

CLAUDIO BERNARDI* - GIUSEPPE FORNARI^o - DAVID LE BRETON[□]

INTRODUCTION¹

1. THE BODY

Performativity pertains to the body as much as to the individual, because one cannot be conceived without the other. We are bodies, and as such we never stop acting, crossed by the countless techniques of the body presented by Mauss in a famous article: even sleeping is performative. Reflectivity is neither an act of pure thinking nor a single trait of consciousness, it concerns the body as well, if one rejects a dualistic vision. Experience shows that it is not necessarily a lucid and elaborate reflection; during daily life many actions are executed without thinking about them but not without reflexivity², a practical intelligence is diluted in factual evidence, even though sometimes a clumsy movement or a hasty evaluation of distances or of the terrain may cause a fall or a temporary failure of the action. The body is no different from thought; it is the person considered with his or her perceptions, emotions, knowledge of the world, learned abilities...

A movement is learned when the body has understood it – according to Merleau-Ponty – that is, when it has incorporated it into its ‘world’, and to move one’s body is to aim at things through it; it is to allow oneself to respond to their call, which is made upon it independently of any representation. Motility is not, then, as it were, a handmaid of consciousness, transporting the body to that point in space of which we have formed a representation beforehand³.

The body does not cease to be reflexive, even if only to put one foot in front of the other or to hold a conversation with someone. It is always a power of acting. It is the foundation of an endless movement of inventions or adjustments in respect of the many different situations the individual has to deal with. Daily life is an infinite sequence of acts, mimics, postures, techniques of the body, sensory perceptions, emotions, and so on, which happen without being necessarily accompanied by a clear consciousness on

* Dipartimento di Scienze della Comunicazione dello Spettacolo, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano – claudio.bernardi@unicatt.it; ^o Dipartimento di Scienze umane e sociali, Università degli studi di Bergamo – giuseppe.fornari@unibg.it; [□] Faculté des Sciences Sociales, Université de Strasbourg – david.le.breton@unistra.fr.

¹ Claudio Bernardi wrote § 3, Giuseppe Fornari § 2, David Le Breton § 1.

² On sensory perception and the emotions, see D. Le Breton, *Il sapore del mondo. Un'antropologia dei sensi*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2007 as well as *Les passions ordinaires. Anthropologie des émotions*, Paris: Petite Bibliothèque Payot, 2004.

³ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945, 161; Engl. transl. *Phenomenology of Perception*, London-Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, 139.

the part of the individual who is undoubtedly performing them. The body is not a device perfectly serving the spirit's purposes; they are intertwined. A painter's talent is not only entrusted to what he projects onto his canvas, but to the movement of his hands, as if he were observing them from a distance, before resuming or accentuating a trait. Again, Merleau-Ponty points this out clearly:

it is possible to know how to type without being able to say where the letters which make the words are to be found on the banks of the keys. To know how to type is not, then, to know the place of each letter among the keys [...]. It is knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort. [...] The movement of her fingers is not presented to the typist as a path through space which can be described, but merely as a certain adjustment of motility, physiognomically distinguishable from any other⁴.

Once the gesture is integrated into the bodily schema, there is no need for the effort that characterized the learning phase, the act becomes self-evident. The child who had trouble maintaining his balance on the bicycle has forgotten his initial difficulties, the driver who was so awkward in the beginning at the wheel, drives now with ease, careful but relaxed; the pole vaulter aims to lift himself over a bar four or five meters high after overcoming his youthful fears... Thousands of gestures of our daily personal or professional life have become diluted in the thought-less evidence of their own execution, even if they were difficult to learn; however they are by no means any less thought. In his *Les mondes de l'art*, Howard Becker⁵ recounts that when he played the piano in the 1940s, he used to play 7 or 8 hours without interruption. It sometimes happened that he fell asleep in the middle of a piece and woke up, and he would only lose his track when he realized that he had slept. A practical knowledge is straightaway a sensory, kinaesthetic, proprioceptive, gestural, even affective repertoire, which embraces the individual with all the components of his relationship with the world.

2. THE EXPOSED BODY. A SHORT DISEMBODIED HISTORY OF THE BODY. AN EXHIBITION

1. *Bodily complications*

The concept of the body, its representation and its experience are at the centre of human existence, at its very heart; for many today they represent its entirety, the only human reality which can be proven and experienced, and as such can be exposed and imposed, because it is seen and perceived as the only possible horizon, exclusive and inclusive at the same time, impossible, to put it simply, to transcend.

The body is tangible, real; the incorporeal is abstract, imaginary, unreal. Yet, despite this sort of undeclared and universal dogma, the bodily representation and notion, as soon as they are inspected more closely, as soon as they are exposed in their different components, appear complex and dissolve into dangerous uncertainties and contiguities,

⁴ *Ibid.*, 168; *ibid.*, 144.

⁵ H. Becker, *Les mondes de l'art*, Paris: Flammarion, 1988.

disconcerting breakdowns and fragilities, altering the initial picture of pure physical and existential reality.

This is a paradox that reproduces and intensifies the one implicitly posed by the notion of “matter”, so ubiquitous and universal as to be considered the only true and real thing, while the notion of spirit has all but disappeared from language, as a quite reprehensible synonym for something illusory and non-existent. However, science itself, which should celebrate the triumph of matter and of materialism (a philosophical category unspoken of nowadays, after the demise of all its antagonistic idealisms and spiritualisms) shows instead that what we call matter is nothing but energy transformed, in other words something fundamentally elusive. Science teaches us that, from a physical standpoint, we are a beam of energy aggregated in the shape of a body, but this same body needs an unceasing production and distribution of energy to be kept alive, that is the constant process of elaboration and transformation of our bodily metabolism. Not only are we a complex system of atoms and molecules held together by rotational motion and force fields, but also, for this same reason, we are an unstoppable flow of metabolic alterations, of electrical fields, and of movements. Matter, apparently so solid, breaks down as soon as it is scrutinised by the scientific eye.

All this holds true, but it is not yet the issue. The truth of the matter is that the notion itself of the body as a unified and personal entity, as an individual and indivisible attribute of the subject who has a body, who “is” a body, is relatively recent. The unified conception of the body dates, with some hesitation and indetermination, from the first historical civilisations. The body conceived as an utterly personal attribute originates during the Christian era, from the idea of the individual made up of an indissoluble unity of body and soul, but still contains some areas of ambiguity and frequent violations of abstract principles, with socially and hierarchically based distinctions which lead to different treatments, different degrees of care and protection of the body. On close inspection, the Judeo-Christian vision of the body – which is on the one hand so fundamental to our current conception of it, marking so indisputably a discontinuity against the backdrop of the ancient civilisations – shares with them, on the other hand, some archaic traits too often overlooked or underestimated.

We can begin with the fundamental “exhibition” of the body and of bodies in the figurative arts through history. Until the end of the Middle Ages, in sacred and sacredly connotated art alike, the human or super-human body (the latter intended as a body superior but comparable to the human one) had a quantitative character. The more important the represented person was, the bigger his or her bodily dimensions would be in the representation, as can easily be seen in countless altarpieces where the donor is tiny compared to the holy images. A superior ranking in the earthly or celestial hierarchy implies a bigger and weightier body. The further we go back in time, the more apparent the bodily measurement of importance becomes, and it is clearly stated in the imagery of the sacred texts. As Isaiah describes his prophetic vocation, he saw “the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple” (6,1). Without entering too deeply into anthropomorphic detail, which could be deemed inadequate, the bodily symbolism filters through the text. God appears as a gigantic human being, ready to crush his enemies and reward his faithful servants, as a Super-King with a massive throne dwarfing the Temple of Jerusalem, with out of range powers to boot. This reminds us of the Egyptian depictions of the over-sized Pharaoh grappling handfuls of tiny prisoners during the battle. Interpretation points to understanding that the visible dimensions of the leader correspond to his “power” to reveal himself, to expose and impose himself upon his subjects, a power which engages the viewer and subjugates

him, in a way that is yet to be determined, considering that these texts and images give the representation as a true fact, not so much as an underlying habit but as the standard mode of operation of reality.

It would be misleading, and a typical modern attitude, to read the Egyptian vision and more so the Biblical narration in purely allegorical terms, despite the fact that the latter uses a symbolic language which borders in the spiritual realm. It was clear to Isaiah, as much as to the medieval artists, that the visions and proportions were not physical, but they reflected nonetheless (1) an absolutely real power and (2) phenomena that can hardly be perceived and comprehended with a modern attitude, but that certify how elementary and inadequate is the vision that we generally have of the body and of its ways of being exhibited. Let's analyse the second aspect, that is commonly less acknowledged, to enable us to go back later to the first and understand the origin of the body powers.

In all archaic and ancient civilisations and in European culture until the Seventeenth century, the body was not considered a material entity counterposed to an immaterial entity, the soul, but was part of a much more complex and articulate cosmic and metaphysical topology. Despite partaking in a more corruptible sphere, corresponding to Aristotle's sublunary world, the body was in close contact with the spiritual and divine world thanks to a vast domain of subtle phenomena, halfway between spiritual and material world, bearing countless influences on people's lives and destinies, and especially on their bodies, seen as recipients of these influxes and source of subsequent irradiation to others in turn. These phenomena were, according to Aristotle, composed of *pneuma* (aether), the fifth element or quintessence, transparent and incorruptible, the stuff the heavenly bodies are made of, presiding also to conception. There is no doubt, however, that the Stagirite's ideas have a far more ancient root⁶. Astral influences calculated according to astrological formulae, having a bearing also on health matters, were only one of the many and frequent examples for ancient, medieval and protomodern men. These influxes were explained as currents of particles or waves emanating from bodies, and they were also the basis for knowledge; the faculty collecting them and transmitting them to the brain through the sense was the imagination or phantasy, a truly intermediate organ, responsible for the relationship with the external world and the functioning of the mind.

Peculiar for our nowadays attitude, and relatively neglected by philosophers and art historians alike, is the aesthetic theory that spun from these representations of the world, where the images were believed to send subtle influences (imprints) which could condition the existence and the actions of those who were next to the images. The sacred representations exposed in churches, therefore, must really influence the worshippers by way of sending them examples of religious edification, as images posted in children's rooms, according to their content, would affect them; and pictures seen during sexual intercourse would determine the character of the conceived, and so on. A Sixteenth century art treatise laments the fatigue experienced by artists, exhausted by the particles emitted by their own minds during their artistic creation, and Leonardo da Vinci shares the same pneumatic view of painting⁷. The same theory is still argued and eloquently

⁶ See G. Agamben, *Stanze. La parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale*, Torino: Einaudi, 2011, 84-90; I.P. Cuianu, *Eros e magia nel Rinascimento. La congiunzione astrologica del 1484*; It. transl. G. Ernesti, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2006, 15-23.

⁷ G. Fornari, *Mediazione, magia, desiderio in Leonardo e nel Rinascimento*, Poggia a Caiano: CB Edizioni, 2012.

defended in his work by Tommaso Campanella, albeit in a more rational and advanced version, organically based on his Renaissance, medieval and ancient predecessors, frequently cited as confirming or at least comparative sources⁸. It is clear that a similar vision of the world does not give rise to ideas akin to ours; on the contrary, it generates an endless series of conceptual and cultural misunderstandings, due to the fact that we, the modern, tend to “translate” old texts with concepts typical of our age, quite often causing misinterpretations. Suffice it to think of the ancient, medieval and Renaissance theories of falling in love, caused by particles or beams departing from the eyes of the lover to hit the beloved, so that Dante’s Francesca, in the *Canto V* of the *Inferno* speaks of “amor ch’a nullo amato amar perdona” (“Love, that denial takes from none belov’d”)⁹, meaning that love is a spiritual and intermediary power that once activated cannot be prevented from achieving its marvellous and dangerous effect: the recipient of love has the duty to interpret it at his or her best from a religious and moral point of view, but does not have the power to stop it. For the Ancient Greeks love was indeed caused by arrows, projectiles invisible and fatally effective, shot by Eros according to Aphrodite’s orders. One cannot apply modern psychological terms to times having similar categories of thought, without falling into a crude anachronism.

As we have seen, the body was the target and source of these subtle or pneumatic forces, the same that sustained its life: and the third dimension corresponding to this intermediary or pneumatic apparatus was the *pneuma*, in Latin the *spiritus*, which acted as a middle term, as an intermediating force between body and soul, keeping the human being whole and guiding its destiny. The contiguity and ambiguity between this meaning of *pneuma* or *spiritus* and the meaning of spirit, intended as a purely immaterial reality, are not casual: it is not a doctrinal imprecision or uncertainty but rather the actual lack of any clear cut, the true uninterrupted exchange that ensures communication between heaven and earth, through an infinite number of forces and “spiritual” beings. In this invisible multitude we find whole crowds of external spirits, good or bad, with whom the individual had to enter into relationship, finding the correct way, that is approaching the former and avoiding the latter, with a representation that even Christianity interprets according to the dichotomy angels/devils and with a peculiar emphasis on men’s free will, which primarily consisted in being able to choose the best vessels for salvation, following the directions of the Church, of the sacraments and the edifying images that the believer had to keep close at hand.

All these representations and beliefs clearly pertain to the great tradition of magic, despite the fact that the category of magic has become in modern times extremely discredited, and appears, to us at least, bland and requiring precise historical contextualisations. The general concept of magic needs to be linked to those of religion and the sacred, so that it is correct to speak of a magico-sacral vision, and the connection remains active as long as the phenomena, which for us are only magical, retain their vitality. Once the “magical” beliefs and practices lose their vigour, they become detached from their religious matrix and turn into residual memories of a world that has been left behind by a new system, which is therefore branded as reactionary and superstitious¹⁰. Several different phases and versions of magico-operative knowledge followed one an-

⁸ See for example T. Campanella, *Del senso delle cose e della magia*, edited by G. Ernst, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2007.

⁹ Dante, *Inferno*, V, 103 (translated by H.F. Cary).

¹⁰ E. De Martino, *Il mondo magico. Prolegomeni a una storia del magismo*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2007, 159-168.

other, each marking a departure and a clear break with the others. We can simplify the succession into the following four stages: archaic, closely bound up with sacrificial rites and operations; ancient, interpreted and expressed by religious and politico-sacral institutions; Christian-Medieval, reinterpreted by the Church, which set out to ban all magical forms closely associated with paganism and the deification of nature; Renaissance and proto-modern, which produced a new ideal of natural magic based on nature working *juxta propria principia*.

Each of these stages yields its own conception of the body. In archaic times, the body was the intersection and result of sacred forces which expressed and orientated themselves through rites, *in primis* sacrificial ones; in the ancient view, in the Western Greek and Roman civilisations, the body acquired more autonomy but existed only thanks to the political and religious institutions which guaranteed its existence, but could also impede it: it was the time of human sacrifices turned into institutionalised torture and the death penalty; in the medieval view, the ancient idea that the body could be revoked by the religious and political authorities lingered, with the difference that Christ's central example introduced the principle of a final bodily reconstruction through the Resurrection, together with the positive or negative retribution owed to the individual; in Renaissance times the body earned itself the status of an autonomous entity, which could be analysed and understood in itself, within the laws of universal connections, inflected however in accordance with the criteria of natural magic.

The scientific revolution of the Seventeenth century clearly made a clean break, destined to put an end to the collective power of magical-performative representations, and introduced modern times, or to be more precise the Western model of modernity. The first to give a convincing account of this process was Michel Foucault in *Les mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*) and subsequent works. His thought deserves to be closely analysed, as it will lead us to understand how to be acquainted with an unusual and disorientating scenario, which apparently makes our views of the body inconsistent and unstable.

2. Foucault's archaeological corporeity

Foucault's historical view, following Nietzsche's genealogy and his demystifying attribution of modern ethical and cognitive representations to long forgotten archaic dimensions, uncovered in great analytical detail, and supported with many sources, the great breakdown and defense mechanism (both caesura and censure) against the past which is at the origin of the entire Modern civilization. However, Foucault's genealogy, which has important bearings on the concept of body, does not look especially forthcoming at first, as it is presented in very lean and intransitive terms and classified emblematically as "archaeology"; it is an original reworking of Nietzsche's project of genealogy, passing through Bataille, and completed with Marxist hints and Structuralist synchronic analyses. The archaeological metaphor explicitly underlines the connotation of something fragmented and buried that is unearthed but is found to be lacking in any vital content, and is impossible to rebuild.

Each historico-cultural stage is, according to Foucault, autistically enclosed within itself, following an organisation of powers which also determines its shapes and language, until a new socio-political formation comes along to establish its own episteme, a different linguistic and conceptual elaboration of a reality that does not have any life of its own, and is totally forged by the most brutal and forward-looking relationships,

overwhelmed by despotic powers organised in the most self-referential of manners. As a consequence, one cannot speak sensibly of history as a process led by any law or purpose, if not within an episteme conditional on a clearly defined domination system. Communication with the past cannot be established except through the residual and negative way of archaeological finds, broken and isolated pieces of long forgotten eras, irrevocably dead and destroyed under the endless sequence of dominations. For these reasons, pre-modern civilisations, with their sympathetic and magic views of relations between things, are as far from us as a remote and out of reach planet, and in this respect the Renaissance is no different from ancient Egypt or prehistoric times¹¹.

The impact of this vision on the representation and concept of the body is considerable, though it only leaks out in some passages, being like a constant backdrop to Foucault's research. The body-machine of Descartes' mechanism takes the place of the body understood as a magic and organic sensorium, passed-through by divine forces and superior influxes, and in turn capable of producing them; and is later superseded, in the nineteenth century, by the body fragmented in its formal and linguistic representations, to the point of being dissolved, reaching an apparent triumph of the human which actually marks its own demise. A disintegration which ultimately brings the dissolution of language into the socio-economic regulation of the world masses reduced to the simple expression of their primary biological needs, the so-called biopower, foretold by the extermination policies of the totalitarian regimes and subsequently more technically organised by the processes of advanced capitalism¹². In this more recent phase, the human body becomes a mere technical variable, the trivialised celebration of the return to nature, the sinking of man before the insignificance of matter. From this we can infer, following Foucault's reconstruction/ deconstruction, that the triumph of the body that we are experiencing nowadays is in fact a shipwreck of the body itself, with the resulting cancellation of all that the previous ages had inscribed and realised in it.

Foucault's research opened new paths in many fundamental directions but was not exploited to its full by historians, as Foucault's historiographical method showed many limitations which in a way caused its collapse upon itself¹³. So it is no accident that, when historicity fails – namely the central role of human history as a unique segment of development through time, capable of reading itself and its own existence – human corporeity, understood as a sphere where significance has both origin and end, fails as well. This is proven by Giorgio Agamben who, carrying Foucault's perspective to an extreme, lays the emphasis on the biopolitical apocalyptic component, proposing a bodily hedonism which hardly differs from the mass biopolitics criticised and described as post-history *à la* Fukuyama¹⁴. In brief, we should leave behind the whole of human history well before having “declared or intended” it, as clearly shown by Foucault's refusal of what he calls, in *The Order of Things*, the “anthropological sleep” from which he would like to awake modern thought¹⁵.

Nonetheless, Foucault's reconstruction of the past reveals somehow the body as the cradle of the original, underlying its peculiarly anomalous position, first and last, de-

¹¹ M. Foucault, *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966, 32-59.

¹² This theory was developed in the lessons at the *Collège de France* collected in M. Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société*, 1976, edizione digitale al link https://monoskop.org/images/9/99/Foucault_Michel_II_faut_defendre_la_societe.pdf.

¹³ As proven by the many restrictions and contradictions in M. Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir*, Paris: Gallimard, 1969.

¹⁴ See G. Agamben, *L'aperto. L'uomo e l'animale*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002.

¹⁵ Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 351 ff.

rived and ancestral, in all respects avoiding classification¹⁶. This is how the philosopher describes this emerging bodily paradox in *The Order of Things*:

But the end of metaphysics is only the negative side of a much more complex event in Western thought. This event is the appearance of man. However, it must not be supposed that he suddenly appeared upon our horizon, imposing the brutal fact of his body, his labour, and his language in a manner so irruptive as to be absolutely baffling to our reflection. It is not man's positive poverty [*misère positive*] that reduced the space of metaphysics so violently. No doubt, on the level of appearances, modernity begins when the human being begins to exist within his organism, inside the shell of his head, inside the armature of his limbs, and in the whole structure of his physiology; when he begins to exist at the centre of a labour by whose principles he is governed and whose product eludes him; when he lodges his thought in the folds of a language so much older than himself that he cannot master its significations, even though they have been called back to life by the insistence of his words. But, more fundamentally, our culture crossed the threshold beyond which we recognize our modernity when finitude was conceived in an interminable cross-reference with itself. Though it is true, at the level of the various branches of knowledge, that finitude is always designated on the basis of man as a concrete being and on the basis of the empirical forms that can be assigned to his existence, nevertheless, at the archaeological level, which reveals the general, historical *a priori* of each of those branches of knowledge, modern man – that man assignable in his corporeal, labouring, and speaking existence – is possible only as a figuration of finitude¹⁷.

Foucault is thinking about the historical moment when human finitude manifested itself in the structural forms of human knowledge, according to Kant who, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* proclaims the ancient architecture of metaphysics unknowable. But we must not be misled by the skilful orchestration of Foucault's reconstruction, clearly indebted to Heidegger's interpretation¹⁸, and his virtuosity in dealing with the acquisitions of the human sciences of the nineteenth century, brushing aside whatever did not tally with his preconceived framework. What is more interesting and relevant is the ubiquitous and at the same time unfinished role played by the human body in the unveiling of the human which is simultaneously an annihilation of it. There is an obvious asymmetry in Foucault's text, which includes in the body and its physiology the organising and productive principle of labour, as well as the folds of the language. Hence Foucault's body coincides with human finitude; however this finitude is not easy to define and circumscribe, contrary to what its spatial connotation would suggest, producing an unsolvable superimposition of empirical content and transcendental explanation which, according to the author, can never be joined, causing the forthcoming disappearance of that hircocervus, of the "empirico-transcendental doublet"¹⁹, of man himself. It is very significant however that it is in the body, that place/non-place, that this contradiction manifests itself, that the death of man, the ultimate meaning of Nietzsche's death of God, can be read for the first and last time. Is this not what explains the strange and indefinite splendour emanated by the mangled bodies subjected to the most atrocious tortures in the *ancien régime*, on which Foucault would elaborate in his subsequent work, *Discipline and Punish*?²⁰

¹⁶ This is detailed in the grand project of the *Histoire de la sexualité*, Paris: Gallimard, vol. I 1976, voll. II-III 1984, Foucault's last work.

¹⁷ Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 328-329 (with edits). [Translator's note: quoted from Kindle ed. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994, 343].

¹⁸ M. Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, Bonn: Friedrich Cohen, 1929.

¹⁹ Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 329-346.

²⁰ M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, Paris: Gallimard, 1975.

This sheds an indirect but penetrating light on the perspicacity and the failure of Foucault's project, on the utility and inadequacy of the historical vision that sustains it, and that it ends up contradictorily denying. The intrinsically aporetic nature of this approach, which, with an argumentative and rhetorical gesture typical of modern times, purports to be the *non plus ultra* of awareness, emerges clearly when it turns out to be systematically unable to explain the historical genesis of the very phenomena that it incompletely describes. No relationship of domination would become so powerfully pervasive and formative unless sanctioned by a significant source of a symbolic kind, becoming a representative tool apt to interpret and shape the world. In the splendour of the ancient tortures, Bataille points us in the direction of emphasising this splendour, which is the primary phenomenon we should consider and which should be linked to its source. And though they are mendacious and illusory, the magical, scientific or linguistic forms described by Foucault are capable of describing reality as a meaningful ensemble, even when the power system celebrates the end of all meaning other than itself, as in the artificial pomp of language and of biopolitics. It is thanks to the idea of *mediation* that this cultural force can be coherently understood, and hence it can be inferred that even when targeted to covering and misrepresenting what was "reality" for all previous ages, this force must interact with a context that in order to exist has necessarily some effective (and therefore true from a performative point of view) repercussions²¹. Even the triumph of mere lies conveys and realises some forms of truth and reality, which can be connected to the notion of *object*, because the human being is in constant interaction with something that surrounds him, from which he comes and to which he must inevitably return.

Furthermore this would prove that, contrary to Foucault's statements, there is not such an absolute and insurmountable abyss between the different historical periods, which would by definition make his archaeological and refutative operation impossible. Even denial and destruction can prove to be positive defining and transmitting means, if aligned in a longer sequence encompassing their generating forces. The systematic rejection of what has come before is actually the classic way to pass down the influence of what is being refused, which will no doubt in time reclaim its cancelled rights, so obsessively downtrodden as to produce the symmetrical reaction of making their effigy apparent every time that they are trodden upon again. The negative of a negative can reinstate the positive initially denied; however, contrary to what is sustained by Hegel's dialectic, it cannot undo the effective destruction of the positive. This has interesting consequences for our theory of the body. We can proceed in our examination of corporeity by taking the events integrally as they develop in history, without any abstract phenomenological method which would disregard history itself, but supposing instead the possibility that the phenomena of the body refer not only to a (hi)story, but also to the very origin of history, thus achieving a truly phenomenologico-historical method²².

3. *Dismembering and remembering*

The body has always existed for the human being in his relationships with others and as an expression of them. The body is by definition exposed, because it is intrinsically

²¹ On the theory of mediation, see G. Fornari, *Storicità radicale. Filosofia e morte di Dio*, Massa: Transeuropa, 2014.

²² For a definition of the phenomenologico-historical method, see *ibid.*, 326-359.

an exposition/exhibition, designed in accordance with rules and modes which define it by segmenting it into accessible and inaccessible zones. The exposed body acquires its features thanks to the corners defining its profile, and thanks to the shadows giving it depth. Bodily exposition is, as a result, mainly visual, because the body can and must be seen in ways and degrees that vary according to circumstances; direct contact with it is only allowed in specific circumstances, socially acceptable and controlled, while the language remains the main mode of contact, bodily and immaterial at the same time, produced by the body to establish a relationship which is still coherent with the pneumatic and intermedial model erased from our cultural memory. Language too is a bodily entity, being an organised combination of sounds that are physically produced and reach the counterpart, exercising influence *in lieu* of physical contact. But visibility is also an optical form of physical contact. We have therefore a crescendo of contacts involving our bodies at increasing levels of physicality and proximity: from visual and auditory contact, at the stem of social relationships, we move on to tactile contact, more controlled and contained, up to the more absorbing and normally forbidden contacts, the olfactory, gustatory, and sexual. At each step, the bodily engagement grows and correspondingly the symbolic barrier also grows, an increasingly stringent network of prohibitions, until it reaches the maximum involvement, when allowed, which is only when the dense texture of inhibitions is suspended.

In all these processes we follow the unitary activity of the set body/mind taken as a whole, not because there are no differences between body and mind but because they are at play within the unique ensemble at the root of the totality and identity of our person. However, all we have said so far, and the existence of the countless thresholds guarding the body's accessibility or inaccessibility, reveal a much more fragmented scenario. The individual unity made up of mind and body, of the mind being an integral part of the body and of the body realising and embodying the mind, is the ever revocable result of a series of conditions which are not only physical, spatial and temporal, but more significantly historical, cultural and social. To put it otherwise, our body is not a biological or ontological entity to be considered as obviously existent, but it exists in all the possible ways and on all the possible levels which correspond to its meaningful and relational expressions hierarchically organised. The unity proves to be manifold as soon as it is touched: not because it does not exist, but because it is the ever changing result of a tension, as appears from a phenomenological observation. Our body is the result and expression of a *field of forces*, like any other physical object for that matter, but with the peculiarity that the forces our body is forged by and made of are also and especially symbolic. In this field of symbolic forces the rupture and interruption thresholds are more important than those of continuity, as without them we could not even exist as bodies; our body would be violated and destroyed and chaos would reign.

This means only one thing: that our body exists as a function of these continuity breaks, that it is formed and defined by being able to give order and collective acceptability to interruption thresholds previously experienced in a disorderly and uncontrolled manner. The truth of this statement is confirmed at the simplest psychological and educational level, in the gradual mastery of the body acquired by the child who learns what his body is and how it works from blurred perceptions and poorly coordinated gestures, which gradually acquire a growing definition and mastery, reaching the psychomotor and expressive control typical of the adult. But these psychological and cognitive examples alone are not enough. The radically cultural and social origin and background of these processes demonstrate that the chaos from which the microcosm of our appearance and of our bodily functions was not of personal and interpersonal origin, but of *col-*

lective origin, as proven by the fact that the concepts of personality and interpersonalitv are historically very recent and do not pertain to most of the history of humankind. Put in a simpler manner, the bodily experience is born out of collective experiences of chaos in which the body as currently conceived by us did not exist yet, but in which there must have been repeated experiences of bodily discontinuity, following the hierarchical structure phenomenologically brought out by our analysis. It was then a body that was not yet personified and individualised, a body not yet existing *as a human body*. This points us in the direction of very remote times when we did not yet exist as *Homo sapiens*, not even as the genus *Homo*. Our body is animal because it belonged to an animal species which we are no more, but we nonetheless continue to be, through transformed and forgotten paths. Our body is the silent legacy, normally unheard, of a very long history of which it is the final product. This is a dramatic story, as it is inconceivable for a pre-human species to become human by means of a conscious decision, as it did not have a human mind to begin with. Any pseudo-scientific and pseudo-metaphysic naturalism is therefore ruled out (where the pseudo- prefix signifies the utter inconsistency of this thesis) but this therefore requests the solution of the problem of defining the breaking point when man realised his bodily, psychophysical and mental identity.

The “break” which gave rise to the human body must have been “physical”, that is perceptible at the biological level of the pre-human animal, and the only action which can fulfil this requirement is the violence which authors like Freud, Bataille and Girard place at the origin of mankind, strictly understood as the genus *Homo*²³. We will not go to the length of presenting and discussing the theories of the above-mentioned authors, which are questionable in many respects²⁴. It will suffice for our reconstruction to underline three main points emerging from their proposals, which correspond to the characters phenomenologically confirmed by our analysis: 1) a state of internal collective crisis to which the pre-human animal could not find an answer; 2) the remedy consisting in channelling the destructive potential of the crisis towards one single target, a group member chosen for some reason; 3) the destruction of this member, which allows the reestablishment of a new order, with religious characters; 4) the birth of sacrifice as a religious act to commemorate and repeat the founding event, and of the prohibitions that guarantee the newly founded order.

Now, there is one sacrificial form that lends itself perfectly to explain the emerging of the corporal and corporeal human being, the sacrifice with bare hands in which a victim – whether human, animal or pre-human – was torn to pieces, literally dis-membered, to enable the “re-membering” of the collectivity during a time of crisis. This could be the event remembered in the sacrificial rite, that is not only a mnemonic remembrance, as the symbolic and physical representation, which developed through an undoubtedly very long cultural stratification, was that the corporeal unity of the body killed would be literally re-membered, put together again, after having been broken physically and symbolically. It has to be underlined that, in order to share this view, this re-remembrance, it is not necessary to attempt hasty and burdensome hypothetical reconstructions, easily undermined by universal scepticism or, worse, by ridicule; it suffices to admit that something like this might have happened, as historical and anthropological data clearly

²³ See S. Freud, *Totem und Tabu. Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker*, Leipzig-Wien: H. Heller & Cie., 1913; G. Bataille, *Théorie de la religion*, Paris, Gallimard, édition posthume 1973; R. Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, Paris: Grasset, 1978.

²⁴ For a critical analysis of these authors, see G. Fornari, “Mediazione estatico-oggettuale. Per una nuova teoria antropologica e psicologica”, *Storie e geografie famigliari*, 7-8 (2012): 57-104 (available at www.academia.edu).

suggest, and that it might have had a significant role. This is confirmed also by the additional possible evidence, equally well documented ethnographically, that at a certain moment in time our species, *Homo sapiens*, learnt to “mentalise” this sacrificial mechanism, transforming it into the ecstatic experience of the shamans, who re-lived the sacrifice within themselves for the collective benefit, to the point of experiencing authentic episodes of dismembering and re-membering, of remembrance in its double sense, both sacrificial and mnemonic, experiences necessary to ensure the collective salvation, the reconstruction and maintenance of the collective body²⁵. What is important to stress here is the historical and cultural manifestation of this event, and its relevance for your reconstruction, whereas the disapproval that it might be met with is an indirect confirmation rather than a rebuttal of the phenomenon. We can now make a collection of the data that have emerged so far, where the procedure itself serves as a confutation of Foucault’s project, precisely by thematising and exploiting it to the fullest.

The nearest phenomenon from which to start our analysis is the current media exposition and super-exposition of the body. In this scenario, the human body is reduced to its appearance, what is displayed in the middle of the apparition, integrally mediated translation which goes hand in hand – in the social representations and in the activities which substantiate them – with the phenomenon of the “dismantling” of the body, of the body equated to a machine which represents ever lighter and thinner technologies, and similar to a machine in the fact that its parts can be repaired and replaced, down to the most nightmarish scenario of an indefinitely protracted mortality, which indeed is a technicised version of immortality. Both these aspects, the mediatisation and the technological capacity of being disassembled, have a common factor, the body’s de-materialisation, its de-body-ment. In this way we have two typically modern phenomena, which reproduce in different ways two of the most archaic events typical of the pneumatic intermediality of the human body, and of its physical and symbolical reduction to its constituents, to the dis-membering and re-membering procedures from which it originates. We are witnessing here the resurfacing of forgotten processes, which partly fall under Foucault’s archaeology, but that ultimately confute it. We need to analyse more in depth the process of forgetfulness, which apparently supports Foucault’s intransitivity.

Forgetfulness as a human phenomenon is a development of the mere cancellation of forms no longer relevant, which is typical of the natural world. To be more precise, the natural cancellation is not even a real cancellation as there is no proper memory to delete, to modify. In order to speak of a cancellation proper, it is necessary that what emerges from the events of destruction endlessly endangering all forms of natural life, rebels against the destruction not only employing all its biological powers but also the new formidable resources lent by the cultural memory, which is mainly cultural, renewed in rites and myths, their verbal translation and explanation. New, unprecedented horizons open up for the preservation of what has been cancelled, and of whom has been obliterated, in the collective memory even earlier than in the individual one. This memory contradicts the need for a defining juxtaposition, for a targeted and specific denial which attracted Foucault’s attention, which ends up identifying it with the law governing history and destroying it, transforming it into a *mise-en-scène* which can only translate under cultural masks what is nature’s domination. But the fact that this explanation

²⁵ Cfr. M. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Engl. transl. W.R. Trask, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974, 34, 36-38, 56-58, 108, 429; shamanism’s role in the origin of *Homo Sapiens* has been emphatically argued, despite some very questionable simplifications, by D. Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2004.

is not entirely true is proven and shown by the return of what has been cancelled under different forms, the re-emergence of repressed contents in more revealing and binding forms, because it is collective and not merely psychical. And Freud psychoanalytic theories point in the direction of two different ways for the repressed to return: the involuntary one, which shakes the resistance of the conscious ego and makes it fall down; and the sought one, which widens the consciousness of the ego and turns into therapy.

4. *A repressed risen*

There is no doubt that the modern disembodiment of the body, in many ways exhibited and dismantled, equals to the return of what has been schizophrenically repressed, separated from the collective consciousness, ready to destroy it through the de-humanisation of the body, through the immaterial sacrifice of its image. The current senile modernity, or post-modernity for that matter, has chosen to privilege its materiality and concreteness versus all previous representations, relegating them not any more to the level of horrible superstitions, worthy only of repression and condemnation, as was the case during the beginnings of the modern era, when the phantoms of the past needed to be exorcised as they were still felt as too near; but to the level of pure and simple curiosities, to be regarded with superiority and complacency, or to be retrieved in an involuntarily Foucault-like attitude, as archaeological finds to be exposed in a museum or in a park. Yet, all this physicality is the most immaterial and illusory of things, as what the current mediatic, bionic, electronic technology does is to dismember and strip the old body of flesh and blood, and to repeat the old representations in more and more desultory declinations, reified according to the capillary rhetoric of the absolutely New, of a technocratic palingenesis that never catches up with the *Omega* it is chasing. Will the hologram then be the last frontier for humankind?

Against the hologrammatic palingenesis of the definitely dehumanised human in the de-bodyfication and de-corporisation of the body reduced to a simulacrum, there is one more historical fact to take into account, which highlights the different possibility of a therapeutical recovery of our repressed, of a differently harmonious recomposition with its history. It is the event of Christ's Resurrection, not considered as an event that pertains to faith, but as a historical phenomenon with distinctive characteristics, to be assumed as they manifest themselves to us, regardless of the stance we decide to assume towards them.

It would seem "obvious" that at the centre of Christ's resurrection as it is exposed in the original Christian texts there is the return to life of the body of Christ. Nonetheless the New Testament is peculiarly evasive on this matter. First of all, there is *no actual* description of the resurrection event itself, as the episodes on the Risen One announce the resurrection as a *fait accompli* or they recount the unexpected and unforeseen encounters with him. The crucifixion, on the one hand, in its public nature, can be considered an excess of exposition, being the expression of the desire to publicly even more than physically annihilate the body of the condemned; the resurrection is, on the other hand, quite the opposite, an exposition accurately hidden, not so much because the Risen One does not want to show himself, but because the Risen One is only accessible by leaving behind the destructive attitude of exhibiting him to the public scorn and exposing him to the most atrocious and humiliating of deaths. This quietly clarifies two things: first, that human expositions are so laden with violence that they amplify and multiply it on infinite levels, as should be well known by anybody who lives in a society where to be

under the limelight of the media can turn into the most immaterial of crucifixions; secondly, that there is a possibility of salvation, passing through more intimate and human types of visibility, obtaining a different exposition, where body and appearance are one.

The second strange thing to notice is that the corporeity of the Risen One, which is boasted rather apologetically as superior to the feeble, vague and partial resurrections of the Greco-Roman times, appears to be intrinsically contradictory. Both *Luke* and *John* in their Gospels insist on the Risen One's physical corporeity, as he shows the disciples his hands and his side, and shares a meal with them²⁶; however, they also give contradictory information on this corporeity. *Luke*, after recounting the episode of Emmaus when the Risen One disappears from the view of the disciples as soon as he has blessed and distributed the bread and has been recognised by them, ends his Gospel as follows: "while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven (24:51)". *John*, after confirming that the stone had been taken away from the sepulchre, obviously to enable Jesus to come out, specifies that the Risen One entered "the doors being shut (20:26)" in the house where the disciples were gathered. Confusion increases when we take into account the first and longest account of the Resurrection, the long passage of *1 Corinthians* 15, where the resurrected body is described as *pneumatikós* (15:44), that is made of *pneuma*, of Aristotle's quintessence, based on much older beliefs, which by the Hellenistic-Roman age had become a sort of conceptual *koiné*, shared by everyone despite the different shades. This amounts to saying that, with reference to the theory of the body and of its presumed substantiality, the accounts of the Resurrection in the New Testament are confused and contradictory.

The opposite is true though. It is exactly this coexistence between elements that our false realism considers antithetical that certifies the illusory and precarious nature of our current bodily representations. Christ's Resurrection, whatever one may think, encompasses all the historical and physical aspects of human corporeity, and does so starting from the Crucifixion, a sentence that, in its symbolic organization and in its ferociously expository manner, reproduces archaic rituals of dismembering, often achieved by hanging the victim to a tree or causing him to be torn apart between two trees held together and then suddenly separated. This amounts to saying that Jesus in human terms has completely lost his body, from its moral and social dignity to its simple physical existence, down to its right to be buried. The great lesson of the Passion is that, despite this, in the pity of those who love Jesus, this body finds another dignity, which proves to be indestructible given that the destruction of the body becomes instrumental to this "other" dignity. The dignity shows itself for the first time when Pontius Pilate is asked for permission to bury the body in a tomb, in the fully historical and human dimension that attaches a sign of shady post mortem survival through the tomb, significantly called in Greek *mnema*, memory.

This first form of love, still nailed to the limits of its terrestrial weakness, is transcended in the inconceivable event of an integral Resurrection, which does not refute or empty the human post mortem devotion, but takes it to the full accomplishment of a Life which has conquered death and bent it to be instrumental to its triumph. The archaic sacrificial aspects are an integral part of this fulfilment, and were immediately accepted by Christ, as proven by the sacramental act of the Eucharist, made

²⁶ While *Luke* presents the two elements together, the fourth Gospel presents the shared meal in Chapter 21, probably an addition by the so called final editor after the conclusion of the original 20 chapters, but drawing from very old Galilean sources (see R.E. Brown, *Giovanni. Commento al Vangelo spirituale*; It. transl. A. Sorsaja, M.T. Petrozzi, Assisi: Cittadella, 2005, 1361 ff).

indelible by the lasting signs of the Crucifixion on the body of the Risen One. And this achievement has essential vehicular and pneumatic aspects, which represent the intermediate and intermedial dimension from which Christ's mediation can be reborn indestructible each time that we comprehend it and we seek it. *Luke's* "physical", apparently physicalistic, Jesus is the one who appears to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and suddenly disappears, as soon as they recognise him through the sacramental distribution of the bread: not only a Eucharistic symbol, but a skilful symbolic representation of the impossibility to separate the Risen One from what the Eucharist portrays and represents, the real and spiritual closeness to him. And *John's* Jesus, the most "exposed", while he discloses the marks of crucifixion he suffered, the wounds that the faithful Thomas wants to touch with his own hands in order to believe, is the same Jesus who reveals himself to the incredulous disciple showing him his wounds and inviting him to touch them. And then Thomas proffers the highest Christological profession of faith amidst the many in the Gospel richest of solemn Christological formulae: "My Lord and my God!" (20:28), a sentence that equals to declaring him the sole and ultimate Mediator, absolutely believable and believed, as soon as he is conceived and perceived for what he is. Nowhere does the fourth Gospel state that Thomas touched that body, as he did not do it, not needing to.

Jesus' resurrectional condition bears in itself the physical and symbolic dimensions of a flesh-and-blood body brutally abused, mocked and sacrificed, the intermedial dimension of a thin and pneumatic body, and lastly the mental dimension which we can reach when we contemplate him. In this global experience, in which the Christic resurrection is the archetype realized in history, we retrace all the aspects of the human body and all the future potential of its existence and access conditions. We must not fear the bodily dismemberments and destructions, because these "decorporisations" are the historic condition for all its present and future reestablishments, for all its "expositions", which are the definitive sign of its reality and dignity, and of its moral and ontological substantiality.

3. THE PERFORMATIVE BODY

Bodies can be exposed in three different ways: voluntarily, necessarily, or coactively.

In the first case, the body is exposed, exhibited and paraded to receive admiration, applause and recognition. This happens in the world of the stars of sport and show-business and in the glitzy empire of the media in general. In the second case the bodies, ever more invisible to the spectacularised society, are exposed to abuse from passing time, weather, hunger, abandonment, wars and violence²⁷. In the third and final case, the bodies are exposed to torture, collective mockery, execration, widespread contempt. In all cases where it is exposed to the view, whether it is to be adored or scorned, the body is fed to the masses in order to fulfil their edification, construction, cohesion and symbolic growth. The difference between the two types of exposition is that, when the body is freely exposed, self-sacrifice prevails; if the body is exposed under constriction, on the other hand, the sacrifice of the other, considered as rejected, guilty, enemy and criminal, is prevalent.

²⁷ A. Dal Lago, *Carnefici e spettatori. La nostra indifferenza verso la crudeltà*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2012.

There is a new, emerging, fourth way of exposing the body, which is ambiguous, only apparently free. This applies, for example, to women's bodies, subjected to the dogma of physical beauty and to the need to live up to male fantasies, causing many personal and collective problems, including feeding disorders. In Italy the famous documentary *Il corpo delle donne*²⁸ proved how powerful the sexualisation of women's body, apparel and behaviour can be in all types and genres of television production. Despite the fact that the most visible expositions belong to the entertainment industry and to public rites, which in the past used to culminate with capital punishment, in reality the issue of exposition refers to everybody. Everybody, in their private and public daily lives, is continuously exposed to the gaze, the judgment, and the action of others²⁹.

The short film *The Butterfly Circus* (USA, 2009)³⁰, directed by Joshua Weigel, is a moving synthesis of the sense and importance of the performative arts in the lives of individuals and communities in relation to the issue of exposing bodies. The film's main actor and character (Will, Nick Vujicic), is a "human trunk", being affected by a rare form of phocomelia characterised by the absence of legs and arms.

The film, set in the Thirties in the United States of America, begins with the crew of a renowned Circus, the Butterfly Circus, visiting a Carnival Sideshow. Among the main attractions of the show there is an exposition of human freaks: the woman "of extraordinary weight", the tattooed man, two young Siamese twins; the star of the show is Will, the human trunk ("limbless man"), the man, "if you could even call him that, whom God himself has turned his back upon", as the presenter puts it. The spectators' initial reaction is one of surprise and horror, followed by hilarity. Most leave immediately, disappointed. A boy, egged on by a friend, throws the apple he is eating at Will and hits him.

The gesture has the flavour of lapidation, of lynching, of human sacrifice, and, at the same time, of the ancient and still modern destiny of deformed and imperfect beings: abandonment, elimination, refusal, occultation, concealment, or the opposite, exposition in order to be offended, humiliated, scorned, used as a pastime or a freak or a wonder to impress the public³¹. The physically impaired man is one of the scapegoats regularly exposed, one of the victims of physical sacrifice or, as it happens nowadays with cyberbullying, subjected to the psychological sacrifice of their reputation³².

The other boy attempts to throw his own apple as well, but Mr. Mendez, the Butterfly Circus director, stops him. Mr. Mendez approaches Will with admiration and tells him that he finds him magnificent. Will, thinking Mr. Mendez is mocking him, spits in his face. Mr. Mendez does not react angrily; on the contrary, he smiles and, asking for forgiveness, leaves him alone. The manager of the show tells Will off angrily for his gesture, and the tattooed man adds his scorn, revealing to Will that the man he spat upon was the director of the travelling circus, the type of show Will has wanted to join for a long time.

Will escapes from the Carnival sideshow and finds a home in the Butterfly Circus,

²⁸ See *Il corpo delle donne*, full version, ITA 2012, in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5m4oM_gcZe4.

²⁹ See the classic text by E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959.

³⁰ <http://thebutterflycircus.com/short-film/>.

³¹ H.-J. Stiker, *Corps infirmes et société*, Paris: Dunod, 1997; D.M. Turner, K. Stagg, eds., *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity: Bodies, Images and Experiences*, London-New York: Routledge, 2006.

³² R. Girard, *Le bouc émissaire*, Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1982.

which is a great family of artists where everyone is friendly. Will thinks he is going to be immediately employed as a freak to attract the public, but Mr. Mendez tells him, “There is nothing inspiring about a man’s imperfections on display”. His is a “different kind of show”. The Circus displays artists, full of strength, colour and grace, each one of them contributing something exceptional, being extraordinary. Will’s encounter with his new artist friends, so skilful and good at their numbers, is humiliating. What can a human “monster” be if not a freak? And what does Mr. Mendez mean when he says that what the world needs is “a little wonder”, and that is what his Circus wants to create and show? Isn’t everybody full of wonderment when they see his exceptional deformity?

In a world governed by shows, not all shows are the same. Mr. Mendez’s show, however, is the same show that theatrical and artistic research has been trying to establish in many ways during the second half of the twentieth century, through the re-discovery of the body, and which has found its highest turning point in becoming performative and leaving behind the work of art, as a dramaturgic text or a perfectly predetermined play³³. According to Erika Fisher-Lichte, the fundamental research and invention of aesthetic experiences capable of transforming those who partake in them aim to re-establish some enchantment in the world, and this is what Mr. Mendez calls “wonder”³⁴. To the prevailing mediatised show, which is simply placed before the eye, is counterposed the show-event, which is produced, in an unexpected and unpredictable way by the interaction between actors and spectators. The bodily co-presence of the participants and the reciprocal exposition of the bodies is at the core of the show-event of contemporary performances³⁵.

Will joins the troupe but does not find a role in the show; he can only be an ecstatic spectator. He discovers that there is a world where people can show themselves not as they really are but transfigured³⁶ through their own resources, attitudes, competences. There is a world where everyone, nurturing their own diversity, has a role, even more, a splendour. But Will cannot see how he can play a role different from that of the freak, the focus of everybody’s eyes, but never approached, only ridiculed, or even worse, pitied. It’s Mr. Mendez who explains to Will that everyone is what he thinks he is, and that he will not find his way and his own role unless he stops believing that he is the man God has turned his back upon. Mr. Mendez shows Will the people of the Circus who appear so strong, united, successful, telling him he cannot even imagine what ashes they were born from. With short flashbacks the movie tells the story of three of them. Anna, the trapezist, was a prostitute who was thrown out of the brothel when she got pregnant with Sammy. Old Poppy, a trapezist famous in his day, was reduced to begging in the streets. George, the incredibly strong man, hides a past of drinking and abuse. Will certainly finds himself in a much worse position than them, being limbless: what can he do? Mr. Mendez does not give him a straight answer, but encourages him and spurs him on by saying: “*the greater the struggle, the more glorious the triumph*”.

The exchange between Will and Mr. Mendez takes place in a small shanty town during the artists’ parade to bring a little wonder, colour, beauty and art in the miserable lives of the local people. The shanty town, the brothel, the street, the tavern, the side-

³³ M. De Marinis, *In cerca dell’attore. Un bilancio del Novecento teatrale*, Roma: Bulzoni, 2000, especially 127-158.

³⁴ E. Fischer-Lichte, *Estetica del performativo. Una teoria del teatro e dell’arte* [2004], Roma: Carocci, 2014, 311-355.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 67-132.

³⁶ M. Canepa, *Friedrich Nietzsche. L’arte della trasfigurazione*, Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2012.

show: five places and five contexts which represent and contain all the places and situations of human misery, unhappiness, degradation and violence. What they all have in common is the absence of the community, of human relations, of communion, of respect and acceptance. What sort of man can live there? Conversely, to what is the redemption and public and private happiness of the Circus crew due if not to the creation and constitution of a group, of an enlarged family, of a company?

This is the reason why the theatre that works with people in situations of marginality is called “social”. Not because it deals with social problems, but because it finds in the relationship, in the performative experience, and in the adventure of becoming associates – partners, co-boarders, colleagues, comrades, sponsors, fellow countrymen, a community – that is in the adventure of deciding to make a life together, the main contributing factor to the personal, familial, collective wellbeing, and the source of the resources necessary to reinvent, reconstruct, or recreate lives that have been shattered, marginalised, wounded, and stressed³⁷. It is true that this can only happen when in the community there is a director, a creative and charismatic personality like Mr. Mendez. One, the community, cannot go anywhere without the other, the charismatic personality: together they represent the secret of social healing³⁸.

In the movie, the fruit of this “social” work of the crew is shown soon afterwards. On their day off, the artists have fun near a river, and Will is the only one left out. He cannot reach the other side of the river as he is not able to swim. He calls for help. He wants someone to take him over. But they cannot hear him. Will asks Mr. Mendez, who is passing by. Mr. Mendez suggests that Will can reach the tree trunk that joins the two banks of the river and climb on it, and leaves. Will tries but falls to the ground. He manages, however, to rise again and for the first time he makes use of the stump of a foot that he had believed useless, walks with ease on the stony ground, and climbs the tree

³⁷ C. Bernardi, *Il teatro sociale. L'arte tra disagio e cura*, Roma: Carocci, 2004; A. Pontremoli, *Elementi di teatro educativo, sociale e di comunità*, Torino: UTET, 2015. In international theatreology, social theatre is commonly considered the Italian variation of applied theatre, an umbrella title which after a decade or so of debate has been finally accredited by the vast majority of researchers and experts, so allowing the analysis and comparison of similar activities and methods of application of theatre to different social contexts. “Applied theatre, like other forms of participatory theatre, is a people’s theatre. It demands community presence and action, and it especially requires a commitment to helping others help themselves” (P. Taylor, *Applied Theatre. Creating Transformative Encounters in the Community*, Portsmouth USA: Heinemann, 2003, 27). Applied theatre means a theatrical practice put into action by a group of people who work together using theatrical techniques to represent, discuss, face and resolve social and existential issues (T. Prentki, S. Preston, *The Applied Theatre Reader*, Oxon UK-New York US: Routledge, 2009). Theatrical practices can be manifold, like role playing, improvisation, theatrical games, tableaux-vivants, forum theatre and Augusto Boal’s invisible theatre, and other methods of theatrical interaction finalised to dialogue, education and development of a group, a community, a society. Applied theatre includes many forms of theatre, such as theatre in education, community-based theatre, politic and civil theatre, theatre of the oppressed, theatre for health education, prison theatre, popular theatre, museum and reminiscence theatre, emergency theatre and theatre for the solution of conflicts, theatre for development etc. (M. Prendergast, J. Saxton, *Applied Theatre: International Case Studies and Challenges for Practice*, Bristol UK-Wilmington USA: Intellect, 2009, 3-27). Applied theatre can be promoted and conducted by actors and professionals of applied performing arts but also by teachers, therapists, activists, organisers of communities and anyone who cares for the life and wellbeing of a group of people, of communities, of territories. Applied theatre can take place in any place, setting and situation (in a classroom, in the open air, in a room, in a street or district) as well as in a traditional theatre building. The use of voice, body, imagination, and of all one’s communicative and expressive competencies turn out to be as very effective practices not only to understand and analyse situations, changes, conflicts, collective and individual problems, but also to give renewed force, vigour, energy to people and groups, to heal the uneasiness of daily life (M. Pompeo-Nogueira, “Theatre for Development: an Overview”, *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 7, 1, 2002: 103-108).

³⁸ R. Sennet, *Insieme. Rituali, piaceri, politiche della collaborazione* [2012], Milano: Feltrinelli, 2012.

trunk. Satisfied and happy to have overcome so many difficulties, Will moves quickly along the trunk but slides and falls into the water. Nobody has seen the scene. When they realise they cannot see him any more they start looking for him, fearing the worst. Worried, they call him desperately. All of the sudden he emerges from the water, happy: he has learned to swim! Will has now understood Mr. Mendez's words: to help oneself, to grow up, to learn, it is necessary to fight and strive to discover and use one's own psychophysical resources.

Will can now have his own extraordinary act in Mr. Mendez's Circus: he can climb to the height of 50 feet and dive into a small tub full of water, welcomed by roaring applause. At the end of the show, a crowd of fans gathers around him, and it is a very different kind of crowd from the one who used to avoid him in the sideshow. People now encircle him with warmth. From the crowd emerges a crippled boy on crutches, followed by his mother. They come to thank Will. What he has done and what he is doing is giving hope, light and strength to those who are maimed, or are experiencing difficulties, despair, and great pain. Surprisingly though, even normal children approach him to express their admiration for his courage and skill. Will has become a role model for everyone. Never again will he be hit by children, nor will he let them down, as he did when they used to ask him what was his act in the Circus and all he could do was shake his head sadly and say he did not have one.

This scene highlights the importance of the show business in creating role models, stars who inspire the desires, the behaviours, the imaginary and the lifestyles of many and in particular of vast groups of fans. The show business is a powerful "erotic" machine capable of influencing people, imposing whatever body they want, what they want to possess, who they want to be, who they want to share their lives with, who they want to follow, and so on³⁹. The power of Eros is equally influential in inspiring and destroying the individual, the group and the collectivity. The outcome, positive or destructive, is determined by the type of relation that the individual has with his own body and the body of the others he enters into relationship with, in the dialectic between the infinity of desire and the limitation of the body⁴⁰.

The movie ends with Sammy, Anna's son, setting free the former moth from the glass jar where it had been imprisoned, now turned into a colourful butterfly. Will, too, has experienced the extraordinary metamorphosis of turning from despised human trunk into a highly praised showman. The metaphor of the moth, to which the name of the Circus clearly refers, normally focuses on the two extremes of the process, the beginning and the end, the ugliness of the moth and the beauty of the butterfly. The less spectacular part, the hidden one, the laborious and unavoidable process that leads from one to the other, is often disregarded, when the moth turns into chrysalis working on itself, and it dies in order to be born again. All artistic performances are the result and the proof of a long process and work on oneself, on one's own body, taking place in many different environments, such as the school, the laboratory, the workshop, the shop, the gym, and the theatre. Even more: the performative action (enaction) is the biocultural basis of humanity⁴¹.

³⁹ M. Recalcati, *Ritratti del desiderio*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2012.

⁴⁰ S. Petrosino, S. Ubbiali, *L'eros della distruzione*, Genova: Il Melangolo, 2010.

⁴¹ The *enaction theory* has five main points: "1) Autonomy refers to the ability of a living system to build an identity for itself, which enables some level of freedom of action within internal and external constraints [...]. 2) Enactive agents also interact with and make sense of their social and physical environments. Engagement with the world is pro-active[...]. 3) Meaning emerges for animals in the course of taking action [...]. 4) For enactivists, the body is the ultimate source of meaning, not simply a functional way of taking action in

One also tends to forget that in the process of transformation from moth to butterfly the most important part is the cocoon, made of silk. Silk is the most beautiful and precious of fabrics. The silk thread is spun by what at first sight appears as an ugly, revolting little creature. The moral of the story is that every group, community, or collectivity functions, grows and flourishes thanks to the richness and preciousness of the weave of its social fabric. Therefore, for the design and tailoring of the most beautiful dresses for humankind, one needs to take care not only of the “emperor’s new clothes” (which means revealing to the prince the truth that he is naked)⁴², but above all of the silky thread produced by the “human moths”.

Leaving metaphors aside: to nurture, to welcome and heal the ugly, the dirty, and the damned human beings, all those whom even God seems to have turned his back upon.

To live, per-form and enact that moth-body that we are, seems the wisest way to ward off the apocalyptic drifts of techno-humanism and post-humanism⁴³.

the world [...]. Finally, 5) regarding experience, enactivists emphasize that experiences transform our bodies and brains over time”, B. Mc Conachie, “The Cognitive Sciences meet Performance Studies”, *Reti, saperi, linguaggi*, 4, 2 (luglio-dicembre 2015): 201-202.

⁴² M.-J. Mondzain, *Il commercio degli sguardi* [2003], Milano: Medusa, 2011, 179-244.

⁴³ C. Giaccardi, “The Posthuman Condition: An Introduction”, *Comunicazioni sociali. Journal of Media, Performing Arts and Cultural Studies*, 37, 3 (2015): 279-289.