

(F)ailing Bodies: The Poetics of DecliningApril 27-28th New York University, Department of German Studies

Keynote: Ian Fleishman, University of Pennsylvania

The ailing body as a site of decadence and decay is a troubling reoccurrence in literary history. Through various media and discursive practices, the body in various states of transformation has been constituted as plastic, fallible, malfunctioning, and vulnerable. These intersecting modalities have long rendered the body a fertile site of theoretical and critical analysis. Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us that, “[the] body is made of flesh, gestures, forces, passions, techniques, powers, impulses; it is dynamic, energetic, economic, politic, sensuous, esthetic—but it is no one of those meanings as such.” This conference invites diverse relational approaches to the body as a contested process of declining and its various positions and potentialities.

Writers across genres and time periods have explored bodily decline, injury, and physical illness, situating textuality as an act of simultaneous constitution and de-constitution of corporeality, dialectically questioning and affirming identities. Literary practice attends to, and accounts for, these corporeal shortcomings in numerous incongruous ways: constitutively, curatively, ironically, and cynically, for instance. From Modernism’s interrogation of industrialization and labor as a bodily practice, to mid-20th century literature’s processing political and gender violence, through philosophical inquiries of the living, thinking with the body and its ailments has been a generative means of examining cultural production.

Attending to the ways in which literature has produced questions of corporeal ailment through failure, injury, and liability invites theoretical approaches which include gender and queer theory, critical disability studies, decolonial interventions, and psychoanalysis. In thinking through the various positionalities of the body in decline this conference will draw a critical eye to the politics and postures of declining. Approaches from literary studies, art history, cultural studies, performance studies, cinema studies and philosophy among other fields are welcomed.

Topics may include, but are by no means limited to:

- medical humanities and pathologization in literature
- psychoanalytic approaches to the body and bodily functions
- literature of disability, debilitation, and aging
- decolonial practices of resistance and colonial injury
- hysteria and its corporeal entanglements
- mental illness and its literary manifestations
- biopolitics and political exigencies on the body
- visual constructions of bodies in decline

Please send a brief abstract and bio to Aviv Hilbig-Bokaer and Francesco Mercuri at ah5423@nyu.edu by January 20th, 2023. Decisions will be sent in early February.