



ESSE-8: LONDON 2006

29 August – 2 September 2006

S1. The Human Body in Contemporary Literatures in English: Cultural and Political Implications

Friday 1 September: 9.30-11.30am

Convenor: Sabine Coelsch-Foisner (University of Salzburg)

Email: sabine.coelsch-foisner@sbg.ac.at

Co-convenor: Marta Fernández Morales (University of the Balearic Islands)

Email: marta.fernandez@uib.es

Issues related to the human body and its cultural implications are recurrent as themes and as strategies in contemporary literatures in English. Both socio-cultural developments and research activities in the life sciences have opened up new scenarios for (re-) conceptualising the human body along political, social, medical as well as fantastic lines. With contributions based on the analysis of texts coming from various cultural traditions, this seminar offers the possibility of discovering and discussing different approaches to phenomena such as anorexia nervosa, (self-)mutilation, body modification or transformation, disciplinary and monitoring practices, as they are presented in recent literary works in English.

The Body and the Machine: Hari Kunzru's *Bodywork*

Pierpaolo Martino (University of Bari)

Hari Kunzru's *Bodywork* (1995) is a subtle and intelligent investigation of the extremely delicate issue of the relation between human bodies and machines. In this post-modern *parable* Kunzru identifies two extreme positions, that of the male protagonist who embraces technology to the extent of renouncing the human (trying to turn himself into a machine) and that of his wife (Cheryl) who celebrates her bodily existence in a difficult and extreme performance of sickness. Cheryl's body is truly a grotesque body trying, through its *perceivable* deterioration, to resist the techno-*logic* - based on functional perfection and perfect reproducibility - embraced by her husband.

The Body and HIV/Aids – Representation in South-African Literature

Ellen Grünkemeier (University of Dortmund)

One significant issue concerning both the human body and its political and cultural implications is the representation of HIV/ Aids in contemporary South-African literature. For a long time the South-African Aids crisis has been regarded as a taboo topic not to be written about, reflecting government politics and unwillingness to deal with the virus. Some recent literary representations of HIV/ Aids, such as Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) and Edwin Cameron's *Witness to Aids* (2005), break

this culture of silence. They open up a discussion that demystifies the virus and takes issue with the HIV/ Aids epidemic in South Africa.

The Genetic Perspective of the Body in British Science Fiction

Sarah Herbe (University of Salzburg)

The rapid developments in the field of genetics have led to a considerable change in the way the human body is perceived. In my paper I shall explore how this change is reflected and worked into a fantastic genre, more specifically, British (hard science) fiction. In many texts, the body is presented as identically reproducible, as a spare parts inventory or as genetic material that can be moulded and manipulated at will. How do these perceptions affect the way the body is experienced, perceived and treated in science fiction texts? What impact do they have on society and family structures?

Anorectic Bodies and Body Politics

Alejandra Moreno-Álvarez (University of the Balearic Islands)

Women are enclosed within a socio-cultural and political construction which has annihilated their real Is. Using psychoanalysis within a poststructuralist/feminist framework we will see how women have been barred from taking part in the creation of language which has made women objects of exchange. Srivastava's novel, *Transmission*, serves as the perfect example to visualize the just mentioned framework. Her work will help us understand the anorexia Natalie, main character in Maxted's *Running in Heels*, suffers. Eating disorders are here understood as a logos and not as the searching for an idyllic body; a statement patriarchy keeps on reassuring.

The "Abnormal" Human Body in Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days* (2005)

Beatrix Hesse (Otto-Friedrich-University, Bamberg)

In reviews, Cunningham's *Specimen Days* has so far been noted primarily for its allusions to Walt Whitman. However, one of the novel's central, though less overt, topics is the dichotomy between body and soul. Cunningham explores this theme by means of recurrent references to the relationship between Man and Machine and through the use of various "abnormal" bodies, most notably those of a deformed child who deliberately mutilates himself to an even further degree, an android robot in search of a soul, and an extra-terrestrial princess of lizard-like exterior. My paper will analyse the respective functions of these various motifs.

Designer Babies and Defective Designs

Arnold Leitner (University of Salzburg)

What constitutes the perfect child? In times of genetic engineering and cloning we tend to believe that prospective parents crave for *the* perfect child: healthy, intelligent and beautiful. In my paper I intend to discuss social implications of surprisingly different circumstances where parents long for disability and deformity in their progeny. Taking narrative as a respected form of investigation of social issues my paper explores literary works ranging from Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* to Simon Mawer's *Mendel's Dwarf*.

Dis/embodying Alterity in Multicultural Contexts

Paloma Fresno Calleja (University of the Balearic Islands)

My paper looks at the inscription of the body in bi/multicultural contexts considering *The Kappa Child* by Hiromi Goto and *Baby No-Eyes* by Patricia Grace. I look at the connections and divergences involved in the construction of identity by diasporic or indigenous authors in contexts of cultural plurality where the physical “anomalies” once used to mark difference are now institutionalised. These novels show how minority authors escape reductive views on their physical appearance and their social position by engaging in diverse processes of dis/embodyment.

An Icon and a Burden: Postmodern Obsession with the Body

Milada Franková (Masaryk University, Brno)

The paper will suggest a range of areas in contemporary British fiction where the body appears in fantastic shapes and contexts, but fulfills very different roles. The iconic body embodies an ideal, albeit in the postmodern age it is usually an ideal filled with sexual desire. In between is the scientific body - semi-real – linked to science-fiction fantasy as well as the real world of science. At the other end of the scale is the body as a burden – far too real, heavy with reality, a hateful body to be discarded. Particular works and authors will be referred to.