

Death and Enlightenment in the Dissection Amphitheatre

Summary

Why is the human body the center of such an intensely mediated attention? Why are the magazines, newspapers, television, ads, commercials filled with images of nude or almost nude bodies? Why are so many writers, artists, photographers profoundly preoccupied by this subject? And why is it that a feeling of uneasiness, or even panic, seems to underline all of this imagery?

Is it because of the fact that the body seems to invisible in this *age of machines*, is it because the body, as we are accustomed to it, is disappearing (according to some thinkers), or is it just because the body is *fashionably* readjusted in the public eye?

What brings the body to the foreground of the debate is not fashion, but necessity. We are intrinsically linked to this body and all that is connected with it.

The body is reconsidered and rethought by artists and writers because, at the same time, it is restructured and rebuilt by scientists and engineers. In an age where body part transplants have become a routine, where the American Health Ministry provides schools with standard digital corpses for study, where special machines can take over bodily functions, while others are being built to reach intelligent thought, where life can be sustained artificially even after the brain has died, where genetic experiments and cloning are possible, where we reconstruct ourselves through plastic surgery in order to meet a fleeting beauty ideal – the concepts and definitions, the values and beliefs, the rights and laws have to be radically analyzed.

Mankind continues to struggle with its perishable nature within the immutable world. Death continues to be the greatest fear. The human body is multiplied in images, is “turned upside-down” in order to make it easier “to see”, to control, to master what spawns fear, in order to reach “enlightenment”.

It is not about hoping that the reason behind this fear will disappear, but about coping with this inexorable phenomenon. Through visual description, through image, mankind can overcome what is frightening, mankind can “face” this reality.

With this thesis, I am trying to follow up on an idea that has already been discussed – through art, for a very long time now, people were thoroughly talking and without inhibition, about eroticism and death.

Within the visual framework, the image unites opposite feelings and behaviors leading to a strong conflict. For example, the erotic startle felt in the presence of a lifeless body is prone to terrify the human spirit, because the spirit is exposed to a paradox.

This thesis aims to bring together these opposite possibilities of the human spirit. I am trying to make out a possibility of convergence of these two opposite feelings. I wanted to look for a certain cohesion in the diversity of the historical and artistic moments described. I tried to create a coherent picture of an ensemble of behaviors.

Thus, from the desire to reach an overview, nothing was more appealing to me than the possibility of regaining from a general perspective, the image that continues to fascinate me – the anatomical image of the human body.

What is it that unites art and anatomy? Is the connection between the two fields relevant or should it be considered as doubtful? The answer is, at the same time, very simple and extremely complex, thus making the human body the most prolific source of interest and artistic meaning.

The cultural creations towards which the project is aiming, found inspiration in nature and the naturalistic representation. Artists and anatomists were attracted to a

certain study of the human figure, study that was done in a variety of ways: dissection, clinical observation, experiment, etc. The historical background of these studies of the body is large and the intention is to map horizons in which, at some point, those who were called artists and those who were anatomists, interacted. Sometimes, they were one and the same.

In general, the dissemination of ideas and images of the body was done because of complex collaborations, not only between the artists that studied the body from a scientific and medical point of view, but also between engravers, wax carvers, sculptors, editors, booksellers, universities, hospitals, museums and galleries.

For starters, one should understand the ability of the human body to be a cultural source and develop an environment where many social components can find immediate meanings. This ability is sustained by the simultaneously abstract and concrete, symbolic and intimate, familiar and occult, mundane and mysterious, sacred and profane character of the body. As anthropology points out, the human body was used – culturally, politically, economically, religiously – in all societies, its avatars being omnipresent; virtually, everything seems to be relevant in order to reach a level of understanding of the human body.

The subject that tackles the human body is extremely vast and I have chosen to focus on art and anatomy, by detailing three parameters – the intellectual, the empirical and the moral parameters.

The human body was a central theme in Western art, throughout most of its history; for representing the bodies in their highest degree of expression, the artists had to

study anatomy: they have dissected the dead in order to depict the living. This subject has been for a long while under the sign of the *obscure*, in the sense that, for the artists, the human or animal anatomy drawing was a part of the academic study in preparation of complex works, being an “intimate” atelier study.

Obscure because many of the drawings and objects created by artists and anatomists in the spirit of anatomical knowledge were considered, until the end of the 20th century, as “disturbing” for a non-medical public and were exiled from profane view, deposited in museum collection or libraries.

This project aims to have a chronological overview of art and anatomy, although it examines works belonging to a period that stretches from the 15th to the 20th century.

I wanted to sketch some of the connections between anatomy, the cultural constructs of the body and the images created by artists, inside this complex field. Some chapters coincide, more or less, with centuries and geopolitical areas, because the medical and artistic body is conditioned historically.

To put it differently, it is amazing that artists from different cultures and times, including contemporary artists, have explored feverishly similar visual solutions, making visible the horror, the pathos, the fragility and the power of the human body.