

Blending Beauty and the Beast: Metamorphic Body Regimes of a Somatic Society

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Steinhoff, Heike. *Transforming Bodies: Makeovers and Monstrosities in American Culture*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. ix + 267 pages. ISBN 978-1-137-49378-1. Hb. €85.59.

Heike Steinhoff's *Transforming Bodies: Makeovers and Monstrosities in American Culture* is a truly postmillennial gambit in so far as it adopts an impressively interdisciplinary approach, fusing the methodological apparatuses of American, cultural, literary, media, gender, queer, disability, and governmentality studies to analyze an exciting selection of texts across a variety of media, ranging from (post-)postmodern novel to reality TV show. The aim is to focus on one of the most intriguing aspects of body studies: the critical interpretation of metamorphic bodies both relentlessly transformed by and transformative of our globalized, post-industrial consumer societies of spectacle, which Steinhoff simply calls contemporary "makeover culture." The book is a timely intervention in the age of the "corporeal turn," an epistemological shift following the linguistic and pictorial turns, where the preoccupation with pantextualization and hyper-spectacularization—attempts to make sense of the world via verbal narratives or visual imagery, characteristic of previous cultural paradigms—have been replaced by an increasing interest in corporeal matters. "Somatic society" tends to project anxieties and desires related to socio-cultural, collective and individual psychological, moral, or political concerns onto the surface of the human body, assuming that these problems can be resolved by a clever restructuring of our physical frames' bodily limitations.

The wide spectrum of examples Steinhoff's introduction provides for body transformations which have become integrated into our daily lived realities in a naturalized manner gives the project a Foucauldian biopolitical edge. Readers are urged to disentangle the intricate web of the "ideological technologies of power" and the subversive "technologies of the self" lurking within habitual body-modification practices: from dieting, workouts, tattooing, and piercing, to organ transplantation, genetic engineering, cross-dressing, sex-change, and cosmetic surgery, and even the imaginary fantastic metamorphoses of humans into superheroes, werewolves, or vampires in blockbusters permeating popular cultural imagination. Each instance of body-change is denaturalized in the volume, on its own turn, while the

familiar examples remind us of the socio-political significance and stakes of the project. Steinhoff provides a complex explanation for the intense global preoccupation with the possibilities of what Susan Bordo has famously called the “malleable plasticity” of our postmodern material being (38): the changing demographic composition of an ageing society stimulates interest in gerontology, chronic illnesses, and the maintainability of youthfulness; but a neo-liberal, transnational, post-industrialist consumer culture’s economic specificities, (bio)technological advances, medical breakthroughs, and political structural diversification might be just as influential factors as the many-fold spectacular simulations characteristic of the celebrity culture, selfie-craze, online telepresence, and virtual reality enabled by postmillennial new media.

Besides referring to these, all-too familiar, cultural phenomena, Steinhoff treads in the footsteps of post-structuralist theory by relying on the critical terminology of feminist and queer semiotics of embodied subjectivity to describe the “transforming bodies” at the focus of her attention. The abundance of her academic apparatus that meticulously makes all mandatory references to the most seminal theoreticians of body studies reveals that this book originated as a doctoral dissertation at the Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany. Steinhoff is far from a debutante, however, as she cleverly navigates her readers through difficult theoretical arguments—although a nuanced differentiation is never provided between twin-concepts, such as Elizabeth Grosz’s volatile bodies, Judith Butler’s performative bodies, Julia Kristeva’s abject bodies, Bordo’s malleably slender bodies, Donna Haraway’s posthuman bodies, or Mary Kosut’s extreme bodies. Even if a comparative interfacing of these critical concepts remains outside the focus of *Transforming Bodies*, the terms are used in an intelligible and complementary manner, with a stress on their shared feature, a conceptualization of the embodied subject as a discursive construct endowed with a potential of corporeal transgressivity apt to rewrite conventionally assigned cultural scripts.

A great merit of the book is that it refuses to draw an absolute dichotomy between “dominant beauty” and “resistant monstrosity,” “made-up” and “make-over” texts. Different narratives are interpreted as engaged in a dynamic, dialogic relationship, as contradictory and interrelated ideological and subversive discourses are negotiated, reproduced, or unsettled by them. Steinhoff never aims to fix the cultural function of the examined texts; however, her authorial voice cannot help becoming an authoritative opinion in a study that deals with highly visible, influential popular/mass cultural texts, but fails to consider a possible polyphony that could have been

achieved by audience research method. The title lays emphasis on American culture—although national specificities are not necessarily foregrounded, apart from rewarding references to the American Dream—therefore, alas, a transnational contextualization, which would have been truly rewarding, fails to fit within the frames of this volume. Despite the fact that the witty chapter headings—“Before” for the introduction, “After” for the conclusion, and “Transformations” for the main analytical corpus—suggest a certain chronological order, the conclusion, besides “constituting a final suture” (237), also presents a new “before” that proposes to enter into dialogue with additional academic and popular texts to set the ground for further investigations. Steinhoff does her best to correlate different and, sometimes, ambiguous discursive articulations and regimes in what she calls a “kaleidoscopic” study.

As for the structure of *Transforming Bodies*, the book begins by setting the theoretical framework, defining the key concepts and outlining the academic developments of New Body Theories, somatechnics and somaesthetics, which established the groundwork of Steinhoff’s succeeding close-reading analyses. Among others, Steinhoff relies on sociologist Mike Featherstone’s description of contemporary consumer culture fueled by the demand of body maintenance as a precondition of the achievement of a marketable self; cultural historian Michel Foucault’s explorations of how the somatic self is (trans)formed, enabled, or restricted within particular fields of power and knowledge; and feminist body politics which seek to rethink the gendered hierarchy of the mind-body dichotomy, and harshly criticize the cultural discipline of women’s “natural” bodies. The most rewarding bits concern the rethinking of the stigmatized cultural Other incarnated in the monstrous body, a simultaneous exploration of the domestication and ideological containment of unruly bodies, and of the subversive potential of deviant practices of somatic transformations as technologies of resistance. The classifications of somatic categories are never fixed, as the culturally constituted categories of beautification/normalization and monstrification/resistance can overlap in complex ways and surface in many self-contradictory shapes. As Steinhoff’s convincing argument reads, makeover culture permeates a plethora of popular cultural products from “reality television, to popular psychology, medical or business advice literature, women’s magazines, and even televangelism” (8), which all tackle changing bodies.

The next chapter concentrates on the popular surgical makeover television show, *The Swan* (2004), to reveal how the process of beautification functions along the lines of a hypernormalization, following gendered, raced,

classed, heteronormative ideals of “fit” bodies. According to Steinhoff, the apparently beautifying surgical somatic transformation is always already hindered by a post-feminist and neo-liberal framework of self-fulfillment, and hence can eventually be interpreted as a process of monstrification.

The succeeding chapters examine productions of the popular mediascape which seem to overturn the predominant cultural representations of the ideologically disciplined contemporary body regime. A selection of fictional texts—Chuck Palahniuk’s postmodern novels *Invisible Monsters* and *Invisible Monsters Remix*, Scott Westerfeld’s young adult science-fiction saga *Uglies*, and the TV drama series *Nip/Tuck*—rewrite cultural scripts of extreme body-transformation by adopting narrative strategies, techniques, and imagery which challenge the hierarchical binary organization of normal versus pathological, and integrate critical theoretical discourses in the reevaluation of monstrosity as a potentially empowering ground of identity. Although radical corporeal difference/malleability is depicted as a “positive force” in these narratives, Steinhoff has no illusions, and clearly demonstrates that the challenging of power structures is not that easy. The unsettling of makeover culture is always on the verge of reinscribing the very ideology it aims to question—simply due to the fundamental assumptions communicated by these stories about an authentic, inner self that can be located at the kernel of one’s material bodily being.

Many of the embodied attempts at resisting normative body-discipline sound dubious and disturbing, because of the pain inflicted on oneself throughout those counter-practices of body modification which border on self-mutilation or self-stigmatization, yet proliferate in lived reality and fictional narratives alike of self-cutters, plastic surgery addicts, or BDSM (bondage, discipline, submission, sadomasochism) aficionados. A psychological explanation of this post-postmodern tendency of “doing the things which scare us most,” in Palahniuk’s words (221), would have been truly interesting. Even if the efficiency of these radical corporeal revisions remains questionable, *Transforming Bodies* indubitably succeeds in introducing an impressive variety of (de)formations the popular cultural representations of extreme somatic metamorphosis may take in and beyond contemporary American culture.

The book is certainly a refreshing read for scholars interested in current trends of American cultural and media studies and, more specifically, the sociology of gendered bodies. But the focus on intermediality and the numerous popular cultural examples hold an interest for lay audiences too willing to gain a better understanding of our curious (post-)postmodern

socio-cultural condition three decades after “the end of history,” when Fukuyama announced the endpoint of humanity’s sociocultural evolution (1989). Steinhoff’s book allows us a glimpse at collective fantasies of post-apocalyptic reality acted out on the surface of transforming bodies.

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