

Time of Monsters

Institute of Modern Languages, University of Bielsko-Biala
16-17 November 2022

It matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts. Mathematically, visually, and narratively, it matters which figures figure figures, which systems systematize systems. ¹
(Donna Haraway)

In the Western perception of things, which still preserves the Platonic, or rather Parmenidean image of a stable order in which they exist, the potentiality of monstrosity, emerging from fractures in this world – or, to reach even deeper, from the dark matter of the *chōra*, the sombre Nurse of all becoming – appears as absurd, and yet at the same time as ecstatic, epiphanic.

Klaus Nürnberger, an expert in the evolution of ideas, sees the recurring manifestations of the monstrous in different cultures as units of meaning travelling forward in time, and in his seminal seven theses on monster culture, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen makes a complementary claim, succinctly reminding us that monsters are inevitably manifestations of the historical circumstances that spawn them: “The monstrous body is pure culture.”² After all, the very etymology of the word monster (“that which reveals”, “that which warns”) encourages treating the monstrous as a text of culture par excellence. This is why our conference invites scholars from various fields to explore the possibilities of reading the terror of our monstrous times as symptoms of what has been hiding beneath the shiny surfaces of our culture.

The third decade of the twenty-first century is indeed a time of monsters, in which threats that we have been apparently aware of for decades, but able to neutralise in our discourses, are beginning to blow up in our faces. The economic, environmental, military costs of the West’s standard of living, which have been relegated to other parts of the world, are now coming back to haunt the global metropole. For a long time the disparity between the parts of the world that contribute most seriously to the climate catastrophe and those that are most immediately affected by its symptoms has been as striking as it is depressingly predictable. Now we begin to realise that it is likely to become somewhat reversed in the near future. We are experiencing a return of the repressed, an eruption of the Real on a global scale: everything we refused to face, everything we swept under rugs, is now becoming impossible to deny and threatens the coherence of the symbolic frameworks, giving us a sense of mastery over our reality. 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. The future has become radically different, unpredictable, and overwhelmingly threatening, and we are in dire need of reimagining our ways of interacting with the world.

Scholars of the monstrous remind us that it tends to facilitate a rethinking of our ways of being in the world. To quote Cohen again: “A mixed category, the monster resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a ‘system’ allowing polyphony, mixed response [...] The horizon where the monsters dwell might well be imagined as the visible edge of the hermeneutic circle itself: the monstrous offers an

¹ Donna Haraway, *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin*, “Environmental Humanities”, vol. 6, 2015, p. 160.

² Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*, “Monster Theory: Reading Culture”, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 3.

escape from its hermetic path, an invitation to explore new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world.”³ In this sense, monsters are not only a manifestation of a crisis (and as such require a new approach to reality), but actually *enable* new approaches by questioning earlier categories through their very presence. The monstrous challenges our ways of making sense and at the same time opens them up to the possibility of new reconfigurations. Our conference invites you to use this opportunity.

Topics might include but are not limited to the following:

- Genesis of monsters
- Monstrosity and reproduction
- Forms of monstrosity in literature and culture
- Manifestations of monsters across the centuries
- Monster with(in) us
- Monsters as others/ as the abject/ as metaphors for social anxieties
- The concepts of ‘monsters’ or ‘monstrosity’ in contemporary research
- The concepts of unwar, unpeace
- Narratives/counter-narratives
- Liminal spaces
- Postnormal times
- Polycrisis
- Anthropocene, capitalocene

Confirmed keynote speakers:

dr Caterina Nirta, Royal Holloway, University of London

dr Jaroslav Švelch, Assistant professor, Charles University in Prague

We welcome proposals from across theoretical and disciplinary fields that engage the conference topic. Please send an abstract of about 300 words and a short biographical note to the conference organisers at: timeofmonsters22@gmail.com.

The deadline for the submission of abstracts is 15 October 2022. The selection of papers is on an ongoing basis, so you should hear from us within a week from your submission.

The conference fee is 450 PLN (100 euro) for on-site participation (lunch and coffee breaks included) and 350 PLN (70 euro) for online participation. Please state whether you are interested in participating online or on-site.

Organising committee

Maria Korusiewicz
Anita Jarczok
Sławomir Konkol

³ Ibid., p. 7