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**“The Dismembered Body: Poe's 'The Man That Was Used Up' and Cindy Sherman's Prosthetic Compositions”**

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This essay focuses on Edgar Allan Poe's (1809-1849) and Cindy Sherman's (1954-) fictions of identity and the way they destabilize representations of the body. It is divided into four sections: first I frame the dialogue between these two historically distant artists, expressing their vision in different media and distinct creative fields (language/literature and photography/the visual arts); then I read “The Man That Was Used Up” considering the dismembered body a self-reflexive device that posits identity as an enigma to be deciphered; in the third section I map Sherman's career, from *Untitled Film Stills* to the later use of prosthesis, with particular emphasis given to her parody of female role models; to conclude I depict Poe and Sherman as tricksters playing at gothic, disturbing the concept of a unitary self, anchored in a safe body, and dissolving the subject positions of reader/spectator and writer/photographer.

1. Identity and the Body

As the interface between “several different domains: the biological and the social, the collective and the individual, that of structure and agent (...), constraint and free will”,<sup>1</sup> the body has become a major topic in recent cultural and literary studies. This preeminence testifies to its paradoxical position in Western culture since modernity — on the one hand, the body is the signifier of the individual self, figured as an autonomous entity inhabiting a material world; on the other hand, it results from a myriad verbal and visual fictions that are inscribed on its “surface” by socialization and frame its legibility in a given historical context. In a progressively secularized world where the spiritual (equated with the irrational) is excluded from the discursive realm, the body becomes the sole index of selfhood, though its mutability points both towards death as annihilation and to identity as performance — the endless reenactment of conventionally prescribed roles, which may be a kind of death itself.<sup>2</sup> The body is thus seen as the tentative frame for anchoring the pretenses of identity,

while simultaneously being perceived as radical alterity, an assemblage of perishable flesh that has long ceased to sustain a soul.

These are recurrent leitmotifs in Gothic, a style that mediates the epistemological rupture between the Romantic and the Modernist periods and deals extensively with “the ineluctable failure of the flesh,”<sup>3</sup> in a world changing its paradigms. Science and medicine make the body a chartable map, and this reification amplifies man’s sense of loss, turning death into the ultimate terror, loathsome and beguiling, a dialectics evident in Poe’s texts.

Throughout his short fiction Poe repeatedly criticizes the materialistic ideology associated with developing capitalism through one of its recurrent metaphors – the body conceived as “organic machine.” Instead of providing a subject unified by a stable physical frame,<sup>4</sup> the writer populates his narratives with fragmented bodies, an objective correlative of the shattered ego, unable to live up to the fictions projected by American culture. We shall see how Cindy Sherman also resists the humanist fallacy of the unified self, deconstructing the human body and the visual and narrative conventions that frame its representation.

## 2. Edgar and the Man

“The Man That Was Used Up” (first published in 1839, in *Burton’s Gentleman Magazine*) literalizes the metaphor of the self-made-man, unveiling the secret anatomy of Brevet Brigadier General John A. B. C. Smith – a character evoked as a collage of military ranks and common proper and family names. To amplify its comic and grotesque impact, this satire of the federal hero fulfilling America’s Manifest Destiny (politically articulated during Andrew Jackson’s Presidency, between 1829 and 1837)<sup>5</sup> uses the stylistic devices of irony, hyperbole and repetition.

The disembodied first person narrator, typical of Poe’s analytical tales, provides the portrait of General Smith “with a kind of melancholy satisfaction in being minute,”<sup>6</sup> describing “the supreme excellence of his bodily endowments” (380). Yet, the enumeration of anatomical body parts through synecdoche fails to account for “the entire individuality of the personage in question” (378).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this heroic character surrounded by gossip seems made out of language, of vague, enthusiastic praises echoed over and over as the narrator seeks in different places the ultimate truth about the General.<sup>8</sup> A choir of

characters will recite a set of incoherent sentences about this “remarkable man” (a qualifier repeated till exhaustion), in the exalted style of popular journalism which Poe parodies throughout his writing.

The text dramatizes exegesis foregrounding the series of frustrated attempts that the narrator makes to get at the gist of things, while circulating through several institutions that should guarantee the stability of the discursive order. First he goes to the Church of the Reverend Doctor Drummummup, who interrupts his and Miss Tabitha’s “brisk *tête-à-tête*” (382) with a Biblical quotation about human frailty (“man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live,” Job 14: 1), silencing all other discourses.<sup>9</sup> The next setting will be the theater, where Poe (quoting Iago) establishes a parallel between the narrator’s state of mind and Othello’s anxious doubts about (Desdemona’s) true identity. But once again the narrator’s (and the reader’s) curiosity is left unanswered, dwelling upon fragmentary texts. Three other failed revelations later, the narrator decides to go directly to the source of his troubles in order to solve the textual puzzle that obsesses him, as the following excerpt clarifies:

There was one resource left me yet. I would go to the fountain-head. I would call forthwith upon the General himself, and demand, in explicit terms, a solution of this abominable piece of mystery. Here, at last, there should be no chance for equivocation. I would be plain, positive, peremptory — as short as pie-crust — as concise as Tacitus or Montesquieu. (386)

This urge to decipher the mystery of the General’s identity highlights the inability of language to circumscribe the body as a significant totality. The ironical reversal at the ending of the story deflates the “colossal proportion” (380) of the war hero, reduced to a torso to which a slave adds prostheses, hinting that the stability of the Southern gentleman’s body rests upon the black man.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, revelation generates perverse suspicions and blocks meaning, which is dislocated from the textual to the physical realm, itself artificial.

This self-reflexive mirror game parodies traditional conceptions of art as mimetic, since the General’s body had been described as a perfect model for artistic representation, rivaling with Apollo (Belvedere), the (neo)classical example of bodily perfection. General A. B. C. provides, after all, the fictional illustration of Poe’s (theoretical) griffin, “no more than a collation of known limbs

– features – qualities,” and his perfection is but the combination of existing disparate elements, proving that art does not result from the Coleridgian organic act of radical creation, ignited by the power of Imagination.<sup>11</sup>

The shift from the author to the artistic object as artifact (potentially reconfigured *ad infinitum* by the reader) is also connected with the narrator’s unreliable status in this short story. Though he exhibits his “cultural capital,”<sup>12</sup> and displays a vast erudition, using French and Latin expressions and literary quotations, the narrator’s credibility is weak. In fact, his assertive tone is undermined from the opening sentence of the story, which denies a stable contextual referent to the character of the General. After a French excerpt from Corneille on death and split-personality, the text reads: “I cannot just now remember when or where I first made the acquaintance of that truly fine-looking fellow” (378). A similar lack of memory affects the narrator in “Ligeia,” whose opening sentence declares: “I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the Lady Ligeia” (310).<sup>13</sup> Both these narrators evince (and confess suffering from) a “pitiable state of [nervous] agitation” (378), which looms under their rational efforts towards stabilizing meaning.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Cindy and the Women

Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980), a series which raised her to celebrity status and was purchased by the MOMA in 1995 to preserve its artistic unity, questions narratorial authority too. Inspired by the collective American imagery and by the filmic universe of the 50s (from the New Wave and neo-realism to Hollywood B movies), the photographer impersonates a set of sixty-nine characters, from the alluring pin-up, to the broken-hearted romantic heroine, or the small-town girl lost in the architectural maze of the big city.

I will briefly consider two images from this series to illustrate some of Sherman’s compositional strategies and the political stance recurrent throughout her career. *Untitled Film Still # 3* (1977)<sup>15</sup> quotes from pop culture and advertising to recreate the vulnerability of the sexy housewife cornered in her kitchenette, apparently looking towards someone outside the image frame. The hypothetical presence of another gaze sets up the spectator’s position as voyeur — a self-reflexive strategy highlighting the politics of vision, of looking and being looked at, which denaturalizes the visual codes underpinning

identity.<sup>16</sup> The woman's neutral expression (recurrent in all of Sherman's characters) accentuates ambiguity, since it frustrates the spectator's need for closure.<sup>17</sup> Trapped in the interplay between the repertoire of images from pop culture (a "supposedly" closed narratorial source) and the photograph's blank surface, the spectator is led to question the limits of representation, and the concept of individual identity.

*Untitled Film Still # 27* (1979) has less depth of field: the image seems to become flattened, the female body is cropped in a close-up, which reduces the surrounding context to minimal props, and increases indeterminacy (is the woman at a party, or at home alone smoking and drinking?). The grotesque touch of the dissolving make-up adds texture to the character's tears, and hyperbolically inscribes pain in the body, evoking another bodily fluid — blood.

In the late 1980s the "juvenile fascination with things that are repulsive,"<sup>18</sup> fully emerges in the photographer's work. The use of color photography (the *Untitled Film Stills* were all in black and white) enhances forms and contours, or creates an expressionist image with unstable boundaries. In *Untitled # 155* (1985)<sup>19</sup> the human body becomes literally fragmented, combined with prostheses and fused with the natural scenery, in a nightmarish scenario that unsettles the categories of animate/inanimate, culture/nature. Point of view is a major signifier here, because the overhead angle adopted by the camera and the figure's reclining position formalize a hierarchy of vision, where the spectator holds some power over the violated female body.<sup>20</sup> This association of eroticism with physical violence against women is recurrent in male fiction (as feminist criticism has pointed out), namely in Poe's short stories and in "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), which equates aesthetic practice with female death, "unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world."<sup>21</sup>

The dialogue between Sherman's images and Poe's gothic universe seems especially appropriate for reading *Untitled # 167* (1986). The flattened visual surface camouflages the final dissolution of the body: "The figure, now absorbed and dispersed in the background, can only be picked out by a few remnants still visible, though only barely, in the mottled surface of the darkened detritus that fill the image."<sup>22</sup> The absence of a unifying point of view is thematized by the reflection of a fragmented face in the mirror (at the bottom left of the picture), a gaze external to the image that saturates the already chaotic

picture. The set of teeth in the center, at the bottom, bring to mind “the *phantasma* of the teeth” in “Berenice,” yet another story where Poe equates “the *physical* frame” with “personal identity.”<sup>23</sup>

In the Old Masters series (thus named by the critics, for Sherman refuses to give titles to her works, deliberately playing upon ambiguity), the photographer addresses the canon of Western painting, and deconstructs the conventions of the portrait — an artistic genre instrumental in the American penchant for self-reflexivity, and historically connected to the first representations of individual identity (an the self-made man) in the New World. In contrast with the vague allusiveness of the *Untitled Film Stills*, *Untitled # 205* (1989) cites Rafael’s painting of his model and mistress *La Fornarina* (1520). The use of prosthesis underlines physicality, grotesquely unveiling the idealization of female anatomy and the representational codes in High Art. *Untitled # 216* (1988-90) parodies Botticelli’s *Portrait of a Young Woman* (1485) and presents the counterpart to woman as temptress, evoking the Christian iconography of woman as virgin mother, a paradox of femininity which ignores physiological evidence.

#### 4. The artist as trickster

So far we have seen how Poe and Sherman stage their politics of identity, centered in the representation of the body as fragment, citation, perceived as a historical variable, not an anatomical constant.<sup>24</sup> Through intertextual allusions which accentuate their verbal and visual texts’ indeterminacy both Poe and Sherman use parody to unsettle the representative conventions of the body. Both playfully question the stability of the subject position in American fictions of identity, be they the gentry tradition of the gentleman and its federal counterpart of the war hero, or the repertoire of images from High Art and popular culture. Both inhabit a gothic wonderland of excess and fragmentation, as *Untitled # 302* (1993) exemplifies, a work that could be read as an adequate illustration of Poe’s dismembered bodies in some of his short stories, such as “Berenice,” “Morella,” “Ligeia,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Man That Was Used Up,” and “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Using only mannequins, Sherman’s photograph represents the human body’s permeability through incorporation – the male’s head inserted into the chest/heart of the female figure. This androgynous-looking queen (with her fake crown, wearing a skirt over a pair of trousers)

could be a character in Poe's gothic tales of psychic vampirism, as the smeared make-up (traces of blood?) hints at.

With her use of prostheses Sherman also problematizes the epistemological status of photography as an expressive medium haunted by the myth of transparency. Curiously, in three articles published in 1840 (one year after Daguerre had officially announced his discovery), Poe (whose most widely circulated image is a daguerreotype taken in 1848) praises the medium's capacity to represent truth:

All language must fall short of conveying any just idea of the truth, and this will not appear so wonderful when we reflect that the source of vision itself has been, in this instance, the designer. (...) If we examine a work of ordinary art, by means of a powerful microscope all traces of resemblance to nature will disappear — but the closest scrutiny of the photogenic drawing discloses only a more absolute truth, a more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented.<sup>25</sup>

This appraisal of the mimetic power of photography, at odds with Poe's intellectualization of the creative (and analytical) processes, betrays his century's fascination with mechanical devices of reproducibility, which paradoxically reinforced the individual's existential disorientation in the developing urban space. Hence it seems that the only means of resistance would be to assume the impermanence of all masks, the reversibility of all roles, conceiving the artist as a scientific genie of composition.

Curiously, both the writer and the photographer (to a greater or lesser degree) incorporate the concept of identity as masquerade into their social personae, providing a perfect portrait of the artist as a performative self, the supreme trickster that builds texts to simultaneously expose the mechanics of their composition. Indeed, Poe's biographers narrate his efforts to impersonate the Southern gentleman, though his artistic talent and his financial limitations also led him to play the role of Byronic poet; during the 1970s, Sherman sometimes went to work and to art openings "in character."<sup>26</sup>

In conclusion, both Poe and Sherman in their lives and works highlight the textual nature of identity and posit the body as a discursive site, inserting it into a signifying order. Both delight in subverting stereotypes naturalized through

ideologically charged “master narratives,” and recognize the textual nature of identity and the impossible artistic task of (re)presenting a unified, original self.

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<sup>1</sup> J. M. Berthelot, “Sociological Discourse and the Body,” in *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, eds. Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth and Bryan S. Turner (London: Sage, 2001), 398.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory,” in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2007), 187-199.

<sup>3</sup> J. Gerald. Kennedy, “Phantasms of Death in Poe’s Fiction,” in *The Tales of Poe*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 124.

<sup>4</sup> See David Hirsch, “Poe and Postmodernism.” in *A Companion to Poe Studies* (London: Greenwood Press, 1996): “Poe undermined the notion of the atomistic individual self,” 401.

<sup>5</sup> For extra information about the historical context that this short story (possibly) comments see Stuart and Susan. Levine, “Comic Satires and Grotesques: 1836-1849,” in *A Companion to Poe Studies* (London: Greenwood Press, 1996), 132-133.

<sup>6</sup> Edgar Allan. Poe, “The Man that Was Used Up,” in *Tales and Sketches*, Vol. 2: 1831-1842, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University

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Press, 1978), 379. All other references to this story will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically within the text.

<sup>7</sup> Michael J. S. Williams, *A World of Words: Language and Displacement in the Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988) argues that this short story deals with the articulation between two dimensions of identity “in the context of the disjunction between a public identity created by a combination of ‘personal appearance’ and gossip, and a personal identity made ambiguous by corporeal reduction” 21.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel. Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (London: Robson Books, 1973) associates this verbal component with the General’s dismembered body: “The great valorous hero, whom the ignorant mob of Americans nearly deify (...), proves to be a mechanismus, a puppet, himself a product of the very mechanical ingenuity whose mindless praise comprises his only philosophy,” 195.

<sup>9</sup> Appropriating religious terminology, Poe parodies the monolithic quality of the reverend’s discourse, underlining its elision of individual voices: “I (...) perceived by the animated looks of the divine that the wrath which had nearly proved fatal to the pulpit had been excited by the whispers of the lady and myself. There was no help for it; so I submitted with a good grace, and listened, in all the martyrdom of dignified silence, to the balance of that very capital discourse,” 383.

<sup>10</sup> Henri. Justin, *Avec Poe jusqu’au bout de la prose* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009) underlines the irony subjacent to Poe’s depiction of the relationship between slave and master in

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some of his short stories, interpreting it as an indirect criticism upon slavery, for “The Man that Was Used Up” see 160-162.

<sup>11</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, Review of Thomas Hood’s *Prose and Verse* (*The Broadway Journal* of 1845) in *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 277. I am indebted to Margarida Vale de Gato’s discussion of this subject in her unpublished PhD dissertation *Edgar Allan Poe em Tradução. Entre Texto e Sistemas, Visando as Rescritas na Lírica Moderna em Portugal* (Lisbon: University of Lisbon, Faculty of Letters, 2008), 136-137.

<sup>12</sup> About the concept of “cultural capital” (cultural competence and general knowledge of the inherited tradition) and how it may translate into the “symbolic,” rivaling with economic capital, see Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: Critique Sociale du Jugement* (Paris: Minuit, 1979), esp. 381 *passim*.

<sup>13</sup> Edgar Allan. Poe, “Ligeia,” in *Tales and Sketches*, Vol. 2: 1831-1842, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978), 310.

<sup>14</sup> Hypersensitivity and nervous acuity is a trait shared by many of Poe’s 1<sup>st</sup> person narrators which may be read as an index to the above mentioned epistemological rupture foregrounded by the Gothic.

<sup>15</sup> See images at the end of the essay.

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<sup>16</sup> See Laura Mulvey, "Cosmetics and Abjection: Cindy Sherman 1977-87," in *Cindy Sherman. October Files 6*, ed. Johanna Burton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Sherman comments on these issues in an interview with Therese Lichtenstein about her Sex Pictures series, stating that her "blank expression" parallels the look of the mannequins she later uses in her photographs, <http://www.jca-online.com/sherman.html>. [February 6](#), accessed February 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Sherman, interview to Lichtenstein.

<sup>20</sup> In "Cindy Sherman: Untitled," in *Cindy Sherman. October Files 6*, ed. Johanna Burton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), Rosalind Kraus maintains that Sherman's "horizontalization" of the pictorial composition in some of her 1980s series (namely the Centerfold pieces) encodes desublimation, subverting the traditional axis of verticality used for representations of the body in modernist painting and in the mass media, 113-119.

<sup>21</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 19.

<sup>22</sup> Krauss, 123.

<sup>23</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "Berenice," in *Tales and Sketches*, Vol. 2: 1831-1842, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978), 216.

The narrator constitutes Berenice as an effect of his disturbed discourse, obsessed with

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the decay of the female character's body: "my disorder revelled in the less important but more startling changes wrought in the *physical* frame of Berenice — in the singular and most appalling distortion of her personal identity,"<sup>213</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Norman Bryson, "House of Wax," in *Cindy Sherman. October Files 6*, ed. Johanna Burton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 85.

<sup>25</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The Daguerrotype" (*Alexander's Weekly Messenger*, 15 Jan. 1840), in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 37-38.

<sup>26</sup> About Poe's disparate identity roles see David Leverenz, "Poe and Gentry Virginia: Provincial Gentleman, Textual Aristocrat, Man of the Crowd," in *Haunted Bodies: Gender and the Southern Texts*, ed. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 79-108. About Sherman's "social performance" see Cindy Sherman, *The Complete Untitled Film Stills* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 11.