

A1. Title of study

Inviting the monster: seeking to centralise deviance and aberration within the practice of communication design

A2. What do you want to research and with what end in mind?

Seeking to explore artefacts and ideas that don't fit neatly into commercial practice or industry-dominated design discourses, this research program aims to locate and support speculation, failure, fear and luck within traditionally linear and pseudo-scientific notions of a 'proper' design process. The loose-ends in/of one's practice—accidents, failures, the half-formed, and the unfinished—are reconsidered as metaphorical 'monsters', valuable aberrations transgressing the borders or boundaries of familiar forms and processes.

Through their very existence, monsters embody a critique of that which they are other to. The notion of critique as implied by monstrosity frames this research. Motivating the practitioner to review habits of practice, my own monsters will posit questions as to the value of guess-work, imperfection, chance, and failure as transformative and generative gestures within creative practice. Through inviting the monster we encourage mistakes. That design learns from being wrong is central to this study.

Expanding the horrific metaphor, this investigation into the 'dark-side' of design, seeks out the excitement of risk, the exhilaration of fear, and the thrill of being exposed. Focusing this study on the practitioner, the designer as 'Mad Scientist'—irreverent, outsider of society, a 'neomaniac', creator of monstrosity—will be explored. In this sense the monster is reclaimed, no longer a by-product of play, exploration, and experimentation, but precisely the point of it.

A3. How will you conduct your research?

As a practice based research programme, initially following a poetic research methodology¹, the field of inquiry has developed through an evolutionary process where earlier projects, designed to explore initial 'triggers', led sequentially into more refined and cohesive projects. In many instances, however, my thinking became more divergent than convergent. To some extent it was this methodology, in particular, that pointed to the value of the monster within trajectories of evolution.

As such, I am now in the process of developing projects through which the metaphor of the monster, and its value to design, can be formed, deformed, mutated and refined. Initially I am looking at precedents for this work, while also documenting a previous project of my own (McCahon font) within the framework of monstrosity. Future projects will be developed out of the loose ends and connections found and fabricated through the process of this documentation.

Due to the hybrid nature of my current practice, precedents for my work will come from various sources, generally located within popular culture. Initially Wolfgang Weingart, then April Greiman and Dan Friedman are influential as their work charts an early critique of the dominant narrative of Modernism in graphic design. Subsequently, the work of west coast American schools, Cal Arts and Cranbrook in the 1990s, is of specific importance to the critical nature of my research. Of particular interest here is Elliot Earls—especially in relation to investigating the role of the designer as ‘Mad Scientist’. The typographic projects of ‘LettError’—Dutch graphic designers Just van Rossum and Erik van Blokland—are influential in their use, or more importantly, mis-use of technology.

The photographs of Diane Arbus and the films of Tod Browning are of interest in their quest to utilise deformity and revulsion within creative practices more generally concerned with the quest for beauty. Musicians and performers such as Hasil Adkins, Lee Scratch Perry, Tav Falco, Jon Spencer, The Cramps, King Tubby, Jack Starr, Marilyn Manson, Grand Master Flash, Michael Jackson, The Mad Professor, and (of course) Elvis Presley are seen as model practitioners within this research program.

My use of the ‘monster’ is currently informed by Colin Nazhone Milburn’s² text on monstrosity in the work of Darwin and Derrida, indicating the relevance of the monster to evolutionary thought. Jeffery Jerome Cohen³, Margaret Tarratt⁴, and David J.Skal⁵ have influenced and informed my attempts to begin to define monstrosity through an exploration of its existence as a mutating metaphor within the narratives of popular culture. While I have drawn many of my references and ideas from horror and science-fiction films of the twentieth-century, I would like, also, to look at literary monsters of the nineteenth-century and see how (or if?) these monsters changed or evolved in relation to the Industrial Revolution. In relation to ‘technological monsters’ I am interested in Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto”, and the cyborg—a hybrid meeting of biology and technology—as a contemporary monster. Also the virus, both literally and metaphorically, as a biological and technological threat, and thus a very contemporary fear, will be posited as a ‘monster’ within this topic.

A4. Why is this research worth doing?

Specifically interested in the way discourse effects practice, and vice-versa, this research programme aims to critique the dominance of linear, problem-solving paradigms in design discourse. In seeking to centralise deviance and aberration within the practice of communication design I hope to develop and support a discursive space in which the ‘offensive’ by-products of a design practice might be further explored, understood, and valued.

¹ Terence Rosenberg **The Reservoir**, 2002

² Colin Nazhone Milburn **Monsters in Eden: Darwin and Derrida**, 2003

³ Jeffery Jerome Cohen, **Monster Theory**

⁴ Margaret Tarratt **Monsters From The Id**

⁵ David J.Skal **The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror**

The focus of this research is on the practitioner. It's value will be in it's ability to provoke a discourse that is derived from, and sympathetic to creative practice. In this respect I will be aiming to feed my research into both professional practice and design education. As professional designers increasingly play second fiddle to market-research and focus-groups, and as educational institutions bow to pressure from funding bodies to become increasingly more industry-focused and vocationally oriented, the language of pragmatism begins to obfuscate the importance of room for play, exploration, and experimentation in what is, still, essentially a creative practice.

In this sense, I am, personally, interested in developing a more open-ended and exploratory practice unrestricted by requirements for beauty, utility, and pre-meditated explanation.

A5. What will you produce?

The projects within this research programme will develop and explore the monstrous metaphor and its potential, or validity, within the design process. Projects will investigate certain questions posed by their undertaking. What is a monster? How to make a monster? Why make a monster? How to talk about monsters?

At this stage I conceive of two 'types' of project. Initially a project (or projects) investigating the potential of chance, mis-hap, and failure to produce 'positive' results within the design process—generative gestures within the conceptualising and rendering of the designed artefact.

Secondly, and alongside this inquiry, I wish to investigate the interactive 'half-life' of the designed artefact. In this respect a documentation project reflecting on the offensive behaviour of a previous project (my McCahon typeface), is intended to unpack and develop this particular notion of monstrosity. I am interested specifically in the creation of typefaces in that they exist as means to ends—ends which the designer, generally, can never completely preconceive or control.

Seeking the hybridisation and mutation of familiar forms and processes, technology, as a physical and/or ideological creator of monsters, will play an important role within the projects I develop. My own naivety and lack of technological know-how will qualify my ability to make mistakes and 'get lucky'.

Text. Writing, as a discursive process, is an increasingly motivating method within my own research practice. Communicating this research through writing will attempt to derive theory from practice, and reciprocally, input into discourse. In my aim to centralise deviance and abberation within the practice of communication design, it is understood that interaction with discourse will be imperative.

A6. Attach a concisely selected preliminary list of readings and references.

Milburn, Colin Nazhone, 2003. *Monsters in Eden: Darwin and Derrida*. MLN 118 (2003): 603–621. John Hopkins University Press.

Skal, David J., 1993. *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*. Faber and Faber Inc., New York (2001).

Cohen, Jeffery Jerome, 1996. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Tarratt, Margaret, 19???. *Monsters from the Id*. [Get this title of John C?](#)

Middendorp, Jan, 19??. "LettError, or The Ghost in the Machine", in *ABCDutch Type*. [Get this title off Galina](#)

Marcus, Greil, 1989. *Lipstick traces: a secret history of the twentieth century*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Marcus, Greil, 1991. *Dead Elvis: a chronicle of a cultural obsession*. Doubleday, New York.

Gerber, Anna, 2004. *All Messed Up: Unpredictable Graphics*. [Publisher . . . ?](#)

Harraway, Donna, 1991. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century, in *Simeons, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* 149–181. Routledge, New York.

Voithofer, R.J., 1999. "Addressing The Cyborg in Educational New Media Design". Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) National Conference, Montreal, Canada (April 1999). [Get www ref for this paper?](#)
