

JAVIER MOSCOSO. 2012. *Pain: A Cultural History*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

In 2004, Javier Moscoso curated the Wellcome Trust exhibition *Pain: Passion, Compassion, Sensibility* at the London Science Museum. Its visual display of pain as an emotion, as a physical sensation, as a spectacle or drama, and as a scientific object of study is now discussed in more detail in *Pain: A Cultural History*. The book contextualises many of the exhibition's wonderful images by introducing various *topoi*, reflected in the chapter headings, which emphasise the meaning of pain as a learned experience. Understanding the expression and experience of pain as culturally determined, as *conditioned* even (p. 2), implies that its presence or visibility depends on its social apprehension. It is this framing of suffering that enables Moscoso to infuse often discussed themes and historical debates with new meanings related to the elusive phenomenon of pain.

The *topoi* singled out by Moscoso are placing the phenomenon of pain within the widest possible framework(s) of reference, which at times requires a leap of the imagination but otherwise rewards the reader with unexpected connections and interpretations that shed new light on the way that pain can be understood. The first chapter tackles the theme of *Representations* within early modern 'spectacles of violence'. Pain is here mostly referred to as 'harm', and one could argue that the experience of harm, although linked to pain, is conceptually a different one. Yet, the bodies of martyred saints, of executed criminals, and the dissected corpses in the anatomical theatre are convincingly represented as exemplary types of bodies upon which the presence or absence of pain and suffering are emotionally and cognitively inscribed. In this, as in all other chapters, pain is never to be understood as a mere stimulus-response type of phenomenon but is embedded within the respective cultural and historical contexts of piety, violence, political power, and the pursuit of nature's secrets.

The second *topos* of *Imitation* reflects the absent or twisted relationship between words and physical entities or, rather, the growing rift between language and the world that emerges in the seventeenth century. In one of the book's highlights, Moscoso draws the reader's attention to the beaten, broken, and bruised body of the imaginary figure of Don Quixote which reveals "the tensions between physical pain and moral suffering, personal pain and the pain of others, internal drama and external tragedy" (p. 34). We are thus offered a fresh reading of Cervantes' tale in which the physical misfortunes are highlighted as much as the imitative model of the chivalrous knight that moulds the experience of Don Quixote's adventures. The theme of imitation is also written into the 'philopassianism' of early modern nuns, based on their mimesis of the pain and passion of Christ (the measure of all human suffering). As Moscoso points out, these nuns "do not live; they copy. They do not feel; they imitate..." (p.45).

The role of the spectator in the drama of pain is highlighted in the chapter on *Sympathy*. Here, pain as a cultural experience is woven into the Enlightenment's concept of sensibility, based on the doctrine of pain and pleasure as the driving force of all living beings. An interesting discussion of eighteenth-century proposals regarding a 'just measure of pain', for example, reveals that corporal punishment was no longer directed at the body, but at "the imagination of the witnesses" (p. 67), the onlooker's sensibility and sympathy for the pain of others. Meanwhile, amidst attempts to define

the physiological homogeneity of pain in medicine, concepts pertaining to the body's brain and nervous system, such as the sensorium commune and the locus affectus, were now reaching into "the imaginary tissues of the physiology of the body politic" (p. 67). Ultimately, the different cultural spheres in which pain was discussed during the Enlightenment began to establish what Moscoso defines as 'counterfactual pain': "the loss of references between what is really lived and what is merely imagined" (p. 70).

With *Correspondence* we enter the nineteenth century in which the spectacles of pain and violence were seemingly more subdued than in the medieval and early modern periods. Yet, pain was everywhere: in colonial exploitations, the educational system, the industrial age's cruel working conditions, laboratory experimentation on animals, and the newly medicalized version of masochism and sexual deviance. Interestingly, the patient's narrative, which appears to have been all but eliminated by the clinical gaze of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century medicine, became once more central in the case of pain. The quest for classifying and measuring the various sensations subsumed under the heading of 'pain' focussed the attention of medicine and physiology towards its exact localisation, but the identification of pain as either *gravative*, *tensive*, *pulsative*, or *pongitive* still had to rely on the sufferer's subjective evaluation. Thus, the objectivity of pain, for Moscoso "the inevitable conclusion of a theme of correspondence" (p. 110), remained as elusive as the sensation itself.

Debates on the absence of pain were just as prevalent as the scientific and medical evaluations of its presence. *Trust* explores the loss of the experience of pain in medicine following the introduction of anaesthesia which was not universally perceived as a benefit to mankind. Rather, new questions around the meaning of pain emerged: was the avoidance of pain in medical treatments, during surgery, and in childbirth even advisable, lest its absence interfered with the healing process? At the same time, that which had now been eliminated during surgery—consciousness—became a new force to be reckoned with. Sigmund Freud might now be associated with the discovery of the unconscious, but the concept, as Moscoso shows, is already discernible in earlier debates over anaesthetised patients who potentially felt the surgeon's knife acutely, but did not remember their suffering due to the influence of chloroform.

The chapter on *Narrativity* sets off with a discussion on the link between, or rather the coexistence of, pleasure and pain. This is nicely done via an analysis of an odd nineteenth-century pasteboard with images depicting torture scenes on the front and nude females in erotic postures at the back—part of a series of images collected by the 'physical anthropologist' Edwin N. Fallaize. The vogue for female nudes in paintings, in classical positions of shame and exposition alluding to Roman slave markets, has traditionally received a feminist interpretation as an example of sexual domination, subjection and violence. As important as the gendered context is, Moscoso identifies here a reduction in meaning that loses sight of the emotional significance of the link between pain and beauty in the nineteenth century. As he maintains, the century's specific cultural climate of bourgeois consumerism rather turned lasciviousness and the 'voluptuousness of pain' into a consumer product (p. 140). Masochism, for example, became a 'cultural icon', but rather than emphasising the traditional link between the masochist's experience of pain and sexual gratification, Moscoso places the condi-

tion within the theme of compulsive consumerism: pain as a mere object that needs to be accumulated so that the ultimate goal—subjection—is achieved. Likewise is this ‘Fetishism of Commodities’, as identified by Karl Marx (p. 143), mirrored in the collected and classified cases of sexual deviation in the new field of sexology.

Coherence returns to some of the topics discussed in previous chapters and underlines once more the elusiveness of pain as well as the role of actor and spectator: nervous pain and the (un)conscious, with Freud representing the shift from neurological disorders to disorders of the mind; the identity of pain and medical taxonomy; the tension between illness (pain with a potentially absent lesion) and disease; and the patient’s perspective versus the clinical gaze. In this chapter, Moscoso also enters into a dialogue with the reader by acknowledging that the sufferer’s point of view, the subjectivity of sensation and/or emotion, have been largely absent in the book (p. 169). This is somewhat rectified in the final chapter, *Reiteration*, which discusses the personal ‘hell’ of chronic pain sufferers in the twentieth century. The distinction between acute pain and chronic pain might have ‘materialized socially’ (p. 201) but by focussing on the patients’ reiteration of their physical pain, Moscoso establishes a link to the sufferers’ subjective experience. Syphilis, phantom limbs and neuralgia exemplify this kind of pain that could not be fitted into taxonomies, which defied standard definitions, and which forced the medical establishment to accept the unique subjective sensory experience of (chronic) pain sufferers.

Moscoso’s overall argument is that pain can and ought to be framed as a social phenomenon in much the same way as any other disease. Hence, one will not find a working definition of pain in Moscoso’s book; instead, we are introduced to various ways and contexts in which pain is acted out, is represented and looked at, is imitated, narrated, and is made coherent with words, gestures and images—all without necessarily corresponding to a view of pain as in-the-body. Pain can thus be written into the body (Don Quixote’s physical suffering) or out of it (disaffirming pain as the masochist’s ultimate goal), depending on the context in which pain is experienced or represented. This framing of pain stands in stark contrast to a new exhibition on pain that was launched in the Science Museum in 2012, the same year that Moscoso’s book was translated into English. The exhibition’s title—*Pain Less*—is programmatic on many levels. It represents the latest scientific research aiming for the absence of pain in clinical contexts. The ultimate message seems to be that the ‘spectacle of pain’ is only happening in the brain, thus reducing suffering in all its representations to a neuroscientific phenomenon. The multifaceted phenomenon of the 2004 exhibition has thus disappeared; or maybe it has just turned into a new form of (counter)factual pain for which Neuroculture is the only cultural context available. And that is why *Pain: A Cultural History* matters: it requires us to keep the dialogue about the various manifestations of pain wide open.

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DOI: 10.1387/theoria.11408