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Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies
(review)

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copyright law. For any scholar interested in the history of film piracy, Segrave's book is a well of information.

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Chris Holmlund.
***Impossible Bodies: Femininity
and Masculinity at the Movies.***

Routledge, 2002.
237 pages; \$26.50 softcover.

Murky Relativism

Chris Holmlund's *Impossible Bodies* begins with the statement that "Hollywood films shape and express how we see—or don't see—our bodies, our selves" and continues with "in the last two decades, dramatic changes have occurred" (3). Beginning with this premise, Holmlund examines some of Hollywood's "impossible bodies" hoping to find some of the meanings behind—and, no less importantly, the pleasures audiences receive from—them. Although all of the bodies Holmlund examines are impossible, in that they are unattainable for most of us, some become acceptable within Hollywood as "more 'proper,' more 'natural,' [and] more 'common' than others," and Holmlund questions why this occurs (4). Throughout, Holmlund resists the easy or pat answer to that question, preferring instead to retain the ambiguity of real-life audience readings and, indeed, the ambiguity of the texts themselves. At the same time, her clear and direct writing style keeps the reader from getting needlessly tangled in murky relativism.

The first section of the book, "Gesturing toward Genres," includes chapters on the Pumping Iron series, what she terms "the mainstream (lesbian) femme film" and nouveaux westerns. Although these genres would not seem to have much in common, Holmlund points out how each highlights contemporary American views on race, class, gender, age and sexuality. "Visible Difference and Flex Appeal," the first chapter in this section, focuses on the ways in which the Pumping Iron series explicitly views the body as a text and "reveal(s) how the visible differences of sex (to have or have not) and race (to be or not to be) mesh with ideology and economy in contemporary American society" (17). In other words, she finds that, within the films, the visible differences of race are sometimes acceptable when they uphold the divide between femininity and masculinity. Along the way, Holmlund looks at the lingering myth of the natural body, the different ways male and female bodybuilders are "gazed upon" and the interplay of economics with gender (and sexual) roles.

In the second part of *Impossible Bodies*, "Siding with Sidekicks," Holmlund writes about "Hollywood's Deadly (Lesbian) Dolls," the "Swede as 'Other'" and Latinas' constricted roles in mainstream film. The strongest chapter in this section, "Crusin' for a Brusin': Hollywood's Deadly (Lesbian) Dolls," considers the emergence of a cycle of films featuring the lesbian as sexy female killer. In this chapter, Holmlund examines the fact that "audiences are both fascinated by, yet uncomfortable with, violent women... [and] a murmured fear of lesbianism lurks beneath the general discomfort with violent women" (74-5). Throughout the chapter, Holmlund argues that "the entire cycle's obsession with death, dying and lethal lovelies masks a more deep-seated denial of age and aging" (75). While asserting this, Holmlund also examines different reactions to this genre by diverse audiences, moving from the mainstream press to lesbian and gay publications. These audiences' reactions vary greatly, from the wildly positive to the completely negative, and Holmlund does an excellent job of showing the different contexts behind these readings rather than championing one over another as more "correct." She writes, "I consider it urgent that queer and feminist responses emerge from the straitjackets of mainstream models. Like other activists-critics, I believe that protests based on 'positive' images and/or 'true' representations have severe limitations. 'Positive' images are not positive for everyone, and 'truth' is very much in the eye of the beholder" (88).

In the last section, "Staring at Stars," Holmlund looks at the star body as text, examining the bodies and careers of Whoopi Goldberg, Clint Eastwood and Dolly Parton. In each, Holmlund points out the conflicting meanings different communities have taken from these stars. The chapter on Whoopi Goldberg "explores why and how Whoopi has succeeded where other African-American women have not, though controversy often surrounds her" (127). "The Aging Clint" observes how Eastwood has managed to remain successful as he ages, examining the generic conventions of the western, the gender double standard that allows men to age visibly and the fact that "age, not gender, will identify the system's next market" (144). Finally, Holmlund looks at the multifaceted meanings behind Dolly Parton's career as a star beloved by fundamentalist Christians and the gay and lesbian communities alike. In Parton, she finds the star who best embodies the Hollywood goal of becoming all things to all people.

Throughout, Holmlund's study serves as a model of how to avoid the easy answer while remaining clear and understandable. While Holmlund maintains the multiplicity of Hollywood texts, she also resists the plunge into relativity, showing how context shapes the readings that different audiences produce. *Impossible Bodies* is a valuable work for anyone interested in depictions of the body in film, and all of the glorious messiness that entails.

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