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Arnold Schwarzenegger: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Body and Image

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REFERENCES


Arnold Schwarzenegger: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Body and Image has been edited by Michael Butter, Patrick Keller, and Simon Wendt, all of whom have contributed individual essays to the volume. Most of the essays appearing in this collection were first presented at the “Arnold Schwarzenegger: Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf Körper und Image” conference that took place at the Heidelberg Centre for American Studies from September 18-20, 2009. Although there is no formal division of the essays in the contents page, a categorisation is suggested in the editors' introduction: the first half of the volume looks mainly at body and the second one at image. Another kind of clustering is also possible to establish based on the different phases of Schwarzenegger's trajectory, with most essays focusing on bodybuilding, movies, or politics. In setting up the theoretical terms of the project in the volume's introduction, the editors put forth body and image as core analytical concepts. Many of the essays engage in thinking the 'natural'/unnatural' and/or 'healthy'/unhealthy' at different levels of conceptualizing the body: as the subject of sensations (well-being and the feeling body), gazes (the looked-at body), desires (proper/improper sexual orientation), and various technologies (the controllable/perfectible body). Read individually as well as a system, the contributions to the volume also shed
light on the shapes of various cultural hierarchies and shifts in terms of what is considered ‘in’/’out,’ ‘high’/’low.’

One of the strengths of the volume is its inclusion of pieces by scholars from a wide range of specialisations, including -but not limited to- media studies, cultural studies, political science, and film studies. In effect, the multi/inter-disciplinary nature of the project is one of its main characteristics, clearly stated in both the volume's title and its introduction. The space is open for the reader to see the different entries and/or clusters as in dialogue with each other. In certain cases, essays seem to work better when read and appreciated in conjunction with each other. For example, Patrick Keller's "Images of California Conservatism: Arnold Schwarzenegger and Political Ideology" sets out an insightful analytical frame for locating the 'truth' of Schwarzenegger's political trajectory at the intersection of distinct forces, namely the larger political context, his image, and his ideology. On the other hand, Frank Sauer's more descriptive approach in "You Are Regulated! Governing the Green State" provides detailed archival information on a specific issue, that is the gradual 'green' transformation in Arnold's rhetoric as Governor of California.

A minority of the essays dwell on relatively well-trodden territory, particularly certain entries on bodybuilding and the (re)production of gender norms. Others, however, exhibit what seem to me a much more adventurous and original stance. One of the essays belonging to this latter category is "Mr. Schnitzelicious, the Muscle Man: Somatic Empathy and Imaginary Self-Extension in Arnold Schwarzenegger's Hard-Body Movies," where Julian Hanich ventures away from a semiotic ‘reading’ of movies-as-texts and adopts a phenomenological approach to explore embodiment and the filmic experience. Another example is Jörg Scheller's "Performing the Subject-Subjecting the Performance: Arnold Schwarzenegger in the Context of Postmodern Aesthetics between Pop Art, Camp, and Performance/Body Art," which situates Schwarzenegger and bodybuilding from the late 1960s onwards in light of postmodern art movements, comparing him as an individual subject and 'artist' to Warhol and other contemporaries, bringing attention to the synthesis of progressive and conservative traits.

Many essays offer a more integrated perception of Arnold’s various images and their function by looking at their reception, thus locating their significance in the dynamic relation between image and viewer, stimulus and recipient. A case in point here is "Bodybuilding, Male Bodies, and Masculinity in 19th and 20th Century America: Eugen Sandow and Arnold Schwarzenegger," where Simon Wendt proposes a fresh methodology by examining reactions to/representations of bodybuilding and bodybuilders ‘from the outside’ (i.e. USA mainstream media) and how these have shifted through the decades. Also, Michael Butter’s "From Rough Guy to Family Guy: The Transformation of Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Star Persona in Twins and Kindergarten Cop" looks at film audiences in their capacity as voters in political elections, exploring the interface between show-biz and formal politics as domains that share important practices and rationalities. In his treatment of much less discussed movies featuring Schwarzenegger, Rüdiger Heinze’s “Conformist Rebels and Popular Outsiders: Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Movie Heroes” examines the figure of the hero and its symbolic function, taking into consideration the positions and roles of audiences as members of a given (USA) social order.

Taken as a whole, the volume does unfold in the terms the editors set up in the introduction. The essays contribute towards one of the main stated objectives, that is sketching and deciphering the complexities in thinking Arnold Schwarzenegger as both a
phenomenon in its own right and an entry point into changing social coordinates. Reading each and all individual pieces, it does become clear what Wendt, Keller, and Butter argue in the introduction: studying Arnold effectively means studying America. Even for readers with a sustained (research) interest in Arnold Schwarzenegger there is a good chance that they might come across something new given the breadth of themes and approaches presented in this compilation. The volume contributes to a variety of fields and sub-fields, such as film and star studies, gender, body and embodiment, and media studies.