

Re-Predicating the Monster

In Niall Scott's *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil (At the Interface)*, an anthology of essays demonstrating more than a little creativity in expanding a popular culture topic into a serious academic field, the thinking follows a particular line of predicating logic.¹ The monster is a *thing* or *person acting monstrously*, or a condition where monstrosity is attributed, as a defining quality. To write this up symbolically using the general non-numerical calculus of George Spence-Brown, we have ...

monstrosity | everyday object/person

You can see the problem with this line of thinking. It "too much accommodates" the way monstrosity is *meant to be consumed* in popular culture (= "ideological"). This can be employed in a "normal-plus-monster" mode or a "normal-minus=monster" mode. In the normal-plus model, the monster is an ordinary, fairly nice person with a surplus, a compulsion or concealed element, that results in an excessive behavior or situation. In the normal-minus model — best known as the "zombie" effect — a seemingly normal person, place, or thing seems uncannily to lack some dimension that would make it fully domestic. This lack invites evil, and evil comes. This is the model used for people who, like Hitler, have through accident of upbringing or natural deformity "made a place" for the devil to reside. In the architectural tradition that has either God, the Devil, or both inhabiting corners, this belief has created rituals and customs that deal especially with corners or even with quadration in general. In the some South-American idioms, "cuadro" means, in addition to a painting or panel, "a problematic situation."

Scott's collection plays out the minus and plus options nicely, but it contrasts with an earlier set of essays inspired by Marco Frascari's initial thinking on the subject of the architectural monster, thinking that led to his book on the subject and to some minor development of the other essays invited for a special session at the annual meetings of the Semiotic Society of America.² The difference between the two approaches can be written, succinctly, in the calculus:

monstrosity | everyday situation ("cuadro")

¹ Niall Scott, *Monsters and the Monstrous: Probing the Metaphors of Enduring Evil* (New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).

² Marco Frascari *et alia*, "Architectural Monsters," special session at the Annual Meetings, *Semiotic Society of America*, Reading, Pennsylvania (1985). See Donald Kunze, "The Role of the Monster in Architectural Production and Interpretation." Later, Frascari produced a book: *Monsters of Architecture: Anthropomorphism in Architectural Theory* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991).

This condition can be paraphrased as: “monstrosity is not simply a lack or surplus of an existing thing, but rather a lack or surplus that — *as a predicate* — is able to take possession of its referent. The common expression would be “the tale wags the dog.” From another source: a mother asks her son to stop sneezing, but the son replies that he’s not the one sneezing: “it’s sneezing me!” The shift to a middle voice, a generic operator, an *it*, is key here. The demon is demonic precisely in its ability to take multiple forms, personalities, aspects, etc. As in the middle voice of many languages, the “*it*” opens up a gap in language itself. It is the “stuff happens” operator that can be ascribed to fate or theology.

The popular culture instructions about consuming the monster metaphor are ideological because speed and efficiency are critical. The audience must *quickly recognize* a cultural message, a *cliché*, if you will, so that it may be assembled along with other *clichés* to create clear, enjoyable, meaningful communications. To be effective, ideology must work invisibly. We accept the predication as a norm, even when it is a norm about the fantastic. We know how Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde work together as a team. We have been informed about the surplus and lack that makes one nice and the other naughty. The ideology of the matter means moving beyond this initial set-up logic to the meat of the matter, i.e. how to deal with it. Saddam Hussein was a “monster” in precisely these terms, and quick consumption of the cultural message was key to the political action, quite monstrous in itself, of committing to war. Ideology gets results, and predication is the key to how well it operates.

This is why the Frascari collection of works on monsters functions in a completely different way from the Scott one. Thanks to Frascari’s instructions to participants, the session’s authors began with the classical model, the idea of the monster in antiquity — as a *divine sign*. In divination, the gods speak although they are unable to speak in the *vulgate* of ordinary language. They speak as if they were the unconscious, or the dream: in ciphers, codes, and rebuses (to name a few). They do not signal; they *signalize*. The shaman cannot read the words of the gods to his clients as if he were splicing off a ticker-tape of stock reports. Interpretation — hermeneutics to be precise — takes its origins from the science of augury. In this science, the monster plays a particular role. Among other kinds of signs (a partial list of Latin terms would include *omen*, *miraculum*, *ostentum*, and *prodigium*), the *monstrum* involves natural beings and events (a storm might be considered, alongside a two-headed calf) that have “gone wrong.” The puzzle form is known in advance. It is “hypotaxis,” or raw juxtaposition. The head of a goat is connected to the body of a lion, which is connected to the tail of a dragon. The correct answer in this case is that the monster is the year whose seasons are represented by the goat (Capricorn), the summertime lion (Leo), and slithery serpentine winter. Œdipus answered



a similar riddle to a similar inquisitor, the Sphinx, herself a monstrous collation of woman, lion, and bird. Such constructions typically condensed a temporal sequence into a spatial hybrid. An eye with wings, or an eye inside a hand, or a dolphin wrapped around an anchor were the raw materials of emblem books such as Alciati’s *Emblemata (Viri Clarissimi D. Andreae Alciati Iurisconsultiss. Mediol. Ad D. Chonradum Peutingerum Augustanum, Iurisconsultum*

Emblematum Liber, 1531).

The predication of such images “took over” the system by giving the part the ability to animate — a more accurate term would be *demonize* — the whole. As in Alciati’s examples (the “quadra” aspect should not be overlooked!) eyes and hands outside the bodies that normally “domesticate” them, as wholes normally do to parts, are given extraterritorial room to expand. Past the point that would dictate death in normal circumstances, they not only live and move about, they create monstrous meanings. Their action reverses predication. They are not a part of a scene, they charge the scene with uncanny significance — they *signalize*. They are not dead, they are not alive, they are the *undead*. This property does not arise out of a surplus or lack condition; it is born from the logical consequences of obversion, the part becomes the whole (metonymy), and the whole is again seized with meaning that comes about as a result of the *act* of converting part to whole, again a metonymy. The two metonymies, taken together, constitute *metalepsis*, a rhetorical term we shall have reason to use again, with strategic intent.

Re-predication is really a reversal, “reversed predication,” involving two metonymies (metalepsis) incorporating the process along with the product. This involves the viewer in the viewed, the maker in the made. It is an epiphany moment of Giambattista Vico’s *verum ipsum factum* idea, that we can know (perfectly, but only) what “we” have made, but our conscious making is the result of unconscious components, which, like the monster, “signalizes” but does not signal. Our relation to the made is epistemological/gnostic. The made is ours to know, but knowing it involves a state that moves, specifically, beyond the ideology of consumption. We do not automatically gain access to the made, simply because we have made it. In fact, this access is barred ($\$$ in Lacan’s *matheme* for the subject) and our relationship is that of our relationship to our own desire (*a*). Thus, we must construct fantasies about the made (again, Lacan: $\$ \diamond a$) that, like the *poignon* or punch symbol, attest to a kind of authenticity not based on collecting predicates but on demonstrating a key functional component, a “tell,” an *einzigster Zug*. This is the kind of sign sought in the auspices of the monster, and the logic goes back to the ancient practice and its involvements with metalepsis. Psychoanalysis involves just such a coming-to-terms with one’s desire, through a replay of personal fantasies, and the aim is to allow the unconscious to translate itself by making its own “tells” evident. As Mladen Dolar argues, this moves the “psychoanalytical subject” past the “ideological subject,” just as Frascari’s special SSA session moved the monster past its ideological popular culture representatives.³

³ Mladen Dolar, “Beyond Interpellation,” *Qui Parle* 6, 2 (Spring/Summer 1993): 75–96.