

Paul Spengemann  
*Whoa Hoo-ah Huh!*

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Rebekka Seubert

Wings beating, hopping, snorting – the red glow of a dragon's cave fills the room, yet its denizen leads a shadowy existence; it licks, whistles, rants and raves until the roof collapses on its head. After a short respite, it re-emerges from the rubble, a churlish, gloomy fellow, staking out its space in this exhibition hall.

Some myths never die. True, the Enlightenment did a largely thorough job with its campaign of demystification, ridding Western cultures of their irrational belief in monsters, dragons and mythological creatures. Yet from out of the niche of science and fantasy fiction in which they endure, myths consistently re-emerge in the public consciousness and enrich our sense of reality with their essence. They fill the gaps left by the abstract and streamlined geometry of our contemporary everyday lives. What was believed to be dead and buried rises potently from our visual memory, a pseudo-giant from the realm of the shades, to test whether its old image can still pack a punch before beating its ugly wings again.

Paul Spengemann, prizewinner at 2017's Art Cologne New Positions Awards, brings a digitally animated dragon to life in his new exhibition *Whoa, Hoo-ah Huh!* in Cologne's artothek. The beamer in the space serves as a light source for the shadowy reflection of this mythological figure, which flies, snorting, through a cave glowing with embers and fire. The 4-channel sound lends the barely visible dragon a distinct spatiality, makes it locatable, and intensifies the viewer's sense of its presence in the shadow theatre. This simple technical installation acts as a presence-machine for the artificially inspirited monster.

A hybrid creature, part reptile, part bird and part beast of prey, the film's digitally generated protagonist seems familiar at first glance, resembling the dragons of European mythology as depicted in medieval literature, art and architecture, with scaly skin like a snake's, and wings and claws reminiscent of hunting birds and beasts of prey. While in Oriental and Asian cultures, dragons are portrayed as beneficent creatures, helping people in their everyday lives, and are consequently revered to this day, in the long-since faded heroic epics of Western and Arabian cultures dragons are portrayed as monsters who must be fought and vanquished to prevent them from bringing chaos and disaster to the world. Anyone who ventures into the dragon's cave must be sure to use a cunning trick to overcome the monster's superior power, otherwise they face certain death. Only deftly standing shoulder-to-shoulder with it or swiftly and precisely striking it with a lance will ensure a happy end to the story.

However, like the digitally animated stick insect in Paul Spengemann's previous film *Walking Stick* (2017), on closer inspection the dragon in this new film is an ambivalent, idiosyncratic figure with anthropomorphic characteristics. Initially, the dragon impresses the viewer with its projected largeness, filling the shadow theatre. But its unintentionally monstrous aspect is contrasted not only by its deliberately awkward, home-made appearance, created by the artist using the democratic means of open source software, but also and especially by its 'dubious' conduct. Its actions in front of the light source resemble those of a rock star waiting to go on stage. The dragon practises whistling, hops about, licks something in the corner and rants and raves until its cave collapses. It communicates with its audience via well-known hand gestures, familiar from pop culture. In one scene, it turns its claw from a peace sign to a sign of the horns, the devil's greeting. The onomatopoeic exhibition title, vaguely imitating the non-lingual sounds uttered by a monster using linguistic means and translating them into text, underlines the fact that the monster in the film was animated according to human criteria: Like its historical counterparts, its role is to reflect human fears. Yet it can only have mastery of its stage so long as the audience continues to watch its performance in the crackling embers, mesmerized and awestruck. Retreat or attack are the only ways to break the continuous loop! In terms of cultural history, portrayals of demons and evil spirits serve the purpose of influencing the course of nature or turning events around towards a positive outcome (e.g. as part of a ritual or a symbolic fight).

If we look closer, we see that the monster is ultimately like a panther in a cage; it is clumsy, vain and captivated by its own crazy shadow but only *in the smallest of all circles turns*. Now would be the time to attack! It would be so easy – but perhaps too easy to go through with.

Translated by Charlotte Kreutzmüller