TECH/KNOW/FUTURE/
FROM SLANG TO STRUCTURE

CONTENTS

AN ODD ASSORTMENT OF THOUGHTS ON THE MONSTERS, MARGINS AND MEDIA OF OUR TIME

Charlotte Kent

1. The world in which we live has strange creatures. The satellite navigation system that helps me navigate the space from here to there, the time of uncertainty after I have departed but before I arrive, depends on three conflicting sciences: quantum physics produces the silicon chip; Newtonian physics puts the satellite in orbit by which the chip finds its location; and, Einstein's theory of relativity maintains some semblance of accuracy for the satellite's readings.[1] That none of these scientific models will replace the other, that their governing logics are in apparent conflict does not mean that I should give up on all three and believe that a flying spaghetti monster is guiding me with his noodly appendage.[2] As John Higgs says in *Stranger Than We Can Imagine*, "a multiple model agnostic would not say all models are of equal value because some models are more useful than others, and the usefulness of the model varies according to the context."[3] The sat-nav is like some folkloric monster——Sphinx, Lernaen Hydra, Nian. These creations, cobbled together of heterogeneous parts that don't seem like they should be as one and yet are, might terrify in combination, but we also recognize a fearsome beauty in their myriad elements. And, our world is made of such creatures.

> "Monsters startle neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships, and features of their environment they have hitherto taken for granted."[4]

2. In their assemblage and exaggeration, monsters emphasize aspects of the social realm that need to be reconsidered. Tricksters are social monsters; they don't follow rules, interjecting incongruous attitudes and behaviors into the social realm. Though scholars identify them by certain characteristics that seem to recur around the world, perhaps the most relevant is that a Trickster cannot be defined.[5] They disorder. Without intention, tricksters' wandering off familiar routes shows us an alter-

nate order, one that may be ancient or a radical emergence. Logic dictates that a self-contained system must operate strictly by its own givens and so cannot and does not respond to anything outside itself.[6] Tricksters permeate the boundary of that seclusion. Whether male or female or neither, animal or spirit or humanoid, the trickster inserts chaos, disruption, violation, that is change in some form or another. We are none of us so isolated now, nor do we want to be——as we recently discovered. Our world is permeated with these tricksters that help us connect but also alienate us, help us learn but also distract us, introduce us to new languages and erase longstanding traditions. And, we cannot simply reject or exile them.

> "These are difficult times because we are witnessing a clash of cataclysmic proportions between two great technologies. We approach the new with the psychological conditioning and sensory responses to the old. This clash naturally occurs in transitional periods."[7]

3. The proliferation of information, connections, opportunities in this age of the internet has by many, if not most, accounts made us oversatiated, overstimulated, overwhelmed. Ernst Becker wrote in the Preface of *The Denial of Death* that "[t]he man of knowledge in our time is bowed under a burden he never imagined he would ever have: the overproduction of truth that cannot be consumed. For centuries man lived in the belief that truth was slim and elusive and that once he found it the troubles of mankind would be over. And here we are in the closing decades of the 20th century, choking on truth."[8] That was in 1973, nearly 50 years ago. As humans, we constantly put ourselves at the center of the universe but with so much information, there seem to be so many centers. The term Anthropocene arose to cohere discussions around our self-orientation, but we are all aware that the same technol-

ogy making it possible to share our existence with the world is also creating and forecasting an intelligence that requires we reconsider our own. Some are tempted to say that things always change, but to ignore these recent changes and their psychic effect is shortsighted. Derrida, writing in *Archive Fever* (1995) about electronics and computers as the new technologies of memory said "the upheavals in progress affected the very structure of the psychic apparatus." [9] He identifies computers' architecture, economy of speed, temporalizing, as moving us away from a history bound to notions of representation and suggests an entirely different logic is necessary.

> "Most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture."[10]

4. For such reasons, Plato's cave metaphor posits sight as false, thereby distinguishing body and mind, sight and insight. Descartes reaffirms the separation of senses from mind. Kant applies that to aesthetics by necessitating an objective, non-sensible judgment. The Enlightenment's development of a scientific method depended on sight to move away from the haphazard ideologies of the mind. As Jaron Lanier, one of the proponents of virtual reality and an original popularizer of its possibilities in the 80s, wrote in his autobiography, "we tend to use visual metaphors to convey analytic mastery, seeing a situation clearly," a concept that comes from the Enlightenment's embrace of science.[11] With the visual turn of the late 20th century, the scholar and critic WJT Mitchel argues that greater visual dominance arose alongside increasing information about problems with vision. Our brains intentionally 'paint' over the blind spot. In certain light situation, our eyes fill in the rest of the

spectrum, altering the colors we see. We tend not to notice what we aren't told to identify. And, as biological sciences started leaving human sight behind (as in genome sequencing), physics abandoned it altogether. Computer technology exemplifies this invisible visuality. Hal, the computer aboard *2001: A Space Odyssey*, sees what Dave does and says, projecting vision as a part of the aptitudes of technology and artificial intelligences, but advanced technologies "see" us, though not with eyes and cameras, but with data. Now, computers can see more than we can though what they see is invisible to us. Donna Haraway, in her now infamous *Cyborg Manifesto*, identified invisibility as a feature of marginal beings.[12]

> "Individuals who never sense the contradictions of their cultural inheritance run the risk of becoming little more than host bodies for stale gestures, metaphors, and received ideas, all the stereotypic likes and dislikes by which cultures perpetuate themselves."[13]

5. There is comfort in the familiar, the categorization of object, discipline, figure. We struggle with the undefined. The ethnographer Arnold van Gennep introduced the notion of liminality to explain the transformation that occurs in rites of transition. After the initial separation, the subject is in an ambiguous state, before arriving at the resolution, the place where all that new information and experience has been aggregated. Moving through the margins is an entirely transitional state. No belonging. No fixed laws. The liminal figure doesn't belong: "their condition one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all customary categories...at once no longer classified and not yet classified, neither one thing nor another; or maybe both; or neither here nor there; or maybe neither"—a monstrous space, but also "a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise."[14] It is

important to realize that the trickster's interjections often harm as much as they disarm. There is frequently a mess involved as the social reconfigures itself.

> "Liminality is the realm of primitive hypothesis, where there is a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence."[15]

6. We are still finding our way around the radical changes of this interconnected, hypermediated landscape. We seek language to anchor our condition even though we know language is an expression of cultural attitudes and changes accordingly. As Odysseus learns, an oar's meaning shifts as it moves inland; from a means of moving a boat, it becomes a winnowing fan. Later, it becomes a grave marker.[16] A urinal shifted into the gallery becomes art, and then later a transcendental monument to the avant-garde. Truth is always a localized construct. In our current condition, we are local and global, and our oars must be more facile; "trickster speaks freshly where language has been blocked, gone dead or lost its charm."[17] The collage of modernism became postmodernism's assemblage. Appropriation was a detournement. To adopt, to adapt, to reconfigure isn't just a recycling mantra but a transformative ethos, turning what is stagnant into something mobile and alive again.

> "Meaning is the product of interaction between the observer and the system, the content of which is in a state of flux, of endless change and transformation...a more general approach to art as residing in a cultural communications system rather than the art object as a fixed semantic configuration."[18]

7. Signification stems from substitution, and a pathway from one thing to the other

is often facilitated by mad tricksters, sophists, poets, artists.[19] Hyde says that "it's as if nothing is significant until it's portable; we must be able to move it, in fact or in mind, from one context or another."[20] A medium is precisely that: "something which intermediates," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.[21] W.J.T. Mitchell in "Addressing Media" said it was the "middle ground between materials and the things people do with them."[22] Media are inevitably liminal, marginal when they are new, falsely appearing to become fixed as cultures adopt them. Traditional arts help us think about, so called, new media, but those ideas developed to discuss television, film, or the internet also influence how we think about painting, sculpture, or architecture.[23] Media remain new, no matter how old they are, because by looking at them and thinking about them we also observe who we are. Whether it is the first picture you hang in your home or choosing to peek into augmented reality, we know media influence us, but so do we influence it. Like any relationship, it is one of "mutual and reciprocal constitution" that needs our attentive presence.[24] Artists working with technology model the realm of possibility.

_(ö)_/

"The artist is faced with two possibilities; either to be carried along in the stream of events, mindlessly, half-aware, and perhaps bitter and hostile as a result; or he can come to terms with his world, shape it and develop it by understanding its underlying cybernetic characteristics. Awareness of these underlying forces will sharpen his perception; the utilisation of new techniques will enlarge his powers of thought and creative action; he will be empowered to construct a vision in art that will enhance the cybernated society as much as it will be enriched by it."[25]

Norbert Wiener, the founding father of cybernetics, invoked the ideas of the psycho-analyst Sigmund Freud and the philosopher Henri Bergson on time and motion, which both had derived from film and photography. As one scholar found, "[t]en years after viewing time-lapse photography... Freud was conceptualizing a model of the mind and of the formation of dreams that in some ways parallels the film appa-ratus invented by the Lumière brothers in December 1895."[26] At the same time, Bergson was reconceptualizing perception away from a bifurcated, subjective position to make perception be durational, one with an emergent past and a future, such that thought was not static but always in process—in the way that he saw film transform the image.[27] Those arts and technics gave Wiener alternative models to think through issues of memory and interaction.[28] As Orit Halpern argues across *Beautiful Data*, "early theories of computing and interface engaged heavily with the fantasies of film and photography as graphical and recording apparatus" to con-struct systems that reimagined the recording, storing, retrieving of information, as well as the management of excess stored material.[29]

This was done in part by cybernetics, defined by Wiener in 1948 as "the scientific study of control and communication in the animal and the machine," which was a progenitor for fields like Artificial Intelligence, Systems Theory, and Computer Science, though its notions spread across the social sciences, in part due to the insistent interdisciplinarity of the Macy's Conferences.[30] The foundational principles of abstraction, quantification, feedback and probability redefined how people imag-ined the social realm. Those papers and discussions would develop and influence a wide array of fields: anthropology, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, urban plan-ning, international policy, economics, education, and more.

Second order cybernetics' theorizing of systems contributes to posthuman-ism's inquiry into decentering the human, expanding the circle of moral concern to

encompass critters beyond the human, alongside doing the work to ensure many humans have rights that have been long kept from them. Systems become networks understood as applied to everything from mass media to social configurations. Large portions of the world in which we live are indebted to the transformative ideas that Wiener proposed, which were partly inspired by insights from the arts' adoption and adaptation of technology.

I offer this sketch here to introduce the ways that creative practices become surprisingly influential, even so far as to determine ways of thinking in fields that then design the fabric of our lives. The pervasiveness of the keyboard inspired whimsy, with letters and symbols animated to produce faces, which turned into emojis and a whole new language arose that says something about our moment. Creative projects can present practices as well as content that provide insights into alternative structures, plausible futures, ways of being in the world we need to produce sooner rather than later. A world sticks around until we have "the determination and skill to remake it into a new one," when we are willing to examine how the "grip of habit" enables the "stubbornness of fact."[31]

I ask you to consider, as Nelson Goodman said in his 1975 book, *Ways of Worldmaking*,: "Worlds are made not only by what is said literally but also by what is said metaphorically, and not only by what is said literally or metaphorically but also by what is exemplified and expressed——by what is shown as well as by what is said."[32] These are liminal times, full of monsters, invisible until we choose to see the mediating work they do, getting us wherever we are going.

1   John Higg s, *Stranger Than We Can Imagine* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2015), 289.

2   I direct readers to the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster: "Thy noodle come, thy sauce be yum, R'Amen." https://www.spaghettimonster.org

3   John Higgs, *Stranger Than We Can Imagine*, 289. Newtonian physics can't address systemic racism and it can't revoke the slavers' use of charts based on Newtonian celestial mechanics to navigate the oceans of the world. That doesn't mean that I should blame racist economies on the stars or reject the utility of the sat-nav at my disposal.

4   Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage" in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Mdemba Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell Press, 1967), 105.

5   Mary Magoulick, "Trickster Lives in Erdrich: Continuity, Innovation, and Eloquence of a Troubling, Beloved Character," *Journal of Folklore Research* 55, no. 3 (2018): 87-126, 91-2; Dell Hymes 2003, *Now I Know Only So Far: Essays in Ethnopoetics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 279-280.

6   Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1998/2010), 118.

7   Marshal McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (Berkeley: Gingko Press, 1967/1996), 94-95.

8   Ernst Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York; The Free Press, 1973), x.

9   Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 15.

10   Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage", 95.

11   Jaron Lanier, *Dawn of the New Everything: Encounters with Virtual Reality* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2017), 124.

12   Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" in The New Media Reader, ed. Noah Wardripp-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 518.

13   Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 307.

14   Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage", 97.

15   Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage", 106

16   Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 65.

17   Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 76.

18   Roy Ascott "Is There Love in the Telematic Embrace?" *Art Journal* 49, no. 3 (1990): 241-7, 241.

19   Umberto Eco proposes that a sign is something that can substitute for something else. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).

20   Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 65.

21   *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Medium."

22   W.J.T. Mitchell, "Addressing Media" in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 204.

23   Mitchell, "Addressing Media", 212.

24   Mitchell, "Addressing Media", 212.

25   Roy Ascott, "Behaviourist Art and Cybernetic Vision" in *Art and Electronic Media*, ed. Edward A. Shanken (New York: Phaidon Press, 2009), 127.

26   Bruce Sklarew, "Freud and Film: Encounters in the Weltgeist," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 47, no. 4 (1999): 1239−48.

27   Orit Halpern, *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason Since 1945* (Duke University Press, 2014), 52

28   Halpern, *Beautiful Data*, 51

29   Halpern, *Beautiful Data*, 70.

30   Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: or the Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge: MIT, 1965), 11.

31   Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 1978), 97.

32   Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 18.

This catalogue was published in conjunction with the exhibition

Montclair
State
University
Galleries

CalARTS