

# Cuteness and Monstrosity

“the baby seahorse rounds up and shows its teeth”

SOINTU SARASTE










**ABSTRACT****DATE:**

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| <p>In this MA thesis work, I write about my artistic research on the themes of cuteness and monstrosity.</p> <p>My focus is in explaining what these themes mean to me and how I use them as inspiration and tools in my performership. In the end, I put them together and explain where the combination of them leads to. I use examples from my own personal and professional life to give context to my perspectives. I also deliver practical tasks, which the reader can try as well, to get an embodied experience of my writing. I discuss in the work with academics from the fields of Cuteness studies and Monster studies. I also bring in the artists who have given input to my research. I illustrate the themes as well with examples of my experiences in performing.</p> <p>Monstrosity and cuteness are very broad themes and can be viewed from many different perspectives. I discuss them from my personal point of view, the one that also makes sense regarding my artistic practice as a dance artist and performer. The themes and their readings are also attached to the time we live in. I emphasise this subjectivity and temporality by supplementing the work with pictures and emojis.</p> <p>The writing throughout the text has a tension, a friction that comes from two polarities pulling to opposite directions. The most visible contrast is the one between cuteness and monstrosity, which are opposites to each other (at the first glance). Another friction point is between the light and playful subjects and the serious and dark ones. I write from both of those registers. And then, of course, there is the act of balancing between telling my own opinions and views and giving space for other voices. This sense of friction is also depicting my feeling towards these themes.</p> <p>This is a sort of a manual for anyone to find their inner cutie and monster.</p> |  |
| <b>KEYWORDS</b><br>monstrosity, monster, cute, cuteness, performing, dance, vulnerability, aggression, girlhood, girl, uncanny  |  |



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References

# 1. INTRODUCTION

In this MA thesis work, I will explain how I understand the themes of cuteness and monstrosity, and how they inspire and provide me with tools for performing. I will cover academic readings about the themes to give an overall picture of them. However, as I'm writing this thesis as an MA Dance Performance student, I must keep it centered on my artistic movement practice. Hence, I give a lot of space to introduce my practical improvisation exercises, which I invite you, the reader, to try as well.

My writing includes personal stories and examples, as I feel that the themes are linked to my personal life as well as to the artistic (if these two can even be separated). Adding in some of the personal input also feels necessary in order to emphasise my subjective point of view. Even if I discuss with other academic resources, the monstrosity and cuteness remain themes that can be perceived, experienced, and viewed in multiple ways. This is my viewpoint on them. Furthermore, the subjectivity and temporality of this thesis are emphasised by the use of emojis. I use them daily in my online communication, and they are inseparably linked to my experience of cuteness, as the use of them is making me cuter. Emojis inevitably transform their meanings over time, with their readings changing with the rapidly changing social media trends. Similarly, I think our experience of cuteness is changing. So, the emojis I have chosen to use here anchor this thesis work this time.

I have a few examples and references from the time before these MA studies, as I feel that this research is a continuation of the artistic research I did during my BA in Contemporary Dance Studies at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance. Back then, I was curious about nonhuman beings, and particularly robots. In retrospect, I can say that they are also some of the monsters I have met on my way up until now.

Cuteness is still a quite recent interest of mine and has risen from my research on monstrosity. When I was already researching monstrosity, I noticed that under my interest was my attempt to get rid of the cuteness in me. So, I don't yet have as much practical artistic material of cuteness as I have of monstrosity. However, I want to speak

about both in this thesis as I feel that they are strongly linked and in a way opposites to each other, or different sides of the same coin. I find it very intriguing and fruitful to work within the friction of the two polarities.

In the last chapter, I'm trying out what happens when the two, cuteness and monstrosity, are put together, forced, or allowed to meet. The themes seem opposite at first glance, but they do in fact have some qualities in common, and sometimes they overlap. And I'm continuing this pondering by thinking of the reasons why the research of these themes matters today. I will finish by concluding the work and speaking about empathy.

The themes of monstrosity and cuteness have started opening up to many directions as I have been researching them. I have had to cut out some of the possible paths to stay in the frame of this particular thesis work. The most important ones of those are the themes of girlhood and power. But they remain present in this work as more or less visible undercurrents.

My artistic thinking has been fed well during these two years of MA studies. Considering this thesis work, my artistic thinking and making have been inspired by Elina Pirinen, Mikko Niemistö, Karolina Ginman, and Maria Saivosalmi, and I want to thank them for sharing their artistic work and practice so generously.

I also want to warmly thank my thesis supervisor, Simo Kellokumpu, as well as my test readers Paavo Ojapelto, Tyyni Kantonen, Hara, Ilmari Kortelainen, Laura Wiklund and Anna Kallio.

Now, let's go! We'll start with Cuteness... 

## 2. CUTENESS

*I was a seahorse who was born curled up inside a pink shell. I came out of the shell and sought shelter from the shadows of seaweeds and corals. I was shy and small. I had a long snout and big eyes, like the seahorses always do. Small fins on my sides. Blinking eyes and the tongue that sometimes comes out.*

(Personal notebook, March 2025)

In this chapter, I will discuss cuteness by first allowing you to embody it through movement and imagination. Then, I will explain the concept from philosophical and cultural perspectives. Afterwards, I will illustrate my relationship with cuteness and how it connects to my history (and present moment?) as a girl. I will also explore the complexity of girlhood. Lastly, I will introduce the topics of vulnerability, sincerity, and honesty, and how they contribute to my performership.

### 2.1. ♥ Get a feeling of Cuteness ♥

Now, I invite you to try these tasks that I have invented to make sense of how to embody cuteness and how to materialise it in order to grasp it. You can do these while taking as much or as little space as feels good for you at the moment. Similarly, you can choose the amount of time you take for this and whether you want music or not.

#### 1. A baby animal is being born

Start by curling up on the floor, eyes closed. Imagine yourself in a nest or other tiny and comfortable, safe spot from where you're soon going to be born. *You can also imagine what kind of an animal you are, but it's not necessary.*

When you feel ready, you are born. You can take the time you need to start the first movements of your baby body. First, maybe toes and fingers start to move, and possibly you want to stretch your limbs. Eyes may stay closed until you're ready to open them. Let your voice be free in case some noise would come out.

Slowly, you can leave the nest and start to explore the environment and your movement with curiosity and wonder.

*You can stick to the image of your animal as much or as little as feels good. Maybe the imagined animal body gives you a certain mood or a movement character.*

## **2. Puppy eyes**

Begin by making a ‘puppy eyes’ face. That means the kind of face the dogs do, when they want something or they might have done something forbidden, and they seem like they are sorry. It happens by pressing your eyebrows towards each other and up as if you were worried or a bit sad. Then inhale deeply through your nose and ‘drop’ the exhale through your nose as if it were a sigh.

Bring your hands close to your chest and connect them. Then start moving them and your shoulders. Start with small movements, but then you can widen the range and detach the hands from each other. Keep at least one body part connected to another.

*The connection can be a brushing one.*

You can alter your facial expression by widening your eyes or moving your mouth.

### **2.2. What is cuteness?**

Something is cute when it possesses a set of characteristics that compose “cuteness” in someone’s eyes. Philosopher Simon May explains cuteness through the easiest example, which is a baby. A baby is small, has big eyes, short and round limbs, and is seemingly helpless. Cuteness can also be elements in one’s behaviour that make it/them seem, e.g., harmless or yielding. These certain elements and our recognition of them as ‘cute’ have evolved over time to motivate us to take care of our children. (May, 2019, 19-20)

However, cuteness has also become an aesthetic that influences various aspects of life, such as social interaction, consumer habits, fashion, etc., and is not limited only to the practicalities of the survival of the human species. Cuteness appears in animals, clothes, people of all ages, cartoons, and practical items. I would say anything could be designed to be cute, at least to a certain extent. Cuteness affects in a way that it invites the experiencer of cuteness to come closer, to touch, hug, help, or take care of the cute subject.

Here, I need to open up a little bit about my perspective on cuteness. In my point of view, cuteness is not a characteristic that the perceived cute subject possesses, but

instead a reaction of the viewer, an affect. In her MA Thesis in Educational Sciences, Minna Saarela points out that there is the word 'cute' to describe an object, but no words for the emotional experience of cuteness (Saarela, 2024, 4). I would emphasise the importance of the latter, e.g., a baby in itself isn't cute, but instead possesses characteristics and qualities, which make up a combination that we perceive and experience as cute. Cuteness isn't a quality of the object, but a reaction in us.

Cultural theorist Sianne Ngai talks about the act of mixing up the subjective and objective, and refers to Kant:

*“in his account, it does not seem possible to judge something beautiful without speaking or at least imagining oneself speaking and without making the "error" of putting one's judgment in the form of a descriptive, third-person statement ("X is cute") rather than a first-person statement that looks more openly like the subjective evaluation it is ("I judge X cute").”* (Ngai, 2010, 955)

We can see that when we talk out loud, and tell that someone is cute, we make it sound like this person objectively is cute. The phrasing of the sentence doesn't give out that the statement is a subjective experience. We could also say, “I find X cute”. Then the subjective experience of cuteness would be better voiced.

Joshua P. Dale, the founder of the academic field of Cute studies, explains that cuteness is a widely recognised phenomenon in our modern society. It is hard to track down when the cuteness started, but Western science began researching it in the 1940s (Dale, 2024). Natalie Ngai, a researcher and professor in media studies, also explains the rise of cuteness in the US:

*“The notion of innocent, priceless childhood consolidated in the 1930s, which defined the innocent, lovable child as an exclusively economic consumer who should be protected from working outside of the home”* (2022, 3).

However, the most notable cute products and characters come from Japan. Dale gives Hello Kitty, Pokémon, and manga as examples. He also suggests that one reason for the

rise of cuteness in Japan could be the cultural shift that “gave girls a breathing space between childhood and marriage in which they were more able to form connections and explore new worlds.” The girls’ manga, *shōjo*, has also influenced the girls’ lifestyle. (Dale, 2024) Japanese folklorist Kanako Shiokawa (2022) notes that the rise of cuteness in *shōjo* can be observed through the characters’ eyes becoming bigger, faces rounder, and sexual features, such as breasts, being concealed. (122-123). The main characters’ principal feature was cuteness, ‘*kawaii*’. Most of the time, they needed to compete against a nemesis who was, on the contrary, “infallibly stunning and beautiful”. (124) The manga suggested that beauty and perfection are attributes based on luck, whether one possesses them or not. Cuteness, instead, was seen as a quality that could “be achieved by personal efforts of self-improvement” (125). Girls would then strive for cuteness by collecting cute accessories and items around them and creating their “shared culture” of cuteness (121). Shiokawa concludes by stating: “ ‘Cute’, in other words, has become a strategic advantage in a girl’s struggle for happiness”(125).

I can personally recognise cuteness being strongly present around me. First of all, people call things, each other, their outfits, events, etc., ‘cute’ all the time. Moreover, the videos of cute animals are popular on TikTok and Instagram. It is also very cute that we communicate online using emojis. The use of them kind of softens the way we talk to each other. And since they are there, it would be weird to answer a nice compliment message with only ‘Thanks!’, and not ‘Thanks!💖’. Furthermore, adding an animal or a plant emoji at the end of a message makes it seem more playful, funny, and sympathetic. 🐾🌿

### 2.3. Cuteness is a friction in my identity

I often find myself being called cute, and it bothers me. When I ask people what makes me cute, I get answers that are not very accurate or comprehensive. Cuteness is hard to pin down, but some elements that make me perceived as cute include my shortness, my friendly presence, and my expressive and young-looking face. It’s quite often that people tell me I look younger than my actual age. Over time, I’ve learnt that if someone wants to guess my age, I either need to prepare to bear it that they guess my age to be 6-10 years less, or just go ahead and tell my age upfront. And then, I anyways need to

prepare myself for the comments, such as: ‘oh, really? I thought you were much younger! I can’t believe you’re that old, you look sooo young!’

Ella Kainulainen (2011) discusses cuteness in her MA thesis "Something absolutely wonderful, but extremely embarrassing!" Research on cuteness at the artistic event Ylisöpö! (My own translation of the title). Rakel Liekki and Riikka Hyvönen, the artist hosts of the event, had written a manifesto for and about cuteness:

*"Cuteness is a feminist statement. A girl grows up with cuteness, but when she grows up, she has to give it up if she doesn't want to give up her credibility.*

*(...)*

*Society encourages - even pushes - girls to be cute. But adults are not allowed to be cute if they want to be taken seriously."* (Kainulainen, 2011, 1) [my own translation]

I relate to Liekki and Hyvönen in this quote about cuteness being a quality that, in many people’s eyes, takes away credibility. Girls can be and should be cute, but adults should be taken seriously, so they cannot be cute. Cuteness is associated with girlishness and childishness. Adult women should rather be beautiful, sexy, or something else (...what?). Cuteness also affects the way I experience my gender. Even though I'm an adult, I feel like I’m stuck somewhere between girlhood and womanhood. I kind of feel like a woman, but then I don't. Liekki and Hyvönen also say in the quote that “cuteness is a feminist statement”. It could mean that they are using cuteness to express themselves, and kind of reclaiming it- they refuse to give it up at an adult age. I have, in fact, pondered similarly to that; *what if I learned to love my cuteness? What if I considered it as my strength?*

Sometimes I almost manage to be proud of it, but then it annoys me again.

I've learned to deal with comments about my cuteness rationally; they're just about how others see me, (maybe) not about what I'm really like. Although I've learned to talk about cuteness quite lightly and laugh about it, there still is rage under the surface. I'd like to be serious, scary, super cool, beautiful, and/or elegant. Instead of fearing being seen as a child.

I got a tattoo on my back five years ago when I was 21. I got a lemon because I thought its sourness would make me less cute. In reality, it is really cute, and I think it adds to my cuteness. I can't see my cuteness myself, and I don't really know how to work out of it either. The problem, in fact, with being cute is that I don't feel cute. I feel like it distorts the image that other people have of me.

Below are two photos of a studio session when I tried to create a cute look. I find this huge beanie and pink-coloured clothes fit the purpose. As facial expressions, excitement and wide eyes work.



Photos: Sointu Saraste

## 2.4. The girlhood resonates in my body

Now I'm going to discuss girlhood. To me, it links closely to cuteness as cuteness is often considered to be more feminine than masculine. To unpack my personal cuteness and relationship to it, I need to go back to girlhood and see how it is still present in my body. Similarly to cuteness, it makes me conflicted. On the one hand, I see girlhood as a weakness to get rid of, and on the other hand, I would still long to be a girl. Now I try to understand why I fear it, but how, on the other hand, it does make me happy with the sense of fantasy it gives.

### 2.4.1. I fear it

I once listened to the actor Antti Holma's *Auta Antti!* podcast (RadioPlay Suomi, 2019), where he talked about the fear of girlhood (the podcast is no longer available for free, so my thinking is included in my referencing). He spoke about how girls are at the bottom of the social hierarchy. I want to add here that we have to recognise that there are other groups of people, such as transgirls and non-binary people, whose position in society is even weaker than that of cisgender girls. Holma sees it so that men are at the top of the hierarchy, followed by boys and women, leaving girls at the bottom. Calling others than girls 'a girl' is perceived as offensive. There are also taunting phrases such as "You throw like a girl", which is intended to call someone a bad and weak thrower. When being called 'girl', someone is belittled and lowered to the bottom of the social hierarchy. Calling a woman "girl" is about treating someone like a child or making them feel somehow less mature than others (Madsen, 2021). However, in modern slang, it is quite common and also positive to call someone 'girl'. Especially doing it so that one extends the 'i' and adds a tone in the sounding of the word to make it sound almost flirty. I suppose this is some kind of familiar and cute talk to express affinity to the other, e.g., when complimenting their appearance. This kind of use of the word 'girl' has possibly spread to the common slang from the gay community, for whom "using these words with their friends is a way of embracing femininity and showing vulnerability or affection to others who share their identities" (Anspach, 2018).

I have not often been called 'girl', but I do remember one time. I was working at Hesburger, and there was a sudden rush. I stayed at work for a good half an hour

overtime to help my colleagues. During restaurant rush hours, it always happened that some orders were forgotten, and others took too long. There was one table where I took burgers that had taken too long to prepare. A family was sitting at the table, and the father was very angry and snapped at me. The child of the family was still waiting to receive the toy of their children's meal. I asked them which toy they wanted. The father replied that I could go and pick out the girliest toy I could find. It was clear in this situation that I was being called a girl, and it had nothing to do with the child wanting the "girliest" toy. I almost started crying and brought pink and dirty hairpins to the table. In this particular situation, it wasn't just that I was called a girl that I felt bad about, but also the anger I was getting from the client and the fatigue of being in a hurry. However, it was and is a general reminder of the hierarchy that Holma mentioned. The man who was calling me a girl reminded me of his power by reducing me to a girl, to a child. At this occasion, I was working at Hesburger, so the only way I could react was to swallow my tears and act as if nothing had happened. It should have been a much worse insult for it to have been worth asking the shift manager to come in or asking the customer to leave. In any case, I was not allowed to attack back. I remember that in addition to wanting to cry, I was angry. I brought the hairpins, even though the child did not look like they necessarily wanted the pins, and I said something like, 'Here you go, this is the girliest toy we have in stock at the moment.'

#### 2.4.2. ...yet it makes me fantasise

These wonderings about girlhood make me ponder: When was I a girl? How did I feel about being a girl then? Am I still a girl?

Yes, I was a girl. I also had a sister, and we were girls together. We watched the Winx Club series on TV and also clips from the series uploaded on YouTube, admiring the beauty and glitter of the fairies.



The glittery Winx fairies (YouLovelt.com)

I still recognise the state of exaltation or enchantment when encountering something very lovely or cute. I started reading *Sailor Moon* (Takeuchi, 2011) manga as part of this research, and I was mesmerised by all the beautiful clothes, cute wide eyes, wavy and shiny hair, and lovely facial expressions. I found myself smiling at the pages and wanting to read and see more.

There's a sense of fantasy I remember from when my sister and I were children, girls. We would invent stories before going to bed or when we were playing. In these stories, she and our best friends and I would transform into Winx fairies (or something else, according to which TV show we were into at the moment) and save ourselves from a catastrophe, such as a flood...

The fantasy, the dream to be as lovely and cute as these wonderful girl superheroes...

Reading *Sailor Moon* brought me close to the fantasy again. The world of *Sailor Moon* or *Winx* is similar enough to be relatable, yet 'cutified' enough to seem like a dream.

I saw the performance *Aikuisten tyttöjen jytähumppakerho – THE SHOW!* (Junes et al, 2025) in the Theatre Academy. The performance dealt with the question of when girlhood ends, or do we carry it with us, even when we are adults. For me, it depicted three adults reminiscing about what it was like to be girls, and they tried to play the same games as they did as children. In one scene, the 'girls' played horses and imagined themselves to be *My Little Pony*-like, coloured and glittery. They invented the most

beautiful and dreamy imaginary appearances to themselves by adding wings and super powers, as well as a fringe, “*because all the rockstars have it*”.

I believe that cuteness plays an important part in creating these girly fantasies as it is a quality that makes things easily approachable, irresistible, and gives an impression of happiness. Overall, I feel quite conflicted about girlhood as I feel like the cuteness in me is pushing me to be seen as a girl instead of an adult, but then again, I feel like the girlhood is offering some fun, playful, and rebellious ground. Rebellious in the sense that the girlhood appreciates things such as friendship, love, care, and beauty over power, money, and knowledge.

## 2.5. Sincerely, honestly, and vulnerably, yours 💕

I’m linking this writing back to my MA studies by saying that I feel like there’s a link between girlhood and qualities such as sincerity and honesty, which I have as my guiding values in my performer’s work, alongside vulnerability. I see that vulnerability is the aim, and it can be reached by being honest and sincere. I feel that all of those three are qualities that can make one seem cute. I have two examples of when I think they made me cute. One occasion was when my friend commented that I was cute when I performed on stage. This was when I was dancing and reciting a poem in *Eri-laisten yksinäisyyksien iltapäivä* (2024, Ylioppilasteatteri). The poem was about admiring the sun that was like an orange, and about playing with it. When I asked what made me cute, they answered that the choreography was quite simple and easy to read, but I also performed it very sincerely. Another occasion was when I was performing in *Valgie verevä* (2025, dir. Oskari Kaarne, Theatre Academy). There was a moment when I was dancing with a stone in a pool and imagining the stone was a healing stone, taking my worries and pain away. A friend said he imagined me being a child playing with a toy as I danced. Somehow, I seemed so honest and innocent.

Even though I have mixed feelings about cuteness, I took these comments as compliments, because these moments had touched my friends. I believe that sincerity and honesty can put me in a vulnerable place as a performer. I think that vulnerability is one of the key qualities that allow people to be touched by a performance.

I have learnt during these MA studies about sincerity, honesty, and vulnerability. Singing classes have been a place where I have had to jump into something unfamiliar and loosen the grasp of control. I didn't have much singing experience before these studies, so that is quite a new medium of expression for me. When I have been taking classes with our teacher, the musician Mari Kätikä, she has been encouraging me to relax and to open the space within the body to let the voice resonate freely. As singing is so new to me, it is both quite scary and exciting. When having a bit of fear in the body, I would rather feel like holding and closing myself to hide. Moreover, in the singing classes I have needed courage to just follow my intuition when reaching for new notes and areas of voice.

As another example, we have had the choreographer Elina Pirinen to give our class morning lessons as part of our studies in the spring and autumn of 2024 and in the winter of 2025. In her classes, we worked with the kinds of improvisation tasks that could bring up many kinds of surprising things and embodiments in the movement. I was also facing the moments of choosing to have the courage to share my work when I'm in an unsure place, taking the courage to stay on the vulnerable ground. Like singing, this kind of way of working is very intimate. I cannot be sure for myself what comes out of the body, and at the same time, as I'm exploring, I need to share with others.

I would say that, in practice, vulnerability is largely about trying to stay calm when I'm nervous. I already mentioned in these classroom examples that it involves losing the sense of control, relaxing, opening up, surprising myself, and revealing the intimate. However, it also requires confidence. Vulnerability is different from weakness or brokenness. It is about allowing the audience to see me on the edge of something personal while being careful not to cross the line. It operates on a scale of how much of my 'civil' or 'real' self I want to show. I maintain my agency by choosing what I want to reveal to the audience and what I want to hide. Therefore, I keep hold of my power on stage.

Maybe sincerity, honesty, and vulnerability might also make me seem cute, because they are the qualities that can make me, as a performer, seem naked in front of the

audience. Even when actually staying in control, I aim to put down all the covers and protections and dare to be small and weak, to be cute.

*I breathe out, I look at the audience.*

*I'm on the stage, but I'm Sointu.*

*I'm Sointu, but on stage.*



### 3. MONSTROSITY

*How do I become a monster?*

*I open my mouth and show my teeth.*

*My head turns down, and my shoulders rise.*

*My back rounds up.*

*Hands in "claw position".*

*Body tenses and twists.*

*The gaze becomes a "below the eyebrows" gaze, and the mouth relaxes.*

*Eyes become slightly glassy.*

*What am I when I am a monster?*

*Liberated.*

*Angry and ugly.*

*Something that's under the surface all the time. It's boiling and foaming there.*

(Personal notebook, October 2023)

In this chapter, I'll delve into the research of monstrosity by explaining what monsters, and therefore monstrosity, are. First, I'll give you a moment to transition from cuteness to monstrosity through movement. Then I'll discuss the concept of a monster by incorporating sources from the perspectives of philosophy, art, and Queer studies. After that, I'll describe how I have engaged with this theme. Finally, I'll introduce the concepts of the uncanny and fear, and how they inspire my performership.

#### 3.1. ⚡ Get a feeling of Monstrosity ⚡

Again, I'm inviting you to dive into the theme of monstrosity through these movement tasks that I've found helpful in embodying the ideas of a monster and monstrosity. You can, this time too, decide the intensity of the movement to suit your needs as well as the size of the space, and the duration spent on this. For music, I would suggest Jon Hopkins' Singularity album or Ruusut by Ruusut, but something else, or silence works too.

### **1. Monster generator**

Start with a shake. When you shake your body, you can change between shaking the whole body at once or choosing to shake one body part at a time. You can also alter the intensity and tempo of the shake. It can be soft bouncing at times and then grow into jumping. You can imagine that there's water, paint, or sand on your clothes and skin, and you want to shake it off.

Next, you can invite your face to join the body. Explore different facial expressions as you shake. Try to discover as many as you can and keep changing them. But keep shaking.

If a certain facial expression or mood begins calling for you, you can let it guide you and take it as your guiding instrument.

### **2. Tension in the body**

First, take a moment to gather tension in your body by tensing the muscles. You can alter the amount and intensity of it. Let the tension move inside you, face included.

Then, invite some twitches to appear, sort of slight electric shocks. Guide them to happen in different parts of the body, and you can assist them with sudden in and out breaths. The twitches can have an impulse to pull the body parts in different directions. Alter their frequency. Try to see if they could happen by surprise.

### **3. Your hand is not your hand**

Start by moving your focus to one hand and relaxing the rest of the body. Then, wait and listen to an impulse for the hand to twitch. Aim to let the twitching happen quite easily and without thinking about it. Have the idea that the hand is moving by itself, without controlling it. The twitching can spread from the hand to the whole arm. The arm can take still positions and move in space. Then the twitching and tension can spread from the arm to the whole body and lead to the previous exercise.

#### **4. Anatomy of a monster**

Relax the jaw and open the mouth slightly. The breath gets audible, you can put a bit of pressure on the throat. Let the gaze drop, and turn into a one, where you ‘look under your eyebrows’. The eyes get lazy. Draw your attention to the teeth and shoulder blades, and find their movement. You can try crawling to help the monstrosity channel through you.

#### **5. Shadow creature**

Find a shadow (any size is good). Look at it, relax your eyes, and open your mouth. Then you’re going to suck the shadow in by making a creaking sound. Whilst doing that, the body and face might react somehow. Then, when you have sucked in the shadow, you can let it affect the body, if it does. You can continue by finding another shadow.

#### **6. Routine of return: come back to your ordinary body**

Close your eyes for a moment to come back to the ordinary, everyday gaze. After that, you can take a walk or shake to return to the everyday body. In addition, you may take a deep inhale and exhale if needed, and then return the breathing back to a casual rhythm.

Sometimes the imagination might bring quite strong bodily states or images, when doing these movement tasks, so it is good to have a routine of returning after doing them. It helps to make this kind of practice sustainable.

### **3.2. What is monstrosity?**

According to the philosopher Noël Carroll, one frame to describe a monster could be that they are “*any being not believed to exist now according to contemporary science*” (1990, 27). This is to say that monsters are beings that are given birth by our imagination. Monsters reside in myths, fairy tales, horror stories, and films, indeed in imagination, theatre, paintings, and in other kinds of fictional or artistic settings.

Monsters also have the element of danger and evil linked to them. They are something to be aware of, to avoid, and to be scared of. Monsters have the potential to evoke the feeling of uncanny, this unsettling, unfamiliar weirdness, in us. Monsters are built of elements that exist in our ordinary world, but then mixed together, exaggerated, or reduced. Not all of the monsters are scary, there is also a great selection of friendly and funny, child-friendly monsters that exist in our culture, such as the monsters in the movie *Monsters Inc.* (2001) or the Teletubbies (whom I am going to mention again in Chapter 4). One rough division when speaking about monsters could be to put them in categories of ‘horrific monsters’ (Carroll, 1990, 40) and ‘non-horrific monsters’.

Furthermore, art historian Nick Capasso explains that monsters can be described as beings who cross and bend our learnt categories. Often monsters might have both human and animal qualities- take, for example, a mermaid, who is half woman, but has a fish tail. It is also common for monsters to inhabit the ambiguous area between good and bad, alive and dead, or strange and familiar. (Capasso, 2001)

Furthermore, monsters can also bend and stretch social and cultural categories. Carroll explains about monsters:

*“They are un-natural relative to a culture’s conceptual scheme of nature. They do not fit the scheme: they violate it. Thus, monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening. They are threats to common knowledge. (...) For such monsters are in a certain sense challenges to the foundations of a culture’s way of thinking.”* (1990, 34)

Monsters have also been seen as symbols of discriminated communities in society. Kahlo R. F. Smith opens their panel presentation at the Center for Monster Studies Festival Panel by defining the monster as “that which in a culture is repressed” (16min15s, 19.2.2025) and explains that queer people and communities have been criminalised in the society and therefore seen as monsters. Experts on the field of Monster Studies Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Henkel, write in the introduction of *Classic Readings on Monster Theory* (2018) that *“inside every monster lurks a human being (...) all monsters are human creations. They exist because we create or define them as such”* (10). They go on by explaining that monstrosity is relative to everyone’s

point of view and “*we are all another’s monsters (...) your monster may be our friend; our friend may be your monster*” (14). So, Monsters have been created by humans, so they wouldn’t exist without us. They are always in relation to our culture and opinions, and they express what is rejected in our society. Michael Chemers, a historian and theorist, writes that the monsters “*are specifically designed to define normality by negation*”(2018, 9).

Noël Carroll writes about monsters in the horror genre and explains how the monsters can only seem horrific if they are considered bizarre and unnatural in the world they exist in (1990, 16). Asa Mittman visits *The Monster Professor podcast* and explains that in medieval times, monsters would more frequently be called a ‘marvel or wonder.’ These words don’t suggest the monster to be a certain kind of entity, but rather describe our reaction to it, which would be marvel or wonder. So monster can be seen as an “*interaction, almost a verb- Can we monster at something?*” (2021, 28min-29min40s). I think this reading of monsters as wonders or marvels is inspiring, as it highlights the choice to see a difference, the unknown as a possibility to be curious and to learn, instead of being afraid.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge that these theorists cited above are writing about monsters from the ‘outside’ perspective, explaining the monster as an object. Another point of view on the subject is to turn towards the ‘monsters’ themselves, to turn towards those who speak or write from the ‘inside’ of the monster and therefore introduce the monster as a subject, as ‘I’. Kahlo R. F. Smith explains that since the society has for a long time seen queer people as monsters, there is also a trend within them to self-identify with the monsters and to reclaim the identity of the monster or a cultural villain. Smith says that it “is only natural in a culture that constantly tries to identify ‘us’ as the villains and monsters” (Center for Monster Studies, 17min20s, 19.2.2025). An example of this kind of self-identification with the monster (at least in a rhetorical level) is how the philosopher Paul B. Preciado has written in his book, *Can the Monster speak?* (2023), about his experiences of being a monster as a trans man and a non-binary person in a society that considered cis-genderness and heterosexuality as the normal. In the book, he highlights the experience of otherness as he has exited the categories defining the ‘normal’ of the society. However, he describes his ‘monstrosity’

with joy; *“I like better this new appearance of mine as a monster than my appearance as a woman or man, since this one is like a leg reaching to the void, showing the way towards new worlds”* (39). He also writes that being trans is not scary, and neither is the transition process, but what is scary is the system that upholds the difference between genders (47).

The cultural monsterising of transgender and nonbinary people is an infuriatingly relevant topic at these times, when so-called ‘anti-wokeness’ and transphobia are gaining more popularity around the world. To draw an example from the US, Donald Trump has just recently started his second term as the president of the US, and already on the first day, he rushed to make an order stating that the state would from now on recognise only two genders: male and female. Trump is trying to make trans and non-binary people monsters in society by repressing and rejecting them. As Trump is executing his hostile and inhumane politics, he is carving a more and more disgusting and evil monster of himself. Here, I call Trump a monster in that regard, that his decisions are immoral and dangerous. Also in Finland, certain organisations and groups see other than cisgender and heterosexual people as monstrous, and want to ‘change’ their gender identity and sexual orientation with unethical and unscientific ‘conversion therapy’. A citizens’ initiative calling for conversion therapy to be criminalised has recently passed to the parliament and has received the support of the majority, but is still on uncertain ground before being implemented into the law (Muhonen, 2025).

### 3.3. Monstrosity as a gateway to be something else

Out of curiosity, but probably also to shake off my cuteness, I started to study monsters and how to embody them. It started when, in the autumn of 2022, actors Esme Kaislakari and Miika Suonperä held an acting workshop at Ylioppilasteatteri theatre. I was at that time one of the new members there. They taught us some exercises from the choreographer Elina Pirinen in order to teach ways to tune the body into different states. In one of the exercises we were feeling somatically the tubular connection between the anus and the mouth. The exercise started with us producing sound and then continuing to movement. During the exercise, I discovered a monstrous bodily presence in which many emotions were present. It felt liberating and special. My emotional states

alternated between happy, sad, and angry during the exercise. I also found the freedom in being ugly.

Around the same time, in September 2022, I also saw the multidisciplinary artist Katja-Maria/Kay Taavitsainen's *I'm the Monster* at Zodiak. It was a performance that combined dance, video projections and live music from Taavitsainen's *Ehkälevy* (2022). In the piece, Taavitsainen went through a journey of finding their identity and voice as a non-binary person. The stage was a place for a poetic rebirth. I see the 'monster' in Taavitsainen's piece being the new identity, which is still unknown and yet to be explored and familiarised. In retrospect, seeing *I'm the Monster* may have been the catalyst for my monster thoughts, although I deal with the theme differently.

Taavitsainen's performance came out of an experience of a non-binary person, while my research came out of a desire to find an interesting movement language and to find a new, alternative way of being 'not cute' for myself.

In the autumn of 2022, at Ylioppilasteatteri, we were creating and performing a horror-comedy play, *Dark Violet* (dir. Korpela & Rekola). My role was to be an actor and choreographer. During that process, we explored a bit the style of grotesque and used a lot of fake blood. That was my first touch and introduction to the world of horror and monsters in my own performership.

When I started the MA dance performance studies at Uniarts in 2023, I started to research the monsters and monstrosity more rigorously. Already in the first semester of the studies, we had a solo performance course, which gave me the first clear context to research my monster embodiment and led to the possibility of sharing my findings with an audience.

My intention in the research for the solo performance was to find ways to become a monster. But as I researched, I realised that the research was rather about channelling a monstrosity than becoming one. To become a monster, to transform, feels very holistic and seems physically impossible. Channelling a monster, instead, feels easier and is more about imagination. It works so that I have an image in my mind of the essence of a monster and its energy, and then I let that channel through me. The tasks that I introduced at the beginning of this chapter are born from the channelling practice. I'm not sure if it is the right verb, but it might be the best one. Channelling could also be close to possessing. However, I think of possession as the involuntary hijacking of the

body by an outside entity, and channelling as the voluntary invitation of an outside being to control one's body. In channelling, the outside entity does not hijack the body completely, but the channeler also retains control of the body.

Later in the studies, we had Elina Pirinen to teach morning classes. Pirinen uses the term 'ghosting' to explain the act of letting some characters, images, and memories speak through the body in movement. I find it interesting to have these different, although quite similar, ways of letting something else speak through the body. Becoming another thing, being possessed by it, to channel it, and to ghost it.

One source of inspiration for channelling monstrosity was Bryana Fritz's *Submission, submission* that I saw at the Moving in November festival in 2023. It was a solo dance performance in which Fritz embodied various historical saints and performed their mythical stories to the audience. It seemed like Fritz kind of transformed into these saints, one at a time, but still kept a touch of herself in the performance, almost like commenting slightly on some events. This duality of seeing both Fritz and the saint at the same time allowed some peculiar humour to arise. The humour was emphasised by the mixing of pop culture, such as Madonna's Like a Prayer song, with the medieval context of the stories. As a spectator, I was constantly wondering a bit if Fritz was serious or not with her 'hagiography' (the writing of saints' lives, in this case through dance) activity.

### 3.4. I find curiosity in my fears

This interest in monsters is a continuation of my research on nonhuman beings. During my BA studies, I researched robots, especially humanoid robots, which I find interesting as they try to resemble humans, but don't quite succeed. I found it very fascinating, the feeling of curiosity towards them at the same time as feeling a bit terrified of their strangeness. In retrospect, I realise that maybe the interest always lay in monsters, as I consider the humanoid robots to be a sort of monster.

Another nonhuman/monster interest of mine is the fungi (=mushrooms). I have had an interesting journey with them as I used to be phobic of them, but managed to beat the

phobia. I don't know for sure how the phobia started, but my parents theorise that it started in primary school when the other kids at school would complain in the canteen about dishes that contained mushrooms. And somehow I learnt from them that there is something wrong with mushrooms and that they are disgusting. This led to me shuddering and feeling ill whenever I saw mushrooms. In the autumn, I would keep my eyes peeled on the ground when walking in the forest to be able to avoid stepping on or otherwise touching them. I was put on a trial even at home, as my dad is an eager mushroom hunter. He picks many kilos of them every year, and then in the evenings, the kitchen smells like fresh mushrooms as he cleans them. My siblings hated mushrooms too, so my parents would dry the mushrooms and grind them into a powder that they put in some dishes in secret. Sometimes we would taste it anyway and complain about it.

When I moved out and started following a vegan diet, I decided that I should learn to eat mushrooms. I started it by buying simple champignons from the supermarket. When I started preparing them, I felt nauseous and held them only with two fingers, to have as little contact with them as I could. When I ate them, I did as one does when trying to make small children accustomed to new ingredients. I cut the champignon pieces very small and mixed them as much as I could with the other ingredients I had on the plate. The champignons didn't taste good, but I succeeded in eating them.

After this initial eating experiment, I started to read about fungi. Once I had given them a chance by including them in my diet, I remarked that something was fascinating about them. What had made me fear them, their sliminess, the somehow undefined appearance, mysterious life underground, and the suspicious existence outside the animal and plant categories<sup>1</sup>, made me now curious about them. I went so far as to buy myself a mushroom growing kit- a box with soil and champignon spores. I had it in my living room for some months and grew mushrooms in it. It was lovely and taught me to like them. I think especially the moment of seeing the very tiny 'babies' pushing

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<sup>1</sup> Fun fact, the fungi are in fact closer to animals than plants. Plants create their energy through photosynthesis, while fungi and animals need to eat something- plants or other animals to obtain their energy. Most fungi also require oxygen to survive, just as we animals do.

through the soil was heartwarming and connected me emotionally with them via their *cuteness*.



The mushroom growing box on the bookshelf and the tiny 'babies' appearing through the soil...  
 ♥ Photos: Sointu Saraste

### 3.4.1. So I follow the Uncanny

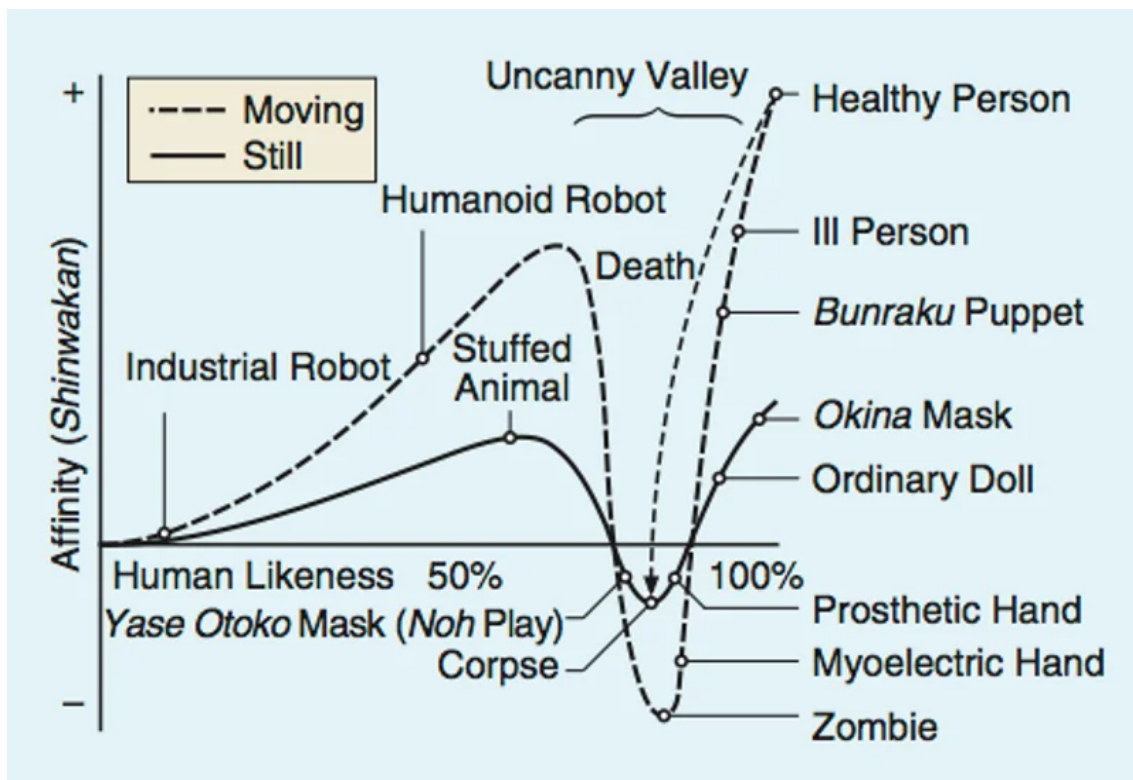
The concept of the uncanny feels important to me as it seems to be the feeling between fear and curiosity. It is the feeling of something being weird, somehow off, but not yet being sure whether it is dangerous or not. Or maybe the uncanny is closer to fear as an instant reaction, but it can shift into curiosity. For example, below my fear of fungi lay a huge curiosity.

Michael Chemers describes that Uncanny is translated from the word *unheimlich*, which Sigmund Freud invented to describe *“that particular type of horror experienced when people or objects we find familiar suddenly, by virtue of a change in perspective or circumstance, appear terrifyingly alien”* (2018, 98).

The uncanny feeling might arise, for instance, when witnessing something that crosses the boundary between what was thought to be a fantasy and reality or between the dead and the living (Chemers, 2018, 99).

Furthermore, explain and illustrate the concept of the uncanny, I want to introduce the theory of the ‘Uncanny Valley’ by the roboticist, Masahiro Mori. It is a concept he invented to try to explain why and in which situations we feel frightened by robots or

other inanimate things that, however, imitate humans or animals in their function or appearance (IEEE Spectrum, 2012).



Masahiro Mori's graph describing the Uncanny Valley. (IEEE Spectrum, 2012)

In the graph, separate lines are marked for moving and still objects, as on certain occasions, it makes a difference whether movement is included or not. Basically, the graph shows that our feeling of affinity towards an object increases as its human likeness increases too. But at a certain point, when the human likeness gets quite high, there's also a possibility for the object to become eerie and scary (=uncanny) instead of familiar and nice. Mori gives a prosthetic hand as an example of this feeling of sudden unfamiliarity:

*“One might say that the prosthetic hand has achieved a degree of resemblance to the human form, perhaps on a par with false teeth. However, when we realise the hand, which at first sight looked real, is in fact artificial, we experience an eerie sensation. For example, we could be startled during a handshake by its limp, boneless grip, together with its texture and coldness. When this happens, we lose our sense of affinity, and the hand becomes uncanny. In mathematical terms, this can be represented by a negative value. Therefore, in this case, the appearance of the*

*prosthetic hand is quite humanlike, but the level of affinity is negative, thus placing the hand near the bottom of the valley. This example illustrates the uncanny valley phenomenon.” (IEEE Spectrum, 2012)*

Furthermore, in the graph, we can see that according to Mori, when movement is added, certain objects acquire more affinity, or on the contrary, drop even lower to the negative side. A humanoid robot makes people feel more fond of it when it moves, but a myoelectric hand (a prosthetic hand that can move according to its owner’s intention to move), at the same time, is further away from the feelings of affinity than an inanimate prosthetic hand. (IEEE Spectrum, 2012)

Here, I must note that Mori’s theory has certain ableist attributes. It is written from a point of view that puts ‘Healthy person’ to be the ideal, 100% affinity, and 100% human-like object. Also, it doesn’t take into account that people get used to many kinds of objects. For instance, I would see that the prosthetic hand might give an uneasy feeling when encountering it for the first time, but most probably it isn’t hard to get used to it. Once people get used to things and objects, they start appearing familiar and normal. Just like I got familiarised with mushrooms and then found a sort of affinity towards them.

I think the theory of Masahiro shows that the feeling of uncanny is indeed a fear towards the unknown, which can then be learnt to be unnecessary.

### 3.4.2. ...and learned two lessons at the iik!week

In September 2023, I was working at the iik!week horror festival at Linnanmäki. It is a yearly organised festival that turns the Linnanmäki amusement park into a horror site, where zombies, witches, and all other kinds of monsters wander around and scare people. I was working there in an immersive horror site called Motel. I was playing a lost tourist in the motel, which is inhabited by evil, monstrous creatures.

The concept of the Motel site worked so that people walked through our site in small groups, and along their way, they encountered actors who played different scary characters. The set was made with precision, and there was thrilling music playing to intensify the atmosphere. My costume included a wig, an all white contact lens on the

left eye, a fake wound on my cheek, a lot of fake blood, a white dress, and a night gown. The makeup was very neatly done, and I would always sit for half an hour in the chair as a makeup artist did it.

I did surprise myself by working in such a place. I get scared very easily, and for example, horror movies, especially the ones with gore and graphic imagery, are too much for me and stay haunting me for weeks at the worst. I auditioned for the job because I wanted to learn about monsters and to get acting experience. But when I went to try on my costume and makeup for the first time, I was horrified. I saw terrifying monster masks hanging backstage, my makeup was scary, and the Motel site was frightening, with ominous music playing in the background. I was doubting whether I could do the job. However, when it was the first work shift, we had time to familiarise ourselves with the site and the other actors' characters. It helped me relax some of the fear. And once I got in the workflow, it got easier, as in the position of being the one scaring others, I obtained a feeling of power and confidence that erased the fear.

My job was to scare the visitors as they walked to the room where I 'lived'. My character could be described as someone half dead, half alive, and who has been badly injured by the other monsters in the motel. I would hide behind a wall and scare the visitors by appearing in front of them as a surprise. Then I would act lost and innocent and talk with a cute high pitch voice, until suddenly getting 'possessed', starting to laugh and pretend to attack them or chase them on my hands and knees. Sometimes I did the classic trick, I sat on an armchair, back towards the entrance of the room. I held my breath and pretended to be a dummy in order to scare them by being a real actor, then shouting and jumping up from the chair.



Playing the 'Tourist' at Motel site, 2023, concept and production by AmazedGames.  
Photo: Erika Luoto

The work was physically and mentally tough because of the repetition and long work shifts. As the site was located in the amusement park, there were a lot of customers, and a new visitor group came in very fast, which made it intense for us performers acting out the same scene many times with only a short break. However, the performance part of it was fun and interesting. It's hard to describe why it was fun. One would think that it is stressful to listen to people screaming when they visit the site. But I didn't find it stressful, as I knew the visitors were actually fine, and the reason they came to the site and paid for their tickets was because they wanted to be scared. So, when they screamed, I knew I was doing my work well.

## What did I learn?

### **Lesson 1.**

When I was working as an iik!week 'monster', I started wondering why people want to be spooked out and scared. From my perspective, I could say I enjoyed the work as an actor in a scary site, but I wouldn't want to be the visitor in a similar place, to be the one who is constantly surprised and scared. I had a hard time understanding why some people want to experience that kind of nervous adrenaline, and therefore, what the meaning of doing the work was.

I talked with some friends about this, and they said they would be motivated to visit a horror site in order to get an adrenaline rush. They described it as going into a 'survival mode' that turns on when you enter this kind of simulated danger situation, even though knowing that you are safe, even if the panic takes over for some brief moments. And they would say that in the end, you feel rewarded, as you have managed to survive the danger. When hearing that, it started to feel quite logical. After all, we were at the amusement park, where people, including myself, go on all kinds of crazy rides to defy their fears.

Noël Carroll writes about this "*paradox of horror*" (1990), which is the paradox of being drawn and attracted to something unpleasant and repelling (159). He gives some suggestions for explaining it. He cites the writer Lovecraft, who wrote that the paradox

possibly stems from us, humans, having an instinct of fearing something unknown (which includes some religious beliefs as well):

*“Humans, it appears, are born with a kind of fear of the unknown which verges on awe. Thus, the attraction of supernatural horror is that it provokes a sense of awe which confirms a deeply-seated human conviction about the world, viz. that it contains vast unknown forces”* (162).

The attraction to horror could also be explained by human curiosity. The monsters (and in this work scenario, monstrous places) bend our understanding of classifications and categories and are thus “*anomalies*”. Carroll writes:

*“Anomalies are also interesting. The very fact that they are anomalies also fascinates us. Their deviation from the paradigms of our classificatory scheme captures our attention immediately. It holds us spellbound. It commands and retains our attention. It is an attracting force; it attracts curiosity, i.e., it makes us curious; it invites inquisitiveness about its surprising properties. One wants to gaze upon the unusual, even when it is simultaneously repelling.”* (187-188)

## **Lesson 2.**

I became a monster, a nonhuman, an object, at times. It obviously was my aim as an actor that people see a monster and get scared when they meet me in the *Motel*. Most of the time, that happened, and they screamed or laughed nervously. Sometimes, the visitors would be the kind of people who seem to be used to such attractions, and they would walk through the site without getting spooked. But then some people probably wanted to show off to their friends that they are not scared of anything, and they react in more surprising ways.

Those people tried to make humour out of the situation, for example, by commenting sarcastically on how pretty I was. Some people were focused on my height, and they chatted with their group about whether it is possible that I’m a child actor. But the most unpleasant ones were the ones that got mean or aggressive when I scared them. Couple of times someone called me ‘a whore’, and someone kicked the air as if to threaten to

kick me. In these situations, I was allowed to stop playing the character and tell them off. I would say: “This sort of behaviour is not allowed in here. From now on, behave yourselves or we’ll call the stewards.” And if there was only one extremely rude person, I would add: “And you can apologise to your group for spoiling the experience as I needed to pause the tour and drop my character”.

I have tried to explain the mean and rude behaviour to myself. It seems like the people want to get back at me for making them scared. Maybe they feel like they are seen as weak if their friends see them frightened. They are not willing to let me have more power in that situation. And maybe it makes it easier to be mean when they, for a moment, see a monster instead of a human. Or I don’t know. This iik!week work also made me think back to my times as a Hesburger cashier. People would treat me very unpleasantly there, too. Was the Hesburger uniform making me a monster as well?



## 4. CUTE MONSTERS OR MONSTROUS CUTIES

In this chapter, I will ponder what happens when monstrosity and cuteness meet, and where they do. Again, I discuss it as a phenomenon in life in general and then how it translates to my performership. I will also illustrate how anger, aggression and rage link monstrosity and cuteness together and motivate my work.

### 4.1. ✨Get a feeling of Monstrous Cuteness✨

Also, for Monstrous Cuteness, the combination of these two themes, I have tried to draft some movement tasks. This is the newest movement category in my research, so I also have the fewest tasks for this. But I invite you to move with this theme as well, and again to adjust the space, sound, duration, and intensity to your own needs.

#### **1. Superficiality and lightness- being ‘special’**

Begin by taking a position that is comfortable, but a little bit out of the ordinary. The position can include an unusual detail or be a bit weirdly elevated. Close your eyes. Once in the position, scan how your skin, hair, and eyes (keeping them closed) are feeling. You can invite a special sensation on these surfaces of your body. *This can be imagined as a gentle tingling, stroking, or caress.*

Imagine the hair, skin, and eyes becoming special in their appearance, such as glittery, different coloured, or glowing. Then, open your eyes and start to move, or move first and then open your eyes.

These thoughts can be added to improvisation:

- The eyes can express the state of surprise, big or small
- You can imagine that the eyes are growing bigger, slightly, or more
- The head can grow too
- The inside of the body can be empty or contain something else than organs
- You can also think about the My Little Pony toys (see photo on the next page) and imagine becoming a similar kind of being



A My Little Pony called Kimono (Brown eyed rose)

#### 4.2. What is the meeting point of cuteness and monstrosity?

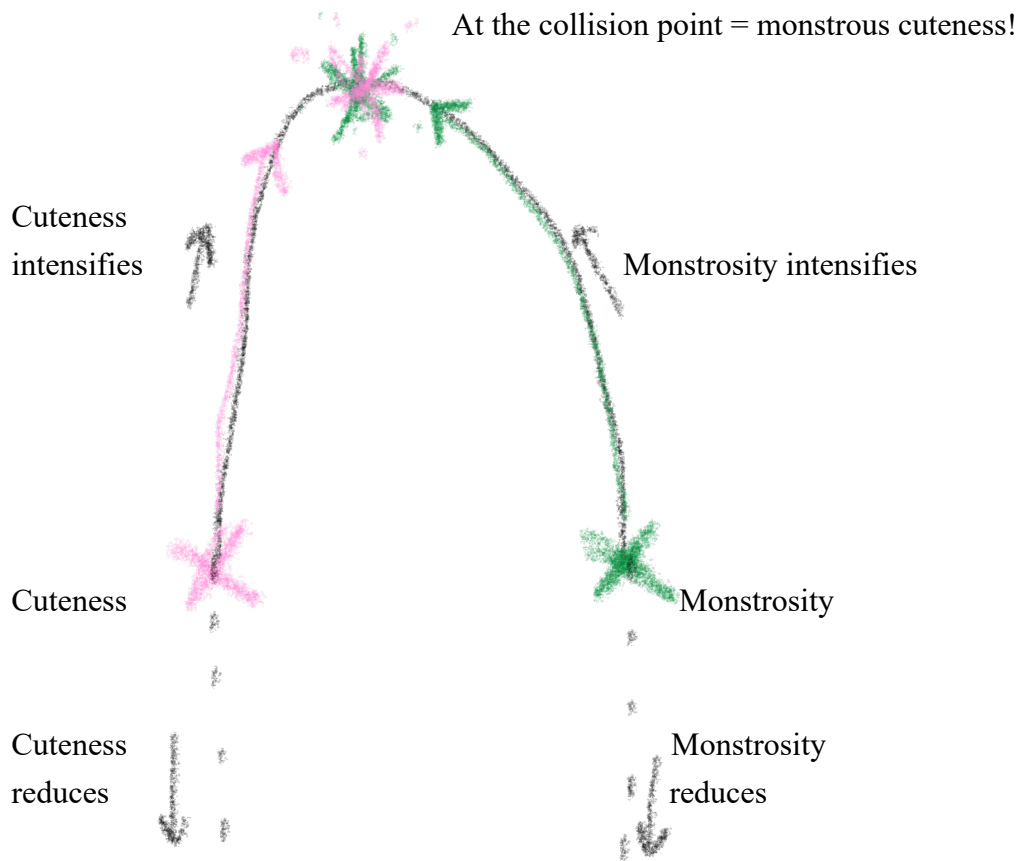
To me, it seems that cuteness and monstrosity are located on opposite sides of the same line.

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cuteness monstrosity

Somewhere in the middle would be 'normal'(if such a thing even exists?). They're both kinds of exaggerations of the normal.

...Or maybe they would rather be located on a circular line, so that they meet each other at a certain point. When cute is too cute, it becomes monstrous and vice versa:



Sometimes, cuteness and monstrosity can be visibly close to each other, as in many of the children's cartoons. As an example, I'd see Hello Kitty- the cute cat, who, however, stands on two legs like a human and has empty black eyes and no mouth, as well as a round and quite formless appearance. Joshua Dale, the founder of 'Cuteness studies' states about Hello Kitty that: *"With that minimal kind of detail, you can imagine whatever you want the cute object is feeling, so you can project your own feelings onto Hello Kitty, and that increases the appeal"* (Maiden Mother Matriarch with Louise Perry, 2024).

Another example could be the Teletubbies, the hybrids of a human-like creature and television.

However, Hello Kitty and Teletubbies are not perceived as monstrous as they are cute enough. They are cutified monsters or cuties on the border of becoming monsters.

*"How much cute can the monster bear to maintain his monstrosity and escape from blurring into virtual nonexistence? How monstrous should the cutie become to turn*

*amusement into terror and cross the boundary of monsters' realm?"* (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2007, 4)

### 4.3. Monstrous cuteness

As I have discussed before, monsters are beings that bend categories by stepping outside of them and between. Philosopher Simon May (2019) argues that cuteness works similarly. He says that cute beings are at the same time *“strong and vulnerable, self-conscious and naïve, beautiful and gruesome...”* and often androgynous (94-95). May, in fact, states that cuteness is a *“specialised manifestation”* of monstrosity:

*“Monstrous is cute only when its strangeness- the imaginary or fantastic character that animates it- discomfords in a comforting way: in other words, when the bizarre distortions and juxtapositions of qualities that give it its monstrous character can be seen not only as destructive, aggressive, unreachable, and sinister but also as protective, tender, addressable, indeed charming and even playful.”* (129).

This reading of cuteness as something that holds power, even if it seems weak on the surface, and as mysterious and ambiguous instead of self-evident and naïve, has made me appreciate it more. It gives a bit more tools and suggestions on how to use my own cuteness in performing.

On the other hand, the essayist Daniel Harris (2022) states that cuteness is an act we do to experience the taking care of something and feeling *“pity and big-heartedness”* towards a child, toy, or animal. He writes:

*“Cuteness, in short, is not something we find in our children but something we do to them. Because it aestheticises un happiness, helplessness and deformity, it almost always involves an act of sadism on the part of its creator, who makes an unconscious attempt to maim, hobble and embarrass the thing he seeks to idolise, as in the case of ‘Little Mutt’, a teddy bear with a game leg that a British manufacturer has even fitted with an orthopedic booth. The process of conveying cuteness to the*

*viewer disempowers its objects, forcing them into ridiculous situations and making them appear more ignorant and vulnerable than they really are.”(41)*

This quote makes me wonder that the monstrosity might not lie in the subject onto which the cute is experienced/done, but in the experiencer/doer of the cuteness. Harris goes on to describe how ‘cute things’ are at their peak cuteness, when they’re sleepy or sleeping, and how plush toys are designed just to be as huggable as possible- objects that will never refuse giving their bodies for our need of physical contact(42). I would also add here that we, humans, have bred our pet animals to be as cute and obedient as possible. To the extent they are like our babies, they wouldn’t survive without us. With many species, we have gone as far as to breed them to the point of having genetic health issues, such as breathing difficulty or heart deficiency. I find it very curious that cuteness is a positive and kind reaction to something we find lovely, but at least in certain cases, underneath it, there resides a need to forcefully nurture and make something our own.

#### 4.4. Aggression, anger, and rage

For me, aggression is one link between cuteness and monstrosity. On a personal level, aggression often rises in me when I’m being called cute. I feel like people see me from the wrong perspective or mistake me somehow, because in my essence, *I’m not cute*. At least not in a sweet way... Aggression is also a feeling that rises up many times in my monsterring practice. The monstrous presence is allowing it to come up.

Anger, aggression, and rage can easily get mixed up, so here is a clarification of how I understand them:

**Anger** = Something is unfair or someone is acting wrong, and this sense of ‘wrongness’ makes one angry.

**Rage** = Anger that is let out in a way that might be harmful to others.

**Aggression** = Urge to attack or defend, a tiger showing its teeth... The action depends on how the aggression is channelled.

I'm discussing aggression, anger, and rage through three different angles: political climate, which makes me angry; protests that are a great way to channel the anger; feminine rage to link cuteness and monstrosity, and lastly, my solo performance in which I put these elements on stage.

#### 4.4.1. Political climate and protests

When I was working on my solo course performance, I noticed that a lot of aggression was linked to my monsterring practice. Politically, the autumn of 2023 had been quite intense. The new right-wing government had started to plan cuts to culture and social benefits, and students nationwide occupied their schools to protest against those. Additionally, on October 7th, Israel escalated their occupation in Gaza by starting the genocide of the Palestinian people, to which Finland and other Western countries didn't really react. Locally, in Helsinki, there was a fight to save the Stansvik forest from being logged down (Marttinen, 2023).

I had had the practice of going to protests, to marches, roadblocks, and those where you stand with signs. That autumn, I learnt some new ways to protest. I climbed trees in Stansvik, slept in a tent at the school occupation, and went to sit and shout at Starbucks [which was raising a lawsuit against its workers' union for showing solidarity for Palestine (CJPME.org, 2024)].

All of the injustice in the world made me see a world full of monsters, and it felt appropriate also to channel my aggression and frustration into my monster embodiment. The following is my diary writing from the moment I saw a forest harvester, a 'moto', for the first time in Stansvik forest, cutting trees in October 2023.

*The moto is a huge giant that moves on large metal rollers, which have tyres inside. Those rollers are powerful enough to take on difficult terrain and crush the bumps on their path. What's left behind is loosened soil and slats. The moto has a long stem before its teeth. The teeth are attached to a precisely coordinated 'head'. The teeth grip the wood and hold it in place so that the saw in the lower jaw can saw down the wood. The sawed tree is turned horizontally in its jaws, and then the cogs on the sides of the jaws tear the branches off the tree. The bark of the tree twirls in the air with the smell of cut wood. A tree that has lived through tens, hundreds of years is dead in*

*a minute. The moto is followed by another machine, which comes and collects the tree and its neighbours in a pile.*

*So if the world was full of monsters, why did I decide to explore the monstrosity in myself and to create yet another monster?*

Furthermore, I had constantly in my head a question from the choreographer Sonya Lindfors that she asked us to ponder in her course Introduction to racialisation at the Theatre Academy in August 2023. The question was: *How does the world shift my art, and how does my art shift the world?*

The question from Sonya Lindfors was difficult to answer, and still is. I suppose it is the kind of question that I will need to rethink over and over again during my career. It also leads to questions about the meaning and purpose of art.

Back then, when I was creating my work for the solo performance course in 2023, I answered these questions by diving deep into myself and my own motivations in order to hopefully find something that would speak to other people, too. As there was a lot of aggression and rage coming out, I needed to trust that it is the material that will be relevant for me as well as for the audience.

#### 4.4.2. Raging female as a monster

I was raised as a girl. This meant in the time and society where I lived that I was praised for being calm, helpful, quiet, friendly, positive, hard-working, empathetic, adaptable, responsible, and patient. Especially the last one, patience, was a virtue that I learnt to be proud of. Others would be annoying or even mean, but I would remain calm and patient without getting angry or upset. Sometimes I would have empathy for them - they must have a difficult time that they're going through, so I need to be patient with them. And when I would get upset, I would rather turn it into sadness instead of anger.

Marianne Riiali writes about anger and aggression, especially with women, in her Helsingin Sanomat article (23.11.2021). In it, psychotherapist Heli Pruuki points out that girls are given names such as Tyyne, Hilja, and Rauha (translating approximately to Sereine, Quiet, and Peace), which indicate those being wished features for girls and women. She tells that girls learn to hide their anger and aggression and explains:

*“Women in particular are ashamed to show aggression. It is thought to be a sign of poor life management if you lose control and get angry. (...) Even as little girls, women have learned that crying is a way to get a hug and comfort, but anger is a way to get rejected. That's why many women burst into tears when they are angry, even as adults.”*

I explained earlier in the Monstrosity chapter that monsters are beings who bend and break our social and cultural categories and norms. I realised that there is monstrous potential in the female body's act of expressing aggression and rage. My cute and small female body had been categorised and taught to be harmonious and mild-mannered. When it bursts out in aggression, it is unexpected and conventional thinking out of character for it.

Anger and aggression are great motivators for creating or doing as they activate the mind and the body. They make me feel the urgency. Urgency and a need to act. The urgency can be channelled to political actions, to art making, to anything, I guess. But if I repress them too much, then they might burst out surprisingly and with no control, in a rage. If there's no control at all, the act of bursting out might be destructive physically or mentally, to me or to others. So it's good to always have a frame or a channel to guide the anger and aggression out before they get impossible to handle.



## 5. UNDER THE SKIN ALL IS WET AND SLIMY, SOMETIMES ELECTRIC AND AGGRESSIVE (2023)

In the first semester of the Dance Performance MA studies, in autumn 2023, we had a solo performance course as part of our curriculum. We needed to plan, choreograph, and perform our own solos in the course. We had six weeks to work and five performances that took place at the beginning of December 2023.

My work for the solo course turned out to be a dance piece to which I channelled anger and aggression, and in which I put on stage my monstering practice. I wore a baby pink skirt and blazer jacket. The costume contrasted the themes of aggression and monstrosity by suggesting something girly and cute. Now I'm going to present the work *Under the skin all is wet and slimy, sometimes electric and aggressive*, through three parts.



### 1. The score:

I started the piece by performing still positions that were inspired by fighting. It seemed like I was escaping or avoiding something. Then I went to the task, *My hand is not my hand* (which I described earlier in the Monster chapter), which led me to shake and go into the monster-channelling presence. The lights dimmed down, I took an ‘under-the-brows’ gaze, and crawled towards the audience. In doing this, I felt dangerous and threatening. Then I started speaking a text in an almost non-understandable manner. A light lit my face and exposed my red painted teeth. I exaggerated vocals, altered my voice between high and low, shouted, breathed in the sounds, and twisted and distorted my face at the same time. After delivering the text, I crawled back and danced a rage dance as the lights went red. Then I fell on my knees, took a breath, and threw myself back as I opened my arms, and a black out ended the piece on that image.



Photos: Sanni Siira

### 2. Performership in the piece:

In the piece, I seek to undergo a transformation into a monstrous presence. This transformation is supported by muscle tensions traveling through the body. The tension starts from aggression.

Before coming on stage, I tune my body into an angry state, in which the aggression is on the edge of bursting out. However, I don't in reality need to be angry. It's enough that I lower my eyebrows and tense my jaw slightly, as well as activate the core of my body and think of clenching my fists. Then I get the physical state of anger going on. Through the score of the piece, I guide the aggression to materialise as tension and then to transform myself into a monster. Transforming into a monster would be the goal, but I end up landing in a monstrous presence, kind of channeling a monster.

The audience is there to witness the transformation. And I want to scare them a bit. Why? I want to demonstrate my power in that moment as well as to show that I'm on the edge of becoming something dangerous. There's a scene in which I talk to them and I tell them a message or a vision, which is hard, if not impossible, to understand. As the art historian Nick Capasso (2001) writes;

*"In myth and religion, monsters play the roles of creators, destroyers, protectors, guides, tormentors, healers, and defenders. They are messengers, revealing portents and delivering warnings (the word "monster" derives in part from the Latin monere, "to show," which also lies at the root of "demonstrate")."*

As I speak to the audience, I try to make myself so weird that I don't appear human to the audience. I trained to use my eyes in a way that they don't seem human. I use my voice in a wide range and produce ugly and unfamiliar sounds. My teeth are revealed in this scene, and the audience sees that they are painted red. The sounds and text come from my mouth in a struggle, the force themselves out of me. As they do, my body twitches and shakes:

*"Behind the curtain, a tentacle hisses loose from the body and reaches out for something*

*r-r-r raa raa ra ra raa*

*soft friction,*

*the sound of a sock against the skin*

*Underneath it wet, all is damp, and slimy*

*Cellular flush*

*let wall-n*

*let me*

*sleep sinking into the eye*

*r-r-r-r*

*sh sh*

*The eyes sink deeper into their sockets*

*The sun would shine in*

*Their mouths recede into a smile-like*

*A blind spot*

*Body, my body, your body”*

I wrote the text in a course that Teo Ala-Ruona taught us in the autumn period in 2023. In the piece, I perform it in Finnish. With the text, some energy or force leaves my monster body, and I retreat from the audience to shake and continue my transformation. The final part is a rage dance, in which I let out the rage and aggression with movement that has qualities of throwing and attacking.

### **3. The life of the piece:**

I had realised from early on that I can't leave the success of my performance to hang on to a certain feeling, in this case, the anger. It would be draining and not sustainable (if not impossible) to drive myself to feel such an intense feeling every time before a show. That is why I, from a very early moment on, mapped the physical state of anger for myself, so that I'm able to recreate it without the emotional state.

Later on, in 2024, I performed *Under the skin all is wet and slimy, sometimes electric and aggressive* at Ilvesteatteri's Röntäkarkelot festival, SLURPS performance tent, GÁTT Nordic Arts festival, and Ylioppilasteatteri's Halloween party. I remarked that the costume also played an important role in getting the body tuned in for the show. I didn't get the original pink costume from Theatre Academy's wardrobe, so I changed it to a gray one, still consisting of a slightly oversized blazer and a skirt. When I wore the costume, I instantly tuned in to the mode of performing and monsterring.



Photo taken from the performance at SLURPS festival, 2024.  
Photo: Aurora Suhonen



## 6. CONCLUSION- SOME WORDS ABOUT EMPATHY

It has been an enjoyable time that I have spent with cuteness and monstrosity. I have been driven by a strong and absolute motivation to understand them. They exist all around us, so it is also a curious task to try and trace them. As they exist in everyday life, it has been necessary to pour some of my personal life into the writing. But I have done it with pleasure, because I like to tell stories. This work has also been quite emotional. I have poured in things that I am angry about, I fear, love, or am insecure about. And, at the end of this writing, I feel like I'm just about to start to grasp and understand what cuteness and monstrosity are about! I'm just a baby! *A little seahorse reading and learning and drooling on my keyboard...*

Anyhow, I think I have shown you both the good and bad, the more positive and the more cynical sides of these research themes. I want to be nice and end with one of the nice things, a potential that is emerging from this study.



I have discussed in this thesis that monsters are beings that exist outside the categories and binary ways of thinking of society, whether because they have been pushed there or due to their own will. However, I believe that by turning to those resisting the structures and systems that create my 'normal', I can broaden my perspectives. By expanding my perspectives, rather than being narrow-minded, I can also liberate myself from the prison of taboos and unnecessary conventionality, and learn to better accept differences. I think monsters are never going to disappear, and they shouldn't even. They are a great tool for imagination to wonder and imagine different 'what if' scenarios. Also, they are a safe way to experience and face one's fears. However, maybe there is still a way to go with finding more respect for the monsters.

What goes into cuteness can work as a "*sweet coating*" (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2007), cutifying things and beings, making them easier to approach and like. I think this is a process that might have happened to capybaras (the world's largest rodent, living wild in South America). They have been 'cutified' by social media meme culture. The internet (especially the algorithms for children and young people) has been full of

videos and pictures showing these calm and ‘chill’ rodents taking it easy, eating, bathing, and jumping into the river. When you think about it, we could also be disgusted by capybaras, as they are rodents. We might think of them as giant, 50 kg-weighted rats, which also have quite bizarre four-toed feet that don’t resemble those of any other familiar animal... So, I think capybaras have been so well-received by the global social media community because of the cute, sweet coating that they have received. Sadly, capybaras have also suffered from this attention and love. There are many videos of capybaras adopted into homes as pets, and of them even being dressed up in dresses or party accessories...

Monstrosity and cuteness, or monsters and cuties, have the potential to work as tools of widening our window of empathy and learning to respect differences and what we might first experience as weird or scary. And understanding that those experiences only indicate that something is new to us. But both monstrosity and cuteness also have their dark side, the othering of the cute or the monster. Not respecting their individuality and existence on their own terms.



A capybara and its baby (Adobe Stock)



I guess my interest in finding my monstrosity is, in a way, about reassuring myself that I'm not the capybara. I don't want to be the pet of others. I don't want to be seen as a chill and kind person who doesn't mind anything. I don't want others to decide how I'm being seen. I'm not harmless. I'm not simple and self-evident. I'm not an attraction.

I believe that the themes of monstrosity and cuteness are very impactful, as they show so much about power relations. They also function as a lens through which I can look at and explore the world. They open strong and meaningful emotional and corporeal landscapes. They hold an immense intensity that, in an embodied form, can speak directly to the bodies of audience members. In an affective, atmospheric, emotional, and subconscious level. Speaking with no words.

And of course, I wish to spread empathy with my dance. Spreading it in an insidious, discreet way. So that it hijacks all brains to be kind. To be cute. And I mean, not to be perceived as cute, not to perform cuteness, but to actually *be cute*. To be the kind of cute that also rages, shouts, and gets into conflicts. Ahhh...



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*I'm the Monster.* Choreography, dramaturgy, composition, and performance: Katja-Maria/Kay Taavitsainen aka meu. Video art and set design: Merle Karp. Sound design of the space and drums: Fjóla Gautadóttir. Sound technique and guitar: Aapeli Hakala. Lighting design: Veli-Matti Timoskainen. Costume design: Kimmo Alakunnas, Kati Sinisalo. Performance of 3.9.2022, Zodiak Stage, Helsinki. Helsinki premiere 1.9.2022.

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