

Bodymodifications, performative saying and politics: from the *veritas obsectorum* to the *veritas rerum*

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Abstract

We are bodies, and we live constantly involved in the representation of corporeity. In contemporary society, this involvement is amplified by television, social networks, social media, representations of all kinds that remind us of corporeity. These representations of bodies testify to a continuous change of the bodies and of the conception of corporeity: a change that develops with socio-political (therefore cultural, economic, etc.) changes. But how “political” is the body of Man? How “political” is the language of the body? These are just some of the questions that arise from the very presence of countless images of the human body in every form and context. A body, influencing and influenced by the complex network of relationships built through what the author has termed “performative saying”, that is “the discourse of a knowledge, expression of the *Weltanschauung* of a certain society”. The body is therefore today more than ever itself a “political saying”, expression of the imaginary and therefore the field of experimentation and continuous changes. These practices of modification – implemented not only for medical, legal, religious and above all political purposes, practices that range from haircutting to amputation of limbs, through tattoos and scarification, etc. – can often be experienced by those who practice them as an approach to the reality of themselves in an attempt to “show what manifests itself from itself, as it manifests itself”. These practices also always characterize status transitions as well as manifest the will to be there and the very mode of this being there. Being inseparable from the historicity of those who practice them, these modifications have a political meaning in which the role of science cannot be ignored. The relationship between science, politics and body modifications is thus expressed, assuredly, in the corporeity of the cyborg and the mutant and in all the political imagery related to and as a result of them.

Keywords: body modifications, politics, ethics, performative saying, science

The becoming of the body and the *performative saying*

A strictly objectivist conception of the body which intends it as something that manifests itself and is manifest (and which therefore has no alternative but to be or not be there) presupposes truth as the immediate presence of a fact. Yet the fact as such is a negation of the present and therefore of immediacy:

“Posta come realtà soltanto l’insieme dei fatti presenti... e limitato l’essere a questa realtà... il reale stesso ci si dissolve tutto come reale, perché quello stesso presente che dovrebbe costituirlo svanirebbe anch’esso... Le cose ci si presentano proprio come e in quanto fatti e i fatti, per natura loro, sono già passati, quando sono fatti. Non il fatto storico soltanto è passato, ma il fatto per sé, il fatto storico è passato, non perché storico, ma perché fatto”¹.

The manifestation of something is then precisely in its becoming, but it is only by abstracting from this becoming that this something can appear present as a “fact”; here lies the contradiction of empiricism, in affirming the being of the fact as an immediate presence, an immediate presence that cannot, however, be contained in the fact, precisely because it is a “fact”:

“L’essenza della presenzialità immediata – che dovrebbe essere l’essenza della svelatezza empiristica – non è dunque ciò che è *diventato* e che si è cristallizzato come *fatto*, oggetto, bensì il divenire, il *manifestarsi*”².

The concept of body is affecting and affected by the complex network of relations expressed in the manifestation, these relations being constructed in what is defined here as *performative saying*.

The “performativity”, however, is not to be understood as deriving from the English “to perform”³, nor in Austinian⁴ or Turnerian⁵ terms.

“Perform” is here understood as deriving from the late Latin “performs, as”, where: “*Per* [...] comme préverbe, a en latin le sens de ‘à travers, pendant’ (local et

¹ P. Carabellese, “La storia”, in AA.VV., *Scritti per B. Varisco*, pp. 24-60, p. 29, Firenze: Vallecchi, 1926: “Given as reality only the set of present facts... and limited to this reality... the real itself dissolves everything as real, because that same present that should constitute it would also vanish... Things present themselves to us just as and in so far as facts; and facts, by their nature, have already passed, when they are facts. Not only is the historical fact past, but the fact for itself, the historical fact is past, not because it is historical, but because it is fact”. (Own translation). It should be kept in mind that in Italian the word “fatto” has the meaning both of “fact” as such, and of “done”: it is a very subtle play on words.

² E. Grassi, “Il Problema del Logo”, in *Archivio di Filosofia*, Anno VI, n. 2, pp. 151-183, p. 154, 1936: “The essence of immediate presence – which should be the essence of empirical unveiling – is not therefore what it has become and that has crystallized as fact, object, but rather the becoming, the manifesting”. (Own translation)

³ As transitive verb: “1. to adhere to the terms of: fulfill; 2. Carry out, do; 3. a: to do in a formal manner or according to prescribed ritual; b: to give a rendition of: present”, as intransitive verb “1. to carry out an action or pattern of behavior: act, function; 2. to give a performance: play”; Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

⁴ Cfr. J. L. Austin, *How to do things with words* (1955), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.

⁵ Cfr. V. W. Turner, *From ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play*, New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982.

temporel), ‘de bout en bout’ [...]”⁶ and “*Formo -as*: proprement ‘mettre en forme’ [...], ‘former, façonner’”⁷. *Performative*, might, then, be understood as the “shaping, forming during (the time in which the saying takes place)”. That is, a saying is performative when the saying shapes itself in the moment in which it is said, shapes (and in this sense constructs) reality every time it is expressed.

The performative saying is to be understood as every discourse of a knowledge, expression of the *Weltanschauung* of a given society; therefore *mythos*, *logos* and discourse are understood as typologies of the performative saying.

These typologies, constituent and constituted constructors of the imaginary and co-constructed by the imaginary – understood as an imaginative dimension capable of producing real effects – contribute to enhance the definition of reality as a social construction. The body is therefore analyzed not in terms of something that is only present and evident (*verum et factum*), but as an expression of the constructive capacity of the performative saying (*verum et fieri*), and as being, in turn, a performative saying with undeniable political meaning, since it is a fundamental element of the “relating to...”, and because it is tied to the modalities of the Being-in-the-world and the imaginary.

Body techniques and body modifications

In “Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology”⁸, Mary Douglas points out that society as a system of relationships influences the way in which the body is perceived and the perception of the body influences the perception of society, and thus social behavior. This brings us back to Marcel Mauss’s article “Les techniques du corps”⁹ in which he shows how even the most basic techniques of the body, from walking to eating, from swimming to having sex, are culturally shaped. But what does he mean by body techniques?

Mauss considers the body as the first means, the technical object of man, and defines the technique as an effective traditional act:

“J’appelle technique un acte *traditionnel et efficace* (et vous voyez qu’en ceci il n’est pas différent de l’acte magique, religieux, symbolique). Il faut qu’il soit *traditionnel et efficace*. Il n’y a pas de technique et pas de transmission, s’il n’y a pas de tradition.

⁶ A. Ernout – A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine. Histoire des mots*, Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1951: “Thought, during (place and time)”. (Own translation)

⁷ *Ivi*: “shaping, forming” (Own translation)

⁸ M. Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, London: Barrie&Rockliff, 1970.

⁹ M. Mauss, “Techniques du Corps” (1935), in *Sociologie et anthropologie*, a. c. di C. Levi-Strauss, Paris: PUF, 1985, pp. 363-386.

C'est en quoi l'homme se distingue avant tout des animaux: par la transmission de ses techniques et très probablement par leur transmission orale"¹⁰.

The body techniques are therefore those techniques, or ways in which man uses his body, transmitted and elaborated through the saying. These techniques change from society to society because they depend on the education of the social group to which one belongs:

“L'enfant, l'adulte, imite des actes qui ont réussi et qu'il a vu réussir par des personnes en qui il a confiance et qui ont autorité sur lui [...] L'individu emprunte la série des mouvements dont il est composé à l'acte exécuté devant lui ou avec lui par les autres”¹¹.

Among the body techniques and the body modifications performed not only for medical, legal or religious purposes, ethnology detects an incredible variety of body modifications, from hair cutting to hair removal to amputation of body parts. What may appear to an eye external to the social group in which such modifications are performed as a disfiguration, appears instead in the emic perspective specific to the social group in which they are performed as an artistic expression of beauty, of the morally correct, of a political identity, or of the perfect human being, etc.

As Bernhard Streck¹² points out, body modifications often have the same function or meaning as jewellery: demarcation, accentuation, prestige or pure aesthetic game. However, the fundamental difference remains the duration of the body modification compared to that of a jewel. Even if today it is possible to remedy some body modifications (e.g. tattoos) or to implant subcutaneous jewels permanently, the difference remains: it is not possible to remedy a scarification or an amputation.

There are, therefore, many reasons to perform body modifications, which can only be understood in the context in which they are practiced, from initiatory processes, to sacrifices and cosmetic surgery, etc.

¹⁰ M. Mauss, *Techniques du Corps*, op. cit, p. 371: “I call technical act a *traditional and effective* act (and you see that in this it does not differ from the magical, religious, symbolic act). It must be *traditional and effective*. There is no technique and there is no transmission, if there is no tradition. This is how man mainly differs from animals: for the transmission of his techniques and most probably for their oral transmission”. (Own translation)

¹¹ M. Mauss, “Techniques du Corps” (1935), op. cit, p. 369: “The child, the adult, imitates acts which have been successful and which he has seen to be successful in people he trusts and who have authority over him [...] The individual borrows the series of movements of which he is composed by the act performed in front of him or with him by others”. (Own translation)

¹² B. Streck, “Körperveränderung”, in AA.VV., *Wörterbuch der Ethnologie*, B. Streck ed., Köln: DuMont Buchverlag, 1987, p. 104.

As remarked by Van Wolputte, “Mauss (1950, p. 379) formulated the idea that people are identified and distinguished by the way they “use” their bodies”¹³. We might add that people are identified and distinguished by the way they modify their bodies too.

Simple body modifications include representations on the skin of images, signs and ornaments, carried out through needle-sticks (e.g. tattoos), cuts (scarifications) or even carving (scalpelling), or obtained through burns (branding of various types: e. g. solar branding, fire-heated branding, electric branding, etc.).

Techniques and representations vary not only from society to society, but also depending on the reason for the modification, the type of effect desired, the pigmentation and the type of skin. Moreover, we could say, techniques and representations depend also from the conception of the skin a society has, as for example among the Kayapo “the skin marks the boundary not only of the individual (as a biological and psychological entity) but also of the social self. Hence a social skin fashions the boundary not only between individual and other social actors, between the individual’s presocial, individual drives and energies and its “internalized others,” its social values, and norms, but also between groups of people, between social classes”¹⁴.

In social groups with dark-coloured skin, the design on the skin¹⁵ is often done by repeated incisions of the same parts of the body, the healing of which is further delayed by the desired or unwanted contamination with substances of various types, a process that leads to the formation of keloids. Decorations or incisions common among social groups of light skin often involve the subcutaneous application of colour by means of a needle, a technique known since the Palaeolithic and widespread throughout the world with infinite variations in the elaboration of the technique, the process, the motif and the social groups that use it¹⁶.

As Streck points out, body modifications can also be interpreted as means of memorizing the central truths of traditions. But it is necessary to consider that the increasingly conspicuous spread of these practices in the West does not always allow a direct connection to the truths of traditions understood or felt by the subject who submits to a practice, but finds the most diverse anchorages in aesthetic, playful, philosophical, religious aspects, etc. but these practices nevertheless always maintain an undeniable political meaning as an act of social communication, as we will see.

¹³ S. Van Wolputte, “Hang on to Your Self: of Bodies Embodiment and Selves, in *Annual review of Anthropology*, vol. 33, 2004, pp. 251-263, p. 253.

¹⁴ S. Van Wolputte, *ibidem*.

¹⁵ Cfr. B. Streck, “Körperveränderung”, op. cit., p. 104.

¹⁶ Cfr. B. Streck, *ibidem*.

Body modifications and the ritual

Currently, in Europe and abroad, there are a large number of social groups (even “non-tribal”) that practice body modifications, whether in traditional-neo tribal, recreational-experimental, bodyart, political, aesthetic or cultural context.

What unites the practices of body modification is always the concept of passage, even in apparently less “ritual” or “spiritual” (in the broadest sense) environments.

But what exactly is meant by rite of passage? How is it experienced in the perspective of those groups that practice body modifications? A definition of rite of passage can then allow us to continue the analysis of the perception of the body and corporeity in social groups that are dedicated to practices of bodily modification, and the political significance of their *Weltanschauung*.

The life of the individual of every society consists, according to Arnold Van Gennep¹⁷, in passing successively from one age to another.

The main ceremony to celebrate this passage is the initiation-rite of passage, whose task is to make the individual pass from a determined situation to another determined one¹⁸. Every change of status of a subject, being inseparable from the society in which he lives, involves precisely the social group to which he belongs and for this reason requires public recognition of the new status. Van Gennep divides the dynamics of the rites of passage into three stages that have a precise symbolic meaning: separation (preliminary rites), margin (liminaries), and aggregation (postliminaries).

For Meyer Fortes, in many tribal societies, the initiatory rite “does not reveal the unknown; it sanctions the open exercise of knowledge and capacities that were previously unauthorized”¹⁹. In fact, reporting the example of the Tallensi rite of passage, in which the first-born takes the place of the deceased father who becomes part of the group of ancestors, Fortes underlines how the knowledge to which the first-born finally has access, is nothing more than a “fictitious secret”.

In its liminal phase, this very elaborate ritual consists in allowing the firstborn to enter his father’s granary, a place which he was previously not allowed to enter: the granary is in fact considered an extension of the personality of its owner. The soul of the owner is linked to the granary and his objects, his weapons, his clothes are imbued with his physical existence. The firstborn, wearing his father’s clothes and entering the barn, takes over the body and soul of his father in the legal sense:

¹⁷ A. Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage* (1909), Paris: Ed. A. et J. Picard, 1981, p. 13.

¹⁸ A. Van Gennep, *ibidem*.

¹⁹ M. Fortes, “The first born”, *J. Child Psychol. Psychiat.*, Vol. 15, 1974, pp. 81-104, Pergamon Press, GB, p. 86.

“Their relative positions are now reversed, the son being clothed with tangible and real paternal power and authority, the father, transposed to ancestorhood, being now dependent on the son for commemoration, offerings and service”²⁰.

It is for this reason that the expression of (or saying of) the rite of passage builds bodies with a different political meaning.

Although fictitious, the secret of the barn has its own political function, which is necessary for the functioning and organization of the whole life of the community. Once the rite of passage has been carried out, the secret is “reconstructed” for the future first-born and so on. This saying of the secret modifies and permeates the daily life of every social actor related to the issue, and also determines its body techniques and corporeity itself, not only through food taboos, for example, but also through ways of sitting, walking and so on.

Even if at first glance the example of the Tallensi does not seem to be a rite of passage linked to a body modification, the link is made precisely because of the transformation of the first-born’s body which takes place during the liminal phase of the rite.

An example of political-identitary body modification among the Nuer is the one carried out during the *gar*, a male rite of passage from youth to adulthood. The *gar* shows how the saying of ritual body modification builds the body of the social actor. It primarily concerns the relationship of the initiate as well as of society with the body of the initiate.

According to the classical work of Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (1940), when the Nuer boys reach an age between 14 and 16 years (an age that can vary depending on the availability of milk and millet that year), they ask their father for permission to be initiated. Having obtained permission, the boy asks for a blessing from a member of his father’s age-set. The future-initiated then negotiates with those who will practice the rite of passage and gives them a fishing spear that will be used to carry out the ritual scarification consisting of six horizontal cuts, from one temple to another, deep to the bone of the skull (the skulls of Nuer are easily recognizable by the marks left by this body modification). The *gar* usually occurs at the end of the rainy season, both because the food resources are more conspicuous, and the many sacrifices and banquets that are offered during the ritual would not otherwise be possible, and because in that period the dry northern wind allows the cuts to heal faster.

The scarification makes it possible to distinguish between Nuer and their neighbours, who operate other forms of scarification.

²⁰ M. Fortes, *ibidem*.

Therefore, in addition to demarcating the passage of transformation of the body of the initiate from a boy's body to an adult's body and to determining his new socio-political status, the scarifications irremediably sanction his belonging to the social group. In fact, even children adopted from other societies are incorporated in Nuer lineages once they have done the *gar*. With the new acquired status, taboos and body techniques also change accordingly.

The body was a performative saying and, through the rite of passage and body modification, which are a performative saying themselves, it becomes a further/other performative saying.

The body, with its body techniques and modifications, is also then the embodiment of the performative saying of society to the individual and of the individual to society.

The body between technique and religion

If the examples given so far refer to tribal societies, in which the performative saying of body modifications is more easily recognizable than in Western society, one wonders what the performative saying of body modification is like in the society of the image and of the saying of the virtual, in other words in the society where bodies are perhaps often reduced to their image, de-historicized from the world of life (thus *Körper* instead of *Leib*) and/or projected on screens.

It is necessary to consider science and technology (and therefore the performative saying of science) as “dominant paradigms [...] on which stands an imagopoietic dimension (creator of images and symbols) that contributes to structuring the collective imagination and the socially dominant values”²¹ of contemporary society.

Gilbert Simondon distinguishes²² three phases of humanity: a primitive magical phase (pre-technical and pre-religious) and a religious phase followed by the technical phase, while:

“Au point neutre entre technique et religion, apparait, au moment du dédoublement de l'unité magique primitive, la pensée esthétique”²³.

Gillo Dorfles points out that aesthetic thought which accompanies all three phases can also identify with them:

²¹ P. Bellini, *Mitopie tecnopolitiche. Stato-nazione, impero e globalizzazione*, Milano: Mimesis, 2011, p. 58, (Own translation).

²² G. Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, Paris: Aubier, 1958.

²³ G. Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, op. cit., p. 160: “At the neutral point between technique and religion, at the moment of the doubling of the primitive magic unit, the aesthetic thought appears”. (Own translation)

“Se la presenza dell’oggetto tecnico (e sarebbe meglio dire tecnologico) costituisce una delle particolarità più curiose e dense di significato della nostra età (lo prova tutto quanto il territorio del disegno industriale) non sarà possibile, peraltro, identificare tale presenza con quella di elementi tecnici nelle fasi “pre-tecnologiche” dell’umanità. Intese dunque nel senso che ho cercato di chiarire le tecniche (che potranno essere tecniche lavorative e speculative, operative e razionali, ludiche e sportive, linguistiche e iniziatiche) verranno a costruire una fitta e ricca intelaiatura entro la quale l’uomo articola il suo *Dasein* e diventa padrone di possibilità creative e fruibili che sono ben al di là di quelle di cui sarebbe partecipe senza il loro intervento”²⁴.

The phases identified by Simondon are therefore not necessarily distinct from each other.

So these creative and fruibili possibilities concern not only the techniques of the body and of the body modification, but also the body modifications themselves.

In the West, the performative saying of body modifications can be found in some social groups involved in body-art, which is closely related to the concept of cyborg²⁵.

In this context, the cyborg and mutant are combined. Cyborg is understood as a form of human life “composed of natural and artificial parts, as the result of a more or less invasive technological manipulation”²⁶, while mutant is understood in relation to the science fiction figure whose human body, as a result of atomic bomb radiation, has undergone a series of genetic mutations “such as to transform man into a subhuman being and at the same time superhuman: the mutant”²⁷.

The rapid and continuous change of economics, ideologies and society during the most recent history of the western world has kept scientific and technological progress as a constant element:

²⁴ G. Dorflès, *Nuovi riti, nuovi miti*, Torino: Einaudi, 1965, p. 28: “If the presence of the technical object (and it would be better to say technological) constitutes one of the most curious and meaningful peculiarities of our age (the whole territory of industrial design proves it), it will not be possible, however, to identify this presence with that of technical elements in the “pre-technological” phases of humanity. So understood in the sense that I have tried to clarify the techniques (which may be working and speculative techniques, operational and rational, playful and sporting, linguistic and initiatory) will build a dense and rich framework within which man articulates his *Dasein* and becomes the master of creative and usable possibilities that are far beyond those in which he would participate without their intervention”. (Own translation)

²⁵ On the figure of the cyborg in contemporary political philosophy see: P. Bellini, *Cyberfilosofia del potere. Immaginari, ideologie e conflitti della civiltà tecnologica; Tra mito e logos: Il concetto di mitopia e la civiltà tecnologica post-moderna, Mitopie tecnopolitiche...*

²⁶ P. Bellini, *Mitopie tecnopolitiche*, op. cit., p. 58. (Own translation)

²⁷ G. Dorflès, *Nuovi riti, nuovi miti*, op. cit., p. 218. (Own translation)

“Tutto ciò che è stato fatto sembra aver avuto come unico scopo, se si volesse analizzare la questione da un punto di vista teleologico desacralizzato, l'accrescimento della potenza del soggetto umano in relazione a se stesso e all'ambiente che lo circonda”²⁸.

Here is the *technoperformative* impulse of which Paolo Bellini speaks, an impulse aimed at a radical transformation of man and his environment, that has at its core a vision of reality as unquestionably divided into subject and object:

“Tale visione del mondo conduce all'ordine reticolare *in fieri* della globalizzazione [...] Inoltre questa globalizzazione può essere interpretata alla luce della pulsione *technoperformativa* che anima l'ordine reticolare, che tende a una trasformazione radicale del soggetto stesso e che asservisce al potenziamento e alla riproduzione di se stessa la totalità delle civiltà umane nei loro vari aspetti economici, ideologici e culturali. Tale ordine sistemico sta evidentemente sconvolgendo i sistemi politici, provocando un mutamento senza precedenti nella storia dell'umanità. [...] Se, infatti, l'ibridazione uomo-macchina in senso materiale, cioè come colonizzazione tecnologica del corpo umano è solo agli albori, la trasformazione della sua *forma mentis* si trova invece in uno stadio assai avanzato, di cui è già possibile misurare gli effetti”²⁹.

There is therefore an embodiment of technoperformativity, in the light of which we can state, once again, that body modifications are inseparable from the political.

What the cyborg, the mutant, the world of contemporary Western body-art and body modifications have in common today is, on the one hand, a certain type of performative saying which, in the case of the cyborg and the mutant, is linked to an imaginary that often intersects with that of the body-art and body modifications.

²⁸ P. Bellini, “Cyborg, potere e ordine reticolare”, *Metabasis*, n.3, pp.1-13, p.4, 2007: “Everything that has been done seems to have had as its only purpose, if one wanted to analyze the matter from a desacralized teleological point of view, the increase of the power of the human subject in relation to himself and the environment around him”. (Own translation)

²⁹ P. Bellini, *ivi*, p. 4-5: “This vision of the world leads to the *in fieri* reticular order of globalization [...] Moreover, this globalization can be interpreted in the light of the *technoperformative* drive that animates the reticular order, which tends towards a radical transformation of the subject itself and which enslaves to the strengthening and reproduction of itself the totality of human civilizations in their various economic, ideological and cultural aspects. This systemic order is evidently upsetting political systems, causing an unprecedented change in the history of humanity. [...] If, in fact, man-machine hybridization in the material sense, i.e. as a technological colonization of the human body is only in its beginnings, the transformation of its *forma mentis* is instead in a very advanced stage, whose effects can already be measured”. (Own translation)

These, in turn, intersect with others imaginaries (e. g. neo-tribalism). On the other hand – but not necessarily in a distinct or exclusive way – they both involve a relationship with science.

The colonization of the body

Unlike in societies where scientific performative sayings have less space than, for example, mythical performative sayings, the construction of contemporary Western corporeity is strongly characterized by the relationship with performative sayings of science:

“In Zusammenwirken von exakter Wissenschaft, Technik und industrieller Auswertung ist ‘die Menschheit vom Gang der Maschinen vollständig abhängig geworden [...], so dass die Apparate, die wir einst frei handhabten, anfangen, so zu unserem biologischen Leben zu gehören, wie das Schneckenhaus zur Schnecke’. Die Autorität des Physikers Werner Heisenberg wird von Gehlen angerufen, um zu beweisen, dass ‘die Technik fast nicht als das Produkt bewusster, menschlicher Bemühung um die Ausbreitung der materiellen Macht, sondern eher als ein biologischer Vorgang im Grossen, bei dem die im menschlichen Organismus angelegten Strukturen in immer weiterem Masse auf die Umwelt des Menschen übertragen werden, ein biologischer Vorgang also, der eben als solcher der Kontrolle durch den Menschen entzogen ist’”³⁰.

Body techniques and body modifications are a characteristic that pervades every context of the life of human life since time immemorial: first as an enhancement of material strength and then as a biological process. The being of this biological process “removed from the control of men” becomes even more explicit, almost paradoxically, with the *Aufstand* – and one understands how:

³⁰ J. Taubes, *Apokalypse und Politik: Aufsätze, Kritiken und kleinere Schriften*, Wilhelm Fink, 2017, p. 226: “In the cooperation between exact science, technique and industrial exploitation ‘humanity has become completely dependent on the performance of the machines [...] so that [...] the apparatus that one day we handled freely, begin to be part of our biological life as the shell of the snail is part of the snail’. The authority of the physicist Werner Heisenberg is called into question: ‘It seems that the technique is no longer almost the product of a conscious human effort aimed at strengthening the material force, but rather a biological process, in the measure in which the structures applied to the human organism are increasingly transported to the surrounding human environment, a biological process, in other words, which, precisely as such, is taken away from the control of men’”. (Own translation)

“El hombre no es nunca un primer hombre: comienza desde luego a existir sobre cierta altitud de preterito amontonado [...] Por eso Nietzsche define el hombre superior como el ser ‘de la mas larga memoria’”³¹.

Bodies are a surface of inscription³² of events, built through the saying in which memory is also at stake. The modifications and techniques of the body are an expression of memory, of the historicity of the *Dasein*. As Van Wolputte underlines:

“[...] power and control are embodied as well. This is the body politic: the human body as tool or weapon of domestication and disciplination and of identification, subjection, and resistance”³³.

Techniques and modifications are co-constructed with the historicity of saying, and changing one changes the other and *vice versa*, in an almost autoctisic relationship.

A concrete example of this is what happened in Australia during the “period of assimilation” (from 1937 to 1971), immediately following the “period of segregation” (1880-1936) founded on evolutionary scientific saying which saw the Australian Aborigines as a primitive society unable to adapt to the “civilized and evolved” way of life of the colonizers and therefore in need of “protection”³⁴.

During the period of assimilation, the objective was to integrate the Aborigines into Anglo-Australian society through education:

“Solo attraverso l’educazione gli aborigeni potevano diventare come i coloni, abbracciare gli stessi valori e modo di vivere e dimenticare la loro cultura, lingua e tradizioni. *La politica di assimilazione si accompagnò ad una campagna di eugenizzazione razziale che, già iniziata nel periodo di protezione attraverso matrimoni con gente bianca, aveva l’obiettivo di eliminare i tratti razziali distintivi degli indigeni.* Gli aborigeni cominciarono ad essere classificati secondo la quantità di sangue aborigeno che, progressivamente diluito, li avrebbe fatti letteralmente “sbiancare”. Il linguaggio dell’epoca distingue, infatti, i “puro sangue” (*full blood*) dai “mezza casta” (*half cast*), “un quarto di casta” (*quadroon*) o “un ottavo di casta” (*octroon*) a seconda se un individuo discende rispettivamente da genitori entrambi

³¹ J. Ortega y Gasset, *La rebelion de las masas*, cap. IV, Santiago de Chile: Editorial Cultura, 1937: “Man is never a first man: he immediately begins to exist on a certain level of accumulated past [...] For this reason Nietzsche defines the superior man as the being ‘who has the longest memory’”. (Own translation)

³² Cfr. M. Foucault, “Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’histoire”, *Dits et écrits*, T. II, Paris: Gallimard, 1994, p. 136-156.

³³ S. Van Wolputte, “Hang on to Your Self: of Bodies Embodiment and Selves”, *op. cit.*, p.254.

³⁴ Cfr. F. Tamisari, *Le generazioni rubate. La rimozione forzata dei bambini indigeni australiani dalle loro famiglie*, Trad. di S. Tiepolato, DEP, n. 5-6, 2006, pp. 255-272.

aborigeni, un genitore bianco e un aborigeno, o da un nonno/a e un bisnonno/a aborigeni”³⁵.

Through the “racial eugenisation”, the body of the indigenous people is modified, their identity is modified, and therefore the performative saying of their corporeity and their political role is modified. In this case, the rite of passage is the forced marriage, the rape, the birth of the new social actor and the actual performative saying around these bodies.

There is therefore no dialogic co-construction through the saying but rather the imposition of a colonizer’s monologue on the colonized body, the rape, the modification of his body and his descendants. That is why scientific saying acts politically on bodies.

There are voluntary body modifications, even if they are not linked to a traditional ritual-initiatory context, but they nevertheless maintain the ritual-initiatory meaning for the social actor who decides to undertake them. From cosmetic surgery to body piercing, from tattoos to scarification, one can say that:

“S’il existe une disproportion entre ce que nous sommes et ce que nous tendons à être, en résulte-t-il qu’elle soit définitive, que nous subissions un perpétuel, un intolérable démenti, et que le sentiment de cette “misère de grand seigneur manqué” justifie le pessimisme? non ; c’est dire qu’il y a en nous quelque chose à conquérir, que nous sommes encore, pour une part et pour la meilleure, étrangers à nous-mêmes, et que nous devons nous traiter non comme un fin, mais comme un instrument de conquête”³⁶.

Something in us is to be conquered: oneself?

³⁵ F. Tamisari, *Le generazioni rubate. La rimozione forzata dei bambini indigeni australiani dalle loro famiglie*, op. cit., pp. 256-257. Italics by me: “Only through education the Aborigines could become like the colonists, embrace the same values and way of life and forget their culture, language and traditions. *The policy of assimilation was accompanied by a campaign of racial eugenisation, which had already begun during the period of protection through marriages with white people, with the aim of eliminating the distinctive racial traits of the natives.* Aborigines began to be classified according to the amount of Aboriginal blood that, when progressively diluted, would literally “whiten” them. The language of the time distinguishes, in fact, the “pure blood” (full blood) from the “half cast” (half cast), “a quarter cast” (quadroon) or “an eighth cast” (octroon) depending on whether an individual descends respectively from both aboriginal parents, a white parent and an aboriginal, or from an aboriginal grandfather and a great-grandfather”. (Own translation)

³⁶ M. Blondel, *L’Action (1893)*, Paris: PUF, 1950, p.145: “If there is a disproportion between what we are and what we tend to be, does this mean that it is definitive, that we are subjected to a perpetual, intolérable denial, and that the feeling of this “misery of the great missed lord” justifies pessimism? No; it means that there is something in us to be conquered, that we are still, partly and for the best, alien to ourselves, and that we must treat ourselves not as an aim, but as an instrument of conquest”. (Own translation)

Approaching to oneself

The body, as Mauss said, is an instrument: the first technical instrument available to the human being. And body techniques and modifications are often, in the perspective of the social actors involved - particularly in the world of bodyart - a way of conquering oneself, of bridging that disproportion between what one feels to be and what one is. The modifications make it possible to strengthen in a certain sense the performative saying of one's body, to make it correspond to the will to say. In fact, this will to say for some people does not correspond to the performative saying of their unmodified bodies. The modification is then not only a passage to another status, but it can also be the transformation into a hybrid, cyborg, mutant, or simply "strengthening of" or "passage to" who/what you are, a saying that allows you to get closer to your self:

"To be, and to appear what we are
hybrid beings
half organic matter, half manufactured product,
mutants,
relieved of our self destructive instincts,
just trying to repossess our bodies
to better master our minds.
what caterpillar would think of flying before becoming a butterfly?
our metamorphosis is a self-examination,
each step is an experience,
each element an answer,
it is a metaphor,
a challenge,
slashes in the lines (pre-traced?) of our lives"³⁷.

This transformation, this approach to oneself can however sometimes mean, either voluntarily or involuntarily, a distance from or an approach to a particular social group or to society in general. In this way, "other" social groups are sometimes created, united by these modifications, whose performative sayings are undeniably political, not only because they often share a political imaginary, but above all because they are acts of detachment (for example, in the case of the cyberpunk movement) or social integration (for example, in the case of aesthetic surgery).

³⁷ L. Zpira, "Mutation", 1998, <http://www.lukaszpira.com/>, consulted july 2019. Lukas Zpira is an internationally renowned body-art, body-hacking, body-modification artist.

Since “we must characterize all comportment of the human being as being-in-the-world, determined by the bodying forth of the body”³⁸, and since comportment “does not simply enter into an indifferent space”³⁹, but rather is in a “relating to...” and is therefore social, as well as political – it is therefore clear why the body, and the saying of body techniques and modifications are political.

And this being a political performative saying also depends on the *epanfoterizein*.

The synchronization of the body

According to Emanuele Severino⁴⁰, the *epanfoterizein* (i. e. the swinging, the tilting) is the fear of the becoming that gives rise to the need for an *episteme* in man.

Yet, given the consequences of the obsessive search for *episteme*, precisely through *tekhne*, the metaphysics of the subject, *Aufstand* and solipsism and so on, there does not seem to be a real possibility of a reasonable *episteme*.

The only conceivable *episteme* seems therefore to be in the *Dasein* and in the *Mit-anderen-sein*: with the *Da* and/or in the *Da* the hermeneutic horizon moves with us. One could say that there is an I-Da-hermeneutic-Other synchrony and it is this synchrony of the hermeneutic horizon that, making us part of the becoming – and therefore the becoming is no longer *objectum* –, allows us to become together with the other becomings: fear disappears, and with this the solipsism of the Other as an elusive becoming disappears too, since the hermeneutic horizons are synchronized. Anti-solipsism can be accomplished when my time and that of the Other, the times of the social actors, are synchronized. The body, therefore, as *episteme* and a way of synchronizing with the becoming; a way of synchronizing with the becoming of others and synchronizing with that of one’s own social group, synchronizing with the political or religious social moment one is experiencing, that is, with historicity.

The modification and the body technique can therefore be instruments of synchronization or de-synchronization. In fact, the different perceptions by social actors with respect to different body modifications determine the synchronization or de-synchronization in social groups.

In the world of *body-art*, of *body-hacking*, most operators claim⁴¹ to perceive from mainstream customers a lack of attention and a lack of will or ability to

³⁸ M. Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars*, translated by F. Mayr and R. Askay, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2001, p. 90.

³⁹ M. Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars*, op. cit., p. 91.

⁴⁰ Cfr. E. Severino, *L'identità della follia*, Segrate: Rizzoli, 2007, p. 276.

⁴¹ What is analyzed here is the result of countless interviews and collaborations, participation in conferences, seminars, conventions, and fieldwork in the world of *body art*, *body-hacking*, etc. that I have conducted in Europe in recent years.

experience and to participate to the process of modification, which means that the mainstream customers want to get the final result, the body modification, “the work already done” without implementing a process of transition, desynchronizing themselves from the tripartition of the rite (understood in the terms of Van Gennepe).

According to the operators, the decontextualization of the experience, the absence from the process, from the liminal experience, by the mainstream client depends on the fact that the simplest and most requested body modifications are now a fashion accessible to everyone and therefore considered as a consumer product and not as a body modification.

The mainstream experiences its body as *Körper*, because of an assimilative-synchronizing aesthetic to the mass society. But the environment of the *bodmods*⁴² perceives the body of the Other as *Leib*; the relationship between operator-client (understood as the contemporary Western version of the relationship “priest”-initiated) is in fact fundamental also, for example, for the purpose of a purely aesthetic *bodmod*. This is because even aesthetics has its relationship with the subjectivity of those who undergo a modification. Aesthetics is also inseparable from the historicity of the *Dasein*.

If in the Hegelian relationship between art and truth, art is interpreted as the sphere of the manifestation of truth, one could interpret the techniques of the body, contemporary body modifications and aesthetic surgery (understood as art) as the concrete expression of an internal interpretation of the socially constructed exterior. That is, they can be interpreted as a form of performative saying related to the representation and self-representation of the body of the social actor as both at the same time primarily intimate and primarily social.

In the art of the body and its techniques, there is the strongest expression of the social actor, expression of a perspective-truth that the social actor has of himself and of his society and also the expression of the perspective-truth that the social actor wants to have of himself and wants society to have of him. In the society of the capitalist performative saying, even body modification (socially and politically constructed!) can become a commodity to be consumed. Every form of body art or body technique has a content of truth: it is the human being who shows himself in the work of art as a productive and formative free act.

On the other hand, “die Wahrheit wäre nicht, wenn sie nicht schiene und erschiene”⁴³.

Through the performative saying of the (voluntary) body’s techniques and modifications there seems therefore to be an attempt to regain and re-approach the reality (*Dinglichkeit*) of the *physis* (in the Greek sense), a return to the *veritas rerum*.

⁴² This term is used here to refer to all types of contemporary body modifications.

⁴³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I, Werke 13*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986, p. 25: “The truth would not be if it did not seem and did not appear”. (Own translation)

Can the political consequences of the attempt to switch from the *veritas objectorum* to the *veritas rerum* give back to man the body that has been dispersed in the saying of the contemporary virtuality?

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