

Liminal Spaces: Literature, Film and the Medical Museum

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The cross-fertilization of the medical and literary fields is nothing new. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, literature often interrogated the medical reality of the day. In the twenty-first century, the rise of medical humanities as a discipline typifies how literature may be used as a means of changing or reflecting on medical practice. However, the question of whether interdisciplinary projects involving literature and medicine demand a thorough knowledge both of the history of medical practice and of the trajectory of literary genres is rarely addressed. And yet such an approach was pivotal to a collaborative project with a medical museum that I led in 2013–14 and that resulted in the making of a short film (*Liminality*, directed by V. Lari) and a photographic exhibition (V. Lari). As shall be seen, the ways in which the emerging ScienceHumanities may help frame and examine literature-and-science scholars' research output may be vital to the future recognition and understanding of projects of this type.

Dealing with representations and the exhibition of medical collections both in texts and in museums demands the joint examination, definition and understanding of the exhibited objects, in particular when human remains are kept within the collections. As this article will emphasize, in this project, the medical museum became a place which collapsed the divide between the sciences and the humanities while the artistic project developed around the museum highlighted the importance of the aesthetic to understand medical collections, their meanings, their uses, and their future.

Medical Practice, Medical Practitioners and Literature

When I started working with the Medical Faculty of Toulouse (University of Toulouse III, Paul Sabatier) in 2013, I had eight years' experience of working with museums and with scientists (mainly from the natural sciences) to try to find matching research interests and, above all, a common language for researchers coming from two radically different backgrounds: scientists, including geologists, palaeontologists, entomologists, biologists, on the one hand, and the humanities on the other. The research project EXPLORA was led in partnership with the Toulouse Natural History Museum from 2008 to 2014, and based upon collaborations with various other institutions, including the Paris Academy of Medicine and the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons, London (see blogs.univ-tlse2.fr/explora/projet-explora/), providing a platform for researchers from many different fields to meet and to work together. The collaborative project with the medical faculty which I next supervised, however, was less concerned with matching research interests: although it did involve research, it was not a research project *per se*. The medical faculty had a medical collection which was (and still is) used as a teaching collection for medical students and of which I had first-hand knowledge having studied medicine there for two years before doing English. The objects on display there were thus familiar to me, even if as a medical student I had only looked at them as tools for hands-on activities or as three-dimensional illustrations of lectures on anatomy. When I went back to see the anatomical museum in 2013 – twenty-four years after I had last seen it – I realized the place had hardly been looked after, and

the collections were left as they were at least twenty-four years before. Many students were still working in the museum, which was covered with graffiti, the students' bags generally left to rest on human remains whose decomposition indicated a patent lack of conservation treatment. As the anatomical museum was not open to the public, my private visit was only due to the fact that I had once been a student there and that I was an insider of sorts who had in the meantime developed a knowledge of the history of the representations of the human body and of medical collections.

This undoubtedly helped. For as I instantly noticed, the museum had become a version of a contemporary non-fictional Satis House, peopled with dozens of morbid Miss Havishams left to rot. In addition to my own ethical reaction to the use – or misuse – of human remains (I had been looking at the human differently for twenty-four years), my own knowledge of the history of medical collections made me realize that many pieces on display were both natural and artificial anatomical models dating back to the end of the nineteenth century, the historical value of which the people in charge of the museum had apparently no idea. There were many wax models by nineteenth-century makers Paul Zeiller, Adolf and Friedrich Ziegler, Jacques and his son Jules Talrich, the Deyrolles and Tramond companies in Paris, Auzoux papier-mâché models and plaster models by Franz Jos Steger. Many of these modellers had been quite active in Europe at the time when anatomical museums were at the heart of medical education and when the lower cost of production of anatomical models made them substitutes of human cadavers (see Talairach-Vielmas and Mandressi).

I could easily identify the different pieces in the collection because my own personal research had been focused on the relationship between science and literature in the long nineteenth century. This had led me to know (potentially) as much about the history of medicine as about the literature of the period and to publish research articles in journals specialised in the history of medicine (see Talairach-Vielmas; Talairach-Vielmas and Mandressi). This knowledge helped me find a common ground and start collaborating with the medical museum as I attempted to show the people in charge of the collection that the objects that made up the medical collection were not simply valuable, but also interesting precisely because they stood at the crossroads between the sciences and the humanities. They were seen as medical tools by medical professionals and students on the one hand, and as historical objects (and human beings) by humanities scholars, on the other. The wax models, in particular, while having been used as mere substitutes for cadavers, were genuine artistic pieces worthy of conservation – and potentially of study. Thus, even if I had been upset about their treatment of human remains, my aim was to make the medical professionals and students realize first the value of these objects as *historical* objects, and second to make them look differently and with more empathy at the objects they ignored everyday.

The Fate of Anatomical Museums

The fate of anatomical museums whose scientific / pedagogic value is now nearly obsolete has recently raised the awareness of scholars, artists, curators and medical practitioners involved in or working close to medical collections. The *Leiden declaration on human anatomy/anatomical collections concerning the conservation & preservation of anatomical & pathological collections*, signed by the participants, delegates and supporters of the International Conference on "Cultures of Anatomical Collections" held at Leiden University on 15–18 February 2012, expressed concern about the storage and preservation of collections of human anatomy and pathology throughout the world. It urged the care of those collections, be they human and animal

preparations, wax and other models, drawings, photographs or documents and archives relating to them (see Knoeff & Zwijnenberg). In France, a conference held in Montpellier in November 2012 revealed the bleak future of many anatomical collections in private collections and hospitals, such as the Dupuytren, Orfila, Delmas and Rouvière collections or those of the Paris Assistance Publique (AP-HP). Bad storage and conservation, lack of space, poor maintenance, limited funding, and even lack of interest have doomed the forgotten patients and artificial models that were the pride of so many museums in the nineteenth century.

Since then, it has become fashionable (partly as a means to public engagement) to give a voice to anatomical specimens, as if to instil a soul into the often anonymous body parts and skeletons exhibited in medical museums. Ruth Richardson's essay, "Organ Music", presented a meditation among exhibits in medical museums. Karen Ingham's film and installation, *Narrative Remains* (2009), focused on six human specimens within the Hunterian collection (RCS) and offered semi-fictional first-person post-mortem accounts of their death. Both are examples of fairly recent attempts at re-embodiment of the dismembered and often un-mourned patients who helped build most medical museums throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Similarly, Valentina Lari's *The Deformity of Beauty: A Last Dance with the Mütter Maidens*, winner of the Amsterdam Film Festival Van Gogh Award for World Cinema–Experimental Film 2012, proposed a dream-like narrative around the pathological collections of the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia. It showed a visitor to the museum having access to the secrets and mysteries of some of the medical wonders now crystallized behind their glass panels. Such artistic uses of the records and physical artefacts of medical museums in order to reconstruct absent bodies and lives change the museum space, creating a new experience for the public who are otherwise often shown cold and clinical rooms displaying impersonal and frequently unidentified remains. Such artistic experiments were, however, carried out in newly renovated and carefully looked after collections. What of those collections which had fallen into oblivion? What about the collections that are no longer used for teaching purposes and have been left to the work of time, their specimens now mouldering away and gradually vanishing beneath layers of dust? As shall be seen, my approach to literature proved essential to fashioning a collaborative project which blended the historical and the material so as to interrogate the meaning(s) of the specimens on display. Through such ways of working, we can begin to formulate one approach to how we might conceive of ScienceHumanities collaborations.

Capturing liminal spaces

The collaborative project, which was conceived a few months after my visit to the medical faculty's museum, aimed at renewing professional and lay audiences' gaze upon medical collections in general. The Toulouse collection especially, because of its strikingly dusty and decayed specimens, melted natural anatomies, and fragmented wax models, enabled us to stress the passing of time, the temporal gap separating the moment when an anatomical specimen or model is of scientific value for medical education from the time when it becomes of cultural and historical value. This time may be counted in decades as dust slowly invades the glass cases and bugs creep into the specimens.

The artist to whom I proposed the project – Valentina Lari – had experience of working with medical collections, having previously developed several artistic projects around them. In working with the Toulouse museum, she chose to evoke the collection's dangerous flirtation with death while simultaneously aestheticizing it. By

bringing to light the idea of suspension, or postponement, the artistic experiment we devised together had to recreate the sense of wonder triggered by contradictory feelings of fascination and repulsion which often emerges when one looks at medical curiosities or at body parts and organs kept in preserving fluids. But the project also aimed to induce feelings of sorrow in the viewers when looking at human specimens decomposing in their jars or rotting on their stands. The collaboration implied writing a common script – a story that would take viewers through the museum space and which would be able to both captivate and touch. It soon became obvious to both of us that the atmosphere was best matched by the genre of the Gothic.

My own exploration of the trajectories of the Gothic and the knowledge I had developed around the history of medical practice, education and anatomical collections ensured that I could supervise and inform the project, pointing out the precise objects that needed to be captured by the video camera and writing about their lost history. With some training in film studies and a thorough knowledge of horror films, Valentina Lari proposed that the short film relate the return of a ghost to the place where he, as a pathologist, used to teach anatomy to his students, the setting giving the impression that clocks had stopped at quarter to nine for ever. Although designed to be atmospheric and potentially chilling, the idea behind the film was nevertheless to reverse commonly accepted ideas of decay and decomposition to look at the dusty, degraded and often broken specimens as so many sleeping beauties locked up in their glass coffins. Regardless of the gender of the wax pieces themselves, therefore, the film would draw upon such archetypes of (female) characters denying death and dissolution to illustrate better the idea of a suspension of decomposition – a challenging struggle against the passing of time. The emphasis on glass throughout the film also aimed to reinvigorate the connections between glass and the scientific world, such as when, at the end of the nineteenth century, the naturalist Eliza Brightwen described her museum experience using a fairy-tale image: “[The student of nature] must pass alone, from chamber to chamber, down corridor after corridor, until he discovers that sleeping princess, Knowledge, who is never found until we industriously seek for her” (Brightwen 222, qtd. in Alberti 382). But a play on corporeality was also necessary to ensure the viewers’ reactions when faced with abandoned human remains and wax models. A frame narrative would show the ghost in the dissecting room as a flesh-and-bone being while a spectral voice would take the viewers through the museum collection. The severing of the voice from the body reflected the idea that the medical museum now hosted objects which had lost their identity: having been moved from the city centre in the 1970s, the collection had been physically separated from its archives, the latter lost and probably discarded at some point. They were thus all nameless objects without a past, just as the ghost was an insubstantial voice. And yet the unidentified patients and specimens were still staring at us from within their glass cases.

The 15-minute film which resulted from the project (*Liminality*) involved therefore several people with different disciplinary backgrounds: a literature-and-science scholar, an artist, a pathologist, and the technical staff involved in the making of the film itself. My own field of study (namely, literature, and particularly my knowledge of the literary Gothic) became pivotal to the project when associated with an interest in and exploration of medical collections, from their history to issues related to their storage, conservation and other aspects linked with curatorship. The film was screened internationally in the two years following its production (in France, Greece, Belgium, the U.S.A, and the U.K.), highlighting the importance of such collections for the history of medicine and the evolution of teaching methods

throughout the world. Moreover, my field of study (popularized so as to present to the general viewer clichés from the literature of terror) also helped me develop reflections on reception so as to devise a script able to elicit emotions and provoke sensations, as well as to build up a project which was in line with contemporary medical humanities approaches to medical practice and education. On the negative side, however, even if the final output which resulted from the project fully combined several fields and competences, it remains hard to classify, not being popular science nor a way to promote interdisciplinary research.

Indeed, the interaction of multiple humanities disciplines (literature and history of science, film-making) which was essential in this project, the artistic creativity which informed it, as well as the collaboration with medical professionals, demanded a complete reshaping of disciplinary boundaries which is difficult for common viewers or even the research evaluator, to discern. In this respect, my project suggests that ScienceHumanities scholars will need to reflect thoroughly on the means of articulating, making visible, and assessing the kind of collaborations which lie at the heart of their work, proposing tools to evaluate their methodologies, research outputs and practices. For the time being, however, if *Liminality* demonstrated and promoted liminal spaces between disciplines, it also showed that it is still problematic today to find a glass case for its exhibition in the museum of academia.

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