



## Unnatural acts

### Description

Wanting to punch someone is a "perfectly natural urge" for a male under certain circumstances said broadcaster Jeremy Paxman ([Telegraph](#)). As it happens, I've just caught up with *Despicable Me 2* (2013), with its camped-up super villain El Macho who boasts, woos and wants to take over the world – repeating yet again through exaggeration and humour a common male stereotype. Celebrity punch ups, cartoons and digital animations are entertainment after all.

Who can blame a man or woman from conforming to their natures? Of course, nature and "the natural" are difficult categories. To identify and define a person, animal or organism in terms of gender informs expectations. For my purposes, the discussion around issues of gender provides a useful test case for tackling the supposed certainties of nature and the natural.

According to feminist writer Judith Butler, "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an interior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (140).

### What a performance!

There's a lot to unpack there, not least the proposition that gender involves acting. To be of a gender is to perform acts, gestures, enactments, and desires: "Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (136). Fabrication, artifice, construction, culture: these oppose the *natural*.

Neither is the connection with acting incidental. She invokes the inversion of stereotypical roles exhibited in cross dressing and *the drag act*: "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency" (137). Entertaining audiences with cross-gendered parody and pathos makes obvious that there really isn't an original (a natural condition) that is being copied.

She cites the role of Edna in the movie *Hairspray* played in the film version by John Travolta, but originally performed by drag artist Divine: “Her/his performance destabilizes the very distinction between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates” (viii).

I’m not sure Butler articulates this, but drag artists are imitating other drag artists as much as the gender they seek to homage, or parody. This tactic to me elevates carnival exaggeration above its role in temporarily breaking the established order. Carnival parody and ambiguity on the edge of good taste reveal the disorder in the establishment. Supported by other writers, she brings one of the basest of entertainment formats to centre stage. Think of pantomime, rowdy bars and cabaret ahead of Greek theatre and Shakespeare—which come to think of include plenty of drag.



## Biological facts

Some theorists say that a person’s sex is a biological fact (what nature bequeathes you), but *gender* is culturally and socially decided. But Butler keeps the two terms (sex and gender) together: “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature” (7). She argues that the supposedly raw nature-given condition of a person’s sex is not only a tenuous foundation on which to build the idea of gender and identity; where it’s accepted without question it conceals its political genesis, and suppresses some fairly obvious “gender discontinuities” (135):

“Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction compels our belief in its necessity and naturalness” (140).

Nature is not something that comes before culture as “a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (7). It’s hard to escape sex and gender in discussions about nature and culture, as nature is often thought of as female: “in need of subordination by a culture that is invariably figured as male, active, and abstract” (37), a trope that Butler and others are keen to overturn.

Her book *Gender Trouble* is as much about power and politics as it is about gender and nature. She concludes with the upbeat if not enigmatic proposition that "genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically *incredible*" (141).

## References

- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. London: Routledge

## Note

- I'm grateful to Richard Hanrahan for alerting me to the function of the drag act.
- The image above is from the 2005 ECA fashion show theatrical costume section.

## Category

1. Nature

## Tags

1. entertainment
2. gender
3. performance
4. sex

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