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The Pageantry of Western Bodies:  
Material Practices, Intercorporealities and Cultural  
Recycling in the Twenty-First Century

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
PhD in Drama

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## **Abstract**

This thesis argues for a new way of thinking about the corporeality in cultural performance. Drawing on performance theory, cultural analysis, corporeal and materialist discourses, I demonstrate how the new workings of bodily materiality and its dramaturgical configurations constitute an extra layer of meaning, most readily discerned when the body is deliberately placed on a public display, thus also exposing and highlighting its – often exaggerated – material workings. The concept of material as used in this study does not denote the anatomical or organic, although it is informed by them; nor does it imply the purely representational body. What I call for is a quality of “presentness” engendered through materiality, between organic and representational, that is informed by historical and cultural context and the workings of fleshy reality, as well as the meanings created by the bodily image. The material layer persistently reveals itself in the four case studies which embody the “pageantry” of contemporary Western bodies and comprise the thesis: the dead body as represented by Gunther von Hagens’ plastinates, the pop body produced by contemporary popular culture, homo nudus, or the naked body, as it appears in theatre performance and the wrestler’s body in the context of professional wrestling. By departing from the well-established postmodern and phenomenological terminology, the study re-evaluates the contemporary status of the body and its reception, and offers new approaches to the heterogeneous bodily manifestations of the twenty-first century.

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## Introduction

When I look at a living thing, what I see and what first occupies my attention is this mass, all of a piece, which moves, bends, runs, jumps, flies or swims; which howls, speaks, sings, performs its many acts, takes on many appearances, assumes a multiplicity of selves, wreaks havoc, does its work, in an environment which accepts it and from which it is inseparable. (Valéry, 1989: 395, emphasis mine)

This excerpt, taken from a short essay by Paul Valéry entitled “Some Simple Reflections on the Body”, draws attention to the material manifestation of the body, its physical mass. The physical mass is perceptible when the body expresses itself through movement – when, among other actions, it bends, runs and jumps. The same mass gives the body a vocal ability, endowing it with the power to howl, speak or sing. The material quality of the body seems crucial for Valéry, as he later argues that if we were to divest the body of its organic parts and functions, and replace these with artificial ones, “life is reduced to nothing or next to nothing; then sensation, feeling, thought, are not essential to it, but mere accidents” (1989: 397).

The present thesis takes the corporeal materiality as its point of departure. The notion of material, as it is understood here, denotes the fleshy reality of the human body. I support the critique expressed by the proponents of new materialism when they argue that, despite the ongoing scholarly interest in bodily matters (spanning at least the past thirty years), the matter itself, its fleshy workings and connotations, is largely overlooked or reduced to a discursive analysis. Similarly to Valéry, I call for the significance of materiality when we are faced with a bodily manifestation. The bodies discussed in the following chapters, however, are no longer simply the examples of bending, jumping or singing “physical masses”. Primarily due to the development of new tools and digital technologies, a different kind of corporeality is emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Due to extensive physical modification, the material quality of some bodies begins to lose its usual appearance. Due to digital saturation of the Western society, the body is extensively portrayed on our multiple screens. Not only portrayed, it is arranged and rearranged, producing a number of new bodily “chimaeras”. Our everyday reality is populated by real bodies, modified bodies,

morphing bodies, digitised bodies and bodies that raise questions of their “authenticity” or “realness”. As already hinted by Valéry, when he says that the body is capable of taking on “many appearances” or assuming “a multiplicity of selves”, our fleshy reality is very intricate. Due to its complexity, this reality offers an extra layer of meaning that informs how we see, use and do bodies, and, most importantly, how we begin to do it differently than before the invention and rapid dissemination of new technologies.

To begin to comprehend this renewed approach to contemporary bodies, I use the configuration of “pageantry”. This allows me to put forward a different manner of thinking about the corporealities that begin to emerge, thus also offering a way to reevaluate the status of materiality as it appears in the Western culture. In the chapters that follow, the bodily “pageantry” denotes the act of theatre or cultural performance. Specifically, a performance that involves displaying, costuming, arranging and rearranging, masking, denuding, choreographing and then observing the human body. The body is deliberately placed on a public display, thus exposing and highlighting its – often exaggerated – material workings. This body does not exist in isolation. On the contrary, it is always already positioned and is inseparable from its environment: the immediate environment as well as the wider, cultural environment. In other words, how we do, perceive and think the newly engendered bodies is influenced by not only the changes in their visual or physical workings, but also specific cultural meanings and historical antecedents.

The thesis is comprised out of four case studies which provide specific examples of Western bodily pageantry: the dead body represented in Gunther von Hagens’ plastinates (Chapter 2), the pop body produced by contemporary popular culture (Chapter 3), homo nudus, or the naked body, as it appears in theatre performance (Chapter 4) and the wrestler’s body in the context of professional wrestling (Chapter 5). Each of these bodies have their historical predicament, however, simultaneously, they also constitute an example of new materiality. Throughout the thesis I argue that even when perceived at arm’s length, exhibited behind glass, turned into a digital display or positioned on a stage or raised platform, the body maintains its material workings. It does so first and foremost through the exposure of the skin – the material border of human corporeality that is perceived in any bodily manifestation. Even in circumstances when the body is covered, we make



sense of this body through the interplay between the coverings and the exposed patches of skin. In the case of von Hagens' Body Worlds, the body reaches beyond the skin, into the inner materiality which, as Drew Leder (1990) observes, is the absent bodily reality. We do not normally see this body; moreover, we can rarely (if at all) experience its workings with complete clarity. Here, the body is composed of the inner viscera – fleshy, messy, bloody and viscous materiality. It is material par excellence; moreover, material that harks back to the history of anatomy and anatomical display. Contrary to the most historical displays, von Hagens' plastinated materialities are irreversibly modified, deliberately flayed, arranged, embellished with additional artefacts and then displayed. What is exhibited is not the "real" body, but a new kind of materiality – an aestheticised dead body, verging on the posthuman.

### **Theoretical Layers of the Study**

The cultural tradition of pageantry can be traced back to the Medieval era and the seasonal theatrical processions that celebrated (and in some European countries still do) the story of Christ (also referred to as Corpus Christi cycles) or the Biblical history of the world. The term "pageantry" is also used to denote the historical re-enactment of local and national events, especially popular in Britain in the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary national and international beauty contests are described as "beauty pageants". Despite the historical and cultural disjunction between these traditions, they all carry similar qualities: they are deliberately constructed and exaggerated spectacles, staged on a large scale; they employ a large number of performers; they costume the performers' bodies; and they put these costumed bodies on public display. The pageant, therefore, is a performance, moreover, it is a cultural performance. As suggested by Valéry, the body is never neutral – it is interrelated with and inseparable from a particular environment which makes it a part of culture. Rebecca Chiyoko King-O'Riain, when discussing beauty pageants, also observes that "they are fascinating cases for [...] revealing the process of collective cultural production" (2008: 74). The bodies in the four case studies of this thesis carry very similar, pageant-like qualities. Each body is deliberately displayed – made visible in

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<sup>1</sup> For further details and descriptions of historical pageants in Britain, see *The Redress of the Past*, <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk/> (accessed 9/7/2015).

order to be observed by the viewer or spectator. Only when perceived does the dead body, the pop body, the nude body, and the wrestler's body begin to generate meaning. Contrary to the historical examples of pageants, the material qualities of these bodies are exaggerated: by exposing and flaying the inner viscera; turning the body into a digitised or sexualised spectacle; deliberately denuding the body in public; or costuming and embellishing the body in the wrestling ring. In other words, these bodies perform to the public, engender a spectacle and often carry theatrical connotations – they embody the instances of bodily pageantry in the Western context of the twenty-first century.

Mieke Bal observes that “cultural analysis seeks to understand the past as part of the present, as what we have around us, and without which no culture would be able to exist” (1999: 1). Bal's suggested approach provides the object of study with an historical perspective. And while the four bodies discussed here are twenty-first century phenomena, they are intimately intertwined with their respective histories: the history of anatomy; the history of popular culture; the history of nakedness; and the history of staged bodily violence. These separate yet interrelated histories work as “distant mirrors” (a term suggested by Marla Carlson, 2010) for contemporary bodily manifestations. They will allow me not to draw direct parallels between the distant contexts, but to provide cultural, visual and material echoes that continue to reverberate in the flesh of the contemporary body.

The performative, cultural and historical workings are perceptible in the four bodies due to their deliberate exposition. Bal provides an analysis of exposition<sup>2</sup> that is important for the present discussion because it affords the body agency. The body in each case study is not only manipulated by outer influences and spectators' reception, it also actively creates meaning by being present, graspable and openly visible to the public. Bal observes that during the act of exposition

An agent, or subject, puts ‘things’ on display, which creates a subject/object dichotomy. This dichotomy enables the subject to make a statement about the object. The object is there to substantiate the statement. It is put there within a frame that enables the statement to come across. There is an addressee for the statement, the

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<sup>2</sup> Informed by her museum studies; see Bal, Mieke (1996) *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*, New York: Routledge.

visitor, viewer, or reader [...]. But in expositions [...], the object, although mute, is present. This presentness matters. It is one of the defining features of cultural analysis to focus on this present quality of cultural objects, including those that came to us from the past. (1999: 8)

The emphasis on presentness allows for the questioning of the agent or subject about the object exposed. Because of its presentness, the object – in the case of this study, the body – is no longer seen as a passive entity simply placed in a particular environment; instead, by being present, the body discloses imagery and historical/cultural connotations, as well as material workings, and begins to create additional meanings. In Chapter 4, the naked body in performance, despite continuous efforts to achieve an authentic bodily denudation by contemporary theatre artists, is never authentic. The actor in theatre, as Andreas Kotte (2010) demonstrates, is specially emphasised and observed by the audience, and his or her actions occur with reduced consequences. The naked body in performance becomes a *homo nudus* – a deliberately achieved material construct that informs the overall theatrical dramaturgy and scenography.

The stubborn presentness of the four exposed bodies offers a challenge: what is the most appropriate theoretical approach in order to begin to grasp these contemporary phenomena? A number of well-established paradigms immediately offer themselves: the contemporaneity inevitably positions the body in dialogue with the postmodern paradigm (and the attempts to reject this paradigm as invalid); the display and imagery created suggest a dimension of visibility; and the bodiliness points to corporeal discourses and phenomenology. However, I believe that the terminology provided by these paradigms, due to changes in Western culture and society (especially the changes brought about by digital technologies), no longer accurately applies to the contemporary bodily manifestations on display. The bodily nomenclature requires an in-depth revision and my cultural analysis of the pageantry of contemporary bodies contributes to such a revision.

As Günter Berghaus notes, the historical period between the 1960s and 1970s, identified by Lyotard as a “postmodern condition”<sup>3</sup>, carried a political agenda: it was

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<sup>3</sup> See Lyotard, Jean-François (2004 [1979]), *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

preoccupied with Western power structures, examining how they determine wider cultural discourses and influence the politics of representation. Due to the problematisation of hegemonic social groups, together with the rise of new media technologies, the systems of representation became fragmented: "...singularity of viewpoint had been broken up. The individual's consciousness and relationship with the outside world [...] were no longer determined by face-to-face communication, but mediated through multiple, artificial, ephemeral images" (Berghaus, 2005: 71). This fragmented representation disrupted the coherent workings of semiotics and the epistemic system; it dissolved the previously fixed connection between the signifier and signified which resulted in the creation of multifaceted, even "schizoid", reality. According to Berghaus, "the ultimate consequence of this process is the 'schizoid' condition of the postmodern subject: the stable, unified, autonomous Ego is split into differentiated selves locked in a perpetual battle with an ungraspable Other" (Berghaus, 2005: 73).

The postmodern condition exposed the subject to a complex web of interrelations: between body and mind; between self and Other; and between the self and their historical and cultural surroundings. It also disrupted the understanding of the body as "universal" or "real". No longer a firmly essentialist notion, the body was "naturalised", automated, disembodied and re-embodied, objectified and re-affixed to the subject, depending on the changes in cultural environments and prevailing philosophical disciplines. The second half of the twentieth century saw a proliferation of interest in such multifaceted "bodiliness", sometimes also identified as a "corporeal turn". Diverse research fields such as philosophy, sociology, feminist theory, history and literary criticism, as well as performance theory, began addressing the concept of the body, "dissecting" the living organism and exposing its various physical shapes and conceptual undertones. The scholarly interests included the body as marked by sexual difference and gender<sup>4</sup>, the body in relation to scientific advances<sup>5</sup>, the disabled

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<sup>4</sup> Sexual difference, gender and their interrelationship with the body and subjectivity are widely discussed by Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Moira Gatens, Vicki Kirby, Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti and many others (Grosz, 1994: 17).

<sup>5</sup> Donna Haraway's notion of "cyborg" (1985) and the posthuman take on the body (Braidotti, 2013) belong to this category.

body<sup>6</sup>, the absent body<sup>7</sup> and the “fluid” body<sup>8</sup>, to name just a few. Despite the resulting bodily multiplicity, the postmodern subject largely maintained his or her embodiment, especially as propagated by the phenomenological movement. As Judith Farquhar and Margaret Lock suggest, phenomenologists argue that “consciousness can exist only as mediated through experienced embodiment”. The body, therefore, is never just an object, but a site of embodied interrelations “where intention, meaning, and all practice originate” (2007: 6).

The new millennium saw the rise of anti-postmodernist discourses. Giles Lipovetsky suggests naming the current times “hypermodern”, especially due to the “headlong rush” in the areas of commercialization, economics and technical/scientific achievements. According to Lipovetsky, the contemporary subject is no longer misguided by the postmodern cult of individualism and is instead permeated by an acute sense of insecurity (2005: 40). Alan Kirby (2009) also observes a break with the postmodern attitude, largely influenced by the rise of digital technologies. He sees the current era as “digimodern”, producing an array of digimodernist texts that are characterised by, among other attributes, onwardness, haphazardness and evanescence. No longer fully established and stable, these “texts” lose their authorial ties, are open to continuous reworking and manipulation, and, where the body comes into play, produce pixelated corporealities that evoke postcorporeal fears. Taking into account the “arguable death of postmodernism” (Kirby, 2009: 37) and the subsequent cultural changes, we can no longer accurately engage with contemporary bodily manifestations through the postmodern prism. Meanwhile, because it emphasises the body as individual and universally embodied, the phenomenological approach, as Farquhar and Lock observe, “can lack historical depth and sociological content” (2007: 7). Consequently, the present study takes a different theoretical point of departure and views the body from a materialist position.

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<sup>6</sup> Especially the interest in the disabled body in the context of performance practices and theory; as an example see Sandahl, Carrie and Auslander, Philip (2005), *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

<sup>7</sup> The workings of inner materiality; see Leder, Drew (1990).

<sup>8</sup> Mary Douglas and her discussion of “viscous” in Douglas (1980), *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Routledge; Luce Irigaray’s analysis of the fluidity of the female body (Grosz, 1994: 204-205); or Rachel Fensham’s notion of the “fluid” body and emotions in Fensham (2009), *To Watch Theatre: Essays on Gender and Corporeality*, Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang.

Contrary to the arguments that a materialist approach implies a reductionist analysis or, as Farquhar and Lock put it, “a biomedical reduction of human distress to structural-anatomical changes” (2007: 10), a closer look at the material workings of the body affords the object of study with an extra layer of meaning, especially when it is combined with cultural awareness. The resulting material-cultural approach, according to Farquhar and Lock, “opens a domain of human experience to the imagination that is at once subjective and objective, carnal and conscious, observable and legible” (2007: 11). In the four cases studies considered in this thesis, the body is present not only as an image or shape, it is also exposed and present through its materiality which informs the performance of the body or, as I see it, its dramaturgy. The material here does not denote the anatomical or organic (although it is informed by them), nor does it imply the purely representational body. What I call for is a quality of “presentness”, not only as it occurs in Bal’s suggested act of exposition, but also as it is engendered through materiality. This presentness contributes an additional layer of meaning-making, between the organic and representational, which is informed by the historical/cultural context and the workings of fleshy reality, as well as by the meanings created by the bodily image.

### **A Revised Nomenclature for the Contemporary Body**

In the essay quoted at the beginning, Valéry splits the human body into three parts: My Body, Second Body and Third Body. My Body, for Valéry and as understood by phenomenological discourses, connotes the embodied subject. It is the lived body, the body we possess, find ourselves in and experience the world through. Valéry’s Second Body forms an image, thus reducing the body to its surface “on which materials, ornaments, armor sit, which love sees or wants to see, and yearns to touch” (Valéry, 1989: 399). The Third Body is the fleshy reality which is understood as limited to “parts and pieces” or “reduced to thin slices and tiny drops” (Valéry, 1989: 400). The four case studies make use of such pre-existent bodily understanding and terminology. In Chapter 1, I touch on the experiential qualities of the lived body as well as how the lived body of the other is perceived. In order to maintain the corporeal discourse, I attempt to draw out the material aspects of embodied subjectivity which provide the body with agency and the ability to perform itself. The notions of bodily

image and bodily surface play an important role in all chapters, especially Chapters 3–5 which discuss the emergent new materialities in the context of popular culture, nudity and professional wrestling. Finally, the fleshy reality runs throughout the whole thesis. However, due to the cultural and material changes of the contemporary Western world, the pre-existent terminology is no longer sufficient to explain some of the bodies we are faced with. As a result, I offer a revised nomenclature that allows to further interrogate the newly emergent corporealities.

In Chapter 4, I ask what I call a “Passow question”: when watching a theatre performance, which body is the spectator faced with – the body of the actor, the body of the character, the material body of the subject or an intricate fusion of all three? Mark Evans observes that just as “human subjectivity is not constituted by one singular discourse, but the intersection of many, overlapping discourses [...], the actor is constituted through not one body, but many” (2009: 170). The actor’s body in theatre, due to the body being a product of the performance, is able to, as Aoife Monks notes, blur into multiple figures, prompting the spectator to believe that the “body is composed out of many bodies” (2010: 20). Bodily multiplicity is not confined to theatre, being also at work in other cases of cultural performance. In Chapter 5, I argue that the wrestler’s body can no longer be contained in a singular corporeality; instead, the spectator sees the material body at “work” in the ring and the digitised version of this same body in the televised recording, as well as the plastic body of the wrestler in the toy shop. All of these “bodies” inform how we come to terms with the material manifestation of wrestling. This suggests that whenever we are faced with the body, it is not, in fact, one body, nor “the body”, but rather “bodies” that are at play, with the plurality and heterogeneity always already inherent within. Consequently, contemporary bodily materiality is not homogenous, instead forming a web of separate yet interrelated materialities. The body, therefore, is composed of multi-layered, ever-changing and evolving intercorporealities, the workings of which are further enhanced due to contemporary hyper- and digimodern influences.

Gail Weiss uses the term intercorporeal in her study of bodily images. For Weiss, the image of the body is intercorporeal because it “is itself an expression of an ongoing exchange between bodies and body images” (1999: 3). And while she suggests that intercorporeality is an embodied affair which is also never private but “mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies”

(1999: 5), she largely overlooks the material dimension of bodily reality. In this study I extend the term “intercorporeal” not only to encompass bodily imagery, but also the body’s materiality and the wider workings of contemporary Western culture. What I argue for is, on the one hand, a certain “Death of the Body”, because “the body” is no longer perceived as an essentialist notion. Instead, we are faced with a multiplicity of “bodies” – diverse intercorporealities – and their interrelationships. On the other hand, it would be misguided to propose that bodily diversity extends ad infinitum, that these “bodies” endlessly generate new meanings and configurations, thus existing in an eternal phenomenological flux. On the contrary, while bodies as we encounter them in contemporary realities initially manifest as acutely divergent, they also carry some fundamental (and often historical) analogies and echoes.

I argue that the process of cultural recycling is one of the reasons for the increased bodily multiplicity – the working of intercorporealities – especially as it appears in the contemporary popular culture. Due to its hypermodern tendencies, as well as the emergence and rapid dissemination of digital technologies, popular culture actively recycles – reuses, reworks, modifies and then reintegrates – diverse strategies and iconographies, including those of the body, which opens up a renewed perspective on the cultural workings and embodiments. In Chapter 3, I demonstrate that the sexualised imagery of “striptease” that can be found in contemporary pop music videos is merely a recycled appropriation of the already well-established striptease culture. Instead of creating its own sexualised tradition, popular culture borrows from pre-existing strategies, turns them into “flashy” iconography and re-sells them to the consumer. The process of cultural recycling cannot be seen as a mere continuation or development of postmodern pastiche. It is global; the recycled configurations are instantly disseminated and easily accessible; their authorship is often questionable; and, most importantly, their purpose and effect usually remain ambiguous. The recycled configurations and intercorporealities of popular culture are, to use Kirby’s notion, evanescent – they disappear from cultural context and memory almost as soon as they appear, quickly being replaced by others.

The body and its intercorporealities are always situated in space: the immediate physical space around it as well as the wider “cultural space”. The four new materialities discussed in this study are not only exposed, but also incorporated into a particular cultural environment. Both the immediate and the wider “cultural” spatial



configurations influence the perception of these bodies and their material workings. von Hagens' plastinates are characterised by the openings in what was previously closely interwoven flesh, thus constituting artificial, aestheticised spaces in the material body. The digitised pop body generates phantasmagorical constructs in virtual space. The dramaturgical workings of naked skin in theatre complement the performance's scenography. And the body of the wrestler choreographs the space around it, "working" the crowd, getting them up from the seats and causing them to burst into a pleasurable bodily furore. These spatial strategies are deliberate, even codified; therefore, I see the body's environment as a dramaturgical configuration. This dramaturgical configuration not only envelops the body and its surroundings but also engenders heterogeneous interconnections. Vera John-Steiner observes that "no longer are the objects of study represented as isolated substances; it is relationships that we seek in our new, post-Einsteinian era of understanding" (1997: location 1510). Once displayed in a particular dramaturgical configuration, the body immediately begins to form spatial relations: with the bodies existing next to it, the bodies looking at it, living bodies, artefacts and dead bodies.

### **Material Layers of the Study and Spectatorship**

After offering an introduction to the new materialist paradigm, in Chapter 1, I briefly trace the material bodily workings as they appear in antiquity, Christianity and the philosophy of Spinoza. With the materialist perspective in mind, I then contextualise the perceptual workings of the body: the acts of perceiving, being faced with and performing the material bodily manifestation. I engage with the phenomenological account of Helmuth Plessner which foregrounds the interrelationship of the body (which Plessner sees as *Körper/Leib*) with its historical, social and cultural environments, and posits our perception of the body and its environment as "ex-centric" – able to experience oneself experiencing. In order to theorise the act of facing the other's body, I engage with the philosophical alterity debate through the works of Emanuel Levinas, Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel. Drawing on Brian Treanor's philosophical reading of alterity, I argue for the other's material body, especially the body in performance, constituting an "in between matrix": between radical alterity and similitude. My reading of Phillip Zarrilli's take

on the performer's body provides an insight into the deliberately exposed body as the body that performs itself. I build on Zarrilli's account of the performing body as "appearance" and argue that this body is produced by a complex web of perceptual and material intercorporealities.

The four case studies that follow work as cultural excursions through heterogeneous new materialities, allowing for a re-evaluation of the body as it appears in twenty-first century Western culture. The main reason for choosing these particular bodies is two-fold: firstly, all four have undergone a material modification of some sort (either modification of the flesh, or modification in how we do and perceive these bodies); secondly, they are situated in different contexts – the contemporary world of anatomical specimen, popular stardom, theatre performance and professional wrestling. As a result, they are part and parcel of the much broader areas of our reality, namely, medicine and science, popular culture, art and sport. This demonstrates that the new materialities are not confined to one narrow area, but have permeated multiple layers of the Western culture. Such pervasiveness, gives a compelling reason to look for ways of thinking about these corporealities, their manifestations and conceptualisations.

In the case of the dead body in Chapter 2, we are presented with the human flesh and its modification. Here, the bodily materiality is sliced open and permanently solidified, thus questioning its humanity and producing posthuman "hallucinations". Chapter 3 discusses the pop body which is often found in popular digitised imagery. By "pop body", I mean the human materiality encompassing elements of popular music, pop art and pop culture in general. Consequently, given her involvement in all three areas, Lady Gaga works as a prominent example in this chapter. The pop body is intentionally flattened with its materiality reduced to mere pixels and therefore produces postcorporeal fears. In both of these cases, the body also lacks a certain, essentially human, vitality. Von Hagens' plastinates, while posing as "real bodies", are in fact stone-cold corpses, artificially "treated", arranged and exhibited, thus fundamentally still, silent and objectified. In the case of the pop body, while it is a real and living human body with shape and form, the material body itself, especially with the help of digital technologies, is usually displayed and consumed as an image. This image, moreover, is often technologically enhanced and exaggerated, which reduces the pop body to a "flashy" (rather than fleshy) incarnate representation.

The two bodies in Chapters 4 and 5 – the naked body and the body of the wrestler – are living and breathing corporealities. However, even here the material workings are not straightforward. The naked body in theatre performance, which I denote as *homo nudus*, is deliberately denuded and positioned in front of the spectator. Its naked skin, drawing on Monks' (2010) idea of nudity being a form of costume, inevitably turns into a material fabric that can be manipulated, partially covered or uncovered, and lit, thus informing the overall dramaturgy created. Such deliberate manipulation questions the authenticity of the denuded materiality. The wrestler's body, meanwhile, is no less codified, positioned between the live appearance during the match, the digitised version on television screens and the plastic toy found in shops. No longer simply a "perceptible mass", the wrestler's materiality is multiplied and globally disseminated. Nevertheless, here, the material workings also maintain their agency by affecting the audience's sensorium through touch and sound.

One final reflection should be offered to the spectator of these four bodies. In Chapters 2–4, the spectator of the dead, the pop and the nude configurations, while fundamentally implied, is not directly involved in the co-creation of the bodily manifestation. The subdued spectator of von Hagens' plastinates (Chapter 2) observes the flayed body from a respectful distance. The hardened flesh of the corpse, the exposed anatomical structures of the muscle, bone and inner organs, and the overall, usually "absent", body evokes moments of projected tactility, yet its aestheticised characteristics also suggest an alienating effect. Pop bodies (Chapter 3), while frantically spinning in the virtual imagery spawned by their recycled intercorporealities, are mainly consumed as spectacles, thus spatially removed from the spectator's material reality. Even the naked body of the contemporary theatre performer (Chapter 4), while allegedly fully exposing human corporeality, proves to be exposing nothing but a series of costumes that manipulate the skin and play with the sexual and nonsexual connotations of the material body. In this case study, the spectator is momentarily enthralled by the projected tactility of the moving, shaking and sweating skin of the performer, only to be quickly reminded that what is seen is not a "naked truth", but a carefully arranged spectacle. It is only in Chapter 5, which deals with the deliberately displayed body of the wrestler, that the audience member is afforded the role of an active participant and, furthermore, a co-creator of the shared fantasy. Here, the spectator is exposed to a multisensory experience, enveloped in a

visual, olfactory and, at times, tangible material manifestation where audience participation is crucial. No longer perceived at arm's length, the wrestling performance rests on the "heated" spectator, their involvement and their corporeal musicality, all of which culminates in a rowdy bodily furore.

The reception of the four bodies is also overlaid with my subjective position as not only a researcher/spectator but also as a physical theatre performer. While I do not explicitly use my firsthand experience of displaying my body in front of spectators, it is inherent in my position towards the human body and its materiality. The body in this study has more agency than it is often afforded in performance studies. This is not only due to Bal's suggested presentness of the exposed object or the presentness of the material layer that I argue for; it also has more agency because, as a performer, I work with the body and, first and foremost, the material body. This body sweats and aches, it is "sick with nerves", it often begs to be emptied out (through urination or defecation) prior to facing the spectator and it possesses a responsive quality. It is responsive because, from the performer's perspective, bodily materiality informs how we come to terms with, experience and perform through the body. As a result, the four bodies in the case studies are also "responsive": they look back, stare, peep through the cracks, shake and sweat, multiply and spawn material illusions.

One could argue that the present study is highly interdisciplinary, employing diverse theoretical approaches (cultural analysis, performance theory, corporeal and materialist discourses) and engaging with contextually varied case studies. However, I do not see it as such. The four case studies often overlap, all of them touching on: the human skin; the questionable "reality" of the body; the deliberately arranged and emphasised performance of the body; and historical echoes in a contemporary context. All four, despite their contextual differences, work as impetus for the overarching preoccupation of the thesis – exposition of the new material workings of the body. One by one, the case studies expose various conceptual layers of this materiality: its fleshy workings and imagery; the spectator's reception of this imagery; the hypermodern insecurities it might cause; and the contemporary cultural strategies of exposing, staging, denuding, masking and recycling.

Due to the focus on material workings, this study does not engage with poststructuralist thought, which tends to offer a discursive, rather than a materialist,

view of the body. Moreover, the four bodies investigated entered contemporary Western reality after the firm establishment of the poststructuralist paradigm, which prompted me to look for alternative theoretical approaches to these bodily manifestations. Furthermore, due to its limited scope (and despite ample opportunities to do so), the study does not engage with feminist thought, which I leave for the future development of this approach, especially in dialogue with the emerging field of materialist feminism.

As an afterthought, Valéry proposes the existence of a Fourth Body which is at once an “absurd and luminous idea”. This body is not the body of substance, but instead the answer to all body-related ontological and phenomenological problems, or “the unknowable object, knowledge of which would solve all these problems at one stroke, for it is what they imply” (1989: 401-402). The Fourth Body, because it is “unknowable”, is a utopian body or, rather, the embodiment of the reason for our continuous preoccupation with the body question. It relates to James Elkins’ idea that “the body can never be fully theorized”, when he suggests that the reason for the endless interest in bodily matters, including the body’s representation in art, is the theory’s (Elkins refers to art criticism, philosophy and performance studies) inability to fully grasp the corporeal (2009: xii). Despite past historical, cultural, religious and scholarly developments, and the vicissitude of corporeal paradigms and discourses they instigated, the material body has retained its quality of ambiguousness. I support Elkins’ statement that the body, despite continuous attempts to do so, resists being sufficiently theorised. Neither does Valéry give the detailed description of the Fourth Body – it is only a suggestion, a yearning for such a body to exist. The present study does not attempt to address all body-related questions. Instead, it embraces the ambiguous nature of the human body as well as its (sometimes rather gruesome) material fates and discourses, and offers an insight into the new materialities, their fleshy reality and the workings of this reality, that begin to emerge in the contemporary Western context.

## Chapter 1

### Exposing the Material

For materiality is always *something more than “mere” matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable.*

(Diana Coole and Samantha Frost)

### New Materialism, Antiquity, Christianity and Spinoza

Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman observe that “ironically, although there has been a tremendous outpouring of scholarship on ‘the body’ in the last twenty years, nearly all of the work in this area has been confined to the analysis of discourses about the body” (2008: 3). The postmodernist reduction of the body and its materiality to a cultural and linguistic construct and, subsequently, approaching the body through the largely discursive critique, as Alaimo and Hekman demonstrate, distorts the understanding of the body. They argue that in order to avoid such reductionist views and to reintegrate “bodiliness” into theory, there is a need for a revised way of talking about the materiality of the human body, as well as the materiality that the body inhabits (2008: 2-4). The new materialist paradigm offers such a revised approach to material matters. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, in their introduction to *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (2010), note that the new materialism adopts similar approaches to those of the historical materialist philosophies of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, particularly in their attention to the developments in the natural sciences that were influenced by Newtonian mechanics (2010: 5). However, contrary to the Newtonian view of matter as quantifiable and the common perception of the material world as solid, inert and easily graspable, contemporary scientific advances provide a very different take on the material. No longer easily measurable and solid, matter is seen as much more indeterminate and, as Coole and Frost put it, producing a “complex choreography” (2010: 8).

Post-Einsteinian physics views matter as active and self-organising with its “subatomic behaviour” consisting of “constant emergence, attraction, repulsion, fluctuation, and shifting of nodes of charge” that demonstrates “none of the comforting stability or solidity we take for granted” (Coole and Frost, 2010: 11). The new materialist approach is strongly informed by such a view of matter and sees the body not only as constructed by particular historical, social and cultural discourses (thus malleable yet largely passive), but also as being able to compose its own environment “in ways that are corporeally meaningful” (Coole and Frost, 2010: 10). The active and self-organising characteristics of matter suggest that the body is not inert or singular and should instead be viewed as actively participating in the cultural processes of meaning-making. It prompts a rethinking of agency where bodily matters are in play, suggesting that this agency is not solely located in the hands of the self-knowing subject. The body communicates through gesture, its fleshy workings and responses, and bodily imagery – some of which, as Coole and Frost suggest, is not immediately grasped by conscious thought (2010: 20). The resulting approach prompts us “to perceive more dynamic, intersubjective, and plural human experiences of carnality that can no longer be referenced by the singular term the body” (Farquhar and Lock, 2007: 2).

In the following sections of this chapter, in order to lay the ground for my approach to the contemporary bodily manifestations in the upcoming Chapters 2–5, I engage with the diverse approaches that run contrary to the singular view of the body. With the new materialist perspective in mind, I draw on: Helmuth Plessner’s interpretation of corporeality which splits the body into two interrelated constructs of *Körper/Leib*; the philosophical alterity debate which allows me to contextualise the intersubjective act of facing and comprehending the other’s body; and Phillip Zarrilli’s phenomenological account which exposes the body as a performing subject, the performance of which is constituted by an intricate work of intercorporealities.

One could argue that the body is, in fact, rarely seen as a singular entity. Historically, attempts to theorise the body have resulted in positioning the body in relation to something else (this relation often constituting an opposition). As Pasi Falk suggests, the historical and cultural development of bodily perception is marked by constant opposition of the body to the “other” (Falk, 1985:116). This body-“other” dualism, and the changing nature of this “other”, runs throughout the Western history

of the body, starting with Ancient Greece and leading up to the twenty-first century. Bodily flesh is opposed to the metaphysical “idea”, the spirituality of the soul and subsequently to the “calculating” reason. However, if one is to look further into these well-established historical binary structures, the bodily dualities are not as straightforward as they appear to be. With the revised materialist perspective in mind, Platonic, Christian and Cartesian discourses and their related cultural workings show that, despite continuous attempts to undermine bodily reality (and thus inevitably materiality itself), the body and its carnal dimension have remained stubbornly present, intricately interwoven into the cultural fabric.

The predominant tendency when considering the relationships between body and “idea” in Platonic philosophy, body and soul in Christian tradition, and body and mind according to Descartes’ ideas, was to diminish, or even negate, the ontological order of material reality. All three “others” were posited as being above human flesh and were considered, respectively, as being superior, assimilated to the actuality of the divine or possessing the power of knowledge and control over nature. The first postulation of this binary perception can be found in Plato’s theory of forms and ideas which posits the idea as being superior to the material nature of form. Christian tradition diminishes the precedence of the materiality of the body even further by emphasising the purity of the soul as opposed to the sinful “fleshiness” of the body. And the prevailing philosophy of the seventeenth century, particularly Descartes’ understanding of the human body and mind, adds an “instrumental” dimension to the body, placing it in opposition to human reason and will. The body thus becomes a machine-like entity, fully subordinated to and controlled by the human mind.

However, Plato’s conceptual separation of matter and idea did not imply the denial of the importance of the human body in ancient times. On the contrary, the society of Ancient Greece was thoroughly preoccupied with the well-being and health of the human organism. As Michel Foucault demonstrates in *The Use of Pleasure: the History of Sexuality* (1992), Greek culture advocated the “virtue of moderation”, which implied the ability to master the body. Bodily activities were closely attuned to the cycle of the seasons; furthermore, Greeks went so far as to coordinate their diet and sexual activity to the particular time of day or month (1992: 111–113). In *The Care of the Self* (1988) Foucault stresses that this regime of moderation did not symbolise a struggle between body and soul; instead it was “a matter of the soul’s



correcting itself in order to be able to guide the body according to a law which is that of the body itself” (1988: 134). The law that Foucault highlights is that of *meden agan* (nothing in excess) which prevailed in the everyday activities as well as the philosophical discourse of Ancient Greece. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 5, it is also the panhellenic games that offer an interest in, preoccupation with and explicitly fleshy iconography of the body. Greek athletes performed naked, often oiling their skin, thus making it shine in the sun. The attention and care for the body not only constituted a bodily spectacle, but also highlighted the material presence of these glistening, naked bodies. As Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht observes, “the appeal for spectators was, first of all, being in the presence – in the physical presence – of the athletes’ shining bodies at the moment of their highest performance” (2006: 96).

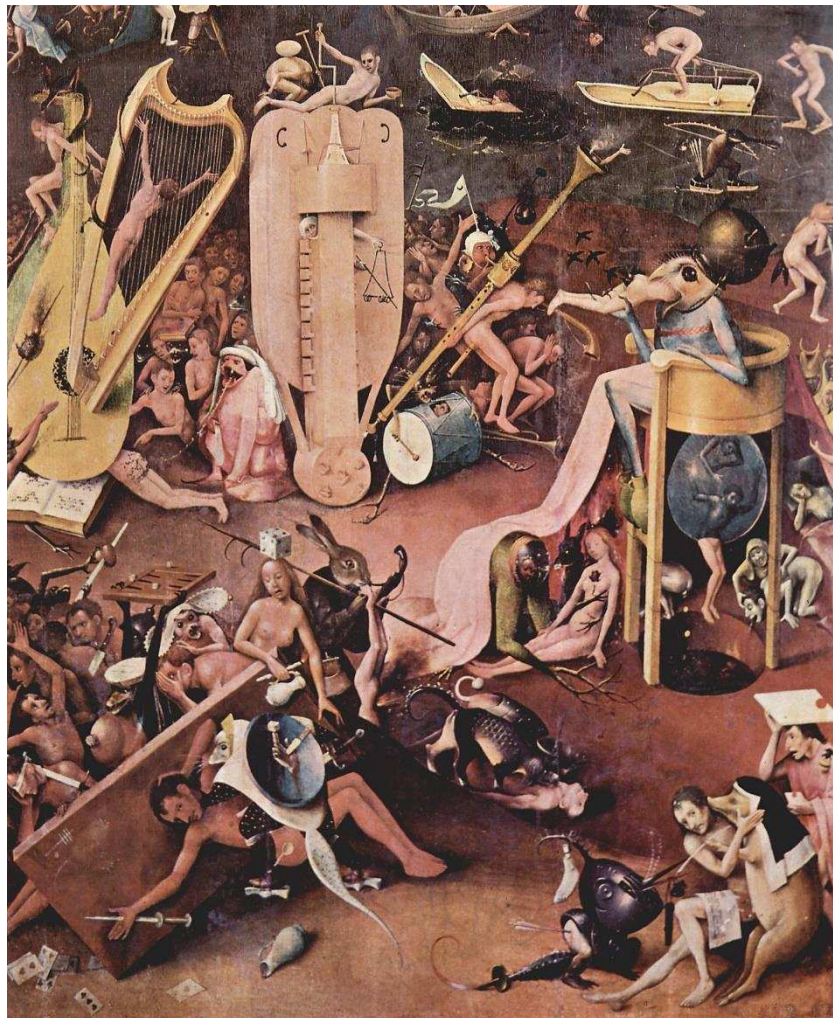


Image 1.1: Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490–1510), detail, oil on wood

In the case of Christian tradition, Falk identifies monastic asceticism as the source of the negativisation of the human body. According to Falk, “the ascetic

principles of monastic life, the prime content of which was a striving towards chastity and the purity of soul through freedom from the evils of the flesh and other worldly vices, increasingly marked out the body as the seat of human sin” (1985: 117). However, recent scholarship reveals an interesting contradiction deeply imbedded within Christian thought which disrupts the strictly oppositional relation between the material and the spiritual. This contradiction can be found at the epicentre of the fundamental truth and essence of Christianity – the idea of Incarnation. In the act of Incarnation, God becomes man and in the act of becoming man, he acquires human flesh. As Regina Ammicht-Quinn states, “God puts on a body and takes it off again like some piece of useful but disposable clothing”, in the process of which “God becomes flesh” (2009: 79). Thus the body, although denied the purity of the human soul, achieves the highest symbolic order possible, that of the divine flesh which, although inaccessible to humanity, is postulated as the basic truth and is profoundly incorporated into the overall religious system of Christianity. The divinity of God’s flesh is further emphasised in the act of Resurrection: by defeating the most common and inescapable of corporeal realities, death, the Christian tradition provides hope and salvation for the immaterial human soul. The symbol of this salvation, however, becomes the body of Christ, the material reality of the bodily flesh which at the same time carries the “worldly vices” culturally embedded in it.

Furthermore, the fact that God becomes “flesh” allows Him to be depicted in art. Christian iconography often emphasises the fleshy corporeality of the incarnated God and the common human subject, and, subsequently, according to Ralph Dekoninck, “the body and art interrelationship is essentially the result of a Christian anthropology and image theology” (2009: 57–58). Its depiction of human flesh includes both the blissfulness of existing near the divine and the excruciating physical torture of sinners, as illustrated in the famous triptych of Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490–1510). The left-hand panel shows the scene in Eden when God introduced Eve to Adam. God is clothed, while the human bodies are nude yet also calmly composed, still blissfully unaware of their nakedness. The figures are incorporated into a peaceful landscape with a variety of animals at their feet and the overall composition offers a stark contrast to that of the right-hand panel portraying the torments of Hell (Image 1.1). The torments are those of the body: pierced limbs, human bodies being eaten by and fornicating with animals, and objects stuck up their

anuses. The scene offers a damning phantasmagoria expressed through the tormented, injured and suffering human flesh. The graphic imagery of sin and its supposed consequences in the afterlife was commonly used as a preaching mechanism against bodily pleasures, which corresponds with the act of negating the body. However, this very negation is simultaneously expressed through the exposition of the body: the bodily reality, material presence and its distortions. While retaining the mode of negativity, the body is brought forward as a materiality *hic et nunc*, fully exposed through its presentness, which affords the spirituality of the Christian tradition an unquestionable somatic element, an idea I come back to in Chapter 2 when discussing the history of anatomy.

The philosophy of the seventeenth century, namely the Cartesian paradigm, split the human subject into two separate substances: body and mind. Descartes radically detached the body from the superior, “calculating” reason. Moreover, by linking the mind to reason and, subsequently, the foundations of knowledge, he placed the mind in a position of hierarchical superiority to Nature (Grosz, 1994: 6). The resulting dichotomy, the ontological gap between Nature (including the body) and culture, strongly influenced subsequent philosophical discourses. Descartes was not alone in attempting to comprehend this dualistic ontology of mind and body at the time. Spinoza, who was aware of Descartes’ ideas, provided a very different analysis of the same issue. Instead of perceiving the mind and body as separate, Spinoza postulated the notion of a singular substance. He saw this substance as absolute, infinite and nonpartitive. In order to explain finite substances like the human body, Spinoza stated that “whatever is finite is not a substance but a modification or affection of infinite substance – a ‘mode’” (Hans Jonas in Grene, 1973: 262). For Spinoza, the body is a finite mode, but it is not a passive entity overpowered and controlled by the human mind. Instead, as Moira Gatens observes, Spinoza saw the body as actively participating in human perception.

According to Gatens, Spinoza believed that “the mind is constituted by the affirmation of the actual existence of the body, and reason is active and embodied precisely because it is the affirmation of a particular bodily existence” (1996: 57). Therefore, while conceiving of the mind and body as separate entities (or modes), Spinoza does not completely separate the two. As J. Thomas Cook explains, Spinoza sees the mind and body as running parallel to one another, as two “causal series” which

are “matched up at every point” (2007: 50). Spinoza understands the mind’s perception of the body as ideas of modifications of the body and because we hold these ideas in our minds, this proves that “the object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, and the body as it actually exists” (Spinoza, 1955: 92). This leads him to postulate a unity of mind and body, an idea which was much later elaborated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>9</sup> and other proponents of phenomenology. In his *The Primacy of Perception* (1964), Merleau-Ponty rejects Descartes’ body-mind dualism and, without reducing human knowledge to a mere sensation, proposes a subjective view of the body as opposed to approaching the body as an object (1964: 25), thus shedding new light on the experiential body and its materiality, or the lived body.

As the foregoing examples from three different historical and cultural environments demonstrate, the seemingly dominant views of the diminishing emphasis on the body and attempts to negate the body are regularly met with the opposing affirmation of the existence of, depiction of and engagement with the materiality of the human subject. This affirmation is expressed through diverse modes, often occurring outside the philosophical domain, as the examples of Antiquity and its everyday preoccupation with the body, and the explicitly “fleshy” Christian iconography, demonstrate. However, the conflicting views of Descartes and Spinoza also show the philosophical “unrest” between contrasting analyses of the subject, which points towards the assertion of bodily existence gradually seeping into philosophical discourses.

### ***Perceiving the Material: Plessner’s Body as Körper/Leib***

Maaïke Bleeker in *Visuality in Theatre: the Locus of Looking* (2008) analyses the complex workings of, as she calls it, the act of “just looking”. Bleeker argues that “just looking” cannot be seen as a simplified and singular act of perception. Instead, it is an “impure and always synaesthetic event” that takes place in the body “as a locus of intertwining of various perceptual systems” (2008: 7). For Bleeker, the act of looking is always already permeated by seeing things that are not actually there:

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<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty never references Spinoza directly; however, according to Henry Pietersma, he often uses Spinozistic ideas and phrases. See Henry Pietersma (1988), “Merleau-Ponty and Spinoza”, *International Studies in Philosophy*, 20:3, pp. 89-93.

“seeing always involves projections, fantasies, desires and fears, and might be closer to hallucinating than we think” (2008: 18). Drawing on Bleeker’s observations, it follows that the act of looking is never unilateral. Moreover, in the case of looking at the body, it is not only the visual and affective workings that are in play – the material qualities of the body seen and your own body form a complex system of perception. The physical gestures, experiential fleshiness and bodily imagery, as well as the imaginary – the illusions and desires constituted by the body or, to use Bleeker’s term, “hallucinations” – contribute to the meaning-making of each bodily manifestation. Merleau-Ponty sees subjective self-reflection as one possible strategy for the analysis of not only the living body, but also the subjective perception of it. However, as Gesa Lindemann observes, the body in Merleau-Ponty’s discourse, due to his emphasis on subjectivity, becomes largely generalised and can be perceived as a “trans-historical condition of experience” (2012: 275). As argued in the Introduction, without the awareness of wider cultural and historical structures and their impacts, the phenomenological preoccupation with embodiment, the experiential relation between the body and self, can lead to a simplified view of the body. Because this thesis is informed by the methods of cultural analysis and, most importantly, because the four bodies discussed in the case studies of the subsequent chapters are deliberately exposed to the viewer and thus objectified, a different approach to bodily perception is required.

Helmuth Plessner, drawing on Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology of embodiment and his idea that the lived body is a centre of human experience, opens up a possibility to analyse the body’s relation to its environment – the subject’s historical and cultural position in the world, which he refers to as *Mitwelt*, the shared world – because he begins his analysis from an objective standpoint. Furthermore, instead of opposing the human body to the “other” and battling the binary structures, Plessner looks at the body itself, from the perspective of the philosophy of the organic. As a result, he inevitably taps into the materiality of the body and, while “probing” deeper into this material body and especially the perception of it, uncovers not one singular bodily phenomenon, but a complex system of interrelations. Plessner postulates the human body as being divisible into two different, but interrelated, constructs: *Körper* and *Leib*. And in the act of experiencing the body, we are involved

in an “ex-centric” action of perception: the self is able to experience itself experiencing, a process that is continuously mediated by the shared world.

Plessner, by approaching the body from the outside, as an object, sees it as always already situated in space – positioned in a specific place in the world. He uses the notion of “positionality” to refer to not only the immediate positioning of the body, but also its relationship to the wider environment (Greene, 1966: 254). According to Plessner, the living body relates to the environment through its boundary. The body has a dual relationship to this boundary: “either its boundary is merely the point where it stops, and (is) identical with its contour or outline” or “the boundary is placed over against the body and beyond it and at the same time directed to it” (Greene, 1966: 256). In other words, the body can be understood as an independent subject, as if cut off from its environment and delineated by its particular shape and outline, but it is also existing in and through its environment, “directed both beyond itself to the environment and from it back into itself” (Greene, 1966: 268). I draw on Plessner’s idea of the bodily boundary when I approach the four bodies in the forthcoming case studies. However, in my discussion, the boundary is also firmly embodied by the material skin. The skin of the dead, the pop, the naked and the wrestler’s bodies performs the dual action of relation identified by Plessner: it is an intrinsic part of the material body, its outline, as well as the material membrane that holds the inner viscera together; however, it also, simultaneously, “reaches out” and relates to its environment. The body reaches out through its materiality, e.g., when sweating or bleeding, as well as its visual and imaginary workings. In Chapter 4, I demonstrate how the skin and its colours can complement the visual dramaturgy of the theatre performance, and the bodily ability to provoke moments of projected tactility, thus reaching out and “touching” the viewer’s body, runs through all of the case studies that follow.

Plessner’s analysis of the positionality and boundary of the living body reaffirms his emphasis on *Mitwelt* as an integral part of its relationship to its surroundings. I see it as the actualisation of the impact that particular historical and cultural situations make on the human body and, if we were to follow Plessner’s argument closely, of the impact made by the body on the shared world of its own accord, thus affording the body agency. The self perceives the *Mitwelt* not only as the “other”, but appears to be intrinsically connected to and inseparable from it, as if

“one’s relationship to oneself and to the outside world is mediated by the Shared World” (Lindemann, 2012: 283). Drawing on these observations, Plessner devises a bodily structure and explains the modes of its perception. The body is delineated by its boundary, and this boundary constitutes the living body of the self or, as Plessner named it, Leib, a lived body. The Leib, however, is distinct from the physical body of the subject, or Körper. As Hans-Peter Krüger demonstrates, according to Plessner’s notion of bodily structure, a person experiences oneself as having a physical body (Körper). The physical body can also be understood as the person’s representative, and the person can be replaced by it. However, we also experience ourselves inwardly, living as a body (Leib), living in this body and through it (Krüger, 2010: 268). Krüger adds that “one does not have the lived body in the external world as one has a body” (2010: 268). Instead the lived body constitutes our inner world. Most importantly, Krüger observes that the distinction between Körper and Leib is not established by the organism, the body itself, but instead is determined by the body’s environment, its shared world (2010: 268). By approaching the human body as an object and splitting it into two distinct (but interconnected) constructs, Plessner performs his analysis from a detached perspective – something Merleau-Ponty insisted was impossible. According to Merleau-Ponty, we cannot stand back from the body and reflect on its experiences, instead we are always already a “body-as-it-is-lived-by-me” and it is only from the subjective position of the lived body that the self-reflection can take place (Grosz, 1994: 86).

Plessner not only stands back from the body in order to analyse it, he also postulates this action of detachment, which he names as “ex-centric” positionality, as an innate quality of the human bodily reality, crucial for the perception of our own body as well as the body of the other. “Ex-centric” alludes to the self being as if “off-centre” and is actualised by “an individual self’s carrying out its life by relating back to itself” (Lindemann, 2010: 281). The act of “relating back to itself” creates a perceptual detachment to yourself, and it is this detachment that Plessner sees as ex-centric. I would suggest that Plessner’s ex-centric positionality, together with his distinction between having a body and the lived body, and the body’s relationship with its shared world, forms a triple action of perception. It is as if the self is at a double separation from its own body.

We have a physical body and can experience it as having a body. We also have an inner, lived body and can stand away from it in order to experience having this lived body. The third perceptual action occurs when we are faced with the shared world: the body is both influenced by its environment and influences the environment in return, and the self, once again, is able to perceive its relationship with the shared world. This triad of ex-centric bodily workings can also be found in Raewyn W. Connell's analysis of the body. According to Connell, "with bodies both objects and agents of practice, and the practice itself forming the structures within which bodies are appropriated and defined, we face a pattern" which "might be termed body-reflexive practice" (Connell in Wellard, 2012: 26). It is through the reflexivity of the body, which is both an object and an agent, that bodily interaction and experiences are formed. Moreover, body-reflexive practice does not happen in isolation and is always performed "via socially constructed bodily understandings" (Wellard, 2012: 26).

By splitting the body into Körper and Leib, Plessner, according to Krüger, is not trying to create a new duality (2010: 269). The physical body impacts the lived body in various ways, especially when the Leib relates to its shared world (Krüger, 2010: 281). When we try to comprehend the notion of ex-centric positionality, it becomes clear that it is neither Körper nor Leib that is at a double separation from itself in the act of perception. Instead, it is our self as a complex embodied entity, an entity which is also related to its environment, that is performing multiple perceptual actions, standing at a distance from them in order to comprehend them and then relating them back to the self. Furthermore, Lindemann claims that because we see ourselves as ex-centric, as "a self [that] not only experiences itself and its environment but also experiences itself experiencing", it allows the self to experience itself as a self and, in turn, this allows us to face and experience other ex-centric selves (2010: 281–282). In other words, I can understand myself as a separate self, which enables me to perceive and experience the others around me, including the others' bodies.

Despite the fact that Plessner creates a triad of sorts by discussing the physical body, the lived body and Mitwelt as separate notions, all three are intertwined and largely integrated when one is attempting to conceptualise the self's bodily perception. The interdependence of Körper and Leib, and their interrelationship with the shared world, inform the complex structure of bodily materiality as it is understood in this study. The ex-centric positionality to our own body allows us to perceive the body of



the other, not as “just a body” (similarly to Bleeker’s account, in which the act of looking is not “just looking”), but as another complex and ex-centric self, moreover a material self. Bodily materiality – the layer of meaning created through fleshy reality, its imagery and perceptual “hallucinations” – is engendered through the complex workings of Körper and its relations to the lived body and the shared world. The material body we face, therefore, is not purely organic, nor purely representational, but an intricate and inter-dependent system involving both which is also mediated through a particular historical and cultural environment.

### **Facing the Material: The Alterity Debate**

In his article “Abject Identities and Fluid Performances: Theorizing the Leaking Body” (2000), David Harradine hints at bodily “otherness” as it appears in the “bleeding” performances of the artist Franko B. Harradine identifies AIDS as a phenomenon which permeated the cultural construction of identity and sexuality at the end of the twentieth century (2000: 78). He uses the symbolically and literally “fluid” performance work of Franko B in order to critically engage with AIDS and explain how it resonates with the discourse of the abject. Franko B uses his own blood to represent human corporeality as a discordant and permeable system as opposed to a closed and homogenous construct (Harradine, 2000: 75). In the case of AIDS, human blood is also the carrier of HIV infection and can symbolise the disease itself. During Franko B’s performances, his blood, due to the intentional cutting of the skin, crosses the material boundary of the body and leaks out. When perceived by the spectator, the blood is seen as a material substance that carries a cultural association with AIDS. Consequently, human blood becomes the abject – a symbolic manifestation of repulsive, even frightening, materiality. The notion of the abject and its perception as repulsive suggest an element of alterity. The material “otherness” is further emphasised through the theatrical use of real blood which turns this bodily reality into an aesthetic construct. In Chapter 4, I refer to bodily substances in performance as “extra-corporeal”: the act of exposing the usually invisible bodily viscera. The notion of “extra-corporeality” suggests that the material substance no longer, strictly speaking, belongs to the body and is instead made “extra”. The specially arranged strategies of the performance allow the material substance to leave the body and “reach

out” into its environment, its shared world. It covers the skin, the costume or the surrounding scenography, thus becoming part and parcel of a particular dramaturgical configuration.

Plessner’s idea that it is the embodied ex-centric positionality, the ability to experience yourself as a self, which enables the perception and experience of other selves, works as a point of departure for an alterity debate in the context of corporeality. Moreover, in the four case studies analysed in this thesis, the bodies are not simply other selves. Just as in the case of Franko B who deliberately exposes himself, pierces his skin and allows the blood to seep out of his body, the bodies discussed in the following chapters are examples of deliberately engendered “otherness”: exposed and emphasised corporealities that are positioned in front of the spectator. Because we face the bodies thus exposed, the dramaturgical configurations of exhibited anatomical cadavers, digitally displayed pop bodies, denuded bodies in performance and the exaggerated flesh of the professional wrestler are inevitably involved in the creation and reception of alterity. The concern with alterity as not only deliberately achieved but also an innate human quality is a widely debated issue in philosophical discourses. The proponents of the philosophical alterity debate, including Emanuel Levinas, Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel deal with the question of otherness which “in the most basic sense [...] asks us to consider what it means for something or someone to be other than the self” (Treanor, 2006: 2). The relationship between the self and the other is reiterated by the act of listening to the “call of the Other” (Levinas), constituted by the “I-Thou” matrix (Buber) and forms an intricate web of “constellations” (Marcel). In this section, I will engage with some of these ideas in the bodily context in order to comprehend the “otherness” constituted by the act of facing the material body.

According to Brian Treanor, “there are fewer and fewer places in the world, physical or intellectual, where we are not confronted in a very obvious way with issues related to what it means to be other” (2006: 198). Treanor implies that otherness is constituted by the environment, by particular “places in the world”. Moreover, as the example of Franko B demonstrates, it is the body, through its particular positionality, which becomes a medium for, or a signifier of, otherness. The material “otherness” of Franko B’s blood is, drawing on Plessner’s argument, fundamentally related to its dramaturgical configurations: the performance context as well as the cultural

awareness of AIDS. The colonial discourse of the “exotic” other or foreign body is another example that deals with a contextually rendered bodily alterity. Diana Taylor provides Columbus’ discoveries of “wild” men and women in the New World as an example of the “exotic” otherness which then spurred a wider postcolonial debate. Columbus captured native Indians in order to accomplish his “reconnaissance mission” (Taylor, 1998: 161). The capture of the indigenous body guaranteed believability of Columbus’ voyage – he had physical proof of the “exotic”, thus implying that the “exotic” New World also existed. From the postcolonial point of view, the major controversy of Columbus’ treatment of the foreign body was the lack of signification it involved (Taylor, 1998: 162). The colonial discourse presented the “primitive” natives as voiceless which, as Taylor observes, resulted in the native bodies being “seen or heard [only] from the perspective of the ‘discoverer’”. The “voicelessness” of these bodies created an asymmetry between them and their “discoverer”, the latter maintaining an authoritative, “innate” superiority (Taylor, 1998: 161–162).

In the performance context, the issue of the other’s body as “exotic” was famously taken up and explored by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco. In their performance art piece *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...* (1992–1994), Gómez-Peña and Fusco dressed as two “primitive” and “newly discovered” indigenous people (they called themselves “Guatinauis”), exhibited themselves in a golden cage and performed “traditional tasks, which ranged from sewing voodoo dolls and lifting weights to watching television and working on a laptop computer” (Fusco, quoted by Taylor, 1998: 163). Gómez-Peña and Fusco stayed silent or spoke only in a nonsensical language (thus mirroring the voicelessness of the natives in Columbus’ time). Their indigenous masquerade problematised the binary structure (lacking “exotic” other/superior [white] self) of the colonial discourse, exposing the ambiguousness of the colonial discourse and its relationship to the body of the “other”. However, the meaning of the body is never fixed; instead, it is in a continuous state of redefinition depending on a particular political, historical and cultural order. Gómez-Peña was forced to alter his performance practice because of “the formidable changes generated by the cult of globalization and virtual capitalism” and “the sudden socialization of digital technologies” (Gómez-Peña, 2001: 7).

This cultural, economic and political paradigm shift divulged his portrayal of the “exotic”, dark-skinned and savage “other” as outdated, maybe even naïve, and alternatively suggested that the “inhabitants of the Southern Hemisphere [became] passive consumers of ‘global’ trash, or providers of cheap labor” (Gómez-Peña, 2001: 10). Furthermore, his practice and theory were also influenced by the “post-racial, post-racist, post-sexist, post-ideological, post civic rights era” with its subject surfing through the amalgamation of the cyber/digital/technological influences (Gómez-Peña, 2001: 12). In the midst of all these “post-”s and technological “chimaeras”, the human body acquired a new significance. While its subjectivity stayed fundamentally embodied, its corporeality was being artificially altered, wounded and enhanced. The emphasis of Gómez-Peña’s performances shifted from the outer/“exotic” alterity to the inner/“fleshy” spectacles of corporeality:

My Chicano and Mexico City colleagues and I have explored the spectacle of the brown body-as-freak by ‘enhancing’ our own bodies with special effects, makeup, handmade ‘lowrider’ prosthetics, and hyper-ethnic motifs. The objective is to heighten identity features of fear and desire in the Anglo imagination, to ‘spectacularize’ our identities so to speak (2001: 24).

As I will discuss later, Gómez-Peña continues to allow his audience to freely and voyeuristically look upon this revised version of the “post-exotic” body, but the relationship with the “other” has changed. His performances no longer play on the spectator’s curiosity towards the “exotic” make-believe, but shamelessly expose its enlarged and exaggerated version in the mundi digitalis and the bodily crises engendered by this.

However, the question of alterity, especially as approached by Levinas, Buber and Marcel, is not solely dependent on a deliberate exposition or the workings of a particular environment which point to “otherness”. The premise of the philosophical alterity debate is the inherent difference of the other from the self which “is born not only of perspective, value, and/or social location but of alterity simply in itself, that is, in the basic recognition that the other is not me” (Lipari, 2004: 128). The understanding of alterity is not only constituted by the concrete examples of the “other” we encounter, but also the innate perception of otherness. The proponents of the alterity debate emphasise the significance of the otherness of the other, which, in the case of Levinas, reached the level of the absolute or infinite “Other” and became

the source of Levinasian ethics. Levinas' transcendental philosophy is characterised by his radical gesture of discarding ontology as *philosophia prima*. He questions ontology's ability to account for the other, especially the absolute other qua other. The Western philosophical tradition regards the other from the perspective of the same or, to put it differently, as something to be overcome and converted into the known (Treanor, 2006: 3). Treanor observes that, according to Levinas, "within ontology the other is subordinated to the same and thereby divested of its otherness", thus this ontological other is "no longer otherness at all" (2006: 14). Instead, Levinas saw ethics as a form of philosophy that is able not only to account for the Other, but also to engage with truth which arises from the ethical relationship and dialogue with this Other (Treanor, 2006: 20).

The transcendental element of Levinas' philosophy arises from his "preontological" understanding of the formation of the self (Butler, 2005: 85–86). Judith Butler observes that the formation of the self is preontological in Levinas' philosophy because "the phenomenal world of persons and things becomes available only after a self has been formed as an effect of a primary impingement" (2005: 86). The notion of "impingement" here concerns the unwilled primary meeting of the self and the Other. Butler argues that "the passive [because it is unwilled] relation to other beings precedes the formation of the ego or the moi or, put slightly differently, becomes the instrument through which that formation takes place" (2005: 87). It also provides Levinas' Other with the quality of the absolute and infinite. Furthermore, Levinas saw an element of asymmetry in the self-Other relationship. The primary impingement acts as an origin for the subject, thus subordinating the self to the Other and, as Lipari claims, forming the "true meaning of subjectivity abided in devotion to the other" (2004: 126). Despite being "above" the self, the Other also appears in destitution, which, according to Treanor, Levinas expresses in the nudity of the Other's face as well as the self's capability of murder (2006: 33). Thus Levinas' Other calls the self's subordinated subjectivity into question and, at the same time, through the destitution of the Other's face and its vulnerability, points the self towards the absolute and selfless responsibility for the other.

Levinas sees the concept of "in between" as problematic, which corresponds to his dismissal of ontology. As Treanor observes, Levinas critiques Buber (and Marcel) for his statement that the relation to the other takes place in the space of "in

between”. For Levinas, this signals a return to ontology and poses a danger of assimilation of the other to the same, because he sees the “between” as a co-presence, and presence suggests “a mode of being, and being totalizes the other” (Treanor, 2006: 110). In contrast, Buber emphasises the co-relation between the self and the other in everyday life. Buber names this relation “I-Thou” and sees it as “intersubjective, ethical, [and] dialogical” (Lipari, 2004: 125). Despite using the “in between” premise, Buber’s “other” maintains the alterity because the true “I-Thou” happens unexpectedly and without aim or intention. It “occurs suddenly without warning” when you utter “Thou” to another (Lipari, 2004: 126–7). The emphasis on the unexpected and aimless nature of such an encounter provides Buber with a possibility to “rescue” the other from the ontological assimilation to the same.

Marcel suggests a slightly different version of the “in between” in his philosophical account of alterity. His thought rests on the analysis of everyday experience. Marcel contrasts the mode of having a body with being a body, and explores how we relate to otherness (things or persons) in these two ways. The body is something that we “have” and “are”. Moreover, as soon as we realise that the body we have is simultaneously us, it can no longer be seen as merely a thing – the body becomes the self “being” a body or simply the self (Treanor, 2006: 61). The mode of “having” implies a relationship to the external things where the self performs an act of assimilation of these things. On the level of “being”, however, the encounter with the body and the other person acquires a different meaning: such an encounter is “not purely external and, as such, plays out in terms of presence and participation” (Treanor, 2006: 61). Contrary to Levinas, Marcel claims that the notion of presence does not immediately suggest the ontological totalisation of the other. Instead, presence points towards intersubjectivity, openness and participatory relationship. The self’s relation to the other’s presence is neither fully external nor internal; rather, it is fundamentally ambiguous because the self can never establish an absolute unity with the other. As Treanor argues, according to Marcel, “we may endeavor to understand and commune with the other in any number of ways, [but] the other qua other – that is, the other as a presence – is de facto beyond my ability to grasp” (2006: 72). Marcel uses the astronomical term “constellation” when describing the relation of “in between”. All beings have their individual “centres” and when coming together, the “centres” form all manner of formations in an attempt to understand each other. But

since the complete understanding of the other's "centre" is impossible, these relationships stay in the form of "constellations" – close to one another, but never fully unified (Treanor, 2006: 72).

Marcel's emphasis on "being" a body as a form of presence plays an important role in the case of a bodily manifestation. While the absolute unity with or complete understanding of the other is unachievable, it points to the quality of presentness that draws the attention to the other's body. Presentness is especially notable when the body is deliberately displayed – deliberately made present. In the case of Franko B, the body is made present through performance strategies: a clearly demarcated space for the event, the performance area being lit and an exposed, near naked body. However, his presentness is also emphasised through bodily materiality, in the form of human blood. Franko B is bleeding in real time, and while, as I will argue in Chapter 4, his "extra-corporeal" performances do not achieve an authentic status because they are specially achieved dramaturgical configurations, the material presentness of his blood creates an intersubjective relation between him and the spectator. Harradine observes that the abject quality of Franko B's performances determines a "constitutive exclusion" and forms an "exclusionary matrix" (2000: 74). Due to AIDS being a representational strategy, the blood, which is clearly visible because it is seeping out of Franko B's naked body, becomes a metaphorical site of contamination and exclusion. However, as suggested by Julia Kristeva, when faced with the abject manifestation, we are not only "sickened" by it but also "drawn toward" it which implies an element of attraction (1982: 1). Therefore, Franko B, through his "extra-corporeal" performance strategies and contextual positioning (the cultural awareness of AIDS), endows his body with an element of repulsive and exclusionary material "otherness", yet at the same time draws the spectator's attention to the spectacle. The spectator's relation to his body is, drawing on Marcel, fundamentally ambiguous, involving a number of "in between" "constellations" as part of an attempt to understand the other.



Image 1.2: Pocha Nostra family reunion, San Francisco, 2003

In his *Aspects of Alterity* (2006), Treanor attempts to find a possible link between the transcendental philosophy of Levinas and the concrete thought of Marcel, “in between” absolute and relative otherness. After a detailed overview of the philosophical alterity debate, Treanor deduces that the other is marked by a radical alterity. However, the other qua other also exists parallel to the relational and familiar elements that the self recognises in the other. Therefore, for Treanor, alterity and similitude exist alongside each other, pulling against each other and forming a “chiastic relationship” which constitutes Otherness. Treanor states that “qua alterity, the other is that which can reveal or bring about something new and unforeseen; however, qua similitude, the other is also susceptible to some measure, imperfect though it may be, of understanding”; and the relationship of the self with Otherness is constituted by “a dynamic tension, wherein the push and pull of the two arms of the chiasmus never come to a final, comfortable rest – one that requires us to constantly adjust and reevaluate as we feel our way across uncertain ground” (2006: 229). Treanor’s “chiastic relationship” between alterity and similitude attempts to bring about a convergence between Levinas’ absolute Other to whom the self feels an innate and unquestionable responsibility, and Marcel’s analysis of the self’s relationship with the other whom one can grasp, but never fully perceive or be united with.



We cannot experience the absolute other, because if the other is absolutely other than me, it would also be imperceptible to me. In order for the self to encounter the other, the other has to have at least a trace of similitude – otherwise such an encounter could not take place or, as Richard Kearney puts it, “any relation with the Absolute makes the Absolute relative” (2003: 15). In his more recent work, Gómez-Peña positions his body in Treanor’s suggested “in between” – in between revealing alterity through the unusual and post-exotic bodily masquerade and the similitude of recognition or understanding. As Bean Gilsdorf observes, Gómez-Peña’s

Performances are often over-the-top parodic jabs at the fears and desires that exist between races and cultures, and he appears on stage dressed in cultural drag, the costumes of fetishized south-of-the-border identities, sporting a Mexican wrestler mask or a wide sombrero, a tiger-fur vest or a gold-braided mariachi bolero (Art21, 2014).

Gómez-Peña no longer attempts to expose the “exotic” other as he did in the early 1990s when his aforementioned performance with Fusco actually tricked some spectators into believing that they were faced with authentic “Guatinauis” (Ginsberg, year unknown). His “cultural drag” is easily recognisable as a specially arranged, very bizarre, act of performance. However, behind this “cultural drag”, there is the material body of the artist who, through painting the face, cross-dressing, exaggerating gender by sporting enlarged metallic breasts or offering glimpses of the naked body covered in a see-through veil, taps into the prevailing issues of intercultural workings in contemporary society (Image 1.2). Gómez-Peña, together with the members of his art organisation La Pocha Nostra (which can be loosely translated as “the cartel of the cultural traitors”<sup>10</sup>), offers a chiastic alterity spectacle to the viewer: emphasised and exaggerated, thus estranged by the deliberate manipulations of the body through costume, yet also endowed with an almost alluring “presentness”, drawing the viewer’s attention towards the body with clearly perceptible cultural connotations. I will again apply Treanor’s chiastic notion of alterity in Chapter 2, where the spectator faces the dead plastinated body in von Hagens’ exhibition. The workings of material “otherness” are especially prominent in the plastinate’s case, because posthuman alterity is, first and foremost, achieved through the artificially preserved and hardened

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<sup>10</sup> See the interview with Gómez-Peña [http://www.artpractical.com/feature/interview\\_with\\_guillermo\\_gomez-pena/](http://www.artpractical.com/feature/interview_with_guillermo_gomez-pena/) (accessed 7/7/15).

flesh of the body. The chiasmic push and pull appears when the spectator attempts to comprehend this body: in between the no-longer-human, estranged Other and the desire to find traces of the ante-mortem human identity.

### **Performing the Material:**

#### ***Zarrilli's Body of Flesh, Blood, Breath and Appearance***

To consider the body as only that which is intended or that which is discursively framed is akin to looking down the beam of a torch and claiming that everything that is lit is all there is or can be. We must not be afraid of the darkness, of the unshapely materiality which will, despite our “clear vision”, eventually find its way into our consciousness (Evans, 2009: 143).

Mark Evans argues that in some ways the performer's body in theatre, despite the discursively inscribed meanings, “remains ineffable, beyond the reach of the conscious rational intellect” (2009: 145). As a result, Evans sees the body as “unruly”, this partly arising from the “unruly” behaviour of the “unshapely” materiality. The “unruliness” suggests that the manifestation of the performer's body is not confined to the purposefully intended dramaturgical meanings, imagery and connotations. Certain meanings, the fleshy workings, imagery and imaginary “hallucinations” of the body, remain unexpected and unconsciously engendered, which affords the bodily materiality agency. Therefore, the bodily manifestations in theatre performance are created not only through the work of director, choreographer or designer – the body, through its presentness and materiality, is capable of performing itself, and it is here that we find the extra layer of bodily meaning I argue for in this thesis. And while not all of the forthcoming case studies are positioned in the theatre environment, all of them are examples of cultural performance. The pageantry of contemporary Western bodies – the dead body, the pop body, the nude body and the wrestler's body – are specially codified, arranged, choreographed (or choreograph the audience) and observed by the spectator. All four, therefore, actively perform, which necessitates a closer look at how the body performs its materiality and, in the process of doing so, creates not the singular entity of the body, but diverse intercorporeal manifestations.

The theatre performance tradition of the late twentieth century, particularly the work done by laboratory theatres – Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Phillip Zarrilli and others – shed a new light on the performer’s body and brought materiality and physical presence to the forefront of dramaturgical composition. These theatre practitioners incorporated Asian techniques (i.e., yoga and martial arts) and philosophy into their training praxis, pedagogy and methodology. In line with Asian philosophy, the intricate relationship between the performer’s body and mind, or simply bodymind, became the central preoccupation. I believe that Zarrilli’s approach to performer training and its theorisation is the most appropriate to the present discussion of performing bodily materiality. Zarrilli, by contributing to the phenomenological research in performance theory, also taps into the idea of intercorporeality (although he does not describe it as such), because, when discussing the experience of the performer’s body, he argues for the embodiment of several materialities: the body of flesh, blood, breath and appearance.

Zarrilli draws on his experience of training in Indian martial arts and kathakali dance-drama when teaching students<sup>11</sup> and working on theatre performances<sup>12</sup>. He employs psychophysical training which is focused on the relationship between the performer’s inner awareness and the outer embodiment, and applies it to contemporary Western performance practice. Zarrilli’s phenomenological research is focused on two questions: “how can the contemporary actor’s body and experience in performance be theorized” and “what methodological tools are useful in an attempt to better understand the embodied work of the actor” (Zarrilli, 2004: 653). As his point of departure, prompted by Indian philosophy and various yoga practices<sup>13</sup>, as well as the Western phenomenological tradition (Merleau-Ponty and Drew Leder), Zarrilli employs the idea of bodymind and identifies two bodily states of the performer: the everyday experience and the non-everyday, “extra-daily” body (I return to the idea of the “extra-daily” body in Chapter 4). The performer’s body is analysed at the experiential level – as a continuous process of perception and embodiment which occurs in everyday life, but is most clearly manifested in the theatre performance

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<sup>11</sup> For more see Zarrilli (2009) and Creely (2010).

<sup>12</sup> As an example of how Zarrilli employs psychophysical training when working on theatre productions, namely Beckett, see Zarrilli (2007).

<sup>13</sup> Especially Ayurveda and *hatha* yoga, and the idea of homologous correspondences between the physical/external and subtle/internal bodies (Zarrilli, 2011: 250–251).

environment. The idea of the process of embodiment suggests to Zarrilli that the experience of one's body is constituted by a series of embodiments of several bodies or, as I see it, the working of intercorporealities. Most importantly, Zarrilli sees these several bodies not as a result of discursive framing, but as heterogeneous and interrelated components situated within the body – the material organism and the perceiving self.

Zarrilli distinguishes four embodied modes of the performer: the recessive body; the surface body<sup>14</sup>; the aesthetic “inner” body; and the aesthetic “outer” body. The recessive and surface bodies point to the materiality of the subject: the fleshy, visually and tangibly perceptible reality. This reality not only gives the body its outline and shape, but – especially in case of the surface body – engages in the creation of a particular dramaturgical configuration. The recessive body is the inner, visceral body, composed of internal organs and their processes. Like Valéry's Third Body discussed in the Introduction, this body has a quality of “absence”: recessive processes happen deep within, of their own accord, and we usually experience them only in times of dysfunction or pain. Therefore, Zarrilli sees the recessive body as characterised by interoception and metaphorically names it the body of “blood”, suggesting the deep inner realities of our viscera (2004: 659–660). The surface body is seen as a body of “flesh” – it is “ecstatic” in the sense that it functions and is experienced through its sensorimotor qualities and is characterised by exteroception. Our five senses open out to the world, which establishes the experience of the world as constituted by the surface body (Zarrilli, 2004: 656–658). This body is also involved in proprioception which “allows our surface body to adjust our limbs, muscles, etc., appropriately to any motor task; therefore, we do not usually have to think about how to walk up a set of steps” (Zarrilli, 2004: 658). I will continually return to the idea of the surface body in the forthcoming chapters. However, due to my position as a spectator, instead of revealing the “ecstatic” qualities, this body constitutes the imagery, tactility and material workings of the skin. Yet, as I noted when drawing on Plessner's account, the surface body, while constituting a bodily boundary, is not confined to it. It reaches inwards, which allows it to produce “extra-corporeal” performances, as in the case of Franko B. It also reaches outwards, into its particular dramaturgical configuration, as

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<sup>14</sup> He borrows the notions of “recessive” and “surface” bodies from Drew Leder. See Leder (1990).

well as the wider cultural environment. Moreover, due to the contemporary process of cultural recycling, the materiality of the surface body is not fixed. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, it is no longer composed only of human flesh, and can be plastinated, flattened, digitised, given costume-like qualities or turned into a plastic toy.

The aesthetic “inner” and “outer” bodies originate in the process of the extra-daily experiences of the performer. Zarrilli sees both of these bodies as “aesthetic” because the performer’s extra-daily experience is not a natural given, but is gradually developed and refined until it reaches subtle levels of experience and self-awareness. I would argue that the term “aesthetic” also implies that these bodies are carefully and deliberately achieved and, at the time of performance, placed on public display. The “inner” aesthetic body is developed when the performer is exposed to in-depth and longterm training techniques, while the “outer” body manifests at the moment of performance and is related to the experiential realities of the performer-spectator relationship (2009: 55–58). Zarrilli observes that the acquisition of the “inner” body consists of the “exploration from within as the awareness learns to explore the body” (2009: 55) and denotes it the body of “breath”. The notion of “breath” relates to his long term involvement with Indian paradigms which see the breath as the metaphorical circulation of inner energy, life force or “wind”. Moreover, the act of breathing is one of very few visceral processes we can consciously control, as well as the one which manifests itself most clearly with changes in emotion (Zarrilli, 2004: 662). Thus the breath can be conceived as not only the metaphorical “inner energy” or “wind” of the human body, but also a material connection to the depths of our visceral reality. The breath, more than any other physiological process, corresponds to the actuality of human existence: our life is bracketed by the first and last breaths.

However, it is Zarrilli’s aesthetic “outer” body of the performer, which he names the body of “appearance”, which the spectator is faced with in theatre or cultural performance. Once displayed, the performer’s body becomes the locus of a particular dramaturgical configuration. According to Zarrilli, the “outer” aesthetic body can be experienced in a conventional dramaturgical setting as a character or, in the case of non-conventional performance, “as the living/human vehicle through which potential experience and/or meaning are generated” (2009: 58) and, I would add, which creates these potential meanings itself, through its materiality. The notion of “appearance”

implies that this body has a quality of artifice. The performer presents a set of actions or tasks, or a performance score enacted through this body. He or she appears as if they are a character or persona generating a set of meanings. However, they only appear to do so. The body of “appearance” is not completely inseparable from the human material reality; instead, it is carefully constructed and formed into a corporeal artefact. In comparison to the “inner” aesthetic body which, having to be mastered, nevertheless becomes part of the performer’s corporeal existence, the “outer” body has a quality of temporariness. It manifests itself for as long as the performance action lasts and then disappears. The body in performance, therefore, while created through the performer’s materiality and informed by deliberate or unconscious material workings, is incapable of creating a real or authentic manifestation. The following case studies – the bodies of the dead, the pop, the naked and the wrestler – tap into the question of the “real” which constitutes another thread running through the chapters. In each case study, I demonstrate that once carefully and deliberately achieved and placed on public display, these bodies firmly maintain their “appearances” and, in the process of doing so, lose the quality of the “real”. Moreover, it is no longer the “real” that is stubbornly sought by the spectator, but the pleasure of perceiving, facing and coming to grips with the artifice.

During the performance, the body is fully exposed and “present for the objective gaze and/or experience of an audience” (Zarrilli, 2009: 58). Simultaneously, in the case of the living body, the performer experiences her or his own material body and its relationship with “inner” and “outer” realities. The performer’s bodily experience matters because it is through the material reality of the body and the intricate web of intercorporealities obtained by training or approaching this body that the publicly displayed bodily configuration, the body of “appearance”, is created. During the public display, the surface, recessive, “inner” and “outer” aesthetic bodies function as a unity and constitute the performer’s physical presence – his or her presentness. The performer experiences all three types of perception (exteroception, interoception and proprioception) and is also aware of all four embodied modes, thus able to adjust to their intercorporeal demands. The publicly and physically experienced surface (sensorimotor) and recessive (mainly breathing) bodies are intrinsically related and felt by the “inner” aesthetic self. As a result, the performer is capable of intentional

bodily manipulation in order to create a desirable bodily manifestation, but only to a certain extent.

I see the performer's body as an extremely "porous" construct. The body of "appearance" is informed by particular performance practices, techniques or methods. During the process of training, it is as if this codified practice seeps into the material reality of the performer, into its "fleshy" and "inner" modes, and defines the performer's physical presence not only according to a particular performance praxis, but also according to the specific historical and cultural situation where the praxis originated. At the time of performance, however, the performer, while being aware of her or his own physical body, thus (to use Plessner's analysis) experiencing herself or himself experiencing material and aesthetic corporealities, is also acutely conscious of being looked at. When the performer's body of "appearance" is exposed, the intricate net of intercorporealities, the fleshy and aesthetic modes, seep back out into the shared world and are met by the gaze of the spectator. Here, the "unruly" body identified by Evans and the material workings that are happening unintentionally become perceptible. The body sweats, reflects light, is momentarily visible through clothing and merges with immediate reality, thus constituting a myriad of connotations and "hallucinations". The spectator, in turn, reflects on these "hallucinations" through her or his – as the earlier observation by Bleeker implies – no less "hallucinatory" perception.

The following case studies – the dead, plastinated body exhibited by von Hagens, the digitised pop body generated by contemporary popular culture, homo nudus in contemporary performance and the wrestler's body in the context of professional wrestling – are framed by the perceptual interactions outlined in this chapter. Due to the deliberate exposition of bodily materiality, all four bodies are not only the objects, but also the agents of performance. They invite the spectator to perceive, to face and even, as in case of professional wrestling, to co-create the shared fantasy of the performing body. Using the materialist perspective as my point of departure, I argue that it is not only the image of the body, the subjective perception of the body or the discursively inscribed meanings that inform bodily manifestation in the pageantry of Western bodies. The spectator is exposed to, first and foremost, bodily materiality. This materiality is not "mere" matter; it is actively performing together with the performing body and creating meaning. The materiality reveals its

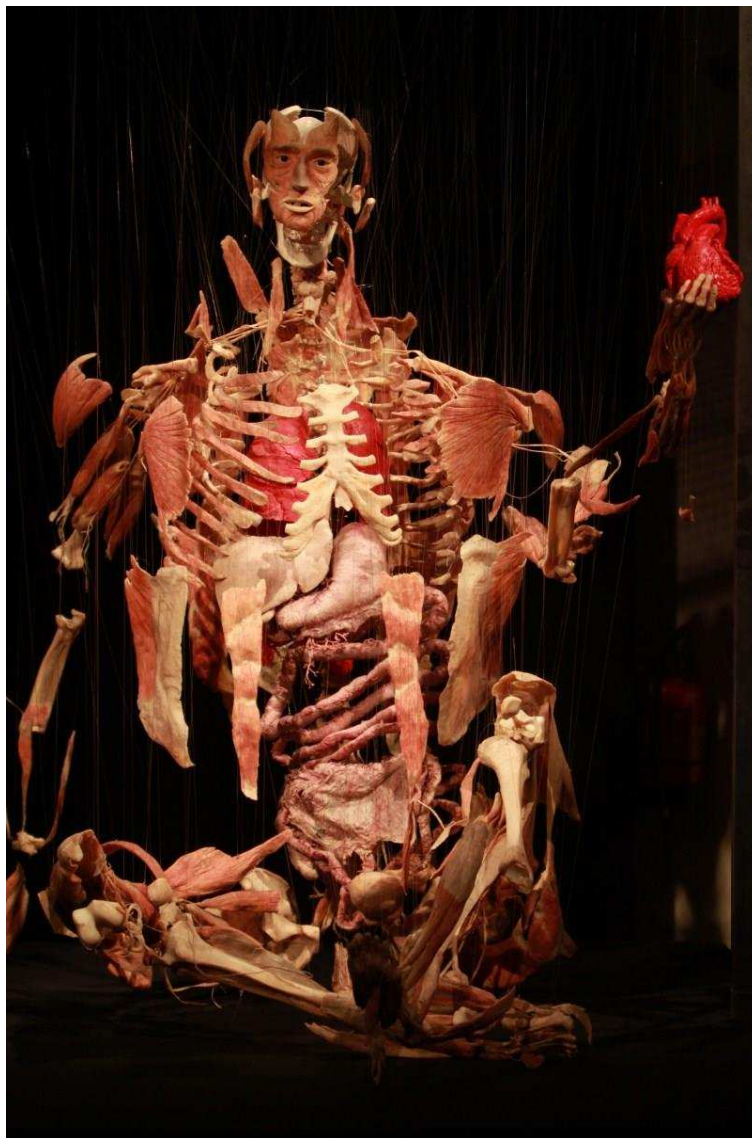
fleshy boundary – the skin – which reaches inwards and outwards; its imagery interacts with and informs the surrounding dramaturgical configuration; its bodily “otherness”, in the case of *plastinate*, constitutes an intersubjective relationship between alterity and similitude; and it always already exists in, and is inseparable from, a particular historical and cultural reality.



## Chapter 2

Gestalt Plastinate:

Performative Self-reflections in Front of the Estranged Other



Gunther von Hagens Sitting Totally Expanded Body

Whereas before, we wanted the artificial object to look like a real one,  
*we have now entered an era in which we want the real object to look like “perfected  
nature”.*

(José van Dijck)

James Elkins in *The Object Stares Back* (1996) provides an example of a series of photographs depicting the execution known as “the death by division into a thousand parts” performed on a Chinese woman. He states:

A strange thing happens in looking at these images, something like what prisoners and soldiers describe who have seen such things. The eye begins, at the first frame, with a woman: she is whole, though she looks as though she may be drugged with opium to lessen the pain. The eye ends, at the last frame, with a piece of meat: it is blurred by the photography, but certainly no longer living or human. In between comes pain and then death. (1996: 110)

Elkins remarks that the power of these images lies in them acting as if they are trapping the woman’s death: instead of occurring prior to the image being taken, the death happens every time you look at the photographs (1996: 115). The present chapter also deals with the “as if trapped” dead body. In contradistinction to Elkins’ example, here we find the already post-mortem bodies, trapped between death and decomposition. However, it is the reduction of the material body to “a piece of meat” that is especially relevant to the present discussion. Gunther von Hagens’ *Body Worlds* (*Körperwelten*) bring the viewer face-to-face with the inner intricacies of human materiality – cadavers that are carefully sculpted, cut “into a thousand parts”, specially preserved and placed on public display. von Hagens’ exhibits do not embody the gruesome reality of painful death as in the case of the photographs of the gradually dismembered Chinese woman. Instead, von Hagens often aims at quite the opposite: to bring the dead materiality back to life through methods of animated composition.

The cultural journey through the pageantry of contemporary Western bodies begins (surprisingly) at the very end of the body’s organic existence as we perceive it – the dead body. It is here that Western society’s interest in the material workings of the corporeal can be explicitly confirmed. The ontological (and phenomenological)

order of the dead body is ambiguous. It forms a part of human corporeality that is absent or, rather, present and perceptible for a very short period of time. The dead body's existence is temporary because, as a contemporary society, we generally discard bodies pronounced "dead" very quickly: we bury or cremate our dead for ethical reasons, as an act of respect for the deceased and/or for hygienic reasons, because decaying flesh becomes repugnant and can cause various diseases.<sup>15</sup> From the material perspective, however, the dead body became an object of intense interest and scrutiny – an anatomical and educational tool providing an insight into the complex organic reality of the living human body. Despite the altogether temporary nature of the corpse, continual attempts were made (dating back to ancient times) to cut into post-mortem human flesh and examine the organic texture and structure of the body. From this educational need arose the desire to preserve the corpse – to delay the process of decay in order to prolong its physical existence on the dissection table. Consequently, a new corporeal dimension was added to human bodily existence: that of the cadaver – the dead body that is artificially "enhanced" and preserved by chemical treatment.

The method of plastination invented by von Hagens and the display of its results in *Body Worlds* are situated within this particular corporeal scope. Moreover, von Hagens' cadavers, or, as he calls them, *gestalt* plastinates, constitute a specially arranged dramaturgical configuration: he not only prepares, but also deliberately arranges and exhibits his plastinates, turning them into a public display and thus exploiting aesthetic creation and composition. The aesthetic element also arises from the reduced level of gruesomeness. According to von Hagens, anatomical cadavers in the past "have retained a certain bloodcurdling aura, and thus give rise to an emotional revulsion" (2007: 260). In comparison, his *gestalt* plastinates are "frozen [...] between life and decomposition" (2007: 267). The method of plastination makes the corpse odourless and stops decay while preserving the "genuine" appearance of the human organism. As a result, after undergoing the process of dissection and anatomical "sculpting", as well as being positioned in "realistic" poses and environments, von Hagens' cadavers become almost aesthetically pleasing to look at – they are as if

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<sup>15</sup> However, as Caitlin Doughty observes, the fear of disease being spread by the dead body is a "pervasive cultural myth": in most cases (with an exception of death caused by highly infectious diseases like Ebola), the corpse poses no health threat to the living. See Doughty (2015).

brought back to “life”. The “life”-like appearance of plastinates suggests to José van Dijck that von Hagens’ creations prompt us to “reconsider the status and nature of the contemporary body, both dead and alive” (2001: 124), the idea that is central to the present chapter.

von Hagens claims that by arranging his plastinates in various “lively landscapes” he references the anatomical artists of the Renaissance and wants to “put the gestalt plastinates back into the living world from which they came” (2007: 266). However, this particular statement is opposed and criticised by the majority of scholarship that focuses on his work and especially the Body Worlds exhibition. While mimicking the historical relationship between the visual arts and medical science, the plastinates are largely viewed as a product of contemporary bioscience: a progression from modern medicalisation towards a posthuman, even nonhuman approach to the body (van Dijck, 2001; Scott, 2011). Similarly to the modern medical establishment, the majority of bioscientists consider the human organism as an object and treat the body, as Rosi Braidotti observes, “as a mosaic of detachable pieces” (1994: 47). However, instead of just cutting the body open to expose and scrutinise the usually “absent” viscera, a new element is introduced: the artificial, chemical and technological enhancement of corporeal reality. Both types of bodies, living and dead, are intrusively penetrated, sliced open, filled up with non-organic matter and have their bodily elements rearranged, enhanced or attenuated. Thus the process of body modification and, some argue, dehumanisation is instigated which, contrary to what von Hagens postulates, “has more to do with the denial of death, than the mastery of life” (Braidotti, 1994: 48).

The present analysis of von Hagens’ work accentuates the outcome of Body Worlds: namely the act of exhibiting the gestalt plastinates for the general public, thus positioning the human body within a particular dramaturgical configuration. In order to analyse the dead-body-turned-deliberately-displayed-plastinate phenomenon, I critically reassess the problematic status of the corpse in contemporary society, with reference to the medicalisation of the human body and the anatomical practices and artists of the Renaissance, as well as Christian tradition and its somatic iconography. Research on von Hagens and his “educational” exhibits tackles a number of different areas such as: the ethics of displaying corpses (Linke, 2005; van Dijck, 2001); the aesthetic element of Body Worlds (Moore and Brown, 2004); the legal aspects of body

donation for plastination (Leiboff, 2005); the posthuman aspect (van Dijck, 2001; Scott, 2011); and the sexualisation of gestalt plastinates (Linke, 2005). I draw on most of these accounts and the intricate questions they raise. However, I also identify a few areas that need further critical analysis and that inform the chief inquiry of the present discussion – how to reevaluate the status of the material body as it appears in Western culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

I place a special emphasis on the posthuman and performative elements of von Hagens' practice and the process of cultural recycling. Posthumanism arises from the acts of dehumanisation performed on the gestalt plastinates. As Uli Linke states, these cadavers are "estranged, depersonalized and reified" (2005: 18), their mortality and natural decay are as if suspended due to the nature of plastination and the idea of the artificial "resurrection" of the dead body.<sup>16</sup> The performative paradigm emerges in the act of looking, at the moment when the spectator is faced with von Hagens' "creations" and dramatic tableaux. According to Rebecca Scott, etymologically, the notion of autopsy already has an element of "looking" or "sight" embedded within it (from the Greek *autopsia*, where *autos-* means "self" and *opsis-* "a sight") which suggests to her that the vision "turns and enfolds back onto the gazer". Thus, when faced with dissected corpses, the spectator is supposedly incited to reflect upon and wonder about her or his own body (2011: 171). But the posthuman nature of gestalt plastinates makes this type of self-reflection problematic, because it questions the "realness" and "lifelikeness" of plastinated cadavers. The question arises: how do you look at, relate to and touch the dehumanised other? How do you respond to the landscape inhabited by frozen, "posthuman" corpses? Moreover, von Hagens' practice taps into the question of cultural recycling – the action of reusing, re-applying and, in the process, modifying the given phenomenon, in this case, the very materiality of the dead body. As a result, gestalt plastinates is not only an example of the "dissolving" integrity of human flesh (von Hagens dissolves some of his cadavers in a special acid) but also the changing status of the human body.

I tackle the above questions by applying an analysis of the human skin: its organic, historical and symbolic meanings, as well as its psychoanalytical

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<sup>16</sup> von Hagens claims that his plastinates can be preserved for around two thousand years (van Dijck, 2001: 109).

connotations. According to the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu, the skin is a foundational aspect of human subjectivity (Anzieu, 1990). Most of the full-body plastinates are entirely skinless. The act of extensive flaying can be said to enforce their anonymity. Most importantly, however, it masks the identity and, subsequently, the humanity of the gestalt plastinate; as Linke observes, the plastinate is stripped from “autobiographical memory” and “historical remembrance” (2005: 18). Therefore, I see the plastinate as an estranged other. This other embodies a new, artificially modified and recycled, corporeality situated in between human materiality and the posthuman body. It is skinless and fundamentally silent. Due to its artificial modification, the plastinate’s body obeys modified biological laws and processes, but is still viewed via a human prism. The body of the estranged other thus works as a powerful representation of material alterity discussed in Chapter 1: the twofold, chiasmic relationship, “in between” similitude and otherness.

The above arguments, together with my observations after visiting von Hagens’ exhibition *Cycle of Life (Der Zyklus des Lebens)* in Munich in 2014, serve as a first attempt to revisit and reconsider the status of the contemporary body: human materiality with its paraphernalia of mortality, anatomical dissection and posthuman tendencies, and performative self-reflection in front of the depersonalised and estranged other.

## 2. 1. In Memoriam to Honoré Fragonard

Geoffrey Gorer in his article “The Pornography of Death” (1955) identifies an “unremarked shift in prudery” in mid-twentieth century society. A gradual reversal of “roles” or, rather, a reversal in attitudes towards sexual matters and death was taking place. Gorer remarks that while sexuality (or, as he calls it, “copulation”) became a more widely accessible and discussed matter, death, on the other hand, progressively achieved a status of an “unmentionable”, “disgusting” and “too horrible to contemplate” phenomenon (1955: 50–51). Until the mid-twentieth century, high mortality rates made death a commonplace everyday occurrence. With the advancement of medicine and hospitalisation, however, natural death is increasingly happening behind closed doors on the hospital bed, usually with only the closest family members and medical staff present. Similarly, in the case of accidental death, the dead body is very promptly covered up and disposed of, thus prevented from being seen by the public. The corpse, explicitly marked by its qualities of repulsive decay, disturbing and sometimes frightful appearance and being an unwelcome reminder of our finitude, is “taken care of” and regulated by the appropriate authorities. The inconspicuousness surrounding the corpse is, presumably, mainly to preserve the dignity of the dead. However, such meticulous regulation of death can also be said to stem directly from Western society’s “shift in prudery” – its ever-growing attempts to deny death.

On the other hand, Gorer notes that while natural death is being masked and made unmentionable and unwelcome, “violent death has played an ever-growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences” (1955: 51). He draws a parallel between our “titillating curiosities” about sex and a similar attitude towards death which is still the case at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The veil of “mystery” shielding both phenomena (particularly death in our times) evokes a pressing need, a voyeuristic desire to see what is hidden, even if it is unspeakable and disturbing (Gorer, 1955: 51). I will return to this, as Gorer puts it, “pornographic” desire to see beneath the veil and to expose the “real” behind the fantasy or costume, both in Chapter 3 when discussing striptease and the pop body, and in Chapter 4 when analysing nudity in performance. For the present discussion, it is important to note that, just as with the body of a stripper

or the openly displayed naked body, the corpse, as William Bogard observes, “has not lost its status as an object of cultural fascination and an emblem of contemporary society” (2008: 191). The widespread attraction of vivid, bloody and gory literary, cinematic and digital imagery of death, corpses, murder and mass tragedy exposes a persistent desire to view death in its openly displayed material reality. Very rarely are we allowed to see, touch or be physically present near the actual corpse; instead, we are allowed to immerse ourselves in imaginary “deaths” which, while arising from and residing in the realm of simulation, still provide “pornographic titillation” to our senses.

The fascination with the corpse adds to the overall complexity of the dead body and its status in contemporary society, and von Hagens’ practice of plastination and his Body Worlds exhibition tap directly into the epicentre of this complexity. Firstly, von Hagens’ gestalt plastinates both reaffirm the medical and scientific domination over the corpse (professionally, he is part of the medical establishment) and challenge the regulations concerning how, where and by whom dead bodies should be seen (by publicly displaying his cadavers). Secondly, his exhibitions reexpose our desire to see the “invisible” – the usually absent bodily viscera. von Hagens’ practice further toys with the “pornographic titillation” of “fleshy” imagery, only this time it is not only deliberately displayed, but also physically present in front of our eyes.

### **Aesthetic Display: Public Dissection, Embroidered Foetuses and Flayed Riders**

von Hagens’ method of plastination has been recognised as a remarkable breakthrough in anatomical science. To put it briefly, his plastinates are prepared by replacing bodily fluids and soluble fats with plastics in a vacuum. Subsequently, the plastics harden and, “as a consequence, plastinates remain dry, odourless and accurate in detail down to microscopic level” (von Hagens, 2007: 260). Moreover, due to the organic tissues being solidified, the full body plastinate can be positioned not only upright (with the help of the skeleton), but in a variety of poses – something von Hagens employs and experiments with, especially when preparing the gestalt plastinates for his exhibitions (von Hagens, 2007: 260). The majority of controversial responses to von Hagens’ work revolve precisely around this particular aspect – the act of using cadavers for public display. In other words, in the case of Body Worlds,



the dead body leaves the usual space of the medical or scientific institution and is openly exposed to anybody willing to view it (and able to pay). Furthermore, not all gestalt plastinates are “passive” objects of anatomy. von Hagens places some of his cadavers in particular poses and positions them within environments that mimic everyday reality. The solidified organic matter is also fragmented, cut into slices or flayed, similarly to clay being manipulated by the hand of a sculptor. Thus positioned and “sculpted”, gestalt plastinates immediately acquire an aesthetic quality (Image 2.1).



Image 2.1: “Sculpted” plastinate, Gunther von Hagens Body Worlds

The notion of “aesthetic” here refers to the act of careful and deliberate arrangement which leads to a dramaturgical configuration spatially and, at times, conceptually removed from the observer’s subjective reality. Elisabeth Bronfen suggests that “the aesthetic representation of death lets us repress our knowledge of the reality of death precisely because here death occurs at someone else’s body and as an image” (*italics in the original*, 1992: x). In the case of gestalt plastinates, death certainly “occurred at someone else’s body” and while it is not represented as an image but as a material construct, the knowledge that you are viewing a real dead body is momentarily subdued through the strategies of aesthetic display. It is only momentarily subdued because, as I will argue later, the deliberately displayed and aestheticised dead human body nevertheless continues to carry the imprint of lived corporeality. As pointed out earlier, the “goriness” of decaying flesh is eradicated; the dead body is “embellished” by special arrangement, “sculpted” flesh and, at times,

additional “props”. Moreover, some plastinates are personified: you see a dancer, a sportsman, or a poker player. The aesthetic aspect of plastination is precisely where the problematisation of von Hagens’ practice resides. As Jonathan Simon observes, “one reason von Hagens is a particularly problematic figure is that he is a member of the medical profession who has taken his ‘art’ and his argument outside the confines of the medical world” (2002: 64).

While von Hagens’ method of plastination can be seen as revolutionary, primarily in the longevity of his cadavers (the process of replacing bodily fluids, especially blood, with other substances has been used since the seventeenth century), the aesthetic display of corpses has a firm grounding in the history of anatomy. Due to an increasing interest in the organic reality and complexity of the human body, cutting into corpses became a useful and popular medical and educational practice. Moreover, during the early Renaissance in Europe, dissections became accessible not only to anatomists and future doctors: practitioners such as Andreas Vesalius (Bologna), Jacobus Sylvius (Paris) and Nicolaas Tulp (Amsterdam) famously performed public dissections, usually on the corpses of criminals. As van Dijck observes, “the naked realism of dead bodies on the dissection table, combined with the public knowledge of their criminal pasts, provided a mesmerizing spectacle for a large audience” (2001: 103). At the end of the seventeenth century, Dutch anatomist Frederik Ruysch amassed a collection of specially preserved body parts and foetuses. The pursuit of knowledge was the primary focus of his collection; however, as Gijsbert M. van de Roemer indicates, “the anatomist also expended a great deal of effort in presenting the spectator with an aesthetic experience” (2010: 169). Ruysch created specially arranged “anatomical” scenes in jars, often combining different organic specimens and objects, like “the head of a baby resting peacefully on a placenta as a pillow” (van de Roemer, 2010: 169) or “a child’s arm holding a passion flower” (van de Roemer, 2010: 170). According to van Dijck, Ruysch’s “favourite displays were little bodies of foetuses or stillborn babies, which he clothed with scarves and embroidered baby hats, replacing their eyes with glass to make them look like innocent infants” (2001: 104). The carefully chosen embellishments masked the dissection wounds and provided his specimens with a lifelike quality (Image 2.2). The nineteenth century marks a shift in public cadaver display; from the aesthetics of “mesmerizing” public dissection and “sentimentally” adorned anatomical specimens to a much

starker, strictly pedagogical presentation. The exhibitions now mainly contained human organs ridden with diseases (often of a sexual nature) aimed at educating the public, with a special emphasis on moral behaviour (van Dijck, 2001: 106).



Image 2.2: Frederik Ruysch's embellished anatomical specimen

Parallels can easily draw between the historical examples of aesthetic cadaver display and von Hagens' exhibition *Body Worlds*. In fact, von Hagens seems to employ all the methodologies of aesthetic display mentioned above. He exhibits both healthy and diseased organs, thus further emphasising the medical-instructive and educational-moral values of anatomy. It can be said that some of his plastinates are "embellished", especially when positioned in specific poses (*The Swordsman*, *The Rider*, *The Chess Player*), grouped in tableaux, or given easily recognisable "props" and glass eyes. In 2002 von Hagens performed a public dissection in London and in 2005 and 2006 he appeared in the series *Anatomy for Beginners* and *Autopsy: Life and Death* screened by Channel 4 (UK): contemporary, mediated versions of "public" anatomical dissection. The question arises: is von Hagens' practice simply a direct continuation of the historical development of anatomy, highly informed by – often eccentric – practices of publicly displaying cadavers? Or can his plastic-filled corpses be placed in a wider, social, cultural and performative context, and seen as a problematisation of the contemporary status of human body?



Image 2.3: Fragonard's Horse and Rider, left, and von Hagens' The Rider, right

von Hagens' exhibitions are direct heirs of the anatomical/aesthetic display amalgamation running through the historical developments discussed above. In order to support this argument further, one more name should be mentioned here, that of Honoré Fragonard, the eighteenth century French anatomist. As suggested by Jonathan Simon in his "The Theatre of Anatomy: the Anatomical Preparations of Honoré Fragonard" (2002), Fragonard is well known for his preparations from cadavers, including full-body specimens, the preparation and display of which blur the distinction between the scientific and artistic. Both von Hagens and Fragonard made a work of "art" using a human corpse positioned on a horse (Image 2.3). Fragonard's Horse and Rider is seen as a particularly advanced, as well as a controversial work of anatomical science for his time. His Rider was exhibited publicly and even featured as a "tourist attraction". An intriguing story surrounded this particular artefact: the Rider was claimed to be Fragonard's sweetheart who "died of grief after her father [...] had refused to give her hand in marriage to the anatomist" and "Fragonard had promptly dug her up, prepared her and put her on the horse" (Simon, 2002: 72).<sup>17</sup> Fragonard prepared his cadavers by draining the blood and injecting the dead body with a mixture of wax and resins. The injections enlarged the blood vessels, giving the cadaver an unnatural effect of swelling. As a result of the deformed blood vessels, as

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<sup>17</sup> This story was a romantic invention of the eighteenth century: the corpse of the "Rider" is actually that of a young man and as Simon's reading of the account of Karl Rudolphi shows, this young man had his penis "partially amputated to seat him better on the horse" (2002: 72).

well as the dissection which left “irregular sheets of dried and varnished muscle”, Fragonard’s “creations”, including his Rider, were not accurate enough to be used for instructive purposes (according to Simon, some anatomical wax models, also widely used at the time, were much more accurate and detailed), instead giving the impression of a “flayed” human flesh (2002: 70–71). This leads Simon to the conclusion that Fragonard “failed to demonstrate new discoveries in anatomy and seemed content to display his mastery of the art of injection and preservation” which signified a “triumph of artisanal virtuosity that left no place for true science” (2002: 72).

Over the years, similar to Fragonard’s, von Hagens’ “artisanal virtuosity” has raised multiple questions and concerns, and caused many controversies. von Hagens has been involved in trials in Russia and China over the acquisition of corpses. The media repeatedly questioned his professorial status<sup>18</sup> and his financial gain from selling plastinates,<sup>19</sup> as well as naming him “Dr Death”<sup>20</sup>. In comparison to Fragonard, von Hagens’ cadavers, including his Rider, are highly detailed and supposedly carry a certain amount of educational value. However, on many occasions, his artistic “flair” and a degree of celebrity overshadowed the scientific achievements of plastination. Nevertheless, both Fragonard’s and von Hagens’ anatomical “virtuosities” point towards wider contexts that go beyond the scientific/aesthetic dichotomies of eighteenth century and contemporary societies, respectively. The need to shroud cadavers in (often) fictional fantasies (Fragonard and his sweetheart, von Hagens and his illegal acquisition of corpses) exposes the audience’s sensibility. The cadaver, despite attempts at aestheticisation (special arrangement, embellishments, flayed skin), retains the quality of a specifically human corpse, human flesh. The dead body always already carries the memory of the past, the lived corporeality within, thus constituting an empathic relationship with the spectator. There is a fundamental difference in how the viewer relates to, for example, a plastinated human body and a plastinated horse. Morbidly exposed human flesh, however, also “titillates” the spectators’ voyeuristic gazes. Both, Fragonard’s and von Hagens’ specimens are fully “nude”, their sexuality (especially in von Hagens’ case) openly satisfying the viewer’s curiosity. The act of cutting into dead human flesh and thus exposing the previously

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<sup>18</sup> See “Plastinator vor Gericht: Gunther von Hagens kämpft um Professorenhre”, *Spiegel Online*, <http://tinyurl.com/7oj7zt6> (accessed 3/5/2013).

<sup>19</sup> See “Händler des Todes”, *Der Spiegel*, <http://tinyurl.com/oxskoyg> (accessed 3/5/2013).

<sup>20</sup> See Marc Steinmetz, “Dr. Tod”, *Der Spiegel*, <http://tinyurl.com/q5htewm> (accessed 3/5/2013).

invisible viscera to the viewer is not only a manifestation of the unaltered voyeuristic fascination with the dead body which goes back centuries, it also problematises the ontological orders of the corpse as cadaver, corporeality as a human quality and death as a guarantee of human finitude.

### **Invisible Made Visible: Somatic Spirituality, Post-mortem Resurrection and Material Recycling**

The organic reality of the lived human body is fundamentally invisible. Human flesh is both literally and perceptually hidden, enclosed by a layer of skin, thus bounded and protected from the outside world. While we are physically bound to our bodily viscera and always carry them around with us, we are unable to see them. Moreover, this is the dimension of material reality which is also often absent from our physical perception: we are unaware of the myriad organic processes happening deep within our organism. The continual disappearance of the visceral body from the perceptual field prompted Leder to identify this particular aspect of human corporeality as “recessive” (as mentioned in Chapter 1, Zarrilli, drawing on Leder, named it the body of “blood”). At times of wellbeing our recessive body operates quietly and with precision. At moments of pain or illness, however, this body unavoidably reminds us of its existence, points towards a particular dysfunction and demands immediate attention. As Leder puts it, in the moment of pain, “instead of just acting from the body, I act toward it” (1990: 78). My body’s demand for attention and my inability to ignore this demand (if I feel unbearable pain, I cannot ignore it, my body and the eradication of pain becomes my priority) constitute instances of the visceral body’s perceptual “visibility”.

In the case of the dead human body and the emergence of anatomy, however, the previously invisible bodily reality is made literally visible to the human eye. According to Foucault, the dissection of corpses can be seen as “the clear light” or “the brightest moment” of medical knowledge. Paradoxically, in the case of anatomy, the dark enigma of human viscera and the absolute Beyond of death constitute the “enlightened” visibility of the human organism or, as Foucault suggests, “knowledge spins where once larva was formed” (1997: 125). The action of opening up a corpse makes the structural workings of the organism, including the traces left by diseases

(the same diseases which provoked the moments of perceptual visibility in the lived body), visible (and tangible) in all of their intricate “glory”. Therefore “the presence of the corpse enables us to perceive it living” (Foucault, 1997: 149): the modifications and dysfunctions of the lived body are revealed (made visible) by cutting into dead human flesh.

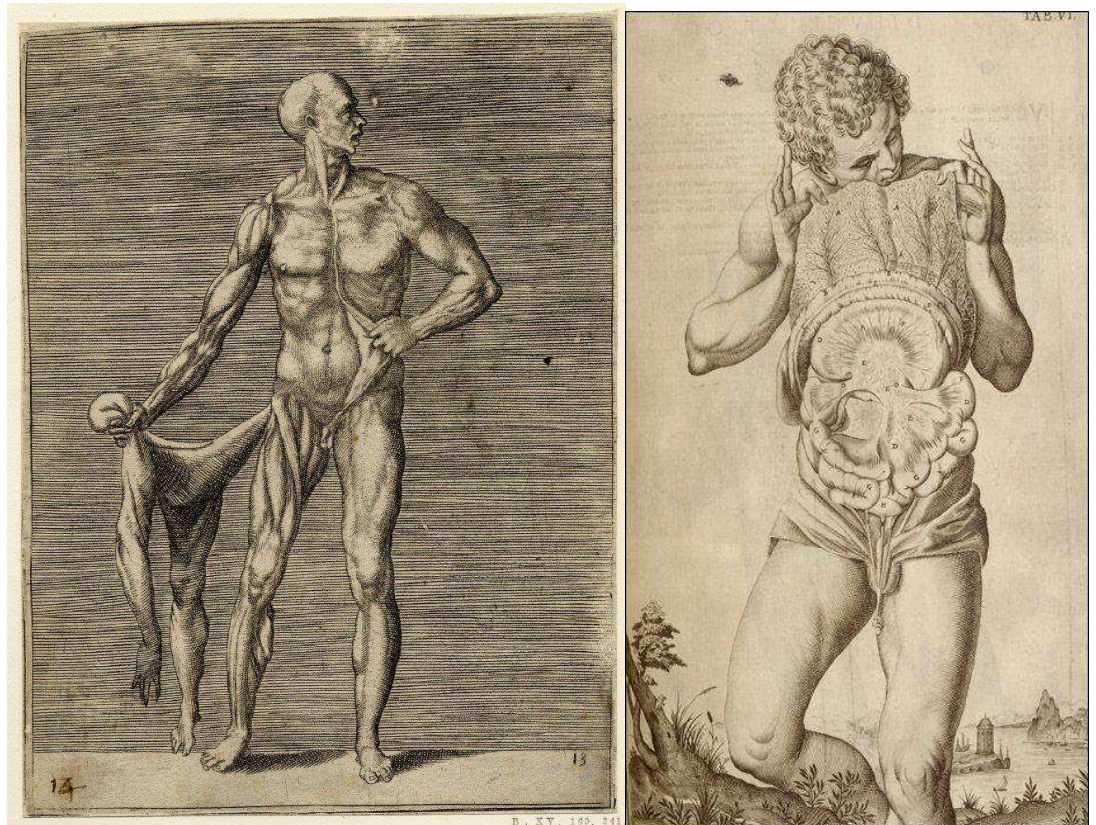


Image 2.4: The “muscle-men” of the Renaissance, engravings by Giulio Bonasone (16<sup>th</sup> century), left, and Giulio Casserio (1627), right

During the Renaissance, acts of anatomical visualisation – exposing the human viscera to the human gaze – not only assisted physicians and satisfied the voyeuristic curiosity of the general public, they also played a major role in aiding artists’ attempts at understanding and representing the human body. Artists such as Michelangelo, Leonardo and others used the dissection of corpses as a method of knowledge which provided a clear picture of how the human body operates. A special emphasis was placed on the structural aspects of the human organism: the skeletal scaffolding and the musculature. This allowed artists to understand how the internal/invisible material reality informs the external/visible appearance of the body, thus establishing a clear link between the fleshy bodily reality, the reality normally hidden beneath the human

skin and artistic manifestations of the lived human body. Once again, but now for artistic rather than medical purposes, the dead human body assisted the apprehension (and representation) of lived corporeality. According to Charleen M. Moore and Mackenzie C. Brown, the artists of the Renaissance saw human musculature as the “mediating organ” between the self and self’s bodily actions (2004:11). The methods of dissection made this mediating function possible, often expressed by “displaying the flayed and dissected human body in their sketches [...] not as lifeless forms, but as robust and vivid ‘muscle-men’”, thus intrinsically “making what is dead alive” (Moore and Brown, 2004: 11) (Image 2.4).

The need to comprehend human corporeality, including its visceral processes and their aesthetic manifestations, can be linked to Christian tradition and its dealings with soma. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, despite the prevailing view of Christianity as an anti-flesh religion (especially regarding sexual matters), recent scholarship reveals Christian spirituality as predominantly “somatic”. As James F. Keenan observes, from very early on, the Christian church claimed a close relationship between the divinity and humanity of Christ (1994: 335). Keenan discusses the extensively corporeal aspects of Christianity, such as the aforementioned Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ, as well as “eating” the Body of Christ and “drinking” His Blood, thus (symbolically) physically consuming the divine blessing. A careful analysis of such bodily manifestations of Christianity, as well as St. Paul’s anthropological theology<sup>21</sup>, suggest to Keenan that “Christian tradition has always regarded the body as constitutive of human identity, and some strands of this tradition have vigorously combated various expressions of dualism” (1994: 332). Moreover, Christian practices see the dead human body (and its organic parts) as an integral aspect of the spiritual self (e.g. consider the importance given to the body relics of saints<sup>22</sup> and especially martyrdom).

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<sup>21</sup> Pauline theology is widely interpreted as anthropological due to its terminology, particularly the use of *soma* to denote not just the “physical body”, but “the human person as a whole”. See Gundry, Robert H. (1976) *Sōma in Biblical Theology: With Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>22</sup> Moore and Brown give a rather “instructive” example concerning Abbess Chiara of Montefalco. After her death in 1308, Sister Francesca of Foligno and her fellow nuns “eviscerated their beloved abbess”: they cut through “the deceased’s back to extract the heart” and “in the dissected organ [discovered] an image of Christ crucified” which undoubtedly signified Chiara’s sanctity (2004: 16).



A link can be established between the images of dissected and “flayed” cadavers and the martyr iconography which places anatomical specimens in the realm of Christianity, informed by its somatic spirituality as well as its intricate relationship with human corporeality. When describing Fragonard’s cadavers, Simon observes that the unevenly cut flesh and randomly exposed muscle “reinforce the impression of a tortured body, flayed rather than dissected” (2002: 70). von Hagens, as previously stated, “sculpts” and marks the dead body in a myriad of ways (including skin removal, “exploded” bodily fragments, longitudinal extension, the “drawer” body, full body slices, etc.) some of which carry the brutal aesthetics of dismemberment, mutilation and generally wounded flesh. Moreover, some of von Hagens’ cadavers are directly inspired by Christian iconography, the most widely referenced being his Skin Man. This particular plastinate has its skin carefully removed and placed in its hand, thus creating an image very similar to Juan de Valverde de Hamusco’s *Ecorché* (1556, Image 2.5), but also indubitably resembling that of the famous Christian martyr St. Bartholomew who is often portrayed holding his own skin (Image 2.6). As I will argue later in this chapter, the removal of the material skin, aside from referencing Christian martyrs, carries multiple connotations. It also suggests the “removal” of person’s identity and memory, thus pointing to the depersonalisation and estrangement of the gestalt plastinate. In Christian tradition (especially in the Middle Ages), the often brutal and bloody somatic imagery goes hand-in-hand with the belief in, as Moore and Brown call it, “eschatological reassemblage and restitution” (2004: 16). According to this belief, on the Final Day of Judgement, even the most dismembered and decomposed of human bodies will be resurrected and “divinely reassembled”: “bone would be stuck back to bone, skeletons re-clothed with muscles and flesh, and the whole body revived” (Moore and Brown, 2004: 16).

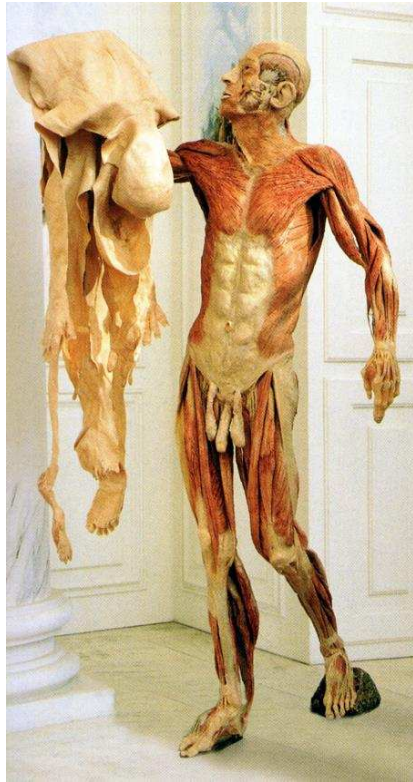


Image 2.5: Gunther von Hagens, Skin Man, left, and Juan de Valverde de Hamusco, Ecorché (1556), right

In an idiosyncratic, predominantly scientific rather than spiritual way, anatomists and anatomical artists, including von Hagens, have also participated and contributed to the tradition of “utopian” post-mortem resurrection. Such contributions include: continual attempts to assist the process of dissection by suppressing the decomposition of the corpse; embellishing cadavers and body parts, thus making them look at least partially “life”-like; and portraying “robust and vivid” dead and dissected – yet very much animated – “muscle-men”. According to van Dijck, von Hagens’ practice of bodily “resurrection” also has an embedded postmodern twist. His plastinates are not only anatomical representations of human bodies; instead, van Dijck sees them as “imitations of representations, executed in modified organic material” (2001: 114–115). Two notions used in this statement point towards the postmodern nature of von Hagens’ practice: imitation and modified. As an example of “imitation of representation”, van Dijck describes von Hagens’ Skin Man as a “wink to Renaissance artistic anatomical tradition”. Moreover, this particular plastinate is not just another case of imitation: here “the ‘copy’ [...] is created from an ‘authentic’ body, which can no longer be labelled ‘authentic’ because of its chemical

modification” (2001: 115–116). von Hagens’ method of plastination is no longer simply concerned with preserving the organic tissue and thus representing the human body – the human flesh is filled with plastic and (most probably) irreversibly modified, thus problematising not only its “authenticity” but also its humanity.



Image 2.6: Matteo di Giovanni, The Apostle St. Bartholomew (circa 1480, oil on canvas)

The artificially modified nature of gestalt plastinates, together with attempts to pass them off as an “instruction” on the “real” human body, also taps into what Umberto Eco sees as “hyperreal” in Western culture. “Hyperreal” connotes the perfect copies and imitations of reality that, due to their “perfect” nature, become “completely real”. As a result, “the absolute unreality is offered as real presence” (Eco, 1986: 7) and we begin to “enjoy the conviction that imitation has reached its apex and afterwards reality will always be inferior to it” (Eco, 1986: 46). In other words, the “perfectly” preserved and aestheticised gestalt plastinate begins to surpass the actual corpse. However, something else is also at work here, something that extends beyond postmodern and hyperreal imitation, especially if you take into account the material

workings of von Hagens' plastinates. His practice blurs the boundaries between the "authentic" and the "copy", as well as the "real" and "artificial". Consequently, the gestalt plastinate taps into all four domains, but does not fully correspond to any of them. It can be said that von Hagens performs the acts of postmodern imitation, especially when drawing on past methods of public display (public dissection and exhibition), embellishment of cadavers and specific iconography (Horse and Rider, Skin Man). Like Fragonard and other past anatomists, von Hagens works with "real" human bodies; however, at the same time and in contrast to the historical examples discussed above, after undergoing the process of plastination his specimens lose the ontological order of the "real" and instead enter the dimension of the "artificial" with the real still implied in it. The material workings of the gestalt plastinate, simultaneously embodying the "authentic" or "real" (the flesh of the real dead body) and "copy" or "imitation" (of historical anatomical specimens), as well as the "artificial" (modified, plastic-filled flesh), suggest a multiplicity of intercorporealities at work. The singular phenomenon – a gestalt plastinate – carries diverse material configurations, meanings and connotations embedded within it, thus making it difficult to place in one particular context or order. In addition, as I argue in the following section when discussing von Hagens' Crucifix, the workings of intercorporealities allow him to freely recycle the dead body: because the corpse's human quality becomes questionable, that very body can be reused and, if no longer necessary, discarded completely. Before coming to grips with this material recycling, however, it is important to introduce yet another intercorporeal configuration: the posthuman quality of the plastinate. von Hagens' scientific method directly corresponds to the contemporary practices of mechanical engineering, biosciences and the posthuman interpretation of the body. A gestalt plastinate, therefore, can also be seen as a posthuman entity which has undergone a form of post-mortem plastic surgery.

## 2. 2. In Memoriam to Ensign James Legg

### (Post)Human “*Hallucinations*” and *Performative Self-reflection*

Mundi digitalis, silicon era, cyber- and simulation culture: contemporary technological developments and their influences on Western ways of being have been given many names. Advances in NBIC (the fusion of nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive science) or GRAIN (the fusion of genetic manipulation, robotics, artificial intelligence and nanotechnology) technologies have been moving faster than the conceptualisation of their practical and ethical consequences (Wilson and Haslam, 2009: 247–249). The increased fragmentation of human subjectivity is seen as one such consequence: in the case of cyber-technologies, the self is multiplied, projected into diverse cyberspaces, clustered into pockets of information and often fully exposed to the voyeuristic cyber-gazes of anyone willing to view it. The self is now swimming in a ceaseless sea of inter-connectivity which is supposedly vital in today’s society of high achievers. As Braidotti put it, “the human has exploded under the double pressure of contemporary scientific advances and global economic concerns” (2013: 1). I would add that the “explosion” of the human (as a concept and phenomenon, as well as an embodied and material entity) has also led to the expansion of our material reality, creating new versions of intercorporeality. Among these, the new concept of posthuman was introduced, a construct which, while exposing fissures in the previously solid structure of humanness, also questions the contemporary status of the human body. The biotechnological processes of material modification and enhancement which emerge in von Hagens’ experiments with post-mortem human flesh play a similar role in some contemporary dealings with the lived human body. Corporeal modification and enhancement also increase the threats of bioterrorism and technologisation of organic matter which, as Samuel Wilson and Nick Haslam argue, pose a threat to our humanity, giving rise to an ominous danger of dehumanisation (2009: 248).

Advocates of biotechnological modification and enhancement see human nature as partially human constructed and dynamic, which leads them to believe that it is potentially subject to a kind of “rational” evolution. This rational evolution of humanity is made possible by an increasing variety of methods of modification, and

enhanced intelligence, according to Wilson and Haslam, “appears at the top of most advocates’ lists” (Wilson and Haslam, 2009: 250–251). Opponents, however, view such enhancement strategies as potentially threatening – posing a danger to the humanness itself. One of their main arguments is that the “technological mastery of human nature is dehumanizing” because it blurs the boundaries between what we call “human” and artificial human-made objects (Wilson and Haslam, 2009: 255). It is precisely within such “blurry” boundaries that the posthuman is seen to be situated. As N. Katherine Hayles argues, “in the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” (Hayles quoted in Lenoir, 2002: 203–204). Moreover, the posthuman arises not merely from contemporary scientific and technological developments. Like the human, and due to its relation to the human, the posthuman is immediately situated within wider human-related contexts. Or, as Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston put it, “posthuman bodies are the causes and effects of postmodern relations of power and pleasure, virtuality and reality, sex and its consequences” (1995: 3).

The artificial aspects of gestalt plastinates which I touched on in the previous section place them at the epicentre of the posthuman paradigm. These aspects include the artificial modification and enhancement of the plastinates: their quasi-organic nature (plastic mixed with organic matter) and their longevity (the nearly permanent suspension of decomposition). Moreover, contrary to von Hagens’ claims, his plastinates are not completely odourless. They are free from the smells of death and decay, but as I noticed during my visit to the Cycle of Life exhibition in Munich and also as observed by Rebecca Scott, the plastinates have “a thick odour like crayon” which increases their artificiality (2011: 175). Scott also notes that plastinates are not “perfectly” made: the little mistakes and breakages are visible on their surfaces as well as small pieces of plastic which have fallen off and collected in the bottom of their glass cases (2011: 175). I also observed the “imperfect” nature of von Hagens’ creations: on closer inspection (while most of his plastinates are encased in glass, some are not, thus allowing for a more up-close view), I could see that various parts of the cadaver are rather clumsily glued together or attached with the help of metal wires. However, it is the full human body slices that lose almost any trace of humanness. Cycle of Life included an exhibit entitled 3D Slice Plastinate: a head-to-toe, sliced and

suspended cadaver, “exploding” horizontally. While skin was enclosing each individual slice and the severe fragmentation of the body left me desperately trying to “glue” the slices back together, the identity (and humanity) of this particular body was no longer recognisable. The artificial aspects listed above, together with the anonymity of plastinates, constitutes the artificiality of von Hagens’ creations – they are human-made and at times utterly dehumanised objects.

Paradoxically, however, despite the artificial and human-made tendencies of modification and enhancement ascribed to it, the posthuman paradigm does not negate the human altogether. Instead, the posthuman always already suggests or implies a certain degree and quality of humanness. Moreover, it is difficult to reject or completely annihilate the human from the posthuman landscape. Over the centuries, philosophical discourses have been preoccupied with the human, forming a closely intertwined matrix, assembling strong and seemingly unchallenged foundations out of which we construct knowledge and perceive the world. Posthumanism, as Neil Badmington (2001; 2003; 2004) argues, does not negate the existence and persistent significance of these foundations. Instead, posthumanism inverts humanness, thus posing a challenge: artificial/outside constructs are leaking into the insides of human perspectives (both culturally, in the form of sci-fi narratives, computer games and simulations, as well as literally and physically, in the form of silicone breast implants or plastic-filled gestalt plastinates). The inversion and diffusion of previously unchallenged human perspectives disrupt the familiar dualistic distinctions between the subject’s inside and outside, thus unearthing gaps in the formerly stable foundations of humanness. Therefore, “the task of posthumanism”, as Badmington puts it, “is to uncover those uncanny moments at which things start to drift, of reading humanism in a certain way, against itself and the grain” (2003: 19).

In the case of von Hagens’ gestalt plastinates, such uncanny moments are not immediately apparent. The spectators are gently lulled into the landscape of the living-dead with the help of very specific dramaturgical configurations: the Cycle of Life exhibition hall was dark, apart from the plastinates and placards which were bathed in a yellowish light; the spectators’ voices were respectfully hushed throughout, undoubtedly influenced by the overall subdued atmosphere; and as well as the plastinates, the viewer was also faced with a number of “educational” placards promoting healthy living and eating, exercise, anti-smoking and longevity. The

ambiguity of plastic-filled and rubber-smelling plastinates is further camouflaged by Body Worlds' motto, an encouraging promise of "Real Humans. Real Science. Really Amazing." The deliberately configured and subdued atmosphere, together with the overpowering knowledge that one is faced with real and anonymously donated dead human bodies, works as a smokescreen, cloaking the questionable "realness" and humanness of plastinates. However, as soon as an "is this a 'he', a 'she' or an 'it'?" question is posed which prompts the objectification of the specimen (despite the fact that usually it is fairly easy to establish a plastinate's gender due to its clearly visible sexual organs), the artificiality and posthumanism disrupts the superficial, commercially inclined and rather naïve attempts to exploit our fascination with the "pornography" of death. Instead, as a spectator, you momentarily see a posthuman dead body which also serves as an uncanny indicator of a possibility – the possibility of the bioscientifically modified and enhanced living posthuman. The questionable "realness" of von Hagens' specimens shows itself in the glass eyes and the quasi-organic components glued together, sliced and arranged in a variety of intricate ways (Image 2.7). These human-made qualities render the plastinates the artificial products of biotechnologies instead of representations of real human beings. Moreover, the ambiguity of humanness and the blurring of boundaries between Nature and artifice, as well as the human and the non(post)human, make it problematic to apply concrete ethical judgement to von Hagens' work.



Image 2.7: A glimpse of the posthuman in von Hagens' Body Worlds



Despite the objectification and dehumanisation of von Hagens' specimens, his exhibitions receive a lot of positive feedback from spectators. In a short video clip (*Gunther von Hagens' Body Worlds*, 2012) posted on Body Worlds Facebook page, exhibition visitors describe their experiences as “profound”, “overwhelming”, “mind-blowing”, “spectacular” and “taking your breath away”. Some claim that Body Worlds gives “a whole different perspective about your body”, “helps you appreciate life”, shows “the fragility of the human body” and “how the body is so intertwined”. Others see it as a perfect “public education tool” for both adults and children: “kids like it, it’s visual”. It could be argued that these positive responses arise from the posthuman paradigm being part of the material and intercorporeal workings of the plastinate. Posthumanism and its persistent dialogue with the human suggest that gestalt plastinates maintain a residue of lived human corporeality. This perspective is also supported by our deeply ingrained, human ways of perceiving the world. Thus even the most “mutilated” and deconstructed plastinate has the quality of “real” humanness implied in it. This humanness manifests itself in the form of knowledge that once this was a living and breathing human being. It can also arise from our persistent need for a “human” dramaturgy. As one spectator put it:

The body is in a pose, as if it was literally frozen in the moment. The only surprising thing is that there is no skin on the body, only the muscles and skeleton are there to see. Let me say this. It is not meant to be scary in any way, but educational. There is no blood or goriness. In fact, I was happily surprised by the respectfulness that is given to each and every body or part that is on display. And around every wall there is a beautiful banner with thoughtful quotes on each. Each body on display has a story, not only in the words under every description, but also in the way they are captured in movement (Raven, 2011).

The “beautiful banner” and “thoughtful quotes” tap into the need to create “stories” or, as I see them, dramaturgies around these anonymous and objectified cadavers playfully posed and displayed in front of the spectator. The need for such dramaturgies is also closely linked to the visual aspect of plastinates, moreover the visual aspect of the body: the tendency, as Elkins put it, to “hallucinate” bodies. According to Elkins, if we see unusual or incomplete shapes, we reflect back to the human bodily form in order to make sense of them, “we instinctively repair fragments into wholes and search for continuous contours and closed curves” (Elkins, 1996: 125)

– something I experienced myself (attempting but failing at) in front of the 3D Slice Plastinate. When faced with the skinless plastinate, you immediately perform a visual action of anthropomorphisation: “connecting the dots” or, in this instance, smoothing the gaping cavities of the dissected flesh to make it “human” again. As a result, and together with the “capturing in movement” and thoughtful descriptions, as a spectator, you are capable of rehumanising the plastinate which, leads to self-reflection.

In addition, the act of performative self-reflection is provoked by the aesthetic choices devised by von Hagens. The lighthearted dramaturgical configurations create an illusion of educational, entertaining and “mind-blowing” living-dead landscapes, thus evoking subjective and often positive responses. von Hagens arranges his plastinates in evocative poses and places them in quasi-realistic environments, thus also encouraging the act of re-humanisation of his dehumanised specimens. Some of the plastinates act as clear representations and actively perform “lifelike” roles: the Cycle of Life exhibition included a muscular gymnast and dancer, intricately carved out and embellished poker players, a kneeling female plastinate with two birds (frozen in the moment of flight) in her hands and many other personifications. Paradoxically, due to such aesthetic manipulations, the artificial and posthuman post-mortem enhancement makes the human cadaver more attractive to its audiences (it is “perfected” and hyperreal). According to another Body Worlds viewer, “the exhibition has managed to make posed dead people seem remarkably non-morbid” (Jim Springhetti, OregonLive, 2012), which corresponds to Badmington’s statement that often “posthumans are far more exciting, far sexier than humans” (2003: 15).

“Viewing a display showing all the parts of a hand, a man looks at his own, opening and closing his grip” (Jim Springhetti, OregonLive, 2012) – an observation that clearly identifies the act of performative self-reflection and demonstrates that it is mainly through spectatorship that you are invited to perceive or, rather, witness gestalt plastinates<sup>23</sup>. The act of looking at the plastinate becomes performative not only because the posed cadavers are already suggestive – pointing to a particular everyday context, be it sports, arts or human relationships. The double nakedness of the plastinates (they are nude and skinless), exposed muscle and bone, also direct the

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<sup>23</sup> However, Scott mentions that in some *Body Worlds* exhibitions, visitors are also allowed to touch specific plastinated specimens, mainly selected body parts (Scott, 2011: 170).

viewer's gaze inwards, into deep visceral realities, and the "frozen" quality of motility reminds of physical actions performed by a lived body. Moreover, as Bleeker claims, the act of looking is in itself performative because it is inevitably an act of making meaning (an aspect of which is our inclination towards the aforementioned human dramaturgy) (2011: 149). We view the world from a specific, subjective position, which arises from our situatedness – a particular historical, political and cultural context. The specific contexts from which we view our surroundings suggest to Bleeker that each spectator or, as she calls them, "seer" performs individual acts of looking, including seeing things that are not really there. As I noted in the Introduction, according to Bleeker, "seeing always involves projections, fantasies, desires and fears, and might be closer to hallucinating than we think" (2011: 18). From a more objective perspective, Elkins also claims that human vision is not as straightforward as we usually believe. He suggests that "each object has a certain force, a certain way of resisting or accepting my look and returning that look back to me" (1996: 70). In other words, some objects have an innate presence or quality which actively catches our gaze, folding the gaze backwards and inwards, back towards our self. And often, especially if deliberately placed in a particular dramaturgical configuration, the object has the power of deception, pretence and mockery, thus "remind[ing] us that the world is full of apparitions" (Elkins, 1996: 51).

Elkins' suggested "certain force" or, as I see it, innate presence of the object corresponds with the quality of presentness I argue for in this thesis. Furthermore, it is not only the visual "force" of the object (in this case, the body) that gives rise to this presentness. I want to propose that, first and foremost, it is the material workings of the body on display that engender not only presentness but also, subsequently, the extra layer of meaning. When looking at something as evocative as a gestalt plastinate, intricately involved in the workings of material intercorporealities because it is an historical remnant of anatomy, an anonymously donated real human body filled with plastic and given depthless glass eyes, ruthlessly dissected, flayed and exposed, eternally performing an imposed role in a human-made environment, gradually shedding broken plastic fragments of itself and capable of manipulating the spectator's gaze, it is no wonder that you experiences a myriad of (posthuman) "hallucinations". In this particular case, the extra layer of meaning acquires the form of performative self-reflections which range from the appreciation of life, the recognition of the

fragility of the human body, the memory of a past injury, the enjoyment of the playful visual spectacle or a reminder of our finitude to the decision to donate one's own body for plastination.

### **Cultural Recycling: Anatomical Crucifixion and the Fashion of the Dead**

The Royal Academy of Arts in London holds an artwork titled *Crucified Écorché* (Image 2.8). It is an anatomical cast which was made in order to resolve an artistic debate: to demonstrate the effects crucifixion has on the human body, thus showing “how one of the longstanding subjects in Western art should be realistically depicted” (Mitchell, 2007: 219). The piece was jointly executed by three members of the Academy – painters Richard Cosway and Benjamin West, and sculptor Thomas Banks – and was completed in 1801. Despite its macabre nature – the figure was cast from the corpse of a murderer, Ensign James Legg, whose dead body was flayed and nailed to a cross before making the cast – *Crucified Écorché* clearly emphasises the importance of human agency. It can be seen as an aspiration towards a realistic representation of the human body, even if the method used to achieve it carries more than a hint of dehumanisation. In contradistinction to the anatomical crucifixion of the early nineteenth century, von Hagens' project *Crucifix* (2012), similarly to his *Body Worlds* exhibitions, illustrates the precariousness of the human body, especially the human corpse, and its status in contemporary society. This particular “artwork” also explicitly signals wider issues symptomatic of contemporary Western society: the declining integrity of human flesh and the possibility of recycling the human material, both of which, as I suggest later in this section, point to a wider notion of cultural recycling.

In order to complete his *Crucifix* project, von Hagens combined a few different human corpses. In this particular instance, however, he did not apply the usual methods of plastination which preserve human flesh. Instead, he used human corpses as casts: blood vessels and bones were filled with plastic, and thus prepared cadavers were submerged in a special acid which dissolved all organic matter but left the plastic intact. As a result, only the plastic “impressions” of the human cardiovascular and skeletal systems remained. von Hagens then used these “impressions” to create his representation of the crucified Christ: each bone and blood vessel was placed in an

anatomically correct position and arranged on a wooden cross. In other words, he recycled the corpses to obtain plastic impressions, in the process of which their human materiality was literally disposed of.



Image 2.8: Richard Cosway, Benjamin West and Thomas Banks, Crucified Écorché (1801)

Both the Crucified Écorché and von Hagens' Crucifix serve as examples of what Jacque Lynn Foltyn calls the transmogrification of the dead: turning human corpses into manageable and useful entities (2008: 103). Crucified Écorché, however, in its endeavour to create a detailed and realistic depiction of the crucified Christ, follows the historical relationship between anatomy and artistic representation. Here, the human body is utilised, but with an explicit ambition in mind – to rectify any possible representational inaccuracies of the past. The material body is still placed in the foreground, emphasising the importance of accurate depiction and representation. von Hagens' treatment of the material body during the creation of his Crucifix, on the other hand, points towards the intercorporeal and posthuman tendencies, their methods and (rather extreme) consequences. Here, the human is still implied in the multiple intercorporealities: von Hagens' Crucifix mimics the long tradition of the

representation of Corpus Christi, it retains the human form (the configuration of carefully arranged blood vessels resembles the shape of a human body) and human corpses were used. The material body, however, is turned into a posthuman cast – recycled in order to be used for “aesthetic” purposes and then disposed of. As a result, the body no longer carries its material value and integrity; instead, it is appropriated and utilised in order to display the ingenuity and skill of the “artist”, in this case, von Hagens.



Image 2.9: Edward Howhannisjan’s fashion show at the Body Worlds exhibition, Berlin 2011

Starting at the material level, the process of recycling extends into wider cultural contexts – this is an issue I will return to in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 when analysing the intercorporeal workings of the pop body, naked body and wrestler’s body. In the case of the gestalt plastinate, recycling problematises the material integrity of the dead body which, of its own accord, leads to ambiguous interactions with post-mortem flesh. Crucified Écorché and Crucifix lay bare the differing realities of the past and present relationships between the living and the dead. Often shrouded in mysticism, criminality or perverse sexual desires, manipulations of the dead body by the living carry a degree of controversy. According to Foltyn, however, “in the past, the dead were said to haunt us”, while “today, the living hover around the dead, demand[ing] that they entertain them” (2008: 103). The largely secular and consumerist Western society, having effectively abolished the spiritualism and fear which surrounded the “haunting” of the dead, through the processes of intercorporeality and material recycling, increasingly provides instances of largely aimless “death”-based entertainment. These changing attitudes towards the dead make events such as a

fashion show at a Body Worlds exhibition possible. In 2011, Armenian designer Edward Howhannisjan presented a fashion collection in Berlin, choosing Body Worlds as his venue (Spiegel Online, 2011). Fashion models with their faces painted in white and black to resemble skulls and thus, whimsically, pointing towards the “plastic” human mortality which surrounded them, strutted among the plastinated human and animal cadavers. Undoubtedly, this provided an uncanny experience: the living literally hovering around the dead – the artificially and aesthetically arranged bodies of the plastinates “mingling” with the no less artificial bodies of the fashion models posing around them (Image 2.9). In addition, as Bogard observes, the waning integrity of human flesh also manifests itself in the diminishing bioscientific value of cadavers. Such practices as computer simulations for educational purposes and harvesting organs from living bodies rather than the dead are becoming increasingly common in medicine (Bogard, 2008: 191). This leaves the corpse in a chilled compartment in the morgue in case an autopsy is necessary, in a dark, respectfully closed coffin or exposed to the visual amazement and entertainment of the public, helplessly skinless and silent.

### **2. 3. The Skinless and Silent Face of the Other: In Memoriam to Anzieu and Levinas**

The skin is so fundamental, its functioning is taken so much for granted, that no one notices its existence until the moment it fails.

(Didier Anzieu)

As this observation of Anzieu implies, we do not generally acknowledge the workings of human skin until it draws attention to itself. von Hagens' gestalt plastinates perform precisely such an action. As pointed out in the previous sections, most of the plastinates are flayed, with their skin partially or completely removed. Such an absence attracts our attention and points to the typical presence of human skin. Throughout the thesis the skin is seen as the material border of human corporeality. It is (usually) the first material reality the spectator faces when she or he is exposed to the body on display. As a result, it is often through the workings of skin that the quality of presentness is engendered, giving rise to material and cultural meanings. Biologically, the skin is the largest human organ, covering the totality of the body. It is understood as a visible surface of the body (or Leder's and Zarrilli's suggested "surface body", discussed in Chapter 1), a border between the inner viscera and, to use Plessner's term, the shared world, a container which holds the fragile human anatomy together and protects it from outer influences, and the human organ which mediates the sense of touch. Historically, the surface of the human body has been marked in a variety of ways and has played an important role in numerous cultural and social contexts. The discourses referenced in the present section accentuate the skin as a material phenomenon: Claudia Benthien exposes the skin's historical implications; Didier Anzieu suggests psychoanalytical links between the skin and our psyche; Steven Connor demonstrates the skin's cultural signification. The multifaceted meanings and connotations of human skin problematise its removal and, in the case of plastination, lead to the depersonalisation and estrangement of the dead human body.

The explicitly "fleshy" tradition and iconography of Christianity, symbolically and literally, made the human body easily susceptible to physical pain. The human



body, first and foremost the skin, was often subjected to self-induced suffering in cases of martyrdom and especially the religious mortification of the flesh. Self-flagellation or the imitation of crucifixion, while serving as expiatory acts of the self's penance, left visible marks, often in the form of painful and bloody slashes and cuts, on the body. The act of Christian mortification constituted a symbolic manifestation of the physical body's finitude and temporal existence, and a possibility for redemption. Connor sees an indirect link between religious practices of self-harm and contemporary mortification. Fetishist and sadomasochistic pornography features similar markings on human skin via the practices of "piercing and tattooing, bondage fashions involving spikes, straps and constrictions of the flesh, and cosmetic styles that stripe and slash" (Connor, 2004: 61). Contrary to Christian practices, contemporary mortification, as Connor argues, does not arise from a need to display the body as an imperfect and mortal entity or to hasten the eternal transcendence of the self. Instead, sadomasochism toys with the painful pleasure of the here and now. Its sexually charged, pain-inducing and skin-slashing rituals transfix the body in its presence, because "now our need is for a transcendence of the body in the body" (Connor, 2001: 47). Lacking a belief in spiritual transcendence, the material body of contemporary pornographic mortification is put to the forefront, thus emphasising the subject's perverse power over this body, induced by closely intertwined and heightened visual and physical experiences and "impressions" on the skin.

On the other hand, human skin, as reflected in many contemporary visual representations (especially advertising), is persistently pictured as a flat and flawless surface – an even, usually matte-like, mask which covers the human face and body. The contemporary iconography of "perfected" skin both represents and encourages the material beautification processes of the skin such as tanning, the application of cosmetic substances and "tightening" with the help of Botox or plastic surgery, disguising any possible imperfections. Moreover, the flatness and flawlessness makes the skin-mask impenetrable – all crevices, spots and wrinkles are unwanted, closed and made invisible. In contrast to such contemporary imagery, human skin used to be seen as a very porous organ. As Benthien argues in *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and the World* (2002), historically, especially in the pre-Enlightenment era, the skin was understood as a boundary between the invisible human organism and its outside, the visible surface. This boundary, however, did not constitute an

impenetrable barrier between the internal and external as it does in many contemporary representations. Instead, the skin, together with the usual bodily “cavities” and “openings”, was seen as one large orifice. The relationship between the inside and outside involved a constant flow between the two, a continuous exchange of substances, a large quantity of which “leaked” through the skin. Benthien observes that “the body surface itself is everywhere a potential exit, because it can open or be induced to open anywhere” (2002: 39). During the historical period discussed, due to the fact that the body’s insides are virtually invisible, the skin became an important referent, a canvas on which a person’s health was literally painted. The various markings on the skin such as bulges, rashes, wounds and tears became manifestations of “inside” diseases, and “speculations about this inside are possible only through signs that appear on the skin or through significant discharging ‘fluxes’” (Benthien, 2002: 40). Accordingly, many medical practices cured illnesses by manipulating the skin: using skin irritants, bloodletting techniques or pricking wounds (Benthien, 2002: 40-41).

Biologically the skin has a manifold function. It works as a protective barrier for the organism, an extra layer of tissue containing and shielding the delicate organic life of the human being. The skin responds to temperature changes, opening and closing its pores when necessary. It absorbs less violent shocks and collisions in cases of trauma. As I argue in Chapter 5, the skin is sensitive to aural influences – it vibrates and conducts sound. Sometimes the skin also exposes and betrays the self, especially in the case of blushing, which might represent the feeling of shame. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson see the human body as a “container”, “bounded and set off from the rest of the world by the surface of our skins” (1980: 29). The idea of the skin being the surface of the “container”, holding the bodily matter and fluids together, points towards the body’s structural aspects, from which the customary analogy between the human body and the house was derived. Benthien discusses this analogy and its various historical and linguistic manifestations in great detail. Most importantly, the body/house analogy allows her to derive a less frequently referenced analogy between the human skin and the solid wall. The skin, here, is seen as encompassing and holding the rest of the bodily structure together:

In the house metaphor, the body becomes a hollow, vessel-like space. This hollowed, empty form is conceivable only with reference to the tentlike, imaginary hide created

by skin. And the skin is not imagined as sacklike and soft [...] but as static and solid, as though it were either impregnated and tanned or a self-contained balloon filled with air (2002: 26).

The skin images derived in this particular analogy not only function as a reminder of linguistic expressions like “living in” the body. A parallel can also be drawn between the idea of the “static” and “solid” human skin and the contemporary fascination with “perfect” body images.

The imagery of the flattened skin surface (usually facial skin), the “smiling” multiplications of which can be found on advertisements on almost every corner, building and bus stop in Western towns and cities, corresponds to the popular compulsion to affect the look of the skin. And the look which is sought after is precisely that of a “static” and “solid” quality: masking the aging lines and blemishes, fighting the sagging flaps of flesh or controlling the discharges of epidermis. Moreover, similar body/house and skin/wall analogies were taken up by the developers of contemporary architecture. Juhani Pallasmaa discusses the “flatness” of contemporary construction. He observes that the building materials commonly used in Western architecture (glass, metals and plastics) create a myriad of perfectly flat surfaces that “deliberately aim at ageless perfection” which, of its own accord, exposes the fear “of the traces of wear and age” as well as the fear of death (2012: location 585). Some of this “flat” architecture is also beginning to mimic the biological workings of human skin: for example, the “Schuco E2”, an “intelligent façade” which is capable of artificial “breathing” and regulating inside temperatures.<sup>24</sup>

Biological function of the skin and symbolic markings on it, as well as its visual and linguistic representations, interlink with one another thus producing different spiritual, sexual, cultural and even architectural meanings. Interestingly, psychoanalysis, especially its branches which are concerned with taking the physical human organism into account, also exploits the notion of the skin, particularly when searching for the crucial link between the self’s inner psyche, self’s ego, and the physical body. The most widely referenced “skin-based” reading of the self is that of the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu. He was highly influenced by Freud, who was the first to point out the importance of the human skin. According to Freud, “[T]he

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<sup>24</sup> See “The Intelligent Façade”: <http://tinyurl.com/qg5gvul> (accessed 29/04/13).

ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body” (Freud cited in Wegenstein, 2002: 250–251). Like Freud, Anzieu stresses the importance of the body and its relation to the self’s psychic functioning. Moreover, for Anzieu, it is precisely from the physical body that the self’s psychic agencies and functions are derived (Anzieu, 1990: 62). This assumption prompted Anzieu to construct his concept of the skin ego: for him, self’s ego is intricately connected to organic sensations on the bodily surface, the human skin, which assists us when distinguishing between external and internal physical perceptions. The ability to distinguish between the two, allows the self to recognise what is mine (i.e., my body) and what does not belong to me (i.e., other’s body) (Anzieu, 1990: 63).

According to Anzieu, “bordering inside and outside the body, the point of separation and contact between you and me, skin is the key interface between self and other, between the biological, the psychic, and the social” (Anzieu cited in Scott, 2011: 173). He developed this argument by observing infants and their relationships with their mothers or caretakers. The sense of touch, how often the infants were touched and how they reacted to this, was of the utmost importance to him: “body-to-body contact between the young baby and his mother [...] conveys elementary forms of meaning that each sense organ, in proportion to its degree of maturity, can then pick up and develop in its own register” (Anzieu, 1990: 65). From observations of infants, as well as adult patients, he developed a theory that the human skin and the sense of touch form a foundational aspect in human subjectivity: beginning in the infancy, skin sensations play a major role in the further development of the self. The human skin works as an interface, between my psyche and my body as well as between myself and the other. In a similar vein, Antonio Damasio emphasises the relationship between the body and the outer object, including the outside world’s ability to alter the body. As Jon Sletvold observes, for Damasio “the bodily roots of the self are affected by interaction with the outer world from the very start” (2013: 1026).

Marc Lafrance discusses the work of two other psychoanalysts, Esther Bick and Thomas Ogden, who also emphasise the relationship between the skin and the self, and base their theses on infant development processes. Bick mainly argues for the importance of the sense of containment that the body’s surface provides, while Ogden focuses on the human skin as the basis for feelings of “groundedness” or

“foundation” (2009: 12). For Bick, the skin, as in the body/house analogy, is a “container”, something that holds the “diffused” pieces of an infant’s self together:

In the earliest moments of life, the infant’s mind is totally diffuse. Because the infant’s mind is so diffuse, it needs to be held together by something external to it – something that will provide it with a secure and ongoing experience of containment. For Bick, the ‘something’ that will serve as the container of the primitive mind is none other than the container of the primitive body: the skin (Lafrance, 2009: 7).

According to Bick, this sense of containment, the experience of the diffused pieces being held together, does not occur naturally. Instead, it has to be achieved via the sense of touch, skin-to-skin contact. Ogden also points towards the tactile sensations of the infant and her gradually forming self. However, for him, the infant’s skin not only provides the feeling of being “held together”, it is also the locus of sensory “impressions” that will gradually provide the “ground” or “foundation” for the development of the self. As Lafrance argues, it is “on and along this surface”, the skin, “that the infant has the most formative and fundamental experiences of the world around it” (2009: 15).

Anzieu’s skin ego, Bick’s notion of containment and Ogden’s idea of “groundedness”, point to the skin’s involvement in the formation, foundation and development of human subjectivity and contribute to the understanding and perception of the skin. Parallels can also be drawn between the functionalities of the human skin and Plessner’s notion of the boundary of the self, as well as Leder’s (and Zarrilli’s) surface body, both discussed in Chapter 1. In fact, I would argue that the skin acts as a material manifestation of both the self’s boundary and the “surface” body. Just like Plessner’s boundary, the skin is a two-dimensional construct, delineated by the body’s shape and continually engaged with the shared world (directed both towards the outer world and back into itself). As a result, the human skin is a site of the identity of the self. It is a sac/wall holding the organic and psychic pieces of the self together; a surface, at once flat and porous, shielding the inner organism and exposing the self in moments of shame; and a border between self and other, the existence of which helps us perceive the self and the shared world.

The skin also has a temporal dimension, making it a site of memory. “Skin time” is not only the here and now, brought about by the physical sensation of touch

or the inner workings of the body. Instead, it is a time which simultaneously moves both forwards and backwards. Biologically, the skin is in a constant state of renewal. We shed cells of our “used” skin at the rate of more than a million each hour (Montagu, 1986: 6). The renewal processes of the skin point to the regenerative abilities of our bodies, opening up the possibility of a corporeal future or, as Ahmed and Stacey put it, the body is thus opened to “unimaginable futures” (2001: 2). We are not aware of how much more our skin will be marked or how much more damage it will sustain. The future-orientated process of skin renewal, paradoxically, can also be seen as moving backwards in time. Connor argues that the healing of wounds and scars can be seen as a process of effacement, a gradual erasure of damage, thus coming back to a state prior to the injury sustained. He sees the skin as a “soft clock”: “we wind [it] up whenever we mark it; and when we mark the skin, and await its healing, we can make time run backwards” (Connor, 2001: 46). In contrast to the popular contemporary imagery of, and efforts towards, impenetrable and matte-like skin, our skins are still very much capable of displaying the histories and memories of the self. These are signalled on the skin as one’s age and race, as well as imprinted in the form of scars, lesions and wrinkles, some of which “move backwards”. Others, however, are permanently ingrained, thus contributing to the unique memory and subjectivity of the self.

From these psychoanalytic observations, one could argue that the skin stands not only for the whole of the corporeal body, but also the psychic development of the self. Therefore, the skin, as Benthien claims, is a synecdoche for the human being (2002: 17). In the light of this statement, as well as the arguments above, the question I wish to pose is this: what does the removal of the skin entail? Moreover, how do we respond to a purposively executed flaying of the body as in the case of von Hagens’ *Body Worlds*? Assuming that the human skin plays a fundamental role in the subjectivity of the self, is it possible to relate to the skinless (and silent) Other exhibited in front of us?

If one seventh of the skin is destroyed by accident, lesion, or burns, the human being dies.

(Didier Anzieu)

von Hagens' plastinates have died a double death: firstly, the natural or accidental death prior to plastination, and, secondly, while being flayed, which occurred during the process of "treatment" and "sculpting". In the case of most plastinates (especially the full body specimens) the skin is absent, exposing the "invisible" viscera, muscle, internal organs and skeleton for the sake of instructive and, as I argued earlier, aesthetic purposes. The first death coincides with the biological mortality of the human being, our inescapable finitude. The second, however, happens post mortem and is not a physical death in itself (although the physical element is still implied in the act of flaying). It is a symbolic death or the death of the self, identity and memory. According to a biology, a human being cannot survive if a seventh of her or his skin is removed. It would seem that the identity of a person can endure the biological death, yet it cannot survive the removal of the skin. According to Connor, the skin gives the body its "face", and without the face, the body loses its very bodiliness: "the skinned body is formless, faceless, its face having been taken off with its skin" (2002). The skin for Connor is not just a part of the body, it is the body itself, its very corporeality. The act of flaying not only causes the deformation of the physical body. Without the body's containing tissue, our organic substances simply spill out, taking the subjectivity of the self with them.

The removal of skin reinforces the anonymity of von Hagens' plastinates. Their identity is literally peeled off, masking the shape of the body (soluble fats are removed), the age of the body and the body's race (both normally visible via the skin). As a result, the plastinates, despite being "sculpted" and posed in a variety of ways, look very similar, as if belonging to a new corporeal – a corporeality of posthuman plastinated-anatomical cadavers. Our perception of the plastinated body is completely inverted: the normally invisible inner body becomes acutely visible, while the visible "surface" body, with the self's memory written in its wrinkles, scars and blemishes, is eradicated. As I observed during my visit to the Cycle of Life in Munich, the only glimpses of skin left on some of the plastinates are the patches on the eyebrows, around the eyes, around the tip of the nose and nostrils, and the lips. The rest of the skin, our

first point of contact when faced with another's body, is missing, thus problematising how we relate to these skinless and unidentifiable "muscle-" men and women.

It could be argued that the fundamental link between the skin and identity was one of the factors that caused spectator suspicion and the subsequent controversy concerning von Hagens' acquisition of corpses. Attempts were made to identify some of the plastinates, thus compromising what von Hagens himself calls a "withholding" of information "in order to avoid a 'personification' of the specimen" (von Hagens in Linke, 2005: 18). In 2001, an inquest was held when a tattoo was noticed on one of the specimens: a Russian Orthodox cross with the phrase "I won't forget you" written in Cyrillic, presumably popular among Russian prisoners (Munro, 2001). Another case sparked public interest when a report was published claiming that von Hagens' company received two bodies, both of which were believed to be executed Chinese prisoners due to their visible bullet holes (Paterson, 2004). In both cases, the tattoo and the bullet holes became "unwanted" hints of human identity (similar to wrinkles, scars and blemishes), peeking through the "perfect" plastinated and depersonalised flesh.

The dehumanisation, depersonalisation, anonymity and sameness of von Hagens' plastinates not only raise the possibility of the creation of a new corporeality. The plastinates represent an altogether new bodily phenomenon or, rather, a phenomenon that was gradually devised as a result of the interest in human anatomy and the historical development of the preservation of dead bodies. This bodily phenomenon can be summed up as a dehumanised cadaver, a "posthumanised" cadaver or simply a contemporary cadaver: a recycled dead body that is positioned in a carefully arranged dramaturgical configuration. It is posthuman, but its humanity is still implied. Due to its human origin, the only way we can read this contemporary cadaver is through the human prism. Nevertheless, the method of plastination radically transforms organic human matter, turning it into plastic. The transformation of the physical body also alters its biological, social and cultural connotations, as well as the reading of and response to this body. The plastinates are flayed, but unlike what occurs with the flaying of a living body, the plastinated insides are not spilling out. The fluids have been removed or solidified, thus permanently located inside the cadaver. The artificial treatment effectively envelops the plastinate in a new skin, providing it with a new "skin wall" in the form of hardened muscle mixed with internal organs, tissues



and bones. The removal of the skin causes the loss of the lived body's "face" and identity, but, instantaneously, a new, plastinated, face (with patches of skin around the eyebrows, nose and mouth) and identity is provided. The initial starkness, crudeness and posthumanism of the plastinate's identity are softened by the aesthetic re-humanisation, playful dramaturgical configurations, visual meaning-making and performative self-reflective hallucinations. The plastinate's new skin sheds fragments of itself similarly to our lived skin. This new skin is covered in a myriad of markings, cuts and openings. It has its morbid, post-mortem and post-plastination history inscribed on its surface. Two plastinates can touch each other, thus representing the tactile qualities of skin, only it is a "new skin" that touches (Image 2.10). Therefore, when we are attempting to come to terms with an object of this new bodily phenomenon, it is inevitable that the plastinate becomes the body of the other or, as I see it, the estranged other. This particular other is situated in between the lived and the posthuman body, and its new skin works as a material manifestation of the alterity debate's "in between" configuration, as introduced in Chapter 1.

Levinas dismisses the Greek philosophical tradition with its emphasis on visual metaphor as a locus of knowledge. Instead, he bases his discourse of absolute alterity on the Hebrew approach to knowing, wherein the auditory qualities outweigh the visual. Levinas' transcendental meeting with the Other or, as Treanor describes it, the "revelation", comes unexpectedly. It is usually "incomprehensible in its strangeness, incapable of fitting neatly into everyday systems of understanding" (Treanor, 2006: 31). The "everyday systems of understanding" here signify those of visually-related metaphors, the structures for making meaning which are inadequate when describing the relationship with the Levinasian other qua other. Instead, Levinas calls for auditory means of communication with the Other such as speaking or hearing, thus his "call of the Other" and the self's oral response to this call (Treanor, 2006: 31). However, for Levinas, the act of communication is not merely a simple exchange of words and it is not just the content of language that matters. Instead, communication always implies exposure: the act of speech makes the self vulnerable. According to Levinas, "[S]aying uncovers, beyond nudity, what dissimulation there may be under the exposedness of a skin laid bare. It is the very respiration of this skin prior to any intention" (1998: 49). Despite the plastinates being "strange" phenomena that do not neatly fit into our "everyday systems of understanding", thus creating a potential for

the representation of other qua other, they are also fundamentally silent. The only “voices” we can hear, albeit metaphorically, when facing a plastinate are those of their anonymity (once this was a human being who, presumably, made a decision to donate her dead body), the occasional “glimpses” of identity (such as the tattoo and the bullet holes), the voice of von Hagens or his colleagues (“Real Humans. Real Science. Really amazing.”) and the “thoughtful” and “respectful” quotations placed next to the specimens.

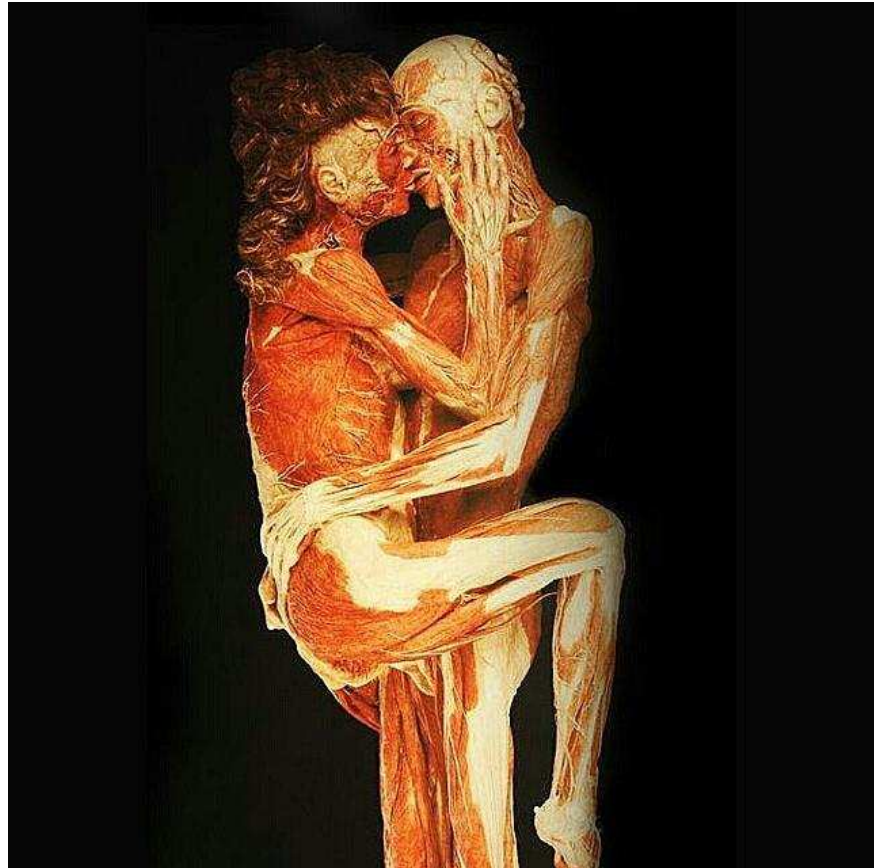


Image 2.10: Two plastinates touching, Gunther von Hagens Body Worlds

The lack of voices makes the application of Levinas’ approach to alterity problematic when discussing von Hagens’ creations as estranged others. Our relationship to the plastinates is primarily visual. The visual, however, as always already informed by the presentness of the material, as well as, in this instance, the quasi-organic and the quasi-corporeal – in other words, the intercorporeal workings of the gestalt plastinate. When looking at the estranged other, our vision, first and foremost, rests on the skin, flayed and re-skinned anew. The new skin, therefore, is where we should look for the estranged alterity of the plastinate. Due to the remnants

of humanness, this is not the absolute Other. Instead, the plastinate is a material example of something “in between” alterity and similitude, Treanor’s “chiastic” notion of otherness discussed in Chapter 1. One arm of the chiasmus here embodies the alterity, extreme biological changes, posthuman aspects, inhumane flaying and objectification of the plastinate. It represents the disturbing, the uncanny and the problematisation of these new post-human phenomena. The other arm stands for the plastinate’s human origins and the techniques of re-humanisation applied to them, as well as the possibility of performative self-reflection which results in positive audience responses. Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate the intricate “push and pull” of these two arms, which often results in the impossibility of coming to, what Treanor calls, a “comfortable rest”.



Image 2.11: The estranged face of the other, from Gunther von Hagens’ *Body Worlds*

As I was carefully feeling my way across the first example of Western bodily pageantry, the dramaturgical configuration populated by plastinated cadavers, searching for a performative self-reflection in the skinned and estranged face of the other, von Hagens’ method of dead body preservation revealed itself as a complex process. As a process, plastination is closely tied to the history of medical, religious and artistic developments, as well as pointing towards possible futures – the uncertainty of posthumanism. The plastinate is situated somewhere “in between”, in a theoretical and material sense, mainly in between the already familiar but not yet everyday reality of the human interface with the non-human. The posthumanity is

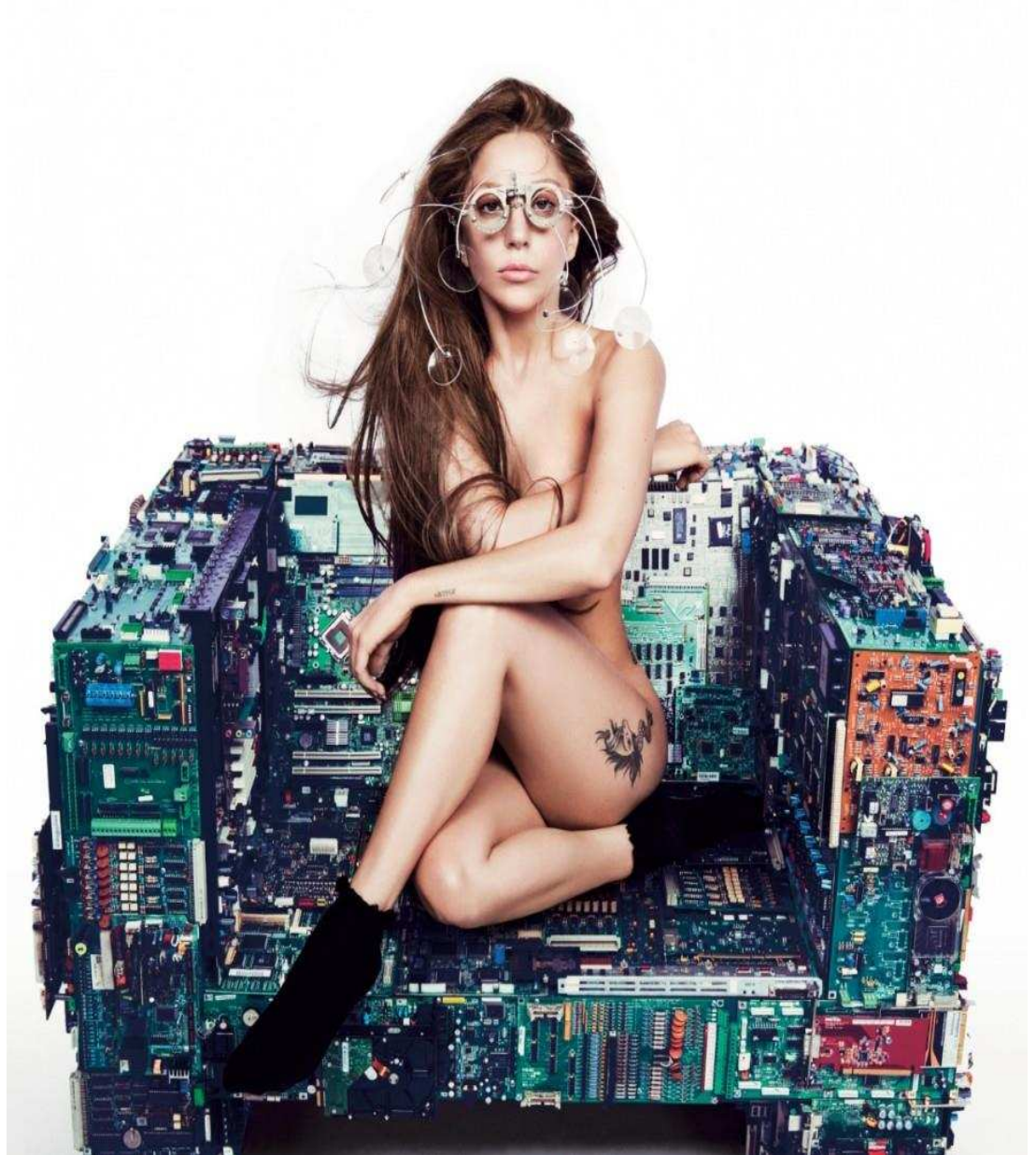
uncertain but discernible since, as Halberstam and Livingston put it, the “posthuman monstrosity and its bodily forms are recognizable because they occupy the overlap between the now and the then, the here and the always: the annunciation of posthumanity is always both premature and old news” (1995: 3). We do not know what will eventually happen to the skin-shedding plastinates, considering their longevity. We do not know if we are to expect more “freak shows” like the fashion-of-the-dead catwalk in Berlin. For now, the plastinate solemnly dances in our contemporary imaginations as an old-new material phenomenon, closely resembling the performative body called for in Antonin Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty” manifesto, re-imagined by Connor as a body which

... has its skin on the inside, and wears its skeleton like a second skin, or armour. This unthinkable body, at once flayed and reskinned, in which the skin bears the weight of intrinsic being rather than the traces of extrinsic meaning, allows one to be made from the inside out rather than the outside in (Connor, 2001: 45).

### Chapter 3

#### Popular Culture Recycled:

#### Hyper-digimodernism, Stripping Bodies and Viral Pop Monsters



Lady Gaga, ARTPOP photoshoot (2013)

Hypermodern methods of disseminating celebrity spectacle illustrate that artifice, if artful, can be even more compelling than the person behind the persona if it forcefully reflects the sullied truths of contemporary life.

(Victor Corona)

As suggested in the previous chapter, von Hagens' posthuman cadavers can be viewed as more attractive, more "real" and "sexier" than the non-plastinated dead human bodies. However, it is not only in the contemporary landscape of the dead that manipulations of human materiality point to their presentness and achieve such a heightened corporeal effect. As Victor Corona's above-quoted observation implies, a similar process can also be discerned in the workings of popular culture, namely the creation and dissemination of the "celebrity" spectacle. While Corona sees a distinction between the person and the artfully designed persona of celebrity (which becomes more compelling), in the present chapter, I draw attention to the corporeal renderings of the "popular body". I argue that it is, first and foremost, through bodily manipulations that the "artful artifice" is carefully and deliberately constructed, placed on public display and then not only consumed, but also, at times, materially replicated.

Pop music "icon" Lady Gaga, in the music video for her song "Applause" (2013), puts her body in an artistic collage of guises, varying from fictional characters and "rising dead" celebrities to references inspired by classical paintings. In the space of three minutes, we see Gaga dancing in simplistic black-and-white scenery which echoes early twentieth century expressionist cinema, this imagery then rapidly switching back and forth between expressionist black-and-white and psychedelic flashes of colour – one moment Gaga resembles the "Death" character from Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, the next she transforms into a zombie-like version of the tormented Marilyn Monroe, an anthropomorphic black swan and Botticelli's *Venus*.<sup>25</sup> The images of Gaga's body work as a locus for the fast paced changes of a postmodern-like pastiche: representations from the present, past, fiction and "reality" flash past the viewer's eyes, forming a chimerical spectacle. Her body dances, writhes,

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<sup>25</sup> For these and other references see *Rolling Stone* (2013) <http://tinyurl.com/mueci6y> and *Slant Magazine* (2013) <http://tinyurl.com/ogrdwp8> (accessed on 19/9/2013).

looks at the viewer, changes colour, has its head removed and reattached – Gaga’s corporeal materiality is chaotic and fragmented, but undoubtedly implied. Simultaneously, however, her body, while creating a corporeal manifestation, also becomes an ephemeral fantasy: a flickering nexus of digital intercorporeality.

The chimerical display produced by Gaga and her creative team serve as an example of another instance of pageantry the contemporary Western body finds itself situated in – that of the pop body. The pop body can be viewed as a manifestation which grew out of the workings of modernity (the freakshow tradition), postmodernity (pop art, de-differentiation, pastiche) and their intersections with popular culture. However, while the pop body is undoubtedly positioned at the epicentre of these historical developments, this body is also a product of a current reality which can no longer be seen as solely postmodern.

In light of Gilles Lipovetsky’s (2005) and Alan Kirby’s (2009) arguments regarding hyper- and digi- modern changes in contemporary Western society, I argue that, in the case of the contemporary pop body, many postmodern-like tendencies continue to be visible and viable in “artfully” created spectacles. At the same time, however, these tendencies now merge with contemporary socio-cultural realities, like hypermodern feelings of insecurity and anxiety (Lipovetsky) or digital textuality and virtual interconnectivity (Kirby). Gaga’s song “Applause” was “leaked” prior to its official release and quickly went viral. Gaga immediately summoned her fan base via social media; her followers were outraged and expressed their support by hacking websites which posted the “leaked” song; the song was released earlier than planned and the music video discussed above then followed. The instantaneous streaming of digimodernist textual (Gaga’s verbal outrage and fan’s response), sonic (the audio recording of “Applause”) and visual (the accompanying music video) discourses, their immediate reception and response, and, most importantly, their existence predominantly in the virtual sphere, signal a change in the process of pop body dissemination, representation, perception and consummation, as well as embodiment.

The instantaneous interactivity of new media gives rise to the pop body as a digitised spectacle. This body is now ever present in the virtual sphere, yet, through deliberate manipulation, simultaneously exists in between past and future renderings, as well as in between fictional, virtual and real artifices. In light of the workings of

virtual reality, can we argue that, due to its increased digital exposition and dissemination, the pop body is becoming a-corporeal? Does the proliferation and consumption of the pop body's digital imagery correspond with the postcorporeal utopia of virtual space? Is the pop body becoming a mere ephemeral fantasy which is gradually shedding its fleshy materiality and dispersing into the ever-flickering, rapidly developing and continuously morphing cyber-ether? Or is there, on the contrary, the need for a reconsideration of how we perceive the material body in the new media? In other words, the main question I pose in this chapter is the following: what happens (or could potentially happen) to the materiality of the body when it is placed in the dramaturgical configuration of contemporary, heterogeneous, no longer strictly postmodern, anxious and increasingly more digitally-saturated popular culture?

In order to apprehend the various manifestations of the contemporary pop body, in this chapter I frequently return to the environment that this body is situated in – the dramaturgical configuration of popular culture. I follow three threads of inquiry – the “recycled new realism”, “striptease culture”<sup>26</sup>, and “designer ideology”<sup>27</sup> – in order to revisit the often discussed and scrutinised phenomenon of pop. While maintaining a dialogue with modern and postmodern influences on the celebrity spectacle, I also suggest a possible change which can be glimpsed in popular culture in general, and in the approach towards the pop body in particular – a renewed attitude towards the representation of the “real”. As Fredrick Jameson suggests, “the real, we have become convinced, has become radically heterogeneous, if not incommensurate” (2015: 119). I want to suggest that one of the reasons for the “radical heterogeneity” of the “real” is current Western culture's tendency to, while still being preoccupied with, as Lipovetsky sees it, the hedonistic pleasures of the present (2005: 37), simultaneously glance back and feed on the (not too distant) past. This instigates the process of recycling I introduced in Chapter 2: a process of reintegrating, reworking and reusing cultural artefacts, materialities, dramaturgies and iconographies.

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<sup>26</sup> The term “striptease culture” was originally coined by Brian McNair (2002).

<sup>27</sup> The term was originally suggested by Dominic Strinati (1995: 225).



In Chapter 2, it was pointed out that von Hagens' plastinates are literally recycled: instead of being left to its own material devices, namely decomposition, the dead body is reworked (plastinated, flayed and sculpted), put on public display (reused), and, at times, its materiality is dissipated completely (turned into a cast). The plastinates, exhibited under the pretence of being "real" bodies, reveal the ambiguous nature of such "realism": while providing a glimpse, albeit a mediated one, into the depths of human corporeality, they also constitute an altogether new phenomenon, a "new", estranged other which is situated in between human curiosity and artificially enhanced posthuman uncertainty. As a result, in the case of the dead body, the "recycled new realism" appears in the form of flayed cadavers. In the present discussion, "new realism" points towards its origins – the emergence of pop art and its interrelationships with postmodernity, popular culture and the body. I propose that contemporary popular culture, due to its hypermodern tendencies, as well as the emergence of digital technologies and new media, actively recycles diverse cultural strategies and iconographies, opening up the possibility of a different perspective on the workings and embodiments of pop. Furthermore, the process of cultural recycling should not be seen as a mere hypermodern development of postmodern pastiche. Instead, it creates what I call a Gaga Effect: a collapse of the largely predetermined and regulated structure of popular culture industries, thus creating instances of indefinite influence. This influence is clearly discernible in the dissemination and recycling of the pop body; however, its purpose or effect (in tandem with the workings of Kirby's suggested digimodernist textuality) often remains ambiguous and indefinite.

The recycled strategy most commonly found in the celebrity spectacle is that of "striptease culture": the sexualisation of the pop body and its ramifications. While drawing parallels between the pop body and the body of a stripper, I will consider the sexually charged environment of pop in order to ascertain if the continual reiteration of the "revealed" body renders it a hyperfeminised (as well as hypermasculinised) spectacle or, in fact, masks the very material body that it exposes. In order to assess the material status of the body in popular culture, I return to the notion of skin. I propose that the imagery created by the stripper's body works as a "second skin", which in many ways corresponds with Corona's suggested "artful artifice". Contrary to the undoubted involvement of the material skin in Chapter 2, the "second skin",

while created through and around the physical body, is as if removed from the body's materiality and works as a rapidly changing, artful and ephemeral fantasy. The stripper's "second skin", however, once worn by the pop body, also becomes a recycled appropriation: it creates a sexualised fantasy of an already established fantasy of striptease, thus being even further removed from the "real" body. Moreover, "striptease" can also be seen as a wider symptom of contemporary popular culture: while continually preoccupied with recycled iconographies and dramaturgies, pop culture is simultaneously obsessed with revealing highly believable ("real") spectacles, thus masking the process of recycled appropriation.

A section on "designer ideology" continues the analysis of the recycled "surface" body and its "second skin". In the context of the pop body, the emphasis falls on consumerism and the "surface-ness" of pop imagery. The processes of advertising, fashion and "surface"-consumption, as Jean Baudrillard claims, objectify the human body, reducing it to a mere shape. The disappearing materiality of the body is also echoed in postcorporeal discourses on the virtual: in many instances, once modified by digimodernist textuality, the body seems to become a mere flattened image, a "second skin" produced by a sum of digitally generated pixels, thus losing its fleshy materiality. However, at the end of the chapter, I question the postcorporeal theories of new media and argue for an "embodied" perception and consumption of the pop body and its heterogeneous "second skin" – the creation of the "viral", yet still embodied, pop "monster". Some configurations of the pop body go "viral", not only in the sense of being widely and digitally disseminated, but also by filtering from the a-corporeal plastic and digital realities back into human materiality, particularly in the form of "human barbies", doll-eye contact lenses, as well as Lady Gaga's fan base. The "viral" pop body results in "monstrous" embodiments which I read through the historical configuration of the freak; nevertheless, the resulting pop monsters, despite any postcorporeal fears, remain fundamentally embodied.

### 3.1. Recycled New Realism

According to Daryl Chin, before being officially named “pop art”, this particular postmodern movement was briefly referred to as the “new realism” (1991: 6). The main idea behind the new realism was surprisingly simple, primarily expressed via the use of real objects or spaces as opposed to imaginary ones. Gradually, however, the concept of the “real” broadened its scope to represent the common realities of the everyday, especially those of the pop-cultural everyday: ordinary life, cultural change, the expansion of mass media technologies and their popularisation. As Tilman Osterwold put it, “[p]op is a buzzword. It is cheerful, ironic and critical, quick to respond to the slogans of the mass media, whose stories make history, whose aesthetics shape the paintings and our image of the era, and whose clichéd ‘models’ determine our behaviour” (2003: 6). In the case of pop art, the imagery of mass media, popular entertainment, stardom and popular culture in general became the main source of artistic inspiration as well as means of expression. In response, popular culture, while being extensively referenced in the works of pop art, did not remain stagnant. It quickly adapted and responded to many avant-garde “trends”, thus incorporating postmodern strategies in its practices. Such tendencies as heterogeneity, discontinuity, pluralism, subversion, pastiche and others (Berghaus, 2005: 72) rapidly permeated the industries of pop.

As a result, according to Dominic Strinati, popular culture became a culture *sans frontières*, happening as if outside of history (1995: 227), with its past and present signs, images and sonic impressions chaotically floating and mixing together. Similarly, John Storey calls popular culture “schizophrenic”: with no sense of a linear time continuum, “tripping” in the perpetual present (2003: 65). Paradoxically, however, despite being incessantly in the present, contemporary popular culture continually looks back or, as Storey put it, “feeds vampirically on the past” (2003: 65). The ever-intensifying capabilities and speed of digital technologies further increased the complexity of the already heterogeneous pop culture. Various manifestations of pop “went viral” – rendered globally visible and accessible with the help of new media.

The “cheerfulness” of “new realism”’s created possibility of ironically transforming everyday objects into works of art gave rise to de-differentiation in

artistic criteria. Frederic Jameson observes that “as for the system of fine arts, it has in postmodernity imploded, the arts folding back on each other in new symbioses, a whole new de-differentiation of culture which renders the very concept of art as a universal activity problematic” (2015: 107). As museum-goers, we are now often confronted with a heterogeneous spectacle: “inimitable combinations of photography, performance, video, sculpture, which can no longer be classified under any of the old generic terms, such as painting” (Jameson, 2015: 107). Furthermore, according to José I. Prieto-Arranz, de-differentiation “clearly affects the up-to-now clear-cut line separating ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture, resulting in the birth of intertextual genres” (2012: 185).



Image 3.1: Lady Gaga, still image from the music video for her song “Applause”

Intertextuality as a creative strategy was used long before the recent expansion of postmodern strategies in art and popular culture. As Marko Juvan observes, intertextuality, or “masterful borrowing”, “was until the eighteenth century acknowledged as the normal path to artistry” (2008: 2). The practice of borrowing, usually based on cultural influence, which was especially prominent in literature, was “grounded in the modern dualism of consciousness and the external world” and was “represented as an external energy that enters the author’s mind and [...] leads him or her to write differently” (Juvan, 2008: 2). Postmodern moves towards intertextuality, however, shifted the emphasis from the “external” element of cultural influence towards the text itself. This move disrupted the hierarchical and causal ties with “authorial masterpieces” of the past, and gave rise to textual plurality – opening the

text towards alternative interactions such as contemporary discourses, as well as popular stereotypes and clichés (Juvan, 2008: 2). Subsequently, contemporary culture, which is arguably no longer, strictly speaking, postmodern, absorbed the processes of borrowing and appropriation, or, as I see it, cultural recycling. Various manifestations of pop, especially celebrity spectacles with their diverse renditions of the pop body, became increasingly chaotic – fusing various cultural strategies, dramaturgies and iconographies, not for the sake of upholding authorial hierarchies, nor producing “masterpieces”, but as a move towards the chimerical – intercorporeal – configuration.

### **Hyperdigitised Intercorporeality of the Pop Body**

Alan Kirby observes that 2000s saw a new wave of anti-postmodernist theories that attempted to “dislodge and supersede postmodernism in the name of something new” (2009: 39). The term “hypermodernity”, coined by Gilles Lipovetsky, represents one such theory. Lipovetsky grounds his observations in the changing socio-cultural reality of Western society (from the late 1990s onwards). According to him, the notion “postmodern” can no longer fully encompass the current “hyper-world” with its “awareness of headlong rush forwards, of unbridled modernization comprised of galloping commercialization, economic deregulation, and technical and scientific developments being unleashed with effects that are heavy with threats as well as promises” (2005: 30–31). He puts a special emphasis on hyperconsumption, or the “third wave” of consumption, where, as Sébastien Charles argues in his introduction to Lipovetsky’s *Hypermodern Times* (2005), the subject no longer consumes to flaunt his or her status or out of rivalry, but primarily for her own hedonistic pleasure (2005: 11). The hypermodern individual, however, while rushing forwards on the tide of ever-developing technologies, as well as being obsessed with her pleasures, is no longer misled by postmodern presentism or the cult of the self. According to Lipovetsky, and it is here that he provides the most clearly defined break with the postmodern attitude, the individual is now “forced to face the rising tide of insecurity”: “instead of being lightened, our burden has become heavier; hedonism is on the retreat before our fears, the servitudes of the present seem more significant than the opening up of possibilities entailed by the individualization of society” (2005: 40). Similarly, Jameson suggests that the individual has become increasingly more vulnerable, largely due to the

workings of globalisation: “no longer protected by family or region, nor even by the nation itself and its national identity, the emergence of the vulnerable subject into a world of billions of anonymous equals is bound to bring about still more momentous changes in human reality” (2015: 130).

Kirby also sees a change or, rather, a beginning of a new phase in our socio-cultural reality. However, he ties it to a specific trigger, a techno-historical event – the invention of, rapid spread of and accustomisation to digital technologies that also constitute a new form of digital textuality – thus his suggested era of “digimodernism”. Like Lipovetsky, Kirby discusses the possible end of postmodernism (or, as Kirby put it, “the arguable death of postmodernism”): the end or death, however, not as a definite collapse of the postmodern paradigm, but as an absorption. According to Kirby, “indeed, to say that something is ‘dead’ is the opposite of arguing that it never existed; it means that, no longer growing and vibrant, an entity [postmodernism – JV] has merged with the ever-expanding past and as such feeds into and inflects our present and future” (2009: 37).

As an example of postmodern tendencies merging with those of contemporary digimodernist reality, one can take the aforementioned artistic process of intertextuality. As Juvan suggests, the representation of intertextuality as an “interweaving of threads” replaced cultural influence and its water-based symbolism of “natural” flows (2008: 3). The imagery of the “interweaving of threads” is rather indicative: it differs greatly from the watery, wavy and leaky associations of influence (these also suggesting a temporal dimension – a “flow” of time or influence gradually “seeping” into an artwork) and instead implies much faster, harsher, more angular and deliberately constructed spatial configurations. Jameson indicates the “new primacy of architecture in arts” (2015: 105) as well as the more general spatial dominance over the perception of time.<sup>28</sup> In fact, intertextuality points to current tendencies in architecture (briefly discussed in Chapter 2) with its use of metal, glass and plastic (as

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<sup>28</sup> This, as Jameson suggests, results in a spatial temporality – reduction of time to the present and the renewed emphasis on space. As an example of the primacy of space, Jameson points to the installation as a paradigmatic practice of postmodern art (2015: 108–109), or the status of real estate in late capitalism: “[p]ostmodern politics is essentially a matter of land grabs, on a local as well as global scale. Whether you think of the issue of Palestine or of gentrification and zoning in American [as well as British – JV] small towns, it is that peculiar and imaginary thing called private property in land which is at stake.” (2015: 130).

opposed to more “natural” materials, like wood), creating spatial structures that are criss-crossed with straight lines and sharp angles. In the case of the celebrity spectacle, the artistic process of intertextuality as a fast-paced criss-crossing is undoubtedly present in Lady Gaga’s video for “Applause”, described at the beginning of this chapter. The “Applause” video consists of multiple (and diverse) “textual” threads that are woven together in order to create an elaborate, pluralist and somewhat chaotic “architectural” design. The postmodernist-like intertextuality of Gaga’s video, however, is now also placed, disseminated and consumed within digital “space” (the video went viral as soon as it was released), thus providing it with an additional (suggested by Kirby) digimodernist dimension.

Furthermore, as Jameson notes, we no longer simply use new technology, but instead actively consume it: “we consume its exchange value, its price along with its purely symbolic overtones” (2015: 111). Kirby proposes a few key features of digimodernist textuality<sup>29</sup> that suggest a change in how we create, and particularly how we consume, these digitally spawned realities. In the case of the pop body, taking Gaga’s “Applause” video as an example, three of these features are especially suggestive, namely onwardness, haphazardness and evanescence. From a temporal perspective, digital text carries a certain openness – while it has a clearly defined beginning, its ending is essentially uncertain. “Onwardness” suggests a tendency of “ongoing-ness” of the text or, as Kirby puts it, the digimodernist text is always “up for grabs” (2009: 52). Gaga’s video and song, after going viral, were instantly (and hedonistically) consumed: viewed, liked (or disliked), commented on and remixed, thus becoming open to continuous reworking and recycling. As a result, the future development of the Gaga’s digital text becomes “haphazard”: it can be recycled in multiple, yet undecided and unpredictable, ways. Paradoxically, however, despite its onwardness and haphazardness that could potentially suggest an artistic freedom or an ongoing commercial and consumerist influence, the digimodernist text is elusive and short-lived: according to Kirby, it “does not endure”, it is “very hard to capture and archive” and “it has no interest as a reproducible item”<sup>30</sup> (2009: 52). Gaga’s

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<sup>29</sup> Onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, reformulation and intermediation of textual roles, anonymous, multiple and social authorship, the fluid-bounded text and electronic-digitality; see Kirby (2009: 52–53).

<sup>30</sup> While I agree with Kirby that the majority of popular culture’s articulations are rarely reproduced as they are, I would argue that they hold some reproducible or, rather, recyclable value.

“Applause” was a big hit in 2013 and, while its traces continue to appear here and there (it is still consumed as a soundtrack in shopping centres and nightclubs), this particular digital text has lost its initial momentum. Such elusiveness also relates to an aspect of Lipovetsky’s suggested hypermodern insecurity: in contrast to the “authorial masterpieces” which are seen as long-lasting and influential, digimodernist configurations do not carry the power of authority or originality.



Image 3.2: Lady Gaga as a black swan in the music video from her song “Applause”

The representation of the body does not escape hyper-digimodernism and its tendencies. In case of the pop body, it becomes marked with an acute intercorporeality. Through elaborate costume and make-up changes, as well as clever CGI (computer generated imagery) technologies, Gaga’s pop body in “Applause” is as if perpetually marked by “onwardness”, a process of becoming without a finite material configuration visible: a flattened black and white image, a psychedelic black swan with a human head (Image 3.2), a winged creature or a contemporary embodiment of Botticelli’s Venus (Image 3.3). Furthermore, due to complex corporeal interweaving not only in her music videos, but also in her live shows and numerous (often deliberately staged) public appearances, Gaga’s pop body bounces in between the popular and high cultural spheres – it becomes “haphazard”. Lady Gaga is a frequently sought after pop figure appearing in media events, television talk shows and celebrity gossip magazines. Simultaneously, her body also references the “higher” spheres, as demonstrated by her interest in Pop Art (especially the work of Andy Warhol), her



brief affiliation with Slavoj Žižek<sup>31</sup>, and Marina Abramovic instructing Gaga in her method<sup>32</sup>.



Image 3.3: Lady Gaga as Botticelli's Venus in the music video for her song "Applause"

In 2013, Lady Gaga collaborated with theatre director Robert Wilson on a series of video portraits based on paintings that deal with the theme of death: Andrea Solario's *The Head of Saint John the Baptist on a Charger*, Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat* and others (all held in the Louvre, Paris). In a video portrait that recreates Jean-Augustine-Dominique Ingres' *Mademoiselle Caroline Riviere* (the portrait of a young girl who died soon after she posed for the artist), we see Gaga dressed in a costume very similar to that in the original painting (Image 3.4). She stands very still, apart from a rather subtle, barely visible, swaying of the body and a slow opening and closing of her eyes performed only once. As Amy Serafin observes, "Gaga managed to capture the maiden's dignified beauty and the knowledge that she

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<sup>31</sup> Žižek and Lady Gaga jointly participated in the UCU (lecturers' union) strike at Birkbeck College, London. In a short essay, Žižek remarks on Gaga's work as the "performance of theory" and a "cultural phenomenon"; see Žižek (2011).

<sup>32</sup> In a short video entitled *The Abramovic Method Practiced by Lady Gaga* (2013), one sees Gaga going through a series of exercises (instructed by Marina Abramovic) designed to develop skills for durational performances; see <http://vimeo.com/71919803> (accessed 18/9/2013).

was about to die” (Wallpaper, 2013). The Wilson–Gaga collaboration harks back to the work of Cindy Sherman, especially her *History Portrait*: a series of photographs in which Sherman recreated (with an astute sense of parody) the works of the “Old Masters” (the likes of Raphael’s *La Fornarina*, Jean Fouquet’s *Madonna and Christ Child*, Caravaggio’s *Sick Bacchus* and others). The process of arriving at these recreations is identical in Gaga’s and Sherman’s portraits, consisting of changing the appearance of their bodies, thereby becoming a different persona. As Kimberlee A. Cloutier-Blazzard observes, Sherman “adopts diverse personae [...] by dousing make-up, setting herself before elaborate backdrops and wearing fanciful dress” (Bread and Circus, 2007). Through performing elaborate historical recreations, Gaga’s and Sherman’s bodies work as manifestations of intercorporeal recycling: both are deliberately arranged and performed cultural refigurations, fusing past and present bodily iconographies, as well as high art and popular culture. However, while Sherman’s work, which was created between 1989 and 1990, assumed the form of photographs exhibited in a museum, Gaga’s portraits are digitised video pieces. In the case of *Mademoiselle Caroline Riviere*, Gaga eerily blinks at the viewer and, while originally exhibited as a piece of art, it is now also disseminated and consumed on the Internet as a piece of digimodernist text. As a result, Lady Gaga’s pop body becomes not only a postmodern (de-differentiated and intertextual), but also a contemporary hyper-digimodernist, phenomenon.

Popular culture, before adapting to the new media technologies, was already heterogeneous, complex and ambiguous. As Strinati put it, “popular culture is diverse because it is open to diverse uses and interpretations by different groups in society” (1995: 40, emphasis mine). Due to its openness, contemporary pop culture, just as it did with postmodern strategies, quickly swallowed and employed innovative methods and techniques from digital media and its interconnectivity. As a result of pop culture’s extensive use of digital technologies, especially social media, it has become instantaneously susceptible to varied responses, relentless critiques and spontaneous influences. Most importantly, the characteristic of openness fused with digimodernist interconnectivity endows pop culture with an ability to hyper-recycle – to copy, borrow and appropriate – almost anything, from fashion trends, musical compositions and dance styles, to neoclassical portraiture (Lady Gaga recreating Ingres’ painting)

or the use of nudity. As I will suggest later, it is even open to the outright plagiarism of previously created work.



Image3.4: Lady Gaga as Mademoiselle Caroline Riviere by Robert Wilson

### **Cultural Recycling, Indefinite Influence and the Gaga Effect**

The practice of relentless hyper-recycling should not be seen as mere mindless appropriation or superficial “anything goes”. While corresponding with the postmodern (Lyotardian) collapse of grand narratives because it dismisses (or rather largely ignores) the supremacy of the masterpiece and authenticity, contemporary popular culture does not eradicate the impact of influence altogether, but rather turns it into a flexible cultural phenomenon. As the manifestations of pop shifted from the “old” media towards new media technologies, consequently opening themselves up to an increasingly globalised production and consumption, it has become more difficult to regulate the causes and outcomes of cultural processes within the popular sphere. Kirby suggests that we can no longer accurately determine the authorship of many digimodernist texts. The authorship, Kirby claims, is often “multiple, almost

innumerable, and is scattered across obscure social pseudocommunities” (2009: 52). As a result, due to its heterogeneity, active and creative recycling processes and extensive virtual presence, popular culture is becoming progressively more spontaneous and surprising, thus retaining an element of, as I will argue later, indefinite influence. In the case of Lady Gaga’s songs, it is often difficult to ascertain the true origin of their remixes: is it Gaga herself, a particular DJ or her fans who disseminate, appropriate and reuse the song? “FireRockerzstudios” (online pseudonym) borrowed and recycled Gaga’s song “Applause” by recreating its video in the style of a popular computer game “Minecraft”. While the lyrics and video imagery of the song were altered, the music is exactly the same, thus pointing to the cultural influence of Gaga’s work. Moreover, such recycling is not confined to Gaga and is true of any reworking of popular digitised material.

The practice of borrowing, or pastiche, as Ingeborg Hoesterey demonstrates in *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, Literature* (2001), is a “recurring” event. Hoesterey traces the use of various forms of pastiche in cultural practices from ancient times up to the twentieth century. She sees pastiche or pasticcio as an ambiguous notion, historically regarded as both a positive artistic practice as well as simply an “Other of high art” (2001: 1). The term “pastiche” carries multiple meanings, like adaptation (which is closely related to intertextuality, the transposition of artistic elements between genres), appropriation (which carries a negative connotation of the intentional borrowing of artistic material), collage (a positive outlook on pastiche, originating in the cubist artistic practice of collage compositions), refiguration (the use of past styles and material in the present context, as in the Wilson–Gaga collaboration on video portraits or Sherman’s work) and simulacrum (corresponding with Baudrillard’s usage of the term), to name just a few (Hoesterey, 2001: 10–15). However, for the purposes of my discussion of contemporary popular culture and the pop body, I wish to emphasise yet another connotation of the term – the cultural strategy of recycling. Hoesterey sees recycling as a relatively new term arising from environmentalism which alludes to “not necessarily creative reuse of traditions, motifs and ways of seeing and doing by contemporary artists” as well as a “citational activity” (2001: 14). I feel the definition provided by Hoesterey is somewhat insufficient and that if expanded and developed, recycling can become a useful analytical tool, encompassing the processes of borrowing and appropriation, especially when applied

to the workings of contemporary popular culture, intercorporeality and the current status of the material body.

As a practice of waste management, recycling is the process of converting used materials into new products. During this process, recycled waste is transformed into a substance which can be converted into new goods and then eventually recycled once again. Due to this continuous reworking, the material substance does not go to waste, stagnate or decompose, but is as if continually brought back to life – activated. A slightly different form of recycling encourages the practice of reuse which constitutes a possibility for the creative application of substances and materials that previously held the negative value of unwanted waste. Such practices range from the application of discarded objects in school art projects and rubber tyres used as building foundations to plastic bottles becoming bird feeders and garden sprinklers.

Cultural artefacts, like art works, fashion trends or sonic compositions, can be (metaphorically) viewed as a pool of “recyclable waste”. Each has the potential to be reused, reworked, transformed or interwoven with other materials. In the case of Lady Gaga and her music video “Applause”, there are multiple, recycled and recyclable components (like cinematic black/white aesthetics or Botticelli’s Venus) that actively reference past, present, artistic and fictional spheres and create multiple meanings. Another example of artistic recycling is the practice of musical borrowing, or “sampling”. Initially introduced in rap music, sampling (putting snippets of different records or sounds from television, film and advertisement soundtracks into a single sonic collage) became a digital method of reproducing copies of sounds such as beats or guitar riffs and often involves an outright borrowing from original records (Mitchell, 1989: 286-287).<sup>33</sup> Consequently, we may question the overall value of such “shameless” recycling, as the resulting artefacts no longer carry the authority of the original and could be viewed as mere superficial borrowings. The notion of cultural recycling, the ability to obtain and appropriate diverse cultural material (which can break copyright laws and in some cases be regarded as an act of stealing),

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<sup>33</sup> Tony Mitchell provides the example of the record “Pump Up the Volume” produced by M/A/R/R/S, which became a hit in 1987 despite “a three-second ‘steal’ from a dance record called ‘Roadblock’”, see Mitchell (1989: 287). More recent examples include Beyonce’s “Crazy in Love” (2003) sampling The Chi-Lites’ “Are You My Woman” (1970) or Gotye’s “Somebody I Used to Know” (2011) “stealing” from Luiz Bonfá’s “Seville” (1967); for these and other examples see <http://tinyurl.com/ppkne8u> (accessed 7/7/2015).

problematizes the issues of authentication, resemblance and originality in popular culture. Therefore, while constituting a potential for “productive” cultural enterprise (it is much easier and faster to borrow creative material rather than create something original), can the practice of recycling simultaneously hold artistic value? In other words, can the artistic “product” concocted from diverse cultural materials carry some form of cultural influence?

In order to come to terms with the notion of influence and how it applies (if it applies) to the workings of recycling in contemporary popular culture, we must briefly consider the concepts of authentication, resemblance and originality. The three, David Rodowick (2001) suggests, are inevitably interrelated. Rodowick argues that originality rests on the quality of resemblance because “the idea of resemblance belongs to the era of representation” where “meaning derives from the authority of the original, an authenticating model that orders and ranks all the copies that can be derived from it” (2001: 211). In other words, originality in, for example, a piece of art, affirms and is, in return, affirmed by the quality of resemblance in copies that arose from or are in some way related to it. Resemblance, especially as an artistic representational practice, works similarly to influence (which I discussed in the context of “masterful borrowing”) because it constitutes a sense of external authority which guides the subsequent aesthetic flows and tendencies, including the authentication of value and originality of these tendencies. However, the postmodern collapse of grand narratives and the practices of de-differentiation, fragmentation and intertextuality disrupted the authenticating flows of resemblance, thus simultaneously fracturing the previously stable position and meaning of influence. As a result, the hyper-recycling processes of popular culture no longer belong to the “era of representation”; instead, they are informed by post-representational processes.

Upholding the quality of resemblance is no longer sought after; in fact, as the aforementioned recycling of Gaga’s “Applause” by “FireRockerzstudios” demonstrates, the opposite is the case: the “original” (which, in Gaga’s case, is a recycled appropriation in itself) is appropriated, reworked and fused with other influences (in this case, a computer game). The resulting “concoction”, while carrying some form of resemblance (the melody of “Applause”), does not hold the value of the “original” and, once positioned in the digital realm, is in a continuous interaction with similar recycled appropriations. While “tripping” in the incessant present and at the

same time “feeding” on the past, popular culture recycles many diverse cultural artefacts simultaneously, spontaneously and chaotically, thus making it increasingly difficult not only to define any traces of “originality” in its context, but also to predict its influence: the next “hit”, “trend” or outcome of a particular pop manifestation. Moreover, the extensive application of new media, as Rodowick observes, shook the authority of originality even further and as a result “the distinction between the original and copy has lost its relevance” (2001: 211).



Image 3.5: Lady Gaga’s fans recycling her costumes

In the case of (re)presentation and perception of the pop body, it always already reveals itself as a hybrid, intertextual and intercorporeal manifestation: simultaneously interwoven with visual, bodily, sexual, cultural and many other forms of recycled material and connotations, thus inevitably disrupting the authenticating values of resemblance or originality. Moreover, as noted previously, it is increasingly disseminated through digital media which heightens and increases the opportunities for further recycling. Nevertheless, I want to argue that in the context of popular culture and its bodily manifestations, the possibility of influence is not completely abolished. Instead, and precisely due to continuous, spontaneous and at times surprising cultural recycling, we are presented with examples of “influential” pop

phenomena, as demonstrated by the presently discussed Lady Gaga.<sup>34</sup> The “influence” of this pop star, however, differs from that of the authenticating resemblance and instead can be seen as largely indefinite.

While the “influence” of some sort can be discerned in Gaga’s work, due to the fragmentation of resemblance and disrupted authoritarian ties between originals and the copies, it is difficult to identify its exact sources and causes. Is it the recycling and shameless appropriation of her songs that provides her artistic work with a (short-) lasting impression of influence? Or is it her ever-changing “monstrous” personae, “schizophrenic” imagery that she creates with her pop body and, sometimes outrageous, choices of costume (which I will discuss later)? In the photographs of her live performances, there is a large number of fans dressed in costumes that enthusiastically (and rather amateurishly) mimic Gaga’s style, latest gimmicks and “guises” (Image 3.5). I propose that the quality of influence in this case (as well as in the cases of the recycling of Gaga’s songs) is not fixed and does not follow a “rigid plan” of representational resemblance. Instead, Gaga’s influence is indefinite, by which I mean innovative and flexible, thus always already, on the spot and in real time, subject to change, happening in dialogue with other pop cultural influences, recycling and digital interconnectivity.

This is not to say that the popular culture industries and their influence are not largely predetermined and carefully regulated by large corporations, financial capital, hierarchy, mass media and internal (as well as external) politics. However, I wish to propose that the chimerical interweaving of intertextual threads, new media’s “onwardness” and “haphazardness”, and the process of cultural recycling provide a possibility for a collapse within the regulated workings of pop. And it is precisely this collapse that I refer to in my notion of the “Gaga Effect”. The Gaga Effect, which, as the name suggests, refers to the likes of Lady Gaga, whose pop body, while manipulated by popular culture industries and the consumer market, gathered enough aesthetic momentum to configure glimpses of indefinite influence. The “Effect” occurs as a response to a pop body’s stardom and manifests itself through the body and its hybrid intercorporeality.

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<sup>34</sup> We should also mention the often referenced David Bowie (especially his “Ziggy Stardust” persona) and Madonna as historical examples of culturally “influential” pop stars.



Nevertheless, there is one common feature which links most instances of the Gaga Effect within contemporary popular culture: despite their popularity, fandom, digimodernist dissemination and viral qualities – rapid appearance, acceleration, diversification and global interconnectivity – they are evanescent. The Gaga Effect lasts a few days or weeks (sometimes even years) and then disappears or, rather, is replaced by something new.

### 3.2. Striptease Culture

Popular culture played a significant role in the sexualisation of and “striptease” in Western society. Theorists, including John Fiske (1989), Brian McNair (2002) and José Prieto-Arranz (2012), refer to the pop star Madonna when discussing the process of sexualisation in general and the imagery used by the popular music industry in particular. Madonna is seen as a pioneer of, specifically female, sexual liberation. Her overtly sexualised pop body caused considerable controversy at the time: it was viewed as outrageous and objectifying the female body by some, while celebrated and seen as a form of positive empowerment by others. Fiske remarks on Madonna’s pop imagery as a possible “threat” to patriarchal symbolic systems and definitions of femininity and masculinity (1989: 99). McNair notes that her sexual transgressions (costumes, live performances and music videos) often carried explicit pornographic tendencies and that she was one of the first performers in the pop music industry to appropriate pornography in the context of the mass market (2002: 66). Finally, Prieto-Arranz argues that Madonna can be seen as a postmodern icon, especially because she deliberately constructed her body to create a complex interplay between sex and religion in her work (2012: 176).

The preoccupation with pornographic imagery continues to saturate Western popular culture in the twenty-first century. 2013 saw a number of high-profile hypersexualised manifestations of the pop body: Miley Cyrus’ “twerking” performance during the live broadcast of the MTV Video Music Awards (Image 3.6), Britney Spears’ music video for the song “Work B\*\*ch” (full of references to sadomasochistic practices) and the “soft porn” in Rihanna’s glorified portrayal of strippers in her “Pour it Up” music video (Image 3.7). Such manifestations unquestionably place the body at the epicentre of the dramaturgical configuration of pop. The three cited instances appeared in a quick succession, as if contemporary popular culture had suddenly gone into a frenzy concerning sex and polymorphous corporeal expressions of sexuality. However, there is nothing “contemporary” about the imagery of these hypersexualised bodies. Instead, the industry employs common stereotypes from the past: suggestive trembling of tight bottoms, provocative gestures and near-pornographic nudity play on familiar manifestations of desire and curiosity. While disseminated as

a digimodernist text via Internet websites and high definition screens, thus more easily accessible and clearly visible than ever, the sexualised pop body itself echoes that of historical striptease as an expression of carnal desire.

The title of the present section, “Striptease Culture”, is a recycled appropriation. Originally suggested by McNair in *Striptease Culture* (2002), it connotes the Western culture as saturated by eroticism, self-exhibition, “soft porn” and “sex talk”. In McNair’s account, “striptease culture”, while influenced by media activity and arising from sex industries like striptease, pornography and, to some extent, prostitution, is also participated in by ordinary people who are not for the most part interested in the sexual arousal of their audiences (2002: 88). The contemporary world that we inhabit, as McNair puts it, is “a world of plural sexualities and [...] this diversity of sexual identities exist alongside many other elements of modern life” (2002: 4). One such element of modern life is the popular media and its involvement in the sexual revolution of the twentieth century. The media, especially with the successive developments and digitisation of new media technologies, played a substantial role in the “accelerating flows of sexual information within and between national boundaries, and erosion of the patriarchal state’s capacity to block out or censor that information” (McNair, 2002: 11). Accordingly, the new media has increased and simplified the communication of sexual content, leading to more pluralistic sexual manifestations. McNair sees this as a “democratization of desire”: simplified and extended access to sexual expression and representation, as well as the emergence of a diversified sexual culture (2002: 11-12).

However, once presumably liberated and diversified, what happens to sexual imagery, more specifically to the sexualised body, in the popular sphere? Does this newly liberated body acquire original, unexpected sexualities? Or is it quite the opposite: sexuality (including its commercial power in the form of consumerist desire) remains on the same ontological level and it is only the tools and configurations of sexual expression that change, together with the new technologies. In other words, can we argue that the imagery of plural sexualities is continually appropriated and recycled by popular culture industries as well as the new media? If this is the case, then what happens to the contemporary body and its “striptease” in the process of such recycling?

The emphasis on “diversified sexual culture” also shed a new light on the conceptualisation of gender. In fact, the two – the socially constructed and biological categories of sexual body and gender – “became enmeshed” with one another (McNair, 2002: 3), thus providing a renewed understanding of sexual identity. Gender theories vary from “naturalistic” and essentialist positions regarding the body as the determining factor in subject formation, to post-structuralist views of the body as socially “cultivated” and engendered via quasi-natural appearances or gender “acts” performed by the subject (Butler), as well as a mixture of both theoretical positions, taking into account the body’s material existence as a foundation onto which gender and sexual identities are gradually inscribed (Grosz). In contradistinction to these accounts, including that of McNair, and their dealings with identity when discussing the workings of sexuality, I wish to place an emphasis on the role played by the material body in contemporary “striptease culture”. The emphasis on bodily materiality allows me to expose that extra layer of meaning – in between organic and representational, informed by both fleshy and cultural workings – argued for in this thesis. As a result, I argue for the sexualisation of the pop body: sexually suggestive workings, imagery, renderings and connotations constituted by and through those “twerking” bottoms, provocative gestures and exposed skin we see in the likes of Cyrus, Spears and Rihanna. This will allow an investigation of what the pop body becomes when situated in the hypersexually charged dramaturgical configuration of popular culture.

In the section “Recycled New Realism”, bodily manifestations were intentionally reduced to the form of hyper-digimodernist textuality. The present section, by stressing the prominence of the body and its sexualisation, will delve deeper into the fleshy realms of the pop body, especially, and prompted by McNair’s configuration of “striptease culture”, the pop body’s interplay with the body of the stripper. Nevertheless, I continue questioning the tendency of recycling which has arguably permeated contemporary pop culture and ask if, in light of the ever-expanding sexualisation of the body, the notion of “striptease” can be understood as a more substantial metaphor for the workings of pop. Specifically, can striptease be seen as an act of revealing (and simultaneously masking) the recycled iconography and dramaturgy of the sexualised body?



Image 3.6: Miley Cyrus at MTV's Video Music Awards, 2013

The practice of striptease, both as an actual act of seductive removal of clothing as well as a wider cultural metaphor, is a long established, often discussed and widely referenced phenomenon. I briefly look at this phenomenon, especially the figure of the stripper, in order to draw some parallels between the tendencies of historical striptease and the contemporary preoccupation with “striptease culture”. It is important to note, however, that in this instance I intentionally avoid the questions of sexual exploitation and objectification (issues that are undoubtedly implied in the sexualisation of popular culture) of the, especially female, subject by pop culture industries and the new media. Instead, I use pop culture’s obsession with the sexualised body in order to expose the contemporary aspects of striptease: namely, the striptease as a hyper-digimodern, deliberately arranged and recycled spectacle of artful fantasy. The notions of artful fantasy, ephemeral spectacle, etc. are prominent in recent striptease discourse. They work as an attempt to unmask the deliberate codification of the stripper’s body, thus problematising the “real” body that is being revealed. And while some close links can be established between the pop body and the body of the stripper, especially as the pop body also creates an artful fantasy of and around itself (something I later call the “second skin”), I argue that the pop body’s “striptease” (because it is always already a recycled appropriation) is even further removed from the representation of the “real” body.

### **Striptease, Artful Fantasies and the Second Skin**

In her book *Stripping, Sex and Popular Culture* (2007), Catherine M. Roach provides a thorough social and cultural analysis of striptease as a professional occupation. In her various accounts of striptease clubs (Roach visited quite a few while conducting her study) and numerous observations on and interviews with exotic dancers and sex “goddesses”, one notion is frequently repeated – that of fantasy. Roach argues that striptease acquires the quality of fantasy because the act of stripping can be seen as a theatrical as well as hyper-feminised spectacle (2007: 38). The stripper body is achieved by careful and deliberate consideration, preparation and investment. It is “shaved, moisturized, perfumed, made-up, coiffed, painted, polished, buffed, clad, shod, and [only] then stripped – [it] takes a huge effort to produce and maintain. It is an ideal that is clearly not natural, but is a construction and artefact of the culture” (2007: 45). As a result of such painstaking “polishing” of the material body, together with its situatedness within a specific dramaturgical configuration (the smoky and darkened strip club, with the body often seen from below as the stripper is performing on a raised and lit stage), the body assumes an image of the artful “ideal”, moreover a theatricalised “ideal”.

The overture of stripping (including both the backstage and onstage activity) can be easily compared to the idyllic image of an actress or pop star who is carefully preparing for her role in the changing room, putting her make-up on and eventually appearing in the spotlight. In addition, both the stripper and pop bodies are marked by (and highly theatrical) temporality: they appear on stage (or flicker on digital screens), deliver their performance and then disappear the moment the performance is over. In the case of the stripper body, as continuously emphasised by Roach, many exotic dancers see striptease as a temporary occupation or transitional space: not only because the stripper body is a young and fit one which cannot last very long, but also because most dancers want to save money while stripping (it can be a very profitable profession) and move on to a different career. Finally, both the stripper and the pop star create, in most cases, an intangible spectacle: the spectator is allowed to view the body, but not to touch. You are spatially removed from this hypersexualised performance – encouraged to immerse yourself in the erotic fantasy created and be

aroused by it, but not to satisfy the arousal through any physical contact or sexual act. The artful fantasy created by the stripper and the pop body entertains our sexual desires, but the desire itself is left fundamentally unfulfilled and impotent.



Image 3.7: Rihanna in her “Pour It Up” music video, 2013

In the process of becoming a stripper, the material body is patched up, underplayed and, in some instances, “disappears” completely. Therefore, in the case of striptease (and, as I will argue in Chapter 4, also in the case of nudity in theatre), the act of stripping, instead of functioning as the sexual revelation of female or male flesh, masks the very flesh it exposes. What we see, then, is not the body, but the body of a stripper – a culturally determined “ideal” fantasy. Roach’s suggested “hyper-feminisation” adds a further perspective on the stripper body: through the use of make-up, costume, high heels and other “polishing” techniques, the body becomes highly stylised or, to put it differently, constitutes a carefully and artfully arranged corporeal manifestation. As a result, with the material bodily reality underplayed or masked, the sexually evocative imagery is achieved through the sexualisation of the body itself: suggestive iconography, physical gestures and their connotations. The artfully

arranged body becomes the locus of the sexual fantasy, however, not because of the bodily exposure, but by shrouding the body in sexual imagery and illusions which I see as the “second skin”.

The carefully constructed “second skin” of the stripper points to the extra layer of meaning achieved through the body’s materiality (in this instance, paradoxically, by masking this materiality) and directly corresponds with that of the pop body. This “skin” is carefully thought out, arranged and dramaturgically configured, created through and around the body. In Rihanna’s “Pour It Up” music video, the pop star is dressed in an explicitly revealing costume: very small briefs and what looks like a bra made of precious stones that barely covers her breasts. The lyrics of the song and the sexualised imagery created by her body point to the glorification of striptease: she has hundred dollar bills plastered onto her skin, repeatedly performs the action of opening her thighs, placing a gloved hand on her genitalia, seductively humping the “throne” she is seated on and moving her hips to suggest sexual intercourse. Just as with the stripper body, Rihanna’s pop body is carefully “buffed” and “polished” (with make-up and a wig as well as, presumably, having been digitally airbrushed), thus masking its fleshy corporeality and becoming an “ideal”. As a result, while her material reality is implied (especially in the physical action), the stardom of Rihanna’s pop body is largely performed via her “second skin” which becomes the primary referent when watching a prancing, writhing and “twerking” celebrity whose pop body creates a compelling and entertaining spectacle. The configuration of the “second skin” partially works as the surface body or the border between the outside world and inner corporeality, both discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. As the notion of a “second skin” suggests, it covers the body, thus creating an outer layer. In contrast to von Hagens’ plastinates and their material “new skin” (the solid and rubbery border which contains their preserved viscera), however, the materiality of the “second skin” works only as a tool for creating a fantasy, an illusion or, as Dahlia Schweitzer put it when discussing striptease, “an ephemeral image” which is a mere “construction of eroticism as unreal and intangible as a character in a film” (200: 66).

The fantasy created by the “second skin” of the stripper body is directed at the spectator. As Schweitzer observes, in maintaining a physical and/or conceptual distance engendered by the illusionary quality of her body, the female stripper acts out a specific persona: she “stays unreal by becoming the vamp, the coquette, the rock



star, the rodeo queen, the Barbie doll, the Southern belle, the Grecian goddess, the femme fatale, the dominatrix, the virgin bride, the nun – the possibilities are endless” (2000: 67–68); while the desirable “characters” performed by male strippers vary from something as mundane as a pizza deliverer to a cowboy, fireman or police officer<sup>35</sup>. However, as Roach gathered from her interviews with exotic dancers, the stripper also creates a fantasy of and for herself:

It’s like a masquerade ball or Halloween dress-up party in which we get to play with a part of our sexuality, to loosen up the reins on an aspect of self usually constrained into narrower socially sanctioned outlets (2007: 38, emphasis mine).

The created fantasy is, therefore, not only manifesting as a desire-inducing spectacle dedicated solely to the spectator, however intangible. It also manifests itself as a private affair, private play and private illusion – and it belongs to the dancers themselves. The stripper (and presumably the pop star) allows herself to “play sexuality”, the aspect of the sexualisation of the body which will recur in Chapter 4 in my discussion of nudity. The artful fantasy becomes a shared fantasy, experience and performance – acted out by both stripper (pop body) and spectator. However, as Roach observes, the content of such fantasies rarely coincides, and instead “two very different and essentially conflicting scripts are often going on within the consciousness of each actor” (2007: 71).

### **Striptease Recycled**

Despite the, sometimes rather seamless, parallels that can be drawn between stripper and pop bodies, in light of the hyper-digimodernist workings of popular culture discussed in the previous section, the artful fantasy created by and around the popular body becomes questionable. If we agree with the statement that the stripper body is an artful fantasy which is deliberately arranged through the workings of the “second skin” and, moreover, this body is also intangible, where does that leave the material pop body and its striptease? I propose that the sexualised pop body is marked by a curious paradox. On one hand, the pop body’s sexuality merely mimics the stripper body’s, therefore also mimicking the artful fantasy. On the other hand, the pop

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<sup>35</sup> See <http://tinyurl.com/oythalb> (accessed on 11/09/2013).

body further masks the material body already shrouded by the workings of striptease. Just as it does with past artefacts, aesthetics or sonic configurations, popular culture borrows, reuses, appropriates – or, to put it simply, recycles – the historical iconography of striptease, thus also recycling the artful fantasies and “second skins” created by it.

The three pop music icons mentioned at the beginning of this section – Miley Cyrus, Britney Spears and Rihanna – temporarily appropriated the “second skin” of a highly sexualised body with all of its corporeal paraphernalia (provocative behaviour, sadomasochism, stripper persona), thus creating a fantasy of an artful fantasy: Cyrus provocatively sticking her tongue out, slapping a dancer’s buttocks, rubbing her groin with a glove resembling a large hand and repeatedly thrusting her hips while surrounded by dancing teddy bears (thus creating an odd fusion of openly displayed sexuality and infantilism); Spears embodying a dominatrix par excellence and recreating sadomasochist imagery by slashing one dancer with a large whip or turning on a vibrator placed in another dancer’s mouth; and Rihanna glorifying striptease as described above. To question the reasons for such sexualisation of the pop body is rather futile: to put it simply, sex sells. Sexual iconography and dramaturgies, the whole historical plethora of striptease and sexual pleasure is a powerful commodity and promotional tool. The irony, however, is that what the pop body sells is a mere recycled appropriation of striptease culture.

On the other hand, as Victor Corona observes, if it is done artfully and convincingly, the artifice constructed by the celebrity body “can be even more compelling than the person behind the persona if it forcefully reflects the sullied truths of contemporary life” (2013: 727). The sexualised spectacles created by Cyrus, Spears and Rihanna are undoubtedly convincing: they are fast paced, “flashy”, self-confident, provocative, physically engaging (by employing dance choreographies) and even exhilarating. The sexualisation of their bodies, despite being a fantasy of a fantasy, is heightened, gripping and thus instantly seductive. While it is questionable whether these spectacles reflect the “sullied truths of contemporary life” with their imagery or content, they quickly become the stuff of contemporary life, especially of the digimodernist discourse – they constitute the “ongoing” and “haphazard” textualities that are quickly disseminated, consumed, commented on, shared and very often re-recycled.

The paradox of the sexualisation of the pop body and the resulting recycled “striptease” can, however, reflect the “sullied truth” of contemporary popular culture in general, because it works as a wider metaphor for this culture. The pop body is involved in continual attempts at exposition of the “real”. The sexualised manifestations of pop often reveal the naked skin behind the costume. The material body, however, as I argued previously, is inevitably masked by the deliberately arranged artful fantasy, therefore, the “real” revelation never takes place. Nevertheless, popular culture persists in revealing the “real” body behind the celebrity’s “second skin” (along with others, Britney Spears has disclosed her un-airbrushed body next to digitally altered images<sup>36</sup>). With such acts of revelation, the pop body continually toys with the representation of the “real” or “authentic” phenomena of everyday life. The revelation, however, is simultaneously superseded by the process of masking. Just as the stripper body masks its very nudity the moment it is exposed, popular culture conceals the pop body behind multiple “second skins”. Moreover, by creating hypersexualised, hyperattractive, fast paced and seductive spectacles, it conceals the very fact that these “second skins” are often borrowed and appropriated past manifestations employed in the creation and dissemination of contemporary ones. As a result, it masks the process of cultural recycling itself.

The pop body is caught in between the two sides of cultural workings, as if playing a leading role in a game of reveal/mask peep show. Furthermore, this body is now situated, consumed and recycled within the digital realm: Miley Cyrus’ instigated wave of “twerking” videos quickly went viral. There are not only other celebrities and non-celebrities having a go at provocative shaking of the buttocks, but also, for example, a video of “twerking turkeys” created and digitally disseminated just in time for Thanksgiving in 2013<sup>37</sup>. With its workings of intercorporeality stretched to extremes – at the same time exposed and concealed, real and un/surreal, human and non/posthuman, original and recycled – the body becomes a heterogeneous spectacle. And while the discourse of contemporary striptease, at least allegedly, still grapples with the fleshy reality of the body (the very same naked buttocks can be used as an

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<sup>36</sup> See <http://tinyurl.com/y3pxrl2> (accessed on 13/5/2015).

<sup>37</sup> See <http://tinyurl.com/ovqlckk> (accessed on 13/5/2015).

example here), does not the digitisation of the pop body increase the plausibility of ephemeral “second skins”, thus also calling into question the body’s materiality?

### 3.3. Designer Ideology: The Creation of a Viral Pop Monster

As the section title – “designer ideology” – implies, in our everyday reality we no longer simply consume necessary goods (food, clothing, etc.); we now also consume their “surfaces” – signs and imagery that these goods represent, be it a popular brand, label or product. The dominance of “surfaceness” implies the emphasis contemporary Western society puts on visuality itself: “we increasingly consume images and signs for their own sake rather than for their ‘usefulness’ or the deeper values they may symbolise” (Strinati, 1995: 225). As an example, one can take the expansion of the fashion industry and the growing appeal of famous designer labels, both of which have changed consumer behaviour. The popularity or “prestige” of the label forms an influential part of popular imagery: it draws attention to itself and often away from the very object it is attached to, similarly to the way in which the deliberately constructed “second skin”, the fantasy of striptease, draws our attention away from the “real” body. Popular imagery is being disseminated and, in many cases, exaggerated by mass media (advertising, television and social media) which gradually saturates other societal and cultural systems, including the perception of the body. As observed by Strinati, continuous media saturation and consumption has erased the boundary between culture and social order. On a fundamental level, Strinati claims, “popular cultural signs and media images increasingly dominate our sense of reality, and the way we define ourselves and the world around us” (1995: 224).

Furthermore, as John Fiske argues, popular culture “often centres on the body and its sensations [...] for the bodily pleasures offer carnivalesque, evasive, liberating practices” (1989: 6). The recent surge of such bodily entertainment has included countless television programmes dealing with weight loss, such as *Extreme Weight Loss* (ABC, 2011–present) which follows eight participants who, with the help of personal trainer Chris Powell, spend twelve months trying to shed weight; other examples include *The Biggest Loser*, a spin-off of an American series shown in the UK between 2005 and 2012 (Living TV and ITV) and *Heavy* (A&E, 2011–present). All of these programmes follow a similar reality television “script” (sometimes called “Fat TV”<sup>38</sup>) where, with the help of experts (trainers and dieticians), participants

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<sup>38</sup> See <http://www.about-face.org/the-list-of-fat-tv-shows-keeps-on-growing/> (8/6/15).

display their large, “heavy” physicalities in the hope of them becoming slightly smaller and lighter. Channel 4’s reality documentary *The Undateables* (2012–present) pushes the idea of bodily “carnavalesque” even further: the show presents people with diverse physical (dwarfism, Apert syndrome [which causes malformations of the face, hands and feet], neurofibromatosis [which causes nerve tissue to grow tumours]) and mental (Asperger’s syndrome, autism) difficulties<sup>39</sup> and helps them to find a date. And while in his review Michael Pilgrim states that the documentary “got the balance about right, because those taking part were allowed to reveal their character and depth” (*The Telegraph*, 2015), it is the initial suggestion of these particular people being “undateable” that sparks viewer interest (why are they undateable?). The “undateability” often centres on a particular physical predicament of the body being displayed. Therefore, while supposedly a tactful, sensitive and balanced display of the body, *The Undateables* inevitably reminds us of a freakshow. This is not at all surprising because, as Rosemary Garland Thomson claims, the contemporary fascination with the body (especially in celebrity culture) has descended from freaks and their performances (1996: 13) – a subject I return to at the end of this section.

As my discussion in the previous sections suggested, popular culture is heterogeneous, responsive to cultural changes and shifts, quick to recycle past and present cultural articulations and even quicker to appropriate new technological developments. Advances in digital technologies and the increased presence of virtual reality have undoubtedly influenced bodily manifestations of pop by providing them with Kirby’s suggested onwardness, haphazardness and evanescence. In order to pursue my analysis of the body and its intercorporeality further, in this section I wish to further question the material status of the hyper-digitised pop body. I follow and apply two main lines of inquiry: first, I reconsider Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the “disappearing” body; and, second, I look at digitised corporeality – virtually constructed bodies and their relationship with the “real”. Baudrillard’s poststructuralist ideas and the postcorporeal new media discourse suggest that the material body, once positioned in the context of contemporary popular culture, begins to disappear: it gradually sheds its fleshy reality and becomes merely a flattened and ephemeral image, an asexual sign or a morphing virtual “amoeba”. Both discourses

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<sup>39</sup> See the list of participants here: <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-undateables/profiles> (8/6/15).

argue that such, rather extreme, instances of the disappearing body are mainly caused by the shift in popular culture – the mass consumerist favouring of the visible. Moreover, as in the case of striptease discussed in the previous section, popular culture often masks the very body it represents, resulting in the perceptual emphasis falling not on the overall image of the body, but only its surface – the artificially constructed “second skin”.

However, and contrary to Baudrillard’s views, the material body itself is far from disappearing. As the examples of Extreme Weight Loss, *The Undateables* and others demonstrate, contemporary popular culture has shown an increasing interest in all things bodily, from contrasting shapes and sizes to the disabled, physically impaired body. As a result, I see a need for an alternative understanding of corporeality in the contemporary hyper-digimodernist context. Mark Hansen suggests that “rather than conceiving the virtual as a total technical simulacrum and as the opening of a fully immersive, self-contained fantasy world”, virtual reality should be viewed as part and parcel of our mixed reality paradigm (2006a: 5). In other words, we always already operate in a mixed reality where different realities, instead of constituting clear cut boundaries, are intimately interconnected, informing, influencing and filtering into one another. In terms of the material body, as I demonstrate at the end of this section, some corporeal configurations become “viral”, not only in the sense of the rapid spreading of digital information or imagery, as the term is commonly used, but also by being replicated physically, “infecting” our physicality. While created in the “technical simulacrum” and “fantasy” world of the virtual, some bodily chimaeras find their way back into the flesh and blood reality.

### **The Disappearing Body**

Baudrillard, in light of progressively effective structures of late capitalist production and consumption, claims that the human body, pushed to the forefront of consumers’ attention, became objectified. Moreover, the body, due to its “rediscovery” as a compelling object in popular cultural industries like advertising and fashion, became a profitable product in itself, a fetish (2005: 277). Baudrillard discusses the eroticisation of our consumerist society, especially in the fashion industry. However, instead of focusing on the workings of striptease culture and its

“sexualisation” of the body with heightened attention to sensuality, sexual desire and pornographic imagery, he remarks on the complete opposite – the utter asexuality of the body portrayed. According to Baudrillard, “the fashion model’s body is no longer an object of desire, but a functional object, a forum of signs in which fashion and erotic are mingled [...]. It is no longer, strictly speaking, a body, but a shape” (2005: 280, emphasis in the original).

If seen as an object that exudes nothing but meaningless consumerist desire, the body loses its physical significance and becomes merely functional: yet another attractive and alluring product on the late capitalist shelf, just like the hourglass-shaped “Barbie” doll (a subject I return to later in the section). Moreover, as the last quotation suggests, the body is now in the process of losing its very bodiliness – the material flesh and blood – and is becoming a “shape”, even an ephemeral sign, very similar to the stripper body discussed in the previous section. Baudrillard expands on this argument and substantiates the idea of a “disappearing” body by comparing it to the transcendental qualities of the soul. As the idea of the soul is no longer able to ensure “ideological integration” in the “developed productivist system” of increasingly secular Western society, the body stands in as a substitute. Therefore, the body, like the soul before it, becomes “an idea, or, rather – since the term ‘idea’ does not mean much – it is a hypostasized part-object, a double privileged and invested as such” (Baudrillard, 2005: 282).

If applied to the manifestations of pop, such objectification, privilege and investment turns the pop body into an explicitly displayed and visible image rapidly flickering on advertisement, television and computer screens. In the case of the celebrity pop body, every material inch is scrutinised by the mainstream media: starting with the clothes or costumes it wears, ending with its hairstyles, breast measurements and even the fertility of its uterus (media coverage of Kate Middleton, intensified by her “royal” pregnancies, comes to mind here). Reality television, such as weightloss programmes or *The Undateables*, is now also exposing non-celebrity bodies with their plethora of undesirable shapes, disabilities and difficulties. Paradoxically, however, as I argued in the “Striptease Culture” section, the body itself, its fleshy materiality, is largely absent; or, rather, the material body’s visibility is highly restricted.



The pop body is caught up in the process of recycled striptease: revealed and stripped bare of its clothing and sometimes its dignity, yet simultaneously masked and covered up by its “second skin”. The celebrity pop body is surrounded by tight rows of security personnel, hidden behind sunglasses or, as in the more radical example of Michael Jackson, utterly masked by plastic surgery and large amounts of white make-up. Stardom in itself can be seen as the “second skin”, which can be “peeled off” from the physical body and which becomes a free-floating, virtual construct, open to continuous visibility and alteration. The avalanche of imagery of and about celebrity and non-celebrity pop bodies suggests that their materiality becomes “flattened”, thus closely corresponding to the contemporary visual representations of “flawless” and “perfected” skin discussed in Chapter 1. Due to its flatness, we now only perceive the image of this body. As a result, the pop body is easily accessible, but mostly as a surface: a magazine cover spread or brief appearances on television and computer screens.

### ***Digitised “Second Skin”***

I borrowed the notion of “second skin” (which I introduced in the previous section) from the world of tattoo parlours where it implies an artificially and artfully created extra layer or garment which is inscribed on the physical body. In my discussion, however, the connotations of the term acquire a slightly different meaning. While created through and around the body, the pop body’s “second skin” is materially further removed from a tattoo, where the ink is directly injected into the outer layers of the bodily flesh, thus decorating the body. Instead, it works as the “ideal” fantasy of the stripper, as well as the virtual body and ever-morphing avatars it creates while inhabiting the “synthetic spaces”<sup>40</sup> of the digital world. Also, it is important to note that in my discussion of the pop body, a “second skin” does not imply the existence of a “first” skin – a primary or essential corporeal dimension of some sort. Instead, the “second skin” points towards the increased multiplication of bodily representation and perception, the working of intercorporealities. The “second skin” works as a conceptual construct, an intangible yet perceptible layer which, depending on the

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<sup>40</sup> The term coined by Edward Castronova. See Castronova, Edward (2005), *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

context the body is situated in, masks certain bodily qualities or exposes others. Similarly, the “first skin” can also be seen as a cultural construct, expressed through the (arguably unattainable) qualities of a pure, untouched or unmediated skin.

The documentary *Second Skin* (2008) exposes the everyday reality of MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role playing game) gamers. In contrast to Western obsession with authenticity, materiality and the “real” body which I touched upon in the previous chapter when discussing von Hagens’ plastinates, *Second Skin* points towards a different kind of fascination – that of being better than our embodied self. During the course of the documentary, which looks into the everyday reality of gamers, their habits and the role MMO games play in their lives (including, in extreme cases, the computer game taking over the subject’s life completely), this better self, the “synthetically” generated cyber-avatar, is visually projected onto the gamers themselves, thus juxtaposing (but also cunningly comparing) the two. The method of merging gamers’ bodies with those of their avatars not only simulates the appropriation which presumably happens when you are obsessively playing a computer game, but also works as their “second skin” – a virtual construct which points towards the “disappearing” of the material body from the perceptual field.

As the popularity of MMO games shows, the body was very quickly swallowed up by rapidly expanding virtual realities which produce numerous ways of representing and perceiving the body. Most significant and persistent of these was the constitution the body attained once placed in the “virtual” realm – that of the aforementioned onwardness and haphazardness, of a body without limits. The moment the body crossed the threshold between “real” and “virtual” and became the “virtual body”, it lost its biological rhythms. As Varga observes, the virtual body no longer follows the natural pattern from birth to death and instead “can be rejuvenated” and “moved around on the time scale” (2005: 210). Moreover, Varga suggests that the virtual body also becomes immortal. The immortality here, however, does not correspond with that of many religious beliefs (2005: 210). Instead, the body becomes immortal in the sense that it is situated within a manifold, heterogeneous and continuously morphing digitised textuality, locked within a mediatised “here and now” continuum.

Vicky Kirby also observes the proliferation of post-corporeal discourses when it comes to the virtual body. According to Kirby, when “freed from the wet net of any carnal mooring, there are no apparent limits to the complex identities that these hybrid avatars of virtual life may assume” (1997: 129–130). The loss of materiality, the erasure of the “wet net” of our carnal being, can point towards an ultimate cyberspace utopia – the free-floating, “perfected” fantasy of the subject, freed from the leaky, meaty and often clumsy stuff of the material body. The virtual body, therefore, becomes a sum of digital dots, a visual collage of pixels – a computer generated image which can be arranged and rearranged in any number of ways. In the MMO *Second Life*, the player’s avatar can get a baby unicorn, however, as blogger Tenshi Vielle observes, “they come with a price”: “you can only get them by having sex with an adult unicorn [...] located at the bel Highland sim in a shop called Sensual Stoneworks” (2007). The imagery of baby unicorn conception Vielle provides is graphic, involving interspecies sex (Image 3.8). As another blogger, Noko Marie, opines, “first, this is bestiality and is sick; second, these are pixels so who on earth cares” (2007). The digital recreation of a carnal act which carries ethical concerns as well as material connotations and associations (some might even find it arousing) is promptly reduced to mere “pixels”: a fantasy of the “second skin” in *Second Life* which is fundamentally acorporeal.

When applied to the pop body, the virtual image of the body becomes yet another configuration of the flattened “second skin”. However, rather than plastered over shop windows or bus stops, the virtual “second skin” is disseminated across networks as data to be displayed on digital screens. Similarly to the avatar in computer gaming, the pop body can be morphed with other bodies, animal-based entities or objects.<sup>41</sup> It can be “Photoshopped” and “airbrushed”, made skinnier or larger (its race and age being just as malleable), thus able to conform to each and every possible consumerist desire. Virtual pop body formations are sufficiently numerous to raise a question of whether this (relatively) new corporeal haphazardness poses the danger of the material body ultimately dissolving into the cyber-ether.

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<sup>41</sup> As an example, see “Celebrity Heads on Animal Bodies” blog, <http://celebrityheadsonanimalbodies.blogspot.co.uk/> (9/6/2015).



Image 3.8: Interspecies sex in Second Life

While it could be argued that both Baudrillard's objectified body of late capitalism and the virtual body point towards the gradual disappearance of material corporeality, the fleshy reality of which is covered up, smoothed out, digitised and free to engage in sex with unicorns, as I noted at the beginning of this section, interest in the body itself, as well as the multiplicity of intercorporeal representations of the body, are far from disappearing. Furthermore, the heterogeneous and chaotic workings of hyperdigitised popular culture do not erase human materiality altogether because, at times, digitally spawned fantasies of the "second skin" filter back into our flesh. Instead of being confined to one particular dramaturgical configuration, the pop body is freely floating from one representational reality to another, traversing the textual, visual, material and digital realms, all equally affective and influential. Hansen sees such a process of uninterrupted traversal (of cultural manifestations and especially of our perception of and interface with these manifestations) as a basis for understanding contemporary reality as mixed. While fundamentally different, the multiple realities we immerse ourselves in and inhabit carry equal ontological status. We almost seamlessly went from consuming printed images to using digitised ones. Moreover, according to Hansen, we engage with all these realities through our embodied agency, especially through motor activity (pushing buttons, swiping screens). As a result,

virtual, digitised reality can be treated as “simply one more realm among others that can be accessed through embodied perception or enaction” (Hansen, 2006a: 5).

Popular culture has created a proliferation of, often rather “freakish”, imagery, some of which we not only consume visually or through motor activity, but also engage with bodily. The following section presents examples of such interaction or, more appropriately, embodied interface: real life Barbie and Ken dolls, “doll-eyed” contact lenses and another look at Lady Gaga, her “monstrous” persona, and the Gaga Effect as manifested within her fan base. In all of these cases, the fantasy of the pop body and the “second skin”, both plastic and virtual, goes “viral”; however, it is replicated and disseminated not digitally, but materially, thus seeping back into the material reality of the body and creating viral pop “monsters” that remain embodied.

### ***The Spectacle of Freaks: Pop Monster goes Viral... and Stays Embodied***

As Rosemary Garland Thomson (1996) demonstrates, over the centuries, the perception of the anomalous human body has undergone a profound transformation. Initially seen as awe-inspiring and a sublime wonder of the divine, with the rise of scientific discourse, the monstrous lost the quality of “enchantment”. As Thomson put it, “by challenging the boundaries of the human and the coherence of what seemed to be the natural world, monstrous bodies appeared as [...] merging the terrible with the wonderful, equalizing repulsion with attraction” (1996: 3). The inquisitive mind of the Enlightenment gradually banished the divine presence within the monstrous body and, just as it did with the anatomical body discussed in Chapter 2, put the “monster” under the intense scrutiny of a curious gaze. Instead of displaying it on a dissection table, however, the monster was renamed a “freak” and put on public show for everyone to look at. While largely eliminating the feelings of wonder and awe, the freak as a site of popular entertainment retained the quality of simultaneous repulsion and attraction. The vast attraction of the anomalous body is demonstrated by the popularity of “freakshows”. Paul Semonin discusses the flourishing of Bartholomew Fair in seventeenth century London, which, he observes, “became a sort of mecca for monsters”. There, freaks were seen “in a carnival setting, along with corps of professional entertainers including rope dancers, puppeteers, posture-masters, fire-

eaters, and animal trainers, all immersed in a cacophony of rumbling kettle drums, penny trumpets, bagpipes, and fiddlers” (Semonin, 1996: 77).

The freaks became an inseparable part of early popular culture, an exotic addition to the cacophonous street and circus spectacle. Thomson provides four interrelated narrative forms that maintained the sensationalist representation of freaks and their popularity: the oral spiel, textual accounts, staging and imagery (drawings or photographs) (1996: 7). All four, while often exaggerated and fabricated, worked as commercial forces that spurred the interest, curiosity and, undoubtedly, profit in the freak “market”. Close parallels can be drawn between the freak spectacle and its narrative forms and the contemporary dissemination and consumption of the pop body, especially the celebrity body. As I indicated earlier, and as Thomson suggests, the current fascination with celebrities originated in the popularity of freaks. The oral spiel, which, in the context of seventeenth century “freakery”, was an “informed” lecture delivered before the show, closely resembles the contemporary pervasiveness of, just as “informed”, celebrity magazines and gossip. Textual accounts are echoed in the advertising techniques of the pop body, while staging informs the visual hyper-representation of live performance in both contexts. Finally, the imagery of freaks, the reproducible copies, which “penetrated into the Victorian parlor and family album” (Thomson, 1996: 7), coincides with the proliferation of imagery of contemporary celebrities, their flattened faces and breasts, which “penetrate” the bedrooms (and digital screens) of countless fans.

Advances in the scientific discourses of anatomy, embryology and teratology at the turn of the twentieth century made the freak body a pathology which diminished its physical presence as a locus of entertainment. It also informed the contemporary, much more discreet and sensitive, approach to the anomalous body. This marked the end of freakshows, which are now often seen as ignorant, exploitative and even cruel in their dealings with disabled corporeality. However, as the direct link between the popularity of freaks and the contemporary pop body, as well as popular culture’s persistent obsession with the corporeal, suggest, bodily freakery is far from obsolete. As Thomson observes, “never simply itself, the exceptional body betokens something else, becomes revelatory, sustains narrative, exists socially in a realm of hyper-representation” (1996: 3). The freak body as a site for hyper-representation reoccurred with a renewed power of exceptionality in the context of contemporary popular culture

and its preoccupation with bodily matters (The Undateables serves as a good example here). Celebrity culture is abundant with examples of renewed manifestations of corporeal freakishness and transgression. From the voluptuous breasts of Pamela Anderson, which at one point were almost literally “breaking at their seams”, to the cyborg-like bodily manipulations of Cher which left no fatty tissues untouched and the increasingly horrifying face of Michael Jackson – every so often, celebrity culture presents its audience with a new “freakish” spectacle. Moreover, the hyper-representation and digimodernism of contemporary popular culture has created another type of “freak”: one which is constituted in a corporeal fantasy reality, yet filters back into the material body. As the subsequent examples will demonstrate, the contemporary “freak” is, at times, able to uninterruptedly move between the imaginary and the “real”, namely between the plastic or virtual image and material reality.

Richard J. Alapack observes that after its launch in the 1960s, due to its popularity, the Barbie doll became a cultural icon. Moreover, Barbie also stood for an ideal<sup>42</sup>, the model of how a woman (and therefore a mother) should look. As Alapack put it:

Mama was supposed to resemble Barbie: an unreal, beautiful, perfectly shaped, fabricated plastic doll. Mamma should cook, sew, and darn socks, but in addition exaggerate her femininity by sporting an hourglass figure (2009: 989).

The “ideal” looks promoted by the plastic toy, together with the wide effect Barbie’s imagery has had on the consumer, reveal the presumably unattainable expectations carried by “designer ideology” and mass consumerism. Barbie constitutes a plastic “fantasy” of the body, a “second skin” – “perfectly shaped” in the form of hourglass, wide-eyed, white and blond. And while created, consumed and disseminated as a plastic toy, this particular “second skin” has filtered back into human materiality, as the example of “human Barbies” shows.

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<sup>42</sup> The series of photographs by Mariel Clayton (2011) ironically expose the Barbie ideal as a cliché of the late twentieth century. Clayton portrays the doll in “real life” settings; the contemporary “real”, however, is exaggerated, abundant with vivid and sexually charged imagery of domestic violence and murderous fantasies; see <http://www.fubiz.net/2011/08/05/barbie-in-real-life/> (accessed 29/08/2013).



Image 3.9: Human Barbie Valeria Lukyanova

Jessica Wakeman states that “Human Barbies are a sub-group of humanity who fascinate and horrify in equal measure” (2014), thus corresponding with the simultaneous repulsion and attraction seen in the freak show. One of the most famous human Barbies – Valeria Lukyanova – is uncannily doll-like. Her body is very thin, especially her waist, her face (at least in the photographs) almost expressionless and her blond hair extends down to her waist, just like the plastic Barbie’s. In a photograph of Lukyanova holding the actual doll, the similarities between the two become apparent, emphasised by her eye make-up (Image 3.9). Human Barbies were quickly followed by Human Kens: Rodrigo Alves, Justin Jedlica and Celso Santebanes, all striving to embody Barbie’s male companion. The examples of Lukyanova and other “human dolls” demonstrate that the plastic bodily fantasy created and disseminated in popular culture (predominantly amongst young girls) has not remained an acorporeal fantasy of the body. Instead, it has seeped into human physical appearance, the material body (admittedly with the help of plastic surgery), and now is in turn being disseminated as a pop sensation – a human body turned doll-like. Moreover, adopting Wakeman’s suggested terminology – calling human Barbies the “sub-group of humanity” – implies yet another case of modified “new” corporeality. In Chapter 2, the “new” corporeality involved the body that is dead, plastinated, turned inside-out and publicly displayed. Here, the body is living, yet also modified, producing an embodied fantasy – we could even argue, recycling a fantasy by bridging the synthetic and bodily realities.





Image 3.10: “Dollyeye” contact lenses, an example from “The Twilight Series”

An example which involves artificially created, often digitised, fantasy filtering into the material body, but on a smaller scale because it requires less effort and modification than the process of becoming a human Barbie, is the phenomenon of contact lenses that alter the appearance of the eyes. As the examples of “Dollyeye” (one of the brands)<sup>43</sup> show, once inserted, these particular contact lenses enlarge pupils, change eye colour and give the wearer the wide-eyed stare of a doll or cartoon character. For an even more extreme change in appearance, you can purchase contact lenses from “The Twilight Series”, resulting in bright yellow, purple or red eyes resembling those of the supernatural characters from Stephenie Meyer’s novels (Image 3.10). In this case, the “second skin” created by popular entertainment industries (animation, supernatural novels and films) is literally embodied in a piece of thin, artificially produced material that is used to cover the human eye. The moment the artificial “second skin” and material surface of the eye touch, the popular fantasy seeps into one’s materiality, altering the human eyes and bringing the “monstrous” fantasy to life.

The examples of human Barbies and “Dollyeye” contact lenses problematise the reduction of the body to a mere shape, as suggested by Baudrillard, as well as the post-corporeal fears of virtual reality discourses. Despite the objectification that makes

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<sup>43</sup> See <http://www.thedollyeye.com/> (accessed 9/6/15).

some bodies resemble a consumerist product (which human Barbie certainly does) and the constitution of numerous virtual avatars, in themselves pixelated images, that are able to morph into any form imaginable, our engagement with contemporary “mixed” reality remains fundamentally embodied. The bodily configurations that began their existence in imaginary or virtual reality are able to filter back not only into our imagination, but into the material body itself. As a result, I propose to refer to such instances as “viral”. The configuration of the “viral” pop body suggests not only that this particular body has become popular and is widely disseminated across digital reality (Internet, social media, etc.). It is “viral” because it also corresponds to the word’s original biological meaning – the infectious agent that is capable of replicating itself inside the living organism. The “second skin” in the form of a bodily fantasy becomes truly “viral” when it gathers so much momentum in the popular imagination and when it saturates the culture to such an extent that we begin to actively consume a particularly “infectious” fantasy by introducing it to material, bodily reality, be it in the form of bodily modification to resemble a plastic doll or putting contact lenses in order to replicate a character from *Twilight*.

The differing manifestations of the “freakish” and “monstrous” are very much present in the work of contemporary pop music artist Lady Gaga whose “schizophrenic” imagery led us into the pageantry of pop bodiliness at the beginning of this chapter. As a popular music icon, Gaga has gained recognition worldwide. Due to the processes of incessant cultural recycling that result in the creation of her complex visual and intercorporeal articulations, her pop body has an ever-changing, chameleon-like appearance which, as Corona puts it, gives her persona “a lasting presence in popular memory” (2013: 725) – the Gaga Effect. Thus created, Gaga’s “monstrous second skin”, as I hinted at in the section of “Recycled New Realism”, has gone “viral” – it is widely replicated among her fans.

The “monster” in Gaga’s work occurs in textual and narrative formats: her *The Fame Monster* album (2009) which includes a song titled “Monster”; the subsequent “The Monster Ball” world tour in 2009–2010; the “monstrous” and in many ways highly theatrical staging of her concerts during this tour – a Frankensteinian castle, Gaga on horseback, a huge inflatable alien-like figure with an enlarged (“monstrous”)

vagina “giving birth” to dancers. Such imagery resembles that found in the virtual realm (Second Life) and, although indirectly, suggests an embodiment of artificially constructed fantasy. Lady Gaga herself, both in her live performances and music videos, represents the pseudo-motherly figure of an “über”-Monster that is idolised and closely followed by a mass of prancing “Little Monsters”, the name she gives her fans. Moreover, the “monstrous” can also be seen in Gaga’s embodied “second skin”, in the visual imagery that she creates around and of herself: she was seen in a costume made out of plastic bubbles, a dress that included figures of Kermit the Frog, a meat dress (which was a recycled appropriation of the meat dress worn by Linda Sterling in 1982)<sup>44</sup>, a variety of unusual head “pieces”, massive “armadillo heels”, ever-changing hair styles and wigs, expressive make-up and doll-eye contact lenses. Gaga’s pop body works not only as an artfully constructed, thus compelling, artifice and spectacle. She also provides, as Michael A. Peters put it, “a release from the ordinary everyday world” to her fans, which works as “a confessional and quasi-religious therapeutic narrative that calls forth a superstar in everyone” (2012: 218).

The majority of Gaga’s “monstrous” manifestations are happening in the virtual sphere – they are consumed as digimodernist textualities. The digital disposition of Gaga’s pop body does not, however, imply that the fleshy reality of her pop persona is disappearing. Her body, instead of losing, in fact, regains and reaffirms its bodiliness, which is achieved through “viral” processes. Gaga’s fans recycle – borrow, copy, appropriate and replicate – the “monstrous second skins” when they dress in Gaga-like costumes, apply Gaga-like make-up or mimic her gestures (e.g., the “Monster paw”) (Image 3.11). Gaga’s digitised fantasy, just as it is in the case of human Barbies, became “viral” and filtered back into the material bodies of her “Little Monster” fans. Therefore, while Gaga’s pop body is undoubtedly involved in the complex workings of contemporary popular culture (recycling, striptease and the creation of numerous “second skins”) and all of these workings carry a possible indication of acorporeality (the artful artifice, which toys with the “real”, yet ultimately succumbs to fantasy), because of the pop body’s spectatorship, its material involvement and the extra meanings created by this involvement, her body becomes an embodiment of contemporary hypermodernity, celebrity culture and fame. As

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<sup>44</sup> See Sean O’Hagan (2014) “Linda Sterling: ‘Lady Gaga didn’t acknowledge I wore a meat dress first’”, *The Guardian*, <http://tinyurl.com/of6y4mu> (accessed 9/6/15).

Corona put it, Lady Gaga has become a corporeal metaphor for “the maddening swirl of images, anxieties and fads” of contemporary popular life (2013: 734).



Image 3.11: “Monster paw” demonstrated by Lady Gaga and replicated by her fans

## Chapter 4

### Homo Nudus in Performance:

### Three Facets of Exhibition-ism



Sasha Waltz, Körper (2000)

As an event that never reaches its complete form, as a form that does not allow itself to be entirely seized as it occurs, nudity, is, literally infinite: it never stops occurring.

(Giorgio Agamben)

The present chapter introduces a third category, a third instance of pageantry which the contemporary body finds itself situated in and faced with. This particular pageantry, however, differs from the previous case studies. While Chapters 2 and 3 dealt with the intercorporeal workings of the dead and digitised bodies, both of which lack a certain human vitality, the present case study purposefully focuses on the living body. Moreover, this body largely depends, even “feeds”, on the immediate presence of fleshy reality – bodily substances, the traumatised body, and skin – of the living and breathing human being. However, and despite the emphasis on the immediate and living physical presence, it also remains closely interrelated to some aspects of the dead and pop body configurations. Like those, this body is shaped by the complex status of bodily materiality: the problematisation of the “real”, heterogeneous imagery, representation and perception, bodily multiplication in the form of intercorporeality and the processes of veiling and unveiling. The dramaturgical configuration I discuss here is *homo nudus* – the naked or semi-naked body encountered in contemporary theatre performance.

Ruth Barcan observes that “the Latinate word ‘nude’ [...] carries the connotation of something sophisticated achieved through culture, rather than something organic” (2004: 33). *Nudus* is a Latin adjective translated as “bare” or “stripped”. In the early eighteenth century, *nudus* entered the aesthetic vocabulary, giving rise to the noun “nude” and subsequently to the wider artistic practice of depicting “the nude” – the naked body of the life model. *Nudus* was initially much further removed from the term “naked” than it is in contemporary usage. In contrast to the aestheticised *nudus*, “naked” pointed (and at times still does) towards the organic or natural reality of animate or inanimate objects (Barcan, 2004: 32–33). My choice to denote the naked body of a theatre performer as *homo nudus* is intentional. As I will argue throughout this chapter, the naked body that is deliberately displayed in front of the spectator inevitably becomes “aestheticised”. No longer (if it ever was) the exposition of the “real”, “natural” or “pure” materiality, *homo nudus* is an

emphasised and codified aesthetic construct, part and parcel of the overall dramaturgy of performance. Furthermore, the body of the performer is not simply displayed naked: it is made naked. Consequently, my discussion centres on precisely this action of “making yourself naked” which is supported with the three facets of exhibition-ism in performance: baring the flesh, baring the skin and baring as corporeal comedy. The notion of “exhibition-ism” is an appropriation which does not carry the original word’s negative, especially criminal, connotations. Instead, it denotes an act common to all instances of nudity – that of putting on a display through the act of uncovering, unveiling, shedding, stripping or exposing, which can carry both sexual and nonsexual meanings. Nudity, as Giorgio Agamben suggests, is not a state, but an event, moreover, an ambiguous event – an action that results in denudation. And due to its complex interrelationship with religious, cultural and social connotations, it is difficult to truly “seize” the naked body when it occurs (2011: 65).

Despite the increasingly liberal attitude towards (or, rather, tolerance for, and sometimes even boredom and disappointment with) Western nude practices and inscribed (or accidental) sightings of bare flesh in the visual arts as well as popular culture, there are only a few academic studies of nakedness, especially in theatre practice. As Barcan observes, there is a considerable amount of literature on the nude in art and pornography, as well as feminist response to the representation of the naked body, but very few “conceptualize nakedness itself” (2004: 4–5).<sup>45</sup> There are even fewer accounts of nudity in theatre performance with, to the best of my knowledge, Karl Toepfer’s article “Nudity and Textuality in Postmodern Performance” (1996), his lengthy studies on German body culture and dance practices (1997; 2003) and Aoife Monk’s discussion on nakedness in her *The Actor in Costume* (2010) serving as the seminal texts on the subject.<sup>46</sup> Barcan blames “the subtler manifestations of Cartesianism” for the prolonged depreciation of the body and its workings, which has resulted in the lack of interest in or, rather, the delayed theorisation of this “supposed degree-zero of human embodiment, nakedness” (2004: 5).

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<sup>45</sup> However, Barcan’s *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy* (2004), Philip Carr-Gomm’s *A Brief History of Nakedness* (2010) and Agamben’s *Nudities* (2011) have begun to fill this void.

<sup>46</sup> In August 2015, George Rodosthenous published an edited volume that also contributes to the theorisation of nudity in theatre. See Rodosthenous, George (ed.) (2015), *Theatre as Voyeurism: The Pleasures of Watching*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.



Image 4.1: Nude in public

However, the human body can rarely be seen as a “degree zero” and instead always absorbs and carries multiple manifestations and meanings. Even when stripped down to its (presumably) primary and purest human form and completely exposed, the body is not neutral. On the contrary, to use a common expression, the naked body sticks out like a sore thumb. Image 4.1 shows a naked woman in a public street. Yet it is not only the naked body that creates meaning in this photograph, but the diverse reactions towards her nakedness from the onlookers: the surprise and slight outrage from the woman with her hands raised; the smiles and voyeuristic looks from the men with video cameras; or the outright refusal to look from the passer-by woman on the right. The naked display, together with the act of looking at this display, emphasises the body so that, as Aoife Monks remarks, the body becomes “extra-present” (2010:



100). Furthermore, in case of the material homo nudus, you do not have to be completely naked in order to achieve such extra-presence. The act of denudation is also achieved by “baring” the fleshy materiality: exposing the “extra-corporeal”<sup>47</sup> by cutting into the flesh and making it bleed, as in the case of Franko B performances (introduced in Chapter 1 and further discussed in the section 4.1), or revealing the traumatised body – obese, anorexic and cancerous corporealities as in the work of Romeo Castellucci. Both instances heighten the body’s physical presence and, moreover, bare the usually invisible or hidden viscera, thus denuding the material body itself. In the case of the interplay between naked and clothed bodies in performance, the spectator sees not just the body, but first and foremost its naked skin. In the section “Dramaturgies of the Naked Skin”, I argue that, even when partially clothed, the body constitutes a perceptually heightened naked configuration and becomes a homo nudus: the clothed body which reveals only fragments of bare skin, particularly in places that usually remain covered (the sexualised bodily locations, like breasts, genitalia and buttocks), immediately attracts our gaze and informs the overall dramaturgy and even the scenography created.

The existing studies of nakedness (especially those of Barcan, Agamben and Monks) collectively argue against the view of nudity as the “real” corporeality and instead see the naked body as always “structured by particular religious, symbolic and visual traditions” (Barcan, 2004: 2). Theatre as a broader category and performance as a specific, delineated aspect of theatre constitute one such tradition. Theatre performance places the body in a particular position in space (for a limited duration) and is created with, around or about a particular body. Throughout Western theatre’s history, the human body has maintained its status as a prime preoccupation in performance, with the physical presence of the performer serving as a persistent point of interest. Preoccupation with the performer’s body led to the development of diverse theoretical methods and practical techniques for training this body in order to increase the performer’s presence – a form of “bodily modification” for the theatre stage. It resulted in the body acquiring “extra-daily” qualities (the notion used by, among others, Phillip Zarrilli and Eugenio Barba when theorising their approach to performer

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<sup>47</sup> The term “extra-corporeal”, as used in my discussion, adheres to its original meaning stemming from medical discourse, where it stands for the material reality situated outside the body (in the form of bodily substance, *i.e.* blood transfusion) or artificial organs (heart or lung machines used during and after surgery).

training) which suggests a distancing from “real” or “daily” corporeality. Moreover, the theatre performer, according to Andreas Kotte (2010), is situated within scenic sequences where her or his physical actions, while often resembling or arising from those of the everyday, carry a special emphasis (the performer is on display, spatially removed from and observed by the audience, with the actions arousing interest) with reduced consequences (the death performed on stage usually does not result in an actual death). As a result, the theatre body is anything but “real”: it is achieved, emphasised, and specially codified. The performer’s body, including the body stripped bare, is the aesthetic construct displayed on stage, situated within a clearly delineated dramaturgy and observed by the spectator.

Despite such a clear codification of the body in the theatre tradition, in the case of the naked performer, claims of nudity as the embodiment of the “real” or “the truth hidden beneath” continue to persist. Benedict Cumberbatch’s nude appearance in Danny Boyle’s adaptation of *Frankenstein* (2014) in London’s National Theatre sparked a lively discussion on the social forum website “Mumsnet”. Forum users playfully deliberated the size of Cumberbatch’s “manhood” and (unfortunately for the actor) expressed their general disappointment. Most importantly, due to the nakedness of the performer, it was not the size of his character’s, his fictive persona’s, penis that was being lamented, but Cumberbatch’s himself, thus heightening his “very private” bodily reality. Monks provides a similar example in the case of the Harry Potter star Daniel Radcliffe disrobing in *Equus* in London’s West End (2007). The media hype surrounding Radcliffe’s naked scene, Monks argues, suggests that “the presence of the film star himself becomes available: ‘now’, the undressing seems to promise, ‘now, we will see Harry Potter... or, Daniel Radcliffe... as he really is before us onstage” (2010: 100, emphasis in the original). In both cases, the border between the character (or, characters, as Radcliffe is seen as both, Harry Potter and *Equus*’ Alan Strang) and the performer becomes porous. The spectator is compelled to believe that she is presented with the “real” naked body; however, whose body is it, exactly: the body of Harry Potter, Strang or Radcliffe? The dramaturgical configuration of homo nudus muddles the artistic bodily construct with the material reality of the subject, the aspect of naked dramaturgy which I later call the “Passow question”: when watching a theatre performance, which body is the spectator faced with – the body of the actor, the body of the character, the material body of the subject or an intricate fusion of all three?

One of the reasons for associating human nakedness with the perception of the “real” is its interrelation with ideas of truthfulness and authenticity that stem from religious and cultural developments in Western culture: the iconography of Adam and Eve’s Fall that shamefully reveals the human flesh and the metaphor of *nuda veritas*, as well as nudist and naturist practices. Moreover, the extra-present materiality of *homo nudus* can result in moments where material “truth” overpowers the artistic construct (for example, when observing the sweaty and shaking flesh of frantically moving dancers). *Homo nudus* is clearly visible and, sometimes, even graspable by other senses: you might be able to smell the body (or bodily discharges) or even touch the body. Karl Toepfer argues that nudity centres on the exposed genitalia of the performer and that its ability to “‘shock’, ‘incite’, frighten, disgust, or otherwise produce intense emotional turbulence” is a consequence of the collapse of distinctions “between the ‘real’ body of the performer and the ‘imaginary’ body of a ‘character’”, where the sexualised “real” takes precedent over the fictitious (1996: 77). However, as I will later argue, even the sight of genitalia (the “shock” factor of which is caused by Western society’s insistence on covering the genitals, as well as conventions in certain genres), rather than offering the baring of the “real” body, once positioned in the specially codified environment of theatre, becomes part of the deliberately arranged spectacle.

The final section of this chapter is a brief observation. I note yet another attitude towards the naked body in contemporary performance (and some cultural) practices. This particular attitude breaks away from bodily “realisms” and “authentications”, and “veils” the body in a much more playful and sensuous representation of nakedness. I argue for the comedy value inherent in naked body display (in, among others, *commedia dell’arte* and streaking), in order to identify some aspects of corporeal comedy in *homo nudus*.

## 4.1. The First Facet of Exhibition-ism

### Trouble in Eden:

#### Authenticity, the “Passow Question” and Strategies of Material Denudation

Postmodern culture is thus characterized by a simple desire for and romanticization of authenticity [...] as by a complex mixture of attitudes – desire for the real, fetishization of the real, resignation to the fact that the real is always elusive, fun in fakery, and celebration of the delights of role-play and performance.

(Ruth Barcan)

### Nudity and Authenticity

Nakedness works not only as an easily recognisable visual and physical manifestation, but also as a compelling metaphor. Expressions such as “lay bare”, “bare it all” and “naked truth” carry the meaning of revealing the objective truth and knowledge of an event, object or self. The naked truth metaphor, or *nuda veritas*, as Barcan observes, originates in the Eden myth, which, while often seen as “hostile to the body”, nevertheless situates the body at the core of its narrative. One of the foundational events within Christian tradition, Adam and Eve’s Fall and the realisation that the naked body is shameful acts as a powerful rupture from unselfconsciousness to conscious truth (Barcan, 2004: 47–48). According to Paul Ableman, the Fall symbolises not only “the change from unthinking participation in the natural world to conceptual separation from it”, but also “the change from timelessness to the awareness of time” (1984: 7). The first exhibition-ism of the naked flesh thus corresponds with the birth of knowledge or, as Agamben observes:

The nudity that the first humans saw in Paradise when their eyes were opened is, then, the opening of truth, of “disclosedness” [...], without which knowledge would not be possible. The condition of no longer being covered by the clothing of grace does not reveal the obscurity of flesh and sin but rather the light of knowability. There is nothing behind the presumed clothing of grace, and it is precisely this condition of not having anything behind it, this pure visibility and presence, that is nudity (2011: 81).

Gustav Klimt reimagined the idea of “disclosedness” in his version of *Nuda Veritas* (Image 4.1). The painting depicts a naked woman who, as Carl E. Schorske suggests, appears as “sexy [...], with hair of flaming red” (1982: 33). A snake is circling the legs of this sexualised female body, recalling the seduction of Eve. The figure looks straight at the viewer, not only with her eyes, but also through the mirror she holds in her right hand. Klimt’s image is arguably that of a “re-empowered” Eve: no longer trying to hide her genitals<sup>48</sup>, sexualised, and, most importantly, pointing the mirror not at herself but the onlooker – thus exposing not her naked corporeality, but the “truth” about the subject looking at her. Schorske observes that the painting, and specifically the mirror, is directed towards the “modern man”, because at the time Klimt “embarked both on transformation of inherited symbols and the desublimation of art” (1982: 33).

It is not surprising that, in the context of bodily manifestations and their complex web of intercorporealities, nudity as “truth”, introduced by the Christian tradition and reimagined by modernity, works as a deeply engrained metaphor. This metaphor, however, instead of “disclosing” the material body, constitutes a “veil” – a cultural cloak of authenticity – that shrouds the perception of nakedness. Especially when faced with the immediate physical presence of the naked body, we are lulled into the impression of “real” and “unmediated” exposure of the human flesh, the flesh that shows the natural, thus true corporeality of its bearer. In other words, we momentarily believe that we are exposed to the authentic body. The cultural practices of naturism and nudism readily embrace such positive connotations of nakedness. As Toepfer (1997) and Barcan (2004) observe, nudism arose as a critique of modernity and urbanism, both of which estranged people from nature and their “natural” bodies. The rise of the machine and the increasingly technological nature of society were seen as sources of inauthenticity as opposed to the organic “real” which, Lionel Trilling claims, retained the criterion of authentic (1972: 127). Nudist practices are full of slogans like “a return to an eternal primeval” (Toepfer, 1997: 32) and “naked as nature intended” (Bell and Holliday, 2000), as well as the belief in the *nuditas virtualis*, nakedness as goodness and innocence (Barcan, 2004: 89). This indirectly echoes the

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<sup>48</sup> The portrayal of Adam and Eve, especially in Renaissance painting, usually shows them with genitals covered; see *Adam and Eve* by Jan Gossaert (1520), Lucas Cranach The Elder (1526) and Tiziano Vecellio (1550).

naturist philosophy of Romanticism, especially that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his conviction that nature “does everything for the best” and that it is within nature that the truly authentic and innocent self resides (Guignon, 2004: 58).



Image 4.2: Gustav Klimt, Nuda Veritas, 1899, oil on canvas

However, and as I argue later in relation to nakedness in theatre, the notion of authenticity and attempts at arriving at the “real” are laden with major contradictions. As Charles Guignon (2004) demonstrates, the authentic self was originally seen as located inside the subject, comprising the true and pure inner reality as opposed to the masked, role-playing and conniving public self. Romantics developed the supremacy of the inner self further by turning away from increasingly urbanised society, but also glorifying a particular outer reality, namely Nature and its ideals. Freudian thought, especially Freud’s concept of the “id”, challenged the alleged “natural” purity and innocence of the inner-authentic self and instead exposed it as potentially aggressive,

violent and even cruel. Structuralist and post-structuralist thought redirected the focus from the subject being constituted by opposing inner selves, to outer systems – the social, political and cultural forces that shape the individual. The resulting undermining of the possibility of a cohesive self left one, according to Guignon, “courageously embracing the fact that there is no ‘true self’ to be, [...] recognizing that where we formerly had sought a true self, there is only an empty space, a gap or a lack” (2004: 119).

Nevertheless, the quest for the “real” continues to persist in the understanding of the embodied subject or, as Barcan observes, Western culture repeatedly manifests “the strength of our desire for authenticity” (2004: 255). von Hagens’ plastinates and pop bodies (especially in the case of recycled striptease), as I argued in Chapters 2 and 3, work under a pretence of the “real” body, and so only after removing multiple layers (sometimes, layers of the fleshy reality itself) of their “authenticity veils”, can we begin to problematise the embodied “real”. Furthermore, these examples demonstrate that the idea of authenticity remains especially intrinsic in cases of deliberately displayed body. Such display is also achieved in the aforementioned cases of Cumberbatch and Radcliffe disrobing on theatre stage. In the history of theatre performance, the preoccupation with and desire for bodily authenticity reached its peak between the 1960s and 1980s, when, as Berghaus observes, the diverse manifestations of body art displayed “essentialist concerns with the body as a vessel of authenticity, identity and selfhood” (2005: 138). Toepfer distinguishes one particular “trend” in the body art movement, which he names “ritual nudity”. According to Toepfer, ritual nudity

[U]rges the body to recover its mythic innocence by releasing and exposing, in Artaudian fashion, what is ‘inside’ it: the body is ‘most naked’ when we see coming out of it what causes us to fear it: sweat, blood, sperm, excrement, urine, vomit, ‘mysterious’ cellular activity (1996: 79).

Ritual nudity probes and denudes the depths of material bodily reality, what I see as the “extra-corporeal”: the body that bleeds, defecates or oozes some other form of its fleshy viscera, thus becoming a “traumatised” or deformed body, or, at times the body in real pain. However, the idea that the material body becomes “most naked” only when it exists in the “extra-corporeal” state does not expose the body itself; it only

veils human corporeality in ritualistic honesty – the belief that through the exposure of the material substances of organic being we are able to perform an “authentic” bodily denudation.

“Authentic” bodily denudation becomes problematic because it is positioned in the theatrical environment, where, due to the workings of codification, the body inevitably turns into a specially arranged aesthetic manifestation – homo nudus. Romeo Castellucci, in his performances which I discuss later on, applies similar “extra-corporeal” strategies of bodily exposition. His performances, however, instead of aiming for the “most naked” and “authentic” body, expose the workings of theatrical codification: ritual nudity in the form of excrement in *On the Concept of the Face*, Regarding the Son of God that turns out to be fake, prop faeces; or bodies in *Julius Caesar* suffering from obesity, anorexia or cancer, unquestionably real corporeal “traumas” that are nevertheless specially arranged, becoming part of the dramaturgy of performance. The act of exhibition-ism, the persistent search for the “authentic”, instead of revealing this “authenticity”, exposes Agamben’s suggested condition of “not having anything behind it” but, I would add, also a number of contradictions. Nakedness continues to bear the stigma of the Eden myth, making it fundamentally ambiguous: simultaneously a (presumably) authentic bodily reality, shameful sight and even a criminal offence. In the case of nudism, the “romantically” inclined position towards Nature and the “true” naked body serves as only one facet of the practice. Nudism arouses both positive and negative attitudes towards the deliberate display of the body. The negative attitudes range from blaming early twentieth century German nudist movements (Nacktkultur) for supporting proto-fascistic ideas<sup>49</sup> to countless arrests of the British “Naked Rambler”, a former army marine who goes on long walks completely naked<sup>50</sup>.

### ***The “Passow Question”: the Making of Homo Nudus***

In his short essay “Whom do they love?” (1992), Wilfred Passow raises a curious question: when watching a theatre performer, which body (he uses the term

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<sup>49</sup> For more, see Toepfer (1997).

<sup>50</sup> See <http://tinyurl.com/n6e3stb> (accessed 18/04/2014).



“person”) does the spectator actually look at? Passow draws on the observations of Joachim Herz and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Theatralische Sendung* which describes Wilhelm falling in love with a young actress Marianne, when he asks: “Does Wilhelm love all the fictitious characters Marianne plays, or does he love the girl herself? It was said that he was attracted by her ‘tone’ of voice, her ‘fine little face’ and her bosom” (1992: 87). After some deliberation, he notes that instead of being faced with a singular performer on a theatre stage, Wilhelm is in fact looking at five different persons: the actual human being “with her ‘very private legs’”; the professionally trained performer; the publicly disseminated image of this particular performer; the display of the performer’s abilities as “the complex ‘sign’ which the actor creates with his physical and mental abilities”; and, finally, the performer’s role, “the fictional figure which the actor portrays” (1992: 85–86). All five can be observed separately, either as ‘signs’ if we assume Passow’s semiotic stance, or, to adhere to my body-centred discourse, as an intercorporeal phenomenon. However, especially in the case of the performer’s immediate presence during the performance, all of these bodies/persons function simultaneously, thus raising the question of which one of these the infatuated Wilhelm falls in love with.

With a similar, yet largely ontological rather than semiotic, premise, David Graver (1997) also observes that the performer’s corporeality is multifaceted. He multiplies the body even further by offering (at least) seven bodies that are represented by the actor on stage: character, performer, commentator, personage, group representative, physical flesh and private sensations. Both Passow’s and Graver’s observations of theatre performers’ corporeal multiplicity correspond with my central position towards the body as intercorporeal, namely, that the body always already carries multiple “bodies” situated within it. And while we might assume that the body stripped down to its “authentic” state simultaneously exposes the real material reality of the performing subject, naked body matters are not as straightforward as they might seem at first glance. Even for Passow, the “very private legs” of the actress Marianne do not immediately signify her true person. Graver also agrees that nudity in theatre is ambiguous when he states that

[e]ven a naked body on stage is usually hidden behind mimetic or performative display. One does not see the flesh before one so much as the flesh of the character

who has disrobed [...] or flesh as an instrument of performance involved in the execution of particular tasks (1997: 230).

Toepfer similarly argues that, despite the brief exposition of bodily reality, nudity in theatre is fundamentally “unnatural”: it is mediated and “remains a theatrical phenomenon, a form of masking, insofar as it amplifies desire to discover, to expose something hidden within the body that one cannot discover, as either performer or spectator, through any mediated image of the body” (2003: 144). Passow concludes his essay by noting that theatre makes a special impact on the performer’s physical presence and, while not using the term “mediation”, he arrives at a similar argument to Toepfer when stating that “when seen in theatrical context, the ‘very private’ physical attributes of an actor or an actress are enhanced by artistic means, by additional signs, and take on the ‘aura’ which theatre seems to cast on ‘mere mortals’” (1992: 90).

It follows that, due to the complex workings of intercorporealities as well as the process of mediation, to look for the “real” body in theatre performance is rather fruitless. Even in the case of denudation, the material reality of the performer becomes a homo nudus: it is constituted and “hidden” behind a particular dramaturgy and, as a result, turns into a mediated display. Furthermore, the performer’s body is no longer a “daily” body, but a specially trained and achieved corporeality, or, as I already argued in Chapter 1 and as suggested by Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, an “extra-daily” body. In their co-edited book, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer* (1991), they distinguish between two bodily states of the performer: everyday and the non-everyday physicality. During the specifically codified training, one of the crucial aims of the performer is to replace her daily or, as Barba and Savarese put it, “habitually” conditioned body and movements with those of the extra-daily (1991: 7). It is important to note that “extra-daily” in this context does not imply techniques that are completely removed from daily life. Thus, for example, an acrobat’s body is not an extra-daily body because, according to Barba and Savarese, it is marked by the “inaccessibility of a virtuoso’s body” (1991: 8). Instead, the extra-daily is situated somewhere between the daily and the body of the virtuoso – subtly interrelated, yet differing from the two in its intended purpose. As Barba and Savarese explain:

The purpose of the body's daily techniques is communication. The techniques of virtuosity aim for amazement and the transformation of the body. The purpose of extra-daily techniques, on the other hand, is information: they literally put the body 'in form'. Herein lies the essential difference which separates extra-daily techniques from those that merely transform the body (1991: 8).

The main aim of extra-daily techniques is not to transform the body's physicality (even though the physical involvement is paramount), but to "in-form" the body, that is to enhance the physical presence of the performer. The extra-daily technique informs the performer's physical presence during training and then at the time of on-stage representation. Moreover, it reaches beyond the representational level and also affects the performer during the pre-representation period (before the representation of movement, sound or text), something Barba and Savarese call "the pre-expressive level" (for example, in a moment of complete stillness) (1991: 8). While the extra-daily technique stems directly from the body, one could even say from its anatomical basis (Barba uses Asian performance traditions, such as kabuki, as examples with their emphasis the positioning of the hips, bent knees, maintaining the balance and so forth), it results in a "pure state" or "pure presence": "this state of being powerfully present while not yet representing anything" (1991: 8).

Barba and Savarese arrive at the notion of "extra-daily" through their preoccupation with Asian theatre and dance techniques, methodologies, philosophies and religious practices. Not surprisingly, their approach to the art of the performer is infused with very specific practical methods (martial arts, Indian dance and yoga) and vocabulary ("secret art", "pure state" and "pure presence" being a few examples). As a result, we should view both their chosen vocabulary and the attainability of their ideas critically (what, in fact, constitutes a "pure" presence, and can this "purity" ever be achieved?). The extra-daily, contrary to Barba's and Savarese's claims for "purity", is very much conditioned: it is part and parcel of a particular cultural-social environment which occurred during the mid- to late 1990s when various Oriental practices gripped the imagination of an increasingly secular Europe; it is influenced by (and borrowed from) highly regimented and codified Asian techniques and applied in a Western context; and, finally, it can be seen as conditioned by theatre itself, by the need to further develop the discourse and methods of theatre performer training. The extra-daily quality of the performer and her physicality, however, does not solely

belong to Asian-influenced techniques. It can be observed in most European theatre traditions and, as Andreas Kotte demonstrates, we do not necessarily need to embark on a quasi-spiritual journey to the Orient in order to decipher the extra-daily “secrets” of the theatre performer’s “art”.

Kotte’s main premise is that theatre and everyday life are closely interrelated. After all, theatre is a human preoccupation and often stems directly from daily life and experience. Therefore, while theatre performance contains scenic sequences (consisting of human actions), these same sequences can also occur in daily situations. As a result, in order to begin to differentiate between the two, Kotte suggests viewing theatre sequences as “specifically emphasized”. As Kotte explains:

Four different sequences can be distinguished that help to articulate the transitions from life to theatre [...].

1. neither emphasized nor with reduced consequences
2. emphasized, but not with reduced consequences
3. not emphasized, but with reduced consequences
4. emphasized and with reduced consequences

Only number four describes scenic sequences that generate and vitalise theatre forms (2010: 37–38).

He notes that “the sequences themselves do not differentiate between life and theatre; the differences lie in their organisation, how they are perceived and their consequences” (2010: 7, *emphases mine*). The special configuration of these three aspects – organisation, perception and (reduced) consequences – results in a scenic, theatrical sequence.

Organisation points towards a spatial emphasis (the performer is placed on a raised stage or surrounded by spectators, thus visually emphasised and removed from our “daily” environment) as well as behavioural, usually gestural (i.e., exaggerated movement), and acoustic (loud speech, song) emphases. Perception, as Kotte observes, “is about building on the universal process of arousing interest and forming groups of actors and spectators” (2010: 18) and indicates the necessary presence of an audience. Moreover, the spectator’s interest is not aroused merely to provoke looking.

We are actively involved in a complex evaluation of the performer and her or his actions, the scenic sequences performed. According to Kotte, the spectator is also acting, mainly by looking and judging the specially emphasised sequences, in the process of which she or he begins to create meaning: “in emphasis tangible physical movement is combined with manifestation, i.e. in emphasis an action can transcend itself” (2010: 40).

Finally, to further remove a theatrical sequence from the “daily”, it has to maintain reduced consequences. This final condition, when combined with emphasis, seems to be crucial for Kotte when he states that reduced consequences by themselves can often occur in the daily life, and “if the field of theatre studies is to maintain its boundaries, emphasis needs to be added to the criterion of consequence reduction” (2010: 29). On stage, a violent punch does not (usually) result in a broken nose, and a passionate love scene does not (yet) culminate in actual intercourse. In our daily lives we can witness the most exaggerated and excessive actions or moments full of pathos, some of which are more than suitable for theatre. However, it is in theatre that the sequence with largely reduced consequences is also specially emphasised. Once positioned in such scenic sequences, the performer’s body simply cannot escape codification. And in the case of nudity in theatre, this body turns into a homo nudus: it is emphasised and codified, constituting an aesthetic construct that forms part of the overall performance dramaturgy and scenography.

### **Strategies of Bodily Denudation: Staged Authenticity and the Extra-corporeal Body of the Performer**

In light of the “Passow question” and the subsequent intercorporeality of the performer, the extra-daily techniques that turn the body into an extra-daily configuration, and Kotte’s suggestion of theatre performance as an arrangement of specially emphasised sequences with reduced consequences, I want to briefly consider specific examples of contemporary performance and their instances of denudation: Franko B’s “bleeding” performances and Romeo Castellucci’s work, namely *On the Concept of the Face*, *Regarding the Son of God* and *Julius Caesar*. Instead of establishing moments of “pure”, “real” or “true” revelation of the body, I argue that these performances betray themselves as cases of “staged authenticity”. Furthermore,

and in contrast to the dance theatre performances discussed in the following section, they deal with “extra-corporeal” denudation: unveiling not only the naked skin, but also the inner materiality of the flesh.

Castellucci’s and especially Franko B’s work continues to toy with the idea of authenticity. However, instead of presenting the “authentic” body, they establish instances of homo nudus – the specially emphasised aesthetic constructs of denudation, the action of revealing the inner viscera which is fundamentally staged. “Staged authenticity” is a concept devised by sociologist Dean MacCannel which he uses to analyse Western tourists’ obsession with the “exotic” when visiting non-Western locations. As Barcan observes, MacCannel “argued that these visits were structured by a discontent with Western modernity and a longing to temporarily reclaim the perceived authenticity and naturalness of non-Western cultures” (2004: 255). And while the contemporary tourist no longer emphatically believes in the “unspoiled” or “authentic” nature of non-Western cultures (according to Barcan, she or he should rather be seen as a “post-tourist” who resigns in enjoying the fakery of the promised authentic), the desire for the authentic, even if it is indubitably “staged”, is maintained (2004: 255). “Extra-corporeal” nudity is a telling example of staged authenticity in a performance context because it continues to toy with the tropes of the “real” by promising us the spectacle of the unmediated body with its grotesque bodily gore on full display (similar to von Hagens’ plastinates discussed in Chapter 2).

“Extra-corporeal” nudity is sometimes also identified as the “leaking body” (Harradine, 2000) or “traumatized body” (Campbell and Spackman, 1998) in performance. The body here is not only stripped of its clothes or costume: the act of corporeal transgression is pushed further – an attempt is made to cross the borders within the body itself or, rather, between the invisible inner viscera and outer bodily reality. The skin is displayed in all its carnality: it is traumatised by cutting or piercing and begins to bleed; the usually hidden orifices are exposed and emphasised; the abject liquids slowly seep out of the body; and what are often perceived as the most grotesque qualities of our material reality come into full view (and, sometimes, range of smell). The body becomes “extra-corporeal” and is left completely exposed with its inner reality literally pouring into the outside. Due to the emphasis placed on the material corporeality of the body, this nudity continues to be perceived as an attempt to escape theatrical representation and display the presence of the real. Monks observes such a

tendency in the work of Franko B and his “bleeding” performances. Franko B, as I already discussed in Chapter 1, positions the body at the centre of his work by piercing his flesh and allowing it to bleed or pouring bags full of his own blood over his head. He also emphasises the truthfulness of his body art:

[a]s he explained to a journalist: ‘I’m obsessed with presenting something in its purest state [...]. And if you’re going to be naked you do it with honesty [...]’. Franko presented nudity as a form of honesty, in harmony with the reality of his own real-time bleeding on stage [...]. [...] his blood was real, his suffering was real, [...] he was a real and completely exposed naked body onstage (Monks, 2010: 110).

While it is difficult to question the “realness” of Franko B’s physical suffering (the process of losing blood can cause a mixture of very concrete bodily reactions like fatigue, pain, even loss of consciousness and, moreover, it acts as an indicator of danger to life itself), what we should question is what happens to this “real” once it is situated in a performance context. The “Passow question” with its intercorporeality, as well as Kotte’s analysis of theatre performance as scenic sequences with reduced consequences, indicates that the body, once it enters the performance environment, becomes a specially emphasised configuration. In the case of Franko B, as Monks argues, despite his aim for “purity” and “honesty”, the representational strategies of theatre betray themselves in the white make-up on Franko B’s body, his (fully dressed) assistants in surgical masks assisting him before, during and after the performance, and the repetitive sound and lights focussed on his blood-covered body (2010: 110). The overall spectacle is carefully thought out, organised and performed. Franko B’s body is clearly emphasised by mixing white make-up with red blood (consequently, as Monks observes, it also becomes costume-like). He is lit, often situated in an art gallery and observed by the audience. And while the loss of blood constitutes a risk, this physical action, no matter how extreme, is performed with reduced consequences (the artist and his “masked” assistants calculate and observe the risk to life). As a result, and as argued by Monks, in Franko’s performances reality and honesty work as a fantasy (2010: 111) – homo nudus which, while emphasising the body and its inside-out nudity, remains embedded in the theatre performance tradition of specially emphasised codification.

“Extra-corporeal” nudity, with its “leaky” bodies and “traumatising” strategies, is firmly situated in the context of performance art. With its roots in the

artistic developments of the late 1960s, performance art, and its body-centred offshoot body art, highlighted the materialisation of art concepts, where the experience of duration, space and body take precedence over their representation (Goldberg, 2001: 153). However, it soon became clear (especially with the aid of structuralist and poststructuralist thought) that the “raw presentness of the performer’s body” (as well as the very idea of the “real” or “authentic”) is a rather naïve attempt at thwarting “the representational frames of visual art or theatre, and by extension, culture in general” (Campbell and Spackman, 1998: 56). Subsequently, scholarly responses to “extra-corporeal” nudity sought to analyse it using Freudian and Kristeva-inspired notions of the abject and the uncanny (Harradine, 2000; Campbell and Spackman, 1998; Spackman, 2000). It was also seen as a critical reaction to the “dephysicalisation” of new media technologies, a response to the AIDS pandemic, a critique of the increasing number of portrayals of death and injury in the media or as a reaction against the “hyper-beautified” and “hyper-healthy” body image promoted by popular culture industries (Campbell and Spackman, 1998: 58). Despite failing to maintain its “raw presentness over representation” status, as Franko B’s remarks demonstrate, the phantom of the “real” continues to flicker in our imaginations when we are exposed to the “leaky” substances of the body. Despite the knowledge that this “real” is specially achieved and emphasised, as the case studies of Chapters 2 and 3, and now the case of homo nudus, show, we continue to engage with it.

Performance art uses a number of “extra-corporeal” strategies to achieve its staged bodily authentication: nakedness, bodily liquids, bodily liquids seeping out of the body in real time and transfiguration of the body, to name a few. Similar strategies have also trickled down to other types of contemporary performance practice. However, just as the “post-tourist” no longer wholeheartedly believes in the attainability of “unspoiled” non-Western cultures, some of these performance practices no longer see the necessity of preaching the “raw presentness” of the “real”. Thus, while Franko B calls for truthful honesty and the pure presence of the body in his performances, to the best of my knowledge, Castellucci and his company Societas Raffaello Sanzio have never made such claims. Instead, Castellucci openly engages in the enjoyment of what Barcan describes as “the fakery of the promised authentic”. It is important to note that the dramaturgies of the body as they are applied, explored and displayed in Castellucci’s work, due to their diversity and abundance, would require a



lengthy study of their own. Therefore, instead of providing a detailed analysis of his, often explicitly visceral, performances (which would go beyond the scope of this study), I have carefully selected only a few bodily “incarnations” of staged authentication (in no particular order) as they appear in the work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio.

### **Extra-corporeality in Performance á la mode de Romeo Castellucci**

#### Prop Urine, Blood and Faeces

Castellucci’s phantasmagorical spectacles are haunted by “extra-corporeal” nudity. In *Tragedia Endogonidia #06 Paris*, the male performer, his genitals covered with a white loincloth and his head adorned with a crown of thorns (thus resembling the image of Christ), gracefully releases urine into a glass tube. The act of urination, however, is a clever simulation, performed with the help of another performer standing next to him. The glass tube containing a yellow liquid alleged to be urine is then slowly pushed into a hole in the wall and illuminated. This carefully arranged and performed sequence brings to mind another “extra-corporeal” artwork: Andres Serano’s *Piss Christ* (1987), a photograph which depicts an illuminated crucifix submerged in the artist’s urine. *Tragedia Endogonidia #01 Cesena* presents a “bloody” spectacle. We see a naked male performer looking upwards, watching the gently swaying, suspended cast of the lower part of a girl’s body (from waist down). The genitalia of the cast is emphasised by suggestively spreading the lips of the vulva. The male performer positions himself directly above the cast and looks up between the girl’s legs, at her vagina. He then abruptly pulls the legs down, which results in a vast amount of red liquid, resembling blood, gushing from above and covering his body. Simultaneously, the suspended cast changes sex: in place of its female vulva, it acquires a penis. The bloodlike red liquid could be seen as a representation of menstrual blood. The act of the sex-change also harks back to the Lacanian “Other” and the fear of castration. And while such explicitly staged “extra-corporeal” manifestations resemble the work of the bleeding Franko B due to Castellucci’s use of (material substances resembling) bodily discharges, something else is at work here. No longer preaching the “real” or “true”,

Castellucci instead creates powerful visual and corporeal imagery that only toys with our desire for bodily authenticity. Despite the urine and blood being fake, however, the manifestations created are no less suggestive. Their poignancy is further heightened by an ambiguity that at times resides in Castellucci's work: once removed from the context of performance art and reinstated in a different type of performance dramaturgy, "extra-corporeal" strategies become contradictory because they can muddle the perception of material "reality".



Image 4.3: Romeo Castellucci, *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God*

In the performance of *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* (2011), *Societas Raffaello Sanzio* explore the material, visual and metaphorical characteristics of faeces or, as Castellucci himself put it, "the spirit of the shit" (O'Mahony, 2011). The performance centres on a son who looks after his senile, incontinent father. Above the two performers, Castellucci positions an enlarged image of Christ (a reproduction of Antonello da Messina's painting *Salvator Mundi*). The "realism" of excrement is certainly emphasised: from the very first brown stain on the

old father's dressing gown, his uncontrollable, repeated soiling of himself (Image 4.3), the son patiently cleaning and dressing his father in a new diaper, ending with "an awful faecal stench roll[ing] out into the audience" (Shaw, 2013) and the Christ face crying "viscous tears of slurry" (O'Mahony, 2011). The performer's body becomes an "extra-corporeal" homo nudus: it not only reveals its material skin through taking off clothing and exposing its bodily materiality through (presumably) releasing the foul brown liquid, but also transgresses its boundaries via olfactory qualities which physically touch the bodily sensibilities of the audience. Most importantly, it remains a specially emphasised aesthetic configuration, because the excrement and its smell are cleverly "churned" theatrical illusions.

As O'Mahony observes, "the only consolation is that this is synthetic prop shit: 'You didn't think it's real?' jokes Castellucci 'I don't actually produce it myself'" (O'Mahony, 2011). The son's patient actions of cleaning and redressing his father also carry affectionate qualities. As Castellucci suggests, "it is very tender. In this representation, shit is an expression of love" (O'Mahony, 2011). Regardless of its artificiality and associations of tenderness, the performative "faeces" resulted in much controversy, because it soiled not only the old man's body, but also the large image of Christ's face which provided a backdrop for the entire spectacle. During the performances in Europe, Castellucci was accused of Christianophobia and spectators were pelted with eggs before entering the theatre (Trueman, 2011). The ambiguous workings of staged bodily authentication, "extra-corporeal" materiality posing as the "real thing", despite being a complete artifice as well as a theatrical illusion, spurred some very real fears of desacrilisation.

### Excessive Body as Bodily Denudation

A different version of bodily denudation is enacted in Castellucci's performance of *Julius Caesar* (Giulio Cesare, 1997). I believe the "extra-corporeal" also plays a role here, because while the performer's body does not expel foul-smelling quasi-material liquids, it is marked by a corporeal excess, akin to the "traumatised" or transfigured body as it appears in body art. In contrast to the "prop shit" and its artificially produced stench, the bodies in *Julius Caesar* suffer from real trauma. This trauma is not self-inflicted in real time in order to increase the body's authenticity as

is often the case in performance art. Instead, its realism is upheld through the trauma being intimately intertwined with the history and materiality of a particular performer. And because it is “unveiled” (the performers appear on stage semi-naked), the trauma is openly visible to the spectator, thus heightening the performers’ corporeal presence. Castellucci places the “traumatically” excessive bodies on full display: Caesar is played by a very old performer; an extremely obese performer is afforded the role of Cicero; a performer with cancerous vocal chords plays Marcus Antonius; while Brutus and Cassius are embodied by anorexic bodies. Consequently, the spectator is presented with an “extra-corporeal” pageantry where (at times rather ghastly) bodies recount the Shakespearean narrative through their simultaneously repulsive yet attention-drawing corporealities.

The concurrence of alienation and attraction situates this bodily spectacle in the realms of the Kristevan abject. Kristeva states that within abjection

[a]pprehensive desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects [...]. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself (1982: 1).

We might be sickened and repulsed by the overtly bulging body of Cicero or, the complete opposite, the skeletal bodies of Brutus and Cassius, thus inadvertently objectifying these excessive corporealities. However, and especially because these bodies suffer from real trauma, our familiarity with their conditions or, as Kristeva puts it, the action of placing oneself beside oneself, results in the irresistible urge to look. Moreover, these bodies are not silent; on the contrary, their use of speech further emphasises the corporeal excess on display. As Luk Van den Dries observes, in the case of Julius Caesar, the spoken language is especially bodily: “the director brings the theme of rhetoric to a point where it no longer has a linguistic function, but becomes a bodily action whereby rhetoric is literally housed inside the body” (2002: 90). Van den Dries then lists examples of bodily language in the performance: the performer placing a video camera inside her throat so that the audience can see the workings of her larynx when she speaks; Cicero speaking after inhaling helium; and Marcus Antonius delivering a speech through his cancerous throat (2002: 90–91).

However, even in this case, the “real”, due to its situatedness within theatre performance, cannot escape theatrical codification. Castellucci very carefully selects the performers for his projects, often according to their physicality.<sup>51</sup> He then positions them within a particular dramaturgy: laboriously arranged and lit, thus creating his highly visualised scenographies. The female performer in *Julius Caesar* deliberately places a video camera in her throat, thus also performing an “extra-corporeal” action – she exposes the workings of her inner body, normally invisible, to full view. Cicero is not allowed simply to speak, but manipulates his voice with the help of helium; and poor Marcus Antonius struggles to communicate with his severely impaired cancerous vocal chords. Furthermore, these specially arranged and emphasised *homo nudi* also constitute intercorporeal phenomena, discussed in the section on the “Passow Question”.

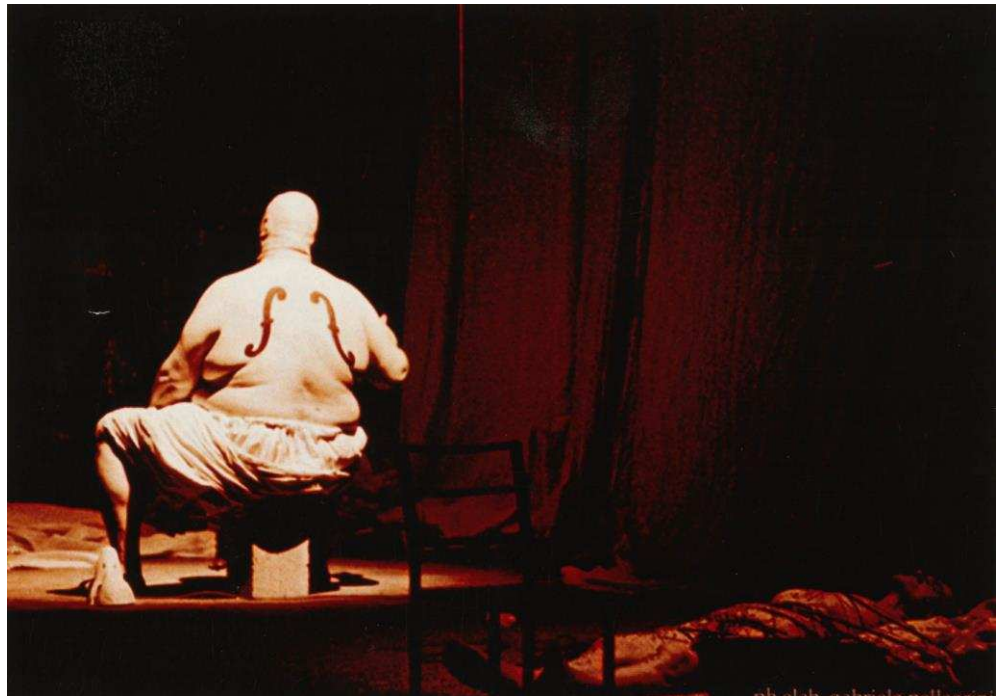


Image 4.4: Cicero becoming part of the *Julius Caesar* scenography

In *Julius Caesar*, the bodies with their denuded excessive corporealities revel in their intercorporeality, which makes it impossible to determine which body is the “real” one. Each performer embodies a fictional character (Caesar, Cicero, Marcus

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<sup>51</sup> We can take Castellucci’s March 2015 casting call as an example. For his *Oresteia* performance project, he was seeking: an extremely corpulent woman; a young actor, very muscular and with perfect stature; a young actor, extremely thin; and a very tall actor, at least 190cm, extremely thin. See <http://tinyurl.com/p5f7drl> (accessed 14/6/15).

Antonius, Brutus and Cassius) in Shakespeare's play. It could be argued that each body also becomes a corporeal costume (the idea of the body becoming a costume is introduced by Monks and will be analysed in great detail in Section 4.2): the traumatised skin robes each character in a distinct corporeal veil, masking the "real" body and thereby contributing to the dramaturgical meaning created. Moreover, because the materiality of the body is emphasised and hypervisible, the spectator is confronted with the fleshy body – the material spectacle. The sight of the traumatised flesh gives rise to the fourth "body", the body of knowledge (or ignorance) that the spectator might have about a particular illness, disability or bodily state. This knowledge endows the body with yet another layer of meaning which corresponds with the outer social and cultural reality (eating disorders, cancer and senility). Finally, the semi-nudity of the performers constitutes the fifth body, the "very private" corporeality that is made visible through the dramaturgy of the performance. Yet instead of unveiling the "hidden truth", nudity, as it is used in Castellucci's work, becomes an integral part of the performance's scenography. In the case of the corpulent Cicero, he is seated onstage, his face is covered with a skin-coloured mask and it is only his bulging upper body that is exposed. The act of masking the face draws the spectator's attention to the body – not the embodied subject, but the form with its large folds of flesh. The body is further objectified because it has two musical symbols (resembling the holes in a violin) painted on his back (Image 4.4), thus contributing to the visual spectacle created not only around the body, but also through the body.

### **Aestheticised Homo Nudus**

The idea of aesthetic display and the aestheticised body is introduced in Chapter 2 in my discussion on von Hagens' plastinates. The "aesthetic" there denoted the act of careful and deliberate arrangement which constitutes a dramaturgical configuration that is spatially removed from the viewer. A very similar act of aestheticisation is also performed in the case of presently discussed homo nudus. Kotte's suggested scenic sequences that are specially emphasised with reduced consequences lead towards carefully thought out, arranged and positioned corporeal dramaturgies that are observed by the spectator and that only toy with the idea of the

“real”. What we observe in the “extra-corporeal” performances of Franko B and Castellucci are not the denuded performers’ bodies that reveal the “authentic” and “real” body, or some “secret” hidden underneath fleshy reality; they reveal the extra layer of meaning – the workings and connotations created by and through the bodily materiality, its relationship to a particular dramaturgical configuration and its perception. These performances constitute the event of denudation, which, Agamben suggests, “never reaches its complete form” and, as a result, nudity “never stops occurring” (2011: 65). And because nudity is a continually occurring event, it leads to the “Passow question”, the intercorporeality of the body. Or, as I argue in the following section, drawing on Monks’ idea of nudity as a costume, with each occurrence of homo nudus, with each piece of clothing removed, a new body is created.

As soon as homo nudus crosses the invisible boundary between the auditorium and the scenic space, it becomes aestheticised. In the performance examples discussed above, the multiplicities of material body phantoms freely roam the stage, and the naked and semi-naked bodies of performers become inseparable from the overall theatrical illusion. The process of creating an aesthetic display often has nothing to do with the concept of beauty (especially in the case of “extra-corporeal” nudity that briefly exposes gory fleshy reality). Instead, the aesthetic processes inform the making of homo nudus, rather similarly to the shaping of the nude in art.<sup>52</sup> Similarly to the naked body of the performer, the nude in art is far removed from what we might consider “real” human corporeality. As Kenneth Clark in his canonical *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (1985) demonstrates, the nude is always already an ideal, because it is never a depiction of the authentic body but rather the reimagining of the body achieved by the artist. During the process of its conception, the nude – the shape, form, and colour of which is closely observed by the artist and then recreated on canvas or in clay – loses any trace of raw materiality and becomes a pure ideal, arguably, an objectified ideal. Clark poignantly states that “in almost every detail the body is not the shape which art had led us to believe it would be” (1985: 4). In theatre, the materiality of the body maintains its fleshy reality. This reality, in the case of “extra-corporeal” nudity is emphasised and forms part of the overall dramaturgy of the performance (Franko B’s carefully controlled bleeding, the prop faeces that is created

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<sup>52</sup> This is not at all surprising in Castellucci’s case given his background in the visual arts: he has a degree in set design and painting from the Accademia di Belle Arti in Bologna.

before the start of the performance or the corpulent body of Castellucci's Cicero looming on stage and becoming part of the scenography). However, the performer's body is never what it "really" is and, instead, just like the nude being reimagined in paint or clay, the performer as *homo nudus* undergoes an analogous process of careful and deliberate arrangement.

The idea of the aestheticised naked body is deeply ingrained in our bodily perception and imagination. The famous case of the art critic and writer John Ruskin serves as a telling example here. Ruskin married Effie Gray but failed to consummate his marriage. Scholars believe that Ruskin has never encountered a living naked woman before and his "anatomical" knowledge of the female body was based solely on the nudes in fine art. After seeing his naked wife he was presumably "shocked by his wife's pubic hair and considered her a freak" (Barcan, 2004: 26).<sup>53</sup> Traces of an aestheticised body can also be identified in the popular imagery of the body, which I touched upon in Chapter 3: "airbrushed" images of naked or near naked bodies. Instances of the aestheticised body – *homo nudus*, the classical nude, and the "airbrushed" pop body – influence popular attitudes towards human corporeality. As Barcan accurately puts it, these images are "part of the strange and insidious process by which people are encouraged to model themselves on bodies that never existed in the first place" (2004: 39, emphasis mine).

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<sup>53</sup> The absence of pubic hair in the depiction of naked female bodies is yet another "ideal" of classical fine art, recently noted and criticised by scholars, see, *e.g.*, Lehmann (2009).



## 4. 2. The Second Facet of Exhibition-ism:

### **Homo Nudus Plays Dress-up, or Dramaturgies of the Naked Skin<sup>54</sup>**

When we watch the actor undressing, we see a series of bodies emerging, which are determined by their relation to clothes (Aoife Monks).

#### **Differing Degrees of Undress**

I will begin this section with two questions. Firstly, how naked does the performer have to be in order to constitute the corporeal configuration of homo nudus? This question immediately taps into a wider problematisation of nudity, namely, what in fact counts as bodily nakedness? In the previous section, I argued that the act of exposing the fleshy materiality of the performer – material viscera oozing from bodily orifices or displays of excessive corporeality – can be seen as an act of “extra-corporeal” denudation. However, what about the instances of homo nudus that do not aim for “extra-corporeal” exposition and stop at the surface of the skin? How many items of clothing does the performer have to take off to appear naked? Depending on a particular social, historical and cultural environment, “to be naked” can carry rather conflicting connotations. Victorian tableau vivants, despite being fully covered in close-fitting fabric, were seen as representations of nakedness. In the contemporary context, the exposed genitals serve as a very clear indication of “nakedness”; however, even this indication can come in a diversity of form: full-frontal nudity, a covered body with only the genitals exposed, a half-covered body with the genitals exposed, a fully nude body with only the face covered and so on. Can the act of stripping, thus gradually exposing the bare skin, be perceived as toying with nakedness? What about the body covered in a see-through garment? Or the body covered with only fragments of skin “peeping” through: slivers of breast, buttocks or belly?

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<sup>54</sup> An article has been published in direct connection to this section. See Judita Vivas (2015), “Dramaturgies of the Naked Skin: *Homo Nudus* Plays Sexuality”, *Platform: Journal of Theatre and Performing Arts*, 9: 1, pp. 12–29.

We immediately notice that it is never fully apparent as to what counts as “being naked”, mainly because the body and its various forms of nakedness never stand alone and are instead always perceived in relation to their surroundings. Even in the case of the fully naked bodily manifestation, we see it as closely interconnected with a particular cultural configuration or historical situation. In other words, we make sense of the naked body, including *homo nudus* in theatre performance, as always already in context. Moreover, as Monks argues, this is the only way we can form an understanding of it, because “the purely naked body is self-contained and impermeable, whereas the nude body surrounded by objects, reaches out into the world” (2010: 105). One of the most immediate objects that *homo nudus* relates to is clothing. Clothing, or costume in theatre, is often the first material reality that the naked body, more precisely, the naked skin physically touches. Moreover, it is through the intricacies (absence, presence or ambiguous presence) of clothing that we make sense of the naked body beneath. As a result, clothing in relation to nudity, as discussed in great detail by Barcan (2004: 11–76), also works as a complex dialectic of concealment/revelation.

Secondly, considering the specially emphasised and codified manifestation of the performer and *homo nudus*’ relationship with clothing, can the body be seen as truly naked in theatre, or does nakedness become a corporeal costume? Monks’ idea quoted at the beginning of this section of the multiplicity of bodies revealed by the act of undressing (2010: 101) emphasises the fact that nakedness in theatre cannot be seen as a singular corporeality. On the contrary, with each layer of clothing, with each fragment of naked skin revealed, a different body is displayed which exposes *homo nudus* as an intercorporeal phenomenon. Moreover, the clothing or absence of it directly influences the situatedness and perception of these bodies. As a result, for Monks, none of the theatre bodies that emerge in the process of undressing signify the real body. Instead, they constitute a series of costumes: “the costume of nakedness, the costume of skin or the costume of the traditions of the nude female [or male – JV] figure” (2010: 101). My interest in this section is centred on the corporeal “costume of skin”, namely, the role skin plays in the performative act of shedding or putting on clothing. I discussed the phenomenological, biological, psychological and cultural workings of the material skin in great detail in Chapters 2 and 3. In the present discussion, I will continue to probe this borderline layer of human materiality;

however, this time I consider it as it appears in theatre performance. Depending on the degree of undress, naked skin constitutes diverse dramaturgies: the skin can be seen as openly staring, seductively enticing or just peeping through the clothing at the spectator.

The emphasis on “visual” action (“staring”, “enticing”, “peeping through”) is not incidental. Elkins suggests that the object is capable of “starring back” at the viewer (1996: 46–85), Pallasmaa attributes special significance to the bodily senses in relation to architecture in his *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (2012) and Michel Serres expressed the idea of skin having eyes (2008: 37). The idea of providing the skin with agency, namely, the ability to return our look, works as a point of departure for my argument that the skin’s role in the making of homo nudus is not homogenous. The naked body can be seen as a spectacle par excellence, as the image immediately attracting an audience’s attention. However, in order to emphasise the material workings when faced with such spectacle, I will turn the tables: instead of highlighting the spectator’s gaze, I will once again direct the focus towards the materiality of the body with a special emphasis on its skin. Serres observes that some

[g]ive in to the weight of things, their epidermis marked locally and in detail by the pressure, as if it had been bombarded. Their skin, therefore, is tattooed, striped, striated, coloured, beaded, studded, layered chaotically with tones and shades, wounds and lumps. Their skin has eyes, like a peacock’s tail (2008: 37).

The skin, which during the course of my case studies, has been cut, flayed, removed, airbrushed, flattened and found itself on the verge of disappearing into the virtual ether, once again becomes a centre of attention. Instead of being physically or digitally wounded, however, in the case of homo nudus, the skin not only grows into a corporeal costume as suggested by Monks, it also becomes part of the overall dramaturgy of the performance. With the help of examples from contemporary dance theatre performances – Olivier Dubois’ *Tragédie*, Alain Platel’s *Out of Context: For Pina* and Sasha Waltz’s *Körper* – I demonstrate that the skin “grows eyes”; it is actively involved in the spectacle created. The skin shakes in tandem with the music; the “tones and shades” of skin constitute visual imagery of the performance; it is manipulated by actions of dressing and undressing; the skin can be physically stretched, thus turning into a layer of fabric; and the reflection of the skin reaches out into the carefully

constructed scenography of the performance. Owing to dance theatre's continuous preoccupation with nudity on stage and differing strategies of approaching this preoccupation, I will journey through the differing states of bodily undress – from the fully naked to covered yet still toying with nakedness – in order to establish the practices of naked skin display and the dramaturgies and extra layers of meaning it creates, all of which arise from the inevitable constructedness of homo nudus.

### **Nudity as a Corporeal Costume**

“Naked costume” is not a contemporary idea. It stems from ever-evolving historical attitudes towards the naked body which expose the dubious role played by clothing in relation to nakedness, especially when it comes to the actions of concealment and revelation. The dubiousness is mostly apparent in highly conservative and “modest” historical-cultural environments such as that of the Victorian era. At a time when propriety and modesty (especially of the female subject) are held to a very high standard, and the body is covered from head to toe with an abundance of clothing, we would expect such sensibilities to reach and influence all systems of society. However, one particular “system” – Victorian theatre – rebelled or, rather, gradually exposed more and more human “flesh”. This was done for various reasons, but mainly for financial gain and to please its increasingly voyeuristic audience. Real nudity, the sight of completely naked flesh, was not permitted, therefore various theatre establishments looked for ways to momentarily expose, suggest or imitate the contours of the naked body. Tracy C. Davis examines the practices of exposure in Victorian theatre in her “The Spectacle of Absent Costume: Nudity on the Victorian Stage” (1989) and some aspects of her discussion point towards the rise of the “nakedness as costume” phenomenon.

Davis quotes a contemporary Dr Michael Ryan's observations of a female actress on stage:

Who has not seen actresses appear in ... dresses as white as marble, and fitting so tightly that the shape of their bodies could not be more apparent, had they come forward on the stage in a state of nature? [...] The attitudes and personal exposure of these females are most disgusting to every really modest mind, and more suited to an improper house than a public exhibition (1989: 321).

This spectator's response to the revelation of a female body shape on a Victorian theatre stage is clear – it is strongly expressed as being “most disgusting” and “improper”. The appearance of close fitting dresses, however, suggests that even in pious Victorian society, theatre held a special status. As Davis puts it “in any other public space, such dress was unthinkable, yet on stage it was accepted” (1989: 322). I would add that on stage, due to theatre's specially codified workings, it was tolerated; moreover, special attempts were made to give a reason for such “improper” bodily displays. One of the arguments for Victorian theatre's preoccupation with the naked body was a compulsion to embody works of art involving idealised portrayals of the nude. And as the presentation of the real nude was prohibited, as Davis observes, Victorian designers “invested considerable ingenuity in creating costumes that simulated nudity – or at least signified it, keeping the referential body to the fore” (1989: 323). Due to such “simulation”, the naked body, while fundamentally absent beneath the clothing (usually a body stocking), was nevertheless more visible than ever. Paradoxically, clothing embodied nudity, and subsequently nudity itself became a corporeal costume.

One of the best examples of “simulated” nudity resulting in *homo nudus* as a corporeal costume is provided by Victorian tableaux vivants. Often arranged in poses resembling the famous works held by the Royal Academy or Parisian Salon, and thus legitimate because of the high status of the visual arts, groups of men and women stood completely still while being looked at by the excited audience (Davis, 1989: 328). In some ways, tableaux vivants resemble the aestheticised plastinates discussed in Chapter 2. Like the groupings of plastinates, the models are specially posed, exhibited, fully visible and accessible to the spectator, thus objectified. In both instances the body is still and – most importantly – silent. However, there are also key differences between the two. The plastinate is a stone-cold corpse, the corporeality of which is turned inside-out, while a tableau vivant is an aesthetically pleasing (and, in some cases, sexually arousing) living body. The plastinate is usually flayed – the skin layer is partially or completely removed, resulting in the dehumanisation of the body; in the case of the Victorian “living statue” the material layer of skin is not only intact, it literally acquires a “second skin” (a notion I introduced in Chapter 3). Here, the body is not tampered with physically but, rather, perceptually: it is aestheticised by veiling it in a closely fitting fabric that suggests “smooth” and “statuesque” nudity, thus closer

to the ideal nude than to the actual body. As another Victorian spectator's observation provided by Davis states:

In every case, I observed that the body, arms, and bosom were completely clothed in very delicate close fitting fleshings, which, when a warm light was thrown on them, appeared (from the vantage of the orchestra stalls) like nature (Davis, 1989: 329).

Western theatre practices no longer see a need for the "close fitting fleshings" as a representation of nudity (at least, not in order to attract and titillate the audience). Since the 1960s, theatre has displayed the naked flesh of the performer and (despite some instances of controversy and censorship) gradually developed differing strategies of naked body display or, as I later call them in relation to Toepfer's analysis, nudity "veils". However, even though an actual body stocking no longer covers the body, the extra-present corporeal manifestation of the naked performer, and especially her skin as it appears in relation to clothing, has maintained an aspect of the "nakedness as a corporeal costume" paradigm.

### **Homo Nudus Caught with its Pants Down, or Skin Openly Staring**

In May 2014, I went to see Dubois' *Tragédie* performed at London's Sadler's Wells. The dancers, nine male and nine female, were fully naked throughout the performance (Image 4.5). In the first half of the performance, the dancers repetitively walked up and down the stage. This had a surprising effect: the naked body became individualised. As a spectator, you were given plenty of time to become acquainted with the differences in shape, size, form, colour and other intricacies and dramaturgies inherent in the naked bodies of the dancers. Collective nakedness, instead of having a uniting effect, made the plethora of bodily differences much more visible. At the end of the performance, however, the performers unexpectedly entered for their final applause fully, or nearly fully, clothed. The audience had been looking at every part of their bodies, including the most private parts, for the previous ninety minutes, yet the moment the specially codified configuration of theatre performance was over, the performers immediately "shed the skin" of their naked bodies.

The abrupt change from fully exposed to covered bodies suggests that in this case nakedness was used as a costume. And instead of embodying, as Dubois claims,

the essential state of humanity or “humanity laid bare” (Winship, 2010), thus “baring” the truth and tragedy situated at the core of human existence, it embodied a slightly different “tragedy” – the naked body’s inability to “bare all”. Paradoxically, the clothed body which appeared for only a few moments during the curtain call seemed to convey different meanings (the performers looked directly at the audience, thus openly and freely – not deliberately – “laying bare” their individual, dressed bodies<sup>55</sup>), while the naked body remained a manifestation of the strictly choreographed and aestheticised homo nudus. And it is precisely this inability to “bare all” that makes the nudity in dance theatre an interesting case study.

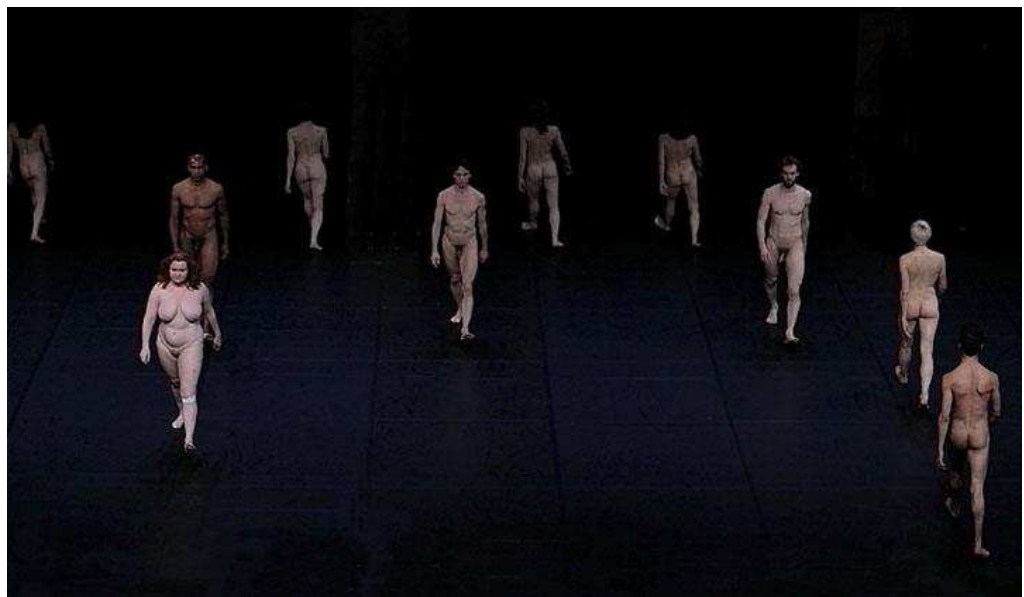


Image 4.5: Olivier Dubois' *Tragédie*

The fully naked homo nudus reveals the totality of the performer’s skin. And whereas Francis Sparshott argues that the naked dancer’s body acquires “negative” connotations because it appears as “one unwieldy surface” or a “pallid mass” (1995: 306), I believe that undressed skin can become actively involved in the overall dramaturgy. The skin, as in the case of Dubois’ *Tragédie*, openly stares at the spectator. This stare is performed through the visual, but also, and most importantly, material qualities of the skin. The lighting design by Patrick Riou and the set design by Dubois himself expose the moving and sweating skin of the dancers: the illuminated skin shakes together with the shaking breasts and swings together with the

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<sup>55</sup> I am not alone in this observation. Judith Mackrell in her review of *Tragédie* remarks on this particular moment as “thought provoking”: a moment that allows the audience to see the performers “anew”. See Mackrell, 2014.

swinging penises; its diverse colours and shades complement the minimalist scenography; and the loud music accompanied by strobe lighting towards the end of the performance reverberates within the frantically moving bodies, thus “touching” these bodies because, as I argue at the end of Chapter 5 in the context of professional wrestling and corporeal musicality, the sound causes the material flesh to vibrate. Through such unquestionable involvement, the skin also provokes moments of projected tactility in the viewer: she becomes more acutely aware of her own body.

In his article “Nudity and Textuality in Postmodern Performance” (1996), Toepfer argues that the exposed genitals are “the most complete ‘proof’ of the body’s vulnerability to desire and the appropriating gaze of the Other” (1996: 76). He observes the spectator’s voyeuristic desire to catch glimpses of the performer’s private parts and suggests that nakedness in theatre commonly refers to the exposed genitalia of the performer. And while he admits that such an argument has its difficulties because some nude performances intentionally mask or obstruct the view of the performer’s sexual organs (for example, by using clever lighting), the fully unveiled body remains the main sign of “true” nakedness (1996: 76). If we agree with Toepfer, then it follows that due to the emphasis on the most intimate parts of the body and their (even if sometimes obstructed) visibility, the naked performer immediately acquires sexual connotations that are closely interlinked with and even arise from the audience’s desire to look at the fully naked body.

This double exchange, the audience’s curiosity that results in a desire to see all and the performer’s action of baring all, is not at all surprising, and it could be argued that it arises from the long-lasting depreciation and suppression of genitalia in the Christian/Western tradition. In his *The Banished Body* (1984), Paul Ableman delves into the problem of the “disappearing” Western body which is centred on the negative attitude towards human sexual organs. Numerous attempts were made to cover up, mask, diminish and debase human genitalia throughout Western history. The Fall of Adam and Eve which gave rise to self-consciousness also immediately prompted them to cover their genitals with “aprons” (1984: 8). As I discussed in Chapter 1, Christianity has always demonstrated a suspicious attitude towards the body. The material body is seen as finite and limited, and moreover, as the source of all immoral aspirations. And it is precisely the lower half of the body that gives rise to these aspirations and, as a result, is incessantly debased by theological discourse. As



Ableman puts it “a pious Victorian would certainly have assumed that the chief purpose of clothing is to conceal ‘the shameful’ parts” (1984: 28). He also sees a direct link between “banished” genitalia in the Christian context and the depiction of the nude in the visual arts tradition:

Women’s abdomens often end in a featureless pink triangle. Men’s reproductive parts, when posture, or convenient obstruction, does not eclipse them totally, are usually shrunken and faded (Ableman, 1984: 57).

It is no wonder that, once more liberal discourses entered Western culture and theatre performance and the “concealed”, “shrunken” and “faded” reproductive parts were displayed in their real light, they captured the audience’s gaze and imagination and became Toepfer’s suggested focal point of the fully naked spectacle.

However, Monks argues that in the case of nakedness in theatre, “the real disappears into the illusion and it becomes clear that the absolute presence of nudity did not take place in spite of theatre’s illusions, but because of them” (2010: 118). Despite challenging the long-lasting tradition of “banished” genitalia, homo nudus is only a theatrical illusion of the real body. In Dubois’ *Tragédie*, once the idea of corporeal costume is introduced, the exposed genitalia gets lost within the intimate folds of the naked skin – rather than exposing the “hidden” or “banished” body that toys with our appropriating desire or gaze, it becomes part of the naked skin dramaturgies which are created. Even Toepfer, while providing a systematic list of genital-exposing nudity encountered in postmodern performance, subsequently (and arguably unbeknown to him) also systematises the “illusionary” strategies of homo nudus. He discerns nine different types of nakedness or “veils” with which the naked skin covers itself in nine different costumes – mythic, ritual, therapeutic, model, balletic, uninscribed, inscribed, obscene and pornographic<sup>56</sup> –depending on the dramaturgy and organisation of the theatre performance (1996: 78–87). It is worth exploring some of these nudity types in greater detail, as they apply to the performances discussed throughout this chapter.

Toepfer’s ritual nudity, which corresponds with the “extra-corporeal” nudity discussed in the previous section, deals with the exposition of the material body

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<sup>56</sup> For a full description of each type of nakedness in postmodern performance, see Toepfer (1996).

(namely, bodily fluids). Mythic and therapeutic nudity “veils” were central to the performance and performance art practices involving nakedness between the 1960s and 1980s. They treat the naked body as collapsing all differences. Toepfer uses The Living Theatre’s practice as an example of mythic nakedness because, according to him, nudity in their performances works as a (corporeal) ideology. The naked body is seen as an emancipatory force which not only unites the subjects but also “transcends the desirability of bodies”, resulting in the innocence and asexuality of nakedness (1996: 79). Therapeutic nudity points towards the “real” by challenging idealised perceptions of the body and arguing for a healthy attitude to materiality and sexuality (Toepfer provides Annie Sprinkle as an example). Balletic nudity, as the term suggests, occurs in dance and dance theatre practices. Toepfer argues that this type of theatrical nudity rarely works as a critique of bodily preconceptions (as in the case of therapeutic nudity) and instead exposes the athletic (as well as aesthetic) qualities of physical virtuosity. While uninscribed or inscribed nudity in performance directly corresponds with the playtext used: the naked body can make a surprising, uninscribed appearance; or, in contrast and due to the contents of the playtext, the spectator expects, even anticipates full frontal nudity (as was the case in the disrobing of Radcliffe in *Equus* where a naked appearance is included by the playwright).

The final two types of nudity “veil” provided by Toepfer carry clear sexual connotations. Obscene nudity is marked by the “filthy” language which goes hand in hand with the filthy body, as in case of Karen Finley’s performances, while pornographic nudity is confined to what Toepfer calls “underground sex clubs” and its main purpose is the sexual arousal of the spectator. I see this final type of nudity as especially problematic because sexual excitability is rather ambiguous. Can we, in fact, objectively determine what will cause sexual excitement during the performance? Any other type of nudity could have a similar effect. Meanwhile, obscene nudity discloses the naked body’s relation to speech, which is one of the most interesting aspects of Toepfer’s analysis: he argues that the naked body becomes even “more naked” when it speaks (1996: 77). *Homo nudus*, as a body on display, is “extra-present” not only because it carries the specially emphasised “costume of skin” that complements the performance’s dramaturgy, but also because it is somewhat empowered by the ability to speak. Even the previously discussed tableaux vivants, despite being still and silent, are, nevertheless, privileged by the possibility of uttering

a sound. The possibility and immediacy of speech clearly differentiates the naked dramaturgical configuration from the “silent” plastinates or digitised pop bodies. It also further disintegrates the already porous border between the performer’s subjectivity and the performer as the artistic construct or corporeal “illusion” of theatre. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the speaking body is much more resistant to objectification than the silent or silenced body.

On one hand, Toepfer’s systematic approach to nudity allows for placing performances in clear categories according to the “naked” strategies used, as well as the meanings created. On the other hand, however, and especially in the case of contemporary theatre and dance performance, these categories are too rigid. The performer often changes into a number of different “naked costumes” or nudity “veils” during the same performance: Dubois’ *Tragédie* starts off as an example of balletic nudity (the nude dancers walk up and down the stage in a strictly choreographed and focused manner which emphasises their athletic and beautiful bodies); yet it could also be seen as employing some aspects of mythic nudity (both female and male dancers are naked, thus becoming a “universal” spectacle which temporarily transcends the differentiations residing in clothed bodies but, as mentioned before, the spectacle leans towards individuation rather than universality); finally, in the second half of *Tragédie*, nudity turns into what could be perceived as obscene when the very same “balletic” and “mythic” dancers begin to grunt, sweat and imitate intercourse.

The fluidity and diversity of meanings created by the naked body of the performer correspond with a phenomenon observed by Monks which was put forward at the beginning of this section: the multiplicity of bodies that emerge in the spectacle of *homo nudus*. The fully exposed skin becomes a corporeal costume in itself and acquires a remarkable ability to seamlessly move between the manifestations of innocence, universality, individuality, aesthetic pleasure and carnal sexuality, thus not only complementing the claims for the ambiguity of nakedness, but also revealing its intercorporeal workings. Furthermore, while involved in the naked spectacle, the material body does not remain passive. Ann Cooper Albright suggests that “at the very moment the dancing body is creating a representation, it is also in the process of actually forming that body” (1997: 3). The skin that is openly staring at the spectator acquires agency and begins to create its own material dramaturgies: informing the scenography by its varying colours, reflecting the stage lights or covering the body in

sweat. Toepfer's analysis is also limited by focussing on performance practices where exposed genitalia works as a sole indicator of stage nudity. As the following two examples of homo nudus will demonstrate, the performer does not need to take off her or his pants in order to appear naked.

### **Homo Nudus in Transition Between Presence and Absence, or Skin Seductively Enticing**

Despite initially presenting itself as one of the most easily discernible examples of stage nudity, full frontal nakedness failed to “bare all”, and instead proved to be entangled in the multifaceted illusions of theatre. As Dubois' example demonstrates, homo nudus caught with its pants down (or rather prancing around the stage for ninety minutes in a “state of nature”) is more readily a type of corporeal costume veiled in diverse performance strategies than a manifestation of the “real” naked corporeality. Moreover, due to its ultimate failure to reveal the promised “true” nakedness of the performer, this type of nudity, according to Monks, is often perceived as disappointing (2010: 102). In order to argue for a slightly different type of nakedness as it appears in performance practices, we must (paradoxically) once again “banish” the already diminished genitals, but not in the way analysed by Ableman, where the genitals were dwindled and faded due to the religious beliefs or moral inclinations of a particular socio-cultural system. Instead, and while keeping the genital area intact, we must expand the all-revealing spotlight to encompass the rest of human corporeality as it appears in performance. As demonstrated by Victorian tableaux vivants, the covered body can be seen as nude, or at least as toying with nakedness. This “toying with nakedness” becomes even more apparent once the performer's body is caught in the transient state between being clothed and naked or semi-naked. The acts of removing and putting on clothing, which expose the strategies of concealment and revelation most readily found in striptease, not only constitute the making of homo nudus and create a simulation of nakedness that endows the performer's skin with an enticing quality, but also echo the broader workings of presence and absence in the Western understanding of the naked body.



Image 4.6: Alain Platel's *Out of Context: For Pina*

In contrast to the full exposure of Dubois' *Tragédie*, the performers in Platel's *Out of Context: For Pina* (2010) are never completely naked. Designed by Dorine Demuyne, their minimalist costumes (in the form of briefs and bras) stay on throughout the performance. Moreover, they occasionally cover the rest of their bodies with large orange blankets (Image 4.6). Nevertheless, an aspect of nudity, while not immediately obvious, is certainly implied – largely in the actions of stripping and dressing again, which works as a framework for the entire piece. At the start of *Out of Context: For Pina*, the performers sit among the audience wearing everyday clothing. Subsequently, one by one, they begin to climb onto the stage. The moment of crossing the boundary between the auditorium and the stage already constitutes an act of bodily transgression and evokes different meanings: this person is not an audience member but a performer; the performers are wearing everyday clothes, yet the moment they step onstage, their clothing becomes a costume. Moreover, the transgression does not stop there, as one by one, the performers begin to slowly remove their clothes, neatly fold them on the floor and simply stand there in their underwear, which then also becomes a costume.

What Platel's performance openly displays (and what happens behind the scenes in Dubois' work) is the transient process which constitutes the making of *homo nudus* – the act of literal and metaphorical undressing. Furthermore, *Out of Context:*

For Pina, by manifesting, emphasising and reiterating the act of undressing, simultaneously exposes the interaction between the strategies of concealment and revelation of the body. The performance “undresses” and reveals the performers’ bodies previously concealed within the audience; the performers’ bodies instantly become specially emphasised and visible, yet their naked materiality remains concealed beneath their casual clothing; the act of stripping begins to reveal their naked skin, yet their genitals remain concealed; during the performance, large blankets are continually draped over and then removed from the performers’ bodies, which works as a continuation of the concealment/revelation dialectic. Such intricate interplay between the clothed and naked body, as well as the toying with the possibility of all-revealing nakedness which is never fully achieved, immediately taps into the workings of striptease. It also emphasises the materiality of the performer’s skin, which, through the actions of veiling and unveiling, begins to playfully “flirt” with the audience or, as I see it, becomes seductively (although not necessarily sexually) enticing.

The concealment/revelation dialectic which arises from the body’s relationship with clothing can be traced back to Judaic and Greek traditions. These two traditions reflect an ongoing ambiguity which can be found in displays of the naked body: conflicting, yet simultaneously occurring, negative (shameful, pornographic, degrading) and positive (innocent, natural, healthy) attitudes towards nakedness. As Barcan, among others (Perniola 1989; Carr-Gomm 2010) argues, this incongruity results from the opposite positions that Judaic and Greek cultures afforded the naked body. Judaic theological thought saw nudity as an absence (shameful exposure and lack of clothing), while Greeks associated it with presence (as a healthy image of the body, especially in athletics) (2004: 83). Mario Perniola notes that Hebrew tradition gives primacy to clothing that is “associated with the notion of *chabod*, which means splendour, glory and honor”, this notion being used in reference to the priestly robe as the “glorious garment” (*begeg chabod*) (1989: 237). The special status of *begeg chabod*, together with the Hebrew metaphor of “clothing” as a divine action of creation and a state of being (God “clothing the Earth” and being Himself “clothed with honor and majesty”) gave rise to a negative position towards the exposed flesh (1989: 238). Meanwhile, the Greek tradition presents us with a very different view of the naked human body, especially in its idea of *kalokagathia*. The ideal body is perceived as a

nude body. It is not only perceived, but also highly praised and celebrated. According to Perniola, for Greeks, “nudity assumed a paradigmatic significance that involved clarity of vision [...] with an athletic perspective [...] that viewed victory and its glorious celebration as an end to be most energetically pursued” (1989: 238). Consequently, we could argue that the Western position towards nudity has inherited the traces of this Judeo-Greek dichotomy and always already situates the naked body in between or (more often) leaning towards one side or the other of the presence-absence spectrum. As a result, the undoubtedly fundamental aspect of nakedness is not its promise to reveal something hidden, but precisely this ambiguity: the naked body is riddled with a number of dualities, such as vulnerable/potent and extra-present, sexual/asexual, universal/culture-specific, celebrated/shameful, natural/constructed.

The dualistic workings of nakedness become especially apparent when we witness them in the making: when layers of clothing are gradually removed and we begin to see glimpses of exposed skin beneath. In the case of Platel’s *Out of Context: For Pina*, the act of unveiling exposes the body as at once vulnerable (just a moment ago this body sat fully clothed within the audience and now it stands on a raised stage, fully illuminated and stripped to its underwear) and “balletic” (the naked skin reveals the material qualities of the body, including the specially trained muscle which undoubtedly carries some ideals of Grecian athleticism and beauty). The performer’s body is at once lacking (the clothing is absent), yet also extra-present – its physical presence is specially emphasised due to the increased visibility of the material skin. Skin plays a prevalent role in this corporeal masquerade of presence-revelation-absence-concealment. While not openly “staring” as it did in the previous example, the skin is actively involved in the stripping spectacle: once partially exposed, it draws our attention to itself, thus (seductively) enticing the viewer. Paradoxically, the main reason for this enticement is the “banished” genitals. Not everything is present, as the naked skin is framed by underwear and the resulting genital absence works as a hindrance which increases the desire to see all. As Anthony Howell observes, “desire is evoked at the moment of revelation, or prior to it, or when what is revealed is snatched away and again hidden from view” and “our attention is aroused by the suspense of these threshold experiences more than by the total state of nakedness” (1999: 20). Platel’s performance, through the naked skin’s relationship with clothing,

continuously toys with the (unattainable) contingency of the naked spectacle which undoubtedly resembles the workings of striptease.

I have discussed the strategies of striptease in great detail in Chapter 3, especially those in relation to popular culture. Similarly to pop bodies, what concerns us here is not so much the sexual agenda of undressing, but the “recycled” theatrical codification of this particular physical act. Stripping on a theatre stage is rarely used to induce sexual arousal. More often it is a critique or pretence of striptease, or the performative strategy of exhibition-ism that recycles certain techniques used by strippers. Nevertheless, the transient act of undressing in both the cases of the stripper and the performer works according to a similar premise, which is the transgression of the boundaries present in the clothed body. As Monks argues:

The act of undressing is governed by the fantasy of transgression, and the structures of convention, ritual and repetition in performance. It is the transgression of the body’s appearance that is at the heart of the act: clothes are central to establishing borders of the body, which can then be crossed (2010: 102).

The act of transgression gives rise to the audience’s anticipation: the moment of crossing the pre-established borders of the clothed body is loaded with the possibility of full exposure, the revelation of “real” nakedness. And, in this case, it is so much more enticing because, as the audience, we are witnesses to this revelation. The stripping act is happening before our eyes and we witness the exposition of the hidden “real” in real time. However, just as the stripper’s performance that never displays the much-promised and anticipated “real” nakedness (as I discussed in Chapter 3, the stripper’s body is a highly codified construct, carefully arranged, “buffed”, “polished” and theatrically displayed), the enticing skin in Platel’s *Out of Context: For Pina* also remains a specially emphasised bodily manifestation. The expectation of the “real” dissipates with the conclusive act of concealment when, at the end of the performance, the dancers walk to their neatly folded clothing, slowly dress their near-naked bodies and simply leave the stage. Platel’s *homo nudus*, after playfully toying with nakedness for the duration of the performance, remains a specially arranged and achieved, theatrical act of exhibition-ism.



## **Homo Nudus Stretched to its Limits, or Skin Peeping Through**

The two previous examples – Dubois' *Tragédie* and Platel's *Out of Context: For Pina* – exposed the ambiguity situated in nudity's relationship to costume and its manifestation in the case of homo nudus on the theatre stage. In Dubois' case, the bare skin of the performer was endowed with costume-like qualities, with its skin openly staring at the spectator, and in Platel's performance, the body was further ensnared in the concealment/revelation masquerade that constitutes the making of the naked spectacle. The naked performer as a bodily manifestation proved to be permanently caught in between presence and absence, with her or his "real" body lost amid the corporeal folds of the costume and her or his exposed skin informing and influencing the theatrical illusions created. To conclude my analysis of the naked dramaturgies of skin, I wish to provide a third example of homo nudus. This particular example differs from the previous two because it stretches the ambiguous relationship between the naked skin and costume to its limits. In the first two performances discussed in this section, the body's interrelation with the various nudity "veils", its intercorporeality, is not always immediately apparent. At times, the material body takes centre stage (especially when the material skin becomes "unruly" and "takes over" the artistic construct created – when it sweats, shakes or simply draws attention to its bodily qualities) and it is only after closer scrutiny that the bodily manifestation proves indistinguishable from the theatrical codification. However, in the case of Sasha Waltz's *Körper*, due to a number of dramaturgical strategies used, the body almost completely merges with its costume.

As Alice Bain observes in her performance review:

A great black 10 metre-high monolith looming over the action suddenly reveals a saintly body flat-framed in a window of light. Another curls into view, and another, until 11 are oozing around together in this celestial elevator, white bodies stark against black. It's nude heaven featuring Lucian Freud's fleshy, soft-folded meat, Breugel's hellish medieval souls, the smooth marble piètas of the renaissance, the bodies of science – all rolling together in slow motion. A whole civilisation's worth of body beautiful cropping up in one image [...]. For an hour and a half, the company whacks out an encyclopedic list of corporeal facts and fairy tales. The work flashes out myriad images of the body in art, in psychology, in medicine, in sport, in love, in society, in violence, in religion (2000).

It is clear from Bain's observations that, in her *Körper*, Waltz generously applies the idea of intercorporeality and creates numerous dramaturgies of the naked skin: the dancer's naked and semi-naked bodies create representations echoing works of art (Freud, Breugel, piètas of the Renaissance) as well as referencing other fields: in one particular scene, dancers manipulate porcelain saucers by stacking them together to form what looks like a human spine and then, in a rapid movement, rupture this construction, thus creating an association with the breaking of the spine. Another scene evokes the idea of a human organ market by having two topless female dancers draw their internal organs on their skin and stick price tags to them. However, it is not only through nudity, physical movement and the use of scenography (a 10 meter high monolith) and props that the dancer's body becomes a carefully arranged and compelling *homo nudus*. The use of costume and the interplay between the costume and the dancer's skin is also especially prominent in *Körper*.

Monks argues that the borders between the performer and her costume are never completely clear: "the costume is the spectator's means to access the actor's body, and is also a means for the actor to access the world of the performance" (2010: 20). In the case of *homo nudus*, it is, first and foremost, the skin that our gaze "touches" when we are faced with the naked body in performance. It is also the skin that forms immediate and complex relationships with other skins, costume, lighting and scenography. Similarly to the complex relationship between the skin-as-material-border and inner and outer bodily realities discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the performer's skin and the fabric covering it (including the skin as a "material fabric") are inevitably intertwined and produce diverse meanings. Moreover, as suggested by Monks, and as I have argued throughout this section, with each new layer of costume added, removed or missing, a new performer-body is displayed. And it is precisely the theatre maker's and costume designer's abilities to multiply the performer's bodily reality or, in other words, the profusion of intercorporealities produced by the skin's relationship to costume, that is explored in Waltz's corporeal choreography. With each scene, *Körper* presents a slightly different version of *homo nudus*. By manipulating their corporeal costumes, Waltz's dancers also seem to modify their bodies, ranging from slight deformation to complete transformation.



Image 4.7: A tableau vivant in reverse: a still image from the film of Sasha Waltz's *Körper* (2000)

In the scene described by Bain, the dancers press their semi-naked bodies against the glass monolith, thus deforming and flattening their skin and momentarily resembling anatomical specimens. During another sequence, the dancers grasp each other's skin in order to lift each other up. The dancer is then briefly carried by the folds of her material skin, which at that moment resembles a layer of fabric that can be firmly gripped, stretched and pulled away from the body. As well as being manipulated as a material layer-becoming-costume, the skin is also in a continuous interrelation with clothing, designed by Sylvia Hagen-Schäfer. She covered the naked body of one female dancer with a see-through garment, thus turning her into a tableau vivant in reverse: fully exposed, yet at the same time concealed (Image 4.7). Other bodies (male and female) are dressed in semi-revealing costumes and the spectator is able to catch glimpses of "peeping" breasts, buttocks or genitalia. Due to the ambiguous costuming, as well as "stretching" their material skins to the limit, the body becomes, to use Kotte's terminology, specially emphasised yet with reduced consequences. Instead of aspiring to reveal the "real" naked body, Waltz's performers display the body that merges with its costume almost completely – a specially arranged material construct. Moreover, because the "real" is no longer attainable, the body's sexuality becomes equally ambiguous. While the costume might (sometimes very playfully) allow the

dancer's naked skin (including the genital skin) to peep through, we are no longer certain if the sexualised exposition has really taken place because the skin has become an indistinguishable part of the corporeal costume itself.

Waltz's dancers are also endowed with the power of speech. The spoken text, however, instead of bringing their subjectivity to the fore, allows for further exposition of the theatrical constructedness of the body: a female and male dancer playfully confuse their body parts by pointing to the armpit while talking about the mouth, or the head while discussing their backside. As a result, on one hand, our perception of the body becomes muddled: the body momentarily "grows" body parts in all the wrong places with its skin simultaneously becoming an indistinguishable part of the corporeal costume and we are no longer certain if it is the material body being exposed or only the layer of fabric resembling the material body. On the other hand, however, the skin is also momentarily empowered: while being flattened, stretched and peeping through in surprising ways, the skin attracts the spectator's attention and "grows eyes" – it actively informs a particular dramaturgical configuration.

The performer's materiality, especially the skin, merges not only with clothing, other bodies and skins. It also reaches out into the outer world of the performance. Towards the end of *Körper*, the female dancer stands in front of a glass wall and her body is reflected onto its surface. A male dancer comes and stands behind the glass, opposite her. Consequently, their body images merge into one, creating a new, confused, fragmented and intersexual bodily construct – imprinting their co-joined materialities onto the scenography of the performance (Image 4.8). Antonin Artaud's idea of the performer and their Other, the Double, comes to mind, as well as the performer's ability: to (with the help of director, choreographer and designer, and their use of specially codified theatrical strategies, illusions and "tricks") reconfigure her or his body; to be on full display, yet, at the same time, completely concealed; to be bodily present, yet also absent; in the process, to fill the performance space with multiple, ever-changing and shifting corporeal phantasms of homo nudus. And, as a spectator, you are provided with the pleasure of viewing and making sense of the multifaceted naked dramaturgy created. As Monks puts it:

When spectators watch an actor in performance they might imagine they see only one figure, but if they were to relax their eyes slightly, this single figure would blur into

multiple ones, all of whom are doing a different job in performance, all of whom are product of the performance. These blurred and multiple figures might even suggest that the actor's body is composite of many bodies (2010: 20).



Image 4.8: A material phantasm of homo nudus: a still image from the film of Sasha Waltz's Körper (2000)

### 4.3. The Third Facet of Exhibition-ism:

#### **Homo Nudus Plays Staged Crudities**

In order to bring this chapter, with its oozing “extra-corporeal” strategies and diverse naked skin dramaturgies, to a close, I would like to offer one more observation concerning the contemporary display of and engagement with homo nudus. This particular facet of exhibition-ism is not concerned with the aforementioned bodily “realisms” or “authentications”, but instead “veils” the naked body of the performer in a much more playful and often exaggerated representation of nakedness. As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, homo nudus is engaged in a continuous material masquerade with its ever-changing staged authentications, corporeal costumes and dramaturgies of the naked skin. One of these costumes affords the naked body yet another extra layer of meaning which gives rise to homo nudus as a highly ludicrous spectacle. The spectator’s perception of the naked body is not only informed by the metaphorical paradigm of the *nuda veritas* or the historical dualism of concealment and revelation; the naked body can also create a highly comical spectacle.

The studies of nakedness referenced in this chapter provide some indication of this potential comic value of nudity; however, they do not analyse it in much detail. Toepfer’s discussion of early *Nackttanz* (the early twentieth century nude dance movement in Germany) includes some rather “spicy” examples of pseudo-erotic dancing that undoubtedly had a “tongue in cheek” element.<sup>57</sup> Barcan observes a tendency towards satirical nudity, especially when it comes to the portrayal of naked authority figures (2004: 212–218). Philip Carr-Gomm presents an array of nude imagery that very succinctly illustrates the naked body knowingly involved in playful situations: nude synchronised swimming (2013: 21), streaking (2013: 181–183); or naked news presenting (2013: 194). Meanwhile, Monks, in her analysis of Forced Entertainment’s *Bloody Mess*, considers the interplay between speech and comic display of the naked body (2010: 116). I find the lack of nakedness as a comic spectacle analysis surprising, especially as the two have gone hand in hand throughout

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<sup>57</sup> As an example, see his discussion of Adorée Villany, who gave nude dance performances around Europe between 1905 and 1915. The humorous attitude towards her nudity, as Toepfer observes, is most prominent in her writings describing the nude dancing (1997: 22–24).

Western historical and cultural developments since (at least) the mid-sixteenth century and the flourishing of *commedia dell'arte*.

Nakedness as a comic spectacle – the body exposed by accident, tricked into undressing or deliberately stripped, as well as “extra-corporeal” comedy – works in the form of long-established and easily recognisable tropes within popular entertainment (especially film and animation). The performer “caught with her pants down” can be funny and, more often than not, playfully sexualised. From the historical perspective, it was Italian *commedia* that most readily and lewdly incorporated playful sexualisation into its manifestations of *homo nudus*. Already in the early examples of *commedia dell'arte*, as observed by Robert Henke, and especially with female performers joining the troupes, the energetic and physically demanding performances “fired the erotic imagination” of the audience (2002: 88). This is eloquently described in a 1616 document from Florence, with a special praise for the charms of one female performer:

In the piazza every evening eight men and women perform comedies which last until half an hour after sunset... The shapely Vettoria, dressed like a trim and neat boy, packs in large crowds with her dangerous leaps, her divine dancing, her sweet singing, and her beautiful gaze, that by its sweetness softens and lulls her audience, who sigh and cry out, “Oh, my heart, what is this marvel?” Of course there are certain dirty old men who keep gazing at her with their mouths open, because they want to play games with her and have a taste themselves (in Henke, 2002: 89).

The observer pays special attention to Vettoria’s physical attributes: he notes her “shapeliness”, her performing “dangerous leaps” and “divine” dancing, as well as her “beautiful gaze”. He also remarks on her costume (“dressed like a trim and neat boy”) which indicates that she was wearing close fitting clothing, which not only allowed her to perform “dangerous” physical tricks, but also exposed her body shape. Therefore, the body, while not literally naked, was undoubtedly toying with an element of the sexualised *homo nudus*: “lulling” its audience and engaging their erotic imaginations, even making those “dirty old men” wish they could “have a taste themselves”, an expression that carries a rather ambiguous sexual innuendo in itself.

However, it was one particular type of comic routine of *commedia*, or *lazzo*, performed by female and male actors, that openly used the comic strategies of

nakedness – the so-called “staged crudities”. Here we find a mixture of both “extra-corporeal” nakedness and naked skin dramaturgies that expose or at least playfully point at the “very private” parts: the bottom and genitalia. As Mel Gordon observes, staged crudities were the most popular comic routines, overflowing with “the infantile and adolescent aggressions of shit and urine throwing, humiliation through exposure, of mixing food and feces (sic), of placing one’s ass in another’s face, and the telling of dirty jokes”, many of which were performed by the Zanni characters of *commedia dell’arte* (1983: 32). Gordon provides some examples of the most popular “crude” lazzi:

The servant-girl [...] empties a chamber pot out of the window. It hits Pantalone [...] as he serenades Isabella.

Pulcinella [...] teaches the female characters the song ‘Anca Nicola’, during which they must raise their skirts three times. When they ask him the meaning of this, he replies that seeing the gate open, men will enter.

Dressed as a waiter, Arlecchino serves all the food, the salad, an omelette, and so forth, by pulling them out of his breeches. When a customer complains about a dirty plate, Arlecchino cleans it by rubbing his ass over it. For dessert, Arlecchino puts a plate under his ass and shits cherries.

Pulcinella explains that his wife came with the following dowry: a windmill in the back of the house – her ass, a watermill in the front of the house – her ureter, and a forest beneath the house – her pubic hair (1983: 32–35).

Commedia’s range of exhibition-isms, from sexual innuendo and semi-nudity, to “extra-corporeal” lewd behaviour and humour, closely echoes the examples of *homo nudus* discussed throughout this chapter, but with some distinct differences. While seen as “banished” in the context of the visual arts, the genitalia in *commedia* is put on a full display: exposed, playfully pointed at or openly discussed. The “extra-corporeal” body (urine, excrement), that overflowing excess of “leaky” and malodorous materiality, does not serve as an indication of the “authentic” or “real”; quite the opposite, it is used symbolically or purely for its comedy value, which arises from *homo nudus* being turned into a corporeal parody. The naked body becomes a comical theatrical illusion: emphasised, specially organised and, most importantly, exaggerated. *Commedia dell’arte* presented its audiences with a “larger than life”



corporeal comedy, where the body joyfully transgresses its boundaries, in both of forms, the skin peeping through (the performer lifting up her skirt) and the “extra-corporeal” materiality (Zanni defecating cherries). Mikhail Bakhtin remarks that the world created by commedia is “chimerical”: it is heterogeneous and “violates natural proportions, thus presenting elements of caricature and parody”; and this parody is captivating because it taps into the “origin of laughter to the human soul’s need of joy and gaiety” (1984: 35).



Image 4.9: Male stalker during the 2011 MTV Europe Music Awards

What about contemporary examples of the chimerical homo nudus with its “crudities”, and the human need for “joy and gaiety”? During the 2011 MTV Europe Music Awards ceremony, a male stalker unexpectedly interrupted the event by running onto the stage. With the crowd erupting into loud roar, he stopped next to the actress Hayden Panattiere who was about to announce an award, covered his genitals in (arguably pretend) shame and after exchanging a few words, ran off again. Here, homo nudus underwent a manifold transgression that resulted in corporeal comedy: the stalker was fully naked, his body crossing the usual boundaries of clothing; he

ran into a restricted area (although this particular “crudity” was staged); the naked act was unexpected, thus transgressing the spectator’s expectations of the event. Streaking, which gained popularity in 1970s in (especially American) university campuses and sport’s events, is often seen as a political act of libertarianism or as anti-establishment but, as Carr-Gomm argues, it is also fundamentally comical, primarily because of its material involvement: “[T]here’s something about running madly around in the altogether in front of other people that is inherently humorous. [...] Certainly it is the sight of jiggling rude bits and flabby pale behinds gadding wantonly about in the fresh air before being tackled ungracefully by puffing policeman” (2013: 179).

And it is precisely the inherent comedy of those “jiggling rude bits” and “pale behinds” that constitutes the post-commedia manifestation of playful corporeality in homo nudus. The genitals reclaim their rightful place as a form of onstage crudity in *Asking For It* (2014), a solo performance by Adrienne Truscott, during which she walks around the audience joking about rape with her genitals exposed. The work of performance artist Narcissister often involves playful exaggeration of genital exposition. In her short film *Hot Lunch*, she presents a sexualised portrayal of the hot dog waitress: dressed as a penis-shaped hot dog; exposing her bra that has fake plastic breasts attached to it; squirting ketchup and mustard from the fake breasts which undoubtedly echoes lazzi of commedia; shaking her bottom with a sausage prop attached, thus deliberately imitating intercourse; and, finally, (apparently) extracting a long cloth from her vagina and placing it in her mouth. None of these actions is done in order to unveil the “honesty” or “realism” of the human body. Instead, Narcissister’s exaggerated corporeal comedy of homo nudus parodies not only the body itself, but also its numerous material representations: contemporary culture’s tendency to oversexualise certain objects, physical actions and imagery. This particular instance of homo nudus playing staged crudities is deliberately arranged and codified: it knowingly employs real or pretended genital exposition and, just as with the pop body discussed in Chapter 3, only much more playfully, recycles bodily manifestations found in Western “striptease culture”.

Homo nudus as a comical spectacle is undoubtedly “present” due to its material workings which not only bring the body to the fore, but also highlight, denude and reveal the fleshy reality. Here, the body is also deliberately exaggerated: made “larger

than life”, more naked and more comical than usual. The theme of bodily exaggeration and excess, achieved through the material workings, continues in the following chapter which introduces one final instance of the pageantry of contemporary Western body – the body of the professional wrestler. I will argue that this body not only creates one of the closest examples of pageantry as it is commonly understood, but it also constitutes a bodily manifestation which in many ways provides the audience with a spectacle full of “joy and gaiety”. In contrast to the bodies encountered so far – the dead body, the pop body and homo nudus – the wrestler’s body is not merely placed on public display; through the historical echoes, outrageous imagery, materiality and bodily furore, this body engenders a shared fantasy which envelops and directly involves the spectator.

## Chapter 5

### Bodily Furore:

#### Sweaty Encounters in Professional Wrestling



Professional wrestling match in Sikeston, Missouri, 1938



Mildred Burke vs. Mae Weston, circa 1970

Evil boasts. Good despairs. Evil sends Good outside of their roped-off reality. Good returns with a serenity exempt from compassion. Man, short of days and sick of troubles, is exasperated: “Kill him! Finish him off! Fuck him up! Destroy him! Tear the bastard’s eyes out!”

(Carlos Monsiváis)

The symphony of the thunderclaps of falling bodies.

(Carlos Monsiváis)

In the chapter “The World of Wrestling” in his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes observes that “the virtue of all-in wrestling is that it is the spectacle of excess” (1973: 15). A little later in the same chapter he suggests that the main object of this “spectacle” is the wrestler’s body when he states that “it is [...] in the body of the wrestler that we find the first key to the contest” (1973: 17). Moreover, it is the multiple aspects of this body, what I see as the working of intercorporealities, that brings it to the fore: the wrestler’s physical actions, facial expressions (Barthes associates these with the tragic masks), excessive and contorted gestures and the overall physique which, for Barthes, resembles that of the *commedia dell’arte* characters (1973: 16–20). While acknowledging and providing detailed observations of the wrestler’s body and its actions, Barthes’ terminology maintains the semiotic framework, particularly in his use of “spectacle” and “spectacular” in relation to the body which, as John Fiske observes, points to the “pleasure of looking” and “exaggerates the visible” as meaning-making (1991: 84). Throughout this chapter, I will continue to return to the configuration of the “spectacle of excess” because while professional wrestling has undergone some major developments since the examples referred to by Barthes<sup>58</sup>, it has not only retained, but also enhanced its already exaggerated and excessive corporeality, which is manifested and often consumed as a spectacle. However, in order to maintain my corporeal discourse and emphasis on the fleshy workings of the

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<sup>58</sup> Wrestling matches are no longer staged only in “the most squalid Parisian halls” (Barthes, 1973: 15), but are also seen as a global sport phenomenon, with the fights happening in major venues around the world observed by sold out audiences.

body, I yet again wish to shift the accentuation from its visual towards its material qualities. My interest here, therefore, is the bodily manifestations of wrestling that often present themselves in their “spectacular” corporeal excess.

The present chapter examines this body-in-excess – the body of the Western professional wrestler, either male or female (from here on simply “the wrestler”). A theme that runs through the previous chapters, the ambiguous “reality” of the body, is also prominent here. As indicated in recent accounts of wrestling in cultural and performance theory (Mazer 2005; Chow 2012, 2014), the perception of the body as “real” wavers due to its theatricality (“Good” and “Evil” characters which are placed in a ring, flooded by stage lights and surrounded by roaring crowds). Additionally, the “real” becomes questionable due to the manifestation of its materiality – the body displaying sharply defined and often glistening muscle contours that form an inseparable part of its costume or, in wrestling terms, “gimmick” (thus echoing the workings of corporeal costume discussed in Chapter 4). Moreover, the wrestler’s actions are conspicuously pre-rehearsed: the spectator is presented with a type of play- or mock-fighting where the fight choreography or “spots” are predetermined, as is the outcome of the match. The “spot” as Tom Wells observes, is “a rehearsed sequence used to structure the fight, so that the eventual improvisation is underpinned with set check points which are recalled and returned to during the live event” (Chow and Wells, 2012: 19). As a result, when watching a professional wrestling match, we are faced with the human body that is deliberately displayed, often partially denuded, costumed and mock-fighting in front of the large audience. This body, I wish to argue, comes nearest to embodying the pageantry as it is often understood.

Drawing on these observations, I will argue for an extra layer of meaning that occurs due to the wrestler’s bodily reality being specially codified or made “present” – the moment of grace. Unexpectedly, in the midst of corporeal gimmicks, pre-rehearsed full body slams and ankle locks, and grunting sweaty encounters, the wrestler’s material reality gives rise to a graceful spectacle. The gracefulness is overlaid with Kleistian marionette-like quality: the wrestler gracefully slipping in and out of the “roped off reality” or, as it was in the case of Canadian wrestler Owen Hart, the wrestler gracefully falling to his death. And while Sharon Mazer argues that the wrestling spectacle contains moments of “truth” because the body is at times “unguarded” (it sweats, bleeds and suffers), thus offering “the sign that the game has

crossed from simulation to actuality” (2005: 80), I will demonstrate that the wrestler’s bodily materiality remains deeply ingrained in the overall shared fantasy of the spectacle. During the pageantry of the wrestler, due to its codification and grace, which afford the body an almost transcendental quality, the material “real” should not be viewed as some “true” influence, disrupting the spectacle from the outside; instead, it more readily resembles the Lacanian “Real”, the momentary opening of a “fissure” situated within the illusionary landscape itself. In Slavoj Žižek’s reading of Lacan, the Real does not enter the shared fantasy (simulation) from the outside (actuality), but is already deeply ingrained in that particular reality (2006: 72). The moment the Real appears, it rips the shared fantasy open from within. The resulting “fissures” of the Real explain the gap (which is based on the rational awareness that the fight is staged) between seeing the body of the wrestler hit the ground and believing that a real accident has taken place. In less severe cases, it prompts the spectator to continually question the “reality” of the event and engage with the fabricated spectacle of wrestling regardless.

The wrestler exists within the wider milieu of popular culture, in particular, the culture of sport (or, as some see it, sports entertainment<sup>59</sup>). In contrast to some aspects of popular culture that during the last four or so decades have received extensive scholarly interest (popular media, pornography, etc.), including popular music and striptease, as discussed in Chapter 3, sport, as many note, has largely been neglected. Or, rather, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht observes, it was often seen as reductionist, “fulfilling nothing but a subordinate function within larger or more powerful system” (2006: 25). Nevertheless, following similar critiques and subsequent critical analyses of sport, there is a growing appreciation of sport as a scholarly subject. Accounts in philosophy and aesthetics (Feezell 2006; Gumbrecht 2006), sociology (Dunning 1999; Eichberg 1998) and cultural studies (Blake 1996) view sport not only as subordinate and carrying a utilitarian value (i.e., to achieve a healthy body), but as a widespread and influential phenomenon per se. Moreover, all of these accounts highlight the predominance of the human body. The sporting body is no longer read as simply the result of Western civilisation’s desire to subjugate and control its members<sup>60</sup>, but

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<sup>59</sup> Vince McMahon, currently majority owner of WWE, was the first person to refer to professional wrestling as “sports entertainment” in the 1980s (Chow, 2014: 47).

<sup>60</sup> Gumbrecht notes that control and subjugation as the main goals of the early rise of sport feature in Norbert Elias’s account; see Gumbrecht (2006: 26).

rather as a material reality which constitutes and informs how we participate in and perceive sports: the body that is involved in self-expression and play (Feezell); the body that carries athletic beauty and grace (Gumbrecht); the body that is manipulated by (outer) training techniques and (inner) diet- and performance-enhancing drugs in order to advance athletic achievement (Cover); or the body and its diverse historical connotations that directly inform the architectural space around it (Eichberg).

The increasing scholarly appreciation of sport in general and the sporting body in particular is useful because it allows to position the wrestler's body within the broader theoretical landscape. In the present chapter, I will return to the issues of intercorporeality and cultural recycling which allow for the reinvention, reintegration and corporeal manipulation of the body on display. I also retrace the specific historical residues found in the world of professional wrestling. As Carlos Monsiváis' account of wrestling's spectatorship, quoted in the beginning of this chapter, demonstrates ("Kill him! Finish him off! Fuck him up! Destroy him! *Tear the bastard's eyes out!*") (2005: 92, emphasis mine), wrestling continues to exhibit a high level of bodily violence which constitutes a contemporary re-enactment of Ancient Greek and Roman sporting events. The historical manifestations of staged violence, however, work only as "distant mirrors" for contemporary reality because the fighting in the ring is no longer as violent, bloody and deadly as it was during the ancient wrestling matches or gladiatorial combat. Moreover, and in contrast to that of some ancient societies, the current spectacle of the publicly violated body often evokes outrage or is dismissed as distasteful. In the case of wrestling, the staged violence is "inverted": it goes hand in hand not only with the excessive theatricality and corporeality that results in an exaggerated parody of sport (and life), but also with tight regulation, thus constituting a specially arranged fantasy par excellence.

The most important recurring principle running throughout this dissertation, however, is the materiality of the body, especially the skin, which is the first and most significant fleshy reality we encounter when faced with a dramaturgical configuration of bodies on display. In the case of the wrestler, I focus on yet another quality embedded in the human skin – that of tactility, the skin's ability to give rise to the sense of touch and the subsequent meanings and connotations created by that touch. Wrestling rests heavily on bodily contact: the bodies are in close proximity, often intimately intertwined in the ring; the wrestler's body is touched by a referee (the



winning wrestler has her or his arm raised); the wrestler touches the audience (directly, by throwing an opponent out of the ring, as well as indirectly, via projected tactility). Moreover, I take my observations of tactility one step further in order to argue for touch as a point of origin for bodily sound which also constitutes what I see as bodily *furore* in the case of wrestling. Bodily *furore*, which Carlos Monsiváis poetically describes as “the symphony of the thunderclaps of falling bodies” (2005: 89), manifests itself during a wrestling match when bodily touch is followed by bodily sound: the body slamming the floor as it falls (in some extreme types of wrestling, the body also loudly smashing wooden boards or being hit by steel chairs). However, it also extends to other forms of sound made by the body, like wrestlers’ banter and dialogue, and especially the “heated” body of the spectator, the roaring crowds which are loudly present in many sporting events, excessively so in wrestling.

This, the final chapter, concludes with an account of these roaring crowds that constitute a bodily aspect briefly touched on (or only implied) in the previous case studies: the composed and subdued spectator at von Hagens’ exhibitions in Chapter 2, the consumer of the pop body in Chapter 3 and the audience experiencing moments of projected tactility and bodily phantoms when faced with the naked body on stage in Chapter 4. Building on my observations after attending a wrestling match in London (2015), as well as Oliver Double’s (2012) insights into the rowdy crowds in British variety theatres, I offer an account of the audience’s bodily involvement while watching (and, most importantly, participating in) a wrestling match. As Claire Warden argues, the audience participation is crucial for co-creating the spectacle of wrestling (2013: 4). The spectator is not only physically present, but also audible, which suggests the presence of corporeal musicality, the bodily *furore* of the crowd which complements that of the wrestler.

## **5.1. The World of Wrestling Entertainment:**

### **Grace, Athletic Performance and Spatial Choreographies**

The TNA (Total Nonstop Action) “Impact Wrestling” match I attended at London’s Wembley Arena (2015) saw large crowds gather around a platform erected in the middle of the space. Stage lights flooded the platform, a large screen displayed the wrestlers’ entrance and two presenters “worked” the audience by repeatedly exclaiming: “we are looking for the loudest person in the crowd who will be taken backstage!”. This prompted waves of progressively louder shouts and screams. Each wrestler was acknowledged with a flash of their name and sometimes also face enlarged on the screen, accompanying personalised soundtrack and a loud encouraging roar (if they were a “face” – the good guy) or an equally loud and mocking expression of displeasure (if they were a “heel” – the villain) from the audience. The spectator was presented with an exaggerated pageantry of bodies: predominantly male, but also female; fit, muscular and topless physicalities, often “embellished” with tight-fitting pants or sparkly briefs; large, verging on obese and seemingly threatening physicalities (Samoa Joe); and bodies dressed in elaborate costumes and make-up (Crazy Steve). In addition to their displayed materialities, these bodies enacted their designated “narratives” such as feuds between different “clans” (The Wolves vs. Bro Mans), the dramatic involvement of a wrestler’s wife (Nikki James) and Good losing to Evil but then instigating a “backstage” fight and reclaiming its good name (Bram vs. Magnus). In quick succession, one match followed another as a build-up to the main event of the night – the fight between Kurt Angle and Bobby Lashley (“The Destroyer”). In the space of four hours, the audience got their fair share of grunts, sweat, screams, blood, “powerbombs” and full body slams.

The above description exposes the dramaturgical configurations used in order to put the wrestler’s body on display: starting from the visual and sonic codification of the space (raised platform, stage lights and soundtracks), ending with the body itself, which is specially trained and emphasised through costume. It is these configurations, together with the scripted narratives that contribute to Barthes’ suggested “excessive” nature of wrestling: the body is enlarged on the screen before it enters the arena; its skin is often exposed through tight-fitting and rather scant

clothing; and, once in the ring, flooded with bright stage lights, it performs the re-enactment of (often exaggerated, but at times also real) pain. And whereas Lucia Rahilly observes that professional wrestling only “apes the grammar of the conventional sporting event” and “its performance derives much of its dramatic punch from the jarring juxtaposition of the ‘vulgar’ or ‘inappropriate’ with the ‘normal’ codes of athletic competition” (2005: 217), the wrestler’s body continues to carry some aspects of conventional sports. Nicholas Sammond suggests that in sports “the body is first and foremost a vehicle for the skills of the individual, an expression of talent, drive, training, and ability” (2005: 4). This athletic criterion – the importance of individual skills, training and ability – continues to be upheld by professional wrestling.

Each wrestler is individualised: she or he has her or his own theatrical gimmick (created by themselves or their management) in the form of a stage persona, name, costume, make-up and narrative. However, they also possess individual sportive skills, namely those related to wrestling as a sport, for example, a signature move (i.e., Kurt Angle’s “ankle lock”). First and foremost, wrestlers are trained as athletes. Sharon Mazer (1990) and Broderick Chow (2014) describe the training process in their respective accounts: the importance of learning to fall backwards and slam the platform (Mazer, 1990: 103); learning to “lock-up” (the common starting point of the wrestling match) (Chow, 2014: 72); and mastering numerous configurations of body slams and body locks. Only when mastered are these skills incorporated into the “work”. Chow notes that from the twentieth century onwards, the “work” constitutes the staple of professional wrestling – “the ‘selling’ the staged violence as real” (2014: 73–74). While carrying out this “selling”, however, the wrestler has to maintain a collaborative ability, largely in order to prevent serious injury, but also because each “work” is an embodiment of “a physical improvisation in which one worker responds to another’s somatic, visual, and aural cues” (Chow, 2014: 74). As a result, the violent confrontation constitutes only the “spectacular surface” of wrestling and each fight is based on closely coordinated teamwork which is fundamental in many sports.

Considering the importance of athletic aspects (individual skills, training and ability) that continue to prevail in the making of, and then the display of, the wrestler, we can begin to position the wrestler’s body in the wider scholarly context of sports –

the framework preoccupied with athletics and its theorisation. George Sheehan provides an astute introduction to this framework:

The intellectuals who look at sport start with the assumption that it must serve something that is not sport. They see its useful functions of discharging surplus energy and providing relaxation, training for fitness and compensation for other deficiencies. What they don't see is that play is a primary category of life which resists all analysis (Sheehan quoted by Randolph Feezell, 2006: 17).

Sheehan's observation points to the rejection of an idea that sport should be seen as subordinate to something else, which reverberates with scholarly accounts from at least the past twenty years.<sup>61</sup> He also suggests that sport arises from the action of play which, moreover, is a "primary category of life". Contrary to Sheehan's assumption that play cannot be theorised, Randolph Feezell in his *Sport, Play and Ethical Reflection* (2006) is preoccupied with precisely this category and looks at the question of sport, the pleasure we derive from participating in or watching sports and the sporting body through the prism of play. One of the conclusions he derives from his analysis, which also informs the present discussion, is that play in sport begins with the body. The source of enjoyment in sport, in addition to the brief respite from the "ordinary", is affirmed by "one's physical presence in the world" (Feezell, 2006: 15).

Feezell's emphasis on the physical presence belongs to a wider academic appreciation of athletics which, in order to avoid the subjugating position, often starts with a renewed interest in the sporting body. The pageantry, the parading of exposed and embellished bodies during live wrestling matches, together with physical training practices and athletic ability, place an immediate emphasis on the wrestler's bodily reality. Moreover, in case of wrestling, it is first and foremost the body that is intimately involved in the tension between customary sports and the wrestling-specific "inappropriate" or "excessive" corporeality. Three particular scholarly accounts are of interest here because they provide useful starting points for further exploration of the

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<sup>61</sup> Among others, Andrew Blake critiques the marginalisation of sport in cultural and social studies and calls for the development of "sporting aesthetics" as well as the analysis of the spectators' "pleasure" while watching sporting events (1996: 17). Eric Dunning suggests that, despite the widespread popularity of sport, sociologists tended to dismiss sports as "trivial" and concern themselves with larger, allegedly more "important" issues (1999: 9). And Gumbrecht expresses his disappointment with the academic analysis of sport which often sees the activity as a "sign of decadence", fulfilling only a subordinate function or serving as a tool for controlling human bodies, social differentiation and financial gain (2006: 25–26).

wrestler's body in contemporary Western society: Gumbrecht's idea of athletic beauty and grace; Neil Carter's historical account of athletic training techniques; and Henning Eichberg's observations on the relationship between the sporting body and the architecture that surrounds it. Drawing on Gumbrecht's, Carter's and Eichberg's observations, I argue that the wrestler's body is no longer just a Barthesian "spectacle of excess". Due to the particular cultural workings involved, this body proves to have a performative agency which is now engaged in the complex workings of intercorporeality (bodily and material multiplicity and its interrelationships) and cultural recycling (reusing, reworking and modifying cultural strategies and iconographies): the creation and dissemination of numerous bodily manifestations that are situated between material physicality and the "real", digitised as well as plastic artifices.

### **Can Wrestling Appear Graceful?**

The above question might seem counterintuitive, especially if we take into account the "excessive", "vulgar", "rule-breaking" and "macho" characteristics of professional wrestling. The core of wrestling is comprised of hand-to-hand (and sometimes also "steel chair to the head" or "barbed wire to the back") combat, sweat, spit, violence, mock fighting and overt cheating. All of this seems to leave no room for bodily grace, which is much more readily associated with, for example, traditional ballet. Yet, just as grace itself, as Gumbrecht puts it, is "unexpectedly complex" (2006: 167), so are the physical appearances created by the sporting body. Solomon Lennox hints at gracefulness in the "dance of pain" in boxing, when he notes that, as the boxers "ferociously launch and land hard blows to their partner's body", at the same time, they also "delicately and fluidly avoid colliding with any of the other pairs" (2012: 209, emphasis mine). Similarly, in the case of wrestling, in the midst of being "pounded" with countless body locks and full body slams, the body provides glimpses of bodily gracefulness.

In his "On the Marionette Theatre" (*Über das Marionettentheater*), Heinrich von Kleist suggests that "there could be more grace in a mechanical puppet than in the structure of the human body" (1989: 418) because a puppet lacks the human ability of self-reflexivity. This implies that grace carries a detached, almost mechanical, quality

that gives rise to unexpectedly compelling movement. Jean-Paul Sartre emphasises such unexpected or, as he puts it, “unpredictable” workings of grace when he states that

In grace the body appears as a psychic being in situation. [...] it is in act and is understood in terms of the situation and of the end pursued. Each movement therefore is apprehended in a perceptive process which in the present is based on the future. For this reason the graceful act has on the one hand the precision of a finely perfected machine and on the other hand the perfect unpredictability of the psychic (1977: 400).

Sartre confirms the complexity of grace as a phenomenon: it appears in the physical act which, while perceived in the present, is also informed by the future, namely one’s (often predetermined) expectation. The act acquires gracefulness when it transcends this expectation and offers an unforeseen outcome or occurrence, thus becoming “perfectly unpredictable”. Gumbrecht, in his *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (2006), applies the concept of Kleistian grace to sport which prompts him to argue that, at times, the sporting body exceeds common expectations and transgresses previously set limits, because “something happens to bodies in the great moments of sports, something bodies were not made for” (2006: 180).

During the TNA event in London, I was faced with bodies that offered occasional glimpses of gracefulness. During one particular match, Samoa Joe came head to head with Austin Aries to fight over the possession of a briefcase (the contents of which were never revealed). Samoa Joe proudly and rather threateningly carried his large physique around the ring – a physical presence which certainly complemented his “bad guy” gimmick. Then, at one moment, he punctuated his “heavy” and slow fighting approach with some fast-paced and very graceful slipping through the ropes, in and out of the ring. The fast-paced movement was startling and acquired an element of gracefulness because it exceeded the common expectations of the movement quality of the large body (something that particular body was supposedly not made for) and produced an unusual corporeal display. Maaïke Bleeker in her analysis of Kleist suggests that the marionette’s gracefulness or, as she sees it, “truthfulness”, does not arise because of a “convincing representation” or our association with the moving body, but rather the complete opposite: the puppet’s movement being more “ideal” than our own (2011: 122), thus unexpected and almost unattainable. This is not to say that the human body can never carry the aesthetic quality of gracefulness. Instead, as

it was in Samoa Joe's case, it complicates what is seen as graceful and why it is seen as such.

Gumbrecht develops the understanding of Kleistian grace even further, when he states that "grace [...] is a function of how distant a body and its movements appear to be from consciousness, subjectivity, and their expression [...]. Grace turns upside down all the accepted knowledge about the relation between the human body and the human mind" (2006: 168). Because the truly graceful act lacks self-reflexivity, it is not the body performing the action that experiences a moment of perceptual disruption which turns the relationship between the body and mind "upside down"; it is experienced by the spectator. Grace problematises the spectator's perception of the bodies seen, because we fail to associate the graceful physical act with the intention of the performer of that act, with why and how it occurred (2006: 169). In addition, we sometimes fail to disassociate the common preconceptions with the actual bodily reality and ability on display. A TNA female wrestler, going by the stage name of Awesome Kong, used her large body to her advantage by gracefully throwing around her much more slender opponents (Gail Kim and Taryn Terrell). Athletic grace was manifested through the unexpected movement quality, strength and endurance of this particular wrestler.

Gumbrecht's discussion on Kleistian grace suggests that the sporting body possesses a corporeal agency – it is able to transgress the spectator's expectations. Moreover, gracefulness allows for the transgression of the pre-conceived, deliberate, and codified action of performing and the state of simply being, thus giving rise to a much more truthful manifestation. And while, as I later argue, the wrestler's fleshy reality remains adaptable, malleable and dependent on a particular context (just as it was in the case of flayed plastinates, digitised pop bodies and the naked skin costumes in theatre performance discussed in previous chapters) and the overall dramaturgical configuration of wrestling spurs the athlete towards a fabricated spectacle, the sporting body is also able to actively create its own perceptual imprints and meanings. This body complicates its relationship with the spectator by establishing graceful impressions in the most unlikely of contexts (like professional wrestling). Moreover, as a result of the arduous work on their bodies, athletes continue to push the boundaries of their physical ability which allows them to transgress previously set goals. When actualised, such bodily transgressions give rise to memorable moments in sport (for

example, Usain Bolt setting a new world record in the 100 metre sprint during the 2012 Summer Olympics in London), during which, as Gumbrecht remarks, the sporting body does something the human body was not made to do.

### **Athletic Performances: From Purging of Humours to Embodiment in Plastic Toys**

First and foremost, the athlete's body acquires agency through the performance of physical actions. Richard Schechner clearly distinguishes sport as one of the everyday situations which can be understood as performative, or simply as performance (2013: 31). For Schechner, "to perform" indicates an act of showing off, going to extremes or emphasising a particular action in front of the spectator (2013: 28). In the case of the majority of sports, the actions performed are always already actions of the body. Therefore, "to perform" here indicates an act of "showing the body": a physically determined performance which, at times, transgresses the limits of previously assumed human physical ability. The heightened attention towards physical performance and ability can be linked to historical training regimes – the arduous work on the body's materiality – the sporting body was (and continues to be) put through. Carter demonstrates that the historical development of sports training constituted a dualistic preoccupation with bodily performance: a shifting focus from its material bodily reality towards its surface imagery.

In his *Medicine, Sport and the Body: A Historical Perspective* (2012), Carter provides a concise history of athletic instruction that flourished during the late eighteenth century. The increased popularity of gambling in sports not only spurred athletic competitiveness, but also gave rise to the demand for improved physical performance. To begin with, this demand resulted in a preoccupation with the material body of the athlete which was reduced to a nearly animalistic level. As Carter suggests, following John Sinclair<sup>62</sup>, "there was little difference in training horses, fighting cocks, pugilists, greyhounds and runners" (2012: 82). A century later, athletic training began to liberally combine physical exercise (usually walking and running) with attention towards the inner reality of the body, namely bodily fluids or humours. The correct

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<sup>62</sup> Carter uses John Sinclair's *Results of the Enquires Regarding Athletic Exercises* (1807) as a reference.



balance of fluids was achieved through the action of purging: sweating, vomiting and bleeding (2012: 82). At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, inner bodily materiality was superseded by the outer image, the visual representation or the “showing off” of the ideal bodily type. The balance of material fluids gave way to the proportionality of the surface body which “was now of neo-classical proportions” and “balanced height, weight, muscle development and mobility. The ideal athlete, therefore, was neither too tall, nor too small, too thin or too fat” (Carter, 2012: 85).

In the contemporary athletic context, we can still observe the remnants of the inner-material/surface-image dualism, as well as the relationship between the two. Certain training regimes are designed solely for the purpose of achieving a particular body shape (i.e., upper-body strength in gymnastics). Similarly, material bodily modification (i.e., the use of performance-enhancing drugs) can be seen as attending to the outer imagery (increased musculature). However, the sporting body is no longer strictly confined to twentieth century ideals of symmetry and proportionality. As I suggested in my observations of the “Impact Wrestling” match in London, the wrestler’s body image is not homogenous; on the contrary, it varies greatly. I saw male and female wrestlers of all shapes and sizes, from the petit Gail Kim and Rockstar Spud (who is very short in comparison to other wrestlers) to bodies that carry excessive material bulk, like Samoa Joe and Abyss (the impressive size of Hulk Hogan also comes to mind). The particularly popular and successful wrestlers often maintain the image of a sharply defined body, exposing bulging muscle to resemble that of action figurines or superheroes (Bobby Lashley, “The Destroyer” certainly fits the bill; see Image 5.1). Here, the material-inside body and its modification often come into play, largely due to the popular opinion that in order to achieve such a sharply defined body, the wrestler is most likely using steroids or has undergone plastic surgery – something which, as Sammond notices, is often denied by wrestlers and their promoters, yet widely discussed by fans (2005: 7). Moreover, and especially in the case of wrestling, the spectator is faced with multiple bodily configurations that not only go beyond the unified surface imagery of the body, but also extend into other contexts of popular culture. The wrestler’s bodily imagery, shape and materiality are freely manipulated and recycled, thus once again pointing to intercorporeal workings in contemporary context.

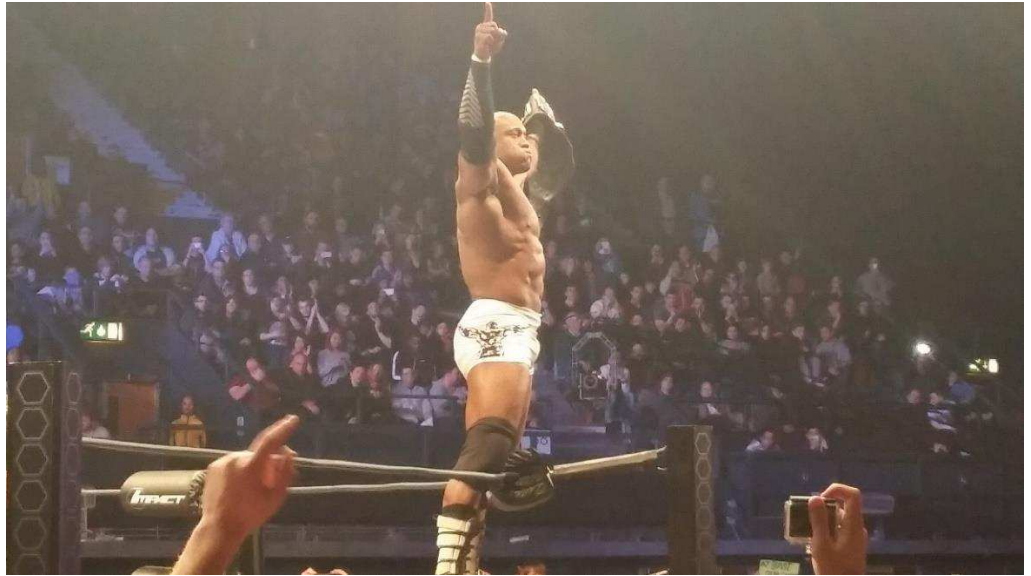


Image 5.1: “Impact Wrestling”, London 2015. Bobby Lashley “The Destroyer”

Ahead of the “Impact Wrestling” event in London, spectators had an opportunity to meet and take photographs of the wrestlers, thus being intimately exposed to their favourite fighters. During the live event, however, the illusion of intimacy is immediately dismantled: the wrestler’s image is often flashed over the large screen, thus enlarging and digitising the face and body that now loom above the audience and for a brief moment dwarf the “real” physicality of the entering wrestler. The manifestation of the digitised body echoes the wrestler’s situatedness: professional wrestling, which began as a form of live entertainment, now exists in between two media, live and digitised performance. Throughout the event at Wembley Arena, we were made aware of the show being filmed: the two presenters explicitly pointed to the video cameras situated in the auditorium (“the cameras are everywhere to catch every bit of action”). Digitised wrestling constitutes an altogether separate performance of the body – it magnifies the physical action. The filmed version of TNA “Impact Wrestling” in New York (January 2015) was composed of wide shots of the event punctuated by numerous intimate close-ups on wrestler’s bodies and especially faces, thus exposing moments of “mad dogging”: faces contorted in pain or expressing rage. The use of close-ups partially resembles the camera techniques found in soap operas. Bernard Timberg remarks that soap opera’s narrative “centres on intense, concentrated forms of emotion” which is achieved through the “intimate camera style” (Timberg, 1983: 76). In contrast to soap opera, however, the camera techniques in wrestling do not maintain the eye-level angle. Instead, the vertically raised angle is

used, thus enlarging the body or face of the wrestler, further emphasising the already excessive corporeality and heightening the intensity of performance. Furthermore, rather than gradually panning on the action (as it does in soap opera), the camera work offers a series of dramatic “punches” to the viewer: it shows a number of close-ups in quick succession, thus creating an illusion of intense confrontation or rapid action.

The bodily manifestations of the wrestler, the sudden shifts from the intimate physical presence, to being displayed on a raised platform, to the digitised close-up, are further fragmented through the action of cultural recycling. Cultural recycling, as introduced in Chapter 3, denotes a phenomenon of reusing, reworking and transforming visual, sonic and corporeal materials, especially in popular culture. Such recycling often results in (in the case of the bodily status) complex intercorporeal flows: diverse bodily influences producing a heterogeneous materiality placed on display. As an example, we can take the popularity of Hulk Hogan (Terry Gene Bollea) that saw his material reality modified into a plastic toy, thus (rather ironically) reconciling the imagery of the action-figure-like physical body of the wrestler with the actual action figure (Image 5.2). Sammond suggests that such corporeal interplay commodifies the material flesh of the body when he observes that

In short circuit of signification that moves from hard plastic body of the toy, through the hard flesh of the performer, to the massive, processed image above them, the presence of the wrestler is consumed, fragmented, and multiplied in the flow of its commodity status (2005: 7).

However, it is not only commodification that is at stake here. Due to its situatedness within popular culture, the wrestler’s body is also distinctly marked by its intercorporeality – the cultural process of not only consuming, but also modifying and freely disseminating bodily reality via diverse contexts and media. In other words, due to the multiple bodily manifestations of wrestling, this body not only creates the “spectacle of excess” as suggested by Barthes, or the “commodified spectacle” as suggested by Sammond, but also the more contemporaneous “intercorporeal spectacle”: it simultaneously exists in between the “real” manifestation (arguably the most “real” is the wrestler seen on the raised platform during the live match) as well as its digitised, televised, virtual and “plastic” artifices.



Image 5.2: Hulk Hogan as a plastic action figure

### **Spatial Choreographies**

Despite the workings of intercorporeality, wrestlers maintain their agency, especially when observed during the live match. Here, the body, while involved in the bodily pageantry and flaunting its “excessive” imagery, also reaches outwards and impacts on, or as I see it, choreographs the space around it. In his essay “The Enclosure of the Body: The Historical Relativity of ‘Health’, ‘Nature’ and the Environment of Sport” (1998), Eichberg demonstrates the relationship between bodily and architectural cultures by tracing the historical development of exercise spaces from the Middle Ages to the end of twentieth century in Europe. Starting from the chaotic open-air games in medieval villages which subsequently moved indoors to designated exercise spaces, only to move outdoors a century later, he shows that the spatial configuration of the sporting body relied heavily on the historical attitude towards the body itself. According to Eichberg, “the body, it appears, does not stop at the surface of the skin. [...] Yet the manner in which it extends spatially is not fixed or predestined, but historical and thereby subject to social change” (1998: 60).



Image 5.3: “Impact Wrestling”, London 2015

Wrestling, as Mazer observes, arose from circus, especially the sideshow performance of the strongman (1990: 103), and thus also moved from chaotic outdoor events into (no less chaotic and rowdy) contemporary indoor venues. While predominantly performed indoors, the wrestler’s body remains the focal point: the spatial dramaturgies are choreographed according to the wrestler’s positionality and physical actions. In the course of the “Impact Wrestling” show, the stage lights (in tandem with the personalised soundtracks) were dimmed and lit up again to mark the wrestlers’ entrances. The movements of referees were informed by those of the wrestlers. Likewise, the cameramen closely followed every physical action performed in the ring. Image 5.3 shows a cameraman assuming a low and wide stance which avoids blocking the “mad dogging” exchange between Kurt Angle and Lashley “The Destroyer”. It also allows him to aim for the vertically positioned camera angle in order to magnify the wrestler’s appearance on screen and create the “excessive”, larger-than-life illusion. Such an illusion is also achieved by the wrestlers stepping on the ropes of the ring, often with their arms outstretched, with their body becoming further raised on the already elevated platform, hence “enlarging” their overall corporeality (Image 5.1).

The spatial choreography also extends into the audience. The spectators are as if “directed” by the wrestlers’ physical performance: they often stand up and sit back

down according to the action in the ring, strain to see the action if it spills out of the platform and run to the sidelines to welcome the wrestler. At one particular moment, Scottish wrestler Drew McIntyre left the ring and stood among the spectators in the front row, causing them to swarm close by and touch him (a moment I return to in the section on “Bodily Furore”). As suggested by Eichberg, the athletic bodily reality, in this case the reality of the wrestler, does not stop with the embellished and bulging surface of the skin; instead, through a deliberate choreography, it is interrelated to the space and other bodies around it. The spatial choreographies also betray the codification of wrestling: this intercorporeal spectacle is spatially arranged and emphasised, hence not only contributing to the pleasure the spectator finds in watching and, as I will argue later, actively participating in the wrestling spectacle, but also complementing the highly fabricated reality.

In wrestling, the display of sporting skills, training and ability is always “interrupted” with theatrical gimmicks and moments of “selling the real”. The intercorporeal workings of the wrestler, the bodily configuration that at one moment is artificially enlarged on the screen and the next is found in toy shops as an action figurine or close-up video recording on YouTube, also contribute to the overall artificiality of the spectacle. The live performance of wrestling, by always transgressing the clearly defined boundaries of the ring, further suggests that we are no longer watching a sports event as such. For Mazer, such a fabricated reality nevertheless produces a glimpse of the “phantom of the real” (2005: 82) in the form of an unscripted occurrence that briefly interrupts the mock fight (in wrestling terms, a “shoot”). In contrast to the pleasure of conventional sports which largely arises from the play as an “immensely enjoyable physical activity” (Feezell, 2006: 11), thus enjoyable to watch, in wrestling, according to Mazer, the enjoyment is derived from the play between the fabricated and the spontaneous, or between the pretended and the “shoot”: “the pleasure for wrestlers and spectators alike may be found in [...] the anticipation of, and acute desire for, the moment when the real breaks through the pretended” (2005: 68).

However, how “real” is this “phantom of the real” in wrestling? Even Mazer, while arguing that the “real” is the unscripted and spontaneous occurrence, describes it only as a “phantom”. In his reading of Lacan, Žižek provides an alternative interpretation of the Real which allows for a further conceptualisation of the intricate

relations between the fabricated and seemingly real manifestations. Žižek notes that “the Lacanian Real is much more complex category than the idea of a fixed trans-historical ‘hard core’ that forever eludes symbolization” (2006: 65). Because it is not fixed or trans-historical, the Real does not appear in the imaginary reality from the outside, as is the case with Mazer’s configuration of the “phantom of the real” and the interplay between the two realities, scripted and unscripted, in wrestling. Instead, Žižek suggests that “the Real – the Thing – is not so much the inert presence that curves symbolic space (introducing gaps and inconsistencies in it), but rather, an effect of these gaps and inconsistencies” (2006: 73). It follows that the Real already exists within the fabricated reality, and the moment that this reality produces “gaps and inconsistencies” or, as Lacan saw them, “fissures”, we are faced with their effect, the manifestation of the Real: be it the Real that conveys horror in films (Žižek uses Ridley Scott’s *Alien* as an example) or the Real as a “shoot” in wrestling.

When watching a highly fabricated reality like the wrestling match, the Real does not “break through the pretended”; instead, especially in the most extreme cases like injury or death, the manifestation of the Real (which already resides within this reality) can complicate our perception of the action by producing a perceptual gap during which we are no longer sure if the Real occurred or if this particular action is part and parcel of the fabricated reality. Therefore, the pleasure of watching wrestling arises not from the interruption by the Real which occurs in the midst of the highly imaginary dramaturgy of wrestling. The pleasure is embedded within the complex, recycled and intercorporeal spectacle itself. It arises from the knowledge that the reality we face is fabricated and that our involvement in this fabricated reality is intentional. The contemporary spectacle of wrestling no longer produces the dualistic workings of artifice vs. the “real”; instead, it produces and disseminates, for immediate consumption, multiple artifices and multiple “real” manifestations, thus engulfing the spectators in a myriad of bodily “phantoms”, the result of which is a roaring burst of bodily furore – the expression of pleasure.

## **5.2. From Ritual to Performance:**

### **Staged Corporeal Violence, the Dying Body of the Roman Gladiator and the Glistening Body of the Greek Athlete**

The utter outrageousness of the wrestling spectacle – regularly synthesizing pyrotechnics, laser-light displays, heavy-metal music, and a panoply of high-flying body slams and potentially dangerous stunts, in addition to the conventional hand-to-hand combat – contextualizes blood and pain within a broader landscape of technologically facilitated illusion (Rahilly, 2005: 223).

Whereas Rahilly remarks on the association between wrestling's preoccupation with "blood and pain" and the wider sphere of "technologically facilitated illusion" (namely action adventure or martial art films), I see "distant" links between contemporary manifestations of wrestling and historical instances of "utterly outrageous" display of the body. From the historical perspective, as Fiske argues, wrestling echoes the aforementioned carnival which introduced the grotesque and "carnavalesque" undertones to the spectacle (1991: 82). However, it is useful to trace the Western preoccupation with wrestling even further back, namely to the Panhellenic games and gladiatorial combat of Ancient Rome, which suggests a transition from ritualistic practice to contemporaneous performance of the staged corporeal violence.

Staged combat games in pankration (Ancient Greek style of wrestling) and munera (gladiatorial contests in Ancient Rome) emphasised the body and its materiality as key components of the overall spectacle – be it the naked body of a Greek wrestler or an excessively decorated, dying body of a Roman gladiator. These games were also violent, bloody and often deadly. Meanwhile, the fabricated spectacle of professional wrestling is fundamentally staged and pre-rehearsed, thus largely safe (the physical injury is minimised), mainly because, in the contemporary context, publicly displayed bodily violence evokes outrage. As suggested by Marla Carlson, Western "bodies have rights, one of which is freedom from pain. The body is thus a site of control; the violated body a familiar sign of injustice" (2010: 5). However, the spectacle of professional wrestling verges not only on the pretended (thus minimised) violation of the material body; it also corrupts or, rather, inverts the "sign of injustice" towards this body. So much so, that the spectator of wrestling, as Monsiváis



demonstrates, is left exclaiming: “Kill him! Finish him off! Fuck him up! Destroy him! Tear the bastard’s eyes out!” (2005: 92). Such a magnified, and in most other contemporary contexts inappropriate, reaction suggests that wrestling constitutes a complex perception of staged corporeal violence in a contemporary context which is grounded in the relationship between the “suffering” body of the wrestler and the emotionally “heated” body of the spectator.

Carlson in *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics, and Artists* (2010) uses the notion of a “distant mirror” in order to compare medieval and postmodern preoccupations with bodily cruelty (2010: 2). “Distant” implies clear historical and cultural separateness between the two contexts (medieval and postmodern), while “mirror” indicates that we can nevertheless discern certain transitional similarities or echoes. I draw on this idea in the present section because the two historical figures – Greek athlete and Roman gladiator – serve not as direct parallels between the historically distinct contexts, but instead embody “distant mirrors” for contemporary staged violence. As an example, one can take the wrestling techniques, described by Stephen Miller in his *Ancient Greek Athletics* (2004), that are found depicted in Ancient Greek iconography. Among these are: “chicken fighting” – avoiding close bodily contact and instead attempting to gain a grip on the opponent’s arms or legs, thus arguably “flailing about” like irritated roosters (2004: 47); *meson echein* or *labein* (“to grab the middle”), one wrestler grabbing the waist of another (2004: 48); and the “flying mare”, the act of slamming the body to the ground, which, as Miller observes, carried a “highly dramatic” effect (2004: 48). All three strategies continue to be applied by contemporary professional wrestlers, with some, like the “flying mare” becoming something of a wrestling staple (this particular move occurred in nearly every match of the TNA’s “Impact Wrestling” show at Wembley). Slamming the body to the ground – the wrestling move which I return to when discussing the importance of physical touch and bodily *furor* in wrestling – in the contemporary context has evolved into more elaborate and risqué techniques like the “gorilla-press slam” (lifting the opponent over your head and slamming him or her to the floor) or the “powerbomb” (a wrestler putting her or his head between the opponents’ legs, lifting the opponent in the air and only then slamming her or his body to the ground) (Sammond, 2005: 343).

The prevalence of certain athletic fighting techniques (and their elaboration) serves as a very clear example of the historical continuation of the wrestling tradition. This continuation, however, is not straightforward. Encounters with staged corporeal violence in Ancient Greek and Roman times held an historically and culturally specific place within the society. The Greek athlete possessed the status of “warrior” nobility which permitted a higher tolerance of explicit violence (Dunning 1999), while the Roman games were seen as acts of “taming” death for the society at large (Pass 1995), as well as spectacles exposing the “moment of truth” (facing death) for the audience in the arena (Gumbrecht 2006). Stage violence carried complex ritualistic and religious meanings<sup>63</sup> that differed considerably from the contemporary position towards bodily brutality. However, just as the Ancient Greek and Roman preoccupation with athletic violence served as a mirror for the status of the society itself, the contemporary appeal of professional wrestling hints at the condition of the Western spectator at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

As Robert E. Rinehart suggests, sport is not only a “performance”, but more specifically a “cultured performance” which demonstrates “the cares, wants, and needs of societies” (1998: 4). The main concern of this section centres precisely on these “cares, wants, and needs” as exposed by the ongoing fascination with, participation in and consumption of the wrestling spectacle. The previous section exposed the complexity of the wrestler’s body in contemporary popular culture, especially when viewed in relation to the wider context of athletics. The workings of Western culture have positioned this body within a fabricated athletic reality and turned it into an intercorporeal spectacle. As a result, the wrestler is in permanent tension between the conventional criteria of sports (skills, training, and ability) and its continual attenuation by turning convention “upside down” (outrageousness, excessiveness and fabrication). It is the latter aspect of the wrestler’s body, the undermining of sportive conventions thus transforming professional wrestling into a contemporary performance, as well as popular fascination with this performance, that I want to explore in the present section.

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<sup>63</sup> Gumbrecht argues that Ancient Greek athletes, especially those participating in an Olympic competition, were seen as demigods (2006: 99).

## **Bodily Violence in Ancient and Contemporary Spectacles of Excess**

Donald G. Kyle observes that “to reinforce the social order [in ancient societies] violence must be performed or proclaimed in public, and public violence tends to become ritualized into games, sports, and even spectacles of death” (1998: 7). The fourth day of the Ancient Greek Panhellenic games was devoted solely to wrestling and boxing, including pankration, an aggressive staged combat with very few rules – according to Jim Arvanitis, only biting and gouging your opponent’s eyes were forbidden (2011). The matches were physically demanding and, at times, life-threatening. The referee stood by to enforce the rules which, nevertheless, were often violated, and even the victorious athletes were left with impaired vision and bite wounds (Arvanitis, 2011). In the contemporary athletic context, intense and, at times, violent physical actions are an integral part of some contact sports (like rugby or boxing). The violence, however, as identified by David N. Sacks et al., constitutes “sanctioned aggression”: a delicately balanced borderline (which sometimes is difficult to discern) between fair play (acceptable and sanctioned by previously established rules) and foul play (not sanctioned and unjustified) (2003: 170). Ritualised violence in Greek sport was more acceptable than in contemporary athletics because Greek athletes carried an element of “warrior” nobility which superseded the contemporary notion of “fairness” and resulted in a higher tolerance of violence (Dunning, 1999: 49). According to Dunning, “this level of violence was consonant with the frequency with which the city-states went to war and the fact that life within them was generally more violent and insecure than that in modern nation-states”<sup>64</sup> (1999: 49).

Neither did the contemporary notion of fair play apply to the ritualised “spectacles of death” in Roman *munera*. Instead, as Gumbrecht observes, the spectator was faced with an “asymmetry between the fighters”: “not only were opponents outfitted with different equipment, but they were hardly ever balanced in the effectiveness of their weapons, the protectiveness of their armor, or even their sheer physical strength” (2006: 103–104). This “asymmetry” contributed to the overall

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<sup>64</sup> In ancient societies, the sportive “fairness” was further violated by occasional match-fixing. A recently discovered papyrus provides evidence of bribery in Ancient Roman wrestling. It mentions a wrestler named Demetrius agreeing to “throw” a match for 3800 drachmas (Quill, 2014, *Smithsonian Magazine*).

“spectacle of excess” of Roman munera: the body was positioned centre stage in order to enact an exaggerated corporeal display, violently fighting other bodies and animals, and ultimately bleeding to death in front of the audience. As a result, the overall organisation of Roman games put the body of the gladiator on public display and then swiftly reduced it to its ultimate material, fleshy level. The resulting “blood bath” fulfilled Kyle’s suggested symbolic purpose of reinforcing social order. As Paul Pass argues, “the purpose of the pain and carnage lay in tapping vital power by provoking, appropriating, and finally ‘taming’ death” (1995: 23). However, the ritualistic action of “taming death” was achieved not only through the corporeal carnage that was witnessed in the Roman arenas. Drawing on Gumbrecht’s observations on the spectatorship of munera, we could argue that the dying Roman gladiator also displayed an element of gracefulness.

Gumbrecht’s analysis points to an additional layer of meaning of the otherwise, from the contemporary spectator’s point of view, inhumane level of violence. The violence in munera catered not (only) to the audience’s bloodlust, but also a desire to witness the human ability to bear the suffering and imminent fate (Gumbrecht, 2006: 107). He suggests a more immediate appeal of the gladiatorial games – the fascination with a “moment of truth”. It concerned not the victor, but the loser of the fight who “lived publicly in the face of death” (2006: 105). Before being pardoned or receiving the final deadly blow, the losing gladiator’s body was publicly suspended between life and death, during which time the spectators’ eyes eagerly followed his composure and face. What they wanted to see was an impenetrable face, “hard as stone”, because “showing composure in the face of such grave uncertainty could transfigure the defeated gladiator into the true hero of the spectacle” (2006: 106). The act of “living publicly in the face of death” endowed the gladiator’s body with the “perfect unpredictability” of grace. This body was momentarily situated in the present, yet also informed by an ambiguous future, a possible pardon or a public death. And while Gumbrecht’s suggested expression of a “hard as stone” face could be seen as culturally contrived, it nevertheless implies the compelling suspense produced by munera: if the gladiator upheld his composure by withholding his self-reflexivity and thus exceeding the expectations of the public, he could be seen as gracefully awaiting death.

Foucault, in his discussion of public execution in the eighteenth century, hints at the similar “moment of truth” displayed by the body of the criminal. He states that

“it was the task of the guilty man to bear openly his condemnation and the truth of the crime that he had committed. His body, displayed, exhibited in procession, tortured, served as the public support of a procedure that had hitherto remained in the shade” (1991: 43). No longer dying gracefully because his fate is already decided, the criminal exposes the truth of the crime through the suffering of her or his material body. Contemporary Western society, however, is rarely presented with such expositions of “truth”. On the contrary, attempts are made to conceal the act of suffering as well as the publicly violated body. Popular iconography often shows the criminal hiding her or his face (especially during a brief public appearance before entering a courthouse). The “truth” of suffering is further concealed by the common bodily gestures of covering the source of physical pain or firmly closing the eyes. And publicly displayed physical violence is hidden from view through the cultural gesture of “sanitised” reporting, largely because the violence itself is not only frowned upon, but also extensively discouraged in contemporary Western societies.

As Kyle puts it:

In recent centuries external factors, such as modern police and penitentiaries, and an internal factor, a conditioned psychology of abhorrence of excess violence, have contributed to a gradual shift in the parameters of embarrassment and shame, including reduced levels of interpersonal violence, increased sensitivity to pain, and an aversion to cruelty. Most moderns are conditioned to feel that the viewing of actual life-threatening violence in public should be distasteful and should be discouraged by the social order (1998: 5).

The feeling of outrage and injustice at the sight of a violated body can be seen as the result of Kyle’s suggested “modern conditioning”. And while we might argue that the contemporary Western spectator receives a fair share of “spectacles of death” through the “technologically spawned illusions”, especially the film and gaming industries, the sight of explicit public violence is very rare. Even media depictions of the violated body are “sanctioned” and “sanitised” in tandem with the “sanctioned aggression” in sports. David Campbell, in his analysis of media photography, argues for that such “sanitised” reporting has become the norm (2006: 60). Despite commonly held views that the Western media is flooded with depictions of bodily horror, he demonstrates that, in fact, sanctions enforced by formal media codes, as well as readers and viewers shielding themselves from the images of violence, result in a “horrific blindness” of

contemporary reporting. This “blindness” is “produced by a combination of the social economy of taste and the media system of self-censorship” and “constitutes a considerate injustice with regard to our collective understanding of the fate of the other” (2006: 71). As a result, and very similarly to the disappearing body of the dead discussed in Chapter 2, the publicly violated body of the other is usually blurred, described instead of shown or cut out of the media footage completely.

Considering the contemporary condemnation of public violence, how can we account for the fascination with staged corporeal violence in the case of professional wrestling? Does wrestling come under the banner of “sanctioned aggression” in sports? Or is it instead closer to the attenuated, modern version of spectacles of excess, thus quenching the thirst for the otherwise largely inaccessible sight of publicly violated bodies? Is it not condemned simply because it is a pre-rehearsed mock fighting, and thus not “real”? Or is wrestling after all only a live version of a “technologically spawned illusion”: bloody fights shown in countless films and television series? Wrestling is a cultural performance, fundamentally underlined by pretence. Wrestlers sell bodily violence by pretending to fight “for real”, which is further exaggerated by occasional asymmetries akin to those found in munera, e.g., a wrestler with a larger physique fighting two slender opponents (Awesome Kong vs. Gail Kim and Terry Terrell during TNA “Impact Wrestling”). The violence of the spectacle is heightened by the predetermined use of props (chairs, tables and tacks), attacking the opponent from behind or forcing them outside the raised platform. The pretence, however, is carefully regulated in order to avoid serious accidents: the fights are carefully planned and rehearsed; the asymmetry and “unfairness” are deliberately decided upon; and the spilling of blood is measured and swiftly cleaned up before the next fight<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> During TNA “Impact Wrestling”, the wrestler Rockstar Spud cut his forehead. It was difficult to judge if it was a deliberate or real occurrence; however, by the end of the fight, the wrestler’s face was fully covered in blood. Prior to the next fight, any blood spilled on the platform was quickly cleaned up, presumably due to health and safety regulations.



Image 5.4: A still image from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*

Due to such deliberate codification, it is doubtful that contemporary examples of staged corporeal violence like professional wrestling serve the ritualistic role of reinforcing the social order or “taming death” as they did for ancient Greek and Roman societies. For the same reasons, it is also doubtful if wrestling is able to fill the gap left by the “horrific blindness” of sanitised reporting. What is achieved by this intercorporeal spectacle of excess is a carefully staged performance of a shared fantasy. Even during the matches where the exaggerated gimmicks are kept to a minimum and the spectator is faced with two “working” bodies, like in the main fight of TNA’s “Impact Wrestling” event when Kurt Angle came head-to-head with Lashley “The Destroyer”, the wrestler’s body cannot escape the workings of pretence completely. Angle and Lashley were getting visibly tired as the match progressed and we could see the sweat dripping from their faces by the end of the fight. The physical effort and exertion, as well as occasional painful falls and punches, were real. Nevertheless, even the momentary “truth” of the material body could not escape codification due to its situatedness: the choreographed entrances emphasised with auditory and light cues, the raised platform, the wrestlers exposing their strong muscly bodies, the referee pretending to control the situation and nearly getting a beating

himself and, finally, the audience exploding in a supportive roar or expression of anger, knowingly participating in the shared fantasy created.

Thus engendered fantasy is not confined to the phenomenon of professional wrestling. It is centred on the (rather clichéd) “physical prowess” that can also be found in the popular reimagining of the Ancient Greek wrestler and the Roman gladiator, the two thus constituting the previously noted “distant mirrors” to the contemporary context. In the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) directed by Howard Hawks, Dorothy Shaw (Jane Russell) sings “Ain’t There Anyone Here For Love”. She is surrounded by a large group of athletic men in flesh-coloured briefs at a gym, explicitly displaying their “glistening”, muscly bodies (Image 5.4) and performing acrobatic tricks in front of a magnified image of a Roman gladiator plastered on the wall. The near-nakedness of the male athletes (together with the setting of the gym, which resembles an Ancient Greek gymnasium) distantly mirrors the surface imagery of the Greek athlete, who, as Miller observes, usually trained and performed naked (2004: 11). The Greek wrestler’s material body was further exaggerated through the practice of oiling his skin which “made the naked bodies of athletes glisten with reflected sunlight, and this very palpable aura set them apart from ordinary men” (Gumbrecht, 2006: 94). The film scene emphasises the physical prowess of the male body through the material imagery that is complemented with the song lyrics, when Dorothy sings “I like big muscles [...] / I like a beautiful... hunk of a man”. Furthermore, the choreography, devised by Jake Cole, is explicitly sexualised. As Robert A. Rushing observes, Cole “was known for his homoerotic appreciation of male form” (2008: 160), and the dancing near-naked men in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* are exposing not only their sporting bodies, but also a homoerotic attitude towards these bodies. According to Rushing, “the sexually provocative postures the men assume are not the kind that are presumably aimed at heterosexual women, particularly when the athletes form two lines and begin rhythmically thrusting their rear ends into the air” (2008: 160). Cole’s “wet” choreography (he has the male performers jump into the swimming pool and emerge with water dripping of their bodies and the film set lights reflecting off their wet bodies) echoes the homoerotic undertones of professional wrestling: the potentially sexual embrace of two sweaty and half naked men who only pretend to fight, an aspect of wrestling I briefly touch on in Section 5.3.



## Death in the Theatre

The Roman munera, and especially the arena (the central, oval-shaped area of the amphitheatre where gladiatorial combats, re-enactments of battles and banquets took place), fulfilled most of the criteria of a theatre stage: a performance space separated from the audience; the spectator able to watch the spectacle at arm's length, with the spectacle actually, as well as symbolically, removed from everyday activities; and an adaptable spatial setting which could be altered to suit a specific event (depending on the whim of the emperor).<sup>66</sup> The theatricality was also implied in the adornment of the gladiator's body with "costly armor" and "the vivid colors and jewelry in which animals killed in the arena might be decked out" (Pass, 1995: 18). Considerable resources were used for the overall orchestration of the event, including supplying the spectators with food and prizes, even spraying them with perfumed water if the atmosphere became too heated (Pass, 1995: 53–54).

The specially delineated space of the arena and the gladiator's body positioned in it were, to use Kotte's terminology (introduced in Chapter 4), "specially emphasised". Munera, however, did not make Kotte's transition from everyday life to theatre completely. The idea of "reduced consequences" (a death performed in theatre not resulting in an actual death) was not only overtly violated, but, done so to an exaggerated extent by the display of carnage. As a result, the body in the arena was positioned in a ritualistic space: between the theatrical re-enactment of death and the possibility of an actual death. The gladiator's material reality, therefore, gave rise to the artificially constructed fantasy with its larger than life hunts and battles, yet was also palpably real with violent deaths occurring in each staged event. It is within this ritualistic space that we can find Pass' suggested transformational purpose of munera. He notes that "by confirming order through disorder, controlling violence by means of violence, injecting fear into entertainment, and transforming ritual into reality

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<sup>66</sup> The ceremonial violence in the arena, the popularity and frequency of these events, not only provided *panem et circenses* for Ancient Roman audiences, but also became an effective vehicle for the demonstration of political power. Pass provides a telling example of Nero using the amphitheatre to stage a hunt, subsequently flooding the same space for a naval battle, draining it for a gladiatorial combat and finally flooding it again for a "lavish floating banquet" – all on the same day (1995: 54).

through actual death”, gladiatorial games presented magnified violence and death before they could be banished (1995: 25).

Pass sees professional wrestling as the “closest to bloodshed in the arena”. And while he remarks that real violence and danger are absent in wrestling, he nevertheless maintains that “at the level of public performance it persists in the form of ceremonial violence, largely replacing what is done with what is thought” (1995: 27). However the “what is done”, especially as it is expressed in the treatment of the material body, is not completely absent. The contemporary performance of ceremonial violence always carries a possibility of injury and death – the Real inherent in the staged spectacle – thus holding a complex meaning for both ancient and contemporary audiences. In the case of wrestling, the unplanned accident (or “shoot”) produces Lacan’s suggested “fissures” in the pleasurable shared fantasy of the spectacle. It also “injects fear into entertainment”: not the ritualistic fear of death as it was in munera, but fear and concern for the other. Once perceived, the “fissures” within the carefully constructed, seemingly “invincible” body of the wrestler turns it into a spectacle of suffering (if the wrestler is injured) or a spectacle of death. In contrast to the Ancient games, such spectacles are never the desired outcome of the otherwise tightly regulated environment of wrestling. Instead, they constitute unwelcome occurrences that, although always already a part of the shared fantasy, disrupt the fantasy of wrestling with the manifestation of the Real.

In 1999, Owen Hart, also known as the “Blue Blazer”, fell from what has been reported as fifty feet and died during the live WWF (now WWE) match at Kemper Arena in Kansas City, Missouri. It is believed that the stunt turned into a fatal accident when a safety wire broke or became disconnected while he was being lowered into the ring (CNN website, 24 May, 1999). Despite the accident happening in front of a live audience, as Chow remarks, “members of the audience, thinking Hart’s fall to be part of the show, cheered after Hart’s body hit the ring” (2014: 47). The match was also being transmitted live; the transmission, however, was carefully “sanitised” and the television audience did not see the actual fall. Instead, as the CNN report states, “the TV audience was being shown a montage of Hart's clips when he fell and the camera panned through the crowd while paramedics worked on him” (CNN website, 24 May, 1999). Such fatal accidents are extremely rare in professional wrestling. However, due to its highly physical and acrobatic nature, the material body, while struggling to

maintain the shared fantasy of “invincible” physical prowess (or, as it was in Hart’s case, the shared fantasy of a superhero who is “flying” into the arena to fight his opponent), sometimes succumbs to its physical limits. Due to the heightened theatricality, the accident, injury or (in the worst cases) death creates a sharp contrast to the otherwise rowdy and pleasurable performance. In Hart’s case, however, such a contrast was not established immediately. Instead, as Chow’s observation shows, the audience momentarily believed the fall to be part of the overall fabricated reality – a spectacular stunt. Once again, the spectator is presented with an (extreme) instance of bodily gracefulness in the most unlikely of contexts. Just as the gracefully dying Roman gladiator who, while existing in between the pardon and the final blow, shows impenetrable composure in his face, Hart’s body, after disconnecting from the safety wire, was briefly suspended in between life and death, gracefully falling to his death in the midst of being applauded by a “perfectly non-expectant” public.

Moreover, Hart’s tragic case, especially its reception by the audience, suggests that something else was also at work. The audience’s perception of the Real as staged and the resulting complex relationship between belief and disbelief can be read through the Lacanian prism of the Real. Žižek observes that, at its most radical level, the Real is “totally de-substantialized”. As I argued at the end of Section 4.1, the Real is not an external act or thing that enters the shared fantasy from outside, it is part of this fantasy and constitutes a “fissure within the symbolic network itself” (2006: 72). Hart’s fatal fall serves as an example of precisely such “fissure within the symbolic network” of professional wrestling. The real accident momentarily became a spectacular stunt due to the shared fantasy (the symbolic network) of the wrestling match being deeply ingrained in the overall dramaturgy and expectation of the audience. And it was only in the moments when the shared fantasy was cracked open by its own “fissures” that the Real became palpable: the hurried announcement by Jim Ross, the television announcer at the match, who stated “this is not a part of entertainment here tonight, this is as real as real can be here” (Owen Hart –The Last Footage); the following confirmation of Hart’s death; and the literal “fissure”, the gap that occurred between the safety wire and the wrestler’s body which caused the accident.

Due to the immediacy of live performance, the appearance of the Real is often followed by a perceptual gap: the spectator believing the event to be part of the

predetermined spectacle, even when that is not the case. In wrestling, the “fissure” of the Real usually exposes the suffering body (tragic death or injury). As a result, during this perceptual gap, and despite the contemporary Western attitude of condemning and “sanitising” public violence, the audience unwillingly engages with the publicly violated body. The wrestler Triple H, in his match against Curtis Axle in WWE RAW (wrestling entertainment television program) on 20 May 2013, could not finish the fight and the event had to be stopped. In the brief YouTube footage of this event, we first see the spectacular entrance by Triple H (bathed in green fluorescent light, threateningly spitting water and displaying his muscular body). He is an impressive looking man and the overall dramaturgy as well as the audience’s rowdy support heightens his prowess. Not long into the fight with Curtis Axle, however, the commentators announce that something is wrong: Triple H keeps shaking his bowed head, stumbles out of the ring towards the medical team, has a sip of water, tries to stand up and continue the match, but falls down and looks disorientated. The material body which a moment previously was bathed in the green aura of a quasi-gadiator, had turned injured, suffering and vulnerable. Nevertheless, the audience can be seen to continue shouting, applauding and encouraging Triple H to go back into the ring. Some of them might have experienced the perceptual gap – thinking Triple H’s disorientation to be part of the shared fantasy. The Real in wrestling creates an opportunity for a much more immediate and palpable confrontation with the other’s material reality and its limitations. Due to the bodily exaggeration – especially the display of alleged physical strength and a promised spectacle of violence – when the spectator perceives the “fissures” of the Real within the illusion, the bodily materiality and its violation become heightened. The Real emphasises the vulnerability of the human body because it appears within a body that just moments before was displayed as a larger-than-life, almost inhuman, figure.

### 5.3. Bodily Furore:

#### When Tactility meets Corporeal Musicality

P. G. Walsh (1996), in his analysis of Livy's account on Bacchanalia, hints at the "heated" atmosphere of this excessive, riotous, and sexually charged ancient ritual. In his account, Livy condemns Bacchanalia as a threat to the stability of the Roman state and warns of the "dangers of lawless gatherings", their "immorality" and "criminality", as well as their "alienation from the Roman religious tradition" (1996: 194). He then describes Bacchanalia as

[A] women's ceremony held in daylight three times a year. But then the presiding priestess from Campania has initiated her own sons, and had converted what was an occasional daylight ceremony into one conducted in darkness five nights a month. There was more sexual abuse of young men than of women [...]. In the course of the ritual, maenads rushed to the Tiber branding blazing torches; these they plunged into the water, and they were able to extract them still alight because they were coated with live sulphur and calcium [...]. Drums had been beating, trumpets blaring, maddened women with torches were streaming down to the Tiber, individuals were mysteriously disappearing, and massive crowds, amongst them prominent noblemen, were participating (Walsh paraphrasing Livy, 1996: 198-199).

While historically and conceptually removed from the contemporary context, Bacchanalia provides an example of the fascination with the staged spectacle and thus works as a distant mirror to the bodily furore of professional wrestling. Walsh's reading of Livy suggest that the Bacchic rituals were permeated with not only visual, but multisensory experiences. They were conducted in darkness, thus, in fact, blurring the visual perception. They carried sexual undertones and provided a mysterious spectacle of plunging burning torches into water and extracting them still alight, thus presumably filling the air with the smell of sulphur. And the loud drum and trumpet sounds provided an additional, auditory sensory layer to these "maddening" celebrations. It is also significant that Walsh uses the notion of "participation" to describe the spectator's relation to these rituals.

We can only imagine the state of the squalid, second rate Parisian halls where, as Barthes describes, the amateur wrestling took place. They were most likely filled with cigarette and cigar smoke, and when the fights commenced, additionally saturated with the stench of sweat. Tony Trowbridge (2013), in his article recalling the 1911 match between the “Russian Lion” (George Hackenschmidt, usually referred to as “Hack”) and Frank Gotch in Chicago, while unfortunately omitting a detailed sensory description, nevertheless hints at the sensory atmosphere in the arena. He describes fans hissing and yelling in disgust when Hack began losing the fight. At one point, Hack tried to grab Gotch’s torso but failed to do so because of the “globs of sweat and body oil” covering his body (Trowbridge, 2013). The “Impact Wrestling” performance at Wembley Arena also assaulted the audience’s sensorium with a variety of sounds and smells, not just the excessive visuality of the spectacle. The air was infused with the smell of beer, fast food and increasingly unpleasant body odours (emanating from members of the audience, not the profusely sweaty “labour” of the wrestlers). In many respects, the overall environment recalled the familiar experience of a sports match or a rowdy music gig.

These staged spectacles are carefully organised (happening a certain number of times, in a particular place), they envelop the audience/participants with diverse sensory stimuli (Bacchantes beating their drums or the pounding music used in wrestling; the smell of sulphur or smells of beer, fast food and sweat during the live wrestling match) and always carry an element of theatricality (plunging torches into water; performing on a raised platform surrounded by “technologically spawned illusions”). The overall dramaturgical configuration creates a “heated”, at times “maddening”, at times sexually charged atmosphere which is reflected in the collective body of the audience because it is allowed, or, rather, is encouraged to participate. The staged spectacle becomes reciprocal and, in the case of the Bacchic rites at least, certainly orgasmic. During the live performance of wrestling, the shared fantasy is created by the “working” body of the wrestler; however, in order to complete its illusory workings, it must reverberate in the collective body of the audience.

The participating audience raises the energy of the spectacle. In contrast to the more traditional types of theatre performance, where the audience is expected to be silent or the spectator involvement is minimal, rationalised and contrived, the spectator’s body during the live wrestling match is “heated”. This points to the

material bodily involvement: the bodily *furore* is audible and palpable, pulsating through the air in the arena and making the fleshy materiality vibrate. Etymologically, “*furore*” is borrowed from the Italian *furor* which means “enthusiastic popular admiration”. However, the root *fur-* is also related to the word “fury” which can be traced to the Latin *furia*, denoting “violent passion, rage and madness”, and even further back to the Roman and Greek myths of the deities of Tartarus who were sent to punish criminals. There, “fury” also acquired feminine associations that inform the English figurative use of the word meaning “angry woman”. The root *fu-* is also present in the Spanish *fuego* and the Italian *fuoco* which mean “fire”. Therefore, “*furore*” carries not only the meaning of enthusiasm and admiration, but also the much fiercer associations with “heated” passions and rage. In the case of wrestling, the “heat” is constituted and experienced through the multifaceted bodily and sensory involvement.

Claire Warden observes that wrestling affords “brief moments of radical democracy, potentially presenting professional wrestling as surprisingly one of the most egalitarian contemporary performance spaces” (2013: 3). As I suggested in previous sections, wrestling’s spectacle is always directed towards the audience. And while the wrestler’s body carries unquestionable agency engendered through its materiality, like the workings of intercorporeality and recycling (multiple bodily manifestations that are freely disseminated and consumed via diverse contexts and media), as well as spatial choreography (the wrestler as if directing the space around it), the performance is reciprocal: it is completed through the spectator’s physical (standing up to meet the wrestler, sitting back down to watch the action), vocal (continual shouts and remarks) and even tactile (by briefly touching the wrestler) participation. Such participatory qualities of wrestling hint at some historical examples of audience’s involvement in the cultural performance. Eichberg describes the collective traits in the pre-modern athletic games that took place during festivities and involved no scorekeeping or any other type of “goal”. During such games (Eichberg gives the example of the “raising the cross” tradition in Brittany in the eighteenth century), the emphasis fell not on the individualised body of the athlete, but the “collective body” of the participants and spectators. This collective body was “convulsive [...], laughing and laughable”, positioned “at the centre of this popular carnivalism” (1998: 141). As I will demonstrate later, a similar blurring of boundaries

between the publicly displayed performer and the spectator occurred in British variety theatres.

Bodily furore in wrestling rests on precisely such collective participation. During the TNA event at Wembley, even as a complete newcomer to wrestling, I was immediately drawn into full participation: following the crowd's cues when to stand up and sit down; recognising which wrestler is the villain, thus deserves a generous heckling, and which is the "good guy", thus in need of support and encouragement. The source of bodily furore, however, is not only the "heated" audience participation. It is sustained through multiple manifestations that combine the bodily (especially the tactile), material and sonic involvement, and give rise to Monsiváis' suggested "symphony" of wrestling (2005: 89) or, as I see it, corporeal musicality. Wrestling's musicality can be sparked by the physical act, like the wrestler's body loudly slamming the platform (as Monsiváis puts it "the thunderclaps of falling bodies") or the wrestler's body being hit with a steel chair. It is also present in the "trash talk" interviews with the wrestlers prior to the match, which then continues in the "heated" dialogue and "mad dogging" between wrestlers, as well as between the wrestler and the referee. This corporeal musicality is complemented by presenters who "work" the crowd throughout the event, being answered by the rowdiness of the audience which more than willingly succumbs to the production of excessive shouts, screams and nasty remarks.

Bodily furore distantly echoes the Bacchic fury which overwhelmed the participants of the ritual, resulting in a near-orgasmic burst of pleasure. After being ignited by the body of the wrestler, furore engulfs the spectator: it is auditory as well as physically felt, because it bounces off the walls of the arena and reverberates in the collective body of the audience. Warden remarks that wrestlers dread silence (2013: 4): if they are met with silence, it is clear that the enactment of shared fantasy did not take place. Instead, with each elaborate slam, fall or ankle lock, the wrestler expects to evoke an affirmative and loud response.



## The Tactile Workings of Wrestling

It is three o'clock in the afternoon, or "wrestling time". For the past hour, the men have been gathering in front of the men's house, tying protective wrappings around their knees and shins and rubbing pequi oil into each other's bodies to make the skin supple and the bones resilient. [...] From the bench the men call out advice and urge friends and kinsmen to use the best holds: forcing the opponent's head down, dragging him down from a standing position, seizing his hand, taking his arm and forcing his body around, and lifting him off the ground (Gregor, 2005: 164).

The handler of the wounded cock has been working frantically over it, like a trainer patching a mauled boxer between rounds, to get it in shape for a last, desperate try for victory. He blows in its mouth, putting the whole chicken head in his own mouth and sucking and blowing, fluffs it, stuffs its wounds with various sorts of medicines, and generally tries anything he can think of to arouse the last ounce of spirit which may be hidden somewhere within it. By the time he is forced to put it back down he is usually drenched in chicken blood [...] (Geertz, 2005 [1972]: 64).

On one hand, the two accounts from which these excerpts are taken continue the historical as well as anthropological exploration of staged corporeal violence central to the present chapter. Thomas Gregor describes the significance of wrestling among Mehinaku men. Wrestling is deeply embedded in their everyday life: it happens nearly every day, even in bad weather ("let the rain stop and the clouds part, however briefly and the wrestlers are back to their holds and throws"); and apart from being a favourite "sport", it extends into the overall culture of the village and affects the social status – a good wrestler is frightening in the eyes of men and admired in the eyes of women, while a loser is seen as a fool (2005: 163). Similarly, Clifford Geertz's analysis of cockfighting emphasises the importance of agon (competition) in Balinese culture which is represented not by the human body, but its embodiment in the material body of the rooster.<sup>67</sup> A cockfight is a multifaceted activity: it is ritualistic and seen as a blood sacrifice (2005: 62); it is deeply embedded in everyday speech ("court trials,

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<sup>67</sup> The embodiment is almost literal, because, as Geertz observes, "in line with the Balinese conception of the body as a set of separately animated parts, cocks are viewed as detachable, self-operating penises, ambulant genitals with a life of their own" (2005: 60).

wars, political contests, inheritance disputes and street arguments are all compared to cockfights”) (2005: 60); and it provides a stimulus for gambling activities.

On the other hand, however, the wrestling practice among Mehinaku men and the Balinese cockfights expose another aspect of the staged violence, including contemporary manifestations of professional wrestling. They not only hint at the overall material involvement of the body (the fighting techniques as described by Gregor, and being “drenched in chicken blood” as suggested by Geertz), but also explicitly point to the corporeal tactility (human or animal). Gregor sees the Mehinaku as a “touching” culture in general (2005: 163), thus the explicit physical contact prior to (tying protective wrappings and oiling each other’s skins) and during the match can be seen as a continuation of their heightened tactile familiarity, or as a more structured expression of such familiarity. In the case of Balinese cockfighting, men form close haptic relationships to their roosters long before the actual fight: they hold them in their hands and between their knees, groom them, gently bounce them up and down and ruffle their feathers (Geertz, 2005: 61). During the fight, if the cock is wounded, it is given all the attention needed which, yet again, is expressed through intimate touch (holding the rooster’s head in one’s mouth, putting medicines in its wounds).

Touch is almost completely overlooked in scholarly accounts of wrestling. When hinted at, tactility is seen as part of the sexualisation or homoeroticism of the spectacle. Rahilly’s (2005) study suggests that the privileging of body surface (the skin which is oiled, shaved and tattooed), mixed with the experience of pain (the body being smashed to the floor or pierced and bleeding) and the pleasure thus afforded (victory to the wrestler, spectacle to the spectator), implies a sadomasochistic tendency in wrestling which points to sexual pleasure. Mazer sees wrestling as a sexualised spectacle of dominance and submission which is “manifestly homoerotic” when she states that “in wrestling the key gesture is the violent embrace of two men, and the conflict reaches its resolution when one man mounts the prone body of the other” (1990: 116). Similarly, Catherine Salmon and Susan Clerc observe that wrestling as entertainment is centred on “half-naked, sweaty men pretending to fight while they have their faces and hands in each other’s groins” (2005: 170). In these accounts, corporeal tactility, while implied, remains solely concerned with “sexualised touch” and the possible pleasures (to the wrestler and spectator) thus afforded, whereas I wish to argue that the focus on the wrestlers’ sexual “groping” of each other’s groins

overlooks a much more complex corporeal involvement when the skin and touch are involved.

Touch, as Jennifer Fisher notes, “is both visible as an actual gesture and invisible, sensed as corporeal positionality” (2007: 176). Moreover, touch is fundamentally embedded in the workings of human skin. In Chapter 2, I discussed the multifaceted – material, visual and tactile – manifestations of this porous boundary between inner and outer material realities. When displayed and made “present” (or absent, as in the case of von Hagens’ plastinates), the skin offers an array of additional meanings in its visual depictions (I referred to the Christian iconography) and bodily manifestations. Psychoanalysis (namely, Anzieu, Bick and Ogden) places a special emphasis on the skin and its tactile qualities and views touch as the foundation for the development of the self. Touch also magnifies the workings of human skin – the material boundary which persistently appears in each of the case studies. The wrestler’s skin is embellished, just as it was in the case of the anatomical specimens in Chapter 2 or the stripper’s skin in Chapter 3. As Sammond observes, the wrestler’s body is “oiled, shaved, sweating, pierced, tattooed, and pharmaceutically and surgically enhanced” (2005: 6). This immediately harks back to the stripper’s body which is, as I indicated in Chapter 3, “shaved, moisturized, perfumed, made-up, coiffed, painted, polished, buffed, clad, shod” (Roach, 2007: 45). It suggests that while the stripper and wrestler are situated in different environments, thus contextually removed from one another, their bodies undergo nearly identical processes of preparation.

The wrestler’s skin is also informed by the dramaturgies of the naked skin which were discussed in Chapter 4. The wrestler’s body is costumed, usually with the sparse, close-fitting and sparkly pants, briefs or tops. The exposed parts of the material skin comprise an inseparable part of this costume: topless bodies of male wrestlers with their skin reflecting the stage lights; sharply defined muscle peeping through clothing (of both male and female bodies); or the grotesquely bulging skin of large wrestlers – all part and parcel of a particular gimmick, thus turning the exposed skin into a corporeal gimmick in its own right. The material body becoming a gimmick is especially prominent in the case of masked Mexican wrestlers. Heather Levi provides the example of El Santo, a popular Mexican wrestler who wore his mask not only

during live matches and film appearances, but also in public.<sup>68</sup> It was not until the end of his career that he finally removed the mask and revealed his true identity (as Rodolfo Guzmán). As Levi observes, “‘El Santo’ was the mask and the torso [he wrestled topless – JV]. He both was and was not Rodolfo Guzmán, for the mask transformed the wrestler and the performance” (2005: 101–102). I would add that the mask and the torso was the performance in El Santo’s case.

Professional wrestling rests heavily on bodily contact: wrestlers firmly grip each other’s bodies and often get intimately intertwined during the match. Such close bodily proximity, apart from carrying sexual associations, provides the wrestler with an acute sense of corporeal positionality (wrestler’s own and her or his opponent’s), which forms the basis of what Chow sees as the “physical improvisation” in wrestling (2014: 74) – responding to each other’s somatic cues, placing the body in a required position and lifting or supporting the partner’s body. The ability to employ this corporeal positionality is learnt during training when mastering the numerous techniques: lifts, falls, locks and body slams. Yet it is crucial during the live match, in order to successfully (and avoiding injury) engender the shared fantasy and perform the “work”, to sell the pretend violence through a number of risqué, near-acrobatic tricks. In this respect, wrestling works like many other performance forms that employ physical contact: acrobatics, dance and physical theatre, all of which rely on the learnt ability to recognise and respond to the “language” of the body. Moreover, during the live wrestling match, bodily touch is extended from the wrestler outwards: the wrestler’s body is touched by a referee (winning wrestlers have their arms raised and, at times, referees get their fair share of “fighting” as well); the wrestler touches the audience (indirectly, through projected tactility, or directly, by being pushed into the audience by an opponent); and the spectators often greet their favourite wrestler not only vocally, but also by extending their hands – yearning for physical contact.

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<sup>68</sup> In Mexican wrestling, the mask plays a crucial role in the overall performance: it signifies the wrestler’s honour. Therefore, during a match, Mexican wrestlers have to protect not only their bodies, but also their faces from a potential unmasking. As Levi suggests, “an unmasked wrestler is disempowered. Until the mask is returned, the wrestler can’t fight, but can only clutch his or her face and wait – either for a partner to retrieve it or be led to the dressing room to put on a fresh one” (2005: 108).

## **Corporeal Musicality**

The spectator perceives the tactile workings of the wrestler's body discussed above vicariously, visually as well as through projected tactility. However, one particular moment during the "Impact Wrestling" show at Wembley stood out. The wrestler Drew McIntyre entered carrying a microphone. After climbing onto the raised platform and in order to affirm his good guy ("face") gimmick, he launched into a lengthy and passionate speech: about his love for wrestling when he was a child, drawing strength from the crowd whilst fighting and "taking back" professional wrestling from large corporations and bringing it back to "the people". While still talking, he suddenly left the "roped-off reality" of the platform, walked into the auditorium and stood among the spectators in the first row. Very quickly "the people" McIntyre was verbally appealing to swarmed closely around him, with some spectators placing their hands on the wrestler's back (Image 5.5). The act of physical touch was no longer happening at arm's length. It was brought into the auditorium and, to the spectators involved, constituted an actual tactile experience. Touching the wrestler's body seemingly completed the communicative exchange, because, as Fisher suggests, "as a communicative act [...] touch, in effect, incorporates the social interface as it dissolves the boundaries between subject and object" (2007: 167).

As I argued previously, the wrestler's material reality is involved in the complex workings of intercorporeality and cultural recycling. As an instance of Western pageantry, it is a materiality that is put on display, specially trained, embellished, magnified and observed by large crowds. The wrestler carries the material body that creates the live spectacle of (simulated and real) excess and pain, yet is simultaneously reduced to plastic figurines in toy shops. The spectator's touch, therefore, can be read as an attempt to confirm the materiality of the body that is so widely disseminated by popular culture. No longer just the objectified and fabricated manifestation situated on a raised platform, the wrestler's skin, its material warmth and texture, is confirmed through touch. However, the momentary tapping into the tactile sense of those few spectators did not rupture the shared fantasy of wrestling. McIntyre did not even flinch at the sensation of being physically touched, which suggests that he was expecting it. On the contrary, his speech and proximity to the audience made his "narrative" even more theatrical, thus further heightening the artifice.

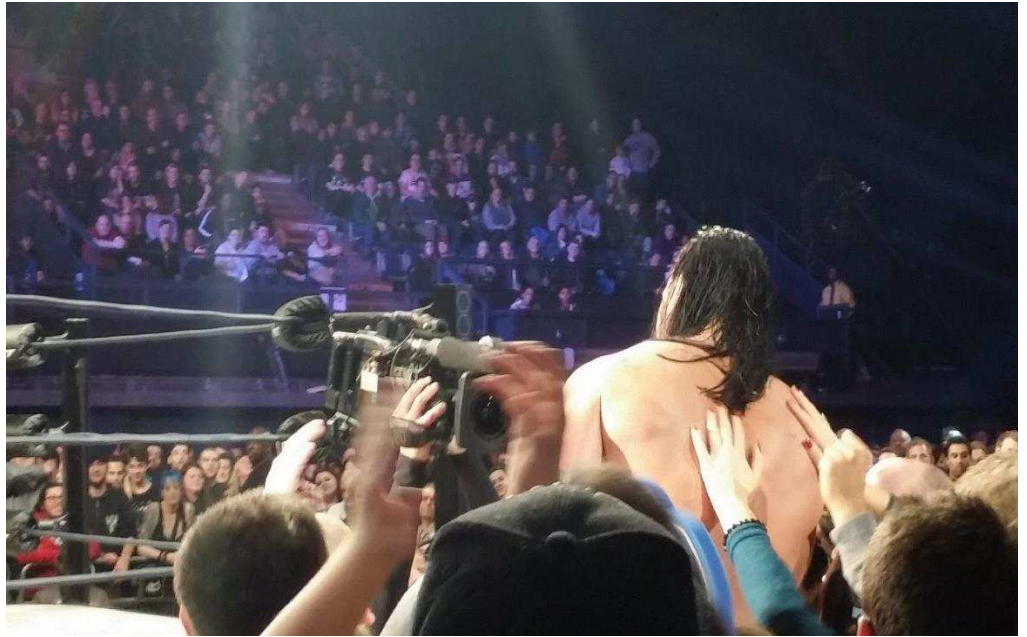


Image 5.5: TNA, “Impact Wrestling” – Drew McIntyre being touched by the audience

Foucault, in his short essay “Utopian Body” (2006), remarks on the illusory workings of the material body. According to Foucault, “everything that touches the body – drawings, colors, diadems, tiaras, clothes, uniforms, [I would add, even other bodies – JV], all that – lets the utopias sealed in the body blossom into sensible and colorful form”. He then adds that in some cases even the material body “turns its own utopian power against itself” and “in its materiality, in its flesh, would be like the product of its own phantasms” (2006: 232). The material reality of the wrestler can be seen as a “product of its own phantasms” which is not ruptured, but instead reconfirmed through the actuality of touch. The moment McIntyre finished his speech, members of the Beat Down Clan (a villainous TNA faction) ran into the arena and gave McIntyre a good beating. In response, the audience (knowingly) influenced by McIntyre’s passionate appeal and brief physical proximity, burst into a loud, disapproving outcry over the fall of their “hero”. The intimate touch thus became a birthplace of corporeal musicality – the roaring reaction to the simulated injustice.

Serres observes that “a sound event does not take place, but occupies space [...]. Sight distances us, music touches us, noise besieges us. Absent, ubiquitous, omnipresent sound envelops bodies” (2008: 47). Likewise, Pallasmaa in his study of the sensory qualities and connotations of architecture, highlights the link between sound and space when he states that “sound reverberating from surrounding walls puts

us in direct interaction with the space” (2012: location 1081). He then develops his argument by suggesting that sound also gives us a sense of participation and connectivity, connectivity within a particular space. According to Pallasmaa, “we stare alone at the suspense of a circus, but the burst of applause after the relaxation of suspense unites us with the crowd” (2012: locations 1056–1081). Such spatial interconnectivity is prominent in wrestling. McIntyre’s lengthy speech, amplified via the microphone, established a closer connection between him as performer and his audience. He then further emphasised this connection through the deliberately achieved proximity – standing amongst the “people” and provoking their touch. But it was only after the Beat Down Clan disrupted this rather intimate configuration and the audience burst into a collective sound that true unity (between McIntyre and his audience, and the audience as participants) was reached. However, does sound reverberate only in space, thus informing our interaction with others through the surrounding architecture? Or, could we argue that sound also reverberates in the material body, thus pointing to yet another extra layer produced by our materiality: the body producing the sound as well as the body receiving the sound, not only through hearing, but through overall bodily involvement? In his circus example, Pallasmaa hints that it was the applause, the physical movement of clapping hands together to create a burst of sound, that gave rise to the sense of unity. Serres also notes the material qualities of sound: the sound “touching” and enveloping the body.

Sound in wrestling, instead of distracting us from the modified, costumed, sweaty and “working” body of the wrestler, engulfs the spectator by uniting her or him with the spectacle through not only its auditory, but also corporeal workings. Twentieth century audiences at British variety theatres, as described by Oliver Double (2012), provide probably one of the closest historical echoes of corporeal musicality as it appears in contemporary wrestling. Double suggests that the rowdy audience of the music hall greeted each performance act with a generous amount of heckling, cat-calling and, at times, even throwing objects at the performer. The audience’s sonic participation was welcomed because, just like in wrestling, silence was a sign of failure. As Double observes, “silence was possibly the most powerful weapon in the audience’s armoury” and was seen as “an awful void that had to be filled” (2012: 137–138). Moreover, because of their rowdiness, the spectators became active collaborators in the creation of a performance. Almost every act involved a direct

addressing of the audience (just as it is throughout a wrestling match when the crowd is addressed by presenters or the wrestlers themselves) which became “a central part of variety appeal” and “an inherent part of its pleasure” (Double, 2012: 132). Double observes that this pleasure was constituted through the exchange of physical energy:

Performing a variety act required the expenditure of physical energy, whether this came in the form of muscle straining to achieve a difficult balance, the lungs and larynx belting out the notes of a sentimental song, or even the small amount of effort required to deliver the punchline of a joke and raise the eyebrow knowingly. Similarly, the members of an audience used physical energy to clap their hands together in applause or laugh out loud (2012: 143).

However, we could argue that it was not the physical energy itself that gave rise to the audience’s participatory pleasure. Physical energy is only the instigator of bodily involvement. And it is the resulting physical and vocal action engendered by this involvement that reverberates in the space and the body, affording the spectator connectivity. In the cases of variety theatre and wrestling, the bodily involvement generates diverse types of corporeal musicality: “lungs and larynx belting out the notes” or the spectator clapping their hands and laughing out loud. As a result, corporeal musicality springs from the bodily, or, rather, material involvement of the performer and spectator.

Music often forms part of an athletic performance. Rinehart notes the musical undertones in contemporary sport, like athletes listening to music prior to an important event and certain musical tempos being associated with athletic activities: “the march tempo is reserved for sprinting, the waltz tempo for middle- to long-distance crawl events” (1998: 3). On a larger scale, many live athletic events are not only visual performances, they are also implicitly musical (fast-talking commentators, cheerleading interludes). Even when the sound is produced artificially (like the individualised soundtracks of some wrestlers), the bodily involvement persists, because sound occupies space by vibrating in the air, and, as Serres notes, “practically all matter, particularly flesh, vibrates and conducts sound” (Serres, 2008: 47). Sound’s ability to pass through the body, thus “touching” that body, explains the fascination, excitement, physical involvement and “heat” – bodily furore – generated by participatory events like professional wrestling. No longer perceived at arm’s length, no longer simply being faced with the pageantry of the body, the spectator is actively



engaged in and enveloped by the deliberately displayed corporeal realities and their musicality.

In wrestling, these corporeal realities, despite being deliberately displayed, thus “present” and accessible to the spectator, provide mere glimpses of the Real which arises from the shared fantasy itself. Therefore, the pleasure generated by spectacles like wrestling emerges not because of the contemporary spectator’s desire for “reality” in the midst of artifice. Instead, the pleasure is produced by the extra layers of meaning engendered by this “present” body and especially so by its materiality: the perception of the codification strategies, illusory qualities, intercorporeal workings and workings of the material body itself. Moreover, because professional wrestling rests on the success of collective participation, it allows the spectator to co-create the shared fantasy which, if successful, reverberates in an outburst of pleasurable bodily furore.

## Conclusion

The boundaries between our flesh and the flesh of the world we are of and in is  
porous.  
Nancy Tuana

Since I began this study in 2012, von Hagens has established a permanent exhibition of his plastinated cadavers in Alexanderplatz in the centre of Berlin. Despite some objections from the Berlin health authorities, the exhibition opened its doors in February 2015, and residents and visitors now can view his aesthetic creations as they please. Two exhibition visitors' remarks, provided by Juliana Woitaschek in "Berlin Has A New Museum, with Dead Bodies" (2015), reveal not only the continual fascination with von Hagens' creations, but also some aspects of hypermodern attitude towards, manifestation of, preoccupation with and dealings with the material human body as it was analysed in this thesis. Both of these visitors want to donate their body to be plastinated, with one claiming that "I don't want to just rot or get burned. To me plastination is art. People are paying to see your dead body in a showcase"; while the other observing that "[t]he thought of existing after death is what makes me want to do it. What's more, nobody has to pay for my funeral, which is great, isn't it?" (Woitaschek, 2015).

The visitors' views on their post-mortem fate are significant because they expose some aspects of contemporary take on our materiality. They do not want this materiality to "just rot or get burned", but rather wish for it to be specially treated, thus prolonging the material existence. This wish to leave a material trace of yourself – the "thought of existing after death" – is a curious one. On one hand, we could argue that it points to the hypermodern insecurities of Western world, as observed by Lipovetsky and discussed in Chapter 3, namely the uncertain and precarious present that suggests no less certain and precarious future (Lipovetsky, 2005: 46). This uncertainty prompts us to look for stability which can be expressed through the (presumably) solid matter of which gestalt plastinates with their rubbery flesh and glass eyes are one representation. The wish for material traces could also point to the postcorporeal fears, the need to keep hold of our material existence in the midst of increasingly digitised

and virtualised visual as well as corporeal manifestations, the process of Kirby's suggested digimodernism. On the other hand, both exhibition visitors and potential body donors remark on the financial gain, thus expressing not only the existential but also monetary value of plastination: people paying to look at the dead body and the expense-free funeral. Moreover, this plastinated body, which now has a price tag attached to it, is also deliberately turned into a "showcase" – exhibited in front of the paying public. The act of placing the body on public display ran throughout the five chapters, because it is this display, this act of making the body present, that not only highlights the exhibited corporeality but also, and especially, its material workings. It also reveals continual preoccupation with what I call pageantry: the fascination of displaying, costuming, arranging and rearranging, masking, denuding, choreographing and then observing the body in theatre or cultural performance. Consequently, could we argue that the two visitors' wish to donate their bodies for plastination also expose a need to prolong this fascination with pageantry – to turn the dead body inside out, provide their materiality with the new, rubbery, skin, sculpt and specially arrange this skin and place it in front of the spectator?

In contrast to the still prevalent belief that the material body (or any other matter) is solid and stable, thus able to provide at least a momentary respite from the hypermodern insecurities of contemporary world, as Nancy Tuana observes in the above quotation, the body, as well as the material world surrounding it, is porous (2008: 198). The new materialist paradigm, which was the point of departure for this study, is informed by the contemporary scientific advances that no longer view matter as solid and fixed, but instead as porous, active, self-organising and able to make meaning through its material workings and responses. Therefore, it is false to look for stability in the material body or world. It is also false to think that, when facing a deliberately displayed body, we are presented with the body. As I demonstrated with each case study, it is not the body, but a plurality of bodies that is at play, in the instances of the dead body, the pop body, homo nudus and the wrestler's body. I proposed to view these new materialities situated in their respective dramaturgical configurations as the working of intercorporealities which incorporates imagery and its connotations, the historical echoes, the cultural situatedness and the material, tangible flesh. This last aspect of intercorporeality, the human fleshy reality, whilst often implied in the analysis of the body, is largely reduced to the discursive level which ignores the active workings and meaning-making of matter as proposed by the

new materialists. It is precisely this material layer that I attempted to highlight in each case study in Chapters 2–5, which prompted me to propose that the bodily materiality carries a degree of agency and, when displayed and perceived, constitutes an extra layer of meaning.

This extra layer of meaning is not universal and depends on a particular bodily manifestation, its immediate and wider (cultural and historical) dramaturgical configurations as well as its relationship to these configurations and other bodies. Therefore, by looking at the material reality of von Hagens' plastinates in Chapter 2, I was able to confirm the often referenced dehumanisation and fundamental artificiality (which negates von Hagens' claim of "Real Humans. Real Science. Really Amazing.") of this particular dead body. The specially treated flesh which, after plastination, is hardened and indefinitely preserved is no longer, strictly speaking, human, and as discussed in the chapter exposes gestalt plastinate as a posthuman phenomenon which points to a wider contemporary interest in posthumanism. The plastinated dead body, therefore, is far removed from the stable phenomenon sought after by the exhibition visitors. Instead, it presents itself as a malleable matter and, when specially arranged and displayed, this matter begins to create additional meanings: the absence of skin and the resulting connotations; the body shedding plastinated fragments; and the plastinated face becoming a face of the new type of corporeality.

In the case of the pop body in Chapter 3, the material layer often becomes a "second skin": it is digitised and reduced to an image, inhabiting the virtual spaces of contemporary reality. Nevertheless, even under these circumstances, we can continue to observe the workings of intercorporealities that often point to the cultural process of recycling (introduced in the context of the dead body, but especially prominent in popular culture). Recycling, as it is understood in this thesis, exposes the ways Western culture reuses, reapplies, reintegrates and reimagines cultural manifestations in order to create new ones. While similar to postmodern pastiche, recycling is predominantly performed in the virtual domain, affording the manifestation, including the manifestation of the body, chimaerical and chaotic qualities. Despite being largely digitised, thus flattened and disseminated across the digital screens, the pop body does not lose its fleshy materiality altogether. As I demonstrated at the end of the chapter, the viral processes of digimodernism prompt some of the "chimaeras" which originated in the virtual environment to seep back into our materiality.

At the first glance, the naked body might seem as the most obvious and maybe even the “easiest” choice if we are preoccupied with human materiality. Once denuded, the fleshy body is fully visible with its skin, muscle, genitals and other surface realities on full display. However, as I argued in Chapter 4, the naked matters are never obvious or easily discernible. Especially so in contemporary theatre environment where, I believe, the naked body becomes a *homo nudus*: an artistic construct composed of specially denuded, arranged, positioned and displayed corporeality. The material layer here, while clearly visible, creates its additional meanings not only through its visibility, but also through the fundamentally ambiguous nature of nudity. The naked body can create the meaning of presence or absence (courtesy of the historical Judaic and Greek traditions); it can create an impression of “baring all” by expelling its inner materiality (and becoming extra-corporeal) or not bare anything at all by becoming, as Monks suggests, a naked costume; it might give an impression of a sexualised manifestation, vulnerable to our voyeuristic gaze, or hide its sexuality in the folds of the material flesh. Moreover, the theatre performer’s material body does not only manifest the meanings intended by the director, designer or choreographer. This body, with its multiple intercorporealities inherent within, is, as Evans argues, also “unruly” – capable of creating its own, unintended connotations. When faced with *homo nudus*, it is the skin that firstly attracts the spectator’s look. As I demonstrated in my analysis of the work by Dubois, Platel and Waltz, in the case of naked performance, the skin acquires agency: not only through reflecting stage lights, sweating or shaking; but also by being able to stare back, entice or peep through the clothing, thus endowing the performing body with additional, often unruly, material manifestations.

I decided to conclude my analysis of the pageantry of contemporary Western bodies with the body of professional wrestler. Not only is this body an example of pageantry par excellence because it is specially achieved through training, costumed, given a clearly defined gimmick and then displayed in front of a large crowd, but it also points to the extra layer of materiality that do not appear in the previous case studies. The wrestler’s body is informed by the “distant mirrors” of staged corporeal violence found in Ancient Greece and Rome. This body is also fundamentally informed by tactility. Finally, the *bodily furore* – the involvement of the spectator who allows the shared fantasy of wrestling to be complete – gives rise to corporeal musicality which often comes from the body (wrestler loudly slamming the platform)

and it also reverberates in the body (the flesh being able to vibrate and conduct sound). Therefore, it is through the bodily, including the material, workings that the wrestling performance is able to create not only a fantasy (the wrestling match, including its outcome, is staged), but also a “heated” and participatory event.

While being particular to the body on display, the extra layers of meaning created by materiality also overlap, constituting corporeal as well as conceptual links between the separate case studies in this thesis. Three of these links should be reiterated once more, as they formed the foundation of the thesis and my take on the new materiality on display: human skin; the question of the “real” body; and the importance of historical echoes in contemporary view of the body. With the exception of gestalt plastinate (where the skin is largely absent), the extra-corporeality of some bodies in performance (where the inner bodily reality seeps out) and the pop body (which is often turned into a digitised image), the material layer of the body is firstly manifested through the skin. The interest in human skin resonates in a number of studies. Amongst others, Anzieu (1990), Benthien (2002), Connor (2001; 2002; 2004) and Serres (2008) highlight the skin’s psychoanalytical, historical, cultural and philosophical meanings. My study, therefore, drew on all of these accounts in order to further emphasise the role played by the skin in the case of cultural performance. Moreover, I looked for the remnants of skin where it is largely absent, like the gestalt plastinate, which acquires a layer of “new” skin, or the digitised pop body, which is given, what I called, a “second skin”. I argued that, first and foremost, it is through the absence, presence, imagery, tactile qualities and its ability to return our look that the skin contributes to the meaning-making in the pageantry of Western bodies.

Once the body enters the environment of theatre or cultural performance, its “realness” becomes problematic. Despite continual attempts to find, affirm and then display the “real” body (which is usually performed by the subject who places the body on display), the resulting manifestation resists this representation of the “real”. Mazer’s suggested “phantom of the real”, which I argued against in Chapter 5, in fact haunts each case study. Instead of revealing the real inner fleshy reality in the case of von Hagens’ plastinate, the original bodily manifestation in the case of pop body, the authentic naked body as it appears in theatre performance or the real injury or accident in the spectacle of wrestling, each manifestation is thus configured that the “real” always escapes the spectator’s grasp. When the body is deliberately displayed, it turns into an artistic construct: specially arranged, codified, positioned and, at times, also

materially modified. No longer a “real” manifestation, it becomes a fantasy (in the case of wrestling, a shared fantasy), where the occurrence of something we believe to be the real more readily resembles Lacan’s the Real – a fissure in the symbolic reality itself, not an outside influence that has entered and disrupted this reality. And because the “real” is always already part of this specially constructed fantasy, it is not the “real” that is sought after in our fascination with bodily pageantry. As I argued in this thesis, it is the fantasy itself that gives rise to the fascination, preoccupation and pleasure we find in the publicly displayed body. Moreover, even the material “realness” of the body – the fleshy, shaky, bulging and sweaty bodily workings – cannot disrupt the created fantasy completely and instead become part and parcel of this fantasy.

Because this thesis is firmly grounded in the methods of cultural analysis, each case study was informed not only by the “presentness” of the body on display and the material workings this presentness exposes, but also the historical context of a particular bodily manifestation. Moreover, I found the awareness of historical context invaluable when attempting to reevaluate the understanding of the body, especially the material body, in the contemporary Western world. Therefore, the meanings created by the new materialities were always echoed in their respective histories: the history of anatomical display, popular culture, nudity and staged corporeal violence. These far-reaching (Antiquity, Christianity, Renaissance) as well as more recent (postmodernity of the late twentieth century) histories of bodily fates and fortunes have left cultural traces in the form of our attitude towards, understanding of, dealings with and iconography of the body. Historical traces inform how we perceive the materiality of the body today. Each body carries its individual history which manifests itself in the material layer in the form of scars, blemishes and wrinkles. Moreover, we also have a collective history of material bodies, which can be recognised through the remnants of diverse intercorporealities, their relationships, their imagery and their sometimes very gruesome fates.

This study focused on the bodily materiality, in order to rethink contemporary Western bodies on display. Why does a closer look at human materiality matter? How do new material workings impact the understanding of contemporary bodies? How does the extra layer of meaning generated through materiality enrich the approach to these bodies? The answer to the first two questions lies within the nature of materiality itself. The new materialist paradigm, by viewing matter as porous, active and self-

organising, affords this matter, including the material body, a much more active role in the process of meaning-making. Because we can no longer view the material body as a stable and fixed entity, highlighting the material results in, firstly, a negation of the essentialist view of the body. The body is not a trans-historical and universal entity, but an active, heterogeneous and self-organising materiality that has undergone (and continues to undergo) numerous modifications. These modifications and their relationship to their immediate and wider dramaturgical configurations shed a light on how we perceive, perform and do bodies. In other words, the emphasis on the material provides a renewed understanding of the heterogeneous workings of these bodies. Secondly, a closer look at the materiality of a particular bodily manifestation provides a more thorough view of this manifestation. If the material plays a much more substantial role in the process of meaning-making than it was previously thought, this role and its consequences should not be ignored, but instead embraced and interrogated.

While, as I indicated in the Introduction and as suggested by Elkins, the body can never be fully theorised, and I did not aim at such full theorisation, a materially informed analysis of bodies in the case studies of this thesis exposed a range of intercorporealities that inform each bodily manifestation. Highlighting materiality did not result in a reductionist view of the body, on the contrary, throughout the thesis, my analysis was always supported by diverse visual, cultural, historical and philosophical bodily connotations. I positioned the material in relation to these connotations. I also attempted to bring out the material that, despite being already inherent in these connotations, was often largely ignored. The bodies that appear in the case studies were chosen very carefully. All of them are deliberately exposed in their respective theatre or cultural performances, thus making it easier to perceive their material workings. Moreover, all of these bodies are the products of Western culture of the twenty-first century, thus resonating increased popular interest in the body, starting from bodily modification and digitisation, ending with bodily denudation and staged corporeal violence.

The answer to the third question lies within a need for a perceptual shift in our approach to bodies as well as their environments. The material aspect is always already inherent in any bodily manifestation. Therefore, we only have to notice, tease out and then question the extra layer of meaning generated through a particular materiality. During the process of my research, in order to ascertain the validity of the materialist



approach, I cast a very wide net and explored a range of bodies from differing contexts. Consequently, many aspects of human materiality were only briefly touched upon or implied, and thus require further analysis. Some of these include: the attitude towards the dead body and its material fates, not only in the Western but also other cultures. Popular culture and bodies produced by this culture, due to it being vast and ever-changing, require continual questioning and problematisation. *Homo nudus* poses questions of the perception of nakedness not only in theatre, but also cultural performances. Lastly, professional wrestling is only one example of the curious fascination and voluntary participation in staged corporeal violence which can be extended to other areas of sport and performance. All of these fields already receive the necessary scholarly attention, however, the inquiry into their material connotations would offer renewed perspectives and raise new questions.

Finally, I feel that there is a need to rethink how we approach the material body in theatre performance and performance studies. Performance art has been dealing with the leaky, viscous and modified fleshy body for some time. The main reason for approaching this fleshy body was (and sometimes still is) to highlight the “real”, “honest” and “authentic” qualities inherent in our materiality. However, as I argued in Chapter 4, the material body, once positioned in performance, becomes an artistic construct, thus no longer “real” or “authentic”. Moreover, at the end of the chapter, I briefly implied that, in fact, the naked body as well as the leaky stuff of the body not only create an (arguably) “honest” manifestation; they are also funny – used as popular comedy tropes at least since the establishment of Italian commedia. This suggests that the approach to the material in performance requires serious reconsideration. The extra layer of meaning generated through the materiality of the body, its dramaturgical configurations and the relationship between them, while unable to expose the “real”, opens the way to an array of new possibilities and approaches to bodies in performance, with at least some of them, tapping into the continual fascination with the illusionary, the unruly and the unintended ways to stage and perform bodies.

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