

Kyra Landzelius

The Preterm Baby as Modernist Project: The Genealogy of an Uncanny Patient

This presentation will briefly sketch the genealogy of the preterm baby as an exquisite subject/object of biomedical intervention, progressively ontologized over time by the sophisticated technologies and epistemic shifts that underwrote the subdiscipline of neonatology. The still-fetalized baby as uncanny patient owes its genesis to complex algorithms of (overt and covert) state violence, launched with the arts-and-sciences of healing placed in the service of national security in an acrimonious and defeated late-nineteenth century France. The frail nursling-turned-modernist project implicated radical shifts in the value accorded 'life', aka French citizen-subjects. In the UK and the USA, the preemie's subsequent emergence was coincident with the discovery/invention of the newborn as a terrain of governance to secure public and economic health. Over nearly a half-century of World Fairs and International Expositions, too-early born infants kept alive and displayed in their customized incubators performed the nation-state's civilizing mission alongside pedagogies of hygiene. By mid-twentieth century, neonatology had consolidated its exclusive jurisdiction over the preterm baby. The preemie's career has successively embodied key categorical debates and pressing biomedical challenges, including: questions regarding the withholding or withdrawal of life support, the limits of human viability, quality of life, resource allocation, and home-hospital contests and partnerships. This work aims to trace the trajectories of how the preterm baby has come into existence as a unique bio-technological creature, a cyborg patient, a novel kin member, a public spectacle and a brand new category of person.