

The Body Project: Anatomy, Relationships, and Representation
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Oral presentation

Smashed Brains in German Literature

Depictions of dissevered heads and smashed brains are abundant in German Literature: starting from descriptions of violence in the medieval literature, to the splattered brains of Dr. Faustus in early modern times to the brutal images of Expressionism.

Especially brains as organs and ideas are strangely on the border between solid and fluid, precious and useless, body and mind. Therefore, by focusing on the brain, we concentrate on the connection between body and soul.

The brain is considered to be the seat of the intellect. It distinguishes the human being from an animal, it is the place where the development of humanity took place. By destroying the brain the existence of a human is irrevocable executed. The topos of smashing brains appears in German Literature over several centuries.

As first inquiries in to recent scholarly output within the field of literature and anthropology, as well as history, have shown research about the depictions of smashed brains are rather rare. The here proposed approach is therefore explorative in an at least twofold sense: the attempt to explore certain depictions regarding their meaning and function within the texts and within the theoretical framework that will be applied (Burke, Bynum, Camporesi, Descartes, Hacking, Vidal).

If the brain is different from mind and, following Wilson (1980: 46): "The separation of mind from body is a conceptual possibility.", how can the brains status be described?

In this context we want to discuss following questions:

1. What kind of depictions of images can be found in German literature?
2. What is noticeable about them?
3. What kind of perspectives do they allow regarding the following topics:
 - physical destruction and the destruction of the mind,
 - mind-body relation, e.g.: What is the position of the brain within the mind-body discussion?, and

- rituals of death and theology of the Resurrection.

In the center of our analysis we are going to concentrate on two particular texts, chosen from two different time periods:

1. Faustus (Johann Spies, 1587)
2. Der Irre (Georg Heym, 1913)

In both texts it is apparent that the destructive moment of human life includes the destruction of the brain as a final destructive act. In "Faustus" the brain of Johann Faustus gets destroyed by the devil, while the protagonist in Heyms "Der Irre" destroys the brains of his first victims, by tread down their heads. In both cases the brains get smashed and irreparable dissolved.

Following Porter (2001: 242): "How did these organs and functions embody emotions, experiences and desires?", we ask: What is the specific role of the brains?

In our presentation we point out that the motive of the smashed brain is a delicate matter when it comes to depicture the final death of human beings.