

The Human Body as a Cultural Product

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Abstract

The present article attempts to chart the human body. It poses questions regarding epistemological issues and the relationship between the human body and art. It chronicles the interdisciplinary of this field of knowledge, as well as its thematic focus, which is essentially the study of the human body as a cultural product. Theoretical research allowed us to trace the subject through depictions of the human body. Therefore, the image of the human body and its relationship to Culture are studied.

Keywords: human body, culture, art, cultural product, man, woman

Introduction

The financial crisis in our country has naturally affected our daily lives, which is reflected in the cultural events of the country. The number of “customers” of cultural events is increasingly lower, while long-standing cultural institution now finds them on the edge of a precipice. In essence, this means that the financial crisis has turned into a crisis of values and cultural products, as they had formed and, inevitably, been commercialized in recent years. Nevertheless, scientists never cease to study various fields culturally. The human body, for instance, has always been at the center of a debate, not limited within the scientific community but becoming a point of interest to the media, as well as public and private discussions. The scientific field of Biology, as it now interconnects with modern scientific applications, defines a human body as a complex machine, which also has a symbolic value. On the subject of beauty regarding the human body, the Ancient Greeks, for example, adored and exalted the human body, engraving it on and recreating it from marble, bronze, stone, and clay, while they also developed theories on beauty (Eco, 2004). However, the human body is not only a locus of beauty; it also enters a dynamic process of becoming, in the sense of cultural beliefs, which include the norms and customs, as well as the experiences of various social groups. Physical experience has been a crucial part of the depictions of the human body in Art. Culture, on the other hand, is de facto an extremely complex phenomenon, which is further complicated due to the fact that is examined from different points of view when it comes to science, with a different purpose guiding each approach. History, Ethnology, Anthropology, Sociology, Art Theory, Literature, they all define Culture in different yet intersecting ways, resulting in frictions and clashes between scientific fields on occasion, but also in fruitful interactions (Filiass, 2000). The members of a social group have certain distinguishing characteristics (language/slang, clothes, gestures, etc.) that differentiate them from people who belong in other social groups. The processes through which a social group gives access to the traditional knowledge one needs to enter it, as well as how this knowledge is used, is the classic definition of culture (Britannica, 2007). In the first paragraph of his book “Primitive Culture” (1871), 19th century British anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor presented a definition of culture which is considered classic: “Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Britannica, 2007).

Cultural Products and Goods

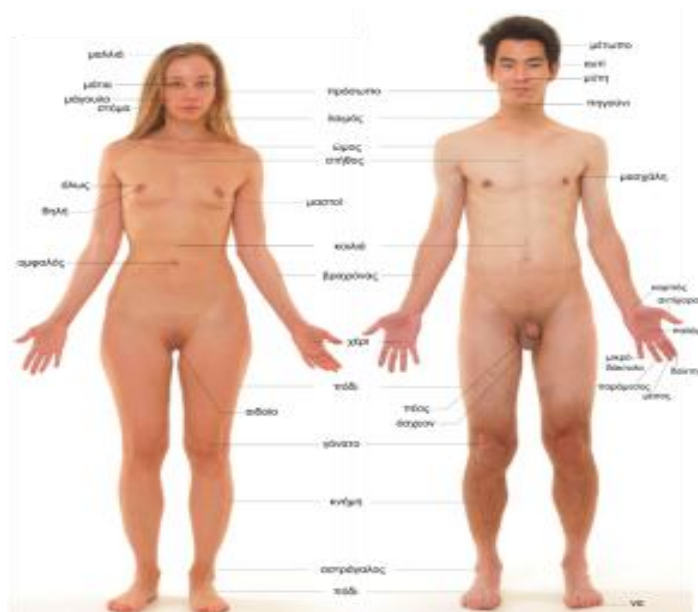
By the term “Cultural Goods” we describe the testimonies of human existence and individual and collective activity (Hellenic Society for Law and Archeology ΕΕΔικΑ, 2008). We understand as immaterial Cultural Goods expressions, activities, knowledge, and information, such as myths and legends, customs, oral traditions, dances, acts, music, songs, skills, or techniques, which serve as testimonies of both popular and literary traditional culture (Γ.Γ.Π., 2012).

The definition by UNESCO includes: cultural heritage, publications and literature, music, visual arts, audiovisual media, sociopolitical activities, sports, video games, games of chance, and tourism. Those working in the commercial sector of culture treat and promote cultural goods as products with the objective of profit. The non-profit sector offers cultural products without expecting any financial gain in return. A criterion of commerciality has been set – a cultural activity is considered profit-oriented if its sales surpass 50% of its production costs (**Spanoudaki, 2013**). Both cultural goods and services entail a creative or artistic background. Cultural goods can be material, such as a book or a painting, or immaterial, such as a museum visit or a play.

In order to ensure quality and cultivate demand, the opinions of experts (“cognoscenti”) need to be asked and promoted, to get the information to the public (**Towse, 2003**).

The human body

The *body* is the material being, the one which consists of flesh and bones. It is the sum of organs and parts of an organism. This is a purely biological approach. Humans identify with their bodies, as it is what defines and limits their abilities and activities, as well as the image they present to other people; it is what they see and touch. The body is an individual’s main means of expression, and it gives them their unique identity in society



(**Panagiotidou, 2010**). The human body was originally studied as a natural element, as part of nature which exists ontologically outside and beyond the span of intervention and management of social sciences. Thus, the mechanistic biomedical model of interpretation of body function was legitimized, with a body as a subject classified one-dimensionally as a natural phenomenon. The science of Sociology began considering the body as a subject of study quite recently. According to this approach, “the body is common in its biological functions with all other bodies, and it is unique as a social entity, as it is subject to and realizes the individual and collective (social) expression and desire” (**Alexias, 2006**). The western scientific model was established on the philosophical duality of the Cartesian concept, according to which the mind and the body are two distinct, separate entities. The body is considered inferior to the mind, and viewed as a machine in which lies the self. The mind is deemed the source of rational thinking (**Ikonomou, 2012**). However, since the early 20th century, this established view and the practice of rationalism have been called into question by a number of intellectuals, including E. Durkheim, F. Nietzsche, N. Elias, E. Goffman, M. Merleau-Ponty, and later M. Foucault, P. Bourdieu, M. Douglas, as well as by feminist theory (**Makrynioti, 2004**). In short, the theoretical framework of Physicalization is based on the following principles: (a) the body emerges as the main component of the identity of the individual, (b) the natural predispositions of the human body are recognized as the necessary base on which historically, socially, and culturally determined abilities and skills of the body are developed, (c) the ways in which individuals “record” on their bodies (physicalize) the social and cultural norms and imperatives are formed in conjunction with social interaction and social systems, yet maintain the potential to diverge from them, go against them, and maybe even change them, (d) the senses are recognized as an important source of knowledge for the individual, both on social reality and on their own body (**Makrynioti, Stigma: Notes on Managing a Worn Identity, 2001**).

The human body Western art

The human body has been one of the main subjects of Western art, from the Renaissance to this day. [...] In modern times, it could be characterized as mutable, imperfect, and wholly human. [...] The human body in art should be separated from the flesh it tends to copy. Its depictions should be viewed as symbolic. It is practically impossible for the body to represent itself as it is, as well as a range of metaphorical concepts, which not even the artists themselves can fully control, simply try to moderate through the use of frameworks and styles (**Britannica, 2007**). Carefully observing one of the *kores* (Figure 1) sculpted by 6th century b.C. artists in Ancient Greece, we can see that they are the same young women with whom Anacreon and Sappho would fall in love, since everything they considered beautiful is there: the smile, the look in their eyes, their step, their braids. Pythagoreans would justify the attraction of *kores* with the proper symmetry of their expressions, as well their well-proportioned and symmetrical limbs, since they were governed by the same law as the distances between the planetary spheres. A 6th century B.C. artist had to render that elusive, indeterminate “Beauty”. It should be noted that the original requirements for the creation of a beautiful form were precisely that proper proportion and symmetry. Therefore, the artist would make the eyes identical, equally proportioned braids, exactly the same breasts, equally long pairs of legs and arms, the folds of the tunics evenly spaced-out, the corners of the lips symmetrical thus forming the typical indeterminate smile of those statues.



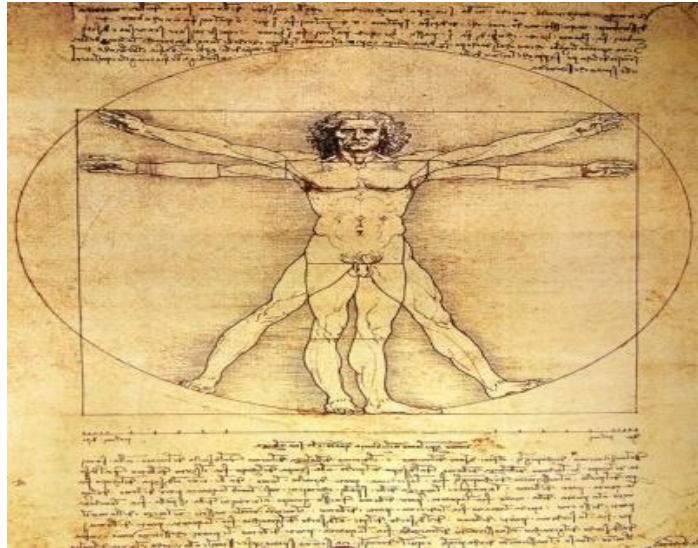
Although symmetry alone cannot explain the attraction of that smile, at the time the rigid concept of proportion and symmetry was prominent. Two centuries later, in the 4th century b.C., Polyclitus created a sculpture which was later named “Canon” because it embodied all the standards for the proper proportions of the body parts – yet that proportion was not the same as the past one regarding symmetry between two similar features; all parts of the

Figure2: From left to right: Doryphoros (Canon); roman copy of Polycleitus’ sculpture, 450 B.C., Naples, National Archaeological Museum. Diadumenos; roman copy of Polycleitus’ sculpture, 430 b.C., Athens, National Archaeological Museum.



body had to have a geometrical symmetry: A equals B equals C. Leonardo Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man would follow as the model for the proper body proportions, expressed in fractions of the full form: the head had to be $\frac{1}{10}$ of the total height, the head $\frac{1}{8}$, the length $\frac{1}{4}$, etc.

Figure3: Vitruvian Man is a famous design with accompanying notes by Leonardo Da Vinci, drawn circa 1490 a.D. in one of his diaries (Eco, 2005).



Rendering the Beauty of the body

For a painter, rendering the Beauty of a body means answering questions of both a theoretical nature (What is beauty? When does it become recognizable?) and a practical one (Which rules, which preferences, and which social norms let us call a body “beautiful”? How does the concept of beauty change over time, and how is it different for men and women?). Comparing various depictions of Venus (Aphrodite), we can see that the debate unfurling around the naked female form is rather complex. B. Green's “Venus”, whose pale sensual skin is highlighted by the dark background, clearly points to a natural and material Beauty which becomes more realistic precisely due to the imperfections of the forms (compared to the classical standards). Although Death lurks behind her, this Venus is a precursor to the Renaissance woman who knows how to tend to and showcase her body with no innuendo. The Renaissance woman uses the art of cosmetics and pays particular attention on her hair, often giving it a strawberry blond color. Renaissance was a daring and active time for women, who adapted to a life in the court and set rules regarding fashion. Later on, as a counterweight to the publicly showcased naked body, the expression of the female face in art would become private, intense, and almost selfish, difficult to decipher psychologically and sometimes intentionally mysterious. Velazquez' Venus, for instance, has her back turned, her face visible only as a reflection on the mirror (Eco, 2005). The Renaissance man places himself at the center of the world and likes to be depicted in all his proud strength, which often comes with certain hardness.

A world of senses and emotion

Aesthetic thinking deepens in the 18th century, looking for a “unity” in beauty, a reference that is more utilitarian, for example that defined by “interests” – the sensible, to be precise: familiarity, preferences, as well as the efficiency of bodies and the promotion of health. Painters and etchers use the “captured moment” technique, to arouse people's curiosity: naked legs suddenly showing under the dress as the woman is moving, breast surrendered to the arms measuring it, deepening looks, perspectives revealing forgotten profiles, the wide movement of her dress suggesting emphasized hips, the lack of balance accentuating the curves of the bust and the neck. A world of beauty more fragile, which reflects what is fleeting, infinitesimal, unexpected (Vigarello, 2007).

Historical trends in the depiction of the female form

We can all agree that the pressure put on women to comply with standards of beauty is far greater than that put on men in the West. One must look for the prevalence of these standards in the changes which took place during the past century. The fact is that the svelte body promoted as ideal is in direct contrast to the “ideal body” of the Middle Age (Grogan, 1999).

The idealization of the thin female form is a rather recent development, dating back to the 1920s. It is a quite popular opinion that the prevalence of the thin beauty standard is the result of the marketing practices of the fashion industry. Until the 1920s, clothes were presented in the form of sketches, and then they began being photographed and widely distributed through fashion magazines. Magazines projected an ideal image of women which would have to be adopted by real women. The fashion industry had promoted a particular type of outfits which seemed to fit different types of bodies. After World War I, the “flapper” look predominated, which favored bodies which were boyish and flat-chested, the clothes facilitating and being showcased by the women’s movements (Grogan, 1999).

Figure 4: Jean Harlow, 1934, <http://www.glamoursplash.com/2008/12/jean-harlow-june-and-marilyn-too.html>



In the 1950s, the body type promoted mainly through the film industry/ Hollywood as well as the fashion industry included large breasts, a thin waist and thin legs. The most characteristic ideal of beauty at the time was Marilyn Monroe. Throughout the decade, various steps are taken towards a thinner standard of beauty. Grace Kelly and Audrey Hepburn were thin, having an air of sophistication and refinement. At the same time, thin bodies became associated with and were considered a characteristic of the higher social classes.

Figure5: Grace Kelly



In the 1960s, Twiggy, a fashion model, became that generations standard of beauty. She was very thin, her chest was almost flat, and her figure was boyish. In the following decades, the female bodies showcased in magazines became increasingly thinner and more symmetrical.

Historical trends in the depiction of the male form

In Roman times, the thin and muscular male body epitomized natural beauty. In the Renaissance, the male body was depicted naked, and some form of natural movement was usually included in those works of art. Art historians believe that Michelangelo chose to depict that moment before the battle, when soldiers were getting dressed, to showcase his ability in depicting the naked male form (Abrahams, 2011).

The bodies have a natural movement and project the aesthetic ideal of the time. The male body was predominant in art until the mid 1800s. Artists then turned their attention to the depiction of the female form. Until the 1980s, the male form was hardly present in works of art, with the exception of works and photographic material directed at homosexual men. There were some exceptions, however: in the late 19th century, Thomas Eakins photographed his own naked body, defying the perception that male bodies should not be presented to a heterosexual audience. In the 1950s, the trend was whatever was pictured in Hollywood. Photographs were mainly of semi-naked film stars, in poses that flattered their toned bodies. Photographs of semi-naked men were prominent in the Western media in the following decades – think of Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, or Calvin Klein models. Fifteen years earlier, these bodies deviated from the standards of beauty, yet they now were the standard. The body was closely associated with setting and defending moral sets of rules of ugliness and beauty. It could be minimized or maximized, reduced or enlarged, cleaned or embellished. The body has constituted a field of expression of hidden desires and manifested emotions. It has been a place where both purity and vexation could be present. The body, then, constitutes a point of entrance to a wider physical and moral universe. Furthermore, it is an experimental protocol in order to enter the shifting and hazy social reality; this murky and patchy reality, every time more opaque and ambiguous. This does not go against the contemporary media critiques, which – as a number of intellectuals claim – treat the cinematic flow of the senses as a pure process, a useful illusion, a construct, a simulacrum (Stafford, 1993).

The grotesque body

Shortly before Descartes and the great “revolution” he brought upon philosophical thinking, in the late 15th century – therefore late Middle Ages –, the “grotesque” body appears: the body which eats, drinks, defecates, engages in sexual intercourse. It is a gluttonous body, whose edges spill out to the world and almost disappear. The fundamental principle of grotesque realism is degradation, deposing anything that had been raised to an intellectual level and idealized and resetting it on an earthly level. The body, the flesh, material status, instincts and urges prevail. Moreover, the grotesque looks for parts protruding from the body, parts which reach to the world and try to connect to it – a classic example: the large nose. The grotesque body is not a closed, clearly defined body, as it had been for centuries; it is a body which is open to the world, trying to connect to it, beyond any boundaries, which it essentially eliminates (Theodorou, 2013).

Figure 6: The grotesque body of a woman, 16th century.



The human body by Matisse

The reclining naked body has been the subject of many of Matisse's works, both paintings and sculptures. His sculpture “Reclining nude I” is posing in a way reminiscent of African Art. In it, Matisse plays with the volume of the female form, which is highlighted by the flatness of the background, a thick shadow separating the two worlds. “What most interests me” he would say “is not still life, nor landscapes; it is the human form. It is the human form which makes it possible for me to best express the religious sentiment I have for life” (Neret, 2002). His works went on to include more movement, for example “The Serpentine”. The embellishment in this work, the ultimate female shape, is the curve, or the arabesque design. The body is serpentine, with its arms and legs entwined as if they were forming a braid. This depiction of free movement was the precursor of Matisse's later famous work “The Dance” (Neret, 2002).

Figure 6: The Dance, Henri Matisse, 1910.

The five dancers are outlined by Matisse in thick brown lines, which accentuate simple anatomical details – the chest, the thighs, the leg muscles – in an intentionally childish way. One foot at the lower left corner of the painting is confusingly blurry, the top right dancer's stomach is clumsily defined, yet no one can seriously consider the crudeness of Matisse's design as incompetence. The left dancer's masculine image forms a perfect geometrical curve – an abstract design that, were it to be repeated, would turn into a mathematical game. Instead, Matisse does his best in tethering his ethereal imagination to the basic natural facts. One dancer is dropping his head forward, his stomach protruding, the muscles of the thighs pulling away. This raw depiction of the body releases the great visceral power of painting. It is impossible to ignore the fact that this looks like a tribal engraving or neolithic fertility idol. This form of painting reconnects contemporary vision to original art (Jones, 2008).

Conclusions

The review of the literature leads us to the following conclusions: First of all, there is a much larger volume of depictions of the female form than of the male form – the female sex, therefore, seems to interest most artists. Furthermore, each artist seems to focus on different parts of the body, which could lead us to support the claim that the body is treated as the sum of its individual parts rather than a whole. Possible causes for this “fragmentation” of the body are the technological developments in the field of Medicine and the scientific view of the body. Regarding physical experiences, a significant number of artists suggest through their works that sexual pleasure is the strongest, most intense state in which humans can be. However, physical experiences are not exclusively pleasurable; they can also be pathological, with pain being a predominant element. Moreover, the standards pushed by the beauty industry in the Western consumerist society have led to people being increasingly dissatisfied with their bodies. Both men and women express dissatisfaction with their bodies, and they engage in body-improving practices, which occasionally turn into obsessive-compulsive and extreme behaviors. Art responds to this phenomenon with performance art, in which the body is no longer a point of reference but “the body itself”, physically and emotionally vulnerable. So if one considers a generally accepted definition of culture, such as the aforementioned “Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Britannica, 2007), one can understand how depicting the body through art constitutes automatically a product of culture. The perceptions of physical beauty, morals and customs, dress, aesthetics, pain and dissatisfaction, gender identity, they all reflect the process of socialization of different societies and their cultural values.

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