

**BEYOND THE CRISIS IN THE HUMANITIES:
TRANSDISCIPLINARY TRANSFORMATIONS OF
CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSES ON ART AND CULTURE**

Collection of Papers

Edited by Žarko Cvejić, Andrija Filipović and Ana Petrov



Faculty of Media and Communications
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CONTENT

Žarko Cvejić, Andrija Filipović, and Ana Petrov

Foreword / 7

Rachel Aumiller

Censoring Emotional Discourse: Marx on Seriousness and Laughter / 9

Sofija Christensen

Discussion of the Representation of Norwegian Centers of Excellence in both Fiction and Reality / 17

Nikola Dedić

Toward a Critique of the Philosophy of the Event / 25

Dubravka Ćurić

Globalisation and World Literature: Pascale Casanova's World Literary Republic and Franco Moretti's Literary World-System / 31

Aleš Erjavec

From Literary to Visual Culture and Aesthetics / 39

Andrija Filipović

Disagency: Toward a Community of Passive Subjects / 47

Marina Gržinić

Necropolitics and Global Capitalism / 53

Jelena Janković-Beguš

Play, Ivana, Play! Constructing a Hybrid Identity
"Betwixt and Between" Musicology and Music Performance / 61

Oleg Jeknić

Aesthetics and Machine Learning: Representation of User Preferences
in a Movie Recommender Systems as the Question of Aesthetics / 69

Lev Kreft

Towards Marxist Aesthetics / 77

Biljana Leković

Sound Art as a Transdisciplinary Practice: A Musicological Perspective / 93

Evangelia Mademli

The Archivization of Everything (Or How I Learned to
Stop Worrying about the Humanities and Love the Archive) / 101

Marija Maglov

Beyond the Crisis of the Avant-Garde in Music: The Potentials of
Welsch's Concept of Transculturality in Musicological Studies / 109

Bojana Matejić

The Aesthetic Dimension: Between Humanist and Anti-Humanist Aesthetics / 117

Vera Mevorah

Internet Art and the Dispersed Public Body: Question of "User" as Audience / 125

Aleksa Milanović

Discursive Construction of the Body
and the Bodily Potential for Creating New Narratives / 133

Radoš Mitrović

Soundscape and Possibility of Engaged Art / Marc Behrens
and Off Modernism / 139

Snežana Mocović

The Punk Discourse: From Subculture to Lifestyle / 145

Sanela Nikolić

Overcoming the Traditional Humanities: The Case of Tel Quel Semanalysis / 153

Rade Pantić

Social Science and Contemporary Society
in Immanuel Wallerstein's World-System Theory / 161

Ana Petrov

Between Utopia and Activism: Pop Music Concerts in Post-Yugoslav Space / 169

Nora Repo

“The most important is humanity. We Must Absolutely Learn Again Where is the Red Line between That What is Human and That What is Not” – Cheikh Khaled Bentounès / 175

Maja Stanković

Art in the Context of Crisis / 181

Lada Stevanović

Knowledge and its Stability in and out of Academia / 187

Dragana Stojanović

The Playful Face of the Performing Object: The Perplexed Relations of the Artist and the Audience in the Presence of an Artificial Body / 195

Aneta Stojnić

Live or Living Dead: (Un)Setting the State for the Hologram Performer / 201

Miško Šuvaković

A New School in the Gray Zones of a Crisis:
Self-Organisation and Self-Education in the Arts / 211

Marko Teodorski

A Fear that Sells: Monster Studies / 221

Polona Tratnik

Bio Art from the Other Europe / 229

Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman

Musicology and the Measure of Transdisciplinarity / 237

A Fear that Sells: Monster Studies

Marko Teodorski

We all have something to hide, some dark place inside us we don't want the world to see. So we pretend everything is ok, wrapping ourselves in rainbows. And maybe that's all for the best, because some of these places are darker than others.¹

Dexter

It is the intention of this brief *exposé* to present an unacknowledged field in the humanities, the monster studies, as well as to point to its essential relationship to consumerism at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The topic and the idea emerged from my research on the monstrous that had principally dealt with the nineteenth-century Victorian monstrosity and its fundamental relation to subjectivity. The Victorian notion of monstrosity, within as well as outside of the Gothic literature, was quite removed from what we can say about monstrosity today. And this difference in representation of the monstrous, of the grotesque and the uncanny, is paramount for understanding of subjectivity, consumerism and aesthetical values of the contemporary culture.

In order to more clearly depict what monster studies really are, and how they approach today's consumerism, I will make a short parallel between the most famous monster narratives of one-hundred-and-fifty years ago, and those we encounter today. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, in 1818, Mary Shelley published the *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, a story about a golem-type monster stitched together from parts of plundered corpses and brought to life by a crazy scientist. The

creature had to flee civilization, roaming the countryside in search of its own humanity, far away from populated cities, ending up in the frozen north. The existence of the Frankenstein's monster was one of a rejected and expelled entity, of an entity that was as solitary and abject as the icy wastelands it fled to. At the other end of the century, in 1890, Oscar Wilde published his eternal work *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a story of a vain, young man who sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for eternal youth. His true appearance, his monstrosity, was stored in a painting and locked up in an attic, far away from the eyes of the public. In order to survive, in order to be, the Dorian's monster – his soul – had to be hidden, it had to be invisible and disguised. The representation of monstrosity in these two narratives (which are merely drops in the vast sea of the Victorian Gothic) although emerging at the opposite ends of the nineteenth century, shared one and the same structure: monstrosity was something to be feared, to be expelled, something to be forsaken and locked away forever. The moral was: the subject *should not* be a monster, or the subject *could not* be a monster. Even more, one could say that the main idea behind the both mentioned narratives was that the *monster could not be a subject*. Victorian Gothic was a popular genre and these monsters were huge, but it was not, at least until the 1860s and 1870s, a genre that was making the writers rich. In the nineteenth century, although often taken as an object of fun and spectacle, monstrosity was not the topic that was producing literary superstars.²

Now let us return to the present day and to a bit different media that corresponds well with the twenty-first-century informational demand: television, and cinema as its counterpart. It is 2015 and we will channel-surf for a moment: what is it that we watch today? The fifteenth season of *Crime Scene Investigation*, that features at least one body turned inside-out per episode, epitomizing an enormous number of other TV shows of the same type (the cannibalistic *Hannibal* included); until relatively recently, we could follow *Dexter*, a serial killer who was using his murdering impulses 'for good' (and most of us actually rooted for him); *True Blood* was also on until a year ago, where vampires were 'coming out of the coffins,' and every character sooner or later turned out to be a supernatural creature of some kind; *Twilight Saga*, with vampires and werewolves, was a blockbuster worth of hundreds of millions of dollars; superheroes of all kinds and shapes (Marvel, DC) are a common fact of the popular culture. In the field of cartoons, monsters even have their own university, like in *Monster University*. Today, the popular culture is flooded with monstrosities so diverse that it would take this whole *exposé* to present only a small portion of them.

Monsters are not bogeymen anymore, they are not the E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Sandman* that will come in the night and get us. In 1889, lamenting mythical monsters, Joris-Karl Huysmans said: "The monster in art does

not exist anymore [...]” (Huysmans 1976, 379). He might have commented on the twenty-first century. The monster has never been ‘just a monster,’ it has always been connected to other identities that were seen as different. But monstrosity, as a radical alterity to what is generally accepted, pales in the face of an endless stream of new monsters that the twenty-first century keeps producing by the tons. Monstrosity, as something disturbing and gloomy, something that implodes semiotic systems and crashes meaning, just does not stand as a concept today, when we turn on the television and just slide into the narratives featuring dismembered bodies and vampire-like blood-sucking creatures on every channel. I am aware that monstrosity is a historically contingent concept and that if it dies in its nineteenth-century incarnation it will rise in a new twenty-first-century one. But that is exactly why we should cease discussing monstrosity as liminality, as something ‘out there,’ because, in doing that, we are applying a defunct concept with no real power in the contemporary pop-culture. In the world of monsters, nobody is a monster. If we read the television narratives as expressions of our times, it seems that the subject being a monster is not such a bad thing anymore. Only in the twenty-first century can Lady Gaga sport an image explicitly modelled on monstrosity, making of it a fashion, an individual choice that involves ‘being a monster.’ Her aesthetics is as eclectic as it gets, her costumes are comprised of inappropriate elements where things are always turned into something else, like cigarettes into eye glasses, or a police ‘crime scene’ tape into a bodice in her video *Telephone*. Only in our times can she openly call for what I find the crucial feature of today’s monstrosity: a complete appropriation of the monster within. Lady Gaga, the ultimate promoter of the monstrous as an esthetic choice, explicitly calls her fans ‘little monsters’ and invite them to embrace their monstrosity:

When they’re young, all Little Monsters learn that they are scary.
 Ugly, stupid, shunned by Cupid, overweight, and hairy.
 But every Monster needs to find that secret deep inside
 that transfers Dr. Jekyll into sexy Mr. Hyde.
 All my Monsters are beautiful, discostoodiful, squarerootiful, oldcootiful.
 Monsters don’t need implants or a bitchin’ Monster car,
 Monsters only need to love the Monsters that they are.³

In the face of this overwhelming popularity of the monstrous esthetics we must agree that, today, monstrosity is *out* and, what is more, *it sells*.

The last few decades are probably the only time in the history of the representation of monstrosity, where a company, like Eastpak (example 1), can use zombies to promote clothes, or fast trains like Virgin Trans

(example 2). We live in a world of monsters and these monsters sell better than any advertising company, because they play on the consumer's fear, which is the consumer's desire proper. Invaded by monstrous images on this scale, what does it mean to be scared of a monster anyway?



In the light of these changes in the representation and the proliferation of monsters, pathologies, superhuman and other figures traditionally used to mark the edges of humanity and subjectivity, what are the monster studies from my title? Monster studies are a mainly underground academic discipline that takes as its focus exactly the phenomenon of the monstrous in its various historical contingencies. It starts from the assumption that the monster *represents* – it is there to embody, and give expression to, the current cultural fears, dreams and desires. I say an ‘underground discipline’ because, as far as I know, there is no unified ‘monster studies’ field, taught as such at any university, in the way gender studies are thought, for example. The initial spark, or at least one of them, came in 1981, when Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park showed that from the Middle Ages until today, the conceptualization of the monster went through profound changes: from that of a prodigy, to a wonder, and then finally to a naturalized object (Park and Daston 1981, 20–54). In 1998, they reconceptualised this linear evolution of the monster in their book *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, adopting a more heterogeneous approach, and historicizing the order of nature itself in its connection to the concepts of wonder and the pleasures of wondering. They showed that in the Renaissance appreciation of wonders there was a highly class-distinctive element of the European elite culture, a practice that changed in the Enlightenment. They pointed to a “sharp rupture in [their] narrative”, the moment when wonders of

nature became part of popular culture. “When [in the Enlightenment] marvels themselves became vulgar,” Daston and Park conclude, “an epoch had closed” (Daston and Park 2001, 19). A stream of scholars picked up where they left of and lead the research on monstrosity further, but each within their own respective disciplines.⁴ Thus, there is no such thing as a unified field of monster studies yet, but what does exist is a number of scholars working intensely on the topic, using various approaches to discuss monstrosity and applying them to different historical epochs. These approaches vary from existentialism to phenomenology and from Marxism to psychoanalysis to postcolonialism. But whatever their backgrounds, most of the scholars agree that the monster, as a concept, as a sign, is deeply historically contingent, that it embodies the times of its emergence. In the words of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen: “the monstrous body is pure culture” (Cohen 1996, 4). The other point at which most of the approaches converge is that the monster is always the constitutive outside of the concept of humanity; it is always an abject entity populating the grey zones of subjectivity, places that Judith Butler calls “zones of uninhabitability” (Butler 1993, 3). This issue could be debated, but we will leave it for another occasion.



In the respect that ‘the monstrous body is pure culture,’ the monster studies then fall within the category of cultural studies, with a very specific and enticing focus. Following the cultural studies’ insistence on localism and historical contingency, especially during the 90s, the monster studies embody the need to understand contemporary societies through their own monsters, leading to the conclusion that the new proliferation and domestication of monstrosity in the Western cultural sphere is essentially

connected to, and expresses late capitalism and *fin-de-siècle* hyperconsumerism. In his seminal essay *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen declares in the thesis VI that the “fear of the monster is really a kind of desire” (Cohen 1996, 16). We read about a monster, we write about it because the monster carries our own desire in its broken skin, and in the contemporary society to attain a commodity, to have a commodity, to *consume* a commodity is the queen of desires. The monster represents something unfinished, something incomplete, it represents something offered to the consumer, but impossible to obtain – the very definition of commodity. An illustration: in his book “The Philosophy of Zombies” (*Filosofía zombie*), Jorge Fernández Gonzalo, a Spanish philologist and poet, made a very clear and strong case for the parallel between undead masses in zombie movies and the contemporary desire to consume, to appropriate, to digest – a consumption based on instinct, without reflection, just like a zombie (Gonzalo 2011). We can all identify with this notion: in zombie cinema and in monster cinema we find that which is familiar to “anyone who has ever entered a supermarket” (Agamben 1993, 37–38), (to borrow the expression from Giorgio Agamben) – and that is the unattainability of our own desire. It is a desire that never ends, just like the monster we read about, just like the grotesque that keeps coming back to life in the last scene of horror movies.

The monster studies are thus intrinsically connected with consumption studies, which makes us – academics who dedicated their careers to the allure of the monstrous body – the grimmest consumers of them all. If there is no better way to sell a product than to appeal to the subject’s fear, than there is no better way to consume a monster but to write about it.

Notes

¹ Tim Schlattmann, ‘Once Upon a Time...,’ *Dexter*, episode 602, directed by S. J. Clarkson, TV show (2011; USA: John Goldwyn Productions, 2012), DVD

² For Gothic fiction in general, see Bloom 2007 or Hogle 2002. For gothic imagination, see Davenport-Hines 1998.

³ Lyrics of Lady Gaga’s song ‘You Are All My Little Monsters,’ the phrase she repeatedly uses to refer to her fans.

⁴ Some of them are Friedman 2000; Baltrušaitis 1955; Canguilhem 2008; Monestier 2007; Hélène-Huet 1993 and many others. French authors were definitely a vanguard in this area of studies.

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