Some Historical Dimensions of the 'Dialogical Body': From Bakhtin's Dialogical Grotesque Body to the Monological Body of Modernity

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This paper tries to bring together two different fields of inquiry: body history and the dialogical self. It employs a dialogical perspective to trace some historical trajectories of a particular Western body concept. It is then argued that a dialogical self perspective may shed new light on some well-established findings in body history. The historical shift from the so-called 'grotesque' (dialogical) body of the Middle Ages, as described by Mikhail Bakhtin, to the modern (monological) body is sketched. The modern body is identified as guided by a kind of body knowledge that is deeply 'physiognomic.' It also echoes a shift in the balance between the 'body we are' and the 'body we have,' i.e., from a truly corporeal self to a body that is only and loosely possessed by a self. It is then argued that a body-historical perspective may also have merit for dialogical self theory because it shows that this modern conception of the body as possession still infiltrates the notion of the body in dialogical self theory.

Psychology suffers from a severe body-neglect syndrome—a condition already heavily lamented by Erwin Straus in 1935 (1935/1956).[1] Straus stated that psychology actually had nothing to say on matters of human embodied experience because it mistook the body as a physical object among others. He identified the roots of such mechanistic understanding of the human body in René Descartes' separation of mind and body, which subsumed bodily sensation (*Empfinden*)—the epitome of bodily existence and experience—under the rational conditions of the *cogito*. According to Straus, Descartes had made a grave and consequential mistake in treating sensation as just another mode of rational consciousness since ways of embodied knowledge could only fall short to the standards of rational knowledge. On these grounds, Straus launched a strong plea for taking sensation serious as a dimension of human existence that could not be explained and understood by recurring to the laws of either physical objects or rationality. He concluded that bodily sensation followed its own laws.

In this paper I position myself in the fields of body studies (Bordo, 1993), body history (Duden, 1991), body criticism (Wegenstein, 2006), and sociology of the body (Lindemann, 2002). From this perspective, I will ask questions pertaining to the historicity of the body. In a cursory rather than detailed attempt I will sketch the shift from a medieval to a modern conception of the body in Western culture. With Duden (1991) I start from the assumption that the dimension of embodied existence called *Empfinden* by Straus (1935/1956) is subject to historical changes, too. My paper is also an attempt to bring together this line of reasoning about the body with a notion of the self that has gained increased relevance in the intersection of cultural/historical psychology and the psychology of the self over the last years: the dialogical self

[1] I thank Gregor Wasitzky for acquainting me with Straus' early and vital critique of objectivist psychology.

(Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). It is my contention that both fields of inquiry may mutually profit from each other's perspectives. A dialogical perspective may shed new light on some by now well-established findings in body history. Reversely, a body-historical perspective may serve to re-think the conception of the body in dialogical self theory.

In particular, I will take a closer look at a body concept I consider typical for Western modernity: physiognomy. Physiognomy literally means 'body knowledge,' and it operates with a fundamental equation of a beautiful mind and a beautiful body. Physiognomic thought in general has a longer history, stretching back to Plato's (version 1963, p. 646) assumption of a correspondence between a beautiful disposition in the soul and a correlating beauty of bodily form. It is not until the beginning of the 18th century, though, that physiognomy is elaborated as a systematic body of thought by the Swiss pastor John Caspar Lavater (e.g., Lavater, 1775/1789). I will analyse his proposal of a science of physiognomy both from a body-historical standpoint, asking what cultural conception of the body it voices, and from a dialogical perspective, roughly employing the distinction dialogical/monological. In order to make the specificity and boundaries of this body concept clearer, I will contrast it with a historically earlier notion of the body described by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984a): the *grotesque body*. A deeper understanding of the socio-historical genesis of our contemporary notion of the body is, however, also necessary in order to critically reflect on modernist theoretical pitfalls like individualism and rationalism. I thus conclude my paper with some theoretical challenges for dialogical self theory that may be deduced from a body-historical perspective.

THE DIALOGICAL SELF AS BOTH EMBODIED AND HISTORICAL

Half a century after Straus' (1935/1956) critique of psychology's disembodied stance towards human existence, Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon (1992) took quite a similar line in criticizing psychology as individualistic and rationalistic. They, too, argued that Descartes was to be blamed for the "ethnocentric Western view of personhood" (p. 23) manifest in most psychological theories of the self. In stark contrast to such conceptions of the self, they understood the self as *embodied*, quoting the so-called social constructionist forerunner Giambattista Vico (1744/1990) and the experiential realist Mark Johnson (1987).[2] In their counterproposal to individualistic and rationalistic theories of the self—*the dialogical self*—Hermans and Kempen tried to overcome Cartesian rationalism in the following way:

"We are not only rational *animals, we are also rational* animals*. This balancing of the emphasis requires acknowledging the role of the body in the process of knowing itself. The most direct way to clarify this point is to show that the body, and, even broader, the reality of space, is in the mind, not simply outside the mind." (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 9, original emphasis)*

The dialogical self theory retained William James' (1890/1952) view of the self as consisting of different constituents: I and Me. The I refers to the reflexive parts of the self (the self as subject, knower, thinker, etc.), whereas the Me is described as the sum of

[2] See for a more detailed elaboration on the theories' grounding in social constructionism, and the consequences of this fundament for its conception of the body Ruck & Slunecko, 2006.

everything one can be said to own (the self as object, as known, thought, etc.). In James' account, the body is part of this sum. It is, as Hermans and Kempen argue in the above quote, "*in* the mind" (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 9). The dialogical self, however, amounts to a 'narrative translation' of James' distinction. Each Me is endowed with a voice to tell its own story, resulting in a multiplicity of I-positions. The centrality of the metaphor 'voice' is indebted to the Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1984b). Bakhtin had studied the works of Fjodor Dostoevsky and concluded that the heroes in his novels had the capacity to tell their stories by themselves. The author of such novels only functioned as a ventriloquist lending his voice to the heroes in his novels so their stories could be heard. Hermans and Kempen imagine the self in a similar vein: The I is but a voice lending itself to different Me's so that their positions can be heard.

The embodiedness of dialogue is, however, hardly ever taken seriously in research employing the notion of dialogical self (Zielke, 2006). Rare and notable exceptions are mostly studies of pre-linguistic dialogues in infants (e.g., Fogel, 1993; Fogel, et al., 2002) and Hermans and Kempen's paper about *Body, Mind, and Culture* (Hermans & Kempen, 1995). The embodied notion of the self is thus hardly taken beyond early ontogeny, and as Zielke (2006) has put it, the high expectations raised by theoretically claiming the self as embodied, are not fulfilled. On the contrary, the body is all too often discussed as part of a person's cognitive repertoire (e.g., Hermans, 1996, 2001a).

The dialogical self is, however, not only conceptualized as fundamentally embodied, but also as fundamentally *cultured*. Hermans (2001b) thus called self and culture "mutually inclusive." In their first assessment of culture, Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon (1992) advanced a very comprehensive interpretation of self and culture, arguing that modernity, with its individualistic and rationalistic ideals of selfhood, had influenced the entire organization of dialogical selves, restricting their full potential and resulting in centrally organized selves dominated by one or few voices. Quite curiously, some later conceptions are less encompassing. When explicitly presenting his model of a culture-inclusive self, Hermans treated self and culture as a "multiplicity of positions among which dialogical relationships can develop" (Hermans, 2001b, p. 243). In this conception, culture is a voice that may speak for itself or speak through another position, not necessarily organizing dialogical relations and selves. However, in his keynote at last summer's *Fifth International Conference on the Dialogical Self*, Hermans (2008) seemed to have favoured the earlier conception to the later when addressing the historicity of the self as one of the major future venues for research in a dialogical self perspective. According to Hermans, the self in its traditional, modernist, post-modernist, and dialogical notion underwent major changes that involved its entire structure, its relation to other selves and the entire world/cosmos, power relations, moral sensibilities, etc. In the following sections I will show that these historical changes also pertain to the body, and that the monological self of modernity is mirrored by a *monological body*.

THE 'GROTESQUE' NOTION OF THE BODY

In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin (1984a) analyses medieval folk culture and the carnival as a subversive counter-culture to the official culture, and, so might be added, to the mind/body separation predominating religious and philosophical doctrine. The body of (catholic) medieval folk culture is, of course, fixated on social hierachies, it is a

working body, and a devoutly catholic body. But what interests Bakhtin, is that it is more complex than that because it also exists on a second plane of reality that turns all existing hierarchies and doctrines upside down: It is a reality of the marketplace with its jugglers, acrobats, vendors, elixirs, magicians, clowns, trainers of monkeys, and people that would later be called 'freaks.' It is also a world of curses and oaths, and, not the least, of the carnival. This second plane of reality and of bodily life is structured according to the principles of what Bakhtin calls "grotesque realism," and it will capture everyone—including the aristocracy and the clergy—during certain times of the year. In the material body of grotesque realism, cosmic, social, and bodily elements together built up an indivisible whole:

"Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose." (Bakhtin, 1984a, pp. 26-27)

The grotesque body concept is profoundly *dialogical*, and this is why it exaggerates and transforms into hyperbole those parts of the body that are especially prone to the docking of the other, and which dissolve the borders between self and other. Medieval folk culture has a general interest in everything that protrudes or sticks out, in all the cases in which the body transgresses its limits or the limits of some classical body ideal. For this reason it has a certain fascination with bodies that were in the Middle Ages coined 'monstrous': with giants, dwarfs, people with missing or additional limbs, Siamese twins, etc. (see Daston & Park, 1998). They were mostly seen as divine signs delivering God's messages. What is most interesting about these bodies from the perspective of grotesque realism, though, is that they turn the classical rules of proportion and of the general organization of the human body upside down.

THE PHYSIOGNOMIC NOTION OF THE BODY

A critical transformation takes place in the early Renaissance. The body becomes a "strictly completed, finished product" (Bakhtin, 1984a, p.29). What is interesting about this body concept from a body-historical point of view is the very fact that the body is turned into a *product*. Furthermore, it loses its primordial ties to other bodies and to the world, becoming "isolated, fenced off from all other bodies" (ibid.). Whereas grotesque realism dedicated its utmost attention to the openings of the body, the Renaissance eliminates "all signs of its unfinished character, of its growth and proliferation," and "its protuberances and offshoots were removed, its convexities (signs of new sprout and buds) smoothed out, its apertures closed" (ibid.). The Renaissance is thus fundamentally a project of bodily closure. The fencing off of the body is more than a metaphor here. It bespeaks the creation of a monological body carrying a single (increasingly scientific) truth, and only one layer of reality, whereas the grotesque body existed on several layers of reality. Even more significantly, the body loses its primordial bonds with other bodies and with the world. It becomes a discrete entity of its own.

According to body-historian Barbara Duden (1991), it was not until the late 18th century that this body canon actually started to guide the ways in which people would feel and experience their bodies. We can get a glimpse of how pervading the new body concept was by then by considering John Caspar Lavater's physiognomy. The impact of Lavater's four *Physiognomical Fragments for the Promotion of the Knowledge and Love of Man* published in Zurich between the years 1775 and 1778 can hardly be overstated. He worked as a Protestant pastor in his hometown, and he would soon be seen as a kind of relationship guru (Wegenstein & Ruck, submitted). It is said that newly engaged couples would consult his wisdom of physiognomic match-making in order to get an expert's approval of their fit, and that in certain villages, people would wear masks on the streets because they were afraid of being diagnosed by a hobby physiognomist.

To Lavater, what makes us human and what constitutes our relations with other beings is the fact that we instinctively and intuitively make judgments of what we see (1775/1789). We could paraphrase physiognomy in terms of Lavater as the highest expertise in body judgment. Or in other words: to relate is to know, to know is to judge. Lavater has a rather deterministic view of man. He believes in a stable and single nature of each man, deduced only by the science of physiognomy. The face can be handled like a diagnostic toolkit, according to an equation between inner and outer beauty: "Beauty and ugliness have a strict connection with the moral constitution of Man. In proportion as he is morally good, he is handsome; and ugly, in proportion as he is morally bad" (Lavater, 1775/1789, p. 135).

Figure 1.

Figure 1 belongs to a series from ugliness to beauty produced by Lavater on two consecutive days in November 1797. In a caption below the drawing, Lavater says about this "ugliest ugliness":

"The unnaturally prominent forehead; the wild eyebrows; the angular and blunt nose; the lacking upper lip; the preponderant lower lip, which almost reaches the end of the rather short nose; the small chin becoming a goiter; [all these characteristics] determine ugliness and stupidity. The eye is goodis." (Translation Wegenstein & Ruck, submitted)

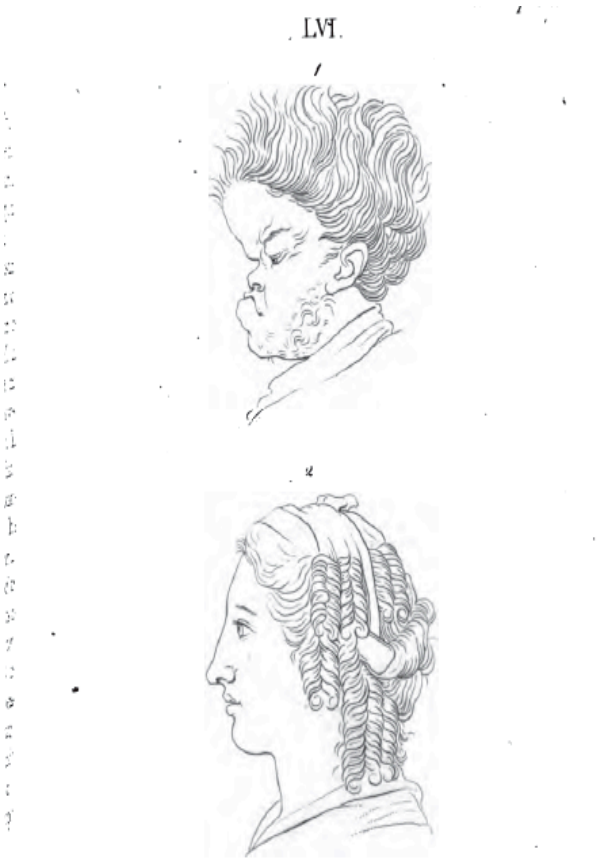

Figure 2.

Lavater finds the ugliness of this face in comparison to classical Greek rules of proportion and is especially negative about protruding or inverting characteristics of the face, about everything that seems too small or too big in proportion to the whole. The ugliest ugliness would be a perfectly grotesque body. To Lavater, however, beauty equals proportion, and an excessive body—or a body transgressing the rules of proportion—bespeaks an excessive character and provokes disgust. He becomes even more judgmental when comparing a male Bashkir to a female Georgian:

"How great soever may be the distance between human forms, between men and men, this Bashkir certainly stands on the lowest step; ... .It is (1) the unnaturally projecting, not human, and, indeed, impossible, inclination of the forehead downward; its unevenness; ... (6) the monstrous out-pouting under lip; .... These traits, individually, decisively, speak stupidity, and impossibility of improvement." (Lavater, 1778/1804, pp. 266-267)

Again, it is an unnatural projection and inclination, an unevenness, etc., that altogether speak of the worst characteristics imaginable for Lavater. Note that in Lavater's world view there is a hierarchy of human bodies stretching from the lowest being on earth up to God. This religiously inspired chain of being would in the course of the 19th century be substituted by an evolutionary chain of being (see Gilman, 1999). The main tenor remains the same, though: Different groups of people can be bunched together, according to nationality or later, 'race,' and ranked hierarchically based on bodily characteristics which in turn bespeak their morality or, later, genetic fitness.

THE MODERN MONOLOGICAL BODY AS A BODY WE 'OWN'

Physiognomy and theories of scientific racism flourishing during the late 19th and early 20th centuries share some core tenets that might be called *monological*. The physiognomic body concept is monological and individualized in various senses: It is a pre-determined entity by itself that disposes of only one layer of reality. There is a single meaning attached to and written onto the outside surface of the individual body—its character—and it is to be revealed by the physiognomist. Furthermore, the body is not meaningful on its own, but only gains meaning in the act of (physiognomic) interpretation, and insofar it bespeaks the character it is said to house. The body does not lose its significance as suggested by the characterization of the modern self as purely *rationalistic*, on the contrary, it is of utmost importance for a scientific intent of decoding

so-called internal forces that has just started to take off at the time and place. Until the inception of intelligence tests in the USA of the 1920s, scientists would continue to measure and judge bodies in order to decipher their supposed messages about morality and intelligence (Tucker, 1994). The monological body is furthermore not primordially intertwined with others and with the world. On the contrary, it has to enter relations *ex post*. Most importantly, the basic interaction that qualifies humans as humans is judgment (in the case of Lavater: judgment about bodies)—a prototypically rational operation. The epitome of this relation is between the physiognomist and his subject, a relationship void of dialogical reciprocity as the subject never talks back.

It is such power relationships between the epistemological subject and object, which Bakhtin (1984b) never tired of criticizing—juxtaposing it with a dialogical approach that would let the subjects speak for themselves and out of themselves. The power hierarchy is twofold, though: It is directed against other bodies by the ones claimed to be experts in 'body knowledge,' and it is directed against each and every body by each and every *self* owning its body.

The turn from the dialogical body to a modern monological body owned by a self echoes what body-historian Barbara Duden (1991, p. 3) has referred to as the "body I 'have,'" to a large part overshadowing the body as felt and experienced, a concept of the body that still guided folk culture in the beginning of the 18th century. Analysing the journals of a medical doctor in German Eisenach in the early eighteenth century, Duden encounters a body concept so alien to her own that she spends the entire book struggling to overturn her former belief that body perception was ahistoric. Although the doctor whose journals she analyses must have been familiar with advances in anatomy such as the drawings of the famous Vesalius, this objectified vision of the body had not yet entered his medical practice. The doctor was himself still part of a world in which a nun urinated through the mouth on several occasions, or a sudden fright caused the menses of a young woman to stagnate, thus inseminating her with melancholic thoughts. Eisenach in the early 18th century was (still) a world in which bodies were perceived as parts of their surroundings, and skins as permeable and porous mediators. Under the skin—where we imagine and all too often accordingly perceive anatomically defined organs—men and women in Eisenach perceived a rather undifferentiated region of metamorphoses between body fluids. Various fluids could change into one another and would take whatever orifice of the body that gave a way out. Several accounts of patients testify that the menses could also leave the body through the mouth or a wound, and that it could just as well do so in the form of breast milk. These accounts are quite at odds with our present, medically informed, understanding of our own bodies, but in early 18th century Eisenach, they made perfect sense as a cultural conception that had not yet anatomically mapped out the body .

Accordingly, the skin was perceived as a mediator. In a dialogical perspective we could say that the skin was the medium in which dialogical interchange between body and world took place. Duden (1991) often emphasizes that the doctor's female patients never referred to their bodies as something they *owned*. Likewise, the power relationship between doctor and patient was not yet in place the way we know it. Duden refers to the doctor's medical approach as one that let the patients speak in their own voice. Nevertheless, she detects some crucial changes that differentiate the body concept of early 18th century Eisenach from the grotesque body Bakhtin described. She refers to

these changes as a rupture in the continuous give-and-take between inside and outside. Towards the end of the 18th century, an objectified version of the body started to guide everyday body perception. The objectification of the body, what Foucault coined the *medical gaze* (1973), was mirrored by the *body as possession* on an individual level. People would refer to their bodies as something they owned. Duden (1991) unfolds the socio-genesis of this modern body concept with several examples. Claudia Benthien (2002) has shown that the meaning of the skin changed, too. It was then seen as a solid surface housing an inside. It is thus not by chance that the ways of body knowledge Caspar Lavater employed, focus on this solid surface: the *face*. We can frame Lavater's focus in Bakhtin's candid terms:

"All orrifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable façade. The opaque surface and the body's "valleys" acquire an essential meaning as the border of a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world." (Bakthin, 1984a, p. 320)

In the tradition of philosophical anthropology (Plessner, 1928; for a sociological re-interpretation see Lindemann, 2002) the human body is considered to be a two-fold existence: we *are* bodies, and at the same time we *have* bodies. Note that being our bodies reverberates what Straus (1935/1956) has called sensation (*Empfinden*). From this perspective, what took place in the late 18th century was that a certain dimension (having our bodies) of our bodily existence took dominance over another dimension (being our bodies). Duden (1991) refers to this moment as a change of balance.

This modernist focus on the closed and individualized body not only penetrates the work of Caspar Lavater which I have mainly discussed as an example of such a body concept. It also slips through the backdoor of William James' (1890/1952) discussion of the body as the sum of a man's [*sic!*] possessions. James, too, slides over the role of the body we *are* at the expense of the body we *have*. In extension, dialogical self theory gets trapped in a modernist preconception when framing the dialogical self as a mind that provides space for the body (see Ruck & Slunecko, 2006). It is not the case that one dimension of our bodily existence has been lost altogether in some free-floating modernist rationality. Rather, the modernist gaze has overlooked an essential mode of our existence, in turn, however, co-producing the realities it looked at. The "balancing of the emphasis," Hermans and Kempen have called for, does not stop short at acknowledging "the role of the body in the process of knowing itself" or at showing "that the body, and, even broader, the reality of space, is *in* the mind" (1993, p. 9). Rather, it requires a serious emphasis on the fact that, way beyond early ontogeny, we are indeed *dialogical bodies* with all their societal, political, historical, and cultural possibilities and constraints.

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