

## Body

Over the centuries the history of the human body—especially in Western cultures—has been characterized by an ever-increasing separation between matter and spirit, between flesh and soul. In cultures where the relation between human beings, deities, and nature is interpreted as a harmonic and constantly interpenetrating rapport of the human with the sacred, the experience of the body has been different. Such is the case in the scholarly traditions of Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine, as well as the bodily practices that derive from them: Yoga, Shiatzu, Tai Ji Quan, Qigong, or acupuncture. Such practices imply complex cosmologies that view the human body as intimately interconnected with cosmic forces and tensions. For these traditions the body is not merely a mechanism entirely controlled by biology, but a site where signs of harmony or disharmony can be read. From Asia to Africa different religions and philosophies have developed ritual practices whereby the social body and the individual body are placed in a common vision of human reality. Symptoms and illnesses at the level of the individual are thus interpreted as expressions of tensions within society, while all suffering is contextualized in a wider field of forces more complex than the purely biomedical etiology. Diagnoses and therapies entail, then, the reorganization of individuals' roles in the social order. In these cultures the social identity of each human being is strengthened or modified through specific ritual practices that underscore the individual's growth and the ensuing transformation of his or her social role. Initiation rituals, therapeutic rituals, and rites of passage are all symbolic practices that transform the human body into an altar that mediates the metamorphosis of the personal identity and the equilibrium of the social body. The body as altar is a means to re-establish social order after an illness or a witch attack; it creates the symbolic space that allows human beings, ancestors, and gods to communicate with each other. Becoming a shaman or a healer, being possessed or sick, the transition from puberty to adulthood—are all processes whereby the body is endowed with symbols and

discourses marking the transition from one state to another. In all processes of transmission or metamorphosis of identity the body is the main vector of symbolic communication. Thus the body surface can be viewed as a social skin—the boundary between society and the psycho-biological individual, a sort of stage on which human beings interpret the drama of their socialization. Through complex social, cultural, and linguistic processes the body surface may also be seen as a constructed entity, capable of transforming both its biological character and its own rhetorical and symbolic potential, capable of inducing ritual possession despite a modern rejection of ancient practices, and still capable of blocking memories of traumatic events in a body whose rituality could become merely narrative. Anthropology has shown us how we can read bodies as topographies that relate memory and community. These bodily traces create belonging and exclusion.

It is extremely difficult to define the body of Western cultures as homogeneous. Both the medicine of Hippocrates and of Galen show that the theories of humors, the relationship between melancholy and bile, between psychological and physical suffering, are themselves the roots of modern biomedicine. Yet we can still attempt to simplify the complex trajectory of the different Western theories if we remember that since the eighteenth century the body has been the object of a long history of control and repressive interventions. Through ethics and science, such disciplinary practices have aimed at separating the body from emotions and at punishing the body—especially the female body—at first through the accusation of witchcraft and of possession and later through the diagnoses of hysteria and other pathologies. The body as machine subject to the social imperative of reproduction and the body of passions are today conceived of as objects to be monitored, manipulated, and rendered passive. The female body has been the locus of many images of madness: from Plato's itinerant uterus to today's eating disorders, anorexia and bulimia. The woman's body seems incapable of escaping the paradox of being a porous body continuously absorbing violence. At the same time its complex somatic, expressing its communicative power, implicitly reveals an autonomous discourse of resistance.

Drawing from psychoanalysis and phenomenology, recent critics have radically criticized the reduction of the body to its purely biological features and rejected its subjugation to any formal logic. Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida have all argued for a new dimension of the body, namely, the body as a political arena or major battleground where identities are wrought. To have or to be a body is a phenomenological paradox today, an outmoded expression that does not capture the tragedy of a ruptured dialogue between the individual body and the social body.

In addition to the techniques of the body, whereby Marcel Mauss argued that each culture is able to transmit its traditions, today there are technologies of the contemporary body that determine the reproduction of the same blueprint. An agile, muscular, and lean body strives to forget the violence of genocide and the holocaust of wars by projecting all over the world the model of a young, and thus innocent, body. The body has increasingly

become a flexible and docile space on which one can read the contradictions of contemporary societies: emancipation and repression at one and the same time. A number of such body techniques may seem to be transgressive and antisocial in character, free from external constraints thus capable of fostering an agenda of individual freedom and the utopia whereby a subject can decide how and what his or her identity may be. In reality, each technique unveils the contradiction existing in the quest for hedonism. According to Arjun Appadurai, to be effective, body techniques imply painful and exacting social disciplines that gradually become a specific habitus, a form of repetitive behavior that actually limits rather than enhances invention and creativity. What in contemporary culture appears to be the search for originality and novelty is in reality only a symptom of a deeper discipline through which desire is shaped according to an aesthetic of the ephemeral, which by way of consumption practices truly becomes an engagement requiring continuous dedication and attention. Ornaments and clothes have always determined the rules of the power of beauty and have made possible societal, group, and class identification of each individual and, consequently, his or her negotiating power. In Western culture, for example, it is impossible to identify the body without thinking of all those accessories that have been the markers of epochs and values: crinoline, garters, bra, stockings, tie. Today, though, especially among the younger generations, the body seems to be in the process of losing all ornament and becoming both the object and the subject of a new aesthetics. With the help of computer technology that is capable of simulating how body parts may physically be changed, the "biological body" becomes a virtual reality. The naked body tends to acquire a power stronger than that of any garment. Through photography, magazines, cinema, and television, new universal aesthetic norms emerge together with bodily practices that tend to homogenize age and genders. The young body tends to wear the same clothes, to adopt similar postures and to build an undifferentiated ideal image on which to inscribe, through direct interventions like tattooing or piercing, its subjective specificity. These are ways of bodily discourse that tend to set aside or efface all form of discourse.

(See also *healing, identity, indexicality, individual, intentionality, metaphor, power, prophecy, space, theater, writing*)

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