

**THE EPIC ANATOMY OF THE BODY.
NEW HISTORICAL-HUMANISTIC APPROACHES
TO THE MEDICAL IMAGE***

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Abstract: *In current historiography, the interdisciplinary study of history, visual arts, and medicine is no longer a novelty. The last decades have brought challenging works to the attention of researchers, highlighting, in particular, affinities between the three fields. Offering a different dimension to medical problems and overcoming chronological, geographical and disciplinary limitations, such books and studies broaden the horizon of knowledge, revealing the effects of medicine on society from multiple perspectives: cultural, political, economic, religious and intellectual. As the innovation in medicine is increasingly accelerated, and the results of scientific research in the field of biomedicine are challenging (often generating ethical debates and moral dilemmas), works like Anatomy of the Medical Image: Knowledge Production and Transfiguration from the Renaissance to Today offers the opportunity to assess the changing role of medical practices over “longue durée” of history. They contribute to a better understanding of the past and a more profound and fuller interrogation of the present. The thirteen contributions in the volume edited by Brill under the auspices of the Clio Medica series show how the historical approach, the visual material and the medical subject can work together.*

Keywords: *Body, Visual Representation, Debate, Interdisciplinarity, Book review.*

Rezumat: *Anatomia epică a corpului. Noua abordare istorico-umanistă asupra imaginii medicale. În istoriografia actuală, studiul interdisciplinar al istoriei, artelor vizuale și medicinei nu mai reprezintă o noutate. Ultimele decenii au adus în atenția cercetătorilor*

* Review on Axel Fliethmann, Christiane Weller (Eds.), *Anatomy of the Medical Image. Knowledge Production and Transfiguration from the Renaissance to Today*, Leiden – Boston, Koninklijke Brill, 2021, XV + 311 p.

lucrări provocatoare, subliniind, în special, afinitățile dintre cele trei domenii. Oferind o dimensiune diferită problematicii medicale și totodată depășind limitările cronologice, geografice și disciplinare, astfel de cărți și studii largesc orizontul cunoașterii, dezvăluind efectele medicinei asupra societății, din perspectivă multiplă: culturală, politică, economică, religioasă și intelectuală. Cum inovația în medicină este tot mai accelerată, iar rezultatele cercetării științifice în domeniul biomedicinii din ce în ce mai provocatoare (generând adesea dezbateri etice și dileme morale), lucrări precum *Anatomia imaginii medicale: producerea și transformarea cunoștințelor din timpul Renașterii și până în prezent (Anatomy of the Medical Image: Knowledge Production and Transfiguration from the Renaissance to Today)* oferă oportunitatea de a evalua rolul în schimbare a practicii medicale în „durata lungă a istoriei”. Ele contribuie la o mai bună înțelegere a trecutului și la o interogare mai profundă și mai deplină a prezentului. Cele treisprezece contribuții reunite în volumul editat de Brill sub auspiciile seriei *Clio Medica* prezintă modul în care pot fi puse la lucru, împreună, abordarea istorică, materialul vizual și subiectul medical.

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From the first reading, the title of the book, edited by Axel Fliethmann and Christiane Weller, may arouse the interest of researchers who deal with the study of the visual, mentalities and the history of medicine. I believe the first keyword in the title – Anatomy – is not accidental, meaning, for some scholars, the pillar of teaching medicine. For others (more concerned with the humanistic side), it symbolises a way to connect the inert body with the living individuals, society and, implicitly, a historical era. One of the most widespread opinions is that anatomy, as a science, emerged during the Renaissance (and, again, the mention in the title of the book is not accidental), striving to achieve its niche in the spectrum of emerging academic disciplines. Dissecting a body not only reduces it to its parts but offers the opportunity to enrich knowledge through discovery. However, the body is a composition of muscles, bones, and blood vessels. It is also an abstraction, a historical, technological or political construct, loaded with meaning depending on the historical era, mentality or visual culture. Moreover, the second keyword in the title is *Image* or how people perceive, see or imagine, generating ideas, alternatives or oppositions.

An *Anatomy of the Medical Image* is undoubtedly a challenging title, especially since it announces a subject treated from the perspective of the production and transfiguration of knowledge over several centuries. So was Antony Kenny's 1973 work, *The Anatomy of the Soul. Historical Essays in the Philosophy of Mind*. The book is built on similar principles to other studies that address the theme of imagining and visualising the human body (Barbara Maria

Stafford, *Body Criticism. Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine*, MIT Press, 1991; K. B. Roberts and J. D. W. Tomlinson, *The Fabric of the Body. European Tradition of Anatomical Illustration*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992; Robert P. Zwijnenberg, Renée Van de Vall, *The Body Within. Art, Medicine and Visualization*, Brill, 2009), attempting to demonstrate how the history of medicine and mentalities merges with cultural studies, anthropology meets religion, anatomy interferes with plastic techniques, philosophy with body aesthetics, and the doctrines of social medicine with political ones. In other words, it has evident academic character, although it seems intended to satisfy the curiosities and tastes of a varied audience.

Taking into account the theme and chronology, the editors structured the volume into three parts for which they found exciting subtitles. A very elaborate Introduction highlights the course of research from the last 30 years on visual paradigms in a cultural context and the role of epistemic images in the complex and complicated process of knowledge. In the field of medicine, images were, for a long time, seen only as illustrations necessary to explain the scientific text, which was not a bad thing. However, the examination of images as a basis for the production of knowledge did not have a considerable role, even if the historians proposed a broader understanding of visual formats, overcoming the traditional interpretations specific to the canons of fine art. Later, the diversified analysis of visual paradigms proved utility in medical historiography. A different look at the body by associating medical information with the historical-cultural and technological context offers unsuspected surprises at the discursive, anatomical, pathological, gender and imaginary levels.

“Epistemology of anatomy and aesthetics” or the first part of the volume, contributes to the knowledge of the anatomical dimension of the body as a subject of dialogue between two competing forces, namely artistic creation and philosophical introspection. Although Rembrandt’s “Anatomy Lessons” have been debated by William S. Hecksher (1958); Josua Bruyn et al. (1982-1989); Baige Elise Smith (2010), Jill Redner reconsiders the representation of the body-mind dualism/soul, insisting on the dialogue between science (medicine) and religion in the artistic depiction of two states of fact: life (those who examine the corpse) and death (the deceased). In both of these, the paradoxical human dimension appears as a divine creation and medical body (p. 47). The changes in the artistic style, the working technique and the intellectual perception of life and death are elements identified by the authors as being decisive in the two-dimensional evaluation (artistic and ideological) of the creation of the famous Dutch painter. Axel Fliethmann proposes an equally interesting material, revealing what happens when the visual

culture meets the medical discourse. The illustration of pathologies implied a visual medical paradigm that breaks the Renaissance man from religious, philosophical or social limitations and stigmas, exposing him as a truthful, realistic construction. In the same key of the historical influences that allow or impose the change, we can read the contribution of Elizabeth Stephens, who brings to light the personality of Anna Morandi Manzolini, “a lady anatomist”, as she was called by Rebecca Messbarger (p. 81), a specialist in moulds medical and one of the provocative female characters in eighteenth-century Europe. According to the author’s opinion, anatomical modelling is the result of the convergence between science and art, contributing to the progress of medical research. The last of the materials that interrogate anatomy epistemically and aesthetically is Heikki Lempa’s study which analyses the anatomy of sculpture and the modelling of the male body through physical exercises. It is a fascinating retrospective on one of the cultural stereotypes from the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that had made Johann Heinrich Lips illustrate the boys in the book of Johann Christoph Friedrich GutsMuths as cheerful and dynamic, in permanent movement, similar to characters from Greek antiquity, but with features specific to the Germanic imaginary. Lempa’s research also highlights the dialectic of masculinity in the early 1800s, when it was understood as a “moral beauty of the body” (p. 110) or a combination of sensitivity and robustness. Moreover, the research findings lead to the idea that there is no singular image of the German man and his body but rather a contested field of competing stereotypes, which shaped what can be called the “classic German male body” (p. 111).

While the first part focuses on the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries, presenting the interference of anatomy with the artistic and aesthetic imagination, the second section of the volume - “Identity and Visual (De)Formation” - explores the relationship between body image and identity in the nineteenth century as the dimension of metaphysical or religious beliefs is overcome by the emotional or psychological. A modern, dispassionate, scientific approach to the human body made it easier to discover the inside and outside of the body, the influence of race or mentalities also facilitating its identification and framing in a particular cultural context. In the study signed by Corinna Wagner, the knowledge of the outer body, through what defines it or is observable/ intuited, leads to the penetration into the secrets of the inner body, unseen/intuited. The connection of the material body with the emotional one can be easily observed in the “expressiveness” of the face (p. 116) or the mimicry of individuals. A historical and anthropological perspective brings Duchenne, Darwin, Bramwell and Parker into the discussion. It is also a provocative invitation to notice the ability of nineteenth-century photog-

raphy to expose facial complexity. The contribution signed by Joanna Madloch underlines the relationship between medicine and image technology in the same nineteenth century, more precisely, the “occupational portrait” (p. 141) that appeared as a response to the increasing specialisation of professions. The photographs were taken between 1840 and 1900, usually in specialised studios, showing doctors accompanied by books and charts, but also by skulls or other parts of the skeleton, as a metaphor for the daring attempt to face death. In addition, the author refers to the photographic image of the dissections that illustrated the courses of the 1880s and 1920s. In essence, it emphasises the profession’s role in a social and cultural context, especially concerning the attitude towards human remains. Carolyn Lau proposes another dimension of the medical portrait (this time painted). She presents the creation of an artist known as Lam Qua, one of the most successful Cantonese painters working in the Western style. Making portraits of notorious patients of the American missionary doctor Peter Parker, he visualised the human body in its most curious details, forcing the viewer to confront the morphological tension generated by the pathological, which surprises and disturbs balance, tact, and science. The unusual combination of morality and strangeness could be a typical rhetorical strategy for so-called curiosity management, the paintings sparking interest from a medical, cultural and historical perspective, but not from an aesthetic one. Diametrically opposite is the proposal of visual artist Stef Lenk, who demonstrates how imaginative thinking and drawing provide a unique language for borderline experiences. He extracts from the clinical content of the diseases the creative, atypical symbolism manifested even during crises of anxiety and depression. Visual exteriorisation thus becomes useful in communicating otherwise uncomfortable topics (mental illness), facilitating destigmatisation and a positive change.

The third group of studies is entitled “Power, Consumption and the Pathological Body” and analyses the perception of the deformed, sick, disabled or mutilated constitution from an angle other than medical and artistic. Malformations or deformities can be negotiated culturally and mentally, especially when the image becomes essential in domains such as political economy, sociology and race ideology. Starting from the historical critique of Foucault, Claudia Stein signs a material entitled “Capitalism without Desire”, which makes me think of Todd McGowan’s book, *Capitalism and Desire*, published in 2016. It is a thought-provoking investigation of the aspects that the author considers “fundamental” in the knowledge of human nature from the perspective of one of the most successful fields of contemporary economic thought and practice: behavioural economics. Considering the historical context of Germany at the beginning of the twentieth

century, she focuses on the “anthropological paradigm of hedonistic human nature” (p. 198), generated from the intersection of laboratory research with the momentum of industrialisation and the explosion of consumer culture. The result of such a combination outlined a distinct profile of the modern man, endowed with a native desire for consumption in its multiple forms. It is an original historical vision of the collaboration between life sciences, biomedicine, biotechnology and political economy that can form the basis of further studies applied to other geographical areas. Michael Hau’s chapter can be considered profitable from the historiographic point of view, even if the subject addressed is a particular one in the vast field of the history of medicine. Reappraising the “capillary microscopy” promoted by the doctor Walther Jaensch, the study shows how new therapies applied to people with “inhibited mental development” could transform them from potential threats to the welfare of the Weimar Republic into productive citizens. It is about a biopolitical strategy meant to increase genetic quality through eugenics, leading to public health and social welfare. There is then a thematic continuity concerning interwar Germany, although Birgit Lang’s contribution aims at another plane: that of the psychiatric discourse that produced an almost pathological fascination with sexually motivated crimes. The author dwells on the phenomenon of “Lustmord” (or sexually motivated crime, victims often being prostitutes) found in the works of male graphic artists and which called into question the role of aesthetics, drawing attention to the management of certain types of sexual, social and political anxieties. The careful contextualisation of the narrative and comparison of criminological photographs with artistic creations indicate a complex construction, exceeding the epistemological limits of criminology, forensic pathology, photography and visual arts. It is a discussion about the imaginative transposition of visceral violence. It is also a way to approach the dimensions of artistic ambivalence regarding the politics and socially engaged aesthetics in the Weimar Republic. Christiane Weller’s study raises a question related to the interest and rationale of art collections within psychiatric institutions: can these artistic creations be “read” and otherwise psychoanalytically, or do they have an aesthetic, sociological or even political dimension? Of course, the portrayal of mental anguish becomes interesting for a specific type of art consumer, “psychiatric” or psychotic works of art being classified according to some criteria, including the diagnosis or pathology of the artist-patient. Also, Weller emphasises a novel aspect, namely the dual character of these works of art. On the one hand, they reflect the clinical side that interests psychiatry as a discipline, functioning “as an archive” (p. 261) as both the narrative and the feelings evoked by it occupy a given space or epistemic context. On the other hand, the artistic creations in

question transcend scientific knowledge, diagnosis and psychiatric classification, undermining or deconstructing medical discourse in favour of the initial elements of self-expression without the need for language or logic. Barry Murnane's contribution is also about the questioning of reason, which investigates contemporary discourses regarding the conceptualisation of the Posthuman, the imagination of biotechnology and the importance of mass media. Building on the 2013 BBC series *In the Flesh*, "a post-zombie apocalypse drama" (p. 262) that presents the possibility of artificially regenerating the undead's ability to think and behave rationally, controlling their criminal urges, the author addresses the challenges of treatments regenerative, surgical and pharmaceutical and the ethics of the biomedical body in the contemporary context of the advance of media and imaging technologies. It is a daring look at the epistemological function of biomedicine which, in nowadays culture and implicitly in the production of visual media, enriches the last 21st-century imagery, dramatically changing the trajectory of knowledge and understanding of the human body.

The 13 chapters, the Introduction, a generous bibliography (in which the diversity of titles shows the seriousness of the investigation and its multidisciplinary or interdisciplinarity) together with two indexes of names and subjects, a list of illustrations and notes about the authors constitute the 104th volume of the *Clio Medica* series printed in 2021 under the auspices of the prestigious Brill publishing house.

Concluding on this book, it is undeniable that the contributors reveal an acute awareness of the ethical questions associated with the history, medicine, art, and biotechnology. They propose a different way of looking at the image (painting, graphic, photograph, film sequence) as a creator, not so much of new objects but, more tellingly, of new subjects. Without neglecting the conceptualisation that highlights the significance of ideas, language and documenting the body, the authors' approaches emphasise relationship, interaction and communication, the act and social, economic, political and cultural impact. Bringing together a unique blend of history, art, and science, *Anatomy of the Medical Image: Knowledge Production and Transfiguration from the Renaissance to Today* is an engaging, interesting, and inspiring read for historians, physicians, sociologists and artists alike. We look forward with interest and enthusiasm to see what new perspectives the interdisciplinary dialogue will unveil.

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