

If It's Not Intersectional, It's Not Monstrosity. An Interview on Horror and Monstrosity with Marina Levina

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About Marina Levina

Marina Levina is an Associate Professor of Media Studies at the University of Memphis. Her research is based in critical/cultural studies with the focus on feminist and intersectional theoretical frameworks. She is particularly interested in how mediated cultural landscape constructs bodies, subjectivities and citizenships as a part of techno-scientific, medical, and political discourses. Dr. Levina's current research interests are focused on cultural studies of monstrosity, critical rhetoric of science, medicine, and technology, critical surveillance studies, and affect theory. Her books include the co-edited (with Diem-My T. Bui) volume *Monster Culture in the 21st Century* (2013) and a co-edited collection (Kelly E. Happe and Jennell Johnson) *Biocitizenship. The Politics of Bodies, Governance, and Power* (2018).

OLZMAN. Did you grow up watching horror? And if so, did you have an all-time favorite and what made it so?

LEVINA. I don't think I grew up watching horror per say because I grew up in Soviet Union. So we had very different. There was no Dracula or Frankenstein or whatever else. Werewolves. You know. But I did grow up reading a whole lot of the Brothers Grimm. And I did grow up reading a whole bunch of Hans Christian Andersen. And just generally the folktales, the Russian folktales; Baba Yaga and the house on chicken legs that she lives in. I guess the joke is that life in Soviet Union was scary enough, was horror enough, you know? But no, I definitely come from a culture where horror is just sort of part of the vernacular. Or at least if not horror, at least the gothic is part of the vernacular, it's part of how you

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interpret the world, part of how you relate to the world. You know they talk about the Russian soul or the Russian perspective. And the thing is, I say sometimes things and my American students are completely horrified because it just sounds really depressing but actually it just sounds uplifting. For example, in Berkeley I used to do these talks. Because, around radiation all my students would get really freaked out and I would try to make them feel better. I would say, "Just so that you know, it's going to get worse. Once you leave the college, it's going to get worse. But don't worry about it because eventually it will get better." Yeah. So I definitely, I think sort of the way of relating to the world as the idea that bad things that are just going to happen and it's normal and that you're not entitled to happiness, you know? I think that definitely was part of my upbringing just naturally living where I was living.

OLZMAN. How old were you when you moved here?

LEVINA. I was almost fifteen.

OLZMAN. Oh, so you like really grew up there.

LEVINA. I grew up in Soviet Union yes. I grew up in the Ukraine. I was like three months shy of 15, like two months shy.

OLZMAN. That's such a vast difference to move from there like in your teenager years to just go. Can I ask what prompted the move?

LEVINA. We were refugees because we are Jewish and anyways, and it was hard growing up Jewish in Soviet Union. There was anti-Semitism institutionalized in the system of how many Jews were allowed to get into university. There was a lot of violence in school. Bullying and violence. It wasn't a great place to grow up Jewish. It's also, like Jewish wasn't really a religious identity because no one had religion, because you know religion is the opium of the masses, that's Marx. So Jewish was your ethnic identity. So you were either Russian, so there was actually a line in the passport where it was recorded what was your ethnic identity. And you were Russian or Ukrainian, or Georgian or what the other republics were or you were Jewish which didn't have a republic of your own you know what I mean? So it was just a hard place to be, and my parents they made lives for themselves. But they wanted better for me. My mom hated the whole system very

much so, but she also wanted me to have opportunities and have a life that I just would not be given a chance to have there. So we were refugees. So we have to get rid of our citizenship and be able to fend off and then we lived in Austria and Italy for six months as refugees waiting for United States giving us permission to enter as refugees.

OLZMAN. What year was that?

LEVINA. It was 1989. So started the process of leaving, we left in May and we didn't get to the United States until November of 1989 and by that point the world was a vastly different place because of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

OLZMAN. Did you start watching horror then when you moved here? How did horror come into your life?

LEVINA. When I went to college. So I came here and I didn't speak any English and high school was this like, terrible experience because you know Kansas, terrible human beings, you know. Anyways, high school is just like this disconnect that I experienced and I went on to college. I've said it about being in college, (I) found my people who ended up being queer folks. Even though I identify as being straight myself, I definitely developed an affinity and emotional and cultural and persecution, affinity in some ways with these queer students on my campus. So I started hanging out with them. And then, you know, *Interview with the Vampire* out, came out and *Interview with the Vampire* was sort of my very first like, moment of like, feeling like these are my people, the vampires those are my people. You know?! So I mean, that I think the queer community on campus at the University of Illinois and kind of prompted me to the queerness of monstrosity. I think that has really opened me up and I just thought it was like I embrace the goth lifestyle. I like all trying to be goth, except I am really too short and too cute to be goth. So I couldn't really get scary. So it was just really cute and anyways, it was really frustrating. But I think because I'm really tried to be scary. I shaved my head and people would be like, oh look so adorable. I'm like, "No! I look frightening!" Like a vampire. But, I was just too cute to be really scary. But I tried, you know, the shave, the leather jackets, had Doc Martens, and you know me now. It's a very different aesthetic obviously. But I still have my pair of Doc Martens I had in college. I saved them. You know now, I feel like I'm more intimidating now because I've learned how to channel my accent and my

Russianness into intimidation. So I think graduate students sometimes are, they're not like scared of me, they love me. They're not scared of me, but they also know I mean business and I'm very serious about the work.

So anyway, *Interview with the Vampire* was really the first moment and then when I was in Berkeley, I got interviewed by this public radio station in Louisville about monstrosity on Halloween. Anne Rice was also on the phone and I was fangirling all over, like my students were laughing at me. They were like, you sound like us, and they asked me, "How did you get into monsters?" "Well Miss. Rice, I just love you so much." Like *Interview with the Vampire*. They asked me what vampires mean and I told them my opinion. Anne Rice said the phrase that I wanted on my tombstone, she said, "Marina is absolutely right about vampires." I can die happy. Like I don't need peer reviewed articles. I don't need anything else. I have Anne Rice telling me I am right about vampires.

OLZMAN. What drew you to study monstrosity, horror, and popular culture?

LEVINA. I think the identification with monstrosity came from, a feeling of difference, and a profound feeling of difference that I had my entire life and not just feeling of difference but the systematic exercise of difference against my own body. So it's not like, I mean I don't want to dismiss anything, but it's not like, I dyed my hair or I just felt different. I don't want to dismiss those experiences obviously. But it was also like I was a shy kid. I'm not a natural activist and not a natural radical. I don't consider myself to be a radical in a sense of the word. And I was always a shy kid who liked books. And in some ways I'm still a shy kid who likes books and the exercise of difference against me as a kid was so profoundly violent that I think when I saw the same when we came to the United States, the fantasy was that this is going to be different - that this is the country that things are different. Like there is none of this here, you know what I mean? And my first interaction with the then GLBT community and now queer community has been through hearing stories about the violence that's directed against queer folk in this country. And I was just 18, 19 at the time. And I was like, this is almost exactly what I went through. This is not OK. This is America! You know, and I think that really, I mean that sense that this should not be happening here in some ways. When you've invested as much as we did in coming to this country, when you're a refugee, you have to believe in the myth of America. You've invested so much into it. You know, like people say, whoa

exceptionalism America. We believed in that and I still have to in some ways believe in it. Otherwise, what was it all for? So to me, monstrosity and the study of difference and the political necessity of those two things, that really tied together in college, and I became a very strong ally. I started some organizations; I did educational workshops about queer issues on campus. I started Campus AIDS coalition. I got some death threats. I got some stuff written on my dorm room. You know, stuff that came along with this. But you know like in this year, when I think about this, I keep thinking about Audre Lorde's Poem, "A Litany for Survival". And it's like you're afraid if you speak, you're afraid if you don't, so it's better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive. And I think the study of monstrosity has gotten deeply tied to that, to political, to teaching and scholarship as political activism because I no longer occupied buildings for the union. I'm no longer in the community doing community activism, but I feel like my scholarship and my teaching is my activism and I have to live up to that. How's that for an answer?

OLZMAN. Are there any horror films you refuse to see?

LEVINA. I won't do torture porn genre. I could probably be convinced to watch a movie or two every now and then if I'm in the right mood with the right people. But it's not something I want to watch. I don't need to watch it, I lived it. [Laughs] You know? So there are two things that genuinely scare me that I just don't watch because I just really get terrified watching it. One is snakes. I'm genuinely terrified of snakes. *Snakes on a Plane* is my idea of a personal hellhole. A nightmare. I did not watch that movie. I had to recognize the music that they play at the beginning of the previews so that I could close my ears and shut my eyes and pretend that this is not happening. And with all my love for Samuel L. Jackson, I still didn't see that movie and don't intend to. So snakes let's just interpret that broadly, and second of all, I really have trouble with home invasions. It like freaks me out.

OLZMAN. So like, *The Purge*?

LEVINA. Yeah, like *The Strangers*. Like when they leave the house and they torture those people, I am not ok with this. I mean I've watched some takes of it. Like *Hush* is sort of a take on it. Sort of more of an empowerment take. But if it's like people are taking over the house and then torturing and killing the people

who live there, it just freaks me out. I am a person who, when I was about eight months pregnant, watched, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *Rosemary's Baby* as a double feature. And I will say this to you, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* messed me up and I wish I didn't see it because it was messed up. I guess being pregnant was not a good time to see it. It wasn't good for my mental health. So yeah, those are the things I do not watch.

OLZMAN. At the monstrosity preconference at the 2017 National Communication Association convention, you shared some really interesting thoughts about Communication Studies as a discipline, your views of calling it a discipline, and what that can bring to the study of monstrosity. Can you share that here again? And/or what can monstrosity as a lens bring to Communication Studies?

LEVINA. Yes, I said that I don't think of Communication as a discipline. I think about it as a field of study, and this is just generally how I feel about Communication. I get uncomfortable...not uncomfortable, but I just don't think it's a discipline. The reason I went to get my PhD in Communication as opposed to anything else was because it was a field. Because it's a field it doesn't just allow interdisciplinary, it necessitates interdisciplinarity. Like, in order to be a Communication scholar you have to be interdisciplinary. Like there is not real other way to function in the field, especially in Cultural, Critical Cultural Studies, and Media Studies. So my work has been interdisciplinary. It has been allowed to be interdisciplinary and its interdisciplinary naturally because of the variety of the field and I think I said at that time that because of that, to me monstrosity is fundamentally an intersectional and interdisciplinary enterprise. I think I said something like, if it's not intersectional, it's not monstrosity. And I thought about that because you know, it's nice to say big things and then you start thinking whether or not you can support it with any sort of other claims. So it's just the thing to say, but I will, I will do this. I will go on record as saying this and the reason why I will say this and the reason I think that monstrosity is necessary to a field like Communication is because I think interdisciplinarity necessitates intersectionality. Like to me those two things go together. Again, interdisciplinarity that's not intersectional is not interdisciplinary and again, I've using intersectionality in the broadest possible terms right? Like, looking at how these different modes of managing, disciplining, of classifying identity can be

combined or bodies can be combined and studied. And to me, monstrosity, what makes a monster such a powerful object of identification that we talk about this idea that like we watched *Interview with the Vampire* and suddenly things became clear that in our heads, right? It's because they're not one thing. Nor will they ever be one thing. Because if you look at a vampire, I mean, a vampire has been alive for what? Hundreds, thousands of years. Right. And this is what I tell my students. I'm like, imagine you were alive for like hundreds of years, would you who truly care about things like sexuality or gender or even race or age or any of this right? Or would you be like, after the first hundred years, would you be like, you know I guess I'll sleep with men now. Like, you know what I mean, like at some point won't everything get so old that you just like kind of move onto the next thing. Right? And sort of like, yeah, that makes total sense right? I feel like if you're alive for long enough, you start caring less and less. Right? And so, you start exploring and that exploration leads to this necessary intersectionality as a way of life. So to me monstrosity is fundamentally about intersectionality. And any sort of study of monstrosity to me that is worth a damn is a study that acknowledges intersectionality in some way, shape or form. Like not every single study of monstrosity has to be about race, but it can't be just about one thing. It can't be just about sexuality, it can't be just about gender, it can't be just about race, it has to be about something broader. Otherwise you're not capturing everything monstrosity is.

OLZMAN. What are emerging areas you see in the study of monstrosity or areas that you believe we need to delve further into?

LEVINA. I think it's becoming a lot more intersectional. I mean, I think Bernadette [Calafell] is definitely leading the charge on that. I think it's becoming a lot more political. It's always been political. When I was getting my dissertation done, during my dissertation, my dissertation was inspired by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Season Four and how Spike was chipped as opposed to staked and so it was these different ways of managing monstrosity through this sort of traditional, like we must kill and there's a stake or we can chip it and the idea of the soul anyway, so this is why. I remember at the time I just wasn't taken seriously at all. At my school, I was the *Buffy* girl. My colleagues would have these panels to which I could have contributed. Never invited me, never anything. It was something, say it was some things that you have to hide, you have work at being

presented as objective. I actually one time submitted a panel on monstrosity to conference that shall remain nameless and I got rejected because I did not quantify monstrosity. Like how do I know there are a lot of monsters? Do I have the numbers for how many monsters there are? I was like, what are you talking about? What?! So anyway, so I think there's a lot more legitimacy to the field because of scholars like Bernadette [Calafell], like Kendall Phillips who are well established in the field and who are doing, you know, who are making full professor while doing this kind of work, and that's what I said that at the monstrosity panel. The preconference was just like this very legitimizing experience in some way, shape or form so I think because it's becoming more legitimate and more people are more invested. And I think that a lot more Internet stuff is centered around monstrosity and that brings it to the forefront. So I think it opens up the possibility of doing more openly political work, openly intersectional work, that you don't have to hide behind. Like I quantify, monstrosity as five monsters this month, six monsters this month I'm like, do you want like a break down? What do you want? So, I think that's where it's going and I'm actually really excited about where it's going. I think it's going in some really interesting directions and I think that the work that is getting produced is just a whole lot more interesting.

OLZMAN. What does your work add to the research in monstrosity and horror?

LEVINA. Well, I think in general, my work, I've always said this, that my work first and foremost in all its shapes in all its iterations is concerned with the question of difference, how do we manage, identify, and classify difference and after we do that, what do we decide to do with that. I believe that science, technology and medicine are, in our society, are some of the most important ways in which we not just manage or classify and produce difference, but also legitimize difference. And therefore it is important, so my work on *Disrupt or Die* essentially talks about how if you move health online, what does it mean about the way you see sick bodies? Because you know the idea is that a body has to be identified as different and one way in which it identified as different is by being labeled ill or sick or able or disabled. There's something about the body that's identified this way and the science, biomedical establishment is very much a leading way in which it gets identified. Now, if you move biomedical establishment online and you personalize health, what does it mean about the way

we see our own body as healthy or unhealthy? As you know, “monstrous” and how do we then proceed on to try “fix them”? So, because I think my work is interdisciplinary partially because I have attention span of a squirrel and so I just go where my interests lead at the time. I am not a very disciplined person by any stretch of imagination and so that's where my head was at that point and that I was really fascinated with that move online and right now my work has gone into a somewhat different direction, but I think the unifying thread about how I sell it for my tenure and promotion files is a work of like critical and cultural studies of difference.

OLZMAN. I know that there can be sometimes projects or things you want to keep under wraps until they come out, but are there any projects you're working on right now that you'd like to share about?

LEVINA. Well, I think this will be out by the time the interview comes out and it gets published, but I just completed. Well, it's like now it's going to through the copy-editing process, a commentary section of *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* journal on cruelty in the age of Trump and essentially I've gotten really interested in the last several years in affect theory and how it can inform against the study and understanding of difference and one of the things that I got interested in is this idea how Trump has been identified as cruel. People really hated Bush and hated Cheney it, but we didn't talk about some culture as being cruel in the same way you talk about Trump and Trump's administration as being cruel. So this idea of trying to tease out what cruelty is. So this was a commentary section. So we did a panel, at NCA 2017, and Rob DeChaine who's the editor of this journal, came and he was really interested. Kumarini Silva, my colleague came on board as a co-editor. This is what I've been working on so crazily for this last month because the deadline was so tight, so it should be out in March. Hopefully. And in it, I actually write about my own, it's part autoethnography, so I write in very deep details about my experiences growing up in Soviet Union and the violence of growing up in Soviet Union. And then coming to the United States and having Russian Jews become very racist and very cruel to people of color themselves and sort of looking at cruelty as sort of like, this attachment to Whiteness that comes with this identity. So that's what I'm working on. That was just completed. I have a book on biocitizenship, an edited collection that's coming out from NYU Press that's going to be cool. But the

newer projects...I'm working with Kyle Christiansen on vulnerability in horror films. I think the next book is probably going to be something about Whiteness and vulnerability because I felt like ever since the 2017 election, I really felt like I had to put my work with new media, digital media on a back burner because I didn't think it really addressed what I needed to say right now at the moment. So I started to transition more to a lot of autoethnographic work. And starting to draw and my own personal experiences as a way of trying to theorize it means to be vulnerable.