Armstrong, Tim **(ed.) American Bodies: Cultural Histories of the Physique, Washington Square, New York University Press, 1996. Pp. 212, no index, no illustrations, 18.95 pb.**

American Bodies: Cultural Histories of the Physique is an edited volume of papers, most of which were given at the 1994 British Association for American Studies Annual Conference held at Sheffield, England. The fourteen essays in the collection, each paired with another under a distinct subtitle, all deal in one way or

another with issues relating to the body in American culture over the past two and a half centuries. They range in approach from cultural and intellectual history to film and literary studies, and they highlight a wide range of bodily subjects such as tattoos, cannibalism, birth control, cyberpunk, anorexia, and plastic surgery. Yet all focus in various ways upon the interrelated topics of body as text, and body as metaphor for social arrangements and cultural processes.

The first essay takes us back to the early years of the nineteenth century where Simon P. Newman approaches the history of American seafarers in an unconventional way by studying records of their tattoos. These, he demonstrates, provide a wealth of information about the origins and physical characteristics of early merchant seamen who always lived with the possibility of death at sea. Their tattoos, usually on the arms or hands, functioned as emblems of membership in the seagoing community and recorded personal names or those of loved ones, important dates, and other personal, political, or religious signs that conveyed status or identity. They were, of course, contradictory signs; they were emblems of both gender and class, badges of pride and symbols of subservience; but through these bodily tattoos the seamen ìexerted some control over the construction of their individual and social identities, displaying pride in their beliefs, their values, their achievements and their membership in the seafaring fraternityî (p. 25).

While tattoos could be seen as one way of demonstrating ownership of a body, Peter Thompsonís essay raises the question of body ownership in a different way by examining stories and images of maritime cannibalism. Thompson relates the stories to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century concepts of ìhumanness,î which were inevitably rendered problematic in the face of survival at sea. Thompson argues that the polarity between savage and civilized, which Enlightenment-inspired American and European texts tried so hard to maintain, collapsed in times of maritime distress. Until the late nineteenth century, the sailors resisted the attribution of barbarity and pathology to those forced to survive at sea by killing and eating crewmates.

The next essays bring us to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the ways in which discourse about the body began to take on a social significance in debates about industrial progress, gender roles, and the dangers of modernity, These essays describe a number of techniques that developed to categorize, discipline, and regulate social and individual bodies, including eugenics, sexology, birth control, and exercise and eating regimes.

Barbara Willis, for example, demonstrates how the body always becomes visible as a model for something else in her ìNeurasthenia,î which was a fashionable nervous disease of the late nineteenth century that signified the exhausted body as the physical effect of changes in the national landscape. From the beginning, she explains, neurasthenia is to be understood in both physiological and metadiscursive and textual termsóas a disease grounded in the body and as a currency that enabled the circulation of other social discourses. Thus exhaustion was never just a physical problem, but was also perceived as a national trait and a sign of national difference. Henry Jamesí The Ambassadors, for example, clearly thematized the double-edged relationship between claims to American national difference and the constitutionally nervous American body, pointing up the blurring of lines between author and doctor that was also represented in the popular writings of doctors such as Silas Weir Mitchell. But this blurring, cautions Willis, should be seen as a gendered one, where male patients were advised to go west and seek a rest, taking plenty of paper and pencils with them, while the female neurasthenic was forbidden any textual engagement. Weir Mitchellís theories about nervousness were thus as much committed to establishing the difference between male and female bodies as to providing a cure, and they informed popular literatureís portrayal of the virile, masculine, entrepreneurial, and imperialist West versus the decadent, feminine, capitalist Eastern establishment. Theodore Rooseveltís injunction after touring the West to ëacquire fearlessness,í for example, is the statement of a perpetual neurasthenic. Says Willis, ìthe interpretive struggles over the phenomenon of nervousness can prove illuminating as we consider our own preoccupations with such physiological attributions of the postmodern body as stress, total allergy syndrome and chronic fatigue syndrome; and as we grasp their usefulnessóand slipperinessóas signifiers for shifting social, political and economic relationsî (p. 98).

The writings of Henry James also appear in Tim Armstrongís essay ìDisciplining the Corpus: Henry James and Fletcherism.î Armstrongís intention is to forge a link between writing and Fletcherizing in Henry Jamesís work Horace Fletcher, of course, was ëThe Great Masticator,í the dietary guru who enjoined everyone that chewing all oneís food to a liquid would maximize bodily efficiency, minimize bodily waste, and allow the body to become like a scientifically managed factory. Jamesís revisions of his writing, suggests Armstrong, can be examined in relation to his Fletcherism phase in order to provide a tantalizing example of the relationship between bodily reform and literary texts. James began Fletcherizing in 1904 as he was finishing his last major novel, The Golden Bowl, and he continued the habit for five years. During these five years he is known to have laboriously revised his corpus for the New York edition using handwritten corrections instead of his usual method of dictation. Armstrongís essay thus focuses upon how James ìchewed-overî or ìre-tastedî his extensive revisions to the New York edition. ìIn voiding himself of the Edition, James could return to more productive work; to the late autobiographies and his last two novels. And he abandoned the chewing cureî (p. 106).

With Brian Caldwell we move from the modem to the postmodern body, and from text to film and representations of the muscle-obsessed male body in cinema. Caldwell focuses upon ìextremeî cinematic constructions of masculinity in ìMuscling in on the Movies: Excess and Representations of the Male Body in Films of the 1980ís and 1990ís.î Concentrating upon ìexcessiveî masculinity in selected movies, he explores both the methodology of that type of representation and its ideological underpinnings. Examples include films featuring the spectacle of the muscled bodies of Arnold Schwarzeneggar and Sylvester Stallone, which have variously been described as a ìcondom stuffed with walnutsî and a ìleatherstocking on steroidsî (p. 134). The manner in which masculinity is both exaggerated and foregrounded, Caldwell suggests, presents real ambiguities, since excess is used to compensate for a destabilizing of the masculine position. ìCinematic excess in general and the display of musculature in particular thus ironically fail to produce a definitive masculinityî (p. 139).

The final set of essays examines text and film while sustaining a central focus upon the relationship between gender and the body. Because the production of writing can itself be seen as a bodily function, Sue Vice wonders whether it might be possible to redraw the history of womenís writing according to a sketch of the changing female body, from 1950s curves to 1980s muscles to 1990s cyberpunk Hence in ìThe Well-Rounded Anoretic Text,î she examines this potential link between the act of writing and the context of eating. Taking an article by Mark Anderson inDiscourse that links the sparse, resistant nature of many modernist texts to the depiction of sparse, wasted bodies, she turns his argument around to show how some recent novels by women writers do just the opposite. Here it is not the case of an anoretic text reproducing itself as a anoretic body, but of an anoretic body producing a textual shape, which is bountiful and well-rounded. According to Viceís argument, her chosen texts explore more productive relationships between eating, body, and writing than those present in the minimalist text of male modernist texts, and anorexia can become both the excuse and the opportunity for verbal lavishness and abundance. Paired with Viceís essay is Karia Boddyís brief analysis of the naturalist textís interest in the controlled environment of the boxing ring and the central role of the spectator. Boddy looks at the way popular boxing fiction in text and film has understood the gendered aspects of spectatorship and evoked boxing as the primary existential experience of masculinity. This has typically been seen as an experience beyond the understanding of women spectators, she suggests, who have elevated the aesthetic aspects of the performance over its display of masculine virility. Indeed, she shows how the boxer protagonists of many stories wanted, indeed demanded, this masculine experience of virility to be observed by women, so that the gaze of women was a crucial element of the fight itself

As Tim Armstrong points out, ìthe best recent work on the body and culture has stressed the way in which bodily and textual relations constantly interpenetrateî (p. 10). The essays in his edited volume make this point in a number of ways, some more convincingly and eloquently than others. The lack of illustrations in a volume focused upon representations of the body is a real disappointment, and tighter editing and the inclusion of an index would have enhanced the volume. Inaccuracies arise in the first sentence of the introduction, when the reader is told that the collection deals with issues of the twentieth century in relation to the body in American culture, yet the nineteenth century is the context of many of the essays. Collectively, however, the contributions exemplify the intensification of historical knowledge and discourse about the body which has taken place since the eighteenth century, and show not only how the postmodern body has inherited many of the problems associated with the body in modernity, but the many ways in which modern and postmodern conceptions of the body have come to coexist.

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