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Some Introductory Remarks on Embodied Cultures and Scenarios for the Times to Come¹

CHIARA CAPPELLETTO

*On the soft fibres of the brain
is founded the unshakeable base of the soundest
of Empires.*

Joseph Michel Antoine Servan, *Discours sur
l'Administration de la Justice Criminelle*, 1767

It is generally agreed today that the living human body should be conceived of as a transcendental, in whose light not only our cognitive activity, our intentionality, and our pathic states but also the status of the subject itself must be understood. The human sciences have largely adopted a materialist approach (Apter [2016]) and are increasingly inclined and able to pursue dialog with the life sciences. This convergence of research perspectives suggests a conclusion to the long and tempestuous phase of interdisciplinary discussion that has characterized the last thirty years of scholarship, during which the human sciences, the life sciences, and neuroscience challenged one another routinely before finally settling on a common area of inquiry under the umbrella of “embodiment.”

The notion of embodiment is implicated in any stance that more or less openly opposes the mind-body dualism or that subsumes this dualism in the nature-culture polarity, thus turning an epistemological and ontological question into an anthropological one. It is, at the same time, a notion compatible with a wide variety of approaches. It admits the possibility of considering the body both as a substratum onto which thoughts and artifacts that complement it are graft-

¹ The essays collected here take up and expand on the topic discussed at the international conference *Bodies and Cultures: How We Become Ourselves*, co-hosted by me and Carmine Di Martino, which took place on May 17 and 18, 2017, at the University of Milan and the Milan Natural History Museum.

ed, allowing it to realize its full potential, and as a live constraint that can (or must) be mastered and from which one can be emancipated by virtue of intelligence and technology. The selection of the body as a condition of possibility *and* thinkability for the humanity of our life need not, however, entail any claims to its superiority. That is, we must not repeat the same move that modern philosophy made with the mind by *valorizing it*—epistemically, heuristically, cognitively...

The set of disciplines that take the processes of embodiment as a common denominator is prompting aesthetics—itself finally free of “gnoseological inferiority”—to rethink its own grounds and aims, and to extend its field of inquiry to the point of a fruitful dialog with philosophical anthropology, cognitivism, neuroscience, and media and cultural studies. The three «fundamental anthropological laws» set out by Helmuth Plessner (1928), the idea of «freedom from bodily limits» put forward by Paul Alsberg (1922), and the notion of «techno-aesthetics» drawn up by Gilbert Simondon (1982), along with the interpretation that John Dewey proposed of pragmatism (1925), are fully integrated into the current aesthetic debate, which also benefits from the viewpoints of more recent authors, such as Antonio Damasio (1994), Shaun Gallagher (2005), Erika Fisher-Lichte (2008), Alva Noë (2009), Lambros Malafouris (2013), Tim Ingold (2013), and Vittorio Gallese (2020), among others. These multidisciplinary grafts are but symptoms of the widespread need for a fundamental renegotiation of what exactly constitutes the humanity of human beings, at a time when the «dark foreboding danger [scil. overshadowing] life,» which Ernst Jünger sensed almost a century ago (1934: 3), is consubstantial with the very idea of the Anthropocene. It seems to me that to meet this need we must accept the thesis—deemed «self-evident» by Pietro Montani in the pages that follow—whereby «the forms of life with which the genus *homo* experimented in the course of its evolution are primarily characterized by a set of practices related to its specific *technical creativity*.» It is therefore not possible to discuss the question of embodiment

without considering the now widely-held position that human history is a «continuum of human-prostheses inter-relations» (Ihde-Malafouris [2019]: 196), although the locations of the cut-off points between such open-ended practices remain to be established (Barad [2003]).

The convictions that, as Carmine Di Martino writes, «technology is separable neither from the rough course of the hominization of the individuals (phylogeny) who make up the species *homo sapiens* nor from that of their humanization (ontogeny),» and the processes of embodiment remain incomprehensible if this inseparability is not taken into account, are not based on the results of theoretical and experimental research alone. In my view, the fact that the body is conceived of as the original cognitive and sensible agent insofar as it is rooted in a world scene that it manipulates, and no longer as an obstacle to the whole affirmation of our human nature, represents the final and fullest affirmation of biopolitics. This development stands to influence not only economic choices and institutional practices but also the very critical thought devoted to finding the best strategies of what I would call “body management,” to the point of finding surrogates for our living organism when the body’s performance is not fulfilling. Bruno Bonnell, the former director of Infogrames/Atari, predicts that the first soccer game between humans and robots will be played in 2050, with the victory going to the latter (Blouin [2011]: 34). Widespread AI is the next step on the road after that.

The current alliance between criticism and special interests from the industrial, pharmaceutical, military, and entertainment spheres, is so pronounced that the “body turn” currently at hand is in jeopardy of repeating those logics of domination that it actually means to deconstruct. It runs the risk of reducing the qualitative richness of plural bodies and (contradictory) individual sensible experiences to statistical data and predictive hypotheses tailored to “standard” neurobiological and anatomic mechanisms, so as to map out a paradoxically idealist notion of the body, whereby “a body *as such*” exists.

To unmask the ideology of such an idealism, it is useful to recall that the relationship between life and technology, and its impact on the evolution of human beings, has a history, which is not linear and incremental (Corbin, Courtine, Vigarello [2005]). Introducing this history into the debate, for instance, by reflecting on the co-dependence of matter, imagination, and machines, as Barbara Grespi does further ahead, makes it possible to resist the homologating effect of the rearview mirror while implying that no teleology is legitimate. Even more to the point, it presents the body as a theoretical object where epistemic outlooks and political plans participate in ongoing processes of becoming, rather than as the last resort for finding an answer to long-standing questions about identity, cognition, and the purposiveness of life. The current neo-animist shift itself prompts a reconceptualization of the idea of the human body-mind as coextensive with the physical, social, and cultural environment, revealing the significance of prosthetic and technological dilations attached to adaptable biological beings, and therefore of the impact of goods, products, and lifestyles introduced by empires old and new. If our inherent plasticity rescues us from a biologically deterministic fate, it also makes us a favored site for projection, manipulation, and product placement (Bahri [2017]: 6).

Any investigation of the body as a material *a priori* must thus be inscribed in the wake of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as much as in that of Frantz Fanon.

Gender studies and, above all, Judith Butler have long been committed to exposing the normative and conservative character of a notion of Body that neglects the phenomenology and power games entailed thereby. In looking back on her idea of the “construction” of identity, Butler has stated: «Basically, I am saying that a body emerges in the world in a state of dependence with respect to other bodies and institutions, and that as a consequence, the body is “outside of itself” and in the social in order to exist, in order to survive» (Butler [2011]: 86). Yet, the idea that the body is exposed to practices—including those of a juridical, medical, pedagogical, reproductive,

athletic, culinary, ornamental, and ritual nature—that shape it, seems to me to come too late. Of course the body’s situatedness is expressed in processes and metamorphoses influenced by dynamics of domination to which it contributes in turn and that enable it to meet the demands of an ever-greater identitary articulation—male versus female, young versus old, white versus non-white, cisgender versus transgender—better than a universal mind could do. But this plasticity does not guarantee that every individual is recognized as determined. Invoking the plasticity of an embodied mind does not suffice to exhaust the question of the processes of individuation. On the contrary, individuals can—once again—be placed in the service of the One: Jean-Francois Toussaint, in collaboration with the IRMES, has determined that “the” human body will reach its peak athletic power in 2060. It is then to compensate for the fact that the athletic body is ineluctably doomed to exhaust its own potential that more and more space is given to the Paralympics, whose contestants have a greater margin of improvement in their competitive results than able-bodied subjects (Blouin [2011]: 25 and 31).

The question is how human bodies trigger, partake in, and/or direct the reflexive processes carried out by subjects in environments that are always already inhabited by other living and artificial bodies, and within what limits they can and should realize their own “technical creativity,” knowing that this opens the door to new material possibilities but also to the destruction of the same. The question is thus in fact an eminently aesthetic one. If we insist on the reflexive and autopoietic capacity of the body, the variety of its forms and their evolution will no longer stand out as exploitations of the norm but as variations of a type whose “naturalness” is the result of an original collaboration between organisms and tools. Resisting the intellectual partisanship between apologetics and apocalypics about the co-dependence of humans and technology, our present discussion therefore sets its sights on the legality governing the imbrication of bodies and prostheses.

Whereas in the human type that was being

developed at the beginning of the 20th century, and that has since come into its own, Jünger detected «the presence of a “second” consciousness» that «reveals itself in the ever-increasing ability to see oneself as an object. [...] [For w]e are not only the first creatures to work with artificial limbs; through the use of artificial limbs we also find ourselves in the process of erecting unusual realms with a high degree of accord between man and machine» (Jünger [1934]: 14), in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin hints at a similar kind of «accord», which we would describe today in performative terms. Countering the idea that humans are passively subjected to artifacts and their codes, he draws a distinction between a «first» and a «second technology»: «The first technology [which, scil., «made the maximum possible use of human beings»] really sought to master nature, whereas the second [which, scil., «reduces their use to the minimum»] aims rather at an interplay between nature and humanity» (Benjamin [1935]: 107). The second technology—which we are currently experiencing—originates where «human beings first began to distance themselves from nature» (Benjamin [1935]: 107)—that is, from their biological givenness.

Understanding this distance is crucial to clarifying the reach of the notion of embodiment, which renders the distinction between an environment *outside* the anatomical boundaries of the human body and an environment *inside* these boundaries inadequate. Elsa Dorlin rightly observes, for example, that «masculine and feminine, taken as so-called “natural” identities, are products of Bayer, Sanofi-Aventis and Pfizer-Wyeth» (Dorlin [2011]: 18). This elision of borders means not only that—as Elisa Binda and Dario Cecchi, respectively, write in the present issue—«the [scil. human] body itself becomes an interface, a *medium*, that is performatively engaged in commerce with the things around it,» and that «the human body manifests [scil. the tendency] to be prolonged by technological proxies», but also that, in the words of Roberto Redaelli, «it is necessary to rethink the relationship between the

apriori and material level, starting from the normativity inherent to the sphere of *aisthesis*», since the mediality of the body is not a biologically neutral given.

It seems to me that this rethinking must start from a discussion of the polarity of endo and exosomatization, of internalization and externalization, which makes Montani's and Ian Tattersall's focus on the emergence of language as an «externalized attribute,» whose corporeality is certainly not reducible to its thinghood, and whose meaningfulness is not reducible to its discursivity, all the more relevant. This polarity plays a part in the feedback movement produced by such attributes—a broad movement encompassing senses and feelings, which, as Cecchi stresses, «enhance the exchange with the surrounding world» through being, in Montani's terms, «technically attuned».

It would therefore be apt to investigate new possibilities for conceptualizing the human form at the precise moment in which it is taken as becoming—that is, as genetically artificial. This could enable us to understand the technological device, not as a tool that is in itself special by virtue of extranatural powers, but as a *pharmakon*, the quality of whose effects depends on the quantity and the modes of administration, and includes unforeseen secondary effects as well as achievements and failures that may or may not have occurred or occur in the future. I therefore subscribe to the incisive claim put forth by Tattersall in his valued contribution to the present issue: admitting the possibility that there were elements of chance in our becoming what we are, he contends that «we are optimized for nothing, and thereby not condemned to be anything». One thinks of the Speedo and Jaked 01 swimsuits, used since the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which make it easier to float so that swimmers can limit their exertion to thrust and speed by reducing the impact of muscle mass (Blouin [2001]: 29). «*Technology is our uniform*», writes Jünger (Jünger [1934]: 11). How exactly we wear it is the crux of the matter.

There are two possible roads here. Either we opt for the binary choice whereby technology functions as a mask that at degree zero assimilates

individual identities and at its maximum degree diversifies them through hyperspecialization; or, we interpret the significance of technology's intervention in life as an expression of the fact that the body is a medium—that is, a mode of organizing intentional and unintentional processes. In this second case, the human being is not a variable of technology but a technical agent, and imagination—not the effectiveness of the tool or the usefulness of the result—plays a privileged role in our embodied cultural formation. «Thanks to a long series of externalized experiences», the imagination is able to «gradually achieve [...] a self-consciousness of its articulatory function» (Montani). This ongoing achievement is at the core of any inquiry about the living body.

Finally, the abandonment of the idea of biological givenness has three orders of consequences that deserve to be further investigated. The first is on the order of substance. Taking the body as transcendental does not imply thinking of the human being as the inevitable result of the activation of neuro-anatomical mechanisms conditioned by the environment. On the contrary, the very fact of culturally qualifying our innate readiness to action when we encounter inorganic matter allows us to reflect on the original self-alienation of the human animal, on its eccentricity, and on its freedom. In order to understand the reach of a self-experience that is genetically vicarious, indebted to the technical devices whereby human beings are co-constituted, it is necessary to refine the investigation of embodied cultural practices and to assume a heterological point of view. This is the same point of view that runs through the pages of *A Cyborg Manifesto* by Donna J. Haraway (1985), of the less well-known *Postcolonial Biology* by Deepika Bahri (2017), and of certain recent studies on pregnancy—deserving of attention from contemporary academic aesthetics—that focus on the natural situated condition during which the pregnant subject has a salient and developing experience of her own duality (Young [1984], Depraz [2003]).

The other two sets of problems are methodological in nature. In order to think the body heter-

ologically, it is useful to reason by way of simulation, outlining “scenarios”—as Tattersall does here. The idea of the scenario updates that of the traditional “thought experiment” by better adapting it to research in which scholars are required to form hypotheses about recurring behavioral patterns in a variety of contexts and cultural habits but that does not dispense with empirical evidence and historical sources. This methodological choice is exemplified in the work of Richard D. Alexander, who makes use of the notion of «surrogate scenario-building» in his research on human behavioral evolution (1989), and Vilayanur Ramachandran, who considers art to be «nature's own virtual reality» in his neuroaesthetic studies ([2011]: 243).

In order to operationalize the notion of scenario, we need to bring up that of performance, as used first by Simondon, and later by Malafouris (unfortunately without citing the former). In *L'Individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*, the French philosopher begins his reflection on individuation with the example of the production of a clay brick, which entails more than the mere application of a rectangular shape to passive matter (2005). This discrete and specific artifact comes into being through the intentional manipulation of a given material, which expresses its own possibilities thanks to the involvement of a particular human being, whose contingent action is in turn shaped by *that* clay. In *Creative thinging* Malafouris calls attention to «the feeling of and for clay,» referring specifically to the «dynamical process of creative material engagement, wherein material and human agency are coupled to each other and allow action to gain a “life of its own”» (2014: 151). As not all actions are performative, such a coupling of natural element and human intervention must be held mandatory in order to understand life as a historical performing process in itself.

The arguments that I am proposing here find support in the essays by Grespi and Christoph Wulf, the second of which has the merit of linking culture to sociality, allowing us to understand the former not as a mere knowing (how to make) but as a situated and relational know-how. Perfor-

mances—which intervene in external objects and in the living body itself—are in no way a reproductive but rather a productive activity that proposes “altered” versions of the initially available model: independent variations on the theme. Thus, as Wulf claims, «while maintaining continuity», performances «also offer scope for discontinuity» such that «alterity is conveyed through performativity.» “Conveying” is produced by a broader set of technical-corporeal gestures. These types of gestures govern the ways in which each body acts in its own environment. This is why «the gesture,» as Grespi writes, «is no longer [to be conceived of as] an involuntary, corporeal manifestation of emotional states, but rather an interface between a subject and the world, a creative form of thought that rejects both rationality and the dimension of the drive.» The historicity of man is ultimately expressed through a series of practices that interact, challenging the very idea of human “evolution”.

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This issue of Aisthesis is enriched by a focus on Florens Christian Rang, William Shakespeare, and Walter Benjamin. Marina Montanelli presents here for the first time an Italian translation of Rang's *Vom Weg messianischer Deutung (On the Way of Messianic Interpretation)*, the introductory essay to his work on Shakespeare's sonnets. The translation is accompanied by Montanelli's comment paper on Rang's text, *Florens der Christ. Un commento a La via dell'interpretazione messianica di Florens Christian Rang*. This paper aims both at contextualizing the figure of Rang and his work on Shakespeare and at addressing the most important conceptual issues of messianic interpretation, work of art, and faith work that Rang's essay presents. Fabrizio Desideri's paper, *Hamlet or Europe and the end of modern Trauerspiel. On some Shakespearean motifs in Walter Benjamin*, deals with the possibility of interpreting Hamlet's time as the time of an "interim" in light of the claims Benjamin makes about Shakespeare's drama in his book on the German Trauerspiel. Taking into

account the interpretations of Pavel Florensky, Lev S. Vygotsky and Carl Schmitt, Desideri shows how Benjamin's characterization of Hamlet reveals something about the nature of modern consciousness and the aporetic character of modern politics. Lastly, Alice Barale's «Unbewaffnetes Auge»: Benjamin's interpretation of comedy in Shakespeare and Molière examines two early works by Walter Benjamin on Shakespeare's comedy *As you like it* and on Molière's *Le malade imaginaire*. The paper deals with the role of the comic within Benjamin's philosophy, including in its relationship to mourning and what Benjamin writes about it in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.