

The Status of the Body between the XVIII-th and the XX-th Centuries

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Abstract:

Until the XX-th century, in European culture, the body-soul relationship was a hierarchical one that had placed emphasis on the soul as the source of life, against the body considered as an ephemeral, inferior, even an evil element, inherently corrupt and corrupting, hence its relation to death,¹ a body that was “devalued religiously and philosophically and kept at a distance through its disciplining and subjection to the will, through the rigors of religious and social rituals and through the aesthetic idealization of its artistic representation”². A change of this paradigm appeared only with XX-th century culture through the usage of the image in the medium of photography, cinematography, television. The body has become the defining self-image of the modern individual, under which he presents himself to society, and in function of which he will be catalogued by his peers. The new cultural media glorify the image of an ideal body that has to be young, fit and harmonious. The individual’s task is just to follow this norm and to carefully take care of his body. Due to excessive mediatization³, the body ends up by being considered an idol/god,

¹ For example, in the Orphic tradition of the myth of Dionysus, Dionysus’s heart survived when he had been eaten by the Titans, Zeus being able to give birth to him again. According to this myth, there is in man a good element, the soul as inherited from Dionysus, and an evil one, the body as inherited from the Titans.

² Codoban (2011), 8.

³ The body as image is essential to the new media. If during the age of the printing press the body had lost from its expressive value because attitudes

leading to the establishment of a cult dedicated to celebrate its rites, consisting in the practice of activities such as shopping, yoga, sports, massage, fitness.

Key words: the body-soul relationship, anatomized body, body as machine, mechanistic/Cartesian philosophy, the image of the body as the self-image of the individual.

Introduction

David Le Breton, in his book *Anthropologie du corps et modernité*, realizes an analysis of the status of the body, starting from its conception up to the XVIII-th century, as an anatomized body and as a machine-body – with the onset of modernity, the body has gained a superior status as an individualizing factor, as image of the human being, under which man presents himself in society and in function of which he will be judged by his peers. This analysis is considered necessary for three reasons: the identity of the human being originates in its body, the body provides a face to the human being and it allows the human being to exist, mediating both its relationship with nature and with other people.⁴ In other words, the body produces sense, inserts the human being into a determined cultural and social environment. Cultural knowledge is a knowledge dedicated to the body, assigning

and feelings were expressed in writing, with the emergence of photography and TV, it gained back its supremacy under the form of a young and fit ideal body.

⁴ “The body is the origin of the human being’s identity, the place and time in which the world takes shape in a distinct figure. It is the axis of the relationship to the world. Through the intermediary of the body, the human being acquires the substance of life and relays it to the others, with the help of the symbolic systems common to all the members of its community. The body is the place where the individual becomes master of his world, assuming it as his good, transforming it into a familiarly and accessible universe, loaded with sense and values, one that can be utilized simultaneously as experience by any other individual that belongs to the same system of cultural references.” Breton (2009), 21.

sense to it, determining its structure and defining its position towards both other human beings and towards the natural environment, in the framework provided by a value system.⁵ On the basis of such value systems, each society creates a different perception of the body: for example, in Melanesian culture, the existence of the body is related to that of nature, especially of the trees, that represent the link between mankind and the Earth⁶, as an “indispensable element in a symbol ensemble”.⁷ In traditional communitarian societies, the body is linked to the individual, its representations being considered representations of the self, but also to nature and to the community.⁸ In individualistic societies, the body is considered as an individualizing factor, a mark of the distinction from the others, separated from the cosmos (man is master of nature, being in his power to create the artificial), but separated also from himself (the body is conceived of as being separate from the essence of the individual).⁹

The anatomized body and the body as machine

In order to find the sources of the modern representation of the body, le Breton investigates the social individual-body link, starting from two currents: individualism (which will provide the perspective of the anatomized body) and mechanistic/Cartesian philosophy (which will provide the perspective of the body as machine). Individualism produces a separation of the human being from its body, which becomes

⁵ “The body appears to be such a trivial thing, but is proven ultimately to be of an essence that is extremely difficult to define. It is never an axiological given, but the effect of a social and cultural construction.” Breton (2009), 21.

⁶ When a child is born, the Canacs bury his umbilical cord into the ground and in that place plant a tree shoot, which is said to develop together with the child.

⁷ Breton (2009), 27.

⁸ “The body does not exist as an individualizing factor, since the individual is not distinct from the others.” Breton (2009), 35.

⁹ “The human being is broken off from the cosmos, from the others and from itself.” Breton (2009), 35.

autonomous, a factor of individualization, a boundary between people.¹⁰ The individualizing character may be discerned in the prototypes of the modern man: the merchant of XIII-XIV century Italy, the cosmopolite par excellence, placing personal gain at the goal of every action, having broken with traditional local community values, and respectively the modern artist, whose social worth is given through the appearance of the personal signature marking his creation, through which he will gain the status of an autonomous creator. Linked to this influence derived from the sphere of art, painting and, later, photography have also brought an important contribution to the process of separation of the individual from the body, through the emergence during the XV-th century of the portrait as ideology of the face, considered as the most personal part of the body. If at the beginning only royalty and clergy enjoyed having portraits painted of themselves, as protection devices against witchcraft, from the XVI-th century onward the portraits start to express reality in a naturalistic fashion, without idealizing and religious connotations.¹¹

The conception of the body as machine, as well as that of the anatomized body, is based on the emergence of the anatomical sciences, developed through the practice of dissecting dead bodies of marginal people, the cadavers of convicts and beggars, persons lacking social worth. Dissections were allowed only with Church control and were realized, starting with the XIII-th century, in anatomical theaters, in front of a receptive public. The human body is separated from its personhood, “the body being a beautiful exemplary of human machinery”¹² and slicing it open does not constitute a desecration since it is all done for the progress of knowledge.

¹⁰ “The body becomes a well defined boundary between people.” Breton (2009), 58.

¹¹ “Painting in itself, support of a memory, of a personal celebration, without any other justification.” Breton (2009), 57.

¹² Breton (2009), 99.

With the XVIII-th century, mechanistic philosophy¹³ brings about the separation of mankind from nature (man begins to dominate nature, nature having become from a mystery, “a mechanical toy”¹⁴) and the separation person-body, the body losing its dignity, having become an object between other objects, transformed by science into a mechanism. Descartes considered the human being as fundamentally divided into a body as a machine¹⁵, as an “accessory”¹⁶ and the mind as spirit, the seat of reason and religiousness.¹⁷ This division marks the subordination of the body, its inferior status, proven also by its utter absence from the Cartesian *cogito*: “I think, therefore I am”. A similar distinction, although with the poles reversed, the body itself being now situated in the foreground, appears also in the political theory of Foucault, according to whom techniques of discipline and individualization are used for the control and surveillance of people’s bodies.¹⁸ People’s conduct, their actions, their very conscience of themselves may be controlled through physical action and the threat of such action upon their bodies. The body reaches the stage where it may be considered “a puzzle, whose elements are always available and

¹³ “Mechanistic philosophy reconstructs the world starting from thinking, separating the world lived by men, accessible to the senses, from the real world, accessible only to intelligence.” Breton (2009), 117.

¹⁴ Breton (2009), 106.

¹⁵ Descartes states in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*: “I have seen myself firstly as having a body, hands, arms, after which I have understood all this machinery made from flesh and bones, as it appears in a cadaver, the machinery we call a body.”

¹⁶ Breton (2009), 112.

¹⁷ “The body is axiologically estranged from the human being, desecralised and transformed into an object for investigations that render it an apart reality.” Breton (2009), 114. “I am no more this bundle of members that carries the name of human body.” Breton (2009), 115.

¹⁸ “The great work on the machine-man was written on two planes: the anatomic-metaphysical one, the first pages of which were written by Descartes, continued then by physicians and philosophers, and the technical-political one, constructed as an ensemble of educational, military, medical regulations, and empirical and rational procedures of control and correction of the operations of the body.” Breton (2009), 127.

may be replaced, in most cases, with technical materials”¹⁹. Anthropology proves the falsity of the body-machine analogy: the body is a necessary condition inherent to the living human being as such, otherwise the body itself would be immortal, all its pieces being capable of constant replacement.

Popular Medicine vs. Modern Medicine

The mind-body dualism constitutes the basis on which medical practices developed. Medicine as an anatomical-physiological science places itself as a defender of the integrity of the body. Through the plurality of its practitioners²⁰ it aims to take care of the illnesses that affect the human organism. Thus, healthcare separates the body from the individual.²¹ The history of the development of medical sciences recognizes two main types of its practice: traditional popular medicine and modern medicine. Popular medicine is a medicine of the body, where the traditional healer takes into consideration the image of the body as a symbol, in relation to the whole cosmos, the body being in direct contact with the world. Thus the healer takes into consideration emotions, stress, everything that upsets the patient. Such traditional healers are witch-doctors and shamans, faith-healers etc., who use a wide array of healing techniques, consisting in such as using healing plants gathered at a prescribed auspicious time, the enactment of rituals, prayers, the healing powers ascribed to magnetism, recourse to the healer’s own holiness acquired through fasting, pilgrimages etc. What all these disparate healing practices and the respective belief systems that form their background have

¹⁹ Breton (2009), 133.

²⁰ “The plurality of the physicians answers to the social and cultural plurality of a world for which every society, every group proposes its own version.” Breton (2009), 136. Different societies, based on their own mode of organization, create different medical apparatuses that the healthcare practitioner will apply in order to cure the patient.

²¹ “It transforms the man into the more or less happy owner of a body, which follows its own biological rhythm.” Breton (2009), 140.

in common is a more holistic approach than that of modern medicine, all considering the individual as a part tightly related to the cosmos.

Modern medicine is an academic and scientific discipline. In it, healing is realized with recourse to synthetic drugs, usually more effective than the remedies of traditional medicine, due to the isolation and higher concentration of the active ingredient, but also carrying a higher risk of giving rise to negative side effects, due to the newness of their use, whereas traditional remedies were used for countless generations (modern drugs are also sometimes more expensive than traditional remedies, a fact that explains, together with these last ones' possible relative usefulness, that there are still people who continue to rely on them). The modern medical practitioner has to take into consideration the whole of the suffering man, not only the affected organ (re-establishing the link between the individual and his body). He has to inform the patient about his illness and about the healing mechanisms prescribed for it, instead of just ascertaining the illness and proceeding to act upon his findings, without requiring the patient's involvement in the healing process. With scientific progress, new medical procedures have been developed: organ transplant, artificial techniques of fertilization, cloning etc. There is also a morally questionable side to these advances, since it may be argued that they run the risk of dehumanizing the body, turning it into a commodity, a series of parts, functions, cells, molecules that may be removed from the body, that may be donated in order to save a life, or may be sold on the black market (although organ transplant is legally gratuitous, based on donation, the commercialization of human organs being forbidden), or even cloned. Numerous problems may appear following organ transplant, as for example the

transplant receiver may develop identity issues²², he may feel that his life doesn't belong to him anymore²³, being morally in debt to the donor, a debt that cannot be acquitted. The family of the donor may also suffer for not having closure, not being able to take their farewell from the dear departed who may seem still alive, ready to open his eyes, while connected to the life support systems prior to the operation of the organs' removal.²⁴ The ease of acceptance of the grafted organ may be influenced by qualities of the donor – age, sex etc.: an elderly man accepts more easily the heart of a young one, a man may accept more difficultly the kidney of a woman, worrying about its effect on his virility.

Cloning is the modern version of the double. It presupposes the creation of an alter-ego body, relating the individual to the genetic information describing his body. The main problems/critiques raised with regard to human cloning are: this practice would reduce the individual to a mere source of information, it disregards the uniqueness of the individuality that is part of what constitutes the human condition – every human being is different, so that the clone cannot be identical with the original²⁵, resembling it only somatically, because an individual is not defined only by his genetic heritage, but also by his personal history.

In the case of the methods of fertilization (surrogate mother, artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization), the body's reduction to commodity status is even more evident. Both the

²² "The grafted senses inside himself an alien presence, the trace of the resistance of another human being. A part of him cannot be controlled." Breton (2009), 360.

²³ "The integration of the grafted organ as a standalone element brings with itself a more or less accentuated and durable interior crisis, in function of the personal history of the individual, of the psychological conditions of the graft, of the quality of care received from family and from the hospital." Breton (2009), 359.

²⁴ "They feel under their hand a warm skin, as it also was a few hours earlier; his face seems ready to smile, his chest rises regularly and moreover his heart continues to beat." Breton (2009), 353.

²⁵ "Through the clone, man becomes his own prosthesis." Breton (2009), 409.

baby and the surrogate mother are merchandise, separated from the functions of sexuality, any woman being able to have a child by herself, even if through the intermediary of a surrogate mother, “hired” for a sum of money.²⁶ According to the new medicine, a child may have up to three mothers (a genetic, a uterine and a social one) and up to two fathers (a biological and a social one).

The body as image under which the individual presents himself to society and in function of which he will be judged by his peers

With modern society, an eulogy of the young, fit, healthy, hygienic body has appeared. The body is no longer a symbol of sinfulness, but a “lifeline”, a means of bettering one’s life, not as a simple means to an end, but as something to be valued in itself, as the truth of the interior subject, its alter ego. Thus, in modernity, the image of the body becomes equivalent with the self-image of the individual, composed on three axes: the axis of content (the body constitutes the coherent and familiar universe made of sensations), the axis of knowledge (the build of the body, its link with the organs) and the axis of value (the judgments made during one’s life experience), all these giving the human being a feeling of personal autonomy. The care for the self, equivalent with the care towards one’s body modifies the way the body is conceived of. With the emergence of the industries of beautification and modeling of the body, of beauty salons, aesthetic surgery, diet techniques, expensive fashionable clothes, the body becomes a commodity product. Both women and men appeal with trust to these methods in order to keep up with fashion, as is the categorical imperative of modernity, including with the value represented by the fashion’s body-ideal, a value promoted through all visual mass

²⁶ The surrogate mother is reduced to the status of a “child-bearing machine”. Breton (2009), 39.

media channels: television²⁷, printed magazines, the Internet.²⁸ A person's value is now linked to the value of his or hers body in the balance of the commerce of seduction. Thus, about a woman that starts to show signs of getting old it is said that she is unsightly, that she is losing her seductiveness, while "about a man of same age it is said that he is eternally seductive, always in power".²⁹ A tattoo is a sign of virility, showing strength of character, while a man's smooth bust acquires an erotic value, presented as such in the media, in commercial publicity. The aesthetisation of the body is seen as a "subtle chiseling of virility"³⁰, a change of the individual in his entirety, conferring him a new and better life. In this context, two new problems are arising: that of the persons with disabilities, and that of old people³¹. Such persons do not fit into the standard of the ideal body as it is promoted excessively by modernity through the means of mass communication. Since the image of the human being is the image of its body, these people, reduced to the physical appearance of degradation of their body, are judged for their difference from the norm – are stared at, marginalized and frequently excluded from social life³², despite the fact that they should enjoy the same respect and equal rights as their fellow men.³³ The bodies of these persons are no longer young

²⁷ The television set is the "modern altar of our civilization" – Codoban (2011), 7. It is a highly influential apparatus – that reduces all informational content to image, music and slogan, thereby being a medium perfectly suited as an instrument for the promotion of goods – dictating all that pertains to matters of taste, especially with regard to fashion.

²⁸ "Obesity is the zero degree of value." Breton (2009), 299.

²⁹ Breton (2009), 281.

³⁰ Breton (2009), 302.

³¹ "Elderly people sometimes wear their body as a stigmata, which is more or less apparent in function of the social class to which that person is belonging and of the quality of the familial entourage." Breton (2009), 271.

³² "As much as the handicap is more visible and more unexpected in the eyes of the normal person, so the indiscreet attention passes from horror to amazement and in the same measure a distancing is more evident in social relations." Breton (2009), 263.

³³ "Between him and the world there intervenes a screen of psychology." Breton (2009), 258.

and seductive, they are destroyed and defeated bodies, which, in the case of the elderly, recall the approach of death.³⁴ The ultimate reduction of the person to his body is marked by the entrance to the asylum, and the inability of recognizing himself, his own face, in the mirror. The caretakers have to give back his identity to the old man, to make him accept his own image, to reintegrate him in social life through interactive activities (games of chess, rummy) in which mostly only they are participating, and rarely any outsiders (pupils, students, etc.).

Modern man feels himself being affectively linked with the world (his disposition affects his tastes, his capacity of receiving adequately a certain situation, gesture, attitude)³⁵. With his body he feels linked only at the moments when he is sick, tired, alone or unhappy. In daily life the body is a semantic filter, an image, a passport for entrance into society and for inter-relating with other people.³⁶ As always, it mediates the relationship with the world, which the human being is only able to grasp by its senses and perceptions.³⁷ The sense of sight³⁸ is captured by the dynamics and architecture of the city. Sight is also the means of discovering the other, as well

³⁴ "It is no longer one who has a story to tell, it is no longer a subject, it is a defeated body, whose hygiene and survival must be understood." Breton (2009), 273. Being old represents "letting yourself succumb to the slow process of dying, which empties all that is essential in your life, which reduces all the previously appreciated actions and at the same time determines one to admit, step by step, as legitimate, the fact of not having but a meager control over one's own existence." Breton (2009), 275.

³⁵ "In this froth of days, man weaves his adventure, gets old, loves or splits up, feels pleasure or pain, indifference or rage." Breton (2009), 194.

³⁶ The body is "an instrument with the help of which the individual can find his place, through which he can act in an inner or outer environment that has more or less sense for him, and authorizes communication with those who maintain a similar worldview as he does". Breton (2009), 205.

³⁷ "The world is an emanation of a body, which transposes it in terms of perception and of senses, one being unable to function without the other." Breton (2009), 205.

³⁸ "the supreme sense" Breton (2009), 210. Sight is the privileged sense of modernity. "Sight, the sense of distance, of representation, even of surveillance, is the essential vector of the human appropriation of the environment." Breton (2009), 212.

as of letting oneself be discovered by others³⁹, betraying sympathies/antipathies, trust/mistrust, attraction/rejection.⁴⁰ The bodily dimension of otherness, characterized by the possibility of appearing under the negative aspects of tiredness⁴¹, wrinkles, pain, is described by Oliver Clement in his work *The Body of Death and Glory. A Short Introduction to a Teopoetics of the Body*. The other is “this face in front of you, which you cannot pass over, that challenges you to answer it”⁴², either positively (by becoming responsible of it) or negatively (by becoming its torturer)⁴³. Hearing is captured by the noises of the city, of the outside, which we perceive as stronger than those from the inside of our home and than those that we ourselves have made. Cemeteries, parks, the home are perceived as the most peaceful zones, where one feels safe.⁴⁴ Smells are classified as personal smells, smells of the others and those of nature, which all intermingle, being difficult to recognize: when we smell something often we cannot define the source and we will only say that it smells foul or nice, or as in the case of little children– it smells like mother (the smell of one’s mother being unique, the little child will recognize it

³⁹ The body is the mediator through which we act, “the one through which I offer myself to the other’s gaze, an equivalent of my presence.” Clement (1996), 8. For example, when I’m becoming blushed, I recognize myself in my body. Had I not recognized myself in my body, I would not have had to blush, because something foreign would not affect me emotionally. This is the reason for which there are places in the world where the whole body is covered by clothes, leaving only the face and hands discovered, as “portions of frontier directly expressive of the person” (Clement (1996), 11.). Clothes cover that which is impersonal and they denote the tradition and the taste of the person wearing them.

⁴⁰ “By lowering my eyes, I steal from the one watching me something from the possibility of discovering me.” Breton (2009), 207.

⁴¹ Tiredness is “the goddess of contemporary life”. Clement (1996), 12.

⁴² Clement (1996), 15.

⁴³ According to Clement, man is born in order to die. For this reason, he will always be tempted to transform the other into his slave, because he considers himself master over the other’s life, placing himself in place of God.

⁴⁴ “zones of amortization of the outside noises, and of reception of familiar sounds, which provide man with the feeling of personal security.” Breton (2009), 217.

anytime). The sense of taste goes hand in hand with value/appreciation: for example pain is bitter, pleasure is pleasant or spicy. The sense of touch, as a means of perceiving objects, is a conductor of sensuousness, tying man to the world. In consequence, modern man seeks quietness, places emphasis on the body, on the rhythm of his life, preferring outdoor activities, sports, hiking.⁴⁵ The activity of walking is “a sensorial experience that does not neglect any of the senses”⁴⁶, it also calms the spirit.

Conclusion

The idea of the body created in the image and likeness of God⁴⁷ is no longer valid, the body being now constructed in the image of the self and personified by one’s own will. The Internet as an institution of the mask offers the possibility of realizing a reduction of the body, since anyone can assume there whatever identity, describing himself as and pretending to be anyone and anything. The modern occidental body is an individualizing factor, a mark of the individual, a place of differentiation between the individuals of a society. Man is consequently torn apart from himself (the person-body separation), from the

⁴⁵ “One may walk even without a precise reason, just for the pleasure of enjoying the passage of time, to make a detour of existence, which may help you to better regain yourself at the end of the road, to discover new places and unknown faces and to share a moment with others, at last to enlarge, through your body, your knowledge of the inexhaustible world of sense and sensations. Walking is a serene method through which duration and space become magical.” Breton (2009), 245.

⁴⁶ Breton (2009), 246.

⁴⁷ The Christian, in order to speak about the body, must take as his starting point the embodiment of the Word, the body of Christ, in whose image the body of man was created. The body of Christ is defined by Oliver Clement as the Eucharistic Body, resulted in consequence of the sticking of the vestments suffused by light on His body on the Mount of Transfiguration, as a body of the communion that encompasses the beginning and, more so, the end, a body of prayer and sacrifice that assumes all our sins, “the body of earthly man and of the heavenly Father”. Clement, (1996), 19. By participating in the Holy Communion, the Christians become parts of this body of Christ.

others, from the cosmos (man as master of nature) and from humanity (his essence), bringing about the possibility of artifice invading the human world, through such practices as cloning, removal of organs, fertilization techniques, and more over so through that coat of arms of modernity that promotes the young, fit, touched up body exposed in fashion magazines as the ideal towards which we should all strive.⁴⁸

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⁴⁸ “Man loses today his last illusions. He already knows he is no longer the center of the universe (Copernic), that he is not so different from an animal (Darwin), and that he has only a limited knowledge of his self (Freud); now, a fourth tearing point announces itself through the effacement of the boundary between human and artificial, enabling that in future, since the human being is not ontologically opposed to the machine, the machine will enter into his fabrication.” Breton (2009), 417.