1. Introduction: the monstrous organization

What are these things of mine, in truth, but grotesque and monstrous bodies?
(Montaigne in Essais)

Whoever fights monsters should see to it that, in the process, he does not become a monster.

(Nietzsche in Beyond Good and Evil)

When starting work on this book I was sitting one evening in our rented apartment in Northampton, Massachusetts, purposelessly switching channels on the television. I hit the History Channel and the series Monster Quest. While this evening’s show was about a ‘monster search for giant squid’ the size of a whale in the Californian Gulf, the series included upcoming shows on Big Foot, mutant canines and giant ‘birdzillas’. Incidentally, next I hit the documentary series Bridezillas on the Women’s Entertainment channel, showing ‘enraged’, ‘difficult’ and ‘demanding’ women during their wedding preparations. Indeed, the world is full of monsters. Folklore and folktales across the world are crowded with two-headed trolls, dragons and sea-monsters, ghosts, witches and wizards. The film industry projects images and stories about frightening and powerful cyborg mixtures of humans, animals and machines in horror movies and science fiction movies. The music business thrives on demonic iconography in monster rock, the events industry produces monster truck shows, and television corporations regularly broadcast documentaries about conjoined twins, hermaphrodites and sex change operations. Even the business press makes big headlines by reporting on Citigroup as ‘Sandy Weill’s monster’ (Fortune, 2001), Enron’s ‘monster mess’ (Fortune, 2002) and the need to cage the inflation monster (BusinessWeek Online, 2007).

The academic world abounds in monsters too. A recent literature search yielded more than 800 references after 1986 to monsters and monstrous phenomena across the natural sciences, humanities and social sciences, in news reports and business magazines – from the zoology of Godzilla (Christiansen, 2000), the biomedicine of monster cells (e.g., Goodman et al., 2002; Boyd et al., 2005) and holomorphic monsters in mathematics (e.g., Luh, 1988), via studies of Frankenstein’s monster in literary history.

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e.g., Lamb, 1992) and monstrous aspects of gender, sexuality and motherhood in feminist research (e.g., Halberstam, 1995; Russell, 2000; Shildrick, 2002; Ussher, 2006), to a sociology of monsters in actor-network theory (Law, 1991a) and monstrous futures in finance (King, 1999). Limiting this search to organization theory yields references to hopeful monsters (Du Gay, 1994), the monstrous aspects of multiple membership in private and organizational life (Munro, 2001) and rational calculation as a monstrous discipline (Clegg, 2005).

Whether or not these things really are monsters, we often view them as monsters because they are seen to disrupt moral, morphological or magnitudinal boundaries – that is, boundaries of good and evil, shape, and size. These monsters are monstrous because they are extraordinarily evil, extraordinarily shaped, or extraordinarily large. This finds resonance in The New Oxford Dictionary of English. Here, a monster or monstrosity is a thing, animal, or ‘imaginary creature that is typically large, ugly, and frightening’, ‘an inhumanly cruel or wicked person’, or ‘a person, typically a child, who is rude or badly behaved’. In addition, a monster can be ‘a thing or animal that is excessively or dauntingly large’ or ‘a congenitally malformed or mutant animal or plant’. Similarly, monstrous is that which has ‘the ugly or frightening appearance of a monster’, but it is also associated with evil, wrongdoing and excessive size. In conclusion, monsters, monstrosities and the monstrous are seen to disrupt the boundaries of the normal, whether a matter of size, shape or morality.

Elaborating on the relationship between the monstrous and the enormous, Canguilhem (1962: 28) argues that ‘both are well beyond the norm’, but that the enormous merely escapes the norm in a metric sense. What makes the enormous monstrous, however, is that ‘after a certain degree of growth quality becomes questionable’. Hypothetically assuming that ‘man is defined by a certain limitation of forces and functions’, Canguilhem adds that ‘the man whose largeness carries him beyond the limitations of man is no longer a man’. The enormous, then, is monstrous to the extent that it disrupts the normal boundaries of human size and magnitude.

But some of the monsters above are monstrous in a further sense – insofar as their disruption of boundaries makes them heterogeneous. Hermaphrodites are monstrous insofar as they are both female and male. Cyborgs are monstrous insofar as they are both human, animal and machine. Pregnant mothers are monstrous insofar as their bodies contain both mother and child. Other people are monstrous insofar as we enjoy multiple roles, identities and memberships in multiple contexts. And we are monstrous rather than purely human insofar as other organisms and artefacts – shoes, spectacles and mobile phones, the hair on our heads and
the bacteria in our colons – are part of us. Indeed, life itself is monstrous insofar as it has evolved through symbiotic relations between thousands of different microbes (Margulis and Sagan, 1997).

The danger of this argument, of course, is that it may lead to an inflation in monsters whereby everything is rendered monstrous. Five hundred years ago, the storyteller François de Belleforest raised a similar concern. While authoring the third volume of *Les Histoires Prodigieuses* (1575) and stating that ‘the present time is more monstrous than natural’ (quoted in Davidson, 1991: 41), Belleforest ‘worried that if the term “monstrous” was applied indiscriminately to everything that was merely rare, it would lose its primary signification as a portent’ (Daston and Park, 1998: 198). But despite the risk of exaggerating the level of monstrous phenomena in the world and reducing the monstrous to a metaphor for anything rare and heterogeneous, as moderns – and as organization theorists – there is more reason to worry that the monstrous is ignored, suppressed and excluded from scholarly investigation. Still, some things are more monstrous than others. And while drawing attention to the monsters in every one of us, this book will also explore how some people are deemed more monstrous than others because they live radically different lives with radically different bodies.

The modern invention of organization theory and the organizations it studies enjoy an ambivalent relationship to monsters and the monstrous. Although organizations and organization theory mostly turn a blind eye to the monstrous, they also seek to tame, kill or exclude it. Indeed, it may be argued that the very act of organization is an act of taming, killing and excluding the monstrous. As organizations continue to be defined as formal, bounded entities, organization is tied up with the drawing and maintenance of boundaries – within organizations and between organizations and their outside environments. This might be known as ‘hosophobia’, ‘a fear of dirt or a fear of the impure’ (Kaulingfreks and ten Bos, 2005: 85). Most organizations still operate through a hierarchical division of labour wherein monstrous impurity, heterogeneity, disorder and confusion are inhibited through vertical boundaries separating different divisions and departments and horizontal boundaries separating managers and workers. And they still pursue a pure, distinct, united and homogeneous identity to avoid being polluted, diffused and confused with other organizations and with the environment at large. On its part, and despite its multidisciplinary roots and ongoing exploitation of other disciplines, organization theory organizes itself by continuing to assert the immutability and impenetrability of its own disciplinary boundaries, typically restricting itself to study what goes on inside and between formal organizations. This is why organizations and organization theory often seek to
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kill and exclude anything – that is, anything monstrous – that threatens to disrupt their boundaries.

As organization theory and organizations kill the monstrous, one may argue with Nietzsche that organization theory – and the organizations it studies – become monstrous themselves. For Nietzsche, whoever fights monsters risks becoming a monster because the very act of fighting is itself monstrously evil. While seeking to fight evil, do good and protect the moral order, you disrupt the boundaries of the very same moral order that you seek to protect. Fighting evil, you enact the very violence that makes you evil. Through the example of the science fiction Alien trilogy, Parker (2000: 78) problematizes the ethical distinction between monsters outside organizations and monsters inside organizations. Here, the alien monster is from the outset an enemy of the organization named ‘the Company’. The Company, which owns all human life, seeks to extinguish the alien while pursuing its corporate strategy of ‘Building Better Worlds’. But as the monster feeds on the organization’s attempt to extinguish it, the organization wants to make use of the monster on planet earth by impregnating humans with alien eggs to create alien clones that can help it seize further control over humans. This suggests that organizations may not only become monstrously immoral and unethical through organizational malpractice and misbehaviour that deviate from their formal goals and procedures (see e.g., Schudt, 2000). Organizations may also become monstrous in this sense by actively pursuing and complying with their formal goals and procedures.

Still, organization theory and organizations may become monstrous for a number of other reasons. While seeking to kill monsters, organizations also seek to exploit monsters. Organizations exploit and consume monsters in consuming all the heterogeneous matter that goes into their production of goods and services. Organizations consume matter and energy, people and animals, plants and micro-organisms, which prior to their consumption were monstrous rather than organized. And with exploitation comes organization and transformation. While exploiting the monstrous, organizations tend to remove it of its monstrosity, heterogeneity and instability – de-monstrating it, homogenizing it, stabilizing it, organizing it and transforming it into something else entirely. Organizations transform matter into fuel, furniture and jewellery; they harness energy into nuclear power, labour power and decision-making power; they shape people into patients and clients, consumers and human resources; they turn animals into food, pets and lab subjects; they make bodily waste into body lotions and fertilizers; and they convert ideas and whims into knowledge, skills, techniques and innovations. In addition, organizations exploit the monstrous while seeking to produce monsters.
The agriculture and biotech industries produce monsters that disrupt the boundaries between different species and phyla, as in genetically modified foods aimed for daily consumption and lab mice aimed for research and development purposes. And as hinted above, organizations in various parts of the entertainment industry exploit a monstrous symbolic for commercial purposes. Publishing houses produce children’s books about furry monsters with big sharp teeth and the film industry produces science fiction movies and horror movies about monsters from outer space that, part organic part machine, creep into and eat our bodies from the inside out.

Yet other organizations thrive in monstrous borderlands. The US–Mexico border is both an international centre of drug trafficking and allegedly host to the world’s largest production facilities for clothing hangers. National border zones such as international airport terminals continue to expand as havens for shopping and consumption. Computer manufacturers, textile manufacturers and automobile manufacturers engage in arbitrage – the exploitation of differences in different markets – by locating factories in South East Asia, call centres and software programming in India and retail shops in Western Europe. And organizations in different industries seek strategic alliances to benefit from each other’s differences. Indeed, Monster.com does not merely brand itself as a monster, but recently entered into a monstrous alliance with the company Freedom Communications to connect job seekers with employers in order to strengthen its position as ‘The world’s leading career network’ and job search engine.

But it is not just organizations that are becoming monstrous. So is the study of organizations in organization theory, and not merely in the sense of becoming increasingly enormous, multidisciplinary and heterogeneous as an academic field. Organization theory too exploits, consumes and produces monsters, albeit typically without acknowledging it. It consumes monsters by studying monsters and monstrous organizations such as the ones above. Of course, these phenomena are rarely known as monstrous, because in order to make sense of them organization theory tends to demonstrate them in a reductionist fashion, organizing them according to familiar schemata and perspectives and translating them into familiar concepts and categories. Hence, monstrous borderlands become matters of market proximity or duty-free market zones, the exploitation of monstrous differences becomes arbitrage and monstrous alliances become strategic alliances.

A notable exception may be the Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism (SCOS). From its very beginning SCOS depicted collective organizational culture in the form of a green, vicious
and fire-spitting monster dragon. SCOS also named its working paper journal *Dragon*, and one of the early key SCOS members, Burkard Sievers (1990), has provided a thorough semiotic analysis of the history of the dragon and the symbolism of the dragon in the context of SCOS.³ In more recent years, however, the dragon seems to have drifted off into the SCOS periphery.

Further, organization theory produces monsters by excluding certain topics from investigation. These monstrous topics typically have to do with issues and problems that are seen to disrupt boundaries of organization, issues and problems that organizations seek to fight, kill and exclude. For instance, and despite some claims (but less evidence) to the contrary (see e.g., Baron, 2008; Heaphy and Dutton, 2008), the mainstream of organizational theorizing continues to exclude or at least marginalize issues of embodiment, emotion and sexuality, largely because people’s bodies, emotions and sexualities are seen to disrupt the rationality, efficiency and performance of organizations and the boundaries between organizational life and personal life.

Conversely, organization theory may produce monsters and become monstrous in a radically different way. Instead of reducing bodies, emotions and sexualities to matters of stress, emotional intelligence and stereotypical gender roles, a monstrous engagement may appreciate how bodies, emotions and sexualities disrupt and shift boundaries of social and organizational norms. Even though this book seeks to address the monstrous aspects of organizations and organization theory from a variety of angles, this particular focus may draw attention to what positively monstrous forms of organizing may look like and what a positively monstrous organization theory may involve by starting to explore issues that remain marginalized in organizations and equally marginalized in organization theory as an academic discipline.

I make no claims to pioneer any of these lines of inquiry. Organization theory is itself a multidisciplinary field, and during the past couple of decades organization theorists have sought inspiration beyond the usual reservoirs of psychology, sociology and economics, moving more deeply into the terrains of literary theory, cultural studies, film studies and philosophy (see e.g., Czarniawska, 1999; Parish and Parker, 2001; Linstead, 2004; Bell, 2008). Moreover, groundbreaking theoretical work on disorganization and the disruption of organization has been carried out by Cooper and others (see e.g., Cooper, 1986; Cooper and Burrell, 1988; Tsoukas, 1998). And whereas the study of gender in organizational life has become an established sub-field, issues of embodiment, emotion and sexuality have become lively areas of investigation in their own right, much because of important groundwork done by research on gender in
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organizations (see e.g., Calás, 1992; Calás and Smircich, 1992). Indeed, these issues, and how they relate to rules, routines, values and technologies in organizational life, are already attracting growing attention through studies of bisexuality, transgender and masochism (e.g., Brewis and Linstead, 2000; Linstead and Pullen, 2006; Schilt and Connell, 2007), cyborgization (Parker and Cooper, 1998; Parker, 2000; Land, 2004, 2006) and excess expressions of passion in organizational life (e.g., Brewis et al., 2006). Still, I do believe that exploring how the monstrous aspects of embodiment, emotion and sexuality disrupt, monstros, disorganize and enable organizations makes it possible to further flesh out the power of these phenomena in organizational life and thought.

I am therefore not suggesting a binary opposition between the monstrous and organization, monsters and organizations. Although the monstrous is often deemed dualistically opposed to organization, the clean cut that such an opposition presumes is untenable: as I have tried to argue above, organizations themselves become monstrous by trying to kill the monstrous and by exploiting the monstrous, and monsters may disrupt and create organizational structures and practices in such a way that organizations themselves become monstrous.

However, my interest in the monstrous and my journey into the monstrous borderlands of organizational life and organizational thought is also of a personal nature. My case is different from Montaigne’s, who was more interested in the monstrosities of his texts than in the monsters presented in his texts (Regosin, 1996). As a transgender person who may be seen to disrupt the boundaries between femininity and masculinity, I am a monster. In contradiction to dominant academic practice, I will therefore not in this book suppress or ignore issues related to my own monstrous embodiment, emotions and sexuality. Instead, and in line with certain feminist approaches (e.g., Dale, 2001; Pullen, 2006), I will draw on my own monstrosity whenever relevant to explore encounters between organizations, organization theory and their monsters. I am not unaware that this makes me open to attack from colleagues who may find my personal accounts an exercise in self-obsessed ego-trips and boring navel-gazing. But is there no difference between being personal and being self-obsessed? Whereas self-obsession would involve constructing myself as a fixed, bounded and homogeneous entity separate from and impervious to the rest of the world, is it not possible that being personal might shed light on my own contradictions, vulnerabilities and capacities, how these contradictions, vulnerabilities and capacities are shaped by the world I live in, and how they affect how I think about, write about and relate to this world? And is it not possible that appreciating rather than ignoring my own monstrosity may further our understanding about how monsters
disrupt and monstructure the boundaries and practices of organizations and organization theory?

Perhaps it is odd to insist on organization theory in this context – even organization studies would suggest a less abstract, less rationalist and less cognitivist approach (see Dale, 2001). But precluding organization theory from a more personal, embodied and monstrosus engagement would already presume that theorizing is an immutable and fixed activity. I therefore hope that a more personal, embodied and monstrosus engagement with organization, organizations and theories of organization may contribute towards making organization theory – and theorizing as such – into a less abstract, less rationalist and less cognitivist endeavour.

The cognitivist heritage of organization theory is a major target in this book. In Chapter 2 I attempt to go to the core of organization theory’s cognitivism to investigate how organizations and organization theory seek to organize the monstrosus by killing it and excluding it. I will trace this act of organizing back to the roots of organization theory as a discipline and to the everyday practices of contemporary organizations. In particular, I am interested in how the Cartesian mind/body dualism has been adopted by organizations and organization theory alike to get rid of anything that is seen to threaten their boundaries. While organizational principles such as the division of labour have a long track record in helping organizations kill monsters, organizations continue to kill monsters through this and other rationalist and cognitivist pursuits, from knowledge management to organizational culture, image and identity.

In Chapter 3, I then investigate how organizations seek to organize the monstrosus by exploiting it – that is, by consuming monsters, transforming monsters and producing monsters. I will first discuss the sense in which any act of organizing – and any organization – consumes monsters. I then turn to investigate how organizations produce monsters for our everyday consumption and for use by other organizations – by using a rhetoric of the monstrosus aimed to attract the attention of readers and consumers, by developing monstrous bodies and technologies that disrupt boundaries of organic and synthetic phyla, and by producing monster characters for our everyday entertainment.

While contemporary modern organization theory rarely acknowledges the monstrosus, Western societies have long been fascinated by monsters. In Chapter 4, and through a number of key examples, I will first trace how the pre-moderns and the early moderns engaged with, made sense of, naturalized and organized monsters – from ancient, medieval and Renaissance theology and medicine, to Classical and Enlightenment biology and science. As the monstrosus was pretty much relegated from elite culture and mainstream science in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, I will then
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discuss how the monstrous appeared mainly as an interest in the Victorian freak show. Finally, I will investigate how monstrous bodies and the monstrous aspects of reality, nature and life itself have attracted renewed interest at the cutting edge of contemporary art, science and philosophy. This provides no blueprint to study monsters in contemporary organization theory, but it does suggest that different ways of thinking about and relating to monsters are possible.

Acknowledging the monstrous nature of bodies, nature and life itself, in Chapter 5 I will discuss what this might mean for organization theory, how we understand organizations and how we understand the monsters that embody organizations and organizational life. Departing from previous organizational theorizing on the monstrous, I will draw on contemporary developments in philosophy and social theory to start sketching out a monstrous organization theory. More specifically, and while utilizing examples of transgender embodiment and disabled embodiment, I will argue that a monstrous organization theory requires a monstrous and realist ontology of heterogeneous and embodied assemblages.

In Chapter 6, I will then discuss what a monstrous understanding of organizations and organizational life might mean for actual organizations and actual people in organizations. People who are deemed monstrous continue to be subjected to both oppression and exploitation by organizations. In the first half of the chapter I will therefore attempt to outline a monstrous politics of organizational life for addressing and changing the negatively monstrous conditions under which people live and work. Through concrete examples of transgender and disability and by problematizing and expanding on the recent debate around the monstrous multitude (e.g., Hardt and Negri, 2004; Virno, 2008), I will suggest a politics that navigates beyond the binary opposition that is often drawn between the identity politics of oppression and the class politics of exploitation. In the second half of the chapter I will then attempt to outline a positively monstrous ethics of organizational life. While acknowledging how certain organizational practices such as the production of genetically modified crops may be deemed morally evil and monstrous on conventional ethical perspectives, I will propose a positively monstrous ethic of affectivity to address how organizations deal with diversity – that is, how organizations deal with people who they often deem monstrous. Indeed, how might organizations learn to incorporate and live with monsters without killing them or exploiting them?

Finally, in the concluding chapter I will discuss the future of monstrous organizations and monstrous organization theory. In other words, how may organizations and organization theory be further monstrected?
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NOTES

2. From Kaufmann’s translation (1966: 146).
3. As Sievers (1990) argues, it was no coincidence that the SCOS dragon was to appear without the typical image of a knight trying to kill it. P.O. Berg, who had commissioned a designer to draw the SCOS dragon, had requested a dragon that should ‘tear down the organization chart that was trapping it’ (Berg, 1987 in Sievers, 1990: 220). According to a friend who had been an early SCOS member, the designer had first drawn a friendly, smiling and cute dragon not dissimilar to the Disney cartoon *Peter and the Dragon*, upon which Berg had insisted that this was no good at all: ‘The dragon needs to look fearsome, ugly and dangerous, spitting fire – like a real monster!’.

Although the dragon was not necessarily evil, it should ‘scare the people experiencing him’ (ibid.: 228), those who were afraid to let go of control – it needed to symbolize the uncontrollable nature of organizational culture, which cannot be structured, fitted into and contained by organizational structure, and it needed to symbolize the fear associated with an organizational culture beyond control.