

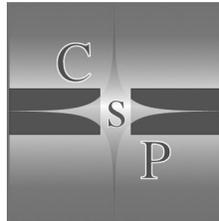
# Back to the Future of the Body



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Edited by

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## CHAPTER ONE

# BACK TO THE FUTURE OF THE BODY

DOMINIC JANES

In an engraving from around 1794, William Blake presents an image of the body as youthful, male, beautiful, racially white and enflamed in celestial radiance (fig. 1.1). This is the figure he called “Albion” and the print, in its various versions is known as “Glad Day”, “Albion Rose” and “The Dance of Albion”. The first uncoloured state of the engraving, dating from 1780, is accompanied by the following verse: “Albion rose from where he laboured at the mill with slaves - giving himself to the nations he danc’d the dance of eternal death”. Historicist readings suggest that we have, in the early version, an image of the revolutionary hero about to sacrifice himself for freedom. With the terrors of the French revolution, “Albion” develops as an allegory of the British people and its struggle for moral transcendence (Butlin, 1981: 27).

Blake’s work gains much of its power by combining neo-classicism with esoteric and gothic themes. His nudes have been seen as exhibiting alternating desires to celebrate, evade and transform the body, such that much scholarship has read his work as representing unease with the material realm (Howard, 1982). However, we do not need to see Blake as gradually abandoning the dreams of a glorious revolution on earth for a purely inner space of revelation. What Blake wanted was a perfect revolution; a perfect transformation in which the body was not let down by the mind and will, nor the mind and will by the body. As Engelstein argues:

Repudiating an understanding of nature as predetermined and unalterable, Blake points to the potential for the birth of a radically different human body, ‘the Human Form Divine’... Blake’s emphasis on the power of imagination to effect change is by no means, however, a rejection of the material world. Instead, Blake undermines mind/body as well as subject/object dualisms in an attempt to create an interactive and flexible body which is no less material than its “natural” counterpart, but is no longer subject to its materiality (2000: 62).



Fig. 1.1, William Blake, *Albion Rose*, copyright, the Trustees of the British Museum

Kenneth Dutton has located the dream of the “perfectible body” deep in the classical Greek roots of western culture (Dutton, 1995). The result of the intervening Christianity was not so much as to destroy that dream, but to displace its realisation into the future Otherworld of Heaven. Blake’s engraving can, therefore, be read merely as being an artefact of the complexities of the reception of earlier religious beliefs and political ideologies. Albion’s body, in this view, is now a body of the past, the value which is only as historical evidence. But to privilege such a reading would be, I think, to deny the significance of Blake’s message. He was attempting to use his imagination to create a form of body that was not simply limited, transient, contingent and the sign of something else that is more important.

A certain impatience with the material as mere flotsam on the sea of power and knowledge can be detected in some recent writing on the body. Canning describes how despite there being a “veritable flood” of work on the body, “many, even most of these studies merely invoke the body or allow the ‘body’ to serve as a more fashionable surrogate for sexuality, reproduction, or gender without referring to anything specifically identifiable as body, bodily or embodied” (Canning, 1999). Turner, addressing the same issue in relation to the body and religion, suggests that one way forward may be to focus on lived experience (Turner, 1997: 15-16). This volume represents an attempt to address some of Canning’s concerns through Turner’s means and, thereby, to get “back to the future of the body”.

This is not simply an exercise in digging corpses out of the historical archive. The question is, rather, what can past lived and thought experiences of the body tell us about what the body can be(come)? Moreover, the body is not to be thought of as merely an “object” or simply a “sign”, but as an active participant in the shaping of cultural formations. As has been commented on the significance of space in the cultural history of prostitution:

far from playing a passive backdrop to social and sexual relations, [space] plays an active role in the constitution of those relations, with the particularities of sites of sex work, whether on-street or off-street, reflecting and reproducing broader moral and social orders in a complex and sometimes contradictory manner (Hubbard, 1999: 31).

The material world of spaces and thing is, therefore, not simply a place for the operation of power. Power, rather, has its material forms. What can past experiences, therefore, tell us about the potential for bodily empowerment?

## The Context

This volume consists of a set of case studies, representing a range of theoretical and methodological approaches. The origins of this collection lie in the work of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities which has been involved in presenting a series of international workshops and conferences on the theme of the cultural life of the body. The rationale for these events was that, in concepts as diverse as the cyborg, the questioning of mind/body dualism, the contemporary image of the suicide bomber and the patenting of human genes, we can identify ways in which the future of the human body has become ambiguous. The aim of these international workshops and conferences was to explore interdisciplinary answers to the question “does the body have a future?” The first of these events, “Bodies Past”, asked what the past history of the body could tell us about that question. It is from this seminar, held on 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> November 2005, that the current volume derives.

The thematic agenda of that seminar was as follows:

- *Property in the body and in the human genome*: it is widely feared that we no longer possess a property in our own bodies. Instead, it has been argued, what we are witnessing is nothing less than a new 'Gold Rush', in which the territory is the human body.

- *The body and the person*: are we our bodies, or are our bodies merely our tools? If we are embodied individuals what limitations does that place on our rights over our bodies? This question surfaces in all sorts of public policy issues from trafficking and prostitution to genetics.

- *Gendered bodies*: to the extent that all human tissue is now the object of markets, it can be said that we are losing the distinction between men and women as subjects with rights over their own bodies. Similarly, gender reassignment, transvestism and other phenomena suggest that the distinction between gender and sex is breaking down. What can we now say about the supposedly immutable categories of male and female bodies?

- *Bodies, regulation and censorship*: what are the limits of censorship over the body in literature, film and the visual arts more generally? Are there any restrictions on what people may see or do with their bodies? How do different countries view such rights, and what is the effect of globalisation on regulation by national jurisdictions?

- *Future bodies, cyborgs and humans*: what does science fiction as metaphor tell us about our desires to control and shape our bodies? The use of the cyborg metaphor in feminist theorists such as Donna Haraway and in such writers as David Mitchell raises disturbing questions about the extent to which we can recognise human agency and emotions in non-human bodies.

- *The body and the body politic*: to what extent is the individual body subsumed in the body politic? For example, in France, individual bodies can be

said in many important senses to belong to the national *patrimoine* and not in fact to the individual. What rights does the state possess over the bodies of its citizens and those of other States in peace and war?

The issues raised in this line up of topics help to make clear why the “the future of the body” is currently a “hot topic”. More than that, the urge to look in a dynamic fashion to the future of the body is a major cause of contemporary anxiety. We live with intense fears of what the body might become as the result of genetic engineering, radiation or any branch of ideological fundamentalism. Darwin was able to displace his own analogous anxieties into an extraordinarily extended scenario: “believing as I do that man in the distant future will be a far more perfect creature than he now is, it is an intolerable thought that he and all other sentient beings are doomed to complete annihilation after such long-continued slow progress” [as the sun cools in its death pangs] (Darwin, 1887: 92, discussed by Gruber, 1980: 110). Our worries are more immediate. It is easy to look back to past bodies as receptacles of innocent, if naïve hopes: for we live with the eugenic nightmares of the mid-twentieth century.

In the 1920s the publisher Kogan Page, attempting to “revive the pamphlet” as their advertising put it, produced a range of small volumes on the theme of “To-Day and To-Morrow”. The subjects of these ranged across the realms of morality, science, war, society, language, art and sport. We find Robert Graves writing on the future of swearing, Bertrand Russell on the future of science, and Rebecca West on the future of the sexes. The volume on the future of the body was written by Ronald Campbell Macfie (1867-1931), physician and poet. He gave the reader his version of the eugenicist prediction of the superman, or, as he called this figure, “the Metanthropos”.

Macfie’s agenda is made perfectly clear. He states that “man’s control over his own evolution is perhaps the most interesting and most important in all biology” (Macfie, 1928: 51). This is vital because of deterioration in the breeding stock such that modern woman is often “as little capable of bearing fine children as suckling them” (80). Meanwhile, there are men who “take more interest in the lie of their hair and in the cut of their clothes than in virile exercise of mind, who no longer have the masculine love of fresh healthy eugenic women and the masculine loathing of paint and powder. We find an increasing tendency to sexual perversities” (81). The answer is to be rid of “the camouflage of artificial conditions of all sorts, from titles to dollars, to rouge and powder” (86). Marriage based on “normal sexual attraction” will do the rest.

In 2000 he predicts that people, free from sexual perversion, will “dress wisely, and eat and drink wisely, and exercise wisely” (90). Moreover, he is optimistic that we might be able to alter genes, and that this could be the “subject of legislation among the Metanthropoi of 5000 AD” (89). Eventually, he concludes, “it will be possible, in time, to breed almost numberless varieties

of the highly moral, the highly intellectual, and there seems some likelihood that the Metanthropoi of the future will be divided into nations akin in mental and moral outlook” (95). Moreover, we will all come to look alike physically, “approaching the most beautiful and efficient possible” (95-6).

Is that Blake’s glad day? And, if so, were not his dreams our nightmares? For Albion is not Black, Albion is not Female, Albion’s rosy cheeks are emphatically the result of nature rather than artifice: is Albion, after all, just a symbol of delusion and racist, misogyny? However, Blake’s men and women are not all alike. He depicted human bodies with “multiple histories of development and a variety, if not an infinity of possible futures” (Engelstein, 2000: 70). The body has been a tool of fascist power and could be again. Perhaps we can learn from past visions and strategies of bodily self-empowerment? Perhaps we need to do so? The Fabian socialist doctor, M. D. Eder wrote in George Bernard Shaw’s magazine *The New Age*, “let us be rid of the Superman. He is a bore” (Eder, 1908). We cannot afford to be flippant. Genomic research means that Macfie’s world of 5000 AD is going to happen, in some shape or form, during the twenty-first century. What better time to look back at the excitement and dangers of bodily potential?

## The Papers

The purpose of this latter section of my introduction is twofold: firstly, it provides short summaries of the papers, and secondly, it aims to explore the way in which themes develop from paper to paper and to, thereby, make sense of their ordering. I want to emphasise that the rationale I have outlined for reading the current volume represents my own personal views and should not be regarded as representing those of the individual authors. I have simply been outlining one vision of the possible significance of collecting work of the kind found here. The research agendas of the contributors come from a diverse range of theoretical and methodological perspectives yet they all, in their different ways, explore and celebrate the cultural understandings of bodies past. They also, implicitly or explicitly, invite thought on the potential for the physical and cultural construction of bodies future.

Cassou-Noguès engages with Descartes the philosopher who is frequently referenced as the celebrated exponent of mind/body duality. This paper highlights the fact that the cultural afterlife of Descartes has involved a degree of intellectual mutation. For Descartes thought that the body was a “machine”, yet his understanding of a machine was very different from ours. His differentiator between a human and a machine was the presence or absence of language, whereas for us, it is, Cassou-Noguès, argues, the presence or absence of emotion. Descartes’ position, when understood in its historical context in the

aftermath of centuries of Christian culture, is perfectly reasonable. For what is the mark of humanity, but the Word? Animals, not having words (and for Christians, souls), yet having emotions are, thus, essentially machines. Whereas, on the evidence of modern (i.e. Victorian and more recent) science-fiction, people have more recently had no problem with the idea of machines (robots) using language. Speech is understood as something that can be manufactured since it does not come from some transcendent source. Most interestingly, Descartes emphasises that words do not have to be rational. He defends the human state of lunatics. His privileging of the Word is such that we do not need to even understand it, nor does it need to be capable of being understood by humans, in order to differentiate the human from the machine. Most recently, however, the cyborg has problematised the very notion of a division between man and machine, hence locking Descartes into a specific cultural context of the production of what have thus become bodies of the past.

If the first paper problematises the boundary between human and machine, the second highlights the elaborate cultural constructions of mankind related to the division between the male body and the female body. Middleton tells us about Victorian facial hair and the cultural construction of masculinity in Victorian England. Widespread, if contested, modes of thought superimposed a gender division on that between mind and body, such that the rational mind was gendered male and the dependent body as female. Yet this left men's bodies as strangely vulnerable, both as a pale adjunct to the supposedly powerful male intellect and, secondly, as uncannily feminised by their very embodiment. The nineteenth century saw something of a crisis of masculinity for reasons that have been extensively studied elsewhere. To give just two important cultural phenomena, the industrial revolution separated many careers from mechanical effort, and so left middle-class men as unmanned in comparison with their lower-class equivalents. Meanwhile, radical thinking was beginning to advocate the notion of rights – and even *equal* rights – for women. And it was here that biology was hauled in to rescue the male body from the danger of resemblance to women. Men started glorying in prominent, and sometime elaborate or even fantastical and perhaps fanatical displays of facial hair. Middleton, however, nuances this story by showing that male opinion was divided over the virtues of growing versus shaving. A key issue was that if power was based on rationality, and the body was an inferior concern, then a concern for facial hair represented a concern for that which was inferior, such that a well-tended and luxuriant beard could, in fact, be effeminate (remembering that the then construction of effeminacy was as an indicator not of womanliness, nor of homosexuality, but of weakness and debilitation).

Amir's contribution discusses the way in which time has been employed in the twentieth century in the construction of the female body as constrained by

supposedly natural and inevitable limitations. Amir refers to “intertwining contingent and specific social arrangements with what are perceived to be objective biological facts” (44). In other words it is accepted that women on average cease to be fertile at an earlier age than men, as a result of the menopause, however, this has been misused as a justification and explanation for female disempowerment. The key phrase, “the biological clock is ticking”, is meant to conjure up the sense that a woman’s body is time-limited in the way a man’s is not. It is only fully functional for a limited period, and that functionality must needs involve reproduction. The discourse of the biological clock coincided with increasing demands for women to take a full and equal place in the workforce. However, it could be countered that nature prevents any such assumption of equality. Furthermore, this image suggests not simply a mechanistic universe, but also woman as mechanism responding to intractable laws. The body and its frailties are here projected as a limiting factor on human potential. To be fully female a woman must be intensely embodied, but to be intensely in a female body is to partially disqualified from the demands of high-flying careers.

Medical science, of course, in the shape of IVF treatments, is able to interfere, to some degree, in these processes. Such science, if considered to be gendered “male” might be seen as coming to aid woman in her temporal bodily frailty. The desire for scrutiny and control of the female body can be seen from the production of a set of male, potential, nightmare scenarios; that of massive lower-class reproduction heedless of the economic circumstances (as with single mothers), or else of middle-class abstinence from pregnancy through the pursuit of careers. Amir refers to the eugenic possibilities underlying such circumstances in that social conditioning and scientific intervention are available so as to construct the ideal “life path” for women and subject them to the operations of male power.

It is not only gender relations that can be abused by systems of power. I would argue that racism focussed on skin colour and face shape is the result of sets of contingent social constructions. It is not, therefore, a permanent structuring element in human society. Thus, the body, in its external signs, can be the victim of its times. There can be medical conditions, such as albinism, that assume great cultural and personal significance because of transient cultural attitudes. Baker’s paper examines the cultural role of albinos in postcolonial African contexts. Why should it be culturally significant that there should be a small number of people with Black African physiognomy but with a lack of skin (and eye) pigment? This does not make them white, in racial terms, but it means that they becoming walking embodiments of the dilemmas of life in societies that have become deeply sensitised to racialised forms of thinking and acting. The albino body, in such circumstances, becomes powerfully uncanny, and

threatening to the comfortable binaries of black and white, dominated and dominant. In this sense it might be argued that the albino body is potentially empowered as a means by which to challenge racist assumptions. However, it is also deeply problematic for the counter-production of African pride and self-assertion. The oppressor, it signals, also lives within. However, there is even more to it than that. As Baker points out, the albino was also constructed in pre-colonial societies and, as such, has long been provided with an aura of the “mythical and the mystical” (81). The challenge here would appear to be whether the albino body can be returned to a lost position in African societies, perhaps by connection with the transcendental such that this body be recovered from its colonial reconfigurations. Or is the albino body trapped in postcolonial time, in which it refers both to the uncanny return of the ancestors and also of the colonial oppressors?

Black albinos take on an external cultural burden of whiteness in postcolonial Africa whether they like it or not. As a Jew, Valeska Gert, was in the similar position of discovering that she was being read from her genetic and cultural heritage. Yet, as an artist, she sought to use her body to express the cultural contradictions of the times in which she lived. Foellmer’s paper shows the ways in which the body is not simply at the mercy of the past and the future, but can be developed to interact with time, place and discourse. Gert, in her dance practice, was thinking through the results of the rapid mechanisation of urban life as experienced in post-World War One Berlin so as to suggest new possibilities for the body in engaging with, enacting, and challenging modernity. In these ways she looked to the future as a place in which the body would be liberated from its old constrictions of behaviour.

Of course, we, with the benefit of hindsight, know that her work was to have a limited impact. As Foellmer concludes, “her radical and groundbreaking art was attacked in a pamphlet by Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. Jewish and leftist, stigmatized as producing ‘Entartete Kunst’ (degenerate art), Gert had to flee temporarily to the alternative modernity of New York” (112). The bodies that Gert conjured out of the air were, thus, the product of a specific set of historical circumstances. When she flickered and jumped, disturbing her audience, she was reacting to the new and shocking experience of the flickering and jumping of the cinema. Yet she was acting out a fascinating modern paradox, that of the unique moment in the age of mechanical reproduction. In a sense, the power of time to single out and distinguish can seem in tension with the mass-production of things, objects and situations, such that in certain forms of post-modernist theory there is no longer a history but simply a seamless web of interchangeable expressions. But if this is the truth of modernising society then it was sharply interrupted, as we have seen, by Nazi censorship and warfare. For Gert’s art was not simply another example of mechanical

production (something that was essential to the Nazi war-machine) but represented a satirising or problematising of the boundary between bodies and machines. If Goebbels would have liked to preside over a nation of machine-like efficiency, Gert was, through her grotesque impersonations, requiring her audience to confront the possibilities for human standardisation through subordination. She produced bodies of the past which speak to us of dangers which have never gone away.

Gert escaped to America, and thus hardly from “time” and “progress”, but two papers in this volume explore the notion that there is an escape out of time, or at least out of the tyranny of time. Time, in the Western, Christian tradition, and its cycles of growth and death, is the product of the Fall. The Garden of Eden before the Fall had no development, and neither does Heaven. States of perfection simply exist. Time itself is the demon unleashed by the act of free will. Corazza and Lobetti discuss East Asian views of embodiment which take significantly different theoretical positions from that which I have just outlined. Corazza emphasises that “fundamental to the Japanese approach is that bodily activities are primarily considered in terms of *basho* (the Japanese word for ‘place’ or ‘space’) rather than time”. The Word in the Western, Christian tradition; that is that discourse that dances between minds considered as immortal souls, is considered as superior to the mutability and frailty of mere worldly space (including the space that is the constituent and habitat of the body). Hence, it can be argued that the very textuality of this current volume represents a denigration of the body and an elevation of mind-discourse. Corazza, however, explains Japanese concepts of bodily space as being not simply more prominent than in the west, but also qualitatively different and more nuanced.

She emphasises the ways in which there are a variety of dimensions of bodily space which, crucially, are not limited by the skin. A person’s space, therefore, is not a singular pinpoint location but the product of the sum of that person’s inter-relationships. Our bodies, in this understanding, are in intimate contact and dialogue with, to use her examples, a stone that one holds, or an object that one sees. It is important to emphasise the intensity of touching that this attitude emphasises. This is very different from the notion that the apprehension of reality happens only within the body, in a central processor, either disembodied as the mind, or embodied as the brain, and that the rest of the body is simply a conduit for information from the outside. The implication is that what is of importance in much of Japanese thought is the intensity of engagement, emphasising individual bodily perception and effort. In this view it is not that time does not happen, but that it is simply not the most important factor. The time-related problem then appears in the form of inquiries as to why the Western body has not in the past been engaging with space in the ways

recommended by such Japanese viewpoints. The volume returns to Japan with the work of Lobetti, but first further explores Corazza's notion of the potential of what she calls the "extended body".

Frampton's concerns are with the potential for bodily extension and pleasure. She writes about wet-nurses, their presence and absence over the last three centuries. She tells a fascinating story of the ways in which the wet-nurse has vanished. The function of the wet nurse was to suckle the children of families who could afford to pay for this activity. The notion was that the provision of milk was simply an alimentary service. However, new notions of sanitation focussed on protecting the boundaries of the physical and metaphorical body increasingly rendered the wet nurse suspect. She was of inferior social class, she penetrated into the heart of respectable families and, it was thought, threatened to pass on taints, even hereditary taints, via the milk to the child. Meanwhile, the experience of breast-feeding was increasingly seen as something which had an important role to play in emotional connection between mother and infant. Frampton argues that this process can be thought to a further stage of development in which breast-feeding can be identified as having elements of pleasures and engagements between bodies that provide alternative potentials for bodily communication compared with those advocated by discourses that emphasise the intensities of sexual contact. Frampton highlights notions of "intercorporeity" in which "the outside world thus enters into and alters us, at the same time that we alter it" (137). This provides an optimistic sense of the possibilities and pleasures of bodily potential.

But what if "intercorporeity" is forced? What if we want to be bodily extended not just in ourselves, but into being someone else? The feeling that technology might assist us to, in a sense, become the beings around us that fascinate seems like a modernist fantasy of empowerment, and a most disturbing one since it seems to offer up the potential to divide the world into a new set of colonisers and colonised. Such worlds are explored by Segal in her readings of three late twentieth-century films, *Gattaca* (1997), *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1999), and *Being John Malkovich* (1999). These films are, to a greater or lesser extent, enjoyably exuberant fantasies. But to what do they point towards? Segal suggests that the last of the three is particularly revealing of what she calls "queer desire". Why, the fantasy asks, do we need to be restricted to the old biological tropes of a man and a woman producing a child? Why cannot a child give birth to a parent, and indeed be in the parent? There is an uncannily eugenic theme running through these films. In *Gattaca* and *The Talented Mr Ripley* the world belongs to those who appear to be superior (and, typically, are blond). The libidinous desire to be perfect and powerful and to possess someone beautiful and powerful lends perverse sexual energy to these films and implies that the frightening attraction of fantasies of perfection and domination has not

disappeared. If people differ in power then who will be the winners and who the losers in the struggle to extend the body?

Does the body extend beyond death? Tomasini disagrees with Aristotle over the importance of respecting the dead. It is not that Tomasini supports notions that there is a supernatural reason for being careful with corpses. Rather, his paper argues that there is a deep-seated cultural understanding of humans as embodied entities, such that a corpse is not, at least, initially mere matter, but is still, in some degree a person. The case studies used to support this contention derive from the “improper removal, retention and disposal of children’s organs” at Alder Hey Hospital, Liverpool [U.K.] in 1999 (164). He references Ricoeur’s theories that present embodiment as being a key aspect of personal identity. This indicates that the notions of the extended body in its special connections with other bodies were well appreciated by outraged and grieving parents of the children in question, even if they were not appreciated or understood by the then medical authorities. The physical boundaries of the self, therefore, blur into those of others. One’s selfhood is at stake in the fate of a loved one and their body.

But there are other ways in which the extended boundary of the embodied self is problematised: notably through cyborg entities and situations. The cyborg sounds new but, in some ways, is not. O’Neill reminds us that “humans and their bodies have been engaged with technology, its manufacture, use and consequences, since tools were first fashioned”, and she reminds us that since the sixth century B.C. teeth from the dead were being used prosthetically (174). She is worried, however, that with the growing complexity of medical possibility “it may be that our human embodiment will not assimilate to such a multiple or heterogeneous cyborg sense of belonging” (190). In other words, might we become metanthropoi by addition rather than transformation? Will we become so extended as to become merely things that are parts of other things? The suggestion is that the body/thing divide will be increasingly problematised, just as artificial intelligence will increasingly blur the mind/computer divide. Can we cope with the absence of boundaries, or will we generate new boundaries? Looking back to the future of the body suggests that we may, in fact, come to love our “attachments” even if, as in Tomasini’s paper, we come to find it hard emotionally to tell what is us, and what is not.

A transcendent material and mental union has been dreamed many times before. Lobetti provides a fascinating account of Japanese ascetic practices. He describes ways in which, by following a range of practices, including “a diet consisting of pine needles, tree bark, pinecones, chestnuts and occasionally stones and crystals” (193), ascetics found ways to die in ritual circumstances such that their bodies, if all went well, did not decay, and they would then be held to have become “sokushinbutsu”, “Buddhas in their very bodies”. The

result is understood by devotees as an extraordinary exhibition of transcendence and bodily integrity (which is entirely vitiated should the body succumb to rot). The resulting “objects” (I use the word in relation to an outsider’s viewpoint) then become the focus of veneration, and, since the soul is alive and transcendent, as active forces in social life. It can be seen, therefore, that there are some similarities with the medieval cult of Christian relics. And just as in the shrines of medieval saints, so these bodies establish zones of sacred space providing opportunities for engagement between ordinary persons and transcendent beings.

These ascetics chose their fate. The potential for the body may lie not just in the ways in which it can grow or transform, but in the location and degree of personal agency involved. McCarron presents us with narratives of people possessing limited agency. He discusses prison lives in which the surface of the bodies of prisoners is made to express via the medium of tattooing. An important shift appears to have occurred between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in so far as the themes of tattoos are no longer focussed upon “the possibility of bodily transcendence”, but, as depicted in recent narratives, suggest that “the overwhelming majority of them [the tatooees] believe that there is nothing to them *but* bodies” (229). Such prisoners are, it is argued, objects that have significance only when under observation. In this sense, the life/death boundary has been transcended. Reality is the enactment of forms of death when in life, as in the skull tattooed on the skin, or as a biker in Hall’s *Prison Tatoos* claims, “death is no big deal... Most guys in here are just as good as dead. We eat, we sleep, we shit. But what’s that? They already took our life” (1997: 12). Agency here operates in relation to the degree to which inmates are able to extend the meanings of their bodies through surface decoration.

Imprisonment, and hence liberation, can, of course, take both physical and ideological forms. Budgeon conducts a detailed examination of ongoing feminist attempts to discuss and understand and enhance the lives of women and their embodied experiences. Female experience is understood in feminist narratives as having been, historically speaking, more or less influenced by male oppression, distortion and appropriation. Attempts to redress the balance are, of necessary, implicated in such narratives, in that their reason for existence is partly to correct past inequality and this at least implies some sort of unequal performance in a gendered struggle for ideological and practical dominance. One approach taken by some feminists has been to return to the body; to celebrate its potential and materiality as being something “pre-social”, as a core of magnificent reality that has been obscured by misogynist discourse. Others, as Budgeon points out, (249) embrace a view of radical social construction in which the female body can be culturally reconstructed into positions of

empowerment. Both approaches can also be divided between those that wish to posit a mind that is transcendent of both body and gender, as the latter approach can sometimes suggest, or else to emphasise that male and female bodies in both their strength and weakness need to be foregrounded. Budgeon concludes by propounding the idea that both approaches are valid, so as to “engage with women’s embodied agency as it is located within specific locations and sets of practices” (250). In other words we can think with the body, in all its fleshy glory, *and* in its socially constructed temporal context.

Whilst Budgeon traces the complexities of feminist strategies of theoretical engagement with the body, Kotef does this and something more, commenting that “like any other subject, women are constructed by complex, overlapping, and shifting grids of discourses” of which feminist theorising is one (268). This paper emphasises that studying such phenomena may not ultimately result in some sort of perfect “understanding” of past and self. Nevertheless, such struggles are not simply an ongoing enactment of evolving forms of hermetic criticism. Kotef’s paper is about a struggle for freedom, both ideological and also physical, as represented by the nineteenth-century, dress-reform movement. In material terms the paper is about bloomers: “a dress, composed of loose trousers that narrowed at the ankles, covered by a skirt the often only covered the knees” (254). The aim was, quite literally, to enable women to move more easily and even, should they wish, to be able to visibly part their legs in public just like men. The resulting furore and ultimate abandonment of the dress has been understood in terms of, firstly, an attempt to liberate women from bodily encumbrances or, secondly, a moment when there was an unusual focus on bodiliness in the context of female emancipation in which women wanted to focus attention on the stifled potential of their bodies or, thirdly, the moment when the ideal of transcending the female body was produced as the result of “an agonising sacrifice” (268). From this point it was decided that reform of female appearance would be abandoned and energy focussed on the notion of mental equivalence to men and the demand, coming in the wake of this assertion, for the vote.

## Conclusion

The theme of the last essay brings us back to the underlying issue of why we are here: if it is not to perpetuate a pre-existing consensus, is it simply to engage in a form of conversation, a minority discourse in which conceptions of the body are comfortably relegated to the role of symbolic traces of the real business of academic career progression? Hopefully not. Out there, beyond the recondite delights of reading and reasoning, there are bodies that are not just symbols of something else; bodies that are culturally constrained when they need not be,

that are misunderstood when they need not be. The papers of this volume cannot provide a programme for the potential and future of the body through its necessarily limited investigations of the past. Above all, there has not been space to engage with every important issue: most notably, the volume does not engage with the problems of the medically diseased body (Porter, 2001: particularly chapters 3 and 4, provide a useful introduction to several key issues). What this volume can hope to achieve, however, is to aid the imagining of forms of cultural health for the body.

Such states that transcend prior limitations and disabilities could, and I would argue, should, take many forms. This agenda is not simply about perfecting a salvation narrative of rebirth such as that which puzzled the initial viewers of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: a Space Odyssey*:

reviewers had gone into the screening expecting a traditional drama of human crisis, love, hate, battle and resolution up among the stars. What they got was one man's obsessively detailed, multi-million dollar waking dream of humankind's evolutionary and technical destiny... [which ends with] one of cinema's most extraordinary images of hope and wonder: the benevolent wide-eyed starchild at the film's end, all wisdom and compassion (Bizony, 2000: 15-16).

In Arthur C. Clarke's novelisation of the screenplay he wrote jointly with Kubrick, the human who has been reborn as a result of an alien-encounter returns to earth and saves the planet from nuclear destruction (Clarke, 1968: 223). This collection of papers does not, I am afraid, point to such a single amazing solution as being on its way to us courtesy of either alien or human science. As Blake knew, we must work for our own bodily revolution. We do not, of course, all want to, or need to, come to resemble the perkily youthful, male, English pinkness of Blake's eighteenth-century starchild (fig. 1.1). Our "metanthropoi", these papers suggest, can be extraordinarily diverse. In this volume we find men, women, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, feminists, whites, blacks, albinos, tattooed prisoners, grieving relatives and medically enhanced patients displaying, defending, understanding and extending their bodies in ways which may give us ideas for the future of our own.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### THE BODY AS A MACHINE: DESCARTES, SHERLOCK HOLMES AND ROBOTS

PIERRE CASSOU-NOGUÈS

My paper is mainly concerned with Descartes' representation of the body as a machine. It aims at contrasting this Cartesian machine with images of "robots" in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature. As is well known, Descartes distinguishes the mind, which is a thinking substance, and the body, which he considers as a machine. In a way (and that has been discussed by various philosophers) this distinction between mind and body, with the definition of the body as a machine, is a consequence of the new physics that emerged at the turn of the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> Descartes, taking the full scope of this new physics, seemed to open up a new era for philosophy in which we still live. I will argue, however, that the Cartesian representation of the body as a machine, with its specific characteristics, has somehow been abandoned. We now have a different image of the body as a machine. As various examples in science fiction show, we may still see the body as a machine but we tend to give different characteristics to it. That also leads to a shift in the mind-body problem.

Considering the body as a machine, Descartes is led to a whole series of questions: for example, how do I know that the person in front of me is indeed a human being and not a machine (a robot as we would say) pretending to be human? The machine as a representation of the body is always also a possible representation of the human being, body and mind. It is true of Descartes' machines, and it is true of the robots of science fiction. In fact, several times, especially in his correspondence, Descartes makes thought experiments, which could easily be (and in fact have been) turned into science-fiction stories. However, these stories, in science fiction, would hardly end with the same conclusion. Descartes' machine no longer appeals to us as it did to the philosophy and the literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It has

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent discussion, Putnam (1999).

become uncongenial to our imagination. I will contrast two images of the man-machine: one that is defined in Descartes' texts and a second one that appears in literature in the second half of the nineteenth century and, in particular, in science fiction.<sup>2</sup>

What then distinguishes the Cartesian idea of the body-machine from ours? I will delineate my theses and come back to the texts later on. First, the paradigm of the machine as a representation of the body, in Descartes, is a clock, an automaton that, once set in motion, as it is wound up, seems to act by itself. On the other hand, when we speak of a robot, we rather imagine a calculating machine, a computer. The robot, it is true, is not simply a computer, but its central part is a computer. What distinguishes different generations of robots in science-fiction novels is essentially their brain, the computer that animates the various parts of the machine.

Moreover, Descartes admits that a machine could express any kind of emotions or what he calls passions. That includes hunger, cunning, anger, fear or love.<sup>3</sup> What distinguishes human beings from machines is language (speech). Machines, according to Descartes, cannot use language or cannot use language normally. Now, generally, our robots, in science fiction, have the opposite characteristics. They can use language (they speak, they reason, they may even joke), but they cannot show emotions. Though one can find counter examples, the image of the robot that circulates in science fiction is apathic (without passion). The human being is no longer defined by its language but by its emotions.

On one hand, we have a clock, which is mute but can express love for its master, or distress when it unwinds. On the other hand, we have a computer, which can talk to us but remains impassive. My point is that the mute but sympathetic clock is no longer a plausible image for us. It also follows that, if one may speak of a mind-body problem in literature, the problem of finding out what makes a human a human is no longer the same as it was for Descartes. The problem is no longer to unite the machine with a mind that would explain the use of language, which a machine by itself cannot produce. The problem is rather to find out how emotions may come to a body, which, apparently, could still be a machine.<sup>4</sup> I will try to give textual evidence for this shift in our images

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<sup>2</sup> The term "man-machine" was coined by La Mettrie (*L'homme-machine*, 1748); the term "robot" was coined by R. Capek in the play *RUR* in 1920. I will use these terms to refer to any machine (also in Descartes' texts) that might imitate human behavior.

<sup>3</sup> Descartes' examples, in his letter to Morus, Feb. 5<sup>th</sup> 1649 (Descartes, 1953: 1318, 1320 ; Descartes, 1985: III, 360 and sqq.).

<sup>4</sup> Descartes considers that speech is "*le seul signe certain d'une pensée latente dans le corps*" ("the only certain sign of a thought hidden in the body"), *To Morus*, Feb. 5<sup>th</sup> 1649 (Descartes, 1953: 1320 ; Descartes, 1985 : III, 366). Language, or speech, is the only

of the body as a machine. But, beforehand, I would like to make three more points.

First remark: Descartes' machine and the robot of science fiction are not the same device and it is not the same function that these machines lack. Now one thesis would be that this function, which the machine lacks, is itself projected into another figure. In Descartes' texts, it is language that machines miss, or a certain kind of speech, and that speech is always referred to the figure of the madman. Incidentally, it shows that the figure of the madman has a function in Descartes' epistemology. It is not simply an exteriority, a figure outside rationality and by the exclusion of which rationality is defined, as Foucault argued. This role given to the madman seems to bring us closer to Derrida's interpretation (see below footnote 8). I will give some quotations later on. The discourse of the madman is, in Descartes' texts, the paradigm of a speech that a machine will never master and that defines humanity. Now, in our literature, say in science fiction generally, machines lack emotions, desire in particular, and it seems to me that a good candidate for a figure of emotions, which would correspond to the figure of the robot, is the vampire. The character of the vampire as we know it, an aristocrat ("male" or "female") who needs to seduce its victims before it can draw their blood, appears earlier, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but it seems afterwards to develop parallel to the new image of the man-machine, the apathic computer. The vampire seems to be the opposite of the robot: the vampire is essentially governed by its emotions (its desire for blood) whereas the robot only follows its reason. The opposition of the man-machine and the madman would then structure classical imagination whereas the opposition of the robot and the vampire would structure our imagination.<sup>5</sup>

Second remark: in this discussion, I only refer to the robot, a machine that imitates, as far as it can, human beings and constitutes an individual. However, there are in science fiction other kinds of machines, which, like Descartes' machines, have something to do with the production of emotions. I am thinking in particular to the machines that enter into the constitution of the cyborg. The cyborg is a mixed entity, with both organic and mechanical components. Now,

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function that cannot be accounted for by the mechanism of the human body. It forces one to acknowledge the presence of a soul in the body of another. Emotions, or sympathy for other beings, in science-fiction seem sometimes to play the same role as speech in Descartes' texts: "If a mechanical constructs halts in its customary operation to lend you assistance, then you will posit to it, gratefully, a humanity that no analysis of its transistors and relay systems can elucidate. A scientist, tracing the wiring circuits of that machine to locate its humanness, would be like our earnest scientists who tried in vain to locate the soul in man." (Dick, 1995: 212).

<sup>5</sup> At least, it is the thesis I defend in my book (Cassou-Noguès, forthcoming).

as components of the cyborg, machines seem to take a new role. There is a whole corpus of texts around cyborgs that relates the mechanical components to the production of emotions and thus delineates another image of machines. That image is also at the center of the concept of the “desiring machine” in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*. I will leave that image aside to concentrate on robots that are mechanical individuals.<sup>6</sup>

Third remark: I argue that our machines, contrarily to Descartes’ machines, may use language, I only refer to our image of machines, to the machines of literature, science fiction in particular. I do not mean that, since Descartes, we have been able to build machines that speak normally, or that we know that machines, in principle, may use natural language. That, obviously, is still a question for philosophy or cognitive science. However, generally speaking, the robots of science fiction may talk as well as human beings do. They can only be distinguished from human beings by their lack of emotion. The machine, as an image, is talkative but apathic. By an image, I understand a description, which appeals to us, even though its characteristics are not rationally justified. There seems to be a relative independence between images and knowledge. On one hand, images modify with knowledge and technology, as the whole development of science-fiction shows, but, on the other hand, images do not simply illustrate knowledge. We *imagine* talking machines, machines that use natural language although we do not *know* whether machines can use natural language.

I will now try to substantiate these points by a few examples. Let us start with Descartes’ position. Descartes distinguishes the mind, which is a thinking substance, and the body. Descartes is convinced that all the functions of the body, breathing, digestion, the beating of the heart, can be explained in mechanical terms. The body then appears an automaton, a machine that, once wound up, acts by itself till it breaks or unwinds. The example that Descartes takes is almost always that of a clock:

these functions [such as digestion of the food, the beating of the heart, etc.] follow from the mere arrangement of the machine’s organs every bit as naturally as the movements of a clock or other automaton follow from the arrangement of its counter-weights and wheels (Descartes, 1985: 108).

Again:

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<sup>6</sup> Similarly, I will ignore the gender of the robot. There are, of course, famous “female” robots such as in Hoffmann’s novella *Der Sandmann*, Hadaly, in *Eve future* from Villiers de l’Isle-Adam (1886), Rachel Rosen, in Dick (1968). It is not clear however that these “female” robots have specific characteristics, except that “insensibility” that defines modern machines.

the difference between the body of a living man and that of a dead man is just like the difference between, on the one hand, a watch or other automaton (that is, a self-moving machine) when it is wound up and contains in itself the corporeal principle of the movements for which it is designed, together with everything else required for its operation; and, on the other hand, the same watch or machine when it is broken and the principle of its movement ceases to be active (Descartes, 1985: 330).

It is clear in these texts that the model, for the body-machine, is the clock, an automaton that seems to act by itself. This image is not peculiar to Descartes. One also finds it in the introduction of Hobbes' *Leviathan*.

Now, according to Descartes, a human being is the union of a soul that is a thinking substance and a body. Descartes is then led to consider all animals as machines, since otherwise one would have to give them a soul. Therefore, every aspect of the behavior of animals must be considered as the result of their mechanism: this includes breathing and digestion, but also hunger, cunning, anger and, apparently, love. Descartes does not deny that animals do appear to have some kind of life, some sensibility or may express some emotions. He argues that these can be accounted for by mere mechanism.<sup>7</sup>

This question reappears with respect to human beings. Of course, I know that I am not simply a machine but also a soul, a thinking substance. I know that I think, and thought, as experienced in the first person, has to be referred to a thinking substance, a soul, beside the body. However, how do I know that the person whom I face is not a machine? The experience of thinking, in the first person, might assure this person that he or she is not a machine but this experience by itself does not communicate. It is then a problem, for Descartes, to find out whether it is possible to recognize from the outside a human being from a machine that would imitate human behavior. As in the case of animals, Descartes believes that the expression of natural "appetites" (hunger or thirst) and "passion" (joy, fear, love, anger) can in some case be accounted for mechanically and, therefore, could be reproduced by a machine. A robot, to use a term Descartes does not know, could show us his hunger or his love. It is only the use of language that distinguishes the human being from a machine or an animal. Descartes clearly separates the use of language from the expression of passions, which machines can imitate: "we must not confuse speech with the

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<sup>7</sup> "I am not disturbed by the astuteness and cunning of dogs and foxes, or by all the things which animals do for the sake of food, sex and fear; I claim that I can easily explain all of them as originating from the structure of their bodily parts." Descartes also mentions "natural impulses of anger, fear, hunger, and so on" (To Morus, 5th Feb. 1649) (Descartes, 1985: III, 365-366).

natural movements which express passions and which can be imitated by machines as well as by animals” (Descartes, 1985: 140). Or again:

in fact, none of our external actions can show anyone who examines them that our body is not just a self-moving machine but contains a soul with thoughts, with the exception of spoken words, or other signs that have reference to particular topics [*ou autres signes faits à propos des sujets qui se présentent*] without expressing any passion. I say “spoken words or other signs”, because deaf-mutes use signs as we use spoken words; and I say that these signs must have reference [*que ces signes soient à propos*], to exclude the speech of parrots, without excluding the speech of madmen, which has reference to particular topics even though it does not follow reason. I add also that these words or signs must not express any passion, to rule out not only cries of joy or sadness and the like, but also whatever can be taught by training to animals (Descartes to the Marquess of Newcastle, 23 November 1646) (Descartes, 1991: 302).

Of course, Descartes knows that an animal like a parrot can articulate a few words. He defines true human speech, which neither machines, nor animals can imitate, with two negative criteria. First, words must not be the exterior signs of an immediate passion (like the cry of joy, the “I am thirsty” of the child or the “hello” of the parrot which expects a candy). Second and more surprisingly, human speech must be able to be unreasonable, not to follow the laws of reason. A good example of this human speech, I think, would be wit (because wit neither expresses an emotion, neither follows logic). Descartes does not mention wit but he always refers this human speech to the madman. The discourse of the madman makes sense even though it might be both impassive and unreasonable. Thus the madman, as the keeper of true human speech, seems to become a peculiar figure in the Cartesian texts, opposite to that of the machine.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, Descartes is led to thought experiments that anticipate science fiction. In a letter to an anonymous correspondent, in 1638, Descartes imagines the following situation. A child is raised in a faraway land where he only meets human beings, such as his parents, and automata: automata in the shape of human beings and automata in the shape of small animals that are offered to the child for him to play with. There are no animals in this land, just humans and

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<sup>8</sup> The role of the figure of madness in Descartes’ metaphysics was at the centre of the controversy between Derrida and Foucault. In a nutshell, Foucault (Foucault, 1961: Part I, chapter V) argued that classical rationality (in particular, in Descartes) is defined by the exclusion of madness and, therefore, related to the social exclusion of madmen (with the multiplication of asylum). Derrida (Derrida, 1963), relying on the *Méditations Métaphysiques*, maintained that madness was incorporated into Descartes’ metaphysics. The text just quoted on language and machines seems to confirm Derrida’s position. Madness appears as an irreducible feature of humanity.