

# MONSTROUS ART

Dirk KLOOSTERBOER\*

## Summary

Art very often transforms reality by combining incompatible features. Such monsters may originate in hallucinogenic visions. According to the theories of Georges Bataille and René Girard, the monstrous generally expresses something discomfiting, associated with the sacred. In the case of monsters combining human and animal elements, the prestige of the beast would reinforce this character.

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## Key Words

Monsters, Art, Hallucinations, Bataille, Girard.

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## Résumé

*L'art monstrueux.*

L'art très souvent transforme la réalité en combinant des éléments incompatibles. Il est possible que des visions hallucinatoires soient à l'origine de ces monstres. Selon les théories de Georges Bataille et René Girard, le monstrueux en général exprime quelque chose d'inquiétant, lié au sacré. Dans le cas des monstres combinant des éléments humains et animaux, le prestige de la bête renforcerait ce caractère.

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## Mots clés

Monstres, Art, Hallucinations, Bataille, Girard.

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Indians living on the American Northwest Coast used to make sensational masks that could change their appearance. By use of some technical devices, an animal head would change into a human one, and back. One mask even alternately shows the features of a bullhead, a raven and a human face (Waite, 1966).

A similar mixture of animal and human appearances features in a more static form in the totem-poles of the Northwest Coast. Boas apparently thought he could 'solve' these hybrids by simply deciding what they *really* represented. Discussing one such depiction he states: "The face is human, but the ears, which rise over the forehead, indicate that an animal is meant" (Boas, 1951 [1927] : 187, cf. 190). In his description of another example he goes even further: "Fig. 207 has a human face with human ears. Only the nose indicates that the mask is not intended to represent a human being" (*ibid* 217). Boas apparently felt that it is only natural to use a human head when you want to depict an animal.

Lévi-Strauss, in his discussion of Northwest Coast art, considers the hybrid forms more seriously:

"Ce don dithyrambique de la synthèse, cette faculté presque monstrueuse pour apercevoir comme semblable ce que les autres hommes conçoivent comme différent constituent sans doute la marque exceptionnelle et géniale de l'art de la Colombie britannique" (Lévi-Strauss, 1979 : 11).

However, one should correct Lévi-Strauss in that there is nothing exceptional about the monstrous combination of animal and human features. On the contrary, this technique is used all over the world (cf. Monti, 1964 : 1202).

## Art and reality

Ortega y Gasset holds that art should not copy reality. "What do I care about an admirably painted sun above a beach, if I have an admirably real sun above a beach over there? What is more, to see the real one I would take the train and thus support the railway company" (Ortega y Gasset, 1993 [1908-76] : 102). One might feel that his argument is not completely convincing, but it remains a fact that art often departs from reality. Very often, this is accomplished by monstrously combining incompatible

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\*NISBO, MvB Bastiaansestraat 40, 1054 SP Amsterdam, Pays-Bas.

features. This technique has been described using terms like incongruity, hybrids, grotesques, monsters; someone even went as far as to invent the term 'néomorphisme' (analogous to 'néologisme').

The monstrous has been associated with twins, with physical deformity, with ugliness, and with the artificial creation of life, not to speak of moral monstrosity. In view of this variety of associations, it is not surprising that the monstrous has been characterized as essentially unclassifiable (e.g., Krestovsky, 1948 : 9). Although this view is probably correct, it may be worthwhile to discuss the monstrous in the restricted sense of a combination of incompatible features.

Most art forms necessarily represent the monstrous in a static form. However, in myths, especially origin myths, the boundaries between different kinds of creatures are often violated as one transforms into another:

"L'âge primordial est décrit avec une singulière unanimité dans les contrées les plus diverses. C'est le lieu idéal des métamorphoses et des miracles. Rien n'était encore stabilisé, aucune règle encore édictée, aucune forme encore fixée. Ce qui, depuis lors, est devenu impossible était alors faisable. Les objets se déplaçaient d'eux-mêmes, les canots volaient par les airs, les hommes se transformaient en animaux et inversement" (Caillois, 1950 : 136).

The same fluidity of reality is found in many descriptions of hallucinogenic experiences. The following - often quoted - account describes the experience of someone who used hashish:

"I thought of a fox, and instantly I was transformed into that animal. I could distinctly feel myself a fox, could see my long ears and bushy tail, and by a sort of introversion felt that my complete anatomy was that of a fox. Suddenly, the point of vision changed. My eyes seemed to be located at the back of my mouth; I looked out between the parted lips, saw the two rows of pointed teeth, and, closing my mouth with a snap, saw - nothing... the whirling images appeared again" (quoted in Siegel and Jarvik, 1975).

Different attempts have been made to relate hallucinogenic experiences to art. A useful clue for such attempts lies in the fact that hallucinating subjects experience stereotypical abstract figures, such as grids and Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1988) found the same figures to be extensively used both in Southern African rock art and in Western European Palaeolithic cave art.

It is plausible that Southern African rock art was related to shamanistic trance experiences, and Lewis-Williams and Dowson argue that the same may have been the case for some Palaeolithic art. In both art forms, representations of monsters occur. If it is true that the art was inspired by hallucinations, these monsters might of course originate in visions of animals transforming into humans.

A somewhat different link between monsters and hallucinations is suggested by René Girard, who holds that human cultures bear the imprint of original chaotic conflicts. Such violent crises would have provided the context for experiences of the monstrous:

"En s'accélération, la réciprocité conflictuelle ne suscite pas seulement l'impression encore vraie de comportements identiques chez les antagonistes, mais elle décompose le perçu, elle se fait vertigineuse. Les monstres doivent résulter d'une fragmentation du perçu, d'une décomposition suivie d'une recombinaison qui ne tient pas compte des spécificités naturelles. Le monstre est une hallucination instable qui tend rétrospectivement à se cristalliser en formes stables, en fausses spécificités monstrueuses, du fait que la remémoration s'effectue dans un monde à nouveau stabilisé" (Girard, 1989 [1982] : 52).

Some observations seem to support Girard's assumption that the monstrous is somehow related to violent crises. For example, Georges Bataille remarks that a book on monsters by a certain Launay appeared in 1651, "c'est-à-dire à une époque de calamités publiques" (Bataille, 1970 [1930]). Baudelaire, discussing the work of some caricaturists, comments that "cette prodigieuse floraison de monstruosité coïncide de la manière la plus singulière avec la fameuse et historique épidémie des sorciers" (Baudelaire, 1956 [1857]). In a more general sense, Thomson argues that the grotesque "tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation" (Thomson, 1979 [1972] : 11).

While Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1988) believe that monstrous creatures might originate in shamanistic rituals, Girard relates them to spontaneous violence. Perhaps these approaches are not as mutually exclusive as they might seem at first sight, as the shamanistic dances of Southern African bushmen illustrate. Social tensions may provide the occasion for holding such dances, and when bushmen describe what they experience while being in trance, they sometimes use the word 'fight' (Marshall, 1969). This is far from an innocent metaphor. Bushmen are very careful not to cause conflicts, but sometimes conflicts do escalate and people get killed. Lee has calculated that these incidental conflicts add up to a homicide rate comparable to that of 'America's most troubled urban

centres' (Lee, 1979 : 398). If ritual trances are described as a 'fight', they are thus associated with a very real threat of spontaneous violence.

## Humor and terror

The inspiration for depicting monsters may or may not derive from hallucinogenic experience. A different matter is what makes the monstrous so significant that it is depicted all over the world. Girard's theory suggests that monsters are associated with violence. On the other hand, John Morreall (1989) holds that incongruity is the *sine qua non* for humor; humor would essentially consist of amusement at incongruent situations.

If Morreall is right, this would either suggest that the monstrous is much more innocent than Girard thinks, or that humor is much less innocent than it is often thought to be. And it even gets more complicated if one accepts that there may be something funny about 'primitive' monstrous art: "Are we justified in regarding totem-poles as grotesque when it is highly likely, indeed in many cases certain, that their creators did not feel this way about them?" (Thomson, 1979 [1972] : 69).

According to Morreall, it makes a great difference under what circumstances incongruity is experienced. He sees humor as a 'sophisticated' reaction to incongruity, which is only possible on the basis of a 'disengaged' attitude. Incongruity is only funny when you are not preoccupied with the practical consequences it might have. "The human [...] could find the incongruous antelope/human funny largely because she could realize that it was only an appearance - her mate had not actually become a monster, that's only how he looked" (Morreall, 1989). Without such a disengaged attitude, incongruity would appear as disturbing and fearsome.

Morreall assumes that withdrawal at gross incongruity is a natural reaction. This reaction would have been produced by evolution, for it is often advantageous to avoid situations that clash too much with previous experience. Indeed, fear of incongruity has been related to children's fear of strangers, which seems to have a similar function (Schaffer, 1966).

Girard has another explanation for the supposedly threatening character of the monstrous. For one thing, it would be associated with the violent crises in which, according to his theory, experiences of the monstrous originate. On the other hand he argues that the monstrous violates the distinctions of normal life. By association it would also be seen as a threat to the distinctions on which social order is based. However, Girard's interpretation of the monstrous is a bit more complicated, for the monstrous

would not only be associated with conflicts but also with their resolution.

The above-mentioned conflicts among Southern African bushmen may end when someone gets killed. The victim need not to be one of the participants in the actual conflict, in fact, a completely innocent bystander may be the one to get killed (Lee, 1979 : 392). This may be shocking, but according to Girard it is far from exceptional. On the contrary, the 'scapegoat mechanism' would be a very stereotypical way in which human conflicts are resolved and would provide the basis for stable societies. After unanimity has been restored, the victim would be perceived as having been instrumental both in causing and in resolving the conflict. An ambiguous power would therefore be ascribed to the victim. Interestingly, victims are often described in hindsight as monsters, both in a moral and in a physical sense (Girard, 1989 [1982] : 53 ff.).

Through Bataille's theory, this association of monsters and victims becomes relevant for art. Bataille holds that art creates a sovereign reality by destroying its subject, by turning it into something monstrous. He compares this technique to the sacrificial destruction of human or animal victims (Bataille, 1988 [1949], 1979 [1955] : 138 ff.).

At this point, it may be good to abandon these speculations for a while in order to look at empirical research of reactions to incongruity. Unfortunately, little research of such a kind has been done. However, Berlyne (1963) has done a series of experiments in order to find out how people react to patterns of varying complexity and among the depictions he used was a set designed to elicit reactions to incongruity. Half of these consisted of normal animals, the other half of incongruous depictions such as that of a feline with an elephant's head. He found that the incongruous depictions are rated significantly more often both as 'displeasing' and as 'interesting'.

## Ingredients of the monstrous

Berlyne used combinations of different animals to construct incongruous depictions. However, this may not be the best way to investigate the monstrous qualities of incongruity. Theoretically, one could use whatever objects one wants to create a monster, but in reality it is far from irrelevant what elements constitute it. For one thing, a monster should preferably more or less resemble a human being :

"Only a human being or a humanoid can be a true monster. No monstrous cupboard, chair, plant or teapot could engender real fear, horror and fascination all at once. The essential condition for a monster is that the human characteristics it

possesses must not be changed too far” (Reichardt, 1994).

A similar view is expressed by Ortega y Gasset, even though he does not explicitly refer to monsters. Art, he argues, should ‘dehumanize’ its subject. However, this does not mean that human characteristics should be completely absent. On the contrary, a work of art should show the process of dehumanization; the ‘strangled victim’ should still be visible (Ortega y Gasset, 1993 [1908-76] : 65).

It is possible to construct monsters out of just human elements. One could think for example of Janus-heads showing incompatible expressions, or of hermaphrodites containing incompatible sexual characteristics. However, more often monsters are created by adding non-human characteristics. Krestovsky stresses the importance of an animal component: “L’animal divinisé est à la base de toute création artistique, sous les formes les plus impressionnantes et les plus fantastiques” (Krestovsky, 1947 : 52). Girard sums it all up: “Pour être vraiment ‘l’inquiétante étrangeté’, un monstre doit tenir à la fois de l’homme et de l’animal” (Girard, 1993 [1990] : 106). Indeed, the combination man-animal is probably the most widespread type of monster.

## The beauty of the beast

One approach to explaining the popularity of monsters combining human and animal features may be to look at concepts of human beauty. It is of course well-known that criteria for beauty vary from society to society, and from period to period. Still, Georges Bataille holds that the margins for variation are not as large as it is often assumed. According to him, it is possible to formulate some general principles of beauty and ugliness: “L’aversion de ce qui, chez un être humain, rappelle la forme animale est certaine. En particulier, l’aspect de l’anthropoïde est odieux” (Bataille, 1985 [1957] : 159). Beauty would be the opposite of animal ugliness:

“Plus les formes sont irréelles, moins clairement elles sont assujetties à la vérité animale, à la vérité physiologique du corps humain, mieux elles répondent à l’image assez généralement répandue de la femme désirable” (ibid.).

However, there is more to it than that. According to Bataille, beauty would be meaningless and sterile if the effacement of the animal inside were complete. For beauty to be effective, it must ultimately refer to some shameful and disturbing animal presence. This leads him to attach special significance to body hair.

This preoccupation with body hair is not one of Bataille’s private obsessions. It is for example reflected in Schmid’s explanation for the fact that Palaeolithic cave art depicts humans naked. The only clothing available were furs, argues Schmid, and therefore humans would only be clearly distinguishable from animals if they were naked (Schmid, 1984). As will be shown below, there is more to the relation between animals and Palaeolithic depictions of humans than just that, but for now that is not important. Hair that humans grow themselves may also receive special attention. For example, in many cultures touching one’s beard is considered a threatening gesture, and in art it is often combined with other gestures expressing a threat (Eibl-Eibesfeldt and Sütterlin, 1985). And to consider one more example: the Colombian Tukano Indians suspect very dangerous pathogenic germs to be present at their sacred places; these germs are “conceived of in terms of pubic hair” (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1968 : 55).

Bataille’s assumption that this preoccupation with body hair has something to do with the fact that it obscures the boundary between man and beast may be sound. However, these examples also show that the significance of this lack of distinction is not just of an aesthetic nature. Bataille would hold that aesthetic and moral values are hard to distinguish when the difference between man and animal is at stake.

It is very well possible that Bataille’s views on this matter were inspired by Lydie Krestovsky’s book *Le problème spirituel de la beauté et de la laideur*, of which he wrote a review (Bataille, 1988 [1949]). Krestovsky discusses ‘ugliness’ in a broad sense, including the monstrous. This is what she writes about it:

“La Laideur morale ramène l’homme à la vie réelle, en brisant le monde factice que crée une oeuvre d’art tendant vers le Beau. La Laideur dans l’Art c’est le désir de reproduire ce réel, de surprendre l’homme à ses moments de défection, d’extraire son essence animale. Rendre la Bête Humaine, qui habite chaque homme, dans sa nudité cruelle, est le but déguisé ou évident de tout analyste qui cherche à créer une oeuvre d’art” (Krestovsky, 1948 : 51).

## ‘Une violence animale’

Animals are feared for quite practical reasons. Predators may pose a real threat, while fear of disgusting animals (snakes, leeches, cockroaches) is related to fear of contamination (Ware *et al.*, 1994). However, Bataille would hold that humans also distrust animals for more complex reasons.

In Western European Palaeolithic cave art, there is a strange difference in style between depictions of animals and those of men (e.g., Clottes, 1989). Animals are generally speaking executed in a naturalistic way, and often the species can be determined. Humans on the other hand are drawn in a much more sketchy manner and in many cases animal features have been added. Bataille thought that this difference had not received the attention it deserved, and wrote a book on it (Bataille, 1992 [1955]). This book, incidentally, neither received the attention it deserves (Kloosterboer, 1994).

Palaeolithic depictions of monsters are heterogeneous in style and generally occupy marginal locations of the caves. Leroi-Gourhan (1983) assumes that they somehow reflect Palaeolithic thinking and culture, but he is hesitant to speculate about their meaning:

“Il est encore trop tôt (si cela doit se produire un jour) pour attacher un sens aux monstres pariétaux des cavernes. L'impression qui se dégage est celle de la multiplicité des formes et des situations. Peut-on d'ailleurs traiter dans le même sujet des témoins aussi disparates que ceux qui n'ont en commun que le caractère insolite de leur composition ?”

Bataille's interest in prehistoric art was not only raised by what it depicts and how, but also by when these depictions were made. In some very broad (and perhaps somewhat imprecise) sense, one could argue that the origin of art coincides with the origin of mankind. Bataille sees prehistoric art as a reflection of the fact that humans began to think of themselves as humans, as opposed to animals.

Among the archaeological findings that provide some insight into this development are those of probable burial sites. However risky the interpretation of such findings may be (Perlès, 1982), they do suggest that death had some kind of special significance for those who buried the dead. Bataille feels that it is safe to assume that death inspired fear, that some sort of taboo regarding death existed.

According to Bataille, taboos are rules that define the profane, the rational, the instrumental, by defining as

prohibited and dangerous all that escapes control. Girard's theory assigns a similar but somewhat more precise function to prohibitions, by arguing that they essentially serve to avoid situations that might lead to escalating violence (Girard, 1983 [1972] : 324-5). Both would agree that prohibitions make human culture possible by stressing the danger of the uncontrollable. However, this implies that culture could not exist without the threat of the prohibited. Therefore, the prohibited is not only seen as dangerous, but it also has some elusive kind of value; in short, it coincides with the sacred.

Now, prohibitions are typically human and, what is more, they are often used to distinguish men from animals. The BaKongo for example compare incest to the behaviour of dogs. Incidentally, they reject eating salads on similar grounds: “Am I a goat that you put raw greens in front of me?” (quoted in MacGaffey, 1986 : 122). Many more examples could be given of peoples that in some way argue that man is no animal, and that therefore he should abide by the rules (Kloosterboer, 1994 : nt. 13). On the other hand, Evil is often referred to as The Beast - in the Bible, for example. It is understandable that this type of argument is often used, considering that animals do not seem to care much about what humans feel to be not done. Bataille argues that there must have been a time when the distinction between men and animals was not yet as clear as today. In this situation, the behaviour of animals must have been all the more disconcerting. The fact that animals transgress prohibitions may have been a reason to associate them with the disturbing qualities of the sacred.

This could be an explanation for the fact that prehistoric man depicted mostly animals. It could also explain why he apparently only considered humans a suitable subject if they were ‘adorned with the prestige of the beast’, as Bataille describes the addition of animal features. In a more general sense, the disturbing qualities of the beast might explain why the mixture of human and animal features is apparently considered such a powerful technique that it is a favorite type of monstrosity in art all over the world.

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