

***French Post-Modern Masculinities: From Neuromatrices to Seropositivity* by
Lawrence R. Schehr. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009.**

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1 When he died in 2011, Lawrence R. Schehr left behind a peerless interdisciplinary body of work. His monographs and journal articles were in areas as diverse as gender and queer studies, literature from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well as French language, culture and civilization. Although the title *French Post-Modern Masculinities* gives the impression that the monograph will address the entire post-modern period, Schehr concentrates on the last twenty years. As he explains *French Post-Modern Masculinities*, his latest monograph, sets out to examine the “changes in the representations and depictions of masculinity and masculine sexualities in the contemporary era of France” (1).

2 In the first chapter, “The Work of Literature in an Age of Queer Reproduction”, Schehr puts into conversation the literary works of Guillaume Dustan and Erik Rémès, analyzing the impact of bareback or unsafe sex on subject formation. Through an incisive reading of the literary works of these two authors, he argues that “the pursuit of sexual pleasure has to take precedence over everything else, and, indeed, that the definition of self comes only from one’s body, from that of another (or others), from the sexualization of masculinity as the be-all and end-all of being” (29). “Neuromatrices and Networks” is the second chapter and it examines French graphic novels which are involved in reorienting the post-modern masculine condition. His interpretation of the attacks against the World Trade Center in the book *Villa Vortex* by Maurice Dantec is particularly enthralling. He compellingly contends that “the destruction of that building is not the destruction of knowledge itself; the attack is against the institutions that organize knowledge and ultimately do not distinguish between knowledge and nonsense, those institutions that also turn knowledge into a kind of propaganda for death and destruction, for collectivization and for emasculation” (79). This ominous vision of masculinity is further developed in the third chapter, “Topographies of Queer Popular Culture”, in which Schehr examines several filmic and literary autofictions. The overarching argument in this chapter is that modern technology and AIDS play an important role in enacting the contemporary crisis of masculinity. “Perversions of the Real”, the ultimate chapter, deals with the essay writings of

right leaning and heterosexual writers such as Michel Houellebecq and Marc-Édouard Nabe. Schehr discusses the manner in which political discourses infiltrate the literary works of these writers with images that invoke a reimagining of sexuality and masculinity.

3 Drawing on Michel Foucault's philosophical oeuvre, *French Post-Modern Masculinities* attempts to contextualize theoretically the current state of the masculine subject as an individual. Employing Foucault's notion of social constructivism as elaborated in *The History of Sexuality*, Schehr shows, by way of a solid historical analysis, how the present masculine subject has come to be constructed. He starts from the post-Enlightenment period in which there is an initial rise of the subject as an individual. His linear historical examination ends in the "post-human" period (10) characterized by the centrality of AIDS and the Internet. This "post-human" period marks an end of the independence of the subject as an individual given the fact that the individual is no longer entirely himself. In terms of the masculine subject, Schehr contends that in this "post-human" period there is a radicalization of discourse on gender and sexuality which has led to the proliferation of a "new masculinity as a visible, palpable vulnerability" (11). Schehr gives a convincing argument of the apparition of this new masculinity by analyzing the combined effects of AIDS and the Internet. He argues that the contemporary subject is a palpably "visible node" (12) through a multiplicity of networks or "neuromatrices" which are brought about by the Internet and AIDS. The author offers a fascinating etymological analysis of the term "matrix" showing how it is a symbol of the maternal, and by extension of the feminine. For him, this reflects the manner in which the "post-human" masculine has been emasculated and indeed stripped of its phallic power and position.

4 The sheer diversity and breadth of the cultural productions that is examined by Schehr in this monograph is nothing less than impressive and undoubtedly the major strength of the book. Effortlessly scrutinizing novels, essays, films and graphic novels, Schehr shows great insight into contemporary French cultural productions that relate to queer and gender studies. He shows inordinate assurance even when handling material which is not only complex but is by and large sexually graphic in content. One such example is the manner in which he details the demise of the invincible heterosexual male subject. Through a reading of works by writers such as Marc-Édouard Nabe and Michel Houellebecq, Schehr hypothesizes that the apparent "death" of the invincible heterosexual male subject has prompted its inauspicious conception of a sexually

decadent and amoral society whose functioning axes upon aggressive and destructive instincts. In the development of this argument, as is the case in the rest of the monograph, Schehr is at once coherent and accessible. The simplicity of expression and the accessibility of the core arguments do not nonetheless compromise the theoretical depth that is achieved in this monograph.

5 *French Post-Modern Masculinities* could however be accused of being somewhat reductionist in its characterization of French gay experience to white, middle-class Parisian experience. An analysis of the interconnections of class, race, nationality and sexuality in “post-human” France would certainly have given this a more holistic depiction of French gay experience. Still considering the weaknesses of this monograph, the presence of several inaccuracies in translation as well as a manifold of typos, spoil an otherwise well-written and well-argued monograph.

6 Given the manner in which it takes for granted the treatment of foundational theories in gender and queer studies, *French Post-Modern Masculinities* would be of particular use and appeal to postgraduate students as well as scholars and researchers interested in the fields of gender and queer studies that relate to cultural studies and production of France and the Western world. The incisive reading of sexually provocative and graphic texts makes this monograph a priceless addition to French gender, queer and sexuality studies.