

THE SKIN IS FASTER THAN THE WORD

Manu Bazzano

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To the memory of Kō Murobushi and Marcello Cua

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Abstract Affect belongs to a pre-verbal domain of intensity. It is recognizable as ‘emotion’ or ‘feeling’, a subjective content that is a socio-linguistic adaptation in the service of convention, even more so with current widespread attempts to measure and regulate affect. Although normally neglected because crudely perceived as unstructured and chaotic, affect is crucial in the process of transformation.

Key words: affect, Cyborg, audit culture, human-animal continuum, Body-Without-Organs

Introduction

What follows is an exploration of *affect*, understood as the pre-verbal, impersonal flow of life’s intensity and immediacy traversing living organisms. Hard to assimilate, affect is habitually translated within subjective human experience as sadness, desire, joy, fear, ecstasy, anxiety and so on. It is rendered as emotion, feeling, and sensation. This diverse subjective content is nonetheless only a form of socio-linguistic adjustment driven by the essentially reactive work of consciousness. In our societies of control (Deleuze, 1992), the inherent autonomy of affect (Massumi, 1996) is forcibly and reactively directed towards adaptation and compliance and driven warily away from actualization.

The compulsion to measure and control affect is not new – nor is, thankfully, the desire through history to be free from its stultifying grip. From Plato to Husserl, from Artaud to Lyotard great examples abound of resistance, passion and intelligence that partly inspire these musings.

The talk/performance, on which this article is based, journeyed through a series of metamorphoses from machine to Cyborg to human to animal.

Obsessive Measurement Disorder

Not everything that counts can be counted. Not everything that can be counted counts

(Saying attributed to Albert Einstein)

Affect is routinely quantified, measured, regulated; it is pathologized through a widespread form of institutionally endorsed pathology, a peculiar condition for which Andrew Natsios (2010), once administrator of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) coined an apposite term: *Obsessive Measurement Disorder*. OMD has effectively invaded not only government policies but also the humanities, including therapy's own potential space (Winnicott, 1971/2005), jeopardizing in the process the increasingly rare chances for individuation, blunting the emergence of autonomous thought, bringing about a veritable *atrophy of the noetic*, as well as aborting the articulation of an organismic idiom independent of the corporate technostructure within whose precincts and shopping arcades therapy now mainly operates.

In his 1906 novel *Kusamakura*, ('Grass Pillow') Natsume Sōseki (2008) tells of a nameless thirty-year old painter/poet who retreats to the mountains at a remote, almost deserted hotel. He becomes intrigued by the mysterious hostess, O-Nami. She reminds him of the John Millais' painting Ophelia. Strangely, when reading about O-Nami, I thought of Medea (Euripides/Vellacott, 1963), the tragic heroine whose pronouncements obliquely motivate these reflections. Looking for subjects to paint, the artist makes only a few sketches. He writes poetry and short prose pieces instead, quoting a variety of painters, poets and novelists. At some point, he feels compelled to explain why he has no desire to go back to Tokyo, stating that if you live in Tokyo too long, they'll start counting your farts.

Sōseki was voicing his dislike for the overbearing culture of Japan in the Meiji era (1868-1912), and there certainly are echoes of the above in our current climate dominated, some would argue, by *the McNamara* or *quantitative fallacy*, named after Robert McNamara, the US secretary of defense from 1961 to 1968. It involves making a decision based solely on quantitative observations (or metrics) and ignoring others. The reason given is often that these other observations cannot be proven. I hear this sort of complaint regularly by trainees who have been told that neither empathy, nor authenticity or the unconscious exist because they can't be measured. Daniel Yankelovich (1972, Internet file) summarized the stages of this major pitfall:

The first step is to measure whatever can be easily measured. This is OK as far as it goes. The second step is to disregard that which can't be easily measured or to give it an arbitrary quantitative value. This is artificial and misleading. The third step is to presume that what can't be measured easily really isn't important. This is blindness. The fourth step is to say that what can't be easily measured really doesn't exist. This is suicide.

Bodily Ontology

Affect is shunned, feared, and neglected. What is perceived as “[a]ffect exaggeration is ... contained ... or, in extreme cases, dealt with by the appropriate professionals” (Massumi, 2002, p. 219). A herd of mental hygiene practitioners are busy instructing the public on how to regulate affect. Within a relatively short time, *affect-regulation* has become the unanimously accepted goal of the mental health industry, now providing a neurons-firing, state-of-the-art, multi-coloured brand new edition of Attachment Theory for the Geek Generation (e.g. Schore & Schore, 2007). On the whole, the public appear to give in to the mental hygienists’ often unsolicited guidance, possibly because the idea of learning from the domain of affect sets off a preternatural fear of life – of its raw intensity and immediacy – activating a bigoted reading of life as unstructured and chaotic, as unintelligent and in constant need of genteel edification. The price paid for acquiescing to this set of wearisome and dim-witted manoeuvres is high: we forfeit transformation. Unlike genteel ‘personality change’, *transformation is not possible* without a process of direct learning (as opposed to translation/repression) from the domain of affect.

Affect does not belong to either taxonomy or *structure*. No transformation can really take place within structure, for structure is a place where nothing ever happens (Massumi, 1996). Affect is *outside* structure; it is felt, however at the level of the skin and the body. Appeal to the body is here deliberately at variance from current anodyne notions of ‘embodiment’, with their evangelical ‘felt sense’ that makes of the body a unified messenger of a singular ‘truth’, or accredits it with the aura of a gnostic soul.

‘The body speaks’, we are told. ‘It speaks beyond thought and abstraction’. But the body is dark, plural, traversed by a multiplicity of sounds and smells and textures and tongues; it says many things at once. We are but *a coalition of affects*. Moreover, this body is not ‘mine’; it belongs to the world; it *is* the world; it may be compared to a revolving door between the wonderful chaos of the world and the sweeping simplifications of the intellect (Bazzano, 2019). Its ‘being-world’ means that it is at all times implicated in the furthest reaches of multiplicity as well as inscribed within an infinite text we forever fail to decipher.

In our endeavour as therapist we would do well, I believe, to turn away from romanticized notions of a felt sense deemed to be the dependable conduit of a universalized notion of embodiment. We would need to conceive instead – in more ‘materialistic’ terms perhaps, in the sense of a ‘materiality’ beyond inert ‘matter’ (Bennett, 2010; Coole & Frost, 2010; Bazzano, 2012) – an incarnate “bodily ontology” (Butler 2010, p. 2) that won’t let us get

away with forgetting that there are bodies subjected to greater precarity than others – bodies whose injuries and lamentations are considered less worthy of our careful and cordial sorrows. Judith Butler writes:

To be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, that that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology. In other words, the body is exposed to socially and politically articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality – including language, work, and desire – that make possible the body’s persisting and flourishing. The more or less existential conception of ‘precariousness’ is thus linked with a more specifically political notion of ‘precarity’. And it is the *different allocation of precarity* that ... forms the point of departure for both a rethinking of bodily ontology and for progressive left politics in ways that continue to exceed and traverse the categories of identity (Ibid, p. 3).

Bodily ontology is equally opposed to the idealistic, surrogate-theology of ‘Being’ that is canonical within the folds of *Existential Therapy Inc.*, and wedded instead to that *ontology of actuality* formulated by the early exponents of the Frankfurt School (Dews, 1986).

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Back from his constitutional in the Black Forest, the Shepherd of Being in plus-four goose-steps into the scene, shouting:

Dasein! *Da* Sein!

A barely audible frightened voice, the voice of a child, replies:

Here Sein?

The command is now furious:

Da Sein! *Da* Sein!

The child’s voice (– bewildered, shocked, realizing with horror an appalling truth. As in Haneke’s film *The White Ribbon* (2009), when Anna’s little brother asks: ‘Must we all die?’) implores:

Here (*Hier*) Sein...

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Android Therapy

A client comes to therapy. He says he doesn’t know if his boyfriend *really* loves him. It’s been up & down in their relationship for six months now. Sometimes he feels loved and cared for, other times he isn’t sure, feels neglected, taken for granted, thinks his partner finds others more attractive. He wants to appease this crippling anxiety, wants to sleep soundly at night. We agree: gaining certainty about his partner’s love will improve his physical and mental health. That’s why I came to see you, he says – to see positive change. Yes, I concur –

empathically, authentically. I am here to foster positive change. I want to help; I want you feel better so that you can go back to love and work & whatnot.

I have a suggestion, I say. It's tried and tested. I've got statistics, I've got numbers. It's, you know, evidence-based. Bear with me please, I say; let me give you the background, the context. Did you know that you can now *measure* exactly how much your partner loves you? Does he love you more or less than other people love their partners? Now you can find out! I can measure for you the available evidence. It will give you the certainty you rightly crave. It is, as I said, evidence-based. With a group of colleagues, I have identified the relevant population. We counted how many times a week partners are brought coffee in bed, counted how many times they are hugged, how many times they are told 'I love you sweetheart'. We then set up benchmarks against which individual performance was measured, with the intention to increase the quality of loving among weak partners. We went further. In order to entice this group and get them to perform better, we kept lists of those who were single but who went above the benchmark when they did have a lover: "the threat of competition from other love-providers stimulated out-performance" (Collini, 2018). Two months after introducing the benchmarks, we found that the average increase of coffee in bed was 23.5%.

Tic toc, tic toc, tic toc, tic toc

Ontic toc, tic toc

Ontic toc, tic toc

That sounds interesting, my client says, but how is it going to help me? No worries, I say. Here, get your partner to wear this *LovBand* on his wrist so that you can record evidence of his loving at all times. You will get real-time statistics indicating he currently stands on the *Global Love Indicator*.

Data before Existence

Fragments of the human float up, then blast through the metal/concrete/plastic body of the machine. They are cracks and blemishes, splinters of forgotten songs, one of which takes its cue from my heartbeat:

Arithmetic Arithmetoc

I turn the hands back on the clock

How does the ocean rock the boat?

How did the razor find my throat?

The only strings that hold me here are tied around the peer

And so a tender kiss brings madness with the bliss

And I'll think of this when I'm dead in my grave (Waits, 2002)

Business ontology: the ancient dream of universality has been finally realized – by the market. ‘We’re truly sorry Jill. Your numbers aren’t good enough. We’ll have to let you go’. In 2001 the US government put up measures to advance educational outcomes in underperforming schools. They called it NCLB, ‘No Child Left Behind’ (Muller, 2019). Under NCLB, scores on standardised tests were established so as to measure success and failure. The threat became high for teachers and principals, whose wages and employment relied on this indicator. Unsurprisingly, teachers rerouted time and attention away from the sort of hands-on education that didn’t turn up in the metrics. The education the children received deteriorated by the minute. The scores went up in metrics. When some twenty years ago the UK Department of Health brought up penalties for those hospitals where A&E waiting times went beyond four hours, some hospitals responded by keeping incoming patients in queues of ambulances, beyond the doors of the hospital. They would start the clock only when patients were admitted.

A number is a signifier like any other

For Lyotard (1984), technologization inevitably leads to the abdication of responsibility in the name of performance. He wrote:

The true goal of the system, the reason it programs itself like an intelligent machine, is the optimization of the global relationship between input and output, that is, its performativity. Even when its rules are in the process of changing and innovations are occurring, even when its dysfunctions (such as strikes, crises, unemployment or political revolutions) inspire hope and lead to belief in an alternative, even than what is actually taking place is only an internal readjustment, and its result can be no more than an increase in the system’s ‘viability’, the only alternative to this perfecting of performance being entropy, that is, decline (pp. 11-12).

In New York State, patients whose operations had not been successful were ‘kept alive for the required thirty days to improve their hospital’s mortality data. In the early 2000s the UK Department of Health introduced penalties for hospitals with A&E waiting times exceeding four hours; some hospitals responded by keeping incoming patients in queues of ambulances, beyond the doors of the hospital, only starting the clock when they were actually admitted.

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The Shepherd of Being goose-steps His way in, shouting at the top of His voice: ‘This is merely *ontic*! It is not *ontological*!!!’

Ontic-toc, ontic, ontoc, tic, toc, on-tic. I feel my heartbeat, veins & arteries pulsating in my throat. In a rare moment of utter silence, I can hear the sound of the blood running in my veins. I slowly morph from all-measuring machine to Cyborg, half-human half-machine. I’m

edgy with the chance of change. I feel that the Cyborg I am now becoming has liberative potential, beyond the simplifications of both positivism and transcendent spiritualism that in their own uniquely coercive ways violate experiencing and prevaricate psyche. It matters little that they are secular or religious: both share what Donna Haraway (2016), calls “a comic faith in technofixes” (p. 3), the truly daft idea that technology “will somehow come to the rescue of its naughty but very clever children, or what amounts to the same thing, God will come to the rescue of his disobedient but ever hopeful children” (ibid).

Metrics are an *instrument*. To what purpose? For whose benefit? Their use is neither neutral nor benevolent; it is not a kindly attempt to lift us out of existential chaos and disarray. They are, Stefan Collini (2018,) writes, “part of more systematic attempts by one group of people to control the behaviour of others”. ‘Accountability is important’ some will say. Sure. But what if it is also “the fig-leaf that covers up this systematic bullying” (ibid)?

If your taxes help to pay my salary, you can claim the right to scrutinize how well I am doing my job. Audit culture is the superstitious cult of numbers, falling headlong into what Oscar Wilde called ‘careless habits of accuracy’. A number holds out the promise of definiteness, exactness and objectivity. But a number is just one way of representing something, *a signifier like any other* (Collini, 2018).

The Reign of Calculability

The meteoric rise of metrics is a response, it has been argued, to a universal weakening of trust (Muller 2018). While this is true to some extent, contemporary forms of accountability express something different, something that Nietzsche’s notions of *ressentiment* and the *spirit of revenge* may help us understand better. Crudely put, for Nietzsche the burden of goody-two-shoes morality inflicted on society was historically the cunning way a society-become-herd universalized its own pusillanimous rules of behaviour which exclusively based on self-preservation. Similarly metrics, the moral code of a resentful, narrow-minded managerial culture are “the means to make sure that professionals’ working conditions should more and more correspond to the alienated, insecure, hollowed-out working conditions of so many other members of society” (Collini, 2018, Internet File).

It is not necessary to summon Nietzsche’s wild spirit to articulate this type of insight. Mild-mannered thinkers like Max Weber and Edmund Husserl hinted at something similar. Weber lamented, at the birth of modern capitalism, the dismal ambience humans inhale within what he called a *reign of calculability*. Husserl wrote the following lines with Hitler already

chancellor for two years, and when a plebiscite would bestow on him the title of Führer and the support of 92% of the German population:

The exclusiveness with which the total worldview of modern man in the second half of the nineteenth century let itself be determined by the positive sciences and blinded by the ‘prosperity’ they produced, mean an indifferent turning-away from the questions which are decisive for a genuine humanity. *More sciences of facts produce a humanity of facts* (Husserl 1954/1970, pp 5-6, emphasis added).

A similar insight can be found in Plato with his opposition between *anamnesis* and *hypomnesis*. Understood in this way, neoliberal systemic stupidity would then constitute only the late manifestation of ancient hypomnesis, beginning for Plato with the written text and reliance on automatic memory as opposed to anamnesis, the process of recollection, of direct dialogical interaction without reliance on external memory supports; the process of attention, one's ability to become absorbed and to construct an independent idiom.

Borrowing from Plato's terminology, our age may be construed as the Age of *Hypomnesis*, of defective and artificial memory, of overreliance on technical data – a world where the transitional space of thought and experimentation has been short-circuited (Bazzano, forthcoming).

Listen to the rationalizing voice of Jason in Euripides's *Medea*; listen to the juvenile hero expound his cool rationality:

If only children could be got some other way without the female sex! If women didn't exist, human life would be rid of all its miseries (Euripides/Vellacott, 1963, p. 34)

Hear how he responds to Medea's passion, love and fury:

I have often noticed – this is not the first occasion – what fatal results follow ungoverned rage (ibid, p. 30)

Jason's world is the reign of calculability, of carefully planned self-preservation, a world that ensures the continuation of linear time and the persistence of a violent notion of identity and a predictable future. Medea's response:

I loathe your prosperous future; I'll have none of it. Nor none of your security – it galls my heart (ibid, p. 35)

Medea's tragic destiny as a foreigner is the same destiny of any foreigner, of any stranger. Not only is she stateless; she proudly rejects the superficial cool ‘reason’ and ‘logic’ of the country that makes a mockery of hospitality and freedom. She rejects ‘integration’. The Chorus echoes her sentiments:

O my country, my home! /May the gods save me from becoming/A stateless refugee/Dragging out an intolerable life/In desperate hopelessness! ...Of all pains and hardships, none is worse than to be deprived of your native land (ibid, p. 36-37)

Humanly Yours

Good evening. I am human now, just like you. Like you, I am full of the dead: they speak with my voice at times; I shake hands with the dead. This early November night is long and cold.

It's a beautiful night yeah
From here to those trembling stars...
And the nerves so fresh (Walker, 1995)

Come closer to the fire, I'll read you an extract from a poem by that wonderful poet, Jorie Graham. It's titled *[To] the Last [Be] Human*:

Wind would be nice but
it's only us shaking.
Listen up it says. Loosen up. It's all going to be
ok. Going to be fine. Give me your hand. What is this you
are giving me, where are your hands, what can you
grip. The thing I am asking for, it is not made of
words. No. It is not made of
data. No.
[...]
So one has to figure out now how to
understand
time. Your time & then
time. Planet time & then yr
protocols, accords, timeframes, tipping points, markers. Each has
a prognosis. Each has
odds. You stop on the bridge in the evening on your way
home and look down to see the
empty riverbed flow. In you /the minutes flow.
(Graham, 2019, p. 65)
[...]

Take this November. How many Novembers with us in it? Blood flows in me. My body is shot through with lines of verse, and long, long forgotten poems, for instance this one from Pier Paolo Pasolini, here speaking to his friend, the actor Ninetto Davoli:

Oh Ninariello, do you remember that dream we talked about so many times? I was in the car, leaving alone, with the seat empty beside me, and you were running up from behind, at the side of the door, still half open, running anxious and persistent, you were

yelling with a touch of child-like weeping in your voice: ‘A Pa’, take me with you, I’ll pay for the journey. It was the journey of a life (Pasolini, 2019)

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Becoming-Animal

Animality without humanity may be blind but humanity without animality may be empty (Acampora, 2003, p. 6)

A ‘dramatic’ (performative, dramatized) way to question and problematize the facile notions of embodiment now in vogue is via the luxuriant notion of the *Body without Organs* (BWO) proposed by playwright Antonin Artaud in his 1947 radio play *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*:

When you will have made him a body without organs,
then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions
and restored him to his true freedom (1976, p. 571).

It is difficult to render in a short space the complexity and liberative potential of Artaud’s notion. I suspect this is best expressed through live performance, something I attempted to do through my experimental intervention at the existential conference in November 2019. Incidentally, the openness, warmth and curiosity with which the experiment was received by those present confirmed my sense that among existing psychotherapy tribes the existential is welcoming and genuinely open to the new, to the seemingly peripheral and minoritarian.

Here I will only sketch a few ideas associated with the BWO. There is so much disembodied talk of embodiment in psychotherapy circles, and many sleepy repetitions of formulaic interventions. When you hear for the umpteenth time the body psychotherapist or supervisor asking ‘where do you feel that in your body?’ you begin to wonder whether this is just another tired formula among many.

What do we talk about when we talk about embodiment? The body cannot just be the body of biology, a body of organs. This body dreams; it is traversed by memories – voluntary, involuntary. When walking, this body of ours is always on the verge of falling. Spinoza (1677/1996) suggests a close correspondence between power and the power to be *affected*. This applies equally to the mind and the body: the mind’s power to think corresponds to its receptivity to external ideas; and *the body’s power to act corresponds to sensitivity to other bodies*. And although an *actual* body has a limited set of characteristics, habits, movements, and affects, it also has a *virtual* dimension: a vast reservoir of potentialities (Deleuze & Guattari 1972/1982). *We don’t know*, Spinoza teaches us, *what a body can do* (1677/1996).

The critique of the mechanization of human existence cannot limit itself to a regressive defense of humans, self-appointed kings and queens of creation. The human “represents no progress over the animal” (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 84), and in order to construct a valid alternative to the Cartesian dualism notionally decried by many we need to move away from anthropocentrism. One of the ways to do this is via a rereading of the animal within the human–animal continuum (Bazzano; 2017; Massumi, 2014; Acampora, 2003)

The term Body-Without-Organs describes an undifferentiated, non-hierarchical description that is *rhizomatic* and horizontal, rather than *arboreal* and vertical; it acknowledges how the human body is traversed by nature; it *is* nature. It calls for the appreciation of our animal/human body and its inherent intelligence. It also calls for a shift in our understanding that challenges the stereotypical placing of animals as either brutal or docile.

The critique of the mechanization of human existence cannot be limited to a defense of so called ‘interiority’ either. There is no such thing as interiority, if by that we mean an uncontaminated basis of all affections. Crucially, interiority is constituted through the internalization of a transitional exteriority that *precedes* it. This is true for both *anthropogenesis* as it is for (childhood) *psychogenesis*.

A shift in focus from interiority to affect and a deeper appreciation of the latter’s subtle workings can turn psychotherapy from a reactive enterprise of self-preservation and defense of the status quo into a spiritual adventure – into an endeavour at the service of transformation.

Epilogue

Picture the slow movement of a lion – grace and danger, intelligence and power – the pink roses in his jaws a rough and sincere offering to you. Hear Angela Georgiou sing Bellini’s *Casta Diva*, an aria that uncannily echoes Medea’s tragic fate. The lion morphs back to human, puts on the Zen black robe and prostrates to the Buddhas in all directions – to all the Buddhas past, present and future, to all the Buddhas present in all things and in all beings alive or dead.

Listen closely to the Chorus at the end of *Medea*:

Many matters the gods bring so surprising ends. The things we thought would happen do not happen. The unexpected the gods make possible. And such is the conclusion of this story (Euripides/Vellacott, 1963, p 61).

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Manu Bazzano is a therapist, supervisor, visiting lecturer at several university and colleges and an internationally recognized author and facilitator. He recently edited *Re-Visioning Existential Therapy: Counter-traditional Perspectives*, a collection of essays by existential practitioners across the world.

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