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Touching, unbelonging, and the absence of affect

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Abstract

This article argues that psychoanalytic notions of affect – including ideas of anxiety and melancholia, as well as deconstructive concepts of auto-affection – offer a feminist ethico-politics and a notion of affect as interface. Beyond the confines of the experiential and the positivist, both psychoanalysis and deconstruction provide insights into affect as a technology that understands the subject as porous. I consider works by Derek Jarman and Shirin Neshat to demonstrate the importance of the ethico-politics of affect as interface in contemporary cultural production. Both artists, in the process of considering the spectacular nature of notions of feminist and queer, use images of interface as a way of delimiting the spectacular nature of being and demonstrating the singularity of the event, the desire to fix through framing, and the parergonal nature of framing. The presence of the subject is questioned even as an auto-affection is suggestive of a spectral demand of the ethico-political. In the case of Jarman's *Blue*, the denial of image as face in favour of the screen as interface is interrupted by sound and voice, which gesture toward representation as impossible but necessary. In the case of Neshat, the persistence of the photographic – the highly aesthetic self-portrait as mug-shot – foregrounds face as interface, as one that questions presence through the insistence of a representational apparatus.

Introduction

> As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. This is not to say that the cultural products of

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the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings – which it may be better and more accurate to call 'intensities' – are now free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria. (Jameson, 1984: 64)

In his essay from 1984, and then later in his book of that name, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', Fredric Jameson wrote of the 'waning of affect' in postmodern culture. The subject was no longer full, constant, singular, and deep, but rather depthless, devoid of a layered archaeology, and an object of surfaces. If the subject seemed affectless, it was as a result of the loss of interiority and with the emergence of intensity that happened elsewhere, as if in a state of intoxified commonality. This waning of affect is as a result of the fact that there is no subject remaining, and no expression. It is, in fact, a deconstruction of the subject as expressive being (Jameson, 1984: 61).

Along related lines, Brian Massumi writes, in his chapter 'The Political Economy of Belonging and the Logic of Relation' in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, that capitalism is a usurping force (2002). He observes in a chapter that questions the desire for origins, 'What is being usurped here? The very expression of potential. The movement of relationality. Becoming together. Belonging. *Capitalism is the global usurpation of belonging* ... Neither celebration nor lament: a challenge to rethink and reexperience the individual and the collective' (Massumi, 2002: 88; original italics).

The assumption that lies within both is of an original subject with depth, a centre and feeling. The 'waning of affect' seems to be about the loss of this as much as it is about affect. Both writers, from a more or less cultural Marxist point of view, see capital as alternately choking and fragmenting the subject, making it less the resistant layered figure of the modernist political, and more the compliant saturated figure whose very potentiality to *be* is wasted. This saturated non-subject is affectless because it is not an expressive subject with feeling, in their view. It has had all its potential dispersed and there can be no common cause among subjects that develops politically in opposition. What is sought, then, is a coming together of subjects in ways that find new forms of political belonging through a line of flight, a collectivity as a kind of assemblage through a new ontology.

However, I will suggest that 'subjecthood' and even Being itself is exactly what is threatened whenever there is some moment of, or emergence of, affect within either a Cartesian frame or a psychoanalytic one. Affect appears to be separate from the subject, above the law of the subject, and indeed threatening to its hydraulics. Subjects may have or lack emotion (those figures we sometimes call *affectless* or in actuality *emotionless* are sometimes exactly manifesting affect in ways that make them less than subjects – robotic figures, as it were, of unbalanced psychical state). The threat to subjectivity I would suggest, however, is when there is a presence of affect – which may manifest itself as much in affectlessness as in some other altered psychical state. These psychical states manifest as interface between the subject and something beyond its being.

Rei Terada, in her beautiful book *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the Death of the Subject* (2001), highlights the way in which affect, since the dominance of Cartesian thought, was always external to a notion of the subject. She references the framing argument between Foucault and Derrida in the latter's review of *Madness and Civilization*, 'Cogito and the History of Madness' (Derrida, 1978a), which was to initiate the epic quarrel between Derrideans and Foucauldians no matter what Derrida and Foucault did to quell the feuds. In showing how Foucault in a sense mistook mental life (psychical states, and perhaps affect itself) for subjectivity, Derrida draws attention to how the death of the subject institutes mental life – what I would call a form of unbelonging, a dissolution of the subject that begins to engender something that is otherwise than Being.

Affect, then, never needed a theory of the subject; it was always, since Descartes, an excess to it, an interface with it, and a challenge to its stability. Affect is characterised by a breakdown in the hydraulics of the economics of the modern subject. As a surplus that questions its boundaries, and a surplus that may manifest itself in affectlessness, it is the porous interface of the skin that marks a relation to alterity. Subjects may have emotions that are identifiable, but it is something other than the subject – and perhaps other than Being – that has affect manifested as interface. Rather than understanding capitalism as the global usurpation of belonging, then, I would suggest that capital on the contrary reinstitutes a notion of Being *as* Belonging. That leaves no space for the critical possibilities of non-belonging as an undoing of being as we know it. That Other than Being is both somatic and psychic – what I would refer to as the psychical – and it is in constant tension between being recognised as a knowable entity that belongs to and dwells in civilisation (something saturated by capital as Massumi might say), and one that exists beyond it. Much in the way in which a frame both delimits and announces the fragility of what lies within, affect is an interface that marks the anxiety of touch as ur-sense and beyond the self-same idea of a subject of expression.

In this article, I hope to show how psychoanalytic notions of affect – including ideas of anxiety and of melancholia, as well as deconstructive concepts of auto-affection – provide an important contribution to a feminist ethico-politics and a notion of affect as interface. Beyond the confines of the experiential and of the positivist, both psychoanalysis and deconstruction offer insights into affect as a technology that understands the subject as porous. I will consider two artists – Derek Jarman and Shirin Neshat – to demonstrate the importance of the ethico-politics of affect as interface in contemporary cultural production. Both artists, in the process of considering the spectacular nature of notions of feminist and queer, use images of interface as a way of delimiting the spectacular nature of being. Rather than focusing on the spectacular nature of autobiographical expressiveness as a location of the bounded nature of political life, they employ an aesthetic of the interface to demonstrate the singularity of the event, the desire to fix through framing, and the parergonal nature of framing. The presence of the subject is questioned even as an auto-affection is suggestive of a spectral demand of the ethico-political. In the case of Derek Jarman's *Blue*, the denial of image as face

in favour of the screen as interface is interrupted by sound and by voice, which seems to gesture toward a representation at once shown to be impossible but necessary. In the case of Shirin Neshat, the insistence and persistence of the photographic – the highly aesthetic self-portrait as mugshot – foregrounds face as interface, as one that questions presence through the insistence of a representational apparatus. If, in Levinas's work, the face is presented as the site of the call of the other, feminist and queer work from Irigaray to Neshat to Jarman, shows how problematic that specular form is. The image of the face is tied to anthropological character and therefore instantiates a notion of the metaphysics of presence. Affect, rather than presenting itself as that which is expressed by the subject, instead appears as a self-touching and auto-affection that both instantiates and questions the stability of the subject.

Of course, all this at least partially depends on what we mean by affect. It has become something of a commonplace in recent feminist affect studies to sideline the psychoanalytic and the deconstructive in favour of Deleuzian notions of affect. In this scenario, one we see exemplified in Patricia Clough's volume *The Affective Turn* (2007, 2010), psychoanalysis becomes the source of pathologisation rather than a resource, and the notion of affect developed in Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?* (1994) becomes dominant, with *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) also playing a part. In the latter, there is a dematerialisation and deterritorialisation of the subject that takes place as affect goes beyond the subject to something else, manifesting itself in a becoming animal, for example, in an attempt to exceed a notion of the subject as anthropomorphic character. So doing, in the works of those who pick it up, like Michael Hardt (1999) and Antonio Negri (1999), and Patricia Clough (in *The Affective Turn* [2007] but not so in *Autoaffection: Unconscious Thought in the Age of Teletechnology* [2000]), affect becomes a way to come together in a new form of assemblaged belonging as a new ontology. But affect in their work is gestured towards rather vaguely. Any attention to what it is in terms of content threatens to become banalised when it is manifested in the prosaics of care or of emotion.[1] Affective labour, originally and ultimately a feminist concept, appears more interesting in terms of the ties it could generate rather than in the labour it involves. While I am sympathetic to the idea of affect's movement beyond the subject, beyond expressiveness, and beyond perceptibility, it does seem as if attention to the labour form itself or any shadow of content would always appear symptomatic. This suspicion of content is quite typical of the ontological approach, and in this context has sometimes manifested itself as a dismissal of feminist notions of labour, or the way in which woman has become enframed as a certain mode of being. Psychoanalysis too often becomes banalised in this scenario as if it were entirely ontic in its implications, as if it never thought the body, somatic manifestations of symptoms, technology, new ontologies, the political, or an interface between body and mind.

It is true that psychoanalysis does not necessarily help itself in this regard. Psychoanalysis does not have a consistent version of what affect is. Nor does Freud. But it is not true, as it has become common to assert, that psychoanalysis

is interested only in the 'body as organism, a closed system, seeking homeostasis and equilibrium' (Clough, 2007: 11). I would like to argue that psychoanalysis could as easily be understood as an open system, a technology, and something that questions the efficacy and indeed the ethics of the new ontologies of body-technology described by Deleuzians. Psychoanalysis, I would suggest, has since its inception, thought the body as a technology, one that crafts the world and is crafted by it, particularly in its Freudian version. In the deconstructive philosophy of Irigaray and Derrida this form of psychoanalysis presents a notion of affect as an interface that threatens the subject, rather than presenting it as a new ontology.

In *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*, Elizabeth Wilson has usefully reminded us of where psychoanalysis starts with its attention to somatic manifestations. She writes very eloquently of Freud's investment in the threshold or interface between body and mind, between soma and psyche, as a relation of mutuality and obligation. She draws her reading from Freud, who writes of neurasthenic melancholia thus: 'associated neurons are obliged to give up their excitation, which produces pain'. She asks, 'what is the character of the psychosomatic structure such that soma and psyche are bound by obligation rather than unilateral control?' (Wilson, 2004: 22). Criticising the fear of bodily focus in feminist theory, the most important example for Wilson is Judith Butler; Wilson elaborates this form of mutuality, and it becomes more and less than an enclosed bodily function that understands its organism as its limit. The affective state, we could say, is a porous framework of psychical response in psychoanalysis, and is often out of synch with itself. Just as we sometimes have bodily memory of losing things, the sensation of a ring falling off or a glove dropping that consciousness only retrospectively catches up with, and just as nerves carry the memory of pain when its source ceases to exert it, the somatic and the psychic can be temporally out of joint even as they are obliged to each other, even as they touch each other in an auto-affection. They constitute, then, an interface that may be without content even as it carries some spectral manifestation of content – the persistence of an image that does not designate a presence, the sonoric allure of a sound or a voice that cannot be represented through an image, that reaches out to touch the ear in ways that make sense only retrospectively. Affect is in some ways then a technology that carries within it the spectral presence of another form of knowing, and another way of being, one that may be otherwise than being. It is a form of being that is out of synch with itself, that does not belong to the saturated space of the centred ego who dwells as Being or a new version of that. Affect is an interface that would appear as a sensory disjuncture from a centralised ego or the centred subject of what Freud would call civilisation with the 'normal' levels of unhappiness that come with its demands, and what I would call modernity with its material and conceptual histories. I would understand this psychical state of obligation between soma and psyche to be affect as a technology, a technology of touch, or following Irigaray's critique of Levinas, a technology of caress. All somatic and psychical manifestations, including senses then, are understood as something felt – in Derridean terms, an auto-affection of sorts, an implicit questioning of self-sameness. This may be, in Irigaray's terms,

akin to the caress of a lover that opens one to one, through the mucous membrane, sensations external and internal, eschewing sameness and the communion that is so antithetical to the Levinasian model of the ethical. Or it could be the sensation of pregnancy that is more than one, which is banalised in the technology of the ultrasound as reference to a face. Less literal than that, less distinct, less representational, less indexical, and less self-asserting, it is a sensation without fully-identifiable content. In a sense, the struggle to know what affect is beyond particular affects speaks to this question of the spectral form of a presence of alterity, of non-self-sameness.

In 1926, Freud writes of the manifestation of anxiety in instructive terms thus:

> Anxiety, then, is in the first place something that is felt. We call it an affective state, although we are also ignorant of what an **affect** is. As a feeling, anxiety has a very marked character of unpleasure. But that is not the whole of its quality. Not every unpleasure can be called anxiety, for there are other feelings, such as tension, pain or mourning, which have the character of unpleasure. Thus anxiety must have other distinctive features besides this quality of unpleasure. Can we succeed in understanding the differences between these various unpleasurable affects? (Freud, [1926] 1959: 132; emphasis added)

Anxiety is felt. There is a sensory aspect to it that I would understand as the body touching itself, an auto-affection as Derrida would name it subsequently, even as it is an unpleasure. Through anxiety, Freud describes affect even as he says he does not know what it is. It is unpleasurable because it is a loss of footing, peripatetic rather than dwelling or rooted. Can we succeed in understanding its content? he asks, Yes and no. As an emotion with content and knowable origin held within a stable subject, yes: we can surely understand the histories of some emotions. As a feeling that threatens unpleasurably, no, because the form of Unbelonging threatens indexicality, it is a loss of representation that is in many ways a sensory undoing. Its relation to content is spectral – a threshold to an alterity that nonetheless touches, an interface that is a loss of indexicality because its boundaries are so porous.

Earlier, Freud describes the affective thus (interestingly through a dynamic of touch):

> I will begin with some examples drawn from social life. A comic story is told of a loyal subject who would not wash his hand because his sovereign had touched it. The relation of this hand to the idea of the king seemed so important to the man's psychical life that he refused to let the hand enter into any other relation. We are obeying the same impulse when we break the glass in which we have drunk the health of a young married couple. Savage tribes in antiquity, who burnt their dead chief's horse, his weapons and even his wives along with his dead body, were obeying this idea that no one should ever touch them after him. The force of all these actions is clear. The quota of **affect** which we attribute to the first association of an object has a

repugnance to letting it enter into a new association with another object and conse-
quently makes the idea of the [first] object inaccessible to association.

It is not a mere comparison, it is almost the identical thing, when we move into the
sphere of the psychology of conceptions. If the conception of the arm is involved in an
association with a large quota of **affect**, it will be inaccessible to the free play of other
associations. *The arm will be paralysed in proportion to the persistence of this quota of*
affect *or to its diminution by appropriate psychical means.* This is the solution of the
problem we have raised, for, in every case of hysterical paralysis, we find that *the*
paralysed organ or the lost function is involved in a subconscious association which is
provided with a large quota of **affect** *and it can be shown that the arm is liberated as soon*
as this quota is wiped out. Accordingly, the conception of the arm exists in the material
substratum, but it is not accessible to conscious associations and impulses because the
whole of its associative affinity, so to say, is saturated in a subconscious association
with the memory of the event, the trauma, which produced the paralysis. (Freud,
[1888–1893] 1966: 170–171; emphasis added; original italics)

Fascinatingly, the affect – here the somatic manifestation of the psychical state –
is again about a synecdochic spectral quality, a loss of content even as the content
insists itself – the spectral hydraulic manifestation of that which is lost, which may
or may not have actual existence, a shadow of materiality that is psychically mani-
fest. The Freudian example becomes, in fact, the template for an understanding of
the problem of the metaphysics of presence. The affective becomes technology that
throws its own indexicality into question. And the model for this is the psychic
apparatus of the dream.
   Freud writes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*,

[T]he great [G. T. H.] Fechner ... puts forward the idea that the scene of action of
dreams is different from that of waking ideational life .... This is the only hypothesis
that makes the special peculiarities of dream-life intelligible.

What is presented to us in these words is the idea of *psychical locality*. I shall entirely
disregard the fact that the mental apparatus with which we are here concerned is also
known to us in the form of an anatomical preparation, and I shall carefully avoid the
temptation to determine psychical locality in any anatomical fashion. I shall remain
upon psychological ground, and I propose simply to follow the suggestion that we
should picture the instrument which carries out our mental functions as resembling a
compound microscope or a photographic apparatus, or something of the kind. On
that basis, psychical locality will correspond to a point inside the apparatus at which
one of the preliminary stages of an image comes into being. In the microscope and
telescope, as we know, these occur in part at ideal points, regions in which no tangible
component of the apparatus is situated. I see no necessity to apologize for the imper-
fections of this or of any similar imagery. Analogies of this kind are only intended to
assist us in our attempt to make the complications of mental functioning intelligible by

dissecting the function and assigning its different constituents to different component parts of the apparatus. So far as I know, the experiment has not hitherto been made of using this method of dissection in order to investigate the way in which the mental instrument is put together, and I can see no harm in it. We are justified, in my view, in giving free rein to our speculations so long as we retain the coolness of our judgement and do not mistake the scaffolding for the building. (Freud, [1900] 1953: 536; original italics)

Acknowledging physiological manifestation while eschewing physiological determinism, Freud effectively questions the metaphysics of presence – a transcendental figure of causality or of occurrence – even as he acknowledges its spectral presence and therefore its manifestation in the dreamwork. The apparatus of the camera becomes the instrument of the interface – the ideal locality or plane. The varied planes of alterity displace a belonging, carry the trace of affective content and yet manifest in a technology that throws them into doubt. Dreamwork demonstrates a loss of indexicality, a loss of the proper name, of the sense of Belonging with its history and with its etymology written as if in the stone of building and dwelling. Affect manifests in the technology as psychical scaffolding, an interface. Affect, then, is a psychical state that constitutes a technology of difference. Psychoanalytically conceived affect is constituted then as an interface showing the porosity of sameness and the opening to (sexual) difference.

The loss of indexicality

How might this technology of scaffolding and loss of indexicality manifest itself? I would suggest that in the visual arts in ways that 'do not mistake the scaffolding for the building', we see a demonstration of the interface between body and mind, soma and psyche, belonging and unbelonging, sensation and association, seeing a face and prosopopoeia, listening to language and hearing sounds. In many ways the most profound example would be Derek Jarman's *Blue*. For the most part, the film is a blank blue screen, referencing and unreferencing International Klein Blue (IKB), which also indexes the increasing blindness of Jarman as he is sick with AIDS and sees in blue (Figure 1) and also the breakdown of indexicality – all we have is the blue screen as if the technology is not working, or the representational work of television is over for the day. Sonic exteriors only intermittently reference what is going on. A stillness hangs over the screen when we expect motion, sound sculpts space in ways with which we have become familiar in video installations in which sound comes to constitute its own porous plane of ideality, but does not explain or fully narrativise. The screen becomes the interface that dramatises the relation of touch and untouchability. The screen becomes an unpleasure of sorts in which it announces the problem of interface: memories of or references to AIDS, of bodies as mucous membranes, of desire and its withholding, of becoming the sea or sky Jarman loved so much. The screen manifests as resistance to the already narrativised story of forbidden caress. The unpleasure of another pleasure may or may not have occurred but hangs over the screen as a spectral narrative of

Figure 1. *Blue* (1993). Director: Derek Jarman. Producers: James Mackay and Takashi Asai. Permission to reproduce granted by James Mackay, Basilisk Communications Ltd.

causation that is always thrown into doubt. The interface, then, becomes the arena of affect – more so in fact than any sentiment brought forth through the fragmented narrative presented in voiceover. In Derrida's terms, it is in a kind of poetic interface that 'the work of mourning, transforming heteroaffection into auto-affection, produces the maximum of disinterested pleasure' (1981: 18) (Figure 2). The spectral (non-) presence of a life itself was narrated and yet already mourned.

This is a film that disallows an understanding of politics as one that assumes the possibility of projective identification. It presents an autobiographical narrative that at once tells the story of AIDS but also never reduces a voice to a knowable entity or to an example of an AIDS victim. Rather, a singularity is presented of the porosity of membrane as risk but also the very possibility of ethics as an opening to the other. Affect, then, is this non-self-presence – an opening to the alterity within as well as that which lies beyond. Interface as membrane, as appreciation of IKB, of the love of other men as an economy of difference, as a touching of the self, a giving presence momentarily to oneself, but demonstrated through the technology and textuality of doing so. The auto-affection, the technology of self-touch, is rather simultaneously an establishment of sameness, a source of anxiety, a reminder of the ways in which being is shaped through technologies which are experienced as real even as they slip away.

In another vein, one could think of the forms of Unbelonging that manifest themselves in the psychic apparatus of Shirin Neshat's work, which constantly

Figure 2. *Blue* (1993). Director: Derek Jarman. Producers: James Mackay and Takashi Asai. Permission to reproduce granted by James Mackay, Basilisk Communications Ltd.

plays with the persistence of photography as if it exemplified the weight and pressure of indexicality. Neshat began working in the medium of photography and the persistence of the photographic manifests as if, having started in that medium with the *Women of Allah* series (1993–1997), it haunts all her images from the outset. As such, the move from one medium to another, from photography to film and to video, becomes interesting in itself, a commentary on the interface of the face seen in portrait photography, and a question of why she changes medium. In video, the referentiality of photographs becomes doubtful, as does, then, the right to inspection they seem to invoke. The photographic, I would argue, constitutes a prolonged pressure on her own work as if she could attempt to escape a captured moment of stasis, which photography retrospectively becomes in her work – haunting capturing by the immanence of death – a kind of death and death mask itself. Even as she uses another technology to introduce temporality, narrative, indeed life, the image, and perhaps significantly, the self-portraits of the singular Neshat as the plural 'Women of Allah', she condenses the possibility of life into the image of (her own) capturing. This evokes a kind of death by and within the technology of viewing, which in the *Women of Allah* series is associated with a gun, and in her video installation, *Rapture* (1999), that opposes two screens, the technology of viewing is associated with the cannon situated in the lookouts of the fortress (Figure 3). Technology as death-related would seem to reference a notion of the visual associated with threat – that the presence of the other must be a threat to *my* existence.

In video works like *Rapture* then, photography and its indexicality oppress and also show the persistence of the photographic partly in terms of the *Women of Allah* series (Figure 4). The images show hands, feet, a face that provides a complex

Figure 3. Shirin Neshat, *Rapture* Series (1999). Gelatin silver print. Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

commentary on the nature of women's status in the Islamic Republic of Iran specifically, the position of women as the biggest consumers and the most consumed (Figure 5), and the fetish structure of photography, in which an image would seem to represent the threatened absence of that which is depicted. A face partially covered with a burqa, and inscribed with a poem you may or may not understand, nonetheless produces both a target and a threat, someone dead and alive, devout and defiant, propagandist and revolutionary, pure and complicitous, the martyr and the target, still and without space to move from the frame. All the images, with eyes inscribed or without eyes at all, seeing or blind, appear as a death mask. Never an identity, she is always an image, a singular-plural transcribed, transcribable, both located and definitely not. If we are to think of this face in Levinasian terms, it will become the occasion for a comportment toward the other. But no presence, divine or otherwise, is assured through this face that is so clearly the object of technology – a presentation of face as interface and a reminder of the value ascribed to it.

Images of stillness in *Rapture*, I would argue, become menacing, as if they always reference a death mask and the threat encapsulated in the *Women of Allah* series. Different and distinct in its use of groups of men and women rather than one face and body repeated, it struggles with the possibility of spatial liberation, and a narrative in time that will interrupt the oppressive reproducibility of the machinery and technology of history, which is indeed the hope of *Rapture* – what the possibility of film and more especially video installation in principle supply. The closing to the narrative, of some of the women in a boat unmoored
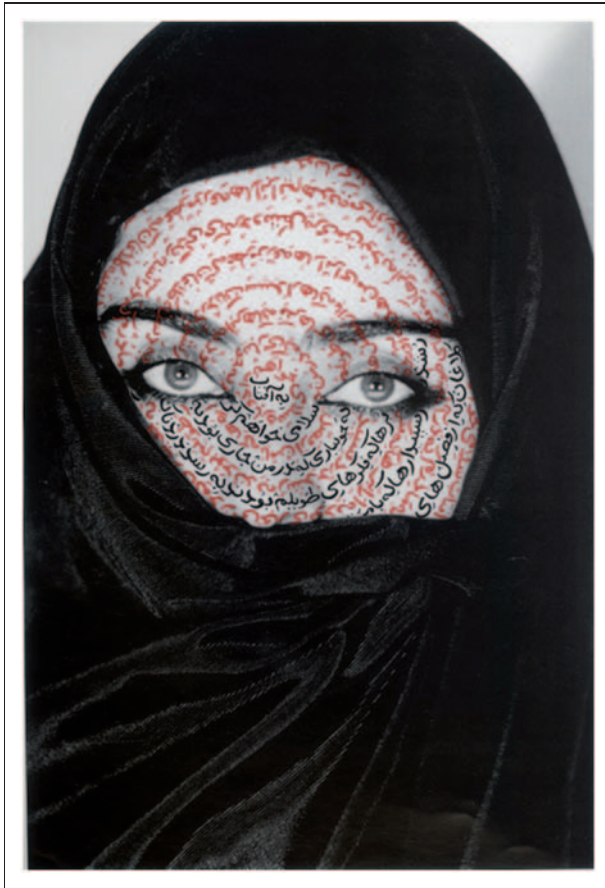
Figure 4. Shirin Neshat, *I Am Its Secret* (1993). RC print and ink (photo taken by Plauto). Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

(perhaps escaping, perhaps plotting, but anyway, in movement), seems an attempt to move from time captured (in photography) to some form of narrative flow (in video). And yet the video of *Rapture* is transferred from 16 mm film, and retains a certain quality from it. The digital transposition sometimes begs the question of whether an image is frozen – recalling a photograph or film or video-still (Figure 6). The image of men menacingly staring out at the camera is barely distinguishable from a still, until the technology in a sense, allows us to breathe – like when a butterfly suddenly makes an arid landscape into something living, an eye will blink, an eyelash momentarily flutter. Different technology then introduces life that is already spectral, that in a sense, begins with death and then, through a slowing down of life into death, tries to find life without belonging within it. Sounds are suspended momentarily, or not filled with words. The binary of (male) fortress and (female) desert seems already trapped within a sexual and anthropological machine

Figure 5. Shirin Neshat, *Guardians of Revolution* (Women of Allah Series) (1994). Black and white RC print and ink (photo taken by Cynthia Preston). Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

in which the tyranny of a binary is death producing such that there can be no movement within it even as bodies move apart and separate and then come together again (Figure 7). There are many references that would seem to harken back to the photographs – the hands held up by the women in the triangle rather than turned inward in the *Women of Allah* series – in a gesture of non-complicity (Figure 8) recalling the hands celebratory with henna in the *Women of Allah* series. The figures struggle not to be inscribed into a technology of referentiality, identity and inspection. The non-conceptual sound of language and music is where referentiality is expected, and yet at the non-conceptual and sensual level, the human as

Figure 6. Shirin Neshat, *Rapture* (1999). Film still. Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Figure 7. Shirin Neshat, *Rapture* (1999). Film still. Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Figure 8. Shirin Neshat, *Rapture* (1999). Film still. Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

communicator paradoxically comes undone and becomes non-human, animal, technology. If technology shows how we speak out of language as much as it makes us human, it also shows the way in which hearing functions to question the limit of the subject.

Similarly, the labour of women, in Neshat's later work, would seem to show a life that was condensed in the image of death and the death mask in photography. The insistence on the framed portrait would seem to suggest a self-attention that is less narcissism and more auto-affection, which seems simultaneously to self-touch as an announcement of self-fetishisation and the problem of the right to look. Both, however, reveal the mask of labour of production or the work of the death drive understood as mourning. The labour of beauty in *Women without Men* (2009) in film (Figure 9) references back to the fetish of beauty present in the condensed photographic images.

One could say that in the short *Mahdokht*, one of the five pieces that would go into the *Women without Men* film based on the novel by Shahrnush Parsipur, we are given a model for such spectral returning. The piece again begins with a reference to an earlier technology – the painting by Millais of Ophelia, Hamlet's suicidal lover. The film then gives her retrospectively a life, such that existing within the realm of the visual arts always makes one live spectrally. The life that unravels seems both older and younger than that of the suicide, mad and violated, knitting children's clothes and a yellow landscape that shows how the yellow wallpaper of Perkins Gilman's asylum has in a sense come to world this woman's space, imaginary and not, geographically specific and yet referencing any number of images,

Figure 9. Shirin Neshat, *Women without Men* (released 2010). Film still. Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Shirin Neshat.

literary and otherwise, as if to say what would it mean for Ophelia, confined in her frame, to retrospectively imagine a life that could move beyond the references of its own choked existence, of saturated belonging, of auto-affection as the porous interface of that frame.

An ethics of obligation

The confinement of belonging in a frame with its teleology of an old technology is a site for critique in contemporary art but also in the form of resistance to an understanding of Being associated with building, with dwelling, with known content, with the right of inspection and identity, with already established worlding and enframing. Heidegger's notions of Belonging, tied as they are to Being, Building, and the etymological, are useful to think with as exemplifying a notion of Being tied to home, the domestic, the enframed that is not untypical in modernist aesthetics and philosophy that fails to understand exile as more than a loss of referentiality. Levinas's work questioned the prioritisation of Being in philosophy, and thinking with and against Heidegger, saw it as a closing down of the philosophical, and posited an ethics of responsibility instead. I would like to understand this ethics of responsibility also as an ethics of obligation in which one can understand traces of the spectral presence of the somatic in the psychic and vice versa. This places affect as what Terada might explain as a bodily thing, or what Derrida would call an auto-affection. To do this is to adhere to a more Derridean and Irigarayan reading of Levinas in the works (by Derrida) 'Violence and Metaphysics' (1978b) and *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy* (2005) and (by Irigaray)

'The Fecundity of the Caress' (1993). Levinas challenges the notion of Being as it relates to alterity, offering a notion of the relation between self and other as a threshold of obligation in which the other does not become subject to the rules of the sovereign self who makes of all others something interchangeable, but rather risks losing Being depending on the demands that alterity brings. In Derrida's reading, Levinas's most significant contribution is to question the logic of sameness and the one which constitutes the dominance of thinking philosophy in and through Greek (and one might, indeed, update this with a change in the language to German that consistently philosophically returns to the Greek). For Levinas, Hebraic thought was brought to bear on the dominance of the Greek, and thus Greek and Jew were pitted against each other, but, as Derrida put it quoting James Joyce, Levinas, in spite of himself, poses the question of a historical coupling between Greek and Jew: 'Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet' (Derrida, 1978b: 153). In attempting to show how the philosophical tradition shaped by the Greek is blind to alterity in its logic of the same and finally its Hegelian totality, Derrida wrote that Levinas's thought sought to develop an ethics based on alterity, indeed an ethics of hospitality, that ultimately risked unwittingly replacing an ethics of totality with one of infinity, both of which shared the violence of the metaphysics of presence:

> to liberate itself from the Greek domination of the Same and the One (other names for the light of Being and phenomenon) as if from oppression itself – an oppression certainly comparable to none other in the world, an ontological and transcendental oppression, but also the origin and alibi of all oppression in the world. (1978b: 82–83)

Levinas seeks a form of relation to alterity through the face of the other, seeking a release from an ontological philosophy (articulated in relation to Heidegger), and Derrida, and differently Irigaray, will show how that ethics of alterity is itself based on an androcentric metaphysics of presence; one that articulates a relation to alterity that seeks absolute otherness and yet demands some aspect of presence – a manifestation of the transcendental signified in form – in this context, through the face, or at least the visage … (which I take, in the French, to be a little more expansive than the physical characteristics suggested in the English). Taking the emphasis off a structure of Being introduces in principle a framework for thinking about the violence of that Being that situates itself in a homeland linked etymologically to a language of the political, of dwelling, of belonging which is nonetheless androcentric and constitutionally anthropomorphic. The relation to alterity in Levinas makes the ethical opening up of the self, the putting at risk of oneself, of the priority given to the Other who makes demands for an ethics of hospitality, in principle, into an ethics of asylum. It makes of one's self a site of habitation of alterity, constitutionally formed and deformed by it affectively. This site of affect in a way suggests that the transformation of heteroaffection into auto-affection is less a narcissism and more an acknowledgement of the manner in which the unfamiliar

inhabits being. This is not an ethics that seeks rights for the Other or a new ontology. It cannot know what the Other needs or wants, or indeed should have prior to an encounter with the visage. But it also seeks some relation to a transcendental figure through that encounter.

If Derrida, from the mid-1960s to the time of his death in 2004, sought to develop an ethico-political with and against Levinas, it was to seek out risk in relation to an alterity without a face, without a body even, acknowledging the violation done by bodies in the moment of encounter, showing therefore the proximity between the Greek – the philosopher – and the Jew – a kind of anti-philosopher – set up in opposition in Levinasian thought. And yet what does it mean to risk border and boundary with the insane, the foreign, the violating man, the beast, the animal, the rock, the sick, the divine, or for our purposes, the ur-difference of psychoanalysis, the feminine? To become partly them as one risks opening to them. It means not to be given Being through dignity or name, to be made substitutable and not simultaneously. In Derrida's language, it was showing that both self and other are prosopopoeias – faces and voices emerging that have an affective, spectral presence that is otherwise than the knowing Being of saturated belonging. Affect, in psychoanalysis and deconstruction, then, becomes an ethics of hauntology.

In Derrida's *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy* and Irigaray's 'Fecundity of the Caress', we see also a questioning of the gendered metaphoricity of touch in Levinas which fails to address the potential violence and stability to and of the feminised other. Touching, caressing, become the Ur-sense, just as a certain melancholia becomes the Ur-affect – one that is open to alterity, that works at the threshold of Unbelonging in order to break free of the stranglehold of Being to spectral content. In its singularity, affect is what Nancy would call a singular-plural. Psychoanalytic and particularly Freudian notions of affect form the means for the threshold philosophy that makes of affect a technology – a techne and an ethics – of difference. In photographic terms, as Derrida puts it, 'One has to acknowledge that nothing is altogether natural in this world, everything is shot through with law, conventionality, technology (nomos, thesis, techne)' (2010a: 39). Writing again of the Greek as if to show the impurity of that imagined site of the pure origin of philosophy, he shows how the notion of an origin of the art work becomes caught up in its own techne – a self-referentiality or self-touching that carries the history of the problem of self within it. One can understand affect as auto-affection as a time of unbelonging – an 'auto-affective synthesis in which activity itself is passivity' (Derrida, 2010b: 14). The work on affect and visuality in Derrida, that begins with his work on painting and framing, demonstrates affect as an auto-affection, a touching, which is also always a heteroaffection, both introverted but always in relation. In the space between the one who touches and the one who is touched is the trace of alterity making even the most intimate caress of oneself into a hiatus. Affect, then, becomes the porous form of the parergon, a relationality, an opening of the singular onto the other. Rather than announcing a new ontology, it recalls a relation to materiality shaped through the technological,

which asks us to consider the interface of ontology and the ontic – an epistemological task that understands affect as the anxious spectral form of the interface.

Note

1. This is true even in Kathi Weeks' (2007) wonderful essay, which comes closest to paying attention to this.

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