

Contested and Monstrous Bodies*

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review of:

Ruth Holliday and John Hassard (2001) (eds) *Contested Bodies*. London: Routledge. (HB: pp. 208, £65.00, ISBN 0415196353 PB: £19.99, ISBN 0415196361)

Margrit Shildrick (2002) *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. London: Sage. (HB: pp. 154, £50.00, ISBN 0761970134 PB: £18.99, ISBN 0761970142)

Following a series of complaints against the lack of embodiment and body research in the social sciences (e.g. Turner, 1992, 1996; Leder, 1990; Shilling, 1993), the past decade has seen an exploding interest in the body, exceeding the boroughs of feminist scholarship and expanding even into the tracts of management departments and business schools (see e.g. Barry and Hazen, 1996; Hassard *et al.*, 2000; Dale, 2001). In this respect, former complainants, some of whom (especially Turner and Shilling) have risen to a certain prominence in the social sciences, have been quite successful in overturning a sorry state of affairs. However, as a majority of this often mainstream work has emphasized ways in which bodies are organized, regulated and normalized – so as to enable, maintain and solidify what (in social constructionist terms) may be regarded a dominant social order – the excess forces of bodies ‘more than normal’ – who resist and disrupt hegemonic social patterns – have been pushed into a minor, peripheral *Hintergrund*. Moreover, as pointed out by some critics (e.g. Williams and Bendelow, 1998; Dale, 2001), much of this research remains disembodied, as scholars typically approach the body as a research object like any other rather than critically reflecting on it in relation to their own embodiment. Interestingly, two recent books may be seen to contradict this trend: (i) the anthology *Contested Bodies* (2001), edited by the cultural theorist Ruth Holliday and the organization theorist John Hassard, and (ii) the research monograph *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (2002), written by Holliday’s Staffordshire University colleague, Margrit Shildrick. Although neither book is easily folded into the field of management and organization studies, *Contested Bodies* (which is dominated by cultural studies people, but includes

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contributions from law, sociology and geography) carries a number of references to bodies in work organizations. And both books may be seen to investigate the other of organization – i.e., bodies that undermine, exceed and destabilize organizational entities and organizational ways of knowing, seeing and doing. This is one (and perhaps the most obvious) reason why *ephemera* readers may find them relevant.

Holliday and Hassard open *Contested Bodies* (henceforth *CB*) by pointing to two problems in body research. First, the scant visibility (in theory) of the material elements that make up the body, and second, the challenge of writing about the body: “How we write about the body, which bodies we write about, and whose body does the writing” (*CB*, 1). In my view, these problems are much related to the title of the book and what the editors highlight as the “[lacking] consensus on what the body is and what constitutes it” (Cream, cited in *ibid.*). In relation to Holliday and Hassard’s second point, the body is contested because academics work from different perspectives that fail to agree on what the body is. Questions of how to conceive and define the body are contested and depend on whose bodies do the writing and which bodies we write about. And in relation to Holliday and Hassard’s first point, one could make the argument (which they do not explicitly do) that bodily materiality gets less attention both because the material multiplicity of bodies further contests what the body is and because some social scientists mistakenly confuse the study of bodily materiality with bodily essentialism or foundationalism. Ironically, in an attempt to warn against essentialism, they quote a conference paper by Cream (1994), who commits exactly this error. But in all due respect, they also reiterate the crucial point that those often regarded as more embodied than others (e.g. women, blacks, homosexuals and working-class people) are refused the opportunity to write about the body because “their work is seen as compromised by their very embodiment” (*CB*, 2). Indeed, it is ‘the more embodied’ who constitute the contested bodies dealt with by the contributors to this volume. The notion of ‘being more embodied than others’ is by no means unproblematic, and, drawing attention to the Cartesian organization of thought and knowledge through which healthy, white men have come to be associated with a rational mind while everybody else (especially women) have been seen primarily through their so-called irrational, abnormal bodies, Holliday and Hassard show the representational and constructed (rather than natural) basis of such claims. Bodies are not naturally given as normal or abnormal, as more or less fleshy and embodied. Rather, the (mis)understanding of embodiment in such terms is produced by the labours of (often competing) knowledge regimes, labours that in a Foucauldian sense have material effects on the bodies scrutinized, which is *not* to say, they add, that these constitute the materiality of bodies. While Holliday and Hassard deserve praise for offering more thought to the notion of materiality than most social and organizational studies of the body, this is pretty much all they say about the issue, and, claiming that conflicting discourses turn the body into a contested terrain, they remain silent about the multiplicity of pre-discursive bodily matter (e.g. desire, illness, micro-organisms, accidents) through which bodily materiality as well as discourses of embodiment are contested and destabilized. In that sense, their editorial carries a bias that is fairly representative of the twelve contributions appearing in this anthology.

The anthology is divided into three sections (‘Pariah Bodies’, ‘Bodies in Space’ and ‘Techno-Bodies’), each comprising of four chapters. On the whole, ‘Pariah Bodies’,

deals with what the editors call 'othered' bodies, which frequently provoke 'disgust and dread'. Students of organization should find much of this interesting. For example, Collier's chapter, which disassembles the dominant view of young male offenders as masculine (and therefore as dangerous monsters), makes the point that the debate on juvenile delinquency extrapolates regimes of organization and subjects of disorganization, regulation and resistance. The problem of boy offenders is often seen in terms of vermin, disorder and disorganization and met by calls for intensified organized police efforts to restore law and order. In a different context of organization, concerned with the problem of workplace discrimination, Bhattacharyya speculates that the home and work from home may offer a way to relearn our humanity and social selves and – it seems – re-evaluate bodily materiality in ways that put more stress on flesh (which she associates with muscles, work and agency) and less on skin (which she deems superficial). Indeed, this distinction calls inside-outside boundaries into question, a theme that during the past few decades has attracted considerable interest in critical organization theory (e.g. Cooper 1986; Cooper and Burrell 1988). Focusing on the (in)stability of bodily and architectural boundaries, Eadie continues this concern in his analysis of David Cronenberg's film *Shivers*. In this film, humans are attacked by artificially manufactured brown parasites that enter the body through any opening available. Interestingly, the human victims are all white and they all live in a private neighbourhood of posh tower blocks guarded by security personnel and located in island isolation. Drawing attention to ways in which the whiteness of buildings and bodies in the film is associated with order and hygiene, Eadie emphasizes how parasite invasion transforms previously overcivilized and desexualized white 'victims' into sexually promiscuous perpetrators and conspicuous consumers. Not unlike Bhattacharyya, Eadie argues that this may be seen as a bodily revolt against a repressive materiality. Mark Featherstone's chapter stands out somewhat from the rest in this section and will therefore be addressed below.

The interest in corporeal, organizational and spatial boundaries is maintained in section two, 'Bodies in Space'. Sally Munt questions the presumably fixed identity of the stone butch by pointing to the desire and subjectivity that is excluded in the process of constructing a rock hard, untouchable and hermetic sense of self, sexuality and embodiment. Robyn Longhurst examines how pregnant bodies provoke dread in public places by breaking a number of corporeal boundaries (between inside and outside, self and other, one and two, mother and foetus, subject and object). Via Kristeva and Grosz, this is discussed through the notions of abjection and leakiness (e.g. waters breaking, vomiting and saggy breasts). Leslie Moran's chapter highlights the spatial boundaries at work in the cartographically based police surveillance of London public bathrooms. As Moran indicates, police surveillance protects the boundaries of public space to the extent that it prevents the occurrence of gay sex in these facilities. Through an account of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, Moran also shows how the boundaries between gay perpetrators and police officers are blurred as the latter (outsiders) need to pass as the former (insiders). In order to make arrests, police officers provoke gay men to effectively break the law. In a chapter more explicitly tied to management and organization, Ruth Holliday and Graham Thompson examine how boundaries between work and play, the public and the private are confused in the case of the office party, which takes place inside work space but outside working hours and which, they say, often comes with much sexual, alcoholic and violent behaviour. Also, the authors argue

that this is the work event through which the embodiment of workers becomes most apparent, highlighting the clash between forces of regulation and “an always *potentially* intransigent and re-embodied worker” (CB, 117). Like Moran, but in a more thorough and convincing way, they turn to Bakhtin and the carnevalesque. This is complemented by a discussion of Weber on asceticism to problematize the public-private and mind-body distinctions. According to Holliday and Thompson, contemporary working life is characterized by a combination of the carnevalesque and asceticism in a ‘work hard-play hard’ work ethic that typically privileges straight, white men; office parties retain strong misogynist aspects that both commodify women and enable straight men to define themselves as the ‘natural’ opposite of the ‘unnatural’ homosexual body.

Allocating chapters to sections is often an arbitrary but no less difficult process. This is apparent in section three, ‘Techno-Bodies’, where Karen Stevenson’s opening chapter on hairstyling clearly overlaps with previous discussions of sexualized space. Both Munt and Moran examine public bathrooms as sexualized space, and Holliday and Thompson employ this trope in their investigation of the office outside working hours. Similarly, Stevenson, while acknowledging a certain prevalence of androgynous haircuts and unisex hair salons, makes a convincing description of the female hair salon as a sexually defined (if not eroticized) space. That hairstyling implies a gendered symbolism, which works to shape body and identity, also ties in with Munt’s destabilizing of butch identity, Moran’s problematizing of police officer subjectivity, and Longhurst’s discussion of maternal identity. Moreover, her treatment of black hairstyling (which often signifies strive towards whiteness) overlaps somewhat with Bhattacharyya’s discussion of race, skin and workplace discrimination and Eadie’s analysis of whiteness in *Shivers*. The problem of allocating chapters is perhaps more pressing with respect to Mark Featherstone’s discussion of alien mythologies in the age of US atomic bombing and space exploration, which might have fitted better into section three than section one. Central to Featherstone is Walter Benjamin’s idea that technological reproduction gives more death (without decay), more alienation and more uncanny alien monsters. Interestingly, this enables Featherstone to show how the US, after the Second World War, constructed itself not unlike the uncanny alien technobodies of science fiction that it claimed to prepare itself against. Again, issues of subjectivity and objectivity are radically twisted.

In some contrast to Featherstone, Stephen Whittle’s and David Bell’s chapters (which *are* included in section three) consider the enabling impact of cyberspace technology. Whittle discusses how cyberspace has been utilized by transsexuals and cross-dressers in community development, activism and the creation and promotion of *transgendered* as a new self-identification category; Bell explores the coalescence in contemporary society of the initially divergent subcultures of cyberpunk and body modification (e.g. piercing and tattooing). For both, issues of identity are at the forefront, and Whittle relates identity to power by examining the hierarchy of passing, which, dominating early transsexual activism, has led to emphasis being put on privacy rights and relationship rights rather than the right of transgendered people to be protected from violence and discrimination. This has privileged the interests of those who easily pass above the rights of those who don’t. Whittle includes a discussion of employment protection for transgendered people, which also may be promoted through cyberspace

activism, and this is an area that ought to attract the attention of future organizational research beyond mainstream studies of diversity management.



Hilary Swank as Brandon
Teena in the film *Boys
Don't Cry*.



The female-to-male
transsexual and transactivist
Leslie Feinberg.

Lars Tatjana: The 75-year
old Norwegian artist Lars
Kristian Guldbrandsen who
identifies as the 23-year old
woman Tatjana L. K.



If only implicitly, Bell's discussion of cyberpunk and body modification subcultures also connects with the construction and materiality of transgenderism. Whereas cyberpunk subcultures seek to leave the flesh behind and subcultures of body modification imply a nostalgic re-embodiment that nonetheless points to the body's malleability, transgendered people may, on the one hand, feel less restricted by the biological body in cyberspace than in the 'real' world, yet, on the other, not find that this satisfies the desire to live as transgendered in the material world. Similarly, Bell shows that neither subcultures of cyberpunk and body modification pursue a one-sided relationship to technology. Even pierced, scarified, branded or tattooed bodies that initially seek to deny technology are caught up in technological relations. And to many (male) participants in cybersex chat-rooms it is the real bodies and genders of fellow participants that matters.

The final chapter by John O'Neill, which is a revision of his earlier piece in Crary and Kwinter's (1992) almost cult anthology *Incorporations*, is perhaps the most extraordinary contribution to *Contested Bodies*. O'Neill depicts the trajectories of aid and Aids through the exchange of milk and blood: Western countries exporting – in colonialist fashion – bottled baby milk that spreads disease in developing countries, and the gift of blood that turns developing countries into Societies with Aids. Both 'gifts' pose a *horror autotoxicus*, a "catastrophe of lethal fluids" that "deals death rather than

life to its trusting recipients” (*CB*, 182). O’Neill provides a thought-provoking and seductive account of the unintended consequences of medical technology, but despite his efforts to revise the argument one hopes that relationships merely touched upon here will be examined more systematically elsewhere.

Overall, *Contested Bodies* has all the good intentions of addressing the construction and experience of ‘othered’ bodies that often disrupt boundaries of organization, and many of the topics discussed should interest organizational researchers and other social scientists concerned with the body. Some of the ideas and arguments proposed are quite intriguing, but as they are presented within the boundaries of rather short contributions they could have been highly improved had they been developed in greater depth and length. While length is never a guarantee for theoretical scrutiny or sophistication, lengthier chapters *may* have been able to offer more in-depth, critical and theorized analyses. Anyway, it is problematic that some of the concepts employed (e.g. space) by various contributors appear thrown in rather than critically analyzed. For example, Collier’s references to ontology, the social and otherness are superficial and contribute little to the argument as such, and Bell’s chapter does not provide a critical analysis of the hype-terminology used by the cyberpunk subculture itself and its academic commentators. Although some will find Bhattacharyya’s personal, narrative prose attractive, the shortage of scholarly references and discussion is glaring. Featherstone’s introductory account of Freudian metaphysics and Eadie’s otherwise convincing and well-written reading of *Shivers* are overly descriptive. Indeed, Eadie’s chapter may have been more obviously relevant to students of management and organization had its conceptual analysis of boundaries been developed in more detail. A similar objection could be made against Whittle’s chapter, which is highly atheoretical. However, potential readers, who undoubtedly will benefit from Whittle’s inside knowledge of the transgender community, should be more wary of out-of-date factual details.¹

Deficient theoretical scrutiny is perhaps a more relevant critique of Munt’s and Stevenson’s chapters. Further theorization may have helped Stevenson avoid the conclusion that female dominance of high consumption “marks the important (re)entry of women into the previously male-dominated public sphere” (*CB*, 149). This is problematic, not least because female dominance of high consumption can hardly be seen to have empowered women and because the public sphere ought to include more than undeniably private department stores and shopping malls. Similarly, more care by Munt would have, perhaps, avoided reducing the disabled public bathroom to a desexualized space; as a butch lesbian, she finds the ‘ladies’ a sexualized space that she is uncomfortable using. Yet, by admitting to prefer the ‘disabled’, she desexualizes not only this space but also the people it is primarily designed to cater for. Most problematic is the shortage of theorization in Longhurst’s chapter. Particularly, Longhurst tends to jump to conclusions rather than thoroughly examine the implications of interviewee responses or carefully explaining the use of complex terminology. Even if I tend to agree with Longhurst’s argument, this is – in scholarly terms – a weakness. The chapter is highly descriptive and would have had so much more to offer had it theorized the many themes of boundary transgression that Longhurst actually identifies and that are

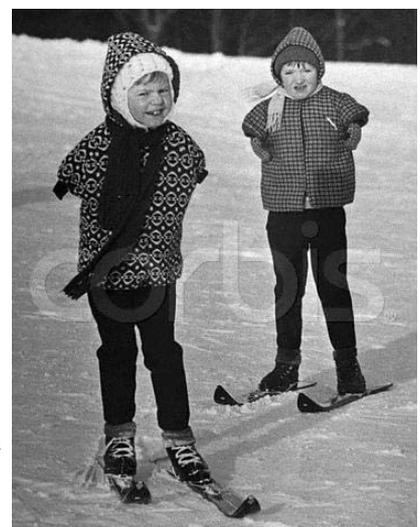
1 It is a pity that several details have not been updated since this research was presented at a Keele workshop some years ago (see Whittle, 1996).

worthy of investigation in their own right. This may also have helped Longhurst avoid or at least problematize the simultaneous rejection *and* use of dualisms and the dubious argument that pregnant women effectively resist by withdrawing from public space. Fortunately, Holliday and Thompson's chapter and Holliday and Hassard's editorial do a much better job on a theoretical level. In addition to offer discussions of obvious relevance to management and organization studies, they demonstrate a good sense of scholarly rigour.

Shildrick's *Embodying the Monster (EM)* continues the emphasis on bodily otherness and the problematization of bodily boundaries and identity by examining historical and contemporary responses to bodies deemed monstrous in medicine, theology, science and everyday culture and by rethinking monstrous embodiment along feminist and post-structuralist lines of thought. While the monstrous keeps provoking fascination as well as dread, attempts to exclude it from discourses of normality and realize an invulnerable, autonomous and stable human self are futile, according Shildrick. The human self is vulnerable in itself, and it is vulnerable to the monstrous through the monsters surrounding us and the monsters that live inside of us. Since monsters are uncontainable and unknowable, their exclusion beyond the necessarily precarious boundaries of the self is also impossible. Following discussions of hybrid creatures, maternal imagination, malformed babies, and the monstrosity of motherhood (the symbiotic or parasite relationship between mother and foetus) in chapters one to three, Shildrick examines the paradigm of contagious monstrosity in chapter four ('Contagious Encounters and the Ethics of Risk'), which culminated with the genocides of the Second World War. Under the belief that unusual physiognomy, chronic illness and disability are contagious, societies have isolated or even exterminated people with such conditions. Shildrick shows particular interest in the construction of disability as inherently vulnerable, helpless and monstrous, but via Freud, Lacan, Kristeva and Derrida she re-emphasizes the vulnerable nature of human subjectivity and the fear of monsters that haunt us by stirring recognition within: disease, disability, bodily fluids, etc.



The conjoined twins Maria Teresa and Maria de Jesus Quiej-Alvarez.



Disabled Children Skiing: These children were born without developed arms due to the drug thalidomide, which was given to their mothers during pregnancy.

In chapter five, this leads her to explore the vulnerable becoming of the human subject through a fairly detailed but critical reading of Levinas' Self-Other relation. Here Shildrick makes the assumption that ontology (and becoming) – which is always relational – is also “always intrinsically ethical” (*EM*, 88). It is what Levinas calls pre-ontological face-to-face encounters with the Other that places human subjects in a situation of vulnerability *and* self-consciousness and freedom, which necessitates response and responsibility. The uniqueness of the face (your own and that of the Other) requires us to recognize the uniqueness of and take responsibility for the Other. According to Levinas, this gift of responsibility is non-reciprocal (expectations of return would imply a post-ethical economy of exchange), but, like Derrida and Irigaray, Shildrick finds this untenable. She also finds his neglect of sexual difference, the feminine, the body and relations between others highly problematic, but this does not inhibit her from taking on board the fundamentals of the Levinasian Self-Other encounter as a way to theorize vulnerability and *mutual* self-other becoming. The self-other relationship is then taken further in chapter six, where, by critically engaging with the ideas of Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty in particular, Shildrick views the ‘touch’ as something that disrupts the distinction between the self and the other and makes us “come face to face with our [monstrous] other selves” (*EM*, 107). Interestingly, this may be seen as a nod towards Levinas' analysis of the caress,² but Shildrick makes no explicit reference to the caress throughout. The skin is more an organ of communication than a boundary, which again reinforces the openness and vulnerability of the human body. In her final chapter, ‘Welcoming the Monstrous *Arrivant*’, Shildrick insists on a positive posthumanist attitude rather than the “putative negativity of anti-humanism” (*EM*, 120). This view is developed through an endorsement of Haraway's celebration of techno-scientific, cyborg monsters, who are seen to disrupt boundaries between humans and machines.



For Shildrick, Haraway's work also poses an ethical message by highlighting the mixed up, impure and monstrous history of human biology. Again, monsters are not oppositional others, but part of us. Thus, she ends with a return to Derrida and his prophecy for a monstrous future where the monstrous *arrivant* – who is both awaited and unexpected – can no longer be kept apart but will cast radical doubt on one's own identity and vulnerability. The only ones who need fear this monstrous arrivant, she says, are “those who have no wish to cede the authority and power that they hold under the sign of modernism” (*EM*, 133).

Given the pejorative, degrading and violent responses to monstrous bodies across Western history, Shildrick does an important job in rethinking monstrous embodiment in positive terms. The argument that the monstrous other is and stirs recognition inside

2 I am grateful to Campbell Jones for making this suggestion.

of us is an effective way to humanize the monstrous and question the stability and homogeneity of human subjectivity. Shildrick's examples from medicine, science, theology and everyday culture (historical and current) are fascinating and her theoretical



discussion of some fairly complex ideas is adept and systematic. Overall, Shildrick presents a convincing and important argument that ought to be taken seriously not only by cultural studies people, but by organizational researchers and other social scientists.

This is not to say that some of her takes on things are not deeply problematic. In addition to an at times pretentious style, her explicit embracing of postmodernism – a label to which the works of scholars such as Derrida, Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty should not be reduced – seems at

odds with her pursuit of an ethics of *responsibility* for the monstrous other, a theme with which the same scholars may indeed be associated. It is however consistent with Shildrick's questionable view that a monstrous borderland is a place where all distinctions are undone (*EM*, 126) – surely, even *monstrous* borderlands with *disrupted* borders presume borders of some sort. Further, it is quite paradoxical that chapter three ('The Self's Clean and Proper Body') deals very little with issues of hygiene and *cleanliness*, that chapter four ('Contagious Encounters and the Ethics of Risk') largely ignores existing debates in the social sciences on *risk* (e.g. Beck 1992), and that chapter five ('Levinas and Vulnerable Becoming') makes almost no effort to theoretically analyze the concept of *becoming*. Moreover, Levinas' anthropomorphic notion of face-to-face encounters as pre-ontological is far more problematic than Shildrick's discussion indicates.

Throughout, Shildrick keeps referring to Elizabeth Grosz as 'Liz Grosz', suggesting a personal relationship to this cutting edge feminist philosopher. But nowhere does she acknowledge one of Grosz's main sources of inspiration: Deleuze's (and Guattari's) biophilosophy and its materialist thinking of embodiment. Perhaps this explains her attack on what she misconstrues as a version of the "Deleuzian body-without-organs", which she argues "has too often been taken to figure a being free of the restraints of physicality" signalling "corporeal mastery" (*EM*, 125, 126). Ironically, it may be more fitting to describe Haraway's cyborg – which Shildrick openly endorses – in such terms. Anyway, Shildrick's partial reading of Grosz, which helps her steer clear of any Deleuzian (or DeleuzoGuattarian) materialism, is in line with her rejection of any pre-discursive embodiment, even though this undermines her view of monstrous embodiment as unknowable. It is therefore reason to ask whether other philosophical figures than Derrida, whose work operates *primarily* (though, I admit, not solely) on a disembodied, textual level, and to whom Shildrick constantly returns, would more adequately lend themselves to embodying the monster.

On the whole, *Contested Bodies* and *Embodying the Monster* provide two refreshing inputs to social science research on the body by making some first steps towards thinking embodiment beyond organization, regulation and normality. But, regardless of

other objections presented here, a fundamental problem is that neither of them goes far enough. As pointed out, *Embodying the Monster* avoids any discussion of pre-discursive materiality, but even *Contested Bodies* largely contains matters within a discursive level of analysis. Both are therefore unable to effectively address the material forces of contested or monstrous bodies that may seriously contest and ‘monstruct’ the organization of embodiment. In my view, a materialist turn is necessary if organizational research is to incorporate – but not eat, chew, swallow and excrete – the other.

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