

## THE DESTRUCTION OF THE BODY AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE SUBJECT: THE SUBJECTIVATION IN JUDITH BUTLER

Henrique Caetano Nardi<sup>1</sup>

Raquel da Silva Silveira<sup>2</sup>

Silvia Maria Silveira<sup>3</sup>

### ABSTRACT:

This work presents topics of the theoretical discussion of the researcher Judith Butler about contemporary questions of gender, with emphasis on the so-called “queer” identity. This author articulates the works of Freud and Foucault, examining the relationships of power in the constitution of psychological life. The sexuality is taken as a political field. In the same way, in present discussions, an example from the cinema and the related story of a transsexual acts as a support to the questioning of compulsory heterosexuality, which also prescribes and legitimises western culture.

**KEY-WORDS:** gender; sexuality; psychicism; power; identity.

“The body is not a site on which a construction takes place; it is a destruction on the occasion of which a subject is formed. The formation of this subject is at once the framing, subordination, and regulation of the body, and the mode in which that destruction is preserved (in the sense of sustained and embalmed) in normalization” (*Butler, 1997,92*).

Judith Butler is a rigorous and stimulating researcher. She gained prominence as one of the principal founders of the *queer* studies in the North American and world academic and political circles. In bringing to the contemporary scene the studies of *queer*, she amplified the reach of gender questions that, for a long time, and being in the hands of feminists, emphasised only the femininity studies. The *queer* identity is a sexual identity that theatricalizes itself, examples of which are the transsexuals, the gay couples or lesbians, the new homosexual identities and the identities that destabilize the sexual identities being homo or heterosexuals, anyway, as Butler

---

<sup>1</sup> Medical Doctor, Doctor in Sociology, Professor of the Post Graduate Programme in Social and Institutional Psychology at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS).

<sup>2</sup> Psychologist, Master in Social Psychology by PGP in Social and Institutional Psychology at UFRGS.

(2002, p.288) says: “*before, it becomes a matter of an internal subversion within which the binary state is presumed and disseminated up to the point at which it ceases to make*”. This author's book which had most impact (*Gender Trouble*, the first edition of which dates back to 1990 and that won a commemorative edition in 1999 due to its ten years of success) has just been translated into Portuguese by the publishing company Civilização Brasileira (*Problemas de Gênero*, 2003). Butler is also recognised for her research that attempts to establish a linking point between the social critics theory, principally contemporary French philosophy (what the North Americans call “*continental philosophy*”) represented by Michel Foucault and the theoretical fundamentals of psychoanalysis. The central discussion of her work is the essentially ethical and political character opened by psychoanalysis in respect to the “*trope*” of our life's course. By articulating Foucault's work on the psychoanalytical referential, Butler searches to comprehend the relations of power from which we emerge as subjects and that are, original and simultaneously, subjectivators and marked by primary vulnerability but that carry inside themselves the possibilities of the construction of the creator's resistance to the serial norm (associated with our wish for identity capture) in the form of self domination in each temporal-space context.

“*Trope*” is a figure of speech (Butler is a professor of rhetoric at Berkley and widely known in the literary field) that is derived from the Greek “*tropicus*” and “*tropos*” that means turn and from Latin “*tropus*” that means metaphor. The sense that Butler prefers is inspired by the Nietzschean perspective of the “lost” origin of the sense (the signs chain). The “turn” represented by the *trope* of our lives refers to the intrinsic mechanisms of the ruling that subjugates us and forms us (the law) and that carry in themselves the possibilities of resistance and the creation of forms of being and existing that can exercise the “care of oneself” as a reflexive practice of freedom.

The constitution of the subject depends in the destruction of the body. “*Soul, prison of the body*”, in accordance with Foucault (1975), is the allegory of the subject's formation from the “cultural unconscious” that de-limits the implicit systems of which we are prisoners. The unique and first essence of the subject is its desire to exist, which is only possible in the human from the desire of the other. The symbolic chain and the significant net is organised from this transformation of the other into “Other” in the constitution of the ideal me.

---

<sup>3</sup> Psychiatric Doctor and Psychoanalyst.

For Butler, the sublimating process is a form in which the body disappears and the subject emerges. Through the mastery of itself, seized from dependence of the other that marks the social ruling and maintains the desire to exist, the subject constitutes itself repeatedly through life. The repetition is the symptomatic way of the reinstallation of power that submits the subject to the identity capture. It is the “in love” collage of subjection that guarantees the maintenance of the forms of domination.

Two scenarios will be discussed in this text as a form of thinking the exercise of the psychoanalysis as a metaphor of the possibilities of resistance/creation that mark the possibilities opened by Butler’s political project in searching for a comprehension of the psychological life of the power between Freud and Foucault.

### **Setting out the spectre of the genders**

*" My name is Agrado<sup>4</sup> because all my life I tried to please others, apart from being pleasant, I am very authentic. Look, what a body! Done to perfection. Almond eyes: 80,000 (pesetas), nose: 200 – such a waste because in a fight I got like this, I know it gives me a lot of personality, but if I had known I wouldn't have touched anything. Continuing... breasts: two, because I am not a monster, 70,000 each, but they are already absorbed. Silicone, where? Lips, forehead, cheekbones, hips and bottom, a litre costs 100,000. Calculate yourselves because I've already lost count. Jaw reduction: 75 thousand. Definitive laser hair removal, because the woman as the man comes from the ape: 60 thousand / session, it depends on the hair of each, in general two to four sessions, but if you are a flamenco diva, you will need more. As I was saying, it costs a lot to be authentic; you cannot save on these things. Someone is more authentic when more of oneself looks as one dreamt of oneself" (character speech in the film *All about my Mother* (1998), by Pedro Almodóvar).*

When taking the word of a transvestite about the construction of his body and of its fight to exist while the subject, you can see emphasized the impossibility of the maintenance of normative speech in regard to compulsory heterosexuality. The social regulation says that the subject can only be man or woman, and, as the

---

<sup>4</sup> The name Agrado, In Spanish, derivates from a verb that means “to please” others

subject can only emerge from an in love connection to the subjection, it is necessary to recognise itself in one of these two places.

This transvestite body sets out a diversion and an affirmation of the norm, because it can be seen as a resistance to the cultural subjection – of what it would designate as a constitution of a masculine gender tied to a male body – as for the subjection to the identity of the female gender.

Agrado comes into the power game, when giving visibility to his 'out of the rule' sexuality, but he doesn't join the game to propose a break from the norm. On the contrary, it is the wish of the norm that drives him/her.

Almodóvar's character's speech reveals an intersubjective side to the subjectivity: the intention in the change is the look of the other; it is the Agrado to the other. In other words, to exist, Agrado needs to feel desired, to construct a love relationship with the other, that makes us think of the confirmation of Butler's hypothesis of the subject's constitution as being a 'in love' connection to the subjection.

The supposition that it is in the course of the construction of the emerging woman in a macho body, it takes as the truth the existence of a wishing essence in the character (you are more authentic when you look more like "you dreamt of yourself") of transforming himself into a woman. The transformation marks the search of a feminine essence that can be reached in the body transformation, since the transformation has to be biological, as it not possible (yet!!!) to modify the genetics, it is possible to mark in the body and search in itself a feminine more than feminine.

Agrado's speech could be the speech of any woman in contemporary society that does the accounts to modify her body in order to model it in accordance with what culture demands of the current feminine image. The "cultural unconscious" that imposes the need to have a sculptural body, fabricated for the show. Agrado, in this sense, highlights the subjection to the norm, because it searches for a woman's body as the said culture.

This possibility of comprehension conserves the dual vision of the gender's constitution, reducing the possibilities of gender identities to be man or to be woman, anchored to the anatomical sexual differences.

From Butler's discussion it is possible to amplify the binary interpretations about gender construction. She also utilises the existence of transvestism to bring controversy to the identities of gender, signalling that this way of being reveals the

precariousness of the metaphysical substance of the sexes. Gender starts to be understood as a performance, a dramatic and contingent construction of sense.

*“In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of casual unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary” (Butler, 1999, p.175).”*

In a way, Agrado gives a performance that maintains her in the strategic game of the binary structure of gender, that even yet is a legitimising form or the subject's constitution. It is a form of subjection to the regulatory power to which she is connected 'in love'.

For Butler there exists a varied range of possibilities as to the constitution of genders inside the polarized spectre by the man/woman identities or even the homo/heterosexual. In questioning the oedipal interpretation of the constitution of the subject, Butler positions herself as refuting the ontological dualism that separates the political and the psychological. She takes the sexuality field as a political fight, which makes necessary the destruction of the binary structure of the sexes for the emergence of new possibilities through a wide spectre of gender constitution that would take you to new relations of power.

In the first presented scenario, the supposition was made that Agrado sets out the assujeitamento paradox, because if on one hand he resists the biological body that doesn't accompany his homosexual desire and on the other hand, Agrado falls in with the assujeitamento to the normative ruling by demanding recognition in this woman's body, once the loving attachment to the assujeitamento is a condition of existence.

As a counterpoint to this situation another scene is presented with the intention of exemplifying how resistance arises from the loving attachment to the norm, concordant with the Foucaultian speech that the relations of power of which we are constituted always produce, as an effect, the possibility of resisting the forms of legitimate domination. The resistance is co-extensive and contemporary with the relations of power.

In the X ENTLAIDS<sup>5</sup>, promoted by the NGO Equality – Transvestites and Transsexuals Association of Rio Grande do Sul, which took place in Porto Alegre, June 2003, a transsexual relates a bit of his/her story and of how he/she started his/her fight for recognition for freedom of sexual choice. A Colombian national, but resident in Italy, after undergoing a sex change operation; he/she goes to the “holy land” in search of baptism. This scene makes us think of the need for recognition of a sacred feminine identity, saint-woman, in direct opposition to the social recognition that a transvestite occupies in the prostitution, bitch-woman, identity of which this person didn’t want to be associated. The Catholic Institution denied him/her baptism, firstly, due to his/her nationality and his/her possible illegality in the country and the stigma of the narcotraffic link. For the first of these hurdles, the necessary documentation presentation was sufficient to clarify the situation of legality. However, a second obstacle presented itself in relation to his/her civil identity, in which the sex appeared as masculine in contrast to the existing condition, which resulted in the confirmation of the refusal of sacrament.

This second scene also raises the question of subjection, the need of the recognition of gender normalisation. However, as the church’s recognition of his/her new gender was denied, this subject joins in the power games through resistance. Faced with the impossibility of recognition in the norm, he/she initiates a movement of rupture in the dominant speeches. There is a commitment in the collective movement, in the fight for the rights of transvestites and transsexuals, the search for a belonging to another logic, in which it is possible for him/her to occupy the place of questioner, capable of saying publicly:

*- Call us sick, but all society does what we do, in other words, uses silicone, undergoes plastic surgery...*

This militancy acts as recognition or a demand for recognition of another identity that is not man or woman, denounced through the exaggeration of the performance, in the fragility of the identity of the constitution of gender as coherent and totalising.

The agnosticism of the genders has as a stage its own body. Man’s body, woman’s body, transvestite’s body, body in transformation, resisting or docile. The way of being of the transvestite implies the destruction of the biological body as a condition for the emergence of the subject. It can be seen as a more authentic

---

<sup>5</sup> National Meeting of Travestites and the Liberated in the Fight against Aids and for Citizenship, Rights and Health. From 26 to 29 June 2003.

existence, whose mobility is more from an existential order than from the erotic. The movement of agonistic construction is not a choice, but an existential condition.

In a way, the transvestite acts and reveals the gender parody, because an origin connected to the biological body wouldn't exist, and the need for the destruction of this body would, which when invested with sense can give conditions for the emergence of a subject.

### **The psychological life of power in the construction of gender**

Butler, supported by Freud's psychoanalyses, has a proposal that "*it may at first seem strange to think of gender as a kind of melancholy, or as one of melancholy's effects*" (Butler, 1997, p. 132). Her argumentation emerges from the Freudian affirmation in *The Ego and the Id* that the unfinished mourning is situated in the centre of identifications that constitute the ego, because the lost object is incorporated and preserved phantasmatically in the ego.

Therefore, taking as an example the negative Oedipus of a girl – terminology criticized by Butler – her attachment to the object of the same sex should not suffer substitution by another feminine figure. She should renounce the possibility of a homosexual attachment as a condition of entrance in the stated positive Oedipus, in other words, the establishment of the so-called sexual orientation with attachment, preferably to a heterosexual object. The girl being subjected to an interdiction that excludes the mother as an object of desire, installing this object in the Ego as a melancholic identification (without mourning), so this identification contains the interdict and the desire. Butler continues with the same argumentative development in relation to the masculine gender which in the end, affirms that the permanence of the homosexual attachment foreclosed terrorizes both sexes.

The interdict of homosexuality operates in a predominantly heterosexual culture. If the culture renounces the homosexual attachment, you can think "(...)the transition from the consideration of melancholia as a specifically psychic economy to the production of the circuitry of melancholia as part of the operation of regulatory power" (Butler, 1997, p. 143). Producing as an effect the consolidation of a speech that naturalizes gender and legitimises ways of domination. For this author, the melancholy produced through the obligatory production of heterosexuality constitutes gender as a performance.

Butler proposes the discussion of the naturalisation of the coherent way sex-gender-practise sexual-desire. The political fight that made possible the visibility of new forms of sexual identities doesn't allow any additional maintenance of the binary interpretations, from the understanding of the classic Oedipal. The Oedipus of Freudian psychoanalyses is constructed inside a regime of truths that naturalises the sexes, that affirms that the biology is the destiny, and proposes that once achieved a sexual orientation stays glued to an identity of coherent gender, permanent and stable.

In this sense, we can think of the psychoanalytical speech as a legitimiser of culture and therefore as a passage of the destiny of the biology to the destiny of the culture.

"On some accounts, the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law. When the relevant "culture" that "constructs" gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny" (*Butler, 1999, pg.12*).

The ethical practise of psychoanalyses nowadays imposes the critical reflection, since we can think that the psychoanalytical theory (as the cultural fruit of an era) supports an explanation that legitimises this construction/investment of the symbolic in the body that, in a certain way, is accompanied by the biological *a priori* and in this way produces a speech of truth.

To articulate the work of Freud and Foucault, Butler allows us to discuss in which way this Oedipal truth around (and on the throne) of the biological body was constructed. The question that Butler introduces permits us to think of the relations of power "within" the constitution of the psyche and brings elements to reflect on the inside of the "psys" discussions, the effects of the normalising power.

## Referências Bibliográficas

BUTLER, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power – Theories in Subjection*. California: Stanford University Press, 1997.

BUTLER, Judith. *La Vie psychique du pouvoir – L'assujettissement en théories*. Éditions Léo Scheer, 2002.

BUTLER, Judith. *Gender Trouble – Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.