

Brandt, Stefan L. 2007. *Inszenierte Männlichkeit: Körperkult und 'Krise der Maskulinität' im spätviktorianischen Amerika* [Staged Masculinity: Body Cult and 'Crisis of Manhood' in Late-Victorian America]. Berlin: WVB, 386 pp. with illustrations, EUR 46.00.

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*Inszenierte Männlichkeit* examines the strategies and mechanisms by which American national identity during the late-Victorian era became intertwined with the discourse of masculinity. The widespread claim that “a masculine age had come” (a battle cry adopted by many intellectuals during this time) is scrutinized in the book as a rhetorical means of cultural self-labeling. The study discusses the issue of ‘masculinization’ of American culture in the years between 1875 and 1925 (a period marked by the emergence of a school of self-declared ‘masculinist’ writers such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Ernest Hemingway) from a deconstructionist and ‘New Historicist’ perspective, investigating the cultural circumstances under which the concept of ‘masculinity’ could gain momentum. The turn-of-the-century is a particularly interesting field for an analysis of cultural constructions of gender. During these years, the conventional models of masculinity and femininity came under intense scrutiny. What ensued was an intricate process of subversion, reconstruction, and reaffirmation of established forms of gender identity. Cultural historians have described the dominant mood of the time alternatively as “sexual anarchy” (E. Showalter) and a “crisis of masculinity” (M. Kimmel). The study takes as its methodological starting point the observation of gender studies scholars that ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ must be seen as historically constructed. Far from being universal or biological, gender seems to be changing continuously, attaching itself to the dominant, residual, and emergent codes designed by the cultural hegemony.

The book tackles the issue of the historical construction of gender from the point of view of its cultural representation. If gender identity is, in fact, heterogeneous and multi-faceted, how can it then be explained that its narrative patterns have retained such a high degree of aesthetic consistency over the years? The idea of a ‘crisis of masculinity,’ for example, has recurred almost cyclically, appearing as a tagline during periods of national predicament and uncertainty. Theodore Roosevelt’s famous claim in 1895, “This country needs a war,” was not only followed by the Spanish American War three years later but also by an epoch of justification of military intervention on the basis of a rhetoric of manhood. Any form of war, Roosevelt asserted in “Manhood and Statehood” (a speech held at the dawn of his Presidency), could be utilized to encourage “the iron qualities that must go with true

manhood.” Likewise, politicians during the Vietnam Era have equated national stability with individual manliness. Masculinity here appears not as a biological quality but as a badge of courage that must be earned and defended. This kind of longing for a ‘true’ form of manliness (or womanliness) has repeatedly led to efforts to ‘naturalize’ gender identity, to portray it as a stable and inflexible entity. By the same token, this rhetorical construction also harbors the danger of its own deconstruction. Whenever it becomes obvious that gender is not a ‘natural’ given but a fragile concept that has to be maintained and cultivated, the legitimacy of the concept itself is at stake. Since the beginning of the age of individual expressionism the discourse of ‘naturalization’ of gender has been accompanied by a strong sub-discourse towards diversification and self-empowerment. It is the task of this study to illuminate the dominant rhetoric regarding the authority of masculinity in the late-Victorian epoch and expose it as a struggle over cultural predominance in American society.

The ‘crisis of masculinity’ around the turn-of-the-century is discussed not as an ‘actual experience’ or verifiable phenomenon but as a strategic construct designed to stage the moment of ‘crisis’ as a national turning point. As I demonstrate in the book, there are five factors which can be regarded as instrumental in the formation of this discourse: 1.) the 19<sup>th</sup> century women’s movement and the concomitant disintegration of the Victorian model of ‘separate spheres’; 2.) the prevalent fears regarding a ‘degeneration’ of the national as well as the individual male psyche, derived from the Darwinian/Spencerian world view; 3.) the collapse of the American Frontier and the challenge of traditional ‘American’ values such as military vigor and individualism; 4.) the expansionist tendencies in U.S. foreign politics (Cuba, Philippines) and the virilization of the dominant image of manhood; 5.) the blooming cult of physical fitness and efficiency that had brought about a mechanized notion of maleness since the 1870s. With respect to this classification, each chapter in *Inszenierte Männlichkeit* deals with one symptomatic sub-discourse of the era, mainly discerning between the following fields: a.) the psycho-sexual, b.) the scientific-philosophical, c.) the socio-cultural, d.) the political-mythological, and e.) the physical-technological. This accentuation provides the study with the heuristic means to develop a clear methodological structure. Yet, this focus is not meant to sketch the American turn-of-the-century as an unambiguous or entirely homogeneous era. Quite to the contrary, the book attempts to examine the underlying controversies and hidden frictions which marked this complex phase in American history.

The selection of texts for the book was conducted under the premise to find documents which can be seen as representative for the dominant rhetoric of the time, yet also echo the complexity and paradoxical multiplicity of beliefs and attitudes. In its claim to name potent

examples of cultural self-fashioning, the book excavates ten literary texts which are discussed in more detailed readings: Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886); Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892); Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895); Theodore Roosevelt's "The Strenuous Life" (1899); Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899); Frank Norris's *Moran of the Lady Letty* (1898) and *McTeague* (1899); Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902); Jack London's *The Sea-Wolf* (1904); and Harold Bell Wright's *When a Man's a Man* (1916). These texts, which can be called 'popular' or even 'spectacular,' solicit a reading of themselves as intricate acts of cultural negotiation and problem solution. In all these literary works, gender is constituted in a manner that hints at a close interconnection between text and cultural practice. The lines of conflict and defense exemplified in them correspond with the tensions and inconsistencies by which turn-of-the-century America was gripped. Frank Norris's infamous remark, "I detest 'fine writing'," reflects the widespread resistance to the codes of 'femininity' which critics commonly attributed to the sentimental novel. The naturalist Norris, who also worked as an editor for the San Francisco *Wave* and a correspondent for *McClure's*, represented a new wave of writers who longed for a tougher and more 'masculine' literature. His colleague Jack London, who often gloated about his own 'primitiveness' ("Surely am I a barbarian"), revealed in the same vision as Norris – the development of a more 'authentic writing' that detached itself from the 'teacup tragedies' of the realists. Ironically enough, many realists also advocated a new 'masculine tone' in literature (while not entirely suppressing the 'feminine voice'). Henry James, for instance, not only supported Norris as his *protégé*, but also produced texts himself which have widely been read as 'masculinist.' *Inszenierte Männlichkeit* thus starts its discussion of the anti-intellectual and masculinist tendencies in 19<sup>th</sup> century America with James's novel *The Bostonians*.

In my readings, I emphasize the complex interrelation between the literary works and their cultural background. Each text is detached from its aesthetic isolation and 'opened up' with regard to the cultural and socio-historical tensions of the epoch. How was it possible, in the face of an apparent loss of traditional values, to resuscitate the 'glorious' image of 'vigorous manhood' that stemmed from the olden days of the westward movement and reinstall it as a principle of cultural practice? The areas of literary exchange discussed in *Inszenierte Männlichkeit* might seem surprisingly familiar to an observer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Contemporary media reports and advice books have pointed to an uncanny parallel between our days and the *fin de siècle*. This impression of 'history repeating itself' can be seen as evidence of the long-term success of those narrative strategies and recipes developed around the turn-of-the-century which promised to liberate men (and the nation) from their apathy.