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Welcome to The Monster Network

Ingvil Hellstrand (University of Stavanger, Norway), Line Henriksen (University of Copenhagen, Denmark), Aino-Kaisa Koistinen (University of Jyväskylä, Finland), Donna McCormack (University of Surrey, UK, and the University of Bergen, Norway), and Sara Orning (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NTNU)

Studies and writings on the monster have a long historical trajectory, but currently we are witnessing an unprecedented resurgence of interest in the figure of the monster. Not only has popular culture given rise to ever-increasing representations of monstrosity, but also the media and politicians are repeatedly evoking the dreaded monster through descriptions of fearful ‘foreigners’ and ‘terrorists’ who supposedly endanger our daily lives. They roam the in-between, making borders and boundaries tremble and shatter; whether these be borders of nation states or bodies, or categories of race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, self and other. Rapid technological and scientific developments make the monster rear its head: bodies are explored and modified by biotechnologies to an extent that challenges our understandings of what is human, what is animal and what is something completely different. Within the areas of communication and tele-technologies, systems and networks are developed to take on an uncanny sense of agency, where their movements and actions cannot be predicted or necessarily traced. The monster lurks in all of these details: a hybrid creature of popular culture and politics, technology and biology, fact and (science) fiction. In this sense, the monster seems to embody a promise of disturbances and change, as Donna Haraway argued in her 1992 text “The Promises of Monsters”.

The renewed interest in the monster has given rise to what is referred to as Monster Studies: a new and increasingly popular interdisciplinary area of research, art, medicine, political science, psychology, computer science, and literature that invites us to think with and through the figure of the monster. This cultural and academic interest in monsters and the monstrous led to the founding of *The Monster Network* – an interdisciplinary and international community aiming to unpack the complexities that haunt our times as an academic, cultural, ethical and political task. The Network connects those with an interest in monsters and the monstrous. The aim of the Network is to spark international collaborations between artists and scholars by organizing conferences, workshops, publications, symposia and public events as well as creating a space for discussions and information on all things monstrous.

Key research questions and methodology

For thinking critically in these monstrous times, the figure of the monster can refer to the representations of the monstrous in fictional narratives, the semiotic-material processes used to render certain bodies as monstrous, or metaphorical companions used to tackle complex theoretical and methodological questions. What does the monster promise? What contradictions, uncertainties,

anxieties, desires and disturbances haunt the shifting landscapes of monsters? How might the monster help unsettle and rethink traditional ontology, epistemology and ethics? In other words: how might the monster help one think and imagine the world differently?

In this sense, the monster is very much connected to the realms of science fiction and fantasy, the genres of imagination and estrangement. However, the monster is not only a creature of fiction, but its tentacles reach to the very real everyday practices that can have crucial consequences on both human and non-human lives. Monsters are about differences, and we want to explore what kinds of questions the monster and the monstrous bring in this contemporary moment. Central to thinking about the monster and Otherness is the issue of increasing migration, border control and use of biotechnologies for reproductive assistance, which make up the structural backdrop for intense debates about personhood, citizenship and national belonging.

What do we do?

The Monster Network is an independent non-commercial research network that aims to serve as a creative and interdisciplinary platform. Since 2014, we have hosted a number of workshops and conferences that engage with these pressing issues, collaborating with several artists such as Tove Kjellmark (Sweden), Liv Bugge (Norway), Trine Mee Sook (Denmark) and Erich Berger (Finland/Denmark). Our work has been generously funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond and the OPSTART-grant (Nordic Culture Fund). In 2016, we organized the international conference *Promises of Monsters*, which gathered over 60 participants from all over the world to discuss the potential of monstering both our thinking and academic and artistic practices. For the last two years, we have put together a Halloween-event with researchers and artists, in which we have addressed questions of monster methodologies and contemporary ethical and political debates about belonging and Otherness.

We are currently preparing a special issue of *Somatechnics* based on the *Promises of Monsters* conference. We are also planning another conference on *Political Monsters*, a writing workshop for both academic and creative writing, and planning different projects involving care robots in fact and fiction, organ transplantation, evolutionary theory, ecocriticism and hauntology, and concepts of assisted nature. We dream of making our own Monster Network Podcast-series. We have our own website, and our social media platforms on Facebook and Twitter which have spawned an interactive international community.

Who are we?

The ghostly tentacles of the universe brought us together on a panel on the figure of the monster at the Somatechnics conference *Missing Links: the Somatechnics of decolonisation* in Linköping in 2013. It became clear that the panelists and a member of the audience shared a desire for more monster work, and so the ghosts were made flesh as we delved into what was to become today's Network. In May 2014, we launched the Monster Network with an event at the Centre for Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Bergen. We continued on to do a panel at the *Voices in Nordic Gender Research* conference in Roskilde, Denmark in 2014. The popularity of the panel emboldened us to go on to bigger things such as the conference *Promises of Monsters* in Stavanger, Norway. As we write, our Halloween event in 2017, *Strange Blood? Nordic Belonging and Otherness*, is underway.

The founding members of The Monster Network are Ingvil Hellstrand (University of Stavanger, Norway), Line Henriksen (University of Copenhagen, Denmark), Aino-Kaisa Koistinen (University of Jyväskylä, Finland), Donna McCormack (University of Surrey, UK, and the

University of Bergen, Norway) and Sara Orning (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NTNU). Together we have published extensively on the monster and the monstrous, the strange and estranged, the normal and abnormal, the human and the non-human.

Open-ended invitation

We therefore reach out our tentacles as a form of an open-ended invitation across and through the disciplines and creative practices. This piece attempts to challenge traditional academic writing, and therefore we have tried to write with collective voices, thus sharing our feminist, decolonial kitchen-table aims of constructive and anti-discriminatory dialogue on and around the monster and the monstrous. We are devoted to communicating with a broader public beyond academia, and all of our events are open to the general public. We are always looking for creative and critical engagements with the figure of the monster and the concept of the monstrous. If you want to add a monster in the form of a poem, a short story, an article, images or something completely different to our blog, then you are more than welcome to contact us or join us on Facebook. We look forward to future collaborations and hopeful interactions.

Key academic publications by the Monster Network

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Koistinen, Aino-Kaisa. "Kultainen vallankumous." *Kosmoskynä*, 2018. <http://www.kosmoskyna.net/novellit/kultainen-vallankumous/>

Koistinen, Aino-Kaisa. "Tullivirkailija." *Supernova. Uusien kirjoittajien antologia*, edited by Mia Myllymäki, Katri Alatalo, Leila Paananen and Shimo Sunttila, Suomen tieteis- ja fantasiakirjoittajat, 2015, pp. 104–123.

Orning, Sara. "Hamskifter." Katalogtekst. *Munchmuseet i bevegelse: Marthe Ramm Fortun, Stein til byrden*, 2016.

References

Haraway, Donna. "The Promises of Monsters. A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others." *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler, Routledge, 1992, 295–337.

Links and contact info

Website (to be launched soon!): <https://themonsternetwork.com/> (in the meantime, see our current website: <https://promisesofmonsters.wordpress.com/>)

Twitter: @_MonsterNetwork

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/535617899880706/>

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