



*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (dir. Albert Lewin, US, 1945)

## The Future Is a Monster

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In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, two monsters haunt Dorian's soul.<sup>1</sup> Both are legible on the surface of Basil Hallward's flawless painting of the young man. The first writes in blood those tempting sins of the senses that Dorian is destined to yield to. This temptation articulates Dorian's sexuality in the miscegenated otherness of the East End. In the moral world of the diegesis, it is the monstrosity of degraded civilization coming face to face with the multiplicity of a body given over to "unrestrained expenditure."<sup>2</sup> It is the eternal present of the sensual animal. The degraded monster is a body satisfying its hunger for sensation without any regard to the future.

At least twice, Dorian actively wrestles with this monster on the plane of conscience: if victorious, he would become "better," he says to himself. It is this monster that the 1945 Hollywood version has the tragic but victorious Dorian (Hurd Hatfield) defeat in the climactic death scene. But in the novel, there is another monster who writes its effects through shade and lines: the figure in the painting, quite aside from decaying due to sin, is disintegrating due to the simple march of time. How can Dorian wrestle with the monstrosity of the future? In the novel, it is by sacrificing himself; in the film, it is by overcoming the self. In either case, both texts

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seem to say, the monstrosity of the future is audible in the infinite movement of time constantly and insistently announcing our own mortality. This same monstrous future—that is, the monstrosity of an inevitable yet unpredictable death—brings with it the possibility of transcending the monstrous body: time is the currency of the body.

In the history of Western thought, the future has often been presented as an absolute monstrosity.<sup>3</sup> The strange positivity of this ugly monstrosity, however, has been signaled by the inevitability of death, an inevitability that, with the advent of regimes of normalization and control, supposedly brings “home” to us the necessity of saving the soul by correcting an always already abnormal body: thus “the soul is the prison of the body.”<sup>4</sup> This body: we have yet to acknowledge its potential becomings, but biopower and necropolitics have unlocked its most monstrous traumas, established entire archives of pain on its surfaces, in its flesh. Whether one refers to them as human rights, trauma portfolios, or literary and filmic *testimonios*, these discursive and material renderings of seared subaltern flesh betray the body’s monstrous affects, that body which is irreducible to and in excess of all productive expenditure. This is the body, in other words, as a center of indetermination whose presensate affects loop from actual past to actual future in an unending circuit of virtual incipencies;<sup>5</sup> these movements establish new contagious connectivities in excess of the body’s functional presence: from being to becoming.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, it is precisely this excess that serves as a metonym for the classed, sexed, and raced other: the abnormal other as excess is a warning (one of the etymological roots of monster) to us all. Thus death, monstrosity, the body and its racialized, sexualized, animalized others have come to prefigure both the risky future and the present to be transcended.

These biopolitical practices normalize the self’s nonhuman becomings as the decisive technology of risk management in the time of counterterrorism.<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben maps the zone of exception as internal to the logic of sovereignty, with the body of the quarantined detainee both instrument and target of its operations.<sup>8</sup> Such operations spatialize time, democracy, the

human, and indeed the subject itself: the quantification of qualitative difference as navigable space data.<sup>9</sup> But what of the becomings spawned with the coming of the risky future, of the return of the body to its own neural zones of indetermination, its incipencies? What of its monstrosity, its newness, its potentialities? Is the future a remainder that any self-constituting act of sovereignty must both calculate on and insure itself against?

There are vibrant lines of contemporary criticism converging in the ongoing confrontation with the legacies of Dorian's twin monsters. Feminist critiques of technoscience,<sup>10</sup> postcolonial biograms of necropolitics,<sup>11</sup> genealogies of normalized sexuality form assemblages, collective enunciations, and in the process become what they are not. If, as both Donna Haraway and Judith Halberstam suggest, the "promises of monsters" are that they are constantly in motion, constantly becoming, certainly the future of criticism must be animated by a ghost still to come—the promise, that is, of its own death-becoming.<sup>12</sup> This promised death, rather than being thought of as lack or absence, or even a tragic event, proceeds from those monstrous potentialities exceeding all actualization, where a change in one element of the critical assemblage is not a change in quantity—a subtraction or addition to its powers, its capacities—but a decisive change in the nature or force of criticism itself. A criticism of becoming must occupy the borders between systems of sensual organization—between, say, popular Bhangra club music, virtual-reality war games, and patriotic sexuality, where "two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy," as the late Gloria Anzaldúa once wrote of the borderlands between being and monstrous multiplicity.<sup>13</sup> A criticism of becoming returns us to a human no longer haunted by his or her monsters, but, rather, inside-outed: indetermination as the event horizon of the bodily interface with proprioceptive biomedicine.<sup>14</sup> At these limits where we must renounce all claims of mastery, criticism promises as well a politics yet to come.<sup>15</sup> It is a criticism that must—and for essential reasons—engage with the contemporary biomedicine assemblage of technologies and bod-

ies, risking its own necropolitics in multiple and sometimes undetermined strategies. A kind of monstrous criticism that diagrams its own relationship to an assemblage of power, discourse, flesh, affect, and intensity—and through that diagram seeks another becoming. Even now, after 9/11—after the worldwide webbing of the photos from Abu Ghraib—there can be no guarantees in the monstrous promises of criticism.

### Notes

1. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: Modern Library Paperback, 1998), 240, 253.
2. See George Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” in *Visions of Excess*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 124. In that text Bataille writes of the bourgeoisie’s “humiliating conceptions of restrained expenditure” (124)—precisely what Dorian leaves behind to become (at least) double. See also Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 45–61; Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vols. 2 and 3, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 197–257; and Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1988), 164–96.
3. Jacques Derrida, “Passages—From Traumatism to Promise,” in *Points . . . : Interviews, 1974–1994*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 372–95.
4. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1994).
5. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998); Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
6. Luciana Parisi, “Information Trading and Symbiotic Micropolitics,” *Social Text*, no. 80 (2004): 25–49; Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

7. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone, 1991); Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
8. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).
9. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).
10. Patricia Ticineto Clough, *Autoaffection: Unconscious Thought in the Age of Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
11. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15 (2003): 11–40.
12. Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 295–337; Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 85.
13. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 13.
14. Mark B. N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 14.
15. Gayatri Spivak, "Revolutions That as Yet Have No Model: Derrida's 'Limited Inc.,'" in *The Spivak Reader*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (New York: Routledge, 1996), 75–106.

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