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The Advent of the "New" Body

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Hervé Juvin, *Coming of the Body* (Verso, 2010).

I have to confess that I am enthralled with the recent rise in popularity of the dystopian genre of films and books. The new miniseries based on Margaret Atwood's classic, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Dave Eggers' techno-utopia, *The Circle*, and Louise Erdrich's new novel, *Future Home of the Living God*, are recent examples of our attempt to grapple with the shifting relationship of ourselves—or, more specifically, our bodies—with reality, a relationship that is now mediated more than ever through technology. The delicate line between fact and fiction, between social, political, and technological trends and their projected fictional outcomes, help me to see with fresh eyes the reality in which we live where little is not mediated by technology. My cautious sensitivity to the development of new forms of technology and social media has waned and various forms of technology now inform most dimensions of my life—from communication with my friends, to my work and how I live and plan my leisure time. I've perhaps grown accustomed to technology's omnipresence because "everyone is doing it," or "living it," as the case may be.

In his *Coming of the Body* (*L'avènement du corps*), Hervé Juvin picks up this same thread that is woven through the dystopian fiction genre—the relationship between technology and the body—with one important difference: his is an account of real events and trends of the 21st century. As the title suggests, Juvin claims that our century has inherited a fundamentally "new body," new in its relationship to time and space and to nature as a whole. Drawing on such diverse fields as demographics, economics, sociology, as well as the fashion, beauty and health industries, Juvin paints a comprehensive picture of the breadth and scope of this "advent" of the new body. It reads as a profound cultural analysis as well as a clarion call: is the advent of the new body and the life that sustains it something we truly desire?

What can be "new" of this body that is as old as creation itself? From the start, Juvin admits that "the body has changed less than the gaze brought to bear on it," for after all, a body is a body is a body. But in an age where "representation" is more important than nature itself (to explain this point, Juvin offers the example of the trend of documenting through social media each moment of our lives) is it not one's gaze that determines the value and meaning of a thing? Today, writes Juvin, "every individual is his own producer/director, all eavesdropping on each other, generalizing telereality, with everyone his own star in his own screen." This desire for perfect representation reveals that we now consider the body to be "resistant to need, suffering and the effects of time." In fact, it is precisely this reversal of man's relationship with nature—what was trustworthy enough to give him birth has now become raw material completely under his own control—that signals the arrival of the new body.

Concretely, Juvin cites developments in the health sciences and sanitation which have allowed us to live

longer than our grandparents and their parents before them and a relative sense of political peace as the necessary preconditions of the advent of the body. These, combined with a new economy aimed at the body and its perfection and technology turned towards the well-being of the body, have helped to generate a new “cult of well-being.”

Juvin’s book reads like a dialogue with a patient—as well as cultured and well-read—friend who feels the urgency and responsibility to help you to see what he sees. Upon reflection, this approach seems justified, as the coming of the new body and the scope of its cultural, political, and social significance are not easily perceived. Since we are living within this new gaze on ourselves and reality, it is not easy to take a step back and perceive its significance. Juvin speaks of the coming of the body as a quiet, almost unnoticed shift in our relationship with ourselves, our bodies, with others and with reality as a whole.

What is at stake for Juvin in the coming of the body? It is nothing less than a “new barbarism” that threatens the fate of France and Europe as a whole. The impact of this new gaze on the body leads us to “mistrust the ability to believe, to think and to construct” for the future. The relationship between human beings is also profoundly challenged: we become “incapable of feeling, and unfit for human relationships,” Juvin argues, “so wide has the disjuncture grown between reason and emotion, logic and effect.” In light of these fundamental effects, Juvin prompts us to ask: who will build the future and pass on to our children our cultural and spiritual inheritance? Where will the children and parents of the future be in an age where childhood has become the object of desire and parenthood a project of the will?

These are grave questions, and Juvin probes them with profound concern. Yet, his book is not heavy with moralism. His Socratic style invites reflection rather than provoking reaction. This is especially remarkable given the intimate themes he addresses: sex, procreation, death, family life, and education. I found this approach very refreshing in an age that seems to default into polarization, barring the possibility of dialogue.

The breadth and depth of Juvin’s argument can be seen in his bold claim half-way through the book that the impact on society of the advent of the body will be equal to the advent of the Incarnation. Why is this? So much has our relationship with reality been transformed that, like the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, it has introduced a new era:

The mystery of the Incarnation is as central to Christian society as the technologized production of bodies will be in the new society; the break with the modes of reproduction as they have always been, among the animal, vegetable and human species, will undoubtedly be as determining for men and women born in the twenty-first century as was the appearing of Christianity, with its vision of a distant world of God, foreign to the human world, and different. The periods before and after the production of bodies will be seen as different eras...We are inventing a new way of making bodies. Incarnation will be under a different sign for future generations; the sign of technology ... With birth removed from nature and become a matter of choice, it is not difficult to predict that death too will be removed from nature and become a choice. This is the novelty that will dominate the historical condition of humanity in decades to come.

While the claim is a bold one, Juvin does make a strong case for a monopolizing experience that leaves nothing unscathed.

For example, Juvin’s ability to discern and articulate the point of unity (in the advent of the body) between a diverse set of cultural shifts is one of the most significant contributions of this book. I read

with appreciation his analysis of the relationship between many of the culture shifts I deal with each day in my pastoral and educational work in Canada: legalization of euthanasia, the strong push for gender ideology, divorce, state-funded *in vitro* fertilization, the legalization of prostitution, and the new panoply of so-called “rights.” Each of them is affected by this new way of perceiving the body. It is refreshing to be challenged not to react to each problem as it emerges in the culture, but to take the time to think more deeply about the undercurrent uniting them all.

While Juvin gives prominent place to the role of desire in this new era of the coming of the body—and especially, the insatiability of the desire animating the whole project—Juvin does not speak at any length of the cultural implications of the constant frustration of man’s truest and most profound desires. For example, he does address euthanasia as a desire to end one’s life when it is no longer perceived as pleasurable, but fails to situate this problem adequately, linking the push for euthanasia to the threat of meaninglessness that prompts other kinds of self-destruction. What about all of the youth who live in constant frustration of a promise of fulfillment—through indetermination and self-making—that can never be fulfilled? The rise of teen suicide and self-destructive behavior on the younger generation merits discussion, too. It would complete an otherwise comprehensive vision.

Does Juvin offer a way forward? It is only in the closing paragraph of the book that Juvin’s lays down his cards, so to speak, and here we see a glimmer of hope. This hope relates back to the Incarnation and what it revealed about the paradox of being finite: it is the locus of our relationship with the Infinite. For Juvin, despite the coming of the body, it is the body that will be our guide out of this “new barbarism.” It is one’s own body—human and so very vulnerable—that is the link to something that is “impermeable to the credit card and resistance to any contract.” We are determined creatures. This very determination in the flesh is what makes us who we are. The body, regardless if it is one that has arrived in the 21st century or lived in the Middle Ages, carries a memory of its finitude. This fact is inescapable. “It roots us in our limits, our last frontier, and even if it forgets, the body alone prevents us from being God to ourselves and to the other.” The question remains if we will ruin ourselves in attempting this grand escape. The drama of our fleshly reality is far more intriguing than any of the dystopian tales that might be spun today.

Ellen Roderick recently received her PhD from the John Paul II Institute in Washington, D.C. Her dissertation was on childhood and its significance for the meaning of human freedom in the theological anthropology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. She is now the co-director of the Diocesan Centre for Marriage, Life and the Family at the Archdiocese of Montreal and is a professor of theology at the Grand Séminaire de Montréal.

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