



Corporeal Passions: Experiments in Visceral Writing

*Intelligence in chains loses in lucidity what it gains in intensity.
The only logic known to Sade was the logic of his feelings.
(Albert Camus, 1956: 36)*

The Unknown Life of the Body

In Western tradition, the body has been considered an obstacle not only to intelligence but also to action. It is quite puzzling to think of the body not being relegated to meanings and representations. Paradoxically, if the body has a magical plenitude for active forces, it is also a passive agent waiting to be inscribed by particular logos. In the realm of social sciences a certain metaphysics setting dualisms between body and mind, subject and object, nature and culture, as well as presence and significance has been at work. The life of the body still remains unconscious and un-theorized. Gilles Deleuze, writing on Spinoza and Nietzsche, diagrams a philosophical reversal by posing a paralelism between body and thought.

... the body is no longer the obstacle that separates thought from itself, that which it has to overcome to reach thinking. It is on the contrary that which it plunges into or must plunge into, in order to reach the unthought, that is life. Not that the body thinks, but, obstinate and stubborn, it forces us to think, and forces us to think what is concealed from thought, life.

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987:189)

Artaud is Screaming

Antonin Artaud struggled to mobilize, in his own life, those forces of dispersion and conflict that the binary language separating language and affect, thought and sensation, is not able to encompass or represent (Barber 1993). At times, he impelled to have recourse to conceptual language, yet only in order to turn language against itself. His scandalous and aberrant actions insisted that physical expression preceded intention and the existence of any possible context to be articulated. In Artaud, thought and language, passion and word emerge out of vociferations, screams and physical contortions, and not from symbolic articulation. For Artaud everything must be made body, for thought is affect and not a form of cognition that must be constructed apart from it.

*a blow
anti-logical
anti-philosophical
anti-intellectual
anti-dialectical
of language
pressed down by my black pencil
and that's all.
(Barber citing Artaud 1993: 144)*

Corporeal Aesthetics

*Ever since I can remember, my critical sense was nourished by bodily sensations – tense muscles, clammy feet, shoes too tight, breath too tight, holding back wanting to laugh – or to scream. Not feeling good in my skin was my way of criticising the definition my culture was giving to the situation. Cultural meanings are sensed bodily as being wrong. Just plain wrong. How else are people capable of social protest? If we were in fact always, already produced by our respective cultures, how could it ever come into our mind to resist them?
(Susan Buck-Morss 1997: 40)*

The Greek *aisthitikos* captures the field of intensities perceived by the human sensorium. The practice of such *corporeal aesthetics* reveals a poetics of materiality and embodied forms of knowledge. Susan Buck-Morss argues that due to the narcissistic illusion of control of the modern man, aesthetics has come to connote detached contemplation rather than *instinctual cognition*. Moreover, for her modern man's detached perception is related to the excessive stimuli characterized by the shock of modern life, war and industrialization. Beyond modernist approaches that often numb the human sensorium by making it invisible,

corporeal aesthetics attempts to address what the body does in the material world by posing perception before presence. Inspired by Virginia Woolf (1931), here the body writer makes tactile and irritant contact with the eventuality of particular corporeal aesthetics. The stream of paragraphs should mobilize fields of intensity, an ambivalent myriad of sensations and stimulation of the flesh that foregrounds a space of contradiction, perplexity and clash.

Double Sensation and the Flesh

Merleau-Ponty gives the example of the continuum of the toucher and touched of two praying hands in order to exemplify the notion of *double sensation* (1968). This indeterminate mutuality in which one experiences the double sensation of being subject and object simultaneously illustrates the fundamental gap of the *flesh*.

But what happens when what we see, even though from a distance, seems to touch you with a grasping contact, when the matter of seeing is a sort of touch, when seeing is a contact at a distance? What happens when what is seen imposes itself on your gaze, as though the gaze had been seized, touched, put in contact with appearance? (Maurice Blanchot 1981:75)

Let me point out that the notion of *flesh* indicates the undecidable zone where the reversible phenomenon of looking and being looked at takes place. This pre-symbolic domain of the *flesh* explores the reversibility of perception in which subject and object, in mutual interaction, change, evolve, link and separate. De Certeau (1979) has also explored the notion of the *flesh* by pointing out that in it there is a certain residual materiality, an unthought suffering that remains prior and irreducible to inscription and textualization.

The Vision of Grace

Is Beauty an Affliction –then? (Emily Dickinson 1975)

This is the proposal for powerfully materialist researchers. Far from clearing the space of disembodied reflection, body writing should reveal and express the secret life of the flesh, a life that is so often compressed and extreme that becomes hardly bearable. This experiment on visceral writing is fully devoted to the bodies that refuse psychological involvement and identification. Thus, the spiritual is itself a quality, an affection of the body. This proposal does not treat beauty and pain as duality, problematising such a distinction by their bizarre complicity in life. Finally, let me point out that grasping the flesh with

austerity, minimalism and reticence should not be considered holding back emotion, for in its own right it constitutes a positive and affirmative form of knowledge. Let the writings of body writers be infested by a splendid vision in which grace cannot be distinguished from suffering and abjection!

I saw that even at the worst days, when I thought I was utterly and completely miserable, I was nevertheless, and nearly all the time, extremely happy. (Maurice Blanchot 1981: 12)

The Story of The Eye

Let me briefly comment upon the spherical metaphoricity of Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (1982). In the preface essay, Roland Barthes argues that in this bizarre story of an object, everything takes place on the surface in a way that is circular and explicit. In fact, the *avatars* the globular object passes through –egg, milk, testicles and moon– has no secret reference behind it. Instead it articulates a fluid contagion of qualities and events.

The world becomes blurred; properties are no longer separate; spilling, sobbing, urinating, ejaculating form a wavy meaning, and the whole of Story of the Eye signifies in the manner of a vibration that always gives the same sound (but what sound!). (Roland Barthes 1982)

In Bataille's narration, the Eye is modified by a series of globular objects that are intimately related to it, yet simultaneously they can be considered as radically different. This double condition can be also found at work in the *wavy meaning* and relentless contagion of properties and events. Just as the transforming process of Bataille's Eye, exploring roundness and whiteness in a space of physical materiality– gives way to bizarre metaphorical extensions; quotidian sensory contact with vibrating appearances may articulate strange wavy meanings. This mutating and mobile fluidity, a kind of *anamorphosis*, is an example of Luce Irigaray's *mechanic of fluids* in that it articulates the drive toward becoming rather than being, that is, toward eventuality and historicity, rather than punctual fixation

Intransitive Writing

It is that which at this instant, issuing out of a labyrinthine tangle of yeses and nos, make my hand run along certain paths on a paper, marks it with these volutes that are signs: a double snap, up and down, between two levels of energy, guides this hand of mine to impress on this paper this dot, this one. (Primo Levi 2000: 25)

Intransitive writing refuses any distance between the writer, the subjects that the text refers to and the reader. Unlike most historical and ethnographic narratives, the author does not provide a channel to access a certain area of facts and events that are separate from the author and ultimately from the reader. This style of writing is not so much a form of reflection of something independent to the act of writing, but is instead an event. The result of the intransitive writing or middle voice is that a narrator addressing objective facts disappears, and one is to join him or her in the procedural construction of producing the real. The perpetual turning away of the middle voice, which neither asserts nor negates and marks the radical exteriority of thought to itself, allows body writers to produce a murmur with no origin, a strange discourse that cannot properly be said to be owned by the author.

The Outside

... to pray, is to throw yourself in this transfiguring arch of light which spans from what goes by to what is about to happen. It is to melt in it in order to lodge one's infinite light in the fragile little cradle of human existence. (Clarice Lispector 1989: 19)

Clarice Lispector suggests that there is an irreducible gap between the pleasant experience of smelling a rose and saying so. When one puts words to an event, inevitably one betrays something. I have worked the irrevocable separation between experiencing pleasure or pain by capturing it through the saying, by ceaselessly ricocheting against an *outside* that cannot be appropriated.

I have captured the instant from which the light, having crashed with a true event, was approaching its consummation. It is coming, I said to myself, the end is coming, something is taking place. I was seized by joy... I see it, I see the light beyond which there is nothing. (Maurice Blanchot 1981: 26)

The *outside* is never where one finds it. It is singular, multiple and different from itself. It is the limit beyond which there is nothing. It cannot be crossed, yet it is continually, always, already crossed.

It fills the being before the mind can think.
(Wallace Stevens 1990)

But what is this *outside* that assays one's body and reminds us that we may not be of our own? What is there, at the other side, infesting my body subatomically from within, so unattainable and irreducible to the integrity of the self and the completeness of the world? The intruding impulses of the *outside* do not only

ruin individual perspective, but perhaps more importantly, they compel me to change. This does not mean that our desires are frustrated by a cruel fate. It may be instead harder to endure the fact that the force that defeats oneself is the same that which sustains that very self.

Blindness and Insight

It was night itself. Images which constituted its darkness inundated him. He saw nothing and, far from being distressed, he made this absence of vision the culmination of his sight ... Not only did this eye which saw nothing apprehend something, it apprehended the cause of its vision. It saw as object that which prevented him from seeing. (Maurice Blanchot, 1988: 15)

The idea of a potential loss of sight threatening vision from within is usually perceived as disturbing and scandalous for Western rationality. Beyond the fear that it is usually associated with darkness, writers such as Paul de Man (1983) and Jacques Derrida (1993) have located blindness at the heart of seeing. Contrary to the ocular-centric approach, this implies exploring the uncertain and productive ambiguity of blindness as another radical way of knowing. Nowadays, it is still intolerable for many anthropologists to consider vision to be captive by that which it cannot see, even if our thinking and seeing is assayed by certain thought that does not let itself to be apprehended. Deeper than the fear that meaningful visions may collapse into blindness, its *secret sharer*, there lies anthropologists' intense anxiety when having to face that which we are incapable of seeing. In fact, a meaningful and significant death may be somehow less terrifying than a life that continues blinded in another form, that is, the incessant and often brutal production of meaning, values and equivalences. Let me here point out anthropologists fear to stop making sense. If we are to transcend the dualism between investigating the other and the exploration of interior space by staring inwards and outwards simultaneously, we should also bring into play the blind spots of their alert blinking eyes.

The Face of the Other

The face... a moment of generosity... Someone plays without winning... Something that one does gratuitously, that is grace... the idea of the face is the idea of gratuitous love. (Emmanuel Levinas 1989)

Emmanuel Levinas refers to the nudity of the face as a strange blankness in which an infinite movement exceeding presence takes place. The proximity of the other's face requires the anthropologist to remain in the absence or void of the face to

face perplexities, rather than denying such highly uncontrollable immediacy. Remaining along the demand of the other's face –in an asymmetrical relation- implies a judgement without criteria, in the sense that it may not be predetermined according to a specific ethical position. The face of the other intrudes upon my privacy, and it is due to this blinding gratuity that moral acts cannot be reduced to measures of negativity and possession. The intimacy of the face escapes my grasp. In fact, it cannot be brought into a closure in the form of communion, effacement or solipsism. Its excessive proximity is an authority without a force, that is, a demand without sanction or reward. Moreover, the other cannot do anything, for it is precisely the other's weakness that exposes my strength, my ability to act, as responsibility. One may witness and experience disorienting instances –such as death, rape or even the encounter of a nude smile- where moral standards happen to be suspended, while simultaneously affirming the most radical differences and solidarities. The closest emotion is often the most distant, for it is removed from stable presence or being-in-the-world.

Las Meninas

In the painting *Las Meninas*, Diego Velazquez caught the painter exactly at the moment when he is still looking at his model and is simultaneously about to paint the model. Michel Foucault (1970) points out that right in the space of oscillation, between visibility and invisibility, lies precisely the fine line where no one and no one thing rules, where all sovereignty is undermined, where incompatible spaces, epistemes, and modes of discourse struggle for dominance. Due to the complex play of absence and presence in the labyrinthine network of looks in the painting, no matter how accurately the inside is made visible outside, or the outside is made visible inside by doubling, a gap that cannot be extinguished continues to exist between the onlookers. This irritant gap, an irreducible instability that one encounters at the core of representation, complicates the process of representation and throws one back to the process of self-reflexivity. In the form of a spiral, the process repeatedly turns at the core of representation not in order to preserve the previous order or establish transcendence, but instead to celebrate a radical break and rearrangement of the epistemological field itself.

Zabala's Photography

The complex exploration of reality by Zabala's camera attempts to transform being by putting to work unsuspected correlations in material and affective dimensions. His photography seeks to transform consciousness by foregrounding the absolute unity of reality to bizarre forms of perception. Zabala's camera is a

machine that is already immanent to the world, rather than a device standing at a distance. This is photographic work in which the gaze of the beholder happens to be aberrantly displaced by getting immersed in a shocking space of horror, obscenity and excess where one sees that which is intolerable to see. This foregrounding of the material affectivity belongs to a photography that effaces categories and in their place erects a fetish, the formless, the uncanny. This bizarre complicity inherent in Zabala's image making explores the multilayered and complex fabric of reality in a way in which perception and representation cannot be treated separately. Much in the vein of Man Ray, Boiffard, Bellmer and Uzac (1985), in Zabala's photographs there is often a gesture to embrace not only static materiality and violence, but also the evidence of the flesh and nothing but the flesh. When viewing these photographs, one finds oneself unable to interpret appearances and expressions. Indeed, it is not possible to ascribe these postures, gestures and appearances to any sort of interiority or psychological depth. Their super-real quality makes one intensely aware that corporeal aesthetics in fact precedes identity formation. The exploration of banal, un-signifying and unconscious gestures of daily life suggests that for this aberrant form of seeing, identity is a transitory effect. Zabala's photographic camera, in this sense, explores the space between the imperceptible and the ultra-theatrical, between the unconscious and the extremely conscious, between the uncoded and the over-determined.

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This article is composed by materials taken from the Phd *Berlin fin the millenium: An Experiment in Corporeal Ethnography* submitted by the same author in 2003 at the University College of London.