Corpus mysticum digitale (mystical body digital)?: on the concept of two bodies in the era of digital technology

Masato Fukushima

To cite this article: Masato Fukushima (2015) Corpus mysticum digitale (mystical body digital)?: on the concept of two bodies in the era of digital technology, Mortality, 20:4, 303-318, DOI: 10.1080/13576275.2015.1083696

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2015.1083696

Published online: 22 Sep 2015.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 258

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Corpus mysticum digitale (mystical body digital): on the concept of two bodies in the era of digital technology

MASATO FUKUSHIMA
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan

ABSTRACT  The purpose of this article is to analyse the theoretical connotation of the idea of our digital body surviving the death of our natural body, advocated by such evangelists of digital afterlife as Bell and Gemmel. For this purpose, I will explore the seminal notion of 'two bodies in one' first analysed by Ernst Kantorowicz in his The King's Two Bodies, which details the emergence of the legal concept by which the king has both a natural body and a mystical body (corpus mysticum) understood as the everlasting polity. To explore the possibility of applying this notion to ideas concerning the body in the digital era, I will elaborate on two additional concepts, namely, the concept of diarchy in traditional authority, as proposed by Rodney Needham, and Toyo Ito's concept of the natural and digital body originating from his peculiar view of contemporary architecture. Through the method of abductive comparison, I will discuss the limitation of Bell and Gemmell's concept of an everlasting digital body, and the intrinsic lack of institutionality upon which the very notion of the two bodies of the king relies. Finally, I will introduce the concept of the corpus mysticum digitale, a figure, which, in the time of the decline of the power of ritual, legitimises the dead as a collective entity that lives eternally, but anonymously.

KEYWORDS: two bodies; ritual; Kantorowicz; virtual body; mystical body

1. Introduction

Man is born, lives his life and dies, 'being old and full of days' (Job, 42:17, King James Version). Except for those deeply indoctrinated by a powerful ideology against it, ritual has been an almost universal way of dealing with the unavoidable arrival of death and the stark reality of our finite lives (Hicks, 2001; Stewart & Strathern, 2010; van Gennep, 1960). A large chunk of classical anthropology has documented the vast variety of ideas – given shape by such ritual practices – about entities that survive our physical bodies (Ahern, 1981; Huntington & Metcalf, 1979; inter alia). Nevertheless, the body has not been considered as merely a vehicle for the life-essence, but also as a basis for creating new meaning, including that of society, out of its existence (Douglas, 1973; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In this article, I will pursue this line of thought in a slightly peculiar way – by focusing on the notion that two bodies exist, united in one. This rather puzzling idea received its
first thorough analysis, at least in the context of Western historiography, from Ernst Kantorowicz in his magnum opus, *The King's Two Bodies*, which centred on the legal theory of the Tudor era in the United Kingdom (Kantorowicz, 1957).¹ The details of his analysis will be outlined later in this article; it suffices at present to suggest the immense theoretical implications and potential, yet so far less-explored, for theoretical development even beyond the context of emerging political theology in the transition to modernity in Britain. Kantorowicz identifies a web-like relationship imbricating the problems of religious and political authority, ritual, personhood, institutionality, and life and death.

Using this concept of two bodies in one, this article examines the validity and potential of a set of recent arguments about online memory, digital afterlives and virtual immortality. I will take up a seminal argument by Bell and Gemmell about ‘total recall’, the recording of every life event as a lifelog and the creation of a new type of body, so to speak, in the form of digital immortality (Bell & Gemmell, 2009), as somewhat representative of a variety of proponents of such a claim.

To bridge the seemingly impassable gap between these two distant thoughts, this article provides two additional lines of reflection. The first is Rodney Needham’s anthropological argument on the general tendency towards dualism of authority and its relation to ritual practice (Needham, 1980). The second is a parallel concept of two bodies in one, the relationship between the natural and digital body, proposed by Toyo Ito, one of the most influential architects in Japan (Ito, 2000a, 2000b). Needham’s argument is required to point out the striking aspects of Kantorowicz’s claim vis-à-vis the more commonplace understanding of the relation between body, ritual and authority in anthropology, while Ito is called upon to prove that there has been a different attempt to think of the body’s dual aspect in terms of the contrast between its natural and digital phase, exhibiting a strikingly different conception of temporality from that of Kantorowicz.

This rather reckless attempt to compare such distant authors may easily lose credibility without proper theoretical justification. One such justification is the use of what I call ‘abductive comparison’, which I claim is not based upon the predetermined comparability of elements, but upon the effectiveness of the concepts created by such comparison itself. In such context, even the surrealistic dépaysement, ‘the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella’ (de Lautreamont, 2011), is legitimised if any abductive concept is created through it.

In this article, the concept expected to be created through such a procedure is the *corpus mysticum digitale* (mystical digital body) – a digitalised version of the original *corpus mysticum*, a Christological concept quintessential to Kantorowicz’s thesis and the passionate focus of a variety of contemporary thinkers, such as de Certeau, Schmitt and Agamben.² The invention of such a seemingly bizarre concept is to cultivate a new, if narrow, pathway to bridge these diverse realms of thought – from ritual, authority and political theology, to the contemporary issues of the digital body and immortality. To avoid the
lengthy and multiple annotations required for such an exploration, I have put them in the notes, while the main text is confined first to focusing on the core elements of each of the three above-mentioned scholars to examine their mutual conceptual relations until they are boiled down to the target concept of the *corpus mysticum digitale*. The latter part of this article tries to assess recent claims about digital death, the afterlife and immortality through the lens of this concept to discuss what has been missing in the previous arguments on this issue, while suggesting the possibility of situating the subject of digitality in a wider theoretical scope not attempted thus far.

### 2. Needham: ritual and authority in dual sovereignty

Both the universality and the distinctiveness of the notion of two bodies of the king should be illuminated in the light of a more general thesis about the relation among ritual, power and authority. In the field of classical social anthropology, authority figures in the so-called traditional societies have often been conceived as belonging to two distinctive realms. Needham has collected many such cases in his anthropological work and has named it ‘dual sovereignty’ (Needham, 1980).

The introduction of his article – the description of the windows in the old library of All Souls College, where figures of English kings are faced with archbishops of Canterbury and the four Latin Fathers (1980, p. 63) – leads to his main thesis: ‘a partition of forces to which men are subject into a diarchy defined as jural + mystical’ (1980, pp. 70–71). The evidence that Needham provides is abundant, from Dumezil’s analysis of Indo-European myths, to the secular power of the brother and the mystical power of the sister in Japan’s islands (1980, pp. 73–88). Despite the well-known limitation of such a structuralist approach, his proposal of an ‘elementary classification of powers’ (1980, p. 88) is also attractive in distinguishing his king from that of Kantorowicz.

Interestingly, Needham hinted that this tendency for bifurcation might be attributable to the dual functions of our brains; to do credit to this universal claim of the bifurcation of the jural and the mystical, historical sociology may show that this tendency multiplies itself. Max Weber’s exegesis (Weber, 1978) of the further division of the authorities of both church and kingship, the former being divided between its legalistic bureaucracy and the countering monasticism, the latter being bifurcated between political machinery and charismatic divination, can be regarded as an interesting corroboration of such a universalist claim.

### 3. Kantorowicz: The King’s Two Bodies

At a glance, Kantowowicz’s analysis of the King’s Two Bodies may seem to be merely a further example of this universal tendency, yet the subtle difference between these two schools of thought will reveal its pivotal importance for the
following argument. As a historian of mediaeval political thought, Kantorowicz noticed a seemingly strange formulation of kingship in the writings and law-reports of the legal theoreticians of the Tudor era – the idea that the king has two distinctive bodies, a natural body and a political body. At the beginning of his masterpiece, he cites the work of legal theoretician Edmund Plowden, by quoting his Reports, collected and written under Queen Elizabeth I:

that by the Common Law no Act which the King does King, shall be defeated by his Nonage. For the king has two Bodies, viz., a Body natural and a Body politic. His Body natural (if it be considered in itself) is a Body mortal, subject to all Infirmities that come by Nature or Accident, to the Imbecility of Infancy or old Age, and to the like Defects that happen to the natural Bodies of other People. But his Body politic is a Body that cannot be seen or handled, consisting of Policy and Government, and constituted for the Direction of the People, and the Management of the public weal, and this body is utterly void of Infancy, and old Age, and other natural defects and Imbecilities, which the Body natural is subject to, and for this Cause, what the king does in his Body politic, cannot be invalidated or frustrated by any Disability in his natural Body. (quoted in Kantorowicz, 1957, p. 7)

The natural body of the king is his physical, mortal body, which will vanish in due course. Yet the other body, the political body of the king, does not die and lives eternally even after the king’s death. These two bodies are unified in the existing body of the king. This seemingly bizarre formulation was very influential in the legal thought of the time, and Kantorowicz traces various historical precedents to show how this notion of two bodies developed in English political thought.

He argues that the development of this idea was stimulated largely by an analogy with the duality of Christ’s divinity and humanity. In fact, even in the twelfth century, the Norman Anonymous, an unknown cleric presumably from Normandy, who wrote passionately on kingship, was insisting that the king had a dual personality, that of nature and that of grace – which the writer calls gemina persona, the ‘twin character’ (1957, p. 49). However, Kantorowicz notes that this should not be understood as a sociological distinction between person and office (1957, p. 59).

In this context, one of the most important features for creating such distinction of two bodies is the general notion of corpus mysticum, or ‘mystical body’ (1957, p. 15). This concept at first meant the Eucharist or consecrated host (1957, p.196) and then gradually changed into something like Corpus Ecclesiae Mysticum, referring to the church as a corporation that survives the death and substitution of its members (1957, chap 5). The rise of the notion of corpus mysticum, he argues, is deeply entangled with the development of a new notion of time. Time in antiquity was largely divided into two elements: aeternitas, the divine eternity of God; and tempus, the finite time of mortal man. What arose during the mediaeval era, however, was a third concept of time, aevum/aion, a sort of continuity beyond our death (1957, pp. 273–284). Kantorowicz believes
that this new notion of time as a continuity beyond human evanescence led to the idea that particular institutions, such as the church, would not die (non moritur). This enabled the notion of corpus mysticum, merged with the idea of continuity, to be gradually applied to various social institutions; personified corporations, such as the church, city and country (1957, pp. 302–303).

The culmination of the development of these conceptual chains can be seen in the context of kingship, Kantorowicz argues, in the idea that the king has an immortal body, called the ‘political body’, which contrasts with his natural body. The undying body of the king has its corollaries – its paraphernalia. The crown (1957, pp. 336–382), the royal costumes used for funerals (1957, pp. 419–437) and the symbol of the phoenix (1957, pp. 388–401) all represent the continuity of the kingdom despite the mortality of the king.

4. Needham and Kantorowicz on ritual and time

Although Kantorowicz’s discussion of the genesis of the idea of the king’s two bodies focuses rather narrowly on English legal thought, he also points out that even in antiquity, a similar distinction can be found in more primitive form, such as the borrowed notion of the duality of Christ to characterise ancient kinship (Kantorowicz, 1957, pp. 439–446). He also shows that in France, contemporaneous with Tudor England’s, there was the dual funeral in which a king’s divine portrait and dead body were treated separately and given different funerals according to these distinctions. He maintains, therefore, that this dualistic tendency can often be observed (1957, pp. 419–437; cf. Ginzburg, 2001). At the same time, he repeatedly emphasises that, outside England, the dualist tendency did not crystallise into a clear-cut concept of two bodies (1957, p. 446). Had he read Needham’s paper, he might have generally agreed with the universal tendency towards bifurcation, but he would not have thought it enough to explain the particular development of the concept of the two bodies of the king in England.

For a smooth comparison of these two authors’ thought, Needham’s cerebral interpretation of the distinction between the jural and the mystical should be translated into a distinction in relation to ritual. Needham’s examination of the mystical indicates that it is but another name for the entity bound up with the rigidity of ritual practice, while the jural can be defined as being relatively free from such constraints so as to deal with the ever-changing issues of the mundane world. Such reinterpretation leads us to clarify one of the most intriguing points in Kantorowicz’s argument, namely that ‘ritual’ is not enough to solve the problem of interregnum, the vacancy of the office after the death of a king. Kantorowicz elaborately narrates the historical decline of the coronation ritual in Britain. There is always a time lag between old and new kings, so that, if a king can be a king only through the coronation ritual, the problem of the vacancy of office cannot be solved. Thus, Thomas Cranmer, archbishop at the time of Henry VIII, underscored that the royal ceremony was not necessary for
the king to be king (1957, p. 318, my emphasis) and that, as part of kingship, he already has two bodies, which evidently differs from all the cases in anthropological research on kingship. In brief, one of Kantorowicz’s accomplishments has been to demonstrate the limitation of ‘ritual’ as the political source of the king’s authority. Something more was needed.

Another difference between these two authors is the problem of time. According to Kantorowicz, the legal theorisation was needed to legitimise the continuity of particular institutions, such as kingship, as corpus mysticum (and thus immortal). For showing such immortality, the notion of time, eavum/aion, discussed above, and the material regalia – such as the crown as a particularly durable material that survives the death of a king as well as a conceptual symbol of immortal kingship – gained importance as the idea of the two bodies of the king crystallised (1957, pp. 336–383).

This temporal aspect is what is totally missing from Needham’s argument. Needham’s theory of bifurcation between the jural and the mystical does not require any temporal legitimation because such bifurcation is hinted to be brought about by our brain functions. According to Kantorowicz, the very ritual was losing its power, probably at the time of the Reformation, accompanied by a declining sense of the sanctity of ritual practice at large. This thrust of Kantorowicz’s argument provides very intriguing material for us to re-examine the meaning of ritual, institution, continuity and so forth in the digital era.

5. Ito: the citizen’s two bodies

My conceptual round-the-world trip continues into contemporary Japan, where Toyo Ito has been dubbed one of the most influential architects in the post-war period. Among his experimental essays on architecture, the city, and society at large is a series of essays about the notion of our new sense of the body. In 1988, in a seminal essay entitled ‘The architecture that an android body desires’, he proposed the idea of the ‘android body’ through the reading of the classical thesis of Marc-Antoine Laugier (1977), an eighteenth century Jesuit priest and theorist of architecture who suggested the origin of architecture was the ‘primitive hut’ designed to shelter our body from the sunshine (Ito, 2000a, pp. 453–454). Ito contrasts this image of the primitive hut on the riverside with the contemporary city-dweller’s experience:

Yet the contemporary city-dwellers have already been equipped with the sense of a body like an android. Because, in the forest of the city-space, these mountain streams may be replaced, not only with streams of cars on highways, but even with the invisible streams of electromagnetic waves, and in the shade of the tree where people are supposed to cool themselves now may find a forest of iron and aluminum with the sounds of synthesizers. (2000a, p. 454 tentative translation by the author)
Ito insists that the kind of architecture required for contemporary city-dwellers surrounded by iron, aluminium and electromagnetic waves is not the monumental, classical edifice, but a temporary shelter, which he insists, fits our increasingly android bodies (2000a, pp. 458–460). Ito used to be well known for his lightweight buildings with temporary shelter-like structures; behind this design lies the notion of this android body. His idea of the co-evolution of body, city and architecture has gradually developed into the notion of the two different bodies of contemporary city-dwellers.

In a series of essays, Ito describes the dual aspects of the body, using various terms such as ‘android body’ (Ito, 2000b, pp. 25 and 50), or ‘virtual’ or ‘media’ body (2000b, p. 292 and p. 341). Ito believes in the growing duality of our body and attempts to connect this bifurcation with the duality of city life itself. Behind this process lies the increasing influence of consumer society, particularly that of the so-called ‘bubble economy’ of the Japan of the 1980s and the advent of the digital revolution of the 1990s. Ito calls this aspect of the city the ‘simulated city’ (Ito, 2000b, p. 142) or, using the popular trademark of the American cling product, the ‘Saran Wrap city’ (2000b, p. 208). In this seemingly homogenised state of city life, he, as an architect, detects an essential difference from the homogenised space, the ‘universal space’ that architectural modernists like Mies van der Rohe had pursued so vehemently.

He adds that this Saran Wrap city is both timeless and spaceless and has five characteristics: homogeneity, transparency, fluidity, relativity and fragmentality. The convenience store, he maintains, is a typical example of the virtual space of the city. Use of artificial cling wrap as a symbol of virtuality based upon simulation urged him to think that nature itself is bifurcated between the ‘real nature’ that we know through our senses and geometrically abstract nature. In his essay discussing Paul Klee paintings (Ito, 2000b, pp. 369–374), he tries to demonstrate that Klee’s painting of shoals of fish in rapid torrents, streams and whirlpools with similar wave-like lines that appear undifferentiated from each other is intended to convey a new understanding of the doubling of nature in relation to modern architecture (2000b, p. 327). The earth and water painted in Klee’s works are the result of the interaction between real nature and geometrically abstract nature (2000b, p. 173). Understandably, this dual concept of nature corresponds with our notion of dual bodies, divided between natural components and electromagnetic (or informational) components. Ito detects a similar understanding of the duality of nature in Klee’s painting ‘Actor’s face’ where Ito believes that many dots and lines depicted in Klee’s paintings represent the flow of both air and water and the scanning lines on a cathode-ray tube. He concludes that all of our bodies, architectures and even trees, each with its own particular shape, merge into these two flows of nature (2000b, p. 374).

Ito’s argument on the duality of bodies has obviously resulted from his observation of Japanese society at the apex of the bubble economy in the 1980s, and his argument could have been subsumed into the then popular genre of the sociology of consumer society, akin to Baudrillard’s (1994)
conception of simulation and simulacra. However, one of the distinctive features of Ito’s argument is his belief that the growing duality of the body corresponds with the duality of cities and even that of nature. This is why he discusses not only the Saran Wrap city but also the idea of informational nature. He believes that this process of bifurcation should be reflected in the practice of architecture.

6. Natural body and time in Ito’s formulation

Compared to the first two authors, there are a couple of novel elements in Ito’s arguments. The first is the possibility of the transformation of our natural body in the wake of digital technology. In contrast to the king’s political body, Ito’s argument provides no reflection on the role of social institutions; he focuses on the natural body per se, which he believes to be doubled by the power of techno-science and information systems.

The second point is his understanding of the notion of time, which is quite distinct from those of the previous authors I referred to. If his is largely in line with recent discussions on the role of digital networks and virtual reality, his radical position is reflected in his rejection of the distinction between the temporal, mortal body (the ‘natural’ body) and our virtual body, which some may believe immortal. Ito rather claims that both our natural body and virtual body, so to speak, are ‘ephemeral’ – using a word he once made a motto for his own architectural style (Ito, 2000b, pp. 55–70).

Ito believes that digital technology does not change the fate of our vanishing body, even if it is digital. In this sense, Ito does not seem to be interested in themes like immortality beyond death because even the seemingly permanent modern skyscrapers made of ferro-concrete cannot avoid the fate of ephemerality. Even angels are, he might say, equally doomed to vanish in the course of time. This formulation of the natural and virtual body, along with the underlying assumption that these bodies are both ephemeral, can be contrasted with recent arguments about digital memories after death. This is where Ito’s peculiar thought may be a link between classical authors such as Needham and Kantorowicz, and the theorizers of life and death in the digital era we are about to discuss.

7. Corpus mysticum digitale

Our three authors tried to show that our bodies can be more than what we are accustomed to, if in very different ways. Needham does not explicitly talk about the body, yet his distinction between the jural and the mystical can be re-interpreted, contra his cerebral interpretation, as the product of intersection between the body involved in mundane practice and the body that is ritualised or tabooed in sanctity. As his attention is towards the spatialised duality of sovereignty and not the temporal transition of the body, the notions of death
and afterlife are not explicitly argued in his article. Consequently, while the ritualised mystical body can be imagined as surviving its physical mortality and living eternally in ritualised form, the situation of the mundane body is unclear in his argument, because the jural, as an embodied institution, also faces death and, as such, must also follow the process of ritualization. This theoretical weakness is where Kantorowicz’s analysis of mediaeval kingship exhibits impressive innovation. As discussed above, when a king dies, ritual is not enough to allow the kingship to survive: a theoretical dualisation of king’s body is required for the kingship to legitimately survive.

By contrast, Ito stresses a dual notion of nature. Rather than talking about the death and afterlife of our bodies, he concentrates upon the transformation of our natural bodies into two different layers, along with the parallel transformation that involves the city and even architecture. This duality of nature, however, is marked by his peculiar lack of a sense of continuity, in sharp contrast to the assumption of monumentality beyond temporal transience that is very often observed in Western architectural thought. This is where we see an interesting element in Ito’s understanding of digitality. For Ito, being digital is largely a matter of a constant ‘flow’ of information, which he symbolises as the lines crossing the face that Klee depicted. According to this understanding, the digitalization of the body, even if it only adds a new layer to the natural body, is still a part of the larger flow of the mortal body. He describes contemporary sanctity as similar to a ‘shadow picture on the paper sliding door (shoji)’ (Ito, 2000a, pp. 249–250) repeating the theme of the nature that vanishes.

The tentative comparison of the trio thus far has shown a couple of intriguing elements to be considered if we try to extend Kantorowicz’s seminal argument into the realm of the contemporary issue of digitality and its relation to body, life and immortality to the targeted concept of corpus mysticum digitale, the digitalised notion of the original mystical body. To reiterate, the concept of corpus mysticum consists of three pivotal elements, which can be summarised as (1) its extendability beyond the individual concept of the body to the wider realm; (2) its temporality beyond the limit of natural body (eavum/aion); and (3) a dim sense of sanctity differentiated from the more secular notion of collectivity, such as the social, from socius, meaning companion or partner, as a collection of individuals. Kantorowicz adds that these three elements both overlap with and go beyond the limit of the ordinary function of ritual, shown in contrast to the more universalistic claims in anthropology, such as Needham’s.

The comparison with Ito’s argument also highlights both the utility and disadvantages of this concept when tentatively expanded to the digital realm. What is visibly missing in the original concept of corpus mysticum is a reflection on the possible bifurcation of our natural body under the influence of whatever technology exists. By contrast, what is to be retained in the original concept is its very basis of institutionality, both in terms of collectivity and continuity, sharply contrasted with Ito’s ephemerality, which lacks both of them. Thus, the digitalisation of the corpus mysticum should encompass the digitalised aspect of our natural body while sustaining its original intentions. That is, this digitalised
body should go (1) beyond the concept of an individualised notion of the body to collectivity or institutionality, (2) which should also go beyond the temporal limit of the individual body and (3) should bear a feeling of sanctity.

8. Bell & Gemmel: digital avatars and immortality (with a concluding remark)

Now, we have arrived at our final destination, the digital body at issue. The growing influence of digital technology, through which our personal information, pictures and memories may digitally survive our deaths, has inspired both academic and popular concern, which had led to the production of this volume as well. Among this burgeoning industry, this section takes up the case of Bell and Gemmell’s (2009) argument, based upon the project of recording all the events of one’s life in something they call a ‘lifelog’. Bell and Gemmell record everything to supplement the fragile capacity of their memories. They call their plan ‘total recall’, and they claim it has dozens of benefits on many levels. Their electric daydream has led them to the idea of creating a sort of virtual self. ‘(W)ith such a body of information it will be possible to generate a virtual you even after you are dead’ (Bell & Gemmell, 2009, p. 6). This idea is further developed in the chapter discussing ‘everyday life – and after life’, where, in place of traditional mementos and memories, they propose to create a digital legacy made up of their digital records, which will create a sort of new image (2009, p. 138). They elaborately narrate their attempt to re-create the image of their close friend Jim Grey, and give him a sort of ‘immortality’ with the help of e-memory (2009, p. 139). The pith of the idea is that, in addition to the mass of personal records, they plan to use avatars and computer learning technology so that their image may interact with posterity and learn from that interaction. This is what they call ‘digital immortality’ (2009, pp. 151–156).  

Against this claim, discontents such as Mayer-Schoenberger (2009) have given the strongest admonition about the growing danger presented by accumulated digital records that cannot be erased. The concern of this article, however, is not to participate in such ongoing controversies but to examine how this kind of argument can be analysed in view of our concept of corpus mysticum digitale.  

At a glance, we soon perceive a superficial similarity between their arguments about the way in which the notion of temporarily going beyond the death of the individual body is enrolled. No doubt this kind of conception of immortality is inspired by the advance of digital technology, in which digitality is conceived not as its fluid aspect, as Ito underscored it, but as a source of continuity or undeletablity enabled by its capacity to store data. In fact, this resemblance is not thoroughly ungrounded or meaningless. Looking back to Kantorowicz’s exegesis, the idea of the immortal body of the king was supported by two elements: the legal theorisation of the continuity of kingship and durable material paraphernalia, such as the crown. Digital technology can be
interpreted as an extension of the latter part of such legitimation, without a proper digital equivalent of the former.

Here, we can point out an irony of the digital era, which can be highlighted when we reconsider the pristine role of ritual further. As stated above, a traditional funeral usually works to transform the status of the individual into the collective category of the dead, principally as an ancestor. The individual goes beyond the confines of the dead body, but as an entity that is socially anonymous, as traditional rituals change the person’s status from that of an individual to part of the collective. Digital technology superficially guarantees a sort of quasi-immortality, but it also retains individual identity, without anonymising the dead. This is fundamentally different from what both the traditional rituals and the legal theories of the Tudor dynasty were supposedly meant to accomplish. The king’s political body is needed because it is the institutional part of kingship, to be immortal as a social institution, in our contemporary terminology. In contrast, our digital body ala Bell and Gemmell or others can be technologically quasi-immortal while our private identity, the natural part of our body, is not transformed into an abstract category as part of a large chunk of ancestry.

One may argue that this retention of personal identity even after death may not be exclusive to our digital age. Portraits and photos are among the devices used to preserve memory from oblivion (Hallam & Hockey, 2001). Yet Kantorowicz underscores that the royal portraits should not be easily interpreted as symbolising a king’s personal identity. According to his analysis of the royal funeral in France, there was an expression of the duality between the funeral for the decaying body of the dead king, and the more pompous funeral featuring the glorious portrait of the dead king. Kantorowicz believes that this royal portrait was indeed a sort of symbol of the continuity of kingship rather than of the mere personal memory of the dead king (Kantorowicz, 1957, pp. 419–437; cf. Ginzburg, 2001). Thus, while the proliferation of personal images from painted portraits, to photos, to digital images should be understood as signalling a sort of continuity from the past, the role of the traditional ritual to wipe their identity out to craft the collective anonymity is equally important to underscore.

Sharing similar aspects with ritual practices, the notion of continuity more acutely matters in the case of corpus mysticum (the body political of the king) because of the need of its transcendental aspect as a social institution with a slight but undeniable sense of sanctity. In contrast, such notion of digital immortality seems to lack this kind of defined relationship with institutionality imbued with sanctity at all, against our (2) and (3) of corpus mysticum digitale. Consequently, the digital body at present should probably be called, likened to our previous neologism, corpus concretum digitale, (concrete body digital) as it lives beyond our natural body with its concrete figure of digitally recorded past, but without clear agreement as to its role in the social collective or any sense of sanctity.

In other words, it seems to lack legitimacy, despite its quasi-continuity: the vehement challenge represented by Mayer-Schönberger’s proposal that amassed
data should be automatically deleted is witness to this visible lack of legitimacy. The imagined community of our digital body, a mass of avatars mimicking our natural body and even interacting with the living after death, does not seem to have gained the institutional support enjoyed by the political body of the king. Even advocates such as Bell and Gemmell, involving a world of cognate digital immoralists so far, do not seem to have realised the need to defend their idea from an institutional perspective.

This is why these newly emerging digital bodies have still fallen far short of being part of the large family of contemporary corpora mystici, namely the prototypes of emerging institutions of any kind. Nevertheless, it all depends on how far this digital body, as a growing (con-cretus, ‘growing together’) body, may be approved as a sort of newly developing institution. I am not so sure about their future. Some may even suggest the possibility of bringing about a more society-like collectivity by developing sentient avatars that interact with each other. However, even these arguments seem to be in need of a shared understanding of the Borromean knot comprising (1) the role of the body as both the foundation and the cognitive scheme of what the larger entity means, (2) the role and the limit of ritual for constructing the dead and (3) the socially shared and legitimised role of the understanding of what immortality means (a contemporary version of sanctity). From such a perspective, the present level of argument concerning the digital body and immortality appears to me to be both too individualistic and too obsessed with the age-old mind/body dualism simply redecorated by technological enhancement. It falls far short of answering the completely different set of questions aroused by the seminal application of the concept of corpus mysticum to the digital realm in a manner as theoretically fecund as its original version, which attracted such a list of contemporary thinkers, from de Certeau to Schmitt. In fact, Kantorowicz’s own reference to political theology was made with the intention of countering Schmitt’s emphasis on the understanding of corpus mysticum in the horizontal way vis-a-vis the latter’s more top-down understanding of it (Rust, 2012; cf. Agamben, 2011; Schmitt, 1996).

This is eloquent witness to the fact that a whole set of possible questions and arguments awaits us, by tracing the less travelled path from the small island rituals of Indonesia and the royal theories of two bodies, via vanishing architectures to the growing number of digital avatars and our memories of the dead, floating aimlessly in cyberspace.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

[1] Jussen (2009) provides an overview of criticisms of Kantorowicz’s work, in terms of its methodology, constitutional semantics, the author’s rather arbitrary use of evidence and so forth. Kahn (2009) summarises Kantorowicz’s tacit argument as (1) the Christological
Concept of two bodies in the era of digital technology

315

origins of secular constitutionalism and (2) the importance of the secular religion of humanity, contrasted with the stance of his contemporaries, Carl Schmitt and Ernst Cassirer.

[2] Kantorowicz’s pursuit of this concept of corpus mysticum is influenced by the work of de Lubac (2007), who traced the historical changes in the meaning of corpus mysticum, and sought to restore the Eucharistic origins of the essence of the church. Interestingly, the contemporary papal encyclical of Pius PP. XII, produced in his Pope Pius XII (1943), Mystici Corporis, seems to return to the original sense of corpus mysticum by manifestly distinguishing it from most ordinary associations in terms of its spiritual unity. Inspired by de Lubac’s argument, de Certeau (1992) discusses the changing meaning (or absence) of the body in the transformation of the notion of corpus mysticum. de Certeau schematises the change from the union of the sacramental and the church, as contrasted with the historical body of Christ, to the subsequent combination of this historical event with the sacrament, both of which legitimise the church. According to de Certeau, this latter schema had the potential to endlessly expand the notion of the body of the church. However, eventually the liaison between the historical and the sacramental separated, which led to the formation of antagonising camps of Protestants and Catholics, thus collapsing the schema.

[3] The cultural peculiarity of this concept is exemplified by the fact that it is difficult to locate an equivalent in other religions. According to Dr Ryusuke Kuramoto, the words used to refer to Buddha’s body (corpus mysticum buddhac?) usually refers to Buddha’s holy remains, which are now maintained in stupas, or relics, in various parts of the world (personal communication; see also Gombrich, 1988). In Mahayana Buddhism, the concept of the Buddha’s body dramatically transforms into what is known as the trikaya, or three bodies. This tripartite structure includes the dharmakaya or truth body, which embodies the enlightenment; the sambhogakaya or body of mutual enjoyment, a body of bliss or clear light manifestation; and the nirmayakaya or created body, which manifests in history (Williams, 1989). However, these ‘bodies’ constitute a transcendental conception of Buddha’s original body, and are not equivalent to the corpus mysticum that was later expanded to signify the church as well as other institutional entities. Thus: ‘But, in its Christian guise, a common preoccupation or postulate, which excludes a priori any hasty generalisation into other religious traditions, affects it entirely. Christianity was founded upon the loss of a body – the loss of the body of Jesus Christ, compounded with the loss of the “body” of Israel, of a “nation” and its genealogy.’ (Italics in original) (de Certeau, 1992, p. 81; cf. Ginzburg, 2001).

[4] Many anthropologists working on traditional kingship have been inspired by Kantorowicz’s analysis, but tend to understand his as claims surrounding the separation between the person and the office of the kingship (Feeley-Harnik, 1985; Hansen & Stepputat, 2006). Huntington and Metcalf (1979) thus rearticulate that in the African Shillluck kingdom detailed by Evans-Pritchard (1948), the person of the king (reth) is only the vehicle of the office of the kingship and is called nyikang or an ‘immortal culture hero’ (Huntington & Metcalf, 1979, p. 165). Mayer (1985) also describes the two thrones of Indian kingship, where the royal throne contains dual aspects as both object and an institution (cf. Tomisawa, 1985). However, these anthropologists seem to miss the subtleties of Kantorowicz’s argument that the declining role of ritual during the Tudor era necessitated the invention of the legal fiction of the body political (cf. Fukushima, 1991; 2002; 2010).

[5] Joining the genealogy of Japanese architects with global reputations, Ito has proven his worth as a theorist of contemporary anti-modern architecture, well known for his futuristic Sendai Mediateque. Since the completion of this building, he has been committed to exploring a new architectural principle, largely inspired by biology to replace the modernist theory of architecture.

[6] Bell and Gemmel’s rather unsophisticated argument about a digital immortality achieved with the help of recording technology and interactive devices can be situated somewhere between practical arguments about how to deal with digital remnants on the web on the one hand (Baldridge, 2009; Carroll & Romano, 2010), and a series of hyperbolic claims from the diverse branches of the so-called transhumanism on the other. The claims of the latter extreme range from a technical singularity that goes beyond human limitations (Kurzweil, 2006) to the possibility of biological immortality (de Gray, 2013; Rose, 2013), to the uploading of our consciousness to a technological body (Koene, 2013; Merkle, 2013) and on to mind-cloning and its diverse consequences (Rothblatt, 2013, 2014; cf. Hansell &
Grassie, 2011, for various criticisms of these claims). More sober, social science-oriented approaches examine the proliferation of such digital images as the interrelation between the self and the various aspects of its digital double (virtual identity, digital effigy, Internet doppelganger) (Graham, Gibbs, & Aceti, 2013, p. 134). Waggner (2009) analyses the relationship between self and avatar in terms of an emerging new self-identity, while Bollmer (2013) underscores its performative aspects imbued with the cultural sense of anxiety from fear of the failed presentation of the self. These approaches, while seemingly diverse, share a fundamentally mentalistic framework, represented by their pivotal adherence to the problematic concerning mind, self and consciousness. Even the occasional reference to the concept of body – such as that in Graham et al. (2013) on the distributed body through the web – is immediately subsumed within the problematic of the self and its diversification. The focus of this article is sharply distinct from all these claims. In fact, none of the trio above was ever engaged in such a mentalistic argument. In fact, a question like ‘What is the consciousness or self-identity of the body political of the king?’ is thoroughly nonsensical in the context of discussing the institutional eternity of kingship. Rather, the pivotal concern of the authors above – especially that of Kantorowicz – was how the body may expand to the wider realm beyond its physical and temporal confines, especially to the realm where theology, laws and politics interface. Presupposing this extensive capacity of the concept of body – and its very specific mediaeval version (the corpus mysticum) – this article tries to pose a question about how such proliferating images of the body, including the avatars that Bell and Gemmel and others stress, can have any sort of institutional legitimacy, just like the churches and cities that were once identified as the extended version of the mystical body. In this sense, the controversy between Bell and Gemmel and Mayer-Schoenberger is, albeit ironically, more adequate to my present concern than, say, Rothblatt’s (2014) theoretical fantasy about the future of these mind-clones.

[7] Personal communication with C. Graham.

REFERENCES


Biographical Notes

Masato Fukushima is Professor of Social Anthropology and STS in the University of Tokyo. He has committed to a wide range of researches on comparative religion, theory of body, learning and cognition, and social studies of science and technology. Articles are to be published in such journals as Social Studies of Science, Science as Culture, and EASTS journal.