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The Semiography of the Fantastic Body

In the first part of the present paper I will rely both on the idea and the various typologies of the fantastic in order to recontextualize them within the more recent horizon of poststructuralist critical thinking. In so doing I intend to realize a double objective. A strong emphasis will be placed on the necessity of opening up the field of iconography and iconology for psychoanalytically and semiotically informed critical approaches that incorporate the complexity of the receiving subject in their account of meaning production, be it verbal, visual, digital or multimedial signification. Together with this theoretical foundation, I also propose to map out the methodological pathways that a new semiographical-interpretive approach could take in combining the considerations of iconography, iconology, and semiotics. *Semiography* will be here defined as an analytical method that revisits the findings of traditional iconographical and iconological investigation from the perspective of the semiotics of multimedial communication, and also employs the tenets of the 'postsemiotics of the subject' in order to throw light on the heterogeneous processes involved in the macro- and microdynamics of semiosis. If this takes us to a semiography of *fantasy as an effect* and the fantastic as a mode of socio-cultural expression, we will be better able to perceive how the combination of iconography and semiotics functions as an indispensable tool in cultural studies. Only in this way can we employ the procedures of iconographical analysis and the metalanguages of iconology and semiotics in describing the role of the fantastic in the complex cultural imageries of the postmodern.

In the second part I will employ the semiography of the fantastic in order to investigate the various representations of the body and the corporeality of the speaking subject through the analogies that are manifest between the semiotics of early-modern and postmodern culture. I will argue that the dissemination of cultural imageries of the fantastic or the fantasticated body are elements of a general semiotic attempt which tries to find answers to the epistemological crisis of the period.

The Semiography of the Fantastic

Recent poststructuralist attempts at defining the fantastic have shared the common goal of moving beyond the methodological limits of genre categorization in order to reveal the logic of the fantastic as an effect which emerges in the speaking subject and as a general operation that is always at work in the symbolizing social practices of culture. When we realize how its inner *hybridity*¹ makes the fantastic resistant to any rigid typology, we also observe that a semiotic understanding needs to relate this hybridity to the frequently observed operation in the fantastic which defines it as a continuous testing of the limits of the symbolic order that contain symbolization within ideologically determined borders. The attempt to map out and test the limits of cultural imagination, to move 'beyond'² symbolic fixation makes the fantastic akin to those *marginal discourses* that work against the norms and categories of a dominant ideology. As Rosemary Jackson points out, "The literary fantastic is a telling index of the limits of the dominant cultural order."³ Semiography, of course, realizes that this applies to all representations of the fantastic and not only to the literary fantastic, but also gives us a warning against generalizations concerning this *subversive* power of the fantastic. It is true that the fantastic has long been operational in our culture as one of the most important sources of productivity and *praxis*.

However, even if the logic of the fantastic appears to be general in targeting the borderlines of the cultural imagination, we need to understand this logic in the broader framework of a *semiotic typology of cultures* and a poststructuralist critique of ideology in order to see how this subversive power might also inform dominant representational modes and not simply marginalized discourses. Iconography and iconology may be useful tools in showing that the attempt to move beyond the limits of conventional signification can become characteristic of dominant trends of culturally fixed symbolism as well as in the search for the perfect language in the epistemological crisis of early-modern culture, or in the quest for total presence in postmodern experimental art. The postsemiotics of the subject contributes to such an understanding with a perspective that penetrates the very structure of the subject in which the fantastic produces an effect that, subsequently, often appears to be shared by dominant and marginalized practices as well. It follows that our task is to relate the workings of the fantastic to the general semiotic mechanism of culture, to problematize its non-mechanical relationship with ideology, and to account for the effect that representations of the fantastic produce in the psychosomatic heterogeneity of the subject.

The various perspectives that have been offered by the recent, psychoanalytically informed theorization of the fantastic all seem to relate the fantastic not

¹ Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic* (London: Arnold, 1996), p. 7.

² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 4.

³ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Methuen, 1981), p. 4.

only to a subversive operation, but also to a *quest*, an attempt to reach a totality which has been lost or which always appears to be beyond our reach. This idea of the quest inscribes the fantastic into the general attempt of the semiotic mechanism of culture to incorporate reality through signification. In this mechanism we have periods which rely on a stable semiotic disposition with a solid epistemology, and periods that will cope with a representational crisis and an uncertainty as to the possibility of getting to know and representing reality. The intensity of the quest for the immediacy of reality and the language that can secure this presence for us will depend on that semiotic disposition of culture which believes this immediacy either to be lost or, just the contrary, possible to establish through social signifying practices. This quest in culture is parallel to the quest inside the subject that aims at compensating for the *losses* (of the mother's body, of reality) and the split that constitutes the subject. In this respect, the fantastic is an intensification of that *compensatory mechanism* which is constitutive of all signification.

It is possible to conceive of the fantastic as a general attempt which is always present in culture, and aims at mapping out new ways of establishing a signification that goes beyond the limits of the conventional. The fantastic in this respect is a *semiotic endeavor* that offers itself as an alternative for those signifying practices that seek to make reality accessible. This quest is the belief in and attempt at *total semiosis*.

This semiotic perspective may clear up the uncertainties as to the subversive, extra-canonical or popular, canonical nature of the fantastic. Traditional ways of fixed symbolization may be arranged in new combinations and forms, and may participate in a general cultural attempt to use the fantastic in order to establish full semiosis and an immediacy of experience, such as the proliferation of the multi-leveled visual representations, the Neo-Platonic diagrams, the multi-channeled emblems, and the iconographic density of the emblematic theater in the Renaissance. The same attempt may be suppressed and kept out of the canon in the Cartesian tradition of the new philosophy of the Enlightenment which aims, above all, to circulate the belief in the total representability of reality and the compact self-mastery of the sovereign subject.

Nevertheless, until the crisis of the project of modernism, the fantastic has always served as a dimension of experimentation (be it canonical or marginalized), as a territory where signification may exert a total effect on the subject. When we are to account for this effect of the fantastic in semiography, we move beyond typologies of cultural semiotics and theories of canon-formation towards a postsemiotics that penetrates the heterogeneity of the subject where this effect *emerges*. It is also through the perspectives of the semiotics of the subject, in so far as it is related to the critique of ideology, that we can understand the new status of the fantastic in the postmodern, where it often appears to lose the subversive power customarily attributed to it.

In relation to the fantastic, postsemiotics picks up where Todorov stops in his typology when he emphasizes the point of *hesitation*, the moment of being lost that the receiver *experiences* in the face of the fantastic.

... there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who *experiences* the event must opt for one of two possible solutions [...] The fantastic occupies the *duration* of this *uncertainty*.⁴

Although Todorov does not fully comment on the *temporal* nature of this duration in the act of reading, he takes us to the crucial point at which we need to realize that the fantastic works by creating a peculiar *effect* in the *temporality of reading*, bringing about the dynamic temporality which was highlighted by reader-response criticism in moving beyond the static impression of formal, New Critical reading. We have to look for the logic of the fantastic in the operations that take place within the structure of the reader, and in order to do so we need to open up the subject as a receiver of the fantastic for its psychosomatic heterogeneity, where the *emergence of meaning* is theorized by postsemiotics.

All accounts of the fantastic dwell upon polysemy, ambiguity, hybridity, and hesitation as characteristic features that associate the fantastic with the grotesque, the Gothic, the supernatural, and the limits of genre categories. Neil Cornwell summarizes the main themes in the critical reception of Todorov's theory as follows: "Hesitation, ambiguity and the supernatural are therefore the key elements."⁵ Wolfgang Kayser defines the grotesque in terms of its capacity to provoke "laughter, disgust and astonishment", as well as produce "the dream-like quality of a work and the unruly fantasy which creates its own world."⁶ These categories of in-betweenness result in the difficulties of pinning down the phenomenon of the fantastic, and they provide a basis for Todorov to argue for the anti-generic nature of the fantastic as a *general mode*.⁷ However, these categories also make the fantastic more understandable if we relate them to the general logic of meaning-creation in which the symbolic interrelationships of language constitute the surface where the categories necessary for identity can be fixed. When these binary categories and the grammar of language are violated, when meaning does not emerge in an unambiguous order, the subject's

⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cleveland: Case Western UP, 1973), pp. 25-6 (my emphasis).

⁵ Neil Cornwell, *Literary Fantastic from Gothic to Postmodernism* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 14.

⁶ Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1981), pp. 30, 40, quoted by Cornwell, p. 7.

⁷ "... Todorov ultimately moves beyond this. In my view it is only through his crucial differentiation between fantasy as genre fiction and the fantastic as a far more resistant, anti-generic mode that the real potential of this field has been fully opened up for the challenge of critical theory." Armitt, p. 6.

emerging fixation as self-identity is brought into crisis.⁸ Julia Kristeva accounts for the effect of marginal discourses (such as poetic language) through this crisis in signification, and this is where the general logic of the *abject* as (cultural) in-between relates to the ambiguities articulated by the fantastic. "The abject is, above all, ambiguity."⁹ The fantastic puts the subject on trial and in crisis, just like the abject, because no unequivocal, categorical meaning emerges in the face of the fantastic. When the categories that are supposed to establish the ego-identity of the subject are transgressed or blurred, the other, non-symbolic modality of the subject is brought to the forefront: a dimension in the heterogeneity of the subject that is in connection with the unstructured drive energies and the corporeality of the psychosomatic body. This modality, which Kristeva calls *semiotic*, receives its energy from the primary loss and the trauma that are constitutive of the subject: the loss of the mother, the symbiosis with reality, the immediacy of experience. Indeed, this is the quest we uncovered in the deep-structure of the fantastic: the attempt to move beyond the categorization of social imagery, to create an effect in the receiver that can mobilize energies that will produce an experience more totalizing than the conventional and the automatic. The in-betweenness, the heterogeneity are the constitutive operations which enable the fantastic to bring about such an effect, thus allowing for the psychically and corporeally motivated *geno-text*, the Barthesian pleasure of the text to surface in the representation.

However, it is exactly this effect that can be deployed and exploited by ideology, and it is through the postsemiotics of the fantastic that we can understand the *ideological commodification* of the fantastic in postmodernism. Without a theory of the microdynamics of the subject that experiences the effect of the fantastic, we cannot account for the *all-pervasiveness* of the fantastic in postindustrial consumer culture. Instead of being marginalized or de-canonized, we find a proliferation of the fantastic in consumerism. A cultural practice disseminates complex imageries of the fantastic that envelope the subject in a constant pilgrimage towards the ever more fantastic.

The subversive power of the fantastic has long been explained by its being "a tear, or wound, laid open in the side of the real."¹⁰ However, when we relate the fantastic to the idea of *expenditure* in the way Bataille theorized it, we also have to insert it into the more subtle dialectic of expenditure and containment. As the arguments of post-Marxism and the New Historicism expose, every ideological establishment is grounded in the continuous production and containment of its

⁸ For a more elaborate account of the way postsemiotics moves beyond the mechanical descriptions of abstract categories in structuralist semiotics, see Attila Kiss, *The Semiotics of Revenge: Subjectivity and Abjection in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Papers in English and American Studies 5, Szeged: József Attila University, 1995), Ch. II. "The Subject of Semiotics", pp. 15-24.

⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), p. 14.

¹⁰ George Bataille, quoted by Jackson, p. 22.

own subversion. In the fantastic imageries of consumerism we discern the way ideology deprives the fantastic of its subversive potential by disseminating it as the primary object of desire. Slavoj Žižek explains this through the logic of 'repressive desublimation'. In the heterogeneity of the subject, the ego has the traditional role of mediating between the drive energies of the unconscious and the social laws of the superego. However, in a culture where enjoyment becomes a compulsion, a social constraint imposed on us by the *obligation to be curious*, the fantastic will become the (hyper)reality where we endlessly try to detect new sites of amusement.¹¹

The bourgeois liberal subject represses his unconscious urges by means of internalized prohibitions, while in post-liberal societies the agency of social repression no longer acts in the guise of an internalized law or prohibition which requires renunciation; instead, it assumes the role of a hypnotic agency which imposes the attitude of 'yielding to temptation', that is, its injunction amounts to a command: 'Enjoy yourself!' An idiotic enjoyment is dictated by the environs.¹²

In the world of the *Matrix*, (hyper)reality and the fantastic overlap to a degree that the logic of subversion goes through an inversion: to be marginal would mean to avoid the quest for the fantastic.¹³

When the society of affluence establishes a short circuit between the fantastic and commodity fetishism, the task of semiography is to unveil those ideological technologies that establish cultural systems of images in the fabric of commercialization and commodification. The analytical tools of iconography and iconology can here join the metaperspectives offered by postsemiotics in order to disclose the ways in which the marketing of the fantastic rewrites the meaning, the use and the effect of traditional as well as new cultural symbolism. This vast field now, of course, covers the commodification of sexuality in commercials as well as the deployment of the male gaze in the cinematic text, the marketing of fantasy in travel brochures as well as the politicization of idealized everyday life as a refuge from the threatening contents of the unconscious. If the

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992), p. 48.

¹² Slavoj Žižek, "Is There a Cause of the Subject?", in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (London and New York: Verso, 1994), p. 94. For commodity fetishism and the politicization of enjoyment also see: Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London and New York: Verso, 1991). For fantasy as a political factor: *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1991).

¹³ Baudrillard comments on the all-enveloping nature of fantasy in the hyperreality of consumerist postmodern society: "Surrealism remained within the purview of the realism it contested – but also redoubled – through its rupture with the Imaginary. The hyperreal represents a much more advanced stage insofar as it manages to *efface even this contradiction* [my emphasis] between the real and the imaginary. Unreality no longer resides in the dream or unreality, or in the beyond, but in the *real's hallucinatory resemblance of itself* [emphasis in the original]." Baudrillard, p. 145.

analysis of cultural imagery is successfully united with the critical theory of postsemiotics, semiography offers us strategies with which to uncover the more latent logic of the fantastic in contemporary as well as earlier cultural representations.

Early-Modern and Postmodern Anatomies of the Fantastic Body

Undoubtedly, one of the most thematized constituents of postmodern cultural imagery is the human body, i.e., the fragmented, mutilated, penetrated, tortured, extended, preserved, cloned body: *the fantastic body*. It is, of course, one of the most thematized concepts of poststructuralist critical thinking as well. In what follows, I will argue that the postmodern problematization of and obsession with the often fantastic body is, to a large extent, an epistemological endeavor which reveals its semiotic nature, if we investigate it within the semiotic typology of cultures, where it shows analogies with the early-modern anatomizing obsession with the limits and interior of the body. The anatomy theaters of the Renaissance will resurface in postmodern culture in the form of the cinematic industry and the new vogue of anatomical performances.

Several representations of poststructuralist theories of the body and the corporeality of the subject argue that the body in postmodern culture becomes an apocalyptic body again.¹⁴ When was the time, the question emerges, when it was also apocalyptic? Where are the roots that feed this body? The ideological technologies of modernism constituted the bourgeois Cartesian subject at the expense of the suppression and demonization of the body.¹⁵ This body resurfaces in the postmodern as the site of danger and potential crisis, the focal point of calamities that may befall our civilization. Since Foucault's introduction of the idea of the hermeneutics of the self, the care of this fallible, apocalyptic body has been conceptualized by theory as a central social practice through which ideological interpellation reaches out to the socially positioned and subjectivized individuals in Western society.¹⁶ The representations of prefabricated patterns of body-identity are endlessly disseminated in postindustrial society. At the same time, with the advent of the postmodern, marginalized signifying practices (poetic language, the fine arts, performances, installations, experimental theater, film) started to deploy the body as a site of subversion, promising to go beyond or to dismantle ideological determination.

¹⁴ Bryan S. Turner, "Recent Developments in the Theory of the Body", in *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, ed. M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth and B. Turner (London et al.: Sage Publications, 1991), pp. 1-36, p. 3.

¹⁵ On the construction and the hollowness of modern subjectivity see Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984).

¹⁶ For a concise version of Foucault's idea of the hermeneutics of the self, see: Michel Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude", in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1985), pp. 365-72.

The apocalyptic discourse on the body may indeed be true, but only partly. If we interpret the body as a semiotic social construct, I believe it is also possible to discern a less apocalyptic and more experimental and epistemological undertaking beneath the surface of the postmodern obsession with the status and the condition of the body. When the study of the various concepts of the body is situated within a semiotic and comparative study of cultural periods, we may also gain insight into analogies between historical periods, and the relationship between culture-specific representations of the body and the general semiotic disposition of culture comes to the foreground.¹⁷

My contention is that the postmodern scrutiny of the body is comparable to the early-modern anatomical turn towards the interiority of the human body:¹⁸ in both historical periods the *body is a territory of the fantastic*, an epistemological borderline, a site of experiments in going beyond the existing limits of signification. In short, postmodern anatomies are grounded in an epistemological crisis which is very similar to the period of transition and uncertainty in early-modern culture, when the earlier 'natural order' of medieval high semioticity started to become unsettled, and the ontological foundations of meaning lost their metaphysical guarantees. It may certainly be argued about any cultural-historical period that it is an age of transition and crisis, but I believe the analogies between the epistemological uncertainties of the early modern and the postmodern lend themselves to a more articulate comparison. If we want to mention only one of the numerous resonances, we might recall that the way Montaigne introduces scepticism and relativism into the early-modern discourse on the nature of human knowledge is very similar to Lyotard's argument on delegitimi-

¹⁷ "[...according to] semiographic consideration [...] the theater or drama model of a cultural period is always in close relation with the semiotic world model of the era, since the representational awareness, the "high semioticity" of the theatrical space always serves as a laboratory to test the most intriguing epistemological dilemmas of the specific culture. Semiography as a critical approach combines the considerations of iconography and the postsemiotics of the subject to investigate the textual strategies through which in-between dramatic characters articulate subject positions that put the identity of the receiver in crisis. Semiography also reveals that it is impossible to understand the strategies of renaissance and postmodern metatheater without a psychoanalytically informed theory of the microdynamics of spectatorship that can account for theatrical experiences such as abjection and pluralization." Attila Kiss, "Character as Subject-in-Process in the Semiography of Drama and Theater", *Semiotische Berichte* 1:4 (2003), p. 187. See Yuri Lotman and Boris A. Uspensky, "On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture", in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. H. Adams and S. Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1986), pp. 410-21 for the idea of an intensified semiotic activity that generally emerges in culture in epistemologically unstable, transitory periods (such as the early modern and the postmodern).

¹⁸ "... early moderns, no less than postmoderns, were deeply interested in the corporeal 'topic'." *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, ed. David Hillman and Carla Mazzio (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. xii.

zation and the crisis of the grand narratives of Western culture, or to the way Feyerabend takes a stand against method.

Several poststructuralist studies of the semiotics of culture have recently focused on the affinity that has emerged in the postmodern towards those practices of early-modern culture which were groundbreaking or subversive in their own time.¹⁹ At the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these practices were simultaneously mapping and thematizing the technologies of identity and the interior spaces of the body. The fusion or the coming closer of cultural registers in consumerist culture makes this affinity between the early modern and the postmodern particularly manifest. The demarcation line between high culture and popular culture is less rigid, more difficult to draw, and easier to penetrate than before. Former cultural idols are marketed nowadays as generally accessible commodities. Shakespeare, for example, is adapted and appropriated in a multiplicity of commercial forms; the top products of Western art and literature are being reproduced in an all-embracing process of commercialization and tabloidization. Renaissance texts that for centuries were canonized as high literature now show up among the commodities of popular culture. This phenomenon of commodification is, of course, part of the process of decanonization and recanonization which questions and revises the reading practices and standards of earlier canons.

The body as a territory of the fantastic appears to occupy a central locus in the vogue of these representations, and it is an object and a cultural phenomenon which also specifically interconnects the early modern and the postmodern. This interconnection has been a subject of critical interest since the early 1980s. By the 1990s, the human body had become a specifically favored theme in the considerably extensive Renaissance scholarly literature on the 'discovery' of early-modern subjectivity and the social practices of self-fashioning. At the same time, it is of course also a focal point in poststructuralist theories of the split and psychosomatically heterogeneous subject.

In his article "Recent Developments in the Theory of the Body", Bryan S. Turner contends that the crisis of instrumental rationality results in the postmodern questioning of the grand master narratives of Western culture, and this crisis is comparable to the climate of the manneristic period of early-modern culture. Other critics argue that the Baroque is a response to the crisis between the cultural and individual that the reformation brought about in Europe.²⁰ Thus, the parallel between early modern and postmodern is conceivable on the basis of reasons that can actually be interpreted, on a general level, as signs of an epistemological crisis in both periods.

¹⁹ "... it is an interesting sociological point that the Elizabethans had, like us, a penchant for gory entertainment." Cynthia Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self: Violence, Subjectivity, and Early Modern Texts* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2002), p. 107.

²⁰ E.g. Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity* (London et al.: Sage Publications, 1994).

We see in the postmodern that the scrutiny and the visual representation of the body appear not only in critical literature, but in general cultural practices as well, especially when we consider the fantastic or fantastically body. The cultural imageries of malls, shopping centers, plazas, movie productions, exhibitions are loaded with representations of the fantastic body that establish a parallel between early-modern and postmodern representational traditions.

A few examples will suffice to demonstrate this tendency. When I first entered the building of the main library at the Bloomington campus of Indiana University in 1996, I caught sight of a large poster advertising a performance of *Coriolanus* with the subtitle: "A natural born killer, too." The title of Oliver Stone's influential film was used as a marketing technique for a postmodern Shakespearean commodity. Five years later at the University of Hull I was reading articles about ambulances lining up in front of a London theater playing *Titus Andronicus*, waiting for members of the audience that needed first aid after throwing up or fainting. A couple of years ago, I ventured to watch the exhibition of the theatrical anatomist Gunther von Hagens in Vienna, and read his program for staging public autopsies and starting an anatomical theater in London. Not much later in Hungary, I saw posters in a cinema plaza with Hannibal the Cannibal, i.e., Anthony Hopkins staring at me from beneath a great big title saying TITUS. This poster was advertising Julie Taymor's spectacular, postmodern film adaptation of Shakespeare's first and bloodiest tragedy. On the Hungarian stage, after an absence of almost one hundred years, four different and quite experimental productions of *Titus Andronicus* were performed within less than ten years.

These are examples of the new affinity emerging in the postmodern towards cultural practices and texts of early-modern culture that scrutinize and thematize the interiority of the human body through surgical or representational means of violence. In these practices the anatomized, transformed, dissected body functions as a *site of marvels*, as a territory of wonders and frontiers. In the present paper I would like to dwell upon the artistic and epistemological implications of those anatomical representations of the body in the postmodern which also testify to an anatomizing obsession that is very similar to the Renaissance curiosity for interiorities. My argument is that it is possible to interpret certain practices in the postmodern turn towards the body as a typical revival of the anatomy theaters of the early-modern period, and that these practices are involved in a process of mapping out new ways of representation and new methods of getting to know reality, similar to the epistemological intentions displayed by the anatomizing modes of thought in the Renaissance.

The most obvious site of the representation of the body in early-modern England is the public theater, with its often fantastic, dismembered, tortured, dissected human bodies. The Renaissance attempt to realize the totality of theatrical effect can be interpreted as an answer to those epistemological uncertainties of the period which resulted in a fundamentally unstable semiotic disposition of the culture. Against the backdrop of the speculations and philosophical

questions concerning the order of the universe and the possibility of getting to know reality, the theater offers a site where the techniques of emblematic density and audience involvement provide the spectator with the promise of a more direct access to reality, an *immediacy of experience* which is otherwise impossible to obtain. Thus, the testing of the body as a site of the fantastic and a borderline of meanings is an example of the *hybridity* and the *quest* that characterize the fantastic.

At the same time, the staging of violence and the violated body was also informed by a keen interest in the interiority, the corporeality of the human being as the site of the emergence of subjectivity, the new, early-modern type of identity. As much recent criticism has argued, the idea of identity as something interior to the human being is a new phenomenon in early-modern culture. It signals the advent of the subjectivity underlying the 'cogito' that later emerges with Rationalism and the Cartesian discourses. This *process of interiorization* is a challenge that many characters of English Renaissance drama fail to meet: they oscillate between alternative types of subjectivity as in-between, abject subjects.²¹ Violence not only opens up the corporeal interiority of the human being, it also dissects the consciousness: the anatomization and representation of the wound in the psyche of these characters reveal them as split subjects.²²

This cultural challenge or ideological commandment is also thematized in postmodern literature. The pluralized characters of postmodern drama and fiction will fall victim to the same failure: they are unable to internalize the cultural patterns of a compact, homogeneous identity. However, the failure often takes the shape of purposeful resistance or subversion as well, and the staging of the abjected body functions as a site of resistance, as a promise to go beyond ideological determination, to arrive at the flesh as a place of authenticity and self-presence.

Thus, the representation of violence and the promise of unquestionable meaning are answers to the epistemological uncertainty of the age. They are accompanied both in the early modern and the postmodern by a cultural urge to move beyond façades, to penetrate surfaces, to dig into wounds. These are wounds that the subject had been prohibited to test in the early-modern period, or wounds that had long been forgotten by the end of the unfinished project of modernism.

²¹ Michael Neill calls this "the new discourse of interiority." See Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: OUP, 1998), p. 159.

²² "The thinking thing, when it began to think, found not repetition and hence similarity, but chaotic divergence, asymmetry, a collection of pieces. Out of this collection of pieces it would, eventually, be possible to manufacture an assembly – a human being which, possessing the form of humanity, was nevertheless understood as essentially split." Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 146.

Coming back to the English Renaissance, in early-modern culture two popular institutions worked to satisfy this curiosity. Real wounds and surgical interventions revealed the secrets of the body for the general public in the anatomy theater, while emblematic wounds on metaphorical bodies thematized this cultural interest in the emblematic public theater.²³ The combination of semiotics and iconography enables us to discern that in various trends of English Renaissance literature we have a special union of the two practices. Early-modern culture takes great interest in interiority as the locus of the secrets of identity. A very telling example of this is the way Sir Philip Sidney writes of comedy and tragedy in *The Defence of Poesy*:

So that the right use of Comedy will, I think, by nobody be blamed, and much less of the high and excellent Tragedy, that *openeth the greatest wounds*, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue ...²⁴

Sidney argues for proper literature to open up the traumatic, ulcerous wounds in the body of society: literature, according to the early-modern argument, should be anatomical and analytic, like the process of dissection. This anatomical zeal starts to be repressed with the advent of Cartesian philosophy and the bourgeois establishment, when linguistic reasoning becomes the skin on the ego, the 'shell' encapsulating the modern subject. Consequently, the tissue that covers the ulcers in the subjectivity of the early-modern subject and in the body of society is the tissue of discursive self-fashioning, on the one hand, and that of civilized order, on the other. This tissue of the symbolic separates us from the secrets of our maternal and libidinal corporeality, the simultaneously inviting and repulsive presymbolic memories of the womb as preserved in our own (largely unconscious and uncontrolled) interiority. When early-modern drama presents persistent images of inwardness, this is not only to uncover and publicly heal the ulcers in the body politic, inwardness is also staged because of the keen self-anatomizing interest of the early-modern subject.

Turning again to the era of the postmodern, we realize that anatomy or self-anatomy constitutes the center of attention in postmodern performances, artistic productions, stagings, happenings, and cultural practices, and the anatomical concentration upon the fantastic body is especially thematized by visual and filmic media. The fact that Julie Taymor directed an often horrific and extremely spectacular feature film with leading Hollywood artists on the basis of Shakespeare's most widely criticized and condemned revenge tragedy is a clear sign of the postmodern interest in the body, but there are many better known examples, such as the films by David Cronenberg and Peter Greenaway, the

²³ For a history of the anatomy theater and its ritualized theatricality see Sawday.

²⁴ Sir Philip Sidney, *Selected Writings*, ed. Richard Dutton (Manchester and New York: Fyfield Books, 1987), p. 124 (my emphasis).

anatomical performances of the body-artists Orlan and Finley, and the public autopsies of Gunther von Hagens.

The subject's relation to the body in the postmodern is rendered uncontrollable because of the panic created by the threat of the potential inner vacuum of the postmodern subject,²⁵ which results in the incessant testing and appropriation of the body. At the same time, it is also used as a rich source of experience that would possibly bring us beyond ideological determination, towards a more direct experiencing of 'some authentic reality' in the Artaudian sense.²⁶ It is only later, and mostly in theory, that the semiotic impossibilities of such an undertaking begin to be thematized.²⁷

In his article on the early-modern anatomical theater, Luke Wilson notes that the real function of the dissection in the theater of anatomy was to reconstruct and to restore to order that body in the interior of which supposedly resided the secret of life.²⁸ In the postmodern this testing of the unknown and enigmatic is turned into a theoretical and performative anatomization of the long forgotten body. However, as for the practice of everyday life and the heterological perspective, we should also be aware that this body of the 'high postmodern' is a resource of endless enjoyment for the fatuous subject of consumerism.²⁹ The *fantasticated* or *idealized body* is the ground of an ideological misrecognition through which the subject is captivated by the promise of the marvels of the body as a site of pleasure, a refuge from ideology. Such refuges, however, always turn out to be cultural practices that the ideological establishment allows for in order to produce and simultaneously contain its own potential subversion. After the 1980s, postmodern performance theories and practices finally come to the realization that it is utopian to believe in the non-ideological experience of an immediate corporeal presence. Both the knowledge and the experience of the body are always mediated. In this respect we might indeed contend that post-industrial society has been turned into a medialized anatomy theater in which the body has once again been neutralized. The charms of the *fantasticated* and

²⁵ I am indebted to Ágnes Matuska for this insight. For the relationship between the subject and representational crisis, see her article "An Ontological Transgression: Iago as Representation in its Pure Form", *The Anachronist* (2003), pp. 46-64.

²⁶ Cf. Antonin Artaud's idea of the theatre of cruelty and the immediacy of experience in *The Theatre and Its Double* (1958).

²⁷ See Jacques Derrida, "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation", in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1978), pp. 232-50 for a critique of the belief in the closure of representation. Derrida's writing has since become the starting point for poststructuralist theories that reject the idea of the establishment of full presence or unmediated experience on the stage, an idea which served for a long time as the basis of the "ontological theaters of the self" (Elenor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism* [Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996], p. 48).

²⁸ Luke Wilson, "William Harvey's *Prelectiones*: The Performance of the Body in the Renaissance Theater of Anatomy", *Representations* 17 (1987), pp. 62-95, p. 70.

²⁹ For the logic of enjoyment as political exploitation, see Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*.

commodified body are disseminated endlessly in commercials, multimedia messages and technologies of commodification, but the subversive potential of this fantastic body has been largely neutralized by consumerist ideology that exploits the fantastic. However, there is also a current, ongoing *radicalization* of postmodern anatomy, such as the anatomy theater of Gunther von Hagens, whose attempts still represent the postmodern epistemological curiosity that is an echo of the early-modern anatomizing mode of thought.