

Chapter 9

The Fruit of Love: The German IVF-embryo Turning from Object into Bio-object

Bettina Bock von Wülfingen

Embryos generated in laboratories do at first sight exemplify the bio-object par excellence. They fit the core criteria of our definition: they seem ‘out of place’-nature, questioning the nature/culture divide as well as the one between ‘life’ and ‘artifact’. As a result of different national regulations they are necessarily¹ embedded in national policies regarding population, especially their status between human and nonhuman, as well as concerning their relation to and that between their parents (which multiply through the laboratory procedures) and technological creators. They are involved in and produce rules for (medical) industry standards, quality measurement practices and quality checkups of their environment, and in their own regard. Entangled in international desires and differences of power, extra uterine embryos are sent around the globe and treated as a commodity. At the same time the ‘lab embryo’ challenges the realness of the ‘lap embryo’: nature in the petri dish turns out to be real nature, while uncontrolled nature ‘out there’, inside dark wombs, becomes unwanted wilderness (Franklin 2006).

All this makes the petri dish embryo a perfect bio-object, one might think at first sight. Yet, it is exactly not the being-out-of-place (if there ever was a ‘natural’ place for an embryo), nor its seeming capacity to challenge the nature/culture- or life/artifact-divide that turns it into a bio-object, that this chapter argues. Such an argument would reenact those modern binaries (in a Latourian sense) and naturalize and universalize the (and any) embryo as bio-object. Instead, although the necessary technology might be in place everywhere, it is very different from country to country and from context to context, when and by what means embryos bio-objectify. Still, officially in some places and in some respect, they seem to resist any (medical, entrepreneurial and research related) treatment and economization. Germany serves as an example in this chapter, being a place where within the past ten years a naturalized and humanized laboratory embryo is questioned more and more in the economic need for it to turn into an (officially recognized) bio-object. This chapter focuses on a particular moment in German history, around the year 2000, where for the first time arguments were introduced into public discourse in favor of the manipulation of the embryo that before had been a reprobate or ‘object bio-object’.

Love plays a major role in this shift.

¹ Even if illegally produced they would not escape these regulations as also their illegal status would determine their ‘wild’ economic and technological regulation apart from the law.