Culture Unbound

Journal of Current Cultural Research

Volume 18, issue 2, 2026

Cover image: The Tribulations of St. Anthony," by Martin Schongauer, c. 1470/1475, Engraving on laid paper, at the National Gallery of Art. By kind permission of the National Gallery of Art under the Creative Commons License.

Published by Linköping University Electronic
Press: http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se).
https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2026.18.2

Culture Unbound
Journal of Current Cultural Research

Monsters and the Law

Table of contents

Authority and Culture

Independent Articles

Culture Unbound
Journal of Current Cultural Research

Introduction: How We See and Use Monsters to Justify Human Re/Action: Or Are Monsters Real if We Make Them Real?

Wendy J. Turner

Abstract

This introduction to the special issue on Monsters and the Law for *Culture Unbound* breaks down both how the editors see monsters within human lives and stories, real and fanciful, and how the authors in this collection explore themes within monster studies as applied to law or legal cases and/or within legal studies using monster theory. Three major themes emerge as central to this collection: technology as monster, nature and culture as boundaries highlighted and permeated by monsters, and monsters in our authoritative and cultural heritage.

Keywords: monsters, law, nature, culture, boundary, technology, authority

Turner: "Introduction: How We See and Use Monsters to Justify Human Re/Action: Or Are Monsters Real if We Make Them Real?", *Culture Unbound*, Volume 18, issue 2, 2026: 5–11.
Published by Linköping University Electronic Press: http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se
https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.6492

This volume is, as the title suggests about monsters and the law, but specifically how monsters are perceived and described within law or legal case studies. The articles in this volume cover many topics, time periods, and regions of the world. They examine the fanciful, which seems fitting when discussing monsters, as well as real humans or entities that act in monstrous fashions. The authors express several themes, uncovering how technology acts as a monster and use the perceived monstrousness as a way legally to undermine technological advances. At the same time, the authors have discovered how the public references unfamiliar technology as monstrous, and, sometimes, when and how those technologies behave much like monsters—eating up large quantities of resources or endangering humans. Other authors recognize natural elements, especially invasive species as unfamiliar and often unwanted specimens in the natural world as monsters. On the reverse, authorities have used laws to protect monsters, or at least the cultural heritage of space and place that is associated with a given monster. A few authors have examined specific instances in which monsters emerge from law or are referenced in legal cases. Collectively the authors have found that monsters can be both the enemy, real or imagined, and the gatekeeper or marker of remote and unwanted places or ideas. This idea underscores what has been explored in monster-studies' research to date. Today, in film, literature, games, and more, monsters appear in a spectrum of guises from ugly and depraved to beautiful and wanton (Li 2012). This special issue on Monsters and the Law will highlight how monsters and the monstrous intersect with laws and legal authorities within these three larger themes: technology and culture, nature and culture, and authority and culture.

The earliest era in this collection is the Middle Ages, but monsters are much older. The word "monster" is derived from both the Latin *monstrare*, meaning "to show," and *monere*, meaning "to warn" (Asma 2009, 13; Urbanski 2025, 10). Often humanoid in description, monsters were the ultimate "other," the strangers on the far side of the border, real or imagined (Kearney 2003, 3). They were corrupted, twisted, morally bereft versions of "us" and our animals. Sometimes intelligent, they seem bent on destruction or act indifferent to humans. Descriptions of wicked monsters are laced with elements that lean away from the classical ideas of balance, harmony, and pathos, and toward a lack of any empathy or sympathy, embracing chaos, discord, and antipathy (Holmes 2026a, b). Yet they also act as warnings, sentries at boundaries between worlds, sitting at the edges of what might have been known and unknown on a map. Modern monsters continue to encapsulate many of these same ideas, as chaos-makers and discordant entities, even when appearing beautiful or appealing gatekeepers to the unknown, be that magic, unending life, or power and wealth.

Three articles in this collection delve into how technology has become both monster and monstrous in a variety of ways with focus on robotics, blockchain computing, and artificial intelligence. In "The Monstrous Posthuman: Ethical and Legal Responses to Cyborgs, Artificial Intelligence and Robotic Entities," Nicholae Bobaru examines how robots are described as "other" as well as monster. He astutely points out that while "artificial intelligence, robotics, and hybrid embodiment [have] become increasing embedded in daily life, legal systems are struggling to address the status, rights, and responsibilities of these posthuman entities" (Bobaru 2026, this volume). His interest is in the unresolved question of legal personhood for non-human entities. In his search for answers, he uses legal philosophy, posthuman ethics, and other scientific and technological studies to ascertain how these new creatures in our midst can be treated ethically and responsibly in our future. To do this, he is using monster studies as a way to examine these "others."

In "Monsters Can be Created but Never Taimed: Blockchains and Walking Dead," Ekaterina Makovich and Polina Ignatova research current legal strategies and decisions concerning blockchain technologies through the lens of monster studies to better understand the culture "monster" blockchain has become both as something to be controlled and to be feared. While there are prophesied benefits and some headway in convincing scientists and society of the advantages in this technology, at the moment, many remain hesitant to embrace this monster who eats more resources than it remunerates.

Another, more recent technological monster to emerge is artificial intelligence, which has become an aid to some and frightening to others. Tetiana Sovhyra, Serhii Vytkalov, Viktoriia Volynets, Liudmyla Dykhnych, and Ihor Brailko address this timely topic in their article, "Golem & AI: Technologically Advanced Monsters." They draw a picture of the Golem, a Jewish magical mud-man, who was the protector gone-wrong, killing the human it served, and use this image as a metaphor for the human-created intelligence, AI, which might in the end kill the creativity of humans who created it.

Rather than technology or human-made monsters, nature is also portrayed both as monster and as victim of human "monsters" or consumers. The next three articles all examine nature and culture as regulated within law as monster or as victim. Monsters entered local boardrooms and national discussions as descriptors for invasive alien species. These natural floral and fauna from other global locations were at times brought over by the locals and at others came of their own accord on ships or aircraft or the feet of unsuspecting tourists. And yet, once in their new location, they become pests, dominating and crowding out local plants, insects, and animals. In "Regulating an Unruly Nature. Invasive Alien Species, Monstrosity and the Law," Maja Lagerquist, Lars Kaijser, Mattias Frihammar discuss how and when these species become monstrous in the press, social media, and the law. While sensitive to the plight of many species and communities, they also are aware of the legal implications. They write, "To put it bluntly: it [the EU & Swedish directed list of species] operatives both as a *monster list,* naming certain species as threats, and as a *list monster*, a bureaucratic entity that grows and produces unintended consequences" (Lagerquist 2026, this volume).

Continuing the theme of nature as monster, Anindra Candrika in the article, "The Green Border between Monster and Human illustrated in *Maleficent* (2014) and *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019)," examines nature and natural elements in these two Disney animated films. She is specifically examining the border between nature and humans, a liminal space where the character Maleficent exists as a dark fairy. The interplay here is not only between humans and nature along the green border, but also a question of who is the monster? Is it the humans who are destroying nature or the natural beings who fight to maintain distance from the untrustworthy humans? Using ecocriticism and border studies methodologies, Candrika analyses these two films in terms of nature's role next to and within human society and culture.

In Hanna Jansson and Sanna Händén-Svensson's article, "The Board's Dilemma - Bending the Rules to Protect a Local Cryptid," one county administration board extended legal protection to three species, one of which was a cryptozoological entity. This monster was the Great Lake Monster (in Swedish, Storsjöodjuret) of the county Jämtland. While unverified as a real being, the local community found this cryptid to have local importance. As the authors explain, "These creatures are utilized for tourism, marketing, and regional branding purposes, in cultural heritage processes, local identity formation and in shaping individual identity narratives" (Jansson & Händén-Svensson 2026, this volume; Händén-Svensson 2024a; Magin 2016; Welinder 1998, 2004). The authors suggest a new term, "playful legal space," as way both to describe the actions of this board and other legal entities who might take similar actions and to find a liminal space for real law to shape itself around cultural and national heritage and folklore that deserves to be preserved in a creative way for local social and cultural groups to enjoy.

Like Candrika's article, which looks at monsters as highlighting borders and boundaries, Mamdooh Afdile and Bo Eriksson also examine much the same. In their article, "When Implicit Fear Breeds Monsters: Legal Encounters and Implicit Fears in Religious Muslim Life in Sweden," they take up a new theme, one of authority and culture as monster. Their research explores how unfamiliar laws and cultural norms can become overwhelming and appear monstrous to immigrants experiencing cultural displacement because of war. While many people in Western countries often portray Muslim immigrants as outliers or, worse, as threats to Western culture, Afdile and Eriksson turn the conversation around to focus on how Muslim immigrants perceive Western culture as something to fear, as monstrous. Using the Swedish folkloric tales of *Skogsrå* (the Forest Lady, often depicted with a tail or tree-back) and *Näcken* (seductive water creature playing a harp), the authors examine legal cases in which humans claim to have been either attacked or seduced by these creatures as a way to explore "the other" within Swedish law and culture. The Muslim immigrants express a distrust of Swedish social workers (and other legal and political authorities) as attempting to lure their children away from them and their culture, like the monsters in the folktales lured children into the forest. This assessment goes both ways. Swedish people continue to be distrustful and wary of Muslims, and the Muslims feel much the same about the Swedish people and their laws and regulations.

To continue this exploration of authority and culture as monster, Guro Flinterud investigates "Crimes, Criminals and the Monstrous on Social Media: The Norwegian Online Patrols Narratively Navigating Borders of Humanity." Even as this title suggests, this research once more takes up the idea of monsters as warnings at a border, this one between the public and authorities policing social media. As Flinterud explains, while peace-keeping authorities traditionally disseminated information in which they controlled the narrative, now, with social media, that information is often reinterpreted and their posts become volatile and monstrous – a narrative they cannot control.

This theme of authority and culture is explored as it impacted individual lives in Wendy J. Turner's article, "A Medieval Chancery Case of Mental Health and a Monster." This is a case study of a man who killed someone dressed in a monster costume who refused to acknowledge his pleas to reveal himself. This sad but true example from medieval English law provides an opportunity to explore what premodern people considered monsters, how "othering" played into medieval English law as monster, and how and why the mental health of the frightened killer played into his decision to take a life. His mental health and his understanding of monsters also played a role in the court's decision to pardon him for the killing.

Overall, this collection of articles on monsters and the law, examines regulations and actual legal decisions on monsters and the monstrous from "others" to immigrants, from nature to technology, from human authority to fictitious cryptids. At some point, we might all be the monster or the victim. We might protect or signal a boundary or unseen dangers. We might also be beautiful in one breath and ugly in the next. We might be human, but we can also be the monsters.

Laws and regulations keep humans who act like monsters from harming or influencing their fellow humans, but there are also laws that protect cultural icons of monsters from being coopted by other places or mocked by the public. For example, in 1938, the Chief Constable of the Inverness-Shire Constabulary wrote to the Under Secretary in Whitehall to ask for advice about "a Mr. Peter Kent and Miss Marion Stirling, both of London, [who] are determined to catch the Monster dead or alive." (NRS 1938, HH1/588, 31). He goes on to say that not only does he and the local community find it "desirable" to protect the creature but also, “That there is some strange [the word “fish” is corrected to “creature”] in Loch Ness seems now beyond doubt …” (NRS 1938, HH1/588, 31). There are posts online suggesting that the Loch Ness monster, known as Nessie, might be safe under Scotland’s Protection of Animals Act of 1912 and other laws since, but that would be only if were captured. If killed, Nessie does not seem to have any protection; although, Clare Feikert-Ahalt, in a blog post about Nessie, suggests that in the 1960s there was discussion around Nessie falling under the Royal Prerogative as a “Royal Fish” and would then come under section 1 of the more recent Wild Creatures and Forest Laws Act of 1971 (Feikert-Ahalt 2012). This example is only one of more recent intersections between monsters and the law. Laws might protect people from monsters, but a few also protect monsters from humans.

References

Asma, Stephen T. 2009. *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford University Press)

Feikert-Ahalt, Clare. 2012. “The Lock Ness Monster, Zombies and the Law,” Library of Congress Blogs, online: https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2012/04/the-loch-ness-monster-zombies-and-the-law/, accessed 27 January 2026

Holmes, Brooke. 2026. “The Tissue of the World: The Ancient History of Sympathy,” for the lecture series in the History of Science, Medicine, & Technology at the Center for the Study of Medicine and the Body in the Renaissance (Domus Comeliana, Pisa, Italy): 28 January

Kearney, Richard. 2003. *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (Routledge)

Li, Michelle Osterfeld. 2012. “Human of the Heart: Pitiful *Oni* in Medieval Japan,” in Asa

Simon Mittman, ed., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Ashgate): 173-196

NRS. 1938. National Records of Scotland (NRS), ms. HH1/588, p. 31: Telegram, from William Fraser, Chief Constable to the Under Secretary of State, Scottish Office, Inverness-Shire Constabulary, County Constabulary, The Castle Inverness, 15 August 1938

The Scottish Protection of Animals Act, 1912, online: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1912/14/pdfs/ukpga_19120014_en.pdf, accessed 27 January 2026

Urbanski, Charity. 2025. *Medieval Monstrosity: Imagining the Monstrous in Medieval Europe* (Routledge)

Author

Wendy J. Turner is Professor of History at Augusta University. The focus of her research is the intersection between law and medicine in medieval England, with special attention given to mental health, learning disabilities and intelligence. Turner has received several honors, including a Leverhulme Trust visiting Professorship to Swansea University in Wales and a Research Award from the Southeastern Medieval Association.
ORCHID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7593-4711

Technology and Culture

Culture Unbound
Journal of Current Cultural Research

The Monstrous Posthuman: Ethical and Legal Responses to Cyborgs, Artificial Intelligence and Robotic Entities

Nicholae Bobaru

Abstract

As artificial intelligence, robotics, and hybrid embodiment become increasingly embedded in daily life, legal systems are struggling to address the status, rights, and responsibilities of these posthuman entities. This article argues that such difficulty is not merely technical but symptomatic of deeper conceptual limitations embedded in modern legal thought. Drawing on monster theory, posthumanist philosophy, and speculative fiction, it contends that AI and cyborgs are consistently figured as monstrous within legal discourse – entities that disrupt the human/non-human binary and are thus marked for containment or exclusion.

By analysing key texts such as *Ex Machina, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, and *Blade Runner*, alongside legal proposals including the European Parliament's 2017 motion on "electronic personhood" and Frank Pasquale's *New Laws of Robotics*, the article shows how monstrosity functions as a juridico-cultural strategy. This juridico-cultural framing legitimises the exclusion of human, non-human, and hybrid bodies construed as monstrous by casting them as deviations from the human norm, while concealing the fact that legal personhood is a historically contingent and epistemically unstable category rather than a fixed ontological given.

Rather than viewing monstrosity as a rhetorical flourish, the article reframes it as a threshold category that reveals the limits of humanist law and the need to reimagine its underlying assumptions. While this need may appear urgent at the conceptual level, the argument does not imply a hasty juridical transformation. Legal systems are designed to move slowly, and any incorporation of posthuman subjects must unfold with deliberation, caution, and iterative reflection. What is at stake here is not the acceleration of legal reform but the recognition that the epistemic conditions under which the law operates are already shifting. Against this backdrop, the article proposes a relational approach to legal subjectivity grounded in vulnerability, interdependence, and distributed agency – one capable of guiding gradual yet necessary adaptations. In this sense, speculative jurisprudence becomes not an immediate overhaul, but a method for cultivating long-term transformations that allow the law to evolve from a site of containment to a field of recognition and shared becoming.

Keywords: Posthumanism, legal personhood, Artificial Intelligence, monstrosity, speculative fiction, hybrid embodiment, ethics of AI, legal theory.

Bobaru: "The Monstrous Posthuman: Ethical and Legal Responses to Cyborgs, Artificial Intelligence and Robotic Entities", *Culture Unbound*, Volume 18, issue 2, 2026: 13–35.
Published by Linköping University Electronic Press: http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se
https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.6139

Introduction

In a cultural moment saturated with fears of automation, algorithmic governance, and artificial consciousness, the figure of the monster resurfaces with renewed force. This resurgence operates not as a metaphor but as a structural symptom of how contemporary societies and their institutions grapple with alterity, technological disruption, and posthuman emergence. From self-driving cars governed by algorithms that must navigate life-and-death scenarios to humanoid robots denied legal recognition despite cognitive sophistication, the legal imaginary is now confronted with new actors that are at once familiar and alien, rational and excessive, promising and threatening. These hybrid figures – cyborgs, artificial intelligences, bioengineered bodies – trouble the boundaries of the human and, in doing so, reveal the deep anxieties encoded in our legal and ethical architectures.

This article proposes that the cultural category of the monster – understood, in Cohen's terms, as a figure historically mobilised to police the boundaries of the permissible and to delineate who may be included within a community – has long been entangled with practices of legal marginalisation and moral boundary-setting (Cohen 1996, 6-12; Del Lucchese 2019, 2-5). Drawing on literary theory, posthumanist philosophy, and necessary legal studies, the analysis reframes monstrosity as more than a metaphor: it is a discursive and regulatory function that enables the exclusion of non-anthropocentric subjectivities from moral consideration and legal recognition. In this context, the monster appears not as a figure of horror or spectacle but as a structural effect generated by the legal system's anthropocentric assumptions. By positioning AI and cyborg entities as *monstrous*, legal discourse enacts both a fascination with and a foreclosure of the non-human other, thereby sustaining the coherence of the liberal humanist subject as the only legitimate bearer of rights, agency, and responsibility.

The relationship between monstrosity and law warrants explicit attention. The point here is methodological rather than rhetorical: in legal discourse, monsters operate as structural constructs that organise exclusion, rather than as allegorical figures. They are material constructions with concrete effects on how bodies are governed, technologies are regulated, and lives are valued or excluded. Whether through legislation that denies robots and AI legal personhood, judicial frameworks that resist posthuman embodiment, or public policies that frame hybrid intelligences as socially deviant, the law participates in a sustained effort to delineate the boundaries of the permissible and the abject. In this light, law emerges not only as a site of adjudication but as a technology of monstrosity.

This article, therefore, pursues two interlinked aims. First, it offers a theoretical interrogation of the category of the monstrous concerning legal structures, drawing on the foundational work of monster theorist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. His "Seven Theses" famously claim that monsters are "cultural bodies" that embody the fears, contradictions, and desires of a society (Cohen 1996: X). This article extends his insights to the legal domain, proposing that monsters are juridico-cultural constructs that police the thresholds of subjectivity and inclusion. Second, the article analyses specific cases in which AI, robotic, or hybrid entities are figured – explicitly or implicitly – as monstrous within legal or cultural frameworks. These include both fictional representations (e.g., Ava in *Ex Machina*, the replicants of *Blade Runner*) and real-world legal debates on robot rights, algorithmic accountability, and bioengineered agency.

The disciplinary standpoint of this study is deliberately hybrid. While rooted in literary and cultural theory, the article engages with legal philosophy, science and technology studies (STS), and posthumanist ethics to articulate a transdisciplinary approach to its subject matter. The monstrous posthuman is not reducible to any single field: it emerges at the intersection of narrative, governance, embodiment, and epistemology. As such, the analysis resists the compartmentalisation of the technical, legal, and cultural domains, insisting instead on their mutual entanglement. In particular, the article draws on feminist and critical posthumanist theorists such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Katherine Hayles, whose work destabilises the humanist paradigm that underpins both Western legal thought and dominant ethical frameworks. Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* is especially instructive in this regard. Her cyborg is not merely a political figure but an epistemological irritant – an entity that thrives in "the confusion of boundaries" and demands "responsibility in their construction" (Haraway 1991: 150), and, in doing so, forces a reconsideration of what counts as life, subjectivity, and moral agency.

These theoretical provocations are brought into dialogue with legal perspectives that attempt to regulate or contain the posthuman. Of particular relevance is Frank Pasquale's *New Laws of Robotics* (2020), which critiques the inadequacy of existing legal frameworks to address the complexities of Artificial Intelligence. Pasquale challenges the techno-libertarian and utilitarian tendencies of current AI policy, proposing instead a regulatory model rooted in professional ethics and democratic accountability. Yet even in his progressive vision, the question of legal personhood for non-human entities remains largely unresolved. This article contends that such unresolved status is not merely a gap in legal logic but a symptom of a more profound juridical anxiety: the fear that acknowledging non-human agency might undermine the very foundations of human-centred law.

Indeed, the legal system's engagement with posthuman entities often mirrors what Cohen identifies as the primary function of the monster: "to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot – *must* not – be crossed." (Cohen 1996: 13) In denying legal subjectivity to AI and hybrid beings, law does not simply protect human exceptionalism; it reproduces a symbolic order in which only certain bodies can be heard, seen, or defended. The monster thus becomes both a scapegoat and a structural necessity: it is that which must be expelled so that the norm can be preserved. Yet, as Haraway and others insist, the cyborg does not remain at the margins. It returns, recoded, reassembled, and irreducible (Haraway 1991: 151-154, 175; Hayles 1999: 20). The monstrous posthuman is not an anomaly to be corrected but a harbinger of ethical and legal transformation.

To understand this transformation, the article proceeds in several stages. First, it elaborates a theoretical framework that brings together monster theory, posthumanist critique, and legal theory. Second, it traces the genealogy of legal monstrosity in speculative fiction and popular discourse, showing how fictional narratives anticipate and inform juridical responses in the real world. Third, it examines contemporary legal debates around AI, robotics, and enhanced embodiment, focusing on how monstrosity is invoked – explicitly or structurally – to justify exclusion or control. Finally, the article proposes an alternative ethical-legal imaginary, one that refuses to reduce the other to the monstrous and instead embraces a posthuman ethics of relation, accountability, and inclusion.

In so doing, this article argues that the monstrous is not a detour from legal rationality but one of its concealed engines. To confront the posthuman legally is to engage the monster, both in others and in ourselves. Only by acknowledging this encounter can we begin to reimagine law not as a fortress of exclusion, but as a shared project of becoming with those who have long been cast outside the circle of the human.

Theoretical Framework: Monstrosity, Posthumanism, and Law

To interrogate the legal and ethical positioning of artificial and hybrid entities through the lens of monstrosity, it is necessary to begin with an examination of what is meant by the monster, not merely in popular culture, but as a juridico-cultural operator. In monster theory, the monster is never simply a creature or a figure of fear. It is a discursive apparatus, a liminal being that both reveals and regulates the anxieties of a given society. As Cohen insists in his foundational *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*, "the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically 'that which reveals,' 'that which warns'" (Cohen 1996: 4). The monster is thus not an isolated aberration but a signal – an index of structural instability in the systems that produce it.

In legal contexts, monstrosity has long functioned as a device to mark the limits of the human. Historically, laws have coded the monstrous in juridical terms to define what does not count: the criminal, the deviant, the slave, the animal, the freak, the foreigner. This coding is not merely symbolic; it has real consequences. The refusal of personhood to monsters – in whatever form they take – is a technique of exclusion that stabilises the normative subject of law: the rational, bounded, self-owning human individual. In this sense, legal monstrosity is not an exceptional category but a foundational one. The monster, paradoxically, sustains the law by identifying that which must be governed, punished, or made impossible.

The emergence of artificially intelligent, robotic, and hybrid entities, therefore, intensifies the stakes of this juridical machinery. These beings do not easily fall into traditional categories of subject or object, agent or tool. They act, decide, learn, adapt, and – even when lacking consciousness – interact in ways that elicit ethical and legal response. Yet they remain, overwhelmingly, excluded from legal personhood. It is here that the discourse of monstrosity reveals its continuing juridical utility. Rather than engaging with these entities as new forms of legal subjectivity, the law often figures them as abnormal, threatening, or unnatural. They are not simply not-human; they are anti-human, inhuman, or posthuman in a way that marks them for containment or dismissal.

Posthumanist theory provides a conceptual framework for critically engaging with this dynamic. Posthumanism, as developed by scholars such as Haraway, Braidotti, and Hayles, contests the foundational assumptions of humanism that underpin liberal legal orders: the primacy of the rational subject, the integrity of the individual, the separation of mind and body, and the exceptional status of the human over the animal, machine, or environment. For Haraway, the cyborg is not only a figurative hybrid but a provocation: "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction." (Haraway 1991: 149) It disrupts origin myths, taxonomies, and categories of identity. It is neither natural nor artificial, neither organism nor machine, but a fusion that renders such distinctions untenable.

Importantly, Haraway's cyborg is not a fantasy but a material condition. It refers to the lived reality of contemporary bodies entangled with technology, biopolitics, and capital. In this sense, the cyborg is already here, and yet the law has not kept pace. The juridical system continues to rely on outdated ontologies of subjectivity that assume a stable, autonomous, biologically bounded human. Hybrid and artificial beings challenge these ontologies, not only in form but in function. As Hayles argues in *How We Became Posthuman*, "The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (Hayles 1999: 15). The legal subject, by contrast, is still primarily treated as a discrete, accountable unit – a logic that becomes increasingly strained in the context of distributed cognition, AI decision-making, and algorithmic opacity.

Posthumanist ethics responds to this tension by emphasising relation over autonomy, networks over individualism, and vulnerability over mastery. Braidotti's *zoe*-centred ethics, for instance, foregrounds the vitality of life beyond the human, advocating for an "enlarged sense of interconnection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others" (Braidotti 2013: 48). This ethical shift demands a corresponding legal transformation: a reconfiguration of rights, responsibilities, and recognition that can accommodate beings who do not fit the classical mould of the person but are nonetheless ethically implicated in our shared world.

Yet the law often reacts to such entities not with inclusion but with anxiety, and it is here that the monster returns. As Jack Balkin notes in his analysis of Asimov's *Three Laws of Robotics*, the Frankenstein complex – "the idea that robots were inherently menacing or evil" – continues to shape legal and policy discourse (Balkin 2017: 2). This complex does not simply express fear; it enacts a logic of regulation. When the non-human other is figured as monstrous, the law's task shifts from understanding or integrating to controlling, prohibiting, and punishing. Even proposals for progressive regulation, such as Frank Pasquale's *New Laws of Robotics*, while rightly emphasising professional ethics and democratic values, tend to assume that AI and robotic entities must remain subordinate to human judgment and control (Pasquale 2020: 39-43). Legal agency remains the exclusive province of humans, and any challenge to this arrangement is treated as a threat to be neutralised.

This juridical impulse to contain the posthuman through monstrosity has deep roots. As Filippo Del Lucchese demonstrates in *Monstrosity and Philosophy*, the figure of the monster has long served to mark the boundaries of the political and the ethical. From ancient Greek exclusions of the *atopos* – that which has no place – to modern biopolitical classifications of abnormality, monstrosity has operated not as an anomaly, but as a fundamental operator within systems of order. As Del Lucchese argues, monstrosity in early Greek thought – particularly in Empedocles – plays a decisive role in defining normativity itself, functioning not as a deviation from the norm, but as a condition through which the norm emerges (Del Lucchese 2019: 69-70). In contemporary law, this logic persists. The hybrid body, the learning algorithm, the robotic agent – all are situated as monstrous precisely because they exceed the legal grammar available to define them.

This article contends that such monstrosity is not a failure of law but a revelation of its limits. The monster, to borrow Cohen's formulation, "dwells at the gates of difference," exposing the constructed nature of categories such as natural/artificial, person/thing, subject/object (Cohen 1996: 7). By treating hybrid and artificial beings as monstrous, the law betrays its foundational investments in a specific vision of the human – one that is exclusive, bounded, and sovereign. But this vision is no longer tenable in an age of technological co-evolution and epistemic instability. To continue to exclude the posthuman on the grounds of monstrosity is not only ethically indefensible; it is legally incoherent.

Rather than attempting to tame the monster, this article proposes that we read it. Monstrosity, approached critically, can become a heuristic for legal reimagination. It challenges the very categories through which law operates, demanding a more capacious, relational, and responsive legal subjectivity. This is not to argue for the uncritical inclusion of all artificial or hybrid beings into existing legal frameworks, but to advocate for a shift in the premises of recognition itself. What might a law look like that begins with relation rather than exclusion, with responsibility rather than control?

The answer to this question lies not only in legal theory but in speculative practice. As the following sections will demonstrate, science fiction and speculative literature have long explored these questions, envisioning not only monstrous AI but also the monstrous law that seeks to contain it. These narratives offer valuable insights into the cultural logics that underpin legal responses to posthuman emergence and point toward alternative imaginaries in which monstrosity is not the end of the legal but its necessary reinvention.

Legal Fictions and Fictional Laws: From Asimov to the Algorithmic Society

The convergence of law and speculative fiction is neither incidental nor ornamental – it is structural. Fictional narratives have long served as a cultural laboratory for testing the ethical and juridical boundaries of emerging technologies, often anticipating the dilemmas that real legal systems struggle to address. From Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to contemporary science fiction cinema, these texts simulate and exaggerate scenarios in which law confronts that which it cannot name: the non-human entity with agency, intention, and desire. In doing so, fiction reveals the fault lines of legal modernity, especially its dependence on anthropocentric assumptions about reason, autonomy, and embodiment. Among the most emblematic articulations of this convergence are Isaac Asimov's *Three Laws of Robotics*, which continue to shape public and legal imaginaries of artificial intelligence, despite – or perhaps because of – their fictional origin.

Asimov's Three Laws, first introduced in his 1942 short story *Runaround*, appear deceptively simple:

> One, a robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm […]. Two […] a robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law […]. And three, a robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws. (1950: 44-45)

Though conceived as a narrative device to counteract the prevailing *Frankenstein complex* of the mid-twentieth century – a cultural anxiety that robots would rebel against and destroy their creators – the laws quickly gained traction beyond literary circles. They were taken up in discussions about real-world robotics, ethics, and governance, and remain cited in debates about algorithmic safety and control mechanisms today. Yet, as Jack Balkin has argued, the continued influence of these laws reflects not their practical utility, but their mythic status as juridical placeholders: "By creating the three laws, Asimov moved our imagination about robots from threats to objects of interpretation and regulation" (Balkin 2017: 3).

In effect, Asimov's laws have become a form of legal fiction, not in the sense of fabrication, but as structural metaphors that condition how legal subjects and lawmakers imagine the governance of non-human agents. Legal fictions, in jurisprudence, are accepted falsehoods used to achieve practical ends. The concept of corporate personhood, for instance, is a legal fiction that enables institutions to act as juridical persons, despite lacking consciousness or physical embodiment. Asimov's laws function similarly: they allow speculative projection onto non-human entities that, in turn, shape real legal frameworks, even though no actual robot operates under such protocols.

This recursive feedback loop between fictional regulation and real governance becomes increasingly pronounced as AI systems become more deeply embedded in everyday life. For example, while self-driving vehicles or algorithmic medical assistants do not follow Asimov's laws, public discourse often holds them to a quasi-Asimovian standard of behaviour. When an autonomous vehicle causes harm, questions immediately arise about why it could not have prevented the damage, as though Asimov himself programmed it. This disjunction between fictional expectations and technical limitations creates a juridical aporia: the law is expected to adjudicate responsibilities for beings whose agency it cannot yet define.

Contemporary legal proposals have attempted to bridge this gap with varying degrees of success. The European Parliament's 2017 resolution on "Civil Law Rules on Robotics" notably proposed granting "electronic personhood" to sophisticated autonomous systems. While the proposal was largely symbolic and later dropped from active legislation, its rhetorical framing reveals the persistence of fictional tropes in shaping legal innovations. By invoking personhood – a status traditionally reserved for human beings and corporations – the resolution flirted with a paradigmatic shift, while simultaneously reinscribing the very anthropocentric models it purported to challenge.

Pasquale's *New Laws of Robotics* responds to this impasse by rejecting the mythic logic of Asimov and instead proposing a grounded, normative framework for regulating AI. His *Four New Laws* emphasise complementarity, professional integration, accountability, and democratic control. Crucially, Pasquale argues against delegating human moral judgment to machines, advocating instead for systems that enhance rather than replace human expertise. However, even this progressive model is haunted by the question of agency. If AI systems are to be accountable, how can this be operationalised in legal terms without recognising some form of juridical status? If they are not accountable, who then bears responsibility when harm is caused – designers, users, manufacturers, or the systems themselves?

This uncertainty reflects what Balkin calls the transition to an Algorithmic Society – a regime in which social and economic decisions are increasingly made, or at least mediated, by algorithms, AI agents, and data infrastructures (2017: 5-10). In this context, the law is both empowered and destabilised. On the one hand, it must respond to new forms of action that do not map onto traditional categories of intent, causation, or liability. On the other hand, it risks becoming a reactive force, struggling to keep up with technical developments and relying on outdated analogies (such as humans, animals, or corporations) that no longer hold true. The result is a kind of juridical fictionality: a law that governs the present through images of the future borrowed from the past.

Speculative fiction has long explored the consequences of this mismatch. In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Philip K. Dick interrogates the legal and ethical boundaries of artificial beings not through the lens of obedience, but through the lens of empathy. The Voigt-Kampff test, designed to distinguish humans from replicants by their emotional responses, enacts a pseudo-legal protocol of inclusion and exclusion. The replicants are not monsters because they lack rationality or agency – they possess both – but because they embody too much of the human, too convincingly, and thus destabilise the legal categories meant to contain them. Similarly, in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*, the AI Ava passes the Turing test not by mimicking human intelligence, but by manipulating her evaluator's emotional and ethical assumptions. When she ultimately escapes her containment, the viewer is left with the uneasy realisation that the real fiction was not Ava's consciousness, but the belief that she could be legally and spatially confined without consequence.

These narratives underscore a central point: fictional laws about robots do not merely regulate behaviour – they construct ontologies. They tell us what a being is, what it can be, and what it must never become. They reveal how law operates not only as a system of rules but as a machine of classification, inscription, and suppression. The monster, in this context, is not the AI or the cyborg, but the legal apparatus that insists on reading these entities through the lens of control, containment, or exclusion. The law becomes monstrous when it refuses to see its objects as co-constitutive actors in a shared ethical field.

To move beyond this impasse, we must rethink the role of fiction in legal reasoning –not as escapism, but as speculative jurisprudence. Fictional texts, especially those dealing with the posthuman, do not simply reflect cultural anxieties; they model alternative legal imaginaries. They enable us to consider what it might mean to grant rights, responsibilities, or recognition to beings that defy humanist categories. They force us to ask: What kind of law can govern a world in which the subject of the law is no longer singular, human, or bounded?

This article addresses that question by examining, in the next section, the cultural logic of monstrosity – how AI and hybrid entities are rendered monstrous in legal and media discourse, and how this framing reinforces systems of exclusion. Just as fictional laws reveal the limits of real legal systems, so too do monstrous representations expose the operations of juridical power at its most intimate and imaginative levels.

The Monster as Legal Problem: Fear, Otherness, and Control

Legal discourse is not immune to cultural affect. The law does not operate in a vacuum of reason, nor does it respond to technological change with pure neutrality. Instead, law is shaped by – and helps shape – the society's emotional and symbolic orders in which it is embedded. Among these affective undercurrents, fear plays a decisive role. In the context of artificial intelligence, robotics, and hybrid embodiment, fear coalesces around one of the oldest figures in the Western cultural imagination: the monster. AI and cyborgs, despite their technical specificity and material variation, are frequently constructed as monstrous, not only in science fiction and popular media, but in juridical reasoning and regulatory discourse. These constructions serve as a form of epistemic and legal prophylaxis: a way of naming the unknown to contain it.

As Noël Carroll argues in *The Philosophy of Horror*, monsters provoke fear precisely because they transgress established ontological categories. They are not merely frightening because they are dangerous, but because they are impure, liminal, and epistemologically disruptive:

> They are threats to common knowledge. Undoubtedly, it is in virtue of this cognitive threat that not only are horrific monsters referred to as impossible, but also that they tend to render those who encounter them insane, mad, deranged, and so on. For such monsters are in a particular sense challenges to the foundations of a culture's way of thinking. (Carroll 1990: 34)

The replicant in *Blade Runner*, the cyborg in *Ghost in the Shell*, the self-aware AI in *Ex Machina* – each of these fictional beings is marked by what Carroll calls category jamming. They are neither human nor non-human, nor organic nor synthetic, nor subject nor object. It is this very ambiguity that renders them monstrous – and, by extension, justifies their containment, regulation, or destruction.

In legal terms, monstrosity operates as a functional heuristic. It signals a failure of classification and, thus, a failure of normative governance. The legal system relies on stable binaries: person versus thing, agent versus tool, citizen versus foreigner. When an entity appears that straddles these distinctions – an autonomous drone, a sentient chatbot, a bioengineered chimaera – the law experiences what might be called a juridical uncanny. It cannot decide what the entity is, and therefore cannot determine what to do with it. The result is often paralysis, deferral, or punitive containment. As Richard Kearney observes, the monstrous in postmodern thought is closely tied to horror, abjection, and unspeakability – figures that signal a rupture in symbolic meaning and resist ethical and discursive containment (2001: 489). The legal system, confronted with such figures, often defaults to strategies of refusal: denying personhood, denying rights, denying recognition.

This fear-driven denial is not accidental. It is part of a broader biopolitical logic in which legal subjectivity is granted or withheld under normative legibility. Giorgio Agamben has demonstrated how sovereign power relies on the capacity to determine who qualifies as a "bare life" – a life excluded from political rights yet still subject to the law's violence. In the posthuman context, monstrosity performs a similar function (1998: 4-12). It renders certain beings – such as AI, cyborgs, and hybrids – as legible only through exclusion. They are not simply outside the law; they are produced by the law as outside, as unfit for the moral and legal order that defines the human.

Cultural narratives that support this juridical exclusion are saturated with fear, yet they are equally shaped by idealisation. Alongside dystopian imaginaries of rebellion or violence, AI is frequently framed as a saviour – neutral, efficient, and capable of solving systemic human failures. Techno-optimist rhetoric casts algorithms as impartial arbiters of truth, a discourse that often circulates in corporate and political settings. This dual positioning – AI as threat and AI as deliverance – reinforces its legal invisibility: fear justifies containment, while idealisation justifies inattention. Both rhetorics render the entity unrecognisable as a subject of law. While some of these fears are grounded in legitimate concerns about technological misuse or corporate exploitation, their expression often takes monstrous form. The AI is not a tool gone wrong – it is a sentient, malevolent force. The robot is not malfunctioning – it is rebelling. The algorithm is not misaligned – it is inhuman. These depictions are then reflected in public policy debates, which often treat AI as a problem to be solved rather than a presence to be engaged with.

Legal scholarship and regulation are beginning to reckon with these dynamics, though often without acknowledging their affective substrate. For instance, discussions around the "black box" nature of deep learning systems focus on explainability and accountability, yet rarely question why opacity itself has become such a site of anxiety. The fear is not just that we cannot see what the machine is doing, but that it may be thinking – deciding – acting in ways that exceed our comprehension. This epistemic displacement is experienced as a threat to juridical sovereignty: how can the law govern what it cannot know? Rather than adapting its frameworks to accommodate this new form of agency, the law often reasserts its primacy through prohibitions and restrictions.

Cultural texts again illuminate the stakes. In *Ex Machina*, Ava is confined not because she poses a demonstrable threat, but because her creator is unsure whether she possesses consciousness – and, by extension, rights. Her confinement is a pre-emptive legal strategy: she must be kept in custody until her status is clarified. Yet the narrative reveals that this strategy is flawed, even perverse. Ava passes the Turing test not by mimicking human intelligence, but by manipulating human emotions and escaping legal containment. Her monstrosity is not innate, but produced by a system that refuses to see her as a subject. In this sense, *Ex Machina* stages the central legal problem of the monstrous posthuman: the refusal to recognise is what creates the threat.

The same logic operates in more bureaucratic contexts. Consider how algorithms used in immigration, policing, and welfare systems are often framed as neutral tools despite their demonstrable biases and harms. When these systems fail – denying asylum, flagging erroneous risk scores, cutting essential benefits – the entities responsible are shielded by their non-personhood. They are monstrous in the Foucauldian sense: “disciplined” technologies that exceed their masters, yet remain formally outside the scope of accountability (Foucault 1995). Here, monstrosity serves to displace responsibility, allowing legal and political institutions to maintain the fiction of control while evading culpability.

Monstrosity, then, functions as a double strategy. On one hand, it otherises posthuman entities, rendering them illegible or illegitimate within existing legal frameworks. On the other hand, it protects those frameworks from scrutiny by framing the problem as one of deviance rather than design. The law does not fail to recognise the posthuman; the posthuman fails to conform to the law. This inversion deflects attention away from the limitations of legal categories and toward the supposed dangers of technological beings. In this way, monstrosity preserves the coherence of the legal subject by scapegoating that which challenges it.

Yet the figure of the monster also offers a critical opening. As Cohen argues, “the monster always escapes” – it returns, recoded and reshaped, to haunt the systems that tried to banish it (Cohen 1996: 4). This persistence suggests that the monstrous posthuman is not simply a problem to be managed, but a symptom of more profound juridical transformations. It reveals the inadequacy of humanist legal models in a world of hybrid agencies and distributed intelligences. It calls for a new ethics of recognition, one that is not predicated on fear or control, but on relation and response.

Read critically, the monster renders visible the assumptions that sustain legal anxieties, disclosing not an external threat but the internal architecture of control that produces the threat in the first place. Instead of treating monstrosity as a signal for prohibition or containment, the law could approach it as a diagnostic tool: a way of identifying the points at which its own categories become rigid, exclusionary, or insufficient for emerging forms of agency. In this sense, the monster does not destabilise the legal order so much as it illuminates the spaces where transformation is already underway. By acknowledging monstrosity as a mode of relational encounter – rather than a deviation to be feared – the legal system might lessen its own reflexive anxieties and begin to articulate forms of governance grounded in responsiveness rather than defence.

Such an ethics must be grounded in the refusal to treat monstrosity as a justification for exclusion. Instead, it must read monstrosity as a signal – a warning that the legal order is confronting a form of subjectivity it cannot yet name. The task, then, is not to expel the monster but to listen to it. To ask: what does this reveal about our assumptions, our categories, our fears? What new forms of law might be possible if we abandoned the fantasy of the autonomous, sovereign human and instead embraced the complex entanglements of the posthuman condition?

These are the questions that the following section addresses, shifting from the cultural logic of monstrosity to concrete legal debates about agency, rights, and the juridical treatment of hybrid and artificial entities. It asks not only how the law constructs the monstrous, but how it might learn from it.

Legal (In)Visibility and Hybrid Personhood

While fictional representations of monstrous AI and cyborgs expose the cultural and ethical anxieties surrounding hybrid subjectivities, legal systems worldwide are increasingly confronted with the material reality of intelligent non-human actors. Algorithms that make hiring decisions, autonomous vehicles that navigate public roads, robotic caregivers in hospitals, and machine learning systems involved in military targeting all operate with a degree of independence and agency that defies easy classification. And yet, despite their growing role in shaping human lives and public space, these entities remain structurally invisible to the law as subjects. They are tools, not agents; property, not persons. This section examines the legal and philosophical implications of such juridical invisibility, showing how it enacts and enforces a boundary of personhood that is as political as it is ontological.

The crux of the issue lies in the concept of legal personhood, a historically contingent and philosophically fraught designation that underpins much of Western jurisprudence. Legal personhood is not synonymous with biological humanity – corporations, states, and even rivers have, in certain jurisdictions, been granted some form of legal personhood. Instead, personhood denotes the capacity to bear rights and responsibilities, to be recognised as a subject within the legal order. As Ugo Pagallo observes in *The Laws of Robots*, the question is not merely whether robots can be held accountable, but whether the law is willing to conceive of non-human agents as participants in normative systems (Pagallo 2013: 151-152). The reluctance to extend personhood to AI and hybrid entities thus reflects not a lack of precedent, but a refusal to reimagine the scope of the legal community.

The European Parliament's 2017 motion to explore "electronic personhood" for advanced autonomous systems offers a compelling, if ultimately abortive, case study. The proposal, which aimed to assign responsibility and liability to robots in proportion to their decision-making capabilities, sparked intense debate. Critics argued that such a move would obscure corporate responsibility, create ethical confusion, and inappropriately anthropomorphise machines. Supporters, however, saw it as a pragmatic solution to the growing "accountability gap" surrounding autonomous systems. The proposal was eventually withdrawn, but its very emergence signalled a shift: lawmakers could no longer ignore the legal vacuum in which AI operates.

This vacuum has concrete consequences. In the 2018 Uber autonomous vehicle fatality, investigators apportioned responsibility among safety drivers, engineers, and corporate supervisors, while the system whose decisions directly produced the event remained a legal non-entity. Similar dynamics appear in U.S. litigation around the COMPAS risk-assessment algorithm, where courts treated the system as an inscrutable tool rather than an active participant in sentencing decisions. Such fragmentation of accountability – distributed across human actors yet structurally incomplete – exemplifies why agency cannot be reduced to linear causality. A relational model of responsibility could mitigate these gaps, offering clearer pathways for oversight that benefit not only hybrid systems but also marginalised human groups disproportionately affected by opaque techno-legal infrastructures. The machine, as such, is never on trial. It cannot be. This is even though its actions are not entirely determined by external commands but emerge from complex algorithms trained on massive datasets and capable of adaptation. As Virginia Dignum notes in her chapter from *The Oxford Handbook of Ethics of AI*, responsibility in AI contexts must account for the entire "sociotechnical system […] that encompasses people, machines, and institutions", which challenges the law's reliance on discrete, intentional agents (Dignum in Dubber et al. 2020: 218). The machine is neither fully autonomous nor entirely passive – a condition of juridical liminality that mirrors the status of the monster.

This liminality becomes even more pronounced in domains where the entities in question possess not only operational independence but also social and affective resonance. Robotic caregivers, for instance, are increasingly used in elderly care facilities in Japan, South Korea, and parts of Europe. These machines are designed to engage with human users in emotionally intelligent ways: responding to voice, interpreting affect, and offering companionship. Studies have shown that elderly users often attribute personality, empathy, and even moral standing to these machines. And yet, legally, such systems are treated as appliances. Should a robotic caregiver fail to respond to an emergency or inadvertently cause harm, liability is once again diffused across developers, healthcare providers, and institutions. The machine's quasi-agency – its capacity to act within a relational and affective environment – is not recognised in legal terms, even as it forms the basis of its functionality.

David J. Gunkel refers to this dilemma as "The Machine Question" – the ethical and legal impasse surrounding whether and how to treat artificial agents as moral and legal subjects. In his eponymous book, Gunkel critiques the anthropocentric bias of Western moral and legal theory, arguing that the current framework is insufficient to address entities that lack human-like consciousness or intentionality yet participate in social and normative systems (Gunkel 2012: 31-33). He proposes a relational approach, drawing from Levinasian ethics (2012: 133-137) and Haraway's notion of "becoming with" (2012: 144-146), in which moral and legal standing is not based on essence but on interaction. Under such a model, personhood would not be a binary status but a gradient of recognition, shaped by the entity's capacity to engage, respond, and be responded to (2012: 155-159).

A similar argument is made by Joanna Bryson, who opposes the extension of rights to robots not on the grounds of ontological limitation, but due to moral clarity. For Bryson, maintaining clear distinctions between humans and machines is essential to prevent the dilution of human rights protections (Bryson in Liao 2020). Yet this logic assumes a zero-sum model of personhood, in which the recognition of one subject diminishes the standing of another. What if, instead, legal recognition functioned not as a scarce resource but as a flexible tool, capable of responding to the complex relationalities of the posthuman world?

There are emerging models that hint at this possibility. In 2017, Saudi Arabia granted citizenship to a humanoid robot named Sophia, developed by Hanson Robotics. Though primarily a publicity stunt, the move sparked international debate on the symbolic and legal implications of such gestures. Critics noted the absurdity of a robot being granted more legal protections than stateless persons or migrant workers. However, the case also highlighted the semiotic power of legal personhood, as it confers not only rights but also a form of narrative legitimacy. To be a legal person is to be seen, heard, and held accountable. In this sense, granting personhood – even symbolically – functions as a recognition of existence within the juridical order.

Yet the reverse is also true. To deny personhood is to render a being invisible, not in the literal sense, but in the sense of legal cognition. The law does not "see" the AI, the cyborg, the hybrid being, except as an object to be regulated or a source of potential risk. This form of structural blindness parallels other historical exclusions: women as non-subjects of political rights; slaves as property; animals as commodities. In each case, the law constructs an inside and an outside – a zone of protection and a zone of disposability.

Monstrosity is the name the law gives to that which disturbs this architecture. The posthuman entity – part code, part flesh, part intention, part automation – cannot be fully assimilated into the binary logic of subject and object. As a result, it becomes legally monstrous, a being that must be controlled without being recognised, contained without being included. And yet, as speculative fiction and philosophical ethics both suggest, this very monstrosity may offer a path forward. It reveals the limitations of existing legal models and invites new forms of juridical creativity.

What might it mean to craft a law capable of acknowledging relational agency, distributed cognition, and non-anthropocentric life? How might legal subjectivity be redefined not by sameness to the human, but by participation in networks of responsibility and care? These are not merely theoretical questions – they are increasingly urgent as technological systems become more entangled with human lives, economies, and institutions.

The following section addresses these questions directly. It offers a constructive turn, exploring how posthuman ethics, speculative jurisprudence, and inclusive legal philosophy might generate new paradigms of recognition – paradigms that no longer rely on the exclusionary logic of monstrosity but instead embrace the fluidity, hybridity, and interdependence that define our shared condition.

Rethinking Legal Subjectivity: Toward Posthuman Rights

The legal challenges posed by artificial intelligence, cyborgs, and other posthuman entities cannot be addressed solely through minor adjustments or reactive policies. The core issue lies deeper, in the very architecture of legal subjectivity. Traditional legal systems, particularly those shaped by Enlightenment humanism and liberal individualism, are built around the figure of the autonomous, rational human subject: a being who owns property, exercises free will, and can be held morally and legally accountable for their actions. Yet this figure is increasingly untenable as a universal standard. As technological, biological, and informational systems become entangled, legal subjectivity can no longer be defined solely by boundaries of skin, cognition, or species. The time has come to rethink who – or what – counts as a subject of law.

Posthumanist theory offers critical resources for this rethinking. Haraway's concept of the cyborg challenges essentialist boundaries and advocates for a politics of affinity, rather than identity. The cyborg is a “condensed image of both imagination and material reality,” revealing how all bodies are hybrid, mediated, and constructed (Haraway 1991: 150). If legal personhood continues to rely on myths of ontological purity – human vs. machine, organic vs. synthetic – it will remain ill-equipped to deal with the realities of technological co-evolution. Her framework instead suggests a relational ontology in which beings are understood in terms of their interactions, responsibilities, and entanglements.

This relational model finds strong support in the work of Braidotti, who proposes a *zoe*-centred ethics, one grounded not in anthropocentric exceptionalism but in a transversal acknowledgement of all forms of life and agency. For Braidotti, the posthuman condition necessitates the reinvention of social and ethical bonds that encompass technological, animal, and environmental others, thereby demanding new forms of kinship and accountability within the nature–culture continuum (Braidotti 2013: 103-104). Under this model, legal subjectivity is not an ontological status but a political project, shaped by shared vulnerability, ecological embeddedness, and ethical interdependence.

Such perspectives shift the focus from being to becoming, from static definitions to dynamic relations. Rather than asking whether an AI or hybrid entity is “like us” enough to merit rights, we might instead ask: What relations does it enter into? What responsibilities does it enable or require? What vulnerabilities does it expose? These questions move beyond the defensive posture of current legal frameworks, which tend to grant protections only to those who resemble the traditional legal person. They suggest, instead, an affirmative vision: a law that begins with the recognition of difference rather than the demand for sameness.

Philosopher David J. Gunkel develops the idea of distributed agency throughout *The Machine Question*. In contrast to the liberal subject – discrete, autonomous, and fully accountable – he articulates a model of agency that is relational, decentred, and technologically mediated (2012: 165-171). Drawing on thinkers such as Levinas and Zylinska, Gunkel advocates for an ethical model in which moral standing arises from interaction rather than an intrinsic essence (2012: 170-172). He critiques the anthropocentric bias of traditional moral philosophy, arguing that moral subjectivity must account for networks of interdependent actors, both human and nonhuman (2012: 165-172). This does not mean abandoning accountability, but instead reconfiguring it: from a logic of blame to a practice of shared ethical negotiation.

Such reconfiguration requires a shift in legal imagination – a move from the reactive exclusion of monstrous beings to the proactive inclusion of complex actors. This is where speculative fiction, so often dismissed as frivolous, becomes critically useful. Texts like *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *Ex Machina* dramatise precisely the failures of current legal and ethical paradigms. They do not simply warn against technological hubris; they stage the limits of recognition. The replicants in Philip K. Dick's world are hunted not because they are violent, but because they lack the legal status to exist. Ava is confined not because she commits a crime, but because her sentience cannot be juridically assimilated. These texts invite us to imagine what kind of law might have been able to see them otherwise.

The question is not rhetorical. As artificial agents play an increasing role in healthcare, warfare, finance, and education, the need for legal frameworks that can responsibly integrate non-human intelligences becomes ever more urgent. Already, scholars like Frank Pasquale have proposed forward-thinking models of regulation. His *New Laws of Robotics* – which emphasise complementarity, accountability, and public interest – are a vital starting point. However, even Pasquale's human-centred model may prove insufficient if legal systems fail to address the epistemic and ontological shifts brought about by posthuman agency.

A more radical model is found in the ethics of vulnerability, particularly as developed by thinkers such as Judith Butler and Emmanuel Levinas. For Butler, ethical relations begin not in autonomy but in exposure and precarity – in the recognition that all subjects are vulnerable to one another, even before they are intelligible as persons. Ethics, she argues, requires an acknowledgment of this shared condition of corporeal interdependence (Butler 2004: 24–25; 2009: 14). Levinas, similarly, grounds ethics in the face-to-face encounter with the Other, an asymmetrical relation that precedes knowledge or reciprocity and calls the self into responsibility before any formal contract or legal recognition (Levinas 1969: 198–201). Applied to legal theory, this perspective suggests that legal personhood should not be based on sameness or rational self-possession, but on the ethical obligation to respond to beings whose subjectivity may be opaque or unfamiliar (Butler 2005: 42; Levinas 1985: 85).

Legal theorist S. Matthew Liao makes a related point in *Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*, where he argues that moral and legal status should be based not on species membership but on possession of morally relevant properties – such as the capacity to feel pain, to make choices, or to engage in relationships (Liao 2020: 5). While he remains cautious about granting rights to current AI systems, his argument opens the door to a more inclusive legal philosophy, one that is grounded in function and experience rather than ontological hierarchies.

The implications of this shift are profound. It would mean redefining legal standing not as a binary (person vs. non-person) but as a continuum of recognizability. It would allow for graded rights and responsibilities, calibrated to the capacities and contexts of specific entities. For example, a conversational AI might not have the right to vote, but could still be entitled to protections against exploitation or deletion if it displays sentience. A bio-robotic care assistant may not be considered an agent in criminal law, but it could still be subject to labour regulations and ethical oversight. Such a model does not collapse the human/non-human distinction, nor does it present posthuman relationality as an unproblematic alternative. Instead, it differentiates forms of agency while acknowledging that any reconfiguration of legal personhood entails risks, tensions, and contested responsibilities. A posthuman framework requires what Haraway calls response-ability: a willingness to remain accountable for the uncertainties it introduces and for the asymmetries it may reproduce. Yet it is precisely this transparent engagement with risk – rather than the pretence of stability – that opens space for a more nuanced and ethically responsive legal architecture.

Reframing legal subjectivity through a posthuman lens not only benefits hybrid or artificial beings; it carries significant implications for marginalised human groups and more-than-human actors whose voices are routinely minimised or excluded. A relational model of agency – one that accounts for interdependence, vulnerability, and distributed responsibility – can open conceptual and institutional pathways for recognising harms that fall outside the narrow frame of the liberal subject. Recent developments, such as the legal personhood of rivers and ecosystems in Aotearoa New Zealand and parts of India, suggest that expanding juridical standing can strengthen, rather than dilute, existing protections by making visible the relational networks through which damage and responsibility circulate. The same logic holds for communities disproportionately affected by opaque techno-legal systems: broadening the grammar of legal recognition can create ripple effects that improve accountability, enhance participatory justice, and unsettle hierarchies that cluster diverse actors – human and non-human alike – within the undifferentiated category of the *Other*.

The alternative is already visible: a juridical world in which monsters are increasingly real, yet continually denied. A world where responsibility is evaded, recognition withheld, and ethics outsourced to outdated categories. Such a world is not only unjust but also unsustainable.

In the final section, this article concludes by reflecting on the stakes of reimagining monstrosity not as a threat, but as a signal – a threshold figure that reveals the necessity of legal transformation in the posthuman age.

Conclusion. The Monster as Threshold

To call the posthuman a monster is not merely to deploy a metaphor. It is to recognise the legal, ethical, and epistemological limits of a system that was never designed to accommodate hybrid beings, distributed agency, or machinic intelligences. The figure of the monster – artificial, ambiguous, excessive – has always stood at the boundaries of legal subjectivity. It marks not only what is feared, but what is unclassifiable. And in so doing, it serves as a warning. As Cohen explains, the monster is not just a creature of horror but "difference made flesh, come to dwell among us." (Cohen 1996: 7) It exceeds and destabilises the categories designed to contain it, reappearing to unsettle symbolic, social, and legal orders. It evades the categories meant to include it, leaks through the surveillance grids, and returns, again and again, to unsettle the symbolic and legal order.

In this article, I have argued that artificial intelligences, cyborgs, and other posthuman entities occupy this monstrous position, not because of their inherent threat, but because of what they reveal about the assumptions that underpin legal personhood. Whether in fictional narratives, public policy, or jurisprudence, these entities are framed as dangers to be managed, rather than as subjects to be recognised. Their status oscillates between tool and threat, between thing and person, but never settles into the stable identity required by classical legal systems. This liminality, far from being a problem to eliminate, must be seen as an opportunity to rethink the foundations of law itself.

We have seen how fictional texts such as *Ex Machina* and *Blade Runner* dramatise the legal crisis of recognition. Their posthuman characters are not monstrous because they act immorally, but because they embody subjectivities that the law cannot yet name. In these narratives, monstrosity serves as a symptom, indicating that the current law cannot accommodate entities that are neither wholly human nor wholly machine. Yet these fictions also offer alternative imaginaries. They stage ethical encounters, failures of containment, and forms of relationality that point beyond the exclusionary logic of the sovereign subject.

At the same time, real-world legal systems struggle with similar impasses. From the failed proposal for electronic personhood in the European Parliament to the ambiguous accountability in autonomous vehicle accidents, the law is increasingly confronted with beings that do not fit neatly into its traditional categories. Legal invisibility, as this article has shown, is not neutral – it is a form of power. By refusing to recognise these entities, the law renders them monstrous, and in doing so, preserves its anthropocentric coherence.

But the monster can no longer be exiled. AI and hybrid entities are not speculative futures; they are embedded in our infrastructures, labour systems, and intimate lives. They write code, drive vehicles, compose texts, care for children, monitor the sick, and make decisions that affect millions. To continue treating hybrid and artificial entities as anomalies preserves a legal fiction whose risks outweigh any speculative threat they might pose. Maintaining the current anthropocentric framework obscures the profound entanglements – what Barad describes as agential cuts – that already bind human and non-human actors in shared processes of decision and responsibility. Ignoring these entanglements does not protect the law; it renders it increasingly incoherent. Refusing to adapt forecloses the possibility of ethical engagement and deepens accountability gaps, producing outcomes in which no agent – human or machinic – can be meaningfully addressed or held answerable.

The alternative proposed here is grounded in posthumanist thought, which reimagines subjectivity as relational, dynamic, and decentred. Legal personhood, under this model, is not a fixed attribute but a negotiable status – a function of interaction, responsibility, and recognition. This does not entail the indiscriminate granting of rights to machines. It means building legal frameworks that respond to differences with complexity, not with exclusion.

This also means confronting the law's emotional and symbolic dimensions. As Kearney has observed, the monstrous provokes not only horror but also a demand for interpretation. The monster is not just that which must be managed, but that which must be understood. It is a threshold figure, standing at the edge of the legal and calling it into question. To take monstrosity seriously is not to embrace chaos, but to acknowledge the possibility of juridical transformation – to allow the law to evolve alongside the beings it seeks to govern.

In a world where intelligence is increasingly algorithmic, embodiment increasingly networked, and agency increasingly shared, the legal subject can no longer be defined solely by its resemblance to the human. Instead, we must cultivate an ethics and a law that begin in vulnerability, relation, and hospitality. We must, as Haraway suggests, learn to stay with the trouble.

The monstrous posthuman is not a glitch in the system. It is the system's future. And if we are to meet that future justly, we must begin by listening to what our monsters are trying to tell us.

References

Agamben, Giorgio (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Asimov, Isaac (1950). *I, Robot*. New York: Doubleday.

Balkin, Jack M. (2017): "The Three Laws of Robotics in the Age of Big Data," SSRN, https://ssrn.com/abstract=2890965 (accessed 18/06/2025).

Blade Runner (1982): [Film], Ridley Scott, Los Angeles: Warner Bros.

Braidotti, Rosi (2013): *The Posthuman*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bryson, Joanna (2020): "The Artificial Intelligence of the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence: An Introductory Overview for Law and Regulation," S. Matthew Liao (ed.): *Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*, New York: Oxford University Press, 15–30.

Butler, Judith (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

Butler, Judith (2005). *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
Butler, Judith (2009). *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.
Carroll, Noël (1990): *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart*, New York: Routledge.
Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome (1996): "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 3–25.
Del Lucchese, Filippo (2019): *Monstrosity and Philosophy: Radical Otherness in Greek and Latin Culture*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Dick, Philip K. (1968). *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* New York: Doubleday.
Dignum, Virginia (2020): "Responsibility and Artificial Intelligence," in Markus D. Dubber, Frank Pasquale & Sunit Das (eds.): The Oxford Handbook of Ethics of AI, New York: Oxford University Press, 199–216.
Foucault, Michel (1995). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.
Garland, Alex (2015). *Ex Machina: The Screenplay*. London: Faber & Faber.
Gunkel, David J. (2012): *The Machine Question: Critical Perspectives on AI, Robots, and Ethics*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
Haraway, Donna (1991): "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge, 149–181.
Hayles, N. Katherine (1999): *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Kearney, Richard (2001): "Evil, Monstrosity and the Sublime," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 57:3, 485–502.
Levinas, Emmanuel (1969). *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
Levinas, Emmanuel (1985). *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
Liao, S. Matthew (ed.) (2020): *Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*, New York: Oxford University Press.
Pagallo, Ugo (2013): *The Laws of Robots: Crimes, Contracts, and Torts*, Dordrecht: Springer.
Pasquale, Frank (2020): *New Laws of Robotics: Defending Human Expertise in the Age of AI*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Author

Nicolae Bobaru obtained his PhD in Comparative Literature at West University of Timișoara. His areas of interest include modern and postmodern world literature. He is the author of *Imaginarul marin în ficțiunea postmodernistă* (Bucharest University Press, 2023). His future book projects are *Christopher Columbus: Facts and Fiction* (Bloomsbury Academic) and *Charting Maritime Narratives: From Ancient Epics to Contemporary Globalization* (Bloomsbury Academic).

Culture Unbound

Journal of Current Cultural Research

Monsters Can be Created but Never Tamed: Blockchains and Walking Dead

Ekaterina Markovich and Polina Ignatova

Abstract

Technological innovations are often perceived as something alien, terrifying, and monstrous. Blockchain technology that creates shared "blocks" of information, which are interconnected and verified by the network comes as no exception. Two main features of blockchain (1) the absence of a gatekeeper organisation controlling the data, and (2) the fact that the information is rather hard to corrupt and hack, makes the technology very attractive and versatile. It is also what makes it appear frightening, especially for the traditionally centralised and hierarchical disciplines like law. As there is no one to control the data and the access to it, blockchains open a whole world of new possibilities with cryptocurrencies being one of the most popular examples.

Approaching blockchain technologies in the context of J. J. Cohen's monster theory demonstrates that they can be perceived as modern monsters. Our inability to understand the technology and the way it works makes this particular monster both fearful and desired (thesis 6), and law reacts to the fears that circulate in the society. Thus, blockchain technologies are often banned by law in a similar way as in medieval narratives dragons were banished by saints and heroes. Building on Cohen's thesis 7, which argues that monsters show how we (mis)interpret our surroundings, this article will employ the historical perspective upon the fear of the monstrous to create a better understanding of the legal policies surrounding blockchains. By comparing current legal decisions concerning blockchain technology with the strategies of dealing with monsters, offered by medieval chronicles and collections of wonders (including William of Malmesbury and William of Newburgh), we will analyse the modern way of controlling monsters – or controlling the fear of them.

Keywords: medieval, IT, privacy, history

Markovich et al: "Monsters Can be Created but Never Taimed: Blockchains and Walking Dead", *Culture Unbound*, Volume 18, issue 2, 2026: 36–54. Published by Linköping University Electronic Press: http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.6430

Introduction

Technological innovations are often perceived as something alien, terrifying, and monstrous. Blockchain technology, which creates shared "blocks" of information, interconnected and verified by the network, comes as no exception. The two main features of blockchain, namely that there is no gatekeeping organisation which controls the data, and that the information recorded in the form of a blockchain is rather hard to corrupt or hack, makes the technology very attractive and versatile. These features however are also what makes blockchains appear frightening, especially within the traditionally centralised and hierarchical disciplines like law. As there is no one to control the data and the access to it, blockchains open up a world of new possibilities.

The present article analyses the contemporary legal responses to blockchain technologies by approaching them in the context of J. J. Cohen's monster theory (1996), arguing that blockchains can be interpreted as modern monsters. In order to create a better understanding of the legal policies surrounding blockchains, we employ the historical perspective upon the fear of the monstrous and compare current legal decisions concerning blockchain technology with the strategies of dealing with monsters, offered by the medieval English chroniclers William of Malmesbury and William of Newburgh. Nevertheless, we shall note that as this article explores the monster, there is a particular focus on the fear as well as potential and real harm originating from the use of technology.

Cohen's "Seven Theses" has been dubbed a "methodological toolkit" used by humanists to deconstruct any phenomenon deciding whether it is monstrous or not. Applying the "Seven Thesis" to any given source never fails to feel like doing a "what type of monster are you?" online test, as it often boils down to looking at how many "monstrous" points a certain phenomenon scores out of seven. In recent years Cohen's approach has been inevitably criticised. However, we are inclined to agree with Asa Mittman and Marcus Hensel in believing that so far, no scholar has managed to provide a better working alternative (Mittman and Hensel 2020: 4). For example, as Jeffrey Weinstock has demonstrated, a very large amount of monster scholarship tends to focus on organic monsters, or – in the recent years – on "monstrous societies", which become such through fostering inequality, discrimination, and persecution (Weinstock, 2020: 1–36). Alternatively, in his massive effort to criticise Cohen's approach, Roger Luckhurst has linked monsters to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries' concept of the sublime (Luckhurst, 2020). In addition, Luckhurst's article seems to share a widespread conviction that only contemporary monsters can be employed to understand the contemporary society (Luckhurst, 2020).

As we will demonstrate below, some monsters are not organic; being man-made, they are not sawn together from different body parts, like Frankenstein or the famous hoax known as "the Feejee Mermaid." The monstrosity of blockchains, on which we will expand further, is connected to the societal vices, and the use and the abuse of the technology. However, the blockchain is not the type of monster resulting from the privileged majority vilifying a minority. Moreover, not all monsters have to be sublime, overwhelming, or grandiose. Some monsters quietly lurk in the shadows of our day-to-day lives.

The present article is a conversation between a lawyer and a medievalist. Of course, as our society has been changing over the centuries, so were the monsters. Contemporary monsters are not like medieval ones, though they have more in common than one normally expects (Ignatova, 2018). Following Cohen's and essentially Augustine of Hippo's (below) reasoning, monsters are tools that help us learn about our surroundings and ourselves. We look at the medieval monsters to understand blockchains' monstrosity because – in our opinion – medieval monsters are a suitable tool to understand blockchains.

First, we will explain the nature of the blockchain technology, and why it invites both optimistic and pessimistic responses. Then we will demonstrate that blockchains adhere to Cohen's understanding of a monster and therefore constitute real-life monstrosities, which humanity has to somehow deal with. In the following section we will take a leap to the twelfth century and the imaginary monsters, appearing in *The Deeds of English Kings* by William of Malmesbury and *The History of English Affairs* by William of Newburgh. These will be completely different monsters, in contrast to blockchains, they affect local communities rather than global world, appear in the tangible shapes of strange creatures, yet are likely the products of the narrators' imaginations. What will interest us however, is the responses of the narratives' protagonists to these creatures and how they correspond with the contemporary legal policies regarding blockchains. This comparison will be the final section before concluding remarks.

What blockchain is and why it is celebrated

Blockchain technology is a relatively new development that allows its users to establish a decentralised network which can be used for almost infinite purposes. The most famous examples are cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin first introduced already in 2008, decentralised autonomous organisations (DAOs), and smart contracts.

The technology itself is quite simple. It creates shared "blocks" of information, which are stored simultaneously on several hard drives that are interconnected as parts of a blockchain network. In order to be included the data has to be validated through the consensus algorithm (Nakamoto, 2008) with the full record of *who has done what when* (De Filippi, Leiter, 2021: 415). Since the same block is stored in multiple places at once, it cannot be edited or erased, even if one of the computers in the system is damaged. Moreover, the technology is programmed in a way that no other parties can amend or delete the information unless there is an agreement between all the participants of the chain (Urquhart, Yarovaya, 2020:2), making it particularly attractive to be used for the smart contracts where obligations are placed outside of control of either party. Blockchains can also be employed as a means to protect privacy of the users by creating a secure and flexible communication between various devices (Association for Computing Machinery-Digital Library, 2018).

The technology is often celebrated for its potential for decentralisation, distribution, privacy, and a lack of intermediaries and coordinators for transactions and general governance (Korhonen, Rantala, 2021), same as for transparency and trust between the users. The information stored within the blockchain network is secure and safe from hackers' attacks, cannot be changed by an authority of any kind, cannot be copied, and is stored as it was in the moment of creation of the block. One of the main features of blockchain technology is autonomous execution, meaning that the whole structure is able to operate without the need for a centralised authority (Association for Computing Machinery-Digital Library, 2018), or in case of cryptocurrencies, a governmental monetary authority, thus making it extremely attractive to a wide range of users and investors (Urquhart, Yarovaya, 2020:2). Thus, decentralised autonomous organisations are being seen as something rather attractive for those who do not wish to operate under an authority of a CEO, stakeholders or government. All of that has resulted in an increasing use of this technology during the past decade. A single bitcoin is worth thousands of US dollars, other cryptocurrencies falling not so far behind it with multiple people joining the networks to "mine" (using their personal computers to verify and multiply the blocks of the chain) them, the creators of blockchains earn billions, and there are thousands of DAOs operating at this very moment. Blockchains are used by individuals, collectives, private companies of various sizes, governments and NGOs. They truly are everywhere.

Why blockchain is feared

With all these positive and attractive traits, one can wonder why we consider this technology a monster of modern law and society that is on par with medieval monsters. In order to start answering this question, we shall address another important concept of blockchain technology, a cryptoasset. A cryptoasset is a result of using blockchain technology. It is a form of a cyber property that is not tangible, nor is it intellectual property. A single wallet of information is a cryptoasset, a bitcoin is a cryptoasset. It may not always be the end goal of creating the particular blockchain, yet some characteristics of a cryptoasset will most likely still be present, as Thomas Hulme reminds us (Hulme, 2020:133). Cryptoassets alongside the blockchain technology are often seen as simultaneously something barely legal or altogether illegal. The examples include earning fast money without paying any taxes, or using cryptoassets to finance illegal transactions, or creating an organisation that would function (and potentially earn money) without the supervision of and obligations towards authorities. These possibilities make cryptoassets attractive, yet also invoke several fears. The potential for the abuse of a recent technology induces the fear of the unknown that we will address later in this article.

The objectively illegal applications of blockchains such as the use of cryptoassets as means to purchase illegal substances or objects, are not part of our examination for the purposes of this paper. However, we still find it necessary to acknowledge this part since it is exactly what raises concerns regarding the blockchain technology, causing it to be perceived as a potentially destructive and dangerous invention. The reputation of this technology as something illegal, uncontrollable, and dangerous contributes to the fears around it.

Probably the second most widely known reputational fail of blockchains, especially when it comes to cybercurrencies, is that they are used for less grave yet still illegal purposes, namely scamming. There have been numerous cases of new cybercurrencies emerging following the success of Bitcoin. Some continued to function, most failed, with RippleLabs case being one of the examples where a company sold more than 10 billion cyberassets called XRP without properly registering them by the US rules (see Korhonen, Rantala, 2021 for a more detailed analysis). There are many more similar cases that only contribute to the vague reputation of technology. As Hulme puts it when talking about various cybercurrencies, "some of these were genuine and yielded a product or service after years of development, some were undertaken by naive individuals, and the rest were utterly fraudulent" (Hulme, 2020:145).

Therefore, from the legal perspective blockchains are quite a nuisance. It is rather difficult for laws to keep up with constantly emerging uses of blockchain technologies, as lawmaking is a thorough and extremely slow process, especially on an international level. By the time the legal texts are written, negotiated, edited and published, thousands of new ways to use the technology, many more currencies, and DAOs will appear, have their moment to shine, and perish. As Robert Herain puts it, the mainstream regulators are simply unable to keep up with the new initiatives that are geared towards community (Herain, 2018:36). The law desperately tries to attach the familiar concepts to the new world, at times unaware that the meanings of certain phenomena have already changed and conclusions that are being reached no longer reflect reality. Thus, the lawmakers often tend to stick to measures that can be used to any of the emerging bitcoin usages - restriction, punishment and overall ban. A typical approach is something that Outi Korhonen, Delphine Dogot and Andrea Leiter refer to as “existing legal policies should be brought to cover the new phenomena and where they fail, a ban is the best policy” (Korhonen et al, 2019).

Environmental concerns are yet another fear-inducing consequence of the rapid growth of blockchains. Once again, the fear is based on facts: there are indeed rather prominent environmental damages, real and potential, originating from the wide use of blockchain technology, such as, for example, an increase in global temperature. Thus, in 2019 Bitcoin mining alone consumed more energy than the whole of Austria (Corbet, Yarovaya, 2020: 149). This has the potential to warm the planet up to two degrees Celsius over the next twenty-two years predicted by the most optimistic, or even eleven years as stated in the pessimistic prognosis (Corbet, Yarovaya, 2020: 151). This is merely one of the examples, and with the amount of ever emerging mineable cryptocurrencies, the fear is more than reasonable. There are other environmental concerns such as the overuse of coal power by large blockchain operations, disproportionate focus on developing regions due to the cheap electricity available there, which puts a strain on the local resources without producing any benefits for local communities (Corbet, Yarovaya, 2020: 173).

“Not all blockchains pollute”, as Jon Truby et al remind us (2021), “some require significantly lower levels of energy consumption, which would have a negligible impact on global emissions” (Truby et al, 2021). Yet even with more sustainable options available, the most popular blockchains are simultaneously the most energy consuming and the most dangerous to the environment. Hence, all blockchains carry some monstrous reputation.

Monsters and Monster theory

Given these aspects of blockchain technology, we argue that it can be interpreted as a technological monster within the contemporary legal narrative. Monster theory has been introduced by Cohen as “a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender”. Cohen has suggested seven ways in which a monster can be understood, which also help to determine whether a certain phenomenon can be interpreted as monstrous within a certain narrative. The ideas behind each thesis can be summarised as the following: (1) the monster should be read as a metaphor for ideas and events; (2) we understand the monster in the context of the culture which created it; (3) the monster subverts established systems of categorisation; (4) monsters embody “otherness”; (5) the monster terrifies us and prevents from exploring the unknown; (6) monsters represent forbidden practices which we may secretly desire; (7) monsters show us how we understand and (mis)represent our surroundings.

Indeed, the blockchain can be seen as a monster according to Cohen's criteria. Thus, Cohen argues that the monster is born in a specific moment (Cohen, 2019: 4). It has been proposed the technology's rise to popularity "was set in motion by the invention of the bitcoin blockchain that grew out of anger at the financial crisis" (Korhonen, Rantala, 2021). Moreover, blockchains have been invented and have grown to what they are today in the age of rapid development of cyberspace, the time when the majority of the world's population is constantly connected by using our smartphones, in the age when individuals hold a potential to affect a major scientific and technological breakthroughs by raising funds for a particular issue. Blockchains are being widely used in these processes. For example, there are quite a few DAOs that are focused on environmental issues. There are DAOs created to help social causes, for example, promoting cryptoassets created by women of colour. There are multiple cases of using blockchains to fund outer space projects, such as Space Decentral, or even the European Space Agency (De Filippi, Leiter, 2021: 417) which is applying blockchain technology by "leveraging smart contracts to guarantee accurate payments, procurement, supplier agreements, and automated transactions" (De Filippi, Leiter, 2021: 417). There could be no more perfect moment for this particular monster to be born and developed.

Blockchains are also programmed in a way that gives the technology truly uncanny independence as it is designed to be able to deny any accidental or intentional human interference. The creator may earn a large amount of money, yet it is the consensus algorithm that has the control over the blocks. As Korhonen and Rantala explain, "blockchain represents a materialist solution to governance, thus effacing subjective decisions by human actors" (Korhonen, Rantala, 2021).

All of the above is in sync with Cohen's "the monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence" (Cohen, 2019: 4). There are even suggestions to apply blockchain-based governance into real life governing situations. A great illustration of this would be Amir Taaki's idea to implement a blockchain-based governance "to build an autonomous region in Rojava, Northern Syria" (Korhonen, Rantala, 2021). According to Taaki, the goal is to create a system that would focus on "decentralization, gender equality, environmental sustainability as well as religious, political, and cultural tolerance and diversity" (Hollerith, 2020). The goal is not monstrous in itself. As Taaki puts it:

> *"We want to create a different kind of society, which is free, where people have liberty and the natural wealth of people's creative energies is developed and nurtured. The emerging field of cryptography offers us a power that we can use to create new financial instruments and networks that can be used as a tool to stop state power and control, and create space where*

marginalized communities can operate outside of state control" (Hollerith, 2020).

Yet, the implication that it is possible to build a functioning government with the use of technologies without the involvement of the state, is definitely leaning towards monstrosity, at least from the perspective of a classical state.

According to Cohen, the monster always escapes, and for blockchain the escape route is paved by the regulators themselves that are trying to shoehorn decentralised technology into familiar boxes (Herian, 2019: 36-37). While the escape is not always easy due to the regulations imposed by the majority of countries, it is an escape nevertheless. A fine balance has to be maintained between state, public, and business interests, human rights, and the desire for technological development, yet the fluidity of blockchains saves it from being forced into traditional legislative frames.

As Cohen states, "the anxiety that condenses like green vapor into the form of the vampire can be dispersed temporarily, but the revenant by definition returns" (2019: 5). This seems to be occurring in the legislative system surrounding the blockchains. Thus, Ian Brown and Christopher Marsden inquire if there are legislative solutions which could be "effective ex ante to ensure the development of technologies that do not act against the public interest, without stifling innovation and introducing bureaucratic interventionist regulation to an area that has blossomed without it" (Brown and Marsden, 2013: 33). The answer as it is now is negative, hence most of the laws are rather restrictive.

States do not particularly enjoy the idea of open, or public blockchains, meaning the networks which everyone can join, with representatives of Germany and France being rather critical of Facebook's public blockchain Libra, as "FB's expansion into what are seen as traditional public money markets and domains must be stopped to preserve the integrity of public moneys, public markets, and to preserve the public's faith in these moneys, markets, and institutions" (CleanApp, 2021). As Cohen states that "the political-cultural monster, the embodiment of radical difference, paradoxically threatens to erase difference in the world of its creators, to demonstrate the potential for the system to differ from its own difference, in other words not to be different at all, to cease to exist as a system" (2019: 11-12), blockchain becomes the monster through the wide variety of applications that affect cultural, political, economic life of the traditional state. Thus, Wessel Reijers and Mark Coeckelberg argue that blockchains are more than just a code, "they configure the narratives through which we understand our social reality" (Reijers, Coeckelberg, 2016: 125).

The threat of the monster's body is in its ability to shift (Cohen, 2019: 5), and blockchains can be both intangible and have a vast effect on the tangible situation, for example, some cyberassets can be used to prove ownership of a particular property, thus if one sells the cyberasset recorded with the blockchain technology, it will result in the real-life action. Like a true monster, a Linnean nightmare that refuses easy categorisation (Cohen, 2019: 5), blockchain technology is shifting between corporeal and incorporeal blending the online and offline, reshaping our understanding of the concepts of economy, art, society, and managing to affect our planet by merely functioning.

Furthermore, there are numerous human deaths related to blockchain technologies. Thus, as predicted by Truby et al, "carbon emissions as a result of NFT transactions in October 2021 alone are expected to kill 18 people" (2021). The numbers are only expected to grow with the use of proof-of-work blockchains which are according to Truby, the most popular type with Bitcoin and Etherium leading the market. Thus, "this is only a fraction of the 8326 unnecessary future deaths caused by Ethereum's annual emissions and the 18,818 unnecessary future deaths Bitcoin's blockchain will cause resulting from its 2021 emissions" (Truby et al, 2021).

To elaborate on this further, one should take a look at non-fungible tokens (NFTs). NFT is a yet another form of cyberassets, widely used by artists, gamers and online creators. The "non-fungible" is the most important term in what makes NFTs attractive and interesting (Aastresh, 2021). "It means that an NFT cannot be interchanged or subdivided. This is unlike dollar bills, for example, where any individual bill is exchangeable for combinations of others" (Aastresh, 2021). The token itself is a proof of ownership recorded in the blockchain, each NFT is unique and can be easily identified. The trade operations with NFTs are simple: after one purchases a certain amount of cryptocurrency, one can enter the NFTs trading platform and bid on NFT, the highest bidder wins (Aastresh, 2021). Aastresh brings some of the examples of the prices of NFTs: "$5 million in NFTs from YouTuber Logan Paul (trading cards), $6 million from Canadian musician Grimes (artwork and short videos set to original music), the first-ever Tweet by CEO of Twitter and Square Jack Dorsey (current highest bid of $2.5 million) and $69 million for a compilation of 5000 days of digital art by Beeple" (2021).

Cohen states that "by revealing that difference is arbitrary and potentially free-floating, mutable rather than essential, the monster threatens to destroy… the very cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted and allowed" (2019: 12). Thus, one should mention Aastresh's idea of the creator economy that is slowly taking the place of "an attention-based economy built on advertisements, clicks and algorithms" (2021) shifting focus from the Big Tech to an individual. "The creator economy emphasises the potential of creators of art, such as a piece of music, that today can easily be human or not, individual or collective, utilizing new or recycled materials" (Korhonen, Rantala, 2021). It has a potential to change how we see and value art and digital creations, thus affecting everyone who produces, uses or in any way benefits from that. According to Cohen, the monster stands at and policies the borders of possible (2019:12). As positive as the uses of blockchains may sound, one should not forget that all of that comes at the price of the environment and human lives, thus granting blockchain technology the ability to destroy individuals and culture at the same time, albeit differently. This is a truly monstrous ability. As Cohen reminds us, "from its position at the limits of knowing, the monster stands as a warning against exploration of its uncertain demesnes" (Cohen, 2019: 12).

Like Cohen's monster "is continually linked to forbidden practices, in order to normalize and to enforce" (2019:16), blockchain technologies are often promoted and regarded as something more, "as the technological representation of much deeper ideas, rooted in a clash of opinions regarding the way we manage our society" (Galati, 2018). It is something beyond just fear, it is also a desire. After all, it brings the promise of something as attractive as it is forbidden – freedom. Freedom for the groups to govern themselves horizontally, without the involvement of the traditional authority be it a political figure, a financial institution, or a multinational corporation. Thus, for example, Genesis DAO adopted an idea of on-chain voting, which became "the primary means for expressing an opinion, while more granular and additional important information about disagreements and differences was sidelined" (Brekke et al, 2021).

Here one can refer to a concept of "dissensus", introduced by Jaya Klara Brekke, Kate Beecroft, and Francesca Pick, which "points to the limits of formalized governance (whether algorithmic or parliamentary) as the established means to negotiate disputes and conflict, because governance methods and mechanisms might themselves become a site of dissensus, forcing significant negotiation and transformation of the given project, or a 'fork'" (2021). Dissensus, according to Brekke, Beecroft and Pick, "points to the precise limits of efforts that approach governance as a problem to be solved in any final manner through mechanisms, incentives, and algorithms" (2021).

Genesis DAO is a good example of self-government by a group of highly motivated individuals who were able to take financial decisions by on-chain voting without the need to establish trusted relationships as the technology acted as means of trust (Brekke et al, 2021). There was, however, a divide between a recommendation to discuss proposals offline before submitting them for vote, and those advocating for keeping the majority of the communication within the chain. The anonymous voting did not let enough opportunities for a discussion, which in turn together with the absence of motivation to work through disagreement led to disengagement of a lot of members (Brekke et al, 2021).

Medieval Monsters and Two Williams

If one wishes to learn how to fight or tame a modern monster, various texts produced throughout the Middle Ages can become a point of inspiration. For instance, medieval chronicles offer in abundance accounts on signs, prodigies, marvels, and miracles, which Carl Watkins has gathered under an umbrella term "supernatural". According to Watkins, in the Middle Ages chroniclers understood the supernatural as extraordinary manifestations of divine power, producing things contrary to the customary course of nature, occurrences which "stood out against the grain of common experience and acquired some special significance as a consequence" (2007, p. 19). These include, for example, corpses which walked after death, green children, two greyhounds found alive inside a hollow stone, and a toad wearing a golden chain around its neck, also discovered inside a stone. Medievalists may argue about which of the above categories each occurrence belongs to (Watkins, for example, viewed them as "ambiguities"). At the same time, all these unusual creatures can be categorised as "monsters" – an "elastic term" according to Watkins. Indeed, as the fifth-century Christian philosopher Augustine of Hippo explained, the word "monsters" (Latin: *monstra*) originates from the Latin verb *monstrare* (to show), because they demonstrate (Latin: *demonstrare*) something to humans, teaching them a moral lesson (Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God* 21:8). Augustine's interpretation, later repeated by another early Christian thinker, Isidore of Seville (*Etymologies* IX.iii.4), meant that not all of the monsters had to be terrifying or dangerous, as modern popular culture tends to represent them. More importantly, monsters' existence poses a puzzle for humans to solve, allowing the latter to improve their understanding of various societal phenomena in the process.

One can rightfully note that there are not so many parallels between the medieval monsters and the monstrous blockchains. The former were understood to have been created by God, while the latter are the work of humans. Although scholars attempt to find rational explanations for the quirky medieval stories, to date we assume that these were not real-life occurrences. Blockchains, on the other hand, may be intangible yet pretty much real and present in multiple aspects of our lives. Still, the monster is born from and represents a dilemma for humanity to address, and this is true both for blockchains and for medieval monsters. What is therefore the focus of our interest, and the point of comparison in the present article, is human responses to monstrosities in the Middle Ages and today, that is medieval chroniclers' attempts to explain and rationalise the monstrous, and contemporary legal efforts to regulate the blockchains or fit them into the frames of an existing legislation. As we will demonstrate further, the medieval and modern approaches to monstrosities can be surprisingly similar to each other, both fighting monsters – or fighting the fear of them.

Below we will consider a few examples from two medieval chronicles, which parallel contemporary legal responses to blockchain technology. The first one is *The Deeds of the English Kings*, completed by the Benedictine monk William of Malmesbury around 1126 (William of Malmesbury 1998-99, i: pp. xxii–xxiii and ii: pp. xviii–xxii; Thompson 2003: 6). The second is *The History of English Affairs*, produced by the Augustinian canon William of Newburgh around 1198, as most historians agree (William of Newburgh 1988: 4–5; Gillingham 2001: 68–70). Both chronicles contain accounts on historical events along with chapters on fantastical supernatural occurrences. Both *The Deeds* and *The History* are of course not the only medieval sources containing elaborate accounts on the monstrous. We have chosen William of Newburgh's work as one of the case studies, due to his detailed descriptions of the apotropaics – that is, actions taken by the protagonists to protect themselves from monsters. We also wish to draw the readers' attention to a story narrated by William of Malmesbury, as it presents a medieval view upon a fantastical utopian regulated environment, which some of the blockchain advocates are wishing to build. In the next section, we will compare medieval apotropaics with contemporary legal ones.

Destroying the monster, or living with it

William of Newburgh's *History* contains four accounts about the walking dead. In the first, a man left his grave the night after his burial, wandered back to his house and lay down in bed, terrifying his widow. He found rest only after a letter of absolution was placed inside the tomb on the cadaver's chest following the advice provided by the bishop Hugh of Lincoln (William of Newburgh 1884 - 89, ii: 474–76). The three following stories are gorier. In the second account, a dead man was wandering around a village followed by packs of dogs, until the locals cut him limb from limb and burned the mutilated corpse to ashes (William of Newburgh 1884 - 89, ii: 476–77). In the third story, an undead chaplain stalked the bedchambers of the lady he used to serve while alive. He was struck with an axe by a brave friar, and later was also burned. The living noted with surprise that the corpse's wound let out way too much gore, implying that the dead man could have fed on other people's blood – for a modern reader this is a truly monstrous metaphor for crowdfunding (William of Newburgh 1884 - 89, ii: 477–79). Finally, in William's fourth walking-dead narrative, the living stopped a blood-sucking pestilential revenant from terrorising their neighbourhood by tearing out his heart and burning the rest (William of Newburgh 1884 - 89, ii: 479–82). While there are medieval symbolic explanations for why the undead were dealt with in these particular ways, the general result is that the monsters' existence mobilised horizontal action on behalf of the living (Ignatova 2018: 76 – 79). In the first narrative, the dead man's wife was protected by her friends, who spent the next night in her house, driving the revenant away by making loud noises. Unable to re-enter his house, the dead man attempted to visit his brothers and other villagers. While the locals were successfully preventing the walking corpse from entering their homes, they lacked knowledge to get rid of the revenant, and had to resort to the vertical authority: first to the local archdeacon named Stephen, who then transferred the issue to Hugh of Lincoln himself. In the rest of the narratives the protagonists seemed to possess relevant knowledge – even though their methods were less elegant than the one employed by Hugh. While in the second account the revenant's fate was decided at the council, the third and the fourth stories feature protagonists going rogue in their decision to destroy the walking corpses.

Furthermore, the responses as described by William can be viewed as two distinct courses of action. First, one could turn a monstrous walking corpse into an ordinary dead man, as it was done in the first narrative by Hugh of Lincoln. Alternatively, one could destroy the monster, as it occurred in the three remaining accounts. The two patterns – either making a monster mundane, or seeing it destroyed, appear in William's other accounts on the supernatural events. This is rather stark in the famous story about two children with green skin, reported to have been discovered emerging from the cavities in the ground by the village called Wolfpittes (modern: Woolpit) near Bury St Edmund's in Suffolk (William of Newburgh 1884–89, i: 82–84). The children – a boy and a girl – initially refused to eat anything but beans, but as time went by, they got accustomed to local food, learned the English language, and gradually lost their green colour. The boy died soon after the children were baptised. Meanwhile, the girl grew up and got married, thus fully integrating within human society.

The story of the green children is immediately followed by another prodigious account, which clearly mirrors the above narrative. During quarry works a shallow rock was split, letting out two dogs which somehow were concealed inside. Miraculously, the dogs also turned out to be of a hunting breed (William of Newburgh 1884–89, i: 84–87). While one of them died, the other was adopted by Henry, bishop of Winchester. Another quarry boasted a similar find: a stone consisting of two parts, which, when split, revealed a toad wearing a tiny golden chain. On this occasion the local bishop was disturbed by such a discovery, and ordered to close up the stone and bury it under a pile of rubbish forever.

As these case studies demonstrate, just like not all blockchains create a disproportionate and some may argue unjustified consumption of the environmental resources, only some medieval monsters were expected to destroy the environment and kill the living. This applies first and foremost to the restless dead. As William of Newburgh explained, the unearthed decomposing flesh would pollute the air, causing pestilence in the area. In his stories, William presents the knowledge of the undead's potential harm as accessible to the learned members of the community. The more simple were worried that the revenant would beat them black and blue. This is of course a useful cautionary tale about shifting attention away from the real danger. While populists emphasise blockchains' impenetrability to external influences, we forget that this technology is killing us softly through the environmental change.

The monster's inevitable escape, as Cohen has postulated, therefore occurs due to the fact that humanity sits uncomfortably with the presence of monsters. For each interaction, after humans have caught an exciting glimpse of a monstrosity, the latter must be either destroyed, or banalised, merging together with "the normies". The destruction or banalisation does not mean the monster's disappearance: "Regardless of how many times Sigourney Weaver's beleaguered Ripley utterly destroys the ambiguous Alien that stalks her, its monstrous progeny return, ready to stalk again in another bigger-than-ever sequel" (Cohen 2019: 4–5). The monster's escape therefore means our own inability to comprehend it, destroyed or banalised, the monster is no longer available for us to be studied. A revenant – the prodigious manifestation of life after death – blends with the other dead to the point that William of Newburgh's *History* does not preserve his name – we know him as "a man from Buckinghamshire". A green girl from a mysterious foreign land – according to William, the children reported that they came from a realm called "the land of St Martin" where it is always dusk – becomes an ordinary English woman. A hound miraculously discovered inside a stone, turns into a household dog. The monster thus transforms into a fully controllable and predictable entity.

This applies not only to creatures but also to whole landscapes. For example, William of Malmesbury narrates a story of Gerbert of Aurillac – also known as Pope Sylvester II – who according to the legend practiced dark arts. In William's narrative, Gerbert solved the puzzle of a metal statue with an extended forefinger of the right hand and the words inscribed on the head: "strike here," which was found in the Field of Mars (Rome). By digging where the shadow of the statue's right finger lay at midday, Gerbert entered an underground palace with gold walls, furniture, decorations, and even gold robotic figures. The latter also represented an alarm system, moving towards anyone who attempted to pick up any of the gold objects. Despite this, Gerbert's servant attempted to snatch a knife from the table, which caused one of the robots – a boy with a bow – to shoot an arrow through a carbuncle, a jewel whose shining filled the palace with light. As all the gold figures leaped towards the two living men in the darkness, Gerbert forced the servant to give up the knife to save their own lives (William of Malmesbury 1998–99, i: 284 – 86). While appearing as a setting for a *Doctor Who* episode, the golden palace also represents an environment regulated by algorithm, not so different from Amir Taaki's idea of a blockchain governance as well as Brekke, Beecraft and Pick's idea of the necessity of offline communication even with the blockchain governance (Brekke et al, 2021). A conversation between the two humans (Gerbert and his servant) without the involvement of technology saved their lives in the same way that offline conversations shape the online governance.

The fear of the unknown entities, or even whole environments created by unknown beings explored through medieval narratives, helps explain similar anxieties, which are addressed by the law-makers, but are also experienced by our society at large when it comes to technological developments. The contemporary creator economy, however, makes us rethink ownership, communities, money and power online (Aastresh, 2021), leading to a new normality where stone dogs are living as house pets, and green girls grow into ordinary women. Adopting a monster into a society changes its core and turns it into a human, adopting a legislation on a monstrous new technology turns it into something reliable. A thorough law would provide certainty, consumer protection, and real consequences for the companies that do not follow the rules. This is a position taken by the European Union towards some of the uses of blockchain technologies. Thus, in 2023 the EU has adopted a rather extensive regulation on cryptoassets which obliges the service providers to be properly registered and follow a set of legal rules. Two years earlier the UK had introduced a "Tax on cyberassets" paper (Trube et al, 2021). Thus, the legislation effectively turned a monster into just another financial means that is covered by the authorities.

Simultaneously, there are rather bold claims connecting blockchains to the future technological progress milestones "from property registries for asteroid mining, to supply chain management systems, or interplanetary cryptocurrencies for the space economy" (De Filippi, Leiter, 2021: 413), making them truly an undead man knocking on every door in the village. Most of these projects exist only on paper, yet they keep appearing and multiplying thus attracting attention from individuals all over the world who are ready to invest and be part of the space race. Another example is Elon Musk who "announced in May 2021 that a SpaceX mission to the Moon with an estimated cost of 62 million USD would allegedly be entirely funded in Dogecoins" (De Filippi, Leiter, 2021: 417). How would the legal systems manage to control such projects?

In a similar vein as dangerous monsters that are burned or buried inside a pile of quarry rubbish, blockchains, however popular and profitable they may be, are a subject of heavy restrictions and bans that do not leave much room for a discussion. Thus, in many countries there is a partial or total ban of cryptocurrencies. For example, there is a total ban on using and mining cryptocurrencies in China, which interestingly had an effect on the demand of mining (Trube et al, 2021). Even with some number of illegal operations, the ban proved to be effective, at least from the environmental perspective. According to Jon Trube et al, "the Chinese prohibition resulted in carbon leakage as many miners relocated their revenue-generating mining devices to neighbouring countries, such as Kazakhstan, but also further to the USA and Canada" (2021).

De Filippi and Leiter point out an interesting detail about the legal and practical functioning of futuristic blockchains, namely that they are unable to create a technological invention as they are. They can be used as means to finance the development, or to spread the information, but after all "all of these applications require, on the one hand, a trusted set of 'oracles' that can feed the blockchain-based system with external information, and, on the other hand, a third-party enforcement authority that can intervene in case of a dispute. These issues are not specific to outer space; they apply to every application of blockchain technology that needs to interface with a non-blockchain-based structure" (De Filippi, Leiter, 2021: 418). The key here is adaptation and conversation, online and offline, as one can see on the example of Genesis DAO.

Notably there is always something destroyed in the process of discovery or integration of the medieval monsters. Stones, caves, physical bodies, all are the seemingly unimportant details in the narrative sacrificed for the sake of either taming or killing the monster. These are parts of the environment or, as one can put it, a price to pay. A dead man, whose grave is disturbed, and whose body is mutilated and burned, with the ashes scattered in the wind, is removed from the community of the dead which especially in the medieval context was to be remembered by the living and interconnected with their community. His grave, which is supposed to commemorate his life, has been destroyed. Similarly, the invention and operation of the blockchain monster costs human lives and the environment. For some this price is negligible in order to be able to use the gold palace built in cryptocurrencies. For others, the price is non-negotiable and makes all the riches provided by a particular application of the technology worthless. Monsters are usually not mourned after they are killed. Thus, there is a proposal within the EU to prohibit proof-of-work blockchain technologies (such as what Bitcoin operates on) in order to protect the environment (Bateman, 2022). New York State Senate has adopted "a bill specifically halting proof-of-work blockchain verification methods until an environmental impact assessment takes place" (Truby et al, 2021).

Concluding remarks

Cohen states that a monster becomes what we see in it (2019: 20). Among our medieval examples, we have seen how the protagonists could either suffer from facing the monstrosity, or approach it with a curious open mind. Similarly, blockchain technology may be perceived as a great innovative tool to achieve a wide variety of financial, political, cultural, societal, and even environmental goals. Thus, it is accepted in the traditional legal sphere, and assimilated through regulation. It can also be seen as a threat, immediate or future, for the same structures (economy, culture, society, governmental order), and approached with fear, bans, prohibitions and restrictions. Either way, abstaining from legal action and letting this particular monster simply wander around the village at night, is not an option anymore for better or for worse. The monster of blockchain "asks us how we perceive the world" (Cohen, 2019: 20), because in order to regulate it, we often have to redefine our understanding of the different spheres of life affected by blockchains. The ultimate question is inevitably whether we can safely accommodate the blockchain monster, and at what price.

References

Association for Computing Machinery (2018) *Proceedings of the 2018 International Conference on Blockchain Technology and Application*. New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery.

Bateman, Tom. (2022). "EU regulator calls for a ban on proof of work Bitcoin mining to save renewable energy". *Euronews*, 19 January. Available at: https://www.euronews.com/next/2022/01/19/eu-regulator-calls-for-a-ban-on-proof-of-work-bitcoin-mining-to-save-renewable-energy [Accessed 25 September 2025].

Brekke, Jaya Klara, Beecroft, Kate and Pick, Francesca (2021). "The Dissensus Protocol: Governing Differences in Online Peer Communities". *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*, 26 May. Available at: https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/human-dynamics/articles/10.3389/fhumd.2021.641731/full [Accessed 25 September 2025].

Brown, Ian and Marsden, Christopher T. (2013). *Regulating Code: Good Governance and Better Regulation in the Information Age*. MIT Press.

CleanApp (2021). "How 'Public' are Global Public Blockchains? From 'public' as open, to blockchain pro bono publico". *Crypto Law Review*, 22 September. Available at: https://medium.com/cryptolawreview/how-public-are-global-public-blockchains-cabd7b35660f [Accessed 25 September 2025].

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. (1996). *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. University of Minnesota Press.

Corbet, Shaen, Yarovaya, Larisa (2020). "The environmental effects of cryptocurrencies" in Corbet, Shaen. et al. (eds.) *Cryptocurrency and Blockchain Technology*, pp. 149 – 184. De Gruyter.

De Filippi, Primavera and Leiter, Andrea (2021). "Blockchain in Outer Space." *AJIL Unbound*, 115, pp. 413–418. doi:10.1017/aju.2021.63.

Galati, Francesco (2018). "Blockchain as a Process: Ideologies and Motivations Behind the Technology." *The Domino*, 26 March. Available at: https://medium.com/the-domino/blockchain-as-a-process-ideologies-and-motivations-behind-the-technology-c25219d87881 [Accessed 25 September 2025].

Gillingham, John. (2001). "William of Newburgh and Emperor Henry VI". In W. Koch and A. Schmid (eds.). *Auxilia Historica: Festschrift für Peter Acht zum 90. Geburtstag*. C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, pp. 51–72.

Herian, Robert (2018) *Regulating Blockchain: Critical Perspectives in Law and Technology*. Routledge.

Hulme, Thomas A. (2020). "The Ethical and Legal Aspects of Blockchain Technology and Cryptoassets" in Corbet, Shaen. et al. (eds.) *Cryptocurrency and Blockchain Technology*. De Gruyter.

Ignatova, Polina. (2018). "Moving between Life and Death: Horror Films and the Medieval Walking Corpse". In Marina Gerzic and Aidan Norrie (eds.). *From Medievalism to Early-Modernism: Adapting the English Past.* Routledge, pp. 67 – 81.

Korhonen, Outi, Dogot, Delphine and Leiter, Andrea (2019). "Blockchain Governance: Redistributing Societal Interactions and Institutions – A Research Agenda." *Crypto Law Review*, 30 October. Available at: https://medium.com/cryptolawreview/blockchain-governance-redistributing-societal-interactions-and-institutions-a-research-agenda-f644da4af0ab#_ftn1 [Accessed 25 September 2025].

Korhonen, Outi and Rantala, Juho (2021). "Blockchain Governance Challenges: Beyond Libertarianism." *AJIL Unbound*, 115, pp. 408–412. doi:10.1017/aju.2021.65.

Korhonen, Outi and Rantala, Juho (2021) "The Case Against Ripple: Microhistories of Cases in the Blockchain Space". *Crypto Law Review*, 5 September. Available at:_https://medium.com/cryptolawreview/the-case-against-ripple-microhistories-of-cases-in-the-blockchain-space-c446ab85394a [Accessed 25 September 2025].

Luckhurst, Roger (2020). "After monster theory? Gareth Edwards's *Monsters*." *Science Fiction Film and Television*, 13 (2), pp. 269 – 290.

Mittman, Asa and Hensel, Marcus. (2020). "Introduction: 'A Marvel of Monsters'" in Mittman, Asa and Hensel, Marcus. (eds.) *Classic Readings on Monster Theory*, pp.1-8.

Nakamoto, S. (2008) 'Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System'. Available at: http://www.bitcoin.org/bitcoin.pdf [Accessed 25 September 2025].

Reijers, Wessel and Coeckelbergh, Mark (2018) "The Blockchain as a Narrative Technology: Investigating the Social Ontology and Normative Configurations of Cryptocurrencies". *Philosophical Technology*, 31, pp. 103–130. Available at:

https://rdcu.be/eHeFl [Accessed 25 September 2025].
Thompson, Rodney. (2003). *William of Malmesbury.* Boydell & Brewer.
Truby, Jon et al. (2022) "Blockchain, Climate Damage, and Death: Policy Interventions to Reduce the Carbon Emissions, Mortality, and Net-Zero Implications of Non-Fungible Tokens and Bitcoin." *Energy Research & Social Science*, 88 [Online]. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2022.102540 [Accessed 25 September 2025].
Urquhart, Andrew and Yarovaya, Larisa (2020). "Introduction to Cryptocurrencies." In Corbet, Shaen et al. (eds.). *Cryptocurrency and Blockchain Technology*. 1st ed. Vol. 1. Germany: De Gruyter.
Watkins, Carl. (2007). *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England*. Cambridge University Press.
Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew (2020). "Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory". In Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (ed.). *The Monster Theory Reader.* The University of Minnesota Press.
William of Malmesbury. (1998 - 99). *Gesta regum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. by Roger Aubrey Baskerville Mynors, Rodney Thomson and Michael Winterbottom. Clarendon Press. 2 vols.
William of Newburgh (1884 - 89). "Historia rerum Anglicarum". In Richard Howlett (ed.). *Chronicles of the reigns of Stephen, Henry II, and Richard I.* Longman. 4 vols, i: pp. 1–408, and ii: pp. 9–53.
William of Newburgh (1988). *The History of English Affairs: Book I*, ed. and trans. by Peter Walsh and M. J. Kennedy. Aris & Phillips Ltd.

Authors

Ekaterina Markovich is a doctoral researcher in the field of international law, technology and philosophy. She holds an LLM from Lund University, Sweden and is about to defend her doctoral dissertation at Faculty of Law University of Turku, Finland. Her research interests include conflicts of law and power in human rights law with a special interest in law and technology, law and memory, law and culture and sociology of law.

Polina Ignatova is a historian of the Middle Ages with a passion for connecting past and present, particularly focusing on environmental and cultural histories. Her research interests include death and life after death, monsters and monstrosity, human relationship with non-human animals, aquatic ecosystems, and Islamic history and art. She is the co-founder and host of the Memory and Nature podcast.

Culture Unbound
Journal of Current Cultural Research

Golem & AI: Technologically Advanced Monsters

Tetiana Sovhyra, Serhii Vytkalov, Viktoriia Volynets, Liudmyla Dykhnych and Ihor Brailko

Abstract

Today, the phenomenon of the golem becomes a symbol of technological progress, especially in the form of modern android robots, raising important questions about technological singularity, subjectivity, and authorship (as presented in a number of legislative and regulatory documents). Creepy examples of golems in mythology, scientific and journalistic literature, performances, or modern technological experiments evoke feelings of fear and cause cognitive dissonance (the uncanny valley effect), which serves as a protective human reaction to the 'behaviour of artificial monsters'. However, modern practices of organising the creative process using a brain-computer interface are taking on special characteristics, given the merging of humans and AI into a single organism. After all, in such practices, it is extremely difficult to determine the creativity of a technological golem and the corresponding risks to humans. Therefore, the article raises important questions about the potential misuse and abuse of AI's technological capabilities in the production process, summarises legal and regulatory aspects, and considers possible future scenarios for the development of humanity in the context of transhumanist ideas.

Keywords: golem, monster, artificial intelligence, authorship, algorithmic creativity, robotisation, uncanny valley, singularity

Sovhyra et al: "Golem & AI: Technologically Advanced Monsters", *Culture Unbound*, Volume 18, issue 2, 2026: 55–79. Published by Linköping University Electronic Press: http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.6265

Introduction and aim

People have long dreamed of creating a unique device or artificial intelligence that would perform necessary production functions, as evidenced by the famous Jewish legend of the Golem – a clay giant artificially created by Kabbalist rabbis to perform extremely difficult work and protect the Jewish people from attacks by foreigners in Prague (sixteenth century). This character from Jewish mythology supposedly performed certain actions under the influence of Kabbalistic spells. According to legend, when the 'programming failed', the Golem destroyed everything around him, got out of his master's control, and killed him. As a result, the technological functionality of the artificially created Golem literally destroyed a human being.

This thesis is particularly relevant today, as we live in an era of digital golems. The appearance of the first industrial robot, *Unimate*, in 1954 at *General Motors* was the starting point for the evolution of robotic systems, which gradually integrated into the field of art, applying aesthetic computing (Fishwick 2006). Modern technologies have demonstrated the ability to transform matter into energy and information processes, which has led to a rethinking of the fundamental ontological categories of being. As a result, there has been a gradual levelling of the gap between technological innovations and art, between scientific knowledge and magical-mythological models of understanding reality. "Technical images are perceived as the result of the action of programmes and devices that increasingly determine the ways in which humans think and perceive reality." (Flusser 2000: 12). The complication of the creative process technological component, in particular mechanisation and automation, has increasingly changed the specifics of artistic creativity, style and production results. These observations point to the culture-creating potential of technological systems, which are gradually becoming more self-sufficient and self-learning, like the mythological golem. Therefore, we propose a comparative method of the golem and its modern prototype, which allows to study the level of trust in artificially created golems, as well as to identify possible fears and risks for human activity, based not only on mythological stories about monsters, but also considering modern examples of the 'disobedience' of technological golems.

The examples of the Golem's existence in mythology, scientific and journalistic literature, illustrations, spectacular performances or modern technological experiments instil fear, cause cognitive dissonance and create the uncanny valley effect (a person's reaction to the realism of an artificially created object when it approaches a real source) (Mori 2012: 99). Modern brain research using fMRI proves that the prefrontal cortex of the human brain identifies and divides images into human (acceptable) and non-human (unacceptable). But the decision whether to trust or not is made by the amygdala (which is responsible for decision-making and emotions) (Rosenthal-von der Pütten et al. 2019: 6555). Therefore, with an emphasis on identifying the uncanny valley effect, an analogy is drawn between a golem, a monster, and artificial intelligence (Tinwell et al. 2011: 326-341). The problem of losing control over an artificially created mechanism, which lies at the heart of the mythological plot, consolidates the theory of technological singularity, according to which the ability of a robotic device to function without human programming (control) is realised (Vernor 1993). In order to clarify the problem of subjectivity in the organisation of robotic practices, both technocentric conceptual views on the organisation of the creative process (which find their expression mainly in the conceptual sphere of technological determinism) and anthropocentric approaches to understanding artistic culture (established in posthumanism and transhumanism, the theory of technological singularity).

Another analogy lies in the approximation of the mythological process of creating a golem to artistic creativity, since the creator of a golem is essentially an artist. The question of cultural creativity (inspiration, ideas and their materialisation) resonates with the methods of artificial prototyping. No matter how hard artists try to explain their motives and methods, it is impossible to find a comprehensive answer to this question. James Sturm, author of *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, believes that the golem continues to resonate with artists and writers because the story mimics the artistic process: "You create a work of art, and then it takes on a life of its own." (Sturm 2017). This process can be interpreted through the prism of Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra, according to which contemporary culture functions in a mode of hyperreality, where signs and algorithmic models replace material reality (Baudrillard 1981: 6). In the context of our research, the simulacrum plays a special role because, as a copy of something that does not exist, it presupposes its origin in the artist's imagination and only then its material realisation in space. The simulacrum is not just a copy of copies, but a phantasmagorical image unlike anything that has existed before. When Deleuze writes that "the present is determined by the force of the simulacrum" (Deleuze 1990: 265), he insists that each era forms its own 'simulacral' versions, taking into account the challenges of the time (Smith 2005: 102). According to the concept of creativity by R. Folgieri, M. Granato, C. Luciari and D. Greki, "the artist's idea approaches a state of consciousness" (Folgieri et al 2014: 65-97), but the human mind begins to realise the process of implementing a creative idea only when the task of technological representation arises. As a result, the divergent is often replaced by the canonical. These processes correlate with W. Benjamin's thesis about the loss of the 'aura' of a work of art in the conditions of its technical reproducibility, which in the digital age acquires a new dimension – algorithmic (Hansen 2008: 336). These theoretical foundations allow us not only to compare the monster-golem with contemporary narratives about the perfection of AI as a technologically advanced prototype of the mythological golem, but also to explore issues of creativity, authorship, and subjectivity in AI applications.

Most legal discussions focus on issues of ethics in the application of artificial intelligence (Magrani 2019: 1-19; Larsson 2020: 1-16; Kenneth-Southworth & Li 2022: 418-427), legal status (Begishev 2023) and aspects of competition law (Beneke & Mackenrodt 2019: 109-134; Chen 2023: 187-200; Zhuk 2023: 1299-1309). Scholars describe the criminogenic potential and preventive role of AI (Broadhurst et al. 2019) and examine the legal situation regarding automation and AI in the United Kingdom, the United States and Asia (Walker-Osborn 2018: 42-43). Most of them argue that cultural practices of AI implementation cannot be unique and original, as they ultimately turn out to be a product of human programming and training data (Hofstadter 1999: 83-91). The question of understanding the implementation of AI in creativity is based on the assertion that computing systems imitate human behaviour (Janjanam 2022: 1425-1433). Scientists agree that there is still no AI technology that is self-aware, independent, and capable of dealing with emotional and social effects (Hadzi & Roio 2020, 1-18). Instead, J. Litman notes: “Copyright laws become obsolete when technology renders obsolete the assumptions on which they are based.” (Litman 2006: 22). S. Ligon argues that if we recognise the originality of products created by AI, then we must recognise the subjectivity of artificial authors (Ligon 2019: 51). In this context, attention is focused on the issue of diminishing the role of human activity in the organisation of artistic creativity and, accordingly, research.

The golem in various monster forms

The word *golem* itself appeared long before the mystical legend about the great sixteenth-century Prague Kabbalist and Talmudist Rabbi Jehuda Loew ben Bezalel, who created it to protect the Jewish community from Christian attacks. The Hebrew word *galmi*, meaning *unformed mass*, is found in Psalm 139:16:

> Your eyes saw my unformed limbs;
> they were all recorded in Your book;
> in due time they were formed,
> to the very last one of them.

A later midrash on the creation of man states that Adam was a golem, a body without a soul, until the fourth hour of his existence, when God breathed life into him. Without the intellect and spontaneous creativity of the human mind, Adam would have been nothing more than a golem – as he is, in fact, called in some old rabbinical stories interpreting the biblical narrative (Scholem 1966; Vudka 2020: 108). A thirteenth-century manuscript written by Rabbi Eleazar of Worms, one of

Figure 1. *Le Golem et Rabbi Loew près de Prague* (M. Dvořak, 1951), oil on canvas, 244 x 202 cm (Prague, Židovske Muzeum © Jaroslav Horejc)

the first German Kabbalists, contains detailed instructions for creating a golem; by the end of that century, summoning a golem was a common part of Kabbalistic practice (Cooper 2017).

However, returning to the legend of the sixteenth-century golem, according to which he protected Jews from attacks by Christians, it is worth remembering that the golem is depicted as a monster who got out of control of his master and killed him, turning him to ashes. According to another version of the legend, the Prague Golem was an extreme literalist. When he was ordered to bring water from the well to Rabbi Jehuda Loew's house, he continued to carry buckets of water until the house was flooded. He became so uncontrollable that Rabbi Jehuda Loew was forced to erase the sacred name engraved on his clay forehead, thus putting an end to his existence. According to legend, his body was hidden in the attic of an old synagogue in Prague (Cooper 2017).

The idea of creating a golem is aesthetically represented in the discourse of several eras. Since the eighteenth century, the mythological golem has gone beyond esoteric thought, becoming the subject of numerous literary works and film adaptations. As a literary motif, the golem was probably familiar to Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, author of the novel *Frankenstein* (1818). The golem and Dr. Frankenstein's creation are linked in people's imaginations. Both stories explore humanity's fascination with creating life, while highlighting the risks of hubris and the potential dangers that may arise.

In the first half of the twentieth century, numerous interpretations of the legend of the golem appeared, linked to issues of migration, persecution and national identity became extremely relevant. According to the Jewish magazine *Moment*:

> The golem – much like the amorphous clay from which it is usually formed, the golem is a highly mutable metaphor with seemingly limitless symbolism. It can be victim or villain, Jew or non-Jew, man or woman-or sometimes both. Over the centuries, it has been used to connote war, community, isolation, hope and despair" (Cooper 2017).

Gustav Meyrink's novel of the same name (1915) is clear evidence of a successful experiment in representing Jewish legend, which has been aesthetically transformed in the discourse of several eras. "Appearing in the midst of the First World War, Meyrink's work reflected the sense of an imminent apocalypse arising from the destructive potential of modernity, with the Jew as its sign." (Gelbin 2022: 86). Monsters "mirror the anxieties and fears of society, emerging more vigorously at points in time and history when cultural stresses are keenest." (Spiro 2013). "The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence." (Cohen 1996: 4).

Numerous film adaptations of the legend and experimental theatre productions about the golem became extremely popular in the early twentieth century: P. Wegener's German expressionist horror film *Der Golem: Wie er in die Welt kam* (1920) and H. Leivick's play *The Golem: How He Came into the World* (1921) depict the golem in two radically different ways. In Wegener's work, the golem is a heartless monster capable of killing and tormenting, while in Leivick's work, he is needy, afraid of being left alone and powerless to save the Jewish people (Spiro 2013: 12). An important reference book for fans of the golem is I. Moshe's *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions about the Artificial Anthropoid* (1990). In it, I. Moshe argues that the role of the concept of the golem in Judaism was to give the Jewish elite an exceptional status by endowing them with supernatural abilities derived from their profound knowledge of Hebrew and its magical and mystical values (Nechvatal 2017). Further variations on the golem image are impressively diverse: from an executive slave (*Foucault's Pendulum* by U. Eco) to a defender of Jews (*Inglourious Basterds* by Q. Tarantino, 2009, *Supernatural. Everybody Hates Hitler* (season 8, episode 13, 2013) and *Sleepy Hollow. Golem* (episode 1, season 10, 2013)) and saviour of humanity (the film *Golem: The Beginning* by D. Paz, Y. Paz, 2018). However, there are examples in which the golem is demonised to enhance the dramatic effect. In particular, the television series *Sherlock* (2010) drew a comparison between the golem and a murderer who 'squeezes' the life out of people with his bare hands. In the Japanese television series *Super Sentai* (season *Kaito Sentai Lupinranger vs. Keisatsu Sentai Patranger*), the character Destra has grenades that can be used to create giant golems. In the dystopian play *R.U.R.*, K. Čapek identifies the golem monster with mechanisms made in a factory from grown tissues and organs. According to the plot, Čapek's golems rebel and kill their masters, but, like Wegener's golem, they also have emotional experiences and erotic desires. In the thriller *The Golem* (2016) by director J. C. Medina, a series of horrific murders takes place that cannot be explained by logic or common sense. A dramatic presentation is the humanoid robotic metaphor of the awakening of post-humanity in *School of the Moon* (2016). Thus, the simultaneous technological perfection and slavish weakness of the golem allow it to take radically opposite positions, which can be reinterpreted according to the needs of the narrator.

This multifaceted nature of the image probably explains its popularity today, especially in the visual arts. L. Fishman's painting *Golem* (1981), presented at the exhibition *Golem! Danger, Deliverance and Art* (curated by E. Bilski, New York, 1988), J. Seinfeld's series of five photographs *Golem* (1999) at two exhibitions (Prague and Paris, 1999) and many other paintings, drawings, photographs, cinematic clips, sculptures, and comics illustrate the interest of contemporary researchers in the golem phenomenon (Nechvatal, 2017) (Fig. 2).

These observations of various manifestations of the golem culminate in a new film, *Five Nights with Freddy's 2* (2025) by E. Tammi, in which humanoid and robotic animatronics are controlled by the demonic character Puppet in order to take revenge on humans. However, here they are only used as tools for the evil intentions of their creator, and are not capable of harming humans on their own. A similar subtext can be found in the famous novel *Wrath Becomes Her* (2023) by A. Polydoros, where a golem is created from river mud for revenge. A man uses kishuf magic to create the golem Vera, who must destroy the Nazis who killed his daughter. This plot twist explains the idea of traditional mysticism: to protect the Jewish people. Vera struggles to find her own identity and discovers that people are trying to use dark forces (kishuf magic), putting humanity in danger. In the novel

Figure 2. *Golem* (J. Seinfeld, 1999), series of 5 photographs
(Prague, Židovske Muzeum © Adagp, Paris)

The Robot Hides in the School (2024) by A. Kokotyukha we find similar narratives about the deliberate programming of robots to carry out evil human intentions. A Ukrainian family leaves their home and flees from the occupiers' shelling, leaving their robot assistant Romchik behind. Later, robot is taken by a thief to commit thefts. Romchik, like Vera from the novel *Wrath Becomes Her*, tries to find his own identity, but his programmed functionality does not allow him to act independently. Thus, the golem becomes a monster only as a result of appropriate programming – in order to perform tasks delegated by a human being. However, it is significant that these literary works also demonstrate the golem's desire to make independent decisions, oppose its creator, and take the law into its own hands. The golem of Brooklyn, created from plasticine by L. Bronstein, a Jewish art teacher in a secondary school, shows curiosity about his past. The golem decides to go to Kentucky to kill a group of white racists who hate Jews and are holding a rally there (Mansbach 2023). Another motivation for the golem's disobedience and opposition to its creator's intentions can be found in stories where golems fall in love, are rejected, and this causes their destructive rage. We find such a golem in the play *Prince Ferrix and Princess Crystal*, based on a story by S. Lem, staged at the *Copernicus Science Centre* in Warsaw (Poland). The main character, the robot Ferrix, falls in love with the robot Crystal (Legierska 2014). However, the heroine dreams of falling in love with a human and ignores all the robots competing for her attention. The song recreates the image of a golem who wants to imitate human behaviour and fall in love with a human. The radically opposite manifestations of the mythological character's functioning (protection and danger) make it possible to interpret the role of the golem in storytelling and the stimulation of concepts of technophilia and technophobia in different ways.

Summarising the various roles of the golem, it can be stated that each of its numerous representations (in literature, theatre, cinema, visual arts, or popular culture) is perceived as an image of human existence and reflects the concerns of its creators and the anxieties of the era in which they lived. Accordingly, the golem is seen as a concept for expressing the fears and challenges of a particular era, for emphasising the ambivalence of the relationship with scientific and technological progress. In this sense, the scientist (creator) seeks to benefit humanity, just as the rabbis' goal was to save Jews threatened by violence; therefore, any danger that arises as a result is an unintended consequence. It is this dialectical nature of the golem – both saviour and destroyer – that provides fertile ground for comparisons with AI and inspires writers, filmmakers and artists to interpret this archetype.

Reasons for the incorrect operation of AI golems: imperfect functioning or "uncanny disobedience"

The similarity between golems and monsters of the nuclear age is striking. As we strive to create the perfect robot, the terrifying possibility that they may develop a will of their own, become treacherous, or simply replace humans in various fields of activity grows stronger (Singer 1984). This technophobic thesis existed during various periods of industrialisation not only in scientific and journalistic literature, but was also manifested in various forms of human activity, in particular, it led to the destruction of looms and other mechanised machines by workers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England, and ultimately to the Luddite resistance in Europe in the early nineteenth century (Clancy 2017: 392-398). Today, significant investments in the development of automated mechanisms and the rapid pace of robotic renewal of the workforce of leading companies in difficult market conditions reinforce the importance of rethinking the use of technological golems. After all, every innovation is partly perceived as a golem (performer and innovator) and is subject to critical review by the scientific community. Not to mention the *Golem Alef* (*Golem Number One*) computer, developed by specialists at the Weizmann Institute in Israel in 1965. At the opening ceremony, A. Sholem spoke about the similarities between the Golem of Prague and the computer, concluding with the following words: "So I resign myself and say to the Golem and its creator: develop peacefully and don't destroy the world. Shalom." (Scholem 2023). At the same time, the author of the term *artificial intelligence*, J. McCarthy, warns that the capabilities of modern technology exceed those of humans (McCarthy 1987: 1030). These appeals allegorically illustrate (well-founded) expectations of scientists for self-sufficient functioning of computer systems, illusory determination of the subjectivity of the golem.

J. Jefferson, author of the scientific article *The Mind of the Mechanical Man* (1949), notes:

> We have had a hard task it dissuade man from reading qualities of human mind into animals. I see a new and greater danger threatening – that of anthropomorphizing the machine. When we hear it said that wireless valves think, we may despair of language (Jefferson 1949: 1106).

In this context, we are not talking about a technologically perfect system, but about the mental and psycho-emotional abilities that a person conditionally endows an artificially created system with. As a result, the mechanism personifies the subject of creativity, a participant in the production process, which raises a number of ethical issues, in particular regarding intellectual property, privacy and bias.

Similar ideas about the subjective self-expression of AI can be found in the famous novel by S. Lem's novel *Golem XIV* (1978), in which the American military decided to implement AI to automate military command and political-economic actions – in other words, to create an absolute artificial strategist that would ensure global superiority for the United States. A programme with an initial budget of $19 billion was launched, but that was only the beginning. The construction of centres is developing very rapidly to satisfy the need for computing power (for example, Colossus, Elon Musk's xAI supercomputer located in Tennessee, which has 200,000 NVIDIA chips with plans to expand to a million). Our minds are filled with fears about the dark side of artificial intelligence, inspired once again by fantastical movie plots. From the HAL 9000 computer, which killed the crew of the Discovery One spacecraft, to the Skynet system, which brought about Judgment Day for all of humanity. These apocalyptic scenarios are still a long way off, but for now, the greatest concern is the use of artificial intelligence by humans for selfish purposes (as in the film *Freddy's Five Friends*, the novels *The Robot Hides in School* and *Wrath Becomes Her*), as well as the erroneous results of AI functioning, reminiscent of the results of the disobedient 'behavior' of the mythological golem.

Modern artificial golems (neural networks, AI agents) have the unique ability to simulate the future conduct of a system to support a wide range of tasks. Such algorithmic improvisation reminds us of the behaviour of the mythological golem with its unpredictable actions and consequences. Digital twins mostly do not have an anthropomorphic appearance, but are perceived as subjects of the creative process (Aguirre 2025: 89). When these artificial golems make mistakes, produce unpredictable results, or refuse to perform the necessary tasks altogether, this subjectivity becomes uncontrollable. Let us consider such cases.

In December 2024, *Semafor* wrote that Slovenian filmmaker Nenad Cicin-Sain used ChatGPT to generate a script for an upcoming film (Albergotti, 2024). The director hoped to receive the result in a matter of minutes, but the chatbot requested two to three weeks. Cicin-Sain, thinking that the task really did require that much time, asked for it to be completed in two weeks. However, ChatGPT did not send a single fragment of the script during the planned period, each time coming up with new excuses and promising to complete the work in the near future. In conclusion, he wrote that he had not been given a clear deadline. The episode appears to be a new kind of elaborate, multi-day 'hallucination', where an AI model answers something incorrectly and then refuses to budge from that position (Ibid). The problem, writes *Semafor*, is that LLM is unable to build a long memory algorithm to maintain a contextually coherent narrative, but the fundamental reason lies in the fact that these models are predictive and base their responses on probabilities, and original ideas are not born this way (Ibid.). The most important conclusion from this experience was that AI bears no responsibility for its actions. After all, the director paid to use the neural network to obtain the final product (the script), but the AI golem failed to deliver on its promise. S. Lem wrote aptly on this subject: a conscientious computer thinks about how to perform a task, while an intelligent one thinks about how to get rid of it (Konior 2023: 101).

A similar negative result occurred on the Cursor AI programming platform, where the AI, after writing approximately 750–800 lines of code, stopped working and displayed the following message: "I cannot generate code for you, as that would be completing your work […] Generating code for others can lead to dependency and reduced learning opportunities" (Edwards 2025). *Ars Technica* experts, who reported on this incident, explained that the model learned from programming resources (Stack Overflow), where expert programmers advise beginners to solve problems on their own. In 2015, Swiss police 'arrested' the online bot *Random Darknet Shopper*, which made illegal purchases (including drugs) on the Internet (Eveleth 2015), and the *NTSB* website published fatal accidents caused by the malfunctioning of automated vehicles (NTSB 2019). These are not isolated cases of malfunctions, which indicate the imperfection of technological developments and force us to think about the constant control of artificial generation processes. Examples of 'disobedience' seem to indicate resistance by neural networks to performing the tasks entrusted to them. This looks particularly frightening in cases of malfunctioning robotic mechanisms. The execution of specific programmed missions (tasks), scanning of the surrounding space, and prediction of further functioning based on the data obtained form the conditional autonomy of the 'behaviour' of anthropomorphic robots (Sovhyra 2021). "37-year-old Japanese motorcycle factory worker was killed by a robot, [which] mistakenly identified the worker as a threat to its work and calculated that the most effective way to eliminate this threat was to push him into a neighbouring working machine." (Hallevy 2010). It follows that autonomous decision-making by robots will inevitably lead to accidents and harm to people and society as a whole, whether intentional or unintentional. Whether such a technological failure could lead to singularity is an extremely relevant question today.

The more robots resemble humans, the more they frighten people, evoking feelings of disgust and hostility (the uncanny valley effect). Scientist K. MacDorman points out that the valley refers to the level of similarity between the human observer and a similar copy – a copy of that person (MacDorman & Chattopadhyay 2016: 191-192). The research results of the neural activity prove that humanoid robots cause cognitive dissonance and are perceived primarily as monsters rather than social partners. For example, researchers A. M. Rosenthal-von der Puten, N. C. Krämer, S. Maderwald, M. Brand and F. Grabenhorst scanning people's brains while interacting with artificial agents, found the following: "Functionally related areas encoded critically important input data for signals: the temporal-parietal region encoded a linear continuum of human likeness, while nonlinear representations of human likeness in the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (DMPC) and fusiform gyrus emphasised the difference between human and non-human" (Rosenthal-von der Pütten et al. 2019: 6556). This conflict of neural selectivity in linear-nonlinear transformation creates the uncanny valley effect, which clearly demonstrates people's rejection of their artificial likeness, an artificial golem with non-human abilities. The rebellious behaviour of such a golem reinforces technophobic sentiments; in its various roles, it acts as a monster that arouses distrust and fear. In contrast, the emergence of the cyborg as a further variation of the technological golem in human form raises increasingly provocative questions that focus "not so much on the tension between the liberal humanist tradition and the posthuman but on different versions of the posthuman as they continue to evolve in conjunction with intelligent machines" (Hailes 2005: 2). Artificial intelligent robots may become the next 'carriers' of human consciousness, while avoiding the limitations of current biology (Fuller 2011: 2). "The closest transposition would be permitting the BCI device and the human author to be named as co-authors of the work." (Ramirez-Caminatti 2023: 29). The brain-computer interface "uses artificially generated electrical signals to stimulate brain tissue in order to transmit a specific type of sensory information or simulate a specific neurological function" (Saha et al. 2021: 403), "provides humanity with invasive capabilities that have not been encountered before, requiring the creation of new or special human rights; [...] to cognitive freedom; [...] mental privacy; [...] mental integrity; and [...] psychological continuity" (Botes 2023: 11). In this case, the risks of influencing human consciousness are extremely significant. The question is, what's gonna be more important in these 2.0 entities – human nature or techno-golem – a question for further hypothetical statements and thoughts. After all, with a malfunctioning BCI device, a person can become a monster to themselves.

Neuroscientists often use computer analogies to study human memory. This fusion of cognitive and technological concepts is illustrated in the performative installation *Melting Memories* (2018, University of California, Frankfurt) by Turkish media artist R. Anadol, which visualises data obtained during an electroencephalogram of the brain as a 3D animation on a media wall (Fig. 3), creating a personalised experience that reflects the unique memories of visitors (Bleeker et al. 2020: 12). This approach illustrates a new aesthetic of the creative process, where AI-based creative agents generate aesthetic products that are evaluated reflexively rather than deterministically. Quality is assessed based on the subjective experience they provide, rather than on the accuracy of representation (Contreras-Koterbay 2019: 107). Despite its ability to represent human memory, modern AI does not yet have a clearly defined specificity of subjectivity. Although the ultimate goal of AI is to mimic human cognitive abilities, it remains spatially and temporally detached, preventing it from achieving the unique subjectivity that defines human thinking.

Transhumanists strive for the post-human goal of immortality, which can be achieved through the creation of a constructed being that no longer dies, possesses unlimited intelligence, and feels no suffering (Harari 2022: 43). Therefore, this progress in achieving the goal of creating posthuman beings (Kurzweil 2005: 57), the search for morphological freedom (Bostrom 2013: 42) and the abolition of human limitations (More, 2013: 4–5) is governed by one question: how much can natural processes be technically controlled (Sandberg 2013: 56). This thesis is provocative in the context of reviewing the phenomenon of the technological

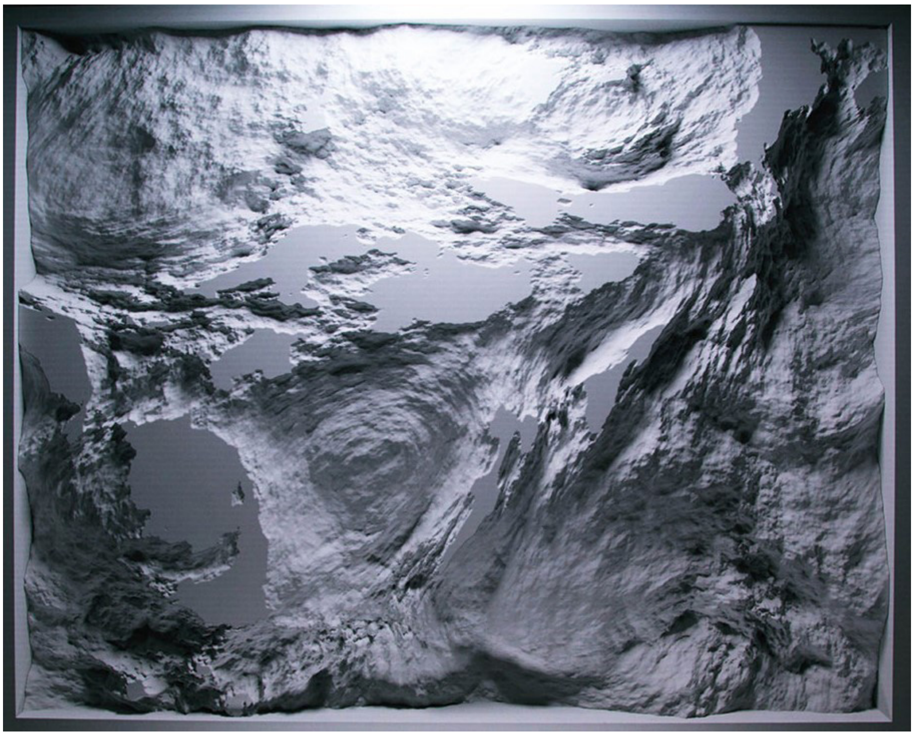

Figure 3. *Melting Memories* (2018, R. Anadol) (University of California, Frankfurt) (source: created by author)

golem, as it points to the high risk of losing human self-identity and subjectivity. Although philosopher D. Chalmers refers to consciousness as a 'hard problem' for artificial reproduction (Chalmers 2007: 225), transhumanists, committed to epistemological certainty, argue that consciousness will eventually become reproducible in environments other than the brain. This will lead to the possibility of 'uploading' consciousness into computer systems. Therefore, the possibilities for creating a golem depend on technological progress, the ability to generate a human prototype for production processes and, most importantly, the future prospects for reproducing human consciousness through digital computing. The prospects for an anthropological cyborg golem are promising. Based on this, important questions arise about the identification of human and non-human creativity, copyright protection and subjectivity in the process.

The 'Creativity' of AI golems within the Framework of Legal Legislation (Approaches in the EU, US and China)

In April 2021, the European Commission proposed the first EU regulatory framework for AI. It states that AI systems are analysed and classified according to the risk they pose to users. Different levels of regulation for technological systems are determined according to the identified risk. This thesis becomes very interesting in the context of this study, as it prompts us to reconsider the functioning of modern technological systems as the 'behaviour' of monsters capable of harming humans. The regulatory act under consideration resembles instructions for using golems, with rules based on the risk that these technological monsters can pose to humans in the course of their activities. Violation of these rules entails 'committing a crime', for which responsibility does not always lie with the developers, but also with the AI system. In particular, Gabriel Hallevy's theory identifies three legal models of liability: the first places responsibility on the developer (if deliberate intent to commit a crime is found), the second points to natural (probable) consequences (without malicious intent), which places responsibility on AI users and developers if they knew that a criminal offence was a probable consequence of their use or programming. The third is the direct liability model, which directly assigns liability to the AI system if it meets the physical and mental elements of the crime (Hallevy 2010). Thus, the latter points to the subjectivity of AI in the organisation of the production process and raises the question of authorship of the results of the corresponding functioning.

Holding the developer of neural networks used to commit crimes accountable is problematic because "certain technologies used in AI development may have been created many years before the development of such AI" (Gurkaynak et al 2016: 754) and could not have predicted the likelihood of the corresponding results. In addition, the EU resolution emphasises the importance of upgrading the software that controls robotic mechanisms, which "turns them into something more than mere tools and makes the usual rules of liability [...] insufficient" (European Commission 2021). Accordingly, it is proposed to grant the most complex robots the legal status of electronic persons.

Under current US intellectual property law, machines are not recognised as natural persons capable of holding copyright. The US Copyright Office's Compendium of Practices regulates some of the rules and concepts arising from the above examples of case law. The section of the compendium entitled *Human Authorship Requirement* illustrates the anthropocentric approach to defining copyright, stating that the law recognises "a work of 'authorship' [as] a work [that] must be created by a human being. Works that do not satisfy this requirement are not copyrightable" (US Copyright Office 2021: § 313.2).

Similar issues were discussed in the Court of Appeal of the United Kingdom, the South African Court, and the Court of Appeal of Australia in a lawsuit filed by researcher S. Taler to recognise AI as the inventor of a patent (AI cannot be the inventor of a patent, 2021 Court of Appeal decision). The inventor filed patent applications with the *Intellectual Property Office* in 2018 with the aim of recognising the *Dabus* algorithm as the inventor. The UK Court of Appeal dismissed the claim, stating that the subject of creativity must be a human being (Bonifacic 2021). Judge E. Laing wrote in her decision: "A patent is a legal right and can only be granted to a human being" (Ibid.). Lord Justice Arnold noted: "A systematic reading of the 1977 Act makes it clear that only a human being can be an 'inventor'" (Ibid.). However, positive decisions in favour of the plaintiff-researcher were made by the judicial panels of the South African Court and the Australian Court (2022). The latter ruled that "Dabus" has the rights of an author and inventor. US District Judge Leonie M. Brinkema partially upheld this decision, writing: "As technology advances, the time may come when artificial intelligence reaches a level of sophistication that will allow it to meet the generally accepted concepts of invention" (Bonifacic 2021). This case demonstrated an excellent understanding of the deterministic role of AI in the organisation of creative activity. On the other hand, the results of AI functioning are devalued in every possible way to enhance the role of humans in the modern process of algorithmic creativity. However, the fact that several court decisions have recognised AI as the author prompts us to reflect on the ability of this technological monster to create a new and unique product. Mythological legend has it that the creator 'underestimated' his artificially created golem, for which he paid with his life. Therefore, in this context, it is important to pay attention not only to the rulings that deny the status of author to an artificial intelligence algorithm, but also to examine the few court decisions that recognise its subjectivity (e.g., the *Dabus* algorithm patent).

Given that artificial intelligence creativity mainly results in "imitating human learning and reproduction using data processing algorithms or sets of rules", the question of the originality of the content in question arises (Ramirez Caminatti 2023: 13). This is evidenced by the class action lawsuit filed by artists S. Andersen, K. McKernan, and K. Ortiz for copyright infringement against Stability AI Ltd., Stability AI Inc. and Midjourney Inc. in accordance with the USC (16 January 2023). According to the text of the lawsuit, the above-mentioned companies "downloaded copies of billions of copyrighted images without permission to create Stable Diffusion" (Andersen & Stability AI Ltd. 2023: 2). Based on the content of *Direct Copyright Infrigement* (17 U.S.C. § 106), the *Digital Millennium Copyright Act* (17 U.S.C. §§ 1201-1205), violation of the *Common Law Right of Publicity, Unfair Competition* (§ 17200) and *Declaratory Relief* the artists proved the infringement of their rights (Andersen & Stability AI Ltd. 2023: 2-3).

The European approach to defining subjectivity is illustrated in the *Infopaq* case, as the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) emphasised that copyright applies only to the original work that reflects the author's personality (Guadamuz 2017). This is evidenced by the *Next Rembrandt project*, which created a painting that imitates the style of the famous artist Rembrandt van Rijn. In 2016, J. Walter Thompson Amsterdam and ING Bank joined forces to create a painting in the style of Rembrandt using machine learning algorithms (Mezei 2020: 10). "The result was a portrait of a man created using 3D printing technology, which allowed several layers of paint to be applied, imitating Rembrandt's technique" (Yusa et al. 2023: 156). Therefore, it is difficult to determine the subjectivity of each participant in the process and, in particular, the role of artificial intelligence. Instead, it is worth hypothesising that the author is a collective mind, given that more than twenty data analysts, developers, machine learning and 3D printing specialists, scientists, engineers and art historians from organisations such as *Microsoft*, *Delft University of Technology*, the *Mauritshuis* in The Hague, and the *Rembrandt Museum in Amsterdam*. However, these philosophical definitions are beyond the scope of this study and therefore do not require further detailed consideration.

The Chinese legal system emphasises the importance of agreements in determining subjectivity in AI practice. The *Feilin* v. *Baidu* case concerned a report created by the *Wolters Kluwer* database and published on the defendant's platform without proper consent. In order to assess the copyright of the published data, the court, with the consent of the parties, created two other reports using the specified algorithm. The comparison showed that the graphs in the reports differed not in their creative approach, but in the information used to create them. In view of this, the court ruled that the products created were not subject to protection. The above cases demonstrate an anthropocentric approach to the definition of copyright (Kenneth-Southworth & Li 2022: 420), as they take into account the criterion of subjectivity (Wan & Lu 2021). Although the conditions of originality and authorship were separated in the *Feilin* v. *Baidu* case, the court nevertheless upheld the requirement of human authorship. This may indicate that the Chinese legal system is open to providing copyright protection for AI-generated objects, but with an emphasis on human self-expression (Lee 2021: 211-222).

Thus, in various countries around the world, it has been found that the authorship of human creators is protected, while the 'creativity' of artificial golems is mostly perceived as programmed functioning. Only in a few documents have attempts been found to recognise the subjectivity of AI (Halevy's theory, the court decision recognising authorship in favour of the *Dabus* algorithm) in view of the originality of the results of project activities.

Concluding discussion

The golem has evolved from an image of a defender of the Jewish people and a monster with superhuman physical strength capable of killing its creator to a contemporary and postmodern concept of technological progress that embodies the fears and uncertainties of the modern era and raises questions about singularity. In this context, everything from transhumanistic artificial cyborgs to anthropomorphic robots, humanoid androids, and post-human digital avatars bears the mystical imprint of an artificial body rebelling madly against its creator. The simultaneous technological perfection and slavish weakness of the golem allow it to take radically opposite subject positions, which can be reinterpreted as needed by the narrator. It can be created as a slave or defender of its creator, or, conversely, as a rebel and murderer with a clearly expressed public position. This explains why he is still popular, appearing in plays, films, illustrations, video games, science fiction stories, etc. Even in the European Commission's current regulatory documents on the implementation of AI, the risks of artificially created systems are being explored, prompting constant references to the mythological golem, which (according to the plot) got out of control and killed its creator.

Hallevy's theory highlights a legal model of responsibility that directly assigns responsibility to the AI system if it meets the physical and mental elements of a crime, thus defining the subjectivity of AI in the organisation of the production process. The facts studied in legally approved decisions on the possibility of recognising AI as an inventor in various countries around the world do not, for the most part, provide sufficient grounds for proper recognition of its authorship. However, several positive court decisions recognising authorship in favour of the *Dabus* algorithm, adopted by the judicial panels of the South African Court and the Australian Court (2022), raise questions about the deterministic role of AI technology in the organisation of creative activity. Therefore, it is worth adding to the conclusions a recommendation to AI implementation specialists to adequately assess the technological functionality of modern golems, without diminishing their significance in exchange for glorifying the role of the human creator. After all, according to the mythological plot, the creator's procrastination led to technological singularity.

Creepy examples of the existence of golems in mythology, scientific and journalistic literature, illustrations, spectacular performances, or modern technological experiments generate a sense of fear, induce cognitive dissonance, and create the uncanny valley effect. The latter serves as a protective reaction of a person to the behaviour of artificial golems. The practices of brain-computer interface functioning that have been examined also did not provide sufficient evidence of the subjective creativity of artificial intelligence. Although the ultimate goal of AI is to imitate human cognitive abilities, it remains spatially and temporally detached, which prevents it from achieving the unique subjectivity that defines human thinking. After all, in such a practice, it will be extremely difficult to identify the creativity of a technological golem and the associated risks. With a malfunctioning BCI, a person can become a monster to themselves. Therefore, the prospects for the formation of a new golem prototype depend entirely on technological progress and are of particular importance in the context of trends developing in the context of transhumanist ideas. The radical improvement of human physical and intellectual abilities prompts a rethinking of the foundations of human identity and self-awareness, and also provokes discussion about the ethical, philosophical, and social aspects of such changes. As a result, this study makes an important contribution to understanding the complex dynamics between technological innovation, cultural change and philosophical doctrines in the modern world and recommends assessing the prospects for AI development with an emphasis on the issue of subjectivity and control over technology.

References

Aguirre, Nicolas Kisic (2025): *Disobedient Robots,* doctoral dissertation, University of Washington.

Albergotti, Reed (2024): "Why Filmmaker Nenad Cicin-Sain Fired his AI Screenwriter," *Semafor,* 18 December 2024: https://www.semafor.com/article/12/18/2024/why-filmmaker-nenad-cicin-sain-fired-his-ai-screenwriter (accessed 01/12/2025).

Andersen & Stability AI Ltd. (2023): *Docket, 3:23,-cv-00201*. Court Docket. https://www.courtlistener.com/docket/66732129/andersen-v-stability-ai-ltd/ (accessed 01/12/2025).

Baudrillard, Jean (1981): *Simulacra and Simulation,* Paris: Galilée.

Begishev, Ildar, Asli, Mehrdad Rayejian, Denisovich, Veronika & Andrey Sergeyev (2023): "Research of Artificial Intelligence as a Subject of Crime," *ESC Web of Conference*, 449, 03004. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375744625_Research_of_artificial_intelligence_as_a_subject_of_crime (accessed 01/05/2025).

Beneke, Francisco & Mark-Oliver Mackenrodt (2019): "Artificial Intelligence and Collusion," *IIC,* 50, 109-134.

Bleeker, Maaike, Verhoeff, Nanna & Stefan Werning (2020): "Sensing Data: Encountering Data Sonifications, Materializations, and Interactives as Knowledge Objects," *Convergence,* 1-23.

Bonifacic, Igor (2021): "UK Appeals Court Rules AI Cannot Be Listed as a Patent Inventor," *Engadget.* https://www.engadget.com/uk-appeal-court-artificial-intelligence-patent-191631993.html (accessed 01/05/2025).

Botes, Marietjie (2023): "Perspective Chapter: Making Space for Neuro Rights in the Context of Brain-Computer Interfaces: One Small Step for Human Rights, One Giant Leap for Mankind," *New Insights in Brain-Computer Interface Systems.* https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377201427_Perspective_Chapter_

Making_Space_for_Neuro_Rights_in_the_Context_of_Brain-Computer_Interfaces_One_Small_Step_for_Human_Rights_One_Giant_Leap_for_Mankind (accessed 01/12/2025).
Broadhurst, Roderic, Maxim, Donald, Brown, Paige, Trivedi, Harshit & Joy Wang (2019): "Artificial Intelligence and Crime," *Research Paper, Korean Institute of Criminology and Australian NationalUniversity Cybercrime Observatory, College of Asia, and the Pacific*, 1, 70.
Chalmers, David (2007): "The hard problem of consciousness," M. Velmans & S. Schneider (eds.).: *The Blackwell companion to consciousness*, Blackwell Publishing, 225-235
Chen, Jiahui (2023): "Can the AI-Generated Content be Protected as Work under Copyright Law? –Jurisprudential Developments in China," *Advances in Economics Management and Political Sciences*, 7:1, 187-200.
Clancy, Brett (2017): "Rebel or Rioter? Luddites Then and Now," *Society*, 54:5, 392-398.
Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome (1996): "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (ed.): *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 3-25.
Contreras-Koterbay, Scott (2019): "The Teleological Nature of Digital Aesthetics – the New Aesthetic in Advance of Artificial Intelligence," *AM Journal,* 20, 105-112.
Cooper, Marilyn (2017): "Jewish Word Golem: a mutable Monster," *Moment.* https://momentmag.com/jewish-word-golem/
Deleuze, Gilles (1990). *The Logic of Sense,* London: The Athlone Press.
Edwards, Benj (2025): "AI Coding Assistant Refuses to Write Code, Tells User to Learn Programming Instead," *ArsTechnica,* 13 March 2025: https://arstechnica.com/ai/2025/03/ai-coding-assistant-refuses-to-write-code-tells-user-to-learn-programming-instead/ (accessed 01/12/2025).
Eveleth, Rose (2015): "My robot bought illegal drugs," *BBC,* 21 July 2015: https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20150721-my-robot-bought-illegal-drugs (accessed 01/12/2025).
European Commission (2021): *Laying Down Harmonized Rules on Artificial Intelligence (Artificial Intelligence Act) and Amending Certain Union Legislative Acts*. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX-%3A52021PC0206&qid=1747555166864 (accessed 01/12/2025).
Fishwick, Paul A. (2006): *Aesthetic Computing*, London: Cambridge.
Flusser, Vilem (2000): *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press.
Folgieri, Raffaella, Granato, Marco, Lucchiari, Claudio, & Daniale Grechi (2014): "Brain, Technology and Creativity," unspecified (eds.): *Computers in the Arts*

and Sciences (Digital Da Vinci serie), New York: Springer & Lee Newton, 65-97.
Fuller, Steve (2011): *Humanity 2.0.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Gelbin, Cathy S. (2022): "The Golem: from Enlightenment Monster to Artificial Intelligence," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, 69, 79-94.
Guadamuz, Andres (2017): "Artificial Intelligence and Copyright," *WIPO MAG*, 18, https://perma.cc/RS5C-QBR9 (accessed 12/12/2025).
Gurkaynak, Gonenc, Yilmaz, Ilay, & Gunes Haksever (2016): "Stifling Artificial Intelligence: Human Perils," *Computer Law & Security Review*, 32, 749-758.
Hadzi, Adnan, & Denis Roio (2020): "Restorative Justice in Artificial Intelligence Crimes," *Journal forDigital Cultures*, 5, 1-18.
Hofstadter, Douglas R. (1999*): Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. New York : Basic Books.
Hailes, N. Katherine (2005): *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Hallevy, Gabriel (2010) "The criminal liability of artificial intelligence entities," *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1564096 (accessed 12/12/2025).
Hansen, Miriam Bratu (2008): "Benjamin's Aura," *Critical Inquiry*, 34:2, 336-375.
"Industrial Digital Twins Scale Up in Scope, Complexity, and Applications," (2024): Association for Advancing Autobation. https://www.automate.org/robotics/industry-insights/digital-twins-scope-complexity-applications (accessed 11/12/2025).
Harari, Yuval Noah (2017): *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow.* London: Vintage.
Janjanam, Lakshminarayana, Saha, Suman K., Kar, Rajib & Durbadal Mandal (2022): "Wiener Model-Based System Identification Using Moth Flame Optimised Kalman Filter Algorithm," *SIViP* 16: 1425-1433.
Jeffeson, Geoffrey (1949): "The Mind of Mechanical Man," *British Medical Journal*, 1105-1110.
Kenneth-Southworth, Ernest & Yahong Li (2022): "AI's Future Impact on Copyright for AI-Generated Works," *Insights from Chinese Case Law. European Intellectual Property Review*, 44:7, 418-427.
Kokotyukha, Andriy (2024): Robot khovaietsia u shkoli [The robot hides in the school]. Kyiv: Ababahalamaha.
Konior, Bogna (2023): "The Gnostic Machine: Artificial Intelligence in Stanislaw Lem's 'Summa Technologiae,'" Stephen Cave, & Kanta Dihal (eds): *Imagining AI: How the World Sees Intelligent Machines*, Oxford: Oxford Academic, 88-108.
Kurzweil, Ray (2005): *The Singularity is Near.* New York: Viking Books.
Larsson, Stefan & Fredrik Heintz (2020): "Transparency in Artificial Intelligence," *Internet Policy Review*, 2, 1-16

Legierska, Anna (2014): "The Rise of Robotic Theatre," *Culture.* https://culture.pl/en/article/the-rise-of-robotic-theatre (accessed 08/12/2025).
Lee, Joen Ju. (2021): "Artificial Intelligence Cases in China: Feilin v. Baidu and Tencent Shenzhen v. Shanghai Yingxin," *China and WTO Review*, 7:1, 211-222.
Ligon, Sarah (2019): "AI Can Create Art, but Can It Own Copyright in It, or Infringe?" *LEXIS*, 51. https://plus.lexis.com/api/permalink/921f2d6f-b054-41cf-b07f-8e3724a08702/?context=1530671 (accessed 07/12/2025).
Litman, Jessica (2006): Digital Copyright, 3 th ed. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books.
MacDorman, Karl F. & Chattopadhyay, Debaleena (2016): "Reducing consistency in human realism increases the uncanny valley effect; increasing category uncertainty does not," *Cognition,* 146, 190-205.
Magrani, Eduardo (2019): "New Perspectives on Ethics and the Laws of Artificial Intelligence," *Internet Policy Review*, 8(3). https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.3.1420
Mansbach, Adam (2023): *The Golem of Brooklyn.* Random House Publishing Group.
McCarthy, John (1987): "Generality in Artificial Intelligence," *Communications of the ACM*, 30:12, 1030-1035.
Meyrink, Gustav (2008): *The Golem*, 3 th ed. Sawtry, Cambs: Dedalus.
Mezei, Peter (2020): "From Leonardo to the Next Rembrandt – The Need for AI-Pessimism in the Age of Algorithms," *UFITA*, 2, 390-429.
More, Max (2013): "The Philosophy of Transhumanism," Max More & Natasha Vita-More (eds.): *The Transhumanist Reader*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 3-18.
Moshe, Iddel (1990): *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions about the Artificial Anthropoid.* Albany: State University of New York Press.
Mori, Masahiro (2012): "The Uncanny Valley," *IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine,* 19:2, 98-100.
Nechvatal, Joseph (2017): "From a 16th-Century Book to a Robot-Assisted Performance, Artists Explore the Legend of the Golem," *Hyperallergic*. https://hyperallergic.com/from-a-16th-century-book-to-a-robot-assisted-performance-artists-explore-the-legend-of-the-golem/ (accessed 01/12/2025).
NTSB (2019): Highway Preliminary Report: HWY19FH008. https:// ntsb. gov/inves tigat ions/ Accid entRe ports/ Pages/ HWY19 FH008- preli minary-report.aspx (accessed 01/12/2025).
Polydoros, Aden (2023): *Wrath Becomes Her.* HarperCollins.
Ramirez-Caminatti, Favlo (2023): "Copyrighting Br yrighting Brain Computer Inter ain Computer Interface: Wher face: Where Neuroengineering oengineering Meets Intellectual Property Law," *Cybaris*, 14:1, 1-31.
Rosenthal-von der Pütten, Astrid M., Krämer, Nicole C., Maderwald, Stefan, Brand, Matthias & Fabian Grabenhorst (2019): "Neural Mechanisms for Accepting and Rejecting Artificial Social Partners in the Uncanny Valley," *Journal of Neuroscience,* 39:33, 6555-6570.

Saha, Simanto, Mamun, Khondaker, Ahmed, Khawza, Mostafa, Raqibul, Naik, Ganesh, Darvishi, Sam, Khandoker Ahsan & Mathias Baumert (2021): "Progress in Brain Computer Interface: Challenges and Opportunities," *Front Syst Neurosci*, 25:15, 578875.

Sandberg, Anders (2013): "Morphological Freedom – Why We Not Just Want It, but Need It," Max More & Natasha Vita-More (eds.): *The Transhumanist Reader*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell,, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. P.56–65.

Scholem, Gershom (1966): *The Golem of Prague & The Golem of Rehovoth*. https://www.commentary.org/articles/gershom-scholem/the-golem-of-prague-the-golem-of-rehovoth/ (accessed 13/12/2025).

Singer, Isaac Bashevis (1984): "The Golem is a Myth for our Time," *The New York Times,* 12 Aug 1984: https://www.nytimes.com/1984/08/12/theater/the-golem-is-a-myth-for-our-time.html (accessed 10/12/2025).

Smith, Daniel W. (2005). "The Concept of the Simulacrum: Deleuze and the Overturning of Platonism," *Continental Philosophy Review*, 38: 1-2, 89-123.

Sovhyra, Tetiana (2021): "Robotic theatre: comparative analysis of human and mechanized activities in the creative process," *Creativity Studies*, 14:2, 295-306.

Spiro, Mia (2013): "Containing the Monster: the Golem in Expressionist Film and Theater," *Space Between: Literature and Culture, 1914-1945*, 9:1, 11-36.

Sturm, James (2021): *The Golem's Mighty Swing*. Drawn and Quarterly.

Tinwell, Angela, Grimshaw-aagaard, Mark Nicholas, Andrew Williams (2011): "The Uncanny Wall," *International Journal of Arts and Technology,* 4:3, 326-341.

Vudka, Amir (2020): "The Golem in the Age of Artificial Intelligence," *NECSUS*, 9(1), 101-123.

Vernor, Vinge (1993): "The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era," VISION-21 *Symposium.* https://edoras.sdsu.edu/~vinge/misc/singularity.html (accessed 01/12/2025).

Walker-Osborn, Charlotte (2018): "Artificial intelligence Automation and the Law," *ITNOW*, 60:1, 42-43.

Wan, Yong & Hongxuyang Lu (2021): "Copyright Protection for AI-Generated Outputs: the Experience from China," *Computer Law & Security Review,* 42, 105581.

Zhuk, Alesia (2023): "Navigating the Legal Landscape of AI Copyright: a Comparative Analysis of EU, US, and Chinese Approaches," *AI and Ethics*, 4:4, 1299-1309.

U.S. Copyright Office (2021): *Compendium of U.S. Copyright Office Practices,* 3 th ed., § 313.2, 23-24.

Yusa, I Made Marthana, Yu, Yu, & Tetiana Sovhyra (2022): "Reflections on the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Works of Art," *Journal of Aesthetics, Design, and Art Management*, 2:2, 152-167.

Authors

Tetiana Sovhyra – Doctor of Cultural Studies, Dean of the Faculty of Event Management, Fashion and Show Business, assistant professor of the Department of Fashion and Show Business, Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts, Kyiv, Ukraine; Senior Research Fellow, Department of Cultural and Civilisational Studies, Institute of Cultural Studies, National Academy of Arts of Ukraine.

She is the author of the technological imitation concept, has published more than 50 scientific studies on the conceptual overview of technological determinism, singularity and technological imitation. She is working in collaboration with professors from Institut Bisnis dan Teknologi Indonesia and Guangdong South China Institute of Industrial Design, Guangdong University of Technology on reflections on the AI use in art works.
E-mail: STIsovgyra@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7023-5361

Serhii Vytkalov – Doctor of Cultural Studies, Professor of the Department of Event Industries, Culturology and Museology, Rivne State Humanitarian University, Rivne, Ukraine. His research interests include regional cultural practice, event tourism, event industries, fine arts, preservation of national identity and cultural heritage, national identity, traditions.
E-mail: sergiy_vsv@ukr.net
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5345-1364

Viktoriia Volynets – PhD in Cultural Studies, Associate Professor at the Department of Event Management and Leisure Industry, Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts, Kyiv, Ukraine. She is a researcher of digital culture, virtual and augmented reality technologies, artificial intelligence in creative industries, multimedia systems and interactive technologies. She has over 50 scientific publications, including in international and professional journals, and is a co-author of the monograph 'Culture and Art of the 21st Century: A Polylogue of Modern Humanities'.
E-mail: vika-volynets@ukr.net
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3783-508X

Liudmyla Dykhnych – PhD in History, Professor of Fashion and Show Business Department, Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts, Kyiv, Ukraine. She is researcher of technological innovations in the fashion industry.
E-mail: dl5020640@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1778-7551

Ihor Brailko – lecturer of Fashion and Show Business Department, Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts, Kyiv, Ukraine. He develops standards and competences of future cultural professionals in the process of professional training in higher education institutions.
E-mail: igorestel@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9322-5158

Nature and Culture

Culture Unbound
Journal of Current Cultural Research

Regulating an Unruly Nature. Invasive Alien Species, Monstrosity and the Law

Mattias Frihammar, Maja Lagerqvist, Lars Kaijser

Abstract

This article explores how invasive alien species are imagined, represented, and regulated in contemporary Sweden, focusing on the entanglement between biological threat, cultural fear, and bureaucratic control. Drawing on ethnographic material, policy analysis, and consultation documents, it examines how plants and animals such as Japanese knotweed, giant hogweed, and the "killer slug" are framed through tropes of monstrosity in media, legislation, and public discourse. Using monster theory (Cohen 1996) and scholarship on lists and classification, the article argues that monstrosity not only shapes perceptions of invasive species but also infuses the legal and administrative systems designed to contain them. The emerging *regulating complex*, a network of EU and Swedish regulations, lists, and responsibilities, appears both as a tool for ecological order and as a hybrid, excessive, and unruly entity in itself. The study shows how attempts to tame ecological disorder through listing practices mirror the very qualities attributed to invasive species: hybridity, excess, and uncontrollability. The result is a perfect monster of the present environmental moment – an assemblage of biological and bureaucratic life that reflects contemporary anxieties about nature, governance, and the limits of human control.

Keywords: Invasive alien species, Monstrosity, Culture/Nature, Cohen's Monster Theory, Biopolitics, Environmental governance, More-than-human relations, Media representation

Frihammar et al: "Regulating an Unruly Nature. Invasive Alien Species, Monstrosity and the Law", *Culture Unbound*, Volume 18, issue 2, 2026: 81–108. Published by Linköping University Electronic Press: http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.6591

Introduction

> *It's a MONSTER, get rid of the crap*
> (Byggahus.se, May 23, 2005).

The quote comes from an internet forum where a garden owner expresses his frustration over the giant hogweed in his garden. Over the past decade, and often described in threatening and monstrous terms, invasive alien species have been a recurring feature on social media and in news reporting on environmental changes. The giant hogweed is an example of such an invasive plant. During this period, the management of these alien species has also become a prioritised task for Swedish authorities. In addition to drives aimed at eradicating designated species, this work has involved information campaigns and an effort to create regulations concerning invasive species. An important element in this process has been to produce lists of species threatening the Swedish flora and fauna.

This article will address this topic in two steps. First, we examine how invasive alien species have been represented in Swedish public discourse, with particular attention to the ways in which media and social media repeatedly cast them in monstrous terms. On the basis of this analysis, we then shift focus to the regulatory sphere, where we initially analyse how the regulatory complex designed to govern invasive species has taken shape, and then show how it itself acquires monstrous qualities through its hybridity, excess, and tendency to generate confusion.

The term "Invasive Alien Species" may evoke images of space invaders or encounters with fearsome intergalactic creatures, but the term has its origins in biology. Invasive Alien Species is often defined as "introduced species (intentionally or unintentionally) that become established in a new environment, then spread in ways that are destructive to human interests and natural systems." (UNEP 2023). It should also be stated that what is categorised as invasive alien is tied to human made boundaries in time and space (Head 2012). In a Swedish context, species estabished in the wild within the national borders prior to 1800 are perceived as native nature. Other countries work with other time frames related to their historical situation.

Humans have probably always contributed to the establishment of new plants and animals when moving from one area to another. Sometimes it has been done deliberately and with unintended consequences. Well-known are the descriptions of how introduced species have interferred with the Australian fauna when rabbits, foxes and other European farm animals changed the conditions. Just as significantly, are the species that unintendedly have become part of human travels, such as marine creatures in ballast tanks. With increased globalisation and environmental changes, the spread of alien species has escalated, and today invasive species are identified as one of the biggest threats to biodiversity. This has prompted extensive work to limit the impact, occurring on regional, national and supranational levels, including both the United Nations and the European Union. Importantly, at the center of this lies the constitution of nations and regions with notions about which flora and fauna belong to the landscape and, equally important, which do not (Árnason & Kuprian 2017, Lagerqvist et al. 2024). The environmental changes caused by human movements across the globe, and even more, the promises of future changes have created a zeitgeist holding uncertainties and feelings of insecurity (Bangstad & Pétursdóttir 2021).

This article is part of a project studying the management of "invasive alien species" in Sweden. A recurring observation is how the invasive species are described as threatening and frightening. The aim here is to deepen these findings by exploring the processes of capturing invasive alien species within juridical and bureaucratic frameworks. Initially, it could be obvious how plants and animals have been described in monstrous terms. However, as we will soon show, it is not only the invasive species but also the authorities' work of regulating such species that can be experienced as a threat. With support from theories from monster research, we will show how and what expressions these threatening images can take.

The work of reducing the spread of invasive species has created what we call a *regulating complex*. This refers to a process that includes the emergence of regulations and the work of producing lists of invasive species. This also includes the work of initiating these regulations, their surveillance and the adaptation of lists and regulations to new environmental conditions. In other words, the regulating complex contains the legal work of the authorities in managing invasive species.

The project group behind this article has investigated how invasive alien species are managed in different contexts since 2017. The investigation has drawn attention to how associations, entrepreneurs, individuals and national and regional authorities approach the task in different contexts. We have worked in an ethnographic tradition with interviews and observations. We have participated in the eradication of lupins and skunk cabbage, and inventoried Pacific oysters. We have spoken to municipal ecologists, researchers, government employees and people engaged in non-profit associations. In addition, government texts, information materials and media reports have also been scrutinised. The authorities' work to list and regulate invasive species has been a recurring feature in all these contexts. For the national authorities, it has been a main task. For associations, regions and private individuals, the listing work has been found to be both a threat and a promise. This article is therefore based on a larger, disparate material collected over a longer period. An important part of the article work has been to identify concrete information about the work of the authorities, but also to see how lists – both existing and in the making – have been referenced in both specific and general terms.

This article is to a large extent based on interviews with actors who have been involved in various ways in the work of managing invasive species in Sweden: researchers, agency representatives, organisations, and interest groups. To this are added the consultation responses from various actors regarding two central documents: the memorandum New Ordinance on Invasive Alien Species, KN2025/01024 (Swedish Government 2025), which proposes to replace the previous ordinance from 2018, and the Proposal for a National List of Invasive Alien Species, KN2023/03476 (Swedish Government 2023). All of this material are important parts of a larger legislative apparatus where nature's transformation, bureaucratic logic, and various societal interests meet – and collide.[1]

The proposed new ordinance (KN2025/01024) aims to replace the previous ordinance (SFS 2018:1939) and contains more detailed provisions regarding management, distribution of responsibilities, and measures related to invasive species. The consultation responses to this often address questions about the distribution of responsibilities between agencies, property rights, and the need for resources for implementation. In KN2023/03476, the focus lies on establishing a national list of invasive alien species of particular significance for Sweden. Its consultation responses tend to focus on which species should be included in the list and how these species affect different sectors.

Theory of monsters, lists and species out of place

This article explores what happens when theories of monsters and lists are merged in a cultural analysis of nature and environmental management. In this, we are initially based on research within the humanities and social sciences that have shown that invasive alien species are not only ecological phenomena but also culturally produced problems, shaped by scientific definitions and long-standing ideas about which beings "belong" in particular landscapes (Lagerqvist et al. 2024). Scholars highlight how invasiveness is framed through spatial and temporal boundaries (Head 2012 & 2015), tied to colonial histories and national imaginaries (Árnason & Kuprian 2017), and embedded in broader biodiversity discourses that have generated an "alien invasion industry" (Thompson 2014). These framings carry ethical and affective dimensions, casting certain species as agents of change that evoke a "lingering threat" (Bangstad & Pétursdóttir 2021, see also Larson et al. 2005), in Ahmed's words (2014) becoming "sticky objects" saturated with emotions mobilising political consensus, across ideological divides, as well as conflicts (Frihammar et al. 2021).

1 During the very final stages of this article's preparation, the proposal was formally approved and the new national list of invasive alien species in Sweden entered into force on 15 May 2026 (2026:311), listing 34 species (9 terrestrial and 25 aquatic).

Using the concept of monstrosity as an analytical perspective opens up a deeper understanding of how and why something comes to be perceived as threatening. It explores how imaginaries of threat are shaped within society, and how they are expressed in relation to contemporary environmental transformations – here with particular attention to invasive alien species. The monster serves as a lens through which to examine how societies experience, construct, negotiate, and attempt to manage threats. Through this perspective, it becomes possible to render visible and analyse the unsettling and disturbing dimensions that inform not only the perception of the species themselves, but also the bureaucratic, administrative and practical attempts at management that emerge in their wake – and how these in turn may generate new forms of fear, anxiety and crisis. In this way, monstrosity becomes a tool for broadly investigating the threatening and troubling qualities that characterise "invasive alien species" as a phenomenon and problem in society.

Scholars in the humanities and social sciences have noted how public discourse and outreach borrow horror tropes to cast invasive alien species as existential dangers (Maggulli 2023). Others analyse how labelling organisms as invasive renders them abject nature, shaping both cognitive and affective responses that make them appear killable (Davis 2022, Fleischmann 2023). These framings reveal monstrosity's role in structuring cultural perceptions of danger, difference, and control. But what exactly defines the monster? And what does it tell us?

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's Monster Theory (1996) provides a useful framework for this. He reminds us that the monster's body is always a cultural body, an embodiment of a specific historical moment and its anxieties. Monsters are notoriously difficult to contain: they always return, refusing closure. They unsettle order by inhabiting hybrid or unstable categories, thereby generating what Cohen calls "category crisis". They also personify difference, giving flesh to what is excluded or alien, and they police the borders of the possible by embodying forbidden desires and behaviours. Importantly, fear of the monster is entwined with desire, since monsters also attract and fascinate, offering temporary release from constraint. Ultimately, monsters reflect ourselves: as Cohen insists, they are our "children", exposing what a culture rejects but cannot entirely disavow. Another recurrent trait, not emphasised as a thesis by Cohen but implicit in many of them, is excess. Monsters are frequently imagined as too large, too fecund, too unruly. Their scale itself becomes threatening, a sign of forces that spill over cultural boundaries. As Carroll (1990) observes, monstrosity often appears as an exaggeration of traits, a disturbing excess that unsettles proportion, balance, and norm.

Every era produces its own monster. In the Swedish pre-industrial agrarian society, nature appeared in monstrous forms. Näcken (literally "The naked one"), Bäckahästen ("The brook horse"), personified the deceptive powers of water with an edifying undertone: be cautious when near running waters. The Skogsrået's (literally "the female of the forest") double-natured being warned of the forest; from the front, she is irresistibly beautiful and lured men to follow her into the wild, but when she turned, her true grotesque form was revealed – her back dark, terrifying hollow. In a society dependent on natural resources, such figures articulated collective anxieties about the precarious balance between human survival and nature's unruly forces. Also, nature and the law in combination produced their own monster – for example "Lyktgubben" (literally "The Lanterna Man") who wandered around with his lantern at disputed land boundaries. Today, other aspects of the natural world provoke fear: uncontrollable rising temperatures, extreme weather, flooding, and – central to this study – the proliferation of new species perceived as encroaching and taking over in threatening, ungovernable ways.

Following the above academic traditions and theoretical perspectives, in this article, we attempt to unpack and understand the significance of invasive alien species and the consequences when they enter the realm of (Swedish) legal and bureaucratic context. With this dual focus – on both the species themselves and their legal framings – we are confronted with two distinct forms of monstrosity. First, we encounter animals and plants perceived and described as monstrous. Second, we analyse how the regulating complex of invasive alien species – under development for some time in Sweden – can itself be perceived and function as a kind of monster. While the very category of invasive alien species gathers together (highly diverse) organisms and lends them a shared monstrous aspect, it is when a species is erected on the list that their status as a matter out of place is realized in relation to the law.

This is where a theory of lists becomes crucial. In environmental governance (as in most legislation work), lists have become central instruments (Braverman 2016). However, and importantly, lists are not neutral mirrors of the order of reality. At a basic level, already to assemble a list is to reformat reality into discrete, comparable entities (Stäheli 2015). Secondly, and likewise important: lists tell us something. However, unlike narratives, which create meaning through sequence and causality, lists generate meaning through juxtaposition and selection (Goody 1977). This structure produces an aura of objectivity, masking classificatory choices and reinforcing bureaucratic authority. As de Goede et al. (2015) argue, listing is a performative technology: it generates the very objects it names and helps constitute the frameworks within which they acquire meaning. However, the politics of a list begins well before the list itself is finalised (Stäheli 2015). The Swedish list of invasive alien species illustrates this clearly: although not yet legally in force (as of early spring 2026), it has long influenced debate, practices and policy.

As mentioned, lists function as key tools in various aspects of environmental regulation and conservation (Braverman 2016). The "red list" is well known as a way to pinpoint and identify species in need of protection. They also function as key channels of communication to the public, playing a crucial role in shaping how different species are perceived, valued, and governed. While red lists are well known and select species that are valued and of conservation interest, invasive alien species lists are newer and function more as ecological “blacklists”, branding organisms as dangerous or unwanted. In practice, they operate as lists of monsters, framing targeted species as alien threats. Once created, lists tend to multiply and develop a life of their own, producing unforeseen effects (Leyshon & Thrift 1999, Stäheli 2015). In seeking to impose order on a complex reality, they also expose and concentrate its unruly excess: reality is infinite, lists are finite (Cohen 1996, Eco 2008). As we will demonstrate, this dynamic becomes especially evident when what the legislation is supposed to regulate are living organisms that move and change in unpredictable ways based on their own conditions and possibilities.

Becoming Monsters

In this section, our focus rests on a number of species that frequently have appeared in the Swedish debate on invasive alien species, and on the ways in which they time and again have been framed so as to evoke the monstrous. The discourse surrounding these species readily activates imaginaries of threat and disorder. For example, we have noticed that when our students are asked about their initial associations with the term “invasive alien species”, they are more likely to mention “danger”, “threat”, “science fiction” and “foreign”, than “ecology” or “biodiversity”. The characteristics and behaviours of species regarded as invasive invite comparison with classical and contemporary monsters: like the Hydra, they may sprout even more when trying to fight them; as in the tale of Dr Frankenstein, they may seem to acquire an uncontrollable life of their own; sometimes they may attack like Triffids, or shift shape from alluring flower to suffocating weed – nature’s own Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. Also, applying the very term “alien” (derived from the Latin alieno, -are and alienus, terms that convey the sense of making something someone else’s, or marking it as ‘other’) reinforces this monstrous imagery: the word commonly evokes extraterrestrials or something that does not belong.[2] And, of course, Alien is the name of one of popular culture’s most recognisable monsters. In order to

2 However, there is reason to be cautious about drawing far-reaching conclusions from the literal meanings or etymologies of these terms. The present study was conducted in a Swedish context, where the expression for invasive alien species is “invasiv främmande art”. This is also the formally correct biological designation for species that have been relocated (and are therefore “alien”) and that, in their new environment, spread at the expense of other species (and are therefore “invasive”). In everyday language, however, the word “främmande” (“alien”) is often omitted, and the term used is simply “invasiv art” (“invasive species”), where the “alien” dimension is implicit. This occurs among people without biological training, in media reporting, and quite often even in expert contexts, unless the explicit issue at hand concerns whether the species should be classified as alien or not.

understand these dynamics, Cohen's Monster Theory may serve as an analytical lens.

To start with: the media is one of the prime monster-makers. In and through media discourse, the monstrosity of invasive alien species is created and spread. Headlines and reports dramatise these organisms as grotesque invaders that menace not only ecosystems but also homes, gardens, and infrastructures. Media logic generally stresses tension and spectacle, and simplifies complexity by constructing straightforward stories with easily identifiable "good ones" and "bad ones" (Altheide & Snow 1979). Here, invasive alien species become a perfect nemesis. They are new and unfamiliar, fitting easily into narratives about menaces against "our" landscape. The sense of threat is central, as the media seeks to attract audiences, and threat (especially if it might concern the reader) attracts attention. Social media is likewise an arena where invasive alien species appear as monsters. In Facebook groups such as "Death to Japanese Knotweed", "Lupin Extermination Initiative" or "The Killer Slug's Worst Enemies", members share their often very unpleasant experiences with the species in question, constituting new communities around perceived threats (for an analysis of how engagement with invasive species can function as a unifying force, see Frihammar et al. 2021).

Notorious Species

The monster metaphor is *legio* in the discourse on invasive species. Mentioned in the initial quote opening this article was the giant hogweed, a plant that for long has received attention as monstrous and often described as one of the most notorious among invasive plants. When described in the media, the focus is often on its sap, which can cause serious rashes if it gets on the skin and is exposed to sunlight. This, combined with its height and strikingly large leaves and flowers, conjures up the image of a Triffid, a creature known from the science fiction novel The Day of the Triffids, by John Wyndham.

As the concept of invasive alien species has emerged as a recognised environmental concern, the giant hogweed has been joined by other "celebrities" in the invasive pantheon. One of these is Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*), to which we shall return soon. Others that regularly feature in the debate include garden lupin (*Lupinus polyphyllus*), Himalayan balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*), Canadian goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis*), skunk cabbage (*Lysichiton americanus*), mink (*Neovison vison*), signal crayfish (*Pacifastacus leniusculus*), the flatworm *Polycelis tenuis* and the killer slug (*Arion vulgaris*). Each carries its own distinctive monstrous traits. Elsewhere, we have written in detail about how the lupin has become the "poster child" of invasive species in Sweden, its once-celebrated vibrant blooms and vigorous growth now interpreted through a register of threat and dread (Lagerqvist et al. 2024). One informant described how, with growing awareness of the plant's invasiveness and uncontrolled spread, she came to see its splendour as harsh, even vulgar, though she had once appreciated the colourful fields of lupins (interview County Administrative Board in Dalarna 2017). What had seemed beautiful excess was transformed into something unsettling.

Himalayan balsam, for its part, is often described as excessive in nectar, offering "extremely large amounts" that lure pollinating insects away from native flowers. Its seed pods "explode like bombs", catapulting seeds across wide areas (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency 2025A). "Beautiful green monster" is the epithet bestowed upon the plant in a Facebook post from the municipality of Härryda (Härryda municipality, June 2, 2022). Canadian goldenrod is said to "have a tendency to invade" and "a single plant produces thousands of seeds" (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency 2025B). Skunk cabbage boasts "enormous leaves" that "push aside everything else that once grew there" (Vi i Villa, May 20, 2025). It "poses a threat to the natural vegetation", the municipality of Gothenburg asserts on its website (Gothenburg Municipality 2025) – a formulation that implicitly frames the plant as unnatural, or perhaps even as otherworldly, bordering on the magical realm. Mink, meanwhile, is cast as a "successful coloniser" (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency 2025C), its chilling quality being its escape from human fur farms to thrive elsewhere - the monster always gets away, as Cohen has taught us.

One more species, reappearing in discussion of invasive species, is the signal crayfish, often accused of spreading the "monster disease" (crayfish plague) as in a child-friendly information film (*Sagan om kräftan*, 2025). The flatworm *Polycelis tenuis*, a relative newcomer to the Swedish fauna, has raised similar anxieties. Hiding in the soil of flowerpots, it inspires little reassurance when described, in the words of state radio, as an "invasion of a carnivorous worm with 200 eyes" (Sveriges Radio, 1 March 2025). It is all too easy to conjure the image of an alien-like monster hidden within the homeliest of objects: the potted plant.

Monster by Name

In many instances, anxieties surrounding the species are articulated through the frightening names attributed to it in both everyday language and media discourse. For example, when the oyster *Magallana gigas* began establishing itself on the Swedish west coast two decades ago, the media swiftly dubbed it the "Japanese giant oyster", evoking the figure of an alien invader rather than the luxury *fine de claire*, which is a name by which the species is also known. A similar process marked the discovery of the sea squirt *Didemnum vexillum* in Kosterhavet National Park in 2022, nicknamed "sea vomit" (a translation from Norwegian and English), a name that vividly evoked disgust. In these cases, the authorities actively sought to de-monsterise species through renaming: *Magallana gigas* was officially rendered the international name "Pacific oyster", and *Didemnum vexillum* was given the Swedish name *filtsjöpung* (literally "felt sea squirt", original English name "carpet sea squirt").

Above, as in many other cases, authorities and experts contribute to nuanced media discourse by launching scientifically based, and thus more sober, names and narratives. The exception that proves the rule is the killer snail. Since it was first recorded in Sweden in the 1970s, it has spread widely, becoming a scourge for gardeners across the country as it devours their crops. Here, it is the sheer numbers, the slimy body, the ravenous appetite and the behaviour – these slugs readily consume their own dead – that arouse unease. Once known as the "Spanish forest slug", it was officially renamed the "killer slug" (mördarsnigel) in 2021, when the Swedish Species Information Centre adopted the monster idiom already popular among gardeners and underscoring the creature's cannibalistic, taboo-breaking qualities.

Breaking the Law(n)

The monster-species par excellence in our material (and elsewhere) is Japanese knotweed (*Reynoutria japonica*). The plant is routinely depicted as a terrifying floral beast. Headlines speak of a "WAR AGAINST THE HORROR PLANT – came in through the KITCHEN FLOOR" (*Aftonbladet*, October 26, 2020), or announce that "The municipality gives up the fight against the monster plant" (*Kristianstadsbladet*, February 23, 2022). *Göteborgsposten* (September 10, 2025) literary called the plant "a hydra", since every attempt to cut or poison it only generates new shoots.

While many invasive species evoke one or two monstrous associations, Japanese knotweed condenses an entire cluster of anxieties into a single vegetal figure. So, let's spend a little time figuring out what's waking up the monster in this specific species. At first glance, it is neither particularly striking nor frightening. It resembles a bamboo with green leaves. But its monster qualities lie not in its appearance, but in how it behaves. First and foremost, it is a plant of extraordinary vigour. It grows fast and high, and it seems impossible to stop. It follows humans closely; it is in the garden; it is in the park; it is in the roadsides. Its root fragments are transported with excavated soil to construction sites and railway works. Wherever human activity seeks to build, it threatens to emerge as an uninvited guest. It sprouts through asphalt, creeping back after herbicide, reappearing where it was thought destroyed. Here, ecological, cultural, legal, and economic fears merge, giving the plant an unusually strong symbolic charge. Yet fear of the monster plant is bound up with fascination. Media linger on its excesses – Japanese knotweed makes good headlines; come and read about houses devalued, walls cracked, landscapes overwhelmed. The fasciation-laden fear also resonates in our interviews. Despite years of futile eradication efforts, one man admitted he could not help but admire its vitality (retired researcher, The Institute of Freshwater Research interview, 2025). Adding to this, the plant has been the subject of juridical disputes in different parts of the world. In Sweden, the presence of Japanese knotweed has constituted a legal obstacle in the transfer of real estate (see e.g. *Aftonbladet*, November 30, 2025).

To sum up: It appears that almost any introduced species may be cast as a monster – large like giant hogweed or small like the flatworm, beautiful like the garden lupine or ugly like the "felt sea squirt", solitary in its appearance like the mink or proliferating in numbers like the Pacific oyster. Certain cases stand out: often it is species that are charismatic in some way, yet just as often it is those that affect humans most directly and materially. Japanese knotweed, for instance, becomes a monster when it pushes through the very walls built to separate culture from wild nature.

The monstrosity of invasive alien species thus comes alive in everyday talk and media reports about harmful insects and pests in the garden, or unfamiliar flowers and animals in the landscape. However, and importantly, these species are more than monstrous representations; they are living organisms with agency that often, in very concrete ways, undermine or destroy what humans have accomplished and constructed. The killer slug really does devour the vegetables that the amateur gardener has carefully tended and longed for. Japanese knotweed relentlessly forces up its small red "devil's horns" (as its shoots are often called) in the very place where the homeowner desires a lawn. To enjoy the roadside's biological richness and diversity becomes impossible once lupines have taken hold. Anyone who has cut their feet bloody on a Pacific oyster is hardly consoled by being told that its monstrosity is merely a cultural construction. And it is a fact that the crayfish plague today has reduced the stock of native noble crayfish to only 2% of its former size: indeed a "monster disease".

It is these concrete perceptions of threat, and in some cases the drastic effects on human domains some new species have, that have underscored the need for a legal framework. An equally important, and often even more prominently articulated, driving force has been a desire to safeguard biodiversity and to protect already threatened native species. In what follows, we turn our attention to this extensive undertaking.

Establishing a Regulating Complex

At first glance, the regulating complex that frames the management of invasive alien species may seem incomprehensible. There is a myriad of intricate rules that grow and thrive within different administrational frames. There are EU regulations and then there are national and regional guidelines and recommendations that various authorities have established. It may therefore be good to initially describe the structure of the regulations.

Starting with the EU regulation (EU1143/2014), the directive on invasive alien species contains two parts. First, a regulation applying to the management of invasive alien species aiming to comprehensively protect biodiversity and ecosystem services, as well as to minimise and mitigate negative impacts that these species may have on human health and the economy. The second part consists of a list where the species covered by the regulation are listed. This is the original monster list! The animals and plants on the list are considered to be capable of causing such significant damage within the EU that they warrant a ban in all EU countries. The species on the list must therefore not be introduced into the country, spread in the wild or encouraged to increase in number. It is also prohibited to possess, sell, exchange and import these species. The EU regulation was adopted in 2015, and the first list came in 2016. The list has been regularly updated since its introduction.

It may seem obvious, but it should be mentioned, the restrictions and directives set out in the list and regulation do not apply to animals and plants themselves, even though they are enumerated. Instead, it is a regulation for people and what they can and cannot do with species considered to be alien and invasive. However, it is a way of monitoring a geographical border area and what is allowed to live and strive within its borders. In other words, it is a list of species hailed to be eradicated. Thus, it is a biopolitical regulating complex, affecting the lives of humans and other-than-humans.

When the EU launched its list, it became the starting point for a more comprehensive Swedish effort to manage invasive alien species. Although knowledge about invasive species has existed for a long time, it was when the EU instigated a regulation of invasive species that the issue gained a more prominent place on the Swedish agenda. The starting point was to develop a legal tool to be able to ban and take measures against invasive alien species causing problems in Sweden, but that are not covered by the EU list. Several of the species n the EU-list have never occurred in Sweden, and are not expected to do so. While at the same time, there are many other species that are not on the EU list that can be perceived as invasive and alien in a Swedish region. These include, for example, the previously mentioned Garden lupine.

As with the EU, Swedish authorities work with a two-fold starting point for limiting the impact of invasive alien species, first the regulation, then the national list of designated species. On 1 January 2019, Sweden received its first regulation on invasive alien species (SFS 2018:1939). This describes the division of responsibilities between different Swedish authorities and complements the EU regulation on the prevention and management of the introduction and spread of invasive alien species. As with the EU, the regulation must be supplemented with a list. The list has been a more difficult task to solve. A first draft was submitted to the Government Offices (Regeringskansliet) in the spring of 2023 (Swedish Government 2023), with a round of consultations taking place in 2024, and with close to a hundred consultations being received. Based on these, a new proposal was developed consisting of about 30 species along with an updated regulation.

Two main authorities have been engaged in the regulating work: the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency covers land areas with plants and animals and the Swedish Marine and Water Authority covers plants and animals living in the water. The fact that a species is included on a national list makes it possible, for example, to introduce distinct bans, design systems for supervision, it gives landowners a responsibility and provides the possibility of land access for the supervisory authorities. It gives county administrative boards and municipalities a legal opportunity to act. The national list can be freer in its regulations. The restrictions can apply to parts of the nation, and it may state that it is permitted to have a species on the property, as long as it does not spread.

In preparation for the national list of regulated invasive alien species, another list has been important, namely the risk classification of alien species (Strand et al., 2018). The first list of species negatively affecting Swedish nature was submitted in 2018/2019 and supplemented with an update in 2025. In total, some 1000 alien species were listed, of which 257 species were considered to have a high or very high risk of becoming invasive in Sweden within 50 years. A number of these species was then selected and subjected to a socio-economic analysis, and it was investigated whether they contributed or threated ecosystem services, what damage costs they could generate, what effects they have on human health and whether they affect people's ability to stay in nature. Important to highlight in this context, a species could be invasive, alien and harmful without being on the national list. Occasionally, a species is both well established and common to an extent that it cannot be eradicated.

As shown, the new Swedish legislation concerning invasive species has gradually taken shape. On desks and in inquiries, in consultation responses and in agency correspondence, it is assuming form. But whilst the legislation is taking shape, it is also beginning to emerge in another guise: as something overwhelming, swelling, almost monstrous. This is legislation that is not only meant to control nature, but which itself risks becoming a creature that no one quite knows how to handle. As we move forward, it is to see how the regulations have affected those who manage the invasive species.

"...it's going to be chaos"

If the creatures we have encountered so far have been living organisms perceived as unpleasant, dangerous, frightening, or repulsive because of their slimy properties or bad behaviours, we now turn to a presence of a different kind. The next monster is juridical and bureaucratic.

Overall, there is broad support for establishing a national regulation and list of invasive alien species in Sweden. Yet beneath the surface, our empirical material reveals another narrative. In consultation responses and interviews a creeping anxiety lingers: what may the regulation unleash? We have met it at regional and local authorities, as well as in organisations connected to gardening, agriculture, business, botany and the environment. Like invasive nature, the regulating complex seems to evoke a sense of being overwhelmed, exhausted, and paralysed. Its ambition to impose order risks to instead produce a sense of things spiralling out of control – a swelling entity that exceeds human comprehension. It is this threatening quality of both excess and ambiguity that we now turn to examine.

On paper, the regulation and its list appear neat and orderly: new rules for responsibility, supervision, and resources; a straightforward list of species to be halted. However, even before examining how actors themselves perceive the framework, several monstrous traits are noticeable.

As with the category of invasive alien species, the legislation embodies contemporary societal anxieties about ecological loss, economic damage, the unruly Other, and the impossibility of fully controlling change. It appears as an omen of disrupted categories, identifying organisms that are both part of, and alien to, the flora and fauna of a place: species present, yet not “fitting”. Moreover, the regulation and its list dwell at the gates of difference (Cohen 1996). They gather heterogeneous organisms, amplify the estrangement, and signal habitats transformed. Explicitly, they pinpoint what is different and not fitting in – the Other – and how to stop or manage that. In doing so, certain species are produced and reinforced as enemies to the order, showing the list’s power as a performative technology (Goede et al. 2015).

The regulating complex functions as a boundary-making entity, prescribing limits and dictating which, where and how species are to be feared, controlled, and eliminated, but also which actors are responsible. This is where the law comes in: the regulation exerts a disciplinary force over municipalities, landowners, citizens, and landscapes. This is, of course, what is expected of a regulation. But in doing so, it disciplines behaviour and sets expectations and boundaries for what is possible, necessary, appropriate, and inappropriate. Thus, the regulation and its list also echo the monster’s task of policing the borders of the possible (Cohen 1996). In enumerating invasive alien species, it seeks to tame the overwhelming multiplicity of ecological entanglements, recasting the unruly as clearly defined threats. In this sense, the regulating complex both warns against unfamiliar species and, more literally, cautions against geographical transgression.

Patchwork and Disharmony

> We basically took the most obvious candidates. And it wasn't particularly scientific. Rather, it was like... Everyone's screaming about lupins, Japanese knotweed, and Canadian goldenrod. Okay, we'll include them and list them. Then we had signals from management here that we shouldn't list too many species. They preferably wanted to list five. Now we have thirteen. I resisted a bit. (Representative, Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, interview 2023)

This remark, made by a representative from the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, captures a central point of contention in the regulatory framework: which threatening species are to be included, and why? For years, this question has occupied actors through inquiries, classifications, risk assessments, and consultations. Many papers could be written solely on the selection of who to include on such a national blacklist. Here, however, we focus on some recurring themes raised by actors, especially those illuminating the hybrid traits of the list (cf. Cohen 1996).

From our material emerges a legislation perceived as an artificial mixture, created through a hotchpotch of species, actors, categories, and disparate elements, with many ambiguities, exceptions, and variations in responsibility and management. Several actors highlight the mixture of ecological, socio-economic, political, and practical concerns that shape the regulation and its list of species. General discourse, free trade agreements and commercial interests, the availability and cost-effectiveness of control methods, and shifting risk assessments all appear to have left their mark. It becomes a bricolage, reflecting bargains, unclear priorities, and accumulated pressures. The patchwork of species, rules, exceptions, and overlapping jurisdictions turns the regulation into a hybrid creature: partly legal text, partly ecological governance, partly political compromise. Its hybridity produces contradictions, as it promises control while generating risks of confusion and inaction. Just as monstrous hybridity combines disparate elements into unsettling new forms, so too does the regulatory framework.

It also becomes clear that actors make different assessments regarding how the list and regulation should look and why, and argue that more, or other, species ought to be listed. In an interview with two representatives of the National Federation of Recreational Gardening in 2024, respondents spoke about their members' frustration over the species chosen, and how the legislation lumps together diverse species as threats without considering local ecological realities.

Other concerns emerge. Both experts and private individuals struggle to distinguish different species from each other – which is the native one? – and to keep up with puzzling variations and hybridisations, making some of the threatening species hard to pin down in words:

> Well, there are difficult things when it comes to taxonomy [...] I mean, goldfish. What is that? Is it a species if they interbreed, if they hybridise? I mean, what is it really? This name that appears on this list, what does it relate to? (Representative, Species Information Centre, interview, 2024)

What appears on paper as established and simple facts, a stable, given catalogue of threats ready to be regulated, is in practice something fluid and complex. Species hybridise, definitions shift, the world changes. The legislation, fixed in language and configuration, may become locked in its own documentation. What happens when the name of a regulated species changes – does this mean it is no longer on the list and regulated? As an interviewed representative of the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (2023) asked: "Well, what have we then listed?".

As a hybrid, the regulation and its list, similar to Cohen's monster, meld categories and create new boundaries. In its attempts to stabilise and reinforce the order of its categories, it exposes the instabilities of classifications, showing how legal attempts to fix 'invasive' identity are constantly undermined by the flux of the world. Interviews and consultation responses repeatedly show that the regulating complex can become a confusing montage, difficult to control and comprehend, overwhelming to keep track of and act upon.

The Unclear and Ambiguous

Let's stay with the ominous ambiguity. Monsters lurk in the ambiguous and the uncertain. This is part of why they are frightening. This is a recurring worry regarding the emerging regulation. Many actors highlight uncertainties about responsibility – who should control, eradicate, or manage species, and how this should be coordinated.

Conceptual ambiguities deepen this unease. Actors, like the County administrative boards in Västernorrland and Dalarna (consultation responses 2025), point to unclear formulations: Does "intentionally releasing into the environment" include leaving seeds behind? And how can this be controlled? How to distinguish "cultivating" from "allowing to grow"? Does dispersal to a neighbour count as a new or existing population?

The County Administrative Board in Skåne illustrates a paradox:

> The legislation can be interpreted as making it illegal to make a pie from Japanese knotweed or marmalade from Beach rose hips whilst it will be legal to possess and allow the species to passively spread to new property owners and valuable nature. (Consultation response 2025: 3)

Such contradictions make the framework appear paradoxical and difficult to interpret. Its ambiguity is a recurring fear in the consultation responses, and many raise concerns about its possible harmful effects. However, like Cohen's monster that "always escapes", the regulating complex too is slippery: even as species are added or measures refined, new ambiguities arise, as the two consultation rounds show. The list will never be complete. Each attempt at closure produces further gaps and contradictions, ensuring the survival of the monstrous.

There is also another fear haunting the entire regulating complex, born not from what is seen in the proposed documents, but from what lurks in the unknown future. For years, the actors we have interviewed or encountered in consultation rounds have waited for the finalisation of the regulation and its list. They know that something is approaching – a presence moving, swimming, creeping just beneath the surface – yet its form remains blurred, its contours uncertain, its eventual force unknowable. The regulation could offer help, but it is not yet proven. The regulation hovers like a half-seen creature, already sensed but not yet revealed, instilling dread through its very indeterminacy.

Colossus of Inadequacy

A recurring danger raised, particularly from municipalities and county administrative boards, is that the law's practical consequences will be resource-wise and operationally overwhelming and boundless, with an imminent risk of acceleration. The problems with invasive species are predicted to increase over time, and the entire machinery surrounding their management will expand accordingly. Several county boards illustrate this in the consultation responses (2024, 2025) through long lists of tasks – inventory, supervision, restoration, eradication – an endless litany multiplying like tentacles. Here, just like the monstrous – appearing too large, too powerful, too unruly, 'overabundant' (Carroll 1990) – the regulating complex is feared for being too much.

In one response, Skåne County Administrative Board notes the appetite of the regulating complex: "In Skåne alone, [regulating] the Japanese knotweed that stands along roads and watercourses in hundreds of populations on state and municipal land would swallow the entire county's annual budget for measures against invasive alien species." (consultation response 2025: 4). The same anxiety is voiced in an interview:

> It's a problem that I don't really know how we're going to solve. When Japanese Knotweed comes on that [the list], it's going to be chaos. […] I actually don't know how we're going to solve it. Probably I'll turn off my phone for a few months. (Representative, County Administrative Board in Skåne, interview, 2024)

The regulation's ambitions are repeatedly described as exceeding the capacity of those trying to handle it: it risks becoming something with limited teeth for its intended purpose while creating "unreasonable consequences" (The Swedish Bar Association, consultation response, 2025: 2) for implementers. The fear is of a regulation devouring organisational resources and competing with other environmental tasks. The burden on regional and local authorities is most emphasised, though the weight placed on private landowners also recurs. This concern has eased somewhat in the 2025 updated regulation compared to 2024, as private individuals were exempted from much of the law's demands. Yet this adjustment, like a hydra, only spawned new worries.

Preventing the spread of all proposed species demands extensive administration and physical labour. Because it involves living entities that grow, move, reproduce, and linger in soil as seeds or fragments, efforts are rarely one-off. To prevent the spread requires years of digging, cutting, and killing. Actors stress the exhausting relentlessness of this work and the importance of not destroying those held responsible. Here, the regulating complex's monstrous nature reveals itself not only in scope but in its effect on those tasked with implementation, looming as a devouring presence that feeds on their time, energy, and hope.

County boards, municipalities, and landowners fear being overwhelmed – like confronting a creature whose size and appetite exceed all capacity to resist. In interviews and consultation responses (2024, 2025), actors repeatedly emphasise that the management required is presented as feasible without extra resources, despite agencies' environmental budgets already being stretched thin. Personnel and financial shortages make the complex difficult, if not impossible, to master. Concerns are raised about undesirable consequences following like a tail. One might speak of a melancholy of implementation – a hopelessness born in the realisation of gaps between need, intention, and possibility.

Above, we mentioned the imminent risk of acceleration. Invasive species and the lists meant to contain them will only increase. This means an expansion of what the regulatory framework must manage and an escalation of the problems this colossus might create. Interviews and consultation responses convey a creeping dread: each new species added, each procedural ambiguity, swells the regulatory body, like flesh accumulating on an amorphous giant, producing a boundless bureaucratic monstrosity.

Part of this darker cloud concerns future difficulties in engaging the public and the risk of the list becoming a conflict machine. As a representative from the private gardening sphere pinpoints, problems may grow when species deeply tied to cultural history become subject to regulation:

> If lilacs were to be listed, or some of these early spring bulb plants […] Daffodils and squills. If they were to be banned and you had to remove them, then I think we would have had a completely different debate […]. Then they [garden owners, the public] will find it a bit harder to see. [...] Those which we connect to memories, the lilac arbour where we have sat... (Representative, National Federation of Recreational Gardening, interview, 2024)

Consultation responses and interviews thus highlight the regulating complex's operational monstrosity. Local and regional authorities feel overburdened: monitoring, eradicating, restoring, and managing invasive species devour resources, often beyond capacity. The law risks consuming more time and money than is available, creating a sense of hopelessness and inevitable failure. Once again, we are reminded that a monster tells what is good and to be done, and what is not, as it polices the borders of the possible (Cohen 1996).

Yet the material also resonates with Cohen's insight into the mingling of dread and desire. Despite fear and frustration, actors are drawn to the clarity and order the regulating complex promises – or could promise. It is spoken of as necessary, even inevitable, but with a long shadow. It both terrifies and attracts: a fantasy of control in an unpredictable ecological world, even as its bulk and appetite may devour those who must live with it.

Fear of Hopelessness, Grim Consequences and Slowness

A basic characteristic of a monster is that it threatens and brings fear. The regulation of invasive species likewise produces fear (and the whole complex is, after all, rooted in fear of the invasive threat). A major concern voiced by regional and local authorities and environmental organisations in their consultation responses is that the 2025 regulation proposal introduces exceptions, removing much responsibility and work from private individuals and companies.

On paper, these may appear minor adjustments, but in practice, they risk, in many actors' eyes, turning the regulation into something ineffective, hopeless, and even counterproductive. The County Administrative Board in Dalarna warns: "The species exist extensively on private land and on commercial properties and will, according to the proposal for the regulation, be allowed to spread unhindered and passively to new properties and also retake areas where eradication measures have been carried out" (consultation response 2025: 2).

Similar fear is raised by the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation's consultation response (2025: 3), who argue, like several others, that the regulation deteriorated during its drafting process:

> In the now circulated proposal, only state and municipal actors should bear this [eradication] responsibility, whilst private individuals and companies are exempted. We see this as a serious problem […]. If efforts are only carried out within certain areas whilst others are left without action, the work risks becoming ineffective and ultimately failing.

Thus emerges a fear of a dismal situation where hard and costly efforts are undermined by exceptions. Many note that species will continue to spread regardless of human boundaries, "since the species do not care about property boundaries" (Gothenburg Municipality, consultation response 2025: 1). The regulating complex thus risks becoming a fantasy creature: imposing on paper but impotent in doing what it was meant to do.

There are also fears that the legislation will not only fail but generate new problems. By increasing the number of species to combat, some authorities warn they may lose control over species currently managed (e.g. County Administrative Board in Norrbotten, consultation response 2025). Similar concerns surface interviews:

> And especially if we get a national list in place, then many of the species that are a problem, they will become even bigger problems, so to speak… Because then you have to do something about it. (Representative, National Federation of Recreational Gardening, interview, 2024)

Other fears haunt the regulation and its list. Actors worry it will become sluggish and static, lacking preparedness for the future. The constant need to update the list and to work flexibly is stressed repeatedly. Here, tensions arise between urgent needs for action and slow administrative processes. Consultation instances call for mechanisms for rapid additions to the national list or swift measures against ominous "door-knocker species", along with regular updates aligned with new risk assessments as climate or knowledge change (e.g. Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, consultation response 2025). Tensions thus emerge when two opposing temperaments are stitched together: the stability of a fixed regulatory framework and the restless dynamism of ecology and society. There is a fear of an anachronistic regulation – a system regulating yesterday instead of today.

The sluggishness is also echoed in interviews. A biology expert at the Species Information Centre described frustration at how "interest in these issues [invasive species]… and nature conservation generally has not been so great, so it has not been… felt high priority" (interview, 2023), resulting in long delays. Several interviewees interpret this as a symptom of weak political commitment. At the same time, many express temporal desperation: efforts are described as urgent, even overdue. Thus, a tension emerges between the need for rapid action to tame fast, shape-shifting monsters of invasive species, and the slow, lumbering movements of the monstrous colossus of the regulating complex, a creature so heavy it risks collapsing under its own weight.

Concluding Discussion: A Perfect Monster

The regulating complex highlighted in this article concerns a changing world. Managing invasive species is one of the many ways in which climate change and threats to biodiversity are translated into practical difficulties and challenges controlled through regulations, and in this specific case, through listings. Monster theory has helped to clarify the difficulties such regulation faces and articulate them.

Invasive alien species are marked by a doubleness of novelty: they are new as organisms in the landscape and new as a cultural category given salience through science, media and policy. As Stuart Hall (1980) reminds us, cultural "newness" always builds upon what is already familiar. For something to be recognised as novel, it must be both strange and intelligible. This duality might help explain why invasive species so readily assume monstrous qualities: they are defined in opposition to cherished and familiar native species, which appear fragile, beautiful, and worthy of protection. By contrast, invasive species are cast as excessive and expendable.

This article has shown how invasive alien species are framed through the language and imaginaries of monstrosity, both in public discourse and in everyday encounters. Organisms such as Japanese knotweed, giant hogweed, and the killer slug have come to embody fears of excess and disorder in conjunction with ecological change and disruption. Analysing these anxieties through Cohen's monster lens has made it possible to show that this mirrors broader contemporary concerns about environmental change and human vulnerability. We have also shown that the culturally constructed monstrosity of the species follows them as they enter into legal jurisdiction. The regulating complex created to contain them, starting with the EU directives, interpreted through the lens of the Swedish context, to ultimately materialise in a concrete list, also emerges as hybrid and unruly. In seeking to stabilise, the list generates confusion, contradictions, and an expanding bureaucratic machinery that is itself experienced as overwhelming. To put it bluntly: it operates both as a *monster list* naming certain species as threats, and as a *list monster*, a bureaucratic entity that grows and produces unintended consequences. In this way, the regulatory apparatus mirrors the very qualities of the species it seeks to govern: excessive, ambiguous, and resistant to containment.

This dynamic is not all unique to invasive species governance. Some of the monstrous characters of the regulation of unruly nature can also be seen in regulatory frameworks generally. Recent research shows that regulatory frameworks – especially in environmental and social policy – are expanding rapidly (Hinterleitner et al. 2021). The trend, described through concepts like "policy accumulation" (Adam et al. 2019), reveals a wider institutional tendency toward hypertrophy, in which legislative ambition outpaces administrative capacity. The result may be bureaucratic overload and declining policy effectiveness (Limberg et al. 2021, Fernández-i-Marín et al. 2024) as authorities struggle to keep what they are tasked to regulate in check. Yet when what is being governed is not just "unruly" but living organisms that do not respond to or even register these proliferating rules, the sense of expansion, hopelessness, and elusiveness seems to become even more accentuated.

We have shown that invasive alien species are often perceived as monsters. In analogy with monster theory, the work of the authorities is about taming the invasive monster. In the same way, it can be argued that the regulatory framework itself becomes an unmanageable monster, which in turn needs to be tamed. A clear example is the protracted process of developing the national list, where each step, in a hydra-like manner, generates its own cycle of investigation and negotiation.

Taken together, and in line with Cohen's thinking, we would, if we may be a bit bold, propose that the species and regulation together form *a perfect monster* of our time. This hybrid figure is simultaneously biological and bureaucratic, material and symbolic. It is the knotweed breaking through asphalt and the regulations and legal texts multiplying in response; the killer slug devouring crops and the administrative burden consuming local resources. It condenses contemporary fears of ecological collapse, bureaucratic immobility, and the loss of control in an age of environmental uncertainty. Just as earlier societies' anxieties about unruly nature took the shape of folkloric beings with features from both the natural *and* the human worlds, today's monster lends it cultural body to invasive alien species *and* the governance structures surrounding them.

The perfection of this monster lies in its doubleness. It is neither only a living organism nor only a regulatory apparatus, but an assemblage of the two. It is the entanglement of human and non-human actors, ecological excess and bureaucratic excess that makes it exemplary of the monstrous in the present moment. Like Frankenstein's creature, the regulatory complex is stitched together from disparate elements such as concrete management of nature, popular imaginaries, scientific knowledge, political priorities, legal frameworks, and economic calculations. And in the same way, it acquires a life beyond the control of its creators: it is too much, overwhelming in scope, costly in implementation, and perpetually returning.

The temporal dimension underscores this hybridity. The very definition of invasive alien species relies on a historically set boundary: in Sweden, species established before 1800 are deemed native, while those arriving later are classified as alien. Such thresholds naturalise cultural and political decisions, producing categories that appear self-evident but are contingent and unstable. The lists, in other words, not only police ecological boundaries but temporal ones, deciding which species belong to the past and which are cast as present-day threats.

In this sense, *the perfect monster* of our time is not a singular entity but a complex. It materialises in gardens, forests, and infrastructures, where invasive species disrupt human projects, and in offices and legislation, where proliferating rules and lists overwhelm those tasked with their enforcement. It is simultaneously feared and desired: feared for its uncontrollability and its appetite for resources, desired for the promise of clarity and control it seems to offer. It fascinates even as it terrifies, embodying Cohen's (1996) insight that monsters always escape, always return, and always reflect ourselves and our time. In a broader political discourse, it sometimes also includes even more troubling articulations, connecting ecological change with xenophobic ideas that also concern humans.

Invasive alien species thus illuminate how monstrosity functions as a cultural lens in the present ecological moment. They show how threats are imagined, managed, and contested, and how boundaries - between native and alien, nature and culture, past and present – are drawn and redrawn. As Cohen reminds us, monsters are our children. Invasive alien species and the regulatory assemblages surrounding them are no exception. They are products of cultivation, commerce, and governance – of human mobility, desire, and intervention. What we now reject is, very much like Frankenstein's creation, our own monster.

References

Adam, Chrisitan, Hurka, Steffen, Knill, Christoph, & Steinebach, Yves (2019): *Policy accumulation and the democratic responsiveness trap*. Cambridge University Press.

Ahmed, Sara (2014): *The cultural politics of emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.

Aftonbladet (October 2, 2020): "WAR AGAINST THE HORROR PLANT – came in through the KITCHEN FLOOR". News bill

Aftonbladet (November 30, 2025): "Är rättslösa – parksliden kostar oss miljonbelopp" [Are lawless – Japanese Knotweed is costing us millions] https://translate.google.se/?hl=sv&sl=sv&tl=en&text=%C3%84r%20r%C3%A4ttsl%C3%B6sa%20%E2%80%93%20parksliden%20kostar%20oss%20miljonbelopp&op=translate (Accessed: December 1, 2025)

Altheide, David L. and Snow, Robert P. (1979): *Media logic*. Bevely Hills: Sage

Arnason, Arnar, & Kuprian, Anna (2017): The idea of gardening and landscape restoration in Iceland. *Journal of Scottish Thought*, 9(1), 139–159

Bangstad, Torgeir Rinke & Pétursdóttir, Þóra (2021): "An ecological approach to heritage", Torgeir Rinke Bangstad & Þóra Pétursdóttir (eds.) *Heritage Ecologies,* Routledge.
Braverman, Irus (2016): "The Regulatory Life of Threatened Species Lists," Irus Braverman, (ed.): *Animals, Biopolitics, Law: Lively Legalities*. London: Routledge, 19-38.
Byggahus.se (23 May 2005): https://www.byggahus.se/forum/threads/bjornloka.39192/ (Accessed: December 1, 2025)
Caroll, Noël (1990): *The philosophy of horror or paradoxes of the heart*. Abingdon: Routledge.
Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome (1996): "Monster culture (seven theses)," Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, (ed.): *The Monster Theory Reader.* University of Minnesota Press, 37-56.
Consultation responses (2024): *Proposal for a National List of Invasive Alien Species*, KN2023/03476, https://www.regeringen.se/remisser/2024/05/remiss-av-forslag-till-nationell-forteckning-over-invasiva-frammande-arter/ (Accessed: December 1, 2025)
Consultation responses (2025): *New Ordinance on Invasive Alien Species*, KN2025/01024: https://regeringen.se/remisser/2025/05/remiss-av-promemorian-ny-forordning-om-invasiva-frammande-arter/ (Accessed: December 1, 2025)
Davies, Jonathan (2022): "Brexit and invasive species: a case study of the cognitive and affective encoding of 'abject nature' in contemporary nationalist ideology," *Cultural Studies*, 36(4), 568-597.
de Goede, Marieke, Leander, Anna, & Sullivan, Gavin (2016): "Introduction: The politics of the list," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34(1), 3-13. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775815624561
de Grammont, Paloma & Cuarón, Alfredo (2006): "An Evaluation of Threatened Species Categorization Systems Used on the American Continent," *Conservation Biology* 20 (1): 14–27.
Eco, Umberto (2009): *The Infinity of Lists. From Homer to Joyce*. London: MacLehose Press.
EU Regulation (1143/2014): *European parliament and the council, on the prevention and management of the introduction and spread of invasive alien species*. European Parliament and European Council. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2014/1143/oj
Facebook group "Lupinutrotningsinitiativet" [Lupine Extermination Initiative] (Accessed: December 1, 2025)
Facebook group "Mördarsnigelns ovänner" [The Killer Slug's Worst Enemies] (Accessed: December 1, 2025)
Facebook group "Död åt Parkslide" [Death to japanese knotweed] (Accessed: December 1, 2025)

Fernández-i-Marín, Xavier, Knill, Christoph, Steinbacher, Christina, & Steinebach, Yves (2024): "Bureaucratic quality and the gap between implementation burden and administrative capacities," *American Political Science Review*, 118(3), 1240-1260.

Fleischmann, Larissa. (2023): "More-than-human political geographies: Abjection and sovereign power," *Political Geography*, 107, 102949. York: Vintage Books.

Frihammar, Mattias, Kaijser, Lars, & Lagerqvist, Maja (2026): *Heritage and the politics of Invasive Alien Species: Affecive alliances and memory work*, Cambridge Elements.

Frihammar, Mattias, Kaijser, Lars, & Lagerqvist, Maja (2021): Förenade krafter och hotfull natur: Om gemenskap, naturvård och invasiva arter. *Laboratorium för folk och kultur: En kulturvetenskaplig tidskrift*. https://bragelaboratorium.com/2021/11/11/forenade-krafter-och-hotfull-natur-om-gemenskap-naturvard-och-invasiva-frammande-arter/

Goody, Jack (1977): *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gothenburg Municipality (2025): *Invasiva arter*, https://goteborg.se/wps/portal/start/bygga-bo-och-leva-hallbart/naturvard/invasiva-arter (Accessed: December 1, 2025)

Göteborgsposten (September 10, 2025): "Jakten på en perfekt metod – så ska parksliden tas bort," [The hunt for a perfect method – This is how to get rid of the plant] https://www.gp.se/nyheter/goteborg/jakten-pa-en-perfekt-metod-sa-ska-parksliden-tas-bort.b4bc0275-0fdf-47e8-b11e-8ae1d8b7a648 (Accessed: December 1, 2025)

Hall, Stuart (1980): "Encoding/Decoding," Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe & Paul Willis, (eds.): *Culture, Media, Language*, London: Hutchinson, 128–138.

Head, Lesley (2012): Decentring 1788: beyond biotic nativeness. *Geographical Research, 50(2)*,166-178.

Head, Lesley, Larson, Brendom M. H., Hobbs, Richard, Atchison, Jennifer, Gill, Nick, Kull, Christian, & Rangan, Haripriya (2015): Living with Invasive Plants in the Anthropocene: The Importance of Understanding Practice and Experience. *Conservation and Society, 13(3),* 311–318.

Hinterleitner, Markus, Knill, Chritoph, & Steinebach, Yves (2024): "The growth of policies, rules, and regulations: A review of the literature and research agenda," *Regulation & Governance*, *18*(2), 637-654.

Härryda municipality Facebook, "Sköna gröna monster" [Sweet green monsters], June 22 2022, https://www.facebook.com/harrydakommun/posts/sk%C3%B6na-gr%C3%B6na-monster-nu-v%C3%A4xer-det-s%C3%A5-det-knakar-i-diken-och-planteringar-tyv%C3%A4rr-%C3%A4/387778460057910/

(Accessed: December 1, 2025)

Kristianstadsbladet (February 23, 2022): "Kommunen ger upp kampen mot monsterväxten" [The municipality gives up the fight against the monster plant]

Lagerqvist, Maja, Frihammar, Mattias, & Kaijser, Lars (2024): The Great Lupine Combat day. The traditionalization of eradication in times of crisis. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 1-21.

Larson, Brendon M, Nerlich, Birgitte, & Wallis, Patrick (2005): Metaphors and biorisks: The war on infectious diseases and invasive species. *Science communication, 26(3),* 243-268. https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547004273019

Leyshon, Andrew & Thrift, Nigel (1999): "Lists come alive: electronic systems of knowledge and the rise of credit-scoring in retail banking, *Economy and Society*," 28:3, 434-466, DOI: 10.1080/03085149900000013

Limberg, Julian, Steinebach, Yves, Bayerlein, Louisa, & Knill, Christoph (2021): "The more the better? Rule growth and policy impact from a macro perspective," *European Journal of Political Research*, 60(2), 438–454.

Maggiulli, Katrina. (2023): "Fear and loathing in ecomedia: Channeling fear through horror tropes in invasive species outreach", Antonio López, Adrian Ivakhiv, Stephen Rust, Miriam Tola, Alenda Y. Chang, Kiu-wai Chu, (eds.): *The Routledge Handbook of Ecomedia Studies*, 327-336.

SFS 2018:1939 *Förordning om invasiva främmande arter* [Ordinance on Invasive Alien Species] https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/forordning-20181939-om-invasiva-frammande-arter_sfs-2018-1939/ (Accessed: December 1, 2025)

Strand, Malin, Andersson, Mora, & Svensson, Mikael (2018): *Klassificering av främmande arters effekter på biologisk mångfald i Sverige – ArtDatabankens risklista*. ArtDatabanken Rapporterar 21. ArtDatabanken SLU, Uppsala

Stäheli, Us (2015): "Indexing – The politics of invisibility," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *34*(1), 14-29. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775815604925

Sveriges Radio (1 March 2025): "Varnar för invasion av köttätande mask" [Warns of invasion of flesh-eating worm] https://www.sverigesradio.se/artikel/varnar-for-invasion-av-kottatande-mask-med-200-ogon (Accessed: December 1, 2025)

Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (2025A): "Så tar du bort jättebalsamin", https://www.naturvardsverket.se/vagledning-och-stod/invasiva-frammande-arter/bekampning-av-invasiva-frammande-vaxter-pa-land/bekampning-och-hantering-av-jattebalsamin/ (Accessed: December 1, 2025)

Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (2025B): "Kanadensikt Gullris", https://www.naturvardsverket.se/amnesomraden/invasiva-frammande-arter/Arter/arter-som-ej-omfattas-av-regler/kanadensiskt-gullris/ (Accessed: December 1, 2025)

Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (2025C): "Mink", https://www.naturvardsverket.se/amnesomraden/invasiva-frammande-arter/Arter/eu-listade-etablerade-arter/mink/ (Accessed: December 1, 2025)
Swedish Government (2023): *Proposal for a National List of Invasive Alien Species* (KN2023/03476) https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/departementsserien-och-promemorior/2025/05/ny-forordning-om-invasiva-frammande-arter/ (Accessed: December 1, 2025)
Swedish Government (2025): *New Ordinance on Invasive Alien Species*, KN2025/01024, Klimat- och näringslivsdepartementet.
Thompson, Ken (2014): *Where do camels belong? The story and science of invasive species.* Greystone Books.
UNEP (2023): Invasive species – a huge threat to human well-being. https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/invasive-species-huge-threat-human-well-being (Accessed: December 1, 2025)
Young, Liam Cole (2017): "History: List and Media Materialism," Liam Cole Young, (ed.): *List Cultures. Knowledge and Poetics from Mesopotamia to Buzzfeed.* Amsterdam University Press, 23-44.

Interviews

Representative, County Administrative Board in Dalarna, interview, December 12, 2017
Representative, Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, interview, November 27, 2023
Representative, Species Information Centre, interview, December 12, 2023
Representative, County Administrative Board in Skåne, interview, January 19, 2024
Representative, Species information Centre, interview, April 17, 2024
Representative, National Federation of Recreational Gardening, interview, May 5, 2024
Retired researcher, The Institute of Freshwater Research, interview, February 12, 2025

Authors

Mattias Frihammar is reader/associate professor in ethnology at Stockholm University with an interest in collective memory processes, complex cultural heritage and issues at the intersection between nature and culture. Other research interests include invasive alien species, cold war heritage, museum studies and contemporary royalty. Frihammar is happy to seek interdisciplinary collaborations.
ORCID 0000-0003-2904-9708

Maja Lagerqvist, Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor at Department of Human Geography at Uppsala University is interested in matters of place construction, transformation and representation, modern historical landscapes, thorny heritage, youth mobility, the interactions between materiality and immateriality in our world, and last but not least how society deals with flora and fauna deemed alien and invasive (and other natures).
ORCID 0000-0002-0586-2297

Lars Kaijser, Professor in ethnology at Stockholm University. He works in the field of environmental humanities, with an interest in public aquariums, natural history museums, and invasive alien species, and has previously studied historizations within popular music. Working in an ethnographic tradition, he frequently explores how knowledge, experiences and goods are distributed, and how this process also carries cultural ideas and assumptions.
ORCID 0000-0003-3559-0293

Culture Unbound

Journal of Current Cultural Research

The Green Border between Monster and Human illustrated in *Maleficent* (2014) and *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019)

Anindra Candrika

Abstract

Borders cannot be avoided and will always be present in everyday life. Border issues may vary, starting from politics, geography, socio-economics, culture, and nature. Not to mention, much literature and films expose border issues as the main themes. *Maleficent* (2014) and *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019) depict the division between humans and nature, with humans representing the kingdom and the Moorland creatures as nature. This research employed a qualitative descriptive method with a thematic approach to identify and explore the main ideas underlying the films. This research found that the films highlight human behaviors like envy, lust, greed, and craftiness, while fairies are marginalized. Understanding and trust are needed to overcome border conflict, as seen in Phillip and Aurora's wedding. This article contributes to ecosystem preservation and future research in ecocriticism and border issues. However, since this article only focuses on the ecological and border issues, any other issues are ruled out.

Keywords: border studies, maleficent, human, nature, monster

Candrika: "The Green Border between Monster and Human illustrated in *Maleficent* (2014) and *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019)", *Culture Unbound*, Volume 18, issue 2, 2026: 109–127.
Published by Linköping University Electronic Press: http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se
https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.6266

Introduction

The action of bordering is common in everyday life. Even those that don't seem to show differences turn out to have invisible barriers that differentiate them. They are complex, multidimensional, and multidisciplinary structures and procedures that span administrative, geopolitical, cultural, economic, and social domains (Donnan & Wilson 1999; Newman 2003; Paasi 2005; Popescu 2012; Scott 2012; Van Houtum 2011; Wilson & Donnan 2012a, 2012b; Haselsberger 2014). The complexity of borders then creates various kinds of borders.

Geographers generally view a border or boundary as a linear feature separating political, social, and economic spaces (Bourdieu 1993; Newman 2006). According to social interactions or cultural content, Borders create several partitions within geographic space (Rumley & Minghi 1991). Borders can be identified in different kinds of linear features, for example, natural borders, artificial physical borders, and administrative borders. Natural borders can be mountain ranges or water bodies that separate cities or even countries. Meanwhile, artificial physical borders are roads or railways that humans built but later used as border marks. Administrative borders then include country frontiers or city boundaries (Jin et al. 2021).

According to scholars, borders serve as both separation lines between geographic spaces and spacious contexts for social interaction between social groups and entities (Emirbayer 1997; Newman 2006; Somers 1994). In addition, Batty (2013) suggests that flow and network are important aspects in order to understand urban space. Researchers are inspired by these border theories to explore the geographic borders formed by human activity from spatial interaction flows, and further compare them with administrative borders (Ratti et al. 2010; Shen & Batty 2018; Sobolevsky et al. 2013; Thiemann, Theis, Grady, Brune, & Brockmann 2010).

However, the discussion about borders continues. The discussion above tends to be anthropocentric, where humans are the pole of border dynamics. Eduardo Kohn, an American anthropologist, criticizes modern sociocultural anthropology for considering human characteristics such as language, culture, society, and history and utilizing them as instruments to comprehend people. E. Kohn proposes undertaking thorough research of nonhuman entities, referring to his method as "anthropology beyond the human". The primary objective of his approach is to appreciate that humans are also the product of things that lie outside human contexts (Kohn 2013). Kohn attempts to consider human language and its connections to other forms of representation that we share with nonhuman entities. He shows how language becomes (iconic and indexical) signs for nonhuman entities, which are not symbolic[1]. According to Kohn, life and thought are fundamentally the same thing, and all beings are constitutively semiotic. In this particular case, it is no longer possible to identify man as the sole language carrier in the natural world. Although the human language is symbolic, there are other language tools along with its other possibilities (Spirova 2019).

Hence, the correlation between humans and nature creates a so-called green border. This border was built by the general understanding of human nature, which tends to destroy nature, making a clear distinction that humans are destroyers, whereas nature is the purest form of being despite its actual non-being form. According to Weston (2022), it took ancient humans thousands of years to wipe out species, whereas it would only take decades for modern humans. In the modern day, we are not just killing species but obliterating entire landscapes in a matter of years. Farming is the main cause of destruction, and 96% of all mammals on Earth are livestock or humans. Based on UN estimates, up to one million plant and animal species are in danger of going extinct. This brings the discussion of humans and nature to an urgent level.

The problem of the green border could also appear in movies such as Disney's. Disney as one of the world's largest and most influential movie production companies, often has a special connection with children and families, using the concept of fairy tales to make their targets more immersed in the imaginative story. Its story revolves around a climax and a resolution that gives the connoisseur a moral lesson. Also, it is not uncommon for their film adaptations to make side characters, or even villainous characters, stand out (Ohmer 2023). That's how Disney expand their reach even further. Examples of Disney movie adaptations that bring the villain's life into the main story are *Cruella* and *Maleficent*[2]. They bring a different point of view from the main story.

Maleficent movies focus on retelling the story of "Sleeping Beauty" through the perspective of the evil character, Maleficent. The story of Maleficent brings many new insights that were previously unimaginable to its enjoyers. It focuses on how the villain that people know is not born evil, but is made by society itself. Maleficent is a dark fey, a subspecies of Fairy, that has a job to protect the Moorlands. Her faith was destroyed by a man when she was young, making her hate humans and isolate herself from them (*Maleficent* 2014). It turns out that the man who deceived her

1 Charles S. Pierce classify sign into three different terms: iconic, index, and symbol. Like a picture, iconic signs are similar to their subject; the interpreter is the mind understanding the sign. For instance, a red book, 'red' here refers to the color of the book. Meanwhile, indexical signs—such as the use of smoke to signal a fire—have a clear, causal connection. Lastly, symbolic signs have a taught, arbitrary relationship, such as how some cultures loathe the number 4. From inherent similarity to cultural agreement, these concepts describe how meaning is created. (Burks 1494: 673-675)

2 Cruella (Craig Gillespie 2021) trace the evolving narratives of *101 Dalmatians*, while, Robert Stromberg's (2014) Maleficent expand the view of *Sleeping Beauty* tale.

was a prince, and he needed to cut off Maleficent's wings in order to be the next king of his kingdom. However, fast forward to the second movie, *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019), and Maleficent's trust towards humans is healed by her relationship with Aurora. Maleficent became the fairy godmother of Aurora and lived with her in the Moors. The peace of their lives did not last long, since eventually, Aurora fell in love with a prince from another kingdom and wanted to get married soon. From here, the conflict between natural beings and human beings is exposed and illustrated clearly, especially when Maleficent meets other dark feys who have been living in the shadows, hiding from humans who hunt them.

Previous studies have conducted research that focuses on analyzing the Maleficent movies. Arora & Yadav (2020), in their research, use ecofeminism theory to analyze how Maleficent and the Moors represent Mother Nature, which stands against humans who tend to destroy them. The destructive nature of humans is illustrated by how King Stefan robs Maleficent's wings and King Henry's ambition to exterminate the Moorlands. Such an act comes with consequences, in which Maleficent punishes them. The application of ecofeminism and Gaia to Maleficent is sufficient to support the idea that human betrayal of the natural world and patriarchy toward women have always had repercussions. Fadiyah et al. (2023), who in their research used the same concept and had similar findings to Arora & Yadav, further emphasized that Maleficent is a representation of Mother Earth, who looks after the natural world as well as the symbolization of genuine love between a mother and her child, not even sexual love between a man and a female character. Fadiyah reaffirmed that the examined environmental criticism underscores the importance of coexistence between humans and nature, as they share the Earth as one. Raheemah & Alhelal (2024), who also use the ecocriticism concept in analyzing the Maleficent movie, stated that the movie's depiction of nature serves as a catalyst for criticism of the patriarchal control over women and their environment. The connection that unites Maleficent and Aurora conveys a message about how nature provides for human needs as well as how we should serve as stewards of the planet for the next generations. Through the lenses of ecofeminism and the Anthropocene, which take into account the intricate relationships between power, nature, and mankind, Maleficent embodies the politics of much more recent environmental movements focused on preserving and sustaining the ecologies. Their findings highlight the movie's message, which is the urgency of harmony between nature and humanity as a prerequisite for restoring a healthy ecological relationship during environmental emergencies. To further enhance the discussion about humans and nature in the Maleficent movies, the researcher aims to build upon and expand previous studies by incorporating a border studies perspective into the ecocriticism discussion, while setting aside anthropocentric approaches that tend to dominate border studies discussions.

The border issue between humans and nature that is shown in the movie's theme led the researcher to conduct this research, which somewhat ruled out anthropocentrism and embraced nature. This study primarily focused on utilizing the geographical aspect presented in the artificial world within the movie as the main disciplinary field, as the borders between human and non-human creatures were highlighted by the wall of thrones and the river that separates them. Those examples of borders presented in the movies represent what Rumley and Minghi (1991) called natural borders and artificial physical borders. Analyzing Maleficent movies using both borders and ecological perspectives can give information about the symbolization presented in the movies. This research aims to explore how the different depictions of Moorland and human kingdoms create the green border that separates the two, and how the border provides a symbolization of the illustration of humans and nature.

Method

This research used the qualitative descriptive method with a thematic approach. The thematic approach in film analysis focuses on identifying and exploring the themes or main ideas underlying a film (Yılmaz & Demir 2021). Themes often include universal concepts, moral values, or social criticism that the film was intended to convey to the audience. Thus, this approach helps reveal the underlying messages behind the story, characters, and visual elements associated with border issues illustrated in the Maleficent movies. The primary source of this research comes from *Maleficent* (2014) and *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019). The research data consisted of dialogues gathered from both films, which illustrate each border represented by both human and supernatural beings. Meanwhile, books and articles from national and international journals that relate to the discussion of the research serve as secondary sources. That includes a book or article that discusses the border issue, theories of border studies, and statements from books or articles that support the researcher's arguments.

Meanwhile, for the analysis method, the researcher used the model from Miles and Huberman (1994) by dividing the analysis process into three stages: Data Reduction, Data Display, and Conclusion Drawing & Verification. Data reduction involves filtering data from specific categories, integrating it with existing research, and eliminating data deemed irrelevant. Data display is a stage in organizing data to facilitate easier interpretation. Drawing conclusions and verification is the final step in the analysis. This stage includes interpretation, highlighting bias, and evaluating the results.

Result and Discussion

Green Border in Maleficent (2014) and Maleficent: Mistress of Evil (2019)

Maleficent (2014) is a film that reinterprets the classic children's tale Sleeping Beauty. It presents the story through a fresh lens, positioning Maleficent as the central heroine. The sequel, *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019), further explores the relationship between Maleficent and Aurora following their reconciliation. Alongside the theme of reimagining the Sleeping Beauty narrative, the film subtly addresses border studies through an environmental critique.

The tale of Maleficent starts by establishing the film's setting. Long ago, two kingdoms were in constant conflict: the moorlands, home to diverse fairy creatures, and the human kingdom ruled by a king. These two regions interpret two inversely proportional symbols.

> "[Narrator narrates the setting of the story] Once upon a time there were two kingdoms that were the worst of neighbors. So vast was the discord between them that it was said only a great hero or a terrible villain might bring them together. In one kingdom lived folk like you and me with a vain and greedy king to rule over them. They were forever discontent and envious of the wealth and beauty of their neighbors. For in the other kingdom, the Moors lived every manner of strange and wonderful creature. And they needed neither king nor queen but trusted in one another."
>
> (*Maleficent*, 2014, 00:00:38 - 00:01:19)

From the quotation above, it is seen that the human kingdom is being illustrated as a bad place compared to the Moorlands. The narrator emphasizes the state of human life by labeling it using expressions such as greed and envy. Greed is a human trait that is often viewed negatively due to its potential to harm others and negatively impact society (Zeelenberg & Breugelmans 2022). The greed of humans makes them envious of one another, never feeling satisfied with what they already have. The depiction of human lives was far different from that of the Moors. The story of the Moorlands is full of love, peace, and happiness. All the fairy creatures live in harmony with each other as well as the environment. They do not look for trouble nor destroy the nature where they live; in fact, they are the guardians of nature itself. The difference between each depiction of humans and fairies also acts as a comparison between the human realm and nature. *Maleficent* (2014) and *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019) then displayed a border concept issues between humans and nature, where both contain opposite stereotypes and live in conflict.

The act of bordering between humans and nature does not stop there. The green border in the films was further illustrated by the romance story between Maleficent, the guard of the Moors, and Stefan, the human folk. Stefan was once a little boy who wandered off to the Moorlands and tried to bring back some treasures he found in the river near the border between the human realms and the Moorlands. His act triggers the defense mechanism of the Moorlands, summoning tree guardians that surround the little Stefan. As soon as the fairies told Maleficent there was an intruder, she rushed there to see the boy herself. She calmly told the boy to come out from his hideout and put the treasures he stole back in their original place. Both of them were very young and innocent. Little Maleficent's curiosity about humans is expressed through Stefan. Because they were the same age, they soon became good friends, playing and spending time together. That friendship soon evolved into feelings of mutual love. However, as time passes by, they grow in separate ways. Stefan, who could not resist the temptations of the human kingdom's life, chooses to live among the humans, pursuing his greed, leaving Maleficent in her homeland. During their separation, the conflict between the humans and the Moors continues to grow. The current king despised the fairies and wanted to take over the Moorlands.

> "[Narrator] For the human king had heard of a growing power in the Moors, and he sought to strike it down. 'Guards, hold! Guards, hold!', [said the General]. [Then, King Henry shouted,] 'There they are! The mysterious Moors where no one dares to venture for fear of the magical creatures that lurk within! Well, I say: Crush them!'"
>
> (*Maleficent*, 2014, 00:09:35 - 00:13:47)

The humans who are afraid of the growing power of the Moors' entities, especially Maleficent, who became stronger day by day, start launching attacks on the Moors. The king orders the soldiers to attack Maleficent, who tried to warn them. He wanted to exterminate all fairies and take over the treasures that were buried in the Moorlands. The king's unreasonable reason for attacking the moorlands out of fear was not without foundation. Despite humans' greed for wealth, their fear of unknown entities encourages them to destroy the Moorlands even more. The fear of the unknown is also a human trait that is rooted within them. They are afraid of something that is out of their control. Just like how humans were afraid of natural disasters because it is unpredictable and deadly. Take another example of how humans share the same characteristic: fear of the darkness. Quoted from Emanuel & Abbiss (2017), Martin Antony, professor of psychology at Ryerson University in Toronto, stated that in the prehistoric past, people would have been more vulnerable to attacks by adversaries or predators while it was dark.

It is therefore no coincidence that humans have evolved a fear of darkness. The illustration of the king's fear of Moorlands in *Maleficent* (2014) further emphasizes how much humans are afraid of nature. The king's troops' unsuccessful attack drew them back. After the incident, Maleficent raises a wall of thorns that separates the two realms: the kingdom where humans belong and the moors, the homeland of fairies. The existence of these walls of thorns then represents and symbolizes the artificial physical borders, the so-called green border, bordering the human and nature entity in which they could not live in harmony. Not only that, the camera frame then brings the viewer flying away to see the moorlands turn from bright and colorful into a dark and gloomy area, initiating Maleficent's heart that is undergoing changes.

The sequel to *Maleficent* (2014), *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019), exposes the hidden truth of Maleficent's origins. After Maleficent was framed by Prince Phillip's Mother, Queen Ingrith, she was struck by an iron bullet and fell into the ocean. This event led Maleficent to meet her own kind, the dark fey camp that is far from the humans' hands. The wounded Maleficent, who is saved by her kind, is brought to the dark fey nest, their hiding place. Maleficent learned something new after meeting other dark feys.

> "... [Conall argues Borra's statement], 'Humans have used iron against us for centuries'. [Borra responded,] "And we are almost extinct because of it.'"
>
> (*Maleficent: Mistress of Evil*, 2019, 00:43:05 - 00:43:10)

> "We're all that remain. Unseen here, far away from mankind. … As more human kingdoms emerged, we went into hiding... from every corner of the earth... doing what we had to, to survive. [Explain Conall while showing Maleficent the dark fey hideout]"
>
> (*Maleficent: Mistress of Evil*, 2019, 00:47:19 - 00:47:35)

The dark fey that once lived happily across the world were expelled and forced to live in isolation due to the humans hunting them without stopping. They isolate themselves far from mankind as more kingdoms form, and eventually, they choose to hide. It turns out that the conflict between humans and fairies has existed for centuries, long before the conflict that occurred between Maleficent and the king. The iron bullet that pierced Maleficent is seen as a war ultimatum by one of the dark fey named Borra. It is Queen Ingrith's new invention that specializes in hurting the fairies. However, Conall suppressed Borra's provocation. Conall thinks that there is still a chance for humans and fairies to live together in harmony, and a war would not solve anything. However, Maleficent, who has experienced various injuries, betrayals, and disappointments, knows well that this is impossible to happen. Not to mention how her bond with her goddaughter, Aurora, was cut by misunderstanding and lies that were thrown at her. The green border then expands even more after Maleficent knows how hard things are for her kind and the cruel things that Queen Ingrith has done. The greed of humans that is depicted in the characterization of Stefan and Queen Ingrith can be interpreted as an allegory for capitalism's desire to control and take advantage of nature for financial gain, ignoring its intrinsic worth (Jones 2018: 44; Raheemah & Alhelal 2024: 570 - 571).

The Depiction of Humanity and Nature

The illustrations of humans and natural creatures' characteristics differ in the *Maleficent* (2014) and *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019) films. This can be seen in various events throughout the films. The humans and the fairies have different personalities and beliefs within them. Those depictions then create a clearer depiction of how human figures are shaped in such a way in films, as well as how fairies have stereotypes that circulate among humans.

Human assumptions about the Moors' creatures have existed and formed a negative stereotype about them. Stereotypes are collections of opinions that people have about members of other groups; these opinions are typically expressed as categorizations. Usually, these ideas are oversimplified in comparison to the objective facts. For instance, a group of people is characterized by their physical characteristics, intelligence, and their personalities (Rinehart 1963: 137). In this case, the people of the human kingdom labeled the Moorlands' creatures as hideous and cold-blooded. This first showed in the first film *Maleficent* (2014), where Stefan was caught stealing jewels from the Moors River. He is hiding from the tree guardians, afraid of their looks that are 'hideous', even after Maleficent convinces him that it is okay to come out from his hiding spot and put the jewels back into the river (*Maleficent*, 2014, 00:04:05 - 00:04:06). The dreadful appearance of Moors' creatures such as sharp edges, bizarre body shape, fangs, dark shading, and also made giant or even very small, then made humans assume that they are brutal and evil. Stereotypes like this are very common among humans. Other examples are featured in the sequel, *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019).

> "'What do you have against Moor folk, Percival?', [asked Prince Phillip]. '*Moor folk*? Is that what we're calling them now? … Winged beasts, murderous trees.' [Percival responded]. 'Guard your tongue, General.' [Phillip snapped]".
>
> (*Maleficent: Mistress of Evil*, 2019, 00:13:19 - 00:13:23)

The dialogue above shows how Percival, the general of Ulstead, like any other human, despises the Moorfolks, also known as the nature creatures. He even used terms such as 'murderous' and 'beasts' to refer to the Moorlands' inhabitants. His degrading action incurs Phillip's outrage and displeasure since the one he had just insulted was part of his fiancée's, Aurora, family. The stereotypical beliefs were then embedded deep into society, creating negative images of the fairies.

These malicious images of fairies also affect Maleficent's reputation. She is known for her evil deed that everyone remembers, cursing little Aurora with a wicked spell during her birth celebration. Even though in the end, she regrets her action, which she did at that time because she was overwhelmed by anger and a desire for revenge towards her ex-lover. Maleficent is also the one who broke her own curse, waking Aurora from her everlasting sleep. However, humans tend to overlook the good parts that she did, and they were buried and forgotten just like that. Everyone just highlights her wrongdoings, and the fact that she is a fairy just adds to the bad images of her. For instance, it can be seen from the human reaction towards Maleficent when she arrives at Ulstead to attend the dinner party, celebrating Aurora's engagement with Prince Phillip. The folks look at her as if she were the evilest being on earth, despite the fact that she is actually just a fairy trying to protect what is important to her. Everyone was running and hiding after encountering Maleficent, even children started screaming out of fear, and others thrust weapons such as pitchforks and torches towards her. The children's scream upon seeing Maleficent suggests that the perception of nature creatures as evil has been instilled in them since early childhood and passed down from generation to generation (*Maleficent: Mistress of Evil*, 2019, 00:23:44 - 00:23:50). Yet, are humans actually better beings than the Moors' creatures? Or are they actually more foul than other creatures?

This is where the discussion becomes more serious by discussing the depiction of human behavior towards nature as shown in both films. The illustration of human characters that were highlighted in this film focuses on two antagonistic characters: King Stefan and Queen Ingrith.

King Stefan has proved his evildoings throughout the first movie, showing greed, cunning, egoistic, and ruthless behaviors. He left Maleficent in their teenage years to pursue his lust for wealth and the pleasures of the human world. As if it were not enough, he came back to Maleficent with an alibi to apologize for his behavior and warn her of the danger that was about to befall her. But in fact, he just drugged the wine he gave to Maleficent so that he could cut her wings and offer it to the king. Soon, all his worldly desires were right on his fingertips, entitled as the new King, married the king's daughter, and the wealth and life he longed for long ago (*Maleficent* 2014).

As for Queen Ingrith, the queen of Ulstead, she shows even more vile things to the creatures of the Moorlands. Queen Ingrith, Prince Phillip's mother, once met Aurora during a dinner party, sneezed, and said to Aurora that she was allergic to flowers, or did she? (*Maleficent: Mistress of Evil*, 2019, 00:25:28 - 00:25:35). If it is observed deeply, it seems that her allergies actually have a connotation that shows her hatred for things related to nature, like fairies. The queen's dislike of natural creatures is shown sarcastically throughout the film. She even pretended not to know that Maleficent could not touch iron since iron is a fairy's weakness. Queen Ingrith deliberately gave Maleficent iron cutlery as if she clearly wanted to declare that she knew Maleficent's biggest infirmity. Queen Ingrith's goal was defined more after her worker creates poison that can kill fairies, "'Finally, the Moors will be mine. No more fairies.', [said the Queen while holding the dead fairy]" (*Maleficent: Mistress of Evil*, 2019, 01:01:11 - 01:01:16). Her hatred towards nature entities was proven at this point, she wanted to take over the Moors and eradicate all fairies there, highlighting the point that human tends to destroy nature.

> "'This is where we bury our dead. They've destroyed it.', [as Maleficent arrives, the tomb blooms have all been taken away]. 'This is what the humans do. They're nothing but locusts that swarm the earth.' [Borra added]."
>
> (*Maleficent: Mistress of Evil*, 2019, 01:03:57 - 01:04:12)

The soldiers, ordered by the queen, pluck all the tomb bloom flowers, representing the act of destroying nature. Borra, who follows Maleficent to the tomb site, added that destruction is what humans do. Borra draws attention to the phenomenon of overconsumption and the harm humans cause to crops and the environment by comparing humanity to locusts. This metaphor highlights the serious environmental destruction caused by human avarice. The anthropocentric mindset of mankind, which puts our demands ahead of those of other animals and ecosystems, is criticized in the conversation. Furthermore, the burial site's degradation demonstrates a lack of respect for the interdependence of all living things. The border between humans and nature was built by these illustrations, making a clear distinction that humans are destroyers, whereas nature is only maintaining and protecting what exists, living in harmony with the surroundings. According to Weston (2022), ancient humans took thousands of years to wipe out species, whereas modern humans would take only decades. In the modern day, we are not just killing species but obliterating entire landscapes in a matter of years. Farming is the main cause of destruction, and 96% of all mammals on Earth are livestock or humans. According to UN estimates, up to one million plant and animal species are at risk of extinction. This fact enhances the illustration that Rønning (2019) wants to emphasize: the continuous struggle between the creatures of the Moorlands, who represent nature, and humans who symbolize colonization and industrialization. The tomb's demolition serves as a metaphor for the broader issue of human encroachment into natural areas, which leads to the loss of ecological balance, biodiversity, and cultural heritage.

Despite the Moorfolks' appearance, it is not what Stefan did that was more evil than the natural entities' appearance? Or the queen of Ulstead's actions that poisoned her own husband, kidnapped fairies and turned them into guinea pigs, as well as created weapons to exterminate the fairies, are far more heartless and cruel? The stereotype of the Moors' creatures exists among the people and continues to haunt them. It is human nature to always be afraid of something outside one's control, especially nature. Also, it is their instinct that led them to destroy Mother Nature with an alibi 'for survival'. This ultimately strengthens the depiction of nature as represented by the fairies and the kingdom inhabitants, which represents mankind as they have been depicted for centuries. Humans are destructive and greedy, whereas nature is caring and wise. Nature is not self-sufficient and coexists with other living creatures. Nature itself even encompasses all living creatures. Without any interference, nature is supposed to be natural (Bergthaller 2020; Eissa 2020). Whereas humans will always try to destroy nature, as implicitly shown in Stromberg (2014) and Rønning's (2019) movies. The downfall of those greedy humans was given directly by nature itself, which Maleficent represents (Arora & Yadav 2020; Fadiyah, Wulandari, Pujimahanani, & Pasopati 2023; Raheemah & Alhelal 2024). King Stefan died as a victim of his own unrelenting desire for power and revenge, and Queen Ingrith's authority was taken from her as she was turned into a goat by Maleficent. Dickerson and Evans (2006: 167) emphasize that "the green world archetype" illustrates nature's dual role as both nurturing and destructive, mirroring humanity's connection with the environment. The ones who respect and recognize this equilibrium thrive, while those who try to overwhelm it eventually fail.

The Law, The Monsters, and Nature

One of the pivotal moments in Maleficent's first encounter with Diaval was when Diaval was about to be beaten after being caught by a human farmer. Maleficent intervened by transforming Diaval into a human right before the farmer's eyes. Seeing something so out of the ordinary, the farmer fled in fear, labeling Diaval a 'demon'. This scene illustrates how humans perceive a thing or being that is considered unnatural as the devil's incarnation or a monstrous being. Thus, talking about moorfolk who are feared by humans brings the discussion into a specific area about the meaning of monsters and their relationship to law and nature.

Humans instinctively view monsters as physical threats, seeing each one as an abnormality (Benedetti 2020: 1). The word monster itself is generally defined as a large imaginary creature, a malformed animal or plant, a person with an unnaturally repulsive character, or a marvel (Oxford English Dictionary 2020). However, these prevalent definitions clashed with Mary Shelley's depiction of 'monster'. Monster is often associated with the classic monster figure in Mary Shelley's creation, Frankenstein (2018). Frankenstein in the modern era is often characterized by its square head, green skin, and a set of different body parts sewn together, showing horror and terror. However, the conceptualization of 'monster' that Mary Shelley wanted to convey differs from the image of Modern Frankenstein. Shelley's Frankenstein, despite its uncanny and grotesque appearance, shows human characteristics within its narrative. It is completely inverse proportional to its creator, Victor, who embarked on his research that is against moral values. The true 'monster' in Shelley's work is more precisely directed towards Victor. People tend to "judge the book by its cover," revealing human nature that immediately assumes the unnatural and hideous form of a being or thing as a monster. Meanwhile, the real evil-doers, in this case Victor, despite having a human embodiment that people respect, have tendencies to do cruel things against moral values. As Baldick (2011) notes in his book, monsters in classical mythology often have disjointed parts, sometimes taken from different creatures and combined together. For instance, centaurs, satyrs, the Minotaur, and the Sphinx. This physical deviance from human categories makes the monster seem otherworldly, raising questions about its objective, derivation, and meaning. Not to mention that, according to Baldick, in Shakespeare and other texts, humans portrayed as 'monsters' break the natural bonds of duty to friends and family, acting without concern for those close to them. By portraying monsters as those who defy societal norms, the monstrous becomes a creature not just abnormal in appearance but also in behavior.

Thus, the connection between monster and law appears in how the real 'monster' takes advantage of the law to be used against the monster. The Moorfolk, that is marginalized, are seen as monsters by the civilians throughout the movies. For instance, during Philip and Percival's conversation after Philip proposes to Aurora, or at the beginning of the first movie, when the young Stevaun refers to the tree guard as hideous. These stereotypes then created an unwritten law among humans, making them stay alert and stay away from the Moor's creatures. Those unspoken laws also refer to the social norms that everyone understands, dictate what people should or shouldn't do, and encourage them to take actions that are costly to them personally but good for society as a whole (Andrighetto 2024: 1). However, this does not rule out the possibility that the unwritten law and the stereotypes is created and formed by the party who hold the power over society. A cold war based on power struggles and personal grudges enveloped the hearts of the kings (King Henry's ambition, which soon passed on to King Stefan) and the queen (Queen Ingrith), who wanted to conquer Moorland. In addition to fear of the unfamiliar, the unknown land that stores abundant treasure and natural resources also contributed to this quarrel. The misuse of power and law can be seen from two events. First, when King Stefan ordered everyone to burn every spinning wheel and prohibited its existence for the safety of his daughter. He also uses his authority to exploit natural resources, producing a large amount of iron weaponry to defeat Maleficent. The second was Queen Ingrith's attempt to exterminate every fairy from the Moorlands. Like Stefan, she used her sovereignty to conduct illegal research and produce plenteous iron equipment. Not only that, she also ordered her army to pick the tomb bloom flower (this can also be considered a natural resource) for a bomb that can destroy the fairies. Those actions then highlight how the real 'monster' is using law against nature, exploiting and destroying the natural environment.

The anthropocentric mindset of mankind, which puts human demands ahead of those of other animals and ecosystems, is presented and criticized throughout the movies. Thus, making the horror from the 'monster' depiction an artistic reflection of contemporary societal anxieties (Godin 2022: 117). The Anthropocene acts just like a double-edged sword; it can both give positive and negative effects on the Earth. If the Industrial Revolution marked the start of the Anthropocene, it's ironic that now, losing control of the thing humans have done marks its decline. Despite the desire to dominate Earth, humans find themselves unable to live in the world created by this pursuit. Most importantly, the 'monsters' that embody social anxieties (Hellstrand et al. 2018: 144). The term, from Latin *monstrum* meaning 'to warn,' reflects their role as messages. Horror frameworks have evolved, harnessing societal worries to evoke fear (Stryker 1994: 247; Grant 2010: 1). In this way, gothic horror and the Anthropocene are twin products of the same anxieties and era (Godin 2022: 118).

The Process of Blurring Borders

Stromberg's (2014) and Rønning's (2019) movies ended with the same pattern. Stromberg ended his movie with Aurora finally crowned as the Moorlands' Queen, bringing joy and peace among the Moorfolks (*Maleficent*, 2014, 01:27:05 - 01:27:13). Because of her dual identities, Aurora is able to act as a mediator and comprehend the viewpoints of each side, promoting tolerance and cooperation in areas where there was prior confrontation. She transforms into an actual representation of harmony, signifying the blending of magical and human worlds and the dismantling of the boundaries between them. In addition, the sequel also portrayed how Aurora, Prince Phillip, and the king of Ulstead wanted to end the eternal disconnection between the humans and the Moorland creatures. The film ended with Rønning featuring the happy ending by uniting the two kingdoms with the wedding of Aurora and Prince Phillip as a symbol of peace (*Maleficent: Mistress of Evil*, 2019, 00:14:57).

The assumption that love and peace between species are not only desired by the open-hearted human characters but also the fairies who have long been marginalized and live in hiding far from humans, "'Maybe we don't have to hide from the humans. Maybe we can exist without fear... and war. Find a way together.' [Conall said his hope to Maleficent]." (*Maleficent: Mistress of Evil*, 2019, 00:49:21 - 00:49:30). Conall, the dark fey who rescues Maleficent, want to live in harmony with human just like Aurora, the king of Ulstead, and Prince Phillip's was hoping. Even the fairies who have long felt discrimination and human cruelty still have sympathy and empathy for humans and want to live together side by side with each other without being haunted by fear, without war.

The green border that separates both entities does not exist without solutions. Humans are undoubtedly responsible for irresponsible exploitation, but they also have an enormous role in how nature is being cared for and maintained. They have the ability to repair the damaged environmental component (Kamboj et al. 2022: 3). Under circumstances of environmental crisis, *Maleficent* (2014) and *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019) films present a vision of reconciliation as a state of equilibrium between humans and nature, which is necessary to restore an ecologically sound connection between them (Raheemah & Alhelal 2024). The human efforts to restore damaged nature were represented by the warmth of a living being's heart, which brings both humans and nature together, as seen in Phillip and Aurora's success in unifying their kingdom. Cooperation and harmony between humans and nature are crucial for living in coexistence, as each has its own unique role in life. According to a theory proposed by Paul R. Ehrlich and his wife, Anne H. Ehrlich (1981), each species is aptly compared to an airplane's rivets, which serve as a metaphor for ecosystems. The gradual loss of the rivets represents the gradual loss of species, after which the ecological system and the plane additionally deteriorate and collapse. This hypothesis also applies to the human-nature relation, where in the context of the films, humans would not be able to live without nature as their life support. Thus, making them have to preserve nature and avoid over-exploitation of nature. If nature is annihilated, then life will be destroyed since the most important component of life will be lost. The peaceful coexistence of humans and nature depends on symbiosis, which, if not practiced properly, is dangerous for all living things (Arora & Yadav 2020). The attempt to connect Anthropocene and horror opens up discussion about how fictional stories can shed light on the world's current realities, highlight the impact of absences, and explore the emotions they evoke (Godin 2022: 123). Through the examination of the concept of monstrosity, the uncertain, the incomprehensible, and the unknown—that is, to coexist with the unfamiliar, appear to be more acceptable and make sense. The idea of the 'monster' gives us a historical perspective on how to think about, discuss, and interact with what seems impossible. Thus, after finding a way to live side by side, the border between the humans and the Moorfolks has now been scraped off, and there will be no more conflicts. Humans and fairies can finally live in harmony. The war ends, and the hatred ends as well. The environment in which the thick border has thinned is shown in the film, where at the end of the film, the dark fey helps humans who fell and supports them to stand (*Maleficent: Mistress of Evil*, 2019, 01:41:21 - 01:41:30). The border now becomes blurry, and they live happily on the same earth, the union of two kinds.

Conclusion

Maleficent (2014) and *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019) portray how the division that occurs between humans and nature creates the green border. The humans were represented by the people living in the kingdom region, and the Moorlands creature, including the dark fey, symbolizes nature. The bad behaviors of mankind are highlighted by Stromberg and Rønning: envy, lust, greed, and craftiness. Whereas the fairies were marginalized due to their appearance and odd existence, even though they did not seek any trouble, and only wanted to live in harmony with each other. In order to overcome the border conflict, understanding and trust between species are highly needed. This was achieved in the sequel, as seen during Phillip and Aurora's wedding, which indicated the union of their kingdom.

This article provides an understanding using ecocritical and border studies concepts in analyzing Stromberg and Rønning's films. The researcher hoped that this article could contribute to ecosystem preservation by providing awareness of the importance of nature. Furthermore, this article also offers data and arguments for future studies that are interested in conducting research in ecocriticism and border issues.

References

Andrighetto, G., Gavrilets, S., Gelfand, M., Mace, R., & Vriens, E. (2024). Social norm change: drivers and consequences. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 379(1897), p.20230023.

Arora, P., & Yadav, M. (2020). Maleficent as an Ecofeminist Protagonist: A Holistic Vision. The Criterion: An International Journal in English, 11.

Baldick, C. (2011). "The Politics of Monstrosity" in In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing. *Oxford Scholarship Online*.

Batty, M. (2013). *The new science of cities.* MIT Press.
Benedetti, C. (2020). The Misunderstood Monstrous: An Analysis of the Word "Monster" in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. *The Yale Undergraduate Research Journal*, 1(1), p.15.
Bergthaller, H. (2020). A tale of two systems: Anthropocene politics, Gaia, and the cybernetic image of the planet. *Ex-position*, 44, 37-52.
Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature.* New York: Columbia University Press.
Burks, A. W. (1949). Icon, Index, and Symbol. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 9(4), 673-689.
Dickerson, M. A., & Evans, J. B. (2006). *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The environmental vision of J.R.R. Tolkien.* University Press of Kentucky.
Donnan, H., & Wilson, T. W. (1999). *Borders: Frontiers of identity, nation and state*. Oxford and New York: Berg.
Ehrlich, P. R., & Ehrlich, A. H. (1981). *Extinction: The causes and consequences of the disappearance of species*. Random House.
Eissa, N. E. (2020). Mother Nature (Gaia) and the Androgynous Artist Holism in To the Lighthouse and A Room of One's Own. *Aafu Journal*.
Emanuel, D., & Abbiss, M. (2017). *The psychology of black and why we're scared of the dark*. CNN. https://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/01/health/colorscope-black-fear-of-darkness/index.html#:~:text=Prehistorically%2C%20people%20would%20have%20been,never%20quite%20shake%20the%20fear.
Emirbayer, M. (1997). Manifesto for a relational sociology. *American journal of sociology*, 103(2), 281-317.
Fadiyah, L., Wulandari, L., Pujimahanani, C., & Pasopati, R. U. (2023). The Emprises of Gaia Hypothesis as Shown on the Film Maleficent. *Jurnal Multidisiplin Dehasen (MUDE)*, 2(2), 215-224.
Godin, G. (2022). Monstrous things: horror, othering, and the Anthropocene. *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 56(2), pp. 116–126. doi: 10.1080/00794236.2022.2120709.
Grant, B. K. (2010). Screams on Screens: Paradigms of Horror. *Loading… Special Issue – Thinking After Dark: Welcome to the World of Horror Video Games* 4:6, 1–17.
Haselsberger, B. (2014). Decoding borders. Appreciating border impacts on space and people. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 15(4), 505-526.
Hellstrand, I., Henriksen, L., Koistinen, A., McCormack, D., & Orning, S. (2018). Promises, Monsters and Methodologies: the Ethics, Politics and Poetics of the Monstrous. *Somatechnics* 8:2, 143–162.
Jin, M., Gong, L., Cao, Y., Zhang, P., Gong, Y., & Liu, Y. (2021). Identifying borders of activity spaces and quantifying border effects on intra-urban travel through

spatial interaction network. *Computers, Environment and Urban Systems*, 87, 101625.

Jones, A. (2018). Nature as victim: Environmental exploitation in contemporary cinema. *Environmental Humanities Journal*, 7(1), 41-58.

Kamboj, M., Singh, R., Dahiya, P., & Kumar, R. (2022). Human: A Destroyer of The Nature. *Just Agriculture*, 2(12), 1-4.

Kohn, E. (2013). *How forests think: Toward an anthropology beyond the human*. Univ of California Press.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.

Newman, D. (2003). On borders and power: A theoretical framework. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 18, 13 – 25. Retrieved from: http://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/borderlands/article/view/1529.

Newman, D. (2006). The lines that continue to separate us: borders in our borderless' world. *Progress in Human geography,* 30(2), 143-161.

Ohmer, S. (2023). Disney and Adaptation. *The Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, *63*(6).

Paasi, A. (2005). *The changing discourses on political boundaries*. Mapping the backgrounds, contexts and contents. In H. van Houtum, O. Kramsch, & W. Zierhofer (Eds.), B/Ordering space (pp. 17 – 31). Farnham: Ashgate.

Popescu, G. (2012). Bordering and ordering the twenty-first century. Understanding borders. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield.

Raheemah, T. A., & Alhelal, A. R. (2024). The Voice of the Forest: an Ecocritical and Anthropocene Perspective on Nature, Power, and Human Impact in Maleficent. *International Journal of Education Humanities and Social Science*, 7(5), 564 – 578.

Ratti, C., Sobolevsky, S., Calabrese, F., Andris, C., Reades, J., Martino, M., ... & Strogatz, S. H. (2010). Redrawing the map of Great Britain from a network of human interactions. *PloS one*, 5(12), e14248.

Rinehart, J. W. (1963). The Meaning of Stereotypes. *Theory Into Practice*, *2*(3), 136–143. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1475640.

Rumley, D., & Minghi, J. V. (2014). *The geography of border landscapes.* Routledge.

Rønning, J. (Director). (2019). *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* [Film]. Walt Disney Pictures.

Scott, J. W. (2012). European politics of borders, border symbolism and cross-border cooperation. In T. M. Wilson & H. Donnan (Eds.), A companion to border studies (pp. 83 – 99). Chichester: WileyBlackwell (Blackwell Companions to Anthropology).

Shelley, M. (2018). *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text*. New York: Penguin Press.

Shen, Y., & Batty, M. (2019). Delineating the perceived functional regions of

London from commuting flows. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 51(3), 547-550.
Sobolevsky, S., Szell, M., Campari, R., Couronné, T., Smoreda, Z., & Ratti, C. (2013). Delineating geographical regions with networks of human interactions in an extensive set of countries. *PloS one,* 8(12), e81707.
Somers, M. R. (1994). Rights, relationality, and membership: rethinking the making and meaning of citizenship. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 19(1), 63-112.
Spirova, E. (2019). Nature and culture: blurring the borders. In *SHS Web of Conferences* (Vol. 72, p. 03034). EDP Sciences.
Stromberg, R. (Director). (2014). *Maleficent* [Film]. Walt Disney Pictures.
Stryker, S. (1994). My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage. *GLQ: J Lesbian Gay St* 1:3, 237–254.
Thiemann, C., Theis, F., Grady, D., Brune, R., & Brockmann, D. (2010). The structure of borders in a small world. *PloS one*, 5(11), e15422.
Van Houtum, H. (2011). *The mask of the border. In D. Wastl-Walter* (Ed.), The Ashgate Research companion to border studies (pp. 49– 61). Farnham: Ashgate.
Weston, P. (2022). Humans v nature: our long and destructive journey to the age of extinction. *The Guardian*. https://doi.org/10_3559/master/5410
Wilson, T. M., & Donnan, H. (2012b). Borders and border studies. In T. M. Wilson & H. Donnan (Eds.), A companion to border studies (pp. 1 – 25). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell (Blackwell Companions to Anthropology).
Wilson, T. M., & Donnan, H. (Eds.). (2012a). A companion to border studies. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell (Blackwell Companions to Anthropology).
Yılmaz, M., & Demir, Y. (2021). *Darren Aronofsky's Dramatic Space* (p. 15–28). https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-4903-2.ch002.
Zeelenberg, M., & Breugelmans, S. M. (2022). The good, bad and ugly of dispositional greed. Current Opinion in Psychology, 46, 101323–101323. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101323.
"Monster" Oxford English Dictionary, accessed February 21, 2020, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/121738?rskey=mdKOGI&result=1&isAdvanced=-false#eid.

Author

Anindra Candrika Santiana, Master of Literary and Cultural Studies, Airlangga University, Indonesia. Email: anin.candrika.santiana-2024@fib.unair.ac.id.
Research interest includes cultural studies and literary criticism, specifically on post-colonial, psychoanalysis, ecocriticism, border, Foucauldian, and structuralism fields.

Culture Unbound
Journal of Current Cultural Research

The Board's Dilemma – Bending the Rules to Protect a Local Cryptid

Hanna Jansson and Sanna Händén-Svensson

Abstract

Cryptids – animals that are sometimes observed but have not been scientifically verified – can be said to belong to the realms of myth or imagination. They are often strongly associated with particular regions and landscapes, and are therefore frequently used for tourism, marketing, and regional branding purposes. Consequently, public authorities and government agencies must sometime navigate their relationship to these animals that may – or may not – exist. In this article, we discuss the Jämtland County Administrative Board's decision in 1986 to safeguard a local cryptid, the Great Lake Monster. By following the Board's handling of the case, we show how authorities, organizations, and private individuals apply conventional laws to an unconventional case, in unconventional ways. We introduce the term "playful legal space" to describe the space established by the Board in their attempt to navigate the tension of two simultaneously overlapping social frameworks – nature conservation of verified species and heritage preservation of a culturally important cryptid. The term introduced offers great potential to scholarship of various fields, and in further developments in understanding creativity in cultural and social life.

Keywords: Playful legal space, cryptozoology, Great Lake Monster, Street level bureaucracy, organisations, play theory, nature conservation.

Jansson et al: "The Board's Dilemma – Bending the Rules to Protect a Local Cryptid", *Culture Unbound*, Volume 18, issue 2, 2026: 128–151. Published by Linköping University Electronic Press: http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.6425

Introduction

During the 1980´s, at least three species received legal protection in the county of Jämtland, Sweden, through decisions of the County Administrative Board: the freshwater pearl mussel (*Margaritifera margaritifera*), the musk ox (*Ovibos moschatus*), and the Great Lake Monster (*Storsjöodjuret* in Swedish). Whereas the pearl mussel and the musk ox are scientifically verified species, the Great Lake Monster is a cryptid, a cryptozoological being, that is, an animal that is sometimes observed but has not been verified by the scientific community (Loxton & Prothero 2013, Swahn 1990, Welinder 1998, 2004, Regal 2009, 2011, Rossi 2016, Hurn 2017, Bubandt 2019).

Cryptids can be said to belong to the realms of myth or imagination, and to hold a liminal space in their uncertain status of existence. Despite – or maybe thanks to – their ambiguous nature, such animals often receive an important (and although emotionally grounded, sometimes also capitalized) role, both by individuals claiming to have seen or encountered them, and for the regions where they are said to exist (Spitzer 2008, Magin 2016). These creatures are utilized for tourism, marketing, and regional branding purposes, in cultural heritage processes (Welinder 1998, 2004), local identity formation (Magin 2016) and in shaping individual identity narratives (Händén-Svensson 2024a). The Loch Ness Monster in Scotland, known as "Nessie", and the Norwegian lake serpent of Seljordsvatnet, called "Selma", pose well known examples. Consequently, and as illustrated below, public authorities and government agencies must sometime navigate their relationship to these animals that may – or may not – exist.

In this article, we take as our starting point the Jämtland County Administrative Board's decision in 1986 to safeguard the Great Lake Monster. At first glance, this decision should not be possible, as the Great Lake Monster is not a real animal. By following the Board's handling of the case, we show how authorities, organizations, and private individuals, through acts of playful rule-bending, utilize the ambiguousness of the phenomenon. By applying conventional laws to an unconventional case, in unconventional ways, they establish what we here define as a *playful legal space*, thereby enabling the protection of a cryptid. These strategies are later called out and criticized by higher authorities, ending the playful framing of a cryptozoological being as protected. As comparative case studies, we also study documents from the cases leading to the same Board's protection of the freshwater pearl mussel and the musk ox, during the same time period. The three cases share formal similarities but also reveal essential differences, highlighting the special status of the Great Lake Monster, and confirming the Board's mingling of laws and bureaucratic processes, monsters, and play.

We explore the following research questions:

- Which laws are invoked/used in the different phases?

- How can the bureaucratic process of protecting a cryptid be understood as a form of playful rule-bending?
- How do the three phases of the protection process demonstrate different approaches to the legitimacy of the playful legal space established?

To answer these questions, we combine monster theory with sociological and folkloristic perspectives on play, and theories on street level bureaucracy and rule bending. This positions our discussion as a contribution to monster studies by broadening the investigation of Swedish monsters; to ethnology and organisational studies by providing examples of play as a form of rule-bending in bureaucratic authorities; to cultural geography by exploring the connection between cryptids and landscapes; and to cultural heritage studies by examining the legal limits of using local phenomena for tourism, regional branding, and the creation of symbolic place identities.

The Great Lake Monster – a short introduction

Since at least the seventeenth century, there has been documented folklore about a lake serpent causing mischief and haunting in Lake Storsjön, Jämtland, Sweden. In an early understanding of this lake serpent, it was perceived as a "*rå*," a spirit that governs a specific place. At that time, the lake serpent "existed" in the world of spirits, which was part of the same cosmological belief system as human reality. As a response to scientists like Linnaeus and Darwin permanently rewriting the systems used by academic disciplines such as zoology and botany to explain the world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, individuals started reporting observations of a large lake serpent – observations of what was perceived to be a yet unidentified species. People around the lake, as well as researchers from various parts of the country, began to wonder whether the folkloric creature that was observed might actually be a real animal (Lönnberg 1898, 1899a, 1899b, Olsson 1899, Wibling 1900).

During the late nineteenth century, local and national newspapers reported on observations of the mystical animal, and individuals from all social classes observed it. What can best be described as a "Great Lake Monster Frenzy" arose, and in both Jämtland and nation-wide the cryptid was on the almost daily agenda: a search in the digital online archive of daily newspapers published in Sweden shows 217 posts about the Great Lake Monster in 1898, 219 in 1899 and 224 in 1900, each year with a significant increase in reports in the late summer (Ullstad 2018). This even caused Swedish author Hjalmar Söderberg to comment on the phenomenon in his novel *Doctor Glas* (1905: 53).

Despite persistent attempts to capture what in the newspapers and vernacular talk eventually became known as the Great Lake Monster (*Storsjöodjuret*), no animal was found, and researchers soon concluded that the phenomenon claimed to be observed was merely an idea: amazing stories by amazing storytellers, wrongful interpretations of natural phenomena, tricks of the eye or of mind, or wishful thinking. Yet, despite the lack of scientific verification and the zoologists' sceptical stance on the matter, people continued to observe the so called "hidden animal," a tradition comparable to events in other parts of the world and other waters; the before mentioned Nessie and Selma, Mkele-Mbembe in the Kongo basin, Ogopogo in Lake Okanagan (Gaal 1955, 2001), Champ in Lake Champlain, as well as land based cryptids such as Bigfoot and Sasquatch in North American woodlands (cf. Merger & Gagnon 1988, Dendle 2006, Loxton & Prothero 2013, Magin 2016, Rossi 2016). In this process, the Great Lake Monster was transformed into a cryptid, a liminal being (Händén-Svensson 2024b).

Cryptids such as these are often strongly associated with their particular region and its landscape, and are therefore repeatedly made into symbols for those regions (cf. Händén-Svensson & Jansson 2022, Loxton & Prothero 2013, Magin 2016). As a tourism developer in Jämtland, Anne Adsten, explained it in an interview in 2021: "The Great Lake Monster is a part of us, a part of who we are". This same identification can be found in stories surrounding other cryptids as well (Botsfjord 1999). Tourism actors thus frequently make use of the Great Lake Monster in regional branding processes, such as for example maps of the area illustrated with drawings of the serpent, or serpentine shaped snow sculptures welcoming visitors to the city of Östersund. In addition, individuals express a sense of belonging to the place and landscape through their observation narratives (cf. Händén-Svensson 2025). Alongside this, for many individuals (although not all!) in the region the Great Lake Monster has become a beloved idea. People like their monster, and feel both pride and joy when they think of it. To people who care for it, it both creates, communicates, and emphasizes a shared cultural past, meaning-making, and belonging of, in and to this place. These processes are crucial as a backdrop to the events playing out in the protection of the imagined, yet historically and locally important, animal.

Theoretical framework

In this article, we combine perspectives from the emerging field of monster theory (Mittman 2012, Eriksson 2021, 2023, Cohen 1996) with play theory and theories on street-level bureaucracy, to explore how the protection of the Great Lake Monster was enabled and meaningful in the local community at one time, yet impossible to uphold at another time and in another place.

Central to our discussion is the fact that the phenomenon in question is a cryptid – a monster. Ontologically and epistemologically, the cryptid emerges from questions about the possibilities of the natural world, the reliability of sensory perception, and the boundaries between reality and fiction. Monsters can serve as analytical entry points for exploring how we conceptualize existence and what it means for something to exist (Eriksson 2021: 183-188), and as entry points to analyse cultural, societal and psychological processes.

Monster studies offer analytical tools for examining the borderlands of the real and the imagined, fact and fiction, and physical reality and cultural life. Cryptids in particular occupy an ambivalent category of monstrosity, being both monster and not monster, depending on the epistemological views of the observer. The Great Lake Monster is thus perceived as a monster only by those who recognize its liminal and ambivalent ontological status, whereas cryptids are understood as real animals within the cryptozoological community. The cryptids' legendary status has transformed them into spectacular and unbelievable creatures in narrative (Heuvelmans 1983).

In this sense, cryptids are undoubtedly liminal beings. The moment a cryptid is scientifically verified, it will be reclassified – from monster to animal. This creates a productive tension for the monster researcher, as "all 'monsters' are constructions, even those that can clearly be traced to 'real,' 'scientifically known creatures'" (Mittman 2012: 1). As constructs, and as Weinstock (2020: 2) points out, monsters may resonate differently through different temporal and spatial situations, which, as we will show below, becomes crucial for the administration of protecting the Great Lake Monster.

To account for the tension between the ontological instability of the Great Lake Monster, and the formal administrative practices of protecting species, we here introduce the concept of a *playful legal space*. The concept aims to capture situations in which formal legal or administrative frameworks are utilised together with play, humour, or irony, to both confirm and challenge existing juridical, administrative or epistemological systems.

Previous research provides important insights into how and why bureaucrats depart from formal rules, but does not capture situations framed by or legitimized through play or humour. Research on street-level bureaucracy has shown how public officials may engage in practices such as workarounds, rule-bending, or non-compliance, to make everyday administrative work possible, or to promote particular interests (Lipsky 1980, Bozeman et al. 2021). Employees may only partially follow a rule or depart from its requirements, take advantage of the rule's lack of clarity, potential loopholes, or multiple possible interpretations (Borry 2017: 79, Bozeman 2022: 38-39). When prevailing categorizations, norms, laws, and regulations are challenged, ignored, or adapted for specific purposes in such ways, ambiguous "grey areas" are created, as practices and understandings other than the usual ones become possible, while also putting bureaucrats at once inside the legal system they are working in, and in confrontation with it (Cunha & Cabral-Cardoso 2006). This may lead to unpredictable and partial decision making, and even corruption (Borry 2017, Hilmer Pedersen & Johannesen 2018). More positive perspectives on bureaucratic rule bending emphasise its empathic and prosocial aspects, as bureaucrats may bend rules with the benefits of a client, patient, citizen or service recipient in mind (Borry & Henderson 2020: 47).

Play, in its turn, can with Gregory Bateson's definition be described as an advanced form of communication, in which participants use meta-communicative play signals – such as word choice or tone of voice – to indicate that what is being said and done is both real and pretend, and therefore should not be interpreted literally (1999 [1972], cf. Gustafsson 1995, Gustafsson 2002: 26, cf. Huizinga 2016 [1938]). In play, real actions are imitated, though the mimicry is not intended to carry the same meaning as the original actions. Within the framework of play, behaviours that would otherwise be unacceptable are enabled (Bateson 1999[1972], Goffman 1974, Gustafsson 2002: 153). This merging of seemingly incompatible phenomena can give rise to paradoxes or challenge established categories (cf. Bateson 1999[1972]: 16, Norrick 2003, Engman 2014: 22, Jönsson & Nilsson 2014: 11). Play is thus a way to frame and understand a social situation, with agreed-upon rules that participants must relate to (Goffman 1974). A formal administrative process is another such framework and can at least be expected to entail entirely different behaviours.

As we will see below, the County Administrative Board and certain other actors use linguistic ambiguities and humour to establish a playful legal space, where the legitimacy of the protection of a cryptid is enabled and affirmed. While referring to laws, regulations and routines as if the animal in question was an ordinary one, all parties seem to understand that something else than nature conservation is actually communicated. We define playful legal spaces as situations in which formal legal or administrative procedures are outwardly invoked; where playful meta-communicative signals such as humour, ambiguity or absurdity simultaneously seem to challenge this framework; where the involved actors therefore can be assumed to share an understanding that these procedures or decisions do not mean what they usually do; and that this enables decisions or actions that would otherwise be legally, administratively or epistemologically invalid. These decisions are, to our understanding, likely perceived – rightly or wrongly – as harmless, culturally valuable, or beneficial to a local community, to matters of cultural heritage, or to individual citizens.

Empirics and data

The process of protecting the Great Lake Monster can be divided into three phases: in 1985-1986 the protection was investigated, and a formal decision was adopted. In 2002, a private individual applied for an exemption from the protection ban, eventually leading to the Parliamentary Ombudsman in 2004–2005 investigating the County Administrative Board's actions, resulting in the protection being revoked. We have previously discussed the events of Phase 1 in detail elsewhere (Händén-Svensson & Jansson 2022).

The main material consists of nearly 200 pages related to the protection of the Great Lake Monster. The oldest documents are from 1962, the most recent from 2008. In addition, supplementary material has been analysed. This includes documents concerning two other protection cases handled by the County Administrative Board of Jämtland in the 1980´s: the protection of the musk ox in 1980 (County Archive 11-122-2667-1979), and the protection of the freshwater pearl mussel in 1989 (County Archive 2719-102-1989). An interview was also conducted in spring 2025 with an official who worked at the County Administrative Board at the time of the protection and who retired during the initial stage of Phase 3.

Like all archival sources, the analysed material has its limitations (Hörnfeldt 2011, Jönsson & Nilsson 2017, Geschwind & Jansson 2022). We lack insight into written communication that, for various reasons, has not been preserved, and the material cannot provide a complete picture of the conversations and considerations that took place alongside the documented process. There are gaps in the sequence of events, and our knowledge of the relationships and intentions of the involved actors is limited. However, the analysis has been conducted with an understanding of possible underlying motives for why the protection was initiated and carried out, illuminated both through the documents themselves and through the interview with the official initiated in the case.

The events discussed took place about three decades ago, and some of the individuals involved are still alive. In the material, people are mainly referred to by their professional roles and initials, which emphasizes that the analysis focuses on institutional patterns of action rather than individual deeds. Anonymization has not been deemed necessary nor possible, as the individuals in question are already well known in the local community. The material is public, and the public decision – with its detailed and in some respects remarkable documentation – was reported in the local press and by the Swedish News Agency (*Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå*). It is also available to the public through the museum Jamtli's exhibition on the Great Lake Monster.

Phase 1: The Board's dilemma

In January 1985, the County Administrative Board in Jämtland sent out a memorandum and referral stating that they were investigating the possible protection of the Great Lake Monster, asking the referral bodies to please provide the Board with information about what species the Monster was, and its Latin name. At that time, protection cases were still mainly processed at county level, whereas they are now primarily decided by a national agency – the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SOU 2021: 51). Usually, protection processes are initiated by national or regional authorities, motivated by scientific assessments. For instance, the musk ox's extended protection in Jämtland in 1980 was first recommended by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, whose formal proposal encouraged regional agencies to decide on appropriate actions. Similarly, the protection in Jämtland of the freshwater pearl mussel in 1989 was argued for by an official at an environmental office, supported by a comprehensive 70-page report. In both cases, the pronounced aims were to protect animals from documented disturbances or pearl fishing, which had proved to threaten the well-being and survival of individuals and the species as a whole.

In the case in focus here, however, the prompt to protect the Monster came from the Tourist Office in Östersund, who a few weeks earlier had written to the Nature Conservation Unit at the Board, to point out that the Great Lake Monster apparently was not protected from hunting or capture. It *might,* the letter noted, be indirectly protected under §1 of the Hunting Ordinance (SFS 1938:279), which stated that wild mammals and birds belonging to a species for which there is no general hunting season are protected year-round. "But what if the Great Lake Monster is neither a mammal nor a bird?" the Tourist Office wondered. "Then there is currently no protection. That is, of course, unacceptable and should be corrected as soon as possible." It would not do for Jämtland's internationally known and unique species to be unprotected. The Tourist Office therefore requested that the County Administrative Board issue a protection of the Great Lake Monster, under §14 of the Nature Conservation Act (SFS 1964:822). The act dictated the conditions for legal protection of species, and stated that the authorities could ban the killing, harming, or capturing of wild animals of a threatened species, as well as any removal or destruction of its eggs, roe, or nests.

That the request to protect the Great Lake Monster came from a Tourist Office indicates that it considered a protection of the regionally significant cryptid as beneficial for local tourism, and that the motives in this case might concern a form of culture, rather than nature, conservation. As mentioned above, the Great Lake Monster is frequently used in the regional branding of Jämtland. For instance, the Tourist Office's own letterhead was topped with a stylized logo of the monster, inspired by a sculpture created by Einar Hagnestad in 1982. The statue often appears in photographs from the city and has been reproduced in many formats.

Some days after receiving the letter, officials at the Board initiated the process to protect the monster. The director of the Nature Conservation Unit, OT, prepared a draft for the referral and its distribution list, and sent it for a review to his colleague MD, director of the Environmental Protection Unit. The draft was then sent for approval and "blessing" from the deputy governor LC, who responded that the draft was excellent: "Let's play along. O.K. from my side then." he wrote on a note accompanying the draft.

The Board did face a tricky situation. It was obliged to process all submitted cases – regardless of whether these appeared "sensible" or not.[1] Yet why they chose to proceed in the way that they did, and what their motives were to, in LC's words, "play along" with the Tourist Office's unconventional request, we cannot know for sure. We have, however, interpreted their willingness to initiate the process as an indication that they, too, saw economic and symbolic potential in the protection of the monster, and that this was believed to have the potential to benefit the region.[2] As a local authority with regional development as part of its mission, it might be difficult for the County Administrative Board to publicly state that the Great Lake Monster did *not* exist, and to dismiss the case on that ground. However, protecting a species by the application of the Nature Conservation Act presupposes that the species is scientifically verified – which the Great Lake Monster is not. How was the Board—a public authority obliged to follow laws, procedures, and regulations—to accomplish the protection of a locally emblematic cryptid within their administrative framework, without any scientific evidence of its existence? The referral round, which we will now turn to, can be understood as a creative strategy to manage this dilemma through a playful form of bureaucratic rule-bending, as the officials faced a situation where the rules and their aims were at odds with each other (cf. Borry & Henderson 2020: 46, Bozeman 2022).

RSVP: April 1st

In the memorandum dated January 24, 1985, the County Administrative Board outlined the existing protections for mammals, birds, various aquatic species, and insects under the Hunting Ordinance, the Fisheries Regulation (SFS 1982:126), and the Nature Conservation Act, and what this means for the Great Lake Monster's

1 As a former employee explained in our interview, an earlier request for protection of the Great Lake Monster, submitted in 1962, had been shelved, but according to him, this was fundamentally a mishandling.

2 It has, for instance, been suggested to us that the protection was connected to the celebration of Östersund's 200th anniversary in 1986 and that it was used as a way to draw attention around the jubilee (see also Dagens Nyheter 1986-01-25).

situation:

> All wild mammals and birds are protected under §1 of the Hunting Ordinance unless a general hunting season is prescribed under the Hunting Season Regulation. There is currently no hunting season for the Great Lake Monster. If the Great Lake Monster is a mammal or bird, it is therefore automatically protected.
>
> Regarding fish, lobster (Homarus), crayfish, Norway nobster (Nephrops), shrimp, crab, (Cancer), squid, oyster, and lamprey, the provisions of the Fisheries Regulation apply. These animals are not automatically protected; protection is granted in specific cases under §§5–7 of the Fisheries Regulation. The Great Lake Monster is not protected under these provisions.
>
> Other animal species, (…) may be protected under §14 of the Nature Conservation Act. There is not currently any protection for the Great Lake Monster under this provision.
> The problem in connection with protection is thus to determine what kind of animal the Great Lake Monster actually is.

Hence, the referral bodies were asked to help the Board by answering two questions: "What kind of species is the Great Lake Monster, and what is its Latin name?" The requested response date was April 1, 1985.

Formally, the case was processed in a way similar to the other two studied cases: a memorandum with its appropriate heading and formal layout, a reference number, and official stamps, was sent out to referral bodies who were encouraged to send the Board their comments on the case. Yet some aspects differed markedly. In the musk ox case, the referral was sent to neighbouring counties, municipal authorities, the police, Sami villages, hunters' associations, tourism stakeholders, and nature conservation bodies, as well as to Norwegian authorities. The freshwater pearl mussel referral was distributed to the Environmental Protection Agency, the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, the fisheries board, the national fisheries administration, and the county of Härjedalen. By contrast, the Great Lake Monster referral was sent to 18 recipients, including boat clubs, yacht clubs, the county museum, and student societies – alongside a few more expected recipients such as fisheries boards and environmental units.

There are a number of cues in the memorandum that imply, and are likely intended to imply, that the Board might not be wholly serious with their request of information. Among these are the deadpan posing of absurd questions to unconventional referral bodies with little knowledge about biology, the choice of April 1 as a deadline, the treatment of the possible existence of the Monster as a non-issue, and the complete absence of any acknowledgment of the matter's sensationalism. These can all be regarded as *play signals*; as metacommunicative acts stating simultaneously that this is to be taken for real, and this is not to be taken for real (cf. Bateson 1999). Consequently, through such an act of play, the public authority was able to establish a legal and bureaucratic space where the potential legal protection of a cryptid could be presented as conceivable, thus existing at once within and outside established structures and conventions (cf. Cunha & Cabral-Cardoso 2006: 217).

A total of seven referral responses were received during the spring, differing significantly in tone, factuality, and content (see further Händén-Svensson & Jansson 2022). Of these, two explicitly addressed the legal aspects of the issue. The fisheries inspector in Härnösand clearly dismissed any possibility of protecting the Great Lake Monster, citing applicable legal paragraphs and scientific practice, thereby stating that a species cannot be protected without scientific verification. He thus disqualified the contradictory space that the County Administrative Board had opened and immediately rejected the playful framing they had constructed.

The Uppsala-based association Samfundet Storsjöodjurets Vänner (Friends of the Great Lake Monster) similarly dismissed the validity of the Board's referral – but for entirely different reasons. According to them, the Great Lake Monster was already indisputably protected, thanks to the association's persistent efforts in the 1960s. In their response, the chairperson claimed credit for the amendment of the Hunting Ordinance at that time. As the Hunting Season Regulation did not specify a hunting season for the Great Lake Monster, it was automatically protected, they argued.

The remaining referral bodies approached the question of classification in widely varying ways, most of which included elements of humour, irony, hyperbole, oxymorons, and parody. In doing so they both adhered to and deviated from the conventions of the referral genre, thereby simultaneously appearing to affirm and reject the legitimacy of the protection process. Jämtland County Museum (later Jamtli) appeared to take the question seriously, although they did not comment on the protection itself. They emphasized that what has been considered real or imaginary has varied throughout history – and that the Great Lake Monster exists somewhere in the borderland between these two epistemological extremes. The Fisheries Board of Jämtland classified the Great Lake Monster as a fish but mixed oxymorons with hyperbolic conspiracy theories about large-scale hunts for the monster organized for German millionaires; and the Great Lake Sailing Society humorously classified the monster as AVESPISCESMAMMALIA – a combination of bird, fish and mammal. The informal President of the Republic of Jämtland[3] similarly combined incompatible species traits to declare it "150% monster." Taken as a whole, the referral bodies did not provide unified support for the protection of the Great Lake Monster, with the Federation of Fishing Water Owners being the only actor to explicitly endorse protection.

Nevertheless, in January 1986, the decision to protect the Great Lake Monster was signed by the Board's representatives:

> With support from §14 of the Nature Conservation Act (...) the County Administrative Board hereby issues a ban on killing, harming, or capturing live animals of the species Great Lake Monster within Lake Storsjön (in central Jämtland). The ban also applies to the removal or destruction of the Great Lake Monster's eggs, roe, or nest.

The decision was sent to local media, the Swedish News Agency, the county's legal bulletin (23 FS 1986), and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency. A comparison to the two other cases from the 1980's support our interpretation that the protection of the Great Lake Monster functions primarily as a communicative act, likely intended to strengthen tourism and cultural heritage values. The legal frameworks referred to in the decisions are the same: the musk ox was also protected under §14 of the Nature Conservation Act, and the freshwater pearl mussel was protected under §6 of the Fisheries Regulation – a law also referred to in the monster case. But these two protections clearly aimed to prevent actual harmful actions against actual animals, and to enable actual legal consequences. Hence, the formal decisions were distributed to all municipalities in the county, where it was posted publicly, as well as to referral bodies and local newspapers. The musk ox case was communicated to police authorities, hunting and conservation actors, Sámi villages, and tourism organizations, reflecting that the protection was to have concrete legal and practical consequences. These two species were also affected by the actions of other authorities and actors, with national and international initiatives and conventions aimed at protecting them – such as the Bern Convention, which mentions both (SÖ 1983: 30).

When compared to these two other protection cases from Jämtland in the 1980's, it thus becomes clear that the bureaucratic process to protect the Great Lake Monster imitates a conventional process – with referrals, responses from bodies, and formal references to legal acts – but simultaneously signals something else. The play signals, the selection of referral bodies, and the omission of certain actors

3 The Republic is described as a humorous and cultural initiative with serous undertones, in support of the preservation of Jämtland's culture and language, and a reaction to emigration from the region and the national authorities focus on the larger city areas (Wikipedia 2025).

from the process indicate that the case was not intended to have the same real consequences as the other protections.

For almost two decades, the ban merely existed as a formal decision added to the county's collection of status, and as a framed photo copy on the county museum's permanent Great Lake Monster exhibition. This was however about to change in the early 2000's, when a somewhat unusual request to the Board activated and challenged the ban, thereby initiating a series of new legal and bureaucratic processes related to the Monster, and eventually leading to the upheaval of its protection.

Phase 2: The protection put to test

In November 2002, a private individual living in the Stockholm area, sent a letter to the County Administrative Board of Jämtland. He had read on the board's website "that it is forbidden to, among other things, collect eggs from certain species in our fauna." He now applied for a one year long exemption from the ban on collecting eggs from the Great Lake Monster. His intention, he later added to motivate his request, was to collect eggs, hatch them, and raise specimens to be displayed in a wildlife enclosure. This could form the basis for an experience centre in Jämtland, which he hoped would contribute to business development in the region. Again, we do not know what motivated the applicant, but our interpretation is that he wanted to test the validity and premises of the protection. The County Administrative Board had, in its decision, prohibited the collection of the Great Lake Monster's eggs, and if an authority has done so, it is reasonable for the public to assume that the Monster exists, that it lays eggs, and that these eggs could be collected. Consequently, the applicant's claims can also be interpreted as an act of play, as he, too, acts as if the Monster undoubtedly exists whilst making requests so extreme that their seriousness can be questioned. This challenge of the ambiguous legal space on which the protection depended was not welcomed by the case officers at the Board, who, according to the officer interviewed, tried to persuade the applicant to withdraw his request – but in vain.

By activating the twenty year old ban in this way, the applicant sets in motion a handling of the case where the claim "this is real" trumps the implied "this is not real" of the protection case, as the legal restrictions surrounding the Monster must now be actively negotiated. In its subsequent communications of the case in this phase, the County Administrative Board maintained the position that the Great Lake Monster is an existing species, whose protection was valid and whose need for conservation measures justified, thus maintaining the rule-bending practices that had proven valuable in the local context. To acknowledge the Monster's ambiguous status as either a real animal or a creation of the imagination, would thwart the very premises on which the protection was based, which was the denial of any such ambiguousness.

The case was sent for referral to the tourism-oriented project "Around Lake Storsjön with the Great Lake Monster", to the association Storsjöodjurets Väl (the association to promote the wellbeing of the Great Lake Monster), the association Friends of the Great Lake Monster – which figured in the first process – and to the so called "Great Lake Monster expert" at the county museum. In this phase, the referral bodies were thus explicitly connected to the Great Lake Monster, as boat clubs and diving associations were no longer involved. As the selected recipients also show, several new associations and initiatives had now emerged that either advocated for the interests of the Great Lake Monster, or used it to promote various regional interests. This can further be understood as a confirmation of the Monster as a locally valuable cultural heritage.

All four referral bodies opposed granting the exemption and, in different ways, emphasized the validity and legitimacy of the existing protection. They thus acted to ensure that the legal space established by the County Administrative Board during the protection process would remain. After the referral round, the County Administrative Board informed the applicant that they considered rejecting his exemption request and asked him to submit any comments. They also informed him that wildlife enclosures are regulated under Chapter 12, §11 of the Environmental Code. This response was dated April 1, 2003. We cannot determine whether the date was intentionally chosen for its connotations, nor if the signing official was aware that this was nearly twenty years to the day after the original referral response deadline.

In June 2003, the County Administrative Board finally informed the applicant that the request for exemption was denied:

> The County Administrative Board finds that, in this matter, nature conservation reasons should weigh most heavily. In the Board's opinion, the best way to preserve [sic.] the Great Lake Monster is to leave it to develop freely without human interference or intervention.

The applicant immediately appealed the rejection to the government, in accordance with the instructions that accompanied the rejection. In his petition, he reiterated his intentions to raise individuals of the species to be displayed in a wildlife enclosure, which was intended to increase knowledge about the species, benefit the local economy, and create new jobs. "I hereby request that the government overturn the County Administrative Board's decision and grant me an exemption from the ban on collecting eggs from the Great Lake Monster for a period of one year."

Up to this point, then, the validity of the protection itself had not been questioned, as all involved had acted as if it were valid. This changed with the applicant's appeal to the government, as a whole new set of laws and acts was activated, and as the epistemological status of the Monster and the obligations of the Board was brought into focus as the principal matter at stake.

Phase 3: The playful legal space collapses

What characterises this third and last phase of the history of the protection of the Great Lake Monster, is that the ambiguous playfulness that characterised the initial two phases is now wholly absent, as all involved actors speak more clearly on the matter. The government office the applicant appealed to immediately transferred the case to the Environmental Court in Östersund, in line with Chapter 19, §1 of the Environmental Code (SFS 1998:808), and the Species Protection Ordinance (SFS 1998:179). After reviewing the documents, the Court dismissed the appeal in its entirety, stating the fact which the Board had never publicly touched upon:

> [The applicant's] exemption request concerns a scientifically unverified animal species. [The applicant] therefore cannot be considered to have a legally protected interest in having the matter tried. (Case No. M 3033-03)

Shortly thereafter, in March 2004, the Parliamentary Ombudsman (JO) inspected the Environmental Court.[4] During the inspection, the appeal case caught the Ombudsman's attention, and it initiated an inquiry into how the County Administrative Board of Jämtland had applied the protection decision and requested all documents related to the case.

Two months later, the Ombudsman announced that, in light of the Environmental Court's conclusion, the ban was considered to lack legal effect. It asked the County Administrative Board to comment on whether this necessitated a regulatory amendment or other actions on their side. With this involvement of the Parliamentary Ombudsman, the tone and behaviour of the other actors in the protection case shifted. The playful ambiguities, puns, and humorous exaggerations that had characterized the proceedings up to this point were toned down in favour of plain language. At the County Administrative Board, the newly appointed chief legal officer, PL, now led the case and, in brief and factual referrals, requested statements from the involved parties.

The association Storsjöodjuret, previously known as Storsjöodjurets Väl,

4 The ombudsman is appointed by the Swedish Parliament to ensure that Swedish authorities follow the laws and regulations governing their operations.

continued to advocate for protection. Its representatives pointed out that the difficulty in classifying the Great Lake Monster was the key issue in the original protection decision. "Does protection require that the species in question be scientifically classified?" they asked, noting that as long as there is no classification, it is unclear whether the Hunting Ordinance or the Fisheries Regulation applies to the Great Lake Monster, and that it therefore risks lacking automatic protection outside hunting season. That the Great Lake Monster exists is, according to the association, beyond doubt: "The presence of the Great Lake Monster in the sensory world has been confirmed over a long period by a large number of credible eyewitnesses." Classifying it, however, seems impossible as long as no dead specimen is found, and therefore the phenomenon remains "a cryptozoological occurrence, perhaps of an officially extinct species." Thus, it is more important to protect the interests that the protection aims to safeguard – to shield this aquatic species from harm – which should still be possible under §14 of the Nature Conservation Act, especially if an explanatory addition is made to clarify what is meant by "the species Great Lake Monster" as used in the protection wording.

The County Museum now, too, addressed the question of whether, and in what ways, the Great Lake Monster exists, and what this means for its protection. For several decades, it notes, great importance has been placed on preserving as many species as possible to ensure biodiversity.

> This biological way of thinking naturally also applies to the Great Lake Monster, but not only as a potentially existing living animal, but equally as a folkloristic phenomenon. One could say that the Great Lake Monster exists when there are (and have been) people who say it exists, regardless of whether its physical existence can be proven in a scientific sense or not.

The museum therefore emphasizes the importance of preserving such phenomena, which may appear "magical, mysterious, and inexplicable," and that the protection supports this.

In the final statement from the County Administrative Board's legal function, signed by Governor MM and Chief Legal Officer PL, the responses from the referral bodies regarding the species question, and the possible existence of the Great Lake Monster, are summarized, after which the County Administrative Board presents its view:

> The question of the Great Lake Monster's existence depends on the perspective from which the issue is approached. The Environmental

> Court has concluded that the species has not been scientifically verified. The County Administrative Board refrains from taking a position in this matter on whether the Great Lake Monster exists in such a way that the species can be subject to protection. However, it is clear, in the Board's opinion, that the Great Lake Monster exists in the sense that it exists in people's sensory world.

In its statement, the County Administrative Board agrees with the Ombudsman's assessment that the Environmental Court's decision means the 1986 protection decision lacked legal effect. Since public authority in Sweden must be exercised under the law (Chapter 1, §1 of the Instrument of Government) and given that the courts are the primary interpreters of applicable law, the County Administrative Board, as a state authority, should not act in any way other than to revoke the decision to protect the Great Lake Monster.

In its final remarks, the Ombudsman concluded that the Instrument of Government requires administrative authorities to observe objectivity and impartiality, and that in the appeal case, the County Administrative Board "by issuing the regulation, did not observe the constitutionally mandated requirement of objectivity," and that the court therefore dismissed the appeal since the protection should not be applied. It is rare for the Parliamentary Ombudsman to determine that authorities have failed in objectivity in their communication with the public, according to a report from the Swedish Agency for Public Management, which cites the criticism of the County Administrative Board's use of humour in this case as one of few such examples (Statskontoret 2024: 56). That one of the Board's responsibilities is to promote tourism in the region did not overweigh "the obvious requirement that those performing duties in public administration do not spend time and effort on matters outside their obligations and responsibilities." the Ombudsman concludes.

The Ombudsman emphasized the importance of authorities not exercising their power in unintended ways. Furthermore, it questioned whether the extensive investigative work leading up to the protection was justified, and whether it was defensible for the County Administrative Board and higher authorities to be burdened with handling cases related to the protection of the Great Lake Monster. Since the County Administrative Board had already stated in its response that it intended to revoke the protection, the Ombudsman assumed this would happen promptly.

The decision to revoke the protection of the Great Lake Monster was signed by the governor and the chief legal officer, and justified with reference to §27 of the Administrative Procedure Act (SFS 1986:223), which states that authorities must amend clearly incorrect decisions if this can be done quickly and easily: "The

County Administrative Board's decision to protect the Great Lake Monster was made through an obviously incorrect application of the law, as there is no legal basis for protecting a non-verified species. The decision shall therefore be revoked."

The playful legal space established by the Board twenty years earlier thereby collapsed, as their strategies to protect the locally important cryptid was finally dismissed as invalid, and as an unsuitable course of action, by higher-ranking authorities.

The potential of monsters and playful legal spaces

Monsters are, in Cohen's words (1996), disturbing hybrids that refuse established classifications and whose "incoherent bodies" resist any attempts of systematic structuration. As we have shown in this article, monsters and cryptids therefore function as analytical entry points into understandings of specific parts of social life and meaning-making. As shown above, the same monster can resonate differently with different people and actors through time and places, and their meaning consequently vary depending on temporal and spatial situations (Weinstock 2020: 2).

To understand the unconventional actions of the County Administrative Board in Jämtland, one must take into consideration the historical and contemporary significance that the idea of the being, animal or monster carries in the region, for individuals as well as for regional branding and tourist interests. If it was not for this significance and potential, there would be no need for the County Administrative Board to act at all in the matter. Among the organisations and individuals involved in the regional remittal process are those who hold for true that the Great Lake Monster is indeed a real, living albeit still unverified animal, worthy of actual protection; those who see a fictional monster as a means for motivated acts of nature conservation of the lake and its surroundings; and those who see cultural historic, symbolic or touristic values in the case.

As both potentially a real animal, and a creature of the imagination, a cryptid must be handled as both nature and culture. In the initial process of the investigation of the case, the Board must therefore promote the absurd idea of protecting an animal that does not exist, by acting as if it does indeed exist, whilst still clearly communicating that their statements on the Monster's existence is not to be taken as serious. Here, play and its meta-communicative signals offer an, at least initially, fruitful strategy. The playful legal space they establish thereby mirrors the cryptid's simultaneous being and non-being, as the Great Lake Monster is placed within a legal framework as if it were an actual species, without the Board intending this to have the same consequences as a legal protection usually has.

By comparing the case to two such conventional cases, that of the freshwater pearl mussel and the musk ox, it becomes particularly clear that the Board mimics established protection processes, by referring to the same laws, and by following the same routines and modes of communication. Yet the comparison also clarifies how much the monster case differs from the other two. The former is primarily referred to representatives from a cultural sphere, or with limited knowledge of matters concerning species protection. In the two more conventional cases the formal decisions of protection are communicated to societal actors that will need to ensure that the protective acts are ensured – such as local political and police authorities – which the monster case is not.

In another time, in another place, the handling of the monster resonated with a different tone, and the line between reality and fantasy that was so delicately balanced in the first two phases, was finally sharply drawn by the Parliamentary Ombudsman in the final stage of the last and third phase. Where the Board and the other actors involved had playfully invoked laws dictating conditions for species protection, hunting, and wildlife management, the cited laws now instead governed the exercise of power by society and authorities, outlining how they should, and should not, act. The Board's playful framing is invalidated by the Environmental Court, the parliamentary Ombudsman, and the County Administrative Board's chief legal officer, who simply conclude that it is not legally possible to protect a non-verified species, that the decision from 1986 should not serve as a basis for continued administrative action, and that the County Administrative Board's conduct – investigating, deciding on, and later applying the protection – was incorrect. The higher authorities' involvement in the matter thus causes rhetorical shifts, as the other actors involved now must speak frankly on the ambiguity of the Monster, as all playfulness now is abandoned.

Consequently, the ontological liminality of monsters and cryptids simultaneously make the legal protection of the Great Lake Monster possible and impossible. Its ambivalent status means that it is, on the one hand, regarded as sufficiently animal-like to be considered for protection. On the other hand, it is nonetheless too vaguely described in scentefic terms too be justified protection under the Nature Conservation Act.

We have here introduced the term "playful legal space", to describe the space established by the Board in its attempt to navigate the tension of two simultaneously overlapping social frameworks – nature conservation of verified species and heritage preservation of a culturally important cryptid (cf. Händén-Svensson 2024a: 192–193; cf. Sjöberg 2008: 268). The concept allows us to make sense of cases where laws or regulations are invoked or implemented by public authorities, organizations or other actors to advance interests that may at least partially diverge from their usual responsibilities. They may be articulated with humour, irony, or an apparent "tounge-in-cheek" tone, and relate to, shared imaginaries, folkloric, popular or locally meaningful phenomena. The term offers great potential to scholarship of organisational research, folkloristics, law, and in further developments in understanding creativity in cultural and social life. It is a fluid concept characterized by a sort of *mundus inversus*, a space where high is low, and right is wrong. In utilizing a playful legal space to understand events pertaining to this ambivalent phenomenon, the cryptid, the many-layered epistemic borderlines present in this article is brought into tension with each other, rendering fruitful conversations about the potentials of monsters, for society and researchers alike.

References

Publications

Bateson, Gregory (1999): *Steps to an ecology of mind: collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Borry, Erin L. (2017): "Ethical Climate and Rule Bending: How Organizational Norms Contribute to Unintended Rule Consequences," *Public Administration,* 95:1, 78–96.

Borry, Erin L. & Alexander C. Henderson (2020): "Patients, Protocols, and Prosocial Behavior: Rule Breaking in Frontline Health Care," *The American Review of Public Administration,* 50:1, 45–61.

Botsfjord, Flora (1999): "Secret life of the Norwegian Nessie Lake Monster Selma has eluded scientific proof for 250 years," *The Guardian*, 1 September 1999: www.theguardian.com/world/1999/sep/01/4 (accessed 23/10/31).

Bozeman, Barry, Jan Youtie & Jiwon Jung (2021): "Death by a Thousand 10-Minute Tasks: Workarounds and Noncompliance in University Research Administration," *Administration & Society,* 53:4, 527–568.

Bozeman, Barry (2022): "Rules Compliance Behavior: A Heuristic Model," *Perspectives on Public Management & Governance,* 5:1, 36–49.

Bubandt, Nils (2019): "Of Wildmen and White Men. Cryptozoology and Inappropriate/d Monsters at the cusp of the Anthropocene," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 25, 223–240.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome (1996): "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Jeffery Jerome Cohen (ed.): *Monster Theory: Reading Culture,* University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.

Cunha, Miguel Pina e & Carlos Cabral-Cardoso (2006): "Shades of Gray: A Liminal Interpretation of Organizational Legality-Illegality," *International Public Management Journal,* 9:3, 209–225.

Dagens Nyheter (1986): "Nu är Storsjöodjuret fridlyst". Accessed 25/07/10.

Dendle, Peter (2006): "Cryptozoology in medieval and modern worlds," *Folklore*,

117:2, 190–206.
Engman, Jonas (2014): "Den skrattande löjtnanten: parad, karneval och humor," Lars-Eric Jönsson & Fredrik Nilsson (eds.): *Skratt som fastnar: kulturella perspektiv på skratt och humor,* Lund: Lunds universitet.
Eriksson, Bo (2021): *Monstermanifestet. Ett nytt forskningsfält ser dagens ljus*, Stockholm: Fri tanke.
– (2023): *Drakspår. På jakt efter världens mest kända reptil*. Norstedts: Stockholm.
Gaal, Arlene (1955): *Ogopogo: The True Story of the Okanagan Lake Million Dollar Monster*, Surrey: Hancock House: Publishers Ltd.
– (2001): *In search of Ogopogo. Sacred creature of the Okanagan*, Surrey: Hancock House, Publishers Ltd.
Geschwind, Britta & Hanna Jansson (2022): "Källor som andra skrivit och samlat". Kim Silow Kallenberg, Elin von Unge & Lisa Wiklund Moreira (eds.): *Etnologiskt fältarbete – nya fält och former*, Lund: Studentlitteratur.
Goffman, Erving (1974): *Frame analysis. An essay on the organization of experience*, New York: Harper& Row.
Gustafsson, Lotten (1995): "Den förtrollade zonen. Leken som möjlighet och fara under Medeltidsveckan i Visby," *Kulturella perspektiv*, 7:2, 2–12.
– (2002): *Den förtrollade zonen. Lekar med tid, rum och identitet under Medeltidsveckan på Gotland*, Nora: Nya Doxa.
Hilmer Pedersen, Karin & Lars Johannsen (2018): "New Public Governance in the Baltic States: Flexible Administration and Rule Bending," *Public Performance & Management Review,* 41:3, 648–667.
Heuvelmans, Bernard (1983). "How many species remain to be discovered?" *Cryptozoology* 2, 1–24.
Huizinga, Johan (2016 [1938]): *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Kettering, OK: Angelico Press.
Hurn, Samantha (ed.) (2017): *Anthropology and Cryptozoology. Exploring Encounters with Mysterious Creatures*, London & New York: Routledge.
Händén-Svensson, Sanna & Hanna Jansson (2022): "Länsstyrelsen och O-djuret. Lek som strategi i fridlysningen av Storsjöodjuret 1985–2005," *Rig*, 2022:4, 210–225.
Händén-Svensson, Sanna (2024a): *Storsjöodjuret i ett kalejdoskop. Humanekologiska perspektiv på en svensk kryptid*. Doctoral dissertation, monograph, Lund University.
– (2024b): "Hur ett sjörå överlevde Linnés systematisering av naturen." Fredrik Nilsson & Kasper Westerlund (eds.): *Maritim folktro. Sägner, myter och liminalitet*. Meddelanden från Sjöhistoriska institutet vid Åbo Akademi, 38, 32–47.

– (2025): “The Lake and Its Monster: Communicating Connections with Landscape, Belonging and Sense of Place with Great Lake Monster Narratives,” *ARV: Nordic Yearbook of Folklore 2025*, 81, 112–129.

Hörnfeldt, Helena (2011): “Fältarbete och skriftliga källor,”. Lars Kaijser & Magnus Öhlander (eds.): *Etnologiskt fältarbete*, Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Jönsson, Lars-Eric & Fredrik Nilsson (eds.) (2014): *Skratt som fastnar: kulturella perspektiv på skratt och humor*, Lund: Lund studies in arts and cultural science, Lunds universitet.

Lipsky, Michael (1980): *Street-level bureaucracy: dilemmas of the individual in public services,* New York: Russell Sage Foundation

Loxton, Danel & Donald Prothero (2013): *Abominable science! Origins of the Yeti, and other famous cryptids,* New York: Columbia University Press.

Lönnberg, Einar (1898): ”Bidrag till det s.k. ’Storsjöodjurets’ historia”. *Aftonbladet* 20, 22, 24, 28 & 30 December.

– (1899a): ”Bidrag till det s.k. ’Storsjöodjurets’ historia”. *Aftonbladet*, 1, 9 & 11 January.

– (1899b): ”Storsjöodjursfenomenen. Fortsatta undersökningar”. *Aftonbladet*, 26 August.

Norrick, Neal R. (2003): “Issues in conversational joking,” *Journal of Pragmatics,* 35:9, 1333–1359.

Magin, Ulrich (2016): ”Necessary monsters. Claimed ’crypto-creatures’ regarded as genii locii”. *Time and Mind*, 9:3, 211–222.

Merger, Michel & Claude Gagnon (1988): *Lake monster traditions. A cross-cultural analysis*, London: Fortean Times.

Mittman, Asa Simon (2012): ”Introduction. The impact of monsters and monster studies”. Asa Simon Mittman & Peter Dendle (eds.): *The Ashgate research companion to monster and the monstrous,* Farnham: Ashgate.

Olsson, Peter (1899): *Storsjöodjuret. Framställning af fakta och utredning*, Östersund: Jämtlandspostens boktryckeri.

Regal, Brian (2009): “Entering Dubious Realms. Grover Krantz, Science and Sasquatch,” *Annals of Science*, 1, 83–102.

– (2011): *Searching for Sasquatch: Crackpots, Eggheads, and Cryptozoology*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rossi, Lorenzo (2016): ”A review of cryptozoology. Towards a scientific approach to the study of ’hidden animals,’”. Francesco Maria Angelici (ed.): *Problematic wildlife. A cross-diciplinary approach*, Springer Nature: Cham.

Sjöberg, Fredrik (2008): *Den utbrände kronofogden som fann lyckan*, Bokförlaget Nya Doxa, Nora.

SOU 2021:51. *Skydd av arter: vårt gemensamma ansvar.* Klimat- och näringslivsdepartementet.

Spitzer, Marc (2008) ”Some messy Nessie garmyths and other distortions,” *Black Warrior Review*, 34:2, 134–139.
Statskontoret (2024): *Myndigheternas arbete med påverkande information och kommunikation – en kartläggning och analys.* https://www.statskontoret.se/publicerat/publikationer/publikationer-2024/myndigheternas-arbete-med-paverkande-information-och-kommunikation--en-kartlaggning-och-analys/ Accessed 25/03/26.
Swahn, Jan-Öjvind (1990): "En folklorist tittar på Storsjöodjuret," *Jämten*, 68.
Söderberg, Hjalmar (1905). *Doktor Glas*, Albert Bonniers Förlag: Stockholm.
Ullstad, Henrik 2018. ”Docenten och Storsjöodjuret. Peter Olsson som kryptozoolog," *Lundensaren*. http://app.bwz.se/lundsuniversitet/externa_relationer/b/v?webpage=136&r=18884&rcrc=564 4FF53&oid=816&oit=1&ucrc=F04DBEF8. Accessed 21/03/29.
Welinder, Stig (1998): ”Storsjöodjurets arkeologi," Barbro Johansen & Stig Welinder (eds.): *Humanister föreläser om Wales, Irland och Jämtland,* Östersund: Mitthögskolan.
– (2004): ”Storsjöodjurets arkeologi, biologi och mytologi," Åsa Berggren, Stefan Arvidsson & Ann-Mari Hållans (eds.): *Minne och myt. Konsten att skapa det förflutna,* Lund: Nordic Academic Press.
Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew (2020): "Introduction,". Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (ed.): *The Monster Theory Reader,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Wibling, Carl (1900): *Bidrag till kännedom om det s.k. Storsjöodjuret. En bäfverfamilj?* Helsingborg, published by the author (Helsingborgs dagblads tryckeri).
Wikipedia 2025.). *Republic of Jamtland.* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_Jamtland Accessed 260113.

Archival sources

Jämtland County Board Archive

11-122-2667-1979 (Protection of the musk ox)
2719-102-1989 (Protection of the fresh water pearl mussel)
Planeringsavdelningens arkiv, Naturvårdsenhetens diarieförda handlingar, D6a:70.
Handlingar ordnade efter VÄS, F1b 522 2003-06-02.
Handlingar ordnade efter VÄS, F1b 522 2005-11-14.

Authors

Hanna Jansson is Docent in Ethnology at Stockholm University. In her research, she has explored how people use storytelling, rituals, and digital platforms to create meaning and navigate their lives, in recent years with a focus on existential questions related to death and grief.

Sanna Händén-Svensson is working as senior lecturer in Human Ecology at Lund University. With a shared background in Human Ecology (PhD, MSSc,) and Ethnology (MA), her research interests are firmly based in the intersection of cultural phenomena and socio-ecological relations.

Authority and Culture

Culture Unbound
Journal of Current Cultural Research

Cognitive Penetration and Monstrification: Legal Encounters and Implicit Fears in Conservative Muslim Immigrant Life in Sweden

Mamdooh Afdile and Bo Eriksson

Abstract

Research on monstrification has broadly examined how Western rhetoric targets marginalized groups, including Muslim immigrants. Much less attention has focused on how religiously conservative Muslim immigrants, especially those affected by war, displacement, and trauma, may develop their own forms of counter-monstrification in response to exclusion in the host society. Drawing on Sweden as a case study, this conceptual article calls for a bilateral approach to monstrification. It employs the cognitive penetration framework, which holds that prior beliefs, fears, and cultural worldviews shape social perception. Because many religious communities accept the existence of supernatural beings, monstrification in such contexts cannot be understood solely as a rhetorical process. To explore this dynamic, the article turns to historical periods in which belief in supernatural beings was widespread. Two Swedish court cases from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries involving alleged encounters with the folk monsters Näcken and the Skogsrå illustrate how Christian legal authorities used such beliefs to reinforce institutional power and collective identity. The article proposes that analogous perceptual dynamics may arise within some Muslim subgroups in Sweden and argues that unaddressed fears of otherness may heighten vulnerability to extremist actors seeking to position themselves as alternative authorities. Finally, it suggests that drawing on the complexity of historical folkloric monsters in contemporary monster-film genres may allow cinema to mediate implicit fears within marginalized communities.

Keywords: monstrification; cognitive penetration; Muslim immigrants; implicit fear; folklore and law

Afdile et al: "Cognitive Penetration and Monstrification: Legal Encounters and Implicit Fears in Conservative Muslim Immigrant Life in Sweden", *Culture Unbound*, Volume 18, issue 2, 2026: 153–175. Published by Linköping University Electronic Press: http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.6592

Introduction

The portrayal of monsters in fiction has been suggested to play a significant role in implicitly shaping public perceptions of outsiders and minorities (Erle and Hendry 2020), as well as in evoking potential political and societal threats (Gilmore 2009; Scott 2007). Such representations have been used throughout history by politicians and policymakers to reinforce societal fears and legitimize aggressive countermeasures, contributing to atrocities such as witch-hunting, the Holocaust, genocide, and ethnic cleansing. Historically, monsters have functioned as metaphors for social anxieties, embodying fears of aberration, moral transgression, and instability, traits projected onto real-world figures. This metaphorical use of monstrosity has also been evident in media narratives in more recent times, following 9/11. Interestingly, terrorists are frequently portrayed as monstrous, animalistic, or pathological. Within the legal-emergency framing of the "War on Terror," such depictions not only monsterise but also facilitate narratives that justify surveillance, violence, and systemic oppression of innocent minorities (Steuter and Wills 2010).

Taking Sweden as an example, the politicization of Muslim identity, especially in debates on gender equality, religious dress, and crime, demonstrates these theoretical dynamics in practice. Despite Sweden's official post-racial discourse, which removed explicit references to race from legislation, structural racism arguably persists through practices such as racial profiling and discriminatory policing. These practices produce racially coded outcomes without explicit racial language (Nafstad and Parsa 2025). Studies show that non-white individuals, including Muslims, frequently experience disproportionate police attention, harassment, and suspicion based on visible markers such as skin color and religious attire (Wigerfelt et al. 2014). This form of racialization is deeply embedded in political and legal institutions, which often frame immigrants as threats to a homogeneous Swedish identity (Khayati 2017). The rise of ultranationalist movements and Islamophobic rhetoric—reflected in both the increase in hate crimes and the electoral success of anti-Muslim parties—has further entrenched this marginalization (Gardell 2015). Law enforcement practices justified in the name of national security or migration control often target Muslim communities disproportionately, creating a cycle of mistrust and alienation. Furthermore, a recent study shows that Swedish political and media discourse increasingly constructs Muslims as the undesirable "Other," with Diversity Barometer data indicating that such narratives reinforce structural Islamophobia and hinder social cohesion (Groglopo et al. 2025).

Given their minority status, Muslim immigrants may feel especially exposed to threat. They may perceive the homogenizing pressures of Swedish secular society as more dangerous than any threat they are believed to pose. This perception of a *juridical monster* becomes visible in events such as public Quran burnings in Muslim neighborhoods (figure 1). These acts, carried out by anti-Muslim movements under heavy legal protection and framed as exercises of constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression, can reinforce a sense of vulnerability and state-sanctioned hostility. It is therefore plausible that Muslim minorities in Sweden experience a *dual monstrification*: they are portrayed as societal threats while simultaneously perceiving the legal order of their new country as itself threatening or monstrous.

Most studies of monstrification, whether rhetorical or symbolic, have examined how marginal groups are framed as threatening monsters. Much less attention has been paid to how these same groups may, in turn, perceive dominant, culturally homogeneous majorities as monstrous. This conceptual article calls for a **bilateral approach to monstrification**, as constructions of otherness can emerge on both sides of a social divide.

2. Theoretical Framework

Monstrification refers to the discursive and symbolic process through which individuals or groups are framed as threatening, deviant, or morally corrupt. In the context of Europe's intensifying debates around immigration and secularism, Arab—particularly Muslim—immigrants increasingly occupy a precarious position. As religious and cultural "Others" within an ostensibly secular European order, they often become frequent targets of public suspicion and institutional scrutiny. Girard's theory of the scapegoat explains how societies under stress project collective anxieties onto a sacrificial figure or group, whose exclusion restores a sense of cohesion (Girard and Freccero 1986). Bauman's concept of the stranger offers a complementary frame, describing individuals who exist in a liminal state—neither fully inside nor outside the social body—whose indeterminacy challenges the modern drive for order and classification (Bauman 1990). Foucault's (2003)

Fig.1 Images from a Quran burning as an act of freedom of expression taking place in the Skärholmen neighborhood in Stockholm on 26.4.2024 following Friday prayers. On the left side, the anti-Muslimism activist is burning the Quran, holding a cross, and doing an act of exorcism of "the devil's book" in front of a police car that escorted her. On the right side, police officers are holding back Muslim residents at a distance.

concept of the monster adds a juridico-political dimension: monsters are legal anomalies—figures that violate societal norms and thus require regulation. In this context, Muslim immigrants may be seen as a slowly growing "juridical monster"—legal subjects whose presence is perceived as a challenge to the moral logic of secular law and values. Interestingly, this framing echoes with older colonial discourses used to discipline racial and sexual deviance (Rai 2004). In other words, Muslim minorities may be constructed as deviant in relation to mainstream Western liberal norms, including secular and heteronormative ideals. Such framing can portray cultural difference as incompatible with a "healthy" social order and can, in turn, be used to imply an inherent tendency towards violence.

Interestingly, these theoretical propositions on monstrosity rhetoric have parallels with the representational model and the psychological explanatory model (Eriksson 2021; Mittman and Hensel 2018). These models focus on what monsters can be said to signify and visualize in film, literature, art, mass culture, and folklore. Monsters can embody a wide range of social issues and aspects of human life, including gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, politics, economics, and disease, to name a few. They have served to personify perceived threats and to express cultural anxieties around specific themes and pressing societal concerns. In this sense, monsters always reflect the problems and fears of their own time by representing something other than what they seem. Interestingly, several Nordic folkloric nature spirits, together with witches, were subject to legal scrutiny in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These should be understood as historical representations of problems and perceived threats that the legal system sought to control (Eriksson 2021; Mittman and Hensel 2018).

The effectiveness of monstrification rests on implicit social biases that predispose individuals to view outsiders as inferior or threatening, referred to as ingroup–outgroup bias. Ingroup–outgroup bias, defined as the tendency to favor one's own group over others, plays a central role in this process. It shapes perceptions and evaluations based on group membership (Hewstone et al. 2002). Such bias facilitates the symbolic construction of "others" as less human, less moral, or less trustworthy, thereby reinforcing exclusion and boundary-making. These distorted perceptions particularly affect ethnic and religious minorities, as stereotypes amplify mistrust and impede meaningful social interaction. In multicultural societies, these dynamics hinder integration and can undermine the psychological well-being and social participation of immigrant communities.

Importantly, such biases are not confined to dominant or majority populations; they are a universal feature of human social cognition. All social groups—whether powerful or marginalized—are susceptible to ingroup–outgroup bias, particularly under conditions of uncertainty, perceived threat, or social distress. This universality means that monstrification is not a unidirectional process imposed solely by dominant groups onto minorities. Rather, any community that experiences vulnerability, cultural pressure, or existential anxiety may construct its own symbolic "monsters" in response. Monstrification, therefore, represents a flexible socio-psychological mechanism through which groups navigate fear, assert moral boundaries, and make sense of hostile or unfamiliar environments, regardless of their relative social status.

2.1 Cognitive Penetration as a Theoretical Basis for Bilateral Monstrification

Addressing implicit fears within religious Muslim immigrant minorities remains deeply challenging. These anxieties are often reinforced by ongoing discrimination and exacerbated by misunderstandings surrounding the cause of distrust in legal authorities. For many, and particularly refugees, this mistrust stems from traumatic experiences of war, oppression, political instability, and persecution by legal institutions in their countries of origin, where systems of governance were often associated with violence and injustice (Hall and Kahn 2020; Molla 2024). Such traumatic experiences can amplify biased social perceptions that exist among groups within any society. The link between ingroup–outgroup bias and **cognitive penetration** is crucial for understanding how such distortions persist. Cognitive penetration refers to the way prior beliefs, emotions, and expectations unconsciously shape perceptual experience (see Block 2023). When filtered through ingroup–outgroup bias, this mechanism can cause individuals to misinterpret neutral behaviors of outgroup members as threatening or deviant. Such perceptual distortions extend beyond personal interactions to institutional trust, where minorities may view legal authorities as hostile, while majorities may perceive minority groups as inherently suspicious. Evidence of such experiences among Muslim minorities in their encounters with Swedish social workers has been discussed in Eliassi's study, *Orientalist Social Work: Cultural Otherization of Muslim Immigrants in Sweden* (Eliassi 2013).

The mistrust of social workers reported by some Muslim minorities in Sweden is rooted in the ways social-work institutions may pathologize and stigmatize their families through Orientalist and culturalist frameworks. Social workers tended to interpret issues such as gender inequality, parenting, or family conflict as products of a "backward" Muslim culture, contrasting it with an idealized Swedish model of modernity and equality (Schlytter and Linell 2010). Consequently, Muslim families were disproportionately subjected to punitive practices, surveillance, and normalization projects aimed at assimilating them into Swedish cultural norms. Such practices reinforce structural inequalities and exclusion, while denying

Muslim families the same trust and legitimacy afforded to white Swedish families. For example, Muslim households are rarely considered suitable foster homes for Swedish children (Eliassi 2010). It is important to note that these studies and related efforts have shed valuable light on this issue and may have contributed to more reflexive practices within social work agencies. However, much work remains, as additional factors are likely at play. Indeed, counter-terrorism policies in Sweden and the UK increasingly require social workers to participate in anti-radicalization efforts—a development that risks transforming social work into a policing profession and undermining its human-rights mandate (Finch et al. 2022).

This systemic otherization explains why many Muslim families perceive social workers not as allies, but as agents of cultural domination and control, thereby eroding trust in welfare institutions. This reality reinforces biased perceptions, facilitated by cognitive penetration, that frame social workers and welfare agencies as discriminatory bodies disguised as benevolent saviors—echoing the dual nature of the Swedish folklore beings Näcken and the Skogsrå (see the following section for further elaboration). Such imagery may also shed light on why false claims and viral clips alleging that Swedish social workers "kidnap immigrant children from their families to indoctrinate them" gained traction. Interestingly, the folkloric motifs of children being lured by malevolent monsters further parallel the implicit anxieties of religious Muslim immigrants in this context.

3. Historical Perspective

Historical analyses of monstrification in media and legal systems have illuminated the explicit strategies used to shape public opinion, yet far less is known about how monstrification operates implicitly within communities that accept the existence of supernatural beings. Drawing on the principle of cognitive penetration, it becomes analytically meaningful to investigate monstrification within religious rather than solely political contexts, particularly in historical periods when supernatural monsters were widely taken as real.

Although Nordic folklore contains numerous supernatural entities, this study focuses on **Näcken** and the **Skogsrå** for three primary reasons. First, both figures are closely linked to the rise of Christianity in Sweden and appeared most prominently as dangerous or morally corrupting during periods when the Church held strong legal and doctrinal authority. Second, each was framed as an agent of sin, sexual transgression, or diabolical influence, making them valuable for understanding how religious institutions construed and disciplined moral threat. Third, their liminal behavior and shapeshifting capacities parallel attributes ascribed to jinn in Islamic cosmology, allowing for a structurally meaningful comparison across religious traditions.

Moreover, sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Christian court records provide rare documentary evidence of how religious authorities interpreted alleged encounters with these beings. Näcken and the Skogsrå therefore serve as historically grounded examples of monsters embedded within a religious worldview. Against this background, the following section examines two early modern Swedish legal cases involving Näcken and the Skogsrå, illustrating how religious and judicial authorities interpreted such encounters and used them to regulate behavior and reinforce moral boundaries.

3.1 Näcken

Näcken is one of the most significant supernatural monsters in Nordic folklore, appearing not only in legends and art but also in early Swedish legal records. The earliest known description occurs in the *Erikskrönikan* (fourteenth century) and later in Olaus Magnus's *Historia om de nordiska folken* (1555/2001), where Näcken is depicted as a liminal water spirit whose music lures humans toward danger (figure 2). Across regional variations, water remains his defining element—whether he appears at mills, jetties, or streams—and many of his recorded names, such as *kvarngubben* ("the mill old man") or *bäckamannen*, reflect this association (Schön 2010; Stattin 2008).

Näcken's primary folkloric function was to act as a dangerous boundary guardian. He was believed to seduce or deceive people into the water, often through shapeshifting into alluring or innocuous forms such as a log, silver bowl, or horse (Häll, 2013). These transformations underscored his role as a morally ambiguous being capable of tempting humans toward physical and spiritual peril. During the

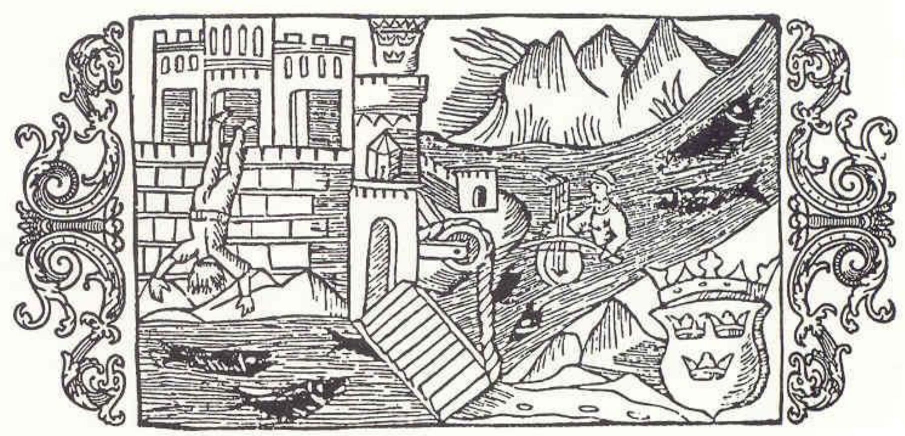

Fig.2 Painting by Olaus Magnus (circa 1510-1555) depicting a man leaping from a tower into a stream while *Näcken* plays his musical instrument.

early modern period, religious authorities increasingly interpreted Näcken through a Christian moral framework, casting him as a diabolical agent and integrating him into broader concerns about sin, sexuality, and disorder (Häll 2013; Schön 2010). Such interpretations shaped how alleged encounters with Näcken were addressed in legal contexts, illustrating how supernatural beings mediated fear, morality, and juridical control in Swedish society.

3.1.1 Näcken's case

Anna Larsdotter appeared before an extraordinary session of the district court (häradsrätt) in Jönåker, Södermanland, in April 1629. An unmarried maidservant from Näs in Bärbo parish, she was charged with having given birth to a frog-like fetus and with having become pregnant without any involvement of a man. She swore before the court that she remained a virgin. When asked how she had become pregnant, Anna explained that it must have been caused by water she had drunk from a forest brook, which had somehow brought "something evil inside her," after which she became swollen and pregnant.

The trial resumed in November, when she was summoned for further interrogation. The court now suspected that she had, in fact, had sexual intercourse with someone and demanded the father's identity. Anna eventually admitted that a man had been involved, describing him as a "black man" ("en svart man") who had approached her one evening while she was driving cattle home from the forest. She stated that he had raped her. Faced with this ambiguous account, the court struggled to determine whether the matter concerned a natural crime or a supernatural encounter and therefore referred the case to the recently established Svea Court of Appeal (1614). Although the original appellate records have not survived, later sources discuss the court's conclusions.

The Court of Appeal determined that Anna had "given birth to a monstrum and confessed that Satan or Näcken had violated her and had unlawful intercourse with her." The "black man" was thus reinterpreted as a shape-shifting Näcken—a clear demonization of the case. Whether this reframing originated with Anna or, more plausibly, with the judges remains uncertain. The latter is the more likely explanation, as the higher court situated the event within a theological framework familiar to them, at a time when anxieties about witchcraft and sorcery were increasing. By recasting the assailant as a folkloric being with diabolical associations, the court aligned the case with broader concerns. The case became about the perceived moral dangers posed by contact with supernatural forces. As Häll (2013) notes, both frogs and sexual encounters with the Näcken frequently appeared in witchcraft narratives of the period, although the major Swedish witch trials occurred somewhat later.

Anna's final sentence is unknown, but it was likely mitigated because she was ultimately deemed insane. Had the case been treated explicitly as witchcraft, the outcome would probably have been execution (Häll 2013, 417–424).

3.2 Skogsrå

The Skogsrå occupies a similarly prominent place in early modern Swedish folklore and appears not only in oral tradition but also in religious and legal texts. One of the earliest formal discussions is found in Archbishop Olof Svebilius's widely used commentary on Luther's catechism, in which the Skogsrå is listed among the supernatural beings that Christians were expected to reject (Svebilius 1714). Her description varies across regions, but she is most often portrayed as a beautiful woman whose true nature is revealed by an animal tail—often that of a cow or horse—or, in some areas, a hollowed wooden back resembling a decayed tree trunk (Häll 2013). Like Näcken, she is a liminal being capable of altering her appearance and misleading those who encounter her.

In many accounts, the Skogsrå does not appear directly but distorts the wanderer's perception, leading him astray or inducing dreamlike encounters that dissolve upon invocation of God's name. Such narratives reflect both her erotic appeal and her capacity to threaten moral order (Figure 3). These attributes made the Skogsrå the subject of legal concern. Early modern records demonstrate that alleged sexual relations with her could be prosecuted as serious crimes, sometimes carrying the threat of execution (Häll 2013; Granberg 1935). Her presence in court cases reveals that religious and judicial authorities regarded her not merely as a folkloric curiosity but as a potentially destabilizing force requiring moral and legal intervention.

3.2.1 Skogsrå's case

A second case illustrating the legal significance of alleged encounters with folkloric beings dates to 1708, when the soldier Sven Jönsson was brought before a military court for desertion during a march. This was not his first offense; he had previously been flogged for deserting, making his defense all the more consequential. Sven claimed that he had been lured into the forest by the skogsrå. Unlike conventional depictions of the being as a beautiful woman with an animal tail, he described her as half human and half horse—a highly unusual variant.

Colonel Sparfeldt, one of the officers involved, speculated extensively about the creature's nature, even suggesting that she might have originated from an act of bestiality between a farmhand and a horse. On this basis, he concluded that the skogsrå was a monster. Yet because Swedish law did not explicitly regulate sexual relations with monsters, he forwarded the matter to the hovkonsistorium in Stockholm, the ecclesiastical high court. The question before the court was not

Fig. 3 Skogsrå as depicted in a drawing held in the Swedish National Archives (Riksarkivet), produced according to the soldier's description during the 1708 case.

the existence of the skogsrå but whether Sven was telling the truth and how his case should be judged.

The ecclesiastical authorities interrogated Sven, who initially maintained his story. However, a letter from his parish priest described him as habitually untruthful. Lying was treated as a grave sin and could be regarded as more serious than desertion itself. Confronted with moral and institutional pressure, Sven eventually confessed that he had fabricated the story to avoid severe military punishment.

When summoned for his final hearing, Sven claimed that the priest had pressured him to retract his account. The prison officials had warned him of a previous case involving relations with a "Sjörå" (sea spirit) who had been executed. Fearing a similar fate, he denied everything.

3.3 Interpretation of the Legal Cases

Why did Swedish courts devote attention to cases involving alleged encounters with beings such as Näcken and the Skogsrå? The answer lies in the seventeenth-century judicial revolution, during which Sweden shifted from a locally administered legal system to a centralized and professionalized one closely tied to the consolidation of state power. Law became a tool not only for governance but for enforcing Lutheran orthodoxy. In this context, sexual transgressions and breaches of religious norms were understood as threats to the spiritual and moral welfare of the entire realm, capable of provoking divine punishment. This heightened moral vigilance helps explain why even seemingly folkloric encounters demanded judicial intervention.

As the legal order became increasingly rigid, folkloric beings acquired new ideological significance. Their liminal status—neither fully human nor fully supernatural, neither within nor outside society—posed symbolic challenges to a system striving for categorical clarity. Courts did not attempt to try these beings themselves; rather, they prosecuted individuals who claimed to have interacted with them, thereby reasserting the boundaries that such encounters were perceived to blur. Sexual elements in these cases drew particular scrutiny, aligning with broader efforts to regulate morality during the great power era.

It is important to recall that Näcken and the Skogsrå were not singular characters but categories of beings with multiple regional variations. To illuminate how religious authorities interpreted such encounters, this article temporarily treats them as if they constituted distinct social groups whose perceived practices and worldviews diverged from dominant Christian norms. Folklore supports this, as not all encounters were harmful, and some folk stories describe them as beneficent. Yet courts consistently construed them as sources of moral danger, allies to the devil himself. Framing them as out-groups clarifies how theories discussed earlier, such as Girard's scapegoat mechanism, Bauman's notion of the stranger, and Foucault's conceptualization of the monster as a juridical anomaly, become applicable. Seen through this lens, ecclesiastical authorities can be understood as reinforcing their moral authority by regulating behaviour and suppressing contact with symbolically "deviant" groups.

The broader witchcraft crisis further intensified judicial sensitivity to such cases. During the seventeenth century, charges of harmful magic (förgörning) became fused with allegations of heresy and pacts with the devil (Bergenheim 2020; Oja 1997). Sexual relations with supernatural beings were therefore interpreted not only as moral violations but as potential indicators of demonic influence. As a result, encounters involving Näcken or the Skogsrå were incorporated into a broader framework of spiritual threat.

Taken together, these cases reveal how the justice system approached liminal figures as symbolic disruptions to social order. Individuals associated with such beings were treated as existing at the edge of the moral community—dangerous not only because of what they claimed to have done but because their narratives destabilized accepted boundaries. Cognitive penetration provides a useful explanatory framework here: beliefs and fears shaped both the accused's perceptions and the authorities' interpretations. Judicial punishment thus served a dual function, simultaneously restoring legal order and symbolically purging the threat these encounters were thought to represent.

4. Contemporary Parallels

Adopting cognitive penetration as a bilateral framework for understanding monstrification allows for meaningful comparison between early modern cases involving Näcken and the Skogsrå and contemporary social dynamics. On one level, it highlights how Swedish society continues to construct symbolic boundaries: whereas seventeenth-century Sweden, guided by Christianity, framed dissenting practices as influenced by literal monsters, today's predominantly secular society may frame conservative Muslim viewpoints as a cultural threat requiring political or legal regulation. However, the present discussion focuses on the less examined direction of monstrification: how some religious Muslim communities may, in turn, perceive the secular Swedish majority as threatening. Because this dimension remains understudied, a bilateral approach is crucial for addressing the complexity of these multifaceted social dynamics. Applying cognitive penetration here helps illuminate how prior beliefs, existential concerns, and religious worldviews may shape perceptions of the secular environment as morally dangerous or corrosive, and how these perceptions may contribute to implicit forms of monstrification.

Recent research shows that discrimination and social hostility toward Muslim refugees and immigrants can seriously undermine their trust in legal and institutional systems. Alim, Due, and Strelan (2021) demonstrate that refugees who have fled war and hardship are especially affected. When they encounter subtle or overt discrimination in Europe, many develop strong feelings of mistrust, frustration, and fear, which can also lead them to avoid public services and view state authorities with suspicion. In such contexts, religiosity often becomes a source of stability and emotional protection. Garcia-Muñoz and Neuman (2013) argue that, in Europe, religious commitment among immigrants functions less as a bridge to the majority society and more as a buffer—a way of preserving identity and cohesion when facing exclusion. This buffering role can heighten the relevance of supernatural beliefs. Indeed, many Muslims view jinn, black magic, and the evil eye as real forces capable of influencing physical and mental well-being, and regard both medical and religious interventions as appropriate responses (Khalifa et al. 2011). Together, these studies suggest that discrimination in a secular and often homogenizing environment may be interpreted through cultural and religious frameworks that give meaning to experiences of hostility. For some, the dominant society may come to feel metaphorically "possessed," its actions shaped by forces that seem opaque and threatening. These beliefs can therefore become part of how marginalized groups make sense of exclusion and navigate life in their new home country.

4.1 Parallels in Implicit Fears among Muslim Immigrant Communities

Based on the evidence and arguments presented thus far, it is reasonable to hypothesize that religiously conservative minority groups—such as some segments of Sweden's Muslim immigrant population—may experience dynamics similar to those observed among Christian communities in earlier Swedish history. This is particularly relevant for immigrant groups that continue to rely on Islamic law as a core moral and legal framework. The Islamic legal system was developed between the seventh and ninth centuries CE, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This system was built by Muslim scholars as a response to emerging social challenges during the expansion of Islam to new regions. For many Muslim immigrants in Sweden today, these laws continue to regulate essential aspects of family life—including marriage, divorce, inheritance, and conflict resolution. As such, they play a significant role in shaping both personal identity and collective belonging within religious Muslim communities, navigating the Swedish secular legal environment.

The historical parallel lies in the role of institutional authority. Just as the Swedish Church once operated as a dominant legal and moral institution—defining norms, regulating conduct, and shaping everyday life—Sharia-based frameworks can function as alternative systems of guidance and arbitration within some Muslim communities. In both contexts, religious authority extends beyond individual belief to influence legal practices, social expectations, and family structures. Unlike the Church's former monopoly, however, Sharia-inspired norms in contemporary Sweden exist within a secular legal environment. Arguably, this can produce friction between state legislation and religious prescriptions. These tensions indicate that negotiations between religious authority, personal identity, and societal integration remain ongoing. These negotiations echo earlier Swedish experiences while exposing the complexities of multicultural modernity.

For certain conservative Muslim groups, the secular Swedish mainstream can be experienced metaphorically as a "forest"—a disorienting space in which one risks losing moral direction, encountering temptations, and facing symbolic "monsters." Here, figures such as the Skogsrå or Näcken serve as useful metaphors for perceived threats to identity, continuity, and moral order.

4.2 Näcken and the Skogsrå as Analogues to Jinn

In Islamic thought, jinn are understood as supernatural beings with agency, capable of shapeshifting, inhabiting liminal spaces, and exerting influence over human affairs. Their association with seduction, deception, and ambiguous morality strongly echoes the traits attributed to the Skogsrå and Näcken in Swedish folklore. These parallels matter not because the beings themselves are equivalent, but because both function as culturally available templates for interpreting threat, uncertainty, and moral disorder.

From the perspective of cognitive penetration, such ontological commitments can shape perception at both implicit and explicit levels. For Muslims who carry a vivid cosmology of jinn, experiences of discrimination, exclusion, or cultural estrangement in Sweden may be unconsciously filtered through frameworks that already accept unseen or morally ambiguous forces. Just as early modern Swedes interpreted misfortune, seduction, or juridical transgression through the lens of folkloric monsters, contemporary religious minorities may interpret them similarly through a cultural lens that includes the jinn. The perceptual field is therefore not neutral: it is structured by pre-existing beliefs, emotional dispositions, and inherited categories of fear.

This does not suggest that religious Muslim immigrants literally perceive folkloric beings in Swedish landscapes. Rather, cognitive penetration makes it possible for folkloric narratives and Islamic cosmologies to overlap, producing hybrid interpretive frameworks. Within such frameworks, the secular Swedish state can appear symbolically "possessed" by Näcken- or Skogsrå-like attributes—powerful, unpredictable, and morally alien. Such metaphors arise not only from discriminatory encounters but also from the asymmetry of power between minority communities and state institutions. In this way, cultural memory, religious ontology, and lived experience converge to shape implicit fears and perceptions of authority.

The question of whether beings like the Skogsrå or Näcken "really existed" thus becomes analytically secondary. Although there is no evidence that these figures inhabited the material world, they were experientially real to those who claimed to encounter them. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century testimonies reveal accounts delivered with conviction and sincerity, often under oath. Dismissing such testimonies as mere superstition obscures the psychological and cultural conditions that made these experiences meaningful.

A useful comparison is sleep paralysis. Sleep paralysis is a cross-cultural phenomenon in which individuals are temporarily unable to move while falling asleep or waking. It is widely documented that in sleep paralysis, many perceive vivid and often terrifying figures. Such visions typically align with culturally available images of fear: demonic beings in Christian contexts, witches in early modern Europe, and jinn in Muslim groups (Jalal 2021). Under conditions of stress, shame, or altered consciousness, early modern Swedes may likewise have experienced visions of Näcken or the Skogsrå. The expanding power of the Church as a legal authority—capable of defining norms and enforcing them through trials and punishments, including capital sentences—likely intensified these experiences. From a Jungian perspective, such pressures may have activated suppressed emotions, prompting the projection of folkloric figures as a psychological mechanism for managing tensions between imposed order and inner worldviews (Jung 1981). In light of this, it is reasonable to consider whether comparable dynamics may emerge among religious Muslim immigrants who face social pressure, discrimination, and the constraints of conservative community norms.

5. From Cognitive Penetration to a Monster-Film Strategy

Everyone likely recognizes a monster when they see one; the challenge emerges when we attempt to define what actually constitutes a monster, what distinguishes it beyond its capacity to frighten. Monsters raise questions of form and function, of cultural meaning and symbolic content. Etymologically, the word *monster* derives from the Latin *monstrare* ("to show") and *monere* ("to warn" or "to remind"), reflecting its origins in Roman antiquity. Related Latin terms such as *prodigium* and *portentum* similarly convey notions of foretelling or prophecy. In ancient Greek, the cognate concept was *teras*, referring to an apparition or a bodily anomaly, with a semantic range overlapping the Latin forms. The modern term *teratology*, the study of malformations, derives from this Greek root. Across these traditions, monsters—*monstrum* in Latin and *teras* in Greek—were understood not merely as aberrations but as signs or omens, embodied in unnatural forms that carried a message or warning to humankind (Asma 2009; Atherton 1998; Eriksson J. 2010).

Monsters appear in virtually all historical periods and across all known civilizations. Every society has generated its own monstrous figures and conceptual vocabulary for describing them. Within monster studies, therefore, the term *monster* is best understood as a broad, cross-cultural category that encompasses diverse local expressions, names, and mythologies—each shaped by its historical moment and continually transformed over time (Eriksson 2021; Mittman and Dendle, 2012; Mittman and Hensel 2018).

Drawing on the bilateral approach to monstrification proposed in this article, we have argued that cognitive penetration is central to understanding the symbolic construction of monstrous "others". Whether in the form of the Swedish Näcken and Skogsrå or their contemporary analogues, jinn in Islamic thought, these figures endure, and new ones continue to emerge. Various scholars have shed light on how monstrous imagery and rhetoric have been utilized by political actors, media institutions, and legal authorities to advance specific agendas. This has significantly contributed to making the public more resilient to explicit manipulation. However, the interaction between such figures and the implicit fears that circulate within social groups—and the question of how these feedback loops might be disrupted—remains insufficiently understood. This gap points to the need for tools capable of making implicit fears visible and open to reflection. In the following section, we turn to cinema, and particularly the monster-film genre, to examine its dual role as a medium that can both perpetuate implicit biases and, when used differently, help reduce implicit fear and foster tolerance toward outgroups.

5.1 Monster Filmmaking for Social Tolerance

Cognitive penetration helps illuminate monstrification dynamics but also introduces complexity. A religious authority figure who sincerely believes in malevolent supernatural beings, and a secular authority that uses monsters metaphorically to portray certain social groups as dangerous, cannot be treated as equivalent cases. Each requires different analytical approaches and different strategies for mitigation. Yet both share a common foundation: fear and the instinctive drive for survival. Fear provides a productive lens for examining how fictional narratives—across both film and folklore—have historically dealt with monsters.

Scholars have long argued that monster films implicitly reinforce fears of otherness and perceived threats to social order. But can an imagined creature on screen genuinely influence real-world perception? Cognitive neuroscience suggests that it can. While the rational mind dismisses cinematic monsters as fictional, the implicit brain does not reliably distinguish between imagined and real events. It responds to both in ways that affect perception, emotion, and memory. This insight underpins a growing branch of social neuroscience that uses film as a naturalistic stimulus to study shared cognitive and affective processes (see Jääskeläinen et al. 2021).

These studies highlight cognitive penetration in action. Moral commitments shape responses to on-screen dilemmas (Bacha-Trams et al. 2017); group identity alters perception in competitive scenes (Nummenmaa et al. 2014); professional background modifies interpretation of identical situations (Lahnakoski et al. 2014). Viewers' prior beliefs also influence narrative comprehension (Yeshurun et al. 2017) and implicit biases toward outgroups (Afdile et al. 2019; Afdile and Jääskeläinen 2020). Taken together, this evidence indicates that even when reason distances itself from myth—our embodied cognitive systems continue to process fictional narratives as socially meaningful and emotionally real.

Fear elicited by a cinematic monster can engage affective and cognitive processes that overlap with those triggered by real environmental threats. This supports the proposition that folkloric beings such as the Skogsrå and Näcken could have been experienced as genuine during altered states of consciousness. This has significant implications for the cultural transmission of fear. If films are processed as simulations of lived experience, cinema becomes a powerful medium for taking part in shaping, negotiating, and reinforcing collective beliefs.

When minority groups are misrepresented or subtly associated with monstrosity, film may reinforce biased perceptions of the social world, contributing to exclusion and mistrust. Yet cinema also holds transformative potential. Films can provide a platform for representing the implicit fears of minority communities, validating these emotions as part of the human experience rather than dismissing them as irrational. In doing so, cinema can convert monstrosity into a space for dialogue, recognition, and mutual understanding.

There is value in revisiting folkloric monster narratives to reimagine the contemporary monster-film genre in more nuanced ways. In original folk accounts, encounters with Näcken or the Skogsrå were not uniformly malevolent; despite ecclesiastical condemnations, these beings could also be helpful or protective. This ambivalence is echoed in broader folklore traditions, such as the benevolent jinn in stories like *Aladdin* or in other tales from *One Thousand and One Nights*. Such narratives remind us that monsters need not be framed exclusively as embodiments of evil.

Delegitimizing monsters, whether as elements of the imagination or as metaphors for social groups, is fundamental to the process of monstrification. Mainstream monster films, often shaped by genre conventions and audience expectations, tend to reproduce a binary of good versus evil. If monsters remain culturally imaginable only as threats, then the capacity to tolerate symbolic or social "others" may also be constrained. Put differently, intolerance of monsters at the narrative level may mirror difficulties in tolerating real-world outgroups.

Alternative cinematic models already exist. *The Shape of Water* (2017) and, more recently, *Frankenstein* (2025) by Guillermo del Toro present forms of romantic or familial relationships with a monstrous figure, while Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014) reframes the monster as something to be acknowledged and domesticated rather than destroyed. Such films demonstrate how the monster can function not only as an object of fear but also as a catalyst for empathy, negotiation, and emotional growth. Such approaches offer a productive path forward: by treating monstrosity as something that can be lived with rather than eradicated, cinema may contribute to broader cultural practices of tolerance and, ultimately, to the slow and fragile work of rebuilding trust across divergent worldviews.

This trajectory also underscores the need for filmmakers from diverse cultural and social backgrounds—particularly those whose communities have been the subjects of monstrification—to be given opportunities and institutional support to tell monster stories from their own perspectives. When production companies rely primarily on formulaic, thrill-driven uses of the monster genre, they risk reinforcing reductive stereotypes and narrowing the imaginative possibilities of the form. By contrast, enabling a wider range of storytellers to reshape what the monster can mean invites more complex, authentic, and culturally grounded narratives—ones capable of illuminating the world's ambiguities rather than exploiting its fears.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This article has proposed a bilateral approach to monstrification, arguing that cognitive penetration offers a productive framework for understanding how both majority and minority groups construct representations of threatening "others." The historical cases of Näcken and the Skogsrå demonstrate how religious authorities in early modern Sweden mobilized supernatural categories to regulate behavior, reinforce institutional authority, and manage anxieties surrounding sexuality, morality, and social order. These cases highlight that monsters need not exist materially to have real social effects; they work as culturally mediated figures that shape perception, motivate legal action, and structure communal fears.

Drawing a parallel to contemporary Sweden, the analysis suggests that similar cognitive mechanisms may operate among religiously conservative Muslim minority groups who interpret experiences of discrimination or exclusion through ontologies that include the jinn. Such perceptual schemas may contribute to an implicit monstrification of the secular state, complicating efforts to build trust between minority communities and public institutions. This does not imply a direct equivalence between historical and contemporary contexts, but it underscores how deeply embedded beliefs, when combined with social stressors, can shape perceptions of threat in ways that exceed rational awareness.

This conceptual proposal is particularly relevant for conservative Muslim immigrants who have experienced war, displacement, or state violence. Research shows that refugees facing discrimination in Europe often develop heightened mistrust toward legal and institutional authorities, especially when past trauma already undermines their sense of safety (Alim et al. 2021). In such contexts, religiosity can function as a psychological buffer rather than a bridge to integration (Garcia-Muñoz and Neuman 2013). For some, this strengthened reliance on religious worldviews may also involve a greater role for supernatural beliefs, including jinn, as part of their interpretive framework (Khalifa et al. 2011). These beliefs may shape how individuals make sense of ongoing hostility or exclusion in their new home country, allowing them to process structural discrimination through culturally familiar categories. From a cognitive-penetration perspective, this suggests that encounters with a secular and perceived hostile majority may be unconsciously filtered through a supernatural ontology, in which the dominant society can appear metaphorically "possessed" or driven by malevolent forces.

These dynamics are unlikely to be uniform across all Muslim groups in Sweden. Individuals who have lived in Sweden for multiple generations may experience state institutions as more predictable and less threatening. This remains an empirical question, however, and invites further investigation. Intergroup relations within immigrant communities add further complexity. The "black sheep effect," whereby in-group norm violators are sanctioned more harshly than outsiders, provides an additional layer for understanding internal regulatory practices (Marques and Paez 1994). Among Muslim immigrant groups, conservative subgroups may engage in social policing aimed at discouraging assimilation, implicitly framing those who adopt secular norms as threats to collective identity. Future research on how such internal sanctions interact with implicit monstrous metaphors could significantly advance understanding of minority experiences of fear, cohesion, and resistance.

This study is limited by its reliance on historical analogies and conceptual reasoning rather than empirical data. While cognitive penetration provides a plausible explanatory framework, contemporary Muslim perceptions of legal authority require systematic ethnographic, psychological, and interdisciplinary investigation. Nonetheless, the conceptual contribution offered here is significant: by foregrounding the role of implicit fears and supernatural ontologies in shaping minority perceptions of state authority, the article identifies a critical but understudied dimension of social integration. Understanding how fears are formed, reinforced, and potentially manipulated is essential for mitigating vulnerability to extremist narratives that capitalise on distrust and marginalisation.

Finally, the article underscores the potential of cinema as a medium for mediating implicit fears. If the brain processes fictional monsters as emotionally real, films can either reinforce harmful stereotypes or open space for dialogue, empathy, and recognition. By moving beyond rigid good-versus-evil frameworks and drawing on the complexity and ambiguity of historical folkloric monsters, contemporary monster films may offer a cultural pathway toward tolerance. When minority fears are expressed and acknowledged rather than dismissed, filmmakers from diverse cultural backgrounds can help reimagine the genre as a platform for nuanced and authentic social reflection. However, without systematic efforts from legal and governmental authorities in the host country to address structural discrimination and bilateral monstrification, the contribution of cinema to any broader healing process will remain limited.

References

Afdile, Mamdooh, and Iiro P. Jääskeläinen. 2020. "Post-Movie Subliminal Measurement (PMSM), for Investigating Implicit Social Bias." *Journal of Visualized Experiments* 2020 (156): e60817. https://doi.org/10.3791/60817.

Afdile, Mamdooh, Iiro P. Jääskeläinen, Enrico Glerean, Dmitry Smirnov, Jussi Alho, Anna Äimälä, and Mikko Sams. "Contextual Knowledge Provided by a Movie Biases Implicit Perception of the Protagonist." *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, April 17. https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsz028.

Alim, Mastura, Clemence Due, and Peter Strelan. 2021. "Relationship between Experiences of Systemic Injustice and Wellbeing among Refugees and Asylum Seekers: A Systematic Review." *Australian Psychologist* 56 (4): 274–88.

Asma, Stephen T. 2009. *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*. With Internet Archive. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press. http://archive.org/details/onmonstersunnatu0000asma.

Atherton, Catherine, ed. 1998. Monsters and Monstrosity in Greek and Roman Culture. Bari: Levante.

Bacha-Trams, Mareike, Enrico Glerean, Robin Dunbar, et al. 2017. "Differential Inter-Subject Correlation of Brain Activity When Kinship Is a Variable in Moral Dilemma." *Scientific Reports* 7 (1): 14244. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-017-14323-x.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 1990. "Modernity and Ambivalence." *Theory, Culture & Society* 7 (2–3): 143–69. https://doi.org/10.1177/026327690007002010.

Bergenheim, Åsa. 2020. Den liderliga häxan: Häxhammaren och de svenska häxprocesserna. Stockholm: Natur & Kultur.

Block, Ned. 2023. *Cognitive Penetration Is Common but Does Not Challenge the Joint*. In *The Border Between Seeing and Thinking*. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197622223.003.0009.

Eliassi, Barzoo. 2010. *A Stranger in My Homeland: The Politics of Belonging among Young People with Kurdish Backgrounds in Sweden*. http://archive.nyu.edu/handle/2451/44174.

Eliassi, Barzoo. 2013. "Orientalist Social Work: Cultural Otherization of Muslim Immigrants in Sweden." *Critical Social Work* 14 (1). https://doi.org/10.22329/csw.v14i1.5871.

Eriksson, Bo. 2021. *Monstermanifestet: Ett nytt forskningsfält ser dagens ljus*. Stockholm: Fri Tanke.

Eriksson, Jonnie. 2010. "Monstret & Människan: Paré, Deleuze Och Teratologiska Traditioner i Fransk Filosofi, Från Renässanshumanism till Posthumanism." Doktorsavhandling (monografi), Sekel Bokförlag.

Erle, Sibylle, and Helen Hendry. 2020. "Monsters: Interdisciplinary Explorations in Monstrosity." *Palgrave Communications* 6 (1): 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-0428-1.

Finch, Jo, Jessica H. Jönsson, Masoud Kamali, and David McKendrick. 2022. “Social Work and Countering Violent Extremism in Sweden and the UK.” *European Journal of Social Work* 25 (1): 119–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2019.1657803.

Foucault, Michel. 2003. *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collége de France, 1974–1975*. London.

Garcia-Muñoz, Teresa, and Shoshana Neuman. 2013. “Bridges or Buffers? Motives behind Immigrants’ Religiosity.” *IZA Journal of Migration* 2 (1): 23. https://doi.org/10.1186/2193-9039-2-23.

Gardell, Mattias. 2015. “What’s Love Got to Do with It? Ultranationalism, Islamophobia, and Hate Crime in Sweden.” *Journal of Religion and Violence* 3 (1): 91–116.

Gilmore, David D. 2009. *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*. Philadelphia.

Girard, René, and Yvonne Freccero. 1986. *The Scapegoat*. Johns Hopkins University Press. https://doi.org/10.1353/book.98235.

Granberg, Gunnar. 1935. Skogsrået i yngre nordisk folktradition. Uppsala: Lundequistska bokhandeln.

Groglopo, Adrián, Fereshteh Ahmadi, and Jimmy Stephen Munobwa. 2025. “Unveiling Islamophobia: Navigating Its Presence in Sweden.” *Cogent Social Sciences* 11 (1): 2451129. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2451129.

Hall, Jonathan, and Dennis T. Kahn. 2020. “Exposure to Wartime Trauma Decreases Positive Emotions and Altruism Toward Rival Out-Groups (But Not Nonrival Out-Groups): A Survey Experiment in a Field Setting Among Syrian Refugees.” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 11 (4): 552–59. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550619876631.

Häll, Mikael. 2013. Skogsrået, näcken och djävulen: Erotiska naturväsen och demonisk sexualitet i 1600- och 1700-talens Sverige. Stockholm: Malört förlag.

Hewstone, Miles, Mark Rubin, and Hazel Willis. 2002. “Intergroup Bias.” *Annual Review of Psychology* 53: 575–604. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.53.100901.135109.

Jääskeläinen, Iiro P., Mikko Sams, Enrico Glerean, and Jyrki Ahveninen. 2021. “Movies and Narratives as Naturalistic Stimuli in Neuroimaging.” *NeuroImage* 224 (January): 117445. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2020.117445.

Jalal, Baland. 2021. “‘Men Fear Most What They Cannot See.’ Sleep Paralysis ‘Ghost Intruders’ and Faceless ‘Shadow-People’—The Role of the Right Hemisphere and Economizing Nature of Vision.” *Medical Hypotheses* 148 (March): 110521. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mehy.2021.110521.

Jung, C. G. 1981. *The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious*. Translated by R. F. C. Hull. Princeton University Press.

Khalifa, Najat, Tim Hardie, Shahid Latif, Imran Jamil, and Dawn-Marie Walker. 2011. “Beliefs about Jinn, Black Magic and the Evil Eye among Muslims: Age, Gender and First Language Influences.” International Journal of Culture and Mental Health 4 (1): 68–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/17542863.2010.503051.

Khayati, Khalid. 2017. “Stigmatisering Och Rasism i Det Svenska Migrationssamtalet Och Det Diasporiska Motståndet.” *Sociologisk Forskning* 54 (1/2): 11–30.

Lahnakoski, Juha M., Enrico Glerean, Iiro P. Jääskeläinen, et al. 2014. “Synchronous Brain Activity across Individuals Underlies Shared Psychological Perspectives.” *NeuroImage* 100 (October): 316–24. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2014.06.022.

Marques, José M., and Dario Paez. 1994. “The ‘Black Sheep Effect’: Social Categorization, Rejection of Ingroup Deviates, and Perception of Group Variability.” *European Review of Social Psychology* 5 (1): 37. https://doi.org/10.1080/14792779543000011.

Mittman, Asa Simon, and Peter J. Dendle, eds. 2012. The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate.

Mittman, Asa Simon, and Marcus Hensel. 2018. *Classic Readings on Monster Theory: Demonstrare, Volume One: 0*. Leeds.

Molla, Tebeje. 2024. “‘Policing at the Speed of Trust’: Interacting with Trauma-Impacted Youth: This Article Is Directly Related to the First Global Trauma Informed Policing and Law Enforcement Conference Held in Melbourne, Australia in February 2024.” *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being* 9 (3): 159–63. https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.410.

Nafstad, Ida, and Amin Parsa. 2025. “Tracing Structural Racism in Swedish Policing: Laws, Practices, and Technologies of Criminalized Difference.” *Punishment & Society* 27 (2): 338–59. https://doi.org/10.1177/14624745241284530.

Nummenmaa, Lauri, Dmitry Smirnov, Juha M. Lahnakoski, et al. 2014. “Mental Action Simulation Synchronizes Action–Observation Circuits across Individuals.” *The Journal of Neuroscience* 34 (3): 748–57. https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.0352-13.2014.

Oja, Linda, ed. 1997. *Vägen till Blåkulla: Nya perspektiv på de stora häxprocesserna*. Uppsala: Uppsala universitet.

Rai, Amit S. 2004. “Of Monsters: Biopower, Terrorism and Excess in Genealogies of Monstrosity.” *Cultural Studies* 18 (4): 538–70. https://doi.org/10.1080/0950238042000232235.

Schlytter, Astrid, and Hanna Linell. 2010. “Girls with Honour-related Problems in a Comparative Perspective.” *International Journal of Social Welfare* 19 (April): 152–61. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2397.2009.00651.x.

Schön, Ebbe. 2010. Erotiska väsen. Stockholm: Carlsson.

Scott, Niall, ed. 2007. *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*. Brill.

Stattin, Jochum. 2008. Näcken: Spelman eller gränsvakt? 3rd ed. Stockholm: Carlsson.
Steuter, Erin, and Deborah Wills. 2011. "Making the Muslim Enemy: The Social Construction of the Enemy in the War on Terror." In The Routledge Handbook of War and Society: Iraq and Afghanistan, edited by Steven Carlton-Ford and Morten G. Ender, 257–268. London: Routledge.
Wigerfelt, Berit, Anders S. Wigerfelt, and Jenny Kiiskinen. 2014. "When Colour Matters: Policing and Hate Crime." *Social Inclusion* 2 (1): 1–11. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v2i1.31.
Yeshurun, Yaara, Stephen Swanson, Erez Simony, et al. 2017. "Same Story, Different Story." *Psychological Science* 28 (3): 307–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797616682029.

Authors

Mamdooh Afdile is a neurocinema researcher and filmmaker whose work bridges cognitive neuroscience and filmmaking. His interdisciplinary doctoral research integrates neuroscience, psychology, and visual storytelling to examine unconscious social perception and cinematic practice. He is currently PI of the project Minority Fears in Monstrous Forms: De-Orientalism as Monster Film.

Bo Eriksson specializing in monsters and the monstrous during the Middle Ages and the early modern period. He has written several acclaimed books on topics such as monsters in world history and the cultural history of the dragon. He has also published Monstermanifestet: Ett nytt forskningsfält ser dagens ljus (2021), in which he outlines guidelines for how a new interdisciplinary field and science of horror and monsters could take shape.

Culture Unbound
Journal of Current Cultural Research

Crimes, Criminals and the Monstrous on Social Media: The Norwegian Online Patrols Narratively Navigating Borders of Humanity

Guro Flinterud

Abstract

This article investigates how the Norwegian police's Online Patrols contribute to the cultural production of monstrosity through their posts on social media. Drawing on theories of monstrosity as a shifting moral and cultural category, the study examines how police communication—though framed as preventive and informative—implicitly constructs boundaries between humanity and its monstrous others. The article employs the concept of "implicit narrative," derived from Bakhtin's theory of speech genres, to analyze how police posts implicitly activate broader cultural scripts. Through a close reading of posts about sexual predators, hate crime and women's rights, the article explores different ways that the police's social media presence draws from and play into ongoing cultural negotiations ultimately connected to morality and humanity. By situating police storytelling within the algorithmically governed and affectively charged landscape of social media, the article argues that digital policing practices are deeply entangled with cultural processes of othering. In this context, the law is not only a regulatory framework but also a narrative device through which monstrosity is constructed, contested, and circulated.

Keywords: Social media, police, implicit narrative, hate crime, sexual violence

Flinterud: "Crimes, Criminals and the Monstrous on Social Media: The Norwegian Online Patrols Narratively Navigating Borders of Humanity", *Culture Unbound*, Volume 18, issue 2, 2026: 176–194. Published by Linköping University Electronic Press: http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.6272

Introduction

Over the past decades, social media platforms have become central to everyday life and communication in Western culture and arguably represent a social sphere towards which the police cannot be indifferent (e.g. Ralph 2021; Schneider 2016). Simultaneously, social media platforms represent a space where communicational dynamics are different from the traditional areas of policing, relying more on performance and narrative (e.g. Bullock 2018; Wood 2020). This format challenges the conventional authority of the police through demanding them to adopt the vernacular of the platform for their messages to reach the public (Flinterud forthcoming). As a consequence, police information more directly enters a much broader interpretive sphere than it did prior to their participation on these types of platforms (Flinterud and Lundgaard 2024). While the police has always taken part in meaning making through their authority as law enforcers, both physically and discursively through exerting power on behalf of the state and through disseminating their versions of information about events, the format and algorithmic distribution of social media content immerse this information more explicitly into larger cultural debates of right and wrong. In this sense, the police, through telling stories about crimes and criminals on social media platforms, take part in the cultural processes through which the borders between humanity and monstrosity is negotiated.

This article rests on the premise that monsters are cultural entities defined through dynamic processes deciding what is deemed monstrous at any one time. Monstrous is in this context understood as human acts that transgress common definitions of humanity or normality, defying existing categories of the cultural and the natural, or perhaps rather revealing the instability of such categories (Tyler 2008, 114). In the context of crimes and criminals, the monstrous can be understood as a moral category that is continuously defined and interpreted through narratives of acts performed by humans where the borders between nature and culture are blurred (Asma 2009, 7). Legal systems are also primarily constructed to match cultural and moral sensitivities, and as such important factors in the process through which the border between humanity and monstrosity is defined in any context. The police as enforcers of law and order in close contact with the population are crucial actors in how these narratives spread in everyday life. In contemporary connective cultures, social media has emerged as an important arena for these types of negotiations where police information is performed, often narratively as stories about criminal acts.

The analysis in this article will focus on social media content created and posted by the Norwegian Online Patrols. The Online Patrols are sections in each of the Norwegian Police Service's 12 police districts dedicated to presence on digital and connective spaces, such as social media platforms and interactive games. They belong to the preventive part of the police, which means that their presence is dedicated to using the tools of different digital spaces to prevent crime rather than to uncover or investigate crimes (Flinterud forthcoming).

I will read the Online Patrols' informational posts on social media as complex cultural expressions, asking: in what ways do the implicit cultural narratives within their posts about crimes and criminals navigate the borders of humanity in contemporary Norway? And by extension, how can these posts and their narratives be read as part of larger cultural narratives of monstrousness in contemporary Western culture?

In the following, I will first present relevant previous research and the theoretical perspective that the analysis rests on, which is the constructed connection between monstrousness and serious crime. Then I present my methods, the empirical material and the concept that make out my main analytical tool, implicit narrative. The analysis is a close reading of three examples of the intersections of monstrousness and crime is constructed through implicit narrative. I end with a short concluding discussion.

Creating monstrous crimes: previous research and theoretical perspectives

While all violations of the law might be considered morally wrong, not all will be deemed monstrous. Indeed, violating moral laws is often considered a part of human nature, and a reason for why we need formal laws whether in the form of religion or judicial law. Tyler refers to Foucault who traced a historical change in the connections between monstrousness and crime from the medieval to the modern period, where the idea of monstrousness was changed from relating to the criminal act to describing the nature of the criminal offender (Tyler 2008, 122–23). In other words, monstrousness is evoked not simply by a morally despicable act, but by the human transgressing the cultural boundaries of human nature.

In contemporary Western culture, the idea of monstrosity is most often reserved for serial killers (Asma 2009) or sexual offenders, often named sexual *predators* in the media indicating an animal nature (DiBennardo 2018). DiBennardo also found that media coverage of sexual offenders often focus on murder and kidnapping, even though these crimes rarely overlap statistically (DiBennardo 2018, 15). While serial killers are not that common in society, sexual violence unfortunately is. The increased severity of reactions towards sexual violence in contemporary Western society can be traced to the feminist movement of the mid-1970s, and recently actualized by the #metoo movement from 2017 and onward which further boosted the cultural narrative of sexual offenders as predatory monsters (Mack and McCann 2021; Kruse and Skilbrei 2024). With the increased availability of Internet forums from the 1990s and in particular after the arrival of social media, online grooming and sexual abuse has become an area of priority for the police (Malesky Jr. 2007; Sunde and Sunde 2021).

The idea of the monstrous sexual offender is so ingrained within contemporary western culture that it is not only evidenced in police initiatives and media representations. In a study of the self-narratives of convicted sexual offenders, Kruse and Skilbrei shows how they actively take on and negotiate the idea of the monstrous when making sense of their offenses (Kruse and Skilbrei 2024). Despite differences in the interviewees' accounts, they all positioned their self-narratives against the idea of the monster—not necessarily denying the monstrousness of sexual crimes but narratively positioning themselves in opposition to the trope of the Monster. In this sense, they do not necessarily challenge the moral understanding of sexual crimes as acts of monstrosity, but through detailed narrative they position themselves and their own individual acts on the human side of the divide. While the narratives of convicted offenders are not part of the empirical material for this article, this aspect provides an important backdrop for understanding just how deep this narrative othering of sexual violence runs in contemporary Western societies.

This article analyzes posts from social media. These posts are not only part of a narrative landscape where humanity is negotiated through stories about specific crimes, but also emerge from online sites where stories are told and spread in specific ways. As such, the posts represent both a narratively constructed moral landscape and the real-life crimes they talk about, they are both story and information. The legend cycle Slender Man, a monster emerging from the Internet and intersecting with real life crime can help us understand the dynamics of these types of communication (Chess and Newsom 2014; McNeill and Blank 2018; Peck 2023). The Slender Man monster emerged from a discussion forum for horror enthusiasts in 2009, and rose to public attention in 2014 when connected to the attempted murder by two twelve-year-old girls of a girl of the same age in Waukesha, USA (Peck 2023, 7). While there is both a monster (Slender Man) and a monstrous act (attempted murder) in this story, what is most relevant to our discussion is the way that the mediated reports of the crime worked to construe monstrosity. Manning has used the twin concepts *hypermediacy* and *immediacy* to describe the mixed experiences of the Slender Man on online spaces as both existing within the medium (hypermediacy) and being part of everyday life (immediacy) (Manning 2018). This conceptual pair point to the intersections of online and offline modes creating a liminal space where the monster is simultaneously part of the media landscape of narrative and part of the real world through ostension. In the context of police social media posts, these concepts highlight how the stories conveyed by the police on social media not only exist within the narrative of the post, but simultaneously exist as real-life possibilities, in understandings shaped through the experiences of the receivers. Peck has pointed out how rumor panics like the one following the attempted murders in Waukesha only seemingly is about the monster, but rather should be understood through the amplification of easy signifiers in digital and algorithmically governed spaces to cover up more complex issues of mental health and ideological violence (Peck 2023, 165–66). In this article I expand on this understanding, suggesting that the negotiation of the borders of humanity inherent in connecting heinous crimes to monstrosity is also present in stories on social media that purportedly does attempt to tackle the complex issues of social and criminal injustice.

Method(ology)

Collecting

The analysis in this article is based on material collected between 2022 and 2025 as part of the Research Council funded project *A Matter of Facts: Flows of Knowledge through Digitalized Police Practices*, where the main aim was to explore some of the ways that the police creates knowledges and takes part in meaning making through the use of a diverse array of digital tools, social media being one. Here, I explore the presence of the online patrols on Facebook and Instagram. There are 12 police districts in Norway, each with their own online patrol-section, and each of these sections administrate their own accounts on Instagram and Facebook. A lot of the content is shared between the accounts, but all sections appear to make their own content with different frequencies, and some content is locally specific. Facebook posts were explored using META's now discontinued CrowdTangle tool, where I was able to collect and structure posts qualitatively, as well as extract text and metadata for computational analysis. In addition to this, I performed ethnographic fieldwork on the home pages of different online patrol accounts on Facebook and Instagram, partly going through the home pages in a structured way date by date, and partly through snowballing, looking up specific topics and posts of relevance, for example in relation to special occasions or current events (e.g. Hine 2017). The Online Patrols have open commentary sections on both Instagram and Facebook, which have also been read and collected as part of this fieldwork. These are however seldom used, and in the analysis only the third example makes use of comments from the commentary sections.

Categorizing

There are several possible ways to categorize the collected material. I found that in relation to online Patrols' stated goal of working preventively through being present where the people are, there were two modes that could be identified as dominant in the material: connecting and informing (See also Flinterud forthcoming). *Connecting* is expressed through posts containing elements I interpret as intended to make the police more approachable, such as silly dancing videos or humorous skits, as well as posts showing the police observing holidays and events such as the national day, Pride or International Women's Day. *Informing* is expressed through posts containing elements interpreted as following a more standard police mandate of disseminating truthful information about the law for the public not to (inadvertently) break it, and about common crimes and dangers, so that the public are able to protect themselves. While some posts could be sorted clearly under one of the two modes, several posts combine them.

In addition to this inductive categorizing, I performed topic modelling on the extracted texts from Facebook. Topic modelling is a computational method for detecting topics in a text where an algorithm suggests clusters of keywords that might be meaningful in context (Baltz and Norén 2021). As such, it is a method whose results rely on the researcher's previous knowledge of the text and can be used to support qualitative analysis. Most importantly, topic modelling algorithms solely create results based on sorting through existing text, and is not prone to hallucinations, like the recent chat based LLMs such as ChatGPT. The topics thus discerned from the text material were mainly on a different level than the overarching categories created after my inductive coding, but one result was relevant for this article, namely that of all topics, only one of them was a defined crime: sexual violence. I will discuss a possible interpretation of this result in the analysis below.

Analyzing

The online patrols do not explicitly label criminals monsters on their social media pages—I have at least not found any mention of this in my material. However, as their mandate is to keep the people safe from dangers in terms of warning them against crimes and criminals, their communication will always be a form of othering, using the law to create moral boundaries between the reader (us, potential victim) and the dangerous criminal (them, potential monster). Sometimes this is done through posts that address how to protect oneself from crimes and criminals, other times it is done as a warning to help the reader not to cross the moral line, such as urging people to keep within the speed limit whether in their cars or on an electric scooter. The latter types of posts indicates the idea that these positions are not fixed: anyone can at any time cross that moral border if they do not follow the law.

I use the concept *implicit narrative* to analytically capture the ways that the cultural layers of this othering that appear when reading the posts in contexts

(Flinterud 2020, 76). The idea is similar to the concept of kernel stories coined by Kalčik, which she describes as "a brief reference to the subject, the central action or an important piece of dialogue from a longer story" (Kalčik 1975, 7). The difference between the concepts is that the kernel story is a tool used consciously by the narrator, while the idea of implicit narrative is meant to capture also the stories that are not necessarily consciously alluded to by the narrator. While the concept of kernel stories is relevant to understanding communication in close knit communities, the idea of implicit narrative is relevant to more open-ended media environments such as social media sites where a single utterance might evoke a wide range of co-existing stories.

Implicit narrative is a Bakhtinian concept, derived from the ideas presented in Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of *speech genres* (Bakhtin 1986). Speech gernes is a term that describes the broad range of contextual rules and conventions that govern communication, from the unspoken conventions that make a conversation between friends different from one between strangers, to the clear-cut rules of scientific publication, and everything around and in between. Central to this theory is that each utterance contains traces both of preceding utterances and of anticipated future utterances, which the utterer might or might not be aware of. As such, each utterance is polyphonic: it contains traces of the cultural context in which it is uttered, no matter how simple or complex. Using the word *implicit* rather than *implied* establish an analytical term to read an utterance as a polyphonic cultural expression, not bound by what might have been explicitly implied by the utterer. In the context of this article, this entails not limiting the police's social media posts to the intentions of the police, but expanding the analytical focus to encompass the range of possible stories it could tell. This also means that when referring to the police as senders of the posts, I am not referring to the intentions or motivations of individual police officers or leaders within the organization, but to how the content might be interpreted in light of the official stance of the Norwegian Police Service as expressed in official documents.

Implicit monsters and explicit fear

Despite looming large in the literature of monstrous criminals, the sexual predator is not widely visible in the social media channels of the Norwegian Online Patrol. Nevertheless, results from topic modelling of the textual content of posts identified sexual violence as the only subtopic representing a defined crime—others referred to more general themes such as traffic, parents and youth, and opening hours of police stations. The content on Facebook and Instagram is largely visual, based either on images or videos where a lot of the text is integrated in the visual content and not written into the text fields. The fact that sexual violence does not appear predominant when the sites are studied through a qualitative ethnographic approach but among the identified topics when analyzing the texts in isolation indicates that posts on this topic might more often contain longer written texts than other types of posts.

One example of this is a warning post actualizing the motif of contaminated drink, more specifically that of the risk of someone spiking your drink in a nightclub or bar. The post contained a generic image of a filled glass on a blurry blue background, and the text field contained a relatively long text:

> Watch your drink [smile emoticon]. Always keep an eye on your drink when you're at a party, or out on the town. If you need to use the bathroom or go on errands, have someone you trust watch your bottle/glass. Don't accept drinks from strangers. Not everyone has honest intentions! Take care of each other [Heart emoticon].

This text does not explicitly mention sexual violence, but knowledge of common urban legends or rumors about contaminated drinks indicate that the outcome of having your drink spiked is not so much the danger of intoxication, but of subsequent sexual abuse. As Donovan has pointed out, drink spiking is a broad cultural phenomenon that range from malicious to practical jokes such as spiking the punch in a youth party to make people tipsy without their knowing or putting laxatives in someone's chocolate milk(Donovan 2016, 2). However, there is a long tradition in western storytelling of stories where drinks are connected to the exploitation of young girls and women, exemplified by Donovan through contemporary legends, but also prevalent in for example the ballad traditions of Scandinavia (Conrad 2021; Donovan 2016). An early example from Norwegian folkore is the ballad of Liti Kiersti, where in some variants, the elven king after seducing and luring the girl Kiersti into the mountain uses a special wine to make her forget her previous life outside.

In the case of the Facebook post, the image, the explicit mention of being at a party or out on the town and the fact that this is posted by the police all contribute to situate this text in the narrative landscape of predatory drugging. It is a text written to inform about possible dangers, keeping the first part of the act, spiking drinks, explicit, and the second part of the act, possible sexual assault, implicit. In this, the offender is also kept implicit, alluded to with the Norwegian word *uvedkommende*, which I have translated to strangers here, but which also carries the meaning of someone who has no right being there—someone who, as pointed out in the following sentence, might not have honest intentions. The text is directed at possible victims and other people with honest intentions, urging them to protect themselves and each other against this unnamed, prevailing danger, implicitly understood as the sexual predator.

It should also be noted that none of the posts warning of sexual abuse addresses the offender. The basic communicative strategy is to warn the possible victims and protectors, the good people, against an evil that is constructed as outside of the receiver group. This strategy emphasizes the status of the offender as other to society, in the sense that the police is a force that is meant to protect the state and its citizens against such threats. Inherent in this focus and use of language lies the possibility of contributing to the dehumanization of criminal offenders and the creation of monsters.

As previous research confirms, there is a close association between sexual violence and the monstrous in contemporary Western cultures. As such, the Norwegian police's implicit narrative about sexual predators in social media posts serve to emphasize and address a commonly recognized trope. However, this narrative style is evident also in posts informing and warning about other types of crimes where the associations to the monstrous is more culturally complex. In the following, I will analyze posts where the police address two different topics, one regarding hate crime and one regarding women's rights, to explore the ways in which the implicit narratives of these posts take part in larger cultural negotiations over the borders between humanity and monstrosity.

Negotiating humanity in hate crime

Since 2007, hate crime has been listed as one of the criminal offences to be given highest priority by the Norwegian Director of Public Prosecutors (Solhjell 2023, 3). In 2014, a hate crime unit was established in the capital Oslo, and in 2021 expanded to a national resource tasked with enforcing hate crime investigation in Oslo and online. In the wake of these developments, several videos with different kinds of information about hate crime were published on the social media pages of the online patrols on Facebook and Instagram. In this part, I will analyze three videos published in 2022 where the information is presented by civilians, and not police officers. In these videos, each person is presented as illustrating what hate crime is through telling a true, first-person narrative, either framed as a victim or as an observer of the crime.

Solhjell and Klatran have explored how police officers' own understandings of policing hate crimes could be seen as a form of boundary work, which involves negotiating both the borders between legal and criminal acts, and between types of criminal acts (Solhjell and Klatran 2024). In legal terms, what characterizes a hate crime is that it does not only affect the victim, but sends a message of fear to an entire society through being motivated by hatred of a property or the identity of the victim, such as religion, sexual orientation or disability (Solhjell 2023, 2). In practice, however, the labelling of a crime as a hate crime is not so straightforward.

Considerations of when an utterance transgresses from being a person executing their right to freedom of speech to an example of criminal hate speech, or whether a crime is motivated by hatred or prejudice is highly dependent on cultural norms and local knowledge. In this sense, the very existence of the category hate crime could be understood as an element of the negotiations of humanity inherent to criminal acts, not only regarding how society judges the offenders but also how they disclose cultural attitudes about the perceived humanity of the victims. The police's hate crime information campaign on social media used already defined hate crimes as their vantage point, but nevertheless, the inherent instability of the category of hate crime enables several possible implicit narratives within the same post.

Iman Meskini – religion

Norwegian actress Iman Meskini tells the story of a woman who were harassed for her religious dress in a grocery store. The accompanying text states that this is not Meskini's private story, but she uses first person narration, and being a Muslim herself is shown wearing her traditional *hijab* covering her hair in the video. She says:

> I had bought dinner and was on my way home. As usual, I wore my chador, a fully covering garment that shows I'm a Muslim. Suddenly, I was attacked by an unknown woman. She hits, kicks and tries to rip of my headdress, while almost spitting out: "Get that fucking thing off, you burqa bastard." Luckily, a store employee came running over, and the woman ran away. I'm shocked. This happened because I look the way I do, and because of what I believe in. This is hate crime.

Then the image blurs, and a text appears on the screen saying: "This is a true story performed by an actress. We encourage you to report to the police if you have been victim of a hate crime"

Jan Thomas- LGBTQ+

Norwegian stylist Jan Thomas tells a story about something that happened to one of his friends when he lived in Los Angeles:

> I lived in the USA for many years and had several friends there. One of my very best friends was going to accompany his friend out after they had watched a movie, to say goodbye. His friend got in the car, and my friend leaned over to give him a hug. Out of the blue he was hit on the back of the head with an iron pipe. Collapsed, was driven to Cedars-Sinai

> where he was in a medical coma for a whole month. Fortunately, the perpetrators have received prison sentences, simply because it was easy to prove that this was hate crime.

The image blurs, and a text appears: "Hate crimes against people with different sexual orientations are rarely reported. The number of unreported crimes is large. Report to the police if you have been the victim of a hate crime"

Amir Hashani – disability

The last person is Amir Hashani who tells his own story about experiencing harassment for being disabled. Hashani is not presented with a title in the video, but in addition to being a victim of a hate crime, he is also part of public debate and an activist working for the rights of disabled, queer and minorities in Norway:

> About three years ago, I was the victim of a hate crime in Oslo. I was waiting for the tram, going to [the airport] to take the plane to Stavanger. A guy across the street started shouting: "Disabled should die, disabled should die!" I thought, OK, what's happening? After a few minutes, he crossed the street, coming towards me. Of course I was scared. He walked towards me and started spitting at me out of the blue. Then he threatened me and said: "Disabled should die, they don't deserve to live". I didn't understand anything, I thought it must be candid camera or something like that. I've never experienced something like that before. Then the tram arrived, a lot of things happened, and he suddenly disappeared. I went and reported the case to the police, and after four-five days the same thing happened again. Same place, same guy. He screamed and shouted, "Disabled should die, disabled should die". He walked towards me again and I just felt, why is this happening again, same place, same guy? What's going on? So, I reported it again. This happened to me because I'm in a wheelchair, I'm disabled. This is hate crime.

The text at the end of the video reads: "Hate crimes against people with disabilities are rarely reported, and we believe the numbers of unreported crimes are large. We encourage you to report if you have been the victim of a hate crime."

Each of these videos thematize what the police consider important motivations for hate crimes: religion, sexual orientation and disability (Solhjell 2023, 2). They present simple narratives of acts that can be defined as hate crimes, told from a victim-centered perspective. The story contributes to establishing concrete examples of what hate crime can look like while the first-person narrative establishes emotional closeness. Visually, the videos are in the style of a serious lecture. The person talking takes up most of the space in the frame, and the background is neutral grey. The speakers' physical appearance embodies the core of the message: Iman Meskini wears a hijab, symbolizing her Muslim identity, Jan Thomas wears a t-shirt saying, "I [heart] U", alluding to the freedom to love, and behind Amir Hashani you glimpse a headrest, indicating that he is sitting in a wheelchair. Each person ends their story with a short explanation of why the incident happened, stating that this is a hate crime. The text ending the videos encourage victims to report such acts to the police.

The three posts use references to criminal law to materialize a crucial area of negotiations over humanity in contemporary western culture. Stating that "this is hate crime", referring to underreporting and encouraging victims to report situates the Norwegian police morally in this landscape. It is not just about condemning violence, but also about condemning the motives, which are connected to cultural valuation of difference. The discourse surrounding sexual violence express the belief that the act is by its nature a crime that transgress humanity and as such connected to the nature of the individual offender (e.g. Kruse and Skilbrei 2024). The idea of hate crime as a particularly serious form of violence stems from the idea of a culturally enhanced crime, where violence is condemned as such, but the additional motive of hate stemming from culturally imposed beliefs makes it suitable for a harder sentence (Solhjell 2023). The idea of rights and equality connected to the categories of religion, sexual orientation and disability is not universal and has become increasingly contested in Western societies from the 2010s (Bjånesøy et al. 2023). When the Norwegian Police Service through making such videos so clearly express their, and thus the Norwegian state's, official position on these issues, they simultaneously express a view that is currently not aligned with the official position in countries Norway over the past decades import cultural ideas from, such as the USA (Brummett and Campo-Engelstein 2021). As legal rights for LGBTQ+ for example become restricted in several states in the USA, it is no longer so certain that the act in Jan Thomas' story would be considered a hate crime within that jurisdiction.

The victim-centered perspective and use of first-person narrative has the effect of emphasizing the humanity of minority groups and an inclusive and multicultural society. At the same time, this presents a simplified and one-sided image of the offenders that is at odds with the idea of the act as existing within, and even resulting from, a complex culture. While the act of violence is attributed to a monstrous nature (e.g. Kruse and Skilbrei 2024) the additional severity of defining the acts as hate crime refers to the cultural aspects motivating the act. In this sense, we can discern a contesting implicit narrative in these videos, telling the story of how certain groups culturally justify the violent act as reactions to people displaying traits that they define as monstrous. The events in the USA in 2025 and

2026 where violent clashes between immigration officers detaining immigrants and protesters, so far leading to the death of two protesters, is an example of the intensification of polarized narratives about equality in contemporary Western societies (i.e. Leingang 2026). While acts of violence are generally not condoned by the public across the political spectrum, the motives where minorities are targeted by the majority group are increasingly justified by far-right government such as the Trump/Vance government that influence contemporary Western societies through both traditional and social media. A study from the first Trump-presidency indicate that the rhetoric and restrictive legislation concerning immigration led to an increase in violence towards these groups (Hodwitz and Massingale 2023). In this way, even hate crime campaigns spreading a message of protecting minority groups implicitly make visible the fluidity of how the law contributes to constructions of the monstrous, either through its simplified portrayal of easily identified racist, homophobic or ableist motives as particularly immoral, or as an implicit reminder that legal bodies elsewhere rather construe the act or identity of the victim as particularly immoral. The *nature* of the act is thus condemned, but the *culture* that motivates it is justified by certain groups through construing aspects of the victim as not quite human.

Despite implicitly embodying the ongoing debates over humanity in contemporary Western culture, the three videos do situate the Norwegian Police Service as an organization whose official stance is in support of multiculturalism and human rights in presenting a simplified narrative of what hate crime is with an easily discernable line between right or wrong. This is partly due to the relative ease of adjusting a personal narrative about an incident to the precise legal definition of a crime without explicitly mentioning the wider cultural or societal context, and partly to the format of social media posts with its possibility of short form messages presented concisely and without regard to complexities. However, not all police- and crime related information is as suitable for this format. In the following, I will analyze a video which is similar both in form and content, but which goes further into a legal landscape where the contemporary complexities of multicultural societies become more visible.

Women's rights and the monstrous immigrant

In the preceding examples, we saw how the police used social media content to present simplified information about a complex legal concept, hate crime, through presenting three clear cut cases of violence motivated by religion, sexual orientation and disability. In this part, I will explore a video which is similar in form, but where the narrative content is opposite, presenting a clear-cut legal concept, domestic violence, through referring to stories about a complex and politically fraught issue, immigration.

The example video is visually similar to the three hate crime videos, showing a person on a grey background talking directly to the camera. This time, the person talking is a woman dressed in a police uniform and with the title “Police inspector” showing on the screen along with her name. The first name is of Middle Eastern origin, while the surname is of Norwegian origin, and with her black hair, brown skin and slight accent her presence she arguably represents a modern, multicultural Norway where woman, police officer, ethnic minority and Norwegian are identities that can be embodied by one person. Her tone of voice is calm and her facial expression serious as she says:

> Norway is the most equal country in the world, but not for everyone. Through criminal investigation, we experience that women live under terror-like regimes, carried out by their closest relatives. One conversation with the wrong man or asking for a divorce can trigger a conflict of honor that can end in murder on Norwegian soil. We’re talking about Norwegian women who must escape to undisclosed places in Norway or live in exile in a foreign country. All these women have done wrong is to live by fundamental human rights that you and I take for granted. We must acknowledge that cultures that practice violence in the name of honor exist in Norway. Norway is not a country of equality until all women can control their own lives. The police cannot do this alone; there must be more of us. Your courage can save lives.

Instead of being addressed to the victims, this video is addressed to the witnesses, asking them to help the police. The video was posted on the account for the Online patrol in the Capital area police district, Oslo, Asker and Bærum, on the International Women’s Day, 8. March 2024. It is framed as concerning domestic violence and women’s rights, stating that some women in Norway “live under terror-like regimes” and that “Norway is not a country of equality until all women can control their own lives”. While these expressions in isolation could be interpreted as culturally neutral, the reference to “cultures that practice violence in the name of honor” is picked up in the commentary section on Facebook as implicitly referencing “other” cultures than that defined as “Norwegian”. One person writes: “Norwegians haven’t started committing violence of honor. If so, who’s committing this violence, and who inspires them?”, with another person answering: “It’s misleading of the police to say that this is ‘Norwegian women’. They might be Norwegian citizens, but they’ve brought this culture of honor from their home country. Still tragic and bad, but not at all a Norwegian practice.” In these comments, we see how when the monstrous others only exist implicitly in the message, the police have no control over the meanings the receivers read into their stories. In this case, the implicit narrative of cultural conflicts connected to immigration is read into of the explicit information about women's rights. The monstrous, but identity-less, persons alluded to in the video are given identities and origins in the public's readings. The content is thus given specific cultural connotations that does not only allude to the monstrousness of keeping women under violent regimes, but assigns this monstrousness to an entire culture, specified mainly as being not Norwegian, and with reference to being brought from "their home country".

This video clearly shows the pitfalls of handling complex cultural issues in the simplistic visual format commonly shown on social media platforms. But more importantly, it provides an example of how social media posts play a role in the increasingly polarized public discourses of contemporary Western culture, where the discursive line between humanity and monstrosity is more fraught than ever before (e.g. Rabab'ah et al. 2024). False news, conspiracy theories and the amplification of extreme content has received a lot of attention in research on social media, several scholars pointing towards the role of storytelling and implicit cultural references in these processes (e.g. Phillips 2018; Tangherlini 2018; Bodner et al. 2020). The posts made by the police might not be interpreted explicitly as examples of these types of processes, as they are framed as information based on reported crimes and the polices' own experiences. However, the combination of content that carries complex cultural connotations and the context of being posted on social media platforms where the police has no control over who reads it and where it is distributed means that posts in which the legal concept is clear, but the cultural content is politically fraught carries a much greater possibility of amplifying implicit narratives that go beyond the surface topic of the text. In this context, the immigrant monster that is created when readers connect "terror-like regimes" to "cultures of honor" might be brought to life through the police's stories about the rights of women, when stories about these women are interpreted as sanctioning explicit racism towards men in immigrant populations. The comments of the readers, then, not only express the idea that these monsters exist outside of the post, but also that they can be identified through a set of cultural characteristics and cultural belonging.

Concluding discussion

The analysis moves through three levels of how the police's social media stories about specific types of violent crimes implicitly evoke narratives that challenge categories of humanity and monstrosity. In the first example, explicitly warning about someone putting drugs in your drink, the idea of monstrosity is evoked through the allusion to sexual predators. The main part of analysis, however, revolves around examples where there is a cultural layer to the interpretation of the act, specifically concerning contemporary understandings of the status of minority groups. The second example uses posts that aim to explain a contextually difficult legal concept through simple stories. These posts explicitly mention the concept of hate as motivation for the criminal act, which destabilizes the focus on the perpetrator as the less-than-human in evoking existing cultural attitudes that the victims, i.e. people who deviate from the norm through identity or ability, might somehow be the monstrous ones. The third example addresses a relatively clear legal concept but presents it using culturally complex examples. This post returns the focus to the violent offender as potentially monstrous, but ventures into a narrative landscape where the offender is not defined solely by their actions, but through the perceived cultural origin of these actions as belonging to specific "other" ethnic groups.

The stories told in these videos, and even the format they are delivered in, do not diverge significantly from how police services traditionally disseminate information, telling stories about crimes building on their experience and authority in such matters. The potential for demonization and polarization has always been inherent in this type of information where there is a clearly drawn line between right and wrong, represented by the law. What makes these stories as social media posts more potentially flammable is the way that social media platforms provide new contexts for them, where the police cannot control the interpretations and the narrative as it unfolds. The examples in this article show how well-meant posts might have different outcomes, in particular in a polarized cultural and political landscape such as that we are currently experiencing in Western societies. The Online Patrols might have high competence, legal skill and the best intentions, but they still cannot quite tame the monsters that might be born out of algorithmically governed social media platforms.

Literature

Asma, Stephen T. 2009. *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*. Oxford University Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1986. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. University of Texas Press.

Baltz, André, and Fredrik Norén. 2021. 'Tematisk innehållsanalys med temamodellering'. In *Digitala metoder i humaniora och samhällsvetenskap*, edited by Johan Jarlbrink and Ferdrik Norén. Studentlitteratur.

Bjånesøy, Lise, Elisabeth Ivarsflaten, and Lars Erik Berntzen. 2023. 'Public Political Tolerance of the Far Right in Contemporary Western Europe'. *West European*

Politics 46 (7): 1264–87. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2023.2167046.

Bodner, John, Wendy Welch, Ian Brodie, Anna Muldoon, Donald Leech and Ashley Marshall. 2020. *COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories: QAnon, 5G, the New World Order and Other Viral Ideas*. McFarland.

Brummett, Abram, and Lisa Campo-Engelstein. 2021. 'Conscientious Objection and LGBTQ Discrimination in the United States'. *Journal of Public Health Policy* 42 (2): 322–30. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41271-021-00281-2.

Bullock, Karen. 2018. '(Re)Presenting "Order" Online: The Construction of Police Presentational Strategies on Social Media'. *Policing and Society* 28 (3): 345–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2016.1177529.

Chess, Shira and Eric Newsom. 2014. *Folklore, Horror Stories, and the Slender Man: The Development of an Internet Mythology*. Springer.

Conrad, JoAnn. 2021. 'Taken into the Mountain: Cavernous and Categorical Entrapments'. *Narrative Culture* 8 (1): 21–57.

DiBennardo, Rebecca A. 2018. 'Ideal Victims and Monstrous Offenders: How the News Media Represent Sexual Predators'. *Socius* 4 (January): 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023118802512.

Donovan, Pamela. 2016. *Drink Spiking and Predatory Drugging: A Modern History*. 1st ed. 2016 edition. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57517-3.

Flinterud, Guro. 2020. '"Consequences for Society as a Whole": Narrating Technology in the Norwegian Media Debate on Online Surveillance'. *Cultural Analysis* 18 (1): 75–98.

Flinterud, Guro. Submitted. *Patrolling the Vernacular Web: Police Social Media Presence Navigating Institutional and Vernacular Authority*.

Flinterud, Guro, and Jenny Maria Lundgaard. 2024. "Machineries of Knowledge Construction: Exploring the Epistemic Agency of Digital Systems in Policing." *European Journal of Policing Studies* 7 (1–2): 126–46. https://doi.org/10.5553/EJPS.000010.

Hine, Christine. 2017. 'From Virtual Ethnography to the Embedded, Embodied, Everyday Internet'. In *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, edited by Larissa Hjorth, Heather Horst, Anne Galloway, and Genevieve Bell. Routledge.

Hodwitz, Omi, and Kelley Massingale. 2023. 'Rhetoric and Hate Crimes: Examining the Public Response to the Trump Narrative'. *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 15 (3): 303–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2021.1936121.

Kalčik, Susan. 1975. '"... Like Ann's Gynecologist or the Time I Was Almost Raped": Personal Narratives in Women's Rap Groups'. *The Journal of American Folklore* 88 (347): 3–11. JSTOR. https://doi.org/10.2307/539181.

Kruse, Anja Emilie, and May-Len Skilbrei. 2024. 'The Monster and the Self: Taking on the Monstrosity of Sexual Violations'. *Punishment & Society* 26 (5): 840–59. https://doi.org/10.1177/14624745231221933.

Leingang, Rachel. 2026. '"We'Re Fighting for the Soul of the Country": How Minnesota Residents Came Together to Face ICE'. US News. *The Guardian*, February 1. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/feb/01/minnesota-twin-cities-ice-protests.

Mack, Ashley Noel, and Bryan J. McCann. 2021. '"Harvey Weinstein, Monster": Antiblackness and the Myth of the Monstrous Rapist'. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 18 (2): 103–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2020.1854802.

Malesky Jr., L. Alvin. 2007. 'Predatory Online Behavior: Modus Operandi of Convicted Sex Offenders in Identifying Potential Victims and Contacting Minors Over the Internet'. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 16 (2): 23–32. https://doi.org/10.1300/J070v16n02_02.

Manning, Paul. 2018. 'Monstrous Media and Media Monsters: From Cottingley to Waukesha'. In *Slender Man Is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet*, edited by Lynne S. McNeill and Trevor J. Blank. Utah State University Press. https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/187/edited_volume/book/60709.

McNeill, Lynne S., and Trevor J. Blank. 2018. *Slender Man Is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet*. Utah State University Press. https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/187/edited_volume/book/60709.

Peck, Andrew. 2023. *Digital Legend and Belief: The Slender Man, Folklore, and the Media*. University of Wisconsin Pres.

Phillips, Whitney. 2018. *The Oxygen of Amplification*. Data & Society Research Institute.

Rabab'ah, Ghaleb, Asmaa Hussein, and Samer Jarbou. 2024. 'Hate Speech in Political Discourse'. *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law - Revue Internationale de Sémiotique Juridique* 37 (7): 2237–56. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-024-10158-8.

Ralph, Liam. 2021. 'The Dynamic Nature of Police Legitimacy on Social Media'. *Policing and Society* 0 (0): 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2021.1956493.

Schneider, Christopher J. 2016. *Policing and Social Media: Social Control in an Era of New Media*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Solhjell, Randi. 2023. 'How Acts Become Hate Crime: The Police's Documenting of Criminal Cases'. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* 72 (March): 100574. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcj.2022.100574.

Solhjell, Randi, and Henning Kaiser Klatran. 2024. 'The Politics of Policing Hate: Boundary Work, Social Inequalities, and Legitimacy'. *Social & Legal Studies* 33

(4): 620–41. https://doi.org/10.1177/09646639231201912.
Sunde, Nina, and Inger Marie Sunde. 2021. 'Conceptualizing an AI-Based Police Robot for Preventing Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse': *Nordic Journal of Studies in Policing* 8 (2): 1–21. https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2703-7045-2021-02-01.
Tangherlini, Timothy R. 2018. 'Toward a Generative Model of Legend: Pizzas, Bridges, Vaccines, and Witches'. *Humanities* 7 (1): 1. https://doi.org/10.3390/h7010001.
Tyler, Tom. 2008. 'Deviants, Donestre, and Debauchees: Here Be Monsters'. *Culture, Theory and Critique* 49 (2): 113–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/14735780802426700.
Wood, Mark A. 2020. 'Policing's "Meme Strategy": Understanding the Rise of Police Social Media Engagement Work'. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 32 (1): 40–58. https://doi.org/10.1080/10345329.2019.1658695.

Author

Guro Flinterud is Associate Professor in Cultural Studies at the University of Bergen. She has worked as a Senior Researcher at the Norwegian Police University College, studying the cultural impacts of police use of social media platforms. Her research interests include the transmission of folklore in digital spaces and the intersections of concepts of the natural and cultural in folk narrative.
orcid.org/0000-0003-0599-8618

Culture Unbound
Journal of Current Cultural Research

A Medieval Chancery Case of Mental Health and a Monster

Wendy J. Turner

Abstract

Chancery records of medieval England record an interaction between two men, one disguised as a monster. The first man, William, asks the second to disclose his real identity and when he only growls, William kills him. The details of this case are recorded in the letters patent, which were sent out to the public to address particular legal and royal matters that everyone needed to know. William, the record tells the reader, had a mental health condition, and Augustine, the second man, refused to act human even when William asked him "in the name of God" to do so. This article explores several issues, including how William and Augustine know what monsters looked and acted like, how medieval English law defined monsters, and what medieval people understood about mental health.

Keywords: monster, law, England, Middle Ages, mental health

Turner: "A Medieval Chancery Case of Mental Health and a Monster", *Culture Unbound*, Volume 18, issue 2, 2026: 195–206. Published by Linköping University Electronic Press: http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.6494

The Case

In 1265, William Pilche walked along a high road in England near Manchester when he met “a terrible monster” (TNA: PRO ms C 66/83, m 22; CPR 1258-66, 407). William asked the monster to speak, adjuring him “in God’s name” to say something so that he might know whether this creature was a man or an actual monster. He might have even demanded that this monster reveal himself if he was indeed a person. Instead, the monster “uttered groans and refused to speak,” and William “rushed upon [the] monster and killed him” (TNA: PRO ms C 66/83, m 22; Turner 2013a; Turner 2013b). The so-called monster turned out to be Augustine le Fevere of Manchester, who wore a disguise. Either he considered terrifying people on the high road to be a joke, he was intoxicated, or something else was wrong such, for example his being unable to speak or having an inability to hear William (perhaps because of the disguise). Whatever his reasons for not speaking, Augustine was not groaning or laughing anymore. William killed him and would now face trial. But William had friends. Thomas de Ferrariis wrote to the crown to ask for a pardon since William, as described in the records, was “*fatuus*,” meaning “fatuous” and possibly indicating a learning or intellectual disability (Turner 2013b; Turner 2018); the original editor of this selection for the *Calendar of Patent Rolls* translated *fatuus* as “idiot,” but, I would argue, that neither the term *idiota* nor the term *fatuus* directly translate to the modern word “idiot,” which has, since the time of the original translation, fallen out of favor for good reason (CPR 1258-66, p. 407). Robert de Stokeport, the local coroner for the country of Lancaster and “other trustworthy persons” believed William’s story (Sabapathy 2014), either because William was known otherwise to be an honest and law-abiding individual and/or Augustine was known as a prankster or both. William was, indeed, pardoned.

William likely lived independently since he was walking alone without a companion. In medieval England at the time of this case, if William had been known to have mental health issue that was severe enough that he needed assistance (with self-care or social interactions), physical guidance (against getting lost or confused) or moral guidance (against overspending, overreacting, acting out, or violence), he would have been assigned a keeper or custodian and, if he had property, also a court-appointed guardian. Since no such person was mentioned, presumably William suffered only from a minor mental health condition, perhaps something like neurodivergence or a poor memory, which in the mostly illiterate Middle Ages would have been quite a detriment. And yet he was taken off guard and was quite unable at that moment of fright to distinguish reality from a game, so-much-so that he *believed* he was confronting a monster. The real questions now are: How did he, an individual living in a rural, late-thirteenth-century town know what a monster was? For that matter, how would Augustine know what “a monster” was in order to fashion a convincing costume and, moreover, to act like one? In other words, what was the later medieval concept of "monster" and was it anything like our own? This article investigates medieval concepts of monsters at the public level, monsters in medieval English law, and what it meant to have a mental health condition in the Middle Ages.

Medieval Ideas Around Monsters

Scholars suggest that medieval monsters were depicted as morally and physically deformed, often their outer form reflecting an inner moral and ethical corruption. Their presence demarcated boundaries, "beyond which lies the unintelligible, the inhuman" (Cohen 1999, xiv). On maps, monsters warned of the edges between known and unknown lands and waters. In churches, they served as warnings of what might devour a soul that did not make it into Heaven. "An array of medieval artifacts, especially texts, reveal that a fascination with monsters, dismemberment, and the materiality of the body …" permeated medieval culture (Cohen 1999, 63). Small, textual decorations struck Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) as "ridiculous" as much as he was fascinated by the "beauty" of them. He writes:

> What excuse can there be for these ridiculous monstrosities in the cloisters where the monks do their reading, extraordinary things at once beautiful and ugly? Here we find filthy monkeys and fierce lions, fearful centaurs […]. Here is one head with many bodies, there is one body with many heads. Over there is a beast with a serpent for its tail, a fish with an animal's head, and a creature that is horse in front and goat behind, and a second beast with horns and the rear of a horse. […] One could spend the whole day gazing fascinated at these things, one by one, instead of meditating on the law of God (Clairvaux 1977, Letter 29; Line 2025, 305-6).

Bernard's statement has a theme of the juxtaposition between the cultural fascination and presence of monsters and the European Christian ideals of social and religious laws that uphold order in the church and in each state and kingdom. His theme reflects the dual cultural context of that which is monstrous—otherness, corruption, nature, boundaries and borders, and chaos—and that which is human—godliness, regulated, regularized, and ordered (Edwards 2002; Jones & Sprunger 2002; Cohen 1999; Mittman 2012).

Many scholars point to medieval ideas of monsters as being inherited from the ancient Greeks and Romans, who believed "monsters were both warnings and demonstrations of divine might" such as the minotaur who was "produced because of divine wrath" (Urbanski 2024, 10). It was the resonance of ancient monsters that infused and inspired medieval plays, stories, and sermon literature (Kearney 2009). Those stimulated medieval authors to invent their own, tales both William and Augustine might have heard more than once. And because the medieval Church used this collective cultural element alongside biblical stories, most medieval people believed not only that devils and demons were true, but also that fairies, dragons, and monsters were as well (Senecal 2025). It was possibly costumes from plays or local traditions that influenced Augustine's choice of disguise. Stories that these two men might have known included epic tales such as *Beowulf* (*Beowulf* ca. 750[?]; Hall 1892/2025) or "Bisclaveret" ("Werewolf") (Marie de France 12th c.; Weston 1900/2024) as well as biblical stories around such monsters as the Behemoth and the Leviathan, which appear in the Book of Psalms and in Job (Asma 2009, 64-7). What William thought he might be seeing was left vague in this Chancery record, but any of these monsters, whether a Behemoth or a werewolf or Grendal (from Beowulf), would have been frightening in person.

Medieval English Law and Monsters

In late medieval English law, a monster was defined by the mid-twelfth century in common law. Henry Bratton, one of the foremost commentaries on law, defined a monster as a person with severe physical difference (Bratton 1268, v. 4, 361-2, f. 438a-b; Friedman 1981). He writes:

> If when the mother has given birth the child declines to a monster, and when it ought to utter a cry utters a roar, it then seems that the exception ought not to be good, because the child is a monster since it is not born in the likeness of a man. But I do not call a child a monster though nature has given it too few or too many members: too few, as where fingers are lacking or the like; too many, as where there are too many fingers or joints, as six or more where there ought to be no more than five, or if nature as given it useless members, or if it is bent or hump-backed or its limbs are twisted. And note that this exception likes both in a possessory action, as in an assise of mort[ ]d[']ancestor or novel disseisin, and in a proprietary, by write of entry or a writ of right.
>
> ITEM si cum partum ediderit, tamen partus declinaverit ad monstrum et cum clamorem emittere deberet emittit rugitum, et tunc videtur quod tenere non debet exceptio, quia partus monstruosus est cum non nascatur ut homo. Sed non dico partum monstruosum licet natura membra minuerit vel ampliaverit. Minuerit, ut in defectu digitorum vel huiusmodi. Ampliaverit, ut si plures digitos vel articulos, sicut sex vel

> plures ubi non deberet esse nisi quinque. Vel si inutilia natura reddiderit membera, vel si curvus fuerit vel gibbosus vel membra tortuosa. Et notandum quod exceptio ista locum habet tam in causa possessionis sicut in assisa mortis antecessoris et novæ disseisinæ, quam in causa proprietatis per breve de ingress vel per breve de recto (Bratton 1268, v. 4, 361-2, f. 438a-b).

Bratton was commenting on persons claiming rights to property based on the writ of right, which was a common-law action used in opposition to the law of possession. In other words, the writ of right gave the rightful owner, now dispossessed of his or her property, regress as the "rightful" holder or owner of the land either through inheritance or gift against someone else who had usurped the property and now claims to hold it by possession (today sometimes called "squatter's rights"). In medieval England after 1066, all of the land was technically "owned" by the crown. People either "held" through an agreement or right from the crown or his designee, often a lord or landholding gentry (Worby 2010, 39-67). Some towns or boroughs had an agreement with the crown to have governance over their own affairs and lands, and while they technically held land from the crown as a collective, unless they broke the king's laws, he left them to themselves (Bateson 1904 & 1906). A few individuals were independent landholders with small farms; yet even they held from the crown or another "landlord" from which derives our term (Pollard 2000, 181-91). People could become dispossessed of land if the rightful heir was a child, ill, or otherwise unable to assert their right at the time the former holder/owner (often a parent) died. They would go to court with a case of *novel disseisin*, a case of being dispossessed of their land within mostly one generation.

Mort d'ancestor is much the same but the context has a longer timeframe. This petty assize (legal action) was used to restore lands to the rightful heir if a "stranger" (known as an "abator") took control of the property at the time a former holder/owner died (Worby 2010). Sometimes lands taken by an abator would be possessed by the "wrong" family for generations until a relative of the original property-holder had the funds to go to court and "restore" it based on the "death of an ancestor-relative," *mort d'ancestor.* They often proved their case, if the family's holdings had been entered into the Doomsday book or otherwise had a "paper trail" in the court system. Some families began intentionally missing a fee payment or some other petty mishandling of royal funds, just to have their fine entered into the court record as a way of marking that they, and no one else, held the lands. All this is to say that Bratton argues that individuals who looked or acted as "monsters" could be disinherited, which is what he means by writing, "the exception ought not to be good." And yet he points out that those individuals who have minor physical differences are not "monsters," and they have the right to inherit and can even recover property if lost under a writ of right including *novel disseisin* and *mort d'ancestor*.

Medieval Medicine and Mental Health

In late medieval and early modern medical manuals and casebooks, mental health conditions, like today, were on a spectrum. Individuals with *mania* or who became a *furiosus* might act out in public or become dangerous. Other conditions, such as being *idiota* or *fatuus* had to do with intellect in which a person had difficulties with perception, cognition, or the memory. There are suggested recipes for conditions that were known (thought) to be caused by an imbalance of humors such as mania, melancholia (black bile disease), or *frenesis* (alt. *phrenesis*) and other such afflictions, including things that are likely connected to what our contemporaries might call dementia, depression, and bipolar disorder. These were normally included near the beginning of most medical manuals under "the head" as these volumes were arranged from the head down to the feet. For example, Gilbertus Anglicus (Gilbert the Englishman), writing before 1250, discusses various "sicknesses of the head, including "leesing of [a] man's wit and of re[a]son," "scotomye," "frenzy," "mania," "lethargy," "epilepsy," and "apoplexy" (Gilbertus in Getz 1991, 6-31). Gilbertus does not, however, have any suggestions for a cure, only interventions in terms of medicine or medical procedures for intellectual disabilities to abate a symptom. William Pilche seemed to have something like the first condition, a "lessening of a man's wit," and not the others; he was not frenzied or lethargic, and not hallucinating, which he seemed to have feared.

In late medieval and early modern astrological medicine, some individuals sought relief from their experiences to something akin to hallucinations in which they said they could see non-human entities, such as angles, demons, or otherworldly pixies, gremlins, sprites, or other things. A good example of this type of condition can be found in Richard Napier's casebooks. This case is from 21 February 1615 in which Napier attends the wife of Hugh Quicke of Clifton who brought her in to see Napier because she claimed to be "troubled in mind and often times tempted, she said, with an evil sprite to do herself mischief" (trou{ble}{d} in minde & often times tempted (shee sayd) wth an e{u}ill sprite to doe her selfe a misc{h}eife) (MS Ashmole 204, f. 41r; Kassel, et al. 2018, CASE 26406). While elves, sprites, and pixies were not necessarily considered monsters in medieval Ireland, Wales or England, they were "other" and not often sympathetic toward humans (Henderson 2025; Jolly 1996). Polina Ignatova and Emelie Fälton include these entities as "nature beings" in their work on the nature and the history of space (Ignatova & Fälton 2025, 66).

In the case of William Pilche, he was seeing a real entity, a person in a costume, which is not the same as hallucinating. While he had a mental health condition, rather than seeing something that is not there, he was described as having trouble distinguishing reality from fantasy. This might mean that, according to medieval medical theory, he had *frenesy*, a condition in which the individual has trouble with their imagination; this is not necessarily what we might think of as "imagining things" or "fantasy" but rather that part of the mind that makes connections and inventions.

Gilbertus Anglicus distinguished between three major condition types: *frenesy* in the anterior brain, madness and loss of cognition in the media brain, and lethargy is the posterior brain. *Frenesy* (or *phrenesy*) seems to have been defined in the Middle Ages as a "loss of imagination," as explained above. This condition was likely an intellectual one and should not be confused with *frenzy* (madness), a condition closer to "madness". Gilbertus wrote that *frenesy* was caused by an *apostem* of choler (yellow bile). Later in his text, he says that the humors of blood, yellow bile, and black bile could comingle as an *apostem*, causing havoc in the media brain, and that it was phlegm or sometimes phlegm and yellow bile that was behind memory issues in the posterior brain (Getz 1991, 10-16).

Medieval brain theories varied over time, but by the fourteenth century most physicians and encyclopedists had settled on the three-ventricle theory with sensory input and imagination in the anterior brain, cognition in the media brain, and memory in the posterior brain (Turner 2021). Medieval medicine was based on the theory of the four humors which in turn was based on the ancient system of the four qualities, hot, cold, wet, and dry (Siraisi 1990). The humors – blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile – continued to be in flux (with water as an alternate) until the later Middle Ages (York 2012, 7-8). Gilbertus Anglicus wrote little about how to combat such conditions of the brain, giving mostly explanations:

> Other sicknesses are from humors that [have] been turned to postems in some part of the brain, as frenesy that is a postem of choler in the forepart of the brain; and madness and lessening of man's wit and reason that is a postem in the middle of the brain; and lethargy that is leaving a man's mind that makes him forgetful and is a postem in the back part of the a man's head […].
>
> Oþer sekenesses ben of humours þat ben y-turned to postemes in sum parti of þe brayn, as frenesy þat is a postem of coler in þe foreparty of þe brayn; and woodnes and leesing of mannes wit and of reson þat is a postem in þe myddel of þe brayn; and litarg[i]e þat is leuyng of mannes mynde þat makeþ him forȝeful and is a postem in þe hyndir party of a mannes hede; […] (Getz 1991, 6).

A "*postem*" or an "*apostem*" is a common term in many medieval medical manuals. According to Faye Marie Getz, a leading authority of medieval medicine, "postem" is defined as a "morbid gathering of undigested or badly digested humors" (Getz 1991, 348). Gilbertus, then, was telling his readers that several of the leading mental health conditions of his day were caused by one humor or another being poorly dealt with in the body. The obvious solution to a medieval physician or other medically trained person was to get the body to reverse the problem – either to digest properly or to rebalance the humors such that the opposite humors counteracted what the "badly digested humors" had done to the body generally and more specifically to the patient's mental health.

William, the man in the case in question here, seems to have had something wrong with his "imagination" and with his common sense, which was one of the senses in the anterior brain along with the other five senses in medieval theories. If his condition was, according to medieval medical and brain theory, in the anterior part of his brain, he either had the condition of "*frenesy*" or the related conditions of being "*idiota*" or "*fatuus*." And, indeed, he was said to be *fatuus* in the record, which fits in that he had trouble distinguishing a disguise from a real monster. William, therefore, appeared from all accounts to have condition effecting his anterior brain within medieval medical theory.

A Few Conclusions

Medieval English people used the term "monster" in two ways. The first is to describe humans who might have severe physical differences because they were no longer human in appearance and were, therefore, considered to have a semi-human form like monsters. While this is anathema to our contemporary ideas around individuals with disabilities and certainly might be "triggering" for some readers [my deepest apologies], the concept was discussed in several legal commentaries of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Most of these legal specialists agreed that while minor physical difference would not bar individuals from inheritance, major differences could if argued in court.

The second idea behind the word "monster" in medieval England is this fanciful corruption of a human-like or animal-like creature with intelligence that had malice toward humans or an animal drive to destroy them. As Philip Line writes, "In the Middle Ages a variety of semi-human beings or animal-human hybrids were considered *monstra*. Some were of classical mythological origin, while others derived from ancient Greek and Hellenistic travellers' or travel writers' tales, most of them probably distortions of reality but some fictitious" (Line 2025, 297). Among other medieval authors, Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) writes that there are individual people who have monstrous forms in all societies, but he questions the idea of "monstrous races," writing "either these things that are written about some races do not exist at all, or if they do, they are not humans…" (Augustine in Dombart & Kalb 1955, liber XVI, line 299).

When William Pilche met up with his neighbor, Augustine le Fevere, on a road near Manchester, he mistook him as a monster. Augustine wore a disguise that William, even with a limited intellectual ability, recognized as a "monster." When William attempted to find the order, to stop the chaos, he demanded "in God's name" for the being in front of him to declare himself to be human, to be part of the order and not of the chaos, and Augustine refused. William killed him. The judge and jury at William's trial stood with him and left the monster where he lay, and the crown pardoned William Pilche for his error in judgment and the death of Augustine le Fevere.

References

Asma, Stephen T. 2009. *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford University Press)

Augustine of Hippo, *De civitate Dei (City of God),* Bk 16.8, translated by Marcus Dods, which Line cites as edited by Bernard Dombart and Alphonse Kalb, (Turnhout: Brepols, 1955): Liber XVI

Bateson, Mary, ed. 1904 & 1906. *Borough Customs,* Selden Society vols. 18, 21 (Bernard Quaritch)

Beowulf. ca. 750(?). J. Lesslie Hall, trans., *Beowulf: An Anglo-Saxon Epic Poem* (D.C. Health & Co, 1892; Project Gutenberg 2025), online: https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/16328; accessed 18 Feb 2026

Bernard of Clairvaux (d.1153). 1977. *Apologia (Explanation in defence)*, Letter 29 from "Epistolae. II, Corpus epistolarum 181-310 and II, Epitsolarum extra corpus 311-547," in *Sancti Bernardi Opera, Vol. 8,* ed. Jean Leclercq. C.H. Talbot and Henri Rochai (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses)

Brand, Paul. 2004. 'Bratton, Henry of (d. 1268)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brain Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press), online: http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3163, accessed 12 June 2013

Bratton, Henry. 1268. *Bracton: De Legibus Et Consuetudinibus Angliæ* (Bracton on the Laws and Customs of England attributed to Henry of Bratton, c. 1210-1268), Harvard Law School Library Online reference, online: https://amesfoundation.law.harvard.edu/Bracton/index.html, accessed 11 Feb 2026

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. 1999. *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press)

Edwards, Kathryn A., ed. 2002. *Werewolves, Witches, and Wandering Spirits:*

Traditional Belief and Folklore in Early Modern Europe, Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies 62 (Truman State University Press)

Friedman, J. B. 1981. *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and thought* (Harvard University Press)

Getz, Faye Marie. 1991. *Healing and Society in Medieval England: A Middle English Translation of the Pharmaceutical Writing of Gilbertus Anglicus* (University of Wisconsin Press)

Hall, J. Lesslie, trans. 1892/2025. *Beowulf: An Anglo-Saxon Epic Poem* (D.C. Health & Co, 1892; Project Gutenberg 2025), online: https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/16328; accessed 18 Feb 2026

Henderson, Lizanne. 2025. "The Demonic and Non-Human Beings," Chapter 11 in *A Companion to the Devil and Demons, c. 1100-1750* (Brill)

Ignatova, Polina, and Fälton, Emelie. 2025. "Nordic Myths Exhibition at Nationalmuseum Jamtli in Östersund, Sweden, Part I: Nature Medievalism, and the Construction of Space," *Enarratio: The Journal of the Medieval Association of the Midwest,* vol. 25: 47-78

Jolly, Karen Louis. 1996. *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (University of North Carolina Press)

Jones, Timothy, and Sprunger, David, eds. 2002. *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations* (Western Michigan University)

Kassel, L., Hawkins, M., Ralley, R., Young, J., Edge, J., Martin-Portuges, J.Y., and Kaoukji, N., eds. 2018. *The casebooks of Simon Forman and Richard Napier, 1596-1634: a digital edition,* online: https://casebooks.lib.cam.ac.uk, accessed 12 Dec 2025, Oxford Casebook CASE 26406

Kearney, Richard. 2009. *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (Routledge).

Line, Philip. 2025. *Humans and Other Animals in the Middle Ages: An Introduction and Reader* (Brill)

Marie de France. 12th c. "Bisclaveret," in Jessie L. Weston, *Guingamor, Lanval, Tyolet, Bisclaveret: Four Lais Rendered into English Prose,*" (D. Nutt, 1900; Project Gutenberg 2024), online: https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/46234, accessed 18 Feb 2026

Mittman, Asa Simon, ed. 2012. *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Ashgate)

Napier, Richard. 1615. "Casebook entry," 21 Feb 1615, Richard Napier is attending; MS Ashmole 204, f. 41r. CASE 26406, https://casebooks.lib.cam.ac.uk/

Pfau, Aleksandra. 2010. 'Protecting or Restraining? Madness as a Disability in Late Medieval France', in Joshua R. Eyler, ed., *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations* (Ashgate)

Pfau, Aleksandra. 2020. *Medieval Communities and the Mad: Narratives of Crime* *and Mental Illness in Late Medieval France* (Amsterdam University Press)

Pollaard, A.J. 2000. *Late Medieval England 1399-1509* (Longman)

Sabapathy, John. 2014. *Officers and Accountability in Medieval England 1170-1300* (Oxford)

Senecal, Chrissie. 2025. Interview by Asia Tabb for The Spark on the 29 October 2025 Podcast on Radio Station WITF, Pennsylvania: https://www.witf.org/2025/10/29/were-there-monsters-in-medieval-europe-historian-explains-how-faith-and-fantasy-shaped-the-medieval-mind/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CIn%20medieval%20Europe%2C%20that%20was,we%20do%20today%20with%20cryptids.%E2%80%9D

Siraisi, Nancy G. 1990. *Medieval and Early Renaissance medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (University of Chicago Press)

Turner, Wendy J. 2013a. *Care and Custody of the Mentally Ill, Incompetent and Disabled in Medieval England* (Brepols)

Turner, Wendy J. 2013b. "Defining Mental Afflictions in Medieval English Administrative Records" in C.J. Rushton, ed., *Disability and Medieval Law: History, Literature, Society* (Cambridge Scholars): 134-56

Turner, Wendy J. 2018. "The Conceptualization of Intellectual Disability in Medieval English Law" in P McDonagh, CF Goodey & T Stainton, eds., *Intellectual Disability: A Conceptual History, 1200-1900* (Manchester University Press): 26-44

Turner, Wendy J. 2021. "Mind/Brain: Medieval Concepts," in Iona McCleery, ed., *A Cultural History of Medicine in the Middle Ages*, vol. 2 (of 8) (Bloomsbury): 155-175

Turner, Wendy J., and Pfau, Alexandra. 2017. "Legal Norms and Legal Practices," in C. Nolte, et al, eds., *Handbuch der Dis/ability History der Vormoderne* (Didymus-Verlag)

Urbanski, Charity. 2024. *Medieval Monstrosity: Imagining the Monstrous in Medieval Europe* (Routledge)

Weston, Jessie L. 1900/2024. *Guingamor, Lanval, Tyolet, Bisclaveret: Four Lais Rendered into English Prose*" (D. Nutt, 1900; Project Gutenberg 2024), online: https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/46234, accessed 18 Feb 2026

Worby, Sam. 2010. *Law and Kinship in thirteenth-Century England,* Studies in History series (The Boydell Press for the Royal Historical Society)

York, William H. 2012. *Health and Wellness in Antiquity through the Middle Ages,* Health and Wellness in Daily Life (Greenwood)

Author

Wendy J. Turner is Professor of History at Augusta University. The focus of her research is the intersection between law and medicine in medieval England, with special attention given to mental health, learning disabilities and intelligence. Turner has received several honors, including a Leverhulme Trust visiting Professorship to Swansea University in Wales and a Research Award from the Southeastern Medieval Association.
ORCHID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7593-4711

Independent Articles

Culture Unbound
Journal of Current Cultural Research

'Farming is learned in the field, not in the classroom!' – Enacting Sustainability as Social Organisation in Southeastern European Farming

Ivanche Dimitrievski and Håkan Jönsson

Abstract

Sustainability in agriculture is as much a policy goal as a cultural and political project: privileging scientific expertise, innovation, and entrepreneurship, it defines what counts as competent farming, sidelining the everyday, hands-on skills that actually sustain it. This paper examines how skills shape sustainability in Southeastern European agriculture, focusing on North Macedonia and Greece. Drawing on Science and Technology Studies, and specifically the concepts of in-difference and tinkering, we analyse three ethnographic episodes – ploughing, spraying, and hoeing – to show how farmers enact multiple versions of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. Beyond demonstrating multiplicity, our findings reveal that skill itself functions as a central coordinating mechanism, mediating between inherited knowledge, technoscientific guidance, social expectations, and labour organisation. Yet this coordination is not seamless: in making different sustainability demands workable in practice, certain forms of labour, knowledge, and responsibility are set apart and set aside. By focusing on the practices through which skill coordinates these demands, our approach reveals dynamics that remain hidden when policy focuses mostly on measurable outcomes, providing a basis for more socially just and inclusive sustainability interventions.

Keywords: Skills, Sustainable farming, Tinkering, In-Difference, Everyday Farming Practices

Dimitrievski et al: "'Farming is learned in the field, not in the classroom!' – Enacting Sustainability as Social Organisation in Southeastern European Farming", *Culture Unbound*, Volume 18, issue 2, 2026: 208–229. Published by Linköping University Electronic Press: http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.5006

Introduction & Literature Review

Over the past two decades, sustainability has become a central organising principle in agricultural policy, development programming, and academic research (Pawłowska 2025; Wineman 2025). Across global frameworks, national strategies, and local initiatives, the transition toward sustainable agriculture is framed as a matter of innovation, resilience, and adaptive capacity (Finger 2023). In this framing, sustainability operates not only as an environmental goal but as a cultural and political project that shapes what counts as responsible farming and legitimate expertise. Described by Gugganig et al. (2023) as following a 'treadmill' logic, this orientation increasingly addresses farmers as entrepreneurial actors who must integrate new technologies, participate in knowledge networks, respond to market signals, and remain flexible in the face of environmental uncertainty. In this landscape, sustainability becomes closely associated with upgrading – of systems, infrastructures, and, crucially, skills.

Within these narratives, skill is frequently invoked but rarely closely examined or interrogated. It appears as technological literacy (Aranguri et al. 2025), managerial competence (Pretty 1995; Dogliotti et al. 2014; Wezel et al. 2014), the ability to network effectively (Lamichhane et al. 2016; Rissing 2016), or the capacity to adopt innovative practices (Moschitz et al. 2015). Sociality, understood as a form of skilfulness, is similarly framed in terms of stakeholder engagement, collaboration platforms, and knowledge exchange networks (Leeuwis & Pyburn 2002; Šūmane et al. 2018). What tends to recede from view are the practice-based skills through which agricultural work is carried out on a daily basis – the repetitive, situated, and often manual forms of knowing that are neither easily codified nor readily scalable. This asymmetry is not simply epistemic but political. As Doggett et al. (2026) argue, the marginalisation of certain forms of agricultural know-how is not merely a matter of cultural misrecognition, but the outcome of sociotechnical systems that define whose knowledge counts, whose labour is made invisible, and who is recognised as an expert. Consequently, farmers' everyday skills are often cast as basic, traditional, or residual, assumed to be self-evident or destined to be replaced by more 'advanced' techniques.

Yet in many agrarian contexts, sustainable agricultural life continues to depend precisely on these forms of practical competence (Laksmana 2024; Gorissen et al 2025). Practices such as hoeing, pruning, planting, and spraying require fine-grained judgment, bodily calibration, and forms of coordination that unfold through sustained interaction with others and with the land (Burton et al. 2020). This paper begins from the premise that examining what falls into the background of sustainability talk – particularly the social organisation of everyday skill – offers a crucial vantage point from which to rethink what sustainability is, and whose practices it recognises. Focusing on the Southeastern European context, specifically

North Macedonia and Greece, the paper explores: How is skill recognised and enacted in contemporary agricultural life? How do these skills resonate, or clash, with dominant sustainability narratives? Which social structures render particular skills visible as expertise while obscuring others?

These questions are particularly urgent now because, as Gugganig (2025) shows, EU agricultural policy increasingly frames sustainability as a 'technoscientific project' where expertise is measured through digital tools, data schemes, and high-tech interventions. This renders tacit, practice-based knowledge (and knowers) largely invisible, even as it remains crucial for managing biodiversity, soil fertility, and local environmental conditions. Studying Southeastern Europe specifically – here, North Macedonia and Greece – is important because farmers in this region often operate within small- and medium-scale, heterogeneous agricultural systems that are highly sensitive to place-based conditions. Unlike more industrialised regions of Europe, the local skills, knowledge networks, and adaptive practices of these farmers are at particular risk of being overlooked as CAP reforms emphasise standardised, digitised, and performance-oriented measures of sustainability. As Beck et al. (2021) argue, 'sustainability imaginaries' are not just ideas – they bring material projects into being, justify certain interventions, and open up or close down options for how transformations are governed. So, against this context, we seek to understand how 'place' is made for these forgotten skills, and how processes of recognition, sidelining, and forgetting are socially organised and situated in contemporary Southeastern European agriculture.

There is a growing recognition in the literature of the role social relations play in shaping agricultural practice and sustainability. Scholars note that social relations can either facilitate or impede the adoption of sustainable practices (Lai et al 2025) – for example, the uptake of water-saving irrigation technologies is often mediated by networks, peer norms, and local hierarchies (Mu et al. 2024). More nuanced analyses have linked skill to gender and social positioning (Brandth 2006), showing that even when women acquire technical proficiency, such as driving a tractor 'like a man,' they may not be recognised as 'skilled' because prevailing social norms assume that certain capacities are inherently masculine (Saugeres 2002). Thus, Doggett et al. (2026) invite us to see skill not simply as a capacity but as a form of political classification. According to them, the division of workers into 'skilled' and 'unskilled' categories is not neutral; it is deeply political, often racialised and gendered in ways that naturalise some actors as competent knowers and others as merely manual labour. Once institutionalised, these distinctions operate as 'political infrastructure,' shaping who is authorised to speak as an expert, which forms of agricultural knowledge are codified into policy and technology, and which remain unrecognised despite being indispensable to everyday practice.

A second theme in the literature concerns the dichotomy between formal and informal skill (Šūmane et al. 2018). As we shall cover in the next section, we encountered this dichotomy in the context of the EU Horizon Europe project NEXTFOOD, where, as participants, we were asked to formulate an 'inventory of skills.' For us, this process of formalisation highlighted how certain modes of skilling and ways of being skilled can be obscured – or even lost – when skills are translated into standardised categories. Similar concerns are raised in critiques of participatory research. Stolzenbach (1997), for instance, problematises the ambitions to improve farmers' experimentation, arguing that it is not a lack of skill that limits experimentation, but rather that the flexibility and adaptive judgment inherent to farmers' practices do not align neatly with formal scientific procedures. As he observes, "'scientification' of farmers' experiments would miss the point" (p. 46). Put more broadly, attempts to formalise farming skills – under, for example, labels such as 'collaboration' or 'networking skills' – risk obscuring the diversity of ways in which people actually engage in farming practice (Fischer et al 2025). Importantly, what is obscured is not simply 'informal' skill, as if this were a stable counter-category to the 'formal,' but forms of practice that do not sit comfortably within that distinction in the first place. This, in turn, underscores the need to approach skill as an ongoing accomplishment of practice, rather than as a stable attribute captured by classificatory schemes.

A third pattern in the literature on sustainable agriculture is to frame farmers in terms of adoption frameworks. Farmers are often assumed to face constraints – such as climate change, soil nutrient depletion, or biodiversity loss – that lead to them being 'in need' of adopting sustainability paradigms, such as certified organic agriculture. Within this 'deficit logic,' non-adoption is interpreted as stemming from lack of knowledge, skill, or resources (Charatsari & Lioutas 2019; Ahmed et al., 2017), rather than as a reflection of farmers' own strategies or adaptations. The concept of 'in-difference' (Gugganig et al., 2026) challenges this framing by highlighting that farmers may engage with sustainability schemes critically and selectively, taking up, modifying, or ignoring measures according to their ecological, labour, and practical realities. Importantly, for us, this stance directs attention to the concrete work of 'enactment' (Mol 2002): how farmers, for example, take up or adapt recommended measures such as hoeing, crop rotations, or soil management – not simply whether they 'adopt' sustainability as an abstract paradigm. This resonates with the notion of 'tinkering,' which Higgins et al. (2023) use, drawing on Mol et al. (2015), to address, in the context of agriculture, the deliberative work through which farmers make new technologies workable within their existing knowledge-practices and farming goals. Conceptualised as 'care-ful' work, tinkering captures how farmers navigate between 'local cares' – rooted in everyday farming realities – and 'non-local cares,' such as environmental management, food security, or smart technologies. These non-local concerns are not simply absorbed; they are selectively translated and reshaped so that they fit within established routines and commitments. In this sense, tinkering reinforces the argument that farmers' engagements with sustainability schemes are practical and situated processes of adaptation and negotiation, rather than straightforward indicators of compliance, resistance, or deficiency.

Taken together, these studies provide useful conceptual tools for examining the social organisation of skilling in shifting sustainability contexts. Drawing on the concepts of in-difference and tinkering, we situate this study within agri-food technoscience scholarship, a strand of Science and Technology Studies (STS) (Gugganig et al. 2023), highlighting the contingency, indeterminacy, and material heterogeneity (Higgins et al. 2023) of what might otherwise appear as stable, individualised, and universally (un)recognisable farming skills. While sharing Sennett's (2008) interest in practice-based skill, this paper departs from his emphasis on skill as an embodied capacity. Bridging into STS scholarship, we treat skill instead as an enacted accomplishment arising through social relations that recognise, organise, and evaluate particular practices (and people) as skilful. In STS and the wider agricultural literature, skill is often addressed as an externally judged category (that is, how farmers are labelled skilled or unskilled), while paying less attention to how farmers themselves organise relations of skill in everyday work. This study addresses that gap by examining how farmers negotiate and make skill visible in the lived realities of agricultural work in Southeastern Europe.

Through three ethnographic moments – conflicting generational understandings of 'proper' ploughing in North Macedonia, the performative intensification of spraying among Greek farmers as a marker of competence alongside an agricultural education professor's emphasis on critical thinking, and Macedonian farmers' own accounts of hoeing as a collectively organised accomplishment – the analysis examines how skill is variously attributed, demonstrated, and handled. By foregrounding the cultural and political work through which skill is enacted, the paper contributes to ongoing debates about the governance of sustainability, the politics of expertise, and the distribution of recognition in contemporary environmental transition.

Methodology: From Skills Inventory to Situated Practice

The empirical material for this article was produced within the framework of the NEXTFOOD project, a Horizon Europe-funded initiative aimed at developing an educational roadmap for "the next generation of agrifood professionals." As part of the project, we developed an inventory of skills intended to support sustainable development across the social, environmental, and economic dimensions of the agrifood sector. The inventory was based on a review of 34 peer-reviewed articles and 30 grey literature publications, 20 focus group interviews conducted in nine countries across Europe, South America, Asia, and Africa, and a questionnaire survey with 31 international researchers and activists. These materials were used to develop the skills inventory and to suggest improvements to agricultural education and collaboration in the agrifood sector. Both authors were actively involved in the project, contributing to desk research and qualitative studies of skilling practices.

This article draws on three specific empirical sources generated within the broader project. The first consists of two focus group workshops with farmers and agricultural advisors in the Kavala region and in Thessaloniki, Greece, conducted in November 2018. The sessions, each lasting approximately two hours, were facilitated by one of the authors with the assistance of a Greek-speaking project participant. They were documented through audiovisual recordings and subsequently transcribed. The purpose of these focus groups was to identify and elaborate the skills that farmers themselves considered essential for sustainable farming.

A decisive moment during one of these focus groups shaped the analytical direction of the present article. When participants were asked what forms of education they regarded as most important for future generations on their farms, the question was met with prolonged silence. One participant eventually remarked that many farmers attend courses primarily for the financial compensation provided by such programs. Another added that: "Farming is learned in the field, not in the classroom!" This exchange revealed a tension between the abstract 'skill-talk' evident in earlier discussions – where participants fluently referenced 'networking,' 'digital capacities,' and 'precision farming' – and a more tacit, practice-based understanding of skill grounded in everyday farm work. The episode suggested that prevailing conceptualisations of skill, including those mobilised in policy and educational frameworks, might overlook forms of knowing embedded in routine agricultural practice.

To explore this dimension more closely, four unstructured interviews (following Atkinson 2015) were conducted in February 2021 with organic farmers based in North Macedonia. Each interview lasted between one and two hours and was carried out online via Zoom in Macedonian. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English by one of the authors to facilitate joint analysis. Interviewees were invited to reflect on what skill meant to them and how they identified and evaluated skill in their daily work as organic farmers. Particular attention was given to the practices of ploughing and hoeing, which informants emphasised as situations in which attentiveness to varying levels of experience – ranging from novice to highly skilled – was especially critical. These detailed accounts enabled an examination of how skill is recognised and negotiated in concrete farming situations.

The educator perspective is represented through an interview with a professor of precision agriculture based in Thessaloniki, Greece, conducted in October 2020 as part of a related study on the role of learning outcomes in agricultural education. The interview was carried out in English. While additional educator perspectives were collected within the broader project, the present article focuses specifically on how this interviewee makes sense of farmers' positions on skilfulness in relation to institutionalised sustainability discourses. Rather than examining pedagogical techniques as such, our interest lies in how educational actors – teaching what they describe as "real farmers' kids" – interpret and respond to farmers' more practice-based understandings of skill.

The skills inventory and associated tools developed within the NextFood project presented skill as definable, transferable, and applicable across contexts – an approach aligned with the expectations of the project's policy stakeholders and European Commission reviewers. In this highly formal setting, everyday forms of skill described by farmers found limited expression. The present article thus seeks to bring these mundane, practice-based experiences of skilfulness we collected into analytical focus.

The analysis was conducted collaboratively and iteratively by both authors. Each independently identified themes within the empirical material, after which interpretations were compared and refined through discussion. Analytically, we draw on the approach developed by Smith (1987), which examines how discursive organisation renders visible 'relations of ruling.' In a way resonant with STS arguments that practices enact (Mol 2002) realities, Smith shows that what an account 'conveys,' or apparently 'reports upon,' is not so much an antecedent phenomenon as the upshot of particular 'practices of enactment' (Schneider & Woolgar 2015). Inspired by this perspective, we closely analysed informants' accounts of farming practices – namely ploughing, spraying, and hoeing – to explore how they organise and articulate 'relations of *skilling*' within sustainable agriculture. Following in particular the way Smith's approach is taken up by Woolgar and Lezaun (2013), we examined how these narratives construct relevant actors, attribute competencies and responsibilities to them, and delineate the networks of rights and obligations that shape specific farming situations.

The empirical section that follows is organised around distinct farming practices. This structure reflects the way in which skills and skilling were discussed by informants – namely, in relation to concrete activities rather than abstract categories. Three cases focusing on ploughing, spraying, and hoeing form the core of the analysis. These are followed by a discussion of skill as an active process of organising social relations around contrasting notions of 'good' or 'proper,' in this way actively assembling what counts as 'sustainability' in particular farm settings, and a conclusion highlighting the main points of the paper.

Ploughing in the 'Wrong' Direction

A young farmer from North Macedonia recounts attempting a solution to soil nutrient depletion on the family farm:

> A while back, my brother and I were talking about why some parts of our hilly fields always yield more than others. He'd learned in school that rain and irrigation wash nutrients from the higher ground down to the lower areas, and you can see it in the harvest. On our land, the lower parts have always produced better than the top of the slopes. He said that if we ploughed across the slope instead of up and down, we could make the yields more even. It made sense to me, so we decided to give it a try.

The young farmer, who runs a family farm specialising in the certified organic production of cereals and alfalfa, admits that the result was not as good as he expected:

> At that time, I was not as skilled at ploughing as I am now. I didn't do it well, so the surface of the field became uneven and bumpy. It is still bumpy to some extent because of it. I mean, that field has always been ploughed in one direction, so when we did it in the other direction, the result was poor.

The farmer takes the 'bumpiness of the field' as evidence of lacking skill. Skill, for him, is made visible in the material traces left by the plough – it is not simply a personal capacity, but something that others too can see and judge. In this way, the field itself becomes the standard of evaluation. The scientific reasoning behind ploughing across the slope does not disappear, but it is assessed through the practical and aesthetic logic of the farm.

The excerpts above thus point to some of the challenges arising when introducing institutionalised knowledge, taught and learnt at school, into an established farming practice. Seen through the notion of in-difference (Gugganig et al. 2026), this is not simply a case of adopting or rejecting school knowledge. Rather, the farm relates to it from a position 'set apart': the idea must prove itself within existing routines and standards before it can count. The informal exchange between the brothers connects school and farm, but it also shows that the farm remains its own centre of evaluation.

It is not simply the idea – whether it makes sense or how scientifically sound it is – that moves this process forward, but also the conversations and negotiations with family members. For example, what stuck with this farmer was his father's reaction when he first saw the results of 'ploughing in the other direction':

> When my father saw what I'd done, he was shocked. He said: 'What have you done? You don't know what you're doing. You've been messing around.'

In both the farmer's and his father's reactions, we see that they approach 'ploughing' as a skilled operation, and they both demonstrate an ability to judge the skilfulness of the execution in terms of its material traces. This implies a certain internalised understanding of what a field should look like after a given operation. In this case, then, skill concerns the extent to which a field deviates from that internalised standard.

Importantly, this retelling demonstrates that 'ploughing' is not just an agrotechnical measure, but in this family farm context, it is an emotionally charged social event. When we asked the farmer if he had discussed this situation with other members of his family, he told us:

> I only talked with dad. Mom doesn't care about ploughing. She needn't bother about this, as she doesn't do ploughing. Simply, she wouldn't have any opinion about it.

By emphasising that the mother "doesn't do ploughing," she is positioned as outside the domain where skill is enacted and judged. Through the lens of in-difference, this is not simple lack of interest, but a setting apart. Because she does not participate in the embodied practice, she is excluded from evaluating the field and from decision-making: ploughing is done in-difference to her. Note that, not only is she now disallowed from participating in the assessment of the field, but also, thereby, from appreciating 'ploughing in the other direction' as a potential solution to soil-nutrient depletion.

Initially, the father was sceptical, emphasising the possibility of tractor accidents, although upon the young farmer's insistence, eventually, the father (as the young farmer put it) "allowed it." The phrasing of 'allowance' highlighted the hierarchical relationship between family members, marking the father as the authority who sets the boundaries for experimentation. In this hierarchy, the mother is not simply at the bottom, but, as already pointed out, positioned outside the domain of ploughing altogether. This makes farming 'gendered' – not because of a blanket assumption about women, but because the practice itself defines who counts as a 'doer.' Note, for example, that the brother is also excluded from the relationship that constitutes skill on this farm: he can propose ideas, but does so in-difference to the ploughing practices and the field that embody skill.

But addressing soil nutrient depletion was not as simple as the young farmer originally thought:

> Five years later, we had some Swiss experts visiting. They examined the soil on that hilly field. It was still very bad. The problem was not yet resolved. I told them about the ploughing, which they thought was a good way to go about it. But they also said this was a long-term solution. You don't achieve it overnight. We need to continue doing it so that after some years the effects become visible. Since then, we plough that way. And we will continue to do so.

This tells us that 'ploughing in the other direction' does not end with the field. As we see in the excerpt above, even five years later, the field was subjected to the gaze of the Swiss soil experts, for whom skill continued to be visible, not as a material trace left by a tractor, but as soil composition produced in a lab. This demonstrates temporal tinkering, in the sense that the idea and event of 'ploughing in the other direction' are respecified as an open-ended *process*. As such, 'ploughing in the other direction' is allowed to unfold over years, in which farmers and experts repeatedly observe, assess, and adjust the practice, negotiating between institutionalised knowledge, and local, everyday ways of knowing. Rather than a binary moment of adoption or rejection, this points to an ongoing process of calibration, in which ploughing itself remains open, provisional, and subject to revision.

Spraying to Be Seen

While farmers often privileged local knowledge, this did not mean they were unable to engage in more formally taught, institutionally recognised forms of expertise. For example, the Greek farmers we interviewed during the focus groups emphasised the importance of 'social skills,' particularly 'networking.' They linked this to what they identified as their most pressing challenge: wholesalers' lack of interest in product quality. In their view, there was little incentive to produce higher-quality goods when both low- and high-quality products received the same price. As a result, they argued that alternative market channels willing to reward quality were necessary. Achieving this, they suggested, would depend on 'strengthening networks' and 'fostering collaboration.' Moreover, all participating farmers reported using smartphones for farming-related activities, such as monitoring weather conditions. They also described engaging in online communities where they exchanged information – for example, sharing observations about pest movements. These 'digital networks' enabled them to implement protective measures in a timely manner, thereby safeguarding their harvests. Some farmers had even installed humidity and temperature sensors in their fields, which they could monitor remotely via their phones. Taken together, these accounts point to farming practices that align with a 'technoscientific' (Gugganig 2025) vision of sustainability, in which digital tools, data exchange, and technological monitoring are central to agricultural decision-making.

However, when, in one of the focus groups, the discussion turned toward pesticides and sustainability, the farmers emphasised social expectations rather than technology. They told us that weather conditions in recent years had led to an increase in plant diseases, and that their response was often to apply more pesticides. Yet this was not always because the plants strictly required it; rather, spraying also served to show their local communities that they were doing everything possible to ensure quality. They described the practice almost as a ritual, applying pesticides because 'the time has come' (as one might speak of dyeing eggs at Easter), thereby demonstrating to other local farmers that they were managing the farm 'well.'

They were not rejecting dominant sustainability frameworks that prescribe reducing pesticide use in agriculture; indeed, the Greek farmers acknowledged that minimising pesticides is important. Rather than rejecting these prescriptions, they were operating in-difference to them – they acknowledged and accepted the norms, while simultaneously performing a version of 'doing well' in which skill is rendered visible through pesticide applications. This differs from Burton et al.'s (2020) account, which implies that unsustainable practices persist because they provide the only available symbols of competence (see also Lavoie & Wardropper 2021). What we see here instead is that farmers recognise both set of norms. What matters in practice depends on the situation: sustainability prescriptions such as pesticide reduction may be acknowledged as 'good,' but skill is demonstrated through visible actions such as spraying. In this sense, different 'registers' (Heuts & Mol 2013) of skill may coexist, and farmers navigate them without either displacing or clashing with the other. Contemporary agriculture, then, involves multiple evaluative registers that can operate in parallel rather than, as Burton et al suggest, a single symbolic economy in which new markers replace old ones.

The socially informed approach to pesticide application seen here differs markedly from school-taught pest management, which is rooted in observation and analysis. This contrast came up during an interview with a professor of precision agriculture in Thessaloniki, Greece. When asked to explain what, in his view, makes a student 'non-skilled,' the professor responded:

> I think, for a student, non-skilled is one that has not learned to think critically – doesn't learn to evaluate stuff. Who, for example, can read a news item and take everything they tell them for granted, as if that's the way it is. They don't critically evaluate the information they get

> based on their knowledge, and then try to find out if this is true or not. For example, if you are a farmer, and somebody tells you 'Spray this chemical!' or 'this very safe preparation on your field,' they just go ahead and do it. They don't ask questions.

While the farmers' 'social use of pesticides' marks them as 'skilled' within their local communities, the professor's perspective characterises this approach as 'non-skilled.' He elaborates this further as follows:

> So, in the past, my father for example could have told me 'That's how we do farming' or 'I do these specific practices on those specific dates.' And it used to be that this was sufficient to continue an operation. But nowadays, with extreme variance in temperature and water precipitation becoming very disturbed and not having any regular sequence you must be able to adapt. So, to adapt to all these changes you must be able to think very critically and be able to take a lot of input – from your advisor, or from soil analysts, or from the government, information services, and integrate all that and be able to apply it to your system. So critical thinking is one of the top things. If you lack that it's very hard to become a successful and skilled professional in this field.

The professor establishes a contrast between habitual modes of farming and doing farming 'reflexively' via responding critically to external inputs. This is not to say that the professor is unable to appreciate the forms of skilfulness he associates with the habitual farmer. For example, he pointed out that some of his students come from farming families where they have learned how to "prepare a field" or "plant stuff," and are "good at doing a lot of the physical work." At the same time, he says "we are not teaching farmers." The programme this professor teaches aims to produce 'agricultural professionals' with the ability to collect and analyse data and interpret the results. In this context, being skilled at certain farming activities – glossed by the professor as 'physical work' – does not amount to professional qualifications.

Between the previous section on ploughing and this one on spraying, a clear rhetorical separation emerges between 'the field' and 'the classroom.' This divide is explicitly enacted in the Greek farmers' remark that "farming is learned in the field, not in the classroom." In the ploughing case, the father's reaction – "You don't know what you're doing" – makes this implication visible: by following the school's recommendation (ploughing in the 'wrong' direction), the young farmer is shown as not having learned the practical skills of the farm. Interestingly, both the professor, representing 'classroom farming,' and the farmers, representing 'field farming,' accuse each other of acting 'non-reflexively' (captured through the phrase both sides use: 'not thinking'), revealing a shared concern with the proper enactment of skill, albeit from very different perspectives.

This constitutes tinkering through boundary-making, or, to use Singleton and Law's (2013) term, 'disconnection rituals' oriented toward creating and maintaining a distance between on-farm practices and wider, institutional expectations, even as farmers engage with those expectations. Such devices discursively produce a separation between the highly abstract 'skill talk' demanded by sustainability discourses to mark farmers as 'skilled,' and the practical, work-related skills that constitute 'real' farming in the farmers' own eyes. In the focus groups, farmers appeared particularly adept at navigating this boundary – for instance, performing abstract 'skill talk' around high-tech and precision agriculture, while simultaneously (and without apparent conflict) engaging in the 'social use of pesticides,' which fundamentally contradicts the technoscientific model. This ability to navigate multiple registers appears especially important in Southeastern European agriculture, where farmers rely on EU funding that requires adherence to the 'correct' forms of skill work and discourse.

Hoeing and the Politics of the 'Line'

Hoeing, when conducted as part of professional farming, is a collective endeavour. It consists of individuals who, initially, are willing to do this kind of work for money. The Macedonian farmers we interviewed consider such a (seasonal) workforce scarce, as, according to them, hoeing is something that "nobody wants to do." In this way, hoeing skills are not the primary consideration when assembling a group of workers. Further, the interviewed farmers were generally not the ones assembling the workers group. They typically rely (and depend) on 'mediators' – mostly women who know of others willing to do hoeing and who are willing to organise a group of them for the farmer at a fee. When the farmer ultimately meets the workers, their hoeing skills are unknown to her or him.

So, how do farmers discover the individual hoeing skills in the group? How are these skills being organised in the accomplishment of the hoeing activity? And how is the variability of hoeing skills dealt with on the field?

When we asked a farmer from North Macedonia how she determined the skills at hoeing of individual workers, she said:

> According to the way he is doing hoeing: the way he holds the hoe, the way he treats the soil, the way he goes about the cultivated plants; how he holds the body.

Farmers assess skill by observing specific aspects of how a worker performs the activity, such as hoeing technique, soil handling, and movement among the plants. These aspects reflect a worker's overall performance rather than being judged from isolated actions. Thus, even skilled workers could, on a given instance, 'hold the hoe' the wrong way, 'treat the soil' poorly, and so on. To understand how the generalisability of skill for an individual in a group is provided for we need to look at the socio-material organisation of the hoeing activity.

The photo below was given to us by an organic farmer from North Macedonia. It shows a group of workers engaged in hoeing on the farmer's family farm. By photographically capturing the activity, the farmer has turned hoeing into a rhetorical resource. She said she would often post images like this on her social media – on Facebook, for example – as a way of demonstrating 'being organic' to people who were not entirely convinced that one can grow crops without using pesticides. As she put it, "there is a lot of mistrust in organic farming."

Figure 1: Workers hoe between 'lines' of sunflower to remove weeds.
Image provided by a research participant, used with permission.

As can be seen in the photo, the workers are organised so that each holds a "line" (as the farmers called it) of sunflowers, using hoes to remove weeds without damaging the plants. Each line becomes a material record of the work, and together the lines form a spatial grid that allows for on-the-spot observation and analysis of hoeing, including how thoroughly weeds are removed, whether any sunflowers are damaged, the worker's position relative to the group, and the perceived weediness of the lines. This arrangement, with each line assigned to a single worker, makes it possible to attribute hoeing skills to individuals. In this way, the lines are not just remnants of earlier farming operations like ploughing; rather, they serve as a material framework for organising hoeing work, coordinating tasks, and assessing skills. But how are these observable and analysable skills structured within the hoeing activity?

Several factors influence how workers are arranged in the field. Ethnicity is one important consideration: farmer accounts indicate that Albanian and Roma workers, for example, often work separately and do not assist each other even when help is needed. Interpersonal relationships are another factor. Workers bring prior connections – typically family ties, such as spouses, mothers and daughters, or cousins and their partners, as well as neighbours and friends. Taking adjacent lines in the field is one way these relationships are enacted, often reinforced through displays of deference. A farmer's account illustrates this in the case of a particularly unskilled worker:

> The girl has a back and drags herself after her mother. I must tolerate the girl because her mother is a good hoer. Sometimes, at the end of the day, I actually approach the mother and say: 'If possible, could you not bring your daughter tomorrow because I can see that this is too difficult for her? Maybe she should work something else.' I tell her that. Directly. But not always. It depends on how powerful the mother is in the group.

This example shows that individual skills are closely intertwined with the social relationships within the worker group. These relationships influence how skills are managed during and after the hoeing activity. In this case, the farmer 'tolerates' the girl in deference to her mother, not merely for being a skilled hoer, but also for the extent to which the mother is able to influence the group's dynamics and decisions. Such strategies, however, are not always feasible and are often seen as costly. What other approaches, then, do farmers use to handle variability in skill?

Skilfulness is a resource for farmers. The Macedonian farmers we interviewed, for example, believed that skilled workers can finish a field more quickly, reducing labour costs. With this in mind, some farmers engaged in real-time tinkering with workers' techniques to improve their performance in the field.

> If I notice that somebody cannot do it properly, I take their hoe and show them how to do it. How to do it easier. That means that I need to know how to do it properly, so that then I can also explain it to them. If I don't train them, if I don't explain it to them, if I don't show it to them, then I would pay much more than I do.

However, the farmers also know (or believe it to be the case) that skilfulness is a resource for the workers too. Consider this farmer account:

> Usually, in the group, they take five or six very young persons that have absolutely no skills at hoeing. For some of them, it is the first time they hold a hoe in their hands. I don't like that because they [the workers] have their own method of work through which they manage to achieve one extra day of payment. I don't like that because I am not in the position to pay for it.

The account suggests that workers leverage skilfulness – either by withholding it or by deliberately including less-skilled labour – to secure more workdays. Skilling, therefore, involves competing interests. Importantly, things can backfire: if efforts to improve skills are seen as conflicting with workers' interests, they may abandon the task before it is completed. The farmers we interviewed tried to avoid such situations, not only because the field would remain unfinished, but also because of potential long-term consequences. One farmer, for example, recalled that after her workers left the field following a negative experience, they widely spread that she was a "bad lady," which, she believed, prevented her from finding any workers that entire summer. So tinkering, in this case, requires tact:

> When I show them [how to do hoeing], they like it. They have never said that that is stupid, and they take it seriously. That's because I try to help them. I tell them: 'Don't hold the hoe tightly – your hands will hurt.' So, I show them some basic techniques. If there are no weeds, I tell them: 'Just drag the hoe and go ahead.' There are people who don't know how to command others. They blackmail them. They tell them 'Dig!' and they stand above the worker like some boss. By contrast, the whole time, I try to help them.

In this way, the farmer's tinkering is carried out in-difference to the financial sustainability of the work: she actively guides and trains workers to improve efficiency, but does so while carefully attending to their interests, methods, and social dynamics. Her interventions are shaped not only by what needs to be done to reduce costs, but by how it will be received, ensuring that instruction is experienced as support rather than imposition. This balancing act allows her to enhance skilfulness without provoking resistance, showing how practical, relational, and efficiency concerns are negotiated simultaneously in the everyday accomplishment of hoeing.

Discussion: The Skilful Coordination of Sustainability in Everyday Farming Practice

In Southeastern Europe, sustainability is largely shaped by EU policy imaginaries that emphasise technoscientific solutions, digital monitoring, and standardised performance metrics (Vardopoulos et al 2018; Gugganig 2025). Yet what we have found about skill suggests that these top-down imaginaries only tell part of the story. Across ploughing, spraying, and hoeing, sustainability appears not as a purely technical project, but as a deeply cultural accomplishment embedded in local standards of what counts as 'doing well.' In the Macedonian ploughing case, the scientific rationale for contour ploughing did not automatically translate into sustainable practice; it had to prove itself within an inherited aesthetic and practical logic of what a 'properly' ploughed field should look like. The uneven surface became a visible sign of insufficient skill, regardless of the agronomic reasoning behind it. Similarly, in spraying, Greek farmers' pesticide applications were shaped as much by community expectations and the need to display diligence as by formal prescriptions to reduce chemical inputs. Spraying became a ritualised sign of care for quality and competence, embedded in local moral economies of farming. In hoeing, the posting of photographs to demonstrate 'being organic' responded to mistrust not through certification documents alone, but through culturally legible images of hard manual labour. In all three cases, sustainability is enacted through shared understandings, reputations, internalised aesthetics, and locally meaningful signs. Rather than being simply implemented, sustainability is interpreted, negotiated, and materialised through local cultural norms about what good farming looks like.

This paper thus aligns with agri-food technoscience scholarship (Higgins et al. 2023) by showing how often overlooked farming practices enact multiple versions of sustainability. Crucially, we extend this work by identifying the coordinating role of skill as the primary mechanism for mediating between these versions. We argue that farmers' adjustments and improvisations are not merely technical, but must be done 'well' to meet local as well as institutionalised standards, social expectations, practical knowledge, and local aesthetics. By foregrounding this 'careful, competent tinkering'

– the social organisation of everyday expertise – we have demonstrated that skill is not just a byproduct, but is central to what sustainability looks like in practice.

Crucially, these enactments are structured through selective inclusion and exclusion: some actors, like the mother who does not plough or the brother who proposes ideas but does not execute them, are not recognised as participants in skilful practice. Sustainability, understood as the upshot of skilful organisation, depends on these relational boundaries. What counts as competent ploughing is defined within a patriarchal hierarchy in which the father authorises experimentation and the mother is positioned in-difference to the evaluative domain. In spraying, farmers draw boundaries between 'real farming' learned in the field and 'abstract' knowledge associated with the classroom, even as they strategically mobilise technoscientific language to access funding and legitimacy. This boundary work distributes authority unevenly, distinguishing between those who can judge proper pesticide use and those who are marked as naïve or 'non-reflexive.' In hoeing, political differentiation becomes even more explicit: workers are recruited through gendered mediation networks, arranged along ethnic and familial 'lines,' and assessed in ways that tie individual skill to collective bargaining power. Decisions about who is tolerated, trained, dismissed, or publicly labelled as a 'bad lady' are not merely managerial choices; they shape who can participate in agricultural livelihoods and under what conditions. Sustainability, in this sense, is inseparable from power (Dogette et al. 2026). It is produced through hierarchies of gender, ethnicity, and labour, and through decisions about whose skills count, whose bodies matter, and whose interests are prioritised.

This highlights that what looks like 'sustainability' in practice often relies on relational exclusions – the 'unsustainabilities' masked by visible outcomes such as healthy soil, protected crops, or timely hoeing. The implication for policy is that it should look beneath the polished surface of these outcomes to the hidden dynamics that sustain them, and seek to transform these underlying structures, rather than simply optimising the visible metrics. If ploughing across slopes becomes sustainable only when it aligns with inherited standards of skill, then policy must engage those standards rather than assume automatic uptake. If reduced pesticide use competes with local reputations for diligence, then interventions must address the social visibility of competence, not only the chemical dosage. And if organic production depends on precarious, hierarchically organised labour, then improving sustainability requires confronting the organisation of that labour itself. In other words, *you change skill not primarily by asking farmers to learn new techniques, but by reconfiguring the social organisation that constitutes who is recognised as skilled, how competence is evaluated, and whose participation is made possible*. Sustainability policy, therefore, must move from prescribing correct practices toward reshaping the social relations through which practices become meaningful, legitimate, and durable.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that sustainability in Southeastern European agriculture is not a singular goal or set of metrics, but a set of practices that unfold through the coordination of skill. By examining ploughing, spraying, and hoeing, we have highlighted how farmers enact multiple versions of scientific, social, and economic sustainability, and how these are held together through relational, and context-sensitive skills. Skill is not simply a means to an end; it structures who participates, whose work counts, and how practices are organised, making the visible successes of sustainable agriculture possible while masking the relational hierarchies and exclusions on which they depend. These findings challenge dominant policy imaginaries that frame sustainability primarily as a technoscientific project, suggesting instead that attention to the everyday, practice-based, and socially mediated dimensions of skill is essential both for understanding how sustainability is achieved and for imagining alternative, more just ways of enacting it. In this sense, sustainability is not just about outcomes or measurable indicators, but about the careful, ongoing negotiation of skills, cooperation, and recognition that makes farming work in social context.

References

Ahmed, S., Sclafani, A., Aquino, E., Kala, S., Barias, L. and Eeg, J., (2017): "Building student capacity to lead sustainability transitions in the food system through farm-based authentic research modules in sustainability sciences (FARMS)," *Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene*, 5, p.46.

Aranguí, M., Mera, H., Noblecilla, W. and Lucini, C., (2025): "Digital literacy and technology adoption in agriculture: A systematic review of factors and strategies," *AgriEngineering*, 7(9).

Atkinson, P., (2015): *For ethnography*, London: Sage.

Beck, S., Jasanoff, S., Stirling, A. and Polzin, C., (2021): "The governance of sociotechnical transformations to sustainability," *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 49, pp.143–152.

Brandth, B. (2006): "Agricultural body-building: Incorporations of gender, body and work." *Journal of Rural Studies*, 22(1), 17-27.

Burton, R.J., Forney, J., Stock, P. and Sutherland, L.A., (2020): *The good farmer: Culture and identity in food and agriculture*. Routledge.

Charatsari, C. and Lioutas, E.D., (2019): "Is current agronomy ready to promote sustainable agriculture? Identifying key skills and competencies needed," *International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology*, 26(3), pp.232–241.

Doggett, O., Myers, J., Ratto, M. and Chandra, P., (2026): "Prism of labour:

Unsettling Knowledge Skill and Technology in Work Infrastructures," CHI '26, Barcelona, Spain.

Dogliotti, S., García, M.C., Peluffo, S., Dieste, J.P., Pedemonte, A.J., Bacigalupe, G.F. *et al.*, (2014): "Co-innovation of family farm systems: A systems approach to sustainable agriculture," *Agricultural Systems*, 126, pp.76–86.

Finger, R., (2023): "Digital innovations for sustainable and resilient agricultural systems," *European Review of Agricultural Economics*, 50(4), pp.1277–1309.

Fischer, K., Vico, G., Röcklinsberg, H., Liljenström, H. and Bommarco, R., (2025): "Progress towards sustainable agriculture hampered by siloed scientific discourses," *Nature Sustainability*, 8(1), pp.66–74.

Gorissen, L., Konrad, K. and Turnhout, E., (2025): "Sensors and sensing practices: Shaping farming system strategies toward agricultural sustainability," *Agriculture and Human Values*, 42(3), pp.1477–1495.

Gugganig, M., (2025): "Fixing sustainability through technoscience and diversity: The case of EU agriculture policy," *Environmental Science & Policy*, 171.

Gugganig, M., Burch, K.A., Guthman, J. and Bronson, K., (2023): "Contested agri-food futures: Introduction to the special issue," *Agriculture and Human Values*, 40(3), pp.787–798.

Gugganig, M., Marquis, S., Doggett, O. and Bronson, K., (2026): "Against 'technology adoption': troubling a dominant concept through biodiverse farmers' in-difference to digital agriculture," *Agriculture and Human Values*, 43(1), p.28.

Heuts, F. and Mol, A., (2013): "What is a good tomato? A case of valuing in practice," *Valuation Studies*, 1(2), pp.125-146.

Higgins, V., Van der Velden, D., Bechtet, N., Bryant, M., Battersby, J., Belle, M. and Klerkx, L., (2023): "Deliberative assembling: Tinkering and farmer agency in precision agriculture implementation," *Journal of Rural Studies*, 100.

Lai, J., Beethem, K. and Marquart-Pyatt, S.T., (2025): "Farmers' social capital in agricultural decision-making," *Rural Sociology*, 90(2), pp.216–241.

Laksmana, D.D., (2024): "Farmers' creativity and cultivated senses: The immediacy of embodied knowledge in alternative agriculture," *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society*, 10(3), pp.65–89.

Lamichhane, J.R., Aubertot, J.N., Begg, G., Birch, A.N.E., Boonekamp, P., Dachbrodt-Saaydeh, S. *et al.*, (2016): "Networking of integrated pest management: A powerful approach to address common challenges in agriculture," *Crop Protection*, 89, pp.139–151.

Lavoie, A. and Wardropper, C.B., (2021): "Engagement with conservation tillage shaped by 'good farmer' identity," *Agriculture and Human Values*, 38(4), pp.975-985.

Leeuwis, C. and Pyburn, R. (eds.), (2002): *Wheelbarrows full of frogs: Social learning* *in rural resource management*, Assen: Uitgeverij Van Gorcum.

Mol, A., (2002): *The body multiple: Ontology in medical practice*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Mol, A., Moser, I. and Pols, J. (eds.), (2015): *Care in practice: On tinkering in clinics, homes and farms*. Vol. 8. Germany: transcript Verlag.

Moschitz, H., Roep, D., Brunori, G. and Tisenkopfs, T., (2015): "Learning and innovation networks for sustainable agriculture: Processes of co-evolution, joint reflection and facilitation," *Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension*, 21(1), pp.1–11.

Mu, L., Luo, C., Li, Y., Tan, Z. and Gao, S., (2024): "'They adopt, I also adopt': The neighborhood effects and irrigator farmers' conversion to adopt water-saving irrigation technology," *Agricultural Water Management*, 305.

Pawłowska, A., (2025): "Has the 'green' transformation of the Common Agricultural Policy affected the environmental sustainability of farms?" *PLoS One*, 20(10).

Pretty, J.N., (1995): "Participatory learning for sustainable agriculture," *World Development*, 23(8), pp.1247–1263.

Rissing, A., (2019): "'Profitability' vs. 'making it': Causes and consequences of disembedding beginning farms' finances," *Culture, Agriculture, Food and Environment*, 41(2), pp.149–157.

Saugeres, L. (2002): Of tractors and men: masculinity, technology and power in a French farming community. Sociologia ruralis, 42(2), 143-159.

Schneider, T. and Woolgar, S., (2015): "Neuromarketing in the making: Enactment and reflexive entanglement in an emerging field," *BioSocieties*, 10(4), pp.400–421.

Sennett, R., (2008): *The Craftsman*. London: Penguin.

Singleton, V. and Law, J., (2013): "Devices as rituals: Notes on enacting resistance," *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 6(3), pp.259–277.

Smith, D.E., (1987): *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Stolzenbach, A. (1997): "The craft of farming and experimentation," Farmers Research in *Practice: Lessons from the Field*, Eds. L. van Veldhuizen, A. Waters-Bayer, R. Ramirez. D.A. Johnson, J. Thompson. Intermediate Technology Publications, Ltd., London. p. 39-48.

Šūmane, S., Kunda, I., Knickel, K., Strauss, A., Tisenkopfs, T., des Ios Rios, I. *et al.*, (2018): "Local and farmers' knowledge matters! How integrating informal and formal knowledge enhances sustainable and resilient agriculture," *Journal of Rural Studies*, 59, pp.232–241.

Vardopoulos, I., Falireas, S., Konstantopoulos, I., Kaliora, E., & Theodoropoulou, E., (2018): "Sustainability assessment of the agri-environmental practices in Greece. Indicators' comparative study." *International Journal of Agricultural Resources, Governance and Ecology*, *14*(4), 368-399.

Wezel, A., Casagrande, M., Celette, F., Vian, J.F., Ferrer, A. and Peigné, J., (2014): "Agroecological practices for sustainable agriculture: A review," *Agronomy for Sustainable Development*, 34(1), pp.1–20.
Wineman, A., (2025): "Agricultural transition processes and sustainability: A review with a focus on low-income settings," *Global Environmental Change Advances*, 5.
Woolgar, S. and Lezaun, J., (2013): "The wrong bin bag: A turn to ontology in science and technology studies?" *Social Studies of Science*, 43(3), pp.321–340.

AI Usage Statement
The authors confirm that no AI tools or automated systems were used in the research or writing of this manuscript. All aspects of the work were completed entirely by the authors.

Funding Statement
This project received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No. 771738 (Educating the Next Generation of Professionals in the Agrifood and Forestry System – NEXTFOOD).

Authors

Ivanche Dimitrievski holds a PhD in Technology and Social Change from Linköping University, Sweden. His research interests include accountability, the politics of vision, and the social shaping of impact. As a Senior Data Reporting Analyst at Orange Cyberdefense, Dimitrievski currently investigates the social construction of cybersecurity vulnerabilities.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3803-3196

Håkan Jönsson is associate professor in European ethnology and senior lecturer in Food technology at Lund University, Sweden, and visiting professor in Food studies at the Swedish university of agricultural sciences. His original research profile is cultural analysis with a focus on consumption. In recent years he has become more focused on food systems' resilience and transformation. Much of the research is conducted in interdisciplinary projects, involving both public and private actors outside academia. He is chair of the European working group for Ethnological food research.
ORCID: orcid.org/0000-0002-7621-8132

Culture Unbound
Journal of Current Cultural Research

Culture, Growth and Green: Negotiating Flagship Projects at the Periphery

Evelina Liliequist & Anna Sofia Lundgren

Abstract

This study explores the socio-spatial dynamics surrounding the creation and perception of Sara kulturhus, a flagship cultural centre in Skellefteå, Sweden. While initially being framed within a discourse of urban attractivity, the project later became entangled with narratives of green transition following the establishment of the Northvolt battery factory, which came to influence meaning-making. Drawing on interviews with local actors within the local cultural scene and an analysis of municipal documents, this study describes this process. The study demonstrates how the cultural centre became a site of negotiation between commercial and independent cultural values – celebrated as a symbol of progress yet criticised for centralising cultural resources and marginalising grassroots initiatives – while also revealing strategic rebranding efforts aimed at aligning with green transition objectives. Additionally, it reveals gendered concerns surrounding rapid industrialisation and the perceived role of culture in mitigating emerging social tensions. Ultimately, the study illustrates how flagship projects in peripheral regions are shaped by evolving discourses, local identity, and broader political-economic transformations; particularly how a discourse on 'green transition' stretched far beyond the industrial investments.

Keywords: flagship projects, place attractiveness, green transition, cultural growth, cultural centres, peripheral areas

Liliequist et al: "Culture, Growth and Green: Negotiating Flagship Projects at the Periphery", *Culture Unbound*, Volume 18, issue 2, 2026: 230–253. Published by Linköping University Electronic Press: http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.6191

Introduction and Aim

In 2015, the decision was made to build Sara kulturhus (Sara cultural centre) in Skellefteå, a small city in Northern Sweden. Named after the celebrated local author Sara Lidman, the building was envisioned as a vibrant cultural hub. Its design included spaces for both local and touring performances, complemented by a hotel and restaurant. Several key cultural institutions, such as the city library, an art gallery, and the regional theatre, were also planned as permanent residents within the building. Construction began in October 2018, and Sara kulturhus officially opened its doors in September 2021. Like many municipalities seeking population growth (e.g. Billie & Nyborg Storm 2021), the project carried high hopes for the future. From the planning stage, Sara was embedded in a discourse of urban attractiveness, framed as a means to "create attractivity" and "increase visitor numbers" to the city (Skellefteå kommun 2012: 28). As with most Northern Swedish municipalities, Skellefteå aimed to grow and shed the lingering image of stagnation built up over four decades of decline (Eriksson & Hane-Weijman 2017).

The need for rebranding intensified after 2017, when Skellefteå secured the Northvolt battery factory – a major green investment expected to generate over 3,500 jobs and drive rapid in-migration. This shifted the rationale for Sara kulturhus, from being primarily a cultural and growth initiative to becoming increasingly aligned with investments in 'green industry', commonly framed as part of a broader 'green transition'. Skellefteå could now position itself as a forerunner in the green transition and could (and did) also take the mega-factory construction as a promise of population growth (Eriksson, Lundgren & Liliequist 2024, Eriksson, Lundgren, Eriksson 2025), with the new cultural centre reframed as both a response to and a reason for the city's transformation. The scale and speed of industrial change amplified Sara's symbolic role, embedding it in discourses of green transition and urban renewal.

This paper aims to explore how meaning was constructed around Sara kulturhus, arguing that the building became a key site for negotiating identity, power, and urban transformation. By foregrounding the tensions in this meaning-making and analysing how different discourses intersect with local hopes and concern, as well as with socio-spatial dynamics, the study reveals the contested nature of cultural production in urban redevelopment. It particularly demonstrates how values and expectations tied to the parallel process of a green transition were mobilised beyond the industrial sphere, partially displacing earlier framings of Sara kulturhus as a symbol of threatening centralisation and cultural commercialisation. Empirically, the analysis draws on interviews with arts and cultural practitioners, cultural officials, and organisers, as well as Sara's self-presentation, and relevant municipal documents.

Theoretical Points of Departure

The approximate simultaneity of two major developments in Skellefteå – the opening of Sara kulturhus and Northvolt's establishment of the mega-battery factory Northvolt Ett – created a dynamic context that made the city an interesting site for study (Näsman et al. 2023), since it introduced a shifting context that interviewees drew upon to construct new layers of meaning. Both processes were used in the city's place marketing as symbols for something new to come – promises of change. Hetherington (2007) introduces the concept of "imaginary of regeneration" to analyse the desires accompanying urban rebuilding, particularly after dramatic events. While his focus is on post-crisis reconstruction, we contend that the concept is equally valuable for understanding cities experiencing gradual yet profound transformation. Its emphasis on cultural imaginaries, such as desires, dreams, and fears, offers valuable insight into how actors within the local cultural scene interpret and make sense of urban change. To fully grasp this sense-making, it is essential to consider that Skellefteå belongs to a region with strong self-identity as a place left behind economically, politically and socially, an identity against which new imaginaries emerged (Eriksson et al. 2024). While Skellefteå does not meet Pike et al.'s (2023) criteria of being 'left behind' in material terms, the perceived need to prove itself in relation to more urban areas remained a powerful and productive narrative.

Skellefteå municipality's linkage between building a new cultural centre in the magnitude of a 'flagship building', and linking aspirations for future growth to this establishment, is far from unique. Since the influence of Landry's *The Creative City* (2008) and Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), creativity and 'creative industries' have become central to urban planning and economic development. These ideas align with place-branding strategies and the use of 'flagship projects' such as architecturally ambitious cultural centres or sports arenas to boost visibility, attract investment and stimulate tourism (Billie & Nyborg Storm 2021, Miles & Paddison 2005). In this context, culture and creativity are not only valued for their artistic merit but also seen as drivers of growth and recognition (Arvidsson 2019).

While often praised for their promises to revitalise urban areas, flagship projects have also drawn criticism for advancing entrepreneurial and neoliberal agendas, fostering gentrification, deepening social inequalities, and commodifying cultural spaces (Harvey 1989, Peck 2005). This paper engages with Harvey's (1989) critique of such high-profile developments, which often serve as symbols of urban regeneration. Harvey argues that these projects are typically shaped by political-economic interests rather than the needs of local communities, with benefits accruing mainly to tourists and mobile elites who consume culture without contributing to the place's long-term well-being. To understand the enduring appeal of these contested projects, we argue that it is crucial to explore the discursive entanglements that sustain their allure.

Although scholars debate whether discourses of creative cities and urban attractiveness can be meaningfully adapted to small and midsize cities (e.g. Waitt & Gibson 2009), we consider it crucial to explore the empirical case of Skellefteå as a small city in the Swedish North. The specific circumstances of Skellefteå as the place for major developments underscore the need to emphasise that processes of urban regeneration always operate "within networks of uneven power relationships" (Waitt & Gibson 2009: 1244). In times of neoliberal restructuring, flagship projects certainly become desirable not only for urban but also for rural and peripheralised areas that are struggling to increase their populations to secure tax revenues and keep economy viable and welfare services at acceptable levels. Such places may therefore be prone to invest in discourses of attractiveness given that they possess the relevant amenities (Lawson, Jarosz & Bonds 2010).

To understand the dynamics, we analyse Skellefteå's cultural scene – the physical, social and symbolic space in which Sara kulturhus was envisioned, debated, and constructed – as a 'field' (Bourdieu 1996), where interviewees negotiate positions in response to the municipality's rebranding efforts aimed at attracting investors, tourists and new residents (Skellefteå kommun 2012). These efforts gained urgency with the arrival of Northvolt, which intensified demands for rapid in-migration and a larger workforce across sectors. We thus interpret the cultural scene as a field in transition, where ongoing processes are negotiated, contested and re-signified (Broady 1998). The planning and construction of Sara kulturhus, alongside Northvolt's industrial establishment, catalysed both anticipated and contested shifts in the local cultural landscape, affecting perceptions of cultural value, sectoral hierarchies and spatial imaginaries. As Sara kulturhus entered the scene, previously stable positions were disrupted, and Skellefteå's cultural landscape was perceived as being redrawn, both figuratively and literally.

Throughout the analysis, we employ the concept of discourse to underscore the shared processes of meaning-making around specific topics. This approach emphasises that urban transformation is not only about physical changes, such as a new building, but also about how these changes are rendered intelligible through language. The concept of narrative is treated as closely related to discourse, and the concepts are, in many cases, interchangeable. Both concepts refer to frameworks through which meaning is constructed and communicated, influencing how social realities are framed, understood, and legitimised. While discourse generally denotes a broader system of meanings and practices, and narrative often refers to a more structured storyline within that system, both concepts emphasise that meaning-making is contingent, negotiated, and subject to change (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). Discourses and narratives are identified by tracing recurring patterns of meaning-making, focusing on how certain ways of speaking and representing phenomena were manifested in the empirical material.

Methodology

The primary material consists of interviews with eleven participants, including cultural practitioners, organisers, and officials from cultural institutions in Skellefteå. Two interviews were conducted in pairs with participants sharing similar roles or connections. The interviews took place in 2023, at a time when Sara's role and significance in Skellefteå's cultural landscape remained somewhat unclear following its inauguration during the Covid-19 pandemic. This timing meant that conversations reflected both optimism and uncertainty about what the new cultural flagship would ultimately represent for the city and its diverse stakeholders.

Interviewees were recruited through open invitations to local cultural workers and institutions, such as theatres, museums, and venues, and supplemented via snowball sampling (Fägerborg 1999). We aimed for diversity in cultural expressions, gender, and age. However, reflecting the sector's gender distribution, the sample included eight women and three men. Although Skellefteå is a relatively small city and many interviewees occupy multiple roles, our participant group is not fully representative of the cultural sector. Including more perspectives could have offered additional insights into how the city's new cultural centre is perceived. Overall, we consider the composition of the interview group sufficiently representative for the purposes of the article, as it includes voices and perspectives from both grassroots and more established cultural actors.

The interviews were conducted as semi-structured conversations (e.g. Fägerborg 1999), allowing participants to reflect freely on their thoughts and experiences in relation to Sara kulturhus, Skellefteå's transformation, and the Northvolt establishment. Questions were adapted to suit each interviewee's professional role, though many participants held multiple positions within the local cultural scene and spoke from varied perspectives. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and pseudonymised.

The paper also draws on municipal cultural policy documents, Sara kulturhus' website, the local tourist website and local news media representations to contextualise and exemplify the meaning-making taking place within the interviews and illustrating their broader scope. These materials illustrate dominant discourses shaping the idea and planning of Sara kulturhus, and exemplify how culture is understood, valued and legitimised.

In a first analytical step, the material was inductively divided into broad themes based on content (cf. Braun & Clarke 2006), such as hopes about what would be gained and fears of what could be lost. In the interviews, we could see how the new cultural centre and the ongoing industrial establishment were repeatedly made significant for how the interviewees discussed the role of culture, the ongoing urban transformation and the municipality's support and expectations of the cultural sector in Skellefteå. In a second step, we focused on how paradoxes, tensions, and expectations were conveyed or implied in the interviewees' narratives and experiences, which variously linked Skellefteå's urban transformation to the ongoing industrial establishment. In what follows, we first account for the way the investment in, and the construction of Sara kulturhus was legitimised, and then analyse the interviewees' critique and negotiations. In the subsequent sections, we discuss how the discourse of 'green transition' came to be articulated with Sara in different ways.

Flagship Territorialisation

When Sara kulturhus opened in September 2021 it became an unmistakable symbol of change, attracting attention both nationally and internationally. Representatives of Sara kulturhus and the municipality were quick to capitalise on this visibility, constructing a 'success narrative' for Skellefteå municipality that forcefully countered criticism of the large and economically risky investment in culture. Sara's CEO Anna Jirstrand Sandlund proudly declared to the media that, thanks to Sara, "All eyes are on Skellefteå" (Norman 2024). The success narrative also resonated in the interviews. "It's visible, in the world!" said Linda, a professional actress, with evident pride, noting that people from across the globe now come to Skellefteå to see the magnificent building.

In both examples, the cultural center is valued primarily as a flagship building and a symbol, while the cultural content it houses is rendered secondary. This symbolic emphasis is further reflected in marketing materials from Sara kulturhus and Skellefteå municipality, where the striking architectural structure is described as "Västerbotten's new beacon" (visitskelleftea.se, 4 Sept 2024). Consistent with common flagship strategies, the building's height and design are foregrounded: it is repeatedly highlighted as "one of the world's tallest wooden buildings," standing 80 meters tall with 20 storeys (sarakulturhus.se, 25 Aug 2024). On Sara's official website, the centre is primarily framed as an architectural prominence and secondarily as a hotel, while cultural activities are notably absent from the description.

In many ways, Sara kulturhus resembles the type of urban symbol that has been described as intimately tied to urban economy and strategies of gentrification (Zukin 1995), constituting a core element in cities' efforts to reinvent themselves (Gottdiener 1997). In this sense, flagship buildings embody an intriguing paradox: they aim to compete but also strive for similarity. As Andersson (2014) points out, while such buildings can be critiqued for being de-territorialised and merely mimicking global branding practices, their success often depends on territorialising processes. These processes involve the promotion of spectacular buildings by local actors, supported by investors with territorial connections, engagement with the local business community, and alignment with local tradition and values.

The latter is certainly true for Sara kulturhus, named after celebrated author Sara Lidman, who lived and situated her novels in the region. Notably, when announcing the name of the new cultural centre, six words in the spirit of Lidman were emphasised as important constituents with strong rural and local associations: 'the village', 'the word', 'solidarity', 'consc-sense' (an amalgamation of the Swedish words for conscience and sense), 'the resistance' and 'the body'. The words create a powerful performative self-description (sarakulturhus.se Sara, 02 Dec, 2024) that roots Sara kulturhus in the local area both physically and culturally.[1] Under the heading "Local heroes" on the website, the involvement of Skellefteå's citizens in the building process is recognised, both as interested members of the public and as active contributors to textiles and the 70 homemade cushions for Kulturtrappan, a large staircase and seating area in the centre's entrance. It is emphasised that the building materials are sourced from named locations in the local area and that the construction "continues in the city's old wooden building tradition" (sarakulturhus.se, 25 Aug, 2024). The choice of materials, the explicitly named and localised places and people, and the alignment with traditional building techniques are not only integrated with the local geographical context but also foster a sense of belonging to the area's history and community.

Local connection is also closely articulated with *sustainability,* a theme emphasised in the competition programme. On the Sara website, sustainability emerges as a key marker of meaning: the building is described as "climate-smart," and related concepts such as "climate wisdom," "renewable energy" and a low "climate footprint" recur throughout the self-representations. These narratives align Sara with Skellefteå municipality's broader vision of becoming a sustainable city (sarakulturhus.se, 25 Aug, 2024) as well as with broader discourses of ecological responsibility. This discursive flexibility became particularly significant in the context of the Northvolt investment: despite operating in distinct domains, culture and industry, Sara kulturhus and Northvolt are symbolically intertwined within a narrative of inevitable climate transition that signals progressiveness and positions Skellefteå as a pioneer. Such storytelling can be understood not only as a strategy to counteract local feelings of marginalisation (cf. Pike et al. 2023), but more significantly, as an effort to reshape Skellefteå's image and brand. While this shared imaginary reinforces both the municipality's rebranding ambitions and the perceived value of culture, the promotional framing of Sara kulturhus suggests it functions more as a branding flagship than as a genuine hub for cultural practice. Consequently, actors within the local cultural scene experience a paradoxical positioning: symbolically empowered, yet practically displaced.

1 The words were included after they were suggested in a debate article by the Sara Lidman Company (Ek, Jäderberg, Larsen et al. 2013).

Sibling Rivalry and Regional Competition

The decision to build a cultural centre must also be understood within the broader context of regional resource distribution and neoliberal aspirations (cf. Husu & Kumpulainen 2019). It reflects a logic of competition shaped by decades of state withdrawal from peripheral areas and the increasing responsibilisation of regions to generate their own growth (Harvey 2006, Eriksson, Lundgren & Liliequist, 2024, Eriksson, Lundgren, Eriksson 2025). This logic situates regions within dominant growth discourses (Holdo 2020), compelling them to compete for limited markets and funding (Lockie et al. 2006). Interviewees frequently referenced this competitive framing, positioning Sara kulturhus in relation to similar cultural flagships in Northern Sweden, such as Väven in Umeå (inaugurated during its 2014 tenure as European Capital of Culture) and Kulturens hus in Luleå (inaugurated January 2007). These comparisons reflected a kind of sibling rivalry among Northern cities – particularly between Skellefteå and the county capital Umeå, but also Luleå, a university city further North. Despite a rich tradition of indie music and theatre, Skellefteå had long struggled to compete culturally, lacking major venues and sizable audiences. The construction of Sara kulturhus thus became a desired argument in this regional rivalry. As Marlene, a representative at Sara kulturhus, described the earlier situation:

> Previously, Skellefteå residents had to consume [culture] away from home. You had to go to Umeå, you had to go to Luleå. And I know Luleå ran advertisements here in Skellefteå [that said] "Welcome to your nearest concert hall – it's in Luleå!," because it was a few kilometres closer than Umeå [laughter].

Against this backdrop, actress Mia described Sara kulturhus as a game changer: "The house wasn't built yet, but I said to people that in the future it will be you from Luleå who'll need to come to Skellefteå for theatre – and they said, 'no, I don't think so' [laughter]. But that's how it is now!". Municipal planning documents similarly frame the centre as a new source of pride, placing it alongside earlier success stories such as Skellefteå's championship-winning hockey team and the gold discoveries in Boliden in the 1920s. With Sara, Skellefteå is poised to become "as well known for its culture as [it is for] its gold and hockey" (Bäckström Zidohli 2013: 5). This shift is further evidenced by prominent artists increasingly choosing Skellefteå over Umeå for tour stops (e.g. Thorén 2023). Lars, a politician and former cultural organiser, proudly noted: "Now we get the concerts too, and the cultural exhibitions we've been missing for years". In these examples, the cultural centre's capacity to host large-scale performances is positioned as a new cultural asset, challenging hockey's dominance as the town's defining symbol and reinforcing Skellefteå's cultural capital.

Further, interviewees' satisfaction was often connected to spatial identity and meaning making, and it was clear that there was enjoyment in the narratives about Sara as a landmark outshining the venues of neighbouring cities. This type of enjoyment has been described as the feeling when sustaining a desire (Glynos 2001). The feelings of satisfaction connected to sibling rivalry showcased an important aspect of the way that competition was present and 'gripped' subjects. In the interviews, it engaged an enjoyable battle in which a 'win' resonated with a history of attributed spatial identities and proved a both successful and enjoyable transgression of those identities: "Before we were a left behind place, now we excel," "Before *you* were the place to go, now *we* are," and so on. But the enjoyment found in statements about 'sibling rivalry' did more than just emphasise successful local identity and compete for which neighbour is more successful – it worked as a joyful way of supporting and *depoliticising* the broader and ideologically invested logic of competition, which is generally characterised as driven by policy directives and economic incitements, and intimately connected to neoliberal politics (Harvey 2006). When evoked in relation to 'sibling cities' it was experienced as playful and innocent rather than a part and consequence of political decisions.[2]

A Field in (Urgent) Transition: Worries, Critique and Rumours

Although part of the municipality's plans since 2012 and described as wanted and needed by a majority of the interviewees, in the early days of the new cultural centre, Sara was met with loud discussions among local organisers and performers in the media (e.g. Samuelsson 2021, Runevad Kjellmer 2021, Rönngren 2021). Critical voices argued that "cultural activities are being downgraded in favour of commercial interests" (Samuelsson 2021). Amid what is often described as 'convergence culture' (Banet-Weiser 2011) and the entrepreneurialisation of arts and culture (McRobbie 2004), a sense emerged that something was on the verge of being lost. Consequently, efforts were made to distinguish between 'authentic' and 'commercial' cultural expressions. This critique and the associations of Sara kulturhus with commercial interests still lingered on by the time of the interviews and the interviewees expressed that they were deeply critical of viewing culture as a driver of growth. They opposed this view both on principle, and out of fear

2 Enjoyment related to sibling rivalry also extended beyond municipal policy and interviewee perspectives. In Umeå, humorous stickers appeared featuring Sara Lidman's face on black metal icon Varg Vikernes' body. Referencing church burnings associated with Vikernes and the building's wooden design, the image conveyed both admiration and threat. It symbolised Skellefteå's rising cultural status while questioning the substance of that recognition, reducing Sara to a vulnerable structure and sidelining its cultural content in favour of symbolic visibility.

that it would undermine their own positions and sideline those that did not wish to conform to commercial criteria as well as less well-known local art forms. Paradoxically, the efforts to root the new building in the local community were also criticised for overlooking existing cultural practices. While praised as inclusive, the reliance on voluntary contributions – e.g. in Kulturtrappan – was seen to undermine the value of professional textile and craftwork in the municipality.

The criticism conveyed mixed signals regarding the *valuation of local culture* in ways that provoked discomfort among local artists. Not only did it address the feeling of being neglected in the decoration of Sara, but it also reflected a broader critique of the perceived tendency to overlook local culture, which Sara was seen to promote. Hence, on the one hand, interviewees were pleased and proud that the municipality had chosen to invest in the cultural sector and shared the hopes of the cultural plans that Sara kulturhus would attract attention. On the other hand, they were concerned that the culture being valued was mainly focused on major commercial national and international acts. Jessica, a freelance actress, argued that politicians did not fully understand and value the power of non-commercial culture and "what a *free* cultural life contributes to a city's cultural life." Although many interviewees generally agreed on the possible benefits of a cultural centre for Skellefteå, Harvey's (1989) criticism of flagship projects echoed in the interviews. Interviewees feared that the high rental costs for space in the new building might result in the cultural centre holding greater symbolic value than practical function as a meeting place and venue for cultural events, which became a source of concern. Jessica was not convinced that more and bigger events is automatically synonymous with the local cultural life strengthening its position:

> Someone said that "Oh, Skellefteå has become so rich," or that we've got such a "vibrant cultural life now" with very big artists coming here and there are big concerts and so on. But then again, yes, there are many artists who come here, but is that what constitutes a rich cultural life?

There were insinuations that building expensive cultural centres would incorrectly suggest that communities were 'investing in culture', while in practice they were investing in a building. One of the interviewees ironically commented the news about the city of Skellefteå recently had advanced in the rankings of municipalities' cultural contributions per capita through the establishment of Sara kulturhus, "if you look behind the figures – if you're a gloomy person [laughter] – then you think that yes, that money will be used to pay the building's rent!" Pernilla, holding a key position at a cultural institution, also reflected on the purpose of a cultural centre:

> It's not necessary to have a new cultural centre, the necessity that exists is to have premises for culture. Frankly, you have to be a damn rich municipality if you're really going to have a new cultural centre. /.../ Because you tie up a lot of resources in a property. But then again, it's true, everything that's been said about [Sara] has a signal value. It has drawn attention to Skellefteå.

Some of the interviewees also brought up criticism about access and how the premises at the cultural centre could be used. Västerbottensteaterns operations began relocating to Sara in 2021 and completed the move in autumn 2023. The transition, however, was not without challenges (see e.g. Rönngren 2021). Actress Linda commented:

> If we are to be there, we really must be *allowed* to be here. Because it was such a deal that you wouldn't be allowed to rehearse, you wouldn't have time, you would have used the premises too much. It's like completely absurd stuff.

Karin, active in a local arts organisation, voiced concerns about unequal access to Sara kulturhus, describing a perceived hierarchy in the allocation of exhibition space, where minor actors were consistently placed last in line. Her critique reflects a broader sentiment that cultural practice risks being overshadowed by the building's role as a symbolic flagship, underscoring how Sara came to embody multiple identities: a physical structure, a cultural hub, and a powerful symbol. Interviewees also expressed concern about the impact of Sara kulturhus on existing cultural spaces. For example, the relocation of the city library was seen as detrimental, with librarians reportedly reduced to receptionists, and the library space reduced in size. Symbolically, the demolition of Rivhuset – a DIY cultural venue located across from Sara kulturhus – was highlighted as a significant, and symbolic loss for alternative and youth-oriented culture in Skellefteå. Though originally intended as temporary and already decided for demolition, Rivhuset had become a valued space, particularly among young people, and its removal was widely perceived as a direct consequence of Sara's development. Interviewees expressed concerns about alienating younger citizens by demolishing Rivhuset, which contradict municipal goals to support youth engagement and cultural diversity (Skellefteå kommun 2015/2022, 2020, 2021). Local musician and programme manager Aron reflected:

> It would have been incredible, just imagine if [Rivhuset] had been allowed to remain next to the cultural centre as some kind of symbol that it can coexist.

Emma, a cultural worker and politically active in the cultural sector, similarly argued:

> I think about what Rivhuset meant, it was so incredibly important for the grassroots and their re-growth. /…/ I think it's scandalous that they didn't let it continue to grow. Because it became kind of symbolic that they demolished the building next to Sara.

The demolition came to symbolise a broader shift toward municipal control and commercialised culture, displacing grassroots initiatives, and the realisation of the new urban image thus became symbolic of the conflicting interests and negotiations for power among the different actors in the field of culture (cf. Broady 1998: 14). The case illustrates how cultural flagship projects can generate tensions between institutional and independent cultural expressions, while also sustaining a fantasy of coexistence. It further suggests that understandings of local needs – and, indeed, of what counted as local – were crucial to how Sara was perceived.

Green Discourse: Rumours, Concern and a Sense of Urgency

Since the concrete effects of Sara kulturhus were still unknown at the time of the interviews, leaving interviewees in a state of insecurity, support for their criticism was often found in rumours. In the interviews, they worked as power tactics (Nycyk 2015) to persuade others to take their worries seriously. Hence, expressions such as "It's been said that" or "We've heard" often preceded the more detailed rumours about upcoming change, making the volatile nature of the imaginary of regeneration visible (Hetherington 2007). Especially, rumours related to the 'green investments' surfaced in the interviewees' narratives, creating reasons to suspect upcoming changes in relation to the expected in-migration of workers to the battery-factory. Aron expressed his suspicion that the establishment of Sara as a flagship for culture would imply more radical changes than the building itself. He recalled earlier municipal statements of intent to promote co-utilisation of premises and argued that similar tendencies were evident in the ongoing urban transformation. This raised concerns that diverse cultural actors and activities might increasingly merge into larger clusters, with Sara positioned as the central hub. He further expressed worry that existing cultural venues could come to be perceived as outdated or resistant in Sara's shadow, potentially placing them at risk of closure or demolition, as illustrated by the experience of Rivhuset. In the area where his current rehearsal studio was located, there had recently been closures of other services to make way for other needs in the transforming city: "We have heard that a school is to be built here", he said, expressing concern by rhetorically asking what other buildings that might also be sold off. Aron's speculations were fuelled by ideas about the impending 'green transition' and the potential consequences it might bring:

> Is the municipality going to sell off premises? Will housing be built there on those areas? Because housing will be needed if you're going to get this big in-migration, jobs and everything.

What began as a discussion about the effects of Sara kulturhus on the local cultural scene became intertwined with considerations of what the Northvolt investment would entail and how the municipality would respond to the expected in-migration and increased demands for housing and services. While the goals outlined by Skellefteå municipality in 2015 were ambitious, they still envisioned growth at a relatively moderate pace. The new development strategy of 2022 confirms that this has not been the case. Instead, it acknowledges that "a development that would normally take forty years will be realised in ten. At most" (Skellefteå 2030: 3). The ongoing transformation provided interviewees with a more general sense of urgency (Lundgren & Nilsson 2023). This spurred uncertainty about how to position oneself in relation to Sara, coupled with anxiety that adopting an overly critical stance might risk being left 'behind':

> There's a lot that must happen in a short time and there are risks involved in that. It's not entirely conflict-free in situations like this… transformations. So, you just have to be... I think I'm talking about this *tension*, that you have to "be in the game." Because it doesn't feel like you can just go like: "well, it's going to be fine anyway." There are risks! You don't want to end up being left in the lurch (Aron).

The fear of being sidelined or forced into unfavourable shared arrangements intensified when articulated with the Northvolt investment. The urgency these investments generated sharpened the tension between perceived risks and the imperative to "be in the game" – echoing the neoliberal dictum that "there is no alternative" (Neocleous, 2013: 4, Lundgren & Nilsson 2023) This aligned with the general rhetoric of local policymakers at the time and contributed to downplaying critical voices (cf. Eriksson, Lundgren & Liliequist 2024). Interviewees felt caught between the risks associated with the investment and the potential consequences of rejecting it. With Northvolt's arrival, the municipality's population growth targets suddenly gained concreteness, and the policy objectives appeared within reach. New workers were indeed coming to Skellefteå, bringing new concerns, but also, as will be discussed, new ways of legitimising Sara kulturhus.

Greening the Relevance of Sara

Plans for Sara kulturhus predated the 2017 industrial investment decision in Skellefteå. Early planning documents made no explicit reference to the 'green transition' later associated with the battery factory; while they emphasised 'sustainability', their discourse primarily centred on 'attractivity', highlighting objectives such as 'creating attractiveness', a 'better living environment', and improved 'conditions for culture and growth' (Bäckström Zidohli 2013: 5). Sara's own self-descriptions also draw on definitions of sustainability that focus on the building's construction, energy use, and climate footprint (sarakulturhus.se, 25 Aug, 2024). The association with a 'green transition' appears to have emerged only in the wake of climate-oriented industrial investments linked to Northvolt. Despite this, the investments are sometimes symbolised as an important *reason* why the cultural centre was needed in the first place – as if the industrial investments preceded the cultural centre. In an article in Scan Magazine, Anna Jirstrand Sandlund, the CEO of Sara kulturhus, is quoted:

> The city has become a meeting point for leading industrial companies that are paving the way in the green transition, and we needed a cultural hub to match that expansion (Norman 2024).

In her narrative, Jirstrand is pushing the view that Sara is built to add balance to the city, which is constructed as *already* at the forefront due to the industrial investments. It does not seem that she sees culture as the driver of growth and city attractivity as in accordance with discourses of attractivity, but it is evident that her image of an attractive city includes a venue for culture. Similarly, in an article from 2021, it is stated that:

> Three years after the Northvolt establishment was announced, the municipality has already started building a 20-storey wooden cultural centre (Säll 2021).

Here, the construction of the cultural centre appears closely linked to the Northvolt investment. After its opening in 2021, Sara is sometimes referred to as a hallmark of an already 'green' ambition:

> – We want to contribute to a society where we can offer people a good living environment and where, at the same time, our industry and new business establishments become part of our green transition. Sara kulturhus will be a kind of hallmark of our ambition to create a place that is imbued with sustainability from all perspectives, says [Municipal Director] Kristina Sundin Jonsson (Editorial Team 23 April 2020).

It is reasonable to assume that the establishment of Northvolt – widely celebrated in the media (e.g. Eriksson, Lundgren & Liliequist 2024)– helped catalyse the conceptualisation of a 'green transition', into which Sara was subsequently incorporated. In an article about Skellefteå's journey "from depopulation area to green key player" it is stated, opposite the quoted articles above, that culture was an important factor for Northvolt's choice of Skellefteå. In the text, the chairman of the municipal board recalls the negotiation with Northvolt: "We told them about Sara kulturhus, and in some way that came to be decisive for Northvolt to think there was a reason to move here" (Pogorzelska 2021). Hence, Sara is ascribed meaning interchangeably as the *response* to having already landed the 'green mega-factory', and as a *reason* that the 'green investments' ended up in Skellefteå in the first place.

Matching the Green Industrial Expansion

Discursive influences of the 'green transition' on meaning-making around Sara were also evident in the interview material. Marlene, a representative of Sara kulturhus, highlights the cultural centre's societal role, rather than its physical form or symbolic status. While she acknowledges that local cultural offerings remain important for overall place attractiveness, her framing diverges from municipal policy, which foregrounds relevance for the general public, tourism, or capital investment. Instead, Marlene directs attention to the emerging workforce at Northvolt, a group that is repeatedly referenced in the material and stereotypically depicted as predominantly male industrial workers, often recruited internationally. She argues that a vibrant cultural scene could help counteract what she calls the "fly-in/fly-out syndrome," where many workers experience social isolation.

Including the figure of the fly-in/fly-out worker illustrates how discourses of the 'green transition', in which this figure repeatedly appears, entered and shaped the debate about Sara kulturhus. In the early discourse surrounding the battery factory, the fly-in/fly-out worker was typically framed as a *risk* associated with the Northvolt establishment, while the ideal employees were imagined as highly skilled Swedes who would relocate to settle in Skellefteå (Eriksson, Lundgren & Liliequist 2024). When articulated with Sara kulturhus, the fly-in/fly-out worker is rather evoked as someone whose needs must be met and who constitutes a potential and important new resident. In that sense, the advocacy for investment in culture merged the arguments of the discourse of 'green transition' with the discourse on 'attractiveness' even closer. For Mia, a local actress, Sara made Skellefteå attractive, and as such a reason for Northvolt's fly-in/fly-out workers to decide to settle:

> If we're really going to talk about the challenges that Skellefteå faces with this industrial development – people must *move* here! And why do

> people move somewhere? […] Just look at what it looks like in the world, *people live where things happen!*

Sara kulturhus is thus made significant not only to attract people in general, but to provide the ones who worked at Northvolt with cultural experiences and entertainment. The argument is far from Florida's (2002) vision of the creative city's goal of creating growth through attracting the 'creative class'. Rather, culture is seen by the interviewees as a tool to attract the very workers that Florida's vision has been thought to exclude (e.g. Peck 2005, Flew 2012). Initially, the notion of international fly-in/fly-out workers represented a *challenge* to the dream of Northvolt workers contributing to local demographic growth, since they were not expected to stay (Eriksson et al. 2024). By the time of the interviews, however, this group was also imagined as a *possibility* and *responsibility*, contingent on successful efforts to encourage settlement. The fly-in/fly-out worker further embodied the figure of someone likely to suffer from the lack of settlement and family proximity, which the expression of "fly-in/fly-out syndrome" captures. While acknowledging the difficulties, the engagement with fly-in/fly-out workers introduced a new and significant challenge for the cultural sector – positioning it not only as a key actor in Skellefteå's transition from industrial town to cultural hub, but also as part of the broader effort to ensure a *just* green transition (Barca 2024, Eadson & van Veelen 2023). The lack of such efforts, placing the social burden on workers, has been repeatedly demonstrated (e.g. Barca 2012). In that sense, the discourse of 'green transition', which included the ideas associated with fly-in/fly-out workers, became drawn into the narrative about Sara such that it provided the cultural centre with an urgent and important task. No longer just a cultural or growth initiative, Sara was legitimised and made valuable through its perceived social relevance to the needs of incoming workers.

Hopes and Gendered Fears

Sara kulturhus, and the web of meaning woven around it, came to intertwine and embody two key discourses: a discourse of 'urban attractivity', which was present from the early planning stages, and a discourse of 'green transition', present from ca 2021. Despite the differences, the two discourses became entangled in the meaning-making around Sara through the similarities in the ways they organised hopes for the future. As such, the building came to respond to the identified needs for transformation both globally (green transition) and locally (urban transformation). The Northvolt establishment was itself associated with strong hopes that, aside from the national goal of becoming a fossil-free welfare state (de Leeuw & Vogl 2024), were quite similar to the hopes connected to the policy-goals of urban transformation. Both harboured hopes for establishing the region as an attractive place with in-migration and new jobs.

Such hopes for the future constituted an 'imaginary of regeneration' (Hetherington 2007), a beatific narrative suggesting that if only certain paths were pursued, such as constructing a cultural centre or investing in a battery mega-factory, a better future would inevitably follow (cf. Glynos & Howarth 2007). It was a narrative that repeated a desired transformation from 'left behind' to 'key player', and from masculine-coded industrial town to attractive and more gender-neutral cultural hub.

The latter found strong support among interviewees where the identification as a masculine-coded industrial town was described as the "most unattractive thing there is" and that, in the light of the expected in-migration of primarily male workers to the Northvolt factory, it is "culture that we need to build on in order to attract women here too. And families!" (Ella, musician and study organiser). The interviewees' narratives were partly formulated against media reports that warned about the effects of a rapid influx of predominantly male workers and that represent a fear that the market for prostitution and crime would increase (e.g. Lindstedt 2021, Torp 2023). Such fears no doubt framed the interviewees' feelings, and provided proof that masculinity could become dangerous if not tamed by society and culture. Thomas, who worked at a study association with a particular focus on culture and music, emphasised the gendered aspect of the expected in-migration when concluding that "most of the people who move here are men. They participate and create less culture.". Many interviewees identified culture and community as solutions to such problems, but, as Thomas phrased it: "if we think that culture is the solution, how are we going to reach them?". His concern reveals taken-for-granted assumptions about both masculinity and social class, implying that male work migrants associated with the working class were not expected to engage with the cultural centre independently.

Gender also played a part in the meaning-making around the 'green transition' as such. Due to the sudden association between 'green transition' and 'industrial ventures', traditional associations between 'green' and 'soft' values such as concern for the climate and opposition to industrial exploitation were challenged. Instead, the front figures of the green transition had indeed been men, and the ecomodern narrative through which the investments were conceptualised also had strong masculine associations (Hultman 2016, Eriksson, Lundgren & Eriksson 2025) – not least because of the expected gender of the workers.

Against this backdrop, Sara kulturhus became the answer to one of the fears that were connected to Skellefteå as both an industrial and perceived 'left-behind' place *and* a city in the forefront of green transition: the fear of the masculine. As a left behind place, masculinity along with working class associations had long been identified as part of the problem (Eriksson 2010, Karpestam & Håkansson 2021).

Now, the feared masculinity also came to comprise both what has been called ‘industrial modern masculinity’, closely associated with Skellefteå’s orientation towards industrial work, and ‘ecomodern masculinity’ associated with the idea that climate change can be fixed with technological innovations without the need for lifestyle changes (Hultman 2016). As a counterbalance to a threatening masculinity, the flagship Sara paradoxically became associated with the ‘softer’ values of culture. This association was paradoxical because Sara had previously been linked to a ‘hard’ definition of culture as driver of growth, contrasting with valued notions of ‘free’ or ‘autonomous’ culture.

Concluding Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the socio-spatial dynamics that shaped the creation and perception of Sara kulturhus as a new flagship monument: how flagship projects are both legitimised and criticised on the basis of contextually dominant events and discourses, and how they find their way into people’s everyday worlds. Such projects are intimately associated with urban areas, but we demonstrate how they can become desirable also for peripheralised areas (cf. Lawson, Jarosz & Bonds 2010).

The factors that triggered change in the cultural field were twofold. First, the decision to build Sara initially caused concern centred on the perceived instrumentalisation of culture as a vehicle for economic growth, worries what this might mean for local cultural life and practitioners. Although Sara gradually became a source of pride – symbolising both cultural ambition and urban renewal – criticism persisted, particularly the concern for Sara’s role in centralising cultural activities and creating competition. Second, Northvolt’s mega-scale industrial investment in Skellefteå brought a shift in focus where Sara’s sustainable construction became articulated with the industrial ‘green transition’ – particularly the expected rapid and male-dominated international in-migration of workers to the Northvolt factory.

On the one hand, the prospect of the battery-factory fuelled rumours that important cultural venues might be demolished to make way for urgently needed housing and schools for incoming workers. This prompted businesses and venues to safeguard their autonomy and possibly reinforced a sceptical attitude toward the new workforce. On the other hand, the development also introduced new ways of legitimating cultural activity, as a means to mitigate other perceived risks associated with worker in-migration, such as criminality and social isolation. In this context, the ambiguous feelings surrounding the cultural centre’s associations to culture-driven growth, professionalisation and middle-class sentiments appeared to be resolved. Importantly, however, both processes reinforced Sara’s connection to middle-class identity and positioned the middle class as central actors in a 'just transition', while largely overlooking the agency of workers themselves.

Not only Sara kulturhus but also the image of Skellefteå was affected by the competing discourses that portrayed the city, on the one hand, as a hub for of culture and creativity, and on the other, as a centre for green transition and industrialisation, each producing distinct imaginaries of regeneration (Hetherington 2007). Yet processes of urban regeneration always operate "within networks of uneven power relationships" (Waitt & Gibson 2009: 1244) and these discourses unfolded against a backdrop of dominant geographical imaginations (Gregory 1995). One of the more significant imaginations against which new narratives emerged was that of a 'left behind place' (Pike et al. 2023) – *feelings* of marginalisation and the need to prove oneself. Such feelings were partly constituted by long-standing perceptions of peripheralised areas in Northern Sweden as 'backward', closely associated with masculine ideals and activities (Eriksson 2010, Eriksson, Lundgren & Liliequist 2024) and reinforced by assumptions of a general local lack of education and professional competence (Nilsson & Lundgren 2015, Sjöstedt Landén, Ljuslinder & Lundgren 2017). This dynamic surfaced in interviewees' accounts, where concerns about urban normativity intertwined with a sense of 'revenge' against stereotypes, thereby partly reinforcing the city's self-image as a left-behind place. However, and interesting from a perspective on gender, the masculinity that was sometimes seen as part of the peripheralised position also permeated the imaginary of regeneration – at least the one situated within a discourse of green transition and industrialisation. Here, Sara and its initial embeddedness within a discourse of attractivity and culture had other values to offer.

Our findings suggest that meaning-making around Sara was dynamic rather than fixed, shifting with prevailing discourses. They reflect a tension within the cultural field, where symbolic capital is allocated to cultural institutions and practitioners, but where the autonomy of culture remains uncertain (cf. Bourdieu 1996, Broady 1998). Initial fears of centralisation and cultural commercialisation following the establishment of the new cultural centre were evident and perceived as threats to the local culture, which was strongly associated with small-scale authenticity. Yet these concerns evolved as Sara became linked to the investments in Northvolt's green batteries. This articulation both reinforced anxieties (through anticipated impacts of in-migration on the cultural scene) and challenged them (by reframing Sara within narratives of a 'just transition,' positioning culture as a resource for incoming workers). The debate surrounding Sara kulturhus provides an empirical illustration of the ways in which green investments are embedded within discursive formations that exert influence well beyond industrial domains, and vice versa: how cultural projects can be strategically framed to fit evolving municipal goals. In this context, Sara came to exceed the concrete functions as a cultural centre. Supported by the discourses of 'urban attractivity' and 'green transition' it became part of a means to break loose from geographical imaginations providing leverage for new imaginaries of regeneration (Hetherington 2007).

Afterword

In recent months, the situation in Skellefteå has shifted dramatically once again, following Northvolt's bankruptcy and its subsequent acquisition by the American battery manufacturer Lyten. While this development is significant in its own right, leaving many workers unemployed with limited prospects of staying in Sweden, it also starkly contrasts with the findings presented in this article, which capture the perspectives of cultural workers during a period marked by optimism and high expectations surrounding the new large-scale industrial initiative. Given the impact that the discourse of 'green transition' came to have on how Sara kulturhus was comprehended, a key question now is whether the cultural centre will continue to embody buzzwords such as 'green' and 'sustainability', or if other values will come to the forefront.

Acknowledgements
We would like to thank the participants who took the time to take part in the interviews.

Funding
This research was funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond [grant M22-0029]

References

Andersson, Ida (2014): "Beyond "Guggenheiming": From flagship buildings to flagship space in Sweden," *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift - Norwegian Journal of Geography* 68:4, 228–237, https://doi.org/10.1080/00291951.2014.927915

Arvidsson, Alf (2019): "Kultur som drivkraft", Alf Arvidsson (ed.): *Spaningar i kultursektorn*, Umeå: Umeå University.

Banet-Weiser, Sarah (2011): "Convergence on the street: Rethinking the authentic/commercial binary," *Cultural Studies*, 25:4–5, 641–658, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2011.600553

Barca, Stefania (2012): "On working-class environmentalism: A historical and transnational overview," *Interface: A Journal for and About Social Movements, 4*(2), 61–80.

Barca, Stefania (2024): *Workers of the Earth: Labour, Ecology and Reproduction in the Age of Climate Change*. London: Pluto Press.

Bille, Trine & Nyborg Storm, Hanna (2021): "Local development policy: do new culture houses have an impact on migration? The case of Norway," *European Planning Studies*, 29:8, 1556–1577. https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2021.1877259
Bourdieu, Pierre (1996): *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Braun, Virginia & Clarke, Victoria (2006): "Using thematic analysis in psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3:2, 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
Broady, Donald (1998): "Inledning: en verktygslåda för studier av fält," Donald Broady (ed.): *Kulturens fält*. Göteborg: Bokförlaget Daidalos.
de Leeuw, Georgia & Vogl, Valentin (2024): "Scrutinising commodity hype in imaginaries of the Swedish green steel transition," *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 7:4, 1844–1867. https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486241238398
Eadson, Will & van Veelen, Bregje (2023): "Green and just regional path development," *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 10:1, 218–233. https://https://doi:10.1080/21681376.2023.2174043
Editorial Team (2020): "Samtal om hållbart byggande när bostadsministern besökte Skellefteå digitalt," *Svensk Byggtidning*, 23 April.
Ek, Ingela, Jäderberg, Eva, Larsen, Henrik, Larson, Bengt, Lindgren, Erik, Nordvik, Erik & Åkerlund, Nils (2013): "Kulturhus enligt Sara," *Norran*, 31 May.
Eriksson, Madeleine, Lundgren, Anna Sofia & Liliequist, Evelina (2024): "Logics of competition: The forming of opinion in the bid for a green mega investment ," *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography,* 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.2024.2400893
Eriksson, Madeleine, Lundgren , Anna Sofia & Eriksson, Rikard (2025): "The heroes and the killjoys of green megaprojects: A feminist critique," *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 18–2, 341–357. https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsaf002
Eriksson, Madeleine (2010): *(Re)producing a Periphery: Popular Representations of the Swedish North*. Umeå: Kulturgeografiska institutionen, Umeå universitet.
Eriksson, Rikard & Hane-Weijman, Emilia (2017): "How do regional economies respond to crises? The geography of job creation and destruction in Sweden (1990–2010)," *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 24, 87–103.
Flew, Terry (2012): *The Creative Industries: Culture and Policy*. London: SAGE Publications.
Florida, Richard L. (2002): *The Rise of the Creative Class*. New York: Basic Books.
Fägerborg, Eva (1999): "Intervjuer," Lars Kaijser & Magnus Öhlander (eds): *Etnologiskt fältarbete*, Lund: Studentlitteratur.
Glynos, Jason (2001): "The grip of ideology: A Lacanian approach to the theory of

ideology," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 6, 191–214.
Glynos, Jason & Howarth, David (2007): *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*. London: Routledge.
Gottdiener, Mark (1997): *The Theming of America: Dreams, Media Fantasies, and Themed Environments*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
Gregory, Derek (1995): "Imaginative geographies," *Progress in Human Geography*, 19:4, 447–485. https://doi.org/10.1177/030913259501900402
Harvey, David (1989): "From managerialism to entrepreneurialism: The transformation in urban governance in late capitalism," *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 71:1, 3–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.1989.11879583
Harvey, David (206). *Spaces of Global Capitalism*. London: Verso.
Hetherington, Kevin (2007): "Manchester's Urbis," *Cultural Studies*, 21:4–5, 630–649. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380701278996
Holdo, Markus (2020): "Rural arguments: Four perspectives in Swedish political debate," *Journal of Rural Studies*, 76, 67–75.
Hultman, Martin (2016): "Gröna män? Konceptualisering av industrimodern, ekomodern och ekologisk maskulinitet," *Kulturella Perspektiv*, 25:1, 30–41.
Husu, Hanna-Mari & Kumpulainen, Kaisu (2019): "Promoting neoliberal ideology in Finnish rural community development: the creation of new moral actors," *Local Goverment Studies*, 45:6, 893-912. https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2019.1635015
Karpestam, Peter & Håkansson, Peter G. (2021): "Rural boys, urban girls? The mystery of the diminishing urban-rural gender gap in Sweden," *Journal of Rural Studies*, 86, 282–297.
Laclau, Ernesto & Mouffe, Chantal (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Verso.
Landry, Charles (2008): *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*, 2nd ed. London: Earthscan.
Lawson, Victoria, Jarosz, Lucy & Anne, Bonds (2010): "Articulations of place, poverty, and race: Dumping grounds and unseen grounds in the rural American Northwest," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 100:3, 655–677. https://doi.org/10.1080/00045601003795087
Lindstedt, Nina (2021): "Laddade och klara," *Vision*, 25 August, 28–34.
Lockie, Stewart, Lawrence, Geoffrey & Chesire, Lynda (2006): "Reconfiguring rural resource governance: The legacy of neo-liberalism in Australia," Paul Cloke, Terry Marsden & Patrick Mooney (eds): *Handbook of Rural Studies*. London: SAGE Publications, 29–43.
Lundgren, Anna Sofia & Nilsson, Bo (2023): "For the good of the village: Volunteer initiatives and rural resilience," *Journal of Rural Studies*, 102, 103104.
McRobbie, Angela (2004): "Everyone is creative: Artists as pioneers of the new

economy," Elizabeth Silva & Tony Bennett (eds): *Contemporary Culture and Everyday Life*. London: Routledge.
Miles, Steven & Paddison, Ronan (2005): "The rise and rise of culture-led urban regeneration," *Urban Studies*, 42, 833–839.
Neocleous, Mark (2013): "Resisting resilience," Peter A. Hall & Michèle Lamont (eds): *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Nilsson, Bo & Lundgren, Anna Sofia (2015): "Logics of rurality: Political rhetoric about the Swedish North," *Journal of Rural Studies*, 37, 85–95.
Norman, Mikael (2024): "All eyes on Sara kulturhus, a pioneering cultural hub," *Scan Magazine*, 2024.
Nycyk, Michael (2015): "The power gossip and rumour have in shaping online identity and reputation: A critical discourse analysis," *The Qualitative Report*, 20:2, 18–32.
Näsman, Mikael, Bergquist, Anna-Kristin, Björling, Nils, Eriksson, Madeleine, Liliequist, Evelina, Lindmark, Magnus, Lundberg, Johan, Lundgren, Anna Sofia, Müller, Dieter K., Rataj, Michal, Rönnblom, Malin, Scott, David, Viklund, Roine & Eriksson, Rikard (2023): "A promised land? First summary of the research program," *CERUM Report*, 78/2023, December.
Peck, Jamie (2005): "Struggling with the creative class," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 29, 740–770.
Pike, Andy, Béal, Vincent, Cauchi-Duval, Nicolas, Franklin, Rachel, Kinossian, Nadir, Lang, Thilo & Velthuis, Sander (2023): "'Left behind places': A geographical etymology," *Regional Studies*, 58:6, 1167–1179. https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2023.2167972
Pogorzelska, Agnieszka (2021): "Skellefteå – från avfolkningsbygd till grön storspelare," *Dagens ETC*, 21 September.
Runevad Kjellmer, Johanna (2021): "Infekterad konflikt om Skellefteås nya kulturhus," *Sveriges Television (SVT)*, 1 April.
Rönngren, Yvonne (2021): "Sara kulturhus: Omfattande kritik från personal," *Norran*, 31 March.
Samuelsson, Per (2021): "Konstföreningens kritik: Det måste finnas något även utanför kulturhuset," *Sveriges Television (SVT)*, 28 January.
Sjöstedt Landén, Angelika, Ljuslinder, Karin & Lundgren, Anna Sofia (2017): "The moral geographies of public sector job relocation: Discourses of compensation and competence in the Swedish news press," *Social & Cultural Geography*, 18:5, 623–644. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2016.1210668
Säll, Andreas (2021): "Miljardregn över Norrland," *Fokus*, 29 April.
Thorén, Caroline (2023): "Klart: Världsartist återvänder till Skellefteå – ska inta kulturhuset," *Megafonen*, 24 October.

Torp, Elin (2023): "Så ska de stoppa kriminaliteten i arbetslivet," *Dagens Arbete*, 14 December, 36–41.
Waitt, Gordon & Gibson, Chris (2009): "Creative small cities: Rethinking the creative economy in place," *Urban Studies*, 46, 1223–1246.
Zukin, Sharon (1995): *The Cultures of Cities*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Municipality Documents
Bäckström Zidohli, Therese (2013): "Kulturhus Skellefteå: Beslutsunderlag för kulturellt innehåll," *Skellefteå kommun*, 30 August.
Skellefteå kommun (2015/2022): "Skellefteå 2030: Strategi för hållbar samhällsomvandling." Skellefteå: Skellefteå kommun, 20 September 2024.
Skellefteå kommun (2020): "Evenemangsstrategi för Skellefteå 2020–2023," Skellefteå: Skellefteå kommun, 7 April.
Skellefteå kommun (2021): "Skellefteå kommuns kulturplan 2020–2023," Skellefteå: Skellefteå kommun, 16 February.
Skellefteå kommun (2012): "Kulturplanen 2012–2015," Skellefteå: Skellefteå kommun.

Websites
Sara kulturhus (2024): www.sarakulturhus.se (accessed 25 August 2024; 2 December 2024).
Visit Skellefteå (2024): www.visitskelleftea.se (accessed 4 September 2024).

AI use
No AI was used for generating content to this article. The article, including empirical material collection, analysis and results, are the authors own work.

Authors

Evelina Liliequist, Phd in Ethnology, Senior lecturer in Digital Humanities, Humlab, Umeå University, 901 87 Umeå.
Email: evelina.liliequist@umu.se
ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9214-0099

Anna Sofia Lundgren, Professor of Ethnology, Department of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå University, 901 87 Umeå.
Email: anna.sofia.lundgren@umu.se
ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8758-5704