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POSTMODERNISM AND THE DISCOURSE OF THE BODY

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I want to to begin with a cursory tour through the postmodern discourse on the body then shift gears and, with the help of certain alternative film practices, attempt to think through the possibility of resistance as this relates to the body. My journey will end up as a kind of round trip that returns us to the body, to a corporeal destination with a difference.

Before I begin, though, let me shamelessly exhibit my lack: I am neither a philosopher nor a meticulous reader of postmodernism. My point of departure is simply my own confusion, occasional anger and political unease with some of the more excessive claims of this discourse, particularly as these relate to the theorization of the body and the repudiation of any project of social transformation. It's a writing influenced by my theoretical and practical engagement with feminism, a practice for whom the issues of the body and social transformation are of not inconsiderable importance.

My own interest in thinking through the possibility of political resistance in relation to the body was sparked through the process of making *Our Marilyn*, a film which was inspired by Marilyn Bell's historic swim across Lake Ontario in 1954. While I began the film thinking I would examine the production of a mythological body through the media and the excesses of 1950's boosterism, the process of making the film, of creating certain images, of speaking with marathon swimmers about their experience, moved the whole project in a slightly different direction. I became fascinated with the visceral experience of the swim itself, with the almost hallucinatory image of a body exerting itself beyond the limits of physical endurance: a body struggling against the relentless onset of

pain, tortured limbs and organs, madness and surrender; a body, finally, whose insistence on the irreducibility of the corporeal, seemed to me to mark a margin of difference and, even, a space of resistance.

I. The Body under Erasure

Let me offer an apocalyptic citation from the postmodern scene: "If today there can be such an intense fascination with the state of the body, might this not be because the body no longer exists[?]".[1]

Let's start with the first clause, with the intense fascination with the state of the body. Postmodernism, both as cultural practice and critical discourse does seem to be characterized by an enduring obssesion with the body. At first glance, the proliferation of body talk might seem to be directed toward healing the split between mind and body that has so thoroughly structured our Cartesian heritage; the split that has allowed philosophy and theory to present themselves as emanations of pure Idea, Spirit or the Dialectic and its like. It is a division which Robin May Scott has suggested commences with Kant,[2] who inaugurates a radical scission of sensous experience from the categories of understanding. This binary logic is currently the object of a sustained feminist critique which argues that western philosophy's repudiation of the body must be read as a version of patriarchy's fear and loathing of an all too mortal reminder—the maternal body. I would suggest that much feminist theory from De Beauvoir on is, in its most generalized strategic form, a writing through and against this breach, a writing which insists with varying degrees of stress on the embodied-ness of meaning and subjectivity. The odd thing about the entry of the body into postmodernism discourse, however, is the extent to which the body is all too often staged only to be made to disappear: the body, tantalizingly absent and present, desired and lost in a theoretical fort/da game.

Much of this paradoxical relation to the body, I'd suggest, has to do with the foundational precepts of poststructuralism which, in their radical anti- humanism, bear Kant's inheritance in a direct line of descent. Certainly, the Foucaultian tradition, with its reduction of the body to a surface on which the technologies of power and knowledge inscribe their effects, may be situated within this epistemological context. As Arthur Kroker has argued:

> ...the thesis of bio-power is profoundly structuralist because it is radically Kantian and it is Kantian to the extent that the new genetics, language theory and cybernetics are strategies—yes nothing but political mechanisms—for suppressing the maundering fanaticism of sensuous experience. The Kantian subordination is not only the vital principle but the actual epistemological context within which Foucault's reflections on power take shape.[3]

As we move further into the giddy world of postmodernism (and giddiness does seem to be a kind of sine qua non, attended by an intensifying hyperbolization of terms) the body receives its death blow at the hands of Baudrillard.

With the dissolution of referential being or substance into simulacra, "no more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept",[4] the implicit Foucaultian distinction between body as ground and power as agent disappears. With Baudrillard the reader witnesses the final dissolution of the distinction between subject and object where both disappear into the relentless flux of signs. Any realm of sensuous experience is always already absorbed by technique as the reigning "medium and principle of a whole new generation of sense... of neutrality and indifference".[5] The body is mediated and refashioned through technique, emerging wholly as an extension of technology and information processing.

This erasure of the body, however, is only made possible through the collapse of certain logical levels. Within Baudrillard, the hyperreal world of fashion advertizing, rock videos or amusement parks are not given as representations, they are the *real*, the hyperreal, more real than real. Here the classical hermeneutic of surface and depth is reversed in a move that constitutes surface as the determinate and ultimate guarantor of depth, where TV is life and life is TV.

But what is, at one level, a prophetic vision of a nightmarish future or an intellectual model moves, without acknowledgement of its discreteness or its limits, into a social and historical phenomenon. Description transmogrifies into evidence, and the model, as Ross Gibson points out, "ceases to be postulative and appears as probative and unimpeachable . . . a sophistic system[. A] model is presented not as a model but as a state of things. . .".[6] At this stage then, there is no longer any question of correspondence or mediation between image and the real: for Baudrillard the hyperreal, the proliferation of images and the massive colonization of being by technology are the exclusive means through which the body is experienced.

It seems to me that this kind of reductionism has to do with the fact that the object Baudrillard writes against, the object of criticism, is really only the most simplistic form of representation: that of naive realism or simple denotation where the image is perceived as an object in the real world. As Meaghan Morris points out, it is the icon and not the verbal sign which Baudrillard employs as the general model for considering all of semiosis.[7] This model of denotation, however, is never really jettisoned but constitutes the basis on which Baudrillard collapses the hyperreal into experience—in the assumption of a spectatorship which is indissociable from the images it receives, where the equivalent to the diabolical conformity of the image is the diabolical behaviour of the masses.

Film and literary theories over the last two decades have travelled a good distance in elaborating more sophisticated models of spectatorship, work which has problematized any simplistic relation between sub-

ject/spectator and the assumption of any unmediated relationship between text and meaning. Hugely informed by psychoanalysis, this work has opened up the possibility of a whole counter-praxis of parodic readings, negotiations and transactions where the process of spectatorship allows for a certain play of phantasy, shifting positions and idiosyncratic readings. In short, it is a theory of reading where implicit spectatorial positions in the text and those assumed by an active reader/spectator do not *necessarily* coincide. Baudrillard, however insists on the equivalence of production and reception. In the *Orders of Simulacra*, he writes:

> . . . no contemplation is possible. The images fragment perception into successive sequences, into stimuli toward which there can be only instantaneous response, yes or no—the limit of an abbreviated reaction. Film no longer allows you to question. It questions you, and directly.[8]

or

> Montage and codification demand, in effect, that the receiver construe and decode by observing the same procedure whereby the work was assembled. The reading of the message is then only a perpetual examination of the code.[9]

or

> . . . you decode it according to the same code, inscribed within each message and object like a miniaturized genetic code.[10]

The point, insisted upon by psychoanalysis, however, is that the process of suturing the subject into meaning or gender is never complete, finite or without slippage. The process of the subject is not the once-and-for-all surrender to abyssal pleasures, the nihilist dreams of the postmodern, but a continual productivity, a continual process of oscillation between punctual meaning and its loss, between identity and its subversion. It is a process, moreover, which incorporates the specificity of personal biography, of the familial and haphazard contingencies of history which produce difference, which produces the particularity of our private histories of desire. All of which is to say that the interpreter, the user of signs, is also a producer of meaning, a site in which the complexity of cultural determination and personal history meet. As C. S. Peirce has observed: "a sign ...is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, it creates in the mind of that person, an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign".[11]

One could add: an idiosyncratic or oppositional sign. The distinction between sign and interpretant in Peirce serves as a reminder of difference, that the subject is not exhausted by received linguistic positions nor entirely consumed by the images she receives. Moreover, Peirce's in-

sistence (and this is something Teresa de Lauretis points out) that the interpreter is the site, the body in whom, the significate effect of the sign takes hold, restores the body to the centre of the process of meaning.

In some ways, it seems like an all too simple or vulgar point to bring up the fact that our quotidian experience is bounded by the body, that the body's daily processes, its brushes with mortality, its aural and tactile relation to the world, constitute the stuff and substance of subjective experience. Irreducibly. We are bodies immersed in a field of sensory impressions, a field which generates its own effects and its own primordial phantasies concerning the relation of bodies to themselves and to others. In that light, there is something I find lovely in Lyotard's assertion that: "the body is to my mind an essential site of resistance because with the body there is love, a certain presence of the past, a capacity to reflect, *singularity* . . .". [12]

It seems obvious. And it seems to me that any theory or writing concerned with resistance has to work through the concept of embodied experience, of the body as a site of semiotic and sensuous activity, of semiosis as a process of interaction between the two.

This is the concept of experience which Teresa de Lauretis is developing as

> ...the process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed...as a complex of meaning effects, habits, dispositions, associations, and perceptions resulting from the semiotic interaction of self and outer world. The constellation or configuration of meaning effects...shifts and is reformed continually for each subject, with her or his continuous engagement in social reality, a reality that includes—and for women centrally—the social relations of gender.[13]

Semiosis, in this regard, would involve not only intellectual but emotional and energetic meaning effects, habits and concrete action upon the world.

II. The Body on Film

Here I would like to consider certain practices of film where the issue of the body is certainly not dead, where the image is not necessarily an "evil demon", nor necessarily complicit in the disappearance of history, the body or the real. There are two schematic categories I am beginning to work with: the ethical and phantastical, although it is difficult to maintain hard and fast distinctions between the two.

A. The Ethical.

This category is inspired by Vivian Sobchack's essay entitled "Inscribing Ethical Space, Ten Propositions on Death, Representation and Documentary". [14] Sobchack quotes John Fraser's *Violence in the Arts* to

the effect that: "what does invite [empathy] is anything that permits one to see the other as agent . . . . [T]wo of the most important factors making for empathy are a sense of the individual as engaged in work and a sense of the physicality of the body".[15]

Sobchack argues that the indexical representations of documentary, as opposed to the iconic and symbolic representations of the narrative fiction film, inscribe a very different relation between the spectating subject and the body images she perceives on the screen, a relation bounded by the intra- and extra-textual knowledge that the subject/spectator inhabits the same world with the referents of documentary representations. As she observes:

> The world into which documentary space extends and to which its indexical signification points, is perceived as the concrete and intersubjective world of the viewer. That is, as much as documentary space points offscreen to the viewer's world, it is a space also "pointed to" by the viewer who recognizes and grasps that space as, in some way, contiguous with his or her own. There is an existential and thus particularly ethical bond between documentary space and the space inhabited by the viewer.[16]

This space, she continues, "points to a lived body occupying concrete space and shaping it with others in concrete social relations which describe a moral structure".[17]

I am beginning to think that if film does have any political vocation at all, it is in the vitally sensual way that film is capable of constituting an emphathetic relation between bodies. I am reminded, in this respect, of Peter Watkin's film *The Journey* which is organized around collective and familial discussions of a series of photographic enlargements of victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These images feature irradiated bombing victims, seared flesh, grostesque blistering, patterns of a kimono burned into a back, a schoolyard of children's corpses. These images provide an intense introduction to the horrors of nuclear disaster to the families Watkins visits in Sweden, Ireland, Middle America and Russia. The film documents and observes these individuals in their contemplation of these images. A process of identification, projection and introjection occurs where children are asked to imagine themselves in the situation depicted in the image, and where the parents respond to the images of the dead schoolchildren as if they were their own. What we observe in the film is a process of politicization which occurs as an empathetic identification with bodies.

It is no doubt the inevitability of that response that prompted the American State department to repress these images, as Joyce Nelson has argued in *The Perfect Machine: Television in the Nuclear Age*.[18] Nelson points out that the official press corps sent to cover the results of the bombings focused entirely on two aspects: the visual spectacle of the mushroom cloud in the sky and the sheer blast power of the bomb as

evidenced by the virtual flattening of both cities. It would take several decades, Nelson adds, before the United States government declassified information and photographs concerning the irradiated bombing victims.

B. The Phantastical. This second category will be dealt with in relation to my film *Our Marilyn*.

OUR MARILYN: the title circulates around the question of the positionality of the subject, that tests the inviolability of the identity between body and proper name. Which Marilyn is ours? Is it Bell, Monroe or the narrator, a contemporary consciousness, growing up, as she puts it, "between these two bodies"? In this condensation of bodies under the proper name, differences are elided and the possibility of possession, of categorization and identity, is thwarted by the uncontainable flux and movement of a body on which the fantastic historic genealogy of Marilyns is written. Here such genealogy is conceived and ordered in terms of the logic of the unconscious, as a perpetual mobility in which the relation between events and bodies is traced through an associational implosion and a continuous intermingling of bodies and categories triggered by the figure of Marilyn.

Like all genealogies, *OUR MARILYN*'s is selective and intentional, positioned around the edges and on the nether side of official accounts and visual records. Its passion is to test the confluence of the personal and the public, of the difference betweeen contemporary and historic readings and interpretations of the event, and the physical and psychic experience of the swim itself. A difference that is, of necessity, invented, phantasized and constructed between the interstices of official discourse. Here then, the visual record, the stock footage culled from newsreels, archives and newspapers is interpolated and layered in the film both as citation of the official historical account, and as raw and plastic material, as a resource to be worked, slowed down, step-printed and repeated toward the writing and tracing of the corporeal and hallucinatory experience of the swim.

The evocation of the experiential in the film is contained in the images of the body/my body, swimming, a body mediated through innumerable transfers between Super 8 footage, to 16mm black and white, through the willful manufacture of the grainy texture and surface authenticity of historic footage. I rewrite this body through the optical printer—its image, bleached, inscribed on different stocks, printed again and again, bearing the physical traces of authorship—of a body figuring a body, and the traces of its transformation where the body dissolves into abstraction, into carnal sensation and motion. If the film may be classed as a documentary, it is as a document not of an historical referent, but of this process of transformation, this writing of history through the traces and the hallucinations we construct of it.

In that rewriting and rememorization of the event of the swim, what constitutes the body and the body of the film is the relentless and agoniz-

ing play of the middle. As regards the official record of this event, the swim across Lake Ontario, existing documentation–like an abbreviated narrative–can only recall beginnings and ends: Bell's entry into the water and the finale as she touches the wharf on the Canadian shore. It was these instances alone which were captured and registered in the public accounts of the swim, these instances which were instantly assimilated into the tantalizing and reassuringly familiar narrative genre of the success story: Horatio Alger, David and Goliath, The Tortoise and the Hare and, last but not least in its national resonance: The Triumph of the Canadian Underdog Against American Champion. What is excised in this narrative, however, is the bodily performance itself, the relentless repetition of the swim for 21 hours, 55 strokes a minute.

To rewrite the story around the experience of that middle is to write close to the body, is to imagine/image an oneiric universe of corporeal sensation. To rewrite from the middle, as well, is to suggest a different form of spectatorial pleasure which is not bound to the narcississtic identification with self-discovery and victorious closure, but inheres in an implicit invitation to surrender to the hallucinatory ebb and flow of bodies. A surrender and imaginary regression to a territory of tactile, acoustic and visual flux where the body might re-experience its most atavistic pleasures.

The recurrent problem and difficulty confronted by feminist film theory and practice has been how to image the female body differently within a tradition of representation in which the body image of woman has served as the ground of the most intense pleasure and anxiety within film. "One is always in representation", writes Cixous", and when a woman is asked to take place in this representation, she is, of course, asked to represent male desire".

One way around this impasse has been to figure the "feminine" under the sign of a certain negativity. As Kristeva writes, "...women's practice can only be negative, in opposition to that which exists, to say that 'this is not it' and 'it is not yet'. What I mean by 'woman' is that which is not represented, that which is unspoken, that which is left out of namings and ideologies".[19] In *OUR MARILYN* a certain negativity is figured in the refusal of synchronicity: the "marriage" of a voice to a body in a fiction of presence and a totalization of identity. Here the radical rupture between voice and body, the heterogeneity of the voices and commentary, always retrospective in relation to the visual immediacy of the swimmer's body, suspends the latter in a refusal of referentiality on the side of the 'as yet not spoken', as that which is exterior to the symbolic contract. In addition, the long sequences of black leader, accompanied only by the sound of her breathing and the unremitting cacophony of waves and wind, positions representation on the edge of the 'as yet unseen', of a body struggling into vision. And yet this negativity in the film is never absolute, its function is not to univocally refuse representation [as if such a thing were possible] but to interrogate the possiblity of an other, of a

figuration of voice, body and desire beyond the inherent limitations of hegemonic categories.

This interrogation begins with the recall and repetition of the images of Bell and Monroe: the swimmer and the movie star, both enjoined in a spectacle of femininity, though from different sides, both upholding the contradictory parts of a unitary whole–the classical opposition of virgin/whore. Both products of the fifties, they represent (and in Monroe's case, simultaneously) the polarities of innocence and experience, availability and saintliness, daughter and lover. Both are ideological markers in a discursive system which eludes and concludes them.

Here the body poses, gestures and performs for the other, the throng of expectant transfixed others whose gaze stands in for that transcendent other-the camera and behind it, the universal spectator. This gaze crosses the logical order of time and space, moves between a rough stage in Korea to a wharf in Toronto, collapses the antinomies of past and present and saturates the body in its sight with meaning and desire. Clearly this constitution of the body as object of surveillance and figure of desire functions within the range of the political technology of the body which Foucault has described. It is a process whose operations are most acutely condensed in the image of the ornamental swimmers where the body is ordered through the imposition of a choreographed discipline, to turn circles, to assume a pre-determined position within a symbolic order whose specific routine antedates and anticipates the participation of any (always substitutable and reproduceable) individual. And is there a body more emblematic of this process, than that of Monroe's? A body reduced to a plastic surface, to the transparency of a signifier embodying the collective and enduring phantasy of a body without organs, without flesh, without substance.

And yet there is a beyond, an invisible excess to the masquerade of femininity which emerges through the microscopic intensity of the optical printer. In two instances in the film the newsreel footage slows down, prolonging a gesture which reveals an undoing, a fraying at the seams of these ancient images of virgin/whore. One presents a coy compliticious Bell, her young virginal head draped in a towel which bizzarely ressembles a nun's cowl, who turns and stares into the camera. The other shows a transvestite Monroe, clad in a military uniform, who turns to offer a complicitous wink at the camera in an instance of delicious conspiracy. Here the voyeur, to quote a recent Chris Marker film, is "voyeurized" and the voyeuristic pleasure which resides in the phantasy of omnipotence and control over an oblivious object, is usurped by the willful "knowingness" of this gaze returned from the screen. What is revealed in the precise instance of that return of the gaze, however, is not a castrating stare, but a playful acknowledgement of the game.

To acknowledge the game and the masquerade is already to bear witness to the fact that there is a space reserved where she laughs, a space where she casts the masquerade as comic invention, a space of resistance

inscribed on the side of the 'as yet unspoken and unnamed' experience of her body.

Vertiginous in its repetition, the image of the swimmer is more obviously cast on the side of this difference. Subjected to the relentless weathering of the optical printer, the figure tends increasingly toward an abstraction of form, of colour, of movement toward the final dissolution of the boundaries between body and water. At this limit, the body charged with extreme pain, loses contours and solidity, is experienced as a kind of permeable matter crossed and fissured by physical impulsions and the mobility of instinctual drive.

What is at issue here, in the violent immediacy of these corporeal experiences, is the existence of a register of embodied meaning, which, as Kristeva notes "elude[s] social intercourse, the representation of pre-existing objects and the contract of desire"[20]. Persisting as a subversive undertow within the rational order of language, this register can express itself only intermittently in the explosions of poetry, in the recall of dreams and in the slips and parapraxes of the unconscious. These phenonmena—however intermittent—do call into question the imperialistic claims of the rational order of discourse to have fully colonized experience and meaning through the laying on of names. They testify, indeed, to a potential resistance where a form of representation could be imagined as a writing with, and not against the body. A utopian writing where the writer becomes swimmer:

> . . . she throws her trembling body into the air, she lets herself go, she flies, she goes completely into her voice, she vitally defends the "logic" of her discourse with her body; her flesh speaks true. She exposes herself. Really she makes what she thinks materialize carnally, she conveys meaning with her body. She inscribes what she is saying because she does not deny unconscious drives the unmanageable part they play in speech. (Hélène Cixous)[21]

To pose corporeal experience as a potential site of resistance is at once to call into question the axiomatic 'truths' of the Foucaultian and poststructuralist enterprise for whom the body only exists as a function of discourse or as a signifier whose effectivity and meaning are restricted to a diacritical relation between terms in a linguistic system. For what inheres in the poststructuralist screening out of reference is a radical negation of the lived body, of the possibility of a register of corporeal experience and meaning that is contradictory, subversive and resistant. What I have argued for in this rather eclectic and round about journey is that the body be considered as a productive site of semiosis which, in its visceral, emotional and reflective engagement with the world, moves language and meaning into new realms of possibility.

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Notes

1. Arthur Kroker, "Theses on the Disappearing Body in the Hyper Modern Condition ", *Body Invaders: Panic Sex in America*, ed. Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1988), p. 20.
2. Robin May Scott, *Cognition and Eros: A Critique of the Kantian Paradigm* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).
3. Kroker, p. 78.
4. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss et. al. (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), p. 3.
5. Baudrillard, p. 99.
6. Ross Gibson, "Customs and Excise" in *Seduced and Abandoned: The Baudrillard Scene*, ed. AndréFrankovits (New York: Semiotext[e], 1984), p.46.
7. Meaghan Morris, "Room 101 or A Few Worst Things in the World," in *Seduced and Abandoned*, p. 101.
8. *Simulations*, p., 119.
9. Ibid, p. 119.
10. Ibid, p. 121.
11. C.S. Peirce as quoted in Teresa de Lauretis, "Semiotics and Experience ", *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984), p. 172.
12. J.F. Lyotard, *ICA Document on Postmodernism* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986), p.31.
13. Ibid, p. 18.
14. *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Fall 1984.
15. John Fraser, *Violence in the Arts* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), as quoted in Sobchack, p. 288.
16. Ibid., p. 294.
17. Ibid.
18. Joyce Nelson, *The Perfect Machine/TV in the Nuclear Age* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1987), p. 31.
19. Julia Kristeva, "Interview ", trans. Claire Pajaczkowska, *m/f* 5/6 (1981): 166.
20. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language/A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (London: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 238.
21. Hélène Cixous, "Sorties", trans. Betsy Wing, in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986), p. 92.