Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism
by Elizabeth Grosz. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, 272 pp. $35.00 (cloth), $14.95 (paper).

Elizabeth Grosz’s book Volatile Bodies: Toward A Corporeal Feminism could be called a guide to sources which broach questions regarding how we occupy sex-differentiated bodies and, more importantly, what formative effects each of the terms “mind” and “body” has on the other. Grosz’s motivation for such an investigation is twofold. First, she is dedicated to undermining dualisms in academic thought which obscure complexity and justify power inequities. Grosz calls her undertaking an experiment, “a wager: that subjectivity can be thought of in terms quite other than those implied by various dualisms.” The primary dichotomization under scrutiny is that which declares mind and body to be radically different and separable substances. Secondly, she strives to reveal how conceptions of reality, knowledge, truth, politics, ethics and aesthetics are effects of sexually specific bodies—a fact which has been hidden from view by the splitting of mind from body. Grosz writes:

If women are to develop autonomous modes of self-understanding and positions from which to challenge male knowledges and paradigms, the specific nature and integration (or perhaps lack of) of the female body and female subjectivity and its similarities to and differences from men’s bodies and identities need to be articulated.

By the end of the book, one stops to contemplate whether Grosz has indeed won her wager. Undoubtedly, she comes closest in her opening chapters in which she unabashedly displays her erudition, highlighting a surprisingly diverse range of theories which have attempted to tie subjectivity to corporeality. The juxtaposition of psychoanalysis, neurology, and phenomenology provides a productive combination of perspectives and an extremely satisfying depiction of embodied subjectivity. However, in the last thirty pages of the book, Grosz stumbles in the face of the grand task of restoring the sexual difference issue which has been glossed over by the male thinkers whose ideas she has detailed in previous chapters. Her focus on societal descriptions of the body in terms of flaccidity and viscosity seems flat and uni-faceted in comparison to the rich and varied, albeit flawed, theories of body and body image which preceded.

The structure of the book is determined in part by Grosz’s model of the Möbius strip which she borrows from Lacan. As Grosz writes, the model of the Möbius strip
provides a way of problematizing and rethinking the relations between the inside and the outside of the subject, its psychical interior and its corporeal exterior, by showing not their fundamental identity or reducibility but the torsion of one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside.  

In adherence to this model, the first part of the book is entitled “The Inside Out,” appropriately followed by “The Outside In.” The former remains the stronger of the two due to the freshness of the material.

In reading the chapters contained within “The Inside Out” portion of Volatile Bodies, most feminist thinkers, philosophers, and cultural studies scholars alike will be confronted with unfamiliar names and theories which add another dimension to Freudian understandings of the body and with examples which confound simplistic envisionings of the body as mere shelter for the mind. The portraits of mind and body sketched out by a number of psychoanalysts, neurologists, and phenomenologists intermesh to create a fairly cohesive picture of how the mind is constituted in accordance with social meanings attributed to the body. After taking readers on a tour through Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis, Grosz describes the ego as a cartography or psychical mapping of the libidinally-invested body—not a point-for-point mental projection of the external body but rather a distorted image shaped by erotogenic intensities. Grosz then details the neurophysiological concept of a body image or a corporeal schema which mediates between mind and body and which makes control over bodily movement possible. She rounds out this portion of the book with the thoughts of Merleau-Ponty on postural memory, the plasticity of body image, and the acquired comprehension of space as a social field. Throughout these chapters, breaches of smooth mind/body interworkings such as hysteria, anorexia, hypochondria, phantom limbs, agnosia (the non-recognition of a body part as one’s own), autoscopy (seeing oneself from outside the body), psychotic depersonalization (a subject’s ego no longer centered in one’s own body), and psychasthenia (a loss in self-placement) highlight the complexity of this torsion of outside into inside and vice versa.

Grosz’s elaboration of the interweaving of mind, body and subjectivity could be applied to media studies in a direct challenge of some of the facile understandings of spectatorial bodies which have inhabited film and television theory. For instance, film theory has referred to the spectator who is mentally and visually engaged with a film as a disembodied subject or as an “eye...no longer fettered by a body.” Similarly, bodies positioned in front of television set have been labeled as “deserted and condemned” couch bodies grasping their remote controls. Early forays into theorizing the virtual reality subject have also relied on metaphors of disembodiment. Grosz points out the error in a simplistic division of body and subject and provides resources for building stronger conceptions of the embodied spectator. For instance, the concepts of psychotic depersonalization and agnosia which Grosz has excavated from the past century of neurophysiology constitute problematizations of the body as location which parallel the new embodied locations of virtual reality. Perhaps by continuing where Grosz left off, the implications of the new rented bodies of virtual reality and their effects on subjectivity can be further explored.

The second section of Grosz’s work, “The Outside In,” is less successful partially due to the wide dissemination of many of the ideas which populate this section. For example, Grosz’s conception of social tattooing, or the active production of the cultural body, draws
heavily from Foucault’s work; thus, she spends considerable time summarizing his ideas, an unnecessary endeavor as Foucault’s studies of the social inscription of the body have already become part of mainstream feminist and philosophical thought. Additionally, many other recent books including Jana Sawicki’s Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body, Rosalyn Diprose’s The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference and Alphonso Lingis’s Foreign Bodies have covered this topic of the social construction of body in greater detail. Grosz’s three chapters which delve into this realm of thought rarely stand out from these other works, except perhaps in her incisive critique of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming woman.” Grosz ends this section with Foucault’s ideas on “self-production” advanced in The Use of Pleasure but cursorily denies the possibility of an aesthetics of self for women. A complexity of argumentation as seen in similar explorations such as Susan Bordo’s “The body and reproduction of femininity: a feminist appropriation of Foucault” is clearly missing.

Throughout these chapters, Grosz duly notes the acceptance of the male body and male subjectivity as a universal within the theories she details. By the seventh of eight chapters, a pent-up demand on the part of the reader for the discourse of sexual difference is undeniable. What follows in the final chapter is an interesting synthesis and extension of the work of Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva. Using these theorists’ concepts of abjection, contamination, and the borderline state of fluids, Grosz explores cultural conceptions of the sexed body which are presumably internalized as self-image. Despite the book cover’s promise of analysis in the areas of pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, and menopause, the issue of menstruation overwhelmingly predominates, and although this exploration is intellectually solid, it draws out the connections between societal envisionings of the body and individual’s body images while failing to develop the links between body image and female subjectivity. Additionally, the almost exclusive emphasis on menstruation leaves many questions unanswered, one of them regarding how social understandings of the female body play a role in the formation of pre-pubescent subjectivity. Grosz at times seems to divide the world’s population into two categories—bodies that menstruate and those that do not—while ignoring her own earlier acknowledgements of a “field” of body types, a field which would include bodies of different skin colors, aging bodies, and handicapped bodies.

As a way of concluding, it seems important to consider the question of whether feminists should indeed move toward a corporeal feminism. Using Grosz’s definitions, such a move would not involve, as one might interpret it, an essentialist embrace of the anatomically female body. Grosz, who denies the existence of a precultural body, instead argues for a feminism that would continue to investigate the historically-constructed body and avoid the somatophobia which has characterized other strands of philosophical thought. Grosz is clearly successful in this respect; many readers will be convinced that the fading of mind into body and body into mind requires greater understanding and that pursuing such an understanding should be a feminist goal. Grosz’s greatest contribution then lies not in her elaboration of a theory which would lay the groundwork for a corporeal feminism, but in her thorough display of the theoretical tools provided by previous thinkers and her inspiring call for further study.
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1Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) xii.
2Grosz vii.
3Grosz 19.