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Abstract: The goal of this article is to discuss the category "monster" and its intimate relationship with the pathologization and/or criminalization of certain people seen as "sexual deviants," especially transvestites, transsexuals, and intersexuals. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the questioning of medical authority, the politicization of social movements of transvestites and transsexuals and the battle for their depathologization, whither the twisting paths of sex or gender, the "paraphilias" and "perversions" with all the persistent stigmatization they receive? Will they come to be embraced as something potentially dangerous by the ever-widening culture of security?
Keywords: monster; object, transvestites, transsexuals, sexual science.

"It is the inhuman, what is beyond the human, that which is less than human, the limit that guarantees to the human its ostensible reality."
--Judith Butler 2005, p. 307.

"The human monster combines the impossible and the prohibited,"
--Michel Foucault, 1997, p. 61.

"The pseudo-hermaphrodite is entirely an object of curiosity and mockery, just as the sexual psychopath is [object] of disparagement and marginalization. The first is a monstrous being, a vaguely ludicrous phenomenon; the second is vicious and detestable."
--Carlos Lagos Garcia, 1925, p. 555.

Perhaps among the social groups that today most provoke repulsion, fear, hatred, and at the same time, curiosity, shock, and desire may be that of people who cross between (across) genders and/or sexes. Heir of an imaginary as old as it is persistent, mixing discourses from religion to criminology, from medicine to politics, the discourse of monstrosity, along with its conceptual imprecision, seems one of the organizing elements of the discussion. The goal of this article is therefore to discuss the category "monster" and its intimate relationship with the pathologization and/or criminalization of certain people seen as "sexual deviants," particularly transvestites, transsexuals, and intersexuals.

The Abject: Category, Beyond Categories, or Adjective?

In the last few years, in various scientific works on sexuality in the area of the human sciences, the term "abject" has been quite frequently used, especially in Brazil. Inspired by the North American philosopher Judith Butler, who, for her part, took the notion of the abject from the book *The Powers of Horror* from the Bulgarian-French psychoanalyst and

¹ Translator's note: this is only a translation of the text, not the footnotes or bibliography; for those, you will have to cross-reference the original. Citations are translated from the Portuguese regardless of the language of the original except for the 5 footnotes included here, which reference English-language originals or, for Foucault, a published English translation. Thanks to Dillon Vrana for gathering some of these.

philosopher Julia Kristeva, the word has been commonly employed as an adjective, synonym of something repulsive, repugnant, disgusting, vile, that inspires horror. In her writings, Butler uses the notion of the abject sparingly, but one can follow a constant line in her analyses: the abject is that which, in the constitution of the socially intelligible subject, is placed “outside” that subject, turning its outside constitutive.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), in her brief discussion of the abject, referring to Kristeva, Butler confirms:

The “abject” designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered “Other.” This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion. The construction of the “not-me” as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject.²

In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), in a footnote, she explains:

Abjection (in Latin, *ab-jicere*) literally means to cast off, away, or out and, hence, presupposes and produces a domain of agency from which it is differentiated...Whereas the psychoanalytic notion of *Verwerfung*, translated as “foreclosure,” produces sociality through a repudiation of a primary signifier which produces an unconscious or, in Lacan’s theory, the register of the real, the notion of *abjection* designates a degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality... I want to propose that certain abject zones within sociality also deliver this threat, constituting zones of uninhabitability which a subject fantasizes as threatening its own integrity with the prospect of a psychoanalytic dissolution.³

Without entering into the psychoanalytic discussion, we can confirm that the abject is the unintelligible, that which, in the constitution of the subject (individual or social), is expelled as something uncategorizable. The abject is that which is outside of the categories of intelligible social thought. In that sense, within the limits of this article, the abject is a category of language that denominates the lack of categories of thought, that is, that which remains outside, expelled from the socially-created categories of thought, established and culturally intelligible in a given historical period.

Still following Butler, in the reflections on sex, gender, and sexuality, abject subjects, that is, those who don’t fit in known categories, do not follow that which the author calls “intelligible genres” which “in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire.”⁴ So “intelligible genres,” which function predominantly even today, organize themselves according to the logic of “if penis, then man, masculine, and must feel affective-sexual attraction for women (is heterosexual)” and “if vagina, then woman, feminine and must feel affective-sexual attraction for men.” In this field, homosexuals and bisexuals as much as intersexuals, transvestites, transsexuals and all those who challenge that supposed continuity can be considered abject.

I think that to consider these people abject is only possible when the term “abject,” as stated earlier, is used as a synonym of despicable, repulsive, vile, horrible, incomprehensible. Maybe the violent and humiliating way, with overtones of disgust, mockery and fear, that such people are still treated everyday, reveal that these people are not beyond or outside of known categories of social intelligibility. Maybe they are in another specific category of

² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 169.

³ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 186.

⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 23.

intelligibility. A category organized since at least Classical Antiquity and that legitimates the way they are perceived and treated socially: these people are in the category “monsters.”

Monster as a Category of Intelligibility

According to various authors who consider the issue, the “monster” is the quintessential hyperbolic mark of something out of order, whether it is “natural,” “supernatural,” or, at the least, outside known systems. It suggests “another order” of the real, or, in many cases, a signal, a message sent by the magical world to warn of possible “deviations.” Monstrosity is consistently understood as a transgression of established laws, aiming, through its presence, to inspire dread and doubt or to punish infractions.

The term “monster” seems not to have a very clear origin. For Rosemary Garland Thompson, the word comes from the Latin *monstra* and means “to show, to present.” Jeffrey J. Cohen agrees that monster derives from the Latin *monstrum*, meaning “that which reveals or warns.” Also locating an origin in Latin, Claude Kappler explains that the essence of the word is in the root *men*, which means mental movement. From that point come families of terms such as *monere*, meaning divine warning, which with time generated first *monistrum* and then *monstrum* and *monstrare*. José Gil concluded that monster comes from the the word *monstrare*, which contained the idea of “teaching a behavior, prescribing the road to follow.”

The monster, then, is that which “shows” [*mostra*] something: a divine revelation, the wrath of God, the infinite and mysterious possibilities of nature, that which man could come to be, the borders between human and inhuman. It is, nonetheless, the manifestation of something out of the ordinary, unexpected. Most importantly, the monster represents a category of thought, an intelligible attempt to classify and orient behaviors in relation to those beings and people who at first escape the cultural intelligibility of the period.

According to Kappler, in his important book on the topic, monsters live at the limits: at the limit of knowledge, of the human, of the socially recognizable and known parts of the world (islands, deep seas, foreign countries, exotic regions, “peripheries” and “favelas” [margins and slums]). But perhaps the most important is that the monster lives at the limit of categories: human, animal, vegetable, mineral, angel, demon, man, woman, homo, hetero, bisexual, known, unknown. Monstrosity is the infinite and possible mixture, union, and/or erasure across sociocultural categories.

This is why the monster is not the abject: “monster” is a category that functions at the limits of categories, at the extremes between categories—even, perhaps, between categorization and noncategorization. Even so, it is a category of social recognition; it is socially intelligible. Violence, sarcasm, disgust, fear and disqualification are not simple reactions to the unknown or to the dismay at losing an assumed stability or psychological/individual or social/collective order; these attitudes, operating through the category of the monster, are culturally and historically legitimated for relating to those who are not comprehensible as human (in the worst cases) or are comprehensible as subhuman or nearly-human (in the best cases).

According to Butler, “[t]he naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm.”⁵ It may be for precisely this reason that the notion of a

⁵ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. x.

place, of a particular *locus* where the monster lives is fundamental: the category “monster” is the region that gives form and limit to the human, being its constitutive opposite, but in which the notion of humanity does not operate with the same force or with the same assumptions, or rather, the rules that apply (and are reinforced) for the world of humans are not seen as valid for the universe of monsters.

Historicizing the concept of the monster, we realize that it is not simply terror that the monstrous figure provokes. It is also fascination, enchantment, doubt, curiosity, and desire: “the monster is transgressive, too sexual, perversely erotic, a law-breaker.”⁶ In that sense, perhaps the monster has too much of what the abject lacks: fascination with breaking known rules, delight in transgression, attraction to the nearly unknown, curiosity about intelligibility.

That is why, from Antiquity to at least the sixteenth century, monsters in the West were also classified among the “miracles” or “wonders” of the world, and could evoke fear as much as sympathy and laughter through their exaggerated, startling or ridiculous forms. Still for Claude Kappler, it is thanks to the “malignancy” found in many of the fantastic beings imported from the East, principally from China beginning in the eighteenth century, that a fundamental shift in the notion of the monster took place. Christianity already had a tendency to associate deformities with the ugliness (hideousness) of the devil. But if up to that period it was seen as leaning more towards the ridiculous than the malign, after that period began a subtle but constant and powerful idea that “miracles” were not as ambiguous and funny as supposed, but essentially evil and dangerous. Beginning with the early Middle Ages, with the association of the concept of the monster with the figure of the devil, and the former comes to be understood merely as the incarnation of something destructive by nature, losing any other aspect beyond that of hate for humankind. After this period, with the domination of Christian ideology in Europe, the strangeness of the “bizarre” is replaced in large part by the fear of evil.

It is this historically-specific fear that justifies the socially recognizable way of dealing with the monster: on the one hand, hatred and violence, and on the other, neglect, humiliation, and ridicule. We may know no other way of facing the threat that noncategorization (the abject) represents. But our culture created a special way to deal with people who fit in the category of the monstrous: the only socially intelligible way to act or react to people equated with Evil and chaos is literally or symbolically to destroy or annihilate them. The monster is not only a domestication of the abject, but its organization as a specific category that legitimates not only attraction but destruction or the punishment of the subject upon whom this attraction devolves.

Now, perhaps even older than the association of the monstrous with evil is that with the erotic-sexual universe: “The monster embodies those sexual practices that should not be performed or that must be performed only through the body of the monster.” But if that relationship dates to Antiquity, it is only in the nineteenth century, with the rise of sexual science, that it will turn pathological, through rational scientific discourse and universal pretension.

It is not by chance that the association between monstrosity, sexualities and unintelligible sexes and genders (called perverse, perverted, deviant or abnormal) is a

⁶ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 16.

constant in medical and legal writing on the subject, particularly from the second half of the nineteenth century to the end of the first half of the twentieth.

Krafft-Ebing's classical work, *Psychopatia Sexualis*, can be seen as the greatest compendium of monsters—"sexual monsters," in this case, a term the author actually uses—ever written in our history. Inaugurating a new taxonomy, this psychiatrist's work is also a continuation of the western tradition of classifying wonders, monsters, and "aberrations" among those beings that "violate" a given order: divine, natural, biopsychological, or social.

According to the doctor and sociologist Georges Lanteri-Laura, in his *Reading of Perversions*, psychiatry in this period divided "sexual deviants" into two categories, "good" and "bad." Among the former are people respected for their goods, intellectual capacity or social status [*literally: a socially recognized last name*—trans]. They are the objects of compassion, understood as unfortunate people on whom a tragic destiny has fallen with problems often seen as biological and congenital. For such individuals, all the medical and juridical efforts are offered hoping to cure them or free them from their prisons. The rehabilitation centers, spas, and bathhouses relied on this public. They are the *perverse*, people understood as sick.

Now the latter group, without wealth, considered cunning but not intelligent, and whose image is almost synonymous with marginality, are faced with severity, fear and disdain. Science considers them closer to vice than to sickness, and the infractions they commit declare their guilt in advance, for they accumulate "deviances" through their so-called "undisciplined" life or carry in the flesh the stigmas of hereditary degeneration, the legacy of parents also involved in "excesses" of every sort. For them, the asylum, the prison, and psychiatric forensics. They are the *perverted*, understood above all as criminals.

Thus perversion delineates itself as a sickness and a perversity, like a vice or crime. Lanteri-Laura argues that medicine and the nascent sciences of the mind saw these "perverse" or "perverted" sometimes as ridiculous, sometimes as monstrous. What is important to underline in this case is that again a play of opposites is evoked, dividing its objects into victims (sick) and evildoers (criminals). According to this author:

This is how, ultimately, the separation between good and bad perversions emerged, and how legal psychiatry appeared, without much respect for humanity, as a kind of medical final judgment, where on the left the scapegoats were readied, and on the right, the lambs. The bad perverts were shown as monsters [...] while the good perverts were shown as tormented, unhappy, misunderstood, full of doubt beforehand and petrified with remorse thereafter, living in anguish and melancholy, disgusted with themselves and very far from pleasure [...]. Thus was a field of perversions structured in which medicine denounced the social danger posed by some, and for others, hoped to be more comprehensive than justice: only the specialist believed himself to possess the knowledge that would permit him to make the right distinctions.

The figure of the monster, upon internalization, would be one of the social bases on which the sciences of the mind would construct the figure of the abnormal, the perverse and the perverted, so that, as Foucault wrote, "the abnormal [...] is essentially an everyday monster, a monster that has become commonplace. For a long time the abnormal individual will be something like a pale monster."

Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, we find the explicit association between monsters and "sexual deviants," for example as much in nascent psychoanalysis as

among medical surgeons. In his lecture on “The Sexual Life of Human Beings” (1917), Freud made clear the separation between “normal” humans and “pathological” monsters:

Now, however, we come to a long series of abnormal people whose sexual activities diverge more and more from that which seems desirable for a rational person. In their multiplicity and strangeness, they can only be compared to grotesque monsters [...]. We can, in the most visible details as in the subtlest, determine the points at which these abnormalities are based in that which is normal and the points at which they diverge from normalcy. And you will notice that here, once again, that which involves sexual activity has this characteristic of impropriety, which here, for the most part, intensifies until it is abominable.

The Argentine surgeon Carlos Lagos Garcia, describing cases of intersexuality, maintained in 1925 that:

The crime of breaking the laws of sexual morphology imposed upon the great majority of humankind, like any infraction, is subject to graduations [...] they can be those sins that run from the simplest and barely-perceptible anomaly to the most complex and insistent monstrosity.

Withing the emerging science of sexuality, all those who do not fit the pattern of a monogamous, heterosexual sex life with reproductive intentions were seen as potentially monstrous. An explicit example of this concept were those people who confused, mixed or travelled between sexes or genders, direct descendants of the West’s quintessential sexual monster: the hermaphrodite.

Questioning and subverting the established limits between man and woman, masculine and feminine, homo and heterosexuality, the clinical figure of the pseudo-hermaphrodite emerged in the nineteenth century, far from the gods and from the magical-divine universe; child of modernity, medicine, and the science of sexuality. No longer a natural wonder but a departure from nature. Now comes the attempt to find the “true sex” that will define who is a man and who is a woman, without the “dangerous” risks of mistaken interpretations. In this way, sexual ambiguity doesn’t lose its place, but it is mostly internalized. Thus the “psychic hermaphrodite” is born. From this figure will emerge all the sexually perverse and perverted and, centrally, the identities (for some) and/or pathologies (for others) created in the twentieth century, of transvestites, transsexuals and intersexuals, that is to say, all these categories emerged from the conception of a certain type of monster. And what is important is not the search for the “true” origin nor the legitimacy of the parentage, but to see how much the idea of a presupposed danger (and of a legitimate violent reaction against this danger) is constitutive of the scientific categories themselves.

It is not by chance that this new sexual monster, the scientific pseudo-hermaphrodite, echoing its ancestor, the mythico-religious hermaphrodite, would be intimately imbricated in the development of the science of sexuality, configuring it from the beginning as a pendulum that understood unintelligible sexes and genders sometimes as a crime, sometimes as a sickness. According to Foucault, in analyzing the monstrous figure of the Middle Ages:

What makes the human monster a monster is not only the exceptional in relation to the human form. It is the disturbance it brings to judicial norms (whether they have to do with laws of marriage, canons of baptism, or rules of succession).

This intimate association between monstrosity, sickness and crime, as we have seen, is very old and constitutive of the notion of sexual “deviance,” as, citing Foucault again,

“while before, ‘monstrosity carried within itself an indication of criminality,’ now there is ‘a logic of monstrosity suspected at the base of criminality.’” Now, this relation does not disappear, but is restructured by the scientific bias of psychobiomedicine, as proven by the above-cited Lagos García, in his *Deformities of Human Sexuality*:

Human sexual deformations produce true exceptions that do not fit within the rules of sexual morphology [...] just as common delinquents are struggling, through their actions, with the laws established by society, so too do the sexually somatically deformed clash, through their bodies, with the laws of sexual order.

Thus do we perceive how the intelligibility developed by sexual science as formed on top of the binaries health/sickness, law/crime, often constituting itself on the very field of intersections between these extremes. It was not by chance that in most of the West since the nineteenth century, social and political struggles for the decriminalization of some of the sexualities seen as deviant, despite legal victories, reinforced the pathologization (direct or indirect) of these same sexualities. This was the case with homosexuality which shifted from a crime in the nineteenth century to a sickness in the first half of the twentieth, and after this period, when it was no longer officially recognized as crime or sickness, was pulverized and reshaped in a series of new “twists” such as egodystonic [*self-conflictual*—trans] homosexuality and the nuisance of gender identity itself, leaving its social intelligibility still precarious and incompletely free of stigma.

Because they were considered perverse, twisted, psychotic or carriers of disturbances and anomalies, the full humanity of transvestites, transsexuals, and intersexuals was called into question, since all these categories presupposed a “deviance” [deviation] from the something healthy and “normal” – the human – leaving the category of the monster for their habitable and intelligible environment. In addition, the very pathologization of sexes and genders can be understood as a “humane” form of punishment for some sort of criminal transgression. What causes the aggressive reaction with which these people are treated is not the fact of their presenting themselves as “real woman,” “man dressed as woman” or anything of the sort, but the fact of already being understood within a (scientific, religious or legal) category of deviance, of “monstrosity” which legitimizes and authorizes violence against them.

Now, the search for social recognition of “deviants,” in the particular case of this article, of transvestites, transsexuals and intersexuals, actually goes on to create a new field of intelligibility for those who escape the crime/sickness stigma. Beyond winning civil rights through public policies, the struggle for these people is to escape the category of monsters and achieve a full and legitimate occupation of the category “human.” And for this, the depathologization of transvestitism, transexuality, intersexuality, and further possibilities of crossings between sexes and genders, is fundamental.

What Lies Beyond Crime, Sickness, and/or “Normalcy”—Where Shall We Go?

Yet if, as we saw, the logic that structures understandings of “deviants” in the science of sexuality operates on the sickness/crime binary, then what happens when we delink it from sickness? That is, if “transgender” identities are no longer officially considered twisted, perverted or abnormal, to what field of intelligibility will they migrate? Back to crime?

As Gilles Deleuze has demonstrated, we live in a control society. It no longer functions only through the logic of discipline, which presupposes the criminalization of some

and their incarceration by others. In the control society, we obey the logic of security: we are all potential criminals and the labor of social vigilance is demanded from everyone, ranging from the anonymous denunciation of crimes to personal and “free” digital social network surveillance, calling this “citizenship.” Fear becomes the central key of political legitimacy and the security industry becomes the fastest-growing market and capital support: economic, social and symbolic. On either side of the cell, we are all expected to become prisoners.

I do not believe that a legal regression to the criminalization of sexual acts or identities currently seen as unthreatening could occur – though rising religious fundamentalism shows that this is not impossible – but the question is, if these people are categorized in the field of sexual monsters, and these are only intelligible as either criminals or sick, how can we turn them intelligible within these limits? How can we escape from this pendular movement? Could it be that the inclusion of these people in the logic of medical insurance in the control society, turning them, for example, into “preventive agents,” could move them from the category of monster to that of human, or would that merely reinforce their stigmatization through the intimate symbolic relationship, again, with sickness?

Certainly social rights are critical to this shift, as is depathologization. Yet I believe that first of all we must not only pull some beings out of the category of the monstrous and allocate them to the field of the human. We must also rethink the limits of the very category “human,” thus revising what remains its uncategorizable outside (the abject) and developing a new position in relation to that which we classify as monstrous. Not only to do away with the category “monster” (for this would be the equivalent, on the conceptual level, of the total extermination of all monsters) but to withdraw the logic of legitimate violence and aggression within that category. Our fear and hatred of monsters was historically created. In the same way, it can be reversed.

At a moment when universities, businesses and hospitals are firing professors, employees and doctors, and hiring security firms that not only surveil and control property and institutions but also, at the extreme, in its symbolic sense, watch over categories of thought, managing the maintenance of social fear and insecurity—at this moment, how can we disrupt monstrosity from crime or sickness? Or rather, where can “trans” identities go?

References

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