

Document name: 'O brave new world, that has such people in it'
Document date: 2013
Copyright information: Copyright © Cambridge University Press
OpenLearn Study Unit: The body in antiquity
OpenLearn url: <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/the-body-antiquity/content-section-4>



John Robb and Oliver Harris, 'O brave new world, that has such people in it'

Robb, J. and Harris, O.J.T. (eds.) (2013) *The Body in History: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–4.

Bodies in crisis – or everyday invisible strangeness?

In the Western world, hardly a day goes by without the announcement of a crisis in the body. New, wonderful, disconcerting, horrifying possibilities continually bombard us. During the time we have been writing this book, these are only some of the actual issues which have hit public attention:

- Is it right to create 'designer babies' to provide organic materials for an older sibling who may need a life-saving transplant? Is it ethical to screen unborn children for genetic diseases? For a preferred sex? For socially desirable characteristics or against socially stigmatized ones?
- Should stem cells from human embryos be used as a research or therapeutic material? Who owns the commercial rights to the genome of the population of Iceland? Should it be legal to trade commercially in human organs for transplant?
- Who controls dead bodies? For people dying in hospitals, is it doctors and hospital administrators or relatives of the deceased? For archaeological skeletons, is it scientists and museum curators, religious communities or descendent groups? Can waste heat from cremating the dead be used to heat a public swimming pool? Is it right to transform dead bodies into works of art for public, commercial display, as in Günther Von Hagens's controversial exhibitions of dissected bodies?
- Should animal organs be custom grown for transplant into humans? Should human genes be spliced into mice for testing human medicines?
- Why are athletes allowed to enhance their performance with caffeine and painkillers but not with steroids? Should students be banned from taking drugs enhancing mental performance during exams?
- When do media images cross the line from promoting attractively thin bodies to pushing girls towards anorexia? Should public health funds pay for cosmetic dental work, plastic surgery or sex reassignments? When is a surgical procedure 'traditional female circumcision' and when is it 'genital mutilation'? What are the social implications of full-face transplants?

- Who is a child's mother – the woman donating an egg for in vitro fertilization, the woman who bears the baby from an implanted egg or the adoptive parent actually raising the baby? Do women older than 60 years of age have a 'natural' right to bear children through surrogate mothers? Who controls the frozen eggs or sperm of persons now dead?
- Do people have a right to end their own lives when and how they wish? Should relatives or doctors be prosecuted for assisting them?

These are items culled from the daily news, not futuristic science fiction. Yet these things broach matters which only a few years ago were considered the stuff of dreams or nightmares. Miracle cures and illness-free lives? Socially engineered designer babies and commodified organs? Human-animal hybrids and robot-like prosthetics? Mix-and-match body parts? Endlessly cloned organs? Free-form parenthood hatched from test tubes? It is as if each news item is the thin end of a wedge opening cracks in how we experience the body. Cumulatively, as wedge after wedge pries open our¹ comfortable, familiar reality, it is almost inevitable that we see ourselves in a state of bodily crisis, with the plastinated corpses of Von Hagens's exhibition serving as a garnish fin-de-siècle flourish.²

But perhaps we should not despair quite yet. The phrase 'Brave New World' was made famous in 1932 as the title of Aldous Huxley's dystopic novel of a grim future in which humans were vat-cloned industrially, tailored eugenically for their predestined social roles and made devoid of individuality and freedom. But it is now eighty years and counting from Huxley's vision. Throughout this time, we have always coped with change. We replace parts of our body with titanium hip joints, battery-run hearts, and dental implants you could chew bricks with, and it has not made us robots. Our vaccine- and antibiotic-fortified super-bodies are invulnerable to a whole range of killers, gaining us, on average, two additional decades of life; rather than basking in godlike arrogance, we spend this time pursuing retirement hobbies. We have decoded the secret of life in the human genome, but totalitarian dictators do not use it to eliminate undesirable races eugenically; instead, amateur genealogists can buy DNA analyses on the Internet to see how genetically similar they are to people who share their surname. Reading about face transplants might make us worry about identity crises, but the first ones, used to rehabilitate victims of severe accidents, have proven psychologically beneficial rather than detrimental. The conceptual challenges posed by technologically assisted reproduction are nowhere near as complex as some of the traditional kinship-and-reproduction systems which anthropologists have documented in Australia, Melanesia and South America – systems based on old-fashioned pregnancy and amazing metaphorical logic, perhaps augmented by the ritual sharing of food, semen, milk or blood.

So is there really a crisis in the body? Humans are amazingly creative and responsive beings; there is no sign that the future is about to throw something at us which we really cannot handle conceptually and socially. What these news items do demonstrate is something else: *these things matter to us*. They matter because the body is central to how we conduct our lives on a daily basis. Beyond these extremes, how we use, live through, think and talk about our bodies is at the heart of the social and

[p. 2]

material world we inhabit. Thus, we project our hopes and fears about the future on the body. Not only has Huxley's vision not come to pass, it has been supplanted by newer, previously unimaginable nightmares and dreamscapes. Indeed, from at least the eighteenth century onwards³, whenever writers have envisioned alternative human worlds – utopian, dystopian or simply different – they have inevitably populated them with alternative human bodies, a fact which in itself tells us how deeply social life is rooted in the body. Every society understands the human body in its own way, and virtually every society believes that their body is *the* true body, the body which has evolved or been created to be the way bodies have to be. This is where the 'crisis of the body' comes from; it is part of our own historical narrative of the body.

Natural bodies? differences around the world today

'Nature', Katherine Hepburn tells Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen*, 'is what we were put on earth to rise above'. Since at least the seventeenth century our own 'true' body has been the 'natural' body, understood as purely physical apart from a soul or mind. Many of our master narratives tell about our rise from body's 'state of nature' – how civilized people wash it, clothe it, heal it, restrain it and educate it. But since some point in the nineteenth century – perhaps *Frankenstein* marks the watershed – the flip side of this narrative has told how we may go too far, how the 'natural' body is being replaced by a futuristic body, unrecognizable and out of control.

This narrative, of course, depends upon the existence of a pre-cultural, biologically necessary body. Yet, when we look at it, there is little natural about our 'natural' body, aside perhaps from our conviction that it is so. We ordinarily find out how dependent upon social convention our body is when travel forces us out of our comfort zone and we encounter people living perfectly happy lives though clothed, fed, worked, washed, doctored and sexually satisfied according to entirely different standards than ours. Conversely, we continually do bodily things previous generations would have considered equally unnatural or improper – everything from unisex public bathrooms to vegetarianism, restrictions on corporal punishment, and open premarital sex. Unless we happen, miraculously, to be the first generation to achieve a genuinely natural bodily life – on the very cusp of technology devouring the natural body – a certain social conventionality appears in our own practice. Indeed, anthropologists have shown how people in different cultures have radically different views of what the human body is and how it should behave. We want to offer three quick examples of this here, to give a taste of the florid variations around the world today, but we will return to the topic in more detail in the next chapter.

How do differences in the body manifest themselves in the world today? Amongst many groups in the Amazon, what a person's body looks like is not fixed by their biology – their 'nature', in our common usage – but by who it is that is looking at them.⁴ Accordingly, all beings, whether human or animal, share a single culture, and all look like humans to one another. So jaguars look like humans to other jaguars, but humans look like

tapirs – prey animals – to jaguars. Tapirs look like humans to one another but look like tapirs to humans. Because the body here is a matter of perspective rather than biology, it is changeable, and particularly powerful individuals can take on the perspective (and thus the body) of another creature. The body in Amazonia is very different from the body in the West, but to understand this we need to place it in the context of a very different way of engaging with the world – a different set of social, political and ontological conventions.

[p. 3]

In Trinidad, in contrast to the feigned indifference of those who cite the old proverb 'clothes do not make the man', clothes tell you who a person really is.⁵ Here the efforts put into looking good, achieving status and being fashionable are recognized as telling people far more about you than whether you happen to have been born into wealth, intelligence or good looks. Truth is not hidden on the inside, as theories as psychoanalysis in the West might have it, but rather displayed in public, on the body where people can see it.⁶

For the shamans of Siberia, gender is not a fixed category given by biology but something that emerges under certain circumstances and that can change through time. Mandelstam Balzer has pointed out how 'at times, and in some Siberian cultures, the shamanic use of sexual power and symbolism meant that male shamans turned themselves into females, for particular shamanic séances, and, in some cases, more permanently'.⁷ Amongst the Chukchi of north-eastern Siberia, female shamans occasionally did the reverse and took on male identities. Male shamans who took on female qualities were known as soft-men.⁸ These soft-men then took husbands, dressed, ate and behaved as women, but despite the connotations of the name in English, soft-men were believed to be especially powerful shamans. The same is true of the attested cases of female shamans, who took up male identities and married wives. Jacobs and Cromwell trace up to ten gender categories amongst the Chukchi.⁹ These range from the taking up of certain female traits by males (or vice versa) to the total adoption of the other sex's way of life.

In three different worlds, three ways of understanding the body emerge. In each case the body is central to how society happens: it lies at the heart of how Trinidadians conceive of truth and honesty, identify and being; it drives the ability of shamans in Siberia to change gender, or those in Amazonia to transform into jaguars. Each of these body worlds has coherence to it and builds upon this everyday strangeness to form a richly evocative subject, central to the societies themselves.

Huxley stole the phrase 'brave new world' from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (Act V, Scene 1). Miranda, who has been raised alone with her father on a deserted island following a shipwreck, beholds people other than themselves for the very first time, and exclaims:

"O, wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in't!"

We agree with Miranda. As we hope to convince you in this book, the really astonishing thing is not any science fiction vision of future bodies, but the complex and often unbelievable bodies all humans live with, in everyday reality.

From 'body worlds' to body worlds

To capture the social life of the body, we want to subvert Von Hagen's title and talk not about 'Body Worlds' but about *body worlds*, not the shocking, skinless, sensationalist bodies he displays, but rather the equally compelling bodies of everyday life. A body world, as we use the term here, encompasses the totality of bodily experiences, practices and representations in a specific place and time. These, we suggest, are at the heart of how we understand the world. The body world of Western daily life involves all manner of engagements: eating, sleeping, sex, painkillers, alcohol, walking, exercise, communications, driving and so forth. All of these are bodily acts, involving specific, usually trained, ways of moving, of carrying and shaping the body, particular forms of gender-appropriate behaviour (that are more or less adhered to) and so on. As our anthropological examples show, this is one example of many, but for all human beings body worlds are the worlds all of us inhabit all the time. Far from being boring, natural or universal, they are in fact fascinating, diverse and culturally specific.

Anthropologically, there is nothing normal about normality; it passes unnoticed not because it is inevitable, or the only way one can live, or even because it necessarily makes much sense, but simply because we are used to it. As we will see in Chapters 2, 7 and 8, our body world has a history and a cultural logic; it too could have been different, and will be different in the future. The strangeness and conventionality of our world is invisible, subsumed into a multitude of bite-sized pieces of experience, lacking the in-your-face shock value of flayed bodies, copyrighted genomes and face transplants. But if we examine daily life analytically, by taking it apart and looking at the rules, habits and bodily practices that comprise it, the 'obvious' nature of what we do and how we live disappears. It is these different body worlds, then, that we seek to explore in this book and to outline how and why they changed.

Bodies have history

But one can also encounter different bodies by travelling in time as well as in space – not to an alien future but to an equally alien past. Roaming away from the present, the historical tourist encounters strange bodies everywhere. Many seventeenth-century Britons – including highly educated scientists – believed that a hanged man's hand could cure some diseases. Medieval theologians found cannibalism peculiarly abhorrent not because of the violence involved but because of the difficulty it implied in sorting out whose body the flesh which was eaten belonged to when Resurrection came. Ancient Greeks placed statues of Hermes consisting of only a head and an erect phallus around the streets as a kind of civic spiritual protection. The most complex technology of Bronze Age Europe was employed

predominantly not to solve life's practical problems but simply to give bodies a shining appearance. Neolithic people risked their lives performing delicate cranial surgery with stone tools for little apparent medical reason. Mesolithic people buried dogs like humans and carved sculptures of people turning into fish (or perhaps fish turning into humans). The list goes on.

These apparently bizarre practices made perfect sense to people involved at the time, just as comparing a body to a machine or to a computer may make sense to us, though it would be utterly alien to these other groups. To understand the body, then, it is essential to set it in its own cultural, social, political and material frame of reference. In turn, this frame of reference has to be understood as *historical*. The body worlds we study in this book are the products of particular histories. To give one example, which we discuss in more detail in Chapters 7 and 8, it is impossible to understand our 'modern' bodies without an appreciation of a range of historical processes including medieval theology that set the body in opposition to the soul; the growth of science in the eighteenth century; the development of discipline in schools, hospitals, factories, asylums, prisons and the military in the nineteenth century and so on.¹⁰ Our bodies carry these histories with them, in the way we move, exercise, sleep, eat and act in general. The body is not a universally shared physical object whose historical continuity comes from its unchanging biological structure, but rather something emergent through history. The body is in history; indeed, the body *is* history.

Yet bodies are not merely victims of historical circumstance. Body worlds and bodies themselves are historical agents in their own right. They embody – the pun is anything but accidental – and produce understandings of the world and so make certain developments possible and forestall others. The manner in which they are understood practically through action and engagement, and materially rather than verbally, means they are often more important in generating action than we give them credit for. Like material things, bodies can be humble and in the background,¹¹ even as they disclose a particular set of possible actions in any particular circumstance. Part of the aim of this book, therefore, is not just to examine how historical circumstances create particular kinds of bodies, but how particular kinds of bodies generate certain forms of history.

Notes

¹ In this chapter, and indeed throughout the book, we use terms like 'we', 'our' and 'us' to refer to a set of perspectives commonly held by many people in Europe and North America. Of course, such a move may make it seem that we presume these people are a homogeneous group, or that we are alienating people from other places and backgrounds. This is not our intention. Rather, the point is simply that readers of this book have a deep well of ethnographic experience to draw on in understanding the body – 'our' knowledge of 'our' own bodies – and this gives us an invaluable resource in discussing these issues. And understanding the historicity of our own bodies is part of the point of the book. One could easily write another book exploring the limits of who the 'us' here actually is, but for the sake of clear writing, we (i.e., JR and OH) have chosen to use these terms as an intentionally general and somewhat vague

shorthand simply to invoke an experience of embodiedness many readers may share.

² Images of plastinated bodies-as-art from Von Hagens's exhibition may be viewed at <http://www.bodyworlds.com/en.html>. We had hoped to include an image here from the 'Body Worlds'. However, after reviewing this chapter, the 'Body Worlds' press office declined to grant permission to use an image – in itself a fascinating example of the sensitivity surrounding the use of dead bodies, here manifested in the organisers' feeling that they need to control the discourse their images provoke. In our text, we do not actually take a judgemental position on 'Body Worlds' – we merely note what others have said about the exhibit. But clearly it hit a nerve.

³ Guadalupe and Manguel (1987) provide a fascinating compendium with many examples of imagined alternative bodies from antiquity to the present.

⁴ See Vilaça 2005; Viveiros de Castro 1998; 2004.

⁵ Miller 1994; 2010.

⁶ Miller 2010, 18.

⁷ Mandelstam Balzer 1996, 165.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Jacobs and Cromwell 1992.

¹⁰ Foucault 1977; 1978.

¹¹ cf. Miller 1987; 2010; Heidegger 1962.

References

- Foucault, M. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Allen Lane.
- Guadalupe, G., and A. Manguel. 1987. *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Heidegger, M. 1962. *Being and Time*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Jacobs, S.-E., and J. Cromwell. 1992. Visions and Revisions of Reality: Reflections on Sex, Sexuality, Gender, and Gender Variance. *Journal of Homosexuality* 23:43–69.
- Mandelstam Balzer, M. 1996. Sacred Genders in Siberia: Shamans, Bear Festivals and Androgyny. In *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures*, edited by S. P. Ramet. London: Routledge, 164–182.
- Miller, D. 1987. *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Blackwell: Oxford.
- Miller, D. 1994. *Modernity, an Ethnographic Approach: Dualism and Mass Consumption in Trinidad*. London: Berg.
- Miller, D. 2005a. Materiality: An Introduction. In *Materiality*, edited by D. Miller. Durham: Duke University Press, 1–50.
- Miller, D., ed. 2005b. *Materiality*. London: Duke University Press.
- Miller, D. 2010. *Stuff*. London: Polity.
- Miller, S. A. 2010. *Medieval Monstrosity and the Female Body*. London: Routledge.

Vilaça, A. 2005. Chronically Unstable Bodies: Reflections on Amazonian Corporealities. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11:445–464.

Viveiros de Castro, E. 1998. Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4:469–488.

Viveiros de Castro, E. 2004. Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies. *Common Knowledge* 10 (3):463–484.