



Towards a Phenomenological Understanding of Disembodiment in Schizophrenia

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse the experience of disembodiment in light of Husserl's phenomenology. Given that disembodiment is characterized by a diminished sense of body ownership, it is usually interpreted in a Cartesian manner as involving a mind-body dichotomy. Contrary to this view, firstly, I argue that the dualist interpretation of disembodiment is phenomenologically untenable, because it is incompatible with experiencing one's alienation in an embodied way. Secondly, I endorse the interpretation of body disownership in terms of multisensory disintegration, and provide a Husserlian reading of this experience by distinguishing among distinct senses of spatiality that are specific to different sense-fields. Specifically, I claim that distinct sense-fields harbour particular centres of orientation, and thus a split between these sense-fields leaves the subject with the discordant sense of inhabiting different points of orientation. Thirdly, I focus on the perturbed sense of spatiality that arises from (i) a vision that is extricated from touch, and (ii) a touch that disengages from vision. Finally, I conclude by stating some limitations of this article, while also suggesting some prospects for further advancements.

Keywords Disembodiment · Schizophrenia · Spatiality · Corporeality · Husserl

1 Introduction

The feeling of dissociation from one's living-body (*Leib*) is commonly encountered in schizophrenia spectrum disorders.¹ In phenomenological psychopathology, as well as in neuroscience, this experience is widely analysed under the concept of “disem-

¹ I align with Sara Heinämaa (2021) and opt for translating *Leib* as “living-body.”

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bodiment” in terms of a diminished sense of body ownership.² In arguing that disembodiment lies at the heart of schizophrenic affliction—shaping the way in which the subject relates to oneself, the world, and others (Sass & Parnas, 2003; Stanghellini, 2004; Fuchs & Schlimme, 2009; Fuchs & Röhrich, 2017)—this concept remains in general ambiguous. In its primary meaning, “disembodiment” refers to the feeling of alienation from one’s own body—usually interpreted in a Cartesian manner—that bespeaks a mind-body dichotomy. Besides, “disembodiment” is also used as an umbrella-term, designating any abnormal bodily experience in schizophrenia. In this broader sense, the subject remains bodily attuned to the surrounding and intersubjective world, albeit in a pathologically modified way. In this regard, Ratcliffe (2008a, p. 200) observes that the “feeling of estrangement from body and world is at the same time a bodily feeling.” Thus, the following ambiguity underlies the antinomic character of disembodiment: on the one hand, the subject is considered detached from the living-body (*Leib*) such that it is left behind as a mere thing (*Körper*), while, on the other hand, the subject experiences this alienation in an embodied way. This results in an incompatibility between clinical accounts of schizophrenic disembodiment and the phenomenological presuppositions they implicitly rely on, for, as Husserl argued, it is impossible to be embodied and to observe one’s body in outer appearance at the same time.

A compelling hypothesis regarding disembodiment has been advanced in the field of neuroscience. According to recent research, such experiences stem from a mismatch between different sensory modalities, and lead to a disturbed sense of spatiality and a weakened sense of body ownership. My main aim in what follows is to offer a phenomenological account of disembodiment that takes into consideration this disruption. I argue in several steps that the dissociation between visual and tactile fields gives rise to a heterogenous and discordant spatiality, marked by multiple and conflicting poles of orientation.³ To this end, (in Sect. 2: “Disembodiment in Schizophrenia and the ‘Contradictory Representation’”) I elaborate on the dualist interpretation of disembodiment in terms of a mind-body dichotomy, arguing that this interpretation is phenomenologically untenable. According to Husserl, claiming that one can view one’s body from the outside while being embodied leads to a contradictory representation, whereby the subject finds itself both *here* and *there*. The idea of a pure and bodyless mind that would observe its own body from afar doesn’t hold either, because such a situation would be incompatible with the experience of *losing contact with one’s own body*. In Sect. 3: “Disembodiment as Multisensory Disintegration,” I endorse the hypothesis that disembodiment results from multisensory disintegration, suggesting that this claim is compatible with—and finds support in—Husserl’s phenomenology of corporeality. Specifically, I claim that different sense-fields harbour distinct centres of orientation, and thus a split between these sense-fields leaves the

² See Stanghellini and Ballerini (2004); Ratcliffe (2009); Colombetti and Ratcliffe (2012); De Haan and Fuchs (2010); Fuchs (2005a, 2015); Irarrázaval (2015); Szczotka and Majchrowicz (2018). For the analysis of disembodiment in neuroscience, see Tsakiris et al. (2007); Uhlhaas et al. (2008); Thakkar et al. (2011); Postmes et al. (2014); Klaver and Dijkerman (2016); Costantini et al. (2020); Fotia et al. (2022).

³ I examine only the dissociation of vision and touch because—in Husserl’s view—these fields primarily underlie the constitution of space. I use synonymously *sense fields*, *sensory modalities*, and *perceptual fields*.

subject with the discordant sense of inhabiting different points of orientation. Given that sense-fields are bound by an empirical synthesis, which is liable to breakdown, it is possible for these to fundamentally diverge. The advantage of this interpretation lies in limiting the phenomenon of disembodiment strictly to the corporeal layer of experience, and thus avoiding a dualist standpoint. In Sect. 4: "Understanding Schizophrenic Disembodiment," I provide an account of schizophrenic disembodiment in light of the results from the previous section, focusing on the perturbed sense of spatiality that arises from (i) a vision that is extricated from touch, and (ii) a touch that disengages from vision. Finally, I conclude by stating some limitations of this article, while also suggesting some prospects for further advancements.

2 Disembodiment in Schizophrenia and the "Contradictory Representation"

Schizophrenic patients often report about the strange feeling of perceiving one's body at a distance, as being *over there*, or not feeling oneself to be *here*. This experience, which is commonly called "disembodiment" in psychopathology (Fuchs, 2015, p. 112; Colombetti & Ratcliffe, 2012, p. 145), is included in DSM-5 (2013, p. 820) under the rubric of "depersonalization," scantily defined as the "experience of feeling detached from, and as if one is an outside observer of, one's mental processes, body, or actions."⁴ In proposing a model of schizophrenia as self-disturbance—understood in terms of a diminished sense of self and a compensatory hyper-reflexivity—Sass and Parnas (2001, p. 353; 2003) argue that disembodiment plays a pivotal role in the weakening of the self and its alienation. On a similar note, Fuchs (2005a, p. 105) claims that "schizophrenic depersonalization results from a divorce of the self from its body that it comes to experience as a Cartesian machine that may be steered by anonymous and alien force." Such accounts usually involve a dichotomy between a disembodied mind and an observed body, such that the latter is given in outer appearance as a soulless machine.⁵ However, in this section, I offer some phenomenological grounds as to why this dualist position is untenable.

As a point of departure, I will take the highly suggestive case study of Kimura Bin (1994, p. 194), analysed and partly translated by Thomas Fuchs (2005a, p. 104). In this study, the patient reports:

When I am looking into a mirror, I do not know any more whether I am here [*hier*] looking at me there [*dort*] in the mirror, *or whether I am there in the mirror looking*

⁴ As Stanghellini (2004, p. 22) maintains, the schizophrenic person "contemplates its own existence from outside—a third-person perspective view, or a view from nowhere."

⁵ See Fuchs (2001, p. 325): "Each action needs reflection and volition in a way that one could call a 'Cartesian' action of the soul on the body." And Stanghellini (2004, p. 155): "This existence as a cyborg or deanimated body-machine comes to its apotheosis in the state of a scanner or disembodied spirit which lives as a mere spectator of one's own perceptions, actions, and thoughts—the most characteristic manifestation of the metamorphosis of the flesh into a psycho-mechanism. *In schizophrenia this involves the experiencing of a dualistic Cartesian form of existence in which embodied self-consciousness is substituted by incorporeal noetic self-consciousness.*" (Added emphasis.) In this context, De Haan and Fuchs (2010, p. 331) use the metaphor of "the ghost in the machine," claiming that, in schizophrenia, the body "becomes the more or less steerable 'appendix of the mind'."

at me here. [...] If I look at someone else in the mirror, I am not able to distinguish him from myself any more. When I am feeling worse, the distinction between me and a real other person gets lost, too. While watching TV, I don't know any more, whether I am speaking [there, *dort*] in the TV-set or whether I am hearing the words here. I don't know whether the inside turns outwards, or the outside inwards. [...] Are there perhaps two I's?

This account involves a tension between two fundamental concepts that belong to the phenomenological constitution of spatiality and corporeality: the *here* (*Hier*) and the *there* (*Dort*). In Husserl's view, it is not accidental that the living-body is defined as the centre of orientation, for it belongs to the very meaning of one's own body (*Eigenleib*) to be the central-member (*Zentralglied*) of the surrounding world (Husserl 1973a, p. 114).⁶ One could go as far as to say that the feeling of losing one's proper place—i.e., one's *here*—is tantamount to losing the sense of owning one's body as such, since being-here and being embodied are thoroughly synonymous for Husserl.⁷ Indeed, my body carries the null-point of orientation and finds itself at the centre of spatiality—for everything is given to my right or left, in front of me, near, far and so on—and yet I can also move (ideally) anywhere in space and occupy each time a different point of orientation. In doing so, the living-body essentially retains its central position in relation to which the entire world is constituted as *there*.⁸ As Husserl puts it: “I have all things over and against me; they are all ‘there’—with the exception of one and only one, namely the Body [*Leib*], which is always ‘here’.”⁹ This is the fundamental premise that underlies the phenomenological constitution of corporeality and spatiality. In this context, Husserl draws a fundamental distinction between outer appearance and outer perception, on the one hand, and inner-appearance (or null-appearance) and self-perception, on the other.¹⁰ The former applies to foreign bodies that are given *there* in relation to me, while the latter applies exclusively to my own living-body, which always finds itself *here*. My body, in this sense, cannot escape its null-point, that is, it cannot abandon its absolute *here* without ceasing to be a living-body:

My Body [*Leib*], precisely as a Body, can, to be sure, never have an outer appearance but only a null-appearance. [...] I *can* make for myself an “image” of my Body in outer appearance, *whereby my Body of course necessarily loses the property of being a Body*. (Husserl, 1997, p. 330; added emphasis.)¹¹

⁶ Husserl (1973a, p. 116) also speaks of the “middle-point,” “the null point,” “point of reference” (*Beziehungspunkt*) (1973c, p. 80; 1997, p. 66), and the “center of orientation” (1952, p. 65; 1989, p. 70; 2025, p. 377). See Husserl (1997, p. 2) for the temporal proximity, spiritual proximity, and multisensory proximity. See also Husserl (1960, § 53).

⁷ As Husserl says (1973a, p. 240): “*Mein Leib ist das Hier*.” See also Ferencz-Flatz, (2014, p. 81), and Picolas and Soueltzis (2019, p. 606f).

⁸ In Husserl's (1973c, p. 308; 1997, p. 265) words: “My corporeal Body can travel only because the null-point ‘travels’.”

⁹ Husserl & E., 1952, p. 159; 1989, p. 166). See also Husserl (1973a, p. 239).

¹⁰ See Husserl (1952, p. 161 f.; 1989, p. 168 f.; 1973a, p. 417 ff.).

¹¹ As Husserl (1997, p. 241 f.) also says: “every thing in the whole world can escape from me, except for my own Body.”

However, certain clinical testimonies raise significant problems for the phenomenological understanding of corporeality, as we saw in the case from above.¹² As Fuchs (2015, p. 203) comments on Kimura's case-study, the patient "is entangled in a disembodied, self-referential, and delusional view *from the outside*." It is precisely such a "view from the outside" regarding one's own living-body that is phenomenologically untenable, inasmuch as—in such a situation—the fundamental difference between the constituting *here* of one's *Leib* and the constituted *there* of the *Körper* would falter away.¹³ On the other side, the phenomenon of disembodiment reveals itself in the fact that patients observe their own bodies as if from afar, experiencing a spatial distance from their own *Leib*.¹⁴ As another patient says: "I feel as if I am sitting on some distant planet [...] *As if I am completely far away from here*, where I am sitting right now." (De Haan & Fuchs, 2010, p. 329; added emphasis.) Understanding such experiences requires an account of the manner in which the living-body—which must be essentially determined as *here*—is experienced in the manner of an alien thing, i.e., as something *over there*.

How can we understand such experiences in a phenomenological way? Husserl himself grappled with this problem in his manuscripts *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*, wherein he concluded that any attempt to analyse such experiences of bodily estrangement must avoid what he called the "contradictory representation," whereby one's body is represented as being both here and there: "With other bodies [*Körpern*], I—the embodied subject [*das leibliche Subjekt*—function as beholder, with my living-body [*Leib*] I imagine myself outwards—which nonetheless yields a contradiction if I remain the same embodied subject [*einen Widerspruch ergibt, wenn ich das leibliche Subjekt bleibe*]" (Husserl 1973a, p. 264).¹⁵ Notwithstanding the "contradictory representation," I can imagine, dream, and may even experience my own body in an alienated way, as given in outer appearance, dislocated from its *here*.¹⁶ Given that I cannot be both embodied—that is, have a body in inner-appearance—and perceive the very same body in outer appearance, the hypothesis of a disembodied ego naturally comes in handy as a possible explanatory device. Indeed, such a view—which retrieves the Cartesian dualism—is widely supported in the phenomenological psychopathology.¹⁷ According to this hypothesis, the act of percep-

¹² See also the words of a patient that testify to the abnormal spatial experiences in schizophrenia as accounted by Stanghellini et al. (2020, p. 535): "I was here and in a different dimension at the same time."

¹³ As Husserl (1973a, p. 256) maintains: "Es ist Widersinn, meinen Leib äusserlich zu sehen." See also Husserl (1952, p. 159; 1989, p. 167): "I do not have the possibility of distancing myself from my Body, or my Body from me."

¹⁴ See Stanghellini (2004, p. 115).

¹⁵ See Husserl (1973a, p. 268): "Das 'wäre ich dort und würde von dort aus mich sehen, so hatte ich diese Ansicht' ist eine *widersprechende Vorstellung*." See also Husserl (1952, p. 309; 1989, p. 322; 2025, p. 254).

¹⁶ See Mishara's (2004) overview of autoscopic and out-of-body experiences, and Ferencz-Flatz's (2011) analysis of the dreaming ego.

¹⁷ I do not intend to argue that Stanghellini, Fuchs, and others support a Cartesian dualist metaphysics. In this regard, see Leder's (2005) objection of dualism and Fuchs's (2005b) response. Instead, I suggest that—on phenomenological grounds—their interpretation of disembodiment in terms of an observing mind and an observed body (as a "disembodied spirit and a deanimated body") is incompatible with the idea of bodily alienation, provided that the latter must be experienced in an embodied way.

tion would belong to a “bodyless ego” (*leibloses Ich*), which, on Husserl’s account, would still be capable of perceiving.¹⁸ However, Husserl discarded this hypothesis, claiming that one can imagine one’s *Leibkörper* as being *over there* only in relation to one’s actual *Leib* which is *here* (1973a, p. 257), and not in relation to oneself as a pure—and thus disembodied—ego (1973a, p. 260). Husserl makes it clear that the hypothesis of a disembodied ego doesn’t work, because we must be able to transpose ourselves from the detached *Leib* (given *over there*) back to our own *Leib* (experienced as *here*): “Now, the replacement of the empirical I with a pure I, respectively with a bodyless I [*leibloses Ich*], is not sufficient for our entire consideration, since otherwise it [i.e., the pure ego] would not be able to transpose itself back [*da es sonst nicht zur Zurückübersetzung kommen könnte*].” (1973a, p. 264).¹⁹ And again:

in the outward transposition [*Hinausversetzung*] of my I and my ego-body—in the sense of that contradictory representation which afterwards is rendered concordant—I don’t merely have an outer appearance of the corporeal body [*Leibkörper*], but rather an appearance that refers back [*zurückverweist*] to a corresponding inner appearance, to a similar one which I would have had if I had transposed [*hinversetze*] myself over there, or if I were there, in the place of that corporeal body that is there. (1973a, p. 266).

This kind of *Zurückübersetzung* or *Zurückverweisen* is essential—if the imagined *Leib* is still to count as my *Leib*—at least for two reasons:

- (i) Granted that a disembodied ego can constitute an alien body (as being *over there*), it is still unable to constitute the experience of *having lost its own body*, since a bodyless ego does not have a body to lose in the first place.
- (ii) Pure ego must constitute one’s body as being *over there*—that is, given in outer appearance—in the manner of the *Leib* of the other. However, the latter can be constituted only on the basis of one’s own *Leib*, something which a *bodyless* ego again cannot accomplish. (1973a, p. 267).

Returning to our case, if schizophrenic disembodiment presupposes a detachment of a pure mind from a corporealized body, then this *Körper* must itself be constituted on the basis of a more originary *Leib*, a *Leib* that remains at least partially operative (*fungierend*) (1973b, p. 57).²⁰ If my body is experienced as foreign (*fremd*), then I must possess the apperceptive means to constitute it as alien through a form of analogical transfer usually involved in the constitution of another’s *Leib*. This, in turn, presupposes a doubling of the body: my body is both my own and alien, function-

¹⁸ Indeed, Husserl (1973a, p. 57) maintains that seeing and touching do not necessarily presuppose an embodied subject.

¹⁹ Husserl perhaps uses the word *Zurückübersetzung* as a correlate of the *Hineinversetzung*, by means of which I *transpose* myself in the *Körper* of the other and thus empathetically animate it as *Leib*. See Husserl (1973a, p. 266).

²⁰ I am grateful to Remus Breazu for referring me to this passage.

ing simultaneously as the ground of empathy and as that which I empathize with. In short, the self must be embodied in order to perceive its own bodily alienation.²¹

The solution to the “contradictory representation” discerned by Husserl lies in the “doubling” of the empirical ego: it is not the same empirical and embodied ego that is both here and there, but rather “a similar one.” When I imagine (or have a dream of) myself as being *over there*, thereby observing my living-body from a distance, I *am not the same* ego as the one observed. As Husserl says: “The contradictory representation becomes concordant when I simply take the doubling as doubling. I cannot be both *here* and *there* at once. But *here* and *there* can be something similar [*Die widersprechende Vorstellung wird einstimmig, wenn ich eben die Verdoppelung als Verdoppelung nehme. Ich kann nicht zugleich hier und dort sein. Aber hier und dort kann ein Gleiches sein.*]” (1973a, p. 264.)²² Therefore, the same words that conclude the testimony of the patient in Kimura’s case study can also serve us to bring this phenomenological consideration to a close: “Are there perhaps two I’s?” Indeed, the answer must be affirmative if the experience of the doubling of one’s own body is to gain in intelligibility.

And yet, considering that the living-body is essentially given as the *null-point* of orientation, some questions remain unanswered: how can I constitute a *different*, and yet *similar* null-point of orientation? What makes such a doubling of the *here* possible? To be more precise, what allows for the doubling of the living-body, such that we do not simply deal with the perception of a different *Leib*, as in the case of another person, but rather with *my Leib* as doubled? In short, how is it possible to have the experience of inhabiting distinct, and yet similar *heres*, without falling into a contradictory representation? I propose to understand disembodiment not in terms of a dichotomy between mind and body, but rather as a disturbance occurring strictly at the corporeal level. In such experiences, the living-body becomes alien to itself in an unreflective, pre-predicative, and passive manner. More exactly, such a disintegration concerns the very foundation of space-constitution, affecting the synthetic functioning of distinct sense-fields, which results in a chaotic spatiality that the subject deems hostile and uninhabitable.

3 Disembodiment as Multisensory Disintegration

Recently, substantial research has been conducted in neuroscience concerning body disownership in schizophrenia. One of the key findings of these studies highlights the importance of intermodal integration of different perceptual fields for a normal bodily awareness. Henrik Ehrsson’s (2012, 2020) experiments are particularly revealing, as they manage to recreate body disownership or out-of-body experiences (OBEs)

²¹ As Colombetti and Ratcliffe (2012, p. 146) put it: “although one perceives the face as strangely unfamiliar, it only appears strange because one *does* still recognize it as one’s own. [...] People feel strangely detached from a body that they still appreciate as their own.” See also Zahavi (1994, p. 69f). Husserl himself makes a similar point in *Ideen II*, (1952, p. 74 f.; 1989, p. 79), claiming that “the Body cannot be pathological throughout, but must be ‘normal’” at least to some extent.

²² See also *Ideen II* (1952, p. 309; 1989, p. 322; 2025, p. 254): “My Body cannot at once and the same time be both here and there”.

in neurotypical subjects by artificially separating the visual and the tactile fields.²³ The paradigmatic experiment in this regard remains the Rubber Hand Illusion (RHI), which—when applied to schizotypal subjects—indicates a proneness towards body disownership.²⁴ Accordingly, Ehrsson (2020, p. 181) concludes that “body ownership can be explained as coherent multisensory perception of one’s own body.”²⁵ From this, it follows that body disownership amounts to disintegration of multisensory coherence. Indeed, multiple studies support this view, suggesting that the feeling of estrangement from one’s own body may arise from abnormal integration of distinct sensory modalities.²⁶

Owing to the fact that the living-body is constituted on multiple layers—whereby different sense-fields are integrated alongside multiple kinaesthetic systems—I propose in what follows to distinguish among multiple poles of orientation that ordinarily function in a concordant manner. Relying on Husserl’s lecture-course *Ding und Raum*, we can draw a distinction between specific kinaesthetic systems (belonging to particular parts of the body), and the overall kinaesthesia of the body as such, which results from the integration of these particular systems of movement.²⁷ In a series of questions broached by Husserl (1973c, p. 306; 1997, p. 264), he acknowledges that specific kinaesthetic systems have distinct null-points of orientation: “Eye-movement: normal position of the eyes. Hand-movements, arm-movements: [what is the] normal position? What constitutes the *null-points*? [Was konstituiert *Nullpunkte*?]”²⁸ Importantly, Husserl (1997, p. 261) claims that “[e]very kinaesthetic system has its null-position,” and that:

The field of sight *has its own “null-point,”* corresponding to the “null-position of the eyes”; i.e., it has its own central point and, in relation to that, an above and below, a right and left (*to be sure, these expressions are not to be understood here in relation to the tactile domain*). (Husserl, 1997, p. 334; added emphasis.)

This is to say, the null-point of orientation involved by vision is not completely homogenous with—nor is it attributable without further ado to—the tactile space. While it is true that we experience a single space both visually and tactilely, we do so as a result of the “empirical synthesis” that joins together distinct sense-fields. Importantly, Husserl contends that such a synthetic integration between different

²³ See also Petkova et al. (2011); Gentile et al. (2013); Guterstam and Ehrsson (2012); Guterstam et al. (2013).

²⁴ See Tsakiris et al. (2007); Thakkar et al. (2011); Ferri et al. (2014); Prikken et al. (2019); Costantini et al. (2020); He et al. (2022).

²⁵ See Stanghellini (2004, p. 130); Fuchs and Röhrich (2017, p. 131).

²⁶ See Giummarra et al. (2008); Zaytseva et al. (2015); Ferri et al. (2018); Fotia et al. (2021); Zopf et al. (2021); Gallese et al. (2024).

²⁷ See the recent publication of Husserl’s D-manuscripts: “Die Totalkinästhesie als Kombinationskinästhesie fungiert wie eine einzige” (Husserl, 2024, p. 211).

²⁸ Added emphasis. While kinaesthetic systems are different from sense-fields in that they do not have a manifesting (*darstellend*) function, they allow us to better distinguish among distinct null-points of orientation involved in diverse sense-fields. See Husserl (1997, p. 257f).

sensory modalities has an empirical character, and not a categorial one. Thus, given that the empirical synthesis is neither necessary nor essential, the intermodal integration is liable to breakdown.²⁹ In imagining a possible tactile displacement of one's own body, Husserl (1973a, p. 286) notes that such an experience would require the "aesthetic layer to be abolished [*die ästhesiologische Schicht fortfielen*]" and for the kinaesthetic system "to lose its binding to one's body [*seine Bindung an den Leibkörper verlöre*]." A heterogenous functioning of different sense-fields, each with its own null-point of orientation, may leave the subject with the contradictory feeling of being dispersed across multiple perspectival points. In such cases, the sense of hereness afforded by vision would no longer be corroborated by that of touch, which may result in the feeling of embodying a different place than the one in which one actually is.³⁰

Interestingly, Husserl imagined such experiences of "disembodiment" in terms of a split between touch and vision:

If my living-body would find itself in a *there*, then I could come closer or take a distance from the living-body. [...] But could it not run away from me? Perhaps visually, but tactilely? Never. But then, there couldn't be a congruence between the visual and the tactile space. So the visual there must indeed be a fixed one, in a fixed position with regard to the visual here. [*Ist mein Leib in einem Dort, so könnte ich mich dem Leib annähern oder von ihm entfernen. [...] Aber könnte er mir nicht davonlaufen? Visuell vielleicht, aber taktuell? Das niemals. Aber dann könnte es nicht eine Deckung von visueller und taktuellem Raum geben. Es müsste also wohl das visuelle Dort ein festes sein, in einer festen Lage zum visuellen Hier.*] (1973a, p. 328).

The lesson of this thought experiment is that we can have certain visual experiences of our own bodies that cannot be matched by haptic experiences. Looking at oneself in the mirror can serve as example in this context: I can see my mirrored body, but I can never touch it, for I can only touch the surface of the mirror. The autonomous functioning of distinct sense-fields enables us to distinguish between multiple senses of being here and there, depending on the sensory field involved, and Husserl makes such distinctions when he speaks of a visual *here* and a visual *there*—in contrast to

²⁹ Husserl distinguishes in *Ideen II* (1952, p. 18; 1989, p. 19; 2025, p. 270 f.) between "categorial (formal and, in a certain sense, analytic) synthesis and aesthetic (sensuous) synthesis." One of the functions of the latter "is to unify with one another the objectivities that are constituted in the various single spheres of sense [i.e., sense-fields or sensory modalities]: e.g., the visual stratum of a thing with the tactile." (1952, p. 20; 1989, p. 22.) Importantly, Husserl claims that the aesthetic syntheses "are not spontaneous products [...], but still they are 'synthetic' unities of components (*ones like these do not necessarily have to be synthetically connected*). The unity of visual sense-thing does not necessarily require connection with the unity of the tactual sense-thing." (1952, p. 21; 1989, p. 23; added emphasis.)

³⁰ Metzinger's (2005, p. 61) analysis of the "proprioceptive hallucination"—whereby one gets the impression of finding oneself in a slowly moving train while watching as the nearby train, in fact, leaves the station—may serve as a non-pathological example in this context. See also the example from section "Understanding Schizophrenic Disembodiment" of this article.

touch—as we saw in the earlier quote.³¹ In another salient fragment, Husserl contends that:

I could also represent that my living-body visually flies away [*mein Leib visuell fortfliegt*], while the appearances unfold in such a way that I constantly see outwardly from here, and then the living-body—in perspectival changes and decrease-ments—eventually disappears in the horizon. Visually, that is a possible representation, but the living-body is not constituted solely visually, and places demands on the haptic appearance and so forth. [...] The representation of how my living-body must look from here, if I went over there, i.e., visually, can be fulfilled according to one stratum, but overall it is a contradictory representation [*im ganzen widersprechende Vorstellung*]. (1973a, p. 417 f.)

Thus, while it is visually imaginable that my body flies away from me, I cannot find a concordant parallel for such an experience in the tactile domain. The contradictory representation arises precisely because the body is considered solely from an optical perspective—or, more exactly, because the *Leib* is deemed to have only one centre of orientation, only one kind of null-point, namely the visual one. Since, as Husserl (2024, p. 55) notes, “visual and tactual spatiality [...] constitute themselves very differently,” disembodiment can be rendered intelligible in light of the possible divergence between different centres of orientation that, with equal force, constitute spatiality from discordant perspectives.

In summary, we can distinguish among several types of spatial orientation, articulated on the basis of different kinds of null-points: (i) *intra-bodily poles of orientation*, whereby, for instance, the head can be apprehended as *here* while the toes as being *there*, and (ii) *inter-bodily poles of orientation*, in which case my living-body (as *Leib*) is *here*, while every other body (whether *Leib* or *Körper*) is *there*.³² In this case, orientation takes place precisely between (*inter*) my living-body and the surrounding bodies. We can further distinguish (iii) the *intra-modal proximity*, where the difference between *here* and *there* arises within a single sensory modality. For example, I discern the *hereness* of the table in front of me and the *thereness* of the tree outside through vision; or I can feel the *hereness* of my keyboard under my fingers, and the *thereness* of the wall as falling beyond the reach of my touch.³³ And lastly, (iv) *inter-modal proximity*, which integrates various forms of *intra-modal proximity*

³¹ In an interesting fragment, Husserl (1973a, p. 282) attempts to analyze the constitution of spatiality—in terms of proximity and distance—only within the mode of touch. Accordingly, he distinguishes a pole of orientation—null-point or *here*—that is specific to touch alone, and that articulates a spatial proximity in terms of a purely tactile “there.”

³² I follow Sara Heinämaa’s (2021, p. 252) suggestion and distinguish among different *heres* and *theres* at the level of the body itself, which I will refer to as *intra-bodily poles of orientation*. This is the primary field of localization that constitutes the *Leib* as *Leib*, and which is a prerequisite for taking the living-body as “an organ of the will” (1952, p. 151 f.; 1989, p. 158 f.; 2025, p. 41 f.; see Ferencz-Flatz, 2014). Also, it is in connection with such a “localization of the kinesthetic series in the relevant moving member of the Body” (i.e., *intra-bodily poles of orientation*) that Husserl proceeds to determine the living-body as “the bearer of the zero point of orientation” (see Husserl, 1952, p. 56; 1989, p. 61; 2025, p. 43).

³³ Husserl speaks of the “localization” I accomplish in various sense-fields” (1952, p. 164; 1989, p. 172), analyzing further in the Supplement III (1952, p. 311; 1989, p. 324 f.; 2025, p. 171) the “localization of

into a unified horizon of spatial experience. In this sense, we can speak of the absolute here afforded by touch and of relative here given by sight. In a way, for touch everything is *here* and nothing is *there*, whereas for vision everything is *there* and nothing is *here*.³⁴ It is precisely the harmonious interplay between distinct sense-fields that enables the articulation of a more complex and nuanced realm of proximity and distance, one we typically take for granted.

4 Understanding Schizophrenic Disembodiment

What can we learn from this analysis in order to understand schizophrenic disembodiment? In answering this question, I shall emphasize two points: (1) Distinct sense-fields are empirically integrated, that is, they concord on the basis of an “aesthetic synthesis” which, for Husserl, is not essential but contingent. In other words, this synthesis can fail—as demonstrated, for instance, by RHI;³⁵ (2) Each sense-field involves a specific *null-point* of orientation—the *intra-modal here* that has a correlative *there*—which articulates distinct senses of proximity. In ordinary experience, these sense-fields function together to produce a coherent, concordant, and homogeneous sense of spatial ambiance. But in schizophrenia this coherence can collapse. As Renée recounts, the self may undergo “a complete loss of the sense of perspective,” and as she later adds: “I got lost easily and I could not orient myself spatially.” (Sechehayé, 1979, p. 88).³⁶

To make intuitive such experiences, let’s first consider a non-pathological case in which we may suffer a slight mismatch between the visual and the tactile fields as manifest in walking.³⁷ Naturally, a flat surface allows me to walk smoothly and without difficulties. Seeing a staircase in front of me attunes my body to the forthcoming change in gait: shortly, I will *walk up* the stairs and not merely continue to *walk on* the flat ground. Because I see them in advance, the stairs do not take me by surprise, causing me to stumble. What I see coordinates with how I move due to a more primordial integration between the visual field and the tactile field, which together present the world as unified and homogenous: I *see* the stairs as “climbable” even though climbing pertains to my feet alone.³⁸ Now, let’s imagine that I see an escalator and thus expect to be carried upward without properly walking.³⁹ What I fail to see, in

the ear noises in the ear:” He thus determines the null-point of accommodation specific to the aural field in analogy to vision. The same holds for other sense-fields.

³⁴ See Husserl’s claim (1973a, p. 285) that the sense of touch is not a distant sense (*Fernsinn*).

³⁵ I align with Schwartz et al. (2005, p. 111) who locate the schizophrenic *trouble générateur* in the “weakening of automatic constitution,” which in my interpretation includes multisensory-integration (i.e., empirical synthesis).

³⁶ See also Stanghellini et al. (2020).

³⁷ For Husserl, walking belongs to the tactile system of movement.

³⁸ What I visually perceive is also accompanied by a tactile horizon. See *Ideen II* (1989, pp. 41–43).

³⁹ According to Husserl (2001), things have an “affective pull” toward us that entice us to enact certain bodily possibilities. See also Doyon (2018, p. 183): “seeing things as thus and so is accompanied by an awareness of (more or less specific) movements I could make in regard to the object in order to optimize my experience.”

this case, is that the escalator is defective and that it no longer functions *as* an escalator, but merely as a staircase. I approach it expecting to stand still as soon as I step on it. Once I do so, I experience stillness in place of the expected motion, and thus I feel dizzy because of the mismatch between the visual expectation that had attuned my tactile posture and the tactile fulfilment I came to experience instead. I may feel slightly dizzy even when I knowingly step on an escalator that is not functioning, because the mere fact of *seeing an escalator* is already associated with *standing still* through a sedimented history of my walking. Many other examples from daily life can be brought up in order to illustrate the empirical, and thus versatile, character of the syntheses that join together vision, touch, proprioception, thermal sensations, etc. into a coherent perception of ourselves and the surrounding world: from learning new skills (especially those which involve our entire body, such as riding a bicycle or diving) to using VR glasses, etc.

Accordingly, we can understand schizophrenic disembodiment as involving a dissociation of distinct sense-fields in a more radical sense, such that one no longer associates the visual spatiality with the tactile one. While we cannot simultaneously inhabit different points of orientation as a unified body, we can—and we do—have distinct poles of orientation according to different sensory modalities. Together, they form a unity that gives us a robust sense of orientation. In the case of their breakdown, the subject is left with disparate senses of proximity that may give the impression of being *visually* there and *tactilely* here. As a result, I may *see* my body and *feel* my body in a discordant manner: the impression of seeing oneself *over there* or the feeling of not being here results from a mismatch between different *inter-modal poles of orientation*. In such cases, the vision is not associated with touch, and thereby seeing oneself, namely one's legs, hands, torso, etc. in outer appearance is taken in absolute terms, not as *here*, in the proximity of my touch, but rather as being utterly external to me. As Husserl (1952, p. 151; 1989, p. 159) writes in *Ideen II*: “the visual Body also participates in the localization, because it coincides with the tactual Body.” Yet such a coincidence may fail to occur, and hence the localization of the visual body (as being *here*, in concordance with my touch) may no longer hold.

I propose now to turn to several case studies of schizophrenic disembodiment, and show how bodily alienation arises from the disintegration of sense fields rather than from a Cartesian split between an observing mind and an observed body. Given the space limitation, I will now turn to an analysis of those cases in which we can speak of (i) a vision that is unanchored from touch, and (ii) a touch that is disengaged from vision.

To begin with, the following report of a patient, examined (using EASE) by De Haan and Fuchs (2010, p. 329), particularly epitomizes the feeling of bodily alienation as revealing multisensory disintegration:

In general, I didn't have a sense of my body anymore; this completely vanished at some time. My face became increasingly strange to me, as it still is today. My voice, too [...] ‘The world is not really tangible anymore, [...] For me it was as if my eyes were cameras, and my brain would still be in my body, but somehow as if my head were enormous, the size of a universe, and I was in the far back and the cameras were at the very front. So extremely far away from the cam-

eras. And I walk, and I look around... and I'm dizzy, and all is like a machine... [...] I have this robot-like feeling in my head, to be looking through cameras, and you observe your whole body, and the steps you take towards the bench.

Such feelings of dissociation from one's own body manifest themselves across different sensory modalities: one does not recognize oneself when *looking* in the mirror, the face *is felt* unfamiliar and the voice *is heard* strangely, the world appears *intangible*, etc. The unusual distance that encroaches in the patient's self-experience, which results in observing one's "whole body," may be understood in terms of the intermodal disintegration between vision (now yielded by eyes as cameras) and touch (the "robot-like feeling" in one's head).⁴⁰

The experiences of a "disembodied mind" (what Stanghellini calls "scanners") can be rethought in terms of a vision that loses its anchor in touch. Such experiences are typically expressed as follows: "I'd like to see the world the way it is [...] The world is empty. It's all just images. Broken images." (Stanghellini, 2004, p. 3), or "it is not me who is seeing that object over there" (Stanghellini, 2004, p. 149). Another important aspect in this regard is that the feeling of unreality may also result from a dissociation of vision from touch. As Renée says: "I was rejected by the world, on the outside of life, *a spectator of a chaotic film unrolling ceaselessly before my eyes*, in which I would never have a part" (Sechehaye, 1979, p. 84; added emphasis). The subject literally loses "touch" with reality, perceiving it as a mere spectacle, as something only to be seen.⁴¹ Seeing, touching, hearing, etc., are no longer integrated within a coherent experience of oneself and one's lifeworld. Consequently, the world becomes "unreal," as if experienced through a transparent wall or a fog (Sechehaye, 1979, p. 127).⁴² Conversely, the recovery from the psychotic state is experienced in terms of a restored sense of multisensory coherence: "I enjoyed everything I saw, everything I touched. For the first time I was in touch with reality" (Sechehaye, 1979, p. 107).⁴³

As to the "deanimated body" (what Stanghellini labels as "Cyborgs"), such mechanical, robot-like experiences of oneself can be grasped in terms of a touch that is extricated from vision (or other associated sensory modalities).⁴⁴ Such experiences are expressed in words like: "It is not me who is doing this action or having this perception" (Stanghellini, 2004, p. 149), or "My skin is extremely thin" (De Haan & Fuchs, 2010, p. 329).⁴⁵ In contrast to the disincarnated gaze, this experience

⁴⁰ See Dibitonto's (2014, p. 292) account of bodily alienation at the level of intra-bodily poles of orientation.

⁴¹ See Ratcliffe (2009). Ratcliffe (2008b, p. 315) suggested in this regard that "a sense of being situated in a world, rather than being cut off from it or viewing it from some strange, detached, dislocated standpoint, is partly constituted by those tactile relations that do *not* cleanly differentiate self from non-self."

⁴² Fuchs and Röhrich (2017, p. 130) speak of the "feeling like 'in a fog' or 'surrounded by invisible walls'".

⁴³ See also the role of touch in the case presented by Dibitonto (2014, p. 301).

⁴⁴ See Ratcliffe (2008b, p. 317).

⁴⁵ Also, the strange feeling of a presence could be understood in terms of a dissociated touch from vision. As Giummarra et al. (2008, p. 151) note, "*Feeling of a presence* (FOP) involves the feeling that another person or 'being' is in extracorporeal space, but beyond the fringes of vision."

presupposes a total abandonment to the action in which the self is involved. In this case, we are dealing with hyperautomaticity, rather than hyperreflexivity: “I can also do things without even noticing. I get up, I brush my teeth, I get back, and I cannot even remember what I have done in between” (De Haan & Fuchs, 2010, p. 330). The notion of the body as a machine can be understood not in terms of a “disconnection between body and mind” (De Haan & Fuchs, 2010, p. 331), but rather as a split between different sensory modalities at the bodily level. If so, hyperreflexivity and hyperautomaticity are to be understood in terms of an uncoordinated domination of vision or touch over other sensory modalities. What is more, we can avoid the Cartesian dichotomy between a disembodied mind and a deanimated body by understanding disembodiment as a pre-reflective and pre-predicative affliction that involves a disturbance of the synthetic integration among distinct perceptual fields.

5 Conclusion

Before I conclude, let me state some limitations of this article, while also suggesting some prospects for further advancements. In arguing that disembodiment is better understood when limited to corporeality, thus renouncing the mind-body dichotomy, I suggest that this experience involves a disintegration among distinct sense-fields, which yields the impression of inhabiting divergent centres of orientation. While it is true that the limitation of this study to visual and tactile fields is not justified other than methodologically—given their pre-eminence in the phenomenological literature—a more elaborate study of schizophrenic disembodiment must take into account other sensory modalities, especially auditory, olfactory, and thermal. Another limitation of this study lies in its focus on body ownership, and the neglect of the sense of agency in schizophrenia. The latter also must be integrated within a phenomenological framework, and could greatly benefit from the phenomenological analysis of involuntary actions.⁴⁶

Other aspects that were not touched in this study concern the intersubjective dimension of bodily alienation (i.e., intercorporeity), and the affective state of the schizophrenic self. Phenomenologically, the experiences one has are not discrete occurrences within one’s mental life but are rather anchored in—and shaped by—the past experiences, forming a more or less unitary and coherent style of awareness. Moreover, the structural intentionality of consciousness, whereby it is related to something beyond itself, places our experiences in a situational context and a motivational nexus within the intersubjectively shaped world. Given that, the experience of disembodiment in schizophrenia is irreducible to out-of-body illusions that are construed in a laboratory setting. The subject that undergoes a full-body illusion knows that the feeling is temporary and that they are observed by their peers for the pursuit of knowledge. They experience alienation from their own body in an atmosphere of trust, which is not necessarily the case for those who struggle with schizophrenia.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ See Ferencz-Flatz (2025).

⁴⁷ For the loss of trust in schizophrenia, see Fazakas and Gozé (2020), and also Visoțchi (2025).

Besides, it is also important to explore the therapeutical consequences for the analysis of disembodiment in terms of multisensory disintegration.⁴⁸

To sum up, if disembodiment involves the feeling of not being *here*, or perceiving oneself *over there*, then understanding such experiences requires us to move beyond the “contradictory representation” of being at once both here and there. We cannot embody multiple places simultaneously—but we *can* experience a dissociation between vision, touch, and other sensory modalities, each of which offers its own, independent sense of proximity. As a result, what one sees is no longer accompanied by the possibility of tactile confirmation, leaving the subject with the impression of having lost touch with both oneself and one’s world. A vision that loses its haptic anchor yields an unreal scene for the perceiving subject, and—more importantly—such a person no longer feels welcomed in a world that remains out of touch.

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⁴⁸ See Martin et al. (2016). Importantly, Christensen et al. (2023) analyzed the role of touch for gaining trust and recognition in a psychopathological context.

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