

The Elastic Psychology of Seymour Fisher

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I.

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In the book *Body experience in fantasy and behavior* (1970) Seymour Fisher proposes a psychology of the human body. It is a psychology that deals not with mental processes, but rather with physicality and with the connection of the human body to its environment.

The boundaries of the body, Fisher says, are not so clear. Rather than a clear boundary, it would be more accurate to speak of a boundary region, a sort of envelope with elastic and malleable properties. This *boundary region* is best understood as a psychically charged zone surrounding the body in close proximity. It does not exactly coincide with the physical body, it is wider. It is subject to both incoming and outgoing influences, and may magnify or dampen these. It can be more open or closed, transparent or opaque. The boundary region may merge with persons and objects in the environment or separate itself from it.

Seymour Fisher spent a substantial part of his working life trying to map out this flexible boundary region. Looking at it today, his project seems rather ambiguous, but the idea of the boundary region fascinates.

II.

December 17, 2017

The department of anthropology, University of Amsterdam.

I am meeting with anthropologist Ulrike Scholtes to talk about her research project on the material customs of the human body. Ulrike researches therapeutic and artistic body practices such as haptonomy, physiotherapy and Butoh, a somewhat dark Japanese performance art. Each of these practices is focused on a specific, distinct way of experiencing the body, and Ulrike's aim is to articulate the often implicit routines that are being performed. I am curious to hear her perspective on the psychology therein. But my approach appears to be somewhat naive. Ulrike is mainly concerned with perceivable routines and actions, and my questions about the role of the psyche suddenly seem vague. As an anthropologist Ulrike looks into material conditions, such as mechanisms of touch and movement, the layout of a space, and the role of artefacts. She examines how these material conditions lead to specific enactments of the body, and thereby to a specific bodily experience. The body is multiple, it appears. Some bodily practices evoke a somatic body, Ulrike says, others evoke an energetic body, or neuro-muscular body. But what about the psychological body?

III.

In 1958, when Seymour Fisher first attempts to map out the elastic boundary region, psychometrics as a discipline is still in its infancy. To measure the subjective experience of body boundary Fisher works with a second-generation

Rorschach test. He asks his participants to describe a series of inkblots and scores their descriptions in two categories following, a standardized protocol: 'barrier' and 'penetration'.

In a typical barrier response the outline of the inkblot is characterized by a protective, enclosing, decorative, concealing, or substantive connotation, Fisher proposed. Think references to clothing, animals with unusual skins, overhanging or protective surfaces, buildings, and enclosing geographical formations (such as a valley or a lake surrounded by land). The second response category, penetration, emphasizes openness, lack of substance, and penetrability of persons and objects. Think mashed bugs, anatomical characteristics, a torn coat, or a body seen through a fluoroscope. This category also includes representations of openings in buildings, degenerative processes, shadows, ghosts and other insubstantial entities.

'There is considerable variation in the firmness or definiteness persons ascribe to their body boundaries', Fisher concluded after conducting a series of experiments. 'At one extreme is the individual who views his body as clearly and sharply bounded, with a high degree of differentiation from non-self objects, and at the other is the person who regards his body as lacking demarcation or differentiation from what is 'out there'.¹

IV.

In the conversation with Ulrike we come across the dominant metaphor of the body in 'western' culture: *the container*, with an inside, an outside, and a boundary in between. The container-metaphor evokes a somewhat static image, we both feel. Most people experience something much more dynamic, and changeable, besides. Seymour Fisher gives some examples of this dynamic. If landmarks in the external environment are very close to us, like a nearby wall, it appears as if our body shrinks; while if we are at a greater distance, like in a large space, or at a window or vista, it appears as if our body expands. Or: When we consciously stare at an object the body boundary hardens and there is a heightened sense of distance and separation, whereas a casual viewing weakens the separation and causes a sense of fusion with the object.² One can artificially fix a weak spot in the boundary region by carrying a weapon, or a shield, or a medallion with some alleged force. Also, mechanical devices, vehicles, or built environment can strengthen the boundary region and stretch it so that it moves away from the skin. The boundary region is to some extent malleable. Humans can learn to use a prosthetic device in case of amputation of a limb. They are able to perceive and manipulate their environment through the use of technical artefacts. Appliances can be incorporated into the region to serve as functional organs.

In contrast to what the container-metaphor suggests, the body is not automatically a coherent whole. 'One does not hang together as a matter of course', anthropologist Annemarie Mol writes. 'Keeping oneself together is something the embodied person needs to do.'³ This takes continual negotiation and trying out. We are constantly probing, practicing and performing our bodies. 'Enactment' is the term that Ulrike and her colleagues use to denote the active realization of our physicality: the somatic, the energetic, or the neuro-muscular body that is called up with a specific touch or movement. Also: the extended or

augmented body taking shape through the use of prostheses, emblems and other external artefacts.

V.

In his experiments Seymour Fisher made use of two series of inkblot-cards (no. 1a – 45a en no. 1b – 45b). The producer of these cards, Wayne Holtzman, had his colleagues making random blots on lithographic paper, the same paper and with the same Pelican waterproof drawing ink that Rorschach had used some forty years earlier. From the bulk Holtzman selected the blots that he thought would be most useful, that is, the ones that were most ambiguous and internally conflicted. Unlike Rorschach he did not make use of any color, and printed only the contours of the blots. It was assumed that the descriptions of the blot would convey information about the experience of the boundary region.

Due to the contours the cards have a strong graphical quality – some blots resemble cave drawings, others geographical maps, floor plans or geological formations. There is a clear association with geography and landscape, an association that reoccurs in the protocols: Animals trapped, horse lying down, garden (card no. 9a). Desert scene, swimming, view from plane (card no. 13a). Island, aerial view of forest lane, cave drawing, man running (card no. 5a). Coral reef, insect, mask (card no. 31b). Window pane, landscape, microscopic slide (24a). Splash (30b). Cathedral (14a). Parachute on fire (card no. 41b).

VI.

February 4, 2018.

People recognize patterns in the most abstract of forms. They see the face of Jesus in their soup and read the body language of the palm tree in the living room. Under favorable conditions, even a plastic bag is endowed with a personality. But what does this tell us about the psychological body?

It made me think of a text I read about a peculiar sensory phenomenon that was described by German form psychologists in the 19th century: the so-called *einfühlen*. When we ‘feel into an object’, Robert Vischer wrote in 1873 (let’s not confuse him with Seymour Fisher), we experience this as an extension of our self, as if part of us wants to shift shape and merge with the object. If the thing is large and immersive, like a forest or ocean, our feeling expands. If it is smaller, like an apple or a closet, our feeling contracts. A strange displacement occurs, Vischer argues. As if we experience ourselves, as it were, at the edges of the object we perceive. As if we penetrate and merge with the object and, as Vischer put it enigmatically, wrap ourselves within its contours ‘like in a garment’.⁴

Remarkably, it has been suggested that Robert Vischer found the inspiration for this mysterious phenomenon in a book about dreams. The same book that inspired Sigmund Freud in writing his *Interpretation of Dreams*, that is, *Das Leben des traums*, according to Freud the first systematical investigation of dream symbolism. The author of this book suggested that the bizarre imagery of our dreams is triggered by somatic stimuli originating from the organs, usually from deep inside the body. The body reacts to these stimuli by casting them in a symbolic form and in this way generates the raw material of our dreams: A dream

caused by a headache is set in a room with terrible spiders on the ceiling. A pursuit through an extended alleyway is caused by problems in the intestines. The most beloved symbol of the dream-imagination, the house, stands for the body itself. Due to this dreambook Robert Vischer was brought to the idea that our body appears to have a natural capacity to objectify itself in symbolic forms, and he was convinced that this mechanism was responsible for the mystical displacements of the 'feeling into'. A rather imaginative leap of thought.

VII.

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I don't think it is a coincidence that with the 'einfühlen' also the art of klecksography, making images from inkblots, reaches its peak. Contemplating ambiguous imagery fits with the late 19th-century sensibility for the irrational as well as with the discovery of hidden depths of the human mind. It is the favorite pastime of the young Hermann Rorschach, who would later invent the first projective test. Rorschach thought of free association around inkblots as a gateway into the unconscious, some sort of visual variety of Freud's *talking cure*. Seymour Fisher projects his inkblots onto a screen so he can conduct his experiment group wise. One by one he brings up the slides with the various Holtzman cards. The participants are seated in a small auditorium, writing down whatever comes to their minds onto the designated form. They write vehicles, clothing, masks and mechanical extensions. They write buildings, jewelry, islands and gardens. A topology of sectors, landmarks and regions for Fisher to analyze. Fisher begins his *Body experience in fantasy and behavior* with a recount of all types of statistical correlations in order to validate his analysis. And he pretty much succeeds at that, but he does not *explain* how the test actually works. I think Fisher acted from an intuition beyond psychometrical rationalization. An intuition that is present also with the 'feeling into' of his obscure namesake, that is to say that the psyche exists also outside the edges of the physical body.

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¹ Fisher, S. (1970). *Body experience in fantasy and behavior*. New York: ACC.

² From: Bloomer, K. & Moore, C. (1977). *Body, memory and architecture*. Yale university press.

³ Mol, A. (2002). *The Body Multiple*. Duke university press.

⁴ Mallgrave, H. and Ikonou, E. (1994). *Empathy, form and space: Problems in German aesthetics*. University of Chicago Press.