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Commun(icat)ing Bodies

Body as a Medium in Religious Symbol Systems

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Bernadette Wegenstein

Seeing, Believing, Suffering
The Body as Medium in Religion and Contemporary Media
Practice

Introduction

In his introduction to the important anthology *Religion and Media*, published in 2000, Hent de Vries asks whether some day society will be able to do without religion. The answer he gives to this question is clearly in the negative:

Would not the relentless substitution of some other medium (perhaps the new technological media) imply its continued manifestation and retirement at once? Positive and negative theology, the theologico-political and its opposite (the secular, the modern, the profane, the finite, the human, the artificial, etc.) would collapse into each other, their difference no longer visible, discernible, decidable – and yet, perhaps, all the more felt, like in an in-difference that makes all the difference in the world.¹

With this provocative statement De Vries not only reaffirms the “postsecular” as the condition of the 21st century – signaling how the rise of new media may imply the “continued manifestation and retirement at once” of religion – but also points to what Spanish philosopher and theorist of the network society, Manuel Castells,² has predicted to be the destiny of any religion in the age of the internet: reactionism. According to such logic, religious orthodoxy gains traction whenever and wherever media have gained a foothold in disseminating a panoply of new lifestyle choices. Likewise, the proliferation of images in the age of the internet conditions some degree of return of the sacred nature of the image once considered powerful enough to be the subject of a strict taboo, the *Bildverbot* of the Abrahamic traditions. It is this sacred aspect of images that this essays seeks to explore, by focussing on the interrelatedness of the regimes of seeing, believing and suffering, drawing on examples spanning from current docu-

1 De Vries 2001, 7.

2 Cf. Castells 1996–1998.

mentary film to the cult of a Catholic saint to the phenomenon of reality makeover TV.

The Religious Turn and the Question of the Image

What is it that conditions our belief in the image, which, freed from its material referent, is “always both there and not there, appearing *in* or *on* or *as* a material object yet also ghostly, spectral, and evanescent?”³ The power of the naturalistic image or one that claims to point to a “reality,” lies in the semiotic contract of the viewer/perceiver/recipient *believing* in what he or she sees. In this regard it is not important, if what we see has really “happened” or has been “photoshopped” (who cares?) – rather, the importance lies in the fact that we *experience* what we see in the image emotionally, rationally. This “power of the image” has a long history and has been used in many different ways from the first “hyperreal” images of the Lumières brothers’ documentary *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (1895) to the *Blair Witch Project* (1999), a student film about an urban legend “come true.” Whether we “care” or not about what is presented as real, the image that claims access to a “truth” *affects* and possibly *changes* us. As both Roland Barthes⁴ and Susan Sontag⁵ have beautifully expressed in their respective works on photography and its magical power to “bring back the dead,” when I face the camera, something comes into being that was not there before. Hence, for Barthes, the photograph becomes the advent of *myself as other*.

The acclaimed documentarian Errol Morris stands in this same tradition of interpreting images as “resurrections.” Morris, who is famous for being interested in – if not to say obsessed with – the relationship between images and reality, addresses the issue of “truth” as a documentarian who inserts himself into the picture, analysing the question and narrative quality of the presence/absence of the represented in the picture. Interestingly, in *Believing Is Seeing (Observations on the Mystery of Photography)*,⁶ Morris tells the story of his childhood and how his obsession with photography began: his father, a physician, who died suddenly when Errol was a small child, left his books and office behind, including some family pictures – but as Morris

3 Mitchell 2009, 39.

4 Cf. Barthes 1981.

5 Cf. Sontag 1977.

6 Cf. Morris 2011.

points out, the father himself, to whom all these pictures and books referred, i.e. their referent, was gone. So for the documentarian, the creation of pictures became a personal journey to understand and re-contextualise the background of a narrative that is suddenly interrupted and that may cause the reader of that narrative to jump to too quick a conclusion.

In this paper, I am discussing an example for such a Morrisian dilemma of interpretation that is drawn from his *Believing is Seeing*. The case in question exposes a complicated religious interpretative context rich with legal, ethical and global consequences, namely, the images of torture from Abu Ghraib: “There are many photographs of al-Jamadi’s body, but it is the photograph of Sabrina with his body that stands out among them. [...] The photograph misdirects us. The public sees the photograph and assumes that Sabrina is the killer and directs their anger at Sabrina, rather than at the real killers.”⁷ Morris’s concern with the interpretation of Sabrina who “proudly” features al-Jamadi’s dead body is the fact that it overshadows the actual “event” in this image, i.e. the torture and killing of al-Jamadi by the hands of American soldiers. To go back to Morris’s childhood trauma of finding pictures of his absent father around his house, the “offense” of the father’s absence was a story that, as he points out, he had to find outside of the family picture left in place of the father, which was to a certain point a misleading trace.

The problem of interpreting Sabrina’s iconic image of triumph over the death of al-Jamadi represents a dilemma that expresses the dilemma of mediality, the body and belief as such: Sabrina’s body language, her smile and her thumbs-up-gesture want to tell us something about how she feels about what is underneath her: the dead body of Manadi al-Jamadi, an Iraqi battered to death during interrogation by the Central Intelligence Agency. But Morris, the detective/documentarian, wants to find out the “whole truth” and so he consults a physiognomist and asks him if Sabrina Harman has really felt “joy” or a “positive emotion” with her smile or if that smile was “put on” and not sincerely felt. The physiognomist claims to be able to prove that Ms Harman did not feel any “real emotion,” because her eyebrow muscles are not engaged, since she was simply saying “cheese” and had internalised posing this way for a photographic snapshot from her American culture (in which even one-year olds internalise this pose). Paradoxically, in his quest for Sabrina Harman’s “true intension,” Morris falls

7 Morris 2011, 118.

prey to the laws of semiosis, or the construction of meaning itself, in that both encoding and decoding a gesture such as the photographic “cheese” are relative to a cultural encyclopedia pertaining to both the physiognomic expert and the documentarian’s analysis.



Fig. 1: Sabrina Harman leaning over the corpse of Manadi al-Jamadi;
<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/05/19/the-most-curious-thing/>

The problem is that by having her picture taken in this manner, the actual crime of whoever tortured Manadi al-Jamadi to death becomes irrelevant in the face of what we see: a female US-soldier not showing any emotion for the tragically deceased. In the face of this depravity, we don’t have the time, context, prejudices or expertise of the physiognomist to study her eyebrow muscles and we cannot think of anything else but that whoever took this picture and whoever posed in it are guilty of the crime of the *Bildverbot* and not of the actual murder. For that death might occur in a state of war could be justified, but what possible justification exists for obliterating the solemnity of death with the forced smile of a high school yearbook photograph?

In the context of Sabrina Harman’s violation of the *Bildverbot*, I want to turn to the question of the status of the body as medium in the Judeo-

Christian tradition, specifically in order to reveal how the implicit relationship between a material body and its inhabiting soul underwrites our reception of these images. Under the influence of Neoplatonism, the western Christian tradition has tended to prioritise the mind or soul over the physical body, thinking of the latter in Plato's words as a prison house. This fundamental divide between the body and the soul was institutionalised in modern philosophy by René Descartes, for whom the body was a *res extensa* inhabited and manipulated by the active *res cogitans*.

In the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche notoriously announced the transvaluation of Christian values and rejected the notion of the body as prison house of the soul:

“Body am I, and soul” – so saith the child. And why should one not speak like children?

But the awakened one, the knowing one, saith: “Body am I entirely, and nothing more; and soul is only the name of something in the body.”

The body is a big sagacity, a plurality with one sense, a war and a peace, a flock and a shepherd.

An instrument of thy body is also thy little sagacity, my brother, which thou callest “spirit” – a little instrument and plaything of thy big sagacity.⁸

For Nietzsche, the body is a multifaceted entity and cannot be separated in the reductive terms of inner/outer, mind/body. For Nietzsche, a media theorist *avant la lettre*, there is only one world and that is the world of the physical senses and of the physical body – “herd and shepherd,” an individual and a communal gesture at the same time. In some ways one can interpret this collapse of the boundary between inside and outside as a precursor of Marshal McLuhan's prophetic insight into the dual function of media as at once extension and amputation of the body or enlargement and ellipsis. In this perspective Sabrina Harman's gesture cannot only be read as an individual act that awaits interpretation in terms of her intentionality and the physiognomic proof thereof. But her gesture, captured in this snapshot, also becomes a symbol, an emblem of her “herd,” the citizens of the United States and their presumed disrespect for Iraqi/Muslim culture as expression of their cultural hegemony, which would be the “narrative extension” of her “cheese-smile.” Sabrina's body-gesture becomes, thus, an embodiment of this hegemony. Whether she “fakes” it or whether she truly lives it – what matters is that she represents this gesture for the viewer who

8 Nietzsche 2012 (1896), part IV. The Despisers of the Body.

is *affected* by it, no matter what her intention may have been. The affect of the viewer in turn conditions his or her reading of Sabrina's intention, the reality of her soul beneath the image of her smile.

But still something is missing. All is not told through this image: who committed the crime? Who is taking the picture? What does he or she, who is taking it, feel? What led to Ms Harman's pose and what will she do next? This external reality belies the power of framing the image and confining it to a certain clipping, which by definition can only ever amputate the image out of a larger context of signification. This context will be activated by the various frames of reference, within which the image is read: for instance, the frame of reference of a news article in *The New York Times*, where the image was first printed. But ultimately the meaning will depend on the viewer and on his or her cultural encyclopedia – a set of competences that was inscribed into his or her interpretive skillset long before seeing this image.

But the image of the murdered Manadi al-Jamadi breaks yet another important boundary, one with religious as well as social dimensions: namely that of representing a dead body *tout court*, whether or not it is framed by the ambiguous gesture of the US-soldier Sabrina Harman. What "confuses" living organisms with a certain intelligence even more than *having* and *being* a body at once, is the knowledge that the body cannot remain when we die and thus vanishes into another material form and shape. Hence, the question of what the body's death means and what it means to *represent* dead cells and dead tissue by imagery, is as much a controversy as the question of when life starts. For we experience life and its temporal borders, its beginning and end, both biologically and materially, but also emotionally and culturally, and images are incapable of avoiding the latter in order to give us the former unadorned. It is for this reason that images play such an out-sized role in making the case of anti-abortionists, as for instance in the case of this photograph of an aborted 9-week-old fetus.

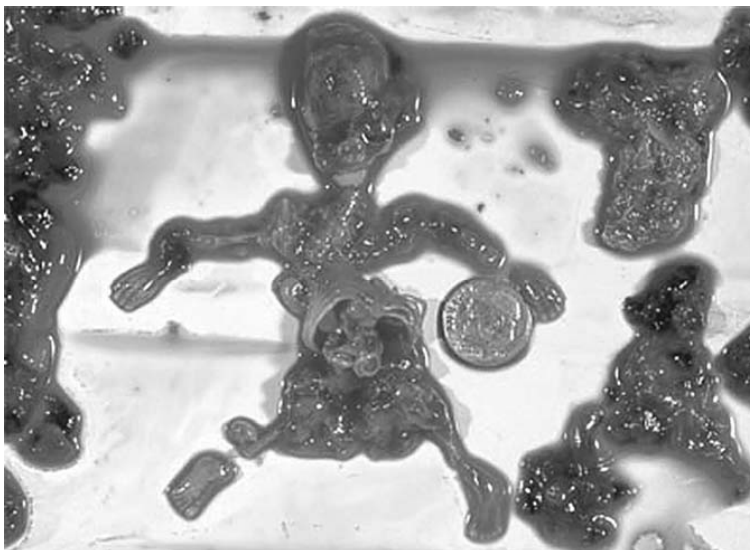


Fig. 2: Anti-abortionist activism image of a nine-week-old fetus; <http://anti-abortion.info/>

The difficult question of what the body actually is, is clearly illustrated in this picture: the body is both an object and an agent. It is looking and sensing and if we want to believe that this is the case already at nine weeks *in utero*, then the not-yet-body or body-to-be in this image is clearly positioned as if to prove its existence as agent by having us *look* directly into the “face” of the fetus. But even more importantly, this “body” (or whoever focussed the close-up of the frame) is “posing” and the “framer,” no doubt a person believing that abortion is wrong, clearly enhances and believes in this pose. The 9-week-old fetus gives us this glimpse into the “beginning of life,” its fragility and delicacy, a delicacy that anti-abortionists are using to say: “Life is sacred, respect it,” while short-circuiting the question of what determines a human life, worthy of the protection of the law. But what we believe or not in this regard is irrelevant. The image ultimately *affects* us whichever way; what this being-affected points to is not what we actually *see* in the image. It points to something that is outside of the frame. This narrative is “amputated” from the image, it exists only elliptically, just like the fact that the US is at war at Abu Ghraib and that someone tortured

Manadi al-Jamadi to death, all of which is only presupposed in the image of Sabrina Harman and her sardonic smile.

An image implies a contract with a viewer. In this contract a *belief* is created in something that actually goes beyond the body as such and points us into the direction of the body's capacity to transcend its own flesh; and yes, this is a transcendence into the realm of the metaphysical and the religious or into a realm where the tension between the body as object and as agent is eradicated. These dead bodies, the one of the tortured Iraqi victim and the one of the "murdered fetus" are both objects and agents of the belief system they are inscribed in. They remain bodies, but are simultaneously activated by their status as images and thus animated in service of the belief system underlying their reception.

The Tortured Body of Saint Agatha as Seen in Christian Spectacle

Religious experience can be one of the most direct revelations of the mediatic nature of the body. From Meister Eckhart to Saint Theresa of Avila, the mystics used their body as a transmitter of a feeling of transcendence, which has often led them to the performativity of the experience of ecstasy, as when Saint Theresa wrote about her raptures, "arrobamientos," as having her body crucified between heaven and earth. From premodern monotheisms to current experiments by neuroscientists of religion like Andrew Newman,⁹ who has demonstrated that both Catholic and Buddhist monks have a particular neurological pattern that can be recognised in the brain when they engage in prayer or meditation, religions have often acknowledged the human body's status as medium. In fact, as I will be discussing in more detail below in section three, the body is not only a potential medium for communicating between the "metaphysical" and the "terrestrial," but the medium also is and has a body, in that in this implosion of inside and outside something new is always being created: a new *house* for a body and soul to *be*.¹⁰

9 Cf. Newman 2010.

10 See Wegenstein 2006, *Getting Under the Skin: Body and Media Theory*, in which I argue for an understanding of the body as a fundamental medium, which thus permits mediation through all other media to occur while necessitating a concomitant understanding of technical media as forms of embodiment.

But for the body to function as medium one important fact needs to be considered, as already highlighted in the first section, and that is that the body needs to be seen and consumed by a community of *believers*: in other words, its capacity to speak to the community and to function as spectacle. According to Jacques Derrida, Christianity is unique and different from other monotheistic traditions in its focus on this mediatisation and the spectacle and in its dependence on the positioning for the “camera lens” as an intrinsic part of the religious spectacle:

In other religions it is spoken about, but the sacred event itself does not take place in the very flesh of those who present themselves for the camera. This, I think, stands in a certain structural relation to what probably distinguishes the Jewish or Muslim religion from the Christian religion, which is to say, the incarnation, the mediation, the *hoc est meum corpus*, the Eucharist: God become visible.¹¹

Derrida, in his reading of Christianity as being intrinsically about spectacle in the making God visible and bodily through the Eucharist, not simply living but *showing* its miracles, goes as far as to interpret the televisual globalisation of religion at the same time a “‘globalatinization’ of the very concept of religion.”¹² (One can almost not help but read the spectacle of Italian politics under the media mogul Silvio Berlusconi as a prime example of such “globalatinization.”) In other words, it is intrinsic and unique to Christianity (Catholicism in Europe and Protestantism in the United States, where many Protestants seem to have decisively overcome the programmatic aversion to images that in part justified the Catholic/Protestant schism) to stage the body in religious spectacles and to ritually consume it in the community of spectators. For Derrida, the return of religion in the form of such televised spectacle, which, as he points out, is always a national project, is therefore also and foremost a return of religious experience for the masses. Derrida further points out that this history of television and the Christian spectacle can be linked not solely with Christianity but with a Greco-Roman-western-Christian hegemony in

¹¹ Derrida 2001, 58.

¹² Derrida 2001, 59. Obviously the embodiment of the incarnation is expressed differently in Protestant denominations that reinterpret the significance of the Eucharist, veto excessive imagery and deny the power of the mediation of saints. In the case of some of these original values they have been, as I mention below, overcome in their contemporary American manifestations.

general and that unsurprisingly its utmost critics will be Judaism, Islam and Buddhism:

In Judaism, Islam, or Buddhism, the appropriation of mediatic powers tends to be directed against Christian tele-technological hegemony. This would constitute one of the figures in the conflictual theatre in which we are situated. The entire process stands in opposition to the old “progressive” hypothesis of the Enlightenment, according to which no marriage or alliance was possible between science and religion. It’s exactly the contrary: we are heir to religions that are designed precisely to cooperate with science and technology.¹³

I cannot think of a better example of such “cooperation” than the marriage between a Catholic celebration and the popular cult of Saint Agatha, practised since the 6th century CE until today in Catania, Sicily, one of the largest Catholic feasts (together with the *Semana santa* in Seville, Spain, and the Corpus Christi celebration in Cusco, Peru). The yearly celebration of this saint’s festival is driven by “atypical Catholics,” many of whom don’t actually go to church, but who find their way “back” or “into” religion because of the fact that it is the church that “owns” Agatha and where the saint’s bust and relics are kept throughout the year. While the *responsabili* (responsables) and *collaboratori* (collaborators) of the festival believe in progress in their daily routines, during the *Festa di Sant’Agata* the cult brings them into a different sphere of belief entirely. The story of the saint can be summarised thus: in the middle of the 3rd century CE, a beautiful virgin from Catania spurned the advances of the Roman Prefect Quintianus. Enraged by her stubborn virtue, according to some of the popular traditions, he locked her up in a brothel and ordered his men to slice off her breasts to punish her. Agatha’s willingness to sacrifice her breasts, the most vibrant sign of her femininity, for the greater good of keeping her virginity and renouncing Quintianus (and of choosing Jesus over him), made her a saint.¹⁴

Her martyrdom even “advanced” her to the status of patron saint of breast cancer survivors in the early 20th century. In 1905, Sir William Osler, one of the four founders of Johns Hopkins University Hospital, advised young medical students: “[...] start at once a bedside library and spend the last half hour of the day in communion with the saints of humanity. There

13 Derrida 2001, 62.

14 According to the Acts of Mombrizio, Christians in Catania have recognised Agatha as their patron saint already since the year after her martyrdom in 251 (Zito 2004, 41).

are great lessons to be learned from Job and from David, from Isaiah and Saint Paul, and I might add from Saint Agatha, as well.”¹⁵ It is not entirely clear when Saint Agatha became the official patron saint of breast cancer, but most likely it happened in the 1940s during Dr. Edward Lewison’s tenure as chief of the first breast clinic at Johns Hopkins University from 1945 to 1972. Lewison, who was himself a secret devotee of the Catholic saint, had even purchased (or obtained in other ways) a sacred relic of the saint.¹⁶

There are several interpretations of why Agatha sacrificed herself and her breasts. The canonical Catholic one is that during the persecution of Christians under Decius (249–251), the early Christian Agatha’s love for Jesus “was bigger than her love for her own body,”¹⁷ and that she sacrificed her breasts, a bodily symbol of her femininity, so that her Christian followers may be saved. But what is more, to return to Derrida’s argument, Agatha did not just sacrifice her body, she did this for the *eyes* of the Christian community and for us, her audience to this day, to *see* it. In fact, the story of her martyrdom is projected in visual images. It is traditionally structured into these four episodes:¹⁸

1. Agatha’s arrest on January 1, 251 CE, for being a follower of Christ; she is handed over to a “corrupt matronly woman” (said to run a brothel) called Afrodisia, who takes her into custody for 30 days; but even Afrodisia fails in her attempt at convincing Agatha to give up her Christian faith. When she hands her back to Quintianus, Afrodisia comments: “It is easier to soften stones, and to change the iron into the softness of the lead, than to take away this young woman’s belief in Christianity.”¹⁹

2. Agatha’s interrogation and trial: between January 31 and February 1 two hearings took place; the church of Sant’Agata la Vetere was built in the

15 Osler 1921, 33.

16 Information found at the Chesney Medical Archives at The Johns Hopkins University during my research for my feature documentary, *The Cure: The History and Culture of Breast Cancer*, in production since 2012.

17 Interview with Stefania di Vita and Veronica Zappalà, two young devotees involved in the festival of Saint Agatha for *The Cure*.

18 Contained in the epigraph of Iulia Florentina at the end of the 3rd century CE, while the original martyrdom was lost, it was then translated into the Greek code by an Italian-Greek writer of the 12th century. The text conforms to a Greek manuscript no. 999 to be found at the National Library of Paris, and is today kept at the Secret Archives of the Vatican (quoted in Zito 2004, 21–22).

19 Di Vita/Zappalà 2004, 20 (my translation).

place of her trial. The first hearing was about Agatha's status as part of the Catanese nobility with Quintinian asking why she chose not to show her nobility wearing the clothes of a slave instead. "I am the slave of Christ," was Agatha's response. The second hearing is about her faith. Quintianus gives her a last chance: "Renounce Christ, and start to adore the Gods [...]." But Agatha remains firm: "You renounce your Gods that are made of stone and wood and start adoring the true God, your creator [...]."²⁰

3. Agatha's torture and amputation of her breasts: according to the tradition of martyrdom, this is the moment the Roman governor decides to torture Agatha, in these phases: she is broken on the rack, then flayed and then burnt with hot irons. During the torture Quintianus is said to have asked Agatha one last time: "Abandon this idea from your soul, so you can save your life." Agatha responded as a martyr: "I feel much joy in these pains: like someone who is delivered a happy notice or someone who is reunited with someone he has longed for or someone who finds a great treasure, so also do I, subjected to this suffering for a short duration, take great pleasure [*gioisco*] [...]." At this point, Quintianus orders the torturers to amputate her breasts. But Agatha warns the governor once more: "You cruel, inhuman tyrant, do you not feel shame for taking away a woman's breast, from which you yourself have sucked on your mother? But I have other breasts that are intact, in my most intimate soul and with which I nurture all my sentiments [...]." It is not until she utters this final sentence elevating the breast to the organ of human affection *per se* that Quintianus orders her to be brought to prison without a doctor to visit her and without allowing her the intake of bread or water.

In this excerpt (next page) from a famous painting by Antonio Pennisi (1777) representing the scene of Agatha's healing through the apostle Saint Peter, who comes to her breasts' rescue with an ointment of aloe vera and myrrh, and which hangs in the church of Sant'Agata la Vetere in Catania, we can see that Agatha's suffering and the sacrifice of her breasts is represented as something painful and at the same time pleasurable. Pennisi shows her with a devotional smile on her face reminiscent of Bernini's statue showing the ecstasy of Saint Theresa, of which Lacan infamously said, "You have only to go and look at Bernini's statue in Rome to understand immediately that

²⁰ These and the following quotes from Agatha's martyrdom are my translations from the Italian version of the hagiographic acts of Agatha's martyrdom available on the website of the Cathedral of Catania: <http://www.cattedralecatania.it/atti.aspx> (15/05/2013).



Fig. 3: Saint Agatha by Antonio Pennisi, 1777, Church of Sant'Agata la Vetere, Catania (excerpt). Still image taken from "The Good Breast" (in production).



Fig. 4: Head shot of Saint Agatha's reliquary bust by Giovanni di Bartolo, 1373–1376. Still image taken from "The Good Breast" (in production).

she's coming [*qu'elle jouit*], there is no doubt about it,"²¹ using a word, *jouir*, that is related to what the Italian reports of Agatha's martyrdom have her use (*gioisco*) in her defiant response to Quintianus. Agatha's "smile" is of course also inscribed into the original statue by the hands of the Siense Giovanni di Bartolo, who designed the reliquary bust between 1373 and 1376, which was then manufactured in Limoges, France. The popular version of the Agatha legend has it to this day that Agatha enters the sunlight every year with a smile on her face, after having been kept in the darkness of her *cameretta* (little room) of the Cathedral.

4. Agatha's death: after four days of detention in prison, during which Saint Peter appears to the young martyr equipped with healing ointments for her breasts, Quintianus is still attracted by Agatha's beauty and enters her cell one last time to warn her of what will happen to her if she does not renounce Christ. But Agatha firmly states to her torturer that her breasts have been cured by Jesus, who sent Saint Peter to her rescue. Quintianus takes this as a confession of her crime to adhere to a religion that is against the state and sentences her to death. On February 5, Agatha undergoes the punishment of the funeral pyre, witnessed by the Catanese community (see the below painting by Bernardino Nigro Greco from 1588 in the Catanese church of Sant'Agata al Carcere), which meant that her naked body was rolled over glowing coals so that she would die slowly and with utmost pain. But during her execution, Catania was struck by an earthquake and Agatha was brought back to her cell, where she died after three hours of suffering. Her last prayer is: "God, you have taken away from me the love of life and you have preserved my body from contamination, you have helped me overcome the torments of the flesh, the iron, the fire and the chains, you have given me the virtue of patience; I beg you to receive my spirit now: because it is already time for me to leave this world and enter into your mercy."

21 Lacan 1998, 76.



Fig. 5: Saint Agatha's Martyrdom by Bernardino Neger Grecus, Church of Sant'Agata al Carcere, 1588. Still image taken from "The Good Breast" (in production).

In the popular tradition of the Agatha cult more "sex and crime" was added into the storyline: Agatha was only 13 or 16 and it is stressed that it was highly immoral of the Prefect to demand sex of her, a virgin, or that he was too old, too powerful and not of the same social class, since she was an aristocrat. The popularisation also adds the sexually-connoted detail of Quintianus locking her up in a brothel headed by Afrodisia. But what all

these traditions have in common is a woman's transvaluation of the search for pleasure, a crucial place in Christianity that places pain *over* pleasure. That "place" of pleasure can truly only be reached through suffering and the endurance of pain and through an offering or a sacrifice in the shape of femininity itself, the breast; a sacrifice that recalls the purification that Paul teaches in his Letter to the Romans, when he urges his fellow Christians to "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice" (Rom 12:1–2) and to die in their own bodies in order to be reborn in the body of Christ. What is important to stress from a media theoretical perspective is that Agatha's pain is productive in that it changes the body into something *more*, namely something to be *consumed and seen* by a community, as Derrida has it.

The point that I am trying to make here is this: what both images – Agatha's martyrdom as imagined by Pennisi and others and the picture of the tortured and murdered Manadi al-Jamadi taken by Sabrina Harman's colleague – have in common is the fact that they inevitably provoke the question of what this death *means* to us who see it represented. While Errol Morris emphasises that believing is seeing,²² Jacques Derrida deconstructs this formulation: there is no need any more to believe, when one can *see*.²³ But in the spectacle of the Catholic ritual of Saint Agatha's sacrifice, believing and seeing have imploded into one and the same act and emotional response, carried forth by a community, tele-vised nationally as the ideology that Derrida called "globalatinization:" this emotion is suffering that is lived in and for the community and that has turned itself into the desire for spectacle, namely to be *seen and heard*.

In the ritual of Saint Agatha one thing becomes crystal clear and that is that religion, at least Catholicism, is *not* just about belief. While the case I have analysed is specific to Catholicism, it reflects an understanding of religious practice as essentially embodied experience that has been corroborated by scholars of religion from William James to Victor Turner. While belief has its place, of course, it must be understood as only one aspect of a broader spectrum of existential involvement with religious practice and community. Seeing Agatha's martyrdom in its vast imagery and seeing her statue once a year during the *Festa di Sant'Agata* and being "in touch" with her visually becomes an index of the physical need of the "audience" to see. But the desire of this devoted community is not only to see, but also to feel something – together. Seeing Agatha is only the trigger. Catholics, devotees,

22 Cf. Morris 2011.

23 Cf. Derrida 2001, 63.

whether following popular or canonical rules, want to *re-live* the suffering of a saint or of Jesus Christ, who suffered on the cross. And yes, from the intellectual distance of the non-practising Catholic this may appear to be a masochistic undertaking. And from that position of profanity, it may even not be too far-reaching to see a connection between the popularised stereotypisation of sado-masochism in the recent bestseller for “desperate housewives,” *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James, and Agatha’s martyrdom: in that both of these narratives stress the fact that women enter into this contract of submission and subordination willingly and knowingly, with a smile on their face – and all others, whether the community watching the procession of the statue or the readers of E.L. James’s smash hit, are there to take pleasure in watching her enjoy. But the “theatre of cruelty,” as theorised by Antonin Artaud in his *Le théâtre et son double*,²⁴ is a theatre where metaphysics re-enter the mind directly through the skin. And this is perhaps the reason for the success of such theatres of cruelty to this day: their lasting ability to *affect* us.

Embodiment and the Made-over Body of the 21st Century

To the very extent that the present can be understood as experiencing a resurgence in the general phenomenon of religiosity, religious discourse itself is experiencing a return to the body, in apparent reaction to those movements that, at the height of modernity, spurned Nietzsche’s famous critique. Thus even in the very Christianity that institutionalised the denigration of the body as the prison house of the soul, the 20th century has seen the inscription of the body into Catholic orthodoxy in phenomenologist-Pope John Paul II’s “Theology of the Body,” which he began publicising in a series of addresses beginning in 1979, but that derived from his earlier book, *Love and Responsibility*.²⁵ Of course, this theology of the body has a very focussed ideology: in the Vatican’s version, a theology of the body is ultimately about the control and containment of bodies, especially in their sexual manifestations. While perhaps more surprising in the religious context, this embodied turn has certainly not only conquered contemporary debates around religion. According to Mark Hansen,²⁶ the media have become “corporealised” and there are innumerable examples for this

24 Cf. Artaud 1958 (1938).

25 Cf. Wojtyła 1981.

26 Cf. Hansen 2006.

melding of media into flesh and vice versa, such as the “skin-architecture” of the *Blur*, designed by Diller + Scofidio (2002), to give one classic example. This is a pavilion on Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland. *Blur* is a prime example of turning one’s inside out and being *one* with one’s outside:

Hovering mysteriously over the lake, *Blur* is a dynamic media building that consists, like the human body, nearly entirely of water. More specifically, *Blur* is a cloud of mist formed by 12,500 spray nozzles covering an infrastructure and producing a fog system. Not only is *Blur* a “smart weather” device, in the sense that the building changes its appearance depending on the (unpredictable) weather of the day, but it is also, as Hansen points out, “space that has been made wearable:” the actual configuration of the building owes much, at any point in time, to the movements and interactions of its inhabitants, and the predominate aesthetic of blur has the effect of making space “cling to” the motile body.²⁷



Fig. 6: *Blur*, designed by Diller + Scofidio (2002). Courtesy of Diller Scofidio + Renfro.

The implosion of inside into outside in what Bernard Andrieu has coined the “epistemological dispersion of the human body”²⁸ has its roots not least in psychoanalysis. For Freud and in his wake, the ego is an entity that is

²⁷ Wegenstein 2009, 30.

²⁸ Andrieu 1993, 9 (my translation).

both external and internal: it is inscribed from the outside (through the eyes and expectations of other people) and at the same time, it is built from expectations and desires stemming from the subject's "inside." At the same time of the invention of psychoanalysis, the philosophical branch of phenomenology was approaching a similar conclusion, namely that the body is a necessary intermediary between the self and the world.²⁹ This phenomenological tradition eventually included the German thinker Max Scheler, on whose work the young Karol Wojtyła wrote his doctoral dissertation *The Question of Faith According to St. John of the Cross*, long before being named Pope John Paul II.³⁰

Emerging from all these debates that remained mainly theoretical in the first part of the 20th century was a new concept of the body that has been with us since the second half of that century. This is a cyborg body, a flesh-machine, also thought of as a "posthuman" body in that it may one day outlive the body as we know it. But most importantly it is a body-medium that cannot be separated from its function as both flesh and screen. It is a body, in other words, on whose skin has been inscribed how it wants to be seen, perceived, interacted with. This body-medium has been received and greeted by our culture with both pessimism (Jean Baudrillard, Donna Haraway) and enthusiasm (Ray Kurzweil and others), it is a living Möbius strip, and its utmost desire – whether we see this expressed in the above example of architecture or in fashion, new media art and video gaming, to give just a few examples – is to blur the inside with the outside and to push against that fourth wall of representation. This is a concept of embodiment that is always on the verge of renovation, change and flux. But while this body of the 21st century has dressed itself in fluidity and movement, it also says: "Wait until you see what I am about to give birth to."

As I have discussed at length in my recent book, *The Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty*,³¹ there is no better example for the implosion of inside and outside than the one proposed by makeover discourse. This is a prime example for the body to show on its own flesh the constitution of a self "underneath." The ideology of makeover believes not only in the body's capacity for change and subsequently in the technologies that make this change possible (such as cosmetic surgery), but it believes in the self as a "project" in its capacity to *change for the better*, in what

29 Cf. Bergson 1990.

30 Cf. Wojtyła 1950.

31 Cf. Wegenstein 2012.

is often coined the “amazing transformation,” staged and televised in what makeover culture calls the “reveal” (of the new body or self). The makeover-self has thus to be ready to do some hard “work” in order to get *better* – inside and out.

Important to recall is that this drive for improvement is ultimately figured in terms of morality: hence the linkage of *aesthetic and moral judgment* as encapsulated already in the Platonic notion of *kalókaqathia*. This judgment has impregnated our western culture of the 21st century as a search for and positive evaluation of the “better-beautiful,” that has been disseminated by physiognomists, racial theorists and others. Today, this “better-beautiful” version of the self has been transformed into a commodity by aesthetic surgeons and by software engineers who develop “beautification engines” of the “ideal you,” and their images are proliferated at the speed of light through our current media culture. This better-you might feature a rounder jaw, a more even forehead, smoother skin, a wider smile or a six-pack as opposed to a “pendulous abdomen,” all examples of improvements, slight or drastic, that suit our bodies and our character better than the “original.”

The genre of the reality TV makeover show is always about “the display of ongoing change and labour,”³² and it requires a self who is willing and able to translate a mental picture of “before” into the reality of “after.” The usage of before/after pictures in reality makeover shows makes evident the constitution of the self through the photograph. While the camera “kills life,” it also creates new life, i.e. a new image in the form of a mental picture of oneself as other. This inner photograph expresses the cosmetic gaze in that mentally the self sees itself already “a step ahead,” as an improved “after-picture.”

The viewers of the makeover show on FOX television, on the other hand, are put into the visual position of the one who takes the picture, who mortifies or freezes these women’s bodies – as we are looking at them through the mirror itself (see below).

32 Jones 2008, 12.



Fig 7. Cindi Ingle sees herself for the first time in the mirror after her surgical transformation in *The Swan*; still image from “Made Over in America” – Icarus Films (Geoffrey A. Rhodes/Bernadette Wegenstein, USA 2007).

The viewer witnesses here a “snuff-film” of a mortified self that has become “other” to herself at the moment of what the show calls “the reveal,” i.e. the moment when the contestant sees herself for the first time in the mirror. The mental image that she has made of herself during the three months while she has been away from any interface that would suggest to her how she would look after her multiple cosmetic surgeries unfolds in front of her and we, the “photographers,” become witnesses to her own *mortification*. This gaze that we are asked to apply is truly *cosmetic*, because it is equipped with and informed by the technologies that make it possible to perceive each and every body against the backdrop of its potential improvement. It is a gaze profoundly entrenched in the digital media revolution offered by the late capitalist media economy as embodied in such reality TV formats as *The Swan*. In other words, this is a gaze that knows how to pose for a surgical camera that not only envisions a bettered self, but makes it *happen*.

Ultimately, this televised, highly public transformation from before to after, the mortification of a prior self, its purification through pain and rebirth as a new self for the awe and enjoyment of a community – how can we not see in it yet another instantiation of the transformation intrinsic to the imagistic tradition embodied by Agatha? For it is in Agatha's body, in her suffering and enjoyment of it, that we can begin to grasp how it is that we both *have* and *are* a body and how the human body can only ever be conceptualised as both a historical and cultural entity. The body produces culture and culture produces the body; the body is the most fundamental medium of human knowledge and experience. It will, therefore, always be the most vital place to start asking questions about cultural meaning. While our bodies and the meanings and values we attribute to them cannot help but change incessantly, the fact of embodiment and of the embodied experience of life cannot.

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