

## Book Reviews

**Martin S Pernick**, *The black stork: eugenics and the death of "defective" babies in American medicine and motion pictures since 1915*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. xv, 295, illus., £22.95, \$29.95 (0-19-507731-8).

Martin Pernick, well known in medical historical circles for *A calculus of suffering*—his book on the history of anaesthetics, has produced with *The black stork* an appetite-whetting prelude to his intended larger study of American health films. The book takes its title from a 1916 film, *The black stork*, which told the story of the refusal of a Chicago surgeon Harry Haiselden to operate to save the life of a multiply-disabled baby, born to the blue collar Bollinger family in 1915. Although the story was fictionalized, and names were changed, the film was remarkable for starring the surgeon himself in a striking piece of eugenic propaganda and medical self-publicity. Pernick's account has excavated the context of Haiselden's film and provided a telling illustration of how the histories of media and of medicine may cross-fertilize each other to produce a type of cultural history. He encapsulates the book's central aim when he suggests that "the controversy over saving defective infants provides an opportunity to observe how science, social conditions, and cultural values intersected to shape professional and lay conceptions of what constituted hereditary defects" (p. 42).

Of the book's two parts, the first, 'Withholding treatment', discusses the cultural and medical historical context of Haiselden's actions. Here, Pernick is laudably sensitive to the different and changing language of scientists, doctors, and the lay public, and the importance of not generating an anachronistic dichotomy between scientific or medical and lay definitions, particularly of heredity (p. 50). He teases out the complexity of the different views of avowed "progressives" and the ambiguities and dynamics of Haiselden's own views, for example over killing or allowing to die.

The second part, 'Publicity', looks more closely at mass media, and particularly films

concerned with eugenics and *The black stork* itself. A concluding chapter seeks to draw comparisons between Pernick's case study and subsequent historical events. For this reader, the best chapter here is also the most general, 'Mass-media medicine and aesthetic censorship', a brief but stimulating introduction to the issues surrounding the genre of health propaganda films. But anyone who has tried to convey a film or other audio-visual artefact in words will not be surprised that the chapters describing *The black stork* and other films are the least satisfactory in the book. Throughout, one ached to see the film itself, not because the book is unsatisfactory as it stands, but because it would resonate so much more read in conjunction with an actual viewing. Here, perhaps, is a genuinely useful potential application for the new medium of CD-Rom.

This is a case study which forcibly demonstrates the advantages to medical history of taking popular media seriously. If there is a potential danger of circularity in using the film as a source of information for the context, and the context as an explanation for the film, it is ably avoided here by the fine detail of Pernick's historical research. We can await his promised larger study with some eagerness.

**Timothy M Boon**,  
Science Museum, London

**Kelly Hurley**, *The Gothic body: sexuality, materialism, and degeneration at the fin de siècle*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture 8, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. xii, 203, £30, \$49.95 (0-521-55259-1).

At the end of Arthur Machen's *The three impostors* (1895), two young men about town enter an upstairs room in an abandoned house on the outskirts of London. The sight which greets them, in the heart of suburbia, on a peaceful autumn afternoon, is of a naked corpse. "The body was torn and mutilated in the most hideous fashion, scarred with the marks of red-hot irons, a shameful ruin of the

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human shape. But upon the middle of the body a fire of coals was smouldering; the flesh had been burnt through. The man was dead, but the smoke of his torment mounted still, a black vapour." In detective fiction, W H Auden said, the corpse must shock "not only because it is a corpse, but also because, even for a corpse, it is shockingly out of place, as when a dog makes a mess on a drawing-room carpet." Machen's corpse is rather more than shockingly out of place, rather more than a mess on a carpet. What fascinates him about it is its *shamefulness*: the obliteration of human form, the reduction to burnt flesh and vapour. Sherlock Holmes never had to deal with anything quite like this.

Machen's story belongs to a vigorous late-nineteenth-century revival of Gothic fiction which also included outstandingly nasty contributions from writers such as William Hope Hodgson, M P Shiel, Robert Louis Stevenson, Bram Stoker, and H G Wells. The distinguishing feature of the horror conjured by these writers, as Kelly Hurley notes, adducing a wealth of examples, was its gratuitousness. Not content with scorched flesh in a suburban villa, Machen interpolated into *The three impostors* further stories about people who end up as snakes or oily puddles. This fascination with what Hurley, borrowing a phrase from Hodgson, calls the "abhuman"—with rot and deliquescence, with slug-men and beetle-women—cannot be explained by the requirements of genre. Hurley's explanation for all this abhumanity is "a general anxiety about the nature of human identity permeating late-Victorian and Edwardian culture, an anxiety generated by scientific discourses, biological and sociomedical, which served to dismantle conventional notions of 'the human'". The "discourses" she has in mind are those associated with Darwin, Huxley, Morel, Lombroso and Nordau.

Cultural historians will be grateful to Hurley for the range and perceptiveness of her attention to a genre which still remains, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Dracula* apart, to a large extent unfamiliar. Rather more familiar, by now, are the "discourses" which, in her

view, establish a context for late-nineteenth-century Gothic; but here, too, she proves a lucid and economical guide. For the social historian of science and medicine, there is likely to be less of value. Hurley's most ambitious claim is that the Gothic "seizes upon the opportunity at hand—the evacuation of human identity accomplished within the sciences—in order to experiment with the 'plasticity' of human and other bodies". In general, she has more to say about the seizing than about the opportunity. That late-Victorian science and medicine did evacuate human identity remains a proposition asserted early on in the book, and thereafter taken for granted, but never properly tested.

**David Trotter**, University College London

**Chloe Chard and Helen Langdon** (eds), *Transports: travel, pleasure and imaginative geography, 1600–1800*, Studies in British Art 3, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1996, pp. viii, 341, illus., £35.00 (0-300-06382-2).

Imaginative geography has been a popular subject of late, being intertwined, as it often is, with the equally fashionable subject of Orientalism. What does this enduring interest in the Exotic signify? Are we all preoccupied with decolonizing our culture; with "brushing our imperial history against the grain"?, as Nigel Leask puts it in his study of *British Romantic writers and the east* (1992). Or is our fascination with the Exotic simply Orientalism in a different guise? I am not being facetious: it is extremely difficult for either "Westerners" or former colonized peoples to think of themselves in anything but Orientalist terms. Notwithstanding the critiques of Edward Said and others, Orientalism is still a living presence; not least, because so many critics of Orientalism have reproduced the structures of domination which they have sought to deconstruct. A hegemonic and monolithic "West" is depicted as intellectually colonizing a monolithic and passive "East", a construct