

The background of the page is white and features several black silhouettes of werewolves in various poses, scattered around the central text. One is at the top left, one at the top center, one at the top right, one at the bottom left, and one at the bottom right. The central text is as follows:

I'M
STILL SCARED
ABOUT TRICHINOSIS
by SABRINA CHOU

NSFW/SVILOVA

I'M STILL SCARED ABOUT TRICHINOSIS

On my first visit to the Aby Warburg Institute Library in London years ago, I noted in one bookshelf that the section on *Monsters* and the section on *Earthquakes and Solar Eclipses* were right next to (or on top of) one another. Years later, watching *South Park* Season 22 Episode 6 “Time to Get Cereal,” the terrorization of the town by a monstrous creature, the ManBearPig, was somewhat of a revelation. The two occasions brought each other into relief, casting one another in reflective, reflexive light.

Spectral threats (ManBearPigs and other monsters) and unexplained phenomena (eclipses, earthquakes, natural disasters) intertwine themselves in our social imaginaries. Perhaps this could help account for Warburg’s organizational logic in placing *Monsters* next to *Earthquakes*. Early accounts of earthquakes and solar eclipses could not have been too far off from descriptions of the mysterious horrors of monstrous figures. Even now, the effects of major earthquakes—barely predictable, unavoidable, and uncontrollable—could be commensurate with the terror, havoc, destruction, and loss that an imagined monster might wreak upon a people. How do social imaginaries form—how are beliefs constructed—between our felt experiences and imagined threats?



ABY WARBURG LIBRARY

Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg
(Warburg Library of Cultural Studies), Hamburg, architect
Gerhard Langmaack, from <http://www.warburg-haus.de>

In South Park, the intertwining of spectral threats and unexplained phenomena is collapsed in the figure of ManBearPig, which Al Gore has previously tried to warn South Park Elementary's students about (in South Park Season 10 Episode 6: "ManBearPig"). ManBearPig acts as an allegory for climate change, whose stark realities are willfully ignored by most of the townspeople at first. Even while their neighbors—or even others dining at the same restaurant—are violently killed and half-consumed by ManBearPig in plain sight, these ManBearPig-deniers continue to reject the reality, existence, and threat of ManBearPig, often until it's too late for themselves. ManBearPig ruthlessly carves a bloody path of carnage through the town. Remembering that Al Gore warned of the threat of ManBearPig more than ten years ago (likely a reference to the real Al Gore's 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*), the protagonists of the show, Stan, Kyle, Cartman, and Kenny, seek his help.

What else but a bizarre and horrific monster could play the part of climate change—a bizarre and horrific phenomenon? One thing to note is that climate change is—by most accounts—an explainable phenomenon which, I suppose, earthquakes and solar eclipses are now, too. The causes of climate change are agreed upon by most scientists. Yet the effects of climate change, while modeled and predicted according to various studies and projections, are incomprehensibly destructive and worlds-ending. (Here, I pause to wonder if a single figure is a sufficient allegory for something like climate change [which indeed could be better named climates-changing], which has been occurring at different time scales; which has already been present for many peoples, creatures, and places whose worlds have already ended time and time again; which affects different people differently; and which, one could say, gains a mass audience only once it starts to affect certain people.) How do spectral threats and phenomena that are larger than us—larger than life—come together in a social imaginary? What outlet

do monsters and other collectively produced imaginary creatures provide, as we navigate between perceived and actual threats, whether produced within a group or precipitated by forces out of our control? What are the stories we tell ourselves to deal with inexplicable, unfathomable loss and grief?



SOUTH PARK

"ManBearPig" Season 10 Episode 6
and "Time to Get Cereal," Season 22 Episode 6.
South Park, Comedy Central, 7 November 2018.

Another example of the collapse of spectral figures and unknown phenomena is the witch hunting that swept across Europe and the territories and peoples it colonized between the 15th and 17th centuries, as is well documented and analyzed by Silvia Federici. In this case, the loss of population due to famine and plague was coupled with collective paranoia and fear, as incipient nation-states sought to increase their control over and supply of labor power. This manifested in the collective and violent demonizing, torturing, and killing of women over more than two centuries. The spectral figure of the witch—who would give the evil eye, make deals with the devil, kill children, and cause livestock to die or fields to wither; who would enchant men and render them impotent or steal their penises and hide them in trees—was scapegoated to explain what may have been lost or taken, to allay paranoias and fears. This socially manifested imaginary also served the purpose of helping to put women's bodies, their labor, and their reproduction under the control of state power. Here, the monstrous was instrumentalized through the space of the imaginary and violently imposed onto a specific population. The abstract spectral figure was inscribed into the bodies of countless women.

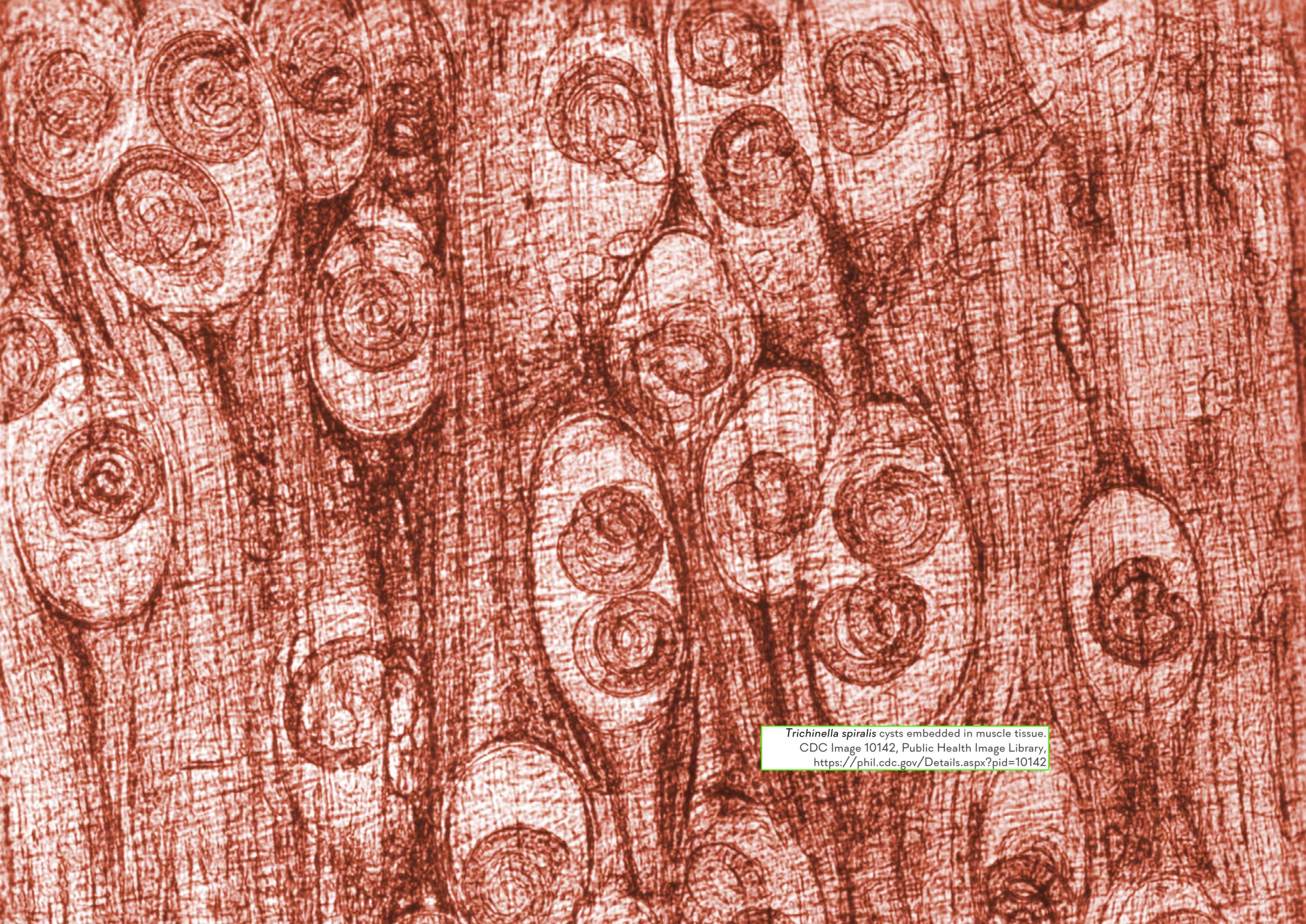


A WITCH SUMMONING DEVILS

R. B. [or S.], 1632?-1725?. 1688.

Artstor, library.artstor.org/asset/SS35197_35197_19457173.

What happens, then, when spectral threats become embodied in others around us, or even in our own bodies? I, for one, am still scared about trichinosis. Trichinosis is a disease caused by the consumption of parasitic roundworm larvae via undercooked meat such as pork or wild game (both omnivores and carnivores). The worms burrow into the body and consume muscles, flesh, and other tissues. There were periods of time (perhaps the 1980s and 1990s) prior to changes in regulations for industrial meat production when there were more prevalent occurrences of trichinosis infections, but by now it's pretty rare. A friend once recounted to me a history of the trichinosis awareness campaign in the USA, which was apparently a propaganda effort led by the beef industry to decrease pork sales in the mid-20th century, so perhaps the fears were overrated. Presently, trichinosis is mostly not a problem, especially if measures are taken to cook meat to a high enough temperature, equipment is properly cleaned, etc. (Of course, avoiding the consumption of meat altogether would also be a solution, one which I won't entertain for the moment for the purposes of entertaining this current thought process.) Yet still, for some (myself included, in my most paranoid flights of fancy), the specter remains. I'm still scared about trichinosis, but I'll eat the sausage just the same. Perhaps a real microscopic monster, and one that—unbeknownst to you—can burrow deep into your flesh with very debilitating effects, maximally magnifies a potential threat beyond the space of the imaginary, precisely because the threat is coming from within. And besides, what (to many of us) could be more speculative than the inner workings of our own bodies?



Trichinella spiralis cysts embedded in muscle tissue.
CDC Image 10142, Public Health Image Library,
<https://phil.cdc.gov/Details.aspx?pid=10142>

Aby Warburg's library, ManBearPig, witch hunts, my undying fear of trichinosis. I don't present these things as equivalent, but placing them next to each other does illuminate how imagined, spectral threats and unexplained phenomena express themselves in a social body: denial of a crisis that's already affecting others until it's too late; scapegoating or sacrificing populations (often xenophobically) as representatives of a catastrophe; the strengthening of control over populations by nation-states; deliberating on what industrialized or traditional practices of production and consumption to hold accountable in the face of a public crisis. These social symptoms continue to circulate around us. I'm writing this now in the spring of 2020, during what I hope is the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. As demonstrated by the current state-mandated restrictions on movement and gathering where I am and elsewhere, the real threat of loss of life from this as yet unknown virus is overwhelming. The restriction on movement has created, in my mind, a state of disembodiment. These regulations deny people the ability to move freely, divesting us from our bodily activities and removing our bodies from sociality. These current circumstances are at odds with embodied life. This is not only because of the loss of life of those who are getting infected, or the threat against the lives of healthcare and other essential workers who lack proper equipment or safe working conditions, but also because of the loss of livelihood for those who are unable to work now; those who are unable to pay rent, support families, and buy food; those who are denied citizenship, housing, healthcare, and other basic rights. The threat of the spectral monster—in this case a fast-spreading virus that specifically targets the respiratory system—has been distributed widely. It has become embodied by large populations of humans who have become ill, who may or may not be infected, or carriers, or who were previously infected and are now immune. (The last of these we may never know, if many cases are so mild that they remain undetected, because of the limitations on or lack of testing in so many places.)

What we are now collectively embodying is suspended between the spectral and the real. What we do know

is daily updated, quantified, reported, and analyzed. And while there's much we don't know about what's happening, what's even less certain is what the future holds (though many who think in public have already begun to expound). Against our own volitions we embody this suspended state, the spectral collapsed into the real, both the imagined monster that could be within and the known and unknown realities outside and ahead. Now made public and no longer self-contained, what happens when our bodies become the figures that manifest our fears and paranoias, the spectral and the unexplained?

Perhaps it is only appropriate. Monsters were half-human, half-creature in early accounts (according to the *OED*), and a combination of man, bear, and pig as per more recent sources. Monsters—and spectral fears—are matters of belief, and moreover, they are subjects of human creation. We've always played a part in monsters. Now we must confront ourselves as the pathogens of our own monstrosity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sabrina Chou is an artist from Los Angeles, US. Her work addresses apparatuses and infrastructures that support, enable, or demand the circulation of desire through a dismembered social body, amongst other things.

NSFW