

The She-Hulk case: body and identity in comics

O caso Mulher Hulk: corpo e identidade em quadrinhos

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Abstract

This paper presents a discussion about the difference between She-Hulk's and Hulk's bodies. Based on the origin of the two characters, we seek to find factors that justify the differences between them. Additionally, this paper presents the context and the possible influences from society in the design of these characters. Based on some texts about body, gender and health, we discuss the relationship between Hulk and his female version from a feminist perspective. We will discuss, in this paper, how the search for the ideal body through the use of anabolic steroids and dietary supplements may be related to She-Hulk. This study aims to initiate a reflection on the characteristics of the female version of Giant Emerald and to bring new issues for future discussions and research.

Key words: Comic. Body. Genre. Physics. Physics Teaching. Gamma Radiation.

Resumo

Neste trabalho discute-se sobre a diferença entre o corpo da Mulher Hulk e do Hulk a partir da origem dos dois personagens, procurando encontrar fatores que justifiquem as diferenças entre eles. Além disso, o artigo apresenta o contexto e as possíveis influências da sociedade na concepção destes personagens. Com base em alguns textos sobre corpo, gênero e saúde, buscam-se as relações entre Hulk e sua versão feminina, numa perspectiva feminista. Discute-se, ainda, como a busca do corpo ideal através

do uso de anabolizantes e suplementos alimentares pode ser relacionada com a Mulher Hulk. Procura-se iniciar uma reflexão sobre os elementos que caracterizam a versão feminina do Gigante Esmeralda, bem como levar novas questões para futuras discussões e trabalhos.

Palavras-chave: Quadrinhos. Corpo. Gênero. Física. Ensino de Física. Radiação Gama.

Introduction

This work^{aa} aims to discuss the different effects of gamma radiation on a man's body (Hulk) and woman's body (She-Hulk), under the perspective that the body consists of a social, mutable and mutant construction, susceptible to the transformations and interventions related to the scientific and technological development of each culture, the laws and the way of producing meaning in everyday life.¹ Amid discussions on the different genders and how they manifest, a question involving the incredible Hulk and She-Hulk arises: if they are similar superheroes, why doesn't She-Hulk have a deformed and monstrous body like the incredible Hulk?

She-Hulk's body fits society's beauty standards, and peculiar is only the green skin, an incredible strength and preserved conscience and intelligence; and a body that increases according to her anger's degree. The origin of Hulk and his powers came from a direct exposure to gamma radiation, which is harmful to the human body. The symptoms of high gamma-ray dosages would be nausea, vomit, headache, loss of white blood cells, hair loss, damages to cells of the nervous system and to cells lining the digestive tract.² In addition, it diminishes the production of the platelets in the blood that help form clots, cause leukemia (blood cancer), thyroid cancer and numerous other forms of cancer.

We will not discuss here Hulk's possible existence or not. It is not the aim of this work. Jean Wood Fuller, an enthusiastic "guinea pig" of the atomic bomb test carried out in the Nevada desert in 1955, exclaimed that "women can stand the shock and strain of an atomic explosion just as well as men".³ However, we can correlate the gamma-ray effects on the body in comic books, the use of anabolic steroids and dietary supplements to fit the established body standards.^{1,4,5}

a This work is part of the final dissertation for the Body, Gender and Society course of the Graduate Program in Biosciences and Health Education - Oswaldo Cruz Institute (Fiocruz), 2014. The course discusses body, gender and sexuality as social constructions and the ways of producing science, relating them to the scientific and technological development based on analyses conducted by social sciences in specific contexts.

The aim of the discussion in this paper is to investigate the factors that make She-Hulk's body sexy and attractive and Hulk's body monstrous and deformed. Are there explanations in the origin of each one or is it just an influence of society and the standards it establishes?

The Emerald Giant^b

In May, 1962, *The Incredible Hulk #1*⁶ magazine (Fig. 1) was published, which tells the story of a thin, shy nuclear physicist, Dr. Robert Bruce Banner. He works at the Los Diablos Missile Base – a military base located in the New Mexico's desert – on the most powerful weapon ever created by man – the incredible Gamma Bomb or G-Bomb. During the first test of the bomb, Banner sees a young man entering the restricted tests area. To save him, Banner asks his fellow scientist Igor Starsky^c to delay the countdown as he rushes to get the civilian out of the room safely.



Figure 1. Cover of the first issue of “The incredible Hulk” (1962)

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hulk_\(comics\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hulk_(comics))

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- b Originally, Hulk's color was gray. Stan Lee chose a color that would not suggest any particular ethnic group. However, due to a problem in the first printing, Hulk's color became increasingly greenish. In the next edition, Hulk was already green.^{2,6}
- c Pseudonym of Igor Drenkov, a soviet spy who wants to steal secrets of the Gamma Bomb.

Starsky does nothing about it, relying on Banner's death in the explosion and, therefore, he would have free access to the bomb's project, while the tests would be suspended in the United States of America. Reaching the civilian, who is a teenager named Rick Jones, Bruce threw him into a protective trench, and before he could get into the same hole, the bomb is detonated. Doctor Banner was hit with gamma rays, and instead of dying, the radiation transformed him in a humanoid monster with a gray skin, called Hulk.⁶

The Incredible Hulk, like other superheroes, was created in the context of the Cold War. Bruce Banner is a nuclear physicist, a scientific career that gained importance after the Manhattan Project,^d and works for the military, as do the physicists of this project. But the similarities and associations with the Cold War do not stop there. The Gamma Bomb testing takes place in New Mexico, the same location of the Trinity Test (1945); and the presence of a soviet spy is an element similar to the events of the Cold War. For many times, Hulk faced communist enemies, but was also chased by the American army. The adventures also addressed the atomic horror, on which the Cold War was fed, and he was his own victim and expressed the regret of many scientists who worked in the war industry.

She-Hulk

The first issue of *The Savage She-Hulk*⁷ (Fig. 2) was published in February, 1980. Now the protagonist is Jennifer Walters, a lawyer and Bruce Banner's cousin. In an attempt to find a reliable person with whom he could talk about his transformation, Bruce Banner decides to visit his cousin, who lives and works as a lawyer in Los Angeles.

d The Manhattan Project was a research work that developed the first atomic bomb during World War II. Some historians agree that the Cold War began after the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.^{2,8}



Figure 2. Cover of the first issue of “The Savage She-Hulk” (1980)

Source: http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Savage_She-Hulk_Vol_1_1

During the visit, they are attacked by gangsters, enemies of the lawyer. Walters is shot by the mobsters, but Bruce Banner manages to save her. She loses a lot of blood, and Dr. Banner improvises a blood transfusion until the arrival of the doctors and paramedics. Hulk’s blood gets in contact with Jennifer Walters’ blood, and she then becomes the She-Hulk whenever in danger or angry.⁷

Discussion

The origin of She-Hulk is not similar to Hulk’s. For this reason, the first question of this work cannot be answered by the difference of the effect of radiation on a male or female body, or at least it should not be considered in this case. The difference lies just in the fact that her body did not have a direct contact with gamma radiation, but with Bruce Banner’s blood instead. For this reason, the direct exposure to gamma radiation can justify Hulk’s deformed body, which does not justify the female version, whose body did not become deformed, only green, larger than normal and with all the same powers of his.

However, the non-deformity aspect of the She-Hulk's body leads us to other questions, such as, for instance, the fact that she was created with a sculptural, but not muscular body – after all, most of the readers of comics are men. According to Le Breton⁹ (p. 41):

In a woman engaged in intensive practice, the ingestion of male hormones associated with diet and workout tends to eliminate femininity and produce a singular body in shape, awkward, except for the haircut and clothing.⁹

Both men and women want to have ideal bodies, and She-Hulk represents such body ideal, because she is not so exaggerated as Hulk. The transformation of She-Hulk, for instance, can be related to the use of anabolic steroids and dietary supplements. The ingestion of male sex hormones, which Le Breton⁹ mentions, can be figured by Bruce Banner's blood to Jennifer Walkers, giving origin to the female version of the Emerald Giant. Many people use anabolic steroids and dietary supplements to achieve the satisfaction of a bodily aesthetics.^{4,5}

For this reason, if Stan Lee had designed her body with an exaggerated and deformed shape, would she have the fans' acceptance? Or would her sexual identity be clear to the reader? Louro¹⁰ says that, in order to understand the place and relationships of men and women in society, it is important not to observe exactly their sexes but everything that has been socially constructed about the sexes. Furthermore, different sexual identities are constituted of different manners of experiencing sexuality. She-Hulk is attractive and sexy, and often her stories portray her romances and sexual relationships with other characters of Marvel's^e universe. For this reason, she has a well-constructed gender and sexual identity for men fans.

Recently, in Scriptnotes podcast, screenwriter David S. Goyer commented that She-Hulk would be like a porn star especially made for Hulk.^{11,12} In response, Stan Lee retorts:

We were looking for a new female superhero and the idea of an intelligent Hulk-type grabbed me. Never for an instant did we want her as a love interest for Hulk. Only a nut would even think of that. As for her looking beautiful and curvy, show me the superheroine who isn't.¹²

But why superheroines must be beautiful and curvy? Our society has what Louro¹⁰ calls “normalization of conduct” of boys and girls, where knowledge about sexuality and bodies, techniques, tactics and technologies is produced to ensure the subjects' “governing” and “self-governing” control. As already mentioned, a very muscular woman loses her femininity, according to the standards and norms established by our society.

^e Marvel's universe is the fictitious setting created by Marvel Comics, where the works produced by the publisher take place. The Incredible Hulk and She-Hulk live in this universe, as well as Iron Man, Capitan America, among others.

Another question is: why doesn't she have the same Hulk's origin? Schienbinger³ says that at the time of the Manhattan Project, there were no women working on the atomic bomb. There were, indeed, women who followed their husbands and worked in "schools, coordinated social events, had babies, cooked, cleaned and created a life somehow tolerable in the improvised city in the desert (Los Alamos)".² However, "in the late 1980s, there were three female bomb designers in Los Alamos".² She-Hulk was created in the early 1980s, but comics have always brought novelties and revolutions, so why not a female scientist? Would she be a cliché, would she have an origin like Hulk's? Or their idea was to have a power relationship similar to Adam's and Eve's origin?

This study aimed to start a gender discussion involving these two characters and is not intended to end the discussion, but to foster and further develop it.

Final considerations

A noteworthy fact and for future studies on She-Hulk is how she subverts the comics' metalanguages. She jumps from a panel to the other, breaking the fourth wall. She breaks panels to take shortcuts, or to speak and give order to the narrator, reader or screenwriter (Fig. 3).

The characters that have such "superpower" are aware that their universe is fictitious. Therefore, they are capable of deeds that would be impossible within the Universe. They can change reality and many times are omniscient within the context of their own false reality¹³.



Figure 3. Example of fourth-wall break (1989-1994)

Source: <http://i80.photobucket.com/albums/j182/swiftian/zaius2009a/zaius09d/shehulk1.jpg>

f The fourth wall is a conceptual barrier between the theater stage, the television and/or movies screen and the viewers.

In the above figure, Jennifer Walters dismisses the narrator, because he “speaks” incorrectly. Characters with this trait are considered nuts or transgressors of reality. That is why She-Hulk has this “power”, which can mean two things: (i) a criticism to the fact that women had no voice in the late 1970s and early 1980; (ii) or a criticism to the commonplace that says that women get into everything. This is an interesting topic of study, but is left for an upcoming work.

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