

C. Xinari on *The Future of Flesh: A Cultural Survey of the Body*.



Publisher

European Association for American
Studies

Electronic version

URL: <http://ejas.revues.org/7833>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Electronic reference

« C. Xinari on *The Future of Flesh: A Cultural Survey of the Body*. », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2010-1, document 4, Online since 04 March 2010, connection on 04 October 2016.
URL : <http://ejas.revues.org/7833>

This text was automatically generated on 4 octobre 2016.

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- 1 *The Future of Flesh: A Cultural Survey of the Body*. Eds Zoe Detsi-Diamanti, Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou and Effie Yiannopoulou. New York, U.S.A.: Palgrave Macmillan 2009. pp 261. ISBN-13:978-0-230-61347-8.
- 2 The matter of the body has generated a lot of discussion over the last twenty years. Body Studies, which is often linked to Feminist Theory and Criticism (after all, body has always been associated to the feminine), has emerged out of a series of debates in areas as diverse as Cultural Theory, Literature, Performance Studies, Biology and Bioethics, Genetics, and Information Technologies. The body has been inscribed and interpreted, naturalised and modified (both artificially and genetically), essentialised and annihilated, materialised and immaterialised, and celebrated for its plasticity. *Volatile Bodies*, *Bodies that Matter*, *Sexing the Body*, *Technologies of the Gendered Body*, *Whose Body is it Anyway?*, are just a sample of the titles that academic research on the matter of the body has produced. Like *gender* in the nineties, the *body*—subject and object at the same time, material yet elusive, gendered, sexed, sexualised, racial(ised), “natural”, “artificial”, or disabled—has been the hot issue of the first decade of the twenty-first century.
- 3 Academic publications aside, investment in the body seems to be ongoing if contemporary obsession to safeguard the boundaries of the body is anything to go by: fitness regimes, cosmetic/plastic surgery, dieting; these are just a few of the ways that the postmodern subject employs in order to exert some form of control over this unruly manifestation of being, the body. Surveyed and monitored on a daily basis, subjected to scrutiny and subjectivated, the body runs the risk of becoming dead matter. Yet, the matter of the body has not been exhausted (nor would we want to run it to exhaustion). Being the contested locus of subjectivity it has proved to be fertile ground for a number of debates pertaining not only to its own materiality but also to the reality of every aspect of life (be it *bios* or *zoe*) associated to it.
- 4 In *The Future of Flesh: A Cultural Survey of the Body*, although the terms “body” and “flesh” have been used interchangeably throughout the collection as the editors note, there is a shift of emphasis and interest from the body to that more basic aspect of being, the flesh. “Flesh, we believe—more than bodies—is at stake in our posthuman times, in the sense

that it is *flesh* that is subject to increased control either in the laboratory or in the marketplace and is caught up in processes of modification that seek to master and profit from it” (4). In these posthuman times (the *post-* here, far from being temporal, already brings the subject to its crisis) the boundaries between human/animal/technological are blurred thus giving rise to new challenges in the discussions surrounding subjectivity and the body. The title seems to reflect an anxiety shared by many; that our excessive practices and discussions relating to the body aim at immaterialising not the body (which seems to have been granted other matter by recent developments in biotechnology and/or cyberspace anyway) but its most primitive and for that reason most abject form, flesh. Although the essays included here vary in terms of ideas and scope, as well as in their degree of engagement with flesh itself, they all share a common interest in body-matter whether it be diseased or healthy, decaying or alive, disposed of or technologically mutated, in the world of reality or of fantasy (the boundaries of which are in any case challenged), as the subject of art or of feminist politics. As the editors point out, “all essays in this volume articulate a vision of flesh not as a category that is acted upon, read, decoded, and classified but as a material force that acts and changes ways of seeing and habits of being” (7). Indeed, the volume continues in the tradition of moving away from essentialisms and makes an important contribution to the ongoing project of thinking through the body.

- 5 It seems to me that the shift from body to flesh at this point in time is both necessary and productive. In discussions of the body in the last twenty years what has become contested matter has been the much talked about ‘materiality’ of the body; whether the body matters beyond the discursive imaginings that poststructuralist theory has assigned it to. This has been particularly true of discussions pertaining to sex and gender, with the transgender body/subject and its investment in flesh (transsexual) or in some occasions its evasion and annihilation of it (as it has often been said of the crossdresser or transvestite) becoming the dominant matter. Although the focus on the semiology of the body has opened up the space for the re-evaluation of aspects of gendered subjectivity and has served our interest in so far as it has been seen as liberating the subject from gender essentialism (*performativity* is the key word here), innovations in areas such as biotechnology have forced us to turn our attention to the matter of flesh as a more solid way of examining both subjectivity and embodiment.
- 6 This can account for the emerging interest in Artificial Life art and biological art projects as discussed by Edwina Bartlem in her essay ‘Emergence: New Flesh and Life in New Media Art,’ in which she discusses developments in this area as “a dynamic site of inquiry and experimentation into the ethics and aesthetics of information and biotechnologies and new imaginings of the body, flesh and life” (155). Although one may be sceptical about the practices and body/narratives such work produces (the artists Orlan and Stellarc are prime examples here) Bartlem is right to point out that such art presents “an aesthetic that is beyond the biologically human and that emphasises human interrelationships with new technologies and engineered life” (156). Within the same thematic context, Elizabeth Bronfen’s deconstruction of the beauty myth through the work of Hannah Wilke and Cindy Sherman both of whom play with the codes of alluring femininity and its commodification in the representation of women in the tradition of the pin-up girl, as well as her discussion of Chuck Palahniuk’s novel *Invisible Monsters* (1999), explore the “murky interface between corporeal self-alienation and the exploration of feminine enjoyment” (102) as well as “deconstructing the mutual implication between

perfect beauty and corporeal monstrosity” (109). Katve-Kaisa Konturi’s essay on ‘Eye, Agency, and Bodily Becomings’ on *Sketches* (1999) a series of photographs by the Finnish artist and sculptor Helena Hietanen brings forth one of the most fleshy issues in feminist theory and art, the experience of the body through and after breast cancer. This is a truly stimulating reading of the subject’s effort to acquire agency over her volatile body, the patriarchal medical establishment and the representation of this body as well as the potential to transform the gaze and be transformed by it in the process. Christina Dokou on the other hand delves into a discussion of the representation of the grotesque body as well as femininity and masculinity in the comic-book culture, a culture in which the human body has been both celebrated for its incredible potential as well as evaded through its genetic mutations, and argues that not only does the characters grotesqueness challenge “prescribed forms of beauty” (134) but also that “this new mutated heroic model reflects the changing aesthetic and cultural attitudes of U.S. teens then and now” (134).

- 7 A further strength of this volume is that not only does it engage with new technologies, theorisations and practices of the body but rather it attempts to read flesh and its theorisation through history as well. Ekaterini Douka-Kabitoğlu’s tracing of the past of flesh in her discussion of ‘Mortal and Immortal Bodies in Ancient Greek Poetry’ as well as Thomas Lacqueur’s ‘The Dead and Dying Body from Hume to Now’ speak of the body at its most “raw” form. However, whereas Douka-Kabitoğlu’s essay addresses the mortal flesh as that which has the potential to become immortal in the form of the heroic body in Ancient Greek poetry, in Lacqueur the flesh takes on its most primitive form as deceased and decaying matter as he explores the history of the cemetery and through it how the effort to give “a solution to the problem of disposing corrupting human flesh, became the solution of making the dead clean again” (49). Lacqueur’s essay can be read as adding to the discussion surrounding the cleanliness and purity of flesh as well as our contemporary anxiety with the aging body and flesh as decaying matter even before death, as well as the sanitization of death and the desire do away with the matter of the decaying body. Along similar lines, Savvas Patsalides’ exploration of *Philoktetes*’ body in John Jesurun’s play, presents us with another instance in which the diseased and decaying body can be a space of resistance to annihilation of the flesh. “Part daemonic mass and part human, half way between one state and another, the diseased body of *Philoktetes* eludes fixed categorisation [...]” (67). That which is in between has both the audacity and the means to defy categorisation and traditional ontologies of being and for that reason serve as a site of resistance to annihilation through discourse. Furthermore, the issue of pain, chronic and intractable pain in particular, which cannot be located, treated and as it were cured, has lead according to Cindy L. Linden to the pathologisation of such sufferers and has made them “primary targets in a domestic war against evil” (81). By resisting categorisation as the source of pain is untraceable and thus incurable, their bodies have been seen as “undisciplined, unruly and out of control” (84), something which contemporary culture feels the need to fight in an effort to impose further control over the body.
- 8 The final section of this volume entitled ‘Posthuman Enfleshments’ engages in dialogue not only with what human is—and in some occasions argues that perhaps we have always been posthuman—but also tries to imagine ways in which these posthuman enfleshments may become a liberating yet not annihilating space for the body in contemporary culture. Nicola Rehling’s reading of cyberfantasy cinema problematises the desire to escape and

transcend the flesh and concludes that “while they stage the fantasy of virtual disembodiment, the ideologies of gender and race attached to the bodies they depict [they] confirm that bodies are unavoidably saturated with meanings” (192). Domna Pastourmatzi in her essay ‘Flesh Encounters Biotechnology’ argues on a related point that the physicality of the body—the flesh—and the brain are locked in a symbiotic relationship which ultimately means that human consciousness is linked to the body’s history; “flesh is not an irrelevant vessel” (212). Linda William’s essay examines among other issues the very notion of the *posthuman* and the temporality of the prefix *post* to conclude that contemporary concepts of the human are informed by modernity and therefore are not “*past* human or humanism, or past modernity” (222). The final essay in the collection is Rosi Braidotti’s ‘Meta(l)flesh’. Braidotti’s contribution to discussions of subjectivity and embodiment are, needless to say, invaluable; her engagement with Deleuzian thought and notion of nomadism and the nomadic subject have greatly influenced the way contemporary theory approaches the embodied subject. Braidotti argues for contaminations and transitions and allies with Donna Haraway’s understanding of the positive aspects of “the promises of monsters” (253). Outlining her interest and commitment to the feminist project, Braidotti, “plea[s] for a form of neo-materialist appreciation for the embodied intelligence of critical questioning entities known as subjects” (254). For Braidotti “one is not, one *becomes* a series of not-ones, to the infinite power” (259).

- 9 The essays in *The Future of Flesh* highlight that “human flesh remains stubbornly bound to questions of identity and selfhood” (5). Whether seen as human or posthuman, whether trying to transcend it or modify it, the matter of flesh persists and, in a multiplicity of ways, as also demonstrated in the essays in this volume, troubles our perception of subjectivity. However, the absence of any reference to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and to the notions of embodiment and embodied experience from a volume which seeks to address the future of flesh seems like a sad omission. Similarly, there is no discussion of the transgender subject, be it transvestite or transsexual, whose controversial investment in flesh—particularly when it comes to the transsexual—as well as its paradoxical interpretation of embodiment, have been a great source of anxiety for feminist thinkers.
- 10 The collection opens with Harold Pinter’s poem “Death” which is also the epilogue to his Nobel Lecture. Although Pinter wants to make a point about truth in art, life and politics the poem also encompasses not only the reality of death but also that of life: the body, dead or alive, is in constant dialogue and exchange with culture and bears witness to its own inspection and scrutiny by it. The body is both a subject and an object, as Merleau-Ponty has it. Bodies—even dead ones—reflect the complex interrelationships between flesh and the wor(l)d; bodies have histories. We tend to think of the dead body as mere flesh, dead matter; yet the paradox lies in that the body persists beyond that. The publication of this volume shows that the body is still very much alive.
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