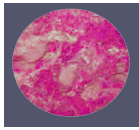
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BOOK REVIEW

The Male Body and Masculinity: Representations of Men in British Visual Culture of the 1990s

Monika Pietrzak-Franger (2007).
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"Is all this attention to the body a good thing?" Laurence Goldstein asked in a 1994 anthology on *The Male Body* (p. viii). Since then, various volumes dealing with the history of the male body have been published, and a journal titled *Masculinities* was launched (and discontinued shortly after). In addition, the male body has become a common presence in advertising, film, and television. Despite this emphasis on the male physique in contemporary culture, the male body has still remained a *terra incognita* as far as the depth of analysis in academic literature is concerned. "Within cultural practice generally," philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone holds, "a male's body is not anatomized nor is it ever made into an object of study in the same way as female bodies" (as cited in Bordo, 1999, p. 18). Although Sheets-Johnstone's statement is certainly exaggerated, it is safe to say that today there still is a huge gap in academic writing on the male (and primarily White and heterosexual) body. While there have been studies on the male body in U.S. culture and film (Bordo, 1999; Lehman, 2007; Neale, 1993) and even books on the representation of masculinity in Spanish cinema (Fouz-Hernández & Martinez-Exposito 2007), British contemporary culture has been widely omitted from these interpretations. The studies by Jeffrey Weeks (*Against Nature*, 1991) and Richard Dyer (*Only Entertainment*, 2002) come to mind. However, they do not tackle "masculinity" as an overarching social and cultural construct but rather deal with the particular aspects of heterosexist norms, gay subculture, and the subversive aesthetics of the male body.

Monika Pietrzak-Franger's (2007) seminal study, *The Male Body and Masculinity: Representations of Men in British Visual Culture of the 1990s*, not only fills this obvious gap in the discipline of gender studies, it also opens up interesting methodological paths in the fields of cultural and media theory, especially in the subdiscipline dealing with transmediality (i.e., the transference of forms and contents from one medium to the other), intermediality and hybridity (following the works by Tholen and Boenisch, the latter two terms are used to define transtextual intermedial relations through which the aesthetics of a work of art is determined). According to Pietrzak-Franger's argument, it is the border character of postmodern media which enables the development of new forms of representation and has far-reaching ramifications on the already existing medial technologies, their constructs, codes, and the ways of perception introduced by them. Thus conceived, the media cannot be thought of as a self-reproductive and stable system, but must be regarded as a dynamic, interdependent nexus, best described as "mediality."

The book works in many different directions, but never loses track of its main focus, i.e., "the various trends in the representation of the male body in the cultural, social and artistic context of the 1990s" (p. 3). In this context, the appearance of glam rock in the 1970s (David Bowie, Elton John, T. Rex) as well as the experimental cinema of directors such as Derek Jarman (*Caravaggio*, 1986), Isaac Julien (*Looking for Langston*, 1988), and Peter Greenaway (*The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*, 1989) has to be mentioned which foreshadowed the later paradigm shift in the 1990s. It is the aim of Pietrzak-Franger's study to examine all these developments as interdependent discourses within the general framework of what she calls "the multi-mediatisation of the body, e.g., the simultaneous appearance of the body in a variety of media, either deliberately introduced by artists or simply due to media re-appropriation of images (by the press or the Internet)" (p. 3). In a society marked by an endless dissemination of signs as well as moments of intermedial exchange, the limits between the real and the copy have blurred beyond recognition. The hyperreal space of the 1990s, Pietrzak-Franger argues, has allowed for moments of boundary subversion and even an erasure of existing oppositions. In this dynamic, "mediatised" environment, British postmodern culture constitutes itself as "a platform for a redefinition of masculinities. Not only was Britain in the 1990s an arena in which

the social meanings of masculinity were readjusted, it also became a stage for new artistic movements … In-yer-face theatre, New British Art, experiments in mediality, the use of new media and non-narrative cinema opened up a space in which the reshaping of the male body and masculinity could take place" (p. 6). During this development in cultural practice, the established notions of masculinity (as a White, heterosexual matrix) were more and more challenged and hegemonic masculinity underwent a process of fundamental revision, in the course of which society as a whole began to change.

The punchline in Pietrzak-Franger's argument is that all these developments, as progressive as they may seem, do not necessarily involve a destabilisation or deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity. Quite to the contrary, many works created in the 1990s "fail, despite their innovative elements, to challenge the exigencies of the heterosexual matrix," thus reaffirming rather than challenging the ideological foundations of phallogocentric society (p. 135). Pietrzak-Franger here mentions the case of Roger Michell's (1999) film *Notting Hill*, which seems to subvert gender hierarchies on the narrative level, yet re-establishes the same hierarchies on the aesthetic and ideological level. Following Abigal Solomon-Godeau's study *Male Trouble*, Pietrzak-Franger concludes:

> If gender identities are to be understood as variable and as effects of performative acts created over-time, certain additions or modifications that occur within them do not immediately deconstruct the heterosexual matrix they pertain to … That is why such seemingly incongruous constructs as those of the male and the female in *Notting Hill* do not pose any problem to the overall structure of gender representation. (p. 135)

The study is divided into two main parts—theoretical and analytical. This division enables Pietrzak-Franger to develop a methodology based on sociology, gender studies, and media theory, and then apply her observations in a number of close readings of visual works (performances, plays, films, paintings as well as sculptures). In the first theoretical part, Pietrzak-Franger sketches a panorama of the socio-political situation in the 1990s, which seems imbued with the values of "New Liberalism" and an emphasis on competition and educational achievement. The types of gender identities privileged during this era were largely influenced by portrayals in the media. Artists such as Robbie Williams began to display their masculinity not as a stable form of identity, but increasingly as "an anxious performance" (p. 28). Simultaneously, magazines such as *FHM, Men's Health, Maxim* and *GQ* targeted a male readership interested in style and appearance. Films such as *Orlando* (Potter, 1992) and *Velvet Goldmine* (Haynes, 1998) played with images of gender confusion and the fluidity of boundaries. In this climate of transmedial fluctuation, new archetypes, e.g., the "metrosexual" (a combination of "metropolitan" and "heterosexual"), surfaced, which in turn had strong effects on social and cultural practice. In this context, Pietrzak-Franger introduces three distinct theories, which she applies to an interpretation of British visual culture of the 1990s: Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical approach of identity formation, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and Bob Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity. These three approaches, she explains, "make it possible to link the notion of identity with that of the body" (p. 57). Following this methodology, the male body is analysed as a compound of stereotypical, idealized, and phantasmatic features. As such it interconnects the realm of representation with that of the cultural imaginary. The "sensate body" (p. 67), Pietrzak-Franger holds, i.e., the body of the (male) consumer, is intimately conjoined with discourses of corporeality staged in the media. Male subjectivity thus appears as a product of various narrative and spectatorial practices. The male viewer is "interpellated," in Althusser's terms, through an intricate process of ideological manipulation in the course of which his body is inscribed with the tenets of Whiteness and heterosexuality. In Pietrzak-Franger's reading, this presupposition of male gender identity by the cultural hegemony can only be successful as it is based upon an interconnection of socio-political, psychological, and medial aspects. Her insights into the cultural patterns of postmodern masculinity go far beyond a simple delineation of images and stereotypes. By linking trenchant observations on the discourses of film, theatre, performance, painting and sculpturing, the study provides a fresh look at the historio-political and aesthetic background of Blair's Britain.

The second part of the book tackles the question of a possible

challenge to traditional forms of masculinity by looking at three different forms of artwork: (a) works that endeavour to maintain the conventional limits of male subjectivity, (b) artistic representations which aspire to destroy the binaries of bodily and gender identity, and (c) pieces that invoke a violent penetration of the body, thus replacing the mechanic body with the *sensate body*. The first group of works includes "representations of the male body which, despite their politically revisionist aims, reproduce and maintain the traditional depiction of masculinity in media and the arts" (p. 92). Cinematic works such as Michell's (1999) *Notting Hill* and Kenneth Branagh's (1994) *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, the author holds, illustrate the personal struggles of male individuals against society's oppressive norms, however, without challenging the ideological framework within which the characters seem imprisoned. Thus, in *Notting Hill* sexual difference is maintained rather than debunked as a valid parameter of social interaction. While the male character is shown, through long passages, as a mere spectacle of the female gaze, traditional power relations are subliminally reaffirmed towards the end of the movie. Likewise, in *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, the monster seems firmly rooted in the realm of the abject, far from reaching symbolic control over the events. Bodily boundaries are deployed in both films to reiterate "the structural fictions concerning gendered bodies and identities" (p. 119). Pietrzak-Franger's film analyses are aptly combined with an interpretation of Ron Mueck's (2000) "phallic" sculptures, e.g., the famous *Untitled (Big Man)*, which render masculinity as an ultimately impermeable and invulnerable entity. Mueck's works negotiate the male body as a "sealed body" immune to a fundamental criticism of its ideological basis (p. 129). The degree of stylization of this body makes it inaccessible to any sensate access on the part of the viewer. "The body is constrained by the existing codes and made distant by its heightened mediatisation. Consequently, the image of masculinity arising in such circumstances is an oppressive and oppressed one" (p. 136).

The second group of works includes, among others, Lloyd Newson's (1995) performance *Enter Achilles*, Peter Greenaway's (1986) film *The Pillow Book*, and Douglas Gordon's (1996) video installation *Monster*. By negotiating corporeality as a highly ambiguous and performative event, these works of art resist essentialist classifications of gender identity and promote an understanding of the male body as a "space in-between" (p. 155). In Newson's and Greenaway's pieces, the lines between male and female (and especially between the male and the female *gaze*) are rendered indistinguishable and unnecessary. Moreover, the lines between body and text as well as the distinctions between various media become blurred in their works. Douglas Gordon's provocative installations go even one step further, showing the monster—marked in Branagh's (1994) movie as an image of the "other"—as a representation of the self. This fascination with the uncanny sides of bodily identity places *Monster* in the tradition of Gothic texts such as Stevenson's (1886) classic *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Despite their attempt to remove the binaries of identity formation, the works by Newson, Greenaway, and Gordon fail to offer an alternative vision of gender identity. "Although the analysis of oppositions often exposes their illusory character and thus their inadequacy in the formation of gendered classification, it also shows male incapacity and lack of readiness to adopt the new thinking" (p. 184).

The third group of works encompasses John Maybury's film on the Irish-born painter Francis Bacon, *Love is the Devil* (1997), Marc Quinn's (1991) series of sculptures, *Self*, Mark Ravenhill's (1996) infamous play "Shopping and Fucking," and Franko B's (1999, 2000, 2005) performance art in the fashion of Pollock's "action painting." What these works have in common is that they seek to dissolve not only the dichotomies of gendered thinking but also the imagined unity of the body itself. The male body is portrayed here as a fractured and finally unstable construct. Maybury's (1997) *Love is the Devil* utilizes narrative strategies that can be described as *queer* and *camp*. The bodies delineated in this film are, following Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, "bodies without organs," i.e., decentralized and highly performative flexibilities that lack an inner core or essence (Pietrzak-Franger, 2007, p. 194). In their grotesque appearance, Bacon's painted bodies evoke a sentient access on the side of the spectator. By the same token, Quinn's sculptures, crafted by adding the artist's own blood, solicit a "visceral" reading that involves the viewer into the practice of art. "Oscillating between the old and the novel concerns of body-oriented art, Quinn realises the feminist call to destabilise traditional representational norms" (p. 208). Similarly, Mark

Ravenhill's and Franko B's works aim at a fragmentation, even a disfigurement, of the body on stage (the most drastic example being the latter artist's cutting of his own veins in a restaging of Christ's death on the cross). Both artists "explore the notion of self-mutilation to comment on the mediatisation and assumed dematerialisation of bodies" (p. 234).

Pietrzak-Franger's study can be called pathbreaking in various ways. It sheds light on the construction of masculinity in postmodern British culture while also excavating the hidden links between different types of media and cultural practices. Utilizing an interdisciplinary and transmedial approach, the book is instructive not only for gender studies scholars but also for art educators, sociologists, and media theorists. The scope of materials examined from British visual culture is indeed impressive. The argument is developed persuasively and, except for a few redundancies, written in an eloquent style. As the author points out in her conclusion, "this study should be seen in a broader context. Male body constructs produced by male artists could be set against portrayals provided by sexual, social, cultural and ethnic minorities. They should also be seen against the context of global tendencies in the representation of masculinity" (p. 242).

In this sense, the book succeeds in bringing about a dialogue on the cultural practices of subjectification and exclusion in general, challenging us to rethink the limits not only between gender identities but also between diverse forms of media. Two formal elements that could be added in a second edition of the book are an index and further illustrations. Despite that, this book is fun to read. In addition, the introductory parts can be utilized as a reference guide to the main tenets of body and gender theory.

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