

IDEALIZED BODIES, INTERNALIZED PAIN

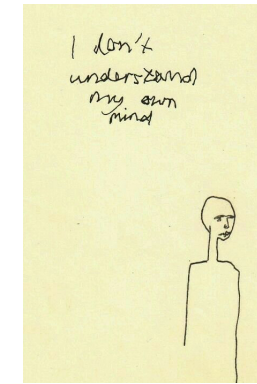
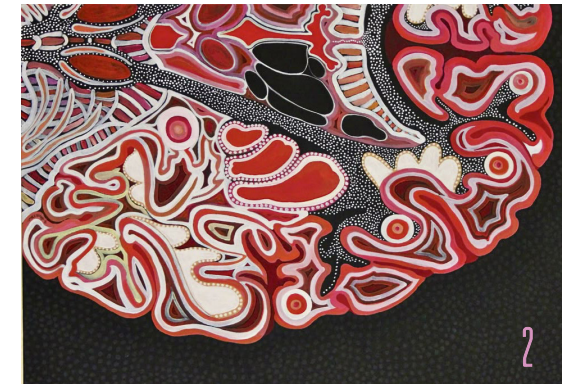


*To those who have suffered because of their body,
to those who have blamed it, wounded it, and disfigured it,
to those who have fought,
and to those who have stopped fighting.”*



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Letter to myself

Dear Carlotta,
It's been a while since the last time I sat down to write to you and talk to you as if you were someone else. Maybe it's partly the shame of exposing my thoughts — too vulnerable for others and understandable only to a few.

When someone asks, “How are you?”, your answer is always the same: “I'm okay, you?”
There's never enough time, nor courage, to have a longer conversation where you actually face the real issue: the monster you've been fighting for years — and even managed to overcome for a while — has come back to haunt your thoughts, to eat you from the inside.

It's absurd when you think about it — eating, the very thing you don't want to do.
What is it that keeps you so attached to it?
What is it that won't let you live, just once, freely?
The food? The calories?
Maybe it's your body — the image of yourself in the mirror — that no matter how much it may improve, will always be the hardest thing to accept.

Why did you have to ruin the best years of your life chasing a number on a stupid scale?

It could have been so much easier.
Your parents wouldn't have worried, and you wouldn't have seen them cry every time you left the psychologist's office.

It could have been easier.
You wouldn't have skipped university, thinking you'd never graduate; you would have made more friends, without constantly worrying about how you looked in their eyes.

It could have been easier.
You wouldn't have started antidepressants at sixteen, switching medication again and again because your body — too young — couldn't handle the side effects.

You say you're fine just to take the burden off others, but deep down you know that's not true.
Why pretend?
What do you see when you look in the mirror?
What do you feel when you don't eat?
Do you think I don't notice you still counting your steps?
That in your head, you still calculate calories — maybe not as obsessively as before, but still?

You go up and down the stairs at home several times a day, sometimes for no real reason — but at least you're moving, right?
You take the longer route on your bike to “enjoy the view,” but in truth you're counting how many calories you're burning.

The question I keep asking is: why?
Why did you choose to hurt your body, to blame it for something it cannot control?
These are questions with no answers, because no matter how hard you try, you don't really want to change.
The feeling of hunger, of thirst, the flat stomach, the sight of your ribs through your shirt — these are things you like.
They make you feel alive.

And yet... you seek help.
You call the doctor — you look for help.
You search online: “eating disorder clinic” — you look for help.
But then you never manage to go further.

You know what it is?
It's shame.
You can't bear the thought that you've fallen into it again.
You can't imagine having to tell your parents, making them worry again about how you're doing, about how much you eat.
You're ashamed.
Ashamed to the point that you can't even read this letter out loud.

I feel the exhaustion you carry inside.
The dark circles under your eyes from lost sleep.
The nightmares about food, about what you've eaten.

I understand your pain — and you need to understand it too.

I am you.

Introduction

The body as a muse

How many times have we heard or read this phrase?

From a very young age, we are constantly bombarded with images of the body—whether in cartoons portraying ultra-thin, flawless princesses or superheroes with hyper-muscular physiques. These images, which we carry with us daily, are not harmless representations. They are vehicles of aesthetic ideals that, much like those seen throughout art history, have taught us to perceive the body in specific, culturally determined ways.

Over the centuries, artistic depictions of the human body—from classical Greek statues and Renaissance works to Cubist interpretations and contemporary body art—have played a key role in constructing and perpetuating unattainable beauty standards, shaping both social and individual expectations. But how exactly has the representation of the body in art history contributed to the construction of these aesthetic ideals and canons—so deeply rooted that they influence contemporary body perception? And how has this influence, compounded by the rise of social media and advertising, become a source of psychological distress and a possible contributor to mental health issues such as eating disorders?

This thesis seeks to explore these questions by tracing the evolution of aesthetic canons from antiquity to their modern-day rupture, and by offering a neuroscientific, philosophical, and phenomenological investigation into how humans perceive themselves—whether through the imagery in paintings or the visuals that surround us daily. To carry out this research, a combination of scientific, artistic, and bibliographic sources has been employed, alongside a qualitative analysis based on open interviews and the collection of personal diaries, as discussed in Chapter 4.

This study does not merely observe how the body has been represented; it questions how such representations have shaped a collective imagination around the “ideal” body—and how that imagination continues to impact individual self-perception. The aim is twofold: on one hand, to understand how and where these mechanisms that generate aesthetic norms originated—analyzing how the body has been used as a foundational element for the rules embedded in modern society; on the other, to investigate the psychological and social impact this exerts on younger generations. To this the thesis is divided into four chapters.

The first provides a historical-artistic overview of body representation across different artistic periods. The second chapter explores the meaning of body perception, including body image, body schema, and the distinction between the lived body and the idealized body. The third chapter examines the connection between the body and aesthetic norms, offering a more philosophical and phenomenological interpretation of reality.

Finally, the fourth chapter introduces the field research conducted with students at KASK School of Arts in Ghent, with reflections and analyses of the interview responses. In a world that expects perfection from us—professionally, socially, economically, and even personally—there is no space for failure when it comes to the body. This reality is so deeply woven into our cultural fabric that it becomes nearly impossible to detach ourselves from it. This thesis aims to be a point of reflection—a space for questioning why we are so profoundly conditioned by what we should look like or become, rather than focusing on simply living the one life we are given.

I. The body as a muse

I.I The body in ancient art: between harmony and proportions

Art is a story of bodies. Since the earliest artistic discoveries, -whether in the form of cave paintings or small full-round statuettes known as "Venus" figurines- , the human body has consistently been a subject of interest throughout art history. The depiction of the human figure has served as a symbol of continuous stylistic evolution, where proportions, movements, and expressions have formed the perfect pyramid to aspire to—both in paintings and in real life. For centuries, a specific bodily image was portrayed based on artistic canons and dogmas, imposed by successive generations of artists and scholars who added new ideals and objectives to pre-existing codes. The first notable example can be found in Classical Art, a historical period that developed between the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, which, due to its complexity, is divided into Early Classicism (5th century BCE) and Late Classicism (4th century BCE). The word *classic* derives from the Latin adjective *classicus*, which in turn originates from “classis”, a term used in Rome to indicate the social classes of taxpayers who enjoyed citizenship rights. The art of this period was considered by both the public and artists as the ultimate example of perfection. From the Greeks, we learned that beauty lies in what is aesthetically pleasing, proportionate, and balanced. Perfection was often embodied in the figure of the athlete, whose physical virtues were recognized alongside moral qualities, and in the gods, who were associated with self-control, courage, balance, and willpower.

In Greek culture, deities were depicted in human form: their bodies, represented in their youthful prime, conveyed an ideal, immortal beauty. The earliest examples date back to the 8th–6th centuries BCE and feature young men or women sculpted in stone or marble. These figures had stout forms, with clearly defined muscles, extended arms, and one leg stepping forward. Male statues were known as “Kouroi”, such as Kleobis and Biton (fig 1), attributed to Polymedes. The female figures, called “Korai” (fig.2), included works like the Hera of Samos. By the 5th century BCE, attention shifted to anatomy and the depiction of movement. Artists like Myron, Polykleitos, and Phidias celebrated muscular perfection and studied harmony and proportion in bodily forms. The *Canon*, a lost treatise on human anatomical proportions, was written by Polykleitos in 450 BCE and is considered the first theoretical work to define beauty and harmony. It had a significant impact not only on art but also on architecture. For the creation of the *Doryphoros* (fig 3), (a marble sculpture, the original of which is lost), Polykleitos conducted measurements on individuals to determine the ideal numerical ratios of the human body.

His findings were documented in the *Canon*, which theorized the upright, nude male figure as the symbol of perfection. Following the circulation of the *Canon*, Galen, an ancient Greek physician with Roman citizenship, stated in his treatise *On the Opinions of Hippocrates and Plato* that:

“Beauty does not consist in the symmetry of elements, but in that of the parts: the finger in relation to the finger, all together in relation to the metacarpus and carpus, and these to the forearm, the forearm to the arm, and all to the whole.”¹

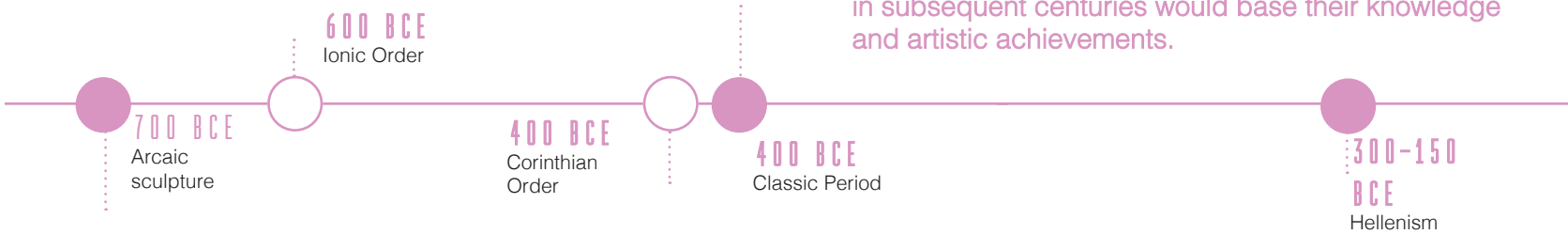
In contrast, Plotinus, an ancient Greek philosopher and successor of Plato, held a different view.

According to Plotinus, “*Nothing beautiful can be composed of parts that are not beautiful in themselves.*”²

Beauty, he believed, was the final vestige connecting material things to their higher principle. He pondered, both consciously and unconsciously, the nature of this beauty in bodies that captivates viewers and provokes joy and contemplation. Here, the concept of symmetry resurfaces, where proportion and pleasing colors together define beauty.

“*If we discover what this beauty of bodies is, perhaps we could use it as a support to contemplate other beauties. Everyone, so to speak, affirms that visible beauty is a symmetry of parts, one in relation to another and to the whole; to this symmetry are added beautiful colors; beauty in beings, as in everything else, is their symmetry and proportion.*”³

For the Greeks, the most appreciated female body was soft and curvaceous, with wide hips, rounded breasts, and firm yet prominent curves. The first example of a proportioned and studied female body was immortalized by the sculptor Praxiteles (370–330 BCE) in the *Aphrodite of Knidos* (fig.4) (360 BCE), a now-lost statue that embodied all the attributes of femininity—attributes that today would contrast with contemporary societal standards. However, the ultimate ideal of female beauty was the *Venus de Milo* (fig.5) , where the female figure still retains soft, pronounced curves that convey great sensuality. Today, Greek art is regarded as classical because it successfully developed characteristics of excellence and formal superiority while maintaining a balance between natural and ideal beauty. It established the foundational principles upon which scholars in subsequent centuries would base their knowledge and artistic achievements.



1.2 The Renaissance and Baroque Periods

Moving past the Middle Ages, - where the aesthetic canon changes, with beauty being represented by the Suevians and Normans with blonde hair, light eyes, and fair skin-, we arrive at the Renaissance. This era revived the classical (Greek) taste for beauty and reestablished the body as a symbol of elegance. The Renaissance was not only a cultural revolution but was experienced by most of its protagonists as a complete and profound change, as they were aware of witnessing a break between the modern world and ancient times (the dark ages of the Middle Ages). The first ideas of Humanism developed during the 15th and 16th centuries, a cultural movement that spread throughout Italy.

The human being assumed a completely different role from the preceding centuries, as they were seen as a unique subject in the whole of creation, capable of self-determination and of cultivating thier own abilities needed to overcome fortune and dominate nature. In the medieval hierarchy, science, medicine, and the study of the body were subordinated to philosophy, law, or theology. For centuries, the illness of an organ was considered a disturbance between the four humors (blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy) and was treated as such. Consequently, anatomy had a limited role in medical practice. In the Renaissance, a renewed interest in anatomy helped define a new approach to care that slowly took hold in the following centuries.

As a descriptive science, anatomy requires reproducible images in print, and the first artist publish anatomical imagery was Antonio del Pollaiuolo. Commissioned to create an engraving depicting a battle of nudes, Pollaio, used the episode of the battle as a pretext to depict the muscles in motion. This image soon became material for Florentine artists who studied muscles and bones in relation to their art. Around 1400, Filippo Villani, the famous historian of Florence, recounted how medical students learned more by studying Giotto's nudes than from lectures, highlighting the educational role of art in anatomical understanding.

Leonardo da Vinci, who trained in Florence under Polaiuolo, studied anatomy not only in relation to his art but also aimed to renew anatomy as a science. With Leonardo, the study of anatomy reached its peak but at the same time deeply distanced itself from the anatomical-artistic representation of muscles and skeletons in the nude that had been prevalent in the Renaissance up to that point. He carried out numerous dissections and post-mortem autopsies, discovering and theorizing that the heart is a muscle and that life is a matter of strength. The result of his many studies is the Vitruvian Man, a pen-and-ink drawing that represents the ideal proportions of the human body, attempting to demonstrate how it can be harmoniously inscribed within the two perfect figures: the circle, (which symbolizes the heaven and divine perfection) and the square (representing the earth). The human body becomes the measure of all things.

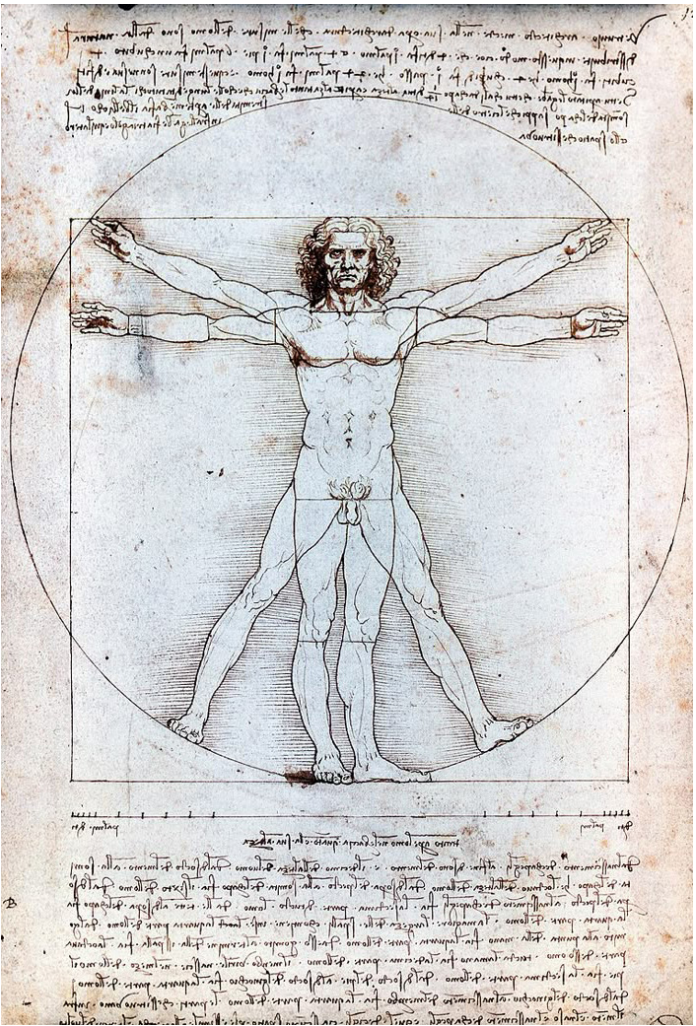


Fig 2- Hera of Samos; VI BCE

Fig.3 - Doryphoros, Policleto

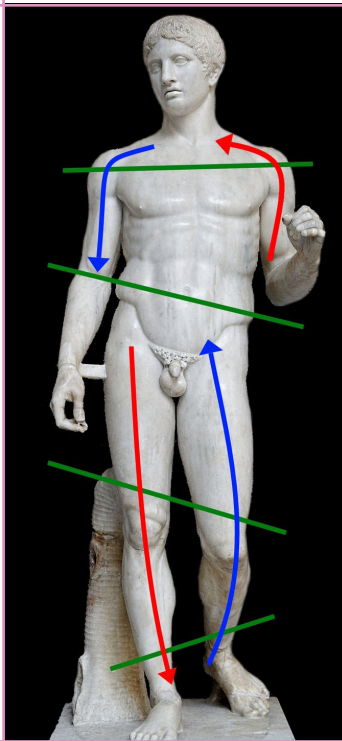


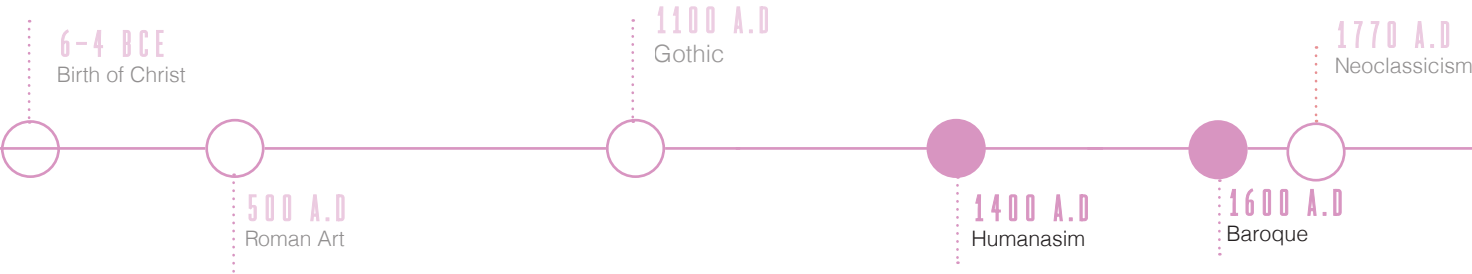
Fig 4. Aphrodite of Knidos 360 BCE



Fig. 5- Venere di Milo, Alessandro di Antiochia, 130 BCE



1. Cleobis and Biton; Kuroi; VI BCE



The reproduction of the human body has always involved significant technical challenges, as this subject is characterized by a great variety of shapes, proportions, and postures. Among the countless reinterpretations of the human figure experimented with by artists, at least three fundamental trends can be identified that have alternated throughout the history of art: realistic, idealizing, and expressive. Supporting the idealizing vision of the body are the works of Michelangelo, who, attempting to exalt the physical perfection of the male form inspired by classical canons, depicted the body with pronounced musculature and dynamic poses. This is evident in the *David* (fig 6) (1501-1504), where the classical composition strongly influenced the artist: the hero's balance is achieved by the crossing of the right leg and left arm bearing weight, and the left leg and right arm releasing tension, exactly like in the sculpture of Polyclitus' "Doryphoros". Each part of David's body is intentional, and Michelangelo emphasizes it powerfully: his brow is furrowed, symbolizing concentration on his enemy; his hands are larger than normal because they are instruments of reason. These examples will reappear in Michelangelo's subsequent works, with bodies predominantly represented with vigor, strength, and pathos.

Regarding the representation of the female body, Botticelli is considered Renaissance's most representative painter, as in his works beauty is idealized in a Neoplatonic style.⁴

Following the aesthetic canons of the time, such as a high forehead, well-defined chin, pale skin, blonde hair, strong nose, and narrow, full lips, Botticelli (fig 7) painted the beauty ideals of 15th-century beauty in women. The female body always was depicted with pronounced forms, with rounded abdomen and hips, and it unconsciously dictated the aesthetic standards that women of the time sought to achieve. The Renaissance spread throughout Italy and Europe until the advent of the Mannerist period and subsequently the Baroque (1600-1750), which became the dominant art style during the 17th century.

Baroque artists rejected the virtuosity and stylization of the Mannerists' figures but absorbed the technique of chiaroscuro, the main tool used to highlight the contours of the body. The leader of the movement was certainly Caravaggio, who painted directly onto canvases without preparatory sketches, depicting common imperfect people with classical beauty and stark realism. However, it was Gian Lorenzo Bernini, the most famous Baroque sculptor, who truly broke from classical norms of the male and female bodies by infusing his works with dynamic motion and emotional intensity.

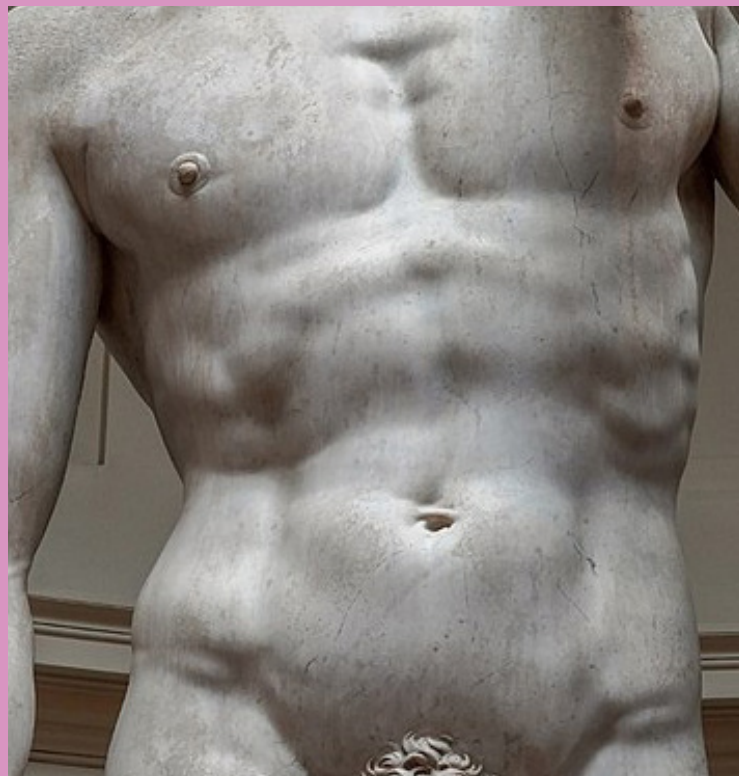


Fig 6- David. Michelangelo, 1501-1504

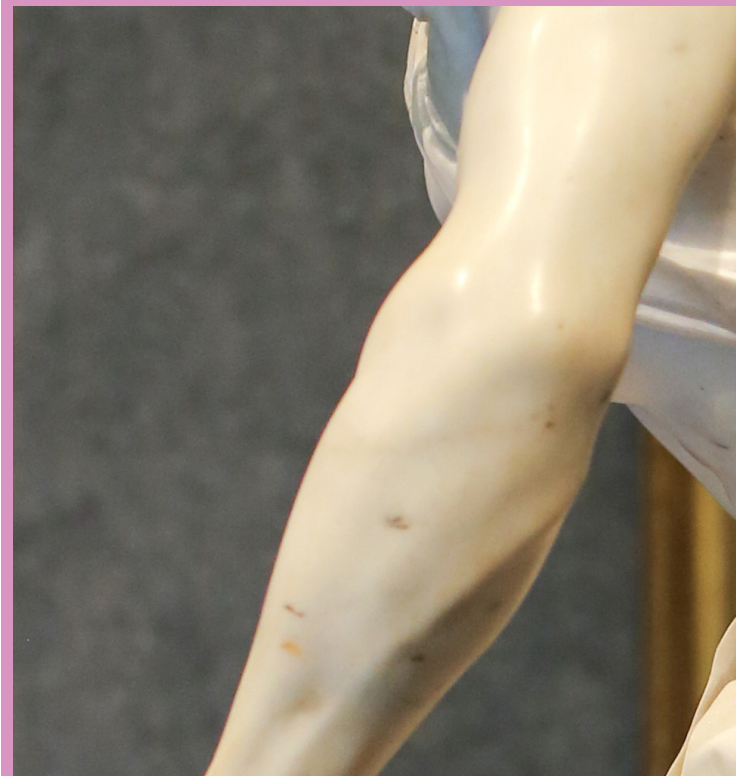
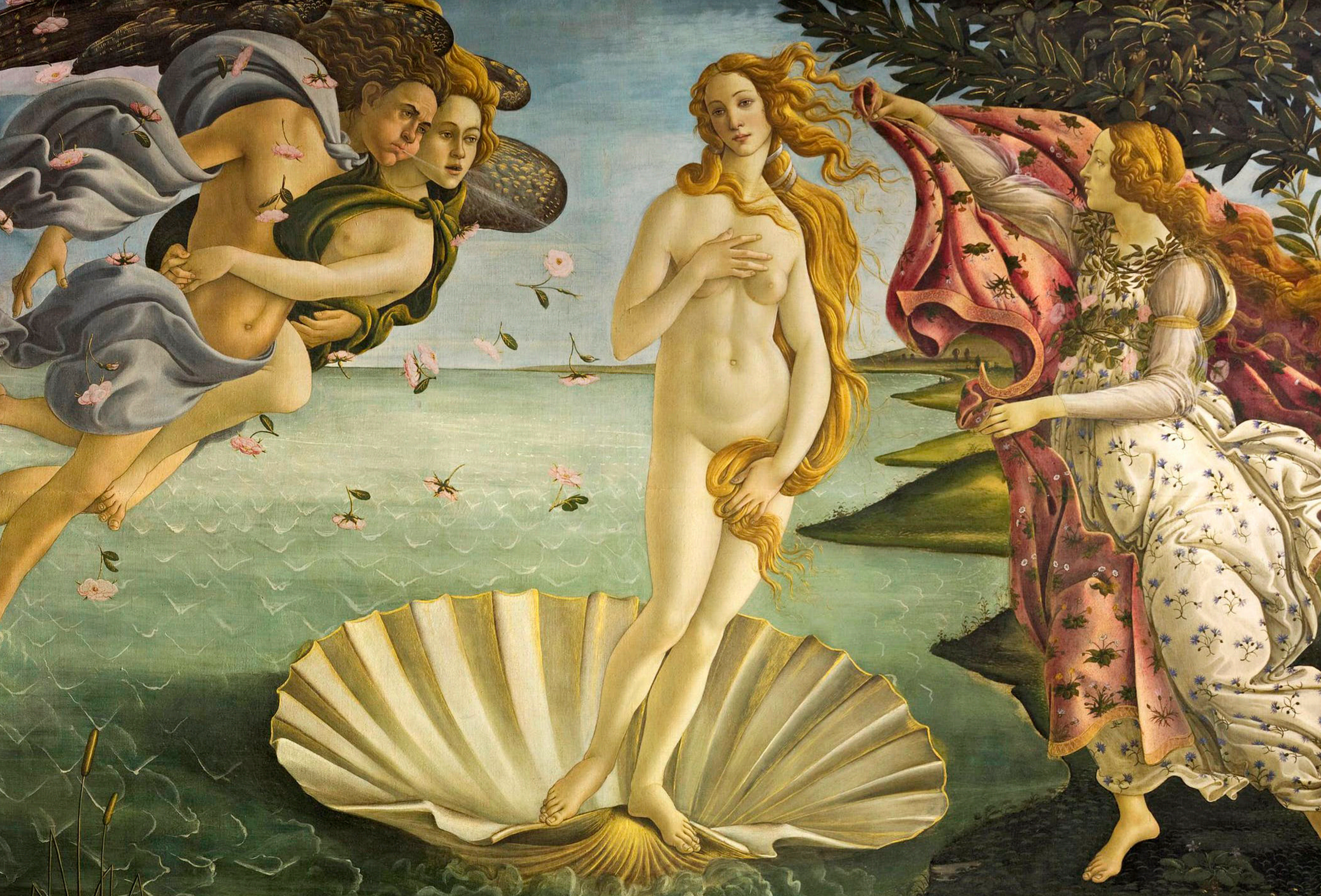


Fig 7- David, Bernini, 1623-24

Where Michelangelo's, *David*, accentuated the characteristics of the hero's body. Bernini's, *David* (1623-1624), captures the figure mid-action. The nude body contrasts with the discarded "scale armor", while the hero's angry expression opposes the musical harmony symbolized by the lyre lying on the ground in place of Saul's sword. Everything within the sculpture has a role, and the movement of the body is the defining element of Baroque sculpture.



I.3 Modernity and the Break from the Canon

In modern times the body both male and female serves as a means to connect with nature, to recover that primal spirit that allows us to live as new beings. With impressionists like Degas, Renoir, and Monet, the classical canon of beauty, symmetry, and anatomical precision begins to dissolve. In Degas' 1883 work *Dancer Tilting* (fig 9), the body is captured in motion without the need to idealize it as a heroine or a deity, but closely tied to the reality of the moment. By the late 19th century, artists like Eduard Munch and his “The Scream” redefined the body, as the external cage of man, juxtaposed with the relationship with one’s inner self. (fig 10)

The body remains central, but within the Expressionist movement (1905-1920), all rules, canons, and geometric and symmetrical grids previously discussed were in favor of an inner and outer “expression” of suffering. The body became the blank canvas on which artists could express their pain, nightmares, and existential torments. Schiele, embodied this shift more than any other. His figures are tense and distorted, with contorted limbs and outstretched fingers—expressing anxiety, fear, guilt, passion, ecstasy, and tragedy.

Schiele deeply felt the threats of existence: he admitted himself to loving both life and death, and used the whole body to express all human emotions: anxiety, apprehension, guilt, curiosity, and surprise, combined with passion, ecstasy, and tragedy. (fig 11)

His characters, were no longer portrayed as human beings but rather as stiff mannequins forced into unnatural poses. This approach influenced Jean-Martin Charcot. He used photography to study mental illnesses, particularly hysteria. Each week, he gave public demonstrations of hypnosis in highly dramatic sessions; these sessions were photographed to provide scientific documentation of their validity: the patients appeared transformed into living mannequins, just like in Schiele’s works. According to Charcot, every pathological event manifested externally, and through the use of photography, hysteria could be diagnosed as a serious disease to be considered, not as a mere theatrical simulation. (fig 12)

Expressionism was not only a communication of distress. Although rare, moments of joy were also expressed through the body. Matisse for example, painted female nudes that showcase the joy of being in the world through dance, while Picasso broke from this representation to restructure the image and the body of the nude woman by geometrizing her figure.

While for the classicists the nude was a symbol of beauty and purity, with Modigliani in 1917 it became a symbol of scandal, an expression too powerful for which the viewer was not yet ready. (fig 13)

The nude body, suffering, dry, thin, continue to show all the rifts of the human soul. Frida Kahlo displays her pain from an abortion, highlighting abused her body to share her pain, such as after her abortion. She highlight how the body can sometimes act as a subject independent of our will, not obeying us, much like in our nightmares. (fig 14)

We have to wait until the 1970s for the birth of a new form of art called Body Art, with Klein as its precursor. From the body as a brush to the body as a support, the step is short. The 20th century comes to a close, and the new century brings with it new discoveries, new ways of using the body—not as a symbol of beauty or perfection but as a communicative means to externalize concerns and anxieties, facing the new canons, no longer artistic, imposed by the society of the 21st century.



Fig 10- Edvard Munch, the scream, 1893

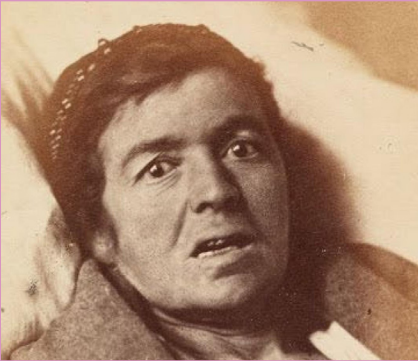


Fig 13- Portrait young woman, 1918, Modigliani



Fig 9- Dancer Tilting, 1883, Degas



Fig 11 - Egon Schiele, Autoritratto, 1912



Fig 14- Hendry Ford Hospital, 1932, Frida Kahlo

2. The Body Between Neuroscience and Social Perceptions

2.1 How does the brain elaborate body image

In the previous chapter, we explored how various artistic movements have represented or imagined the body—realistically, expressively, or in idealized forms. These “canons” have exerted a profound influence on the perception of the real body. A key question arises: is it possible that, centuries after classical, Renaissance, and Expressionist art, body perception is still governed by unwritten yet inherited rules—rules that continue to shape contemporary standards of beauty and bodily value? Before attempting to answer this, it is crucial to define what is meant by “body image” and to understand the historical origins of the term. In 1905, French neurologist “Pierre Bonnier” was the first to introduce the expression “body schema” (“schéma corporel”) to indicate the topographical and spatial representation of the body that enables orientation within the external environment.⁵ The term “body image”, however, was coined by “Paul Schilder”, a Viennese psychiatrist and psychoanalyst born in 1886. After earning his medical degree, Schilder embraced Freudian psychoanalysis while maintaining a foundation in neuropathology. He devoted his work particularly to the psychogenesis of psychiatric disorders and became a pioneer in group psychoanalytic therapy and developmental psychology. Prior to Schilder, bodily awareness had been attributed exclusively to physiological processes. Schilder was the first to highlight, in a detailed and systematic way, the psychological and social factors involved in both the formation and disintegration of body image. With Schilder’s contributions, environmental and behavioral factors began to be considered essential in understanding disorders affecting bodily perception—such as “phantom limb syndrome”.

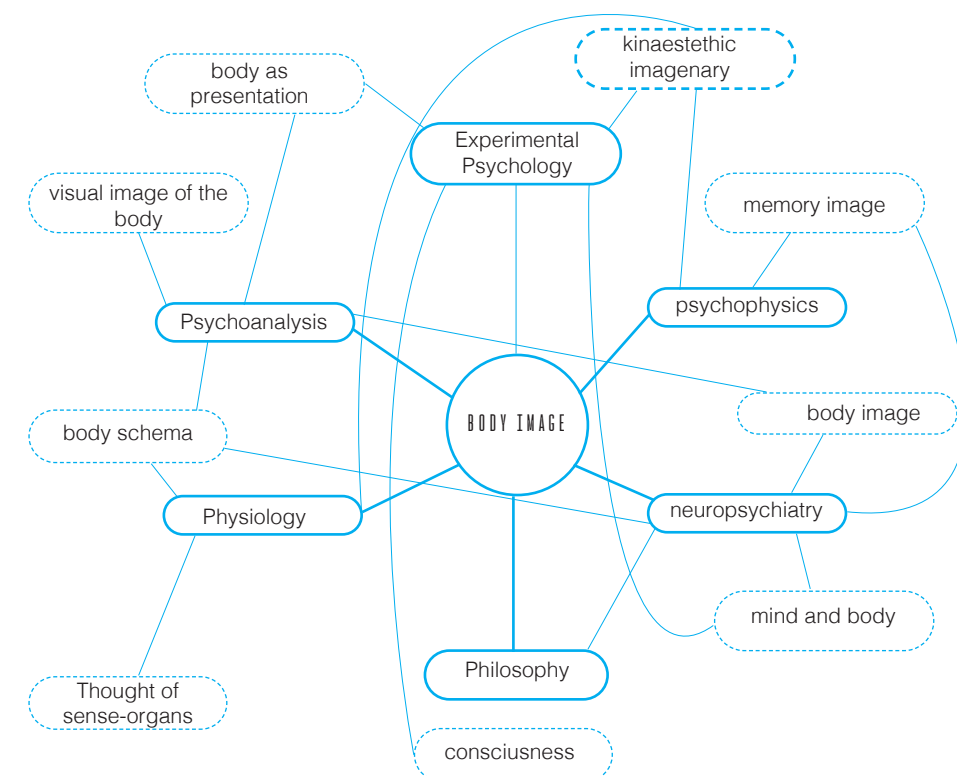
In the introduction to his 1935 work “The Image and Appearance of the Human Body”, Schilder offers a seminal definition:

*“The body image is the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves.”*⁶

Schilder was the first to describe the concept of “body schema”, or the constant awareness of possessing a body. For instance, if we are bitten by a mosquito, we instinctively know where to scratch, without consciously identifying the exact spot of the bite. When considering the global experience an individual has of their body—excluding emotional or painful sensations—we recognize a form of bodily unity that does not merely manifest as perception or mental image, but rather as a “synthetic feature” of the body schema.

In other words, the body appears to itself in a specific way; the image is not only a sensory perception, even though it originates from the senses, but also involves mental structures and representations—without being reducible to them. Moreover, according to Schilder, body image is formed in the brain and undergoes constant reassessment. The mind persistently checks how the various parts of the body conform to the idea we have of it, and to its overall unity. In 1988, psychologist “Peter Slade” redefined body image as:

*“The picture we have in our minds of the size, shape and form of our bodies; and our feelings concerning these characteristics and our constituent body parts.”*⁷



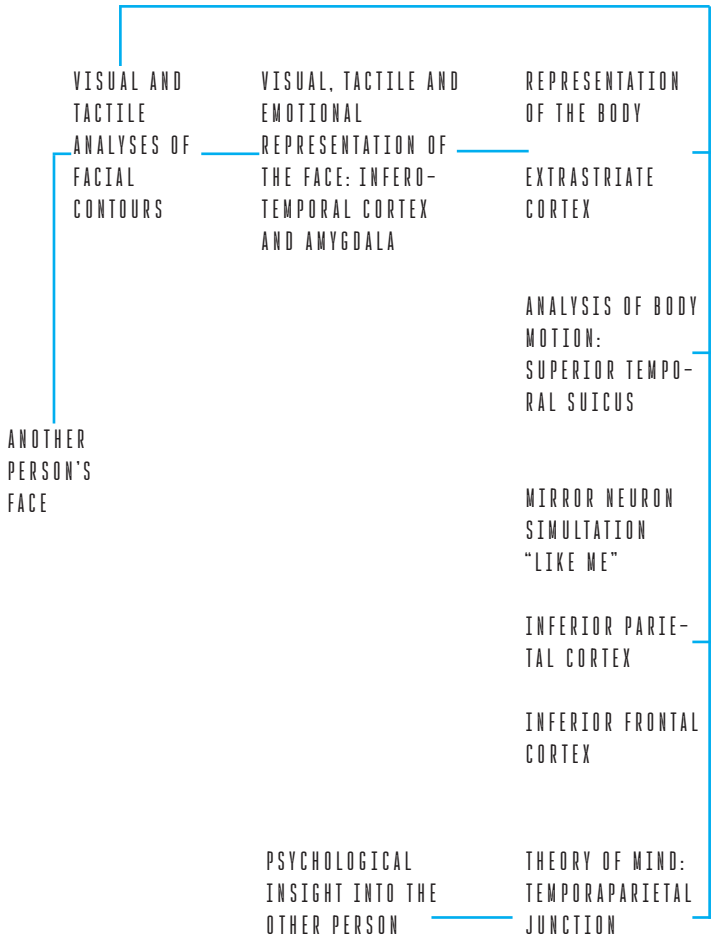
- Slade’s model identifies four distinct components:
- A *perceptual component* (how a person visualizes their body’s size and shape);
 - An *attitudinal component* (what the person believes and knows about their body);
 - An *affective component* (the feelings a person has towards their body);
 - A *behavioral component* (related to actions such as eating and physical activity).

The construction of body image is a complex phenomenon rooted in both neural pathways and psychological processes. Through modern neuroscience, we can better understand the intricate interplay between brain function, perception, and self-esteem. But how does the brain process an image or piece of information? To answer this, we turn to “Eric Kandel”, born in Vienna in 1929 and awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine. Recognized as one of the most influential neuroscientists of our time.⁸ In his 2012 book “The Age of Insight” he explains that the brain first processes sensory input from various organs: visual information from the eyes, auditory signals from the ears, olfactory input from the nose, taste from the tongue, and tactile information—such as pressure or temperature—from the skin. The brain then analyzes this sensory data through the lens of prior experience to generate a coherent perception of the external world. It is the brain that integrates all aspects of our mental life: perception, thought, emotion, memory, and action. Yet, as Kandel writes,

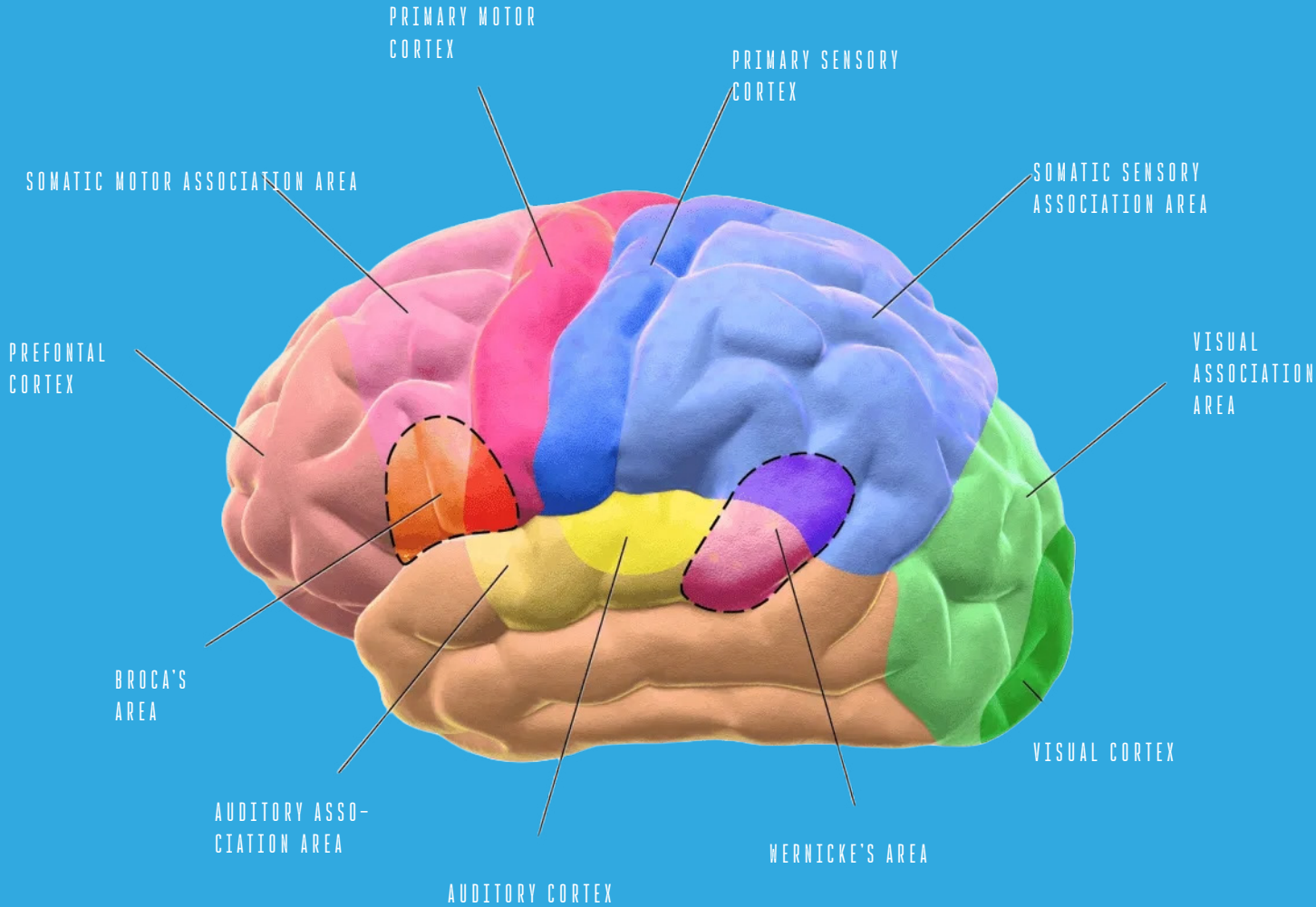
“*although it may seem as though we possess a visual image of the world in our brain, we actually have a symbolic representation.*”⁹

Applied to body image, this means that through continuous observation—via mirrors, photos, or screens—we construct a hypothetical mental image of our body. This image is often disconnected from objective reality, especially when it becomes demotivating or deconstructive to the self. If we were to deconstruct that mental image, we might find it bears little resemblance to our actual physical form. Kandel supports this notion by mentioning “the Mind’s Eye”, noting that what we see surpasses the content of the image projected onto the retina of the eye. The image captured on the retina is first translated into electrical signals that define lines and contours, forming boundaries around faces or objects. These signals are then decoded and reconstructed in the brain, resulting in the image we perceive. But which brain regions mediate body image? The “primary areas” involved include: the visual cortex, the somatosensory cortex, the insula, and the prefrontal cortex. Each of these plays a specific role in shaping our perceptions and attitudes related to the body.

Furthermore, when confronted with a negative body image, the neural system known as the “mirror system” enables us to empathize with others and internalize external standards of attractiveness. These *mirror neurons* are designed to reflect the emotions and actions of those around us. Artists, too, have long employed the mirror not only as a tool for self-portraits, but also as a means to project emotional and physical realities—either their own or others’. A telling example is Jan Vermeer’s painting “The Music Lesson (Lady at the Virginal with a Gentleman)”. At first glance, the woman appears to be watching her hands on the keyboard. However, upon closer inspection—thanks to the mirror placed above the harpsichord—we see that her gaze is actually directed toward the man beside her. Her true interest is revealed not in the action, but in the relationship suggested by the reflection. It becomes evident that, although these scientific insights are more recent than the works of 20th-century artists, the latter—perhaps unconsciously—were already expressing concepts that had yet to be explored in neuroscience and psychology.



Which brain regions mediate body image?



2.2 Imagining bodies and Embodied cognition

We have analyzed how body image is perceived and what occurs neurologically during this process. However, when discussing the body schema or body image, it is necessary to refer to another discipline that has theorized a relatively recent concept: the “philosophy of the body”, or embodied cognition. According to this perspective, the nature of the human mind is deeply connected to the characteristics and movements of the human body. Embodied cognition suggests that these elements are essential to a wide range of cognitive functions, including perceptual biases, memory recall, comprehension, and high-level mental constructs. The concept of the philosophy of the body has its roots in phenomenology, particularly in the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a French philosopher and leading figure of 20th-century phenomenology.¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty's intellectual formation was significantly influenced by Edmund Husserl, founder of phenomenology, and by Martin Heidegger, although he distanced himself from both in order to develop a conception of the world and the subject centered on embodied and perceptual experience. Merleau-Ponty proposed a vision of the human being as rooted in the world, thus overcoming Cartesian dualism, which conceived reality as divided into two substances: the spiritual (*res cogitans*) and the material (*res extensa*).¹¹

For Merleau-Ponty, the vision of the body as a mere object is artificial and fails to account for how we actually live our existence. In contrast, he described a philosophy that places the body at the center of human experience—the “lived body” (*corps propre*), not as one object among others, but as the subject through which we perceive and engage with the world. Perception, therefore, is not a mental act but an embodied experience that involves the body as a living unity. In his work “Phenomenology of Perception” (1945), Merleau-Ponty offered a groundbreaking vision of the body. He argued that the body cannot be measured or defined solely as an external object:

*“When an individual looks at himself in a mirror, the most that he is able to see of his body is an image, or externalization that fails to represent the experience of anchorage, or his particular experience and perspective from where he stands in the world. The image in the mirror seems to float in a virtual reality where it knows nothing of gravity and perspective.”*¹²

The lived body, according to Merleau-Ponty, is in the world as the heart is in the organism. It sustains the visible spectacle in the sense that it embodies the entire perceptual process through which the subject makes sense of reality. It is in the body that the foundation of all knowledge—perception—is anchored. The body is the tool through which we are in the world, through which we perceive and come to know it. Merleau-Ponty explains that we perceive our body both from within (as if it possessed a “natural consciousness” capable of localizing sensations—for example, when touching a cold object, we feel the sensation precisely where the contact occurred) and from without (when observing ourselves in a mirror).



This dual perspective creates a sort of ambiguity in bodily perception: we become, simultaneously, the one who senses and the one who is observed. This dynamic profoundly affects our self-image. For Merleau-Ponty, the act of feeling is fundamental. It allows us to connect with the objects around us, but not passively—we must be captured by them in order to relate to them and grasp their wholeness. This process of “feeling” the body involves both physical sensations and mental reflections, a concept that contemporary psychology has linked to the mechanisms behind body dysmorphia and eating disorders. If we perceive the world through our bodies, then the body should be a familiar place. But when bodily perception is distorted—due to social influences or, as we have seen, to artistic and aesthetic canons—this familiarity is lost and transforms into discomfort and suffering.

Merleau-Ponty also devoted much attention to art, viewing it as a means of revealing aspects of the world that elude scientific representation. Paul Cézanne was, for him, an emblematic figure in showing how modern art could express the open experience we have with the perceptual world. Through his expressive use of color, Cézanne returned to an original experience in which the divisions between soul and body, or thought and vision, no longer applied. Color, in Cézanne's work, re-establishes the connection between the self and the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne reveals the synthetic, primordial nature of perception, where objects and sensations are deeply intertwined. Cézanne does not treat the body as a central subject, but rather as a secondary tool: it becomes a volume that structures space, and his faces lose all expressive individuality. He portrays a timeless world, where nature and humanity nearly merge.(fig 15)

Rejecting the rules and canons of classical art, Cézanne avoided conventional strategies and schemes. He focused instead on the perception of the world and of things. For him, the world of objects is not a separate reality; each thing speaks to our body and to our life. The individual is invested in the objects, just as the objects are invested by the individual. Based on Merleau-Ponty's account, Cézanne helps us understand that art, as an aesthetic and perceptual experience, must be considered as a whole. The color of an object is not something separable from the object itself—for instance, the red of an apple is not an additional property but an integral part of the apple in our perception. We do not first see a shape and then its color; we perceive a single, inseparable unit. (fig 16)

But what happens when this perception concerns our own body? In this case, the object (the body) is not a sum of isolated qualities (weight, shape, skin color, proportions), but a whole perceived entity. When perception is distorted, the body is often mentally fragmented, divided according to the same grids and schemes used in classical art. We isolate features—stomach, legs, face—emphasizing details and losing sight of the body's unity and essential function. Thus, if Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology affirms that the body is a unified whole, in the perceptual and cognitive distortions associated with eating disorders, this unity becomes altered and subjective.



Fig 15- Cézanne, Mont Sainte-Victoire seen from Château Noir, ca. 1904

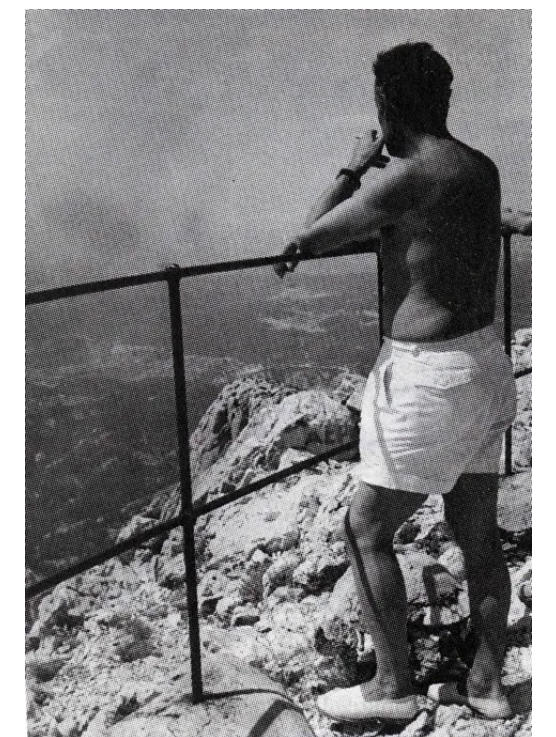


Fig 16- Merleau-Ponty at the Summit of Mont Sainte-Victoire, summer 1960; 2012
Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

3. Body philosophy: construction and impact of idealistic esthetic guidelines

3.1 Guidelines of the Body: Between Body and Soul

In the previous chapters, we analyzed how the body is subject to distorted visual perceptions: it is not a neutral biological fact, but rather the product of norms, expectations, and social relations. No matter how far we choose to go, how much we try to hide or erase ourselves, how invisible we try to become hoping to melt under the summer sun—the body will always be with us, wherever we go. Who embodies this cage—this inescapable presence with which we are fated to coexist, from which nothing can be concealed? The answer is offered by the renowned French philosopher, sociologist, and historian Michel Foucault. In one of his two radio lectures on “heterotopias,” broadcast in December 1966 and revisited a year later, Foucault states that the solution lies in the “my” or “our” body.¹³ Crucial to the argument developed in this chapter is understanding which body he is referring to. It is not the segregated body of the mad or the ill, nor the surveilled, punished, trained, treated, or sexualized one. It is, rather, the relationship between the self and the body—his own body—which he describes in the first person. It is the body that enables him to move, yet by preventing him from escaping its envelope, it condemns him to a fixed location, a defined and unbreachable space. It is a “merciless topos,” the opposite of utopia. However, if we view the body not only as a prison but as something we can truly inhabit, it can become the starting point for imagining a utopia.

It is the discomfort the body generates that compels us to imagine something different, something better. Indeed, Foucault acknowledges that the first and most deeply rooted utopia within the human being is that of a disembodied body. Yet such utopias are not born solely from the rejection of the body and its fragility, but from its ambiguity: the body is at once visible and invisible, open and closed, clear and mysterious. We cannot see our own eyes as they look at our hips, our back, or the nape of our neck—unless in a mirror. We thus discover that the body is always projected outside of itself, into the world, in constant relation to its surroundings.

There are, however, experiences that diminish this utopian drive of the body: death, the mirror, and love. The corpse and the reflected image reside “elsewhere,” in an unreachable dimension. Love, on the other hand, situates the body “here,” for the contact with the other reaffirms our presence within our own body. Once again, Foucault turns to art, identifying a form of hope in Luca Signorelli’s painting “The Resurrection of the Flesh”, where bodies rise again—stronger and purer. It is in this conception and hope that the myth of the soul is grounded: a soul that inhabits the body, yet surpasses, protects, and survives it.

Centuries before Foucault—well before the birth of Christ—Pythagoras, the Greek philosopher, introduced the concept of “metempsychosis”, the doctrine according to which the human soul, imprisoned in the body due to an original fault, purifies itself by transmigrating from one body to another, and upon reaching its final purification, reunites with the Divine Soul.¹⁴ According to this belief, the soul migrates from one body to another and, depending on one’s conduct in life, is either promoted to a higher level or demoted to a lower one. Death thus becomes the passage from one “end” to a new “beginning”: while the body dies, the immortal soul transmigrates into another form. The history of the body has long been examined by historians, who have studied it within the framework of demography and historical pathology; they have analyzed it as the site of needs and appetites, of physiological processes and metabolisms, as a target for microbial or viral attacks. These scholars have shown to what extent historical processes are intertwined with what may appear to be merely the biological substratum of existence.

Yet the body is also directly immersed in a political field: power relations exert an immediate hold over it, they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it into specific forms of labor, impose rituals, and demand from it certain signs. This concept is central to Foucault’s most well-known work of 1976, “Discipline and Punish”, where—beginning with the crisis of incarceration as a relevant form of punishment—he focuses his attention on the body and power.

Foucault, however, is not the only thinker to describe the metaphorical cage in which humans are forced to live, without any possibility of escape. Throughout history, and particularly in literature, numerous authors have adopted the concept of the “human cage” in various ways. Among them is Franz Kafka, who in “The Metamorphosis” of 1915, explores the paradox whereby, in the moment of greatest alienation from a socially human condition, the protagonist Gregor Samsa meets his death as a result of being all too human.¹⁵ In Kafka’s work, the body is stripped of all its human characteristics and transformed: when Gregor Samsa wakes up after a restless night of troubled dreams, in his small room, transformed into a giant insect, his world collapses. In Kafka’s work, the body is stripped of all its human characteristics and transformed: when Gregor Samsa wakes up after a restless night of troubled dreams, in his small room, transformed into a giant insect, his world collapses. At first, he considers this condition to be fictitious, convinced he is still in a dreamlike state, but he must soon come to terms with the physical space of his body and his new self-perception. Gregor no longer recognizes his body: every movement is painful and unfamiliar. He wants to get up, to speak, but cannot. It is this sense of imprisonment that renders the body a limit—not the physical change itself, but the inability of others to accept it.

This brings us to another concept: that of “being and appearing,” a central theme in the work of Italian author Luigi Pirandello. His thought contributes significantly to the discussion in this chapter. While Foucault and Kafka reflect on the body as a cage or prison, Pirandello explores the alienation of the individual, compelled by social conventions and expectations to wear a social mask. “One, No One and One Hundred Thousand” of 1926, is not only the title of one of Pirandello’s most famous works, but also a condition of modern humanity—caught between fragments of physical and psychological identity that society refuses to accept. The individual lives in conflict between life—a continuous, unstoppable flow—and “form”, the social labels and roles they are expected to conform to. Suffocated by this constant struggle that imprisons them in a fixed and immutable reality, the individual seeks, unsuccessfully, a way out. Yet a changeable ending is possible. Only through the awareness of the masks we wear daily can we attempt to approach a form of authenticity—even if we remain conscious of its fragility.



3.2 Artistic Nudes and the Feminine Body as an Object of Desire

As seen in the first chapter, Greek art is the origin of numerous unwritten artistic rules that have been passed down through the centuries to painters and sculptors. The body is subject to these canons, and the various poses in which statues of athletes, dancers, and warriors are depicted aim to express a wide range of emotions, both basic and complex—among them the quintessential Greek “pathos”. The artistic nude is the ultimate representation of the human body from this period and will characterize every century of art history: it can be considered, in a way, a work of art in itself, whose purpose is to draw the viewer’s attention to the essential and original nakedness of the human body. Let’s imagine we are observing a landscape painting: the main subject of the painting becomes the landscape, just as inanimate objects are the focus in a still life. The same occurs when we observe a nude—here, the human body in its entirety becomes the absolute protagonist of the representation. Starting with the Renaissance, studies of the human figure and the effort to render it as realistically as possible became more in-depth: the body as it had been depicted up to that point was no longer enough, as it did not embody the idea of perfection so eagerly sought by classical artists. It was with the advent of the academies in the 16th century that a clear distinction was established between the realistically studied body and the idealized body, “elevating it to a perfect microcosm that reflects the work of God”¹⁶

The nude—especially the female nude—assumed a central role in the history of art, becoming not only a subject of study and admiration but also a vehicle for a visual and cultural ideology. The female nudity, stripped of symbolic or mythological meaning and observed solely as a body devoid of intimacy, was historically constructed to satisfy the male gaze, which often reduced women to an aesthetic surface or an object of desire. If we consider the most famous artworks in which female nudity is at the forefront, it is easy to see that there is not a single “ugly” depiction of a naked body. This reinforces the equation beauty = “good” and “ugliness” = bad. Even with the advent of modern art, women continued to be seen as passive muses: whether portrayed as a duchess in Francisco Goya’s *Portrait of the Duchess of Alba* (fig 17), as an exotic fruit in Gauguin’s *Woman with Fruit* (fig 18), or as a prostitute in the works of Toulouse-Lautrec (fig 19), women were always observed, studied, and depicted through male eyes. In contemporary art, the female body has been fragmented, deformed, and reduced to a symbol, often deprived of its essence.

This is a period of apparent change in which artistic rules were abandoned to emphasize non-canonical colors and forms—as seen in Picasso’s famous painting “*Les Femmes d’Alger*”, where five presumed prostitutes are represented in geometric forms, maintaining feminine traits and rendering the figure of the body through color games. Picasso places the women in the position of models, shattering three-dimensional space and making them aware of being observed. Artists of the time unconsciously drew a fine line on the woman’s body, making her simultaneously the “object and subject” of their paintings. Eroticism comes into play—defined as the various manifestations of sexual desire that attract one to something or someone—which has always had a place in art, even when considered scandalous. Paradoxically, it seems that only eroticism can protect women from this “dehumanization,” maintaining them in a liminal space between human and symbolic. This demonstrates the continuous inner conflict of the artist, driven by a desire to transcend limits and conventions, using “eros” as a creative force. This concept is identifiable with the term “Male Gaze”, which refers to the act of depicting the female universe in visual arts and literature from a heterosexual male perspective, resulting in portrayals of women as mere sexual objects meant to satisfy men. In 1972, critic John Berger wrote an essay titled “*Ways of Seeing*”, in which he stated:

“A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. [...] Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves.”¹⁷

It is thus clear how cultural, behavioral, and beauty standards are—often unconsciously—transmitted to women from a young age, simply by observing a painting of a naked woman. When did the notion of beauty as a cultural construct first emerge?

The beautiful roman woman, 1917

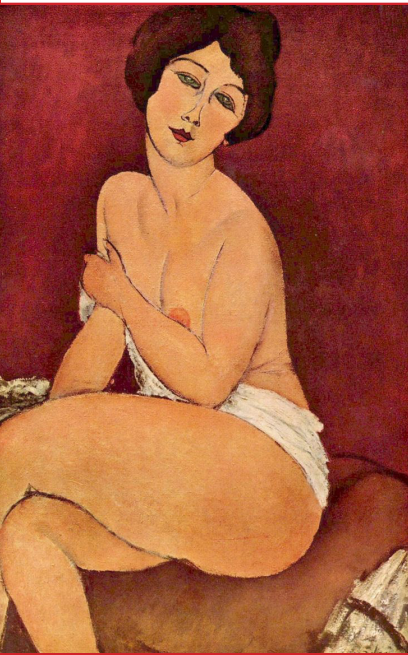


Fig 17- Portrait of the Duchess of Alba, Goya

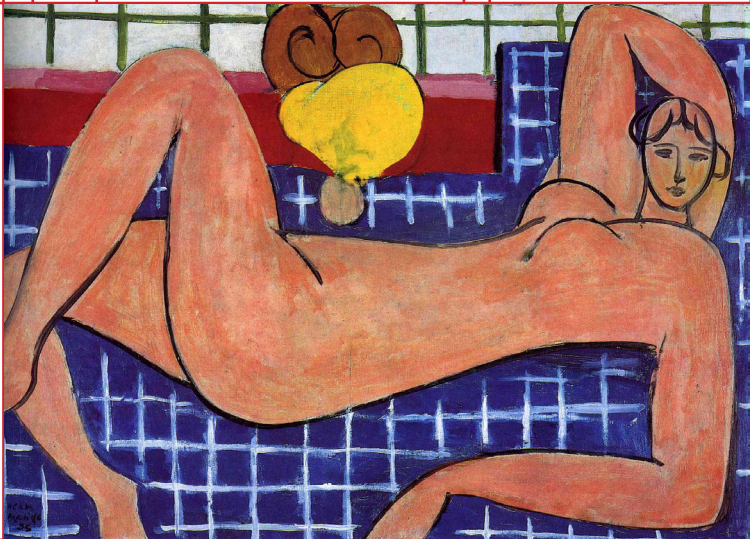


Paolina Borghese, Canova, 1805-1808

Fig.18- Woman with fruit, 1893, Gauguin



Le Demoiselle d' Avignon, Picasso



Henri Matisse, Grand nu couché, 1935



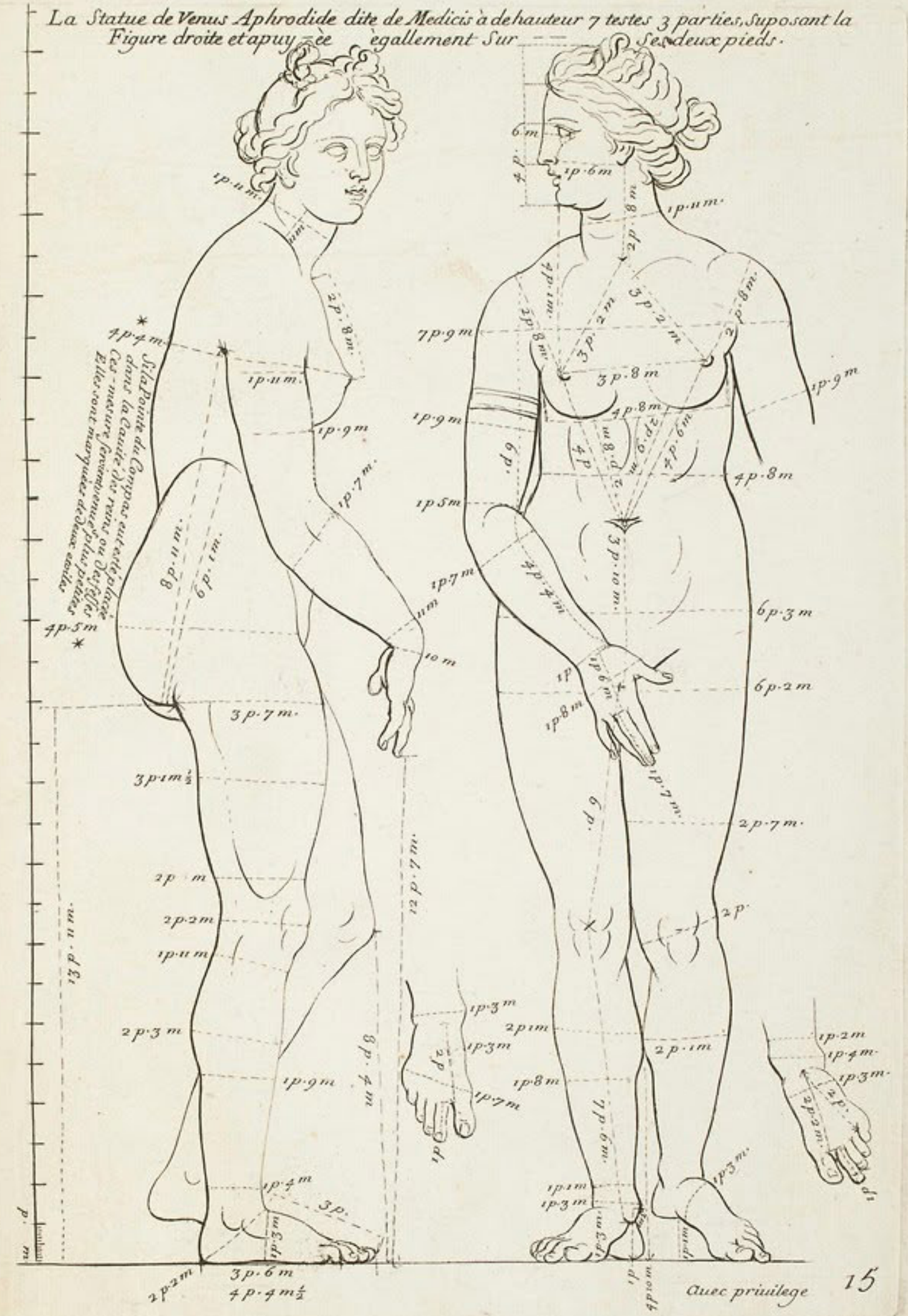
Fig 19- Toulouse lautrec, Poster Moulin Rouge

At the end of the 18th century, Kant spoke of aesthetic taste as a

“common aesthetic sense, based on the universal communicability \[...] of a mental state open to knowledge, in the mutual animation of imagination and intellect,”¹⁸

concluding that beauty is closely linked to morality. Later, Hegel shifted this idea to the realm of the artwork, describing Romantic art as a response to the need to represent the individual as a reflection of their emotions. If in “The Picture of Dorian Gray”, the portrait—the art of the nude and the depiction—is the medium through which man identifies himself and simultaneously becomes a victim of himself, in our time it is technology which, through instant dissemination, conditions us to become the worst version of ourselves.

While the concept of Apollonian beauty was deconstructed in the fields of art and aesthetics, society continues to pursue the academic Renaissance ideal. This is where “media archetypes” come into play—public figures with exaggerated traits, referring to different fields, promoting a type of physical beauty to be emulated. Thus, we realize that the mental images of every individual are traceable to an artistic iconography based on a classical scheme, unconsciously learned and internalized since early memory. This gives rise to what scholars call the “Dorian Gray Syndrome”, an excessive concern with one’s physical appearance, especially as one ages. The Dorian Gray Syndrome takes its name from the famous novel by Oscar Wilde (1890), in which a young man, upon admiring his own portrait, feels a deep desire not to age, to remain young forever—going so far as to sell his soul so that he may stay eternally youthful and beautiful, while the portrait shows the signs of physical decay instead. Patients suffering from this syndrome are so obsessed with the idea of beauty that they engage in dangerous behaviors that harm their health. At the root lies self-rejection—this is the perception mentioned in previous chapters, based on social constructs that the individual projects onto themselves and others, forcing themselves to be and appear in a certain way.





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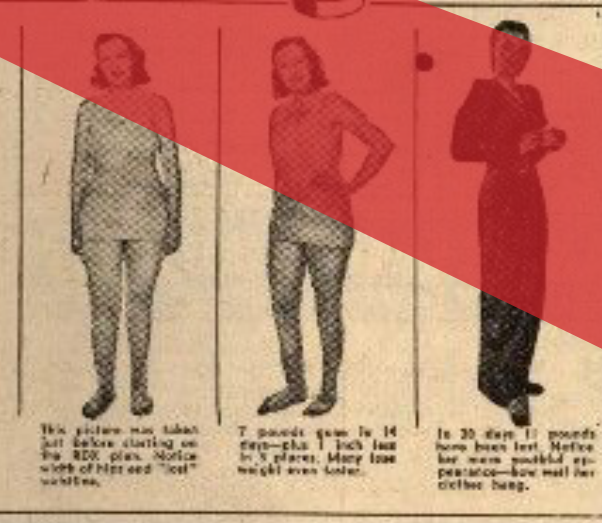
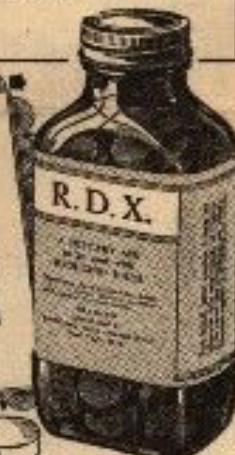
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3.3 Media and Social Networks: How Do They Change Our Vision

Jean Baudrillard, sociologist, philosopher, political scientist, and essayist, opens his book “Simulacra and Simulation” by quoting Ecclesiastes or Qohelet, a religious text found in the Bible written in Hebrew. According to Baudrillard, the world we live in today is not real but a simulacrum. From the Latin “*simulacrum*”, meaning “figure, statue”, the term originally indicated the image or representation of a deity. If we were to redesign the concept of a simulacrum in today’s world, we would say that it is an image or representation that does not refer to any reality, yet claims to be considered real. The culprit of this cosmic chaos we find ourselves in, the media and modern technologies. With the advent of mass media, television, advertising, and all forms of communication, our perception of reality has significantly diminished. In fact, we are conditioned by images that regenerate themselves—that is, they are endlessly modified, growing ever more distant from the original version. Baudrillard himself theorizes in his book that the lack of distinction between reality and simulacra originates from several phenomena, the first of which is the media world. For the philosopher, media are responsible for blurring the line between essential products (for living) and those for which a necessity is created through commercial imagery.

In the past, it was possible to distinguish the real world from that of images: everything appeared for what it was—people turned to paintings, artworks, or statues. Today, however, that distinction is no longer possible because we are destabilized by the referential instability of the images we observe. We live according to the principle of simulation, where every move, action, and perception determines how we will spend the rest of our lives. The consequence of this process is “hyperreality”—a pseudo-reality generated by the simulation of models that lack a referent in the real world. In this context, the body—and the image we project onto it—perhaps plays the most important role, while also bearing the most dangerous consequences. Michelangelo, Botticelli, and Titian designed what they considered to be “ideal bodies”, without any direct social expression projected onto the individual. Their vision of reality was based on what they had seen in the years preceding their success: their studies, sculptures, paintings, and the renowned artistic canons of their time. The “society of art” unknowingly laid the foundations upon which the “modern society” has built and continues to expand.

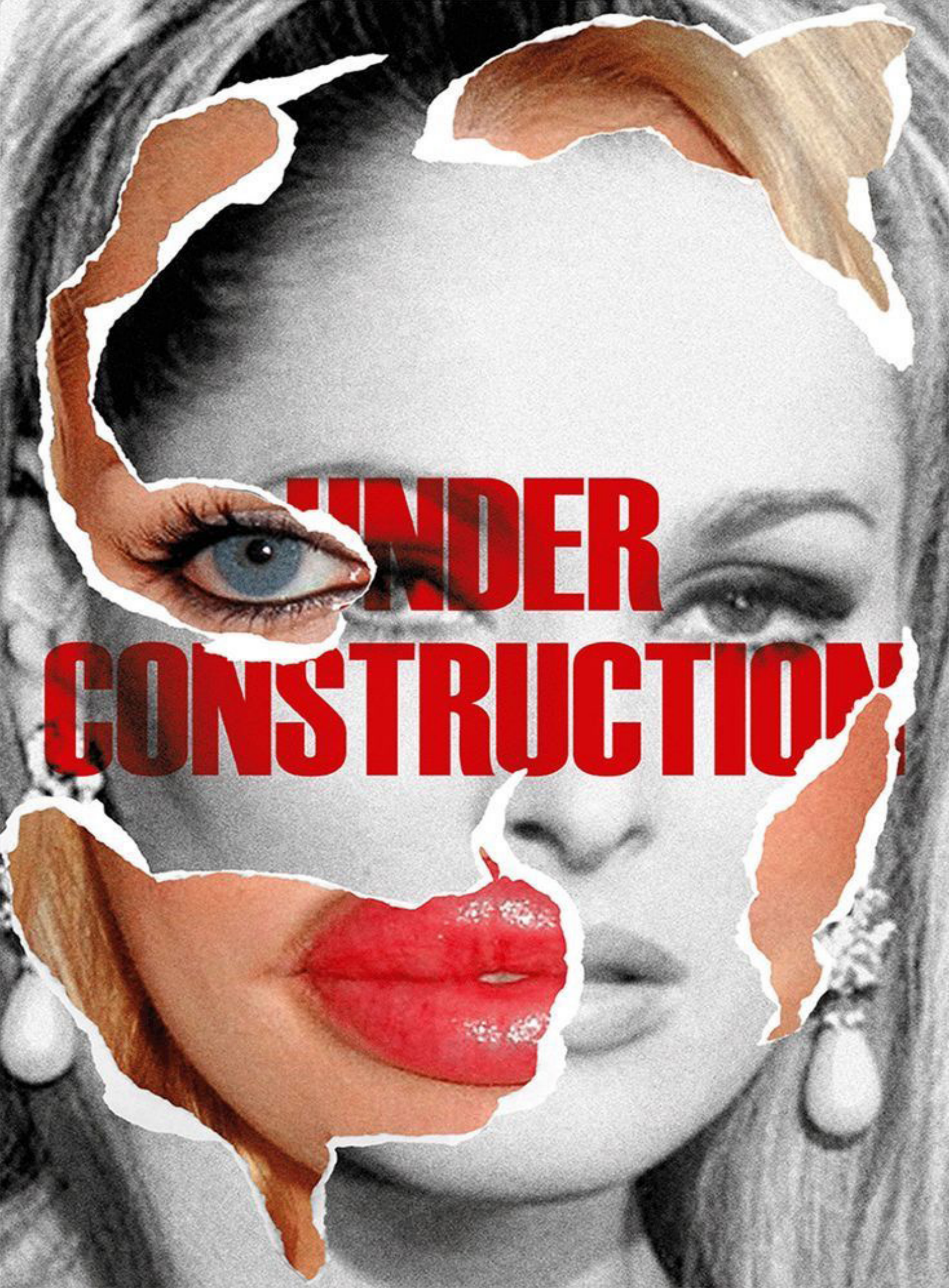
If classical art sought perfect proportions and eternally youthful bodies, in the era of social media, the body is constantly perfected through filters, editing, and photo selection. The objectification of the female body resurfaces in both cases, with persistent sexualization aimed at the male gaze. What is and was represented is the “acceptable” or “desirable”. What changes, however, is the symbolic value attributed to the body: in the past, it reflected abstract concepts (divine beauty, heroism, sin), while today it symbolizes success, health, happiness, and discipline.

“The body is the most beautiful object of consumption,”

says Baudrillard—hypothesizing in his time what would come to define the 21st century and beyond. It is, in fact, the body that first creates the image of individuals.¹⁹

The consumer society we currently live in has become enslaved to the body, establishing an unwritten law that implies the need to have an ideal body. Individuals are thus required to undergo strict body discipline: constant gym workouts, healthy and restrictive diets, and aesthetic surgeries to showcase a new body conforming to society’s expectations. The body must then be well presented—through carefully chosen clothing, where nothing is left to chance. Fashion and the clothing industry have become one of the most explicit forms of consumerism. It becomes increasingly difficult to understand that our needs can be fully met by what we already own, without the urge for new purchases every month. In 1899, sociologist Thorstein Veblen attempted to demonstrate that daily consumption had become a process of social distinction, coining the term “conspicuous consumption”. He studied the emerging class of wealthy New England industrialists who sought to imitate the customs and lifestyle of European aristocrats. And here again, the past and present intertwine: it is a matter of “status quo”. Lower classes imitate the lifestyle of the wealthy. The difference today is that aristocrats represented by celebrities and influencers who, through collaborations with prestigious brands and companies, influence us to buy what they advertise—convincing us that we too can and need to become like them. Advertising and marketing have refined their persuasion techniques to such an extent that we are no longer capable of living in or recognizing a world without branding.

"THE SIMULACRUM IS NEVER WHAT HIDES THE TRUTH; IT IS THE TRUTH THAT HIDES THE FACT THAT THERE IS NONE. THE SIMULACRUM IS TRUE."



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4. Personal Body Perception and Psychological Distress: Sensitive Open Call at Kask

4.1 Metodology and Analysis

After analyzing, in the previous chapters, how the body has been constructed, represented, and desired through art, philosophy, and contemporary media, this chapter aims to answer the initial question of the thesis: How do aesthetic norms imposed by society, conveyed through art, affect body perception and contribute to psychological distress? In order to seek an answer beyond my own thinking, I decided to conduct research within the KASK University in Ghent, asking students around my age about their experiences. To do so, I organized a “sensitive open call” with the goal of meeting at least 12 individuals who were willing to answer 11 questions related to the body, relationship with food, body perception, and the connection between art and the body. All interviews were anonymous and followed a specific structure: each participant was given one question at a time to answer. Once a response was received and noted in a pre-set Excel file, they were shown cards from a well-known board game used in psychology to communicate emotions, “Dixit”. Numerous psychologists have reported that using games like “Dixit” is beneficial for several reasons: first, it reduces the anxiety often associated with therapy. Patients feel more comfortable in a playful environment, where they can freely explore their emotions and thoughts without the pressure of a clinical conversation. The game helps create a less formal atmosphere. Additionally, it improves communication: patients learn to express themselves in new and creative ways, enhancing their communication skills and social interaction, as happens in role-playing.²⁰

In the case of these interviews, as it was not a clinical conversation, the game allowed participants to freely articulate their response using the graphics or link an emotion or feeling to a specific card. Following the analysis of the data and responses, it was found that the same cards were often chosen, even for different questions. One of the most selected cards was number 5, chosen 7 times. It depicts a human figure walking, surrounded by flying papers that drift away, leaving only the eyes visible. In the background, a threatening storm looms. Some participants associated it with body weight, identifying the papers as the weight we try to lose, which in some way does not satisfy us because our bones can feel heavier beneath it. For others, the card symbolized an inner crisis triggered by judgments, words, thoughts, or external expectations written on those papers that the storm would like to eliminate, but, being so tightly attached and internally connected, it fails to do so.

Another card, chosen 6 times, was number 45. It is interesting to note how the theme of art reappears in this graphic and how it was chosen by most participants as a response to questions about aesthetic standards. The card shows a child on a very tall ladder, sculpting a dove in the sky. The white dove is often a symbol of purity, peace, and idealized beauty. Therefore, the connection is direct with how society imposes models of perfection in aesthetic standards. For all the participants who chose this card, the child represented man, who, from his innocence, is driven from a young age to shape his perception of beauty in order to conform to society. It reveals how many people are constantly under pressure to achieve unattainable standards and how this can lead to psychological distress.





The various answers to each question were summarized to identify a common thread linking them all. A complex and multifaceted relationship with food, the body, and self-perception was highlighted. In particular, people feel mainly influenced in their food choices by factors such as emotions and stress, society and cultural pressures, and self-control and insecurity. Eating behavior is often linked to situations of sadness, loneliness, and anxiety. Some eat to distract themselves or comfort themselves during difficult moments, while others tend to eat very little or avoid eating altogether when under extreme stress due to an exam or significant event. On one hand, there are the expectations, whether social or familial, regarding the body and food—how much we eat, how we eat, and in what manner—while on the other hand, there is the continuous struggle with self-control. Following these three themes are the influences of unsolicited and unrequested external comments. In today's society, people increasingly feel authorized and legitimized to voice their unsolicited thoughts about others' bodies, whether humorously or with a kernel of truth, without realizing the impact these comments can have on the person receiving them. Some interviewees recalled specific moments in which they experienced difficult situations, even within their own homes, due to comments about their bodies or what they were eating.

“ I remember we were sitting at the table in a hotel with my parents’ friends, and one of them was talking about how much I was eating. He thought he was being funny, but he didn’t know what I was going through. Even though I politely asked him to stop and change the topic, he kept going until I stood up and yelled ‘Stop talking about it.’ He was silent after that.”

However, it is not only others who comment on our bodies, but we ourselves are often the first to do so. Self-perception, as mentioned in the second chapter with Schilder’s body schema, is the primary cause of eating disorders, which, when leading to body dysmorphia, causes individuals to enter a never-ending loop of guilt and questions that affect them day after day.

“ Every time I eat, I look at myself in the mirror. I see a change from evening to morning and immediately change my mind. I decide I won’t look at myself in the mirror anymore, but I always fall back into the same habit. When I eat too much, I close my eyes so I don’t see what I’m consuming.”

Out of 13 interviewees, 2 admitted to having an eating disorder, one of whom started therapy, while the other is currently in recovery. However, until now, not all responses have shared similarities. Yet, to the question “Have you ever felt pressured to meet certain aesthetic standards?” everyone agreed. For all of them, the answer was affirmative, particularly due to the rise of social media, movies, and advertisements. Here’s an example:

“ I remember a particular moment when the ‘pdf girls’ started circulating, that is, girls in photos in such absurd conditions that they seemed edited and unreal. I became so focused on those photos that I wanted to look like those girls, and I began choosing what to eat based on that. It really influenced my relationship with food.”

To deepen the reflective moment, each person who participated was given a small personal notebook to use freely during the two weeks following the interview. The goal was to allow them to rework emotions or thoughts that had emerged during the meeting, but not only that, as for some, it served as a refuge from intrusive thoughts.

“ I took the book and wrote down what was happening in a few words. This action made me feel more secure, and it didn’t make me dissociate completely. So, thank you for the book.”

It became evident how the most difficult thoughts are often those that are intrusive, uncontrollable, automatic, and persistent.

“ I was really that hungry. But you’re always hungry.”

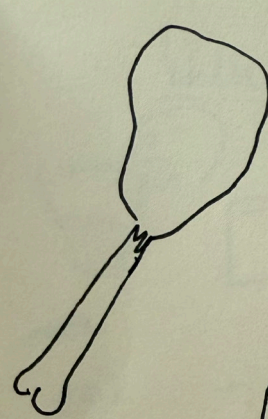
These post-interview reflections represent a fundamental part of the research—not for the content itself, as not everyone chose to write daily or participate fully, but for the emotional and self-analytical value. They leave space for thought and awareness that the body is not just a visible surface, but also a place of thought, conflict, and continuous internal narration.

"hauw i was so
hungry"

"yo'ee always very
hungry meet"

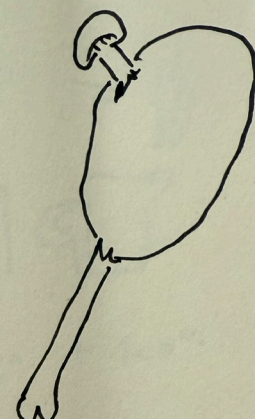
DE MAMA VAN
EEN VRIENDIN:

OH GE ZIET ER GOED
UIT, JE BENT VERMA-
GEAT HÉ?



Chicken
2 days death

nonmem



chicken
4 months death



Toxic

5th Feb
cooked - ~~at~~ 21h
pasta + ham

Pickles + avocado 6th

Black Coff 8:30
bread + jam

3x

- Sandwich $\Rightarrow$ Italian bel

- Tea

- Yaki Noodle (resto) spicy
Soup and mix fride rice

Conclusion

During the interview, each participant was asked the same question that guides this thesis, which was analyzed multiple times in the previous chapters. The answers varied: for some, the bodily vision in art was seen only as a means to bring something to life, while for others, it is part of the problem in our society. However, they all share a particular critique regarding the representation of the female body. As we saw in Chapter 3, throughout the centuries of art history, women have always been depicted from the male gaze. According to 10 out of 12 students, this led to an extension in the era of social media of how the female body was perceived in the past, and still reproduces the “woman to be looked at, man who looks” pattern. This thesis was born from a personal need to discover whether my direct experience with my body as a battlefield could be similar to others' experiences, whether my fixations, paranoias, and intrusive thoughts were the same as someone else's. I wanted to convince myself that I was not alone. Starting from this, I began to ask myself when I first started to worry about my physical appearance and how I wanted to appear in the eyes of others. Who sets the rules? Who imposed these standards of ideal beauty? Through the study of artistic representations, I analyzed how the body has been idealized, broken, mutilated, hidden, or elevated as a symbol of power and perfection. With the help of scholars such as Foucault, Kandel, Merleau-Ponty, etc., I examined the deeper mechanisms of body perception and the transformation of the ideal image. Who we are, how we think, how we reason, and how we live has a neurological foundation, and to understand it, we must start from the origins. Finally, I was able to confront myself and listen to sincere, vulnerable, and courageous voices who willingly participated in my "sensitive open call."

From this study, it clearly emerged how aesthetic standards—today mediated through social media—affect self-perception, generating frustration, guilt, and depression, and how they can lead to obsession, responsible for the development of eating disorders. But if the body can be controlled, it can also be freed. If others can define and diminish it, we can redefine it for what it truly is.

On a personal and artistic level, I've always had an obsession with the body—especially thin, skeletal bodies. I relate more to Schiele's painted bodies than to the curvy, proportioned ones of Michelangelo. I see the body as a blank canvas, a medium for protest and expression. I use the body as an end in itself, searching for a way to offer it peace and care when something inside isn't working as it should.

I don't want to idealize it in my art—I already do that in my mind. I want to show it as it is: fragile, contradictory, alive. Through my projects as a designer and critical designer, I stage the body as if it were my open diary. It's the only space where I feel that even my tired, wounded body can reclaim its dignity—without being judged. Not even by myself. This thesis does not seek to provide absolute answers valid for everyone, but rather to serve as a starting point for reflection and understanding that the body should not only be the projection of an image. The body must be alive, real. A body that is enough in itself.

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