Crabface, Wounded Woman and Buttman

Refiguring moving, infecting temporalities

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CRABFACE

The name for cancer – the disease – derives from a figural and figurative 'impression' of the marks it bears on the body. The term originates from the Greek word *karkinos* – meaning literally 'crab', which derives from an observed resemblance of the visible tumours of the body with the sea creature. The metaphor of the crab – walking, dancing, sliding into the depths – has since seized hold of the body, painfully persisting in time.

Cancer – the crab – has historically infected the tropes around the ill body, becoming the figure of a certain inhumanity: the obscured face of life through the signs of its negation. A particular kind of epistemological recalibration, I suggest, takes place when confronted with this presence. By putting unstable and deviant figurations in contact with cultural *events*, I here wish to propose the appearance of the crab as a kind of disfiguration that proliferates *in the face of* an inhuman temporality intrinsic to the human.

WOUNDED WOMAN

Title: 'Shrinkage'. On screen, two middle-aged women are boxing in a ring. They are arguing about their relationship. The camera pans to the floor of the ring; the canvas is stencilled with breast cancer figures and statistics. Medium close up of YVONNE sitting on the scaffold right in front of the ring. She is wearing a fighter's robe as though she were the next contender. She removes her left arm from the sleeve of the garment to reveal an ambiguous site of corrugated flesh – her mastectomy scar. Direct camera address; an even, almost toneless voice that verges on the deadpan:

> YVONNE: All right, I've been putting this off. I had been living an oblivious cat's life, only in my case I had five chances instead of nine. Five biopsies – I almost said lobotomies – five biopsies in eight years following up on that first diagnosis of lobular carcinoma in situ. Eight years ago they didn't call in situ carcinomas breast cancer. "A marker of higher risk," that first breast surgeon kept repeating, and I in turn repeated it like a mantra. "Not breast cancer, but a marker of higher risk. "He wanted to take 'em both off. No breasts, no breast cancer. I did my research, found a more conservative surgeon, and weighed the odds.... "You're more likely to die in a car accident, " Dr. Love had said. Since I didn't own a car, I didn't know quite what to make of that. (Rainer 1997: 102–3)

This is an emblematic sequence of *MURDER and murder*, Yvonne Rainer's 1996 feature movie. The film is a semi-autobiographical meditation on the silent killers of society, such as sexism, homophobia, illness and, most significantly, breast cancer. In this scene, I argue, Rainer constructs an affective mode of exposure of/to the vivid signs of cancer – the crab – that calls for a reconfiguration of our encounters vis-à-vis mortality.

In her volume *Precarious Life: The powers of mourning and violence*, Judith Butler explores the themes of injurability and responsibility through a re-signification of Emmanuel Levinas's conception of 'the face' as the fundament nexus of a sustained and sustainable relation to others. She writes: '[T]he face – which is the face of the Other, and so the ethical demand made by the other – is that ... by which we are wakened to the precariousness of the Other's life' (2004: 139). This conception does not reflect a literal human face, but rather the 'corporeal vulnerability' that is the condition of the human, or what Butler

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■ *MURDER and murder*. Director Yvonne Rainer. Rainer as 'the next contender' sits on the scaffold in front of the ring and addresses the camera in a scene from 'Shrinkage'. Zeitgeist, 1996. *Courtesy of Yvonne Rainer*

calls: 'the cry of human suffering, which can take no direct representation' (144).

In pursuit of this address, I here recognize the lineaments of Rainer's wound – the ligaments of the crab – to be the figure of the Levinasian face 'which no face can fully exhaust' (Levinas cited in Butler 2004: 144). This disfiguration is in effect a defacement that makes possible the 'monstrance' of the unrepresentable inevitability of death coming *face to face* with life.[1] The impact of the crab-face, in fact, marks the exposure of that that can be felt but not seen through a contact allowed by a frontal encounter. This dynamic of 'touching' proximity with what cannot be represented is made even more evident in the sequence titled 'Reconstruction'.

The set is a cocktail party where the fictional characters exchange news and confidences. The camera cuts to a wall upon which someone is stencilling: 'In 1992 thirty-seven and a half million people in the U.S. had no health insurance.' YVONNE walks into the frame; she is wearing a tuxedo, the top left side cut away so as to reveal her mastectomy scar. She speaks to the camera:

> YVONNE: In the beginning you also get stabbing pains at the back of your armpit if you move in the wrong way. The surface of your skin remains numb for a long time. That's why you want to keep touching it, testing it, caressing it. It is your vulnerable place, your Achilles Heel, the new love of your life, this absence, this flatness, this surgeon's gift. I could say I don't want my breast back. It's more complicated than that. It isn't that I don't miss it. It's just that I've gotten used to this asymmetry. I want it not to happen again. I want to live out my allotted time without disease. (Rainer 1997: 112)

As Rainer addresses the residual feelings of the disease, her hand stretches across the extended physiognomy of the wound – the armpit, the puckered tissue, the tight flesh over the rib shell. Facing this contact, I suggest, opens a gap in the circuits of coherent appearances. This chasm is 'felt' as a palpable echo, the resonance of possible refigurations – Achilles's Heel, surgeon's gift – and disfigurations – the uncanny asymmetry of the touch of death. These figures constantly change, becoming both fully formed and fragmented parts, metaphors and statistical numbers virtually metastasizing the patina of the camera/eye.

In the turning motion of figures and figurations, the body that appears under the sign of cancer, I propose, relates the address of the face (of the other) through the figure of *prosopopoeia*: the rhetorical trope that extends human voice or face to the non-human or absent.[2] What emerges from this monstrous site is a silent 'cry of human suffering' that hails the viewer to attention. The injunction of faciality in Rainer's tale becomes ethically significant because it urges the beholder to 'face up' to an encounter with a precariousness that raises the spectre of deaths, and murders, suffered by physical illness as well as by social diseases, forcing the audience to take a position with respect to these events.

What I suggest here is that *MURDER and murder* becomes a document, a testimony of Rainer's own subject-matter as well as an archive of the troubling appearance of the vulnerability of the body and the precariousness of life; a condition that requires the viewer to face up and look back to turn and re-turn to those instances of (un)arresting force that compel us to 'interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense' (Butler 2004: 151). The act of looking back/facing up hence configures a kind of facing in the ethical sense that Levinas

[1] The word 'monstrance' comes from the Latin word *monstrare* meaning 'to show', which shares its root with *mōnstrum* – 'portent', 'unnatural event', or 'monster'.

[2] Via Latin from Greek *prosopon*: 'mask' or 'face' and *poien*: 'to confer'. Notably, Paul de Man questions what is said to be human through the trope of *prosopopoeia*: '[m]an can address and face other men, within life or beyond the grave, because he has a face, but he has a face only because he partakes of a mode of discourse that is neither entirely natural nor entirely human' (1984: 90).

describes as regarding the address of the other.

Ultimately, Rainer's aesthetic and metaphorical figurations become the corporeal trope of unrepresentable vulnerability, which then is incorporated in the visual frame of witnessing to produce a temporal structure similar to a crabwalk. This metaphorical backward movement becomes palpable within an affective atmosphere that *moves* bodies beside one another within a spatiotemporal dimension that does not recount a (hi)story but an encounter that emerges in the consonance of the 'shared' gap of the wound. This temporality is so ecstatic that affective response must admit a time-lapse between exposure and recognition as the relation between these impressions reaches out to touch the eye, the ear, the skin of the future in ways that make sense only retrospectively.

I am reminded here of the crucial moment of recognition that Walter Benjamin called

> the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.
> (Benjamin 1985: 243).

In this temporal impasse we need to move quickly from cognition to resolution and to action, from aesthetic thinking to political feeling. How better and more ethically to respond to this look back that moves us forward than to offer a full-fledged face in return – to respond with an act of sensation?

BUTTMAN

Self Unfinished (1998) is the first solo work by French choreographer and former breast cancer researcher Xavier Le Roy. In this piece, Le Roy applies formal and structural strategies not dissimilar from those employed by Rainer in *MURDER and murder*. I will here probe the ways in which the figures, and indeed disfigurations, contained within these two sets of moving images can reconfigure a touching connection between the temporal frames of critical and critically embodied histories.

In *Self Unfinished*, Le Roy pays attention to elements of self-figuration and alterity examining the potential representation of the body's abilities (and disabilities) by way of torsion, manipulation and inversion of body parts, movements and spatial relations. What *appears* is a scene of figurality that dramatizes its own disfiguration. This effect is principally obtained by the skilful concealing of the head and the face of the body, respectively, the perceived locus of identity and figurality, and, recalling Butler's echo of Levinas, that that defines the human in the field of appearance.

Artist Jérôme Bel provides an account of the destabilizing aspects of this experience: 'that body totally identic to that of every more or less normal spectator, is monstrous, or it is something different from what one expected before the show, and it has hidden faces' (2003: 83, my translation). Like the wound/face of Rainer's experience, Le Roy's monstrous appearance becomes accessible through defacement, or more precisely, through radical effacement. This headless body, and therefore indefinable figure, can be best described as a performative 'face' in Levinas's sense: the aesthetic manifestation of a critical condition that marks 'the proximity we might have to the precariousness of life itself' (Butler 2004: 145).

I would like to explicate the function of such figural operations by focusing on one significant image that perhaps will arrest the reader's attention. This is how Australian scholar Amanda Card describes some of Le Roy's extreme figurations:

> One blogger on a site called *Critical Dance* … recorded this comment from a friend: 'I feel like I just spent an hour watching a guy with his head up his ass'. … What I like about this annoyed response is that it is disarmingly accurate. … In *Self-Unfinished* [sic] Le Roy does have his head up his ass, so to speak.
> (Card 2010: 18)

Looking at the scene, in place of what is fundamentally not there – the face – the viewer finds a hole – an ass – that again exercises the function of *prosopopoeia*: the figure positing voice or face to that that is deprived of shape

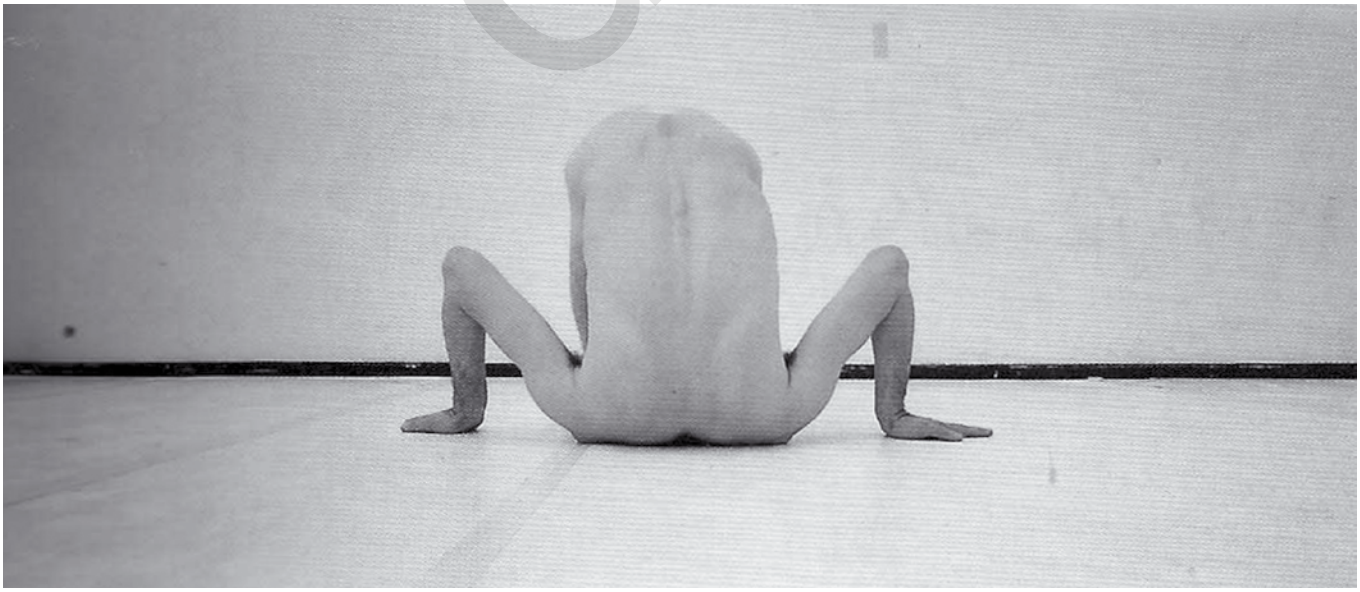
or presence. One could say that Le Roy makes a *crack* on embodiment. The butt-face allows the spectators to move beyond the very place where the self is believed to dwell by putting in its place a joke about the very nature of the face: we are looking at the black hole of identity – a hole that threatens the rim of vision.

What is offered to the spectator is not an arresting vision on subjectivity or disability but a moving joke about what we expect to see, and fail to, when we 'fixate' the figure of the body. This appearance makes the spectator the real butt of the joke – the upturned face that laughs back at the heterology it observes, to uncanny effect. A transitional moment of surprise and relief, laughter explodes as an audible fit of rhythmic sound that interrupts the regular flow of breath – an acoustic cut/gap in which familiarity or comfort at the level of the 'skin' comes to stand in for a feeling of unease or discomfort: I begin to giggle when poked by an image that pricks me, that punctuates me, but that animates me to respond. I am infected with some kind of 'light' spirit that takes on a mouthy posture.

In *Self Unfinished*, the viewer 'faces' the double gap of one's orifice – the mouth – beside the other's – the crack. Le Roy's representation, I argue, enacts an ethical susceptibility by linking the figure and effect/affect of the face to a 'bottom-ethics' that extends human voice, and face, to the non-human. The figure of Le Roy's butt-head reflects a 'sound' embodiment as always existing in relationship with absolute alterity – with death and with the Other – generating an encounter that brings about a 'sense' of temporality, for Levinas suggests: 'the situation of face to face is perhaps the very accomplishment of time; the encroachment of the present on the future is not the feat of the subject alone, but the intersubjective relationship' (1987: 79).

Finally, one last appearance of emblematic power: stark naked, the body on stage begins to crawl, crablike, scuttling sideways, down stage and back again. This animal-body travels under the sign of cancer. Once again, the crab has seized the body but this time the mark it leaves does not emerge on the surface of skin but on the flesh of time. The figure of the crab/cancer reappears to sustain a contact, a precarious meeting of sorts between two temporal frames of representation that seem very remote in time.

What we find in the movement between two quite distinct forms (of expression) – Rainer's wounded flesh and Le Roy's disfigured body – is a certain kind of animal figuration, or faciality, that provides an opening into the status of performance in relation to the



■ Figure 2. *Self Unfinished*. Performance by Xavier Le Roy, 1998. Le Roy progresses in a crab-like posture across the stage floor. *Photo Armin Linke, courtesy of Xavier Le Roy.*

temporal organization of its historical archive marked by the synchronicity and co-presence of fugitive mo(ve)ments of contact. Borrowing an expression from Cesare Casarino:

> [A]ll points of tangency, of intersection, and of divergence aside – both projects in the end *butt up* against the intractable matter of corporeality. It seems that at the end of time there stands the body and its demands forever waiting to be attended to. (Casarino 2003: 194, my emphasis)

CRAB TIMES

The 'moving' and 'touching' images of *MURDER and murder* and *Self Unfinished* expose the vitalities and corporealities sustained in the face of precariousness. Both texts proceed by a gradual defacement of a critical body politic through a gentle transmission of a kindred spirit. In this atmosphere, the temporalities of pain, pleasure and desire come *face to face* and move to the rhythm of time 'passing' between them. Their motion can be felt 'aside' one another, proceeding together backwards and into the future, holding out the possibility of a temporal crabwalk as performed by Gunter Grass in his 2002 novel: '[D]o I have to sneak up on time in a crabwalk, seeming to go backward but actually scuttling sideways, and thereby working my way forward fairly rapidly?' (2002: 3). Thus, the animal, inhuman figuration of the crab becomes the *face* of time and its connecting and connective lineaments/ligaments.

Rainer's and Le Roy's configurations transpose the back and forward mo(ve)ments of time into the figurality of a pas de deux. They move alongside a practice of time as nowhere existing away from bodies and never alienable from their moving (and sometimes touching), infective (and at times infected) histories. They turn to assist one another and make their way back with quivering, scuttling vibrations, carrying 'the scents and similar exudations of history' (Grass 2002: 13) that will re-emerge in some degree transformed into futurity. They carry 'on' an aesthetic and ethic vision of inexhaustible vitality. Yet, like all temporalities, this one also retains its dangers: that its stilled mo(ve)ments may sink their claws into the folds of time, seizing its depths, metastasizing the wounds of history, making it impossible to move forward and on. This is why this is a model of temporality that must be held with *care*.

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