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By Andrew Goffey

Andrew Goffey reviews *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Biotechnology and the Mutations of Desire* by Luciana Parisi

Sex, Roland Barthes once remarked, is everywhere but in sex. A computer program, an advertising pitch, a car, a recipe: all are candidates for the erotics of libidinal investment. Uprooted from its referent and transformed into a mobile, infinitely displaceable signifier, sex becomes an indispensable component in the games of abstract equivalence of contemporary capitalism. Whether its destiny is to become an element in the reactionary investments – the reterritorialisation of drives – essential to the shoring up of an economic system, however, requires an imaginative rethink of the way that we conceptualise sex.

Luciana Parisi's recent *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Bio-Technology and The Mutations of Desire* wants to have done with the attempt to understand sex and its politics through culture and its vicissitudes. It also wants to have done with attempts to understand gender through nature and its avatars. In fact, in keeping with the very Deleuzian inspiration of her book, Parisi's 'micro-feminist' take on sex wants to discard all of the dualisms – about mind and body, nature and culture, form and matter – we rely on when we talk about sex. Her vision, and it is a vision, is literally a molecular one in which sex is instantiated in any number of biologically, culturally and technologically defined assemblages.

Like a number of other contemporary researchers, Parisi is tired of the debate about nature and culture and of the way that it remains, implicitly, in the background of 'radical' PoMo theories of gender as performance. Although *Abstract Sex* wants to cut across the biological-technological divide, it is to biology that Parisi turns for her basic conceptual vocabulary. However, the biology she likes is not the crude genetic determinism favoured, for example, by recent evolutionary psychology in its attempts to explain sex and gender, but rather the alternative conceptual models provided by researchers such as Lynn Margulis. Margulis and her co-workers have a lot to say about the possibility of models of evolution which provide an alternative to the step-wise refinements of (neo)Darwinian descent with modification. The concept of symbiosis provides strong evidence for the horizontal transfer – Margulis calls it 'genetic trading' – of genetic information as an alternative mode of transmission. Concurring with recent critical accounts of molecular biology, symbiosis enables a critique of the metaphysical privileging of unity and linearity over multiplicity in favour of 'a-parallel' or 'non-linear' evolution.

For Parisi, sex is abstract because it is everywhere: it is 'abstracted'. It ceases to designate the sexed reproduction which serves as a model for much biological research (as well as forming the 'givens' sitting in the background of the cultural approach to gender) and spreads disease-like from bacteria through human culture and into the macro-parasitic machinery of capitalism. Sexed reproduction – familiar to humans and some other life forms – becomes a historically relative mode, not the conceptual centre from which to understand other forms of sex relation: bacterial sex and cloning designate other equally valid types entailing their own organisation and following their own rules.

Abstract Sex is remarkably lacking in the censorial tone familiar in many critical accounts of sex and sexual politics. The term itself 'Abstract Sex' is a bit of a provocation: becoming abstract is not something to be disparaged. It simply is, albeit in an infinitely mobile and mutable format, actualising into: microbial sex, bacterial sex, meiotic sex, aquatic sex human sex, turbo sex, cybernetic sex... Sex sex sex. This absence of critique is not a simple omission but the consequence of the happy nihilism of the theoretical stance that *Abstract Sex* adopts. The attack it launches on the dualistic quality of our thinking about sex develops the implications of the Nietzschean critique of transcendent values

proposed by Gilles Deleuze. In this world, concepts cease to be representations of things and become more like colours: colours as such are not representations of the world – they either suit you or they don't. Hence *Abstract Sex* develops a sort of conceptual poetics in various shades of black: terms seem just to crop up in the course of a chapter, naming something into existence without following the academic niceties of rational justification. The procedure is disarmingly simple but complex, bewildering even, in its effects: *Abstract Sex* doesn't want to be pinned down by the (representational) norms of theoretical discourse. As a consequence, it is difficult to say, in the detail, what *Abstract Sex* is about: 'aboutness' is tied in too closely to the problem of representation to provide a useful measure of the value of a piece of writing - and incidentally, once discarded, makes the idea of the 'review' somewhat redundant.

In a conceptual universe which has abandoned representation and its principles perhaps the only half sensible way of evaluating a book is to see what new questions it forces you to ask. *Abstract Sex* does a good job of developing a productive critique of the anthropomorphic assumptions of much theorising about sex and gender and its technique of magnifying the place of sex and reproduction onto every stratum of nature-culture is a useful reminder of the relatively limited place of human sex across life forms. At one point in her book Parisi acknowledges that what she is doing might appear simply to be another form of anthropomorphisation 'the extension of a cultural conception of femininity onto the unknown – the interpretation of random matter'. Whether 'sex' with all the historical associations which weigh it down is a word adequate for a creative rethink of the propagation of life forms and for the functions of the human mode of sexed reproduction within the cosmos is clearly a speculative issue. Parisi's bet is ultimately that a passage via philosophy is necessary in order for this to become a political problem. a

Luciana Parisi, *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Biotechnology and the Mutations of Desire*, London: Continuum Books, 2003 £18.99

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