

## **Boneware and Body Culture**

### **The Revenge of the Body**

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"They're only facts."  
Johan Sjerpstra

The body has found a way to chase the spirit from the flesh: this, essentially, is the project of virtuality. From its inception, cyberspace has been placed in the tradition of the Gnostic conspiracy to attain the pure spirit by leaving the body behind. The VR-prophets have only cast their gaze in one direction: ahead towards the thrilling adventures and ecstasies soon awaiting the spirit of the age. If people looked back at all, they saw the past as a prelude to today's megajump into the empire of speed. Attention focused on immaterial tendencies; the body was relegated to the reproductive sector [sports, food, sex]. The question of the body may be intellectually revived every now and then [especially whenever the Spirit is at a loss and boredom strikes] — but in this periodic celebration of the revival of the repressed, the body, in spite of its materiality, is still interpreted metaphorically and used as the topic of in-depth debates.

#### **Body of ours, you won't be forgotten**

The body is engaged in a project of its own. It currently reveals two trends: revenge and metamorphosis. The body no longer wants to be used as a compensatory device for the failed virtuality of all those rotten chairs, clumsy keyboards, high desks, radiant screens, carcinogenic mobile phones and static electromagnetic fields. Not to mention the long working hours of the overenthusiastic data workers, their Net addiction, the misfiled data and the constant stress of keeping up-to-date. The ergonomics industry stays in pace with the computer trade, but it's a hopeless task. We may pity the astronauts whose muscles shrink under conditions of extended weightlessness, but far worse are the stiff muscles, sore tendons, mouse elbows, nagging wrists, deformed vertebrae, dislocated shoulder blades, bruised tailbones, and the CTS and RSI of the triumphant virtual class.

#### **I've left my body to progress**

Because one is oneself a part of digital "progress in action," any inconveniences are taken for granted. Worthless interfaces, incomprehensible and extensive software, lost data: the body is written off as quickly as the accompanying hardware. Data mining: even miners do not develop black lung until after retirement. The Adilkno orthopedist Rothule: "They should never have introduced computers before a try-out period of 15 years." Now an entire class of therapists is growing filthy rich over the rehabilitation of the common digirati. Private healthcare is blooming. In the workplace, it is not just our intellectual work that is controlled by the system, but even the body is supervised and subjected to a new regime. It must be relieved, exercised, and relaxed every fifteen minutes. Every hour you are required to leave the terminal and go to the recreation room, where easy chairs and New-Age music await you. The canteen only serves organic food in an attempt to normalize your completely messed up yin-yang balance. The euphoria has subsided and so have all doubts and criticisms. There's a job to be done, and that hurts. The network is fully operational and has to be rendered profitable. Any expense cuts, once made by the organization through computerization, are now being undone by long-term absenteeism. Bill Gates, we love you!

The vengeance theme dates back to the introduction of computers when it was believed that all those electronics would relieve us from much tedious work. This fairly simple psycho-analytic framework will continue to bug Third-Wave profiteers for generations to come. It is the posthuman version of the ever-so personal which turned out to be political. Gender has been replaced by the flesh, and the frivolousness of wetware and its amusements has been taken over by rigid boneware and its prostheses. This is a disorder which no esoteric antidote can cure. It's not between the ears, but between the elbows. That is why something has to be done. To this end, a variety of mind-body syntheses are on offer: from tantra, yogarobics, physiotherapy, brisk walking, and callisthenics to the intercultural detrainment-mix of the high-impact workout. All these methods are designed to avoid the sudden return of the physical, all too physical.

### **Your body is your best friend, but how well do you really know it?**

From the body's point of view, these hypermodern phenomena take on a very different perspective. What if the body were found to have a mind of its own? The themes of return and revenge result from a cultural discomfort; they are a physical version of Adorno & Horkheimer's "Dialectic of Enlightenment." But the body discovers great opportunities in virtuality because this will allow it to discard all civilizational ballast attached to it through the ages. Cultural norms have always meant the dominance of spirit over the body. Today this spiritual regime is called identity, health, or spirituality — now and for posterity.

To have a liquid identity is already quite acceptable [albeit not to the authorities], and that is a first step towards the realization of bodies without identities. The alluring perspective of a migration of spirits into cyberspace opens up the potential space of a body that is freed from its spirit. Free from restrictions, the body will be able to set out on its own course. It will be free to transform itself and take on the strangest shapes. In our present duality, the body can only be understood as a nuisance or pleasure machine, subject to a given body politic. But that which we have interpreted as the revenge of the body, in the above, may as well point to a hidden agenda by the body as such. Perhaps the body has used the spirit to persuade humanity to develop the means to leave earth and spread throughout the galaxy. Perhaps virtuality is the body's tool to shake off the spirit like some sort of parasite. Everything that is pleasurable is bad for your health, and that in and of itself is food for thought. European thinking practically coincides with the notion of culture. It is always a matter of providing a shelter for the spirit, be it in the form of a temple, palace, church, library or the [digital] city at large. This is the domain of "wherefore"-thinking, placing everything within a linear motion towards a well-defined endpoint: Truth, freedom, beauty, heaven, or higher things. It is the origin of the urge toward virtuality. With the emigration of this body of thought to the New World, the division between corporeality and the spiritual principle was rendered absolute. In the U.S.A. people no longer provide the spirit with a shelter, it is the body itself which is rebuilt. Both the urban and natural environment are denied their direct impact on human existence. Everything is submitted to the physical condition. The body is its own foundation and no longer yearns for the spirit: thus Walt Whitman's "I think the body electric."

What gives Americans their local color is their belief that their own culture is a global one. Local cultures believe that they coincide with their own contexts. Europe has ample experience with cultures that staked a universal claim. From a European perspective, the particular body politic that accompanies the Internet-cyberculture is no more than one of many disciplining methods. Europe could never have developed the concept of "body culture." The body was subjected to culture; combined they were nothing. The body was neither the goal of culture nor its carrier. The strength of "body culture" is that it is a self-

sufficient culture that does not have to lead anywhere. It is no longer a question of "wherefore"; rather, it is the notion of "how to" which fuels the extension of practices. In American technology [and "body culture" IS technology], the European antithesis between nature and culture is eliminated: the body becomes a [bio-]machine amongst [fitness-]equipment. Technology is how the body discards its cultural obligations. "Body culture" demonstrates, in a festive and sporting way, that technology is not necessarily anti-corporeal [as Europeans had believed]. Machines improve on the body, not because it is in such bad repair, but because it can be made even better than it is. This is the principle behind every gymnasium.

A lot of the post-60s achievements revolved around the acceptance of physical joys and burdens which had been either repressed or controlled for centuries. The body culture of the 1980s elaborated on these foundations and developed an unprecedented physical ideal. After its emancipation the body went its own way, whether to flex its muscles, have its breasts enlarged or have itself surgically [or digitally] remodeled. These are all attempts to curb the body's unrestrained and autonomous urge toward metamorphosis by meeting it halfway. This also explains the fear of drug use in sports [and in society as a whole]: what will happen if the body leaves its natural and cultural boundaries behind altogether? We know all about "digital delirium" — but where would physical delirium take us?

### **Genetic design beyond revenge?**

It is easy to imagine a World Order ruled by an [American] desire for clean genes [and memes]. Though strong supporters of a dirty hybridism, we are even more interested to see what happens when the body is really left to go its own way, not subjected to any aesthetic/genetic control. This is where the posttechnological paradigm opens up, free from the tedious dialectics of the body and technology. In this respect, the cyborg serves as a carnivalesque transitional figure. Cyborgs parody their natural aspects with their prostheses and vice versa. They flaunt their gadgets in festive ways, because the relationship between the body and technology is still quite obvious. So all kinds of baroque interfaces are being designed in which the role of the [electronic] artist is grossly overestimated. They betray a naive faith that things will work out just fine between ourselves and technology. But what does this mean to technology? The post-technological body has transcended all cheap syntheses between body and spirit, nature and culture, culture and technology, materiality and virtuality. It refuses to be a genetic and historical vehicle any longer. It invites us on a journey through the body, through the abysses and uncharted grounds of living materiality. That is the starting point of all negative thinking.

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