The Symbolic Body and the Rhetoric of Power

Laura Verdi

Abstract: In this article I will discuss the human body, both physical and social, as an instrument of political and aesthetic power and will analyze the processes of its social construction, starting with the notion of *Corpus Mysticum Christi* as the metaphoric organizational structure of consensus to power. From the Low Middle Ages to the present day, we will observe how the treatment of the body has evolved and how present-day show business and politics make use of charisma, from typically conceived 'concentrated stardom' to a conception of 'diffused stardom'. Both models are given aesthetic significance and rhetorical amplification, thus resulting in images of power and a means of social control. The conclusion of the article examines how power relations are currently being affected in a social environment that is highly influenced by the media and how, no matter which era is being discussed, the existence of the social body still depends on the physical body.

Keywords: beauty, body, consensus, crucifix, media, Middle Ages, power, social construction

It is becoming increasingly difficult to relate our forms of shared knowledge (social representations) to wide-ranging, if not long-lasting, symbolic and cultural universes. In many cases, the current crisis of the political model of democracy makes it very arduous, perhaps even impossible, to understand the extent to which these representations are the effect of an omnipervasive logic of spectacularization or, rather, new mythologies and passions elaborated according to a bottom-up rather than top-down logic, as most past history reminds us. The democratic model—never wholly implemented as the direct government of the people, but instead historically achieved through a representative system of empowerment—has been able to co-exist with the model of the nation-state, which incorporates the image of a law sovereignly exerted from above.

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Lately, the crisis has intensified under the effect of telecommunication networks: their planetary diffusion has questioned and discredited the classic democratic model by introducing and spreading models that are more directly participatory. Capable of global visibility, cultural codes are used nowadays to express a form of 'liquid power'. Banking on empathy and affectivity, digital cultures allow cybernauts to enter public space directly and, through new virtual communities and urban tribes, enable them to participate in 'communicracy', as Susca and De Kerckhove (2008) call it, following in the track of Bauman's (2000) 'liquid modernity'—as if, from the organic solidarity model of modernity, we were returning to mechanical solidarity, not to mention Durkheim (1893). Individuals are once again gathered by their likeness, and the individual personality is absorbed into the collective personality. The aura of the tribe is re-created, with symbols, affects, and information being circulated and shared. Destined to dissolve in the immediacy of the *hic et nunc*, it is a form of horizontal sharing that does not imply the vertical, diachronic dimension. Also, it does not contemplate ideals to be achieved in the long term through repeated participation and political commitment. It creates new idols to consume, as if in cannibal rites; new kings' bodies to be transformed into symbols; new spaces in which to share emotions that have increasingly less to do with the spaces of everyday living and solidarity and increasingly more to do with virtuality. And yet we are still under the influence of a political and thus vertically exercised power, even if it arouses our enthusiasm less and less and can hardly stimulate our imagination. Here, indeed, lies the paradox of this effervescence, which reveals itself to be a 'nascent state' (Alberoni 1968) of digital more than political power. Here, no groups or movements with shared social goals are formalized; rather, an inner solidarity is created that is destined to dwindle when the network that links the members of the digital tribe— and with it 'communicracy'—dissolves.

However, in digital tribes, as in traditional communities, that which underlies interaction and the meaning of human relationships is always the body. It is the first object of observation and imitation through art, but also the first measure of space and the first form of active and passive power. It exerts power and suffers it through the construction of symbolic apparatuses, and it is soon distinguished into the physical body and the political-symbolic body.

The social perception of the body is always changing, diachronically and synchronically, according to the time and space where the body is inscribed, taking on different valences in the social. Within a more historicist than idealistic or materialistic-dialectic view, however, a background option emerges: the irreducibility of the 'mental equipment' of both traditional and contemporary societies. This notion has its roots in an almost motionless conception of history, often marked by the 'mental prisons' described by the historian Fernand Braudel (1963). It is from these premises and from the analysis of the contradictions that the body encounters, through the attempts of rationalization and imposition of social control, that I will discuss the body as an instrument of both active and passive political and aesthetic power and the processes of its social construction.

I will start with the image of *Corpus Mysticum Christi*—that is, the Christian belief that considers all of Christendom to be a holy, mystical body of Christ—as the metaphoric organizational structure of consensus to power from the Low Middle Ages to the early Modern Age. I will then move to the body as represented by present-day celebrities in show business and politics, who can well illustrate how the rhetorical exemplum enacted from time to time makes use of charisma. From classically conceived "concentrated stardom," which gives the star (*divus*) his or her extraordinariness and peculiarity of personal charisma, the shift is toward a conception of "diffused stardom" (Kermol and Tessarolo 1998: 136), in which charisma tends to generalize when the mechanisms of role separation weaken (Rein, Kotler, and Stoller 1987). Both models are given an aesthetic meaning and become images of power as an instrument of social control and rhetorical amplification. And so the charisma concentrated in the body of the thaumaturgical kings becomes charisma that is learned through exercises and behaviors and is then spread through the media to get visibility, as we will see below.

The Reasons of the Body

In bringing the body to reason, we address the root cause of the centuries-long focus on the body, which has attracted the interest of every type of society, from the most puritanical to the most liberal, simply because the body has reasons that reason often ignores. The discourse on the body has developed through all possible means: dialectical and philosophical, theological and medical, artistic and dietetic. However, it has oftentimes been a war waged against the body by other reasons (state, religion, health, etc.) to such an extent that even today a large part of the so-called advanced West has not yet resolved, if not in an extreme way, the *querelle* between the body and the mind, formerly between the body and the spirit. This *querelle* can be interpreted as the first example of social control exerted on the body through the mind. In history, however, opposite cases can be found whereby different value systems (usually seen by others as deviant) pertained. Removing the body from the subjugation of the mind and from mechanisms of social control has always meant giving unbounded satisfaction to body drives, as was the case in medieval heretical communities.

Today, the body is known to be, first of all, sexed and seeking to assert itself from either a male or female standpoint. It has also a gender, which is not so well defined by innate characteristics but rather is socially and culturally constructed—that is to say, it is defined through a weakening or strengthening of its sexed identity as a result of social roles, language, and behaviors. From Plato onward, a conflict has also arisen between 'geographically' distant parts of the same individual: the head and the belly, subsequently represented as the spirit (later as the mind) and the body, with the former nearer to heaven and thus more noble, and the latter nearer to earth and thus more prone to guilt. This corresponds with the different cultural perception of the

body, the twofold meaning—semantic, as well—that both the Greeks and the Romans gave to the opposing pairs *σώμα/δέμας* and *corpus/anima* (i.e., dead body/live body). In other words, like *bios* (the living being in its empiric individuality), which is inescapably tied to temporality and destined to structure itself through the body, the *soma* (the single specific form of life)—as opposed to *zoè*, which indicates life as a physical phenomenon—alludes to the vitality expressed and manifested in all organic beings. *Zoè* indicates life *qua vivimus* (*by which* we live), while *bios* signifies life *quam vivimus* (*that* we live) (Melchiorre 1989).

Defined by Descartes as the opposition between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* (i.e., the world of objects and the world of those who think of them), the *querelle* over the body was destined to arouse heated polemics within the very culture that, together with Greek classicism, was its source. The Platonic idea of the body as the prison of the spirit, as folly and, in a wider sense, denial of all values, has remained rooted in Western thought as an enduring, disjointing thought. The mind-body opposition—seemingly overcome by modernity and already forgotten by postmodernity—surfaces whenever the uncertainty and complexity of our culture bring up questions that we cannot answer. Again, we are unable to cope unless we resort to binary and opposing barriers that, in turn, consider the mind as the origin of rational, positive values and the body as the generator of disvalues.

Classic logic, with its *modus ponens* (which has an insurmountable foundation in the principles of identity, non-contradiction, and excluded middle), does not allow for any respite in our effort to construct a body with its own reasons, emotions, and feelings—a body that is not heteronomous but has its own power, one that is non-conflictual with the power of the mind. In Greek and, later, Latin thinking, knowledge is acquired by understanding causes, and the cause of the existence of the body, the *causa prima*, could only be God. Seventeenth-century deism, for instance, maintained that the universe had been deterministic from its creation: God may have started the process but had no further influence on subsequent events, which were determined by the cause-effect chain. Hence, the construction of a unilinear logic, far from supplying satisfactory cosmological justifications, was soon to lead to metaphysics. Only modern scientific thinking, in its rationalism, was then able to conceive the notion of an order to the universe in which a man, composed of both body and spirit, could finally act on nature to his own advantage. However, the anthropocentric rationalistic model, inaugurated in the Renaissance by demanding that the body be given back its own centrality, had to co-exist with models of social and pulsional control put forward by the Christian religion to bring the body to reason. Suffice it to recall the outbreak of Inquisition folly against witches, Jews, heretics, and Moors in the midst of the Renaissance (cf. Verdi 1980).

The body, then, is memory of the law (Galimberti 1983: 185), which expresses itself through marking, sexual differentiation, and the artificial creation of needs and desires—so much so that we could say that “the law cannot exist without bodies … in the sense that without bodies the law would have no instincts to deviate from, no pleasures to postpone, no manifestations to repress” (ibid.:

212; see also Verdi 1991). However, the law is exactly what makes the *physical* body a living *social* body (Husserl [1931] 1950), giving life to those 'mental prisons' (Braudel 1963) that engender dichotomous conceptions of history (traditional societies/modern societies), which can be resolved only through huge changes in mentality. These same changes have generated new cultural models that have been widely addressed in the anthropological and then sociological literature (Benedict [1934] 1946), while the issue of collective attitudes toward great events is considered central by historians besides Braudel (e.g., Alberto Tenenti, Philippe Ariès, Pierre Chaunu, Michel Vovelle) and by scholars leaning toward historical anthropology (e.g., Carl Schmitt) who have analyzed the role of the body as a collective image.

The King's Two Bodies and the Metaphor of Power

Husserl's ([1931] 1950) distinction between the two models of the body—the mortal one that perishes with death (*Körper*) and the social, political one (*Leib*) that is made imperishable through the heightening of the space-temporal sense horizons—is the same as Kantorowicz's (1957) well-known distinction between the king's 'two bodies'. According to this notion, "a king is something more than his mere body; it is an imaginary presence in which the whole social body can recognize itself" (Furet 1997). Actually, as Ornaghi (1996) explains, "the theory of the king's two bodies is the main point of junction between the medieval community and the modern territorial state: similarly to how the former finds its collective body identity in the *ecclesia Christi* (church of Christ), the latter can replace it based on the new collective identification that can be found in the sovereign's body. Here, the thaumaturgical practices described by Marc Bloch … find their intrinsic justification: so that the monarch can be the body of the entire community he must arouse—as Kantorowicz himself says—a 'semi-religious emotion', like the one produced in the presence of a sovereign who is himself 'God's anointed.'"

Likewise, it appears credible that "the image of *Corpus Mysticum Christi* provided the fundamental metaphoric structure around which the consensus to power organized itself from the Low Middle Ages to the early Modern Age. In other words, the formula of the king's two bodies is the lay version of an ecclesiastical principle to which, in a transfigured way, jurists and writers resorted to guarantee the territorial state an everlasting *dignitas*, which 'will never die' … Indeed, what makes the theories on the political body obsolete will be the subsequent process of juridical abstraction through which the dignity of the *persona ficta* will be directly reserved, without bodily mediations, to the state as an artificial construction" (Ornaghi 1996). The sovereign's political body, a kind of *deus absconditus* (hidden god) within his physical body, is destined to dissolve inside the structures of the modern state. It becomes the 'total social fact' that Mauss (1923–1924) talked about.

Contemporary social systems can even "dream of and program the total takeover of their members' bodies … The socialization process does not have

theoretical limits, only those of the body and of the flesh" (Pozzi 1994: 121). The social control, which Parsons's (1987) sociology assigns to centers of power and institutional sources that neglect a social body endowed with heavy bodies, carried by social actors understood as individuals, is no longer issued by a single recognizable source but rather by a plurality of sources. And so the outcome is what Pozzi (1994: 123) describes as a paradoxical result, as regards the disappearance of the mono-referential figure of the king: "In turn, the social is forced to mobilize massive structures and processes to hold at bay and bring to reason what it itself produces when it invests the bodies with sociality. This is a further ironic contradiction of the social that reflects again on the social."

Sociology keeps a prudent distance from such points of view, preferring a perspective that presents the body as abstract, if not as a pure organism (Pozzi 1994: 117). The great exception of the nineteenth century was certainly Simmel, who started his exploration of the body from the tangible image of things and thus referred to the unity of the individual in which body and soul are indivisible. With respect to the disorderly and chaotic instances expressed by the body and to its substantial asymmetry, the soul acts as a unifying principle through law, harmony, and symmetry. And so Flaubert's aphorism, 'Le bon Dieu est dans le détail' (which was later taken up by Warburg and his school), was also valid for Simmel (1985: 27). However, sociology seems to forget that the social appears as the dimension of the political-social-experiential body (*Leib*) and not the natural individual body (*Körper*), which is mortal and unrepeatable. The power of the former over the latter thus seems to be irreducible.

It is exactly starting from here that an attempt can be made to approach the complex reasons that, for 2,000 years, have guided figurative art along such diverse routes in the representation of the body subjected to social control. The example I will use is drawn from the Christian iconography of the body of Christ and of the saints. My goal is to review some of the steps that, from the first moment of construction and social control of the body as anti-physical body (and therefore as social body), originally divine (Christ's), led to the subsequent creation of a *deus absconditus* (sovereign) and ultimately to the state.

Holy Schizophrenia

We will need to return to the notion of *Corpus Mysticum Christi* mentioned above in order to try to understand the meaning that figurative art has given to this body, at once human and divine, which lives, dies, and is resurrected. Above all, we will try to understand how the Christological model has been the key to, and at the same time the origin of, the social and artistic representability of a suffering but paradoxically powerful body.

In the Middle Ages, *De Imitatione Christi* (The Imitation of Christ) became the principal exemplum, both in religious literature and in iconography. As such, it was constructed top down, starting with the Edict of Milan (AD 313), which gave Christians the freedom of professing their religion, and the Edict of Thessalonica (AD 380), which recognized Christianity as the official state religion

of the Roman Empire. Flagrantly violating the faith's evangelical precepts, the temporal power of the Pope was theocratically exercised in an increasingly marked way (not as a means of autonomy but as a goal) for 1,500 years until 20 September 1870, when the Aurelian Walls were breached at Porta Pia and the Italian army subsequently captured the Vatican State.

However, if *De Imitatione Christi* was the exemplum, it was fairly easily manipulated. Focused on social control and integration and mirroring the widespread fear aroused by the fast approaching Day of Judgment (Delumeau 1987), the exemplum also promoted a millenarian siege mentality that held the ignorant masses of the Middle Ages in its power. Fear resulted in denial of the physical body—now looked on as a source of contamination and deviance (sin) since birth—and inspired belief in the divine precept of mortification to exalt the spirit. The denial of the body, then, involved punishment, flagellation, and mortification of the flesh. In addition, the body of Christ, the optimal model of the body that must suffer to redeem its sins and earn the happiness of Paradise, was increasingly represented as suffering rather than triumphant. It was the body that offered itself in a supreme "total performance of the agonistic type" or "total social fact" (Mauss 1923–1924)—an absolute 'feast' that was the donation of the self in the name of the schizophrenic annihilation of the physical body.

Theology and the interiorized notions of the Christological model were at the origin of the twofold iconography of *Christus triumphans* (triumphant Christ) and *Christus patiens* (suffering Christ). The image of the cross appeared at the end of the fourth century (thus, after the Edict of Milan), first in a bejeweled cross in Santa Pudenziana, a church in Rome, and then on the mosaics of the triumphal arch in Santa Maria Maggiore and on those in the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna. The crucifix with the figure of Christ first appeared in the fifth century in Rome's Church of Santa Sabina sull'Aventino, where Jesus, open-eyed and without a nimbus, was placed between the good thief and the bad thief.

In the following centuries, wooden crucifixes also become popular in country churches or along pilgrims' routes as a memento to praying. However, it was from the twelfth century onward that the tradition of painted crucifixes began. On them, Christ was depicted in a frontal position, with his head held high and his eyes open, alive and triumphant over death. *Christus triumphans*, endowed with a social body (*Leib*), was recognized as the unifying *logos,* a far-away deity, alien to the other direct conditions that medieval men were subjected to. This was the king's body in its symbolic and anti-naturalistic form, later to be succeeded by its other form, that of the individual and physical body (*Körper*) in the iconography of *Christus patiens*. Depicted as dead from the thirteenth century, this model of Christ had first a Byzantine and then a Franciscan origin. The figure appeared in agony, his eyes downcast, his body contracted in a painful spasm. In this image of a suffering Christ, 'losing his life drop by drop' (*per stillicidia emittere animam*), lay all the negative power of the exemplum. One of the first of its kind was the lost crucifix by Giunta Pisano for the Basilica in Assisi (1236), which represented the twofold iconography with a cross on both sides. Still preserved to us is the crucifix of San Domenico in Bologna (from about 1250).

Obviously, the study of the origin of the iconography of the body of Christ does not end here. Greenhalgh (1985) examined the use of the social and political body of a triumphant Christ when he addressed the many similarities to the pagan use of the political body of emperors. This correspondence offered "a rich field from which to draw suggestions for the development of Christian ideas. As most iconography of the Roman emperors was generic rather than strictly personal, the same goes also for that used for Christ, who can be portrayed as a learned teacher as well as a god and a king" (ibid.: 168). The scholar made a list of several iconographic coincidences between the body of Christ and that of the Roman emperors, such as the theme of the Resurrection, corresponding to celestial apotheosis, or the triumph of Jesus over Satan in the form of a snake, similar to the image of the emperor who triumphed over his enemies by treading on them (ibid.: 169). All of these coincidences correlate with the model of 'concentrated stardom' mentioned above. However, no correspondences are found in pagan iconography for the theme of Passion, which remains wholly Christian. The symbols of the nimbus, the globe, the Tree of Life, and many others (which have nothing to do with the iconography of the body) are pagan-derived (Verdi 1996: 49). They survived for a few centuries, but they never became equal to the symbol of the crucifix. Ultimately, the great novelty lies in the representation of the sovereign body, the body of religious power, as no longer victorious (as it was with the emperors), but prey to suffering and death.

The Holy Body and the Salvation of the Soul

It is not only in the body of Christ but also in his iconographic simulacrum that Christianity identifies the source of all forms of salvation. However, when the concept is taken back to its original meaning, *salus* (*σωτηρία*), it appears again in its semantic duality of both salvation and health. Invested in a cyclic conception of time, the Christian culture identifies itself in the body of Christ through the moment alternative to his death and resurrection, that is, the moment of his birth, which to the eyes of the world represents the hope for redemption. The body of the Divine Infant appears as the originator of a new order and, at the same time, of salvation and health for the social body of Christianity. The formal perfection and freshness of flesh found in the figurative reproduction of that body are forgiven for one reason only—because, despite being divine, it is predestined to suffer and die. This notion is central to the attempt to define a key to the representability of the body that gets to the core of contemporary Western culture. It does not then seem unreasonable to start from here in order to understand the generation of the social body from the physical body—of a carnal, individual body that generates the social one, just as Simmel intended.

Likewise, the exemplum of the body of Christ is followed by that of the saints, who, in the Christian-Catholic theology, represent the intermediation between humankind's insignificance and God's perfection. The integration of the body of the saint into the ecclesial body depends on how far it is removed

from the social body. Like the physical body of Christ, that of the saint is also a source of scandal and transgression, of disorder and non-integration. Indeed, it goes against the fundamental (and pagan) precept of *amor sui* (self-love), again launching the obscene image of heroism of the flesh that opposes any project of integration due to the immense and chaotic disorderly strength it has at the symbolic level. This body is the image itself of the paradox of power: the indecent unacceptability of the physical body and its intrinsic violence have as a counterweight the social body, a model to be imitated and venerated, imposed by a power that always wants humans to be heteronomous.

The body of the drawn and quartered, the crucified and the beheaded, the roasted and the stoned, the drowned and the suffocated, the hungry and the sick is the body of total sanctity: in sum, the salvation (*salus*) of the soul is not through health and its deceiving seductions, but rather the consequence of giving up the health (again *salus*) of the body. Therefore, without God there is no possible salvation, but, we can add, without health there is certainty of salvation. In the paradox of the application of the ancient precept of *salus* lies the key that is essential to an understanding of the (figurative-preceptive-didascalic no less than theological) use of the body in Christianity (cf. Verdi 2006).

Actually, the figurative representation of the body is nothing but the other side of the social and mental representations of each epoch, the negotiated and then shared model of knowledge, which makes it a type of a priori category of vision. It is at the base not of our looking but rather of our seeing—that is, the collecting of information that the world affords us through intermediation, made collective but unconscious, or even preconscious, by images. It is that 'visual thinking' (*das bildhafte Denken*) that forms the "archetypal expression of all communicative behaviors," not conceptually or musically formulated, but expressed "as rhythm, proportion, atmosphere, in short … an 'image' not yet embodied in a specific medium," as Dorfles (2000) says, and that precedes the spoken language.

Holy images, in particular, have represented for centuries the exemplum of vision and behavior, the indication and paradigm of action. The body of 'holy anorexics' (Bell 1985), for instance, appears more subjected to social control and conditioned by a symbolic order that denies its natural dimension as a physical body (incorporating it into the social one). As a result, it is more capable of aberrations, renunciations, self-constriction to disgusting rituals, flagellations, the use of the cilice, and other such actions. Therefore, the more a body is physically obliged, the more socially constructed it is; it becomes the subject, one could say, of a rationalized irrational choice. Its cultural meaning, as Geertz (1973) summarizes, is in its use, that is to say, in its being a form of reproduction of a model of power and order and, at the same time, a guarantee of continuity and recognizability. Such a body is perfectly integrated within a social order aiming at *salus* and at the reproduction, yet again, of the mechanisms that perpetuate it. The paradox of the exemplum (at least following the classic Mertonian functionalistic typology) becomes more evident than ever: while on the one hand it puts forward salvation as a goal, on the other it uses every possible means to damage the health of the body. Giving up satisfaction with regard to

the physical body leads to the triumph of the social body and its absolute symbolic power within the Christian, in particular Catholic, imaginary.

Let us also not forget the theodicy (vindication of divine goodness) developed by the Scholastic philosophy. Although it stated that when God created the world, He did the best thing of all, it never actually deduced the point that underlay Leibniz's theodicean theory a few centuries later—that ours is the best possible world because it was created by God. Like Boethius ("If God exists whence evil? But whence good if God does not exist?" *De consolatione philosophiae*), Plotinus, and Augustine of Hippo, medieval philosophers did not expect to rationalize the origin and explanation of evil and suffering. Paradoxically, Christ's suffering also remains unexplained and mysterious, the effect of the same inscrutability of the divine will that concerns humankind as a whole.

The body of the saints lends itself to further categorization, recalling a model I have established elsewhere (Verdi 1996) concerning the ever different forms that the body takes on in the history of art, but also in the history of ideas. I believe that it is recognizable in the first and second of five models of the body that I have outlined as follows (ibid.: 55):

> … the *angel-like* body, the *exceptional* body, the *everyday* body, the *deformed* body, the *missing* body. The first is mainly the body of the Paleochristian and Byzantine art up to Gothic art, in other words, the medieval body; the second is the body of deities (by now only Christian), the body of saints and heroes, but also the crazy body that inspired so many, especially northern paintings of the Renaissance, through to Mannerism, the Baroque, and the Age of Enlightenment. The *everyday* body appears with Naturalism and Verism in the nineteenth century, while the *deformed* body is created by the artistic avant-gardes of this century wishing to leave behind quickly Verism and the soppiness of Symbolism. Lastly, the *missing* body did not survive the excesses of its representations—an orgy of portrayals in the new 'anonymous depiction' of advertising—in the contemporary age.

The body of the saints, 'angel-like' or 'exceptional', belongs in any case to the wider category of the denied body, not in its portrayal, but in its health and physical integrity and in its being, once again, a social body that is deprived of a sexed and gendered body identity. To be a fully recognizable model, the body of the saint will always iconographically wear the stigmata of suffering and illness. Able to endure both of them, according to indicators of pain bearability or the threshold of pain (which was very high from the Middle Ages until the Industrial Revolution, which introduced new drugs), the body of the saint became an icon that, alongside the crucifix, accompanied the daily life of believers and was thought to be the way to salvation, if not to health. The body of the saint was petitioned for intercession and healing, miracles and special blessings. The saint was seen as a vicarious deity, closer to humans because he himself was human. In his name, shrines were built and pilgrimages organized, ex-votos were offered, and the monumental construction of the intermediation between God and the world, that is, between the social body and the physical body, which was totally absent in Protestantism, had its beginning.

The Body and the Discomfort of Modernity

At least until the Age of Enlightenment, art agreed with medicine, suggesting to politics the consonance between military and manly virtues. According to the stereotype of manly classicism, moral values were embodied and realized in ideal measures, any variations on which had to be seen as deviance (Mosse 1996). The social body, yet again, was reflected in a powerful and normative male body, both in the iconography of power and in medical theories, like those of Lavater (1803), of the second half of the eighteenth century. Drawing on the connection between Lavater's Christocentric theology and theories of physiognomics, which also gave God the body of a white man, the scholar's postulate of the eighteenth century was born: as Jesus Christ was the ideal man, he must also have been the most handsome. For another hundred years, the perception of the body—the result of widely shared social representations, filtered through painting and sculpture—kept alive the distinction between the holy body and the profane body. This distinction, which had long created very radical categorizations, started fading toward the end of the nineteenth century until it disappeared. As mentioned elsewhere (Verdi 1996), the model of the 'exceptional' body drifted toward the 'everyday' body, which no longer needed religious mediation to find reasons for its own representability.

After the Industrial Revolution, the new division of labor, the introduction of ordinary medical practices in the daily life of an increasingly greater number of people, the changes brought about by the improved eating habits of adults and babies, higher schooling levels, and women's participation in the production processes—all these allowed the body new visibility, which was also due to the now prevalent tendency toward rationalization. In the mid-nineteenth century, the body was represented according to the models and techniques typical of Verism and Naturalism, which reigned in all of the arts. Nudity was no longer looked upon negatively, nor was it removed through the conceit of the natural distance of mythological subjects (Gay 1984). A healthy body did not need to hide behind a sacred body to be portrayed or behind a sick body to become the object of public devotion. From then on, sickness and health became values (or disvalues) to be treated separately. The boundary between the two, however, remained the object of cultural definition.

The 'deformed' bodies created by the nineteenth-century avant-gardes were not simply artists' inventions; they actually responded to the diffusion of a new expressionistic explosion. The deformations reproduced the symptoms of a cultural and social discomfort that was already deeply felt in the first decade of the century and then increased in the wake of the first-ever world wars. Initially through Surrealism and then through an increasingly pervasive abstractionism that resulted in a desperate tendency to the materic and the informal, the image of the body was on its way to the representation (mediated by social construction processes) of the negative. One could indeed wonder if any body at all was contemplated in the imaginary of some artists and authors, or whether it had actually dissolved, along with the hope of recovering it to more human dimensions of life. This question arises vis-à-vis works by Picasso and

Schiele, Dix and Grosz, Dalì and Max Ernst, and many others. Only in the post-war years did that deformed, unrecognizable body reach the apex of its non-being, through the excess of being, of overexhibition through the amplifying mechanisms first of the mass media and then of the new media. By then, artists such as Frida Kahlo, Fernando Botero, Hans Hartung, Francis Bacon, Alberto Giacometti, Jean Fautrier, and Jean Dubuffet had already been noticed.

The tragedy of 'contemporary man'—destined to live, as Sartre says, with death in his soul in a vacuum crossed by the real—is expressed through bodies that are emaciated, ravaged and corroded, worn out by time and by life. It is indeed here, and not earlier, that the ascending course of overexhibition of the body reaches its climax and the body disappears, behind and within its media simulacra. A prisoner of excess, the body becomes invisible, almost transparent, as a social and symbolic, as well as individual, machine. In advertising, the body is everywhere and nowhere; it towers in the ads as it does on the walls, in the press, and on television. Lastly, the Internet robs the body of its weight, confines it to virtuality, devoid of space and time, because it is immersed in every space and every time all at once. Taking as the categorical imperative the duty of pleasure—"a manifest absurdity," according to Kant (1970: 49; see also Verdi 1991)—or, if we prefer, the duty of being healthy (Ariès 1975, 1977), the body denies death and sickness and disguises its insignificance before them. This view, held by Andy Warhol, Gina Pane, and Louise Bourgeois, is represented by present-day artists Orlan and Stelarc, Marina Abramović, Maurizio Cattelan, and Marc Quinn.

The body takes upon itself the stigmata of a sick and guilty culture, irresponsible but hugely powerful, forgetful and launched at full speed, no longer with goals or limits. Never so visible and at the same time so invisible, art has never understood the body so well. It refuses pain and death in a compulsive and definite way; it does not accept itself in the weakening of old age, as in the mirroring of other bodies that are totally devoid of their sexual markers. The body is a mere wrapper, better if beautiful. It no longer even resorts to *salus* as health but rather to a neurotic health consciousness misunderstood as beauty, which falls prey to extenuating aesthetic rites and to increasingly frequent surgery. Carried out on the body, such surgery removes evidence of the passage of time but also of any form of thought. Body art has—ironically and painfully—increased this neurotic aspect of body-mind schizophrenia by sometimes combining Baroque iconography, medical and computer technology, the theatre, and mass communications, as does the performance artist Stelarc when he challenges the traditional idea of beauty and the Western concept of identity and otherness.

However, at the same time, starting at the end of the twentieth century and continuing into the twenty-first century, a strengthening of the phenomenon that began in the United States at the time of the 'flower power' movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s has now converged into the phenomenon of the New Age movement. The religion-medicine relation that was solid in the Middle Ages but increasingly less so from the Humanism of the Renaissance onward now shows the novel result of a relation between medicine and religion

and of a link between physical healing and inner healing (Guizzardi 2004: 151). In this instance, too, an artistic current exists alongside the issues of the body, in relation to an individual's psycho-physical well-being and the evocative potential of the environment on the body.

What is certain is that art (i.e., 'visual thinking') always manages to be the first to grasp and express the changes in communication paradigms and in the formalization of the codes of power, drawing from the development of medicine the manifestation of experiential and research elements that win over ideological and partisan ones. However, the end of the twentieth century has offered the body another instrument of technological expression—one so powerful that it will have an impact on all previous codes.

The New Community Body

Compared to a century ago, we are now happily free from the scandalousness of the physical body-social body union. Thanks to technology, the physical body has been liberated from the power of the social body: the former has been deified in order to make the latter a symbolic object of undisputed media power. In the process, the borders between high and popular culture have disappeared. Technology, still the art of *logos*, has rapidly transformed into what Susca and De Kerckhove (2008), with a delightful neologism, refer to as 'technomagic'. Within new emotional and symbolic ('affectual') communities that lack a project and are removed from the 'social contract', new forms of communication are being created that vibrate and coalesce around the community body. This results in a 'connective intelligence', triggered by the new media.

The crisis of religions and ideologies has sanctioned the success of this knowledge, which is incorporated within communities that find in electronic tribes a new path to an otherwise lost re-enchantment and 'aurization'. According to Susca and De Kerckhove (2008: xi), "the process of technical reproducibility of the work of art has not extinguished … the aura, but rather has displaced … it on the social body. It seems therefore pertinent to view the latter in terms of the 'social divine' proposed by Emile Durkheim." The social body reappears here in the shape of the aurization of new diasporic public spheres, in which, in terms of symbolic power, it has been reinvested. Buoyed by emotional exuberance, cognitive and aesthetic pleasures, and ludic impulses, 'technomagic'—in a concurrence of religiosity, magic, and technology—creates a new social effervescence. Here, the body is the message of the new electronic media. Communion of emotions generates communication, which generates 'communicracies', forms of liquid power. The law of the state gives way to the law of the group.

It is at this point that the rhetorical and symbolic foundations on which the social construction models of the body traditionally rest are turned upside down. No longer built top down, as with the Christological models, they are being redefined as bottom up. In other words, they start from consensus mechanisms that are wholly similar to those of ancient democracies but are now

obtained through virtual 'communicracies', nets of associative action and communication that are construed as a community body. There, aesthetic dimensions are still inflecting power relations, as was the case with Barack Obama in the 2008 US presidential campaign. Television stars belong not only to show business but also to the world of politics (Rein, Kotler, and Stoller 1990), and so politicians make their way into show business. The outcome is an ongoing semanticity that produces deification and mythologization. But in 2008, the model was 'diffused stardom' (Kermol and Tessarolo 1998), and so Obama's body (social body) was created by his supporters: during the campaign, a million volunteers, logged in on Obama's Web site, organized more than 75,000 events in the virtual community. Although it is an extraordinary rhetorical medium of global amplification, the Internet still needs to resort to the logic of communities, as did the ancient Christian ecclesia. Once again, it is demonstrated that, beyond the eternal mechanisms of mass removal and sublimation, the social body still needs the physical body in order to exist.

At the same time, taking part in a similarly new yet ancient rhetoric of power, we have made the beauty of the body (forever estranged from universal aesthetic canons) a myth, a normative overarching category that has become a life goal, an essential ingredient of mass pleasantness. The beauty of the body in the mass imaginary ceases being a subjective fact to become social and cultural, but also liquid. The heartless hedonism that Max Weber feared is now at the extreme of rationalization mechanisms. The assignment to this new body paradigm, which could not be further from the idea of the archetype, illusory and deceptive both in the public and private sphere, does not yet accomplish the task of giving sense to the unrepeatable existence of each subject. Such a task goes beyond the capabilities of the virtual physical body, endlessly reproducible like a mechanical doll but unable to give vigor to a new body model. Its political role, above all, too often brings to mind the always seductive Chinese shadows. No better fate has befallen the crucifix, the religious symbol on which I intentionally dwelled so long. Even the body of Christ must paradoxically become equally devoid of sense in order to assume a completely new meaning, this time inscribed in its very invisibility, as the poetic images of Paola Signorelli (figs. 1–3) suggest.

At the same time, more often than not it is the imaginary body that creates the real body, the daily micro-history that affects macro-history, or, to paraphrase Benjamin (1936), "the digital reproducibility of the political that urges the political development of the public" (Susca and De Kerckhove 2008: xii), thus overturning the power relations between the physical and social bodies and questioning the formation mechanisms of the rhetoric of power. In a certain sense, the five body models presented above (Verdi 1996) are not completely outdated, even in a media communications society in which the role of the state loses its centrality, taking second place to virtual communities. The growth of virtual models has resulted in new 'angel-like' bodies, disembodied but not at all 'exceptional', no longer other-directed but not yet self-directed. It also confuses everyday life with a second, virtual life, again 'deforming' the looks of the human body, which has become an icon in a virtuality that mimics reality, going beyond it but not yet resolving it.

Figure 1 *Piccola Deposizione* (Small Descent from the Cross). 2007. Oil on canvas. 100 x 70 cm. © Paola Signorelli

"The silence of ordinary, everyday objects suggests a mysterious life of their own outside time … [they] are bearers of an intelligently formulated and pessimistic message, the leitmotiv of which is the spiritual alienation of modern man."

— *Nicolaas Teeuwisse*

Figure 2 *Grande Crocifissione II* (Great Crucifixion II). 2006. Oil on canvas. 80 x 120 cm. © Paola Signorelli. "The sensuous beauty of the soft, creased cloth and the clear, vibrant light give the picture a silent, almost metaphysical power and poetry."

— *Nicolaas Teeuwisse*

FIGURE 3 *Grande Deposizione* (Great Descent from the Cross). 2007. Oil on canvas. 120 x 80 cm. © Paola Signorelli

"This painting offers a world of silence to counter the ubiquitous assaults on our senses by the media ... It is remarkable for its austere monumentalism. It is no coincidence that the composition should be reminiscent of famous prototypes in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European painting, yet it is also astonishingly unconventional."
— *Nicolaas Teeuwisse*

Laura Verdi is Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Padua, Italy. Her research topics address especially the sociology of cultural processes (knowledge, music, cinema, popular traditions, social anthropology, etc.) and epistemological questions. She participated in Italy's 2008 National Research Project (PRIN), "Artistic Resources and Cultural Planning," and in the 2007 conference of the Research Network for the Sociology of the Arts at Lüneburg University, "Sustainability: A New Frontier for the Arts and Cultures." A member of several academic associations and societies, her most recent publications include "The Arts and the Future City" (2008), "New Arts for a New Citizenship" (2008), "Tra sociologia ed estetica" (2008), "Arte e società: Il pubblico dell'arte contemporanea" (2009), and "Storia della magrezza" (2009).

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