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Radiography as exorcism. David Le Breton (translation Marie-Jeanne Da Col Richert)

A young woman is dancing in front of an oriental prince. She undressed slowly, she is soon naked, waiting for the desire of the man whose interest she thinks she has aroused. "Go on" says the prince surprised she has stopped halfway. Beyond clothes, there is the skin. And beyond the skin? What secret does the dark night of the body conceal, how to bring out the desire hidden in one's seeing and that can be taken from the other only with his death?

Western medicine has based its therapeutic efficiency on the systematic opening of the human body, on the exploration of the smallest tissue or humoral fragment. It took this fantasy to the letter and committed itself to seeing, removing the skin bringing to light a coherent mess of viscera and tissues thereby becoming the absolute intimacy of man, to finally discover that there is nothing to discover. No ultimate truth, but a mass of blood and bones, of flesh and organs: that which remains of a man after an anatomical investigation.

From the iconography of anatomical treatises to radiographs, from scintigraphy to CT scan or ultrasound, an imaginary fantasy of transparency offers the human body to countless visibilities in the tracking of disease or abnormality. A surprising stripping discloses tissues, cells, lightens the opacity of the body without leaving anything unexplored. The organic clutter translates into a plain surface, a pattern or into signs to interpret, delivered to the familiarity of those who can decode. Images console us of the impossibility to enter a world that is infinitely plural and shifting, they enable us to have control over it, whether it be a social or organic world. They tell the story of a world finally understood as it has been reduced to a handful of clues and instantly frozen.

Radiography dissolves the screen of human appearances, deprives the superfluous tissues of the body as many unnecessary clothes and reveals its organs or skeleton, overlooking death. The transparency of the flesh spares dissection or autopsy. During one's life radiography plays with the tissues more effectively than a knife and exposes them to the practitioner's appraisal without undermining the integrity of the body. It is an anatomy with clean hands, without flood or fluids being spread. Man contemplates his own skeleton without having passing away for all that and with his body intact. He quietly dons his skeleton during the break behind the machine and takes his intact body again once the examination is over. The living seizes the dead innocently, without fearing the worst. In this way any image referring to death in any way is a memento mori, it is a lesson in humility calling forth the infinite fragility of human condition. It reminds us in both senses of the word that we are mortal.

But the activity of fantasy or of the "unconscious" carries the content of the image beyond its puritanical desire to provide data for a diagnosis. An image is never a copy of reality, but a look at it, the result of a technique that illuminates some data, while leaving others in the dark. A scientific approach certainly aims at eradicating the imagination from within carefully, it seeks objectivity or pure transposition of reality; it aims at giving a result that enables one to think or that can be used straight away. The conversion of the body into image, even the most clinical, the one that is most subservient to signs, sets one's imagination working. As if the deprivation of sign stimulated fantasy, in the same way as walls in practical cities called for graffiti. Even cut off from any "background image", stripped of its depth, reduced to pure information, an image stimulates fantasy, encourages diversion. And if it is an image from below the skin, then an abyss of imagination unfolds. Any glance at the world is interpretation, especially when confronted with an image that seems torn from death itself. In front of a photo, the unconscious and the more lucid confusion coming from one's personal history, are given free rein.

David Le Breton, Professor at the University of Strasbourg, Member of the Institut Universitaire de France, author of *La chair à vif. De la leçon d'anatomie aux greffes d'organes (Exposed flesh. From a lesson in anatomy to organ transplants)*, Paris, Métailié, 2008. *Anthropologie du corps et modernité (Anthropology of the body and modernity)*, Paris, PUF, 2008...

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