

Body-Doubles

[Steven Connor](#)

A talk broadcast as part of *The Human Zoo*, BBC Radio 4, 8th July 2014. [[listen](#)]

I went to Barbara's 90th birthday party the other day. She told me of the vivid dreams she still has of climbing the cliffs above her cottage in Wales and of the strange desolation of being reeled back into the aches of her waking body. Shakespeare's Jacques describes extreme old age as 'mere oblivion,/Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything', but this remorseless subtraction doesn't seem right. Surely, in fact, the older we grow, the more thickly these other, earlier dream-bodies teem in us; somewhere in that shuffling old man holding up the bus a boy still teeters on the top board.

Many cultures think of dreaming as a taking leave of the body. And what of what we know as 'out-of-body experiences', classically experienced near death, in which one may appear to hover above, or look compassionately down on one's body? There can be no doubt that there is an experience of some kind involved here, though we must doubt whether it is really an experience of taking leave of the body. For what do I experience an out-of-body experience *with*? If I am flying or floating, I am still imagining being in some kind of body. I have never heard of anyone vividly imagining being nowhere, or in several places at once, which is what an out of body experience would really mean. If I can, just about, imagine my body as a puff of smoke, or resolved into a dew, it seems I must nevertheless still imagine it somehow as clinging cloud-like together, exhibiting that characteristic of being in one place at one time that is just what we mean when we speak of a being a body.

And yet if I cannot imagine myself out of my body, or some kind of body, I cannot imagine myself completely in it either. I cannot, for example, feel all of my skin at once, I can only flit the spotlight from earlobe to elbow to flank. And at times when I do seem to come close to being in the whole of my body, in swimming, for example, or, for all I know, skydiving, then this seems paradoxically to approach the condition of a kind of ecstasy, in which I actually come close to being out of my body.

So being embodied, it seems, means being unable either to abandon or fully to inhabit my body. What my body most essentially is is its own power to reach beyond itself, whether for the dropped sixpence, the somersault or the end of the runway. I can only be in my body when my body is, as we tellingly say, 'in motion', reaching or recoiling between one position and another. In medieval folklore, it was believed that bears gave their cubs their bodies, by literally licking them into shape. When we pat, caress, or even buffet another, we similarly give them embodiment by animating their bodies. A body is never quite contemporary with itself, it is always a rippling fan of profiles like Marcel Duchamp's painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*. We think of embodiment as a kind of confinement, but perhaps to have or be a body at all is always to be partly elsewhere than in it, in some other dream-body, or body-double, like Barbara snoozing in Earl's Court while yet still striding her glad height.