

CYBORGS AND VAMPIRES. THE MONSTER'S BODY FROM THE PRODIGIOUS POWER OF IMAGINATION TO THE NATURALIZATION OF DIFFERENCES

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Abstract

The monster is a symbol of wholeness: an expression of the teratological wonder and of the prodigious power of imagination. But, from the modern project of social order, the monster is identified with “the different” so the normal human can trace a perfect match with the one that G. Canguilhem calls the “zero degree of monstrosity”. However, the Foucaultian time, eager to clean the society from the different, the exceeding, the misfits, it seems - today - to give way to the era of “new monsters”. Not only cyborgs, but - above all - insatiable vampires constantly searching for their identity, the excessive purchase of objects and “bodies” fit to respond to fashion update required to be “normal”.

Keywords: Monster, Body, Imagination, Power, Social order



«De occulto orbis terrarum situ interrogasti et si tanta monstrorum essent genera credenda,
quanta in abditis mundi partibus per deserta et oceani insulas
et in ultimorum montium latebris nutriri monstrantur;
et praecipue de his tribus
orbis terrae generibus responderi petebas quae maximum
formidinis terrorem humano generi incutiunt,
ut de monstruosis hominum partibus describerem
et de ferarum horribilibus innumeris bestiarum formis
et draconum dirissimis serpentiumque ac viperarum generibus.»

Liber monstrorum, Prologus

When Hippocrates, in his treatise on the *Superfoetation*¹, justifies a noble Athenian woman for giving birth to a child “different” from the others, he includes the monstrous in the category of imagination, which - just in a rational attempt to explain the exceeding - acquires a prodigious power. The power of imagination of a pregnant woman manifests itself in altering the development of the human embryo, which assumes the features of a simulacrum, an effigy, a wonder. In fact, if we think of the Middle Ages, as well as the Renaissance, it is easy to see that the monster is exposed and not hidden. He is the *monstrum*: the object to show, but also what the unpredictable demonstrates, i.e. the power of nature. If, then, we go back in time further, the monster becomes a sign, as for the Babylonians, a people who practiced teratoscopy because, conceiving the monster as a divine warning, only through the analysis of his body we can reach the interpretation of gods’ predictions. Even for St. Augustine the monster is what admonishes as it etymologically contains the *monere*, i.e., the demonstration of God’s will². The etymology itself of the word monster embodies a range of meanings that characterize the figure of the monster as very complex and able to fit between the monstrous and the monsters, that is, between the extreme negative polarity and the miraculous, the marvelous: concepts which join together and characterize the symbolic value - or archetypal³ - of the monster, as far as becoming signs of the sacred. The monster, in fact, is above all one who holds a sacred place. Griffins guard the tree of life, snakes watch over the crater of Dionysus, and a dragon is the guardian of the golden apples of the Hesperides⁴: the monster is first and foremost the guardian of a treasure that - to be reached and conquered - presupposes a passage, an effort, an act of heroism channeled and caused by the monster itself. In this sense, the monster becomes a symbol of the transit from the old man to the new one, like Jonah, who gobbled up by the sea monster, is reborn through a profound change.

If, then, we turn to an even more intimate interpretation, the monster becomes a symbol of the

¹ See F. Lopez, *Il pensiero olistico di Ippocrate*, Edizioni Pubblisfera, San Giovanni in Fiore, 2004

² See R. Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiement and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York- London, 1994

³ See C. Bonvecchio, *Il cavaliere, la morte e il diavolo. Un percorso nella post-modernità*, Sriptaweb, Napoli, 2010, p. 32; see C. G. Jung, *Simbole der Wandlung. Analyse des Vorspiels zu einer Schizophrenie*, Walter Verlag AG, Olten; G. Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1963

⁴ See J. Chevalier – A. Gheerbrant, *Monster*, in *Dictionary of symbols*, trans. by J. Buchanan-Brown, Penguin Books, London, New York, 1996, p. 111

irrational forces, of the interior restlessness of the ego, of anguish and of what is obscure in our unconscious. In short, there are many interpretations that can be addressed to the image of the monster, and what unites them is certainly the uniqueness of this representation. A uniqueness, that - from the classical age - increasingly marks its boundaries - especially in the modern age. - An extraordinariness, i.e., something that is extra-ordinary, that exceeds the norm and renders the normal «on zero degree of monstrosity»⁵. Even Aristotle - tracking the human type in the male - conceives the female as the being that comes out from the norm, i.e., as what is exceptional, abnormal, and therefore monstrous. A concept of monstrous that - adding to the pathologic and the abnormal - makes the norm «in the first instance a biological quality - the potentiality for vital development of an organism is meant in terms of both physical and psychological aspect»⁶. The “regular type” becomes, thus, a basically static ideal model and determined of man leading to an inevitable dichotomy between normal and abnormal⁷. This dichotomy - in turn - dresses the monster with the veil of difference, because «it is in the language of the monstrosity that is often reflected the difference. Since the difference holds a structural and constitutive function, it, as pejorative, occupies a strategic position. It can therefore shed light on the complex and asymmetric relationships of the power in the position of dominant player»⁸. In other words, the more the norm takes the form as a symbol of a rational coding - the more there is an increased presence that exceeds this standard, and «what is the social outcome of a particular biological configuration is actually the biological representation of a preliminary policy option»⁹. For this, the figure of the monster suffers a directly proportional relationship between the processes of social homologation associated with well-defined standards, and his emergence as being eccentric, or, how to be extraordinary: out of a natural, cultural and predetermined order¹⁰. Moreover, the monster is above all

⁵ G. Canguilhem, *La connaissance de la vie*, trans. by F. Bassani, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1976, p. 226

⁶ R. Esposito, *Bios. Biopolitica e filosofia*, Einaudi, Torino, 2004, p. 126

⁷ See E. Geoffroy Saint Hilaire, *Etudes progressives d'un naturaliste*, Roret, Paris, 1835; I. Geoffroy Saint Hilaire, *Histoire générale et particulière des anomalies de l'organisation chez l'homme et les animaux des monstruosités des variétés et vices de conformation, ou traité de tératologie*, J. B. Baillière, Paris, 1832-37

⁸ R. Braidotti, *Metamorphoses. Towards a materialist theory of becoming*, trans. by M. Nadotti, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2003, p. 209

⁹ R. Esposito, *Bios. Biopolitica e filosofia*, op.cit., p. 125

¹⁰ See R. Braidotti, *Metamorphoses. Towards a materialist theory of becoming*, op. cit.

one who opposes the order representing his antithetical side¹¹: chaos, disorder, the unpredictable, becoming the Aristotelian figure that «brings together the impossible»¹², but that - simultaneously - eludes rationality which, through rigor and hierarchy, rules and disciplines. And this process, containing within itself the discipline and the rule, turns out to be a reality that is consolidated and becomes tangible through the thought of Michel Foucault. He thematized biopolitics and biopower following the intuition that «in the late eighteenth century we have entered into a society of the norm, health, medicine and standardization, which today is the essential way of functioning of our society».¹³ This is a new political rationality that finds its primary source in the pastoral power belonging to the Christian tradition: a power, that is, not so much aiming at the achievement of a territorial sovereignty, but rather channeled towards the direct rule of the individual's life but also of the entire community¹⁴, i.e., like the shepherd on a single sheep and the whole flock. And when the pastoral power undergoes a process of secularization, the rule «is multiplied in several areas: how to rule the children, to govern the poor and the beggars, how to govern a family, a house, how to govern the armies, the different groups, cities, states, the body and the spirit», thus witnessing, «the multiplication of all the arts of government - teaching art, political art, economic art - and the institutions of government, in the large sense that the government had at that time».¹⁵ This is a real institutionalization of knowledge, which supplies a power with disciplinary face and, at the same time, regulatory and normative. It acts both on the individual and the population considered as a set of living beings and among them is to be identified the different, the misfit, the one who exceeds the norm¹⁶. Hence, «the transition from big monster to the small perverse could be realized only through the concept, use and operation of the instinct in the knowledge and practice of psychiatric

¹¹ See P. Tort, *L'ordre et les monstres*, Le Sycomore, Paris, 1980

¹² Aristotle, *Poetica*, in *Opere*, trans. by P. Donini, Einaudi, Torino, 2008, 1458c

¹³ M. Foucault, *El poder, una bestia magnífica*, in O. Marzocca (a cura di), *Biopolitica e liberalismo*, Edizioni Medusa, Milano, 2001, p. 78

¹⁴ See M. Figiani, *Oltre l'impersonale*, in L. Bazzicalupo (a cura di), *Impersonale. In dialogo con Roberto Esposito*, Mimesis, Milano, 2008, p. 86; see R. Esposito, *Termini della biopolitica. Comunità, immunità, biopolitica*, Mimesis, Milano, 2009, p. 176

¹⁵ M. Foucault, *Omnes et singulatim: Toward a Criticism of Political Reason*, in O. Marzocca (a cura di), *Biopolitica e liberalismo*, op. cit., p. 111

¹⁶ A. Brossat, *Les apories du "droit à la vie"*, in «La rose de personne», n. 3, 2008, p. 120

power»¹⁷, since «to say that the power in the nineteenth century, took possession of life, or at least to say that the power, during the nineteenth century, has taken over his life, means that it has come to occupy the entire surface that extends from the organic to biological, from the body to the population, through the double game of discipline technologies on the one hand and the control of technologies on the other one. We are, therefore, within a power that has taken over both the body and life, or if you want that has taken over life in general: setting up two poles: on one side the body, on the other the population»¹⁸. Thus, regulating and governing the body's life are the hallmarks of biopolitics and its primary device: biopower, which leverages and is substantiated - in turn - through economic and biomedical systems. And these particular processes generate the distinction between normal and abnormal, between healthy and pathological, or rather - as Georges Canguilhem would say - between normal and pathological,¹⁹ between monstrosity and portentous, as in the body there is a foundational principle both of the disciplinary and the regulatory power, that is the differentiation, which is actually the preferred instrument to discriminate, include and exclude. In fact, thinking to the biopolitical and thanatopolitical realities, the monster becomes the abnormal that is superimposed on the pathological ascribing it in the category of degeneration since «biological abnormality is nothing but the sign of a more general abnormality that places the degenerated subject in a permanently differentiated condition from other individuals of the same species. [...] Affirming that the degenerate is abnormal means to place him in an area of distinction not entirely within the category of man»²⁰. The body becomes, therefore, not only the open space on which to mould the invisible Ego, but also the dimension in which we can trace the difference legitimizing the rule: the monster, the deformed, the sick, the insane give meaning and truth to their polar opposite, i.e., to the healthy, to reason, to normal. And «when the monster has become a biological concept, when the monsters are divided into classes according to constant relationships, it is the time when the monster is naturalized, the irregular returns to rule and the prodigy to prevision. [...] At the time of the experiments, the miracle was considered a symptom of

¹⁷ M. Foucault, *Les anormaux. Cours au Collège de France 1974-1975*, trans by V. Marchetti and A. Salomoni, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2000, p. 122

¹⁸ M. Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société*, trans by A. Fontana and M. Bertani, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1998, p. 219

¹⁹ See G. Canguilhem, *Le normal et le pathologique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1966

²⁰ R. Esposito, *Bios. Biopolitica e filosofia*, op. cit., p. 125

childishness and mental illness, it denounces the weakness or failure of reason»²¹. For this, - from the biopolitical reflections of Foucault²² - the figure of the monster takes on a unique meaning almost completely abandoning the miraculous, the endemic miraculous to its own etymological derivation. The modern art of government, the rationality of the state containing the Foucaultian correlation between individualization and totalization, not only naturalizes the madness, but «also tries to naturalize the monsters. [...] In the nineteenth century the fool is in the hospice where he must show what is the reason, and the monster is in the vessel of the embryologist, which serves to show what is the norm»²³. The miraculous, the wonder that contains the power of nature itself is lost in the maze of standards and biopolitical discipline, which uses the power from Panoptical form: that is capable of monitoring - differentiating and excluding - without being supervised. An Orwellian power, which - often in the course of history- turns biopolitics into thanatopolitics²⁴: for instance the Nazi experience, which draws its source of legitimacy from the fact that the domain on the body takes the form of possession by the state on the physicality of the individual as a member of society, or to the eugenics principles which constitute determinations of state organization. The state selects, manipulates its members to achieve a collective goal, namely, - although it is actually a dystopia - the celebrated common good, the perfect social order, which already for Plato is a guarantee of stability and strength for the state: «the best men must unite as often as possible to the best females, while the worst males to the worst females thus the children of the former must be raised, those of the others not, if the flock must be excellent. But no one except the rulers must know that all this is happening, if the flock of the guardians will be as immune from strife»²⁵. This is in line with modern social engineering, for which «the only really consistent and effective prototypes were also the most inhumane, cruel, heinous and scandalous, most notably those of the Nazis and Communists, followed at a short distance by the recent exercises in ethnic cleansing.

²¹ Ibidem

²² See M. Foucault, *Les anormaux. Cours au Collège de France 1974-1975*, trans by V. Marchetti and A. Salomoni, op. cit.

²³ G. Canguilhem, *La connaissance de la vie*, op. cit., p. 248

²⁴ See M. Figiani, *Oltre l'impersonale*, in L. Bazzicalupo (a cura di), *Impersonale. In dialogo con Roberto Esposito*, op. cit., p. 86

²⁵ Plato, *Tutte le opere*, trans by E. V. Maltese, Libro V, pag. 257

Considering humanity as a garden that wants to become more beautiful and harmonious it is inevitable that some men appear to be weeds. Social engineering has proven to excel, more than anywhere else in the extermination of human weeds»²⁶. The monsters become, the different: a problem to be solved and dispatched by the state. It is a problem that gradually evaporates from the state sovereignty, and is embodied in the individual, becoming the functional autonomous choice of the consumer. He, deviously-induced by new dynamics of global economic power - goes beyond state boundaries to build his self-identity, his being “non-monster”. And this particular passage seems to characterize our contemporary world, where we see the replacement of biopolitics with bioeconomics: that kind of economy that «appeals to bodies, to lives, in the form of commercial management, inducing and collecting a question of empowerment, transformation and care to be satisfied just paying»²⁷. This is a new form of power over life and - above all - on the body of the individual to whom is requested a continuous updating according to the standards generated primarily by the policies of the global market. We move from health to fitness, from the adhesion to the norm to the deregulation and privatization since being included in the “list of who’s who” becomes personal responsibility in a passage that goes from the Panopticon to Synopticon. While «the Panopticon forced people to a position to be watched, the Synopticon does not need to force anyone just because it seduces people to watch»²⁸ and be modeled deserving to be watched. It «is global in nature; the act of watching sets free the viewer from its location, and carries him, at least spiritually, into cyberspace, where the distance has no importance, even if, physically, you have not moved»²⁹. Moreover, modern man seems to have to fulfill a new duty: the fitness since in the age of globalization - being naked means being unable to spruce up your physicality and «the raw body, unadorned, not reformed, nor “worked” is a source of shame: it offends the eye, invariably leaves much to be desired, and above all it becomes a living witness of a not performed duty by the ego,

²⁶ Z. Bauman, *Living on Borrowed Time. Conversations with Citlali Rovinosa-Madrado*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2010, p. 158

²⁷ L. Bazzicalupo, *Ambivalenza nell’immaginario e nella rappresentazione del corpo nei dispositivi biopolitici*, Lecture at C.R.I.S.I.S., Teramo, 2nd March, 2012

²⁸ Z. Bauman, *Globalization. The Human Consequences*, trans by O. Pesce, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2010, p. 59

²⁹ Idem, p. 43

and perhaps by incompetence, ignorance, impotence and insignificance of his genius»³⁰. In a consumer society the body itself becomes the consuming subject and the consumed object, offering itself to change until reaching the transformation: to that monstrous, perhaps, which tends to monstrosity including the portentous and its potentiality. Unlike the monstrous that assumes a predominantly negative determination, the monstrosity, in fact, can be meant as that term that is capable of containing within itself the elements of wonder still belonging to fables time, when «the monstrosity was the expression of the miraculous power of the imagination»³¹. This feature seems to be reemerging in our contemporary world: an era in which technological advancement not only open new gates to the imagination, but, even, makes possible a realization of the most extravagant aspects concerning the corporeal. It is important, in this sense, to consider the figure of the cyborg: «post-human image, alien to any kind of divine, supernatural or magic intervention, if you prefer»³². The cyborg - by becoming a possible reality of the overcoming of the natural limits - makes the myth a «mythical narrative, since opening up to an undefined future, it let us consider man as a genetically perfectible being on whom we can technologically intervene by manipulating the genetic code (i.e. replacing nature) and engaging in his body electronics in order to improve his characteristics»³³. It is, therefore, a monstrosity redeemed by the normalization of the political rationality of modern style, and open to wonder: not only imagined, but also real. It deconstructs the paradigm of normal/abnormal, healthy/disease through a reliance on technology that becomes part of a mythical dimension belonging to a perspectivism tending to the perfectibility of human beings and his futurity, which never occurs as to be determined, reached its final value . And technique itself becomes «the condition of contact and access, already inherent in the existence, making a unique body with other bodies»³⁴ in the world of an ecotechny³⁵, where, instead of living in conflict with nature, in a continuous desire to outdo ourselves, we assume a symbiotic relationship with it.

³⁰ Z. Bauman, *Consuming life*, trans by M. Cupellaro, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2010, p. 75

³¹ G. Canguilhem, *La connessance de la vie*, op. cit., p. 247

³² P. Bellini, *Il cyborg, una nuova mitopia tecnologica*, in «Pedagogika», anno XIV, n. 4, 2010, p. 45

³³ P. Bellini, Tra mito e logos: Il concetto di Mitopia e la civiltà tecnologica post-moderna, in «Metabasis.it» n. 8, anno IV, 2009, p. 9

³⁴ T. Ariemma, *Il senso del nudo*, Mimesis, Milano, 2007, p. 68

³⁵ J. L. Nancy, *Corpus*, trans by A. Moscati, Cronopio, Napoli, 2007, p. 73

In this dimension the becoming a man is an experience that uses the congruence of the transformation processes and of nature creation followed by the technique in a dimension of imminent proximity, to the neighbor, which includes the most tangible manifestations of the infinite power of nature. The cyborg appears to be a point of reunion between the monstrosity and its most intimate and natural aspect, which makes the prodigious monster «proof of the regularity and uniformity of nature, that even in the chaos of physical deformity makes them act the same laws applied to the regular world»³⁶. However, the figure of the cyborg condenses a duality that characterizes the contemporary reality: on one hand it is a positive character of performative type, on the other hand it becomes a symbol of a body that consumes and that - paradoxically - reaches the result of being consumed. The new monster, the cyborg, the emblem of human perfectibility and the desire to overcome themselves, is still pressed by the power embodied in the Foucault's intuition that the bodies are governed by their wishes. But if this theory is true, also applies to E. Durkheim, for which the man is that being by unlimited wants, and - consequently - highly vulnerable. And the non-fulfillment, the vulnerability lead him to be a victim of himself, to be consumers of himself as exposed to conditions apparently anomic: as a vampire, which symbolizes the hunger, the craving that revives and multiplies when is believed appeased and satisfied³⁷. The vampire is the monster tormented: he that devours himself. The vampire «is literally an insatiable consumer driven by the frenzy of perpetual youth, while the cyborg has incorporated the mechanisms of consumption in his adolescent flesh»³⁸. In the passage from the cyborg to vampire lies, therefore, the extreme version of bioeconomics reality in the consumer society, which - once again- tacitly dictates approval and consequently discrimination parameters. Not only cyborg, but - above all - vampires constantly searching for their identity, the excessive and disproportionate purchase of objects and fashionable³⁹ "bodies" fit to promptly respond to the requested update in order to be "in". The foucaultian time, eager to clean the society from the different/misfits, the exceeding, gives way to the era of "new monsters" beings constantly induced to the excess. If we think to plastic surgery we can see that, by

³⁶ M. Mazzocut - Mis, *Mostro. L'anomalia e il deforme nella natura e nell'arte*, Edizioni Guerini, Milano, 1992, p. 15

³⁷ E. Petoia, *Vampiri e lupi mannari*, Newton Compton, 2003

³⁸ M. Farci, *Lo sguardo tecnologico. Il postumano e la cultura dei consumi*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2011, p. 108

³⁹ See J. G. Melton, *The vampire book: the encyclopedia of the undead*, Visible Ink Press, Canton, 2010

now, «it has nothing to do with the elimination of a physical defect or the attainment of an ideal form denied by nature or by fate, but with the need to keep up with standards which change rapidly, with the maintenance of its market value and with the elimination of an image that has outlived its usefulness or its charm, in order to replace it with a new public image in a single package with a new identity»⁴⁰. Modern man becomes, therefore, a victim of himself in a vicious and paradoxical circle glorifying autonomy, freedom of infinite choice, but basically and tacitly he is the victim of a binding choice. This is the generation of a system - now without a regulated domestic policy - which delegates to every single individual the responsibility to have a bright future full of prestige, consuming the body itself, becoming a marketable goods, where «the economic exercise of power is a social exercise, surely dissymmetric, but diffuse and polycentric»⁴¹. So the body suffers a particular passage that goes from subjectivation made by the political power - especially from the modern age - to the individualization referring to economic power. This happens because the possession of economic means allows the individual to enter the sphere of “Who’s Who” of those who are able to accessorize their body - and the body of their children - with everything is necessary to be candidates for perfection which, however, appears to be a relative and never absolute perfection. New subjects are created with regard to market needs, new members of that segment of society fully efficient in a situation where the economy stands as an array of parameters on which is based discrimination, which - in our contemporary world - is no longer determined by social status or skin colour, but, by an economic global system that - escaping from the political power - draws its legitimacy from itself. The market strategies become new places and no-places of biopower and bioeconomics devices that trap and bring back monstrosity to the monstrous, the monster to the no prodigy being, the abnormal to the normal at a time when adhering to the rule may mean primarily to respond quickly to global economic imperatives.

⁴⁰ Z. Bauman, *Consuming life*, op. cit., p. 127

⁴¹ L. Bazzicalupo, *Il governo delle vite*, Mimesis, Milano, 2008, p. 115



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