

Introduction: On Corpses

Why dedicate an entire issue to, of all things, the corpse? One gathers from the following articles that the corpse reveals an aspect of human life that escapes most analyses of the body, embodiment, the lived-body, etc. Such analyses generally aim to reveal the body not as an object but, as simultaneously sensing and sensible, a site or locus of subjectivity that is sexually, politically, and historically inscribed. In some fundamental sense, however, the corpse, though it is still a body, challenges the extent to which it can be seen as the site of a *subject's* inscription. Yet neither is it a mere *object*. One way to understand why we would dedicate a volume to the corpse, then, is because it allows us to interrogate the limits of the embodied subject. What does it mean to say that there is a body without a subject? Is the corpse in fact subject-less? It also allows us to investigate this 'body-thing' as a vestigial site for certain sexual, political, historical, and representational commitments. Does the corpse constitute not the structure of subjectivity but the structure of history or a culture? Or is the corpse antonymic to these commitments? If so, then what might it instead commit us to, if anything?

That the corpse remains a historically, culturally, and politically inscribed subject is evident in Tina Chanter's work on Sophocles' *Antigone*. The act of leaving Polynices' corpse, by Creon's decree, to the open air to be consumed by carrion effectively erases Polynices' status as an Athenian citizen and transubstantiates the materiality of the corpse into one that is immaterial and non-human - that of a slave. Chanter draws our attention to the ways in which Antigone's refusal to leave the unburied remains of her brother - a refusal that has been traditionally romanticized as an act of rebellion against authoritarian control - circumscribes and reifies class boundaries between the free, the civilized, and the unfree, uncivilized slave. In effect, Polynices' unburied body unearths how a "western, hegemonic canon" has effectively buried a history of chattel slavery that has made much of this cultural output possible. Chanter's engagement with particularly notable ruminations on Antigone, such as Hegel's and Derrida's, serves to exemplify how "the figure of Antigone [...] has been appropriated in ways that consolidate, rather than disrupt, a tradition of thought that evades its own implication in slavery and colonialism."

The vulnerability of Polynices' corpse to shifting symbolic placement in the social imagination points not only to the corpse's lack of fixity, but also to its often unsettlingly ambiguous status. Beginning with an

6 Janus Head

examination of Vesalius' drawings, which attempt to animate the cadavers in dissection, alongside the plastinated, active corpses in Guenther von Haagen's *Body Worlds*, Brent Robbins considers the extended life of the "undead" body. The extended lives of these corpses for the purposes of scientific investigation (queries about Haagen's "scientific intentions" aside) serve as the backdrop for Robbins' analysis of cadaver dissection in modern medical education in which reductionist and mechanistic views of the body foreclose existential reckonings with the meaning of death. Drawing on Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, in particular the distinctions between *korper* and *leib*, Robbins telescopes the discussion to the ambiguous status of the corpse that oscillates uneasily between its status as a didactic machine and a lived, "memorial body". Robbins' study reveals how students in medical education struggle with this ambiguity and often find creative ways of adapting to the cadaver's doubly encoded presence, which allow its lived history to remain in the face of mechanistic views that might otherwise obliterate this history.

The struggle to "adapt" to the presence of the corpse, as Robbins' analysis reveals, serves as the central turning point for Natalie Alvarez's 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 figure 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.

What these papers collectively move us toward is the corpse's inadequation to exhibition, such that no historico-theoretical structure of representation can grasp it. But if the corpse itself falls outside of the

political structures of Athens, outside of the *mathesis universalis* of modern science, or even outside of the ordinary representational structures of the theatrical event, then one needs a radically different, almost untheoretical, way to access it. One needs to begin again as naively as possible. The corpse is, of course, a *dead body*. This means that the living body cedes to a presentation of the profundity of death. The presentations of a living body have now, in some way, been swallowed up by an abysm—an abysm of time, of space—and it is precisely this abysm that appears and makes itself felt. This apparition of death seems to be a unique one—it shows itself as that which is ungraspable by the viewer of a dead body. It ruptures the natural or quotidian economy of perception, but in such a way that this rupture can never be explained away by speculation.

A reflection on the corpse in its concrete, factual corporeality, then, quite naturally builds towards a consideration of the presentation of death itself in its concrete, factual corporeality, and thus without recourse to any theoretical or conceptual hindsight. In other words, any interrogation of the corpse itself must also, at least in a broad sense, require a phenomenology of death—an analysis of the way in which death presents, without resorting to a hidden explanatory infrastructure that is said to *cause* the phenomenon. How do we understand death as an abysm of time and space in which the living terminates? And how do we understand the corpse in the light of such a death? How is there a dead body, in other words, that does not refer to an afterlife, which duplicates and stands beyond our present life?

It is often repeated that the dead body articulates a sense of the *Unheimlich*. But just as often, perhaps, attention is not paid to the precise meaning of this articulation. The *Unheimlichkeit* of the corpse does not merely mean that through the corpse one encounters the uncanny, though it is often translated in just that way. It means, literally as the “un-home-ly”, that the corpse subverts the comfort of home by co-presenting a something or somewhere *else* – the “alien.” This ability to open up beyond the home is a fundamental character belonging especially to the corpse. The *lich* (“-ly,” or sometimes also “like”) of *Unheimlich*, after all, has the cognate meaning of “dead body”; *lic* in the Old English, which is also cognate with the German *leiche*, survives to convey the meaning of corpse. The dead body is the un-home. It operates by standing in the place of what is not-home, and here we also glean the adjectival aspect of the dead body. The not-home is intimately connected to “the alien” in the sense of *das Fremde* which, derived from *fram*, indicates a moving “onward,” “forward,” an “on the way” or an “away.”

8 Janus Head

The dead body, then, comes to imply a “being at a distance” and even a “not belonging to,” the “unacquainted” or the “unfamiliar.” In the encounter with the corpse we discover, finally, a profound sense of the ek-static, a transcending out into what is different from oneself.

The phenomenon of the corpse, it could be said, does not bear the flat and symmetrical correlation between subject and object but rather asserts its own difference and suspends the dogmatism of a consciousness that constitutes the objects appearing before it. This is precisely what leads Athena Colman to read the Lacanian concept of the ‘anamorphic object’ into Freud’s uncanny, precisely in order to get beyond Freud’s apparent emphasis on vision and representation in his renderings of the uncanny. For the anamorphic, she writes, “breaks open the similitude—throwing the subject of representation against the reality of death/castration from which it is always attempting to cover over.” The corpse’s inversion of representational, intentional and objectifying consciousness is also what leads Drew Dalton to understand its phenomenality, as against Heidegger in *Being and Time*, in the light of the Levinasian face. As a face, the corpse is not itself an appearance but retains its singularity precisely as that which falls outside phenomenality. That the corpse is a face allows us to say that it no longer functions merely for Dasein to confront the possibility of its own death. It retains an excessive Other-ness and, rather than be absorbed into the same, demands that its viewer be transformed in relation to it. The corpse does not abolish its own particularity; its particularity, qua Other, is precisely what induces an anxiety. Dalton writes, “the corpse, like Levinas’ face, could be read as a rupture within the phenomenological field which presents infinitely more than it objectively presents functioning as a window to that which lies beyond it [...]. Perhaps this is why it inspires anxiety within the onlooker—it carries in its presentation the trace of the horizontality of beings, the nothing.”

If the alien-phenomenon finally undoes the structure of an objectifying and re-presentational consciousness, then one may wonder about the extent to which so-called representational art can genuinely figure the alien in its alienness, and specifically the corpse. To a certain extent, in dealing with precisely this question, Colman follows Lacan’s famous analyses of the Holbein canvas, *The Ambassadors*, in which Lacan understands the Death’s Head of the canvas not as the picture per se but as the hidden anamorphosis of the scene. Rajiv Kaushik points out that, in much the same way, the paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat are obsessed with a hiddenness other to

the present scene. Kaushik interprets Basquiat's emphasis on the marginal in terms of this hiding. Thus the marginal in Basquiat's work, he thinks, can be said to be consonant with the obscene in the sense of an obverse scene. This ob-scene is achieved, Kaushik argues, by the glyphic character of graffiti by which the image defies the ordinary logic of a picture frame. The glyphic quality of Basquiat's work allows it to figure, rather than represent, the indeterminate. Basquiat's repeated image of death and dead bodies can finally be read in the light of a space that is prolonged into the depths of an alterity, an ob-scene that functions as the other side of the presented scene. Minissale considers a possible counterpoint to this alterity. Here the corpse is examined in the light of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic philosophy. The photography of Andres Serrano ("Faciality/Defacialization photography") or Peter Witken ("Dismemberment photography") is central in this essay. Although they do so in different ways, both artists, according to Minissale, display the "rhizomic and transversal with rather more chaotic subterranean connections and ruptures, some of them interlacing with and gently undermining the enlightenment vision." They display, in other words, a "grave," a truly shared ground more radical than "the corpse as an obscene plateau, as a thousand plateaus."

In some respects, a discussion of the obscene in reference to the corpse, though unavoidable, also risks aestheticization. To aestheticize the dead body is to approach it within the realm of the familiar, to colonize it. On the other hand, the corpse in its *rigor mortis* seems to imply a fixity or a dead-stop—an end to any and all theorization. But, as these papers demonstrate, the corpse is not entirely lifeless. It does not rest in peace. Not only is the corpse in its ambiguous status vulnerable to symbolic imposition (historical, medical, theatrical). It also has its own functioning power. It reveals itself as an annihilating force. The annihilating force of the corpse annihilates thought and, at the deepest level, subverts the very the impulse to impose upon it. It is thus not a *rigor mortis* per se so much as it subjugates its viewer in its other-ness. In this light, other papers here seek to re-encounter the corpse, paradoxically, in its own vitality. The corpse permeates in its unboundedness and it defies reason. At the very least, the papers collected here attempt to regain this un-thought of the corpse.