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Passive engagement and 'the face': The possibility of witnessing, recognising and recovering mediated bodies in suffering

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ABSTRACT

The viewer of the televisual image often looks away from the mediated suffering of (distant) bodies, victims of terrorism, overwhelmed, helpless, seemingly consigned to a despairing passivity. But to not look is to refuse recognition of these suffering bodies and to accept their effacement (in death and mediation) as subjects. This paper adopts a Levinasian approach to 'the face' to discern a way for the viewer to bear witness and establish a social connection with mediated bodies in suffering. Ultimately, for the viewer, it is not agency but responsiveness that matters, a *passive engagement*; an openness and a readiness to respond to the Other's call upon us, which makes possible a meaningful engagement. The effacement of mediated bodies in suffering cannot be reversed, but in the viewer's recognition and respons(ibility) it can be exceeded, transcended and they can be re-covered finally as subjects.[1]

"To inflict suffering is not to reduce the Other to the rank of object, but on the contrary is to maintain him [or her] superbly in his [or her] subjectivity" (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 1969: 239).

The contemporary understanding of atrocity is principally a product of the impact of televisual images, constructed, selective and decontextualised; the viewer can feel helpless, even overwhelmed daily by images of terror and suffering. In the 'consumption' of mediated terrorism, the viewer of the televisual image is hauntingly confronted with an irresolvable dilemma; as Susan Sontag writes (2003: 43), "the gruesome invites us to be either spectators or cowards, unable to look". Often, the viewer chooses to look away, or not look at all. But to not look is to ignore the suffering of those (distant) bodies. It is to refuse recognition of them as others with whom the viewer shares the world. And it is to avoid and deny the viewer's own responsibility, in their death and their mediation.

Effect, affect and effacement, in mediation and death

Terrorism seeks to efface its victims with the express aim of communicating to other parties. Its 'success' depends on its victims being witnessed, for atrocity "must be made visible to terrorise"; such atrocity selects, or rather targets, victims and "reduces them to de-humanised objects" (Humphrey, 2002: 91). Terrorism "objectifies and codes the victim's body … made to signify a

category and no longer an individual subject" (Humphrey, 2002: 94). Indeed, it "is the body's capacity for pain that makes it available for objectification" (Scarry, 1985 cited in Humphrey, 2002: 25). Atrocity "starkly reveals … the vulnerability of individual life to all claims to power" (Humphrey, 2002: 4). Yet, arguably, effacement through (violent) death is mirrored by that through mediation. The camera, and by extension the (news) media, is often conceived of as seeking to objectify those it seeks to represent; what is represented becomes "something that can be possessed" (Sontag, 2003: 81). The subject is appropriated (as mediated victim-body), and his or her suffering is thus diminished, perhaps even denied.

The viewer of the (televisual) image continues to be exposed to ever more (distant) violence and trauma, yet while the camera allows one to witness it also serves to alienate or separate one from what, indeed *who,* is witnessed. Sontag (2003: 106) further argues that the surfeit of images "keeps attention light … [and] relatively indifferent to content". Humphrey (2002: 96) claims that when atrocity and death is seen "on (the other side of) the screen we watch it passively as a spectacle, we don't react to what we see in the same way as if it were actually happening to us". The viewer is thus granted the freedom to 'see' by the camera/image, but the freedom to act, to intervene is withheld; after all, the represented events have transpired and the possibility for action passed/past. Yet conceiving of the relation of viewer to image (and to who is *contained* in the image) in such a way serves to insulate the viewer from responsibility for what one sees (both the act of viewing *and* the acts viewed). Watching the innumerable bodies in suffering, victims of atrocity, presented as distant and anonymous, "protects but also prevents [the viewer] from comprehending the Other's experience of pain and suffering" (Humphrey, 2002: 99). Further, it serves "to collectivise the Other's death as if it belonged to them as a category" (Humphrey, 2002: 101). Their victim status thus presented as inevitable, the viewer becomes inattentive, alienated, blunted into passivity by the inability to act and the insulation from responsibility.

Yet is it necessarily any better to be moved, affected by the mediated suffering? Certainly, Humphrey (2002: 91) argues that affectivity "is the primary mode of connection between victim and witness" and that "the priority of affect over cognition in the media" restates its importance in establishing meaning. On the other hand, Sontag (2003: 80) expresses increasing concern with media "exploitation of sentiment … and of rote ways of provoking feeling"; for in so far as "we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering" (102). For Sontag, sentimentality and sympathy are simple, facile responses, even 'impertinent' and 'inappropriate'. In sympathy, just as in indifference, we also abrogate our responsibility (for seeing and for what is seen). It seems then, given the objectifying and annihilating effects of mediated terrorism, that alienation and indifference or an equally impotent sympathy are the despairing lot of the viewer of the televisual image.

However, I argue that a renewed ethical space for the *re-covery* of mediated bodies in suffering *as* subjects is possible by adopting a Levinasian approach to viewership, but it requires a shift from *what* the viewer sees to *how* the viewer views. Or, more precisely, a shift from what the viewer sees to *who* the viewer views and, more than that, *how* the viewer is also (the) *viewed*. Such an approach affords the viewer a meaningful way to respond ethically to (the often anonymous) mediated bodies by re-conceiving the relation of the viewer to the image *and* to the viewed. The paper seeks to demonstrate this by disrupting and overturning typical notions of viewer and viewed, viewing and being viewed, not to replace viewer passivity but rather to activate it; to propose a reconstituted viewership underpinned by a radical passivity, a *passive engagement*, to make possible the re-covery of mediated bodies in suffering as subjects.

Although the appropriation of Emmanuel Levinas's applied ethics could be regarded as an example of the totalising tendencies he critiques (i.e. assimilating and marginalising difference, seeking to bring it into the Same), the paper—not written from any avowed position of authority on Levinasian thought—is intended primarily to stimulate discussion on the possibilities of contemporary viewership. And it is perhaps Levinas himself who opens a way for just such an

extension; his response to watching the suffering of children on French television, "Nothing is nobler than exposing man's misery" (cited in Lewis, 2007: 83).

Witnessing the face of the Other

For Emmanuel Levinas, ethics as 'first philosophy' concerns my relations with the other(s) and originates before the foundation of philosophical principles, rules or codes, when the face (*le visage*) of the Other discloses itself to me, 'face to face'. The face "is simply there, present to me in an originary and irreducible relation" (Davis, 1996: 46). It is disclosed as absolute Other and 'breaks into' my lived experience, "still a thing among things, [it] breaks through the form that delimits it" (Levinas, 1969: 198), implying that it was *already* and *always* there; absolutely beyond my comprehension—ultimately unknowable, mysterious. It "comes to [me] unexpectedly, and calls [me] out of [myself] and into an ethical confrontation" (Davidson, 2008: 43). It cannot be assimilated, nor is it an object for my cognition or manipulation, since anything we can 'know' becomes the Same (see Critchley, 1996). Significantly, the face is *expression,* "a source of meanings coming from elsewhere rather than the product of meanings given by me" (Davis, 1996: 46); "I do not struggle … but I respond to [the face's] expression, to [its] revelation" (Levinas, 1969: 197).

The encounter with the face shows me the existence of a whole world outside myself. This encounter both precedes and exceeds my experience; ethics precedes ontology (Bergo, 2007). As a real part of the human body, it may be available to be empirically encountered, but ultimately the face "*impose[s] oneself* above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form … in a mode irreducible to manifestation" (Levinas, 1969: 200, emphasis in original); it "lies outside and beyond what can be seen and experienced" (Davis, 1996: 135). For Levinas, and the viewer of the image, it is both the reality of the encounter *and* the elusiveness of the face that are crucial. For "[w]ithout the possibility of real encounters, the Other would be a senseless abstraction; but if the encounter were only phenomenal this could easily become an object of perception or knowledge" (Davis, 1996: 135).

Thus, for Levinas ethics is a *response* to what is out there already; it originates from without. The Other's 'regard' *of* me constitutes me as self, "an 'I' discovers its own particularity when it is singled out by the gaze of the other" (Bergo, 2007: para. 4), and challenges me to respond. In provoking recognition, the Other in turn commands respect and humility. The face of the Other *elicits* my responsibility; and "in calling [me] to responsibility, it founds [me] and justifies [me]" (Levinas, 1969: 197). I can neither accept nor reject this responsibility because my existence is entirely bound up in my relation with the Other (Davis, 1996). We are therefore "ethical in [our] very foundations, involved in ethical relations whether [we like] it or not" (Davis, 1996: 53). This does not mean that we will respond in an ethical way, only that we *must* respond.

For the viewer of the image, to witness is no longer to be able to feign ignorance of suffering, and it is to assume a measure of responsibility. In witnessing suffering "social connections [can be] created between victim and witness, establishing a basis for moral responsibility" (Humphrey, 2002: 91). And as Sontag (2003: 117) observes, although "[i]mages have been reproached for being a way of watching suffering at a distance … watching up close—without the mediation of an image—is still just watching". *All* witnessing "involves an epistemological gap whose bridging is always fraught with difficulty". This is a difficulty compounded by geographical and cultural distance, but "[t]o judge from appearances is the fate of all who have to rely on communication for access to others' experiences" (Peters, 2001: 713). Paradoxically, just as atrocity must be made visible to terrorise, witnessing—whether in person or through a text—is likewise essential for the recognition of its victims.

However, as Davis (1996: 133) observes, to witness or look, is also "associated with perception and knowledge, therefore it annihilates the face … by bringing it within the sphere of the Same". Since we cannot even comprehend the Other, the only "way of suppressing it is to seek its annihilation" (Davis, 1996: 50). So mediation, like death, can be argued as the attempted destruction

of the face, its mystery and infinity. Yet Levinas argues ultimately that the Other cannot be annihilated. An individual 'face' can be—this cannot be dismissed nor its tragedy diminished—but the face of the Other, his or her *face*, never can be; it "resists possession … in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp" (Levinas, 1969: 197). It "remains inviolate and inviolable. The face appears in my world but does not belong to it; I can do it no harm" (Davis, 1996: 50-51). The face transcends the suffering body (*and* its representation) but, paradoxically again, also facilitates its re-covery after loss. Although death and mediation seek to efface the suffering body, this effacement is never total, never complete. Admittedly utopian, Levinas demonstrates the futility and ultimate failure of violence, "that it can never succeed in its true aims" (Davis, 1996: 51); it "is still a power, for the face expresses itself in the sensible, but already impotency, because the face rends the sensible" (Levinas, 1969: 198). The face exceeds and *survives* the obliteration of any individual face. The frailty and strength of the Other is thus mirrored in death and mediation. In both it is always available for appropriation, but despite this, can never be fully grasped, ensuring "the survival of alterity" (Davis, 1996: 141). The Other is not just someone who can be seen, but is someone who also sees, who also regards (us). Respecting otherness thus lies in our resisting the Other's annihilation, and makes re-covering victims possible.

The face and re-covering victims as subjects

Sontag's discussion of the photos of victims taken at Tuol Sleng prison by the Khmer Rouge demonstrates the need for a Levinasian approach to the viewing of images. Thousands of men, women and children were held at the prison, located in a former school in the Cambodian capital, Phnomh Penh, in the latter half of the 1970s. Photographed, forced to produce false confessions and tortured before execution, of an estimated 17,000, only 12 detainees survived. In Sontag's opinion, those photographed "remain an aggregate: anonymous victims" (2003: 60), demoted to representative instances of their impending plights. However, the face— *their* faces—must not be confused with or reduced to "anything we might see, thematize and appropriate" (Davis, 1996: 133), for this would "make of [each] an intentional object of the perceiving consciousness" (Davis, 1996: 46). As Levinas writes (1969: 50-51), "[t]he face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me". These victims-to-be, their singularity denied, only their plights known to the viewer, silently and defiantly stare out at the camera. Each stares out *and* through the camera/photograph, at those that seek to objectify them, murderer and viewer alike. The photos are undoubted visions of terror and trauma yet the faces therein cannot be confined to mere representation, these suffering bodies exceed their representation in their stare, in their regard; each face "overflows images … [and] never becomes an image or intuition" (Levinas, 1969: 297). The viewer of the images, even now, is included in this regard and implored/compelled to assume responsibility, to acknowledge they and their suffering. Their faces call on the viewer to respond, to recognise them as Other, and to re-cover them as subjects.

Another more contemporary example further supports this line. Following the Madrid train bombings of March 2004, in which 191 were killed and over 1500 injured, the Spanish edition of the *Metro* newspaper ran a series on the victims.2 A person close to each victim was asked to relay their personality, life and hopes. Accompanying each piece was a portrait of the victim. In this way, each was effectively and poignantly memorialised "through a portrait, not as a picture of a corpse … biographically and subjectively re-covered for their readers" (Humphrey, 2002: 104). In this way the viewer of the images can also re-cover the face of the victims of Tuol Sleng. The viewer may not have any biographical information or personal stories, but sees each as each was—not as they were to become—alive, like the viewer; terrorised certainly, but *the face* extant. They are (ever more) memorialised, and they and the trauma they suffered acknowledged and witnessed. For the viewer of the images cannot be indifferent when attending to each face *as face*. The 'bodily' face may have been erased, but as exhibitors of *the face*, the subjects can never be erased while the viewer

acknowledges them and responds to their call upon him or her. They transcend their representation, transcend their violators, transcend their effacement.

The third party and re-covering the 'faceless'

Yet what of those bodies in suffering we do not see clearly, or who are hidden (from mediated view) entirely, perhaps even annihilated? In lived experience, we are readily open to the face of the Other. Yet, while my responsibility for the Other is absolute, each exhibitor of the face is not always or equally present to my lived experience. Likewise, in the 'consumption' of mediated terrorism it is not always easy to discern and respond to the face of mediated others. A body in suffering will not always so evidently slip or transcend its representation. Something more therefore seems to be required if the viewer is to be able to witness and engage with *all* distant, mediated (suffering) bodies.

According to Levinas, in the encounter in which I discover the Other, "the potential presence of innumerable others is also revealed to me" (Davis, 1996: 52). The simultaneous disclosure of this third party (*le tiers*) shows, not only that a world exists outside of myself, but that one exists outside my relationship with the Other, that I share the world with "a multiplicity of others, in which each subject is unique" and each responsible for all (Davis, 1996: 84). For as Levinas writes in *Otherwise than Being* (1998), the third party "is always potentially present in the proximity of the Other, because the Other is never simply *my* Other; the Other implies the possibility of others, for whom I myself am an Other". The third party 'interrupts' my relationship with the Other and prevents it from becoming self-enclosed; "it is with the third [party] with which justice begins" (Levinas, 1998: 150).

This possibility is pertinent to our many encounters with the 'faceless' third party in the coverage of terrorism, and a BBC documentary on the Madrid bombings, "The Drug Dealer, The Estate Agent and The Telephone Man" (Taylor, 2005), serves to illustrate this.3 While the images and testimony of bloodied survivors readily disclose the face to the viewer, it is those suffering bodies that cannot be seen clearly, those in body bags, those strewn across the tracks and those in the wreckage of the trains that are now my focus. For their existence as the third party—*potential* or, in this case, *hidden* rather than disclosed faces to and for me—does admit that in one's experiences of mediation, just as in lived experience, the viewer *feels* varying intensities of 'faceness'. However, as Moran (2000: 349) observes, "[o]ne does not actually have to see someone to face the ethical demand of their 'face'". The viewer of the image is compelled and, more importantly, able to open him or herself to these innumerable and potential Others, with whom one shares the world. As Levinas (1969: 297) notes, justice "consists in again making possible expression … [it] is a right to speak." The victims and many survivors, *all* bodies in suffering and exemplars of the third party, may not directly disclose the face to us; we may not even encounter their (mediated) existence. Yet it is nevertheless possible for the viewer to also recognise their face. Like the Other, they too are deserving of and compel one's response and responsibility; in "the proximity of the other, all the others than the other obsess me, and already this obsession cries out for justice, demands measure and knowing" (Levinas, 1998: 158).

Responsiveness as a passive engagement

Sontag (2003: 102) suggests that viewers do not become inured "because of the quantity of images dumped on them. … It is passivity that dulls feeling". Yet Levinas argues that it is not agency but responsiveness—a fundamental or absolute passivity—that matters in my relations with others. Agency suggests that the Other is manipulable and can be grasped, whereas responsiveness is an openness to the Other and a readiness to respond to the Other's call upon me. Such responsiveness, such a *passive* engagement, is admittedly difficult, but as Sontag (2003: 117) duly recognises, "images cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn". Yet, as Levinas

attests, our capacity to assume the suffering of the other in no way goes beyond passivity; "translat[ing] into a fundamental reconceptualization of what the subject must be like for ethics to become possible" (Zeilinger, 2009: 107).

According to Levinas, my absolute responsibility for the Other is necessarily one-sided, and "not mirrored by the Other's reciprocal responsibility towards me", for this too "would imply that I was empowered to speak for the Other" (Davis, 1996: 51-2; see also Bergo, 2007). As such, the relationship cannot be universalised and we must accept morality "as aporetic, never resolved, without recourse to comforting principles which help to simplify difficult choices" (Davis, 1996: 53). The goal then for the viewer of the image is to bridge the inevitable epistemological gap accompanying his or her relations with the Other *and* its mediation, accepting that this gap can never be fully bridged. This requires laying oneself open to the Other and 'going beyond' the images to discern the face. It also requires 'going beyond' images in *looking for* and recognising the face to also facilitate an ethical response to the third party; to declaim "'Here I am' as a witness of the [face], but a witness that does not thematize what it bear witness of" (Levinas, 1998: 146). It requires all this, accepting that since my responsibility and obligation are absolute, "they exceed my ability to fulfil them, always demand more, are never satisfied" (Davis, 1996: 54).

Levinas' ethics of the face and the third party does not, and cannot tell the viewer of the televisual image how to witness the (distant) suffering of Others; rather, it represents "a challenge" (Davis, 1996: 144) and, more than this, a possibility. Since suffering must be witnessed in order to recognise its injustice, by adopting a Levinasian approach to the 'consumption' of mediated terror the (mediated) Other can be regarded not just as someone to be seen, but as someone who also sees, as someone who also *regards* us. After all, as Sontag (2003: 87) observes, photos of suffering and death, of the victims of Tuol Sleng, of Madrid, of anywhere, "are more than reminders of death … [and] victimization. They invoke the miracle of survival" in their continual perpetuation and renewal of memories. The effacement of mediated bodies in suffering, victims of terror, cannot be reversed, but in the recognition and respons(ibility) of the viewer of the image—in the viewer's response as (also the) *viewed*—it can be exceeded, their victim status transcended, and they can be re-covered finally as subjects.

Notes

1. An early version of this paper was presented at the Interrogating Trauma conference <http://wwwmcc.murdoch. edu.au/trauma/main.html>. An Interrogating Trauma conference book anthology (co-editors Antonio Traverso & Michael Broderick) is expected to be published in 2010. I would also like to thank the anonymous readers for their excellent and challenging responses to my paper for *ACCESS*, and I hope to have responded adequately to their criticisms.

2. The *Metro* was a free daily newspaper available across Spain. Metro International <http://www.metro.lu/> announced that the Spanish edition of the newspaper was to cease distribution in early 2009 <http://www. spanishnews.es/20090201-free-metro-newspaper-ceases-to-exist-in-spain/id=195/>. Ironically, it was distributed outside the (underground) rail system.

3. The documentary was part of a three-part series entitled, *The New al-Qaeda*, and was aired in Australia on the SBS TV program, *Cutting Edge: Terrorism Special*, in December 2005.

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