

The Hermaphrodite as a Monster: the photographic Genesis of the scientific Discourse on Intersexuality since the 19th Century

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In this paper, I investigate knowledge practices in the context of photographic representation of intersexes in the scientific field since 1860. Pictures of intersexes are in various ways central artifacts of knowing, expressing a wide range of knowledge forms on gendered bodies. Such visual representations are thus multi-disciplinary and trans-epistemic. By understanding photographic images of intersexes as trans-epistemic objects I draw attention to the ways in which they are crucial to knowledge practice in defining not only trans-gendered categories of individuals, but also the key principle of sexual dimorphism in the scientific realm and for a wider public. I postulate that hermaphrodite photographic representations play a seminal role, in the past as today, in shaping not only “gender norms” but also other cultural widespread assumptions. They show selected body parts through a ritualised performance that reiterates the “institutional concern” with a “gender order”, from which follows social exclusion as well as societal and individual self-hatred. The intersexual body exemplifies at best the standard process through which the “abject” is produced constructing exceptional bodies - in brief, monsters. The confrontation with such imagery could nevertheless favour challenging modes of social tension. Above all, the pictographic conventions of hermaphrodite imagery work as epistemic tools of “scientific objectivity” but they can also be its rivals.

photography
intersexes
institutional concern
gender norms
physical and mental images of the body

1. Introduction

My paper focuses on images of hermaphroditism, which in 1916 was termed “intersexuality” by the Berlin biologist Richard Goldschmidt.¹ Since ancient times intersexed bodies were literally constructed as mythical monsters and have been seen as such in the medical discourse until today. The enduring influence of the mythical and religious literary imagery of hermaphroditism on scientific culture throughout history presupposes the hegemonic

“inhuman” or at least “monstrous” reading of intersexuality that is implemented by visual representations.

In this paper, I investigate knowledge practices in the context of visual, i.e. photographic representation of intersexes in the scientific field since 1860. The analysis will be centred on the socio-cultural tensions that are expressed by images of “hermaphroditism”. Pictures of intersexes are in various ways central artifacts of knowing, expressing a wide range of knowledge forms on gendered bodies. Such visual representations are thus multi-disciplinary and trans-epistemic. By understanding photographic images of intersexes as trans-epistemic objects I draw attention to the ways in which they are crucial to knowledge practice in defining not only trans-gendered categories of individuals, but also the key principle of sexual dimorphism in the scientific realm and for a wider public. The representations of hermaphroditism and intersexuality in circulation that have been studied are essentially malleable epistemic objects; they act as “boundary objects” and are defined by an ‘unfolding ontology’.² This became apparent in the many iterations and changing versions of images of gendered bodies observed in the course of the history of visual medical representation of intersex patients.³ The meaning of the hermaphrodite photographic imagery does not arise from an inherent connection with the represented but is informed by technological conditions and cultural context.⁴ Pictures of the “heteronormalized” hermaphroditic body show how body definitions in general are at the mercy of circumstances.⁵

Historical premises. Scientific discourse about hermaphroditism and early photographic representations of intersexual patients about 1860

2.1 The hermaphrodite within the medical discourse

In the years between 1860 and 1870 the occidental world found itself intensively pursuing the quest for “identity in the order of sexuality”. The “real” gender of hermaphrodites as the identification of different perversions, their classification, and their characterization, fascinated the medical and scientific circles. The aim of this search was to arrange and clarify the problem of individual and genus with respect to the system of sexual anomalies. Doctors at the time viewed all gender mixtures as a sort of “blind” from which the “true gender” had to be retrieved. On this basis, in this period, the first analysed cases of hermaphrodites were continuously referred to as “Pseudo-Hermaphrodites”.

2.2 Nadar's hermaphrodite as research starting point

As early as 1860 the French photographer Gaspard Félix Tournachon (1820-1910), working under the name of Nadar, took a series of nine photographs – which I take as the first examples of medical pictures of intersex patients – with the help of Dr. Jules-Germain Maisonneuve that depicted a young intersex patient. They show the genitals of a hermaphrodite, a person who had both a penis and a vagina, but they were not published at the time and little is known about the patient and the role of the physicians involved in this case. Dirk Schultheiss, Thomas R. W. Herrmann, and Udo Jonas have recently discussed the available information on these artworks that today belong to the photographic collection of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.⁶ The authors commented solely on the pioneering cooperation between a medical expert and a photographer and their impressive technical photographic quality.

At this time photography advanced the scientific quest to categorize experience, and specifically to categorize human beings, distinguishing male and female, sick and healthy, criminal and law-abiding, along with racially inferior and superior categories of humans.⁷ For this reason it is important to analyse how (particularly early) photography shapes scientific evidence about intersexes through the performance, or the ritualised repetition, of socio-cultural norms on gendered bodies. The socio-cultural convention of discretion determines the photographic representations of the intersex body.⁸ The pathologization of intersexes may be understood as a rhetorical and practical mechanism; all individual traits have consequently to be effaced in order to emphasize the deviant.⁹ Images of hermaphroditism become loci for cultural negotiations, conflicts and demands. They embody the ambiguity and the intrinsic tension of Western culture, mirroring the “static but unstable state” of gender and perpetuating colonial hierarchies of gender.

Pictures of intersexed bodies are “third spaces” to locate “hybridity”,¹⁰ since such bodies question the social institution of reproduction and its centrality to the sexing of the body. This most salient institution for thinking about gender turns out to be an “imposition of a norm, not a neutral description of biological constraints”.¹¹



(See: www.ltrr.org/files/images/articles/NadarExam.jpg)

3. Images of hermaphroditism within a visual economy

Images have lately received increasing attention in the experimental culture of science – as well as in the social sciences and humanities. An iconic or pictorial turn takes place in the scientific world. This implies the acknowledgement of a “new interdisciplinary science of the image”¹² as well as entailing a new understanding of the historicity of scientific knowledge. Focusing on scientific photography allows us to grasp how this technique of iconographic reproduction renders the interdependence between scientific and socio-cultural assumptions despite any alleged “faithful” depiction. In this sense, pictures are loci for tension between different registers of knowledge, between science and the humanities.

Particular attention should be paid to past and contemporary images of the intersexual body, images which were realised as “demonstrations” of a culturally conceived anomaly. As Alice Dreger points out, the term monster is indeed related to “demonstrate”, as “the monstrous is that which portends”. The intersex body is seen as transitory, not fully integrated in the fixed-gender dichotomy. There is still a need to explore the multifaceted interactions between medical images and cultural ideologies that have

brought about this situation. The intersex body unfolds the complexities involved in medical images and their making; it illuminates their uses and meanings both within and outside of medicine. The obsession to render the anomalies of the human body visible - just as nowadays with the proliferation of images of the body's interior in the popular media does - has since the 1860s affected our view of corporeality and our understanding of health and disease, of normality and deviance. The quality of the imaging apparatus has improved vastly over the last few decades. It is now possible to depict organs and tissues in amazing anatomical detail and in dynamic mode, but perhaps even more striking is that all kinds of functional processes in the body can be imaged and monitored. In addition, images are increasingly used in patient treatment, not only in planning operations, but also to guide surgical or radiological interventions intraoperatively. Imaging as a process implies in itself a kind of "intervention". The cultural history of hermaphroditism and the past as the recent medical interventions used to "correct" it, offer an account of the emergence of a "visual economy" realm without which the body is not even thinkable. Jonathan Beller defines the visual economy as the historical transformations of visual attention into a socially productive activity (sensual labor) realized by, and as shifts in, visual cultural technologies. In brief, the image during the twentieth century achieves an economic logic; today, it functions economically at a variety of levels including the extraction of biopower from spectators and the organization of their desire.¹³

Eventually hermaphrodites confronted scientists with a complex question: what is sex, really? The detailed illustrations accompanying studies on hermaphroditism released in the late 19th century expound the scientific and medical complicity with social norms of 'sex' and 'gender'. Moreover, they are significant elements in helping to understand how cultures enforce ideas about 'normal' bodily conditions and behaviours. Dreger shows how and why medical and scientific authorities constructed sex, gender, and sexuality as they did, and especially how the material conformation of hermaphroditic bodies - combined with social exigencies - forced uncanny solutions. This can help us to understand present-day conceptualizations of sex, gender, and sexuality, which are spawned by a visual economy. Beller limits his analysis of the visual economy to the twentieth century, although Nadia Guidotto argues that it reaches back much further than that. After scrutinizing "medical" photographs of intersexuals as well as several drawings representing hermaphrodites (in earlier images), it becomes clear that "images are more than just one-dimensional, objective sources of data".¹⁴ In lieu, the intersex body is changed into merchandise, "trafficked" in medical texts "in the name of modern notions of progress, truth, finding a cure, etc".¹⁵ Such a body is exchanged through the visual economy, the economy that transfers biopower - the power invested in life itself - from the subjects into

the image. Sited in the image, biopower is utilised to construct “the subjectivity of the viewer as well as the viewed”.¹⁶ Beller rightly remarks that “we consume images in order to maintain ourselves as such”.¹⁷ Images are normative and organize desire by clearly discriminating life that has been configured as marginal. This life is defined as repulsive in its insubordination with respect to gender norms. Butler points out that trans-genders and intersexes “enter into a matrix of differential humanisation”: their lives don’t count as lives.¹⁸ It is possible to circumscribe the domain of recognisable humans, structured by racial and gendered norms. If the work of norms derealizes a life, then this life is in some sense lost. Following Butler, “under pervasively transphobic conditions what is repeatedly lost for transgendered people is a place, a you, a possibility of address”.¹⁹ According to Lacanian psychoanalysis sex is a norm, in addition Butler calls attention to how a norm actually materialises a body, emphasising the place of constraint in the very production of sex. Interestingly, norms cannot be internalised, in fact they constitute the subject and are at the same time internal and external. Gender is then not to be found inside or outside the hermaphroditic “bodily ego” immortalised by photographers, being gender rather “a problem of the boundary that is sometimes set and sometimes lost” between the inside and the outside.²⁰ Images of intersexuality bring into play the obsessive desire to render the anomalies of the human body visible, to disclose the interior of the body. They are sites of negotiation, similes that represent the external-internal dynamic through which the gendered boundaries of the body are set up.

Foucault pinpoints the relation between disciplinary control and - visually put on show - “organic” body:

“The disciplinary controls of activity belonged to a whole series of researches, theoretical or practical, into the natural machinery of bodies; but they began to discover in them specific processes; behaviour and its organized requirements gradually replaced the simple physics of movement. The body, required to be docile in its minutest operations, opposes and shows the conditions of functioning proper to an organism. Disciplinary power has as its correlative an individuality that is not only analytical and ‘cellular,’ but also natural and ‘organic’.”²¹

William Spanos (2000) criticises the ontological foundations of Western metaphysics which relies on a supervisory relationship and fixes the object of study under its gaze. This advantaged position of vision causes violence as it privileges the viewer and disqualifies the seen. Seeing is the first step to understanding, and comprehension allows for “domination.” Our language formation and thinking privilege vision, as Spanos notes we “see” what another means or “inspect a body of knowledge”.²² Similarly, Monique Sicard stresses the “exercise of the gaze” associated with scientific usages of

photography and cinema towards the end of the 19th century.²³ The scientific gaze creates a distance or even a distinction between the observing and the observed subject. According to Sicard, the production of a knowledge which is founded on the power of the gaze would automatically imply the exercise of the subject's right to know an object without consenting that the object lays the subject in the test. Sicard opens up a necessary reflection on the usage of mediation's dispositifs and the interpretation of images. In the turning point of the 19th century the fascination for images, typical of Jean-Martin Charcot's medical inquiry on Hysteria, has something of the positivist attachment to observable facts, materiality and didactic eagerness.²⁴

A significant example of positivist zeal for portraying the body is Guillaume-Benjamin-Armand Duchenne (Duchenne de Boulogne, 1806-1875). He had the ambition to bring together three of the most important developments of the nineteenth century: electricity, physiology and photography. Photography had been employed since 1852, when Duchenne, at first with the assistance of Adrien Tournachon (1825-1903) - the brother Nadar, who often worked together with him -, recorded his experimental faradisation of facial muscles with a camera. Duchenne's photographs were inserted in *Le Mécanisme de la physionomie humaine ou analyse électro-physiologique de l'expression des passions*, published in 1862. This book was integrated into the education of artists as a counteractive to earlier representations of emotions. Darwin included them in his publication on human and animal expressions. The Darwinian rigour is also to be found in Nadar's portrayal of the hermaphrodite, which is a unique experiment and the first photographic representation of an intersexual body. This picture presents analogies with Duchenne's medical photography. Clinical and criminological photography operate in the 19th century through a "gesture of detection", a peek through the keyhole revealing the "hidden" sex. These pictures are baffling since they show something that is "off-scene", obscene. Medical photography possesses a narrative structure - in particular the narrative moment of the finger that discloses and points - which is comparable with the tradition of the pornographic gaze.²⁵ Linda Hentschel highlights the "dispositif of the gaze" that in art as well as in pornography tries to penetrate or to pervade the limits of the image's and the body's space.²⁶ Francis Galton, the half cousin of Charles Darwin, and Cesare Lombroso were two explicit models for clinical and also for the sexological photography from this epoch until the 1930s.

Actually, the 1850s and 1860s are a crucial moment to grasp the cooperation between medical and artistic professionals pertaining to the representation of the body, in particular the deviant, "monstrous" body. From the outset, by means of this collaboration, scientific body imaging is characterised by an accurate construction of images of the human body. It seems that the body becomes a mere image. Meticulous classification, precision and "objectivity" are the most evident marks of intersex photographic representation at the

time. This hermaphroditic “image-body” is a constructed space; in part an experimental one, in part it is destined to fix the fluid boundaries between normal and deviant - gendered - bodies. Hans Belting remarks that “already Plato was aware of the difference between bodies as natural media against writing and picturing as artificial media when he argued against the latter as dead memories while he defended living or bodily memory”. Belting highlights the mediality of images, rooted in a body analogy, also in the sense that our bodies function as media themselves. They are living media against any fabricated media, against any rigid dualism which so often separates internal and external representation. “Physical images cannot exist without the participation of mental images, since an image by definition is one that is seen”.²⁷ Consequently, physical images of the hermaphroditic or deviant body interact with mental images of this body whereas the photographer realises the sequence that creates it.

As Butler puts it, “If the ‘reality’ of gender is constituted by the performance itself, then there is no recourse to an essential and unrealized ‘sex’ or ‘gender’ which gender performances ostensibly express”.²⁸ The reality of the hermaphroditic body is thus performed by medical photographic representations. I would argue that not only the reality of a “deviant” gender but also the reality of the body is constituted by the photographic performance itself. As we know, social reality is not a given but is continually created as an illusion “through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign”.²⁹ Such a bodily illusion is created by texts and images, which are both *ekphrasis* (description). Sigrid Weigel eliminates the prejudices that unbendingly distinguish the sciences of the text and those of the image.³⁰ Emphasising the “imaged character” of language she blurs the frontiers between the two. The body is always conveyed through an image which is paradoxically “always a written one”, as Johann Wilhelm Ritter stated in the 18th century.³¹ Martin Kemp speaks for his part of a “game of visual words”.³² That said, it is important to specify that such an understanding of the body as a construction doesn’t negate the materiality of the body. Such materiality is “in some sense animated by a norm, or contoured by a norm”;³³ once more, this draws attention to the place of constraint in the production of sex.

However, other than in the case of language and text, our fruition and interpretation of images is burdened with a pretence of faithfulness. Images of the body are supposed to convey a “true” body and their internal truth. The point is that pictures of the body also interact with internal, mental images of the same body. During their fruition, common notions of what is “external” and “internal”, particularly about gender, are challenged. Pictures of the hermaphroditic body offer an ideal field for experimentation. They perform a continuous shifting of the bodily boundary and its “problem”, gender. The

viewer and the observer are both engaged in an erratic search, a search which is displayed beyond the inside-outside of the body and our imagination. As regards images of intersexed bodies and the contemporary discussion about them, a discussion which is invariably shifted in an “invisible interiority” of the body, Antje Hornscheidt proposes a derridianian approach.³⁴ No point or “halt” of an “original meaning” - or ascription of original meaning - should be consequently available in order to enforce a “sustainable” visual “ambiguitisation-*VerUneindeutigung*” of the perception of gendered bodies.³⁵ The ideas of a first sign and of a primary meaning in the “process of seeing-*prozessuale Sehen*” are here radically questioned. Hornscheidt comments on the picture of the artist Del LaGrace Volcano, a naked torso exposing his/her intersexed genitals and breasts. This image may paradigmatically suspend hegemonic practices of perception regarding intersexed bodies: the gaze is made uncomfortable by the absence of clues as to a clear gender attribution and is not able to find any peace of mind or a “rest-Halt” during the search for them.



(See: http://static.pagina12.com.ar/fotos/soy/20080418/notas_y/lagrace.jpg)

4. Conclusions

According to Didi-Huberman, visual representation has an “underside” in which seemingly intelligible forms “lose their clarity and defy rational understanding”.³⁶ In effect, even if executed with scientific rigour, Nadar’s portray of the hermaphrodite reveals the “underside” or “other side” of the intersexual dimension, a world in which “grins hung about without the cat” – as in Lewis Carroll’s novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).³⁷ This has spectacular-performative as well as symbolical facets, at the same time questioning and affirming not only the gender dichotomy, but also binarism, i.e. the most important social and epistemological category to order and decode reality.

Hence, in the case of intersexes’ images, it is crucial to explore the “entangled history” of the medical discourse on hermaphroditism and the extremely rich cultural production (mythical, theological, esoteric, literary and politico-literary) broaching the issue of the hermaphrodite/androgynous in the course of the centuries.³⁸ With reference to this kind of entanglement, I include - as counterpoint to the Foucauldian reading of paradigm shifts and discontinuities in the medico-legal discourse on hermaphrodites - Warburg’s concept of *Nachleben*, which refers to the survival (the continuity or afterlife and metamorphosis) of images and motifs.³⁹ Through this concept I introduce the problem of memory into the *longue durée* of the history of motifs and images, in particular regarding the imagery of hermaphroditism.

In the case of hermaphrodite imagery, knowledge and understanding are not only conditioned by the epistemic presentation medium and by the technological aspects of image production but also by its aesthetic perception. The perception of the images of Maisonneuve’s intersex patient creates a certain intentional aesthetic consciousness, the consciousness of the “instable relationship” between the scientific object and its photographic representation. Since the intersex body is an object of scientific inquiry, in the course of Nadar’s as well as of Del LaGrace Volcano’s photographic sequence - both works of art - he/she becomes something “more”, attracting different kinds of curiosity, and a variety of aesthetic responses.

A variety of cases of hermaphroditism in science as well as in the humanities (Herculine/Abel Barbin as a patient of Gilbert Chesnet and later of Auguste Tardieu, Bertha Pappenheim/Josef Breuer as a patient of Sigmund Freud, Martha/Karl M. Baer as a patient of Magnus Hirschfeld⁴⁰, David/“Brenda” Reimer as a Patient of John Money and others) provides evidence for the impact of such images as “scientific objects” i.e. “trans-epistemic objects”.

On the basis of the literature on hermaphroditism and intersexes⁴¹ as well as an interdisciplinary - mainly anthropological but also semiotic,

phenomenological and discourse analytical - approach to images, I postulate that hermaphrodite photographic representations play a seminal role, in the past as today, in shaping not only “gender norms” but also other cultural widespread assumptions. They show selected body parts through a ritualised performance that reiterates the “institutional concern” with a “gender order”, from which follows social exclusion as well as societal and individual self-hatred.

The intersex body exemplifies at best the standard process through which the “abject” is produced constructing exceptional bodies - in brief, monsters. The confrontation with such imagery could nevertheless favour alternative modes of tension challenging the gender order. Above all, the pictographic conventions of hermaphrodite imagery work as epistemic tools of “scientific objectivity”⁴² but they can also be its rivals.

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