

The Poetics Seminar

2. The Monster (Notes: October 31, 2017)

Today we'll focus on the figure of the monster, and expressions of monstrosity. This will move us from the Fool, and the poetic conditions of not-knowing, toward questions of materiality, bodies and form: the monster complicates a relation to the body and what counts as proper form. The monster disrupts conventional understandings of beauty by relating us to disfigurement, the ugly, horror and contamination. It is therefore a type of extreme, a limit, to the category of aesthetics: and in terms of poetics, the monster again places us at the limits of the graspable, leading to a language of the freak or of filth – dirty words enabling us to speak of fear and trauma as well as transgression.

The monster has many expressions, and appears within an array of contexts and narratives, from fairy tales to legends, comic strips to B-movies; from zombies to werewolves, vampires to witches – monsters are somehow primal and archaic. In a sense, we have an extremely wide range of monstrous forms, but also a deeply ambivalent relation to the monster, and this we might capture as an essential aspect: *Monsters straddle the line between proximity and distance, and between seduction and repulsion: we are drawn to the monster, and at the same time, it terrifies us. Something that is absolutely Outside, while also relating deeply to the Inside, to what is close or even inside us.

The theorist Jeffrey Cohen gives a hint of this when he writes: “In its function as dialectical Other ... the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond – of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant but originate Within.” (Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 7).

How might we unpack this further, the notion of the monster representing the outside, the truly Other, while also originating from within? Here we may turn to the work of Mary Douglas and her writings on taboo. The issue of taboo, as something which is forbidden and that poses a danger to the social order, works to set up a type of structure, defining what is permitted or not, what is acceptable and allowed, against what is unacceptable, illegal or otherwise illegitimate. Yet, again, there is a deep ambivalence running throughout this relation: often what is taboo also holds a certain attraction, a type of temptation or seduction; it has a power over us.

*examples: farting in public; incest; eating shit, or human flesh

Taboo mostly relates to the body; and in particular, as Mary Douglas proposes, to the openings of the body; as a structuring device, taboo works to regulate the openings and borders, what is allowed to move in and out of the body. Taboo is fundamentally connected to filth and defilement: what may contaminate or dirty the social order.

The orifice, this site of possible penetration, is one of potential contamination and contagion; it signals the vulnerability of the body, and therefore the vulnerability of the social body: to be exposed to things outside itself, and to let things from inside go out into the open.

Contagion and contamination act as deep references, and potential dangers, around the issue of taboo, and we can see how monster narratives are often based on contamination: the mutation of the body through outside influence.

*The monster is fundamentally dirty; it relates to what should not be mixed together (taboo of inter-racial relationships)

The monster then leads us to the poetics of the hybrid, the mutant, and also, the collaged: I would say, haunted form: the creature. As we discussed with the Fool, poetics is always relating us to the limits of language, to what is unnamable; we encounter the force of the inexpressible; and poetics gives an expressive form to this – it traces what cannot be fully comprehended or graspable. In doing so, it produces a knowledge explicitly of that which is never fully knowable.

With the Monster, I would say, we again reach the limits of language, yet rather than being related to something completely exterior to us – to something in the world, which we experience – the monster is profoundly interior: it is in fact something we may become; the literal manifestation of what our bodies can do and yet, often, should not.

Here, we are led to the issue of “repression”: this is also key to the ambivalence of the forbidden; taboo requires repression – it is unspeakable, it is not allowed, it must be held back – and yet, it must also figure within the social order, to give it a sort of space. *we’ll return to this idea later, through the theme of “carnival”.

The forbidden essentially draws a line, creating an inside and an outside, a legal boundary and a social contract; in doing so, it produces an arena of fantasy, practices that act out what we may not do openly.

*The repressed will eventually return through any number of forms:

*Film: *Night of the Living Dead* / coming up from the ground; the corpse (Kristeva)

As Mary Douglas suggests, what is not allowed, what is placed outside the social order, is often closer than we think; it often comes from inside, in the form of bodily fluids (menstruation), in the form of forbidden desire (incest: within the family), and even in the form of an evil thought (fantasy). We are in a sense always defined by the forbidden, and taboo is precisely what regulates this relationship in the form of repression, fantasy, and sublimation:

*That it is given expression yet through another form, a type of acting out, in the open, yet masked or controlled.

*We will come back to this, also to question in what way artists are involved in these topics.

Frankenstein

Let us turn to a specific monster, that of Frankenstein. The story of Frankenstein is a story of the creation of a monster; the monster here is a product of the scientific imagination – Dr. Frankenstein is obsessed with the idea of creating life, not through a process of natural birth, but through the possibility of science. He invents a body, and imbues it with life. Yet, upon confronting his own creation, he is suddenly horrified – he cannot stand the look of the monster! And he even attempts to kill it, but suddenly pauses, to question his own moral conscience: suddenly he is unsure. Instead, he abandons the monster; in other words, he literally tries to repress it from his thoughts, and his memory. But, of course, the monster returns; the monster, here, is the perfect embodiment of what Freud would call “the return of the repressed” – it will always come back to haunt the doctor, in one form or another.

The story then develops into a tale of horror, where the monster kills in the hopes of convincing the doctor of creating a second monster, a wife: the monster, in other words, searches for belonging, for being part of the social order: it wants to have a place in the world. The doctor is so appalled at this idea, which ultimately drives the monster into terrible violence. There are a number of ways we can think about the monster here; for instance, as the embodiment of the return of the repressed, as a figure that literally shows us what we should not see or do (to play God); as an abnormality, a deformed figure – the monster as a type of sickness; and as a figure that crosses the border between inside and outside, law and criminality.

*If we remember: the doctor constructs the monster from body parts stolen from the cemetery. This is clearly a strong aspect of the monster: a deformed object, an uncanny figure that combines diverse elements, a mutation. The monster is literally an alien, and in this case, it is an alien that is close to us – it is made from human parts – while representing what must be rejected: an unnatural form.

*Franco Moretti examines Frankenstein as a narrative about industrial capitalism, and the emergence of the proletariat.

*The proletariat-monster is alienated from himself, forced into a type of mechanical labor that estranges him or her from the materials of craft; this would be given a further expression in the early silent film *Metropolis*, in this case showing us the proletariat as a type of zombie.

The monster generally tells us something about the social order, about what is permitted and what is forbidden, and about how we deal with repression: what is repressed, desired, and fantasized, and yet which must be regulated by one's own moral decisions.

*What do we do with our fantasies? Where do they go, and how do we live with them?

Abject

Artists are of course in dialogue with the monstrous: we might even say, that art objects are materials brought into a certain disfigurement – we are always working within and against traditions of production, challenging the limits of what counts as “beautiful form”, and extending the borders of the speakable or imaginable. In other words, artists occupy this ambivalent zone between what is inside and what is outside, between the forbidden and the acceptable.

*Art is a certain production that takes lessons from monstrosity; it aims for an impossible expression, it tries to bring this out into a space of culture, into language.

In many ways, in the studio we create monsters; we search for materials to capture the unspeakable: what is often difficult to articulate; what drives our imagination and which demands a type of form: we try to give life to things, especially that which is often missing: we search for ways to materialize difficult or vague thoughts.

Art objects or works are haunted forms; they always refer us to a type of disorder while bringing this into an ordered presentation: that is its tension: between the formless stuff of the body and the formation of a cultural production.

Is this not exactly what the monster is? A form that is always on the verge of falling apart?

The poetics of the monster is therefore an essential element to artistic work in general:

it is a poetics of the fragile border of one's own body: what lives inside and which must come out; it must live in the world.

Here, we can turn to the work of Julia Kristeva, where she discusses the topic of the abject (*Powers of Horror*). Kristeva defines the abject as the reaction we have when confronted with a threat to the breakdown in meaning – or what she calls “the symbolic order”; the abject is precisely that point where we lose the distinction between self and other, between subject and object. As an example, she focuses on the question of the corpse: the corpse forces us to confront our own mortality, our own materiality, and to some degree, we react with a sudden uneasiness – or maybe we react this way upon seeing blood, or a wound: it makes a shiver, or even vomit. So, abjection is a type of psychological process, where we encounter and negotiate the breakdown of what it means to be a body, a subject, distinct and whole, and separate from others and from the primary matters of life and death.

As Kristeva states: the abject threatens us; it has to do with "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules."

“A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance; I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.” (Kristeva)

The abject is often a piece of oneself that is rejected, or cast off; it is “the me that is not me”. Here, Frankenstein becomes the literal embodiment of the abject: it is an abject-form.

The abject is the central feature of the monster: it is precisely what horrifies, often a bodily matter that appears where it should not; that leaks or spills forth, that stains or contaminates; it is a dirtied material, a loss of form.

*Film: *The Blob*.

The abject threatens the stability of the social order by interrupting the scene with a cut, a wound, a flow. With the indeterminate – as Kristeva suggests, the abject returns us to “the animal”.

She writes: “by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.” (Kristeva)

It's important here, to refer to a certain gendered reading carried through questions of the monster and the abject; as Kristeva also considers, the feminine historically is located within the politics of abjection, in terms of what is deemed vile; and we might even consider this today in the religious systems that require woman to cover themselves, particularly the element of hair: what is so problematic about female hair we might wonder? We might say, it refers us to a wild body, a body overflowing with sexuality, referring us to the pubic region, to a certain animality that might disrupt the

orderly operations of masculine society. Woman, in this regard, is dangerous, precisely because she overflows.

*Luce Irigaray / use of this concept as a position of strength; “menstruation” / menstruation huts (Nepal case)

The Grotesque

The monster, the abject, these lead us to the topic of “the grotesque”, which has its roots in the medieval and the origins of carnival. Historically the grotesque is found in expressions of the demonic, and often appears in the form of monstrous depictions, such as sculptures of gargoyles, weird creatures, and also, often through the combination of human and the non-human. The grotesque we might call an aesthetics of the monstrous.

Wolfgang Kayser gives a deeper view onto the grotesque; he writes:

“a world in which the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals, and human beings, and where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid.”

*subject of Animism

The grotesque is a type of monstrous vocabulary, a repertoire of expressions that animates the monster, articulating the abject through a broader cultural project: of what Kristeva calls “the powers of horror” and which we might also call “the poetics of horror”.

So here I want to conclude by considering traditions of Carnival, and to follow how the monster, and the grotesque, bring us closer to questions of the social order, and a poetics of disfigurement: a *disfiguring*. While we know carnival through its current expressions, from Rio to Cologne, which appear as rather staged events, the writer Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us of its origins in Medieval Europe, and what he calls “the market place” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*):

*The market place as that social milieu of the people, and that often stood in contrast to the order of the King and the Church.

*Bruegel painting: *Carnival’s Quarrel with Lent*

The market place was in fact the sphere of the carnivalesque, taking the form of various celebrations, theatrical dramas, and banquets and feasts, all of which circled in and around holy days and seasonal rituals, such as the harvest. Carnival, as Bakhtin reminds, was a space of popular festivity, and often carried a deeply comical and critical dimension. Aspects of satire, poking fun, and caricature were aimed at bringing down to the ground the high formalities of Church and State ceremony, and the pronouncements of official figures.

Regardless of specific contexts or places, we can understand carnival as the ritual suspension of the social order; during carnival, the fixity of social status, of the presentation of the self, and one’s place within a given community – these are given a temporary relief. Instead, there is a type of lawlessness that occurs, where bodies take on different identities, often through the use of costume, and liberties are extended beyond the usual boundaries.

*this is the abject arena that enables the outside to have its place

We can identify a number of modalities here:

*inversion of social roles / Mimicry

*expressions of debauchery (sexual promiscuity, drunkenness, hilarity) / Trickery

*worship of the animal: pantheism / Monstrosity

In this way, abjectness, grotesque expression, and monstrous depictions are about giving space explicitly to what Bakhtin calls “the lower bodily stratum”, or, the pit of the stomach, the genitals, the center of the body and earthly passions. As well as the dirty elements, such as the fecal, the drunken, and the debauched.

So, we have the monster, as the embodiment of the repressed; the abject, as the ambivalent tension between attraction and repulsion, the dynamics of taboo: we fear what we secretly desire; and we have the grotesque, as the aesthetics of bodily horror – a monstrous aesthetic platform that also raises questions about the social order: what is on top, and what is below? What is included, and what is excluded? The grotesque, like the monster and the abject, makes apparent these borders through a type of radical obscenity; the performance of the abnormal.

*The freakshow / where the abnormal go

*The development of the Circus

Therefore, a poetics of horror is one that is always hard to stomach; it in fact aims to give form to what is explicitly formless.

Works to consider:

Hans Bellmer / *the doll and the puppet; ambivalent relation between subject and object (animism)

“The Doll” (1937-8)

Cindy Sherman / abjectness and the “grotesque”: to repulse the master gaze

Film Stills

Grotesque Pictures

Sex Pictures (1992)

**object / desire / repression; the abject disrupts the function of the object: it has no object, it is always a break in this logic.

Carolee Schneemann / Catharsis

“Meat Joy” (1964) / “the ecstatic”; loss of borders: catharsis / ritual

“Interior Scroll” (1975) /

Mike Kelley / teenage life (adolescence):

“fear and trauma”

Kristeva says about art, that it is “relating us to the fragile borders” and to what is “prelinguistic” / it uses a language not of communication but of want.

“Educational Complex” / what cannot be remembered (trauma) (1995)

“Day is Done” / the extra-curricular (teenage fantasy) (2005)

Marcel Dzama / the freakshow; fantasy of carnivalesque societies
Drawings

Sandra Vasquez de la Horra / drawing out one's own fantastical life: the secret wish
Drawings

Thomas Hirschhorn / theory of collage; "diversification"
"Too Too Much" (2010): trash / saturation / excess
"Hotel Democracy" (2003):
"Eternal Flame" (2013): Relational Form: the messiness of social life