



MASTERARBEIT

„Monstrosity as a psychodynamic process“

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Universität Augsburg, Dezember 2018

Monstrosity as a psychodynamic process

Nina Blagojevic is an alumna of the Elite Graduate Program “Ethik der Textkulturen” at Augsburg University. Looking at several Anglo-American literary texts, her master thesis draws on sociological theories of identity construction to profess a psychodynamic and processual understanding of the nature of monstrosity.

Monsters are a way of imagining otherness

As a category of imagination, the idea of ‘monsters’ is deeply imbedded both in the cultural practices and the storytelling traditions of most societies. From the Hydra of ancient Greece to the serial killer Norman Bates, there seems to be a unifying need for human cultures to populate their stories with terrifying and wondrous creatures.

This universal appeal of monsters suggests that they do more than scare and excite us. As an embodiment of otherness, they can also serve as a projection of collective fears, provoke thought, or reflect the borders of what is deemed human. In this line of thought, monsters and monstrosity are customarily regarded as a sort of mirror image that can be used to draw conclusions about individuals, societies, or humanity as a whole, but that are also to some extent distinct from the category of the ‘human’.

Yet, monsters don’t exist on their own, and what makes them monstrous, what constitutes their ‘otherness’, is up for debate. Perceptions of the ‘good’ and the ‘monstrous’ change over time, adapt to societal circumstances and can by their very nature never be ultimately fixed. What behaviors, attitudes or even physical bodies can be incorporated into the realm of the ‘normal’ can vary even from individual to individual. Indeed, the category of a monster is only possible in a world where there are non-monsters with the power to define such categories and to shape discourses (in the Foucaultian sense of the word).

Monstrosity is a dynamic process of identity construction

This point has been raised many times, but it has been looked at predominantly from the perspective of the individuals or societies defining monsters. To remedy this, Nina Blagojevic explores how monstrosity itself can be understood not as a static feature a person or creature simply ‘has’. Rather, monstrosity is best described as a dynamic and relational process that is very much a part of inter-subjective human experience. The question central to this line of thinking is not in what way people, creatures or things are monstrous, but how they become monsters through a relational engagement with and negotiation of the categories of ‘self’ and ‘other’.

Informing this process-oriented outlook on monstrosity are the insights of psychological and sociological theories of the ‘self’ and identity formation. The basic tenants of relational identity theory inform and feed this understanding of monstrosity as an interpersonal and evolving category.

Understanding monstrosity in this way, as a process taking place between the self and the other, not only widens our understanding of the ‘monstrous’ other. It also entails significant ethical consequences. If society is implicated in ‘making’ monsters, it shares a certain responsibility. If a monstrous deed cannot simply be ascribed to a monstrous nature, society has to consider to what degree societal norms or mechanisms of exclusion have played a role in it.

Failing to acknowledge the processual nature of monstrosity, on the other hand, will lead to a hardening of categories and perpetuate ideas about the dangerous 'other'. Prejudices become self-perpetuating and hinder any social movement towards inclusion. Seeing monstrosity as a dynamic, constructed category, in all senses of the word, is therefore an important prerequisite for exposing and combatting the underlying mechanisms behind racism, sexism, and other forms of exclusion.

Elite Graduate Program „Ethics of Text Cultures“:

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