

Cultural Studies: Images of Bliss & The Male Dancer

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If it's a good bet to avoid judging a book by its cover, it's also probably best to avoid selecting books on the promise of their titles. I wanted to love both of these books, I really did. Murat Aydemir's [*Images of Bliss: Ejaculation, Masculinity and Meaning*](#) and Ramsay Burt's second edition release of his now classic [*The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle and Sexuality*](#) are appealing to gender studies scholars and cultural studies enthusiasts on several counts. But their covers and their names are their



most seductive features. Aydemir's *Images of Bliss* features a photographed stream of ejaculate coursing diagonally across the book's protective covering. Ramsay's reissued and updated *The Male Dancer* features two partnered male dancers shown in partial view, seductively poised at the spine of the book as if at the wings of a stage. As one partner gazes upon the other's muscular leg and follows him offstage, we as readers are invited to consider a phenomenon too long in the wings of cultural criticism: the male dancer and the spectacle of the male body. Unfortunately, the seductive promises of both of these books fail to deliver.

Each title offers something very promising to generalists of masculinity studies. *Images of Bliss* promises to locate an overlooked aspect of the male body—semen—within a broad survey of its cultural meanings and its contribution to constructions of masculinity. *The Male Dancer* is marketed as “essential reading for anyone interested in dance and the cultural construction of gender.” Both promise to take up the beacon of masculinity studies to point scholars instructively in the direction of the very *hot* area of male corporeality.

Titles such as these that focus on male body seem well-positioned to take up general ideas about the body and spectatorship that have for so long been the focus of feminist analyses of representations of female corporeality. Yet, both *The Male Dancer* and *Images of Bliss* are more specialised in their focus than their titles—cannily chosen to appeal to a wide spectrum of readers—convey. *The Male Dancer* concentrates less on the general phenomenon of male dancing and the body, the twinned subjects of its title, than it considers specifics of theatre dance history that remain densely obfuscatory to a generalists of gender studies. With its focus on the spectral absence and renegotiated presence of male dancers in classical theatre jazz and ballet during the 19th and 20th centuries, this book requires a sustained interest in the history of Western theatrical dance which this reader did not share. Recent phenomena such as the wildly popular *So You Think You Can Dance?* series alongside general scholarly studies of the male body, such as Susan Bordo's book of that name might encourage a reader to think of dance as an accessible way to understand the negotiation of gendered cultural constructions. But this seems to be a case of a highly specialised book hitting the market with good timing and a bad aim. *The Male Dancer* remains ultimately unable to address dance within the popular purview that might create a relatively broad market for it in the first place.

However, for readers better guided than this one, who actually do take to heart warnings about judging books by their covers, and who are not seduced by the wide-reaching scope promised by these titles, there are many redeeming features. Within a niche readership of

scholars of dance studies, *The Male Dancer* makes a very considerable contribution to performance history in a gendered context. Ramsay begins the book with a striking anecdote about the low status of male dancers in the nineteenth century, and sets out to examine how this came to be. Contravening formalist and modernist accounts of dance that have overlooked gender and sexuality as relevant objects of study, Ramsay succinctly argues that dismissive attitudes about male dancers can be traced to general ideas about the male body circulating through culture more broadly. Readers more interested in the cultural construction of the male body and the role of spectatorship than in dance history will find themselves engaged enough in Ramsay's observations about cultural constructions of the male body to transpose these insights into other contexts. In close readings of the choreography of Nijinsky, Graham, Bausch and others, Ramsay relates their performances and the reception of them within the social, political, and artistic contexts in which they are produced. Readers interested in the book's broader insights into male corporeality might find themselves skimming these dense sections on choreographic "auteurs," but even in the chapters that focus on the classical canon of choreography, those without a dance background can still glean fascinating insights. The problem here is that the book straddles two book markets: dance history scholars and gender studies scholars. For the latter group, the social and political contexts are not elaborated enough.

Readership is a problem for *Images of Bliss*, too. For some reason, judging by this book's title, a reader might actually expect a fun romp through the cultural history of its subtitle: *Ejaculation, Masculinity, and Meaning*. Indeed, it seems one very disgruntled [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) reviewer felt that way. Bitterly disappointed by the lack of fun-stuff he proclaims in his caveat to fellow Amazonian browsers: "Do not be seduced by the title of this book. It is the most boring and irrelevant piece of academic hoo ha I have ever seen."

The most fun aspect of this book is its very brief discussion of a Metallica album cover and a chapter that analyses the cum shot in pornography. Otherwise, it sticks very sternly to a corpus of dusty old men and their ideas about semen: Aristotle, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Georges Bataille, Jacques Derrida, and Marcel Proust. To some extent, this is a random survey of the "seminal" contemplations of great men and Aydemir takes his reader on a supposed pleasure-tour through history, psychoanalysis, art, literature, pornography, and philosophy. But Aydemir's pairing of Cuban American contemporary artist Andres Serrano's ejaculation art with Aristotle sums up the kind of random—let me say promiscuous—connections he makes:

Both are investigating, imagining, and questioning sperm in contrasting yet related ways. This...urges a close reading of the two in dialogue with each other: Aristotle as illustrated or enacted by Serrano; Serrano as provoking a re-reading of Aristotle. (4)

The logic of this comparison is never clear to the reader, though it seems so to the author. Certainly Serrano never explicitly cites Aristotle, and we might even suppose he has never even read Aristotle's intimate contemplations of spermatozoa. At one point, Aydemir observes that Aristotle's observations of sperm occur at the level of extreme close-up, "so close up to his object [that]... [h]e must be nearly rubbing his nose in it" (13). One can only presume this is true of the author as well, for his intense focus on the topic of sperm does not pull back far enough to place his object of study within a satisfyingly broad *or* focused logical context.

Aydemir's style of writing and research method seems to owe as much to the dense poststructuralism of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis as it does to the approaches of Judith Butler. Indeed, much of this book seems indebted to Butler's *Bodies That Matter*. Fans of Butler's writing will perhaps have more stamina than this reader to persist with the book's opaque and rarified writing style. To this reader, the impenetrability of the text was a terrible tragedy for the subject matter. As Aydemir argues convincingly in his introduction, citing Luce Irigaray, a "reckoning with *sperm-fluid*" is long overdue (xvi), especially in consideration of how much attention the phallus and the female body in general have

received in Western culture and critical theory.

[Images of Bliss: Ejaculation, Masculinity and Meaning](#)
(2007)

by Murat Aydemir
[University of Minnesota Press](#)
ISBN: 0816648670
384pp US\$24.95

[The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle and Sexuality](#)
(2007)

by Ramsay Burt
[Taylor & Francis Group](#)
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