

Wrestling Bodies: An Introduction

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The idea of dedicating the eleventh volume of GRAMMA to “wrestling bodies” did not spring out of a wish to conform to the Athens-2004 Olympic spirit. Although all the papers that appear here were originally presented at our 2003 conference on the human body,¹ a conference that was instigated by the twenty-eighth Olympiad in Greece, their aim has been to examine, problematise and question our modern appropriations of the classical, ideal body.

The fact that old and new forms in the image of the modern body are counterpoised to a new effect makes our need to understand the past as urgent as our need to understand the present. If in the lustrous bodies of the ancient wrestlers, liberally coated in olive oil and dust to make themselves easier to grasp in the muddy arena, the Greeks saw and glorified the very image of ancient society, or the ancient *polis*, an organisation geared for war, then what do we see today in the perfectly shaped and controlled bodies that dominate sports or the media? The structured, hard, powerful, muscles of ancient wrestlers, a prime constituent of beauty, a fetishistic substitute for the phallus even, are today not merely stretched to their limits, but *beyond* them, transforming the body into the very opposite of its classical ideal. As the articles in this volume argue, it is the image of the grotesque, abject, diseased, violated, or schizo- body that lurks behind the veneer of its slippery polished surface. Modern bodies are no longer wrestling against other, also perfectly trained, bodies; in resisting the very image of the ideal body, they have been turned into an arena themselves, a battlefield where struggles for power take place. They are bodies that are fighting against themselves.

The five essays comprising “Bodies Wrestling with Representation” (Part I) locate one of the most politically-charged aspects of this struggle in the conceptual shift that currently marks the interface between the human body and the representational practices that construct it. As the essays in this section reveal, contemporary cultural analysis and practice display a new concern with

1. “The Flesh Made Text: Bodies, Theories, Cultures in the Post-Millennial Era” was a conference organised by the English Department at Aristotle University in cooperation with the Hellenic Association for the Study of English (HASE) and the Hellenic Association of American Studies (HELAAS), 14-18 May 2003.

recovering the lost materiality of the body in order to re-establish it in what are thought to be its brutally physical dimensions. Clearly, the call for a reappraisal of material corporeality constitutes a reaction to social constructionist perspectives and the semantic encoding of embodiment predominant in post-structuralist, feminist and post-colonial theories. There is perhaps little chance that any self-respecting academic today will return to a pre-Foucauldian, pre-symbolic, pre-discursive conceptualisation of the corporeal as a natural given. Costas Canakis does well to remind us that the human body is always already immersed in signification. It acts both as the source and the target of metaphors, constructing social meaning at the same time that it is rendered intelligible through the work of the signifier. In the subtext of his linguistic perspective, the subject continues to be embodied in society and culture, imprinted on the skin by gendered, sexualised and racialised significations and power relations.

Panagiota Petkou and Victoria Rivera-Cordero wrestle with bodily representation rather more forcefully. In their arguments, the “textualised” body makes space for the “corporealised” text. Interestingly, they both identify a “material” reading process that draws readers back to corporeality as corpses and ill bodies. More specifically, Petkou’s reading of *Frankenstein* contends that Shelley’s novel accentuates the visibility of the corpse in its abjection and contaminating power. As a result, readers are confronted, and infected, by a text that gazes back at them through the eyes of the monster. Disgust at the wasted, dead body points at once to the physicality of the readerly response and of the text that produced it. In a similar vein, Rivera-Cordero insists on the materiality of the writing and reading processes. Not only do syphilis and AIDS structure Delicado and Goytisolo’s novels in a thematic sense. The ill and fissured body, penetrated and full of holes, provides a model for understanding the workings of modern and postmodern textuality, “corporealising” representation as a strategy for dismantling social stereotypes around contagious diseases. Arguably, corporealising the text does not necessarily annul what is often regarded as the progressive politics of “de-naturalising” the body, usually associated with the inscription of the category of the body in discourse. Rather, it goes beyond it in ways that uncover a more nuanced and less uni-directional relationship between embodiment and discursivity.

Central to this critical and artistic return to the “matter” of bodily existence is a call for the re-definition of embodiment itself. Posthuman discourses offer perhaps the best example of rhetorical and lived spaces where the mixing of the organic and the inorganic requires that flesh is encoded anew and that alternative forms of subjectivity are envisaged. As Bernd Herzogenrath argues, the biological and the machinic coexist in any understanding of the corporeal in a relationship of mutual and continuing re-definition. The body is thus recast as a category in a state of becoming, always in perpetual motion as it enters into recurrent relations with other bodies and substances. In her reading of cyborg performance and digital art, Tatiani Rapatzikou, too, identifies the fusion

between the physical world with electronic means as what provides new ground for bodily awareness. Computers and virtual reality spaces transform the contours of bodily existence and in doing so generate new sets of meanings that re-write the corporeal. If nothing else, the posthuman body is the site where notions of flesh and life engage in a constant negotiation of their definitional limits and imaginative possibilities.

The idea of bodies *wrestling* with social pressures, cultural definitions, political, racial and gender ideologies is explored in the second part of this issue. Focusing on a variety of disciplines such as literature, performance art, and visual representation, some of the contributors take as their starting point the familiar metaphor of the body as a space where meanings are inscribed and contested. They seek to examine the various tensions emerging from both the body's own complexity and fragility, and its potential for critique and disruption.

There is a marked emphasis on the various processes by which the body's own porous limits and identities, its difference/otherness can be transformed into a force that destabilises culturally mandated meanings, social functions and significations. For example, in Paulina Palmer's analysis of three of Jeanette Winterson's novels, the grotesque female body becomes a sign of difference as well as the site where the fractured and contradictory nature of women's history and narratives are inscribed. In this way, as Palmer suggests, Winterson manages to expose the inauthenticity of all gender roles and practices that an essentially phallogentric culture has ascribed to women. In a similar body, Goldie Morgentaler's essay explores the subversive potential of the much-celebrated feminine ideal in Victorian literature. In her article, the urge to destroy the beautiful body of a woman emerges as a kind of anti-aesthetics that can be interpreted as a form of resistance to the cultural standards regulating Victorian female beauty.

The tendency to *wrestle* with the various contending discourses that posit the body both as locus of ideological, cultural, and political contradictions and ambiguities and as a disruptive force in its abjection has led some of the writers in this part to an investigation of the body's significance and function within our postmodern political society. The image of the dead, starved, or otherwise abused body, which dominates the iconography of humanitarian campaigns, takes on political connotations as it reflects the cultural and ideological controversies stemming from a visual rhetoric in which the body, according to Gregory Paschalidis, has become the site of contemporary problematisation over traditional concepts of politics and community.

The powerful impact of the visual representation of the body on society at large is particularly evident in art where the interactive relationship of the body of the artist with the body of the spectator, as well as their spatial environment, opens up a new ideological terrain for the body's symbolic function as a source of exploration and experimentation. Claudine Armand's paper focuses on a group of mid-twentieth-century artists whose work shared a particular interest in both the material environment and a new awareness of the body. By means of

turning the skin into a projection surface of signs and meanings, these artists investigated the potential of the body in art as a medium of protest and liberation in a politically repressive society.

The complex interaction between the human body and space takes on new dimensions when positioned within a postmodern city. In Betty Nigianni's analysis of Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, the labyrinthine space of the postmodern metropolis leads to the individual's experience of depersonalisation and the eventual dissolution of the physical body. Contrary to the pervasive notion, however, that the shattering of the body leads to fragmentation and annihilation, Nigianni's critique of the transgression of one's physical limits in a postmodern environment follows Auster's insistence that what this transgression leaves behind is not a sense of loss and madness but creativity and inspiring imagery.

In bringing together different perspectives on the question of embodiment, our aim has been to argue that contemporary bodies are involved in an endless wrestling match against their own otherness and abjection, against social regulations and cultural definitions, as well as against dominant theoretical positions on corporeality. What these contributions share is the desire to show that behind the sanitised surface of the ideal body, a dominant image still today, lurks the disruptive force of the violated, diseased, wasted, starved body. The recurrence and variety of these "anti-bodies" point to the continuing ability of the body to resist, question, even escape categorisation and immobilisation. It has been our hope that this volume, through its interdisciplinary character and multi-sided arguments, will contribute new insights into one of the most debated, controversial and inspiring objects of contemporary research.