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The Horizon where Monsters Dwell

Living in Gramsci's "time of monsters" – watching the certainties of the old world order collapse before our eyes, uneasy about what monstrosities might lie ahead, we feel that reflecting on the very category of the monster is perhaps more advisable than at most times. With the atrocities committed in the name of the Capitalocene feeding the rise of populist, if not outright fascist, trends in world politics, the unequal distribution of the costs of the climate crisis, and armed conflict threatening to envelop us in the third world war, a new world indeed struggling to be born. Our times are monstrous not simply in the lethal menace looming over the horizon, but also in how the present situation disallows the complacency of having any sort of fixed framework for dealing with the challenges ahead. After all, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen observes in his seminal *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*:

A mixed category, the monster resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a 'system' allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction),

and resistance to integration—allowing what Hogle has called with a wonderful pun ‘a deeper play of differences, a nonbinary polymorphism at the ‘base’ of human nature.’ The horizon where the monsters dwell might well be imagined as the visible edge of the hermeneutic circle itself: the monstrous offers an escape from its hermetic path, an invitation to explore new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world.¹

While our volume makes no pretence at offering a methodology for navigating the time of monsters, it does invite a reconsideration of what the tradition of monstrosity has to tell us about the mechanisms governing our reality. If there is something to be learned from Adam McKay’s monster of a disaster comedy *Don’t Look Up* (2021), its metaphor for the climate crisis in the form of an impending collision with a comet involves a fundamental flaw: unlike the film’s danger, none of the situations we are confronted with has fallen out of the sky. They are all in a lesser or greater degree the results of our previous actions. The armed conflicts threatening the global balance of forces, the climate crisis, the threat of another pandemic have all been building up for decades now, and are a consequence of what we collectively chose to prioritise.

The monsters are already here; we can no longer pretend they will go away if we close our eyes. The question that we urgently need to ask ourselves is how to tame them, live with them, learn from them. Partly for this reason, the essays have been arranged in a roughly chronological order, reflecting a wealth of approaches to the category of the monster throughout the ages.

The opening essay, therefore, deals with classical antiquity. Krzysztof Tomasz Witczak examines the representations of the mythical female monster Campe in ancient Greece and Rome. The article shows many transformations Campe’s image underwent in ancient literary works and points to various places she might have inhabited. Quoting Adrienne Mayor’s interesting hypothesis, Witczak concludes that “Campe should be treated as a trace of a paleontological legend created by the ancient Greeks based on the fossil bones of some extinct giant animals.”

Dana Vasiliu’s essay bridges classical and medieval times. Although she is primarily interested in the emergence of Purgatory in the thirteenth

¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3

century, she also points to the classical origins of the monsters believed to inhabit it. Many thirteenth-century maps depicted Purgatory as located in southern Africa, behind Ethiopia and near the equator. It was graphically represented by galleries of monstrous, humanlike beings with various bodily defects. Vasiliu argues that these deformed creatures living at the edges of the world, which she specifies as the Antipodes, often symbolized specific sins that required cleansing in the purgatorial fire.

Kamil Pysz's article takes us into more contemporary context with its consideration of H. P. Lovecraft's handling of the theme of monstrosity. Pysz finds in Lovecraft a dark shadow of his period's triumphalism, with its progress and discovery leading to a sense of existential dread. In the article, Lovecraft is situated as a representative of American Decadent Movement, capturing the apocalyptic sentiments of the era. His cosmic horror consequently reverses the traditional expectations of the genre and the monster's position within it. In Lovecraft, "the world is not an orderly place that is at some point disrupted by the monster but it is non-human and threatening in the first place."

The following text, Justyna Jajszczok's analysis of Richard Marsh's 1897 novel *The Beetle*, remains within the same historical period. The book's eponymous creature, in its amorphous, constantly changing form, serves to question and undermine the political, racial, and gender distinctions imposed by the British empire at the height of its powers. Analysed in the light of the concept of reverse colonialization, the novel is read by Jajszczok as reflecting the imperial Gothic's anxieties about the European domination of the world.

The group of three essays that follows contributes to the discussion of deeply-rooted cultural associations of the female body and femininity more broadly with monstrosity, which can be traced back to mythological figures like Medusa, the Sirens, and the Harpies, or the above-mentioned Campe. Over the centuries, such associations have reflected broader social anxieties around gender, sexuality, and power.

One such monstrous female figure is the Evil Stepmother from the classic fairytale "Snow White," who becomes the focus of Zuzanna Szatanik's article. Szatanik first analyzes the well-known Grimm Brothers' version of the tale to show how it has maintained patriarchal values and then concentrates on one of its numerous modern retellings, "The Tale of

the Apple,” created by Emma Donoghue in 1997. Szatanik demonstrates how Donoghue undermines the patriarchal framework of the classic tale by queering the relationship between the two main characters (Snow White and her Stepmother) and subverting the Evil Stepmother’s image by liberating her from stereotypical roles and representations.

Nina Augustynowicz’s essay deals with the increasing medicalization of fatness and shows that Western discourses around it lead to the stigmatization of overweight people, who are often treated as “embodied pathologies.” Fat bodies, especially fat female bodies, Augustynowicz argues, are often regarded as monstrous and abject. She analyzes “Eight Bites,” a short story by Carmen Maria Machado, whose protagonist undergoes bariatric surgery. After the procedure, the woman is haunted by a formless monster which symbolizes her ambivalence toward her bodily transformation. Augustynowicz contends that the monster’s continued presence in the protagonist’s home embodies the complex cultural discourses on fatness and their persistent, disciplinary control over female bodies.

Marie-Luise Meier sets out to determine whether video games exhibit the same level of technocriticism as other media, particularly cinema and television. To do this, she analyzes the portrayal of robots in video games, with specific focus on their gender dimension. She proposes a typology of the common characteristics of gendered cyborgs and AI to explore the intersections between robots, gender, and monstrosity. Her framework considers the following categories: robots’ functions, their implied gender, how their gender is conveyed, their signature skills, and their typical traits. Meier’s analysis reveals that while female-coded robots are often portrayed as caring and empathetic, female-coded AI typically embodies the monstrous. Meier concludes that although most video games maintain the technocritical stance prevalent in movies, the most recent games, such as *Detroit: Become Human*, challenge this traditional association, suggesting a potential shift in future video game narratives.

The following two articles also explore the potential of monstrosity in science fiction texts. Sławomir Konkol analyses a 1976 post-apocalyptic novel by John Crowley. Informed by the major intertext of Crowley’s book in the form of the mediaeval genre of the beast epic, the article goes on to consider the ways in which Crowley transcends his model to provide a commentary on the political, and particularly racial, tensions of his

own times. The hybrid characters of the novel, the eponymous *Beasts*, are constructed both in the literal sense of being the result of genetic engineering and in the sense of being categorized as monstrous for political reasons.

Katarzyna Więckowska, in turn, looks at a more contemporary novel – Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future*, published in 2020. Here, the monstrosity is also entirely of human making, and also unquestionably political. Robinson’s monster is capitalism itself, presented as an omnivorous beast that resists all attempts at containment. The novel presents a post-apocalyptic scenario much more drastic than Crowley’s, although its vision of humanity in the wake of a devastating climate disaster strives, nevertheless, to offer alternative possibilities of civilization functioning beyond the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene, and the Necrocene.

The thematic section is concluded by two texts that focus on Polish culture. In the first of these, Michał Kisiel attempts to bring together the monstrous realms of the undead with Tadeusz Kantor’s late theatrical output and its “negotiations of the boundaries of life and death, which often abolish overly individual, human, or linear understandings of both categories and instead expose us to the nonhuman vibrancy that underlies them.” The monstrous is thus located within the functioning of subjecthood through what Kisiel terms the “monstrous onto-epistemology of memory.” In this reading, memory itself becomes monstrous in being endowed with a nonhuman agency of its own.

The closing article, written in Polish by Teresa Banaś-Korniak demonstrates how Western European demonological themes and motifs were transformed in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Polish literature. Polish authors of both serious treatises on hell and purgatory (Chomętowski and Meller) and popular texts (e.g. *Devil’s Law Deed* or *The Parliament of Hell*) adapted these themes to reflect the socio-political conditions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, as well as the contemporaneous culture and customs.

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The opening article is an introduction to forty-second (1/2024) issue of the World and Word semi-annual journal which is mainly devoted to the notion of monstrosity in its various incarnations. The authors briefly introduce the theme of the volume and summarize the articles contained in its first section.

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Słowa kluczowe: studia nad potwornością, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen