



**Utrecht University**

Reviving the Monstrous:  
An Analysis of Morehshin Allahyari's *The Laughing Snake* and Its Critical  
Intervention

Zeynep Naz Inansal  
Research Master Thesis  
Media, Art and Performance Studies  
Department of Media and Culture Studies  
Utrecht University  
6084834  
zepnaz@gmail.com

Supervisor: prof. dr. Maaike Bleeker  
Second Reader: prof. dr. Frank Kessler  
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## ABSTRACT

*She Who Sees the Unknown* (2017) is an ongoing artistic research project by Iranian multi-media artist Morehshin Allahyari in which she recreates monstrous female figures of Middle Eastern origin (*jinn*) through 3D printing technology and her own concept of 're-figuring'. The latter refers to the conscious reclaiming and re-appropriating of the stories of feminized or female figures of *jinn*. *The Laughing Snake* (2018) is an artwork that reveals the potential of Allahyari's re-figuring in practice as it most clearly demonstrates how re-figuring can be used for empowerment amongst the series of artworks in *She Who Sees the Unknown*. The aim of this thesis is to understand the critical intervention performed by Morehshin Allahyari's hypertext narrative in *The Laughing Snake*. To do so, this thesis analyzes the artistic tools, methods and figures that are used in the production of *The Laughing Snake*. It focuses on what these artistic tools and methods offer in terms of performing a critical intervention in future imaginaries, as well as the monster's necessity and significance for these artistic and political practices.

Chapter One of this thesis provides a historical background of 3D printing technology, focusing mainly on 3D printing art and how such a technology is entangled with the artistic aims and critical interventions Allahyari makes through her artistic practices. Chapter Two is dedicated to exploring the concept of re-figuring, Allahyari's artistic research process that involves re-appropriating the stories of Middle Eastern monstrous figures. Chapter Three focuses on *The Laughing Snake* in detail, looking at the significance of the monster in this critical intervention and how the storytelling elements and style contribute to its message and effect. Together, these chapters provide the context and analysis necessary for understanding the importance and potential of Allahyari's critical intervention in *The Laughing Snake* specifically, as well as *She Who Sees the Unknown* more generally.

**Keywords:** 3D printer, Re-figuring, Jinn, Monster, Middle Eastern Futurism, Morehshin Allahyari

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## INTRODUCTION

“[T]he future is necessarily monstrous: the figure of the future, that is, that which can only be surprising, that for which we are not prepared, you see, is heralded by species of monsters. A future that would not be monstrous would not be a future; it would already be a predictable, calculable, and programmable tomorrow”  
(Jacques Derrida, 386-387, *Points....: Interviews*).

The inspiration for this thesis came from my deep interest in monstrous female figures. Ever since my childhood, I have been eager to learn more about witches and monsters. This curiosity led me to build my research interests accordingly and I spent the first year of my graduate studies conducting research on witches in performance art, specifically on the ways that the witch can be seen as a resistance figure in the present. This research paved the way for the following thesis, which explores the critical intervention performed by Iranian-born artist Morehshin Allahyari through her artwork *The Laughing Snake* (2018), in which she uses a 3D modeled female *jinn* to reflect on the experience of being a woman in the Middle East. I was first exposed to Allahyari’s work through her participation in the 2017 IMPAKT Festival in Utrecht, and I became especially interested in the particular ways that she brings together 3D printing technology with supernatural elements like *jinn* in order to reflect on her personal experience with oppression. I concluded that this artwork could and should be examined further because it raises interesting and important questions about the usage of non-Western figures and the empowerment and the representation of female figures, while also functioning as an example of how storytelling and 3D printing technology can be used together as an intervention to reflect on these themes.

This thesis contributes to understanding of the significance and the necessity of reviving the monstrous both in the present and in relation to the future, specifically in the coalescence of technology and art. As well, this thesis offers much needed contributions to the existing body of cultural studies scholarship—monster studies—which explores the figurations and meanings of the monster in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Monster studies is quite a recent area of study within academia, in existence for approximately twenty years but gaining popularity especially over the past decade. Cultural theorist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen paved the way for addressing the monstrous as an academic subject in his 1996 edited volume *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Within, Cohen coined the term ‘monster theory’, and in his ground-breaking article on the subject, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” offered a framework for using the monster as a figure to interpret and better understand the cultures in which the monster is created and embedded. Looking at the

relationship between the cultural and that which is considered monstrous is especially relevant in this case, since Allahyari also uses the monster to reflect on her experience of being a woman in Middle Eastern culture. The monsters discussed in this project are *jinn* (see Chapter Two), monstrous figures from the Middle Eastern folklore that are revived through a critical artistic project as a form of artistic resistance.

There has been a significant increase and expansion in the literature regarding monster studies over the past ten years, bringing attention to its significance to the present. In a more recent edited volume, *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader* (2013), media scholars Marina Levina and Diem-my T. Bui bring together essays dealing with the monster in contemporary society. The contributions within “theorize the monstrous as a condition of the 21st century” (2) because monsters “represent collective social anxieties over resisting and embracing change in the twenty-first century” (1-2). *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (2013) is another collected volume on the subject edited by Medieval art professors Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle. The contributions within explore the history of monstrous figures and also make challenging cases for the necessity of studying the monster in the present, especially its relevance in the Digital Age. As a follow-up to this volume, Mittman recently edited a two-volume series, *Classic Readings on Monster Theory* (2018), which was co-edited by cultural researcher Marcus Hensel. The first volume looks at the impact of the figure of the monster and how monster studies have developed over time, featuring key texts that shaped monster studies dating back to Cohen’s (1996) edited volume. Divided into two sections—monster theories and theories that often go hand in hand with the monstrous—the latter volume looks at specific cultural stories and figures that function as case studies to apply the first volume’s theoretical work. In 2018, the multidisciplinary academic journal *Somatechnics* also dedicated an issue to monster studies entitled “Promises, Monsters and Methodologies : the Ethics, Politics and Poetics of the Monstrous.” The special issue positions the monster as “an expanding phenomenon” (144), rising from the political climate in the present and especially connected to the rise of right wing political movements and parties across the global North; by showing the great potential of “opening up knowledge and its methods to new paths, old paths that remain underexplored, or paths that are yet to be created” (160), this special issue underscores the importance and relevance of monster studies today. These recent works on the subject also frame the monster as a figure that can be used to stimulate innovative discussions regarding its relevance and necessity as a framework for viewing and understanding the present,

especially in regard to technological developments, transformations, and the increase of fear surrounding things like global warming and artificial intelligence.

Monsters have served as a fruitful and accurate metaphor for phenomena that are beyond our understanding. In addition to the aim of contributing to these existing discussions, this thesis investigates Allahyari's artistic and interdisciplinary approach to the monstrous as a case study. Despite the aforementioned scholarship that engages with the monster's relevance in the present, this thesis takes a more culturally specific, situated approach to the monster and its role in shaping the past, present and future, while also highlighting the relevance of work that foregrounds the relationship between the cultural and temporal nature of the monstrous. Furthermore, it looks at the significance of reviving and producing situated and culturally specific monsters from the past, specifically figurations from the Middle East, in order to re-situate them in the present and relate them towards the future. In accordance with these aims, the thesis focuses on the artistic tools and methods such as Allahyari's use of re-figuring, 3D printing and storytelling, rather than adhering strictly to the monstrous and its social, political, cultural and aesthetic implications. Importantly, this approach and focus addresses the lack of scholarship on monsters from the Middle East generally, and Iran specifically, especially those that are viewed as female.

This thesis aims to interrogate the role and significance of the monster and the monstrous in relationship to the artistic tools and methods used in the making of a specific artwork. To do so, it focuses on artist Morehshin Allahyari's creative research project, *She Who Sees the Unknown* (2016 - Present), highlighting one of the artworks in the project entitled *The Laughing Snake* (2018). Allahyari's project utilizes 3D printing technology in order to make visible and interrogate monstrous Middle Eastern female figures. In practice, *She Who Sees the Unknown* involves reproducing these monstrous figures through the 3D printing technologies and through re-appropriating their stories in a critically engaging way, a process referred to as re-figuring by Allahyari. Through her artistic works and writings, Allahyari establishes re-figuring as a *ficto-feminist* practice of engaging with *jinn* and figures of oppression, empowering these figures by giving them back their voices, their gazes, and ultimately, control over their own stories. My intention is to demonstrate the ways that this artwork contributes to both conceptualizing difference and to talking about the present, past and future through situating the figure of the monster as a figure of female empowerment in the specific contexts and traditions of the Middle East. This thesis is thus guided by the following question: How can we understand the critical intervention



performed by Morehshin Allahyari's hypertext narrative *The Laughing Snake*? This research is also supported by the following questions:

- In what way can 3D printing technology in the work of Allahyari, in particular *The Laughing Snake* be understood as critical? In what ways does it contribute to the critical intervention performed by the artwork?
- How does Allahyari's concept of re-figuring contribute to the critical intervention performed by *The Laughing Snake*? In what ways can re-figuring be understood as performing a critical intervention in storytelling and future imaginaries?
- What is the significance of the monster in *She Who Sees the Unknown & The Laughing Snake*? How is the monster situated as a figure of empowerment?
- What is the significance of reviving the monstrous in the present? What is the function of remediating these figures in the present and in relating them to the concept of the future? Why bring monstrous stories from the past in order to talk about or deal with the future? What makes the monster a relevant critical intervention in the production of narratives of future? How does Allahyari's artistic research project contribute to monster theory in the 21st century?

Through an analysis of the artwork I will show how these factors together manage to create a unique example of a counter-narrative that critically engages with prevailing understandings of difference and systems of oppression in the present. This thesis thus makes a case for returning to the monstrous, for retrieving those feminized monsters from Middle Eastern traditions in order to engage with the idea of the future via the technological tools (3D printing) that help create the imageries of possible futures.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research for this thesis is qualitative in nature and based on an analysis of the artwork *The Laughing Snake* and the critical intervention it performs. This research places Allahyari's work within the history of 3D printing technology in order to explore her artistic appropriation of this tool in relation to the choice of tools and technologies, as well as how her artistic practices fit into the larger discussion surrounding technological tools and artmaking. The research establishes Allahyari's re-figuring as an activist practice that intervenes through mobilizing stories of the

oppressed, and offers further analysis through philosopher Donna Haraway's theories of storytelling as a form of resistance (Haraway, 2016) and through the works of Afrofuturism and related counterfuturisms, especially Middle Eastern futurisms like Arab and Gulf futurisms. The figure of the monster and its significance in this critical intervention is demonstrated through applying Cohen's monster theory and positioning the monster as a breaker of categories. Finally, the thesis performs a close textual analysis on the hypertext narrative *The Laughing Snake*, focusing on the storytelling style, elements of the hypertext narrative, the narrative shift in the female gaze. This analysis is supported through feminist film theory, specifically the work of Laura Mulvey (1989), and provides a detailed account on the female gaze and its cultural and social meanings. The relationship between these theoretical and analytical tools, particularly how they contribute to each other, is discussed as well. Ultimately, this research presents a case for the relevance of reviving the monstrous *jinn* of the Middle East and re-contextualizing them in the present in order to discuss, critically engage with and reflect on the future and its imaginations.

## INTRODUCTION TO MOREHSHIN ALLAHYARI

Moreshein Allahyari is an artist, activist and researcher, born and raised in Tehran, Iran and currently residing and working in New York City, U.S. Her artworks focus on the deployment of concepts such as identity, documentation, archiving, borders and representation, while her practices and use of certain technological tools and methods contribute to the coalescence of technology and art<sup>1</sup>. She obtained a B.A. in Social Sciences and Media Studies at the University of Tehran before moving to the United States in 2007, where she obtained a M.A. in Digital Media Studies from the University of Denver and an M.F.A. in New Media Art at the University of North Texas (Allahyari, 2019). She channels her unique educational background into her artworks, not only by demonstrating an extended interest in new and digital media, but also by directly engaging with digital technologies and new forms of media in order to enrich them with personal or collective stories of struggle. Her early work can be considered more autobiographical, as these works illustrate a prominent conflict—oppression or self-exile—from a personal perspective.

A common tendency of her work is the featuring of personal stories and an emphasis on their role in the documentation of history. She deliberates on forms of collective oppression and struggle by means of giving prominence to her own and others' personal stories and perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> All information on the artist is taken from her biography on her website, <http://www.morehshin.com/artist-information/>, and from now on will be referred to as (Allahyari, 2019).

While the early works of Allahyari exhibit focus on the notions of censorship, self-exile, personal stories of war and oppression, her later work builds upon this foundation by investigating the representation and documentation of memories and stories. Further, she questions the ways in which the archiving of these stories and memories could function as a form of resistance. She critically engages with the concept of representation and the potential reconstruction of these memories and stories in order to resist and counteract underrepresentation. Through emphasizing personal memories and experiences of oppression and misinterpretation, she draws attention towards the significance of granting these stories a platform to enable people to take control of their own narratives. This can also be interpreted as an intervention against the top-down approach of the existing narratives of oppression, and as a way of embracing the personal experiences that deal with these issues as a part of this narrative.

Her first exhibited artwork, *Over There is Over Here* (2011)<sup>2</sup>, is a 3D animated video shown online, which takes the viewer on a journey in a space built around a hundred year old photograph of political prisoners in Iran, questioning whether time should be seen as a non-linear concept (Allahyari, 2019). The 3D animated photo was placed in the center of a constructed 3D virtual space; as the viewer toured the space, the 3D photo continuously transforms in a way that reveals that it is not built in a linear fashion. This artwork was followed by *The Romantic Self Exiles I* (2012)<sup>3</sup>, a video installation where she constructed her hometown Tehran from memory by means of 3D animation as a reflection on self-exile and memory (Allahyari, 2019). This video installation was projected onto transparent building blocks made of plexiglass, which created multiple shadows and distortions of the reflected images. Some parts of the city were left empty, whereas some regions were merely incomplete due to her fragmented and deficient memory that was used as a source material to resuscitate the city. Through this installation, it becomes clear that Allahyari questions the role memory plays in self-exile and the means by which it weakens one's bond with one's home country.

*Re: Apologies to the Many Wonderful Iranians* (2012)<sup>4</sup> is another video installation where Allahyari coalesces personal stories to meditate on the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and the feeling of living with a constant sense of fear (Allahyari, 2019). The 3D animation is reflected upon a window,

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<sup>2</sup> More information on the artwork can be seen through the following link: <http://www.morehshin.com/over-there-is-over-here/>.

<sup>3</sup> More information on the artwork can be seen through the following link: <http://www.morehshin.com/romantic-self-exiles-i/>.

<sup>4</sup> More information on the artwork can be seen through the following link: <http://www.morehshin.com/re-apologies-many-wonderful-iranians/>.

depicting buildings and objects slowly fading and dissolving into each other, as well as things falling apart. These artworks mark the beginning of her interest in personal and collective memory and the archive. Concurrently, they are a testament to how she taps into her interest in digital art for the purpose of dealing with the more conceptual themes of archiving, documenting memories and the question of the importance of personal stories in discussing greater conflicts. Themes of destruction and distortion are also evident in these artworks, as she meditates on the issues that are manifested with war and oppression, ultimately relating these issues to her own memories. Allahyari has been working exclusively with the 3D printer as an artistic tool since 2014 (Allahyari, 2019), and Chapter One shows how she positions it as a philosophical tool to reflect on oppression, censorship and representation.

## **SHE WHO SEES THE UNKNOWN**

*The Laughing Snake* is a part of Allahyari's ongoing body of work, *She Who Sees the Unknown*, which began in 2017 and through which she conducts artistic research on monstrous female figures of Middle Eastern origin, known as *jinn*, reviving them through using 3D printing technology (Allahyari, 2019)<sup>5</sup>. Her process includes researching these figures, recreating them through 3D modeling and 3D printing, and re-writing their stories by connecting each figure and their story to a modern form of oppression. She names this concept of consciously reclaiming the figure through re-appropriating their story as 're-figuring' (see Chapter Two). The figures that she chooses to put through the re-figuring process are female *jinn* from Middle Eastern folklore that have been forgotten over time. The second chapter of this thesis shows how through re-figuring, she reclaims these *jinn* and empowers them so that they might assist in challenging contemporary form of oppressions. She shows their strengths and the ways they can be powerful figures in both the past as well as the present. Through this work she has created a freely available online archive, as well as a physical archive of 3D printed sculptures of the figures and multi-media artworks that include new media forms like video and virtual animation.

2018's *The Laughing Snake*<sup>6</sup> is the artwork that reveals the potential of Allahyari's concept of re-figuring, demonstrating how it can be used as an empowering concept. In my opinion, it can

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<sup>5</sup> The information on *She Who Sees the Unknown* is taken from the project's website, which will be referred to as (Allahyari, 2019) in the following sections. The website can be viewed through the following link: <http://shewhoseestheunknown.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> More information on the artwork can be seen through the following link: <http://shewhoseestheunknown.com/the-laughing-snake/>.

be seen as the artwork that most clearly demonstrates how re-figuring can be used for empowerment amongst the series of artworks in *She Who Sees the Unknown*. The original myth of *The Laughing Snake* tells the story of a hybrid figure of a *jinn*—half woman, half snake—that takes over a village, causing chaos and killing people. After many unsuccessful attempts to kill her, she dies when a man holds a mirror to her face, which causes her to die of laughter (Allahyari, 2019). Allahyari's contemporary twist on the story is a web-based, hyper-textual and interactive narrative, where the viewer can navigate the story by clicking through certain keywords, ending up in descriptions of Allahyari's personal memories of growing up in Iran and being a woman in the Middle East. The artist entangles her own story with that of the *jinn*'s, embodying the monster while also changing the monster's story. In Allahyari's retelling of the story, the snake dies of laughter after seeing her reflection *within* today's world as a whole. This moment of re-figuring is also emphasized through the retelling's narration style, making it a specific moment in the hypertext where the reader is allowed to make their own choice in the development of the story. Through both her narration style and the recasting of the story's ending (where she herself turns into *the Laughing Snake*), Allahyari suggests parallels between herself and the monster/*jinn*. This thesis argues that Allahyari is making an important critical intervention with *The Laughing Snake* both through the artistic elements of the artwork and through her choice of medium and tools. This thesis thus investigates the significance of female monsters, re-figuring and 3D printing technology in this specific critical intervention.

## THESIS STRUCTURE

This thesis consists of an introduction, conclusion and three main chapters; Chapter One and Chapter Two discuss the main artistic tools, methods, and theoretical writings used by both Allahyari and this thesis, while Chapter Three provides critical and textual analysis of the artwork and its context. Each of the artistic tools and methods used in the making of *The Laughing Snake* contribute to a significant aspect of the critical intervention that is performed. For instance, Chapter One gives a detailed account of the history, areas of use and various implications of 3D printing technology. Through providing an extensive overview of 3D printing technology, it produces the necessary framework for exploring Allahyari's appropriation of the 3D printing technology and its specificity. She reclaims the tool as a philosophical tool to meditate on the implications and effects of 3D printing technology. She re-appropriates it as an archiving tool, forming a remediated online and physical archive of Middle Eastern female *jinn*. Introduced in Chapter One, her concept of

*additivism*, which brings together activism with additivist technologies such as 3D printing, comes into play here and highlights the potential of using 3D printing technology as a tool for resistance and critical intervention. Her critical writings on the subject, *3D Additivist Manifesto* (2015) and *3D Additivist Cookbook* (2017) are introduced to establish how she calls for artists, thinkers and engineers to create plural futures. On one hand, Allahyari reclaims this archiving tool and produces an archive that functions as a form of resistance in terms of both its contents and the way it is produced. On the other hand, she also reclaims her right to participate in the imagination of the future through reclaiming a tool for producing and imagining the future.

Chapter Two examines re-figuring, the term Allahyari uses to refer to her artistic research process in *She Who Sees the Unknown*. This section first introduces and explains Allahyari's concept of re-figuring, an activist form of activating, reviving and re-appropriating Middle Eastern female *jinn*. By examining the examples of *jinn* that Allahyari has re-figured, this section provides insight into how these *jinn* myths can be relevant in discussing personal and social experiences of oppression in the present. This chapter makes a case for reviving these stories as well as re-appropriating them. This argument brings us to another aspect of Allahyari's critical intervention, as re-figuring is a critical intervention in these specific stories and the way they are told. Through re-figuring, Allahyari demonstrates the relevance of the monster, specifically the female *jinn* from the Middle East, in discussing oppression in the present and future.

Feminist philosopher Donna Haraway's theories on how storytelling can likewise be used as a tool of resistance to challenge and intervene with established categories and concepts that are introduced in Chapter Two. Haraway's work is used to understand the necessity and the potential of telling stories that move beyond anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. In a similar vein, Allahyari critically engages with the stories and non-human figures in *She Who Sees the Unknown*, and through her concept of re-figuring, produces a performative example of taking control of one's own story. Theories of counterfuturisms, including Afrofuturism and Middle Eastern futurisms, are also discussed in this chapter to better understand re-figuring and to demonstrate how Allahyari's concept follows a similar trajectory in future imaginaries that involves re-imagining the past. Counterfuturisms and re-figuring don't simply imagine a different past or future, but work through a temporal resistance, wherein they reclaim the stories of the oppressed and underrepresented in the past and present for the future, an empowering act which can be considered an intervention in existing temporalities. These findings also demonstrate that the oppressed can find emancipation in the future through revising the past first.

Chapter Three situates the figure of the monster as one that reflects directly back on the culture in which it is created. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's theories on monster culture from *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996) directly contribute to this thesis' understanding of the monstrous *jinn* in Allahyari's artworks. The monster is positioned as a figure that resists any form of categorization and breaks identificatory mechanisms, as well as a figure that embodies the anxieties and desires of the culture that created it. Thus, *The Laughing Snake* can be seen as a reflection on the fears and desires of Middle Eastern societies regarding women. Through Richard Kearney's and Cohen's theories on the topic, the monster is framed as an extreme case of marginalization and as a figure of deviance. By embracing this figure as an identity, Allahyari performs an intervention in the existing structures of identity and resists them through embodying the monster/ous. Philosopher Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection from her seminal work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1984) is also highlighted in this section in order to understand how the woman and the monster hold a similar position in the eyes of a patriarchal society and culture. This research importantly contributes to the scope of monster studies in the 21st century, an area of studies that lacks scholarship regarding Middle Eastern *jinn* and female monsters. It also aims to contribute to the discussion surrounding the monster's significance in talking about oppression in the present, as well as the future.

The second section of Chapter Three demonstrates how the story of *The Laughing Snake* manifests itself by investigating the storytelling elements, which includes the hypertext narrative, differential or alternative outcomes, re-figuring of and within the story, and the role of the female gaze in this intervention. Through the use of hypertext and alternative outcomes, Allahyari produces a narrative that supports her process of re-figuring while also showing different outcomes that could lead to either empowerment or oppression. It manifests as an example of the necessity of going back to the past and revising it in order to change the future. Through the use of the female gaze and the change in the emphasis of the look, Allahyari gives the monster its reflection back and reclaims her own reflection and personal narrative. This contention is supported through feminist film critic Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1989), where she defines the male gaze of classical Hollywood cinema and elaborates on the woman's function as being an object of this male gaze. Allahyari's personal stories are also positioned as examples of an objectifying male gaze where the woman's function is to be an object of desire. Using this theory as a point of departure, I argue that by re-figuring the story and changing the emphasis of the look/gaze, Allahyari gives agency to the monsters in her stories. As discussed in this section, *The Laughing Snake* creates an example of a critical

intervention and narrative that reclaims certain artistic tools, Middle Eastern *jinn* stories, personal stories of oppression and the ability to imagine the future by manifesting a shift in the power of the monster. It thus repositions the monster as a figure of empowerment and resistance.



## CHAPTER 1: MOREHSHIN ALLAHYARI & 3D PRINTING ART

In accordance with the aim of investigating the critical intervention performed by Allahyari in *The Laughing Snake*, this chapter begins by introducing Allahyari's artworks that center around 3D printing technology in order to establish the common themes and artistic intentions that are present in each. After establishing a basic understanding of her works, the following section introduces the 3D printer and gives a brief account on its history and areas of use, specifically addressing its applications in medicine, engineering and manufacturing. The next section discusses the trends in 3D printer art and reveals some examples of 3D printer art, arguing that the general tendency is to use the 3D printer for what it offers materially, as a functional tool that allows certain production techniques. This part of the chapter also functions to contextualize how Allahyari's artworks are positioned in relation to other artists that are working with 3D printing technology as an artistic tool. As well, the general trends in the field of 3D printer art are established. The next section focuses on Allahyari's artistic approach and critical engagement with the 3D printer exploring the ways she uses it as a tool of resistance through archiving and documentation, and explaining how the 3D printer has come to be a part of her artistic practice. Her positioning of the 3D printer as a philosophical tool and how this move distinguishes from other artists that deal primarily with the 3D printer's materiality is discussed in depth. This section also investigates her artworks featuring the 3D printing technology chronologically, as each of the artworks raises questions and challenges the technology in a way that leads to each other. For example, the artist's criticality towards the 3D printer and its potential has become more clear over the course of her experimentation with the technology. It is thus necessary to go through these works in detail through a close analysis in order to better understand how her latest project, *The Laughing Snake*, came to be.

### ON ALLAHYARI & 3D PRINTING ART

Allahyari has exclusively been working with the 3D printing technology since 2014 (Allahyari, 2019)<sup>7</sup>. She has expanded this praxis by exploring wider areas of use and how it can be used as a tool of resistance. Let us have a brief look at her works that utilize the 3D printer

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<sup>7</sup> More information on Allahyari's artworks can be found through the following link: <http://www.morehshin.com/artworks/>.

with the intent of establishing her artistic relationship with this tool. *Dark Matter* (2014)<sup>8</sup> is her first work in which she has used 3D printing technology as her primary artistic tool to create a series of sculptures. She juxtaposed various objects that are forbidden in Iran— VHS tapes, The Simpsons toys, Barbie dolls, satellite dishes, sex toys and Buddha statues—with forbidden acts such as owning a dog or eating pork. Hereby, she meshed these objects and ideas together to create 3D printed, hybrid sculptures (Allahyari, 2019). Examples of these hybrid sculptures include a Buddha statue with the head of Homer Simpson and a dog using a satellite dish as a dildo. With this artwork, she explored how the 3D printer could be exploited in a country like Iran, a context where many objects and acts are forbidden. She looks beyond the functional possibilities of the 3D printer and manages to question censorship, meanwhile exposing its absurdity. Later, her project was commissioned by the Forever Now project, which is an organization that curates videos and sounds to be sent to space as a representation of the artworks of the world (Allahyari, 2019). She created a video featuring 3D models of these statues as more of a dystopic documentation of the world that reflects on oppression and a darker side of life on Earth. *Dark Matter* is a depiction of Allahyari's personal experience with oppression and censorship in Iran. In an interview with *Wired*<sup>9</sup> in 2016, she states, "I've experienced all of these forbidden things" (Allahyari, 2016), describing how she was afraid to walk her dog on the street. By means of this artwork, she manages to narrate her personal experience with oppression and censorship.

Allahyari's most notable project yet, *Material Speculation: ISIS* (2015-2016) won her the Leading Global Thinkers of 2016 award by *Foreign Policy Magazine*<sup>10</sup>, for "saving heritage on a Zip drive" (*FPglobalthinkers2016*). The project comprises of reconstructing twelve artifacts that were destroyed by ISIS in 2015. Following the viral propaganda video of ISIS destroying artifacts at Mosul Museum, the artist began researching the destroyed statues. After undertaking a yearlong intense research, she 3D modeled the artifacts based on the existing images and data with the highest precision possible. Subsequently, she 3D printed these reconstructed 3D models as sculptures. Inside, she embedded USB sticks and memory cards containing her entire research, including printable files of the 3D models, images, videos, maps and her e-mail correspondence

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<sup>8</sup> More information on the artwork can be seen through the following link: <http://www.morehshin.com/dark-matter-first-series/>.

<sup>9</sup> The full interview can be read through the following link: <https://www.wired.com/2016/03/morehshin-allahyari-print-your-reality/>.

<sup>10</sup> The full article can be read through the following link: <https://2016globalthinkers.foreignpolicy.com/2016/profile/morehshin-allahyari?3fa4cfa909=>.

with archeologists and museum employees (see fig. 1). She published parts of her work online free of charge, for people to experiment with. As of late, she is currently seeking to find an organization that is willing to host the remainder of this data to make it freely available online (Allahyari, 2019). Allahyari describes the sculptures as “time capsules, each object is sealed and kept for future civilizations” and positions the 3D printer as an archiving tool for artifacts and “for resistance and documentation” (Allahyari, 2019). She elucidates that through this artwork she intends “to use 3D printing as a process for repairing history and memory” (Allahyari, 2019), through making history available and opening up the possibility for these artifacts to be explored by the general public. With this artwork, Allahyari resists the destruction of these artifacts, reshaping the relationship that people have with them, by devising a form of engagement that did not exist before. Now that they are accessible online, people can read detailed information about the artifacts, observe them in 3D, and 3D print them with the material and of the size of their choice.



Fig. 1. The figure of *Lamassu* from *Material Speculation: ISIS (2015-2016)* with a USB stick inside, *Morehshin*, <http://www.morehshin.com/dark-matter-first-series/>.

In 2018, Allahyari partnered with Israeli artist and scholar Dr. Lior Zalmanson for the artistic project titled *Rendering Borders (2018)*<sup>11</sup>, where once again, she explored the subversive use of the 3D printing technology, this time in relation to the body and borders. The exhibition took place between 14th of April 2018 and 12th of July 2018 at Art Cube Artists’ Studio in Jerusalem. The artwork was produced throughout the course of the exhibition, during which Allahyari’s body parts were remotely 3D scanned in the United States and 3D printed at the

<sup>11</sup> More information about the artwork can be found through the following link: <http://www.artiststudiosjlm.org/rendering-borders.html>.

exhibition space. The artwork also offered an interactive experience for the viewer. Each visitor had to go through a psychological screening exam, where they were asked questions that were also asked by the army in the process of recruiting an agent. If they passed the test, they were provided with a 3D printed body part of Allahyari and were then asked to document that body part in a location of their choosing and tell a personal story in relation to it. These body parts were then reassembled by the visitors at the end of the exhibition (Allahyari & Zalmanson, 2018). The work reflects on the limits of bodies, individual freedom of travel and international borders in relationship to digital technologies, in conjunction with questioning the specificity of borders by looking at the relationship between Iran and Israel. Inspired by the preclusion of Allahyari entering the exhibition in Israel because she holds an Iranian passport, both artists wanted to challenge the exclusions of borders and how these conditions related to them personally (Allahyari & Zalmanson, 2018). In an interview with *Haaretz*, Zalmanson explains that he was inspired by hackers planting a virus in a system and, in a similar vein, wanted to symbolically plant Allahyari into the system “for healing, understanding and communication,” (Zalmanson, 2018). This artwork is an intervention against the geographical and political borders, using the displacement of certain bodies to go beyond the physical and political borders through using 3D printing technology as a tool for resistance. It is another example of Allahyari’s way of pushing the 3D printer beyond its conventional use, exploiting its connection between the virtual and the physical to support her aims. In this artwork, she repositions the 3D printer as a tool that can also render borders invisible instead of creating new ones. This brings us to her latest project that connects all the concepts and themes mentioned so far.

Allahyari’s ongoing artistic research project *She Who Sees the Unknown* (2016 - Present) recreates *jinn*, monstrous female figures of Middle Eastern origin, through artistic methods such as 3D modeling, scanning, printing and storytelling. This work aims to deal with and “explore the catastrophes of colonialism, patriarchy and environmental degradation in relationship to the Middle East” (Allahyari, 2019). The project consists of researching, retrieving and re-appropriating the stories of these monstrous female figures and creating 3D models of them. Allahyari constructs a 3D model for each figure and re-writes their story by juxtaposing the figure with a contemporary form of oppression. She refers to this process of rewriting the stories with a contemporary twist as re-figuring, which will be explored thoroughly in the next chapter. She 3D prints sculptures of these monstrous female figures, but also produces videos and installations from their 3D models to create multiple artworks. This project uses the 3D printing technology as a tool for documentation and archiving not only to preserve the figures, but also as

a tool for resistance as it bestows them a public platform. She puts emphasis upon the significance of providing a platform for thinking figures, stories and myths that don't come from a Western tradition, ultimately setting her sights on creating twelve of these figures. The details and the steps of the project, as well as the stories, information and online versions of the artworks, can be found on the website dedicated to the project called "She Who Sees the Unknown"<sup>12</sup>.

Through these discussed artworks, Allahyari looks beyond the primary material function of the 3D printer as a manufacturing tool, and instead, questions the utopian and dystopian potential that this method of production holds. Through critically engaging with this method and expanding its areas of use, the artist positions the 3D printer as a tool to contemplate with. This idea is supported by her artist statement taken from her personal website, in which she describes technology as "a philosophical toolset to reflect on objects" and also as "a poetic means to document our personal and collective lives struggles in the 21st century" (Allahyari, 2019). She uses this digital technology and its potential to reflect on the aforementioned concepts of representation, identity and borders. Thus, by using the 3D printer as her artistic tool, she performs an intervention in the representation of certain figures, stories and myths.

## ON 3D PRINTING TECHNOLOGY

Since its inaugural prototypes dating back to the early 1980s, the 3D printer has been rapidly developed, utilized in various fields including medicine, the tech industry, the arts and engineering. Simply put, the technology consists of printing a digital 3D model into a 3D object, thus, accurately transforming the virtual into the physical. According to *Make: Getting Started with 3D Printing* (2016), the technical term that is most often used to refer to 3D printing is *additive manufacturing*, describing its production process of additively combining layers on top each other to obtain the product, and is also referred to as, "FDM (fused deposition modeling) or sometimes FFF (fused filament fabrication)" (L. Kloski & N. Kloski, 2016, xi). In their book *Fabricated: The New World of 3D Printing* (2013), Hod Lipson and Melba Kurman explain that this emerging manufacturing technique "enables us to make objects in shapes never before possible" (11) as the layer by layer production method "opens up the ability to physically output a broader range of digital concepts," (12) such as "internal hollows or interlocked parts" (12) that were previously physically

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<sup>12</sup> The website can be viewed through the following link: <http://shewhoseestheunknown.com/>.

implausible to produce before. They elaborate that the 3D printer is able to fabricate complex designs accurately from the virtual world to the physical one, and also exhibits versatility in the raw materials it accepts to work with as input. In addition to enabling complex designs, 3D printing technology directly effects manufacturing processes, as “it will *augment* current means of mass production” (Kloski & Kloski, 4) allowing production to happen in various areas, and therefore it wouldn’t be limited to the factory only. John Jordan also discusses this in his book *3D Printing* (2018), arguing that the 3D printing technology has “the potential to reinvent supply chains” (15) since “production can be moved to where the product will be used” (15). He gives the example of the International Space Station “where a 3D printer made a wrench in zero gravity” (15), and states that this would open up many possibilities in relation to producing spare parts and enabling easier repairs. He concludes that “[d]ecentralizing the productive infrastructure helps move manufacturing closer to particular markets” (196), which will “accelerate innovation” (196). In their book on the subject entitled *3D Printing For Dummies* (2017), electronics engineer and designer Richard Horne and Kalani Kirk Hausman who is a researcher on 3D printing technology, refer to this issue as a form of “democratizing manufacturing” (163) as the 3D printing technology provides “a mechanism by which any person can create a design on free software and then render that idea.” (163). They also note that 3D printing technology points to a transformation where “the future can be a sustainable and personally customized environment” (12) considering the rapid production process. John Hornick refers to this issue in his book *3D Printing Will Rock the World* (2015), arguing that 3D printing technology will allow “the human drive to make will be rekindled.” (96). As discussed in this section, the 3D printer is a special manufacturing method that unlocks a multitude of opportunities in various areas. In 1999, the vast potential of the 3D printing technology was hinted at when a 3D printed and lab-grown urinary bladder was successfully transplanted to a patient. The incident opened up discussions regarding the possibility of use in areas such as medicine and science (*digitaltrends*, Dormehl, 2019)<sup>13</sup>. The early 2000s saw the rise of creative ideas concerning the areas of use of the 3D printer, as the access to it became extensively accessible. The commercialization of 3D printing attracted the attention of various industrial sectors wishing to experiment with the technology, ultimately using it to 3D print manufacturing products and goods such as houses, furniture, car parts, a full aircraft and body prosthetics.

The rapid development of the 3D printing technology and its use in different sectors opened up discussions on its greater potential. Looking at some headlines on the topic could give us an idea

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<sup>13</sup> The full article can be read through the following link: <https://www.digitaltrends.com/cool-tech/history-of-3d-printing-milestones/>.

on the hype surrounding the technology. In April 2019, scientists 3D printed a functioning human heart using the patient's own cells (*forbes*, Jefferson, 2019)<sup>14</sup>, evoking the question “Could 3D printing solve the organ transplant shortage?” (*guardian*, Gatenholm, 2017)<sup>15</sup>. The technology is expected to revolutionize other sectors as well, considering how relatively fast and low-cost it could be. It has become a popular figure in the discussion surrounding the future and is positioned as the quick-fix or potential savior in the following headlines: “These homes are proof that 3D printing could help resolve global homelessness,” (*mashable*, Dermentzi, 2018)<sup>16</sup> “The audacious plan to end hunger with 3-D printed food,” (*quartz*, Mims, 2013)<sup>17</sup> “How 3D Printing Could Revolutionize the Future of Development” (*medium*, Rosenthal, 2018)<sup>18</sup>. But will 3D printing technology be able to live up to this expected potential? Even though the 3D printer is more accessible than ever in the present, experts argue that it still has a long way to go before reaching these goals. For instance, the CEO of Monoprice, an electronics retailer, Bernard Luthi believes that the technology is still far from being able to print *anything we want*. He explains that the printers still need to become more affordable, user-friendly and reliable in order achieve these goals and states: “There are still obstacles that we, as an industry, need to overcome” (*futurism*, Luthi, 2018)<sup>19</sup>. The discussion surrounding the potential of 3D technology demonstrates that it is an emerging technology that sparks conversation in various creatives, scientists and thinkers.

The history of 3D printing technology's development also features interventions from designers, engineers and creatives. It is a technology that invites participation and intervention, and its development process is a testament to these aspects. Engineer and interdisciplinary technology researcher Joan Horwath's book *Mastering 3D Printing: Modeling, Printing, And Prototyping with Reprap-Style 3D Printers* (2014) discusses how the 3D printer was developed collectively after a certain point in its design stage, with what was called the RepRap Movement. Adrian Bowyer, a

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<sup>14</sup> The full article can be read through the following link: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robinseatonjefferson/2019/04/18/scientists-print-worlds-first-heart-with-human-bioinks-next-teach-them-to-behave-like-hearts/#62e4b98c6f44>.

<sup>15</sup> The full article can be read through the following link: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jul/30/will-3d-printing-solve-the-organ-transplant-shortage>.

<sup>16</sup> The full article can be read through the following link: <https://mashable.com/2018/03/13/3d-printed-homes-tackle-global-homelessness/?europa=true#6VDcOasbraqV>.

<sup>17</sup> The full article can be read through the following link: <https://qz.com/86685/the-audacious-plan-to-end-hunger-with-3-d-printed-food/>.

<sup>18</sup> The full article can be read through the following link: [https://medium.com/@plus\\_socialgood/how-3d-printing-could-revolutionize-the-future-of-development-54a270d6186d](https://medium.com/@plus_socialgood/how-3d-printing-could-revolutionize-the-future-of-development-54a270d6186d).

<sup>19</sup> The full article could be read through the following link: <https://futurism.com/heres-life-like-3d-printers-can-create-anything>.

mechanical engineering professor from University of Bath in the United Kingdom initiated the movement after some design patents regarding the 3D printer were expired, proposing the idea of developing a 3D printer that would produce parts for 3D printers. He published the designs of his 3D printer online and challenged designers to improve and re-design them, as well as make their contributions publicly available online. The project was subsequently titled the RepRap Project and subsequently received funding from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council in the UK (7). This movement helped to develop the 3D printer, meanwhile rendering it a collective design project that is not controlled by a certain company or a person. As a result, 3D printing technology is open to discussion, improvement and contribution by any individual who is interested. This is essential to understanding Allahyari's work better, since she also has a critical relationship to the 3D printing technology. Her artworks too, encourage contributions from people and invite people to engage with them by making most of the designs open source. The act of developing a technology collectively can also be read as a way of creating a plural future with contributions from a wide community of people.

Horwath argues that crowdfunding allowed many talented entrepreneurs to attain funding for their projects, leading to the production and materialization of exciting designs. He points out that the expiration of the patents on core 3D printing technologies had made it harder for people to obtain funding in the traditional way. Hence, she explains that many startups that utilize the 3D printing technology were funded through crowdfunding, a collective funding mechanism (7). This also means that, contrary to the obligations of traditional funding style, companies would have control over their own designs and would not have to report to investors. The independence of the technology from patents and companies allows for a freedom that does not exist in technologies that are controlled and maintained by certain companies and groups. Therefore, these aspects illustrate that the 3D printer tends to invoke and invite collectivity and collective thinking, intervention and participation. This makes 3D printing a technology that goes hand in hand with the idea of plural futures and multiple stories, which will be explored in the following sections.

The accessibility of the 3D printing technology also unlocks forms of craftsmanship and production methods for individual use that were previously solely available to companies. It is a tool that allows manufacturing on the levels of artistic and craftsmanship, rendering it a skill that can be obtained instead of a talent that is granted. This paves the way for more people to experiment with it in the future, given that it will increasingly become more accessible and affordable. Horwath mentions that the technology is similar to the magic wand, as it offers people "the promise of control over the physical world" (11) and grants individuals "powerful new tools of design and



production” (11). It could be argued that the technology helps go beyond the need for craftsmanship in certain forms of design. However, she also draws attention to how technological tools are potentially dependent on their user, arguing that “technologies are only as good as the people using them” (11). Thus, it can be concluded that this emerging technology has immense potential that sparks exciting discussions on the notions of accessibility, collective design, funding and craftsmanship, and that these possibilities can be realized through different forms of use. At this point in the chapter it is most beneficial to move on to expounding how artists are experimenting with new addivist technologies and how Allahyari is calling for exciting and emancipatory uses of it.

### **ON 3D PRINTED ART**

Stephen Hoskins’s book *3D Printing for Artists, Designers and Makers* (2018) explores the 3D printer’s relationship with visual arts and the ways in which this technique is used by artists, offering a comprehensive look at 3D printed art. His findings indicate that visual artists who experiment with 3D printing technology prefer it for the aesthetic implications it conveys and the possibilities it brings out. He explains that the majority of the 3D printer art concerns itself with the materiality or the physicality of the technology. Therefore, he also studies it from a material context and deliberates on the ways in which some artists have used it to elevate their craft. He argues that 3D printing technology has started transforming the notion of craftsmanship and that it is bound to have “a fundamental impact on the area” (58). He draws attention to the importance of skill in artworks that form the crafts category and expounds that the skill-sets necessary for craftsmanship are evolving. He further argues that this also means by which certain skills come to be redundant in creating artworks, citing specifically sculptures with the “possibilities of printing in ‘real’ materials such as metal, ceramics and soft colourful plastics” (58). That is why Hoskins questions if there is “a *craft of the digital*” (59) and, after discussing the issue with various artists, concludes that it demands skills considering that “without tacit knowledge of materials and a fundamental understanding of process you actually can’t make things well in 3D” (73). He explains further that many artists are adapting their existing skills and practices and elevating them through 3D printing technology. Thus, to Hoskins, 3D printing technology unlocks greater potentials and new prospects for artists. The lack of scholarship on the subject of 3D printer art supports Hoskins’ findings on the subject. The books that deal with 3D printing technology and art mostly offer technical approaches and serve as guides to 3D printing and design processes. *3D Technology in Fine Art and Craft:*

*Exploring 3D Printing, Scanning, Sculpting, and Milling* by Bridgette Mongeon (2016) supports this claim, as she describes the technology as “a new toolset” (xii) that “helps to expedite the creative process” (xii), therefore allowing artists to only focus on their creative process.

Hoskins examines a few artists as case studies in his book. Michael Eden is one of them; a practicing ceramic artist who has been working with the 3D printing technology. In his work *The Wedgwoodn't Tureen* (2008), he redesigned a Wedgwood tureen from the first Industrial Revolution. Eden explains that thanks to the means of 3D printing technology, he “produced it in a way that would have been impossible using conventional industrial ceramic techniques” (72), liberating him from the constraints of his previous production method imposed. Eden adopted the use of the 3D printer in order to realize his creative ideas, exemplifying the potential of this new material technique that was previously not practicable with other technological tools. Mat Collishaw is another artist that employs the technology for its unmatched technique. His sculpture *All Things Fall* (2014) is a 3D printed zoetrope that according to the artist, could not have been produced in any other way. He expounds that “to get any kind of accurate registration of my figures from one to the next” (87) his only accurate option was 3D printing, as hand modeling did not serve the artwork’s aesthetic. These artworks are examples of how artists are exploiting the technology as means of realizing some creative ideas that were not possible to produce without this technology. Therefore, they view the 3D printer mostly as a material tool. Hoskins describes their use of the technology as an “incidental or a by-product” (87). This practicality aspect is not merely used to create exceptional artworks, but also to significantly simplify the production process. What Hoskins refers to as “a means to an end” (78) can be exemplified by Karin Sander’s *People 1:10* (1998-2001), where she 3D printed body scans of real people. In this, she was only interested in producing a realistic product, and not the production process itself. Another example to this is the *Medal of Dishonour* (2009) by Richard Hamilton, in which the artist uses 3D printing techniques in order to duplicate and place Tony Blair’s head on a medal. He chose the technique because the immense simplicity it provided with respect to sculpting the medal from scratch. He explains that “[i]n the early part of the twenty-first century, most artists are more concerned with concept, and the means of production has become almost secondary” (82). These artists comprise a fraction of those working with 3D printing, notable because they are primarily concerned with getting their ideas across, using the technique without meditating on its implications or critically engaging with it.

Hoskins dedicates a section of his book to studying craftsmanship in relation to 3D printer art. He explains that another characteristic of artists utilizing the 3D printer is the aforementioned requirements of skill in craftsmanship. Some artists are using the technology in order to produce

artworks that were previously outside of their area of expertise. Jonathan Monaghan is a multimedia artist who uses the technology merely as a physical, practical tool that enables him to realize what his imagination has explored. He expresses that he does not consider himself crafty but rather creative on the computer and excited with how the 3D printer allowed him to materialize the things that he designed on his computer. He argues that, “there is no limit to the forms you can produce using 3D modeling and, theoretically, just being able to press a button and have that model physically manifest is so exciting for me” (96). Sophie Kahn uses 3D printing technology to create deconstructed sculptures that are seemingly incomplete in multiple ways. She explains that what initially drew her to 3D printing technology was relative affordability. She discusses that she “didn’t have access to a foundry or kiln” (93) or “couldn’t afford expensive fabrication” (93) and thus “being able to produce small pieces in those materials was liberating” (93). Even though the quality is not the same as more traditional mediums, 3D printing technology allows her to create more freely what she devises in her head.

The artworks discussed in this section serve to highlight a pattern of how artists utilize 3D printing technology to materialize their creative ideas. Some use it as a tool to enhance and elevate their skills, while others use it to rise above the limitations of their physical abilities and experiment with design processes. Here, it is important to position Allahyari’s art towards the philosophical side of this spectrum, as she does not directly belong to a style of artmaking focused on experimenting with materials but rather considers the technology more as a tool to think with. Thus, she distinguishes herself from the existing kinds of 3D printing artistic practices mentioned above. However, fruitful to keep in mind is that she is also not a trained sculptor, and only through accessing 3D printing technology was she able to enter this field.

## **ON ALLAHYARI’S USE OF THE 3D PRINTER AS AN ARTISTIC TOOL**

Allahyari has extensively employed the 3D printing technology ever since 2014’s *Dark Matter*, the first artwork where she used the 3D printer as her primary artistic tool. In an interview with *Digicult*<sup>20</sup>, she refers to 3D printing technology as “a technology filled with hope and promise” and “a Utopian and Dystopian medium” (Allahyari, 2016). These statements indicate that she is aware of the positive and negative implications of the technology, as well as the potential of its functions and related techniques. She questions the possible negative

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<sup>20</sup> The full interview can be read through the following link:  
<http://digicult.it/news/spread-what-has-been-destroyed-interview-with-morehshin-allahyari/>.

implications of this technology without overlooking its fruitful aspects. In each of the consecutive artworks in which she utilizes the 3D printing technology, she manages to expand the boundaries of the current common practice and question how the 3D printer praxis could be expanded and transformed. Talking to *Wired Magazine*, she explains that her experience of growing up in Iran without simple access to various technological tools, such as a stable Internet connection, shaped her relationship with digital technologies, making her appreciate them more and causing her to initially “see 3D printing as a privilege” (Allahyari, 2016). She states that this also generated an urge in her, “to use it in a way that went beyond what it was meant for” (Allahyari, 2016). Her artworks position the 3D printer as an extraordinary creative and technological tool that can grant access to various unique forms of storytelling, archiving and documentation. Her idea of expanding the area of utilization of the 3D printer can also be regarded as a form of intervention as well. In other words, she refuses to adopt the technology in the traditional way but rather chooses to build her own relationship with it. In her artworks, she re-purposes the function of the 3D printer and explores new areas of use and new potentials, making it her own. This can be interpreted as her way of resisting the top-down industry-led indoctrination of how to utilize the technology and its potential.

*Dark Matter* (2014) is Allahyari’s first artwork in which she experimented with the 3D printing technology as her primary artistic tool. It is fruitful to now conduct a close analysis of this artwork, as it functions as the first step on her artistic journey of conceptualizing the 3D printer as a tool of resistance. As described previously in this chapter, *Dark Matter* consists of 3D printed sculptures that are hybrids of objects or things that are forbidden to own or do in Iran. Through putting the 3D printer in conversation with aspects of life in Iran, specifically in the sense of using the 3D printer to reflect on this censorship, the artwork exemplifies the ways that the 3D printer can be used as a tool of resistance in a country where many things and objects are forbidden, censored or considered taboo. Through *Dark Matter*, Allahyari manages to look beyond the notion of delimiting the use of the 3D printer to its materiality, with its sole function being the printing of objects that one is not supposed to have. Instead, it experiments with the idea of the 3D printer in a way that allows the audience to reflect on oppression and censorship. With this artwork, she also draws attention to how oppression and censorship functions in Iran, forbidding ownership of certain items that are considered an ordinary part of daily life in other parts of the world. It demonstrates how invasive a government can be in people’s personal lives and choices, like intervening with their use of sex toys and controlling what they can watch or

consume in their personal time. The artwork demonstrates how personal this oppression can become as well as the absurdity of governmental intrusion via censorship and other legal means. It also highlights the irrationality of censorship by incorporating humor into the artwork and through creating useless and weird objects. (see fig. 2)

In *Dark Matter*, Allahyari creates a counter-narrative that highlights the ridiculousness of what is forbidden under oppression and effectively documents an archive of resistance. Instead of documenting oppression itself, she documents her own understanding and experience of censorship, granting a new purpose to the 3D printer in the context of the forbidden. This can be regarded as Allahyari's way of discovering means to resist oppression through exposing its ridiculousness, since 3D printing the forbidden objects in order to possess them secretly would also mean complying with the censorship and abiding by its terms. The artwork's core principle can be thought of as resisting censorship by refusing it and going beyond its rules restricting certain objects by creating them instead. Yet, the artwork also takes this idea a little further and questions and reflects on the entire notion of censorship as a means of revealing its absurdity, strangeness and inconsistencies. This is due to the fact that producing the forbidden objects and obtaining them through the 3D printer would render the technology as merely a physical tool that functions within a larger system, essentially complying with the censorship and going by its rules. But *Dark Matter* critically engages with censorship as a real concept with personal outcomes. The weirdness of the hybrids and the created objects are in line with the randomness of the forbidden objects. The artwork also functions as an unusual archive depicting Allahyari's personal engagement and experience with the censorship in her home country. If these objects were to be discovered in the future, they would function as historical artifacts of the artist's own rendition of history. This point is quite important, since the artwork also performs an intervention into the past, as well as the present and future.



Fig. 2. Sculptures from *Dark Matter: First Series* (2014), Morehshin, <http://www.morehshin.com/dark-matter-first-series/>.

## ***THE 3D ADDITIVIST MANIFESTO & COOKBOOK***

In 2015, Allahyari teamed up with artist Daniel Rourke and released *The 3D Additivist Manifesto*<sup>21</sup>, which functions as a call to artists, creators, thinkers, engineers and people interested in expanding the areas of use of the 3D printer. The manifesto positions the technology as a philosophical tool and aims to challenge, question and meditate on the implications and the potential behind 3D printing. With reference to the technical term used to refer to the 3D printing technology, additive manufacturing, and conjoined with activism they developed the term *additivism*, for the purpose of disrupting “material, social, computational, and metaphysical realities through provocation, collaboration, and science fictional thinking” (Allahyari, 2019). The manifesto calls for pushing these forms of technology “to their absolute limits and beyond into the realm of the speculative, the provocative and the weird” (Allahyari, 2019).

First, the manifesto embraces 3D printing technology as an artistic and philosophical tool. It also reveals new areas for its use and sparks a discussion on ways it can be used for resistance. The artists perform an intervention into the 3D printer’s more established areas of use and conceptualize the 3D printer as a possible tool to intervene, speculate and provoke with. The manifesto also helps to understand why and how her 3D work is intended to be an intervention. The manifesto was followed by a call for submissions which were later turned into *The 3D Additivist Cookbook* (2017)<sup>22</sup> which contains essays, designs, artworks, 3D files and templates featuring collaborations with artists and designers. The cookbook highlights the importance of diversity in manufacturing alternative realities. Allahyari and Rourke describe their aim as follows:

We hope the diversity and scope of these works inspires actions and narratives into being that far exceed the scope of our collective vision. The 3D Additivist Cookbook is an idea, a community, a movement, an archive, and a collective effort to inspire and challenge narratives for governing, acting, networking, and creating together. #Additivism proposes that multiple, infinitely colorful and profoundly different worlds can and should exist simultaneously. #Additivism proposes that the time to start designing, prototyping and manufacturing those radical worlds – in abundance – is now (2).

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<sup>21</sup> An online version of “the 3D Additivist Manifesto” can be read through the following link: <https://additivism.org/manifesto>.

<sup>22</sup> An online version of “the 3D Additivist Cookbook” can be seen through the following link: [http://www.morehshin.com/3d\\_additivist\\_cookbook/](http://www.morehshin.com/3d_additivist_cookbook/).

*The 3D Additivist Cookbook* emphasizes the importance of criticality when thinking about emerging technologies and brings attention to the role of storytelling and creativity in this process. It positions narratives as forms of resistance, as they demonstrate the various worlds that exist, and emphasizes the importance of simultaneity of their existence. The project is an open call to artists and activists to share their stories, to collaborate with each other and to build alternative worlds and imagine futures through the 3D printer. The call sought out strategies and designs that challenge dominant narratives and push the boundaries of the 3D printing technology. The responses to the call included designs, artworks, stories and critical essays that engage with the 3D printer. Some examples of the responses are as follows: *Man Made* is a design project by Ami Drach and Dov Granchow that re-imagines the hand-axe from the pre-historic ages and improves the design to be more user-friendly with the 3D printer. In *Synthetic Protection: Biointelligent Membranes*, Catherine Disney re-imagines the human membrane that can be 3D printed from synthetic materials and that would be resistant to the effects of global warming. A more functional design project was *The Webcamera Obscura* by Jasper Meiners and Isabel Paehr, which contained instructions on how to 3D print an anti-surveillance device for the webcams on laptops. Similar understandings and philosophies are very much present in Allahyari's work, and are especially prevalent in her current project, *She Who Sees the Unknown* as well as in her practice of *re-figuring* (see Chapter Two). The manifesto and cookbook also perform an intervention into creative, artistic methods and the discussions surrounding 3D printing technology. They reclaim this tool in order to create alternatives, to call for the novel use of the technology, and to create various forms of resistance through multiple stories.

## INTERVENING IN DIGITAL COLONIALISM

This brings us to a more negative use of the 3D printing & scanning technology that urged Allahyari to name and critically engage with its impacts. *Digital colonialism* is a concept that is developed by Allahyari in order to describe the cases where 3D scanning and printing technology are used to recreate a contemporary form of colonial mentality. An example of this is when a Western company or museum embarks on research at an archeological site in the Middle East, wherein archaeologists create 3D scan historical artifacts and do nothing to make this data available to those living in the place of origin of these artifacts. Allahyari argues that this can be considered as a form of colonialism, as it is a way of claiming artifacts and their detailed information and ultimately rendering them inaccessible to their place of origin. Taking these

artifacts and making them available elsewhere also raises questions regarding the possession of these artifacts, as profit is being made over the heads of the original owners. Therefore, this act can be seen as a contemporary form of colonialism that is performed through the exploitation of contemporary digital technologies. Using 3D scanning and printing technology to revoke colonialist actions inspired the artist to develop and work with this particular term. In a lecture she gave on this topic at the University of Michigan, she argues that tools like 3D scanners “are going to mark new areas of colonialism in ways we have not experienced before” (Allahyari, 2017). This act of digital colonialism provokes questions on ownership and reveals how access to certain technologies can create a power imbalance. For instance, Allahyari describes how ISIS’ public destruction of artifacts generated a great deal of support for the reconstruction of the destroyed items, especially by Western technology companies. The problematic aspects of this type of reconstruction are that the information on the artifacts is not made available to the public, that there is monetary gain secured by the companies from the artifact, and that the reconstructions are repositioned in the West. In her 2017 lecture at the University of Michigan, titled “On Digital Colonialism, Re-figuring, and Monstrosity”, she argues that this “reorientation changes or ignores the historical and political narratives that usually get lost in this very technoutopian simplistic, binary reading of political events” (*UM Stamps*, Allahyari, 2017). In an interview with *Ibraaz Magazine*, she gives the example of Palmyra’s Arch of Triumph being reconstructed at Trafalgar Square and states:

To put Palmyra in London, and then rebuild it in this kind of saviour way is to ignore a long history of colonialism; how the West has played a role in the formation of ISIS, and how more 'War on Terror' increases that terror. Removing an artifact damaged by ISIS from its complex context and history, as many of these reconstruction projects did, only reinforces the narrative of Western society as civilized and Muslim societies as barbaric terrorists. Yet the reception of these projects was more celebratory than critical (Allahyari, 2017).

As argued by Allahyari, separating these artifacts from their history is robbing them off of the heritage and culture they belong to, as well as robbing the original culture of its artifacts, and is a form of engaging with them from a superficial standpoint. She also emphasizes the importance of remembering colonialism and its effects when thinking about historical figures in the Middle East. She also argues that this brings out the question of ownership, describing the problematic aspect of this as follows:



ISIS reclaims the objects through destruction, through creating absence. The western tech companies and digital archeologists reclaimed it after destruction through a new kind of presence (*UM Stamps*, Allahyari, 2017).

Allahyari explains that ISIS' destruction of these artifacts can be regarded as a form of reclaiming them as their property. She also points out that the Western tech companies are recreating these artifacts elsewhere and argues that this can also be regarded as a form of claiming these artifacts as their property. She argues that reclaiming these artifacts can be seen as these companies trying "to become a white savior, to reclaim the future, to reclaim these histories" (*UM Stamps*, Allahyari, 2017). Digital colonialism therefore demonstrates the darker potential behind the 3D printing technology. Understanding how this tool is capable of restoring and claiming artifacts proves the importance of reclaiming both the technology and the physical artifacts. Reclaiming the tool intervenes in Western tech companies using it to their sole advantage and manages to go inside the crack made through artistic intervention. Allahyari has evidently accomplished this in her artworks. In an interview she gave to *The Verge*, she explains that she aims to "reclaim and redistribute forgotten cultural artifacts" (Allahyari, 2018)<sup>23</sup> through using open source software. Through her work with the 3D printer, she proposes resisting forms of digital colonialism through reclaiming personal and collective stories, histories and artifacts, through embracing our own stories, and through telling these stories ourselves in various ways. In an important and critical way, she is reclaiming the very same artifacts claimed by both ISIS and Western tech companies.

### **ON MATERIAL SPECULATION**

Allahyari's project *Material Speculation: ISIS* (2015-2016) recreated twelve of the artifacts that were destroyed by ISIS, and can be regarded as her direct response to digital colonialism. She places emphasis on the open source aspect of her project. On February 2016, Allahyari contributed all of her research and 3D printing files of the artifacts of King Uthal to *Rhizome's The Download* series. It was made freely available online for people to access the design files and 3D print the artifacts according to their preferences. She is currently seeking a platform that would allow her to release and preserve her entire work (Allahyari, 2019). Through the act of granting open access to the artifacts that were destroyed, she aims to transform the

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<sup>23</sup> The full interview can be read through the following link: <https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/210>.

resistance against their destruction into a more inclusive and collective one. This can be read as a statement on accessibility and a form of questioning our relationship with the artifacts. *The Rhizome*<sup>24</sup> website invites people to 3D print Allahyari's work, describing this act as "a poignant act that rewrites material violence with a collective force on the network" (Soulellis, 2016). The invitation also highlights the importance of adding character to these copies, making them personal and experimenting with them. Through this act, Allahyari re-situates the accessibility of the artifacts that were meant to be destroyed permanently and makes them even more accessible than they were prior to their physical destruction. She allows people to establish a personal relationship with the artifacts and contribute their stories in their own personal ways. This artwork can be understood as a double act of resistance, both to ISIS' attempt to make these works disappear and to digital colonialism and companies that claim possession over the disappeared artworks.

Allahyari claims that *Material Speculation: ISIS* "inspects Petropolitical and poetic relationships between 3D Printing, Plastic, Oil, Technocapitalism and Jihad" (Allahyari, 2019). She draws attention to the role of oil in the creation of ISIS and its material relationship to plastic—the material used in 3D printing—as they are both made from petroleum. She suggests removing ourselves from the troubling *us vs. them* rhetoric and a binary or dichotomous understanding of political events (*UM Stamps*, Allahyari, 2017). She argues that the public reaction to and discussion of the artifacts destroyed by ISIS fails to account for all the artifacts destroyed in Iraq and Syria by the US Army, and that these artifacts and omissions must be included and questioned as well. She states that it is necessary "to make visible, what has been invisible, to question colonialism and techno-capitalism alongside ISIS" (*UM Stamps*, Allahyari, 2017). She concentrates on providing visibility and starting a conversation on the things that are not generally discussed when regarding the destruction of these artifacts. This is exemplified through the questions around accessibility and ownership of the reconstructed artifacts that emerge through Allahyari's artworks, as well as the role of emerging digital technologies in developing these critiques and interventions.

The artifacts that were destroyed can be considered an archive of the cultures that produced them. Allahyari recreates this archive in digital form and provides open access to it. From a practical standpoint, this archival format makes an absolute or permanent act of destruction very difficult. It also allows for new ways of relating to and engaging with the objects

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<sup>24</sup> The full article can be read through the following link: <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2016/feb/16/morehshin-allahyari/>.

that are included in the archive, in addition to more generalized ideas of the archive itself. Something that previously existed physically in a certain place now becomes widely accessible, even in physical form, via the internet. Her idea of giving open access to the artifacts' digital data can also be understood as a political statement, exposing the hypocrisy of companies or individuals profiting off this destruction. It likewise challenges boundaries and borders, highlighting the possibilities and limits of the 3D printer's physicality and functions. This choice is also a form of placing emphasis on the importance of heritage that consists of ideas, and of the need to question how access to technological tools helps people to create their own realities. The project urges people to engage with the artifacts but also reveals the hypocrisy surrounding them, in that there are now mourned but suffered from a lack of care and consideration before their destruction by ISIS. The artwork also questions ownership regarding these historical artifacts, with ISIS claiming ownership through destruction, whereas Western tech companies do so by 3D scanning them. Her concept of digital colonialism puts as much importance into ideas, figures, and storytelling as the physical and the material aspects of her artistic practice. The artwork shows that robbing the artifacts of their history and place is a form of colonialism and appropriation. Her zip-drives and data serve the function of reminding us of the importance of these aspects. In a way, it is also an intervention to the handling of historical artifacts. Through this artwork, she renders the borders insignificant, pushing these forms of cultural heritage beyond borders by giving access to everyone in the context of a virtual space.

## **CREATING A PERSONAL ARCHIVE OF UNDERREPRESENTED FIGURES**

Allahyari's current artistic research project *She Who Sees the Unknown* (2016 - Present) also deals with the issues of representation, documentation and the archive, through recreating twelve female monster figures from the Middle East through using the 3D printer. The artist explains that she embraces these monstrous figures as they are "able to challenge and change the power structures that exist in our political and social realities" (Allahyari, 2019). She explores ways of re-imagining future through re-imagining the past and the stories of these *jinn* and the ancient myths surrounding them. Talking to *The Seen Journal*<sup>25</sup>, she explains that she does not regard this project as a way of keeping these stories alive but as "wanting to create worlds around these figures who are forgotten and misrepresented through 1500+ years of

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<sup>25</sup> The full interview can be read through the following link: <http://theseenjournal.org/art-seen-international/refiguring-monstrosity/>.

history” (Allahyari, 2018). She wants to reclaim these figures in order to think about technology and future with them. She positions the *jinn* as “a new set of figures that do not come from a white or western knowledge and structures” (Allahyari, 2019) that can be used in creating alternative worlds. She defines this project as “the proposal of another kind of future—a future not taken over by patriarchal and colonial systems and forces” and emphasizes the need for “more of these kinds of counter narratives, imaginations, and platforms” (Allahyari, 2018). Furthermore, Allahyari aspires for this project to remind people of the Middle East that their stories and the figures within them matter “for claiming an alternative future” (Allahyari, 2018) inclusive of the Middle East and non-white, non-Western figures.

The production process of Allahyari is comprised of four different stages: “Archiving, Production, Storytelling, Ha’*m*-Neshini (Sitting Together) + Fabulation Stations” (Allahyari, 2019). First off, she starts by researching these monstrous female figures in ancient archives and texts, subsequently assembling an archive with the information and the pictures. She states that an archive of this sort does not exist yet and is planning on preparing a book, a reading room and an online platform in order to make the entirety of her research accessible free of charge. She explains that “this practice becomes part of a project to make visible undocumented and forgotten histories” (Allahyari, 2017) and a way of distributing information. In the production stage of her research, Allahyari picks twelve figures and 3D model these figures based on their ancient illustrations and images. She re-appropriates these figures physically. The figures that are 3D modeled will also be made freely available online, ready to be used in video and film, or to be printed in 3D. Allahyari explains that she imagines these sculptures becoming “an army of dark figures existing alongside a series of re-appropriated and mashed up talismans” (Allahyari, 2019). In the third stage called ‘storytelling’, the artist rewrites the stories and the myths of these figures, staying true to their main abilities and powers but also tying them together with contemporary examples of oppression in order to make them more relevant. The final stage, ‘Ha’*m*-Neshini (Sitting Together) + Fabulation Stations’, aims to create a common space to discuss these figures and tell their stories. It includes performances and discussions, featuring thinkers, researchers and artists from the Middle East. This stage also features performance lectures allow for a “coming together of fiction, theory, and activism, using the figure of Jinn and the stories associated with some of these figures, as a point of departure” (Allahyari, 2019). Allahyari has coined the term re-figuring in order to describe her process of going back and retrieving these ancient myths and re-appropriating them.

The significance of the 3D printer in this art project is how it allows an intervention in the past by reclaiming certain underrepresented figures, giving them a platform and making them present. It also has a practical connotation of creating an archive and documenting these figures that were bound to be forgotten. Another significance that is offered through the 3D printing technology is the prospect of replicating these figures, enabling anyone to recreate them in their own way. This facilitates a discussion regarding these figures and allows them to traverse borders, materiality and physicality. It recreates them and allows an audience engagement with them, further enhancing the conversation surrounding this technology.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter we took an extensive look at the 3D printer in relation to Allahyari's art as an emerging form of technology and an artistic tool, including the ways it can become a tool of resistance. As demonstrated in the previous sections, Allahyari manages to form a philosophical relationship with this technology and critically engages with the various discussions it evokes. As an emerging technology, the 3D printer is developing quickly, making it more accessible and relatively affordable each step on the way. With the help of crowdfunding projects and the accessibility of the technology, various people including creatives, artists, engineers, scientists are experimenting with it and exploring new areas of use. Allahyari is an artist who has developed her own form of engagement with the 3D printer, challenging and questioning the potential implications of the technology and aiming to push its boundaries. What is specific to her practice is that she doesn't only engage with the material aspect of the technology but also positions it as a philosophical tool to meditate on the discussions it evokes regarding accessibility, representation, and power dynamics. Through her use of the 3D printer as an artistic and philosophical tool, she reflects on the history and the stories of historical artifacts. She contextualizes the dystopian implications of the technology with her concept of digital colonialism and resists it through envisioning new possibilities of reclaiming and engaging with the historical artifacts. The physical aspect of this is that these figures can easily be multiplied and recreated in various forms, which goes hand in hand with Allahyari's aim of giving these figures a platform. They are able to go beyond borders through their virtual form, which provides an intervention into these particular forms of borders and their rules. Therefore, the objects and figures created by Allahyari challenge established borders in an illustrative way. All of these artworks and writings also demonstrate the specificity of Allahyari's engagement with the 3D

printer. She uses it subversively and positions it as a philosophical tool that asks questions about colonialism, representation, oppression, personal stories, documentation and archiving. The next chapter demonstrates how the concept of re-figuring helps to understand the specificity of the intervention made by Allahyari through her art, and the ways in which it connects with the 3D printing technology.

## CHAPTER 2: ON RE-FIGURING

“All of this has happened before, and all of this will happen again”  
(Battlestar Galactica, 2004-2009).

This chapter will demonstrate how the concept of ‘re-figuring’ helps to further understand the critical intervention made by Allahyari in her artistic project *She Who Sees the Unknown*, and more specifically in her artwork *The Laughing Snake*, which constitutes a part of this larger project. Allahyari began referring to her creative process as re-figuring in 2016, when she was developing the idea for *She Who Sees the Unknown*. It originated from Allahyari’s ideas on the necessity of telling multiple stories, and is connected to her call for creating plural futures that feature multiple kinds of stories and figures from various backgrounds, discussed in detail in Chapter One. Re-figuring refers to the act of rethinking, re-appropriating and rewriting the stories of forgotten figures from the past. More specifically, in the case of *She Who Sees the Unknown*, it is revising the stories of the *jinn* from Middle Eastern folklore through rewriting their stories by connecting them with a contemporary form of oppression. These *jinn* and their stories have been mostly forgotten, and thus have not been carried on to the present. Through re-figuring, Allahyari reclaims these figures and the way their stories are told, building new narratives featuring these previously forgotten figures. In *She Who Sees the Unknown*, the *jinn* that have also gone through the process of re-figuring are *Huma*, *Ya’jooj Maj’jooj*, *Aisha Qandisha* and *The Laughing Snake*. Their individual processes of re-figuring will be discussed extensively in the following sections. As well, re-figuring will be positioned as a concept that is significant to the artistic intervention performed through the specific artwork *The Laughing Snake*.

The chapter first introduces Allahyari’s concept of re-figuring, describing its steps and explaining its aims. Then, the examples from *She Who Sees the Unknown*, namely *Ya’Jooj Ma’jooj*, *Huma*, *Aisha Qandisha* and *The Laughing Snake*, are discussed in order to demonstrate the ways that re-figuring was performed in creating these figures. Then the figure and significance of the *jinn* is introduced to support a better understanding of how re-figuring works in practice. The chapter then discusses Allahyari’s sources of inspiration for the term re-figuring in order to show how other concepts that position storytelling as a tool for resistance can assist in understanding Allahyari’s re-figuring and the intervention made by *The Laughing Snake*. Donna Haraway’s ideas on the subject are explained in relation to re-figuring. Haraway’s ideas about “staying with the trouble” are connected to Allahyari’s aim of creating multiple futures and the ways that re-figuring can be

considered as a way of contributing to multiple futures is further interrogated. Furthermore, the works of Afrofuturism and counterfuturisms are discussed and positioned as concepts helpful to a better understanding what re-figuring is doing in *The Laughing Snake* and *She Who Sees the Unknown*. Ultimately, this chapter argues that re-figuring is an activist practice and a tool of resistance for Allahyari, demonstrating the ways that re-figuring can help us to better understand the critical intervention made by Allahyari through *The Laughing Snake*.

## ON RE-FIGURING

Re-figuring is a concept that Allahyari uses to describe the intentions of her artistic research in *She Who Sees the Unknown*, but she also uses the term to refer to the artistic process of this project. It is the act of retrieving certain underrepresented and forgotten figures in order to reimagine a different kind of future through their use. She is re-appropriating the stories of the powerful female *jinn* from the Middle East that have negative connotations and changing the perspective of their stories. In an interview that she gave to *The Seen Journal*, she gives the example of *Huma*, a female *jinn* that “became more male” (Allahyari, 2018) over the years. Through re-figuring, she repositions female *jinn* in the present, putting them in the center of contemporary narratives that feature revised versions of these *jinn* brought together with a relevant and contemporary form of oppression. Allahyari describes re-figuring as “an act of going back and retrieving the past” that is about “activation and preservation” (Allahyari, 2016). Therefore, through this re-figuring, she activates and resurfaces these *jinn* and preserves them through creating an archive that features reproduced and rewritten versions of them. She re-imagines the stories of the past and questions if this could lead to imagining other kinds of stories in the present and future. She uses re-figuring as a creative tool and a form of resistance that reclaims these *jinn* and their stories.

In her process of re-figuring, Allahyari makes a critical intervention into the existing representations of these figures through her critical engagement with these stories. She takes responsibility for their representation through re-appropriation of their stories. Allahyari explains that these stories were mostly forgotten, and even if not, their central figures were often transformed. She argues that powerful monstrous female figures from Middle Eastern folklore were “either changed to negative figures though time or are not taken as seriously as a lot of male superhero mythical stories that we hear about” (Allahyari, 2019). Therefore, she rewrites their stories with an emphasis on their power and how they might be relevant or necessary in the present for dealing with contemporary forms of oppression. With each re-figuring and rewritten story,



Allahyari re-situates the *jinn* as a figure that reflects on the effects of oppression both historically and in the present. She embraces their monstrosity and creates new figures that can be used, in her words, “to challenge and change the power structures that exist in our political and social realities” (Allahyari, 2019). Re-figuring these female *jinn* is also a form of empowering them, as Allahyari is shifting the power in these stories by depicting these *jinn* as empowered figures.

For Allahyari, the term re-figuring is not only imagining or creating something new but also a way of taking responsibility for how these *jinn* and their stories are told and positioned, a form of demanding and creating change in the representation of these figures. She explains that it is a practice that helps “to reflect on the effects of historical and digital colonialism and other forms of oppression and catastrophe” (Allahyari, 2019). *She Who Sees the Unknown* reflects on this digital and historical colonialism through creating an archive of *jinn*, featuring their histories, stories and representations. The project resists many aspects of digital colonialism by making this archive publicly available and also simply through the creation of the archive itself. It reflects upon the selective aspect of writing history and the carrying of figures to the present and creates its own version of a necessary history to reflect upon and question the present. For each of the *jinn*, she pairs a contemporary form of oppression that each *jinn*'s power and qualities are uniquely suited to address and challenge. This revisiting provides a historical point of view for the stories and revising them aims to free these figures through empowerment. The production stages discussed in the first chapter demonstrate that research is an important part of the process, as the figures that are being researched are not necessarily part of an already existing or extensive archive. Thus, Allahyari's research and production processes support this re-figuring and these stages contribute importantly to the resistance and intervention. Re-figuring thus repurposes stories and narratives and uses them tools for resistance and intervention.

## EXAMPLES OF RE-FIGURING

Allahyari's main source for the project *She Who Sees the Unknown* is the Arabic manuscript *Kitab al-bulhan* (Abd al-Hasan Al-Isfahani) from the 14th century, translated to English as *The Book of Wonders or the Book of Surprises*. It is an illustrated book that contains images and stories of monsters and *jinn*, astronomy, and astrological signs, a text that can be seen as a Middle Eastern encyclopedia of supernatural things. Islamic Art specialist Stefano Carboni discusses the manuscript extensively in his article “The ‘Book of Surprises’ (Kitab al-bulhan) of the Bodleian Library” (2013), explaining that it was written during the time the Jalayirids, a society that

“epitomised Persian and Arabic culture of the time,” (22) concluding that the book can therefore be “regarded as a hybrid of both literary cultures” (22). Carboni brings attention to the comprehensive quality of the book and explains that it provides information on various stories and myths from the Middle Eastern region, namely Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Turkey. Allahyari decided to focus on the female *jinn* in this book during her initial research process. These figures were powerful female figures that were either had negative connotations or had simply been forgotten. She wanted to use them for “reimagining a new kind of Middle East and world with a female, non-cis, non-white, non-Western future” (Allahyari, 2018). It is thus both necessary and fruitful to take a closer look at the examples of re-figuring before delving deeper into the description of the term, to set examples that can help better understand the process and how it has been achieved in *She Who Sees the Unknown*.

*Ya’Jooj and Ma’Jooj* are two figures that are also featured in the Qur’an who are known to cause mischief and create chaos on Earth. They are also depicted as nine-headed hydras in *Kitab al Bulhan*. According to their myth in *Kitab al Bulhan*, they both were separated from humans by an iron wall that was built by Alexander the Great—called Zulqarnain in other myths—but they continued to cause fear as they still posed a threat to the human world. According to their prophecy, one day *Ya’Jooj* and *Ma’Jooj* will break down the iron wall and this act will signal the end of days and destruction of the human world (Allahyari, 2019). Allahyari created a video<sup>26</sup> that contains the 3D modeling process of *Ya’Jooj* and *Ma’Jooj* and she re-imagined their story in a setting where the iron wall separating the *jinn* and the humans is broken. The video shows the figures being 3D modeled, with a voiceover by Allahyari telling the story in which *Ya’jooj* and *Ma’Jooj* break down the wall and come together with the earth, only to be exiled again. The story depicts an eternal loop where the *jinn* keep coming back only to be pushed out again. Through re-figuring of the story of *Ya’jooj* and *Ma’jooj*, Allahyari brings attention to the constant othering of certain people by turning them into the monstrous. The video *Ya’jooj Ma’jooj* (2018) can be viewed online on Allahyari’s website, where she further explains that through this poetic story of *Ya’jooj* and *Ma’jooj* she is re-imagining their power in relation to their monstrousness. She argues, “rather than rejecting this monstrosity, I question it and embrace it through telling a poetic story” (Allahyari, 2019). This can be seen as her way of saying that the monstrous others that are pushed outside will always come back, and that these figures aren’t necessarily so different from the people that have created them. Depicting the incomplete versions of the figures and their creation process with a story of their monstrousness can also be seen as her way of reflecting on the creation process of these figures.

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<sup>26</sup> An excerpt of the video depicting the 3D modeling process of *Ya’jooj Ma’jooj* can be watched via the following link: <https://vimeo.com/342063763>.

This can also be read as an argument regarding the stories' or myths' roles in the creation of both others and monsters.

Another version of the artwork was presented as a Virtual Reality experience<sup>27</sup> at Parsons Institute, Sheila Johnson Design Center in February 2019, as a part of the exhibition “Speculative Cultures: A Virtual Reality Exhibition.” In the installation, the viewer was invited to stand on a maze drawn onto paper, and through the VR experience they can go inside the story of *Ya'Jooj* and *Ma'Jooj* into a dark place, where their movements are limited, and they are left facing the elements of the story such as the iron wall and the 3D modeled versions of *Ya'jooj* and *Ma'jooj*. The viewer could not move around the space to explore but could only stand at a certain spot and watch; some movements, such as hand gestures, were requested from the viewer in order to continue the story. The VR experience shows *Ya'jooj* and *Ma'jooj* creating fires and destroying things. She explains that she wanted to create this sort of VR experience that allows the viewer “to be still in some sort of meditative mind-set, standing in front of the two figures of *Ya'jooj* and *Ma'jooj*” (Allahyari, 2019), following and watching the story. She wanted to create the effect that makes the audience “feel involved but also controlled by the storyteller at the same time” (Allahyari, 2019). The viewer is involved in the sense that they are inside the story's world, where they can watch the events and also are required to participate in certain moments with hand gestures. The storyteller controls the viewer in the sense that the movements that are required are decided by the storyteller. This artwork can be seen as reflecting on one's own participation in creating chaos. In this VR experience, the audience participates in the chaos through making the movements that continue the story, which in turn makes the *jinn* create chaos in the virtual. This artwork can likewise be seen as Allahyari's way of making the audience question their participation and contribution in creating monstrous others as well as chaos. The re-appropriation of this story was inspired by Donald Trump's ‘Muslim ban,’ a U.S. immigration policy restricting access to citizens of several majority Muslim countries, which affected Allahyari personally. In an interview that she gave to *The Creative Independent* in 2017, she explains that she became stuck in Berlin, where she was attending a conference and was unable to reenter the US for ten days (Allahyari, 2017)<sup>28</sup>. This made her relate to *Ya'Jooj* and *Ma'Jooj* as the figures of mischief that would bring chaos to the worlds. Through this artwork, Allahyari questions the monstrous other, and positions it as a status that needs to be questioned and meditated upon, as it can shift in different contexts.

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<sup>27</sup> A documentation of the “She Who Sees the Unkown: *Ya'jooj Ma'jooj* - VR” (2018) can be watched through the following link: <https://vimeo.com/296029355>.

<sup>28</sup> The full interview can be read through the following link: <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/morehshin-allahyari-on-making-art-that-you-don't-want-to-sell/>.

Another *jinn* that has gone through Allahyari's process of re-figuring is *Huma*, the *jinn* from Middle Eastern tales that is known as the one that "brings heat to the human body" (Allahyari, 2019). In the original story, *Huma* possesses human bodies, giving them fevers. Allahyari re-appropriates *Huma*'s story by re-imagining it in the context of a common catastrophe of our time: global warming. Her rewritten story is told through a video, that features a 3D model of *Huma* and with Allahyari narrating the story. In this new version, *Huma* creates common fever, making all temperatures equal in every part of the world. She creates the catastrophe of global warming but destroys injustice in her way of giving all humans the same conditions in this disaster. The video was also exhibited in the form of an installation with a 3D printed sculpture of *Huma* along with her talismans (see fig. 3) at Transfer Gallery in Los Angeles in 2017. Through this re-figuring, Allahyari brings attention to the uneven consequences that global warming would have, and starts a discussion. In her website she points to professor Erik Swyngedouw's essay "Apocalypse Now! Fear and Doomsday Pleasures" (2013) as the inspiration behind this story. The essay demonstrates how the fears surrounding the global warming and the horrible outcomes it could have that are feared by the elite, are already the living conditions of many people on less privileged sides of the world. Through this re-figuring, Allahyari brings attention to the uneven consequences of global warming.



Fig. 3. The figure of *Huma* from *She Who Sees the Unknown* at Transfer Gallery, *She Who Sees the Unknown*, <http://shewhoseestheunknown.com/huma/#installations>

The third *jinn* that has been re-figured is *Aisha Qandisha*, a fearsome *jinn* who is also referred to as "the opener," as she possesses humans through opening them up by creating a crack in their body for other demons' possessions. If the possessed person were to refuse to open up and submit to this process they would end up mad (Allahyari, 2019). In her re-figuring of the story, Allahyari brought together the *jinn*'s story with her personal involvement in an abusive romantic relationship.

She created a video featuring a 3D modeled version of *Aisha Qandisha* that contains a poetic text describing Allahyari merging together with the *jinn* and reclaiming her own power. The artwork was also on display as parts of an installation at Hartware Medien Kunst Verein, Germany in 2018 and MacKenzie Art Gallery, Canada in 2019. The installation was comprised of a small 3D printed statue of *Aisha Qandisha* standing above a pool filled with a blood-like, red liquid, in front of the projection of the video (see fig. 4). In the video, Allahyari re-imagines herself as *Aisha Qandisha* and tells the audience the things that she wanted to say to her abusive boyfriend. The video shows a 3D modeled *Aisha Qandisha* standing while written words appear on her. These words are addressed to the abusive boyfriend, calling out all his mistakes and telling him that he needs to change, as *Aisha Qandisha* is heading to the future. Allahyari describes the work as “a process for opening, revenge, closure, and healing” (Allahyari, 2019). This could be seen as Allahyari’s own reclamation of power through empowering *Aisha Qandisha* and sparking a discussion on the necessity of openness. The openness that this artwork creates can be seen as the openness lacking in the abusive boyfriend, in the sense that he would be more open to understanding his mistakes.



Fig. 4. The installation of *Aisha Qandisha* from *She Who Sees the Unknown* at Mackenzie Art Gallery, *She Who Sees the Unknown*, <http://shewhoseestheunknown.com/aisha-qandisha/>.

The most recent re-figuring is *the Laughing Snake*. The myth of *The Laughing Snake* tells the story of a hybrid figure, or a *jinn*—half woman, half snake—that takes over a village, wreaking havoc and killing people. She is only killed when a man holds a mirror up to her face, causing her to die of laughter (Allahyari, 2019). Allahyari’s re-figuring of the story has a different ending, where *the Laughing Snake* dies of laughter when she sees her reflection *within* this world. The story builds

up to this ending in the form of a hyper-text interactive narrative, held by the Whitney Museum's online collection, where the viewer can navigate the story by clicking on certain key words. The viewer ends up in Allahyari's personal memories of growing up in Iran and being a woman in Middle East more generally. She also entangled her personal memories, going through sexual abuse and oppression within the story, and by the end turning into *the Laughing Snake* herself. She reclaims her power and kills her abusers as the *jinn*. This example of re-figuring deals with oppression in relation to the female body in the Middle East through bringing attention to the different forms of oppression that a woman growing up in Iran has gone through. The artwork points to the parallels between the monster and the woman in the eyes of the patriarchy. Through shifting the effect of the female gaze, Allahyari empowers *the Laughing Snake*, as it now takes control of its own destiny and decides to die. Through the ending of the story, where she becomes one with *the Laughing Snake*, she embraces monstrosity but also empowers herself. Through this example of re-figuring, Allahyari embraces monstrosity and shifts the power from the forces of oppression to the *jinn* and herself, thus reclaiming power. This topic will be explored further in the next chapter.

## ON JINN

Given the topic of Allahyari's work, it is necessary to look at the figure of the *jinn* and the ways in which it can help to better understand re-figuring and the intervention performed by Allahyari through *The Laughing Snake*. In his book *Islam, Arabs, and Intelligent World of the Jinn* (2009), scholar of Arabic language and culture Amira El-Zein offers an extensive look at the figure of the *jinn*. He brings attention to the dual dimensional aspect of the *jinn* and their "ability to live and operate in both manifest and invisible domains" (34), referring to them as "shape-shifters" (46). He explains that "the Qur'an speaks of *jinn* as having free will like humans" (57) and that they are to be held accountable of their actions by God. He describes that "their bodies are made of fire and air, which allow them to move about through space more easily than humans" (61). Allahyari emphasizes that *jinn* have free will, explaining that what separates them from the angels is their "power of choice and will", which is the reason for them to be "fearsome and honored" (Allahyari, 2019) in Iranian culture. Allahyari describes that the *jinn* are able to possess the bodies of humans and that when they do so, "they guarantee an utter openness. A new kind of entrance, portal, and arrival to the outside" (Allahyari, 2019). She states that "this is what makes them a desirable figure for an act of re-figuring" (Allahyari, 2019). In her artworks featuring *jinn*, Allahyari uses these

figures to create new stories that contain her own experience regarding contemporary forms of oppression. Therefore, it can be surmised that through using these *jinn*, Allahyari is aiming to reclaim the stories and figures that are left *outside* in order to create new *portals* of thinking and imagining. She also emphasizes the importance for these figures to have free will. As she is re-situating and positioning these figures in current stories that reflect upon the present, past and future, she emphasizes the importance of doing this with figures that can make independent choices. She re-imagines a future where victims of oppression have free will, choice and power. For instance, this can be seen in Allahyari's re-appropriation of *the Laughing Snake's* story, where the *jinn* reclaims its own body and chooses its own faith. *Aisha Qandisha's* story likewise depicts an empowered figure who claims her own rights and frees herself from her former abuser. In all of the aforementioned stories, the *jinn* bring forth new commentary and information on contemporary forms of oppression, specifically those directly experienced by Allahyari herself.

Through re-figuring *jinn*, Allahyari makes them a part of the imagining of the future. In each of the aforementioned stories of re-figuring, she imagines a future where these *jinn* are empowered and free. She stresses the need for expanding our imagination and introducing "a new set of figures that do not come from a white or western knowledge and structures" (Allahyari, 2019), especially when thinking about plural possible futures, technologies and power structures. She suggests retiring Haraway's famous figure of the cyborg (Haraway, 1984), stating, "If Haraway claimed to be 'a cyborg rather than a motherly/earthy goddess,' I claim to be a Jinn rather than a cyborg" (Allahyari, 2019). This is a direct reference to Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1984), which is a manifesto that calls for a resistance to binary oppositions such as race, class, gender, all forms of Cartesian dualisms, and also the idea of the earth centering around humanity; she reinforces her call through adopting the figure of the cyborg. She adopts the cyborg as a figure that "can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (181). Haraway takes the cyborg myth and separates it from the idea of technology being a tool or a servant to humanity, and instead proposes a rethinking of the possibilities that could be created through a fusion of human and machine. She ends her manifesto with, "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (181). In this, Haraway's cyborg can also be seen as a figure of resistance. However, through proposing the figure of the *jinn* over the cyborg, Allahyari makes a clear statement in favor of the necessity of plural resistance figures from various backgrounds. In her statement, the artist doesn't necessarily dismiss Haraway's cyborg, but urges the need for multiple figures from different backgrounds and cultures when thinking of new worlds. She brings attention to the fact that most of the imagination on future comes from white or Western

knowledges and structure of thought, especially in regards to technology, and argues that important change starts in engaging with and participating in these discussions. She chooses the figure of the *jinn* in her act of re-figuring as her way of joining the discussion on the future on her own terms. Her feeling of not being represented within existing conversations about the future can be connected to the term “inappropriated otherness” (299) brought forth by Haraway in her article “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others” (1992). Here, Haraway brings attention to the uselessness of categories that are based on opposition and brings forth this term for “those who cannot adopt the mask of either ‘self’ or ‘other’ offered by previously dominant, modern Western narratives of identity and politics” (299). She points to the need “to be in critical, deconstructive relationality, in a diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)nality as the means of making potent connection that exceeds domination” (299). This can be seen as suggesting a more interconnected way of existing together in difference, as well as a useful manner of deconstructing the existing categories and hierarchies that cause domination. This brings attention to the importance of connections and the necessity of getting rid of certain figures or ideas dominating others. This can be connected to Allahyari’s urge to include new figures through re-figuring and her way of making connections through deconstructive relation. In the artworks that constitute *She Who Sees the Unknown*, she deconstructs existing stories and creates a relationality between the past and the present through commenting and reflecting on forms of oppression. Even though she deconstructs certain stories, she still keeps certain aspects the same and creates a relation through making connections.

## **RE-FIGURING STORYTELLING**

Re-figuring is a term through which we can understand the critical intervention the artwork makes. Through the process of re-figuring, Allahyari emphasizes the need for rethinking existing narratives and the stories that we use to imagine and discuss the future. She also positions storytelling as a tool for resistance that can be used in order to challenge power structures and discuss contemporary experiences of oppression. A creative and activist practice that challenges the existing master narratives, re-figuring is the re-appropriating of existing figures in order to meditate on the present, past and future. It is a thinking process that questions dominant ideas of future through different fictions, that also manifests itself in material practice. Re-figuring uses storytelling as a tool to manifest itself. In order to emphasize the potential of stories and figures, Allahyari



points to the following quote from Haraway's book *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016):

“It matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts. Mathematically, visually, and narratively, it matters which figures figure figures, which systems systematize systems” (101).

As Haraway describes beautifully, the stories, figures and concepts that we choose to speak with, think with and make sense of the world with, matter deeply. They have the potential of world-building, of creating ideas and actions. It could be argued that storytelling is a form of thinking that allows a unique imagination and freedom in meditating on complicated subjects. Therefore, re-figuring also positions storytelling as a powerful and necessary tool of intervention and invites us to question our stories, while at the same time, introduces new tools to build new worlds. Haraway also questions the existing stories in her aforementioned book, where she explains that storytelling must go beyond “the box of human exceptionalism” (39) and suggests telling stories of other creatures that humanity shares the earth with, further challenging human centered master narratives. Allahyari also challenges these master narratives and argues that she aims to move beyond the binary views of “West vs. Islam, tech-future vs. religious history, and to look at forgotten, misrepresented and suppressed histories and narratives” (*UM Stamps*, Allahyari, 2017). Both Haraway and Allahyari stress the need for a change in our stories and our tools for imagining and thinking. The process of re-figuring emphasizes the importance of looking back and examining ourselves, our stories and our narratives once more. It reveals how the idea of human exceptionalism refers to a very specific form of human, and that new stories should not be formed before taking responsibility for the old ones. Re-figuring demands change through re-creation and re-appropriation. It brings forth the necessity of recycling human centric stories rather than simply dismissing them. This could be seen as a form of resistance that is claiming responsibility and also making a statement on the need for going back and rethinking existing ideas.

## **RE-FIGURING THE FUTURE**

Allahyari stresses the need for creating plural futures. This was established through her call for multiple futures in Chapter One in relation to *The 3D Additivist Manifesto*. In an interview that

she gave to the Rubin Museum in 2017<sup>29</sup>, she explains how she finds that a certain, established idea of the future can be problematic when “that space is imagined by a very specific demographic, a specific group of people” (Allahyari, 2017), referring to the tech-future imagined by Silicon Valley, which only represents a certain privileged group of people. She argues that this leads to the exclusion of various minorities from this space of the future, as it would “be limited to what they know and what they think are the problems of the world” (Allahyari, 2017). This is why she finds it important to rethink and reimagine this space of future through introducing and encouraging alternative futures, which she sees as “the way to invade that very image of the future—to suggest other ways” (Allahyari, 2017). Allahyari explains that there is an urgency in including the underrepresented figures in discussions regarding the future. In multiple interviews, she describes her experience of not feeling included or represented in certain feminist or activist practices and movements in the present as well. Re-figuring puts emphasis on the representation of certain dismissed and underrepresented figures and aims for “re-equilibrating contemporary imbalances of power” (*Ibraaz*, Allahyari, 2017). For instance, this can be seen in *Huma*’s re-figuring, where her power is used to get rid of a certain form of injustice. She empowers each figure by giving them certain powers and spells, taking them “out of their context in order to create the space to build new stories around them” (*Ibraaz*, Allahyari, 2017). For each figure, she creates a new story and a new context. For instance, she puts *Huma* in a world with global warming, brings *the Laughing Snake* together with a woman in the Middle East, and puts *Aisha Qandisha* in the aftermath of an abusive relationship. Through this re-appropriation, she wants to build “a counter-reality that is critical of both the Western technology industries and Islamic iconoclastic claims over heritage” and to create a “new feminist collection and discussion of dark goddesses, feminine monsters and *jinn* that loops back and builds on my previous work” (*Ibraaz*, Allahyari, 2017). Through creating these artworks and stories, Allahyari creates a new form of reality where the future is discussed and imagined through *jinn* and female monstrous figures. She includes her own personal stories in the form of her imagination of the future. She also creates a new form of archive, both physical and virtual, that contains these figures. Through this archive she reflects on her own understanding of heritage and reclaims the figures from her own history. This could be related to her previous work, *Material Speculation: ISIS*, through the idea of creating a digital archive of the figures and history of the Middle East. Her creation of sculptures can be seen as her feminist army of figures in the sense that they all reflect on a certain oppression from a feminist point of view. As demonstrated by

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<sup>29</sup> The full interview can be read through the following link: <https://rubinmuseum.org/spiral/re-figuring-the-future-with-morehshin-allahyari>.

Allahyari's statements on the subject, representation is an important issue when discussing the past, present and future. Re-figuring stems from Allahyari's call for the necessity for multiple, plural narratives and ideas when discussing important issues, and in this case, the future. The creative process is a form of intervention into any certain idea of a future or any (pre)established outcome. It doesn't necessarily recommend another 'better' outcome, idea or a way out, but brings attention to the necessity of plurality in this discussion.

This final section will give an account of counterfuturisms, and the ways in which they can be useful in better understanding and positioning re-figuring in relation to the future. This section also aims to answer the following question, could re-figuring be seen as a form of counterfuturism? This is inspired by media scholar Jussi Parikka's observations in his article "Middle East and other futurisms: imaginary temporalities in contemporary art and visual culture" (2018), where he discusses counterfuturisms and their relationship to temporalities. Parikka questions if Afrofuturism, Gulf futurism and Middle Eastern futurism have "any sort of liberating potential that work against the already existing times?" (41), given that they "articulate a cultural politics of time, a chronography of power" (42). Parikka brings forth Allahyari's project *She Who Sees the Unknown* as a valuable example of counterfuturism that addresses "contemporary themes of colonial forms of visual culture and knowledge" (42).

Thinking in terms of counterfuturisms started with the Afrofuturism movement. The term was coined by Mark Dery in 1993, in the article/interview entitled "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose" (1993). It refers to the production of speculative fictions in relation to afrodiasporic characters that serve as emancipatory and empowering futures. Dery describes Afrofuturism as the "African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future' (180). It functions as a disruption of the idea of the future that is engineered and "already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners and set designers" (180). Therefore, Afrofuturism also challenges the ownership of future by one certain group of people, similarly to Allahyari's call for plural futures.

In his article "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism" (2003), cultural theorist Kodwo Eshun brings attention to the powerful drawing "power from the futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past" (289), and positions the future and its imagination as an emancipatory, empowering thing. He explains that through prediction and science fiction, the future industry aims to control the tomorrow (291). Thus, he points to Afrofuturism as "a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afro-diasporic projection" (301), and as a space where "intervention within the current political dispensation may

be undertaken” (301). Even though the scope of this thesis doesn’t cover Afrofuturism or science fiction in depth, these aims are importantly similar to Allahyari’s in re-figuring. She is reclaiming stories from the past and revising them in order to make them present in the future, intervening in the Western-centric idea of the future and progress. Through making these Middle Eastern monstrous figures present in the present and future, Allahyari is disrupting the shiny idea of progress and reminding us that monsters and the monstrous will necessarily exist in the future as well.

Allahyari’s call for multiple and plural futures inclusive of non-Western others and bodies resonates with the ideas raised by the Middle Eastern futurism movement. Parikka argues that Middle Eastern futurisms aim to go beyond “hegemonic narratives” (qtd. in 54) and that they should be considered as “as active forces that can unhinge existing temporal schemes and complexify already existing regimes of time as forms of power” (44). Therefore, through these futurisms, the power behind imagining and determining the future is transformed and reclaimed by the oppressed, by the people who are denied a place in those ideas and imaginations of the future. These futurisms question and critically engage with the production of future and “represent, remediate and articulate how time is being produced, and they relate to an investigation of time as productive of reality” (54). Parikka explains that these function as “ways in which anticipation functions as a cultural force that is mobilised not only in narratives but in [...] simulations and modelling” (54). Therefore forming and producing these futurisms function as ways of critically engaging and disrupting the Western-centric ideas and imaginations of the future, and contribute to alternative ways of thinking. Therefore, it can be concluded that re-figuring is a form of counterfuturism, that highlights the necessity for the oppressed to critically engage with the past, in order to create an emancipatory imagination of the future. Allahyari is bringing the past, present and future together through re-figuring and shows, importantly, that they aren’t separate from each other.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated the ways in which re-figuring helps better understand the critical intervention performed through *The Laughing Snake*. Re-figuring is a key process in Allahyari’s artistic research *She Who Sees the Unknown*, that consists of re-appropriating *jinn* from the Middle East through rewriting their stories in relation to a contemporary form of oppression. Through the process of re-figuring, the artist takes control of the representation of these forgotten figures and positions them as necessary and useful figures inside the discussion on contemporary

forms of oppression. The artist emphasizes the importance of thinking and creating with figures that come from various backgrounds, especially non-Western ones. She also positions storytelling as a tool for resistance in her process of re-figuring. Allahyari performs an intervention in the existing stories and the representation of Middle Eastern *jinn*, and reclaims the ways in which they are represented. This reclaiming also happens through 3D printing, which Allahyari uses as a tool for re-figuring rather than a tool for manufacturing. As discussed in the previous chapter, 3D printing technology also allows people to take responsibility for the representation of things, inviting them to engage with stories and with figures and to experiment with them. The term also connects with Allahyari's call for plural futures with stories from multiple backgrounds. The next chapter will demonstrate how the monster is a key figure in the concept of re-figuring, and how the monster and the monstrous helps to understand the artistic interventions made by Allahyari.

### CHAPTER 3: *THE LAUGHING SNAKE* & THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MONSTER

“People who deny the existence of dragons are often eaten by dragons.  
From within.”

(Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the  
Writer, the Reader and the Imagination*, 2004)

This chapter focuses on the artwork *The Laughing Snake* by taking a close look at the significance of the monster in this story as well as its narrational elements; the hypertext narrative, the storytelling style, the re-figuring of the story and how the female gaze all play a role in this re-figuring. The chapter argues that Allahyari is embracing monstrosity and adopting the monster as an identity by suggesting parallels between herself and the monster in the narrational elements of her work and the ending of the story. ‘Monster theory’ (Cohen, 1996) is used in order to help better understand the ways in which we can understand the role of the monster in the artwork, what it entails as an identity, and its role in the intervention of *The Laughing Snake*. This chapter argues that in this artwork, Allahyari uses the monster as a figure of empowerment that can be seen as a way of challenging the system of representation. Thus, through this form of storytelling and re-figuring, Allahyari shifts power balances and re-situates herself and the female *jinn* as figures of empowerment. In the narrative of *The Laughing Snake*, she shifts the emphasis of the monster’s gaze and through this, changes the role of the monster in the story from a victim to an empowered figure that claims its own rights.

Firstly, the chapter introduces the hypertext narrative and how Allahyari uses forms of digital interactive narration as her tools and the website as her interface; in other words, of how the work manifests itself. It also gives a brief account of the ways in which the artworks are presented and of the installations in which they are exhibited or shown. Next, the chapter moves on to the significance of the monster in the narrative of *The Laughing Snake* and investigates the role of the monster in the intervention made by the artwork. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s book *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996) discusses the monster extensively, and will be used as a primary source in analyzing the appearance of the monster in Allahyari’s work and in explaining how we can interpret the meaning of the monster in her work. This chapter discusses the close connection between the monster and the culture that gave birth to it. The monster is positioned as a figure that represents the fear and anxieties of a culture in the particular time that it emerged. Cohen’s theory is used to help better understand how the monster of *The Laughing Snake* can be

seen as an embodiment of the fears and anxieties of Middle Eastern culture. This is also connected to the narrative that contains personal stories of Allahyari that address being a woman in the Middle East, and through this suggestion of similarity, the fears and anxieties regarding the woman in the Middle East are further elaborated.

The next section of the chapter focuses on how the monster is a figure of resistance that can help better understand the intervention made by the artwork. Firstly, the ways in which the monster challenges these established categories are presented in order to better understand how Allahyari's doubling of the figure of *the Laughing Snake* can be interpreted as her way of challenging established categories of difference and identity. The chapter then establishes the monster's relationship to borders and show the ways in which it is considered a boundary creature, that is, a key figure in the formation of identity. The monster is a figure that evokes dual emotions in the individual. As a boundary creature that cannot be easily categorized, the monster also challenges existing categories of identity, showing how they are not always clearly functional or visible. In order to have a better understanding of how the monster subverts these categories, the monster's relation to identity structures is discussed. The monster is conceptualized as abject and the effects that it provokes in the individual is contextualized through philosopher Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. These theories are used to better understand how adopting the monster as an identity can be interpreted as a form of critical intervention. Through drawing parallels between the monster and the woman, this chapter looks at the ways *The Laughing Snake* brings them together and the meaning of this grouping.

In the reworking of the story the chapter looks at the change in the story, where *the Laughing Snake* sees its reflection *within* the world and dies of laughter. Entangled with Allahyari's personal memories of sexual objectification and oppression, this chapter argues that this look functions as the monster's way of breaking down the voyeuristic look towards it. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1989), wherein she defines the male gaze of classical Hollywood cinema and elaborates on the woman's function of being an object of the male gaze is used as the main source on the female gaze. Specifically, this chapter explains how the personal stories in *The Laughing Snake* prove to be similar, as the male gaze is present in the stories and Allahyari herself also functions as the object of this gaze. Thus, it is argued that the story of *the Laughing Snake* subverts and transforms what Mulvey describes as the male gaze and how through the shifting the emphasis on the look, the artwork gives agency to the monster and, consequently, the woman represented in Allahyari's personal story. The chapter also discusses film scholar Linda Williams' article

“When the Woman Looks” (2002), where she explains how the woman’s looking towards the monster in horror films is a recognition of their similar status within systems of patriarchy. She positions the monster as a double for the woman, which relates well with *The Laughing Snake*. These theories are used to argue that in this case study, the monster is doubled with the woman, empowered through difference and the repositioning of the gaze, thus taking back her reflection through the rejection of the preexisting image. This happens through laughter and, as Allahyari describes, “[h]er laughing, and subsequent death, is a powerful gesture to take her reflection back” (Allahyari, 2019) and, following Kristeva, this chapter further argues that this “laughing is a way of displacing abjection” (8). Through a close analysis of the artwork, this chapter demonstrates how the reclamation of the monster’s reflection resembles Allahyari’s reclamation of her own reflection, thus (re)claiming her image as a Middle Eastern woman through this artwork.

### ***THE LAUGHING SNAKE***

*The Laughing Snake* is a web-based hypertext narrative that can be viewed online, through Whitney Museum of American Art’s *Artport*<sup>30</sup>, the museum’s online gallery space for web-based and internet art, where Allahyari’s artwork is included in the museum’s permanent online collection. Besides this virtual version, *The Laughing Snake* was also displayed in the form of an installation at New York City’s Hunter College in March 2019, a part of a group exhibition titled “Refiguring the Future”. The installation was also exhibited at Mackenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Canada as a part of the exhibition titled “Morehshin Allahyari: She Who Sees the Unknown”, an exhibition that focused specifically on Allahyari’s works in progress, and shown from May to August 2019. Both installations were comprised of a room with walls covered in mirrors, a 3D printed plastic sculpture of *the Laughing Snake* suspended from the ceiling, and a screen where the viewers could click through and experience the hypertext narrative of *The Laughing Snake* (see fig. 5). Here it is necessary to further introduce the term hypertext narrative, which was first articulated by media theorist Theodore Holm Nelson in his 1965 article “A File Structure for The Complex, The Changing and the Indeterminate.” Nelson introduces and defines the term hypertext as “a body of written or pictorial material interconnected in such a complex way that it could not conveniently be presented or

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<sup>30</sup> The artwork can be viewed through the following link: <https://whitney.org/artport>.



represented on paper” (84). A hypertext narrative is thus a type of narrative that comprises of multiple texts and multiple outcomes. The user can click through certain words or sentences to navigate the narrative, and each of these hyperlinks lead the user to different results and create different stories. This can be seen as an online version of a choose-your-own-adventure novel, albeit one that uses a web interface rather than traditional forms of publication. It is a form of interactive storytelling that invites the reader to participate in the story and interact with the different possibilities it possesses. However, it is important to keep in mind that the user isn’t able to change the outcome or the ending of the story, but merely choose different ways to get there. The endings are predetermined by the writer and the interaction only changes the paths through which the user reaches the story’s conclusion.

The online version of *The Laughing Snake* starts with a video that takes the viewer on a journey through a 3D modeled, dark, desert-like space. As the camera moves forward in this space a voice-over by Allahyari tells the story of a figure named, “She Who Sees the Unknown”. This story can be seen as a general introduction to the project of *She Who Sees the Unknown*, as it describes the aims of the project and common qualities of the featured figures in poetic form. It is the story of a figure that “had seen what there was and had embraced the otherness”, who is “a possessive jinn, a divisive persona, a monstrous other, a dark goddess”, whose story was “untold and forgotten” and who is “of and from the near east” (Allahyari, 2018). After this introduction, the hypertext narrative begins. Every step contains a verse with certain words that are hyperlinked. The reader navigates through the story by clicking on these hyperlinks. The story of *the Laughing Snake* is entangled with Allahyari’s personal experience and memories of being a woman in the Middle East, specifically in Iran. Some words in *the Laughing Snake*’s story lead the reader to Allahyari’s personal memories of sexual harassment, the objectification of her body, stories of exploring her own sexuality and the experience of having to cover up her body and hair. These words and how they lead to the different storylines will be discussed further in the following sections of the chapter. Through entangling her personal story with that of *the Laughing Snake*, Allahyari creates a relationship and a doubling between the *jinn* and herself, which emphasizes the similarity between the statuses of *jinn* and women in the Middle East. It would be important to also emphasize that all of the different endings to the story contain another version of Allahyari becoming *the Laughing Snake* and embracing its monstrosity. This ending indicates that the narrative intends for the doubling of the *jinn* and Allahyari. It can also be argued that through this doubling, Allahyari is embracing the monstrous *jinn* as

an identity. Therefore, it is useful to look at the significance of the monster as a figure more generally and what exactly a ‘monstrous’ identity entails, as well as its potential as a figure of empowerment and resistance.



Fig. 5. The installation of *the Laughing Snake* from *She Who Sees the Unknown* at Hunters College, 2019 *She Who Sees the Unknown*, <http://shewhoseestheunknown.com/the-laughing-snake/>.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MONSTER

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Laughing Snake is originally a *jinn* featured in the Arabic manuscript *Kitab al-bulhan*, also referred to as the *Book of Wonders*. Allahyari is revising and re-figuring *the Laughing Snake* in a setting where the monster’s story is intertwined with Allahyari’s personal memories and experiences of being a woman in the Middle East. The artist’s choice of using monsters that are from the Middle East is a conscious one, as discussed in the previous chapter. This choice combined with the entanglement of the monster’s story with Allahyari’s personal experience in the Middle East can be seen as her way of commenting on Middle Eastern through its own sets of figures. The monsters are closely connected to the culture they are created in, which is explored thoroughly in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s book *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996). As discussed in the introduction, Cohen coined the term ‘monster theory’ in this book, using it as a term that refers to adopting a critical and academic approach to the monstrous. His theories on the subject are referenced widely in monster studies. (Hanafi, 2000, Levina & T. Bui, 2013, Mittman & Dendle, 2013, Mittman & Hensel, 2018). The monsters that Cohen examines include literary ones depicted in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), or those represented in

cinema like those in *Alien* (1979). However, he also looks at real-life figures like serial killers or social outsiders. Cohen groups them under the term ‘monster,’ which he describes as “that which is difficult to apprehend and to domesticate (and therefore disempower) that which threatens” (viii). He thus discusses a wide range of monsters represented in culture and media and defines them through their difficulty to be understood and domesticated. Cohen explains that his work aims to unveil the potential of looking at monstrosity seriously as “a mode of cultural discourse” (ix) and the ways in which the monster can be a fruitful figure for cultural analysis. Bringing together his previous work on monster theory, he established seven theses that could help better understand the monster in relation to the culture that created it, a manifesto entitled “Monster Culture: Seven Theses” (1996) that argues that instead of teaching, “monsters mean” (Mittman & Hensel, xii). In this work, Cohen states that “[t]he Monster's Body Is a Cultural Body” (4) and positions it as an embodiment of the anxieties, fears, desires and fantasies connected to the cultural conditions that conceive and circulate certain figurations of the monster. He argues that this aspect makes monsters and the monstrous “pure culture” (4), and that “the monster exists only to be read” (4), and thus is a figure that invites discussion and analysis on the culture that it embodies. The monster’s demonstrating quality can also be found in the word’s etymological roots, which come from the Latin words *monstrum*, meaning ‘omen,’ and the verb *monere*, which means ‘to warn’ (*merriam-webster*). Therefore, the monster as a figure has a revelatory and demonstrating quality regarding the culture that it is created in.

These theories could help better understand what the monster in *The Laughing Snake* is demonstrating. Firstly, *the Laughing Snake* is a monster that was created in the Middle East, and it can thus be seen as an embodiment of the fears, anxieties and desires of Middle Eastern culture. Allahyari’s positioning the monster as intertwined with her personal stories of having a female body in the Middle East can also be interpreted as a way of suggesting parallels between *the Laughing Snake* and herself, reflecting the similarities between the situations of the monstrous and of having a female body in the Middle East. This is an illustrative way of using the monster as a figure to demonstrate the experience and implications of being a woman in the Middle East. This can also be viewed the other way around, where the woman is seen as an embodiment of certain fears and desires of Middle Eastern culture. Through this doubling of the monster and the woman in the Middle East, Allahyari emphasizes the similarity of their experience. The way this work proposes connections between her personal experience and the monster invites such interpretation.

The monster is a figure that transforms accordingly as the culture and the time changes. This makes the monster a timely creature useful for reflecting on the past, present and future, given its tendency to transform. The monster is able to embody specific problems and topics of the time in which it exists and is therefore a useful figure to reflect on time and its effects on culture. Cohen explains that the monster “Always Escapes” (4) only to come back in another form. He elaborates the impossibility of getting rid of the monster or the monstrous, as such figures always find ways of returning, having transformed accordingly to the cultural conditions of the present, thus making all of their deaths or erasures temporary. Allahyari’s reproduction of the monster can therefore be understood as a way of emphasizing the relevance of the figure of *the Laughing Snake* in the present. Furthermore, using an ancient figure in order to reflect on the present conditions of being a woman in the Middle East can be seen as a way of illustrating how the situation hasn’t improved over time. This hints that the same desires and fears of the past continue to be present and prevalent in the current situation in the Middle East.

Cohen also explains that the reason behind the monster’s ability to change form is that the monster is corporal and incorporeal at the same time. Even though the monster has a physical body and is known to cause physical harm, it also has incorporeal features that make it possible for it to be recreated in another body, in another time. He argues that the monster’s “threat is its propensity to shift” (5). This separates the monster from the human, creating a threat since the human is not able to shift through corporal and incorporeal like the monster. The monstrous figures in *She Who Sees the Unknown* are corporal and incorporeal in another aspect as well, as they can be created in both forms, carrying digital and cultural information with them, and always able to transform. Through the process of 3D modeling, these *jinn* exist in a virtual space, yet they are also recreated in physical space. This relates to Cohen’s contention that the monster’s ability to shift is what makes it impossible to get rid of. As a figure that can easily transform and shift boundaries, the monster always finds a way to escape by changing or transforming. This point also highlights how redundant it is to try to kill or eradicate monstrous figures, suggesting a different approach. The monster is a figure that resists death through its ability to change. This helps better understand how ancient monsters remain relevant to discussing contemporary problems. Looking at *The Laughing Snake* with Cohen’s work in mind, the artwork shows how ancient monsters are relevant in the present. This can be understood as Allahyari’s way of commenting on how the status and representation of women and the

female body have remained the same for decades throughout the Middle East. This also highlights the non-changing quality and static nature of Middle Eastern culture and its relationship to women. Allahyari asks how it is possible to imagine a future when we are still dealing with the problems of the past. Through adopting the ever-changing figures of the monstrous female *jinn*, she emphasizes the need for change in the representation of powerful female figures. In relation to *The Laughing Snake*, this is a way of challenging existing representation of women in the Middle East and a reflection upon their capability of finding the power they need within or amongst themselves. Furthermore, this is an important way of recreating and materializing figures previously considered incorporeal, which also emphasizes their relevance in the present.

It is important to keep in mind that even though *the Laughing Snake* is referred to as a female figure, it is actually a hybrid between a snake and a woman. Following Cohen, such a hybrid figure is monstrous because it is not bound by categories, a breaker of categories that performs various interventions through its existence. It is a boundary creature that does not belong to either side of the border. In this case, *the Laughing Snake* is neither human nor animal; it exists between the two, carrying qualities of both human and animal which makes it an uncomfortable or unfathomable figure for many people. *The Laughing Snake* cannot be condensed or confined to any one category, as the monster refuses any category and resists any form of integration. Cohen describes how “The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis” (6) and explains how the monster continuously escapes because it “refuses easy categorization” (6). As a hybrid creature that does not fit into the existing categories, the monster in *The Laughing Snake* likewise challenges binary opposition and demands “a radical rethinking of boundary and normality” (6). This particular positioning of the monster makes it a thinking tool that allows for the rethinking of categories. This quality of the monster also contributes to a better understanding of Allahyari’s interventions, especially given that she tells her story through the figure of the monster. This can be seen as her way of reflecting on not feeling represented by the existing categories or representations of identity. In *She Who Sees the Unknown*, Allahyari shows how there are multiple forms of powerful female figures that don’t fit inside the existing stereotypes or categories of powerful female figures. This serves as a reflection on the various shapes that empowerment can take and how these forms resist categorization or do not necessarily need to be categorized.

Cohen also brings attention to the monster's "ontological liminality" (6) as a reason that it appears in times of crisis or as a warning against a forthcoming crisis, and how the monster functions as an alternative to thinking with or in binary oppositions. Its monstrosity introduces the crisis as a warning against "the clash of the extremes" (6), showing the possible negative outcomes. It is thus "a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (6); not having any distinct form itself, the monster is a threat to these distinctions, proving that they are not necessarily finite, workable or unchangeable. He also describes that despite the attempts to categorize it in the past, the figure of the monster has always escaped extinction only to return at the margins of society, often living on the edge of borders. Cohen summarizes these aspects as follows:

A mixed category, the monster resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a 'system' allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction), and resistance to integration (7).

The monster asks for a new way of thinking through the formation of connections, constituting a new system that allows various voices and underrepresented figures to be heard and included. This resistance to integration can be seen as a key point of thinking with the monster, offering a platform for exploring multitude and difference. The monster provokes and invites us to rethink boundaries and existing categories. Cohen describes that the monster creates and presents "an escape from its hermetic path, an invitation to explore new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world" (7). Therefore, the monster not only warns against the current method of categorization, but also suggests a new approach: interconnectedness. The figure of the monster illustrates the world as interconnected and suggests that a collective approach could be a better way of perceiving and acting in the world. This goes hand in hand with Allahyari's call for plural futures. Rather than integration, the monster demands new voices, a system of polyphony. Therefore, through adopting the monster as a figure in this artwork, Allahyari performs an intervention into existing categories of representation and aims to abolish them, offering in its stead the possibilities engendered through interconnectedness. In this case, Allahyari's representation of women and the female body in the Middle East resists complying with existing forms and ways of representation, instead creating her own body of alternatives. She is refusing to integrate, since, just like *the Laughing Snake*, she does not belong to any of the existing

categories. This is an explicit statement rejecting these categories by choosing the monster as her representative. Through this choice, Allahyari brings attention to the lack of accurate representation of powerful female figures within Middle Eastern culture.

## THE MONSTER AND DIFFERENCE

The monster's resistance to be bound by categories causes it to be labeled as negatively different. But as a figure that challenges established categorization, the monster also questions difference. Cohen explains that the monster is "difference made flesh" (7), describing its function as a figure that questions and embodies difference simultaneously. He describes the monstrous body as created through alterity that appears to be outside or external, but that actually originates within. Even though it can be used as an embodiment of many kinds of difference, the monster has historically been associated with "cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual" (7) difference. He describes this as "[t]he exaggeration of cultural difference into monstrous aberration," (7) citing Biblical examples where "the aboriginal inhabitants of Canaan are envisioned as menacing giants to justify the Hebrew colonization of the Promised Land" (7), and cases in medieval France where Muslims were transformed into "demonic caricatures whose menacing lack of humanity was readable from their bestial attributes" (8) in songs about the Crusades. He also provides more diversely sourced examples, including a Serbian soldier's interview describing Bosnians "feeding Serbian children to the animals at the zoo" (qtd. in 8), European representations of Native Americans as "savages" (8) in the United States, and the history of "xenophobic misrepresentation" (8) of Jews in Europe. Cohen argues the reasoning behind these monstrous attributions is that "representing an anterior culture as monstrous justifies its displacement or extermination by rendering the act heroic" (8). According to Cohen, this phenomenon blurs the boundaries between personal and national bodies, as different forms of alterity are usually interchangeable or able to be transformed into one another. However, he also argues the "the political-cultural monster"(11) embodies such difference, and "paradoxically threatens to *erase* difference in the world of its creators" (11). The figure of the monster does this through revealing the inconsistencies of categorization based on binary systems, which serves to highlight some of the problematic aspects of constructing a system based on positive difference. Towards this contention, Cohen quotes philosopher René Girard's book *The Scapegoat* (1982), which deals with concepts of

difference by looking at persecution texts in order to identify and position differences that are not (easily) defined inside existing systems of thought:

Difference that exists outside the system is terrifying because it reveals the truth of the system, its relativity, its fragility, and its mortality.... Despite what is said around us persecutors are never obsessed with difference but rather by its unutterable contrary, the lack of difference (qtd., 12).

Girard points out a key aspect of difference in relation to systemic conditions and thinking. He argues that differences which are not clearly defined as oppositional and that do not fit inside preexisting binary systems are threatening since they can reveal similarities as well as oppositions. This is how the monster reveals “that difference is arbitrary and potentially free-floating, mutable rather than essential” (Cohen, 12), showing that difference is subjective and not necessarily definite or negative. Herein, monsters and the monstrous pose a threat to the “cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted and allowed” (Cohen, 12) by showing how this system of identity formation is invalid and inconsistent. Exposing these inconsistencies can consequently upset systems and societies by showing how and why they need monsters in order to survive, especially given that the lack of difference can also be disruptive to the system. This further exposes how the system feeds on these differences, if not requiring them. Paradoxically enough, Cohen’s point also illustrates how difference does not exist in regards to outsiders or those considered to be ‘The Other’ in the eyes of the system. Such systems – cultural, social, political and economic – feed on difference, ensuring their stability through an idea of difference that allows for the grouping together of diverse and differentiated individuals who differ from assumed or established norms. In *The Laughing Snake*, Allahyari brings together the woman and the monster, forming a connection that illuminates a doubling between them. Monster theories help in understanding how this doubling is an intervention in the representation of difference more generally. Through bringing together figures that are considered to be different, Allahyari shows how both the monster and women are similar in the eyes of the patriarchal systems and beliefs.

Through demonstrating the similar status of the monster and the woman in Middle Eastern culture, Allahyari is also reflecting on how difference is represented in the Middle East, demonstrating the parallels amongst and within supposedly different categories or identities. She brings together the feelings of fear usually evoked by the monstrous with the



feelings of desire traditionally associated with female figures. This pairing of desire and fear shows that these feelings are interchangeable in certain cases, which invites the viewer to think differently about pre-established difference and the feelings evoked by such juxtapositions. This duality is also present within the monster as it is a figure that contains multitudes. This is discussed by philosopher Rosi Braidotti in “Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Differences”, where she takes a close look at teratology, the science of medically investigating monsters, which is concerned with bodies that have a lack, an excess or a displacement of organs and limbs. She uses teratology to elucidate “the perception of embodied differences” (136), which is central to the radicalization and genderization of certain differences. Braidotti argues that “to be significant and to signify potentially contradictory meanings is precisely what the monster is supposed to do” (135), and that the monster “governs the production of differences here and now” (141). In this, the monster signifies contradictory meanings; its liminal state allows it to be both the same and the Other, helping understand the paradox of difference through the similarities between the established differences. Braidotti’s theorization speaks to Allahyari’s choice of the monster as an identity, and to her doubling of the monster and the woman in *The Laughing Snake*. Herein, this doubling is a reflection on a kinship between the monster and the woman, showing the similar treatment and conditions of figures that are considered and defined as different from one another. This directly challenges existing concepts of difference which require that its constituting categories are differentiated, finite and static. In an interview that she gave to *Ibraaz* in 2017, Allahyari explains that she is specifically interested in “non-binary ways of thinking – the fact that things can be both and neither” (Allahyari, 2017). Her choice of monsters as her figures in re-figuring supports her questioning of difference, illustrating how perceptions of difference created the monstrous and monsters in the first place. Through embracing a figure that contains multitudes, Allahyari makes a statement on the double nature of things and how such figures can be considered differently from other points of view and in relation to other entities. This is further evidenced in Allahyari’s commentary on the way difference is handled, where she brings attention to the double-faced quality of difference. In the case of *The Laughing Snake*, she is reflecting upon the woman as being different from the presumed norm of the man. Furthermore, through suggesting a connection and entanglement between the monster and the woman via the ending of the *jinn*’s story, she brings attention to aspects of the woman and the monster that are similar in their positions of difference, being the subjects of desire and fear simultaneously.

The monster is a creature that evokes dual emotions in the individual. Cohen argues that the “Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire” (16), and describes the attraction of the monster as despised but desired at the same time. Close relation between the forbidden and the monstrous is what makes the figure of monster appealing as “a temporary egress from constraint” (17). It is an example of freedom without restriction. Cohen explains that the monster causes repulsion and attraction simultaneously, and this reaction is a reason for the monster’s popularity - “for the fact that the monster seldom can be contained in a simple, binary dialectic” (17). He describes that the social or cultural loathing of the monstrous is often paired up with an envy of “its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair” (17). This desire for the monster is a common trope explored in many horror films, in which “fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space” (17). This safe space allows individuals to displace their fears, yet it these fantasies also connect the monster to the individual, bringing about a fear of similarity with the monster. Cohen explains that the effect of horror in these film begins when “the monster threatens to overstep these boundaries, to destroy or deconstruct the thin walls of category and culture” (17). He explains that the monster can function as an alter ego in the condition of it being “contained by geographic, generic, or epistemic marginalization” (17). Boundaries need to be set very clearly in order for the individual to experience this effect through depictions of the monster. Cohen explains that using the monster as a secondary body introduces one to “the simple and fleeting joys of being frightened, or frightening—to the experience of mortality and corporality” (17), feelings not immediately associated with the environment produced by horror films that, as previously mentions, is a liminal space based on a perception of safety. It also allows the individual to experience forms of liberation as monsters offer “the possibilities of other genders, other sexual practices, and other social customs” (Cohen, 18). Cohen concludes that the space between desire and fear resonates with philosopher Julie Kristeva’s *theory of abjection*. Kristeva’s theories help to interpret *The Laughing Snake* as a reflection and commentary on the dual nature that the woman evokes. Through creatively illustrating a personal experience of the female body in the Middle East in *The Laughing Snake*, Allahyari also comments on the desire that the woman evokes. The personal stories of Allahyari include many men catcalling her and harassing her on the street, which can be read as a form of experiencing temporary egress through their fantasies on the female body. Through the doubling of characters and connection to the monster narrative, she demonstrates the fear evoked by both the monster and the woman at the same time. She is also

feared, and this aspect is present in her personal stories where she talks about questioning cultural norms or masturbating. Her pleasure and curiosity are feared, seen as threats, and often punished.

The significance of the female monster comes also from the lack of female monsters and the relatively sparse representation of female monsters compared to male monsters. Film scholar Barbara Creed discusses the cinematic representation of women as monsters in her book *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1993). She brings attention to the lack of theoretical work on the topic of women as monsters/monstrous, stating that there is usually a tendency to portray the woman as the victim of a male monster. Instead of the term “female monsters”, Creed suggests the term “monstrous feminine” as it “emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of monstrosity” (3). She argues that it is quite common for societies to have “a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (1). She explains that the Freudian explanation of this fear is the fear of being castrated by the woman. Creed argues such feelings can also be understood as opposite and introduces film studies scholar Susan Lurie’s article, “The Construction of the "Castrated Woman" in Psychoanalysis and Cinema” (1981). Within this essay, she discusses the opposing approaches to this topic, arguing that men fearing castration, and the woman by proxy, is a result of women not being castrated, rather than a fear of castration itself. She explains that “[t]he fantasy of the castrated woman is designed to assuage the male's complex dread of woman by addressing the major components of that dread” (56). These theories could also be related to the dual feelings evoked by the woman and the monster, as it can be seen as an explanation of the fear evoked by the woman.

## **THE MONSTER AND BORDERS**

The monster being considered different, makes it a key figure in the formation of identity. This is discussed by Cohen, who argues that the monster is constructed in relation to the bodily, geographical, temporal and technological boundaries that construct culture and is, as a result, “an extreme version of marginalization” (ix). He therefore positions the monster as a boundary creature, and a key figure in the formation of identity as well as in the construction of deviance. He explains that since identity is formed through negation or opposition, the monster—being the opposite of the norm—has unsettling effects on what is constructed as

natural or human. As a creature formed through opposition, the monster is destined to be the other, and outsider; yet being a boundary creature also means the monster possesses knowledge of the border that excludes it. However, even though the monster is a boundary creature, it is important to acknowledge that it can still exist on the ‘inside’ of established borders and boundaries. As discussed earlier, the monster in Cohen’s monster theory has a body that cannot be categorized or tamed. Thus, the primary way that the monster relates to borders through the expulsion of its monstrous body to other side of borders.

Contemporary philosopher Richard Kearney’s book *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (2003) deals with monsters similarly, aiming “to reinvestigate practices of defining ourselves in terms of otherness” (5), and he subsequently challenges these forms of polarization. Kearney groups together the figures of strangers, gods and monsters, all of whom exist in a frontier zone; in this, all three groupings “represent experiences of extremity which bring us to the edge” (3) and “subvert our established categories and challenge us to think again” (3). Kearney explains that these figures of alterity “threaten the known with the unknown” (3), creating an effect of horror and, as a result, are “[e]xiled to hell or heaven; or simply ostracized from the human community into a land of aliens” (3). This fear is explained as being created by the unknown, where the unfamiliar is perceived as threatening. For instance, monsters signal “borderline experiences of uncontainable excess, reminding the ego that it is never wholly sovereign” (3), and that there is another possibility of existence of behavior that remains outside the boundaries of the norm. This potentiality defies existing norms of identification that keep the individual ego contained and stable by showing and exploring other forms of identification. Cohen similarly argues that the monstrous body in horror films is used to express “fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion” (17). In this case, the horror film serves as “a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space” (17) and the monster functions as “an alter ego, as an alluring projection of (an Other) self” (17). In this, the monster functions as an individual’s alter ego, another body through which they can explore and play out their escapist fantasies. This helps contextualize why Allahyari chooses to live out her fantasy of empowerment and reclaim her body through using the monster as an alter ego. The monster, through its extreme marginalization, evokes a sense of freedom and offers a glimpse of a world outside the established borders of identity. Through demonstrating both fear and the desire, and drawing explicit parallels between them in her work, Allahyari critically reflects on the desire to be monstrous and to what extent these feelings are held in common.

Kearney argues that as the ideas around self-identity shift over time, the threats against it shift as well. He gives the example of the stranger, a figure that transforms over time from foreigner, to invader, and to alien, functioning as “a limit-experience for humans trying to identify themselves over and against others” (3). He explains that these stranger figures police borders and make the extremes of thought and language visible. He describes the monster as “unrecognizable” (4) and therefore defying the “accredited norms of identification” (4). By refusing recognition, the monster helps call into question the norms of identification. Kearney also argues that these figures of otherness are connected to aspects of human nature. He describes them as “tokens of fracture within the human psyche” (4) that remind us how we are also split between opposites: “between conscious and unconscious, familiar and unfamiliar, same and other” (4). He argues that this split creates a choice on how we relate to the otherness within, trying either “to understand and accommodate our experience of strangeness” (4) or “to repudiate it by projecting it exclusively onto outsiders” (4). He concludes that it is usually the latter that is chosen. Instead of recognizing an internalized otherness, generalized fears and anxieties are projected towards them through scapegoating and stereotyping in an “attempt to simplify our [and their] existence” (5). Kearney explains that this happens, because “we refuse to acknowledge ourselves-as-others” (5). Thus he concludes that this stranger as the feared other actually exists inside of us. Similar to the fear of recognizing oneself in the monster, Kearney cites aliens as an example of being “dreaded not because they are other than us but because they are *more like us than our own selves*” (75). He explains that “what we most fear in the demonized other is our own mirror image: our othered self” (75).

Kearney further explains how through the projecting this strangeness and the expelling the other, “we deceive ourselves into thinking that we have exempted ourselves from estrangement” (73); in reality, however, we are only repressing the feelings, creating a form of anxiety defined by Freud as the ‘uncanny’. Kearney argues that freedom from defense mechanisms against the difference of otherness requires “a certain decentering of the ego which opens the self to the novel, the incongruous and the unexpected” (77). This allows the individual to “*de-alienate* the other” (80) through acknowledging the connection between the other and the self. This is done by recognizing “the other as another self bearing universal rights and responsibilities” (80) and by encouraging a conception of the Other “as someone

capable of recognizing me in turn as a self capable of recognition and esteem” (80). Keary’s theories help clarify how embracing the monster as an identity is a way of embracing and de-alienating the Other. Allahyari is actively recreating, re-figuring and researching these monsters, which are arguable attempts at better understanding the Other and its implications. Allahyari’s doubling of the monster and herself in *The Laughing Snake* is a manner of accepting and embracing the Other within herself, as well as a way of making peace with this figure. The ending of the story where she becomes the monster can also be understood as her way of resisting existing identity structures through forming her own identity. The idea of the Other within the self, and how this can be related to the formation of identity, is explored thoroughly in below through Kristeva’s theory of abjection.

## THE MONSTER AND ABJECTION

Kristeva’s theory of abjection highlights effects evoked by the monster in both the individual and society. The monster can be considered abject, as it evokes similar effects within the individual. Kristeva’s seminal book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) develops her theory of abjection from its start as a psychic process in identity formation, to its affects on cultural norms and social life. She investigates how this process is an experience that leads to separation, when identity is formed through opposition, and questions the effects of abjection on the individual and the society. Abjection is the emotional state of these developments and a process through which an individual is confronted with the boundary of the self, when the distinction between the self and the Other is blurred. Kristeva explains that “loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung” (2) can be considered abjection, but that the concept of abjection is not limited to such objects. She also gives the example of bodily fluids as abject, as they are often considered to be an aspect of the self that is not the self. She explains that abjection is caused by things that are not just dirty, but rather are that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). The abject is not bound by established categories in that it is in-between the self and the Other. It is what disturbs the identity of the self and its constituted boundaries, while also making the individual more conscious of these boundaries and their precariousness. Kristeva also describes

that the abject as “ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (1). This is related to the revelatory purpose of the abject, as it reveals other possibilities beyond the sense of the individuated self. The abject is what is left outside all the established categories and therefore “cannot be assimilated” (Kristeva, 1). As discussed in the previous sections, the monster is a figure that evokes dual feelings on/within the individual. It is a boundary creature that cannot be categorized and a figure that disturbs identities and systems. It is also an example of the self that is not understood to be the self, as it possesses similarities with the individual while remaining extremely marginal. Following Kristeva, the monster can thus be considered abject as it evokes the experience of abjection within the individual that ultimately results in the monster’s exclusion.

It is also important to highlight that the thoughts and feelings evoked by abjection do not have, “properly speaking, a definable *object*” (Kristeva, 1). Art theorist Rina Arya, who discusses abjection extensively in her book *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature* (2014) points to this inability to objectify the abject is what makes it a threat. She argues that, “objectifying something means that we are able to keep it at arm’s length, to ward it off and to analyze it in relation to the subject viewing or engaging with it” (28). But the abject remains a threat, and not only a bodily one. She explains that abjection occurs when the “clearly delineated boundaries between different states: inside and outside, life and death, and so on” (40) are threatened. She argues that “our sense of self is never entirely stable and is under the threat of invasion” (19). The abject, therefore, needs to be banished, excluded beyond the border, and placed outside of social and cultural systems, so that these systems can remain unchanged or peaceful. In this way, abjection functions as a guarantee for the system’s stability and normalcy. By banishing the abject, that which does not belong or fit into any category, individuals within a society do not have to face the self and its monstrous desires. However, the abject continues to be a threat. Arya explains that the banishment of the abject only creates stability for a short time, as “its presence disrupts the stability of self and society, thus activating the need for the operation of abjection” (Arya, 4). Just like the monster, the abject continues to threaten the self. Arya explains that abjection also brings attention to “the precarious nature of the boundary” (40) as well as its fragility. Through exposing the fragility of the boundary of the self or the boundaries separating the society from the abject, abjection provides an opportunity to rework the mechanisms of identity, to reconceptualize the place of discussing

and creating new forms of identity and resistance, thus challenging the status quo. Philosopher Tina Chanter discusses similar ideas in her book *The Picture of Abjection: Film, Fetish, and the Nature of Difference* (2008), where she argues that abject moments “provide opportunities for reworking identificatory mechanisms” (3). Through paying attention to the moments of abjection, individuals can learn more about the nature of identity mechanisms and how the Other is not quite separate from the self. The theory of abjection importantly helps to understand the figure of the monster as well. As a boundary figure that creates disturbances in identity structures and established categories, the monster also goes through the process of abjection and resultingly, is expelled. In this, Allahyari’s way of dealing with the monster is a way of dealing with the abject. The theory of abjection helps to understand how Allahyari depicts the experience of having a female body in the Middle East through *The Laughing Snake*. Her drawing of a parallel between figures of the monster and the woman shows how the monster and the woman can evoke similar responses in the eyes of the patriarchy, and Allahyari supports this with her the narrational style. The theory of abjection thus helps better understand the connection between the monster and the woman and how their experience is both different and similar, illuminating important aspects of the reasoning behind this banishment.

## ON THE FEMALE GAZE

An important component of *The Laughing Snake* is the role of the female and male gaze in the story. Allahyari’s personal stories contain memories of her being objectified by the male gaze. The story’s climax and the ending occurs through the gaze, wherein *the Laughing Snake* looks at itself and dies. The re-figuring of the story thus also happens through the gaze, as Allahyari changes its function. To discuss the significance of the gaze in this context calls for the contributions of film theory, as it is a discipline that discusses the gaze extensively in relation to cinema, and to artistic media more generally. Film theorist Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay on the subject, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), articulated the differences between the male gaze and the female gaze. Through examining the formation and the functions of the male gaze in cinema, Mulvey is “demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (14). She explains that the woman “stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other” (15), and that “man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through



linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning” (15). She brings in the concept of “scopophilia (pleasure in looking)” (16), explaining that this “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (19). This establishes women as “simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (19). She explains that shifting the emphasis of the look is possible through cinema and that ultimately it is “the place of the look defines cinema” (25). Likewise, in *The Laughing Snake*, Allahyari’s shifting of the look designates a change in the storyline. Following Mulvey, this suggests an understanding of this shift as a way of empowering the figure of *the Laughing Snake* by allowing it to take control of its own body. Mulvey explains that the image of women has been constantly made subject to the male gaze in the traditional film form. But breaking this norm is possible through shifting the emphasis of the look or gaze. Allahyari changes the emphasis of the look in *The Laughing Snake* and empowers the figure of *the Laughing Snake* by allowing her to change the outcome of her gazing into the mirror. The original version of the story exemplifies the assumptions of the male gaze, as the men battling this *jinn* hold up the mirror wanting her to see what they see. But Allahyari’s re-figured version is an active female gaze, as she explicitly takes control of her own body, faith, image, and representation. This look functions as the monster’s way of breaking down of the voyeuristic look towards itself. In this way, the story of *The Laughing Snake* subverts and transforms what Mulvey describes as the male gaze. By shifting the emphasis of the look, the artwork gives agency to the monster and therefore, the woman, represented in Allahyari’s personal story.

Feminist scholar Linda Williams discusses the significance of the female gaze in her article “When the Woman Looks”, where she explains how the woman’s look towards the monster in horror film is a recognition of their similar status within systems of patriarchy. First, she explains the trope of “the refusal of the woman to look” (61) at danger in horror films. She argues that this is because “she is often asked to bear witness to her own powerlessness in the face of rape, mutilation and murder” (61). Williams also adds that if she looks, the woman is “punished, in other words, by narrative processes that transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy” (61). Thus the woman’s looking at the monster in horror films “recognizes their similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing” (62), and establishes that there is not a significant “difference between an

object of desire and an object of horror as far as the male look is concerned” (63). She describes this “as the feared power and potency of a different kind of sexuality (the monster as double for the women)” (63). Therefore, the female look towards the monster is “a flash of sympathetic identification” (63). Williams explains that this doubling happens when, only occasionally, the woman is allowed to look, and “she sees a monster that offers a distorted reflection of her own image” (64). This is a result of the “the many mirrors patriarchal structures of seeing hold up to the woman” (64). Williams concludes that the threat of the monster or the woman for the male lies in their possibility to castrate and “the power to mutilate and transform the vulnerable male” (65).

Williams’ arguments regarding the similarity between the woman and the monster in horror film illustrate several aspects of the intervention made by Allahyari in *The Laughing Snake*. She also positions the monster as a double for the woman and draws similarities between their situation. By adopting the monster as her double, Allahyari reflects on patriarchal ways of seeing, ultimately rejecting this look by identifying as the monster instead. Through shifting the power through the female look, Allahyari is also making an intervention in the patriarchal structures of looking and the voyeuristic look, particularly by giving *the Laughing Snake* control over its own body through her own look.

### **RE-FIGURING *THE LAUGHING SNAKE* & SHIFTING THE POWER**

Allahyari’s use of the hyperlink structure in *The Laughing Snake* is quite meaningful to her artistic intentions. The numerous options of hyperlinks and their outcomes unfold the same story structure, supporting the narrative through its narrational style. The theory of gaze can help to better understand the shift in the story. In the first section of the story, each verse contains only one hyperlink, and thus the reader only has one option and cannot make an alternative choice. After four verses containing one hyperlink, the following verse contains two hyperlinks which lead to the same place. This could be read as Allahyari’s way of demonstrating that the beginning of the story is not interchangeable, and that there isn’t really another option for the story to develop otherwise. The beginning of the story is the introduction to the story and the introduction is not subject to change. This section goes as follows:

“She is the *Laughing Snake*

Known as the one *mirrored*

She is daughter to no warrior

Wife to no nobleman!

Mother to no hero!

She stands *rootless* yet rooted

The one ‘displaced the same *elsewhere*’

She is the *destroyer* of all occupiers

The Killer of the people of no sky

Capturing those with wings who do not fly

Putting out every fire in favor of her own *flame*” (Allahyari, 2018).

The words that are italicized are the ones that contain hyperlinks. The reason behind the particular choice of words can be seen as Allahyari’s way of emphasizing these particular words within the story. The emphasized words are; “laughing”, “mirrored”, “rootless”, “elsewhere”, “destroyer” and “flame,” all of which can be used to describe *the Laughing Snake* itself. They are the adjectives and nouns that explain the main qualities of the *jinn*. In the last paragraph, the hyperlinked words “flame” and “destroyer” present the viewer with a choice yet they lead the reader to the same place. This is Allahyari’s way of emphasizing both the words themselves and their interchangeability. It is only in the following section that different choices start to appear. This section goes as follows:

“Her story is told at every edge of the world

A jinn no one could elude

One time into the past and one time into the future

They prayed

‘You have created this monster, now give her *her equal*’.

But *no equal* was found to fight her” (Allahyari, 2018).

The first opportunity for the viewer to choose between hyperlinks is the breaking point of the story. This is an example of how Allahyari evokes a shift in perspective. It has another significance, as the words “her equal” lead the reader to the original ending of the story, while the words “no equal” lead to Allahyari’s ending that is re-figured. Both of these outcomes are not the end of this hypertext. They contain multiple hyperlinks that lead the reader to Allahyari’s personal stories. The significance of the words “her equal” leading to the original ending of the story can be read as Allahyari’s way of showing that in the re-figured version of the story, she is an equal to the figure of *the Laughing Snake*. The hyperlink “her equal” leads to the following section:

“All eyes on her  
 They held a mirror in front of her  
 When she saw her *reflection*  
 She burst into *laughter*  
 She laughed for days and nights  
 Until she *died*” (Allahyari, 2018).

This version contains the original ending of the story where *the Laughing Snake* is held up to a mirror and dies of laughter upon seeing her reflection. Through the words “her equal”, Allahyari creates a connection between *the Laughing Snake*’s fate and her own. The word “reflection” leads to a personal story of getting caught masturbating by her grandmother and of being told that a snake will come out of her vagina if she continues to masturbate. This is a way of seeing her reflection in this story and also a commentary on using shame as a scare tactic. The word “laughter” leads to the story of Allahyari questioning the existence of God in primary school and being told that she will be hung from her hair in hell for doing so. Through linking the story to the word laughter, Allahyari reflects the ridiculousness of this threat and questions the punishments. The word “died” leads to a section describing sexual harassment experienced by Allahyari from ages 16 until 22, which similarly reflects the horrible effects of constantly going through such daily patriarchal challenges. All of these sections contain the option to “continue”, which leads to the previous section, where the reader can make a choice between the “her equal” and “no equal” hyperlinks. This move emphasizes that the story does not end there but offers an

alternative ending through re-figuring. Choosing the option “no equal” leads to the re-figured version of the story. This section goes as follows:

“All eyes on her  
 They held a mirror in front of her  
 When she saw her reflection *within* the world  
 She burst into laughter from *the image: Them, holding a mirror*  
 She laughed *hysterically* for days and nights  
 Until she died” (Allahyari, 2018).

In this version of the story, *the Laughing Snake* laughs at her reflection within the world while also laughing at those holding up a mirror to her image. All of the hyperlinks featured in this section lead to an ending of the story. These endings are separated from the other parts of the narrative through the use of a different background, and they contain no option of continuing via hyperlink. The three endings can be seen as the endings that Allahyari wants for the story. The word “within” leads to a story in the future where Allahyari come together with hundreds of girls carrying safety pins—a simple object to keep one safe when attacked or sexually harassed—and she is given her own. With this, she imagines a future where these situations won’t exist. The words “the image: Them, holding a mirror” leads to another story in the future where Allahyari becomes one with *the Laughing Snake*, who are both empowered and making their own choices. The final hyperlink “hysterically” leads to a story of a man sexually harassing Allahyari on a bus. She imagines a future where she will take out her safety pin and stick it in his leg until he bleeds and disappears. A significant aspect of the outcomes of the hyperlink “no equal” is that all of the personal stories featured are written in future tense, whereas all of the other stories are written in past tense. In this section, Allahyari takes control of her own image, body and reflection through coming together with *the Laughing Snake*. She does so by imagining futures where she is empowered. By deciding her own outcome she rejects the image that is imposed on her through laughter. In an interview that she gave to *The Seen Journal*, Allahyari argues that “[h]er laughing, and subsequent death, is a powerful gesture to take her reflection back” (Allahyari, 2018). This is thus her way of deciding on her own outcome and making her own decisions. She rejects the imposed image through laughter because,

following Kristeva, “laughing is a way of displacing abjection” (Kristeva, 8). She regains control over her own faith and renders abjection as useless and powerless.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated the role and meaning of the monster in *The Laughing Snake*. Through the storytelling style and the re-figuring of the narrative, Allahyari suggests a connection between the woman and the monster of *the Laughing Snake* and doubles them to make clear their similar experiences in the eye of the patriarchy in the Middle East. Her adoption of the monster as an identity allows for monster theory to be used to better understand the artwork. Through discussing Cohen’s theories of the monster, this chapter established that the monster is a figure that is an embodiment of the fears and desires of the culture that created it. The use of this figure to reflect on her experience of being a woman in the Middle East is Allahyari’s way of demonstrating the fears and desires surrounding the woman in the Middle East. It was also argued that Allahyari is challenging the concept of difference through bringing together and showing the similarity of two figures that were previously considered as distinctly different. Through Kristeva’s theory of abjection, it was established that the experience and the effect evoked by the woman and the monster are similar. This was also demonstrated through the narrational elements and the structure of the hypertext used by Allahyari to emphasize the moment of re-figuring in the story, making it a moment where the reader can make a choice in the story. Her narrative structure is different in the re-figured and the original versions of the story. In the re-figured version, she empowers both figures through bringing them together and shifts the emphasis of the gaze within the story. In this, *the Laughing Snake* chooses its own destiny and rejects the patriarchal and voyeuristic gaze towards it. Through the *jinn*’s laughter abjection is displaced and Allahyari is empowered through becoming *the Laughing Snake*, taking control of her own body and fate through fighting back against her oppressor and abusers.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis aims to answer the question: ‘how can we understand the critical intervention performed by Morehshin Allahyari’s hypertext narrative *The Laughing Snake?*’. To do so, it analyzes the artistic tools, methods and figures that are used in the production of *The Laughing Snake*. It focuses on what these artistic tools and methods offer in terms of performing a critical intervention in future imaginaries and the monster’s necessity and significance in this intervention. Thus, this thesis presents a case for the relevance of reviving the monstrous in the present in order to discuss, critically engage with and reflect upon the future and its imaginaries. This research is also positioned within the framework of contemporary monster studies, and cultural studies of technology more generally.

Allahyari has been working with 3D printing technology since 2014, also using it as her main artistic tool in her long-term multi-exhibition project *She Who Sees the Unknown* (2016-Present). As discussed throughout this thesis, Allahyari importantly distinguishes herself from other artists using 3D printing technology who consider it primarily as a tool for manufacturing. Instead, she critically engages with the 3D printer and adopts it as a philosophical tool (see Chapter One). Allahyari uses 3D printing technology as a tool to reflect on forms of oppression, including her concept of digital colonialism, a contemporary form of recreating colonialist behavior that the artist opposes in both her artistic work and writings. She resists the phenomena of digital colonialism through adopting 3D printing technology to create a digital and physical archive, specifically an archive of Middle Eastern *jinn* figures. With this, Allahyari performs an important and timely intervention in 3D printer art.

In both *She Who Sees the Unknown* and *The Laughing Snake*, Allahyari uses 3D printing technology also as a tool for what she calls ‘re-figuring’. This concept refers to her artistic research process of re-appropriating the stories of Middle Eastern female *jinn* figures (see Chapter Two). Through re-figuring, she reclaims these forgotten figures and gives them a platform where their stories are told anew. Allahyari critically engages with the myths of these figures of *jinn* and the ways they are depicted, positioning them as necessary and useful figures inside the discussions on contemporary forms of oppression. The artist emphasizes the importance of thinking and creating with figures that come from various backgrounds, especially non-Western ones. She also positions storytelling as a tool for resistance in her process of re-figuring.

The process of re-figuring resonates with the ideas brought forth by counterfuturism movements of Afrofuturism and Middle Eastern futurisms, including Gulf futurism and Arab futurism. Afrofuturism positions the future and its imagination as an empowering act for the oppressed. Continuing to expand on this body of work, counterfuturism movements critically engage with the production of future and place importance on re-imagining the past as a form of resistance (see Chapter Three). Allahyari's re-figuring can also be considered as a form of counterfuturism, as it is an act of reclaiming stories from the past and revising them in order to make them present in and for the future, thus intervening in the Western and Euro-centric ideas of progress and the future. Through making these Middle Eastern monstrous figures present in the present and future, Allahyari is directly intervening in and challenging the Western-centric, progress oriented imaginations of the future, further reminding us that monsters and the monstrous will necessarily exist in the future as well.

Highlighted throughout the thesis are the ways that the artistic tools and methods of 3D printing, re-figuring, and the style of storytelling are interlinked and that thus contribute to each of the other elements of Allahyari's artistic practice. A specific example of this is Allahyari's use of the 3D printer as a tool for re-figuring. She critically engages with this production method and re-appropriates it as a storytelling tool, as well as a tool for re-creating and revising narratives and figures. This also resonates with the general focus on how the 3D printer allows easy reproducibility on demand in different materials and sizes. By connecting re-figuring and 3D printing technology, Allahyari also invites others to participate in the re-figuring of these artworks. Furthermore, reclaiming these stories effectively resists their extinction and erasure, thus serving the purpose of an evermore inclusive archive. Through her *She Who Sees the Unknown* project, Allahyari forms an archive of monstrous female figures from the Middle East, thus importantly contributing to the preservation Middle Eastern cultural heritage. This thesis invites a rethinking of the choices of preservation and the archive. Through Allahyari's creative acts of archiving, Allahyari also makes a critical intervention into how histories are preserved. Through 3D printing technology, Allahyari remediates these female *jinn*, turning them from their more traditional depictions in 2D paintings into 3D models and objects. In this, she also gives them a physical form. Together, these aspects suggest that the *jinn* could exist anywhere, anytime, and in many different forms.

Through *The Laughing Snake*, Allahyari creates an example of the monster as a figure of empowerment. She reclaims her own story and the story of the *jinn* in *The Laughing Snake* and re-appropriates it in a way that enables the monstrous to work as figures of empowerment.



Through the use of the monster, the artwork suggests a breaking of the boundaries and binary oppositions that are usually used to talk about oppression and difference. By bringing in a figure that resists any form of categorization, both the artwork and Allahyari likewise resist categorization. Through embracing monstrosity, reclaiming the female gaze and playing with ideas of abjection, the artwork refigures the monster narrative. It demonstrates a way of thinking that is relational and complex, bringing forth the figure of the monster as an example of this reframing. Through her artistic research project, Allahyari creates a future imaginary that contains monstrous female figures from the Middle East and thus directly intervenes and critically engages with the ideations of future that is exclusively white or Western. This artwork thus functions as a form of critical intervention that reclaims the future through the use of what has historically been understood as simply monstrous, and therefore, undesirable and rejected.

Through her storytelling style, Allahyari draws parallels between the monster and the woman, with the latter eventually becoming the monster by turning into the *jinn* in *the Laughing Snake* in the ending of the artist's retold story. Both the narrative and the narration style function as tools for empowerment for both the monster and the woman, as well as for Allahyari herself. The hypertext begins without offering any choice to the viewer, who simply click through the story via the only option presented in each section. The first time that the viewer is given a choice of navigating the story as they want is precisely the moment where re-figuring happens. The original version of the myth takes the reader through multiple options and choices that lead to various different moments of oppression that Allahyari experienced growing up in the Middle East. The re-figured version of the story makes multiple outcomes available to the reader, all where Allahyari turns into *the Laughing Snake* and thus becomes empowered through taking control of her body. The re-figuring of the story and its meaning is specifically discussed as the change in the look or the gaze of the *jinn* in *the Laughing Snake*. Thus, it can be argued that repositioning this gaze functions as a way of breaking down of the voyeuristic look towards the monster and monstrous. The parallels between the monster and the woman also make this a form of empowerment for the women or feminine figures featured in the story, as well as for Allahyari herself. The story of *The Laughing Snake* challenges the presumption of a male gaze, empowering the monster and monstrous and giving it agency over its own body and representation. This empowerment is evoked by a change in/to the female gaze and through reframing the central act of laughter, through which *the Laughing Snake* and the woman both reclaim their bodies and take their reflections back.

Together, these factors—3D printing, re-figuring, the figure of the monster and the shift in the female gaze—create a fruitful example of a counter-narrative that critically engages with prevailing understandings of difference and systems of oppression in the present. Thus, this thesis presents a case for returning to the monstrous, for retrieving those feminized monstrous *jinn* from Middle Eastern traditions, and for creatively and critically engaging with the idea of the future via the technological tools (3D printing), all of which together create and encourage new imageries of the future.

This thesis doesn't argue for the idealizing of the monster as a positive figure that people should identify with. Rather, it provides a case of an alternative depiction of the future that could function as a framework for thinking with non-Western figures and thinking beyond the prevailing ideals of the future. It also invites the bringing forth of other figures that aren't used, are forgotten or dismissed, and makes a case for these forgotten monsters. The larger argument surmised here is that it would be fruitful and important to include underrepresented, unwanted and marginal figures in future imaginaries, as they can provide useful ways of empowerment. This thesis demonstrates that the monster could open up necessary questions regarding the past, present, future in unique ways. In doing so, it also invites and suggests a rethinking of monster narratives and supports a re-figuring of them.

This thesis also presents the importance of questioning the methods that are used in producing an artwork by showing a rare example of 3D printed art that is critical and political. The implications of their choice of tools and technologies, and how this fit into the larger discussion, can provide the artist with a much needed critical stance. This can lead to a resistance against the top-down organization and use of both technology and artmaking. Therefore, this research also contributes to the scholarship of 3D printed art, demonstrating a rethinking of the use of these tools, a democratization and opening of possibilities.

A few central questions arise from these argumentations and reflections on Allahyari's artwork. These include: Why is it important to tell situated monster stories? More specifically, why is it fruitful to bring forth stories and figures from non-Western parts of the world in the imagining and the discussion of the future? One response to this is that opening up the imagination of futures can serve as a valuable thinking tool in imagining alternative futures and realities in which cultural others actually belong. It also serves as a useful tool for the oppressed and underrepresented to reclaim their stories, realities and futures. This would also bring in

various figures, realities and different kinds of awareness in the future imaginaries and their implications.

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