

Body and Soul

Notes on Challenges to Freedom

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It is probably a good thing that the theme of this conference has puzzled me. I see this as a sign that there is research going on and that frontiers are being moved – although I have not been part of it and therefore have something to learn, like most people. That is how research should function: discover the unexpected, ideally in the most mundane and everyday context.

However, is this really an issue? What could they mean by asking us, in our day and age, to consider Media, Body and Soul? Then I read the following passage, only a few months ago:

I've been a journalist for 30 years and for most of that time a good part of my livelihood has been writing columns, comments and first-person humour pieces for the sorts of features pages that are becoming increasingly hard to write for. Traditional feminine self-deprecation is part of the territory; it's where a lot of the humour and the empathy comes. But there has always been a line beyond which we weren't expected to go, a balance between good copy and self-respect.

But in the last couple of years we have been asked to write some toe-curling stuff, especially about our bodies. It's mainly in the tabloids, but it appears in the upmarket titles too. Editors no longer want my shorthand or my interviewing skills, or even my way with words. They want my body and soul, two things I'm not used to hawking.

This is Jill Parkin in *The Guardian*, 27 April 2009. She tells of younger colleagues stuffing themselves with chocolate or booze and waking up in anxiety and fear, just to be able to report on it, at the whim of some sensationalist, pound-smelling editor. One of her own recently offered commissions was to be part of "How You Look Good Naked". The application form asks you to submit photos of yourself front, rear and in profile, naked, but in underwear. She refused, but somebody else probably did not.

This is probably an old genre in the media, although it used to be more common to report on your deeds rather than on your degrading. But even the deeds of progress are using body and soul more starkly than before. In the leading Swedish daily – if I still may say so – *Dagens Nyheter*, one journalist has used the past six months to try to prune her quite everyday-ish body using humiliating and excruciating methods. She reports

on these methods as if she had returned from a Burmese concentration camp, and, yes, she has lost 20 pounds or so...

Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) was a bestseller. Not exactly Shakespeare, but still. Reality media is the phrase, and reality seems to mean Body and Soul.

I don't really know what to do with this. But somehow, I'm convinced that the organizers of this conference are on to something.

Is this something going on in the media only? I mean, is it reserved for the 7/24 global freak show that sells audiences to advertisers, being just a sort of radicalization of it? Media historians will one day be able to tell us the answer, perhaps even before this weekend is over.

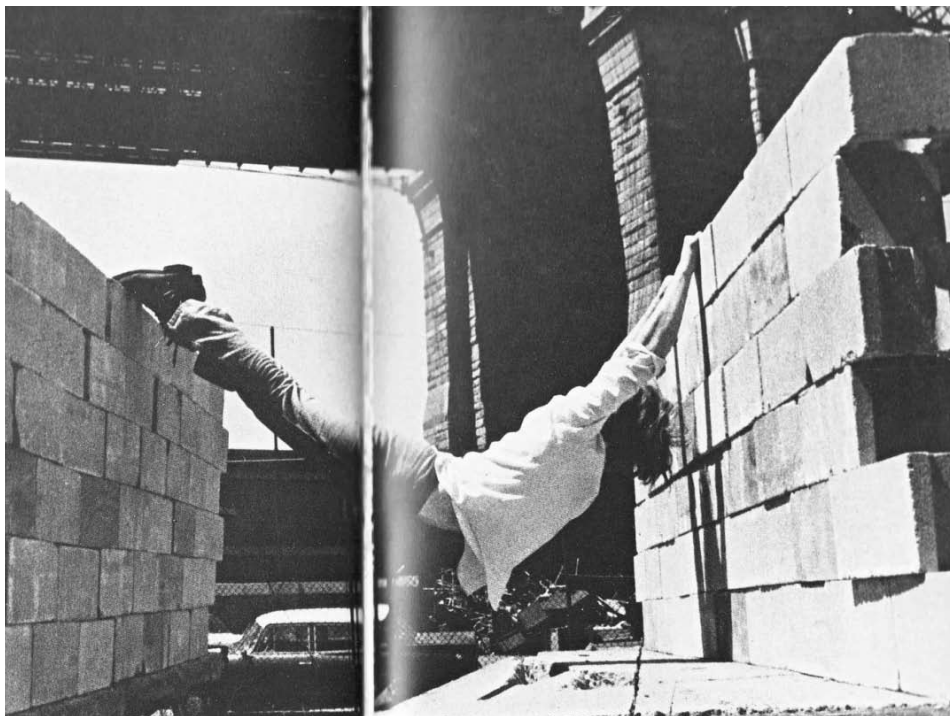
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Something is going on with us.

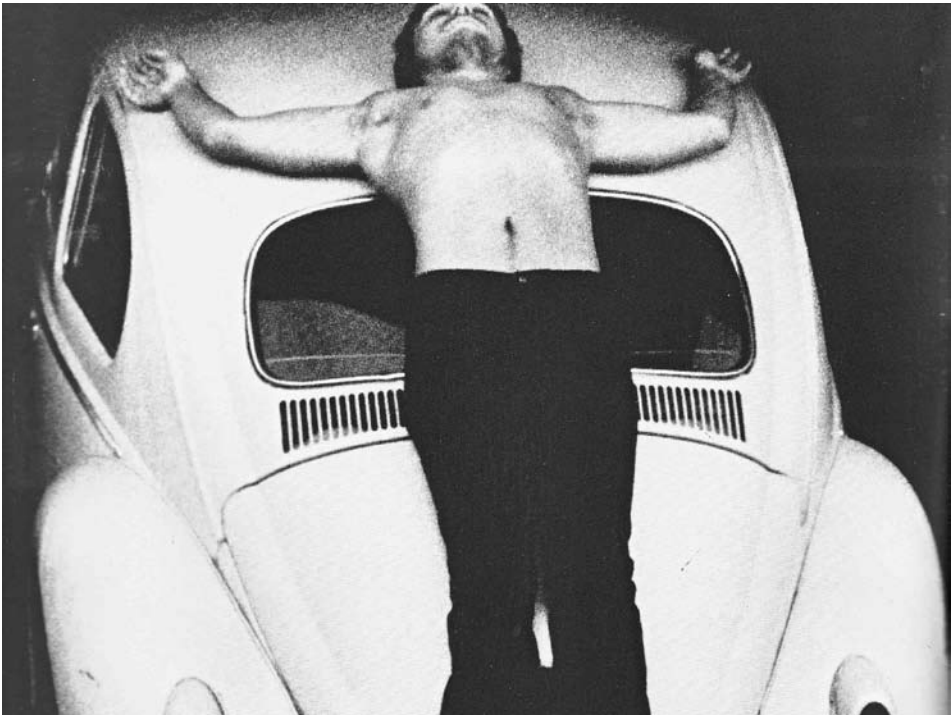
I just recently met a guy who had been off our radar screens for a while. He called it an exile and I didn't dare ask what it was. After having said hello, he said, on his second or third sentence, that he went to the gym every day. As sort of evidence of his new commitment to a straight life.

Only ten years ago, even five, fifty-year-old college educated professionals would not say this about themselves. So even if Jill Parkin is right that this is partly a women's and feminist issue in media culture and sociology, men are not unaffected.

I had to admit, in this conversation, that I also go to the gym occasionally, as if that placed us on the same rational side of reality, i.e. not among those who did not care about



Dennis Oppenheim, *Parallell Stress*, 1970.



Chris Burden, *Trans-fixed*, 1974.

themselves and their self-fashioning, as Stephen Greenblatt called it in his important study of early modern literature.¹ Or “technologies of the self”, as Foucault would say, if I translate him properly to English.²

But didn't we use to care about others? Or at least claim that we did?

Never really watching much of the mud wrestling on TV, I now realize that as a regular gym client I have enough current anthropology to sort out without it. When I was twenty, like so many people I see in the locker room are now, most of my contemporaries thought of society as something that was real, and a legitimate object of collective responsibility and collective action. Therefore they were active in social groups, study circles, they used their bodies and souls, more or less as they were, to promote some cause beyond the personal.

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The most widely debated piece of art this year, in this country, is an installation by an art student who reenacted and documented, on live camera, her own faked suicide attempt and what then happened among ordinary citizens, the police, and at the psychiatric clinic. Much could be said of this work, which has drawn thousands to art shows and the web to see it who would otherwise probably not come anywhere near contemporary art.³

Here I will only say that it fits our theme. It is a very solid example of how the media have become extremely apt at transforming what is social into a matter of individualized bodily experience. In a sense the artist did that too, and who uses whom here is not obvious. Both do, probably.



Chris Burden, Shoot, 1971.



Hermann Nitsch, Aktion Eindhoven, 1983.

Clearly, art has been around for a long time, exposing dung and mud and bare flesh and suffering, even in the days when most media considered it below what decent society should become engaged in. To expose body and soul was to say something important about society, art, and the human condition.

Drawing on earlier work by Dadaism and experimental theatre and dance, “body art” really took off in the 1960s and 1970s. Dennis Oppenheim x-rayed his own intestines as ginger cakes meandered through them and turned himself into a human bridge, pushing to the limits what a body could perform.

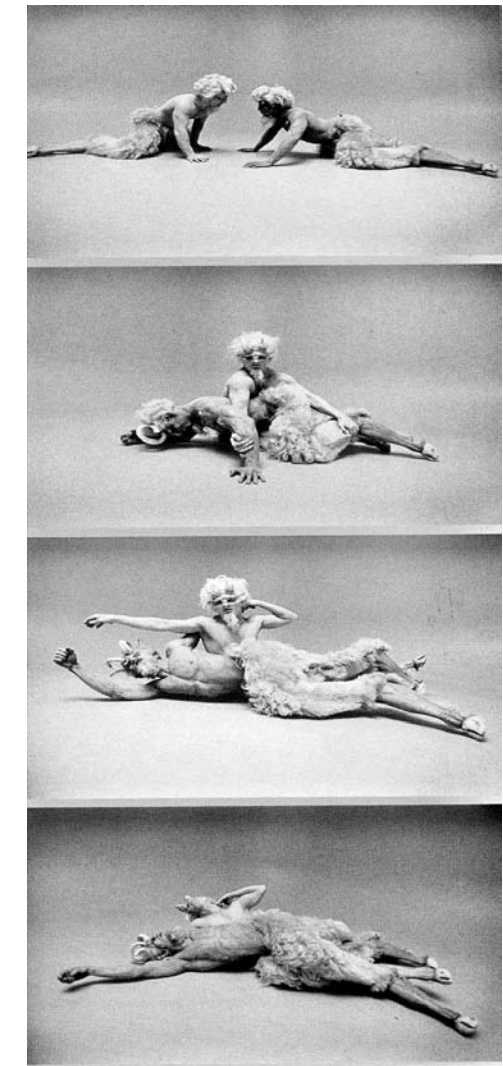
Chris Burden let a friend shoot him in the arm in a Los Angeles gallery, and then made a statement on the car society by crucifying himself to a Volkswagen, which actually rolled down the street for a couple minutes with the engine at full speed, “screaming” as it were for the victim.

Viennese artist Hermann Nitsch performed live acts with blood, lambs, cows and a host of Christian symbolism in an extension of abstract expressionist painting, literally uniting body and soul in orgies of frenzy and revulsion.

Matthew Barney turned bodies into nightmarish fairy world tales with animalistic features.

Many artists, like Ethyl Eichelberger, would refer to the orgiastic, transboundary eroticism, the bizarre and the morally challenging aspects of the body.

Crossing boundaries finally became almost a cliché. In Stockholm some years ago, a Russian artist turned himself into a dog and barked and bit visitors on the leg.



Matthew Barney, *Envelopa: Drawing Restraint 7 Guillotine*, 1989-1995.

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I have referred to art partly to make us see that the media usage of body and soul is the result of sampling. I do not deny its creative elements, but as scholars we should also contextualize and we should acknowledge the significant role of art in the development of mainstream media form and content. Like the fashion industry also exploits art, and the street, the media use art, and the street.

And it is not just body, or body and soul. It could also be almost only soul. A very successful, and widely sold, book this year in Sweden is one by my colleague in Uppsala, Karin Johannisson, on melancholy as a cultural phenomenon. It is not a typical academic treatise. No, it is intimate, it brings on the personal souls, and indeed bodies, of philosophers, scientists, artists, and authors. Pokes around there, reads the scars and the tattoos. It does not influence the science itself very much, I think, but it has already influenced the way ordinary people talk about it.⁴

Come to think of it, I have written a book myself that will be published in a couple of weeks, an essay on the life of Charles Darwin, which does something similar: makes him very intimate, turns him into body and soul. Why did I do that? I have written thirty pages explaining that it has to do with understanding how knowledge is actually produced as a practice, as a site-specific local and physical (“situated”, is the term) phenomenon, rather than as a flow of Big Ideas in an airy construct called “intellectual history”.⁵

My argument is partly captured by the title of a book that appeared a decade ago, *Science Incarnate* (1998). In it, Stephen Shapin and Christopher Lawrence and a half dozen other contributors set out to demonstrate that what has been regarded as pure science – not just as a value free, but also as a body free, flesh free, de-odorized search for truth – has in reality been a history of embodiments, of material, sensual practice, of human fragility.⁶

That book was a sign of its times. It foreboded an interest that has grown since. We understand science better if we also consider bodies and souls.

But, and an important *but*, it was of course not a plea to substitute rationality with carnal juices or to explain away method using mental fabrication.

But that is of course my rationalization also. Am I – along with Shapin and Lawrence – also part of this trend I am trying to dissect, although perhaps under a different production logic than Jill Parkin? Preparing for this conference has made me wonder, which is, again, a good thing.

Typical explanations of the current body and soul trend in the media revolve around the change in commercial logic. It was perhaps expected that the intimization and privatization of the media that have been ongoing for a long time would quite logically take this route, especially as the presence of anyone on the Web has brought the lowest common denominator of human expression to the attention of millions. We talk in the public realm now as we talked at the kitchen table, or in the locker room, in the past.

I believe there is a change going on and that we should take it seriously. I will return to our contemporary concerns shortly. But perhaps we should also, and indeed we always should, historicize the phenomenon. Perhaps we could see some new things clearly here, partly because they are in fact old.

My first impulse is to look at religion. The confessional is a religious genre, used famously by Augustine in the book about his own life in the late 4th century. The body is what the saviours and the prophets use, along with their words, to convince us of their serious intent and the depth of their undertaking. Indeed, their words, it seems, would not be much if it weren't for their deeds, and the ultimate deed is material, not ideal.

Chris Burden on his Volkswagen thus belongs to a grand tradition.

When Ignatius Loyola goes to his grotto to discover things, he experiments on himself, lets hair and nails grow. To reach the truth you must endure pain, on the cross or on your way through the Inferno or Purgatory.

In a certain sense, there has always been an oscillation between the expressive and the rational, between body and mind, the carnal and the cerebral. And we are perhaps in a phase of inward, carnal and expressive passions, just like the ones observed by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944/1947), although their deceptive commercialization, the “Aufklärung als Massenbetrug”, was of course much more timid then. We could expect the tide to turn again, hopefully.

But if it doesn't? The truth is, after all, that even if there is a dialectic process at play, there is also always an irreversible change going on.

You may say – thinking of Christ on his cross, or the eremite on his desert column, or the gladiator whose body might save him from death – that two thousand years ago truth issues were settled in a physical way. In the Grand Narrative of Western Reason and Liberation, this changed during the Renaissance and even more so during the Enlightenment. Truth was separated from revelation and the individual physical body was removed from the evidence.

Religious belief was increasingly individualized, and the soul and the body became parts of the private sphere. As religion retreated what grew was a new idea of the public sphere, one not ruled by priests but by secular thought and ideas of civic virtue. I am talking now of course of the Western world, for simplicity's sake.

The media, at least a very large and hegemonic part of them, claimed and were granted membership in this rational, civic, public sphere. In that sense, there has always been a close relationship between the idea of freedom, at least Western style, and the growth of the media.

I think it is important to note this relationship as we witness current media trends. The call for this session underscores avant-garde movements of the past like the futurists, the Russian constructivists, or Guy Débord's Situationist International. It is true that they articulated compelling versions of liberty, often going against the grain of social conventions and mainstream norms, including the regular media. They were probably also prepared to use the body as a form of expression, although that is certainly not the only thing they did.

There are links between these oppositional movements and the kinds of movements that are now occurring on the Web and that are expressing themselves in the new media. The experimental unites them. The scepticism of the public realm does so too. And now as before, critical social movements can achieve a great deal by creating counter cultures and their own autonomous public spheres.

But is that freedom?

The front cover of the book on melancholy (*Melankoliska rum*) that I just mentioned is a painting of a bed on which a woman is lying. But we cannot see her face, only her back. It is not like in the adverts for *Hästens* or *Dux* beds. It is not inviting or cosy. The image rather conveys a sense of loss. There used to be a promise here, but it did not come to fulfilment.

And aren't we all there? Am I not legitimately preoccupied with taking charge of my life and getting under the skin of my melancholy? Indulging in the carnal failures that seem to unite us? The fat and the ugliness? Turning the loss we can see everywhere around us into, if not freedom, at least some personal success? And finding, through this private soul searching, a new lease on life?

I suppose that is what drives much of the economic logic of the media boom in the Body and Soul business, although this boom is found in many other industries as well. It drives the publishing industry, it drives tourism, travel, spas. It is part of a wider market of disenchantment, the longing of the empty, and as such it has very little to do with freedom.

This aspect of the media has in fact only a cursory connection with the civic and the public spheres. It seems as if the passions are what could unite the masses, and therefore what drives the media industry. Very little in the social media seems to me to have countered that logic so far.

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In the spheres that are closest to my own attention, I fear there is mostly gloom. Science and cultural sections of the media are increasingly mainstreamed and cater to a limited number of best-selling items. Profound discussions are rare. I see a rapid fragmentation of the public sphere and a migration of social elites away from the common interest.

Some time ago I was in Umeå – after all a university town with quite a strong civic spirit. I wanted to see a movie with my oldest daughter, just turned 17. She walked us into the Sandrews movie theatre with some ten or so screens. Couldn't we go somewhere else, I asked her. No, she said. Why not? When I lived here a decade ago there were four other theatres? Now there is only one, she said, quite matter-of-factly, as if monopoly were perfectly okay.

I looked in shock and awe at the selection of films in this monopoly: Harry Potter, Ice Age 3 or 4, this or that 5 or 6. Brüno. But there was a new Woody Allen movie, of course. Was she interested?

Woody Allen, who is that?

I suppose cultural conservatives have always sounded like I do in a certain sense. And I suppose it doesn't help much to merely *claim* I am at least comparatively radical.

But given the kinds of issues you will be discussing these coming few days, I would like to remind everyone that dystopia was also a word used in the call to this conference.

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Fahrenheit 451, Ray Bradbury's 1953 novel, has a scene at the end where people have congregated like a religious sect to rehearse the content of the books, by heart, in a sub-culture of political memory, because the book burning brigade has destroyed almost all of them. We are not there yet, but perhaps there we can now see why he wrote this during the Cold War, and perhaps even more clearly why Francois Truffaut's film version was released in 1966, when the free word was at peril and when carnal pleasures and carnal avant-gardism started spreading, despite bigotry and censorship.

I could now turn this into a final sermon on what societal values I believe in and why I think they are threatened by the unreflected continuation of the media commercialization of Body and Soul.

I could, but I will not; it is probably redundant. It would require another lecture, and perhaps a church or a political theatre rather than an academic auditorium. But I will

finish by expressing my curiosity: Why aren't media scholars more visible in this debate? Are they now elevated high above such mundane and simple tasks?

My horizon is of course not as wide as yours, but I would like to see at least reflexions of the leading lights of media research being brought to bear on these debates. Even in Sweden.

Or are we already beyond the point where critical knowledge has any right to speak in mainstream contemporary media? If that is the case, I see no hope of liberation in contemporary media culture, although I would like to be convinced I am wrong.

Notes

1. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, IL & London, The University of Chicago Press, 1980).
2. For example in his *Histoire de la sexualité*, vols. 1-3 (1976-1984). See also Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the self", in L. H. Martin, H. Gutman and P. H. Hutton (eds), *Technologies of the self* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), pp. 16-49.
3. <http://www.konstfack2009.se/bachelor/bafa/anna-odell/#>. A large number of articles are available on www.dn.se.
4. Karin Johannisson, *Melankoliska rum: Om ångest, leda och sårbarhet i förfluten tid och nutid* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2009).
5. Sverker Sörlin, *Den blinde skaparen: En essä om Darwin och livets sammanhang* (Stockholm: Weyler, 2009).
6. Stephen Shapin & Christopher Lawrence, eds., *Science Incarnate: Historical Embodiments of Scientific Knowledge* (Chicago, IL & London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

