

NUOVE FRONTIERE DELLA CORPOREITÀ. ABITARE IL MONDO DURANTE LA PANDEMIA

NEW FRONTIERS OF CORPOREALITY. INHABITING THE WORLD DURING THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Starting from the definition of the lived body, this paper explores the possible effects that the Covid-19 pandemic may have had, both in individual and more markedly social terms, on the way we conceive of our bodies and our corporeity. Within the body-world dialectic, it is highlighted how the new limits of our normality correspond to a new way of inhabiting the world and imagining our possibilities. Furthermore, a space is dedicated to the risks of identity inherent in the progressive limitation of the body's movement in space, and in the organicist conception of the body proposed by the biomedical paradigm.

A partire dalla definizione di corpo vissuto, in questo lavoro si esplorano i possibili effetti che la pandemia da Covid-19 potrebbe aver avuto, sia in termini individuali che più marcatamente sociali, sul modo con cui concepiamo il nostro corpo e la nostra corporeità. All'interno della dialettica corpo-mondo, viene evidenziato come ai nuovi limiti della nostra normalità corrisponda un nuovo modo di abitare il mondo e di immaginare le nostre possibilità. Inoltre, è dedicato uno spazio relativo ai rischi identitari insiti nella progressiva limitazione del movimento del corpo nello spazio, e nella concezione del corpo in chiave organicista proposta dal paradigma biomedico.

Keywords

Body; Corporeality; Inhabiting-the-world; Limits; Movement; Identity
Corpo; Corporeità; Abitare il mondo; Limiti; Movimento; Identità

Introduction

“Yet here too the body does not renounce its way of being in the world as an original opening, it just declines its “presence” in such outdated ways that make it incommunicable in its radical solitude.”

(Galimberti, 1983, “The Body”).

What has happened to us since March 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic forced us into *social distancing*, into restrictive measures of various kinds, into changing all our lifestyles? In inhabiting the world, the body builds a relationship of mutual exchange with space, in which it recognises itself and is recognised, constructing a system of references and reciprocal cross-references between itself and things, which become “its own”, allowing the body to feel at home within its environment and its routinised practices. In the face of the global pandemic that has overwhelmed us all, our relationship with the world and our possibilities of acting in it seem to have radically changed. If we assume that the ego cannot be distinguished from the body (Binswanger, 1936) but that it is precisely through the articulation of these two entities that it is possible to understand the founding character of human experience, understanding it as the subject’s assumption of his own being-in-the-world, and that the body is not only the place of origin of every gesture, but that we ourselves are body (Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Gamelli, 2001, 2009, 2019), the question that is foundational in this new normality is: What has happened to our bodies and the way we inhabit the world (Galimberti, 1987), in facing the limitations of our spaces and possibilities?

1. What kind of body are we talking about?

What are we talking about when we talk about *ourselves* and *our bodies*? If we assume that we are not “of the brain alone” (Contini, Fabbri, Manuzzi, 2006), in this work we distance ourselves from possible relapses into dualisms that refer to that now well-known Cartesian error (Damasio, 1994). *Our body* cannot be configured here as a mode of *res extensa* in opposition to a hypothetical *res cogitans* (Descartes, 1637). In fact, the pandemic and its consequences cannot be seen as bringing about substantial changes in our biology - except, of course, in cases of infection, but these are beyond the scope of our discussion. Instead, we want to deal with the detectable consequences at the level of the change in our experiences following substantial changes in our lifestyles, setting aside any impractical reductionist approach. Our attention is focused on the corporality understood in its two different epiphanies (Calvi, 2005), focusing on the relationship between the body-that-I-have and the body-that-I-am (Mariani, 2004), which defines the subject itself. We therefore understand the lived body (Leib) (Merleau-Ponty, 1945) as that single historicized entity that experiences the world through emotions and relationships. The biological body (Körper), i.e. considered only in terms of its anatomical structure and in reference to the components that allow it to explore and move in the surrounding space (Husserl, 1950) does not coincide with the image of the body that we have. In our daily lives we realise that we have a body, that we are a body considered as a mere physical object, mostly when it does not function, and becomes an object of study as an abstract body (Gamelli, 2019). The perspective in which we are moving proposes instead a consideration of man as a unity of body, mind and emotions (Mannucci 2006), as constantly interconnected dimensions that orient the subject in his thinking and feeling.

We will attempt to explore the changes in this *living body* (Mariani, 2020), always keeping in mind the two distinct poles that we have highlighted (Leib-Körper), and adding a third, which makes the possibility explicit: the *world*. This too should not be understood in reductionist terms, but operationalised as a direct logical consequence of the definition of the *intentionality of consciousness* (Brentano, 1874). If in fact *consciousness* always has an *object* and my body partly coincides with it, we can define the *world* as any object of consciousness that is not part of the body, anything that I am not within the *me-not-me* dialectic (Winnicott, 1962, Winnicott,

1971). It is therefore the emergence of a *limit*, a *boundary* that marks the origin of self-consciousness. Following the trends of the intersection between body and world, as if reconstructing a bolt from the shape of the key, we can thus reformulate our initial question: how does the subject change in the experience of his own body - and complementarily of the world - as the *limits of the world* change?

2. From body to space: the new limits of movement

In the circumstances of this new normality, we have found ourselves faced with a world that has ceased to function in the way we knew it, that has pushed us to come to terms with completely new rules, which seem to proceed in an opposite direction to the hoped-for “revenge of the bodies” (Cunti, 2010) supported by the movement of pedagogical culture for over a decade now (Gamelli, 2001, 2009), in the sense of the construction of a new educational way of thinking and experiencing one’s own body and that of others. In addition to the social distancing, one of the limitations that has affected us in a more important way has been that of our possibilities of movement in space, touched especially in the dimension of our possibilities of acting in reality. How could this state of affairs have led to an impoverishment of our identity dimension, if we consider that the individual’s conception of himself is determined as much by his theoretical knowledge as by the ways in which he acts and interacts with others and with the world? (Morin, 1991). It is in fact gestures that create that unity of identity that we call the body, in the sense that it is not the body that organises and arranges gestures, but it is gestures that give rise to a body from the immobility of the flesh (Galimberti, 1987). The construction of our mental image is produced both by self-observation of the body (Gibson, 1979) and by *feeling* our own body, which is the specific to which we anchor our identity.

Being active in experiencing the-world allows the subject to experiment and to acquire new awareness of their own spatiality and the ability to have conscious control over it (Cunti, 2017), due to the fact that “*movement, as well as being expression and communication, is relation in the sense of the bond, of the further forms that “going towards” can take, but it is also a giving of oneself in the most congenial ways and above all consistent with the possibilities made available by the context*” (Ibid., pp. 23-24). How might our progressive disembodiment have affected the meaning of our relationships and our knowledge of ourselves, our bodies and the world?

The interweaving of bodily experience, cognitive processes and life contexts (Striano, 2015, p. 92), which turns out to be what guides educational, social and relational processes (Contini, 1992) cannot but result, in this framework that we have outlined, other than changed, as the quality of the link with the surrounding environment and our representation of reality changes, which is reflected in the way we act, since thinking of reality in a certain way produces effects on how we consequently act in reality.

It is necessary to reflect on the possible implications of identity also in view of the embodied nature of the mind (Damasio, 2003), due to the fact that it cannot be separated from the thinking, feeling and acting of the body, and that in turn the body turns out to be the starting point in the process of development of cognition and identity of each subject (Cappuccio, 2006; Gallagher, 2009). One could almost hypothesise that the impossibility of living in an embodied way in the environment (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) might have had an impact on the quality of the ontological link between body, mind and environment (Bateson, 1972), considering how difficult it was to make explicit the “fundamental axes” that make the mind embodied, particularly in the dimensions that see it embedded, ex-tended, enacted, i.e. rooted in the environment, dependent on social relations and acted upon (Clark, 2008; Varela, Thompson, Rosch, 1991). The disappearance of our presence also modifies the perspective of the habitability of space, understood as a humanised and recognisable environment, which is constructed and organised through the exploratory actions that we perform by moving our bodies in space (Neisser, 1976). As well as the organisation of our daily experience within a stable scheme of reality, which develops in the organism as a feeling that is produced by the body-in-action: a feeling of the body as it acts in the world (Damasio, 2000).

What possible implications could arise from the disruption of the continuous process of writing and rewriting of the schemes of reality and of the interactional exchange of information, and of the habit of being subjects located in the environment through the constraint constituted by our body? For now we can only hypothesise that, if the gestures that each individual makes are not a simple nervous and semi-automatic response to a stimulus, but constitute the body's response to a world that engages it (Galimberti, 1983), and through whose mediation the subject learns, forms, constructs knowledge, experiences emotions and internalises its own vision of the way in which it inhabits the world (ibidem), what we are or think we are cannot remain unchanged in the face of the changes of which we have been protagonists, falling, despite ourselves, far beyond that body which was already lost in post-modernity (Cambi, 2010).

3. Who and what can we touch? The new limits of the medicalisation of the body

Beyond the limitations of the body's movement in space, a no less challenging issue to address is the fact that, currently and on a daily basis, we do not know whether our bodies carry and consequently transmit the virus. While bearing in mind that the body always represents the discriminating and emblematic element of diversity (Manucci, 2017), "the junction between being 'healthy' or 'sick', the dividing line between the 'known' and the 'unknown'" (ibid., p. 3), the question is no less challenging to address. (ibid., p. 216), in the current emergency situation the way in which we conceive of our own and other people's bodies is gradually being emptied of the intersubjective dimension of corporeality, understood as the signification of the body as a body-project, as consciousness, as a relationship and as a value (Milani, 2010), going in the direction of a prevaricating medicalisation. Corporeality, resulting as much from the interweaving of the subject's social identity and life context, as from the cultural stimuli to build a body-consciousness, which is also a body-in -relationship, feeds on the stimulations coming from our ex-position to the world (Galimberti, 1987), just as our individual existence, which passes through the body and finds in it its identity matrix, is simultaneously a social and cultural construction (Orefice, 2017). The representations, discourses and theories produced by the social context are also fundamental with respect to the ways of representing what is healthy - *touchable* - and what is not - *untouchable* -, in a process of construction of meaning that originates from the body, which appears as "*an extraordinary vector of understanding - or not understanding - the relationship between the individual and his world*" (ibid. p. 60). The current social discourse around the body makes it an object of study fragmented into its parts, which is a far cry from Merleau-Ponty's (1945) conception, according to which we are *in* our body, or rather we are our body, whereby "*we do not merely contemplate the relations between the segments of our body and the correlations of the visual body and the tactile body: it is we ourselves who hold these arms and legs together; who see them and at the same time touch them*" (p. 214). In this time marked by the uncertainty of bodies and the delimitation of boundaries, whatever the body does becomes an object of observation and is questioned: coughing, sneezing, panting, sniffing, breathing (Greenhalgh et al., 2020). Isolation has become the symbol of the 'common good' as it protects us from the encroachment of the other's body, no longer a resource but a possible threat. What consequences might result from the exclusion of the other's corporeality, also from the point of view of building empathic relationships?

We know, in fact, that all psychic activities are based on biological functions, that at the origin of the elaboration of a "thinking Ego" there is an "Ego-skin" (Anzieu 1985, 1990), and that it is through the intersubjective exchange between bodies and contact with the bodily presence of the other that the foundations are laid for the development of empathic experiences, as confirmed by recent neuroscientific discoveries relating to the activation of mirror neurons (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia, 2006). The exclusion from our daily lives of the experience of the body, replaced by the body as a biological simulacrum of life (Galimberti, 1987), under the sign of its defence as an absolute value, "which opposes that absolute negative that is death, and its daily anticipation that is the disease" (ibidem, p. 94) has delivered us to the spread of medical control in the open space of society, which pursues unconditionally the biological value of life,

without consideration of its existential quality.

Biomedical knowledge, which, as numerous authors have already pointed out (Farmer, 2003; Pizza, 2015; Quaranta, 2006; Taussig, 1980), coincides with “official” knowledge about the body “isolated” from its cultural context, has produced the expulsion of man from his relational and symbolic framework (Orefice, 2017), creating an “anthropological hole” due to which “we struggle to understand the body of the Other because we do not start from the social and cultural representations through which the subject acts on the world, and the world acts on the subject” (ibid., p. 63). Fear of contact has transformed our natural sociability into something that, rather than enriching the way we inhabit the world, is a threat to our health (think of the dreaded assemblies, red zones, DaD, wheeled desks...), against which isolation and individualisation, to the detriment of our positioning within shared structures of meaning, have seemed the best solutions. What, instead, were the solutions to make us safe from the fear of the presence of the other, from the widespread sense of precariousness, from the insecurity that is turning today, and more and more, into a sense of mistrust towards others? As already highlighted elsewhere (Orefice, 2012), the reductionist perspective of the body, which renounces its being constantly “open to the world”, i.e. not cut off from the subject nor isolated from the cosmos (Diamond, 2012), risks making it an object among objects, increasingly manipulable and transitory, the product of a bricolage of unstable and fragile identities (Le Breton, 2007). If each person’s presence is denied to us as a con-presence, if the condition of being-with that founds our co-ontological experience of community is lost, what becomes of the experience that each person has of being a single body among bodies, which is differentiated from the otherness of the body of the Other? In the wake of this question, we reflect on how necessary it is today to rethink and problematise the meanings that our body is assuming, so as not to run the risk of emptying it of meaning in the name of an organic modelling of which science has accustomed us to thinking (Galimberti, 1987). Now more than ever, it is desirable to try to proceed in opposition to reductionism, in the direction of an integration of the various aspects that characterise our body being, which finally puts authentic identity and corporeity in the foreground (Cunti, 2016).

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