

Eva Meyer & Vivian Liska

(editors)

*What does the Veil know?*

Heike Behrend  
Stéphanie Benzaquen  
Ayşe Erkmen  
Rike Felka  
Silvia Henke  
Benda Hofmeyr  
Rembert Hüser  
Ils Huygens  
Carol Jacobs  
Elfriede Jelinek  
Vivian Liska  
Eva Meyer  
Willem Oorebeek  
Johannes Porsch  
Laurence A. Rickels  
Avital Ronell  
Hinrich Sachs  
Eran Schaert  
Gisela Völger

Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht  
Institute of Jewish Studies, University of Antwerp  
Edition Voldemeer Zürich  
Springer Wien New York

Editors

Eva Meyer, Berlin

Vivian Liska, Antwerp

Published with support from the Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht,  
and the Institute of Jewish Studies, University of Antwerp.

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Edition Voldemeer Zürich

P. O. Box 2174

CH-8027 Zürich

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Translators: Cathy Kerkhoff-Saxon & Wilfried Prantner (Elftiede Jehinek, Hinrich Sachs,  
Eva Meyer), Huang Qi (西紗知道甚麼?), Cecile Rossant (Rike Felka).

Production, design, and layout: Edition Voldemeer Zürich (Huang Qi, Janis Osolin).

The layout is based on a concept by Pascale Gatzen, Eva Meyer, Johannes Porsch, Eran Schaerf.

Printing: Gebr. Klingenberg Buchkunst, Leipzig.

Paper: Munken Pure (ISO 14001, EMAS, Paper Profile, FSC, PEFC).

SPIN 12638994

With 84 illustrations

ISBN 978-3-211-99289-0 Springer Wien New York



Springer Wien New York

Sachsenplatz 4-6

A-1201 Wien

www.springer.at

www.springeronline.com

*Benda Hofmeyr*

*The Future*

*that Death/Other*

*gives*

This essay seeks to locate the event that happens in the face of Death/Other as conceptualized by Emmanuel Levinas. This event can be understood as a decisive moment of "veiled revelation" in which the future becomes present and I become Other. This revelation is not an "unveiling"—it becomes possible not despite the veil, but *because of* the veil. For Levinas, our encounter with death can be likened to the face-to-face encounter with the other person, the very incarnation of alterity as such. Because the face remains veiled—holy, not sacred—the self, that kernel of immanence, which up until now was self-supporting and autonomous, is preserved in transcendence. It is now heteronomously reoriented, separated from its own inwardness, becoming other-to-itself without—miraculously—losing itself (AF, 49/63). This "second birth" is what Levinas

Geoff Andrew, *Ten (10): BFI Modern Classics*, London: BFI Publishing, 2005.

Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Evidence du film: Abbas Kiarostami*, trilingual edition (French, English, Persian), Bruxelles: Yves Gevaert Editeur, 2001.



describes in *Le temps et l'autre* as "vanquishing death."

### *The Present and the Future in Levinas*

Levinas's philosophy is concerned with our present life in-the-world and the future beyond-this-world, with immanence and transcendence, with the self and the other person. His early phenomenological analyses, which proceed descriptively to bring to light the essence, have bearing on the present, on our life in-the-world, on immanence. The latter is more often than not interpreted as ontology inferior or ethically inessential to the future, to transcendence. Levinas's work cannot, however, be reduced to a binary opposition. For him, the promise of the future is a promise of resurrecting the past, with all its forces, but in such a way that it would begin anew. The happiness of a new beginning that the future can bring, a new beginning of the being one is and has been, is the paradoxical happiness of the *felix culpa*. More than the loss of immanence and self, which could be interpreted as a fortunate fall because of the good that comes from it, it is the preservation of immanence in transcendence. For Levinas, the "first" beginning in the now, the instant of immanence, is the very condition for the possibility of a second beginning, a "new birth" (TA, 81/179). Our life in-the-world is more than just a miserable series of events that will eventually lead to a happier outcome. The movement that leads an existent toward the Good is not a transcendence by which that existent raises itself up to a higher existence, but a departure from Being: an *ex-cendence*. But ex-cendence and

### *The horizontal transcendence of light*

#### *Being-in-the-world*

the Good necessarily have a foothold in being, and that is why Being is better than non-being (EE, 15 [Preface]). A being is the very condition for the possibility of escaping Being.

Levinas thus radically redefines the ancient sense of time conceived in terms of an infinite succession of instants. According to his existential interpretation of time, an instant is indeed a commencement, an inauguration, a dawning. This present is the awakening of consciousness, an *Au-geblick*. The future does not signal the recurrence of the now or its continuation, but the possibility of another instant or beginning, another chance for the now. The event that the future brings is a chance to recommence otherwise. This is the sense of time not as a determinate infinity of instants, but rather of the *infiniton*, the ever recommencing of the definitive (cf. EE, 14 [Lingis's introduction]).

Levinas's thought begins with the origination of the distinct existent: impersonal Being hypostasizes in a being. He then moves onto the progressively more intricate constitutive strata of subjectivity, its materiality and solitude, its insertion in and life in the world, its suffering and death, to conclude with the subject's encounter with the other person. It is this encounter that introduces the future into the present.

According to his early ontological analyses, our "economic" existence, our being-in-the-world, is defined by our relations to objects and

