

**VISUAL TRESPASSINGS:  
EXPLORATIONS OF THE LIMIT IN CONTEMPORARY  
AMERICAN VISUAL ARTS: SALLY MANN'S DEAD BODIES**

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***Abstract:** Drawing on cultural studies, visual culture and semiotics, the present study investigates the particular ways in which contemporary visual arts approach the ontological issue of the limit, in a culture that has gradually and persistently blurred all limits to near erasure. In this sense, this study looks at American photographer Sally Mann's visual explorations of the body-as-flesh, as bold interrogations of cultural taboos, as well as innovative visual cues of ontological and epistemological transgression and inquiry.*

***Keywords:** body, death, limit, representation, visual culture.*

## **1. Introduction**

Despite the fact that, ultimately, death is as natural a phenomenon as birth, the history of mankind reveals that, as a species, we have spent incredible amounts of energy and have used impressive and intricate artifices of the intellect to conceal its implacability. Moreover, we have constructed true edifices of imaginative and narrative creativity to avoid contemplating the unavoidable. Thus, over millennia, death seems to have shifted from a natural phenomenon that Neanderthals must have succumbed to just as unwittingly as mammoths or wild boars, to an intensely culturally embedded mythology, designed to numb our fears and anxieties. As Homo Sapiens rose, so did his terror of his own demise. And so did his therapeutical strategies of containing and redirecting his fears. Culturally speaking, these strategies gradually developed into complex religious and philosophical systems. Their role was to promote heroism and sacrifice as means of transcending death and ascending to a superior ontological reality called *afterlife*, as the mortal aspect of the body remained beyond debate. The soul was thus invented, as a superior, ethereal, invisible, impalpable, untraceable, but immortal entity that could ensure the continuity of the human project in the afterlife. The body was consequently either demonized, trashed, downgraded, as the despicable reminder of human limitations, or, more recently, hysterically glorified as the only visible and palpable trace of human existence and a timely victory of culture over nature. In both cases, the denial of death was thus sealed. And mankind could go on with its projects of immortality.

Representing death should therefore be regarded as a cultural effort to efface and overwrite a natural phenomenon rather than an attempt to accurately portray it. Consequently, representations of death should be studied as cultural expressions of

human intellect and creativity during a particular time and within a certain space rather than imitations of reality. And more importantly, they should all be circumscribed to a certain cultural and ideological frame of mind, which unavoidably produces stereotypes, clichés, and patterns.

The present paper attempts to look at 20th century American photographer Sally Mann's visual representations of death and decay as provocative insights into the real nature of the relationship between the body, nature, culture and the human spirit in the contemporary Western world. In doing so, this paper considers some of the most important discourses on the body as the junction site of nature and culture, ranging from Freud's bodily fixated psychoanalytical theories (2016: 117-135) to Foucault's (1995: 3-32) rewarding recuperation of the body as cultural text, as well as to contemporary theories in visual representation and semiotics. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the role that Ernest Becker's 1973 *Denial of Death* had in the production of this text, as it placed into a much wider context many of the concerns and conclusions of the present investigation. Despite its modest visibility, Becker's work is a compelling insight into the Western attitudes towards death, as well as a bitter reminder of the constant terror of death we have to put aside every day, in order to function as individuals and communities. As a cartographer of contemporaneity's philosophical solutions to this terror of death, Becker's central thesis is that all human activity, individual or collective, past or present, is in fact a flee from death or, as he (2011: 3) calls it, a denial of death. The immortality projects that mankind has imagined throughout the millennia have taken a plethora of forms and expressions, all of which have served as therapeutic denial mechanisms. It is in this context of social psychology and cultural history that the present paper places its inquiry. To what extent can the blunt contemplation of uncosmetized dead or diseased bodies subvert the denial of death and trace the limits of a culture? How can contemporary art photography interrogate cultural taboos and question the Western heroic projects? And finally, is there anything other than beastly nature left once the body has been stripped of its cultural layers and meanings?

## **2. Cultural attitudes towards limits and death in the contemporary Western world**

The world must have been terrifying to the early humans. And it must have been so primarily due to the world's apparent limitlessness. Consequently, as Neanderthals evolved into Sapiens, human activity gradually intensified towards setting limits. Creating communities, naming the world around and all the things in it, mapping, bordering, regulating actions, behaviours and relations, all of these became soothing initiatives in setting out limits. The limit seems to have had an almost therapeutic role in human development. It still does. It controls fears, normalizes behaviours, appeases anxieties and turns the world from a terrifying, uncontrollable chaos into a friendly, predictable haven. But the limit also provokes. It invites trespassings. It ignites progress. Hence, there is an inherent ambivalent nature in the limit. It organizes, yet narrows down, it regulates, yet creates categories, it soothes, yet provokes. In Western culture, attitudes towards the limit have therefore oscillated between acceptance and rebellion, surrender and challenge, according to the dominant ideology, social and cultural variables.

As Yuval Noah Harari argues in his recent works, *Sapiens* (2011) and *Homo Deus* (2015), in the theocratic West, life, death and all the norms regulating them

were dictated by a superior divine entity, generically called God, by means of the sacred Word (the Holy Books) and were, therefore, outside the reach of humans. Death and the representations of it were therefore standardized in normative narratives and imagery, generally emulating from the Bible. Religion provided a safety net for people's terror of death, by putting forward the improbable, yet utterly enticing concept of afterlife. As Harari (2014: 2) puts it in the opening of his study, "Homo sapiens rules the world because it is the only animal that can believe in things that exist purely in its own imagination, such as gods, states, money and human rights". As the first valid hero system in the history of mankind, religion relied on collective heroism and on collective reward. The concept of afterlife provided both an impulse to heroism and a reward for it. As generated by an ontologically superior entity, God, the limit could not be transgressed or transcended other than in/under His terms and was therefore out of human reach. In addition, as Becker (2011: 12) argues, Christianity, in particular, won the battle with other mystery cults by putting forward a hero who came back from the dead and thus epitomized people's uncanny hope for eternal life. The terror of death became the main source for religious control and domination, as death became heavily mythologized as a threshold to Heaven or Hell. But thus, it became manageable. Therefore, in the classical Western visual arts, representations of death range from various personifications of mythological or religious inspiration (generally moulded on biblical imagery), to skulls (Albrecht Durer, 1521; Frans Hals, 1626; Van Gogh, 1885; Cezanne, 1898; Picasso, 1908), still nature or gracefully dying humans (the Passions of Christ, Michelangelo's *Pieta*) (Stewart 2019).

As religion gradually started to lose its grip on people and the Church, as an institution, came under increasing criticism from a constantly growing part of the society, previously unquestionable limits came under scrutiny and challenge and the terror of death was again on the loose. New systems of repression had to take over in order to make human existence bearable. New heroic narratives had to replace the declining allure of religion. With Nietzsche's 1884 proclamation of the death of God (Nietzsche 2006: 5), secular humanism came into place. With man replacing God starting with the Enlightenment, the entire Western attitude towards limits and death was reconfigured. Life, death, moral and aesthetic norms came under the governance of human reason and later, emotions. As a consequence, Western narratives and representations became increasingly heterogeneous and diverse, while death a reality to be avoided at all costs. Left by himself, man had not only to seek for the meaning of life on his own (Becker 2011: 194), but also to come up with innovative narratives to keep the *Angst* of death at bay. Consistently, the myth of the immortal soul was gradually replaced with that of the more vulnerable *self*, an entity that situated the pursuit of happiness and, alas, the source of all unhappiness inside man. If the soul was externally defined mostly by religious grand narratives and was, therefore, located in a region beyond human intervention, with redemption as the sole pathway to Heaven, the birth of the self sealed the death of God. In the 20th century, psychoanalysis and psychology reconfigured the world's limits and located them in the human mind. Freud's lifework is a long study of human anxiety as a response to "the terrors of nature", "the painful riddle of death", "nature's dreaded forces" (Freud qtd. in Becker 2011: 53). The limit is, all of a sudden, insurmountable other than through repression, deceit, and, again, mythologizing. The self becomes the foundation of individual identity, the new myth of the 20th and 21st centuries. And identity, a collection of socially and culturally acceptable attributes, meant to safeguard man in the face of

the death dread. If, in the theocratic West, collective identity prevailed and was mostly externally determined by a set of norms meant to keep people culturally homogenous and functional as a group, with humanism, identity gradually slid towards the individual and more personal coordinates. Even though, to the modern man, this must have felt as a huge step towards personal freedom and progress, from the point of view of the relationship with limits and death, this put a heavy weight on his shoulders. He was now to set his own limits, deal with death his own way, find meaning on his own terms. All of which led, as Becker argues, to the emergence of the neurotic individual that characterizes contemporaneity. As he (2011: 191) puts it, “modern man became psychological because he became isolated from protective collective ideologies”. If history is “a succession of immortality ideologies”, then “modern life is the failure of all traditional immortality ideologies to absorb and quicken man’s hunger for self-perpetuation and heroism” (idem: 190).

In the same matter, Yuval Harari (2014: 34) embarks on making some daring predictions about the near future of mankind, claiming that we are on the brink of a momentous leap from *Sapiens* to what he calls ‘*Homo Deus*’. This would actually represent the next step that secular humanism takes in replacing divinity with humans, not only at the level of decision-making and norm and pattern generation, but also at the level of literally creating life, and, therefore, deleting death from human experience altogether. To Harari (2014: 45), what Becker labeled as modern neurosis in the 1970s, is in fact the expression of a brave new world at its dawn. One which will entail a new paradigm in discourse and representation, where the absence of death (even if only at a conceptual level) will certainly lead to an exacerbation of standardized corporeality, already visible in practices and rituals such as dieting, exercising, plastic surgery, the wellness industry, etc. The healthy living body will therefore become the only possible body, while art an end-product of algorithms.

### 3. The body as limit

Ernest Becker (2011: 51) provides a chilling definition of what he calls the human paradox: men are gods with anuses. Beyond the intended oxymoron of such a statement, there is an underlying painful truth: the body is what stands in the way of human self-sufficiency. The body is a constant reminder, as well as the cause of our mortality, frailty, vulnerability, limitations and unhappiness. The body *is* the limit. That is why the body has systematically been vilified as the source of man’s fall, weaknesses, passions and addictions. Historically, religion has enclosed the body into a rigid corset of rules, regulations and disciplinary practices, meant to minimize the consequences of what Becker (idem: 96) calls the “creatureliness” in man. Man’s body was a “curse of fate” and culture was built upon repression”, because “man was primarily an avoider of death” (ibid.). The body/soul dyad dominated the Western thought for nearly two millennia, if not more. While the soul was an expression of the divine spark, one to eventually return to its Father, the body was a prison, a cage, a carcass, meant to remind man of the Original Sin. Which, in Kierkegaard’s existentialist reading of the myth of the Fall was the fall into self-consciousness. This fall resulted in the existential *Angst*, a dread which translated man’s inability to fully identify as either animal or angel (idem: 69).

Despite Freud’s groundbreaking body-centred psychoanalytical theories at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which in fact accentuated the body-as-limit

ideology, it was Foucault's major contribution to the 20th century episteme to recuperate the body from the negative conceptual framework it had been historically exiled to:

[...] to man's experience a body has been given, a body which is his body – a fragment of ambiguous space, whose peculiar and irreducible spatiality is nevertheless articulated upon the space of things; to this same experience, desire is given as a primordial appetite on the basis of which all things assume value, and relative value; to this same experience, a language is given in the thread of which all the discourses of all times, all successions and all simultaneities may be given. This is to say that each of these positive forms in which man can learn that he is finite is given to him only against the background of its own finitude. (Foucault 1995: 314)

For Foucault, the body is a cultural space rather than anything else. It represents a locus, where discourses, power and ideologies compete for supremacy. Far from being a mere physiological entity of the animal realm, the human body is the product of the culture it lives in. Consequently, its significance to cultural studies should be paramount. Following Foucault's line of thought, contemporary Western culture gives centrality to the body's connection to identity as a cultural construct. As Mark Currie argues in *Difference*,

personal identity is not really contained in the body at all; it is structured by, or constituted by, difference. [...] identity is not within us because it exists only as narrative. By this I mean two things: that the only way to explain who we are is to tell our own story, to select key events which characterise us and organise them according to the formal principles of narrative to externalise ourselves as if talking of someone else, and for the purposes of self-representation; but also that we learn how to self-narrate from the outside, from other stories, and particularly through the process of identification with other characters. (Currie 2004: 17)

The body becomes thus central to Western culture in the past century, as both a medium and a locus, a performance and a representation, a source and an end, a map of mankind's advances and failures. As Nicholas Mirzoeff argues in his introduction to *Bodyscape*,

if the body changes, then everything has been transformed; the body is at once the final point of resistance to the global imperatives of postmodernism and the first to be affected by them. (Mirzoeff 2005: 2)

#### 4. Sally Mann's dead bodies. A case study

In contemporary Western art, the body has been taken as far away from standardized representation as possible. Today, it carries the subversive potential for transgressing stereotypical representation and for performing a critique of old idols. Representations of the queer body abound in contemporary visual arts, in order to mark the interrogation of limits and boundaries, the transgression of cultural norms and taboos. However, there is an intriguing and persistent avoidance to represent dead bodies, even though these would be similar in meaning to the body-as-flesh trope, so extensively used in representing the female body, for instance. When representations of dead bodies do occur, however, they are either instrumental to another field of study, mostly documentary or forensic photography, or conventionally beautified and thus heavily cultured. Representing

dead bodies *per se* should, therefore, be seen as a strong cultural and artistic statement in contemporary Western visual arts and an exploration of the limits of Western culture itself.

Born in 1951 in Lexington, Virginia, Sally Mann's relationship with death began in early childhood. Her father was a country doctor and hence well acquainted to disease and death, which added to Sally's own keen observations of the rural life (and death) of the American South, with its vast landscapes and isolated vibes. There were several momentous instances that she spent in the proximity of death that ignited her seemingly morbid interest in photographing dead bodies: the death of her dog and that of her father, juxtaposed with an artistic audacity and undisputable talent that made Time magazine call her "America's best photographer" in 2001. The choice of her photographic series *Body Farm* as the subject of the present analysis was primarily motivated by Mann's explicit disregard for the cultural taboos that Helene Cixous so well pointed out in her feminist *Laugh of the Medusa*:

Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex. (Cixous 1976: 885)

Uncommitted to Cixous's feminism, Mann publicly acknowledged the Western world's reluctance to visualize death, at the opening of her exhibition in New York in 2004:

There's a new prudery around death. We've moved it into hospital, behind screens, and no longer wear black markers to acknowledge its presence. It's become unmentionable. (Mann qtd. in Morrison 2010)

As a matter of fact, Mann's straightforward statement is a very accurate account for what has happened with the dying human body in Western culture over the past few centuries. As previously stated, with the demise of religion as a functional system of meaning, the reality of death brutally invaded the individual sphere, without the mediation and regulations of religion. Therefore, man was forced to conceal it behind new and diverse mystifying screens in order to restore the meaning of life and make life itself manageable. Looking at death right in the face would be, as American psychiatrist Irvin Yalom (2008:1-5) argues in his eponymous book, like staring at the sun: unbearable, painful, mindblowing.

Sally Mann does exactly that in her two photographic series dedicated to death: not only does she stare at the sun, looking at death from an angle unprecedented in visual art, but she also forces everyone else to do the same. *What Remains*, also known as *Body Farm*, is a collection of photos taken at the University of Tennessee's anthropological facility, a place where, for the sake of research, bodies are left to freely decompose in nature. Some of these bodies were donated to research, some belonged to homeless people, as Mann confessed. In various stages of decomposition, these naked bodies speak about human vulnerability at its peak, while exploring their metamorphoses in nature. There is a definite shock effect that Mann is looking for in all her photos, one that seeks to provoke, take the viewer out of his comfort zone, unculture him and strip him naked. Mann's photos are subversive in an obvious way, as they are targeted towards mankind's grand narratives: history, religion, culture itself. *What Remains* is a question that the spectator has to answer once he decides to look at these photos. Mann's photos render the human body generic, as all the subjects are not

only dead, but also naked and beyond recognition, due to decay. Cultural attributes, such as gender, race, age, social status are effaced and overthrown by death's work.

One must not forget, though, that Mann's work is not forensic photography, but art photography. What makes it art? How can showing appalling images of rotten bodies be art, after all? And how can one appreciate such images? The answer is to be found in the abrupt change of paradigm that Western art has undergone in the past century. Gradually moving away from figurative representation and embracing new forms of expression, contemporary Western art made a remarkably bold step in the 1960s, best epitomized by Andy Warhol's commodification and relativization of the artistic product. Art was no longer to serve a fickle aesthetic purpose and please a handful of educated connoisseurs, but was to be more about cultural diversity, globalism, identity and questioning limits. Therefore, ever since, contemporary art has come to encompass a wide spectrum of materials, subjects, modes of expression and concerns that are often met with a critical eye by the established art critics. As Nicholas Mirzoeff argues,

rather than presuppose an opposition between art, history and theory leading to a series of intellectual compromises, the artwork should be seen as the meeting place for all three, requiring a fluid and diverse approach to its interpretation that cannot be limited. (Mirzoeff 2005: 11)

Reflecting the rapid changes and subsequent uncertainties in the Western world, the body has once more become central (Mirzoeff 2005: 1). But one must not mistake the representation of the body for the body itself. This is the central thesis of Mirzoeff's *Bodyscape*:

In representation the body appears not as itself, but as a sign. It cannot but represent both itself and a range of metaphorical meanings, which the artist cannot fully control, but only seeks to limit by the use of context, framing and style. This complex of signs is what I shall call the bodyscape. (Mirzoeff 2005: 2)

In Mann's case, the metaphorical meanings attached to her representation of dead bodies are culturally targeted. Mann's *Body Farm* is used to support the culture/nature dichotomy in a reversed sense, with nature eventually overcoming culture in an undisputable way. Human vulnerability is laid bare in these photos, which document the utter lack of control, the inability, the disability. The black and white contrast is used to enhance the fine line between what is and what is not, between what is visible and what is not, with profound areas of grey shadows that mark the in-betweenness. The human body becomes flesh, carcass, empty shell, food for others, but also a powerful sign of becoming. Death is seen as natural, universal, overpowering, yet very much organic and dynamic. Mann's dead bodies are one with their background, they have been absorbed, almost swallowed by the landscape. There is an ambivalent aesthetic of vulnerability and strength, desperation and hope, decay and becoming.

## 5. Conclusion

Mann's photographs of dead bodies are meant to brutally call back the Western eye to what life is really all about, forcing an aesthetic of decay and decomposition. They are strong visual statements of the in-betweenness of the human body, constantly transgressing the boundaries of nature and culture, life and death, health and illness, beauty and horror. This would be consistent with what

Mirzoeff (2005: 2) observes, namely that “the modern period may be characterized [...] as having an awareness that the body is mutable, incomplete and altogether human”.

The shock effect is given by the cultural taboo of representing death as such. The body-as-flesh trope subverts the devouring gaze of the spectator who is consumed by the contemplation of implacable death. The staged visual representations of dead or disabled bodies violate the social and cultural norms of acceptability, while interrogating their authority. Trespassing boundaries and forcing limits represent necessary stages in the process of identity formation for Sally Mann. Her photos also discuss the problematic relationship between reality and representation, creating an imaginary of death and decay which forces the viewers to acknowledge their own finitude. Unable to master nature, the man is forced to fully admit his finitude in the shape of his own transient body. In visual arts this would translate as a rhetoric of bodily transgression and mutability, as Mirzoeff acknowledges:

The coherence of the represented body is, however, constantly undermined by the very incompleteness these images seek to overcome. The body is the object of whose materiality we are most certain, but the undefinable potential of that inevitably incomplete materiality remains a constant source of unease. (Mirzoeff 2005: 19)

Consistently, Sally Mann’s photography focuses on decomposing corpses, as if to challenge all unifying representations of the human body in Western culture. Just as her bodies melt away in nature, dissolving their contours, losing their attributes, becoming one with the landscape, the normative structures of traditional Western culture seem to fade away before the spectacle of unmediated death.

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