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MONSTERS

Men, Murderers, Mighty Machines

“monstra sunt in genere humano”

(“Monsters are part of the human race”, St. Augustine)

Monsters have haunted our imagination for as long as we can remember. Thanks to the Enlightenment, rationalism, and scientification neither fictional nor “real” monsters send much of a shiver down our spines any longer, whether these are ogres or people with physical deformities. Yet aestheticised forms such as horror, vampire, or splatter films are proof that monsters have never stopped fascinating us. While certain manifestations of this fascination may disappear it will always resurface in new forms. There are many monsters in existence today, even if they are not always known by that name. The concept of the monster, with all its variations on monstrosity, has almost become arbitrary; it is inevitably applied where social exclusion is promoted, where access is denied, where lines are drawn, or in extreme cases of segregation. People create their own identity through constructing this “other”, this thing “no-longer-human”. Monsters are counter-images of humans and human relationships. Humans cannot conceive of themselves without monsters, because these counter-images are like photographic negatives that reveal something significant about our own self-understanding – what it means to be human. The monster thus marks the boundaries of the human, and investigation of the subject can therefore be highly contentious and also compelling. The figure of the monster allows us to understand human rights as a political and cultural achievement of European bourgeois modernism, emerging from the distinction made between the human and the non-human. The concern here is not to attach labels through the explicit use of “monster” as a concept; the key point is to identify and recognise the functions of existing “monsters” which take the form of virtual mechanisms of extreme exclusion and delineation.

This project is concerned firstly with those implied forces of peculiarity or otherness that mark out individuals, groups, institutions, or even hierarchies as monstrous.

Secondly it focuses on how such forces are exploited in order for the relevant social structure to achieve stability or define itself.

For example: how many – and which – artificial organs may be transplanted into a human being before that person is no longer protected by a declaration of human rights? Who should make that kind of decision? Which actions by an individual, a group, an organisation, or a state lead to exclusion from the realm of humanity, either in reality or via the media? And why?

How important is it for the monster to be situated on the far side of the dividing line? Are the processes of exclusion legitimated when it is denied access? Which authority should have the last word in determining “monstrous” characteristics?

In the final analysis the distinction between man and monster is still a matter of perspective and as such cannot be seen in absolute terms. Yet a declaration of universal human rights involves setting up boundaries. The course of these boundaries determines behaviour towards members of the same species, and the formal question remains as to their sphere of validity. In other words, whom do they exclude? Seen from the perspective of human rights, only a non-human – somebody who has been declared a monster – would not fall under their jurisdiction.

On the other hand formal declarations of human rights have attracted hefty criticism, supported by the way that states authorities seem to selectively interpret them. It is not necessary to turn to China to find examples of this blinkered attitude; one could for example question why only nineteen out of the thirty articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are reflected in the German Basic Law. Consequently this project focuses specifically on the situation in our part of the world, in particular on countries that once belonged to Socialist Eastern Europe.

On the one hand this project can be seen as divided into distinct sections: the exhibition itself and an accompanying film programme, a series of talks and dialogues, a forum for young scholars, a film lounge, plus seminars and workshops. On the other hand this kind of conceptual compartmentalization runs counter to the concept's interdisciplinary aims, as it posits distinct sections that are in fact closely interwoven. With that in mind, what follows is an attempt to present the different formats and also highlight some of the points of connection between them. It is neither possible nor desirable for us to provide a finished concept – this is “work in progress”.

The project has three content-based sections: The Monstrous Individual, Beat the Monsters!, and Your Friend the State. Already existing key works by the participating artists will be presented, which will not necessarily be part of the working project itself. The majority of the works will be new or further developments of existing works and thus cannot currently be meaningfully shown in a project application. The research on the project will also continue after the application has been submitted, possibly resulting in additions to the list of artists and consequently changes to the projected fees. The workshops and the *forum junge wissenschaft* (forum of young scholars) are presented outside the framework of the three sections, as they are intended for overarching interdisciplinary analysis. Some of the films are listed within the themed sections, and a complete list is also given at the end of the text.

The people and institutions named in the application have all played a role in conceiving and realising the artistic, theoretical, and participatory elements of the project.

The project will be publicised in the foyer of the Motorenhalle in Dresden to catch the attention of visitors, and the main further PR activity will focus on the Internet in line with the project's aim of attracting international exposure.

Part I: The Monstrous Individual

From Frankenstein to Hannibal Lector – artificial and human monsters

“What a chimera then is man!
What a novelty! What a monster,
What a chaos, a contradiction, a prodigy”
Blaise Pascal (1623 – 1662)

Part I of the *Monsters* project is devoted to the monstrous individual. The spectrum ranges from artificial monsters, human clones, mechanical people or homunculi, people with physical defects, through to people labelled monsters on account of their actions or those seeking to bring monstrous situations to public attention.

Part II: Beat the Monsters!

Neo-Nazis and tribal warriors, terrorists and freedom fighters, refugees and displaced persons, beggars and oligarchs.

The contributions to this part of the concept deal with mechanisms controlling the absolute and existential exclusion of groups and imagined or real opponents. The works focus on explaining the causes behind these developments or posit an antidote to reflect upon. They concern the calculated, almost inevitably violent reactions when the whole rhetorical gamut of exclusion from tribes, ethnic groups, or milieus is evoked. German right-wing extremism serves as a case study, providing the basis for artistic works and workshops and illustrating how a group seen by an overwhelming majority in society as monstrous has itself labelled other people as monsters who can be attacked with impunity. This section explores the themes of how the enemy is viewed, feelings of hate, and the way that groups of people who have voluntarily or involuntarily found themselves on the edge of society discredit others and are themselves discredited.

Part III: Your Friend the State

Monstrous institutions and (state) structures

“The state must be a diaphanous cloak that snugly envelops the body of the people. It must yield to each throb of the arteries, each flexing of the muscle, each thrill of the sinews.” (Georg Büchner, *Danton's Death*)

States, state structures, institutions, and organisations which would be heavily criticised when regarded from a Western, democratic perspective generally see themselves as upholding democratic ideals and human rights. It's just that these rights and ideals are sometimes interpreted rather differently. Yet there has also been serious erosion of various civil rights in the West in recent years. It is often argued that surrendering these freedoms to the state results in a higher degree of security in return. The author and historian Götz Aly looks at the collateral damage that results from this kind of trade-off. Aly sees both the Nazi dictatorship and Communist East Germany as examples of prosperity being traded for a loss of political representation. The idea of a state that wraps itself around its citizens like a cloak combines bold socio-political utopias with political extremes.