# Bodies of Stone in the Media, Visual Culture and the Arts

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# Introduction

## Learning from Stone

*Alessandra Violi, Barbara Grespi, Andrea Pinotti and Pietro Conte*

The extension of life to inert matter is one of the most fascinating turns taken by modernisation: over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the emergence of technologies that appear to be endowed with vital properties, sensory faculties and cognitive functions called into question the demarcation between the animate and the inanimate and opened a new vision of what it is to be an object. Or one might also say that it reactivated an ancient readiness to recognise the lives of things, which is the common denominator of various artistic experiences and, over the two centuries, has become the focus of a dedicated line of thought.[1] Since the nineteenth century, this development has placed at centre stage the media both because, conceived of as nervous bodies,[2] they occupy a special vantage point on reality and because, insofar as they are 'technical objects', they are endowed with their own life, intelligence and language. The cinema has been particularly fruitful in this animist turn, presenting itself as a machine able to breathe life into bodies and at the same time to reveal 'the face of things';[3] not only the theories but also the films of Jean Epstein bear the most eloquent witness to this shared sensibility and have been the object of a widespread re-evaluation in recent cinema studies.[4]

Nevertheless, the life of inorganic things that has been rediscovered by technology and the media raises an insistent question of significance for modern man, who is still faced with death. The fact of the cadaver remains

1 Cf. Papapetros, *On the Animation of the Inorganic*.

2 For a reconstruction of nineteenth-century thought on the relation between media and the enhancement of perceptual and nervous faculties, see Andriopoulus, *Psychic Television*.

3 Balázs, *Visible Man*, p. 46.

4 And this applies not only in the French-speaking world: in addition to Aumont, *Jean Epstein*, see Keller and Paul (eds.), *Jean Epstein*, and Wall-Romana, *Jean Epstein*.

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the principle obstruction for the line of thought that envisages an osmosis between the animate and the inanimate, so much so that it has become the object of a specific imaginary that embraces photography, sculpture, archaeology and, above all, the sciences, within which stone—the material to which tends flesh bereft of life—takes on a wholly novel guise. The *body of stone* in its widest sense, running from the mere mineral object to the literally petrified cadaver, from the anthropomorphic statue to the monument, from the catatonic body to the fossil, from the miniature to the autoicon, thus offers us a privileged object of analysis through which to investigate a sort of secondary effect of animism: the aesthetics of suspension in between states—between life and death, organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate—taking account of both its anthropological roots and its modern and contemporary expressions.

How has this state of suspension been conceived and represented? For a start, it has to do with a state of uncertainty between immobility and movement, the possibility of bodies that are at once immobile and in becoming. Certain natural forms attracted attention in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as models for aesthetic experience focused on this aspect: for instance, fossils that survive for millions of years in a state of transformation so slow that it cannot be seen; or those mimetic animals that practice an apparently perfect immobility that they can snap out of; again, ever-greater attention was paid to the life of the Earth considered both as a planet in orbit and as a geological body subject to eruptions and thus in a paradoxical state of (*perceived*) *stasis in movement*. And for similar reasons, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the peculiar features of organic materials such as wax attracted the attention of philosophers, giving rise to an aesthetics of precarious immobility.

The essays in this volume show how certain modern bodies—in the arts, the cinema and the media—find a performative model in the fossil, the mimetic animal and the process of liquefaction (of wax or volcanic lava). These may be articulated as the possibility of fixing fictional identities over multiple time scales, as the performance of a gesture that fuses the human image with the mineral, as the creation of sculpted objects that exhibit their own decomposition, or as the emergence of superheroes who are stone in movement. It is no surprise that cinema has been most taken up with this kind of suspension, given that it is technically dependent on the immobility of the single frame and the movement produced by the speed of the film's passage: as a reverse of the fossil, the cinema involves a purely optical movement, one that can be seen though it does not belong to the 'body' of the images. Inspired by Bergson, Gilles Deleuze theorised this feature

of cinematic language, proposing a threefold articulation of the relation between image and movement. In *The Movement Image*, he distinguishes between the image as an emblem of a movement (*pose éternelle*), the image corresponding to an unmoving segment of a movement (*coupe immobile*), and the image that makes up a moving segment of a movement (*coupe mobile*).[5] Cinema renders this last typology and thus succeeds in representing the root of movement, becoming the image of its self-activation and thus of the very possibility of a dialectic between fixity and mobility. Building on Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben suggests that the movement of the cinematic image is a descendent of the Greek myth of the awakening statue and that it is a non-narrative but rather technical re-elaboration of the mythic tale, allowing there to be images that do not immobilise bodies but liberate them and 'disenchant' them, setting them in flux by disrupting the state of inertia ('break the ties holding them and *begin* to move').[6] The intense interest directed by cinema, and especially in such genres as fantasy and horror, toward the figure of the statue that becomes animate—which is examined in several of the essays below—may thus be read as a narrative reconversion of the aesthetic vocation of a medium that feeds on states of suspended motion.

More obvious still is the relation between photography and immobility. This emerges, especially in the nineteenth century, in an enormous archive in which the body, fixed on a plate, is presented as the *alter ego* of the statue. At the same time, the immobilisation of the subject is not just an effect of the image but a requisite for the image to succeed in reproducing the pose. In Roberto Rossellini's film *The Machine that Kills Bad People* (1952), the lead character uses the camera to bring about well-aimed petrifications: by re-photographing the photographs of the village's baddies, the apparently benevolent do-gooder paralyses their bodies, turning them into statues that adopt the same pose as they were in when they were originally snapped. But their paralysis does not last. The bodies have not been mineralised once and for all but have only been suspended and are ready to be 'disenchanted' and set once more in movement. Rossellini's parable picks up on a late-nineteenth-century photographic genre of the baby portrait in which the infant is *held still* by the mother and so is granted a potential for movement, though this is blocked into an unnatural pose.

A further way that the body in stone can be suspended— which is a focus of the essays below—concerns the uncertainty about the line between life

5 Deleuze, *Cinema 1 – The Movement-Image*, pp. 7-8.

6 Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', p. 58 (italics added).

and death. This touches also on the photographic series just mentioned, which is one element in the rich modern imaginary of 'Life in Death', which aligns the creatures of gothic literature and film—reanimated corpses, the undead, vampires and zombies—with bodies that are *still* living but that are photographed out of fear of premature death, as with many other forms of monumentalisation based on the purely material exchange of flesh and stone.

Traditionally, the monumental idea (the *kolossos*, the headstone, the wax death-mask, the mummy) starts from the cadaver as the 'object' which, as George Hersey has suggested,[7] *is produced* with a view to the monumental gesture. In particular, the architectural monument is the outcome of a violent (and sacred) gesture as the terminus of a sacrificial rite involving the destruction of one body and its replacement by a stone structure. In the classical world, the pagan temple is the final stage of a process that passes through the erection of architectures of 'flesh' built out of the butchered limbs of the victim. Thus the architectural object hides the destructive gesture from which it originates, recomposing the fragments into an organic whole that looks ever less human. This anthropological snippet also gives support to the Vitruvian metaphor of the building as body (the façade as face, the columns as legs and so on) as well as making an important connection between architecture and cinema, which are both expressive forms based on the re-composition of the parts of the sacrificed body torn into pieces. Sergei M. Eisenstein viewed the origin of montage in the light of the myth of Dionysus: in archaic cultures, various cults took literally this myth in which the Greek deity is ripped apart by the titans and then magically recomposed. In primitive tribes, the periodic killing of the chief, who is then cut up and eaten, was aimed at making those who partake in the act become one with the tribe and a part of an organic and cohesive unity, an effect that could only be achieved by a bodily experience. In the evolution of society, the ritual became ever less fierce, passing from human to animal sacrifice and then from the flesh and blood body to its symbols (not least the Eucharist as the emblem of the holy body consumed for the communion of the Church). Yet Eisenstein wants to show that cinema represents modernity's more radical and definitive leap: the narrative dimension of the myth is abandoned and replaced by a purely conceptual structure in which only the principle is retained. Montage is thus in its way the monumentalisation of a body and its re-composition in a form that restores unity and confers on it an infinitely higher value that is different from the sum of its parts. The awareness achieved through the experience of filmic montage permits a retrospective

7 Hersey, *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture*.

re-interpretation of the pre-cinematographic forms of montage; it is in this sense that Eisenstein describes the Athens Acropolis as 'the perfect example of one of the most ancient films'.[8]

The conceptual linkages among stone-architecture-cinema open the way to a fresh way of thinking about monumentality. Even if the founding experience of death does not disappear, what does disappear is the cadaver, which is imagined under the guise of various re-integrations at the service of a new, mixed and suspended body with different borders.

Various case studies in this volume explore some of the most interesting contemporary approaches to somatic monumentality: for instance seeing the body that undergoes organ transplant as a biological monument, an organic memory of the donor, or analysing artistic productions with a monumental function that conform to new properties of the human body, not only its shape—which it shares with the cadaver—but its temperature, which denotes its vitality.

For all that it overlaps in many ways with those already mentioned, the suspension of the body of stone between the animate and the inanimate is a mode that also has its own specific characteristics. Are bodies that act, react, operate and perform animate even when they are in part mineral? The question resonates down the tradition of statues that come to life, the Golem and the multifarious forms of androids, humanoid robots and cyborgs that simulate ever more naturalistically the living human body: this is the complex constellation that Victor Stoichita has dubbed the 'Pygmalion effect'.[9] Progress in simulation is not, however, a continuous approximation to perfect equivalence: as Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori already noted in 1970, up to a certain point, the greater an android's similarity to man, the greater this latter's sense of familiarity and confidence with it, but when the simulation of the human reaches very high levels, we encounter a crash in what we might call positive empathy toward the cyborg, which Mori represents graphically as a downturn that he calls 'uncanny valley'.[10] Only when faced with androids that are effectively indistinguishable from humans—a result nearly achieved by Hiroshi Ishiguro's recent Geminoids[11]—does the graph begin to climb again.

Our reference to empathy in this context calls for closer reflection on the phrase 'animation of the inanimate'. If we take the genitive in its objective

8 Eisenstein, 'Montage and Architecture', p. 60.

9 See Stoichita, *The Pygmalion Effect*.

10 Mori, 'The Uncanny Valley'.

11 http://www.geminoid.jp/en/robots.html (accessed 9 December 2019).

use, then the formula presupposes a conception of the inanimate as an empty and inert recipient ready to welcome the vitality that the living subject infuses in it. This reading embraces all the subjectivist and psychologistic models that are founded on processes of projection and attribution. If, on the other hand, we take the genitive in its subjective use, then it is the inanimate itself that appears paradoxically endowed with its own soul, its own personality and expressiveness, capable of interacting intersubjectively with the human. The aesthetics of the doll and the puppet, such as we find for instance in Kleist, Hoffmann, Poe, Baudelaire, Bergson, Rilke, Benjamin, Klee and Worringer have explored many features of these oxymoronic landscapes. Or at least they seem to be oxymoronic from the viewpoint of a dual logic that enforces a rigid opposition between the animate and the inanimate. But the renewed attention in the most innovative recent enquiries in cultural anthropology toward the notion of 'animism'[12] is an eloquent symptom of the need for a radical re-thinking of the relation between the animate and the inanimate. It is to this call that the present volume seeks to respond, articulating in the essays that make it up the possibility of dissolving the rigid opposition between the two terms in an osmotic process that turns the border into a threshold that can be traversed in both directions.

The following sections are tagged with four keywords for objects, aspects or states that best bring out the features of the aesthetics of suspension that is the subject of the volume as a whole. Statue, Matter, Corpse and Monument may be taken as standpoints from which to view a many-faceted subject that is at once fleeting and beguiling and that can be captured only in fragments presenting the first tiles of a mosaic that has yet to be brought to completion. On the one hand, each of the pieces is freestanding and calls for treatment on its own terms, while on the other they are interconnected and can be seen as mutually illuminating.

Thus, the sculptural cases presented in various sections of the volume (especially the second and the third) all share the notion that anthropomorphism involves the sense of touch rather than visual perception, though the stress falls differently, from the quality of the materials in upsetting the border between inert matter and life to the memorial form that the materials produce. Likewise, the image of the wax statue that gradually melts recurs across the second and the third sections, either as the experiment of a work of art on its own materials or as a proper science-fictional character that stimulates a reflection on the status of the corpse. Transverse themes

12 See Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*; Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*; Ingold, *Rethinking the Animate, Re-Animating Thought*; Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*.

emerge, especially between the third and the fourth sections, also from the various media in play: cinema as an archive of gestures in stone, or photography as a fossil image that evokes and awakens a fictional character, or the touching history of a human life. These are just some of the many cross-connections woven into the mesh of a volume that was conceived as a network of open questions, case studies, scientific hypotheses and philosophical outlooks; and it is in the spirit of an operation that makes no claims to being systematic but rather is offered as scouting a landscape that we leave to the reader the pleasure of uncovering other knots within this fabric. All this, of course, within an underlying approach shared by all the contributors according to which modern and contemporary culture has witnessed the re-emergence of an ancient—even ancestral—form of (pseudo-) animism that has been worked over and re-launched in the terms of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sciences that sought mineral bodies that were living differently and capable of giving birth to a powerful imaginary that in turn powered the visual culture.

In these ways, there is a back-and-forth among the pieces of the mosaic we are presenting. Nevertheless, we have chosen to identify the single sections with some of the principal junctures in the parallelism between the fleshy body and the mineral body. The introduction of each section seeks to give some account of the outlines and the inner connections among the papers presented, but it is worth setting out the guidelines that motivated our adoption of these four working hypotheses as well as of the underlying model that unites them.

As the most obvious sort of body of stone that one could think of, the statue is a virtually obligatory stepping-off point. Since antiquity, the statue as an uncanny object has aroused fantasies of the reanimation of bodies and conversely of their regression into the mineral state. The section begins by recalling how the classical myths of petrification were taken up and subject to a first modern recounting in the narrations and depictions of possible transitions from flesh into stone and back again. The trajectory is towards the cinema, which, in various moments during the twentieth century and with ever more complex linguistic strategies, conjured up the passages from one state to the other. The second section is dedicated to matter, the apparently insuperable and concrete boundary between the terms of the binomial: organic vs. inorganic. In media and visual studies, there has been a recent return to matter as a result of a renewed attention to the hardware of supports and its effects on symbolic processes. In this light, the essays in the second section consider the various strategies of hybridisation and of the treatment of materials in their ever-closer entanglements with the human body. Here too, the line of enquiry begins with primitive cultures as a literal

closeness (the miniature attached to the body) and evolves into a perceptual closeness (the fascination with wax as an unaccountable material). The third section seeks to bring into focus the thorniest of the terms in play—the corpse—by way of the bridge between arts and sciences that was built by the revolutionary anatomical modelling in the eighteenth-century Florentine Natural History Museum. The section takes in corpses at all levels: imagined corpses that can be glimpsed within still living bodies in some photographic styles; concrete bodies that have been vitrified, desiccated and mummified by science; and corpses whose organoleptic properties have been reinvented by science fiction. In these ways, science, science fiction and fantasy offer a first mapping of ways to get around the main obstacle to any idea of widespread, suspended or delayed animation. Lastly, the fourth section is given over to the most important cultural facet of the transformation of a body into stone: the process of monumentalisation. Seen from this point of view at the end of our itinerary, we can make out the impact that the imaginary of suspension has had down the centuries, so often in relation to the theme of memory. The need to externalise this internal dimension of human beings often underlies this mineralisation of the body, taken in the broad sense and following an arc that runs from the unmasking of the self to the mummification of one's own cadaver, from the construction of non-anthropomorphic (but still bodily) commemorative objects to the use of the flesh-and-blood body as a sepulchre in which to bury and conserve parts of others' bodies.

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