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Paper Outlines

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Silent Protest: On the Desire for the Political

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What does it mean when, as in silent protest, people enter the public sphere in order to withhold from it the very material--speech oriented toward opinion--that animates its world-making and world-building effectivity? What does it mean to think of the political as something overheard? What does it say about this historical moment that so much art-activism mobilizes not classic public sphere communication but noise, the activity of visceral immediacy that communication rationalizes, brackets, idealizes, and disrespects? This paper contributes to the archive of rethinking publicness by looking mainly at contemporary U.S. based artworks in the politically depressive position that enter the normative public sphere as representative members of a body politic seeking a way to maintain their desire for the political while rejecting its conventional aesthetics/sensual formation. This work thinks about sonic politics from a variety of perspectives, and looks particularly at what it means to remediate the habituation, expectation, and attentiveness of the senses to their current historical moment. Its claim is that sonic politics tries to take the body politic out of solitary confinement (the solitary confinement of relative powerlessness that atrophies opinion itself into noise) while only sometimes knowing what forms a revitalized sensual solidarity might take. The archive includes work by Cynthia Madansky, Ultra-red, Lisa Johnston, and others.
Fear in Public: Agoraphobia then, in conversation with ‘affect theory’ now

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Agoraphobia is one of many phenomena that disturb the ideal of public space. The panicked response to squares, streets, highways, and trains – to all those most characteristic spaces of circulation and exchange – punctures the vision of the agora as a space of free intercourse. Agoraphobia marks a hiatus in industrialized, metropolitan life: it seems at once an archetypal metropolitan disorder, and one that often pushes the one experiencing it to turn his or her back on metropolitan modernity, reducing the city to the size of a house or even a room. But the history of agoraphobia (a history that I have been tracking since its emergence as a named phenomenon in the early 1870s) displays the difficulty of how to account for the agoraphobic response to public spaces. Because it is unclear what precipitates the agoraphobic attack, it is equally unclear whether ‘the problem’ lies with the individual, the society in which she cannot fully participate, or the built environment that would seem to be the immediate provocation of her terror. Agoraphobia immediately and inevitably poses the question: What is the agoraphobic response a response to?

I have studied a series of critical moments in the story of agoraphobia – moments that mark the transformation from the earliest clinical definitions of agoraphobia in the 1870s in Continental Europe up to its current manifestation as Panic Disorder in the DSM–IV. In so doing, it has become clear to me that any attempt to define agoraphobia runs up against the problem that because agoraphobia has no obvious or discrete phobic object (unlike, say, the animal phobias), any such definition has to decide upon what it is that the agoraphobic individuals fears, and to decide whether agoraphobia can indeed be understood on the model of other, more obviously circumscribed phobias. The answers that clinicians and sociologists have provided to these questions over the decades are enormously revealing. By claiming to establish what it is about the individual, or the city surrounding her, or the society she inhabits, that sets off debilitating anxiety, they offer their own visions of what anxiety is, what the city is, what public space is and ‘does’, and, of course, how a cure might be effected.

My interest in the psychoanalytic literature on anxiety – and in particular in Jean Laplanche’s writings – has led me to see the apparent lack of phobic object in agoraphobia as its most fascinating attribute. On Laplanche’s account, anxiety is primary – always emerging in an individual before fear – and anarchic. It is fundamentally not adapted to reality or to ‘realistic’ objects or danger, and therefore is not to be understood as a response to the danger of real objects. What is of great interest in Laplanche’s account is how anxiety always serves to undermine the narcissistically oriented boundaries of the ego (‘Anxiety is the impact of destructuration produced on the ego and its objects by the drive-attack’). Because of

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this attack and its destructuring force, the ego suffers a collapse in the sense of reality and of the separation between subject and objects that the ego usually ministers. Laplanche regards agoraphobia as a particularly unimpeded manifestation of this attack: since there is no distinct object of phobia against which the anxiety has collected, anxiety appears at its most unstructured, turning on and unravelling the boundaries of the ego. But for Laplanche affect – by virtue of its intimacy with the drive – can never derive ‘merely’ from the interior.²

Laplanche’s account alerts us to the complexity of the affective lines that cross between the internal world and external world, and of how to interpret whence – and in relation to what – affect arises. The lack of an obvious causal ‘object’ in agoraphobia points to what it is, if it is not one outside agent or ‘thing’ that precipitates anxiety, that somehow effects the momentary loss of a perceptual world of objects. Historically, this apparent lack of object is repeatedly disavowed in most conceptualisations of agoraphobia. Those writing on agoraphobia tend to interpose objects or people that are said to be the instigators of the agoraphobic attack – or, in the case of Panic Disorder, to foreclose on any sustained interrogation of the individual’s relationship with the object world and external world by installing the cause within the terrain of physiology. It is as though the conjecture that there may be no discrete, obviously discernable cause of the anxiety is itself too anxiety-provoking to contemplate. I have come to regard the recurring attempts to insert causal ‘objects’ for agoraphobia as therefore symptomatic of the problem that anxiety – in the form of agoraphobia – poses.

But the accounts of many of those who have been gathered under the phrase ‘affect theory’ could be said to inhabit a place to one side of the kinds of accounts to which I have referred above. The re-emergence of a language of ‘affective contagion’ and of ‘affective triggering’ is tied to a different model of how subjects and objects relate – or do not relate – to one another. We find within ‘affect theory’ an (over)emphasis on the involuntary triggering of affect, and a space of sociality that Ruth Leys has described as filled with subjects ‘that can incidentally attach [themselves] to objects but which [have] no essential relation or intention towards them’.³ In my presentation, I shall adumbrate what I see as some of the key questions raised by the current amalgam of social/cultural theory and neuroscience that is being developed to explore affect and sociality. In particular, I sketch out what I see as affect theory’s reluctance to engage with some of the impasses thrown up by the history of agoraphobia.

² For Laplanche, the drive is fundamentally indebted to the trespassing intimacies of the other, rather than being an endogenous and biologically rooted force.
Towards an ethics of global media: truthfulness, hospitality, care

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This talk will approach the question of how public space is configured, especially on a transnational or global scale, by addressing the absence until recently in media research and public discourse of broad debate about the ethics of what media do to sustain (or perhaps undermine) possibilities of mutual understanding across the major differences of political, cultural and religious worldview that are inherent to the global scale. The talk will draw on my book Listening Beyond the Echoes: Media, Ethics and Agency in an Uncertain Age (Paradigm Books 2006) and my subsequent development of themes in that book’s last chapter. In this way, I will, I hope, be able to suggest one line of debate which needs to opened up, if new types of public space and discourse are to be facilitated.

Such debate is very much needed since media are crucial (cf Roger Silverstone Media and Morality 2006) in representing to us a common world on all scales up to and including the global, yet this is a world where we know there is little agreement on normative frameworks. What we need is a framework of global media ethics, or at least a framework in which the questions for exploration in a global media ethics can be delineated. This is not to be found in any existing textbook on journalistic ethics or any journalistic code.

By ‘global’, I do not mean that the issues raised by circulation of media messages on a transnational scale are the only important ethical issues, or that universal ethical principles are readily available on a global scale. I mean only that, when we discuss media ethics, we should formulate it in terms that can take account of the ability of media messages to be globally circulated, however local their intended audience. In thinking about the ethics of media we can’t ignore the potentially global space in which media operate, any more than (as Hans Jonas noted in his book The Imperative of Responsibility (1984) more than 20 years ago) we can ignore the global scale on which human actions affect the environment when thinking about the ethics of what we do in terms of carbon emissions.

This talk will explore, as a starting-point for such a global media ethics, the tradition of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. I am interested in Bernard Williams’ argument in his book Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (1985) about how modern moral complexity requires the more flexible framework of ethical rather than moral philosophy. Williams insists that the openness of the Socratic question that Aristotle developed - how should I live? – is valuable because it implies a second question: ‘how should any of us live?’, that is, ‘how should we live together?’ These questions are posed in a very open way very different from how questions about media would be posed in the Kantian tradition. So instead of constructing an abstract system of media obligations that a rational person – any rational person, our aim can be more modest: to find starting-points for discussion around which consensus may, over time, emerge – in spite of obvious and unresolved differences in norms and values on a global scale.
This requires moving beyond the obvious restrictions of original Aristotelian ethics, which was based on an implausible – and often offensive – notion of a fixed human nature, drawing instead on John McDowell’s notion of ‘second nature’ (for discussion, see Sabina Lovibond, *Ethical Formations* 2002), that is, the irreducible aspect of our condition as human beings that involves the development of institutions, traditions, values that are more than purely ‘natural’, that precisely are not fixed, because they are continually growing through embodied reflection on the world as we find it, for example the growth of media institutions as a lens through which we see ‘the world’. It is then necessary to make the general question ‘how should we live together through media?’ more specific, by reference to what are plausibly the aims of media as a human practice, following the general method of Alisdair MacIntyre (*After Virtue* 1980). I suggest two specific aims: first: *to circulate information that contributes to the successful individual and collective life of the territory to which media transmit;* and second through the circulation of fact and through a certain regulation of opportunities for the expression of opinion and voice, *to help us sustain a peaceful life together,* and to do so in spite of our conflicting values, interests and understandings.

From this starting-point, I suggest three specific dispositions that could be considered media-related virtues, or communicative virtues (Lovibond 2002). These are developed drawing first on Bernard Williams’ *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002): Accuracy and sincerity or authenticity. *Accuracy* is obvious, given the first aim of media as a practice that generates the information we need to live effectively in the world: we are entitled to expect of journalists not only accuracy, but for them to take appropriate levels of care to verify the statements they make. By the second virtue, *sincerity*, Williams means the disposition to make sure that what we say is what we actually believe, with authenticity being a development of sincerity at the level of selves. I suggest a third virtue is essential for media practice on a transnational scale, which provisionally we might call *hospitality*.

In exploring the latter, I will also draw on Axel Honneth’s political/social theoretical work on recognition and the notion of ‘post-traditional’ communities (Honneth, *Disrespect* 2007), and particularly the recent work of Paul Ricoeur (*Reflections on the Just* 2007) on ethics and ‘linguistic hospitality’. The latter, I suggest offers a more promising route to thinking about the virtues that are distinctive of transnational communicative spaces than notions of hospitality (eg Silverstone 2006) based in some idea of territorial exclusivity. If there is time, I will also look here at the possible relevance of the ethics of care developed from the feminist tradition (Virginia Held *The Ethics of Care* 2006 – compare Nick Stevenson *the Transformation of the Media: Globalization, Morality and Ethics* 1999).
**Stripping the public bare or, the transformative potential of splicing nudity in**

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My talk at the ESRC Emergent Publics seminar series focuses on the final section of a three part article. The aim of the article is to think, somewhat conceptually, about transformative politics of social difference within contemporary global north regions such as the UK. Usually addressed in relation to gender, race, sexuality, and, to a lesser degree, disability and age,¹ my entry point here is somewhat different: the less familiar angle of organised social nudism. I’m interested in the contribution organised nudism, as social politics and social movement, makes to how we think about equality, autonomy and publics, and to the relationship between them. My talk focuses on the third part, publics. My aim in this brief account is to locate this discussion within the wider aims of the paper as a whole.

There is a vast, rich literature exploring equality, group autonomy (including separatism) and publicity as political goals, strategies and modes of engagement for constituencies defined through their gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class, bodily capacities, and religion. Given the complexity of this discursive development, it may seem superfluous to revisit this terrain from such an underdeveloped angle as social nudism. However, as discussions develop, positions, norms, intentions, and effects can solidify. There is therefore some value in approaching the terrain of social difference and transformational politics from an angle which, to some, appears to have much less at stake, or where what’s at stake, and how to think about it, is currently far less crystallised.

My discussion opens with the question of equality, which I read as a political project oriented to undoing asymmetrical social distinctions – that is, not just rendering identities (men, women, for instance) socially equal, but rendering the distinction between them an insignificant one. My concern is to think about how and where nudism sits within such an equality politics, given the claims that nudist identities and practices (in contrast to those of ‘textile’ others) are stigmatised, practically discouraged and socially disadvantaged. But while the discrimination facing nudist practice and to some extent nudist practitioners is clear, how social significant is this division? Is it one that should be undone? For my starting point is that public policy, culture etc will inevitably treat different preferences, practices, and beliefs differently. Not all distinctions are proper subjects for undoing. Building on an approach outlined in *Challenging Diversity*, I ask: to what extent does the distinction in question, here nudist/ textile structure core tenets of social life?² Does it work to sustain other core, constitutive inequalities, such as gender, race, and class? Or is it an inequality of status and practice that should be undone because, regardless of its socially peripheral (or otherwise) status, the inequality is both acute and unjustifiable?

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¹ The relationship of class to social difference politics is a complex one now being addressed by a range of scholars as well as policy-makers in the UK.

² Asking this question also highlights the importance of moving away from a binary account of inequality, here to focus on the different organising principles of dress, and nudism’s place within them.
Working through these different possibilities, in relation to nudism, my argument settles on the latter. The nudism/textile division may support foundational norms and social dynamics such as the intimate/impersonal, and it may, to a limited degree, entrench distinctions of gender, race and class, but the primary problem with the division is that, from a progressive perspective, it creates inequalities – of stigmatisation and practice-based discrimination (what you can do where) without, arguably, sufficient justification.

Does this mean the nudist/textile divide should become an insignificant distinction? And if so, what might this look like? While there are few, if any, mainstream instances of societies that are entirely indifferent to whether clothes are worn or not, partial examples of greater indifference exist, at least in certain outdoor public spaces, as in East Germany post World War II (see McLellan 2007). Yet, as McLellan’s discussion illustrates, does rendering differences insignificant risk ceding cultural richness, as minority practices simply get incorporated into the status quo?

I am wary of suggesting that an equality politics oriented to undoing generates sameness – for as some inequalities get eroded, new ones invariably emerge; moreover asymmetrical differences can, arguably, become recast as stylisation (the gender-queer argument); while as particular asymmetries reduce they often acquire a relentlessly fractal effect. Nevertheless, in relation to particular inequalities, such as here the nudist/textile distinction, I want to suggest undoing the distinction, in isolation from the creation and promotion of rich alternative ways of living, is of limited value. A supplemental politics, then, is crucial to a critical project, intent on shaping what normative and ideological form undoing the distinction takes.

In making this claim, I want to associate an equality politics with the development of “alter-normative” practices, and their insertion into public life. Equality, autonomy, publicity – these three political pathways are often produced as oppositional, whether along lines of sameness/difference or of separation/inclusion. I don’t want to eliminate their agonistic or contrapuntal quality, or to diminish the challenge pursuit of each entails. Rather, my aim is to propose, through the case of nudism, that we think of the three in necessary tandem. Thus, autonomy, oriented to organisational and community practice rather than individual decision-making, provides a framework for thinking about the development of rich associational life. In particular, as I explore in the paper, I use autonomy to emphasise the importance of developing new kinds of power - as expressed through self-law, self-rule and self-realisation. This doesn’t mean that, whenever organisations or communities imagine and produce their desired ways of living, the form, substance or direction of power is necessarily new or distinctive. Mainstream nudist organisations often use their own governmental power, for instance, in fairly conventional ways. However, my claim is that distinctiveness is essential to thinking about these formations as autonomous.

The development of distinctive practice doesn’t mean associations are or become shut-off islands. Nevertheless, the third strand of this argument – and the focus of my talk - explores the importance of politically (re)engaging with the mainstream. This is vital, or at least is understood as such, to ensure valuable “alter-normative” practices don’t remain the inaccessible property of small groupings. While the power of community norms, systems and structures (such as alternative currencies or temporalities) might have effects regardless of a group’s intent, deliberate
engagement provides an important register, shaping what equality within the mainstream might look like, and how much of mainstream life is at stake.

In the article, I focus on nudism’s engagement with non-nudist sociality, through nudism’s insertion into different registers of public life within global north regions such as the UK. In thinking about the public as intersecting, overlapping, multiform practices of circulation, orientation, interaction and self-work, the question foregrounding my discussion is: what gets inserted: simply naked bodies or something more? As the discussion reveals, the naked body, out of place in public, is never just the naked body. Nevertheless, politically, coupling nudity with alter-normative ways of living, organising, thinking and being may generate different equality strategies (or their resistance) as attempts are made to “splice” this coupling into public life. But given the difficulty apparent in just inserting naked bodies into the constitution, orientation, interaction and composition of publics, it seems hard to imagine that much more could be crammed in. Even if nudist public action encompasses alter-normative values, what’s required for these to get incorporated into the publics in question?

This doesn’t mean the pursuit is worthless. Leaving aside those individuals for whom the practices are inspiring rather than unintelligible, continuous rubbing of autonomous ways against mainstream public practices may enlarge the cracks or, conversely, generate a growing fit over time. It also doesn’t mean that naked public bodies alone are insufficient. While an equality politics wrought around undoing distinction may seek to incorporate naked bodies within, and align them to, the prevailing status quo, inserting naked bodies into dominant publics, particularly unexpected publics, exceeds and troubles a domesticating politics of top-down equality. More specifically, “splicing” nakedness in may unsettle dominant distributions of the sensible in ways that change its ordering. Others have suggested this may foreground proprioception and touch, at the expense of vision. Nude insertions may also reorient publics, in other less direct ways, including through the fantasised body, towards smell and taste as well.

The redirection of sensory perception towards touch is evident in nudism’s attachment to feel, particularly the feel of ‘natural’ elements: wind, sea, sun. To this extent, public sphere scholarship, with its almost exclusive emphasis on speech and texts, may seem narrow in the face of multi-faceted sensory engagements. But the ghettoising or compartmentalisation of elemental touch within the rural spaces of beaches, cliffs and forests highlights the limited effect of changing publics alone in the absence of, not simply here a richly, more autonomous, associational life, but an equality one oriented to rendering certain distinctions insignificant. Thus, nudist equality proponents might ask: if naked bodies experiencing the weather are deemed acceptable on public beaches, why not on city streets, in public buildings or in other stranger encounters?