

Book Reviews

Martin S Pernick, *The black stork: eugenics and the death of "defective" babies in American medicine and motion pictures since 1915*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. xv, 295, illus., £22.95, \$29.95 (0-19-507731-8).

Martin Pernick, well known in medical historical circles for *A calculus of suffering*—his book on the history of anaesthetics, has produced with *The black stork* an appetite-whetting prelude to his intended larger study of American health films. The book takes its title from a 1916 film, *The black stork*, which told the story of the refusal of a Chicago surgeon Harry Haiselden to operate to save the life of a multiply-disabled baby, born to the blue collar Bollinger family in 1915. Although the story was fictionalized, and names were changed, the film was remarkable for starring the surgeon himself in a striking piece of eugenic propaganda and medical self-publicity. Pernick's account has excavated the context of Haiselden's film and provided a telling illustration of how the histories of media and of medicine may cross-fertilize each other to produce a type of cultural history. He encapsulates the book's central aim when he suggests that "the controversy over saving defective infants provides an opportunity to observe how science, social conditions, and cultural values intersected to shape professional and lay conceptions of what constituted hereditary defects" (p. 42).

Of the book's two parts, the first, 'Withholding treatment', discusses the cultural and medical historical context of Haiselden's actions. Here, Pernick is laudably sensitive to the different and changing language of scientists, doctors, and the lay public, and the importance of not generating an anachronistic dichotomy between scientific or medical and lay definitions, particularly of heredity (p. 50). He teases out the complexity of the different views of avowed "progressives" and the ambiguities and dynamics of Haiselden's own views, for example over killing or allowing to die.

The second part, 'Publicity', looks more closely at mass media, and particularly films

concerned with eugenics and *The black stork* itself. A concluding chapter seeks to draw comparisons between Pernick's case study and subsequent historical events. For this reader, the best chapter here is also the most general, 'Mass-media medicine and aesthetic censorship', a brief but stimulating introduction to the issues surrounding the genre of health propaganda films. But anyone who has tried to convey a film or other audio-visual artefact in words will not be surprised that the chapters describing *The black stork* and other films are the least satisfactory in the book. Throughout, one ached to see the film itself, not because the book is unsatisfactory as it stands, but because it would resonate so much more read in conjunction with an actual viewing. Here, perhaps, is a genuinely useful potential application for the new medium of CD-Rom.

This is a case study which forcibly demonstrates the advantages to medical history of taking popular media seriously. If there is a potential danger of circularity in using the film as a source of information for the context, and the context as an explanation for the film, it is ably avoided here by the fine detail of Pernick's historical research. We can await his promised larger study with some eagerness.

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Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic body: sexuality, materialism, and degeneration at the fin de siècle*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture 8, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. xii, 203, £30, \$49.95 (0-521-55259-1).

At the end of Arthur Machen's *The three impostors* (1895), two young men about town enter an upstairs room in an abandoned house on the outskirts of London. The sight which greets them, in the heart of suburbia, on a peaceful autumn afternoon, is of a naked corpse. "The body was torn and mutilated in the most hideous fashion, scarred with the marks of red-hot irons, a shameful ruin of the