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birth of the new clinic

ALAN PETERSEN

The Body in Question: A Socio-Cultural Approach

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A moody photograph of Rodin's bronze *The Thinker* dominates the cover of Alan Petersen's new book. Perched on his rock deep in contemplation, this nude specimen of traditional masculine perfection—lean, muscled, young—embodies and offers a prelude to some of the themes within. And like *The Thinker* they're big ones: nature/culture relations, the divides between mind and body, the 'sculpting' and customising of bodies—that Petersen cleverly terms 'the body shape industry'—and the ways in which bodies are classified and categorised. Who said we should never judge a book by its cover? Surely this image has been carefully chosen with certain audiences in mind and is an important part of this text. If we accept that, then the selection of Rodin's icon of intellectual accomplishment and physical excellence speaks volumes about the ways in which this book ponders deep questions. But it also highlights ways in which it is something of a rational masculine endeavour that happily takes on many of the questions feminists have been grappling with for decades, mulls them over and then suggests ways forward. For example, after touching on some of the feminist literature on women's use of beauty treatments and cosmetics, Petersen suggests that:

One can acknowledge that individuals may express agency through participation in practices of body modification and management and thereby constitute themselves as particular kinds of selves, while at the same time recognising that the options for thinking and acting are prescribed or suggested by the social context. (79)

This argument is nothing new for people who have read, for example, the famous debate from the late 1990s between Kathy Davis¹ and Susan Bordo² about whether and how feminists might attribute agency to women who choose cosmetic surgery while also examining their choices as part of a matrix of social, political and economic relations. Bordo is especially eloquent on the subject of how bodily dissatisfaction is both created and then ‘cured’ by techno-medical, media and global financial forces. However, while Petersen’s suggestion is nothing groundbreaking, it is nevertheless still sensible and welcome. It is useful to be reminded that individual choices happen in wider contexts and that examination of those contexts is crucial in an increasingly global, corporate and media-saturated world. And this is one of his primary aims: to try to change the direction of scholarship of the body. He wants to encourage it to be more socially accountable, to take into account political, regulatory, financial and global forces as well as personal, local and individual ones:

Unfortunately, in studies, ‘the body’ is often abstracted from everyday contexts and people’s everyday concerns and experiences. Indeed, to talk about ‘the body’ at all in isolation from the person and from social, political, historical and global contexts invites such reification, objectification and abstraction... (4)

One of the ways Petersen talks about bodies in their social contexts is to examine media and discourse, especially around issues such as

neuroscience and embryonic stem cell research. A number of studies from UK print media, mainly from the early 2000s, are deployed to show how stories about science are ‘framed’. Petersen is deeply concerned with how language, particularly in print media, affects the ways we view technology and the body. He emphasises that how issues are represented—by the media that report them, by pharmacological conglomerates that stand to profit from them, and by research institutes that are more likely to fund projects that will yield positive findings sooner rather than later—is crucial. So important is the relationship between media and areas such as stem cell research that he argues ‘understanding the operations of the media in general, and of the news media in particular, is crucial to an understanding of how science is *accomplished*’. (30, italics in original.) Using an actor network theory approach, he suggests that news items about the body, technology and science are hardly neutral journalistic translations of facts but rather part of complicated interactions between scientists, research funding organisations, pharmacological groups, patients, religious lobby groups and so forth. Like Latour, he urges us to ‘get behind the news’ so as to explore

what happens in the laboratories and in the professional networks and in the process of communicating findings (the massaging of results, the downplaying of negative findings, the issuing of carefully worded press releases, the negotiations between scientists and journalists, and so on). (32)

In addition, he argues convincingly that what is *left out* of science reporting shapes perceptions as much as what is *left in*, and what is often left out is consideration of the social and ethical dimensions of research. Scientific journalism, framed in these ways, helps create an uncritical public ‘climate of expectations’ (36) where research is characterised in terms of ‘breakthroughs’ which are utterly positive and beneficial. This in turn fuels certain kinds of corporate activity and research funding decisions. Petersen carefully outlines how corporate, scientific and journalistic industries *together* create and redefine an atmosphere where research is defined in terms of breakthroughs, discoveries, medical miracles and real life science fiction. In such accounts science is always progressive, always objective, and always working for the common good. Alternative or critical views are often simplified or ignored and among other things, ‘what such stories mostly do not portray are the behind-the-scenes struggles of scientists in competition with other scientists to achieve the “breakthrough”’. (43)

A very dramatic media example is used in chapter three, ‘Re-shaping and Perfecting Bodies’. The author tells us that ‘recent news reports highlight some pertinent specific issues in need of analysis’ (77) and summarises a 2005 article from *The Observer* reporting that aborted fetuses from Ukrainian women are being sold to beauty salons, mostly in Moscow, to be used in very expensive ‘foetal therapy’ which is said to halt ageing and cure conditions such as Parkinson’s disease and Alzheimer’s. *The Observer* journalist even suggests that some

women are being paid more money to have later term abortions. Petersen’s purpose in deploying this example is clearly stated—to emphasise that ‘if this report is true, then it would seem that the pursuit of “beauty” by some rich female “consumers”—who themselves are at risk of being duped by those promoting these treatments—may be at the expense of the health and well-being of other, poorer women’. (77–8) But the power of this example is undermined as he offers no analysis of the piece of journalism itself. Apart from questioning whether it might be true or not there is no examination in this instance of the power of the media, in particular the reliability of reporting in the UK of events that may or may not be occurring in the former Soviet republic. The article is taken almost at face value and lacks the interrogation necessary to ‘get behind the news’ that Petersen insisted earlier in the book is vital for understanding bodies, science and biotechnology.

In fact this writer is at his best when he abandons media analysis and focuses on addressing broad issues from historical and geo-political perspectives. For example, the discussion about obesity in chapter three is particularly interesting, showing how fatness is popularly depicted as a global ‘epidemic’ and the ways in which this works to condemn certain individuals as infectious and diseased. He identifies a deep contradiction here: ‘epidemic’ suggests something plague-like, out of people’s control, yet responsibility and even blame for obesity are still placed with individuals who are depicted as mismanaging themselves and lacking self-restraint. The heavy shadow of

disapproval cast upon overweight people happens partly because much of the scientific knowledge about obesity is confused and imperfect, and discussion about obesity's actual geographic and demographic spread is paltry. (60) Petersen outlines the origins of the body mass index (BMI), arguing that 'an arbitrarily defined measure of body dimensions and weight has become the yardstick for evaluating health risk and classifying pathologies'. (57) He suggests that because the BMI was developed within Western capitalist culture it doesn't necessarily apply meaningfully to societies that may have different body sizes and different relationships to food and nutrition.

This could be a useful general text to get sociology or cultural studies undergraduates started on thinking about the body and social context. Each chapter gives a solid socio-historical overview, then moves to examples and most often a series of pertinent questions. Clear and balanced summaries of the impact that theories, philosophers and scientists as diverse as Descartes, Darwin and Social Constructivism are presented. Petersen is not uncritical of them, for example of Darwinism he writes:

Scientific research of 'natural' processes is seen to 'progress' and to 'improve' bodies and lives. What is often not acknowledged is that the evolutionary theory of Darwin can be and has been used to justify all kinds of inequalities and injustices, including racial discrimination, eugenics, and sex discrimination and exploitation. (24)

Chapter four, 'The Classification and Regulation of Bodies', would be fine reading for first year health science or medical students, for whom some of the concepts could change whole careers; for example, the idea that increasingly the invention of medical technologies coincides with new categories of illness, syndromes or dysfunctions. Petersen provocatively states that 'advertisers may work closely with drug companies to help create new diseases' (89) and examines the rise of and marketing of Viagra as an example of the hype around a medical product 'creating' a medical condition. Chapter five, 'Powers of Mind over Body', features an extended examination of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) industries. Worth £1.6 billion annually in the UK alone, CAM is increasingly mainstream. The burgeoning range of therapeutic choices comprises a huge market and a growing global, corporatised set of industries governed by large conglomerates as much as by consumer insistence on 'choice'.

The Body in Question adds to ongoing research and increasing interest in how bodies are commodified as both objects of (potential) beauty and as systems or machines always in need of medical intervention or enhancement. It offers explanation—historical, philosophical and economic—about how patients have become consumers who, whether they're ill or not, are probably being sold a medical 'breakthrough' that will lead to expectations of improved health and prolonged life.

Petersen poses many questions and has some serious general critiques of theorists of

the body in this book. While he insists that in future we take into account power relations and strategies of social change he does not actually do this himself, except in the most wide-ranging of ways. Similarly, his claim that 'a thoroughgoing analysis of the politics and workings of the media is crucial' (30) if we are to understand how ideas connected with bodies arise and circulate is strong and valid but isn't adequately backed up by his own media analysis here. However, he certainly demonstrates that we are at a theoretical and historical juncture where new questions about the body need to be asked, particularly in relation to advantage and disadvantage, social justice, public expectations, responsibility and blame, corporatisation, what constitutes 'health' and 'beauty' and how those ideas are promulgated. And no doubt, in a world where your Botox is provided alongside your reiki massage and your hypertension drugs, and where medical tourism and trade in human organs is flourishing, research based on these questions will be increasingly important.

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1. K. Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body*, Routledge, New York, 1995.
 2. S. Bordo, 'Braveheart, Babe, and the Contemporary Body' in S. Bordo, *Twilight Zones*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997, pp. 27–65.