**Visual Rhetorics and the Seductions of the Monstrous:**

**Some precautionary observations**

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Monsters and the monstrous have always evoked the contradictory response of fascination and fear, a sense of ontological, epistemological and ethical uncertainty and confusion that can resolve in outright horror at the human inability to either control a seemingly threatening materiality, or move towards alternative and more hopeful modes of becoming. The 21st century is a fertile time for the monstrous, crossing and reworking material in digital, political, philosophical and bioscientific imaginaries alike. It is little exaggeration to say that the discourse of the monstrous - the anomalously embodied, the strange - leaks and flows from every academic orifice in a delicious parody of the incontinent maternal body, the archetypal monstrous-feminine. The very excessiveness of corporeality that promises to productively transgress normative expectations can be both scholarly and fun, and – under conditions of promise – a kind of Bakhtinian celebration that revalues what has been figured as the excluded other. And yet, doubts creep in. The exuberant Lords of Misrule who take power in Carnival, are after all returned to their servitude once the festivities are over, and I wonder if every recovery of the strange is also a form of cover-up. Is it complicity with – not contestation of – the normative order that evokes a certain discomfort?

What follows, then, is at least precautionary, offering primarily a reflection on the rhetorics and ethics of representation, before I return to other possible ways forward addressing how we might engage and speak *with* the monstrous. My intention is not to spoil the ludic possibilities we might have, but to sketch out a critique that challenges us – without judgement – to better understand our own motivations and inevitable limitations. As Donna Haraway succinctly notes:

Witnessing is a ... limited practice that depends on the constructed and never finished credibility of those who do it, all of whom are mortal, fallible, and fraught with the consequences of unconscious and disavowed desires and fears. (2000: 158)

Difference – whatever form it takes – is always seductive and most often it is mediated primarily through representation in its various forms. My approach here will attend to both historically situated and contemporary accounts of our longing for the monstrous, a performance of desire that encompasses not just the human but all sorts of hybrid forms and morphological differences. As so often, what appears to be marginal is instead revealed as symbolically and ontologically central.

I shall not offer visual illustrations, not in the spirit of exiling them, but in order to avoid falling too quickly into a familiar mode where our responses to otherness are to some extent ready-made and pre-labelled: amazement, curiosity, unease, voyeurism. The point is to place the questioners – you and me – in question, rather than the objects of scrutiny, to ask what is going on in those engagements. It’s not so much the embodied specificity of any particular monster that should concern us as the ethical question of the negotiation of the encounter with the monstrous. If, as Asa Mittman puts it, the monster is ‘not really known through observation, but through its effect, its impact’ (2012: 6), what exactly are we looking for, when we look at the monster?

When Haraway (1992) coined the phrase, *promising monsters*, what did thatreally mean? Is it that we imagine that the monster is there to *offer* us something; to answer to a putative human need? Or does it promise on its own terms in line with its extra-ordinary capacities?But perhaps that is a false distinction, for what marks the monstrous above all else is ambiguity and ambivalence. With regard to that modality, I would suggest that the question of desire, as both pleasure and fantasy, *is* always present, both intentionally and uninvited, and it will weave in and out of this essay. And as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen puts it in his 7 monster theses: ‘Fear of the monster is really a kind of desire’ (1996: 16). My own take, partly inspired by Susan Stewart’s text *On Longing* (1993) which analyses how certain extra-ordinary corporeal forms are narrated to realise a version of order and normativity, speaks to desire in the mode of nostalgia, which Stewart calls ‘the desire for desire’ (23). Nostalgia, she claims, is always ideological, the past it narrates is always absent, figuring the lack that generates longing and desire. We can readily recognise that our persistent fascination with the monstrous speaks to a profound longing that may manifest not just in curiosity but as a form of desire for that from which we are estranged. In critical cultural studies, the complications of Freudian and Lacanian desire, which clearly do provide a platform for understanding the seductiveness of the monstrous, especially in the form of the lost maternal body, are now more often surpassed by the celebration of a reconfigured and wholly positive desire in its Deleuzian sense. I’ll outline that more reparative reading later when I turn to the monstrous on its own terms, but first, I want to focus more fully on how response is filtered through the senses.

For many – perhaps most – people, both historical and contemporary, monstrous embodiment in its many forms arouses a discomfort that is more or less successfully managed, primarily through the privileged medium of sight. Of the other senses, hearing may occasionally figure as a point of anxiety at things that roar unseen or go bump in the night, but for the most part the monstrous other is silenced, while the prospect of touch (Shildrick 2009), commonly elicits a certain destabilising ‘yuk’ factor and is carefully avoided. In contrast, the modes of visualisation and visual rhetorics of the monstrous function to create an interval between self and other that allows for a reassuring self-security. If we understand representation as the making present of what is absent in reality, then it is clear that what is at stake is not the encounter with the ‘lived actuality’ of any independent other, but a mediated version that can be manipulated and controlled at will. What is spectacular in the everyday sense of word – marvellous, amazing, fabulous – is reduced to the spectacle. And as Jonathan Crary notes: ‘the spectacle is ... a set of techniques for the management of bodies’ (1989: 105).

The history of the monstrous is packed with visual imagery that erases the singularity of any actual occurrence of anomalous corporeality with its excessiveness, ambiguities and lack of containment and deals instead in a thoroughgoing objectification, socio-cultural prejudices, and sedimented generalisations. The monster books that circulated in Europe in the Renaissance and early modern period are a case in point, for although the description accompanying each new occurrence typically claims to be based on eye witness accounts, the representation of the monstrous figures is reduced to a relatively small number of endlessly repeated images (Shildrick 2002). Of course we shouldn’t discount the economic considerations in play – print was a relatively new and expensive technology – but the repetitive effect becomes one of familiarity. The fixing of images across decades, even centuries, achieves a kind of order of their own, even as they appear to threaten or signal disorder. The cultural, religious and political beliefs of the authors and consumers of monster books are far more in evidence than the singularity of the monstrous figure and the texts function not just to normalise some forms of embodiment above others, but to reinforce certain practices as desirable or permissible, while others are outlawed. On an individual level, the monster was often associated with sexual transgressions, while on the macro-level, its appearance could signal the corruption – political, moral and sexual – of whole societies (Shildrick 2002).

Representations served, then, an important monitory *and* disciplinary function, yet at the very same time, monsters were also viewed as prodigies in all the ambivalent meaning of that term, at very least as evoking god’s awesome power to vary the natural order. That differential response, with its intimations of ambiguity in the meaning and significance of the monstrous, is in the end what saves them from being simply objects of knowledge. In its many guises, the anomalous body is continually produced and reproduced as spectacle in historical documents, medical exhibits, art, dime museums, freak shows and in a more contemporary vein in popular culture, TV ‘reality’ shows, pornography – and of course academic texts. Before considering the excess of representation, we need to ask what is at stake in visualisation itself.

As early monster books indicate, there is always a certain closure in the static image which transfixes and holds in place that which might otherwise remain unknown. And in our own time, the equivalent to ‘eye-witness’ accounts is demonstrated by technologies that purport to capture the monster on film or photograph or in a petri dish, to fix it in time and thereby make it real, albeit far from tangible. It is of course this desire for domestication of the strange that seeks to erase the monstrous as such. In every case of visualisation, all elements of unruliness, excess and leakiness are carefully confined to the single moment of display, ordered into a recognisable narrative that gives us what Derrida (1999) calls the ‘right of inspection’. It is perhaps related to what Garland-Thomson understands of staring, which she claims, ‘is curiosity when we laud it and voyeurism when we condemn it’ (2009: 174). In the case of monstrous images, the potential of a returned gaze is largely unthought or absent, and, at that level, the right of inspection can indeed be an exercise of power over otherness, a move to erase strangeness and construct otherness within certain sanitised and manageable categories. The monstrous or repulsive are after all as much socio-aesthetic constructions as those of beauty or perfect form. Classification according to such categories sets in train a further set of meanings that have served historically and in contemporary contexts to underpin and justify sexist, racist and colonialist enterprises. Right now we only have to think of the multiple images of refugees crowded into insanitary holding camps to understand the dehumanising effects of categorisation.

The archives of the monstrous are rich in negative imagery which all too often overlaps with the devaluation of disabled bodies. Interestingly the sense of wonder that still haunts the edges of Ambroise Paré’s Renaissance proto-scientific text, *Of Monsters and Marvels* (1982),has by the time of Gould and Pyle’s Victorian classification in *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine* (1897) been reduced to mere classification with a strong whiff of prurience. Where the significance of the links between disability and the monstrous have only recently been explored, there has long been a powerful analysis of the ways in which monstrous discourse and representation has been used in the service of racism. The notorious case of Sara Baartman (not her own name of course), a Khoi Khoi woman, who was widely shown caged as the ‘Hottentot Venus’ in 19thC Europe as a signifier of racial deviance, unbridled sexuality and monstrous corporeality, has been outlined many times (Gilman 1985; Lindfors 1996; Buikema 2009). The fear of and fascination for the otherness of the African woman was managed through a close control and quest for knowledge over Baartman that extended even to her post-mortem examination and display. Her exhibition during her life – as the exemplar of all things primitive against which European spectators could count themselves civilised – was predicated on the widely accepted view of the 18thC French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon that essentialised black people as ‘lecherous, riddled with animal sexuality, and afflicted with physical characteristics that are closer to orang-utans than to humans’ (quoted in Buikema 2009: 77). The words shock us, the more so the images of Baartman still regularly displayed. If Baartman’s body was typically staged as a visual disturbance, it raises the fundamental ethical question of representation: how to refer back to and critique such depictions without reproducing the evident harm.

Susan Stewart (1993) too is clear about the colonialist and racist implications of display which she sees as a moment of closure that establishes and sets out the generic conventions of ‘the typical’ (49). In any spectacle, the body of the other is all surface, with any inferred inner meaning – such as amorality - read off the visible anomalies. Although the supposed purpose of the spectacle may be to bring the subjects under scrutiny ‘to life’, it effects a mapping exercise that fixes the characteristics of the strange in a permanent here-and-now. As Stewart puts it:

(t)he body of the cultural other is ... both naturalized and domesticated in a process that we might consider to be characteristic of colonization in general ... On display, the freak represents the naming of the frontier and the assurance that the wilderness, the outside, is now territory. (110)

Moreover, the monstrous other is not only silenced, but ‘the spectacle assumes that the object is blinded; only the audience sees’ (108). Many historical exhibitions of the human body promoted – as entertainment – some form of interaction between the spectator and exhibit, that characteristically involved passive reactions on the part of the one shown, and in freak shows the convention was that a pitcher would provide encouragement and information to the paying public before and during any viewing from a distance. The speechless and unseeing other is afforded no agency, and as the classical ethnographic diorama of 20th century museums shows, any sense of a living history is erased in favour of a fixed idealisation that speaks to the grasp of knowledge.

Our contemporary representations of the monstrous in the literature, film, and digital culture are indebted not just to the natural history and medical texts of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, but also to the bestiaries compiled by classical and medieval scholars, and the later fashion for cabinets of curiosity which exhibited random exoticised anomalies over which the owner could display control. Fascinating though such images can be, the problem is that just as the use of certain terms, like ‘monster’ itself, is freighted with sexist, racist and ableist connotations which must be constantly challenged and undone, the deployment of visual imagery also requires critique and negotiation. By openly engaging with such representations, we may, at the very least, hope to counter the negativity associated with differential embodiment, *but that is not enough*. Whether the images we research are historical or current, overtly fantastic or ostensibly accurate representations of reality, the twin pull of repulsion and fascination is not just abstract consideration, but is realised in us all. None of us is innocent. Nonetheless, while we may teeter on the brink of a voyeurism that in its lack of (self)-recognition would reduce the focus of our gaze to merely an object of desire for the absent or forbidden, a more reflexive engagement will provoke just those questions that I want to ask of the ambivalent nature of the encounter with the monstrous. Again: what exactly is it that we are looking for?

Too often, the experience of the spectacle is decontextualised: deliberately lacking in a past, uninterested in the spectator’s own site of reception and unaware of who is controlling the representation (Lippard 1992). As Derrida asks in *Right of Inspection:* ‘Who has the right to watch the scene, to “capture” the images, to interpret them, frame them, and edit them? Who has the right to invoke narratives? And to be believed?’ (1999: 8). Do any of us have the right to view putatively monstrous images; to interpret them or invoke their stories? Nevertheless, in exercising our delicate sensitivities through refusal, do we equally give ourselves self-serving alibis against engaging in necessary critique? Gillian Rose, for example, decries the postmodernist mistrust of representation as justifying a mystification of ‘something we *dare not* understand, because we fear it may be all too understandable, all too *continuous* with what we are – human, all too human’ (emphasis added, 1996: 43). But Derrida, note, is not counselling withdrawal. As he says in an interview tellingly called *No One is Innocent*: ‘we must do and think the impossible … If I only did what I can do, I wouldn’t do anything’ (2001: 2). And for him, critical questioning is also a moment of crisis. In short we *should* be undecided, at a loss, disturbed that our moral and cultural certainties are thrown into doubt. The creation of an ethics of encounter should involve a struggle.

In his own reflections on the monstrous *arrivant*, Derrida (1995) gives further weight to the considerations that must inform any ethics of encounter. His deconstruction of the way in which the normative response to the monstrous always entails the grasp of knowledge and a concomitant domestication of the strange is fully convincing, but it does not rest there. The grasp of knowledge does not imply any form of tactile engagement but rather putting into place the safety of a specular interval. Yet whilst the right of inspection *is* a troubling constraint on monstrous alternatives to conventional standards, it is not an absolute limit. *Embodying the Monster* (Shildrick 2002), explores the monstrous not simply as a signifier of otherness, but an altogether more complex figure that calls to mind not so much the other *per se*, but the trace of the other in the self. In a challenge to the oppressive closure of identity – either self or other – Derrida suggests that we should learn, ‘how to let it [*the monster*] speak, … or how to give it back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself’ (1995: 176), but that is far from implying any comfortable assimilation. Contrary, then, to Stewart’s characterisation of the freak display as a ‘horrifying closure’, the ability of monstrous difference to enter into a shared space of identity may gesture towards an opening up of signification. For all that strategies of representation seek to hold the other at bay and to cement and police the boundaries of difference, they fail in their aim. The separation and distinction proper to categorisations of the anomalous other are undermined by the persistence of a troubling familiarity. In P.T. Barnum’s highly popular 19thC *‘What is It?*’ show, for example, the spectacle of the putative man-monkey created not just feelings of racial superiority in the viewing public, but inevitably raised the question of the supposedly ‘missing link’ in human evolution. In making such a connection, the distance, the hiatus, created by the gaze is frustrated by its own object. In visual representation, the emphasis may be on the interval of difference, but fear and anxiety are more provoked by its opposite, the intimation that the monstrous others *are* all too human, close kin of even the most normatively embodied self.

To some extent there is a tendency to think of the unrestrained sexism, racism or disablism of the past as the monstrous other of our own more sophisticated apprehension of otherness, but I would suggest otherwise. In the early 21st century the capacity of biotechnologies to radically vary and make strange the body has not made morphological difference any more acceptable. Indeed, on the contrary, the processes of normalisation correlative to the stable bounded subject are potentially even more powerful, and thus call for greater resistance. Perhaps the dominant role of future techno-science will be to impose conformity: as the ability to read and intervene in organic structures becomes increasingly commonplace, it may be that the very alterity and strangeness of the anomalous other will either be endlessly recuperated within the known, or eliminated entirely. As Derrida warns: ‘from the moment they *[the monstrous others]* enter into culture, the movement of acculturation, precisely of domestication, of normalisation has already begun’ (1995: 386). The policing of boundaries and right of inspection, that effects both real and symbolic violence, continues unabated. But that seeming impasse is not where Derrida leaves it, for the defining modality of the monstrous is not containment, but excess. And as Cohen reminds us ‘the monster always escapes’ (1996). You can never be sure of monsters.

The attribution of excess to the monstrous can be traced back to Aristotle and has always marked the failure of monstrous corporeality to stay in place, to respect the boundaries that categorisation would impose. The excessive and anomalous body is a dangerous body that resists systems of logic and the regimes of binary identification. It is with this unpredictable power to disturb and unsettle in mind – this irreducible indeterminacy that resists final intelligibility – that the monstrous provides us with a powerful incentive to rethink the ethics of visual representation. For Derrida, it concerns not the manifestation of what is already seen, but the sense of what is yet to come – the *à-venir –* whose coming, not yet and maybe never realised, cannot be controlled*.* It is the very undecidability of the monstrous that may signal a way forward. As he asserts:

A future that would not be monstrous would not be a future; it would be already a predictable, calculable and programmable tomorrow. All experience open to the future is prepared or prepares itself to welcome the monstrous *arrivant*. (1995: 307)

And it is not just that the *arrivant* is undecidable in itself; although the encounter is always in one sense awaited, it is also unexpected, a necessary surprise, in Derrida’s terms, if the welcome is to have ethical valency. Rather than the encounter mobilising a recuperation of alterity, the violent scene - both actually and symbolically – of conventional representation, it is a confrontation with what is both a ‘constitutive outside’ and an impossible, irreducible excess. At the same time, the refusal of linear temporality in the phrase *à-venir* is no mere word-play, but a marker that what is yet to come is paradoxically already here. If the other is both excessive to and constitutive of the self, then it cannot be assigned to either a fixed time or place. In consequence, my ethical responsibility cannot be determined, nor deferred; it encompasses both my own becoming and coming of the other who has been there from the first (Shildrick 2002).

Such a reading goes much further than simply acknowledging the familiar uneasiness and the undoubted voyeurism that images of anomalous bodies potentially provoke, and engages instead with the Derridean exhortation to preserve the strangeness, uncertainty and risk of the unreclaimed monstrous other. If the other in its non-conformity eludes conventional designation and remains beyond the limits of intelligibility, then no form of representation will be adequate. Yet because we cannot escape the necessity of representation, the *limits* on the possibilities of what is materialised must remain open to ethical scrutiny. While difference remains locked into binary structures, representation inevitably refers back to a clean and proper standard that is only satisfied by forms of being that display conventional morphology, and that are unquestionably human. Ethical responsibility lies, then, neither in re-cognition as an appropriative move, as though the other could be encompassed by the categorical limits that conventionally define my own being in the world, nor yet in an insistence on absolute difference, for that vacates entirely the very possibility of an ethical relation. The critique of representation may yet provide a hopeful indication that there are other ways of being that will continue to exceed the structures of normativity. Let us reimagine visual representation as at very least ambiguous: on the one hand as pertaining to the need for closure and order; on the other as an invitation to a sensuous opening on to alterity. The excess of the monstrous surely gives rise to a gap in which the event of visualisation is a preamble to the imaginative disclosure of other worlds. If looking is a form of desire, it suggests - in psychoanalytic terms - something absent from the image, some space that evokes an *a-venir*, a fantasy of the beyond. It speaks to the notion of an unsatisfied desire that can shatter normative structures and bring into being transgressive possibilities.

The becoming of the monstrous other is highly problematic, at very least unpredictable, but in holding open undecidability as a virtue, I see Deleuze as a possible guide. My final section, then, seeks to briefly engage with a Deleuzian take both on becoming-monster as a form of becoming-minoritarian and on the radical implications of concorporeality in the mode of assemblage. One way of unsettling mainstream paradigms must surely reside in a validation of the anomalous as encompassing alternative ontologies and ethics – from the satire of Jonathan Swift through Haraway’s declaration, ‘I’d rather be a cyborg than a goddess’ (1991: 181); Braidotti’s prescient linking of Deleuze and the monstrous (Braidotti 1994, 2000); and my own exposure of the dangerous discourses of disability and sexuality (Shildrick 2009). In contesting socio-political conventions, the would-be subversive subject, enters into what MacCormack (2004) names as a perverse practice of resistance that seeks to reimagine meanings and values. My question is whether the desire for the monstrous could count as just such a perverse practice. MacCormack herself is fully cognizant of the problems as well as the potentials of becoming-monster insofar as it might in the end reiterate existing ontological patterns. It would be, she says, ‘unethical to use perversion tactically without acknowledging issues of power, control and oppression’ (2004: np). The issue is that the multiple articles in literature, film and art devoted to the monstrous other often appeal to normative subjects who wish to escape the strictures of their own lives by identifying, partially at least, with what appears to be transgressive.[[1]](#endnote-1) But desire and fantasy here are the unproblematised attributes of the specular consumer, mechanisms of the self-constructing subject that are at best tangential to the unrealised monstrous other itself. Is representation returned to its operation, not as a mode of revelation, but as yet another cover up?

The point of perversion for Deleuze, however – and it mirrors Haraway’s rejection of transgression for its own sake (1994) – is not to romanticise marginality as an end in itself, but to position perversion as a modality that brings into question and disorders normative structures. It asks us to consider different ontologies. Rather than focusing on how the normatively embodied may queer themselves, it shows how the other can productively exceed that self-reflective process. In place of an external surface that differentially mirrors the viewing subject, the question is: can unexpected facets of the other break through to radically contest the nature of the symbolic order? Can we see the seductiveness of the monstrous as an invitation to other worlds? As such, it is worth risking the seductive mixture of disgust and desire that the monstrous can provoke in order to open up new possibilities. MacCormack gives further justification for continuing with that approach:

Perversion is an ethical tactic towards transformation as much as it is a subversive one, because it refutes the desirability of being accepted within dominant discourse, without refuting its own history or forgetting the accountability of the dominant. (np)

The idea of refuting dominant values whilst honouring one’s own history is well exemplified I think by many accounts of freak show performers who refused any label of victimisation (Adams 2001; Chemers 2008). And it is a powerful theme in a 1932 film featuring the Hilton twins: Todd Browning’s notorious movie *Freaks*, the perversity of which – in MacCormack’s sense – was such that it was banned for many decades. Times change, and it is now freely available in its entirety online.

So how does this relate to the Deleuzian sense of becoming? I see becoming as performative in the fluid sense outlined by Butler (1993). It is never the uncovering of an as-yet obscured core, a moment of truth as exhibition purports to be, but a dynamic process that neither imitates nor identifies with any category or form of organisation (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 262). It is fundamentally non-representational, figuring instead lines of flight and the production of desire. Becoming deterritorialises and releases us from the hierarchical binaries of real or fantastic, human or animal, normal or abnormal, dealing instead in multiplicities that cannot be pinned down. And if becoming *is* the process of desire, as Deleuze and Guattari claim (2004: 301), it is not in the psychoanalytic form of lack, but as a positivity, excessive to the embodied self and unfixed. It is desire in the ontological, not libidinal, mode. As Felix Guattari explains:

desire is everything that exists *before* the opposition between subject and object, *before* representation and production. It’s everything whereby the world and affects constitute us outside ourselves, in spite of ourselves. It’s everything that overflows from us. (emphasis added, Guattari 1996: 46)

The process of becoming-monster is of course open equally to those whose corporeality is counted as normative and those already labelled as monstrous; for both it is an opportunity to escape the dominant reality of exclusionary binary identities. Rather than entering into becoming as either one or the other, the flow of desire produces something new that makes it much more than yet another strategy of the conventionally embodied subject. In place of the separation of subject and object, seer and seen, becoming generates material linkages that cannot be traced to either origin or end. These are the multiple, eruptive and transformative connections that give rise to what Deleuze and Guattari call assemblages. Becoming-monster, then, pushes us away from self-definition, not to the emergence of a new individual but to forms of concorporeality in which self and others are no longer distinct. In a Deleuzian scenario, the differential ‘being’ of any subject is always in a process of unravelling to enter into new alliances that are not marked by any essential form or teleology, but by energy, speed and fluidity. Rather than providing a stable centre, a reference point for the grasp of knowledge or agency, the body is a conduit for the intensity of apersonal potentials and desire. It is the very antithesis of any form of fixed representation, either visual or textual – and perhaps we should seek out the monstrous precisely where representation and intelligibility break down.

Deleuze himself was deeply engaged with cinegraphic techniques, which he saw as restoring the fullness of external images, and as countering the idea that perception is equal to the image (1995: 43). And we might assume that the movement-image of film is precisely what allows for the unfolding of the dynamic force of life as opposed to the stasis of photographic or putatively documentary images which seem to strip away any virtual or durational context. Certainly Deleuze would concur that conventional representations fail to enable us to think the unthinkable – what has not yet been thought, the *avenir* in Derrida’s terms – or to exceed what is already recognisable. And he understands photographs, in particular, as merely illustrative representations of reality that iterate images to the point of stagnation and perceptual blockage (Kramp 2012). Nonetheless, in his work on the painter Francis Bacon, he asserts that ‘figurative givens are much more complex than they appear to be at first’ (Deleuze 2003: 90); and elsewhere: ‘what counts in the image is not its meager content, but the energy – *mad and ready to explode* – that it has harnessed’ (Deleuze 1998: 160). Perhaps then we could rethink all visual representations as not just vulnerable to external creative interventions and revisions, but open to inherent forces and sensations that, for Deleuze characterise the irrepressible vitality of life. Certainly the monstrous is always excessive and in any case, in the unlimited mode of an assemblage, no single unit has meaning other than through its irreducible connections with other affects and flows of energy. The continuous process of becoming other – becoming monster – bursts through boundaries and limits, and by reconfiguring agency as heterogenous, dislocates a symbolic order that cannot encompass multiple difference.

In shifting the terrain, the Deleuzian approach clearly offers reasons to be hopeful and confident that our reflections on monstrous corporeality have a critical perspective and substance, and are not simply the occasion of indulging our own desire to capture difference. Against the goal of embracing the monstrous in the hope that it will be erased, the ethical task is to stay with the difference, to let it speak, to let it overflow us. It requires us to move beyond the *interval* of visual representation as the dominant medium through which to think the monstrous and to be welcoming instead of the engulfing disturbances of monstrous affects in the normative order.

But for all that, I want, in conclusion, to be clear that the unavoidable visual rhetoric of images of the monstrous should cause some discomfort, some anxiety that our reflections – even in words alone – will be complicit with the very standards that we wish to unravel. It is a delicate undertaking to engage with both celebration and critique, and there is always the risk of failure. But even as I understand the issue of how we represent others to be of ethical concern, I’d also stress Derrida’s insight that there is no possible moment in which an ethical demand can be fully satisfied. It remains, as always, an excessive demand, an horizon of aspiration, and a necessary corrective to the desire to celebrate the transgressive without precaution. The seductions of the monstrous are rich with both problems and possibilities. Let’s keep both in mind and acknowledge the risks whenever we take the gamble of representation. And if we understand visual rhetorics, not as points of arrival but as provocations to further travel, then can we really hope to unfold the promises of monsters.

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1. 1. Examples could include widely popular films like *Avatar* (2009) which lends itself to multiple interpretations; comic series like *Hellboy;* and novels like *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1964). Whatever the intentions of the author or performer, very few such spectacles confront readers/audiences with their own voyeurism. Mat Fraser’s original 2001 performance of ‘Seal Boy: Freak’ – reproduced in the North American television show *American Horror Story: Freak Show* (2014) – is a notable exception. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)