

# Imagining the Body: On the Power of Images and the Force of the Corporeal in Adriana Cavarero

Emma Ingala<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The body, its materiality, and the images through which we apprehend them have been a constant concern in Adriana Cavarero's philosophy. The contention of this paper is that her work on this topic lays out the foundations for (1) an understanding of the relationship between the imaginary and the corporeal as one of entanglement and inseparability; and (2) responding to the questions of what an image and a body can do. To develop this, this paper focuses on two texts, *Stately Bodies* and *Inclinations*, that provide, respectively, (1) an account of the assemblages and frictions between images and bodies through an analysis of the metaphor of the body politic in Western thought; and (2) an ontology of bodily images. Although both texts critically engage with Western hegemonic images of the body, I argue that the presence of the body as a powerful physical givenness articulates the narrative of *Stately Bodies*, while *Inclinations* is rather focused on the capacity of images to constitute different subjects and different worlds. These two perspectives are complementary rather than contradictory. Reading them together allows for the distillation

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of an original approach to the body in its double dimension of flesh and image that contributes to current debates on the discourse/matter divide, and offers a nuanced understanding of the power of the imaginary and the force of the corporeal. The fundamental argument defended is that Cavarero points continuously to the capacity of the concrete matter of bodies to sustain and/or disrupt the imaginary constructions that structure our experience and, at the same time, to the potential inherent in images to sculpt our bodies, our subjectivity, and our politics.

*Key words: Adriana Cavarero, images, body, corporeal ontology*

### **Biography**

Emma Ingala is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Logic and Theoretical Philosophy and a member of the Institute for Feminist Research at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain. She specialises in post-structuralist thought, feminist and gender theory, psychoanalysis, and political anthropology. She is the co-editor (with Gavin Rae) of the volumes, *Historical Traces and Future Pathways of Poststructuralism: Aesthetics, Ethics, Politics* (Routledge, 2021), *The Meanings of Violence: From Critical Theory to Biopolitics* (Routledge: 2019), and *Subjectivity and the Political: Contemporary Perspectives* (Routledge: 2018), as well as book chapters published by Beauchesne (France), Bloomsbury, and Edinburgh University Press (UK), and numerous articles published in international journals including *Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Society*, *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory, Literature and Religion*, *Anales del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía*, *Daimon*, and *Ideas y Valores*. She is the co-chief editor of the journal *Logos. Anales del Seminario de la Filosofía*. She has also been an invited Visiting Professor at Royal Holloway, University of London, and the University of California, Berkeley, USA.

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Western philosophy has tended to consider the body and its material reality in a binary opposition to the soul, reason, or the mind. Since ancient Greece, the body and everything associated

with it – nature, biology, matter, passions, passivity, needs, the feminine, animality, and so on – has generally been regarded as a burden, a liability, or an imprisonment. This has led many philosophers to either downplay and ignore the corporeal, subordinate it to the higher and nobler status of the incorporeal, or consider it a threatening, dangerous, and even horrific reality that must be kept under control. As a consequence, Elizabeth Grosz has suggested that Western thought “established itself on the foundations of a profound somatophobia” (Grosz, 1994: 5), one that continues to structure contemporary thought.<sup>2</sup> To combat this, a number of contemporary theorists – especially those aligned with the so-called new materialisms – have called for a (re)turn to or a foregrounding of matter (Coole and Frost, 2010: 2; Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012: 85, 93).

The work of Adriana Cavarero addresses and attempts to offer redress for the historically prevalent somatophobia of Western philosophy. To do so, she has focused on the hegemonic images of the body that articulate our collective imaginaries and symbolic frameworks, and has striven to propose alternative images that, in reshaping these imaginary and symbolic structures, promote alternative ways of experiencing our (corpo)reality. Her research has frequently highlighted the power of images to mould our world and our bodies, and, consequently, the importance of questioning and subverting certain images to make room for other imaginings and, along with them, other embodiments and worlds. At the same time, Cavarero has not only scrutinised the realm of the imaginary but brought to the fore the potency of the corporeal itself, of the flesh, of “physical givenness” (Cavarero, 2002: xi). The materiality of the body is thus regarded not just as that which is produced by the images that render it intelligible and visible, but as something that can underpin or disrupt these images.

This paper examines the nature of the relationship between images and bodies in Cavarero’s philosophy, and seeks

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<sup>2</sup> These statements are, of course, a generalisation. However, while there have been important schools of thought in Western philosophy that have valued matter and the body, the privileging of the non-corporeal over the corporeal has more often than not been the dominant position.

to make explicit an insight that implicitly traverses her entire *oeuvre*: the entanglement of the imaginary and the corporeal. Images and bodies are not two discrete realms, but intertwined and inseparable realities. With this, Cavarero's work neutralises the material/discursive opposition, and situates itself methodologically on the threshold between images and bodies. To explore this entwinement of images and bodies, I focus on two texts separated by almost twenty years, *Stately Bodies* and *Inclinations*, that provide, respectively, (1) an account of the assemblages and frictions between images and bodies through an analysis of the metaphor of the body politic in Western thought; and (2) an ontology of bodily images. Although both texts critically engage with Western hegemonic images of the body, I argue that the presence of the body as a powerful physical givenness articulates the narrative of *Stately Bodies*, while *Inclinations* is rather focused on the capacity of images to constitute different subjects and different worlds. These two perspectives are complementary rather than contradictory. Reading them together allows for the distillation of an original approach to the body in its double dimension of flesh and image that contributes to current debates on the discourse/matter divide and offers a nuanced understanding of the power of the imaginary and the force of the corporeal. Although Cavarero does not explicitly respond to the question of what a body/an image can do, she continually points to the capacity of concrete bodies to disrupt the imaginary constructions that structure our experience and, at the same time, to the potential of images to sculpt our bodies, our subjectivity, and our politics.

### The Figural and the Flesh

In her 1995 book *Stately Bodies (Corpo in figure)*, Cavarero explores the origin and different versions of the metaphor of the body politic, wherein the political community is portrayed as a body with a head, members, and/or organs. She does so by stressing a paradox inherent in this metaphor: on the one hand, Western politics predominantly banishes the body from its phallogocentric domain and confines it to the realm of the

private, all the while, on the other hand, figuring the political order through corporeal images. The body is expelled from the political and rational domains only to return to these domains as a metaphor of their nature and organisation. For Cavarero, even if the exiled body and the returning body are not the same – the former is feminine, murky, animal, uncontrollable, and linked to necessity and biology, while the latter is masculine, rational, adult, vigorous, harmonious, independent – there is something symptomatic in this stubborn return (Cavarero, 2002: viii). It bears witness to a materiality that, often in disguise and appearing to be tamed and rationalised, acts as a disrupting force that refuses to remain buried beneath the surface of the established order:

The body of which we speak is obviously an imagined one: the body as represented, belonging wholly to the discursive order. This is true although its mere physical givenness often comes to undermine the order of the design that adopts its figure. Thus, something inherent within the elementary potency of the *given* ultimately exceeds the discourse that has taken it as its object (*ibid.*: xi).

In the history of the figural analogy between the human body and the political community, Cavarero claims that the body is initially forced out of the logocentric male realm and placed in polar opposition to reason, but it compulsively attempts to return and re-enter the space from which it was expelled. Western somatophobia's operation of exclusion is not, therefore, a neat manoeuvre, but one that, in psychoanalytic terms, provokes a return of the repressed. As Freud hypothesised, the repressed always returns, albeit distorted and deformed, in the form of a transactional product – such as dreams, symptoms, parapraxes, slips, and so on – resulting from the negotiations between the repressing and the repressed forces (Freud, 1957: 154). In *Stately Bodies*, Cavarero interrogates the different historical and conceptual forms that the return of the repressed body takes, promoting not so much a voluntary re-turn *to* matter and the corporeal as such, but enquiring about the symptomatic and often unconscious and unintentional

manifestations of the return *of* matter and the corporeal in Western culture.

My contention is that Cavarero offers in this text a careful analysis of the return of the rejected body under two particular forms, and that this analysis contains an account of the relationship between the figural and the carnal. Specifically, the excluded body returns through a double movement: on the one hand, under the guise of a tamed or domesticated corporeality – a transactional product stemming from the conflict between a pressing and stubborn materiality and the repressive force of the *logos* – dressed in images of an ordered, structured, perfectly harmonious, male, adult, and rational body; while, on the other hand, the body bursts uninvited into the rational political order as a prelogical, feral, wild, raw, feminine, and animal flesh, that challenges and perturbs this order. Cavarero's position is not that the first body is purely figural or that the second body is exclusively material; both are complex assemblages of imagery and somatic givenness. In the next two sections, I turn to examine these complex assemblages through Cavarero's reading of Antigone, Plato, and Hobbes.

### **“A Word Red and Dark as Purple”: Antigone's Body**

Cavarero's history of the returning body starts in ancient Greece and, more concretely, takes as its point of departure the centrality of the body in Sophocles' *Antigone*, a centrality that she identifies as being anomalous in Western culture. While standard readings of this tragedy emphasise the expulsion of the feminine body – Antigone's – from the *polis* as its terrible other, Cavarero points out that the whole story revolves around a rejected body – or rather a corpse: that of Polynices, the dead brother whose burial Antigone fights to guarantee against her uncle Creon's decree – with no soul, a body whose centrality is subsequently transferred to the body of Antigone herself, punished for her violation of the city's law with being buried alive. Cavarero draws attention to this odd foregrounding or “triumph of the body” (Cavarero, 2002: 15) that the *polis* fails to expel and keep at bay; a body considered the enemy of the *polis*, uncanny, monstrous, deadly, and symbolically loaded with the

value of a “pure body” (*ibid.*). The tragedy’s plot revolves around the “uncontrollable contest between violent expulsions and terrifying returns” (*ibid.*), and in this particular contest it is the expelled that wins.

Cavarero reads this centrality of the body from two sides: on the one hand, its “unrivalled figural power” (Cavarero, 2002: 19), its “symbolic power” (*ibid.*: 24), which unleashes a cascade of uncanny images linked to the terrible, dreadful, pre-logical, “cadaverous nausea and incestuous sexuality” (*ibid.*: 16); on the other hand, the terror induced by these images is underpinned by “the corporeal materiality of existence” (*ibid.*: 32), by the fact of death but also the fact of birth, both horrifying from the perspective of the city’s masculine rationality.

While this reading acknowledges the force of the materiality of existence, and more concretely the capacity of “the very pulsing of the body” (*ibid.*: 34) to disrupt and subvert the imaginary scaffoldings of our worldviews, this materiality is not understood as an unfiltered presence, but as something that appears always already wrapped in a symbolic fabric. The two most common mythical figurations of this pure body in Western culture are the woman and the animal, and Cavarero shows how both are linked in the question of the origin (*arche*) of man: born of a woman and born as an animal that soon, and to his own relief, domesticates and leaves behind his bestiality through his rational and technological skills (*ibid.*). However, as much as man tries to sever his ties to the mother and the animal – and hence the body – to erase a story that “he either does not recall or is afraid to narrate” (*ibid.*), these ties underpin what he is: “the politics that banishes the body from within its walls speaks indeed, from beginning to end, only in the grammar of the body” (*ibid.*: 48). There is, thus, in *Antigone*, a corporeal imagery that, under many forms and figures, bears witness to “a corporeal substance that pervades language” (*ibid.*: 51), an excess or overabundance that cannot be contained within the parameters of words and images but that nevertheless inspires and provokes a new stream of words and images. “A word red and dark as purple”, Ismene’s description of her sister *Antigone*’s speech – for which Cavarero chooses Hölderlin’s translation (*ibid.*: 50) – condenses the entanglement of words and images in the tragedy: *Antigone*’s words are dense and red

as blood to the point that they cannot be neatly separated from her body, precisely because they are sustained and rendered possible by this body that the mainstream Western tradition has forever struggled to keep out of sight.

### The Uncontainable Monstrosity of the Body: Plato and Hobbes

Cavarero reads the centrality and excess of Antigone's body in parallel with Plato's condemnation of the corporeal. Although these might seem antithetical perspectives, Cavarero shows the extent to which Plato's efforts to abject the body from his philosophy result in an obsessive presence of the corporeal in his lexicon and his metaphors. Even if Plato's infamous identification of the body (*soma*) with a *sema*, a prison or tomb for the soul, initiated the polar opposition between the intellectual and the material and, with it, Western thought's phallogocentrism, Cavarero draws attention to the fact that he is simultaneously the thinker that inaugurates the analogy between the body and politics that will lead to the figure of the body politic. Antigone, therefore, is not the opposite of Plato, but his dark reverse, the repressed that returns despite Plato's conscious intentions.

According to Cavarero, a similar return occurs in Hobbes' doctrine when the state is portrayed metaphorically through the image of the biblical monster Leviathan, an imagery that entails a violent irruption in the realm of the political of the bestial horror of the corporeal. In Cavarero's itinerary, Plato and Hobbes are two examples – the first inaugural and the second paradigmatic of Modern thought – of the intricate relationship between the body and its images. In this section, I therefore analyse Cavarero's reading of these two authors to develop her insights on the materiality of the body; namely, that this materiality (1) cannot simply be understood as raw and pure, but is always already apprehended through a framework; (2) destabilises the images crafted by Western thought to tame and dominate the body, in particular the images of an adult, rational, and male body that are invoked by the metaphor of the body politic; and (3) is not the opposite of rational and

political discourse, but its neglected foundation, which is why it compulsively returns to the political scene.

Cavarero traces the return of the repressed body in Plato in two texts: the *Republic* and the *Timaeus*. The presence of the body in the *Republic* is ambiguous and paradoxical (Cavarero, 2002: 57), its images are “neither simple nor univocal” (*ibid.*: 68). On the one hand, the body appears as the material place of inscription of the tripartite soul, with the rational soul located in the head, the impulsive soul in the breast, and the appetitive soul in the belly. Analogously, the body is the image upon which the political realm is organised and administered with justice, insofar as it is divided into three classes of citizens, each of which must adhere to their particular function in accordance with their link to one of the parts of the soul and the body: philosophers, warriors, and producers. From this perspective, there is an internal affinity between *psyche*, *soma*, and *polis*, and justice and health become synonyms, requiring that each part of the order performs its own specific task. On the other hand, the body emerges as an external and upsetting threat, a disquieting alterity, and an obscure matter against which the rational order is built. This return of the repressed is explicitly acknowledged by Plato as an occurrence of the night, especially in sleep (*ibid.*: 64–6), when the rational soul lets down its guard and the other two parts of the soul, home of the passions and the instincts which are taken to be more corporeal than intellectual, take control.

However, Cavarero points to another form of the return of the repressed in Plato that is no longer conscious or explicitly acknowledged by him, but rather symptomatic of a Freudian parapraxis: while Plato seeks to design the political order analogously to the order inherent in the soul and its tripartite structure, the body ends up paradoxically being the surface of inscription and unintended foundation of this design (*ibid.*: 69); a foundation that Plato “sought to deny and remove, even as he betrayed its obsessive presence” (*ibid.*: 68). Against Plato’s will, the corporeal invades his language and his imagery, seeming, as it happened in *Antigone*, “to win out over the logical powers so keen on removing it” (*ibid.*). Plato’s lexical ambiguity leads him not only to situate the soul inside the body, in specific parts of it, but also to include in the soul a sort of monster – with which

he refers to the appetitive soul (*ibid.*) – that man carries within himself and which he must spend all his life trying to restrain and tame.

The ambiguity of the body is equally present, albeit from a different perspective, in the *Timaeus*. Cavarero focuses on the image of the *chora*, a motherlike and material figure, an invisible, ductile, formless, and ineffable being or receptacle wherein all visible things are generated according to the model provided by the intelligible – reproducing the mother–son–father triangle. The *chora* works as a radical alterity with respect to the *logos*, as something unspeakable and unintelligible, and simultaneously and paradoxically as a necessary precondition and foundation of the logical order; it is that which remains outside of the *logos* and, at the same time, that which makes possible and produces the visible world according to rational guidelines. The *Timaeus* is “an example of that phallogocentric foundation of Western discourse that is built simultaneously *against* and *upon* a corporeal material identified with the female” (*ibid.*: 84). The material, the corporeal, and the feminine are expelled only to be found again as an eerie presence that both underpins and subverts the domain of the *logos*.

Cavarero’s analysis of the symptomatic presence of the corporeal in Plato concludes with a reflection on the status of the body at stake:

We are speaking of an image, and thus of an operation pertaining to the discursive register. There is no doubt, however, that the given organisation of the body is the principle that guides the image’s contents. The image is thus wholly free within the creative play of discourse, yet is anchored to an empirically binding datum (what we might call its specific object), necessarily preceding it and constraining it within a specific, objective, and pre-existing grid of figural inventions (*ibid.*: 88).

A few pages later, in a chapter devoted to the metaphor of the body politic in the Middle Ages, Cavarero repeats this idea: “any bodily image must necessarily contend with a fundamental material realism inherent to the thing represented” (*ibid.*: 110). In both passages, we are confronted with the notion that the

creativity and inventiveness of the images that represent our world in general and our body in particular have as their limit “the given organisation of the body” (*ibid.*: 88), “an empirically binding datum” (*ibid.*), a “fundamental material realism” (*ibid.*: 110). Despite the best efforts of Western hegemonic discourse to suppress the corporeal, the body always returns as a disturbing presence that challenges and disrupts the logic of this discourse. Cavarero stresses that it may seem that, in Plato, the relationship between the pure physical givenness and its images, or between the bodily material and the discursive and imaginary register, is reversed. After all, for him, the body is prefigured as an idea in the sphere of the *logos* and thus the idea of the body would come first, with the actual body being “not so much the object of representation as its faithful result” (*ibid.*: 88). However, there is, beyond this seeming resolution, and hidden behind the figure of the *chora*, “an unresolved primordial matter that contradicts the self-sufficiency of the entire operation” of the *logos* (*ibid.*). Corporeality “turns the tables” yet again (*ibid.*: 89).

Although Cavarero does not develop her position regarding the capacity of the corporeal to undermine the endeavours of a repressing and taming image, she lays the ground for a nuanced conception of the body that is not reduced to the pure materiality of its flesh or the direct result of an imaginary and discursive construction, but a complex entanglement of matter and image. We could say that, although she leaves open Spinoza’s question regarding what the body can do (Spinoza, 1985: 495), she provides a series of conceptual resources and tools to think it in its double and inseparable dimensions of matter and figure.

Cavarero pursues this double dimension in Hobbes’ philosophy. Hobbes prefigured one of the hegemonic images of subjectivity in liberal political thought and, more broadly, in contemporary societies: that of the individual. In Hobbes’ account, individuals exist from the very beginning, even before the establishment of an institutionalised political order. His narrative starts in a state of nature where individuals, in seeking to fulfil their own selfish aims and, as a consequence, clashing against each other, provoke a chaotic situation of war of all against all. Hobbes explains that, in this state of nature, he

considers “men as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly (like mushrooms) come to full maturity (VII.1)” (cited in Cavarero, 2002: 178–9). In the beginning, men are not born of a gestating body but are self-generating mushrooms. As Judith Butler describes it, “the state of nature provides an imaginary framework in which there is only one individual in the scene: self-sufficient, without dependency, saturated in self-love yet without any need for another” (Butler, 2020: 30). The individual is always already male, adult, sovereign. Drawing from the psychoanalytic lexicon, Butler conceives of this notion of the individual not so much as a *fantasy*, that is, a conscious wish, but as an unconscious *phantasy* (*ibid.*: 34) that has opaque determinants and complex effects. This resonates with Cavarero’s diagnosis of Plato’s foregrounding of the rational soul as being founded by and simultaneously provoking a symptomatic unconscious obsession with the body. In Hobbes’ case, the phantasy of the individual is built on and depends upon a prior expulsion or repression: of the scene of birth, of childhood, of the feminine and everything traditionally associated with it, of our fundamental vulnerability, interdependency, and need for care, of illness, and so on. For the individual to affirm himself, an “annihilation” or “inaugural violence” (*ibid.*: 38) had to be accomplished. However, what is written out of the picture vehemently returns to undermine it, and Cavarero studies the particular form that this return takes in Hobbes.

Hobbes theorises the passage from the state of nature to the political state as the result of a pact wherein individuals transfer their power to a sovereign that absorbs and concentrates all forces into one and who consequently is able to protect them, end the conflict, and guarantee peace. Cavarero focuses on the different metaphors that Hobbes employs to describe the state that results from this pact: a machine, a gigantic artificial body, a person, and a monster (the biblical Leviathan); the first three conceived of as rational, and the last one carrying the semantic load of the terrible, of an absolute and irresistible force, and of bestiality (Cavarero, 2002: 167). There are, therefore, two conflicting images at play: the state understood as an artificial – as opposed to the state of nature – rational body or machine, mechanically constructed and so

knowable, and the state as a mythical, bestial, and unknowable monster endowed with an invincible power to which nothing can compare. Cavarero notes that the biblical monster is barely engaged with in Hobbes' text, but its presence is so significant as to become the title of the work: "the power of the image surpasses the intentions of its user" (*ibid.*: 181). The symptomatic return of the body in Hobbes, of what was repressed in both his notion of the individual and his conception of the state as a rational machine, crystallises in "a dark side of power that may exceed the rational structure of political order, lending it a monstrous aspect" (*ibid.*). This monstrous aspect of power is not the opposite of the rational state, but its reverse side: to end with the state of war of all against all, a terrifying power takes control concentrating in itself the force of all. That force, therefore, does not disappear, but is absorbed in its entirety by the sovereign. "Violence, war, and conflict do not remain objects to be tamed and *resolved* by the political structure; rather they seep into the order itself, contaminating and transfiguring its peaceful face, presented as just and good, into something terrifying" (*ibid.*: 182–3). The body thus returns under the form of a bestial monster, through the image of an unparalleled and terrible power that the rational order struggles constantly to banish. In this sense, the phantasy of the individual and its ideal of self-sufficiency and self-control is disrupted by a monstrous corporeality that remains beyond its command all the while being a neglected albeit intimate part of the individual. Equally, the state reveals itself in an ambivalent manner as both human and monstrous, rational and bestial, peaceful and threatening: "The object that both motivates and overshadows the political order invades the figure and always inevitably returns" (*ibid.*: 187). The images concocted to exorcise the monstrosity of the body, that of the individual and that of the state, end up discovering that very monstrosity at their core.

### **What Can an Image Do? Inclining the Subject**

Although in *Stately Bodies* Cavarero does not directly respond to Spinoza's question on what the body can do, in several passages she points to the ways in which the force of corporeality

disrupts the imaginary, symbolic, and discursive constructions through which we experience our bodies and our subjectivity. Her stance regarding images in *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (*Inclinazioni: Critica della rettitudine*, 2014) is similar: she insists on the importance of working at the level of the imaginary, of crafting and providing images that can constitute an alternative to the violent, exclusionary, and patriarchal images of the body which are hegemonic, but she does not directly address the question of what an image can do. The aim of the second part of this paper is to examine Cavarero's ontology of bodily images and extrapolate from it, through the mediation of Emanuele Coccia's theory of the sensible, the status, role, and power of images.

In *Stately Bodies*, Cavarero studies the metaphor of the body politic in Western culture and the representation of the corporeal underpinning it as the figural grounds of a binary logic that institutionalises a dualistic distribution of gendered bodies. Images, therefore, have the capacity to give shape to and condition our experiences and the way in which we structure our world. Conversely, Cavarero insists that these images are frequently underpinned and/or disrupted by what she calls the "physical givenness" (Cavarero, 2002: xi) or the concrete matter of the body. Her work in *Inclinations* also presumes this double dimension of corporeality, but the body is approached fundamentally from the perspective of its images and their ontological rather than their epistemological or ideological status; that is, from the perspective of their being and their power to mould being.

The first principle of an ontology of bodily images is that our experience of bodies and our way of referring to them is always dependent on a discourse or image that turns them – or does not turn them – into something visible, intelligible, and even readable. The material is, as we have been insisting, not absent or merely secondary, but since it is always presented to us through an imaginary framework, it is important to acknowledge the effects of this framework: it can render bodies noticeable, important, valuable, but it can just as well be translated into inequalities, exclusions, and violence. Identifying and confronting this violence requires that we take seriously the task of analysing the potentiality inherent in

images and dispute the figures that populate the imaginary. From these premises, and through an engagement with Cavarero's ontology of bodily images, I would like to emphasise the importance of working in the realm of images because this is, first, a creative and productive dimension, to a great extent responsible for our processes of subjectivation and for the structuration and categorisation of our world; and, second, the site where critique can (i) denounce the imposition and naturalisation of certain practices of violence and exclusion that operate on the basis of a particular imaginary framework to (ii) open up the space to more just frameworks.

Cavarero does not systematically discuss what an image is nor what it can do. Therefore, before turning to examine her project in *Inclinations*, I will supplement her analysis by very briefly engaging with Emanuele Coccia's response to these issues. In *Sensible Life: A Micro-ontology of the Image*, Coccia maintains that images are neither subjective nor objective, neither mental nor corporeal, but constitute a third territory, an intermediary and supplemental world, or a "medial space" (Coccia, 2016: 35). From this space, "as if in exile from the world in which the body and soul co-exist" (*ibid.*: 17), existing "out of place" (*ibid.*: 19), images give shape to both subjects and objects, minds and bodies. Images derive from the space of objects – without being confused with them – as a sort of "*esse extraneum*" (*ibid.*), extraneous or foreign being that appears "outside of itself" (*ibid.*), and from that foreignness they support and make possible the life of the subjects and their bodies. Images are

the manner in which we give ourselves to the world, the form that allows us to be *in* the world (for ourselves and for others), and the way in which the world becomes understandable, accessible, and liveable. Only in sensible life is a world given to us, and only as sensible life are we in the world (*ibid.*: 2).

As such, there are as many worlds as there are images. With this, Coccia forces us to look at images beyond the binary opposition between matter and mind, and to understand their intimate link to and effect upon matter:

Thanks to images, matter is never inert but always malleable and full of form, and the mind is never purely interiority but technique and mundane life. It is harmful, then, to reduce the sensible life to the psychological; images have a *cosmological* function, not merely a gnoseological or physical one. Images are the true cosmic transformers that allow for the spiritualisation of the corporeal (or its animation) and the embodiment of the spirit (*ibid.*: 38).<sup>3</sup>

Coccia explicitly addresses the question of what an image can do: “In man [*sic*] and in his body, what is the sensible capable of? How far do the power, activity, and influence of sensation go in human activity?” (*ibid.*: 4). His answer is that the sensible – that is, the medial space of images – precedes and survives the act of its perception and works as a “background murmur” or “ultimate horizon” (*ibid.*: 43) of every project, activity, and reality. Images allow us to act on things and be acted upon, to have an environment and to interact with it. They can make our world liveable or unliveable.

From these coordinates, we can now return to Cavarero’s ontology of bodily images to examine what these images do to ourselves, to others, and to our world. In *Inclinations*, Cavarero studies what she identifies as the hegemonic corporeal posture in Western culture, whose images have been not only privileged but also idealised since at least Plato: rectitude, uprightness, righteousness, straightness, and erection. The idealisation of this posture has led to it being semantically associated with truth, morality, justice, norms or normality, the mind or soul, culture, and the masculine. Conversely, the image of rectitude has produced its binary opposite: a negative conception of inclination as that which has to do with passions or emotions, abnormality or perversion, the body, nature, and the feminine. Cavarero holds that the history of Western philosophy is

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<sup>3</sup> This is an idea that appears in Cavarero as well, especially when she deals with the status of the orgasm and the prevalence of the body: “The prevalence of the body is indeed here only the inherence of the existence of the body – or, rather, the spirituality of the flesh and fleshiness of the spirit, which makes their indiscernibility the miracle of uniqueness” (Cavarero, 2000: 112).

articulated around the image of rectitude, and that this image reaches its zenith during Modernity, when the notion of the self-standing individual, an upright man that does not need any support (Cavarero, 2016: 2), becomes the dominant representation of subjectivity. Although Descartes does not appear in *Inclinations*, his understanding of the subject as endowed with an upright reason that always wants the truth and, as if following a straight line, always tends towards it – and whose error can only be attributed to the interference of external elements such as passions or the senses; an error that can be avoided if a good method is implemented – is a paradigmatic example of the idealisation of rectitude (Deleuze, 1994: 131). The image of verticality, of an upright posture, provides a visual representation for the phantasies of autonomy, independence, and self-sufficiency that give content to the modern notion of the individual. Verticality is the posture of an individual who stands straight on its own, alone, without needing anything or anyone to maintain its equilibrium and subsist.

Cavarero tracks the origin of this promotion of the image of rectitude and of the idealisation of *homo erectus* back to Plato's myth of the cave, where a man – the true philosopher – manages to leave the cave, abandon the awkward position of being bent over himself, stand up, and conquer the erect posture. “Then comes the climax of Plato's story: the liberated man stands firmly under the perfect midday sun, its rays perpendicular and hence producing no shadows. He turns his eyes to the sun and is able to contemplate it without being blinded, recognising it as the principle of everything that is visible” (*ibid.*: 47). The birth of the modern individual, therefore, is made possible by a “mechanism of verticalisation” (*ibid.*: 53) that starts in Greece and that leaves in the shadows everything that actually supports the individual and keeps him standing and alive. From the myth of the cave to Kant's anthropology, where the newborn's crying is interpreted as “a cry of indignation for not having been born already adult and perfectly autonomous” (*ibid.*: 29), Cavarero outlines a genealogy where rectitude and verticality render invisible the links, bonds, and dependencies that constitute and sustain subjects, and

impose a moral pattern of binary opposition between straight and inclined, right and wrong.

The inclusion of Hobbes in the genealogy provided in *Inclinations* offers a different perspective from the one outlined almost twenty years earlier in *Stately Bodies*. Although, as we have seen in the latter text, Hobbes is one of the creators of the ideal of the individual that appears on the surface of the earth as a self-sufficient adult, erasing any trace of dependence or helplessness, in *Inclinations* Cavarero stresses Hobbes' pessimistic anthropology, which conceives of humans not as naturally good but as naturally inclined to violence:

Hobbesian anthropology is characterised by a horizontality on which violent and congenitally “warped” individuals move and clash. This predicament explains the need for an omnipotent and terrible vertical political sovereignty to rectify these otherwise warped individuals (*ibid.*: 75).

In this case, verticality and rectitude are neither the defining feature of a rational subject (as in Descartes or Kant), nor an ideal toward which humans must strive (as in Plato), but an artificial corrective mechanism that is not only introduced from the outside (the sovereign state) but also conceived of as an irresistible power able to suffocate the potential threats coming from the twisted nature of the individuals that submit to it. The Hobbesian subject is bent by his own passions, inclined, and never really straightens up; verticality belongs only to the Leviathan. There is, therefore, an ambivalence in Hobbes' theorisation of the subject: individual but inclined. The idealisation of rectitude is still there, but the return of the repressed is more patent than in other thinkers; in Hobbes, rectitude is menaced from the inside by what in *Stately Bodies* Cavarero identified as the monstrosity of the body.

With her genealogy of rectitude, Cavarero does not simply aim to unveil a number of presuppositions of mainstream Western philosophy, but to reflect on the effects of the images through which we experience and give shape to our bodies and our bodily postures. From this, she builds up an alternative image, that of inclination, which serves as the basis for a new

postural ontology and a new ethics. To do so, she first re-signifies and re-evaluates what being inclined means. Rectitude and inclination are to begin with geometrical concepts, but the philosophical re-appropriation of these images immediately grants them a moral connotation: they represent the correct and incorrect, normal and abnormal, reason and passions, straightness and deviation, orthodoxy and perversion. Cavarero points to the gendered dimension of these two images: the *homo erectus* is the archetype of reason, virility, and technology, whereas inclination – whose etymology relates to *kliné*, “bed” in Greek (*ibid.*: 3), and which is associated with instincts, emotions, and nature – is tied to the feminine.

Cavarero invites her readers to fill the medial space of images with inclined postures and to rethink what being inclined means. An inclined subject is no longer an unencumbered, straight, or static subject, but a subject who depends on others and other things to stand and survive, and who therefore leans towards the outside, lives outside of itself, ecstatic, without stability. For an inclined figure, stability is always precarious, always reliant on being supported by something external. Cavarero illustrates this through Leonardo da Vinci’s “The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne”, which contains figures – two mothers and a child – leaning forward, bending over each other, each sitting on another’s lap, caring affectionately for each other. In this context, Christ’s vulnerability and exposure appear not as contingent features of a child, but as features shared by the whole of humanity. In Butler’s words,

no one actually stands on one’s own; strictly speaking, no one feeds oneself [...]. No one moves or breathes or finds food who is not supported by a world that provides an environment built for passage, that prepares and distributes food so that it makes its way to our mouths, a world that sustains the environment that makes possible air of a quality that we can breathe [...]. We do not overcome the dependency of infancy when we become adults. That does not mean that the adult is dependent in the exact same way that the infant is, but only that we have become creatures who constantly imagine a self-

sufficiency, only to find that image of ourselves undermined repeatedly in the course of life (Butler, 2020: 41–2).

For Cavarero, images are a sort of theatre where the human condition can be interrogated (Cavarero, 2016: 10). They offer and entail a staging of the human. Coccia affirms something similar when he describes the sensible realm of images as a “secret natural theatre where everything comes to manifesting itself; [...] a stage that is in constant movement, opening the world to another life” (Coccia, 2016: 35). This is, however, a very particular theatre wherein images do not simply describe, represent, or illustrate, but make worlds, are the fabric of different ontologies, and entail various ethical and political commitments. The two postural paradigms of rectitude and inclination produce different worlds, mark bodies differently, lead to different ethics. Whereas rectitude imposes an individualistic and egoistic view and a pattern of normality that exerts violence upon whatever does not conform to that norm, inclination displaces the centrality of the individual and the normal to render visible the relations and interdependencies that constitute the subjects, the processes and the elements through which subjects are produced and sustained—or condemned to disappear both from the realm of the visible and from existence. While the image of rectitude produces individualism, binary distributions, and exclusions, Cavarero considers that the image of inclination “bends and dispossesses the I” (Cavarero, 2016: 7) and, for that reason, can be invoked to articulate a relational ontology and an ethics and a politics of solidarity, community, and action in concert (*ibid.*: 131).

### **Concluding Remarks: Incarnated Images**

I have read Cavarero’s analysis of the metaphor of the body politic in parallel with her proposal for an ontology based on the imagery of inclination. In combination, these projects (1) acknowledge a materiality or physical givenness of the body that obsessively returns to underpin and/or disrupt the corporeal images, especially those that try to foreclose it; and

(2) insist on the importance of disputing these hegemonic images on the terrain of the imaginary itself. Putting these two efforts together prevents us from reducing Cavarero's notion of corporeality to pure and unfiltered matter, and the posture of inclination to a mere image. The concrete matter that appears and reappears compulsively is always already apprehended through a myth, a narrative, an image, a discourse, or a set of conditions that make this appearance possible. Similarly, the image of inclination is not an image that is first proposed and then superimposed on bodies, but one whose success corresponds to it being anchored in the flesh, in the corporeal experience, underpinned by the force of materiality. The reason why the fantasy of the individual and its adult, male, perfectly harmonious body is continuously challenged by the force of the corporeal is the same as the reason why the image of inclination has a chance of effectively populating the medial space of the sensible: materiality bears witness to the vulnerability and interdependence of bodies, and not to their supposedly atomistic and self-standing existence. The individual and the body upon which the metaphor of the body politic is built are, thus, not incarnated but discarnate, not rooted in the experience of the flesh but concocted as a fantasy that negates this very experience and represses its materiality.

Admittedly, as some commentators have noted, while Cavarero's work on images throughout philosophy and art is deep and thorough, her engagement with the concrete materiality of bodies and the diverse experiences of corporeality is limited and remains abstract. Fanny Söderbäck, for example, remarks that, although Cavarero finds Arendt's notion of natality original and fruitful, but abstract, disembodied, and sexually neutral, Cavarero's own notion of birth runs a similar risk of abstraction, since "she actually rarely grapples concretely with the gestating body in all its complexity" (Söderbäck, 2018: 278). According to Söderbäck, while Cavarero appeals to the importance of the material and maternal body, nowhere in her work does she engage with the particular and embodied experiences as expressed by actual mothers. This leads Cavarero to overlook the experiences of gestating bodies that do not conform to cis-normative standards of reproduction and the ways in which racialised

bodies differentially experience gestation, labour, and parenthood (*ibid.*: 278–9). Söderbäck concludes that Cavarero’s notion of birth, invoked to make Arendt’s natality more incarnate, remains a concept disconnected from lived reality, with the consequence that the remaining task is to “bring flesh itself to bear on both birth and death, and the life that spans them” (*ibid.*: 279).

Cavarero’s work certainly exhibits these limitations, and to enrich and nuance its potentiality, it is crucial to incorporate flesh itself, real bodies and their different experiences into her notion of concrete matter or physical givenness. Nevertheless, one of the fundamental contributions of her research on the threshold of bodies and images – the one that this paper has focused on – remains its acknowledgment and examination of a quasi-transcendental double dimension of the body/image entanglement: on the one hand, the force of the corporeal to sustain or tear apart the scaffoldings of the imaginary; on the other hand, the power of the imaginary to make worlds and, with it, liveable or unliveable bodies and lives – to use Butler’s notion (for example, Butler, 2015: 18. See also Zaharijević and Milutinović Bojanić, 2017). These two dimensions are not dualistic, binary, or consecutive, but simultaneous, the front and back of the same movement of incarnated images and imagined bodies.

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