

As the shadowy other to normative conceptions of health, productivity, and capacity, the defect marks the limit of our expectations about what a body can do. In the history of Western thought, both the female and the disabled body have been aligned with such corporeal deficiency, seen as less capable than their male, able-bodied counterparts.

Such conceptions of the defect(ive) frequently draw on an association between the organic and the mechanical, the natural and the artificial, the spontaneous and the automated. But these slippages and crossovers are far from one-sided in their invocation of a distinction between living bodies and machines. For the history of the defect is also a history of bodily potential—of figures whose apparent dysfunction is easily converted into a source of invention, generation, and productive change. Far from merely signaling the interruption or breakdown of a healthy bodily system, the defect has also emerged historically as its creative force, the seed or motor of its persistence.

This two-day symposium explores this multi-faceted nature of the defect, starting from two distinct, but subtly related epistemological and social sites—one ancient, one modern. In addressing the gaps and overlaps between biological and technical conceptions of deficiency, error, and impairment, we will have occasion to consider the complex imbrications of medical discourse and imagery with its philosophical, social and technological registers. We will ask whether and how the category of the defective might be reclaimed as a source of errant potential, rather than remaining confined within teleological frameworks of development, necessity, and reproduction.

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BERLIN INSTITUTE FOR CULTURAL INQUIRY

T H E E !

Symposium – 11-12 June 2015, In English

N V E N

**The Invention
of Defect**
Disability, Femininity, Technicity

O F D E

F E C T

With:
Emanuela Bianchi and
Mara Mills

Organized by
S. Pearl Brilmyer and
James Burton

MARA MILLS

On “Impairment”

“Impairment” is a central term in Anglophone disability studies, referring to physical difference or injury. “Disability,” by contrast, is understood to be social, the result of such factors as stigma and architectural or design exclusions. Recent scholars have contested this tidy physical/social distinction, however no work has been done to explain the roots of the modern concept of impairment. This talk will discuss efforts in the fields of medicine and communications to standardize the definition of impairment in the U.S. around 1920, in the context of industrial hygiene, workers’ compensation, veterans’ rehabilitation, and communications engineering. In the 1920s, impairment began to replace “defect” in the medical field as an explanation for reduced “work capacity.” At the same time, within telecommunications, the category of “transmission impairments” was formalized to explain phenomena such as noise, cross-talk, and distortion. Rather than antitheses to the norm, defects had begun to seem ubiquitous—however only defects that interfered with performance could be considered impairments. This lecture unearths a series of surprising connections between AT&T (American Telephone & Telegraph) and the public health field to explain this unlikely convergence, as well as the enduring „social“ aspect of impairment.

Mara Mills is Assistant Professor of Media, Culture and Communication at New York University where she works at the intersection of disability studies and media studies. Her research and teaching interests include communication history (especially related to telephones and reading practices), science and technology studies, disability theory, and mobile media studies.

EMANUELA BIANCHI

The Doctor and the Errant Body in Aristotle’s Metaphysics

The healthy animal organism is a key paradigm for Aristotle. In this talk, Bianchi outlines how the coming to be of the animal organism is intertwined with Aristotle’s metaphysics, and specifically how Aristotle’s theory of sexual reproduction forms a cornerstone of his metaphysical thinking. Here, the defect takes center stage, as the female only appears through an error or misstep in the reproductive process, and the hegemonic unity of the animal organism begins to become undone in the face of what she calls “the feminine symptom.” This aleatory dimension of the natural world falls outside the teleological natural order, and often acts against nature. The Greek notion of automaton denotes for the Greeks, as it does for us, a wondrous, apparently self-moving, puppet. But it also denotes the random motions of the natural world. And both these conceptions – technical wonder and natural exteriority – play a key role Aristotle’s account of animal genesis. In turn, automaton indicates a dimension of Aristotelian metaphysics that remains undeterminable by the teleology, remaining as an irreducible aleatory dimension. At key points in his texts, Aristotle draws on the figure of the doctor in a series of symptomatic attempts to re-establish the paradigm of nature as craftsman, thus keeping the defect at bay. What, then, might we make of the observation that the doctor himself may also be subject to error?

Emanuela Bianchi is Assistant Professor in Comparative Literature, with affiliations in Classics and the Program in Gender and Sexuality Studies, at NYU. She is the author of *The Feminine Symptom: Aleatory Matter in the Aristotelian Cosmos* (Fordham, 2014). She works at the intersection of ancient Greek philosophy, contemporary continental philosophy, and feminist and queer theory.

THURSDAY, 11 JUNE 2015

Evening Keynote

19:30 **Introduction:** S. PEARL BRILMYER
19:40 **Keynote:** MARA MILLS:
On “Impairment”

FRIDAY 12 JUNE 2015

15:00 – 17:00 **Workshop:** DEFECTIVE BODIES
Introduction and Moderation:
S. PEARL BRILMYER AND JAMES BURTON

The workshop will present a conversation around ontological, biological, and technical aspects of bodies perceived as defective with pre-circulated texts by Emanuela Bianchi and Mara Mills.

17:00 – 17:30 Coffee break

Evening Keynote

19:30 **Introduction:** JAMES BURTON
19:40 **Keynote:** EMANUELA BIANCHI:
The Doctor and the Errant Body in Aristotle’s Metaphysics

Both keynotes are open to the public. However, the workshop -- due to a limited number of seats -- requires prior registration. If you intend to participate in the workshop, please register by 8 June 2015 at presse@ici-berlin.org