

## The Pictures of Dorian G(r)ay – body, image and subjectivity on a gay social network

### Os Retratos de Dorian G(r)ay – corpo, imagem e subjetividade em um site de relacionamentos

### El Retrato de Dorian G(r)ay – cuerpo, imagen y subjetividad en un sitio de redes sociales

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**Abstract** *The article is the analysis of texts and photographs published on online profiles of a social network for gay men on the internet. It also uses interviews which were conducted with users of this website. It focuses on the relations between body, image and production of subjectivity in the present days by employing the theoretical framework of post-structuralism. It considers the link between body and image as the legitimization of bodily ‘truth’, in which bodies are coerced by visibility and the spectre of ageing.*

**Keywords:** *Body; Image; Social Networks; Subjectivity*

**Resumo** *O artigo empreende análises de textos e fotografias publicados em perfis online de um site de relacionamentos para o público de homens gays, bem como utiliza entrevistas realizadas com usuários do site. Foca nas relações entre corpo, imagem e produção de subjetividade no tempo presente, empregando aportes teóricos do pós-estruturalismo. Considera a ligação entre imagem e corpo*

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*como legitimação da 'verdade' dos corpos, coagidos pelo espectro da velhice e pela exortação à visibilidade.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Corpo; Imagem; Redes Sociais; Subjetividade*

**Resumen** *El artículo aborda el análisis de textos y fotografías publicados en los perfiles online de una red social orientada al público de hombres gays y utiliza entrevistas con los usuarios del sitio. Se centra en la relación entre la imagen, el cuerpo y la producción de subjetividad en la actualidad. Emplea las contribuciones teóricas del postestructuralismo. Considera los lazos entre imagen y cuerpo como la legitimación de la 'verdad' de los cuerpos, amenazados por el espectro de la vejez y por la exhortación a la visibilidad.*

**Palabras-clave:** *Cuerpo; Imagen; Redes Sociales; Subjetividad*

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## Introduction – or “How sad it is!”

In Oscar Wilde’s novel (1994, p. 34), which borrows the title in corruption for this article, the main character makes the following statements by fixing his own portrait:

How sad it is murmured Dorian Gray with his eyes still fixed upon his own portrait. ‘How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June... If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old!...For that – for that – I would give everything! Yes there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!’

We take some of Wilde’s biographical features. He was condemned to prison for being homosexual (he maintained a scandalous relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, whose father processed the writer for ‘acts of gross indecency’). He is considered as the icon of dandyism due to the eccentric way in which he dressed, spoke and behaved in the English society of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he died in complete misery (without the company of his beloved lord) and in physical decadence (effects of meningitis and of other infections he suffered from) at the age of 46 in Paris, in 1900.

Paula Sibilía (2012) already successfully approached the phenomenon of the “morals of smooth skin” at the core of a censorship policy of old age in images of bodies in the means of communication. Inclusively the author also used a passage of the same novel by Wilde in order to introduce the discussion about the horror of the process of ageing in one of her academic productions (SIBILIA, 2012). In spite of the similarities between this text and the discussions Sibilía carried out, we seek here to articulate analyses on body, image and production of subjectivities by focusing the meanings gay men, who are users of a relationship site<sup>3</sup>, attribute to the modes of displaying their bodies online. We analyse part of the data which were produced by means of virtual ethnography that was

<sup>3</sup>The site is *Manhunt* (<http://www.manhunt.net/>).

carried out on the site we mentioned between March 2009 and February 2012, period during which we filed and classified 304 profiles of different users, which contain images and textual descriptions of their bodies. We also conducted 4 body-to-body interviews (without internet mediation) with four different users who accepted to answer a set of semi-structured questions in the form of a conversation about body, gender, sexuality and internet. Therefore we extolled the marks of masculinity and of sexuality we considered as constituent elements of singular experiences of the sociability of a social/sexual network of the internet. Moreover we took the internet as part of a device which actuates in the production of subjectivity, in which the bodies made in images seem to be imprisoned in a constant presentism and they seem to be haunted by the spectre of finitude – of old age.

We consider excellent the fact that the author of a work which precisely deals with the morals of appearances, more than hundred years ago, came to an end which frightens many men with homoerotic tendency: of the crepuscule of the body, of the fading of youth, of the loss of vigour; a solitary end. That which happened to Wilde in real life as well as that which happened to Dorian in fiction can repeat itself today, in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, frequently and daily with the *Dorian Gays* of our time. Therefore we quote that polemical passage of the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which the character establishes correlations between body, image and subjectivity and we put the question: in which context does the updating (continuity) and/or displacement (discontinuity) of Dorian Gray's desire gain vitality among Brazilian male gays, users of a relationship site today?

### **“(...) with his eyes still fixed upon his own portrait”**

The relationship site Manhunt has existed since 2001; it was created in the United States. At the moment, Manhunt has versions in nine different languages and it is available in four continents. The main objective of the site is to provide a set of technical possibilities by means of the internet through which male gay users of the site can interact and create

social/sexual networks. In this respect, Manhunt figures as a means of être-ensemble (to be together), according to that which Michel Maffesoli (2005) proposes, or as a desire network, according to Richard Miskolci (2013). It is important to point out that Manhunt characterises itself as a *social/sexual network*, as the subtitle of its main page expresses it: “Any man. At any moment. At any place”. It is this way that, differently from other social networks such as Facebook or Twitter (RECUERO, 2009): Manhunt proposes to provide modes of relations and sociability between male gays in order to arrange sexual and affective meetings.

Once he is registered on the site, the user creates a profile online, in which he can use textual resources in order to describe himself and that which/those who he seeks to get to know. There is space for the publication of body measurements, such as height and weight and other physical characteristics, such as the colour of hair and eyes, age, size of the penis, colour of the skin. More important: the site permits the publication of albums with until 12 pictures, in which supposedly the bodies which are described in the texts are materialised in photographs. The centrality of the body made of texts and pictures reinforces the central objective of the site we have just mentioned: to promote meetings between men who are looking for sexual partners.

The users’ bodies are *presentified* (SÁ & POLIVANOV, 2012) in photographs and texts in the Manhunt online profiles. Bodies made of photographs and texts are not very immaterial; they gain materiality precisely by means of the close relation between flesh and image, because it is through the always updated, presenteeist picture that the bodies gain visibility, meaning and value in the context of Manhunt and in the very dynamic of its sociability. The *presentification* of the body, by means of images and texts, is always produced in the relation to the other users, supposing that the exhibition is made for another one (SÁ & POLIVANOV, 2012). André Parente (1993, p. 30) suggests: “The image does not reproduce the real. (...). If the image reproduces the real, it does it literally; it reproduces it a second time.” This is a way of thinking about the image “as a pure, sensitive being of feelings which affirms the real as new” (PARENTE, *op. cit.*). Hence the question is to understand the ways through

which the bodies turned to be materialised into photographs and pixel texts, by means of machines and technologies, “because they are the correlate of social expressions which are able to give birth to them and use them as organs of nascent reality” (PARENTE, 1993, p. 15). The pixel-bodies of the Manhunt users are the most common and concrete expression of our political real: they are effects of the force relations, which constitute and institute the society in which we live today.

This is a possible approach concerning the possibilities the internet provides for sociability: that which supposes that “machines are social before being technical”; which means that “there is a human technology before a material technology” (DELEUZE, 2005, p. 49), that is to say that for each historical period there are technologies – machines, technical apparatuses – which are products of a specific historical, political, cultural organisation and of the power relations which are exerted there. The technical apparatuses do not determine who we are and how we are; there are machines which articulate themselves to the historical and political contexts of a given culture in order to meet the urgencies that are put there and to occasion new ways of subjectivity production (GUATTARI, 1993; LÉVY, 2005). “It is easy to make certain types of machine correspond to each society”, because each society establishes a determined regime of power machines are a part of, “not because machines are determinant, but because they express the social forms that are able to give birth to them and to use them” (DELEUZE, 1992, p. 223).

In this sense to think about the internet as an instrument and a means, through which relationships between the individuals are established, means to analyse it in its eminently political aspect (WOLTON, 2004). It is in this sense that we propose, together with Félix Guattari (1993), André Parente (2004) and Paula Sibilia (2002) that the world computer network and the technologies, which constitute it, characterise a technological apparatus: machine of incessant subjectivity production. Apparatus refers to a non-homogeneous complex “which encompasses discourses, institutions, architectonic organisations, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific enunciations, philosophical, moral propositions” (FOUCAULT, 1984, p. 244), which decisively is

not only restricted to the discourses (the apparatus is not only restricted to the words, to that which is said, to the enunciable), but it also refers to the set of conditions which enable something or someone to appear and to be seen (the apparatus refers to things, to the people's lives, to the bodies, to that which is visible). This apparatus is "a kind of historical formation, the main function of which is, at a determined historical moment, to respond to an urgent need. Hence the apparatus has a dominant strategic function" (FOUCAULT, *op. cit.*): it produces subjectivities, with the same force with which it produces discourses, silences, architectures, technologies, institutions, programmes, policies, bodies, opinions, truths, visibilities, and sayabilities. The apparatus produces life and ways of experiencing life (DELEUZE, 2007).

One perceives that in this conception the apparatus is not only something which refers to an object or to a subject, but which, above all, forms and produces the objects and the subjects to which it refers. And it is on the basis of the actuation of an apparatus and within it that that the modes of being and of being in the world are produced – in other words, the apparatuses constitute and institute the world in which we live, within which we experience our existence today. In order to think about the internet, the ways in which the individuals use it and the forms with which society signifies it, it is productive to take it as being implied in the institution of a "bio-political communication network" (PARENTE, 2004, p. 92), in which the uses and abuses the individuals make of the technical possibilities of the computer world network expresses the ways through which we are led to be what we are.

Therefore this discourse network is called technological apparatus; it is gaining density around and about the digital technologies, with their numbers, percentages, statistics, previsions, counts and graphics. (cf. BARBOSA, 2013). Not only this: also the machines and their physical apparatuses (computers, notebooks, desktops, modems wires, cables, antennas, screens, monitors, bulbs, lasers, CDs, DVDs, connectors, etc.) compose the lines of the technological apparatus, plus the whole industrial set which produces these physical materials. Also the very legal propositions, commercial treaties, theoretical and philosophical productions on the world

computer network are part of the technological device. And the most important: the workers who professionally exercise creation functions, implementation and maintenance of digital technologies, as well as we, users of the possibilities these technologies and researchers on/of the internet provide, we are the most alive and acting line of the device. At last we constitute the whole vital strength and we compose the technological device. In this perspective, the point is not to demonise the internet and the set of technical possibilities it introduced in our everyday life by labelling it as a manipulating authority; it is not either the point to glamorise and celebrate the digital technologies as inedited (*inéditas in-é-ditas*), that is to say, *as something which was not said before*, inaugural and absolutely new by classifying them as revolutionary. By thinking about the world computer network as a subjectivity producer device, we suggest to avoid the binomial pessimism/ingenuity in order to adopt disputes about the ways in which the internet possibilities can establish new fights, new combats, new force relationships in society (NEGRI, 1993).

### **“I would give my soul for that!”**

According to Foucault (2006a), if there was a time, above all at some moment between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in which the disciplinary regime characterised the occidental societies and the regime of surveillance there expressed itself by means of the figure of the panopticon, we can say that in contemporary times we are experiencing (living, producing, making everything operate) a diverse context (FOUCAULT, 1984; DELEUZE, 1992). We can no more be subject to a relation of control-repression of the body, since it is no more only sufficient that the body be docile – “a body which can be submitted, which can be used, which can be transformed and improved” (FOUCAULT, 2006a, p. 118), although the docility of the body is a condition in order to control it. We can suggest that now a much more insidious and continuous relation to the body (through the body), less negative than repression, subsists, because it does not prohibit directly; it is more productive, because it continuously stimulates and exhorts: the “control-stimulation” (FOUCAULT, 1984,

p. 147; cf. DELEUZE, 1992), the “chiselled bodies” (SANT’ANNA, 2001; 2005), the “show of the Í” which is repeatedly exteriorised by means of text and image (SIBILIA, 2008), of the bodies the flesh of which is sculpted by physical activity, always ready to exhibit themselves (SOARES, 2009).

In post-disciplinary society, the control-stimulation of the conducts, of the bodies and the capitalistic production of subjectivities, according to what Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik (2010), refer to, rearrange the ways in which the individuals experience their lives and recognise themselves as subjects. To be permanently online turns to be one of the manners of being more controlled in the context of online control-stimulus. To show one’s body is no more a scandal, but an incessant demand of the control-stimulation mechanisms (FOUCAULT, 1984; SIBILIA, 2008). There are various forms of control-stimulation and the one we privilege here is the exhortation to visibility as a form of surveillance: “an ‘over-concern’ about one’s own reputation and about the social capitalisation of one’s own image in the collective actions” and in sociability (ANTOUN, 2010, p. 150). To show oneself is to give oneself up to control with good grace.

It is for this reason that, if we want to take the internet as the ‘panopticon of present time’, we will have to reform the model of few-see-many, Jeremy Bentham’s panopticism extols: few guards live in the central tower of the panopticon and have a power of surveillance and control over many other individuals enclosed in the peripheral ring function (FOUCAULT, 2006a). As everything indicates, it seems that now we conserve the disciplinary principle of visibility as a snare, but we must radicalise panopticism: no more few-who-see-many, but now many-who-can-see-many, or many-who-exhibit themselves-for-many – that is, at least, in a first approach concerning the ways in which the bodies are displayed within Manhunt.

In one of the body-to-body interviews, which were conducted simultaneously with two users of the relationship site *Manhunt*, Xato and Donald<sup>4</sup>, Xato was 31 and Donald, 34. The first was a lawyer; the second, an

<sup>4</sup>The names of all the interviewees were changed.

information scientist. Both were civil servants and dwelled in the quarter of Copacabana. In the interview, we spoke about the moment of their lives in which they started to use the internet as a sociability tool. Both cited the *Internet Related Chat* – mIRC, a chat programme online which marked the beginning of the commercial internet in Brazil (LEMOS, 2004; RECUERO, 2009). According to them, mIRC functioned as a tool to get to know male gays in the city of Rio de Janeiro, at the end of the 1990s. In that period, the bodies were not the *pixel-bodies of today* and the display of the flesh on the internet occurred in a differentiated way.

*Xato:* There was no video, wasn't there?

*Donald:* There was nothing. Only scanned photos.

*Survey conductor:* But it was rare, because to scan was very expensive and the connections were not yet broad band...

*Donald:* I scanned my photo at the faculty, I studied informatics.

*Survey conductor:* Ah, of course. And at the faculty there was...

*Donald:* There was a scanner and I scanned my photo there.

*Xato:* I scanned my photo at my workplace (guffaw). But only one. There was this thing of sending, but I didn't send many.

*Survey conductor:* Wasn't it a naked photo?

*Xato:* No, of course not. How do you develop this?

*Donald:* That's it, how do you develop. And these digital technologies of today, with your own cell phone you take a photo and there is a little cable which downloads directly to your computer and nobody knows about it.

*Xato:* A little cable, no! *Bluetooth*, it downloads directly!<sup>5</sup>

It is important to stress that, most of the times the photographs, which are published on the profiles of Manhunt, are registered thanks to the contemporary cell phones, which are simultaneously digital cameras. The supposed facility and popularisation of devices that are able to make registers of pictures are some of the conditions of the possibility of such kind of picture which I find on the Manhunt profiles online. We must also underline that digital cameras have another technical differential: it is different from the techniques in former times, when you had to take

<sup>5</sup> Passage of the interview conducted on May 22nd 2010.

the photographic film to a specialised shop to have it ‘developed’ in order to have the photograph printed on a special paper; today the pictures are digitally and virtually produced, published and manipulated. This means that, for example, Manhunt users produce pictures of their own bodies with their cell devices or digital cameras, transfer these pictures to their computers or notebooks and publish them on that relationship site almost instantaneously and anonymously. The pictures of the naked bodies need not be chemically treated in specialised shops in the ‘development’ of photographic films as it occurred in former times. The technical possibilities of the apparatuses of production and visualisation of the picture are therefore closely linked to the forms in which the display and the exhibition of the bodies occur on Manhunt. According to what Ives Michaud (2008, p. 546) suggests:

These apparatuses permit to see new aspects of the body. They are powerful: they propagate pictures that have been rare until now (medical, pornographic, criminal, sporting pictures). They become new extensions, prosthetic limbs or body organs, inclusively in the sense of the social body: the camera, the video camera, which were initially reserved to the reporter or to the filmmaker, get into the tourist’s hands and, at last into everybody’s hands. There are more eyes to see and to see themselves. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it will come full circle: what one sees and what is seen are constantly in the mirror and there is almost nothing that occurs, which does not immediately get its picture. (...) Finally the vision apparatuses became omnipresent and invasive and do not leave anything anymore “out of sight”. *Nothing is hidden anymore*. [We underline].

Nothing is hidden anymore *supposedly*. From the perspective we adopt here, we can verify that there is exhortation to exhibition, above all on social/sexual networks. Nevertheless it is possible that this visual economy also preserves its invisibility zones, according to that which we will demonstrate further. The soul Dorian Gray would give to inhabit the painting in which he is portrayed as a young man does not exist in the post-disciplinary societies, in which the regulating panopticon of control-stimulation operates; there is only the corporal surface there which is constantly compelled to exhibit itself.

## **“If it were I who was to be Always Young, and the picture that was to grow old!”**

The passage below is based on a body-to-body interview, which was conducted with a Manhunt user<sup>6</sup>; it shows the importance of the publication of always updated pictures of the users' bodies in their online profiles. The interviewee was Nonix, 24 at that time, inhabitant of So-bradinho, in the Brazilian Federal District. He studied Humanities at a private faculty of Brasilia and he was a trainee of a Ministry. When he was asked about the reason why he had published photographs on his online profile in which only his abdomen and his chest appeared, without shirt, he answered:

*Nonix:* That's it, because what matters there is this. [...]

*Survey conductor:* And did you already have any other photo of your profile different from those?

*Nonix:* The photos are old; they have been there since carnival, already so worn out. The very Manhunt suggests doing this: “change the photos”. These guys don't read nick [nickname], these guys don't read texts. These guys look at the photos. So if that photo has been there for a long time, it gets boring. Change the photos and you receive more messages. Inclusively, a guy I went out with, he sent me messages three times and I answered ‘but we already know each other’. He: ‘really?’ Where from?’ I: ‘take my phone number and call’, he: ‘ah, it's true’. So there is that thing, the same person you already went out with, already knows you and sends messages again. [...] When I was not that big... But on those photos I had taken a little bit steroids. These photos are all from a toilet of the hotel. And then when I got to Brasilia I received many messages. Now I don't receive so many anymore because it's a bit old, but if I put another one, I think it will increase again.

In this passage there is the suggestion that the pictures, which were published in the profiles, are more worth than the texts. The interviewee reiterates “the guys don't read texts. The guys look at the photos”, thus he reinforces the character of sociability which marks the body on the

<sup>6</sup>The interview was conducted on November 5th 2011.

site – that is to say, many-exhibit-themselves-for-many. But “the guys” don’t look at any picture: it must be the pictures of the body and of determined parts of the body. This body made of an image cannot be anyone: it must *be* and *show to be a body-that-matters* – “the more of the body appears, chest and abdomen, it draws more attention”, says Nonix. A body-which-matters is a body which incarnates the regulations of the “market of appearances”, as Sibia (2009) and Carmem Soares (2009) mention it. Besides this, these pictures must be updated: it must be photographs of the body-which-matters in the present time, now, and never old or “worn out” as the interviewee suggests it. Nonix says that the very site Manhunt stimulates and impels the users to change the pictures in their profiles as often as possible. Nonix shortly tells an episode of the time he sent photographs of his to another user he had met personally some time before, but that user did not recognise him – supposedly because he had not updated the pictures of his body which he had published in his profile online. Anyway, Nonix relates the strategic function of the pictures which are published in the profiles, which is to increase the possibilities of communication between the individuals, possibilities of creating bonds which increase proportionally to the publication of pictures – updated ones – of the bodies-which-matter. And more than that: according to Nonix, one of our *Dorian Gays*, the word is deficient with relation to the image.

Among the 304 profiles we analysed, 195 did not publically exhibit their faces on the photographs of their bodies they published in their profiles online. It was common that, in their profiles, Manhunt users published photographs on which their faces were cut by framing or edited by edition programmes. On the contrary, the nudity of the body was reiterated: penis and buttocks, pectorals and biceps were published in almost all the 195 profiles where faces did not appear. This is another differentiation of Manhunt in relation to Facebook, for example: on Facebook, the faces can compose the pictures of the profiles online (SÁ & POLIVANOV, 2012), whereas in those other parts of the bodies there are extolled for the publication. It is probable that this singularity is very much due to the fact that Manhunt is one among various social/sexual

networks which are available on the internet, on which the male/female users prefer to exhibit the *parts that matter* in order to attract the others' attention. Nevertheless we believe that there is another reason for the disappearing of the face: the fact that they are *gay men*, who can be submitted to the recognition of others and, eventually, to discrimination and to violence, because they escape from the heterosexual norm (BUTLER, 2012; SEDGWICK, 2007). We remember with Débora Diniz (2014) that in the discrimination and violence perpetrated against non-heterosexual persons, the picture also functions as a proof.

Although the users' photographs generally show *bodies without head*, there were disputes concerning the signification body-image-word. A user wrote: "there is only a chest here on my photographs, but if you observe well, behind it there is a heart, isn't there?", passage in which the user alluded to the part of his body which was published in his pictures (his chest), but he suggested that there is something that goes beyond the pictures he published, something which could not be grasped by the pictures, something that is not passible of exhibition or of display through pictures (his heart) Another user wrote: "DO YOU WANT ME TO SAY + THAN THE PHOTOS?", putting an answer on that which exceeded the pictures he published in his profile; then he started to compose a written text about the specifications on features of his personality and the ways in which he liked to have sex – which indicates a relation of complementarity between text and picture. Another Manhunt user published: "WITHOUT PHOTO, NO CHANCE!!! WITHOUT PHOTO, NO CHANCE!!! WITHOUT PHOTO, NO CHANCE!!!" three times and in capital letters, in an exclamation tone, which attested the fundamental importance of the pictures for sociability with other men.

The imbrication body-image-word in the Manhunt online profiles is powerful and it characterises the basic way in which sociability occurs between users. In this dispute, the body-word seems to lose in face of the vigour of the body-image, as if the text were not sufficient in face of the photograph, as if the photograph had more force than the text. As Foucault (1999, p. 12) suggested it "no matter how much one says what one sees, that which one sees lodges itself in that which one says". Text

and images are irreducible to one another, above all because to describe a body is, today, radically different from to show a body. Nevertheless the question is not to defend which is more ‘real’, if it is the description (word) or the exhibition (image) of the body. “More important than the technological novelty”, Rogério Luz writes, “is the apparatus of force from where the relationships between figure and concept, image and word, emotion and reason historically emerge” (LUZ, 1993, p. 54). This way, the correlations which are established between photographs of the Manhunt users’ bodies and written texts about their bodies constitute two acting fronts of the same way of producing subjectivity, that which depends on the “ocular-centrism” of the occidental post-disciplinary societies (ROSE, 2007), in which visual power expresses visual pleasure (MIRZOEFF, 2003). The *Dorian Gays* venerate the image of their bodies in pixel and this cult is the mark of our time, says something about us and about our moment.

The image of the body and the body made of images are part of a “new moralisation of the corporal practices” which aim at “winning on the market of appearances; to obtain success, beauty, self-esteem or efficiency; to accomplish a good physical performance and above all a visual one” (SIBILIA, 2009, p. 34). To win on this market of appearances also means not to go much beyond the appearances: Wilde himself (1994, p. 5) adverts: “Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril”. Among the various forms of moralisation of the body in the sociability between gay men of the Manhunt site is the seclusion of the body in an always present, presentecist time, which supposedly links it to its ‘truth’. In the context of this relationship site, the ‘true’ body is that of present time and this is only possible when ‘truth’ is not only *said* but, above all, *shown* by the means of images.

Another user of the site adds another dimension, although it is similar to that of Nonix, with respect to the function of the pictures in the profiles. This is MadeInBrazil, freelance professional, inhabitant of the South district of São Paulo, 36 at that time. During our interview, we spoke about the criteria he used to choose his photographs and to publish them in his online profile. He answered:

*MadeInBrazil*: I put my present photos, of a year ago, of the last trip I did. Of a year ago. Since I don't go out very much, I don't have recent ones [...]. So I try to be the most true possible. [...] Eve though I still go there and I say: when I am going to send a private message to the person I say "Look, these photos are from more or less one year", because it's mixed, there are some of more or less one year and others which are not, there are some with trunks, I say "oh there are photos from 8, 10 months ago, you gain 6 kilos, I stopped exercising", I explain. I say "oh I'm shorty, I measure 1.64 meters, I don't weigh 61 kilos, I weigh 66-67 now – I'm getting bald, I've got a small belly". My ass has the size of Brazil.

*Survey conductor*: Do you explain?

*MadeInBrazil*: I explain.

*Survey conductor*: Why do you explain?

*MadeInBrazil*: Because I am true. I'll not go on role playing.

Whereas Nonix establishes a relation between the publication of determined pictures of his body with the greatest possibility to create bonds and to maintain communication with other men within Manhunt, *MadeInBrazil* mentions another function of his photographs: the relation to the 'truth' of his body. Nonix, as well as *MadeInBrazil*, allude to the necessity to constantly update the pictures published in their profiles, pictures which would serve to capture the body in its today and its now. According to *MadeInBrazil*, more kilos, less hair, short stature, all this must be *confessed* if his body were eventually confronted with the pictures he published in his profile. The demand for updated pictures, that is to say, for pictures of the bodies which correspond to that which the body is today, is, in some way, a demand for the 'truth' of the body: *the 'truth' of the body is that which the body is in present time.*

Thus the demand for updated pictures to be published in the online profiles constructs a bond which links the 'truth' of the body to its identity in present time: the body must be identic to itself in the pictures which are published, today and now, and this identity would supposedly attest its 'truth'. Photographs of eight, ten, months, one or three ago are considered non-updated pictures of the body, therefore 'false', 'lying' pictures, because they do not correspond to the present 'truth' of the identity of the body of today and now. Thus the body is confined to a

narrow temporality, of a constant present time. The body is secluded by a “photogenic totalitarianism”, in which it is exhorted “that everything in the body be prepared in order to be seen, displayed, adopting a pose: even that which is considered as opposed to any pose and to any display starts to be compelled to appear” (SANT’ANNA, 2005, p. 107).

Super-exhibited and venerated in the purity of its pixels, submitted to a “photogenic totalitarianism”, in which every part of the body is summoned to appear through pictures that are always updated in order to legitimise its ‘truth’, the body-image is equally dissociated from its own self. The principle of the *‘always updated photogenic totalitarianism’* disarticulates the body from its own self as an effect of the demand for the always updated ‘truth’ of the body that is captured by images. Because if the ‘true’ body is only updated by means of photographic registers – ‘true’ body because it is linked to its ‘truth’ by the updated identity between body and image –, this implies that the body of yesterday is made ‘false’, or no more ‘true’; the body of yesterday is no more identic to the body of today. The body of yesterday is another body, different from the body of today, so that a site user does not recognise Nonix when he updated his photographs in his profile. This is the way of making one of the modalities of the exhibition of the bodies on Manhunt: *updated bodies*, which have always been submitted to constant updating, making the body become “the anchor point, the witness, which permits to ascertain, register and measure the changes, the transformations and the tensions, that are induced by social reflexivity, with disenchanting, sinister or indifferent objectivity” (MICHAUD, 2008, p. 564).

In other words: given the demand for updating of the images of the body, which supposedly link it to its ‘truth’, we can admit that the body is neither unique, nor coherent, nor unified, nor identic to itself in the course of time. The body changes more than we think and certainly much more than we like and probably much more rapidly than we would like to. It is precisely because we know that the body is involved in a continuous flow that there is the demand for constant updating of the images of the body. The body, which is conceived as being in constant mutation, is that body which was one yesterday and which is different

today in such a radical way that the body of yesterday is the ‘false’ body and the body of today is the ‘true’ one – or still: *the body of the past is the anti-body of the body of the present and the body of the present is the body-which-matters*.

To demand images of the body which are always updated is also a way to admit the rapidity of the transformation of the body, as if the body of yesterday were always a false version of the body of today. To demand images of the present body, which are always updated, is also to deny that the body of the past is the same as that of today. The body of the past is an undepictable and unexhibitable body (and this is why it is necessary to give some explanations about this un-updating, as MadeInBrazil does). The body of the present is different from the body of the past and its updated ‘truth’ occurs by means of images – like in a portrait of Dorian Gray which is permanently being painted. This *imag-ethic* (and the snare) of the *Dorian Gays* of our time: they are obliged to continuously depict their present bodies under penalty of dissimulation.

The temporal identity of the body ceases here; a brutal discontinuity with respect to its past and to its present has been inserted into it. The identity of the body, which would legitimise its ‘truth’ starts to be linked to the temporal determination of the body in the present and it establishes a rupture with its past. The identity and the ‘truth’ of the body are also secluded in the today and the now of the present time, the past being the guardian of the ‘false’ body, of the non-identical body.

The body, which is updated in images that are identical to its own self, is only one of the modalities of the *exhibitable body-which-matters* and the body-non-identical to its own self, un-updated, is also only one of the forms of the *undepictable anti-body* within the visual economy of Manhunt. We draw attention to the coercion, which is imposed on the bodies so that they can detach themselves from their past through the photographic register, which is always updated with respect to the state of the body of the present. It is possible that the body gets slimmer with time passing, or more handsome; it is possible that, with time passing, the body gains weight, that baldness appears, as MadeInBrazil says.

Thus the always updated image of the body requires to be worked on, that is to be constantly improved so that each updated photographic register of the body surpasses the former.

### **“For that – for that – I would give everything”**

The two passages of the interviews show clearly that this intermittent work of upgrading the body belongs to the order of aesthetic, of the form, of the reduction of fat, of muscle maximisation, of the efficiency of potency, of beauty, of seduction, and to some extent, of youth. The body of today is coerced to be always more handsome and, paradoxically, younger than the body of yesterday. Many individuals, maybe the majority of them, do not succeed in following this exigency of constant improvement and rejuvenation. The two participants of the survey, who were interviewed, suggest this: Nonix was “bigger” in the past because he took steroids; MadeInBrazil was slimmer and had more hair.

This formulation concerning the modes of exhibition and of significance of the images of the bodies in the online profiles of the Manhunt users also allows us to refer to the delicate thematics of ageing for gay men. If the bodies which are to be exhibited are always more “true” the more updated they are, how will a body, which is coerced to be always more handsome and younger today than it was yesterday, administer the passing of time in it, since today it will always be older than yesterday? Hence, if this body is very old, it will be expelled to the *borders of the visible* in the visual economy of the Manhunt images: rigid age limits constrain the possibilities for the creation of relationships between the site users and they can also constrain the possibilities of the exhibition of the showable, exhibitable and visible bodies. Among the 304 online profiles that were filed, only 1 showed half-naked men older than fifty (and, even though, *without head*). Beneath there are some passages of online profiles which indicate the generational importance for the bonds that are perhaps created within Manhunt:

I want a friend [...] who is young and who likes a 40-year-old mulatto. [...] Ah! It's me on the photo, it is recent.

I am [...] A used forty-year old and in good conditions.

Guys ... honestly... I don't want to be picky... but I'm not into twinks, blacks, old (OVER 30) and fatties ... [...] ONLY TO LET IT QUITE CLEAR: over 30 NEVER; between 25and 30 MAYBE; under 25 very good, under 20 THE PERFECTION. SO DO NOT INSIST.

I am only looking for boys/young guys [...] from 18 to 30 [...]

Limitations (because without them it is going to be a mess): I am no into guys who are over 30, people with a dark skin, twinks or those who want to be women, fatties or those who are overweight, hairy or “bears” and druggies in general. ... It's all a matter of getting horny, I don't get with these persons.

This last passage of the profile shows the ordering function which the most diverse limitations play in the ways of exhibiting and showing the bodies on Manhunt – and that, in their radicalism, they constitute themselves into practices of exclusion: the body, which is marked by the passing of time, together with others that exhibit distinct marks (of race/ethnicity, of femininity, of weight, of the hair distribution), is brought here in a dangerous proximity in the excluding circumscription of those bodies *which are no good, which do not matter, which do not count as exhibitable*. And, according to what this passage says, the distribution of the limitations occurs by means of the parameters of “being horny”, of sexual desire and corporal pleasure. In the name of desire and pleasure, we can suggest that there are attempts to expel the aged bodies from the regime of visibility of the online profiles within the site: the distribution of limitations is also a distribution of *ways of not looking* at these bodies. It is like this that the *old anti-bodies*, for example, remain on the *border of the visible*, positioned like those that are not desired, not looked for, not looked at – but even though necessary as exemplary bodies of that which is not desired, of that which is not looked for, of that which one does not want to see.

The demand for updated photos of the body seeks to freeze the body in its instantaneous present. It is an attempt to capture it in its today, detaching it from its past. On the other hand, the demand for youth keeps

its ruin in itself. Because the body of the past, which is depicted by the means of images, is also always younger than the body of the present – it is what we learn with Dorian Gray. The body of the present is submitted to the passing of time, which always moves towards the ageing of the body. *The body of today will always be older than the body of yesterday.* The exigency of updated photos of the body of today seems foolish and the generational restriction for the exhibition of corporal images between the Manhunt users seems strange: the supposed inexorability of the passing of time corrodes and erodes any freezing of the body by means of images. One of the site users writes in his profile: “Always behave with the same prudence as if you were observed by ten eyes and pointed at by ten fingers, because at the age I am now and with all my experiences I do not exchange myself for three 25 year-old ones”.

Hence we note that the control-stimulation also functions in the stimulus to invisibility of determined bodies (for example, the aged bodies). Thus it is possible that the formula of the panopticon of present time is not that of the many-see-many. The present formula can be the inversion of the disciplinary panopticon: many-see-few, that is to say, the body which is stimulated to exhibit itself is always a unique one, the same (young, white, slim, muscular, manly), and there are many spectators of this exhibition – spectators who generally do not enjoy the same right to show themselves.

### **Final – or “It is only the shallow people who do not judge by appearances”**

Almost at the end of the interview conducted with Nonix, which lasted about two hours, he said the following:

*Survey conductor:* How do you deal with ageing?

*Nonix:* I don't like it. I hate birthdays. I say that I want to die to the most at 40, I don't want to grow old.

*Survey conductor:* Because of that decadence of the body?

*Nonix:* Because of the limitations that old age brings about. [...] I already knew other gays who say “50 is my limit, I don't want to live more than that”.

*Survey conductor:* But then, how does one do? If one passes over the line of 40? And of 50?

*Nonix:* It is what I use to say: I hope to be coming back by plane from a trip and it falls into the sea where they cannot find the body.

In the interview with Xato and Donald, which lasted about three hours, the moment they spoke about ageing was as delicate as it was for Nonix, as the passage beneath shows it:

*Donald:* Thus, this part of the body is recent, you see? [...] To go out, take off your shirt, to go out who I want to go out with, you see, I am in this phase, to meet someone nice... [laughing]. But I know that this will cease one day, you see? Because age...

*Survey conductor:* And is it age that will put an end to this??

*Donald:* Age will put an end to the very body. For me it's this. [...] My focus today is exercise, it's my body, it's making out, it's to get to know... Today, you see? When I will be, I don't know, 45, 50, maybe my focus, I think, maybe will be to study more, to read books, you see? Because the cultural part for me is boring, that you experience today, this part I intend to use in the future. [...] So I am experiencing the body. So when I am 40 and more, it will be the intellectual part indeed. I think it's horrible to grow old. I will die early in order not to grow old, I always say this. [...] I don't want to have the ideas I have today when I am 49.

On the basis of these passages, we attempted to give some clues for possible answers to the question that was put at the beginning of the text concerning the present context in which we can think about continuities and discontinuities of Dorian Gray's desire in Oscar Wilde's novel about body, image and subjectivity among the Brazilian *Dorian Gays* of today.

We can emphasise a morals of the appearance and the fear of old age as updated marks of the literary fictitious character with relation to the users of the relationship site. The ghost of physical finitude, with all the aesthetic effects it brings about, generates repugnance among the gay men who participated in the survey. The marks of time which inexorably insinuate themselves into the flesh are refused, less because of the cheerfulness to experience the present than because of the fear of the future. The desire that another body and that another image of the body grow

old in the place of the ones we have is something that Dorian Gray and the *Dorian Gays* have in common.

Nevertheless, the continuities cease there. In the first place because the horror of the ageing of the body, in Dorian Gray, was not part of a culture in which the bodies are the surface in which the power relationships actuate, which exhort and stimulate physical exhibition and the subjective exteriorisation as ways of control. It is only in the core of somatic culture (COSTA, 2005; ORTEGA, 2005) in which one can postulate that the corporal appearance coincides with the aesthetico-political (dis)value which every individual enjoys in society. In the second place, we must consider the fundamental role digital technologies play as the expression of singular social relationships today. To desire that a painted picture grows old in the place of our physical body is quite different from photographing our body day after day by means of smartphones and digital cameras. We can say that the painter of former times could retouch the image of the canvas with benevolent brush strokes in the same way in which we retouch the images on edition software. Nevertheless we never suppose that the body can be captured by such daily images and in such a reiterated way and that this imagetic register serves to connect it to its 'truth' which is always updated. Contrary to the picture of Dorian Gray, which grew old in the place of his body, today the photographs of the bodies which are exhibited on the relationship sites remain young, as the witnesses of the vigour lost at each second. The pictures of yesterday are the proof that the body of today is older.

Above all, today the dread of the old body is a piece in the machinery of subjectivity production which does not only abominate old age, but also fat, femininity, negritude. We suppose that the bodies made in images on Manhunt are the most disseminated expression of a cultural and political process which seeks to reaffirm and preserve the young, manly, slim and white purity and expells all the other bodies to the borders of the zone of visibility and of visual spectacle. In his interview Donald suggests that intellectuality does not share the same significance of physical pleasures, like "exercise" and "making out". That is to say, the deficit of the word with relation to the image, which exists in the online profiles,

also expresses itself in the unequal valorisation between body and mind, which indicates an updated *Neo-Cartesianism*. The fantasy of death and the desire of the disappearing of the body, which appear in the two passages of the interview, are the gloomiest evidences of the *est-ethic* and of the *imag-ethic* we sought to outline here. Maybe it is precisely ethics as a reflected practice of freedom (FOUCAULT, 2006) which leads us to the new forms of struggle against all these modalities of subjection.

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