

Images from a historical interstice – Herbert Marcuse and the cyborg`s new sensibility ¹

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Introduction:

On this paper I will develop some implications about the concept of obscenity from Marcuse, to thinking over some political paradoxes that permeate our contemporary lives. To this, I assume a question: what has been considered obscene in these, the first two decades of the twenty-first century?

Obscenity, as a perversion, has to do with transgressions against sexual morality, a form of behavior that affects sexual mores and causes estrangement. The obscene sheds light on the cultural taboos from which our bodies, that is to say our identities, are formed. The obscene is the opposite of the chaste, the pure, the decent, the dignified and, as such, it is a moral concept. I propose that this category can help us reflect on certain subjective paradoxes and on contemporary politics.

I have two groups of questions that mobilize this lecture. I am not sure if I can answer all of these questions, but we would do well to reflect on them. First, in regards to that mixture of terror and desire present in obscenity, and I ask: towards which kind of phenomenon does obscenity lead us today? What does it say about desire and the contemporary body? What does it say about contemporary taboos? Second: how could critical theory make use of this concept without falling into moralism or conservatism? Can obscenity become a political concept?

Now, we will see some contexts where obscenity touches a political dimension.

I

Today in Brazil we see extremely conservative and backwards political decisions being made. Some months ago, Brazilian congresspeople, part of a contingent that calls itself BBB (meaning Bullets, Bulls and the Bible) and supported by both violent media action and national elites, paralyzed the government and

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started a political crisis with the potential to severely curtail human rights in Brazil. In the past few months, many law projects of this sort were approved or are under discussion in the Chamber of Deputies commanded by deputy Eduardo Cunha. Some examples:

- The criminalization of heterophobia.
- The approval of a law project that prohibits the distribution of the “morning-after pill” and denies abortion rights to women who were victims of sexual abuse.
- Changes to the official political conception of what a family consists in, with the determination that a family must be regarded as constituted by a man and a woman within a traditional heterosexual union.
- The punishment of teachers who talk about diversity and gender in their classes.

In the latter case, conservative politicians defend that such ideas will trouble the mind of children and trouble their identity; that children should not be allowed to choose, but simply obey; and that “gender ideology” is the end of the traditional family and of our species, because, and I quote, “a man cannot reproduce with another man, a woman cannot reproduce with another woman,” end of quote. In a speech given by deputy Jairson Canario, he says, and once again I quote, “*If God didn’t want there to be a difference between a man and a woman, he would have made Adam with both genitalia,*” end of quote. God or Nature has supposedly created us as men and women, and all changes to reproductive sexuality are considered obscene; expressions often used are “mutations”, “people of another race”, suggesting, in other words, all non-compliant behavior to be anti-natural, perverse, pathological. What this reveals is how deep the connection is, within this discourse, between nature and values, biology and morality.

Some questions mobilized by this discourses: What exactly is, to them, obscene? Where are such obscenities to be found? It seems that to them homosexuality is a kind of obscenity. So, sexual pleasure detached from biological reproduction. Or, we can put the question differently, using a critical reversal: is the mobilization by these deputies to change the law and decrease freedoms – and, subsequently, increase prejudice – not in itself obscene? What is the taboo that hides under these moral and political discourses? It is, to put it simply, the sexualized body. Eroticism. Biology. Nature.

II

In two thousand and one, before the September eleven attacks, a couple of performance artists created *pornoterrorism*, an artistic and political performance inspired by the *post-porno* genre. By post-porno, we mean those performances that seek to oppose the normalized pornography that we are made familiar with by the cultural industry. They are exhibited in alternative, underground spaces of art and culture.

The pornography on display in such exhibitions focuses on hidden and strange sexual practices. In the words of the *pornoterrorist* Diana Torres, the objective is, and I quote, "*to create a state of excitement that causes an openness of feeling*," end of quote, leading sexuality from its preconditioned dimension to a liberated sphere. This liberation could lead to the emergence of cosmopolitical humans constituted in a space of freedom beyond sexuality, gender identities or national identities. A space of freedom beyond the abstract images of selves.

Now, we can revisit our question, from a different perspective: what exactly is, to *pornoterrorism*, obscene? To what an extent were such performances successful in remaking and disrupting the concept of obscenity?

Faced with the "obscenity" of our society, the only possible reaction would be a counter-obscenity. "*Pornify terrorism*", as the slogan goes – that is the message of *pornoterrorism*. But here, the meaning of the term "obscenity" is changed.

The obscene in *pornoterrorism* does not consist in strange sexual practices, paraphilic and abject. To performers of this sort, it is attempts on the lives of people that are truly obscene, their deaths broadcast live from every angle, their desperation and fear of the other. Obscene is the emotional trigger produced by fear. The shock of the image of the attack, repeated over and over again, is truly terrifying.

But shock as it appears in the performances of Diana Torres is something different – It brings forth a memory of eroticized bodies, forgotten senses, pleasures buried by social fears. It also brings to mind the sexuality of objects, of sounds, of smells, of bodily fluids.

Obscenity is a concept linked to sexual taboos. In the obscene, one simultaneously finds sexual deviations and, at the same time, the norm that produces suffering and prejudice. A critical concept of obscenity needs to be perverse. A critical obscenity is a result of a critical theory of obscenity. Because it

reverses the prosecution: the accusers are turned into the accused. The obscene is the repressive order, the militarized society with its weapons; social paranoia; exclusions; prejudice and stereotypical thinking.

III

What is it about pornography that makes it exciting? Marcuse tried to show us. Excitation, as a mixture of violence and pleasure, reveals the contradictory internalization that forms our feelings and identities. The unconscious dimension of industrial society with its specific production of bodies. *Eros and civilization* is the book where Marcuse presented to us this repressive body alongside images of potential liberation.

The body, here, is given crucial importance: it is not simply the theme of this book. As I read it, the book mobilizes our bodies. In this sense, I propose that *Eros and civilization* is a rather poetic book. Are we ready to understand the implications of these mobilizations?

IV

What is important to me is to reflect on how to construct a kind of discourse to problematize the emergence of conservative positions that permeate all social classes in Brazil today.

What we can see is that the arguments presented by conservative Brazilian politicians are always rooted in a biological and fixed conception of the body intended to allow them to keep the body under control. A kind of naturalized or reified conception of human nature that reveals the extent to which anthropology is present in political praxis. I think that the emergence of this discourse at this moment is a symptom of the specific and deeply paradoxical character of our relationship with nature, biology and the body in the twenty-first century.

Against such politicians, the feminist movement is one of the most important in Brazil at the moment. Feminism refuses nature through an understanding of gender where so-called “natural” sexuality appears as a cultural construction. However, the biological body must not disappear. It is necessary that we recreate the body anew, through what may be termed a political biology. A way to do this seems to be present in Marcuse, in *Eros and Civilization*, a book that, to me, is both

obscene and perverse, but in the *pornoterroristic* sense of these terms. I quote Marcuse:

No longer used as a fulltime instrument of labor, the body would be resexualized. The regression involved in this spread of the libido would first manifest itself in a reactivation of all erotogenic zones and, consequently, in a resurgence of pregenital polymorphous sexuality and in a decline of genital supremacy. The body in its entirety would become an object of cathexis, a thing to be enjoyed-an instrument of pleasure. This change in the value and scope of libidinal relations would lead to a disintegration of the institutions in which the private interpersonal relations have been organized, particularly the monogamic and patriarchal family.

The counter-obscenity consists in *postgender* bodies, in transexuality, in the queer individuals and cyborgs that we see in *pornoterrorist* performances. The body is not split into parts or limited to organs and functionalities, to mind and feelings, to head and heart. The counter-body lies beyond the language that sets it as a tool that is separate from me – as an object or nature. If it is a kind of *Great Refusal*, so is it also necessary for critical theory to become something of a cyborg – for it to escape dualisms and create a new language, a language able to confront the paradoxes of our time.

To me is important the idea that technology is not just an instrumentality, but a kind of ontology too. Marcuse said this when he used the concept on *technicity* on the article “From ontology to technology”. I think that the ideas by Donna Haraway about the Cyborg Manifest and its metaphysical implications can help us to see toward this instrumental concept of instrumentality.