

THE BODY BYTES BACK

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Discourses about endings are still very much present. After the spectre of the end of the subject, the end of the human being as such has been raised through genetic engineering and new political decisions concerning research and medical interventions. The end of democracy and art has also been prophesied; not to mention the implosion of the public realm and the undermining of its apparent opposition – the private. Especially the end of the body has been intoned in various scenarios. A closer look, however, makes it evident that it's not so much the body which has come to an end, but the understanding of it, the perception of it, the images of the body which have changed over the years and: the more we talked about the end the more the body commenced to occupy the centerstage of our personal and public life.

Partly, of course, it's true to say that the body has lost its importance if we, for instance, consider the decrease in manual work where the strength of the body and its apparatus had been a major presupposition. But at the same time, and if we look back over the last 30 years, there has been an incredible resurgence of interest in the body, in its shaping and modification – piercing, tattooing, dieting, fasting, sport, dance, losing or gaining bulk, fat or musculature. Strategies by the fashion industry, nutrition, and socialisation rules have put the body in a remarkable, spectacular place – the body has become the most attractive spectacle in our society.

But what do we mean when we talk about the BODY – is it the surface, the skin of the body, its appearance, or is it the body with a soul, an inner space? Is it the sign of gender which marks the body? Is it the moving body or the medical model of the body? Are we talking of the genetic model of the body as the carrier of all informational data? To hear, to smell, to grasp, to talk – the mouth, the eyes, the arms, the nose, the lips, the skin – do these parts of the body and all of them together form the BODY or do they have, quite to the contrary, a life of their own – redefining the body's materiality, its borders, and its structure again and again?

Various tendencies have worked together to create a new perception and new images, representations, new strategies of visualising the body – influencing discourses, academic disciplines, terrains, and locations. One has to look at art, theory, and societal developments together to see how these forces have constructed the body as a site of contestation – a contestation which circles around the question of the <nature of the subject>.

The body as book

With the arrival of the book – as one of the most decisive media – the body gained the status of a book: the skin was compared to the cover, the back of the book with the human back, the front-page with the human front, the body of the book with the human body. From then on this body book was understood as keeping its own secrets, following its own rules and laws, and telling its own stories in different languages. Particularly in the second half of the 18th century the body came under the control of two different sets of knowledge producing systems. On the one hand there was science, such as medicine and biology, and on the other, the new born humanities – pedagogy, linguistics and economy. The first one (anatomical research) opened – literally – the body to reveal its secrets and to produce the model of ideal bodies. The humanities produced their own interests – economics, history, language building the mainframe to analyse man's being. In the course of the 19th century seeing, speaking, and controlling became recognised as scientific strategies. According to Michel Foucault, it was the time of the docile body, a body shaped and formed by different discourses and institutions such as the family, school, police, the hospital, etc. For Foucault, it was absolutely clear that it was particularly the invention of psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud – the famous talking cure, by which the body and its phantasmatic dimension – sexuality & desire – had lost their former innocence. This means that body and sexuality – which before Freud were understood as the <site of nature>, had changed sides – and thus commenced to occupy the terrain of culture. Of course, this is not quite right – the body has never occupied the side of nature, but for the first time with Freud one might say that human sexuality was clearly separated from animal procreation.

From nature to culture – from body to ego and back again

In *The Ego and Id* (1982 [1923]), Freud defined the *ego* as a boundary surface. From the description of the conscious as interface, Freud proceeds to the shell and the core, the *ego*, is regarded as a psychical cover, as a point of contact or relay point between the outside world and the psyche. The skin is the “real body.” As Freud describes it, the body, and especially its surface, is a site of both external and internal perceptions at the same time. It is seen as a separate object, yet the sense of touch provides it with two types of sensation, one of which seems to be a sense of internal perception, seemingly inside the body (Cf. Freud 1982 [1923]). For Freud, it is not the projection that makes the *ego*, as <body-ego>, superficial, but rather it is the body itself that functions as superficies.¹ According to Jacques Lacan, however, the *ego* does not recognise its own superficial character and thus insists on a (fictional) substantiality (Cf. Weber, 1978).

While Foucault defined sexuality as the name of a historical dispositive that is based upon no reality, I would rather suggest – insisting on a psychoanalytic basis – to see it as an a-historical moment, thus to understand sexuality as the <sexual>, as something quasi-universal opposed to various forms of genders and sexual practices. It is well known that Freud paid particular attention in his work to the drive, which he sharply differentiated from instinct. This drive might be understood as a transition, as a link between sexual and gender identities, as, so to speak, the place where the original cleavage² inscribes itself, and which does “business” under the name of sexual difference. From the very beginning, Freud had always defined the drive as a threshold concept, as something that marks the border between the somatic and the psychic – but which is not the border itself! The drive as used by Freud embodies a mental representation. And Lacan assigns to this mental representation a separate name – the famous <objet petit a>. This small object designates precisely that moment at which sexuality begins to function as a retrospective in and through the symbolic order. Lacan provides a long list including the voice, the gaze, the phoneme, as nothing else but possibilities of the

¹ Freud later added an explanatory note: “The ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensation, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body, besides, as we have seen above, representing the superficies of the mental apparatus.” (Freud 1982, p. 294, footnote 2)

² “Différance” as the original deferral which forms the essence of life: “It is far more so: since deferment (différance) is not an essence, because it is nothing, it is not life, if being is defined as *ousia*, presence, beingness/reality, substance or subject. Life must be considered a trace, before being is defined as presence.” (Derrida 1976 [1967], p. 311)

objet petit a. This means that the drive attains satisfaction in and through this object; desire, however, is endless. And both constitute that which unfolds as human sexuality in its diverse manifestations.

The body – a contested zone

Throughout the same period – over the last three decades – the body has not only attracted more and more attention, but it has also been separated from its gender. The famous formula “sex & gender” has been regarded as having made tremendous progress, as having become a bulwark against a biologicistic point of view with regard to gender identity. But a remnant of uneasiness has remained, since “sex & gender” (sex = the body, and gender = the social-cultural roles of gender) cannot really be separated. In the early 90s, this uneasiness was formulated by Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, Moira Gatens and many others. The body can only manifest itself, this is the tenor of these authors, as one marked by gender, which means that there is no body outside of the symbolic order. Rather, this order produces different bodies, female and male bodies.

In response to criticisms of *Gender Trouble* (1990), where Butler had introduced the body as radical construction, she restated in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) her understanding of the concept of a discursive performativity as a “materialisation of sex.” “Performativity is always a reiteration of a set of norms,” (Butler 1993, p. 12) which produces its references, its materiality as boundaries, fixations and surfaces. These may change through the course of history, and they are shaped by so-called “regulatory schemas”³ into respectively intelligible bodies. In this way, Butler has attempted not only to dynamically comprehend the materiality of the body, but also to reunite sex and gender as inseparable categories. This means that the body must always already be sexually marked, in other words, always already in the position of gender, in order to be read as culturally intelligible.

Right on the heels of Butler’s work came Elizabeth Grosz’ critique of gender. Unlike Butler, gender represents for Grosz a redundant category, since it is only defined as a “performance of sex” (Grosz 1995, p. 212). Grosz defines the body – following Deleuze and Guattari – as a “sexed body” sub-

³ Butler characterises regulatory schemas as those historical, mental, social formations which direct, define and change the imaginary morphology of the body. (Cf. Butler 1993, 13f.)

jected to a constant “becoming-other”⁴ which materialises itself in this process of “becoming.” As Grosz emphasises, body and sexuality prove to be profoundly unstable categories. This instability goes deeper than the variability of gender identities, for the body must ultimately be grasped as something which could do much more than culture permits it to do. Here we have a body with extremely liquid boundaries and osmotic contours, a body with a remarkable power to incorporate and expel inside and outside in a continuous process, “to open itself up to prosthetic synthesis, to transform or rewrite its environment, to continually augment its power and capacities through the incorporation and into the body’s own spaces and modalities” (Grosz 1994, pp. 187-88). Both bodies *become* in the repetition of doing. A becoming which is essentially accompanied/born by its sexual ascription, while it is also always and already crossed/disturbed by it.

However, as Elizabeth Grosz claims, drawing upon Derrida, it is precisely that original void, linked to the metaphors of sexual difference as trace, which smoothes the way. According to Derrida’s view, sexual difference is a sexuality preceded by an exclusive assignation – male and female; it is a kind of “raw material,” from which the sexes emerge – depending on the specific historical-psychical situation. Against this background Grosz defines sexual difference as “the horizon that cannot appear in its own terms but is implied in the very possibility of an entity, an identity, a subject, an other and their relations” (Grosz 1994, p. 209).

Now this is exactly what I mean with the name sexual, as the prerequisite for male and female. Sexual difference is thus that first cleavage, which indeed does not emerge as such but, as original negativity, determines the positivity of genders. In *The Ticklish Subject* Slavoj Žižek has turned Butler’s *Gender trouble* on its head and made body trouble out of it, since sexual difference – according to Žižek, “indicates the enigmatic domain which lies in between, no longer biology and not yet the space of socio-symbolic construction.” And he continues by arguing that the point one has to emphasise here is “how this in-between is the very cut which sustains the gap between the Real and the contingent multitude of the modes of symbolisation” (Žižek, 1999, p. 275). Thus sexual difference is a failure of/in the symbolic order.

⁴ Deleuze/Guattari define becoming-other as “an encounter between bodies, which releases something from each and, in the process, makes real a virtuality, a series of enabling and transforming possibilities.” (Grosz 1994, 134)

The time of informatics – the body bytes back

“I want,” as Donna Haraway once wrote, “a feminist writing of the body that metaphorically emphasises vision again, because we need to reclaim that sense to find our way through all the knowledge and ways of seeing. But not just any partial perspective will do; we must be hostile to easy relativism and holism built out of summing and subsuming parts. *Passionate detachment* (Anette Kuhn) requires more than acknowledged and self-critical partiality. We are also bound to seek perspective from those points of view, which can never be known in advance, which promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organised by axes of domination. In such a viewpoint, the unmarked category would *really* disappear – quite a difference from simply repeating a disappearing act. The imaginary and the rational – the visionary and objective vision – hover close together” (Haraway 1990, p. 192).

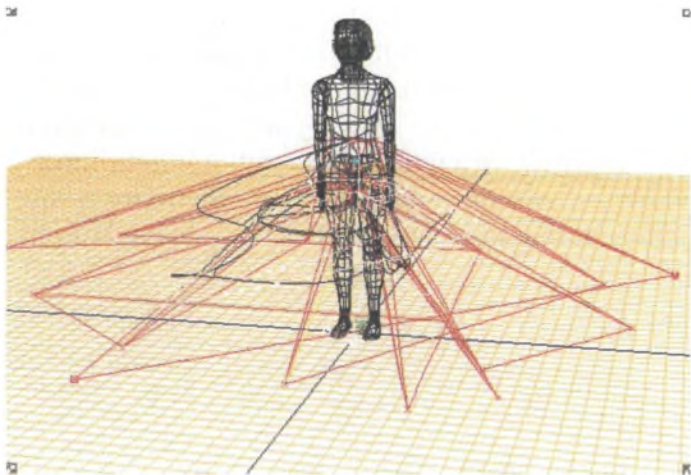
So Donna Haraway in the mid 80s – affecting not only feminist discourse on “body & gender,” but the discussion of knowledge, science, technology, truth, objectivity, politics in general, many years before Butler and others, commenced to deconstruct body, sex and gender. Haraway asked: where does the body end, what counts as part of the body, what makes a body human or non-human? All of these are questions defining the borders of the body, and renders the body back, as a question of definition. And this question has quite obviously come – not only in the field of information and reproduction technologies – under new pressure. Where do we draw the line? Not so much as an answer to this question, but more as a mean of imagining a situation still unthinkable, invisible and yet not makeable, Haraway introduced the figure of the cyborg. This cyborg illustrates a new hybrid form of being, half electronic, half biological, but also historically constituted. According to Haraway the cyborg arises at historical moments of social transition; times of radical uncertainty when borders are broken or under threat, and traditional strategies of drawing boundaries no longer function: moments such as the present when the distinction between man and cybernetic organisms are breaking down. (Cf. Haraway, 1990) In this context Haraway draws particular attention to the porosity of bodily boundaries, in particular the skin. As we have already heard according to Freud, the skin is a key element in the construction of the Ego as such. It follows that the bodily interface is from a psychoanalytic perspective, the question of the subject itself.

This means further, that Haraway’s question, “why should our bodies end at the skin?” (Haraway 1990, p. 178), should not be understood only in this sense of a new merging of machines and human bodies, but also from an

epistemological perspective, which means that these (body) boundaries are virtual in the sense of their powerful implementation and their possible actualisation. This can be seen as her reference both to Michel Foucault's concept of power – the docile body, which I have mentioned earlier, and to Deleuze & Guattari's desiring machines, the body without organs, etc. Like Deleuze & Guattari, Haraway conceives the subject and object not as opposing entities, but rather as affinities, as things that affect and are affected, that assume and reject. In this sense, her cyborg may be read as something unfinished, as something that must constantly redefine its boundaries and whose identity is a nomadic one. What Haraway wanted with her figure of the cyborg is to present a radical attempt at re-thinking the relationship nature/culture/technology and along with it the relationship human – non-human, although, here there are, of course, many questions she leaves unanswered. Even more, many attempts of artists and filmmakers to use the concept of the cyborg – to create new visions of the human being, often lead to traditional, familiar, stereotypical and old images of male and female bodies.

The Loss of Depth

In her *Manifesto for Cyborg* (1990[1984]) Haraway turned Michel Foucault's *Birth of the clinic* (*Naissance de la clinique* 1972) on its head and she wrote: It's time to describe rather its death, since the hospital, the school and other institutions analysed by Foucault wouldn't be the normative forces interpellating the individuals as subjects (in the sense of Louis Althusser) any longer. She agrees with Foucault that psychoanalysis might be seen as a culmination



Tina LaPorta,
Cyberfemme (1993)

in the process of normalisation. At the same time Deleuze/Guattari reproached Freud's psychoanalysis for the same reason – as being the cure for something which has been introduced or stimulated by its own introduction. Thus Haraway tried in her own approach to ignore or overcome Freud and everything connected and influenced with/by the unconscious. Her cyborg has only surface, skin is no longer the border between an inner and an outer space, but rather the interface between the other and me, or the interface between the machine and the human. In this sense Haraway might be seen as a protagonist for feminist thinkers and others to focus on surfaces, connections, interactions, hybrid species, etc. Haraway saw herself much more related to Deleuze and Guattari and their <becoming-woman> or <becoming-animal>. But her refusal of an unconscious (inner, deep) space as the kernel of the subject (as something from the outside which seems to occupy the very inner place) has not only been a relief (in the sense of an antihumanist stance) but it has also produced new problematic formations of identities and identity politics. Haraway's definition of a new feminist policy, embracing race, class and gender differences, is grounded implicitly on a subject who intentionally acts and negotiates, who knows about him – and herself and the others. There is no space left which goes beyond this kind of agency. Now, one could argue that we are facing the same problem with Deleuze's & Guattari's <plane of immanence> (actually Spinoza's). Deleuze/Guattari don't accept any transcendence or unconscious in a Freudian sense either. But the two philosophers "instantiated-know" something which goes beyond the individual, i.e., there is a space and a time beyond the individual's time and space. It is at the same time crossed by two opposite movements: towards the rock (the rock of the ego) and away from it. The famous <lines of flight> and the territorial and reterritorial forces subjectifying the individual to a state, a nation, a family, a name, a sex, class and race, mother or father, etc. Whereas "subjectification" means that "one is always a subject in, or a subject to, either the State or Capitalism, and its aim is to produce more surplus value," subjectivation describes "lines of flight within the subject." But these lines of flight have less or nothing to do with the individual. They rather point towards an "individuation operating by intensities, within individual fields not within persons or identities" (Deleuze, cited in Murphy 1996, p. 98).

The Body – Nothing too Much

Detlef Linke, a German neurologist and author of many books on the brain and the human being, stated recently⁵ that the antihumanist deconstruction, starting with Heidegger, did not really push the project of mankind towards any relief. The farewell of the subject has not been followed by any ethical (as in the case of Kant) thoughts or imperatives. If there isn't a master there won't be any order, so far Linke. Thus the figure of the angel is a remarkable one, since angels have no body, they are pure words, their or-



Klonaris/Thomadaki ©, from the *Angel Cycle*



Klonaris/Thomadaki ©, from the *Angel Cycle*

⁵ Paper presented at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne, On V. Flusser, lecture, January 15th, 2002.

dering is one of words, a symbolic order which is not disturbed by any decay of the flesh. There are many examples in which angels play a powerful role – especially with regard to cyberspace and virtual reality. Angel-like subjects are flying across the data space and their bodies are like shadows eternally light. Why the angel? Why here? The Greek artists, Maria Klonaris and Katerina Thomadaki,⁶ have been working for many years on their *Angel Cycle* (1985–2001, *Le Cycle de l'Ange*), paralleled by other projects such as *Sublime Disasters* (*Désastres sublimes*) in which the figure of the twin plays the central role. Again a figure which is neither human nor machine, neither male nor female, neither flesh nor image, similar to the one of the angel. This is exactly the moment where I would like to reintroduce the body – neither-nor, but too much!

In my last paragraph I will confront three different bodies: the cyborg, the angel and the anorexic. Each of them underlines in a specific way the double constitution of the human being: a being of need and of desire.

In a remarkable note about anorexia nervosa Jacques Lacan stated: “It is the child one feeds with most love who refuses food and plays with his refusal as with a desire (anorexia nervosa)” (Lacan cited in Shepherdson 1998, p. 30). And he continued: “It’s a failure of the gift of love.” The example of the anorexic – in a society of fullness – if we focus at least on the industrialised countries – points powerfully to the nothing and too much of the human being and its specific materiality – the body. It is the difference and the doubled constitution of the human being. “As far as the oral drive is concerned, (...), it is obvious that it is not a question of food, nor of the memory of food, nor the echo of food, nor the mother’s care, but of something that is called the breast. (...) To this breast in its function as object, objet a cause of desire. (...) we must give a function that will explain its place in the satisfaction of the drive” (Lacan cited in Shepherdson 1998, p. 47). Thus in eating the Nothing the drive finds its satisfaction and the anorectic her peace with the uncontrollable body. The cyborg doesn’t have a drive nor a desire, his/her body is under the control of various power stations, but s/he has no future, no vision, no desire. The angel by contrast can’t find a place – neither here nor there. Whereas the anorexic body is sentenced to death, the cyborg’s fate is just to be. The angel by contrast is meandering from one side to the other and back again – introducing the order of desire combined with a body which can’t be framed. I am very aware of the potential misunderstanding one might produce in installing the figure of the angel as the ideal or best visualisation of the double status of the human being. The trope of the angel is much too overburdened with a huge variety of cultural interpretations! But neverthe-

⁶ The two artists have been based in Paris for more than 25 years.

less the transparent body of the angel indicates powerfully the relationship of the drive and desire in a convincing visual way.

Nothing – too much: an endless movement of becoming – between full and empty – symbol and sign – signified and signifier – between without-organs and organisation.

All these dichotomies are telling examples of a bodily dimension which itself is not part of the body. There is always already another degree of materiality or a different layer involved. Something which Lacan tried to articulate with his distinction of need – demand – desire.

To conclude: The ongoing debate about whether we are already living in a post-human epoch or if we are only on the way to becoming cyborgs (as Haraway put it) is missing a decisive moment. The question is not so much whether the body can be genetically improved, its organs exchanged and substituted with animal and artificial organs. The question is rather: *whose body?* There is never a body, there is always a body and a subject, even though one can't separate the two dimensions in a strict sense. But the dimension of desire is that of the subject and therefore of the unconscious – which like an envelope – covers the material base of the body. Even if one changes the genetic code – as the real – a symbolic and an imaginary order have to be evoked to grasp this occurrence as a human event.

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