

Preface

When I was younger, my Aunt would say to me: "If you look at yourself for too long in the mirror you'll see a monkey there". I must have looked at myself for longer than that: what I see is much lower than a monkey, it's close to being vegetative; more like some kind of polyp... Do other men suffer this way, when they examine their own faces? Perhaps appreciating your own face is an impossibility? Or is it perhaps because I'm on my own? People in society have learnt to view themselves in a mirror in exactly the same ways their friends see them. I don't have any friends: is this why my flesh seems so naked? Yes, that's it... that's what nature in which men are absent would say.

J.P. Sartre, *Nausea*

Why do so many people feel uneasy when they look in the mirror or at pictures of themselves?

The body itself, how they imagine it to be, or how they wish it were, may account for this, but it might also be behind, or be the starting point for, different kinds of psychological disorders. If a person's self-image fails to match up with their vision of the body they would rather have, this can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and lowly self-esteem and deeply wound how they perceive their own identity. The more physical appearance becomes the calling card for those who seek the approval of others, the truer this becomes.

Where might the painful idea that some people are living in the *wrong* body come from?

In some cases, appearance and self-image differ remarkably and subjective perceptions prevail and reject all evidence to the contrary. Thus, the problem no longer seems to have anything to do with the body. Strangely enough, the less people recognise themselves in their own body, the more they are interested in it. To "understand our own features", to give it significance – according to Sartre – we must learn to see ourselves precisely as we appear to other people. This seems another way of

saying that identity can never be taken for fact. Even the nature and significance of different parts of the body varies and is short-lived, because it requires two separate viewpoints to substantiate it: our own and that of people important to us.

A children's fairytale provides a useful illustration of the important role that social recognition plays in identity. The story recounts an unusual encounter between an opossum and a mouflon, both of which, not having met other varieties of their own species, were unable to appreciate their own body shape. The two creatures, however curious they might have been about each other's characteristics, were equally unable to appreciate their own (because each could see the other "in the round", but only a part of themselves). Therefore, they took it in turns to ask one another questions in order to make themselves aware of their own bodies. The proceedings led them to believe they were not at all the creatures they really were and to start behaving in keeping with what they learnt from how the speaker described them. In the long term, these accounts became far removed from how the character being described really felt, but as far as the other was concerned, they were being "truthful". This distancing becomes progressively confirmed as time passes, and neither of them discovers who they really are. The other participant's reality will become the only identity that counts. This story is interesting because each of them, thanks to misunderstandings, have experiences characteristic of other species, without being aware of it.

A complex scenario, performed on the thin cable of ambiguity, where no one knows about his more or less correct representation of one's identities, believing each of them as truth. The narrator illustrates the underlying theme of the story for the listener, namely the primeval relationship between the body, individual appearance and identity: we exist, we think and experience, forever in search of constancy between perceived outward appearance and perceived self-representations. The tale also reveals that we (more so humans than animals, in truth) must try to find the most credible reflection and confirmation of ourselves in the eyes of others, because it is impossible for us to familiarise ourselves with our true features. How can we figure out our own features without using real "mirrors" or other people's considered opinions about us? Is it not true that, although every facet of our bodies says something about us, for some reason different "zones" exist, some of which we feel better characterise us and others which we would gladly disown? What causes this "distancing" experience, this incongruous "rejection"?

In some cases, this rejection becomes so strong that we embrace the notion that a change in appearance will transform the appeal and substance of our own identity: which is precisely how dysmorphophobics, bulimics and anorexics see themselves. As is often the case, we play most what we least cannot be, or sometimes, what we dare not be! – transcendental bodies, then, suggesting alternative identities and relapses. This said, we are not referring to dysmorphophobics alone, or to those on waiting lists for plastic surgery. We all have this rebellious nature. Contact lenses, dentures, padded brassieres, high heels or tattooed eyebrows are all subtle forms of makeover, not startling per se, yet indicative of an analogous, subconscious hunger for a new identity designed to stimulate further appreciation. Disorders related to somatic characteristics ultimately are rigorous self-criticisms and are indicative of a

remarkable conflict between our appearance (what we display) and how we see ourselves. In such cases, our sense of self-worth can be in thrall to our self-critical and disapproving inner voice. Being predominant, this voice has the power to erase all contrary evidence, throwing open the doors that lead to disagreeable thoughts and unrestrained behaviour. These are conflicting, repressive and intolerant abysses in which we are easily lost and that we cannot understand simply by giving them names or diagnostic labels, because the individual's psychological complexities transcend such labelling. Moreover, diagnostic practices are rational interpretations, intelligent approximations that are not always worthy of the questions they should answer. Some clinics are beginning to question if every pleasure-loving form of gluttony should be diagnosed as "bulimia", or every beauty intervention as "body dysmorphic disorder", thus highlighting that imprecision of language typical of many concepts designed to explain human behaviour and its distinguishing features.

The subjects of this book are bodies, features and identities, the relationships between them and those that separate them. It discusses theories intended to explain this phenomenon and the alternatives that have led to their development. By the way, if the problem is not inside the body, we can't find there the solution. Accordingly – and herein is this book's premise throughout – we cannot understand body disorders unless we first deal with how we regard the body itself and the theoretical filters used to interpret it. Indeed, there are obstacles and misunderstandings surrounding any discussion of the body: any ontological definition requires that it be "object", tangible in and of itself, the sole factual definition of human existence. Nevertheless – and herein lies the source of all misinterpretations – despite the fact that the body is susceptible to being condensed by the established natural sciences, it evades attempts to pigeonhole it as a "substance". If we resist this temptation, we avoid reducing this complex theme to a one-dimensional explanation. Although regarding bodies as physical and biological organisms has succeeded for some writers, others maintain they can also be envisaged using other forms. As we will discover, the development of the medical model seems to be the result of a formal choice, a convention of language even, by interested parties (groups of professionals) and common sense than from the evidence itself. Nowadays, we are no longer surprised that "body image disorder" is treated as a clinical syndrome and listed as an eating or a somatic-type disorder. We are becoming convinced that we cannot operate without using a cultural and historical choice that has achieved widespread consensus. Examining the birth of new organisational syndromes from historical, socio-cultural and linguistic viewpoints, we will discuss this "totalitarian" medical model in greater depth.

This book's linking theme is the notion that the psychological body and its predicaments are experiences in fluid interaction, depending on situation and context, rather than simply the product of inflexible cognitive models and personality profiles set in stone.

We will also challenge the relevance of the "appearance-internal" ("in" being to "out" as "superficial" perspectives to "deep") construct with regard to the relationship between "bodies" and "identity". In this book, these ideas will be discussed

from an historical and cultural viewpoint (“individual appearance”, “how physical appearance was described in Greek and Roman cultures”), from a phenomenological point of view (“the body as subject or as object of experience”), from medical and neurological perspectives (through the idea of “body schema”), from a psychological frame (the birth of the “corporeal self” and the limits of reductivism). We will not also neglect sociological and symbolic aspects (e.g. the “normo-pathical” body).

This writer will also selectively discuss some of the psychological processes involved in the development of awareness of the corporeal self. Most of the theoretical references will be discussed from phenomenological and interaction perspectives. Indeed the objective is to guide the reader through theory rather than content, paying particular regard to social and interactive aspects, which in turn will be developed using reflections borrowed from anthropology and semiotics.

For example, the importance of public opinion in establishing identity will be tackled in the first section. If “repute” is the traditional means a person is known by in our society (and a rigid and unalienable one to be sure), then outward appearance becomes the obvious means for identification, the inscrutable proof that we are who we say we are and not somebody else. A person’s authenticity, their bodily identity, is often (wrongly) taken for granted and recalls periods when a person’s identity could only be established by their physical presence. Now notarised documents, the driver’s license, fingerprinting, the photograph itself have eliminated the problem of the counterfeit identity. This has done away with the idea of the doppelganger, of the coincidental double, which existed in previous times, for example in Plautus’ plays. At the same time, it has reduced the body’s power as the “source for recognition of the body”, relegating it to other purposes, particularly aesthetic-visual ones. This was not the case in former times! As we will discover, terms (which are never hap-hazard) used to describe appearance betray the cultural usage to which we are heirs: visage [*viso* in Italian] (from *visus*) means “that which has been seen”, face [*faccia*] means “that which has been done”, what I make [*faccio*] of the other person’s visage. The term aspect (from *spicio*, *ad-spicio*) has similar linguistic origins. In addition, physique, stature, features [*figura*, *statura*, *lineamenti*, in Italian] are, according to Maurizio Bettini, terms that refer specifically to the body as an image, static rather than in movement – a “body portrait” then. For the Romans, the opposite was true. Just one of the many suggested examples concerns the features and expressions used to describe them and that mostly involve linguistics and motion. The face is seen as something changeable, an indicator of various states of mind. Indeed the expression *vultus* is plural, even when it is referring to a single person. The connection between the internal and external takes place by using the mouth – the most important term – which enables the most intimate aspects of self to come to the surface through language, another “body” in other words, another way of understanding it. Our careless use of language when analysing ourselves is the price we are required to pay for understanding these distinctions. Some elements of the rapport between the body and the significance of identity nevertheless evoke an essentially cross-cultural code.

What psychological factors govern this correlation between the body and personality as valid today as it was in the past? Individual and collective understanding

of personal experience (current and past) when allied with consistent behaviour and remembrance of past stories (including affective ones) all guarantee our identity will be instantly recognised by means of these unique characteristics.

Semiotics gives us another example of the interchange between the individual and the collective. As our account will show, the body is not just a fact of nature but neither is it just the product of society. Roland Barthes explains that it is “if anything the result of an indeterminate realm, where a half-formed subjectivity (the individual’s) and an inter-subjectivity (that of common sense) profoundly converge, neither nature nor culture, neither mind nor body” (Barthes 1998, p. XXXII). Cinema and the fashion industry both give us examples of the language of society and of this kind of osmosis: far from being natural, the supposed spontaneity of facial expressions is always “planned and calculated”. Facial expressions studied to the *n*th degree lead to an actor’s face determining the current “look” and becoming the prototype for other faces, in the same way that the actor’s appearance is based on the streetwise individual.

Similarly, we are the victims of “psychological illusion” if we believe choosing an item of clothing (e.g. an overcoat or a necklace) is down to individual choice, or that fashion is merely the end result of individual preferences “multiplied” on a group scale. When prehistoric man first placed a fur coat over his shoulders to protect himself from the cold, he was truly performing a solipsistic act, but once the choice of garments and how they would be used, and the choice and cut of the materials, was determined by a social group, clothes became a matter of convention. Aesthetic objectives were irrelevant. Dress styles, with their specific contrived rules, creations and no-no’s, have become institutionalised. If it is true that a large social body allows to individuals to take an active part of it, culture takes part in shaping bodies, modifying their surfaces, modulating their functioning, producing expressions and postures, as well as traditions, values and habits. In this sense body can be conceived as situated (in a specific context).

Thus, the body as the subject of scientific understanding is the context in which our subject matter is shaped in detailed and profound ways. The conceptual blueprints of the psychological disciplines, such as psychiatry and psychoanalysis (and indeed all cognitive disciplines), have evolved through the separation of the soul (*res cogitans*) and the body (*res extensa*). Our current humanistic sciences all subscribe to the idea of a dual rapport between body and mind. The parameters Descartes drew up in his era remain the same as now, thus making it hard to find the room for new ideas. Their style is still governed by the methods he introduced.

The body is a theoretical concept as opposed to a recognisable and empirical entity that can be objectified, an idea that was never stated, even though it forms the basis for a large part of psychological research surrounding the body and its anxieties. The most important theory to explain a body image disorder seems to suggest the perceived deformity can be ascribed to a “perception disorder”: the anorexic’s tendency to envision they are fatter than they really are could be the result of an acquired sensory-perceptual disorder. Scientific articles on this subject expound extremely sophisticated instruments for evaluating body image (generally or partially).

Later, because of a number of incongruities and inconsistent results, this perceptual theory gave way to a theory about attitudes, moving the problem from the domain of the senses to that of the emotions, whilst persevering with the methodology. These are interesting, but often self-contradictory, ideas and will be discussed at length in this book. They often confuse the reader since the “image” construct is often mistaken for the “body schema”, or not enough care is taken to use the instruments in a consistent manner. In the end, there are as many versions of body image as there are instruments designed to assess it.

A widespread and discordant literature, an ensemble of voices which make it difficult to be integrated in a same score (or music sheet). Indeed, this corpus of publications mountain of work has spread and legitimised the concept of the anatomical body, or, more specifically, the body and its particular parts that can be broken down into component sections – “affective”, “cognitive” and “perceptive” – all of which have provoked much confusion in understanding and in epistemology. In phenomenology, for example, the result is the “non-body”. If the primary meaning of the word “body” [*corpo*] is “giving”, “giving body to”, as in “giving life to a totality that exceeds the sum of its parts”, then the scientific world’s surgical interventions should be capable of reducing it to its component parts. The desire to have control over all its possible manifestations would reduce it to the shadow of its former self, its presence to a hopeless memory. Writers like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Husserl and Binswanger differentiate between contributions of a psychology that “understands” the body by how it presents itself and those of a psychophysiology that “rationalises” it, as it would explain any of nature’s phenomena. The alliance of psychology and natural science models exposes humankind to the risk of being stripped of its uniqueness. The body as understood using scientific methods (*Körper*) is not the same as the one that enables us to experience (*Leib*). The former loses psychological relevance because it lacks the purpose of its own actions. This is a body bereft of a third dimension.

Thus, phenomenological methods cannot conceptualise the body because it is not just object. No one is granted a faithful image of his or her own body, not because of some deficiency in perception, but because of the distinctive nature of our existence. Self-images are generated by our self-same bodies and are not mere reproductions of anatomical structures, nor do they coincide with what our knowledge of self-awareness tells us (Galimberti 1983, p. 163). It is a changeable, continually fluctuating image. Self-characterisations permeate and absorb the individual’s conceptual groupings, his normative processes, his value systems, far removed from the faithfulness to the original we would expect from a duplicated image. Thus, body image is the result of whatever subjective version of reality each individual develops from the consequences of their social surroundings, their levels of education, behavioural models, their expectations and those courses of action determined by their role, and the characteristics of a specific body shape, rather than from the physical reality of their bodies.

The reader will undoubtedly appreciate that this book does not deal with certainties. The body is a poor topic for the optimistic soul wanting to understand fully its

representations and hidden truths. Italo Calvino in his book *the Adventures of a photographer* gives us a touching example of the difference between experience-self and object-self, encapsulated as form and captured in time. A photograph represents the ultimate attempt to capture an individual experience in permanent form. A flattering idea, but how satisfactory is it? The very moment someone has their photograph taken, some of its living presence is stolen and has already been converted to memory. Such thoughts cause Antonio, prey to an unhealthy and unwavering desire to capture the seductive curves of his beloved Bice, to hesitate to use his skills as a photographer: “Was he maybe not trying to photograph memories, on second thoughts, vague surface echoes of memories? His refusal to experience the present as a future memory, in the style of a Sunday snapper, did that not lead him to attempt an equally unreal manoeuvre, namely bringing a memory to life, replacing the present, before his very eyes? He was aware that he would only be able to capture an objective extraneousness by exaggerating poses, only by faking a half-completed movement could he simulate non-movement, non-life [...]. Besides photographic reality immediately becomes nostalgia, joyfulness fleeing on the wings of time, has a commemorative quality even if it is a photograph taken just the other day [...]. Moreover, lives led through photographs are already self-commemorative ones [...]. Believing that a snapshot is more real than the posed portrait is wrong”.

The relationship between the body and images of it is chaotic in this case also. To Calvino the photograph is a lifeless object; it distances the present and imitates a spontaneity truncated by expectations of how we would want to appear. Antonio was in search of a format beyond time and space: he didn't quite know how he would do it, but he was determined to succeed. “It's a question of the method you use. Whatever person or object you decide to photograph, you must persist in photographing that and that only, at all hours of the day and night. Photographs only mean something if you exhaust all the possibilities [...]. The Bice he wanted to capture was an invisible one, a Bice completely alone, a Bice whose presence presupposed that he and anyone else would not be present. Antonino fell into a deep depression. He began to keep a diary: a photographic one of course. He remained at home, collapsed in an armchair the camera around his neck, and compulsively snapped pictures, looking at nothing. He was taking pictures of Bice's absence [...]. To get all this in frame required acquiring an extraordinary technical ability, but only this would stop Antonio taking photographs. Once all possibilities had been exhausted, when the circle closed in on him, Antonio understood that photographing photos was the only road left to him, in fact the true road he had been vaguely searching for up to then”.

Perhaps Roland Barthes was right when he stated that: “there exists a vast field of inter-subjectivity for bodies that science cannot touch. Only literature is able to describe this world of delicate bodies” (Barthes 1998).

The Corporeal Identity
When the Self-Image Hurts

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