

Deadly Simulacra

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Abstract

Taking the lead from a tale by French writer Prosper Mérimée, narrating the terrifying story of a statue of Venus that suddenly—and tragically—becomes alive, the paper will dwell on the several versions of this narrative topos (William of Malmesbury in the 12th Century, Gautier de Coincy in the 13th, Hermann Kroner in the 15th, up to Richard Burton in the 17th, Joseph von Eichendorff in the 19th, Gabriele D'Annunzio in the 20th) in order to semiotically reflect on two streams of the human imaginary: on the one hand, the statue that becomes alive; on the other hand, the human being that becomes a statue. Following such historical, anthropological, and semiotic excursus, the paper will conclude with an in-depth analysis of a very common present-day urban performance: living statues. Also with reference to contemporary British novel *Observatory Mansions*, by Edward Carey, the paper will seek to answer the following questions: why is the spectacle of the human body that becomes like stone so fascinating? Why are spectators attracted by immobility and yet offer their coins in order to see it turn into movement and life again?

Keywords: *simulacra, living statues, immobility, death, cultural semiotics*

*Quid (h)ebetes morimur? Qui profuit lucem uidisse?
Si nihil inquiras, hoc est beluarum adesse.
(Commodiano, Carmen apologeticum, 33-34)*

Simulacra that perfectly imitate the human body are often perceived as bearing a connotation of deadly power. *La Vénus d'Ille* [the Venus of Ille], a tale by the 19th-century French writer Prosper Mérimée¹ effectively exemplifies this cultural trend. The narrator of the story, a Parisian antiquarian, goes to Ille, a little town in the Roussillon, South-West France, to conduct an inspection of the regional artistic heritage. During the survey, he is hosted by M. de Peyrehorade, a local antiquarian and erudite. Once in Ille, the narrator finds out that

M. de Peyrehorade keeps in his garden a huge statue of Venus, which some peasants had accidentally found under an olive-tree, and whose digging up had caused one of the men to be seriously injured. For this reason, but also for the expression on the face of the Venus, one of beauty and cruelty at the same time, rumor has spread among the inhabitants of Ille that the statue is indeed an evil idol. M. de Peyrehorade does not believe such superstitions; on the opposite, he sets to celebrate the wedding of his son Alphonse with one of the most beautiful and rich girls in town, Mlle de Puygarrig.

Everything is ready for the wedding and the celebrations. The groom, a lively but coarse youngster, has already purchased a costly ring, which he is meant to slip on the bride's finger at the ceremony. However, on his way to the church, he comes across a match of handball between a group of his fellow citizens and a team of Spaniards. Since the former are losing, Alphonse feels obliged to turn around the match: he takes off the wedding clothes and, not knowing where to put the ring (it was too expensive to be entrusted to some servant), slips it on a finger of the Venus.

After the wedding, guests gather for a party. The groom, who has overdrunk during the entire feast, approaches the narrator and, visibly disquieted, reveals to him the strangest worry: he tells him that, after the French won the handball match, he went back to the statue to recover the ring, but he realized, to his dismay, that the Venus had clenched her fingers, so that it was impossible to take the jewel from her. As a consequence, he was obliged to give Mlle de Puygarrig another ring, which he had received as a pawn from a Parisian courtesan. The narrator is not too concerned by the groom's story, imputing it to drunkenness, and commiserates the bride, whose virginity is going to be sacrificed to such a barbarian.

At night, the narrator hears some heavy steps along the stairs but ascribes them to Alphonse's massive and drunk body. The day after, though, he is awoken by indistinct screaming, coming from the room of the newlyweds. Once there, he is confronted with a bloodcurdling scene. The groom lies in bed, dead. His gnashing of teeth and blackened face express utmost anguish. The body is rigid and cold, stained by huge blues on the chest, along the hips and on the back. M. de Peyrehorade tries to reanimate him, in vain, while Alphonse's mother cries desperately. On the other side of the room, the young bride convulsively flounders, surrounded by numerous guests, all astonished and aghast. On the carpet, there lies the ring that Alphonse had slipped on the statue's finger. Nobody can explain the horrible tragedy, and the only witness of the event, Mlle de Puygarrig, tells a story that everybody believes is due to her madness.

She had been in bed a few minutes, the curtains had been drawn, when the door of the room opened, and someone came in. The girl was sitting on the bed, facing the wall. She didn't move, thinking that it was her husband who had come in. Suddenly, the bed squeaked as though under a huge weight. The girl was greatly frightened, but she didn't dare to turn. Five minutes passed like this, maybe ten...she could not fathom the passing of time. Then she made an involuntary gesture, or maybe the person who was in bed made one, and she felt the touch of something as cold as ice. She took refuge between the bed

and the wall, trembling in fear. Soon after, the door opened again, someone came in and said: “Good evening, my little bride”. The curtains were immediately drawn. She heard a muffled scream. The person who was in bed, at her side, abruptly stood up and seemed to stretch her arms forward. The girl then turned...and she saw her husband on his knees near the bed, his head at the pillow level, in the arms of a sort of greenish giant who was clamping him. She recognized the bronze Venus, the statue of M. de Peyrehorade...

As it is often the case with Mérimée’s tales, he is not the inventor of the story. Rather, he found it and told it adapting it to his artistic needs and literary sensibility (Bowman, 1960; Requena, 2001; Sprenger, 2000; Velay-Vallantin, 1990). Already in the 12th century, the English historian William of Malmesbury² narrated a similar story, in which the human-like features of a statue conceal a malefic power. Nevertheless, this version of the tale does not end with the groom’s death. The Venus prevents him from consummating his marriage: each time he seeks to get close to the bride, the statue comes between them, demanding, by virtue of the received ring, a sort of *ius primae noctis*.

In the Middle Ages this legend enjoys extraordinary diffusion, whose effects reverberate also in the following epochs. Hermann Korner,³ a 15th-century German chronicler, mentions it in his *Chronicum apud Ekkardum*.

From the 14th-century on, then, Christianized versions of the tale circulate. Gautier de Coincy,⁴ French abbot and author of *Les Miracles de Nostre-Dame* (1218), replaces the statue of Venus with that of Mary. In this version, too, a youngster slips a ring on the finger of a statue, which withholds it. The groom, though, does not interpret this prodigious event as he should, that is, as an invitation to take the religious vows. He therefore gets married, but does not succeed in consummating his marriage. Eventually, he is obliged to keep his promise and to marry the Holy Virgin, thus becoming a monk.

Afterwards, numerous authors turn this popular legend into literary tales. Richard Burton⁵ in *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) writes a version that is very close to Mérimée’s; the romantic Joseph von Eichendorff⁶ in his tale *Das Marmorbild* (1819) juxtaposes the statue of Venus and a woman in the flesh that looks like her, and who saves the protagonist from the spell; other modern versions have been created by Heinrich Heine, Henry James, Gabriele D’Annunzio, etc.

The uncommon diffusion of this tale, where the boundary between the reality of the human body and the appearance of its simulacrum blurs, can be interpreted from two divergent points of view. On the one hand, focusing on the particular more than on the general, one can search for the specific motivations that pushed each author, and each cultural context, to produce one or another version of the story. Thus, the tale of the feminine statue that turns into a living character and hinders the consummation of a marriage can be read as expression of the threatening shadows that the pagan world projects onto the Christian one in the Middle Ages (historical perspective); as manifestation of the conflict between uncontrolled sexuality and the constrictions imposed upon it by the religious ritual of marriage (religious perspective); as fruit of the contrast between male desire of copulation and fear of losing one’s corporeal identity inside the feminine

body (psychoanalytic reading); as literary representation of the opposition between social and mystical marriage (in the case of the “Christianized” versions); as symptom of a new cultural climate, where love for the body and for statues conflate (especially in romantic versions, often influenced by the flourishing of archeology, by the neoclassical ideals of beauty, and, specifically, by the retrieving of the Venus of Milo in 1820).

On the other hand, the tale can be viewed from a general perspective, underlining common points with analogous stories, so as to understand more about how human imagination works (at least in the cultural context where the legend of the statue of Venus spread, that is, Western Europe). The present paper will privilege the second point of view, neglecting the numerous differences among versions of the tale in order to situate it within a vaster category of cultural constructs, which nevertheless all revolve around the same theme: the relation between the reality of the human body and the simulacra that humans create so that they look identical to the original.

Ernst Gombrich, and many others after him, have underlined that there is something disquieting in the artist’s power to imitate nature. Such disquietude, which sometimes leads to dismay or utter terror, has its roots in the two main sources of Western culture, that is, Jerusalem and Athens. In the Greek world, mistrust toward representations is archetypically voiced by Platonic philosophy, which has exerted a deep influence on the Western conception of art. As regards Jerusalem, in the book of Genesis, God makes man in his image and likeness, then breathes the breath of life into his nostrils. Man, creature of God, can, in his turn, create simulacra that reproduce the appearance of life in every detail. Yet, such an appearance remains different from reality, since even the greatest artist lacks the capacity of instilling the breath of life in simulacra.

The artist’s incapacity to cross the threshold between appearance and reality of life has been sublimated, in the Western *imaginaire*, into two categories of tales: those of human defeat and those of superhuman power. The former are very common in the legendary lives of artists, especially with reference to sculpture, the art that most resembles the divine model of creation (or, from a secular point of view, the art that provides the metaphor that humans have used to imagine the creation of bodies from inert matter). One of these clichés exactly is the feeling of defeat to which the sculptor is prey when facing the simulacrum: even when the simulacrum is perfect, and exactly because of such perfection, the artist is distressed by the sculpted body’s lack of life (or speech, the most typical symptom of real life from Michelangelo until Turing). The cliché often requires that the sculptor inveighs against the mute stone, thus giving vent to rage coming from human impotence.

On the other hand, the same relation between life and simulation has been transmogrified in utopic tales and legends, wherein the artist succeeds in overcoming the barrier between reality and appearance. From the myth of Pygmalion on, from the Jewish Golem to the literary and cinematographic Frankenstein, the world culture is replete with tales and legends in which a human creator succeeds in getting hold of divine power and transforming inert matter into a living life. Nevertheless, as the story of the Venus d’Ille

demonstrates, these traditions are often characterized by diabolical, baleful, and evil elements. Each specific case should be studied individually, in order to understand the meaning of it in its cultural context. However, there is little doubt that all these stories share a common point: when artists, or creators, manage to equal the creative power of God, when they trespass the limit between the appearance of the simulacrum of life and real life, they are subject to the same dangers that manifest themselves in the myth of the genesis of humanity: a perfect simulacrum, so perfect that it is no longer simulacrum but real reality, develops an autonomous life and escapes the control of its creator. Perfection of creation therefore coincides with the annihilation of any form of control that the creator might exert on it.

If sculpture has provided for centuries the ideal example of art imitating God in creating the human body, it has been subsequently replaced—in this *imaginaire* where desire and fear of divine power blur—by other kinds of arts, each representing a metaphor of the human approximation to the divine faculties: sculpture in classical myths, mechanics in Enlightenment traditions, surgery in the romantic ones, until nowadays, when the ambivalent relation with the simulacra of the body is manifested in different ways: genetics, for instance, which in our *imaginaire* triggers both ambitions and fears; as well as other phenomena of the present-day cultural production, especially in mass communication.

Not only tales in which the bronze of statues turns into the flesh of the body underline the human disquiet about the relation between reality and appearance, between life and its simulacra; also tales in which this passage takes place contrariwise emphasize it. They are usually anguished tales: the human body, real life, turns, due to a prodigious event (usually a cursing or other evil influence) into creature of stone, deprived of speech and vital breath. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* provide a compendium of these transformations; the most famous ones are those provoked by Medusa's gaze. If the first series of tales, where inert matter becomes alive, like in *La Venus d'Ille*, voice human desire and simultaneously fear of replacing God, or even surpassing Him in power, petrification tales are probably related to the unconscious thought of death, of the human destiny to return to dust (it is maybe the same desire that generates the "Pygmalion syndrome"). Going back from life to death, from the reality of life to its mere appearance (like a corpse that no longer hosts any vital breath) is the terrifying thought that recurs in tales of bodies turned into stone.

The present paper will end with a punctual semiotic analysis of one of the most recent manifestations of petrification, a phenomenon that every urban dweller has observed at least once. Walking through the cities of Europe or North America, especially in the most touristy areas, one frequently comes across the so-called 'living statues', or 'human statues'. Various clothed and made up, in various postures and different relations with the surrounding urban environment, these performers pretend to be statues. A detailed typology of the several forms this particular kind of street theater takes cannot be provided here (their aesthetic value spans from pathetic improvisation to mimic virtuosity); nor can the present paper propose an in-depth historical reconstruction of this

form of entertainment; its origins are remote and intertwine with the evolution of Western theatre, in particular with that of processions, mystery plays, *tableaux vivants*, the so-called “attitudes”, pantomime, all spectacle genres in which the immobility of the human body is used as a device of theatrical expression. Rather, the present paper would like to offer a semiotic reflection on the existence and success (also in commercial terms) of living statues, relating it to the main subject of the paper, that is, the relation between the reality of life and its simulacra.

In this case, too, such reflection will be introduced by a literary reference. Edward Carey,⁷ a contemporary English author (born 1970) has obtained international recognition thanks to his first novel, *Observatory Mansions*, published in 2000 (Carey, 2000). The protagonist of the novel is Francis Orme, who earns his life by performing as a living statue on an empty plinth in the historical city center of London. Francis perfectly masters the art of immobility. Dressed completely in white, the face painted in the same color, he stays immobile, his eyes shut, until he hears the tinkle of a coin against the metal receptacle before the plinth. Then he opens his eyes (every time on a different spectator, whose characteristics cannot be revealed by the simple tinkle) and blows some soap-bubbles; thereafter he falls again in the most complete immobility (at least until the next donation).

Carey’s novel would deserve an in-depth analysis, especially because it wittily deals with the theme of immobility of the body and its relation to time and death (the passage in which the protagonist sits a contest in order to be hired as a living statue at the wax museum is, for instance, extremely enjoyable: in describing the test, the author effectively plays with the ambiguity the first part of the present paper has dealt with, that between the apparent life of the statue and the real one of the body). However, the most interesting aspect in Carey’s evocation of living statues is that which could be defined as the ‘commercialization’ of immobility (and the consequent consumption of it).

This form of spectacle, based on immobility, has always been used, with various levels of dexterity, as an expedient to obtain attention and, as a consequence, donations. Nevertheless, whereas before spectators were invited to pay so as to enjoy the spectacle of immobility, subsequently most street artists have realized that interspersing immobility with short moments of interaction with the audience could arouse their hilarity, as well as munificence, and relieve, moreover, the tension of muscles. In other words, whereas before living statues were paid for staying immobile, nowadays, as in Carey’s novel, they receive money so that they interrupt such immobility. What are the deep reasons of such change?

Arguably, the way in which living statues currently work, especially in their interaction with spectators, must be studied in relation to how the body behaves in contemporary societies. There is little doubt, indeed, that immobility of bodies has become an extremely rare phenomenon. Present-day human limbs are constantly in action and on the move, unceasingly shunted from one place to another in the post-modern metropolises, caged in a constant acceleration of rhythms of life. Immobility, absolute staticness, has therefore

become, for the body and its relation with space, what silence is for communication: a very rare treasure, kept by some mystics and few privileged ones (the époque of stylites and dendrites is far). One could therefore hypothesize that, in the beginning, living statues offered exactly that: a souvenir, albeit an obviously artificial and faded one, of lost immobility.

How to explain, then, this evolution of living statues, who interact more and more with their audience and increasingly shorten the time of immobility between one exhibition and the following one (thus losing their appeal, since the interaction is remunerated only when prolonged and credible immobility is interrupted)?

On the one hand, there is the almost childish pleasure of controlling another human body, of making it move from absolute immobility to movement through the simple tinkle of a coin, or the rustle of a bill. Paying a living statue to see it move means also that: purchasing the control over the other's body, even though for a single instant. But there are deeper anthropological reasons, more profound motivations, behind the commercial interaction between the living statue and its audience. People are willing to pay the statue when it moves because it is entertaining. Yet, like most entertaining things, this one, too, triggers elatedness because it pushes away that terrible thought, that unthinkable thought that the living statue, on the contrary, evokes when it dwells in immobility: the turning of the body into inert matter, the passage from the reality of life to its mere external appearance. Whereas the myth of the statue that becomes alive nurtures the human fantasies of power and immortality, the spectacle of the human being that turns into stone is unbearable. One must therefore pay so that this spectacle ends, so that death turns out to be mere fiction and the statue is allowed to go back to life. The fact that what dispels the thought of death and prolong the illusion of life is money is quite telling of the role that this symbolic instrument has taken on in contemporary societies; it is telling also of the influence that consumption in general, especially that which generates speed, acceleration, and dynamism, exerts on the ontological definition of human beings.

Perhaps human beings could learn a lesson from a human statue entirely consecrated to immobility (but who, today, would accept such sacrifice? And who would pay to admire it?). The human impotence before this simulacrum of absence of life, the human incapacity of pushing it again to cross the threshold between appearance and reality, would make human beings humbler, slower, and more silent.

Mérimée's story revolves around the idea that a perfect simulacrum of life can represent an attempt against life. On the contrary, a perfect simulacrum of death can teach a salvific lesson, like in the sad description that Francis Orme, the living statue of *Observatory Mansions*, offers about his father, always immobile in his armchair and master of the art of immobility:

In this way, seated in his chair, death forgot Father. Death paused for a moment in front of stationary Father and then moved on thinking his business has already been accomplished. (Carey, 2000, p. 18).

Notes

- 1 Paris, 28 September 1803 – Cannes, 23 September 1870.
- 2 Wiltshire, c. 1095/96 – c. 1143.
- 3 Lübeck, 1365 – 1438.
- 4 Coincy, 1178 – Soissons (Aisne), 1236.
- 5 Leicestershire, 1577 – Oxford, 1640.
- 6 Ratibor, 1788 – Neisse, 1857.
- 7 England, 1970.

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