

Soft telepresence as an incarnation of pain.

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Abstract

This is the abstract of the thesis.

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Introduction

The following introduction recounts the constitutive turn of events that led to the formation of this Master's Thesis. My underlying principle is, and has always been since I was discharged from my military duty, the use of cutting edge technology for social well-being. Throughout my evolution as a developer, I slowly drifted away from paths of algorithmic rationality and abstract, alienated coding and into questions of meaning and existence. Following my Bachelor's degree in Philosophy of mind and Neurobiology, I have sought ways to transcend my institutionalized role of a programmer and use the knowledge I have gained to challenge pressing issues of our society, and in particular, my own society in Israel.

The final phase transition occurred in the summer of 2012, when I landed on an opportunity to join a two-week conflict resolution workshop in Germany. The initiative, as started by an Israeli and a Palestinian who formed a relationship through mutual work, grouped young adults from both sides, carrying their hopes and doubts, to sit and talk together in one shared space. The participants in fact lived no more than a hundred kilometers away from each other; and yet they were so infinitely apart in practical terms that the most reasonable place for them to meet was in a separate continent, 4000 kilometers away. Ever since its formation, Israel has been divided between two nations, Jews and Palestinians. Due to the events of the 1967 "six day war", and until this very day, most of the Palestinians reside under Israeli military occupation. Access restrictions enforced by the Israeli government prohibit the crossing of populations between the nations and inhibit the Palestinians' mobility. A 700-kilometer-long concrete barrier surrounds the "Green line" that separates Israel from the West Bank – the area with the largest concentration of Palestinian population. While the crossing of Israelis to the other side is, at best, frowned upon, and at worst institutionalized and encouraged in the case of settlements; the Palestinians endure stricter restrictions, not only across the West Bank, but also within it. Multiple checkpoints divide different areas of the land and force the Palestinians to face military control on a daily basis. These restrictions compelled the Palestinians in our group to take a detour through Jordan in order to get to Germany, rather than taking the shortest path through Israel's airport.

Since the conflict between the nations is very much situated in the land of Israel/Palestine, meeting at a relatively neutral and distant location was also constructive. As noted by Nietzsche (2001, p. 134) : "Egoism is the perspectival law of feeling according to which what is closest appears large and heavy, while in the distance everything decreases in size and weight" . Albeit Germany plays significant role in the conflict with its great effect on the historical processes that lead to the formation of Israel as the home of the Jewish people, it was, nevertheless, easier for the parties to bridge the gaps without the unnerving presence of soldiers and the affect of this blood-soaked land. Up until then, the closest encounter I have had with a Palestinian was an occasional crossing with a nearby "Israeli-Arab". This controversial term can be accounted for an

attempt to sequester the national aspirations of the Palestinians that ended up under Israeli jurisdiction during the 1948 war for its independence (Peleg & Waxman, 2011, p. 26). To this day, the 1948 war marks both a national holiday for Israelis and a monumental catastrophe, or “al-Nakbah”, for Palestinians, due to hundreds of thousands of them being driven out from their homes and becoming refugees in the neighboring countries. As for 1967 Palestinians that found themselves out of Israel’s borders after its formation – they are currently living under either siege in Gaza or under military occupation in the West Bank. Naturally, my encounter with them has been strictly imaginative or digital – this was about to be my first physical encounter with the *Other*.

Growing up as part of a middle-class Israeli family, in Tel-Aviv of the 90s, I was raised upon liberal and humanistic values, all while living in the occasional war zone of missiles and suicide bombings. I was constantly immersed in media spectacles, interchanging from the hopeful discourse of peace, to the despondence of carnage of war. As a result, I developed a self-contradictory and somewhat post traumatic view of the Palestinians: They represented, on one hand, a source of danger, and on the other, a marginalized and abused population. Their behavior was both condemned and justified, they were both terrorists and freedom fighters; they were to be reconciled with, but could not be fully trusted.

I remember the anticipation I felt as we arrived, in pouring rain, to our host institution “Jugendakademie Walberberg”, a youth center and hostel in a remote village close to Cologne. The Palestinians were already waiting for us at the rendezvous point, waving flags and demonstrating unity. Upon meeting the embodied strangers face to face, I experienced what could be described not only as an emotional turmoil, but also to some extent a spiritual event. A vertical motion in which transcendental forces and ideas sedimented within a body, only so that they can once more coil up within themselves, and transcend along their historical contingency to emerge a true found *Logos* – the actual voice and ideas of the corporeal stranger. The *Other* was no longer a fetishized stranger, but a verified existence. Simone Weil enunciates in her collection of aphorisms - *Gravity and Grace*: “Man has to perform an act of incarnation, for he is dis-embodied (désincarné) by his imagination. What comes to us from Satan is our imagination” (Weil, 2002, p. 54). I can validate Weil’s intuition: After this act of incarnation, I felt more capable of practicing conflict resolution. I felt grounded, open to difficult discussions and was able to obtain a sense of release from pain that I was enduring. It was as if the corporeal presence of the Palestinian in front of me had untangled and mended short-circuits that existed in my mind, and from then on, everything felt more natural.

At the end of the workshop in Germany, we were asked to think on how we can utilize what we had gained toward the upcoming future. At that moment, I felt a great sense of duty – I was to use my software engineering skills to bring about this event that I experienced to a massive scale, to enable conflict resolution for the masses until a critical point of the nonlinear system that is society is reached, and the democratic process is shifted toward peace-making. I did not consider at first that corporeality as such, is a crucial ingredient for

this process. I simply aimed toward a free and expressive virtual encounter between conflicted strangers; whether through games, music, chatting or other forms of online communication. Now, however, I would like to contend that the virtual reality is insufficient for a true determination of history, and for a true transformation of the individual. Through the Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and post-colonial theories of Sarah Ahmed, I would argue that an embodiment is necessary for inter-subjective dialectics that determine the style of our social existence. The physical flesh of our subjectivity in time and space, and our physical interaction with the other, demarcates our being in this world and form our social identity. This realization led me to pursue the technological solution for an efficient, mobile and expressive *re-embodiment*, a *techno-flesh*; one that can cross borders, separation barriers and facilitate events of incarnation when a physical encounter is not possible. I found the answer in the form of Soft Robotic Telepresence, a modern-day incarnation, an Avatar for pain relief.

In this thesis, I establish a theorem regarding the importance of embodiment in social transformation; I then ask the question of whether a remote re-embodiment, a *techno-flesh*, can exhibit the same power for social dialectics as a direct encounter, and if not, how can we bring it as close as possible to the actual thing. I will outline my journey for constructing a telepresent soft robot that can serve as a mediator between subjects in conflict, knowing that I will first and foremost test it in the land of Israel and Palestine, but hoping that it can be applicable to any situation of conflict or other situations of social and physical gaps. The implementation is put to preliminary testing and is evaluated for future work. I invite the reader to join me on this journey of transcendent hope and corporeal suffering.

Stranger Fetishism and the Circulation of Emotions

We begin with a further investigation of the conditions that led to the above event of incarnation. As noted, prior to the encounter, I had nothing but an image of a Palestinian; the so called *Other*. An image that was fed by media, by conversations, by my own internal processes, none of which originated directly by a Palestinian, co-inhabiting my own time and space. I have developed a milieu of emotions toward this image that were by definition generalized and prejudiced, since they were oriented toward an abstract entity, a generalized identity. Moreover, these emotions tended to be posited on more extreme ends of the emotional spectrum, either being strongly negative or strongly positive.

This phenomenon is symptomatic to what is described by Sara Ahmed as "Stranger Fetishism". In her book *Strange encounters* she defines it as "a fetishism of figures: it invests the figure of the stranger with a life of its own insofar as it cuts 'the stranger' off from the histories of its determination." (Ahmed, 2000, p. 5). The epistemological gap of the stranger in its corporeality leaves an opening for an over-representation; a figure of our imagination that we endow

with deep emotional value. Ahmed borrows the term “fetishism”, both from a Marxist perspective of “commodity fetishism” and from a Freudian perspective of a phantasmic substitution.

Let us first examine the Marxist perspective. In *Capital: Vol I*, Marx explains his notion of commodity fetishism (Marx, 2015, p. 47). The fetishism lies in the Bourgeois’s inability to discriminate between the commodity item’s inherent and physical history - such as labor time, materiality and use, and its abstract value that is determined by the social relations of exchange: “A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour” (Marx, 2015, p. 47). When we assign a monetary value to a certain item, we in fact conceal the fact that this value is a result of a social and historical process, and it appears as if the value is an objective property of that item. Ahmed equates this process to the fetishization of the figure of the stranger. So in this case, the ‘commodity object’ that is tied to a material basis would be a corporeal person of some social identity, while the value that we assign to it is the abstract figure of the stranger. Much in the same way, we are prone to assign our prejudices, that are a product of social exchange, as actual qualities of a person.

The Marxist analogy becomes even more interesting when we examine the economical circulation of emotions that are associated with the stranger. In her later book, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed identifies a relation between the circulation of abstract monetary value during commerce and the circulation of affect involving strangers in society (Ahmed, 2014, p. 45). In his discussion about the general formula of capital (Marx, 2015, p. 104), Marx explains the importance of the transition from the more simple form of trade: Commodity-Money-Commodity (C-M-C), to the more modern form of Money-Commodity-Money (M-C-M). In the former, more simple form, money is used only as an abstract mediator between two objects that are grounded in their materiality and use-value. For example one would sell their produced crop of corn to obtain money, which would then be used to buy cloths. However, in the latter form of M-C-M, the accumulation of abstract value is the end goal of the transaction, and since the only use of the money is to further accrue it, the process is endless. Thus, value, or circulated capital “suddenly presents itself as an independent substance, endowed with a motion of its own, passing through a life-substance of its own, in which money and commodities are mere forms forms which it assumes and casts off in turn” (Marx, 2015, p. 107). The same effect, Ahmed suggests, occurs when the imaginative figure of the stranger, and its associated emotions are circulated throughout society. Ahmed provides as an example the discourse surrounding asylum seekers in the UK. Leaders of the conservative party have created a frightening image of the asylum seeker, one that is not only “flooding” and “swamping” the nation, but is also disingenuous in their intention; faking the need for asylum in order to be able to reside in the country. This discourse is passed around, from speech to speech, from media report to office conversations, all while breathing life into the imaginative figure and accumulating affect, intensifying the associated negative emotions. The reason

for this intensification is exactly that which enables the infinite accumulation of capital, its disassociation with anything physical that can set its bounds: “The impossibility of reducing hate to a particular body allows hate to circulate in an economic sense, working to differentiate some others from other others, a differentiation that is never ‘over’, as it awaits others who have not yet arrived. Such a discourse of ‘waiting for the bogus’ is what justifies the repetition of violence against the bodies of others in the name of protecting the nation” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 47). Ahmed notes that her analogy to Marx is limited, since her “argument does not respect the important Marxian distinction between use value and exchange value” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 45), yet it is imperative to recognize the metaphysical similarity between the two notions of circulation. In both, a lack of access to the worldly *flesh* of things, whether they are a stranger or a commodity, drives the emergence of an abstract image, the circulation and amplification of that image in society and the projection of strong emotions toward that image.

The discussion on projection relates to the Freudian view of fetishism. Ahmed suggests that the “process of fetishisation involves, not only the displacement of social relations onto an object, but the transformation of fantasies into figures” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 5), she slightly backtracks in the corresponding footnote (Ahmed, 2000, p. 182), arguing that the Freudian model is less suitable, since it privileges the phallus (or lack thereof in women), as that which is being concealed and substituted by the fetishized object. It is however valuable to note that in Freud’s account for fetishism, it is described as “habitually present in normal love, especially in those stages of it in which the normal sexual aim seems unattainable or its fulfilment prevented” (Freud, 1953, p. 154). Once more is the tendency to ascribe emotional value to an object, as a substitution for a physical state that is non-accessible. We can observe a similar notion at the other end of the emotional spectrum when dealing with the “uncanny”. The term was first explored psychologically by Ernst Jentsch (1997), defined as an uneasy feeling of “psychical uncertainty” (Jentsch, 1997, p. 5) that arises when something unknown and foreign is encountered in correlation to something old and familiar, for example when we are uncertain if a certain character is a human person or an automaton. Freud expanded on that notion, claiming that the “uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression”, citing examples of repressed phenomena such as “animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man’s attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex” (Freud, 1955, pp. 241–242). Nevertheless, there is a resemblance between the uncanny and fetishism. In both cases, a certain inaccessibility to the true nature of an object, a certain gap, serves as an incubator for repressed desires or fears toward that object. The conviction that positive and negative emotions are in many occasions interchangeable is also supported by Ahmed (2014, p. 50). She defines hate as a form of intimacy that is in fact predicated by love, citing Gordon W. Allport’s classic account *The Nature of Prejudice*: “a symbiosis and a loving relation always precede hate.

There can, in fact, be no hatred until there has been long-continued frustration and disappointment” (Allport, 1954, p. 215). This is all the more supported by neuropsychological studies such as one performed by Zeki and Romaya (2008), showing that hate and love share overlapping neuropsychological mechanisms.

Whether it is fear, love, hate or any other emotion, the impossibility of truly knowing a subject may lead to figure abstraction and ultimately to fetishisation: an emotionally attached relation between us and an imaginative figure. Such a relation, as any highly emotional attachment, is prone to addiction and obsessiveness. Moreover, as we’ve seen, the figure can gain a life of its own and intensify once it takes part in social circulation. Surly, this effect is not simply triggered on any subject that is only partially known; it requires a starting point, an initial value, a birth of a figure. It could be a reported incident involving an asylum seeker, or a mysterious encounter with an attractive individual. If out relation to the abstract figure would remain in the transcendent realm, it wouldn’t have been a major cause for concern, but the relation is naturally cast back into a living subject, resulting in peculiar behavior at best and violence at worst. It remains to be asked, how does one “truly” know a subject? How do we “unfetishise” the stranger? As Marx’s example suggests, there may exist a pivotal role to physicality, to corporeality. Thinking about today’s virtual and digital methods of social interaction, how does a typical WhatsApp conversation contribute to social relations? It is well agreed upon (**REF**), that indications of the users’ status such as “typing” or “seen message”, create mystery and thus only incubate the fetishized figure, not to mention more enigmatic ways of knowing individuals such as through their social feeds. Yet it seems that even a direct Skype conversation is somewhat lacking. The exact cause is elusive, and perhaps only manifests unconsciously, but a virtual encounter always leaves some room for interpretations regarding individuals and our relation to them. Is it body language that we are missing? Some nuance of speech that is not transmitted accurately over the fiber optic cables? Or is it something even more fundamental? To illuminate the significance of the inter-corporeal interaction, we turn to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Flesh and Inter-Corporeality

How is the physical different from the virtual? How is the real different from the imaginary? These kind of questions quickly evolve into the most fundamental questions of Being and Consciousness. Queries that have troubled man-kind in both east and west since the beginning of history. However, we are not simply looking for any perspective on the meaning of life and existence; we are looking for one that bestows special status to the physicality and embodiment of the human connection. One that investigates into the corporeality of the *Other* as a medium and a foundation of affect and knowledge, that incorporates the *Other* into *Being*. There is no better place to look than the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Phenomenology is a discipline of philosophy that is firstly attributed to Ed-

mund Husserl, but spans a wide range of thinkers and methods (Smith, 2018). Husserl defines it as a “science of essence”, pertaining to the a-priori intuitions of consciousness and experience (Husserl, 1982, p. XXII). The discipline of phenomenology can be seen as a historical development which stems from the intuitions of the greatest thinkers of western philosophy such as Descartes and Kant; the intuition that if we are to know anything about the world, it has to start with our conscious experience and its intuitive structures. Merleau-Ponty joins this project with his most widely acclaimed work *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). In this work he reminds us that any pure conscious experience is nevertheless an act of the body, that perception is a bi-directional interaction of our body with the world, inhabiting time and space. This implies that “learning”, and even “thinking” are all intentional bodily actions upon the world, and should be investigated as such. According to Merleau-Ponty, insofar as we develop as a body, the range of possibilities is gradually “sedimented” into our physiology, and we become habituated, adjusted to the world that surrounds us. This is not a solipsistic act, since we always co-develop our social identity in concordance with other inhabitants of the world. Despite being written in the 1940s, this approach is relevant even to today’s modern neuroscience, especially to researchers that inspect the brain as a self-organized non-linear dynamic system that dissipates into the open environment. One of those researches was Walter J. Freeman, a scientist of *Neurodynamics*. In his book *How Brains Make Up their Mind*, Freeman argued that the brain operates as a self-organized complex system of nerve cells, that is arranging its “attractor landscape” in concordance with the outside world. Input from the outside environment triggers this dynamic system into a trajectory of patterns that determines our behavior. Freeman cites Merleau-Ponty numerous times, asserting his intuition of bodily perception and assimilation of the world’s structures. (Freeman, 2000, pp. 125–127). An even more radical scientific manifestation of Merleau-Ponty’s theories can be found in theories of *Quantum Neurodynamics*, that portray the brain as a dissipative quantum field that melds with the external world. Quantum neuroscience researcher Giuseppe Vitiello refers to the “openness of the brain to the external world” as dissipation (Vitiello, 2007); Merleau-Ponty uses very similar phrasings in his theories, maintaining his focus on the entire body, rather than just the brain. Such thought is linked to even more modern theories, for example regarding the roles that gut microbes play in shaping our behavior (Dinan, Stilling, Stanton, & Cryan, 2015). The intuitive investigations of Merleau-Ponty are proven to be scientifically sound even decades after they were written.

We turn now to the final published works of Merleau-Ponty: *The visible and the Invisible* (1968), a work that is incomplete due to his untimely death at the age of 53 and was published posthumously, and *Eye and Mind* (1964, p. 159), his last published essay about aesthetics and metaphysics. In these works Merleau-Ponty lays down his critique of previous philosophical interrogations of existence, and begins to divulge his own ontology, the ontology of *flesh*. Throughout the works, Merleau-Ponty places great emphasis on how our relationship with the *Other* is viewed through a particular metaphysical lens; after-all, that is the basis

for our existence as social beings. This is also the pressing issue for the purpose of this thesis, so we will direct our gaze toward the *Other* when reviewing the works. The underlying question, however, is still one of *knowing*. What exists? What is true? How do we make the logical leap from being immersed in a vivid experience of life, to devising positive facts about our world, ourselves and others? Merleau is critical of “philosophies of reflection”, primarily referring to those of Descartes and Kant that could be considered as forms of Idealism. The proverbial *Cogito* - “I think there for I am”, intuitively shifts our attention to the world of *thought*. We cannot directly know and access the world outside of our body, except through the mediator of thought. Through reflection and logical analysis, we deduce whether our experience is that of perceiving the real outside world, or that of imagining. By examining the consistency of change in our inner world, in relation to our actions and our body, we assert the geometrical rules of the world. Our interaction with the world is passive; we consume light that is coming from things, and organize it according to our logical structures. What does that suggest regarding our relation to others? “If then the others are thoughts, as such they are not behind their body which I see — they are, like myself, nowhere; they are, like myself, coextensive with being, and there is no problem of incarnation”. Reflection is thus “the simple transposition of the incarnate subject into a transcendental subject and of the reality of the world into an ideality” (Merleau-Ponty et al., 1968, p. 31). Hence, intuitively we disregard the others in their physicality: “there is no intermundane space, there is only a signification ‘world’ ” (Merleau-Ponty et al., 1968, p. 53). In *Eye and Mind* Merleau-Ponty argues that painting is the ultimate manifestation of *Being* in all its depth. A Cartesian view of vision however, is insufficient in its understanding of the world around us: “A Cartesian does not see himself in the mirror; he sees a dummy, an ‘outside,’ which, he has every reason to believe, other people see in the very same way but which, no more for himself than for others, is not a body in the flesh.” (1964, p. 170). From these writings it is clear that this form of idealism is perilous, because it encourages the reduction of individuals to thoughts, of actions to signs and of bodies to images. Such a view may lead Sarah Ahmed’s notion of fetishisation of the *Other*.

Idealism has another fundamental flaw in its logic, and that is its circularity - the fact that the rules of perception and the relation between subject and object, are defined using the same logical constructs that they induce. How could we formulate the relation between ideas and things, when all we have is our pure experience that has no inherent logic of subject and object? What is the primal a-priori basis for the notion of space? Who is the circumscribed “I” that thinks therefore it exists? These logical loops sprouted deeper philosophies of experience, such as *Being and Nothingness*, the title of Jean Paul Sartre’s essay on ontology (Sartre, 2012). Sartre recognizes that our subjective experience is in fact all there is, this *Being* that we endure encompasses everything and leaves no room for a subject or object. What then remains to our subjectivity is merely a vessel for *Being* - a *Nothing*, a negation of everything. We are solely a “a fissure that deepens in the exact measure that it is filled” (Merleau-Ponty et al., 1968, p. 53). Sartre states that “man is the being through whom nothingness comes to

the world” (Sartre, 2012, p. 24), and another name for that possibility to “secret nothingness” would be “freedom”. Nonetheless, My concrete body, my thoughts, my subjectiveness, these are all parts of *Being* that lie at a close distance to the nullified self. Where, then, is the place of the *Other* in such *Being*? It is clear that if *Being* is everything, then my body and situation share the same *Being* as the *Other*’s body and situation, an intermundane space is emerging. But more than a cooperation, the interaction with the *Other* is a vortex that drains into my nothingness: “The experience of the other’s gaze upon me only prolongs my inward conviction of being nothing, of living only as a parasite on the world, of inhabiting a body and situation”. (Merleau-Ponty et al., 1968, p. 62). The *Other* is there, reaching me, touching me, but I cannot reach its essence, it is transcendent. For me, there is only one nothingness and that is my own, my own freedom. I can only view the *Other* as a superficial clone of myself. This type of analysis, Merleau-Ponty states, “makes of the other an anonymous, faceless obsession, an other in general” (Merleau-Ponty et al., 1968, p. 72). As explained by Jack Reynolds (2014, p. 134), Sartre is accused of ignoring “the way in which otherness is always intertwined with subjectivity”. This inscrutable gap between the *Other*’s will and the flesh of the world pushes us once again into the chasm of fetishism. In one of the footnotes in *The Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty et al., 1968, p. 81), Merleau-Ponty notes a more general problem in what he names “philosophies of the negative”, such as the one posed by Sartre: they tend to refer to the problem of *the* other and not *an* other; “a non-I in general”. This generality is exactly the type of abstraction that Sarah Ahmed is problematizing in her work. The connecting thread between *Stranger Fetishism* and the philosophical critique of Merleau-Ponty is our ability to view the *Other* as a subjectivity in the flesh, as a body whose consciousness is interconnected to our body, perhaps only then we can truly respect the other’s alterity, inspect its nuances and perceive our interactions without prejudice. Merleau-Ponty defines this as “*inter-corporeality*”.

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