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Are We Essentially A Brain?



This article explores the contexts and significances of the notion widely disseminated since the middle of the 20th century that humans are essentially a brain, through different examples taken mainly from literary novels and films. The author points out how other characteristics have defied this affirmation in narrative plots in order to reaffirm the personal identity of its main characters.

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With a growing life expectancy, the problem of brain deterioration has reached pandemic proportions. The most known of the diseases is Alzheimer's disease, which affects the memory, language and muscle coordination; in advanced stages there is a loss of muscle mass, patients become incontinent, have long-term memory loss and no longer recognise family and friends. This dramatic profile has inspired many moving testimonies from patients (such as the self-portraits of artist William Utermohlen) and from relatives (as in the article "My Father's Brain" by novelist Jonathan Franzen).

The deterioration of the brain destroys the characteristics which traditionally define a person and make up what is their personal identity. Neurodegenerative diseases seem to confirm what philosopher Roland Puccetti was referring to when he wrote that "where the brain goes, there too goes the person". The same author turned his statement into a novel entitled *The Death of the Führer* (1972), in which Hitler's brain lives on in the body of a young and voluptuous woman. This disturbing transgender character is also the paradigm of the "transgenerational brain": the brain

transplant of person A, old or terminally ill, into body B, young and healthy, which allows A to live on. Fiction? In 2015 an Italian neurosurgeon proclaimed that he could conduct a functionally equivalent operation (head transplant), and a young Russian man with spinal muscular atrophy volunteered for the procedure. But the fiction goes even further: since it makes the brain the only part of the body which does not age, successive transplants onto younger and healthier bodies provide it with an indefinite lifespan. The brain, mortal matter, thus takes on the role previously assigned to the spirit, an immaterial and incorruptible substance.

Fictional literature and films contain central elements of ancient myths. The gods conferred immortality and an unmeasurable longevity onto Tithonus and Cumæan Sibyl respectively, but they did not give them eternal youth. In both cases, sexual desire was what motivated the gods to grant their wishes. In both cases, the mortals finally reject the wishes they were granted. Modern fiction combines these elements with a characteristic which provides a particular cultural and philosophical value for today's world: if the generalised idea of "we are our brain" is the postulate which projects its plots, the challenges faced by the characters in their "new bodies" questions this and emphasises contextual and relational dimensions which are also constitutive of the person.

Fernando Vidal

Research lecturer at ICREA - Centre for the History of Science (CEHIC), UAB
fernando.vidal@icrea.cat

References

Vidal, F. **Desire, indefinite lifespan, and transgenerational brains in literature and film.** *Theory & Psychology* 2016, Vol. 26(5) 665–680.

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