

## The Odyssey of the Body between Communication and Mediation\*

Adrian Bojenoiu  
University of Bucharest

### Abstract

The present paper investigates the status of the body as an image and its new forms of cultural coding. The first part analyses, from the historical point of view, the dualism of the relation soul/body marking the essential changes that it had experimented through the history of the occidental thinking. As an example, modern philosophy introduces a change of perspective by representing a soul immanent to a body like an essence immanent to a phenomenon. This gradually leads to the idea that what makes us unique and gives us individual identity is in fact our body since it is the body itself that renders the generically universal consciousness a self-consciousness. The next step analyses the mutation from body-communication to communication-body relation, from the idea of body-language to body-communication which was possible and could only develop in an environment dedicated to the therapy of interpersonal relationships or, generally speaking, of communication. The last part of the text develops the idea of the Swiss anthropologist Adolf Portmann in which the surface of the body is not a simple protective coat but a special sense organ that functions in the most various ways, primarily to create an appearance defined as what is visible, what is actually being revealed.

**Keywords:** image, body, soul, communication, mediation, language, interpretation, appearance

At the end of a century of rehabilitation, the body seems today to be one of the winners of our times. Treated as an enemy in Plato's philosophy and in certain aspects of the

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Christian religion, the body has changed its status from one of exclusion into one of dominating discursive power. Once concealed under various garments that obliterated its sensuality and trained through different ascetic techniques to surrender to the primacy of the soul and to restrict its “animality” in favour of a representation closer to divine redemption, we encounter it today, freely performing on the altar of our civilization, on the screens of our TV sets, of multimedia gadgets and of other sensation engendering devices.

The body is nowadays in complete control of its presence which is no longer subjected to something or somebody else; the light in which we perceive it today, the place it has gained and the attention it is given prove the fact that we are facing a new form of cultural encoding. An entire range of activities—massage, fitness, aerobics, body building, dozens of therapies, hundreds of body modelling techniques—are exclusively dedicated to the body. Moreover, the pharmaceutical and medical industries place it at the core of their preoccupations. Everybody seems to contribute to a cult of the body which does not compel it to make special efforts, as those usually associated to work or sports training, but to perform various easy actions meant to offer it pleasure and relaxation.

The continuous medical efforts and spectacular endeavors of new communication media place the body at the core of Western civilization. The new star of the day cultivates its own spontaneity in the name of naturalness and authenticity and against the old religious and moral norms. Visual arts are the first to show their obvious openness to the body to the detriment of the soul; such manifestations as artistic performances, surgical interventions with artistic intentions, relational aesthetics or different gadgets that invite interaction all demand the presence of the body in its full vitality. Briefly, beauty is entirely corporeal nowadays and if we do celebrate anything at all, we celebrate the vitality of life itself—as the last form of the sacredness of our world.

### **A brief history**

When following the history of the soul-body relationship we come up against a series of unhappy conjectures marked by

dualism, according to which these two inseparable entities fight for supremacy. One has to lose in favour of the other and vice versa, in order for each to accomplish its destiny. To support either of them is to alienate the other as we are confronted with an insoluble contradiction with respect to their management.

For a long time, the body was considered to be a formidable enemy in Western culture, well rooted in certain Christian denominations and in Plato's philosophy. Starting with Greek Antiquity the body was ostracized by the great Orphic tradition brought into the west via the Pythagorean philosophical school of thought, especially the Platonic school. Orphism is an essential stage in understanding the history of the body and its relation to the Western tradition. The Titans devoured Dionysus but his heart escaped this act of cannibalism; Zeus struck the Titans with his Lightning and brought Dionysus back to life by reviving his heart. This myth suggests that the human being is born out of the Titans' ashes that resulted from Zeus' punishment and that, accordingly, within the human being the soul—the good element inherited from Dionysus, coexists with the body—the bad element inherited from the Titans.

The Orphic practices tell us that Orpheus is the one who brings redemption through a series of techniques and rituals and that final deliverance cannot come outside an Orphic existence based on *askesis* and body privations which, in the end, will lead to a complete detachment from earthly sins and weaknesses and even from corporeality and bodily existence.

This visible dualism of Greek philosophy as introduced into Christian thought—via Plotinus and Plato's early writings—proves the asymmetrical relationship between body and soul: the body is a mere receptacle, a residing place for the soul which is infinitely more valuable. In *The Elements of Judaism*, Brian Lancaster highlighted the general rejection of the spiritual values implied in bodily action: "Spirit and matter were irreconcilably divided. The dualist principle became the seed of a powerful rejection of the body." (Lancaster, 1993: 57)

There is no doubt that until the beginning of the twentieth century there was a hierarchical dualism in the relation soul-body, accompanied by a moral rigor which was

meant to discipline the latter. The body has been continuously devalued by religion (mainly by Protestantism) and philosophy and kept under control through discipline and violent submission, through rigorous religious and social practices and through an aesthetic idealization of its artistic representation.

In modernity the body and soul relationship was balanced when the idea of immanence emerged in Western thought to tell us that the essence resides in the phenomenon and that reason and body play an equally important part in valuing life. This change was triggered by Descartes who distinguished between the *res extensa* that designated the body as materiality ascribed to science (thinking) and the soul, which cannot be assessed as immaterial and belonging to the church. The gap between soul and body inherited from Christian thought and Platonism was diminished by the Cartesian theory of the passions, which introduced something different from the conscious mind, still bound to the body but not yet referred to as the unconscious. The passions, Descartes said, are “those perceptions, sensations or emotions of the soul which we refer particularly to it, and which are caused, maintained and strengthened by some movement of the spirits” (Descartes 1985, 339; AT XI 349)

Eighteenth-century German philosophy revived the soul/body dualism by raising the stakes through the invention of the *ego*. If Descartes conceived the body exclusively in spatial terms, with a strict delimitation in regard to the soul, in German philosophy the body starts to contribute to a larger extent to the understanding of the *ego*. Hegel’s and Kant’s German rationalism made it obvious that the basis of the world we inhabit is the subject and not some preconceived form or substance. Reality is now the result of a construct generated by the intellect and the psyche. The person, as a subject, becomes the central element, since the restructuring of the entire world starts from the subject. The Kantian principle of equality between thought and experience will finally lead to the equality between consciousness and body (with a particular focus placed on the intellect). It therefore follows that the body, thanks to its perceptive apparatus, plays an important part in knowledge

acquisition, though the elements of knowledge acquired through perception are ranked as secondary qualities.

Hegelian immanence and its introduction of the theme of alterity turned out to be considerably more influential. Alterity implies the revaluation of the body-consciousness dichotomy; the Other is perceived as a body since it is first presented to us as a body and not as consciousness. Starting from there, the body takes the first step towards entering the realm of communication as a means of expressing consciousness. The introduction of the idea of alterity, as well as of that of immanence, was the moment when the body found a place of its own in Western modern thinking. While the soul continued its dialogue with divinity, the body seemed to be a mere host of the soul. With the introduction of the idea of modern immanence, the body becomes the strategy a soul uses to present itself to another soul.

The consequence of such ideas is that the relation between I and the Other ceases to be conceived solely as a relation between two personalities but also, and always, as a relation between two bodies. Hence, if somebody's gesture to caress me transforms my body into a person or a soul, as happens when one is in love, somebody else's gaze can reduce my body to an object when I do not count as a person for that somebody, as happens in the case of physical violence or in medical procedures. Our corporeal existence offers not only the possibility of love and passion but also that of violence and abuse. For a philosophical, officially academic cast of mind, the body remains the prisoner of metaphysical representations. It is worth mentioning that philosophy was tributary to an ideology of reason in order to be able to genuinely rediscover the body, limiting itself to an empirical rehabilitation. More recently though, the socio-humanistic disciplines that replaced metaphysical thinking turned out to be more daring but not strong enough to really place the body at the core of Western civilization.

The beginning of the twentieth century heralded a new modality of thinking the body, visible at a theoretical level. Freud's and Jung's psychoanalysis was the first to reverse the relation soul-body, using the theory of sexuality. This was

followed by more recent theories such as ethnology and anthropology which initiated the discussion of various corporeal techniques and of the human body as a cultural construct. The issue was later on taken over and developed in turns by sociology, as an analysis of the social through the body, and by phenomenology as a discussion of the body in relation to the Other's body.

Starting with Nietzsche and continuing with Foucault the subject undergoes an archeological analysis. Punishments and power techniques place the subject under the Other's control and make him dependent upon the Other, constructing his identity through self-knowledge and consciousness. From this moment on, the body has been finally able to turn itself into a battle field for feminist activism which, in the light of corporeal-sexual and gender identity, pursued the theoretical interest in the body and deepened it through deconstructivist strategies.

Modern philosophy introduces a change of perspective by representing a soul immanent to a body like an essence immanent to a phenomenon. This gradually leads to the idea that what makes us unique and gives us individual identity is in fact our body since it is the body itself that renders the generically universal consciousness a self-consciousness. At the end of the nineteenth century, thanks to Nietzsche's philosophy and Freud's psychoanalysis, the theoretical representation of the subject changed yet further: frustration, inhibition, censorship, and punishment became strategies that contributed to the birth of the subject and its representation as a body. Our body individualizes us in a different way than the one performed by the physiological particularization of our consciousness. Our incarnation is traumatic. The unconscious with its neuroses and psychoses is the place where traumas are inscribed into our individualized existence.

The various forms of inadaptation are generated by the fact that during our existence the body conceals effects that we cannot know from the start but that we can identify in our complexes, frustrations and sufferings that make our live really ours. That is because, unlike our instincts, the pulsions theorized by psychoanalysis are not connected to specific

conditions of satisfaction but possess an unlimited plasticity and are always ready to replace their objects and purposes. This traumatic charge inscribed within the body—evaluated by psychoanalysis and used as its discursive support, will gradually allow us to discover the existence within the body of a sensitive life that can be re-programmed.

### **From body/language to body/communication**

The possibility of stepping out of the substantialist metaphysics of the body initiated by Freud and Jung arose at the same moment as the philosophical thematisation of communication and the semiology of French structuralism, which was also centered on verbal language. In this way, the effective mutation from body-communication to communication-body relation, from the idea of body-language to body-communication was possible and could only develop in an environment dedicated to the therapy of interpersonal relationships or, generally speaking, of communication.<sup>1</sup> The appearance of the idea of body as language, first generated by psychoanalysis for pseudo-medical purposes, introduced a new sense in communication. The skin as a sensory organ had long been ignored, considered to be the sense of the body, the only sense that engendered a double sensation, both active and passive, internal and external. Perceived as an exterior coating, it allows the psyche to represent the body in its relations with the exterior world, with space and time.

“The most profound thing in man is his skin,” Paul Valéry used to say (1971-1974, 215-6). Gilles Deleuze has taken over and reinterpreted these words as the revelation of the limitation (*effet de surfaces*) paradox: “it is by following the border, by skirting the surface, that one passes from bodies to the incorporeal.” (Deleuze 1990, 10) This point is particularly emphasized by Didier Anzieu, who extends Freud’s notion of the ego as a mental projection of the surface of the body, and claims that the sensations connected to the skin are the matrix for the constitution of psychic apparatus. The concept of the “skin ego” is therefore fundamental. The body is the self-skin and reason is just an alteration of our skin, its capacity to release the images it engenders beyond our body (Anzieu 1985,

40). The surface of the body is not a simple protective coat but a special sense organ that functions in the most various ways, primarily to create an appearance defined as what is visible, what is actually being revealed. It can be regarded as the limit of our organism, the place where it differs from all the rest and, at the same time, where it acquires a point of contact with the rest of the world. It becomes an organ, a site of life and existence, an organ of transparency and ornament, according to which what is most exterior in us speaks of the innermost, and this interiority is the story that our form never ceases to communicate.

From a completely different perspective than that of communication, the Swiss anthropologist and biologist Adolf Portmann (1967), theorizes that the appearance of any living creature is not a minor or accidental feature, but the exercise of a specific type of power. He understands the visible aspect of an animal as the self-representation of individuality. By this he refers not only to the optical-acoustic and olfactive features specific to each individual while in a state of rest, but also to his/her movements, to all his/her manners of expression and manifestations in time and space. It is no accident, he states, that the technical concept used to designate the biological identity of any living creature gives in fact a name to its sensitive appearance, its species. Briefly, our first image is our skin, our first appearance/apparition is given by our skin and its extension determines our relation with the exterior world. In defining our appearance we always redefine our nature, and vice versa: every time we modify our nature we also modify our appearance or species, in other words, we “change our skin”. To put it differently, appearance is the equivalent of life itself since everything alive has a skin. The skin is the one element that defines the animal as an entity living on and within its own appearance/apparition.

The essence of this *metaphysics of the skin* is focused on the moment when the surface of the body loses its transparency, becomes visible and acquires a visibility in full process. Of course, Portmann refers to the representation of nature from the perspective of performativity, according to which all species can be reduced to those modes of

representations that living beings were able to choose in order to present themselves to the world. Obviously, the individual cannot be separated from the habits that shape his mode of existence and manifestation; similarly, any living creature cannot be separated from the particular fashion—as image flow—that defines its belonging to one species or another, to one type of representation or another, or to a particular identity. According to Portmann there is a “dividing line which separates the organic forms which can see one another and those which are never able to look at each other – a boundary between two stages in the intensity of living.” (Portmann 1967, 108)

Coming now to the relation soul–body, but still from the anthropological perspective, and the theory of communication, we notice that the dynamism of this relation is enriched with the idea of body as language, of body/communication. Corporeal or generally non-verbal communication refers to facial expressions, physical appearance, movements and gestures, tactile messages, voice characteristics, various types of behaviours determined by time and space, and engenders differences of gender, age and culture. Put together, these types of representative-expressive actions have rapidly gained poetic value and much more than that.

The possibility of conceiving of the body as an expression generating entity is based on a theoretical and pragmatic reevaluation of the “sensitive” in communication, as first performed by Paul Watzlawick and the Palo Alto school. Watzlawick basically took over and developed Freud’s body-language formula, thereby significantly contributing to the consecration of the body as language, as body-communication. This change is the result of rejecting the dietary-referential system, formulated by Freud and Jung, in favour of analyzing daily language and inter-corporeal relations. “Relationships are not aspects of first-order reality, whose true nature can be determined scientifically. Instead they are pure constructs of the partners in the relationship, and as such they resist all objective verification.” (Watzlawick 1984, 238) The clearest consequence of this move is the elaboration of the distinction between analogic and digital in communication and the act of providing the body with analogical communication.<sup>2</sup> From this

moment the correlation communication-body becomes the identity body-communication that places the body within the web of social significances: “an interpretation of reality is only an interpretation and not reality itself.” (Watzlawick 1984, 215)

When all the barriers that separate the body from social realities are destroyed and the body is placed at the core of communication, a theoretical reevaluation of the “sensitive” is required. This is no longer understood as the exclusive realm of the senses as these are not the ones to define the conditions of possibility, but are instead conditioned by the apparently trivial, general and decisive fact that any living being shows itself to other living beings in an act that might coincide with communication. Any living being is first and foremost an appearance, an image or form. The *appearance*, as an act and phenomenon, is not accidental but can be viewed as the manifestation of a specific power or a faculty whose exercise can again be regarded as the manifestation of human life and of the life of other species, as an expression of a genuine poetics of surfaces. Therefore, to live means to appear since anything that lives possesses a skin and lives at the surface of its skin. Biosemiotics teaches us that the skin is what allows the representation of the animal as an entity living only on and in its own appearance.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, thanks to the skin, the entire body becomes an organ meant to be seen – *à être vu*, a metaphysical organ whose discourse is essentially based on appearance and draws its force from the ornament. Hence we can infer that if the specific features of an individual acquire a definite body only through the exercise of appearance, if any type of nature has to possess a cosmetic façade or an ornament in order to be able to reveal itself and has no other means of expression but the power of the ornament, the nature of any identity is equally aesthetic and biological.

Generally speaking, cosmetics highlights individuality and functions at the same time as a connection between the body and the exterior world. The *poetic* content of appearance—the ornament or the garment of appearance—is relational, in the sense that the spiritual movement specific to the self of appearance lies in its power to recognize itself in something

alien which is appropriated precisely through this movement. In other words, in order to make ourselves recognizable and to have an identity, we have to face something that does not belong to us. This is the paradox of body cosmetics as well as communication: the fact that a completely alien fragment of this world gets closer to us and to our body than our body itself. An extrinsic piece of our body, entirely made up only of images, succeeds in containing and expressing our soul, its psychology and character better than our anatomic body might actually do. In cosmetics, the individual inhabits things to the extent to which these things become identical with its form.

Georg Simmel has defined the ornament as a frame where corporeal and psychological elements are inextricably mixed together, “the outwardness and the inwardness of their forms weaving into one another” (Simmel 2009, 332). The halo of the ornament and the attention it attracts boost and enhance its bearer’s personality: it becomes more prominent or more intense when ornamented in one way or another. Thus the sensitive elements of the ornament “increases or enhances the impression of the personality, while it functions as its, as it were, radiation.” (Simmel 2009, 333)

Cosmetics must be understood here as a faculty of the individual, as the power of a body to possess a garment, to transform a part of the exterior world instead of transforming its own appearance and truth. We can infer from this that any act of embellishment implies a displacement of the *self*; in this way the self becomes identical with certain objects, substances, images, shapes or colors which are, in reality, totally ambiguous for us. In the same way, through any type of ornament we operate an identification between us and a particular feature of the exterior world, making it bear the imprint of our spirit and pretending that our personality emanates from this very feature. The first condition of our identity is accordingly the exercise of this faculty which, when taking into account its form and relational nature, coincides with communication. All old and new forms of corporeal communication such as dance, fashion, body painting, plastic surgery, art performance, tattoos and even appearance itself bear the mark of this faculty.

## **From the sensitive body to the mediality of the image**

In relation to speaking and to the text, the image seems to occupy the same position in our culture as the body in relation to the soul. The problem of corporeal communication thus becomes the problem of images: as soon as images are censored, gestures also disappear in the field of culturally regulated communication. That is why it is difficult to decide whether it was the image that re-inserted the body within the cultural discourse of contemporary civilization or, on the contrary, the body that re-inserted the image as understood in Western civilization. “For the message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs. [...] This fact merely underlines the point that ‘the medium is the message’ because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.” (McLuhan 1994, 8) As image, the body is an essential presence for the new media, especially for those relying on image proliferation. The shooting camera and, generally, the whole range of gadgets meant to capture images, reorient the public’s attention towards the human gesture, action and behaviour. Pride of place goes of course to the mirror as an object and has done since the Renaissance; painting occupies the second place followed, more recently, by photography. But it is cinema that considers the action and behaviour of the human body as communicational language. The image thus produced and distributed changes the relation between the digital and the analogic in signified systems which are the basis of cultural messages and this change is visible in the significant part the body is assigned in communication.

Before the appearance of the printed book, the analogic signs were predominant in popular culture. With the advent of the printing press the human body lost its expressive value, because the spirit found a real body materialized in a book, and feelings and attitudes started being expressed in texts, deemed better suited to the expression of ideas. We should not conclude that the advent of printed texts and the emergence of the book as a new mass cultural coding triggered any decline in image

production. What really changed was the type of image coding and decoding as a consequence of an invention or a technique of transmission and distribution of the sensitive (the printing press and book distribution).

We have already seen that the presence of the body as a sign in communication denies the arbitrariness or the non-motivation of the sign, to the benefit of the analogic or, more precisely, to the benefit of the image. In fact, images behave like all other signs in that they render visible the spiritual invisible, giving it substance to help it materialize, and blur the materiality of the visible through stylizing and de-substantialization. The image accordingly appears as a semiotic game of transition from the invisible to the visible – the “social as a script” Baudrillard says (1995, 88) –, but in Western culture this transition is mediated by the text. If, by means of texts, the written word builds an image that tries to represent the soul, images, acting now like signs, blur the materiality of the body, rendering it an evanescent, ever-changing presence. Therefore, it is not the body as presence that is reiterated but new possibilities of signification and new signifying systems that are engendered, thereby extending the civilizing codes and reappraising human nature. What is obvious in this change is the importance given to the image as sensitivity.

Since the concept of image has already been mentioned several times, a few remarks may be in order to better define the terms used when discussing the image both as an ontological support and as a product and object of the new technologies and forms of communication.

Taking into account the history of culture and the arts, it becomes obvious that any image is a form of sensitivity in itself. If we take the physics of the sensory systems as a point of reference, the image represents the existence of forms in a manner that is different from their natural subject, as in the case of the mirror or of any other type of image capture or representation. Our image corresponds to our form beyond our materiality, in other words any form that can cease to exist in its own place and comes to exist outside itself can become image.

To be an image means to exist outside ourselves, to be aliens to our own bodies and souls; to be alienable. To put it

differently, forms are capable of acquiring a status which is different not only from the natural being they assume in their corporeal existence but also from the spiritual status they assume when they are recognized and perceived by others.<sup>4</sup> For any form to become an image is to experience the exile out of their own locus to an additional space, which is neither the space of the object nor the space of the subject but derives from the former and nourishes on and gives life to the latter. In both cases our form becomes image when it is able to exist beyond ourselves, beyond our body, without becoming a body in its turn but simply remaining at the surface of other objects.

Aristotle and Descartes among others taught us that the sensitive does not coincide with the *real*, as the world is not sensitive in itself but becomes sensitive only outside itself. Aristotle highlighted this aspect in his *De anima*, demonstrating that it is not enough to make a subject interact with an object in order to create a perception; it is first and foremost necessary that the situation or that thing *become a phenomenon* and then the phenomenon, exterior to the thing itself, meet the sensory organs.

The process that renders things sensitive is different in time and space from the process that makes them come into existence. The corollary of this is that the image is neither an act of perception nor the perceived object, but the form of the object as pure perceptibility and latent perception capable of acting outside us.

The engendered images are forms projected into the exterior world. Their existence is not structurally different from the phenomena people can interiorize. The study of intentional projection allows us to understand to a certain extent the nature of what we generally call experience or, in a broader sense, knowledge. If the faculty of knowing can be associated with the capacity of interiorizing a mundane element, all beings that are able to know are able not only to receive and acquire forms but also to project their knowledge upon the exterior world and to make their interiority exist outside their being. Conversely, any sensitive element projected into the world is bound to bring a part of the world to the person that projected it. It results that any time we utter something we know, a part

of us is carried into the world and is alienated, and so is our own interiority. The soul, for instance—when reading a book—or the body—when watching a film or dancing—is precisely what can emerge from itself under the guise of an image and become sensitive. Any projective act, mark of the sensitive life, transports a particular form of spirituality into the world, taking it outside itself and alienating it.

Finally, sensitive life is the object which undergoes the exercise of culture, work and institutions; it is the manner in which and through which what we call spirit has to engender and discover its own forms of existence. Most social, political and cultural processes that impinge on people's forms of existence and general modes of life are focused upon the sensitive life. A pertinent demonstration is offered by *fashion*, taken as a generalized phenomenon, as it defines the world where we act as sensitive beings in relation to the others from a social perspective; fashion shows that one of the most urgent, constant and precise actions and preoccupations of any society is to define the manner in which each of its members has to be perceived by the others. Maintaining this relation relies on the capacity to produce images of things, a sort of commerce with and production of the sensitive.

Image projections, drawing and music, for example, and a large part of human spiritual activities derive their force from this capacity to stabilize forms in specific *media*, in a constant circuit of exchange, to translate them into a different medium before they re-enter the world of things. The French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari<sup>5</sup> use the phrases *plane of immanence* or *image of thinking* in order to define this *mediality*. We should not understand from here that thinking is the only element that defines human life, as it has the capacity to set the entire body in motion by means of ideas. Life is shaped in fact by the power to free these ideas, to make them acquire a life of their own, the ability to transpose them into a medium that defines human activity. In this tertiary space the limits of human existence and of its realities are being negotiated.

The objectification of the spirit is accordingly achieved in the invisible daily commerce that we establish with the natural

and artificial *media*—if such differentiation might be allowed. To the same extent to which we can experience ourselves only by looking at ourselves in the mirror, our spiritual existence—our image—manages to prolong itself beyond us, into the *media*. Only by dint of images can we give shape to things and succeed in insinuating ourselves inside other living creatures.

Thanks to the sensitive we are made of and that we produce, we can project ourselves outside our beings and exercise our influence upon the world and other living beings. Mediality facilitates the passage of intentional forms from one person to another and makes objects or inanimate bodies bear the trace of the existence going on around them and stay as such. The sensitive is not only the place where forms are extracted from matter but it is also the space that houses the reification process and the alienation of the spirit and of the subjective. Wherever there is sensitive life, the object and the subject become the poles of a bidirectional movement.

Media transform and spiritualize things, creating the possibility of a mundane existence. This mediality is finally the space where the body is spiritualized today. Present-day mass-media and the wide range of communication media double the expression of this game as they have understood only too well that our body is first in a series of perceptions in full process. A body devoid of active perception would not be our body but a sensitive object that we can perceive and experience. Consequently, in order to be—body or soul—we have to define ourselves starting from a series of immediate perceptions which seems to be given and supported today by the continuous trade of images and, implicitly, of the sensitive.

The media space is a natural game in which everything comes to be manifest. It is a scene in perpetual movement that opens the world to unknown possibilities and offers a different life than that any living thing possesses in its matter or in its memory. It is a fragment of the world that allows forms to prolong their lives beyond their nature and beyond their material and corporeal existence and even beyond their self-awareness. As Bourdieu says, “images have the peculiar capacity to produce what literary critics call a reality effect. They show things and make people believe in what they show.

This power to show is also a power to mobilize. It can give a life to ideas or images, but also to groups.” (Bourdieu 1998, 21)

### **Paradigmatic characteristics**

At the moment of man’s appearance on earth as a living being, his nature was conceived from top to bottom, from his transcendental essence to his particular incarnation as a person. The next formula was that of the socially conceived person, from bottom to top. We notice that in both cases, and taking into account the most ordinary human features, the human being is always conceived of as a soul. As long as anthropology analyses human nature starting from the soul, it remains metaphysical. Sociology changes this perspective since its focus is shifted from the soul, the consciousness and even the mind, to the body endowed with a brain, not in the sense of a vulgar naturalism that regards it as an organ, but as a complexly structured thing that proves today be in charge of many of the processes philosophy once used to assign to the soul.

It is worth mentioning that this change is not operated at the level of reality but is a change of paradigm. Man’s sociological thought is not defined as characteristic of a social animal but of a natural animal whose ideals are ecological and democratic and who sees sociality as a gregarious mass phenomenon. What gradually disappears together with sociality is the cultural manifestation that gives way to a technological civilization and to its functional rules. The abundance of commercial goods has made cultural rules (which used to compensate for the scarcity of material goods through a symbolic depth) no longer necessary. The members of a poor society, subjects to the social constraints imposed by self-conservation and survival, have been and still are more *cultural*, more inclined towards spirituality, whereas the members of rich societies are more *natural*, more *corporeal*, as they corporeally obey certain rules of civilizing consumerism rather than embracing cultural rituals. In Western civilization the tendency to transform all actions, states and images that the body can generate into goods or services becomes ever more visible. Moreover, what provokes terror in Western culture is the public image of a disintegrated body, a body bereft of life or

submitted to various punitive practices. The actions that generate such images are considered to be non-democratic as the presence of the body in the public space and the interest in communication are the consequence of a particular form of socialization, of a life devoid of ethics, politics and law. Nowadays, normativity starts with the body not with the soul.

In reality, the body has been an interface not necessarily of the soul but of various patterns of cultural programming that acted upon it.<sup>6</sup> The dialectics of the sacred and the profane tells us that any type of desacralization is in a way a re-socialization, to the same extent to which in communication any de-coding is also a re-coding. As Eliade pointed out, “the majority of men ‘without religion’ still hold to pseudo religions and degenerated mythologies. [...] The unconscious activity of modern man ceaselessly presents him with innumerable symbols, and each of them has a particular message to transmit, a particular mission to accomplish, in order to ensure or to re-establish the equilibrium of the psyche.” (Eliade 1959, 209, 211)

By imposing corporeality, the Western culture adheres to a special type of communication which is already conceived in a different way than mere transmission of information; by imposing communication as a relation is in fact a celebration of the power of vitality specific to the body freed of its old symbolic and cultural determinations. In this way, the triumph of the body in the public space represents the triumph of the relation over the content, which coincides in turn with the victory of the image over the text.

Today the body juxtaposes with its own image, and the position of this image in the economy of human communication is tightly connected to the problems of human artifacts. These allow the fixation of mental images and their removal outside individual life so as to be used in interpersonal and collective communication. The intensification of vitalism as a result of the proliferation of body images, thanks to the explosion of gadgets used in the vast communication network, is the effect of a new cultural coding based on the affective relationship between the self and the mundane image of the body. My own image reflected by the mirror/screen of a device and its technological proliferation is, literally speaking, the new avatar.

Even if the body disappears today behind its own visibility, in other words behind its own sensitivity, it has to capture and emit, thanks to its iconic status, all its shocking features, all its strangeness, surprise, anxiety, fluidity, even its self-destruction, instantaneity and irreality, in order to become sensorial over and over again. The superiority of contemporary human beings seems to be given by their power to get lost in the sensitive, to such an extent that they actually become able to produce it.

### **The body wears the world as a garment**

We have already noticed that our anatomical body and cosmetics are the poles of a reality and of a common game between life and appearance. The mask offers this paradox, the paradox of mediality which makes our body a vehicle to transform us into image and compels us to get closer to images in order to give shape to our body. Under these circumstances, the fact of being in the world ceases to appear as a fall and a form of banishment caused by sin. If the Church sees the human being as the image of God with the obligation to emulate God, postmodernism makes human beings emulate themselves and establish a privileged connection with their own image.

The world today is a secondary body, a garment that can find its materialization in any object as it neither defined by any specific nature nor by any particular substance. It is not the world that brings its inhabitants into existence, but it does give them the possibility to appear as something different. The closeness of the world to the body defines the world as sensitivity, as an ever-changing image. We no longer refer to a precedent or to an extension but to a common place, a middle ground where life and its habits totally coincide. As Paul Virilio noted, “the much-vaunted globalization requires that we all observe each other and compare ourselves with one another on a continual basis.” (Virilio 2005, 61)

In more technical terms we can say that the image—as a result of the mask—transforms practices into custom or fashion; we should not understand it as an accessory or an item of luxury but as a space that shelters the most profound and intense nature of everything that participates to the sensitive.

The fact that today the body lives through images must be understood as the individual's transcendental faculty to transform part of the exterior world instead of transforming his own appearance and truth. In the process of this sensitive closeness – “a genuine visual market” (Virilio 2005, 60) – the body becomes whatever is alien and alienable; it is its own medium and each of its actions is a multiplication and a reproduction of itself. The sensorial is the expression of this endless reproduction. The image of the body, the sensitive, becomes the place where its entire genesis is inscribed and where the description of the world is being performed.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The psychoanalytical theoretical and practical background built around the idea of body-language obviously detaches the body from communication and keeps a certain distance from the social reality it can inhabit. In order to pay greater attention to the curative aspects, mainly transmitted through verbal language, Freudian psychoanalysis pushes corporeal expression outside communication.

<sup>2</sup> Analogic and digital in classical semiotic terminology distinguish between the motivation and the amotivation of signs

<sup>3</sup> For Portmann in *Animal Forms and Patterns: A Study of the Appearance of Animals*, (1967), the term “Fanera” designates the secret capacity of any animal to transform its own nature in a fashion; he places the substantial element of animal existence in the modes of representation.

<sup>4</sup> As Guy Debord notes, “the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.” (Debord 1994, 4)

<sup>5</sup> In *What is Philosophy?* the French authors delimit and name tertiary spaces for entire series of creative domains such as philosophy (plane of immanence), fine arts (plane of composition) or science (plane of prospection). „[...] it is inevitable that philosophy, science, and art are no longer organized as levels of a single projection and are not even differentiated according to a common matrix but are immediately posited or reconstituted in a respective independence, in a division of labor that gives rise to relationships of connection between them.” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 91) These tertiary spaces house the negotiation of the limits of these domains and of their contents.

<sup>6</sup> Let's take this example from Bourdieu: „The top competitive sports increasingly rely on an industrial technology that calls on various biological and psychological sciences to transform the human body into a efficient and inexhaustible machine. Competition between national teams and governments

increasingly and ever-more emphatically encourages the use of prohibited substances and dubious methods of training.” (Bourdieu 1998, 96, n. 3).

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**Adrian Bojenoiu** has a PhD degree in philosophy from the West University in Timisoara, currently he is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Philosophy. His main interests are the new theories around the study of image in the field of art, anthropology and philosophy. Independent curator and founder of the *Centre for contemporary culture Club Electroputere*, initiator of the project *Romanian Cultural Resolution*, published in 2011 at Hatje & Cantz printing house. Since 2012 is co-founder of the Art project Mobile Biennale.

Address:

Adrian Bojenoiu

Str. Calea Victoriei, nr. 101, sc. B, ap. 15

București, Romania

Email: [abojenoiu@gmail.com](mailto:abojenoiu@gmail.com)