

## Aesth/Ethics of the Body: (Self) Recognition and Peer Gaze in Adolescence

### Est/etica del corpo: lo sguardo dei pari e il riconoscimento di sé in adolescenza

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#### ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a transformative period in which the body takes centre stage. During this phase, the reworking of one's aesthetic and ethical self-representation increases vulnerability, as individuals undergo a transition in their identity and become more exposed to the gaze of peers. Being seen and appreciated, and belonging to a group, are fundamental needs, as peers become key reference points for mirroring and mutual recognition, or its painful absence. Pubertal and neurological changes heighten sensitivity to the judgments of others, making the body the primary mediator between the self and others. Through the body, adolescents express themselves, seek recognition, and construct self-understanding. Its primacy in communication also makes it the site where dissatisfaction with appearance emerges and where emotional and psychological distress are expressed (e.g., through self-harm, eating disorders, or social withdrawal), reflecting a denial of recognition of the emerging affective, social, and aesthetic-ethical self.

L'adolescenza è un momento trasformativo in cui la corporeità occupa il centro della scena, fase dell'esistenza in cui la rielaborazione della rappresentazione est/etica di sé rende più fragili perché presi in una transizione identitaria e più esposti allo sguardo dei pari. Essere visti, apprezzati, appartenere a un gruppo costituiscono bisogni fondamentali in adolescenza quando i coetanei divengono punto di riferimento, luogo di felice rispecchiamento, di mutuo riconoscimento o della sua dolorosa negazione. I cambiamenti puberali e neurologici intensificano la sensibilità al giudizio altrui, rendendo il corpo il principale mediatore del rapporto tra sé e gli altri. Attraverso il corpo si dice di sé, si chiede riconoscimento e ci si riconosce. Il suo primato comunicativo-relazionale lo trasforma anche nel luogo ove germina l'insoddisfazione per la propria apparenza, ove trovano espressione sofferenza emotiva, psicologica (*cutting, eating disorders*, ritiro sociale), "luogo" fisico del diniego del riconoscimento del nuovo sé affettivo, sociale ed est/etico.

**Keywords:** adolescent bodies, aesth/ethical self, body image, social imaginaries, peer recognition

**Parole chiave:** corpi adolescenti, apparenza est/etica, immagine corporea, immaginario sociale, riconoscimento tra pari

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## 1. Shedding One's Skin

Adolescence – particularly early adolescence (ages 10–14) – is a period marked by profound uncertainty, during which individuals must navigate a social environment that is, at times, harsh and unpredictable. In this phase, adolescents may encounter heightened psychological challenges. Everything changes, and one's own body – what is most intimate and familiar – can suddenly become strange and alien.

The metamorphosis that structures this developmental stage is powerfully exemplified in *Junior*, a short film by Julia Ducournau (2011). The narrative revolves around an adolescent who is compelled to confront a gradual climax of physical transformations, preceding psychological ones. The director adopts the aesthetic of body horror to convey the centrality of the body in this phase of life and to bring to the screen the sensations of fear, anxiety, and helplessness experienced by the adolescent subject when faced with a metamorphosis that erupts suddenly: unexpected, unsettling, and frightening precisely because it is unpredictable and beyond control.

Junior (Justine Ferri), a preadolescent girl perceived by her peers as a tomboy due to her language, clothing, and behaviour, and who socialises primarily with boys, undergoes an abrupt and disturbing bodily transformation. Life confronts her with a catastrophic and discontinuous transition (Mancaniello, 2018; Thom, 1992), signalled by an intense malaise that materialises through the body: a body dense with mystery and unrecognisable even to Junior herself.

The aesthetic – and ethical – language of fragmentation, rupture, and monstrosity adopted by the director renders intelligible through visual means an otherwise incomprehensible and unstoppable physical transformation, which reflects the inner upheaval accompanying the lived experience of adolescence (Barone, 2009).

Junior's *skin-ego* – the site of encounter between the self and others (Anzieu, 2017) – begins to flake and peel, and the young girl witnesses the dissolution of her own skin, that very skin which constitutes the largest organ of the body, the organ that protects us and establishes us as subjects distinct from the surrounding world. Junior/Justine thus literally embodies the mutable dimension of adolescence: she sheds her childhood skin, the boundary between inner and outer worlds.

The skin that once contained the child disintegrates, a loss that expresses and exposes the rupture between the biographical, psychic, and social “before” and “after.” Adolescence is the moment in which one changes skin: a new container for a new social subject, visible and desirable in the eyes of others.

As a living archive of our biography, the skin becomes a site of psychic and affective investment, particularly during adolescence, insofar as it renders visible the metamorphic process one is undergoing. The outcome remains unknown, yet is articulated through the “new” gaze directed at the desirable body by others. It is precisely this exposure to the gaze and power of others that renders the subject more vulnerable to their judgments (Le Breton, 2016).

“The gaze of the other is something that seizes me and embarrasses me” (Massa, cited in Cappa, 2025, p. 19), particularly at a moment when the individual may experience a sense of disjunction from their own existence, marked by feelings of estrangement or bodily discomfort that anticipate a shift in social status and role.

Junior's skin, in the process of transforming her into Justine – an attractive adolescent – dissolves, bringing to light hidden and deeper dimensions of the self, such as the emergence of a sexed identity that signals the onset of metamorphosis. Junior's bodily transformation can thus be interpreted as a metaphor for the ambivalence inherent in processes of becoming, in which growth and self-discovery coexist with discomfort, alienation, and profound vulnerability.

The metaphor of shedding an outer layer, employed by Julia Ducournau, recalls that used by Françoise Dolto: the image of the lobster (1998). Lobsters shed their shells and remain defenceless while they form a new one: a period marked by effort, suffering, experimentation, and intense emotional experiences. During this time of transformation, the threat is both internal and external. It may take the form of the child one once was: of a childhood that one does not wish to relinquish, or cannot, often due to ambivalent parental bonds.

## 2. Self-Recognition in Adolescence: The Gaze of Peers

In the external world, the threat is concealed in the gaze of the other, in socio-cultural expectations of attractiveness that exert pressure to conform to unrealistic and unattainable ideals (Basson, Weinbach, 2023). The body – as a site of identity production (Iaquinta, Salvo, 2017) – becomes, during adolescence, a battlefield upon which access to the self is negotiated: “In which gender do I recognise myself? Which feminine, masculine, or other models will I identify as my points of reference?”

It is through the body that the appropriation of the self takes place: from piercings to tattoos, from makeup to clothing. These function as symbolic practices through which adolescents assert their independence from their parents and invent themselves while seeking their place within the peer group. Adolescents, engaged in the search for a sense of self, personal worth and the meaning of existence, gradually detach themselves from the parental (ethical-affective) gaze in order to expose themselves to the aesthetic-affective evaluation of their peers. The adolescent stage is thus dominated by the faces and bodies of contemporaries, toward whose gaze one is oriented.

Being seen, appreciated, and belonging to a group constitute fundamental needs in this phase, during which the ethical-aesthetic representation of the self is being reworked. Peers become the primary point of reference: a space for mirroring and mutual recognition, or, conversely, for its denial.

Neurological changes during adolescence involve brain regions responsible for the perception of others' expressions, emotions, and judgments: processes that, at this stage, are primarily embodied by peers (Steinberg, 2014). The resulting heightened sensitivity, intertwined with the search for selfhood, finds in the gaze of contemporaries a powerful space of mirroring, intensifying the desire for social acceptance and rendering rejection particularly painful.

Reactivity to the gaze of the other extends across the entire *skin-ego*, also shaping body image (Zimmer-Gembeck, Webb, 2017). Within this framework, adherence to gendered standards of attractiveness – already identified as a salient social trait (Coleman, 1961) – remains a central element of adolescent experience in the contemporary infosphere.

In what may be termed “social adolescence”, individuals are also confronted with the image and representation of their “social body”. Highly visual media posts, often featuring heavily edited images, exert significant pressure on adolescents' body image (Tiggemann, Zaccardo, 2018). Among 1,391 U.S. adolescents (ages 13–17) surveyed by the Pew Research Center, 47% reported feeling pressure to look good (55% of girls, 39% of boys), while 41% feel pressure to fit in socially (45% of girls, 37% of boys) (2025). Similarly, 65% of 1,060 Italian adolescents surveyed (ages 14–17) identified “feeling good about oneself” as their primary aspiration for the future (Con i Bambini, 2025).

Physical appearance plays a significant role in socio-relational dynamics, particularly during adolescence, when the definition of one's position within the social hierarchy and the management of one's reputation assume central importance (Emler, Reicher, 2000).

Festinger's Theory of Comparison suggest that individuals engage in social comparison processes in order to evaluate their own social standing relative to others (1954). Complementing this perspective, the Tripartite Socio-cultural Influence Model (TSIM, Thompson *et alii*, 1999) proposes that three primary socio-cultural forces – peers, parents, and the media – shape body image through mechanisms such as the internalisation of dominant cultural ideals (e.g., thinness) and the promotion of appearance-based comparisons, thereby reflecting and reinforcing gendered socio-cultural pressures.

Some adolescents tend to follow the dominant pattern of behaviour, while others are less influenced by peers. But for all adolescents, the search for peer recognition in this developmental phase—particularly sensitive to ideals of beauty – can be understood as operating along two primary pathways: likeability and popularity (Hubers *et alii*, 2016).

Likeability (social preference) is defined as the extent to which an individual is liked and accepted by their peers, and it is typically associated with prosocial behaviour and low levels of aggression. Popularity (or perceived popularity) refers to the degree to which an individual is regarded as socially dominant, visible, and influential within the peer group setting the norm. While both likeability and popularity are associated with personality characteristics such as agreeableness and extraversion, the latter is also correlated with problem behaviour. In fact, popularity constitutes a multifaceted construct, encompassing both favourable attributes – such as intelligence, friendliness, and physical attractiveness – and less desirable

traits such as arrogance, manipulateness, and even aggression (van der Linden *et alii*, 2010). These dimensions relate not only to the attainment of popularity but also to its maintenance over time (Cillessen, 2011).

Some characteristics can predict the status an adolescent is likely to achieve, and these are often gender-related: coolness and toughness help males gain a recognised position within the group, while for females, physical appearance and academic success play a similar role.

Misrecognition and/or denial of recognition among adolescents manifests in two forms: passive (unpopularity) and active (rejection) (Lease, Kennedy, Axelrod, 2002), both of which are associated with low peer status. Within the hierarchy of social desirability, low popularity results in diminished prestige, social invisibility, and limited access to social capital.

The invisible adolescent occupies a peripheral position: tolerated but not excluded. Social invisibility is strongly correlated with socially (un)desirable traits such as physical appearance (unattractiveness), which assumes different forms for males (athletic body) and females (attractive body), in line with gender stereotypes reinforced by the media.

Rejection, in contrast, is enacted actively by peers who do not conceal their disdain. Traits that increase the likelihood of being rejected include ‘being different’, anxiety, shyness, aggressiveness, and conduct problems (Knack *et alii*, 2012). Invisible, rejected, or bullied, adolescents often experience a pervasive sense of worthlessness (Pietropolli Charmet, 2013), which is elicited and reinforced by negative feedback from peers based on specific characteristics – such as physical appearance, social status, or abilities – making the victim the target of ridicule, denigration, and humiliation (Dusi, Landuzzi, 2026).

An intangible aura surrounds these adolescents, from which more popular peers distance themselves for fear of being “contaminated” by the same stigma (Henricks *et alii*, 2023).

### 3. Bodies That Matter

Appearance plays a central role during this stage of life, when the process of identity formation must align with the changes occurring in the body. During adolescence, bodies matter. In relationships with peers and with oneself, the materiality of the body asserts itself. The aesthetic body and the aesth/ethics of the body stand between the childhood self and the emerging self, which is called upon to mentalise the potentials of this new “armour”.

This armour is not yet fully mastered, but its pulsating energy and aesthetic force are keenly felt. Its aesthetic power is amplified and mediated by “semitechnical” devices (Foucault, 1975/1976), such as those of the media and social platforms (WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, X, Discord). Adolescents engage in a process of subjectivation that exposes them to imaginaries and identity models imposed by the surrounding context.

Recognition during adolescence is the recognition of the self in the emerging body: a recognition received from others, particularly peers, and, for the digital natives of Generations Z and Alpha, one that is mediated primarily through the body. The advent of the network society (Castells, Cardoso, 2005) has imposed a new *pictorial turn*, in which the image asserts itself with full communicative power.

The physicality of the body is not an absolute given; rather, the bodily dimension is interpreted through a discursive framework that assigns and reassigns meaning on a historical and cultural basis. In the narcissistic society of spectacle and consumption, the aesthetic hegemony of slim and toned bodies exposes adolescents to a form of “imprisonment” dictated by socially defined ideals of beauty, often unattainable for ordinary mortals.

The socio-cultural discourse to which adolescents are exposed from early childhood shapes their imaginaries, asserting its normative power and signalling which bodies “matter.” Bodies matter because it is there – in the body, through the body – that each of us interacts with the other self, both human and non-human (Butler, 1993).

Bodies that deviate from the idealised standards of beauty imposed by the mass media “subculture” are thus exposed to family pressures and to the disapproving gaze of peers, which overlays the adolescent’s own self-perception. Round, abundant, or *coloured* bodies – bodies outside the normative ideal – are, in adolescence, treated as less “counting” than others.

Consequently, corporeality, together with the gender it expresses and the sexuality inscribed and enacted by the body, intersecting with other identity differences and social status, constitutes the generative matrix for ethical and psychological aggressions practised both face-to-face and online among peers, particularly in peer relations among girls (De Vita, Vittori, 2022).

The paradox is intrinsic to the human condition: adolescents find themselves in a situation in which they must be like others in order to be accepted, yet also unique to express themselves. While Junior/Justine is accompanied by her mother to the hospital to understand what illness is taking over her body, she asks, “Am I a strange girl?” Her mother reassures her, responding that she is “pretty, funny, smart...” and adds, “You are like no one else... unique.” To this, Justine asks whether that is a good thing, and her mother affirms, “Very.” Thoughtfully, Junior/Justine replies, “I think I am strange.”

This brief exchange between Junior/Justine and her mother encapsulates the fears of every adolescent, caught between the desire to belong and the desire to be recognised as a unique individual. Being perceived as strange jeopardises the possibility of being accepted, valued, and included in the peer group: a belonging that allows adolescents to feel safe and to recognise themselves more easily (Dienlin, Johannes, 2020). It threatens the capacity to feel good about oneself, to acknowledge one’s own identity, and to respond to the inner voice that urges one “to thine own self be true” (Shakespeare, *Act I, Scene III*). These conflicting desires must be negotiated in relation to the expectations and imaginings of others, which influence and constrain adolescents in uncontrollable ways (Butler, 1993).

#### 4. To Be Young, Gifted and... *Beautiful*

As a tool for self-experimentation and the exploration of the identities one wishes to inhabit, the body in adolescence exists not only for oneself but also for others: adolescents often feel permeated by the gaze of others, even transparent in the face of evaluative observation. Because the ability to appreciate the emerging self – and to recognise oneself within it – depends significantly on this gaze, adolescence is marked by a heightened investment in appearance and in the body as the primary support of identity. The body thus becomes a tool for controlling the narrative one wishes to present to the peer world.

Consequently, the body becomes an object to be appropriated, shaped, and rendered worthy of the gaze of others, and of oneself. In adolescent representations, the recognition received by one’s body equates to self-recognition, a primary existential and ontological need (Dusi, 2017). Within this recognition lies the legitimised possibility of being oneself within the social bond (Le Breton, 2016).

In the current historical period, characterised by socio-economic and cultural transitions, adolescents – young beings endowed with enormous potential – are exposed, even more than adults, to the fragility of the human (and non-human) world, and thus to the uncertainties of the future for new generations. As these adolescents seek selfhood and envision possible futures, they are particularly concerned with the care and promotion of their real and virtual image.

Within the Digital Wild Web, this phenomenon is amplified. Social media transform the body and identity into content to be displayed, shared, and evaluated. Every post, photo or video becomes an act of self-presentation, subject to a vast and immediate audience. Feedback – likes, comments, views – functions as micro-validations that can instantly elevate or undermine an adolescent’s mood and self-esteem.

The mass-media subculture, serving the neoliberal market, demands that adolescents be young, beautiful, and high-performing (paraphrasing Nina Simone). As explorers of new worlds, adolescents confront a society of aesthetic, professional, and relational performance, becoming particularly vulnerable to performance anxiety (as narrated by Mose in the song *Ho paura*), depression, and the pervasive sense of shame that colours their perception of “their” reality. For girls, this depression is often associated with body appreciation frustrated by appearance comparisons (Zheng *et alii*, 2024).

The body, becoming sexually active, no longer ‘guilty’ (Pietropolli Charmet, 2018), becomes central; it fully reclaims its place in adolescent existential and communicative space. The death of the childhood body, ushered in by the emergence of the erotic body, imposes a new, bold, and intrusive physicality that exposes the adolescent both to the gaze of others and to their own. Through the lived body, one speaks of oneself, communicates with others, recognises oneself, and is recognised.

The communicative-relational primacy of the body also renders it the site where dissatisfaction with

one's appearance can germinate (Valois *et alii*, 2019; Webb *et alii*, 2017), and where adolescents manifest emotional, psychological, and mental suffering, such as cutting, eating disorders, or social withdrawal. The body is, thus, a physical "place" in which the recognition of the new sexed, social, and aesth/ethical self is denied. The adolescent's lived body is illuminated or obscured by the gaze of the other, which can either foster a positive relationship with oneself or cast one into the abyss of humiliation. The gaze of others, when internalised, is projected onto their relationship with the self, and every adolescent in some way experiences the inevitable feelings of light and /or darkness.

Junior's *lived* body, before transforming into Justine, carries her into unknown territories. This is an irreversible process confronting the aesthetics of disintegration and rupture, a reflection of inner turmoil that is today exacerbated by a key tension in the network society: "the opposition between the Net and the Self" (Castells, 2023, p. 942).

When you feel really low / Yeah, there's a great truth you should know/  
When you're young, gifted and ...  
...Your soul's intact.

*Wanted:* Adults capable of containing, supporting, and guiding... Reliable, present and able guarantors of safe relational spaces where our adolescents can explore their new bodies, nourish their emerging selves, and imagine (im)possible futures.

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