

The Immortal Bodies, by Boris Groys

In our present time, one feels somewhat embarrassed when speaking or writing of immortality, in particular the immortality of individual. You feel you have to explain how on earth you came up with such an odd —even *kitsch*—topic. Today the individual's immortality seems a more appropriate theme for a Hollywood B-movie than for a seriously wrought philosophical lecture. This was not always the case. In the past, it wasn't considered uncomfortable to talk about immortality because people believed that the soul would outlive the body. Therefore, it was considered absolutely appropriate and reasonable to give thought, while still on earth, as to where your soul would end up when you died. But above all, our ancestors would pose the question of which part of the soul is potentially immortal—and which mortal.

Philosophy, as it was initiated by Plato, has been for a long period of history nothing other than an attempt to anticipate the further life of the soul after death. In other words, to carry out a *metanoia*, that is, a transition from an innerworldly to an otherworldly perspective, from the perspective of the mortal body to that of the eternal soul. *Metanoia* is namely a necessary starting point from which to become metaphysical, to attain a meta-position in relation to the world and thus to regard and think of the world as a whole. If the *metanoia*—that is, the anticipation of one's own immortality—becomes impossible, the individual loses the ability to change perspective. In this case, the only starting point for an individual's thinking and praxis is the perspective with which every individual issued, through his inner nature and the terrestrial positioning of his body. If one is merely mortal, to escape one's position in the world is impossible.

Today though, as modern, post-Enlightenment individuals, we hold that God is dead and that the soul cannot outlive the body. Or to be more precise, we don't believe that such a thing as a soul can actually be differentiated from the body, separated—made independent. Correspondingly, we also don't believe that a change of perspective, a *metanoia*—that is, achievement of a meta-position in relation to the world—is possible. Of anyone who speaks today it is first asked where he is from and from which perspective he speaks. Race, class, and gender serve as coordinates whereby the positioning of every voice is located. The concept of cultural identity, which stands at the centre of today's Cultural Studies, also serves this same initial positioning. Even though the relevant parameters and identities are interpreted as social constructs rather than “natural” determinants, this hardly invalidates their effect. It may perhaps be possible to deconstruct social constructions, but they cannot be abolished or deliberately replaced.

Still, it seems to me that the finitude of the soul does not yet mean that *metanoia* is impossible. Even in modernity there has been no perfect synchronization of body and soul: both remain hetero-chronic and thus separable, even despite the loss of faith in the soul's immortality. Although we no longer speak of a disembodied soul, still we can and must speak of a soulless body, or a corpse. The soul may have no further life after the death of the body; however, the body certainly lives on after the soul passes away. Here we can definitely speak of a *life after death*, because a corpse is active throughout: after death it remains active, in that it elapses, decays, and decomposes. This process of decay is potentially infinite—one cannot definitively say when the process ends because the body's material substances remain identifiable for a long enough time. Even if the vestiges of the corpse can no longer be identified, it doesn't mean the body has disappeared, but simply that its elements—molecules, atoms, etc.—have dispersed throughout the world to such extent that the body has practically become one with the entire world. If you wish, it has become a body without organs. This unification with the cosmos, materially as well as spiritually, offers a perspective that makes possible another kind of *metanoia*. Instead of the immortality of the soul we achieve a different kind of immortality: the immortality of the body's material substances, the immortality of the body as a corpse. This corporeal immortality can be anticipated during one's own life as much as the eternal life of the soul was anticipated in the past. Perhaps here we can speak of a *heteronoia*, an anticipation of the body's rather than the soul's destiny in the afterlife. Moreover, we could even argue that the concept of the corporeal immortality is older than the belief in the immortality of the soul: Egyptian rituals of mummification tell us nothing else.

I am speaking here of *heteronoia* after Michel Foucault's concept of *heterotopia*. Once the soul has departed, the body as corpse is transported to a space other than the one it occupied during its life: the cemetery. Foucault rightfully considers the cemetery, along with the museum, the library and the boat—we could also add the garbage heap here—as “other” places, as *heterotopiae*. The body transcends the place where it resided during its lifetime, in that it has been brought to the cemetery. Thus occurs a pretty drastic change of perspective: looking out from a cemetery, a museum or a library, the world appears from a different—a heterotopic—perspective. In this way, it is possible for the individual to experience *heteronoia*, by thinking during his lifetime of his body as a corpse. Then we

wouldn't ask where he is coming from, but where he will be brought after his death—and thus this heterotopic endpoint becomes the origin of his worldview.

Philosophy has been preoccupied for a long time with the metaphysics of the corpse—whether explicitly or implicitly. There is no other way of understanding the entire *Décadence* movement of the 19th century. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin describes allegory as a figure that represents the body's decay. Thus allegory, for Benjamin, differs favourably from the symbol: if the symbol tends to generate the effect of a living, animated presence, allegory represents the very process of the body getting rid of the soul. The concept of deconstruction as it was developed by Jaques Derrida could equally be thought of as a delineation of a “different” metanoia of this kind—namely as the thematisation of a post-death decomposition, already anticipated in life. We are talking here about the perpetual and everlasting decay of the body, which has neither beginning nor end. The “muselmann”, someone who has become almost a living corpse under the conditions of a concentration camp, as he is described by Giorgio Agamben in his book *Homo Sacer*, is understood by the author as the embodiment of “bare life”. Agamben declares the living corpse to be the carrier of true, genuine, pure life, from whose perspective social, “animated” life can only properly be apprehended. In a similar vein, these reflections can be applied to the characters that dominate today's mass cultural imagination, which is full of immortal bodies without souls. So vampires, zombies, clones and living machines—the miscellaneous undead—take pride of place in today's mass culture.

But in our culture the actual locations of physical immortality are our various archives—and in particular the museums. Works of art are the corpses of objects. In art museums, objects are kept and put on display after their death: after they have been defunctionalised, removed from the practice of life. The life of artworks in museums is a life after death, a vampiric life protected from the sunlight. At the same time, today's art museums demonstrate particularly clearly the difficulties confronting those who seek heteronimia. The aim of the European avant-gardes was and remains—even if today one repeatedly hears that the avant-garde is no more—to demonstrate the material, the purely corporeal, the *cadavérique*. Hand in hand with this aim, objects become removed from the context of their everyday use, use which has allowed their pure materiality, their corporeality – and reality of a corpse - to be overlooked. However, the viewing of art leads repeatedly to a lively communication with artworks—to an aesthetic experience, to interpretation, to historicisation, etc. Briefly: too many souls are projected onto artworks. Thus is heteronimia hindered: the viewer looks at the artwork from a worldly perspective, instead of changing perspective and beginning to observe the world from the perspective of the museum, that is, viewing the world as a corpse.

That is why contemporary art aims at making the corpse look increasingly corpse-like—in order to make impossible further projections of the soul onto works of art. Art today demonstrates an increasing degree of decay and decomposition, an increasingly radical volatile and transitory nature. On walking through the modern and contemporary art rooms of the museum, the stages of art's development appear as stages of decay. First, the mimetic image disintegrates—the material substance of the work of art becomes evident. Then the body of the artwork itself begins to disintegrate. It suffers sawing, damage, dirt, reduction to a black square or a simple cube, all of which resist any attempt on the part of the spectator to see other than mere material objects—corpses. Then come performances, actions and projects, of whose corpses only some vague material traces still remain. These are presented in installations which, rather than being designed as complete bodies, are arranged as accumulations of body parts and can be rearranged, partially exchanged, or even completely replaced by different body parts.

The creation of icons of a radical, *cadavérique* profanity can of course only be successful for a short period of time, that period during which the violence with which a specific object was torn from the everyday still remains palpable. We know that Duchamp's urinal will never again find its place in the bathroom; Warhol's Campbell's soup will never return to the supermarket to be purchased and consumed and it leaves us with a feeling of infinite sadness. In this sense, Lenin's mausoleum in Moscow's Red Square is particularly characteristic: there, Lenin is put on display to prove that he is really dead and will never arise—at least as long as his corpse remains on view. The suspicion that resurrection is possible or might even have already occurred can only be taken into consideration when the corpse disappears. Lenin's corpse could thus be considered a readymade in the tradition of Duchamp—a readymade manifesting the finality of death.

The classical metanoia gave legitimacy to the philosophers, at least in Plato's view, to govern the Polis, or the State. The Christian church has also long substantiated its claim for leadership through assertions of its ability to consider and judge finite, mortal activities on this earth from the meta-perspective of the soul's immortality. Here the political

dimension of the question of individual immortality and our capability for metanoia becomes very clear. In this respect, heterotopia is no exception: the heterotopian gaze is simultaneously the gaze of power. But here the philosopher becomes an artist—or better, a museum curator. At the end of the 19th century, the Russian philosopher Nikolay Fedorov developed the project of the “common cause”, which called upon the modern state to resurrect and make immortal, through science, all individuals who have ever lived upon the earth. Fedorov used the art museum as a model for the utopian society of immortals he wanted to build. Here we have a heterotopia involving an entire society, which would transform the entire societal space in a heterotopia. The state would become a museum of its own population, and every individual an artwork. As the museum’s administrators bear responsibility not only for the collection’s inventory but also for the perfect condition of each and every artwork, sending them for restoration if they are threatened by deterioration, so the state should bear responsibility for the resurrection and afterlife of each and every individual. The state should no longer allow individuals to die in private. It ought not to allow the dead lie in their coffins.

As Michel Foucault famously put it, the modern state can be defined by the maxim “it makes live and lets die”—as opposed to the earlier sovereign state, which “makes die and lets live”. During modernity, the natural death of the individual has been considered a private affair into which, as Foucault describes it, the state declines to intervene. What is most interesting about Fedorov’s project is that it doesn’t consider death a private affair. Rather, Fedorov takes with full seriousness the promise of the emerging bio-power—that is, the state’s promise to take care of life as such; he calls upon the state to think and fulfil this promise to its logical end. Fedorov is primarily reacting to some of the contradictions inherent in the socialist teachings of the 19th century, which were taken up not only by himself, but also by other authors of his time, in particular by Dostoyevsky. Socialism promised a complete social justice, whilst simultaneously connecting this promise to the belief in progress. This belief implies that only future generations living in a fully developed socialist society will be able to enjoy complete social justice. In contrast, a role as the passive victims of progress is foreseen for previous and current generations, and they can expect no justice in all eternity. Therefore future generations will get to enjoy socialist justice at the cost of their cynical acceptance of an outrageous historical injustice—namely the exclusion of all previous generations from the future society. Socialism thus functions as an exploitation of the dead for the benefit of the living—and as exploitation of those who live now for the benefit of those who will live later. The only possibility for socialism to construct a just society in the future is to aim to resurrect of all those generations that created the basis for its success. Those resurrected generations will thus be able to participate in the future socialism—and the provisory discrimination of the dead for the benefit of the living will finally be eliminated. The coming society, in order to be a just one, cannot remain only contemporary. This completed, future socialism must establish itself not only in space, but also in time, transforming the latter into eternity through technology. Before it can be considered just, a society must be not only international (that is, reaching across space) but also inter-generational (reaching across time).

Not for nothing did many Russian intellectuals and artists willingly take up Fedorov’s ideas after the October revolution. In their first manifesto in 1922, representatives of the Biocosmic-Immortalist movement, a political group with origins in Russian anarchism, wrote the following: “For us, essential and real human rights are the right of being (immortality, resurrection, rejuvenation) and the right of mobility in the cosmic space (and not the alleged rights proclaimed in the declaration of the bourgeois revolution of 1789)”. Thus Alexander Svyatogor, one of the main proponents of the Biocosmic-Immortalist movement, considered immortality to be both the aim of and the condition for the future communist society, for he believes that true social solidarity can be established solely among immortals. As long as each individual possesses a private “piece of time”, actual private property cannot be abolished. A total bio-power, on the other hand, signifies not only the collectivisation of space but also of time. Only in eternity can the conflicts between the individual and society—insolvable in real time—be successfully resolved. The goal of physical immortality is the highest goal for each individual, and only when society adopts this goal as its own will an individual remain forever loyal to society.

Indisputably among the most spectacular and far-reaching results of this program are the theories of rocket propulsion developed by Constantin Tsiolkovsky at the same time. Tsiolkovsky actually aspired to the so-called “patrifaction of the sky”: the colonisation of the cosmic space by humanity’s soon-to-be immortal ancestors. Later on, his research became the starting point for the Soviet space travel. Another fascinating biopolitical experiment, albeit not quite so influential, was the Institute for Blood Transfusion founded and directed in the 1920s by Alexander Bogdanov. In his youth, Bogdanov was a close friend of Lenin’s; he was also a co-founder of the intellectual-political wing of the Russian Social Democrat party, which later led to the emergence of Bolshevism. In the 1920s, Bogdanov became deeply enthusiastic about blood transfusion, which he expected would achieve a

deceleration, if not the total annihilation, of the aging process. He thought that blood transfusions between younger and older generations would rejuvenate the latter, and simultaneously serve to balance out inter-generational solidarity. Incidentally, Bogdanov died during one of these transfusions.

For today's reader, the reports of Bogdanov's Institute for Blood Transfusion evoke first and foremost the novel "Dracula" by Bram Stoker. For example, in one purported case from Bogdanov's institute the blood of a young female student was partially exchanged "with the blood of an older writer", from which both were alleged to have benefited equally. This analogy is by no means coincidental. The society of vampires—of immortal bodies—described by Stoker is the society of a bio-power *par excellence*. However, the novel (written, by the way, in 1897, at the same time as Fedorov was developing his project of the "common cause") describes the regime of the total bio-power not as a utopia, but rather, as an anti-utopia. And so the "human" heroes of the novel bitterly defend their right to a natural death. Their fight against the society of vampires, which establishes and guarantees physical immortality, has continued in Western mass culture ever since, although the temptations of vampiric seduction have never been completely suppressed. The rejection of physical immortality is certainly not new, to which the stories of Faust, Frankenstein and Golem well attest. Today's vampires though, as they are depicted in books and films, are not loners. They constitute a society built not only across nations but also across generations, a communist society of immortal bodies, in fact, such as Fedorov and Bogdanov had in mind. This is probably the very reason why such a strong resistance to this kind of society exists, as does the temptation to be part of it. To understand the radical biopolitical imagination of our times, fixated as it is upon corporeal immortality, we should it seems to me, read Fedorov, Bogdanov and Bram Stoker simultaneously.

Translated from German by Elena Sorokina and Emily Speers Mears