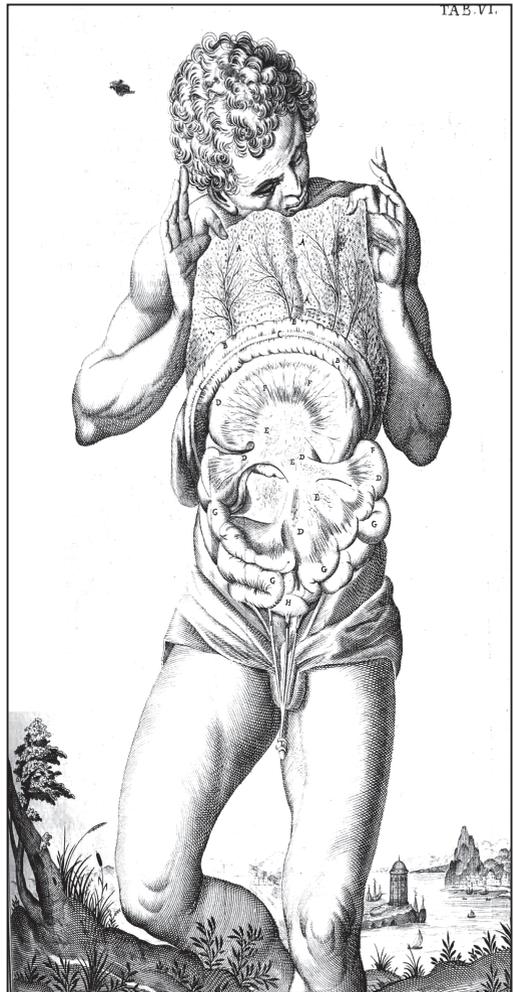


THE DISSECTED BODY

Venelin Shurelov

Current human codes for language, creativity, behavior and emotions are synthesized in ritualized myth labs, such as the various art forms. Theatre art as a syncretic form skillfully summarizes these developments. One of the steadiest trends is related to the efforts to find tools for comprehending and controlling the world around us and to adapt such tools to human society. This understanding coincides with another mysterious evolution: the growing effort to improve the human condition, through our own technological reproduction and the concept of the human body as a control tool. The epic history of the theatricalization of the technological human counterpart goes through the symbolic and actual mortification of the human body.

This text aims to draw attention to the perspective to the human body through the eyes of Enlightenment anatomists. What is the degree of influence of their discoveries on the art of Modernity? What do “artists / anatomists” reveal beneath the surface of the human body? What does Modernity reveal under its own skin, establishing its own normativeness? How does what it discovers affect the understanding of the body, the individual, the subject, the object? Is a new theatrical territory being born on the dissection table?



Tabulae Anatomicae... Giulio Casserio, 1552–1616 [anatomist] and Odoardo Fialetti, 1573–1638? [artist], Venice, 1627. Copper engraving, National Library of Medicine.

The body and the corporeal are the point of intersection, where two streams meet, but they sometimes diverge, settle, and also stir: the streams of the human and of the inhuman. In this paper¹ these concepts are replaced by an actor (human) and an object (inhuman). In the practice of theater, the boundaries between the human and inhuman are removed, they exchange properties, meanings, energies. A new body is born in this process: the body of the performer. Its functions throughout the history of the theater are determined by many factors (religious, social, political), as the bearer of various schemes for visualization of the imaginary or the brutally mundane. However, never has the performing body, and the body in general, been so radicalized in its autonomy as it is in Modernity. New practices introduce such body constructions in which the body becomes an exclusive source of aesthetic strategies, values and symptoms.

“Although the body is paramount to the theatrical event, the theater contains the assumption that the body is in fact redundant or that it must be transformed or replaced in order to achieve the perfect theatre performance. However, in the theatre performance the body is always ready to provide itself (by agreement) in the exchange aimed at achieving a successful image, the perfect shape is a surface/epidermis capable of constant transformations.”² This is one of the inherent paradoxes in theater as an art form; the aesthetics of the performing body continues to be

¹ This paper is part of a larger study by the author: *The Actor As An Object, The Object As An Actor*.

² Kunst, Bojana. *The Fragmentary Body and the Question of Normativity*. <http://www2.arnes.si/~ljintima2/kunst/t-fbqn.html>.

inhabited by the ideal of the impossible body – a body capable of overcoming mental and biological limitations, overcoming gravity (ballet), capable of endless rehearsals, immortal, irradiated with absolute grace (Heinrich v. Kleist), flawless, perfect and functional. The idea of the performing body in its deep essence is of an *artificial* body, significantly different in its performance from its everyday behavior. The longing for the impossible body contains an ontological connection to the replacement of the body with an artificial one; in fact, each new theatrical paradigm introduces its own system of substitution, a strategy representing a whole network of new theatrical signs, sometimes disguised by the illusion of mimesis – the naturalism, sometimes enthusiastically emphasizing the artificial – the avant-garde.

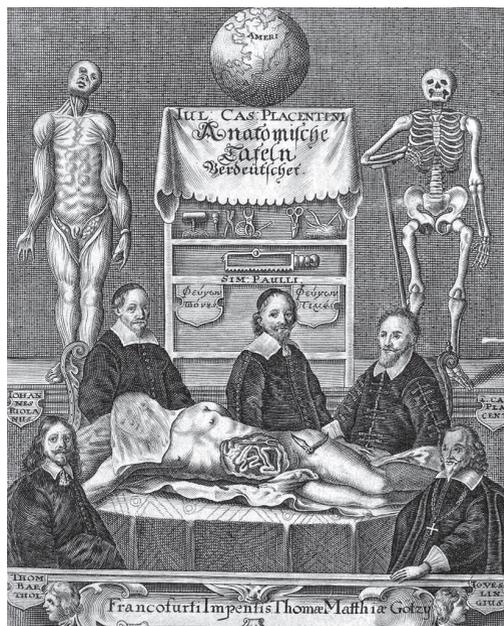
At a time when the *artificial* still belonged to the mystical world and the theatre had the function of making the connection between man and God, the perfect body was hung over the stage – *deus ex machina*. In the Age of Enlightenment, when the body was “revealed” as a machine without secrets, the machine became a metaphor for the complex of emotional functions and the performing body was perceived as a machine producing emotions (Diderot). When individual machines are connected to the abstract system by functional automatism, the body on the stage is reduced to an abstract conglomeration. With the help of evolving technological capabilities, it is gradually becoming a fully applicable category.

Before we get there, we will go back in time to the image of that helpless, naked and cold body placed on the dissection table, in the operating room of some of the

famous anatomists, who first received the right to look into the *unseen* and carefully systematize it. As repulsive as this picture may seem to us, we must pay special attention to it. The paradox is that it was important mostly because of the way it was viewed. The change in the way we see things changes the world of images. Modernity is the time when the culmination of this process, which turned into the *liberation* of images, occurs. Before the liberation of images, Modernity was in the crisis of its own definition, since it recognized itself in the self-experiential actuality and it lacked an image of itself. The anatomical passion for both revealing and veiling the image is also a man's attitude towards the *ideal* (normative) body. In search of its normativeness Modernity perceives, but also further develops the experience of the Enlightenment in revealing what is beneath the epidermal surface. The modern obsession with the fragmented and dissected body was preceded by the anatomical gaze in the seventeenth century.

Let us follow the imagology of time, part of which is visible in this image: atlases, wax models, anatomical collections and one subject with a special status: the anatomist. The role of the latter is crucial, it is the link between the theory of gaze and the theory of image, since he has received not only a scientific education of the eye, but also has the skill of the hand. Obviously, the status of anatomists was very similar to that of sculptors, artists, architects with an additional, essential mission to mediate between science and art. It was the anatomists who were authorized to reveal *formae in profundis*³ and thus to distinguish the surface form from the essence hidden

³ *De profundis* – Latin, literally “from the depths”.



This illustration shows five notable anatomists posing around a corpse. In the upper middle part of the image, where the continent of America can be seen on the globe, the idea of the anatomical body as the “New World” and the dissection as a journey of exploration is clearly expressed. Frankfurt, 1656.

beneath the surface between the visible and the invisible. This privilege granted to anatomists influenced art. We assume that these artists observed much more than everyone else who conventionally can see. They were able to represent the forms hidden below, revealing the hidden matter much more accurately, because it is much *clearer* in their view.

“The exploration of the invisible was no less than a spectacle – an unusual form of initiation, a revelation ritual for people chosen (and competent enough) to enter the imaginary; and, at the same time, a privilege to create the basic image of the body, as well as the relating stereotypes of that period.”⁴

⁴ Kunst, Bojana. Op. cit.

The intertwining of artistic and anatomical ideas was encouraged during the Renaissance. During this period the work of the anatomist was established as a public phenomenon. I would like to briefly mention the causes and consequences of this process. In response to changes in the medical education and practice – a result of the increased circulation of ancient and medieval anatomical treatises, thanks to new inventions in printing and the growing fascination with the so-called *postmortem* state of the human body, a curious new structure appeared in a number of European cities: the *anatomical theater*⁵. “Usually built of wood, it was an ephemeral structure, not unlike a theatrical set, designed to accommodate the occasional dissection that the early Renaissance university demanded. These temporary theaters could be built in preexisting spaces – lecture halls or, better yet, churches and public piazzas that were already designed to accommodate audiences in the hundreds.”⁶ The structure of the anatomical theater played an important role in drawing attention to the visual aspects of the new anatomy. It *dramatized* the dissection, offered each visitor a tangible and immediate visual experience. “The famous Flemish anatomist Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564), who performed numerous dissections throughout Europe between the 1530s and 1543, usually worked in temporary wooden theaters. ... Vesalius exploited contemporary theatrical techniques, diminishing the distance between the

⁵ Theatre (English) 1. theatre; 2. med. operating room.

⁶ Park, Katharine and Daston, Lorraine. *The Cambridge History of Science*. Volume 3. *Early Modern Science*. Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 275.



The Reward of Cruelty (1751) by William Hogarth (1697–1764), engraving, British Museum.

lecturer and the audience by allowing the audience to handle the organs as he removed them from the body.”⁷ In his *Anatomy: Or Five Books on the History of the Human Body*, Alessandro Benedetti published the earliest and most comprehensive description of this new structure; here is a part of it: “A temporary theater should be built at a large and well-ventilated place, with seats arranged in a circle, as in the Colosseum in Rome and the Arena in Verona, sufficiently large to accommodate a great number of spectators in such a manner that the teacher would not be inconvenienced by the crowd... The corpse has to be put on a table in the center of the theater in an elevated and clear place easily accessible to the dissector.”⁸ The comparison with the Colosseum, although very pretentious, gives us a clear idea of the high attractiveness of the spectacle.

The trajectory I explore in relation to the body, which began during the

⁷ Ibidem, p. 276.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 275.

Renaissance, continued into the Enlightenment, and culminated in the avant-garde of the early twentieth century, where several scattered pieces of the body remain, is an interesting research object. In its starting point, it is represented mainly as a return to the classical (ancient) image, in the sense of the Renaissance ideal of harmony of the inner and outer. The darkness of the morbid anatomical theater is at the same time permeated by the light of the ideal body. One of the main ideas leading the hand of anatomists is the choice of the finest elements presented in the infinite variety of nature. The body chosen for dissection had to be as beautiful and perfect as possible, only perfect bodies could become exhibits on the basis of which everyone could base their criteria. In 1796, Samuel Thomas von Sömmerring published one of the first anatomical works containing an image of a female skeleton, which he modeled after the Venus of Medici, with the desire to present the shapes as ideal as possible. The author's intention was not to show the woman or the man in their individuality, but to present the ideal human.

The practice of the Enlightenment anatomists is quite different – the bodies available for study were far from the Renaissance ideal. On the contrary, they were separated from the whole moral and ritual system of anatomy and medicine. An invitation to an anatomical lecture reads: "By the favour of our distinguished magistrates I shall reveal to the sight of any of you who are curious to see what nature has enshrined in all of us."⁹

This *peeking* definitely adds a perverse and eccentric dimension to the anatomical perspective. With the determination to get

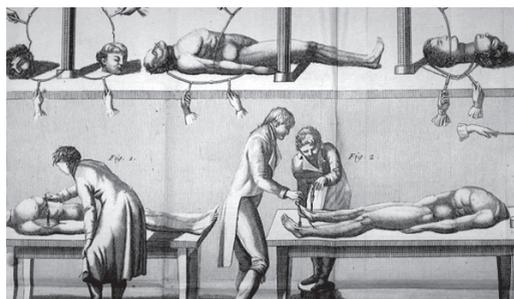
⁹ Kunst, Bojana. Op. cit.

to the *bottom*, an explanation of the unknown and the unseen is sought with the means of dissection, but also through the measurability, calculation and classification of *formae in profundis* they will begin the introduction of the Absent body, the Other Body.

Using his special method of preparation, the famous Dutch anatomist Frederik Ruysch (1638–1731) managed to preserve his exhibits so that they looked alive. His collection mainly contained dead children's bodies and various parts of them, dressed and placed on silk pillows. The terrifying calm of the (quasi) splendor with which they stood in front of the visitor and showed their bodily interior demonstrates the desacralization of the body. These images were beginning to present a universal warning against death and the transient nature of the microcosm, but they also represented a rather ruthless connection between life and death, between interior and exterior.

"Medical advances can provide us with good examples of ethics"¹⁰, wrote the French physician Dr. Pierre Rousseau in 1775. Many secrets of the body were revealed and the body became so much emptier and more artificial, reduced to a systematized, generalized, controlled,

¹⁰ Roussel, Pierre. *Système physique et moral de la femme, ou tableau philosophique de la constitution, de l'état organique, de temperament, des moeurs & des fonctions propres au sexe*. Paris 1775. Cited in: Kunst, Bojana. *The Digital Body: History of Body Visibility*. <http://www2.arnes.si/~ljintima2/kunst/t-fbqn.html>; Schiebinger, L. *Skeletons in the Closet: The First Illustrations of the Female Skeleton in Eighteenth-Century Anatomy*; Gallagher C. & Laqueur T. *The Making of Modern Body*. Berkeley & Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, ed. 1987, p. 68.



Dr. Giovanni Aldini (1762–1834) led an experiment using electricity on recently executed criminals, causing eyes to open, limbs to twitch, and other muscle movements. This illustration to his essay on galvanism shows doctors reviving corpses. Mary Shelley makes a clear reference to galvanism in her revised 1831 edition of "Frankenstein".

universalized, exteriorized, cut, re-shaped, stuffed, prosthetic, objectified *thing*. Surface and content, body and soul, external effect and the ability of the internal, invisible principles and visible results. The manifestation of the mystery about our body undoubtedly has a long history, but for the first time in history the body is seen *dissected*, it is regarded as a source of information, as a sample, as a production of a physical image. Thus, in the Age of Enlightenment, the body began to influence views on nature, life and morality.

The body is deprived of radiance and wholeness, but it is precisely the body as a fragment, as a destroyed wholeness that strongly reflects on Modernity. A good expression of this view can be found in the new perception of the world defined by Benjamin: "A generation that had to go to school in carts is now standing in the open air in a remote province where there is nothing reminiscent of change except the moving clouds, and below those clouds, under the power field of destructive torrents and thunder, is the small and fragile

body."¹¹ We can assert that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were marked by the disintegration of bodily structure and the ubiquitous consciousness of its uselessness, fragility and defilement.

The widespread medicalization in the nineteenth century, what Gustave Flaubert called a "clinical view of life", had a wide impact on the discourse and practice of theatre. Pathologies, symptoms, neuroses, infections, degeneration provide theatre with a whole new network of psychophysical correlations. The development of psychiatry and psychology in the mid- and late nineteenth century was strongly influenced by the somatic view and interventions. The theatrical body of Modernism and the discourse and practice of medicine are intricately connected. Part of this medico-somatic heritage is mediated by naturalism. Modeling itself through scientific observation, naturalism in art is a continuation and finalization of physiology, expanding its field of analysis from the individual to the social body, which in itself is characterized by the normal and the pathological. Two revelations of the modern are conceived in naturalism: body language and the penetration into the body. Transparency, which demonstrates scientific observation and the discovery of the functions of organics, raises doubts about the world of words. In a specific way, the cultural influence exercised by scientific medicine contributes to the legitimation

¹¹ Benjamin, Walter. *Experience and poverty*. In: *Selected Writings*. M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland, & G. Smith (Eds.), R. Livingstone and others (Trans.), vol. 2, part 2. 1931–1934. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA., p. 731–736. [First published in *Die Welt im Wort* (Prague), December 1933. *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, 213–219.]

of the bodily in literature and in the theatrical text. For Foucault, the clinical creates a specific relationship between the body and the eye; it also contributes to the formation of a specific dialectic between the internal and the external, the normal and the pathology, the institutional and the individual. The focus is on the body and its medicalized articulation. Rhetoric is the enemy of Zola's naturalistic theater. Adhering to the *phenomenon*, he sees in the words only an expression devoid of meaning.

It is interesting to discuss the influence of the understanding of corporeality by naturalism on drama and its theory in the late nineteenth century: for example, in the plays of Ibsen, who simultaneously liberates and limits body language, exploring the physiological dimensions of the ethical and motivating factors caused by the idea of transparency inherent in pathological anatomy and other branches of experimental medicine of the nineteenth century. The involvement of medicalization, accompanied by pathology (crimes, violence, wars, sexual deviations), is definitely relevant to the representation of the individual and collective body in naturalism. This somatic discourse draws attention to the strange overlap and relationship between the institutions of theatre and medicine in the early period of modern drama. The biographical reference is quite indicative. Ibsen and Strindberg studied medicine before becoming involved in the theater, and Chekhov was a medical practitioner. The interpretation of this trajectory suggests reflections in the fields of theatre and medicine, each of which introduces a certain discourse and technologies concerning the physical. The stethoscope first used in 1816, the micro-

scope and thermometer – in the middle of the century, the X-rays – after 1890, are part of the advancement of medical technology for penetration, measurement and imaging of the body. In general, the birth of what we call “modern drama” is happening alongside an unprecedented cultural, professional and technological development of medicine.

The modern medicalized body is also a technological body: after naturalism with its organicity it is complicated by the analytical and material intervention of machines. As Tim Armstrong argues in his book *Modernism, Technology, and the Body*¹², since the early twentieth century, the body has been permeated by a number of additional means; the body itself is incorporated in a complex of different biomechanical systems, technologies and regimes that can be applied to it.

Such is the phenomenology of time: theatricalization of medicine and medicalization of theatre.

The phenomenon of the fragmentary/ dissected body has its projection in the postmodern, technocultural or, let us call it, *contemporary* state. The vivid images that emerge relate to “the function of the human body is reduced to that of a container (Stelarc), a specimen for the analysis of man's evolutionary and physiological potentials (Eduardo Kac, CAE), to that of mere material subjected to various operative and technological transformations (Orlan, Acker). In other words, the body is viewed as something that should be despised, dissected, or transformed.”¹³

¹² Armstrong, Tim. *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

¹³ Kunst, Bojana. Op. cit.



"Woman's head", Orlan, 1996.

This phenomenon also expresses the ultimate problematic fragility of the nature of the ideal image itself. Any production of an ideal image is the result of mutilation. The body can never be depicted as an ideal whole, on the contrary, it is always represented only as a fragment. No doubt no one was as aware of this fact as the anatomists. Not those of our time who are devoted to objective scientific work, who consider the dead body as a morphological object to study, but the anatomist-artists of the Enlightenment.

According to Barbara-Maria Stafford, the eighteenth century still influences many visual strategies today. In fact, many of the special phenomena of the past seem to have been renewed in the present. The latest exhibition of bodies and body parts by Gunther von Hagen¹⁴, Damien Hirst's cut animal carcasses¹⁵, Orlan's ongoing plastic surgery¹⁶, Stelarc and his latest project to implant a third ear¹⁷, Eduardo Kac's biogenetic experiments¹⁸ and a number of other radical strategies for post-human body, body

¹⁴ <http://www.bodyworlds.com/en.html>.

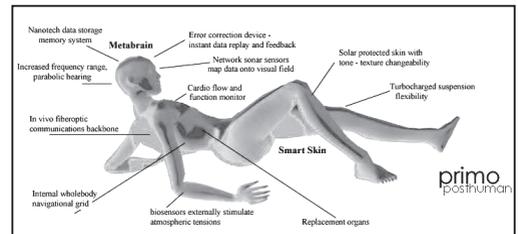
¹⁵ <http://www.damienhirst.com>.

¹⁶ <http://www.orlan.net>.

¹⁷ <http://www.stelarc.va.com.au>.

¹⁸ <http://www.ekac.org>.

hacking, transhuman, bioroids and cyborg indicate that man's anatomical passion is still dominant. However, it is now based on the discomfort of the ever-increasing difference between the physical and the technological, in their degrees of rational attainment. The discomfort is also based in the fact that we are constantly confronted face to face with a weak body, reminiscent of the lost battles with nature and evolution, dependent and fragile, unable even to maintain its intimacy and identity. "The modern man since the late nineteenth century to the present day has been successfully overcoming the fantastic moral classifications of the eighteenth century, but only to replace them with a world without secrets, bodies without organs, naked flesh, an epidermal sack, creations of duplicates and clones and an upside-down genetic identification."¹⁹



"Primo Posthuman 3M+", Natasha Vita More, 2000.

In art in general, the spirit should perceive itself as a simultaneous process of self-externalization and a return to itself. In the dynamics of this process, modern art will perceive itself as a sensory form, as an act of freedom and reflection. In opposition to the classical imitation of nature, art will expand the framework of beauty by shifting to the aesthetics of the ugly, the spicy, the adventurous, the striking, the

¹⁹ Kunst, Bojana. Op. cit.

new, the shocking and the disgusting. "Modern art is decadent in reality, but thanks to this it has advanced on the path of absolute knowledge."²⁰

Bojana Kunst visionarily summarizes: "In the continuous presence of the desire for a whole and ideal image, reflected even in the dispersed parts of the fragmentary body, and to the fact that, after so many centuries that divide us from the mentality of the Enlightenment, we still believe in a certain dialectic of the interior and exterior of the body. The resemblance between us and the scholars of the Enlightenment is only that of strategy, however; the fascination of horror and the universal allegorical character of the anatomical images of the Enlightenment have been substituted by a world without secrets, bodies without organs, naked flesh and its fragile potentiality crushed by commercial, popular, scientific and aesthetic pressures."²¹

The human body is not just an object that is part of the material, external world or existing outside and independent of knowledge; nor is it available as the goal of an activity over which we can dominate, which we can exploit and manipulate. It has its own constitution and its own written language, the decipherment of which was initiated in a special way by the anatomists of the Enlightenment.

During the Enlightenment the naked and cut human body was freed from its sacredness, it extolled the transient, the dynamism, the actuality, the dialectic of mystery and scandal, and the pleasure derived from horror.

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Aneta Stefanova*

²⁰ Хабермас, Ю. Философският дискурс на Модерността. ЕА-Плевен, 1999, с. 47. [Habermas, Jürgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. EA-Pleven Publishing House, 1999, p. 47.]

²¹ Kunst, Bojana. Op.cit. <http://www2.arnes.si/~ljintima2/kunst/t-fbqn.html>.