Bodies of Knowledge: anatomy, complexity and the invention of organizational systems, 1500-1850

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Appel à contribution
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Beginning with the remarkable work of Andreas Vesalius (1543), anatomists sought to create new narrative arrangements that mimicked the internal organization of the body. In the years following the publication of Vesalius’ systematic arrangement of anatomical narratives provided an opportunity for examining a variety of topics across many disciplines. As a result, many authors adopted the anatomy as a means of describing/mapping the structural particulars of nearly every imaginable subject. In an attempt to assign meaningful connections to the seemingly discrete phenomena of the ‘rational’ cosmos, scientists, philosophers and artists looked to the human body as an organizational reference, citing the internal structure of the human body as a prime example of an integrated system. The body, they argued, was an enclosed space (delineated by the flesh), making the investigation of its inner structure relatively straightforward. What they discovered inside the human body, however, was a degree of complexity previously unsuspected. In the attempt to arrange distinct parts/organs of the body into groups according to their specialized, collaborative functions, anatomists exposed the limitations of traditional modes of scientific narration. Faced with mounting complexities, they tried to describe the human body as an order of simple and distinct parts that could be arranged into increasingly compounded configurations (systems). Taken together, these systems contributed to the integrity (interrelatedness) of the physical whole.

To give an account of such complex, trans-spatial associations required the development of new forms of scientific description: cross-referenced, digressive narratives that could accommodate the non-linear arrangements of systematic embodiment. Anatomists sought to explain the body’s inner structure by dividing/dissecting it (both abstractly and physically) into distinct parts and by creating ‘textual maps’ of the coherences of “Structure,” “Action,” and “Use” that they discovered between individual components (to arrange internal organs according to the ‘physical logic’ of structural and functional relation.

With the concurrent rise of anatomical and mathematical science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, understandings of the divisibility of matter—theoretical and actual—arrived at a kind of observational and experimental depth, conceived most often in terms of mathematically divisible space. Quite naturally, the intellectual dissection and mapping of human knowledge followed in the wake of these advancements. The resulting shift toward systematic arrangements of information (organizational schemes
of such important characters as Bacon, Descartes, Leibniz, Newton, and Bayle. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (particularly in the works of Chambers, d’Alembert, Condorcet, Linnaeus, Erasmus Darwin, and Lamarck, among others), the narrative logics of systematic organization dominated the various approaches employed by philosophers and scientists to arrange the scattered contents of the universe in a single, unified, branching system—thereby giving rise to the construction of a changing radically the way that we think about the universe and human understanding.

For the purposes of this collection, we seek essays that consider the influence of anatomical science and/or early modern theories of the body on the ‘artificial’ organization of knowledge and the world (1500-1850). We are mindful of opening this discussion to include emerging Atlantic considerations, including the application of systematic organization to ‘New World’ contexts. We are eager to entertain abstracts that explore the manner in which colonization of the Americas, Africa, and the Caribbean was influenced by emerging organizational systems (taxonomies of knowledge) in Europe. In addition to the themes listed above, proposals should cover a broad range of topics, from an expansive list of disciplines: Mikrokosmografia (1615). In short, systematic organization resulted from efforts (esprit de système) took shape in the body of knowledge by functional (rather than syllogistic) relation.

Scientific Materialism between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The body as a central reference for the theoretical construction of

Body as an Organizational Metaphor

Encyclopedism and the Body of Knowledge

Bodily Systems, Systematic Classification and the Evolution of Species

Complexity, Logic and ‘Systematic’ Arrangements of Knowledge

Body as a cartographic metaphor / Cartography as a metaphor of the body

Atlantic Circulation as a metaphor of Systematic Unity

The Classification of Bodies in the ‘New World’

The Influence of Taxonomies on Artistic Representation
Politics of the Body/Body Politics in the Enlightenment

Comparative Anatomies and the Categorization/Hierarchy of Knowledge

Keywords & Key Phrases:

- System(s)
- Systematic
- Body/Bodies of Knowledge
- Spatial Organization [of Knowledge]
- Complexity
- Physical Logic/Logic of Physicality
- Aesthetics of System
- Textual Mapping
- Artistic Representations of the Body

Important Figures (include, but are not limited to):

- Andreas Vesalius
- Leon Battista Alberti
- Albrecht Dürer
- Piero della Francesca
- Helkiah Crooke
- Leonardo da Vinci
- Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa
- Peter Ramus
- René Descartes
- Baruch Spinoza
- Francis Bacon
- Rembrandt van Rijn
Frans Hals
Thomas Hobbes
Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz
Isaac Newton
Bernard de Mandeville
Pierre Bayle
Ephraim Chambers
Julien Offray de La Mettrie
Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle
Jean-Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet
Jean le Rond d’Alembert
Denis Diderot
Carl Linneaus
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel
Erasmus Darwin
Jean-Baptiste Lamarck
Charles Darwin