

# An Interdisciplinary Exploration of the Medial Bodily Imaginary

Butnaru, Denisa (ed.) 2020. *Medial Bodies Between Fiction and Faction: Reinventing Corporeality*. Bielefeld: Transcript. (266 pages)

**MEDIAL BODIES BETWEEN** *Fiction and Faction: Reinventing Corporeality* is a volume developed from a 2015 conference entitled *Medial Bodies between Fiction and Faction: Reinventing Carnality*, organised by a research council from the University of Freiberg called Factual and Fictional Narration. The book is edited by Doctor Denisa Butnaru, and it draws together multi-disciplinary fields, such as sociology, science and technology studies, and the arts. This accumulates into a transverse understanding of corporeality: that of *faction*.

The production of *faction* has different meanings in different disciplines. In literature studies, the term *faction* identifies how facts are appropriated into fictional environments, while in sociology, psychology and anthropology *faction* points to the artificial production of facts through narrative interviews. The interdisciplinary perspective within this volume engages with these multiple meanings, whilst arguing also for *faction* as a new epistemology – as an intermediate imaginary between fiction and fact. Particularly in literary and performance studies, in which the ability for bodily transformation appears more apparent, representations of the body as malleable and “plastic” are multiple. Science fictional and posthuman bodies in literature and performance art

often indicate how our understanding of corporeality and selfhood are challenged through technologisation and hybridity. Butnaru however argues that what distinguishes this volume is that it does not only make an analysis of the semiotics of hybrid or technological forms. Rather, *Medial Bodies Between Fiction and Faction* argues that “bodily models thought not long ago to be only fictional products have become at present a part of our concrete reality” (2020 14), and specifically looks at this transposition from fiction to fact. Eschewing arguments from deconstructivism and poststructuralism which position the body as semantic intersection, Butnaru describes an explicit transference of meaning, where fictional imaginaries transition into real life, both as selfhood and as material change. Butnaru writes:

The body supports the production of faction through the migration of imaginaries between fact and fiction: the medial body blends, transforms and translates imaginaries, spotting the echo of fictional scenarios in factuality and contributing to a process in which what has been thought to be extraordinary, becomes real, and therefore ordinary. (11)

Butnaru’s specific point of inquiry – which inspires this volume and forms the basis of her essay contribution, “The Protean Self” – is on the technological transformation of disability. In particular, she discusses how prosthetic exoskeletons in science fiction transform into science fact, but also the role that performance art has in accepting new bodily forms and medial selfhoods and what these contact zones can tell us about our corporeal models.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, “Hybrid Bodies”, contains essays about corporeal hybrid forms. It addresses cyborgism (Stephen Packard), technology/biology hybridity in performance art (Bianca Westerman), androidism (Matthias Hausmann), and representations of human/technology and human/animal hybridities (Ursula Klwick). This first section covers a range of literary mediums and periods considered broadly within the realm of the speculative, including superhero comics, gothic novels and sci-fi television. These hybrid forms make

representations of the transformative potential of corporeality and present bodily boundaries as permeable and medial, unsteady also the boundaries between fact and fiction. The second part of the book, entitled “Bodies Unbound: Disability, Ability, Enhancement”, explores the tensions between disability and representations of technological enhancement such as prosthesis. The topics covered in this section span the tension between fictive prosthesis iconography and actual amputee selfhood (Valentine Gourinat), neoliberal media fetishization of prosthesis (Luna Dolezal), the representation of the “gene” in reproductive and necrotic bodies in detective media (Gero Gutzzeit), and Denisa Butnaru’s mentioned exploration of a wider acceptance of science fictional prosthesis in sociological narrative interviews. The final section, “Corporeal Interfaces”, is a more loosely connected collection of essays concerned with the body as medial, identifying bodily phenomenological contact zones with the cinematic body and that of the viewer (Stefan Kristensen), narrativity (Marco Caracciolo), the assemblages of artistic virtual performance (Martin Dornberg and Daniel Fetzner), and the relationship between “deviant” embodied performance in self-harm artworks and social media (Julius Erdmann).

Whilst all essays within the volume engage with the intersections of corporeality and technology, many delineate fact and fiction in ways seemingly counter to the central thesis of faction. Indeed, some of the literary analysis – particularly in the section on hybridity – is arguably supportive of the poststructuralist-deconstructivist “blurring” of “semantic reservoirs of knowledge” (11); a position which Butnaru explicitly distinguishes the volume from. One such example is Hausmann’s exploration of the science fictional android, where rational scientific fact is satirised into the fantastical and artistic dimensions of the automaton; a conflation Hausmann argues only exists in the “text and the reader’s mind” (71). Butnaru’s thesis is that corporeal meaning transfers “from fiction to fact” (11), which describes a linearity that is not precisely unearthed in all essays, whilst both Gourinat and Dolezal rather appear to argue for the wide gulf between fictional representations in the media imaginary and lived reality in regard to prosthesis. Though

the unique thesis that the body imaginary moves *from fiction to fact* is not entirely convincing, the numerous essays do contribute to an outline of a certainly factional body.

The thesis of the book is ambitious, culminating in essays which draw from disciplines across arts, sciences and humanities to generate faction as something informed by multiple perspectives: disability studies, phenomenology, performing arts, narrative studies, and science and technology studies. The combination of the broad multi-disciplinarity lens, and the specificity of the introductory thesis, makes it difficult to discern precisely who the key audience is. However, for readers interested in contemporary theories of the body, in sociology and in developing interdisciplinary perspectives, this volume will undoubtedly give new insights, whilst those with specific disciplines may find perspectives in an essay outside of their field. As a reader in science fiction literature, I personally found generative potential in the materiality of medical performance BioArt, as discussed by Westermann. Ultimately, I think this is perhaps the greatest benefit of thinking through and with faction: that readers are given the opportunity to find new disciplinary contact zones to generate new imaginaries, as fact, as fiction, and as faction.

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