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Book Review

***Fictions of Legibility. The Human Face and Body in Modern German Novels from Sophie von La Roche to Alfred Döblin***

by **Gabriela Stoicea**, transcript, 2020. 200 pp. \$60.00

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***Fictions of Legibility. The Human Face and Body in Modern German Novels from Sophie von La Roche to Alfred Döblin***

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Against the backdrop of modern European discourses on the body as text, the paradigm of readability of human bodies and its development in literary texts, Gabriela Stoicea's *Fictions of Legibility* marks an important contribution to cultural and German studies. Stoicea argues for "moments of resistance" (15) in modern German literature that responded to physiognomic discourses of their time. Starting with the rise of physiognomy in the 18th century, the author's study seeks to illustrate new perspectives on the "fascination with physical appearance" (15) in German literature. In undertaking close-readings and an interdisciplinary cultural study approach to the examination of the role of body descriptions, Stoicea shows how three German-speaking authors—Sophie von La Roche, Friedrich Spielhagen and Alfred Döblin—partook in physiognomic discourses of their time ultimately wrote against a monolithic semiotics on the readability of human bodies codified by the pastor and philosopher Johann Caspar Lavater that were both radicalized and instrumentalized for ideological purposes such as eugenics.

With the aid of a cultural studies approach Stoicea's in-depth investigation demonstrates how, over a course of three centuries, the German novels *Geschichte des*

Fräuleins von Sternheim (1771), *Zum Zeitvertreib* (1897), and *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) formed another body of work that discursively expatiates on the legibility of bodies and thus stand in conversation with predominant ideas about physiognomy. Stoicea's new perspectives on the three novels reveal that La Roche, Spielhagen and Döblin allow different views on different narrative 'body types' from different perspectives. These in turn manifest new forms of legibility and comprehension of the novels' characters.

Since the study attends to the literary role of the depiction of bodies and their legibility over three centuries, the book is chronologically divided into three parts that provide historical backgrounds with regard to social transformations, philosophical and natural scientific discourses as well as the progressing entanglement of psychological matters in German literature from the 18th to 20th century.

In the introduction, the author points out the impact of the evolution of print culture on the intellectual reading culture. As the availability of books and the marketplaces gradually expanded and diversified, the reading habits and cognitive processes and expectations of readers also changed and became more refined. Stoicea's interdisciplinary approach conveys the importance of such cultural and economic transformations in and beyond the period of Enlightenment in European society and thus accentuates their critical role for her subject matter; the legibility of human bodies in German literature. For Stoicea, being concerned with the study of the human body and face, this also means being

concerned with the audience, the readers as well as their transformations against the background of cultural shifts in history.

The study's first main part informs the reader about the theoretical beginnings of physiognomy as a pseudo-scientific field. Key figure of physiognomic thought in the Enlightenment period was Lavater. His *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775-78), documenting obscure thoughts on and approaches to *Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* (as the subheading suggests), were considered seminal contributions to the epistemology of the body by pathologists, philosophers and physiologists of that time. However, Lavater's "X-ray-like vision" (46) and his religious agenda focused on the relationship between intellect and sight but lacked the ambiguous complexity of the body. Stoicea supports her interrogation of the failings of both Lavater and the discourse on physiognomy itself with images from the *Fragmente*.

In the three main parts, Stoicea skillfully weaves together her observations on three different legible 'body types' introduced by La Roche, Spielhagen and Döblin respectively. First, in von La Roche's case, the author's examination outlines how the writer synthesized prevalent theory on physiognomy established by Lavater into a new model of narrating the body – the "Body in Perspective" (49) – that allowed different aspects of visibility and troubled prevailing physiognomic ideas. Stoicea stresses that La Roche excoriated Lavater's antiquated argument for monosemiosis by creating a multi-perspective narration (Bakhtin)

“to obliterate the human body from view” (52) and restoring visibility to the bodies of her characters. Regarding the intersection of body, mind and text, Stoicea’s finding in her observation is that bodies cannot be reduced to causal and “cognitive operations, since so much in literature, as in real life, depends on the imagination and on historical conditions” (61). In *Fräulein Sternheim* Sophie von P.’s body resists causal hermeneutics and translates its physicality into a narrative multi-faceted force.

In part two, Stoicea discusses Spielhagen’s “Body as “Versable” Type” which conflates the depiction of social status with physical appearance and its expressive variations. Spielhagen wrote *Zum Zeitvertreib* against the backdrop of the incremental industrialization of Western society that changed labor conditions and impacted the depictions of bodies in literary and in sociological discourses. A consideration of the relationship between body, gender and social class through the lens of social ontology combined with feminist discourses on industrialized bodies would have benefited the chapter’s historization. However, as the author shows in Spielhagen’s case, the individual psychological processes of the characters are undermined by the “rich expressivity” (125) that negotiates their social status and their representation through their bodies. According to Stoicea’s reading, Spielhagen redefines Lavater’s definition of physiognomy by understanding corporeality as something “versable” (125; latin *versabilis*), something that resists exterior forces of control. In his novel this concept allows for a depiction of a socially typical hero/ine “but also (a)

uniquely complex” kind and therefore also for the narrator’s ability to form “corporeal poetics that resist the homogenizing, flattening forces of modernity” (125).

In the third part Stoicea specifies Döblin’s body type as the “Soul-Stripped Body” that is formed in the intersections of visual media, politics, mental health and novel writing. The author’s extensive study of the novel outlines its interdisciplinary complexity in which the depictions of bodies respond to contemporary discourses in psychoanalysis, photography, ideological politics, and literature. Stoicea stresses Döblin’s resistance to the instrumentalization of the body as it was in Nazi propaganda, configuring him as a political writer who was writing against the racist physiognomic discourses of his time. For Stoicea, the soul-stripped bodies “engage in order to estrange” (169), they resist a facile psychological revelation and instead invite the readers to interpret and construe their narrative appearance.

The study would have benefited from a more detailed consideration of the transformation of meaning of bodies as economic entities and their estrangement in the context of technological progress, and how spaces effect the invisibility and visibility of the legibility of bodies. How did these German writers further respond to discourses on the hegemony of normative bodies that are reduced to their value as laboring forces? How do writers negotiate anthropocentric discussions on the tension between inorganic and organic bodies, Marx’s Leib-Körper dynamic?

Fiction of Legibility shows how gradual processes of industrialization, the

“technological, scientific, and socio-economic developments” (15), influenced epistemologies of bodies, texts and readers. Stoicea creates meaning for each body type by she instances by showing that the readability of human bodies entails a dynamic of multiple factors that comprises discourses of the human body as well as with writing, reading and cognition. At the same time, these types constitute bodies of resistance that expose the narrative possibilities of novels and their cultural significance for discourses on identity and politics.