

2026: Vol 7, Nr 2
doi: 10.24834/jotl.7.2.2039

INTO THE UNKNOWN: TOWARDS A MONSTER PEDAGOGY FOR SUPERVISION

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Abstract

In this article, I explore the dynamics of the supervision process in academia through the figure of the monster. Drawing on Monster Studies, an emerging interdisciplinary field that applies the monster as a means to think critically and creatively about the ethics and politics of difference, I approach what I see as a dilemma in the teaching and supervision situation: both wanting the student to succeed in academia, by being recognizably ‘academic’ enough, while also wanting to make space for the student’s difference and otherness. Academia has some strict rules and categories for what can be accepted and judged as ‘proper’ research, which means that all teaching and supervision becomes a ‘domestication process’, where the otherness of the student is polished so they may fit in. How can the monstrousness of the student be nurtured by the supervisor while they also ensure the student passes their exams? I suggest that a monster pedagogy can be one way to approach – but ultimately never solve – this tension.

Keywords: Monster Studies, Monster theory, Monster pedagogy, supervision.

Sammanfattning

I den här artikeln utforskar jag dynamiken i den akademiska handledningsprocessen genom monster-figuren. Med utgångspunkt i Monsterstudier, ett framväxande tvärvetenskapligt område som använder monstret som ett sätt att tänka kritiskt och kreativt kring olikhet, närmar jag mig vad jag ser som ett dilemma i undervisnings- och handledningssituationen: både att vilja att studenten ska lyckas inom den akademiska världen genom att vara tillräckligt tydligt "akademisk", samtidigt som man vill skapa utrymme för studenternas olikhet och annorlunda. Den akademiska världen har strikta regler och kategorier för vad som kan accepteras och bedömas som "riktig" forskning, vilket innebär att all undervisning och handledning

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blir en "domesticeringsprocess", där studentens "märkligheter" poleras, så att studenten kan passa in. Hur kan studentens monstrositet vårdas av handledaren, samtidigt som handledaren också säkerställer att studenten klarar sina prov? Jag föreslår att en monsterpedagogik kan vara ett sätt att närma sig – men i slutändan aldrig lösa – denna spänning.

Nyckelord: Monsterstudier, Monsterteori, Monsterpedagogik, handledning.

Introduction: Wonder and Amazement

In the essay 'The Importance of Stupidity in Scientific Research', Martin A. Schwartz states that "What makes it difficult is that research is immersion in the unknown" (Schwartz, 2008, p. 1771). He argues for the importance of 'stupidity', in the sense of becoming as comfortable as possible with uncertainty and not-knowing in the research process and suggests that it is the responsibility of universities to teach their students this art of staying with stupidity. Due to the ableist history of the term 'stupid' (Crofton, 2017; Resnick, 2025), I am hesitant to apply the same terminology as Schartz. I do, however, agree with the sentiment behind it: that research is about entering the unknown, about figuring out all the ways one does not know the world (and oneself) and learning to stay with the discomfort this might bring. Further still, looking at the etymology of 'stupid', I am interested in its roots in being 'amazed' (Online Etymology Dictionary: stupid), which in turn is related to being overwhelmed with wonder (Online Etymology Dictionary: amaze), with *monstrum*, that is, a "divine omen or wonder" (Online Etymology Dictionary: demonstrable).

Instead of 'stupidity', I therefore turn to another figure that is equally associated with something unpleasant, with the unknown and, importantly, with wonder: the monster. As such, this article builds on and contributes to what I have elsewhere referred to as a 'monster pedagogy' (Henriksen et al., 2017), that is, a way to understand the teaching and learning situation as one defined by the unknown and uncontrollable, but therefore also by promises of wonder and transformation. I have primarily worked with monster pedagogy in the context of classroom (online and offline) teaching, but in this article, I explore the dynamics of the supervision process in academia through the figure of the monster.

Monsters in the University

In the introduction to *Monsters and the Monstrous*, one of the editors, Asa Mittman, describes a situation where an older, more settled colleague gave him the advice that "you got to drop all this monster stuff and start doing *real* scholarship" (Mittman, 2013, 2. Emphasis in original). Mittman uses this episode to show how the subject of monsters is typically understood as a little childish and non-consequential; something not dealing with the 'real' world, and also something not belonging to the world of academia. This – that monsters do not belong within academia – is, however, not quite true, as monsters have a long and strained relationship with western knowledge production, perhaps especially within the field of the natural sciences and medicine. As an example, the field of embryology is related to teratology, the historical medical 'science of monsters'. Feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti explains how teratology was developed as an interest in and attempt to explain and undo what she refers to as the 'monstrous birth', that is, the birth of 'abnormal' bodies (Braidotti, 1999). In this way, academia

definitely had – and still has – an interest in the monster, but this interest serves the purpose of studying, knowing and thereby eradicating the monster through science.

The monster, however, pushes back against the categorizations and processes of science. Monster theorist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests that the monster stands for a ‘category crisis’, as its body brings together categories that within the western history of ideas are not supposed to be brought together (Cohen, 1996, p. 6). Within popular culture and art, the monster’s monstrosity often stems from its hybridity, as it can be both living and dead (e.g. the vampire), human and animal (the werewolf), biology and technology (the cyborg), etc. As such, monsters challenge given frameworks used to make sense of the world, which can be anxiety-inducing, but also, as feminist theorist Donna Haraway writes, promising (2004). The monster, she suggests, challenges the structures and categories used to understand the world, and show how things could be different. This makes the figure of the monster of particular interest to scholars working with the experiences of marginalized people, people who are othered and considered ‘abnormal’, since the monster can make visible these mechanisms of othering and what consequences they have. As such, scholars within feminist theory, queer theory, critical disability studies, decolonial theory and similar have turned to the figure of the monster in order to conceptualize and theorize experiences of otherness and difference (Davies, 2025; de Bruin-Molé, 2019; Halberstam, 1995; Shildrick, 2002).

Within this growing field of Monster Studies or ‘monster theory’, the unruliness of the monster is therefore not a threat but a possibility and a promise of change (Haraway, 2004; Braidotti, 2002; Shildrick, 2002). This – the monster as a promise of change and norm critique - is a point that has also been taken up by researchers within pedagogy.

To Adam Golub and Heather Richardson Hayton, editors of the anthology *Monsters in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching What Scares Us* (2017), monsters “have always been educational” as they “performed sociological functions, embodying a society’s deepest fears, signifying difference, and defining the Other, and reinforcing cultural boundaries. Monsters ‘produce wonder and demand explication,’ writes Lisa Verner. They both frighten and instruct” (Golub & Hayton, 2017, p. 8). With the development of Monster Studies, the teachings of the monsters are, however, reimagined and rethought, and the wonder and mystery they raise are less an invitation to the academic to explicate at all cost. Instead, it invites to a critical engagement with the systems that produce ‘norms’ vs the ‘abnormal’, and the consequences for those who fall into the latter category. In the case of teratology, the monstrous body is a body that can be killed with impunity, dissected and put on display, all in the name of scientific explanation. This, Braidotti argues, makes the monstrous body an inherently vulnerable one (Braidotti, 1999), which is not something that is typically associated with the popular imaginary of the monster, but which nonetheless haunts many branches of monster theory.

“Pedagogy is the practice of daily failure,” Erika Kvistad, Sara Orning and I claim in the chapter ‘Monster Pedagogy: A failing approach to teaching and learning in the university’ (Henriksen et al., 2017, p. 29). Our argument is in many ways similar to Schwartz’s, except with a larger focus on the teaching situation. By ‘failing’, we refer to how the teaching and learning situation is ultimately unpredictable, risky and out of one’s control, despite the increasing demands for structure and (self)reporting. One of the reasons we took an interest in the monster as a pedagogical figure is not only because the monster – as Schwartz’ ‘stupidity’ – evokes a sense of the unknown and its dangers (of failure), but also exactly because it embodies experiences of vulnerability. “Vulnerability [is] an

existential state that may belong to any one of us, but which is characterised nonetheless as a negative attribute, a failure of selfprotection, that opens the self to the potential of harm,” writes feminist philosopher Margrit Shildrick. She continues: “As such it is, like the notion of the monstrous, largely projected on to the other and held at bay lest it undermine the security of closure and self-sufficiency. The link that I want to make is that we are always and everywhere vulnerable precisely because the monstrous is not only an exteriority” (2002, p. 1). I suggest that this – the connection with the unknown, otherness, vulnerability and the university – makes the monster an interesting and potentially subversive companion when it comes to rethinking university pedagogy, both in a class setting and in the supervision process.

Monsters in the Supervision Process

Before moving on to how I approach the supervision process through a monster lens, let me first say that I speak from a very specific academic position: I teach creative writing and have a background in gender studies and Cultural Studies. As such, I teach and do research within a fairly sprawling array of interdisciplinary fields, most of which – not least gender studies – value norm critical thinking and creativity in one’s engagement with research and research communication. The monster pedagogy approach is, of course, not a universal strategy that will work across – or even within – disciplines. Instead, it is one way to reimagine specific pedagogical relations that may or may not be helpful to the individual teacher, student or/and supervisor.

As a supervisor, I see my role as two-pronged: 1) I am a facilitator of the student’s learning, meaning that I am not an encyclopaedia – I am, after all, not the expert on the student’s subject, the student is – and as such, I am here to support the student as they develop confidence in their own gut feelings and their own creative and critical thinking. Here I agree with education scholar Eva Brodin (2016) that critique and creativity are not at odds, and that criticality is not necessarily ‘destruction’, so to say, but a creative practice of thinking and imagining how things could be different. At the same time, my other task is 2) to make sure, as much as I can, that the student will be able to finish their assignment, whether this be on BA or MA level. At first glance, the two parts – facilitating the student’s independent learning and making sure they can pass their exam – do not seem at odds. I do, however, suggest that there is a tension between the two, as the first part is about nurturing the specificity of the student and how they see the world, and the second part to a large extent is a process of ‘domestication’, making the student ‘recognizable’ and therefore ‘evaluable’ within an academic setting. This is where monster theory and the role of the monster in academia helps me approach this tension, not in an attempt to necessarily do away with it (I’m not sure this can be done), but to acknowledge that it is there and that the domestication process I am embarking on together with the student is far from neutral and innocent.

I understand the figure of the monster as a figure of difference, otherness and vulnerability; it is a body that enters academia to be studied and understood in order to be avoided in the future. This is the vulnerability of the monstrous body; it can be violated with impunity since its monsterization means it has no rights to protection or ethical consideration (Shildrick, 2002).

I am not making a one-to-one comparison between medieval two-headed calves, that were shipped off to a faculty somewhere for dissection, and present-day students. I am, however, suggesting that western academia functions according to specific rules and regulations defining what is ‘proper’ and ‘objective’ research, and that anyone who wants to move through the gates of academic research training, of

academic publishing, of academic teaching, etc., need to be ‘recognizable’ as properly academic and objective within these measurements. When I teach academic writing, for example, one question the students keep raising is: “How do I stay true to myself and my own voice while at the same time writing in a way that ensures my assignment passes or/and I can get published in an academic journal?”

This is something Brodin brings up as well, calling the need for acceptance and recognition part of a self-critical instinct of self-preservation, which can stand in the way of exploration and experimentation (2016, p. 187). Feminist and decolonial scholars have also criticized norms of academic writing, arguing that they are not neutral or ‘natural’, whatever that would mean, but designed according to very specific understandings of what a ‘proper’, ‘objective’ scholar looks like (white, able-bodied, middleclass, male) and write like (distanced, impersonal, what Haraway calls the God Trick: claiming to see everything from nowhere [Haraway, 1991]).

As a supervisor, I am aware of how my students will have to enter into this performativity of academia, but also how this performativity – as queer theorist Judith Butler argues (Butler, 1993), albeit not in a pedagogical context – brings with it its own seed of potential change and subversion. For if something needs to be constantly repeated and enforced, such as academic conventions, they show how things are not ‘naturally’ occurring, but need to be (violently) reinforced. Therein lies the risk and promises of monsters: yes, the monster can be shipped off to academia, dissected, put in formaldehyde and ‘known’, thereby stripping it of its monstrous unruliness, but this merely defers the borders of the monstrous; as with Schwartz’ ‘stupidity’, one can never know everything, and since one can never know everything, the monster as a figure of otherness and difference remains, though elsewhere. Cohen writes that “[t]he monster always escapes” (Cohen, 1996, p. 4), and this, the inability to fully domesticate the monster, can be seen as that which makes it threatening. I suggest, however, that this is also what makes it a promise of transformation (of academia).

As a supervisor, I see it as my responsibility to help the student sneak as many of their unruly, non-dissected monsters through the gates of academia as they can, while still ensuring they ‘pass’ as academics. I do not have a specific way of doing so, since the supervision process is relational and depends on the student’s needs and background. However, a few things I try to do are 1) to encourage the student to try out a subject they are excited about, even – or especially – if they worry that it is ‘unacademic’ or not ‘serious’ enough (“you got to drop all this monster stuff and start doing *real* scholarship” [Mittman, 2013, 2. Emphasis in original]), and 2) create a plan with the student in order to make the subject ‘pass’ as ‘properly academic’.

An example, using the method of ‘fabrication’ (Markham, 2011), where I draw on my collected experiences of supervision and construct a fabricated student, could be: the student – ‘Alex’ – is an MA student with an academic background in Contemporary Literature. At our first meeting, we discussed the supervision and what Alex will need from me going forward. We discuss the project proposal they sent to me in advance of the meeting – they want to do an analysis of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Orbital* by Samantha Harvey using discourse analysis and possibly some queer theory. As we talk, it becomes increasingly clear, however, that their heart is not in the project and that they have barely finished reading the novel, which, mind you, is quite short. When asked why they chose this topic, they reply that they love science fiction and that they watch a lot of Star Trek and read and write a lot of Star Trek fan-fiction, but that none of this felt particularly academic, so they chose *Orbital* as a compromise. We talk a bit about what a project about and with Star Trek fan-fiction would look like, what they enjoy

about it, what it brings to their understanding of the genre, and we discuss the different options available to Alex when it comes to applying fanfiction *writing* instead of only fan fiction *reading* as a method.

This is where the ‘passing as academic’/smuggling in the monsters begin, as we start applying the academic ‘lingo’ necessary to be understood and evaluated, such as: what is the research questions(s)? what is the theory, what is the method? How would you structure the thesis? What field would you be writing from and what fields are you in dialogue with? If you write your own fan fiction as part of the thesis, what does it bring to the research? Have other researchers done something similar? Etc. Primarily, I encourage the student, here: Alex, to be transparent; that is, I tend to say that most things go, as long as the student can explain why they do what they do and how it relates to their overall argument.

It is, however, worth noting that some students have more leeway than others when it comes to bending the rules of academia. Some students find that they have more to ‘prove’ than others, e.g., if you are already not ‘read’ as properly academic due to your class, racialization, gender, sexuality, and other intersections, then you are less free to and more vulnerable when challenging academic conventions. In other words, the more ‘monstrous’ you are, the more thorough the gatekeepers of academia will search your luggage for monsters, which leads me to 3): being as open as possible to the fact that, in this relationship, I am a representative of the academic world that is domesticating the student, that is, making them recognizable and passable within an academic context. As such, the student’s monsters – their otherness – are also at risk from me, and in my excitement to support the student’s monstrousness and otherness, I may bring already vulnerable and monsterized students into even more vulnerable and monsterizing situations. I am also part of defining what their ‘monstrousness’ is and, therefore, also what academic normativity is.

Ultimately, the true monsters that the student will be sneaking inside academia will be the ones I never even recognized as monsters in the first place, because I simply did not know where or how to look. They will be unknown to me, and as a supervisor and teacher, I need to learn to stay with that lack of knowing rather than demand the monsters show themselves.

Monsters in the Concluding Thoughts and Beyond

As previously mentioned, Erika, Sara and I have described pedagogy as a “practice of daily failure”, and that is where I would like to end this text. As a supervisor, I cannot not fail at my two-pronged teaching philosophy, as it strikes a delicate balance between 1) the absolute unknown (see Schwartz’s argument) and monstrousness of the research process, which includes both the research topic and, on a more philosophical level, the unknown and unknowable within both student and supervisor, and 2) the demand for recognizability within the academic system (individual study plans, mid-way seminars, publications, conference presentations, the defence, etc.). This is a vulnerable process of transformation and becoming, both for student and supervisor, and my hope is that in the failure – not in the stupidity, as Schwartz suggests – there is also a promise of going astray, of wandering¹, of ending up in unlikely places outside of both my own teaching philosophy and the regulations of academia; perhaps in the

¹ ‘Error’ is etymologically related to ‘wandering’ and ‘going astray’. Etymonline: error (n.). Link: <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=error>

failure lies the possibility, risk, threat and promise of the monstrous, of the student becoming something that could never have been predicted, least of all by me.

All in all, approaching the supervision process through the figure of the monster does not radically change the tools and techniques of the process – I am sure that the supervision I described with ‘Alex’ is par for the course for many supervisors. I do, however, suggest that the monster as a figure of illegitimate knowledge and academic trouble can add nuance to how one thinks and imagines the teaching and supervision process. The monster’s hybrid, vulnerable body is a reminder that things could and should be different, and that only by letting the students keep as much of their strangeness and otherness as possible can old institutions change beyond what they are currently able to imagine.

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