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To cite this article: Geneviève Godin (2022) Monstrous things: horror, othering, and the Anthropocene, *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 56:2, 116-126, DOI: [10.1080/00794236.2022.2120709](https://doi.org/10.1080/00794236.2022.2120709)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00794236.2022.2120709>



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Published online: 15 Sep 2022.



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Monstrous things: horror, othering, and the Anthropocene

By GENEVIÈVE GODIN

SUMMARY: This article approaches the masses of discarded things washed ashore and roaming waterways as the new monsters of the Anthropocene. It explores the ways in which monstrosity and archaeology intersect, and how the genre of horror simultaneously emerges from and informs the current epoch. As they embark on their post-abandonment journey, things' immense scale, spread, and refusal to serve as proxies for human narratives result in the impossibility of fully grasping and making sense of them. Combining archaeological approaches and queer theory, this article attempts to get to the heart of the inevitable, complex entanglements between people and monstrous Others.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2018, I encountered what appeared to be two stranded, entangled commercial fishing nets, commonly known as ghost nets (Fig. 1). They had recruited various pieces of plastic, driftwood, marine life, and unidentifiable agglomerates as companions over the course of their journey, coming together as a single entity. Approximately 20 m in length and beached in Ingólfssfjörður, a fjord in the Strandir region of the Icelandic Westfjords, the creature, from a distance, seemed too imposing, too peculiar, too repulsive, to have emerged from the sea. It appeared on the horizon as a mythic being, not as marine litter. A sea monster, it seemed.

The sea monster I stumbled upon was made up of things adrift—purposely thrown away, inadvertently lost, or otherwise abandoned—that, as they outlived their past roles and fell out of human networks of ordering, clung to the present with renewed vitality, failing to meet their end, to remain inert, to disappear. Such things are best described as ‘unruly’—a term borrowed from contemporary archaeologists Bjørnar Olsen and Þóra Pétursdóttir, who define unruly heritage as the ever-accumulating masses of

things, unintentional monuments, and involuntary memories of the current epoch that make the past neither distant nor ever truly gone.¹ Among these peculiar assemblages, I specifically concern myself with the debris found alongside waterways, including the ways in which it presents itself and what it has the potential to evoke.

The notion of monstrosity enters the narrative presented here through the impossibility of fully grasping, categorising, and making sense of such things. Their scale, spread, and fragmentation prevent us from understanding them as a whole, as a complete story to be read. They inevitably become the *Other*. While the idea of things as anthropogenic sea monsters is directly inspired by ghost nets, it is by no means limited to this specific type of materiality and extends to all things that have undergone similar processes of othering. The role of the ghost net is therefore to provide a departure point from which lingering material legacies can be explored in their monstrous forms. This paper focuses on such materials in a broad sense, and attempts to draw conceptual links between horror theory and archaeological works that explore spectrality, hauntings, lingerings, and so forth. Its aim is to propose a lens through which



FIG. 1

Ghost nets stranded in Ingólfssfjörður, Iceland (photograph by the author).

archaeology may begin to come to terms with the ungraspable—a theme which is intimately known to the genre of horror—and establish this impossibility as a category we may work with.

To this end, I touch on the history of horror and hint at the possibilities that may arise from thinking of discarded things as the new monsters of the Anthropocene. Horror is said to be an artistic reflection—whether it is visual, literary, or cinematographic—of contemporary societal anxieties. Gothic horror specifically was born alongside the Anthropocene and is rooted in concerns surrounding technology, the normative ordering of the world, as well as the limits of life and nature. Of particular interest are the themes of excess and ugliness, which are a strong undercurrent in many works of the genre, and seem particularly well suited to archaeological approaches investigating hauntings and attachments. I further explore these themes through the groundbreaking novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, before reconciling the monster with contemporary archaeological theory.² As an analytical tool that directly engages with the unusual, the unwanted, and the unsightly, Jack Halberstam's

approach to queer theory is the lens through which I delve into the realm of failure, monstrosity, and being and living with strange material Others.³

AN AGE OF THINGS

The present moment bears many labels, each highlighting a different facet, including Anthropocene, Carbocene, Capitalocene, and Ctluhucene, to name only a few.⁴ The concept of the Anthropocene specifically attempts to put a name on the human-oriented character of the current era. Grounded in the earth sciences, the term originated as a means of capturing the idea of an Earth bearing humanity's footprint down to its geological core: *anthropo-*, relating to humankind, and *-cene*, denoting an epoch.⁵ The Age of Humans, in which the increasingly unstable ecosystem is a direct result of our environmental impact. Having outgrown its origins, the term now permeates discussions in public and academic spheres.⁶ As it gained in popularity, the Anthropocene also evolved into a catchall category. It has grown to encompass a wide range of activities and consequences such as a questioning of the human-nature divide, exploitative capitalism, climate change, environmental injustices, material excesses, rising sea levels, garbage patches, as well as the articulation of potential futures ranging from the utopian to the horrific, and inexorably torn between the promises of more technology and the romanticisation of a return to nature.⁷

It is difficult to put an exact date on the beginning of the Anthropocene. Rarely are geological epochs narrowed down to a specific moment. What is the marker of our geological footprint? The steam engine? The first nuclear weapon? The birth of the factory? The proposed dates range from 8,000 years ago, which marked the beginning of an increase in greenhouse gas emissions with the rise of agriculture, all the way to the start of the Atomic Age in 1945.⁸ Nevertheless, many seem to agree that the Anthropocene emerged approximately 250 years ago, prompted by the First Industrial Revolution, marking the definite start of an environmental impact that could no longer be minimized, ignored, or attributed to chance.⁹ Overlapping with the Age of Enlightenment, the early days of the Anthropocene also brought about an intense interest in matters of knowledge, nature, and science, in addition to a political and economic societal shift towards capitalism.¹⁰

One of the central constituents of the Anthropocene is an awareness of the geological role humankind is playing through perceiving ourselves as a geological force.¹¹ Its inception, then, may be more social than geological. This conversation also has serious political and ethical implications, as different start dates prompt us to distribute responsibility in various ways. Did early agriculturalists lay the foundations for the Anthropocene? Is political

conflict responsible for our current predicament? Is it the disembodied event of mass industrialisation's fault? Who witnessed this transition, and who contributed to it? At the heart of the Anthropocene is a paradox. It is both caused and perpetuated by surplus and excess yet brings about devastating losses—as highlighted by the fields of discard studies and extinction studies.¹²

The Anthropocene destroys and proliferates, impoverishes and saturates, makes and unmakes the Earth. Studies of it revolve around the destructiveness of our presence in terms of habitat and species loss, resource exploitation, no longer so natural disasters, and coastal erosion, but also engage with the unexpected abundance emerging from these losses. Landfills contaminate soil and water, garbage patches expand, and new species flourish amidst the damage. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Tsing explores the resilience of the sought-after matsutake mushroom, which grows in human-ravaged forests.¹³ A sociological study of abundance in the Anthropocene has shown that bed bugs, hookworms, and various forms of bacterial life are now stronger than ever.¹⁴ Neither bodies of work discuss loss and abundance in isolation but instead delve into the unexpected realities that emerge at the intersection of the two. The new worlds of the Anthropocene that, despite the name of the epoch, do not seem particularly concerned with humans.

If it is the First Industrial Revolution—the triumph of people over nature as part of Enlightenment thinking—that marked the beginning of the Anthropocene, it is rather ironic that it is now a loss of control and the rise of the non-human that either fuel it or mark the beginning of its demise. As strong as our desire to make the Earth belong to us and us alone might have been, it appears we now find ourselves unable to live in a world that is the direct result of this attempt at gaining control.¹⁵ Things, material culture, and waste materials are arguably some of the most conspicuous non-humans in the Anthropocene—as evidenced by legacies that are so large, so excessive, so pervasive, that they can no longer be overlooked as they pile up in sites of discard and roam the seas. While most, though not all, non-human life suffers habitat and population losses, these inanimate yet vital Others appear to prosper and proliferate. They are characteristic of a materially saturated era, the Age of Humans, for which the name *Age of Things* might be more appropriate.

THE HORROR CONNECTION

Horror fiction may find its root in folklore, but its current articulation, what we presently understand to be effective horror, conceivably emerged in the early gothic literary works of the late 18th century.¹⁶ Gothic fiction rose alongside an increase in

technology and the first major wave of industrialisation, dealing with themes such as life and death, machine and nature, as well as desire and fear. The genre is in constant tension between good and evil, and breaks down this polarisation, in part by denying its audience a straightforward happy ending.¹⁷ Most importantly, horror's monsters embody contemporary social anxieties.¹⁸ The monster has been theorised as a creature bearing a message, its name originating from the Latin noun *monstrum*, formed on the root of *monere*, a verb meaning 'to warn.'¹⁹ We see further evidence of this in how the frameworks of horror have shifted through time and space, continuously adapting. Their efficacy resides in their ability to harness contemporary societal worries, and reflect them back onto their audience to elicit affect.²⁰ Thus, gothic horror and the Anthropocene are twins, conceived by the same anxieties and born within the same historical moment.

Much of the features of gothic fiction and the Anthropocene are shared. Excess and abundance are central elements of both contemporary materials and the horror genre. The latter delves into desire and disorder, blurring the lines between the rational and the imaginary, and unfolds in a space of confusion and ambiguity.²¹ Monsters—vampires, ghosts, zombies, werewolves, and a plethora of unnameable creatures—are reminiscent of stranded ghost nets and other waterborne debris. Neither alive nor dead, unrecognizable, misshapen, gazed upon with curiosity and a desire for the thrill of the uncanny, yet repugnant and feared, both dwell at the limits of the knowable and the possible.²² In the absence of concepts that fully grasp such materials, the monster appears as a fair substitute. It has been argued that moving through the Anthropocene requires imaginative speculation, rather than retrospection. Conjuring up radically different worlds emerging from the failures of technology, progress, and socio-political systems is, in essence, an act of science fiction.²³ The present can similarly be processed through fictional worlds, employing the monster as a historically situated methodology and mode of thinking.²⁴

Fiction occupies an interesting position, as it is fashioned by the collective imaginary but also has the potential for shaping it in return.²⁵ Horror tells us something about our world while doing something to it. Fictional content can and often does constitute cultural memory, although not always in a readily accessible, obvious manner. Indeed, works of fiction do not have to present a coherent, unambiguous narrative; their role, rather, is to serve as the concretisation of a set of discussions, questionings, and concerns, rooted in a specific moment and locale.²⁶ Discursively rendering the world through crafting narratives can serve both as a reflection of that world and as a sense-making device. In short, the monster tells us about what is happening, and about how we are processing those events. While, as a concept, it is

a cultural construction, the monster inevitably exceeds its discursive form as it escapes its own conceptualisations and captures more than its cultural presets.²⁷ If excess, ambiguity, and unintelligibility are determining factors in constructing the monstrous, as they are for ghost nets, then the world's masses of abandoned things may very well be the new monsters of the Anthropocene.

MONSTER THEORY

Through their joint origins and concurrent growth, monsters and the Anthropocene were entangled from their inception. However, the argument has been made that there is more to this relationship, that they are not merely siblings, but that it is the monsters themselves that gave birth to modernity. Without the construction of monstrous Others, the rhetoric of the First Industrial Revolution would have had no ground to stand on.²⁸ The rise of biopower, as well as the apparatus of discipline that extractive capitalism and the ordering of a labour force demand, depend on the purposeful articulation of mechanisms of exclusion. Grounded in Michel Foucault's work, this perspective claims that the frameworks ensuring obedience rely on the establishment of normal and divergent behaviours—of the well-adjusted worker and the monstrous Other.²⁹ Without monstrous bodies, there can be no normal subjects. In short, there is no modernity without deviance and no order without chaos.

Having established a connection between horror and the present moment, I wish to further expand on what *makes* monstrosity. Building on the concept of the deviant subject, ugliness provides a good starting point. An ugly future comes as a challenge to the idea of a 'good Anthropocene,' drawing attention to the unavoidable abjection, destruction, and losses that populations are already experiencing and will continue to experience in the near future.³⁰ Ugliness is not a straightforward property or simply an aesthetic quality, nor does it reside in that which is labelled as unsightly. It instead emerges as 'a function leveraged to uphold notions of worth' through discourses of normality—that is, another mechanism for ordering.³¹ The monsters of the Anthropocene are ugly, and this quality is in conversation with their excessiveness. Together, they weave a complex narrative of things that are warped, deviant, unruly, and, most of all, *over-exuberantly alive*.³²

The monster has a legacy of being a mixed entity that can be traced back to the Middle Ages. In its different articulations, it has been a hybrid of human and non-human, sexes and species, half-alive and half-dead, and so on.³³ This is reminiscent of the peculiar assemblages one might find stranded on the shore: creatures taking up residence in tangled nets, algae wrapped around plastic containers, a deflated balloon inside a carcass. By appropriating this

liminal, in-between space, the monster is not a known entity as much as it is something that fails to be anything else.³⁴ In making this claim, I embrace a view of monstrosity that employs the figure of the monster as a 'loose and flexible epistemological category that allows us a space to define that which complicates or seems to resist definition.'³⁵ This is a view that resonates with both Foucault and queer theory by bringing processes of othering, transgressions of category, and the normative ordering of the world to the forefront.

Monstrosity makes limits visible while also undermining them, attempting to fracture the illusion of order through its elusiveness.³⁶ To this, I wish to add an element of wilfulness, and a refusal to be reincorporated into the structures of normativity. The monsters of the Anthropocene do not wish to be categorised, do not ask to be deconstructed into knowable parts, do not need to be redeemed. They exist negatively, standing in opposition to known cultural codes simply by virtue of being and of relentlessly remaining.³⁷ Three principles of monstrosity have been established so far: first, the monster is deeply embedded in the Anthropocene, and we might even suggest it is an integral part of its foundations; second, monstrosity is excessive, ugly, and disruptive; lastly, the monster is unknowable by design, always escaping cultural codes. In the following section, I turn to two different approaches to monster theory: Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seven theses³⁸ and Bruno Latour's concept of care.³⁹

COHEN'S SEVEN THESES

Cohen's foundational 1996 essay is an attempt to read cultures through the monsters they engender. Also heavily inspired by Foucault's work on the construction of normal and deviant subjects, as well as the establishment of regulatory regimes grounded in this distinction, this essay represents a departure from the idea of monstrosity as a natural category.⁴⁰ In an effort to deconstruct monstrosity as something that is done as opposed to something inherent, Cohen lists seven characteristics that jointly constitute what we think of as monsters in the arts, but also how evil is constructed in the media more broadly.⁴¹ Although this paper stands in opposition to Cohen's idea that monsters can be fully deconstructed and discursively rendered, as well as rejects the claim that they are purely symbolic representations of human culture, the seven theses prove useful as descriptive tools for demystifying what it is that makes them monstrous in the first place.

While not all will be discussed, the theses are the following:

- I. The monster's body is a cultural body
- II. The monster always escapes

- III. The monster is the harbinger of category crisis
- IV. The monster dwells at the gates of difference
- V. The monster polices the borders of the possible
- VI. Fear of the monster is really a kind of desire
- VII. The monster stands at the threshold of becoming⁴²

As per Thesis I, Cohen's monster is a projection. It is something other than itself, existing only when looked at.⁴³ While I have already readily conceded that there is something of our anxieties, desires, and concerns in the figure of the monster, I here depart from Cohen by arguing that the monster is not just a projection of those sentiments. We may very well construct monsters in the stories we tell, but this relationship is far from unidirectional. If we accept that monsters are entities in their own right that exceed their discursive renderings, an actor-like agency follows, giving them the ability to evoke certain responses that are not solely the fruits of our psyche but a relational endeavour. Theses II to V further support the points I attempt to make with regards to othering and elusiveness. 'The monster always escapes' is a powerful statement that permeates much of monster theory.⁴⁴ The monster is free and will always free itself—parallels with what we may call queer failure will become evident in subsequent sections. Like things adrift, the monster will find itself elsewhere, transformed and unrecognizable, uncontained and uncontainable. It *wants* to leak, fracture, recombine, slip, and break away.

LATOUR AND CARE

Cohen's Thesis VII makes a statement that is also found in Latour's work on the topic: 'Monsters are our children.'⁴⁵ The child demands care, and the plea is precisely this. 'Love your monsters,' writes Latour. 'We must care for our technologies as we do our children.'⁴⁶ We must do so because we are already inescapably entangled. For Latour, modern technology is a monster, both in its discarded state and in its active use. Latour's critique is located in the idea of modernity as proof of our full decoupling and detachment from nature—an ideal that has proven to be unattainable in the Anthropocene, as these very technologies destabilise the environment we were certain we had wrestled into submission, blurring the nature-culture divide.⁴⁷

The issue is not that we have not cared sufficiently for the Earth, clarifies Latour, but that we did not care for technology and, upon witnessing its destructive force and monstrosity, abandoned it to itself.⁴⁸ In advocating for extending love to the monster, Latour

articulates a moral responsibility. Drawing on the story of Frankenstein, it is stated that it comes as no surprise that we have forgotten Frankenstein was the man—the doctor who created the monster—and not the creature itself. In confusing the two, we ignore the true morale of the tale: 'our sin is not that we created technologies but that we failed to love and care for them.'⁴⁹ Latour's final proposition is that the environmental crisis of the Anthropocene is not solely a crisis of Earth, technology, politics, or people, but a crisis of care as well; a crisis of not showing love and concern for non-human Others.

FRANKENSTEIN'S CREATURE

The Anthropocene may be said to have led to a reconfiguration of what nature is, where it begins and ends, what kind of care should be extended to it, and whether anything can ever be truly natural. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* published in 1818 is the quintessential literary expression of the anxieties of the First Industrial Revolution—in the midst of which it was written—around the limits of nature and technology, humans and non-humans, and life and death. Victor Frankenstein's creature offers a metaphor for processing the blurry categories of what constitutes an orderly life and the monstrous qualities that can emerge from liminal spaces. Unlike horror tales that place death and loss at the forefront, Frankenstein's creature is born out of an obsession with life, not with its cessation. The monstrosity woven through Shelley's work does not necessarily stem from the threat of harm, although it is indeed present throughout and acted upon, but from an excess of life where none should be. Where it is simply not right or proper for life to dwell, and yet, it found a way—like things adrift from which we expect inertia, and that surprise and horrify us with their peculiar life force.

Frankenstein marks a shift in horror literature as one of the first tales to ground itself entirely in reality. The birth of the creature is, of course, an extremely unlikely event, but it does not involve supernatural elements *per se*. The creature fashioned in Doctor Victor Frankenstein's laboratory is pieced together from deceased bodies and brought to life through electrical current. The project was originally born out of Victor's research and concern with life itself, how it proceeds, where it resides, and how it endures. 'With how many things are we upon the brink of becoming acquainted,' asks Victor, 'if cowardice or carelessness did not restrain our inquiries?'⁵⁰ The doctor is asking this: how many things, how many non-humans may contain life, if only we were to let go of our preconceived notion that they must not? If, as Latour⁵¹ suggests, we were to care sufficiently for them? What is of interest for this paper is how Frankenstein's creature challenges the

idea that the categories of natural and human-made can ever be disentangled.

A frequently encountered argument is that the creature is not monstrous because it is unnatural, but because it escapes all known categories and shocks Victor, prompting the doctor to abandon his most prized creation.⁵² In its abandonment, the creature enters a space of failure. It is discarded without ever being useful, left to its own devices, to a life without upward mobility or possibility for normative success. Like anthropogenic debris, the creature will roam the seas and travel the Earth. In one moment it even declares, 'If I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear!'⁵³ If I cannot be absorbed into the proper order of things, I will be unintelligible and inaccessible. I will be monstrous. As the creature shifts from benevolent to murderous, Shelley conveys the rationale of the First Industrial Revolution: to make a better world with technology, to improve it with things. Shelley also foresees the paradox of the Anthropocene: that the abundance of materiality at our service would not be contained or tamed, that it would rise with life, and the impression of mastery over non-human nature would crumble to pieces, constituting an epoch's crisis.⁵⁴ In *Frankenstein*, the repulsive character of the creature is tied to a disordering force.

Ugliness is not inherent to the being, as some might argue it is not inherent to anything, but a dormant feature, its possibility brewing under every surface, reminiscent of things' ability to become unruly and places' potential for ruin.⁵⁵ The term 'ugly' first appears at a very specific point in the story. In its lifeless form, Victor did not describe the creature as repugnant as one would a broken thing, but rather as a prowess of science and knowledge as one would an object in working order. 'Its unearthly ugliness (...) almost too horrible for human eyes' only comes into being as the creature becomes incoherent—that is to say, as it first twitches with life, in a body where life has already left once and has no natural right to flourish again.⁵⁶ Ugliness and excess become enmeshed and indistinguishable in the creature, its body in pieces, containing too many others, leaking at every seam, misbehaving, nonsensical, and illogical. The greatest transgression in *Frankenstein* is a confounding of the order of things.⁵⁷ What is it about the object that we cannot aesthetically process and face, and that must be relegated to the world of monsters, we may ask?⁵⁸ But let us consider the opposite. If the unsightly and the elusive are best read through the discourse of monstrosity, why not apply it to the study of unruly archaeological things?

OTHERING AND MATERIAL ENCOUNTERS

The monstrous saturation of the current epoch, of this Age of Things, is one of its defining features. Things

are in abundance and things are leaking out, evading containment. It should come as no surprise that plastic adrift, for instance, has been described as an 'invasive species' since capitalism in its current articulation relies on overproduction.⁵⁹ Plastic as a species of its own is routinely presented as a threat of unnamed provenance, thus framing it as a wilful creature separate from its human creators. I contend that the Anthropocene in the material realm in the case at hand primarily expresses itself through two elements: the sheer volume of things, and their unruliness. From an archaeological perspective, it has been convincingly argued that the masses of discarded things in the Anthropocene find themselves 'out of hand' and 'out of context,' and are characterised precisely by their refusal to be properly contained, domesticated, and categorised.⁶⁰ The contemporary ordering of space demands cleanliness and order, yet the things themselves and their fragments form hybrids, agglomerates, and all sorts of creative alliances that defy material ordering.

This material disordering is further explored in the work of Tim Edensor in the field of industrial archaeology, through the messy relations between non-humans and humans experienced within the modern archaeological ruin. The ruin is a place of excess where things and spaces release energies, creating new multiplicities.⁶¹ Edensor further maintains that, by existing beyond their use and ownership, such things interrogate the very notions of value, ordering, and non-human passivity. Not fitting into existing categories, discarded and abandoned things become detached from their former meaning and purpose.⁶² They are no longer part of a human-oriented narrative in which their role is to be a useful object for us—one which is expected to behave in a stable, predictable, and consistent manner that works towards that goal, with its form and meaning intact. Their great escape makes things too deeply embedded in their own history to serve as mere proxies for our histories.⁶³ The human can no longer be read through this materiality, as it ceases to act as a stand-in for those who made, owned, and used it.

The unwanted things this paper concerns itself with are strangers. Debris adrift is subsumed under one name but contains multiplicities, unexpected and unknowable. It is the monstrous Other. In the case of waterborne debris, the metaphor of the perpetual stranger operates on another level as well, given that the problem of waste has been described as a problem of things not belonging where they are.⁶⁴ Such materials may wash up far from their point of origin, or stay embedded in the foreshore for centuries. In any case, they become disconnected from their previous lives, discarded in sites other than the ones in which they were used, re-emerging unexpectedly in confusing, unknowable, and at times ugly or shocking ways. That being said, the unrecognizable thing-stranger may present itself as detached from any

obvious narrative, but that does not mean the power of the non-human to evoke certain things has disappeared—the same can be said of monsters that retain the ability to frighten despite their unintelligibility.

While a familiar evocation may no longer be possible, the sensual quality of things can still trigger a wide range of emotions and involuntary memories by launching us into a space of the familiar made strange, through things' refusal to remain legible. Scholarship on attachments and lingerings can be helpful for understanding how evocations may still occur without narratives, in addition to providing insights into how things might return or remain to haunt us. In rejecting anthropocentrism, the emergence of object-oriented approaches has prompted debates around correlationism. The turn to things requires a reconsideration of where knowledge resides—can humans and non-humans only be accessed and known relationally, as they meet? Or can there be a thing-in-itself, individuals-in-themselves, and a third space where they encounter each other? The position put forth in this paper is the latter, locating the potential for evocation in three sites—the individual, the thing, *and* their point of encounter.

AFFECTS AND HAUNTINGS

Anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin argues that the 'emotive energies' of things and places are produced and communicated relationally, through an interaction between people and their environment.⁶⁵ This claim is grounded in a study of the lingering spatial and material melancholic affects of the 1974 war in Cyprus, as they manifest themselves through the Turkish-Cypriots' relationship with spaces appropriated from the Greek-Cypriots and the materials they had to leave behind. As it becomes evident that the melancholy felt by the Turkish-Cypriots is grounded in a particular transposed reality, Navaro-Yashin further argues that things, places, and subjects must be read within the context of their own politics and histories.⁶⁶ Affect, from this widely shared perspective, does not reside in the thing itself, but requires a situated encounter between the human and the non-human for it to be co-created and experienced. Most importantly, it appears to be predominantly rooted in the human subject insofar as it requires its presence for affect to emerge.

An approach to the aftermath of things more in tune with the object-oriented methods adhered to here may be that of Edensor, as mentioned previously, who employs the concept of the ghost and its capacity for haunting to describe ruins as imbued with a peculiar life or afterlife force, rather than empty and inert. Such works tend to disembodify affect and locate it outside of the mind. Ghosts reside in the realm of the uncanny and are capable of

coming into contact with the individual, prompting memories and affect.⁶⁷ They emerge as a disruptive force that affronts our sensibilities as we move through ruins, and with which we can engage, but that does not reside primarily in the psyche.⁶⁸ Edensor's ghosts haunt the discards of modernity and take on a monstrous quality through the impossibility of completely severing our attachments to these unruly locales. Waterborne debris cares very little about its own abandonment, disrupting the order of things with its twofold transgression: it refuses its attributed passivity by sticking to the present, and makes itself unintelligible by taking on unexpected forms. Things such as ghost nets may not be ghosts in the sense of mere shadows of their former selves, and may instead continue to be actors even in their aftermath, but they nonetheless acquire the capacity to haunt, torment, and permeate place—an ability that is at home in the realm of monstrosity.

THE QUEER LINGERING OF THINGS

Having established a link between monster theory and archaeological theory, I finally turn to the concept of failure as it has been articulated in the field of queer theory, specifically in Halberstam's body of work. The idea put forth here is that of a form of failure that does not mark an end. It is something else, something that carries on, akin to what has been labelled hauntings, affects, afterlives, aftermaths, and so on in archaeology. Failing to meet expectations presents itself as an opportunity for disrupting the logics of success. 'Under certain circumstances,' writes Halberstam, 'losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.'⁶⁹ Failure is therefore not the cessation of life, but an escape from the ordering of the world. It is also a mechanism for disrupting seemingly clear boundaries. I contend that a material failure would blur the lines between successful objects and useless things, docile and haunting materials, as well as a normatively ordered world and one replete with unruly debris.

To a failure to be properly categorised we may also add a failure to disappear, to be discarded, and to not return. Disposal and abandonment are processes fraught with insecurities, which inevitably imply a form of care to ensure that all movement is stopped, afterlives are paused, and materials do not re-emerge.⁷⁰ Exploring the sociology of disposal, Kevin Hetherington writes that disposal is in essence about 'managing an ever-present potential absence such that that absence does not itself make an appearance as a visible agent.'⁷¹ This is reminiscent of Edensor's work on hauntings, which suggests that ghosts will roam freely if they are not contained and if their absence is not continuously ensured. As it

returns, waterborne debris emerges as a form of present absence, as an absence that failed to remain one, escaping back into the realm of presence. As it does so, we are able to 'appreciate fully the agency of absence' as a form of queer failure characterised by motion rather than inertia, and which presents itself not as a void but as a habitable negative space in which unruly things can thrive.⁷²

Within the field of environmental humanities, Nicole Seymour further argues that the kind of environmentalism the Anthropocene requires must also be queer, insofar as it ought to operate on a principle of caring for the Other beyond immediate gains, familial relations, and self-interest.⁷³ This Other includes non-humans—flora, fauna, ecosystems, things, and places—to which empathy needs to be extended with no promise of success or reward.⁷⁴ Based on this, I suggest that affects⁷⁵ or hauntings⁷⁶ come from a material failure that does not mark a disappearance, but a new beginning in a queer negative realm that does not revolve around successful categorisation and management. Failed things are ambiguous, elusive, and unruly, and it is from this multifaceted failure—failure to remain useful, to be properly discarded, to stay inert—that the haunting emerges. The responses they actively provoke—as they get in the way, mingle, destabilise, impose, contaminate, leak, exude—are reminiscent of a specific genre in the arts: that of horror, as the refuge of things and beings that are no longer, not quite, and always looming.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The anthropogenic sea monster of Ingólfsfjörður embodies an epoch characterised by excess and loss on a scale that is almost impossible to grasp due to its breadth and fragmentation. An Age of Things, masquerading as the Age of Humans, in which immense quantities of undesired and undesirable things outlast their own disposal, roam waterways, and saturate shores, refusing the fate envisioned for them. These agglomerations of unruly things are here to destabilise our notions of worth, disrupt the ordering of the world, and prove that the non-human will not disappear. They undergo processes of othering and return to us in shocking, unintelligible and useless forms, the only constant being their refusal to remain lifeless. In making their absences present, they reframe failure not as an end, but as an opportunity for new becomings, for new aftermaths as entities that evoke affect and haunt the present.

Parallels can easily be drawn between material othering, the genre of horror, and archaeological research on hauntings and lingerings. Monster theory has proven itself very capable of deconstructing monstrosity and bringing to light the places where it resides, one of which is undoubtedly the material

realm. I hope to have shown that it can manifest itself in things adrift—in ghost nets, certainly, but extending well beyond that as well—through their ability to continue prompting affect and roaming the world despite the end of their lives as useful objects-for-us, in spite of their detachment from any obvious human-centred narrative, and with great contempt for the order of things they have escaped. In embracing hybridity and fragmentation, unruly things simultaneously seek to be made monsters and reject the contemporary ordering of space—as defined in the field of industrial archaeology—which demands that objects remain properly categorised and in their rightful place. Like Frankenstein's creature, they confound ordering and defy categorisation, hence relegating themselves to the realm of monstrosity.

What labelling the discards of the Anthropocene as monsters does, then, is enable us to speak of that which defies definition, yet must nonetheless be lived with in an epoch of inescapable material saturation. The Other presents itself as compulsory, as an entity that will endure, regardless of human intentions. The genre of horror is often viewed as pure culture, while the field of archaeology has a strong material basis. Through an attempt at bridging the gap between the two, I hope to open up a conversation around how fictional discursive renderings of the world can in fact speak volumes about its contemporary material realities, highlight how absences made present are experienced, and explore the types of affective encounters they create. Monstrosity presents itself as a way of grappling with the ambiguous, the unintelligible, and the unknowable—that is to say, a way of living alongside the Other. The figure of the monster therefore gifts us with historically situated ways of thinking through, speaking about, and engaging with the impossible.

GRANT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper is published with financial assistance from The Research Council of Norway.

NOTES

¹ Olsen & Pétursdóttir 2016, 38.

² Shelley 1869/1818.

³ Halberstam 2011.

⁴ González-Ruibal 2018, 12.

⁵ Lorimer 2017, 131.

⁶ Dalby 2016, 36.

⁷ Lorimer 2017, 117-118.

⁸ Lorimer 2017, 120.

⁹ González-Ruibal 2018, 15.

¹⁰ Bryant 2011, 16.

¹¹ Pálsson et al. 2013, 8.

¹² Giraud et al. 2019, 358.

- ¹³ Tsing 2015.
¹⁴ Giraud et al. 2019.
¹⁵ Hamilton et al. 2015, 10.
¹⁶ Grant 2010, 2.
¹⁷ Hubner 2018, 2-3.
¹⁸ Hellstrand et al. 2018, 144.
¹⁹ Stryker 1994, 247.
²⁰ Grant 2010, 1.
²¹ Hubner 2018, 58.
²² Grant 2010, 4.
²³ Lorimer 2017, 128.
²⁴ Hellstrand et al. 2018, 146.
²⁵ Erll 2008, 389.
²⁶ Erll 2008, 396.
²⁷ Nuzzo 2013, 57.
²⁸ Rai 2006, 539.
²⁹ Rai 2006, 540.
³⁰ Dalby 2016, 33-34.
³¹ Rodrigues & Przybylo 2018, 2.
³² Rai 2006, 552.
³³ Malatino 2019, 42; Sharpe 2007, 385.
³⁴ MacCormack 2012, 257.
³⁵ Weinstock 2020, 4.
³⁶ Nuzzo 2013, 56; 61-62.
³⁷ Rai 2006, 553.
³⁸ Cohen 1995.
³⁹ Latour, 2011.
⁴⁰ Weinstock 2020, 26; 28-29.
⁴¹ Weinstock 2020, 25.
⁴² Cohen 1995, 4-20.
⁴³ Cohen 1995, 4.
⁴⁴ Cohen 1995, 4.
⁴⁵ Cohen 1995, 20.
⁴⁶ Latour, 2011.
⁴⁷ Lorimer 2017, 127.
⁴⁸ Latour, 2011.
⁴⁹ Latour, 2011.
⁵⁰ Shelley 1869/1818, 40.
⁵¹ Latour 2011.
⁵² Hammond 2004, 192.
⁵³ Shelley 1869/1818, 115.
⁵⁴ Stryker 1994, 248.
⁵⁵ See, however, González-Ruibal 2019, 178 on 'engineered monstrosity.'
⁵⁶ Shelley 1869/1818, 77; Gigante 2000, 569.
⁵⁷ Malatino 2019, 43.
⁵⁸ Gigante 2000, 568.
⁵⁹ Wichter 2019; Edensor 2005, 61.
⁶⁰ Pétursdóttir 2017, 196.
⁶¹ Edensor 2005, 124.
⁶² Edensor 2005, 123.
⁶³ Pétursdóttir 2017, 199.
⁶⁴ Pétursdóttir 2019, 8; see also Douglas 1996 on belonging.
⁶⁵ Navaro-Yashin 2009, 1;14.
⁶⁶ Navaro-Yashin 2009, 1;9.
⁶⁷ Edensor 2004, 835.
⁶⁸ Edensor 2004, 837.
⁶⁹ Halberstam 2011, 2-3.

- ⁷⁰ Hetherington 2004, 157.
⁷¹ Hetherington 2004, 171.
⁷² Hetherington 2004, 170.
⁷³ Seymour 2013, 12-27.
⁷⁴ Seymour 2013, 185.
⁷⁵ Navaro-Yashin 2009.
⁷⁶ Edensor 2004.

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SUMMARY IN FRENCH, GERMAN, ITALIAN AND SPANISH

FRENCH

TITRE : Monstrosités : Horreur, Autrui, et Anthropocène

RESUME : Cet article traite de la multitude de choses jetées, échouées sur le rivage et errant dans les cours d'eau comme étant les nouveaux monstres de l'Anthropocène. Il explore comment se croisent la monstrosité et l'archéologie, et comment le genre de l'horreur à la fois émerge

de l'époque actuelle et contribue à celle-ci. Alors que les choses jetées entreprennent leur voyage post-abandon, leur immensité et leur étendue, ainsi que leur refus de servir de substituts pour les récits humains, rendent leur pleine compréhension et toute intelligibilité impossibles. Combinant approches archéologiques et théorie queer, cet article tente d'entrer au cœur des enchevêtrements inévitables et complexes entre les gens et les monstres.

GERMAN

TITEL: Monströse Dinge: Horror, “Das Andere” und das Anthropozän

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG : In diesem Artikel werden die Massen von weggeworfenen Dingen, die in Gewässern landen und angespült werden, als die neuen Monster des Anthropozäns bezeichnet. Es wird die Art und Weise aufgezeigt, wie sich Monstrosität und Archäologie überschneiden, und wie das Genre des Horrors gleichzeitig aus der aktuellen Epoche hervorgeht und diese prägt. Während sie sich nach dem Entsorgen auf ihre Reise begeben, führen ihre immense Anzahl, die Verbreitung und die Weigerung, als Stellvertreter für menschliche Erzählungen zu dienen, dazu, dass es unmöglich ist, Dinge im Anthropozän vollständig zu erfassen und zu verstehen. Dieser Artikel kombiniert archäologische Ansätze und Queer-Theorie und versucht, den unvermeidlichen, komplexen Verstrickungen zwischen Menschen und dem monströsen Anderen auf den Grund zu gehen.

ITALIAN

TITOLO: Cose mostruose: l'orrore, l'alterità e l'antropocene

RIASSUNTO: Questo articolo affronta gli ammassi di rifiuti che giungono a riva e che vagano sulle acque in qualità di nuovi mostri dell'antropocene. Vengono analizzati i modi in cui la mostruosità si incrocia con l'archeologia, e come tale tipo di

orrore affiori simultaneamente a denunciare l'epoca in cui viviamo. Nell'intraprendere il loro viaggio dopo l'abbandono, l'enorme quantità di questi oggetti, la loro diffusione, l'impossibilità di supplire alla narrazione umana, sfociano nell'impossibilità di afferrarne il senso, o di dar loro un significato. Nel combinare approccio archeologico e teoria queer, questo articolo cerca di puntare al cuore di una questione inevitabile: il complesso intreccio tra gli individui e la 'mostruosità' dell'alterità.

SPANISH

TÍTULO: Cosas monstruosas: horror, 'otros' y el Antropoceno

RESUMEN: Este artículo versa sobre la multitud de cosas descartadas llegadas a la costa y que vagan por las vías fluviales como los nuevos monstruos del Antropoceno. En él se exploran las formas en las que se cruzan dicha monstruosidad con la arqueología, y cómo el género de terror tanto nace como informa la época actual. La inmensa escala de estas cosas, su expansión y su rechazo a servir como representantes de las narrativas humanas las vuelve incomprensibles y sin sentido. Combinando enfoques arqueológicos y utilizando la teoría queer, este artículo intenta llegar al corazón de los enredos inevitables y complejos existentes entre las personas y los monstruosos 'otros'.

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