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Bodies in Public Spaces: Questioning the Boundary between the Public and the Private

As Submitted to *CRITICAL HORIZONS: A JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY*

AND SOCIAL THEORY

Abstract

This paper examines the connection between politics and public space at a time when photography and the new media have put the classical distinction between the public and the private into question. My focus is on the body which, according to Hannah Arendt and the classical philosophers, is the most private thing there is. Drawing on the work of Weimar photojournalist Erich Salomon – who was among the first to infiltrate the spaces where political talks were held and decisions taken – I argue for an understanding of the body as an aesthetic object and a site where public and private criss-cross and intersect. The body in photography leads me to the final part of the paper where I trace the figuring of the body in the texts of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, and argue that far from being a recent phenomenon, the aestheticisation of politics is already at work in the tradition that celebrates deliberation and the public use of reason.

KEYWORDS: public, private, (the) political, body, photography, photojournalism

Introduction

In the tradition that hails from Thucydides and Pericles, the problem of the political has often been linked to the construction of a space that is distinct from the other fields of human activity, for example, the home, or the routines of work and labour. “Is politics possible without the *polis*”, asks B. Fontana in his book on Gramsci and Machiavelli, or, in other words, “what is politics without a public space? And what is a public space without public actors engaged in the world defined by this space?”¹ Ever since the emergence of socially constructed spaces invested with political and judicial functions, politics has been entwined with a notion of space that bears multiple meanings; it is the *place* where political discussions can be held and decisions taken, but also the space occupied by the *bodies* of public actors who in a variety of ways take it upon themselves to make a critical intervention in politics. In this delimitation of space both as to its boundaries with other spaces – political or non-political, public or private, domestic or alien – and as to its constitution from bodies

we see the conjunction of the two terms that form the focus of my paper: the *body* and *public space*. My contention is that it is precisely this conjunction that makes the notion of public space inherently unstable and ultimately impossible to sustain. By means of this conjunction there are made to come together two chains of concepts that a pure notion of politics would prefer to keep apart, namely, nature, and that which is deemed to be other and higher than nature. The latter has gone down in the history of philosophy by different names: the Greeks called it *nous* or *dianoia*, i.e. mind or thought. With Descartes it received the name of *res cogitans* or thinking substance, in opposition to *res extensa* or extended substance that Descartes identified with corporeity. Whatever the name, however, and notwithstanding the differences between the ancients and the moderns, the underlying problem is fundamentally the same: on the one hand, politics is of necessity localised inasmuch as it represents a response to and attempt to deal with specific spatio-temporal, geographical, and social conditions, in a word inasmuch it forms part of “man’s metabolism with nature,” as Marx would have it. On the other hand, politics indicates a break with nature, which in the philosophical tradition that derives from Aristotle has been associated with the human capacity for “action” [*praxis*] and “speech” [*lexis*].² Following Aristotle, who, we recall, describes the human as *zoon logon echon* or animal that speaks, we could view this capacity as enabling human beings to give an account of themselves and their deeds, argue and deliberate, and finally, tell stories, the stories of individual lives between birth and death, which, according to Hannah Arendt is the “prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history”.³

This definition, however, does little to alleviate the tension at the heart of the concept of politics; as Arendt explains with regard to the Greek notion of the public space, “[b]efore men began to act, a definite space had to be secured and a structure built where all subsequent actions could take place, the space being the public realm of the *polis* and its structure the law. [...] But these tangible entities themselves were not the *content* of politics (*not Athens, but the Athenians were the polis*).”⁴ This, in a nutshell, is the problem before us: in order to emerge as such the politics of the *demos* has to abstract from the tangible attributes of the space in which it is to take place.⁵ And yet, such politics depends crucially on the presence of bodies, i.e. tangible entities that stand up, make their way to the podium, and begin to emit sensible sounds with of their mouths and tongues. “In acting and speaking”, says Arendt, “men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice.”⁶

In this paper I propose to examine what happens at the interstices of this conjunction between body and politics, space and speech, the tangible and the intangible, sensuousness and thought. Is the boundary between them secure and safely drawn, or is it rather permeable and always put into question? And what happens when the immediate contact between these domains disappears such that the physical presence of the *demos* in procedures of public deliberation is either no longer *possible* – because modern states have long exceeded the size set down by Aristotle – or no longer *necessary* – because participation in public processes can now be technologically assisted and operated from a distance?⁷ Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt who made forcefully the case for a rejuvenation of the public as a prerequisite for an agonistic view of politics, I argue that the distinction between the public and the private is less clear-cut and well-bounded than it is sometimes assumed; that each of these spheres instead quite frequently makes inroads into the other so that we are often at a loss to unequivocally tell where the one ends and the other begins; and, finally, that the blurring of this distinction can be already found in the foundational texts of this tradition, the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics that inaugurated it.

I propose to make this argument in two steps. In the first step, I raise the question of the *medium* that allows access to the public space. Using examples from the photography of Erich Salomon – who in the late 1920s and in the 1930s was among the first to infiltrate the spaces where statespeople held talks and took political decisions – I discuss the relation between publicness and publicity or public exposure. What happens to the notion of the political as essentially public when political decisions are taken behind closed doors? And how is this notion transformed when the doors are flung open, and the world is allowed to ‘look in’ through the aperture of Salomon’s photographic camera?

The exposure of the body of the statesperson to the public eye leads me to the second part of the paper in which I consider the body as *martyr* in the twofold sense of the term, namely as witness and as victim of persecution. Taking my cue from Arendt’s conception of the body as quintessentially private (and thereby the foundation of all private property), I follow her tracings of this notion in the classical texts and argue that the figuring of the body in those texts invites a more complex understanding of the public and the private in which the boundaries between them are constantly crossed and put into question.

Politics witnessed: the testimony of the camera

With the rapid expansion of the Internet, technologically assisted participation in politics has become a less remote (a more *tangible*, one might say, somewhat ironically) possibility. Throughout the 20th century, however, the public could have only limited and indirect access to the spaces of debate and political decision-making; the modern state had effected what seemed to be a final and definitive divorce between politics and public space. And just as the people as subject and ultimate ground of political legitimacy could only take part in politics through their representatives, elected or otherwise, similarly the people, as interested and affected party, could only get a glimpse of the proceedings through other representatives, this time unelected: those working for the press. It is difficult to envision what form democratic processes might have taken without the interpolation of the photographic camera and its agents who brought politics and the public domain into the sanctity of the home. A small army of operators bolstered by the great expansion of newspapers and illustrated magazines in the interwar period, and especially in Germany during the Weimar Republic, were transforming the terms under which the public engaged with politics and current affairs.⁸

Salomon stands at the centre of this process: having taken up photography at a time when big cumbersome flashes were no longer required, he takes full advantage of the technical capabilities of the smaller inconspicuous cameras: his work eschews the carefully posed style of earlier photographers, opting instead for unposed spontaneity in “unguarded” moments.⁹ His images therefore appear to hark back to an aspect of politics that had until then been largely hidden from the public, thus retrieving a dimension of publicness that in principle defines politics. Salomon did not confine his photographic work to political topics, strictly speaking; however, in contrast to other photographers of the time who concentrated on social issues (such as for example, Dorothea Lange in the US, best known for her Depression-era work), Salomon makes the courtroom, the conference hall, the Reichstag, his main focus. His preoccupation with places where politics takes place makes his work particularly suited for consideration alongside Arendt’s. There is in fact a lot that connects these two, otherwise unrelated, figures: their Jewishness, an intense interest in the “political,” and of course the centrality of the Holocaust in their life and death. For both Arendt and Salomon, the years of the Weimar Republic were very active; however, in contrast to Arendt who escaped Nazi persecution by fleeing to the United States, Salomon was not able to get out in time. Though very aware of the mortal danger the rise of the Nazis represented – leaving Germany for the Netherlands in 1933 – Salomon was reluctant to flee yet again, paying this hesitation with his life in Auschwitz in 1944.¹⁰

Photographically, Salomon creates quite a splash with his new “candid” style of documenting political events and personages.¹¹ The offspring of a prestigious family of bankers, he is largely tolerated by heads of states, ministers, and official representatives who, perhaps not realising the far-reaching effects photojournalism would have, were likely to perceive him as an eccentric, an amusing indiscretion, at worst a mild nuisance, but certainly not as someone bringing a powerful new medium to bear on the conjunction between politics and the public.¹² A photograph from 1931 depicting a group of ministerial representatives at a reception chuckling at the sight of Salomon’s camera highlights this attitude rather well; upon seeing Salomon, the French foreign minister Aristide Briand points his finger at him and cries out, “Ah, le voilà! Le roi des indiscrets!”¹³

What is Salomon’s aim when he breaks into the rooms where the political elite of Europe meets? Is he trying to make a statement about politics, that politics cannot be done behind closed doors but ought to open those doors to the public? And if this is not possible as we no longer live in republics such as Aristotle’s Athens or Rousseau’s Geneva, then that it should at least open itself up to the public eye? For the moment, this eye coincides with Salomon’s eye, stalking behind the camera – an eye that is constructed technologically and can therefore emerge only once the photographic medium has been invented, but also an ideal eye that has existed ever since there has been theatre, actors and spectators, or – let us remind ourselves of Rousseau’s *amour propre*, Adam Smith’s “impartial spectator”, and Hegel’s self-consciousness – ever since vision took a step back and, instead of being immersed in the world around it, looked upon itself as another might be seeing it.

What is the nature of the delight Salomon takes when he causes the otherwise closed doors to be flung open, and allows the world to “look in”, as it were, through the viewfinder of his photographic camera? Does he take it upon himself as a political or civic task, if you wish, to remind politics of its classical beginnings when political personages had to stand up before their equals and give an account of themselves? Or is he mainly interested in the aesthetic qualities of his subjects irrespective of whether these subjects appear in explicitly political settings or not? In other words, is his primary motivation political or aesthetic?¹⁴ A photograph taken in Lausanne in 1932 seems to testify to the former; for once, Salomon was not allowed to the meeting convened to discuss the war reparations owed by Germany, so he photographed the hats of the delegates lying on top of two ornately decorated desks symmetrically placed to the left and right of a closed door.¹⁵ One wonders

whether it was his wounded feelings at being excluded that led him to photograph the delegates' accessories and the symbolically closed door, or a sense that such secrecy and exclusivity have no place where the public interest is at stake.

Not all of Salomon's photographic production, though, is as tightly linked to political topics and subjects. In his picture of Romanian poet and League of Nations representative Elena Vacarescu, for example, the focus seems to be on Vacarescu's exaggerated facial expression and imposing bodily presence even though the occasion is a speech delivered at the League of Nations.¹⁶ At yet other times, it is ordinary bodies that seize Salomon's imagination. Bodies in trains or buses, at the beach, in hotel rooms, common people or celebrities in convivial surroundings get captured by a playful Salomon, who sometimes presides over his own triumphs as in one of his photographs of Léon Blum (leader of the Popular Front and French prime minister from 1936 to 1940) depicting Blum examining photographs taken by Salomon. We see Blum slightly bemused, and we guess that he Salomon must be feeling rather pleased with himself for creating this nice *mise en abyme* – Salomon capturing Léon Blum looking bemused looking at a picture taken by Salomon – a *mise en abyme* of which he is the subject and author, though one who remains behind the scenes and keeps himself unexposed even as he directs all action.

For sure, Salomon's photojournalism belongs to an era when the classical notion of public space as involving immediate physical presence is no longer possible. However, the photographic medium ushers in a revival of the public by allowing the physical identities of the political personage to stage a comeback, as Hannah Arendt says, "in the unique shape of the body", and, by means of the development of sound, film, and video technology, in "the sound of the voice," too. Modern politics may not allow for direct participation, but its conjunction with the body remains stronger than ever even though this conjunction has now taken on a new inflection by re-interpreting publicness to mean publicity or public exposure. This inflection, however, is crucial; even though the mechanically (and now digitally) reconstructed world may give the impression of transparency – whereby the camera and its operator become mere appendages ('fly-on-the-wall') in an otherwise seamless whole incorporating both public actor and spectator – the photographic medium effects a redistribution of the respective roles of "public" and "private" that both enacts and precludes a coincidence of spectator and actor. Let me explain this by reference to two distinct ways of thinking about photography; on the one hand, photography is considered as a *pure medium*, i.e. an instrument

that enables the representation of events (in Salomon's case, of the 'scene' of politics), but which itself does not alter those events or bring its own distinctive impact upon the proceedings. Of course, in some cases, like that of the photograph of Aristide Briand becoming suddenly aware of the presence of the photographer and pointing his finger at him, the resulting image has been totally shaped by the presence of the camera. Ideally, though, the camera should be unnoticed and inconspicuous resulting in images which the camera records but does not shape – a style which Salomon pioneered with his 'candid camera'. On the other hand, a more critical approach dismisses photographs as documents of an event (or a historical epoch) on the basis that photographs are, in Ariella Azoulay's words, 'partial, false, incidental and biased'.¹⁷ No book has probably done more to disseminate and entrench this view than Susan Sontag's *On Photography*; challenging the view that photographs are passive representations of what is there, Sontag questions their power to serve as evidence. "A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture."¹⁸ Thus, Sontag's work draws attention to an aspect of photography that characterises all art, but photography even more so, because of photography's evidential/documentary nature, namely that no medium can claim to be a complete, transparent, unmediated representation of reality. Applied to Salomon's photojournalism, Sontag's critique would suggest that the photographer's candid camera only gives the *illusion* of publicness whereas, in fact, all it does is keep the goalposts exactly where they were before. The elites of Europe continue to meet at banquets, hotels, conference halls, the State Opera, etc., and no amount of public exposure makes any difference to the actual power relations between rulers and ruled. Put in the terms of political theory, Salomon's photojournalism cannot put the *demos* back at the centre of the political processes, nor can it bring back forms of public speaking, acting, and relating to one another which Arendt saw as integral to politics in an authentic sense.

Whilst justified to some extent – inasmuch as photography cannot re-instate the classical paradigm of politics – what this criticism fails to reflect on is its own implicit assumptions about what counts as "real" as opposed to mimetic representations of the real.¹⁹ A view of photography as mimesis necessarily inserts it into a hierarchised set of relations presupposing that we *know* and can easily distinguish between the original and its representation. But it is far from clear that in all cases one can do so unproblematically. Take for example the photographic self-portrait (such as that shot by Salomon of himself holding his camera); here, the roles of spectator and actor become inextricably linked inasmuch as the creator of the photograph is also its subject, and – once the photograph is developed and printed – its viewer as well. This is similar to Salomon's shot of Léon Blum we

discussed above; Blum is here put in the role of spectator but also in that of the subject of the second photograph which Salomon playfully captures.

But there is also another sense in which photography shifts the relations between actor and spectator, creator and subject, original and mimetic artwork, and that has to do with the inherent unpredictability of the photographic capture. Although the photograph is a technological product, and technology has been traditionally linked to certainty, uniformity, consistency and standardisation, not even the most accomplished photographer can predict with complete precision what will happen the exact moment she presses the shutter button. This inherent unpredictability makes the photographic medium something other than what its critics describe it to be, i.e. a technique easily appropriable by rational/bureaucratic institutions in the service of controlling society.²⁰ This is not to say that photography has not been used for such purposes; but neither the photograph itself nor the responses it incites can be classified according to a categorial framework exhaustively determined in advance. That is why photographs – in the plural – have been used *both* for buttressing the established order *and* for challenging it, *both* by reactionaries *and* by revolutionaries; because the essence of the photographic image – if indeed such a thing exists – is impossible to determine. In fact, photographs have much in common with what Arendt saw as the best in human beings: their unpredictability and capacity for initiation, for regeneration and creation.²¹

The body as martyr

Interestingly, the revival of publicness heralded by Salomon's work further blurs the boundaries between the private and the public inasmuch as the images published at this time tend, according to Annie Rudd, to portray political leaders as "relatable" individuals. In her discussion of early photojournalism Rudd highlights the tendency "toward a fixation with private life and personal detail," delivering a humanising effect that allowed the reading public to see well-known public figures "comporting themselves in ways that defied popular expectations."²² It could be argued that this is the same tendency that intensified in the "golden age" of the paparazzi and more recently, through the enormous proliferation of images on the internet and in the social media. But is the hunger for more body, more images, more intimate details of celebrity life a symptom of visual cannibalism brought on by the extraordinary advances in camera and publishing technology? Or is rather a certain aestheticisation of politics already at work in the philosophical tradition that celebrates public deliberation and the common use of reason (Aristotle), and instates the notion of human rights beyond inequalities of birth or social status (Stoicism)? In this section I would like to

explore the notion of the body as *martyr* in the twofold sense of the term, namely as persecuted victim, but also, importantly, as witness.²³ I thus hope to show how much indebted our culture still is to a notion of the body bequeathed by the classical tradition of Plato and Aristotle. This part of the discussion will also allow me to raise the question of the future of politics. Given the unprecedented expansion of the new media, and the gradual displacement of the physical that this entails, will the conjunction between politics and public space ultimately vanish, thus inviting a new thinking of politics, or will it continue its grip, though perhaps in different forms and configurations?

In *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt makes two comments that help elucidate the ancients' conception of the body. Thus, she notes that from the late fifth-century onwards "the *polis* began to classify occupations according to the amount of effort required, so that Aristotle called those occupations the meanest 'in which the body is most deteriorated'."²⁴ Discussing modern misconstruals of the ancient conception of slavery, Arendt further remarks that a change in a slave's status "such as manumission by his master or a change in general political circumstance that elevated certain occupations to public relevance, automatically entailed a change in the slave's 'nature'."²⁵ Now, what could be more foreign to our modern sensibilities than that one's nature could change as a result of external circumstances? It is arguably correct that our notion of "nature," and more specifically "human nature," is essentially informed by Stoicism: it is with the Stoics that a conception of the self as capable of exercising "choice" over impulses, beliefs and actions or contingencies of birth comes to the fore.²⁶ To assume, by contrast, that a change in someone's external circumstances could effect a change of "nature" suggests a notion of nature as not intrinsic to the human *qua* human, but something that comes to the human from the "outside". The Stoics, by contrast, whose influence on modern philosophy and popular culture has filtered down through the intermediary of Christian doctrines, opened up a way of thinking about nature as something located "inside," an essence with which humans are born and of which they are never stripped.²⁷ Thus, we talk about human rights as rights that belong to humans *essentially*, and would never possibly suggest that a condition of rightlessness that sometimes befalls stateless people might signify a change of *nature*.²⁸ Quite the contrary; the very idea of human rights implies that these rights belong to the proper of human beings, and they are part and parcel of what it is to be human irrespective of external circumstances or other eventualities. Such a conception implies a locus of nature inside rather than outside the human being, a locus that belongs to the human itself and does not come to it as a result of accidental circumstances.

The slave Epictetus, about whom it is related that he had the strength to tell his master who was twisting his leg (presumably with the intent of putting his stoic convictions to the test), “if you go on you will break it”, and then, when the master does break the leg, “Did I not tell you that you would break my leg?”, offers a good example of such an “inside” notion of nature.²⁹ It is his determination to identify an inner core upon which external influences have but little impact that allows him to withstand the pain and detach immediate sensations from his sense of who or what he is: “I” am something other than this pain; my suffering does not define me. Is it an accident, however, that it is usually from the body or bodily affects that the stoic finds he has to prove his detachment? And isn’t it telling that mastery over such affects is in turn demonstrated by means of a certain bodily and/or facial demeanour? For how else can one prove one has mastered one’s pain or suffering other than by means of mastering the bodily symptoms of pain and suffering? Thus, stoicism has the following paradoxical consequence: on the one hand, its whole endeavour is directed at identifying an inner sense of self, which in itself does not appear as it does not belong to the order of phenomena; on the other hand, it is by means of *phenomena*, therefore of a certain aesthetic presentation, that such detachment can be demonstrated and made to appear to oneself and to others.

A precedent for such a conception of the body and its relation to the self can be observed in Plato’s *Symposium*. Consider the way that dialogue ends with Socrates making his way to the gym, and then about his daily business after a night of hard drinking that had left everyone else crushed. In contrast to the others – who, Plato’s point is, are non-philosophers – Socrates is able to master his bodily functions as shown by his ability to withstand the exhaustion of drunkenness and sleeplessness.³⁰ Whatever the differences, therefore, between the Platonic/Aristotelian and the Stoic conception of nature, a certain solidarity is present among them manifesting itself in thinking the body as an *index* where the human and the less than human – the subhuman, i.e. the not properly or ideally human – is registered. And even though we no longer classify occupations in terms of the extent of deterioration they effect on the body, as Aristotle did, we nonetheless still gauge our humanness in proportion to the degree of mastery we are able to exercise on our bodies. Thus, insofar as its outward form bears testimony to our inner strength and endurance, its sufferings and its pain, the body becomes a witness of our proximity to the ideally human. The beautiful and the abject, the desirable and the unbearable, the appealing and the nauseating, are inscriptions on the body of the authority or, conversely, the failure of reason, just as the face of the small girl possessed by the devil in the film *The Exorcist* gets distorted or reassumes its human form in line with the presence or absence of evil in her.

Thus, the body is shown to be at once the site of two contradictory determinations. On the one hand, it epitomises everything private; it is the principle of individuation insofar as it marks out what is mine from what belongs to the common; as such, the body has been thought to be the locus of all appropriation and, therefore, the ground of private property. As Arendt reminds us, “Locke founded private property on the most privately owned thing there is, ‘the property [of man] in his own person’, that is, in his own body. “ ‘The labour of our body and the work of our hands’ become one and the same, because both are the ‘means’ to ‘appropriate’ what ‘God ... hath given ... to men in common’. And these means, body and hands and mouth, are the natural appropriators because they do not ‘belong to mankind in common’ but are given to each man for his private use.”³¹ And she continues:

But it is true, nevertheless, that the very privacy of one’s holdings, that is, their complete independence “from the common,” could not be better guaranteed than by the transformation of property into appropriation or by an interpretation of the “enclosure from the common” which sees it as the result, the “product”, of bodily activity. In this aspect, the body becomes indeed the quintessence of all property because it is the only thing one could not share even if one wanted to. Nothing, in fact, is less common and less communicable, and therefore more securely shielded against the visibility and audibility of the public realm, than what goes on within the confines of the body, its pleasures and its pains, its labouring and consuming.³²

And yet, I would like to argue, the fragile membrane that the skin is and that screens the pleasures and pains from the visibility and audibility of the public realm is also a screen on which these pleasures and pains are projected, and so they speak to us sometimes more eloquently than words, which if, anything, belong to the common, to the *logos* that according to Aristotle distinguishes human from non-human animals. In other words, the body appears to be a site where private and public intersect, thus compromising the purity of the public realm, but also bringing a whiff of the common back into the household, i.e. the foremost locus of the private, even if this comes to pass through the household master whose gendered body is able to move freely between the two realms.

A similar structure marks the public space and turns it from a site where the public use of reason is exercised – let us not forget that reason is by its nature supposed to be anonymous and impersonal – to a place that is part of a specific natural environment and condenses in its geometrical and architectural features a certain history and memory. And yet, at the same time, politics cannot renounce its aspiration to be pure, that is, reach beyond individual or particular interests, or the historically and socially specific; in a word, it cannot renounce looking to – impersonal – reason for guidance.³³ This, in a nutshell, is the fundamental contradiction that turns public space into a place at, say, the foot of a hill, while at the same time purporting to abstract from such particularities.

If, therefore, the view of the body as belonging firmly to the one side of the public-private polarity is problematised, the upshot is that something of the body belongs inherently to the public;³⁴ or that the public is constituted by means of a double resignification whereby two diametrically opposed ascriptions are simultaneously assigned to the body: on the one hand, the body is what is essentially private; on the other hand, what is most radically my own proves to be laden with otherness.³⁵ In Stoicism, this otherness is further layered with alienation and foreignness; as put in Epictetus' *Dissertationes*, "[y]ou ought to treat your whole body like a poor loaded-down donkey; if it be commandeered and a soldier lay hold of it, let it go, do not resist or grumble."³⁶ Mitsis elucidates: "For the Stoics [...] an individual's personality is not tied in any fundamental way to an external thing such as property or, as this passage from Epictetus drives home, even to one's own life or body. One's own body, for the Stoics, is something external because it is vulnerable to fortune and not in one's power."³⁷

Two consequences follow from this; on the one hand, my body and face become aesthetic objects not only to others but also to myself. Photography will elevate this aestheticisation to new heights but the roots of this process lie primarily not in the technological advances that make the mass production of cameras possible but in a metaphysics that turns the opacity of the body into a signifying transparency. On the other hand, politics can no longer be identified with the construction of a space that is separate from the reproductive processes of life, but to a certain concurrence of private and public that includes the body at the same time as it excludes it. Crucially, this double gesture of inclusion/exclusion necessarily reinstates the visual arts (and of course photography) into the very core of the political because ultimately, the words of the public actors, the stories that constitute, mobilise and bring together the *demos*, also require an aesthetic presence that acts as a martyr: a witness and a being-witnessed.

The Future of Politics – the Future of Photography

I would like to conclude with a question concerning the profound transformations affecting politics of which technology is the direct or indirect cause. We have seen that the arrival of new media has brought the "public" back into a practice of politics that had by then lost much of its public reference and accountability.³⁸ Such a revival of the public, however, seems to be very different from the kind of public participation identifying the politics of the *demos*; among others, it relies on a restriction or, in some cases, complete elimination of the dimension of physical proximity that the public sphere previously required. From the traditional notion of the public space, it eradicates both

the dimension of *place* as naturally and socio-historically specific, and that of the *body* as an opaque surface, thus pointing towards a more idealised notion politics than had previously been possible. The question facing us, as I see it, is the following: are we moving, slowly but inexorably, towards a new practice of politics for which our philosophical categories leave us unprepared? Or is this new politics the culmination of these very categories whose ultimate *telos* is to eliminate the particular, the specific and the accidental, thus making room for a pure, unadulterated use of reason? In his book *Theatricality as Medium* Samuel Weber raises a very similar question with regard to the future of the theatre, which, notably, has an intimate relation to politics inasmuch as it involves actors and spectators, speech and recounting, and a circumscribed space, the stage, where such action and speech can take place.³⁹

[H]ow does it come about, and what does it signify, that, in an age increasingly dominated by electronic media, notions and practices that could be called “theatrical”, far from appearing merely obsolete, seem to gain in importance? In other words, given that the medium of theatre and the effect of theatricality presuppose, as one of their indispensable preconditions, some sort of real, immediate, physical presence, and given that the status and significance of such presence has been rendered increasingly problematic by the advent of the “new media,” with their powerful “virtualising” effects, one might expect to find that practices relating to theatre and theatricality would tend to diminish progressively in scope and significance. Yet the contrary appears to be the case. Theatrical practices, attitudes, even organizations seem to proliferate, in conjunction with if not in response to the new media.⁴⁰

In the face of such proliferation, one wonders whether, instead of eliminating one side of the equation – that which pertains to the physical, the local, the bodily – the new media have not rather intensified the tension inviting us to think the terms of the problem anew. One also wonders whether we might not engage more fruitfully with Arendt’s distinction between private and public not by dismissing it but by sharpening its poignancy brought on by instances of rejuvenation of the public realm – fragile, disjointed and ambiguous though these may be. Movements that sprang up across the globe in the past decade can be seen as just such instances that have used images, words, text messages and social media to bring forth a new solidarity of the body, new nodes of communication and resistance against the privatisation of experience forced on to them.⁴¹ The fact that the public realm brought to life by these movements was not permanent does not mean it was inconsequential or less real, as a Platonist might be inclined to think. Instead, its impermanence could be seen as an inexorable feature of politics, namely that politics and the affairs of the *demos* belong essentially to the realm of temporality, fragility and precarity.

Such precarity is evident in the closure of the public space that opened with Salomon’s photojournalism. The second world war put an end to the political iconographies of the interwar

period. We have thousands of images made by Salomon – images that reveal a playfulness, a sense of humour, a carefree aspect in their creator. We also have images of the man himself, a “Mr Mephistopheles,” as Aristide Briand used to call him, on account of his hair which protruded from either the side of his head. But after 1940 all we have is silence.⁴² Maybe it’s just as well that there are no images of Salomon as a camp inmate because what would such images signify other than a Nazi victory over Jewish and Weimar culture? The reason for this, however, is not, as critics of photography maintain, that images are inherently incapable of capturing and relaying the essence of a thing but rather that in the face of a world-shattering event both iconography and speech reach a limit. This limit is not absolute; as Hegel has shown, limits are in principle re-appropriable and renegotiable, in fact limits consistently invite interrogation and sustained engagement.⁴³ It is in the nature of photography to interrogate its own limits, just as it is in the nature of language to do so, and in this process, new glimmers of politics and publicness open up.

NOTES

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1. Fontana, *Hegemony and Power*, 12.
 2. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 25; see also Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 3.
 3. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 184.
 4. *Ibid.*, 194-5 (emphasis mine).
 5. A separate issue I do not address here concerns the ownership status of public spaces and whether ownership is constitutive of public space. On this see the discussion in Ruppert, "Rights to Public Space."
 6. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 179.
 7. On the shifting boundaries between public and private at an age of new media communication see also Thompson, "Shifting Boundaries of Public and Private Life."
 8. See Freund's account of the period in Freund, *Photography & Society*, 115-18.
 9. Cf. the title of his 1931 book Salomon, *Berühmte Zeitgenossen in Unbewachten Augenblicken*. ('Celebrated Contemporaries in Unguarded Moments').
 10. Salomon, *Portrait of an Age*, xiv; see also the account of C. Benfey whose grandfather was personally acquainted with the Salomon family. Benfey, "The Unguarded Moment."
 11. On Salomon's 'candid camera' see Rudd, "Salomon's Candid Camera"; Freund, *Photography & Society*, 115-24.
 12. On the difficulties photojournalists encountered in securing admission to political meetings, court proceedings or other newsworthy events see Salomon, *Berühmte Zeitgenossen*, chapter 1, "Der Kampf um die Aufnahmemöglichkeit"; Freund, *Photography & Society*, 121-23.
 13. Salomon, *Le Roi Des Indiscrets*.
 14. Salomon had an acute sense of the political significance of his images, as well as the potential for demagogic manipulation by "radical newspapers." In *Berühmte Zeitgenossen* he discusses the effect of images from stately banquets showing lavishly prepared dishes at a time of economic hardship and unemployment. Nor did he think that images from banquets were the ideal of photojournalism. "They are not the means for bridging the gulf [*Kluft*] that sometimes exists between rulers and ruled." Salomon, *Berühmte Zeitgenossen*, chapter 1.
 15. Salomon, *Hüte*.
 16. Salomon, *Rumänische Dichterin*.
 17. Azoulay, "What Is a Photograph?" 9.
 18. Sontag, *On Photography*, 3.
 19. Of course, no one expects that photography of itself could usher in a new kind of democracy modelled on the classical paradigm. However, there is an expectation that photographs should serve as a reliable source. Azoulay, who is critical of this tradition, makes the point that "[s]uch platitudes, turning the photograph into an unreliable source that is given to manipulation, are disappointed with it or find fault in its failure to fulfil the fantasy of a *sovereign source*." Azoulay, "What Is a Photograph?" 10 (emphasis mine).
 20. Sontag, *On Photography*, 16.
 21. See the discussion of this point with regard to Arendt in Grumley, "The Messianic, Sovereignty and the Camps," 239.
 22. Rudd, "Salomon's Candid Camera," 415, 424.
 23. Though commonly connected to the Christian notion of voluntarily suffering death for one's religious beliefs, the word derives from the Greek *martus* (Aeolic: *martur*), meaning "witness." There are numerous occurrences of this in the classical Greek texts, for instance, in Sophocles, *Trachiniae*, 1248; Euripides, *Phoenissae*, 491; Plato, *Gorgias*, 471e; Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1375a; Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 4.87.
 24. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 81-2; cf. Aristotle, *The Politics and the Constitution of Athens*, 1258b.
 25. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 84. Needless to say, Arendt did not endorse Aristotle's view of the low rank of the activity of work. On this point see Taminiux, "Athens and Rome," 172.
 26. Such a conception of the self can be already seen to be at work in Aristotle as we gather from the incident related by Diogenes Laertius (and quoted by Jacques Derrida in his *Politics of Friendship*) where Aristotle is accused of giving alms to a bad man. Aristotle replied that he gave alms to the man, not his morals. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 196. "He thereby invokes the form or essence of the human. This humanity of the human destroys the finite proportionality that would ordain the calculation of worth, to give only following only this rule. A *principle of infinity* has already entered the proportionality" (Derrida's emphasis).

²⁷. On the Stoic impact on Christian thinkers see Engberg-Pedersen, “Stoicism in the Apostle Paul: A Philosophical Reading”; Sorabji, “Stoic First Movements in Christianity”; Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind*, 343–418; Long, *Epictetus*, 259–72. For an alternative view stressing the incompatibilities between Stoicism and early Christianity see Rowe, *One True Life*. On how Christianised Stoic natural law replaced the classical-Aristotelian notion of politics through the Thomist *lex naturae* see Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, 47–49.

²⁸. It is in this sense that the Stoics are viewed by some as the originators of the idea of natural/human rights. For a summary of this position and counter-arguments see Bett, “Did the Stoics Invent Human Rights?”

²⁹. See the Introduction to Rolleston, *The Teaching Of Epictetus*, 11.

³⁰. Plato, *Symposium*, 223d.

³¹. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 111.

³². *Ibid.*, 112.

³³. Cf. Arendt’s discussion of this in *ibid.*, 198: “The *polis*, properly speaking, 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. ‘Wherever you go, you will be a *polis*’.”

³⁴ This is similar to the “publicness of representation” which Habermas discusses in relation to the English king; “[h]e displayed himself, presented himself as an embodiment of some sort of ‘higher’ power.” Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 7. See also *ibid.*, 13.

³⁵. Again, a precedent is found in the duality with which the I, according to Socrates, is confronted in thinking. See Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 32; for a discussion of this point see Petherbridge, “Between Thinking and Action,” 973.

³⁶. Epictetus *Dissertationes*, 4.1.79, quoted by Mitsis, “The Stoic Origin of Natural Rights,” 172.

³⁷. Mitsis, 172.

³⁸. J.E. Green has argued that this moment represents a shift from a “vocal” to an “ocular” model of democracy. See Green, *The Eyes of the People*. Rudd discusses this point in connection with Salomon’s photojournalism in Rudd, “Posing, Candor, and the Realisms of Photographic Portraiture,” 163–64.

³⁹. See Arendt, *Human Condition*, 187 where Arendt brings out the connection between politically relevant action and drama or play-acting.

⁴⁰. Weber, *Theatricality as Medium*, 1.

⁴¹. See Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street.” See also Cram, Loehwing, and Lucaites, “Civic Sights” on how the shift from “deliberative publicity” to “photographic publicity” can be seen as an alternative to the bourgeois public sphere and capable of addressing fundamental limitations in the latter.

⁴². According to an article in Radio France Internationale, Salomon shot his last series of celebrities in 1940 but did not sign the photographs. Bouvet, “Erich Salomon, Gentleman Photographe.”

⁴³. See Hamacher, *Pleroma*, 238. Stone, *Petrified Intelligence*, 96. Stone, “Adorno, Hegel, and Dialectic,” 1132. Roupa, *Nature and Politics in Plato and Hegel*, 8–9.

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