
The Year's Work 1996

The Year's Work in
Critical and Cultural Theory

6

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Tim Armstrong on *American Bodies: Cultural Histories of the Physique*. Its contents include Simon P. Newman on the tattoos of early American seafarers, Peter Thompson on maritime cannibalism, Louis J. Kern on male sexuality in Victorian free love literature, Margaret Jones on the early twentieth-century feminist fight for birth control, Barbara Will on nervous systems over the same period, Tim Armstrong on Henry James and Fletcherism, Lee Grievson on *Drive for Life*, a one-reel film by D.W. Griffith, Brian Caldwell on muscles in Stallone and Schwarzenegger movies, James Annesley on violence in 'blank generation fiction', particularly Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* and Brian D'Amato's *Beauty*, Richard Canning on Armistead Maupin, Amanda Boulter on Octavia E. Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy, John Moore on Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*, Sue Vice on 'the well-rounded anorexic text' and Kasia Boddy on women spectators in boxing fiction and film. The essays collected in this volume, another 'proceedings' book, are said to be 'based' on papers given at the 1994 British Association for American Studies annual conference held at Halifax Hall, Sheffield. The number of essays listed promises quite a substantial volume, but most of the essays are very slight and do not seem to have been 'worked up' much from their original state as conference papers. Oddly, the contents page promises 277-plus pages of text, whereas there are only 211. Consequently, as a book, it reads like a large tray of hors-d'œuvres – quite tasty, but nothing really filling.

It is difficult to tell, but it is possible that *Representations*, the cradle of New Historicism in Berkeley, has attempted a relaunch of its governing theoretical framework by publishing a special issue on 'The New Erudition' (56) edited by Randolph Starn. Either that or, as Starn also partly confesses, it is simply a convenient label that he has applied in order to homogenize, in recognizable commodity form, an otherwise heterogeneous bunch of essays concerned with 'seemingly unrelated interests' that he happened to 'cobble together'. This admission does not, however, prevent Starn from issuing a manifesto detailing the main characteristics, aims and objectives of this 'New Erudition' in bullet points. These are: 'a penchant for the arresting detail, trace, clue, sign, shard and so forth'; 'a predilection for the curious, strange, unexpected, sometimes uncanny and riddlesome fact, feature or cultural field, both in its own right and also as "normal" for a hermeneutics of culture'; 'interdisciplinarity: that is, a latitudinarian attitude towards distinctions of genre, discipline or cultural status'; and 'a "genealogical" mode of research and representation attentive to typological relationships across time and to particularities in time'. It all sounds like New Historicism to me, so the curious thing is why *Representations* should want to repackage it as 'The New Erudition', a peculiar phrase that combines slick American marketing with pomposity. Is it possible to have slick pomposity? I suppose it is the preferred mode of senior American politicians. However, apart from the packaging, the essays 'cobbled together' here are very interesting and diverse. They include Carlo Ginzburg, 'Making Things Strange: The Prehistory of a Literary Device' (8–28), Michel de Certeau, 'Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias' (29–47), Jan Assmann, 'The Mosaic Distinction: Israel, Egypt and the Invention of Paganism' (48–67), David N. Keightley on the origins of writing in China (68–95), Michael Zink on 'Nerval in the Library' (96–105), Robert L. Chibka on 'The Library of Forking Paths' (106–22), and Aleida Assmann on 'Texts, Traces, Trash: The Changing Media of Cultural Memory' (123–34).