

Exhibits from the Life of Bodies

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1278. An abbot returns to the village of Sedlec, Czechoslovakia from the Holy Land, bearing a handful of earth taken from Golgotha, the "Place of the Skull." On account of this pious deed, the burial plots around the Church of All Saints become prime real estate for noblemen wishing to jump queue at the resurrection. The cemetery is soon filled to bursting, and will continue to overflow into the ossuary until the 1870s, when the artist František Rint is commissioned to beautify the premises. Among his masterpieces are a chandelier said to feature every bone in the human body, and four pyramidal stacks of tiered remains. It is a true Golgotha in its own imposing right, and the perfection of the Medieval genre of *memento mori* - not to mention host to a constant procession of tourists. In 2005, an exhibition of dissected human bodies, posed and plastinated, opens in Tampa, Florida. Pitched as an educational opportunity, the procession encounters the usual opposition from religious groups, incensed at this blatant act of desecration, as well as an unexpected obstacle. The exhibition's eponymous bodies were, it seems, donated by the Chinese government, having no next of kin, nor any verifiatory papers. Given the established link between the Chinese prison-industrial complex and the black market in body parts, this lack of due process is enough in itself to make anyone with the least imagination nauseous.

Human rights advocacy groups have hounded the exhibition in its travels from day one; and yet their vigorous defense of human dignity *qua* rights is not itself uncomplicated. For the legal terms by which one may reproach China, as a pertinent example, for violations of human rights require that China defer to international demands; consider how China's human rights record is more often than not called to account under the sign of free trade, as part of the imperative to ethical consumerism in the West. To this end, China may be accountable to human rights only insofar as they are co-extensive with the demands placed upon the individual by Capital; the proper name for those networks which, in the case of Bodies, absolve the exhibitors of responsibility for the terms of the bodies' (or any indeed, resource's) extraction. In his Declaration of the Rights of Human Beings, Raoul Vaneigem describes the right to survival under such mercantile conditions as little more than a "stay of execution" in exchange for the reproduction of oneself as a commodity, an amnesty "granted to anyone who assumes it 'by the sweat of his brow'" (Vaneigem 2003, 2).

Does this not resonate with the teachings of Paul, in whom we may find the earliest articulation of a pan-cultural, universal law outstripping any local, political instantiation; like human rights, a dignity afforded to all regardless of social station? Yet salvation proceeds from a conscious affirmation of oneself as the subject of said grace; and then from the point - made emphatically by Paul, who cites his own toil amid the Thessalonians as an example - that heavenly salvation demands hard labour on the earth, in order that one may transcend this plane altogether. That one ought not to seek earthly fulfilment, rather purposing oneself at a world to come - this is a faith traces of which remain throughout the Sedlec Ossuary, where the temporal innovation of Christianity (which had earlier posited a free subject against the backdrop of extant determinist cosmologies) granted its dead antecedence over the merely punctual living. "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep" (Thessalonians 4:15). A sixteenth-century edition of the woodcuts of Hans Holbein the Younger, whose depictions of the Dance of Death more or less codified the genre in the medievalist's imaginary, expands on this scripture accordingly: "As sleep does not extinguish man, but holds the body

in repose for a time; so Death does not destroy man, but deprives his body of its movements and operations" (Holbein 1971, 9).

But the Bodies exhibition, unlike the Sedlec Ossuary, does not depict such a suspension; it is a straightforward celebration of vivacity. Contorted into positions of play, the bodies on display are a depiction of the machine beneath the ephemeral rituals of life, and do not indicate any further horizon. Reconstructed bodies, denuded of their skin, are posed throughout as though playing basketball or football, riding a bicycle, even conducting an orchestra. One flensed specimen assumes the contemplative posture of Rodin's 'Le Penseur,' a properly philosophic corpse. The horror consists herein; that those whose bodies these once were are perhaps more alive in death than in life, which they may have endured in forced confinement, or worse. The supra-political, ultra-secular excuse for these grotesqueries is that, as Dylan Thomas put it, "after the first death, there is no other" (Thomas 2003, 106). For what further degradations can one suffer after death? It is written in the Gospel of Luke, "Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do" (Luke 12:4). And yet in Tudor England, contrary to this wisdom, only the bodies of murderers and criminals could be used for scientific ends, for they were not among those to be resurrected at the Second Coming. But again, as Bodies supporters would say, this would be to miss the point. We are not awaiting the resurrection, and these people were already dead. So what constitutes complicity? (One may be reminded of the Buddhist view that it is permissible to eat meat only if it has not been slaughtered on one's behalf.)

That Bodies makes claims for itself as an educational tool, offering an illuminating glimpse of the body as it appears to the God's-eye-view of modern medicine, needn't undermine its theological suggestiveness. Žižek points out the underlying notion of *vanitas* present in the first media coverage of the technology of the X-ray; a technology which enables us "to see a person who is alive as if he were already dead, reduced to a mere skeleton;" an intimation of mortality shared by Hans Castorp in *The Magic Mountain*. Žižek cites Virilio, for whom the object becomes perceptible only when immobilized, and goes on to describe eighteenth-century tableaux vivantes, which can be "inserted into the long ideological tradition of conceiving of a statue as a frozen, immobilized living

body, a body whose movements are paralysed (usually by a kind of evil spell): the statue's immobility thus involves infinite pain ..." (Žižek 1997, 87).

It is this infinite pain we can observe in such an exhibition. The Bodies display does not function as a *danse macabre*; but what if this is because it does not, after the silence of the organizers becomes (in the imaginary) an admission of guilt, suitably address itself to the universal, instead referring to a particular atrocity, horrifying in its specificity and contemporaneity?

Perhaps this sense of being surrounded by thinly disguised atrocity, even in the modern world, is the elusive subject of Reggio's film *Naqoyqatsi*, the third installment in his heavy-handed triptych of non-narrative montage. From its opening shot, which pans across a derelict neo-classical edifice, to the three-dimensional computer imaging of the human body which recurs throughout, from CAT scans to stills from primitive VR, the film plumbs vast, uncanny valleys of body worship to present a cluttered but extensive co-theory of human and technological expansion. The Hobbesian connotation of its title ("Naqoyqatsi" is a Hopi word meaning roughly "life as war") is telling of its relentlessly, aimlessly pessimistic content. Power and resistance both find merely rote expression here. The images of atrocity that appear are simultaneous depictions of celebrity; infamous despots whose faces stand in for their crimes, or of bodies repetitively piled to the point of stylization; contorted glyphs of human suffering. In the vertiginous, high-speed world which the film seeks to depict, we cannot apprehend the object unless it is fixed to the spot. A lengthy, panoramic shot of famous faces from a wax museum illustrates this point precisely. One needs no reminder that the historical Madame Tussaud was a French noblewoman, tasked during the Revolution with casting the deathmasks of prominent society people who had fallen victim to the guillotine. Today, the wax museum that she founded in London includes the likenesses of living icons as disparate as Lady Gaga and Vladimir Putin.

Such figures are the inverse likeness of those on display in the Bodies exhibit. There we find actual bodies, meticulously reconstructed, that they may lay bare the ultimate sameness of the finely calibrated machines called human. The stark presence of each un-manned body is compounded by the troubling obscurity of the donors, who themselves may have been disappeared, reduced to

political and social non-entities. On the other hand, the wax mannequins displayed at Madame Tussaud's are not bodies, though they have bodily presence. They are mere façades of human identity, but each, for being the likeness of a celebrated person, has the aura of a singularity, even of historicity, which is precisely the quality that the Bodies exhibit denies its wares.

If, as Barthes remarks, the function of mythology is to immobilize the world, then the relation of celebrity to life is fundamentally antagonistic. In partaking of celebrity idolatry, the mythological likenesses in which we are so pruriently invested both feel and suffer on behalf of the passive viewer, a unilateral relationship made possible only by our sanitary distance from the object of idolization.

This relationship is troubled now by the vastly expanded territorial claims of the Spectacle, as popular culture explodes into billions of little self-employed pieces, but its highest expression may be preserved in the brilliant, ideographic portraits produced by Andy Warhol; celebrity likenesses haloed in colour, like Orthodox religious icons - an oft-cited resemblance, foregrounded in recent Warhol exhibits at the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens. But the 2-dimensionality of the icon in religious painting, before and contemporary with the Italian Renaissance, fulfilled its function of illustration without idolization, as contrasted with the Pagan tradition of sculpture. These likenesses were possessed of a symbolic power precisely because they were divested of any virtual function. And perspective arrived in painting with the discovery of a fixed point of view; therefrom, writes John Berger, "all reality (could be) mechanically measured by its materiality" (Berger 2008, 81). Berger's lapsarian account of art as a falling away from an unmediated reality begs the question, "What other measure is there?" but the answer may already lie within his formulation.

Peter Sloterdijk finds that "the philosophical basis of Renaissance painting was a radical shift in its truth model," as "the European West exchanged primal images for primal scenes" (Sloterdijk 2011, 156). In what he deems a semio-political decision, the Renaissance brought about a novelization of pictorial space, emphasizing the relation of subjects in the depth of a shared world, while the Eastern style of icon painting "continued to base its image concept on the statuesque elevation and immobilization of the ideas shining in" (Sloterdijk 2011, 156). The objectification of the world, that it may

straight-forwardly signify, depends upon the petrification of relations; thus every likeness gains a shadow, an uncanny social-empirical avatar. It is this virtual reality that precedes the electronic sequel; wherein our interaction with a lifeworld is belied by (or finds its meaning in) ruthless mathematization. Here too, the semio-political cleft occurs, between orders of exceptional and integrated signs. We can observe a similar succession between primitive, twentieth-century virtual realities, where, Eric McLuhan claims, soft-focus brings the viewer back to the sensory modes of the early middle ages, before the invention of pictorial space, and the lush, immersive 3-D of films like *Avatar*, where the eyes converge stereoscopically upon a vivid, involving landscape. Even today, one cannot help but wonder what will happen when these incipient technologies advance to the point where nothing would appear to be out of place, and one can relate to a programmed non-presence as they would an actual, bodily form. To this end, there have emerged entire edifying, heroic genres of science fiction based on the struggle of the individual against such a regime of inauthenticity.

Consider the pop-culture fascination which most resonates with the iconography of the *Bodies* exhibition, namely, zombie lore; the vision of one's neighbours reduced to ravenous, thoughtless automatons. Like the Medieval *danse macabre*, like the *Bodies* exhibit, these are the index and not the symbolization of death, a re-materialization of the folkloric figure of the "Undead." The Victorian ghost story, wherein a tormented soul survives its bodily prison and continues to rehearse its trauma in an endless repetition, is superseded by the more properly apocalyptic nightmare of an unfeeling, unthinking body, reduced to its basest appetites. If this fascination can be read as an unconscious response to the prevailing physicalist description of the human, one may readily apprehend how each campfire tale relates to the most chastening psychological model of its time. Sloterdijk suggests that the advent of dissection "brought forth a new conception of the human being as a wondrous manufacture of the organs," and how this new eye on the body created the effect that "humans, above all relationships to others of their kind, were firstly and ultimately single, unrelated bodies," only later sorted into social groups (Sloterdijk 2011, 126). The present-day vogue of the "living dead" speaks to exactly such a fanatical insistence on sovereignty and self-differentiation

against a homogenous mass; the survivor is not for life exactly, but she is certainly against death.

Foucault writes of how the emergence of a clinical pathology brought about the dispersal of death in time; how the study of disease altered our perception of death, from a simple end to life, which was reconfigured as a series of “separate, partial, progressive deaths” (Foucault 2003, 177) to a constant companion. Considered in this light, a whole genre of *memento mori* commences with an affront to religious superstition, and is itself of the Enlightenment. Pathology made of the body a kind of arrow in time, bisecting life and death. It is this object that is traced by the camera of Stan Brakhage in “The Act of Seeing With One’s Own Eyes,” a grimly silent film depicting numerous autopsies performed in a Pittsburgh morgue. “The Act ...” is, for its intense focus, its crucial sense of gradual revelation in time, its sustained interest, and its inquisitive, highly subjective camera work, a decidedly opposite film to the above mentioned *Naqoyqatsi* – an explosive barrage of images projected through the screen, as they are strewn through time and space. The collaged surface of the film stands in direct contrast to the ocular analogy of Brakhage’s camera work, as well as the sense of the title. (From the literal sense of the word “autopsy,” combining *autos*, self, and *opsis*, sight.) *Naqoyqatsi* offers us a view from nowhere. Here, the film screen is a moral technology, and its subject is the same abstract human who is the subject of abstract “rights.” Brakhage, on the other hand, depicts, in many ways, the very suspension that Foucault describes when he writes that “the possibility of opening up corpses immediately, thus reducing to a minimum the latency period between death and the autopsy, made it possible for the last stage of pathological time and the first stage of cadaveric time almost to coincide.” And a moment later, that “death is now no more than the vertical, absolutely thin line that joins, in dividing them, the series of symptoms and the series of lesions” (Foucault 2003, 173).

Bodies would fast-forward this severing distinction; the element of the uncanny, the cognitive dissonance that cannot but creep in at the sight of the display, comes about as a result of the specimen’s having been reconstituted as its living likeness, reenacting the events of an idealized daily existence. The finality of death is inescapable in Brakhage’s autopsy film; the cause of each corpse’s death

is sometimes obscure, sometimes painfully, wincingly clear, but in each case the body is transformed, and in this new, inert phase of existence, that is, in death, it demands that reconceptualization which is so difficult for the living, and which ensures the poignancy of and perseverance of religious custom the world over.

Modern medical science, which surely is equipped with its own poignant and bizarre customs, has transformed our concept of the body totally. Today, we can treat its components separately, that we may selectively regard parts of the living subject as though already dead. And yet this map of organs without bodies, this materialist *méconnaissance*, is diagnostically invaluable, its description possessed of a truthfulness that cannot be evaded. This begs the question, where may we locate ourselves between the redoubtable veridicality of this description and its apparent insufficiency before even the first most obvious fact of our subjective experience? Perhaps it is strange that scientific materialism should remain a scourge of philosophy today, when a coherent alternative is scarcely conceivable. We are materialists by proxy, however uneasily we may sit with certain of this doctrine's implications. Along these lines, it is worth considering that, while religious dualism is held to be a wholly untenable position, and philosophers delight in sniffing out the cryptic religious kernel in every humanist prerogative, today we face down a technological morality that, even as it chides the believer for enforcing a separation of mind and matter, would separate the subject from the body to the fulfilment of political ends.

Implicit in the Dance of Death is a critique of class. From the labourer who works the field to the highest religious authority, every man is equal in death, which is to say before God. The synonymy of these terms is crucial to our formulation; as so much of the symbolism that pervades any discussion of death today was instated in the Middle Ages, and in the Middle Ages, death meant to stand in the presence of God.

The severe religious injunction that underlies each medieval depiction of death was meant as a corrective to earthly hubris, articulating a clear limit to human power and understanding. Yet a further implication of this radical equalization consists in the mantra that all things must pass, that life is toil and drudgery; chiefly, in the ingenious inversion of class consciousness, which insists that earthly injustice is moot even or especially from the standpoint of those who

suffer. The various scientific incarnations of the *danse macabre* embody opposite values, as the Bodies exhibit speaks to a perfectible understanding of the human; which is, with Vitruvian man as its emblem, the optimistic creed of the Enlightenment. Bodies presents to us an admirable human figure; equality in the guise of biological sameness, as it passes over questions of political and economic stratification which are raised not only by the ideological nature of the presentation, but the materials themselves, as its organizers engage a supply chain which may defile the “universal human” they would presume to represent. Agamben writes, in his theorization of bare life, of a “life exposed to death” (Agamben 1998, 81). If any such abject figure can be observed in the Bodies exhibition, it would be better described as death exposed to the glare of life.

It may be instructive to compare the strangely calming space of the Sedlec Ossuary to the brash, ahistorical transgressiveness of Bodies, as each of these arrangements would symbolize the unconditional terms of our lease on the earth and our own bodies - the historical field on the one hand, and biological determination on the other. But the Bodies exhibit would bracket one term unto the presentation of the other, even forcing an eclipse; it is biologism at its worst, addressed to an ossified social totality. Here as for Sloterdijk, the body as a closed system represents the isolation of people from one another, opening onto a dearth of co-recognition. Rather than abstract, infinite, social man, we are presented with a finite, machinic sociology; a description of the “living representation of perpetual motion” (La Mettrie 1994, 32) as a contradictorily staid emblem of dynamic processes. To this worldview, human potential exists not even as an abstract negative capacity, nor as the will to collectivity, but in strictly recombinatory terms, as combinations of parts.

The key distinction here, and an important point of divergence between the religious and scientific conceptions of death as the denominator of all life, is temporal. The cadaver-double who appears throughout the medieval corpus, satirizing the worldly vocation of a correspondent body, is not a spook, but represents the empty remnant of the life it haunts, ready to swap places with spirited flesh and desiccate while the soul ascends. This body is a divisor that indicates, importantly, the radical difference between mute body parts and personhood, only one of which is subject to putrefaction. Here the distinction is fine but important; the body is at-

temporal, but the spirit is timeless. In the present-day Dance of Death, we are each made contemporary of the body in all its mechanical signification, which is not an an-aesthetic object. We are that living thing already dead.

Yet this attempt to reduce the human to a catalogue of physical processes cannot forestall the element in which any attempt at such a description is already embedded. For this immobilizing comprehensiveness aspires to a state of atemporal perfection, in order that ideology may work upon our precise coordinates. Barthes describes mathematics, for example, as “a *finished* language, which derives its very perfection from (the) acceptance of death.” To this, he opposes Myth, not as an over-determined plurality of customs and beliefs, but as a concentrated form of signification which we may construe as the empty form of any discourse. And even this finished language may be repackaged by mythological means; Barthes refers to the manner in which a morsel such as “ $e=mc^2$ ” came to act as a metonym for physics in its entirety in the popular imagination. “Myth, on the contrary, is a language which does not want to die: it wrests from the meanings which give it its sustenance an insidious, degraded survival, it provokes in them an artificial reprieve in which it settles comfortably, it turns them into speaking corpses” (Barthes 1972, 133). Our propensity to myth makes of the human body a dense signifier, as glimpsed in the dazzlingly suggestive surfaces of the exhibits glossed above.

This is a formal feature that divergent religious and scientific conceptions of the body have in common. The semantic *gestalt* that one may read from the surface of the body is, whatever its content, a product of the mythographical impetus to overreach the object of the senses, and a certain insistence on the legibility of nature. However the body is to be read - as a stolid rejoinder to the metaphysician; as the ‘best picture of the human soul;’ as a debased automaton or an angelic unity - this quintessentially aesthetic information comprises the active part of its appearance.

This is a separate issue from the instrumental means of the natural sciences; and really has very little bearing on the actual physical determination of the natural world. For it seems foolhardy to object to the conception of the body as a “manufacture of the organs” on the charge of reductionism; we may be that very thing. But myth knows only artificial causality (Barthes 1971, 130); even to the extent that the

Bodies myth, as propagated by the exhibition under examination, may in every factual detail correspond to the findings of a responsible science, and yet this would remain utterly coincidental; its presentation nonetheless a mythical confabulation. (To this end, biologism is most threatening when the factual support for its ideological claims is verifiably true. Phrenology, for example, was never such a threat to human dignity as many a more innocuous Darwinism, because it could be falsified by ever more rigorous scientific research; hence the connection between allegedly disinterested science and dubious value claims, as though one followed naturally upon the other, is left intact, even strengthened, by the rejoinder. One may persist in believing that value claims are subject to falsification.) Ideology in this case functions by restoring magical properties to the object of science. The kind of metonymy whereby a single body may denote the unchecked claims of a vast discourse bears close relation to the manner in which, by Adorno and Horkheimer's account, magic and myth operate. "Magic implies specific representation. What is done to the spear, the hair, the name of the enemy, is also to befall his person" (Adorno 2008, 6). But in every such case, the singularity of the effigy produced a worldly remainder, in much the same manner that the Christian burial site represents the general equality of every man in death, as well as the specific memory of all interred therein. But the object of science is not a representation of anything; it is a self-same specimen. What then is there to say about an exhibition such as Bodies, except that it is haunted by its own undead remainder, semiotically religious although spiritually bereft; for it takes the specimen-object of science and imbues it with a mythic narrative of progress, even while exploiting a methodical separation from its social context, lest the imaginary causality of mythology open onto a new narrative dimension to the display; that of a torture gallery. And can we not find in this shared mythical structure a space for the assertion of rights?

For universal human rights are a semantic innovation on behalf of those who absolutely lack any affordance of health, safety, or self-determination. One can imagine the Chinese political prisoner shocked to discover that they had been the subject of rights throughout their torture and detainment; but paradoxically, this privation is a pre-requisite to the invocation of rights. This is a distinctly theological motif; the by-no-means demonstrable conviction that where

there is a body, there is a body of rights; and this positing of an indivisible integrity from which rights are derived, and to which rights are addressed, is nothing other than a contingent decision, one myth among many available to modern taste.

“In the camps,” Adorno writes, “specimens died rather than individuals,” depriving the interred of what “ultimate, minimal property had been his own” (Schweppenhäuser 2009, 67). It is, in the final, eschatological event, an assertion of exactly this “minimal property” belonging to the pre-modern subject that gave the Dance of Death its timeless meaning; likewise, before blind obeisance to work took over from its ritual function, it was the submersion of the individual in a corporealized social tableau allowed the ultimate, unsurpassable sacrifice to be enacted upon the living subject in advance of his or her obliteration. This ritual-aesthetic participation then comprises the basis for those rights that we may hold as unassailable, an extra-legal conductor between persons as though each were part of a larger body. It is in this spirit, I think, that Raoul Vaneigem proposes as his first, most basic, universal right, “the right to *become* human” (Vaneigem 2003 [my emphasis]). Any doctrine of rights that attempts to forego the processual nature of the positive appearance of its subject will always be capable only of administering to bodies, nothing more.

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