

# Skepsi

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**Enacting Interpersonal Space: the Role of the Body in Social Cognition**  
Chiara Teneggi: *University of Bologna*

**Tam Lin Transformed**  
Kat Peddie

**Bodies in Motion: Working through Plurality**  
Noyale Colin and Rebecca Woodford-Smith: *Middlesex University*

**Tangled Pathways**  
Kate Lewis

**'Build Ups' and 'Slim Downs': Reshaping America, 1945–1970**  
Elizabeth Matelski: *Loyola University Chicago*

**Passing Thoughts: A Photographic Essay on the Body as Form**  
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**Dance Theatre: An Anti-Discursive Illustration of an Embodied Existence**  
Claire Hampton: *University of Wolverhampton*

**Back from Beyond: 21–22 July, 1972**  
Harriet L. Clements

**Toward an Ontology of Corporeal Uniqueness**  
Eva De Clercq: *University of Pisa*

**The Swarm: A provocation for opening**  
Dara Blumenthal—Guest Editor:  
*University of Kent*



# (De)Parsing Bodies

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*Skepsi* is an online research journal based in the School of European Culture and Languages at the University of Kent (SECL) and is entirely run by research students.

The aim of *Skepsi*'s editorial board is twofold: to honour the spirit of SECL by striving to take advantage of its unique position as a crossroads in academic studies in Europe and to become a forum for European postgraduate researchers and postdoctoral scholars by developing collective thinking processes in the context of academic research.

Our title, *Skepsi* — which comes from the Ancient Greek 'σκεψις [*skepsis*]' or 'enquiry' and the Modern Greek 'σχέψις [*sképsis*]' or 'thought' — symbolises our will to explore new areas and new methods in the traditional fields of academic research in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Originality and creativity in the approach of thought and of texts are crucial for us: to enhance and to promote these aspects will be our contribution to the tremendous range of existing academic publications.



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**F**or this issue of *Skepsi*, dedicated to the Body, we welcome Dara Blumenthal as Guest Editor and must thank her for her input, particularly as regards the choice of cover image, a striking image from the work of Joe Wright, an artist who aspires to show through his photography intimate aspects of the world around us that all too often we, preoccupied as we are with getting on with our lives, fail to notice. We thank him for allowing us to use one of his images and urge you to visit his website.

Thanks are also due to all who submitted material for consideration, both those whose work was accepted and those who were, on this occasion disappointed and we must not overlook our dedicated teams of peer reviewers, copy editors and proof readers, who all contribute to the journal's quality.

On a personal note, we welcome Jo Pettitt who has recently joined the Editorial Board after helping with the organisation of our very successful fifth annual conference, *Don't Panic! The Apocalypse in Theory and Culture*, held in May 2012, of which more in a future issue dedicated to its proceedings.

Finally, although, as we said in our last issue, Fabien Arribert-Narce had already left the Editorial Board, he was still very much an 'eminence grise' behind the scenes; in particular, he worked closely with our Guest Editor for this issue. But now we must say 'Goodbye' properly. Having worked closely with the members of the new team and prepared them for the challenges and rewards of running *Skepsi*, he has turned a new page and begun a new chapter in Japan.

*Skepsi* would never have existed without all the effort, passion and commitment that Fabien, a founding member of the Editorial Board, put into it. He will be greatly missed by all of us who had the honour and pleasure of working alongside him and seeing *Skepsi* grow from an idea sketched on a napkin into the respected and well known graduate journal that it has come to be. We thank him with all our hearts and wish him well in Japan.

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## Foreword

The aim of this special issue of *Skepsi* dedicated to the body is twofold: on the one hand, our intention is to contribute to challenging the conception of the body as a rock-like and autonomous unity, a conception that, starting with Descartes, has deeply characterised philosophical tradition;<sup>1</sup> on the other, we believe that, in order to investigate the perspectival nature of the body, it is necessary to adopt an interdisciplinary approach; for this reason we welcomed not only academic articles, but also creative works both textual and visual.

The inspiration for this issue was a conference entitled *The Body: Exploring Culture and Research* held at the University of Kent in October 2011, a conference which our Guest Editor Dara Blumenthal organised. However, it was not intended that the issue would necessarily be confined either to the proceedings of the conference in particular or to academic articles in general.

The project we present in the following pages can be well described by a sentence from Friedrich Nietzsche's uncompleted and posthumous work *The Will to Power*: 'the evidence of the body reveals a tremendous multiplicity' (Nietzsche 1968: 518). The concept of multiplicity is the Ariadne's thread that gives continuity to the present issue: multiplicity as a theoretical hypothesis about the nature of the body and multiplicity as an interdisciplinary approach to imagine new ways to study and experience it. This idea of a body as a plurality that cannot be fixed into a static unity is graphically illustrated by the cover image, a swarm or 'murmuration' of starlings. A passage from Roberto Esposito's *Immunitas* clearly expresses the conception of the body we want to propose in this issue:

[T]he body is a place of confrontation and competition between diverse, potentially conflicting cellular segments. It is never original, complete, intact, 'made' one and for all; rather, it constantly makes itself from one minute to the next, depending on the situation and encounters that determine its development. Its boundaries do not lock it up inside a closed world; on the contrary, they create its margin, a delicate and problematic one to be sure, but still permeable in its relationship with that which, while still located outside it, from the beginning traverses and alters it. (Esposito 2011: 169)

From poetry to neuroscience, from photography to philosophy, the following contributions address the theme of the body from different perspectives in order to let its complexity emerge.

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<sup>1</sup> For a clear and complete analysis on the body in modern thought, see Chris Shilling's seminal work *The Body and Social Theory* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2003).

Chiara Teneggi demonstrates how the main approach to the study of social cognition in contemporary neurosciences reduces the ‘social event’ to the ‘behaviours of individuals’. But in a social context, ‘behaviours are not only of individuals but also between individuals’; consequently the subject is not something prior to the relationship between other subjects but is always the result of an interaction. In this sense, as the neuro-phenomenologist Francisco Varela observes, ‘the virtual self is evident because it provides a surface for interaction, but it’s not evident if you try to locate it. It’s completely delocalized’ (Varela 1995: 211).

From different perspectives, Kat Peddie and the co-authors Noyale Colin and Rebecca Woodford-Smith elaborate in their works an idea of body as always kept within a relationship, as opposed to a monadic and static representation of it. In a poem inspired by the folk song *Tam Lin* and the reading of Georges Bataille, Peddie offers the means whereby to think of our body as having a permeable boundary. Tam Lin’s metamorphoses, in the arms of his lover Janet, prove that diversity and otherness are not just a risk but also a positive possibility. Collin and Woodford-Smith analyse the theoretical question of embodiment through the lens of performance making, demonstrating the importance of body representation as distributed rather than closed by immutable boundaries. Their approach has a double relevance: on the one hand, it indicates a different way of understanding the body; on the other, it allows the inextricable connection between theory and practice to emerge.

Katie Lewis’s pictures allow us to understand better how to frame a question concerning the definition of our body. Lewis usually organises her work into grind-like charts and diagrams ‘mimicking science and medicine’s representations of the body as a specimen, visually displayed for the purpose of gaining knowledge’. Her aim is to create ‘distance from the information and objectify the experience, giving a false sense that the body is accessible and easily understood’. Her artistic works thus make us understand that asking ‘what is our body?’ implicitly brings with it another question regarding accessibility to our somatic identity, a question too often forgotten.

Following a Foucauldian genealogical methodology, Elizabeth Matelski’s contribution seeks to demonstrate that the ‘ideal body shape’ is a relative and historical concept related to a wide variety of factors, not only medical but also and mostly social and political. Matelski’s analysis takes into consideration in particular the transformations of aesthetic canons in the United States between 1945 and 1970. The study not only has a historical relevance but also defines an interesting framework useful to understand contemporary issues related to an obsessive concern with the body. In the words of the British sociologist Nikolas Rose, human

beings today ‘judge and act upon their soma in their attempts to make themselves not just physically better, but also to make themselves better persons. This is what I call a “somatic ethic”’ (Rose 2008: 46).

Introducing a genealogical analysis of the body also implies the need to face the finitude of ourselves in its entire contingency, as Foucault himself wrote:

‘Effective’ history deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature, and it will not permit itself to be transported by a voiceless obstinacy toward a millennial ending. (Foucault 1977: 88)

Ashley Denise’s photographic images explore the materiality and plasticity of the body from an original point of view which allows the contingency and finitude of the human condition to emerge. The clocks and the images of organs and bones beneath a layer of apparently artificial skin are just few of the details that bring the spectator into this dimension of *absolute immanence* in all its enigmatic meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Facing our *absolute immanence* means also facing the suffering and the vulnerability of our existence. The poem by Harriet Clements ‘expresses the body’s reaction to trauma by drawing on a personal experience’. *Back from Beyond* communicates with rare intensity our own precariousness and fragility. In doing so, it also reminds us of a fundamental perspective from which we have to consider the body: the phenomenological one, a point of view too often forgotten by some important philosophers of the mind who assert the possibility of reducing a first person experience to a third-person point of view (e.g. Dennett 1991).

If Daniel Dennett’s decision to declare consciousness as a necessary illusion is aimed at liberating the philosophical thought from what he calls the ‘Cartesian theater’ (Dennett 1991), the two final articles seem to suggest a third way of bridging the gulf between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, a way which is neither reductionist nor metaphysical. The articles by Eva De Clerq and Claire Hampton close this issue on the body by engaging in critical terms with Cartesian dualism. Hampton investigates the value of dance theatre as a legitimate means of transcending dualistic tendencies in academic research. She claims that in order to avoid a reductionist interpretation of ourselves it is necessary to use a new form of enquiry aimed ‘at presenting body and mind as mutually obligated parameters of subjectivity’. Starting from a reading of J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth Costello*, De Clerq argues that the singularity of human existence finds its roots in the body itself. Her analysis of the notion of

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<sup>2</sup> For an explanation of the term *absolute immanence* see Giorgio Agamben’s essay so entitled in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Agamben 2011).

embodiment is also useful to put into question what we could call new postmodern forms of dualism that permeate so called Continental thought.

Finally, an enigmatically entitled and thought-provoking afterword from our guest editor Dara Blumenthal points out the constant movement between nature and culture, the living body and the political context, showing how these dimensions cross each other and make one the provisional outcome of the other. Blumenthal finds in this ontological premise the political possibility to challenge the individualism characteristic of the capitalist society. But, in order to preserve the emancipatory character of her political provocation, it is important to remember that, as Agamben clearly states:

The ‘body’ is always already a biopolitical body and bare life, and nothing in it or the economy of its pleasure seems to allow us to find solid ground on which to oppose the demands of sovereign power. In its extreme form, the biopolitical body of the West (this last incarnation of homo sacer) appears as a threshold of absolute indistinction between law and fact, juridical rule and biological life. (Agamben 1998: 105)

Forgetting this important advice would mean to negate the ontological premise itself, that is, to fight against every dualist and monist thought that presupposes a body already fully defined, doing nothing but mirroring the metaphysical structure we are trying to deconstruct.

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