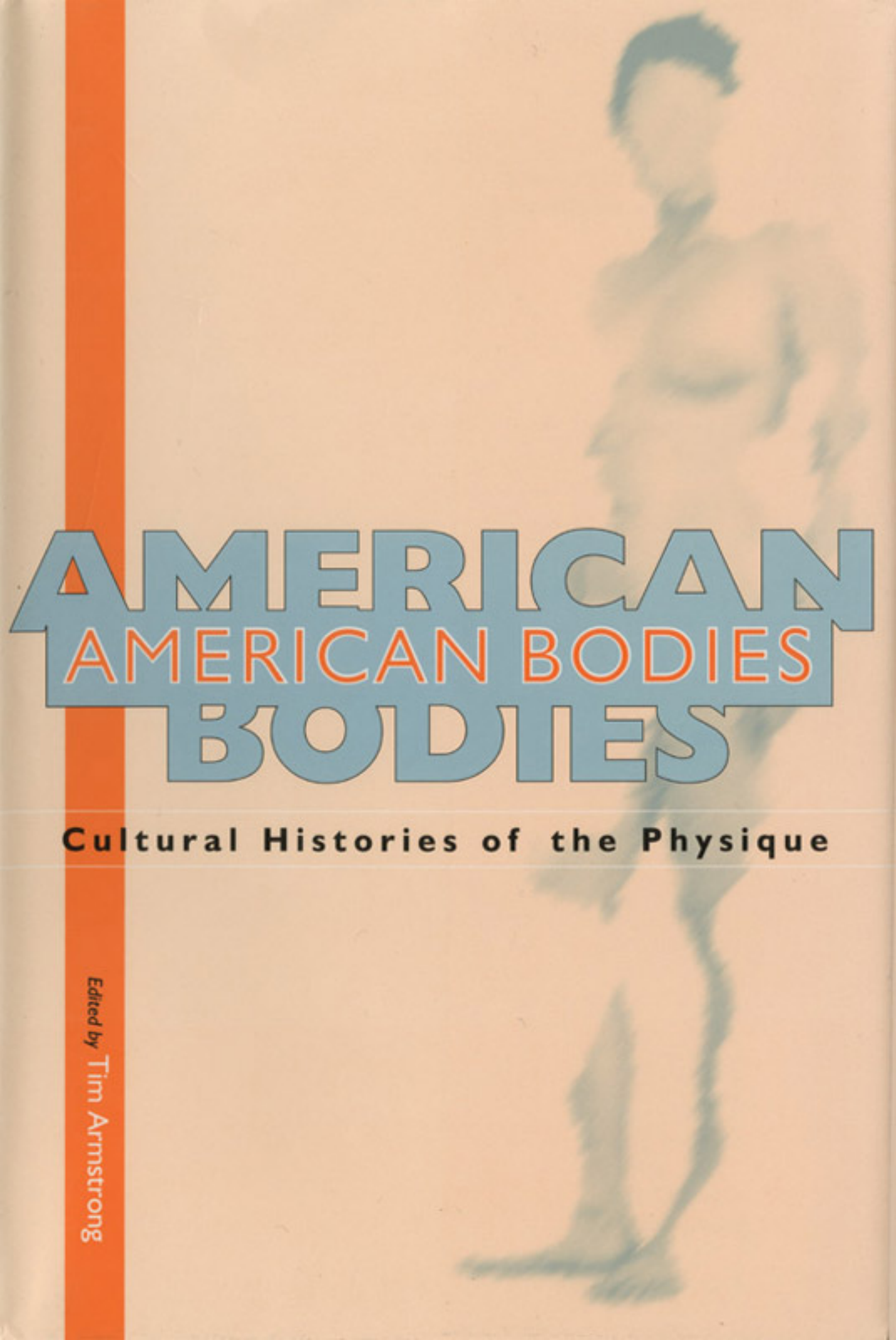

AMERICAN BODIES

Cultural Histories of the Physique

Edited by Tim Armstrong

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We could thus speculate that the male body in cinema is caught in the crisis engendered by modern modes of production: 'work' in the sense which is so important in the nineteenth century has been replaced by the commoditization and marketing of the self, with particular emphasis on beauty and on the body as image (as in the elaborate and non-productive musculature which Caldwell discusses. The body as commodity is also discussed by James Annesley, who examines the penetration of the body as evidence of the violence of its commodification in late capitalism, using two 'blank generation' novels, Brian D'Amato's *Beauty* (1993) and Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* (1993). The former's focus is plastic surgery as self-fashioning, dependent only on the ability to pay. In the latter, murder and dismemberment serve as metaphors for that reduction of the body to the status of object and waste which Annesley sees as endemic to the postmodern. *Frisk* becomes postmodern satire, challenging the reader with the blankness of its response to pornographic violence; while *Beauty* literalizes the equivalence of money and beauty.

Richard Canning's discussion of the discourse of sexuality in Armistead Maupin's *Tales from the City* trilogy (1978-82) focuses on the absence of the body rather than its presence. He argues that for all that the novel parodies patriarchal structures like the family, the gay body represents a limit point for the early Maupin, before AIDS: his texts see an elision of the sexual body, prompted by his need, in the context of original publication in a mass-market newspaper, to address an audience outside the gay community. Writing on an author from a milieu similar to Maupin's, John Moore considers Samuel R. Delany's cult science-fiction novel *Dhalgren* (1974), and attempts to explain its success—a success maintained despite its formal experimentation. Linking *Dhalgren* to Delany's candid bisexual autobiographies, Moore concludes that the novel's popularity must be attributed in part to its focus on sexuality. Where Maupin's satirical engagement with a popular audience tempers his treatment of the body, Delany's more experimental work finds an audience through privileging the body.

The paired essay on science fiction by Amanda Boulter examines the Afro-American writer Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy, which uses alien colonization of Earth and genetic manipulation to explore race and gender in a context conditioned by 1980s debates on sociobiology and the human genome. Butler's benign aliens, the Oankali with their multiple genders and their hybridization with the people of Earth, create a situation which both sharpens and problematizes the category of the 'human'. Butler's characters wish to assert their biological difference from the aliens, but find that their unity is challenged by differences of gender, race, and power. Boulter also shows how involuntary hybridization in Butler's work recalls the histories of slavery and colonialism in America, founded as they were on rape and bodily appropriation. Nonetheless, she detects a utopian, 'curative' trust in Butler's trilogy which points towards a 'polymorphous future' in which essentialism has melted away.

A final pair of essays continue the recurrent interest in this volume in relationships between gender and the body. Sue Vice contests Mark Anderson's contention that the modernist text operates by a refusal of meaning which might be thought of as 'anorexic' (an anorexia embodied in such texts as Melville's 'Bartelby the Scrivener' and Kafka's 'The Hunger Artist'). In Vice's account, recent texts by women writers explore more productive relationships between eating, body and writing than those

present in the minimalist texts of male modernists. Finally, Kasia Boddy explores the issues of performance and the reified body in an essay that shares some of the preoccupations of the essays by Annesley and Moore. The naturalist text's fascination with boxing finds its focus, in Jack London's boxing stories, on the figure of the woman spectator. The woman is supposed to see the performance as masculine virility; instead, she often sees it as an æsthetic performance closer in its coding to the 'feminine'. In Joyce Carol Oates's *On Boxing* (1987) and in her fiction Boddy sees an existential approach to the fight which places Oates close to male writers like Norman Mailer and Ishmael Reed. But Oates also—in a step beyond this paradigm—compares boxing to childbirth, a simile which reaffirms sexual difference.

Taken together, these essays suggest that the current preoccupation with the body remains productive of a dialogue between modernism and postmodernism; between a body which retains a privileged status as the carrier of meanings and physical or metaphorical work, with a potential for creativity and threat, and, on the other hand, a body which has become enmeshed in less tangible forms of reproduction. Terry Eagleton's recent call for a moratorium on work on the body and sexuality reflects an irritation with the latter possibility (and with a politics which, it seems to him, effaces class in favour of representational categories). That seems premature, enmeshed as we are in a historical dialectic in which the postmodern and modern conceptions of the body co-exist; in which the body is both the site of discourse and of political intervention. More prosaically, one could argue that the body has been for so long the site of repression, and (in the period treated here) of successive efforts to police the body politic, that the current enthusiasm for exploring its meanings reflects an emancipatory pressure which has not yet been dissipated. As recent developments in American cultural politics suggests—the disbanding of the NEA and NEH was being debated as this publication went to press, two institutions attacked for reasons at least related to the representation of the body—bodies are still subject to cultural fears which impinge on political structures.

Tim Armstrong

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic, An Archæology of Medical Perception* (London: Tavistock, 1973); *The History of Sexuality* (3 vols; trans. Robert Hurley; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981-88).

2. The range of work on the body is such that the most recent articles are already dated; see, for example, A. Frank, 'Bringing Bodies Back in: a Decade Review', *Theory, Culture and Society* 7 (1990), pp. 131-62. A selection of relevant texts in the field of gender alone would include Gena Corea, *The Mother Machine: Reproductive Technologies from Artificial Insemination to Artificial Wombs* (New York: (Harper & Row, 1985); Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1987); Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medical-Moral Politics in England* (London: Routledge, 1987); Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge,

James Annesley

Commodification, Violence and the Body: A Reading of Some Recent American Fictions

Contemporary American narrative's preoccupation with bodily violence is apparent to the most casual of observers. These concerns have been brought to the fore by, among other things, the recent emergence of Quentin Tarantino as one of America's leading screen-writers and directors and the debate generated by the brutal tone of his films *Reservoir Dogs*, *True Romance* and *Pulp Fiction*. Tarantino's notoriety has been matched in the literary world by the controversy that accompanied the publication of Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho*. The interesting thing about these pieces is, however, that their portrayals of extreme violence are neither unusual nor unprecedented. The gruesome scenes and brutal images presented by Ellis and Tarantino are not shocking deviations from the mainstream, but elements that are characteristic of it. This widespread emphasis on representations of corporeal violence can be seen in, for example, the films of Abel Ferrara, Jonathon Demme's *Silence of the Lambs*, the Raymond Carver stories 'So much water so close to home' and 'Tell the women we're going', Ray Shell's and Jess Mowry's tales of urban deprivation and drug-addiction, the Vietnam novels of Bobbie Ann Mason and Jayne Anne Phillips and the revisions of Western mythology offered by Clint Eastwood in *Unforgiven* and Cormac McCarthy in *Blood Meridian*. The prevalence of this kind of imagery in recent American film and fiction demands interpretation and this paper intends to contribute to that project by reflecting on the deployment of representations of corporeal violence in one particular strand of modern American writing, the strand that has come to be known as blank fiction.

Blank fiction is a new tendency in American writing. This fiction, which has been described as the work of a 'Generation X' and labelled in alternative terms as 'the fiction of insurgency', 'blank generation fiction' and 'Brat Pack fiction', can be identified by its characteristic use of flat, stunned prose styles and the employment of authorial perspectives that seem cold, distanced and voyeuristic.[1] Jay McInerney, Donna Tartt and Tama Janowitz are writers who have established themselves working within this form and affinities exist between their work and the less familiar fiction of authors like Darryl Pinckney, Lynne Tillman and Joel Rose. The tonal and stylistic similarities shared by these novelists are paralleled by a common set of thematic preoccupations. Their narratives are predominantly urban in focus and intimately concerned with the dynamics of popular culture. More significantly, blank fiction displays a willingness to engage with the kind of experimental subject matter that

obsessed Bataille, Burroughs and De Sade. Blank novels are about 'sex, death and subversion' and this thematic continuity means that these novels return repeatedly to images of the violated human body.[2] Blank fiction's concern for images of brutality finds specific articulation in Dennis Cooper's novel *Frisk* and Brian D'Amato's *Beauty* and it is upon these texts that this paper will concentrate.[3] The intention is to link a discussion of the way the body is represented in these two novels with a reading of wider social and economic forces by suggesting that the brutal and objectified images used by Cooper and D'Amato reflect an environment that is, in a different way, being brutalized and objectified. Their fictional descriptions of bodily carve-ups and aggressive penetrations register the economic forces carving up, penetrating and brutalizing the social body of modern America.

An analysis of the role played by the concept of beauty in these narratives offers a useful way of establishing the problem and developing the arguments needed to read the portrayal of bodily violence from a materialist perspective. These texts focus on beauty and the body's æsthetic and establish, through these *foci*, a sense of the forces that link the individual human body with the economic body. In both *Frisk* and *Beauty*, the body's visual æsthetic is the mechanism through which capitalism gets to grips with the personal. *Beauty* is both a received judgment on the body's appearance and a means of putting an economic valuation on that appearance. The complex functioning of the idea of beauty thus engages the body in the exchange system and provides the means through which the body is transformed into a commodity.

D'Amato's *Beauty* is a novel about plastic surgery, about the purchasing of beauty. It describes the activities of a New York sculptor who leaves the world of art and becomes an illicit cosmetic surgeon, using new and untested techniques to radically alter the faces of his female customers. These slickly performed but ghoulish procedures represent brutalization: they attack the flesh, penetrate and mould it into new shapes. Despite the controlled violence of these processes, D'Amato emphasizes the quality of the results achieved. His artist–surgeon does not perform minor alterations, he completely restructures faces. The crude cosmetic surgery of silicon and liposuction is replaced by a fantasy surgery that totally transforms the body.

This narrative introduces a number of crucial ideas, the most important of which is the understanding that cosmetic surgery provides a means of marketing and commercializing the body's appearance. Beauty, something previously considered to be 'free' and 'natural' is, as a result of cosmetic surgery, made available to those with money. The central feature of D'Amato's representation of cosmetic surgery is that he puts beauty up for sale in absolute terms. The fantasy operations he imagines are freed from the constraints imposed on real cosmetic surgery by factors like age and bone structure. The only thing *Beauty*'s surgical procedures need is money. D'Amato's text thus describes a situation in which beauty is totally commodified. The novel's central character complains that 'It's horrible the way some people try to convince you that you can't buy beauty.'[4]

At this point it is essential to acknowledge that the connection between money and beauty is not unique to a world in which the kind of fantastic transformations described by D'Amato are possible. Cosmetic surgery is nothing new. The histories of foot-binding and infibulation, for example, give an sense of the extent and antiquity

of practices intended to refine the body's appearance. More importantly, the cultural norms that define the beautiful face must be read in terms that appreciate the role played by the taste of dominant and wealthy power groups in their construction. However, the practices described in *Beauty* establish links between economics and the body that are of unprecedented strength and directness. The situation D'Amato imagines is one in which the body, and specifically the female body, is being completely fetishized. This fetishism holds clears echoes of Marx's sense of the dehumanizing consequences of commodity fetishism. Marx writes:

> The mysterious character of the commodity form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of things.[5]

Marx's position finds a specific resonance when read alongside D'Amato's text and prompts a recognition of the way his novel represents cosmetic surgery as a process of dehumanization that is both abstract and physical. The objectification of labour described by Marx is an objectification that takes place on the level of social psychology. In D'Amato's text this abstract process is translated into real corporeal event. The body is operated upon and, as a result, enters the exchange system. The dehumanizing consequences of commodification are thus exactly paralleled by the dehumanizing consequences of creating the commodity through the surgical brutalization of the body. All the dehumanizing effects of commodification identified by Marx are present in this system. The difference is, however, that this economic relation involves an extra level of dehumanization that takes place in a way unforeseen in Marx's original discussion. *Beauty* thus represents a situation in which commodification has an impact on human experience that is more intense and more extreme than that originally envisaged by Marx.

This sense of a heightened level of commodification can be linked to the theoretical interpretation of late capitalism advanced by Ernst Mandel. Mandel's concern is to outline the specific character of late twentieth century capitalism and to contrast contemporary economic relations with those of earlier periods. He writes:

> The age of late capitalism, with its accelerated technological development and the…massive extension of intellectually qualified labour, drives the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production to its highest pitch.[6]

Mandel's thesis differentiates late capitalism from preceding modes of production by identifying the increased intensity of capitalist activity in this period. Late capitalism is capitalism at it 'highest pitch', an 'accelerated' capitalism where the increased intensity of economic activity creates conditions in which capital's contradictions become more severe. This interpretation of the intensification of capital is developed into a more specific reflection on commodification by Frederic Jameson who argues 'late, multinational, or consumer capitalism…constitutes… the purest form of capital yet to have emerged', and suggests that this period is characterized by a 'prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas'.[7] The links between Jameson's

position and the arguments offered by Mandel are clear. However, there are differences and it is important to recognize the way Jameson refines Mandel's argument and connects it more directly to reification: where Mandel sees increased contradictions in late capitalism, Jameson sees increased commodification. In Marx's view commodification precipitates particular kinds of contradictions. Jameson's position outlines a specific arena and context for these contradictions, contradictions which develop as a result of what Mandel identifies as the general intensification of the capitalist mode of production. Jameson's ideas thus provide a precise way of reading the commercialization of the body presented by D'Amato. *Beauty*'s somatic preoccupations reflect Jameson's suggestion that late capitalism involves an expansion of capital's sphere of influence into 'hitherto uncommodified areas'. Clear parallels exist between the language and ideas associated with economic invasion and penetration and this discussion of the invasion and penetration of the human body by, simultaneously, the operations of cosmetic surgery and the commodification that attends those operations.

The relationships between this economic model and D'Amato's text can be strengthened by considering the central role played by æsthetics in the promotion of products. This function is illustrated in *Beauty*'s portrayal of the artist–surgeon's search for an image of the supposedly perfect face. His energy is concentrated on an attempt to construct a composite image of different faces using the already commodified images of fashion models and film stars. He uses these airbrushed, idealised images of beauty as the templates for his own creations and transforms them into new commodities. This triumph of commodification means that the advertising devices become products in their own right; D'Amato's artist surgeon turns advertising into reality in the faces he constructs. A perfectly commodified system results with the product and the promotion melding into one. Capital, in D'Amato's world, instead of selling through advertising, now sells advertising itself. The circle closes completely when the women who have been transformed using images from fashion and the cinema become themselves fashion models and film stars. One scene in the novel captures this play on levels in particularly clear terms. D'Amato describes his surgeon visiting a department store and discovering that the mannequins in the shop have been modelled on one of his surgically transformed women:

> One day I went shopping in Barney's…there was a whole gang of her there, unmoving, five garishly swimsuited, variously wigged clones, staring down at me with lifeless eyes through the window. Apparently a mannequin company had made a head design based on her; kind of an interesting reverse switch, I guess, but I sort of lost interest in shopping that day.[8]

Life is not imitating art, it is imitating advertising, with that imitation then becoming advertising itself.

The centrality of the concept of beauty to the processes of product promotion has been explored by W.F. Haug, and the applicability of his *Critique of Commodity Æsthetics* to this reading of Beauty is striking. Haug identifies the æsthetic illusion, the beautiful appearance, as a key element in the marketing process. Haug argues that 'within the commodity system of buying and selling, the æsthetic illusion—the

commodity's promise of use value—enters the arena as an independent function of its selling'.[9] In D'Amato's novel it is clear that the women who have had their faces transformed are not just the products and the customers, they are the advertising as well. In a curious way their beauty has become an 'independent function' of the process of selling cosmetic surgery. A cosmetic surgeon's clients are living advertisements for that surgeon's skills and D'Amato capitalizes on this fact and brings these commodifying and recommodifying forces into focus. In Haug's view this cycle of images, and the power that accompanies those images, is an inevitable part of the æsthetics of marketing. He suggests that 'Æsthetic innovation, as the functionary for regenerating demand, is thus transformed into a moment of direct anthropological power and influence'.[10] The implication is that beauty, as superficial appearance, takes on an authority that is at odds with its superficiality. Marketing's need for æsthetic innovation, and the power those innovations yield, create complicated sets of relationships between the commodity and the consumer. Rachel Bowlby offers a similar kind of interpretation when she argues

> The commodity makes the person and the person is, if not for sale, then an object whose value or status can be read off with accuracy in terms of the things he has and the behavioural codes he adopts.[11]

The commodity's transformative potential is, in Bowlby's terms, associated with the æsthetic illusions supplied with the commodity. This transformative potential is literalized in D'Amato's text which represents the anthropological power of the advertising image in a way that sees those images being themselves anthropomorphized. Bowlby's understanding of the commodity's power to 'make' the person, finds vivid reflection in *Beauty*'s portrayal of a world in which the authority of the æsthetic illusion is unparalleled.

The interrelationships that D'Amato constructs between the commodity, the commodity's image, the consumer and the body thus offers a means of shedding light on Mandel's view of late capitalism's heightened contradictions and Jameson's sense of the intensification of commodification in the late capitalist period. D'Amato's text creates an environment in which the body takes on a number of contradictory roles and becomes the site in which conflicting forces meet. It is the consumer and the consumed, the selling point and the product. The fact that the dehumanizing consequences that attend the body's commodification take effect in a way that allows the objectified body to become, in its own way, an æsthetic illusion and thus complicit in its own objectification is one of the most striking twists in D'Amato's narrative. This reading of *Beauty* is thus organized in terms that re-examine the forces that Jameson and Mandel identify as characteristic of late capitalism. The fact that brutalization, dehumanization and exploitation are dominant themes in D'Amato's text makes this association even more interesting as it offers the possibility of establishing an interrogative perspective on this mode of production. Late capitalism is shown breaking into new markets and effecting human experience in a specific and disturbing ways as it penetrates the limits of the body and commodifies the physical core of experience and subjectivity.

The problem with this reading is, however, that it relies on assumptions that figure the body in ways that contradict more established critical positions. The suggestion here is that the penetration of the body represents a diminishment of human experience. Corporeal limits are signalled as precious and the breakdown of those limits is marked in negative terms. This contradicts the orthodox postmodern line which places the piercing of the body's limits in a positive light by arguing that such denaturalizations disrupt the imaginary unity of the body and undermine positions that draw their strength from biologically determined reasoning. Recent criticism has made a great deal of, for example, the significance of the female cyborg, interpreting her as a figure that articulates the artificiality of the construct of the body.[12] A cyborg's prosthetic organs are read as an expression of her ability to define herself and her own body rather than having her body defined for her. Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* considers these issues on a theoretical level by asking the question 'are bodies purely discursive?' and interrogating the relationship between materiality and bodily identity.[13] These interpretations do not, however, work well when linked to the denaturalizing processes of cosmetic surgery which enforce dominance rather than deconstruct it. In the kind of cosmetic surgery described in *Beauty*, the penetration and transformation of the body is a process that works to reproduce cultural norms. The women created are not cyborgs, they are mannequins. Rather than breaking up culturally constructed ideas about the female body, cosmetic surgery carves those constructions deeper into the skin.

Beauty's representation of cosmetic surgery provides a clear opportunity for interpreting its brutal treatment of the body in economic terms. The potential for reading the depiction of bodily violence in Cooper's *Frisk* in this way is, however, less obvious. *Frisk* revolves around the lives of a group of young gay men. The novel describes them sleeping with their friends, acting in porn films, prostituting themselves and taking drugs. The central character, Dennis, is haunted by the recollection of being shown, while still an adolescent, the pornographic image of an apparently dead boy. The teenage memory of this 'snuff' picture plays on Dennis's mind and provides the background for his adult obsessions with masochism and murder. At the end of the novel he moves from Los Angeles to Amsterdam. The penultimate section of the book is in the form of a long letter written by Dennis to a former lover that describes a series of brutal sexual murders that he has apparently committed, with the help of two accomplices, while he's been in Holland. Dennis's accounts of these murders represent the human body in terms that are completely objectified and dehumanized. The letter explains how

> We cut him apart for a few hours and studied everything inside the body, not saying much to one another, just the occasional, Look at this, or swear word, until there was nothing around but a big, off-white shell in the middle of the worst mess in the world. God human bodies are such garbage bags.[14]

There is no sense here that the corpse is in any way connected with humanity. It is a thing to be mutilated. It is the 'worst mess in the world'. This inhuman atmosphere

is heightened by the lack of communication between Dennis and the other murderers, just grunting at each other, swearing and making phatic observations.

The potential for establishing an interpretative response to this piece in economic terms is not immediately apparent. Traces of the economic sphere can, however, be observed in this section's complete objectification of the body. The language of transforming living matter into dead echoes Marx's interpretation of commodity fetishism as a kind of metaphorical death. It is possible to strengthen this position by considering the way *Frisk* makes connections between the murders and coprophilia. The letter describes, for example, a section that includes the following dialogue between Dennis and the punk kid he is murdering. Cooper writes:

> I'd never wanted to eat someone's shit before, but I was starved for the punk's. I asked him if it had been eaten before. He mumbled, No, let me go. I asked him if he'd like me to eat it. He said, Are you really going to kill me? I said no very casually. Then I repeated my question. He said he didn't know what I meant. I said if he'd shit in my mouth we'd let him go. He said okay.[15]

This piece establishes links between commodification, excrement and murder, links that can be interpreted by considering Norman O. Brown's discussion of 'filthy lucre' in *Life Against Death*. Brown states that 'Money is inorganic dead matter which has been made alien by inheriting the magic power which infantile narcissism attributes to the excremental product.'[16] The relationship established here between excrement and money is a relationship that is reflected in *Frisk*'s description of Dennis's bargain with the punk. Dennis, employing a system of exchange that uses excrement instead of money, encourages the punk to try and buy his freedom with his 'filthy lucre'. This commercial proposition commodifies the punk's body and simultaneously devalues it by pricing it in excremental terms. The important point is that this devaluation takes place on both metaphorical and literal levels as the body is simultaneously subjected to the abstract mortifications of the reifying process and the real mortifications of violent death. The casual brutality described in *Frisk* is thus linked to this dehumanizing transaction, a transaction that generates 'dead matter' in economic terms (the commodity), in psychological terms (excrement) and in real terms (murder).

It is possible to strengthen this sense of the relevance of Brown's ideas by considering the way his argument develops into a reflection on what he identifies as the fundamental human need to produce objects that are both 'alien' and 'dead'. Brown writes:

> Excrement is the dead life of the body, and as long as humanity prefers a dead life to living, so long is humanity committed to treating as excrement, not only its own body, but the surrounding world of objects, reducing all to dead matter and inorganic magnitudes.[17]

Brown's understanding of humanity's commitment to treat 'as excrement...the surrounding world of objects' gestures towards a connection between his position and Marx's interpretation of commodification's objectifying impact. The problem with this relationship is that Brown's work is resolutely ahistorical. His argument reads the

human tendency to reduce everything to 'dead life' along essentialist lines and suggests that there is 'something in the structure of the human animal which compels him to produce superfluously'.[18] The ahistoricism of Brown's stance can, however, be broken down by putting a historical slant on his attempt to locate history's meaning in individual psychology. Brown's suggestion that surplus is produced in response to a fundamental human impulse is thus projected onto a historical axis and reinterpreted as a manifestation of the intrinsically overproductive character of capitalism. The historicization of this thesis creates an opportunity to develop these ideas on death, excrement and the body into a wider reflection on the dehumanizing and objectifying forces of commodification. This approach enables *Frisk*'s representation of coprophilia and the violence to be viewed in a way that illuminates the increasingly dehumanizing conditions generated by the intensified levels of commodification in late capitalism. The parallels between Brown's argument and the imagistic scheme employed by Cooper prompt a recognition of the economic dimension in *Frisk* and thus provide a framework for interpreting the text's repeated emphasis on scenes that involve the transformation of living matter into dead. Look, for example, at the following section in which one of Cooper's characters visits a doctor's office.

> The most interesting thing inside the office were charts showing human anatomy, one male, one female. Covering most of the wall, they showed life-size, young-looking people whose flesh had been peeled off at various points. The purplish stuff inside the wounds made Joe think of a pair of pyjamas he'd worn when he was seven or eight.[19]

The important thing here is the way the reflections on the colour of the inside of the human body turn into a recollection of an object. The pyjamas are indistinguishable from the image of human tissue and the whole structure of the character's response to the body involves a kind of reification.

The opportunities for reading *Frisk*'s treatment of the body in these economic terms can be extended by examining the text in a more straightforward way and looking at its content. The commercial focus in *Beauty*'s descriptions of cosmetic surgery is mirrored in *Frisk*'s representation of pornography and prostitution. In *Frisk*, as in *Beauty*, the æsthetic illusion of the commercialised body is both the economic value of that body and an actual corporeal attribute. Once again evaluations of the body's physical appearance and assessments of its beauty are seen to lock the human frame into commercial relationships. In porn acting the beauty of the body determines the value of the performer. In a similar way, the æsthetics of the body determine the value of the prostitute. Porn and prostitution are not, of course, new types of commercialisation and it is difficult to argue that they, in themselves, represent the intensification of capital identified by Jameson and Mandel. What is important in *Frisk* is, however, the way these professions dominate. Everybody sells their body in this accelerated flesh-market.

This reading of the violent imagery in *Frisk* must be tempered by an appreciation of the fact that the murders described are in fact nothing more than the product of Dennis's fantasies. The letter is a fiction and nobody really gets hurt. Even the 'snuff'

Notes

1. These definitions are taken from Douglas Coupland, *Generation X* (London: Abacus, 1992); Robert Siegle, *Suburban Ambush: Downtown Writing and the Fiction of Insurgency* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); and Elizabeth Young and Graeme Caveney, *Shopping in Space: Essays on American 'Blank Generation' Fiction* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992), pp. v-vi.
2. *High Risk 2, Writings on Sex, Death and Subversion* (ed. Amy Scholder and Ira Silverberg; London: Serpent's Tail, 1994).
3. Dennis Cooper, *Frisk* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1991); Brian D'Amato, *Beauty* (London: Grafton, 1993).
4. *Beauty*, p. 307.
5. Karl Marx, *Capital* (trans. Ben Fowkes; London: Penguin Books, 1976), I, p. 164.
6. Ernst Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (trans. Joris de Bres; London: Verso, 1978), p. 267.
7. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 36.
8. *Beauty*, p. 279.
9. W.F. Haug, *Critique of Commodity Æsthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society* (trans. Robert Bock; London: Polity Press, 1973), p. 17.
10. *Critique of Commodity Æsthetics*, p. 44.
11. Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 26.
12. Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the Reinvention of Nature* (ed. Donna Haraway; London: Free Association Books, 1991). This paper was first published as 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s', *Socialist Review* 80 (1985).
13. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 67.
14. *Frisk*, p. 106.
15. *Frisk*, p. 99.
16. Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death* (2nd edn; Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1985), p. 279.
17. *Life Against Death*, p. 295.
18. *Life Against Death*, p. 256.
19. *Frisk*, p. 51.
20. Elizabeth Young, 'Death in Disneyland: the Work of Dennis Cooper', in Young and Caveney, *Shopping in Space*, p. 260.

photograph that has such a significant effect on Dennis's imagination is shown to be a fake. In this respect *Frisk* appears to be a novel that gestures towards familiar postmodern concerns about the ontological status of fiction. The material perspective of this paper seems to be at odds with a text that is apparently so intent on interrogating the whole problem of materiality and representation. This is the line Elizabeth Young takes in her essay 'Death in Disneyland: the work of Dennis Cooper'. Young suggests:

> Cooper's central concern is something that has obsessed postmodern theorists. Faced with a seamlessly hyperreal society, apparently invulnerable to negation or political change, theorists have struggled to articulate a 'real' that escapes representation.[20]

Young's Baudrillardian reading locates Cooper's work within the æsthetic flux of postmodern writing and implicitly rejects interpretations grounded on material concerns. The fundamental problem with Young's approach is, however, that it is unable to step outside the boundaries of postmodern thought and remains caught up in exactly the kind of hyperreality she describes. Cooper is condemned to replicate Baudrillard in a way that leaves Baudrillard's postmodern pronouncements unchallenged and traps *Frisk* in a cyclical logic in which fiction can only reflect on a 'seamlessly hyperreal' world. A materialist reading of these fantasies, on the other hand, breaks down this sense of the hyperreal and allows *Frisk* to be engaged in terms that interpret the social significance of its fantasies. It is possible to strengthen this position by considering the way Cooper's text, in its combination of the brutal and the banal, seems to invite reflection on the meaning of those relationships. The glossy character of *Frisk*'s style, a style that enables Cooper to move so smoothly between the horrific and the mundane, appears to articulate a range of specific anxieties about the meaning of violence and the status of the body. The text's superficial and blank response to corporeality compels the reader to reflect on these conditions and encourages a search for elements that have been displace in the narrative's attempt to appear empty. The effort to trivialize and debase the human body becomes, when viewed in this way, an approach that almost insists *Frisk* be interpreted in terms that reject those trivializing processes. Cooper's method loads the body with significance and legitimates perspectives that read the body as a site in which the impact of wider forces, and particularly wider material forces, are registered.

This reading of *Frisk*'s representations of bodily violence is thus located within a framework of ideas derived from the analysis of commodification in late capitalism. *Frisk*, like *Beauty*, employs its images of the brutalized body to reflect on wider forces of dehumanization. The reading proposed here translates the mundane violence of Cooper's and D'Amato's texts onto an axis that measures these descriptions against an interpretation of the casual cruelties of the everyday economy. This assessment of the gratuitous blood-letting portrayed in *Beauty* and *Frisk* is an assessment that gestures towards the possibility of establishing a wider understanding of modern American narrative's general preoccupation with brutality, an understanding that sees in this preoccupation a reflection of the complex relationships that have developed between commodification, violence and the body.

AMERICAN BODIES

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