

HI3T8-30 Rebuilding the Body: The Pursuit of Perfection, 1861-2021

26/27

Department

History

Level

Undergraduate Level 3

Module leader

Roberta Bivins

Credit value

30

Module duration

10 weeks

Assessment

100% coursework

Study location

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

Description

Introductory description

We live in demanding times. Humans today are bombarded with images of 'perfect' bodies, and surrounded by products claiming to perfect our minds and lives. Self-help is big business, and individual success is persistently tied to levels of physical and mental wellness that hover just out of reach. Self-improvement is nothing new -- but our contemporary focus on perfectible bodies has intensified with the rise of secularism, consumerism, and 'self-optimisation'. This module will draw on cultural history, disability studies, and the histories of science, technology and medicine to ask: 'What is a perfect body, and who is served by the pursuit of perfection?' Comparisons across global cultures of 'perfection' will test Eurocentric understandings of what constitutes the physical and mental 'ideal'.

Module aims

This module will explore the emergence of contemporary cultures of self-improvement; test claims about the benefits and attainability of perfect health and well-being; and historicise contemporary expectations of self-perfectibility. Looking initially at post-conflict rehabilitation, surgeries of assimilation, and the emergence of a marketplace of perfectibility, it will challenge assumptions about ability and disability and set the stage for case studies of 'perfection' consumerism in the

second half of the twentieth century. These case studies will incorporate attention to biomedical and technological developments while challenging claims that novel tools and techniques drive changing ideas about perfect bodies, minds or lives. By sifting specific case studies, students will develop the tools required to trace the impacts on ideals of human perfection of social, political and economic change; gender, class and ethnic positionality; and the dissemination of cultural assumptions through mass media. While the module's principle examples will be drawn from the US and UK, students will also encounter very different ideals and practices of 'perfection' drawn from other cultures.

Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

- Week 1 Introduction and Key Approaches
- Week 2: Restoring Masculinity: War-torn Bodies and Minds
- Week 3 Repairing Difference: Plastic Surgeries of War and Peace
- Week 4 Selling Better Bodies: Commercialising Perfection
- Week 5 Selling Better Brains: Medicating Minds
- Week 6 Reading Week
- Week 7 Pursuing Pleasure: From Vibrators to Viagra
- Week 8 Making Babies: New Reproductive Technologies
- Week 9 Seeing and Selecting: Dystopian Perfection
- Week 10 Body hackers: Self-Enablement and Rejecting "Perfect"
- Week 11 Conclusion and Critical Essay Workshop

Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate a systematic knowledge and understanding of the pursuit of ideal embodiment in the US and UK from 1861-2021.
- Critically analyse and evaluate the social, economic and political impacts of cultures of self-improvement through medical, technological and commercial interventions on embodiment.
- Effectively communicate ideas, and make informed, coherent and persuasive arguments relating to the role of the media and the marketplace in selling 'perfect' selfhood.
- Critically review and consolidate theoretical, methodological, and historiographical ideas relating to ability, disability, and identity in the modern period.
- Produce critically engaged undergraduate scholarship on the history and contemporary impacts of the pursuit of perfect bodies and lives.
- Contextualise and critically evaluate contemporary cultures of perfectionism and hyper-attainment.

Indicative reading list

[Reading lists can be found in Talis](#)

Research element

Students will use primary research in the historical databases, film, literature, and popular culture to write their first and third essays. They MAY, with module leader's permission and ethics approval, use social media research and surveys to further explore their topics.

Interdisciplinary

This module will include readings from science and technology studies, medical anthropology, and medical sociology. Some sources will be drawn from the medical literature.

International

While the principal geographies of this module will be the US and UK, it will also include global examples for the purpose of critical comparison.

Subject specific skills

See learning outcomes.

Transferable skills

See learning outcomes.

Study

Study time

Type	Required
Seminars	19 sessions of 2 hours (13%)
Tutorials	4 sessions of 1 hour (1%)
Private study	258 hours (86%)
Total	300 hours

Private study description

History modules require students to undertake extensive independent research and reading to prepare for seminars and assessments. As a rough guide, students will be expected to read and prepare to comment on three substantial texts (articles or book chapters) for each seminar taking approximately 3 hours. Each assessment requires independent research, reading around 6-10 texts and writing and presenting the outcomes of this preparation in an essay, review, presentation or other related task.

Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

Assessment

You do not need to pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Assessment group A1

	Weighting	Study time	Eligible for self-certification
Assessment component			
Seminar contribution	10%		No
This assessment will reflect students' active contributions to small and whole group discussions in seminar. There will be no penalty for non-participation when students have excused absences, but unexcused absences will draw a failing mark for that day. Student preparation encompasses completing their required readings for the day -- c. 2-3 hours per seminar. Students with reasonable adjustments or additional concerns about oral participation will be offered a suitable alternative.			
Reassessment component			
1000 word reflective essay in lieu of Seminar Contribution			Yes (extension)
Assessment component			
1500 source based essay	10%		Yes (extension)
This essay, identifying, interrogating and critically contextualising a piece of historical advertising, reporting, representation, or self-help advice relating to perfecting the body, will support students in developing the digital and archival skills they will require for their final essays, and the critical and analytical skills they will use for their intermediate essay assessment.			

Reassessment component is the same

Weighting**Study time****Eligible for self-certification****Assessment component**

3000 word blog

40%

Yes (extension)

Students will explore attitudes towards the pursuit of perfection in a blog intended for a specified public audience. They will use the public history historiography to inform their choice of topic for that audience, and will present their audience with unique historical examples, visual content, and links to wider additional resources suitable to their audience's needs. The blog will be written in language tailored to their audience.

Reassessment component is the same**Assessment component**

3000 word essay or policy brief

40%

Yes (extension)

Drawing on and extending the case studies we have explored across the module, use the historical literature and primary research to analyse the pressure to be 'perfect' and the ways in which individuals, societies, corporations and states experience and respond to changing expectations and ideals of embodiment. Students will define their own titles, subject to module leader approval.

Reassessment component is the same**Feedback on assessment**

Written feedback provided via Tabula; optional oral feedback in office hours.

Availability**Courses**

This module is Core optional for:

- Year 3 of UENA-VQ34 Undergraduate English and History (with a term in Venice)
- Year 3 of UHIA-V102 Undergraduate History (Renaissance and Modern History Stream)
- Year 4 of UHIA-V105 Undergraduate History (Renaissance and Modern History Stream) (with Intercolated Year)

- Year 4 of UHIA-V103 Undergraduate History (Renaissance and Modern History Stream)
(with Year Abroad)