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Unravelling the Monstrosities Within

How can characters in stop motion animation illustrate the monstrosities that live inside us and help us to be kind to them?



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Abstract

Key words: monsters, empathy, mythology, narrative, humour, weird, uncanny, craft, stop motion animation.

This paper looks upon monsters as a medium; how concentration of fear can result in the demonisation of individuals. It explores how the use of craft, with a focus on stop motion animation, can be used as a tool to build empathy and help to heal fragmentations of society. Working with contemporary mythologies, crafted techniques are metaphorically related to the fragility of societal structures and collective narratives. Hand crafting references relics of consumer culture and explores variable autonomies over personal narrative, investigating imbalances of power.

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Introduction

My MA project is centred around an exploration of Western societal ideals and power dynamics, through the use of handcrafted characters and stop motion animation. There is a focus on consumer culture, material value systems, and object identity associations. I am interested in the politics of narrative; the reciprocal relationship between narrative, the 'collective consciousness' and the power structures that support the continued existence of an unequal capitalist society. I use a combination of materials in the characters I make, drawing from traditional jewellery processes and hand sewing. Using the stop motion animation technique, I explore aspects of the uncanny and the creation of an imaginary world, parallel to our own. The material reality of the crafted characters in real-world recognisable settings, combined with creepy, unexpected movements and fictional narratives explores the fluidity between imagination and reality; encouraging us to question the accepted narratives of society.

Monsters will be explored throughout this paper as a medium; to deconstruct what it is about them that does not fit into the societal context they are situated in. Most of the characters I create are based upon interactions I have had with real people (see appendix); what I have deduced about their societal standpoint from our interaction and picking out elements of their outlook that I perceive to be at odds with my personal moral standing. By separating what I view to be the 'monstrosity' within them, from the person themselves, I hope to understand the environment that cultivated the monstrosity; to make an attempt to empathise with those that hold opposing moral views.

When I started this project, I was thinking about the disadvantaged of society and wondering how, through craft, their struggles could be acknowledged and shared. I soon however, began to realise the moral implications of me as a privileged white artist attempting to tell someone else's story that I had no right to. I thought about how little agency those on the bottom rungs of society have over their narrative; was I really going to butt in to very sensitive topics I have no knowledge or experience of? I didn't want to be using people just so I would have an artistic topic to work with. And so, I thought I must turn to my personal experiences. It's tricky to really look at and share the parts of ourselves we are disgusted with. It is easier to examine monstrous qualities once removed.

By observing others and pinpointing certain qualities I found to be disagreeable, but without writing off their whole character, I hoped to make sense of the wider conditions that contribute to these monstrous qualities. I hoped that through craft I would express patience, understanding and empathy toward others. By extension I could show these qualities toward myself, accepting that although there may be a monster inside all of us, it doesn't mean that we are completely rotten to the core.

This paper looks at the theory behind monsters, the weird and creepy, humour - all providing a platform to examine the relevance, or irrelevance, to their context; how does their existence highlight the parameters of what is socially acceptable within a specific context? I explore contemporary mythologies and how narratives support the workings of an unequal capitalist society. The paper will also discuss the methods I have used to explore these ideas. Stop motion animation provides a tool to breathe narrative into craft, floating between the tangible and the imaginary. The politics of 'sloppy craft', or an amateur aesthetic, are discussed. It explores how the uncanny and the comical provide a reflection to divergences from society; a slight uncomfortableness, or a shared moment of laughter, provides an opportunity to assess what is in or out within our perceptions of an expected worldview. I aim to use craft and animation as an empathic tool to encourage us to listen

to others outside of our echo chambers; using imagined characters and humour I hope to provide a distance with which to process societal power structures on an individual level.

Mythic Storytelling

“Narrative is a culturally given way of organizing and presenting discourse. The characteristic structures of narrative themselves carry important meanings. Narrative links events into sequential and causal chains, and gives them a beginning and an end. These features are transparent signifiers of coherence, order and closure.” (Hodge R. & Kress G., 1988: p.230)

Stories provide the structure to religion, history, science, fairy tales, branding and politics. These are stories that compartmentalise abstract, messy, sticky ideas, into neatly digestible nuggets of narrative. A way of making the world appear more black and white than it is; creating clear margins of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, heroes and villains, leaders and followers.

Whilst investigating the ambivalence of the internet, Phillips & Milner dissect the ability of storytelling to shape the cultural sphere. They argue that, in their essence, stories are collective. Storytelling borrows from, and feeds back into a shared cultural tradition. Even if we don’t actively believe a narrative, the connection to an unseen cultural history, means that any story that is told will be exerting an influence on the very fabric of the culture it is told in. Choosing to disregard or disbelieve certain narratives is not an option (Phillips W. & Milner R., 2017). In my project I consider how dominant narratives can entrench fragmentations of society. How judgements placed on individuals, in relation to singular, monolithic characteristics about them results in missed opportunities for connection and creates barriers to a more unified society. By focussing on the differences of other people, that we consider to be disgusting, or ‘monstrous’, is to ignore the nuances of their character and write them off as a ‘monster’ - without taking the time or empathy required to consider a more wholesome view of their attributes and outlook.

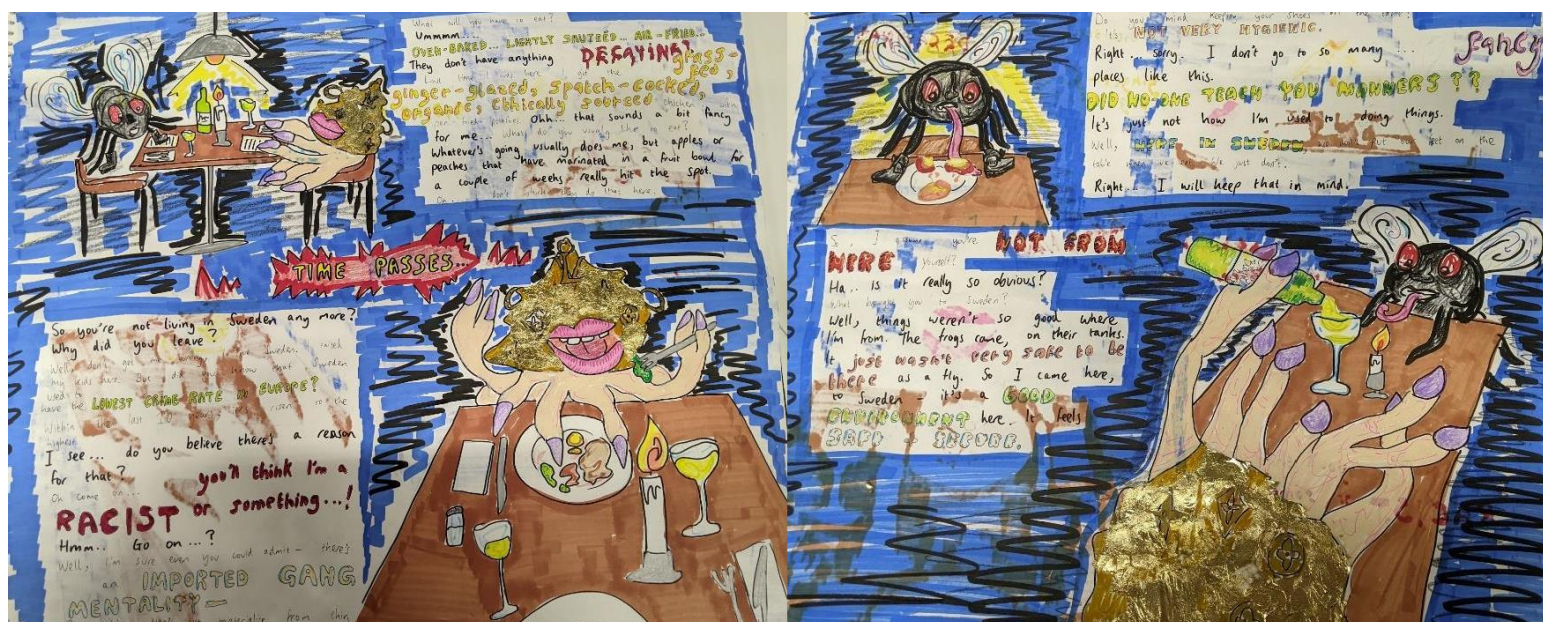


Figure 1 – Narrative storyboard, sketchbook pages.

Extraction of the Monster

The tendency to categorise in pursuit of order, extends to often intangible feelings of fear. Monsters provide a simplified cathexis of fears and uncertainties, which is easier to direct attention toward, than to begin unravelling the wider systems that incubate these anxieties.

“The externalization of the monster was also a rejection of a confrontation with the monstrosity within. In other words, what the externalization of the monster aimed to mask was the void at the heart of the European understanding of the self.” (Litventseva S. & Wagner B., 2021)

In *“Monster as Medium: Experiments in Perception in Early Modern Science and Film”*, Sasha Litventseva & Beny Wagner suggest that by externalising the monster, we reject a confrontation of the monstrosity that resides within us. ‘The monster’ provides a neatly categorised area to direct fears and negative energy toward. This can deflect negative thoughts and energy away from ourselves, providing a distraction from addressing what monstrosities may be living within us.

Despite provoking fear in us, monsters provide a tangible form with which to project, perceive and communicate fear – eliminating the ungraspable and chronic threat of the unseen and the unknown. Technologies provide a platform for an idea to spread and become a monstrosity. Litventseva & Wagner ask if the manifestation of fear within the monster means that ‘the monster’ is a technology in itself? (Litventseva S. & Wagner B., 2021)

Monsters, stereotypes and ‘othering’ are an embodiment of the cultural and political conditions, that cause the need to marginalise and scapegoat in the first place. They are a cultural signifier, a form of media that attempts to pinpoint the causes of the unexplainable, or the perhaps shadily disguised.

By merging human or animal associations, with aspects of the uncanny in crafted characters, I wonder if we find empathy or if we find disgust. Through my craft practice, I seek to understand the infectious nature that capitalism has on our perceptions built on narratives of villains and heroes.

In his journal article *‘Narrative Performance in the Contemporary Monster Story’*, Daniel Punday describes the monster as a body comprised of individual elements, rather than a whole. Monsters require their human characteristics to remain recognisable – one or two features are exaggerated, and they become a caricature that stirs a discomfiting sense of dread within us. Manifesting in an uncanny form, whilst retaining an association to the human body, offers a human relation to the monster - this can be built upon to create a feeling of empathy. With the presence of relation to the human form, monsters can be used as a window to the human condition and as metaphor to explore transgressions that are repressed by dominant culture (Punday D. 2002).

A monstrous body is meaningful because of the context it operates in; it is a mirror to the expectations of society. To define something or someone as a monster, is to refer to a cathexised trigger of fear and disgust. An unacceptable fragmentation of society, it does not fit in to the cultural social definitions of how we assume humanity should operate. Using the monster as a creative medium offers a platform from which to explore those people, entities and ideas which transgress from societal expectations from a specific time, place and cultural standpoint. The portrait of the monster within art is very much a portrait of the artist and the artist’s context for making the work – *this* is what *we* consider to be an unacceptable transgression from what *we* believe should be the dominant ideals. So the monster represents something, that is in some form, repressed. This is why I believe that the monster is absolutely a medium and a snapshot of time, place and culture.

At the core of my project is not only the monstrosities of society, but a process of kindness and acceptance. The monsters I create have loosely been based upon encounters with real people

(see appendix); I have pinpointed aspects of these encounters that triggered a sense of disgust in me. I didn't want to look away and ignore these feelings of disgust. I didn't want to dismiss these disagreeable characters as monsters and fall into the black and white narratives of good and bad we grow comfortable with in childhood. I wanted to work out what it says about me and my own societal position when I find something disagreeable in someone. To separate the monstrosity from the person, is to attempt to understand the conditions in which the monstrosity was cultivated, whilst retaining empathy for the person which harbours the monstrosity. Seeing it almost like a parasite, that attaches itself to inherently innocent souls and infects their body and mind. To demonise those that we don't relate to, or don't agree with, is only to further entrench the polarisations of society as we seek to surround ourselves with those that echo our views and opinions. By striving to exercise empathy and understanding, I believe is the only way we can begin to try and heal these monstrosities.



Figure 2 – Hand crafted 'monster', still from a stop motion animation – shell, gold decoupage, brass, plasticine, epoxy resin, copper, enamel, fabric, lipstick.

The Weird, Wonderful and the Humorous

Just as monsters can represent societal transgressions, that which we find to be 'weird', demonstrates something straying from the expected. Not necessarily scary, the weird can sometimes be strangely compelling – something that we don't quite understand, it can be hard to look away.

*"What is the weird?...It involves a sensation of **wrongness**: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object **is** here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. The weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate."* (Fisher M. 2016: p.21)

In this quote from *"The Weird and the Eerie"*, Mark Fisher attempts to pinpoint the essence of what it means for something to be 'weird'. To be weird is to be different to what we are used to, to be out of place. It is not as emotive as to become offensive or scary – maybe it is to a degree, but the more innocent of 'the unexpected' suits the weird better. According to Fisher, a defining characteristic of horror as a genre, is an encounter with the unknown – this sense of the unknown creates fear and a need for avoidance. What differentiates the weird, is a feeling of fascination. Whilst it may repel us to an extent, the weird is also fascinating and compelling. It does not completely terrify us; we are almost attracted by its uniqueness and its apparent lack of anchor in its context (Fisher M., 2016).

This concept of 'the weird', I can relate to many aspects of my practice. In terms of monsters and character creation, human bodily references offer a sense of the uncanny. We can recognise fingers and finger nails – but we don't usually see them detached from a body or moving in the way that they do in stop motion films. An alternative fictional world is created within the animations; it remains tethered to our understanding of reality through the use of real and recognisable settings, bodily and animal associations, and a material understanding. An element of fascination comes from wondering how these undefinable characters found themselves to be in this 'real' setting. The handcrafted nature of the characters can lead us to imagine their creator; questioning their context and simultaneous narrator and creator.

The weird entity has the potential to be separate from its time, place and context. It is weird in relation to the accepted norms of its surroundings and context; through its isolation from context, a weird object can be used as a tool with which to explore an alternative reality; a way of how things could look if we were to diverge from accepted norms, where the weird fits in and becomes unexemplary. The weird can be scrutinised to examine personal and cultural moral codes; what we find weird will be different for everyone. By exploring why we define something as weird, there is opportunity to discover the boundaries of a potentially oppressive or limiting accepted moral standard.



Figure 3 – Hand crafted tentacles with fingernails; work in progress shot – copper, enamel, hand stitched fabric, stuffing, wire.

Just as what is perceived to be weird is a document of something transgressive and parallel to a time, place and culture, humour is also deeply tied to its context. When the value of art is often in question, the desperation to be taken seriously can feed into a ‘snobbish distrust of the accessible’ (Reaves W., 2001: p.2). Art that is humorous is easy to dismiss; it can be seen as a gimmick and lacking in any serious substance. However, it is important to recognise the social significance of humour. What we find funny can differ between cultures, generations and social classes; humour is constantly evolving and changing just as other art forms are. Humour and humour in art are a societal reflection - an opportunity to encapsulate the mood of a time; to offer a sense of shared exclusivity of those who are in on the joke.

Humorous art is able to reflect the values of a dominant class, but also has the power to challenge ruling ideologies. When we find something funny, it is like we are offered acceptance into a secret club. We now have something in common with the others who are laughing.

“If art history can teach us anything, it’s that progressive forms of art that purport to challenge the authority of gallery and museum contexts are easily rendered caffeine-free caricatures of themselves once the sites of authority give them a platform.” (Carney P., 2015 p.125-6)

This quote highlights the importance of the context and the audience when determining the progressive and or humorous value within an artwork. If humorous art is used as a tool to challenge the ruling classes and ideologies, to poke fun at the absurdity of the establishment, it suggests an

outsider perspective to the ruling classes. An underdog, critiquing the power structures that are in some way keeping them out. Not all funny art has to be progressive or challenging the status quo – but to me it seems like a missed opportunity if it's not. To capture attention with humour, simultaneously presenting a societal critique. To make light of that which is monstrous to us, is to consider it from an alternative view. By experiencing laughter, a connective and positive emotion, a platform is created for empathy to build upon. How could we hate something that made us laugh? Humour in art is a chance for a shared experience, a strengthening of community ties; to me, this exists in parallel to the core identity of craft as a discipline.

Lifestyle Mythologies

Part of the reason opportunities for shared experience, and activities that promote the mixing of various societal subsectors, feels so important may be down to an evolution of the characteristics that constitute identity. Place of birth and family trade have perhaps quietened as key components of identity; an increasingly mobile and urbanised modern society has shifted or dissolved these static, traditional and stable parameters of identity for many people. In a city where most are anonymous it is easy for an atmosphere of alienation to occur – people all within close geographical proximity can belong to vastly different societal subcategories. When place becomes less synonymous with identity, we are susceptible to seek an identifiable ‘anchor’ in other ways (Duyvendak, J.W. 2011). It could be argued that this cultivates an environment for capitalism to flourish; a chasm is carved that yearns to be filled with meaning. An opportunity is presented for advertising to provide us with meaning and encourage us to seek identity within consumption. Advertising has the power to attach cultural values to goods; which in turn has the power to veer our perceptions of character and identity further toward the objects we choose to surround ourselves with. In order for capitalism to survive, it must be constantly creating new and unknown desires in consumers. When we have everything we need to function and survive, there must be new functions attached to objects in order to feed capitalism’s requirement for a consistent pattern of consumption (Lury C. 2011).

For this reason, there has come to be strong narratives attached to brands and luxury consumer items. As a society we have built a shared understanding on the signs of objects; with the help of advertising and generationally developed value systems, we are silently telling a story of how we are to be perceived in the clothing, items and objects we choose to surround ourselves with. This however, of course depends on the purchasing capital available with which to build this story of ourselves. It is collectively relevant that in a capitalist society, where perceptions of character are built in relation to nuances of lifestyle, that those in a financially richer sector of society have a stronger position to ‘tell their story’. Sequentially, they have a greater influence on the fabric of the collective narrative; and ultimately a more powerful position in society. Because of this unequal distribution of power, it can be easy to demonise those in financially strong positions as monsters. However I would argue that, by writing these off as monsters, there is a missed opportunity to consider the wider societal conditions that this ‘monster’ is borne of. Through empathetic craft I aim to forgive the monster; to distance accountability from the individual and a shifting of focus toward capitalism as ideology, and the hierarchical structures that it thrives on. By referencing relics of consumer culture; dressing characters in imitation Prada boots and Louis Vuitton shells, my aim is to unravel the mythologies we attach to consumer objects. Using a humorous language of caricature, I ask us to digest the signs, objects and symbols, that comprise the questionable foundations supporting societal structures of power.



Figure 4 (left) Handcrafted fly character with Prada boots on stop motion film; installation shot – fabric, copper, enamel, cellophane.



Figure 4.2 (right) Handmade imitation Prada boots; close-up shot – silver, faux-leather, reflective neoprene, eyelets, zip, silicone.

Stop Motion Animation: Straddling Imagination and Reality

During my master project, I have been using stop motion animation as a method to bring life to craft, situating my crafted objects within a contextual narrative. To me, stop motion is a humorous and empathic tool that can be used to explore sticky, societal issues. The analogue nature of stop motion aligns with the process of craft; it is laborious, physical, bodily-engaged and slow. Tangible materiality, human touch and real sites, in combination with the 'magic' of objects moving in a way that we do not expect, provides an opportunity for stop motion to explore the boundaries between fiction and reality. Expectations and moralities of the real world are shifted in this imaginary world; yet the presence of a physical materiality in stop motion, in contrast to computerised animation, provides an omnipresent tether to reality. This allows an opportunity to metaphorically dance between the real and the imaginary, perhaps whilst questioning the absolute truth of our perceived morality and coaxing us to consider the elasticity of the accepted narrative.

The handmade fabrication of an imaginary world, and the miniaturisation within stop motion, direct the focus of a narrative toward materiality. In the book *'On Longing'*, Susan Stewart describes the theatricality of miniatures and the direction of attention it facilitates toward the narrative and materiality of the objects *themselves*, instead of the objects becoming merely a background context for a narrative that plays out around them (Stewart, 1993). When I allow objects to move through stop motion, I am questioning the autonomy of these objects and the metaphorical value systems that they represent. I am exploring aspects of control; during the process, I am in control of moving the objects, but ultimately, they decide themselves how they will move. As the maker, I can make a choice as to which materials I use and how I put them together; but the inherent qualities of the materials, and the craft histories they embody will charge their resulting form and personality. It is difficult to see the result until after the process is finished – this makes it feel like the objects are taking on a life of their own; we work together, it is not just I as a maker that is in control of the work. This process of collaboration between me and the objects, links to the tandems of power that exist between humans and consumable objects. Consumer goods are parasitical toward us, until we cannot define ourselves without them. It can be argued that an object can only be defined in its relation to us; and our parameters of identity lean on the constellation of objects we surround ourselves with – one cannot be categorised without the other.

The ability to skew perceptions of scale within stop motion, offers the opportunity for an imaginary world to be created, in parallel to our own. It has strong connotations of children's play; the chance to imagine a different order of things, where we decide who is in charge. Seeing things that we recognise, recreated in miniature, can provide a feeling of endearment and 'cuteness'. This could offer a pique of interest with which to take on the narrative. By recreating something scary like a monster, in a digestible and endearing manner, perhaps it can provide us with an empathy and a sense of understanding behind what created the monster.

In stop motion, even stories with a sad and melancholy heart, manage to float on a wave of humour. In the short film *'Candela'* (Riba M. & Solanas A., 2020), the story focuses around an old woman in a dilapidated neighbourhood, who eventually dies alone in her apartment, her body eaten by rats. It is a sad and touching tale, yet retains an edge of dark humour. The expression of the puppets is caricature-like; seeing the clunky, handmade, bloody eaten 'flesh' in plasticine, after the rats have gnawed her limp arms, inspires a laugh at the ridiculousness of it all. A contrast that would be difficult to achieve, were the story played by real actors in an actual physical setting or fabricated with computerised animation.

So, in a time where animation technology is advanced and a multitude of effects can be achieved at the touch of a button, what is it about the laborious technique of stop motion that is still

relevant today? I think that stop motion offers some of what we crave in the same way that we relate to craft; the digital and homogeneity are insipid in a modern capitalist society – there is not only a desire but a need for us to connect with materiality and the handcrafted.

There is a literal and metaphorical reference to children's play in stop motion. This builds a feeling of nostalgia, and perhaps a theoretical entry point with which to question the societal expectations we grew accustomed to as children. A sense of innocence and honesty is inherent in the medium; the technique is simple in concept to understand. This stands in contrast to the mystique involved in computer animations, without physical materiality as a referential anchor. We have a craving for connection to the material world; even in a digital format, stop motion provides recognitional reference to materials we are familiar with.



Figure 5 – Still from the stop motion short film “Candela”.

There are several inspiring stop motion practitioners operating within the Swedish context - perhaps most notable of these, are Swedish duo Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg. In 2021, the pair showed a selection of their films in the apartment of art collector Eva Livijn. By placing Djurberg's films, thick with humour, satire, playfulness and grotesqueness within a fancy apartment in an affluent area of Stockholm, to me, was to attach another layer of humour to the work. With music for the films produced by Berg, the dramatization of the stop motion is enhanced and nudged toward film traditions. The films manage to be humorous, serious, dark, disgusting, playful and meaningful all at the same time – the music helps to shape our understanding of the characters and lean into their humorous nature. By pairing the childlike aesthetic of the clay-moulded characters with dramatic sounding music, the viewer is left with a conflict of tones. For me, the setting of the exhibition created the feeling that the characters in these films might have snuck their way into this apartment, and were squatting within this luxurious environment. The viewers were laughing at them, but maybe they were laughing right back at us. It felt like somehow these characters had tricked the art world; they didn't even need to sneak their way into this fancy place, they had actually been *invited*.



Figure 6 – Nathalie Djurberg & Hans Berg in the apartment of Eva Livijn, Stockholm. October 2021.

Revolutionary Amateurism?

Just as Djurberg/ Berg's films allowed access into a usually unattainable setting, craft in general can be used as a bridge between societal sectors. Rooted in community, craft has the capacity to be charged with a collective narrative. The history and evolving generational uses of different materials and craft techniques cause the attachment of variable associations. This rich history can be utilised as a conceptual tool to the modern crafter; are we paying homage to the crafters that came before us, or are we subverting a technique or material's traditional association? By using a handmade-amateurish aesthetic, with a notable imprint of the making process, I hope to stimulate a personal connection to the work and argue that by presenting deep, complex and challenging ideas in a way that remains understandable and accessible by a majority, does not make the resulting art any less serious.

If creativity, art and craft can be used to tell a story, and narrative has the potential to perpetuate or slowly revolutionise the upholding power structures within a society; to dismiss accessible, easy to learn techniques as outsiders to 'serious art' worthy of legitimate critical analysis, it is to deny everyday people the liberatory opportunities that art and craft can provide. By framing art and craft as clean, slick and professional, is to block people from the opportunity to contribute to cultural and societal evolutions (Muhammed Z., 2020). It speaks to an entanglement of art and craft with capitalist intentions. To eliminate any physical reminder of process, to me can suck the soul from art, turning it into an almost ego driven object – potentially demonstrating a lack of honesty

and creating a hierarchy between creator and consumer. The sense of awe in looking at a technique we don't understand can distract from the narrative and context tied up in an artwork; we marvel at the craftsmanship, but is this where things end and we move on?

Craft theorist Glenn Adamson states that, not only is it okay, but that it is necessary for a contemporary artist to be amateurish (Adamson, G. 2007). Denis Longchamps offers a digestible breakdown of this in his essay '*An Impression of Déjà Vu*'. If craft is all about process, for something to be 'poorly done' is to break from the parameters of what defines the craft – a breach of discipline. Discipline is defined as a way to ensure a continuity of practice – an indiscipline demonstrates a rupture in this continuity (Longchamps, D. 2015). Following this logic, in order to bring something new to the field, art and craft *should* be amateurish. For art to be truly creative, it should involve experimentation and an aspiration to expand its field through the creation of new knowledge. This key element of experimentation, will surely be limited if the technical rules of a discipline are followed to a tee?

I understand however that there is a degree of romanticism in thinking that by using amateur techniques and aesthetic, we are elevating the position of the everyday crafter. Sandra Alföldy perhaps suggests otherwise in her essay in the book '*Sloppy Craft*'. She highlights the disparities of intention between the 'Martha Stewart home-craft kit' crafter and the arts professional using 'sloppy craft' as a means of expression. Alföldy deduces stark differences from the aesthetic goals of the home crafter and the 'fine craftist'; the home crafter is striving for uniformity, seeking perfection and aiming for replication of example (Alföldy, 2015). The kit crafter seeks to replicate the products of machine production; to appear so perfect that the human touch is almost untraceable. In contrast to this, the 'fine art crafter' aims to highlight the touch of the hand, proudly displaying the laborious time and effort put into manifesting their idea.

Alföldy's observations and viewpoint have led me to question what it really is that appeals to me about the sloppiness/touch of the hand aesthetic. What I thought was about connection to a mass of common crafters, has the potential to be considered a tokenistic, even patronising link to draw. As an artist/crafter I have the platform, knowledge and training – I can make a conscious choice to subvert from technique; I have the control and power to use 'sloppiness' as tool.

Perhaps the true motivation is that through the time and labour invested in crafting, a personal process of understanding and support for my idea is taking place. I am saying, I believe in it, and you can see this in the time I have invested with my bare hands, which I am showing you through a visible remainder of the process. And because I believe it, maybe you might take a look and consider whether you believe in it too.



Figure 7 – Hand crafted baby flies – iron wire, faux leather, hand stitching, cellophane.

Conclusion

Throughout my master project my aim has been to explore the narratives and structures, that breed demonisation of individuals into ‘monsters’; and therefore entrench polarisations of society. I’ve focussed on using craft used as a tool for empathy and understanding, taking time and energy to consider the underlying nuances of the monstrous, or what is perceived to be unacceptable, yet lives inside us all as human beings.

I’ve looked at the weird and the humorous, considering their relevance borne from context. In the same vein as monsters, they demonstrate a transgression - manifesting as something outside of what is expected and acceptable. I’ve thought about how many power structures are built on simplifying and categorising, when something is too difficult to explain and indefinable to summarise. I’ve tried to use craft and empathy to look closer at the pathologies of society, through the lens of individual narratives. Working with the concept of ‘the weird’ I encourage us to look at the absurdity of value systems and the consumerist objects and lifestyles with which we impregnate identity. I ask how what we use to communicate our identity in a capitalist society, can perpetuate inequalities; as those without the monetary capital to fulfil the lifestyle they seek, have lesser autonomy over creating their narrative.

I centred around the method of stop motion animation employing an amateur, handcrafted expression. With a root fixed between the real and imaginary, I have realised the potential of stop motion to investigate the fragility and mythical nature of the narratives that support the structures of society. Physical difficulties of the technique have arisen; as a beginner, there are certain elements I feel are beyond my control. The way the characters move is what will determine the way they are perceived, and this is something I don’t always feel is within my control. As an autonomous artist, I discover that my patience and energy for the technique wears thin after a few hours; a limitation when trying to get every shot within one scene.

For me there is an inner need to be working with my hands and making with craft. During the project I've searched for the source of this personal need, and questioned it's societal relevance. I've settled on the idea that craft and making things with our hands is an opportunity for capitalist rebellion; a chance to create the props to direct our own narrative.

Do I feel I have an answer for my research question? How can stop motion animation be used to illustrate the monstrosities inside us and help us to be kind to them? Well, the character of stop motion, in its analogue, sometimes child-like and clunky way, means that there is usually an undercurrent of humour to the animation. This connective emotion can be the start of an empathetic relation to the characters I illustrate within the narratives. Basing the characters on those which I have encountered in reality, I hope offers them some factual context and a chance to translate this empathy to the real world.

Appendix

i) Character References

In this paper I have referred to characters I have created that are based on interactions I have had with real people. Below I give a brief context of the interactions that inspired these characters.

Fly with Prada boots (Figure 4)

This character was created in relation to a project at 'Norra Tornen' penthouse, a luxury apartment in Stockholm. We met an architect who told us about his work and lifestyle, mentioning his self-named 'Prada addiction'. The next time we saw him he fittingly was wearing 13,500sek Prada boots. I was almost amazed by his lack of self-awareness, especially when talking to a group of broke art students. When visiting the penthouse, I thought about how someone could get 'stuck' at the top of the societal ladder. When surrounded by others in similarly luxurious lifestyles, it could be easy to lose sight of what's below and keep striving to impress your peers. I thought about a fly getting stuck behind glass. In my story the fly tries to get out at first, but eventually succumbs and tries to fit in by donning miniature Prada boots.

Octopus with Louis Vuitton shell (Figure 2)

The idea for this character arose from an interaction I had with a lady on a plane from London to Stockholm. We got to chatting, and she told me she used to live in Stockholm but had moved due to an increased crime rate. She blamed this on a so called 'imported gang mentality', before going on to explain how it is hard to talk about such things in Sweden without being labelled as a racist. I thought about her failure to consider wider societal failings that lead to crime, and instead scapegoating 'the other'. I also thought about the ease of her movement; how it was ok for her to move country out of choice but not for someone that does so out of necessity. She carried a Louis Vuitton handbag and had lip fillers with pink lipstick on.

ii) Reflection

One thing I decided to work on since the exam, was thinking about different ways to present video as part of an installation context. By considering the screen/TV as an object in itself, to be built into the installation. This was something I changed between the exam exhibition and the spring show; I think in the exam I was trying to be too 'clean' – separating the videos from the sculpture/installation and not filling the space with the sculptures. In the spring show I tried to bring the viewer into the world I had created. Different creatures crawled over a papier mâché tree trunk, fabricated into sculpture from a drawing draped over the wall. By picking and mixing elements from sculpture, video, drawings and text I tried to formulate a multi-faceted context to present the ideologies of my fictional world, filled with monstrous characters. I feel that this strengthened my questioning of the border between fiction and reality; allowing the viewer to see physical objects from the fantastical world of the stop motion. It was a question of which seemed more dead and alive – and sometimes what we see on a screen can seem more real than what's right in front of us. I think by using this variety of methods I probed the avenues from which we receive narrative, and asked us to question which is the most believable.

During the spring exhibition I made the screen more physically present in the space. The projection was presented on a hanging screen, taking more space. A TV screen was smattered with textile spaghetti and used as a perch by a crafted fly. It can become hard to capture people's attention to persuade them to sit a while and watch the whole film when there is so much to see. Seeing inspiration of how other students presented film, for example inside a box which had a bench to sit on inside, or in a room where the floor was covered in soft pillows. In the future I think it could be a method to create a more intimate, inviting environment with which to sit with the film. As film is a medium we have such easy access to wherever we are, at home or on our phones, I think in an exhibition context there becomes a need to create something spatially significant about viewing the film in this context. Otherwise, why did we make the trip out of our homes to come to an exhibition if we could have seen the same thing at home?

I like the idea of working with a space and adding screens/projections into unexpected positions. The film then could become a 'mask' or clothes for the space; as the viewer we would have to work a bit in the space to discover the footage. I also think that I could experiment and work with integrating sculpture and video into a space more; projecting inside a sculpture for example, to create video as part of an environment.

I have had a hard time trying to reach the core of what I'm doing in my practice. The stop motion animation is something I discovered during my time at Konstfack, and I became excited to think I had found a medium that seemed to work for creating stories from my crafted objects. It came out in one of my pre-exam discussions that it felt like my heart wasn't really in the stop motion, as I saw it as a means to an end rather than the most important part of what I was doing. I think that creating a story, and exploring a character is really the most important part of what I'm doing – acknowledging this opens me up to explore this path in different ways. Maybe a site specific character could be followed around a space, their story discovered in different mediums along the way.

During the exhibition I also began to see my work as a bit repetitive and 'safe' in scale. I think I could have experimented more with characters of different sizes, to create different feelings and further comment on their power structures. Do they appear relevant in scale to their environment or is there further opportunity for metaphor in an unexpected sense of scale? For example, they could appear in one size on the screen, and in another when in physical form. Susan Stewart's *"On Longing"* was an inspiring read during my research, and thinking about the miniature vs. the gigantic and the metaphors they could contain is something I believe I could go further into in the future.

Being honest, after the exhibition I did feel a little bit deflated with everything. I guess this is normal after the end of an intense two years. I definitely feel that I learnt a lot over the course of the

masters, and that my work and practice developed over that time. However, I feel still a bit hazy on where I sit with my work. I don't feel like I have a completely clear concept or core to my work; more a constellation of different things to work with. This means it easy to lose the true purpose of what I'm doing, and the purpose of craft within it.

I can try to theorise on the handmade and the time consuming processes of craft, but sometimes when I see the finished result I can wonder if it was really worth it. I think I just enjoy the process of craft, but I can question its relevance to other people in an exhibition context. Maybe actually sharing the process with others would help it to feel more meaningful?

It feels that the process is the most important part of the craft for me; I then feel conflicted about the finished object. It feels hard to see the value in it when it is completed. Almost as if the joy of the process doesn't deliver in the finished object. There is then the question of what to do with it; the object feels like it has value because of the labour and the time that went into it. But to match it up to monetary value feels a lot more than anyone should be prepared to pay for a function-less object. And then when we don't have spaces to store these objects, what happens to them? It feels like I just want to throw them away so that I don't have to think about it any more, but that feels sad because of the time and care that went into making them.

So maybe a focus in the future I could put more thought into celebrating and sharing the process of making, rather than always thinking in an exhibition mindset, where creator or artist is depicted as the sole narrator of a story. How could I think on ways to create narrative in a more collaborative way? I would like to facilitate a workshop to explore different mediums and ways of telling stories. Perhaps this would make my work feel more meaningful, as I would be able to feel I was sharing it in a more engaging way with other people. As my work is so interested in different types of people, I feel there is a need to open it up more and let other people in. This feels big and scary and all I want to do is sit at a desk and sew, but I also recognise the need to absolve some control from my work, to let it open and see how it can be shaped with the help of others.

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Image References

Cover Image – My own image, Elizabeth Abbott (Artist), installation view at Konstfack degree show, May 2022.

Figure 1 – My own image, Elizabeth Abbott (Artist), sketchbook pages, December 2021.

Figure 2 – My own image, Elizabeth Abbott (Artist), stop motion animation still, December 2021.

Figure 3 – My own image, Elizabeth Abbott (Artist), work in progress shot, November 2021.

Figure 4 – My own image, Elizabeth Abbott (Artist), installation view, October 2021.

Figure 4.2 – My own image, Elizabeth Abbott (Artist), detail shot, October 2021.

Figure 5 – Still from the stop motion film “Candela”, Riba, Marc & Solanas, Anna.
Taken as a screenshot from the trailer viewed at: <https://vimeo.com/402895452>

Figure 6 – My own image, installation shot from Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg showing at Eva Livijn’s apartment, Stockholm, November 2021.

Figure 7 – My own image, Elizabeth Abbott (Artist), studio detail shot, January 2022.