

The emergence of the body as an epistemic object between science and culture in American intellectual history, 1846 – 1898.

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Hypothesis and Summary

1. Hypothesis:

It is the main goal of this project to show on the example of the constitution of the human body in its practices and representations at the interface of culture and biomedical science in the USA in the 19th century, that contemporary global information society and its famed fundament in digital media, which are supposedly represented in the 20th/21st century postmodern motives of *virtualization* and *fragmentation*, are actually remnants of a 19th century intellectual milieu and climate that had emerged in the New England states between 1846 and 1898. Therefore, the motive of virtualization and the global epistemic culture it confounds as knowledge and information society is not the result of the revolution in digital and mass media, quite on the contrary, the emergence of the process of *virtualization* and its epistemic culture in the 19th century are the reasons why the new media were socially acceptable at all.

2. Summary:

In the discourse between science and culture in 19th century North America, a new epistemic culture begins to arise with the year 1846, the year of the foundation of the *Boston Herald* as well as the first successful *public* demonstration of anesthesia at Boston's Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH). In this new epistemic culture, the human body emerges as an epistemic object in practices and representations from discursive formations and processes that distinctly resemble the figurations and processes that construct the human body as an object in science and culture in the late 20th and early 21st century with its global epistemic culture, described under umbrella terms such as world knowledge society or global information society.

In the formation of the discourse of the body, the body as a trope forms the interface between science, literature, journalism and art. An interface formed in the juxtaposition of two phantasms that together create a process of pre-digital *virtualization*, which we will find, ideal-typically, in the lives and works of physiologist/psychologist William James (born in 1842), his brother, the author and essayist Henry James (born in 1842), the artist and photographer Thomas Eakins (born in 1844), and the celebrity, philanthropist and art collector, Isabelle Stewart Gardner:

Stitched into the space between the “regionalization-” and “control-”phantasm, the increase in *fragmentation* and *virtualization* unto the end of the 19th century and beyond, will refigure and relocate the discourses of the body, its practices and representations to bridge culture, science and society through discursive formations that are the inalienably necessary historic aprioris that will come to guarantee the social acceptance of the latter 20th century's global information society, its digital media and media products. Providing fodder in favor of this account, we will be enabled to argue that postmodern condition of the information and knowledge society as societal self-description is not the result of the revolution in information theory and technology in the mid-20th century, as is generally claimed and accepted as a popular standard account, instead we argue that the “virtualizing conditions” of knowledge and information society, the idea (or dispositive) of global epistemic culture, emerges in the 19th century as the historic apriori that provides the criteria of social selection that will lead to the acceptance of the media revolution.