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Towards Karin Sellberg, Lena Wånggren and
Kamillea Aghtan (Eds.), *Corporeality and Culture:
Bodies in Movement*

Karin Sellberg, Lena Wånggren and Kamillea Aghtan (Eds.), *Corporeality and Culture: Bodies in Movement* (Farnham, UK and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2015)

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In the philosophical tradition, ranging from Plato to Descartes, amongst many others, the ontological distinction between mind and body entailed the subordination of the latter to the former: "The mind not only subjugates the body, but occasionally entertains the fantasy of fleeing its embodiment altogether."¹ From the 1980s

¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, [1990] 2006), 17.

onwards, in view of the so-called *corporeal turn*,² both the Humanities and Social Sciences as a whole have tried to revise Cartesian dualism(s) by empowering the body - thus overcoming its representation as a mere *unhappy object*.³ Drawing on this focus of the body as an active site of resistance, the contributors of *Corporeality and Culture: Bodies in Movement* survey modern and contemporary corporeality across disciplines, encompassing a multi/interdisciplinary perspective.

The book's straightforward preface concerns its structure and the reasons why the editors chose to write such a book in the first place: thanks to a conference held in Edinburgh on May 28-29, 2011 (*Bodies in Movement: Intersecting Discourses of Materiality in Sciences and the Arts*), they realized that the corporeal turn had already influenced each and every scholar involved in the project; as such, they had to seriously consider publishing the conference proceedings in order to contribute to the cross-disciplinary development of the current scholarship on bodies. The book is then divided into three sections, each one preceded by a short explanatory introduction - which helps the reader understand the essays' commonalities.

The first section - "Movements of Violence and Corollaries of Sight" - is made up of three theoretical papers which deal with the ways in which the body affects - and is being affected by - external factors. Fiona Hanley, Tami Gadir and Irene Noy, by describing the space where the conference took place, give an account of the dependency of the body on infrastructural supports: indeed, each site presupposes specific conditions which discipline bodily movements, especially for those who do not fit into the phallogocentric system (16). Charlotte Farrell looks at both a conference presentation by theorist Alphonso Lingis and an installation by artist Wangechi Mutu, through the notion of "to be moved to tears" - outlined by William James (21): her main concern is analyzing the affectivity that moved her to tears when viewing these performances. Consequently, as in the previous essay, there is a connection between the body and the environment, which brings the author to conclude that the body exists coextensively with the spatial dimension (29). Similarly, Xavier

² Cf. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Corporeal Turn: An Interdisciplinary Reader* (Exeter-Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2009).

³ Cf. Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), 42.

Aldana Reyes explains how an on-screen mutilation can affect the viewer. In particular, he is interested in horror films as “[...] the most obvious body genre” (39), where corporeal vulnerability is facilitated by somatic empathy (41). The special charm of this section lies in the ways in which it attempts to look at the biomediated body⁴ as a place-based surface, thus bringing forward Judith Butler’s latest research on bodily vulnerability within spatial boundaries:⁵ here, each essayist widens her insights into the threats of gathering in the street⁶ by focusing on the experience of being in a public building (e.g., university, exhibition room, cinema).

The second section - “Monsters, Margins and Corporealizing Choreographies” - focuses on the artistic and literary representations of non-normative bodies, including: bio-figures, cyborgs, hermaphrodites, etc. Elizabeth Stephens examines bio-sculptures (i.e., living organisms as artwork). Take, as an example, transgenic artist Eduardo Kac’s *Bioluminescent Bunny*, a Frankensteinian monster which calls into question the very essence of life as it “[...] was produced by implanting a rabbit [...] with a Green Fluorescent Protein (GFP) gene from a type of jellyfish” (59). Likewise, Rosemary Deller looks at how bio-art disrupts the boundary between human and non-human beings in Kira O’Reilly’s performance piece *inthewrongplaceness* (2004-2009). Sebastian Schmidt-Tomczak shifts to a particular type of corporeal otherness: the cyborg - a crucial trope in challenging the politics of exclusion and oppression (87) - in Oshii Mamoru’s *Ghost in the Shell*. Karin Sellberg considers the rewriting of the Platonic hermaphrodite in Angela Carter’s novels and John Cameron Mitchell’s musical and film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001). The molding of a non-normative body and the resulting *Frankenstein syndrome*⁷ - the dreary feeling that a piece of a dead person’s matter is now a part of you - are seen here in a new light. At the core of each analysis there is no longer a transplantation patient, but either the reader or the viewer’s response to that intersubjective and intercorporeal event.

⁴ Cf. Patricia T. Clough, “The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine, and Bodies,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), 210.

⁵ Cf. Judith Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 21.

⁶ Cf. Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2015), 125-26.

⁷ Cf. Jenny Slatman and Guy Widdershoven, “Hand Transplants and Bodily Integrity,” *Body and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2010), 69-72.

Nevertheless, what the entire section seems to lack is a deep-rooted examination of the relationship between body and space. The only exception is Sellberg’s essay which considers the corporealizing process as a complicated spatio-affective amalgamation (105), thus establishing a coherent connection with the previous section.

The third section - “Political Technologies of Embodiment” - deals with war bodies, medical monsters, and poetic forms of embodiment. Jasie Stokes examines Mary Borden’s memoir *The Forbidden Zone* (1929) in order to analyze the traumatized body within the interstitial non-places of WWI (i.e., the spaces between the trenches and the home front). Ally Crockford draws on the concept of the *monstrous body* - already outlined in the second section - from a medical perspective. After introducing Frederick Treves’ *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*, she describes scientific case studies which prove that, oftentimes, the monster was just a person born with a non-normative body (e.g., supernumerary leg, diphallism). Peter Arnds explains the double meaning of *humanity* - the liminality between the human and the animal (141) - in narratives about fascism, the Third Reich, and genocide: this notion could be applied to both the ruling class - as a hybrid of man and wolf - and those who were subjugated - thus reduced to the level of parasites. Although there is an explicit degradation of the human being, he demonstrates that literature offers many strategies of resistance. For instance, Primo Levi - by writing his testimony *If This Is A Man* (1947) - tried to fight back against the reduction of certain humans to subhuman levels. Douglas Clark, instead, looks at how Emily Dickinson’s actual body merges - and, at the same time, resists assimilation - with her poetic bodies. Seen through the lens of the Critical Medical Humanities, this section puts many relevant issues at stake, each one related to the suffering body. For instance, the belatedness of trauma and the drift from the physical to the mental realm; the healing effect of illness narratives and the laboratory as the place where the destabilization of the normative human form takes place (128).

Overall, *Corporeality and Culture* is an excellent and well-organized volume. Contributors provide fascinating insights, which are in tune with one another and with the theoretical assumptions advanced in the first section. It fits in perfectly with the current debates on

the role of the body in literature, medicine, society, and beyond. In particular, each essay shows how Body Studies can clearly be seen to intersect with other methodologies (e.g., Gender Studies, Affect Theory, Critical Medical Humanities) in the theorization of the body as an affected and affecting site. It is definitely a must-read for those who are working - or are willing to work - on theories of embodiment.