

Abjection, Affect and Othering Through Art

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This paper is the result of both my engagement with the work of the artists Georgia MacGuire and Jacqueline Taylor as well as a more solitary immersion in ideas concerning the discourse of New Materialisms. In keeping within a new materialist approach, it involves a transversal encounter with, and application of Kristeva's thinking on abjection that is concerned with how Kristevan abjection is articulated in art, a process of *othering*.

Kristeva says of abjection that it is a primer of culture, because as a process it is fundamental to the constitution of identity and the renewal of meaning through an expansion of language. In this paper, I argue that abjection is also a primer of affect and is the operation through which affects are given valency: either negative or positive, which in turn articulate modalities of othering as oscillations between the empathetic and ethical, or repellent and adversarial. I argue further that it is the notion of jouissance and positive affect that distinguishes Kristeva's account of cultural production from other thinkers such as Freud and suggest that this has significant implications for understanding the dynamics of othering or the kinds of relationality made possible through language.

In this paper, I draw on theories of affect in the work of Henri Bergson and on Francois Lyotard's theorization of the phoné, a term that refers to non-verbal sound articulations of language, what he calls the "affect phase" of meaning production or inarticulate affect as elaborated by Claire Nouvet (2003).¹ I also touch briefly on Sylvan Tomkins account of positive affects and in particular the affects of joy and interest which I believe will help to illuminate Kristeva's account of abjection as a process that gives rise to creative production, and which I suggest, in turn leads to an alteration of relationality. It is this aspect of poetic language that has the capacity to engender social and political change or revolution. Bergson's notion of "affection", Lyotard's conception of inarticulate affect, and

Tomkins account of positive affects can help to extend understandings of Kristeva's elaboration of abjection not only in terms of how it relates to language and meaning-making, but also to notions of affect as a barometer of relationality and othering.

In *Memory and Matter* (1988), Bergson's account of the relationship between memory, matter and image suggests that memory is the intersection of mind and matter. Human consciousness is derived from images that emerge through human entanglements and continuity with matter and which are apprehended through what he terms "affections" that arise from fundamental instinctual processes of the living organism to move towards and incorporate that which will enhance survival and to repel or avoid objects that threaten it. This articulates centripetal and centrifugal rhythms and movements of the body that Bergson suggests are later differentiated into affections as an indication of a phase in meaning-making processes. Bergson links affection to the sensation of pain and argues that this is the basis for the organism's action (1988:50). Affections are related to nascent images not all of which are visible to consciousness, but that impress practical attitudes and movement on the body (Nouvet 2000:14). Consciousness responds to and registers affections - sensations which fade if they lack "interest" or the organism's investment in them. The body's responses furnish us with a particular aggregate of images and these are processed via the nervous system to give birth to representation. Perception in this schema is a function of the disturbances of images (the flows of matter/memory) that affect the body. Because there is a zone of indetermination surrounding the body in relation to objects, activity, perception and affective states depend on the number, distance from, and attention given to objects (images) encountered by the body. The process described can be understood in terms of spatiality and in this regard corresponds to processes of abjection; but the process can also be understood in terms of temporality because of the duration or intervals of movement between the body and surrounding objects. Affective states operate as a call to action - movements which give rise to externalized perception.

What Bergson's account illuminates is that relations to objects can be viewed as a process that modulates distance between organism and object or spatial relations as movements towards or away from what is encountered in terms of a modulation of pain. I suggest that Kristeva's abjection may be understood as an amplification of those centrifugal and centripetal movements described by Bergson, but with a crucial difference. This difference is related to Bergson's positing of affection as pain and his absence of the relationality that is implied through the processes of both attraction and repulsion, and pleasure and displeasure, otherwise articulated in Kristeva's account of abjection. I would argue via Kristeva that the spatial relationships articulated through notions of attraction and repulsion (negativity and rejection), give rise to articulations or valences of affect that in turn colour the way in which othering is articulated in language. I suggest that this difference is related to the way in which the infant's relation to the mother both before and after birth is implicated in creative production and the expansion of language. Another distinction between Kristeva and Bergson and other accounts of the relationship between body and mind or conscious thought, such as that of Lyotard presented here can be found in their differing conceptions of "affect" and the emphasis that Kristeva places on the link between both positive and negative affect. In departing from Sigmund Freud, Kristeva suggests that both positive and negative affect have the power to impel; they can therefore be understood as a form of agency that functions beyond survival instinct and biological process. As I discuss, Tomkins provides further insights in this regard. It is in the phase where either attraction or repulsion is registered that objects begin to take on value or become perceptions. In aesthetic experience, the relationship between the two remains ambiguous producing dynamics of pleasure and displeasure and the indeterminacy and ambiguity of the aesthetic image that I would argue is related to the forces of abjection. This ambiguity is an effect of the pre-Oedipal relation to the mother's body: on the one hand, the repulsion required for separation at birth, but on the other, not only of pre-natal plenitude and mutual co-existence prior to birth, but also of the neo-natal relation to the mother in the phase of primary narcissism. Through understanding Kristeva's departure from

Freud's explanation of primary narcissism, a different set of pre-linguistic relations emerge that opens up a way of conceiving of a sympathetic and ethical relation to the other.

In order to highlight the distinction between Kristeva and Freud in relation to this and to provide a springboard for the performances as part of *Otherlands* to follow as well as my later discussion of the performative work of Georgia MacGuire and Jacqueline Taylor, let me turn now to Lyotard's notion of "inarticulate affect" which is largely drawn from Freud's psychoanalytic method. As Nouvet observes, "Lyotard highlights the following negative traits of the 'Freudian lesson': The affect is not addressed, not referencing not signifying" (Nouvet 2003: 233). This perspective rests on Freud's theory of primary narcissism as a pre-oedipal state occurring prior to the emergence of an ego. Hence, in this phase, affectivity erupts in the absence of the ego and before its emergence (Nouvet: 233). The child therefore, cannot address the affect. From this emerges the Freudian idea that the adult in the grip of affect, reverts to the state of the pre-egoic infant (Nouvet: 233). From this perspective, Lyotard extrapolates the notion that affects are experiences without a subject; that is, phases without an addressor or an addressee – pain and pleasure are not related to any object. Affect signals itself, gives a sense of itself in its absolute singularity without saying what it means or to what it refers. Affect then, is tautological: it signals itself, its presence (Nouvet, 2003 it: 236).

Lyotard tells us that affect, which is something we share with other animals, has an auditory articulation which he refers to as the *phoné*, a concept that does permit an understanding of a "middle" phase in the movement towards language. The *phoné* is not an arbitrary sign and does not have a referent, but neither is it a mere sound, it is rather a tone or inflection that preserves the nuances of the sensation that it is. The *phoné*, or affect as it is related to language, can be viewed as something like Kristeva's semiotic; it is not the absolute other, or outside of articulated language, but passes through logos without being able to speak it. However, Lyotard's explanation seems to confine the *phoné* to an instinctual articulation of suffering and maintains his emphasis on the idea that the

phoné does not communicate a signification about a referent nor the notion of an addressor/addressee relation (Nouvet: 237).

In therapeutic analysis, the phoné attests to the singularity of the case - usually indeterminate suffering as it infiltrates the psychoanalytic context. Like the experiencing of art, it is a form of affective exchange that is the basis of transference. What is not clear in Lyotard's account is how transference occurs and how empathetic relationality is made possible. Nouvet explains with reference to André Green:

But here we are moving into uncertain territory. "Empathy," so necessary to the analyst, may soon become easy prey to the affects projected by the analyst on his patient, beyond what is expressible, intelligible and representable and may take a mystical turn in which scientific truth may well be lost. (Nouvet 2003 citing Green: 242).

Here, we see not only the objectification of the analysand as a passive partner in the therapeutic context. Moreover, it is the discourse of analyst, rather than that of the patient that is the container of "truth". Also present is the notion that positive affect related to empathy, like the feminine, is "mysterious territory." Elsewhere (Barrett 2011) I have argued that the artist resembles the analysand and the artwork returns something new to the artist as well as to subsequent audiences of the work. I would also like to suggest here, that aesthetic experience, like the discourse of anamnesis, is grounded primarily in a form of auto-communication between the self as ego and the self as other. Abjection, and the jouissance that attends abjection, is the route by which the self is able to access this other and hence to bring forth mutant enunciations that allow a shift in consciousness, which also permits and articulates a shift in relations to and with the other. Tomkins suggest that the affects, prior to their emergence as known feeling or emotion are analogues of and amplify stimuli so that they come to our attention. In artistic practice, jouissance may also be understood via Tomkins account of the positive affect, joy. He suggests that the positive affect of joy

relates to social bonding. What then is *jouissance* other than an articulation of the relation of the infant to the mother's body as a precursor of sublimation that is productive of language.

Tomkins tells us that of all the affects "interest" is the most crucial to the development and extension of consciousness and meaning: "the interrelationship between the affect of interest and the functions of thought and memory are so extensive that the absence of the affective support of interest would jeopardise intellectual development no less than destruction of brain tissue" (1962: 343). How might this be related to Kristeva's abjection? Kristeva suggests that the straying of abjection starts with a question. The question which operates both as effect and a cause of abjection leads to a straying and displacement of objects from their proper place. Encounters with the unknown or with objects that disrupt the normal equilibrium of our mental processes give rise to the intensity and excitement of interest that accompanies creative activity – this borders on the *jouissance* engendered by the loss of self and collapse between self and other in aesthetic experience. Abjection operates two directionally: centrifugally towards the unspeakable thing and delirium but also centripetally towards signification, because as a process, it is contiguous with and passes through the operations laid down in the phase of primary narcissism that articulate both positive and negative affects. The pre-significatory "figure" of the mother of Kristeva's primary narcissism, that which she calls the "imaginary father", is a maternal structure that emerges through the mother and the mother's love and care that the child begins to apprehend well before entry into language. In this phase there is both the mother's turning towards and a turning away from the infant. What emerges is a "not-yet-subject" – one that is nevertheless present and causally if not referentially linked to the maternal body as figuration or primary identification. This also articulates the semiotic or heterogeneous dimension of signification that can signal both positive and negative affect; it is also what constitutes the ambiguous nature of the aesthetic image which is not yet (quite) a sign. Kristeva's articulation of primary narcissism makes it possible to conceive of a different kind of subject and a different kind of signification that constitutes the performative articulation of images which emerge through creative

practice and aesthetic experience. I argue that this and other ideas presented in this paper relate to the performative practices of Georgia MacGuire and Jacqueline Taylor.

The bodies of work of these two artists, though visually quite distinct from each other, articulate the workings of abject and affect. For MacGuire, there is a disjunction between mutant creatures and the monstrous feminine, as well as affect as it is encountered in empathy and suffering. The relationships between attraction/repulsion, the sacred/profane, purity/contagion also mean that there is a continual straddling between these two states which underpin the aesthetic encounter with the work. For Taylor, this manifests in the complex relationships between visual/verbal registers and their ambiguities. There are also spatial ambiguities, that resonate closely with Kristeva's chora, and ambiguities through the use of colour via their disassociation with any pre-established signifiers. Like MacGuire, there are also relationships between positive/negative, affect/toxicity, sacred/profane and beauty/obscenity as states relating to the 'monstrous' are encountered on a purely aesthetic level. It is here, where discourse relating to meaning-making and signification can be extended, opening up sites of otherness through the provenance of affect and encounter that does not rely on the closure of representation or socio-symbolic structures.

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¹ My understanding of inarticulate affect presented here is informed by my reading of Claire Nouvet's, article, *The Inarticulate Affect: Lyotard and Psychoanalytic Testimony* Discourses, 25.1& 2 Winter and Spring, Wayne State University Press, 231 – 247, 2003 which in turns relates to her own translation of Jaen Francois Lyotard's essay "La phase affect" that appears in Lyotard's *Misère de la Philosophie*, Paris: Gallilee , 200 :43-55