

Monsters, Monstrosities, and the Monstrous in Culture and Society

Edited by

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Series in Sociology



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Introduction

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The terms “monster” and “monstrous” are subjectivizing adjectives that are often used to refer to entities’ characteristics or somatic individual traits, as well as certain types of style and design. They evade clear definition since they encompass various complex, conflicting notions. Monsters simultaneously cross borders and demarcate them: The stranger and the other vs. one’s cohorts and acquaintances; the ugly and disgusting vs. the beautiful, the pleasant, and the harmonious; the abnormal and the freakish vs. the normal and the well-adjusted; the human vs. the inhuman, cyborgs, hybrids, mutants, and animals. These borders involve the specific and the diffuse, inclusion and exclusion, and lastly – good and evil. The various attributions we make, connect monsters with topics such as sex and gender, religion, psychology, aesthetics, and politics. Within the context of the makeover paradigm, they also relate to idealized standards of beauty, bodywork, and cosmetic surgery. Monstrosities often seem strange, repulsive, frightening, and abhorrent, but at the same time, they can also strike us as fascinating and interesting, captivating, and sometimes even amusing. Like societal taboos (Freud, 1950), monsters are extremely ambiguous, and – again, just like taboos – they are a constitutive element of the history of our civilization in a way unrivaled by almost any other entity. The monster is a reified, personified concept, a distilled embodiment of historically contingent reduction, selection, and structuring of social order. The monster, the monstrosity, and the abomination are at times very specific entities; they remain at the borders of our concepts of reality and define the scope of an unspecified external world from the inside out – monsters are therefore the last specifiable element of our conceptions of reality (Lacan, 2013).

In the discourse dedicated to neoliberalist tendencies, monsters are linked with the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion: Most of the inconsistency between the naturally given facts of appearance and the cultural constructed,

idealistic evaluation of “natural” beauty – which is, of course, artificial – is abrogated in practices of self-discipline and manipulation of one’s own body (Saguy, 2013). Within a neoliberalist society, the monster has to be adjusted, and the monstrous has to be normalized (Foucault, 2007). Plastic surgery reveals very clearly the tendency to gain normalization instead of acting in a subversive and disruptive way. Plastic surgery is usually not used to create a subversive sketch of oneself to undercut the assumed “own nature”. Instead, it aims at optimizing the cultural idealized perception and understanding of “beauty by nature” of the own body (Haraway, 1999). Cyborgs, on the other hand, enable the opposition to dominant subjectivity practices (Haraway, 1987). Despite the fact that there is no nature in adopting the sophisticated cultural achievement of aesthetic surgery, the aim is to obtain a gendered and fitness-related optimum in regard to socially set standards, which are obviously contingent historical structures of relevance. The cyborg-figure was introduced in humanities as the outcome of a mindset dedicated to the monstrous, as a strategy to achieve substantial freedom from entrenched societal frameworks [the human as a natural entity strictly linked to (assumed!) nature-given goals]. Today, however, it is very often reified as a neoliberalist concept to manage the body in regard to demands of fitness, beauty, and expected behavior, as well as cognitive capacities (Orland, 2005). The irony of these practices is that while purportedly generating material for diversifying and equalizing social realities (e.g. as described in Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” (Haraway, 1987)), the outcome is often the reification and permutation of stable differentiations/oppositions that are strictly linked to hierarchical relationships between them. On the contrary: obvious deviations from the expected shape and / or behavior are stigmatized as monstrous in a completely negative notion and therefore have to be normalized. Cyborgization became a procedure to align oneself with the common standards and gain adaptation in the best possible means.

In the past, different approaches dealt with the continuum from the very well-known and intimate to the unknown and uncanny; e.g. Haraway’s Cyborg (Haraway, 1987), Agamben’s Homo Sacer (Agamben, 1998), as well as Garfinkel’s transgender studies (Garfinkel, 2007) or Goffman’s analysis on total institutions (Goffman, 1961). In their most extreme peculiarity, monsters always provoke a direct confrontation with the status quo. They don’t question academically the point of reference that is taken for granted, and that is used to define what seems to be good and naturally right – like humanities and social sciences, the two fields that usually conduct these kinds of enquiries. Instead, they allow the structure of order and rightness to collapse. In this regard, the term implosion is commonly used – especially by Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 1994, 1983) and Bataille (Bataille, 2001) – to point out that the monster and the monstrous both simultaneously act as firewall and explosive.

It combines antagonist forces and is at the same time very different from non-linear and non-hierarchical theories and approaches that in the past were proposed as alternative views of contemporary societies – e.g. Deleuze's and Guattari's proposal of a rhizomatic view of reality (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). Contrary to the unmanageable intertwined references of the rhizome, the monster is embodied throughout.

One type of monster, the hybrid, can be found in all levels of scalability. Methods of cleanup are found on the levels of the individual, organizations, and society. The actor-network theory, in particular, constructs monsters that way. In his work "We Have Never Been Modern," Bruno Latour (Latour, 1993) shows that there has never been a societal reality that was that dependent on mechanisms of cleanup. Nature and culture are intertwined quite irreversibly and never were separated that strictly. This notion constructs the monstrous as a typically modern phenomenon. It arises out of the effort put into these processes and destroys things and creatures to maintain the nature-culture differential. John Law's "Sociology of monsters" (Law, 1991) sets up monsters from different perspectives and on several levels (from micro to macro). Monsters run counter to common classification patterns. What these contributions accomplish is shifting the perspective from the "naturally given" view, with its preconditions, enforced and directed by discourses of cleansing, to the ambiguity and subversiveness of monsters.

Monsters play an important role in narrative structure as well. We use the term narrative widely here for "high arts products" as well as "popular culture." Monsters have been very popular in modern aesthetics since romanticism. One group of narratives focuses on how to contain a monster. They shape one part of aesthetics and popular culture: Firstly, the uncanny, better known as the horror, creates the monster as a threat, showing and testing the borders of society's hegemonic rationality (Freud, 1955 and Rosenkranz, 2015). It is something of an imperative that the monster has to be destroyed (Carroll, 1990). These types of narratives stigmatize monsters as evil and colonize them. Secondly, there are a lot of comedies related to the makeover paradigm. These narratives focus on the improvement of the protagonist, the adjustment to (beauty) standards. Thirdly, there are comedies that modify and reintegrate the monster into the social order. Fourthly, some dramas focus on the failure(s) of unadjusted monsters. All of these four types of narratives reproduce the social order. They construct monsters in a negative way, to be precise, as creatures that have to be contained, reintegrated through modes of adjustment, something that has to be transformed in order to be beautiful and good.

On the other hand, narratives also contain more complex, more dialectical functions of monsters. They also focus on "inclusion exclusion dialectics" but

differ from the first type because they show the monsters' potential and possibilities. Modern aesthetic theories no longer focus on mimesis, a copy – like reproduction of “given nature,” but on creating other worlds. Art is no longer bound to the conventional understanding of purpose and sense, as Immanuel Kant's (Kant, 2007) and especially Friedrich Nietzsche's (Nietzsche, 2000) aesthetic theories point out. The purpose and sense of art lie in art itself; it is beautiful because it is needless; it is luxury. Socio-political approaches, like Friedrich Schiller's (Schiller, 2004) and Herbert Marcuse's (Marcuse, 1974, 2002), see the shift of perspective produced by society's aesthetic education as inevitable for a better life. The creation of monsters is not considered as purely negative, but as beings with potential. Modern conceptions of the absurd, for example by Martin Esslin (Esslin, 2004), and of the grotesque, for example by Wolfgang Kayser (Kayser, 1981), show the inappropriateness of society's hegemonic understanding of the world. Modern theories sketch the aesthetic of the monstrous as an aesthetic of deviation, showing potentials. The monster acts as corrective, contrasting and correcting the well-established order of looking at things. It holds a mirror in front of people and makes the established order of looking at things visible to them.

Goffman shows in his study *Stigma* (Goffman, 1986) that monsters are stigmatized by society because of their deviations, but they can form groups with fellow monsters and develop techniques for handling their stigma. Some monsters even turn their flaws into abilities, special gifts. Popular culture supplements aesthetics with figures, which turn their flaws into positive potentials: Firstly, sometimes characters with differing or shared defects form groups in comical or serious ways. The monstrous here functions as a solitary deviation. Secondly, there are narratives that focus, more or less, on success stories of anomalous characters – exemplarily shown in the likeable figure of the underdog. These subversive narratives aren't subordinated to the makeover paradigm, which means their characters don't have to be modified. Humor is very important, though, because it helps monsters to survive and solve problems. It makes it easier for them to face their fears, sometimes even overcome them – getting through awkward and uncomfortable situations. Julia Kristeva has shown that laughing interrupts the discourse of standardization without bursting it (Kristeva, 1982). In the context of the comical, the genres of satire and sarcasm are the third type of these monster narratives. Fourthly, there are horror narratives that don't reproduce the social order. One example of this type of horror narrative indicates that the monster is still alive, but the number of humans is reduced, or humanity is destroyed – these narratives are very popular in the zombie genre.

Modern science and aesthetic theory imply that rationally oriented logic – the strict demarcation of boundaries through the use of dualisms – reduces

the complexity inherent in the concept of the monstrous, instead of examining it more closely. It also creates a stigma instead of pointing out potential. A “specific utopia of monsters and the monstrous” is a sociology of the other, an aesthetic-sociological future outline of a society for cyborgs, hybrids, mutants, extraterrestrials, and robots. Our anthology not only aims at the reconstruction of constructions and second-order observations of today’s reality – which is predominantly hostile to input from monsters and monstrosities – but also at inventive and constructive contributions to a social future that will hopefully be influenced and shaped by “monsters” and “the monstrous.”

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**Gender, Biopolitics,
Feminist & Queer Theory**

1.

Revealing the Anatomy of the Seductive Unknown: German Sirens of the 19th Century

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Abstract

Understanding literary constructions of the female monster of the post-Enlightenment help us make sense of the socially constructed woman and the insistent “othering” of woman that dominated the 19th century, and, to some extent, continues today. The existence of monsters as cultural embodiments of the unknown in the Middle Ages, before modern scientific advancements were able to explain natural phenomena, is unsurprising. But what do monsters say about identity formation and how the world can and should be understood after the Enlightenment, an age of supposed reason? The existence of the female monster – already “othered” as women and doubly “othered” as a monster – simultaneously calls into question Enlightenment notions of reason while figuring the woman as irrational. The appearance of the most prominent female monster of the German canon, the siren figure Lorelei, coincides with the economic depression in the Rhine region and the perversion of nature when the Rhine is straightened. In male-authored texts, she is often spurned by a lover, and she always lures men to their death, making her seem a fearsome and violent creature. By contrast, the female-authored water nymph is shown explicitly betrayed by man thus turning the trope of the nature spirit ravaging innocent men on its head by calling attention to a justified motivation for revenge.

Keywords: Lorelei, siren, female monsters, female authors, German

1.1 An Introduction to the Post-Enlightenment Female Monster

The age-old siren call has famously beckoned man to disregard his surroundings until he is crushed upon a jagged shore. The siren’s beauty and

voice are seemingly magical in their power to overwhelm him. But what does she look like? What does she sound like? Is not *this* vagueness the most alluring part of all? This is, at least, what German male-authored representations of sirens have often implied, in particular in the texts under discussion here, Goethe's "Der Fischer" (1779), Brentano's "Zu Bacharach am Rheine" (1801),¹ Eichendorff's "Waldgespräch" (1815), "Der stille Grund" (1837), "Verloren" (1841), and Heine's "Ich weiss nicht was soll es bedeuten" (1823/24). Because these authors give us few clues to the siren's complete physical appearance, her fishy tail can be imagined away, and the ideal woman superimposed over the monster. The existence of such "possibility-women" (Wienker-Piepho 1992, 101) post-Enlightenment presents a delectable tension between knowing and not-knowing. We "know" she is beautiful and seductive, even as we are denied a detailed representation. We also "know" the danger of her voice, even as we never actually hear it unmediated. Desire and containment of such a creature become the "natural" intertwining reactions to her presence and her song.

Enter the overlooked German female-authored siren such as those found in Franz' "Die Nympe aus Goethe's Fischer" (1843)² and Huch's "Lügenmärchen" (1896), who only marginally resemble such "possibility women." In true Enlightenment fashion, these authors privilege knowledge over fantasy, fidelity over seduction. The siren is presented completely in her fishy monstrosity and exists in a kind of sisterhood of the "other" with human women. Her unmediated voice reveals itself to be unthreatening, eliminating any justification for containment or neutralization.

Since Homer, the *Wasserfrau*, "equally seductress and seduced" (Dippel 2003, 263),³ has evoked a "mixed feeling of anxiety and lust, of threat and satisfaction, of denial and longing" (Roebing 1992, 1).⁴ She has many names: Melusine, Undine, siren, Rusalka, nix, mermaid, fountain woman, nymph, naiad, nereid, as well as a "large German repertory of untranslatable Mettjes, Buckelesmuhmen, Bachhakeles, Nixen, Nikkis, Seegöttis, Pützfeen, Soothmühmchen, Dämpflichen, Mümmlings, Zwergenweibeln" (Wienker-Piepho 1992, 94). The half-woman, half-fish fantasy figure is often read by modern literary critics as some form of dichotomy (Stuby 1992, 56). But most commonly, she is understood as a

¹ The poem appears later in 1801 under "Lureley" with small revisions.

² This is the date from her *Vermächtnis*. Original date of publication unsure.

³ "Verführerin und Verführten zugleich" [Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German to English are mine.]

⁴ "Mischgefühl von Angst und Lust, von Bedrohung und Befriedigung, von Verleugnung und Sehnsucht"

projection of male erotic desire: “The horizontal nix body offers itself to the male gaze as an object of lust, as a projection screen for a desire, which allows itself to be enjoyed hazard-free” (Stuby 1992, 163).⁵

However, in the proliferation of the siren in German-language literature of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the representation does not simply conform to erotic projection. Both male and female authors featured water women in their texts, yet to read the numerous anthologies and literary criticism discussing sirens, nymphs, and mermaids, one would conclude that female authors did not deploy such figures in their writing.⁶ (Or that they did not do so until the 20th century with Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Undine geht*, which has received substantial critical attention.) Thus, for instance, Roebing’s

⁵ “Der horizontale Nixenkörper bietet sich dem männlichen Blick als Lustobjekt dar, als Projektionsfläche für ein Begehren, welches sich gefahrlos genießen läßt.” See also Böschenstein (1992, 113) and Schmitz-Emans (2003, 218-219). This interpretation is born out in many of the well-known representations of water women in German-language literature beyond those under discussion here such as Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué’s *Undine*, Gottfried Keller’s “Seemärchen,” other texts by Clemens Brentano, Heinrich Heine (*Harzreise*), and Joseph von Eichendorff, Theodor Fontane’s *Melusine*, Ludwig Tieck’s *Sehr wunderbare Historie von der Melusina*, Gebrüder Grimm’s *Die Nixe im Teich*, Franz Kafka *Das Schweigen der Sirenen*, E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Der goldne Topf*, Rainer Maria Rilke, Alois Wilhelm Schreiber, Thüring von Ringoltingen’s *Dis abenteürllich buch beweyset uns von einer frawen genandt Melusina die ein Merfaye was*, Egenolf von Stauffenberg’s *Die gestörte Martenehe*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Neue Melusine*, Achim von Arnim’s *Der Ritter von Stouffenberg*, and Eduard Mörike’s *Die Historie von der schönen Lau*. This list is not complete. It does not include the numerous ballets, operas, operettas, etc. Irene Krieger has collected.

⁶ These anthologies include *Märchen von Nixen und Wassensfrauen* edited by Barbara Stamer (1987), with no female-authored texts, and *Undinenzauber* edited by Franz Rainer Max (1991), with contributions by Nelly Sachs, Regina Röhner, Ingeborg Bachmann, Penthesilea (Leonie Meyerhof), Barbara Frishmuth. With the exception of Meyerhof (who has received no critical attention), these authors published in the 20th and 21st centuries. Other collections discuss wider themes found in male-authored texts, for example, Benwell discusses the origin of the Wasserfrau, Bessler the visual representations of *Wasserfrauen*, Deppermann the slavic version of the *Wasserfrau* in the Rusalka, and Klugsberger examines strictly mermaids/Meerjungfrauen in literature. The most frequently analyzed female-authored *Wasserfrau* is found in Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Undine geht* (Baackmann, Fassbind-Eigenheer, Revesz, Stuby, ter Horst). Other female-authored *Wasserfrauen*, which have received critical attention, are generally from the 20th century and are primarily in Anglo-Saxon literature and film, such as Kerstin Hensel’s *Ulrich und Kühleborn* (Davies), Edith Wharton’s *Custom of the Country* (McHaney), Marilyn Monroe as Lorelei Lee in “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes” (Fauser) and “Lola rennt” (Revesz).

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