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CORPOREALITY AS “ANTIBODY” OR THE AESTHETIC SUBVERSION OF “BODY” AS A TRADITIONAL CATEGORY¹

Michel BERNARD

Translated by Marie Claire Forté from :
« De la corporéité comme "anticorps"
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In 1971, the Éditions universitaires invited me to write a book about “the body.” I was struck by the utter strangeness of the word. It captured my entire attention to the extent that it overshadowed the procession of sensations, images and ideas that usually come with it and constitute its common signifier. Instead of diving directly and spontaneously into denotation and connotation, I was arrested by the very fact of its designation, its status as utterance or product of utterance.

And I wondered: why such a designation? Which desire and more radically, which intentionality does it answer to? What are the implications? Choosing to use and write this word, is one not already positing the existence of a single and permanent empirical configuration, summarily validating it as a possible scientific object, and inasmuch begging the question and ensconcing oneself into a perfect vicious cycle?

Not only is the word not innocent from an axiological or ideological standpoint, it portrays and puts forward, through its implied utterative disengagement², the simulacrum of lived experience it pretends to designate and ascribe as objective reality, as being itself for itself. The word “body” presents itself as auto-foundational of its own referent: it legitimizes the belief that secretly facilitates the process or approach by which it considers this referent which, of course, emanates from a specific culture and its history.

¹ English translation of a (slightly edited) presentation given in French in 1990 at an international conference hosted by l’UQAM in Montréal and published in the collective book *Le Corps rassemblée* (Montréal: Université du Québec à Montréal, Éditions Agence d’Arc, 1991).

² I am using the distinction made by Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtés in *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* (Paris: Hachette-Université, 1979) between enunciative disengagement that projects the actant of the enunciation and utterative disengagement which projects the actant of the statement.

This is true so much so that this word or its exact equivalent does not exist in all languages. In some oriental languages, for example, Chinese, no single term denotes the existence of the body as a recognizable and autonomous substance—there are rather lexemes designating states or situations. Postures, attitudes, gestures, movements and mimics characterize them: standing body, seated body, bent over body, walking, running, hitting, taking, laughing, crying body, etc. Far from being the understood object of a universal and necessary experience, the body is foremost a statement and a singular mode of utterance implicating a context and an activation softly tracing a secret tactic of individually managing our own lived experience of ourselves, of others and the world. By fabricating the simulacrum of an identical, recognizable and intelligible referent, this form of designation reveals the specific work of a particular mode of perception, expression, action and conceptualization betraying the originality of a cultural praxis³.

The term "body" is, effectively, a linguistic sign that, distinct from other signs, radically and implicitly engages a way of perceiving, expressing, acting, thinking and, of course, speaking, which somehow delineates and characterizes the environment of a culture and the possibilities available to the individuals belonging to it. This approach submits all of the term's functions to aims of identifiability, cognition, exchange and control, in short, to the authority inherent to signifier intentionality. If it is true, as Umberto Eco affirms,⁴ that the semiotic process cannot be reduced to the category of linguistic signs solely corresponding to one of four modes of sign production (recognition, ostension, replica and invention) and that a linguistic sign is not limited to establishing a relation of substitution between signifier and signified, it is also true that the word "body" underlines or highlights what Julia Kristeva names the "ideologeme of the sign" as a binary structure of equivalence based on the reversibility of a mercantile process and as such, as an instrument of control and manipulation, or power.

Using this type of linguistic sign to designate the material and sensitive dimension of lived experience entails the distortion and even the falsification of the five processes that constitute and ensure our relationship to ourselves, the other and the world. This falsification operates through five related reductions:

1. Perception as a sensorial process is reduced to a cognitive process of information: perceiving is no longer living the fleshy, random and ambivalent experience of an encounter or event, but rather an attempt to identify its cause or referent. Erwin Straus staunchly objected to this confusion in his work *The Primary World of the Senses*,⁵ where he tended to an exclusively phenomenological approach to the sentient being. Translated into semiotic terms, this relates to Eco's understanding that if perception is, in principle, always interrogative and conditional given the complexity of its contextual implications, it becomes assertive and apodictic when these implications are withdrawn, being reduced to a simple equivalency.⁶

³ As an example, consult the collective publication in French edited by Maurice Godelier and Michel Panoff, *La Production du corps* (Paris: Éditions des Archives contemporaines, 1999).

⁴ Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984), 20-45.

⁵ Erwin Straus, *The Primary World of the Senses. A Vindication of Sensory Experience*, translated by Jacob Needleman (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).

⁶ Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, 35.

2. The impulsive and energetic *ex-expression* process, in the etymological sense (the only valid sense, in my estimation), is reduced to a *communication* process: the immanent and auto-affective dynamic which constitutes expression transforms itself into an instrumental power of emitting and transmitting signs. The lexeme "body" is thus the product and endorsement of a diverted or mislead expressivity.

3. Similarly and in parallel, *action* as an intensive force of energy expenditure is reduced to its utilitarian and relational finality: the category "body" becomes the support, the vehicle and the term of a capacity for biological *adaptation*.

4. Correlatively, *thought* which accompanies it and is posited by this category or lexeme morphs into the organizational logic of a technocratic *agenda*: calculating rationality absorbs the innovative and unpredictable force of its imagination.

5. Finally, the last implicit reductionism in using the category "body" is that the material *pragmatism* of emission and the poetics of speech are subject to the hegemony of transmission's *semantic function*, that is the imperative of what is commonly referred to as communication: the sovereignty of a "body" posited as provider and vehicle of the exchange of meanings infiltrates and neutralizes vocality.

In short, as we see, the traditional model of "body" is not exempt of heavily loaded presuppositions. Heir of a metaphysical-theological tradition that made it the basis for an organized ontological vision of the world, it became imbued and invaded by the scientific-technical project of a triumphant capitalism. Daily experience finds itself foremost in-formed and normalized by the social imaginary and discourse fostered and promoted by this model. As I tried to show in my book ironically entitled *Le Corps* [The Body], we live our relationship to ourselves, the other and the world exclusively through our collective, individual, cultural and instinctual history. Through its implications, complexity, contingency and transience, the category "body" governs the most banal elements of quotidian life.

However, it seems that the advent of contemporary art, and more specifically, the ways in which it completely unsettled how we understand the creative process, contributed in deconstructing this model, questioning its hegemony. Inspired, stimulated and encouraged by the vision and thinking of artists such as C zanne, Artaud, Klee, Kandinsky, Bacon or Cage, numerous different—divergent—thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty, Ehrenzweig or Deleuze, reveal that the creative act is not borne from the inherent power of the "body" as a permanent and significant organic structure. It is quite the contrary: such acts result from the work of a mobile and unstable material and energetic network, from impulses and interferences of disparate and overlapping intensities.

Thus, from a strictly phenomenological point of view, Maurice Merleau-Ponty shows us that the category "body" conceals the strange and singular operation of a "tissue," an "intertwining" of multiple heterogeneous and reversible sensations. Simultaneously active and passive, these sensations are in a play of inter-

twining correspondences that he metaphorically names "the flesh": a being "of several leaves or faces," "a being in latency," a track "of a certain absence."⁷

According to Austrian psychoanalyst Anton Ehrenzweig, author of *The Hidden Order of Art*,⁸ a creative act happens through a "scanning" or unconscious sweeping of structures that consciousness superficially perceives as disjointed. This entails the operation of a body reticular and mobile rather than substantialist and permanent. Conceived of as a sensorial, heterogeneous and contingent spectrum, this body is laboured by an antinomian double mechanism of differentiation and undifferentiation (which Ehrenzweig calls "serialization"). In other words, far from emanating from a homogenous and identical subject-body, artistic production is the deconstruction and unveiling of its unstable and random sensitive materiality.

Another hypothesis consistent with this view but in its own way and despite, from a specifically psychoanalytical approach, vigorously contesting the Freudian theory of the unconscious: the "rhizomatic" conception of Deleuze and Guattari. For these thinkers, the body-organism which we contend with daily is but a "strata on the 'Body without Organs,' in other words, a phenomenon of accumulation, coagulation, and sedimentation that, in order to extract useful labour from the Body without Organs, imposes upon it forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organizations, organized transcendences."⁹ They name, after Artaud, the "Body without Organs," subject to this labour of normalization, defined as a pure field of intensities, a connection of multiple heterogeneous a-significant forces, in short, in their words, a "rhizome." There is no corporeal being as such, rather a perverse and polymorphous energetic becoming like the "great ephemeral skin" relevantly described by Jean-François Lyotard in his *Libidinal Economy*.¹⁰ It disguises itself into simulacra of permanent, voluminous and organized bodies.

Thus, despite or beyond the differences in approach, contemporary philosophers and aestheticians agree to radically subvert the traditional category of "body" and propose an original vision, simultaneously plural, dynamic and random, like an unstable chiasmic play of intensive forces or heterogeneous vectors. Vision which it is henceforth appropriate to name with the more supple and spectral connotation term "corporeality" [corporéité]. The term is not new. French translators of Husserl, particularly Paul Ricœur have sometimes used the French "corporéité" as equivalent of two German words: *Leibhaftigkeit* and *Körperlichkeit*. However, the meaning attributed to it by the founder of phenomenology and further, his disciples, is not the one I attribute to it. In Husserlian terms, corporeality refers only to the "basis for the noematic posited characteristic," which is to say the way in which the meaning of an object (a landscape, for example) offered to our consciousness is originally fulfilled by perception.¹¹ The phenomenological acceptance of the category "corporeality" is reduced to the concrete or sensory mode of the cognitive process and not, as I feel I must posit, the structure or track underlying the sensorium itself in its materiality and malleability, independent of all noetic intentionality.

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 136.

⁸ Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), chapter 3.

⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Masumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 159.

¹⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, translated by Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

¹¹ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy: General introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, translated by Frederick Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), 327; *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, translated by Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1960).

From this designation and aesthetic-philosophical change arise three important consequences, which we shall elaborate on. The first and most obvious concerns the very status of art and the relationships between the arts or, said otherwise, between the unity and plurality of art. There is no longer art as such, an autonomous and transcendental activity in a unified field previously confirmed by a value or a norm. There is rather a fortuitous becoming of intensities activating the contradictory differentiation and conjunction processes, distortion and organization processes. Within the artist, diverse meanings answer each other in a perpetually renewed polyphony, like a strange, mobile keyboard, precarious and untellable, with which the maker has the pleasure of composing unheard of variations.

Through this, the specificity and relative autonomy of art in relation to others cannot be justified by its independence and original material properties as perceived by a sole sensorial organ. Firstly, artistic specificity is rooted in the singularity of the functional modulation of managing energy and not in the objective and rational reality of a product (painting, sculpture, score, play, ballet, perfume, etc.). Secondly, no modulation is exclusive or segregated. It is necessarily articulated through and interfering with other modulations. That is, the concept of "corporeality" implies a polysensory intertwining or an intersensory chiasm that invites the artist on a perpetual journey, and infinite wandering: in its essence, art is nomadic. Its apparent sedentariness and insularity within a field stems from the normative exigencies of social needs and institutional constraints. In reality, art does not support boundaries and limits—which is what Mikel Dufrenne refers to when he defends an "aesthetic without interferences"¹² that has no law other than the mobility of artwork without borders, stateless and wild.

Thus, like a palette where primary colours blend, there is a kind of "aesthetic spectrum," interconnected energetic and sensory tonalities: pictoriality, plasticity, musicality, fragrance, flavour, theatricality and, for what I dare to name for dance, orchesality (in reference to its Greek origin, *orchesis*). These last two tonalities are aligned not only to each other, but also and especially to the first three.

This leads me to highlight a second consequence of this preferred articulation of "corporeality": its implementation into spectacle. Speaking of a spectacular corporeality entails radically transforming approaches to performance and dance. According to my hypothesis, theatricality stems from the vocal matrix's ambivalent structure as motor and vehicle for managing the energy we each contain.¹³ Along this same line, if all expressivity requires the antinomian mechanism of an immanent differentiation dynamic, laboured or exploited by a vain desire for auto-affection or specularly, the voice constitutes its archetype and source, conveying visibility no less than audibility. Bachelard writes that "the voice projects visions." Expression is essentially "transvocalization." Theatricality necessarily results from the contrasting or contrapuntal play between a process of distortion and a quest for identity and unification, or even further, between an exponential differentiation and a continuous repetition.

Then, instead of considering the actor or dancer's body as an organized and significant morphological whole, a hierarchical unit of forms and signs, we are invited to approach it as a temporal and rhythmic

¹² Mikel Dufrenne, *Vers une esthétique sans entraves : mélanges offerts à Mikel Dufrenne*, (Paris: Union générale d'édition, 1975.)

¹³ Michel Bernard, *L'Expressivité du corps. Recherches sur les fondements de la théâtralité* (1st edition: Paris: J.-P. Delarge, 1976; 2nd edition: Paris: Chiron, 1986), chapters V and VI.

modulation of micro differences or slight distortions affecting operators of embodied pragmatics. From these seven operators (range and diversification of the visual field, orientation, posture, attitude, movement, mimicry and vocalization), the dancer ceaselessly multiplies specular and free play or gravitational metamorphosis. In short, spectacular corporeality encourages another way of seeing and in this way, another approach and analysis of theatre and dance.

However, because of this, it engages a third and no less important consequence: the need for a different way of teaching it or mode of pedagogical relation. As I have tried to demonstrate,¹⁴ educational intent is laden with the sedimentation of conceptual models that determine all learning behaviours. The model of the "body" being perhaps the main one, or one of them, as it has traditionally been the support, vehicle and site of relating to the other. Until today, this relation has always been assimilated to the production of information or messages through different sensorial means, that is, to a logistics of communication. As Deleuze and Guattari ironically affirm, teaching becomes thus reduced to "insigning."¹⁵ By adopting another vantage and replacing this substantialist, semiotic and instrumental model with the reticular, intensive and heterogeneous one of "corporeality," we disrupt the power dynamic installed by this logistics. Without freeing ourselves from the hold of our perceptions, if we emphasize, as a painter or musician, the disparities, mobility and interferences of sensory arrangements, we obstruct the empire of forms and signs, and also modify the mastery target that uses them. Instead of programming an action upon a body that we have already evaluated for functional modality, we play, as supported by Bachelard, upon and with the uncertainties and contingencies of relational experience and therefore the temporality of experience. A risky proposal perhaps, and certainly not a profitable one, but one that at least has the merit of rendering the teaching act adequate in regards to its proffered ethics. Therefore, the theoretical refusal of the traditional concept of "body" is a reaction and immune protection against the philosophical vision carried by this concept, a true "antibody" in both senses of the word.

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¹⁴ Michel Bernard, *Critique des fondements de l'éducation. Généalogie du pouvoir et/ou de l'impouvoir d'un discours* (Paris: Chiron, 1988)

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 75.