

## QUESTIONING THE BODY TODAY

### 1. The body today

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We live in strange, paradoxical times – times when very often contradictory ways of thinking coexist. This is true also for our relationship with our bodies. Here, by “body”, I mean above all our body, our own body, in particular the physical body (in German: *Körper*).<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand in fact, our body may be cared for, may be an object of attention – even pampered; on the other hand, it may be manipulated, changed – even tortured.<sup>2</sup> In one way, it is interpreted as something to be cherished, safeguarded, protected; while in another way, we relate to our body as if it were something to be controlled, as if it were at our disposal. Thus, just as the body may be cherished, so it may be destroyed; just as it may be enhanced in its power, so it may be used and consumed. In other words, nowadays the body, our body is at the same time something that we can try to make everlasting or, quite simply, annihilate.

We must examine this ambiguous and paradoxical situation in depth. I shall work from the philosophical standpoint, not from the sociological

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1 See for a general overview: Michael A. Proudfoot (ed.), *The Philosophy of Body*, special issue of “Ratio”, 2002; Basil Blackwell, Oxford 2003.

2 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain. Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford U.P., Oxford 1985.

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or psychological. This research will serve to provide a less schizophrenic relationship with the way we are and will be of help to us in taking better care of ourselves. To this end, I wish to briefly discuss several ways in which we relate to our bodies nowadays, i.e. ways that are expressed in the figure of the body exhibited, the body transformed, the body decorated, the body patient, the body controlled and the body virtual.

## 2. The body exhibited

In the “society of the spectacle” that we live in today<sup>3</sup> the body too is seen as something to be put on stage. It *is* inasmuch as it *appears*. It is the very place where we manifest our ego. It is a way of presenting ourselves to others and letting them know who we are.

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Appearance here gives à access to reality. But, if we look more closely, this presumed “reality”, in other words: our “true ego”, is only its appearance. And our body – fashionably decked out – is in fact the chosen place for this appearance. This is why the body must be cared for; this is why it has to be presented in the best possible way.

In other words, in the society of spectacle, that which shows is not the expression of something “authentic” that should be “behind” the appearance and which, through appearance, is revealed. On the contrary, the “authentic”, the “true”, the “real” are *only* what appears. They are absorbed, so to speak, into this appearing. And this means: appearing *is not the expression* of something, but is simply its *fleeting display*. It is enough to be on stage; enough to make an entry.

Our body cannot escape the dynamics of being made into a spectacle. Nowadays – from the standpoint that everything can and must be put on show – all the veils too, that might still have hidden it, have fallen from the body. In the society of appearing there is no room for modesty. What is important is to

3 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, translated and annotated by Ken Knabb, Bureau of Public Secrets, Berkeley, CA, 2014.

show off. Thus, the body becomes the *body exhibited*; the *body exposed*.<sup>4</sup>

Let us consider this aspect in particular; let us ask ourselves: but are this exhibition, this exposition really possible? Can it be truly, thoroughly realized? In other words, for our body to be properly on show, is it enough to denude it?

The answer is no. This is not the way to recover our innocence. We cannot go back to nature. Because – and this is a common experience – even the body on show, naked, disarmed or seductive in its nudity, ends by being perceived, and *wants* to be perceived all the same, as if it were clothed. *Nudism is a form of culture*. Today, the naked body is a way of revealing oneself. We have lost the possibility of perceiving and expressing our innocence.

In a word: a return to nature, expressing our nature, seems today to be impossible. Pure nudity cannot be manifested and perceived as such. Thus there is nothing to be done but to take good care of our appearance; nothing to be done but dedicate our attention to our bodies.

### 3. The body transformed

The body, I have said, always finds a way to flaunt itself, even when dissimulating. But its exhibition is never direct, immediate or innocent. It is always in a cultural guise. Always mediated by something else. In other terms: even when it is naked, the body is always perceived as a *body dressed*.

“Dressed” does not necessarily mean “clothed” even if according to the decrees of fashion, the “dressed” body primarily means the well-kept body, safeguarded, protected through care and attention. That care and attention that enhances its beauty and camouflages its defects. To the cost of changing it, of wanting to transform it.<sup>5</sup>

Care of the body in fact implies a specific *transformation*. A transformation

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4 See Michael Kohler (ed.), *The body exposed. Views of the Body. 150 Years of the Nude in Photography*, Edition Stemmler, Kilchberg, Zürich 1995.

5 See f.e. Harold Koda, *Extreme Beauty. The Body transformed*, Metropolitan Museum of Art Series, New York 2004.

by which we aim to adapt our natural appearance to particular, socially accepted cultural models. But this is an ambiguous transformation. On the one hand it may be to conserve or enhance particular features of the individual; on the other, it may correct or eliminate certain natural features (a crooked nose, small breasts). It is possible to enhance some parts of the body and destroy others. In all events, the male athlete and the depilated woman are the most widespread confirmation of the effort to transform oneself carried out with the alibi of care.

This means that today the body increasingly proves to be an *artifact body*. It is a body manipulated, that can be manipulated: In other words, it is a *body under control*. Control is the extreme result of taking care of oneself, it is the demonstration that we have dominion over ourselves. And it is the spectacular nature of our body that effectively exhibits this dominion – even to the cost of disregarding some natural requirements, such as consuming a balanced diet.

**138** *Diets* are in fact one of the most common expressions of this control. *Bulimia* can be seen as the attempt to dominate not only the self but also the world – even by incorporating it. *Anorexia* can be seen as a way by which paradoxically, control by control, the body is exhibited as it gradually disappears. Thus, these illnesses, if closely considered, are the expression of *control* taken to an extreme: a control over one's self that believes is achieved and manifested via the body.

#### 4. The body decorated

But even the body controlled, even the body enhanced by cosmetic surgery, is in difficulty when faced with its nakedness. It is not completely at ease with itself. The body exhibited, cared for, controlled does not – literally – fit into its skin.

Our *skin* is what stands between us and others. For this reason, because it is what connects us to others, it is cared for. But because exhibiting it completely is impossible, we could say that the skin is always too thick. It is a channel for, but also an obstacle to, the complete manifestation of oneself. Once more, we

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try to control it, slice it, even remove it.<sup>6</sup>

To scarify the body, to puncture the skin, can be seen as an extreme attempt at completely denuding oneself. The body here is the body *engraved* and exhibited in its flesh. The body is not flesh, incorporation is not incarnation, as Michel Henry reminds us.<sup>7</sup> By removing the skin we expose the flesh. This is how scarifying is seen nowadays. In fact, diversely from what was done in tribal societies – where scarification was symbolically a trial by pain to be overcome, nowadays in the society of show, scarifying, even to the extreme of removing skin, has become an exhibition. The incision forms a design, a curlicue. It does not manifest a shortcoming; it is an ornament.

Seen from this viewpoint, scarifying is a more ferocious form of *tattooing*. It loses its original meaning. It is no longer the proof of an ordeal overcome. It does not enable us to learn about ourselves through pain (as in the 20<sup>th</sup> century example of scarifying recounted by Kafka in his tale *In der Strafkolonie*).<sup>8</sup> The tattooed body is in fact only a *body decorated*. In some rare examples, it is a work of art. It is the attempt to exhibit oneself by concentrating attention on a *particular point* or aspect of oneself. Although, unfortunately, a good tattoo does not remit an ugly body.

Again, unlike the meaning of a tattoo in tribal societies there are two main elements today that distinguish this practice. There is the idea of the body as the *body divided into plots*. There is the intention to make the body – or rather its skin – a *place for something lasting*.

Regarding the former aspect, a tattoo occupies the body only partly. It may of course extend over wider and wider areas of the body, as in Japanese culture but usually tattooing only draws attention to that *part* of the body where it is visible and not the *whole* body. A tattoo is a way of drawing attention to that part of the body. Thus a tattoo leads us to concentrate our attention on the decorated part and ignore the rest. This is the demonstration of a widespread trend in general thought: the trend towards dividing the

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6 See f.e. Elizabeth Stephens, *Anatomy as Spectacle. Public Exhibitions of the Body from 1700 to Present*, Liverpool U.P., Liverpool 2013.

7 Michel Henry, *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair*, Le Seuil, Paris 2000.

8 Franz Kafka, *In the Penal Colony*, in *The Complete Stories*, ed. By Nahum N. Glatzer, Schocken Books, New York 1971, pp. 140–67.

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body into plots; the idea, that is, that the body can be seen as a set of *spare parts*.

But – and this is the second point that I wish to underline – a tattoo is not done with *henna*, it is not a transfer stuck onto a child's arm. A tattoo is binding because it cannot be wiped away. A tattoo is for ever. This means that the body is seen as a place where one can make a gesture that expects to be lasting, to last at least as long as the body where it is, lives.

But here is where the difference between intention and result emerges. As I have said, the intention is to be lasting. And, in effect, one does not usually remove a tattoo (unless by painful, invasive techniques). But even so, once more the desired result, that of leaving a sign that will last the lifetime of the body, cannot be achieved. The body is corruptible. The skin wrinkles, loosens, creases and sags. As a consequence, the tattoo changes. Thus, the pretty butterfly on the body of a young girl makes a completely different impression on the same girl's body when she has aged.<sup>9</sup>

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## 5. The body patient

The most recent forms that the body can take on nowadays in exhibiting itself – scarifying and tattoo – recall a singular connection between taking care of one's appearance and feeling pain. Caring for one's appearance leads back to regulating a desire: for example, restraining my desire to eat sweet foods. Thus, to achieve the desired result one is often obliged to endure sacrifices, both great and small. The body is the place of suffering and endurance. The figure of the *body patient* emerges, not only able to welcome pleasure but also pain. Actually: able above all not only to live through alternations of pain and pleasure, but also through their overlapping.<sup>10</sup>

And it is in this alternation, this overlapping that the *passivity* typical of the human being consists that radical passivity: “more passive than any other

9 On the topic see Nikki Sullivan, *Tattooed Bodies. Subjectivity, Textuality, Ethics, and Pleasure*, Praeger, Westport, CT, 2001.

10 Steven Allen, *Cinema, Pain and Pleasure: Consent and the Controlled Body*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2013.

passivity”, that Emmanuel Levinas speaks of. The passive body is in fact the patient body: it is willing to be changed, manipulated, inscribed, cut. But also *passed through*.

The body *passed through* is the place of piercing. Here too, the subject wants to state the power they have over themselves. Once more the boundary between agent and patient is blurred. Piercing is the symbol of a decisive experience, one that has left its mark and has really gone through the body of those who have carried it out. Now, this experience is recorded by the presence of a foreign object – metal or bone – that passes through the body: that penetrates the soft tissues and comes out on the opposite side, inevitably to be exhibited.

But a similar “foreign” body, that passes through my flesh, may be *rejected*. In other words, my body may not recognize this object as something compatible with its nature so it may become inflamed or infected. It may even go so far as to expel that which – in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy – it considers an “intruder”.<sup>11</sup> But even rejection can be an occasion for showing oneself off. And it may lead to the search for further forms to integrate that which belongs to it and that which, by contrast, is extraneous to it: between what is natural and what amounts to the artificial.

This can be taken to the extreme. On the one hand there are performers – the most famous of which is M.me Orlan – who see the artificial transformation of their body as a work of art.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand are those who use certain expedients – medical products, body building apparatus, prosthetics – to overcome the limitations of their humanness. On the one hand we have artists who show off the work executed on their body: work that may even require their sacrifice. On the other, a trans-humanistic prospect is ever more forcibly being imposed. However, in each case, there is no escape from the rationale of exhibition, not even when the results are truly horrific. On the contrary: precisely *because* they are so.

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11 Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'intrus*, Galilée, Paris 2000.

12 See f.e. C. Jill O'Brian, *Carnal Art. Orlan's Refacing*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis & London 2005.

## 6. Control over the body and caring for oneself

So, what is it then, in the end, that spurs the *body*, when *exhibited* in our times, to state itself in the various forms that we have touched on here: i.e. the *artifact body*, the *body parceled out*, the *body decorated*, the *body patient*, the *body passed through* and the *body exposed*? The answer, as we have seen refers back to our desire to *control* our body. But behind this desire to control there is another, even more disturbing, phenomenon. That is, the fact that we no longer feel that this body of ours belongs to us. It is beyond our grasp. For this reason we want to control it, manipulate it, feel it even if it is painful.

We are going through a gradual process of detachment from our body. We see it as an object; we can contemplate it; we let others contemplate it; we exhibit it like a show: like on television. Certainly, this means it is *our body*. But, when considered in this light, it becomes an *alienated* body. Thus, we may not recognize it. We may lose contact with ourselves. In other words, we may experience our body as *ours but not ours*. This happens because, as we have seen, when the body is exhibited, it is not as its true nature but as something that is artificial. When we try to control it we run the risk of annihilating it; when we show its ornamentations, such as piercing, we run the risk of staging only the pain it cost us to have it done.

But that is not all. If, in fact – faced with our constructed, manipulated, controlled body – we run the risk of not recognizing ourselves any more; if, that is, the sense of our corporality proves absent, then what is left is undeniably true and real. But it is a truth, a reality that belongs to another world: that belong to an artificial, faked world. The body that we can no longer recognize is the *body virtual*.<sup>13</sup>

Once again: the body virtual can be kept under control because it is *mine and not mine* at the same time. It does not fully match my true nature because it has undergone change. It belongs to another order of reality. But it is still the body that I have chosen to have. More than nature can, it is what realizes my *virtus*, my fullest potential. It is the body I want to live in. But in order to

13 N. Katherine Hayles, *How we became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London 1999.



continue in this virtual condition, it needs constant attention.

But what does this attention, that far too often we have towards ourselves, amount to nowadays? And what form is *right* for it to take to correspond to what we are? I shall conclude my discussion by the answering these questions.

There is in fact a complete misunderstanding when we speak of “care”. Certainly, care is attention towards oneself: in order to make the best impression, seem most efficient or beautiful to others. Thus *care* is transformed into *control*. But to take care of oneself, look after oneself does not mean just that. It does not mean stopping at mere exhibition, it means reaching the substance. And this substance not just adopting some form of maintenance, but rather, by these practices, to discover and confirm the *sense* of our being.

The sense of being human is in fact of having our limits, of being corruptible, temporary. We are born, grow old and die. The sense we have is to live out our time: as an opportunity, as the occasion for relating to ourselves and to others.

Our body is the mirror of this situation. The signs of passing time are written on our bodies and go deeper than any tattoo. Every body is destined to live patiently with the consequences of passing time and by which it is traversed. The way we look after our body is, therefore, the way we accept our temporality. *Not* by opposing it, to annul the consequences and to rein in the effects of ageing, as we have seen: because everything we do to achieve this is in the end a confirmation of this very situation. But to express – we could say – *compassion* towards ourselves. To grasp back what we are, beyond all alienation that may concern our bodies.

To conclude, only in this way will the body become once more *my* body. Only through the right sort of attention to myself, I will not put the clock back with its end in destruction, but I shall understand it and accompany it. I shall accept it as something meaningful. The meaning of what I am.