**David Le Breton’s Existential Sociology of the Body**

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**Abstract**

The article presents the socio-anthropology of the body of David Le Breton to an anglophone readership. It goes through his vast oeuvre and shows how the body appears in his work at the intersection of the physical and the symbolical, sensation and signification, objectivation and individualisation. Tracing some of influences that have shaped his trajectory (Mauss, Simmel, Merleau-Ponty, Bakhtin, Bataille), it presents his sociology of the body as a philosophical reflection on the human condition and a contribution to cultural anthropology and the sociology of modernity.

**Keywords**

David Le Breton - philosophical anthropology - anthropology of the body - sociology of modernity - symbolisation - individualisation

David Le Breton is a well-known, much-read French anthroposociologist of the body. Author of more than 40 books, translated into many languages, though unfortunately not in English (see, however, Le Breton, 2017b and various articles in *Body & Society*), his vast oeuvre explores the body in all its states from a multiplicity of angles - the body as a social, cultural and symbolic construction (Le Breton, 1985, 1990, 1992b); as it is felt in the flesh or objectified by medicine in the course of history (Le Breton, 1990, 1993); as a synaesthetic sensory receptor (Le Breton, 2006); as a sounding board (voices, words and silences) (Le Breton, 1997; Breton and Le Breton, 2009); as a register of pain, whether suffered (Le Breton, 1995a) or self-inflicted as a scar (Le Breton, 2003); as a surface of expression (tattoos, piercings) and a signature of identity (Le Breton, 2014); as a vector for risky behaviours (Le Breton, 1991, 1995b, 2002) of adolescents who are going through existential crises (Le Breton, 2002, 2007); as a malleable object of desire and technological extension of the ego (Le Breton, 1999); as a support for emotions (Le Breton, 1998), sensations (Le Breton, 2006) and pleasures (walking, singing and meditation) (Le Breton, 1999, 2000, 2020). The bodies of adolescents, the elderly, women, prisoners, adventurers, doctors, patients, blind, deaf and autistic persons, the body of each person, objectified, personalised, categorized, identified, filmed, lived, in all its states, these are the bodies at the heart of his work.

In this article, I want to a pay a tribute to David Le Breton and reconstruct the main lines of his vast oeuvre, indicating in passing the great authors (Mauss, Simmel, Merleau-Ponty, but also Bakhtin, Bataille and Caillois) that have influenced him.[[1]](#endnote-1) I will do so by drawing a portrait of the artist that will show his face, his heart and his soul. The text contains three movements and a short conclusion. In the first movement, I will try to identify the threads that weave his work together and give it its unity. I will argue that his anthropology is essentially existential. In the a second movement, I will interpret his anthropology of the body as a philosophical anthropology that joins meaning and signs in a symbolic interactionism. Shifting from philosophy to anthropology and sociology, I will show in a third movement how the body is at the same time a condenser of culture, a synthesiser of the person and an analyser of modernity. I will conclude the text with an “opening”.

**The Open Book of Humanity**

*Work in Progress*

Le Breton’s sociology of the body is a work of sensitive thought. His texts start from the body, but go elsewhere. In the Simmelian tradition that he represents at the University of Strasbourg, the sociology of the senses and sensations, of feelings and emotions is perfectly undisciplined and interdisciplinary. If it touches the reader, it is not only because it deals with the great metaphysical questions (life, death, love, violence, meaning...) by going through anthropology, sociology, religion, history, social service, psychology and psychoanalysis, but also because, as in art, literature and cinema, the author shows himself by talking about others, the world and the universe. In his work, his own sensibility and finesse have become a method for discovering variations in sense and signification and disclose thereby, through the sharing of emotions, a human world that is mysterious and overwhelming, sometimes even unbearable, but always fragile.

Author of a novel, two detective stories and an experimental film, David Le Breton is a great writer, essayist and humanist. Nothing human is foreign to him, including the foreign and the inhuman. When you look at his publications, you realise that all the seminal ideas and essential themes of his work were planted in the span of a decade (1984-2005). His books on the body, the senses and the emotions are work in progress. His first scientific book, soberly entitled *Corps et sociétés* [Body and societies] (Le Breton, 1985), served as a model for the others. It already contains the outline of the history of anatomy, the anthropology of pain, the psychology of child development and the critical sociology of modernity. His studies of so-called “wild” children and the semiotics of gestures were further developed in *Les passions ordinaires* [Ordinary Passions] (Le Breton, 2004), a book on the cultural construction of emotions and affects that offers also a trenchant critique of the biology of emotions. Published in 1993, *La chaire à vif. Usages médicaux et mondains du corps humain* [Raw Flesh. Medical and mundane uses of the human body],a well-documented work on the role of cadavers in the history of Western medicine, was reprinted, expanded and republished in 2003 with a new subtitle *De la leçon d'anatomie aux greffes d'organes* [From the lesson of anatomy to organ transplantation]. His very short introduction to the sociology of the body (Le Breton, 1992b), now in its tenth edition, lays out the construction site of the body and lists the fields that have been explored (body techniques, expression of feelings, gestures, sensory perceptions, markings on the skin, etc.).

Thanks to the accumulation of materials, observations, surveys, readings and travels, the research advances. With each new edition of *Anthropologie du corps et modernité* [Anthropology of the body and modernity], Le Breton (1990, 2005, 2017) updates, revises and completes the previous version. By incorporating the syntheses of his research, the book offers an anthology of his work. It took him fifteen years to put together *La saveur du monde* [The flavour of the world] (Le Breton, 2006), a tasty book on the anthropology of the senses with excursions on the Japanese tea ceremony, the sound of church bells and the smell of holiness. In the same spirit, *Des visages* [Faces] (Le Breton, 1992a, revised and expanded in 2003 and 2022) explores the face in all its aspects, from the portrait and the mirror, face-to-face encounters and the exchange of glances to the disfigurement in the concentration camps and the face transplant. His analysis of the disorders of the face is itself disturbing and disquieting. The new, revised and expanded edition of 2022 contains an analysis of facial recognition and the semiotics of the mask during the Covid-19 crisis. His Goffmanian study of laughter, in fact, of the laugher in company (Le Breton, 2018) was soon followed by a more literary one on the smile (Le Breton, 2022), that mysterious expression of the face.

The anthropology of pain (Le Breton, 1995a, revised and completed in 2003), whether occasional, chronic or total, and its accompanying litany of sufferings, is yet another chapter in his sociology of the body and meaning. Pain differs from one culture, one society and one person to another. Depending on whether it is chosen (tattooing, incision, sport, SM) or imposed (accident, illness, torture), it is also felt differently. Pain is both objective and subjective. Physiological and psychological, it invades existence and morphs into suffering. The book on chronic pain and the reinvention of the self (Le Breton, 2017a) gathers testimonies of patients who, despite the misunderstanding of their entourage and their own retreat from the world, have, more or less, learned to live with their pain. This book on chronic pain patients serves as an aid to readers affected by chronic pain, i.e. pain that persists for more than three months. There is only one step from pain to self-mutilation of the body by incision (Le Breton, 2003, Le Breton, 2007: 99-132) as a paradoxical excision of suffering. In any case, the relationship between meaning (*sema*) and the body (*soma*) is always at the centre of his work.

The “socio-anthropology of adolescence” constitutes a separate chapter in Le Breton's work. It extends the anthropology of suffering and the sociology of the body into collaborative qualitative research on the risk behaviours of young people who, living on the razor's edge, put their bodies and their lives at risk in a frantic quest for meaning. In *La passion du risque* [The passion of risk], Le Breton (1991) proposed an initial analysis of risky behaviours, from the exploits of adventurers and extreme sports to runaways from home, drug addictions and suicide attempts by adolescents in the throes of distress. *La sociologie du risque* [The sociology of risk] (1995b) takes stock of this existential sociology of risk by incorporating the more macro-sociological analyses of Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and François Ewald on technological dangers and manufactured risks in late modernity. Out of print, the book will not be republished, but completely rewritten with an additional hundred pages and published in 2002 under the title *Conduites à risque. Des jeux de mort au jeu de vivre* [Risky behaviours. From the games of death to the game of life]*.* It has become a centralreference of the research programme at the University of Strasbourg on adolescent suffering, rites of passage, ordeals, attacks on the body and the identity of a disoriented youth in postmodern societies (cf. Lachance, 2012). *En souffrance* [In pain] (Le Breton, 2007) describes a wide range of risk behaviours (running away from home and living in the street, alcoholism and drug addiction, violence and deviance, anorexia and bulimia, unprotected sexual relations) and attacks on the body (incisions and scarifications), focusing on the difficulties adolescents have in entering adult life.

By showing how individuals seek meaning by losing themselves, “disappearing from themselves” (Le Breton, 2007: 133-148 and 2015) or how they find it in the act of walking (Le Breton, 2000, 2020), the sociologist explores the contours of contemporary identity in a disenchanted and individualised world, without myths and collective rites. If we take all his explorations of the body-continent as a whole, we realise that David Le Breton's entire work constitutes a single, interminable essay on human nature and its cultural variation in the most diverse social situations and the most personal life experiences. Under his pen, nature has indeed become the open book of humanity.

*Ecstasy and Existence*

In his work, there is life, but also and above all experience. His anthropology of the body is a cry from the heart. Both sympathetic and cordial, his sociology is existential - it desperately seeks meaning. Meaning must be understood here in all its senses (Grondin, 2003: 27-34): as “directional meaning” (the sense of direction), “significant meaning” (the sense of signs), “sensory meaning” (the flavour of the world), “reflexive meaning” (the capacity for judgement) and “existential meaning” (the meaning of life). His anthropological reflections on symbolism, corporeality, intersubjectivity, senses and emotions go to the heart of existence, if we understand the latter with Karl Jaspers (1932, II) as the free consciousness of a possible existence that does not ignore the “limit situations” of a human life, but goes through them to illuminate their meaning. If he attaches so much importance to the trials of life (entry into adult life, separation, accident, handicap, illness, bereavement, solitude, old age, etc.) which destabilise the course of existence, it is because he knows from experience that, in the face of the abyss, in the face of death, it is a case of “make or break”.

Critical moments mark a possible turning point in the course of a life. The crisis of meaning can lead a person to death, even if he or she continues to live, or to a rebirth. The theme of initiation of a life that, in the face of extremes, recovers and finds itself in an inner conversion, is constant in his work. Some of his books end with an “opening” (Le Breton, 1995a: 217-219; 1997: 267-268; 1999: 219-223; 2002: 275-281; 2006: 427-428; 2007: 343-344; 2015: 193-195; 2018: 237-239) - a brief opening to the “non-identical”, to speak like Adorno, to the mimesis with what still escapes the grip of the system. The opening to the non-identical and to otherness is a crack through which transcendence enters his work like a small ecstasy in existence. For a brief moment, the subject steps out of herself (*ek-stasis*) to find herself in the fullness of a presence. “These are moments of sur-prise, where one leaves oneself, where one is crossed by an intense feeling of presence in the world” (Le Breton, 2020: 93). The opening comes at the end when the author looks back on his text and himself to draw a life lesson. His reflection on the human condition is both universal and personal. He takes a detour through the multiple experiences of others before returning to himself. His search for the body in all its states is an asceticism that transforms the seeker (including the reader)of meaning. In the end, he is not quite the same. Like the actors who go through terrible ordeals (illness, prison, depression, drug addiction), sometimes bordering on the unbearable, the author also dies and is reborn.

**The Anthropology of the Body**

*A Philosophical Anthropology*

The anthropology of the body is a philosophical anthropology. And doubly so. First, in a non-technical sense, it offers us a reflection on the *conditio humana*. As he says in a book-interview: “I write about the body in an anthropological way, and what interests me is the human condition” (Lévy, 2004: 45-46). In the great tradition of Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Kant, Feuerbach, Rousseau and Nietzsche, but also and above all of Montaigne, philosophical anthropology reflects on the nature of Man, its meaning and destiny. If Le Breton studies the human being in all its complexity, ambivalence and fragility, it is in a way because he wants to know who is the human being, the *anthropos*, this featherless biped that walks, acts and suffers with others, and asks itself the nagging question of its place in the universe: Why? Where do we come from? Where are we going? But it is also a philosophical anthropology, in the narrow sense of the term, as a discipline between phenomenology and hermeneutics, which strives to reconnect nature and culture, body and mind, microcosm and macrocosm. Like Max Scheler, Arnold Gehlen and Helmuth Plessner, to name but a few of the great names of interwar philosophical anthropology (Fisher, 2008), David Le Breton finds the specificity of the human being, as a zoological species, in embodiment and language. Each forms an autonomous and interdependent system of signs. *Soma* and *sema*, the two ends of the chain, are never disjointed; on the contrary, meanings and symbols are always articulated together in a dynamic relationship to the world.

In the footsteps of Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, the body, the “zero object of our location”, is conceived and experienced as both object and subject of observation. Object and objectivity, the body is never a thing in itself. Before being objectified as a body (*Körper*), it is experienced in the flesh as a lived body (*Leib*) which opens up to the world through the senses and language. Senses and signs, reality and imagination are intertwined as in a chiasm (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 172-204). Inseparable as front and back are, they must be thought of together in their unity as a “uni-duality”. The lived body, the body that touches, perceives, tastes and listens to the world, just as the world it touches, perceives, tastes and listens to, are constituted by culture and traversed by symbols. Symbolism does not cover the body, but reveals it in situation and signifies it by opening up a world - the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*).

David Breton's philosophical anthropology is a cultural anthropology that privileges symbolism: “For my part, my privileged concept is that of the symbolic: that is to say, meaning insofar as it is part of a system of signs and therefore a system of interpretation of the world” (Breton and Le Breton, 2009: 51). The symbolic conditions the relationship to the world. Between me and the world, me and others, there is an invisible web of signs, starting with language and the movements of the body, which make sense, each in their own way. The body itself is a social fabrication. The anthropologist mysteriously states that “the body does not exist” (Lévy, 2004: 92) - and this is why he often puts the word in inverted commas. The bracketing device (*epoche*) allows him to analyse how the body, but also the senses, sensations and emotions are constituted by a society, a culture and a history that are both collective and personal. In the tradition of Ernst Cassirer, Le Breton considers that the sensible is always already signified and signifying. As human beings, we do not have access to the things in themselves. “Perception is not coincidence with things, he says, but interpretation” (Le Breton, 2006: 14). Even if we are not aware of the constitutive activities of the mind, the fact remains that the things we encounter in the world presuppose the intervention of an apparatus of symbolic representations of sense data. The experience of the world is therefore not immediate, but mediated by symbolic forms (language, religion, art, science), which link the senses to signs, thus opening the world to the miracle of meaning. “The miracle is the sensuous matter which, by the way it is represented, gains a new, pluriform spiritual life” (Cassirer, 1964, I: 27).

The materialisation of spirit and the spiritualisation of matter are two aspects of a single process of humanising the world. By casting its net over the world, the symbolic connects everything that exists into a system of meaning. The leaf that trembles in the air, the sorrow that pinches one's heart, the smile on one's face and the smell of the rain are not perceived or experienced in the same way in all cultures. The “anthropological detour” (Balandier) shows that cultures are distinguished from each other by the way they signify. Everything that exists is enclosed in, and disclosed by, a mesh of shared meanings that structures the thinking, feelings, judgements and practices, in short, the modes of being of its members. Like Lévi-Strauss, David Le Breton believes that the cultural variation of humanity is infinite. If each society expresses its relationship to the world in a specific way, if each culture symbolises the universe in a differential way that is specific to it, all together they show the incredible power of the symbolic. Each society, each culture, each social group represents and realises only a particular case of the possible. This is why the same gesture, the same object, the same practice can, despite their phenomenal identity, signify something completely different. A spit, for example (Le Breton, 1998: 159), may be an expression of anger and contempt, but elsewhere it may enter into the protocols of greeting, recognition and affection. Conversely, one can enter into interaction through a great variety of greeting gestures (id., 91): the handshake, the hands clasped on the chest (as in *namaste)*, the nod, the hug, the peck (or pecks) on the cheek, the kiss on the mouth, the sniffing and rubbing of noses. Marcel Mauss had already observed that a single cultural matrix or form can express itself in phenomenal variation: “The very gestures, the knot of the tie, the collar and the wearing of the neck [...]: everything has a form which is at once common to a great number of men and chosen by them from among other possible forms” (Mauss, 1968, II: 470). The imprint of society still shows itself in its limits. Ethnopsychiatry reveals that even when members of society lose their grip and take refuge in madness, their misbehaviours and inconsistencies are no less embedded within socially and culturally prescribed forms of behaviour.

*A Symbolic Interactionism*

David Le Breton incorporates the lessons of the structuralism of Mauss, Cassirer and Lévi-Strauss into symbolic interactionism (Le Breton, 2004). Symbolic forms are not structures, forces or social facts that impose themselves on individuals from the outside, as in Durkheim. On the contrary, with Georg Simmel, he insists that society is not a thing, but a process of association between interacting individuals and groups who are aware of forming a unity, however temporary. “Persons who look at each other, who are jealous of each other, who write letters to each other and have lunch together [...] Thousands of such relationships between people hold us together [in a society]” (Simmel, 1992: 33). On closer inspection, there is not one society, but a myriad of occasional and evanescent micro-societies, made up of interacting individuals.

An avid reader of Marcel Proust, Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel, the French sociologist observes interpersonal interactions with finesse - the postures that subtly adapt to each other, the glances that cross each other, the movements of faces and hands, the smiles that are exchanged, the etiquettes and manners, the obligatory expressions of feelings, the mimics of annoyance, boredom, contempt that the actors pretend to ignore in conversation, etc. Nothing is too subtle to escape the gaze of a micro-sociology attentive to gestures, emotions and interaction rituals. Like Goffman, he practices a third-person phenomenology. He looks from the outside, but without the cynicism that marks the life and work of the Canadian sociologist. Thanks to his ability to identify sympathetically with the actors, often in the company of novelists (Proust, Dostoyevsky, Canetti, Auster), he moves imperceptibly from the external behaviour to the interiority of the actors. By recording their vulnerability, he notes the contingency of sociability and the instability of society. Ontological security is never acquired forever. At any moment, society can collapse and the subject with it.

Society is therefore not a substance, but a continuous process of interactions between individuals and groups who interpret the situation of action by adapting their behaviour to each other in order to act together in a contingent world. Interpretation is based on the more or less shared perceptions, representations, meanings, expressions and evaluations that society makes available to its members. In situations, individuals draw on these collective references to understand each other. "Understanding is first and foremost the condition for exchanges between actors who could not interact without understanding each other” (Le Breton, 2004: 3). Pragmatism, from which symbolic interactionism is derived, insists on mutual understanding. It is through the exchange of perspectives and by taking the role of each other that the actors manage to elaborate a common definition of the situation and to coordinate their actions as best they can.

Society does not impose itself on the actors from the outside. Rather, it is the actors who continually constitute, make and remake society in symbolically mediated interactions. For Le Breton, actors are not agents, but actors who give meaning to their actions. They are, of course, socialised in a culture and produced by a society that shapes their ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Products of a cultural and collective history that they incorporate, they also have a personal history, however, that differentiates them from others and makes their understanding of the world both collective and singular.

Socialisation does not exclude subjectivation, but makes it possible. It is because society is within them that the actors can give meaning to their action and situate themselves in relation to the expectations of others. They do this in a reflexive way. By adopting the gaze of others on themselves, they become an object to themselves; by responding creatively, each time in a particular way to the expectations of others which they can accept, refuse or shape, they become subjects. Identity is not substantive, but relational and processual. Endowed with a reflexive identity that imprints its mark on actions, the subjects who constitute themselves over time are the product of a history, a culture and a particular society, which shape them and which they shape in their own way and at their own risk. Indeed, there is no guarantee that their identities will not crack. It only takes one critical event (illness, separation, unemployment) for ontological security to slip away. Moreover, since there is an unconscious in the body and in the mind, not everything is accessible to the cogito. The body has its reasons that reason does not know.

**The Sociology of the Body**

*The Body as a Total Social Fact*

The “body” is at the heart of David Le Breton's work. All of his research converges on it and, yet, we know that the body is only the obligatory point of passage for his reflections on the human condition. The body is a “total social fact”, as Marcel Mauss would say, which condenses within itself all the dimensions of human existence. Insofar as representations, actors and practices are anchored in the body, the whole of society is, so to speak, “folded” into the body (Lahire, 2013). To understand it, we must analyse it as a physio-psycho-socio-anthropo-logical unit. It is a microcosm that collects social, cultural and personal life in its totality, complexity and ambivalence. “Because it is at the heart of individual and collective action, at the heart of social symbolism, the body is a powerful analyser that allows a better grasp of the present” (Le Breton, 1990: 7-8, cf. also 1985: 15; 1992b: 98; 1999: 20). As a privileged analyser of modern societies that express themselves in and through it, the body is not only a prism that reflects social meanings. It is also and just as much a living synthesiser through which the subject creates with, against and for others, his or her own world. As a provider of meaning and values, the body is therefore not only the material substratum of action; as a transformer of social and cultural meanings into personal meanings, it is also the place where the subject emerges at the intersection of somatisation and semantisation.

We have seen that somatic anthropology is a symbolic anthropology that traces the historical, cultural, social and personal variations of embodied practices. It should be noted, however, that when Le Breton moves from the anthropology to the sociology of the body and from traditional to modern societies, the analytical and critical tendencies gain the upper hand over his synthetic and symbolic proclivities. Caught up in a long-term process of objectification and individualisation, everything happens as if at the end of modernity the body and the individual were no more than the remains of a completely disenchanted and desymbolised technical universe. In the “desymbolisation of the world” he discerns “the major anthropological risk” (Le Breton, 2002: 52) of contemporary societies. The critique of modernity and post-modernity thus leads him to a slightly conservative vision, tinged with nostalgia, which opposes traditional to post-modern societies, the Global South to the West, the working classes to the bourgeoisie, alternative to modern medicine, the countryside to the city, walking to the car and the bicycle to the plane. When he speaks out against the modern city, which he associates with concrete, asphalt and noise, a tinge of romanticism seeps in: “Conviviality with nature, the village or the city, the house, that relationship of happy familiarity that engages the sense of intimacy, so important in Bachelard's thought, the feeling of continuity that links the earth and the senses, inhabited places and the body, all this tends to fade away, to disappear from the social spaces of the West as it modernizes and develops” (Le Breton, 1985: 146).

The tendency to reify the body and subjectivity in modernity cannot be denied (Vandenberghe, 1997-1998). My question concerns the normative basis of the critique. It is to be feared that a radical critique of the present based on a past that is no longer present will miss its target. Instead of looking forward, it looks backward. The solution lies in an anthropology of modernity that finds meaning in symbolic interaction and language communication, but also in all the gestures of openness to otherness that force us to decentre ourselves in order to broaden our perspective and continue the work of symbolisation. If the anthropology of the body has taught us anything, it is that despite and beyond the anthropic mutation, we are still human beings, endowed with flesh, formed by symbolism and open to others. Beneath the machine, there is always the human being.

*The Invention of the Individual*

In traditional societies, the body is not yet separated from the community, from nature, from the cosmos. “Body, soul, society, everything here is intermingled”, as Mauss (1950: 303) says. The body is part of a living whole and signifies it. Since everything is connected to everything else through universal sympathy, everything is a symbol and every element bears the signature of the whole. “The cosmos is in man, as man is in the cosmos” (Le Breton, 2006: 395). Between the body and the cosmos, there is, as Foucault has clearly shown in his archaeology of the human sciences, analogy, resemblance and correspondence. It is enough to interpret the body to find, as in a “hieroglyph” (Foucault, 1966: 42), the hand of God. Until the 16th century, the human being is not an “in-dividual”, an undivided and separate being, but a knot of relationships. The subject is in his body, but he does not yet have an objectified and individualised body, separated from others, from nature, from the stars. It is only with the long transition to modernity that the body will be simultaneously objectified and individualised.

It is in Mikhail Bakhtin's great book (1970) on “grotesque realism” in the works of Rabelais that David Le Breton finds the most complete description of the living, joyful and exuberant body in medieval popular culture. In popular comic culture, as expressed in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and as it survives today in Carnival, especially in Brazil, the body is still part of a great body in jubilation. Merged into the collective body, the individual body opens up to the cosmos, even as it bends downwards and becomes disindividualised. Through its orifices, the body remains open to other bodies; through its excrescences, it crosses its boundaries; through its excrements, it remains linked to the earth.

Human among humans, united in a single popular body that unites beings of all ages, sexes and conditions in a single movement, the incorporated subject in contact with others is transformed into an animal that loses and finds itself in the joy of collective effervescence. For Rabelais, the corporeal and material “bottom” of popular culture is creative and regenerative. By pulling everything downwards, towards the bowels and the bottom of the earth, grotesque realism suggests that death is part of life and that both are only phases in a cosmic process of continuous renewal: “Everything that is completed, quasi-eternal, limited and outdated rushes into the earthly and corporeal ‘bottom’ to die and be reborn there” (Bakhtin, 1970: 368). This co-implication of death and life, of the low and the high, of the abject and the sublime, can also be found in Georges Bataille's philosophy of erotic transgression (1957).

It is only later, in the sixteenth century, with the emergence of a new literary canon that separates popular from official culture, that the body will detach itself from other bodies and close in on itself. The orifices that give access to the interior of the body will be sealed and delimit its boundaries. As the body becomes individualised, attention shifts from the body's bottom (the genitals, the buttocks, the belly, the nose and the mouth, which symbolise metamorphosis) to the top (the head, the face, the eyes, the lips, which express the individual's character). “The body of the new canon is *a single body;* it no longer retains any trace of duality [which embodies the opposites]; it is self-sufficient, it speaks only in its own name; everything that happens to it concerns only it, an individual and closed body” (Bakhtin, 1970: 319).

For David Le Breton, the objectification of the body and the individualisation of the person are the hallmarks of the West and, by extension, of modernity. The fabrication of the body as an autonomous, visible and divisible entity and the invention of the individual as an independent being are correlative processes. The closure of the body and the emergence of the individual as *homo clausus* (Elias) must be understood within a multisecular process of civilisation that separates human beings from one another by separating them from their bodies. “It is the body, it is said, that separates human beings from one another like a wall - even though we know perfectly well that it is the body that brings them together” (Elias, 1987: 164).

The individual body that encloses the subject is also the one that frees it from the collective body. The body is the “factor of individuation” of the soul which fragments the spirit and differentiates the person from the collective to which it belongs and out of which it emerges (Durkheim, 1960: 386). The body is a factor, but also a function of individualisation. Uncoupled from the social body and yet produced and constructed by it, the body becomes, as David Le Breton (1990: 14) so aptly puts it, “a body unto itself”.

Like the individual, the body is what remains when it is removed from the community, the cosmos, the totality of relationships. The body that used to be the link between humans and the universe now becomes a circuit breaker. The skin is a boundary that separates people from each other, while the face becomes the place of identity that differentiates individuals from each other. “The modern definition of the body implies a triple withdrawal, concludes Le Breton (1992a: 27): the human being is cut off from others (individualistic structure), cut off from itself (human-body dualism) and cut off from the cosmos (which has become simply the ‘environment’). The body is a remnant. But this remnant gives the individual a face”.

In his masterpiece on faces, which I personally consider his best book, David Le Breton (1992a) traces the birth of the individual among the privileged classes. In the painting of individual portraits of merchants, artists and *condottieri*, first in early medieval Flanders and Germany and then in Renaissance Italy, he detects the first signs of modern individualism. The collective body slowly becomes an “I myself” to which the body lends its face. The invention of the face coincides with the hegemony of sight. More abstract than the other senses, sight is more distant and selective, as Georg Simmel (1993: 276-292) noted in his seminal essay on comparative aesthesiology. Much later, the representation of the face would be democratised by photography. Today, the avalanche of *selfies* seems more a symptom of the crisis of individualism than a sign of its apogee.

At the same time as the body was individualised by the face and represented in painting without any religious reference, it was objectified and detached from the person by medicine, particularly by anatomy. Defying the theological prohibitions on dismembering the corpse, which prevents its resurrection, the opening of the body by dissection radically separates the body from the person. The face that personifies the body disappears. What remains when the person is removed is the body as a corpse, as a collection of bones, muscles and ligaments, organs and veins, such as can be seen on the famous plates of flayed bodies in Vesalius’ *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543). In his book on the history of anatomy, David Le Breton makes no secret of his horror: “With flesh exposed, the belly open to tangled viscera, the skull sawed off, the skin flayed, the muscles flaccid and red, all modesty gone, the body is searched without any other form of scruple in the name of the superior imperative of knowledge” (Le Breton 1993:11).

Cut off from the person and detached, the body thus becomes an autonomous object *sui generis* whose functioning can be studied as if it were a machine. The anatomical and physiological objectification of the body affects the perception of the body itself as something that one has and owns. Barely a century later, in a significant passage of his *Meditations* (1637), Descartes associates his body, as if by slip of the tongue, with an animated corpse: “I considered myself first of all as having a face, hands, arms, and all this machine composed of bones and flesh, such as it appears in a corpse, which I designated by the name of body' (Descartes *apud* Le Breton, 1993: 95).

*The commodification of the body*

Mechanism, a philosophy of physical bodies in motion, will become the paradigm of Western medicine. The Cartesian dualism between the soul and the body will find its fulfilment in modern medicine. If anthropic mechanism separated the soul from the body without knowing how to join them (except through the “pineal gland”), biomedicine radicalises the dualism by separating the human being from its own body. Indeed, modern medicine does not treat the human being so much as its organs. By disregarding the relational aspects of disease and the holistic aspects of treatment, medicine depersonalises disease and specialises in fragmenting the body in order to focus on the organ, its pathologies and its symptoms. In order to make a diagnosis, it is necessary to carry out examinations, ever more examinations, which make the body “visible and legible” (Serres, 1974: 15-72). Following on from Vesalius’ anatomy, “inscription technologies” (radiography, ultrasound, MRI, etc.) of biomedicine transform the lived body into a series of superimposed images or figures that only the doctor can interpret. Patients see themselves, but no longer recognise themselves in the image of their body that the doctor sends them.

An image of the body has replaced the lived body. By radicalising the disconnection of scientific knowledge from the lived body, modern medical science has ended up reifying the body. It becomes a complex machine (comparable to a car), connected to other machines and computers, whose functioning must be optimised (by adjustments and oil changes) and whose life must be extended (by replacing wearing parts) at all costs. The technicisation of biomedicine and the commercialisation of its services in a highly specialised hospital-medical industry find their operationalisation in therapeutic overkill and resuscitation techniques that transform patients into plants that are artificially kept alive in a prolonged vegetative state.

It is therefore not surprising that medicine is entering a crisis and that patients are increasingly turning to alternative medicines (ayurveda, acupuncture, magnetism) and alternative treatments (homeopathy, chiropractic, oligotherapy) that seek to humanise medicine through a holistic approach to the person. While these so-called “alternative”, “unconventional” or “complementary” approaches make it possible to reintegrate the body into the mind through a process of re-symbolisation, they do not escape the corrosive effect of ambient individualism. In a disenchanted world, the resignification of the body cannot restore totality. By embracing both science and magic, conventional and non-conventional medicine, scholarly knowledge and popular knowledge, the post-modern individual is “in search of a lost body” (Le Breton, 1990: 91). Without worrying too much about the coherence of their knowledge, individuals cobble together their personal vision of the body; by passing from one practice to another, from fitness to yoga for example, they also pass, but without knowing it, from one body to another.

In the imaginary of contemporary societies, under the discourses of the “liberation of the body”, Le Breton detects both an infatuation for the body and a hatred of the body. Both the “return to the body” (as *alter ego* in a process of subjectivation) and the “farewell to the body” (as *alter techno* in a process of objectivation) express an investment in the body that is itself the result of a long-standing desymbolisation of the relationship to the world, to oneself and to one's body. On the side of technophilic somatophobia, we find the body machine of mechanic philosophy, but now equipped with all the excesses that the technological commodification of the body makes possible (Le Breton, 1999): harvesting, trafficking and transplantation of organs; cosmetic surgery, body-building and body art; *in vitro* fertilisation, ectogenesis and cybersexuality; genetic manipulation, cloning and animal transgenesis; artificial intelligence, robots, transhumanism and cyberpunk. All these phenomena of the “extreme contemporary” bear witness to the programmed obsolescence of the body in the age of its industrial production and reproduction.

On its somatophilic side, the body is seen as a resource, as an instrument that individuals can manipulate and mobilise in their quest for a personal identity. Le Breton (1990: 157-180) speaks of the body as an *alter ego* - a mirror in which the new Narcissus contemplates himself. In the age of emptiness, there is only the body left to which the individual can attach himself. Without transcendent reference points, without community, without values, the individual sculpts, transforms and drapes the body to create an identity. The bodybuilderwho works his muscles forges a body that strangely resembles the plates of the anatomy books: “The structures are as visible under the living skin of the practitioners as they are on Vesalius’ plates” (id., 38). Others seek to differentiate and distinguish themselves through tattoos and piercings. In some of the more extreme cases, individuals self-mutilate by cutting and burning themselves to feel that they exist. To escape suffering, they add to it. In order to suffer less, they inflict controllable pain on their bodies, thus manufacturing identity with pain. “The body cuts (incisions, abrasions, scarifications, burns, excoriations, lacerations, etc.) are an ultimate means of fighting against suffering; they refer to a use of the skin that also makes it a sign of identity in the form of wounds” (Le Breton, 2003: 9).

*Anthropology of limits*

Following in the footsteps of Marcel Mauss, Georg Simmel and Georges Bataille, David Le Breton does not see the human as a being who prudently calculates profits and losses like a small grocer. On the contrary, in order to feel that they exist and to escape the monotony of the routines of daily life, human beings, especially when they are young, want to live an intense life. They seek excess, flirt with danger and throw themselves headlong into adventures that test their limits and reveal what they are capable of. It is by taking the risk of losing themselves that the subjects find themselves *in extremis*.

In his anthropology of limits, David Le Breton (1991, 1995, 2002, 2007) explores “another sociology of risk” that puts games with death (symbolic or real) at the centre of the analysis of transgressive behaviour. When the meaning of life slips away, when there are no more limits, playing with death offers a solution. When applied to the younger generation, the expression “risk behaviour” refers to a whole series of disparate behaviours (running away from home, alcoholism and drug addiction, violence and delinquency, anorexia and bulimia) which are similar in form and have in common that they symbolically or actually, in any case deliberately, put existence in danger. Le Breton stresses that these behaviours should not be interpreted as suicidal. Rather, he sees them as desperate attempts to escape suffering and give meaning to life. By taking back the initiative and control, even if it means losing their lives, youngsters are trying to secure themselves so that they can finally live. Death games therefore express a will to live. Or, as Nietzsche put it: “I wanted to live, that is why I had to die” (quoted by Le Breton, 2002: 122).

The majority of young people enter adulthood in relative peace. A minority, however, feel bad about themselves. Before the Covid-pandemic, a quarter of young people were in distress. During and after the pandemic, rates of youth depression soared. Faced with an unstable and threatening world, without reference points, the youth lose their footing and enter into a crisis. The social crisis finds its extension in an identity crisis which is compounded by an existential crisis. Adolescents have the feeling that their life is null and void. They feel abandoned by their peers and struggle with recognition. Disoriented and alone in a world that does not support and understand them, that does neither hold nor contain them, they enter into despair and take action. “Acting replaces the impossibility of putting into words. [...] He reacts with an immediate action that resembles a cry: he throws himself out of the window, swallows prescription drugs from the medicine cabinet, runs away from the family home, suddenly enters into unexpected violence, drinks with friends before getting back into his car and driving at full speed on the roads, etc.” (Le Breton, 2002: 96).

Risk behaviour is symptomatic of a society of individuals adrift, as analysed and diagnosed by the sociology of individualisation (Beck, Giddens, de Singly, Dubet, Martuccelli). In the absence of well-established traditional rites of passage between childhood and adulthood, young people with a poor sense of self lack symbolic markers to accompany them as they enter adult life. Confronted with the emptiness and the lack of meaning and recognition, they invent, alone or with their peers, rituals that put them to the test and in danger. These acts, which the anthropologist describes as “acts of passage” (Le Breton, 1995b: 166 and 2007: 123-127), aim to give meaning to their existence.

Following Van Gennep and Victor Turner, Le Breton distinguishes three successive moments in the individualised rites of passage: the preliminary moment with removal from the family circle; the liminal moment of the ordeal and the excess and, finally, the moment of the young person's rebirth and return to society. The transgressive acts of the liminal phase, which are generally frowned upon by the parents, are appeals to their peers for recognition of their suffering and their person. By conjuring up pain, these quasi-sacrificial acts provoke a symbolic exchange with death. In the form of an ordeal (judgement of God - *ordalium* in Latin), self-inflicted torments force the judgement or verdict and give a firm answer to the question of the person's worth. The ordeal manufactures the sacred at the intimate rather than the collective level, because in modernity, religion, myths and rites have become individual and intimate.

In *La trace et la peau* [The mark and the skin] (Le Breton, 2003), a terrific, yet also terrible book, David Le Breton analyses the attacks on the body (incisions, scarifications, burns, bloodletting, pricks and insertions of objects under the skin) as “identity wounds”. In the traces of the College de sociologie (Bataille, Caillois, Leiris), he underscores the sacrificial dimension. The scarification is a sacrification. “By *consecrating*, by introducing at his own expense into the domain of the sacred, something that belongs to him and that he abandons” (Caillois, 1950: 34) - in this case blood, skin and pain - the person who cuts him or herself freely gives a part of his or her body and introduces it into the domain of the sacred in order to save the whole. Le Breton insists that the offering of pain does not aim to increase pain. On the contrary, it seeks to reduce psychic suffering. Attacks on the body thus function as “a kind of homeopathy. In order to regain control, the skinned subject seeks to hurt himself, but to have less pain” (Le Breton, 2007: 113). If he cuts his body with a razor blade, a knife, a cutter or a piece of glass, paradoxically, it is to suffer less.

The surveys that Le Breton and his team in Strasbourg have conducted among young people have established that risk behaviour and attacks on the body are gendered. In girls, suffering is more internalised. Risk behaviours are more solitary and silent. They turn violence against themselves: “Girls use their bodies as a sounding board for their painful relationship with the world: nausea, vomiting, depression, diffuse pain, loss of consciousness, spasmophilia, tetany, isolation, scarification, suicidal thoughts, sleep disorders, nightmares, etc.” (Le Breton, 2002: 142). In boys, the suffering is externalized. It manifests itself less through self-effacement and more through confrontation and aggression, often under the gaze of peers, directing the violence towards the outside world (drunkenness, speeding, delinquency, suicide). Moreover, in suicide attempts, boys use more radical means. “They use guns and the father's or stepfather's gun or resort to hanging, drowning or defenestration. Girls resort more to drugs and, fortunately, most of the time they are saved” (Lévy, 2004: 152). The thesis of transgression, which Le Breton borrows from Bataille, is that in borderline behaviour “the approval of life manifests itself even in death” (Bataille, 1952: 17). By going to the limit, or even beyond it, young persons find, thanks to the thrills they seek by messing around, the meaning of their life. The ties that bind them to the world are re-established. The identity crisis is over; the passage is made; the discontinuous meets the continuous again.

*Opening: The Interior Amazon*

Phenomenologically, the human being is an embodied subject, a being who opens up to the world through the senses and signs. Existentially, the human is a being thrown into the world who seeks the meaning of life. Without flesh, the human being would not exist. In its experience, the body spontaneously appears as both *cogitatio* and *res cogitans*, subject and object, lived body and material body. Thanks to its “eccentric positionality” (Plessner), on the border between interiority and exteriority, the body can split itself without alienating itself. “It is double in itself, says Helmuth Plessner (1980: 248), but unified in this doubling”. The body can appear to the actor in the first person as something s/he is or in the third person as something s/he has. In certain circumstances, however, which may be painful (fatigue, pain, illness, disability), pleasurable (pleasure, tenderness, enjoyment) or both (expenditure, perversion and excess, as in Bataille's mixing of the sublime and the obscene, depression and ecstasy), actors may feel that their body is slipping away. But these experiences of duality are part of the human condition. Beneath the material body is the flesh; beyond the suffering is the hope of being reborn.

Modern dualism is of a different order, according to Le Breton (1990: 158). The reification of the body fragments the unity of the human being and separates the person from its own body. Originally, technology is only an extension of the body. In modernity, the human being becomes a machine and its body a prosthesis, unless it is the other way round. A modern person has the same body as the Neanderthal. Nevertheless, everything has changed, and one cannot shake off the impression that today it is technology that makes the human being by changing its nature. Modern individuals have almost literally cut themselves off from themselves, from others and from the universe, leaving only a fallow world. The body is a remnant. Objective autonomy is accompanied by subjective anomie. Lost in a world that no longer understands them, the postmodern subject fragments, acts out and disappears to give meaning to a life that no longer has any.

Le Breton is a hiker (Le Breton, 2000, 2020). One can sense that when he reflects on the present world, he would like to escape once again. By walking, meditating and singing, he wants to break through modernity to discover “the elemental” (Le Breton, 2000: 74): the earth, the stones, the sun, the wind, the heat and the cold. If he sets out on his journey, it is because he wants to overcome the alienation and fragmentation of being, to rediscover the meaning and silence of yesteryear. For, by leaving the city, “the walker finds a pre-modern world, prior to separations” (Le Breton, 2020: 106). If he returns to the experience of the lived body, of sense and sensibility, it is to be fully in the world. “If one has sufficiently sensitive hearing, one hears the grass growing, the leaves unfolding in the tree tops, the blueberries ripening and the slow rise of the sap. One feels again the light trembling of time that noise and urgency usually cover” (Le Breton, 2000: 55). The phenomenological reduction brings him back to the presence of things. Without the awareness of being separated from them, the things themselves are given to him “in person”, as Husserl would say. Sensorial immersion is an opening to the world.

For David Le Breton, walking is an “inner journey” towards presence. “The Amazon is always within” (Le Breton, 2020: 154 and s.d.), he says in a reminder of his wanderings in Brazil in the late 1970s (Le Breton, 1991: 9-10 and Lévy, 2004: 38-40, 143-144, 147). For him, hiking is a happy way of disappearing from oneself into nature, which restores the feeling of passionate existence: “Celebration of the body, of the senses, of affectivity, setting the whole person in motion, active presence in the world, walking puts one back in touch with oneself and with the sensation of existing” (Le Breton, 2020: 16-17). By leaving one's home to walk, one also leaves one's home to abandon oneself to one's being and to exist fully, if only for a moment, as long as it is eternal.

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