

Thursday, 12th, 3.50pm-4.40pm

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Original abstract:

Theories of Practice: An Ethics of Film Analysis

With film theory the "text" that is film has at times encountered diverse readings that account for potential relations to and of the subject. Marxism, feminism, formalism, structuralism, phenomenology and psychoanalysis have all offered positions of the subject (both film and its viewer) in relation to their discrete disciplinary borders. However, it may be that in terms of a film's relation between theory and practice, the discipline of psychoanalysis has the most unresolved dispute. Clinically speaking, psychoanalysis treats the human subject and not a film text, and while it has been argued that there exists the possibility for film to be either analyst or analysand, a deeper ethical question is opened around practice. A clinical ethics of the subject suggests that in transference the analyst keeps her unconscious out of the session. This paper probes the possibility of such a reading of the textual filmic encounter that keeps open this ethical domain of psychoanalytic practice. Is it possible to encounter a film, to produce its reading, via the ethics of psychoanalytic practice? What would it mean to do an 'analysis' of film where one's unconscious is kept professionally at bay? Does it even make sense to treat an engagement with film as if it were a clinical experience?

This strategy brings into proximity questions of theory and practice, ethics and psychoanalysis in relation to the work of Joan Copjec on psychoanalysis, ethics and film. Her work on sublimation in relation to ethics and readings of filmic space will offer a register for my reading of P.T. Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*. Her position that gathers together sublimation and invention will develop on from Lacan's insistence on a difference between objects and themselves. In addressing the thematic of the conference *Pathologies of Enjoyment* this paper suggests a new pathological engagement with film and the subject through the absented unconscious of analysis itself. In doing so, this 'reading' aims at another ethical direction where the film / its unconscious speaks for itself.

Introduction: Ethical Subjectivity in Levinas & Lacan

My identity today comes from the place of the other that is filmic. I use the term *filmic* as a strategy for marking out a beyond of the encounter with film that is mediated by stories, characters, genres etc., that is often the case when the tools of psychoanalysis are applied to film theory and criticism. I will not be addressing a film in particular or films per se as though this proper name were adequate enough to contain the range of methodologies, styles, disseminating encounters in the service of the screen. Rather, I wish to probe the experience of being with film; being in screen space, in order to question a more originary space. That is, why is it that we endure the screen? How has it come to possess us spatially and temporally? This space of the other that is filmic, is rather a space between other and self, other and subject, which marks here a critical ethical import for a weaving across psychoanalysis and philosophy. Regardless of a filmic encounter or that with another subject in and out of the clinical setting, both encounters engage in productive forces within systems of representation and reproduction. Forces most often that are highly mediated and impartial. In bringing together the radical ethics of Emmanuel Levinas and the ethical practices of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis, I hope to open up a possibility around the success of a vision as acknowledged failure; a failure that opens up onto a new discourse on being with the other that critically probes the violence inherent in vision that is more than a

harmless fantasy. Further, it is the work of Emmanuel Levinas that offers up a new way of seeing, which he nominates as a vision without seeing. This vision without seeing that brings to appearance our encounter with another finds correspondence in the ethics of psychoanalytic practice and which Simon Critchley connects from Freud's writing on "the Thingly secrecy of the neighbour"; something which we will return to at the end of the paper. Whilst, it is certainly not an easy fit to bring Lacan and Levinas into proximity, and indeed only few writers have done so to date, I want to suggest that they identify a common formal structure to ethical experience, despite many insurmountable differences at the level of content. A common structure that I wish to thematise at the level of a resistance to the fantasy of visibility and appearances in terms full inscription. For Lacan, in his Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ethics is articulated in relation to the order of the real:

"My thesis," Lacan writes, "is that moral law, the moral command, the presence of moral agency in our activity, insofar as it is structured by the symbolic, is that through which the real is actualised — the real as such, the weight of the real." (p.20).

The real is often depicted as appearance insofar as it is impossible to inscribe its full meaning; this performatively-speaking *is* the real. As Lacan states: the real is "that which resists, the impossible, that which always comes back to the same place, the limit of all symbolization". Whilst we will return to this furtive place in more detail, this obscure gloss on the real in relation to the inherent link to the ethical structure coincides centrally to a Levinasian interstitial site of ethical resistance.

Non-Indifferent Vision

For expedience sake or lack of time, let us first return to the scene of filmic encounter to move through a domain of visibility or 'visual arts' that for many years has critiqued the problematics of representation and symbolic exchange. Further I would like to bring together these critiques through an examination of an ethics of the screen in terms of its disseminating potentiality to reach into mass-consciousness; to examine if you will the symbolic dimension of ethical subjectivity.

So, how does the intervention of film develop the experience of being ethical? What is the experience of being ethical or point of resistance in encountering a medium that is saturated with rich symbolic language? Is there a politico-ethical responsibility at stake given the filmic dissemination reaches into the hearts' of mass-audiences and into our public i.e. shared spaces?

It is this latter question to which Hannah Arendt offered a partial answer to when in 1958 she defined the democratic public sphere the "space of appearances" of that is, what phenomenology calls "stepping forth". Arendt famously wrote:

"The polis is not the city state in its physical location it is the organisation of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose no matter where they happen to be. It is the space of *appearance* in the widest sense of the word, namely in the space where I appear to others and others appear to me. Where men make their appearance explicitly." (Arendt *The Human Condition*, 1958: p.42).

Since then other political philosophers have tied the public space to *appearance* though not necessarily in so many words. In the early 1980s *Claude Lefort*, influenced by Arendt, introduced ideas, which have become the key concepts in the discourse of democracy. Concepts, which link the notion to *appear* to the declaration of rights.

LeFort said that the hallmark of democracy is the disappearance of certainty about the foundations of social life beginning with the democratic revolutions of the 18th Century that destroyed monarchical power. And with the French and American declaration of rights the power of the state was no longer attributed to a transcendental source, such as God, Natural Law, self-evident truth. Now power derived from the people. Yet with the disappearance of references to an outside source of power an *unconditional source of social unity* of the meaning of the people vanishes as well. While the people are the source of power they too have no fixed meaning, no substantial identity. [Possibly add some Foucault here]

Democracy says, Lefort is instituted and sustained by the dissolution of the markers of certainty. It inaugurates a history in which people experience a fundamental indeterminacy as to the basis of power, law and knowledge, and as to the basis of the relations of self and other.” (Lefort, *Complications: Communism and the Dilemmas of Democracy* (Columbia University Press, 2007, p.12.)

The meaning of society; the basis of the relations between self and other is decided within the social world but is not imminent there. Rather democracy gives rise to community spaces; a realm of possible ethico-political interaction, which appears when in absence of a proper ground the meaning and unity of the social order is at once constituted and put at risk. Because the social order is uncertain in the deep sense of being founded on a groundless ground, and therefore impossible, it is open to contestation.

So what is recognised in this community founded on a groundless ground is the legitimacy of debate or other forms of contestation (such as art or critical encounters) about what is legitimate and illegitimate. These forms of resistance or contestation are initiated with the declaration of rights, but the democratic invention deprives rights just as it has the people of a substantive foundation. Like the people, rights become an *enigma*, without objective guarantees, entangled with politics, their source isn’t nature but the human utterance of right and the social interaction implicit in the act of declaring. Through this interaction those who hold no position in the political community make an appearance. When social groups lay claim to new specific rights they join a long history of struggle against oppression. In declaring new rights they repeat the original democratic need for freedom and equality and also declare what *Étienne de La Boétie*¹ calls ‘a universal right to politics’; The right to appear as a speaking subject in the public and communal sphere. The space of appearances, the shared space of community, appears then with declarations of the right to appear.

Coming into Appearance; an ethics of exposure

¹ *Étienne de La Boétie, The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, translated by Harry Kurz and with an introduction by Murray Rothbard, Free Life Editions, 1975.

As I said earlier, defining what it means to suggest an ethics of the screen encounter through a critique of the ethico-political question at stake in its disseminating potentiality; a potentiality that mediates a rich symbolic language in shared i.e. communal exchange, seems to suggest here that we are in a space of appearances. It is a space in which we appear collectively; not only because we often share viewing with others, let us call them an audience, and this term is appropriate for its consumerist connotation. And yet we also share the lives of others in existence within the diegetical and symbolic fabric of the film.

So, to be engaged in filmic encounter is to appear but also, and this is ethically more significant, to be exposed to the appearance of others. The space of appearance idea, evidences a transparent relation between being ethical in a shared sense and to visibility and thus suggests an opening to some of the initial questions posed: How does the intervention of film develop the experience of being ethical? Is there a politico-ethical responsibility at stake given the filmic dissemination reaches into the hearts' of mass-audiences and into our shared spaces?

Indeed, the space of appearance implies a special and two-fold role for both those who deal with the production of images and the role of the viewer within this system of reproduction. That is, in terms of a deepening and extending of the space of an ethico-political experience that brings into question the saturation of meaning and identity and furthers the encounter of otherness; of the invisible; the marginal to come into appearance.

Here, however, we encounter a problem. For important strands of contemporary art and film theory and more broadly of intellectual thought have criticised vision, precisely because it is the sense that instead of welcoming others as other, tends to meet them in relation to make them disappear. Transforming the other into an object of knowledge, vision is mediated by a desire to reinforce the subject's mastery as is thus triumphal rather than responsive. If then exposure to others lies at the heart of democratic politico-ethical life, the question of how our encounter with film, or in more broader terms, screen space (and let us not forget the sub-textual theme of the psychoanalytic session) develop the experience of this exposure, calls for still other kinds of questions:

With what kind of vision shall we meet the appearance of others? Can our being with the screen help establish ways of seeing that does not seek to reduce the experience of exposure? What kind of vision overcomes apathy and overcomes this response to the suffering or differences of others? In short what is communal sight or vision? Before addressing these questions and as a caveat, my emphasis here on the communal is thought alongside a radical notion in line with philosophers such as Jean Luc Nancy's *inoperable community*, Maurice Blanchot's *disavowable community* and Giorgio Agamben's *coming community*. Further it is a community that I want to emphasise does not fall into the realm of a public/private dichotomy and hence, I feel has some currency within the "private" space of clinical practice. Further the conceptual approach to ethics of Levinas of which we are about to introduce, is a conceptual framework that refuses to be an ethics based on the discourse of the master, but equally refuses the unsatisfactory option of what, David Ross Fryer states as "a modern and even postmodern ethics based on the reduction of the ethical to one's own life" (*Intervention of the Other: Ethical Subjectivity in Levinas & Lacan*, New York: Other Press, 2004: 5). It is beyond the modernist category self, and even the postmodernist notion of

subject is contestable and perhaps, his thought situates itself more comfortably in the current discourse of post-humanism.

An ethics of appearance: The third party

To return; the radical re-evaluation of ethics undertaken by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, offers I think some answers to these questions around what kind of vision shall we meet the appearance of others? A way of thinking about relations between vision, representation and the space of appearances that challenges triumphalist vision. For Levinas conceives of the other as an *enigma* rather than an object of knowledge. He is concerned not with the appearance of the I (eye *le moi... check this spelling*) ... “Isn’t there something like a war inherent in this affirmation of oneself” he asks (*Totality & Infinity*, p.12). But, rather, with the way I call myself into question when exposed to the appearance of the other. He calls the other person who appears to me, the face. What Maurice Blanchot has rightly described in his writings on Levinas “a curvature of intersubjective space” (*Totality & Infinity*, 291). But the face is more than the other person in the world. It manifests the other in the sense of that which cannot be made fully visible or knowable. The face is tricky territory in that it is a focus on the “non-phenomenon” of the face; that which cannot be contained in consciousness. As David Ross Fryer and Simon Critchley both pick up on, it is a shift in Levinas’s work from phenomenology to “ethical language”. One of the terms in Levinas’s ethical language is *trauma*, which we shall come to focus on in order to bring out the links between Levinas and the psychoanalytic dimensions of ethical experience. Let us say for now that for Levinas the ethical demand is a traumatic demand.

Describing the other as that which approaches but cannot be reduced to a content, Levinas distinguishes what *appears* from what is *fully seen*. What is more, when the other appears, she is accompanied by something else, what Levinas calls the third party. The approach of the third party is not like that of an other person in an empirical event but rather an awareness that the other is never simply my other. Rather the other implies the possibility of others, for whom I am myself an other. I am made to realise that the other does not merely exist for my sake. That my neighbour is also a neighbour to the third party and indeed that to them, it is I who am the third party. With the notion of the third party, Levinas enters the discourse of a non-dialectical relation; what he calls ‘relation without relation’ (Critchley 59). For the third party lifts the encounter with the other beyond the space of a dyad, and places it into space that only *appears* from a third-party perspective as equal, symmetrical and reciprocal from a neutral, third-person perspective that stands outside that relation. That is the relation can only be totalised by imagining myself occupying some God-like, third-person perspective outside of the relation. When I am within the relation, then the other is not my equal and my responsibility toward them is infinite. It is such a non-dialectical model of intersubjectivity that Levinas has in mind; hence ‘relation without relation’. The third party is, to quote Levinas, “the whole of humanity, that looks at us”. We might start to imagine that it is the screen space that takes up this place on the high-point of this inter-subjective curvature. And therefore the relation with the face, insofar as it is always a relation with the third party, “places itself in the full light of the communal order”. The other’s (the film’s etc) approach bespeaks the social world, but what it tells me is that I cannot meet that world from a position of full understanding, the world is not mine. Levinas puts it like this “the presence of the other is equivalent to this calling into question of my joyous possession of the world”. Levinas dispossession of the subject of knowledge recalls the dissolution of certainty, that in the Lefort accompanies the collapse of the ground of the social.

Both Lefort and Levinas are philosophers of the *enigma*, of that which escapes comprehension and dismantles the subject. The inhabitant of the Lefortian or Levinasian communal sphere does not aspire to total knowledge and impartial vision with which he can supposedly perceive a foundation unifying the social world. Such knowledge and vision eliminate otherness that which is unamenable to the would-be unity. Rather the disappearance of certainty that calls us into social and communal space, obliges us to be what Levinas calls “non-indifferent to the appearance of the other”. Non-indifference designates an ability to respond in ethical responsibility, that for Levinas is the essence of the reasonable being in man.

The concept of non-indifference is part of an ethical political discourse that differs from tradition discourses of morality. Here is how Levinas distinguishes his ethical philosophy from other meditations on morality:

“Let us say very schematically that one begins habitually with the universality of the moral law, the great Kantian idea. For Kant it was a matter of re-attaching ethics to a rationale principle, the universality of the maxim of action being for Kant the criterion of moral value. My manner of approaching the question is in fact different. It takes off from the idea that ethics arise in the relation to the other and not straight away by reference to the universality of a law.” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pg 45).

Morality is a discourse of certainty, while the ethical political is incompatible with moral certainty, for responsiveness to the face of the other, turns us away from our narcissism. Interestingly in our context Levinas links responsiveness to vision, but also and more significantly he links it to a critique of vision. A word (vision) he surrounds in scare quotes, alerting us to dangers of the relations it signifies. “Ethics is an optics”, writes Levinas, but he continues, “it is a vision without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalising objectifying virtues of vision. A relation of a wholly different type.” (end quote). Communal vision on this account foregoes totalising and objectifying images. Levinas, Like Lefort marks a departure from traditional, if critical accounts, of the communal sphere, which assume that being in relation means aspiring to impartial vision which siezes the totality.

If philosophers and those who deal in the criticality of images have deepened and extended the communal sphere of appearances one component of their task has been the promotion of vision without image of, that is, non-indifferent ways of seeing. And because non-indifferent vision obliges the subject to call itself into question, thinkers who explore its possibility take part in the psychic subjective transformation, which like material transformation is an essential component rather than mere epiphenomenon of social change.

As I hope has become clear, however, furthering non-indifference is not simply a matter of producing images, films for instance, that go against any main-stream symbolic transaction and hence, the alternative image of those subjects that have been rendered invisible in the existing social sphere of appearance. That is, of making true images of these groups in order to counteract false ones. For as we have seen, and as Judith Butler argues, Levinas’s face of the other is precisely that which is lost when caught by the image, when seen as image. We have arrived at a final question: How can the encounter with screen space develop the

experience of being ethical by aiding the appearance of others while also making visible the limits the face places on the success of any representation? Limits that are the conditions of appearance.

[IF I WERE TO DO A READING OF A FILM? *SECRET LIFE OF WORDS*, IT WOULD BE PLACED HERE]

Consider this film that in some way goes toward a struggle with an ethics of the image.

Witness by Proxy—The psychoanalytic space of ethics:

Let me suggest a possible discourse that describes a relation of the screen and the viewer as one of witness. A witness not of proof but of testimony, which I would like to now correspond to the psychoanalytic clinical experience. What we will come to describe here as a *witness by proxy*. Perhaps, this is my radical contribution today in a possible positioning of transference in an interstitial zone.

The screen-space develops the viewer's experience of being communal or social by facilitating the appearance of the face of the other. Though it may seem odd to use the term face, even whimsical, to bring up the face in connection both a film whose character is blind and further to a community that shows no faces of an audience and what is more, and emphasises its failure to do so. But the lack of faces is precisely its point, for as we have seen, Levinas's face is not the literal face, but precisely that which alludes the grasp of full knowledge and vision; In approaching, in appearing the face exceeds what can be seen, rather Levinas says "the face speaks". [BRING IN SAYING AND THE SAID] The face exceeds vision, insofar as vision is, and again in Levinas's words "a search for adequation". Indeed the face cries out for inadequate vision, which is to say, response.

Insisting on inadequate vision the FILM was influenced by and belongs within a tradition of visual arts that was informed by feminist critiques of representation. Visual art that produces critical images whose goal is to undo masculinist ones. Those driven by ideals of the subject's adequacy, impartiality, completeness. Critical images set up a relation of non-indifference to the other, promoting a vision without image. Here feminism opens onto human rights, at least a notion of human rights that takes its point of departure from La Fort, who, to repeat myself wrote that "the French and American declarations of the rights of man made an *enigma* of both society and right. That enigma, remember, arises from uncertainty about the basis of society and of right. It brings us into the social space and exposes us to the appearance of others. If we accept, rather than try to evade the enigma, the rights of man implies that, as Levinas puts it, "consciousness of the rights of the other man, whom I am answerable".

Answering is urgent for the survival of the social sphere, or perhaps, I should say the 'curvature of inter-subjective space' based on 'relations without relations'. For if one current task of the producers of critical images and for that matter the visual historian and critic, in developing the experience of being ethical is to establish new and non-indifferent modes of seeing. This task urges us to counter the ways of seeing promoted by the symbolic sphere of appearance that is the Corporatised mass-media. Writing recently about the role of the cultural critic about the US etc war on terrorism, Judith Butler suggests something similar "If cultural criticism has a task at the present moment, says Butler, it is no doubt to return us to the human where we would not expect to find it. We would have to interrogate the

emergence and the vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, at what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense.”

The limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see and what we can sense, Butler is describing Levinas’s face understood as the cry of human suffering that demands response. Butler contrasts Levinas’s use of the face, with the dominant medias literal use of faces in ways that may be humanising or dehumanising, but in either case, cover over suffering. The dehumanised faces of Osama Bin Larden, Yosof Arafat and Sadam Hussien, says Butler, have been deployed to encourage disidentification with the Arab World. At the same time the unveiled faces of young Afghan women liberated from the Berkah humanised the war, but do so in manner that symbolises the successful importation of American culture. Presented as either the spoils of war or the targets of war, faces like these marshalled in the service of war, silence the suffering over war. Butler calls them triumphalist images not just because American triumph is their thematic content or subtext but because, like what I have called masculinist images, they disavowal the failure of representation and thus blot out the appearance of the face.

By contrast critical images promote non-indifferent vision. In doing so they contribute to the transformation, not only of the blind-eye, but the deaf ear. In this regard, the transformative potential of critical images can engage its viewers’ in a kind of seeing and listening, known as witnessing. An activity that seems crucial in our time of collective, human inflicted traumas, such as war, that call out for witnesses.

Philosophers like Giorgio Agamben have theorised the position of the witness as the basis of ethical political relations, insofar as the witness answers to the suffering of others without usurping the place of the other. Primo Levis, writing about himself as a survivor witness of Auschwitz, inaugurated the discourse about witnessing as a way of being for the other. When he insisted that the survivor of Auschwitz himself isn’t a complete witness since he or she didn’t undergo the complete experience of Auschwitz, which was an experience of death. The survivor witness says Levi, is a witness by proxy; a witness for the other. For in the case of Auschwitz, the Musselman; the malnourished inmates who were dead in life. Since by definition the complete witness is the one that cannot speak. Levi’s account blurs the distinction between primary witnesses; those that testify to a traumatic event that they lived through and secondary witness; those who observe the testimony of the primary witness. He makes himself a secondary witness who performs the gesture that Levinas describes as “seeding one’s place to the other.”

SAY SOMETHING ABOUT THE FILM & WITNESS BY PROXY OF JOSEF THE BLINDED WITNESS TO HANNAH’S TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE ... NOTE THAT HANNAH CONSTRUCTS AN OTHER “FICTIVE” WITNESS (BY PROXY) BEFORE AND DURING HER TELLING.

Like vision without image, witnessing is a way of seeing that challenges the subject’s mastery since it requires an acceptance of vulnerability. As Cathy Caruth argues in her book *Trauma Explorations in Memory* (1995), to bear witness to the truth of suffering over a traumatic event, is to bear witness to that event’s incomprehensibility. By definition the traumatic event that’s caused suffering has not been fully known or experienced. The victim suffers from

incomprehension. Taking Freud as her starting point, Caruth, says to know trauma is to understand too much and therefore to betray the victim. This poses a problem for representations that want to respond to the suffering of others. While traumatic suffering calls out for the event to be witnessed, it creates a need for a new kind of witnessing. The witnessing of an impossibility. Witnessing in the ethical sense of answerability, thus requires a critique of triumphalist images based on notions of representational adequacy.

IF I'M TO INTRODUCE THIS I NEED TO TALK ABOUT THE AUDIENCE WHO WATCHES A FILM ABOUT AN EXPERIENCE THEY MAY HAVE EXPERIENCED (SURVIVED):

“THE SECRET LIFE OF WORDS” FILM / Projections as *works as a work of therapy* in its notion of witness by proxy. In this sense it refers to therapy for a troubled society through its mnemonic representations and also refers to therapy for remembering the atrocity of war on communities of people. In this sense, the film space through its telling of a silent ruined condition resemble people who have been rendered silent both by historic trauma and historic and present indifference. Like Hannah who was unable to speak of her identity when confronted by the initial blindness (both literal and emotional) of her patient, Josef who is limited by his own suffering.

The critical handling of the film's imagery answers silently to the status of a speaking subject, calling out of its mute condition, talking and engaging in ethically in relation with it, like a psychoanalyst. The projection also helped the human victim speak by highlighting the supplemental language of her gesturing hands that care for her patient, while withdrawing from a seeing that is mapped out by gestures of recognition akin to a unity of a met gaze. In this sense the film protects the speakers, both the true witnesses who sit outside this film space yet has experienced (survived) the trauma of war first hand, and from the grasp of *vision with image*; vision that knows too much and so betrays the speaker. In this way the screen space facilitates the appearance of the face and offers the viewer the position of witness, whose inadequate vision permits her to respond to the cry of suffering.

Trauma; an ethical language

To repeat myself, the non-phenomenon of the face as that which cannot be contained in consciousness is a shift from phenomenology to what Levinas describes as an “ethical language”. A language made from some strange and hyperbolic terms such as *persecution, obsession, substitution, hostage and trauma*. As Critchley notes: “Levinas makes the extreme claim that my relation to the other is not some benign benevolence, compassionate care or respect for the other's autonomy, but is obsessive experience of a responsibility that persecutes me with its sheer weight. I am the other's hostage, taken by them and prepared to substitute myself for any suffering and humiliation that they may undergo. I am responsible for the persecution I undergo and even for my persecutor; a claim that, given the experience of Levinas's family and people during the WWII, is nothing less than extraordinary. *Trauma* was not a theoretical issue for Levinas, but a way of dealing with the memory of the horror. Levinas describes the relation of the infinite responsibility to the other as trauma. (Critchley, p.61)

The ethical demand is a traumatic demand. Further, for Levinas, responsibility, begins with a subject approving of a demand that it can never meet, a one-sided, radical and unfulfillable demand: “To be I signifies not being able to escape responsibility” or again, “to be a ‘self’ is

to be responsible before having done anything”. I, as it were, decide to be a subject that I know I cannot be. I give myself up to a demand that makes an imprint upon *me* without my ever being able to understand *it*; beyond comprehension. I am an existential exaggeration. This is why Levinas’s main thesis is an ethics before being; it is an excess of ontology; of being.

To bring our hypothesis closer to Lacan; The ethical subject is defined by the approval of a traumatic heteronomous demand at its heart. But, importantly, the subject is also *divided* by this demand, it is constitutively *split* between itself and a demand that it cannot meet, but which is that by virtue of which it becomes a subject. The ethical subject is a split subject (a split that is asymmetrical of course).

Lacan – An Ethical Acknowledgement: In excess of Knowledge

Earlier, I mention that for Lacan in Seminar VII *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* ethics is articulated in relation to the order of the real and further the real is that which always come back to the same place; the limit of all symbolization. The basic thought here is that the real is that which exceeds and resists the subject’s powers of conceptualization or the reach of its criteria. The thesis here is that ethics is articulated in relation to the order of the real insofar as the real is the guarantor of what Lacan calls *das Ding*, the Thing. Ethics is a relation to the real and what stands in the place of the real is the Thing.

What exactly is the Thing? The main example of the Thing in the ethics seminar is Freud’s figure of the *Nebenmensch*, the fellow human being or neighbour. Everything turns on the interpretation of a single passage from Freud’s early 1985 *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. Let me paraphrase the key passage: Freud talks about the complex of the fellow human being’ or even ‘the neighbour complex’. This complex breaks down into two components, Freud says. One the one hand, if I look at another human being, say someone I know well, then there are things about him or her that I understand and that I can describe, such as facial features, mannerisms, tone of voice, etc. However, Freud goes on to claim that there is something about the neighbour that escapes my comprehension and which stands apart from me, *als Ding*, as a Thing. Therefore, as well as I might know someone, even someone I share my life with, there is a dimension of *Thingly Secrecy* about them that I cannot know. In his commentary on this passage from Freud, Lacan writes, ‘The *Ding* is the element that is initially isolated by the subject in his experience of the *Nebenmensch* as being by its very nature alien, *Fremde*.’ What interests Lacan is the idea of the Thingliness of the other person is something alien to me but which is located at the core of my subjectivity. The Thing is, we might say, the excluded interior, where I discover that what is most interior to my interiority is exterior to me, it is ‘something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me.’ (i.e. *the uncanny, host as hostage, welcoming the stranger etc*).

How can I ever know the other person is in pain? I *cannot*. That is to say, there is something about the other person, a dimension of separateness, Thingly secrecy or what Levinas calls ‘alterity’ that escapes my comprehension. That which exceeds the bounds of my knowledge demands *acknowledgement*. An acknowledgement that in the clinical setting and indeed my collapse of being with others engaging the trauma of the image, we might describe as *witness by proxy*. As previously suggested, while traumatic suffering calls out for the event to be witnessed, it creates a need for a new kind of witnessing. The witnessing of an impossibility.

Witnessing in the ethical sense of *acknowledgement*, thus requires a critique of our role of participating with triumphalist images based on notions of representational adequacy.

There is a *neighbour* or *nebenmensch* intricacy at work in both Levinas and Lacan. For both of them, ethical experience begins with a heteronomous demand, the infinite demand of the other's face in Levinas, the demand of the fellow human being who stands in the place of the real in Lacan. Furthermore, the demand of the Thing lodges itself at the heart of me, as the excluded interior. We might think here of the Thing as a traumatic mark within the subject, yet foreign to it. It is a mark that as mentioned earlier, is by definition the traumatic event that caused suffering that has not been fully known or experienced. The victim suffers from incomprehension and we are witnesses to this incomprehension, by proxy, by *acknowledgement* of the limit to our knowledge.

One might say that the psychoanalytic experience begins with the recognition of the *demand* of the unconscious, the impingement of the fact of unconscious desire in the form of the symptom. In the analytic situation, that is, if the analysand has *agreed* to the interpretation of the symptom, the fact of this desire provokes an act of *approval* of the part of the subject. That is, the subject decides henceforth to relate itself approvingly to the demand of its unconscious desire. This demand produces what I see as the categorical imperative of Lacanian ethics and which is the motto of *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 'do not give way on its desire' (*'ne pas céder sur son désir'*). That is, do not cease to approve of the demand of unconscious desire in the activity of its interpretation. For Lacan, it is this act of approval that founds the subject, where he claims that *'tout le cheminement du sujet'*, the entire itinerary of the subject, articulates itself around the Thing that casts its shadow across it. Thus, psychoanalysis has the *ethical* goal of putting the subject in relation to its desire. This is why Lacan can claim that Freudian psychoanalysis, as much as Kant's critical philosophy, subscribes to the primacy of practical reason. The difference between Lacan and Kant, like that between Levinas and Kant, lies in the gap between the heteronomous and autonomous determinations of the ethical subject. The unconscious is not a law that I wilfully give myself, it is a law to which I am involuntarily given. The ethical question is ultimately how I transmute the passion of the unconscious.²

² Critchley is concerned that Levinasian ethics with its focus on trauma risks amounting to nothing less than a long philosophical suicide note or at the very least an invitation to some fairly brutal moral masochism. In his view, thinking of the work of Melanie Klein, the trauma of separation requires *reparation*, the ethical *tear* requires *repair* in a work of sublimation that would be a work of love. In other words, Levinas risks producing an ethics without sublimation, which risks being disastrously self-destructive to the subject.