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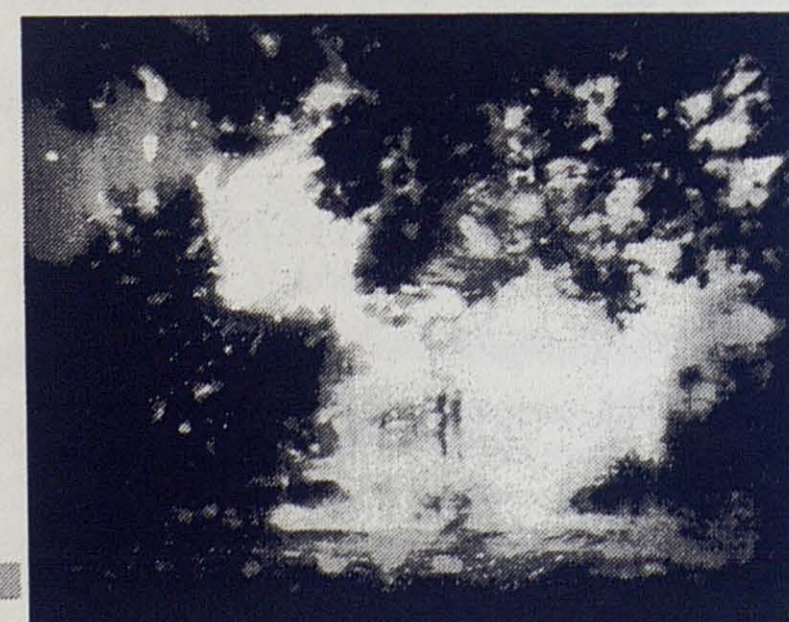
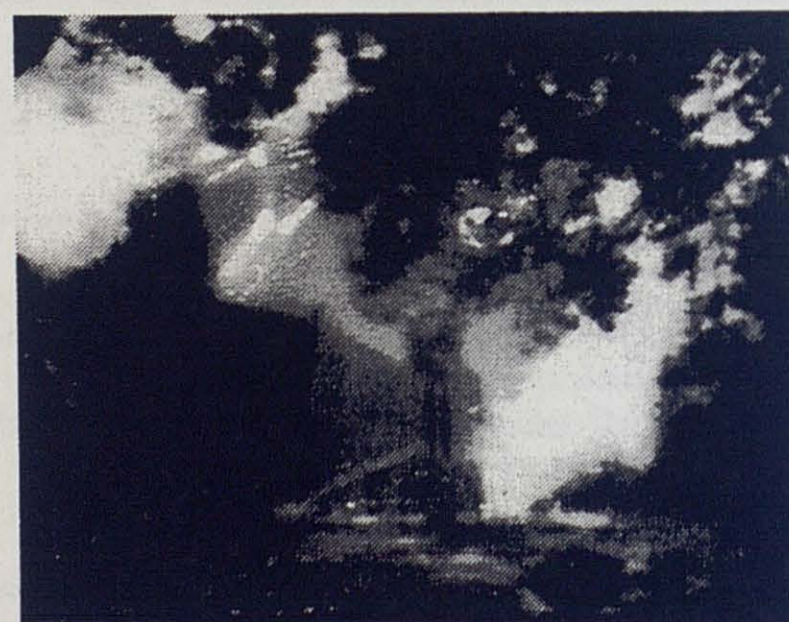
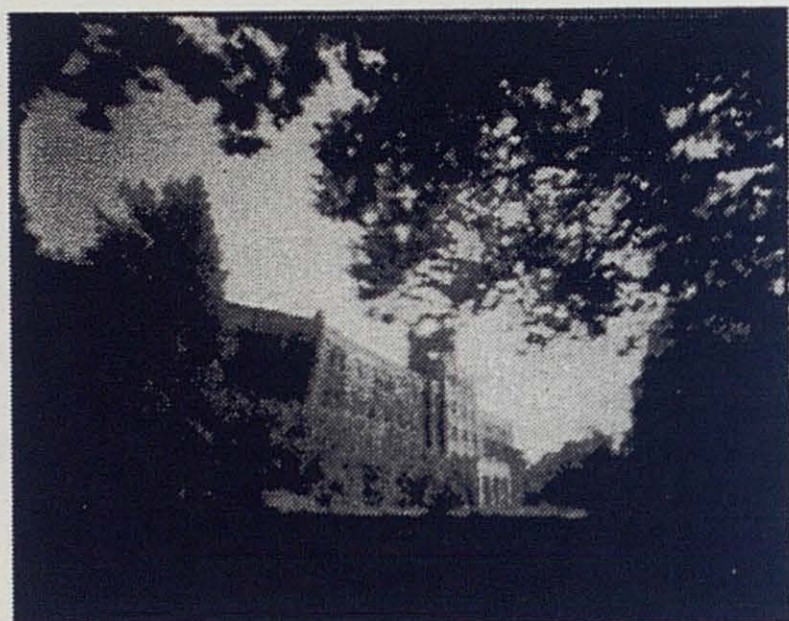
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Top to bottom
Justice of an Epidemic.
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Tuberculosis
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book review: Lennard J. Davis' **Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body**

New York: Verso, 1995

by Michael L. Dorn

It is not often that a book appears that establishes a whole new benchmark in scholarship, but Lennard Davis' recent contribution to critical disability studies manages just this feat. Drawing on examples from a wide variety of literary sources, as well as the visual and performing arts, Davis shows how disability concerns are foundational to critical analysis of almost any cultural work — especially work in which impairment is not an explicit theme. Questions of bodily normality/abnormality are shown to complicate debates on nationalism, colonialism, Enlightenment, industrial development, socialism, post-structuralism, feminism, and deconstruction — often in startling ways. It would be a significant 'missed opportunity' if this message were not recognized by other workers in critical social theory.

Given his recent experiences in addressing critical theory audiences, the author of *Enforcing Normalcy* is not confident of gaining such well-deserved recognition. In the book's preface, Davis relates a discussion he had with a colleague who uses a wheelchair as they planned a disability session for the Marxist Scholars Conference in New York in 1994. Davis had noticed the greater popularity of sessions on 'culturally engaged' topics like the novel or the body at professional conferences. His colleague explained that "people don't come to sessions on disability. They think it is a specialized area and only the disabled come." Contradicting such assumptions, the author's main point is that the concept of disability regulates the bodies of those who are taken to be normal — that is, most of us, most of the time:

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Disability presents itself to 'normal' people through two main modalities — function and appearance. In the functional modality, disability is conceived as inability to do something — walk, talk, hear, see, manipulate, and so on. This aspect of disability is of course part of a continuum of the many things that people can or cannot do. For example, I cannot do mathematical functions very well therefore I am somewhat learning-impaired. Few would consider that limitation a disability. But if I cannot walk very well with a prosthetic limb or a club foot, then I am disabled. The construction of disability is based on a deconstruction of a continuum... The person with disabilities is visualized, brought into the field of vision, and seen as a disabled person... Disability is a specular moment. The power of the gaze to control, limit, and patrol the disabled person is brought to the fore. Accompanying the gaze are a welter of powerful emotional responses. These responses can include horror, fear, pity, compassion, and avoidance (11-12).

Davis conducts extensive explorations of both of these modalities. The arguments of historians Theodore M. Porter (1986) and Daniel J. Kevles (1985) — that the rise of statistical thinking was based on a moralizing, normalizing agenda — are reviewed and extended in Chapter Two, "Constructing normalcy." Here Davis traces the origins of the functional modality of disability to the quantification of human differences and the privileging of the 'normal man' by Adolphe Quetelet and his followers in the nineteenth-century statistical movement. In the Chapter Six, "Visualizing the disabled body: the classical nude and the fragmented torso," the modality of appearance is examined through examples from psychology and art history. One of the primary functions of culture is a splitting, or cleaving, of consciousness into good and bad parts. In order to retain a hallucinated view of ourselves as 'whole,' our bodies must be split along this good/bad axis. These lines of tension follow the pushes and pulls of concrete social forces, such as the demands of industrial production, or the commodification of personal attractiveness. While most of his examples refer to physical disability, Davis also notes that, in the nineteenth century mental illness was viewed as a fragmentation of the body's means of communication brought on by the fragmentation of modern society.

As a child of deaf parents (although not hearing impaired himself), Davis demonstrates a particular familiarity for distinctions between the deaf (a discreet minority group with its own language — ASL), the deaf (those with hearing impairments who are not part of the signing linguistic community) and the 'deafened moments' that

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each of us experiences in our lives, for example when you 'tune out' exterior distractions in the course of reading this book review. By examining the literature of the Enlightenment in Chapter Three, Davis finds that this was a period when deafness was a topic of intense popular interest and academic debate. The deaf person became actualized as a cultural icon in the eighteenth century when European society began, on a mass scale, to read. Along similar lines, the deaf as a linguistic minority group in every state became an object of medical/professional scrutiny during the imperialistic nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Chapter Four on "Nationalism and deafness," Davis discusses Alexander Graham Bell's eugenic campaign to prevent the procreation of the deaf, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 'splendid deception' of hiding the physical impairments brought about by the ravages of polio. Both are examples of the similar ways that race, nation and physical identity are defined, and how the 'enabled' body becomes a sacred repository of national identity.

Another topic that attracts Davis' attention is the assumption of 'normality' that permeates the very information systems that are at the disposal of the critical theorist. While many progressive intellectuals have stepped forward to decry racism, sexism, and class bias, it has not occurred to most of them that ... their very practices of reading and writing, seeing, thinking, and moving are themselves laden with assumptions about hearing, deafness, blindness, normalcy, paraplegia, and ability and disability in general (4-5).

Davis re-examines the debates from literary criticism in Chapter Five, "Deafness and insight: disability and theory." Rather than arguing for the primacy of either the written or the spoken word, he posits sign language as an intermediary between these two positions, fruitfully demonstrating how the entire debate was premised upon the false dualism between writing and speaking. The historical construction of this dualism can be traced to what Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes* (1993, 44) calls "the secular autonomization of the visual as a realm unto itself." There is, then, a history (and geography) of the senses to be written

The communications media of each period, whether oral, chirographic [written], typographic, or electronic, emphasize different senses or combinations of them, to support a different hierarchical organization of sensing. And the change in the culture of communications media ultimately leads to change in the hierarchy of sensing (Lowe 1982,7).

This review presents only a small sampling of the pleasures to be

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found in *Enforcing Normalcy*. The book is a must for researchers and teachers of disability studies, drawing together perspectives in postcolonialism, cultural studies, feminism, and Marxism in a readerly fashion. Teachers of gender/women's studies, ethnic/race studies and multicultural courses in the humanities should turn to *Enforcing Normalcy* when seeking to avoid tokenism and include a mature disability perspective into their curricula. As a work of creative reorientation, some of Davis' conjectures, like the admittedly 'somewhat preposterous' suggestion that Europe went 'deaf' during the eighteenth century, await full historical documentation. I found myself wanting more spatio-temporal delineation on the trends and movements being depicted; although examples of disability and deafness are drawn almost exclusively from France, Britain and the United States, the author generalizes to broad periods ('the Enlightenment') and regions ('Europe'). But these are minor quibbles. Those interested in drawing these lines can refer to Davis' generous list of works cited, or the growing literature in disability history and geography (see Dorn 1994). In the end, *Enforcing Normalcy* is recommended to anyone who wonders where Western standards of bodily 'normality' come from, and why they still hold such powerful sway over the popular imagination.

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