HERE I STAND:
MEDIATED BODIES IN DISSENT

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“Here I stand; I can do none other…”
—Martin Luther

Of all of the various forms of political dissent, the most dramatic as a form of expression is that which places lived bodies in tension with the prevailing social order.1 This is not to say that written expressions of dissent are of no consequence. The public letter, the polemical essay, the pamphlet, poster, placard, and graffiti have all had their moments of concrete social effect, large and small. To cite but one example, Martin Luther’s posting of The 95 Theses eventually clove in two the mighty Roman Church. Yet it is the other great Martin Luther—the author of the “Letter from a Birmingham City Jail” (1963)—who proclaims in that same letter that dissenters at times have no choice but to “present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community” (King 2005, 577). Even the first Martin Luther went to defend his writings before the Imperial Diet in April 1521, at great risk to his own person.

Bodies so presented—in marches, strikes, sit-ins, demonstrations and other mass assemblies—are just the opposite of Foucault’s docile bodies (Foucault 1995, 125–169). They are a collective will concretized, an intersubjective mass animated by a common purpose that fills a public space and obstinately makes their shared demand. Historical examples are nearly inexhaustible: English and American suffragettes agitating for the franchise, Gandhi’s Salt March, the Hungarian Revolution, King’s massive march to Washington in 1963, the student movements of 1968, Czechoslovakia’s Prague Spring and Velvet Revolution, the numerous protests and rallies against U.S. involvement in Vietnam in the late 1960s, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

1 Obviously lived bodies may also be placed in cohesion with prevailing social orders, e.g., as they were at Nazi Party rallies at Nuremberg in the 1930s. But such instances fall outside the scope of this investigation.
Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, the global protests that took place in February 2003 against the war in Iraq, and most recently, the “Green Movement” protests following the 2009 Iranian presidential election. The presence of such dissenting bodies assembled in various public spaces has at times been essential in dramatizing grievances and re-constituting the meaning of a political landscape.

Though such dissenting bodies have often been met with the full force of the state, the political efficacy of such bodies has been seriously undermined in recent years due to more subtle strategies aimed at suppressing such dissent, as well as counterstrategies meant to circumscribe these efforts at suppression. My goal is to explore these developments through phenomenological analysis. After preliminary considerations of (1) different forms of political potency and (2) the lived body and its movement through space, I will move on to investigate (3) what it means to be a dissenting body witnessed within a public place, and (4) what happens when dissenting bodies are consigned to circumscribed spaces or retreat to the “virtual.” This analysis will show how these developments “blind” the media witness, which renders dissenting bodies far less politically effective than they have been in the past and dangerously weakens the democratic traditions of free speech and open dissent. These findings, in turn, support my call (5) for a re-insertion of the embodied subject into the practice of political dissent.
1. The essential structures and basic forms of political potency: a micro-phenomenology

To say that “the political” is a complex phenomenon would be an understatement. What I intend to accomplish in this section should be considered no more than a provisional sketch. “The political,” very broadly construed, is to be found within the various and complex relationships between individuals and political institutions. “Political potency,” again broadly construed, refers to the various ways in which political will is expressed within an intersubjective complex of individuals and political institutions that have been constituted over time. This holds for all of the traditional forms of government: monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, tyranny, oligarchy, etc. Whatever the political typology, the various institutions that sustain a particular political order were established through actions oriented toward the past, present, or future behavior of other persons (Schutz 1967, 15–20). The intent of such political institutions is to order (or re-order) a lived and social world in a particular way, thereby endowing it with political meaning. These institutions take many different forms (e.g., the Throne, the Court, the Constitution, the Law, the Party, the Leader), and the activities that give rise to them are diverse (e.g., institution via law, consensus, the franchise, usurpation, conquest, coercion, reform, revolution). The evolution of political institutions often proceeds in fits and starts, suffering opposition, reversals, periods of relative stagnancy or subordination, sometimes extinction, and occasionally rebirth and ascendancy. But the common aim of all of these institutions is to moderate in various ways the assorted relationships between different subjects and their activities.

Once a political order is established through the creation of its various institutions, political will is expended to sustain this order. Through such sustaining activities, political institutions tend over time to take on an authority that becomes sedimented into their meaning such that we passively defer to them, at the expense of surrendering reference to the original activities in the lived world which gave rise to these institutions in the first place. In this way, a

2 But it is important to note that even in a well-established political order, its institutions are never static. Once established, they are only stable to a greater or lesser degree. Since they are the product of meaning-constituting subjects within a world that is always lived, they are over time always “on the way” or under revision. Even the most stable of these institutions still undergo incremental change—through legal amendments and statutes, by-laws, policy, bureaucratic or personnel changes, elections, etc. However, such revisions do not typically go to the structure of established institutions, and so may be considered expressions of political will aimed at sustaining the fundamental meaning of a constituted political order over the long term.
political institution assumes a largely abstract, impersonal and a-spatial character. Though it is true that elements of it must manifest themselves concretely (e.g., a police officer, a courthouse, a soldier, a government building), we still tend to refer to these as agents of an entity expressed as an abstract noun—the Law, the State, the Government. The fact that the authority of such an abstract entity is established and maintained only by the concrete subjects who subject themselves to this authority does not seem to diminish its hold on us (Husserl 1970, *Crisis*, 362).

However, there are also a range of political actions intended to fundamentally alter the meaning of an established political order at a structural level. In societies with a higher degree of political liberty, such changes can occur through actions legitimated by the order itself (e.g., the implementation of a “radical” reform or policy, or the election of a “radical” candidate). In societies with less political freedom the expression of radical political will tends to be relegated to the margins of legitimacy (e.g., minority dissents or symbolic “protest” votes). As the level of freedom is further reduced the radical will is pushed to increasingly extra-institutional modes of expression (e.g., petitions or “open” letters). In the most extreme cases, political dissent is repressed to such a degree that it can only take an illegitimate form: either surreptitious acts of subversion of the political status quo (e.g., anonymous graffiti, the clandestine distribution of *samizdat*, sabotage), or open and violent confrontation with the status quo (e.g., riot, coup d’État, revolution, “terrorism,” and the like).

It should be noted straightaway that the forms of political potency I have just presented in a somewhat binary manner would be best conceived as a continuum of possible actions. Somewhere in the middle of this continuum is where I will place bodies in dissent, which, through a strategy of affect, may function as a form of expression that may serve both reforming and radical political wills, through a concrete appeal to what is traditionally called “civil society.”

2. Phenomenological descriptions of the lived body and its movement through space

In order to reflect on a dissenting body in this context, it is first necessary to grasp certain essential dimensions of a lived body, described phenomenologically.

Husserl asserts that the lived body [*Leib*] is the bearer of felt sensations and is always co-given in experience, not as just any other spatial thing, but rather as a center of orientation. From this center all else is understood in terms
of near or far, in front or behind, within or beyond reach, etc. Through its intrinsic capacity for motility, the lived body can reposition its center in space in order to bring things into its kinaesthetic horizon, so that it may then grasp something that is now near. This motility is at the root of all action, perception, and expression (Husserl 1989, 159–160; 165–167).

Merleau-Ponty, elaborating on these basic insights, sees the lived body (or “body-subject”) as a synthesized, indivisible, reciprocal, and intentional unity of sensory powers and experiential modalities. It is dynamically oriented toward the world, and endowed with a spatio-temporal order that provides us with both a past comprised of sedimented experiences for dealing with the present, and a situated present that guides us into a beckoning future (Pietersma 1997, 458). In its various modalities the lived body communicates with this beckoning world through mute gesture, opening itself to new kinds of conduct while at the same time reorganizing and transforming that aspect of its world through a particular manner of taking up that world. Each gesture has an immanent meaning, insofar as it is a response to an already meaningful world that relates to perceptual horizons comprised of other perceiving subjects. A bodily gesture is taken up “in a kind of blind recognition” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 185) by those witnessing it, and then made explicit by that perceptual community. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, the lived body is itself already “primordial expression” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 67).

On Alfred Schutz’s account of intersubjectivity, it is through expression that social relationships are realized. Though we can only have at best an approximate knowledge of the other’s inner life, we can intentionally grasp these subjective experiences through our perception of speech acts, sign systems and bodily gestures, which can be taken as indicators of this inner life. Such expressions intersect with our own, and through them we may intimate that the other’s stream of consciousness is temporarily flowing alongside ours. Through acts of attention that bring us into more intimate involvement with the other, these two streams may eventually become synchronized and, through social interaction, interlocked. According to Schutz, this simultaneity is the essence of the social relationship and forms the foundation of intersubjective understanding, partnerships, and other modes of shared activities with our contemporaries (Schutz 1967, 102–118).

These descriptions provide a rudimentary account of the characteristics essential to my investigation of the body in dissent: its essential centeredness, its motility in space, its temporality, its inherent expressivity, and its potential for political unity and action. Action may be understood in terms of movement, and like any lived body, the dissenting body moves through space. All spaces
have a “near” and a “far,” and the body distinguishes between a “here” and possible “theres,” with potential paths between these spatial dimensions. Each space is also experienced as more or less open, and the body becomes aware that each space has its edges or horizons which it may move toward or from which it may retreat. If it moves toward these edges it will inevitably encounter “thresholds” of various kinds that are experienced as more or less permeable and which announce a new space. But this is to conceive of space as abstract and featureless. It is vital to remember that the body encounters space which has already been inscribed by various cultural expressions in manifold ways, making it already rich in meaning. Space is not a sterile void. Rather, it is always space in a living and lived world that is made even more meaningful by the body’s regular traversing or inhabiting of particular spaces, rendering these spaces more familiar. In this way, a space once regarded in primarily spatial terms becomes a lived, meaningful place (Casey 1993).

The lived body, then, is our “opening onto the world,” with which it is in dialogue. It is itself a “power of natural expression” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 181), and moves through the world toward beckoning horizons, gesturing toward and orienting itself in relation to things and other embodied subjects.

3. The dissenting body en masse in thick and thin, its relationship to edges, and the necessity of being witnessed

For the purposes of this investigation, I am going to assume a high level of political solidarity on the part of our dissenting bodies, brought about by the intersection and synchronization of political expression and will, arrayed and
committed to expressing dissent against a political institution of one kind or another. (The particular nature of this institution is irrelevant to a phenomenological inquiry).

Dissenting bodies may orient themselves with other dissenting bodies, and acting in concert from a sense of shared political will, constitute themselves into a dissenting body en masse, which may vary in number and extent. As the dissenting body en masse becomes increasingly synthesized and dynamic, it becomes increasingly meaningful. It may move into different spatial horizons to explore and constitute further meaning, or encounter constituted meaning which resists or restricts these efforts (Husserl 1989, 159–160; 165–167). This body communicates with this beckoning world through mute gesture, opening itself to new kinds of conduct while at the same time, reorganizing and transforming that aspect of its world through a particular manner of taking up that world in a particular place.

All places are already meaningful, and often (but not always) a place is chosen as a site of dissent for its symbolic meaning (e.g., a public square or avenue bordered by government buildings). But this meaning is infinitely malleable, and is transformed when the dissenting body en masse traverses a path and crosses a threshold into a particular place. Though this body may be identified as dissenting by various speech acts and sign systems (e.g., chants, banners, flags, placards, and the like), please recall that the exclusive focus of this investigation is on the bodily and spatial dimensions of dissent, so it is necessary to look past these phenomena. If attention is firmly fixed on these dimensions, what manifests itself is that the level of meaningful affect is
As I have already mentioned, all places have definable edges. A room has its walls and ceiling; a street has its curbs and bordering structures; an open landscape has its horizons. And while the edges of a place may be temporarily altered in various ways (by fences, barricades, police), these still constitute edges that are encountered by the dissenting body en masse. These encounters may manifest themselves in different ways. If the edges are inanimate structures (e.g., buildings), the dissenting body en masse can press up against them, or even attempt to transgress or violate these edges (e.g., by vandalizing or destroying them). The periphery of the dissenting body en masse may

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3 Another dimension of this phenomenon that could be analyzed would be the velocity of the movements of a dissenting body en masse.
attempt to communicatively engage the edges through bodily gesture if these edges are wholly or partly constituted by embodied subjects. I will call these animate edges, and if such an edge is experienced as a deliberate obstacle (e.g., riot police) to the dissenting body en masse, the body may resist it by attempting to penetrate it.

All of these possible encounters involve bodily gestures of various kinds, running the gamut from physical contact with inanimate objects to attempts to physically transgress against an animate edge. But in order to understand the dissenting body en masse itself as a gesture and a powerful expression of political will, I would like for the moment to imagine the edges and this body as co-existing alongside each other.
Edges may appear as thick or thin to a greater or lesser degree (e.g., tall and closely-situated buildings toward the “thick” extreme, open horizons at the “thin” extreme). Dissenting bodies en masse can also present in terms of relative thickness, understood in terms of density. A thin dissenting body en masse may be experienced as highly dense in relation to an edge that is relatively thinner, but it may be experienced as less so in relation to a thicker edge. One way that a dissenting body en masse is able to achieve a high level of affect is when it is able to appear highly dense in relation to thick edges. Massed bodies filling such a space to the edges creates an intersubjective social body formed through a confluence of subjective consciousnesses, wills, projects and action for the very purpose of expressing dissent through a collective gesture of resistance—by its mere presence. Yet this dissenting body en masse is not an inert body [Körper], standing like a wall or a barricade or some other kind of inanimate obstacle. It is a living body [Leib] comprised of living bodies, and so it is pregnant with potent and potential meaning.

Each lived body within this gesture, by virtue of being its own center of orientation, is aware of the proximity of other lived bodies, of actual and possible tactile contact with them, the direction of their movement, and the focus of their attention, all of which it shares. Within this focused body the self is not lost but amplified, and so is distinct from Heidegger’s the “they” [das Man] (1993, 122–129). Rather, in a dissenting body en masse the “I” becomes a “We,” an “Us” arrayed against a “them,” or an “it.” This “Us,” this “We,” manifests its lived qualities in many ways. It can present a “front” or a façade, move in a unitary way though space, take a deliberate line of march toward a
specific place, cross thresholds, confront edges, fill spaces, generate replicated gestures, and swarm over objects. Even standing mute in a relatively static state, the dissenting body en masse gently roils in animation, appearing to breathe. Simply standing silently, unified and obstinate, it has transformed the meaning of the place it inhabits. Its simple presence in this place is an assertion that takes the form of a silent contention with the political institutions it stands against. In this contention the dissenting body en masse presents its face; it looks, and what it looks at feels its attention. This look is experienced as menacing, in a way very similar to when a comfortable and familiar room is rendered ominous when several strangers enter to stand and silently stare at us.

Though the dissenting body en masse achieves some of its power from this look in the Sartrean sense (Sartre 1956, 340–400), it derives even greater potency from its being looked at. In fact, the potential political affect of this body is wholly dependent on its presence being witnessed. This is because the same expressive power that so intimidates the political institutions confronted by such a body may also signify a simultaneity of political wills between the dissenting body en masse and other dissenting bodies witnessing the stand the former is taking. The more subjective forms of political dissent (e.g., public letters, pamphlets, placards, buttons, bumper stickers, and the like) may be experienced by the witness as symbolic markers that serve as motives for believing in the existence of a unified movement of dissent. A dissenting body en masse, on the other hand, is what Husserl would call an expressive or meaningful sign because it more fully reveals to the witness the meaning of standing apart politically. This signification goes beyond the mere “marking” of an experience of dissent to actually revealing the experience itself to the witness.
(Husserl 1970, 269–275; 276–278; Mohanty 1969, 11). This lived and intersubjective form of dissent therefore has the enormous potential of bringing the witness into synchronization with the expression of political will and action signified by the dissenting body en masse.

4. Dissenting bodies gone soft: dissenting bodies consigned to circumscribed space, and disembodied dissent in virtual space

Is it any wonder, then, that in the face of such potent instances of expressive power that animate edges, acting on behalf of threatened political institutions, have historically moved on or constricted themselves around dissenting bodies en masse in attempts to disperse, displace or control them? Though effective through the use of overwhelming force, such violent replies risk exacerbating such situations by accentuating the political affect of such bodies by bringing them empathy on the part of witnesses. This is especially so in an age of mass media which greatly expands the pool of potentially sympathetic witnesses. Thus, the most effective way of dealing with dissenting bodies en masse, especially in societies with a free press, is to prevent them from coming into sight in the first place.

Ever since the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December 1999, it has become increasingly common for authorities to keep dissenting bodies en masse isolated, either through statute, legal coercion or physical opposition—or a combination of all three. The strategy is to keep such bodies out of sight and earshot of the targets of their protest and
outside the view of media covering the event. This practice has been instituted in many of the subsequent meetings of the WTO and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Despite the fact that the WTO and IMF have mostly met in nominally democratic nations, anti-globalization protesters have often been prevented from entering the city where these meetings were taking place. One year the WTO even met in Doha, Qatar, so the repression of dissent was not seen as the action of a “democratic” nation. ⁴

This practice reached its pinnacle in the United States under George W. Bush’s authoritarian presidency. At presidential appearances, dissenters from administration policies were routinely banished under threat of arrest to cages that are called without irony “First Amendment” zones. This was done under the transparent pretext of securing the president from terrorist attack, even while Bush supporters were allowed to freely voice their political views within sight and earshot of the president. ⁵

Bodies en masse that passively acquiesce to such “management” of dissent surrender their motility, their façade, and virtually all of their expressivity, and are therefore complicit in the loss of their own agency, and by extension, their political potency. By consenting to participate in such a ritual,

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⁴ The event took place on November 9–13, 2001.
⁵ Ironically making it easier for anyone intent on harming the president to penetrate his “security zone” by disguising him or herself as a supporter.
dissenting bodies allow a political institution to place them as it sees fit, inscribing these bodies with its meaning, reducing them to objects in a tableau of its construction. Such manipulated dissenting bodies are thus re-absorbed into the body politic from which they were seeking to distinguish themselves, thereby blunting both their political effect and—more importantly—their affect. Such degraded bodies are docile precisely in Foucault’s sense of the word, having rendered themselves politically impotent.

This practice of ritualizing dissent has driven protesters into a new space where they are more free to voice their views—cyberspace. The advent of Internet technology has allowed an outpouring of unfettered political speech of every kind. It has also made possible the wide dissemination of political information and the organization of massive protests (many of which, unfortunately, are funneled into the aforementioned “free-speech zones”). Such “virtual dissent” is increasingly taking the form of blogging, electronic petition drives, email campaigns targeted at elected representatives, and fundraising for television advertisements presenting dissenting views. But this form of dissent is available only to those on the right side of the digital divide, already greatly undermining the extent to which subjective expressions of political will may appear and become synchronized with a larger, intersubjective movement of dissent. Furthermore, the very nature of an online political community of dissent is very diffuse due to the high degree of mediation that the technology imposes between its members. Disembodied and isolated from one another, atomized and fragmented, they are reduced to mere nodes in a network exchanging and launching relatively anonymous packets of information that at best serve as ephemeral indications of unified dissent, and which lack the expressive affect of manifest dissenting bodies en masse.6

5. Conclusion: a call for a re-assertion of the embodied subject into the practice of political dissent, and the potential of “social media”

In the past, when the right to assemble has been threatened with either abrogation by the state or state complicity in physical coercion, dissenting bodies have deliberately put themselves in harm’s way by either engaging in acts of civil disobedience or by stubbornly and publicly re-asserting this right in the face of threatened violence or legal sanction. Exemplary cases of this include the dignified protests of the mothers of the “disappeared” in the Plaza


Also noteworthy are several iconic instances of nonviolent direct action generated by the U.S. civil rights movement between 1955–1965: Rosa Parks’ incitement of the Montgomery bus boycott; James Meredith entering the University of Mississippi under federal guard; the Congress of Racial Equality’s Freedom Riders; and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s organized sit-ins of segregated lunch counters. In each instance, state power in several forms was deployed to forbid the presence of dissenting bodies in a specific place. And in each instance, the manifest obstinacy of dissenting bodies was essential to the efficacy of these acts of protest. For example, images of violence and mayhem were spread across the world by a
watching media when the Birmingham, Alabama police turned dogs and fire hoses on peaceful civil rights protesters in the spring of 1963. This would not have been possible had there been no dissenting bodies to absorb this abuse of state power. Had these bodies instead docilely taken their place in some state-sanctioned circumscribed space or retreated to a strategy of virtual dissent, it is difficult to imagine that their grievances would have been nearly so compelling.

More recently, Iranians protesting the contested re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad put thousands of their bodies on the line, obstinately filling streets and other public spaces, where they were met with violence at the hands of state security forces and irregular militias. In the face of a massive government effort to censor both domestic and foreign media within Iran, these bodies documented their own repression using hand-held video cameras, and then posted these images to social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Once posted to the Internet, these images were picked up by major networks outside Iran, who then put them before the eyes of the world (Labott 2009). These images of a repressed dissenting body en masse carried all of the earmarks of what communication theorist John Fiske calls “videlow”—abrupt cutaways, shaky camera movements, poor focus, bad zooms and dropped cameras—which manifest an authenticity absent from the more polished images of “videohigh,” which is typically controlled by capital or the state (Fiske 1998, 157–158). As these dramatic low technology images spread—including the
haunting and iconic images of the fatally wounded protester, Neda Agha-Soltan, dying before our eyes—sympathy for the Iranian Green Revolution became global in scope (Baud 2009).

The Green Revolution demonstrated that inexpensive and readily available photographic and video technology, when combined with the new social media, offers a viable alternative to a mass media witness blinded by censorship or apathy. But the Iranian protests also dramatically illustrate the central claim of this essay: that dissenters must avoid the ghetto of circumscribed space and return from the exile of the virtual to present their bodies and literally “make their stand” when necessary, in the name of the two Martin Luthers, Neda Agha-Soltan, and efficacious political dissent.
Works Cited


