Judith Halberstam: Popular Culture "conceives" the Transbiological

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ON OCTOBER 24, 2006, the Center for the Study of Women presented Judith Halberstam's provocatively titled talk, “Transbiology: Penguin Love, Doll Sex, and the Spectacle of the Non-Reproductive Body” as part of a speaker series focusing on performance and embodiment. Effortlessly moving between references as diverse as Joan Roughgarden’s influential book *Evolution’s Rainbow* and horror films, Halberstam called into question our society’s deepest assumptions about the nature of humanity, heterosexuality, reproduction, and the conflation of these terms. By examining the tenuous discourses of human reproduction in *March of the Penguins* and *Seed of Chucky*, she opened up a space in which to discuss what she terms “counter knowledges” in the realm of popular culture.

A Professor of English and Director of the Center for Feminist Research at USC, much of Halberstam’s past work has challenged the artificial binarism of distinctions between masculinity and femininity, man and woman, and heterosexuality and homosexuality. Her most recent book, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, examines transgendered possibilities and productions of space and time which provide alternatives to hetero-normative conceptions. In this book and throughout her career, one of Halberstam’s central concerns has been the investigation of popular culture’s representations of queer, transgender, and transsexual bodies and subjectivities.

In her talk Halberstam went beyond issues of gender and sexuality in order to look at pop cultural representations of transbiology, a term...
which might best be understood as a blurring of the lines between human and non-human. Drawing on the examples of the anthropomorphized penguins in *March of the Penguins* and the transubstantiated human-dolls in *Seed of Chucky*, she convincingly demonstrated the way in which these films denaturalize discourses of human-ness. In the case of *March of the Penguins*, Halberstam argued that this denaturalization was unwitting. Even as the film, with its humanizing voiceover, attempts to naturalize heterosexual love and reproduction, it comes apart at the seams. While the voiceover neglects evidence of productively non-reproductive (and likely non-heterosexual) members of the penguin community, these members are highly visible and, as such, allow us to understand the effort that was necessarily involved in spinning the film into the tale of family values that it was perceived as by the Christian right. Instead of demonstrating that penguins-as-humans are naturally disposed to heterosexual family life, the film’s subtext works as “counter knowledge” in relation to heteronormative assumptions which are rooted in the rhetoric of “nature.”

On the other end of the spectrum, *Seed of Chucky*, in its connections to the horror and animation genres, allows (and even encourages) transbiological play. As Halberstam noted in the talk (as well as in her book *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* [Duke University Press, 1995]), the horror genre has often served as a site for the working out of human versus its others. In the context of *Seed of Chucky*, she drew on horror’s destabilization of inside/outside and gendered distinctions to call for a reevaluation of the animation lab which puts it into conversation with the biology lab. Both the reproductive technologies of the latter and the aesthetic technologies of the former serve to denaturalize what is considered “human.” *Seed of Chucky* is an especially interesting text in which to explore this connection given the film’s tale of a human criminal who is transubstantiated (the film’s term) into the body of a doll by way of supernatural forces. Halberstam found it noncoincidental that the “seed of chucky” turns out to be a highly androgynous individual (*above*) whose gender is finally determined only by recourse to the traditional oedipal scenario.

The overall thrust of Halberstam’s talk was to suggest that contemporary popular culture, despite its frequent efforts to toe the heteronormative line, is actually able to imagine new, interesting, and potentially liberating alternatives to bodies, subjectivities, and relationships dictated by the “natural” rhetoric of heterosexual reproduction. By suggesting the concept of “counter knowledge,” which is produced by failures (i.e. that of the voiceover in *March of the Penguins*), and stupidity (i.e. horror films such as *Seed of Chucky*) Halberstam provided a productive framework by which we can examine not only popular culture, but the deeply held social beliefs and assumptions that inform it.

Laurel Westrup is a PhD candidate in the Critical Studies in Film, Television, and Digital Media program at UCLA. Her dissertation will explore what she terms the “political economy of death” in relation to the performance of rock music in film and television. In addition to her work on the relationship between music and the moving image media, her research interests include new approaches to feminist media theory, diasporic filmmaking and reception, and media convergence.