

Bodies Unseen: The Early Modern Anatomical Theatre and the Danse Macabre of Theatrical “Looking”

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The struggle to “adapt” to the presence of the corpse serves as the central turning point for this investigation into the theatrical encounters with the corpse in the early modern anatomy theatre. Beginning with novelist W.G. Sebald’s claim, in *The Rings of Saturn*, that the art of anatomy was a way of “making the reprobate body invisible,” Alvarez queries how the corpse as the central “gure of this theatrical space challenges conventional modes of theatrical looking and how the particular viewing procedures invited by the anatomy theatre, as a theatrical space, effectively make the body “unseen.” Using Restoration diarist Samuel Pepys’ documented encounter with a corpse and the early phenomenologist Aurel Kolnai’s writings *On Disgust*, Alvarez attempts to account for the “perceptual and interpretive black hole” that the corpse presents in this schema. The corpse’s “radical actuality” and, paradoxically, its “surplus of life” act as a cipher that cuts through the virtual space constructed by the anatomical demonstration, undermining the gravitas of the scientific gaze that has acquired its weight in contradistinction to the theatricality of the event. But the corpse’s “radical actuality” and its “surplus of life” introduces a *danse macabre* of theatrical looking that moves between absorption and repulsion, reversing the otherwise consumptive gaze of the onlooker.



Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson* Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632)

In the opening pages of W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, the speaker ruminates on Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* (1632), a painting purportedly depicting the public dissection of a corpse by Dr. Nicolaas Tulp at the Weigh House in Amsterdam, where a guild hall with furniture, art, and medical instruments was also used as an anatomy theatre (Baljet 4). As the speaker in Sebald's novel notes, we the onlooker of the painting are standing where those witnessing the dissection might have stood and the painting's adherence to the conventions of anatomy and group portraiture of the period (mis)leads us to believe that we see what they saw then, at this ostensibly documented account of an anatomical demonstration: the body of Adriaan Adriaanszoon, alias Aris Kindt, a petty thief who had been hanged only a few hours prior to the dissection here depicted, his body "greenish, prone...his neck broken...and his chest risen terribly in rigor mortis." And yet, the speaker notes, "it is debatable whether anyone really saw that body, since the art of anatomy, then in its infancy, was not least a way of *making the reprobate body invisible*" (my emphasis; Sebald 13). Indeed, that the body is not seen is reflected in the surgeons' gaze in Rembrandt's painting, directed at the anatomy book at the feet of the cadaver, and that of the two surgeons at the apex of the painting, who are aware of being spectated, returning the gaze of the painter/onlooker. If, as the speaker of Sebald's novel argues, the art of anatomy makes the reprobate body invisible, what did those onlookers present at Dr. Tulp's dissection see and what, in fact, is seen in the encounter with the body of the corpse on the gurney of the anatomy theatre?

The historical relationship between theatrical spaces and the early anatomical amphitheatres that borrowed from the same Vitruvian architectural principles has been aptly documented. However, what I wish to investigate here is how these anatomical amphitheatres, as theatrical spaces, shape reception of the corpse that is both seen and, as Sebald suggests, not seen. How does the corpse signify in this context and what is the nature of the onlooker's encounter with the corpse on the gurney? How the body signifies is of no small importance in current performance studies scholarship. Due in large part to the influence of Michel Foucault, the body in performance has become the subject of active critical inquiry, particularly in analyses of avant-garde performance since Artaud in which it becomes a locus of meditations, not only on the body as a discursive site, but on the nature of the performing body itself. In current performance studies scholarship, the body on display is caught between two general

theoretical leanings, one that sees the body as discursively inscribed and another that imagines the body in its essential facticity, a presence that supersedes the discursive. Independently of each other, these theorizations are inadequate in considering how the onlooker's experience of the body on display is shaped by the dynamic of its encodings in representation. What I would like to propose here is that we consider the body on display in the anatomical theatre as an opportunity to investigate potential models of theatrical reception in the onlooker's encounter with the body. The concentrated atmosphere of the anatomical theatre with the insentient body occupying centre stage is organized around an invitation to look. However, I would like to consider how the corpse presents an opportunity to assess traditional frameworks of theatrical "looking" and examine how the corpse challenges the consumptive spectatorial gaze solicited by this theatrical space. The viewing procedures of this theatrical space, I will argue, do not imply a static relationship between the viewer and the body, despite the fixity of the corpse on the gurney; rather the medicalized body in a state of decay possesses, paradoxically, a "surplus of life", to use Aurel Kolnai's phrase, that cannot be bound up within the terms of theatrical demonstration.

In an effort to attribute the anatomy theatre full status as other recognized theatrical sites in the early modern period, Charles Estienne, the famous Parisian professor of anatomy, argued in his textbook on theoretical and practical anatomy published in 1545 that "anatomy was comparable to any other public show, and a dissected human body to 'anything that is exhibited in a theatre in order to be viewed'" (Ferrari 85). Estienne's study appropriates the terminology of theatre architecture as a means of identifying the necessary features of the anatomy theatre most conducive to providing optimum vantage points of the cadaver for the spectator and improving the aesthetic experience of the demonstration. The modern critic W.S. Heckscher (in his *Rembrandt's Anatomy* of 1958) goes so far as to suggest that in fact the establishment of an autonomous building to accommodate theatrical performances originated in the anatomical amphitheatre. But rather than complicating the matter with speculations about the origins of permanent early modern theatre spaces proper, I would like instead simply to establish the relationship between the two architecturally in order to examine the theatrical viewing procedures invited by the anatomical demonstration. Alessandro Benedetti, a teacher of anatomy in Padua, for example, modeled his

temporary wooden structure on the Roman amphitheatre, as most early modern anatomy theatres of the period did. The Roman amphitheatre also characterized tendencies in fifteenth century Italian theatre design, as evidenced in the Teatro Olimpico, initially designed by Palladio and completed by Scamozzi in 1584 and the Teatro Sabionnetta designed by Scamozzi in 1588, both following the Vitruvian principles that had acquired such currency in the Renaissance. It seems particularly suitable that Vitruvian principles, based on the ideal proportions to be found in the human body, would serve as the basis for the design of the anatomical theatre. As Vitruvius writes in his *Ten Books on Architecture*:

Symmetry is a proper agreement between the members of the work itself, and relation between the different parts and the whole general scheme, in accordance with a certain part selected as standard. Thus in the human body there is a kind of symmetrical harmony between



Engraving of an anatomical demonstration at Leiden (1609), anon.
(after a drawing by Woudanus)

forearm, foot, palm, finger, and other small parts: and so it is with perfect buildings (36).

The body, in its “symmetrical harmony” at the centre of the amphitheatre, signifies a macrocosmic structural order; indeed, the corpse on the gurney, its arms splayed out toward the concentric circles of seating that surround it as in the image from the anatomy theatre at Leiden (1609), is particularly suggestive of the “Vitruvian Man,” emblemizing this harmonious symmetry between the parts and the whole.

At Padua, Benedetti’s temporary structure eventually led to the creation of the first permanent anatomical theatre, built in 1594, through



Frontispiece to Andreas Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543)

the initiative of the scholar and Professor of Anatomy Fabricius. The theatre held 200 to 300 spectators in six concentric galleries with very narrow rows that provided standing room only – what little there was of it – from which point the onlooker would look down on to the cadaver in the central “playing space.” The modern scholar, William Brockbank vividly describes his own difficulty squeezing into a row at the surviving theatre at Padua and the woodcuts we have depicting dissections, such as the demonstration at Leiden or the frontispiece to Vesalius’ *De humani corporis fabrica*, demonstrate that the corpses and physicians played to packed houses, suggesting that the onlookers may have found themselves often shoulder to shoulder in the aisles.

Benedetti’s 1493 text on anatomy details an early anatomical theatre, including its audiences which, he writes, should be organized “according to rank” with a Praefectus to ensure the proper placement of spectators and supervise the proceedings (Brockbank 372). The make-up of the audience at Padua was apparently as follows: Professors of Anatomy occupied the first row of the theatre as well as the Rectors of the City and the University, the Councilors, members of the medical college and representatives of the Venetian nobility. Students occupied the second and third rows, among them ostensibly a young William Harvey, the English physician who would later describe the uses of the veins and circulatory system of the human body in detail. The fourth, fifth, and sixth rows were for other spectators, who had paid a general admission fee to watch the demonstration, but as Brockbank speculates, it was no doubt very “difficult for them to see the details of the dissection from the upper tiers” (374). The low light would not have facilitated their view, either: the theatre had no windows and was lit by two chandeliers with four candles in each, and eight candles held by students around the gurney. The theatre was otherwise in darkness. One wonders whether the spectators in the upper tiers would have experienced the embodied excitation rippling through the galleries from those in the front rows in close proximity to the body – an experience felt, perhaps, more so than seen. Heightening the theatrical effect, the body was elevated on a lift through a trap door opening to the room below where it was prepared for dissection, as Vidius relays in his *Anatomy* of 1611, usually by “men of the lowest classes who are accustomed to hard work, and do not refuse to touch or carry away that which is messy” (Brockbank 372).

This rigid adherence to hierarchically organized spatial relationships – the anatomy theatre asserting itself as a microcosm of a macrocosmic

structural order – with the “lowest classes” located in the bowels of the anatomy theatre¹ from which the “reprobate body” ascends, signals perhaps a particular anxiety about the annihilating force of the corpse. In its bare inversion, its interior exposed to view, a subjectivity that is present but vacated, the corpse, I will argue, cannot participate in the same terms of this theatricalized demonstration. The corpse of the reprobate Aris Kindt, the former petty thief, who shared a criminalized status with most of the bodies seized for anatomical demonstrations, is here irreducible to that status despite its undeniable materiality.

That the anatomical dissections in the early modern period presented more of a “theatrical occasion than a lesson”, as Brockbank claims (371), is supported by the fact that flute players often provided musical accompaniment and the anatomy amphitheatres were typically flanked by rooms serving food and wine (how the witnessing of a dissection might encourage the appetite, I have no idea). But this was a ritualistic drama, as Jonathan Sawday captures in rich detail:² the careful arrangement of seating according to rank, the playing of music during the dissection, the procession that heralded the entrance and exit of the anatomists, ceremonial dress, and of course, the elevation of the body through the trap door. As a theatrical performance, there is much debate as to the hold it exerted over its spectators – Cynthia Klestinec argues that the atmosphere of the anatomy theatre was marked by civility, decorum, and studiousness, while Giovanni Ferrari argues that it was a chaotic, carnivalesque atmosphere, similar to that depicted in the frontispiece to Vesalius’ *De humani corporis fabrica* (64); Ferrari substantiates this assertion by noting that at the time of Vesalius’ writing, public dissections were moved to January in order to coincide with the carnival period (66).

Given the explicitly theatrical atmosphere of these anatomical demonstrations, it made infinite sense that Inigo Jones, the English architect and scenic designer who was trained in Italy and influenced by the writings of Vitruvius and Palladio, would be commissioned to design an anatomy theatre on Monkwell Street in London for the Barber Surgeons in 1636.³ The accoutrements of this ritualistic drama of the anatomical demonstration in a candle-lit amphitheatre, along with the musical accompaniment, point to a clear theatrical vocabulary at work, designed to shape the onlooker’s experience of the body in this performance. But the question remains as to how we are to understand the nature of the corpse’s “participation” in this theatrical event. If we consider the corpse on the

gurney in terms of its “radical actuality,” to borrow Stanton Garner’s phrase, it is worth considering how the corpse could conceivably have the power to undermine, or perhaps even foil, the dynamics of this “theatricalized” encounter.

Samuel Pepys, the 17th century diarist from whom theatre historians have gleaned much about Restoration theatrical culture, would have been quite familiar with the nature of the contract between spectator and stage as an active playgoer. A diary entry of particular interest to this study takes place on February 27th, 1662, when Pepys documents his attendance at the Jones-designed Barber-Surgeon’s Hall on Monkwell Street to witness an anatomical demonstration led by the Lecturer on Anatomy, Dr. Christopher Terne. In his entry, Pepys notes that “the reader, Dr. Tearne, with the Master and Company” enter “in a very handsome manner” and that once all is “settled” the doctor begins a “very fine” lecture on “the kidneys, ureters, &c.” After the lesson concludes, Pepys, along with a “great story of company” adjourns for “a fine dinner” in the Hall among “good learned company” (53). What is most compelling about Pepys’ diary entry is the account of his own uncanny encounter with the cadaver. After dinner, Pepys returned to the anatomy theatre in the company of a Dr. Scarborough and some of his friends to “see the body alone”. There, Pepys reached out to touch the cadaver. He writes, “I did touch the dead body with my bare hand: it felt cold, but methought it was a very unpleasant sight” (54). Sawday, entranced by this entry, muses, “[t]here is something compelling at this sudden vision of the diarist tentatively reaching out to touch ‘with my bare hand’ the anatomized corpse” that is “expressive of a paradoxical fascination with the dead body which goes beyond mere voyeurism” (78). How this encounter with the corpse goes beyond “mere voyeurism” is of central interest to this paper. What compelled Pepys to see the body “alone” and, to return to the original question, what did he (not) see in the anatomical demonstration that perhaps compelled him, along with several others, to return to “see the body alone”? Pepys’ impulse to reach out and touch the body suggests a need to concretize the experience and make tangible what sight alone could not assimilate.

One could imagine Pepys’ return to the corpse as at once terrifying, repulsive, yet safe in the certain voyeurism. The absorption of the corpse, to borrow Michael Fried’s term,⁴ in its *rigor mortis*, will not return the gaze of the onlooker (with the exception of those rare occasions in which the corpse was discovered to be not quite dead yet⁵), but rather, invites the

gaze of the onlooker in, undisrupted. What Barbara Freedman says of the theatre, following Freud's conception of the ego as, initially, a "projection of the body's surface", can certainly be said of the anatomy theatre: "[It] plays upon our specular captivation by corporeal images; the body as a vehicle facilitates identifications that evoke the illusion of self-presence" (3). The absorption of the corpse, its "universal indifference" to the onlooker's gaze encourages a process of identification-as-possession that firmly attaches us to the corpse, not merely as a *memento mori* reminding us of our own provisionality, but as a trans-subjective unification fusing our own becoming with the fluid decay of the corpse. Here, Aurel Kolnai's writings help to elucidate the relationship between death and disgust: our revulsion of the corpse gives way to a "fusion and a confusion without restraint" compelled by "decomposition, pulverization, universal indifference", resulting in the dissolution of the "alien" (73-74). Pepys' compulsion to return to the corpse might best be explained in terms of this "sneering affinity to the disgusting formation [...] from which we cannot divert ourselves" (74).

In one sense, following Kolnai, this dissolution of the alien in the encounter with the corpse invites us to consider conventional modes of theatrical identification that are, as Elin Diamond argues, at once "imperialistic and narcissistic" – a tentatively reassuring process that subsumes the other into the "I" forming, in turn, an authoritative, unitary, humanistic "we." This "mimetic pleasure of identification" not only promotes a "preemptory 'we'", Diamond argues, it also "conceals the narcissistic claims" of the viewer, both of which, in effect, "promote the annihilation of difference [...] and thus violence to the other" (404). This formulation of identification serves, in part, to tease out the dynamics at work in Rembrandt's depiction of the surgeons who both literally and metaphorically *overlook* the corpse in the desire to demonstrate, through the anatomical lesson, the knowledge they already possess about the body before them.⁶ In the imperialistic, consumptive gaze, the other is annihilated and remains unknown in a process that forces the other to conform to the familiar. The scientific gaze of Rembrandt's surgeons, I would argue, is similarly 'preemptory,' looking to the anatomist's book and its diagrammatic idealities that provide the field of measurement and the framework for seeing, or not seeing, the body before them. The scientist's act of overlooking the body, allowing the book's representations to guide their gaze, might be seen through the lens of Husserl as symptomatic of

the “Crisis of the European Sciences” in which empirical measurement proceeds “under the guidance of a world of idealities”, a world that has “been objectified in advance through idealization and construction” (34).

But the ceremoniousness, dignity and power of the scientific gaze demonstrated by Rembrandt’s surgeons cannot contain or fully assimilate the cadaver’s paradoxical “surplus of life,” to borrow Kolnai’s phrase, the “swollen overloadedness of the organic matter” removed from the body in dissection of which Sebald’s speaker reminds us when he notes the corpse’s swollen chest and “the white mist that rises from within the body opened presently after death” (17). The corpse’s “surplus of life” not only subverts and undermines the expert authority exerted over it by exposing its contingent, temporal status, a reminder that the surgeons themselves are not impervious to death and decay; in Kolnai’s terms, the surplus of life “endeavors to break altogether through any boundaries which may be set upon it and to permeate its surroundings” (73). This surplus exceeds anything that can be accommodated in the process of identification and indeed, it may help to account for the ways of seeing in the anatomical theatre among spectators like Pepys, or those in the upper galleries who looked down into the well of the amphitheatre at the Vitruvian Man (or Woman) on the gurney. It is the corpse’s invitation to gaze, its substantial and existential proximity, and its surplus that actualizes Pepys’ fascination and repulsion.

While this paper has established the shared dynamics between theatrical spaces proper and the anatomical theatre in order to demonstrate the ways in which the anatomical theatre borrows from and conforms to theatrical practices, the corpse at the centre of this theatricalized demonstration, its surplus of life that breaks through any boundaries imposed upon it and permeates its surroundings, presents somewhat of a perceptual and interpretive black hole in this schema. Unlike the matrixed actor-in-role in the theatrical scenario, the corpse “escapes transformation into the virtual realm” (Garner 44): it is irrefutably material, a concrete focal point at the centre of this performance, but one that is incapable of presenting a “rival phenomenality” for the spectator, as Stanton Garner suggests, due to its liminal status as a being that is simultaneously present and not present. In the conventional theatrical event, Garner argues, the appearance of the actor/character introduces a shift “with phenomenological consequences different from those for artistic genres in which the body fails to make an actual appearance” (46). With the presence of the actor/character, the

onlooker must go through a reorientation, looking “in relation to” the body on stage: “On stage, what was oriented in relation to the gaze is now also oriented in relation to the body that inhabits its boundaries. [The] [v]isual field now discloses, and must accommodate, a habitational field that constitutes a rival perceptual center” (46). Garner attempts to account for the complexity of theatrical viewing that is “never exact or stable” due to this competing orientation, a “dynamic of intersubjectivity” which, Garner suggests, “characterizes perception outside the theatre, whereby the Other represents the opening of an autonomous, differently oriented world within the perceptual boundaries of my own” (47). The elements that comprise the *mise-en-scène* of the anatomical demonstration, from the lecturer’s instruments, his vestments, to the flute playing, do not signify *through* the corpse, nor are these in turn, merely “reducible to spectatorial object”, to borrow Garner’s phrase. The corpse, in this respect, complicates a conventional set of viewing procedures, which this theatrical demonstration might otherwise invite; perhaps it goes without saying that the body does not “do” what it normally does in theatrical performance, nor is the performance’s signifying field mobilized by the presence of the corpse at its centre.

The corpse acts as a cipher that cuts through the virtual space constructed by the anatomical demonstration, exposing a hollow theatricality that cannot signify in any operative sense due to the absence of a perceiving, phenomenal centre around which the event is organized. The presence of the corpse exposes a tension at work in the theatrical atmosphere of the anatomical demonstration setting: a carefully constructed, ceremonious spectacle that has been mindfully established only to be broken by the austerity, not of the scientific gaze, but of the dead body’s “radical actuality” (Garner 44). With the formation of permanent anatomy theatres in the early modern period comes the birth of the *scientific view*, the authority and power of its gaze on public display in a theatricalized setting ceremoniously marking its symbolic introduction, not merely within the virtual space of the anatomical demonstration, but at this historical juncture. The scientific objective, which strives to attain knowledge through empirical study and observation arguably acquires its *gravitas* in contradistinction to the theatricality of the anatomical demonstration, which it stops short with the weightiness of its task. Ultimately, however, it is not the scientific objective that ruptures this theatrical setting, but the dead body’s “intrusive actuality...[its] material, physiological facticity” (44). The presence of the

corpse disrupts any recourse to conventional modes of theatrical 'looking' invited by the theatricality of the event and exposes the performance of the anatomical demonstration and its scientific framework as *performance*.

The corpse's "surplus of life", which cannot be contained - neither by the terms of performance nor by a scientific view - accounts for what the viewer does not see and is not able to see; it also accounts for how Sebald's speaker sees anatomy as an art that makes the body invisible. The cadaver's surplus exceeds representation and exceeds seeing, precisely because of its uncanny absorption of the onlooker that fuses the beholder and the beheld inextricably, leaving us with only a "distorting mirror" of ourselves. But the absorption also points to what Kolnai says is an "impoverished dimension," despite its fullness and surplus of life (74), an impoverishment that compels us to fill it, encouraging a "striving for one's being", to use Kolnai's phrase, just as it is subsumed and absorbed in the encounter with the corpse. The imperialistic dynamic at work in conventional modes of identification in which the other is assimilated by the spectating 'I' is reversed by this impoverishment - the object of the gaze absorbs and consumes. The mode of theatrical looking in the anatomy theatre might thereby be described as a *danse macabre* of surplus and impoverishment that at once repels and compels us, like Pepys, to return to the corpse, and pulls our gaze into the well of the amphitheatre where we lie.

Notes

¹ Identifying additional theatrical parallels, Amy Strahler Holzapfel likens this image of the body ascending from the preparatory room below the anatomy theatre to the "hell-mouth trap of the medieval theatre, through which devils and other satanic characters would emerge or make hasty retreats" ("The Body in Pieces: Contemporary Anatomy Theatres." *PAJ* 89 (2008): 4).

² See in particular chapter three of Jonathan Sawday's *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995).

³ The original plans for Inigo's anatomy theatre on Monkwell Street are housed in Worcester College, Oxford. Its elliptical shape is consistent with the anatomy theatre at Padua. For a brief overview of the theatre in the Barber Surgeons' Hall, see Brockbank, p. 376-377.

⁴ See Michael Fried's "An Introduction to My Art Criticism" in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* for a lucid overview of how Fried employs the notion of "absorption" from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century criticism, particularly in opposition to theatricality, as a desirable method of shaping the relationship between the painting and the beholder (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 1-76. See also Fried's *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁵ Sawday relays accounts of “miraculous revivals” of the body on the anatomy table that were, more often than not, a result of the clumsy work of executioners, or a collusion between the victim and the hangman: “The anatomization of 1587 recorded by John Stowe...offers a particularly gruesome instance of an anatomy taking place on the still-living body of an executed felon” (see *The Emblazoned Body* 61).

⁶ It is worth considering Sebald’s musings here as to whether or not the notorious error in Rembrandt’s painting of the left arm of the cadaver is not a deliberate one on the part of the painter: a message, perhaps, about the hazards of miss-seeing: “Now, this hand is most peculiar. It is not only grotesquely out of proportion compared with the hand closer to us, but it is also anatomically the wrong way round: the exposed tendons, which ought to be those of the left palm, given the position of the thumb, are in fact those of the back of the right hand. In other words, what we are faced with is a transposition taken from the anatomical atlas, evidently without further reflection, that turns this otherwise true-to-life painting (if one may so express it) into a crass misrepresentation at the exact centre point of its meaning, where the incisions are made. It seems inconceivable that we are faced here with an unfortunate blunder. Rather, I believe that there was deliberate intent behind this flaw in the composition. That unshapely hand signifies the violence that has been done to Aris Kindt. It is with him, the victim, and not the Guild that Rembrandt his commission, that the painter identifies. His gaze alone is free from Cartesian rigidity. He alone sees that greenish annihilated body, and he alone sees the shadow in the half-open mouth and over the dead man’s eyes” (16-17).

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