

The anatomical
theatre in
six parts and
two voices

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The anatomical theatre in six parts and two voices is a commissioned text on the erotic body that circulates between poetic action and theoretical reflection.

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I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it. It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes place between my soul and God, that I pray to God for His goodness to make those who may think that I am lying experience it.

– St. Teresa of Ávila 1515–82

Part 1: Pulse

I am not St. Teresa. When I died, they took me apart to study my heart. It was a stunning performance. In life, my heart could not study itself. It revealed nothing to me. St. Teresa's heart studied the erotic love of God, and her own writing performed its memory.¹

1 Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda y Ahumada was born in Spain three months after the birth of Flemish anatomist Andreas Vesalius. They both lived through the greater part of the sixteenth century.

I was not St. Teresa of Ávila, nor was I an incorruptible saint. My organs were not scented like flowers. In death, just as in life, I was only a body of parts. They re-animated me, pumping the veins in my arms and legs to learn how my blood worked, as part of their early research on the pulse. St. Teresa's written testimony is one of self-dissection, through the heart to the entrails – not by the knife but the light and love of her God, put into prose. (The only carnal or erotic study permitted to a woman at that time, performed perfectly.) Unlike St. Teresa, I was not immortalized by Bernini, in sensually invaginated robes of marble. The sketches doctors made of me were in parts. An arm and its veins, arteries. Two ovaries. A fetus. My face was of no importance. This they did not study. Nor how I might have walked, what I may have carried, how I may have loved, nor my hands. They did not wish to study my eyes, they were of no relevance to how my heart may have pumped the blood between the uterus, my arms and back. I was not even as whole in my carnal image as the autopsied men once hanged for petty crimes, their bodies snatched from the poorhouse.

In death, my heart did produce a revelation, and propelled men to fame: "the blood passes through the lungs and heart by the force of the ventricles, and is driven thence and sent forth to all parts of the body, the blood in the animal is impelled in a circle, and is in a state of ceaseless movement...this is the act or function of the heart, which it performs by

*means of its pulse; and that it is the sole and only end of the movement and pulse of the heart.*²

My body performed the discovery of the pulse as a ceaseless movement. But I was never able to participate in this discovery.

From these revelations of the heart and organs, a machine-age body and its heroes were born. Like the pulse, the project of the Enlightenment has also been carried out in a "state of ceaseless movement", at the sacrifice of the body. Through dissection and observation, knowledge is revealed, as a collection of observable, representable parts. The body-as-material became a model for critical thought. Spurred on by the poetics like Kleist's *On the Marionette Theatre*³ the erotic tensions between desire and knowledge, performance and perfection are realized as study: offered to powerful men, the anatomists of Modernity. Geography as ownership, is mapped, a globe of puzzle pieces. European theatre's becoming is located there too, a fantasy of hysteria, a body without organs, a space of uncanny potential constructed through centuries of female dissection.

Illuminated and inspired, Artaud testified to this fantasy: "When you will have made him a body

2 Harvey, William. 1628. *An anatomical dissertation on the heart and blood in animals*. Harvey is said to have experimented on his own sister.

3 von Kleist, Heinrich. 1810. *Über das Marionettentheater*.

without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom.”⁴ The anatomical theatre produced male protagonists. On this stage, the femme fatale and the whore, the virgin and the vamp, the wife and the mother, are just parts.

Part 2: Skin

The first theatre built to observe dissections of the human body still stands today. It lies in the Palazzo del Bo, Padua, Italy, established in 1595. Organized public human dissections, or autopsies, on criminal and animal corpses were already practiced in Europe as part of early Modern medicine as early as 1404. This observational work had an unprecedented impact on the European desire for and consciousness of the body, and a shared economy for the production of knowledge. For the next 500 years, Europe saw a growing public problem with non-consensual post-mortem dissections of the poor, body-snatching from graveyards and outright murder-for-profit of sex-workers and other vulnerable peoples. The trade proliferated to meet the growing demand for bodies in anatomical theatres popping up internationally. Observation of the dissection of corpses done in the name of the medical profession was synonymous with enlightenment

4 Artaud, Antonin. 1947. *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*. Radio play.

thinking and the height of elite theatricality.⁵

The famous diarist (and abusive lecher) Samuel Pepys, known for his detailed accounts of Restoration Theatre in England also attended the dissection theatre for pleasure, a common social ritual for the elites, on February 27, 1682/83. He describes dining beforehand, having cocktails after ‘the show’, in a private backstage meeting with the surgeon and corpse who would answer all his curiosities, visually. To participate in discovery implied revelation of a secret order and grand design. It also positioned observation and the gaze as a primary means to power and knowledge, both privately and socially. The more beautiful and fresh the bodies, the better.

Part 3: Pancreas⁶

Counterpleasures, according to author Karmen MacKendrik, are the pleasures of excess, which are pleasures of transgression. “In being the pleasures of and exceeding the limits of reason or moderation, they are also pleasures that cross

5 Perniola, Mario. 1989. *Between Clothing and Nudity, Fragments for a history of the human body, Volume 2*. Zone, New York, N.Y.

“The process of knowledge (in Modernity) becomes an unveiling of the object, a laying it entirely bare and an illuminating of its parts”

6 The word comes from the Greek *pan*, all, and *kreas*, flesh.

what we thought were genuine boundaries.”⁷ Counterpleasures employ the logic of the orgy and its impulse. Not necessarily sexual, the orgy can be described as a condition of desire when ecstasy is achievable only through an excessive mode of appropriation. Ecstasy and revelation in this instance, needs “too many bodies” and relies on spectacle.⁸ As an aristocratic impulse, the orgy strives to its objectives through secrecy, based on careful exclusion and selection, as well as appropriate framing and myth. The orgy as situation relies on a secret rather than open condition of existence, and an unconscious belief that the end of the world is necessary.

The anatomical theatre staged its enlightened, orgiastic fantasies as part of the imperial opening (literally) of a new, other world, through the theft and sacrifice of the bodies of the old. The old ‘irrational’ world represented by medieval thinking, or other alien worlds (colonies) were the meat and bone for this ceaseless Dionysian unfolding.

16th century Flemish doctor Andreas Vesalius joked about breaking into graveyards to steal bodies for the task of staging these shows. Vesalius, considered the father of modern anatomy, was the

7 MacKendrick, Karmen: 1999. *Asceticism: seducing the divine*. Counterpleasures. SUNY Press.

8 Toepfer, K.E. 1991. *Theatre, aristocracy, and pornography: the orgy calculus*. PAJ Publications, New York.

medical avant-garde, subsequently influencing Darwin and other material scientists. He was chided by authorities in his field for doing the dissections himself while lecturing instead of using a ‘barber.’ The close proximity of speech to the action of dissection also created intimacy between the titillated spectators and the protagonist, opening up flesh. With god-like status, he and his colleagues’ progressive performances changed everything. Vesalius’ hands-on experience and published works established materialist enlightenment perspectives of the body, seen as a machine or object, debunking prior religious ‘myths.’ Born out of early anatomy, Vesalius’ famous *De humani corporis fabrica (On the Fabric of the Human Body)* is perhaps one of the most sublime examples of the erotics of the gaze creating a distance or objectification of the flesh. His sketches of corpses (idealized, like Greek male athletes) present a state of erotic rapture or post-coital enlightened reflection on their own flayed flesh. These sketches are provocative scientific drawings of animated corpses in various states of affective unveiling. A man made only of sinew and muscle gazes at his own skin draped in his left hand and a knife in the other. The skin is portrayed as a wholeness, a pure garment with empty eyeholes, a body without organs that could be slipped back on like a ghostly gown. Drawings depict the same man in various states of ecstasy as if in a partially aroused state, opening his own flesh-garment

to let light into the bones beneath. He directs his erotic attention towards the study of his flesh, yet without depriving him of analytic subjectivity. He is at one with desire, fantasy, and the ability to be enlightened even by his own self-vivisection.⁹ The sketches are a clear companion to the highly desired ritual events of the anatomical theatre or 'show,' as solemn as they were, charged with status in the power of looking, and as a result of looking: knowing, being, belonging, as Pepys' diary indicates. In the anatomical theatre, man can participate in and learn from his own self-exposure. He can take pleasure, even in death.

Only male corpses are portrayed in Vesalius' *Fabrica* in their entirety. Females are truncated torsos, displayed as reproductive parts or as other markers of difference from the male, as singular phenomena. Females are passive fragments, organs on a table, like Hans Bellmer's sculptures. The men are standing subjects examining themselves.

Part 4: Face

After Vesalius, the social body of the Enlightenment was obsessed with its own observation, to prove to itself that *it exists*. In order to see itself, the body

9 Andreae Vesalii Bruxellensis, scholae medicorum Patauinae professoris, *de Humani corporis fabrica Libri septem*. 1543.

of the Enlightenment dissected the other. Perhaps this need was greatest because, despite every effort to prove otherwise, there is no such thing as *the body*; the idea exists after the Enlightenment as metaphysics. The erotic in post-Enlightenment drama is created through making vulnerable or 'peeling back' the layers of the everyday social garment, exposing the uncanny, intimate (close) or potentially 'open' parts of a situation. Such an 'opening' in the example of the anatomical theatre also implies, in a way, the transition from dead to living, as described by this witness who compares the anatomist to an artist or animator: "We cease to wonder at man; but a new labour arises: we begin to be amazed at Molinetti alone.

While you search the supple pathways of the blood, its nimble course, its slippery passages, behold our own blood seized with ecstasy, halts inert in our veins ... you do not dissect bodies, Molinetti, but adorn them. You bring them into the Theatre cleansed from all dirt, perfectly in limb, and the obedient muscles are freed at your touch; thus you show yourself not anatomist, but, what is far greater, a god."¹⁰

The anatomist, both in the dissection theatre (and in parallel positions of political power) invented a form of spectatorship linking erotic

10 Baines, Thomas. 1662. *In praise of his Paduan professor of anatomy, Antonio Molinetti*.

pleasure to the unveiling of fundamental knowledge. The failure of that knowledge is most heinously demonstrated in European constructions of race as the justification for the enslavement of Africans. In 1810, they brought Sarah Baartman from South Africa to Europe where she was displayed as a curiosity of racial difference and 'inequality.' They crudely named her "Hottentot", instead of her origin, Khoikhoi. Her body was said to exemplify black hypersexuality and offered proof of African moral inferiority, and African slavery was horrifically justified through her forced nude performances. The famous British anatomist, Georges Cuvier, described her as the so-called missing link between animals and human beings. After her death, Cuvier dissected her and displayed the remains. For more than a century and a half, visitors to the Museum of Man in Paris viewed her preserved brain, skeleton and genitalia, and plaster cast of her body. The notion of study is indebted to the memory of forced performances of the oppressed and enslaved, represented by figures like Sarah Baartman. White bodies as global subjects were invented in the dissection theatres. The perversion of eroticism and spectatorship in these countless instances call for a recuperative, performative return to erotics and study. A return led by the formerly vulnerable, as a means not only to testify, but mourn, and rebuild. A wish to enjoy the very flesh which has built and nursed the world.

We (who have only existed as parts) perform, through erotic choreographies, a repetitive search to re-enter embodiment as study. We dissect its failed ethics with our gaze. We are called to erotics as a study, and study as performance. We know we exist, we perform our re-animation, our pleasure. Our inheritance is a tired experiential mode of study and ocular learning in a repressive structure. Erotics, therefore, is not only the by-product or source of body-snatching, but a space for resistance to that economy. Erotics is a movement score, a way of breathing, a return to sleep, ancestral knowledge, a means of recovery: alternate demonstrations of the ceaseless movement of the blood between the arm and the heart before a public. There is no such thing as Woman, she cannot be observed. How to meet the body on stage, as pleasure, as power, here in life?

Part 5: Ceaseless movement

Eroticism and ethics are both concerned with our orientation towards the other, which often functions through inequality. Normative desires are constructed through positioning deviant ones, and 'deviance' is usually only formally recognized as a means of control of the oppressed, rarely in the service of justice. For this, we know erotics is also entangled with hypocrisy, and the history of repressive behaviors and performing lies. Erotics as a study lends itself coyly to ethics in its willingness to concretely engage in, analyze and even critically

enact the positions, interpenetrations, provocations and seductions that we characteristically play in social life. Where pleasure, trauma, memory, and the struggle for self-mastery meet in the performer and her body, the erotic as power also resides.

Josephine Baker claimed "It is the intelligence of my body that I have exploited and that is what has turned me into an international star." What makes a body erotic is not its nakedness, but its potential for transition from one state to another. From closed to open, a promise of ecstasy: as in the case of dissection. What makes one the subject of that unveiling and not only its object, is control over the means of re-production. Audre Lorde's writing positions erotics as power. Love and erotic life are core radical acts in becoming fearless: "Unless one lives and loves in the trenches, it is difficult to remember that the war against dehumanization is *ceaseless*."¹¹ It is a call to return to the wounded body as a symbol of power, and its desire. It's a call to re-animate erotics with radical acts of love. Actions. Performances.

Part 6: Eternal return

There is no such thing as Woman, she cannot be observed. There is no such body as the slave, only the economy it produces. There is no such thing as Europe, there is only the history of dissection,

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11 Lorde, Audre: 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*.

maps, writing. Because of all this failure, I turn away from saints and towards erotics as study. I turn towards love.

I perform organs in a state of ceaseless movement, a pulse searching for its face. I create and participate in the politics of pleasure. Not as an imitation, not as dissection. As the agent and the matter, of study.

I open. I close. I study (and am studied). I trace a continuum of longing: falling and rising, watching and being watched. I conduct a dramaturgical problem. I perform the situation, we perform you. I perform my arm, my heart, my pulse. The room.

I am an entanglement of transitions, all of them promising something, delivering nothing. In a state of ceaseless movement, I am and I study, the pulse. Come to my bacchanal. I might shake only to feel my flesh under the lights. Between here and there, life and death, having and not having, wrapping and unwrapping. No promise of transformation, but care for the dead. This stage collectively mourns and buries a battlefield of infinite parts, not only mine: Femme Fatale, Whore, Virgin, Vamp, Mother, Animal, Saint, and you are obliged to watch. Do not abandon me here. I do not fear getting burned, but I fear the moment after, fear the mourning for the remains. It will be ok, just to burn. But to grieve alone, I cannot bear. It's me, the re-anatomist, and

a state of ceaseless movement. Your pulse. I am the new anatomical theatre. I am the knife, and I am the subject. I re-make my body. The agent and the matter, of study. And you, we do not know who you are. But you have been here a long time, heart beating.

Other Sources

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