vampire* adapts Murnau’s aesthetics of immediacy which I have described in the section on *Nosferatu*. This perspective of film as the medium of immediacy becomes Murnau’s destructive obsession in *Shadow of the Vampire*, as the film clearly states through an insert: “F. W. Murnau then creates the most realistic vampire film ever made and establishes himself amongst the greatest directors of all time” (*SV*: 0:05:40). This is also reflected in the dustcoats and sunglasses used in the film. Historically, these served as a precaution from the strong light on contemporary sets.<sup>15</sup> Here, it renders Murnau a mad scientist that Houswitschka reads as one cause for

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<sup>15</sup> Safety glasses were obligatory, since the film used at this time was less sensitive to light than its modern counterpart and, thus, a stronger light irradiation was utilized (cf. Houswitschka 2005: 65).

a shift from an aesthetic discourse to a quasi-scientific one (Houswitschka 2005: 64–65). However, one could also relate this to immediacy as Murnau’s aesthetic principle, if we consider his short manifesto:

Because we have the moving picture, our paintings will grow and recede. Our poetry will be shadows that lengthen and conceal. Our light will play across living faces that laugh and agonize. And our music will linger and finally overwhelm because it will have a context as certain as the grave. We are scientists engaged in the creation of memory, but our memory will neither blur nor fade (*SV*: 0:14:00).

This is an adaptation of *Nosferatu*’s perspective on film as the prime medium of immediacy of its time. Here, Murnau describes film as the logical consequence and improvement on various media (painting, poetry, music) and a connection of apparent dichotomies (grow-recede, lengthen-conceal, laugh-agonize, linger-overwhelm) that all become re-experienceable like a memory that “neither blur[s] nor fade[s]” (ibid.). Movies become an immediate entry point to an experience resembling life in an untainted way that is endlessly repeatable.

Finally, the diegetic story of *Nosferatu* is complemented by myths surrounding Murnau, Schreck, and the production of the real movie. Here, the breach between reality and fiction does not occur within the diegesis (i.e. *Nosferatu* and its fictional production), but rather with discourses from outside the narrative. *Shadow of the Vampire* primarily refers to a common characterization of Murnau popular in the 1990s, which depicted him as a perfectionist and “dictator on the set” (Houswitschka 2005: 66).

Further, the myths surrounding Max Schreck are integrated. Since the mid-1980s rumors spread that Schreck had ‘really been’ a vampire. According to Thomas Elsaesser, this theory is based on the amalgamation of the vampire as a metaphor for the attitude of a star as well as the mysterious and barely recognizable person of Max Schreck underneath the make-up (Elsaesser 2009: 90). His ‘telling name’<sup>16</sup> might be a reason for the uncertainty concerning his persona, which is also considered a source for suspicion in *Shadow of the Vampire*: “His name is Schreck. Max Schreck. [...] Schreck? You’re sure you have the name right? [...] I’ve never heard of any Max Schreck in the Reinhard Company” (*SV*: 0:10:50). Consequently, reality is also questioned on the conceptual level of *Shadow of the Vampire*. These discourses based on myths and rumors oppose the setting of a making-of and alleged re-enactments of the historical figures of Murnau and Schreck.

*Shadow of the Vampire* uses remediation within a single medium to question the borders between fiction and reality and, in doing so, questions the core-concept of immediacy deployed in the real *Nosferatu*. Through the mixture of *Nosferatu*’s plot with the story of its production, the integration of the logic of immediacy as the fictional Murnau’s agenda, and the integration of the myths surrounding the real personas of

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<sup>16</sup> The German actor’s (1879–1936) name could also be ‘translated’ into ‘Max Fear’ or ‘Max Horror’, since the German term ‘Schreck’ refers to [English:] fear; fright; shock; scare; horror. Indeed, the German expression ‘Oh Schreck!’ can be translated into [English:] ‘Horror of horrors!’. By sheer coincidence, Schreck’s forename Max adds additional emphasis, as in [English:] ‘max[-imal/-imum]’.

Schreck and Murnau, *Shadow of the Vampire* argues against the immediacy of film as its prime feature.

In the next section, then, I will address the relation between Murnau and Schreck in *Shadow of the Vampire*. Despite Murnau's attempt at creating realism through film, he eventually suffers from film's impact on reality. This inversion explains how media, exemplified by film, rather form a reality than depict it in a contemporary understanding.

### **Murnau and Schreck as 'Doppelgänger' and the Failure of Immediacy in Film**

Murnau and Schreck are 'Doppelgänger' that connect film ('Murnau') and vampirism ('Schreck') through their resemblance of each other. This also addresses the relation between reality and film, since Murnau (a historical figure and cipher for reality) is influenced by the vampire and film. He tries to create the most realistic vampire movie ever made, but in *Shadow of the Vampire*, the opposite is true. Instead of creating a film that resembles reality much akin to a virtual reality (cf. Bolter/Grusin 2000 [1999]: 21), reality starts to resemble the movie he tries to shoot: Instead of creating immediacy, Murnau is taken over by his vision and his film and, eventually, becomes vampiric himself.

Murnau resembles the vampire first on a metaphoric level: he deliberately sacrifices his crew to prevail. He absorbs the life of his team into his filmic vision and thus acts like a vampire (cf. Houswitschka 2005: 65). Consequently, the similarities of Schreck and Murnau become even more apparent; whereas Murnau only subsists metaphorically on his team, Schreck feeds quite literally on them.

Murnau resembles Schreck further on a formal level through filmic techniques. Arriving at the castle, they film the first encounter of Hutter and Count Orlok. Here, Murnau utters the following stage direction: "You are afraid. Who is the person who brought you?" (*SV*: 0:22:00). In the corresponding scene from *Nosferatu*, Hutter also turns around and sees the Count riding away (*N*: 0:23:45 onwards). In *Shadow of the Vampire*, the camera does not cut to this image, but Murnau standing behind Gustav (cf. Baeva 2014: 265). His question also emphasizes the connection between these images, as Murnau actually brought him there, just like the Count brought Hutter to his castle. Murnau is depicted as vampiric, since he essentially acts as Orlok's 'Doppelgänger'. The use of shadows also connects Murnau with Schreck and is borrowed from *Nosferatu* (*N*: 1:28:18).

However, there is another element connecting the vampire and the director: the camera as a vampiric device. First, there is its functionality, as "it gives immortality by taking away the flesh and blood of its subjects [...] and transform[s] them into enduring spectres and shadows on screen" (Baeva 2014: 269). This idea can be seen in the make-up used for the actors on the fictitious set of *Nosferatu*, as they look like skulls (Baeva 2014: 269). Also, the cameraman Wolf seems to be drained off life every time he rolls the camera. Thus, the camera itself seems to be the vampire, especially since Max Schreck is never shown sucking his blood. Greta even comments on the life-draining power of the camera (Baeva 2014: 269): "A theatrical audience gives me life, while this... *thing*... merely takes it from me" (*SV*: 0:08:19; emphasis added).





**Figures 4a–4d.** Here, Murnau (bottom; left and right) in *Shadow of the Vampire* is characterized as vampiric by using the same style of depiction that was used for *Nosferatu*'s vampire and Max Schreck (top; left and right), the movie's 'actual' vampire. By using the same shadow-technique to represent both the vampire and the director, the 'Doppelgänger' motif is enacted on the level of style (*SV*: 0:18:23 and *SV*: 0:34:45 for Murnau; *SV*: 1:04:31 and *SV*: 1:05:35 for Schreck); screenshots taken by the author.

The last scene reveals the vampirism of the camera as well, as Murnau films the death of his remaining crew (cf. *SV*: 1:20:00 onwards). The cuts in the lens of the camera increase, while it reflects more and more light and the life seems to be drained from Murnau's eyes and face.

At the same moment, Schreck also dies by a filmic mechanism: the admittance of light through the opening of a gate equals the exposure of film (Baeva 2014: 269), which already appeared in the original *Nosferatu* (Gelder 1994: 97). Additionally, Schreck's death is portrayed as a burning and crumbling stripe of celluloid, which connects it directly to the medium film and the connection to Bolter and Grusin's contact points becomes even clearer. Here, the former metaphorical overexposure of film in *Nosferatu* becomes a depiction of a literal overexposure within a filmic mechanism. Since light in this conception becomes a marker of immediacy and connection to reality, the vampire as personification of film is destroyed by an overexposure of reality. Whereas in *Nosferatu* the destruction of the vampire through light signified the victory of immediacy over hypermediacy, here it signifies the failure of this concept. The vampire has been defeated and the presumably most realistic vampire film is finished. However, for Murnau this obsession with immediacy ends tragic. His destiny is hinted at in a conversation between Grau and Galeen about Stoker's *Dracula*: "It made me sad. [...] Dracula hasn't had servants for 400 years" (*SV*: 0:49:20). As Dracula or Orlok before him, Murnau remains alone. As the vampire is without servants, the director is without his crew.

*Shadow of the Vampire* not only borrows the story of *Nosferatu* and its production as well as its aesthetics, but it dissolves the borders between fiction and reality and, in turn, between medium and vampire. The vampire here becomes a method of addressing the hypermedia world in which cinema is now integrated and that is defined by an inverted relation between media and reality: “Transparent digital applications seek to get to the real by bravely denying the fact of mediation; digital hypermedia seek the real by multiplying mediation so as to create a feeling of fullness, a satiety of experience, which can be taken as reality” (Bolter/Grusin 2000 [1999]: 53). Trenchantly formulated by the fictional Murnau, this means that, “If it’s not in the frame, it doesn’t exist!” (*SV*: 1:21:50). Whereas *media* of immediacy strive for the erasure of their mediation, *hypermedia* strive for a recreation of audience’s feeling of being in a world defined by its media.

### Conclusion

I demonstrated that *Dracula* uses a structure akin to an early or prototypic hypermedia strategy in order to remediate itself during the emergence of technical and mass-media. This is accompanied by the ‘creature Dracula’ as a personification of the novel’s structure and the media it incorporates and displays. Both the novel and the vampire thrive on the new media emerging at this time and acknowledge the need for an open form of media and their borders to prolong the existence of the novel. The vampire becomes a technique to reflect on the medium he is portrayed in.

With entering the cinema, the vampire becomes a filmic creature. *Nosferatu* here engages in a narrative of film as the medium that can provide immediacy. Through remediation as absorption it incorporates textual media and addresses its condition as a filmic adaption of its predecessor *Dracula*. Deploying similar strategies, *Nosferatu* considers film the logical continuation of the novel and an improvement in terms of immediacy. In *Nosferatu*, the vampire is connected to the logic of hypermedia that brings to the fore its own mediation through diegetic remarks and filmic techniques. *However*, the destruction of the vampire through sunlight (the contact point between film and reality) renders this logic irrelevant and undisrupted immediacy pertains.

Finally, *Shadow of the Vampire* addresses the situation of film in a hypermedia environment that does not depict reality but strives to achieve the real by re-creating the experience of being in a world dominated by media. As a fictional making-of it first devalues *Nosferatu*’s claim of immediacy by questioning the very potential of film to even depict the real. The inversion from film depicting the real to reality being influenced by film is portrayed through the relation of (the fictional versions of) Murnau and Schreck. Through the narrative and the filmic aesthetics, Murnau is compared to a vampire and shows vampiric traits through his obsession with his project’s realism. His endeavor ends in tragedy: The final scene of Orlok’s defeat in *Nosferatu* is re-enacted but its meaning changes: The vampire dies from overexposure of reality but leaves Murnau alone like Dracula and Schreck have been before him. This shows that the obsession with film’s alleged immediacy is destined to fail in a new media world where media influence reality rather than the opposite.

I have addressed several instances of remediation within vampire-media in different times and turning points in media-history. The vampire becomes a technique to speak self-reflexively about the medium itself and its standing in each contemporary media-

landscape. Remediation has proven to be a well-suited terminology to describe the relation of these different media in their respective environments: Be it to remediate as in to rehabilitate like in *Dracula*, remediation as reform to ascertain the supremacy of one medium over the other like in *Nosferatu*, or remediation within one medium as this supremacy is receding with the emergence of digital hypermedia like in *Shadow of the Vampire*.

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# KON SATOSHI AND JAPAN'S MONSTERS IN THE CITY

Chris Perkins (University of Edinburgh)

**Abstract:** *This article offers an analysis of Kon Satoshi's use of monsters in his 2004 animated television series Paranoia Agent (Mōsō Dairinin). Focussing on the bat-wielding figure of Shōnen Batto and a cuddly pink doll called Maromi, it is shown how Kon Satoshi uses these figures to critique a range of fatalistic discourses on Japan's decline that have emerged since the bursting of Japan's economic bubble in the early 1990s. I argue Kon repackages the 'vague sense of anxiety' prevalent in post-bubble Japan as monster in order to access the psychic realities of Japan, and as a tool for developing a critique of Japan's fear of and fascination with social monsters. Through analysis of key scenes, the article shows how Kon develops a rich dialectical understanding of Japan's on-going search for monsters, while also forwarding his own humanist view of social responsibility as method of navigating the ever-changing social environment of late-modern Japan.*

**Keywords:** *Kon Satoshi; anime; monsters; spectacle; media; Japan; lost decades.*

## Introduction

This article<sup>1</sup> offers an analysis of Kon Satoshi's use of monsters in his 2004 animated television series *Paranoia Agent (Mōsō Dairinin; Kon 2010 [2004])*.<sup>2</sup> However, the two monsters in question do not immediately strike the viewer as particularly monstrous. One is a teenage boy wearing inline skates and holding a crooked baseball bat known as Shōnen Batto (see figure 1b), the other is a cuddly pink doll called Maromi (see figure 1a). At first glance these two characters have little to do with each other. However, as will be shown, Kon Satoshi uses these figures to critique fatalistic discourses of the nation since the bursting of Japan's economic bubble in the early 1990s, and the clamour to escape from the anxieties of the post-bubble age. After providing some background on Japan's postwar monsters in the city, I draw upon the work of Smits (2006) to conceptualise cultural monsters as the product of mismatches between extant categories of understanding and emerging social phenomena. I then move on to analyse Kon's monsters in *Paranoia Agent* in the context of this framework, arguing that Kon repackages what David Leheny (2006) has termed the 'vague sense of anxiety' prevalent in post-bubble Japan as monster as both a method of cognition and a tool for developing critique of the anxiety discourse. Through this dual mechanism Kon develops a rich dialectical understanding of Japan's fear of and fascination with monsters, while also forwarding his own humanist view of social responsibility in late-modern Japan.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own unless stated otherwise. Japanese names are provided in surname, forename format.

<sup>2</sup> This is the official rendering for the English language release of the television series. *Paranoia Agent* was released in North America and Europe between 2004 and 2005 by Geneon, and the series was also broadcast on the cable channel Adult Swim in 2006.



Figures 1a–1b. Maromi and Shōnen Batto. Copyright: MVM Entertainment.

### Japan's Monsters in the City

Japan has a well-known history of monsters in the city, and although the use of monsters for social critique stretches back to at least the Meiji Period (Figal 1999), it is Japan's post-war monsters that immediately spring to mind. These monsters have also tended to be rather destructive. Godzilla, perhaps Japan's most famous postwar monster, is a prime example. In his own inimitable city-trampling style, Godzilla was a direct response to Japanese anxieties regarding Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the developing Cold War order, as well as a visual manifestation of anger at America's Bikini Atoll nuclear tests in 1954. This test of a hydrogen bomb codenamed Bravo in the Marshall Islands showered 23 crewmen of the Japanese fishing boat Lucky Dragon with radioactive ash, resulting in one death and many hospitalisations (Dusinberre/Aldrich 2011: 5; Shun'ya/Loh 2012: 319–331). However, as Napier (1993: 332) argues, rather than a simple critique of the growing Cold War pact developing between the Japanese and Americans, Godzilla played a number of roles, tapping into nuclear anxieties but also, by having Japanese science defeat the evil monster, offering “its immediate postwar Japanese audience an experience that was both cathartic and compensatory”.

Fast forward thirty years and Napier draws attention to another monster, this time in the form of the demonised teenager. Now it is the biker (*bōsōzoku*), Tetsuo, in Otomo Katsuhiro's 1988 animated film *Akira*, whose body becomes a site of Japanese anxieties regarding its youth, the relentless integration of technology into society (see Morris-Suzuki 1988) and the ever-present nuclear blast, which haunts the narrative and acts as a metonym for Japan's long postwar (Harootunian 2006). Like Godzilla, Tetsuo unleashes destruction on (neo) Tokyo; but unlike Godzilla, science cannot come to the rescue—indeed it is science itself that produces a monster outside the human capacity to understand, prescient of the ‘beyond all expectations’ (*sōteigai*), discourse maintained

by Tepco in the wake of the Fukushima Dai-ichi meltdown.<sup>3</sup> And like that ongoing disaster there is no catharsis, only the potential for reinventing the nation inherent in destruction (Dudden 2012).

In 1988, as the cells in Tetsuo's body multiplied out of control on Japan's cinema screens, the Japanese economy appeared to follow suit. From the 1960s Japan experienced unprecedented economic growth under the Ikeda plan and apparently sage stewardship by the technocratic elite; in the 1970s Japan seemed to weather the economic turmoil brought about by OPEC induced oil shocks better than the established Western powers; and in the 1980s Japan looked set to dislodge the US from its number one slot, at least in economic terms. However, in contrast to the delirious bubble years of the mid to late 1980s, when the Nikkei index shot up into the stratosphere and, like Tetsuo's mutated form, a speculative property bubble grew out of all proportion, the 1990s and 2000s were marked by profound unease. After the 1989 stock market crash, commentators, politicians, and the media began discussing the end of a particular idea of Japan. Out of the institutional wreckage left by the bubble crept monsters which started to gnaw away at the accepted truths of Japanese society—that it was harmonious, peaceful, hardworking and equal. As Leheny (2006) has argued, in the 1990s and 2000s (known in Japan as the two 'lost' decades) Japan learned to 'think global' but 'fear local'. However, what were people scared of? Two monsters spring to mind, although I use the term loosely as they were not the monsters of Japanese folk tradition, but people rendered monstrous in the context of a Japan seemingly in national crisis.

The first was the bloated figure of Asahara Shoko, the leader of Aum Shinrikyō.<sup>4</sup> In 1995, fearing a police raid on their base of operations Aum took plastic bags wrapped with newspaper and packed with the neural toxin sarin onto the Tokyo underground, which spreads underneath the city like a vascular system. They then stabbed the bags with the sharpened tips of umbrellas, letting the poison leak into the city's blood stream, killing 13 and affecting a thousand more. What made this act even more monstrous was the fact that Aum counted many members of the educated elite within its ranks: members of the class which was supposed to lead the nation into the future seemed to be intent on bringing that future to an end. There was also something otherworldly in its subterranean menace; as the novelist Murakami Haruki (Murakami 2000: 237) put it the Aum incident was a "nightmarish eruption from beneath our feet—from underground—that threw all the latent contradictions and weak points of our society into frighteningly high relief". It was also an event that unleashed monsters which appeared in his earlier novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*: "the five Aum 'agents' who punctured those bags of sarin with the sharpened tips of their umbrellas unleashed swarms of INKlings beneath the streets of Tokyo" (Murakami 2000: 241).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> After March 11, 2011, *Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings* (TEPCO), the Japanese electricity company that built the Fukushima nuclear plant, argued that the earthquake and tsunami could not be predicted and therefore could not be prevented. See Pulvers (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Aum Shinrikyō, known as Aleph, was a Japanese new religion lead by Asahara Shoko. The group was responsible for a number of murders, in the 1990s culminating in the 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system. For more see Reader (2000).

<sup>5</sup> Murakami's INKlings feature in his novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (Murakami 2003) in which they are described as dangerous sewer-dwelling monsters.



The second monster was the juvenile murderer Shōnen A. In 1997 Shōnen, or Youth A, committed a series of attacks against elementary school children in Kōbe, a city that was only beginning to recover from its own subterranean nightmare in the form of the great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995. His attacks culminated in him murdering one child and placing the head on his school gate. A note accompanied the head, in which Shōnen A taunted the police and swore revenge on the school system that he said had ‘robbed him of his existence’. Like the Aum incident, this child-come-monster came to represent national anxieties in the wake of the bubble economy. According to Andrea Arai (2000: 848), attempts to delve into the inner recesses of his mind “echoed back on the problems of its nurture, and from here to that which is naturally supposed to emerge as the end result of this process of development, the adult subject, and from there to a national subjectivity”. However, the search for explanations at the national level only served to heighten the social anxieties produced by the event. Shōnen A was rendered monstrous by the fact that he seemed to be unknowable: He had stepped out of society’s life course schematic, out of the institutions and value-laden categories used to make sense of children’s actions.<sup>6</sup>

What draws these monsters together? As Arai has already pointed out, there is something here about unknowability. But this explanation only begs the question: What does it mean to *know* something and what does this have to do with monsters?

The ‘monster theory’ of Martijntje Smits (2006) is helpful for answering these questions. In explaining the cultural use of monster metaphors in the context of scientific and technological developments, Smits argues that technology becomes monstrous when it problematises the basic categories underpinning a society’s symbolic order. Drawing on the work of Mary Douglas (2002 [1966]), Smits suggests that monsters emerge from the gaps between the cultural categories that form the precondition for our perception of the world, and new phenomena that do not fit neatly into those categories (2006: 494). Unknowability, thus, comes from a failure of fit between categories of knowing, which establish a society’s symbolic order, and emergent phenomena, such as technological change, which call that symbolic order into question.

Important for the discussion to follow is Smits’ observation that culturally produced monsters—as an unknowable challenge to the symbolic order—provoke two seemingly contradictory but nevertheless concurrent reactions. The first is fear: the unknowable leads to uncertainty and ambiguity, and a challenge to our security. The second reaction, however, is fascination and reverence. Those phenomena that transcend our categories of knowledge offer salvation, the promise of the new, and the excitement of the untamed. Furthermore, it is perfectly possible for these two dispositions towards the monster to be held at the same time. Just as monsters are the product of categorical breakdown, our dispositions towards the monster also defy simple categorization (Smits 2006: 493–495).

Indeed, we see this duality of fascination and fear in all the examples of Japanese monsters discussed above. With Godzilla, there is both the terrible destructive power of science, and the potential for limitless energy and technological salvation. The same is also true of Tetsuo’s embodiment of technological development and the rampant market economy. If Aum and Asahara were simple objects of fear, it would be hard to explain

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<sup>6</sup> For details of the ideology of childhood as seen in Japanese schools see Fukuzawa (2007): 61–86.



the media frenzy that followed the Aum incident, and subsequent attempts to engage with Aum as an object of fascination. This is because Aum was an example of category confusion: Educated, intelligent middle-class people who should progress through the standard life course instead renounced the world and eventually tried to bring about its end. The category confusion then produced incessant attempts at explanation as a method of suturing up the symbolic order. Shōnen A's monstrosity also came from broken categories—Japanese school children should be cheerful, buoyant, diligent and rule abiding (Fukuzawa 2007: 71). Shōnen A made children unknowable by disproving the universal applicability of these descriptive categories. To return to Arai (2000: 852): “[c]hildren that commit crimes like adults, who want what adults want, are thus incomprehensible, and this lack in knowledge leads to the production of the monstrous”.

Thus, these monsters, as well as numerous other moral scares in the mid to late 1990s, were both produced by, and went on to fuel, the vague sense of anxiety in Japan brought on by recognition that the grand-national narratives of the second half of the twentieth century could no longer be sustained. Both Aum and Shōnen A committed their brutal attacks at a point when Japan was experiencing shocks that shook the foundations of institutional realities carefully instigated and maintained throughout the postwar period: the family, gender roles, Japan's middle-class society, the school system, banking and the political apparatus all became problematic.

As will be discussed below, Kon's approach to Japan's contemporary cultural monsters recognises the duality of fear and fascination. In *Paranoia Agent*, two apparently distinct monsters, one which strikes terror into the hearts of the Japanese, and another that promises salvation, are shown to be the two faces of the same phenomenon. But more than simply showing us the true face of Japan's new monsters in the city, with *Paranoia Agent* Kon challenges us to move past the duality to look for a certainty grounded in humanist ethics, and by doing so find the stability needed to resist succumbing to the temptations of fear and fascination.

### **Kon's Monsters in the City**

Kon's films were all released in the context of a Japan in the social, economic and political doldrums depicted above: A discursive situation that provides a point of reference for his civic conscience (Napier 2006). It is important to emphasise that this was a discursive situation above and beyond anything else, by most objective measures Japan was, and still is, a safe, hi-tech nation with a well-educated workforce and enviably low unemployment. This is not to downplay the very real human and material devastation of the events described in the preceding pages, but as Leheny (2006: 46) reminds us, “people create their own reality; whether there were real witches in Salem was less important, at least in terms of consequences for the town than people's belief that there were”. This was something Kon was acutely aware of, and we can plausibly read *Paranoia Agent* as a sustained attempt to represent this discursively produced reality as well as the consequences for the ‘Townsppeople’ of Japan. This goal is also hinted at by the Japanese title of the series: although admittedly not as catchy, a more literal translation would be ‘Agent of Delusion’.

Each of the stories deals with a particular national point of concern: youth violence, bullying, child molestation, online suicide groups and issues of gender roles—the

monsters creeping from the cracks in Japan's ailing institutions.<sup>7</sup> The 13-part television series is linked together by our first monster: a baseball bat wielding teenager known in English translation as 'Lil Slugger' but in the original Japanese as Shōnen Batto. In each episode, a character or group of characters experiencing anxiety or fear are attacked by Shōnen Batto and knocked into peaceful unconsciousness. His first victim is Sagi, a timid toy designer struggling to create a new cartoon character to capitalise on the success of our second monster, Maromi: a cuddly pink teddy bear/dog like character, who was a big financial success for Sagi's company.<sup>8</sup> After a day of relentless pressure from her boss and bullying from her jealous colleagues, Shōnen Batto suddenly appears and attacks Sagi in a car park. Two police officers, Ikari and Maniwa, are assigned to investigate the incident but they make little progress: the mysterious bat-wielding boy attacks more and more people, all of who seem to be suffering from anxieties.

After a suspect dies in custody, Ikari and Maniwa are struck off. Ikari goes on to work as a security guard on a construction site, while Maniwa becomes obsessed with the case. The attacks continue and the series becomes frantic: Shōnen Batto grows in power, while at the same time anticipation over new animated series featuring Maromi turns into mass hysteria. As Shōnen Batto becomes more powerful, Ikari and Maniwa confront Sagi, who reveals that Maromi is based on a puppy she had as a child. However, Sagi had let go of the puppy's leash and it had run into traffic and died. Scared of what her father would say, Sagi invented Shōnen Batto to account for the puppy's death. At this point in the narrative it becomes clear that Shōnen Batto returned to save the now adult Sagi from the pressures of creating a new character at work. Shōnen Batto's 'attack' gave Sagi the excuse she needed to avoid the pressure placed upon her by her boss and colleagues. However, once the concept of Shōnen Batto got out via the mass media other people began to draw on him as an escape route from the pressures they were experiencing. When Sagi admits the truth in the final scenes of the series Shōnen Batto is defeated.

As Gerald Figal (2012) has also argued, Maromi and Shōnen Batto illustrate how Japanese society has created methods to simplify and sanitise human emotional reactions to events, and thus avoid dealing with those events head on. Furthermore, by linking the two together, Kon argues that they share the same cause. As with Leheny's observation about the Salem witch trials above, Shōnen Batto is a discursively produced monster: Or more accurately he is the teenager rendered monstrous. However, consistent with the duality of fear and salvation discussed above, this production of the monstrous is, for Kon, an escape mechanism. Sagi invents him in order to escape from the reality of her pressured life, but once Shōnen Batto is let loose into the world, subject to media debate, gossip and speculation, he becomes a resource for others and takes on a life of his own. In this sense Kon's monstrous teenager further illustrates the flimsy divide between private and public demonstrated by Arai's discussion of Shōnen A, whereby an isolated incident concerning particular victims and their families quickly evolved into a national level crisis pointing to a breakdown in the structure of Japan itself. In much the same way, Shōnen Batto acts as a conduit to facilitate the transference of individual anxiety to the nation, lifting responsibility for dealing with

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<sup>7</sup> The following plot summary is based on the one found in Perkins (2012: 126).

<sup>8</sup> The name 'Maromi' does not have a direct translation into English, but the name implies something round and soft.

the causes of such anxiety from the shoulders of the characters and placing with the nebulous realm of the national. The point of attack is the point of transference, with unconsciousness akin to the delegation of thought to the nation itself. Shōnen Batto's monstrous reality is thus enacted and maintained through performance, with his ontological status the product of cumulative constitutive speech acts that have become routinised through everyday usage and propagated through media spectacle.<sup>9</sup> As Debord argued, the media as spectacle goes beyond simple representation to become “a social relation between people that is mediated by images” and in this meditational capacity, the spectacle of images has tangible social effects: “[...] when the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real things—dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for hypnotic behaviour” (Debord 2009: 24–25). Therefore, it does not matter that Shōnen Batto is a figment of Sagi's childish imagination or that he has no physical reality per se. It is enough that he has a psychic reality and as such can, and does, motivate ‘hypnotic’ behaviour.

Shōnen Batto has a mutually constitutive relationship with our second monster, Maromi, who is also a product of the spectacle, also able to provide the motivations for hypnotic behaviour. If the baseball bat-wielding monster offers escape through unconsciousness, Maromi offers the same solace through another mechanism: The soft reassurance of consumption and play. Thus, while some have drawn attention to the cathartic and communal aspects of consumption in Japanese society (Stevens 2010), Kon draws equivalence between Shōnen Batto's physical violence and what he sees as a problematic relationship between the Japanese and their media industries.

In this, as I have argued elsewhere (Perkins 2012: 130), Kon's message appears similar to that of Japanese postmodern theorist Asada Akira (1989), who has argued for a critical appraisal of Japan as postmodern playground. According to his analysis, after the social and political turmoil of the 1960s, Japanese society embarked on a process of infantilisation; the development of a ‘playful utopia’ typified by a society carried away by wordplay, parody and “other childlike games of differentiation” (Asada 1989: 275). However, this utopia is “at the same time a terrible ‘dystopia’”, stemming from the underlying ideology of Japanese-ness that acts as the ‘protection’ to enable the “children to ‘play freely’” (Asada 1989: 276). Infantilisation seems to be a component of Kon's diagnosis of Japan's search for monsters as well. Shōnen Batto is a monster produced by a child trying to avoid responsibility for her actions (Sagi), a monster that grows in strength (and efficacy) when used by others who are also trying to avoid engagement with themselves and others. Like Shōnen Batto, Maromi is a product of a mutually constitutive relationship between the media and the consumers who use media products as a means of escape.

The relationship between anxiety, production of the monstrous and escape is elaborated in episode 11 of the series. This episode begins with a sickly woman explaining to a doctor that she cannot afford an operation that might save her life. As she walks through the waiting room we see Sagi on a morning television show discussing the upcoming Maromi animated series. Asked how she feels about Maromi's success, Sagi replies:

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<sup>9</sup> I draw on the discussion of ‘performativity’ in Butler (1988).

Maromi has been *brought up* by everybody's love. How can I put this, I hope that from this point on her circle of peace will continue through this animated series (Kon 2010 [2004]: 0:02:00–0:02:11 [*Paranoia Agent*, episode 11]; my emphasis).

As Sagi hopes for peace through Maromi's soporific calming presence, the next scenes show Shōnen Batto mania at an all-time high. A succession of people speculate on his appearance: a transformation from teenager to rock monster, to muscle bound freak to hideously scarred demon. One gossiping middle-aged woman finishes the sequence by exclaiming, "He's not a human being but a monster, a monster!" (Kon 2010 [2004]: 0:02:51–0:02:53 [*Paranoia Agent*, episode 11]) and we are presented with a tusked boar holding the signature crooked baseball bat. These scenes are juxtaposed with shots of the frail-looking woman walking through the streets. When she returns home a panting, Shōnen Batto—seemingly eager to send her into unconsciousness—greeted her. The woman then starts to speak to the monster:

I know you. Why are you here? I also called you, didn't I? Yes, I did think about it, that I wanted to die. That I didn't want to continue living by having that surgery [at this point Shōnen Batto takes one step forward in preparation to strike]. But I was wrong. Wrong to think, even for a moment, that I want to die. If I did, that would mean I had betrayed him, my husband (Kon 2010 [2004]: 0:03:10–0:03:47 [*Paranoia Agent*, episode 11]).

The woman's husband is Ikari Keiichi, the police officer charged with solving the Shōnen Batto cases, and who is struck off the force after a suspect dies in custody. Ikari's wife tells Shōnen Batto of her illness, her self-loathing and feelings of guilt, but how her husband had urged her to 'accept reality' (*genjitsu wo ukeireyō*). Shōnen Batto becomes more and more aggravated as he hears this story: when Ikari's wife appears to doubt her husband, he grows into a muscle-bound monster, only to swing ineffectually when it becomes clear that Ikari's wife takes responsibility herself. As the episode progresses Shōnen Batto becomes more and more frustrated by Ikari's wife. At its climax, it is the wife that takes on a monstrous appearance. Her head appears blurred and distorted on a black background as she tells Shōnen Batto that human beings have the power to stand up to reality. Shōnen Batto then throws a television onto the tatami mat floor, at which point Maromi's pink face appears on the screen. Although originally Ikari's wife's lecture was directed at Shōnen Batto, it is now reframed by shots of Maromi's new series, of families entranced by the screen:

You can't understand for you are not human. You merely hurt people and believe that you have relieved their suffering. How sly of you. Feeling euphoria over things like this is the best you can manage. Your very existence is deception. Yes, you're the same as this Maromi creature that deludes people with ad hoc relief (Kon 2010 [2004]: 0:17:16–0:17:42 [*Paranoia Agent*, episode 11]).

Shōnen Batto and Maromi are our two principle monsters, but perhaps one more lurks beneath the surface: the ideology of Japanese-ness that Asada Akira drew attention to above. The previous scenes were intercut with shots of Ikari himself, but it appears he is not the steadfast man his wife makes him out to be. Indeed, Ikari is not immune to the siren song of delusion. However, his retreat is neither Shōnen Batto, nor Maromi, but instead a nostalgic postwar fairground ride where people play their roles in a predictable way, unlike the ‘real’ world that Ikari has withdrawn from. However, this world is haunted by his wife’s presence and as she lies dying on an operating table he starts destroying the 2D world around him with a baseball bat. Maromi tries to stop him as he does this, pleading that if he continues he will destroy his world and as such his place of belonging. Nevertheless, as Ikari destroys the world around him little Maromi dolls appear, demonstrating Ikari’s nostalgic retreat is of the same origin as that provided by the mass media spectacle of Maromi and the monstrous form of Shōnen Batto (Perkins 2012: 129). They are all methods of escaping the pressures of human interaction, of dealing with the present and for avoiding responsibility for action.

### Conclusion

This article has argued that Kon Satoshi’s animated television series *Paranoia Agent* is an investigation into the psychic reality of Japan’s city dwelling denizens that seeks to uncover and problematise the status of Japan’s monsters in the city. In doing so, Kon shows us a process of performative construction of the monstrous as people reach out to monsters in order to alleviate the pressures of the everyday. But, once propelled by the media spectacle, the monsters conjured up in *Paranoia Agent* go beyond individuals’ ability to control them, and end up running rampage across the city. Kon’s is thus a cautionary tale about the dangers of producing monsters that, while figments of the collective imagination, can still wreck material havoc, and cause us to disengage with actuality of everyday experience.

In episode 11, we see Ikari standing on a train. Three students sit behind him complaining about their exams, one of them hopes that Shōnen Batto will come along and ‘smash up the school’. It is a short scene, but there is something telling about this destructive urge, an urge to call upon monsters that will shake the foundations of society and turn everything upside down. This hope for creative destruction can be found in some commentary on the 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster, which I touched upon in the opening discussion of this article. For example, on March 16, 2011, the philosopher Karatani Kōjin wrote that the disaster held potential for Japan to step outside the framework of capitalist economic development and competition, and that

[i]t is not Japan’s demise that the earthquake has produced, but rather the possibility of its rebirth. It may be that only amid the ruins can people gain the courage to stride down a new path (Karatani/Lippit 2011: n. p.).

I wonder what Kon would have made of this statement. It is clear he would have faith in the capacity of the people affected to face the seemingly overwhelming challenges ahead of them. However, I also think he would be suspicious: both of nihilistic yearning for change through disaster and of what Leheny (2011) has termed Japan’s new ‘disaster nationalism’, which appropriates the *local* suffering of the people of Tōhoku

and presents it as a condition for *national* recovery and integrates the disaster into pre-made political projects regardless of the wants and needs of the victims (Dudden 2012: 348). For this articulation, and the national discussions that follow, might also be considered delusions that detract from engagement with reality.

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**EXPLORING CULTURAL MEMORY THROUGH POLITICAL  
ECONOMY—MANUFACTURING HISTORY IN THE DOCUMENTARY  
*THE BATTLE FOR HITLER’S SUPERSHIP (2005)***

**Juliane C. Bockwoldt (UiT The Arctic University of Norway)**

**Abstract:** *This article suggests supplementing Astrid Erll’s framework for analysis of memory making media with key insights from Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model. An analysis of the documentary The Battle for Hitler’s Supership that portrays the story of the German battleship Tirpitz, which the British Royal Air Force sunk in Tromsø in 1944, will illustrate the benefits of this approach. The combination of a formal analysis with an examination of the structural conditions that predispose the medium’s appearance provide valuable insights into how and why a specific dominant message that is conveyed by the documentary emerges. I show that the political economy behind the TV production has an impact on the documentary’s content and form and argue that the evolving narrative not only depicts a story about the specific events of November 1944 but also about current national self-perceptions and self-presentations.*

**Keywords:** *documentary; cultural memory; propaganda model; meaning potentials; World War II; Tirpitz.*



**Figure 1.** The camera looks up to the bow of a battleship (Quinn 2005: 0:00:03); screenshot taken by the author.

## **Introduction**

The screen is filled with darkness that gradually recedes and reveals the bow of a ship. The ship appears massive as it is depicted from below, indicating the perspective of a viewer at ground level. Four low-pitched accords accompany this image and underline a menacing character.

These are the first seconds of the British documentary *The Battle for Hitler's Supership* (Quinn 2005) that recounts the story of the German battleship Tirpitz. These seconds already set the tone for what Astrid Erll (2008) refers to as an antagonistic rhetorical mode of memory-making: black and white, good and evil, big and small—a mode that is retained throughout the entire documentary.

In this paper, I analyse the documentary *The Battle for Hitler's Supership* with an eye on how the battleship Tirpitz is constructed as a stand-in for Nazi Germany. I show how the ship is framed as monstrous and how this framing matters not only for an understanding of history, but also for discourses on contemporary conflicts. In the beginning, I address the first seconds of the above-mentioned opening sequence in detail, then I analyse an interview scene that constructs the perception of an evil enemy, and finally I examine an outstanding cross-clipping sequence that reveals the tone and the ideological position of the documentary as a whole.

I take recourse to the analytical framework of Astrid Erll (2008) that distinguishes between intra-, inter- and pluri-medial levels. Specifically, I focus on how pluri-medial dynamics might be affected by the structural conditions behind the medium, meaning by those who hold power, capital and authority to predispose processes of production, distribution and reception. To achieve this and add a critical dimension to Erll's (2008) framework, I combine her work with Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model (Herman/Chomsky 2002 [1988]) that introduces a series of filters that guide news media production and coverage. Their model is primarily designed to analyse the political economy of, meaning the structural conditions behind, news media. In the following article, I demonstrate its applicability to another genre, the war documentary.

I suggest supplementing Erll's (2008) experiential, mythical, antagonistic and reflexive rhetorical modes and levels of analysis with an emphasis on the political economy of cultural expressions. Such a development of Erll's approach to media analysis has to my knowledge not been attempted before, and that is why an application of it to this historical documentary can be particularly valuable.

The antagonistic mode of rhetoric, meaning that two parties oppose each other, in the opening sequence is created by using music, cutting and footage selection. The opening sequence of the documentary mediates the antagonistic theme of the overall narrative, but what are the reasons for the antagonistic theme in the documentary? Which conditions based on ownership and authority behind the medium predispose the reproduction of a dominant narrative of World War II in this documentary? What implications does this predisposition hold for an understanding of British political and moral position during and after World War II, and for the United Kingdom's standing in current world politics?

The presentation of historical events in popular media is not only about what happened in the past, but also about how the presented parties might want to be seen in contemporary situations and conflicts. Marita Sturken, for example, addresses the

important question that, if history is overwritten by fiction, then fiction is the source of what audiences remember about historical events:

[...] [T]he relationship of mass culture to memory has often addressed concerns about how popular culture and mass media can co-opt memories and reconfigure histories in the name of entertainment—what has become known, for better or for worse, as the ‘Spielberg style’ of history, in which simplistic narratives are deployed to evoke particular empathetic responses in viewers, and through which memory texts are fashioned (Sturken 2008: 75).

What Marita Sturken describes here is what I explore with the example of the documentary *The Battle for Hitler’s Supership*. I analyse three specific scenes to determine if the combination of Erll’s analytical approach with Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model offers new and unexpected insights.

### **Combining Theories**

Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky developed the propaganda model in *Manufacturing Consent* in 1988. They state that every mass mediated news coverage needs to go through five ‘filters’ to become a part of a mainstream media discourse. The first filter is about ownership and refers to that many mass media belong to few large media conglomerates. The second filter depicts that companies that are funding medial representations will want to profit from the medium’s success. The support by experts in the field that is reported about is part of the third filter. The fourth filter is about strategies to discredit critical voices towards the promoted mass-mediated message. Finally, the fifth filter addresses the framing of an evil other, originally communism, that is accepted by the audience and that can function as antagonist (Herman/Chomsky 2002 [1988]: 3–31).

According to Herman and Chomsky, most US news items emanate from companies bound by economic goals and incentives. These news items are dependent upon factors such as advertisements, authentication and legitimisation by accepted experts. These factors often shape the narrative in correspondence with accepted and hegemonic frames. Most representations that gain status within the mass media system and within public discourse have to satisfy these filters. The aim of the propaganda model is to test “the performance of the mass media of the United States” (Herman/Chomsky 2002 [1988]: lix)—not without highlighting that their model could potentially be adapted to phenomena in other mass-media environments.

Other mass-media environments could be, for instance, historical feature films or historical documentaries that deal with past events. This is where the question of authentic presentation of historical events and the medial presentation of individual and collective memories becomes significant. Film and cultural memory are tightly interconnected (Erll 2008) and it is therefore important to examine the political economic background for the medial representation of historical events.

Carl Plantinga observes that “nonfiction moving pictures [...] have no unitary ideological effect, central function, or singular purpose, but a multitude of effects and purposes, depending on use, context, audience and other factors” (1997: 4). Following this thought, I argue that this multitude of effects and purposes might be predisposed by

the production processes and by the pluri-medial networks that frame reception and the position of the film in discursive environments.

Matthew Alford (2011) establishes a 'Hollywood Propaganda Model' where he applies Herman and Chomsky's five filters to the Hollywood genre. Astrid Erll and Stephanie Wodianka introduce the term *Erinnerungsfilm* (2008), memory movie. They write that a movie is not an *Erinnerungsfilm* in itself, but rather is part of a network of cultural and media dynamics that selectively frame certain films as historically relevant and others as not.

As a specific form of the *Erinnerungsfilm*, the war movie has the implied fictionality and creative freedom on its side while it can play with different strategies of "documentariness" (Corner 1999: 36), meaning strategies derived from the documentary genre. In contrast to this, the genre of the war documentary is primarily inscribed with assumptions about truth, facts and authenticity. At the same time, however, this genre also draws on narratives and cinematographic patterns of fictional movies. In the words of Edward Branigan (1992),

[a]lthough somewhat surprising, we will discover that the purest instance of a narrative scene may be found in the classical documentary film which seeks to make the past immediate for the spectator by compressing and reducing the levels of narration (xiv).

While the main interest of narratologists such as Branigan is an immediacy between medium and viewer, film scholars also address the aspect of affect connected to the documentary genre: "Like the dramatic film, the documentary wants you to feel and care deeply about the events and people of the past" (Rosenstone 2006: 74). Similarly, Bill Nichols (1991) describes a difference between the plot in fiction as a world of imagination and the propositional world of a documentary. Documentaries do not differ from fiction films in their constructedness as texts, but in the relation between the representations they make and a preceding real world.

Some documentaries make strong use of practices or conventions, such as scripting, staging, reenactment, rehearsal, and performance, for example, that we often associate with fiction. Some fiction makes strong use of practices or conventions, such as location shooting, the use of non-actors, hand-held cameras, improvisation, and found footage (footage not shot by the filmmaker) that we often associate with non-fiction or documentary (Nichols 2010 [2001]: xi).

Additionally, Nichols states that "[a]t the heart of documentary is less a *story* and its imaginary world than an *argument* about the historical world" (Nichols 1991: 111; emphasis in original). In contrast to fiction, the documentary form works with conventions that call for evidence drawn from historical sources (ibid.: 117) such as files, footage and original artefacts (Jones 2012: 204). Documentaries often make claims about historical truth, but should, according to Jill Godmilow and Ann-Louise Shapiro, rather engage the audiences "in a discussion about ideological constructions buried in representations of history" (1997: 83) to reflect about histories.

Moving back to the framework of Astrid Erll, the intra-medial perspective focuses on various ‘rhetorics of collective memory’. Erll (2008) divides these rhetorics into an experiential, mythical, antagonistic and reflexive mode (390). The medium’s formal elements create these modes of rhetoric. This implies that the formal elements are crucial for establishing memory-making potentials of a medium. For example, a documentary might employ elements like the selection, editing and compilation of original, contemporary and fictional footage, support the narrative by means of music and sound effects, or use rhetorical tools such as a narrator’s voice to invite certain memory-making potentials.

When examining the inter-medial constellations of a medium, the focus is on the cross-references, interrelations and reciprocal influences between the medium under scrutiny and various other media. Intertextuality (Brunow 2015: 145), recognisable elements, and received narrative figures and tropes can contribute to an impression of authenticity—a feeling of familiarity and realism of the depicted events. A specific representation seems to neatly align to what we know, or believe we know, about the mediated past, and thus makes it more easily digestible and understandable through reliance upon specific inter-medial references. This inter-medial level also guides and predisposes reception by connecting the intra-medial meaning potentials to certain discursive frames that then tacitly guide and facilitate the activation of these potentials.

At an intra- and inter-medial level, a medium builds up potentials for meaning (Erll 2008: 395). According to Erll, these potentials are then selectively activated, negotiated, or possibly subverted in and through situated processes of reception (2008: 396). To increase acceptability with mainstream audiences, a medium’s intra- and inter-medial levels need to correspond to established narrative patterns—the often-hegemonic frames of a genre. Berthold Molden’s statement can support this hypothesis:

In terms of memory studies, hegemony is built by prioritizing some memories over others according to the specific power constellations of a given society. There is no one history because every historical event can have different meanings, can be ignored, or interpreted from radically different perspectives (2016: 128).

Hegemonic cultural expressions systematically invite dominant meaning potentials through specific formal means. Formal means that may express dominant antagonistic modes of rhetorics in documentaries that supposedly deal with true events.

Memory potentials can be identified at an intra- and inter-medial level. Only a pluri-medial level of analysis, however, enables insights into how these potentials are negotiated, channelled, disseminated, or suppressed. Erll proposes that a pluri-medial network is needed to understand the position of a medium within a specific discourse and its actual impacts as a memory-making medium. The cultural reception of a medium is the key for its memory potential to become actualised. It needs reviews in magazines, special features on TV, educational packages and merchandise strategies, among other measures, to “lead reception along certain paths, open up and channel public discussion, and thus endow films with their memorial meaning” (Erll 2008: 396).

There are a few issues that Erll’s framework does not sufficiently account for. For instance, it lacks attention to affect in media analysis. Therefore, in addition to Erll’s

analytical levels, the authenticating strategies identified by Sara Jones are also of importance. Jones distinguishes between two major trajectories of authentication in film: “[...] the first relating to the referentiality of events and objects, and the second to the affective response of the viewer” (Jones 2012: 196). These authenticating strategies can be found in documentaries as well as in fiction films. Within the referential strategy, the use of familiar pictures, sounds and stories helps to form the narrative and to create an authentic appearance. On the one hand, monochrome footage might be seen as mediating the representation of an authentic past. Such footage has characteristics that audiences with a certain genre competence might perceive as authentic. On the other hand, re-enacted footage, shot with a shaky camera and coloured with a sepia filter invites connections with what we might know from early war journalism. “[...] [R]e-enactments are an example of experiential authenticity: the images are felt to be authentic even where they are not originals” (Jones 2012: 205). Such tools are deployed at an inter-medial level, where the references between media are highlighted and contribute to producing a medium’s memory-making potentials (Erlil 2008).

### **Analysing Three Forms of Constructing Evil**

It is said (Asmussen/Åkra 2015 [2006]; Quinn 2005) that Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom during World War II, called the German battleship Tirpitz ‘the Beast’ and defined her destruction as objective with highest priority for the British Royal Air Force. This phrase is used prominently in *The Battle for Hitler’s Supership* and it functions as an important narrative device when constructing Tirpitz as evil in the first seconds of the presentation. The position of the person where the quote allegedly emanates from holds prominence and authority—Churchill is mostly recognised by the audience as an important historical figure. His utterance might therefore be accepted as true and trustworthy.

I start with the historical background on the documentary’s major theme—the Tirpitz. Commissioned on 25 February 1941, the ship operated mainly in Northern Norwegian waters and was a major threat to the Allied convoys between Murmansk and the United Kingdom. After various Allied attacks against the ship, and long repair stops in the Kåfjord close to Alta, the Tirpitz was moved to the Sandnessund close to Tromsø. This is where the British Royal Air Force destroyed it with Tallboy bombs on 12 November 1944 (for a detailed account, see for instance Asmussen/Åkra 2015 [2006]).

The documentary *The Battle for Hitler’s Supership* portrays a story of Tirpitz. The paratextual frame of the documentary, meaning the genre category, the selection of footage, and the appearance of eyewitnesses, lets the viewers assume that they are watching a reliable representation of past events (on paratextual frame, see Nichols 2010 [2001]: 20; on genre expectations, see Quinn 2013: 289). Authenticating strategies in this documentary help to mediate a coherent and believable story about a real past event to audiences (Jones 2012: 196). Looking more closely at how a narrative with a classic evil main adversary is constructed, I trace the formal elements through which *The Battle for Hitler’s Supership* manufactures an ultimate ‘other’. An other that can be presented as a virtual enemy with insurmountable features based on historical events (Der Derian 2009 [2001]).

I show how the formal and referential cinematic strategies described above pull the audience to an accepted, uncritical narrative about World War II. The authenticating

strategies and the rhetorical tools for the selection and compilation of images, the convincing use of speech, sound and music contribute to creating this historical documentary's specific memory-making potential (Erll 2008) of an uncritical World War II narrative. The antagonistic rhetorical mode (ibid.) creates a particular, ideological bias to this nationalistic memory-making potential and to the different elements of 'anti-ism' (Herman/Chomsky 2002 [1988]).

Eyewitnesses from the British, Norwegian and German side provide their observations on Tirpitz in various interview surroundings in this documentary. Jones (2012) writes on the use of eyewitnesses in documentaries in general:

[Their] testimonies are embedded in the film in a particular way that creates further links between past and present, and which is likely to generate a specific emotional, physical and cognitive response in the viewer (197).

Therefore, eyewitnesses can also serve as a referential authenticating strategy in a documentary, as well as an affective one. In particular, I explore the staging of one eyewitness further, and investigate how stylistic elements in *The Battle for Hitler's Supership* create the impression of opposing an evil other in this scene.

The interview scene I chose for this paper is especially significant because of the documentary's introduction of the eyewitness that recalibrates the relation between what the viewer sees, and the information that the viewer receives. The eyewitness mentioned here is a former member of the Norwegian resistance, Terje Jacobsen. He appears twice in the documentary.

How do music and sound effects support and strengthen the setting, and help to create the main narrative of the documentary with the Tirpitz and Nazi Germany as the monster that has to be fought? Is it true that music has become a pedagogic commentary to point to the narratives most important moments (Larsen 2013 [2005]: 172)? What role does text play in the eyewitness scenes, by the interviewee and by the narrator?

Expository documentaries rely heavily on an informing logic carried by the spoken word. In a reversal of the tradition emphasis in film, images serve a supporting role. They illustrate, illuminate, evoke, or act in counterpoint to what is said (Nichols 2010 [2001]: 107).

Before the first sequence with the eyewitness Jacobsen (Quinn 2005: 0:14:20–0:15:11), battleships are shown at sea and the British narrator speaks about the Allied convoys that require protection from the German battleship Tirpitz. This presentation claims the significance of the convoys for the outcome of the war and emphasises the menace posed by the battleship. On an inter-medial level, a visual style resembling original war footage reminds viewers of World War II reports that create an impression of authenticity and that visually support the statements made by the narrator. The narrator announces: "The mere threat of the Tirpitz was tying up much of the whole [British] fleet".

The next scene is filmed from below something that seems to be a tower on a construction site and moves down to ground level in a shaking manner. The sky behind the tower resembles dawn or dusk light (see figure 2).



**Figure 2.** The sky behind the tower resembles dawn or dusk light (Quinn 2005: 0:14:24); screenshot taken by the author.

What little light there is comes from behind a person and makes only its contours visible between the buildings and structures. The narrator states “Churchill had been outmanoeuvred [...]”. The person is observed from below. The camera work is shaky and sometimes parts of structures cross the view. It seems like the viewer is observing from a hiding place. Against the light, it is visible that the figure is wearing a hat and a coat. The person bows their head slightly. The camera angle changes and the viewer can recognise the person as a man. The narrator introduces the man with “Spies like Terje Jacobsen risked their lives every day.” After this sentence, the camera observes Jacobsen while he is disappearing behind the barely lit structures. Similar to the first sequence of the documentary when the screen gradually reveals a big ship, the documentary here again works with contours that slowly become visible, employing darkness and light to indicate opposition, and spoken words by the narrator to anchor the scene (on relation of text and image, see Barthes/Heath 1977: 156). The presentation of Jacobsen relies on cinematographic patterns from fiction films genre such as spy movies, with the camera filming from a supposedly hidden position, a meeting set ‘at dawn’, and the depicted person’s old fashioned, dark clothing. The eyewitness who experienced the actual event, but who the viewer sees in his late 80s, mediates the impression of time and the passing of time; he embodies a connection between past events and present day to echo Jones.

The sound is remarkable during this scene: A *basso ostinato*, a permanent low-pitched recurring melodic pattern lies under a gentle melody of a melancholic wind instrument and the approaching footsteps of what emerges as Jacobsen can be heard. This principal structural element of the music composition mediates a menacing atmosphere that supports the hidden position of the camera perspective. The function of the music is to emphasise the presence of a potential threat, in this case Nazi Germany in the 1940s (on function of music in general, see Helseth/Maasø 2008: 80). On the one



hand, the music in this scene works as a referential authenticating strategy that corresponds to familiar musical patterns known from the motion picture genre mediating suspense. On the other hand, the music, combined with the images and the narration, invite the audience to feel a yet to be revealed threat, to be seen by some vaguely defined evil (on music in documentary in general, see Jones 2012). These observations point to additional insights that an approach combining Erll's concepts with a focus on the evocation of affect can bring.

The next scene is an interview, where the aforementioned Jacobsen is sitting in what appears to be a basement with lighting from a small door behind him (see figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Terje Jacobsen is sitting in what appears to be a basement with lighting from a small door behind him (Quinn 2005: 0:14:45); screenshot taken by the author.

It is dark in the room except behind the man where the stairs he is sitting on seemingly lead to the light. The wall behind Jacobsen looks old. He is wearing a shirt and tie under his coat, and fine black shoes that reflect the bit of light from the door behind him. His hands are lying in one another. The camera is filming from below up to Jacobsen and towards the light. The Norwegian speaking of Jacobsen can vaguely be heard under the voice-over, as is practiced in every interview sequence of non-English speaking interviewees in this documentary. The voice-over of Jacobsen has a slightly smoky, rough and elderly sound, fitting to the bold role of the spy that he is mediating. Jacobsen's name and 'Norwegian Resistance' appear at the bottom of the screen in a faded newspaper typewriting style. Jacobsen's voice-over says:

One day some men asked me to come to a secret meeting. I met three people and they asked me 'Are you willing to join the resistance?' At the time, I was living 20 kilometres away from Tirpitz. I would get up early every morning and go down to the fjord to watch her. Sometimes, I would stay there all day.

The introductory sentence of the documentary's narrator is rather dramatic, while the content of the text of Jacobsen himself is less surprising: a spy who observed the Tirpitz, and stayed there for a while. The description by Jacobsen of "go[ing] down to the fjord" might evoke an aesthetic impression. The active movement from one level 'down' to another depicts a certain engagement of the spy and his commitment to the cause. However, the little content of his comment seems to be compensated by his dramatic introduction, the staging of his entry to the scene and by the composition of the interview scene.

After the interview, the camera films Jacobsen outside and leaving the scene. The camera remains in a hidden place. Jacobsen is again walking against the pink light of the sky, with a bowed head. The viewer can faintly hear his steps on metal, while the narrator states that in 1942, Norwegian spies sent an urgent message to the United Kingdom and reported that the Tirpitz was ready to depart for the convoys. Following this message, the British Royal Navy abandoned a convoy heading to Murmansk and German submarines and planes attacked it. When the Tirpitz arrived, the attack had already ended. Within the documentary, this attack seems to have the role of a justifying narrative because it is the main occasion where the Tirpitz, though indirectly, was responsible for the death of many British citizens. After this story of the attack, the Tirpitz is not only a symbolical threat but has become a real target for revenge. The story can work as "evil deed" (Pötzsch 2013: 130) that justifies both the attacks on the battleship and the acceptance of about 1000 dead soldiers on the wreck of the Tirpitz after the last attack.

According to Jones (2012), the combination of both strategies, the referential and the affective one, is what makes the documentary appear authentic. In addition, Owen Evans emphasises the importance of the connection between authenticity and affect: "It is the careful orchestration of these melodramatic elements [...] that creates what we might call an authenticity of affect [...]" (2010: 173). Even though he refers to the motion picture *Das Leben der Anderen* (Henckel von Donnersmarck 2006), his observation retains relevance to this documentary. The concepts describing fiction films can also be used to analyse documentaries because of the inherently narratological framing of past events applied in both genres (see Nichols 1991). To gain acceptance and to attract wider audiences, documentaries and fiction films often do not challenge established patterns of good and evil and frame 'the other' in lighting, music and by visualizing and narrating terms like 'the Beast' in opposition to the positively connoted 'us'. These media draw upon both referential and affective authenticating strategies to re-tell and strengthen hegemonic narratives that might prepare the way for arguments on a contemporary and global scale about participation in conflicts and military intervention based on a civil duty.

Stylistic elements such as mystic music, a camera angle from a hidden perspective, and the support of the secret atmosphere by a dawn-like coloured sky, which might be familiar from fiction film, were combined and help to portray the narrative of Terje, the spy. This scene featured the real Terje Jacobsen. Aged over 80, he climbs down into a barely lit bunker at dawn, wearing a coat, to say one paragraph about his position during World War II. Even though this interview situation is implausible, the documentary's producers decided to stage Terje to illustrate the situation of the Norwegian resistance in historical times. These elements do not correspond with Jacobsen's current life situation

in a rational way, but invite us to identify with the presented story, accept the framed good and bad, and experience the event with the eyewitness. Terje Jacobsen also has the function of an expert (Herman/Chomsky 2002 [1988]: 19–25) who testifies the truth of the reported events. His personal report strengthens the claim for authenticity of the documentary's narrative and contributes to the dominance of the generated meaning potential.

This scene with Terje, the spy, in *The Battle for Hitler's Supership* invites the audience to feel like a confidant of the secret activities the eyewitness was a part of more than 70 years ago. On an intra-medial level (Erll 2008: 390), the stylistic tools described above, establish an experiential rhetoric of collective memory. The audience receives historical information filtered through the experiences of the expert, Terje Jacobsen. At the same time, an intimacy between spy and audience is invited that charges the representation with affective value.

The second part of my investigation on this documentary concerns the hypothesis that the documentary itself has an overall antagonistic mode of rhetoric of collective memory (Erll 2008: 390) on several levels. On a superficial level, Winston Churchill is the protagonist and the Tirpitz is the antagonist; man against machine that points to an imbalance of powers. The ship as emotionless and overwhelming enemy incorporates the inhumane other as mighty antagonist. The sympathy of the audience is systematically directed to the human, to the known 'us', and against the unknown, evil 'other', the machine. As I mentioned at the start of this article, the overwhelming character of the battleship emerges immediately in the initial seconds of the documentary. The camera looks up to the bow of a battleship; a perspective that makes the (human) audiences feel small and weak when confronted with the size of the ship (see figure 1) when the screen is filled with darkness that gradually recedes and reveals the bow of a ship. Within three seconds, the viewer reaches an understanding from being literally 'in the dark' to knowing the reason for the darkened screen—the massive ship. The literal darkness on screen resembles the metaphorical darkness of National Socialism and Fascism that is made to appear threatening, on the advance and potentially all-embracing, but then moves away. The light pushes aside the darkness, and the diffuse menace gets the recognisable, defined shape of a ship—a machine—which is a concrete enemy that can be discovered, seen and attacked. On the one hand, evil appears as eerily menacing without concrete source, musically illustrated when revealing the contours of the ship in the opening sequence. On the other hand, evil becomes discernible as something material that can be targeted and ultimately destroyed.

Like the viewer, Churchill is opposed to this monstrous battleship in the overarching narrative of the documentary. The music supports this message by four dark accords that are repeated several times when the battleship is introduced from 0:00:00 to 0:00:25 (Quinn 2005). This dark music has the function of creating a menacing atmosphere and a mood that helps to illustrate its evil throughout the introduction (on music's function in film, see Iversen/Tiller 2014: 46f.). The narrator's speech is not yet required in this situation. Image and music both mediate an overshadowing evil that the viewer learns to identify as a huge ship.

Thus, on a deeper level, the antagonistic mode of rhetoric is established as a dominant frame that tacitly colours all other depicted people, settings and events. Churchill is

brought forth as the democrat of the common people who does not want to bear the burden of war but is forced to do so, facing the evil threatening to devour the world. On the opposing side, we see the Tirpitz and Hitler, the Chancellor of Germany from 1933 to 1945, representing the full strength of technical and social power of National Socialism, linked to an antagonist that apparently has all the odds on his side. This narrative is supported in various ways throughout the documentary. One occasion is the opening sequence of this documentary that works as a transit from the world of the spectator to the world of the film.<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 4.** The introduction of Hitler (Quinn 2005: 0:00:30); screenshot taken by the author.

The introduction of Hitler and Churchill (Quinn 2005: 0:00:30–0:00:38) makes the relationship of these two understandable to the viewers. Hitler is walking from the left to right, accompanied by a group of his officers. He is wearing his uniform and is easily recognisable by his body language, mimic and moustache. The soldiers on his left are standing in a row and he passes them. The camera perspective is from an angle at breast height, which enables Hitler to seem taller. The group of soldiers, guided by Hitler, is walking towards the light. The scene mediates a picture of power, strength, military efficiency and unity—resembling a well-functioning machine rather than a group of human beings.

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<sup>1</sup> On opening sequences in contemporary American and British war films, see Pöttsch 2012.

In contrast, Churchill is depicted in civilian attire as he crosses a street from the right to the left. He is accompanied by his wife, Clementine, who is walking one step behind him. There is no entourage of soldiers accompanying him and he is presented as the common, average person. He is wearing his characteristic coat and hat, not a uniform. His body language and slightly crooked position makes him easily identifiable. Churchill is not surrounded by his officers and he is instead presented as a tired yet determined man who has to face the threat on a mission to protect the so-called free world.



**Figure 5.** The introduction of Churchill (Quinn 2005: 0:00:35); screenshot taken by the author.

The presentation of these opposing characters points to ideological differences between an individualistic conservative liberal democracy with values such as family and the burden of office as central tenets, and a machine-like national body of National Socialism that seems powerful and insurmountable.

The visual presentation of these two historical figures is supported by the auditive arrangement of the scene. The music changes when Hitler and Churchill appear on the screen. Both men apparently move towards each other and the music gets a forward-pushing, cascading tone. The text spoken by the narrator, who is identifying them as Hitler and Churchill, anchors the images (on relation of text and image, see Barthes/Heath 1977: 156). Picture, music and text interplay on intra- and inter-medial level and mediate a strong impression of the relations of power and of strength between Hitler and Churchill.

### **Emerging Meaning Potentials**

This short analysis of selected scenes from the documentary *The Battle for Hitler's Supership* shows various elements that contribute to dominant meaning potentials and the principal antagonistic mode of collective memory. I am interested in how an

eyewitness expert, satisfying the third filter of the propaganda model, and footage from the 1930s–1940s are atmospherically arranged to identify and intra- and inter-medially present a form of undisputed evil in the documentary's narrative that answers to the fifth filter established by Herman and Chomsky.

What structural conditions behind the documentary that correspond to the filters for mass-mediated messages presuppose this presentation of the World War II event? Apart from the definition of the positions during World War II, what is more interesting here are implications that the documentary's narrative can be seen to have for contemporary attitudes, actions and perceptions of states on a global arena. What picture of the Allied forces does the documentary mediate and why is this relevant for today?

The documentary *The Battle for Hitler's Supership* was jointly released by Channel 4 International, Channel 5 [2002–2011: Five], The History Channel and NDR (Norddeutscher Rundfunk [Northern German Broadcasting]) in 2005, in conjunction with the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. Channel 4 and Channel 5 are part of the same network, are largely commercially self-funded, and have a public mission (Catterall 2013). The History Channel functions commercially and is owned by A&E Networks (Taves 2001). NDR is a public and regional German channel (*NDR* 2005 [1991]). Tigress Productions, which has made many documentary films, produced *The Battle for Hitler's Supership* (Tigress Productions 2018). Piers Gibbon, an award-winning narrator in television programmes, gave his voice to the documentary (Gibbon 2018). Its director James Quinn is known for various television documentaries for British channels. He works as a lecturer, author and creative director (*SIDF* 2015).

In which way do these structural conditions regarding ownership and distributing channels that form the base for this documentary production predispose the formal patterns that I described above? Most of the producing channels finance the film commercially by selling productions and time for commercials. To make a film—including a documentary—attractive for the media market, it needs to correspond to accepted conventions, narrative patterns and popular medial representations (Marich 2013 [2005]). Hence, the expectations of the intended audience need to be fulfilled. These expectations are grounded in the channel's programme and in its broadcasting patterns, and the audience's general knowledge about World War II. The audiences who choose this channel because of its characteristic outlook may be attracted by a certain genre of programmes—a genre that recounts established and accepted narratives about history and about the status of the participating parties. Furthermore, audiences might expect a particular flow of affect from threatened underdog to winner, which is reminiscent of basic Hollywood scripts. The stylistic elements of the documentary, which are well known from motion picture genres, invite audiences to affectively engage with the narrative, and not to rationally question it. Suspense, emotion, identification and alignment with people and topics that the programme portrays seem to direct the narrative towards accepted patterns defined by a mnemonic hegemony of Churchill being the moral underdog fighting the ultimate enemy.

One remarkable narrative pattern appears on several occasions in the documentary: The British do not surrender to an apparently insurmountable antagonist, but make use of their virtues such as endurance, optimism and effectiveness to take actions and change their destiny. The strategy to give the British the image of the underlying only enlarges their victory in the end.

The above-mentioned scene involving the former member of the Norwegian resistance Terje Jacobsen shows the tools with which the makers of *The Battle for Hitler's Supership* invite the audience to identify and align with the spy by fulfilling the 'expert-filter' of the propaganda model. The music in the introductory scene of Hitler and Churchill provides reading instruction to audiences regarding antagonistic mode of rhetorics by clear formally created 'anti-ism', in terms of how the situation of two opposing parties, Hitler and his war machinery against Churchill and civilians, should be understood.

The dominant meaning potentials in these examples seem to be clear: the war machine of Nazi Germany and Hitler is presented as one uniform unit; an inhumane and invincible machine-like enemy. Opposite to this enemy, Churchill and the civilian British army face the battle reluctantly. As the liberal hero and family man, Churchill invites the narrative to draw on a David and Goliath story, pulling the sympathy of the viewer to the underlying 'David' Churchill.

Formally, this narrative of the leader as a common man is constructed by the selection of footage and its arrangement, and by affective and referential authenticating strategies that are applied by music, cutting and recognisable patterns, as I showed above.

The targeted audiences of this documentary are rather limited—a specific group interested in World War II events. Still, the documentary's paratextual frame (Genette 1997) and thereby its pluri-medial network creates an environment that can nourish the medium's memory potential. The documentary's ownership and distribution channels facilitate memory potentials for interested audiences. The documentary's well-known director and narrator contribute to the film's appearance as a trustworthy and fact-based articulation. The accessibility of the documentary channels such as Channel 4 makes it potentially widely accessible, possibly increasing its range of address beyond the immediately envisioned core group.

The observations above show that Herman and Chomsky's filters can be applied to this documentary: the ownership by among others the private company Channel 4 proposes an alignment with economic profit by advertisements in breaks during and after the screening and by size and segment of the targeted audience. Adequate experts such as Terje, the spy, testify to and confirm the truth value of presented events and support the authentic appearance of the documentary. The narrative is constructed stringently with the help of old footage, eyewitness reports and the narrator's commentaries, which leaves little space for questions and an ambiguous interpretation of the narrative. The last filter from the 1988 model, described as 'anti-communism', but here more generally interpreted as 'anti-ism', is definitely satisfied in this documentary, creating a monstrous 'other' of the Nazi German battleship Tirpitz and its master, Hitler.

## **Conclusion**

The analysed scenes support accepted historical narratives of the Norwegian resistance that was in hiding because of an evil threat to the world, National Socialism and the battleship Tirpitz, and of the British population led by Churchill who had to fight an over-powerful enemy.

In this case, the structural conditions of the documentary's production, distribution and reception represent a part of a media complex. This media complex of influential

owners impacts on which histories are produced, how they are mediated, who has access to them, and how they will be received in the public discourse.

Although several potentials of meaning for different audiences can be created, there is often one established dominant meaning potential (Pötzsch 2013: 134) that needs to be examined with a critical view. In *The Battle for Hitler's Supership*, the two authenticating strategies of affect and reference, as well as an antagonistic mode of memory-making, help to create a good versus evil narrative, 'us' versus 'them'. The narrative is structured around the image of an emotionless machine directed against the common British—and Churchill, their reluctant leader. One might stretch this thought to 'Nazi German autocracy versus British liberal democracy'.

Additionally, the conditions of a documentary's production, distribution and reception are of importance when analysing a medium's potential influence and purpose. Putting the spotlight on the affective strategies that are used in a medium, be it documentary or fictional movie, might provide insights in its meaning potentials for influence and the goals of its message. Consequently, the inclusion of elements of political economy in media analysis can be crucial. Questions of ownership, funding, expertise, and handling of reception can point to possible reasons explaining the relentless creation of mnemonic hegemony on the formal level of any medium.

Potential impacts of the memory-making potential of *The Battle for Hitler's Supership*, however, are limited. The pluri-medial networks (Erll 2008) within which the production is embedded are restricted to the respective channels where the documentary and others of its kind are shown. Nevertheless, this documentary embraces and celebrates established narratives, and might therefore contribute to and strengthen hegemonic discourses about World War II.

As Molden writes: "Hegemony thus establishes one particular narrative as a quasi-natural universality and delegitimises alternative forms of reasoning" (2016: 126). The rhetoric in the selected sequences of *The Battle for Hitler's Supership* are part of this 'quasi-natural universality'. The representations of good and evil in this documentary are accepted by the audiences, they do not contradict what intended audiences already expect. They confirm opinions and strengthen the non-nuanced division into a moral protagonist and an ultimate evil antagonist. The representations in this documentary also invite the audience to accept 'necessary wars', as Churchill and the British society had to fight during World War II. This mnemonic pattern for the past event might function as a lens for current conflicts and prepare the audience to accept contemporary military actions against a (medially) framed evil.

The 'anti-ism' in *The Battle for Hitler's Supership* is distinctive and the selection and compilation of footage, sounds and music, and the narrator's text establish an antagonistic mode of rhetoric. A critical examination of created 'anti-isms' in a documentary can contribute to a more differentiated look on the constructed modes of rhetoric and allow questioning of the dominant meaning potentials of film, and media in general.

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## **Biographical Note**

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# A TALE OF TWO VERSIONS— *I AM LEGEND* (2007) AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

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**Abstract:** *Based on a comparative reading of the officially released version and the director's cut of Francis Lawrence's movie I Am Legend (2007a; 2007b), the present contribution interrogates possible connections between the political economy of film production and aesthetic form. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks such as Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model and Artz' critical study of global entertainment industries, and combining these with an analysis of Lawrence's two versions, I argue that profit-oriented adaptations to implied market pressures are not neutral endeavours, but inherently political acts that shape aesthetic form to, often-tacitly, reiterate a received hegemonic status quo.*

**Keywords:** *I Am Legend (2007); propaganda model; Hollywood; cultural production; othering; test-screenings; liminal space.*

## Introduction

The present tale of two versions is essentially a story of emphasis. Contrasting the officially released version of Francis Lawrence's Hollywood action-flic *I Am Legend* (2007a) with a director's cut that has only subsequently been made available on a DVD edition, I investigate, how the profit-orientation of a global film industry translates into aesthetic form that then invites hegemonic potentials of meaning and practice. Last-minute alterations to the cinema version of Lawrence's film were aimed at making the product digestible to mainstream audiences thus securing financial revenues. In addition, however, these changes also align the narrative to hegemonic discursive frames of othering and violent exclusion proving that market-oriented adaptations of cultural products are not politically neutral endeavours.

Hence, a focus on emphasis. The title of the film—*I Am Legend*—is also the last sentence in Matheson's 1954 novel upon which Lawrence's film is based: “[I am] a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever. I am legend” (Matheson 1954: 160). I argue that the officially released version puts emphasis on ‘I’—*I am legend*—to reiterate the importance of the individual hero of the story who, in this particular version, sacrifices himself to save humankind. In contrast, the director's cut puts emphasis on the last word—*I am legend*—to highlight, in line with the novel's original narrative, the dawning awareness of the main protagonist that, rather than being the hero in a Manichean struggle for survival against an evil enemy, in reality he himself acted as the legendary demon killing apparently monstrous, yet still living and thinking beings in their sleep. The following text is the story of this shift in emphasis, its probable reasons, and potential implications.

### **The Political Economy of Cultural Production**

Ever since Stuart Hall's (1977) studies on how received discourses, available technologies, and established relations of power and production predispose both form and reception of cultural expressions, it has been accepted wisdom that material conditions and political economy matter for artistic creations and their possible implications and effects—that the fields of aesthetics, economy, and politics are intrinsically intertwined. According to Hall, the formal features of television programmes are shaped and understood in complex contexts that tie down the freedom of active producers and audiences, but do not determine their activities in the last instance. However neatly structured and composed a specific cultural expression might be, it can always be read against the grain or placed in new and potentially subversive contexts. Hall develops an understanding of production and reception as active and situated processes that are influenced by a variety of factors. In the present contribution, I show how the political economy of contemporary Hollywood cinema impacts upon aesthetic form, and investigate the role of pre-screenings with test audiences in these processes.

In his critique of the ideological implications of transnational media corporations, Artz (2015) writes that

any music, movie, art, political discourse, or social commentary that passes through corporate media filters must meet the prerequisites of mass entertainment and profit, thereby weakening and undermining any political edge, class independence, or democratic potential (13).

Arguing that “all entertainment carries kernels of cultural values, social norms, and political ideology” (4), Artz asserts a fundamental significance of cultural expressions for politics and democracy at a global scale. Throughout his book, he shows among other things how mainstream media take part in establishing and maintaining a cultural form of hegemony that can productively harness, for instance, issues of diversity yet at an underlying level rearticulates these in individualist terms as such leaving pressing questions of ownership, economic exploitation, power, and collective action untouched. As a result, argues Artz, mainstream culture predominantly reiterates a received status quo in political and economic terms.

Given his theme and overall critical outlook regarding the material conditions for media production in global capitalism, it is surprising that Artz (2015) refrains from referring to the work of Herman and Chomsky (2002 [1988]) who have made similar points before and who have developed a terminology centred precisely on the term filter invoked by Artz (2015) in the quote above. The reason for this omission can possibly be found in the fact that Herman and Chomsky (2002 [1988]) focused on the political economy of news production and dissemination with main focus on the US, while Artz (2015) directs attention to global entertainment industries (mainstream television and film).

Herman and Chomsky (2002 [1988]) studied the institutional logics behind what they perceive as a significant political bias of major US news media. Providing wide empirical evidence for imbalanced reporting, they identify five filters through which potential news items need to pass and that influence both form and content of the

disseminated messages—[1] ownership, size and profit-orientation of the production company, [2] the economic importance of advertising, [3] sourcing, [4] flak, and [5] anti-\*ism. In their studies, they show how each filter operates and how they interact to reproduce a hegemonic image of capitalism, US foreign policy and military interventions, as well as political, economic, and cultural elites as inherently benevolent factors and as subservient to an allegedly universal greater good. In spite of sustained criticism (e.g. Brahm 2006), the model is today widely acknowledged as a viable analytical tool enabling a critical understanding of the role of mainstream media in capitalist systems (Krüger 2013; Robinson 2015; Zollmann 2018).

In line with the arguments offered by Alford (2011; 2015), I believe that Herman and Chomsky's approach can be used to throw light upon the conditions of emergence of ideological biases not only of supposedly factual news items, but also of mainstream fiction film and, indeed, cultural expressions in general. Through a combination of the propaganda model with the works of Artz and Alford, I take up the question of how the profit orientation of global entertainment industries translates into artistic form that then builds up and disseminates certain potentials for meaning in line with dominant interests.

The identified dynamic is an effect of the structural conditions under which the contemporary mainstream film industry operates and brings to light a form of power that is not wielded by distinct autonomous actors but that still serves particular interests. This form of power is hegemonic—it is “constituted *organically* [...] throughout society” (Mosco 2009 [1996]: 206; emphasis in original) and is based on largely-implicit consent rather than coercion. It is reproduced through intrinsic mechanisms such as profit-orientation and return-of-investment calculations based on the assumed tastes of specific mainstream audiences rather than through open censorship or overt political directives.

Through an analysis that compares and contrasts the officially released version of the Hollywood action movie *I Am Legend* (Lawrence 2007a) with a director's cut that was made available via a later DVD edition, I will demonstrate how economic considerations streamline commercial cultural products and illustrate how the filters profit orientation and anti-\*ism operate in practice.

### **Self and Other in Hollywood Cinema (and Beyond)**

Hegemonic mainstream tastes, including their political and ideological biases, constitute narrow frames for allegedly creative industries. Today, any divergence from tested and tried conventions that might alienate hegemonic audiences implies a financial risk that few major studios are willing to take (Artz 2015; Alford 2011; Alford 2015). Major productions are regularly submitted to various forms of corporate pre-testing and pre-screening leading to often severe changes in manuscripts and final products that might radically break with the intentions of directors and script writers. In spite of overall differences in outlook, both Artz (2015) and Marich (2013) agree that, in the industry, the financial bottom-line predisposes both content and aesthetic form. However, while Marich's (2013) merely instrumental approach remains oblivious of the politico-ideological implications of this profit-orientation, Artz (2015) show how the political economy of a globalised entertainment sector constantly pushes products into maintaining and reiterating a received status quo.

In his book, Artz (2015: 200–213) shows how economic considerations impact upon form and content of commercial mainstream cinema. He identifies five key thematic threads prevalent in most of the released films' narratives: [1] the imminent presence of severe threats and dangers, [2] citizens as inherently powerless victims, [3] individual heroes who [4] exert a justified form of violence, and [5] thereby reassert a received status quo in the end usually reinforcing conservative gender roles, family relations, as well as established political and economic conditions. According to Artz, adherence to these genre templates not only adjusts works to assumed audience expectations thus reducing the financial risks of film production, but also ideologically and politically realigns them to the very hegemonic order from which the product emerged in the first place.

And, the discursive and cultural frames set by mainstream cinema matter. Miskolczi (2008: 123), for instance, connects the Hollywood war film's genre conventions to the cultural frames legitimating actual wars. He writes that generic war films "restrict themselves to one point-of-view" and thereby "propagate the unnatural divisions that cause war in the first place". In a similar manner, Der Derian (2002: 110) asserted that "more than rational calculations of interests take us to war. People go to war because of how they see, perceive, picture, imagine, and speak of others; that is, how they construct the difference of others as well as the sameness of themselves through representation". In a critique of Hollywood war and action cinema, I concluded in a similar manner arguing that the genres offer easily accessible "interpretative schemata that inform political discourse in that they tacitly order and disambiguate confusing and complex political environments and challenges" (Pötzsch 2013: 142).<sup>1</sup>

In sum, it can be argued that popular culture functions like an implicit background of meaning—a horizon of plausibility—that makes certain understandings and options for action appear viable and sound while others are brought to emerge as strange, less convincing, or outright ridiculous. As such, cultural expressions do not determine subjects. Rather, they resemble tacit patterns of support and restraint that offer apparently valid and easily applicable, familiar frames for understanding and, this way, incrementally move the entire system of interpretation into a particular direction. Factors at the level of political economy play a key role in these processes of maintaining and reinforcing a cultural form of hegemony.

As among others Hall (1977) has reminded us, cultural expressions merely offer potentials for meaning and understanding that are actively negotiated in situated contexts of reception. As such, any mainstream film can, with some effort, be enlisted in progressive political projects. However, this endeavour takes an amount of energy and dedication the average leisure-seeking spectator might not be able or willing to invest. Therefore, to suggest that a majority of spectators will be inclined to passively reproduce the dominant meaning potentials that are systematically invited through mainstream culture does not imply the assumption that spectators are slavishly bound by an ideological cinematic apparatus. Hegemonic frames of meaning and practice can always be challenged. Such a challenge, however, is not invited by mainstream culture's

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<sup>1</sup> All the authors mentioned in the section above interrogate special cases of orientalism—the institutional and discursive construction of a Western self in opposition to a narrowly framed largely imaginary Eastern other—that has been identified and described in detail by Said (1978).

aesthetic form and therefore demands an active spectatorship with the necessary resources to deconstruct implied messages and content (Hall 1977; Kellner/Ryan 1990).

How do hegemonic frames for meaning and interpretation emerge? In earlier studies inspired by neo-formalist film analysis (e.g. Thompson 1988; Bordwell 2006), I have analysed how Hollywood war and action films strategically deploy a variety of formal devices to constantly reiterate a basic story template centred upon a particular relation between what is framed as an honest and true soldier-self and an inherently evil, threatening, and incomprehensible enemy-other (Pötzsch 2010; Pötzsch 2013). Based on Smith's (1995) studies of character engagement in film, I have shown that narrative tropes such as the evil deed committed by a de-humanised enemy or the unexpected event enforcing direct violent encounters between self and other, together with an uneven distribution of such techniques as slow motion, dwelling close-ups, flashback sequences, focalisation, and sad or valorising music among others give rise to a biased structure of engagement that systematically motivates audience sympathy and empathy with one side of the conflict. Meanwhile, the enemy-other is confined to an inaccessible beyond cordoned off by an 'epistemological barrier' that precludes access to the alternative perspectives, the individuality, and indeed humanity of the opponents (Pötzsch 2010: 69; Pötzsch 2013: 129–131). Drawing upon the work of Butler (2009), I have argued that this specific aesthetics of mainstream cinema plays into cognitive and discursive frames of war, rendering implicit plausibility to political articulations presenting all kinds of others as ungrievable and therefore disposable life—a form of anti-\*ism producing monstrous adversaries and unworthy victims in the terms of Hermann and Chomsky (2002).

Filmmaking in Hollywood is an industry-style endeavour. However, also the Hollywood studio system can produce works at odds with received hegemonic frames and this way problematise its own genre conventions and their relation to politics (see for instance Misek 2008). In earlier studies, I have identified liminal characters and liminal spaces as key devices of estrangement<sup>2</sup> inviting for such a critical dismantling of generic forms of othering in mainstream film (Pötzsch 2010: 72–77). The term liminal here refers to border-crossing individuals and shared locations in the diegetic universes of war and action films. Both can estrange, and thereby question and challenge, received frames of de-humanisation and exclusion in that they enable the voice and identity of the previously confined other to emerge and assert its relevance. Locations that make possible direct non-violent encounters between self and other and characters that can provide inside perspectives on the rationalities and considerations of both opposing groups invite mutual understanding and an acceptance of the other as fellow human being. As such, these tropes subvert the epistemological barriers of the genre that present the other as “ubiquitously absent” (Pötzsch 2013: 135–137, 139–140, 142)—as inaccessible and hardly ever seen, yet still a potentially omnipresent deadly threat—thereby inviting for a problematisation of violence and de-humanisation in film and beyond.

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<sup>2</sup> The term estrangement is derived from Russian formalism and in particular the work of Viktor Shklovsky (1965 [1919]). It denotes the capacity of art to surprise the viewer and thereby enforce a de-habitualisation of the apparently well-known thus facilitating a new and more reflected seeing. Thompson (1988) has used the term for a neo-formalist analysis of Hollywood film.

The following readings are guided by these considerations and apply the methodological template introduced above to an analysis of Lawrence's *I Am Legend*. I show how both versions set up and negotiate epistemological barriers and liminal elements, and flesh out the opposing meaning potentials invited by their respective cinematic forms. The identified differences will then be connected back to the economy and politics of Hollywood filmmaking.

**“They Won’t Stop!”—Demonising the Other in the Officially Released Version of Lawrence’s *I Am Legend* (2007)**

The film *I Am Legend* (Lawrence 2007a) follows elite military scientist Robert Neville (played by Will Smith), the presumably last human survivor on Earth, in his struggle to find a cure against a virus that has killed virtually all of mankind and transformed most of those remaining into sinister vampires preying upon the living during night time. Lawrence’s movie is the last in a series of adaptations of Richard Matheson’s 1954 novel *I Am Legend* and has been greeted as a straightforward genre movie fulfilling the related expectations.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the movie has been officially released in a version that not only entails severe narrative inconsistencies, but also breaks with key elements of Matheson’s novel.

In Lawrence’s film, the story is focalised through main character Robert Neville—the lone survivor of the plague—who, accompanied by a German shepherd dog, follows his daily routines in an apparently de-populated New York. Hiding in his fortified home during night time, he uses the days to gather supplies and catch vampire specimen for his experiments aimed at eradicating the disease. According to Moya and López (2017: 5), this setting brings forth Lawrence’s Neville as a “Cartesian figure, [...] a Crusoe and a Dr. Frankenstein figure at the same time”.

During the course of two earlier screen adaptations—Ubaldo Ragona’s dark and haunting *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) and Boris Sagal’s action-flic *The Omega Man* (1971)—and culminating in the cinema version of Lawrence’s film, a gradual militarisation and ‘elitisation’ of the main protagonist can be observed. As such, Neville transforms from a plant worker in Matheson’s book to a scientist in Ragona’s movie, a military doctor in Sagal’s adaptation and, finally, an elite military scientist in Lawrence’s film. In spite of Lawrence’s refreshing move of casting a non-white actor as Neville, Roberts’ (2016) observations of a gradual transition of the main character “from anomaly to messiah” (42) is correct and leads the consecutive screen adaptations further and further away from the disruptive tone and unsettling plot of the original novel. As will be shown in the following sections, however, this trend is only valid for the officially released version of Lawrence’s movie and is reversed in the director’s cut that realigns the film with the critical and subversive narrative of Matheson’s book.

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<sup>3</sup> It has been noted that Will Smith is the first black American to act as the last man on earth (see for instance Brayton 2011). Previous adaptations of Matheson’s novel such as Ubaldo Ragona’s *The Last Man on Earth* (2008 [1964]) and Boris Sagal’s *The Omega Man* (2003 [1971]) starred white actors—Vincent Price and Charlton Heston—in the lead role as Morgan and Neville respectively. Steve Niles and Elman Brown’s graphic novel *I Am Legend* (2007 [1991]) follows the same convention and presents Neville as a white male—this in spite of the fact that Matheson’s novel does not specifically mark Neville as white.



In the officially released version of *I Am Legend*, a logic of mutual exclusivity is predominant from the beginning and maintained throughout the entire narrative. The audience is systematically invited to align and ally with Neville alone. Devices such as close-ups on his face, flashback sequences, sad or valorising musical tunes, and monologues among other things make his feelings and considerations accessible to spectators and thus strongly invite allegiance and empathy with his character. In contrast, the vampires remain largely in the shadows, hidden in the dark or only briefly captured in quick cuts and quivering long-shots. Once they appear, they are narrowly framed as posing an immediate and deadly threat that has to be disposed of under the application of all means available, thus rendering implied legitimacy to the severely violent measures taken by the main protagonist. Negotiation, retreat, and even surrender are excluded as viable alternatives due to the completely inhumane nature of what is framed as an incomprehensibly aggressive, monstrous opponent.

When presented as object for Neville's scientific experiments, the vampires are reduced to the status of pacified, clinical exhibits. The scenes are set in a clean and neatly organised high-tech laboratory in the basement of Neville's stronghold. The other is depicted as tied to a stretcher and connected to various instruments monitoring its biological (mal)functions (see figure 1). The specimen do not have names, but are distinguished by the code for the experimental serum they are exposed to. Rather than constituting an alternative subjectivity the movie's hegemonic discourse frames the other as deadly threat and dangerous symptom of a terrible disease. Neville's activities in the laboratory are presented as the determined and well-organised endeavours of a professional scientist working for an unquestionably good cause. This cause and the clinical atmosphere of calm professionalism discourages possible sympathy with the suffering and dying other.



**Figure 1.** The other as scientific exhibit in the officially released version of *I Am Legend* (2007); screenshot taken by the author.

The officially released version of Lawrence's film maintains a form of de-humanisation and de-subjectification of an objectified and "unambiguously not human" (Hantke 2011: 170) enemy-other even at the cost of obvious narrative inconsistencies. For instance, the

film leaves the apparent development of the enemy's intellectual capacities and organisational skills throughout the narrative unexplained, and as such refrains from further inquiring into the sudden ability of the vampires to implement coordinated attacks, or to construct a sophisticated trap to capture Neville. As Bowring (2015) argues, this overall outlook is in line with the beginning of Matheson's novel where Neville "displays many classic attributes of the dominant self over a foreign other" (132), but decisively breaks with the book's ending that witnesses a re-humanisation of the opponents and entails a "complete reversal of position of self and other" (134).

After the death of his only companion, the German shepherd dog, a despairing Neville tries to commit suicide by openly attacking the vampires during night-time, but is rescued by Anna and Ethan, a woman and a boy exhibiting the same inexplicable immunity to the deadly virus as he does himself. As the two adults cautiously start to communicate, a fundamental disagreement emerges between them. While Neville puts his trust into science and almost manically works on developing a cure (to the human-created disease), the woman claims to be following the voice of God leading her to a colony of survivors. The character of Anna also opens an estranging gaze on the vampiric other that grows out of an apparently religiously motivated form of compassion and, thus, constitutes an alternative to the militarist logics and cold scientific calculations of Neville. How the film towards the end negotiates the opposing view-points and philosophical positions of Anna and Neville is key for the overall ideological outlook of the work and constitutes a crucial difference between the cinema version and the subsequent director's cut.

The end of *I Am Legend* (in its officially released version) depicts Neville, Anna, and Ethan trapped in the laboratory. Only a wall made of security glass—the classical trope of a protective topographical barrier coinciding with an epistemological one—divides them from the monstrous enemy's massive onslaught. Sequences of quivering mid-shots on the anonymous mass of aggressively attacking vampires are juxtaposed with close-ups on the slowly cracking protective barrier, and on the three human survivors. When the enemy is about to break through, Neville hands the cure—a serum he had just extracted from one of his objects of experimentation—to Anna, and hides her and the boy in a small safe room attached to the laboratory. During a last conversation, Neville says he is doing what he is doing because he "started listening". In the officially released version this implies that he was convinced by Anna and started to follow the voice of God supposedly speaking through her. In addition, he states that "they won't stop" reiterating once more the complete impossibility of any solution to the conflict except a total annihilation of either self or other. Then, Neville uses a grenade and heroically sacrifices his own life to stop the menacing advance of the vampires, obliterating the estranging potentials of Anna's emerging compassionate outlook on the other in the process.

The final sequence of the officially released version completes this moral dichotomisation of the narrative. The scenes show the woman and the boy arriving at an uninfected safe haven. A massive steel portal slowly opens and the camera catches a white wooden church, an American flag, and armed men in uniform—the classical insignia of US religious conservatism (see figure 2). As the woman and the boy enter the village, a voice-over recounts Neville's heroic deed stating that he became legend

because he successfully developed a cure and saved their lives while sacrificing his own.



**Figure 2.** Wall, church, flag, and soldier-self: Connoting safety in the officially released version of *I Am Legend* (2007); screenshot taken by the author.

As among others Bowring (2015) and Degouveia (2017) have pointed out, the ending of the cinematic release decisively breaks with the tone of Matheson's novel that explicitly disconnects the figure of the vampire from tropes of evil and precludes the emergence of a dichotomous moral universe. In the officially released version of Lawrence's movie, this critical perspective is reversed, as the ending completes the transition of the main protagonist from "anomaly to messiah" identified by Roberts (2016: 42). This move, again, invites a connection between the film and mainstream political narratives in the US that often rearticulate complex real-world struggles and contradictions through simplistic frames of epic battles between good and evil centred upon the violent male hero.

The icons of rural, religious conservatism and American patriotism deployed in the final sequence of the film to connote safety and a new start, the idea of following the implied will of God, and the way the coloured main protagonist sacrifices his life combating a completely dehumanised, aggressive enemy, all resonate with a religiously inspired populist rhetoric positing a predominantly US self against evil opponents threatening their lives and freedom without apparent reason. In particular these factors have led Hantke (2011) to categorise the film as "a key text of the final period of the Bush years" (166) that relocates the future to the Republican ideal of rural, small town America (168) and prompted Moreman (2012) to assert that Lawrence's film favoured "conservative Christian moralizing" rather than staying close to Matheson's original focus on "alternative spirituality" (130). In a similar manner, Heyes (2017) claims that the officially released version "recodes the vampiric dark-seekers as radical Islamic terrorists" (1), while Boyle (2009) describes the film as reiterating a "neoconservative combination of religious and market fundamentalism with an aggressive foreign policy" (1).

Some authors have directed attention to ambivalent and critical aspects of the officially released version. Hwang (2015), for instance, argues that Lawrence's film "draws a clear boundary between humans and the monsters", but at the same time finds that the film, in its officially released version, "reveals the instability of the border between us and them" (2). In a similar manner, Bowring (2015) makes the argument that the theatre-version of *I Am Legend* retains some critical potentials in that it frames Neville's death as due to his inability of understanding the humanness of the other (135–136). However, she also concedes that for instance Hantke's (2011) critical reading of the other in the film as "insect-like invasion" (135) has its merits. According to Brayton (2011), Will Smith's starring as a "black Christ" (69) somewhat alleviates the most accentuated messianic right-wing elements of the narrative, as such pointing to a common trade-off between identity issues on the one hand, and politics and economy on the other that was identified by Artz (2015) as typical for mainstream US culture.

As the remainders of the article will show, I agree with Hantke (2011), Moreman (2012), Boyle (2009), Žižek (2010), Heyes (2017), and others who have pointed to the conservative, militarist, and at times outright reactionary ideological subtext of the officially released version. In contrast to all the authors mentioned above, however, I put a critical reading of the hegemonic version of *I Am Legend* up against the significant subversive potentials for meaning invited by a director's cut that openly interrogates and directly challenges received generic Hollywood conventions thereby estranging received discursive frames of othering and exclusion.

In contrast to the officially released version, the director's cut of Lawrence's movie sticks far closer to the original narrative of the novel the film is based on. Accordingly, this 'unofficial' release not only provides answers to the unresolved questions concerning the sudden intellectual and organisational capabilities of the enemy, but in the end also fundamentally redistributes the roles of good and evil. This happens through the successful activation of the subversive potentials vested in the shared, 'liminal space' (Pötzsch 2010) of the laboratory during the final sequence of the film. As I will show below, this alternative ending counters the dominant tendency of meaning of the officially released version entirely and makes the film resonate strongly with an oppositional discourse critical of populist framings of complex and contradictory real-world struggles as simplistic wars against evil.

### **"Did All of Them Die?"—Recalibrating Self and Other in the Director's Cut of Lawrence's *I Am Legend* (2007)**

The director's cut of Lawrence's *I Am Legend* fundamentally changes the film's narrative. By means of a new ending and a few changed scenes, this alternative version effectively punctuates the discursive logic of polarisation that remains constitutive of the official release. This is achieved on the liminal location of Neville's laboratory that has been transformed from a field of battle to a shared space enabling communication and peaceful exchange. Surprisingly, neither Heyes (2017), Moreman (2012), Boyle (2009), Hantke (2011), Žižek (2010), or Moya and López (2017) take this alternative version into account when criticising *I Am Legend's* inherently conservative, reactionary, militarist, and religious ideological subtexts, and the film's incapability of addressing issues of third spaces, cultural hybridity, and peaceful coexistence. Degouveia (2017: 143) briefly acknowledges the existence of an alternative version of

the film, while Bowring (2015) mentions the director's cut in an endnote conceding that it "dwells much more on the encounter between Neville and the Dark Seeker" (142, note 6). Unfortunately, neither of them subjects this original version to any closer scrutiny.

The director's cut consciously plays with and gradually explains the various cues deployed throughout the film to tacitly imply a possible evolution of the vampiric other. When Neville for instance captures a 'female specimen' for his experiments, a male appears in the door and exposes himself to the light of the sun that is deadly for vampires before retreating with a scream. Neville is unable to interpret this behaviour as caused by possible care for the captured individual, but mechanically records this event as due to a complete breakdown of human capacities for reasoning, effectively reducing the enemy to the status of merely vegetative life. Later, the main protagonist is caught in a sophisticated trap that the enemy-other has put into place by copying the mechanism Neville himself uses to get hold of specimen for his experiments. The stunning fact that the vampires have developed the skills to construct such a device, and to ensnare its victim by distributing shop window dummies in the area, remains unacknowledged by the main character—and by the officially released version of the film.

Neville remains positioned by a hegemonic discourse of war that makes the other inconceivable as anything but a dehumanised deadly threat, or an objectified symptom of disease. In contrast to the officially released version, however, the director's cut makes this 'epistemological barrier' (Pötzsch 2010; Pötzsch 2013) that confines the other and effectively prevents its emergence as a conscious and living being, the overt theme of the subsequent narrative. As such, the film interrogates the very conventions of its own genre and, through a carefully devised storyline, subverts these eventually. After the arrival of the human survivors, Anna and Ethan, the barrier stabilising the hegemonic subject-position of the soldier-scientist, slowly starts to crack, and during a final showdown on the liminal grounds of the laboratory, it dissolves entirely.

One scene is crucial for the denaturalisation of Neville's hegemonic discursive position as a scientist and military man. As he shows Anna his laboratory, she catches sight of the female vampire Neville had newly caught. Anna approaches the other tied to a stretcher and a close-up on her face reveals that she watches the creature intensely, before asking: "Will that [the test serum] cure her?" Neville replies with a matter of fact voice that "[...] no, this will almost certainly kill it". When Anna turns away the camera follows her movement filming over her shoulder to indicate her point of view. It finally catches sight of hundreds of black and white photographs covering the entire back wall of the laboratory (see figure 3). All the images show the faces of vampires and are marked with various information written in tiny letters under each image. Anna stands paralysed for a few second before she asks: "Did all of them die?" Neville answers without looking up with a brief and simple "yes", whereupon Anna utters an exasperated "My God...".



**Figure 3.** “Did all of them die?”—Re-Humanising the objectified other in the director’s cut of *I Am Legend* (2007); screenshot taken by the author.

This sequence clearly shows the degree of dehumanisation of the other characteristic of Neville’s hegemonic subject position and has led Degouveia (2017) to speculate about a deliberate iconographic connection between a “genocidal magnitude” (145) of Neville’s experiments and the activities taking place in the ‘laboratories’ of Nazi death camps. As will be explained later, this comparison is viable, but only in relation to the director’s cut that, unfortunately, has been disregarded by Degouveia. In only focusing on the officially released version, the suggested analogy would make an implied Dr. Mengele the main hero of the narrative who, in the end, sacrifices himself to amend his sins and save mankind from his victims now re-framed as a deadly threat. This interpretation, of course, is deeply problematic and only attention to the director’s cut can alleviate this aporic conclusion.

In both versions of *I Am Legend*, the character of Anna opens potential new perspectives on the confined other. Only in the director’s cut, however, this alternative gaze comes to fruition enabling a fundamental challenge of received Hollywood tropes and the hegemonic discursive position of the main hero.

Anna’s inclusive position emerges from her use of the personal pronouns ‘he’ or ‘she’ as opposed to Neville’s ‘it’ when referring to the vampires. Such verbal re-articulations of the other as inherently human are visually supported by a different gaze that enables an individualisation of the enemy, and that does not only challenge Neville’s hegemonic point of view, but also brings the discursive frames constituting both self and other to the sudden awareness of the audience.

Neville, however, remains insensitive to this potential repositioning. He is unable to accept Anna’s articulation for what it really is; a re-framing of the enemy-other as a fellow human being. Therefore, Neville snaps back into his scientific mindset by targeting the element of religion in Anna’s speech, effectively circumventing an engagement with the subversive potentials emanating from her compassionate inclusion of the other. Neville simply states that “God didn’t do this, Anna. We did”, implying a repetition of his mantra ‘I can still fix this’, thus reiterating the received Hollywood trope of the individual male hero saving the day. The director’s cut, however,

fundamentally subverts this position in the end precisely by re-articulating and including the previously confined other on the liminal space of the laboratory.

In the following night, Neville's stronghold is attacked by a ravaging mass of extremely aggressive vampires. During the struggle, Neville, Anna, and Ethan are forced to retreat into the laboratory. In the end, only the transparent security glass of the quarantine section where also the female specimen Neville had captured earlier is located, protects them from the onslaught of their enemies. While the officially released version defuses this potential liminal situation by annihilating both Neville and all his opponents in the blast of an explosive device triggered by the main protagonist to save Anna and Ethan, the director's cut presents a surprising turn of events.

The subsequent scenes witness a subtle change in focalisation towards balancing the perspectives of Neville and his main adversary. A series of shot/reverse shot sequences alternate between the point of view of Neville who wields a pistol and exclaims that he can save everybody because his serum works, and the vantage point of the vampires' leader reacting with apparent outrage repeatedly throwing himself against the security glass that slowly starts to crack. Then, a series of close-ups shows the two opponents facing one another, before the vampire suddenly smears what appears to be a butterfly on the glass wall and retreats (see figure 4a). Neville's face, filmed in a close-up, reveals his dawning understanding as he slowly turns around the body of the female he had been experimenting with and reveals the tattoo of a butterfly on her shoulder. The shock this sudden discovery of the enemy-other's humanity and subjectivity entails is clearly reflected on the main protagonist's face that turns ash-grey. The transparent barrier formerly protecting the self against an apparently inhumane other has suddenly been transformed into a medium of communication and non-violent exchange.

Neville slowly puts the gun down, carefully removes the tabs and tubes that insert the serum into the woman's body and tells Anna to open the door. When she asks what he is doing, Neville answers: "I start listening". In this case, however, this does not imply that Neville starts to listen to the voice of God implying a successful repositioning within a hegemonic religious discourse, but that he now engages in a first-to-second person dialogue with the enemy. *Neville has started listening to the previously confined voice of the other.* This evolving communication with the vampires is enabled on the shared liminal location of the laboratory that had been blown to pieces—and thereby deprived of its subversive potentials—in the officially released version of the film.

Neville then leaves the quarantine section with the female vampire lying on a stretcher. Dwelling close-ups and mid-shots on the two vampires now reunited are supported by low music. Their gestures reveal mutual affection, care, and love, and strongly invite audience empathy with their evolving characters. The male vampire then carries the woman outside leaving Neville, Anna, and Ethan behind without harming them. A last eyeline match that indicates Neville's perspective focuses once again on the hundreds of black and white photographs covering the laboratory wall (see figures 4b–4c). This time, Neville (and the audience with him) perceive the depicted specimen as individuals, and indeed his victims, effectively indicating Neville's adoption of a different gaze, and the successful dislodging of the hegemonic identity of the soldier-scientist.





**Figures 4a–4c.** Dislodging mutually exclusive identities of war: liminal grounds in the director's cut of *I Am Legend* (2007); screenshots taken by the author.

Throughout the sequences in the laboratory, the enemy-other has been re-humanised and re-subjectified. The other emerges not only as an alternative discursive identity, but, in contrast to Matheson's novel, also as a morally and ethically superior agent who



refrains from avenging the terrible sufferings Neville had been subjecting their species to during his experiments. At this point, Degouveia's (2017) observations regarding the Neville–Mengele analogy become relevant and can be sustained throughout the remaining narrative that refrains from absolving Neville of his sins and denies him the honours of heroic self-sacrifice.

The iconography of the laboratory with the meticulously recorded mass murder committed for a presumably good cause against victims that had been discursively reduced to mere vegetative life, indeed uncannily reminds the viewer of imageries connected to Nazi death camps during World War II. This choice of style draws a chain of equivalence between the narrative's main protagonist with whom the audience is aligned and allied, and the 'physicians' experimenting in the camps. By these means, the film underlines the extreme consequences of discursive constructions of the other as less than human and issues a damning critique of the dominant ideology of generic Hollywood war and action cinema as inviting precisely such forms and practices of de-humanisation.

In the last scene of the film, the breaking up of formerly sedimented hegemonic subject-positions is visually emphasised through the spatial movement of the main protagonists who leave the (crushed) topographical barriers of Neville's home behind and head into an unascertained beyond. The movement of their car across a bridge into the unknown illustrates a dislodging of Neville's and Anna's discursive identities. In the end, both military-scientific and religious, hegemonic frames are unsettled through a "performative encounter" (Rosello 2005: 1) with the allegedly evil and deadly dangerous other that enables new, nonviolent subject positions, inclusion, and mutual understanding. The contrast to the officially released version that reinstates an inherently patriotic and religious discourse as a hegemonic diegetic frame that necessitates the total annihilation of the other could hardly be more striking.

This closure brings the director's cut into close proximity to the narrative in Matheson's 1954 novel that, according to Faizi (2015), is a study about the terrible consequences of "dialogue annihilation" (40). In the novel, the main protagonist's final exclamation "I am legend" (160) serves to indicate his sudden realisation that while having lived in the profound belief of having fought evil, in reality he himself had acted like the legendary monster killing infected yet still human beings in their sleep: "he [Neville] was anathema and black terror to be destroyed" (Matheson 1954: 160).<sup>4</sup> Published in the US at the height of McCarthyan cold war paranoia, it can be argued that Matheson's novel represents a comment on the predominant hegemonic discourse of its time that is comparable to the way Lawrence's director's cut reframes the global war on terror and its various strategies of populist othering and exclusion.

Such connections to political discourse are in line with much of the criticism levelled against the theatre version of Lawrence's film. Walliss and Aston (2011), for instance, state that "[t]he decision to release a more straightforward, unambiguous version [of *I Am Legend*] that resituated Manichean concepts of good and evil, represents the contestation and difficulty in addressing such themes in a post-9/11 world where socio-political turbulence, military conflict and the War on Terror engendered a divisive terrain of meaning and representation" (62). Arguing in a related direction, Bowring (2015) comments that "[i]t is notable that the post 9/11 adaptation [of Matheson's *I Am*

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<sup>4</sup> For a thoughtful comparison of novel and film versions, see for instance Bowring (2015).

*Legend*] is the adaptation which refuses the most forcibly to shift perspective in the way Matheson's novel did [...] which indicates much about contemporary perspectives and accounts of selfhood and alterity" (135). In a similar manner, Žižek (2010) laments the loss of the original narrative's "authentically multicultural experience" (63) in that the "hero's death reasserts [...] his lost community" (64) rather than fundamentally questioning received perceptions of the other. According to Žižek, this makes Lawrence's *I Am Legend* indicative of a reactionary turn in US politics and culture after 9/11. It is surprising that none of the above-mentioned authors takes the director's cut of Lawrence's movie into consideration, or addresses the timely question of why the accomplished and thoughtful narrative of the original film had been transformed into shallow and unconvincing mainstream entertainment prior to its cinematic release.

### **Profit-Orientation Turned into Artistic Form—*I Am Legend* and the Political Economy of Art and Entertainment**

In his handbook for movie productions, Marich (2013) presents a series of strategies and tactics that can be used to ensure the economic viability and success of film projects. Detailing among other things established best practices for poster design and placement, the use of trailers, pre-screenings, tracking surveys and end surveys, as well as single- and transmedia marketing, he shows what producers and directors can, and according to him indeed should, do to make their products economically sustainable and profitable.

In his endeavour, Marich (2013) constantly subsumes aesthetic and political considerations under the allegedly overarching logic and requirements of an economic marketplace where cultural products' main function is to vie for the attention of mainstream audiences with the main purpose of achieving economic gains. As such, the strategies and tactics he presents are apparently located above politics as they, in an allegedly neutral fashion, describe the very means necessary to survive the severe competition characteristic of the cultural sector. However, as among others Artz (2015) or Alford (2015) have shown, the decision to simply accept the peculiar tastes and preferences of mainstream audiences and various subsegments of this category as the only viable measure of success is a problematic move that disregards the inherently political and power-laden character of hegemonic positions and outlooks. Established frames and predominant tastes are reified—treated as a natural state of affairs that then pre-structures and predisposes the further production process. By these means, content and form of mainstream cultural products are systematically pushed to neglect non-normative audiences and to reinforce already dominant positions.

The tale-of-two-versions recounted above reflects the operation of such a hegemonic apparatus of production. According to among others Lambie (2011) and Lunte (2015), the changes made to Lawrence's movie prior to its official release were the result of pre-screenings of the completed film with test audiences who had rejected the original narrative and demanded a more morally straightforward and up-beat ending to the story. In an interview he recently gave to *Screen Rant* (Cotter 2018), the director himself conceded that economic constraints made him refrain from his original wish to do "the story of the novella [*I Am Legend*] straight up" (n. p.). In continuation, Lawrence asserts the superior quality of the original ending and explains the subsequent changes with conventional genre expectations of targeted audiences:

I agree it's [the director's cut is] the better ending. I mean, it's the more philosophical version of the end, but in terms of story math we're doing everything you're not supposed to do, right? The hero doesn't find the cure, right? They drive off into the unknown and the creatures you've been saying are the bad ones the whole time you learn actually have humanity and aren't the bad ones—the hero's the bad one. And so you've basically turned everything on its head. We tested it twice and it got wildly rejected, wildly rejected, which is why we came out with the other one (in Cotter 2018).

This makes apparent that expected box-office numbers undermined the critical outlook of the original work and instead led to a film that reiterates, even at the cost of significant narrative inconsistencies, a received Hollywood story template centred upon a Manichean struggle between good and evil.

Through the case of *I Am Legend*, the pre-screening of movies with hegemonic test-audiences becomes conceivable as a key mechanism of a Hollywood propaganda model in the sense of Alford (2011; 2015). Through this technique, Herman and Chomsky's (2002 [1988]) first filter—ownership and profit orientation—becomes operational and successfully plays into the fourth and fifth one—an avoidance of possible flak and the invocation of a generic anti-\*ism. As the readings of the two versions conducted above suggest, in adapting aesthetic form to genre conventions and assumed mainstream tastes, Lawrence not only ensured economic success of his title, but in the process also recalibrated *I Am Legend's* overall ideological outlook aligning it to hegemonic discursive and cultural frames centred upon perpetuated struggles against allegedly inhumane and disposable, *ungrievable* (Butler 2009) others.

In contrast to the released version, the director's cut of *I Am Legend* profoundly challenges such a reified hegemonic world view prevalent in the contemporary US. In its original form, the film re-ambiguates an apparently dichotomous and mutually exclusive moral universe and relentlessly exposes the brutality and inhumanity underlying received generic conventions and dominant discursive frames of war. With its new ending, the film lost most of its challenging and troubling aspects, thus becoming politically docile as well as digestible and sellable to key audiences. This shows that economically motivated changes and alterations of cultural expressions are never unpolitical, but imply an often unintended and implicit, but nevertheless powerful, reification and reproduction of a received hegemonic status quo.

## Conclusion

Making movies is an expensive business promising significant revenues, but also holding considerable potentials for economic failures and financial loss. In a market-oriented cultural sector predominantly oriented towards returns of investment, aesthetic, political, societal, and other considerations regularly loose out to allegedly natural market logics that streamline cultural expression with the objective to tailor them to the specific tastes and preferences of hegemonic audiences.

Through a comparative reading and subsequent contextualisation of the officially released version and the director's cut of Francis Lawrence's *I Am Legend*, this article has shown that such practices of adaptation to assumed mainstream tastes are never innocent or located above the messy realms of politics. On the contrary, as the present

tale about a shift in emphasis has illustrated, allegedly neutral, economically motivated changes to manuscripts and whole films not only increase a particular work's range of address, but also imply an, often-tacit, realignment to received power structures and hegemonic frames for practice and understanding.

In highlighting this connection, I intended to contribute to a better understanding of the inherent connection between media content and messages on the one hand, and the political economy of their production and distribution on the other. After all, when profit-orientation turns into aesthetic form, this form will hardly invite for the dismantling or subversion of the very structures and frames predisposing its emergence in the first place. As among others' Stuart Hall's (1977) seminal work has shown, critical media scholarship needs to take the connections and mutual interferences between the realms of meaning and material production into account to be able to adequately describe, and intervene in, the politics of contemporary popular culture.

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# “HOW LUCKY YOU ARE NEVER TO KNOW WHAT IT IS TO GROW OLD”—WITCH AS FOURTH-WAVE FEMINIST MONSTER IN CONTEMPORARY FANTASY FILM

Rikke Schubart (University of Southern Denmark)

**Abstract:** *This article focuses on the figure of an aging and powerful witch pitted against younger women in three contemporary fairy-tale movie adaptations: Snow White and the Huntsman (dir. Rupert Sanders, 2012), Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters (dir. Tommy Wirkola, 2013), and Maleficent (dir. Robert Stromberg, 2014). Each film transforms the aging witch from stock villain to a more nuanced character. This revision is intriguing for its concern with power and gender and for a reflection of contemporary debates about age and power within so-called wave feminism. The article uses two frames. The first is feminism and ageism, focusing on wave feminism and aging, and the second is the trope of the witch, drawing from fairy-tale studies, social history, and social anthropology. The article reads conflict between an aging witch and a young woman as a clash of feminist waves, and the witch’s ‘monstrosity’ as her refusal to be sidelined in a world obsessed with youth.*


**Keywords:** *witch; fairy-tale film; fantasy film; monster; gender; fourth-wave feminism; ageism; Snow White and the Huntsman (2012); Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters (2013); Maleficent (2014).*

## Introduction

“You don’t even realize how lucky you are never to know what it is to grow old” (1:33:18–1:33:26), the Queen tells Snow White before attempting to kill her in *Snow White and the Huntsman* (dir. Rupert Sanders, 2012). Ravenna is an old witch, and to stay young and powerful she drains young women of life. If she takes Snow White’s heart, she will have eternal youth and power.

Among monster tropes, the witch stands out for a link to misogyny, sexism, and ageism. In earliest historical records from Mesopotamia (circa 3,000 BC) a witch was a priest-magician (Henderson 2016: 22) whom society believed had magical powers. Such magical abilities, and thus persons, could have various forms—be a magician, a sorcerer, a diviner, and more. Then in Medieval time the witch was re-interpreted as female and targeted in witch-hunts, and in modern time, finally, is also site for entertainment and feminist protest. The witch is a polyvocal monster, both fiction character, cultural trope, and a threat used today to terrorize women (Federici 2018: [Kindle loc.] 841–1246). The witch invokes victimization and agency, fear and fascination, femicide and feminism, fact and fiction. In this matrix of significations, this article focuses on the aging and powerful witch pitted against younger women in three recent fairy-tale movie adaptations: *Snow White and the Huntsman* (from here on *Snow White*), *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* (dir. Tommy Wirkola, 2013; from here on *Hansel & Gretel*), and *Maleficent* (dir. Robert Stromberg, 2014). Each film transforms the witch from stock villain to a more complex character. I find this revision intriguing for its concern with gender and for a reflection of contemporary debates about age and power within wave

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feminism. The article uses two frames. The first is *feminism and ageism*, focusing on wave feminism and aging, and the second is *the witch trope*, drawing from fairy-tale studies, social history, and social anthropology. To put the argument in a nutshell, I see the conflict between an aging witch and a young woman as a clash of feminist waves, where the witch’s ‘monstrosity’ is her refusal to be sidelined in a world obsessed with youth.

### **Feminist Waves and Ageism**

In my use of ‘feminism’ I take bell hooks’ often-quoted definition: “[F]eminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (2014: 7). In this view, the opponent is not the male gender or men as individuals, but the ideology of “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” based on oppression of women and other minorities (8). hooks rejects narrower versions of feminism because they create privileges and divide women. Instead she wants solidarity. “Sisterhood could not be powerful as long as women were competitively at war with one another” (8).

The wave metaphor starts with Martha Weinman Lear’s 1968 article ‘The Second Feminist Wave’ discussing sixties’ feminism as second wave and a suffragist struggle (from 1848 to 1920) as first wave. Since then, the metaphor remains contested. Does ‘wave’ mean transformation of a feminist movement or a new generation of feminists? A third wave was launched with Rebecca Walker’s article ‘Becoming the Third Wave’ which concludes, “I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the Third Wave” (2006 [1992]: 5). Postfeminism was in the eighties and nineties embraced as individualism, choice, and multiple femininities.<sup>1</sup> The third-wave feminists reject postfeminism as neo-liberal, and where postfeminism and the third wave overlap in time, the first is associated with a naïve embrace of popular culture, the latter with a critical stance. Also, by naming itself ‘third’, feminists distanced themselves from a second wave. Where first and second waves understood themselves as shared and inclusive, the third wave was “a generational phenomenon raising the question [...] to what extent the rising generation must rebel against the earlier” (Spencer 2007: 299). The third wave critiqued the second wave, their mother generation, for favorizing white, middle-class, Western women, and it would focus on minorities and formulate the theory of *intersectionality*, developed by lawyer and professor Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw:

[Intersectionality is] a theoretical framework that posits that multiple social categories [...] intersect at the *micro* level of individual experience to reflect multiple interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the *macro*, social-structural level (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, compulsory heterosexuality, *hetero-normativity*, ableism) (Launius/Hassel 2015: 114; emphasis in original).

A fourth wave, named by journalist Pythia Peay (2005) and author and activist Jennifer Baumgardner (2011), begins between 2005 and 2008. Like the third wave, the fourth wave focuses on minorities, especially LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender)

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of postfeminism, see for example Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001). [External reference, therefore not listed in the bibliography.]



and people with alternative bodies. The difference between third and fourth wave is a use of social media and online activism. “[A] distinctive trait of the fourth wave movement is its reliance and usage of technology and media to connect and reach populations across cultural and national borders [...]. The defining differences between the ‘waves’ of feminism are not necessarily the wars waged as much as the tools used” (Looft 2017: 894). Fourth-wave feminists are savvy social media users, and their activism has been accused of shallow feminism because it is easy to tweet, and because of its use of celebrities like Beyoncé, Miley Cyrus, and Emma Watson (Looft 2017: 896). A wave metaphor can quickly establish a new generation, however, sociologists Elizabeth Evans and Prudence Chamberlain warn it obstructs continuity between generations: “[I]t is of strategic and intellectual value for feminist writers and activists to critically engage with the narrative [of feminism], to ensure that it does not continue to be used solely as a means by which to reinforce feminist in-fighting and crude, inaccurate caricatures” (2015: 406).

*Ageism* is a system of privilege and oppression intersecting with sexism. Aging is the process of growing older, ageism the idea it is bad to age. As media scholar Anne Jerslev puts it: “[O]ld age is bad, repulsive, and ugly” (2018: 352). We experience aging as lived personal life (micro level) and as social life (macro level). And while we might be more or less able to control private experiences, we must negotiate society’s stereotypes and scripts. Aging is scripted by what linguist Deborah Cameron (2015) calls *the master narrative*, society’s idea of gender and appropriate gender behavior. And both the gender stereotype and the old stereotype are different for men and women.

Seventy years ago, when psychologist Erik Erikson formulated his theory of age and development, old age was a phase of wisdom. Erikson divided the life span into eight phases where adulthood was the sixth (young adulthood, 20–45 years) and seventh (middle adulthood, 45–65 years) phase, and old age (past 65 years) the eighth phase (Erikson/Erikson 1998 [1982]). To each phase he suggested a crisis; in young adulthood the crisis is to establish a family and in middle adulthood it is to become a ‘numinous’ role model with ‘true authority’ to guide a young generation with “ethics, law, and insight” ([Kindle loc.] 987). Later, Joan Erikson, Erikson’s wife and co-author, added the ninth phase, past 80 years. In old age we share our wisdom with society, and Joan calls the ninth phase a ‘gerotranscendence’ which brings “a new feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe” ([Kindle loc.] 1766). Today, social gerontology divides ‘old’ into young-old (65–75), middle-old (75–85), and old-old (past 85), the latter called *deep-old* invoking the metaphor of falling into the abyss of death (Pickard 2014). And today, aging is not seen as wisdom, but as decay and death.

Ageism intersects with sexism. Sociologists Jay Ginn and Sara Arber point out men are judged by their career, women by a youthful body: “Because women’s value is sexualized, positively in the first half of life, negatively in the second, it depends on a youthful appearance [...]” (1993: 61). A woman’s value is tied to beauty and youth. Naomi Wolf notes in *The Beauty Myth* “[a]ging in women is ‘unbeautiful’ since women grow more powerful with time, and since the links between generations of women must always be newly broken” (1991: [Kindle loc.] 119). On a man, wrinkles signify life experience, but on a woman, they signify loss of beauty. A woman’s face “loses its value when the process of ageing cannot be concealed by any means anymore” (Jerslev 2018: 353) and women struggle to age successfully by staying “fit, fashionable, flexible, func-

tional” with a youthful appearance (Jerslev 2017: 68). The ideal is women should age without visible signs of aging.

### The Witch

The witch is a polyvocal trope who lately is embraced in the West as a figure of revolt. Film scholar Barbra Creed in *The Monstrous-Feminine* reads the witch as man’s “morbid interest in the witch as ‘other’ and a fear of the witch/woman as an agent of castration” (1993: 74). While Creed sees the witch as men’s projection of fears onto women, other scholars link the witch to protest. Film scholar Vivian Sobchack calls the witch’s magic actions “an apocalyptic feminine explosion of the frustrated desire to speak” (quoted in Creed 1993: 78). And Kristen J. Sollée in *Witches, Sluts, Feminists* (2017) discusses women’s use of witchcraft as feminist protest against patriarchy. Yet, in the South and East, the witch is used to oppress women in a historical movement political philosopher Silvia Federici in *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (2018) links to neoliberal economic policies. In Africa and India, the witch is used to murder women and instill terror ([Kindle loc.] 706–714).

The etymology of ‘witch’ is from Old English *wicca* and the Proto-Germanic and Proto-Indo-European words *wiglian* ‘to practice divination’, *wichelen* ‘bewitch’, *wicker* ‘soothsayer’, *wikkjaz* ‘one who wakes the dead’, and *wikkô* ‘necromancer, sorcerer’. Oxford English Dictionary has two entries for witch, “a man who practices witchcraft or magic; a magician, sorcerer, wizard”, and “a female magician, sorceress; in later usage esp. a woman supposed to have dealings with the devil” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2019). Under the second entry are figurative uses: ‘witch’ as “a young woman or girl of bewitching aspect or manners” and ‘old witch’ as “a contemptuous appellation for a malevolent or repulsive-looking old woman”. In Merriam-Webster’s definition, a witch is “one that is credited with usually malignant supernatural powers [...] [—] a woman practicing usually black witchcraft often with the aid of a devil or familiar” and “an ugly old woman: hag” (*Merriam-Webster* 2019b).

The etymology of ‘magic’ is unclear. Greek *magus* means *magician, sorcerer, conjurer* and Old Persian *mayu* means *help, power, and sorcerer*. Social historian Lizanne Henderson in *Witchcraft and Folk Belief in the Age of Enlightenment Scotland* links the witch to ancient magic: “The *magoi* were a class of priest-magicians from the Eastern Babylonian Kingdom [...] [and] Herodotus, the famed ‘father of History’, reported in the fifth century BCE that the *magoi*, or Magi, ‘are a peculiar caste, quite different from the Egyptian priests and indeed from any other sort of person’” (2016: 22). To the Greek, magic was foreign and in contrast to their civilization and religion. Today, anthropology separates religion from magic, seeing the first as society’s institutionalized use of supernatural acts and the latter as an individual’s use of supernatural acts for private gains (Sørensen 2014: 25). Magic exists in a social field of acts and beliefs, and practitioners are called magicians, witches, sorcerers, priests, necromancers, diviners, charmers, and wise men and women (Henderson 2016: 23). *How* a practitioner was perceived is a matter of perspective: The Greek viewed the Babylonians as magicians, and the Egyptian priests viewed Moses as a magician, not as a prophet.

So, how does the witch transform from magician into a monster? The etymology of monster is from Latin *monstrare* (to show) and *monere* (to warn), and in ancient Greece the monster was a warning about evil sent from the Gods (Hellstrand et al. 2018: 147).

In modern-day use, Merriam-Webster defines ‘monster’ as what is *deviant or abnormal, threatening, strange, terrifying, and large* (Merriam-Webster 2019a). Noël Carroll in *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990) distinguishes the monster in horror from other fantastic genres in that it is lethal, disgusting, and seen as abnormal, a breach of ontology: “Boreads, griffins, chimeras, basilisks, dragons, satyrs, and such are bothersome and fearsome creatures in the world of myths, but they are not unnatural [...]. [M]onsters of horror, however, breach the norms of ontological propriety presumed by the positive human characters in the story” (16). Hellstrand et al. in ‘Promises, Monsters and Methodologies: The Ethics, Politics and Poetics of the Monstrous’ (2018) discuss ‘monster’ as a border concept and a methodology and outline three uses: as a *rhetoric* to target others as being outside society’s norm, as an expression of *cultural anxieties*, and as a tool for *dialogue* about the nature of society’s borders, of what we deem normal or deviant, human or monstrous:

[...] [T]he monster’s relation to the anomalous ties it to histories of oppression, objectification and resistance often related to issues concerning queerness, disability, race and class. [...] [T]he monster is about the struggle over representation and meaning-making, of categorizing specific bodies, entities and life-forms; and of making visible the constructed, unstable ‘nature’ of these very categories (145).

‘Monster’ can be seen as a dynamic site of meaning-making which has different significations in different genres, and also as a method to enter a position of dialogue with what is outside society’s norm, what is strange, foreign, ‘Other’. Returning to the witch, Christianity in the fifteenth century transformed the witch from magician into a woman in league with the Devil who “carried out *maleficium*, known in Scotland as malefice, acts of harmful magic” (Henderson 2016: 58). It is estimated 100,000 people were accused of witchcraft in Europe, between 50,000 and 60,000 executed, and of these 90 to 95 percent were women (99).<sup>2</sup> Historical records show the accused were of all ages, social circles, and occupations, however, Henderson points to the stereotypes *sexual predator* and *old hag*, the latter “well-past child-bearing years and as such, of diminished value and societal worth. Based on the known ages of accused witches, at least half and possibly more were over forty, with only around 14 per cent under thirty [...] indicative of a prejudice, even debasement, of older women [...]” (82). The figurative uses of witch (as young and sexy or old and ugly) originate in the medieval witch-hunts. But why target women? Federici points to the rise of capitalism and “the relation between witch-hunting and the increasing enclosure of the female body through the extension of state control over women’s sexuality and reproductive capacity” (2018: [Kindle loc.] 69). Women were exploited as free-work force in a patriarchal capitalist enterprise.

How does the fairy-tale witch fit into the matrixes of monster, witch, and feminism? As Carroll points out, monsters embody different emotions depending on *genre context*. Supernatural horror and the fairy tale belong to the fantastic, however, horror has emotions of fear and disgust, and the mode in the fairy tale is light with the primary emotion

<sup>2</sup> Percentages vary from country to country. In Scotland, 80–85 percent of witches were female, in England and Russia 90–95, but in Iceland only 10 percent tried for witchcraft were female and of 22 executed only one was a woman (Henderson 2016: 78).

of wonder because a happy end is certain and any transformation is possible—“hands are cut off, found and reattached, babies’ throats are slit, but they are later restored to life” (Warner 1995: xv). The same tropes can have similar qualities (use magic, kill and eat children) but generate different emotions. Thus, in Carroll’s sense, the fairy tale has no monsters, because supernatural beings do not solicit fear.

In *From the Beast to the Blonde*, fairy-tale scholar Marina Warner discusses the historical realities behind fairy tales. A universal motif is *female rivalry* between a young heroine and an old woman, who can be a mother, step-mother, or witch. “All over the world, stories which center on a heroine, on a young woman suffering a prolonged ordeal before her vindication and triumph, frequently focus on women as the agents of her suffering” (1995: 202). Female rivalry is found in patriarchal societies where women must protect themselves and their children from a husband or other wives. An aging wife might be replaced by a younger woman as in Giambattista Basile’s Sleeping-Beauty-tale ‘Sun, Moon, and Talia’ (1634), she could be a widow in need of a new household as in Charles Perrault’s ‘Cinderella’ (1697), or she could be an obstructive mother-in-law as in Perrault’s ‘The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood’ (1697). If she could not have children, was unwilling to be a wife, or was old, she was seen as a threat.

Female rivalry is a motif in both fairy tales and wave feminism and interlocks with ageism and sexism. Interestingly, in fairy tales both good and evil old women die. Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim links the fairy tale’s good mother to the evil stepmother: “The fantasy of the wicked stepmother not only preserves the good mother intact, it also prevents having to feel guilty about one’s angry thoughts and wishes about her [...]” (quoted in Warner 1995: 212). Literary scholar Sylvia Henneberg in ‘Moms do Badly, But Grandmas do Worse: The Nexus of Sexism and Ageism in Children’s Classics’ says the fairy tale’s old women fall into three stereotypes: “[W]icked old witch, the selfless godmother, or the demented hag” (2010: 128). However, whether good or evil, “the dead mother plot is a feminist necessity” and old women die (127).

### **Snow White and Age Anxiety**

Female rivalry is at the heart of many fairy tales, including that of Snow White. The good mother, stepmother, and evil witch reflect one and the same mother figure. In Grimm’s 1812 ‘Little Snow-White’, the Queen has a magic mirror that tells her she is “fairest of them all”. When the mirror says her seven-year old daughter is more beautiful, she “became pale with envy, and from that hour on, she hated Snow-White. Whenever she looked at her, she thought that Snow-White was to blame that she was no longer the most beautiful woman in the world” (Grimm/Grimm 2013 [1812]). In Grimm’s 1857 version (Grimm/Grimm 2005 [1857]), the mother has died in childbirth and the envious Queen is a stepmother and witch. In both the 1812 and 1857 versions, the Queen sends a huntsman to slaughter Snow White in the forest and bring back lung and liver for her to eat. In Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (dir. David Hand, 1937), Snow White is not seven, but fourteen, and the witch falls from a cliff and dies instead of being killed by the prince.

Rupert Sander’s 2012 version combines female rivalry with a critique of patriarchy. Snow White is here eighteen (played by 22-year-old Kristen Stewart) and the Queen is called Ravenna (Charlize Theron) and has been given an origin story of trauma. The story begins with the King’s Queen dying when Snow White is ten. When the King res-

cues a beautiful woman held prisoner by a mysterious army, he marries her the next day. “I was ruined by a king like you once”, Ravenna tells him on their wedding night. “I replaced his Queen, an old woman. And, in time, I, too, would have been replaced. Men use women. They ruin us and when they are finished with us, they toss us to the dogs like scraps” (*Snow White*: 0:07:33–0:08:05). Before killing him, she adds: “When a woman stays young and beautiful forever, the world is hers. First, I will take your life, my lord. And then I’ll take your throne” (*Snow White*: 0:08:08–0:08:26). Ravenna imprisons Snow White who escapes eight years later. The Queen sends a huntsman to murder the stepdaughter, but the two raise a rebellion, and Snow White kills Ravenna in combat, becoming a new Queen.

In earlier versions we know nothing about the Queen. In the 2012 version, we learn of an attack on Ravenna’s village when she was ten. In a flashback mid-way in the story we see her mother casts a spell: “Beauty is all that can save you, Ravenna. This spell will make your beauty your power and protection” (*Snow White*: 1:01:25–1:01:34). We assume Ravenna was saved by beauty and raped by a king. This is her motive for using magic to kill kings and conquer kingdoms. The film thus links Ravenna and Snow White, who were both traumatized in childhood.

In ‘Vigilante Feminism: Revising Trauma, Abduction, and Assault in American Fairy-Tale Revisions’ fairy-tale scholar Laura Mattoon D’Amore reads Ravenna as a rape avenger who “uses the tools of patriarchy to protect herself and her brother and, in her mind, to wreak havoc on men who destroy women, thus believing, in her mind and through her own definition, that she is saving womankind” (2017: 387). D’Amore calls the violence a female character uses to avenge men’s abuse of women *vigilante feminism* and sees Ravenna as “a rape survivor, a perpetual victim of men’s whims, and in an effort to survive, she has done what she believed she needed to do to turn the tables on patriarchal power” (395).

I agree rape is important to understand Ravenna, however, I think the link between beauty, youth, and rape is crucial. Beauty saved her from death, and beauty is throughout the film linked to power and youth. When her powers wane, Ravenna ages and is rejuvenated when her brother Finn (Sam Spruell) brings her young women to drain of life. Power equals youth, and it is a specific kind of beauty that restores power, namely *youth’s beauty*. Jerslev points to the hypervisibility of young women and invisibility of old women in the media (2017: 68). Today, women tread a precarious path of ageless aging under society’s ‘age gaze’ which scrutinizes women’s faces for age markers. In the 1812 version, the Queen is in her twenties, and in *Snow White*, Ravenna (played by 37-year-old Theron) in her thirties. When Ravenna drains a girl, she looks in her forties, and later, sitting by a mirror, in her fifties. When Snow White kills Ravenna, in a 25-seconds long close-up on her face, she ages from her thirties to young-old, middle-old, old-old, and, finally, dead.

D’Amore argues vigilante feminism “does not work against the male gaze but rather shatters the lens that frames it [and it is] interwoven with a contemporary sensibility that individual freedom and empowerment constitute a feminist rebellion” (390). However, we can ask in what way Ravenna is feminist. Her powers are linked to youth and beauty, and the mirror speaks in a male voice which sounds like the voice of patriarchy: “She [Snow White] is the reason your powers wane [...]. Take her heart in your hand and you shall never again need to consume youth. You shall never again weaken or age”

(*Snow White*: 0:22:22–0:23:04). Wolf says society uses the beauty myth to discipline women. “Entrepreneurial beauty” is the work women must do to stay young and beautiful, but “they could be as good and as beautiful as you please—for too long; upon which, aging, they disappeared” ([Kindle loc.] 469). Thus, men work as news anchors longer time than women. Similarly, Ravenna’s powers are linked to her face. The King married Ravenna on ‘face value’, so to speak, knowing nothing about her except that she was beautiful. The close-up of her death shows ‘loss of face’, a popular trope in witch narratives.

Ravenna’s costumes connect her to death. One dress is decorated with beetle wings, another with raven bird skulls, her wedding dress has golden nets over her shoulders which costume designer Colleen Atwood said mimicked the human skeleton (Roberts 2012), a headpiece is decorated with bird bones, a corset designed with worm-like metal strings, and when she attacks Snow White, her cape with raven feathers transforms into black ravens. Ravenna is dressed in bones, beetle wings, and bird feathers to signal natural decay and death. In contrast, Snow White brings life to the kingdom, Ravenna has turned into a wasteland. Men fall in love with Snow White, both her childhood friend Will, huntsman Eric, even Finn allows feelings to get in the way. Citizens rise from oppression in a rebellion led by the teenage princess.

From a narrative perspective, Ravenna is the evil Queen who murders people and pollutes nature, and Snow White is emphatic, helps the poor, tames trolls, touches people’s hearts with her speeches. Seen from an age perspective, however, youth is pitted against old age, and Ravenna is a gold-digger who manipulates her way into the King’s bed with ‘unnatural’ beauty. If we read Ravenna as representative of a mother, she is the old generation blocking the way for the young. In the fairy tale, old women are expected to “‘naturally’ withdraw from their social roles so as to make their ultimate disappearance—death—less difficult for the smooth functioning of society” (Henneberg 2010: 129). The powerful and aging witch expresses “the idea that as women grow old, they also grow evil and that any power they have will naturally be put to ill use” (130).

When Ravenna dies, Snow White tells her “you can’t have my heart” (*Snow White*: 1:58:45–1:58:50) and looks in the magic mirror and cries. But what—who—are the tears for? At plot level, they are for Ravenna, which doesn’t make sense. Ravenna murdered the King, imprisoned Snow White, and destroyed the kingdom. In Carroll’s definition, Ravenna is not a monster, yet she is the only character using magic and is singularly evil and clearly deserves to die. So why cry? Perhaps because, at an emotional level, we can read the tears as a daughter mourning a mother. Ravenna’s death makes room for Snow White’s coronation.

The loss-of-face can be read as both warning and proof of lived life. In a discussion of the old woman in the horror film *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (dir. Adam Robitel, 2015), horror-studies scholar Agnieszka Kotwasinska uses the concept ‘transaging’ about multiple ages being present in a person, like multiple selves. Rather than have a fixed identity at a certain age, transaging is “a multiple, ambiguous, and contradictory process, which provides the audience—continuously, and simultaneously—with images of past, present, lost, embodied, and imagined selves across the whole lifetime” (Moglen; quoted in Kotwasinska 2018: 188). Ravenna’s aging can be seen as “a spectacle that un-settles the frame” (190). *The Taking of Deborah Logan* “manages to reimagine female old age” (190). Similarly, Ravenna’s feminist potential is not only revenge

on men, but also her spectacular display of women's frustrations with age. From a wave perspective, Snow White's refusal to give her heart echoes third and fourth wave feminists, who rid themselves of a parent generation and move forward. To them, Ravenna represents the 'monstrosity' of an old generation and her 'revenge' a politics of anger and greed that lacks empathy and solidarity.

### **Hansel and Gretel and the Female Entrepreneur**

Tommy Wirkola's *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* (2013) twists the tale of Hansel and Gretel. The film has a group of witches organized by Grand Witch Muriel (Famke Janssen), and the theme of eating children is also a story of witch-hunting. Muriel is what we could call an entrepreneurial witch, whose aim is not personal gain but to organize witches in collective defense against witch-hunts.

In the 1812 Grimm fairy tale 'Hansel and Gretel' (Grimm/Grimm 2002 [1812]), a father leaves his children in the forest because the family is starving. The mother has convinced him this is best. In the 1857 version (Grimm/Grimm 2002 [1857]), she is a stepmother. In the forest, the children find an old witch who wants to eat them, Gretel pushes her into the furnace, and they return to live happily with the father (the mother/stepmother has died). The tale describes the old woman as a "wicked witch who was lying in wait there for children [...] if she captured one, she would kill him, cook him, and eat him", and "as old as the hills and leaning on a crutch" (Grimm/Grimm 2002 [1812]). *Hansel & Gretel* plays out the fairy tale in its title sequence and then opens with Hansel (Jeremy Renner) and Gretel (Gemma Arterton) as adult witch-hunters hired by the mayor in a village to find twelve children kidnapped by a witch.

The tale reflects female rivalry and also a historical poverty, that in the past made poor people leave children to die. Again, the witch represents mother and stepmother. Wirkola's *Hansel & Gretel* expands the story to Hansel and Gretel now being independent contractors selling their services. The villagers are represented by, on the one hand, the mayor, and, on the other hand, a sheriff who wants his posse to hunt the witches. Thus, the sheriff and siblings compete for the same enterprise, the witch-hunt financed by the village. Out in the forest Muriel summons 'sisters from all dark corners of the land' in a plan to brew a magic potion on the night of a blood moon. This requires the heart of a White Witch and the sacrifice of thirteen children, but, if successful, the potion will protect against fire and put an end to witch-hunts.

Thus, Gretel (played by 26-year old Arterton) and Muriel (49-year old Janssen) represent a young and old generation. In her analysis of *Hansel & Gretel*, D'Amore interprets Gretel as another example of vigilante feminism. D'Amore focuses on Gretel's childhood trauma (captured by a witch) and the sheriff's rape assault. "Gretel embodies this decision to empower herself through violence, channeling vigilante feminism to protect herself and her world from threats beyond the power of others to solve" (2017: 398). The film offers "an attractive characterization of female empowerment" (398) when Gretel headbutts the sheriff. However, if we understand feminism as a struggle to end sexism, Gretel's violence doesn't lead to feminist action. She doesn't care a young woman, Mina, is almost burnt as witch in the beginning. Hansel saves Mina, whom he thinks is human, but who is a white witch who later helps them kill Muriel. From a power perspective, Gretel sides with her brother and sells her services to a patriarchy

headed by the mayor and sheriff. Muriel, on the other hand, represents agency outside patriarchy. Henderson reminds us the typical accused witch was

[...] an independent adult woman who does not conform to the male idea of proper female behavior [...] [who] does not require or give love [...] does not nurture men or children, nor care for the weak [...] [and] has the power of words—to defend herself or to curse (2016: 77).

Looking at the plot from a witch’s perspective, a different story emerges. Yes, Muriel lives in a subterranean lair with cells for abducted children and keeps a troll as slave. From a human perspective, she *is* a monster. But she is also an entrepreneurial aging and powerful woman, living as an outcast because men try to kill her. When bounty hunters enter her forest, she protects her property: “This is my land! Dare you! There is no use in praying. Even your God knows better than to come here” (*Hansel & Gretel*: 0:20:48–0:21:32). Unlike Gretel, she emphasizes with sisters, saving them from capture, and looking forward to share the magic potion with them: “It will change everything. We will be invincible” (*Hansel & Gretel*: 0:28:10–0:28:20). “[T]he witch, or non-conformist woman, pits herself not only against men but other conforming women. She thus becomes alienated from both male and female society” (Henderson 2016: 77). The insistence on *her* land, *her* free will, and *her* organization of witches, makes Muriel a threat. Federici, in a political analysis of witch-hunts, points to the targeting of women who own land or are financially independent. In India and Africa, women are accused of being witches and beaten or killed, crimes that go unpunished by authorities, an “institutional tolerance of domestic violence [which] creates a culture of impunity that contributes to normalizing the public violence inflicted on women” (2018: [Kindle loc.] 780). In Tanzania, 5,000 women a year are burnt as witches (2018: [Kindle loc.] 86) and in India women are killed as witches (*Reuters Bhubaneswar* 2019).

There is a disturbing misogyny and targeting of otherness in *Hansel & Gretel*. The witches are presented as both monsters and social outcasts: They are young as well as old, dressed in rags or in alternative life-style costumes (Goth, punk, hippie), and some are biological rarities, e.g. Siamese twins or have lymphatic filariasis or sacral agenesis. The film also includes iconic activities listed in the infamous book for witch-hunting, *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486): Witches fly on broomsticks, assemble at night, practice dark magic, and eat children. This ‘otherness’ legitimizes any type of violent retaliation and we see witches being beaten, kicked, shot, burnt, and tortured. Gretel defends herself against rape assault, but she also gleefully inflicts violence on the witches. When Hansel tortures a young witch, Gretel smiles as he puts on brass knuckles. The end, where Hansel machineguns every witch, reads more like femicide than heroism, the latter being the film’s intention.

*Hansel & Gretel* has a mixed feminist message. We find the young and old, but also the ugly and beautiful, human and witch. White witches are beautiful—Mina, Gretel’s mother Adriana, who was a Grand White Witch, and Gretel—and evil witches are ugly with human faces masking witch faces that are angry, white, and with black blood veins. They do not desire beauty, but safety. Muriel’s sisterhood embodies radical feminist violence and includes individuals of alternative lifestyles and bodies. In a wave perspective, Gretel is a media-savvy neoliberal selling her services (using posters and news



stories) and Muriel is the leader of the minorities, of whose rights the third and fourth wave talk. In this reading, Gretel sides with patriarchy and Muriel is the feminist.

### **Sleeping Beauty and Ruling Power**

Robert Stromberg's *Maleficent* (2014) splits female rivalry into *ruling power* and *maternal love*. The witch is now hero and protagonist, the Protector of a magic kingdom, and she only turns evil because she is betrayed by a man from the human kingdom, and, finally, is redeemed when she sacrifices herself to save his daughter. In a double oeuvre, the witch survives but cedes her power to a young woman.

Now, to unravel the complexity at work, let us first look at female rivalry in the 'Sleeping Beauty' fairy tale. In 'Sun, Moon, and Talia' (2013 [1634]), a lord places his sleeping daughter in "one of his country mansions [...] on a velvet throne", where she is found by a king. He impregnates Talia, who has twins in her sleep. When the Queen discovers the affair, she tries to eat Talia, and the King burns the Queen and marries Talia. In Perrault's 'The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood' (2013 [1697]) is added the theme of inviting all but one fairy to the celebration of the child. The King and Queen forget "a very old fairy" who casts the curse. When a hundred years have passed, a prince finds the princess, but when he takes her back to his kingdom, his mother, who is an ogress, tries to eat her. Finally, in Grimm's 'Little Briar-Rose' (Grimm/Grimm 2015 [1812]), the uninvited fairy curses the princess, and after a hundred years, a prince comes by, "so amazed at her beauty that he bent over and kissed her". In these tales, the old women cling to social positions and represented as obstacles to a new generation: The Queen cannot have children, the mother-in-law eats people, and the fairy is just old and evil.

We recall the old woman in fairy tales is expected to disappear to make room for the young. However, the idea of a powerful woman can also create fear if seen as a threat to society. Federici suggests women were targeted as witches as part of changing socio-economical social structures, where female bodies were tamed to serve an emerging capitalist class:

Outside these parameters, outside of marriage, procreation, and male/institutional control, for the capitalists as well, female sexuality has historically represented a social danger, a threat to the discipline of work, a power over others, and an obstacle to the maintenance of social hierarchies and class relations (2018: [Kindle loc.] 454).

The powerful witch refuses to acknowledge men's authority. Thus, in the film's start, the child-fairy Maleficent lives isolated from humans in the moors when she becomes friends with the boy Stefan. Later, the adult Maleficent (Angelina Jolie) is Protector of the moors and Stefan (Sharlto Copley) is servant to the King. When the King attacks the moors, Maleficent (Angelina Jolie) tells him, "you are no king to me" (*Maleficent*: 0:10:55–0:11:00), and fights off his soldiers with powerful swings of her wings. The King promises his throne to who can kill Maleficent, and the power-greedy Stefan uses Maleficent's feelings for him to drug her and cut off her wings. "He did *this* to me, so he would be king?" (*Maleficent*: 0:24:05–0:24:11). A bitter Maleficent curses King Stefan's daughter Aurora to fall asleep at sixteen and only wake "by true love's kiss"

(*Maleficent*: 0:32:40–0:32:47). But as the girl is raised by three fairies in the woods, she comes to love Aurora, who believes her a fairy godmother. Maleficent tries to lift the curse, however, it is not by a prince’s kiss, but by Maleficent’s kiss, that the curse is broken. Aurora helps Maleficent get her wings back and after Stefan falls to his death, Maleficent crowns Aurora as Queen of both kingdoms.

Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) transformed the fairy tale’s Queen, mother-in-law, and old fairy, into the witch Maleficent who rules in a gloomy castle and can turn into a dragon. Interestingly, Stromberg’s *Maleficent* splinters the evil Disney character into several ‘versions’ of Maleficent: We see her as first a child, a fairy with horns, wings, and earth-colored costumes, who looks like a Valkyrie when she as adult defends the moors. Then there is the iconic villainess from Disney’s version, in a long dress, black cape, and with horns wrapped in a black headpiece. And finally, there is a redeemed Maleficent with her wings restored, clad in leather jacket, pants, and high-heeled boots, a modern costume like those worn by the action heroines in *Charlie’s Angels: Full Throttle* (dir. McGinty Nichol, 2003). In a transage perspective, Maleficent contains multiple ‘selves’ that represent her different life stages, and the film thus offers a multi-dimensional witch.<sup>3</sup>

This combination of love and ruling power is ambiguous. On the one hand, Maleficent defeats men. She also lives outside of the nuclear family and patriarchal society. On the other hand, the bitter and childless Maleficent must redeem herself through maternal love. And in the sixteen years from the curse is cast, she thinks only of Aurora. Henneberg says of grandmothers, “she has withdrawn from her own life [...] she has no history before [her loved ones] and no life apart from them” (2010: 130). It seems the only purpose for a (good) woman is to watch over a child, and Maleficent confesses at Aurora’s bedside: “I will not ask your forgiveness, because what I have done to you is unforgivable. I was so lost in hatred and revenge. Sweet Aurora, you stole what was left of my heart and now I have lost you forever” (*Maleficent*: 1:15:50–1:16:18). This sanctity of maternal love erases the female ruler.

In *Women & Power: A Manifesto* (2017) British historian Mary Beard says women in politics are discriminated against and portrayed as evil witches and Medusas, and “[w]omen in power are seen as breaking down barriers, or alternatively as taking something to which they are not quite entitled” ([Kindle loc.] 347). Women in politics are seen as not ‘real’ women, but cultural monsters ridiculed for looking like men (when they wear suits), or for behaving like witches. Beard disagrees with the feminists who embrace amazons, witches, and the Medusa as figures of female strength. These were monsters in antiquity, and today “we have no template for what a powerful woman looks like, except that she looks rather like a man” ([Kindle loc.] 332).

If the aging witch holds on to her powerful position, she must die. Thus, in *Mirror Mirror* (dir. Tarsem Singh, 2012) the evil Queen turns to dust when the King returns. And Ravenna returns in *The Huntsman: Winter’s War* (dir. Cedric Nicolas-Troyan, 2016), where she tells her sister Freya (Emily Blunt), “[d]id you not think I wanted a child? Did you not think I wanted love? But these things were not meant for me. I have a higher plan” (*The Huntsman*: 1:45:18–1:45:32). However, if a powerful witch wants to live, she *must* cede power. Maleficent crowns sixteen-year old Aurora and the film

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<sup>3</sup> The film calls Maleficent a fairy, but we will understand her as a witch, because the Church believed fairies as real as witches and burnt people for being fairies (Henderson 2007).

salutes maternal love. In the end, a volatile Maleficent flies high into the sky, an image of female strength—but not of ruling power.

### **Conclusion—Witches, Waves, and Voices**

The trope of an aging and powerful witch is elaborated and explored in the contemporary fantasy film for feminist potentials. She invokes a matrix of meanings tied to a historical past, genre, and generational conflict. Feminists like Federici and Beard link her to political and socioeconomic forces, where changing social roles and politics of land-ownership and workforce leave women vulnerable in patriarchal societies.

Ravenna, Muriel, and Maleficent represent a new and complex evil witch, a new version of the witch as monster, who invites dialogue about what aging and powerful women look like. This witch dissolves boundaries of youth and aging, and she is no longer a lonely figure but has a family (Ravenna's brother and mother, Muriel's group of witches, Maleficent's goddaughter Aurora). Sociologists Dafna Lemish and Varda Muhlbauer suggest that media representations of old women are helpful when "[...] the women behind the characters and the characters themselves serve to confront and reframe the anxieties, fantasies, and ambitions of many older women" (2012: 177). And they warn that the wave metaphor "[...] pits older women, as a tremendously valuable resource of experience, wisdom, and skills, against young women rather than as supportive of them and transferring social capital that might strengthen younger generations of women" (171).

I believe this aging witch is a step towards an increased visibility of aging women and that she offers reframing and images of transaging. Her social inclusion, however, remains problematic, and the convention of passing power from old to young persists. Also, the actresses embodying her—Theron, Janssen, Jolie—express the privilege of being white, Western, and able to pay for the entrepreneurial work needed to age without visibly aging. Still, the aging and powerful witch can be read as a source of agency. Beard says we must redefine power from being structured in male terms as a 'job' to instead be seen as collective action: "What I have in mind is the ability to be effective, to make a difference in the world, and the right to be taken seriously, together as much as individually. It is power in the sense that many women feel they don't have—and that they want" ([Kindle loc.] 506). Such power could be a collective movement across waves and generations. Today's aging and powerful witch expresses such a movement.

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### Biographical Note

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# MONSTROUS (M)OTHERS—FROM PARANOID TO REPARATIVE READINGS OF OTHERING THROUGH ASCRIPTIONS OF MONSTROSITY

Tess Sophie Skadegård Thorsen (Aalborg University)  
and Mira Chandhok Skadegård (Aalborg University)


**Abstract:** *The Danish film A Horrible Woman (orig. En frygtelig kvinde, 2017) marked a pattern that can be identified throughout several decades of Danish filmmaking. Examples are found in contemporary films like Antichrist (2009), as well as in earlier Danish films like The Abyss (1910) and Red Horses (1950). In these and other examples, women characters exhibit monstrous behavior that can be construed as a form of othering. Furthermore, othering women and mothers by presenting them as terrible, abnormal, or monstrous in Danish (popular) culture goes well beyond the silver screen. In this article, ‘mother–daughter scholars’ Mira Chandhok Skadegård and Tess Sophie Skadegård Thorsen explore how monstrosity functions as a tool for othering in film and other media, offering both a (generational) and historical view, and a discussion of current constructions of monstrosity, on and off screen, in Denmark. The article argues that monstrosity, as a symbol of power and violence, becomes a particularly oppressive gendered gesture. The authors examine this in a correspondence with one another. In letter form, with shifting analytical positions between mother and daughter, a dialogue emerges between generations on questions of ‘(m)otherhood’ in Danish film and other Danish contexts, transitions of female film characters from passive to aggressive, and the role of monstrosity in othering non-white immigrant ‘(m)others’ in public discourse. Finally, the article argues for a different approach to ‘monstrous othering’. Through a reparative reading, it discusses whether there is empowerment and agency connected to being ascribed monstrosity.*

**Keywords:** *monstrosity; othering; mothering; structural discrimination; film representation; reparative reading; mother–daughter scholars.*

## Introduction—The First Monstrous Mothers

“What woeful maternal fancy produced such a monster?” (Huet 1993: 3).

In this article, we examine links between monstrosity, othering, and mothering in contemporary Danish contexts. As ‘mother–daughter scholars’ in different fields ([structural] discrimination studies; film [and media] studies), we look at how notions of mother, woman, and monster are connected in film, and the construction of immigrant mothers in Danish public debate. Based on a negotiation of the ways in which monstrosity and othering can be seen as reciprocal patterns in the filmic and social frameworks we draw on, we suggest that everyday others are monstered through their particular framings of difference. That is, by constructing, or casting, difference in ways that distinguish *self* from *other*, *normal* from *abnormal*—a process of marginalization or alienation is in play. Drawing on Karen Barad’s (2015) and Judith [Jack] Nordlit 42: *Manufacturing Monsters*, 2019. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.7557/13.5013>.

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Halberstam's (1995; 2011) analyses of monstrosity, we argue that this construction of difference as unnatural or dangerous (albeit symbolic or normative danger), is a process of othering. Monstering, then, aids in othering, while othering legitimizes monstering. Patterns of othering, that position mothers as the culprit-other at blame for monsters, are present in new forms of conflation of monster and mother in contemporary Danish film, as well as constructions of immigrant mothers in Danish public discourse.

In line with foundational work on the connections between women and the monstrous (Creed 1986; Shildrick 2001), we argue that structures of othering and monstering are at play in the positioning of women and mothers as monstrous others. These structures, for example, are similar to the othering and monstrosity at play in constructions of immigrant mothers (and sons) in Danish public discourse. We find that such gestures can be found in films where women are framed as dominating, emasculating, and overpowering mothers-to-be; in news-stories framing others as potential gang-members and terrorists; or in artistic renderings of the freakish other. Monstrosity, when produced through otherness, is not an unusual occurrence in contemporary Danish pop-culture and media (Andreassen 2005; Nielsen [M. M.] 2018; Yilmaz 1999).

Like monstering, othering constructs difference in ways that distinguish (and elevate) *self* from *other*, resulting in forms of marginalization and alienation. Monstering, while comparable and perhaps even overlapping, takes othering further by implying something unnatural, dangerous or malignant (Ryan 1998; Cohen 1996).

The article is structured as a correspondence between mother and daughter scholars. We take our points of departure about monstrosity and othering in our respective fields of [structural] discrimination studies and film [and media] studies. We examine links between the framing of women as causes of monstrosity, women as monsters, and monstrosity as a signifier for otherness with regard to minorities that are othered based on non-gender markers. Our inspiration for this type of collaborative-through-correspondence research comes from Henry Mainsah and Lin Prøitz' (2015) work on collaborative auto-ethnography. The approach provides a way for us to integrate meta-theoretical perspectives from the body of the researcher as privileged site of knowledge (Mainsah/Prøitz 2015). The integration of our own relationship and correspondence mirrors the inclusion of researchers as production site (Alvesson 2003; Delamont 2009), and draws on our (affective and theoretical) situated knowledge (Haraway 1988), experience as gendered and racialized others in the academy, and as mother and daughter. In this way we include, or point to, our bodies and social positions as relevant to (and affected by) the issues in focus. Being actual mother and daughter, while quirky and ironic, is also a serious reflection on how discourses on issues of gender, monster, and mother are imbricated in everyday lived experience. Our unique positions as researchers that are subject to (and reflected in) the same patterns of oppression that we examine allows us a dual lens, widening the boundaries of our partial perspective (Haraway 1988).

Our approach is comprised of a critical discourse analytical lens, with an emphasis on structural discrimination and its sedimentation in language and everyday practice. Such analysis rests on post/de-colonial theory and critical analysis of powered dynamics and processes (Skadegård 2017). We pair these with critical analysis of intersectional representations on screen in conversation with particular Danish social phenomena. This oscillation between the textual and contextual is premised on Anamik Saha's (2017)



push toward comprehensive analyses of film within the context of impact, production, and industry. Moving beyond the textual thus becomes a framework for negotiating filmed representations of otherness as co-constitutive practices for (and reflections of) societal patterns of oppression. We agree with bell hooks when she states that television, film, and other media “are powerful vehicles for maintaining the kinds of systems of domination we live under, imperialism, racism, sexism, etc.” (hooks 2008 [1996]: 174). This frames our premise that political and social lived reality, and the oppressions these embody, are intimately linked to representations of life in film and media.

Methodologically, we engage our examples from film, politics and the construction of immigrant mothers in contemporary Danish public discourse, at the intersections of content, reception, and recirculation or reproduction. As such, we engage the examples both at their discursive level, as well as through a consideration of particular forms of reception. This creates a dynamic body of empirical material that highlights what is gained by engaging the arts in conversation with the contexts they reproduce and represent, bringing forth the strengths of both a film- and media-specific analyses of tropes and representational dynamics, as well as a focus on discursive and power practices on micro and meso levels of society.

The work reflects data-collection and analysis that was carried out in the contexts in which we are situated: Denmark and the US. As such, while the emphasis is on Danish material, the lack of Danish research on particular gendered dynamics of othering on screen demand the application of a theoretical lens that goes beyond Nordic research. The framings and implications of monstrous (m)othering on screen in Denmark are necessarily specific to Danish histories, national narratives, and localized renderings of race, class, gender, and more. As such we bring the primarily US American and British theories of monstrous othering to bear upon a Danish context.

Aside from this introduction and the conclusion, only the final section of the article is authored in collaboration rather than correspondence. In that section, we argue that a ‘reparative reading’, in Sedgwick’s (1997) terms, might facilitate a more reflexive and nuanced negotiation of monstrosity in Danish films and contexts.

## **A Horrible Woman**

*Dear Mom,*

In my research on racialized, classed, gendered, sexualized, and abled representations in Danish film, I recently came across a disturbing piece. When it hit Danish movie-theatres in 2017, *A Horrible Woman* (orig. *En frygtelig kvinde*), directed by Christian Tafdrup, received quite a bit of publicity in Denmark. While the film is clearly (intended to be) satiric and humorous, the thematization of controlling and aggressive women hit a politically sore spot following the recent #metoo and gender-representation debates in the Danish creative industries (Nielsen [S. B.] 2017; Nikolajsen 2017; Torres 2017; Ulrich 2017).<sup>1</sup> It seemed, due to increasing awareness within the public domain,

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<sup>1</sup> The #metoo campaign spread from the US to Denmark, leading to a series of revealing stories in national newspapers of sexual misconduct and abuses of power in the Danish film-industry—ultimately resulting in the restructuring of staff in one of the most famous production companies, *Zentropa*, and the production of a theatrical reading of #metoo-inspired stories at Copenhagen’s *Teater Grob*.

misogyny in Danish film had crossed a line this time. On the international movie database *IMDb* (2017), *A Horrible Woman* is described as follows:

When Rasmus meets Marie, he is certain that she is the love of his life. However, it doesn't take long before it turns out she is a possessive and manipulative being, that cunningly dissects Rasmus to pieces (*IMDb* 2017).

Unsurprisingly, many of the Danish reviews focus on (the director) Christian Tafdrup's anger or bitterness toward women. He has stated that the film is loosely based on true events, and has inferred on multiple occasions, that the main female character is a coarse caricature modelled on what he believes to be a general tendency among many Danish women (Nielsen [S. B.] 2017). A few critics mention, that the archetypical, one-dimensional, cunning, dominating and manipulative girlfriend/wife character is hardly an original one (Nielsen [M. M.] 2018; Nikolajsen 2017; Ulrich 2017; Bjørnlund 2017). In my forthcoming research on gender representations in early Danish film and representation-practices in the contemporary Danish film industry, I similarly find that reductionist and one-dimensional characters frequent Danish silver screens (Thorsen 2019). Nonetheless, I would argue that the particular kind of woman we find in *A Horrible Woman* is different from the many annoying women that have graced Danish cinema through the past 122 years of Danish film history.<sup>2</sup>

1910, the Danish film by director Urban Gad, *Afgrunden* (*The Abyss*; also known under the title *Woman Always Pays*), featured Asta Nielsen in her breakthrough role as the piano teacher Magda Vang. Magda behaves badly and elopes with a circus artist, leaving behind her well-intentioned and loyal partner. She dances provocatively in the circus and ends up stabbing her lover in jealousy, resulting in her imprisonment. In the bestselling Danish film *The Red Horses* (*De røde heste*) from 1950, the evil stepmom Zita plots with her lover to steal stepdaughter Bente's inherited farm. In the famous *Olsen-banden* films (1968–2001<sup>3</sup>), Yvonne is a mostly harmless but highly annoying, high-pitched complainer, who obstructs and hinders the male characters in carrying out their plans.<sup>4</sup> The Danish film history is full of horrible women. But unlike these previous portrayals of women who do something bad, are bad, are controlling, belittling or overpowering, the female lead in *A Horrible Woman*, I contend, differs from in her exaggeratedly monstrous and cunning behavior. In addition, I argue that this might be a development of gendered monstrosity that could be recognized in other contemporary female roles in Danish films, such as Charlotte Gainsbourg's roles in *Antichrist* (2009) and *Nymphomaniac* (2013)—both directed by Lars von Trier—, the role of Tina in the short *Kenned* (dir. Trine Nadia, 2012), and the cannibalistic, monstrous women in *The Neon Demon* (dir. Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016).

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<sup>2</sup> My overview of productions of women in Danish film history is not comprehensive, and is mainly based on selected canonical works complimented with archival research with an emphasis on early Danish film (1897–1912), carried out 2015–2017, courtesy of *The Danish Film Institute's* digital library.

<sup>3</sup> If one includes the 'Advent calendar' series *Olsen-bandens første kup* (1999) and the *Olsen-banden Junior* prequel (2001) and excludes the musical from 2008, as well as the animation films from 2010 and 2013. The last (thirteenth) 'classic' *Olsen-banden* film is from 1981; the 'very last' (fourteenth; not part of the initial canon) is from 1998.

<sup>4</sup> She is a central character with a stable function, and present in all 1968–2001 films.

Before I can get into how some of these women characters have been designed, framed, and instructed to perform monstrosity, let me provide a definition of the term. Rosi Braidotti, in her work on teratology, mothers, and others, suggested that the monster was defined earlier, “[...] in terms of *excess*, *lack* or *displacement* of his/her organs. There can be too many parts or too few; the right ones can be in the wrong places or duplicated at random on the surface of the body” (Braidotti 1999 [1996]: 290; emphasis in original).<sup>5</sup>

If we follow this simple definition of monsters, the horrible woman in *A Horrible Woman* hardly qualifies. Aside from her breaking the fourth wall and sending the audience a devilish look (with briefly added flaming-red pupils in the trailer), she is not malformed. However, while Rosi Braidotti acknowledged the direct and literal definition described above, she also suggested an alternative definition—a *redefinition*—of monstrosity:

As a way of concluding I would like to propose a redefinition: the monster is a process without a stable object. It makes knowledge happen by circulating, sometimes as the most irrational non-object. It is slippery enough to make the Encyclopaedists nervous; yet, in a perfectly nomadic cycle of repetitions, the monstrous other keeps emerging on the discursive scene. As such, it persists in haunting not only our imagination but also our scientific knowledge-claims. Difference will just not go away (Braidotti 1999 [1996]: 299).

By highlighting the monster as a ‘slippery’ ‘non-object’, Braidotti’s redefinition moves us from the literal and material realm of embodied monstrosity, to a figurative, flexible, and fluid realm where monsters are produced *on the discursive scene*. If the monstrous becomes something one does, “[a] process without a stable object” (Braidotti 1999 [1996]: 243), rather than something *one looks like*, the binary lines between monster and norm become even more blurry. But where does that leave mothers?

The horrible woman in Tafdrup’s film is framed as parenting the male lead into submission. While motherhood is not a direct theme in the characterization of her until the very end, mothering is. Parenting, or treating you partner as a child, thus became part of the discourse surrounding the film. For instance, in an opinion piece in the Danish national newspaper *Berlingske* [previously: *Berlingske Tidende*], where the writer argues that her male friends are also “treated as children with full-grown beards [by their female partners]” (Nielsen [M. M.] 2018). To further this parental link to subjugation, the male friends of the lead character are heavily limited in continuing their social lives outside of the family once women and children become an increasing part of their everyday-life. Their partners and children are portrayed as the literal killjoys to parties and nights out throughout the film.

As such, by invoking a powered dynamic in which male enjoyment is presumed to be dependent on social lives with other men outside of the family realm, and where female joy is framed as contingent on control of male partners, both the film and the opinion

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<sup>5</sup> We use ‘teratology’ as a word for the study of monsters. In biological studies, teratology is used to refer to studies of abnormality or malformation—however, in literary and film research, and in our particular case, it refers to the study of (the construction of) literary and figurative monsters in media, film and societal discourse.

piece reproduce hegemonic articulations of gender, thereby re-centering male pleasure and the male gaze.

Mothering, then, emerges as a monstrous control of the overpowered male subject. This linking of mothering and monstrous, controlling and emasculating behavior is not particular to *A Horrible Woman* or to Tafdrup's male perspective, however. In the 2012 Danish short *Kenned*, director Trine Nadia brought to life a similarly domineering woman, Tina, who, in her efforts to become pregnant, forces her partner to soak his testicles in ice-water before making him endure less-than-enjoyable sexual acts. In this case, female desire for motherhood is framed as detrimental to male pleasure, which, once again becomes the central parameter for whether or not a relationship is portrayed positively.

In Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009), Charlotte Gainsbourg's role develops into a monstrous character after losing her only child. Throughout the film, Gainsbourg's increasingly monstrous and violent behavior is assumed to spring from the lack and loss of her child, and, subsequently her purpose as a mother. However, as we come to learn toward the end, Gainsbourg's failures as a mother may very well be the root of her own demise and unravelling, as we wind up questioning her implication in the death of her child. In one particular scene, Gainsbourg deliberately puts the wrong shoes on the child's feet, causing pain and malformation. The scene produces her simultaneously as a monstrous mother, and a deliberate producer of malformation. "What woeful maternal fancy produced such a monster [...]" indeed (Huet 1993: 3; see introductory quote).

The scene resonates with Huet's work, which identifies a pattern, in early literary traditions, of construing monstrosity as a result of a mother's imagination. In other words, Huet describes a tradition where monsters and mothers were separate, but linked, through a conception of the mother as a root-cause in producing monsters (Huet 1993).

In these films, however, motherhood, mothering, and monster conflate into one being or doing, which brings us closer to Braidotti's processual definition (Braidotti 1999 [1996]). The abovementioned women *act monstrously*, perhaps even *become monstrous* through their behavior, and they are certainly framed discursively in ways where they are *more monstrous* than their male counterparts. The women become monstrous when mothering (or failing to mother). But if monster is something one does, and is not fixed, why is it just women who are produced as monstrous in these films, and why is their monstrosity linked to gendered performance and motherhood?

*With love, Tess.*

### **Women as Monsters and (M)others**

*Dear Tess,*

These are difficult questions, particularly for a mother to answer. What, more specifically, do we mean when we say 'monster'? Moreover, what is actually suggested, or drawn on, when a film constructs an emasculation of a male character through the parenting (mothering) behavior of his female partner? I wonder which assumptions about gender, masculinity, and femininity are at play here? From my perspective, there appears to be some complicity with differing oppressions, and notions of femininity and masculinity that foster monsterring.

My first thought is that because the notion of mother and woman tend to be conflated in our shared imagination, any woman who is not—or will not be—a mother is often perceived as outside the norm. She is somehow lacking. She doesn't live up to her appropriate role as woman, or may be framed as emotionally or physically inadequate or incomplete (Lisle 1996). Is this a form of monsterring? Alletta Brenner, in her work on monstrosity and womanhood, suggests that it is. As she writes, “monsters are objects that cross the boundaries of what we perceive to be normal, and thus natural” (Brenner 2009: 163).

With this in mind, what about women who do become mothers? Are they free from monsterring, or behaving as monsters? By becoming mothers, they seemingly perform ‘woman’ correctly. Yet I would say that women, subject to dominant notions of mothering, traverse a fine line. As you suggest, mothering is (and has been) politicized and scrutinized in ways that place blame on mothers for everything from health, for example in regard to breastfeeding (Murphy 1999), schizophrenia, as the trope of the ‘schizophrenogenic mother’ (Harrington 2012; Hartwell 1996) to anorexia which may be blamed on bad mothering (Vander Ven/Vander Ven 2003), and the list goes on and on (Singh 2004). Much of this can be linked to Freudian perspectives on gender and their continued influence, though it hardly starts with Freud. The point here is that career choices, lifestyle choices, sexual orientation, and much more position women precariously, and often as bad women and bad mothers (Ladd-Taylor/Umansky 1998)—and perhaps also as monsters?

When the woman in the film *A Horrible Woman* demands oral pleasure for herself without reciprocating, and behaves in otherwise unpleasant ways, it suggests to me that her character is produced by (and exemplifies) current fears and anxieties around changing gender roles in our shared imagination.<sup>6</sup> While the film could be read as a satire on received gender roles, the film's director has stated that he modelled the story on his own failed relationships with ‘terrible women’ (Nielsen [S. B.] 2017). As Laura J. Shepherd (2010) points out, society (and perhaps also the director) estimates women through certain expectations around femininity and performance of gender. The character's behavior does not live up to appropriate feminine gender performance. Instead, it reflects a role reversal, or hegemonic masculinity, through which the female character reads as emasculating (an interesting notion in itself) and terrible, though we hardly would shake a leg had the behavior been conducted by a male character. In our terminology then, she is *constructed as monstrous*.

This is underscored by her comical breaking of the third wall. She turns and connects with the audience while her eyes literally flash red, drawing on shared constructions of devilry and the unnatural. While this infers humor or awareness of the extremity of caricature, it also presupposes a shared framework in which demanding, selfish, or non-nurturing behavior (in women) is absurd and discomfiting enough to be found humorous. She represents a bad or inappropriate woman. She does not nurture. She does not please. It appears that the joke relies on what Judith Butler (1999 [1990]) has deemed a “grid of cultural intelligibility” (194), or shared framework through which

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<sup>6</sup> Lack of reciprocation in sexual relations is usually something experienced by women. See for instance the seminal works by Peggy Orenstein on teenage and young women and sex in the US—including *SchoolGirls* (1994), *Waiting for Daisy* (2007), *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* (2011), *Girls & Sex* (2016), and *Don't Call Me Princess* (2018). [External references, therefore not listed in the bibliography.]

gender is congealed and naturalized. The joke seems to suggest some shared anxiety, or what I describe as ‘shared underlying knowledge’ (Skadegård 2017), about current negotiations around changing gender roles and expectations.

As you write, and as several reviewers note, women in film who perform in ways that are interpreted as dominating, demanding, or controlling are well-known tropes (Nikolajsen 2017; Ulrich 2017), and are what we refer to here as othered and subsequently monstered. They are horrible women, or women who perform ‘woman’ badly. In some interpretations, they are seen as the necessarily negative result of gender equality and subsequent fall of the (heteronormative) family (dir. Trine Nadia, 2012; dir. Lars von Trier, 2009). The male figure connected to such women is portrayed as comic and tragic, hen-pecked and submissive (Ulrich 2017).

Let us dwell on this disconcerting construction of the hen-pecked male, and its resonance with the audience, as described in several reviews of the film (Nielsen [M. M.] 2018; Torres 2017; Ulrich 2017). Words like ‘monster’, ‘alien’, and ‘diabolical’ are used to describe the female character (Torres 2017; Ulrich 2017). She is said to emasculate (Torres 2017) and ‘bitch-slap’ (Ulrich 2017) her lover. Further, several reviewers directly assert that the behavior, while exaggerated, is something many in the audience would recognize from their own daily interactions (Torres 2017; Ulrich 2017). Why is this notion even amusing? In my view, there is something very troubling going on here. If the female character, as Tafdrup says (Nielsen [S. B.] 2017), is representative of a broader tendency among women, then what exactly is that tendency? Do we, in all earnestness, still attribute passivity or weakness to men that actually listen to their (female) partners? What is it about characteristics we attribute to the feminine, that cause such a stir when connected to constructions of masculinity? Is an assertive woman such a contrast to her gender as to provide enough shock value for comedy? Is she, by performing woman without being subservient, a red-eyed monster? And, if so, could we consider whether this monster could also be seen as constructive and productive? Can we see her as breaking with (or disrupting) oppressive gender roles and categories, and enacting woman as assertive and in control? We may not like her, but we may perhaps find, in her liberating badness, an outlet for the frustration that passivity might engender? As Judith [Jack] Halberstam suggests in *Skin Shows*,

[t]he monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities [...] and so we need monsters and we need to recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities (Halberstam 1995: 27).

This negative emphasis on the female character in *A Horrible Woman* can perhaps function to enlighten us, rather than vex us. The rendition of gendered interaction provides an opportunity to examine and critique the monstrousness of traditional expectations in regard to gender. Certainly, it makes some of the paradoxes within our notions (and practices) around gender equality explicit. For example, on the one hand, narratives or discourses of gender equality are strongly sedimented within Scandinavian contexts. We firmly believe that gender equality exists. On the other hand, women remain under-paid and underrepresented within power structures (Borchorst 2011 [2008]). Furthermore, while pornography, topless public bathing, sex before marriage,

and other relaxations of traditionally constrictive sexual norms set part of the stage, the framework remains within a masculinist, patriarchal sexual narrative. That is, female bodies remain the battleground over which sexual and libertarian freedoms are negotiated and construed. In Scandinavia, as *#metoo* and (anti-)everyday-sexism campaigns have emphasized and made explicit, sexual revolution operates within a framework in which women are still shamed in rape cases, slut-shamed in social contexts, violated, constructed, and seen as objects for consumption to a much higher degree than men. Similarly, the August 2018 legal banning of burqas and niqābs in Denmark suggests that women's bodies are still considered spaces through or over which a (mostly-male) parliament can exercise control. This leads me to ask whether Scandinavian sexual liberation, despite its progressive perspectives, also functions as a pathway for more masculine access, less masculine responsibility, and continued oppression of women?

It could appear that the move toward more liberal sexual interaction, without a critique of masculinist, patriarchal norms, as well as an absent critique of male-centered sexual pleasure, provides a context in which sexual liberation occurs within a heterosexist and masculinist/patriarchal sexual framework. A woman usually remains an object of consumption, a pathway to pleasure, a collection of holes, and an implement to attain male pleasure and appease the male gaze (Mulvey 2009 [1989]). It would seem that a discursive conflation may occur here between Scandinavian sexual freedom and gender equality. Put another way, one might ask whether more relaxed Scandinavian sexual norms (sex without marriage, sexual liberation, etc.) are (mis)interpreted to imply gender equality? The apparent paradox between notions of gender equality and structural and institutional inequality (Borchorst 2011 [2008]) certainly points to a challenge.

As you have pointed out, *A Horrible Woman* appears to have been received by critics as an illustration of masculinity in crisis in Danish contexts. Several reviews have stated that the dilemma between the partners in the film reflect more general challenges between men and women (Hoffmann 2018; Nielsen [M. M.] 2018; Nielsen [S. B.] 2017; Torres 2017). In one online assessment, the film is described as “a kind of modern monster film, where the alien is Woman” (Torres 2017). In my mind, the heteronormative and misogynist representation of women, sex, and power in the film seems out of sync with broader Nordic narratives of progressive gender policies and perspectives. I wonder if this may point to a paradox, or a tension in regard to how gender is constructed and enacted in Danish contexts? Certainly, the heterosexist leanings and underlying assumptions within the film suggest a disparity between expectations (or a fantasy) of gender equality, and more general social expectations of gendered behavior that seem to mirror a less progressive stance.

In the film, the female character is portrayed as being sexually voracious and aggressive. This, to me, suggests some tension, or challenge, in regard to the construction of female sexuality within the film. On the one hand, progressive sexual mores support the notion that women enjoy sex and want pleasure. Yet the film's framing of female desire as aggressive, negative, even emasculating, suggests anxiety or discomfort with female sexuality that resonates more with shared expectations of women performing as passive objects of sexual desire. They risk being monstrous when they step out of a passive, receiving position.

If the film mirrors a wider and shared perspective on expectations of gendered behavior, as many of the reviews suggest, it hardly reflects a progressive stance on gender. Rather, it expresses very traditional gender expectations, and shames women who do not perform accordingly. Disparagement of female sexual desire in the film seems to suggest that sexual interaction remains construed within a traditional framework. When a female does not perform as a passive object, *she is monstered*. How, then, are we to understand the gender progressiveness, or sexual and gender equality so widely assumed to exist in Scandinavian contexts? This disparity seems, in my mind, to suggest that the notion of gender equality within the Scandinavian framework requires further scrutiny. As Borchorst (2011 [2008]), Kapur (2012), Mohanty/Russo/Torres (1991), and others have shown, assumptions about causality between ‘Western’ notions of sexual liberation and gender equality risk essentialization in terms of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity or culture.

While performing the role of ‘woman’ badly is monstrous, I would add that performing it well may also be damnable. As a mother, and as *your mother* in particular, I have had to tread carefully in the precarious space of gender, mothering, and being, certainly at times, horrible (not just due to the sudden monstrousness that occurs in parents during their children’s teenage years...). Whether we like it or not, being a mother has far-reaching social, emotional, and personal implications.

How I performed ‘mother’ and ‘woman’ had an impact on how you and your siblings construct gender, and what you came to expect of a mother. Had I performed badly, I could have been construed as a monster of one kind. As I mentioned earlier, mothering has been scrutinized and linked to all manner of ills and harm to children. Yet, I can’t help but think that there is also a certain monstrousness, or violence, to performing to societal expectations of ‘good mother’. Acting in complicity with certain gender norms may present a skewed version of what is fair to expect of a woman. By this I mean that women are often presumed (and expect themselves) to be disproportionately nurturing, caregivers, primary homemakers, have professional careers, or at least participate actively in breadwinning. Further, add to this pressures and norms in regard to appearance, sexuality, social interaction, and so on. Performing gender, parent, and mother in this way communicates very high (and very particular) expectations to children. It may instill unrealistic notions of success criteria. Certainly, in Denmark, we are currently seeing high levels of stress and performance anxiety in young women (Sørensen et al. 2011). Could one argue that it is monstrous to perpetuate such norms without at least critiquing them? A double bind is at play: If we don’t perform good mother, the child will suffer, yet when we do, that child may still suffer.

While each family is a unique construct, and parenting roles are distributed in varying ways, there can be no question that certain stigmas and disciplining frameworks are at play, explicitly as well as implicitly. Parents define the framework, rules and even the physical space in which growing up happens. Parenting means power and authority, and provides the examples and norms that children internalize and either emulate or, perhaps, resist.

*Love, Mom.*



## Love and Benevolent Monstering

*Dear Mom,*

When I first wrote you about Marie-Hélène Huet's (1993) work on mothers being blamed for producing monsters, I considered Huet's argument and the precarious position of the mother as a particularity to the context (literature from centuries ago). However, your suggestions in your letter about the policing or judgement of differing forms of mothering behaviors and woman behaviors puts Huet's findings in a troubling new light. While the linking of mental illness and monstrosity is hardly a new one, and a highly problematic one at that, the contemporary research on the implications of mothering suggests to me that Huet's theory on the blaming of mothers for their monstrous offspring is hardly a finished chapter in history.

Are we suggesting that the judgement and policing of mothering practices serves to other and monster child, or mother, or both? It would seem, based on the double-bind you described of either failing your children by reinstating violent norms, or potentially harming them in your efforts to break them, that monstering is not something you *do*, but something you *are made into*, in your performance of normative or non-normative mothering roles. This makes me think of Halberstam's (2011) work on the queer art of failure. If the normative system is one of oppressive control of behavior, is failing to uphold it really a failure? Or is it queer resistance?—A resistance of definitions, perhaps?

I went to the cinema with *your* mother some odd weeks ago. We saw the new feature film *Mary Shelley* (dir. Haifaa al-Mansour, 2017), the coming-of-age love story based on the life of the young author surrounding her publication of *Frankenstein* (1818). Most of the film centers on her love relationship with the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, her relationships to her father and sister, and, perhaps most importantly, the painful loss of her baby, who dies after she has to carry it through the rain, worsening an already onset pneumonia. She goes on to give birth to her debut novel *Frankenstein*. The references, in the film, to the book as a project she sees as a baby (a replacement or even a therapeutic treatment of her loss), further the argument we recognize from the *IMDb* description of the film, that “personal tragedy [...] [transformed] Mary and fuel[led] the writing of her Gothic masterwork” (*IMDb* 2018).

Toward the end of the movie, Mary's exchanges with her stepsister Claire and the estranged love of her life, Percy, shed light on the metaphorical layers of monstrosity at play. In both scenes the interactions flesh out parallels between Mary's life and the experiences of [Victor] Frankenstein's monster. In a confrontation with Percy, Mary asks: “don't you recognize Victor Frankenstein?” (dir. Haifaa al-Mansour, 2017). This suggested positioning of Percy as responsible for creating a monster corresponds not only with the climactic dissolution of their love, but with dialogue between Mary and Claire. As Claire states, the book is a “perfect encapsulation of what it feels to be abandoned [*sic*]” (ibid.). In the film's framing of Mary, the abandonment she has endured (whether from the love or her life of from her baby's passing) produced her as the figurative symbol of monstrosity. As her sister states, “we both know this is no ghost-story” (ibid.), it becomes clear that the monsters at play are not exclusively fictitious.

In the case of Mary Shelley, it seems that her failure to rescue her child, while it could be interpreted as inadequate mothering, is not the most central monsterring dynamic at play. Instead, the intentional framing of Frankenstein's monster as a symbol of Mary's internalized monstrosity becomes a link to viewing the monster as both separate from, and situated within—in other words: the monster is both *other* and *self*.

In addition to bridging the gap, at least in part, between Braidotti's (1999 [1996]), Halberstam's (1995), and Huet's (1993) definitions of monstrosity, the film *Mary Shelley* (2018) also implies that monsterring of others—in this case the director's and audience's monsterring of Mary; and Mary's 'production' of Frankenstein—can all be done through benevolent acts, good intentions, and more importantly, *love*. This suggests to me that a positioning of the monster, whether as other, or within, can be imbued with otherwise positively associated affects. Take, for a start, a look at bell hooks' work *All About Love* (2000), in which she suggests an entire rethinking of love as a radical practice. She argues that "[...] it is useful to see love as a practice. When we act, we need not feel inadequate or powerless; we can trust that there are concrete steps to take on love's path" (hooks 2000: 165). This shift towards analyzing love not as fixed or even interactional, but as processual, serves to complicate 'love' as a simple or exclusively positive affect.

Similarly, consider the work of Lene Myong and Mons Bissenbakker (2016 [2014]), Peter Hervik (2004), or yourself (Skadegård 2017), who have all argued that in a Danish context, benevolence, love, kindness, or hospitality for the other as guest (Derrida/Dufourmantelle 2000 [1997]; Hervik 2004), may seem positive, well-meaning, or full of good intentions, but can be laced with ambiguity, harmful, or even violent practices.

Even if a monster is treated with love, benevolence, and kindness, does that treatment serve to sustain the monster in its inferiority? Does it serve to position non-monsters as 'better than'? If our love of and for monsters reconstitutes power through definition, is it really 'love'? If we return to bell hooks (2000), she would likely argue, that it is, at best, a *misunderstanding* of 'love'. If we return to Myong and Bissenbakker's (2016 [2014]) work, othering practices have been shown to stay intact even in cases where they are done through systems intended to be inclusive and loving.

If, as you have suggested, monsterring can be a practice of controlling, defining, or judging a woman or a mother, even through kindness and benevolence, then this form of monstrous othering, perhaps, goes beyond gender? This also seems, in some part, to correspond to Rosi Braidotti's (1999 [1996]) argument:

The persistence of the racial and racist overtones in teratological discourses intersects with the continuous emphasis on controlling and disciplining the woman's body. Thus, teratology shows the imbrication of gendered and racialized narratives and the role they play in constructing scientific discourses about the female body. Their interconnection is such that any analysis of female embodied experience simply needs to take into account the simultaneous—if often contradictory—effects of racialized and gendered discourses and practices (Braidotti 1999 [1996]: 298).

If anything, Braidotti seems here to suggest that an intersectional approach to teratology (the study of monsters and the abnormal) is inevitable. Additionally, it would seem to me that she is driving through the point that monsters (particularly those we know from literature and arts) are imbricated in, and thoroughly linked with, reality, including the structures of reality we know from gendered and racialized thinking about bodies.

Fictional monstrous bodies as symbol and metaphor for human bodies, or even, perhaps, human systems, structures, psychologies, and fears, are hardly particular to Braidotti's work. In the Danish anthology *Monstrologi—Frygtens manifestationer* (Christensen/Christiansen 2012), this link is made particularly clear. Further, in his contribution 'Things Come Alive—Rise of the Zombies', Steen Ledet Christiansen (2012) shows that:

[...] not only is the zombie an image of fear of terrorism in an age of war on terror, but also the even more insidious fear that we will be swallowed up by the networks we ourselves created, just as we swallowed up others on our path to empire (Christiansen 2012: 161).

Adding to this, Kim Toft Hansen's (2012) piece 'Batailles Godnathistorie—Jean Rollin, True Blood og den erotiske vampyr' about erotic vampires, stresses the metaphorical link to real life otherings and sexualities. This is apparent, for instance, when he brings in the work of George A. Dunn and Rebecca Housel's (2010) anthology *True Blood and Philosophy*. This, he argues, illustrates the ethical link between "adjustment, assimilation, and integration [...] between individuals, who are different" (Hansen 2012: 279). The argument is brought home by Gunhild Agger's (2012) contribution on real-life monsters, understood as criminals and murderers, through the lens of the crime-documentary genre.

But are the monsters and monsterings on screen really as closely linked to the everyday as we suggest? Surely, the 'individuals, who are different' in Hansen's vampire analyses are more different from each other than people of varying sexualities, skin-colors, national or ethnic backgrounds? By using vampires and zombies as metaphor for the real, is the gap between us and the monster or the other made bigger or smaller? In other words, what happens when the monster is no longer fiction?

If the monsters we see in Christiansen's (2012) zombies, Hansen's (2012) vampires, and Agger's (2012) real-life criminals and murderers are produced as clearly *other*, through the mediated format they are presented to us in, and if there is a clear and binary divide between them, then perhaps that is specific to mediated monsters. While cinematic language might make mediated monsters easier to catch, the monstering of the real becomes increasingly difficult when it happens through mediation. As such, in instances where the monster is *not* a vampire or zombie, but 'just' a monstrous woman, inspired by real life, our monster might in practice become a scapegoat for heterosexism, misogyny, and racism, as we see in the case of our 'monstered (m)others' from *Kenned* (2012), *A Horrible Woman* (2017), and *Antichrist* (2009). Perhaps, the closer we get to non-fictional monstrosity, the closer *monsters get to us*.

Or, as Rosi Braidotti (2011 [1994]; see also 1999 [1996]) argues:

They [the monsters] therefore represent the in-between, the mixed, the ambivalent as implied in the ancient Greek root of the word for ‘monsters’: *teras*, which means both horrible and wonderful, object of aberration and adoration, placed between the sacred and the profane. The peculiarity of the organic monster is that she is both Same and Other (Braidotti 2011 [1994]: 216).

But what do we make of this ambivalence through our intersectional lens? Does this translate into the questions of racism and structural discrimination that you work with? Does it apply to other categories than gender?

*Much love, Tess.*

### **Otherring Visible Minorities**

*Dear Tess,*

Your questions bring so much to mind. In regard to monsterring the real, I cannot help but think about how certain racialized bodies are constructed within Danish media and political discourse. Exaggerated and negative media coverage, explicit denigration of Muslims, repeated and often racist depictions of non-white Danish youth, are just some of what we have become accustomed to (Nielsen [A. S.] 2019 [2018]; Andreassen 2005; Yilmaz 1999). Not too long ago, for instance, a Danish court ruled to evict an entire family from their (rented) home in an apartment complex, because a child in the family was convicted of a crime (*Sjællandske* 2018). This practice, which has since been applied to other families with immigrant background (*Ritzaus Bureau* 2018), suggests that the family is deemed unable to perform correct parenting. Parenting is seen to result in the child’s criminal behavior or aberration. One could say, that the family is constructed as having *produced a monster*.

This requires some context. As you know, having grown up in Denmark, this type of situation is racialized, classed, and gendered in very particular ways. The families in question are families of color. Further, as renters and residents in the areas that they live, they represent a social and economic position that, while unspoken, is marked by class (presumed working class; presumed welfare recipients). Yilmaz convincingly explains how individuals such as those in question here can be seen as examples of how social and economic challenges have become *ethnified* (Yilmaz 1999). That is to say, social problems and resulting criminal offences, are conflated with skin color and ethnic background. For example, racialized men are often assumed to be more violent and criminally inclined than the rest of the population. Rather than seeing crime, violence, unemployment, and other concerns as situated within complex social, historical, and economic structures, there is a tendency to see these as connected directly to ethnic minority status and the construction of these groups as essentially deficient in particular ways (Hervik 2004; Yilmaz 1999). This is also mirrored in current political initiatives directed at families with immigrant backgrounds. Among other things, these include punishing families as delinquent for sending their children on holiday, or longer stays, in their countries of origin, or for caring for their toddlers at home rather than sending them to institutional day-care. With a point of departure in normalized, negative

constructions of immigrant families, these parents are constructed as problem families, unwilling to integrate or assimilate.

It seems reasonable to wonder if the construction of ‘non-white family’ (defined in Danish political discourse and statistics as immigrants of ‘non-Western’ descent) as problematic, figures into the court decision to sanction eviction.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, there are a disproportionate number of non-white families and individuals that experience being targeted, for example by police, or described as intractable in news and other media coverage (Andreassen 2005). I suggest that the decision to punish an entire family for a member’s crimes is potentially connected to the way these families are racialized and classed, and, as I discuss below, to the notion of a monstrous female. I cannot say that such a gesture or positioning couldn’t also happen for a racially majoritized (white) family similarly positioned (economically and socially). However, the legal sanction here seems clearly directed at a particular group, making the decision institutionally and structurally discriminatory (Skadegård 2017).

Let me add some perspective to illuminate how this connects to our topic of women and monsters. As I see it, a number of elements are in play. One issue is that racially minoritized immigrants and their descendants (and families) are constructed as culturally incompatible with Danish contexts, norms, and culture (Hervik 2004). That is, racialized persons in Denmark are seen, described, and understood to be essentially so different to ‘Danes’ (whether Danish citizens or not), that they are often considered irreconcilable with ‘Danishness’. Neo-racist narratives which infer that non-white subjectivities are culturally different, and less civilized, than white European bodies underlie a number of shared presumptions and discourses about non-white immigrants (Hervik 2004). One of these is the role of the female/mother. On the one hand, racialized and immigrant women (including mothers) are constructed as incompetent, and oppressed (Andreassen 2005). They are seen as illiterate, lazy (unwilling to join the work force), submissive (to their male partners), or in other ways problematic. On the other hand, however, because racialized immigrant fathers and males are constructed as patriarchal, violent, oppressive, and absent (another form of monsterring), the same women are paradoxically also constructed as central caretakers in immigrant families.

As such, these families are constructed, on the one hand, as oppressed by patriarchal structures and violent (monstrous) men. On the other hand, the women are constructed as primarily responsible. This also infers that they are at fault for fostering, for example, criminal, or otherwise monstrous offspring. Racially minoritized, immigrant women are seen to favor male children via leniency and lack of structure (neglect), leaving young males free to roam the streets as violent sexual predators (Andreassen 2005). In this way, immigrant women can be said to be monstrous in their production of aberrant (monstrous) male children due to their bad mothering. It is an interesting twist that in the case of these women, their assumed passivity and submission to male dominance is the problem. In the film, *A Horrible Woman*, it is precisely these qualities that are lacking in the majoritized (white) female character, and which result in her being monstrous and horrible. It seems racialization, class, and other factors intersect and create differing grids of oppression for minoritized and majoritized individuals.

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<sup>7</sup> It is common in Denmark to use the term ‘ikke-vestlige lande’ [‘non-Western countries’] as a category. See, for example: *Danmarks Statistik* 2017.

So, to go back to the court case and the family evicted because of a child's behavior, one could say that certain discriminatory discourses underlie notions of the maternal, immigrant, and non-white household. The racialized immigrant female parent is made congruous with our notion of the 'monstrous mother', *a mother who produces monstrosity*. Further, the paradoxes within this way of perceiving the mother/family suggest, as discussed earlier, that a catch-22, or metaphorical vice grip, infuses how mothers are defined, constructed, and blamed. This links to Freudian inspired readings of the essentially monstrous female subject (when she does *not* do 'female' correctly), and to the ensuing notion that she is also 'monstrous' when she *does* 'female' correctly (Creed 1986; Williams 1984)—yet, when she is a raced female...

she can do *no* right.

*Much love, Mom.*

### **A Collective Reparative Reading—Revolutionary Mothering, Empowerment, and Agency**

In the above correspondence, we share thoughts, ask questions, and try to speak to the issues from each our personal, generational, and theoretical perspectives. We do this to underscore how issues around gender, mother, other, and monster are not merely theoretical or abstract. They are very much a part of our everyday material existence. The forms of oppressive gestures and expectations to gender performance hit close to home in many ways. As a female parent, certain considerations arise. As a younger researcher on gender, other considerations come to the fore. Yet each of us is met with disparaging constructions and renderings of women in film, media, and everyday activity. Mothering, but also being a woman in a heteronormative context, is a contentious and dangerous field in which any step can potentially be interpreted as a misstep. We look at how a film, produced through and for the male gaze (Mulvey 2009 [1989]), draws on and reifies certain normative gender oppressive discourses. Our thoughts behind the structure are many. As Mainsah and Prøitz (2015) illustrate, there is much to gain from collaborative and atypically dialogical approaches to research on race and gender. It is also a deliberate methodological divergence from close textual analysis, which dominates studies of raced and gendered representations (Saha 2017), and from studies of social difference through lenses of the powered majority.

In line with Tuck and Yang's (2012) concerns about the uses of 'decolonization' as metaphor, we do not throw the terminology around lightly. Meanwhile, working collaboratively while incorporating our relationship with each other and allowing it to guide us, brought to mind the words of Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni:

In decoloniality, research methods and research methodologies are never accepted as neutral but are unmasked as technologies of subjectivation if not surveillance tools that prevent the emergence of *another*-thinking, *another*-logic, and *another*-world view. Research methodologies are tools of gate-keeping (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015: 489; emphasis added).

We find that there is much to gain from viewing monsters not through the classical early 1900's lenses or definitions of binary difference, as in Braidotti's (1999 [1996]: 290) simple definition, but rather, as processes of othering and processes of conforming to or

resisting self-definitions of the monstrous, as described in her alternative redefinition (1999 [1996]: 299; see block quotation).

In making this assertion, we have perhaps carried out what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1997) would call a ‘paranoid reading’ (we did, after all, see monsters everywhere, quite literally). What Sedgwick proposed in her groundbreaking work on paranoid reading, is that the deconstructive or perhaps critical-for-the-sake-of-criticality, undertone of an analysis such as ours, can benefit immensely from a self-reflexive reconfiguration of the purpose and practice of critical theory. Sedgwick calls this direction ‘reparative reading’.

In our analysis, the reparative reading of *A Horrible Woman* (2017) operates on two levels. Firstly, while our analyses in the correspondence can be seen as expressions of paranoid readings due to the consistent (re)definitions of monsters and monstrosity in the film, as well as within Danish society, any such takeaway would be premised on the assumption that monstrosity is inherently destructive or negative. To us, the processual focus of the analyses enables nuanced and dynamic understandings of monsters and (m)others, that can adapt the fluidity of these constructions as they are (re)configured through time. By this, we mean that the connection between mothering, monstrosity, and othering allows for ways to see how notions of the unnatural, the alien, and monstrous connect to contemporary categories such as woman, mother, and ‘race’. That is, we look at how the concern with, or construction of, the unnatural or abnormal, functions to maintain certain tropes about difference. The monster has changed form in the sense that we no longer rely entirely on figures like vampires and zombies to invoke the unnatural, the abnormal, or the monstrous. Further, we point to monstrosity as potentially also connected to well-intentioned, even loving gestures. At first glance these arguments might read as paranoid; monsters are everywhere, and even when produced through love and benevolence, they are often examples of violent definition through power. Meanwhile, we argue that monsters may not be all bad. As we discuss below, the monster can also be understood as a productive force, or an interrogation of the normal. As such, our critical and paranoid reading was always laced with a reparative possibility.

Secondly, the reparative reading can be seen as a next step in our argument. If we have established that monstrosity and monsters occur continuously in relation to and enmeshed with (m)others, then what does monstrosity do for such (m)others? Perhaps it is too easy, paranoid even, to assume that this monstrosity exclusively others, or that othering is necessarily an entirely destructive rather than productive process. If anything, this next step of reparative reading would suggest that monstrosity and othering are complex and fluid processes with multiple potential (paranoid and reparative) outcomes.

Karen Barad explains this duality well in her *GLQ* article ‘TransMaterialities—Trans\*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings’:

Monstrosity, like electrical jolts, cuts both ways. It can serve to demonize, dehumanize, and demoralize. It can also be a source of political agency. It can empower and radicalize. In an unforgettable, powerful, and empowering performative piece, ‘My Words to Victor Frankenstein [A]bove the Village of

Chamounix',<sup>8</sup> Susan Stryker embraces the would-be epithet of monstrosity, harnessing its energy and power to transform despair and suffering into empowering rage, self-affirmation, theoretical inventiveness, political action, and the energizing vitality of materiality in its animating possibilities (Barad 2015: 392).

A critically paranoid reading of the positionings and monsterings of others, and otherings of mothers in film and everyday contexts, is perhaps necessary to comprehend the very real-life-consequences of the very real people who can be monstered, othered, mothered, or any combination of the three. It is perhaps even reparative, or at least productive, in itself. However, in the spirit of Sedgwick's (1997) reparative reading, and Barad's (2015) and Halberstam's (1995) room for nuanced coinciding multiplicities (what we might call 'quantum monsters'), we would like to take our argument one step further, by suggesting that monsters are enmeshed with hope and possibility through their very monstrousness. They are both the mirror we hold up to the normal, and a way to break with it. For us, this is a reminder that the fear and policing of mothering, the definition and outing of monsters, and perhaps even the subsequent othering of them comes from *somewhere* and leads to *something*. As we see it, these places and things have to do with power, agency, and hope. By identifying and marking them, we might strengthen our capability to mitigate or at least understand what monstering *does*.

Perhaps our fear of monsters is a direct response to their ability to mirror something in ourselves that we either wish to have, or had forgotten was there. Or maybe we are just afraid of their power. But if anything, as a monstrous other, or othered monster, that could be a reminder of the fragility of norms and the potential that lies in standing out. And perhaps the paranoid reader, who laces her analysis with repair is then enabled to recognize that potential, and to recognize the norms that it breaks with. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says,

[...] she has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did (Sedgwick 1997: 22).

If monsters, as Barad suggests, are "a source of political agency" (2015: 392; while referring to 'monstrosity'), they may be seen as automatically imbued with hope. It might arguably be the case for past and future monsters alike, that this hope is born from the potential fear of monsters. This fear is clearly rooted in their power, hence the cutting both ways (Barad 2015). What then, do we gain from using our definitions to limit that power, when it is at the very core of our existence as, and with, monsters? What kind of agency might one think a monster to have if one reads a monster reparatively? Surely not just the agency to aid us in self-definition through othering, but also agency in resisting that same othering. This suggests to us, that it is revolutionary to carry out mothering regardless of monstrous dilemmas. Just as it is revolutionary to

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<sup>8</sup> Stryker, Susan. 1994. "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix [*sic*; later republished as: 'Chamounix']—Performing Transgender Rage", *GLQ—A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1:3, 237–254. [External reference, therefore not listed in the bibliography.]



love, a love that can affect change, when we resist monsterring as othering and read it as repair.

## Conclusion

Not all others are monstered, and not all monsters are others. However, the two categories can, at times, become filtered and enmeshed. For mothers, the link becomes more blurry, as mothers oscillate between being framed as the root cause of monstrosity, and being monstered themselves. Regardless, framings of motherhood become contentious spaces for the negotiation of gender, difference, and norm, both in fiction and beyond.

In the film, *A Horrible Woman* (2017), the female character is monstrous and comical, emasculating, and awful. Yet, as we point out, when racialized women with immigrant backgrounds perform gender in passive, subservient, and softer ways, they are constructed as monstrous in their passivity. When the mother/co-author in this article describes performing ‘good mother’ in her own life, the indirect consequence is the monstrous expectations that are thereby communicated to her children. We have argued that the monsterring process is both an external and internal one, as well as a potentially productive one. We have suggested that monsterring occurs even within benevolent, kind, and loving (m)othering. This mirrors the processes of structural discrimination and systemic othering that we know from intersectional analyses of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heteronormativity, and more.

Finally, we suggest that, if we view monsters and monsterring as processual, we are also able to repair and rethink the revolutionary possibilities, agency, and resistances that they symbolize and enact. Rather than subscribing entirely to reparative reading as a solution, or paranoid reading as a problem, the oscillation between the two produces potential for a *quantum monster*, a duality of being and being produced as. That is, both destructive and constructive. This positioning of the monster allows for a reckoning with agency as being simultaneously self-defining and restrained. Also, it positions monsters as *both/and*. They are the products of monstrous mother’s imaginations in fictions past, and transformative possibilities for the future. At the heart of this dualism, in our case, was the duality of our own mother–daughter relationship and its monstrous manifestations of willful potential.

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### Biographical Notes

Tess Sophie Skadegård Thorsen, Mira's daughter and Dr. Rashmi Chandhok Skadegård's granddaughter, is a PhD candidate in the School of Social Sciences at Aalborg University. Tess' research on the production of representation in Danish film is a part of the VELUX-funded research project 'A Study of Experiences and Resistance to Racialization in Denmark' (SERR).

Mira Chandhok Skadegård, Tess' mother and Dr. Rashmi Chandhok Skadegård's daughter, is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Aalborg University in Copenhagen, Denmark. The focus of her current research is primarily on structural discrimination (gender, religion, social background, and the other discrimination grounds), and dynamics connected with power, inequality, inclusion/exclusion and complicity. Her theoretical framework builds on her background in philosophy, anthropology, and literary theory, and is strongly informed by postcolonial, feminist discourse theory, deconstruction, CRT and intersectional perspectives.



*Section 3*

Video Games and Play

*As a tool of oppression,  
the monster  
policing the borders  
of what is permissible*

—Stang, on page 235.

“The monster, like the abject,  
is inherently ambiguous [...]”

—Stang, on page 252.

“As they constitute a baseline for the  
representation of computational others,  
analyzing hostile monsters is [...] essential to  
the study of representation of all enemies  
in video games”

—Švelch, on page 272.

“In mass media, the subaltern are often  
left without a voice or humanity [...],  
if not explicitly depicted as  
dangerous monsters [...]”

—Hammar, on page 280.



# THE BROODMOTHER AS MONSTROUS-FEMININE— ABJECT MATERNITY IN VIDEO GAMES

Sarah Stang (York University)

**Abstract:** *This article examines examples of the monstrous-feminine in the form of abject maternal monsters in a selection of commercially successful and critically acclaimed mainstream video games using conceptual frameworks and textual analysis methods established in the work of Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed. The Broodmother from Dragon Age: Origins (2009) and the Mother from Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening (2010) are considered as problematic examples of the abject monstrous-feminine which fall into a long tradition in horror media of framing the female body and the birthing process as something horrific and repulsive. Kerrigan from the StarCraft series (1998–2017) is examined as a possible counter-example, demonstrating that the monstrous-feminine can exist in a playable and potentially empowered form, though she is problematically empowered within a violent, militant framework. Overall, this article critically analyses the ways in which video games remediate tropes of gendered monstrosity and reinforce the misogynist norms and values of hegemonic heteropatriarchal ideology by forcing players to enact symbolic violence against transgressive female bodies.*

**Keywords:** *video games; monstrous-feminine; maternal; abject; motherhood; Dragon Age: Origins (2009); Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening (2010); StarCraft series (1998–2017).*

## Introduction

Monstrosity has long been the subject of much interdisciplinary research, particularly for scholars interested in questions of meaning-making and identity formation. Theorists have deconstructed the ‘monstrous’ as a broad category of alterity, marginality, abjection, deviance, and even potential agency and empowerment. Monstrosity is of particular interest to media scholars, since portraying monsters with certain physiological, phenotypical, or cultural qualities that reference specific groups of people and specific types of bodies, or inversely, portraying specific groups of people with monstrous qualities, has been a common practice in all media forms. In this sense, scholars have long noted that the mediated monster often functions as a symbolic representation of some kind of marginalized identity.

In his book *Monster Theory* (1996b), Cohen observed that “any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body” (Cohen 1996a: 7). Stories which present the monster as a terrifying and abject Other who must be slain by a hero in order to restore normative order—a narrative set-up rooted in mythology and familiar to all media forms—can therefore be read as means to demarcate and police the boundaries separating what is considered to be the normal, rational, healthy Self from the abnormal, irrational, unhealthy Other (Picart/Browning 2012: 1). That monstrous Other is often portrayed as female: from the seductive siren and enraged gorgon to the

evil witch and the castrating *vagina dentata*, female bodies and female sexuality have commonly been rendered monstrous and threatening within patriarchal ideology.

While female monstrosity in art, literature, and horror films has been extensively studied (see, for example, Creed 1986; Dijkstra 1986; Creed 1993; Huet 1993; Grosz 1996; Caputi 2004; Wood/Schillace 2014; Santos 2017; Harrington 2018), female monstrosity in games has received less attention (Santos/White 2005; Spittle 2011; Sarkeesian 2016; Stang 2018). This is a particularly egregious gap in media scholarship because in many games, fighting and slaying monsters is central to gameplay. This is undoubtedly due to their historical connections to the popular fantasy tabletop roleplaying game, *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax/Arneson 1974–), which involves players enacting a power fantasy by killing monsters in order to gain experience points and level up. *Dungeons & Dragons* itself drew heavily from war games and classical mythology, which is rife with stories of heroic characters slaying monstrous Others (Nikolaidou 2019).

As an effort to contribute to addressing this gap, this article examines the ways in which a selection of commercially successful and critically acclaimed mainstream video games present the female body—particularly female reproductive processes—as monstrous. This analysis utilizes and builds upon the psychoanalytic concept of the abject as developed by Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed’s influential concept of the monstrous-feminine. Tropes associated with the abject and the monstrous-feminine found in horror film are remediated in many video games, though unlike film, games force the player to embody the heroic representative of normalcy and slay the monster themselves. The argument underpinning this article is that the act of playing as a hero who slays pregnant and birthing monsters—referred to here as ‘Broodmothers’—functions as a re-enactment of the violence directed at women’s bodies within our heteropatriarchal societies. This virtual symbolic violence therefore reinforces misogynistic hegemonic ideologies.<sup>1</sup>

The article begins with a discussion of female monstrosity as it has been theorized by media scholars and an explanation of both the abject and the monstrous-feminine as conceptual frameworks. This is followed by a brief discussion of the severely lacking (or problematic) representation of motherhood in games as compared to the medium’s overabundance of fathers and father figures—a trend known within game criticism and scholarship as the ‘dadification’ of games. This leads into the analysis of the maternal monsters themselves, which have been studied using visual and textual analysis (close reading) techniques drawn from both film studies (Creed 1993; Williams 1991) and game studies (Carr 2009; Carr 2014). While there are dozens of abject mothers and maternal monsters in games, this article focuses on two particularly obvious and egregious examples of the trope: the Broodmother from *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009) and the Mother from *Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening* (BioWare 2010). Finally, the central character Sarah Kerrigan from the *StarCraft* series (Blizzard Entertainment 1998–2017) is discussed as an alternative—but ultimately problematic—vision of a

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<sup>1</sup> Women who are not biologically female are particular targets for heteropatriarchal violence, and historical concepts of monstrosity and abjection are directly tied to both femaleness and femininity; however, as this article is addressing reproduction and birth, my focus is necessarily on biological femaleness. Accordingly, when I use the word ‘female’ I am referring to biologically female bodies, and when I use the term ‘woman’ or ‘feminine’ I am referring to gender, which does not necessarily correspond to physical femaleness.

monstrous-feminine Broodmother, revealing the possibility of playable and therefore potentially empowered monstrous mothers.

### **Monstrosity and the Female Body**

As a tool of oppression, the monster polices the borders of what is permissible, and to step outside of social norms risks, according to Cohen, either “attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself” (Cohen 1996a: 12). This is particularly true for women: not only are women often the victims of monstrous aggression in popular culture, but they are also commonly portrayed *as* the monsters. As Cohen observed, “the woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith, [...] or Gorgon” (Cohen 1996a: 9). Female reproduction has always been especially heavily policed within patriarchal society, and the male fear of female fecundity and potency has resulted in maternal bodies being strictly controlled or reviled as abject (Kristeva 1982 [1980]). The association of maternity with monstrosity in mythology, religion, folklore, storytelling, and popular culture has been well documented (Kristeva 1982 [1980]; Creed 1993; Huet 1993; Caputi 2004; Wood/Schillace 2014; Santos 2017; Harrington 2018). Monstrous mothers make monstrous offspring, often without any kind of paternal input, and even the ostensibly ‘normal’ female body parts which are directly involved in the reproductive process, particularly the uterus and vagina, are themselves associated with monstrosity in the form of the monstrous womb and the *vagina dentata*, or ‘toothed vagina’ (Creed 1993; Caputi 2004).

This article draws primarily upon Barbara Creed’s (1986; 1993) influential analysis of female monstrosity—what she termed the monstrous-feminine—in film. Although critical of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Creed effectively applied the psychoanalytic concept of the abject, as theorized by feminist scholar Julia Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror* (1982 [1980]), to a wide selection of well-known horror films. Kristeva drew on Lacanian psychoanalysis to articulate the abject as that which disrupts, disturbs, and is rejected by the normative, patriarchal realm of law, order, and propriety. The abject is associated with the primal, bestial, physical, and the feminine. The abject disturbs identity and threatens the borders we have established between human and animal, culture and nature, self and other. In signalling this categorical breakdown, the abject draws one “toward the place where meaning collapses” and so “is radically excluded” from normative society, thought, and behavior (Kristeva 1982 [1980]: 2). Facing the abject is therefore a traumatic experience, and a common reaction to it is disgust and horror. Any activities or substances which invoke disgust or horror are all part of the abject, such as bodily fluids and excrement, disease, open wounds, death and decay, cannibalism, bodily alteration or transformation, dismemberment, and even sexual perversion. However, the abject is, paradoxically, associated with both fear and *jouissance*, as we are often both disgusted by and drawn to that which is abject. This helps to explain the popularity of the horror film, the most abject of genres.

Importantly, the abject also exists in the infantile time before we separated ourselves from our mothers, that is, before we recognized a boundary between our own bodies and the nourishing maternal body. Female reproduction and motherhood are therefore especially associated with the abject. This was made clear by Kristeva when she stated that “[f]ear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative

power” (Kristeva 1982 [1980]: 16). The archaic mother, or the primal mother, is the mother of earliest infancy—who Freud called the “first nourisher and first seducer” (Freud 1949 [1940]: 188)—and is a repressed presence in the human psyche and, unsurprisingly, a common monstrous presence in many horror films (Creed 1993). Accordingly, psychoanalytic theory argues that we must reject our mothers in order to form our own identities and become part of the normative, patriarchal world, which is represented by the father. At the moment the child rejects the mother for the father, the mother becomes abject. This division between the embodied, natural feminine and the mental, ‘civilized’ masculine reinforces the taxonomical patriarchal hierarchy which places women beneath men (MacCormack 2012: 257). However, by framing maternity as abject, there is also a recognition of its power to disrupt the patriarchal symbolic order, especially when that maternity is presented as monstrous, threatening, and powerful.

In her application of abjection to the monstrous-feminine in film, Creed observed that “[a]ll human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (Creed 1986: 44). Her analysis included the primordial Archaic Mother in *Alien* (Scott 1979) and the Monstrous Womb in *The Brood* (Cronenberg 1979), which both represent the fear of female generative power; the Possessed Monster in *The Exorcist* (Friedkin 1973) and the Witch in *Carrie* (De Palma 1976), which both embody the cultural association of female sexual maturation with corruption and sin; and the Vampire in *The Hunger* (Scott 1983) and the Castrating Mother in *Psycho* (Hitchcock 1960), which both directly threaten male sexual identity. These are more than just female versions of male monsters, as “[t]he reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience” (Creed 1993: 3). Creed found that it is the female physicality of these cinematic monsters that was so disturbing and abject, particularly monsters which give birth, possess phallic symbols, and penetrate or castrate their victims.

Of course, as Creed observed, “the feminine is not per se a monstrous sign; rather, it is constructed as such within a patriarchal discourse which reveals a great deal about male desires and fears” (Creed 1986: 70). This is likely because the films Creed analysed were all directed by men and appear to be intended for male audience members. The same can be said of most mainstream video games: according to the International Game Developers Association’s 2016 *Developer Satisfaction Survey*, 72% of game developers are male (Weststar/Legault 2016), and game scholars like Jesper Juul (2012 [2009]) have long noted that developers often make games that would appeal to their own demographic. Although Creed was discussing film, her observations and theories about the monstrous-feminine, particularly abject maternal monsters, can be readily applied to video games.

While the application of psychoanalysis to horror films and monsters is a popular theoretical approach, and the monsters discussed in this article clearly embody aspects of the abject and monstrous-feminine, it is important to underscore the generic differences between horror, fantasy, and science fiction. While the games under study here certainly remediate tropes common to much horror media, the *Dragon Age* series is a fantasy series (perhaps more specifically dark fantasy, but it is not categorized as ‘horror’) and *StarCraft* is science fiction. This is an important distinction to make,

because in horror media there is generally a single monster, or single kind of monster, who disrupts normative society and must be slain, controlled, or contained to restore the symbolic order. However, in fantasy and science fiction, the worlds are populated by monstrous creatures or ‘monstrous’ (i.e. nonhuman) races. In this sense, monstrosity is normalized in science fiction and fantasy in a way it is usually not in horror. Given that Creed identified the abject monstrous-feminine in the context of horror films, this necessarily means that the concept cannot be perfectly mapped onto science fiction and fantasy. However, the creatures and characters I discuss here do exemplify aspects of both the abject and the monstrous-feminine, suggesting that while monstrosity is normalized in these games in the form of populations of monstrous beings who share the same world as the human (and humanoid) races, it is still presented as horrific and abject. This is particularly the case with female monsters, as I demonstrate in this article, underscoring the fact that certain tropes connected to the act of othering female bodies and female reproductive processes are not limited to the horror genre.

In addition, while there is a strong tradition of adapting feminist psychoanalytic film theories to games (Santos/White 2005; Spittle 2011; Rehak 2013; Carr 2014; Trépanier-Jobin/Bonenfant 2017), rather than immersing the viewer in the story through shots designed to foster identification with certain characters, video games position the player as an actor in the game’s narrative. In this sense, by forcing the player to control a generally normative, non-monstrous heroic representative of the symbolic order, games make players complicit in the violence enacted against monstrous bodies. Although *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening* allow players to embody marginalized identity positions, such as a racialized elf or a persecuted mage, these characters are not monstrous. Rather, players enact the role of heroic Grey Warden tasked with slaughtering countless monstrous Darkspawn—the primary enemies in the game—and their monstrous, abject mothers. This complicity is precisely why studying the monstrous-feminine in video games is an important task: we do not simply watch the cathartic re-enactment of patriarchal violence directed at non-normative and transgressive reproductive female bodies as in the horror films discussed by Creed—we *perform* it. This is why my discussion of Kerrigan in this article is given so much attention: As I demonstrate, she embodies aspects and tropes of the horrific monstrous-feminine, but she also subverts them in several ways and is, most importantly, a *playable* character. Rarely are players given the opportunity to embody the monstrous-feminine themselves, and this speaks to not only the unique medium specificity of games in their incorporation of the player, but also to the ways in which games allow scholars to push psychoanalytic textual analysis past its established cinematic constraints. As this article outlines, the abject and monstrous-feminine manifest very clearly in games, and while most games with female monsters simply present them as horrific creatures to defeat, there remains the possibility for a repositioning of the player *as* monster.

### **The Brood and Its Mother (*Dragon Age: Origins*, 2009)**

Video games have always struggled to represent motherhood. While fathers are often featured as heroic player characters—a trend known in game criticism as the ‘dadification’ of games (Brice 2013; Joho 2014; Voorhees 2016; Stang 2016)—mothers are generally absent, deceased before the story begins, killed off during the game, or

portrayed as villains or monsters. This tendency has become so common that some critics have demanded to know where the mothers are in video games and why they are portrayed so poorly when they are present (Smith 2014; Campbell 2016; Gray 2017). While killing off mothers to spur the protagonist on his hero's journey certainly points to patriarchal ideology in game narratives, when mothers are present but framed as evil or monstrous the misogyny becomes particularly palpable. The trope of pregnant or birthing female monsters is clearly tapping into the previously discussed revulsion and fear towards female fecundity, particularly when that birth is non-normative, when the mother or her offspring are transgressive in any way, and when the mother reproduces independently. Female reproduction without male input is, understandably, a particularly potent fear in patriarchal society. Like most fears and anxieties, it has manifested in horror media; as such, the birth-as-horror trope is so widespread that it has proven a popular subject for feminist film scholarship. For example, in writing about David Cronenberg's 1979 body horror film *The Brood*, Creed points out that:

The mother's offspring [...] represent symbolically the horrifying results of permitting the mother too much power. An extreme, impossible situation—parthenogenetic birth—is used to demonstrate the horrors of unbridled maternal power. Parthenogenesis is impossible, but if it could happen, the film seems to be arguing, woman could give birth only to deformed manifestations of herself (Creed 1993: 47).

Although parthenogenetic reproduction might seem to empower the mother, giving her uncontested control over her offspring, it generally comes at a high price. While her pregnancy is certainly unconventional, it is often the result of infection, contamination, or mutation and causes abject transformations, madness, and, eventually, death at the hands of the protagonist. In *The Brood*, Nola is infected/impregnated by her own psychotic rage caused by the abuse she suffered from her parents. She uses her monstrous offspring to try and reclaim her daughter from her husband who wants full custody of the child. To save the girl—and keep her for himself—the husband murders Nola, though the final scene of the film reveals that the daughter has begun to show symptoms of the same infection which plagued her mother. These themes of enraged and abused women, horrific maternity, bodily transformation, and infection-as-impregnation are clearly paralleled in BioWare's critically acclaimed fantasy role-playing game *Dragon Age: Origins*, and its expansion *Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening*, in the figures of the Broodmother and the Mother, respectively.

In *Dragon Age: Origins*, the player encounters the monstrous Broodmother—an enormous multi-breasted female creature who exists to give birth to litters of twisted and evil Darkspawn, the primary enemies in the game (see figure 1). The player must fight this monster—who attacks by screaming, spewing vomit and saliva, sending her Darkspawn children to attack, and grabbing with her tentacles—in the fleshy, pulsating, pink walls of her lair. The atmosphere surrounding the player as they uncover the truth about Darkspawn procreation is like a horror film: dark, dank underground caverns, creepy music, the manic whisperings of prisoners driven mad by their captors. The Darkspawn are the primary enemies the player must fight throughout the game, though little is revealed about them until this moment. The Darkspawn resemble twisted,

monstrous versions of the gameworld's normal 'races': Humans, Elves, Dwarves, and Qunari, and in this scene, the player learns why. The Darkspawn breed by capturing women of these various races, force-feeding them poisonous Darkspawn blood, body parts, as well as flesh from people of their own race. This process kills most captives, but some survive the Darkspawn poison—called the Taint—and mutate into cannibalistic Darkspawn Broodmothers. Each race of Broodmother gives birth to a specific type of Darkspawn—a twisted manifestation of the monstrous mother herself, just as Creed described in her discussion of *The Brood*.



**Figure 1.** The Broodmother from *Dragon Age: Origins*. Screenshot by the author.

This segment is rife with abject symbolism. First, the Broodmother is an animal-human hybrid, with tentacles and a spider-like protrusion: hybridity, liminality, and categorical breakdown all signal the abject, especially in terms of challenging the boundary between human and animal (Kristeva 1982 [1980]: 207). Kristeva notes that women are often associated with the animal in patriarchal society, and that the abject subject is one who is “heterogenous, animal, metamorphosed, altered” (Kristeva 1982 [1980]: 207). Second, she resides in a lair that is clearly coded as vaginal or uterine: dark, dank, fleshy, pulsating rooms and corridors are particularly common visual motifs in horror and reference the psychoanalytical ‘archaic mother’ (see Creed 1993: 18). Third, she spews vomit and saliva: bodily substances are always abject and so it is no surprise that they are framed in the game as both a deadly threat and a revolting mechanic (Creed 1993: 2–3). Finally, she has been transformed through torture, cannibalism, and consuming ‘tainted’ blood: Bodily transformation and cannibalism are both abject—again, signaling the breakdown between Self and Other—but the Darkspawn blood is a particularly powerful abject symbol. Blood itself is an abject bodily substance (Kristeva 1982 [1980]: 3), but tainted blood can be read as a reference to menstrual blood, which both Kristeva and Creed discuss at length as being particularly abject in patriarchal

society as a symbol of female fertility, sexual maturation, and sexual difference. Kristeva writes that “blood, as a vital element, also refers to women, fertility, and the assurance of fecundation. It thus becomes a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection” (Kristeva 1982 [1980]: 59). Creed notes that “[i]n the horror genre [...] menstrual blood is constructed as a source of abjection: its powers are so great it can transform woman into any one of a number of fearful creatures” (Creed 1993: 83). The most fearful of creatures is, of course, a monstrous mother who parthenogenetically spawns monstrous offspring. Naturally, those offspring are loyal only to her and pose a threat to the protagonist/player-character, who serves as the representative of the normative, patriarchal symbolic order.

The connection between blood, transformation, fecundity, monstrosity, and the female body is worth exploring further. In her book *Managing the Monstrous Feminine*, Jane Ussher observes that:

Menarche marks the point at which a girl becomes a woman; when childhood innocence may be swapped for the mantle of monstrosity associated with abject fecundity. The physical changes of puberty—breasts, pubic hair, curving hips and thighs, sweat, oily skin, and most significantly, menstrual blood—stand as signifiers of feminine excess, of the body as out of control (Ussher 2006: 19).

The transformations undergone by the Broodmother are particularly excessive: she swells in size, grows multiple breasts, her lower body transforms into tentacles, she becomes violent, and she apparently loses the ability to speak (she only roars and grunts, like an animal). In other words, the process that turns her into a mother also makes her monstrous (or vice versa). That process itself is articulated by one of the Darkspawn’s prisoners, a woman named Hespith. She explains:

We tried to escape, but they found us. They took us all, turned us. The men, they kill... They’re merciful. But the women, they want. They want to touch, to mold, to change until you are filled with them. They took Laryn. They made her eat the others, our friends. She tore off her husband’s face and drank his blood. And while she ate, she grew. She swelled and turned gray and she smelled like them. They remade her in their image. Then she made more of them. Broodmother... (*Dragon Age: Origins*).

It is unclear whether, after their initial transformation, Broodmothers begin to reproduce parthenogenetically or not; however, the Darkspawn appear to be loyal to their mother, sacrificing themselves to try and stop the player-character from killing her. As the Broodmother dies, Hespith finishes her story: “[t]hat’s where they come from. That’s why they hate us... That’s why they need us. That’s why they take us... That’s why they feed us” (*Dragon Age: Origins*). The line “that’s why they hate us... That’s why they need us” is particularly potent here, as it also articulates the contradiction inherent in misogyny, especially revulsion and hatred towards the maternal.<sup>2</sup> However, even

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that *Dragon Age: Origins* features a far less abject monstrous mother in the form of Flemeth, a witch who embodies a maternal, antagonistic, and ambiguous role. Flemeth is the adoptive



after learning that these Broodmothers are tormented victims, the player is not given an option to be merciful. The act of murdering this tortured and mutated woman is perhaps rendered less disturbing because she does not speak, she only shrieks and screams. What if she could vocalize her own agony? As it turns out, we still have to murder her even as she speaks to us: in the following game in the series—which features a psychoanalytical familial drama in which the maternal is pitted against the paternal—the main antagonist and final boss is a uniquely self-aware and fully sapient Broodmother.

### **The Mother vs. The Father (*Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening*, 2010)**

The main antagonist and final boss of *Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening* is unironically called the Mother. She is a unique, self-aware Broodmother who can speak but has been driven mad by her own mutations. Her dialogue and narrative function reflect common ableist tropes of madness in video games (Lindsay 2014; Goto 2015; Chang 2017): she laughs to herself, repeats herself, speaks in the third person, and is, of course, *evil*. Her character design is similar to the Broodmother in *Dragon Age: Origins* in that she is also a half human-half tentacle/spider monster hybrid with multiple breasts (see fig. 2).



**Figure 2.** The Mother from *Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening*. Screenshot by the author.

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mother of one of the player's party members, a mage named Morrigan, who believes her mother plans to take over her body in order to regain her youth. At Morrigan's behest, the player can confront and kill Flemeth, who takes the form of a dragon in the battle. Although she appears to die, Flemeth reappears in subsequent instalments in the series, occasionally helping as well as hindering the player-character. As a mother figure, an older woman, a witch, and a shapeshifter, Flemeth also embodies aspects of the monstrous-feminine, though she turns out to be much more than simply another monster for players to kill. Future research on Flemeth as an embodiment and subversion of the monstrous-feminine could provide another valuable example of ways for developers to allow for a potentially empowered and appealing monstrous mother.

However, the Mother's human half is thin whereas the original Broodmother is fat (though the Mother is much larger in size), her skin is less pink, and her face is more human—though she can open her mouth in an entirely inhuman way (see figure 3). She also has a comparable combat style, grabbing and swatting at the player-character with her tentacles, spewing vomit and saliva, shrieking loudly to stun the player-character, and sending waves of her Darkspawn children to attack.

In the game's narrative, the Mother's desires are contrasted with those of the Architect, a paternal, male Darkspawn who is also uniquely intelligent and self-aware. The Architect was responsible for granting sentience to the Mother. This caused her to remember who she once was and the fact that she was forced to devour her own family when she was mutated into a Broodmother, a realization that drove her mad. Her awakening also caused her to no longer hear the call of the Archdemon that normally controls the Darkspawn, and she blames the Architect for the loss of the Archdemon's 'sweet song'. The other sapient/awakened Darkspawn are torn between loyalty to the Architect, the reformer who wants them all to become sapient and self-sufficient, and the Mother, the traditionalist who wants them to return to mindlessly serving the Archdemon. Both characters control hordes of Darkspawn, but the Architect is presented as calm, logical, and wanting only peace for his 'children', whereas the Mother is portrayed as mad, evil, emotionally unstable, and using her children as tools for her own desires. Although the Architect refers to the Darkspawn as his children, and the Mother even refers to him as 'the Father', he cannot reproduce. The Mother, on the other hand, gives birth to uniquely mutated Darkspawn called the Children who are protective, obedient, and loyal only to her.



**Figure 3.** The Mother's Final Scream (*Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening*). Screenshot by the author.

While the Mother has awakened Darkspawn who follow her and call her 'mother', her offspring are more monstrous and abject than regular Darkspawn, who emerge from

normal Broodmothers as monstrous toddlers. The Mother's Children are born instead as worm-like Darkspawn called 'childer grubs' which hibernate in cocoons after birth. These grubs emerge from their cocoons to attack and devour nearby prey, which determines the next stage of their evolution. If the grub consumes the flesh of a tainted creature, like another Darkspawn, it transforms into a 'childer hatchling', with legs and claws. According to the *Dragon Age Wiki*, after consuming another tainted creature, the hatchling evolves in a fully grown 'childer' (see figure 4a):

This final form of the Children is by far stronger and deadlier than all previous forms. Their claws have grown long and sharp, and they sprout additional insect-legs. Their body is encased by a protective carapace, making them much harder to kill than a childer grub or hatchling. They are also frighteningly fast; adult childers are capable of speed unmatched by every other type of darkspawn (*Dragon Age Wiki*: paragraph 6).

By making her offspring even more repulsive, monstrous, non-humanoid, and abject, the game reinforces the message that she is worse than the Architect, and that she must be stopped before she covers the world in monstrosities that are loyal only to her.



**Figures 4a–4b.** An Adult Childer (*Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening*; left) and The Architect (*Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening*; right). Screenshots by the author.

Regarding the Architect, the Mother states that “[h]e claims he wishes the darkspawn to be free. What he truly wants is to correct them!” (*Dragon Age: Origins*). The Architect, on the other hand, argues that “I do not seek to rule my brethren. I only seek to release them from their chains” (*Dragon Age: Origins*). Although this may appear to be a noble goal, the Darkspawn will never co-exist peacefully with the other races in the world given the grotesque and violent way in which they procreate. While the player can

choose to agree or disagree with the Architect, there is no room for understanding in the player's interaction with the Mother. This is perhaps because she is physically far more monstrous than the Architect (see figure 4b) and she is framed as delusional and described as 'mad' by other characters. The Architect describes her as his 'most flawed creation', explaining that "freedom drove her mad, and she has poisoned the minds of others" (*Dragon Age: Origins*). Before killing her, the player has the option to call the Mother a horror and say she must die, or to say that "[e]ven were she not mad, the Mother would still be disgusting" (*Dragon Age: Origins*). She deserves to die, apparently, either because she is a horror, because she is mad, or because she disgusts the player. Interestingly, none of the dialogue options refer to her Children as a reason for killing the Mother. The motivation, then, for killing her is because she is abject or mad rather than the actual threat her offspring pose to the world. In this sense, the game's developers assumed that the player would not feel pity or sympathy for the Mother, let alone agree with her desires. Yet, if players are familiar with the first game in the series, they know that the Mother must have once been a human woman. Tortured and mutated, forced to devour her own kin, and then made to 'awaken' from the Archdemon's song, losing her blissful ignorance and mindless purpose. Importantly, the Mother speaks to the Architect and the player, so even if the game forces players to murder her, she can at least vocalize her anger and pain. Indeed, when the final battle with her begins, the Mother tells the Architect that he cannot hurt her anymore than he already has, suggesting that the greatest pain he could ever have inflicted upon her is to make her aware of her own abjection. She then opens up her mouth like an alien and screams (again, see figure 3), a common image of the monstrous-feminine, and begins attacking the player. The player is forced to fight her, and when she is defeated the player-character kills her by stabbing their sword deep into her throat or electrocuting her while she screams in agony.

This narrative framing of the father as good, trustworthy, logical, and calm and the mother as evil, mad, emotional, controlling, and abject demonstrates the patriarchal fear of the maternal, birthing body as well as the misogyny embedded in the game. Kristeva noted that the logic behind patriarchal power structures is to contain female generative powers within strict behavioral codes due to the underlying assumption that women are always teetering on the brink of evil and want to create children that are loyal manifestations of themselves (Kristeva 1982 [1980]: 91). The maternal body is therefore a nexus of abjection and existential anxiety, the cause of an abject fear that the makers of *Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening* remediated by uncritically representing the mother as a literal monster. At the end of the game, the Mother refers to the player-character as 'the instrument of the Father' and while she is referring to the Architect, this could also be interpreted as her recognition that she, a deviant, mad, hybrid, monstrous mother, is being slaughtered by a servant of patriarchal ideology. Indeed, the game frames the player-character in that way, allowing only for an (admittedly very suspicious) alliance with the Architect. The player is never given an option to agree with, support, or even sympathize with the Mother. Murdering her by stabbing a phallic sword down her throat as she screams and opens her mouth up in a horrific, alien manner reinforces the player's position as a dominant, masculine, and violent representative of the symbolic order.



### An Empowered Broodmother? (*StarCraft*, 1998–2017)

The Broodmothers in the *Dragon Age* series clearly embody the abject and function as ludic versions of Creed’s monstrous-feminine. However, not all maternal monsters simply exist for the player to slay: Sarah Kerrigan in the *Starcraft* series is an important example of a kind of Broodmother who serves as a central, playable character. Her position as player-character is important to consider because of its implications for female representation in games. Indeed, the incorporation of players into game narratives is a way in which they open up space for alternative kinds of identification and the potential disruption of misogynistic tropes. At first glance, allowing players to embody the monstrous-feminine could be read as a progressive move and a decentering of patriarchal ideology. Kerrigan is, however, an ambiguous character, and as I demonstrate, she is entrenched within patriarchal control structures even as she fights to resist them.

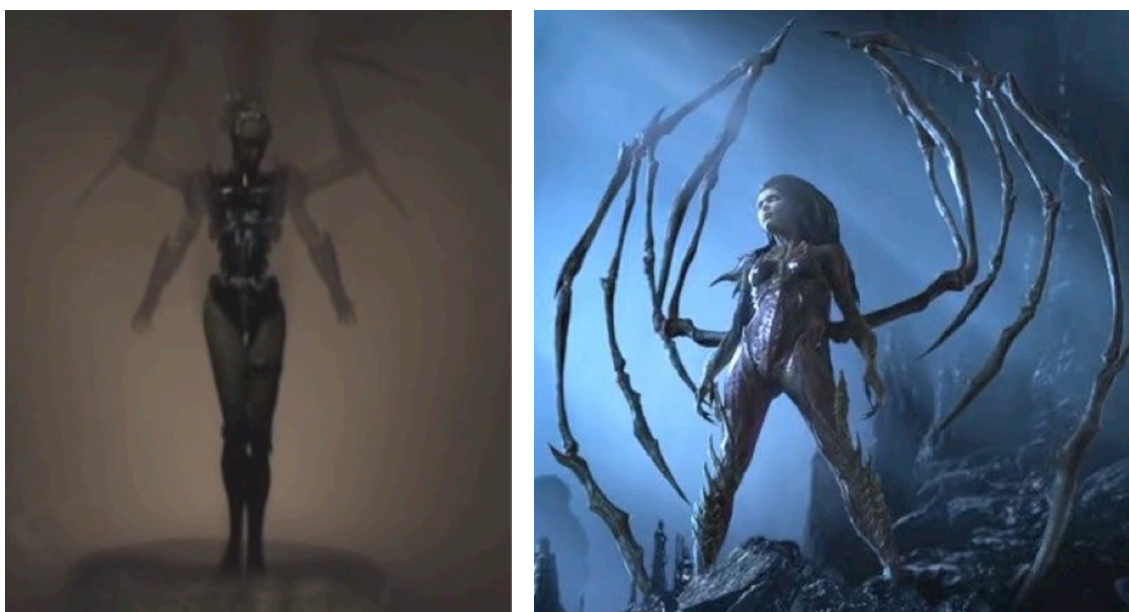
First introduced as a highly trained Terran (human) espionage agent and assassin with powerful psychic abilities, Kerrigan was captured by the Zerg, a race of biologically advanced, hive-minded, arthropodal aliens. Dedicated to the pursuit of genetic perfection, the Zerg relentlessly hunt down and assimilate advanced species across the galaxy, incorporating useful genetic code into their own. Kerrigan was chosen for this process, placed in a chrysalis, and forcefully infested by the Zerg. Through this painful process, reminiscent of the way Darkspawn turn women into Broodmothers, Kerrigan became a Zerg-Terran hybrid, under the control of the Zerg Overmind. The Overmind is the leader of the Zerg swarm, and while it is ostensibly genderless, it is voiced by male actors. The Overmind was responsible for capturing Kerrigan and turning her into a Zerg weapon, and it also refers to her as its “daughter” (*StarCraft*). Kerrigan in turn refers to the Overmind as her “father” whom she “live[s] to serve” (*StarCraft*). Her ‘infestation’ caused her to physically mutate, developing green skin, a hard carapace, skeletal wings, claws, yellow eyes, and worm-like protrusions which grow from her head (for the change in her avatar appearance, see figures 5a–5b).



**Figures 5a–5b.** Kerrigan’s avatar in her human and Queen of the Blades form (*StarCraft*). Screenshots by the author.

Her design became considerably more elaborate in *StarCraft II* (to understand how her full body cutscene design changed between the first and second games, see figures 6a–6b). In the expansion, *StarCraft: Brood War* (Blizzard Entertainment 1998), the Overmind is killed and Kerrigan fights to claim undisputed control over the Zerg, becoming the self-proclaimed Queen of the Blades. In this expansion, Kerrigan is a central character, although a villainous one. She is ruthless, cunning, and manipulative,

willing to brainwash, blackmail, and betray when it suits her purposes. She is completely self-aware and unapologetic, as exemplified by her observation that “at this point, I’m pretty much the Queen Bitch of the Universe” (*StarCraft: Brood War*) and her declaration that “every living thing in the universe will bow before the Queen of Blades, or else they will die” (*StarCraft: Frontline: Why We Fight*). Instead of being driven mad by her abject mutations, Kerrigan embraced them.



**Figures 6a–6b.** Kerrigan as the Queen of the Blades in *StarCraft* and *StarCraft II* cutscenes. Screenshots by the author.

In *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty* (Blizzard Entertainment 2010), Kerrigan is defeated by the Terrans and is de-infested, a process which alters her DNA again, rendering her more human than Zerg. This de-infestation was done to her against her will, and the attack against her was led by her former lover, Jim Raynor. Unfortunately, the de-infested Kerrigan struggles with her own identity and the guilt she feels for her behavior under the influence of the Zerg infestation. As she laments to Raynor, with whom she has rekindled a romantic relationship, in a companion comic to *StarCraft II*: “I was a billion claws. A billion fangs. I was in control. I killed. And killed. I was in control. At my word, mountains fled. Planets died. I was in control, and I was the monster” (Dayton 2013: 9). Kerrigan’s de-infestation also disempowers her: she loses her confidence and her self-assurance, she questions her own identity and purpose. In this sense, Raynor’s work to remove Kerrigan’s Zerg infestation is also a project to turn her from a threatening *femme fatale* (in reference to Doane’s 1991 work on the dangerous, seductive woman archetype from *Film Noir*) into a ‘damsel-in-distress’ for him to protect. Indeed, as soon as they are reunited, players are shown several scenes of Raynor acting ‘manly’ and protective, and Kerrigan looking up at him with loving eyes. However, Kerrigan is not really the damsel-in-distress that Raynor desires: she still retains her powerful psychic abilities and in *StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm* (Blizzard

Entertainment 2013), Kerrigan discovers that although she appears mostly human, she can still control the Zerg and even spawn Zerg and Zerglings at will (see figure 7). While she struggles with guilt and the awareness that she would never again be fully human, she is also driven by a desire for vengeance against the evil Terran emperor, Mengsk. Kerrigan originally served emperor Mengsk before her capture by the Zerg, but he used her as a weapon, ruthlessly torturing and brainwashing her to increase her powers. Although she was his most powerful soldier, Mengsk did not bother trying to rescue Kerrigan from the Zerg Overmind, instead leaving her for dead. After their reunion, Raynor begs Kerrigan to give up on her plans for revenge against Mengsk and focus on their relationship instead. However, Mengsk captures and supposedly executes Raynor, rekindling Kerrigan's obsession with vengeance. In order to gain enough power to defeat Mengsk, Kerrigan decides to secure her role as Zerg queen once again. She re-infests herself by entering the spawning pool where the Zerg first evolved, losing her humanity and being reborn as the Primal Queen of the Blades. In this form, she is more powerful than ever, and is finally able to murder Mengsk.



**Figure 7.** Zergling from *StarCraft*. Screenshot by the author.

Although Kerrigan certainly embodies aspects of the abject, with an insect-like body and the ability to instantly spawn monstrous alien beings, she is not as physically grotesque as BioWare's Broodmothers. Kerrigan is conventionally attractive and is the subject of much fan art, fan fiction, and cosplay. While she is a human-alien hybrid, she is alien in a more traditional science fiction media sense: mostly an attractive human but

with subtle elements of exotic Otherness. One aspect of her Otherness is her skin color, which becomes green after her transformation. Alien women characters are often portrayed in science fiction media as beautiful humanoid women but with ‘exotic’ skin colors like green (such as Gamora from *Guardians of the Galaxy* [Gunn 2014]) or blue (such as the Asari from the *Mass Effect* series [BioWare 2007–2017]). A second aspect that reinforces this reading is her hair: her human form had long, straight, red hair and her eyes were green, coding her as white, but once she was transformed, her hair turned into long, brown, dreadlock-like tentacles.<sup>3</sup> Like the alien from *Predator* (McTiernan 1987), these brown dreadlock-like protuberances code her as racialized, placing *StarCraft* into a long popular culture tradition of visually depicting alien and alien-human hybrid characters as racialized Others (see Guerrero 1993; Nama 2008; Bernardi 2008). As Bernardi observed, “[r]ace in Hollywood cinema is often played out, encoded and articulated, in the representation of humanoids of all kinds, from aliens to hobbits to post-humans of color” and “phenotypes such as skin color and hair provide clues to [their symbolic] racial identity” (Bernardi 2008: xix). Interestingly, when she temporarily becomes (mostly) human again—the form I refer to as ‘de-infested’—Kerrigan’s brown dreadlocks remain, suggesting that her hair represents her alien aspect (see figures 8a–8c). Indeed, the *StarCraft Wiki* states that “Kerrigan’s new state had a mostly human form, but still had some zerg traits such as her dreadlock-like antennae instead of hair” (*StarCraft Wiki*: paragraph 77). In an attempt to rid herself of her Zerg aspects, Kerrigan even tries to remove her ‘hair’, though she is unsuccessful. Although Kerrigan’s relationship with her own hybrid identity is fraught, by making her appear white in her human form but symbolically coded as racialized in her alien (monstrous) form, *StarCraft*, like much science fiction media, creates a clear association between humanity/normalcy and whiteness and between monstrosity and the racialized/exotic Other.



**Figures 8a–8c.** Kerrigan in her human, de-infested, and Queen of the Blades forms as portrayed in *StarCraft II*. Screenshots by the author.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that some fans assumed human Kerrigan was a woman of color because her avatar in *StarCraft* has a tan and her hair, although red, already appears to be dreaded (see figure 6a). Her clearer and more graphically-advanced portrayal in *StarCraft II* (see figure 9a), in which she is more clearly coded as white and her red hair is not dreaded, therefore surprised some fans.



While Kerrigan is undoubtedly empowered in the sense of being a powerful queen, her empowerment came at the cost of her own agency and placed her within a militaristic command structure. She also has a past filled with abuse and suffering—a common backstory given to ‘strong female protagonists’. She developed psychic powers as a child and accidentally killed her own mother and severely injured her father. She was then conscripted into a militaristic Ghost Program where she was tortured under the guise of training her to use her powers. Her training turned her into a ruthless, remorseless assassin, and her mental conditioning meant she was unable to refuse any direct order given by a superior officer. Her infestation was done to her against her will by a male-coded character, as was her later de-infestation. Although she did choose to re-infest herself, she did so to get vengeance for the death of her lover, meaning that she sees her powers and her offspring (and the entire Zerg species) as tools for her own violent ends and her motivation is tied to her relationship with a man. In this sense, Kerrigan is unfortunately not really ‘empowered’, nor can she be read as a feminist reworking of the monstrous-feminine. Although she is complex, fully developed, and certainly designed in a less misogynistic way than the *Dragon Age* Broodmothers, she is still framed using tropes common in the representation of female characters in games: as both a victimized damsel-in-distress and a dangerous *femme fatale*.

As a violent, ruthless, power-hungry, vengeful queen who cares little for the wellbeing of her subjects and offspring, Kerrigan certainly embodies the monstrous-feminine. While her maternity is not as abject as that of BioWare’s Broodmothers, she orders the Zerg to create larva-producing hatcheries, which briefly look like pulsating yellow sacs. Kerrigan can then mutate the larva into various types of Zerg creatures. She can also spawn larva-like parasites out of her hand, which can infest others and become Zerg Broodmothers. Kerrigan created intelligent, sapient Broodmothers who could take over the swarm in case of her death. In this sense, Kerrigan is the mother of Broodmothers, or a Broodmother Queen. The Mother similarly controlled other, unawakened Darkspawn Broodmothers. Like Kerrigan, she was once human but was mutated against her will into a monster, then ruled and propagated the very species that tortured and mutated her. Unlike the Mother, however, Kerrigan is not presented as mad—though she is clearly driven and passionate—and she is framed as a villain rather than as a monster. She is a fully developed character, with a personality, emotions, and even a love story in *StarCraft II*.

Like many powerful nonhuman or hybrid female characters in science fiction, fantasy, and horror media, Kerrigan is villainous, deceitful, violent, and cruel. However, towards the end of *StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void* (Blizzard Entertainment 2015b), Kerrigan is ‘redeemed’, though that redemption comes with a high price: she becomes a Xel’naga—a race of powerful god-like beings—and sacrifices herself to save the universe. While Kerrigan is (effectively) forced to die by merging with a god and then exploding, she dies as a hero and a giant flaming goddess (see figure 9), rather than, for example, having the player-character’s phallic sword slammed down her throat, like the Mother in *Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening*. Kerrigan leaves the Zerg in the care of one of her Broodmothers and her ultimate fate is left unknown, though a blurry silhouette of her human form appears in a cutscene with Raynor at the end of the game. In this sense, Kerrigan is granted a ‘happy’ ending; however, it is important to note that she appears fully human in the final scene, suggesting that the monstrous-feminine can

only get a happy ending if she gives up her monstrosity in favour of normalcy—in this case in the form of a heteronormative romantic relationship. While the games seem to suggest that Kerrigan’s happiness can only occur with her in human form and with Raynor as her lover, she spends most of the games as a monstrous-feminine character, and most *StarCraft* fan art of Kerrigan features her as the Queen or Primal Queen of the Blades. In this sense when players use her as their avatar, they are not really choosing to play as a regular human woman, rather they are enacting the role of monstrous-feminine, of Broodmother, of villainous *femme fatale*. Indeed, due to her popularity, she—in her monstrous form—is also a playable character in the popular multiplayer online battle arena game *Heroes of the Storm* (Blizzard Entertainment 2015a). However, Kerrigan cannot be uncritically celebrated as an example of ‘positive’ female empowerment: though Kerrigan is undeniably ‘empowered’ in the sense that she is powerful, her powers—both psychic and Zerg—were forced upon her against her will by male characters and her empowerment occurs within the violent, militaristic context of galactic conquest and bloody vengeance. Kerrigan’s lack of care for her ‘children’—which she simply uses as weapons—means she is not an example of a positive maternal figure either. Like the monstrous-feminine and the abject itself, Kerrigan is ambiguous. Her character shifts and develops considerably throughout the games: Kerrigan appears as a tormented human soldier; an obedient Zerg hybrid; the cold and calculating *femme fatale*-like Queen of the Blades; a self-doubting damsel-in-distress; the ruthless and vengeful Primal Queen of the Blades; and a giant, fiery Xel’naga goddess. Although she is ambiguous, this depth and her status as playable character makes Kerrigan an alternative and far more interesting version of a monstrous-feminine Broodmother.



**Figure 9.** Kerrigan ascended as a Xel’naga (*StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void*). Screenshot by the author.

### Conclusion—The Monstrous Female Body

Kristeva argued that the maternal body is a site of conflicting desires because it is both reassuring and stifling. In its association with bodily waste and bodily movements, including the birthing process, the maternal is also framed as primal, physical, and natural. Yet bodily wastes, bodily movements, and the birthing process fill us with disgust and revulsion. This is the tension between the abject and the symbolic order: The former represents all that is natural but dirty and so must be repressed and rejected, whereas the latter represents that which is clean and proper. It is no coincidence that the first is associated with the feminine and the female body and the second with the masculine, the phallic, and the patriarchal. “Classical mythology”, Creed observed, “was populated with gendered monsters, many of which were female” (Creed 1986: 44). These creatures were almost always killed by the male protagonist, punished for their unchecked sexuality, fecundity, and feminine power. This narrative structure is common in Western literature and cinema, and, of course, in contemporary video games. To progress in games such as *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening*, the player is forced to serve the symbolic order by slaying the mother figure, along with her unnatural, monstrous offspring.

Although this is a common narrative set-up, it is not the only possibility. Kerrigan in the *StarCraft* series demonstrates that the monstrous-feminine and hybrid, abject maternal can successfully exist in a centralized role. Of course, this is at least partially because Kerrigan is only slightly abject compared to the other Broodmother examples and is empowered within a violent, militaristic context. She is also framed as a villain rather than as a monster, though she certainly embodies aspects of the monstrous-feminine. However, while her death is heroic, she still dies at the end. Even if she does reappear in the final cutscene, she appears as fully human and apparently back in her old relationship with Raynor. In this sense, Kerrigan the independent, powerful, monstrous Queen of the Blades dies—like most monstrous women she is not allowed to remain monstrous *and* get a happy ending. Kerrigan is, therefore, an ambiguous character—a monster, a villain, a damsel, a *femme fatale*, but also a playable character and in many ways a very different manifestation of the monstrous-feminine.

In the late 1980s, Creed lamented the fact that feminist film scholarship had focused primarily on woman-as-victim and wondered why woman-as-monster had been so neglected. The same could be said of current video game scholarship: the lack of dynamic female representation in video games has been a heated topic of discussion for years (for example, see Miller and Summers 2007; Williams et al. 2009; Hayes and Gee 2010; Sarkeesian 2013–2017); however, while feminist scholars focus on woman as damsel-in-distress, the study of woman-as-monster has been neglected. Although this article focused on Broodmothers, there are several other examples that could be discussed. Future research could examine The Vagary from *Doom 3* (id Software 2004), a spider-woman hybrid pregnant with a visible foetus in her translucent abdomen; Cleopatra from *Dante’s Inferno* (Visceral Games 2010), a giant purple goddess who births monsters from her nipples; the final boss from *The Evil Within 2* (Tango Gameworks 2017), a giant monstrous woman called the Matriarch who spawns spiderlings that burst from her stomach; Mother from *The House of the Dead: Overkill* (Headstrong Games 2009), who releases bloated mutant offspring. She is also the final boss of the game, and when she dies her son, the game’s main antagonist, crawls up her

giant vagina. In addition, both the *Silent Hill* (Konami 1999–2014) and *Resident Evil* (Capcom 1996–2017) series feature several monstrous creatures that clearly embody anxieties around female reproduction and reproductive organs. These examples of the abject maternal monstrous-feminine demonstrate how the patriarchal fear of and revulsion towards female reproductive powers manifest in the form of video game monsters. While film and literature also commonly utilize these tropes, the fact that the player is the one who must murder these maternal monsters and their twisted offspring—often as a major boss or the final, climactic battle of the game—makes them complicit in the misogyny these games represent. Players must kill these monstrous women to proceed or to win the game, and since they are presented as unquestionably horrific and abject, there is little room for a resistant or oppositional feminist interpretation of these monsters. Perhaps ambiguous and/or playable monstrous mothers like Kerrigan offer an alternative reading and a less misogynistic representation of powerful, monstrous (i.e. non-normative and transgressive) maternal figures. In any case, it is important to ask why these tropes are so popular and enduring; why developers keep drawing on this abject reproductive imagery; how players read, interpret, and react to these monsters; how they differ from their cinematic and literary counterparts; and how generic differences between horror, science fiction, and fantasy change the way monstrosity is presented. Given the ubiquity of ludic monsters across genres, there is considerable work to be done on this topic.

The monster, like the abject, is inherently ambiguous—both repulsive and attractive—and it is important to note that within the ambiguity of the abject maternal monster lies great potential for feminist reclamation. Indeed, for feminist scholars like Patricia Yaeger (1992), Mary Russo (1995), and Deborah Covino (2004), the abject woman is subversive and liberating: she “immers[es] herself in the significances of the flesh, becoming willfully monstrous as she defies the symbolic order” (Covino 2004: 29). This description could easily be applied to Kerrigan, particularly when she ignores Raynor’s desires and embraces, then re-embraces, her own monstrosity. Kerrigan also embraces her own reproductive powers as the Queen of the Blades, which relates to Yaeger’s proposal that women seek a grotesque and sublime feminist aesthetic by embracing their own maternal power (Yaeger 1992). The imagery of Kerrigan as ruthless alien hybrid Broodmother Queen and then as a fiery, unstoppable goddess reinforces a reading of her as empowered and empowering, though she is couched within a problematically patriarchal context in a game designed by men primarily for male players. The enduring popularity of Kerrigan, particularly as she is envisioned and remixed by fans and as she appears in other titles as a playable character, speaks to the attraction to and identification with the monstrous-feminine. Perhaps we will see more games in which we play as Kerrigan-like monstrous spider goddess-queens who slay representatives of normative, heteropatriarchal, hegemonic ideology.

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### Biographical Note

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# ALWAYS ALREADY MONSTERS—*BIOSHOCK'S* (2007) 'SPLICERS' AS COMPUTATIONAL OTHERS

Jaroslav Švelch (Charles University and University of Bergen)

**Abstract:** *The article explores the manufacturing of monsters in video games, using the case of the influential 2007 first-person shooter BioShock, and 'splicers'—its most numerous, zombie-like enemies. I combine two methodological perspectives on the 'manufacturing' of splicers by analyzing [a] the title's developer commentary and other official paratexts to trace the design of splicers, and [b] the game's embedded narrative to reconstruct the diegetic backstory of splicers. I argue that video game enemies, including splicers, are 'computational others', who may appear human on the level of representation, but whose behavior is machinic, and driven by computational algorithms. To justify the paradoxical relationship between their human-like representation and machinic behavior, BioShock includes an elaborate narrative that explains how the citizens of the underwater city of Rapture were dehumanized and transformed into hostile splicers. The narrative of dehumanization, explored following Haslam's dehumanization theory (2006), includes [a] transforming splicers into atomized creatures by depriving them of political power and social bonds, [b] creating fungible and interchangeable enemies through splicers' masks and bodily disintegration, [c] justifying splicers' blindness to context and their simplistic behavior by portraying them as mentally unstable addicts. The article concludes that all video game enemies are inherently monstrous, and that critique of video game representation should focus on how games fail to make monsters human, rather than how games render humans monstrous or dehumanized.*


**Keywords:** *monsters; video games; first-person shooter; BioShock (2007); zombies; otherness; computational other; hauntology.*

## Introduction

The backstory of the 2007 hit game *BioShock* (2K Boston 2007a) goes like this: In an alternate history mid-1940s, industry magnate Andrew Ryan set out to do 'the impossible'. He built a city on the ocean bed, called it Rapture, and invited industrialists, artists, and scientists to populate it. His dream was to create a paradise where man's ambition would be unchecked and free from government regulation, taxation and intervention. The biggest scientific achievement of Rapture was the discovery of ADAM, a substance that unlocked gene splicing, allowing humans to gain special powers, packaged as retail products called *plasmids*. In 1960, the game's protagonist, a silent character named Jack, enters Rapture after his plane crashes into the sea, and tries to help a man named Atlas, who gives him instructions over a portable radio. By that time, the city is already in ruins and embroiled in a plasmid-fueled civil war. Players set out to reconstruct the larger narrative of Rapture's demise piece by piece and explore whatever is left of the once prosperous city.

Early in the game, you wander through a dark hallway, and happen upon a distressing scene (see figures 1a–1b): You see a shadow of a woman with a baby carriage, and the

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woman sings a lullaby. For a moment, it feels as if you have encountered a fellow human. However, as you make your way toward her, you find out that the woman is pale and disfigured; and you see that there is no baby in the carriage—just a revolver. The woman starts attacking your character, screaming incoherently. You have no choice but to bash her with a wrench. The illusion of humanness has been shattered. Like most survivors in Rapture, that woman is a ‘splicer’—a decaying and deranged, monstrous ex-human. It is not only her tattered clothes and weird grin that gives it away, but also her relentlessly aggressive, repetitive behavior, which clearly puts her into the category of video game enemy, or more generally, a *computational other*—a non-human algorithm-driven agent.



**Figures 1a–1b.** The ‘mother’ splicer’s shadow on the wall (left), and her attacking the player (right). She is rendered using the ‘Lady Smith’ model, also seen in figure 2c and described in more detail below. Screenshot from *BioShock Remastered* (2K Boston/Blind Squirrel Entertainment 2016); taken by the author.

This special issue examines how media texts produce, define and ‘manufacture’ the other, the enemy, and the monster. Out of media forms and genres that build on antagonism and othering, first-person shooter (FPS) video games like *BioShock* are perhaps the most striking, as they rely on the mechanics of aiming, shooting, and eliminating large numbers of opponents. As Aarseth wrote of *Doom* (id Software 1993), one of the genre’s progenitors, “[t]he player must combat an endless stream of monsters, demons and ‘former humans.’ [...] The choice of actions is simple: explore, destroy, and protect yourself” (Aarseth 1999: 36–37). Although *BioShock* contains a significantly more sophisticated narrative and more intricate mechanics, it adheres to the genre’s basic principles. As succinctly summed up by Aldred and Greenspan (2011: 487), the majority of *BioShock*’s gameplay “consists of winning space by killing splicers and lumbering ‘Big Daddies’ while navigating the leaky tunnels and ruined businesses, dance halls, surgeries, and bars of Rapture’s grotesquely hedonistic cityscape”. To power up, the player collects ADAM, produced and carried by Little Sisters, girls specifically genetically modified for this task, who are guarded and protected by the Big Daddies, massive creatures in diving suits.

In video games, opponents like splicers and Big Daddies pose as challenges and objects of player agency, and therefore play an important role in the progression and segmentation of gameplay (see Zagal/Fernández-Vara/Mateas 2008). To morally justify

the carnage, enemies tend to be portrayed as monstrous—either metaphorically in the case of terrorists or enemy soldiers, or literally in the case of zombies, demons, and other fantastic creatures (see Asma 2012 [2009]; Kocurek 2015). The question of who the enemy is and how they are portrayed has consequently become a prominent subject of video game scholarship (Šisler 2014; Glas 2015; Valeriano/Habel 2016; Pötzsch 2017 [2015]). Critically examining war-themed shooter games, Pötzsch (2017 [2015]) has introduced the concept *character filter* to show that enemy combatants in FPSs tend to be uncharacterized and anonymous. He treats the character filter as a part of war games' *selective realism*—a mode of representation that is audiovisually realistic but selectively filters certain aspects of war and its impact on society. In an analysis of action adventure games, Glas (2015) has pointed out that enemies tend to play the role of *generic expendables*, who serve as cannon fodder for player action. Both analyses point to the fact that certain genres of video games heavily rely upon dehumanized enemies. Previous studies of video game representation have argued that the dehumanized portrayal of enemies draws from existing stereotypes, and relates to existing power configurations of race, class, and geopolitical power (Brock 2011; Šisler 2014; Valeriano/Habel 2016). In this article, I want to use the example of *BioShock* to offer a complementary point of view—to explore how monstrosity and dehumanization of video game enemies derive from their computational nature. The study follows up on my previous research on video game monsters, which has similarly emphasized their functional and mechanical aspects (Švelch [Jaroslav] 2013; 2018).

### Dehumanization and Computational Otherness

*Dehumanization* can be defined as a “denial of full humanness to others”, which often leads to moral justification of indifference or violence to such others (Haslam 2006: 252). Haslam's influential model of dehumanization sketches out its two possible trajectories, each contrasting selected features of humanity to a non-human counterpart. The first trajectory is of *animalistic dehumanization*, which transforms a civil, refined, moral, rational and mature ‘full’ human into an uncultured, coarse, amoral, irrational and childlike animal. The other trajectory is of *mechanistic dehumanization*, which turns an emotionally responsive, interpersonally warm, cognitively open, agency-possessing, and deep ‘full’ human into an emotionally inert, cold, cognitively rigid, passive, interchangeable and superficial automaton (Haslam 2006).

While Haslam does not mention monsters explicitly, the growing body of monster scholarship (see Cohen 1996; Mittman/Dendle 2013) suggests that dehumanization can also result in representations of *monstrous* others. While embodying fears and anxieties of cultures and societies, monsters are—similarly to animals or machines—constructed as entities that “fail to fulfil[l] the criteria of human subjects” (MacCormack 2013: 293). Carroll has influentially operationalized monsters more specifically as beings that are “not believed to exist now according to contemporary science”, and that are “threatening and impure” (Carroll 1990: 27–28). The impurity rests upon being “categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless” (Carroll 1990: 32). Represented as disintegrating, genetically altered ex-humans, splicers are also good candidates to be called monsters—although, as we will see, not all scholars of *BioShock* would agree.

There are affinities between the three categories of non-humans—monsters, machines, and animals. Luckhurst (2015: 8–9) argues that computers or systems “become zombified because they are marked by loss of agency, control or consciousness of their actual state of being: they are dead but don’t yet know it, living on as automata”. Brooks’ parodic *Zombie Survival Guide* compares a zombie brain to “a computer programmed to execute one function [...] until its power source eventually shuts down” (Brooks 2003: 15; see also Perron 2018). This affinity owes in part to the lack of humanity in both monsters and computers, and pertains not only to computers as technological artifacts, but also to computationally simulated beings, who may likewise appear zombie-like.

Users of digital media tend to interact with artificial agents that employ computational algorithms and databases. I will refer to these as *computational others*. This category includes non-player characters (NPCs) and enemies in video games, but also computer operating systems, or social media bots. My conceptualization of this category has been partly inspired by Kearney’s work on monstrosity and otherness, in which he focuses on the instances of “intercommunion between distinct but not incomparable selves” (Kearney 2002: 18). A computational other is thus more than a computational object or process; it is recognized as a partner in interaction. Many computational others have qualities that enable them to communicate with humans—they may use human language, appear human, or even exhibit simulated emotional reactions. At the same time, human users or creators acknowledge the computational nature of such others. Despite the advances in artificial intelligence and the rising tendency to see computational agents as human-like or post-human subjects (see Carter 2007; Wolfe 2010), they tend to be clearly recognizable as machinic.

Many video game characters (or social media bots, for that matter) are hybrids—they appear human on the level of audiovisual representation, but they are clearly computational on the level of rule systems. As Juul (2005) has observed, the connection between rules and fictional (audiovisual and verbal) content is often tentative and arbitrary. Consider, for example, Dr. Steinman, one of the unique ‘boss’ enemies of *BioShock*. He looks like a human (or an ex-human), and the game equips him with a backstory of pride and hubris, told mostly through non-interactive means. But as a simulated agent within the game world, he is just a stronger splicer with a machine gun, repetitively attacking the player—exhibiting machinic behavior that can be more readily ascribed to a monster than a human. Although Carroll’s (1990) concept of impurity originally applied to contradictions on the level of representation (such as zombies being dead *and* alive in their fictional worlds), we may argue that Dr. Steinman is monstrously *impure* due to the contradiction between his representational and mechanical features. This impurity of computational others makes them always ready to be represented as monsters, regardless of their appearance.

## **Material and Methods**

There are multiple reasons to study computational otherness on the example of *BioShock*’s splicers. First, *BioShock* is a best-selling, well-received, and influential FPS; a part of the video game canon (Parker 2017 [2015]). Second, the splicers’ design process is well documented through interviews, developer commentary and other

paratextual materials.<sup>1</sup> Third, *BioShock* is a very carefully constructed game: as Parker notes, the game “is designed from the ground up to invite sustained reflection, debate, and criticism” (Parker 2014: 134; see also Parker/Aldred 2018b: 12). Its explanation of the splicer phenomenon is, correspondingly, rich and elaborate. To justify the enemies’ in-game behavior, a large part of the game’s backstory chronicles their dehumanization.

My two main research questions are the following: How does the game justify the role of splicers as generic expendables? And how does their representation relate to genre conventions, underlying technology, and production processes? I combine two main methods: first, I analyze the *production narrative* to understand how the team’s design paradigm and production process shaped in-game representation of enemies. The information about the process has been collected from the game’s official paratexts, such as the *BioShock* art book [AB] (2K Boston 2007b), the Director’s Commentary [DC], and the interactive ‘Museum of Orphaned Concepts’ [MOC], the latter two of which are included in the 2016 ‘remastered’ version of *BioShock* (2K Boston/Blind Squirrel Entertainment 2016).<sup>2</sup> Second, I conduct a textual analysis of the game’s *embedded narrative*, a narrative that is “pre-structured but embedded within the mise-en-scène awaiting discovery” (Jenkins 2004: 126). Shards of this narrative are revealed to the player by means of environmental storytelling, diegetic promotional films, and—most importantly—audio diaries [AD] recorded to reel-to-reel dictaphones.<sup>3</sup> I use these to reconstruct the splicers’ backstory and analyze it using the lens of dehumanization theory. Following the recommendations for video game close reading outlined by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011), I also compare the embedded narrative with my observations of splicers’ in-game mechanical behavior, collected during a playthrough of the game.

The combination of these two methods allows me to focus not only on those representations of splicers that made it into the game, but also their previous iterations. Akin to the method of *hauntology*, first suggested by Derrida (2006 [1993]) as a way of accounting for what is absent from political discourse, I will thus try to uncover how absent and deprecated content still fundamentally shapes and ‘haunts’ the final game artifact.<sup>4</sup>

### ***BioShock*’s Forgotten Enemies**

Soon after its release in 2007, *BioShock* became a part of the video game canon, and its creative director Ken Levine a respected auteur (Parker 2017 [2015]). Judging by the volume of scholarship, *BioShock* has also captured the minds of game scholars. It was used as a showcase of video games as art (Tavinor 2009b); as an example of the video games’ ability to convey political and philosophical messages (Packer 2010; Cuddy 2015); as a commentary on biopolitics and genetic enhancement (Peaty 2012; Ledder 2015; Henthorn 2018); and as an intriguing dystopian narrative (Aldred/Greenspan

<sup>1</sup> My usage of the terms *paratextual* and *paratexts* follows Švelch [Jan] (2016).

<sup>2</sup> I refer to material in [DC] using episode numbers (based on the order in the game’s menu) and timestamps, to [AB] using section titles (the book is not paginated), and to [MOC] using names of the presented 3D models.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of environmental (and indexical) storytelling, see Fernández-Vara (2011).

<sup>4</sup> The concept of hauntology has been previously applied to games by McCrea (2009) and Janik (2015), although both focus on diegetic ghosts, apparitions and traces of the past, rather than traces of the production process.

2011; Schulzke 2014; Lizardi 2014; Maziarczyk 2015). It has inspired a monograph on forced choice and propaganda (Jackson 2014), a volume of popular philosophy essays (Cuddy 2015), and a media studies-oriented academic anthology (Parker/Aldred 2018a).

Some of the critical praise and academic interest stemmed from the game's critical engagement with the 'objectivist' worldview of the writer Ayn Rand (1905–1982). In her novels—such as *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957)—and essays, Rand praises laissez-fair capitalism and attacks collectivism, taxation, and government that “seem designed to punish the effective and benefit the incompetent” (Packer 2010: 212). Rapture is clearly an echo of Galt's Gulch, a utopian project founded by John Galt, the hero of *Atlas Shrugged*; and the character of Andrew Ryan is an amalgamation of John Galt and Rand herself [DC: E1 0:05:00]. However, *BioShock* is a *parody* of *Atlas Shrugged*, turning its utopian vision into a dystopia (Tavinor 2009a; Schulzke 2014). Although this fact is rarely pointed out in its academic interpretations, *BioShock* teems with irony and hyperbole, portraying possible outcomes of the objectivist ideology in a grotesquely exaggerated manner, and employing tropes from horror and comics.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike Rand's fiction, *BioShock* includes literal monsters. Big Daddies and Little Sisters became the iconic signifiers of the *BioShock* franchise—and have been analyzed from the point of view of gender, biopolitics, and fatherhood (Stang 2018; Henthorn 2018; Vanderhoef/Payne 2018). However, the player spends a larger portion of the game combating splicers. Despite the volume of literature about *BioShock*, very few authors dwell on splicers for more than a couple of sentences. As Mejeur—whose detailed queer reading of splicers is an exception—points out, they are “an ever-present invisibility” throughout *BioShock* (Mejeur 2018: 134), making them generic expendables par excellence.

According to the game's backstory, all splicers used to be inhabitants of Rapture, but lost their humanity due to societal collapse, addiction to ADAM, and mind control. Existing literature lacks consensus over what kind of creatures splicers really are. On the one hand, they are, despite their condition, still considered *citizens* of Rapture, although they are “violent, genetically modified citizens” (Peaty 2012: 156), “violent and erratic citizens” (Henthorn 2018: 208), “enraged/deranged Rapture citizens” (Lizardi 2014), or “citizens of Rapture disfigured by their repeated use [...] of ADAM” (Mejeur 2018: 114). Other authors, however, emphasize splicers' monstrosity. They are described as “mutant zombies [...] ruined by their own lust for perfection” (Aldred/Greenspan 2011: 482), “zombies who have become slaves to their drug addictions” (Schulzke 2014: 326), “mindless horrors” (Weise 2008) and “ghoulish once-human splicers” (Vanderhoef/Payne 2018: 54). Although individual authors may disagree on the exact proportion of humanity that the splicers have maintained, they all implicitly suggest that splicers, as portrayed in the finished game, are *in transition* from humans to monsters. This makes them a fitting case for the analysis of how games dehumanize people and manufacture monsters.

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<sup>5</sup> Ken Levine explicitly mentions inspiration by Batman and by the work of Stan Lee [DC: E5 0:08:54–0:09:00; E9 0:01:28–0:01:35]. For an example of a scholarly analysis of *BioShock* that does focus on irony, see Gibbons (2011).

## A Complete World Without Humans

It is well documented that *BioShock*'s game design preceded the writing of its story (Jackson 2014). *BioShock* had not been advertised as a political commentary, but rather as an innovative FPS, or a “genetically enhanced shooter” (Peaty 2012: 154). It offered a playground for fast-paced gameplay with customization and progression options, and for creative combinations of weapons and special abilities to battle a diverse set of enemies. The game's narrative changed several times in the development process and was built to fit the gameplay mechanics and technological constraints.

In terms of its gameplay design, *BioShock* follows a design tradition of the *Ultima Underworld* and *System Shock* series (Blue Sky Productions 1992; Looking Glass Technologies 1993; *ibid.* 1994; Looking Glass Studios/Irrational Games 1999)—which is unsurprising given that Levine directed *System Shock 2*. As Jackson discusses in much more detail, this line of games aimed at computationally simulating as much of the game world as possible, at the expense of pre-scripted events and conversations. They focused on creating immersive, “sealed off and ‘complete’ environment[s]” such as *Ultima Underworld*'s Stygian Abyss or *System Shock*'s Citadel Station (Jackson 2014: 49). Like those titles, *BioShock* is set in an enclosed, isolated space, in part because of technical limitations of the game's engine. As Levine puts it, the team's philosophy was to “focus on an area that you can really bring to life” [DC: E1 0:00:56–0:01:14].

An important obstacle to the creation of such complete environments is the difficulty of simulating people. The designer of the first *System Shock* game, Warren Spector, has recounted that his team was dissatisfied with the interaction with NPCs in the preceding *Ultima Underworld* games: “So the team designed around the unsolvable problem—we killed everyone off. The inhabitants of Citadel station would exist, for the player, only through e-mail and video logs” (Spector 1999). Bringing a place to life thus paradoxically means removing humans. In this approach to world-building—which Weise (2008) has called the “dead world concept”—only *monsters* are left alive. *BioShock*'s dystopian tone therefore stems not only from its critical engagement with Rand's utopias, but also from this particular game design tradition. Although there are a few encounters with sentient humans in *BioShock*, these are carefully orchestrated so that the player can listen to or watch the characters but cannot directly interact with them until they die or become foes in a battle. This way, the game avoids the challenge of simulating a two-way conversation. Even the support roles usually occupied by human NPCs were assigned to machines. Levine illustrates this notion with the example of a vending machine: “If we had a shopkeeper sitting there, you can't shoot him, he sits there, he doesn't say anything and, all of a sudden, he feels fake. Whereas a vending machine [...] could feel a hundred percent authentic” [DC: E3 0:08:11–0:08:23].

Early in the development process, both NPCs and enemies in *BioShock* appeared significantly less human than in the finished product. Their gameplay behavior, or—in game developer parlance—their AI, was inspired by animal rather than human behavior.<sup>6</sup> Ken Levine remembers that the idea came to him while watching nature TV shows: “We didn't have the ability to do a lot of smart AI. So I said, what if their

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<sup>6</sup> In game developer discourse, the term ‘AI’ is often used to denote any computer-controlled behavior, even if it is rigid and does not aim to be ‘intelligent’.



behaviors are just very primal and we can model those behaviors?” [DC: E8 0:01:48–0:01:53].<sup>7</sup> The design featured three categories of simulated entities—*gatherers* (future ‘Little Sisters’) who collected resources, *protectors* (later known as ‘Big Daddies’) who behaved like animals protecting their young, and *aggressors* (the most traditional FPS enemies) who went on to become ‘splicers’. Originally, gatherers looked like slugs, and aggressors resembled B-movie science-fiction monsters (see figures 2a–2c).<sup>8</sup> Protectors were the only ones whose visual design remained in place.



**Figures 2a–2c.** Concept art for one of the initial, unused *BioShock* monsters (left), and for the ‘Steinman’ (center) and ‘Lady Smith’ (right) splicer models that were included in the finished game (*AB: Enemies*).

While the initial goal was to create fun mechanics, designers were also trying to create spaces and characters to which players can emotionally relate. According to the game’s lead animator Shawn Robertson, the space was to feel “lived in” [DC: E1 0:08:05–0:08:18]. In this respect, he admits that the original gatherer slug had “horrible design [...] because you don’t care about slugs” [DC: E8 0:03:48–0:04:00]. In the end, the slugs were not removed entirely, but instead implanted *in* the bodies of the girls. The evolution of splicers’ visual design followed a similar trajectory. At first, they were more akin to conventional sci-fi aliens and mutants. Robertson had thought of the original mutants as ‘Scooby-Doo monsters’ because they were “too inhuman to invoke

<sup>7</sup> This story is corroborated by designer Alexx Kay on the development team’s blog (*Irrational Games* 2010).

<sup>8</sup> These labels (*gatherers*, *protectors*, *aggressors*) are still present in the game’s file structure, but with the exception of the label *gatherers* (which is used as a synonym of ‘Little Sisters’), they do not appear in the game’s narrative or representations.



empathy” [*MOC: Missing Link Model*]. In the finished game, they are deformed but recognizable as humans, still wearing the clothes they had before Rapture collapsed. As the *BioShock* art book tells it: “Once more fantastical monsters, you can see the progression as Rapture came to life and the enemies turned from horrors into things that clearly once were people with lives—lives that went very wrong” [*AB: Enemies*].

Despite these changes, Little Sisters still behave like gatherers, and splicers like regular FPS enemies. There are five categories of splicers in the original game, based on movement and attack styles, but all of them are aggressive. They are capable of pathfinding, shooting, and using health stations when their health is running out. You cannot parlay with them, they do not collaborate or self-organize, and, although they come in groups, they fight as atomized individuals.

We can observe a paradox here: on the level of game mechanics, non-player characters and enemies are clearly machinic, modelled after a simplified and abstracted ‘primal’ animal behavior; they marry the two prototypes of a non-human (machine and animal) presented in Haslam’s model of dehumanization. They possess as much humanity as a vending machine or a fighter drone. On the other hand, to maintain affective connection, they were made to *appear* human on the level of audiovisual representation. *BioShock*’s answer to this conundrum was to present splicers as *former* humans and Rapture as a place that was not currently, but *formerly* ‘lived in’. To give a human face to the non-human, the fictional characters of splicers had to be dehumanized. The following three sections will outline three aspects of dehumanization that splicers went through: their atomization into anti-social aggressors, their bodily disintegration and deindividuation, and finally, loss of agency and context awareness.

### Aspects of Dehumanization (i)—Atomized Mutants

The first aspect of dehumanization I will discuss is the loss of “restraint and civility” that turns a human into an “uncultured, coarse and amoral” being (Haslam 2006). In the game’s backstory, the splicers’ aggressive, anti-social behavior—as well as their mutant powers—result from the failure of Rapture as a social experiment. In line with Schulzke, we can consider the game a *critical dystopia*, as it “continually emphasizes the political conditions that led to Rapture’s collapse” (Schulzke 2014: 326). Ryan’s project of Rapture was informed by his Randian worldview, summed up by Waldron (1986: 464) as a belief “that selfishness is a virtue and therefore that the good man is the one who does not respond selflessly to the abject predicament of others”. Ryan’s ideology combined an extreme form of laissez-fair economics with a disdain for social and political institutions, and, as time progressed, with stubborn isolationism. This ideology turned out to be fundamentally flawed when put into practice.

We have seen that some authors have described splicers as ‘citizens’. But although they were inhabitants of *a city*, they were not citizens in the political sense. Marshall’s classical typology of modern citizenship breaks it down to three components: *civil citizenship*, which entails equality before law and freedom from arbitrary arrest; *political citizenship*, which entails the right to vote; and *social citizenship*, which includes access to social and economic welfare (Bealey/Johnson 1999: 53). From the scant information about the legal and political arrangements of Rapture, we can deduce that there were no laws (save for the ban on contact with the outside world instated by Ryan several years after Rapture’s construction), and that the city was nominally

overseen by a Council, but its powers were mostly advisory and it was probably unelected.<sup>9</sup> Civil and political citizenship of the inhabitants were therefore next to non-existent, and social citizenship was sacrificed in exchange for lack of taxation. There was no gun control, and Ryan Security is portrayed as the dominant enforcer of order.<sup>10</sup>

In the hyperbolic legal and political void, the well-being of Rapturites depended solely on the benevolence of Ryan and his fellow industrialists. Ryan's adversary Frank Fontaine gained significant power through capitalizing on Rapture's deficiencies. First, he became rich through his smuggling operations—lucrative due to Ryan's isolationist policies. He used the funds to control the ADAM and plasmid industry through his Fontaine Futuristics company [*AD: Fontaine's Smugglers*; *AD: Kraut Scientist*]. Second, he gained support of Rapture's underclass through ostensibly charitable institutions like Fontaine's Homes for the Poor and Little Sister Orphanages. In fact, both were increasingly used as sites of genetic experiments on non-consenting subjects [*AD: Rapture Changing*]. Fontaine made the clients of his institutions into his army of splicers who were "burping fire, spitting ice" [*AD: Fontaine's Army*]. Recognizing the threat, Ryan built an army of his own, and, after some hesitation, took a 'desperate measure' in the form of enhanced plasmids with pheromones that allowed him to mind-control large parts of the population, who had by now turned into ADAM addicts [*AD: Desperate Times*]. This is a reason to dispute Packer's (2010) and Schulzke's (2014) readings, both of which assume that splicers unquestioningly adopted Ryan's objectivist ideology. The aforementioned evidence shows that many of them had been disenfranchised and turned into addicts or mind-controlled drones. Rather than active supporters of an ideology, they were atomized individuals that could neither organize nor resist.

Here, *BioShock*'s dystopian narrative parallels Agamben's critique of contemporary biopolitics. Agamben argues that historically, the political life (*bios*) and biological life (*zoé*) of an individual have been distinct, but they are becoming more and more interlaced due to reasons that include prolonged states of exception and the medicalization of society. As a result, political power directly decides matters of biological life (Agamben 1998). Ryan and Fontaine's growing power over the biological lives and genetical make-up of Rapture's inhabitants, unchecked by either law or institutions, is one of the key points in the splicers' story.<sup>11</sup> Unable to participate politically, they were reduced to what Agamben calls *bare life* (biological life disconnected from politics) and molded into monstrous weapons.<sup>12</sup> As a character in the game's backstory puts it: "There's an arms race on here in Rapture, but it's not about who can build the best guns and the biggest bombs. It's about who can become less of a man and more of a monster..." [*AD: Genetic Arms Race*]. As the society collapsed, the

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<sup>9</sup> The subservient role of the Council can be deduced from [*AD: Death Penalty in Rapture*] and [*AD: Ryan Takes F Futuristics*]. The only mention of elections comes from a recorded, but unused propaganda radio play in *BioShock 2*. Its canonicity is therefore debatable.

<sup>10</sup> For example, in public service announcements.

<sup>11</sup> To an extent, we can see Ryan and Fontaine's actions as a reflection of the developers' design choices. Like Ryan and Fontaine, the team created the game world, separated it from its surroundings, instigated the conflict within it, and 'designed' its monsters. Levine and Robertson recall that the character of Ryan was an answer to the question "What kind of person would want to do this"; *this* meaning the creation of Rapture [*DC: E1 0:04:10–0:04:20*].

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of zombies as *bare life*, see Stratton (2017).

overwhelming majority of survivors turned into fierce, dehumanized mutants that could be believably rendered as computational others, i.e. artificial agents driven by algorithms and stored in databases.

### Aspects of Dehumanization (ii)—Fungible Bodies

Another relevant aspect of dehumanized entities is *fungibility*—the quality of being interchangeable while performing the same function. According to Haslam (2006), fungibility is typically associated with automata. As the computer can easily (and almost endlessly) copy virtual objects and entities, replication from a limited pool of assets is a typical feature of computational others. Fungibility also pertains to fictional creatures like zombies. Presumably, they had all once been human, but they are disfigured enough that their individualities do not matter anymore—they have been transformed into a deindividuated mass (see Lauro/Embry 2008). Similar to zombies, splicers are disfigured due to adverse effects of ADAM addiction—bleeding, hair loss, hormone imbalance, jaundice, lesions, spider veins, swollen gums, tooth loss, and tumors.<sup>13</sup>

As is common in FPS games, *BioShock*'s enemies become the player's targets and playthings. One can enjoy killing splicers in entertaining ways, for example by catching dynamite in mid-air and hurling it back at enemies. Animation and sound effects are designed to enhance the visceral experience of damaging splicers' bodies. Splicers can take plenty of damage, resembling a crash test dummy, but when hit, they jerk and convulse in an exaggerated, slapstick manner. Upon death, they fall to the ground, often comically, as ragdoll physics take over their animation. As Phillips (2018: 139) has noted, "ragdoll physics literally objectify a body, bypassing its agency to subject it to the physical forces of the game world".

Game scholars have previously linked video games' strong focus on the body and its disintegration to the aesthetics of *grotesque realism* (Klevjer 2006; Majkowski 2015; Mejeur 2018). Introduced by Bakhtin to describe the work of Rabelais, grotesque realism builds on the "exaggeration of the improper" (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 307) and "turns the vulgarity of excrement, orifice and bodily dismemberment into a joyful affirmation of the materiality of the body" (Klevjer 2006). Despite its somber narrative and the designers' focus on creating emotionally resonant characters, *BioShock* follows many tenets of grotesque realism. It celebrates destructive action and abounds in macabre imagery of violence, gore, and deformity, which is—despite the painstaking diegetic explanations—gratuitous and excessive. At the same time, this aesthetic emphasizes the fungibility of splicers. While focalizing the materiality of their bodies as objects of player action, it erases individuality. Except for bosses and a few scripted scenes, splicers are presented as a mob of indistinguishable enemies. Moreover, they perpetually respawn to keep up the challenge, echoing Majkowski's observation that grotesque realism shows the body as "constantly connected to the world and other bodies, always unready, becoming, giving birth, dying, and being recreated" (Majkowski 2015: 31).

Especially in the opening sections of the game, the player will encounter splicers who wear carnival masks. In the game's diegetic world, the story of the masks goes back to

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<sup>13</sup> These symptoms have been abridged from a longer list on the *BioShock Wiki* (FANDOM 2018).

the New Year's Eve celebration of 1958. For the occasion, numerous guests gathered for the masked ball at Rapture's Kashmir Restaurant.<sup>14</sup> Just after the midnight toast, the gathering was invaded by Frank Fontaine's insurgent army, marking the start of the civil war. Now, splicers find themselves at a carnival that never ends. Employing Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, Mejeur (2018: 133) points out that "[by] assuming their masks, splicers take on a collective identity that effaces their individual identities". The masks hide their lack of distinctive features, and expose the repetitiveness and replicability of splicers as computational others.

To paint Rapture as a believable city, *BioShock* attempts to give splicers a set of personalities that reflect the town's social structure. Similar efforts to infuse computational others with personality often turn out comical or uncanny. That was the case of the infamous *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* line "I used to be an adventurer like you, then I took an arrow in the knee", which was repeated so many times by so many different NPCs that it became an online meme (Bethesda Game Studios 2011; Rosenberg 2017). In *BioShock*, however, splicer models are essentially *caricatures* of Rapture's inhabitants, which fit the title's grotesque realist aesthetics and its satirical take on Randian utopia.

Examining the game's data file structure, fans discovered nine splicer *models*, each consisting of a 3D character model and a set of over a hundred voice acting lines (*2K Forums* 2009).<sup>15</sup> From the lines and the appearance, one can reconstruct a coherent backstory for each model. The one codenamed 'Dr. Grossman'—a germophobic, paranoid surgeon—became a fan favorite thanks to over-the-top comedic one-liners such as "There's semen on everything! EVERYTHING!" or "Bacteria are microscopic... Heh, that's what they want you to think". Others models include 'Baby Jane', a failed aspiring actress, or 'Lady Smith', a xenophobic upper-class matron.<sup>16</sup> However, despite the generous amount of content, the re-humanization of splicers can only go so far. The population is represented by nine models, realized as a potentially infinite number of in-game specimen. One may encounter multiple 'Dr. Grossmans' and 'Baby Janes'. Moreover, *models* do not relate to in-game behavior, following the designers' decision that "splicer models could fill any behavior role" [*MOC: Hooker*]. Splicers' personality (or their story) is thus ultimately separate from their behavior (or their rules), highlighting the fungible, interchangeable nature of computational others.

### Aspects of Dehumanization (iii)—Controlled by Addiction

On top of what I have discussed in the previous two sections, dehumanization also renders its targets irrational, childlike, and lacking agency. In Rapture's backstory, these features are justified by the splicers' addiction and the resulting mental disorders. The theme of addiction highlights Rapture's portrayal as a caricature of a Randian utopia built on individualism and unbound capitalism (see Muniz 2015). An important feature of capitalism is the deep contradiction between—on the one hand—the consumerist ethic of hedonism and instant gratification, and—on the other hand—the values of self-

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<sup>14</sup> While not all inhabitants of Rapture were present, the event is portrayed as having symbolic importance for the whole city.

<sup>15</sup> Some accounts include a tenth model, which is used to portray immobile statues.

<sup>16</sup> Model names are never explicitly used in-game, although they appear in some paratexts such as [*MOC*]. Otherwise, the names can be deduced from the game's file structure.

control associated with the Protestant work-ethic (Bell 1976). As the sociologist of addiction Gerda Reith points out, neoliberal societies tend to define addict identities in terms of loss of control, which results in the inability to make reasonable consumer choice (Reith 2004). The addict is seen as “overtaken by the daemonic force of addiction” (Reith 2004: 297), controlled by a substance that “is attributed with influential powers—no less than the ability to overwhelm the individual and transform them into something else entirely—an addict” (Reith 2004: 286).

As *BioShock*'s backstory tells it, splicers are invariably ADAM addicts. Some were forced to use it by Fontaine or Ryan, others descended into addiction on a quest for self-enhancement, or simply by using plasmids to improve their odds of survival.<sup>17</sup> Due to addiction, they transformed from ‘good’ capitalist consumers into deviant consumers, scouring the city and killing for ADAM. By the time the player character enters Rapture, this change has been compounded by outright mind control exercised by Ryan, who, ironically, robs splicers of the freedom of choice that his ideology used to extol.

With ADAM addiction came mental deterioration. In social theory, dehumanization and exclusion through the category of mental illness has been described in much detail by Foucault (1988 [1961]), who showed how medical discourse had been constructing the mentally ill as non-citizens. In contemporary media, people with mental illnesses keep being portrayed as either dangerous or childish (Wahl 1997; Harper 2009). In line with its satirical tone and grotesque realist aesthetics, *BioShock*'s portrayal of mental illness favors impact over nuance. Splicers display the most over-the-top, sensationalist indices of mental affliction, which seem to disqualify them from any kind of reasoned, civilized behavior.

Following the 2013 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* classification, splicers could be said to bear symptoms of at least two major disorders. The first is the *paranoid personality disorder*, as they assume that other people will “exploit, harm or deceive them” (*American Psychiatric Association* 2013: 650). In some of their monologues, they accuse the player character of fictional crimes. Lady Smith cries “You’re stealing! I know it”, while Baby Jane blames anyone she attacks for her plight, insisting: “You did this to me! You!” Even more importantly, their paranoia justifies the fact that they attack on sight, which is an important part of the aggressive behavior of FPS enemies.

Splicers can also be said to suffer from *dissociative identity disorder*, characterized by “disruption of identity” that involves “discontinuity in sense of self and sense of agency, accompanied by related alterations in affect, behavior, consciousness, memory, perception, cognition and/or sensory-motor functioning” (*American Psychiatric Association* 2013: 292). Judging from their lines, splicers live in a delusion that the world around them has not changed since the outbreak of the civil war, underscoring Rapture’s state of perpetual corrupted carnival (see Mejeur 2018). When ‘Baby Jane’ splicers are idling, they say, for example: “Who needs to make it on Broadway when you can make it here?” When they are attacking, they bark phrases like “Give me the part, you bastard!” or “He’s standing in the wrong place!”

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<sup>17</sup> The use of ADAM in plastic surgery is documented in [*AD: Limits of Imagination*]. The use of plasmids (which require ADAM) for self-defense is shown in several in-game promotional films that serve as tutorials.

These symptoms justify both the splicers' aggressive behavior and the fact that their utterances barely fit the context. Some of the lines match gameplay situation (attacking, being attacked, being on fire, player death), but many are triggered randomly. What may initially sound like chatter among splicers are in fact monologues—a bundle of decontextualized non-sequiturs that echo splicers' lost humanity. This cognitive rigidity and emotional inertness are among the prime features of mechanistic dehumanization. After all, computational others may be good at following specific, clearly defined goals, but usually fail to account for the wider context.

### **Jack—Not Your Ordinary 'Splicer'**

The narrative of addiction and dehumanization is mirrored in the story of the main protagonist, Jack. To battle splicers, he is—like them—driven to hoard and abuse ADAM. He, too, respawns; he has very little individual identity; and is shown to lack agency (Aldred/Greenspan 2011). This mirroring is not too surprising if we consider that players often succeed in gameplay by internalizing the game's mechanics and algorithms, such as the patterns of enemy behavior. As Manovich (2001: 222) has noted, “the similarity between the actions expected from the player and computer algorithms is too uncanny to be dismissed”. Jack's behavior—largely controlled by the player—thus also echoes the game's computational principles.

However, Jack's narrative trajectory deviates from that of splicers in many crucial aspects. He is no ordinary Rapturite, but neither is he a random plane crash victim. In a famous plot twist, Atlas (Jack's guide through Rapture) is revealed to be Frank Fontaine and Jack is revealed to be the illegitimate son of Andrew Ryan, seized upon birth by Fontaine and mentally conditioned to do the latter's bidding.<sup>18</sup> It was Fontaine who ordered Jack to fulfill various missions within Rapture, and, ultimately, to kill Ryan. As analyzed by Aldred and Greenspan (2011: 490), among others, the twist “cleverly [addresses] the dystopian themes of user agency and free will”. But although Jack's (and the player's) agency is problematized, he manages to break free of the mind control, and turns on and defeats Fontaine. We never see Jack from the third person view, so it is difficult to assess whether plasmids deform his body. However, other human survivors neither recognize nor approach him as a splicer. In other words, he can reap the benefits of plasmids without suffering the side effects. Unlike others, he can be redeemed, and his dehumanization reversed.

Throughout the game, the player can choose whether Jack ‘harvests’ Little Sisters for ADAM, or ‘saves’ them, i.e. whether he treats them as a resource (in line with the Randian worship of selfishness), or whether he treats them compassionately. If he saves all the Little Sisters, a final cut-scene shows them helping him escape Rapture, joining him on a journey to the surface, and becoming his surrogate daughters. He becomes a patriarch of a family that can easily pass as human (see Stang 2018).<sup>19</sup> The special status Jack maintains thanks to his connections to Ryan and Fontaine resonates with the

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<sup>18</sup> Jack is controlled by the phrase “Would you kindly”. Origins of this mental conditioning are detailed in the *Burial at Sea* DLC to *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013; see also Maziarczyk 2015).

<sup>19</sup> The other two, ‘negative’, endings (which can be distinguished by tone but not by events depicted) hint at Jack becoming a villain himself and starting a nuclear war. However, Levine has said that he had originally intended only one ambiguous ending; the idea to create multiple endings reportedly came from the publisher (Sinclair 2007).

elitism of Rapture's Randian utopia. The privilege to leave is reserved to the player character, but not to regular splicers. While Jack is always shown from the first-person subject position, splicers remain othered by being presented as objects of player agency and obstacles to gameplay progress.

### Conclusion and Discussion

Throughout the article, I have presented two complementary strands of argument. On the one hand, I traced the efforts of *BioShock*'s designers to make their game immersive and emotionally affecting; on the other hand, I examined the steps taken in the game's backstory to make in-game fictional humans less human. The splicers' mechanics were inherited from the initial 'Scooby-Doo monsters', who, despite their placeholder status, still haunt the final version. To provide a coherent justification of their behavior, the game's embedded narrative tells a story of dehumanization and degradation without redemption. So much of the agency and ability we associate with humans has been taken away from Rapture's citizens that they are closer to zombies or vending machines.

I have identified three main avenues of dehumanization, each of which provides a fictional counterpart to the mechanical features of splicers as computational others:

[i]—Erosion of social structure and eradication of political life following the fall of Rapture, which transforms splicers into atomized creatures.

[ii]—Bodily disintegration and the use of masks that makes splicers into fungible, interchangeable enemies.

[iii]—Addiction and loss of mental capabilities, which explain the splicers' blindness to context and their simplistic behavior.

As *BioShock* shares mechanics with many other first-person shooter and role-playing games, similar techniques of dehumanization have been employed in numerous titles, although they might appear less prominently in their narratives. Games like the *Fallout* series have used dystopian settings to justify violent and immoral actions of both player and non-player characters (Interplay Productions 1997; Black Isle Studios 1998; Bethesda Softworks 2008; *ibid.* 2015; Obsidian Entertainment 2010). Bodily disintegration and the foregrounding of anatomy is, in general, typical of blockbuster action games, for example in headshot sequences (Phillips 2018). Similar to splicers' masks, helmets and uniforms in shooter games like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward 2007) also hide the individuality of the soldiers, making them into fungible enemies. The theme of addiction, brainwashing and mental conditioning is commonly used to justify violence and explain enemy behavior. The mind control trope was even more pronounced in *System Shock 2*, *BioShock*'s predecessor (Looking Glass Studios/Irrational Games 1999), in which ex-human enemies, subsumed into a collective entity called 'The Many', seem to be vaguely aware of the fact that they are being controlled—and even tell the protagonist that they are sorry for attacking him. A more recent example is *Far Cry 5* (Ubisoft Montreal 2018), a game in which most enemies are supposedly under the influence of hallucinatory gas called 'Bliss'.

I have argued that dehumanization is encouraged by technological constraints put on computational others. The enormous challenge of simulating complex, non-violent human behavior may drive developers to fall back on the convenient but stereotypical themes of violent conflict with dehumanized enemies. That said, the relationship between technological affordances and the representation of otherness is far from straightforward. I do not wish to make a technologically determinist argument by ascribing all the problematic and simplistic features of video game enemy representation to the underlying hardware architecture and software engines. These do not absolve designers from the responsibility for their work. I would, however, like to suggest rephrasing of one of the central questions in the critique of video game representation.

My analysis has shown that NPCs are partially monstrous from the outset and by default, not only as a result of conscious or unconscious design choices. Rather than asking how games *dehumanize* people (or groups of people), we can ask how they *humanize* (or fail to humanize) computational others. As they constitute a baseline for the representation of computational others, analyzing hostile monsters is therefore essential to the study of representation of all enemies in video games. In this respect, *BioShock* is, despite its stereotypical portrayal of queerness (Mejeur 2018) and mental disorders, a self-aware and self-reflective title, honest in admitting that its enemies cannot be human. It engages with their computational otherness and couples it with a sophisticated narrative about dehumanization and its possible causes. In my view, the game is thus less effective as a critique of Randian objectivism, than it is as an exploration of what it means to be deprived of humanity.

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## Biographical Note

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# MANUFACTURING CONSENT IN VIDEO GAMES— THE HEGEMONIC MEMORY POLITICS OF *METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN* (2015)

Emil Lundedal Hammar (UiT The Arctic University of Norway)

**Abstract:** *In this article I argue that the structural conditions of global capitalism and postcolonialism encourage game developers to rearticulate hegemonic memory politics and suppress subaltern identities. This claim is corroborated via an application of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's propaganda model to the Japanese-developed video game Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain. This case study highlights that the hegemonic articulations of colonial histories are not exclusive to Western entertainment products where instead modes of production matter in the 'manufacturing of mnemonic hegemony'. I also propose that the propaganda model, while instructive, can be improved further by acknowledging a technological filter and the role of the subaltern. Thus, the article furthers the understanding of the relation between production and form in contemporary technological phenomena like video games and how this relation motivates hegemonic articulations of the past in contemporary mass culture.*

**Keywords:** *cultural memory; political economy; video games; postcolonialism.*

## Introduction—Playing the Cold War

*Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*<sup>1</sup> is an action-stealth video game that lets consumers play with Cold War colonialism in the Soviet-Afghan war and the Angolan Civil War. As the rogue US soldier 'Venom Snake', players do mercenary contracts for either the US or the Soviet Union. As part of this mercenary work, *MGSV* positions players as neutral between the warring imperialist interests, so that neither the US or the Soviet Union are seen as more legitimate than the other—i.e. both imperial nations in the game are part of the same hegemony with "a common interest in opposing military structures" (Kaldor 1991: 112). Players are tasked with building up Snake's own private paramilitary army called the 'Diamond Dogs' by taking up mercenary contracts in Afghanistan and Angola for either US- or Soviet-backed movements such as the real-historical 'União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola' (UNITA) and 'Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola—Partido do Trabalho' (MPLA). Player activities consist of procuring resources from Afghanistan and Angola, killing or capturing enemy soldiers for players' own gain, and destroying their military installations. The game's main narrative covers political themes such as the loss of language through cultural imperialism, the interests of colonial powers, and the dynamics of managing a paramilitary mercenary force, something of which I elaborate on later. Yet despite these relatively refreshing political themes in mass cultural entertainment, I claim that the game still 'manufactures mnemonic hegemony' in its Cold War depiction of Afghanistan and Angola.

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter referred to as *MGSV*.

Before proceeding, by memory politics, I refer to the political aspects of how individuals and collectives construct understandings of the past through culture (Erll 2011; Rigney 2016) where multimodal interests compete over the formation of cultural memory. Here, contemporary power relationships affect the dominant consensus of our recollection of the past; what Berthold Molden terms ‘mnemonic hegemony’ (Molden 2016). As he writes, “access to and control over the means of communication and diffusion of historical narratives are of utmost importance for the establishment and maintenance of mnemonic hegemony” (Molden 2016: 134). By manufacturing of mnemonic hegemony, I here denote the process where cultural expressions, such as video games, construct dominant cultural memory that, among other things, reduces already marginalized groups and counter-hegemonic ideologies to dehumanized monsters or antagonists (Hall 1997; Said 1979 [1978]), if not subaltern (Pandey 1995). The latter, especially, are represented with little agency, few capacities to express themselves, and fewer conditions for ethical consideration (Hartmann 2017). The subaltern are positioned within mnemonic hegemony<sup>2</sup> so that they cannot articulate themselves inside it (Spivak 2010 [1988]). Such positions of subalternity can be reinstated with the help of hegemonic cultural expressions. In mass media, the subaltern are often left without a voice or humanity (Beverly 2001: 54), if not explicitly depicted as dangerous monsters (Calafell 2015). As I argue, this mnemonic hegemony and the reproduction of the subaltern can be seen in the case of Afghanistan and Angola in *MGSV*. To account for this, I trace the game’s memory politics to the game’s context of production where capitalist and postcolonial structural conditions reign.

As a Japanese game, it is pertinent to inquire how *MGSV* affirms mnemonic hegemony of the Cold War. In my analysis of the game, I inversely follow Paul Martin’s (2018) reading of the Japanese-developed *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom 2009), where he argues that the game’s apparent white colonialist fantasies are a product of Japanese history and imperialism. In contrast, I read *MGSV* as a product of global hegemonic culture rather than only as a product of its origins. As Soraya Murray writes on *MGSV*, the juxtaposition between the game’s Japanese origins and its memory politics “becomes extremely complicated” (Murray 2017: 143) by virtue of the game’s affirmation of US mnemonic hegemony despite being created in Japan. *MGSV*, I argue, frames the Cold War proxy wars in Angolan and Afghanistan with little consideration to the memories of those most affected, and instead follows Western mnemonic hegemony. This, I argue, derives from its modes of production.

The game was primarily directed by Hideo Kojima, a 30-plus years games industry veteran, who is regarded as an auteur (Green 2017; Higgin 2009b), a rare label in the landscape of blockbuster game development (Nieborg 2011). Co-workers close to Kojima have stated that he does not care about the money nor the budget of a project in order to ensure the execution of his vision (*NationFusion* 2015: 0:34:57). Such complexities of a non-profit-oriented auteur nuance my argument on the relation between production and form in *MGSV*. Therefore, my reading both challenges the perception of Kojima as a renegade auteur of the industry and the persistence of Western mnemonic hegemony in mainstream video game production.

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<sup>2</sup> That is to say that, as Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, the subaltern should not be tied to a nation-state, but seen as “fragmentary and episodic” (2002: 34).



*MGSV* is part of the popular *Metal Gear* series (Stanton 2015) spanning multiple video games since the first entry called *Metal Gear* (Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo [KCET] 1987). The series is developed and managed by Konami, and directed by Hideo Kojima and co-developed by hundreds of workers in each entry. The series emulates the US cinematic spy and action genre (Wang 2014), and it invokes political themes of espionage, military conflict, nuclear warfare, the Cold War, transfer of genes and memes, post-traumatic stress disorder, and child soldiers. In addition, contrary to the norm of mainstream military video games, the series has criticized militarization, nuclear armament, and governmental power structures (Keogh 2015). Yet, even though the game tangentially evokes the themes of Cold War colonialism and proxy wars, players are primarily tasked with rebuilding their military operations via extracting resources from Afghanistan and Angola, rather than, for example, assisting the imperialized peoples in them.

### **Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model**

To understand the causes of *MGSV*'s memory politics of war and colonialism I apply the 'propaganda model' by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (2002 [1988]). They originally made several cases for how US news media is more about selling a product conforming to dominant narratives than about informing their readers about world affairs—something still apparent today (Edwards/Cromwell 2018), and something which applies to video games like *MGSV*. While theirs is not a theoretically exhaustive model, it is nonetheless instructive in determining some of the factors that motivate media to serve the interests of the ruling elites. Here, Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony is useful (Femia 1987 [1961]; Gramsci 1971 [1929–1935]), where the ruling classes do not necessarily employ means of coercion to enforce their ideology, but rather make use of culture to create consent (cf. Hall 1982: 86), while those in the margins, such as the subaltern, are 'culturally imperialized' (Young 2004) and made voiceless outside the established consensus. It is this manufacturing of hegemony and marginalization in US news media that Herman and Chomsky (2002 [1988]) investigate by means of the propaganda model. Using case studies such as coverage of the Vietnam war (169), the elections in Nicaragua (134), or the Indonesian invasion of East Timor (33), they aptly identify how counter-hegemonic perspectives are filtered out in leading US news companies. In turn, what gets produced is 'propaganda' that in turn helps 'manufacture consent' about contemporary US imperialism (iix).

Herman and Chomsky characterize the propaganda model via the ownership filter; the advertising filter<sup>3</sup>; the sourcing filter; the flak filter; and finally the anti-communism and fear filter (Herman/Chomsky 2002 [1988]: 6)—each of which I define in their respective sections below. They argue that these filters exclude those perspectives that challenge the dominant consensus. Or inversely put, these filters establish consensus regarding what the public at large considers to be common sense.

While Herman and Chomsky focus on news media, similar processes of filtering are relevant for other media industries, such as Hollywood film and US television programming (Alford 2015; D'Acci 2004; Molina-Guzmán 2016). Mass culture undergoes similar manufacturing processes that reproduce and re-affirm hegemony—

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<sup>3</sup> I do not include advertising as a filter in my application of the model to *MGSV*. Advertising is simply not present in this particular instance (Alford 2015).

the stories told, the perspectives included, the groups represented, etc. are framed by similar filters that preclude counter-hegemonic expressions.

Although there seems to be a sharp epistemological distinction between news media and popular culture, I argue that this line can at times appear blurry. Echoing the epistemological contentions by Hayden White (1990 [1987]), it is important to take narratives, including fictitious ones, seriously as a form of understanding of history. Robert Rosenstone (1995) has similarly argued that popular feature films leave a residue of knowledge in audiences' understandings of the past. Likewise, cultural memory studies (Erlil 2011; Rigney 2016; Reading 2016 [2015]) take popular culture very seriously in the formation of understandings of the past. Thus, it is important to consider different cultural forms due to their potential predispositions on how people see the world and others (Dyer 2002 [1993]). It is thus helpful to apply Herman and Chomsky's model to an analysis of mass entertainment in order to identify the factors that reproduce hegemony in, for example, video games.

The propaganda model encourages attention to frames of production that predispose or filter these products along ideological fault lines. As Nicholas Garnham argues,

so long as Marxist analysis concentrates on the ideological content of mass media, it will be difficult to develop coherent political strategies for resisting the underlying development in the cultural sphere in general which rests firmly and increasingly upon the logic of generalized commodity production (1979: 145).

It is useful to consider the production of games as part of a large-scale commercial culture industry within a capitalist economic system with colonialist roots (Fron et al. 2007; Kerr 2017; Mukherjee 2017) if we are to fully grasp Garnham's 'underlying development' of, in this case, cultural memory. Thus, when applied as a lens to analyze games, the propaganda model contributes to existing scholarship on the politics of video games, the relation between production and form, and, echoing Garnham's statement above, uncovering the materialist processes that produce hegemony.

### **The Political Economy of the Video Games Industry and Games Analysis**

In this section, I qualify why Herman and Chomsky's model is relevant to the games industry and the analysis of games. Similar to their claim that ownership of news media is largely concentrated among few vertically-integrated companies (Herman/Chomsky 2002 [1988]: 14), so too does the games industry consist of a few major companies that by and large have remained static over the last thirty years (Kerr 2017). This consolidation of cultural and economic power has resulted in fewer titles with ever-bigger production budgets amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars excluding marketing costs (Nieborg 2011). One consequence of these large financial investments is that the games industry relies more and more on retaining their consumers within their digital eco-systems (Joseph 2018). As a result, homogenous game designs that encourage constant and repeated activity with behavioristic rewards have become a mainstay in these products (Nieborg 2016; Stenros and Kultima 2018; Sotamaa/Karppi 2010)—something *MGSV* also is culpable of. Meanwhile, these expensive projects are made possible by the labor of predominantly young and often apparently naïve software

workers in precarious employments (Kerr 2017) who are driven by an easily exploited passion that game companies use for major surplus profits (Woodcock 2016). These companies concurrently make use of global production networks in countries with lower wages and worse working conditions that allows them to exploit cheap, outsourced labor for maximum profit towards the global power centers (Thomsen 2018). Emanating from this context of production, the perspectives and ideologies included in these products conform to the acceptable consensus for entertainment where female characters are sexualized for assumed straight audiences (Lynch et al. 2016), and their racialization favors white Eurocentric hierarchies (Srauy 2019 [2017]; Higgin 2009a; Williams et al. 2009). As studies have shown, US white heterosexual men in their 20s and 30s dominate the characters available in games (Shaw 2015a; Williams et al. 2009; Gray 2014), while the conveyed ideologies and possibilities for action are very much in line with imperialist logics (Mir/Owens 2013; Lammes 2010; Mukherjee 2017; Ford 2016). Thus, the propaganda model and its attention to the ideological implications of modes of production, help us in understanding why mass cultural games are the way they are. In order to illustrate the significance of the political economy of video games on mnemonic hegemony, I now proceed to apply the filters of *ownership*, *sourcing*, *flak*, and *anti-communism and fear* to *MGSV*. I do not include the filter of *advertising* in my analysis, since *MGSV* does not explicitly rely on advertising revenues as its business model.

### *Ownership*

Herman and Chomsky (2002 [1988]: 3) define the filter of ownership as the size, concentrated ownership, ownerwealth, and profit orientation of dominant mass-media firms. They argue that fewer, but larger actors own more and more of mass media, while their revenue and amassing profits take precedence over all other aspects. The result, Herman and Chomsky argue, is that ownership filters out perspectives or considerations that challenge or threaten the position of the owners or the function of the mass media as a business.

Applying the ownership-filter to the production of *MGSV* one can highlight the internal power hierarchy of Konami as a company and how its business culture influences not only the game's memory politics but also its workers. Konami Holdings Corporation is the company that owns and funds the development of the *Metal Gear* series since its inception in 1989, with the subsidiary Konami Digital Entertainment as responsible for digital game development and publishing. Since the increase of game development budgets, Konami has consolidated its businesses to fewer, but more expensive projects, until a change of executives allocated resources to less risky financial investments with higher returns in mobile and arcade platforms. This was evident back in 2010 when Konami's low-investment mobile games proved to be financial successes. It resulted in a restructuring of the company to focus on projects with lower costs and higher profit-margins (Pearson 2015). Thus, *MGSV* proved to be the final blockbuster budget project greenlit by Konami, until upper management cut the development short and rushed the project's release in September 2015 following its multiple delays. This rush also resulted in a public controversy between the director Hideo Kojima and Konami, where the former was legally barred from speaking to

anyone outside the company, while his name was erased from the marketing of the game (Parkin 2015).

The exact production costs of *MGSV* are unknown, but according to the Japanese financial newspaper Nikkei (2017b), the total amount was ~80 million USD already six months prior to release; a high, but not uncommon, amount for mainstream blockbuster projects. *MGSV* ended up shipping six million copies in the financial quarter of its release that resulted in 771.8 million USD in revenue and 210.8 million in profit for Konami Digital Entertainment (Pearson 2016). The biggest markets for *MGSV* proved to be US and European consumers (Grubb 2015; *PAL Charts* 2015), while the home market of Japan only had seven percent of total sales (Romano 2015). This means that *MGSV* has likely been tailored and developed with the intention to sell in territories where digital game consumer markets and circulation networks have already been established to the degree that a hundred million dollars project is sustainable for Konami. Given the conditions of the ownership filter, it is likely that *MGSV*'s memory politics were made appealing, uncontroversial, and comfortable for such markets to consume.

Some months prior to *MGSV*'s release, Nikkei also published a report on Konami's labor practices and how employees were harassed and bullied by upper management (Pearson 2015). Not only did the public gain insight into how Hideo Kojima was treated with the erasure and silencing of his contribution to the project, but the report uncovered stories of how underperforming employees had to clean up garbage at Konami's fitness clubs; computers were disconnected from the Internet to have workers focus on their task at hand; e-mail addresses were random strings and letters that were randomly reshuffled every month to prevent people outside the company to contact or 'poach' their labor; and lunch breaks were monitored and their total minutes revealed internally to co-workers in order to increase peer-to-peer surveillance. These were just some of the revelations that the Nikkei report unearthed, displaying the company's exploitative and oppressive working conditions.

Two years later in 2017, Nikkei once again reported that Konami was using its influence to obstruct former workers at the company from e.g. getting health insurances; Konami also "files complaints to gaming companies who take on its former employees" (Nitta/Tani 2017b; Nitta/Tani 2017a). Other examples include warning other gaming and media companies against hiring ex-workers; closing business due to pressure from Konami; not being allowed to put Konami experience on their CVs with legal threats; monitoring the social media activities by employees and punishing them accordingly if they step out of line. Despite warnings of how these labor practices might hurt the success and future of the company, Konami has shown record operating profits in 2018 (Valentine 2018), thus confirming what many already knew: Profits and healthy labor practices often do not go hand in hand.

In *MGSV* itself, one 'mechanical aspect' (Aarseth/Calleja 2015) of particular interest to this article is the ability to capture and extract enemy soldiers and prisoners for players' own employment. The game motivates players to do so based on the skills that the characters in question possess—proficiency in combat, intelligence, base development, and a host of other factors related to functioning of the player's home-base. The mechanic of capturing and enslaving soldiers for the players character's ludic benefit is something that Mukherjee touches upon in his article on slavery and video

games “where the protagonist is a free man and has the agency to change the destiny of those who are enslaved” (Mukherjee 2016: 245). Leigh Alexander (2015) aptly observed the parallels between this ‘free man’ managing his enslaved subjects and the managerial position afforded to players and the labor conditions at Konami. As such, the ownership filter here highlights abhorrent labor practices that in turn result in a game where player actions mirror comparable forms of exploitation.

Thus, ownership and the function of business are the foundation for not only the development of *MGSV* but also the virtual game world the workers produced. The owners of Konami have a vested interest in making products that yield high profit, so they produce playable memory politics that are in line with the preconceived beliefs of their consumers, as I also illustrate later. Furthermore, the structure of Konami and the way they treat their employees show how internal labor practices affect the product at the end where the game system of capturing and managing workers reflect comparable labor conditions.

### *Sourcing*

Herman and Chomsky define the sourcing filter as how news media acquire information to produce articles and news segments to sell to audiences (2002 [1988]: 18–19). In US contexts, government and corporate leadership make up the predominant sources of information for journalists. This means that news media reporting needs to correlate with what their sources claim—contesting or opposing them could result in a loss of access to the information that news media needs in order to do their reporting. Therefore, they are more likely to reproduce what these sources state—i.e. an elite consensus—rather than critically engage with the information. While sourcing in news media is significantly different in video games, I propose that sourcing also constitutes a viable tool to understand the limited perspectives and beliefs of the developers at Kojima Productions. For example, in *MGSV*, the developers used sources for the landscape of Afghanistan and Angola, the historical information about the Cold War struggles in these places, the material culture of the setting, and so forth. Thus, while Herman and Chomsky refer to government sources in journalistic reporting, I move the concept to refer to the perspectives and inspirational sources that inform the development of *MGSV*’s memory politics.

One instance of sourcing that filters out dissent, is its reliance on Hollywood narrative conventions that align with US interests. The game director Kojima has previously stated that he wants to shift that focus away from Hollywood (Parkin 2014). Yet *MGSV* clearly follows the genres and cultural associations established in Hollywood cinema. From Kiefer Sutherland—famous for his role as Jack Bauer in the US military propaganda show *24* (Cochran/Surnow 2001–2010; 2014)—as the voice actor for the game’s protagonist, to the hiring of Harry Gregson-Williams (composer of several pro-military films such as *The Rock* (dir. Michael Bay, 1996) and *Spy Game* (dir. Tony Scott, 2001)), to the use of hour-long ‘cutscenes’, to the reliance on Hollywood camera aesthetics, to its military fetishization (Stahl 2009) with the game’s detailed emphasis on the weapons, US military lingo, and military vehicles, *MGSV* and the entire series are known for mimicking US popculture. Moreover, its virtual Afghan landscape mostly consists of rocks, sand, stony hills, guard posts, military bases, and a couple of clay houses. Here, Murray aptly writes, “the formal aesthetic sensibility of the game [...]

mirrors the Afghan landscape of the American cultural imaginary” (Murray 2017: 166–167). In fact, Hideo Kojima revealed in an interview that parts of the depicted Afghanistan was inspired by the landscapes of Jordan (*Metal Gear Wiki* 2018), thereby echoing the “‘Orientalist’ mode of representation” (Šisler 2008: 207), where Middle Eastern and Arabic countries are flattened in meaning and nuance.

*MGSV*’s sourcing also highlights its gender dynamics. A series already known for its use of female characters as sexualized for a male gaze (*GamesRadar* 2015), the *only* female character in *MGSV* is a *mute* sniper called ‘Quiet’ who dresses in a bikini, ripped stockings, and a thong. Kojima excused the visual design by claiming that he wanted to challenge fans when they dress up (‘cosplay’) as Quiet (Thomsen 2015). However, the game highly emphasizes her as a sexual object with camera zoom-ins on her cleavage during cutscenes, stripping animations during helicopter rides, and a gratuitous shower-scene shown in first-person perspective for assumed straight male consumers. This sexual objectification is exacerbated with violent misogyny in one scene where Quiet is electrically tortured and sexually assaulted while the camera lingers on her cleavage. Thereby, as Gandolfi and Sciannamblo write, *MGSV*’s gender politics forms “a war imagery characterized by (a) the exploitation of women and (b) an employment of female body as a tool to fulfill the visual pleasure of the male gaze” (2019 [2018]: 331). Quiet, the *only* female character in the game’s narrative, is unable to speak, is strongly objectified for heterosexual male gazes, and has to undergo sexualized violence. Although a thorough gender analysis of *MGSV* is beyond the scope of this article, from my reading it is clear that the misogynist dynamics in the game relate to the gender politics at Konami and the patriarchal aspect of Japanese society with its conservative and oppressive gender structures. The Western games industry has had decades of structural sexism that marginalizes and oppresses people who do not identify as cis-men (Ochsner 2019 [2017]; Fron et al. 2007), and this structural force is intensified in Japan by its patriarchal contexts (Fujihara 2014; Okabe 2018) with one instance of a female employee at another Japanese game developer attempting suicide due to sexual harassment (Ashcraft 2012). As such, the sourcing for how women are represented in *MGSV* rely on hegemonic views of the history of women in warfare and media, as well as a misogynistic games culture, industry, and dominant patriarchal segments of Japanese society.

Finally, the sourcing filter also relates to how the notion of the subaltern are effectively voiceless in the manufacture of consent. It is precisely those who can never be articulated that are excluded from constructions of cultural memory such as in *MGSV*. As I show later, the peoples of Afghanistan and Angola are hardly, if ever, represented in *MGSV*’s virtual playground. It could reasonably be assumed that the developers simply did not include or consider what Angolan or Afghan peoples of today think about the imperial proxy wars in the 1980’s and so implicitly were made voiceless or non-existent. Their subalternity also extends to counter-hegemonic perspectives such as decolonization and anti-imperialist ideology, which are also precluded for players. This is made explicit in an audiotape in the end of the game where one character informs Venom Snake that

[t]he civil war will keep burning on whether we accept this job or not. Another East–West proxy war, with the communist MPLA on one side and the

capitalist-funded CFA on the other. An endless seesaw of blood and violence played out in the hands of the superpowers. [...] For us to survive, we need to expand our organization, and get strong enough that no one can threaten us. So, our only option is to fight, and grow, and fight, and grow (Otness 2016).

The game's narrative thereby forces players to circumvent an anti-imperialist play, by positioning the Angolan Civil War as a perpetual struggle without any real sides. Mukherjee, following Edward Said, identifies such foreclosures of anti-imperial imagination, where "both the geopolitical and the identity maps are 'adjusted' by the colonial hegemonic system" (Mukherjee 2018: 515). It is not possible for *MGSV* to grapple with the complexities and contradictions of imperialism in Angola or Afghanistan, and therefore it has to resolve its tensions by reverting back to its mnemonic hegemony. Once the game's narrative ends, players in *MGSV* are therefore left without any resolution to the war for independence in Angola or Afghanistan—any alternative histories and avenues of anti-imperialism are foreclosed by the tyranny of realism (Shaw 2015b). In that sense, Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model can be further complicated with reference to how groups and counter-hegemonic ideologies are left out and rendered voiceless via the process of sourcing. In *MGSV*, it appears that the peoples of Angola and Afghanistan are effectively without centrality or agency, and counter-hegemonic commemorative play (Hammar 2017) is not possible.

### *Flak*

Herman and Chomsky define the filter of flak as the individual or organized negative responses to a media statement or program (2002 [1988]: 26). This occurs when a news media outlet experiences heavy criticism for publishing controversial news stories. The 'flak' refers here to the attack and discrediting of the outlet or individual journalist in question, which often forces the outlet to withdraw such reporting. In response, news media must build up barricades, spend resources on legal defense, and protect advertising that might get withdrawn because of it. Flak therefore serves to demotivate or force news outlets to refrain from reporting on stories that might entail controversy, especially from actors with power and wealth at their disposal.

This is evident in the games industry where game publishers want to avert flak as much as possible. The optimal objective for companies is to rely on hegemonic depictions in order to sell their game, but simultaneously appear as neutral and unassuming as possible in engaging with cultural zeitgeists (Campbell 2018). This becomes palpable in the marketing of blockbuster games, where developers, executives, and PR downplay or completely absolve the inherent politics of their games, while the imagery and narrative in the promotional material clearly highlight these politics (Pfister 2018). Inversely, flak also happens when social criticisms related to gender, sexuality, or race mobilize reactionary consumers to harass developers and critics, especially if the initial critics are women and minorities (Massanari 2017; M. Salter 2017; A. Salter/Blodgett 2012). Here, game companies try to avoid the ire of these reactionary consumers by ignoring the ongoing harassment campaigns, while continuing to center white American male protagonists and marginalizing white women and people of color in their products. Game companies thereby avoid flak by adhering to the established status quo with what appears to be the acceptable form of ideology—i.e. US

politics with white heterosexual men as the driving force, while other perspectives and identities are left in the margins and made subaltern.

This adherence to the status quo and avoidance of flak is seen in the landscape of *MGSV*. Its version of Afghanistan is empty and devoid of civilians—they are effectively subaltern. As Pötzsch (2017 [2015]) highlights in his research on the representation of conflict in war games, civilians in war games are usually ‘selectively filtered’ out. This way, the genre can “systematically structure player experiences in a way that glorifies warfare and soldiery and that suppresses unpleasant, yet salient features and consequences of military and other violent conduct” (157). Afghanistan and Angola are in a sense a place outside of reality, where players can adopt the role of the invader who enters the life-less war zone to accrue wealth and personnel in a ‘Just War’ (Donald 2019 [2017]). Flak filtering enables *MGSV* to convey the view of military conflict as clean, honorable, and just, with the subaltern being both silent, passive, and ultimately absent. There is no loss of innocent life and little consideration of the peoples of Afghanistan. Instead, its virtual playground only represents Soviet-backed Afghan soldiers and Mujahedeen, and never US military operatives, thereby reproducing the hegemonic innocence of US imperialism. As Mukherjee writes, “the images of the orient are always being manufactured and only represent things that colonial imperialism wishes to show and see” (2018: 515). Indeed, *Venom Snake* only faces Soviet soldiers or private military forces without national affiliations, thereby making it possible to avoid controversy for Konami. One could easily imagine the flak that they would have received if the game allowed players to assassinate CIA operatives or to assist the Angolan people rise up against the foreign invaders. While the game does address the imperial interests of foreign forces in Angola via small audio-clips, this commentary is unfortunately relegated to optional cassette tapes that players might accidentally pick up in the virtual landscape and listen to at their own discretion. As such, the game makes the topic of imperialism optional, if not accidental. Like the aforementioned phenomenon of game publishers both relying on cultural imagery to promote their product and denying the politics of such imagery, this allows Konami to have their ‘Cold War proxy war cake and eat it too’, so to speak. As Murray argues,

[t]hus, the game’s evocation of colonial powers is not reflected upon by the game’s narrative or its mechanics [...]—they are simply a comfortable narrative contextualization to construct opposition for the US player-character (2017: 162).

In the game’s depiction of Afghanistan, Murray’s point is seen when there is no sign of technological progress or civilization beyond military installations, thereby reproducing the depiction of colonized countries as uncivilized and conflicts only struggles over land without people or infrastructure (2017: 150). In a sense, Murray argues, “[...] Afghanistan is configured as in need of intervention” (2017: 167). Players have to travel via helicopter from their offshore military base to the deserted Afghan landscape to eliminate opposition, procure resources and personnel, and conquer territory. As such, the game invites players to ‘intervene’ in the sense that these activities are unlabored and worthless until players arrive to procure and activate their use-value (researching



equipment, staffing at the base, buying new weapons, etc.) without consideration to what such ‘extractivism’ entails for the local population.

This extractivism is also seen in the case of Angola (which the game’s narrative refers to as ‘Africa’, thereby continuing the colonial tradition of reducing countries and borders created by colonial powers to an entire continent as seen in hegemonic discourses in other media (Wainaina 2019 [2005])). The Angolan geographical landscapes in *MGSV* vary between jungle, swamp, plains, and mud with the occasional military bases, guard posts, mines, and an oilfield, echoing the Western stereotypical depiction of sub-Saharan African countries as conflict-ridden nature only populated by military forces and resources to be appropriated (Bonsu 2009; Himmelman 2012). Yet while the game explicitly depicts the colonial powers, such as South Africa and the Soviet Union battling over Angola, this proxy war is seen as a senseless war between equally opposing sides—i.e. players are not encouraged to reflect upon the victims of proxy wars, the effects of colonialism on the population, national sovereignty, and so forth. Instead, the use of these colonial settings serves as a form of ‘window dressing’ to ‘spice’ up the imagined players’ activities. As Murray argues, “as a *playable* space, it lends itself even more to the ‘dreamwork of imperialism’” (2017: 138, her emphasis). Thus, space in *MGSV* follows Edward Said’s classic definition of imperialism as “thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others” (Said 1994 [1993]: 7). Yet these ‘others’ in *MGSV* are never really present—i.e. they are effectively subaltern, as established earlier.

Flak, it seems, entails that *MGSV*’s colonial politics are made comfortable and inoffensive for players to play with. There is sparse critical commentary on Cold War imperial interests, the virtual spaces are selectively sanitized from the horrors of war and instead created as spaces for plundering, and finally the people of Afghanistan and Angola are reduced to colonial stereotypes, if not entirely erased. It speaks to the contemporary hegemonic discourse on colonial history that this game’s simulation of proxy wars are considered inoffensive and playful by consumers and media alike, and that anything subversive or indeed counter-hegemonic would likely face flak.

To be fair, *MGSV* also depicts Angolan child soldiers, yet they also serve as a part of the (Western) visual imagination of sub-Saharan Africa with children holding US- and Soviet-exported rifles. The dynamics between colonizer and the colonized is exacerbated when players have to rescue a group of enslaved Angolan child soldiers from a local diamond mine, and escort them to a landing zone for helicopter extraction. Afterwards, the children are ‘liberated’ in the sense that they now live on the offshore military base where they will learn “to read and write, do basic jobs”, thereby giving them “a chance at a real life” as Venom Snake puts it during a cutscene. Subsequently, the player-character is able to capture other Angolan child soldiers and send them to the player’s homebase. While it is unusual for a game with this relatively high budget to include ‘African’ child soldiers—something which is perceived as controversial by mainstream Western entertainment companies and audiences—the game does not comment or elaborate on their politics. The children simply exist in the game as a superficial nod to the topic of ‘African’ child soldiers—they hardly ever have a unique name or receive any form of individual characterization with little to no dialogue. It is simply not possible for players to free them or release them, but instead the choice is

either to let them continue being child soldiers or imprison them on a remote base to, mechanically, function as value for better player abilities.

This mechanical reduction of child soldiers, similar to the mechanical function of slaves in *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (Hammar 2017; Mukherjee 2016), also speaks to the technological filtering where realist simulations in video games simply are too complex to produce and therefore confer limitations on game developers. In order to be competitive and meet state-of-the-art production values in the games industry, thousands of workhours are required to develop animations, textures, rigging, lighting, voice acting, motion capture, script writing, bug-testing, and many other aspects of contemporary mainstream video game development. As such, the technological filtering of video games entail that realist simulations are both costly and difficult to produce, thus excluding non-essential narrative expositions, such as the complexities of child-soldiers. We see this in *MGSV* where narrative expositions are relegated to simple voice-clips between different characters that can be acquired in the game world as the aforementioned cassette tapes and played as simple audio files for players, something that is relatively cheap to put in a game. This is a cost-saving measure that cuts back expenses and reduces the labor complexities of storytelling in video games, and it thereby filters certain viewpoints that are deemed unimportant by the developers or that can only be reproduced according to the algorithmic nature of video games. As such, it can be reasonably assumed that technological impositions matter in the manufacture of consent as well, insofar as the medium affects our ability to interpret and configure (Shaw 2017). Here, I am referring to the technological conditions of media that shape the manufacture of consent to a degree that perhaps Herman and Chomsky did not account for. Contemporary popular video games are simply very difficult, and therefore costly, to produce. Moreover, we can reasonably assume that the algorithmic nature of video games imply that their meaning-making has to conform to this algorithmic condition, as Alexander Galloway (2006) for example argues on the simulation of history in video games: All meaning is subjected to the logic of code, e.g. "the transcoding of history into specific mathematical models" (Galloway 2006: 103). The intrusion of technological constraints and affordances do 'filter' what perspectives are possible, both on a practical level (political economy of game production) and an ontological level (algorithmic nature of video games).

#### *Anti-Communism and Fear*

Herman and Chomsky define the filter called 'anti-communism and fear' (2002 [1988]: 29) as an othering of dissenting opinions that are framed as intolerable and unreflectively regarded as a threat. Given the 'Red Scare' in the US during the Cold War (Haynes 1995), they refer to the silencing tactic of being labeled a 'communist', an unacceptable position considered beyond the pale in US contexts. The filter of anti-communism and fear thus refers to positions and labels that are considered *a priori* reprehensible by the established hegemonic discourse. The filter is mostly employed as a rhetorical device to exclude counter-hegemonic perspectives from even being entertained or engaged with. Basically, Herman and Chomsky's filter refers to a fundamental form of radical othering of someone with the objective to delegitimize their perspectives.

In *MGSV*, the anti-communism and fear filter is seen in the main villain ‘Skullface’. He is a disfigured main antagonist who wishes to eradicate the English language because of US cultural imperialism (cf. Phillipson 1992). His plan is made possible with the fantasy element of parasitic spores that make people lose their language. Skullface also intends to arm all nation states with nuclear weapons to allow for MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) and nuclear deterrence between all nations. His plans are ultimately foiled by Venom Snake, who then executes Skullface. In a way, his motivation echoes the anti-imperialist movements and positions in the 1970’s against the US cultural imperialism via products and culture such as Disney (Mosco 2009 [1996]: 91–92; Dorfman/Mattelart 1975). In this way, Skullface arguably represents a position that would otherwise be viewed favorable by those opposing cultural imperialism via language. Yet by framing anti-imperialist ideologies, such as the linguistic ramifications of cultural imperialism, as being beyond the pale and associated with disfigurement, *MGSV* very much filters out such positions.

Similarly, *MGSV* also evokes the disease-ridden exotification associated with the colonized people of the Global South (cf. Fanon 1963 [1961]; Said 1979 [1978]; Stronach 2006). We see this when enemy soldiers turn into mindless husks who are then controlled by *MGSV*’s antagonists. This same virulent control of colonized people mirrors the way the zombie genre has been used as ‘a surface upon which humanity reflects anxieties’ (Boyer 2014). The ‘subaltern zombie’ of the ‘exotic and dangerous Africa’ is a symptom of colonial consumers’ anxiety about the colonized lands reminiscent of the colonial imagination of the African continent as wild and disease-ridden (Kiple/Kiple 1980).<sup>4</sup> In one segment of *MGSV*, bedridden Angolan children are medically experimented on in a decrepit, dirty make-shift hospital ward, which highlights this cultural imagery of ‘Africa’ as a plague-ridden space that needs intervention from the white savior, Venom Snake. The infected children and soldiers are both without a voice and without agency, thus they are the ultimate subaltern who literally cannot speak.

As such, the filter of anti-communism and fear highlights on the one hand how anti-imperialist ideologies are represented as beyond the pale via the disfigured villain Skullface, while the spaces of especially Angola are reminiscent of white colonial imaginations of sub-Saharan Africa as disease-ridden and inhospitable. Therefore, *MGSV* propagates an already existing image that shores up a cultural consensus among Western players regarding anti-Western ideologies and the lands and peoples of Angola (‘Africa’) and Afghanistan.

## Conclusion

*MGSV* stands out as a game that simulates colonial imaginations of the proxy wars in 1980’s Afghanistan and Angola. Players are able to traverse these spaces without consequence for local populations and with hegemonic imagery that reduce these spaces to entirely militarized spaces where enemy soldiers can be captured and enslaved. It follows US mnemonic hegemony as evidenced in the portrayal of Angola as a disease-ridden, hostile environment; in how its populations are turned into mute monsters unable to articulate their struggles; in how these countries solely exist for players to

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<sup>4</sup> A similar image of ‘Africa’ is also seen in the aforementioned case *Resident Evil 5* that invoked similar dynamics of race and colonialism (Harrer/Pichlmair 2015; Geysler/Tshabalala 2011).

extract resources from; in how children are uncivilized soldiers meant to be saved by foreign interventions; in how both Afghanistan and Angola can be invaded and left without any consequences to their spaces and inhabitants. Despite being made in Japan, *MGSV* reiterates hegemonic ideas that one typically finds in European and North American imaginations, including patriarchal notions of womanhood seen in the character Quiet. It is therefore edifying to notice a non-Western collective of individuals producing a game that reiterates the Western mnemonic hegemony. Via my application of Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, I have shown that the ownership filter brought attention to the profit-maximizing and exploitation of workers at Konami. The sourcing filter drew out the game's Hollywood influences, patriarchal gender norms, and exclusion of subaltern perspectives. The flak filter showed the erasure of counter-hegemonic ideas and the reinforcement of US mnemonic hegemony in order to avoid controversy. Finally, the filter related to anti-communism and fear showed how the game antagonizes anti-imperialist and subaltern approaches to the memory of the Angolan and Afghan Civil Wars. Finally, I have indicated venues of interest to an improved propaganda model, such as technological filters and notions of the subaltern. In turn, my article potentially serves as a case study to explain how relations of production frame form. War games, and arguably video games more broadly, are part of and reproduce a hegemonic system that reinforces Western consensus on cultural memory related to 21st century colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism, and ultimately, can be traced back to the political economy of video games.

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*Section 4*

News Media and the Public Sphere

*Wann wird die Geschichte  
zur Waffe;  
wann zum 'Monster',  
das sich von unseren Sehnsüchten und Ängsten nährt?*

—Sturm, on page 348.

“We know the names and faces  
of victims of acts of terror such as 9/11  
but we hardly know the names or faces  
of the many thousands of Afghans  
who have died as a result of the  
so-called ‘War on Terror’”

—Ottosen, on page 305.

“The ‘common enemy’,  
a designated monster to fear,  
suggests a morally justified friend–  
enemy relation and can represent  
a powerful instrument to corral  
public opinion about policy options  
dealing with ‘others’ in so far  
as it makes mutual understanding/  
peaceful forms of contact appear unlikely”

—Andreasen, on page 333.

“[...] rumour can have the potential  
to become destructive,  
to ‘be a monster’,  
because we love it so dearly—  
and have been loving it for such a long time”

—Sturm, on page 347.

# NORWAY'S NEW(S) WARS— SYRIA IN THE NORWEGIAN MASS MEDIA

Rune Ottosen (Oslo Metropolitan University)

**Abstract:** *Through two case studies, this article will explore how Norwegian news media framed the Norwegian military presence in Syria. Earlier research by the author has shown how the legal aspects of NATO's out-of-area operations have been ignored by mainstream media. In this study, emphasis will be put on self-censorship among Norwegian journalists, ignoring the fact that Norwegian special forces took part in military operations inside Syria from May 2017 to March 2018. The hypothesis based on Johan Galtung's (2002) theory of peace journalism is that mainstream media refused to see the connection between Norway's bombing of Libya and the escalation of the 'civil war' in Syria. According to legal experts, the Norwegian military presence in Syria was a violation of international law, as it supported rebel groups in armed confrontation with the Assad government, recognized by the Norwegian state through diplomatic relations. The hypothesis of the study—based on an explorative investigation of selected Norwegian news media—is that Norwegian politicians, silently supported by the media, have changed basic principles of Norwegian security policy without an open public debate. Before 1999, Norway was a loyal NATO member based on the notion that NATO was a 'defense alliance'. After the change in NATO strategy to the new out-of-area policy, Norway has in practice become a 'military tool' in the geopolitical strategy of the US. This change of policy has, to a large extent, happened without critical investigation by mainstream media. The article presents two case studies of how Norwegian media dealt with the legal issues when Norway was asked to contribute in Syria, and how the Norwegian military presence was reported by Norwegian media in the periods December 2015 to January 2016, as well as May 2017 to March 2018.*

**Keywords:** *peace journalism; international law; Norwegian news media; Syria; Libya.*


## Introduction

The main purpose of this article<sup>1</sup> is to investigate the manner in which the Norwegian press covered the presence of Norwegian troops in Syria in 2015–2016 and 2017–2018. Of special interest is how the legal issues connected to the operation were addressed. Another concern is how the military presence in Syria was seen in the context of the bombing of Libya in 2011, where the UN mandate was defined by UN Security Council Resolution 1973 as an operation within the framework of the UN principle of the 'responsibility to protect' (R2P)—although it was soon redefined by NATO as an operation for 'regime change' (Tunander 2018). My own research showed that Norwegian media paid scant attention to the legal aspects of the operation (Ottosen/Slaatta/Øfsti 2013). The article will examine how the Norwegian media dealt with the legality of the case when Norway was asked to send special forces to Syria in

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper presented to the *Manufacturing Monsters* symposium 'New(s) Media? Political Economy, History, and Technology of News Making in Germany, Turkey, and Norway', UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Department of Language and Culture: September 11–13, 2018.

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2015 (when the request was refused) and in 2017, when Norway ended up sending special forces.

### **Background—Norway and the ‘New Wars’**

There has traditionally been a high level of consensus among Norwegian politicians and the mainstream media on security and foreign policy (Ottosen/Nohrstedt 2005; Ottosen 2005a; Ottosen 2005b; Ottosen 2010). NATO's out-of-area policy was established in 1999, and first implemented when the former Yugoslavia was bombed in the same year. During the Cold War, NATO's strategy was to deter potential attacks by the Soviet Union. After the Warsaw Pact was dissolved in 1991, NATO sought a new role. Where the ‘battle against radical Islam’ and the ‘threat of terrorism’ were crucial, a more offensive geopolitical role was introduced. Norway adopted this new policy, which was approved by *Stortinget*, the Norwegian Parliament (Helseth 2007).

Kristoffer Egeberg sheds some light on this change in NATO policy in his book *Fredsnaasjonen Norge* [*Peace Nation Norway*] (2017). Egeberg reviews all of Norway's military operations abroad, from the 1960s onwards, with or without a UN mandate. He has conducted in-depth interviews with all Ministers of Foreign Affairs and all heads of Norwegian defense forces and Ministers of Defense in the period since the change in NATO policy in 1999 with the introduction of this new out-of-area policy. In addition, he has talked to numerous leading politicians about their views on the ‘new wars’ outside Europe. In all this impressive empirical evidence, one key factor stands out as the most important reason for Norway's choice, over and over again, to take the crucial decision to send troops to other countries: the Norwegian Ministers' commitment to NATO membership and the fear of ‘disappointing’ the US leadership (Egeberg 2017). This is also the conclusion of the independent *Godal-utvalget*, mandated to evaluate the Norwegian military presence in Afghanistan. A government white paper of 2016 concludes that the Norwegian military presence in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014 has contributed little to positive or peaceful development in Afghanistan and that the main reason for the Norwegian military presence there in 2001 was to accede to the request of the US (*Godal-utvalget* 2016).

It could be asked whether it is in the long-term interest of Norway to continue taking part in new military adventures with uncertain and potentially dangerous outcomes. Norwegian security policy, according to Egeberg's book, seems to be preoccupied with the question of how a small country like Norway can be relevant despite its limited military resources. The crucial concern seems to be whether we are ‘in the warmth’ or ‘out in the cold’ in the eyes of ‘big brother’ US—seemingly a more important question than whether the ‘new wars’ are within the framework of international law (Egeberg 2017). Since the out-of-area epoch was introduced in 1999, Norway has declined all requests from the UN to contribute troops to UN peacekeeping operations—a clear policy change, as in the period before the ‘new wars’, Norway had taken pride in offering military contribution to numerous UN peacekeeping operations in the Middle East and in Africa. In recent years, all available resources have been used in living up to the expectations of our NATO allies (Egeberg 2017: 350–353). In this situation, a potential contribution by the media—in the spirit of peace journalism—could be to remind politicians and the public that the traditional Norwegian security policy, before the ‘new wars’, was that all decisions regarding Norwegian foreign and security policy



should have their basis in the UN Charter and the decisions taken in the UN Security Council (Ottosen 2005a).

Although Norwegian media have tended to support Norwegian war efforts in all NATO out-of-area operations, opinion polls suggest a divided public (Nohrstedt/Ottosen 2014; 2017). In the period 2007–2010, surveys show that around 35 per cent of the Norwegian people opposed the Norwegian military presence in Afghanistan, despite the fact that all the political parties in *Stortinget* voted in favor of the deployment there in 2002 (Eide/Ottosen 2002: 24). Critical voices against the ‘new wars’ have also been raised in debates, in letters to the editors, and in niche newspapers such as *Klassekampen* and *Ny Tid* (Nohrstedt/Ottosen 2014).

### **Theory—Propaganda, Enemy Images, and Peace Journalism**

In this article, I will draw upon Johan Galtung’s theory of peace journalism and upon my earlier work (Ottosen 1995) on enemy images in journalism (see appendix I).

The peace journalism section of Galtung’s model has a moral and ethical point of departure, acknowledging that media themselves play a role in the ‘propaganda war’ (Galtung 2002). Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick state that

[the peace-journalism approach] uses the insights of conflict analysis and transformation to update the concepts of balance, fairness and accuracy in reporting[.] [It also] [p]rovides a new road map tracing the connections between journalists, their sources, the stories they cover and the consequences of their journalism—the ethics of journalistic intervention[,] [and] [b]uilds an awareness of non-violence and creativity into the practical job of everyday editing and reporting (Lynch/McGoldrick 2005: 5).

All parties in modern warfare acknowledge the media as an essential factor in a ‘battlefield for propaganda’ (Herman/Chomsky 2002 [1988]; Zollmann 2019 [2017]). PR campaigns, propaganda campaigns and psychological operations (PSYOPS) for wars are well organized by PR firms, governments and the military (Nohrstedt/Ottosen 2014; 2017). It takes courage and professional skills to confront the narrative presented by governments during preparations for war—as is demonstrated by the example of false accusations of weapons of mass destruction before the war in Iraq in 2003 (Bennett/Lawrence/Livingston 2007).

The coverage of war, conflicts and security policy also reflects the views of the political elite (Hallin 1986). In their book *Manufacturing Consent* (2002 [1988]), Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky also make a point of the close relationship between the military-industrial complex, the media and political elites. There are both political and financial reasons why the media join forces with the political elite and the military in times of war: in many cases the companies producing and selling weapons also own news media. The two authors also introduce the concept of ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ victims. We know the names and faces of victims of acts of terror such as 9/11 but we hardly know the names or faces of the many thousands of Afghans who have died as a result of the so-called ‘War on Terror’ (WoT).

There is empirical evidence from previous research that propaganda and PSYOPS by the parties involved in a conflict influence the framing of stories (Ottosen 2009;

Nohrstedt/Ottosen 2014; 2017). One example could be before the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003, when media labeled Saddam Hussein as the 'new Hitler' and at the same time redistributed false accusations that he possessed weapons of mass destruction (Ottosen 2009). The battle for hearts and minds thus starts before a reporter enters the battlefield. In earlier work I have made the point that reporters covering war must report on issues such as propaganda and PSYOPS to educate readers about the context where propaganda plays a role, even if the reporters do not talk about it. If they *do not* report about it, and keep the public ignorant of the influence of information warfare, journalists will be part of the problem (Ottosen 2013).

War propaganda is well known for its polarized discourse when it comes to how the main actors, motives, warfare and truths are treated. The 'enemy' is painted in black whereas the 'own' side is white. A paradox here was that Saddam Hussein fought with brutal methods against radical Muslims while he himself preferred a moderate trend in Islam, and he also tolerated minorities such as Christians. By invading Iraq in 2003, and leaving it as a 'failed state', the US made it easier for the so-called Islamic State (IS) to gain power.

There is a parallel here to the US/NATO campaign against President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Compared to Saudi Arabia—the US ally in the region—Assad was more respectful towards Christians and other minorities, and if the main aim was to fight radical Islam and IS, the rational approach would be to leave him in power. But power politics is not always rational. In Western propaganda about a potential military intervention in Syria, we saw enemy images of Assad in person and enemy images of Islam with reference to IS (Hellestveit 2015; 2017). In practical terms, the Norwegian forces in Syria supported militant Muslim groups in their struggle against Assad. During the bombing in Libya in 2011, NATO provided air support for the Islamist militants who toppled the Gaddafi regime in the end. These groups also brought their weapons to Syria, where they continued the battle against Assad (Tunander 2018). The destabilization of nations such as Libya and Syria was not part of an official Norwegian policy but, rather, an unintended consequence of our support for US policy and military operations. There are reliable sources that the destabilization of the Middle East is part of US Middle Eastern policy. In a sensational interview with Amy Goodman from *Democracy Now!* (as screened on March 2, 2007), retired General Wesley Clark talks about a visit to the Pentagon immediately after September 11, 2001, and how he heard that the Bush administration had a plan to attack not only Iraq but also six other countries in the region, including Libya and Syria (Goodman/Clark 2007). The reasoning behind this policy seemed to be that since it was impossible to control the region by permanent military occupation, the preferred tactic was to destabilize the regimes they disliked—such as Gaddafi's Libya and Assad's Syria—through limited military operations and military support to opposition groups (Nohrstedt/Ottosen 2014: 188). One theory is that enemy images of Assad and of IS in Syria drew attention away from potentially problematic legal issues in respect of Norway's involvement in out-of-area operations. Another is that if the media had learned from the shortcomings of earlier war coverage it could have played a constructive role by highlighting the legal concerns at the time of the discussion on whether Norway should be militarily involved in Syria. By building on earlier experiences in Afghanistan and Libya, the media coverage of the Norwegian war efforts in Syria could have used peace journalism by

going beyond the government propaganda and deliberating on the Norwegian military presence in such conflicts and whether it is counter-productive by contributing to the escalation of conflicts.

In the book *New Wars, New Media, New War Journalism* (2014), Stig Arne Nohrstedt and I examined how the legal issues were reported in Norwegian and Swedish coverage of the Gulf War and the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Our conclusion was a criticism of the shortcomings in the way Swedish and Norwegian media deal with legal issues: “The conclusions of our projects during a period of more than 20 years of research are that there are a number of professional shortcomings in war and conflict journalism. [...] Generally and continuously, war journalism fails to provide the general public with relevant and correct information concerning both military interventions and catastrophic war adventures and the juridical and human rights implications of these new wars” (Nohrstedt/Ottosen 2014: 197–198).

Why are the legal issues so important? Norway’s traditional position has been that all warfare should be conducted within the UN framework; therefore all military interventions should be based on UN Security Council resolutions (Leira 2007). In the case of Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, there seems to have gradually been less and less attention to international law among politicians and in the media. While he was still alive, the professor of law, Ståle Eskeland (1943–2015), argued that the Norwegian participation in Yugoslavia in 1999, in Iraq in 2003 and the Norwegian warfare in Libya in 2011, were a violation of the Norwegian Constitution, which states in Paragraph 28 that issues of going to war should be dealt with in an actual meeting between the government and the King (Eskeland 2011). In the case of Libya, the leaders of the political parties did not meet but were consulted on mobile phones. Eskeland (2011) claimed that all the military interventions mentioned above represented a violation of international law because of the lack of a clear UN mandate. He warned that Norway could be held accountable by the International Criminal Court (ICC), even if Norway has not been linked to war crimes and atrocities (Ottosen 2009: 218–220).

It is worth noting the discrepancy in views between Norwegian politicians and legal experts on the juridical issues related to Norway and the ‘new wars’. According to one of the most prominent Norwegian experts on international law, professor Geir Ulfstein, it can be questioned whether any of the abovementioned military interventions by Norway were within the framework of international law (Ulfstein 2015a). The contradictory views of legal experts and politicians could have been used by the media in the spirit of peace journalism to raise critical issues on the agenda in the public debate. One explanation of the absence of critical journalism could be the consensus of the elite over these issues. A unified elite often means less critical news journalism (McCombs 2004 [2001]). Another point could be that the use of enemy images in journalism could be to avoid criticism and defer attention from the mistakes and wrongdoing of your own government by blaming ‘the other side’, as Galtung suggests (Galtung 2002).

### **The Experience of Libya**

When the case of Syria came on the agenda in 2015, the Norwegian mainstream media missed the opportunity to use the recently published *Godal-utvalget* report on Afghanistan condemning the use of humanitarian rhetoric to explain Norway’s presence

in Afghanistan. The *Godal-utvalget* report frankly admitted that the ‘real reason’ for Norwegian participation in Afghanistan was to secure the close relationship with the US. When humanitarian rhetoric was used again in the propaganda for intervention in Syria, the media could have asked a simple question: When ‘humanitarian rhetoric’ in the Afghanistan case was based on the false assumption that the Norwegian military presence was helpful, and the same mistake was made in Libya, why should it be different in the Syrian case? And why did the media not ask critical questions about the relationship between Norway’s bombing of Libya and its effect on the ‘civil war’ in Syria? It is well known that radical Muslims after the fall of Gaddafi brought the weapons they took from the Libyan military to Syria and continued the fighting there (Tunander 2018). Why were Norwegian politicians not confronted with these questions?

As Johan Galtung has shown in his model of 2002, mainstream war coverage at present is violence-and-victory oriented. This is often linked to a dualistic method, a zero-sum game where the winner takes all (as in sports journalism). A potential consequence is that war journalism can contribute to escalating conflicts by reproducing propaganda and promoting war. In section IV of Galtung’s table (see appendix I), the aftermath of a conflict, in peace journalism terms, should put emphasis on “conflict resolution, reconstruction [and] reconciliation” whereas the ‘war journalism’ position would be “leaving for another war, return if the old war flares up again” (Galtung 2002: 272).

When Norway was asked to send special forces to Syria, the media could have taken the peace journalism approach and reminded Norway of its responsibility for leaving Libya as a failed state after Norwegian aircraft had dropped 588 bombs in 130 bombing raids (Ottosen/Slaatta 2015). To this day, the targets of these bombs are classified information, and the Norwegian public does not know the effect of the bombing and how much infrastructure was ruined and how many civilians were killed (Heier/Ottosen/Tvedt 2019).

The NATO bombing had an ambiguous UN mandate through Resolution 1973: a request for an immediate ceasefire, an end to the violence against civilians and the implementation of a ‘no-fly zone’ over Libya. The resolution gave permission to use ‘all possible means’ to protect civilians. When NATO took over the operation, it was clear that ‘regime change’ and the toppling of Gaddafi were the main purpose. This caused negative reactions from the major powers—Russia and China felt betrayed when ‘regime change’ came on the agenda and have since blocked all attempts to implement ‘the responsibility to protect’ (R2P) in Syria. The long-term outcome of the bombing of Libya could be that, through its own interpretation of Resolution 1973, NATO has forever undermined the possibilities of future action by the UN in the prevention of humanitarian disasters and attacks on civilians under the principle of R2P (UNGA 2005; Lippe 2019). In February 2012, Russia used its veto to stop a UN resolution from imposing sanctions against the Syrian government (Ottosen/Slaatta/Øfsti 2013).

Peace journalism is people-oriented in the sense that it focuses on the victims (often civilian casualties). It is also truth-oriented, in the sense that it reveals untruth on all sides and focuses on propaganda as a means of continuing wars (Galtung 2002: 261–270). Norwegian media have shown little interest in looking critically at the propaganda (before the bombing started); claiming that the main purpose of the military intervention was to ‘protect the civilian population’ in Benghazi. However, Norwegian media could

have referred to a report of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the British Parliament, which concludes that the propaganda about Benghazi was a lie and that the British government had “failed to identify that the threat to civilians was overstated and that the rebels included a significant Islamist element” (as quoted in Norton 2016). In his book *Libyakrigen* (2018), Ola Tunander documented that the attack on Libya was prepared months in advance and that Qatari security forces were on the ground preparing the invasion.

As there are clear parallels between the propaganda for ‘humanitarian intervention’ in the Libyan and Syrian cases, I will argue that it would have been constructive and helpful for the Norwegian public to discuss Norway’s role in light of the summary of the British Parliamentary investigation which concluded that the propaganda myth of NATO support for a ‘democratic nonviolent Libyan opposition’, often repeated by Norwegian politicians, was a *lie*. Ben Norton (2016) provides the following summary:

[i] The uprising—which was violent, not peaceful—would likely not have been successful were it not for foreign military intervention and aid. Foreign media outlets, particularly Qatar’s *Al Jazeera* and Saudi Arabia’s *Al Arabiya*, also spread unsubstantiated rumors about Gaddafi and the Libyan government (see Norton 2016).

[ii] The NATO bombing plunged Libya into a humanitarian disaster, killing thousands of people and displacing hundreds of thousands more, transforming Libya from the African country with the highest standard of living into a war-torn failed state (see Norton 2016).

### **Connection Between Libya and Syria**

In a study, Sjur Øvrebø and I investigated whether Norway’s newspaper *Aftenposten* looked to the Libyan experience when a parallel situation occurred in Syria on August 21, 2013, with claims that the civilian Syrian population should be protected from a ‘gas attack’ by the Assad government through military intervention (Ottosen/Øvrebø 2016). This is often referred to as ‘Obama’s red line’—if the Assad government crossed the ‘red line’ by ‘attacking its own people’, the US would consider military intervention. The military intervention halted because the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, lost a historic vote in Parliament to join forces with the US. An analysis of Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*’s coverage revealed that it supported military intervention, although to this day it has not been proven that ‘Assad’ was responsible for the ‘gas attack’. There was contradictory information available at the time. In a December 2013 essay in the *London Review of Books*, the Pulitzer prizewinner and US-based investigative reporter Seymour M. Hersh blamed the media for too easily buying President Obama’s conclusion that the Assad government was behind the attack (Hersh 2013). Even though the Assad government was identified as the most likely perpetrator at the time, Hersh’s arguments only became known to the readers of *Aftenposten* several months later. In an interview with Hersh on April 15, 2014, *Aftenposten*’s US correspondent Kristoffer Rønneberg quoted him going even further than he had in his article in the *London Review of Books*, identifying the rebels and Turkish intelligence

and military as most likely to be responsible for the 'sarin gas attack' (*Aftenposten*: April 15, 2014; as quoted in Ottosen/Øvrebø 2016).

Rather than critically addressing the uncertainty around the 'gas attack', the enemy images of president Assad and of IS were used to make a case for Western intervention in Syria (Ottosen/Øvrebø 2016).

### Norwegian Parliamentary Report

In 2017, the Norwegian Parliament appointed a group led by former Foreign Minister Jan Petersen to evaluate the warfare in Libya. The report was presented in September 2018 (*Libya-utvalget* 2018). On January 8, 2019, the Foreign Minister Ine Marie Eriksen suggested sending the report to the Foreign and Defense Committees, to prepare a discussion in Parliament. This means that seven years after Norwegian planes dropped bombs over Libya, this war experience has still not been properly debated by Norwegian politicians. For some reason, the above-mentioned crucial facts in the British report were not mentioned in the Norwegian report. When the Norwegian report passed *Stortinget* in April 2019, it was almost without critical debate. The same political parties which went to war and bombed Libya to a failed state 'freed themselves' from any wrongdoing (Ottosen 2019).

### Syria as a Case Study

The unrest in the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' of 2011 escalated into a full-scale 'civil war' in 2012. More than 5,000 [*sic*] armed groups tried in vain to 'unite' their forces (Hellestveit 2017). When all efforts to launch a R2P operation with a UN mandate failed, Russia sent troops to support the Assad government (2015–). The US countered by establishing 'Operation Inherent Resolve' (2014–; without a UN mandate) to fight IS and other Islamist groups in Iraq and Syria. Norway joined 'Operation Inherent Resolve' and was to contribute by sending forces to Iraq in 2014. Norwegian troops supported the Iraqi defense forces with training. There was no UN mandate for this, but since the Norwegian forces were sent at the request of the Iraqi government, most legal experts say this operation was legal and complied with the UN Charter (Hellestveit 2017).

In this article, I only discuss the Norwegian operation in *Syria*, as its legal status is much more controversial and thus more relevant to the research question. The timeline looks like this:

[i] In 2014, Prime Minister Erna Solberg publicly makes it clear that Norway will *not* send troops to Syria.

[ii] In December 2015, the US and France ask for Norway to contribute aircraft and pilots. After some hesitation, Norway *declines*.

[iii] In May 2016, upon request from the US, as part of 'Operation Inherent Resolve', Norway sends 60 special forces to train opposition groups in bases in Jordan *near* the Syrian border.

[iv] In July 2016, the government takes a new decision (with little public attention and no transparency), allowing the Norwegian forces to *cross* the border from Jordan to Syria.

[v] On May 20, 2017, several foreign news reports claim that Norwegian forces had *crossed* the border between Jordan and Syria. There is no official statement from the Norwegian government and little media attention.

[vi] In February 2018, the Norwegian troops *return* to Jordan with little media interest.

## Two Case Studies

The two case studies are relevant to the research question. Case 1 covers December 2015 to January 2016, when Norway was asked to send aircraft and pilots to Syria. After hesitating for a few weeks, the Norwegian government said ‘no’. Case 2 covers May 2017 to March 2018, when a new request was sent to Norway to contribute troops in Syria. There was little public debate around this, and the Norwegian people learned from a few news reports that Norwegian troops had crossed the border to Syria in May 2017.<sup>2</sup> The outcomes of case 1 have recently been published as a journal article in Norwegian in *Internasjonal Politikk* (Ottosen/Rudsengen 2018).

Case 2 has been published as an exam assignment at Oslo Metropolitan University (Bing 2018). The theory, method, research design and the results of these two projects are not directly comparable. As the method and design are explained in detail in the two publications, I will not go in detail here. Interested readers can consult these two publications (Ottosen/Rudsengen 2018; Bing 2018). What the two projects have in common is, that in different ways, they address the legal issues involved in Norwegian participation in Syria. I will use the results from the legal analyses in these publications and place them in a new context here, and then relate them to the research question in this article.

### Case Study 1—The Coverage of the Request to Send Norwegian Planes and Pilots in the Period from December 2015 to January 2016

The question is: Could the media have played a more independent and critical role, based on the principles of peace journalism, when Norway was asked to contribute militarily to Syria in 2015? The few weeks before Norway turned down the request could be the most appropriate period for a discussion of the legal principles involved.

I will argue that the Norwegian media should take an independent stand in the case of Syria, based on the principles of the UN Charter. The Norwegian media should also address the principles of peace journalism and the long-term consequences of potential new military interventions by Norway, rather than automatically be loyal to the Norwegian government.

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<sup>2</sup> Both these cases have been part of my ongoing research on Norway’s role in ‘new wars’. Both projects have been conducted by my research assistants under my supervision.

### *Case Study I—Background*

When France and the US asked Norway to participate in the bombing of Syria, professor Geir Ulfstein reminded us of Norway's lack of respect for international law in connection with the Afghanistan war in 2001, the Iraq war in 2003 (when Norwegian soldiers supported British troops towards the end of the war) and in Libya in 2011 (Ulfstein 2015b). The Norwegian Foreign Ministry claimed in a declaration that the Norwegian contribution in Syria was 'legal' (UD 2016). This was contested by another legal expert, Gro Nystuen, who stated: "When you use military force on another country's soil against the ruling government, you must have a [UN] mandate or be invited. Assad has not invited Norway to Syria. The UN resolution to fight IS does not authorize ground forces in Syria" (as quoted in Melgård/Prestegård 2016). With these statements, Norwegian journalists were given a solid juridical background for asking critical questions of the government.

As part of an ongoing research project called 'Norway and the New Wars', my research assistant Belinda Jørandli Rudsengen and I investigated how the Norwegian newspapers *Aftenposten*, *Dagbladet*, *Dagsavisen*, *Klassekampen*, and *Verdens Gang* [VG] covered the request from the US to participate with troops in the war against IS in Syria in 2015–2016.<sup>3</sup> As mentioned earlier, the main focus in the study is how the media dealt with legal issues.

The time of the analysis was December 8, 2015, to January 22, 2016. The articles were identified by searching in the *Retriever* database, covering most Norwegian newspapers. The search words and the process of choosing the relevant articles for the study are explained in more detail in the above-mentioned publication (Ottosen/Rudsengen 2018). The articles were categorized in a quantitative content analysis—whether they are 'critical of participation without a UN mandate', 'critical anyway', 'positive with a UN mandate', 'positive anyway', 'neutral', or 'other'. The research questions were intended to see how the media dealt with the legal issues when Norway was formally asked to send troops to Syria:

[RQ1]—Did the media take a position when Norway was asked to contribute to the warfare against IS in Syria [in December 2015]?

[RQ2]—Did the media address the legal aspects when Norway was asked to contribute troops in Syria in December 2015?

### *Case Study I—Findings*

A total of 30 articles in the five newspapers (see appendix II) were identified as relevant for the research questions. Most were news articles. Only two editorials took a clear stand on the request of Norwegian military support for the war against IS in Syria. The following is a short summary of the results (for more details, see Ottosen/Rudsengen 2018):

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<sup>3</sup> The full report, with more detailed empirical evidence is published in Ottosen/Rudsengen 2018.



*Aftenposten* is Norway's biggest newspaper, with a conservative-centrist orientation. In the period under investigation, it carried only four texts dealing with Norwegian participation in the war against IS in Syria. The articles were evenly divided between criticism and neutrality. This was surprising, as *Aftenposten* has traditionally been supportive of US warfare.

*Dagbladet* is a traditional liberal newspaper. Of the three articles *Dagbladet* published about Norwegian participation in Syria during the period of the survey, none shows any clear tendency. Two were in the 'neutral' category, while one is placed in the category 'others'.

*Dagsavisen* has a background as a social-democratic party newspaper with a liberal/left-wing orientation. Of its seven articles, five were 'neutral', one critical of 'without a UN mandate' and one editorial commentary was 'critical, regardless of a UN mandate'.

*Klassekampen* has a left-wing orientation and has traditionally been the newspaper with the most critical attitude towards Norway's participation in the global 'War on Terror' (WoT). With a total of twelve, *Klassekampen* was the newspaper in the sample with the most articles in the period under investigation. Five of these were 'neutral' and five 'critical'. One was 'positive, regardless of a UN mandate', and one 'negative'. *Klassekampen* had two editorials, both 'neutral', with no clear position.

*Verdens Gang*, or *VG*, is a tabloid with a conservative pro-US orientation, and the only daily in Norway supporting the invasion of Iraq. Of the four published articles in the period, three were news articles with 'neutral' framing and one was 'positive, regardless of a UN media mandate'.

### *Case Study 1—Summary*

The majority of the articles were news articles with no clear position on the issue of Norwegian military presence in Syria. This can be explained partly by the fact that most of the articles in the sample were news articles, and the news genre in traditional journalistic norms is expected to be balanced and neutral (McCombs 2004 [2001]). *Dagsavisen* was the only newspaper with an editorial commentary which took a clear stand against the military presence in Syria, regardless of a UN mandate.

A separate investigation of the use of sources shows a clear over-representation of elite sources such as military officials, experts and politicians (for details, see Ottosen/Rudsengen 2018). The conclusion is that the selected newspapers hardly used the window of opportunity to undertake a critical investigation of Norwegian participation before the Norwegian government decided to send troops in June 2016.

### *Case Study 1—Could Peace Journalism Have Made a Difference?*

I will discuss below whether the media used the 'window of opportunity'—in the period before the decision to send troops to Syria in June 2016—to consider earlier military

interventions, including the bombing of Libya. As it was an open question whether Norway would send troops this time, the opportunity could have been used to raise critical awareness in the public mind about possible negative consequences. The UN Charter is the most important document for regulating the behavior of nation states in relation to issues of war and peace—and it seems highly relevant to me that journalists and the media should draw attention to legal issues when a country is being asked to contribute to a war. Besides the ‘big questions’ relating to article 33 about conditions for war and the role of the Security Council, the issue of respect for the sovereignty of member states mentioned in article 2 is relevant. In article 1 of the UN Charter, respect for the sovereignty of other states is essential to maintaining peace and security as the overall most important goal of the member states (Ebbing 2017).

In the 30 articles analyzed (see appendix II), this kind of constructive legal and principled approach is almost totally absent, except for the one editorial commentary in *Dagsavisen* clearly opposing Norwegian participation in the warfare. Overall, the need for a UN mandate to take part in military activities is vaguely mentioned—if at all. How can this lack of principled approach be explained?

### **Case Study 2—The Coverage of Norwegian Military Presence in the Period from May 2017 to March 2018**

In 2017, a new request was made, and Norway sent special forces from Jordan to Syria without drawing much public attention.

The research question in this case study was: How did the Norwegian press address the legal aspects of the coverage of Norwegian forces in Syria? The investigation conducted by my research assistant Ida Bing covered the period from May 20, 2017, to February 18, 2018, when the Norwegian soldiers were withdrawn from Syria. Relevant keywords in the *Retriever* database covering most Norwegian newspapers identified 59 articles relevant to the research question.<sup>4</sup>

The method in this part of the study was a quantitative content analysis based on Teun A. van Dijk's (1988) ‘main story’ (‘title’, ‘lead’ and ‘beginning’ of an article). As a research tool, pre-defined positions on the legal issues were introduced; then the article was read and placed in the most relevant category. The options were: ‘supportive, regardless’ (SU); ‘supportive, based on international law’ (SF); ‘critical, regardless’ (KU); ‘critical, based on international law’ (KF); ‘neutral’ (N) and ‘other’ (A). Each category is explained in table 1:

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<sup>4</sup> For more details on coding, empirical findings etc., see Bing 2018.

Tendency	Code	Explanation
‘Supportive, regardless’	SU	Supportive of Norwegian soldiers in Syria, regardless of whether the contribution is rooted in international law.
‘Supportive, based on international law’	SF	Supportive of Norwegian soldiers in Syria, given that it is rooted in international law.
‘Critical, regardless’	KU	Shows a critical trend, regardless of whether the contribution is rooted in international law.
‘Critical, based on international law’	KF	Critical to the presence of the soldiers or to Norwegian participation in general.
‘Neutral’	N	Articles with no clear tendency. The sources do not take a stand, or the different sides are discussed in a balanced manner.
‘Other’	A	Articles that deal with Norway’s military contribution in Syria, but do not take up intl. law or show any position, for or against.

**Table 1.** Categories of the second case study.

The use of sources was addressed by identifying and counting the sources used in each article. Also considered was whether the experience of Libya was mentioned in the article. The whole coding is presented in a separate report, available upon request. In the following, I only present a short summary.

### *Case Study 2—Background*

That for several months from 2017 to 2018, Norway had troops on the ground in Syria created little attention in the media. This should normally be a major news issue, but the Norwegian media was astonishingly quiet. A number of critical questions should have been raised to the government. Why are the troops there, who are they fighting for, and who are they fighting against? And, most importantly, is this presence justifiable according to international law?

Those who followed international websites covering Syria could read that on May 20, 2017, Norwegian special forces crossed the border from Jordan into Syria.

My research assistant Ida Bing has investigated how the Norwegian media covered this.<sup>5</sup> As background, we refer to an interview with the Norwegian News Agency (*NTB* [*Norsk Telegrambyrå*]: September 5, 2014; see *NTB* 2014), in which the Norwegian Prime Minister, Erna Solberg, said that it was unacceptable for Norwegian forces to

<sup>5</sup> Many thanks to my research assistant Ida Bing. The research report is also available in her thesis, where the methodological and theoretical issues are explained in more detail (Bing 2018).

participate militarily in Syria. Just a month later, it became known that the extended foreign and constitutional committee in *Stortinget* had changed its position and was now open to Norwegian military participation in Syria. We can only speculate about what kind of pressure from the US persuaded Norwegian politicians to change their position. The 'civil war' in Syria had started in 2011 as a 'political rebellion' against Bashar al-Assad's government. It was hoped that a 'democratic opposition' would win, but we know now that it were Islamist rebels who took the initiative in the armed struggle against Assad, and that they were supported by countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. After control of large parts of Syria for some time by the terrorist organization IS, the country is fragmented. In practical terms, the major powers Russia and the US took part in a 'proxy war' in Syria. The question, then, is how Norwegian forces could contribute in this chaos. The US launched 'Operation Inherent Resolve' to drive out IS and secure its own geopolitical interests in the region. Norway has traditionally held the position that we take part in military action where there is a UN mandate. In Syria, most experts said there was no legal mandate. Norway has diplomatic relations with the Assad government, and has protested against foreign military presence in the country. A normal interpretation of international law is that Norway thus violates international law when it supports armed struggle on the ground in Syria. In a note from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, it was stated that the Norwegian authorities believe UN Security Council Resolution 2249 gives the right to fight against IS in Iraq and Syria according to the principle of self-defense. However, the situations in Iraq and in Syria are quite different. The Iraqi government *invited* the Norwegian forces, whereas the Assad government has *protested* against their presence. Belinda Jørandli Rudsengen (2016) has demonstrated in a Master thesis that Norwegian media tend to avoid dealing with such complex issues of international law.

The Norwegian government was silent about the presence of Norwegian special forces, and at the time there was no debate in *Stortinget*, and scant media attention. The left-wing newspapers carried some critical reports about the Norwegian soldiers after they had returned to their bases in Jordan. One story claimed that Norwegian soldiers had trained Islamist groups involved in human rights violations (*Klassekampen*: August 29, 2018; see Shanmugaratnam 2018). The Norwegian Minister of Defense, Inge Marie Søreide, publicly stated, after the troops were withdrawn, that 'of course' Norway's presence was within the framework of international law (*Klassekampen*: June 16, 2017; see Braanen 2017). The legality is however disputed by experts. In her book *Syria* (2017), Cecilie Hellestveit writes that Norwegian forces might end up supporting armed struggle against the Assad government, which would clearly be a violation of international law since Norway still has diplomatic relations with Assad's regime (Hellestveit 2017).

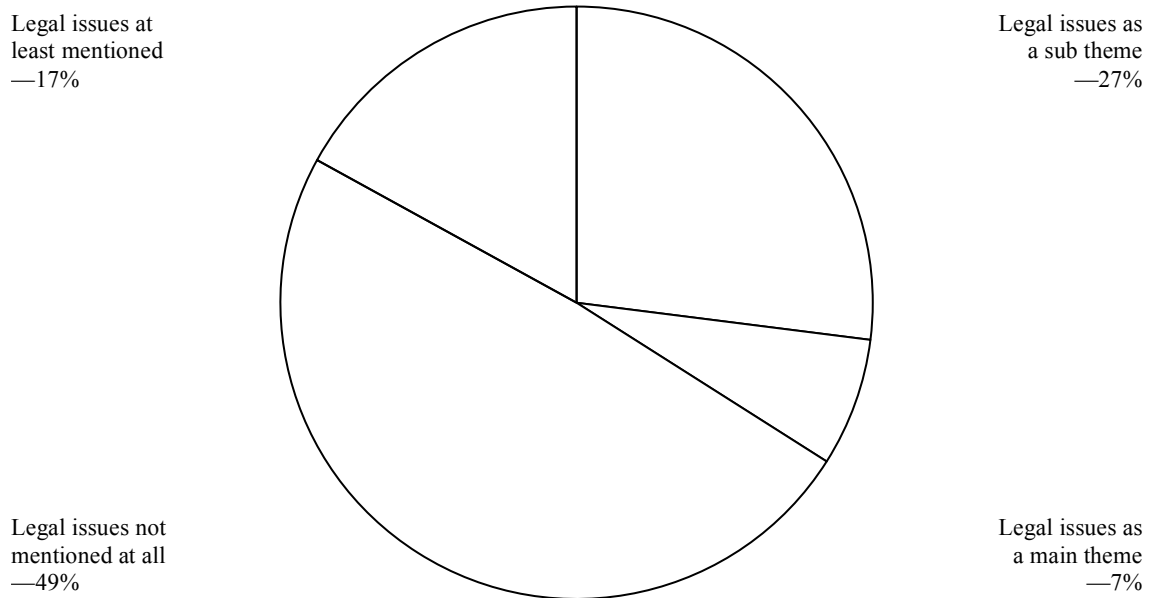
### *Case Study 2—Findings*

The total overview of the coding based on the predefined positions on the conditions for Norwegian military presence in Syria can be found in table 2:

Tendency	Count	Per cent
‘Critical, regardless’	22	37.3
‘Neutral’	19	32.2
‘Critical, based on international law’	11	18.6
‘Other’	4	6.8
‘Supportive, based on international law’	2	3.4
‘Supportive, regardless’	1	1.7

**Table 2.** Findings of the second case study: Coding.

Investigating the whole sample, we found that 22 articles referred directly to the presence of Norwegian forces in Syria. Our conclusion is that this is a low number, given the controversial fact that the troops were there without a UN mandate. Half of the articles were critical to the Norwegian presence because of the lack of a UN mandate (see table 2). Three articles showed different degrees of support for the Norwegian presence and 19 were ‘neutral’.



**Figure 1.** Findings of the second case study: International law as a theme.

Half of the articles (49 per cent) did not mention the legal issues at all; only 7 per cent had legal issues as a main theme; further 44 per cent do at least mention legality, or have it as a sub-theme. The conclusion is that the small amount of coverage through all these months did not draw attention to the legality of the Norwegian presence in Syria. This supports findings from previous research which show that Norwegian media under-report legal aspects of Norway's warfare abroad (Nohrstedt/Ottosen 2014; 2017).

Because the 'Syrian rebellion' started around the time of the bombing of Libya in 2011, we also look into whether the media covering Syria drew any connection between the war in Libya (where Norway participated actively in the bombing) and the rebellion in Syria. A minority of the articles (20 per cent) mentioned such a connection, but the majority did not. Of the articles, 60 per cent were news articles and the rest were commentaries and letters to the editor. One of the findings of the survey is that critical reflections on the Norwegian military presence are found in commentaries rather than in news articles. The day Norwegian soldiers crossed the border, there was only one news article mentioning it. In most of the articles, the Norwegian military presence was not the main story (van Dijk 1988). One important reason was of course that there was a great deal of secrecy around the operation, but as it was controversial that should be a reason for informed politicians to raise a public debate. The *Godal-utvalget* white paper summarizing the Norwegian military presence in Afghanistan from 2001 (*Godal-utvalget* 2016) points out as a problem that there was a lack of debate and too much consensus in the security policy.

#### *Case Study 2—Summary*

We can conclude that the coverage in the Norwegian media of the Norwegian forces in Syria has barely provided basic facts about what the forces have been involved in on the ground. Although most of the articles were critical of the Norwegian presence in Syria, the coverage of legal issues was too superficial to create a public discourse. In the period after our investigation period, the newspaper *Klassekampen* documented that the Norwegian soldiers gave practical support to so-called 'moderate Islamist' groups. Although the 'main purpose of the mission' was to fight IS, these forces said openly that they were also fighting against the Assad regime (*Klassekampen*: August 29, 2018; see Shanmugaratnam 2018). Why did this not create a huge public debate? Independent legal experts claim that Norway could, potentially, be involved in military incidents, including confrontation with Syrian—and even Russian—forces that could spiral out of control. A relevant question from a critical journalist could be about the harm this could cause to bilateral relations in the tense situation of 'the new cold war' on the border between Russia and Norway. The official Norwegian position is to endorse the 'moderate Syrian supporters'—independent commentators, on the other hand, claim that it is no longer realistic to talk about a 'moderate Syrian opposition'. In practice, the opposition against the Assad government consists of Islamist groups, in many cases with links to al Qaeda and IS (Hellestveit 2017). Could it be that enemy images of Assad and IS made it possible for the Norwegian government and the media to ignore the legal issues? Rather than discuss problems such as the lack of a UN mandate, and military actions that could cause violations of human rights, the focus is on the 'evil-doers', Assad and IS. The paradox that Norwegian forces have ended up on one 'evil

side’—Islamist groups— against ‘the other’—Assad—must be made a key part of the follow-up investigation, with in-depth interviews with editors and journalists.

### *Case Study 2—Could Peace Journalism Have Made a Difference?*

In his 2002 model for peace journalism, Johan Galtung makes a point of transparency. The secrecy and lack of openness of the Norwegian government could have been a gift for Norwegian journalists. When legal experts were so clear about the lack of a legal mandate, and with the recent experience of Libya in mind, they could have raised some tough questions to the government. Galtung warns against a lack of historical context and ‘leaving for another war’ without evaluating the consequences of previous ones. It is hard to understand, after the lack of results in Afghanistan and the damage done in Libya, that Norwegian journalists were not alert and ready with searching questions when the Syrian case came up.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

The two case studies presented here reveal that Norwegian media seemed unable to adopt peace journalism when Norway was asked by ‘our ally’—the US—to take part in new ‘out-of-area operations’. When President Trump decided to bomb Syria in response to a ‘gas attack’ on April 6, 2017, the US fired more than 50 cruise missiles at a Syrian airfield—even though there was no clear evidence that the Assad regime<sup>6</sup> was responsible for the attack. Rather than taking the peace journalism approach, contextualising the event and recalling earlier events such as the Libyan bombing and the unsolved August 21, 2013 ‘gas attack’, *Aftenposten* supported Trump’s bombing in an editorial (*Aftenposten*: April 8, 2017; see Eilertsen 2017). Professors Malcolm Langford and Geir Ulfstein had to remind *Aftenposten* that the bombing was a violation of UN Charter’s article 2, point 4 (*Aftenposten*: April 11, 2017; see Langford/Ulfstein 2017). *Aftenposten* does not live up to the expectations of critical journalism (Galtung 2002).

The Norwegian media could have used the window of opportunity before the troops were sent in order to warn against the danger, including the risk of breaking international law. In a letter to the editor of *Klassekampen*, Cecilie Hellestveit (2015) suggests several scenarios that the media could have picked up on, or—even better—suggested themselves, in light of the negative experience in Libya. Hellestveit reminds us of three possible Norwegian military contributions that are within the framework of international law:

[i] An invitation from the Assad regime<sup>6</sup> to support the fight against IS (the most unlikely scenario as it could imply an alliance with Russian forces against NATO) (see Hellestveit 2015).

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<sup>6</sup> *Editorial comment* by Christian Beyer: Throughout the text, expressions such as ‘Gaddafi regime’, ‘Gaddafi’s Libya’—referring to the [Great] Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya—; or ‘Assad regime’, ‘Assad’s regime’, ‘Assad’s Syria’—referring to the Syrian Arab Republic—appear by choice of the author; and in line with the terminology and vocabulary of certain referenced bibliographical sources.

[ii] The UN Security Council has ruled that self-defense against IS could be legal. But IS has not attacked Norway, and Norwegian forces cannot fight in Syria against the will of the Assad regime<sup>6</sup> (which has, in fact, protested against Norway's involvement) (see Hellestveit 2015).

[iii] A mandate from the Security Council could make it legal to fight in Syria, according to Chapter VII. No such mandate exists, however, as the US decided to start bombing in September 2014 before a meeting in the UN Security Council. In a separate ruling on Resolution 2249, the Security Council did authorize strikes against IS on Syrian territory, but the conditions are limited and unless the Norwegian government is open about their activities this ruling cannot be used (see Hellestveit 2015).

Hellestveit warns that Norwegian troops might end up in a conflict with Syrian and Russian forces, and thereby support Saudi Arabia—and the US by proxy. This could create a potentially dangerous situation with our neighbor Russia (Hellestveit 2015).

To avoid putting Norway in a dangerous situation, the Norwegian media could have chosen a peace journalism approach by defining 'conflict/war as a problem' and suggested negotiations (Galtung 2002). By being *proactive* and suggesting peace talks, Norway could return to its traditional position on foreign and security policy within the framework of the UN—but it seems, instead, that the media passively watch Norway trapped in a destructive pattern, almost sleepwalking into a situation with the potential to contribute to a conflict escalating out of control.

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## Biographical Note

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**Appendix I—Peace/Conflict Journalism; War/Violence Journalism (Galtung 2002)**

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**Peace/Conflict Journalism**

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**War/Violence Journalism**

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**I—Peace/Conflict-Oriented**

Explore conflict *formation*;  
*x* parties, *y* goals, *z* issues;  
 general 'win-win' orientation.

Open space, open time;  
 causes and outcomes anywhere,  
 including in history/culture.

Making conflicts transparent.

Giving voice to all parties;  
 empathy and understanding.

See conflict/war as a problem;  
 focus on conflict creativity.

Humanization of all sides  
 (regardless).

*Proactive*: Prevention before any  
 violence/war occurs.

Focus on invisible effects of violence  
 (trauma and glory, damage to structure/culture).

**I—War/Violence-Oriented**

Focus on conflict arena;  
 2 parties, 1 goal ('win'), 1 issue ('war');  
 general 'zero-sum' orientation.

Closed space, closed time;  
 causes and exits in arena,  
 'who threw the first stone?'

Making wars opaque/secret.

'Us–Them' journalism;  
 propaganda, voice for 'Us', only.

See 'Them' as the problem;  
 focus on who 'prevails' in war.

Dehumanization of 'Them'  
 (more so the worse the weapon).

*Reactive*: Waiting for  
 violence before reporting.

Focus only on visible effects of violence  
 (killed, wounded and material damage).

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**II—Truth-Oriented**

Expose untruths on all sides.

Uncover all cover-ups.

**II—Propaganda-Oriented**

Expose 'their' untruths.

Help 'our' cover-ups and lies.

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**III—People-Oriented**

Focus on suffering all over:  
 on women, the aged, children,  
 giving voice to the voiceless.

Naming all evil-doers.

Focus on peacemakers among the people.

**III—Elite-Oriented**

Focus on 'our' suffering;  
 on able-bodied elite males,  
 being their own mouthpiece.

Naming 'their' evil-doers.

Focus on 'elite peacemakers'.

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**IV—Solution-Oriented**

Peace = non-violence + creativity.

Highlight peace initiatives  
 to prevent more war.

Focus on structure, culture,  
 the peaceful society.

*Aftermath*: Sincere interest;  
 resolution, reconstruction, reconciliation.

**IV—Victory-Oriented**

Peace = victory + ceasefire.

Conceal peace initiatives  
 before victory is at hand.

Focus on treaty, institution,  
 the controlled society.

*Aftermath*: Leave for another war;  
 return if the old war flares up again.

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## Appendix II—The Analyzed Articles of Case Study 1 (Ottosen/Rudsengen 2018)

Newspaper and Date	Source and Title
<b>I—Aftenposten</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>Retriever search; n=4, N=30</b></span>	
December 8, 2015	“Stortingspolitikere advarer mot å bidra militært i Syria”
December 8, 2015	“USA ber Norge gå inn i krigen mot IS i Syria”
December 9, 2015	“Militært bidrag må være [en] del av en bred strategi”
December 14, 2015	“Stor skepsis til norske flyangrep”
<b>II—Dagbladet</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>Retriever search; n=3, N=30</b></span>	
December 9, 2015	[quote] “Farligere enn bombingene i Libya”
December 10, 2015	“Vil ha syriske flyktning[s]-soldater”
December 17, 2015	“Frykter et rære samfunn”
<b>III—Dagsavisen</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>Retriever search; n=7, N=30</b></span>	
December 9, 2015	“Advarer mot militærmakt”
December 9, 2015	[quote] “Vanskelig for Norge å si nei”
December 14, 2015	“Syria etter bombene”
December 16, 2015	“Bør Norge bidra mer i kampen mot IS?”
December 23, 2015	[NTB] [quote] “Ikke norske fly til Syria”
December 29, 2015	“Norge, Syria og Libya”
January 19, 2016	[NTB] “Norge utelukker ikke økt innsats mot IS i 2016”
<b>IV—Klassekampen</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>Retriever search; n=12, N=30</b></span>	
December 9, 2015	“Russisk rulett i Syria”
December 10, 2015	“De kan bli lovlige IS-mål”
December 10, 2015	“Norge må si nei”
December 11, 2015	“Frp kvier seg for krigen”
December 11, 2015	[sic] “Stortinget”
December 12, 2015	“Vil sende bakkestyrker”
December 12, 2015	[sic] “Syria-bidrag”
December 15, 2015	“Syria-krigen og folkeretten”
December 19, 2015	“Vil ikke krige i Syria”
December 21, 2015	“Folket er delt om Syria”
December 22, 2015	“Vil ikke sende kampfly”
December 23, 2015	“Må holde flyene hjemme”
<b>V—Verdens Gang</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>Retriever search; n=4, N=30</b></span>	
December 8, 2015	“USA ber Norge delta i krigen mot IS”
December 9, 2015	“Dette kan bli Norges IS-bidrag”
December 22, 2015	[quote] “IS er ikke en gruppe vi kan forhandle med”
January 16, 2016	“Norge sier[:] Nei til jagerfly i IS-krig[en]”



# THE COSTLY AND DEMANDING— EXPLORING SOLUTION-BASED OTHERING OF ‘NON-EUROPEAN IMMIGRANTS’ IN NORWEGIAN POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Søren Mosgaard Andreassen (UiT The Arctic University of Norway)

**Abstract:** *This article examines the Norwegian scholarly report titled NOU 2017:2—Integration and Trust: Long-Term Consequences of High Immigration (English translation; chapter 1.1) to unpack how ‘non-European immigrants’ are constructed as an economic and social challenge for the welfare state. Principles from discourse theory (DT) and the conceptual framework of othering are applied to discuss how the designation of this category of people as objects of qualification/integration may serve to reify racialized relations of inferiorized difference between white Norwegian majorities and societal newcomers from the Global South. The author tracks this dynamic to a discourse in which the relationship between the Norwegian state and immigrants from countries outside of Europe is organized as a binary opposition between a vulnerable self and an overwhelming, inherently faceless ‘other’. It is suggested that the othering enabled in the NOU (Norges Offentlige Utredninger) report can be viewed as a specific production of monstrosity: a horror-vision of a failing, unintegrated welfare state that needs safeguarding against abnormal, ‘huge waves’ of immigrants from ‘further south’. The argument is finally presented that the report’s vision of integration, by being coded with the logic of presenting a necessary response to an existential threat to welfare state structures, engenders a precarious form of social distancing that is theorized as solution-based othering.*

**Keywords:** *immigrants; immigration; othering; integration; solution models; NOU.*


## Introduction

A critique does not consist in saying that things aren’t good the way they are. It consists in seeing on just what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established and unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based [...]. To do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy (Foucault 2000 [1981]: 456).

That a social democratic government has succeeded, after the whole of the last century, in making ‘asylum seekers’ and ‘refugees’ into monster words is almost unbelievable (Cohen 2000: 43).

In 2015, unprecedented numbers of people sought refuge from violent conflicts and applied for asylum in Norway (NOU 2017:2: 11). The so-called refugee crisis sparked heated political debate regarding the extent to which ‘cultural differences’ and rising public expenses associated with integrative processes of qualification would jeopardize welfare state institutions. These political discussions led to a government commissioned report titled *Integration and Trust: Long-Term Consequences of High Immigration*,

Nordlit 42: *Manufacturing Monsters*, 2019. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.7557/13.5018>.

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published on February 1, 2017. With special emphasis on refugees, this report was mandated to assess “to what extent a persistent high level of immigration may influence solidarity and trust in Norway and the importance of differences in terms of culture and values” (ibid.: 3). The report thus raises questions about causal relations between complex social phenomena such as public trust and ‘cultural differences’. More importantly, it brings up questions about how othering may emerge as a byproduct of the very discursive processes used to designate refugees and ‘non-European immigrants’ as objects of integration, qualification, and so-called safeguarding mechanisms deemed crucial for the continued existence of the Norwegian model.

With these considerations in mind this article examines how ‘non-European immigrants’<sup>1</sup> (henceforth abbreviated and referred to as ‘NEIs’) and their relation to the Norwegian welfare state are constructed in the *NOU 2017:2* report. I concentrate on three analytical trajectories. Firstly, I contextualize my enquiry with existing bodies of research concerned with the political operationalization of the concept of ‘integration’. This is done to situate the report’s key concept in a wider Scandinavian context and to elaborate on how it may function as a central discursive instrument to render NEIs governable. Likewise, it is discussed how the concept of integration represents a hegemonic pattern of racialized reasoning influential in structuring the “universe of the undiscussed and undisputed” (Bourdieu 1977 [1972]: 170) about NEI identities.

Secondly, I analyze textual representations of the relationship between the NEI category and the Norwegian state in the report. In doing so I apply discourse theory (DT) based on the writings of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001 [1985]) to examine specifically how the use of metaphors and chains of equivalence and difference gradually structure a discourse of (dis)qualification in which the inclusion of NEIs is presented as contingent on costly and demanding processes of ‘qualification’. As a means to unpack the discourse of (dis)qualification, and the socio-cultural position it reflects, I then examine how two mutually exclusive subject positions of vulnerable self/overwhelming ‘other’ configure a network of relations between the Norwegian state, its white majorities, and NEIs. I argue here that the report’s vision of integration may reproduce a racialized hierarchy between white Norwegian majorities and NEIs by being coded as a key condition for inclusion, societal cohesion, and thus a solution to a pressing, societal problem. I conceptualize this dynamic as ‘solution-based othering’.

Finally, I discuss how the discourse of (dis)qualification may be understood as a securitization move by framing NEIs, and the challenge of integration, as an existential threat to welfare state structures. By constructing NEIs as risk objects of qualification, the *NOU 2017:2* report may consequently invite problematic forms of subordinated inclusion insofar as the latter are manufactured as a culturally/professionally inferior, costly, and inherently abnormal element in the welfare state.

### **Methodological and Analytical Trajectories**

As of yet, no study has drawn attention to how the *NOU 2017:2* report constructs NEIs and how the emergence of a discourse about ‘qualification’ may function as a

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<sup>1</sup> The report often uses the cover term ‘immigrant’ to refer to refugees as well as migrants “from conflict-ravaged and maladministered countries further south” (*NOU 2017:2*: 1). I use the abbreviation ‘NEIs’ to refer to these categories of people, refugees and immigrants from countries outside of Europe, that are grouped together and designated as an object of integration/qualification in the report.



racialized<sup>2</sup> technology of representation. From this standpoint, structural racism and discrimination may work not only through direct processes of exclusion and systemic (re)productions of marginalized subject positions. Structural racism<sup>3</sup> may also occur through less obvious mechanisms of subordinated inclusion in which people designated as objects of integration have to aspire to a number of (perhaps unachievable) regulatory ideals to be worthy of egalitarian belonging in the Norwegian welfare state.

The aim here is to unpack how the project of qualification outlined in the *NOU 2017:2* report may constitute othering of NEIs and contribute to construct them as part of what is outside the discourse about the ‘ideal’ welfare state and what we may term ‘legitimate Norwegianess’. This serves to show how the process of designating NEIs as objects of qualification can indeed be seen as a form of ‘monstering’ precisely because they are created as a monolithic, border-breaching figure from the margin<sup>4</sup> that above all poses the threat of instability and the blurring/pollution of boundaries between a vulnerable, qualified, ‘European’ inside and a chaotic, unqualified, ‘non-European’ outside. And this, one could argue, is what monsters and their manufacture are all about.

Specifically, I approach these issues by examining how discursive ‘closure’ in the reading of NEIs is enabled in the report, i.e. how the text gradually narrows down the possible and plausible interpretations of the relationship between NEIs and the welfare state. This is also why I see it as relevant to study the report with the discourse theoretical tools provided by Laclau and Mouffe (2001 [1985]). Within their reading, discourse is defined as a “structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice” and “an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of difference, to construct a center. We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, *nodal points*” (ibid.: 112–113). Consequently, discourse is understood as an attempt to give meaning to a social formation, for example identities, by arranging a particular network of relations between descriptive concepts (termed ‘elements’) and thus arrest the ever-present “flow of differences” around particular privileged discursive points (ibid.: 115; Laclau 1990: 99–100). While nodal points often represent ‘empty signifiers’ (terms that mean very little in and by themselves), they are made meaningful through chains of equivalence and difference that link different elements and weave together specific conceptual spaces and establish identities relationally (Johansson 2011: 199).

Hence, a particular discourse on immigration is an attempt to stabilize the horizon of plausibility for what can be expressed and thought about the phenomenon by situating it within an enclosed field of other signifiers, such as integration, qualification, and structural upheaval. This outlook, in which identities are temporarily fixed configurations of inherently unstable meaning, invites analysis of how discursive ‘closure’ actually work, i.e. how language practices serve to narrow down the realm of possible and plausible interpretations of identities and their probable social performances (Laclau 2005: 130–131).

Analysis is based on the summary of the report’s findings and recommendations segment which has been made available in English. This segment is a translation of the

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<sup>2</sup> Defined here as a categorization of people on the basis of what appears to be innate and ‘under the skin’.

<sup>3</sup> I refer here to Teun A. van Dijk’s (2002) understanding of racism as a system of social inequality characterized by ethnic dominance, power relations between dominant white and ethnic minority groups, and the presence of everyday discriminatory discourses and other social practices (93).

<sup>4</sup> More precisely: “Conflict-ravaged and maladministered countries” (*NOU 2017:2*: 1).

original report's chapter 1.1, which functions as an easily accessible version for media use and future legislative drafts. The analysis has been carried out, firstly, by locating nodal points in the text: signs that are given a 'privileged status', and by investigating "how they are defined in relation to other signs in the discourse" (Jørgensen/Phillips 1999: 30). Drawing on the insights provided by especially Mikkel Rytter (2018) and Marianne Gullestad (2002; 2004), the concept of integration and its orbiting elements have then been used as a primary data tracer to locate chains of equivalence and difference stabilizing the meaning of two primary nodal points and the relation between them, namely the NEI category and the Norwegian welfare state. In doing so, I have looked specifically for reoccurring rhetorical frames signaling a logic of difference and/or equivalence in the relation between the state and NEIs. For example, the systematic use of the notions 'risk' and 'lacking qualification' of NEIs in relation to their 'integration' into a 'Norwegian model under pressure' have been identified as a coherent chain of equivalence. This chain facilitates a specific conceptual separation in which white Norwegian majorities and the NEI category are positioned as mutually exclusive social configurations.

As a means to consider more precisely how textual mechanisms of 'closure' in the *NOU 2017:2* report work and are empowered by a distinct problem/solution framing, this article outlines a new conceptual approach termed 'solution-based othering' by fusing Steffen Jöhncke's (2004) concept of 'solution models' with Ruth Lister's (2004) definition of othering. Finally, Barry Buzan et al.'s (1998 [1997]) perspective on securitization is applied to discuss how chains of equivalence developed around the concept of 'risk' represent a central component of monsterization. As a securitization move, I argue, the report may invite an understanding of NEIs, and the process of integrating them, as an imminent existential threat to Norwegian welfare state structures.

### **The NOU Institution and the *NOU 2017:2* Report**

Reports from Norges Offentlige Utredninger (NOU) are scientifically backed recommendations made by a committee, panel, or expert group designated by the Norwegian government or parliament, in order to establish knowledge and consider solutions in relation to a wide range of societal issues (*Regjeringen 2017b*). A NOU document often provides specific recommendations for how issues are to be dealt with and regularly represents the first step in the political process of policy making. Following publication, a wide range of institutions and organizations seen to be significant stakeholders in the object of knowledge are usually invited to debate and comment on NOU reports through a process of public hearings ('Høring[er]').<sup>5</sup>

The object for the following inquiry, the *NOU 2017:2* report, has been produced by a committee of eleven scholars, advisors, and directors (the Brochmann II committee<sup>6</sup>) designated by the Norwegian government in 2015. Following its publication and presentation on February 1, 2017, more than 100 actors were invited to comment, and 68 responses were received (for detailed overview, see *Regjeringen 2017c*). However, even though written opinion is indeed invited, the report is not subsequently revised. As a consequence, the report remains in and of itself a highly influential body of

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<sup>5</sup> This is, however, also an open process so that everyone in principle is able to submit comments.

<sup>6</sup> Overview available at *Regjeringen 2017a*.

knowledge and a mechanism of legitimacy for future political discourse and decision making.

### **The Concept of Integration as Signifier for the ‘Immigrant Other’**

According to Lister (2004), the production of ideas about the ‘other’ in difference to a collective self can be defined as a process of differentiation and demarcation by which “the line is drawn between ‘us’ and ‘them’—between the more and the less powerful—and through which social distance is established and maintained” (101). Othering thus implies a purgative process of separating the ‘good’ inside from the ‘bad’ outside as people and groups are classified in a negative way that forms an identity based upon a lack, deficiency, or contamination of the existing (Said 2003 [1978]: 72; Reinke de Buitrago 2012: xv). In the context of the *NOU 2017:2* report, I suggest that the tendency to (re)produce widely shared beliefs about those who ‘naturally’ belong within the nation and ‘others’ who do not, may be unpacked by examining how the concept of integration contributes to stabilize interpretive frames through which NEIs are constructed not only as costly and demanding ‘others’, but also as a figure constitutive of imaginaries about the Norwegian ‘us’. As shown by Per Mouritsen (2016: 17) and Mikkel Rytter (2018: 2–5), the concept of integration has thus been particularly effective in establishing social imaginaries about ‘genuine’ and ‘artificial’ members of the nation by merging ideas of what we may term ‘monstrous agency’, i.e. polluting behaviors of uncivicness, problematic traditions, low education, poor social conditions, and crime with public perceptions of NEIs (in particular: Islam and newcomers from North Africa and the Middle East).

It is also at this point that the function of discourse in the exercise of power, producing social realities by generating criteria for inclusion and exclusion, rights, and expectations for particular categories of people, becomes evident. An illustrative exemplar here is that when NEIs develop distinct communities or enclaves, they are in the main referred to as a disconnection from the majority of Norwegian society and come to resemble a disruption, or impurity, within the social order caused by ‘lacking integration’. It is seldom discussed, however, how these ‘parallel communities’ may have been constructed as outside- or out-of-order communities through discursive technologies (integration/qualification) that serve to isolate them as bubbles of problematic dissonance within mainstream society (Olwig/Pærregaard 2007: 18; see also Olwig 2012).

In light of these reflections, we may initially observe that the *NOU 2017:2* report systematically asserts that the continued existence of the Norwegian welfare state is at risk if future integration of NEIs fails, as the Norwegian societal model is

[...] dependent on high employment rates and a relatively equal income distribution to maintain today’s generous welfare institutions. These requirements are especially challenged when the composition of the population changes in terms of qualifications (13).

With this perspective, the report links to a dominant tendency within integration policies in Scandinavia that conceptualizes NEIs as a societal liability, and as negative factors of production whose unacceptability is linked to the perceived impediment they represent

to economic growth (Olwig/Pærregaard 2007: 10–11). As documented by a number of scholars, the prevailing idea of integration has, since it emerged in the 1980s in Scandinavian political and academic rhetoric, become increasingly entangled in a logic in which the national is constructed as positive and universal, and cultural differences are framed as treatable deficiencies (ibid.: 17–23). More precisely, the term integration has become politicized, normative, and imbued with a critical potential for exercising and reinforcing racialized boundaries between the national ‘us’ and the refugee/immigrant ‘them’ (Gullestad 2002: 36; Rugkåsa 2010: 10–15).

On a fundamental level then, ideas of integration serve to promote specific imaginaries of culture, race, and how the national community ideally should be ordered as an ‘integrated’ whole that habitually frame NEIs as socially and culturally inferior (Rytter 2018: 3). As Karen Fog Olwig also observes:

[...] [A] substantial reason for an imagined similarity-community based on an idea of cultural homogeneity has gained so vast an impact today is that it has been coupled to a political project of integration (Olwig 2008: 235).<sup>7</sup>

This points towards a central conceptual component in the contemporary political project of integration in Norway, namely the trope that the ‘unintegrated’ and ‘unqualified’ societal newcomer stands in contrast to stability, to order, to community, and safety (ibid.; Gullestad 2004: 192; Hervik 2004a: 150). This means that the societal project of integration advocated and reproduced by the *NOU 2017:2* report cannot simply be regarded as a mapping exercise of neutral arrangements which allow Norwegian society to manage immigration. On the contrary, the concept of integration can predispose what Sara Ahmed (2012) refers to as an ‘excluding mechanism of inclusion’, precisely because it defines this category of people in terms of that which ‘they’ are lacking in relation to ‘us’, and simultaneously works under the cover of being an innocent, positive-productive problem-solving instrument (65). Analysis of how NEIs and their integration are constructed as a societal challenge may thus contribute to our understanding of how such interpretative frames may not only reflect, but also (re)produce social stratification along a white majority/racialized immigrant boundary: a boundary which may trap the latter in Sisyphus-like struggles for non-subordinated belonging within Norwegian society.

### **Reader-Positioning Frames in the *NOU 2017:2* Report—Introductory Metaphors of Natural Disaster**

With the terminology of Laclau and Mouffe (2001 [1985]), the *NOU 2017:2* report can be understood as the contingent alignment of meaning around particular privileged concepts from which a temporary stabilization of signification emerges (129–133). By anchoring privileged concepts such as ‘immigrants’ and ‘Norwegian model’ to particular meanings, the report thus articulates a discourse organized around nodal points, demarcates subject positions and limits the realm of possible interpretations.

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<sup>7</sup> As translated by the author. Original text in Danish: “en væsentlig grund til at et forstillet lighedsfællesskab baseret på en idé om kulturel homogenitet har fået så stor gennemslagskraft i dag, er, at det er blevet koblet til et politisk integrationsprojekt” (Olwig 2008: 235).

Right from page one, it is clear that the concepts of integration and integration capacity have a privileged status as they appear systematically and serve to gradually fix the two nodal points ‘immigrants from outside of Europe’ and ‘Norwegian model’ in relation to one another. The report’s specific operationalization of integration highlights the supposed effects of various competence increasing programs, specifically relating to general education and qualification for the job market (2–10). The report recommends a heavy focus on integration, implicitly understood as: “activation, qualification and adaptation: participation requirements relating to different welfare benefits, i.e. basic education, training and qualification adapted to the immigrants’ starting points” (4–5). Indeed, integration is articulated as critically important as it is “about safeguarding the mechanisms and cohesive forces that form the basis for the society’s democracy, the state based on the rule of law and welfare for its citizens” (20).

The reference to ‘safeguarding the mechanisms’ is important to note because it implies that integration represents a critical process to ensure the very continuation of the welfare society. This effectively entails a polarization of the discursive space in which the figure of the ‘immigrant’, implicitly destabilizing the ‘cohesive forces’ of society, comes to resemble what Laclau (2007 [1996]) terms a common enemy (38–41). The ‘common enemy’, a designated monster to fear, suggests a morally justified friend–enemy relation and can represent a powerful instrument to corral public opinion about policy options dealing with ‘others’ in so far as it makes mutual understanding/peaceful forms of contact<sup>8</sup> appear unlikely.

This mechanism of discursive polarization may be examined further by zooming in on the opening sequence of the report and the structuring textual frames that depict the arrival of NEIs. Here, the meaning of NEIs is immediately stabilized as their arrival are defined in terms of an ominous boundary event. That is, the moment of migratory movement from outside of national territory to the inside is conceptualized in terms of natural disaster and malevolent penetration. This is illustrated in the following examples from the report’s introductory section:

The huge wave of asylum seekers and refugees arriving in the summer and autumn of 2015 placed severe pressure on the Norwegian immigration regime (1);

[...] the huge and largely uncontrolled influx of people from conflict-ravaged and maladministered countries further south (ibid.);

[...] the refugee crisis became an explosive force that few had foreseen [...] an influx of people with little ability to provide for themselves, will represent an additional challenge and increase the pressure on public finances (ibid.).

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<sup>8</sup> According to Mouffe (2000), this is also why democratic politics should seek to *prevent*, or transform, antagonistic social configurations as they make it less obvious to perceive ‘others’ in terms of shared humanity and common interest (101–103). Political struggles, she suggests, should rather generate relations of ‘agonism’ between ‘adversaries’ and ‘legitimate enemies’ who are enabled to hold and defend valued ideas, positions, and identities (ibid.).

As a central identity constructed in the *NOU 2017:2* report, NEIs are in the opening (virtually tabloid) gambits conceptually tied to an objectivized force promising economic and social fragmentation of welfare society and its institutions. This frame is enabled specifically by the drawing of a chain of equivalence (the huge wave/huge and largely uncontrolled influx/explosive force/pressure on public finances) that organizes the meaning of migratory movement and creates clear-cut categorical boundaries from which an idea of NEIs as a homogenous, destabilizing ‘force’ emerges (Laclau/Mouffe 2001 [1985]: 121–126; Laclau 2005: 82–86).

The most powerful, persuasive discourses have shown to be those attempting to ground themselves in the ‘scientific’, the ‘true’, and the ‘natural’. One might add to this that hyperbolic discourses about ‘others’ that attempt to configure categorical identities by referring to embodied forms of knowledge and emotionally supercharged experiences (the experience of drowning in this case), also belong within this category. By establishing blurred, yet symbolically and emotionally effective analogies between two ideas, metaphors play a particularly salient role in providing interpretive ‘closure’ to the chains of equivalence presented above, domesticating the otherwise polyvalent process of association, as well as reinforcing specific readings of NEIs as objective and self-evident. With the terminology of Laclau and Mouffe, metaphorical substitutions thus produce meaning precisely by enforcing an equivalence that suspends the differential features of identities (2001 [1985]: 110). They assert that

[...] metaphors are not forms of thought that add a secondary sense to a primary constitutive literality of social relations; instead, they are part of the primary terrain itself in which the social is constituted (ibid.).

The wave metaphor (seen in the initial example) is critical to focus on here for two reasons. Firstly, it is important because it is placed in the introductory lines of the report and thus frames the process of reception and conditions a specific understanding of the entailing text. Secondly, it touches on a shared, embodied form of knowledge of vulnerability and fear. Equating NEIs with an uncontrollable, liquidized force, the report may thus trigger experiences of danger, i.e. the feeling that ‘we’ are overwhelmed/drowning in immigrants. It is in their seemingly natural, objective, and subconscious application that metaphors become the most powerful and persuasive, and it is from such fixations of meaning, I maintain, that perceptions of monstrous otherness and ideas of NEIs as less-than-human are enabled.

By activating an ecology of tabloid/sensationalized metaphors such as ‘huge wave’ and ‘explosive force’ the report also positions its readers within a very specific frame of interpretation that limits the possibility to think about the NEI category in terms of shared humanity and individuality as they are merged into a faceless, insurmountable, and inherently ‘dead’ locomotion. This, of course, establishes and legitimizes a context for conflict. Objectivized phenomena such as huge waves have a panic-inducing quality and make certain actions appear ‘obvious’, such as the construction of defensive measures: dams, security checkpoints, or walls. In this sense the implicit notion that ‘they’ are flooding ‘us’ and our society also predisposes phobic perceptions of NEIs as responsible for, and representatives of, monstrous agency. That is, behaviors which are

seen as boundary-defying, polluting the normative social order, and thus potentially disruptive to cohesion in society (Ngeh 2011: 147).

### **The Discourse of (Dis)Qualification**

As the report goes on to articulate the possible consequences of high levels of immigration for the ‘unity and trust’ in the Norwegian model, a logic of equivalence serves to gradually link the NEI category with costly processes of qualification and social challenges for white Norwegian majorities. Samples include, but are not limited to:<sup>9</sup>

The [Norwegian] model is vulnerable to the immigration of a high number of adults with low qualifications (1);

[...] requirements are put under particular strain when the composition of the population changes, in terms of the qualifications of the individuals (4);

[...] a challenge for the continuation of the model, particularly if the proportions of people with low qualifications increases (ibid.).

A high number of newcomers with weak or unrecognized labour market qualifications [...] represents an additional challenge (12).

The examples serve to show specifically how the ‘flow of difference’ is arrested as meaning is gradually organized around the two nodal points, NEIs and the welfare state. As relational objects of knowledge, NEIs are constructed through the combination of elements such as ‘low qualifications’, ‘strain’ and ‘challenge’, which, at the same time, is the very characteristic that defines them in terms of problematic difference to an already vulnerable Norwegian model. On the one hand the weakness of the welfare state is thus repeatedly emphasized, on the other hand the threatening nature of NEIs is systematically accentuated in terms of lacking qualifications.

This framing places NEIs within what Laclau and Mouffe (2001 [1985]) term a ‘myth’ that the nodal points draw upon and reinforce: the age-old myth of a dangerous and uneducated, animalistic and barbaric outside threatening to ‘flood’ and destroy the civilized inside of the Norwegian model (74). According to Laclau (1990), the function of the myth is precisely to enable an inherently contingent representation to appear like a natural, stable, objective condition (60–62). More specifically, the virtually timeless myth of civilized ‘us’/barbaric ‘other’, synergizing with the discourse of (dis)qualification, enable what Laclau and Mouffe (2001 [1985]) term an ‘antagonistic space’ in which the existence of one identity effectively prevents the full constitution of the other (127–130). As a consequence, the qualifying of NEIs from public expenses into a functional part of the labour market appears to be virtually mission impossible: it is resource demanding, costly and characterized by the possibility of “value conflicts and cultural clashes” (*NOU 2017:2*: 20), as well as a declining standard of living for ‘us’.

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<sup>9</sup> Similar applications of the term ‘qualification’ are found on the pages 1, 4, 7, 11–15, 19, and 20.

An application of Laclau's theorization (2005) furthermore implies that the designation of NEIs as objects for qualification can be understood in terms of a hegemonic intervention that serves to stabilize a specific frontier in relation to white Norwegian majorities (131). I argue here that such hegemonic interventions and the hegemonizing property of 'integration' are indeed fundamental to any understanding of the constitution of NEI identification and struggles for belonging in present day Norway. Thus, through the systematic application of elements such as 'lacking qualification', the pre-emptive political project of integration positions a particular agenda as the only reasonable and as incarnating the general interest. It effectively fixates a particular pattern of support and restraint for understanding the NEI category and what it means in relation to Norwegian majorities and the welfare state.

As a hegemonic configuration of NEI identification, the tropes of integration/qualification enable discursive 'closure' precisely by (re)enforcing a dichotomizing frontier-narrative of relative inferiority. Here, the idea of newcomers as unqualified/burdensome acts as a quasi-natural universality that undergirds a specific horror-vision of a declining and vulnerable self/welfare state under attack/pressure from an overwhelming, faceless force of immigration. It offers a fluent, legitimate and highly racially biased vocabulary to define NEIs negatively insofar as it consolidates racialized connections between notions of ethnicity, religion, and the type of societal problems (such as 'cultural differences') they create for white Norwegian majorities. This dynamic is particularly evident in the parts where the report elaborates on the societal consequences if 'integration' is unsuccessful, for example:

If [the] Norwegian society does not improve its ability to integrate immigrants and refugees from countries outside of Europe, there is a risk that increasing economic inequality could combine with cultural differences to weaken the foundation of unity and trust and the legitimacy of the social model (1).

How can cultural differences be acknowledged without also weakening the bonds that hold society together? (8).

The quotations can be read as harmless statements to the government of a small country seeking to protect and develop its fund of 'unity and trust'. At the same time, the idea is presented that equality as cultural and economic sameness is imperative for social cohesion, and that cultural differences per definition are problematic. In this sense the report links cultural difference to foundational weakening and potential collapse and assumes that homogeneity is the primary key to stability. This interpretation is supported as the report elaborates:

If they are seen as representatives of cultural differences [...] they can also contribute to challenging both the function of the welfare state and the basis for the legitimacy of the common good (8–9).

This mode of reasoning is important to highlight because it reflects what Mouritsen (2016) terms an 'undertheorized assumption' in the literature on immigration and social cohesion that presumes a direct causal relation between sociocultural homogeneity and



increasing societal solidarity and trust (6). The argument that cultural differences cause a weakening of the ‘bonds that holds society together’ is thus problematic not only because it blurs the fact that the causal mechanisms underlying such macro-scale social processes are extremely complex, but also because the central causal mechanism (increasing cultural differences = decreasing trust) is intensely disputed (ibid.: 2). The point is here that when the myth of cultural difference, as an element within the discourse of (dis)qualification, is framed as a causal mechanism hindering peaceful coexistence/mutual trust, it positions its audience to think about NEIs in terms of monstrous otherness. That is, as incarnating a (cultural) difference that threatens to confuse and displace the boundaries of the existing and in doing so unleashes uncertainty and danger for Norwegian white majorities (Douglas 2002 [1966]: 140).

### **Subject Positions of Self/Other**

The particular process of othering implied by the designation of NEIs as objects of integration may be further unpacked by examining the subject positions developed within the discourse of (dis)qualification identified in the previous section. I here follow Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré (1990) who suggest that processes of identification involve the creation of a structure of rights with particular status positions for people to occupy and ascribe to each other (46–48). The main point is that each subject position not only offers a sense of who I am/you are, but also a tight grid of possibilities for, and limitations on, agency (ibid.).

In the *NOU 2017:2* report, NEI identification is organized discursively as this category is gradually anchored to elements orbiting the privileged notions of qualification/integration, and the expected socio-economic impact of immigration on Norwegian society. NEIs, integration, and immigration in general, are for example represented systematically in terms of a “severe pressure on the Norwegian integration regime” (1), an “increased burden on the welfare state” (5), and “an additional challenge” (12). Similarly, the report states that “the challenges have simply been too great in terms of the labour market’s capacity to absorb these immigrants” (14) and “to significantly increase employment [...] will be costly and demanding” (18).

Within a discourse theory (DT) perspective, what the mosaic of semantically cross-fertilizing identifications does is precisely to block and streamline the flow of meaning around the concepts of ‘non-European immigrants’ and ‘immigration’. Hereby, what we may term a transporter-position is created in which ideas of NEIs as bringing a kind of ‘unqualified, chaotic outside’ in contact with the ‘qualified, homogenous inside’ of the Norwegian model are made possible and plausible. What may be generated from such a position is more specifically the self-evidence of the reductionist idea that evil, enemies, and ‘others’, are (always) coming from elsewhere (Trinh 2010: 2). It profoundly distracts us from understanding tensions connected to the incorporation of an inherently heterogeneous range of newcomers as multifaceted and dialectic processes occurring *within*. For example, how dominant sets of “symbolic resources and interpretive frames that circulate [society]” (Gullestad 2006: 24) may give rise to subordinated forms of inclusion and belonging.

Importantly, the subject position developed toward NEIs is created by, and granted meaning through, a correspondent social mapping of a Norwegian self. Thus, a complimentary subject position is made available in the *NOU 2017:2* report which

primarily relates to an idea of the Norwegian welfare state as vulnerable and in need of political safeguard. Again, a salient chain of equivalence is found on page one (but see also page 20). Here, Norwegian society is described as

[...] facing a period of structural upheaval. An increased dependency burden and increased uncertainty [...] will require the reprioritization of economic and welfare policies. High levels of immigration [...] represent an additional challenge and increase the pressure on public finances [...]. The huge wave of asylum seekers and refugees [...] placed severe pressure on the Norwegian immigration regime [...] (1).

The main point is to notice how the two subject positions developed in the discourse of (dis)qualification place NEIs within a binary, polarized relationship with an exposed welfare state and, implicitly, its unity, trust and white majority of non-immigrant citizens. In such a system of setting up order through opposition discursive closure occurs as NEIs are positioned as an antagonistic outside of the discourse about the welfare state. As Laclau and Mouffe (2001 [1985]) have observed, two identities are thus antagonistic insofar as they negate each other's existence—but this is so because they are always also mutually constitutive (127). In this sense, immigrants from “further south” (ibid.: 1) (i.e. the Global South) are produced as threats to the partial stability and reproduction of the welfare state but are also part of the condition of possibility for the constitution of a seemingly homogenous, ‘integrated’ population. Importantly, the ‘constitutive outside’ is often envisioned in terms of a uniform, faceless ‘other’, and this is precisely what happens within the discourse of (dis)qualification and its mutually exclusive subject positions where the incomprehensible ‘huge wave’ of NEIs promises social and economic insecurity/downfall for an already vulnerable and pressured self.

Of course, the relation between individual consciousness, subject positions, and hegemonic ideologies that are present in society at a given time should not be understood as a one-to-one relation. As Peter Hervik (2004b) points out “public messages and discourses are not simply xeroxed or faxed into private minds” (249). As a communicative event the *NOU 2017:2* report does not necessarily generate subjectivity or political decisions. However, there is what Jutta Weldes (2003)<sup>10</sup> terms a dominant “background of meaning” (7) with a profound capacity to invite certain interpretations of the NEI category and the state, which, like the assigned voice of a skilled ventriloquist, may translate into rather direct practices of exclusion and tiered inclusion.

### **Solution-Based Othering**

The previous sections discussed how the *NOU 2017:2* report organizes relations of problematic difference through the use of panic-inducing metaphors and by accentuating the lacking qualifications of NEIs in relation to white Norwegian majorities and a welfare system under pressure. It was shown how a discourse of (dis)qualification, coupled with an idea of ‘cultural differences’ as fundamentally

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<sup>10</sup> Weldes (2003) writes about the impact of popular culture. However, her notion is useful to describe how various existing meaning structures—also political discourses—may transcend into individual attitudes and social practices.

destabilizing, positions NEIs as an element of danger in relation to a fragile welfare state. Here, the hegemonic project of integration can be understood as a ‘solution model’ for these challenges that may infuse social boundaries with normalcy and material reality in terms of institutionalized programs, public attitudes, and behaviors.<sup>11</sup> Building on these insights, the present section links to Jöhncke’s (2004) writings on ‘solution models’ to conceptualize how the report’s problem/solution framing becomes a critical component of the othering that occurs when NEIs are designated as objects of qualification.

Solution models can, in this context, be defined as distinct clusters of thought and practice (often institutionalized and made into policy) that are designed for the management of irregularities within society (ibid.: 385). The important point to make with this concept is that there is a level of ontological interaction between the solutions that are applied to deal with societal issues and the way these phenomena come to be understood as being problematic in the first place. Thus, when the hegemonic discourse of integration as qualification is activated in the *NOU 2017:2* report, a critical feature of its function is that it on the surface appears simply as a neutral, necessary, and non-biased intervention towards the ‘immigration problem’. Considering the previous discussion, and the fact that the concept of ‘othering’ is by itself somewhat unprecise, I suggest that it is relevant to introduce a concept that may capture this particular mode of social distancing often found in problem-solution framings.

What I term ‘solution-based othering’ can here be defined as a double bind process of categorization which constructs a specific solution strategy to a problem, but by doing so also normalizes antagonistic social distance between groups or individuals and sediments their identities. More specifically, solution-based othering naturalizes certain interpretive frames rooted in ideas of abnormality, malfunction, and an imperative of transformation by producing a social imaginary of threatening ‘problem bearers’. In the present context, solution-based othering also highlights the way that the consensual basis of power may be produced and perpetuated at the intersection between the construction of a collective threat/risk and discourses of solvation with a certain ‘persuasive capacity’ (van Dijk 1989: 23).

Having established the specific boundary making quality and automated ‘naturalness’ inherent in solution-based othering, we may go on to observe that a particularly potent example for reflection is found within the report’s brief description of ‘new strategies’ if the “more short term reforms [...] within the existing integration system have not produced satisfactory results” (19). Here, the following solution to the immigration problem is suggested:

If significant cuts in benefits become necessary in the future, political decisions will also be necessary as to whether these shall apply to all citizens or whether newcomers and foreigners should have limited or full access to benefits (ibid.).

As a type of solution-based othering, the system of segregated access to welfare benefits proposed in the report, distinguishing between the belonging and juridical rights of

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<sup>11</sup> For example, legislation was passed in 2018 criminalizing face-concealing forms of dress, i.e. burqas and niqaps in kindergartens, schools, and universities in Norway to ‘promote positive communication’ and to improve the conditions for integration (Zander et al. 2018).

‘citizens’ and ‘newcomers and foreigners’, may be regarded as a strong, hierarchical symbolic/legal demarcation of social boundaries of belonging between descent-based Norwegians and newcomers. Embedded in the metaphorical context in which migratory movement is described in terms of the violently penetrating “explosive force [...] largely uncontrolled influx of people” (ibid.: 1) requiring “emergency measures” (ibid.), the model is granted validity precisely by being layered with the appealing logic of representing a *solution* designed by experts, i.e. an active, conscientious, necessary response to a problem which comes to appear as critical for the wellbeing, even survival, of ‘us’. Thus, by invoking a logic that equates economic rights with natural/ethnic belonging, the report creates a sphere of argumentation in which an antagonistic us/them dichotomy is reasonable and normal to the extent that it may allow for direct economic exclusion and social marginalization—if necessary—of societal newcomers.

This discussion serves to highlight a contradiction insofar as the report’s declared goal is to act as a guide towards better ‘integration’ and societal cohesion. However, by (re)producing a discourse of (dis)qualification and dynamics of solution-based othering, it may also fuel socially disintegrating attitudes and practices by solidifying group boundaries and a hierarchical, polarized, competitive environment in which some (vulnerable) citizens may legitimately claim welfare resources and belonging more than the designated ‘others’. In the following and final section, I explore this perspective further by applying Buzan et al.’s (1998 [1997]) concept of securitization to the report. The argument is presented that the construction of NEIs as an existential risk factor to the welfare model is a key mechanism in the report by which solution-based othering and politics of exclusion are established as potential, yet reasonable actions.

### **Securitization of the Welfare State—The ‘Severe Pressure and Explosive Force’ of ‘Non-European Immigrants’**

Research shows that contemporary integration policies and programs in Scandinavia are increasingly designed to sustain the structure of the welfare system rather than the requirements of its target groups (Gullestad 2002: 19; 2006: 197). Rytter (2018) points out that perceptions of integration in Scandinavia appear to have changed in the wake of 9/11, the Bush administration’s War on Terror, and the so-called refugee crisis (6). As part of this contemporary situation, in which strategies of integration have become fused with concerns for national safety in a series of ‘security/integration responses’ (Bleich 2009: 355), the *NOU 2017:2* report may in itself be conceptualized as what Buzan et al. (1998 [1997]) describe as a ‘securitization move’ in relation to the phenomenon of immigration. Within this perspective, ‘security’ is defined broadly as “an existential threat to a referent object” (Buzan et al. 1998 [1997]: 21), and securitization is understood as “the intersubjective establishment of an existential threat with a saliency sufficient to have substantial political effects” (ibid.: 25). Thus, securitization is about when and how an argument is constructed and presented in a manner that makes an audience accept the need for extraordinary measures beyond normal political logic (ibid.). The *NOU 2017:2* report can be regarded as a securitization move that presents the challenge of ‘integrating’ NEIs as an existential crisis/hazard to the unity and trust on which the Norwegian nation supposedly is built, as well as its economic structures. Here, the discourse of (dis)qualification plays an important role in effectively

establishing the condition of the welfare state as that of the survival of a fragile self in an inherently hostile environment of immigration. Central for establishing this dynamic is the configuration of a rather explicit conceptual template of immigration as a risk factor associated with structural upheaval. For example:

[...] [T]here is a risk that increasing economic inequality could combine with cultural differences to weaken the foundation of unity (1).

The trend towards permanent low incomes and unstable employment among refugees [...] increases the risk of residential segregation along ethnic lines (7);

[...] the risk that continued high immigration will create increased inequality with regard to income, standard of living and employment. High immigration also entails a risk of value conflicts and cultural clashes (20).

Risk is practically always associated with negative effects which people are expected to fear. According to Alan Hunt (2003), “risk discourse transposes anxieties into an objectivist problematic” (174). Consequently, risk, fear, and precaution may shape an ontological position for newcomers which “expands beyond a specific referent and is used instead as a more general orientation” (ibid.: 42). Specifically, the merging of integration with risk-issues of national and international (in)stability, is solidified in the report through a logic of equivalence in which the concept of immigration gradually is made correspondent to conceptual frames of emerging conflict. Immigration and its impact on the state is for example discussed in terms of:

How can relatively homogeneous welfare states, with ambitious goals regarding material comfort, participation and social equality, handle the challenges associated with cultural diversity? To what extent is it *reasonable* to set demands for cultural adjustment [...]? [...] In other words: How can cultural differences be acknowledged without also weakening the bonds that hold society together? (8; emphasis in original).

As a securitization move, most clearly relating to what Buzan et al. (1998 [1997]) term ‘societal security’, the *NOU 2017:2* report constructs the phenomenon of immigration as a type of ‘identity/welfare dissolvent’ and an objectivist risk-problematic for the state’s constitutive fundament of unity and trust (121). Certain emergency measures are suggested in this context, such as the proposal to establish welfare segregation to ensure the survival of the welfare state outlined in the previous section. This idea of welfare segregation is clearly beyond what Buzan et al. (1998 [1997]) describe as the “normal political logic” (22) in Norway, where, until now, a social and political ideology of egalitarian social/economical security and even an emphasis on “multidimensional majority cultures” (*NOU 1995:12*: 26) have been salient. In this sense, the theory on securitization is useful as a conceptual linchpin to solution-based othering insofar as it emphasizes how experiences of security and threat runs in tandem with socially constructed perceptions of potential risks, their causes and the ‘logical’ means by which to address them (Buzan et al. 1998 [1997]: 22–24). Likewise, the representation of NEIs

as existential threats to the societal system and the possible solution of economic mass exclusion may be regarded as a potent dimension of the solution-based othering of NEIs. It inscribes onto newcomers, and entwines into public debate, a stigmatizing definition of these identities and their possible and probable behavior as virtually parasitic, destabilizing, welfare receiving individuals. Indeed, trajectories of solution-based othering and securitization may combine and enforce one another in an intersectional production of racialized relations of problematic difference between immigrant minorities and national majorities in ways which are not yet examined: a perspective, it seems, that warrants further scholarly attention.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined how NEI identities and their relation to the Norwegian welfare state are conceptualized in the *NOU 2017:2* report. In this document, NEIs are made equivalent to ‘lacking qualifications’, a risk of structural upheaval, and thus a significant challenge for an already pressured welfare system through a discourse of (dis)qualification. Discursive closure of this reading is facilitated, firstly, by opening gambits in which the moment of migratory movement to the national territory is framed in tabloid metaphors of natural disaster. Secondly, through two mutually exclusive subject positions in the discourse of (dis)qualification in which the relationship between the Norwegian state and NEIs is organized as a binary opposition between a vulnerable self and an overwhelming ‘other’. Thirdly, through the specific problem/solution framing inherent in the report’s vision of integration that serves to narrow down the zone of possible and plausible interpretations of NEI identities and their social performances as costly and demanding ‘problem bearers’.

Finally, by connecting to securitization theory, reflections were presented as to how the representation of immigration as a severe risk to a fragile welfare society might result in a normalization of shared understanding of NEIs as an existential threat to the established order, as well as a legitimization of emergency measures (ethnic/economic segregation).

In light of the present analysis, it seems that the *NOU 2017:2* report could work more appropriately towards ambitions of ‘societal coherence’ if an increased reflexivity of constitutive concepts such as ‘integration’ as a particular contributor to solution-based othering were to be achieved. Chantal Mouffe and Slavoj Žižek may provide some guidance here. Mouffe (2000) thus observes that democratic politics are always concerned—and should be concerned—with the creation of unity in a context of diversity and conflict and is thus always concerned with some kind of an ‘us’ and ‘them’ construction (101–102). Creating the cohesion of any *demos* should not be understood as a task that is to be achieved through the total overcoming of such oppositions. The crucial issue is rather to create ‘legitimate enemies’ by manufacturing the us/them divide so that ‘they’ cannot be perceived as monstrous figures, parasites, or mutually exclusive enemies to be feared, excluded, and even destroyed in order to secure ‘our’ safety and wellbeing (ibid.). Similarly, Žižek (2016) argues for the manufacture of chains of equivalence crossing national and cultural boundaries that invite us to perceive all oppressed and excluded peoples not in terms of threat, danger or evil, but in terms of the shared substance of our social being (107). Maybe such “global solidarity of the exploited and oppressed” is a dreamscape (ibid.: 110). However, as

Žižek cautions, if we do *not* engage in it, then we are really lost: and we will deserve to be lost (ibid.).

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## MACHT, MANIPULATION UND MITEINANDER— MEDIENRÄUME DES GERÜCHTS

Katharina Sturm (Berliner Synchron)


[EN] **Abstract:** *'Whoever rules over mankind's stories shall be king.'*—When Game of Thrones' season eight ended, some considered this an answer too simple for eight seasons of fighting and suffering. It is this author's opinion that this truth is beautiful just because it is humble. The following article does not consider 'stories per se', but a form of narrative, which is as much unique as it is ancient: 'rumour'. If we consider rumour 'to be a story' and if we also allow the idea of stories to be powerful, rumour must appear as one of the strongest kind of narratives, as rumours do not only tell interesting myths; they also seem to provide 'us' with secret knowledge, with a little bit more truth than 'those', who did not hear it.

Starting from a point of view where rumour is basically seen as an aesthetic phenomenon with strong emotional impact, the following article is going to ask how the rumour becomes interesting for both a psychoanalytical approach and a political one. Reasoning forward, the question shall be asked how this seemingly simple device of narration rises from emotion building to becoming a 'true monster', influencing mankind to the core of democracy. Or is it rather to be seen as a weapon for truly democratic participation? Notion is that both truths are true in their own way and that the relevant question actually should ask if the true 'hero' and/or 'monster' is not actually the one who carries this specific weapon. Due to this, the emotional impact rumours have, shall always be kept in mind during the following examination. Aim of this essay is, to bit-by-bit develop an idea of rumour, starting from an aesthetical regarding to a rather psychoanalytical and finally to a political, or rather society-affecting, point of view. In terms of structure and content, this essay aims to dig out rumour from a more sensual level of perception, to the concrete analysis of rumour as part of daily media consumption. The basic statement of this essay is that rumour can have the potential to become destructive, to 'be a monster', because we love it so dearly—and have been loving it for such a long time. In order to emphasize this notion, a rather wide and open historical frame is chosen, with the intention to pierce into current perceptions at times, just to illustrate the rumour's 'monstrosity'—but also to underline its inherent 'ambiguity'.

[EN] **Keywords:** *rumour; secret [secrecy]; (media) society; social codes; informal exchange; blurred images; psychosomatics; Freudian bonus of seduction; public sphere; private sphere; social exclusion; 'Fake News', echo chambers [filter bubbles]; Network Enforcement Act.*

[DE] **Zusammenfassung:** ›Gerücht‹.—Ein Begriff, unter dem sich jeder etwas vorstellen kann und eine Form der Botschaft, die in geradezu unerhörter Weise zu affektieren vermag. Denn wer schätzt nicht eine gute Geschichte, besonders wenn sie vermeintliche Wahrheiten enthüllt, die einen Wissensvorteil, also einen zumindest winzigen Machtvorsprung erlauben?

Nordlit 42: *Manufacturing Monsters*, 2019. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.7557/13.5019>.

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*Geschichten sind Macht, wer Vergangenheit und Gegenwart in eine gute Erzählung zu verkleiden weiß, hält das Geschick der Menschheit in den Händen. Zugegebenermaßen ist dies eine kühne Behauptung. Stark vom Finale der achten Staffel Game of Thrones' motiviert, macht die Verfasserin dieser Zeilen doch darin eine ganz simple Wahrheit aus: Menschen lieben Unterhaltung, ganz besonders, wenn es sich dabei um sie selbst dreht, wenn sie durch die Einbettung in eine Narration ein Stück Ewigkeit für sich beanspruchen können. Somit leitet dieses Essay auch eine an diesen Gedankengang geknüpfte Überlegung ein: Ist das Gerücht nicht zunächst einfach nur eine unterhaltsame Erzählung, in der wir uns selbst und unsere weltbewegenden Fragen erkennen? Über einen primär emotionalen Zugang soll versucht werden, zu verstehen, warum das Gerücht sich sowohl im Interessensspektrum der Psychoanalyse, als auch in dem der Politik wiederfindet. Wann wird die Geschichte zur Waffe; wann zum ›Monster‹, das sich von unseren Sehnsüchten und Ängsten nährt? Ist das Gerücht ein Medium ›potenziell monströser Machenschaften‹? Ist es ein Werkzeug, das ebenso gut im, wie gegen den Sinn der Demokratie eingesetzt werden kann? Oder ist es vielmehr so, dass jede Waffe letztlich beides ist—je nachdem, wer sie führt? Welche Rolle spielt dabei die gemeinsame Wahrheit als verbindender Faktor, gegen die scheinbare Unwissenheit der Ausgeschlossenen? Zu diesem Zweck soll sich im Folgenden die Betrachtung des Gerüchts aus dem Umkreis von Kunst und Literatur nach und nach ins Zentrum aktueller Mediennutzung vorarbeiten, wobei die emotionale Verbindung zum Rezipienten stets im Blick behalten werden soll. Sowohl Aufbau als auch Inhalt der Untersuchung wollen zeigen, wie sich diese besondere Form der Narrative zunächst auf einer rein ästhetischen, lustvollen Ebene erspüren, dann nach und nach als konkreter Gegenstand der Medienwahrnehmung fassen und schlussendlich bezüglich seiner öffentlichen Wirksamkeit kritisch hinterfragen lässt. Bewusst ist dabei der zeitliche Rahmen, innerhalb dessen das Phänomen betrachtet werden soll, weit gefasst. Es wird versucht, dort in die gegenwärtige Wahrnehmung des Gerüchts einzudringen, wo es sich als ›monströse Entität‹ für oder gegen die Demokratie bemerkbar macht.*

[DE] **Stichwörter:** Gerücht; Geheimnis; (Medien-)Gesellschaft; soziale Codes; informeller Austausch; unscharfe Bilder; Psychosomatik; Freud'sche Verlockungsprämie; Öffentlichkeit; Privatheit; Ausgrenzung; ›Fake News‹; Echokammern [Filterblasen]; Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz.

### **Einleitender Bewusstseinsstrom—Eine Geschichte, so alt wie das älteste Medium...**

Am Anfang des Alten Testaments leben die Menschen im Einklang mit sich, der Natur und der Präsenz ihres eigenen Ursprungs; der Macht, die durch Kraft eines Wortes die Welt und aus sich heraus ihr unvollkommenes Abbild, den Menschen, entstehen ließ. Dann—der erste ›Plot Point‹ der menschlichen Geschichte—geistert ein Flüstern durch die friedliche Stille: Vom Baum der Erkenntnis zu essen könne bedeuten, mächtiger zu werden als ›Gott‹ selbst. Vermutlich ist es nur deshalb verboten. Ob nun Neugier oder Zweifel schließlich die Oberhand erringen: Mann und Frau gewinnen, indem sie nachgeben, freien Willen; die Fähigkeit sich selbst auch losgelöst vom Instinkt wahrzunehmen—im Unterschied zum ›Tier‹, das sich primär über das instinktive Verhalten definieren lässt. Sie gewinnen jedoch auch das Wissen um die eigene

Sterblichkeit, die eigene Nacktheit, die Fähigkeit über beides zu verzweifeln—und haben sich somit selbst aus dem Paradies der kindlichen Naivität verbannt.

Die Geschichte der Vertreibung aus dem Paradies ist nur ein Beispiel. Würde jedoch in den verschiedenen Mythologien und Religionen dieser Welt geforscht werden, so ließen sich ohne Zweifel Gegenrede, Neugier, Wissen und Gerücht als rote Fäden der beliebtesten Konfliktlinien ausmachen. Neugier und Erkenntnissuche erscheinen als ebenso starke Motivationen wie Liebe und Hass. Gerüchte und Geheimnisse, die den paradiesischen Frieden stören, sind hingegen offenbar ebenso gern gewählte Grundlagen für dramatische Wendungen wie Tod, Katastrophen oder das Auftreten magischer Wesen. Die Zirkulation von Mythologie und auch die des religiösen Kanons, auf den die unterschiedlichsten Kulturen ihren Ursprung berufen, um Geheimnisse, Neugier und Gerüchte, ist Teil einer bis heute gängigen kulturtechnischen Gewohnheit. Bilder und Erzählungen werden um alltägliche Beziehungen und die über sie hinausreichenden Wünsche und Träume entworfen. Gerade im Bereich ›literarischer Erzeugnisse‹ erweist sich die »Enthüllung von Geheimnissen [...] [als] das explizite oder implizite Ziel« der Narrative (Knirsch 2014: 333). Ein Sprung in die literarische Neuzeit:

Edgar Allan Poes *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* [...] gilt als erstes Beispiel [...] in welchem die äußeren Umstände der Tat von Beginn an bekannt sind und wo die Frage nach dem Täter im Vordergrund steht (Knirsch 2014: 333).

Poes ›Tales of Ratiocination‹<sup>1</sup>, deren Anfang *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841) bildet, haben »explizit ›the satisfaction of the intellect‹ zum Ziel [...]« (ebd.). Auffällig ist dabei, dass regelmäßig nicht allein die Aufklärung eines Geheimnisses *an sich* im Fokus des Interesses steht. Vielmehr wird die Enttarnung von Aktivitäten und Agenden geheimnisumwitterter Gruppierungen in den Mittelpunkt gerückt. Ein Agieren abseits der Gesellschaft aufzudecken—sei es ein zwielichtiges Milieu oder ein subversives Komplott gegen die bestehende Ordnung—ist scheinbar die ideale Entschuldigung, die natürliche Neugier ausleben zu dürfen, ohne sich dem Vorwurf der Triebhaftigkeit aussetzen zu müssen (Poe 2009 [1841]). So bedarf es der Nachforschungen des respektablen Fräuleins von Scuderi, um hinter Ernst Theodor Amadeus [E. T. A.] Hoffmanns Figur des René Cardillac dessen narzisstisch-egozentrische Fixierung auf die eigenen Kunstwerke aufzudecken und die im Geheimen ausgelebte Neigung, sich durch Mord und Raub der Stücke wieder habhaft zu machen, zu enttarnen (Hoffmann 2013 [1819]).

Im Bereich der zeitgenössischen Unterhaltungsliteratur zeugt der Erfolg der Bücher Dan Browns von dem nach wie vor ungebrochenen Interesse an geheimen Organisationen und deren Enttarnung. Browns Leistung ist dabei die Synthese geschichtlicher Fakten mit Gerüchten und Mythen rund um sogenannte Geheimgesellschaften, wie den Illuminati (den ›Erleuchteten‹), den Freimaurern oder Tempelrittern. Dabei wird grundsätzlich die Perspektive vertreten, geheime Organisationen würden im Stillen an der brutalen Zerstörung der etablierten Ordnung arbeiten. Statt einer alten, respektablen Dame vertritt bei Brown ein hochintelligenter, charismatischer Mann, der mit vollem Einsatz von Körper und Geist die Situation klärt,

<sup>1</sup> Eigenbezeichnung Poes; so von ihm ab etwa 1844 im persönlichen Schriftverkehr bezeichnet.

das Interesse der ›Öffentlichkeit‹. Robert Langdon (Brown 2000; 2003; 2009; 2013; 2017) dient als Identifikationsfläche des Lesers, weil die oben benannte ›satisfaction of the intellect‹ durch ihn versprochen und zudem mit einem attraktiven Körper verbunden wird: In der Figur dieses ›Indiana Jones ohne Peitsche und Hut‹ verbindet sich der Leser für die Dauer des Romans mit dem perfekten Wesen und folgt einem inneren Streben, das offenbar bereits Adam und Eva beschäftigte (Köhlmeier/Liessmann 2016).

Die Geschichten um den multitalentierten Professor lassen sich somit in gewisser Weise mit den beliebten Mythen um Volkshelden wie Robin Hood vergleichen. Während diese jedoch oft in einer Art heroischer Opposition zum Staat stehen, bezieht die Robert-Langdon-Figur zwar ihren Charme aus denselben Faktoren der Attraktivität, der idealen Verbindung aus Körper und Geist. Ganz im Dienst der Öffentlichkeit platziert er sich allerdings klar gegen die Opposition. Eines der berühmtesten Beispiele für diese literarische Gegentradition zum romantischen Schurken stellen jedoch weder er noch sein Vorbild Indiana Jones dar. Es ist ab 1887 Arthur Conan Doyles Sherlock Holmes, der den Leser—gefiltert durch die stets staunende Figur des Watson—an seinen gedanklichen Meisterleistungen teilhaben lässt (Doyle 2011 [1887]). Dank der Verbindung aus scharfem Geist und einem den irdischen Bedürfnissen überlegenem Körper, deckt Holmes Intrigen, Verbrechen und Syndikate auf, die allzu oft dazu angetan sind, das gesittete englische Bürgertum zu bedrohen. Transformationen dieses ungebrochen faszinierenden Stoffes in die Gegenwart, insbesondere die gefeierte BBC-Neuinterpretation *Sherlock* (Moffat/Gatiss 2010–2017), deren letzte Staffel 2017 ihren Höhepunkt fand, fokussieren das Interesse an geheimen Organisationen und hyperintelligenten Super-Schurken. Mit großem Erfolg portraituren die *Sherlock*-Macher und Schauspieler Andrew Scott einen Professor Moriarty (von Doyle erdacht als ›Napoleon des Verbrechens‹), der in erster Linie ein mephistophelischer Meister der Manipulation ist. Moriarty zu besiegen bedeutet in erster Linie, hinter die Fassaden medial verbreiteter Gerüchte, subtil eingesetzter Zweifel und vielen geheimen Verzweigungen und Anspielungen zu blicken. Ebenso stabil wie feingliedrig, entspinnt sich sein Netz fünf Staffeln lang—selbst über den Tod des Antagonisten hinaus. Unter anderem gelingt es Moriarty, durch geschickt gestreute und ausgearbeitete ›Fake News‹, innerhalb weniger Wochen das öffentliche Bild des selbst recht undurchsichtigen Privatermittlers Sherlock Holmes zu diffamieren. Ausschließlich dank medialer Gerüchteverbreitung etabliert sich eine Situation, aus der sich Holmes nur durch einen ›Schritt ins Extrem‹ befreien kann. Die Szene seines fingierten Selbstmordes avanciert für Wochen zu einem dominierenden Gesprächsthema in gewissen digitalen ›sozialen Medien‹ und löst einen Strom von Theorien, Gerüchten und Vermutungen aus. Nicht *ob*, sondern vielmehr *wie* Sherlock überlebt haben kann, ist dabei der gerüchteindizierende ›Cliffhanger‹, der trotz einer recht langen Pause eine Brücke des Interesses bis Staffel drei gespannt hält. Die pure Kommunikation um die Serie, die ausufernden Gerüchte und Theorien, die dieses meisterlich gehütete Geheimnis anregt, scheinen fast mehr Vergnügen zu bereiten als die Auflösung selbst. Die Serie hat sich aus ihrem eigenen dispositiven Rahmen hinausgewölbt und wird dank der sprachlichen Technik der Gerüchteverbreitung zum Gegenstand sozialen Austausches.

### **Annäherung an das Gerücht in der (Medien-)Gesellschaft**

Es kann angenommen werden, dass es das Decodieren des Geheimnisses und nicht die schlussendliche Lösung oder gar der darum gesponnene Plot ist, welches das Interesse des Publikums wachhält. Die Decodierung des Bildes, der geheimnisvollen ›Hülle‹ um den *monströsen Kern*, als Gemeinschaftsleistung des Protagonisten und des Zuschauers, ist dabei der eigentliche ›Lusttrigger‹. Mit Sigmund Freud lässt sich das Geheimnis— beziehungsweise die Lust an der Durchdringung der ›Hülle, die das Geheimnis‹ umgibt—in Analogie zur ›Psychologie der Erotik‹ setzen (vgl. Martinez Mateo 2014: 339). Auf das Suchtpotential der erfolgreichen Entschlüsselung des Geheimen verweisend, notiert Martinez Mateo, im Freud'schen Sinne, dass »der Prozess der Enthüllung [...] zum Fetisch werden kann« (ebd.).

#### *Das Geheime als Verlockungsprämie—Unscharfe Bilder, psychosomatische Schauer und soziale Codes*

Es ist wohl den Untersuchungen der frühen Psychoanalyse—insbesondere den »bildgebenden Verfahren der Neurologie oder de[m] Rorschach-Test aus der [Freud'schen] Psychologie« (ebd.)—zu verdanken, dass sich ein erkenntnistheoretisches Bewusstsein für den Zusammenhang zwischen der Wahrnehmung der Welt in Form vieler emotional behafteter Bilder und der Lust am Geheimen entwickelt: »Genau wie das Schauen eine notwendige Bedingung für das Durchschauen ist, ist die Existenz einer Hülle die notwendige Bedingung für die Existenz eines Geheimnisses [...]« (ebd.: 333). Diese Erkenntnisse stellen die Basis der nun folgenden Analyse des Gerüchts als *potentielles Monster in der Gesellschaft* dar.

Stellen wir uns vor, in einem ansonsten leeren und weißen Raum hätte jemand ein Bild aufgehängt. Das Auge bleibt daran hängen und kann sich, ohne die Ablenkung anderer Farben oder Gegenstände—zumindest innerhalb der Grenzen eines wie auch immer gearteten Bilderrahmens—ungestört darin verlieren. Doch statt einer konkreten Szenerie, sind nur verschwommene und in Bewegung befindliche Formen zu sehen. Statt also einen konkreten Inhalt zu erfassen, wird die Wahrnehmung so aktiviert, dass sie in der Unschärfe schwimmt. Sie lässt sich entführen in eine Welt, in der die Vermutung hinter dem Inhalt konkreter wird als es die schärfste Darstellung sein könnte. In gewisser Weise wird das unscharfe Bild damit zum Spiegel: Der Blick schaut nicht über die Darstellung hinaus, sondern vielmehr springt jene Motorik der Wahrnehmung an, die sehen möchte, statt konkret etwas zu sehen. Wir blicken gewissermaßen in diesem Moment in uns selbst und lesen sozusagen von innen nach außen die eigenen Ängste und Träume *in* das Gemälde. Dort, wo sich Inhalt, im Sinne eindeutig benennbarer Kontur, verschleiert, wird das Geheimnis zur Realität—und Realität, im Sinne der nur annäherungsweise erkennbaren Inhaltlichkeit, wird zum Gerücht.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Was hier eher assoziativ anhand des Beispiels eines Bilderrahmens imaginiert wurde, lässt sich sehr konkret auf die Realität bezogen in Hito Steyerls *Die Farbe der Wahrheit* (2015 [2005]) nachvollziehen; vorrangig im Kapitel ›Die dokumentarische Unschärferelation. Was ist Dokumentarismus?‹ (7–16). Steyerl beschreibt dort die Wirkung unscharfer Nachrichtenbilder direkt aus dem Kriegseinsatz, die gerade durch ihre Unschärfe den Eindruck der Direktheit vermitteln, obgleich sie in Armee und Fernsehen eingegliedert sind. Um das Feld dieses Essays nicht zu ausufernd zu gestalten, ist eine weitere

Gottfried Boehm analysiert die Konfrontation des Auges mit dem unscharfen Bild als eine ›Intensivierung des Bildes‹:

Das Auge wird einerseits für das Bild an sich geschärft, andererseits erhält es viel Spielraum, denn durch Unschärfe verfremdete Welten entfalten jenseits des Erkennbaren unvorhersehbare Möglichkeiten (vgl. Boehm 2009: 220; zit. n. Smid 2012: 145).

In der Unschärfe, konkretisiert Tereza Smid mit Gilles Deleuze, liegt eine ›Entgrenzung des Raumes‹, in der sich die Suche nach Bedeutung auf die Ebene der Assoziation verlagert (vgl. Smid 2012: 155).<sup>3</sup> Die Ebene menschlicher Wahrnehmung, die hier beschrieben wird, ist vergleichbar mit dem was William James als den ›Schauer‹ bezeichnet (vgl. James 2005: 31). James beschreibt damit die unvermittelte Reaktion auf epische und musikalische Dramen. Nimmt man sich jedoch die Freiheit, darunter ganz allgemein eine Wahrnehmungsform zu verstehen, die auf subjektiver und emotionaler Ebene angesiedelt ist und synthetisiert diese Vorstellung mit den oben beschriebenen Theorien der Psychoanalyse, dann kann dieser Schauer auch in der Konfrontation mit dem unscharfen Bild und der Rezeption von Geheimnissen und Gerüchten gefunden werden. Die Ränder des Gerüchts sind unscharf und durchlässig, es lässt sich im wahrsten Sinne des Wortes weder fassen noch endgültig rahmen. Der psychosomatische ›Schauer‹, den James beschreibt, ist das Versprechen einer starken, bedrohlichen oder verlockenden Emotion. Womöglich ist sie sogar gerade deshalb so verlockend, weil sie bedrohlich sein könnte (›Quo vadis, Apfel?‹—siehe Adam und Eva zu Beginn<sup>4</sup>). Die Ungewissheit und Unschärfe ist ein Aspekt, der Geheimnissen und Gerüchten *Süße* verleiht. Geheimes Wissen gewinnt dementsprechend eine »sozialisatorische Komponente« (Schlicht/Klinge 2014: 18). Gemeinschaften definieren sich um das Wissen, dieses *Mehr* zu besitzen, das von anderen begehrt wird und sei es nur der Wunsch nach Gemeinschaft an sich:

Die Teilnahme an bestimmten Gesellschaften erfordert das Verbergen von inneren/äußeren Zuständen, wie Träumen/Begehren/unsittlichem Benehmen, sowie die Kenntnis und Beherrschung von ›mehr oder minder geheimen Codes‹, ein Begriff des Geheimen, den Simmel mit dem Privateigentum bzw. dessen Verletzung in Verbindung brachte (Schlicht/Klinge 2014: 18).

Zwei Faktoren spielen hierbei eine Rolle: Zum einen gewinnt das Mitglied der Gesellschaft durch sein ›geheimen Wissen‹ einen Wissensvorsprung gegenüber Nicht-Mitgliedern. Die Verweigerung von Kommunikation schließt damit den Rahmen des Geheimen um die sozialen Codes, welche zu kennen Voraussetzung für die Teilnahme an dieser Gesellschaft ist. Wohl aus diesem Grund lässt sich feststellen, dass »die Neugier, deren möglicher Gegenstand ein Geheimnis ist, zur notwendigen

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Darstellung von Steyerls Thesen hier unterblieben—sie sollten jedoch hinsichtlich einer weiterführenden Kontextualisierung dieses Absatzes nicht unerwähnt bleiben.

<sup>3</sup> Tereza Smids Artikel erschien in der Sammlung *Filmische Atmosphären* (Brunner/Schweinitz/Tröhler 2012). Siehe, zur Vertiefung, ebenfalls darin: Flückiger 2012 und Schweinitz 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Siehe zudem Michael Köhlmeier und Konrad Paul Liessmanns *Wer hat dir gesagt, dass du nackt bist, Adam? Mythologisch-philosophische Verführungen* (Köhlmeier/Liessmann 2012).



intellektuellen Grundausrüstung eines jeden Menschen« gehört (Knirsch 2014: 330). Das, was sich so schwer eingrenzbar unter ›Glückseligkeit‹ versammeln lässt, ist, dem zufolge, nicht nur »Ziel und Ende alles menschlichen Tuns« (ebd.), sondern auch Folge einer »Tätigkeit theoretischer und betrachtender Art«. Christian Knirsch führt dies weiterhin so aus, dass »eine Analogie zwischen dem Theoretisieren und der empirischen Wahrnehmung in Form des Betrachtens« impliziert wird (ebd.). Die vorliegende Arbeit möchte zudem, an das oben Geschriebene anknüpfend, die Behauptung aufstellen, dass allein schon die grundsätzliche Idee, ein verborgenes und verbotenes Wissen könnte entzogen werden, dazu reizt, Gerüchte und Theorien um das Verborgene zu spinnen. Neugier als Triebfeder menschlichen Strebens nach Glück und das Gerücht als dessen Ausläufer, machen den Geheimnis-Rahmen um das Unbekannte zu einem unscharfen Bild. Die von Freud beschriebene erotische Lust an der Durchdringung des Unbekannten liegt auch in der Ungewissheit, nicht sagen zu können, ob das Verborgene bedrohlich oder verlockend ist. Dieser ›Verlockungsprämie‹, um im Freud'schen Jargon zu bleiben, unterliegt der Außenstehende—wie auch dem Wunsch, Teil einer Gemeinschaft zu sein, der in der menschlichen Psyche ebenso tief verankert ist, wie die Furcht vor dem Alleinsein. Durch diesen direkten Einfluss auf Angstgefühle und Glück, steht der Geheimnisträger dem Uneingeweihten unweigerlich in einem Machtvorteil gegenüber:

Geheimnisse werden [...] auch attraktiv, weil sie schnell einen autoritären Status oder eine machtvolle Aura verleihen können. Wer ein Geheimnis besitzt, weiß mehr und vermeintlich Wertvolleres als der andere und stellt so Asymmetrie zwischen sich und den Nicht-Wissenden her. Geheimgesellschaften im klassischen Sinn operieren nicht zuletzt auf dieser Grundlage (Knirsch 2014: 330).

An dieses Zitat anknüpfend, wird mit dem Terminus ›Gerücht‹ ein bisher unbeachteter Hebel ins Spiel gebracht. Er spielt auf die Option an, Wissen einerseits wohldosiert zu verbreiten, es dabei aber so geformt zu platzieren, dass es sich trotz seiner scheinbaren Enthüllung weiter auf der Ebene der Unschärfe—und somit auch: jener der Emotionalität—aufhält.

#### *Perspektiven auf das Gerücht als Medien-Element*

Zunächst ist festzuhalten, dass die sich mit den Phänomenen ›Geheimnis‹ und insbesondere ›Gerücht‹ befassenden Wissenschaften auch versuchen, historisch-zeitliche Eingrenzungen für das Aufkommen und Neuformatieren der einen oder anderen Perspektive auf das Gerücht zu nennen. Tatsächlich sind diese recht eng an die Entwicklungen und Umstrukturierungen machtpolitischer Formen geknüpft. So beschreiben Laurens Schlicht und Sebastian Klinge einen Wechsel von »traditionellen Formen der Produktion von Geheimnissen und geheimen Räumen« zu *neuen*, eher ›im Außerhalb‹ der Regierung angesiedelten Variationen und stellen ihr Aufkommen in Zusammenhang zu der »Erfindung des Bürgers in der französischen Revolution« (ebd.: 14). Daniel Hausmann (2014) hingegen untersucht den Umgang mit dem Gerücht als massenwirksames machtpolitisches Instrument in der zwischen circa 1616 [1636; 1644] und 1911 [1912] zu verortenden chinesischen Qing-Dynastie. Dies in das US-Amerika

der 1930er-Jahre transferierend, entwickelt er Erkenntnisse, abgeleitet aus den Strukturen der Unterdrückung im Volk verbreiteter Nachrichten, zu einem Plädoyer gegen die Herabsetzung der Masse als ›von Emotionen getriebene Hysteriker‹ weiter. Analog zu Hausmann, lässt sich *Lügen im Netz*, das 2017 erschienene Werk Ingrid Brodnigs, lesen—eine Auseinandersetzung mit ›Fake News‹ und Populismus, aber auch dem Internet. Platziert insbesondere in den digitalen Medien, werden so Räume identifiziert, in denen das Gerücht in bisher schwer einschätzbarem Maße zirkulieren und wachsen kann. Brodnig und Hausmann lassen sich dabei insofern vergleichen, als dass sie das Gerücht als politisches Mittel zum Zweck verstehen. Grundsätzlich unterschieden werden muss, im Umgang mit ihren Perspektiven und denen der Autoren Schlicht und Klinge, ob der Begriff ›Gerücht‹ als Label verwendet oder als sprachliches Phänomen verstanden wird. Ist also ›Gerücht‹ ein wertender Stempel, dem, durch eine zweite oder dritte Instanz, eine Aussage aufgedrückt wird, oder ist Gerücht einfach nur ein anderes Wort für Nachricht? Auch stellt sich in jedem der Texte die Frage nach dem Ursprung des Gerüchts, als verunglimpft Nachricht, als Medium der Massenhysterie oder als Mittel, Privatheit gegen Öffentlichkeit abzugrenzen. Auch hier kann also von der Identifizierung verschiedener medialer Räume gesprochen werden: Wird mit dem Gerücht bewusst eine Grenze zum Außen aufgebaut oder werden soziale Räumlichkeiten erschaffen, die einer besonderen Form der öffentlichen Meinungsbildung und -äußerung dienen? Diese Unterscheidung soll im weiteren Verlauf des Textes nicht lediglich als ein dichotomes Entweder–Oder verstanden werden. Vielmehr ersucht die Arbeit beispielhaft zu skizzieren, unter *welchen* (multiplen) *Bedingungen* das Gerücht sich in *welchen* (mitunter vermischten) *Räumen* aufzuhalten vermag. Teil dieser Debatte ist auch die bei Schlicht und Klinge auftauchende Überlegung, wie das Gerücht als Sprach-Entität kognitiv erfassbar ist.

Daniel Hausmanns leitende These ist, dass durch die Klassifizierung einer Information als ›Gerücht‹ dem Volk die Kompetenz abgesprochen werde, Wissen zu beherrschen, zu bewerten und weiterzugeben. So würde dem Volk unterstellt werden, nur auf primitiver—im Sinne von: mystifizierend-emotionsgebundener—Ebene mit Informationen umzugehen. Zu diesem Zweck würden Nachrichten, die ohne staatlichen Einfluss weitergegeben werden, als Aberglaube, Geschwätz—eben: Gerücht—abgetan werden. Bewusst wird, als Teil dieser Maßnahme, Massenhysterie und Aufstand mit dem Fehlen einer übergeordneten Kontrolle bei der Verbreitung der Nachricht kontextualisiert. Das Gerücht würde somit *per se* als Medium der Hetze abgestempelt. Die Klassifizierung einer Information als Gerücht stellt also, so Hausmann, eine staatlich abgesegnete Verunglimpfung dar:

Im Rahmen der Gerüchtepsychologie oder Gerüchteforschung stehen hauptsächlich die Fragen im Vordergrund, warum und unter welchen Bedingungen Gerüchte zirkulieren, was ihre Inhalte sind, wie sie entstehen und welche Aussagekraft die einzelnen Personen haben, die an sie glauben und sie erzählen (Hausmann 2014: 116).

Diese Perspektive, so Hausmann, bewegt dazu, dem Gerücht einen subversiven Inhalt zu unterstellen, es damit aber auch zu pauschalisieren. Mit Bezug zu den Forschungen Pascal Froissarts subtrahiert er das Gerücht von Vorurteilen gegen die ›Masse‹.

Assoziationen wie ›Unordnung‹ sollen ebenso wie die Vorstellung vom Gerücht als einer »subalternen Kommunikationsform, die angeblich von phantastischen oder mystischen Inhalten durchzogen gewesen sei« und nur dank der »Ignoranz des Volkes« am Leben erhalten werde, entkräftet werden (ebd.: 117). Die pauschalisierende Taktik, so Hausmann, läge darin, das Gerücht von vornherein als gefährlichen Unruhestifter und noch dazu als unwahr zu stigmatisieren, um somit Tendenzen einer unabhängigen Nachrichtenverbreitung im Keim zu ersticken:

Etwas als Gerücht auszumachen, war eine Strategie, Neuigkeiten, Geschichten und Kommunikationsnetzwerken im chinesischen Volk ihre Wahrhaftigkeit und ihren Geltungsanspruch abzusprechen. Sie wurden als irrationale Gefahr für die soziale Ordnung stigmatisiert (Hausmann 2014: 118).

Diese Klassifizierung der Nachricht als Gerücht und die inbegriffene Diskreditierung nicht-institutionalisierter Information wird von Hausmann in Frage gestellt, um darüber gleichermaßen eine Sicht auf Masse als »durch primitive Emotionen zu einer Ganzheit« verbundene Individuen zu enttarnen (ebd.). Die Beschäftigung mit Massenphänomenen werde nur durch ihr Negativ-Extrem—erschreckende Massenpaniken, wie sie etwa Orson Welles Hörspiel ›The War of the Worlds‹ von 1938 auslöste—motiviert und schiene in diesem Sinne eher diktatorischen und latent menschenverachtenden Tendenzen als einer neutralen Perspektive entgegenzukommen (vgl. ebd.).

Dass Hausmann dabei ausgerechnet Orson Welles berühmtes Hörspiel anspricht, verdient einen kurzen, überleitenden Exkurs: Als Halloween-Episode des *The Mercury Theatre on the Air* [CBS Radio] wurde das Hörspiel am 30. Oktober 1938 ausgestrahlt. Orson Welles, zu diesem Zeitpunkt noch verhältnismäßig wenig bekannt, fungierte als Erzähler und Regisseur. Die nach einer kurzen Einleitung eingespielte Episode basiert lose auf dem Roman *The War of the Worlds* (Wells 2014 [1898]). Ganz unabhängig von den Ereignissen 1938 hatte Herbert George [H. G.] Wells bereits 1898 mit diesem Werk einen literarischen Meilenstein geschaffen, Vorlage für zahlreiche Adaptionen, bis hin zu einer Steven-Spielberg-Verfilmung (2005), mit Tom Cruise und Dakota Fanning. Inhaltlich wird, grob umrissen, der Angriff der Marsianer auf die Erde beschrieben. Nachdem der Kampf um die Welt schon verloren erscheint, sind es ausgerechnet die zahllosen Mikroorganismen und Bakterien, die in jedem Wassertropfen leben, vor dem das Immunsystem der maschinenartigen und scheinbar unzerstörbaren Angreifer kapituliert. Diese scheinbar unbedeutendsten Lebewesen, eigentlich kaum wahrnehmbar, besitzen die Macht zu einer Zerstörung von innen heraus. Dass dies wirksamer scheint als die mächtigsten menschengemachten Kriegsgeräte, spricht bis zum heutigen Tag seine eigene subversive Sprache. Die Unsterblichkeit der Orson-Welles-Adaption liegt allerdings hauptsächlich in den Folgen begründet, die sich noch während der Ausstrahlung auftraten. Da diese nach einer kurzen Einleitung ohne Werbeunterbrechungen und in der bislang ungewohnten Form hastig eingesprochener Kommentare und Kurzinterviews durch die Kanäle rauschte, stellte sich gerade unter den später hinzuschaltenden Zuschauern die entsetzte Überzeugung ein, man würde tatsächlich angegriffen.

»What a night [...]«—so äußerte sich Welles Jahre später; betonte jedoch auch, dass es nicht die kurzzeitig aufgeschreckten Bürger (die ›Masse‹), sondern vielmehr die sie

noch lange nach dem Ereignis mit Information versorgenden Medien (die ›Massenmedien‹) waren, die das Geschehen größer machten als eigentlich notwendig:

[...] I was blocked by an impassioned crowd of news people looking for blood, and the disappointment when they found I wasn't hemorrhaging. It wasn't long after the initial shock that whatever public panic and outrage there was vanished. But, the newspapers for days continued to feign fury (Welles; zit. n. Tarbox 2013: 53).

Anders als von der Gerüchtforschung zu diesem Zeitpunkt ausgelegt, war es nicht die Leichtgläubigkeit des Publikums, die eine Hysterie auslöste. Stattdessen zeugt die heftige, panikartige Reaktion der Masse eher von der relativen Unvertrautheit mit dem Medium Radio in Verbindung mit offenen, sich nicht erklärenden Inszenierungen, die spätestens mit der Postmoderne und dem Aufkommen nicht-linearer Narrationen heute zur Gewohnheit geworden sind. Darüber hinaus ist es jedoch die nachträgliche Berichterstattung der etablierten—im Sinne von: vertrauten—Massenmedien, die das Gerücht sowohl am Leben erhält, als es auch auf die Ebene der Legendenbildung hebt. Statt das Gerücht also selbst als Medium zu betrachten, lässt sich am Beispiel von ›The War of the Worlds‹ (Welles 1938)—transformativ eingebettet zwischen *The War of the Worlds* (Wells 1898) und *The War of the Worlds* (Spielberg 2005)—vielmehr nachvollziehen, dass die Wirkmacht des Gerüchts als Nachricht von dem Medium, in das es platziert wird, abhängig ist. Das Radio, als Kanal über den sich zu diesem Zeitpunkt die größtmögliche Masse an Menschen zugleich erreichen lässt, sowohl was die Geschwindigkeit, Reichweite und die emotionale Wirkung der Adressierung angeht, macht sich damit als potentiell Instrument der Manipulation bemerkbar: Wenn es gelingt, das Gerücht einer außerirdischen Invasion derart glaubwürdig über die massenhaft zugänglichen Kanäle zu schicken, so liegt die Option, Meinungen—und auch ›demokratische Wahlen‹—zu manipulieren, nicht fern. Zugleich ist das Aufspringen derjenigen Medien, die zwar langsamer wirken, jedoch als vertrauter und daher vertrauenswürdiger *wahrgenommen* werden, eine Bestätigung der aufgepeitschten Emotion, also Grundlage einer Meinungsbildung.

#### *Das Gerücht im digitalen Raum (1)—Hinführung*

Das Bild des medial verbreiteten Gerüchts schlägt erfolgreich die Brücke ins digitale Zeitalter und stellt Zusammenhänge zwischen dem damals noch jungen Medium Radio und den heutigen Debatten und Ängsten rund um das Internet her: Wie »mit Halbwahrheiten oder falschen Behauptungen Stimmung gemacht wird«—und ›Nutzer‹, wenn nicht in Panik, dann doch immerhin »durch unseriöse Meldungen in Wut versetzt werden [...]«—lässt sich Ingrid Brodnig zufolge im Internet hervorragend nachvollziehen (Brodnig 2017: 7–8). Nachdem einleitend schon die Rede von dem psychosomatischen Schauer war, den das Gerücht, als unscharfes Bild verstanden, allein durch seine Nähe zum Geheimen auslösen kann, lässt sich leicht nachvollziehen, dass »gerade unseriöse, emotionalisierende Berichte [...] oft beeindruckend erfolgreich« sind (ebd.). Brodnig spricht dabei von einem »Markt an Irreführung und Desinformation, der auch ›Fake News‹, also vollständig erfundene Meldungen« nicht auslöst (ebd.). Damit weist sie auf einen weiteren, bisher unbeachtet gelassenen Faktor hin: Überträgt man

den anhand Freuds Überlegungen dargestellten erotischen Reiz des Geheimen auf das Gerücht und verbindet diesen mit dem adrenalineladenen Schauer, den eine aufregende und ungewisse Nachricht wie der Angriff der Marsianer auslöst, wird verständlich, weshalb Halbwahrheiten, Andeutungen und Gerüchte so gut verkäuflich sind. Erklärt diese einfache Feststellung einerseits die Bestsellerzahlen von Büchern und Filmen wie denen von Dan Brown, so verliert sie ihre Belanglosigkeit, wenn es nicht um den Verkauf von Produkten, sondern von Meinungen, politischen Ansichten und Wahlergebnissen geht.

*Das Gerücht im digitalen Raum (2)—Zorn und Falschinformation im französischen und US-amerikanischen Wahlkampf*

Ingrid Brodnig greift für die Darstellung der Beeinflussung des Gerüchts auf politischer Ebene insbesondere zwei sehr aktuelle Beispiele auf: die 11. Wahl des Staatspräsidenten der Fünften Französischen Republik 2017 (mit einer Stichwahl zwischen Emmanuel Jean-Michel Frédéric Macron und Marine Le Pen), sowie die 58. Wahl des Präsidenten der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika 2016 (mit den aussichtsreichsten Kandidaten Donald John Trump und Hillary Diane Rodham Clinton). Hierbei beurteilt Brodnig insbesondere den US-amerikanischen Wahlkampf als »herausragend negativ [...] und untergriffig [...]« und betont dabei, wie mit Falschmeldungen und Gerüchten »ein wesentlicher Teil der Aggression [...] im Netz geschürt« wurde (ebd.: 17). Im Anschluss an die US-amerikanische Wahl 2016 verglich *Buzzfeed* die Interaktionen zwischen den »20 stärkste[n] Falschmeldungen« und den »20 stärkste[n] Nachrichtentexte[n] klassischer Medien« (zit. n. Brodnig 2017: 17). Die großen Nachrichtenmedien wurden dabei nicht nur von den digitalen Medien an sich, sondern insbesondere von »gefälschten Inhalten« überboten (ebd.). Obgleich diese Ergebnisse aus dem Umfeld der US-amerikanischen Bevölkerung gezogen werden, wäre es falsch, daraufhin nur Rückschlüsse über ein nationales (Wahl-)Verhalten zu ziehen. Wie Brodnig deutlich klar macht, gilt auch für die französische Wahl 2017:

Mit Unterstellungen werden einzelne Kandidaten in ein schlechtes Licht gerückt. Im schlimmsten Fall sind einzelne Gerüchte sogar extrem sichtbar und führen dazu, dass der betroffene Politiker sich ständig rechtfertigen muss; in diesem Fall kapern Falschmeldungen also sogar einen Teil der öffentlichen Debatte (Brodnig 2017: 14–15).

Hervorzuheben ist, dass Falschinformationen, egal wo sie erdacht werden, als »Brandbeschleuniger für das eigene erhitzte politische Lager« zu sehen sind (ebd.).

Weiter oben im Text wurde der Lustgewinn des Gerüchts als Teil einer Verkaufsstrategie bezeichnet. Wie in jedem Vermarktungsprozess, wird auch im Wahlkampf und der politischen Meinungsbildung eine Zielgruppe anvisiert und eine grundsätzliche Haltung in ein scheinbar unverzichtbares Bedürfnis gesteigert. So »zirkulieren« die Falschmeldungen und Gerüchte »gerade bei jenen Wählern, die den betroffenen Politiker ohnehin nicht gewählt hätten—diese Bürger werden emotional weiter angetrieben« (ebd.). Schon im alltäglichen Konsum lässt sich in Frage stellen, ob die forcierte Intensivierung von Trieben, wie Hunger, sexueller Lust und Besitzgier, nicht über das gesunde Maß hinaus geht. Hier wird »das Schüren von Wut« als »eine

äußerst erfolgreiche politische Strategie« angesehen: »Es aktiviert das eigene Lager und bringt Menschen auch eher zu Stimmabgabe« (ebd.). Diese ›Wut‹, so Brodnig, muss nicht zwingend eine unbegründete sein, schließlich geschehe »gerade gesellschaftlicher Umbruch [...] oft, weil Menschen zu Recht wütend sind [...]« (ebd.: 39). ›Wut‹, so erschreckend ihre Ausläufer sein mögen, gewinnt Relevanz, wird an die Notwendigkeit einer Mobilisation zum Überkommen von Stillstand gedacht:

Das ist eine besondere Stärke dieser Emotion: Sie aktiviert Menschen. Problematisch wird es dann, wenn Wut gezielt gegen benachteiligte Minderheiten geschürt und damit ein neuer Sündenbock kreiert wird, oder auch, wenn in erster Linie Empörung erregt wird, um Aufmerksamkeit zu erheischen (Brodnig 2017: 39).

Weder das Weitergeben von Informationen—seien es nun Gerüchte oder Fakten—noch das an sich sehr soziale Teilen von Gefühlen, selbst wenn diese mit Wut und Aggression getränkt sein sollten, steht hier in Kritik. Kritisch zu betrachten ist hingegen: Einerseits richtig ist, »je mehr Emotion ein Inhalt hervorruft, desto wahrscheinlicher [...] [wird] seine Verbreitung«. Andererseits stimmt aber auch, dass »auch falsche Behauptungen [...] geteilt [werden], wenn sie die richtigen Emotionen auslösen« (ebd.: 42). So führt Brodnig Untersuchungen an, nach denen Trumps Behauptungen während des Wahlkampfes 10000-mal geteilt, 11000-mal kommentiert und 121000-mal ›geliked‹ wurden; und zwar völlig unabhängig von deren Wahrheitsgehalt (vgl. ebd.). Dies gewinnt aus emotionstheoretischer Sicht an Tragweite. Durch die Auslösung von Wut wird die Reaktion »auf eine Sache, die ein gewünschtes Ziel vereitelt oder erschwert« forciert und offenbar immer dann mit besonderem Erfolg gelenkt, »wenn der Angreifer identifizierbar ist und als ungerecht wahrgenommen wird [...]« (ebd.: 39). Es kommt, so Brodnig, zu einer Beeinflussung der Denkinhalte, welche »eher zum Wunsch nach strafenden Maßnahmen [...]« führt:

Diese nachgelagerten Effekte erklären zum Teil, warum das Auslösen von Wut die Wahrscheinlichkeit erhöht, dass ein Individuum eher einem Handelnden die Schuld für etwas geben wird als den situationsbedingten Besonderheiten [...] und warum wütende Menschen eher weniger zu selbstlosem Verhalten neigen (Brodnig 2017: 39).

Mag also einerseits das Gerücht, indem es zum Mittler eines gemeinsam geteilten geheimen Wissens wird, zunächst als sozial eingestuft werden, so lässt sich Wut als potentiell eher egozentrische Emotion beschreiben. Im Effekt vertiefen sich, wie im Nachfolgenden noch eingehender dargestellt werden wird, Isolationstendenzen wie auch eine geschlossene und aggressive Haltung der zornigen Gruppe gegen das anvisierte Objekt. Die ärgste und bedrohlichste Konsequenz dieser Tendenzen ist Zorn, der sich durch stetige Unterfütterung und Befuerung zum Hass verfestigt, insbesondere wenn sich dieser Hass, wie oben bereits angedeutet, durch falsche oder fehlgeleitete Informationen gegen einen wie auch immer gearteten Sündenbock richtet.

*Das Gerücht im digitalen Raum (3)—Gerüchte-Hydra NetzDG?*

›Fake News‹ sollen seit einiger Zeit, ob nun aus Schutzwillen oder zur Kontrolle, vermeintlich regulierende Maßnahmen wie das NetzDG<sup>5</sup> entgegengestellt werden. Gerade dieses noch recht junge Gesetz scheint sich dabei auf manchen Ebenen als Hydra zu erweisen. So empört sich ein im Juni 2018 bei *akweb.de*<sup>6</sup> erschienener Artikel darüber, dass der Versuch, hasserfüllte, rassistische und diskriminierende Beiträge zu reglementieren, einerseits für Protest in den rechtskonservativen Reihen Sorge, andererseits jedoch auch von genau diesen als Mittel zum Zweck erkannt worden sei:

Das neue Gesetz funktioniert dabei zu ihrem Vorteil: Sie beobachten ihre Gegner\_innen akribisch und verabreden sich dann auf Plattformen wie *pro0gramm*, *Discord*, *Twitter* oder auf *Facebook*-Gruppen, um auf der Basis des Gesetzes vor allem gegen Linke vorzugehen (›apolitAsh‹/›zugezogenovic‹ 2018).

Mithilfe geschlossener *Facebook*-Gruppen, so führt der Artikel weiter aus, würde Material aus dem Umfeld linker und feministischer Aktivitäten gesammelt und durch die gezielte Wiederholung für eine Sperrung dieser Inhalte gesorgt werden, was in der Schließung einiger Accounts bei *Twitter* etc. resultiert habe. Diese Taktik, so unterstellen es die beiden ›Autor\_innen‹<sup>7</sup>, werde auch von Anhängern der *Alternative für Deutschland* [AfD] praktiziert, um so Kritikern dieser Partei ›das Wort zu nehmen‹.

Laut eines *Zeit-Online*-Artikels vom 4. Januar 2018 sind es primär »schwere Straftaten, Volksverhetzung [und] die Verbreitung verbotener Symbole«, denen mit der NetzDG entgegengewirkt werden soll—das NetzDG somit eher eine ›Formalisierung‹ bereits bestehender Gesetzmäßigkeiten (Kühl 2018). In Folge einer Meldung und Prüfung werde ein etwaiger Verstoß zunächst mitgeteilt und der beanstandete Inhalt schließlich gesperrt, beziehungsweise unauffindbar für »Besucher mit einer deutschen IP-Adresse« gemacht (ebd.). Dass, so Kühl, umgekehrt keine Ahndung fälschlich gemeldeter Inhalte vorgesehen ist, macht einen potentiellen Missbrauch wahrscheinlich. Kritisiert wird

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<sup>5</sup> Das Gesetz trägt den offiziellen Titel ›Gesetz zur Verbesserung der Rechtsdurchsetzung in sozialen Netzwerken‹, sowie den offiziellen Kurztitel ›Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz‹. Aus Letzterem speist sich die Abkürzung ›NetzDG‹. Erlassen wurde das NetzDG am 1. September 2017 (siehe *BAnz* 2017); in Kraft getreten ist es am 1. Oktober 2017 (siehe *juris* 2017). Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland bildet den räumlichen Geltungsbereich. Im *Anwaltsblatt* 5/2018 diskutiert Helmut Redeker das NetzDG als ein Symptom fortschreitender ›Privatisierung staatlicher Kernaufgaben‹ (Redeker 2018). Es entbehrt diesbezüglich natürlich keiner Ironie, dass die beiden hier herangezogenen offiziellen Verkündungs- und Bekanntmachungsorgane der deutschen Bundesbehörden ihrerseits vollständig privatisiert sind: *Juristisches Informationssystem für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland GmbH* (seit 1985), sowie *Bundesanzeiger-Verlag GmbH* (seit 2006).

<sup>6</sup> *ak—analyse & kritik* [*akweb.de*] verortet sich (nicht zuletzt qua offiziellem Untertitel) als ›Zeitung für linke Debatte und Praxis‹. Sie gilt gemeinhin als publizistisches Organ der ›Undogmatischen Linken‹ und wendet sich daher gerüchteweise—und stereotyp formuliert—innerhalb der breit gefächerten ›linken‹ Medienlandschaft eher an eine *Jungle-World*-, denn an eine *Junge-Welt*-Leserschaft.

<sup>7</sup> Hier steht, an den Artikel von *ak—analyse & kritik* angelehnt, ein ›Gendergap‹.

unter anderem, dass denjenigen Verantwortung übertragen werde, die eigentlich beschränkt werden sollten.<sup>8</sup>

Wenige Tage vor der erwähnten *Zeit-Online*-Publikation, am 2. Januar 2018, behauptet Patrick Beuth in einem als ›offenen Brief‹ geschriebenen *Spiegel-Online*-Essay (»Liebe Trolle, Hetzer und Schreihälse, [...]«), dass die AfD—»geplant oder nicht«—vormache »wie sich das Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz instrumentalisieren lässt« (Beuth 2018). Hierbei nimmt Beuth Bezug auf die sehr ruckartig vollzogenen Löschungen eines ›Tweets‹ der AfD-Politikerin Beatrix Amelie Ehrengard Eilika von Storch, sowie dessen Persiflage durch ›Das endgültige Satiremagazin‹ *Titanic* (vgl. ebd.). Auch Christian Meier, Medienredakteur der *Axel-Springer-Welt*, fragt sich bezüglich des Umgangs mit dem NetzDG latent polemisch: »Weiter so, oder auf den Müll damit?« (Meier 2018).

Wenngleich weniger gesellschaftskritisch motiviert als *ak—analyse & kritik* [*akweb.de*], zeigen also auch systembejahende Medien eine wenigstens skeptische Haltung gegen das neue Gesetz, die insgesamt für eine eher pessimistische Politikhaltung allgemein zu sprechen scheint. »Wir leben«, so Brodnig, »in einer Zeit, in der Populisten es vermögen, eine tiefe gesellschaftliche Unzufriedenheit anzusprechen« (ebd.: 10). Daran ist, wie schon am Beispiel ›The War of the Worlds‹ (Welles 1938) angedeutet, das Medium, innerhalb dessen sich die jeweiligen Meinungsräume bilden—hier: das Internet—›nicht Schuld‹. Dennoch muss erwähnt werden, dass »Technik [...] manchmal wie ein Verstärker« wirkt, wenn es um das Streuen und gezielte Platzieren von umstrittenen Inhalten geht (ebd.). Es ist ebenso Stärke wie auch Schwäche des Internets, dass es »einfacher macht [,] gleichdenkende Individuen zu finden«, da sich im selben Maß auch »Ansichten weiter polarisieren« und sich dadurch potentiell zerstörerische »Randgruppen fördern und stärken« (ebd.: 60) können. Das Vorhandensein von Polaritäten und der Wunsch, sich eher mit Gleichgesinnten auszutauschen ist für sich noch eher harmlos. Trotzdem kann im Fall der hier benannten Abgrenzungstendenzen ein sich nach und nach auftuender Spalt innerhalb der Gesellschaft nicht übersehen werden.

Dass sich von Beginn an eine Art finsterner Gerüchtewolke um das NetzDG und den ohnehin schon sehr in der Schwebe befindlichen freien Umgang mit dem Netz und den digitalen ›sozialen Medien‹ legt, ist kein Gerücht, sondern logische Schlussfolgerung— auch dank der Haltung tendenziell eher massenkompatibler Medien: Anhand des Orson-Welles-Beispiels ließ sich behaupten, dass es die ›Newsreporter‹ waren und nicht die Inszenierung selbst, die den Skandal am Leben erhielten; ihn überhaupt erst zu einem solchen werden ließen. Ähnlich kann auch behauptet werden, dass eine missgestimmte Haltung, die eben nicht nur in Nischen, sondern auch in der breiten Öffentlichkeit durchscheint, für eine tiefere Verankerung der Negativität spricht, als die bloße Existenz kritischer Meinungen es könnte. Wie auch immer die politische Haltung hinter den zitierten Artikeln zu werten sei, soll im Sinne wissenschaftlicher Neutralität unerheblich bleiben. Dennoch ist bewusst einleitend die Wahl auf ein Beispiel aus einem eher eindeutig positionierten Milieu gefallen.

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<sup>8</sup> Eike Kühl (2018) beruft sich an dieser Stelle auf Markus Beckedahl von *netzpolitik.org*; siehe auch Reuter/Biselli 2018 [*netzpolitik.org*], die ihrerseits von ›apolitAsh‹/›zugezogenovic‹ 2018 [*akweb.de*] herangezogen werden.



Die Ränder des Gerüchts sind durchlässig, seine Rezeption gleicht der des unscharfen Bildes und speist sich aus dem psychosomatischen ›Schauer‹ derjenigen, die sich eben nicht allein von seinen Inhalten, sondern auch von der Art, wie mit Gerüchten umgegangen, wie sie kommuniziert und wie sie eben mitunter auch reglementiert werden, betroffen fühlen. Dabei verwandelt sich der Versuch, das Gerücht einzuzäunen, offenbar in den ›Trigger‹ eines Schneeballsystems aus Gerücht, Gegengerücht und der Dehnung der durch die Reglementierung gesetzten Rahmungen. Statt eine Oberhoheit zu gewinnen, hat sich die Regierung also tatsächlich eher instrumentalisieren lassen; und zwar, indem der mit teilweise ohnehin unschönen Mitteln bestrittenen ›Rechts-Links‹-Debatte eine weitere Austragungsfläche geschaffen wurde.

Es genügt nicht zu konstatieren, dass die Entität ›Gerücht‹ heute und in der Vergangenheit zur Abstempelung nicht-regierungskonformer Information instrumentalisiert wurde (und wird), um es zu rehabilitieren. Das wird vor seiner offensichtlichen gesellschaftlichen Brisanz deutlich—spätestens sobald es tatsächlich zum Werkzeug von Falschinformation und Manipulation wird. Eine Rehabilitation soll auch gar nicht der Anspruch dieses Essays sein, das vielmehr die Unmöglichkeit, das Gerücht aufgrund seiner Unschärfe als *gutes* oder *schlechtes* Wesen einzuordnen, betonen möchte. Dennoch scheint an dieser Stelle eine gewisse Klarstellung und Differenzierung angebracht: Der Unterschied zwischen dem Ansatz Hausmanns und Fallbeispielen wie ›Fake News‹, üblen Nachreden und dem Beispiel des scheinbar Gerücht-katalysierenden Effekts der NetzDG ist, dass einerseits eine obere Instanz eine Information als Gerücht klassifiziert, um sie zu dämpfen. Andererseits wird klassifiziertes—im Sinne von: geheimes—Wissen scheinbar in Ansätzen aufgedeckt und dabei mit Bedacht verfremdet oder gänzlich erfunden, um in der Öffentlichkeit eine bestimmte Reaktion auszulösen. Soll diese gleichsam der eigenen politischen oder sozialen Agenda dienen, wird der ›Geheimniswahrer‹ zu einer Art ›Puppenspieler‹.

#### *Das Gerücht im digitalen Raum (4)→Fake News‹ als Gerüchte-Typ*

Selbst wenn eine Falschmeldung als solche identifiziert wird, stellt Brodnig klar, wäre es inkorrekt zu denken, »dass sich Menschen Fehlinformationen nicht zu Herzen nehmen« (ebd.: 18). Ganz besonders in Phasen, »in denen ideologischer Extremismus erstarkt [...] tritt Irreführung deutlich sichtbar auf« (ebd.). Obwohl »Politiker wie Donald Trump versuchen [,] [sich] dieses Wort anzueignen«, meint der Begriff ›Fake News‹ letztlich nichts anderes als eine »fabrizierte Meldung, die mit einer Täuschungsabsicht in die Welt gesetzt wurde« und ist somit ein altes Prinzip (vgl. ebd.; vgl. auch das hier nun leicht umformulierte Postulat des einleitenden Bewusstseinsstroms: ›Ein Prinzip, so alt wie das älteste Medium‹). Brodnig unterstreicht diese These, indem sie auf das Vorkommen von ›Fake News‹ in großen Zeitungen, mindestens seit Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts, verweist. So wurde etwa verbreitet, dass »wilde Tiere aus dem städtischen Zoo ausgebrochen wären und Dutzende Menschen umgebracht hätten« (ebd.: 29). Wodurch sich die ›Fake News‹ als Gerüchtekategorie spezifizieren, ist der Umstand, dass das Gerücht an sich sowohl in seiner Auslegung wie auch bezüglich seines Wahrheitsbezuges ambivalent ist, ›Fake News‹ hingegen definitiv erlogen und manipulativ sind. Die Agenda, mithilfe einer explosiven Information »Menschen politisch zu manipulieren [...] oder aber [...] ökonomisch von der Aufregung zu profitieren« (ebd.) lässt sich durchaus sämtlichen

Gerüchte-Typen nachsagen: Nicht nur erfolgt die Verbreitung stets in ähnlicher Form und zapft in vergleichbarer Weise die emotionalen Rezeptoren an. Es lässt sich zudem von Gerüchteverbreitung unterstellen, dass durch die Ambivalenz der Nachricht eher Unsicherheiten geschürt, als Klarheiten geschaffen werden, was mitunter der Förderung negativer Emotionen dienen kann. Wobei—auch hier liegt ein Unterschied zu ›Fake News‹—das Gerücht *an sich* als unscharfes Objekt emotionaler Wahrnehmung auch in dieser Hinsicht ambivalent bleibt, wie sich hieran anschließend noch ausführlicher darstellen lassen wird.

›Echokammern‹, *Isolation und Radikalisierung—Das Gerücht als Meta-Medium*

Brodnig unterstreicht, im Rückgriff auf verschiedene Untersuchungen, die sich den Themen ›Betrug‹ und ›Fake News‹ im Internet zuwenden, eine Parallelität hinsichtlich einer gezielten Förderung von ›Misstrauen in die Demokratie‹ einerseits und einer bewussten Auswahl der Räume, in denen dieses Misstrauen geschürt wird, andererseits:

Die meisten üblen Gerüchte kursieren also hauptsächlich in der inhaltlich dazu passenden Nische im Netz. Allerdings gibt es politische Höhephasen, in denen einzelne Falschmeldungen tatsächlich viele Wähler erreichen [...] (Brodnig 2017: 15).

Die eigentlich relevante Untersuchung in diesem Kontext ist also nicht die psychologische Konfiguration der Masse als ein von der Individualpsyche unterscheidbares Phänomen und auch nicht der Inhalt des Gerüchts an sich. Es ist zudem, wie sich besonders anhand ›The War of the Worlds‹ (Welles 1938) zeigen ließ, inkorrekt, beziehungsweise unvollständig, das Gerücht als Medium zu betrachten. Stattdessen handelt es sich offensichtlich vielmehr um eine Art ›medial transportiertes Meta-Medium‹, dessen Wirkweise ebenso stark davon abhängt, an wen sich die verwendeten Kanäle richten, wie von den Geheimnis-Inhalten, die es mit sich führt. Das Gerücht ist wohl Träger einer Nachricht, es muss jedoch, mitsamt seinen Inhalten, angemessen—im Sinne von: zielgenau und kommunikativen Hürden ausweichend—selbst übermittelt werden, ist also ebenso ›Botschaft‹ wie ›Medium‹ und, alles Gesagte zusammenfassend, in erster Linie ›Sprache‹. So identifiziert Brodnig unter anderem drei gemeinsame Nenner, die alle dazu angetan scheinen, ›Fake News‹ erfolgreich zu kommunizieren, was in erster Linie bedeutet, ihre Inhalte verständlich, eindeutig und auffindbar zu platzieren: Den von den Erfindern als ›Mainstream-Journalismus‹ bezeichneten Plattformen werden »unjournalistische Webseiten« entgegengestellt (vgl. ebd.: 13). Hierdurch wird also ein Forum für ›alternative Medien‹ erschaffen, die angeblich anstreben, »Wahrheit [...] oder eine Gegenöffentlichkeit herzustellen« und dabei, im Sinne der Eindeutigkeit, »faktenorientierte Ausgewogenheit« gegen »besondere Einseitigkeit« zu ersetzen (ebd.). Diesen drei Parallelen ergänzt sich ein Umgang mit Fakten, der sich darauf kapriziert, Inhalte in irreführender Weise vorzutragen, also sie zu überinterpretieren oder sie in ›falsche Zusammenhänge‹ zu stellen oder sie allgemein ›betrügerisch‹ zu überarbeiten, wenn nicht gar zu erfinden:

Die Behauptung, dass eine 75-jährige Schwedin [während der Silvesternacht 2015/2016 in Köln; Anm. d. A.] von Flüchtlingen vergewaltigt wurde, wird mit

dem Bild einer brutal zugerichteten älteren Frau unterstützt [...]—tatsächlich zeigte das Bild das Opfer eines Gewaltverbrechens aus Südafrika, wie die Faktenchecker-Seite *Mimikama.at* aufdeckte (Brodnig 2017: 32–34).

Trotzdem muss gerade dieser Moment genutzt werden, um Hausmann in seinem Postulat beizupflichten: gegen die Aburteilung einer Gesellschaft, die dem Gerücht glaubt, als *per se* ungebildet und leichtgläubig. Denn ganz im Gegenteil sind es, so Brodnig, vielmehr »jene Personen, denen ein politisches Thema besonders wichtig ist [...]« (ebd.), die sich dazu verleiten lassen, eine Unwahrheit zu glauben, sofern sie auf die passende Weise an sie herangetragen wird. Neben der Feststellung, dass wir »ganz unbewusst« Informationen oft so werten, »dass sie zu unserem Weltbild passen« (ebd.), suchen wir diese Informationen auch ganz gezielt auf, um besagtes Weltbild zu bestätigen. Gerade in den fragmentierten Räumen des Internets lassen sich nicht nur diese, sondern auch die dazu passenden Menschen finden, die diese Bestätigung um die bereits besprochene soziale Komponente des geteilten (geheimen) Wissens ergänzen. Dass Bestätigung und Zusammengehörigkeit positive Gefühle sind, steht ebenso außer Frage, wie die Abhängigkeit dieses Gefühls von miteinander geteilten Meinungen. Neben der bereits erwähnten Zwiespältigkeit des Internets als offenem Raum, in dem jeder die Bestätigung findet, die sie oder er sucht, erklärt gerade das Modell von Gruppen, die sich lediglich bekräftigen (aber nur selten in Frage stellen), weshalb sich die Theorie vom Internet als Ansammlung von »Echokammern« entwickelte. Gemeint sind »digitale Räume, in denen sich Menschen [...] mit Gleichdenkenden austauschen und [...] Informationen beziehen, die zu ihren Interessen und ihrem Weltbild passen« (Brodnig 2017: 61). Als gefährlich wird von Brodnig daran in erster Linie das Fehlen der »Stimme des Skeptikers« eingestuft (vgl. ebd.). Wenn also Forschergruppen wie die »Computational-Social-Science«-Sektion an der *IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca* ermitteln, dass Gruppen, egal ob »Wissenschafts-Fans« oder »Verschwörungstheoretiker«, gerne in »Communities mit demselben Interesse bleiben« (vgl. ebd.: 63), scheint dies zunächst einfach verständlich. Fest steht jedoch auch, dass der Austausch in einer Gruppe, die sich ständig nur selbst bejaht, eher dem »Geklöke« von Schafen ähnelt und dass hinter der Existenz einer »Echokammer« weniger Austausch als vielmehr große Einsamkeit lauert: Wer nur dem eigenen Echo lauscht, bespricht sich letztlich nur mit sich selbst und erfährt in diesem Sinne niemals Gegenrede. Neben der Wut macht also auch ein falsch verstandenes, im Grunde non-kommunikatives, Miteinander die ohnehin schon als Randgruppe bezeichneten Individuen eher einsamer, wodurch negative Gefühle potentiell eher gefördert, als ausgeglichen werden. Diese Tendenz, von den US-Ökonomen Matthew Gentzkow und Jesse M. Shapiro als »Isolationsindex« bezeichnet (vgl. Brodnig 2017: 63–66), ist nicht nur eine traurige Perspektive auf das eigentlich sozial veranlagte Wesen Mensch, sondern begründet zudem, warum »die Haltungen [,] die diese Gruppen« in den »Echokammern« eben nicht erst entwickeln, sondern aneinander manifestieren, sich teilweise in den »Bereich des Ideologischen« steigern können (vgl. ebd.). Jenseits von geschickt bearbeiteten Fakten und gezielt platzierten Inhalten gilt hier, dass sich Menschen gefunden haben, die sich selbst als »Randgruppe« definieren und vermeintlich über geografische Distanzen hinweg Ansprache gefunden haben (vgl. ebd.: 60). Wenn aber einmal Menschen einander finden, die ansonsten den Eindruck haben, eher wenig gehört und verstanden zu werden, kann die daraus folgende

Interaktion ihre Ansichten weiter polarisieren und sogar zum Handlungsaufbruch führen (vgl. ebd.). Bemerkenswert ist, dass somit sowohl die ›Echokammern‹, als auch der Isolationsindex und schlussendlich die Radikalisierung der Randgruppen zwar auf Basis von Gerücht und technisch-medialer Verstärkung zustande kommen, letztlich jedoch von der emotionalen Wirkmacht von erfolgreicher Kommunikation, beziehungsweise ›Sprache als solcher‹ leben.

*Gerücht und Geheimnis als Sprache (der Demokratie?)*

Es scheint daher nur folgerichtig, die Wirkweise des Gerüchts als sprachliche Eigentümlichkeit, die ihm offenbar eine gesellschaftspolitische Macht in der hier unrisenen Form verleiht, zu analysieren. Diesen Weg wählen Schlicht und Klinge, die, wie bereits angemerkt, das Gerücht im Umfeld des Bürgertums als Folgeform geheimer Räume nach der französischen Revolution begutachten. Dabei gehen die Autoren von einem zunächst eher ›offenen‹ Begriff des ›Geheimen‹ aus, wie er sich in die Zeit vor dem 18. Jahrhundert situieren lässt (vgl. ebd.: 15). Mit Hilfe der ›Geheimnistypologie‹ von Jan und Aleida Assmann lässt sich noch etwas ausführlicher unterscheiden in Staatsgeheimnisse (*arcana imperi*), Herzensgeheimnisse (*arcana cordis*), ›religiöse Mysterien‹ (*arcana die*) und ›Welträtsel‹ (*arcana mundi*) (Assmann/Assmann 1997: 9; zit. n. Knirsch 2014: 328). Damit wird unterschieden zwischen Geheimnisarten, die »primär zwischenmenschliche Beziehungen zwischen Individuen oder Gruppen [...]« meinen und solchen, die über den »größeren, in ihrer ultimativen Abstraktion gar für einen universalen Personenkreis [...]«, für den sie von Interesse sind, auszeichnen. Letztere werden von Knirsch ›epistemische Geheimnisse‹ genannt.

Letztlich sind natürlich auch diese Geheimnisarten von Menschen gemacht; im Gegensatz zu den oben diskutierten Geheimnisarten entstehen diese aber nicht aus der zwischenmenschlichen Interaktion, sondern aus der Auseinandersetzung des Menschen mit der Natur und ihren Phänomenen (Knirsch 2014: 328–329).

Gleichzeitig wird, mit der ›Einführung der Demokratie‹ in ein gesellschaftliches System, gerade diesem im Dialog mit sich, seiner Natur und seinen Beziehungen stehenden Menschen auch ein neuer Raum erschlossen, nämlich die sogenannte ›Öffentlichkeit‹, die »eine Gegenposition zu einer absolutistischen oder aristokratischen Politik hinter verschlossenen Türen darstellt« (Martinez Mateo 2014: 137). Einerseits stehen staatliche Einrichtungen nun für ein offenes Eintreten für das Interesse dieses Raumes und seiner Bewohner, andererseits differenziert sich mit seiner Etablierung auch automatisch ›repräsentativ‹ von ›privat‹—man könnte auch sagen: ›innerlich‹ von ›äußerlich‹. Im Verweis auf Richard Sennet und Hannah Arendt unterstreicht Martinez Mateo die Notwendigkeit, dass sich ›Innere Räume des Geheimen‹ entwickeln, um den »Schutz oder die Wiederherstellung der Öffentlichkeit als in sich transparente Sphäre der Politik« zu gewährleisten (vgl. ebd.: 140). Durch die Verlagerung aus der Sphäre der Herrschenden ins Bürgertum wird auch der Grund für diese Annahme deutlich: Das Geheime, sowie die Instanz des Gerüchts, als staatlich nicht reglementierter Nachricht, gewährleistet die sogenannte ›Privatsphäre‹. Damit erhält die »soziale Beziehung, die durch das Herstellen eines Geheimnisses etabliert wird« (ebd.) eine gesellschaftliche

Funktion. An diesem Punkt lassen sich die eingangs benannten Emotionstheorien mit sprachwissenschaftlichen Erkenntnissen verbinden. Unterstrichen wird das Bild gemeinschaftlich geteilten, nach außen abgeschirmten, Wissens, sowie der damit verknüpften Machtpolitik des Gerüchts, als Ball, der zwischen den emotionalen Rezeptoren der Beteiligten hin- und hergeschoben wird.

Sowohl bei [Friedrich von] Schlegel [in *Ueber die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (sic; 2007 [1808])] als auch bei [Wilhelm von] Humboldt [in *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* (sic; 1949 [1836; 1848])] wurde zugleich das ›Gefühl‹, das ›Einfühlen‹ in die lebendige Struktur der Grammatik zu einer legitimen epistemischen Technik, die das Geheimnis der Sprache, ihr ›inneres Wesen‹ ergründen helfe (Schlicht/Klinge 2014: 16).

Schlicht und Klinge führen zudem aus, dass, Humboldt zufolge, ›nur in Spuren‹ eine Rückverfolgbarkeit allen Sprachlichen, also auch des Gerüchts, »existiere, die mit dem ›Geist‹ der Sprache und ihrem ›Leben‹ verwoben seien« (ebd.: 15; mit Bezug auf Humboldt 1949 [1836; 1848]: 37–39). Sprache als solche ist also ebenfalls ein unscharfes Bild, das sich eher an der Breite und Tiefe des durch sie ausgelösten Schauers, statt an konkreten inhaltlichen Aspekten festmachen lässt. Dabei lässt sich das Gerücht, durch seine Verwandtschaft mit dem Geheimen, als Essenz dieses Sprachphänomens betrachten: Nicht der Inhalt des Gerüchts an sich ist bestimmend, sondern vielmehr ist seine Nachricht allein anhand der individuellen Relevanz, die es für das fühlende Wesen hat, zu bewerten. Typisch für seine kommunikative Form, wird diese Relevanz wiederum davon unterstützt, dass das Gerücht über die passenden Kanäle an die richtigen Personen herangetragen wird. So würden wohl einem Menschen, der zeitlebens ohne mobile Kommunikation ausgekommen ist, die Gerüchte um ›Datenklau‹ und unlautere Verwendung von ›Metadaten‹ wenig ausmachen. Da wir jedoch faktisch alle in irgendeiner Form digitalisiert und somit Produzenten von Metadaten sind, wird die Furcht zum mindestens als Unwohlsein beschreibbaren Schauer, den man im Grunde bei jeder *Amazon*-Bestellung wahrnehmen könnte. Die ›heftige‹ Wirkung von ›The War of the Worlds‹ (Welles 1938) ist, analog dazu, weniger auf die angebliche Unterbildung der breiten Masse zurückzuführen, als vielmehr auf den Umgang mit einem Medium, das schneller, breiter und direkter informieren konnte als man es vor seinem Aufkommen von medialen Kanälen gewohnt war. Darüber hinaus traf die emotionale Botschaft von Angriff und Gefahr, losgelöst von deren konkreter Form, aber offensichtlich auch einen gewissen Nerv—oder vielmehr eine Nervosität, durch die das erreichte Publikum empfänglicher wurde, als ursprünglich absehbar. Hinzu kommt die damals noch recht neue Erfahrung, dass sich eine Liveübertragung, anders als die Zeitungsnachricht, nicht zeitlich zurücksetzen lässt: Wer also zu spät zugeschaltet hatte, konnte nur noch aufschnappen, jedoch keine Kontexte erkennen. In der Weise, in der das unscharfe Bild als Spiegel der eigenen Seele beschrieben wurde, ist die Existenz des Schauers als Reaktion auf das Gerücht signifikanter Teil eines Gesellschaftsbildes. Diese Behauptung lässt sich unter anderem am Erfolg der Kommunikation—sowohl anhand der Verbreitung, wie auch an der Heftigkeit der Emotionalität und nicht zuletzt der Überlebensdauer in der Berichterstattung—ableiten.

Bemerkenswert sind dabei die Zusammenhänge zwischen Öffentlichkeit und Privatem, die sich auf tun: Offensichtlich wachsen Ängste im Geheimen und werden, ausgelöst durch ein Gerücht, an die Öffentlichkeit gezogen. Selbst außerhalb von kritischen Momenten wird so deutlich, dass sich eine Gesellschaft auch aus den Wechselbeziehungen zwischen Öffentlichem und Privatem, auf die das Gerücht verweist, definiert.

### Resümee

Offensichtlich lassen sich private und öffentliche Räume aus den Sphären des Geheimen ableiten und schaffen damit so etwas wie die ›Individualität‹ einer Gesellschaft. Die ›Faszination des Unschärfen‹, so lässt sich weiterhin argumentieren, ist sicherlich ein Faktor, der das Geheime wie auch das Gerücht in der Gesellschaft hält. Es lässt sich nun jedoch auch die These aufstellen, dass Gerüchte und Geheimnisse notwendig sind, um überhaupt von einer Gesellschaft sprechen zu können, nicht zuletzt deshalb, weil die Sphäre des Privaten, mitsamt ihrer sozialen Bindung, ein notwendiges Gegengewicht darstellt, um ›Öffentlichkeit‹ überhaupt erst behaupten zu können.

Gegenöffentlichkeit(en) oder Geheimgesellschaften, die primär mit Teilinformationen und Gerüchten agieren, leisten demnach einen Beitrag zu diesem Gefüge, da sie es immer wieder in Frage—und vor die Verantwortung, sich vor sich selbst zu rechtfertigen—stellen, was ebenfalls unverzichtbarer Teil des ›demokratischen Prozesses‹ ist. Die Schaffung einer Individualität ist es, die, im privaten wie im öffentlichen Raum, das ›Draußen‹ gegen das ›Dinnen‹ abgrenzt. In *Transparenzgesellschaft* (2012) führt Byung-Chul Han aus, dass es ein tief veranlagtes Anliegen der ›menschlichen Seele‹ zu sein scheint, sich ›Sphären‹—man könnte hier auch von Räumen oder einem Hort sprechen—zu schaffen, »in denen sie [die menschliche Seele] *bei sich* sein kann [,] ohne den Blick des Anderen« (Han 2012: 8; Hervorhebung im Original). Zudem, so fasst es Marina Martinez Mateo zusammen, ist die mit dem Bürgertum aufkommende Differenzierung von Öffentlichem und Privatem verbunden mit dem Geheimen, »als [...] Ort, der im Verborgenen bleiben darf und soll, um ihn vor den Augen und dem Zugriff des Staates zu schützen« (ebd.: 139–140) und der durch das Gerücht eine Beziehung zur Öffentlichkeit unterhält, die auf kommunikativer Ebene unverzichtbar ist. Damit wirkt die Ausbildung von ›Echokammern‹ im Grunde wie die Extremform des Strebens, einen Gegenentwurf zur Öffentlichkeit, ob nun privat oder subversiv, zu schaffen. Gilt es, zur Teilnahme an der öffentlichen Gemeinschaft Kompromisse, was die eigenen kommunikativen Bedürfnisse angeht, einzugehen, findet sich hier ein Ort der Befreiung von angestauter Emotion in nahezu kathartischer Weise. Das Gerücht ist ein Mittel, gehört und gesehen zu werden, wobei auch dieses Potential durch politische Vermarktung pervertiert werden kann.

Wiederum hat sich das Gerücht also als *ambivalent* erwiesen: Es scheint, als sei es mit grundsätzlich sozialisierend wirksamem Potential ausgestattet, das sich jedoch aufgrund seiner Unschärfe in *monströse Gegenteile* verkehren lässt. Die Arbeit im und mit dem Geheimen ist nicht nur Methode zwielichtiger Randgruppen, sondern ein wirksames politisches ›Marketinginstrument‹. Die Schaffung von Räumen, die durch das Geheime umfriedet werden, ist jedoch auch das natürliche Verlangen jedes Einzelnen, um Privatheit dem Druck der Öffentlichkeit entgegenzusetzen. Aufgrund der genannten Zusammenhänge, sowie aus dem natürlichen Bedürfnis, Teil einer

kollektiven Gemeinschaft—lies: Wissensgemeinschaft—und nicht ausgeschlossen zu sein, sind die geheimen, privaten, nicht-repräsentativen Räume begehrt und Objekt für Nachforschung und Gerüchteverbreitung. Dabei entstehen unweigerlich Machträume, an deren Reibungsflächen sich diejenigen, die manipulierbar oder zu verunsichern sind, verschwenden lassen. Das Gerücht bildet Bezugspunkte zwischen dem Geheim-Privaten und dem Repräsentativ-Öffentlichen. Es wird dann zum ›Monster‹, wenn es mediale Aufblähung und undifferenzierte Verbreitung erfährt. Das bedeutet jedoch nicht, dass es als kommunikatives Werkzeug besser im Milieu der unterhaltenden Künste aufgehoben wäre. Gerade zur Definition einer Öffentlichkeit, die sich unabhängig vom Staat austauscht, gehören das Gerücht und seine (medialen) Räume; gerade *wegen* der Ambivalenz, die sich durch deren emotionale Kontextualisierung auftut. Zu spekulieren, zu theoretisieren und zu hinterfragen sind sowohl lustbringende Betätigungen der menschlichen Psyche, als auch Basis einer Bevölkerung, die sich beteiligt und denkt, also Teil der Demokratie. Das Ausufern emotionaler Reaktionen, sowie Versuche der Manipulation, sind Tendenzen, die das Gerücht insbesondere in seiner Variante der gefälschten Nachricht mit sich führt und die als Teil des freiheitlichen Diskurses ertragen und beantwortet werden müssen. Ihnen entgegenzuwirken, indem grundsätzlich jedes Aufkommen von Wut im Keim erstickt wird, kann nicht der probate—im Sinne von: ›demokratische‹—Weg sein. Wie in jeder guten Beziehung ist vielmehr an dieser Stelle die Ursache von Isolationstendenzen, Zorn und Offenheit für radikalisierende Einflüsse zu hinterfragen und mit inkludierenden, aufklärenden und kommunikativen Mitteln der potentiellen Eskalation eine Antwort zu geben.

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[DE] **Biographische Angaben**

Katharina Sturm studierte zunächst Theater- und Medienwissenschaften in Kombination mit Anglistik in Bayreuth. Im universitären Rahmen experimentierte sie mit Regie, Schauspiel und Bewegung; zuletzt entstand so mit ›Salomé tanzt!‹ (2013) eine Kombination aus Kunstfilm und Tanzperformance. Akademisch beschäftigte sie sich in dieser Zeit besonders mit Regietheater und Autorenfilm, beispielsweise mit Pedro Almodóvars Zuschauerbehandlung (Thesis, 2013: *Die doppelte Adressierung: Zuschauerbehandlung in Pedro Almodóvars Werk*). Nach dem erfolgreichen Abschluss des Bachelors zog sie nach Köln, wo sie unter anderem an den Projekten des Theaters ›ImPuls‹ teilnahm und als Regieassistentin am Theater ›Der Keller‹ arbeitete. Weitere Theatererfahrungen sammelte sie am Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf, dem ›Forum für Freies Theater‹ (›FFT‹) in Düsseldorf, sowie während des ›Impulse‹-Theaterfestivals in Düsseldorf und Köln. Schließlich schrieb sie ihre Masterarbeit an der Ruhr-Universität Bochum im Fach Medienwissenschaften. Thema der Arbeit war die Untersuchung emotionalisierender Maßnahmen im politischen Dokumentarfilm (Thesis, 2018: *Die emotionale Dokumentation: Vernetzungsökonomien und Emotionalisierungstechniken*). Weitere Interessensgebiete während der Masterphase lagen im Bereich psychoanalytischer Theater- und Filmbeobachtung, sowie der Fantastik. Direkt im Anschluss konnte sie als Projektassistentin zur ›Berliner Synchron GmbH‹ gehen, wo sie noch bis August 2019 tätig sein wird. Parallel dazu hat sie an der ›University of Bayreuth Graduate School‹ mit der Promotion zum Thema *Zerstörerische Plastizität* nach Catherine Malabou; beziehungsweise der ästhetischen Verhandlung von Trauma im Kunst-, Theater- und Medienumfeld, begonnen. Sturms jüngere Veröffentlichungen beinhalten ›Das Spektakel und die Masse‹ (siehe Sturm 2017), und ›Die Perspektive der Anderen‹ (mit Stina Freund; siehe Freund/Sturm 2018).

[EN] **Biographical Note**

Katharina Sturm moved in 2017 from Düsseldorf to Berlin, where she lives and works since then. Before that, she studied Media and Theatre Sciences at the Ruhr University Bochum. Currently, she is working on a PhD thesis on Catherine Malabou's *Ontologie de l'accident: Essai sur la plasticité destructrice* (Éditions Léo Scheer, 2009). Her thesis focuses especially on Malabou's concept of 'destructive plasticity'. Katharina Sturm has furthermore taken a deeper interest in concepts of masses, culture and mass culture, as well as psychoanalytical approaches to theatre and media analysis.

[EN] **Editors' Note**

Sturm's essay on the rumour's potentially monstrous character ('Authority, Manipulation, and Togetherness—Media Spaces of the Rumour') appears in German. Its narrative mode can best be described as a colourful, multi-faceted stream of consciousness: From Adam and Eve via *The War of the Worlds* to 'Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz'; and beyond. From the *worlds* to the *words*: Those of our readers who may lack sufficient German proficiency, are encouraged to have a look at the English translation of Hans-Joachim Neubauer's *Fama* (1998; 2009 [1998])—*The Rumour* (1999 [1998]). There are also Chinese, Croatian, Finnish, Japanese, Korean, and Spanish editions.

*A good read!*

Neubauer, Hans-Joachim. 1998. *Fama: Eine Geschichte des Gerüchts*. First German edition. Berlin: Berlin Verlag.

———. 1999 [1998]. *The Rumour: A Cultural History*. Translated by Christian Braun. First English edition. London/New York: Free Association Books.

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## Book Reviews

*It is,  
in no way,  
'the complete story'  
[...]*

—Hordijk, on page 388.

“En journalistikk som viser seg  
ute av stand til å kritisk følge  
elitedrevne prosesser og praksiser  
mister den sentrale vaktbikkjefunksjonen  
som man ofte uten videre ettertanke  
tildeler store medieaktører”

—Pöttsch, on page 378.

“In recent years, the famine of 1932–1933  
has reached new heights  
as a politicized event [...] in a ‘memory war’  
on many discursive levels [...].  
This should, symptomatically, remind us  
of the sheer power that media narratives have  
in shaping public imaginations”

—Hordijk, on page 388.

## BOKANMELDELSE—UWE KRÜGERS *MAINSTREAM* (2016)

Holger Pötzsch (UiT Norges arktiske universitet)

Uwe Krüger. *Mainstream: Warum wir den Medien nicht mehr trauen*. ISBN-13: 978-3-406-68851-5. München: C. H. Beck, mars 2016. Paperback; 174 sider; UVP [veiledende pris]: €14,95.<sup>1</sup>

I et velkjent innslag av det tyske satireprogrammet *Die Anstalt* (episode 3; ZDF, 29. april 2014)<sup>2</sup> viser kabarettistene Max Uthoff og Claus von Wagner frem et tett nettverk som forbinder ledende tyske publisister og journalister med sentrale transatlantiske lobbyorganisasjoner og tankesmier. I en påtatt naiv stil opplyses publikum om tette forgreininger som blant annet fører til grove unnlaterelser i rapporteringen og skjevheter i fremstillingen av viktige saker. I en lengre replikkveksling vises det til et konkret eksempel hvor de samme journalistene som deltok i utarbeidelsen av utenrikspolitiske strategier i etterkant var ansvarlige for positive omtaler av disse strategiene i sine respektive aviser og TV-stasjoner. På Uthoffs spørsmål om ikke dette konstituerer klare interessekonflikter, svarer von Wagner lakonisk at en slik fortolkning hadde forutsatt forskjellige interesser til å begynne med.

Innslaget i *Die Anstalt* synliggjør en av kjernefaktorene i en økende tillitskrise mellom ledende tyske medier og offentligheten som har utviklet seg over de siste årene. Bidragets innhold er ikke oppspinn, men baserer seg i sin helhet på en rekke kritiske nettverksstudier Uwe Krüger (2013) har gjennomført som viser hvor tett sammensveiset journalister er med politiske og økonomiske eliter, og hvor lite deres mediale dekning av viktige begivenheter og utfordringer avviker fra et hegemonisk eliteperspektiv med røtter i politikk og næringsliv.<sup>3</sup> Krüger setter dermed en rekke kritiske spørsmålstejn bak den ofte ureflekterte antagelsen om sentrale massemedier som en fjerde statsmakt med stor betydning for en demokratisk offentlighet.

Krügers første bok fra 2013 skapte en til dels opphetet debatt i tyske medier og akademiske kretser. I store tyske aviser som *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* og *Süddeutsche Zeitung* ble det blant annet påpekt at selv om tette forgreininger mellom beslutningstagere og journalister skulle være et faktum, kan man ikke uten videre anta at medlemskap i slike nettverk direkte forårsaker politisk slagside i rapporteringen (se, for eksempel, Holzer 2013). Den kanskje skarpeste kritikken fra akademiske kretser sto kommunikasjonsforskeren Christoph Neuberger (2014) fra München for. Han hevdet blant annet at Krügers forskning bar preg av store mangler med hensyn til metode, kildevalg og problemformulering, og kritiserte boka for manglende vitenskapelig nøytralitet. I et motsvar har Krüger (2014) tilbakevist Neubergers kritikk. Også det ovennevnte innslaget i *Die Anstalt* skapte bølger. En av redaktørene som ble nevnt i

<sup>1</sup> Denne anmeldelsen er basert på bokas første utgave fra mars 2016. Den andre, reviderte og oppdaterte utgaven kom i august 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Et opptak av innslaget er tilgjengelig på *YouTube*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SASZZBnwePM>. For hele episoden, se: <https://www.claus-von-wagner.de/tv/anstalt/20140429-europaeische-union> [22. desember 2018].

<sup>3</sup> For en engelsk oppsummering av forskningen, se Krüger 2015.

sendingen, Josef Joffe fra *Die Zeit*, prøvde å stoppe kringkastingen med juridiske midler. Først i januar 2017 avgjorde den høyeste tyske domstolen at programmet igjen kan legges ut i ZDF sitt mediatek.<sup>4</sup>

I sin nye bok *Mainstream: Warum wir den Medien nicht mehr trauen* (2016) oppdaterer Krüger sin forskning delvis med utgangspunkt i kritikken som har blitt fremmet mot den, og utvider perspektivet til å omfatte andre enn rent nettverksrelaterte fenomener. Samtidig retter denne boken seg til et breiere publikum, noe som fører til en lettere tilgjengelig stil som gjør verket lesbart også for personer som ikke har tysk som morsmål. Akkurat som Krügers første monografi (2013) er også den nye boka mye omdiskutert i tyske medier og offentlighet og har også fått noe oppmerksomhet i Norge (se, for eksempel, Malling 2017).

Gjennom bokas til sammen 8 kapitler følger Krüger stort sett samme stil og logikk. Han åpner med å referere oppsiktsvekkende unnlaterelser og skjevheter i mainstream-rapporteringen av sentrale saker som Ukrainakrisen, bankkollapsen, gjeldsproblematikken, TTIP-forhandlingene, tyske krigsdeltagelser og flyktningkrisen for så å rette søkelyset mot en rekke faktorer som kan forklare slik ubalansert mediedekning. Disse faktorene blir knyttet til en rekke fagbegreper som kort introduseres for leseren; dog mangler boka dessverre en kobling til Herman og Chomskys (2002 [1988]) propagandamodell selv om den spiller en viktig rolle i Krügers tidligere forskning.

Allerede undertittelen i Krügers bok er program. *Warum wir den Medien nicht mehr trauen* kan oversettes med *Hvorfor vi ikke lenger stoler på mediene*. Med det strategisk plasserte personlige pronomenet «vi» etablerer Krüger sin tilhørighet blant folk flest og signaliserer en viss avstand til mainstreamdiskursen han vil kritisere på vegne av «oss alle».

I kapittel 1 viser Krüger til Ukrainakrisen som en skjellsettende hendelse. Han viser til en rekke faktiske forhold som ikke ble fanget opp av tyske mainstreammedier før han henter frem etablerte stemmer som i etterkant bekreftet (og beklaget) den feilaktige dekningen (deriblant en rekke sentrale publisister, journalister og en tidligere tysk utenriksminister). Ifølge Krüger er Ukrainakrisen emblematiske for en tillitskrise mellom etablerte medier og tyskere flest—en påstand han kommer jevnlig tilbake til gjennom resten av boka.

I kapittel 2 etablerer Krüger begrepet mainstreammedier og avgrenser det fra relaterte konsepter som ensretting («*Gleichschaltung*») og systemmedier («*Systemmedien*») og distingverer det fra det historisk belastete ordet løgnpresse («*Lügenpresse*»). Han argumenterer for at begrepet mainstream muliggjør en nøktern, ikke-polemisk og ikke-nedsettende tilnærming til de reelle mekanismene som skaper en overraskende høy grad av konformitet i mediedekningen i pluralistiske og demokratiske samfunn som det tyske. Krüger viser til en voksende kløft mellom offentlig og offentliggjort mening («*öffentliche und veröffentlichte Meinung*») som sentral faktor i tillitskrisen mellom medieprodusenter og resipienter. Nettopp dette fokuset gjør boka også relevant for andre enn bare tyske lesere.

På bakgrunn av sin begrepsavklaring vender Krüger i kapittel 3 søkelyset mot journalistiske praksiser og ser på prosesser av «mainstreaming» i lys av teknologiske og økonomiske mekanismer. Krüger viser hvordan nye teknologier førte til synkende

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<sup>4</sup> For mer informasjon om programmet, se Krüger 2019.



inntekter og trangere økonomiske rammer for store mediehus, en trend som har ført til endrede rammebetingelser for journalistisk arbeid. Han refererer til en rekke studier som viser at tiden avisredaksjoner bruker på undersøkende journalistikk er blitt sterkt redusert på grunn av nedbemanning og aktualitetspress, og at arbeidsforholdene til journalister er blitt prekære, noe som fører til redusert evne til å utfordre arbeidsgivere eller viktige beslutningstagere. I tillegg påviser Krüger en økende innflytelse av PR-bransjen, lobbyister og politiske rådgivere som ofte leverer ferdigskrevne saker som journalister har lite tid til å kritisk bedømme. Især studier han siterer som peker mot paralleller mellom interessene til store annonsører og innholdet i ukemagasinene *Spiegel* og *Focus* kan karakteriseres som oppsiktsvekkende (Hagen/Fläming/In der Au 2014).

På bakgrunn av Bennetts (1990) begrep indeksering («indexing») kritiserer Krüger i Kapittel 4 at viktige tyske mainstreammedier ser ut til å begrense sin dekning til en gjengivelse av de posisjonene som til enhver tid dominerer sentrale politiske partier og samfunnsinstitusjoner. I utenrikspolitiske saker identifiserer Krüger i tillegg en form for «power indexing» (2016: 61) som reduserer journalistenes aktiviteter ytterligere til en ukritisk viderefremføring av regjeringsposisjoner. Han siterer studier som har analysert tysk mainstreamrapportering om Kosovokrigen, innføringen av euroen, krisa i Hellas og invasjonen av Irak.

Kapittel 5, 6 og 7 undersøker elitemiljøene de mest innflytelsesrike journalistene beveger seg i, og viser til utelukkelses- og rekrutteringsmekanismene som sikrer stadig tilfang av likesinnete nykommere og som effektivt marginaliserer avvikende og kritiske stemmer. Disse kapitlene sammenfatter Krügers (2013; 2015) tidligere forskning om elitenettverkene i tysk presse og politikk, og oppdaterer den med henvisning til aktuelle caser som Ukrainakonflikten, innvandringsdebatten og fremveksten av den fremmedfiendtlige bevegelsen Pegida og høyrepopulistiske partier som AfD i Tyskland.

I kapittel 5 introduserer Krüger Bourdieus begrep «habitus» for å forklare de ofte usynlige og implisitte sosialisering- og tilpasningsprosesser bak dannelsen av mainstreamtenkning og -rapportering, mens kapittel 6 gir en sammenfatning av forfatterens nettverksanalyser som viser tette forgreininger som knytter sammen sjefredaktører, ressortsjefer og nyhetsankere med elitære stiftelser, konferanser, tankesmier og lobbyorganisasjoner. Krüger bruker begrepet «embedding» for å karakterisere disse nære relasjonene og deres diskursive og politiske effekter. Især poenget om at statuttene til tyske *Bild-Zeitung* forplikter alle sine medarbeidere til å aktivt støtte opp under det transatlantiske partnerskapet med USA er et oppsiktsvekkende spark mot journalisters ofte påståtte uavhengighet.

Kapittel 7 inneholder en beskrivelse av slike kretser og arrangementer som presseklubber, private sammenkomster, mottagelser og festiviteter som er en naturlig del av «alfajournalistenes» arbeidshverdag i den tyske hovedstaden og andre urbane sentre. Krüger viser hvordan slike sammenkomster (som journalister er avhengige av for å komme i kontakt med sentrale kilder) uunngåelig farger deres oppfattelser og fortolkninger av viktige saker. Han identifiserer blant annet noe han kaller for en ansvarssammensvergelse («Verantwortungsverschöpfung») hvor sentrale politiske aktører tillegger journalister ansvar for å vinkle rapporteringen på en måte som unngår kontroverser og ikke skaper bekymringer i kapitalmarkedene, hos sentrale allierte, eller hos folk flest. Ifølge Krüger fører dette til en ukritisk ensretting av journalistikken som

knyttet tettere og tettere til en etablert politisk linje definert av regjeringen og andre «ansvarlige» institusjoner og individer.

I kapittel 8 sammenfatter Krüger faktorene som, ifølge ham, fører til en økende tillitskrise i nåværende tysk offentlighet. Med utgangspunkt i hemmelighetskremmeriet rundt frihandelsavtalene TISA, TTIP og CETA argumenterer Krüger for at kritisk journalistikk i dag i økende grad finner sted andre plasser enn i de etablerte mediehusene. Krüger viser til betydningen av digital teknologi for skapelsen av motoffentligheter og alternative diskurser som kan balansere mainstreammedienes ensidige fremstillinger og kildevalg. Forfatteren nevner dog ikke debatten rundt varslernettsteder som *WikiLeaks* eller aktivitetene til sentrale nye medieorganisasjoner som *The Intercept*. Dermed mister han muligheten til å nyansere en noe overflatisk behandling av forholdet mellom digital teknologi og demokratisk offentlighet som kulminerer i Krügers observasjonen om at både elitesirkler og digitale plattformer ofte fungerer som ekkokamre med en tendens til å fremheve det kjente og kjære på bekostning av alternative posisjoner og ideer. Boka avsluttes med en kort liste over praktiske tiltak både journalister og mediebrukere kan ty til for å gjenopprette gjensidig tillit og skape en åpnere og mer konstruktiv meningsutveksling i samfunnet.

Krügers bok er kjennetegnet av en gjennomgående kritisk tone og legger ikke skjul på forfatternes overbevisning om at endringer i måten journalistikk drives og formidles på i Tyskland må til om et åpent demokratisk samfunn skal kunne bestå. Denne noe normative holdningen er imidlertid lite problematisk fordi forfatteren overbevisende underbygger sin kritikk med empiriske studier og uttalelser fra sentrale aktører.

Til tross for den kritiske tonen tegner ikke Krüger et monolittisk bilde av tyske medier. Han tar stadig høyde for motstemmer og positive eksempler også fra innsiden av elitediskursen. Gjentatte ganger nevner han viktigheten av en viss nærhet mellom sentrale beslutningstagere og journalister som er nødt å ha kilder «der det skjer». Krüger påpeker også at det, under visse omstendigheter, kan finnes gyldige grunner for å holde tilbake viktig informasjon fra offentligheten. Den vide empiriske forskningen forfatteren refererer til tyder imidlertid på en ubalanse og partiskhet i ledende tyske medier («Leitmedien») som må ansees som problematisk.

Krüger retter søkelyset mot generelle mekanismer som systematisk motiverer en bestemt type adferd blant journalister og beslutningstagere. Dermed unngår han et uproduktivt fokus på grupper av lysskye konspiratorer som forklaring på ubalansert mediedekning. Hans fokus er på rammene som driver journalistisk og publisistisk arbeid i en bestemt retning uten å anta at slike med nødvendighet må være styrt av tilsynelatende allmektige individer eller grupper.

*Mainstream: Warum wir den Medien nicht mehr trauen* viser hvorfor en voksende avstand mellom borgere og elitene er problematisk for et demokratisk samfunn. En journalistikk som viser seg ute av stand til å kritisk følge elitedrevne prosesser og praksiser mister den sentrale vaktbikkjefunksjonen som man ofte uten videre ettertanke tildeler store medieaktører. Krügers bok kan sees som et velfundert kall for et kritisk og konstruktivt engasjement med disse utfordringene—et kall som er relevant ikke bare i en tysk kontekst.

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## Biografisk notat

Holger Pötzsch, PhD, er førsteamanuensis i medie- og dokumentasjonsvitenskap ved UiT Norges arktiske universitet. Pötzschs forskningsfelt er medier og krig med hovedvekt på krigsfilm og -spill, kritiske tilnærminger til digital teknologi og grensestudier. Han har publisert i en rekke fagtidsskrifter og leder for tiden de internasjonale forskernettverkene WAR/GAME og «Manufacturing Monsters».

[EN] **Editors' Note**

Pöttsch's book review appears in Norwegian and is thus written for a Scandinavian audience. For a summary of Uwe Krüger's research in English, see Krüger 2015. For a book review in English, see Keel 2018.

## BOOK REVIEW—ANNE APPLEBAUM’S *RED FAMINE* (2017)

Frank Hordijk (UiT Culture and Social Sciences Library)

Anne Elizabeth Applebaum. *Red Famine: Stalin’s War on Ukraine*. ISBN-13: 978–0–241–00380–0. London: Allen Lane, September 2017. Hardcover; 512 pages; RRP [recommended retail price]: £25.00.<sup>1</sup>

Written by Anne Applebaum, *Red Famine* is a detailed historical account of the famine of 1932–1933 which engulfed ‘Soviet Ukraine’ (Ukrainian *Socialist Soviet Republic*, 1919 [1922]–1936; Ukrainian *Soviet Socialist Republic* [UkrSSR], 1936–1991)—an event known as the ‘Holodomor’.<sup>2</sup> The Holodomor is considered to be the second great famine since the inception of the ‘Soviet Union’ (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics [USSR], 1922–1991) and it cost millions of lives, with numbers ranging from 3 to 10 million.<sup>3</sup> In comparison, the first great famine in ‘Soviet Russia’ (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic [SFSR], 1917 [1922]–1991) claimed approximately 5 million lives in 1921–1922. That famine struck Russian parts of the Soviet Union the worst, but Ukraine suffered as well. The first famine became known to the world while it was unfolding and was then intercepted by international aid, while the Holodomor of 1932–1933 was covered up and virtually erased from the Soviet public memory. While the Holodomor narrative is relatively unknown to the Western public, it is not a new one. The British–US–American historian Robert Conquest<sup>4</sup> published the first scholarly treatment of the Holodomor back in 1986 in a book entitled *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*. In 2004, the two British researchers Robert William Davies and Stephen G. Wheatcroft challenged Conquest on ‘intentionality’ and the death-toll with their study *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931–1933* (2009 [2004]).<sup>5</sup>

Applebaum’s recent book picks up on this contested memory of the Holodomor. She is mostly known for historical narratives such as *Gulag: A History* (2003), while also working as an outspoken columnist in *The Washington Post* and other US news outlets, where she frequently voices her opinions on world affairs, often on the situation in

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<sup>1</sup> Allen Lane (London) belongs to Penguin Random House—such as Anchor Books (New York) and Doubleday (New York). In addition to the Allen Lane 2017 hardcover edition, both a Doubleday 2017 hardcover edition and an Anchor Books 2018 paperback edition are available; among other reprint editions. Further, Applebaum’s *Red Famine* is also available in Norwegian: *Rød sult: Stalins krig mot Ukraina*, translated by Rune R. Moen, 2018 published by Cappelen Damm (Oslo).

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘Holodomor’ roughly translates to ‘death by starvation’. According to Applebaum (2017: xxvi), it is derived from the Ukrainian words *holod* (hunger) and *mor* (extermination).

<sup>3</sup> These numbers have been heavily debated, but the historical consensus seems to stabilize at 3.9 million (Applebaum 2017: 279–280). The politicalized versions of these numbers are often set at 7–10 million, probably to ‘outdo’ the 1941–1945 Holocaust.

<sup>4</sup> [George] Robert [Acworth] Conquest (1917–2015) was known for his polemical and condemning historical books on the Soviet Union and was an adviser of both Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan on questions concerning the Soviet Union.

<sup>5</sup> Read more about this in the *Deñ* [*The Day*] article ‘How the West Interprets the Ukrainian Holodomor: Robert Davies and Stephen Wheatcroft vs. Robert Conquest’ (Kulchytsky 2015).

Ukraine—while typically characterizing Ukraine as the ‘victim’ and Russia as the ‘aggressor’. This view is reflected in the preface of her new book:

The *Maidan revolution* [sic] of 2014, *Yanukovych's decision to shoot at protesters* [sic] and then flee the country, *the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea* [sic], *the Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine* [sic] and *the accompanying Russian propaganda campaign* [sic] all unexpectedly put Ukraine at the centre of international politics while I was working on this book (Applebaum 2017: xxx; emphasis added).

It was truly a timely publication in the year 2017, with a divided Ukraine still locked in something akin to civil war, Ukrainian acts of aggression towards Soviet monuments and the release of *Bitter Harvest* (2017), a Canadian–US-American film directed by George Mendeluk, which tells the tale of the Holodomor to a global audience.

Furthermore, as exemplified by the above quotation, it seems that Applebaum's narrative of the Ukraine–Russia conflict is synchronized with the Western mainstream media version of the event.<sup>6</sup> While Applebaum presents *Red Famine* as an objective historical work, one should keep in mind her other role in the news media and think tanks where she often warns about ‘total war’ with Russia. While it is important to contextualize *Red Famine* within her political work, my goal is to focus on how the content of her newest book is presented.

A look at the bibliography in *Red Famine* reveals that Applebaum consulted a vast amount of literature in English, Russian and Ukrainian. Applebaum notes that the wealth of available documentation ‘finally’ makes it ‘possible’ to tell ‘the complete story’ of the Holodomor. Well, in this case, perhaps it is better to name it the ‘almost complete US-conservative's version’ of the event. Applebaum's work is, after all, aligned with Canadian and Ukrainian research, to which the author acknowledges a great debt for supporting her work. She tells us that: “[...] Conquest's *Harvest of Sorrow* (like this one) was written in collaboration with the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute” (Applebaum 2017: 336). This information should caution the reader of what strain of the Holodomor narrative we have before us.

Applebaum explains that since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the independence of Ukraine a lot of work has been done collecting oral history and memoirs in Ukraine. Quotations from such witness testimonies are used to great effect throughout the book and make a gruesome reading, but one should perhaps be slightly wary of relying too much on such sources as they are not always trustworthy and may be politically motivated or otherwise manipulated, as pointed out by the US-American–Canadian historian John-Paul Himka.<sup>7</sup> However, Applebaum relies heavily on witness testimonies to ‘prove’ that the famine was deliberate. Perhaps the best examples of this

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<sup>6</sup> Oliver Boyd-Barrett did an extensive study of such narratives and balanced them with narratives from ‘Western’ ‘alternative media’ in his book *Western Mainstream Media and the Ukraine Crisis: A Study in Conflict Propaganda* (2017), which should be consulted if you are interested in a critique of the hegemonic ‘Western’ mass-media narrative of the conflict.

<sup>7</sup> See John-Paul Himka's review article ‘Encumbered Memory: The Ukrainian Famine of 1932–[19]33’ (2013). Himka is known for challenging the ‘mythologizing’ of Ukrainian history. About this, read his article ‘Interventions: Challenging the Myths of Twentieth-Century Ukrainian History’ (2012). It is worth noting that none of his works are considered in Applebaum's here-reviewed book.

can be found in chapters eight–ten that deal with the alleged decisions made by the Soviet government to ‘initialize’ the famine.

Applebaum’s book is divided into fifteen chapters, not including the preface, introduction and epilogue. It includes historical maps of Ukraine and includes a large number of documentary photographs.

The introduction briefly tells of the various obstacles that hindered the formation of an independent Ukrainian state before 1917. In the first chapter, the narrative begins in 1917, the first year of the ‘Ukrainian Revolution’. In 1918, Ukraine became an independent state for a short period—interrupted by German, Polish and three Soviet invasions. The third Soviet invasion came in 1920, which temporarily ended any hopes for independence, but Ukraine would still enjoy some freedom for the next ten years, although part of the Soviet empire.<sup>8</sup> In chapters one and two we learn about Ukraine’s struggle for independence and identity in the period leading up to the Holodomor and we are offered important background material for understanding the famine(s). This chapter introduces the important label ‘kulak’, one of the three peasant class categories devised by the Bolsheviks. Referring to a rich peasant who exploited others to work for them, it became increasingly political: “Very quickly, the kulaks became one of the most important Bolshevik scapegoats, the group blamed most often for the failure of Bolshevik agriculture and food distribution” (Applebaum 2017: 35).

*Red Famine* rears its head in chapter three, where the first famine of 1921–1922 eventually forced a truce between the Red, the White and anarchist armies. Applebaum attributes this famine to ruthless policies of grain confiscations exacerbated by civil war, propaganda, hate speech—and bad weather. Unlike the Holodomor of 1932–1933, “[...] in 1921[–1922,] mass hunger was not kept a secret. More importantly, the regime tried to help the starving” (Applebaum 2017: 61). Fridtjof Nansen and Herbert Hoover were key actors in the international relief effort. Applebaum posits that the famine was used to quell Ukrainian rebels and subdue the church, but the extent of the famine frightened Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks, forcing them to temporarily halt the grain confiscations. The famine’s consequences were peasant uprisings and fear for loss of power and resulted in two new policies, Lenin’s ‘New Economic Policy’ (NEP) and ‘Ukrainization’. The latter meant that the Ukrainian language was finally legalized and standardized, after having been very restricted in pre-revolutionary Russia.

Chapter four, covering 1927–1929, tells how the NEP resulted again in a food crisis and unrest. Under Joseph Stalin, a new phase of collectivization was about to begin in 1930; the subject of chapter five. The goal was to gather all small farms into large state farms and ‘proletarianize’ the peasantry, with the aim of boosting grain production and export, the income to be used to further industrialize Stalin’s empire. A ‘Five-Year Plan’ was introduced spawning competition to fulfill or exceed the set quotas. These policies were yet again met with discontent in rural Ukraine as the peasantry was restored to pre-1917 conditions—a ‘second serfdom’, so to speak. The freedoms

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<sup>8</sup> At the time of ‘the Russian Revolution’ (1917), Ukraine was part of Tsarist Russia (Russian Empire, 1721–1917; Tsardom of Russia, 1547–1721; note: Russo–Polish War, 1654–1667). The pair of revolutions in Russia ignited Ukrainian hopes for independence. As it turned out, Ukraine was too important to be granted absolute independence under the Soviet yoke. Soviet control did not come easily, and the Ukrainian peasantry violently resisted the collectivization policy. It took two famines to finally quell Ukrainian resistance. For a more detailed account of this, read chapter two of Robert Conquest’s *Harvest of Sorrow* (1986), next to *Red Famine* (2017).

Ukraine experienced since the truce in 1920 were gradually taken away as Applebaum illustrates with quotes from Miron Dolot's memoir of the Holodomor, *Execution by Hunger: The Hidden Holocaust* (1985). Conditions became worse than ever for the Ukrainian peasantry. This was heralded in Dolot's peaceful Ukrainian village by the appearance of state activists who were dispatched to the countryside to implement collectivization. Applebaum describes many of them as truly patriotic and motivated by the propaganda and the hate speech used in the 'de-kulakization' campaign. To be named a 'kulak', which originally meant a wealthy farmer, but which came to be applied to anyone who opposed collectivization, owned a cow or seemed better off than others, entailed grave consequences:

As de-kulakization began in earnest, the vicious language had practical consequences: once a peasant was named a 'kulak' he was automatically a traitor, an enemy and a non-citizen. He lost his property rights, his legal standing, his home and his place of work. His possessions no longer belonged to him; expropriation often followed [...]. In practice, de-kulakization quickly evolved into plunder. Some kulak property was confiscated and then sold to the public at improvised auctions (Applebaum 2017: 126–127).

Male heads of households, and many families were deported to remote corners of the Soviet empire: "In time, the large numbers of deported kulaks would fuel the rapid expansion of the Soviet forced labour system, the chain of camps that eventually became known as the Gulag" (Applebaum 2017: 132).<sup>9</sup> All of these elements are skillfully implemented by Applebaum to convince the reader of how 'brainwashed' these evil state agents were that invaded and despoiled the Ukrainian countryside. It also shows Applebaum's somewhat uncritical use of memoirs published by the Ukrainian diaspora.

Chapter six deals with the second wave of peasant rebellions and uprisings, which occurred in 1930, and documents widespread resistance towards the second collectivization drive, and chapter seven relates how this failing project was ruthlessly forced through by resorting to violent methods and a fearful propaganda campaign. Mass arrests and deportations of 'counter-revolutionary elements' and the implementation of draconian laws were among the methods used. Especially harsh for the starving rural population of Ukraine was the law of August 7, 1932, which allowed for the theft of even small amounts of food to be "[...] punished by ten years in a labour camp—or death. Such punishments had hitherto been reserved for acts of high treason" (Applebaum 2017: 181). Such examples of Stalin's policies and their consequences are abundant throughout the book and much like Conquest's *Harvest of Sorrow* (1986), many of the chapters read like horror-fiction at times. Compared to the way that Conquest compares the mass starvation in Ukraine to the killing of Jews in the 1941–1945 Holocaust—"Ukraine [...] was like one vast Belsen" (1986: 3)—Applebaum is perhaps more neutral in her descriptions of the horrors of the famine and comparisons

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<sup>9</sup> For more details on the 'Gulag', see Applebaum's *Gulag: A History* (2003).



with ‘Nazi’<sup>10</sup> crimes. Nonetheless, in chapter eight, she seeks to prove, with documents, that Ukraine became something like ‘a vast extermination camp’.

A related point that needs to be addressed in this case is the use of documentary photography in *Red Famine*. The book is illustrated by a fine collection of photographs taken during the famine. A few of these images show dead famine victims; none shows dead or skeletal children, which otherwise tend to provoke the most pronounced emotional reactions in viewers. Such pictures are, however, displayed in Conquest’s book and they are mostly of victims of the earlier famine 1921–1922, and were in fact taken in *Russian* areas of the Soviet Union, although this is not stated in Conquest’s book.<sup>11</sup> To her credit, Applebaum has not re-used these iconic images of starving or dead Russians, even though she writes about that famine as well. Instead of resorting to the shock value of photographs like the ones Conquest used, Applebaum documents the extent of the later Ukrainian famine, and argues that it was to a large extent man-made, using material not available to Conquest.

Chapters eight, nine and ten focus on decisions made by the Soviet government that ‘led’ to the Holodomor of 1932–1933, making the case that the famine was ‘deliberate’. Numerous Russian scholars do not agree with many of these arguments, which we shall go into later in this review.

Chapters eleven and twelve recount in explicit detail the starvation and survival in the spring and summer of 1933, before chapter 13 tells of the aftermath of the famine, and chapter fourteen details the ‘cover-up’ of the famine. Much is made of the claims of *New York Times* journalist Walter Duranty, who reported that there was no famine, only widespread cases of malnutrition. This point is still debated today with several newly released documentaries and films to tell the tale of the journalists who witnessed firsthand the horrors of the Holodomor.

I would now like to focus on the two last parts of the book, chapter fifteen and the epilogue, as they are perhaps the most relevant for media and documentation studies, as well as memory studies, and because they aim to connect the famine with current debates and events in Russia and Ukraine.

The topic of chapter fifteen, ‘The Holodomor in History and Memory’ (Applebaum 2017: 320–345), is how the famine has been represented in memory and history. It shows that from 1933 to the late 1980s, the Soviet government(s) denied it and tried to ‘erase’ it from collective memory (Applebaum 2017: 321). The only exception to this silence was during Adolf Hitler’s occupation of Ukraine. Applebaum writes that when the Nazis entered Ukraine in June of 1941 they knew about the famine of 1932–1933 and used it for their own propaganda campaign, pinning the blame on ‘Judeo-Bolshevism’. German troops were at first greeted by many Ukrainians as liberators, but events would prove this terribly wrong. The Nazis’ main interest was grain to feed their country during the last phase of the war. Thus, the Nazis aspired to design their own famine based on Stalin’s methods. Incredible as it may sound, Applebaum (2017: 324) asserts that: “Contrary to stereotype, the German authorities were less efficient than

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<sup>10</sup> From here on, the rather colloquial, yet commonly accepted phrases ‘Nazi’ (National Socialist) and ‘Nazis’ (National Socialists) are being used by choice—analogueous to ‘Nazism’ (National Socialism).

<sup>11</sup> Some of the most iconic photos were taken by Fridjof Nansen during the famine relief mission in Russia 1921–1922. See a narrative of that famine and the photos ‘in their proper context’ in *Nansens kamp mot hungersnöden i Russland 1921–[19]23* by Carl Emil Vogt (2007).

their Soviet counterparts: [P]easant traders did get through the make-shift cordons—they found it difficult to do so in 1933—and thousands of people took to the roads and railroads again in search of food”. Despite restrictions and difficulties imposed on them by the Nazi regime, Ukrainians again enjoyed religious freedom and could start to speak openly about the famine. But because of the collaboration by Ukrainians in the 1941–1945 Holocaust and the fact that the famine was used in Nazi propaganda, the collective memory of the famine remains tainted. So by relating this lesser-known part of history, Applebaum wants to show the origins of the current ‘Nazi–fascist narrative’ the Russian government uses to delegitimize the Ukrainian government and to justify Russia’s ‘annexation’ of Crimea. She then intertwines this history with contemporary politics:

Thanks to the politics that swirled around the word ‘genocide’, it became a kind of identity tag in Ukrainian politics, a term that could mark those who used it as partisans of one political party and those who did not as partisans of another. The problem worsened in the spring of 2014, when the Russian government produced a caricature ‘genocide’ argument to justify its own behavior. During the *Russian invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine* [sic], Russian-backed separatists and Russian politicians both said that their *illegal interventions* [sic] were a ‘defence against genocide’—meaning the ‘cultural genocide’ that ‘Ukrainian Nazis’ were supposedly carrying out against Russian speakers in Ukraine (Applebaum 2017: 354–355; emphasis added).

Applebaum shares no source for the story above and fails to mention an ‘alternative narrative’ pointed out by Oliver Boyd-Barrett (2017: 21), among others, where right-wing groups and ultra-nationalists indeed played a vital role in instigating violence against the police forces during the ‘Euromaidan’ (2013–2014), causing the ensuing chaos—nor does she mention the fact that Russia legally had stationed military forces in Crimea prior to the ‘invasion’ (Boyd-Barrett 2017: 63). Such stories are seemingly ignored by ‘Western’ news outlets like the *New York Times*, according to Boyd-Barrett.

The same chapter discusses the Holodomor documentary *Harvest of Despair* (dirs. Slavko Nowytsky and Yuriy Luhovy, 1984) and the subsequent release of Robert Conquest’s book on the famine in 1986. Conquest’s book received widespread interest, but also critical reviews and some academic journals did not even care to consider it. A book published in response was *Fraud, Famine and Fascism: The Ukrainian Genocide Myth from Hitler to Harvard* (1987), by a Canadian labor activist named Douglas Tottle. Applebaum tells of how at the time the book was promoted by the Soviet government and that it was nothing more than “Nazi propaganda” (Applebaum 2017: 338). What Applebaum writes about this book is very significant in light of current events:

In retrospect, Tottle’s book is significant mostly as a harbinger of what was to come, nearly three decades later. Its central argument was built around the supposed link between Ukrainian ‘nationalism’—defined as any discussion of Soviet repression in Ukraine, or any discussion of Ukrainian independence or sovereignty—and fascism, as well as American and British intelligence (Applebaum 2017: 338).

This is, according to Applebaum, the same type of discourse used today in the Russian information campaign and such historical knowledge disseminated here is very useful for understanding current events in Ukraine, though I would say that the reader should be critical of the tone and language of the text and understand that there are, obviously, always several sides to a story.

The epilogue, ‘The Ukrainian Question Reconsidered’ (Applebaum 2017: 346–362), sums up the main points and arguments of the book and addresses interlinked issues in present-day Ukraine, such as the genocide debate.<sup>12</sup> Where does Applebaum stand on the question of genocide? This is crucial because the debate on genocide and intentionality is very much connected to recent developments concerning Ukraine and Russia, especially since 2014.<sup>13</sup> I see Applebaum as fairly balanced on the question whether the famine constituted genocide and if it was part of a pre-mediated plan by Stalin to exterminate the Ukrainian people. Yes, she documents that policies were put in place that facilitated conditions for the famine, but she brings up the point that Ukrainians did not suffer *exclusively* and that Ukrainian communists were complicit in the crimes. She recognizes that other parts of the Soviet Union were also badly affected, for example Kazakhstan and rural parts of Soviet Russia. Even so, her narrative (and, not least, the title and the publisher’s promotion of the book) may give the impression that it aims at demonizing ‘Stalin and his circle’ alone. Only if you read the whole book you will understand that her arguments are not purely one-sided.

How would the current Russian government and influential Russian historians view this book? Applebaum answers this herself when laying out how the Ukrainian government, under President Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010), ‘pushed hard’ for the world to recognize the Holodomor as attempted genocide. The Russian government saw this as an attack on them, being the successor of the USSR (Applebaum 2017: 352). Russian academia then formed a counter-narrative that did not explicitly deny the famine but instead “emphatically downplayed” (Applebaum 2017: 352) it and Ukraine’s suffering. This counter-narrative is found in a 2008 publication by a Russian scholar named Viktor Kondrashin with the title *The Famine of 1932–1933: The Tragedy of the Russian Village* (2008a; title translated by the author). Kondrashin does not deny there was a famine and shows that Stalin knowingly let people starve, though he asserts that certain pre-dominant estimates of Ukrainian death tolls were too high. Applebaum argues that scholarly interpretations of the famine are not that different in Ukraine and Russia, but that politicalized versions of the event create different public understandings. This statement seems slightly odd since her argument stands almost in dichotomous opposition to Kondrashin’s: She seeks to prove that the Holodomor was a ‘genocide’ of the *Ukrainian* people, while Kondrashin stresses the point that Stalin’s terror was primarily targeted at the *entire* Soviet peasantry and that many other regions were also affected by the famine. Applebaum refers to a 2008 ‘Holodomor genocide

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<sup>12</sup> The Polish-Jewish lawyer Raphael [Rafał] Lemkin (1900–1959) coined the word ‘genocide’ and called the ‘Soviet Genocide in Ukraine’ a ‘classic example’ of his concept (Lemkin 2009 [1953]; Applebaum 2017: xxvii). However, to classify the Holodomor as genocide by international law has proved difficult, partly because of the complex nature of the famine and partly because of the denial of the crime by Russia. Equally important is the absence of documents proving that Stalin planned the genocide.

<sup>13</sup> Including the 2014 Ukrainian ‘revolution’ and the 2014 ‘annexation’ of Crimea by the Russian Federation. Obviously, the terms ‘revolution’ and ‘annexation’—as taken for granted by Applebaum 2017—remain highly politicized and disputed, and thus underline the power of language.

question' debate between Viktor Kondrashin and Ukrainian historian Stanislav V. Kulchytsky—as published in the Kyiv-based, outspokenly 'EU-and-NATO-supporting' and 'West-oriented' newspaper *Den* [*The Day*].<sup>14</sup> By reading these articles, one may get closer to the crux of the matter.

After Viktor Yanukovich (2010–2014), the successor of Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010), took over the presidency, the Holodomor language had been toned down. Yanukovich has since refused to call it a genocide. Relating to dominant Russian Holodomor discourses in the late 2010s, Applebaum ascribes: “[...] [T]he arguments had come full circle. The post-Soviet Russian state was once again in full denial: the Holodomor did not happen, and only ‘Nazis’ would claim that it did” (Applebaum 2017: 355). In her concluding words she states that Ukraine did overcome Stalin's terror and that it remains a sovereign state to this day, and it does not matter whether we classify it as ‘genocide’ or as ‘crimes against humanity’. She goes on to state that the Russian state now continues with the ‘same methods’ to undermine and deconstruct it, both in a literal and physical sense. It remains to be seen what the future holds for Ukraine.

To conclude, it must be stressed that *Red Famine* is written from a particular angle. It is, in no way, ‘the complete story’ of the Holodomor. To some degree, it implies that certain Ukraine-related current-day practices and policies of ‘Russia and Putin’ are somehow comparable to the ‘monstrous’ ones of ‘USSR and Stalin’. The way the narrative of the book is constructed demonstrates that the line between history writing and geopolitics can be—as so often—considered blurry.

The theme setting and particular relevance of artificial or man-made famines seems to come up in intervals, when tensions re-arise between ‘Western’ powers and Russia and seems to be useful for the purposes of ‘demonizing’ ‘Putin’—the current President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin (2000–2008; 2012–)—, ‘the Kremlin’, the Russian government; or simply ‘Russia’ in the eyes of ‘the West’. In recent years, the famine of 1932–1933 has reached new heights as a politicized event to be instrumentalized in a ‘memory war’ on many discursive levels (history, mass media, memorialization, etc.) between key-representatives of the current countries Ukraine and Russia (Hordijk 2018). This should, symptomatically, remind us of the sheer power that media narratives have in shaping public imaginations.

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<sup>14</sup> This enlightening debate stems from a history conference held in Moscow in 2008, where divergent historical perceptions of the Holodomor were under discussion (Kondrashin 2008b and Kulchytsky 2008; see also Kulchytsky 2015).

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## Biographical Note

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# End Matter

*What does it mean  
to 'know' something  
and what does this  
have to do with monsters?*

—Perkins, on page 144.

“[...] monsterring is not something you *do*,  
but something you *are made into*”

—Thorsen and Skadegård, on page 217.

“[...] this, one could argue, is what  
monsters and their manufacture  
are all about”

—Andreasen, on page 329.

“Cave! Hic dragones”

—Robinson, on page 118.



**TAMING THE MONSTER JOURNAL—  
A HUG TO THE NUMEROUS REVIEWERS**

**Manufacturing Monsters**

This special issue greatly benefited from the generous work by the following forty-six reviewers who wrote fifty-one reviews (of twenty-five manuscripts—*id est*: six hundred twenty-five pages; including one thousand and one bibliographical entries).

To you, dear reviewers: Your *monstrous* support was, as so often, unpaid—but valuable indeed. The energy you have put together in writing your thorough reviews substantially helped in shaping and re-shaping (and sometimes even re-re-shaping) the wonderful scientific endeavors of our authors.

Thank you so much!

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### Manufacturing Monsters

#### Andreasen

Søren Mosgaard Andreasen works as a doctoral student at the School of Sports Sciences in Alta, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, and holds an MPhil in Peace and Conflict Transformation. As an independent scholar he has researched the ideological performance of Islamophobic media entrepreneurs and the discursive construction of immigration in and through policy documents. Currently, he is working on a dissertation exploring dimensions of affect, belonging and happiness in place-bound Norwegian nature practices in a context of rapid social change and rising, perceived insecurities about the future. Andreasen is associated with the research groups ‘Diversity and Marginalization’ and ‘Narrating the Postcolonial North’.

#### Beyer

Christian Beyer is a bus driver at Torghatten Buss where he drives beautiful people and big packages between Nordland, Finnmark and Lapland. As a searcher and *re*-searcher, he came across questions of political philosophy and power politics in places such as Tehran and Hamadan, Murmansk and Belgrade, Qazvin and Qom. After having been a doctoral research fellow at UiT, he continues to work as a part-time lecturer at the Department of Language and Culture where he teaches the course ‘Manufacturing Monsters’ together with Holger, Juliane and Emil. Chrill considers as quite fascinating: epistemology, the manufacture of knowledge, and the grotesque carnival of academia. Regional focus: Syria, Iran, and the wider axis of resistance.

#### Biscaia

Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia holds a doctoral degree in Literature (2005). She is the author of the book *Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque: Texts of Contemporary Excess* (Peter Lang, 2011) as well as co-editor of the collection of essays *Intercultural Crossings: Conflict, Memory, Identity* (Peter Lang, 2012). She is part of the international project ‘Bodies in Transit 2’ which addresses how bodies have been historically transformed through social relations, discourses, and technologies, by drawing from feminist, queer, postcolonial and posthumanist theories of the embodied self. Currently she is teaching at the Universities of Beira Interior and Aveiro, Portugal.

### **Bockwoldt**

Juliane C. Bockwoldt is a PhD candidate in Media and Documentation Studies at UiT researching the mediation of the story of the German battleship Tirpitz in British, German, and Norwegian documentary and exhibitions. Research interests are in cultural memory, visual anthropology, museology, and polar history.

### **Borg Andreassen**

Anja Borg Andreassen has a BA in English Literature and Linguistics from NTNU and a BA in Media and Documentation Studies from UiT The Arctic University of Norway. She is a librarian at Tromsø Public Library and City Archives.

### **Hammar**

Emil Lundedal Hammar is a PhD candidate in Game and Memory Studies at the Department of Language and Culture at UiT The Arctic University of Norway under the supervision of Dr. Holger Pötzsch. He holds a cand.it in Games Analysis from the IT University of Copenhagen and a BA in Philosophy from the University of Copenhagen. In 2016 he won first prize with a personal essay on the relation between being a citizen of a former slave nation of Denmark and playing contemporary digital games dealing with the 18th-century Caribbean slave system in the essay contest ‘Digital Lives’ organized by the Norwegian cultural organization Fritt Ord. He currently coordinates the international ENCODE research network at UiT and is part of the WAR/GAME research group. Together with Dr. Souvik Mukherjee, Emil also co-edited a special issue on postcolonial perspectives in game studies for the *Open Library of Humanities*. His research interests include game studies, memory studies, critical race theory, the political economy of communication, critical and materialist approaches to media, and postcolonialism.

### **Hiltunen**

Kaisa Hiltunen works as a senior researcher in the Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies at the University of Jyväskylä. She is interested in the way cinema wields power and how power relations manifest themselves in films. At the time of writing she works in the collaborative, arts-based and ethnographic research project ‘Crossing Borders—Artistic Practices in Performing and Narrating Belonging’.

### **Hordijk**

Frank Hordijk is currently a librarian at the Norwegian Polar Institute and at the UiT Culture and Social Sciences Library. He holds a master’s degree in Media and Documentation Studies. His interests include Ukrainian and Russian history and exploring representations of historical memories in film and literature.

### **Lehner**

Alexander Lehner is a doctorate candidate in English Literature at the University of Augsburg, where he worked as an assistant editor for *Anglia—Journal of English Philology* and teaches the subject of game studies. His dissertation focuses on the function of meta-fictional and self-reflexive video games in relation to the networked society. With Augsburg's 'Environmental Humanities Research Group', he has published on ecocriticism in relation to self-reflexive video games in *Ecozon@* and *Paidia* and also works on the concept of 'Regenerative Play' together with Gerald Farca. Aside from game studies and meta-games, he is also interested in self-reflexivity in media, film and especially horror fiction.

### **Ottosen**

Rune Ottosen (b. 1950) is Professor Emeritus of Journalism at the Oslo Metropolitan University. He has written extensively on press history and media coverage of war and conflicts. He is co-author with Stig Arne Nohrstedt of several books, the latest *New Wars, New Media and New War Journalism* (Nordicom, 2014). He was one of the editors and co-authors of the four-volume Norwegian press history *Norsk presses historie 1–4: 1660–2010* (Universitetsforlaget, 2010). He is Vice President of the Norwegian PEN and a member of the Norwegian UNESCO commission.

### **Perkins**

Chris Perkins is Senior Lecturer in Japanese Studies at the University of Edinburgh. He has published on topics including Japanese media, radicalism in modern Japan, and border politics.

### **Pötzsch**

Holger Pötzsch, PhD, is Associate Professor of Media and Documentation Studies at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. His main research interest is the intersection between media and conflict. He has published on war films, war games, memory and conflict, the politics and economy of digital networks, and border culture and technology. He currently coordinates the research networks 'Manufacturing Monsters' and WAR/GAME.

### **Robinson**

P. Stuart Robinson is Associate Professor of Political Science at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. His research concerns the cultural and social dynamics of continuity and change in world politics. He writes about film for a wider audience for *Montages.no*.

### **Schubart**

Rikke Schubart lectures at the University of Southern Denmark. Her research is on emotions, gender, and the fantastic. Recent publications are *Mastering Fear: Women, Emotions, and Contemporary Horror* (Bloomsbury, 2018) and *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones, and Multiple Gender Engagements* (Bloomsbury, 2016; with Anne Gjelsvik). She recently published an article on Gal Gadot and *Wonder Woman* in *Continuum* and co-edited the special issue 33:2 on women in the transmedia fantastic. She is director of the network ‘Imagining the Impossible—The Fantastic as Media Entertainment and Play’.

### **Skadegård**

Mira Chandhok Skadegård, Tess’ mother and Dr. Rashmi Chandhok Skadegård’s daughter, is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Aalborg University in Copenhagen, Denmark. The focus of her current research is primarily on structural discrimination (gender, religion, social background, and the other discrimination grounds), and dynamics connected with power, inequality, inclusion/exclusion and complicity. Her theoretical framework builds on her background in philosophy, anthropology, and literary theory, and is strongly informed by postcolonial, feminist discourse theory, deconstruction, CRT and intersectional perspectives.

### **Stang**

Sarah Stang is a PhD candidate in the Communication & Culture program at York University in Toronto, Canada. She is also the editor-in-chief of *Press Start* and the essays editor for *First Person Scholar*. She approaches the study of digital games and other media from an interdisciplinary, intersectional feminist perspective. Her current research explores the representation of non-normative and marginalized bodies in both digital and analog games.

### **Sturm**

Katharina Sturm moved in 2017 from Düsseldorf to Berlin, where she lives and works since then. Before that, she studied Media and Theatre Sciences at the Ruhr University Bochum. Currently, she is working on a PhD thesis on Catherine Malabou’s *Ontologie de l’accident: Essai sur la plasticité destructrice* (Éditions Léo Scheer, 2009). Her thesis focuses especially on Malabou’s concept of ‘destructive plasticity’. Katharina Sturm has furthermore taken a deeper interest in concepts of masses, culture and mass culture, as well as psychoanalytical approaches to theatre and media analysis.



### **Švelch**

Jaroslav Švelch is an assistant professor at Charles University, Prague. He is the author of the recent monograph *Gaming the Iron Curtain: How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games* (MIT Press, 2018). He has published work on history and theory of video games, moral dilemmas in video games, and on the Grammar Nazi phenomenon. In 2017–2019, he was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Bergen, researching history, theory, and reception of video game monsters.

### **Thorsen**

Tess Sophie Skadegård Thorsen, Mira's daughter and Dr. Rashmi Chandhok Skadegård's granddaughter, is a PhD candidate in the School of Social Sciences at Aalborg University. Tess' research on the production of representation in Danish film is a part of the VELUX-funded research project 'A Study of Experiences and Resistance to Racialization in Denmark' (SERR).

### **Ulstein**

Gry Ulstein is a PhD candidate at Ghent University in Belgium where she is a member of the project 'Narrating the Mesh' (NARMESH), led by prof. Marco Caracciolo. NARMESH studies the representation of nonhuman realities and environmental issues such as climate change in contemporary literature and oral storytelling. Gry is particularly interested in contemporary weird literature as an expression of ecological anxieties.

*List of Contributors*

## TAMING THE JOURNAL MONSTER— BUILDING BIBLIOGRAPHICAL BRIDGES

Christian Beyer (Torghatten Buss and UiT The Arctic University of Norway)

### The Seven and the Many—Or: The Most Referenced Works in Our Special Issue

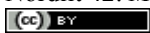
Seven is a nice number. Cohen chose to proclaim his ‘Monster Culture’ through seven theses—many of which have been internalized by manifold scholars of the young discipline ‘monster studies’ by now. Here, we want to make reference to the seven most used works throughout our special issue, and many more. We speak of seven particular books that got mentioned by at least three of our contributors each (figures 1a–1g). Quantitatively speaking, and not quite surprisingly, it is the ‘seven-theses author’ Cohen himself who leads the bibliographical entries with his *Monster Theory* collection (mentioned in six contributions). *Manufacturing Consent* follows suit, just to add the ‘manufacturing’ to the ‘monster[s]’. What you will find underneath is a list of all works that were referred to at least twice. These works are sorted in chronological order. Later on, we will list further writers who also appear multiple times throughout our special issue, yet through different works.



**Figures 1a–1g.** Free after Cohen’s ‘Seven Theses’, the seven most referenced works of our special issue are depicted here with book covers of current (re-)print editions. Illustrations by courtesy of the respective copyright holders—from left to right: Penguin Books, Routledge, Penguin Books, Pantheon Books, Routledge, Routledge, University of Minnesota Press.

In short, we consider as a bibliographical bridge the shared bibliographical reference to a particular work or to a particular person by at least two of our issue’s authors. If some of our authors refer to ‘writer A’, an imaginary bridge is being created between their contributions—oftentimes unconsciously. These bridges become even more intriguing when noticing that numerous authors independently investigated the identical ‘work B’, without even knowing that another contributor did so as well. Our overview is based on a close examination of all roughly 1000 bibliographical entries in this special issue. It may not be free from errors. For the detailed references, see each contributor’s bibliography individually. Here, our contributors are referred to by SURNAME only, while the names of the source authors are given in full.

Nordlit 42: *Manufacturing Monsters*, 2019. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.7557/13.5024>.

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*Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818)*

A decent group of our authors relates to *Frankenstein*. While **ULSTEIN** and **ROBINSON**—and also our collective **INTRODUCTION**—directly refer to two editions of the classic work *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (2012 [1818]; 2003 [1818]), **BISCAIA** starts her contribution with a 100-year reference and **THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD** refer to Haifaa al-Mansour's drama film *Mary Shelley* (2017). In addition, **ULSTEIN** mentions Jed Mayer's 'The Weird Ecologies of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*' (*Science Fiction Studies*, 2018).

*Bram Stoker's Dracula (1897)*

Next to Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein*, Stoker's 1897 *Dracula* seems to be a must-read within 'monster studies'. In our issue, **ROBINSON** and **LEHNER** pay close attention to this work. While **LEHNER** makes use of the 1997 critical edition *Dracula: Authoritative Text, Context, Reviews and Reactions, Dramatic and Film Variations, Criticism*, as edited by Nina Auerbach and David J. Skal (see below), **ROBINSON** uses Cambridge's 2013 reprint edition. **LEHNER** relates to further re-readings of Bram Stoker, including Jennifer Wicke's 'Vampiric Typewriting: *Dracula* and Its Media' (*ELH*, 1992), Friedrich A. Kittler's 1993 *Draculas Vermächtnis: Technische Schriften*, Lyndon W. Joslin's 2006 *Count Dracula Goes to the Movies: Stoker's Novel Adapted, 1922–2003* (this being a revised edition of Joslin's 1999 book; a third edition followed in 2017), as well as Leanne Page's 'Phonograph, Shorthand, Typewriter: High Performance Technologies in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*' (*Victorian Network*, 2011).

*Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks (1935)*

From 1929 to 1935, Antonio Gramsci wrote his *Prison Notebooks*. These appeared much later, in 1971, translated and edited as *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, reprinted by numerous publishers. **ROBINSON** uses the widely distributed 1973 reprint copy by International Publishers, while **HAMMAR** refers to a 2005 Lawrence and Wishart edition of the same foundational work. Furthermore, **HAMMAR** reads Joseph V. Femia's *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness and the Revolutionary Process* (1987 [1981]).

*Mary Douglas' Purity and Danger (1966)*

**ANDREASEN**, **PERKINS** and **ROBINSON** all share the following source: The 2002 reprint edition with a new preface of Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, originally published in 1966.

*Edward Said's Orientalism (1978)*

To many contributions, the question of othering is essential. In that regard, no less than four articles (**HILTUNEN**; **PÖTZSCH**; **HAMMAR**; **ANDREASEN**) relate to Edward Said's 1978 classic work *Orientalism*—while referring to different (reprint) editions (1978; 1979 [1978]; 2003 [1978]). In addition, **HILTUNEN** and **HAMMAR** include a reprint edition of Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1994 [1993]) into their bibliographies.

*Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's Manufacturing Consent (1988)*

Four articles (**BOCKWOLDT**; **PÖTZSCH**; **HAMMAR**; **OTTOSEN**), one book review (**PÖTZSCH**), as well as our collective **INTRODUCTION** refer to the book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky; written in 1988 and revised with a new introduction in 2002. All here mentioned five contributions have in common that they utilize this particular 2002 reprint edition. Regarding current 're-readings' of *Manufacturing Consent*, three contributions (**BOCKWOLDT**; **PÖTZSCH**; **HAMMAR**) make reference to Matthew Alford's 'Why Not a Propaganda Model for Hollywood?' (2011) and 'How Useful Is a Propaganda Model for Screen Entertainment?' (2015). While the 2011 article was part of Alison Edgley's *Noam Chomsky*, it is noteworthy to mention that Alford's 2015 article appeared in *Screens of Terror*, a collection edited by Phil[ip] Hammond: The name Hammond will be mentioned in the Pötzsch section again; then with reference to the forthcoming *War Games* volume by the two (2019). Two contributions (**OTTOSEN**; **PÖTZSCH**) link to two of Florian Zollmann's reviews of '[...]—The Propaganda Model after 30 Years' and his call to 'Bringing Propaganda Back into News Media Studies' (2019 [2017]; 2018). Further selected references to the propaganda model are made through Gabriel N. Brahm's 'Understanding Noam Chomsky' (2006) and Piers Robinson's 'The Propaganda Model: Still Relevant Today?' (2015), both referred to by **PÖTZSCH**; David Edwards' and David Cromwell's *Propaganda Blitz* (2018)—as to be found in the bibliographies of the **INTRODUCTION** and **HAMMAR**—; and also through Oliver Boyd-Barrett's *Western Mainstream Media and the Ukraine Crisis* (2017), as mentioned in the book review by **HORDIJK**.

*Noël Carroll's Philosophy of Horror (1990)*

Three of our contributors (**ROBINSON**; **SCHUBART**; **ŠVELCH**) integrated Noël Carroll's 1990 *The Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart* into their bibliographies.

*Barbara Creed's Monstrous-Feminine (1993)*

References to Barbara Creed's reading of Julia Kristeva and her concomitant elaboration of the term 'monstrous-feminine' can be found in three of our issue's contributions. While **THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD** point to Creed's foundational article 'Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection' (*Screen*, 1986), **SCHUBART** lists the related book version *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993). **STANG** has a look at both of these publications. Note, in that regard, the resemblance to Mary Ann Doane two-years-earlier published *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (1991)—a source that is being taken into account by **STANG** and **THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD** as well.

*Marie-Hélène Huet's Monstrous Imagination (1993)*

Already on the blurb, the potential reader is being asked: "What woeful maternal fancy produced such a monster?" As a key reference within 'monster studies', Marie-Hélène Huet's *Monstrous Imagination* (1993) is more than welcome in our collective bibliographical bridges. Here, we can link the articles of **THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD** and **STANG** to another: the two make use of that particular Huet text.

*Rosi Braidotti's Nomadic Subjects (1994)*

Both **BISCAIA** and **THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD** work with the second edition of Rosi Braidotti's 1994 *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (2011 [1994]). Later, in 2018, Rosi Braidotti was the co-editor of *Posthuman Glossary* (together with Maria Hlavajova)—a collection that is referred to by **BISCAIA** and **ULSTEIN** (through the articles 'Speculative Posthumanism' and 'Ecohorror' by David Roden and Christy Tidwell). **THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD** mention Braidotti's 1996 article 'Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Differences', as reprinted in Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick's *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (1999; 1999 [1996]), and **BISCAIA** adds Braidotti's books *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (2002) and *The Posthuman* (2013) to the set.

*Judith [Jack] Halberstam's Skin Shows (1995)*

Known to us as Judith, and Jack, and everything in-between, the *Female Masculinity* (1998) author Halberstam has her and his place in two of the issue's bibliographies. Both **THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD** and **STANG** work with *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995), and **THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD** add *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) to the reading list.

*Vincent Mosco's Political Economy of Communication (1996)*

Ten years ago, the second edition of Mosco's *The Political Economy of Communication* (2009 [1996]) appeared. This print version has been read by both **PÖTZSCH** and **HAMMAR**; and has been utilized by the two.

*Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's Monster Theory (1996)*

Five of our authors (**BORG ANDREASSEN**; **ROBINSON**; **THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD**; **STANG**; **ŠVELCH**) refer to the 1996 collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. While **BORG ANDREASSEN**, **ROBINSON**, and **STANG** explicitly quote from Cohen's article 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)' therein (3–25)—such as we do in the **INTRODUCTION** as well—, **ŠVELCH** points to the collection as a whole and **THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD** refer to a book review by John S. Ryan (1998) instead. In addition, **ROBINSON** also has a look at another article of the 1996 collection: 'Vampire Culture' by Frank Grady (225–241).

*Stuart Hall's Representation (1997)*

In 1997, Stuart Hall edited *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Therein, he contributed with his article 'The Spectacle of the 'Other'' (223–290). In our special issue, this article is being referenced by both **HILTUNEN** and **HAMMAR**. In addition, **PÖTZSCH** makes use of Hall's 1977 *The Cultural Studies Reader* contribution 'Encoding/Decoding' (91–103) and **HAMMAR** complements the list of Hall references with 'The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies', as published 1982 in *Culture, Society and the Media* (61–95). It is also **HAMMAR** who includes current Stuart Hall readings such as Isabel Molina-Guzmán's '#OscarsSoWhite: How Stuart Hall Explains Why Nothing Changes in Hollywood and

Everything Is Changing’ (*Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 2016) and Adrienne Shaw’s ‘Encoding and Decoding Affordances: Stuart Hall and Interactive Media Technologies’ (*Media, Culture & Society*, 2017). Jumping from *Culture, Society and the Media* via *Media, Culture & Society* to the journal *New Media & Society*, we find therein the 2009 article ‘The Virtual Census: Representations of Gender, Race and Age in Video Games’, written by a whole group of people: Dmitri Williams, Nicole Martins, Mia Consalvo, and James D. Ivory. This, in turn, is one of the multiple sources both STANG and ŠVELCH share.

*Barry Buzan, Jaap de Wilde and Ole Wæver’s Security (1997)*

In 1997, the ‘Copenhagen School’—known for their ‘securitization’ concept of international relations—published their primary book *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. References can be found in our INTRODUCTION and in ANDREASEN (1998 [1997]). Furthermore, the section on Sybille Reinke de Buitrago’s *Portraying the Other in International Relations* (2012) below gives hints at other crucial texts of international relations, as referred to by ANDREASEN and ROBINSON, and by our INTRODUCTION.

*Julian Petley’s ‘Manufacturing Monsters’ (2000)*

We consider the *Index on Censorship* special issue 29:5 on ‘Manufacturing Monsters’ (2000), edited by Julian Petley, as one of our key sources. Funnily enough, we came across this work *after* having coined our course with the same name—as a symbiosis of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky’s ‘manufacturing’ (2002 [1988]) and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s ‘monster[s]’ (1996). Yet, as one does after having ‘invented’ a ‘creative’ title: One searches the World Wide Web for potentially earlier appearances of the ‘just established’ phrase. *Unfortunately*, we were indeed not the first ones with that idea. *Fortunately*, the 2000 issue ‘Manufacturing Monsters’ turned out to be a treasure: Therein, we did not only find an interesting article by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s name twin Stanley Cohen (‘Some Thoroughly Modern Monsters’, 36–43)—but also quite relevant contributions by Noam Chomsky (44–48) and Edward Said (49–53), both of which have their own section in these bibliographical bridges. While our INTRODUCTION gives credit to the special issue ‘Manufacturing Monsters’ as a whole, ANDREASEN starts his analysis with a block quotation from Stanley Cohen’s article.

*Margrit Shildrick’s Embodying the Monster (2001)*

In our collective INTRODUCTION, we shortly refer to Margrit Shildrick’s *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (2001). This bibliographical entry is shared by THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD. In addition, THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD make use of Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick’s collection *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (1999 [1996]) when referring to Rosi Braidotti’s contribution ‘Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt’ therein (see also the section on Braidotti’s 1994 *Nomadic Subjects* above).

*Richard Kearney’s Strangers, Gods and Monsters (2002)*

Both STANG and ŠVELCH look at Richard Kearney’s 2002 work *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*, wherein Kearney notes that “[e]ach monster narrative recalls that the self is never secure in itself” (2).

*Peter Hervik's 'The Danish Cultural World of Unbridgeable Differences' (2004)*

Content-wise, at first glance, the two contributions of THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD and ANDREASEN appear to deal with quite different issues. It is the more intriguing to see that a bibliographical bridge can be built, regardless. Not least due to the shared Danish situatedness, both articles contain Hervik references. While THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD have studied Hervik's recent edited volume *Racialization, Racism, and Anti-Racism in the Nordic Countries* (2019 [2018]), ANDREASEN highlights Hervik's 'Anthropological Perspectives on the New Racism in Europe' (*Journal of Anthropology*, 2006). Building a semantic inversion to Hervik's following title, both THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD and ANDREASEN bridge to the identical reading, after all: 'The Danish Cultural World of Unbridgeable Differences' (*Ethnos*, 2004; 'unbridgeable' emphasized).

*Robert Marich's Marketing to Moviegoers (2005)*

Both BOCKWOLDT and PÖTZSCH have included the third edition of Robert Marich's *Marketing to Moviegoers: A Handbook of Strategies and Tactics* (2013 [2005]) into their bibliographies.

*Judith Butler's Frames of War (2009)*

ROBINSON and PÖTZSCH make use of the 2009 book *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* by Judith Butler. In addition, our collective INTRODUCTION refers to that title. PERKINS and THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD join the bibliographical bridge to Butler through entries of 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory' (*Theatre Journal*, 1988) and the 1999 reprint edition of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999 [1990]).

*Stephen T. Asma's On Monsters (2009)*

In an earlier manuscript version of her text, ULSTEIN linked to Stephen T. Asma's *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (2012 [2009]). Although this particular entry has vanished by now, its soul, so to say, still remains: In other of her current works, ULSTEIN relates to Asma's notion of grasping the monstrous as a "cultural category" (13). If you look closely enough, Asma's monsters still remain visible at two other places: ŠVELCH's bibliography, as well as the INTRODUCTION's one.

*Sybille Reinke de Buitrago's Portraying the Other in International Relations (2012)*

As an essential course literature, *Portraying the Other in International Relations: Cases of Othering, Their Dynamics and the Potential for Transformation*—an edited volume put together by Sybille Reinke de Buitrago (2012)—appears at two places in our special issue: You will find the references in the INTRODUCTION and in ANDREASEN. This work is clearly interwoven with discourses on 'securitization' (see above) and to be read in conjunction with other classics of international relations, such as Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (2000 [1977]), Robert Cox's 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory' (*Millennium*, 1981), and Rob B. J. Walker's *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (1993), all of which can be found in ROBINSON's literature list.



*Berthold Molden's 'Resistant Pasts versus Mnemonic Hegemony' (2016)*

Our two co-editors **BOCKWOLDT** and **HAMMAR** both link to an article by Berthold Molden: 'Resistant Pasts versus Mnemonic Hegemony: On the Power Relations of Collective Memory' (*Memory Studies*, 2016).

*Holger Pötzsch's 'Selective Realism' (2017)*

Holger Pötzsch can easily be regarded as a 'personal bridge' between many of our contributors—one who has private contacts to numerous of our authors. It is therefore not striking to find his name in many of the special issue's bibliographies, including the one of his own contribution (**PÖTZSCH**), but also the ones of **BOCKWOLDT**, **STANG**, **ŠVELCH**, and **HAMMAR**. Among the Pötzsch works, two get mentioned twice: the 2013 article 'Ubiquitous Absence: Character Engagement in the Contemporary War Film' (*Nordicom Review*; used by **BOCKWOLDT** and **PÖTZSCH**), as well as the 2017 article 'Selective Realism: Filtering Experiences of War and Violence in First- and Third-Person Shooters' (*Games and Culture*; used by **ŠVELCH** and **HAMMAR**). Further, **STANG** points to Phil[ip] Hammond and Holger Pötzsch's forthcoming collection *War Games: Memory, Militarism, and the Subject of Play* (2019), **BOCKWOLDT** mentions the 2012 article 'Framing Narratives: Opening Sequences in Contemporary American and British War Films' (*Media, War & Conflict*), and **PÖTZSCH** re-reads his earlier work 'Challenging the Border as Barrier: Liminality in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*' (*Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 2010).

**The Manifold—Writers Who Appear Through Different Works**

In the following, we refer to further key authors who have been mentioned multiple times throughout our issue. Yet, other than above, in these cases, our contributors have not related to identical works, but to different texts of the same authors instead. Since we have already started to 'sort' our bibliographical bridges chronologically, we will continue with a 'time map'. All the following writers are sorted by year of birth.



**Figures 2a–2g.** Interspecies thinkers: Bakhtin; one of Bakhtin's cognitive analytic therapy [CAT] research fellows (both figures originate from the same photograph); Foucault and his cat *Insanity*; Derrida and his cat *Logos*; Žižek and a thespian cat; Haraway's stuffed octopus; Haraway. Compilation by the author. Photograph sources: The Scientific Library of M. V. Lomonosov Moscow State University and the Bakhtin Museum Oryol (Victor Duvakin, 1973); Camera Press and Magnum Photos (Martine Franck, 1978). Screenshot sources: *Derrida* (dir. Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman; Zeitgeist Films, 2002); *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (dir. Sophia Victoria Twisleton-Wykeham-Fiennes; Zeitgeist Films, 2012); *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival* (dir. Fabrizio Terranova; Icarus Films, 2019).

*Selected Works by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)*

Next comes Freud: ‘a classic’, so to say. Here, referred to by three of our contributors: **ULSTEIN**, **STANG**, and **STURM**. While **STURM** makes use of Freud references throughout, **ULSTEIN** picks up ‘The Uncanny’, as reprinted in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Vol. XVII* (1966 [1919]) and **STANG** studies the translated reprint edition *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1949 [1940]). Without this particularly phrased outline—the one of ‘psychoanalysis’—titles such as Mary Ann Doane’s *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (1991) or Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) would most likely not exist (both of which are discussed by **STANG** as well).

*Selected Works by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975)*

Also Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin’s carnival can be tracked as a bibliographical bridge between two of our contributions; even if rather indirectly: Whereas **ŠVELCH** points to *Rabelais and His World*, as translated by Héléne Iswolsky (1984 [1965]), and further looks at current Bakhtin readings such as Tomasz Z. Majkowski’s ‘Grotesque Realism and Carnality: Bakhtinian Inspirations in Video Game Studies’ (as part of a proceedings collection that was co-edited by Jaroslav Švelch [**ŠVELCH**] in 2015) and Cody Mejeur’s 2018 contribution ‘“Look At Me, Boy!”: Carnavalesque, Masks, and Queer Performativity in *BioShock*’ in *Beyond the Sea: Navigating BioShock* (a collection that also Sarah Stang [**STANG**] contributed to), **PÖTZSCH** makes use of Hamed Faizi’s carnivalesque interpretation ‘Distorted Dialogue in Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend*: A Bakhtinian Perspective’ (*Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 2015).

*Selected Works by Michel Foucault (1926–1984)*

Translators and editors such as Richard Howard, James D. Faubion and Paul Rabinow made accessible the works of Foucault to many of us. In our issue, **ŠVELCH** reads Foucault through the lens of Howard (*Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, 1988 [1961]), and **ANDREASEN** traces Foucault’s question ‘So Is It Important to Think?’ in Faubion/Rabinow’s critical edition of *Power: Essential Works of Foucault—1954–1984* (2000 [1981]).

*Selected Works by Jacques Derrida (1930–2004)*

Yet another ‘big name’; yet another bridge between two of our contributions: **ŠVELCH** reads Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (2006 [1993]), while **THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD** chose Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle’s *Of Hospitality*, as translated by Rachel Bowlby (2000 [1997]).

*Selected Works by Johan Galtung (b. 1930)*

While the **INTRODUCTION** starts with a classic text reference to the ‘young Galtung’ (‘Violence, Peace, and Peace Research’; *Journal of Peace Research*, 1969), **OTTOSEN** turns to the ‘old Galtung’ when reading ‘Peace Journalism: A Challenge’, as printed in 2002 in *Journalism and the New World Order 2: Studying War and the Media*, edited by Wilhelm Kempf and Heikki Luostarinen.

*Selected Works by Robert A. Rosenstone (b. 1936)*

Robert A. Rosenstone appears in two of our special issue's bibliographies: **HAMMAR** looks at 'The Historical Film as Real History' (*Filmhistorica Online*, 1995), whereas **BOCKWOLDT** investigates the first 2006 edition of Rosenstone's key publication *History on Film—Film on History* (a third edition got published by Routledge in 2017).

*Selected Works by Teun A. van Dijk (b. 1943)*

Reference works by Teun A. van Dijk function as a suitable bibliographical bridge between the articles of **OTTOSEN** and **ANDREASEN**. In the first bibliography, we find van Dijk's *News as Discourse* from 1988. The second bibliography includes van Dijk's 'Structures of Discourse and Structures of Power' from 1989 (as printed in *Annals of the International Communication Association* 12:1, 18–59), as well as 'Ideologies, Racism, Discourse: Debates on Immigration and Ethnic Issues' from 2002 (as printed in *Comparative Perspectives on Racism* by Jessika ter Wal and Maykel Verkuyten).

*Selected Works by Donna Haraway (b. 1944)*

The three contributions of our issue by **BISCAIA**, **ULSTEIN** and **THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD** have in common a bibliographical focus on Rosi Braidotti (see above). They also share a particular interest in the work of Donna Haraway, yet through different writings: While **THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD** take into account Haraway's foundational text 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' (*Feminist Studies*, 1988), **BISCAIA** adds the 1991 book *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*—a collection of essays written between 1978 and 1989—, the 2007 monograph *When Species Meet*, as well as the 2007 exhibition catalogue (*Tender*) *Creatures*. **ULSTEIN** looks at the recent *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). Just to round up this multifaceted canon, our **INTRODUCTION** pays homage to Haraway's 1992 text 'The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others', as published in the collection *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler. Our colleagues from 'The Monster Network', Ingvil Hellstrand, Line Henriksen, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, Donna McCormack and Sara Orning (2018) did so as well—in *their* monster-issue introduction (*Somatechnics* 8:2, special issue: 'Promises of Monsters'; see **SCHUBART**'s and also the **INTRODUCTION**'s bibliographies).

*Selected Works by Linda Williams (b. 1946) and Mary Ann Doane (b. 1952)*

The two 'film and gender' scholars Linda Williams and Mary Ann Doane often collaborate. As it is the case with David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (see below), our special issue contains both a bibliography with one collective work by the two, and another one that refers to two individual texts of each. **THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD**, on the one hand, link to Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams' 1984 collection *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* as an example of a collaborative Williams/Doane work. **STANG**, on the other hand, points to two individual 1991 writings by the two: Linda Williams' 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess' (*Film Quarterly*), as well as Mary Ann Doane's *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*.

*Selected Works by David Bordwell (b. 1947) and Kristin Thompson (b. 1950)*

As a ‘film theorist couple’, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson have published a lot of their works in co-authorship. In this issue, **ROBINSON** includes Bordwell and Thompson’s eighth edition of the 1979 collaborative work *Film Art: An Introduction* (2008 [1979]), while **PÖTZSCH**’s bibliography contains one source from each author separately: Kristin Thompson’s 1988 *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* and David Bordwell’s 2006 *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*.

*Selected Works by W. Lance Bennett (b. 1948)*

**OTTOSEN**’s article and **PÖTZSCH**’s book review refer to works by W. Lance Bennett. In the book review’s bibliography, we find the entry ‘Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States’ (*Journal of Communication*, 1990). **OTTOSEN**, on the other hand, refers to W. Lange Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence and Steven Livingston’s *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina* (2007).

*Selected Works by Slavoj Žižek (b. 1949)*

No contemporary media issue without Žižek, apparently: In our case, **PÖTZSCH** has a look at *Living in the End Times* (2010), while **ANDREASEN** gives credit to *Against the Double Blackmail: Europe, Terror and Those Seeking Refuge* (2016).

*Selected Works by David J. Skal (b. 1952)*

Here, a bibliographical bridge between **BORG ANDREASSEN** and **LEHNER** can be drawn. While **BORG ANDREASSEN** refers to the 2001 revised edition of Skal’s 1993 *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*, David J. Skal also appears as the co-editor of the 1997 critical edition *Dracula: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Reviews and Reactions, Dramatic and Film Variations, Criticism of Bram Stoker’s 1897 Dracula*; as mentioned by **LEHNER** (see above).

*Selected Works by Gloria Jean Watkins (b. 1952)*

Gloria Jean Watkins, known to many of us by her pen name ‘bell hooks’, is represented in two of our articles: **THORSEN/SKADEGÅRD** examine hooks’ *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (2008 [1996]) and *All About Love: New Visions* (2000). **SCHUBART** does so with *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2014).

*Selected Works by James Der Derian (b. 1955)*

Two of our authors include texts by James Der Derian. While **BOCKWOLDT** mentions the 2009 monograph *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military–Industrial–Media–Entertainment–Network* (as inspired by Eisenhower’s military–industrial complex; see also our collective **INTRODUCTION**), **PÖTZSCH** refers to Der Derian’s ‘In Terrorem: Before and After 9/11’, as part of Ken Booth and Tim Dunne’s 2002 collection *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order*.

*Selected Works by Espen Aarseth (b. 1965)*

Among illustrious other names mentioned here, Espen Aarseth is first and foremost known within the discipline of video game studies. ŠVELCH brings to our attention Aarseth's 1999 'Aporia and Epiphany in *Doom* and *The Speaking Clock: The Temporality of Ergodic Art*', as published in Marie-Laure Ryan's *Cyberspace Textuality*, while HAMMAR refers to Espen Aarseth and Gordon Calleja's 2015 contribution 'The Word Game: The Ontology of an Undefinable Object' in *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*.

*Selected Works by Bernard Perron (b. 1965)*

As an editor and book author, Bernard Perron is represented in our issue through three references—all via ŠVELCH and STANG. While STANG's literature canon includes Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron's collection *The Video Game Theory Reader* (2003), ŠVELCH relates to Perron's collection *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play* (2009) and to the recent monograph *The World of Scary Video Games: A Study in Videoludic Horror* (2018).

*Selected Works by Colin Campbell (b. 1967)*

The writer Colin Campbell is mentioned in two of our issue's contributions on video games: STANG looks at the article 'Where Are All the Video Game Moms?' from July 2016 and HAMMAR includes the writing 'Why Are Game Companies so Afraid of the Politics in Their Games?' from June 2018, both of which were published on the US-American gaming website *Polygon*.

*Selected Works by Roger Luckhurst (b. 1967)*

Roger Luckhurst appears in two bibliographies of our authors' articles: While ŠVELCH refers to the 2015 book *Zombies: A Cultural History*, ULSTEIN re-reads Luckhurst's *Textual Practice* article 'The Weird: A (Dis)Orientation' (2017).

*Selected Works by Sara Ahmed (b. 1969)*

Due to its appearance in our INTRODUCTION, and due to alphabetical order, Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006) makes the very first bibliographical entry of our special issue. Some three hundred pages later, ANDREASEN comes back to Ahmed, when referring to *On Being Included* (2012).

*Selected Works by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (b. 1970)*

Also ULSTEIN and LEHNER are connected through a bibliographical bridge: While Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's collection *The Age of Lovecraft* (2016) is a key text for ULSTEIN's analysis (including Weinstock's introduction and afterword therein), LEHNER makes use of Weinstock's 2012 print *The Vampire Film: Undead Cinema*.

*Selected Works by Jesper Juul (b. 1970)*

STANG and ŠVELCH have a look at two (of so far three) books written by the Danish game researcher Jesper Juul: ŠVELCH examines Juul's first book, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005). STANG continues with Juul's second book, *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players* (2009) on the basis of its second reprint edition from 2012.

*Selected Works by Astrid Erll (b. 1972)*

Yet again, two of our co-editors have one theorist in common: BOCKWOLDT and HAMMAR include works by Astrid Erll into their analyses. While BOCKWOLDT refers to Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning's 2008 collection *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (in collaboration with Sara B. Young; the later 2010 paperback edition was entitled *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*) and Astrid Erll and Stephanie Wodianka's 2008 collection *Film und Kulturelle Erinnerung: Plurimediale Konstellationen*, HAMMAR links to Erll's 2011 monograph *Memory in Culture*, also in collaboration with (and translated by) Sara B. Young.

*Selected Works by Patricia MacCormack (b. 1973)*

In our collective INTRODUCTION, we shortly refer to Asa Simon Mittman and Peter Dendle's collection *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (2013). This edited volume includes an article by Patricia MacCormack, 'Posthuman Teratology' (293–310) that can also be found in ŠVELCH's bibliography. Further, STANG integrates MacCormack's 'The Queer Ethics of Monstrosity', as published in *Speaking of Monsters: A Teratological Anthology* (2012: 255–265), edited by Joan S. Picart and John Edgar Browning.

*Selected Works by Matthew Thomas Payne (b. 1977)*

A ŠVELCH–HAMMAR bibliographical bridge can be drawn, this time with reference to Matthew Thomas Payne. ŠVELCH added five articles of the edited volume *Beyond the Sea: Navigating BioShock* by Felan Parker and Jessica Aldred (2018) to his bibliography—two of which are mentioned in other paragraphs of our bibliographical bridges (see the entries to Bakhtin and Stang [STANG]). A third one is of interest here: John Vanderhoef and Matthew Thomas Payne's 'Big Daddies and Monstrous Mommies: *BioShock*'s Maternal Abjection, Absence, and Annihilation' (50–73). By coincidence, Vanderhoef worked as one of our reviewers. Matthew Thomas Payne, on the other hand, is the co-editor of *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* (2009)—a source crucial to HAMMAR's research.

*Selected Works by Vít Šisler (b. 1978)*

The *CyberOrient* editor Vít Šisler builds liminal grounds between Arabic and game studies. Within our issue, ŠVELCH and HAMMAR also build a Šisler bridge towards another: 'Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games' (*European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2008) complements HAMMAR's bibliography, while the 2014 *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* contribution 'From *Kuma\War* to *Quraish*: Representation of Islam in Arab and American Video Games' has a place in ŠVELCH's literature list.

*Selected Works by Sarah Stang (b. 1988)*

In our special issue, Sarah Stang [STANG] and Holger Pötzsch [PÖTZSCH] have one thing in common: They appear as both article authors and references alike. As shown above, Pötzsch references can be found in PÖTZSCH, BOCKWOLDT and HAMMAR, ŠVELCH and STANG. Stang references, on the other hand, can be found in STANG and ŠVELCH: While STANG refers to her *First Person Scholar* and *Press Start* articles ‘Controlling Fathers and Devoted Daughters: Paternal Authority in *BioShock 2* and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*’ (2016) and ‘Shrieking, Biting, and Licking: The Monstrous-Feminine and Abject Female Monsters in Video Games’ (2018), ŠVELCH highlights Stang’s recent ‘Big Daddies and Their Little Sisters: Postfeminist Fatherhood in the *BioShock* Series’ in *Beyond the Sea: Navigating BioShock*, as edited in 2018 by Felan Parker and Jessica Aldred (see also the Bakhtin section above).

**Editors’ Note**

The idea of rounding up our special issue in this way came to us while harmonizing all the bibliographical entries into one pattern. We have tried as best as we could to double-check each single source. Sometimes, names that we have never heard before appeared over and over again, in multiple contributions. Somewhere on this planet, different scholars had come across the same readings. We simply wanted to underline this complex, interwoven net of border-crossing–border-creating literature. As editors from different fields, we have learned of many intriguing discourses that were unknown to us before. Quite often, shared literature lists make visible certain symptoms of academic echo chambers, copy-paste works, or self-referencing networks. Shared foundational texts serve as sense-making tool kits to the members of so-called ‘fields’, and give a hint at somehow negotiated vocabulary within them. Yet, what we have in front of us is an example of an interdisciplinary collaboration of writers. Since our special issue had an ‘open call’, many of our collaborators do not even know each other personally. Yet, in the end, it was possible to build bibliographical bridges between all of them—every single contribution has at least one theoretical link to another article. This way, it is possible to theoretically unite our work, and consider it as (part of) a whole.

*On the Arbitrariness of ‘Order’*

As so often, such act of sorting and selecting, naming and framing, is a rather arbitrary endeavor. Most often, literature lists are sorted alphabetically. Here, we opted for a chronological order instead, just to create a ‘time map’ of some sort. Holistically tracking all shared works or shared theorists that appear at multiple places throughout our collection does of course not necessarily mean that we will find here the ‘most important’ theorists to each contribution. In fact, numerous key sources may be lacking, if only mentioned by one author alone; while some of the here-mentioned entries may simply relate to rather ‘subordinate’ references by many authors alike. Yet, what we have aimed at offering here is a selected bibliography that includes all ‘shared readings’ of our partly individual, partly collective *Manufacturing Monsters* journeys—a shared literature canon that brought us together, sometimes unknowingly, and that further invites for a continuous examination of monstrous topics beyond the disciplines.

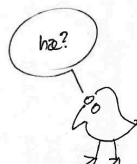
### **Biographical Note**

Christian Beyer is a bus driver at Torghatten Buss where he drives beautiful people and big packages between Nordland, Finnmark and Lapland. As a searcher and *re*-searcher, he came across questions of political philosophy and power politics in places such as Tehran and Hamadan, Murmansk and Belgrade, Qazvin and Qom. After having been a doctoral research fellow at UiT, he continues to work as a part-time lecturer at the Department of Language and Culture where he teaches the course ‘Manufacturing Monsters’ together with Holger, Juliane and Emil. Chrill considers as quite fascinating: epistemology, the manufacture of knowledge, and the grotesque carnival of academia. Regional focus: Syria, Iran, and the wider axis of resistance.

### **Acknowledgements**

Takk and dėkuji to the border poets at Torghatten Buss. Crucial copy-editorial *MaMo* work took place in the bus garage right next to the university campus, and, quite literally, on the road—during driving breaks en route to Narvik and Alta.

Giitu and спасибо to the regional branch of the Russian Philosophical Society. Parallel to our journal, our academic neighbors from the Murmansk Arctic State University publish a collection that includes one further *MaMo* contribution as well—as an addendum to our issue, so to say.





## From the *Nordlit* Archives

Eleven years ago, in *Nordlit* 23 (2008), Polly Gould noted on pages 106–108:

**Arctic Frankenstein**—Doctor Frankenstein trains in the art of medicine, which Bauman (1992) describe[s] as the ‘modernist strategy’ in reaction to mortality. Like the Pygmalion myth, *Frankenstein* is the story of a man creating life without sexual reproduction, not with the craft of a sculptor but with the skill of a surgeon; however in this case the outcome is physically monstrous. The story can be read as a story of gender and difference, of production and reproduction, creation and recreation, and a search for origins, beyond the maternal body. The ‘monster’ that has no name, escapes the attic laboratory, stealing the Doctor’s coat, and crucially, the doctor’s journal. He is a nameless, speechless being, full-grown but having to learn the world anew. He comes into awareness and speech and starts to question: “But where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses; [...] What was I?” (Shelley 2003 [1818]: 124). He learns to read, and can then decipher the writing in Viktor’s diary, which reveals to him that he was stitched together from pieces of the dead. The monster, our monster, sutured, patch-worked together from old corpses, brought to life as a new being, has a consciousness of his own made-ness which triggers a search for his origin that replicates the experience of post-modern subject: fragments, parts, frictions and fictions, collected into a whole, montaged, collaged together. The monster searches for the man who made him. Behind the story of the life of the monster, is the story of his fictional creator, the scientist-man. Behind them all is the biography of the life of the author, the woman-writer Mary Shelley, whose own birth led to the death of her mother, Mary [Wollstonecraft], the great advocate for women’s rights. Shelley lost three of her four children.

*Excerpt taken from:*

Gould, Polly. 2008. “Sexual Polarities: Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Polar Exploration as a Search for Origins Beyond ‘Woman’”, *Nordlit* 23 [12:1], 103–118. (The text above has been slightly re-formatted.)

*Mentioned secondary sources:*

Bauman, Zygmunt. 1992. *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. 2003 [1818]. *Frankenstein [or, The Modern Prometheus]*. Reprint edition. London: Penguin.

Eleven years earlier, in *Nordlit* 2 (1997), Christina Sandhaug noted on pages 37–38:

**Linguistic Monsters**—Our failure to acknowledge the ‘in-betweens’ is our fallacy and what turns our ‘outsiders’ into monsters. And as we don’t allow ourselves to think about them, we don’t talk about them, a denial by which the modern mind hopes to press monster out of existence. I would hazard to say that if we didn’t construct these categories in our mind and in our language, there wouldn’t be any hybrids at all, in that there wouldn’t be any categories to mix. If we chose to call them, us and everything, hybrids after all, as does Latour (1993 [1991]), in a non-modern world ‘hybrid’ wouldn’t be a bad word. Rather, it would be the acknowledged norm. But we *do* purify between culture and nature, human and non-human, and by labelling the former ‘us’, or ‘the One’, and the latter ‘the Other’, we ensure our power. “The self is the one who is not dominated, who knows that by the service of the other, the other is the one who holds the future, who knows that by the experience of domination, which gives the lie to the autonomy of the self” (Haraway 1991 [1985]: 177). To be One becomes to be powerful. What happens when the modern mind is confronted with incidents or beings that resist purification, something not easily marked as the One or the Other? We label ‘it’ monstrous, because it poses a threat to our Modern Constitution by which we make and dominate Others. ‘Monster’ becomes a metaphor for all that doesn’t fit our categories. Their monstrosity lies in that they both invite and resist purification.

*Excerpt taken from:*

Sandhaug, Christina. 1997. “Caliban’s Intertextual Refusal: *The Tempest* in *Brave New World* and *Galatea 2.2*”, *Nordlit* 2 [1:2], 23–44. (The text above has been slightly re-formatted.)

*Mentioned secondary sources:*

Haraway, Donna. 1991 [1985]. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century”, in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, edited by Donna Haraway. London: Free Association Books, 149–182.

Latour, Bruno. 1993 [1991]. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

# Nordlit 42

*aims at*

mapping the  
manufacture  
of monsters.

## *Written by*

Søren Mosgaard Andreasen, *Alta*  
Christian Beyer, *Tromsø*  
Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia, *Aveiro*  
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