

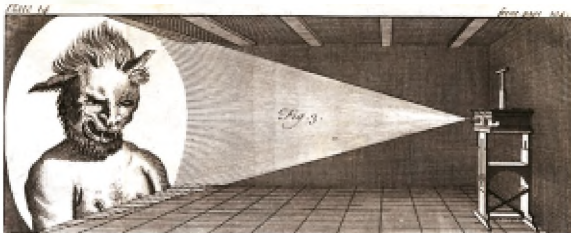
The Magic Lantern

THESE MONSTERS ARE REAL

Nicole Mollett

By the time Paul de Philipsthal coined the term 'phantasmagoria' in 1792¹ the magic lantern was already nearly 150 years old and frightening images were clearly popular. Kircher's diagrams from 1671² (see page 9) show a skeletal 'Grim Reaper' and figure in hellfire, and Willem Jacob Storm van 's Gravesande in 1720³ depicts a magic lantern projecting an image of a satyr – a fine monster (Fig. 1). But the phantasmagoria shows only really became 'all the rage' at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, coinciding with the Gothic revival, and Philipsthal himself performed in London alongside Madame Tussaud's exhibits.

Phantasmagoria shows included devils, skeletons, ghosts and strange mythical beasts which were skilfully rendered using fine brush strokes on glass. They were back-projected on screens, often animated using trickery such as moving projectors, smoke and mirrors. The aim was to convince the audience of their authenticity. These hand-painted visions were frightening, comical and gloriously grotesque.



1. Magic lantern projecting satyr by van 's Gravesande, 1720³

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Conjuring up supernatural beings from beyond the grave has long been a form of public entertainment. Whether through the magic lantern, on the stage, or in fairy tales and paintings, a menagerie of beasts and monsters have always had a place in society's collective imagination. But do these diabolical creatures still have cultural significance today, and why are we still so fascinated by them?

Monsters have captured my own imagination since I was a small girl, as they still do with most children I know. I vividly remember being terrified by the zombie dancers in Michael Jackson's *Thriller* music video, and enchanted by the goblins of the 1986 film *Labyrinth* (created by Jim Henson) in which David Bowie starred as the Goblin King Jareth. Monsters inhabit our collective imaginations, living in fantasy worlds, maps and nightmares, where they dance in the margins and hide in the dark.

Natalie Lawrence explains in her essay 'What is a Monster?' that the word itself comes from the Latin word *monstrare* meaning 'to demonstrate', and *monere*, meaning 'to warn'.⁴ A monster is the opposite of normal. It is a creature with strange, misshapen, ugly, or grotesque features – be they bulging eyes, claws, horns, spikes, hair or feathers. There is a whole spectrum of possible attributes which can transform an ordinary being into something monstrous.

One of my favourite examples of a monster is a small curious hybrid creature on display at the Horniman Museum, once called the Japanese Monkey-fish or 'Ningyo' (Fig. 2).⁵ Mermaids and mermen have had a place in Japanese culture for thousands of years, with a long history of mummified mermaids in Shinto shrines and temples. X-rays and DNA testing of the Horniman specimen revealed it to be constructed of a mixture of materials including fin ray bones, wood, clay, papier-mâché and fish teeth. This kind of model was originally created by Japanese fishermen as a talisman to ward off evil spirits or plagues. From the 17th century onwards, they were sold to be displayed in cabinets of curiosities or to travelling sideshows for public entertainment. The merman's expression is of menacing glee and its fingers end in claws with an animated posture. The charm of this object lies in its absurd mixture of both fragility and wickedness.

The Ningyo demonstrates that a monster is a kind of visual device or metaphor, used to articulate our fears and manifest our subconscious worries which we have yet to fully comprehend and control. Yet our modern understanding of the monster is so very different from that of the medieval and Renaissance period. Nowadays we live in a disenchanted world, myths and the supernatural are questioned, and it is no longer assumed that every living being is created by a God. Nature is something to be dissected and defined by science.

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2. The Japanese 'Ningyo' at the Horniman Museum in London



3. Sea-witch slides, hand-painted by Nicole Mollett in 2014

However the ancient symbol of the monster remains. We know these beasts are not real, yet paradoxically we are still enchanted by them. As Natalie Lawrence writes: "Such monsters are images that embody the cultural or psychological characteristics that we as a society find difficult to acknowledge. By excising them, through fantastical narratives, we rid ourselves of the undesirable attributes they are perceived to carry."

In *Imaginary Animals*, Boria Sax writes: "All imaginary animals, and to some degree all animals, are ultimately both monsters and wonders, which assist us by deflecting and absorbing our uncertainties."⁶ Thus the monsters and folklore revered by a culture reveal something of their moral and philosophical beliefs. We use monsters to talk about difficult subject matter and can on some levels be understood by the monsters we choose to imagine.

The nature of how we perceive and use monsters has changed over time. Monsters can provide a safe space in which to escape the realities of modern life. The growing appetite for monsters is demonstrated well by the popularity of the TV series *Game of Thrones* or the film series *Fantastic Beasts*. Monsters are often represented as a positive force for good. For example, Pokémon (short for 'pocket monsters'), a Japanese game and card collecting craze featuring a wide range of monsters, began in the late 1990s and has grown into a global phenomenon. In the game the players harness the unique powers of Pokémon to strengthen and protect themselves from attack – the more Pokémon monsters you own, the more powerful you become. The monster transforms to become a friend. As the catchphrase of the main character Ash, in the Pokémon film, says "I choose you!"

The magic lantern slide monsters I paint, some shown here, are influenced by a range of medieval paintings and prints. From Hieronymus Bosch and Brueghel, to ancient church carvings, I am always on the hunt for a good monster. I prefer to humanise my beasts. I want them to be both grotesque and subversive, but also relatable in

their strangeness. The monsters I create aim to seduce and repel viewers in equal measure.

One example is the sea-witch slides I painted for a performance on the Isle of Sheppey in 2014 (Fig. 3). These slides explore the idea of the monstrous feminine. Part woman, part fish, I tried to make them as gnarled and sensual as possible. Representing a woman's body as a place of magic and witchcraft, showing imperfections such as hairiness, slime and excessive voluptuousness is still considered controversial. So enlisting the help of a few monsters to exorcise any residual prejudices my audiences might harbour seems an appropriate tool to use.



Green dragon slide by Carpenter & Westley, c.1840 (Lester Smith Collection)



Revolving faces, rackwork slide by W.C. Hughes, c.1880 (Martin Gilbert Collection)

I believe monsters can be used as a way of talking about our complicated human psychology. By projecting our flaws onto imaginary beings it is easier for us to digest our communal truths. Far from being a primitive expression of culture, monsters are a sophisticated mechanism with which we can understand ourselves. Therefore in many ways these monsters which we project using a magic lantern ... are real.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

Where not otherwise credited, the slide images in this article are hand-painted magic lantern slides by Nicole Mollett.

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3. Willem Jacob Storm van 's Gravesande, *Physices elementa mathematica*, 1720
4. Natalie Lawrence, University of Cambridge, www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/what-is-a-monster. See also her other writings on monsters at www.nataliejlawrence.com
5. Tyne and Wear Museum, *Roll up, roll up. See the mermaid!*, blog post 2014 blog.twmuseums.org.uk/roll-up-roll-up-see-the-mermaid
6. Boria Sax, *Imaginary Animals: The monstrous, the wondrous and the human*, Reaktion Books, London, 2013



Carpenter & Westley slide, c.1840 (Lester Smith Collection)

