

“Inside(s) Out: The Uses of Monstrosity”

Ada Rosen

There was a shelf in my college’s library, tucked away on the very bottom floor, that housed twenty to twenty-five titles grouped together under the topic “transgender.” In contrast to the theoretical and scholarly books on every other shelf, these “transgender” texts turned out to be nothing more than didactic guidebooks for the tolerant cissexual.

Here’s the essential vocabulary you need to be a good ally! Don’t forget to put your pronouns in your email signature!

Susan Stryker claims that “transgender studies’ most critical task” is to “disrupt ... denaturalize ... rearticulate ... and make visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between [gender and] the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body” (Stryker 2006, 3). What I found in these texts was an attempt to *renaturalize* rather than denaturalize—to write trans bodies into the normative structuring of sex and gender. Even at their best, these books aspire only to evoke sympathy through the deployment of the “wrong body” trope that has already been so thoroughly critiqued by theorists such as Gayle Salamon, Sandy Stone, and Judith Butler, to name a few.

As what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen terms a “harbinger of category crisis” (1996, 6), the transgender body becomes a monstrous body, a threat to be dealt with immediately. In attempting to render transness non-threatening, the books I found at the library are but a part of a much larger project. As I argue in my piece, transgender representation in the American mainstream functions as a form of threat negation, operating through either abjection or absorption. Looking broadly at the scope of said representation, one might be inclined to think that things have changed for the better—that the popular shift from abjection to absorption must signal a similar shift in attitude, from disgust to acceptance. To this point I have several things to say: first, to believe that progress is linear—that all things get better with time—is to ignore the continued and heightened violence, both physical and legislative, faced by trans people every day. Second, to desire acceptance into the current social order is to strip transsexuality of its transformative potential, for it is through exclusion

that the outcast is given a different perspective. Sara Ahmed writes of not being accommodated as the experience of being hammered, of having one's existence chipped away at. Those who experience hammering, she tells us, are given a hammer of their own with which they can begin to demolish the very structures they find themselves excluded from.

Attending now more directly to the intersection(s) of monstrosity and queerness—the monster is similarly constructed through exclusion. As Jack Halberstam writes, “monsters are defined both as other than the imagined community and as the being that cannot be imagined as community” (Halberstam 1995, 2). Monsters have long served as a way of “policing” the border between the known and the unknown (Cohen 1996, 12), the acceptable and the unacceptable. Etymologically, the English *monster* is thought to be descended from the Latin *monstrare*—to demonstrate—and *monere*—to warn. There is thus a pedagogy of monstrosity; the monster is that which demonstrates wrongness, impressing upon us an understanding of the human subject and its limits. The title of my project, *Inside(s) Out*, is a reference to the binary opposition of insides and outsides, external and internal, upon which the signification of both horror and gender often rely.

The closing section of my video functions as a love letter to some of the films that have inspired me in my own bodily revolts. Although my decision to close with a montage is rather non-traditional within the practice of videographic criticism, I was attempting to heed Sandy Stone's (2022) words and find a new position from which discourse is possible. If we want to enact change beyond the individual we must reject what Stone calls the “Derridean imperative” that reads: “Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres” (quoted in Stone 2022, 16). The monstrous embodiments found in works of body horror serve as my primary object of fascination due to their slippery and hybrid nature(s), neither cleanly human nor monster. “Am I becoming a 185-pound fly?” a mutating Seth Brundle asks in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986). “No. I'm becoming something that never existed before. I'm becoming Brundlefly.” A mixing of genres, a commitment to dissonance and illegibility, to becoming something new—that is what inspires me.

Click [***](#) to view the video essay.

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