“Krampusses are very very very wild. And Krampusses are very beautiful,” an eight-year old pupil from Dorfgastein in Austria wrote in her school essay on St. Nicholas’ Day 2011. She is not alone in her ambiguous attraction. Confronted with the Krampus, hardly anyone remains indifferent. Tourists produce their cameras, children run after them to provoke them or hide on the attic full of panic. At the bar of a pub in Dorfgastein, old locals shake their heads with concern and complain about the deterioration of the “good old ways.”

Krampus events in Austria have seen a tremendous increase since the turn of the millennium. In 2014, in the valley of Gastein alone, there were 97 “Passen” (Krampus groups) – the valley has around 13 000 inhabitants. There, these troupes comprise of Saint Nicholas, the ‘basket carrier,’ his helper carrying a large basket filled with small bags of sweets to be left in people’s homes, sometimes one or two Angels, young women dressed in white, and four to eight Krampus. Only on 5th and 6th December, they walk from house to house to reward the good children and punish the naughty ones. In many other regions, this is not the case. There, the Krampus season stretches from early November until Christmas and many of these groups do just fine without the figure of Saint Nicholas.

Organised Krampus runs, professionally moderated by experts of folklore, are the highlights of advent tourism in the old town of Salzburg. There, the groups are hand selected: “according to custom,” providing spectacular performances and in compliance with all safety regulations. In stark difference to these tame performances are the Krampus events in the “combat zones” of the outlying districts, the suburbs and villages. Security wise, those are very differently managed. Sometimes, Krampusses and onlookers are separated by extensive crowd barriers and large contingents of security personnel, sometimes there are only lose ropes – or no barriers at all. In the yearly parade in St. Johann 80 troupes with 1000 Krampusses move through a clearly demarcated space. Thousands of spectators fight for the spots in the first row to witness the morbid vitality. The troupes are much more diverse than at the tourist events, also their masks and accessories. More immediate, aggressive and emotional, less cameras, more action and much more pheromones and adrenaline.

Another category is the so-called Krampuskränzchen, events that are confined to one specific location and mostly organised by one single Krampus troupe. In the valley of Gastein, they are not much more than a gathering of locals at a pub or the emptied garage of the volunteer fire brigade. Here people meet to chat until out of a sudden the Krampusses enter the scene and rage havoc, leaving the place in a complete mess before retreating to prepare for the next attack. In the suburbs of Salzburg, on the other hand, these events have developed into highly professional shows with choreographed performances and pyrotechnics that attract hundreds of clubbers.

When we look at the literature, however, these massive changes have so far hardly been taken into account. The publications we know describe the Krampus as a custom with a centuries-long tradition, originally confined to remote mountain valleys and supposed to cast out winter and its evil spirits. Under the influence of tourism and media, so the argument goes, this original custom got out of hand
and has become a meaningless public entertainment. We believe that this explanation hides more than it reveals. In the Austrian media, on the other hand, the Krampus is connected to sexualised violence, alcoholism, atavism, rural backwardness, low levels of education, and right-wing nationalism. But just looking at the scale and diversity of the Krampus shows that both of these analyses fall short of the phenomenon.

The aim of our work, then, is to make sense of the Krampus as a multi-layered youth culture that navigates between appropriation and boundary-making in respect to the custom and its custodians. For this, we engage with the people who become Krampus every year to show how contradictory their interpretations can be. After five years and three fieldwork periods in Salzburg and Tyrol we are convinced that the Krampus offers a unique window to think through contemporary social and political configurations in alpine Austria and beyond.

Before we extend on this, we want to briefly go through the history of the phenomenon. We do this also because working on the Krampus inevitably means to find a position in regards to his origins. For many active Krampusses it is very important to stress that their custom is centuries-old. Often they use words like pagan, pre-Christian, Germanic or Celtic. In extensive work Hans Schuhladen did not find any pre-modern sources. His oldest document is from 1582, from the Bavarian town of Dießen, in which the participants of “a hunt on the Percht” received a monetary remuneration without giving any further details. In the 17th century the reports from Bavaria, Tyrol and Salzburg pile up. All of the source until the early 19th century refer to these events with regards to Percht or Perchten, with Krampus entering the scene only later. Now, Percht is a word that is mostly thought in relation to the old deity Perchta, but the similarity between the two words is the only clear connection between a pre-Christian religious belief and the Krampus. So far, nobody has found a historical source linking the masked parades to any form of cultic or religious practice of the deity. Also, the numerous bans against the practice, first and foremost in the Archbishopric of Salzburg, were not intended to eradicate superstition or pagan traditions. These gatherings were banned because the authorities saw them as a threat against public order – young masked people roaming the streets at night, drinking, dancing and fighting. Even more troubling was the fact that girls and boys committed these shenanigans together. Until around 1800, there were many of these bans, but hardly any descriptions of the custom. Only with the advent of romanticism and its different attitude towards the peasantry and its culture, we find first reports.

Judging from these sources, we believe that the most convincing interpretation of the old Perchten runs is that they were carnival parades. With the simultaneous invention of tradition and folk studies in the second half of the 19th century we start finding detailed accounts of masked customs. This is also the time when ideas about pagan origins first appear. From everything we can say now, it was the folklorists who came up with these theories and convinced many of the active Krampusses that this must have been the case.
The Krampus's first foray into popular culture was strongly connected to the invention of a new technology: the post card. Introduced in Austria-Hungary in 1897, over the following decades millions of Krampus post cards were sent every year in the weeks before Christmas. The two major themes were children and sex. The Krampus is engaged in punishing mischievous children and at the same time, he radiates sexualised mischief. To this day we believe they remain central. This brings us back to the Krampus as a contemporary youth culture and the question: why the recent boom? First, we think this is not dissimilar to the Krampus craze at the last turn of the century. There are many similarities between 19th century postal service and the internet, as David Graeber has recently argued. More specifically, the post card of those days has a lot in common with social media in the last decade; both are forms that disrupted communication and profoundly changed the relation between private and public. But we believe there is more to the recent boom than a new technology. In a discussion a few weeks ago, a friend suggested the Krampus to be “almost like an empty signifier” to which I had to reply: “I think the opposite is true. To me the Krampus feels more like an extremely full signifier. It is so full of possible meanings. Actually, this is the only way I can make sense of it right now as to why people with vastly different aims feel they can express themselves through becoming Krampus.”

What do we mean by this? What we can say for certain is that the motivations of Krampusses are very diverse. One common theme through all the differences, however, is the impression that the Krampus gives our interlocutors a perception of embodied immediacy that they cannot experience in their daily life. Through the liminality of becoming Krampus they feel a precarity they can translate into a subject position that provides them with security in challenging times. Where this goes, again, is highly diverse: some see the Krampus as a guardian of traditional family values, some as a remedy against the perceived ills of social media, some as a way to experience the fantasy worlds of live action role play. Others instrumentalise the Krampus for their xenophobic agenda of opposing the immigration of Muslims in what they perceive as an attempt to destroy the culture of the occident.

What we see as the most intriguing thread, however, leads us back to the Krampus post cards and their two most important themes: sexuality and children. Where those two come together is in the production and performance of male subjectivity. To us, the main reason for the recent Krampus boom lies in the opportunity he gives to perform masculinity differently. Now, again, we do not suggest that we are dealing with a uniform masculinity here; on the contrary, these Krampus masculinities very greatly.

In many ways, becoming Krampus allows young men to escape the growing insecurity and precarity of male role models. As Krampus there is no contradiction between being a confident masculine predator who gropes every woman he encounters and being a responsible, grown up husband who raises his children through his benevolent monopoly of violence. Then there is of course the comfortable safety net of a group of likeminded men and the male bonding going on during the Krampus season. What’s
more, in the Gastein valley our research shows how the relations that active Krampusses have with their female family members change during Krampus season. Without their support, there would be no Krampus. They bake the cookies, run errands, keep the men fed and hydrated and pick them up after ten hours of running and drinking. Women as well as men see their involvement in the custom as a service to the community and hardly anyone questions the gendered division of labour. During those weeks, gender roles suddenly seem unambiguous with the women relegated to supporting roles like in the good old days.

Outside the Krampus, things are very different. A lack of qualified work and child care, combined with the better education of young women compared to their male class-mates, leads to a stronger out-migration of young women. Women are much more independent economically and leave their partners more easily than their mothers would have when things don’t work out. And even where the nuclear family still works, the increasing insecurity on the job market and the feminisation of labour inhibits young men to inhabit the masculinity they learned from their fathers.

What’s more, in places like the Gastein valley the Krampus provides a possibility that few adolescent men in Europe have: a rite de passage, albeit a rather strange one as this initiation goes on for years, moving in and out of liminality every autumn. They enter the custom with 16, as timid boys that have to prove themselves worthy of becoming Krampus under the watchful eye of the whole community. After two or three years, they reach their peak as aggressive and dreaded Krampusses. In their late twenties, most of them shift to the role of the benevolent Krampus. They are no longer that interested in chasing women and competing with members of other troupes in highly ritualised show fights, but focus their attention on the children they encounter in the houses they visit.

Then, they are finally ready to get married, stop becoming Krampus and instead become full-grown members of the community. That’s at least how things were in mid–20th century Gastein. Now, we see many Krampusses still active well into their late forties and early fifties which hints at yet another reason for the boom. Through the Krampus, older men can reconnect with the virility of their twenties and feel young again for a few days. This is but one example of how changed performances of gender influence people of all ages. We hope this has given a sense of why we insist on the ambiguity of the Krampus practice as the main reason for its strong appeal in recent years.