

# Quarantine Symptomatology: is a naked running body a heterotopy?

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## *Abstract*

*This article attempts to critically focus on a news event happened during the quarantine in Italy. Indeed, in the middle of the global pandemic, while the Italian government forbid citizens from leaving their homes, a young woman ignored the restrictions and after stepping out of her house, started running through the empty city. The fellow-citizens of the small-town who were around, both shocked and confounded by the singular event, took their smartphones out of their pockets and began recording what was happening in front of their eyes. The news and the critics have mainly focused on the absence of empathy shown by the fellow-citizens, but the aim of this paper is to interpret this act from a philosophical point of view, looking at its phenomenology as the deepest symptom of the quarantine. Is the woman lacking lucidity or can we also interpret her performance as a metaphor for something else? Can we say she is simply a victim of delirium or is she claiming her right of appearance in space someone took away from her? The work interprets the body as the greatest heterotopy of the quarantine, by showing the gesture as a claim to appear in the deprived public space, it will underline the performative relevance of the woman's behaviour.*

## **Introduction**

On the fifteenth of April 2020, in the midst of the global pandemic, a completely naked woman leaves her house and starts running along the city streets (Feltrin Jefwa; Chiariello 2020). The fellow citizens who are passing by, surprised by what is happening, suddenly take their smartphones out of their pockets and record the scene. They laugh, incredulous: they cannot believe what is occurring in their small provincial town, there, in front of their eyes. After a while, a couple of Civil Protection officers help the dazed woman to recover. After covering her with a wool blanket to stop the rav-enous cameras from recording, they accompanied the lady back home.

Criticism of the event, some of which even came from the mayor of the town, mostly centred the ab-sence of empathy demonstrated by the town's citizen. Indeed, they just seemed desperate to

report the scene without even thinking about aiding the helpless woman (Feltrin Jefwa; Chiariello, 2020).

Some who have read the news have been shocked, whilst others, after viewing the video on social media, have been amused by the weird behaviour of a naked woman who escapes from her house to run through an empty town.

Against this backdrop, we will attempt to critically think about the meaning of what happened. Our purpose, indeed, is to philosophically question the woman's behaviour during a pandemic in order to underline its performative relevance. Is the woman unable to understand the extent of her gesture, or can we consider her behaviour as a symptom of the quarantine forced isolation?

In this paper then, we will provocatively invert the perspective by considering the woman not just as a victim of delirium, but as a conscient subject. Once seen from this perspective, the gesture can be interpreted as a claim for the right to freely appear in the public space, where the government was prohibiting its occupancy.

We will see how the pandemic has reinforced the fragmented condition of the public sphere, already vexed by the contemporary post-democratic (Crouch, 2018), globalized set-up (Castelli, 2019). The woman's performance will gain a particular meaning when interpreted as the need for a vulnerable subject (Butler & Athanasiou, 2019), to reappropriate the publicity sphere negated by this ultimate form of forced isolation (fig. 01).

### **What can a body do...now? Toward a politics of the heterotopy 1**

During a radio conference held on the 7th of December 1966, Michel Foucault introduced his listeners to the concept of *heterotopies*. As the ancient Greek etymology suggests, as places these are meant to be the main feature of which is to contest reality.

These *hetero-topoi* arise specifically as counter places: they can be said to be other-spaces in relation to the context they spring from. Their main characteristic, indeed, is the ability to create an original space-time order inside everyday life, simply arising from the experience we all live. In any case, the author writes that to every heterotopy corresponds, in parallel, to a heterochrony, an exclusive temporal structure which removes time from its loyalty to clocks by inventing a new way of scanning the rhythm of moments (Foucault, 2006).

Heterotopy and its heterochrony then, own the great power to delete the normal experience of space-time perception by creating extraordinary moments made of different and autonomous rules and structures.

At the end of the same conference, Foucault stated that the heterotopy par excellence is the boat. To him, the big XIXth century typical vessel:

*[...] is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea (Foucault, 2006, p. 28).*

If on the one hand, the boat represented the greatest economic instrument of the last centuries, the philosopher shows that on the other hand, it has simultaneously been the most important reserve for our imagination. The ship, indeed, let us imagine ourselves as adventurers and discoverers... as corsairs freed from the typical civil society duties.

Incidentally, quarantine has represented a heterochrony where time was suspended in an awkward waiting. The central question then becomes: if to every *etero-chronia* corresponds a heterotopy, where might this be situated?

Considering the event, can we not say that the heterotopy is precisely that running body? His refusal to stand immobile, sealed up and constrained witnesses the need of the organism to run away from an overwhelming and anomalous environment. The gesture does not only have to do with the subject of the act, but allow us to consider the body of action as a self-constituted *topos*, the place where protest is effectively performed.

Moreover, the space where the run happens cannot be distinguished by the surrounding architectures and infrastructures. Not only are these the primary conditions of the movement, but they also take part in the creation of the heterotopic space. As Butler (2017) writes, the freedom of a body can be exercised only if there is a support to sustain it.

Not only is the interdicted space used to empower the alterity, but every leap the body makes, the trial to inhabit a different and divergent reality is constantly renovated. Paradoxically, the heterotopy becomes present when the feet touch the soil and use it to hold and nourish the claimed freedom (Butler, 2017).

Not by chance, to be trampled is not a private space where everything is allowed, but on the contrary, the public one. In a way here the body appearance resembles an ancestral being and his vitality suggests a sort of vernacular practice of land occupation (Boni, 2019).

What happens during the run is that the organism tries to re-appropriate in a spontaneous manner what has been taken away from it (Butler & Athanasiou, 2019). The aggravating normed circumstance, which in fact prohibits the attendance of the public space, reduce the street, the public space par excellence, to a private place, a space-of-deprivation (Lefebvre, 2018). Its peculiarity, that of possibly being enjoyed collectively, is in fact denied to those who cannot demonstrate a valid justification to occupy that piece of concrete.

In particular, when to lead the action is a feminine body the scene colours up of extremely political meaning. Indeed, the space of the city responds historically and architecturally to the patriarchal logic (Decandia, 2019). Given this condition, the behaviour of women's bodies responds to a particular geography of fear, shaping and conditioning their everyday life experiences (Kern, 2020). This is the reason why a feminine body running over a city's paths shifts the expectations connected to the genealogy of that same space and ends up representing an unconscious reclaim for a brand-new and inclusive form of urbanity.

The "*phallic-visual-geometric*" space (Lefebvre, 2018, p. 281) maps and manage the city's routes, but this time, for a while, it is de-formed by the heterotopic resistance. By deciding to be

ex-posed and to autonomously perform, the body establishes a totally dynamic lived space which disarms the power of the abstract space representations (Lefebvre, 2018).

Now, the body making its way states his right to appear in the public space (Butler, 2017; Butler

4.Athanasiou, 2019). This time, the gesture witnesses a precariousness which is not only social and economic, but, during the pandemic crisis, especially biological. His display, in fact, can be effective only if performed in the public soil because this is the only place where this behaviour becomes explicitly political (Arendt, 2017). The feminine body statement is a call for a street politics action.

The subject of the run recalls of Foucault's corsair because it witnesses a different and engaging modality of existence (Foucault, 2006). Finally, the space of de-privation and his typical oppression can be forgotten, and overcome, at least for a moment (Lefebvre, 1969) (fig. 02).

### **Vulnerability and public space**

The peculiar nudity of the running figure is what lends this event its exceptionality. The woman, by undermining the wraps and undressing from civil clothes, becomes the main actress of that counter space which now appears to be appropriated by her moves. The gesture of undressing, abandoning her clothes and leaving behind the social meaning incorporated in these objects (Bourdieu, 2001), gives this act the opportunity to be critically read.

This raw bust is innocent and at the same time harsh. It is not intimidated, neither it does appear as an educated and subjected body. There, it belongs to an invisible space-of-presence, situated, but hetero-topical (Lefebvre, 1977; Foucault, 2006). It is exactly for this reason that this exceptional performance is able to pierce the surrounding scenery. The body represents an oxymoron: its vitality clashes with the crudeness of the concrete, with the pruned trees and the saturated colours of the commercial signs.

In the raw and innocent bareness, norms, symbols and social practices incorporated by clothes are not visible anymore, neither recognizable: the body, here, simply embodies itself, showing off its vulnerability. Yet, this is not intended as an exposure to brutal violence: on the contrary, when the body appears in the public space is calling for a relation with others, but at the same it is conscious of the dispossession the exposure involved in this process of affection-connexion (Butler, 2017; Butler & Athanasiou, 2019; Deleuze, 2013). Indeed, an action cannot be performed alone: to be effective, it requires a plurality of subjects (Arendt, 2017).

Therefore, the nakedness is not just a symptom of delirium, because if we go beyond the appearance, we find that this is a call for attention, a way to make sure that whoever is looking is really affected by what is happening. This event forces passers-by to find a valid explanation for the disturbing running body. In fact, this atypical figure overwhelms the spectator's familiarity with

his everyday life landscape, the same he used to cross repeatedly. The awkwardness, then, is meant to awaken the observer: the run is thus to be interpreted as a call to take the responsibility of this affection. But as Arendt (2017) writes, it is never possible to perform alone: instead of welcoming the body's openness, the public sphere dispossesses her by refusing to recognize the displayed vulnerability, the need to breathe.

As we saw, the woman literally pierces the scene, but on the other hand her action is immediately classified as an irrational behaviour: she is seen as a victim of delirium. The victimhood rhetoric is not here by chance here: this has indeed the function of forgetting both the subject and the inflicted injustice (Butler & Athanasiou, 2019). The rhetorical obsession for compassion reduces the political claim of the vulnerable subject by simply labelling her as a poor victim of a delirium. The subject's behaviour is then pathologized and the paternalistic foundational logic is just reinforced (*ibidem*).

By recording the scene, the fellow citizens place a layer between them and the performer, underling the difference between the normal (and normed) and the atypical or the monstrous (Foucault, 2005).

The public sphere, then, displays its strained condition. Beyond the Social Media society mask, a progressive closure of the identities happens by showing their increasingly closing and self-referentiality (Pariser, 2012; Castelli, 2019).

At this point, the only way to render this event is to jeer at it, to transfigure the indecorous into an object, into an entertaining spectacle (Debord, 2012). Not only is the nature-landscape becoming a commodity, but the running body too, which is in turn condensed into a technological device, prepared to be widespread and dismembered through the insubstantial network (fig. 03).

## **Conclusion. Disclosing metaphor?**

When in the second radio conference Foucault (2006) described the body as utopic, he reminded his audience that it is because of both the mirror and the corpse that its transformative and resilient character is forgotten. In fact, with these two elements we perceive our body as situated, we see something that is outside of us. It has thickness, contours, and weight... but still "it" is something other than us. This representation of the body, a pitiless *topia* (Foucault, 2006), fences the organism into a shape, assigning a specific place to every move it makes.

In reality, this is what happens when the performative body is recorded or photographed in order to be jeered at: by reducing its image to a fools' joke the body becomes a corpse. An optical layer, the one of the camera, separates and divides the performer's action from its potential plurality (Arendt, 2007).

The heterotopic body told that the article discusses about is a metaphor for a mutilated public space, where the Biopolitical power is not only surveilling and norming the streets (Foucault,

2015), but it is incorporated in the individuals' Panopticon-like behaviours (*ibidem*). Now, the typical plurality of the public space is only considered a hygienically unsafe crowd.

If the pandemic heterochronia suggested new approaches to everyday life, its heterotopic counterpart has been completely ignored. We do not mean that the spatial issue has been ignored, on the contrary this has been the occasion to accelerate the crumbling of the public sphere. Spaces have been rethought by governments in relation to the infection rate and the urban environments have been recalibrated according to the norms of social distancing norms. The consequence for all those places notable for their aggregative peculiarity has been their unavoidable penalisation and denaturalisation, and with this the annihilation of the individual's agency. From a spatial point of view, Covid-19 has not been democratic at all. As a matter of fact, it has profoundly stressed the geography of social inequality and exacerbated mobility injustice. More explicit has been the case of the Southern regions where the class divide has only intensified.

The challenge, now, is to understand how the public sphere will evolve through these conditions. In part, the answer has been suggested by the "I can't breathe" extremely performative riots, but in regards to the virus' progress, the future is still uncertain. What is certain is that new hermeneutics of the Covid-19 affected public space are extremely necessary and urgent (fig. 04).

## Notes

27 «What can a body do?» is the unceasing question Deleuze pronounce during its lectures on Spinoza. In order to understand what a body is capable of it is necessary to acknowledge the complex relationships established with other things and bodies. A body, here, is defined by this ensemble of organic and inorganic relations, or in other words, by its power of being affected (Deleuze, 2013).