

The Clash

of Metaphysics and Contemporary Discourse of the Body

During a televised debate on the ethical dilemmas of transplantations, one of the most distinguished and eccentric contemporary Polish philosophers Prof. Boguslaw Wolniewicz asked provocatively: why don't we can our dead and send them in that form to poor countries that suffer hunger. He refers to his former critical opinion about present body manipulations (especially transplantations) that he calls "neocannibalism" (see Wolniewicz 1993). Wolniewicz identifies consumption in the metaphorical sense ("the consuming of the body by consumer culture") with literal consumption - the metonymical sense. This is not accidental - he is simply making a critical comment on the current dominant social vision of the body, its commodification, openness and docility to any modifications, and the consequent problem of its integrity (during and after life). The philosopher uses a caricature that reveals the peculiarities and essentials of contemporary body image, and in the case of the example he used the explosive power of the message is enormous. He recalled the figure of the fragmented body that for many scholars perfectly describes the existing social relations of diverse cultures (Douglas 1973; Jeggle 1986; Helman 1988; Featherstone 1991).

They prove that the body is one of the most important social symbols, that it is a symbol capable of symbolising anything, that provides its parts as a principal medium of classi-

fication.¹ For that reason everything outside the body can be understood within bodily categories. It is a privilege of the most aggressive ideas in culture, the most important ideas within the given culture.

Mytho-logical thinking (to use this old but sometimes still useful expression introduced by Levi-Strauss), traces of which we can still observe within contemporary cognitive systems, made the body and its parts the main tools of symbolization, "a ready-to-hand source of diverse allegories" (Turner 1991: 5). This kind of thinking relies on the "sign structure within similarity" that establishes the ubiquitous resemblance of separate elements of the world.

In their similarity of structure the body and man are models of all of reality: cosmos, society, culture - they are a microcosm within which all rules governing the macrocosm (all analogies, compatibilities, symmetries) are reflected, so they are webs of significance, signs to be deciphered to understand a given part of reality.

The whole world is treated as parallel to the body and vice versa. For example: the symbolism of body parts can correspond with structure of the physical space conveyed as social space:

The man is the head of the family, the backbone of the family group. The social unit is treated as something analogous to the human body in its main parts. Body parts in themselves can represent a whole man² or his abstract features. He/she can have a small or large head, can have or not have a spine, but this indicates not his/her physical state, but the disadvantages of his/her character. (Firth 1990: 242)

This last sentence points to a very important element of mythical thinking, still present in our common sense. I refer to the conviction that anatomical changes entail physiological and psychological ones (Libera 1997: 117). So our character can be copied into our appearance, our physiognomy, and could be read from the shapes of our body parts - the body, within this structure of thinking, is a complex text, a set of mutual relations and dependencies.

Body parts can serve interpretation, or can be a basis of classification (see: Kordys 1991: 65; Paluch 1995: 157; Toporov 1977: 109) of more elaborated structures:

1. There are however some opposing opinions supporting the thesis that treating the body as a universal ground for basic intuitions about space is only a prejudice of Indo-European languages (Levinson 1996).

2. The case of passport photography - a humorous example was given by N. Barley in his *Innocent Anthropologist*, from northern Cameroon where one is for all.

Many cosmological texts describe sameness of the constitution and functions of the body and space (universe): the body is described as earth; bones as stones; water as blood (or other fluid substances of the body: tears, urine); hair as plants; eyes (or sight) as sun (or light); hearing as sides of the world; head as heaven; anus as hell; different body parts are parallel to different social groups, etc. (Libera 1997: 31-32; see also Benedyktowicz 1992: 85-88, 107-109)

The symbolism of body parts shows that they were hierarchically ordered, that some had more symbolical value than others; for example the heart as a site of feelings, emotions, reason (it is Platonic metaphysics that separate these two), the most important human qualities, as a central point of the body, was endowed with great semantic value; it was held as a noble organ, and for example the intestine, in folk culture, was not positively valued, was not marked with a vast array of meanings (it was commonly called "tripe", with the obvious negative connotation of that noun); and particularly a "dirty organ", "the body's bottom", "the left face" (in opposition to the essential, noble part of the body, the proper face) it was the "bottom"; its function and the semantic topography of the body (with negatively valued lower and back sides) give the label of a base organ (Libera 1995).

This "[...] 'analogical thinking' relies on constant comparisons, on seeking for parallels and oppositions, to seize one body part by means of features and functions of the other, by means of similarities and differences between particular fragments of the body and certain areas of the surrounding world. In consequence the body is defined with heterogeneous classificatory criteria" (Libera 1997: 114; see also Ellen 1977: 349; Eco 1996: 50-51), and each part of it holds special symbolic value dependent on the classificatory web used in a given context.

Within (post-)Cartesian dualistic metaphysics the former relationships and dependences are broken, but the body still provides metaphorical constructions for modelling the world (see i.e. Scheper-Hughes 1996; Lock 1987).

Industrial society inherits dualistic metaphysics and the mechanistic vision of the world and with them receives the image of the body as "organic machine". This metaphor was already well known in the nineteenth century, and "organi-

cism", which established equivalency between members of society and the attributes of natural species, such as body parts, is characteristic to many, if not all, known cultural systems. The "body-machine" is not only an effect of the erudition of nineteenth century humanists, but it is rather a social diagnosis, because in that time the human body became an integral part of the production mechanism. So, as Foucault shows, the body was shaped to be maximally docile and effective - then it is productive and useful (but Foucault, I can add in the margin, omitted the fact that discipline of the body is a condition of the social competence of the individual in all cultures).

Anyway, the industrial "body-machine" is the whole composed of autonomic and replaceable parts, fragments. The consequences of this fragmentation and autonomization are significant: treating the body as a collection of replaceable parts (an image fed nowadays by rapid progress in the sphere of medical techniques and by the growing influence of medical discourse on contemporary culture) entails breaking the integrity of a person.³

The images of the coherent body and the coherent "self" have both been fragmented. (Helman 1988: 15)

The replaceability of body parts and their partial artificiality cause their commodification and "[...] within the context of commodification, metaphorical thinking rapidly depersonalizes, desubjectifies, and thus dehumanizes the body and its parts" (Sharp 2000: 27). Embodied in everyday language, the micro-physics of commodification becomes a fragment of our common sense, something perceived as natural and positive - the popular metaphor of the "gift of life" is applied simultaneously to blood donors, surrogates, and organ donors (many donors feel that they are involved in mission-like activity or treat donation as an act of heroism, generosity, which causes an increase in self-esteem). But "the giving of the gift is not grounded in any immediate social relationship between recipient and donor. As such the gift is asocial, and resembles an alienated object, a commodity" (Jackson 2002: 338). Bodies that fail to become donors "go to waste" and the language of commerce is said to "cheapen" the donation process, and the brain dead are not "patients" but "donors". In turn, the imagery surrounding the "recycling" of human bod-

3. I'd like to add here that new medical techniques both rely on and encourage the autonomization of the body and selfhood. There are some cases when the artificial body and its artificial parts serve as better models of the physical body than this body itself - I mean practicing procedures by surgeons on computer generated "bodies". Laura Behling found this type of "replacement" as "[...] an intriguing trajectory that both advances the notion of selfhood and simultaneously challenges their veracity. If the nineteenth century worked to ensure that the unwhole body did indeed retain its sense of self by creating a prosthesis to mimic corporeal symmetry, then the late twentieth-century's technology seems intent in doing precisely the opposite, deliberately fragmenting the body. This shift from artificially-constructed

wholeness to artificially-constructed fragments suggests a shift in the ways in which the physical body is viewed, and the decreasing importance the corporeal self assumes" (Behling 2003).

ies downplays the sense that cadavers are medical refuse. Policy makers work cooperatively and aggressively to perpetuate language that foregrounds gift exchange even as they consider the further commodification of the body through a host of marketing strategies (Sharp 2000: 27).

The individual's body is now part-industrial. His implants link him permanently to the world of industry and science. He is also the ultimate *consumer*, incorporating the products of industry into his very body, and a living, walking advertisement for their efficacy. He is not only a unit of production in the workforce of that society, but also a unit of consumption in every sense. The new parts of his body are mass-produced, impersonal, replaceable, stronger than the rest of his body, and age much slower than the body itself. In the more secular society of today, this may symbolize a type of partial immortality. [...] While the implanted body may have more of these 'social' links to other people, the links are really those of consumer to producer. (Helman 1988: 15)

Autonomous parts are leaving their place within the symbolic web of the former integrated body, so their hierarchical organisation is being changed and they are losing their former significance. But from the other side they are gaining new meanings within consumer culture, and significance is being placed on parts which were previously irrelevant, and furthermore we can even observe the emergence of new parts of the body - for example, there is a discussion about whether it is proper to treat genetic material as a body part or not.

The hierarchy of body parts is also being moved from privileging inner to outer ones. Two mutually connected factors have been decisive about it. The first is the visualism of contemporary culture that prompts us to find analogies between our appearance, "body language" and socially desirable state - for example the perspective of live success. In other words, semantic value is given to those parts that have direct influence on face-to-face interactions. The second factor is that within consumer culture the body is also "[...] proclaimed as vehicle of pleasure: its desirable and desiring and the closer the actual body approximates to the idealised images of youth, health, fitness and beauty the higher its exchange-value"

(Featherstone 1991: 177).⁴ So this culture, in addition to commodification and medical technologies, tends to treat the body as plastic, docile to any modifications – outer body parts are on the front line of a battle for narcissistic cultural ideals. As Baudrillard once noted: “everything in present days indicates that the body has become an object of salvation. In that moral and ideological function it has replaced the soul”.

Contemporary culture still makes use of the body as a model of particular segments of reality and forms body image such a way that it could match a coherent world view (mission impossible) – the difficulties in generating such a totality are especially visible in the incoherent body images and contradictions within social discourse of the body. Nowadays we are experiencing such a moment – new ways of thinking about body are constantly being demanded and the old ones are being redefined.

The scene of the clash of post-Cartesian and mythological thinking about the body is social discourse on treating the body as “flesh” – to be more precise, a general refusal to treat it that way. We can observe this critical reaction not only in patients doubts but, for example, during and after Orlan’s performances or exhibits of von Hagens’ plastinates. It is interesting that those artists who treat the body as material for their art (as flesh), who have become emblems of “commodified body culture”, give the best evidence of the semantic significance of the body and its parts – it is no coincidence that the face, and not for example legs, is the object of Orlan’s artistic activity. Orlan and von Hagens are providing an experiment that explores the social boundaries of “well known and ordered categories” of thinking about the body. Critical reaction to their art is an effect of the radical exposure of those boundaries because it shows also the direction in which narcissism and consumer culture is trying to move them.

Ethnographic data also shows and confirms that there is no common consent on the dissemantisation of the body. For example, patients after heart transplantations used to denominate themselves as “those from the table” – and they ironically introduce the slaughterhouse vocabulary into self-descriptions, or self-commentaries. They sometimes describes themselves as collapsible people, hybrids, and within those expressions there is still an uncertainty present about whether the body is only a collection of spare parts.

It is especially visible in treating old, ill and disabled people: there are “proper and improper” spaces, clothes etc. for them (i.e. disabled people can’t “expose” their sexuality and the sexuality of their bodies, because it is tied to youth, power and health).

Therefore nowadays body parts are not semantically neutral. The heart cannot be easily transformed into a socially irrelevant “organ for transplantation”. It is very significant that the first heart transplantations were accompanied by objections caused by the fact that it was perceived as a hotbed of emotions, feelings and the soul, that it is inseparably connected with personal identity (i.e. sexual) – so, the question arose of what will happen with a man (recipient) who receives a woman’s (donor) heart, what about his personality, would he become a homosexual? – people asked. At present, patients at transplantation clinics (or hospital units) often declare that they feel a stranger’s heart inside them (after the operation of course). Sometimes they start to identify with the former organ owner (donor), although they don’t know anything about the person. Such an identification can even lead to an “identity crisis”:

These crises reflect not simply the ‘foreign-ness’ of the organ, but the anomalous *relationship* of recipient and donor – the incorporation into the bodyself of the vital organ that belonged to a complete stranger, that is, so to speak, quintessentially not-self. (Jackson 2002: 339)

There were some cases when the “recipient” felt he/she had taken over the dead donor’s characteristics, that his own body was becoming “dead” or “sallow”, that he/she could incorporate unwanted traits of the donor’s personality. When the donor was much younger than the recipient this latter feels like a young person after the operation, feels strong and healthy, even if the medical staff didn’t notice a real recovery. One of the anthropologists’ informants said:

Sometimes I feel born again. (cf. Jackson 2002: 339)

Discussions of body fragmentation and treating its parts as flesh can also be historically, socially and politically informed: as Hogle illustrates for post-unification Germany, a host of taboos surrounding the procurement of body fragments and the proper handling of the dead expose anxieties about eugenics policies and medical experimentation under Nazism. Today, skin is rarely taken from German bodies. Instead, it is imported from countries where social taboos are

less pronounced (Sharp 2000: 304); almost the same situation exists in Denmark where, because of religious limitations, there are no "brain dead", so body parts are imported. Another example is organ stealing rumours in Brazil or South Africa, where stories about kidnapping babies and poor adults for "spare parts" not only reflect common anxieties about modern technologies that have proceeded too far and too fast.

These rumours rather testify to the way that poor bodies are socially mishandled, disrespected and abused in medical encounters. Not only are poor people's bodies mixed up and lost in the cemetery, making it difficult to honour the dead in small Catholic rituals of visitation, prayer, and attention to the grave, but their bodies are also mixed up and not infrequently 'lost' in the public hospitals and clinics in the city. Illiterate people carrying 'anonymous' or non-specific country names are prematurely assumed to be unknown or abandoned. When they die in hospital - as they do with alarming frequency - the bodies are claimed by the State. It is for this reason that shantytown residents so often fear hospitalization and avoid dying in public hospitals, where they imagine that autopsies are unnecessarily performed in order to harvest usable organs as a way of cancelling their medical debts. (Scheper-Hughes 1996: 5)

The dissemantization of the body within medical and biotechnological discourses raises real fears of the monster-like people of the future; we also fear that such discoveries might oppress, enslave and dehumanise us, or that we will overstep our ability to control our own creations (see Kable 2003); these fears also invoke the near future where the diffusion of electronic circuits into the human body will be so ubiquitous that it will be no longer possible to distinguish the flesh from the prosthetic (see Kalamaras 2003).

Here the central question is who is the monster - the creature or its maker? Hospital units are regularly occupied by cyborgs in a host of forms. Potential organ donors are suspended in cyborgic animation, linked to life-support systems designed simply to postpone their deaths. (Hogle 1995b; cf. Kaufman 2000)

Similarly, the lives of premature infants (Casper 1998), the aged in palliative care and accident victims in intensive care units are routinely sustained through a host of technologies fastened to and embedded within their bodies. Ohnuki-Tierney (1994), who writes about transplantations in Japan, identifies the associated widespread discomfort as rooted in the "transgression of basic cultural categories and the emergence of a new 'nature' (p. 239)[...]" (cited in Sharp 2000: 308).

Transgressions in culture or breaking cultural taboos always have an impact on moral discourse - they stimulate it. And so it is in our case. Christian Bernard, who as the first to conduct a heart transplantation was compared with Nazi doctors, and even few years ago surgeons and anaesthesiologists who declared "brain dead" patients' hearts as suitable for extraction were treated as murderers. Dr. von Hagens has many times been called a contemporary Dr. Frankenstein.

Within this ethical discourse the physical body and social body deliver each other ordering figures of thought again. As Cecil Helman wrote:

The new, industrial body [...] symbolizes also a new type of society [...]. For example, Gordon has pointed out the similarity between Western ideas of the body as a collection of independent organs, and that of society as a collection of autonomous, sovereign individuals. The parallel for replaceable body parts is, therefore, replaceable people, particularly in the workforce. However, this new society - like the new body - is a collage of different elements: some living and contemporary, some artificial and industrial, and some ancient and traditional. It is created not by one Dr. Frankenstein, but by many [...]. (Helman 1988: 16)

To summarize the main ideas of the paper I must emphasise that contemporary "body parts surgery" relies not only on medical and technical bases, nor does it evoke only ethical and legislative discourse (see Libera 1999). It is deeply rooted in "mythological" thinking and dualistic metaphysics, which are negotiated within the context of contemporary culture. As ethnographic data indicates, the most elaborated discourse on body parts surgery accompanies the crossing between these two different metaphysics: when thinking by analogy (body parts as analogies of emotions, character, identity, society) is

trying to be replaced by thinking within dualistic sign structure (body as "flesh" and machine). "Breaking the spell" of the body, treating it as a flesh, is an effort to deprive it of its historical meanings, move it toward an area of a completely different semiotic system - from "body as sign (text)" to "body as thing" in the process of accelerated semiosis. In connection with it, a new hierarchy of body parts appears. The place of precious ("noble") and base body parts is seized by useful and useless, expensive and cheap (the market regulates their value). The body functions within consumer culture, and its parts function as products (commodities) that are consumed in many different ways. For those who do not agree with such a commodified ("narcissistic") vision of the body, transplantations are contemporary versions of cannibalism.

Tracing this discourse is the best way to understand the contemporary body as social construct. It also enables the recognition, awakened by surgery, of fears of a "new Frankenstein" or "neo-cannibalism" as products of the consumer culture.

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