“The Anthropology, beforehand called Ethnology, has always been dazzled by the other’s appearance: the other’s bodies or other bodies? Up to 1950, the body was considered the best “tool” to understand different cultures as well as ethnic differences on it. From this scientific moment regarding this vision of the body as “the key” to understand the other one; new racial theories have come up into Human Science dividing it into two new disciplines: the physical anthropology and the anthropometry. Unfortunately, in a certain manner, the urgency of having a so called visual anthropology is unrelated to the body’s history in anthropology; and the body is taken as a traditional researching “object” in the field of the visual anthropology. Thus, after the racial theories applied to the “primitive body” by the physical anthropology there has always been academic mistrust and disdain regarding to the images (photographic and video graphic).
According to David MacDougall, “if anthropology was always interested in visual aspects, its problem has always been to know how to deal with them” (1997), and this problem seems to be closely linked to others that appear as “personal concept” and “body techniques”, isolated by Marcel Mauss in 1950. In anthropology, the individual body images represented face this double heuristic ambiguity, and that double interpretation challenge: what to do with the images that only show the lowermost part of a person’s visible “self” and his culture? First anthropological looks at the body… I think it will be good to remember once more, the idea that the urgency of the anthropology, while science is contemporary to the invention of the photography. First of all, the joint action between the anthropology and photography was encouraged by two aspects: the first one was linked to the colonialism, and the other to the scientific body law regarding to anthropologic research at that time. In fact, the conception of creating a man’s science – anthropology – is quite recent. Certainly, anthropology was born at the beginning of the 20th century, and was focused on the populations’ study which did not belong to the occidental civilization, and was closely attached to colonialism. On the other hand, shortly after having pledged its own research methods and theories, the anthropology realizes that the empiric object that was chosen (the so called primitive societies) has been disappearing: it is the worldwide “acculturation” phenomena, the end of the “savage”, the death of the “primitive” and his culture. The encounter between “knowledge” and “technique” has received a scientific evaluation through the race evolution theories in which the body was merely considered as a culture support.

Ethnologists, anthropologists’ ancestors used to think that it was only necessary to look at the people’s bodies to figure out their cultural differences in order to study them. The cultural and social differences were analysed biologically and the racial concept was created by scientists at that time in order to study the primitive cultures and their relationships with the body. The anthropology was always fascinated by the visual aspects of bodies, considered as a proof among the cultural differences, and visual anthropology emergence was inseparable from the physical and
biological anthropology works and the history of the body. In this way, the emergence of anthropology as a scientific discipline is closely linked to the invention of the photography. Regarding this fact, the anthropology starts a new phase of visual cannibalism and the images of those times’ “primitive” helped to evaluate the racial theses to distinguish the differences between the “savage” and the “civilised”. Those scientific theses were based on the body ethic concept and decency: nudity was considered as a “visible” proof of “decay” and of the “savage’s” cultural inferiority if considered to be a symbolic indicator of his closeness to nature.

I totally agree with Etienne Samain when he claims that anthropology lost more than half a century (1850-1910) mapping photographically the world of “races”, human “kinds”, and human species characteristics. However, “the physical anthropology – the study of skulls, arms, feet, breasts and if possible the whole body sculptured in plaster – and anthropometry were blind alley”. So far, this usage of racial body images has caused kind of embarrassment among new anthropologists. It is necessary to state that the receptiveness of these “anthropologic concepts” was different at the end of XIX century. At that time, in the Occident, the body was extremely hidden by clothes and only the face and hands were shown. All corporal activities and “corporal techniques” were done in a hidden way in reserved places called “intimacies” (Vigarello, 1985).

In this ashamed context, the exotic bodies’ visuals shocked the audience a lot and became many times an excuse to show a kind of ethnographic pornography as shown in this post card that represents a “Zulu” woman, “typically proportionate”. Many postcards of the anthropometric type from that time represent naked women whose “poses” seem to support even more the idea of physical inferiority and moral one. The nudity in those women, for example, was seen and interpreted as an Ethic proof or just a proof of lack of Ethic “characteristic of the savage races that had remained nearer the animal state”. The other’s nudity that shocked the public opinion so much was overexposed in the ethnographic photos at that time, which transformed itself rapidly into a symbolic indicator of its closeness to nature. All
kinds of nudity will be punished... and in the colonial context those images helped to convince the Europeans about the idea of race hierarchy as well as the benefits of the “human” progress that they could provide to the “primitives”. This little story about the human bodies show offs by ethnography indicates very well how the use of the bodies’ images in anthropology has always been a parasite by the theoretical paradigms linked to colonialism. At that time the anthropologists used the photography and the cinema newly born to register, to measure and buy the bodies. The Anthropometry has always supported “scientifically” the fixed bodies’ images or in movement, and those images helped illustrate the racial theories, the heredity ideas and the human evolutionism inspired by the natural sciences. Take the other’s body as a “visible” proof of his primitivism was also a way to spread the colonialism, and a radical manner to support the racial theses that wanted to see the man as mere product of his body.

Still nowadays, Fatimah Tobbing Rony accuses the “fascinated cannibalism” from the occidental culture sublimated through the other’s race images consumption: “The cannibals are the consumers of the exotic bodies’ images – and even their own bodies – offered by the media and science” (Rony, 1996:10). I would also add the so called “sexual tourism”. The body is not merchandise and the other’s body representations cannot turn into intellectual pornography. This racial and sexual condition of the body’s images can explain in a way the prejudice of Social and Human Sciences referring to the bodies’ images throughout the 20th century. The photography and the cinema contributed during the 19th and 20th century to create the idea of a body in the same way we see it nowadays, yet to try to rethink about the “body’s visual” in an anthropological prospective, we have got to go back to Marcel Mauss’s theses about notions of an individual and body taking an insight look at Margareth Mead and Gregory Bateson’s work about the corporal culture in Bali. It seems to me that only from Mauss an anthropological look on the body can be considered as true. In 1950, in front of the Psychology school in Paris, the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss claims that man is not a product of his body, but he makes his own body in interaction with others, through his social immersion
in a symbolic universe from his culture: the body is not a nature’s fatality, but it is a
cultural, social and individual constructional object.”

“... The manifesto’s name signed by several intellectuals and scientists in France on May 2000 to express their
indignation due to a savage traffic of women in the East European countries.