

# FACING THE CLIMATE (ON DIFFICULT MOTHERS)

---

ARNE DE BOEVER

1

Does the climate have a face? You've probably heard of (maybe you've even experienced it) the ethical import of the first images of planet earth: somehow, seeing the planet at a distance enabled people to care about it more. It probably helped that the planet appeared as a beautiful, colourful ball onto which, very easily, a face could be projected. Everyone can relate to the planet as a person, to a 'mother' earth. We all love our mothers, right? Perhaps even a little too much.

Indeed, do mothers have to be lovable? What kind of love is solicited by the lovable mother? Might mothers want to be loved otherwise—from beyond the limitations of the kind of love that is solicited by lovability? Doesn't one want to be loved first and foremost in those abilities that pose a limit to what is called love?

Another way of asking this is: does the climate need a face in order for us to be able to care about it? Some might say that yes, it does—and they may refer to the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas when they do so. For Levinas, the face of 'the other' (it's been suggested he has

mostly humans in mind) is where the ethical relation opens up, as a dimension or epiphany that challenges not just my power ('pouvoir') but my very capacity for power ("mon pouvoir de pouvoir", as Levinas puts it). If the face challenged only my power, I would just need to apply myself more to master it; if my capacity for power is being challenged, on the other hand, the game changes (from quantitative to qualitative). Levinas is in the qualitative, not the quantitative game.

But to read Levinas literally, as if he were talking about actual faces, about what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call faciality—the structured distribution of eyes, nose, mouth, ears, et cetera—would be an error: at its best, least gentrified (and it's gentrified motherly love that I was targeting earlier on), Levinas's face challenges such a "beautiful" distribution, appearing instead much more like a smashed-up face, a Francis Bacon face (or "head", as Deleuze suggested)—as no "face" at all. *Face off. The mother's head. In Precarious Life*, which takes its title from Levinas, Judith Butler suggests that the face may just as well be a human back. Granted, it's still a *human* back we are talking about here, even if the description that Butler takes from Levinas when she points this out—it talks about "shoulders with blades like springs, which seemed to cry, sob, and scream"—invites us to also take into account the non-human (animal; object) when we think the Levinasian face.

## 2

Compare and contrast these two challenges to the human face: in the animation classic (yes?) *Shrek 2*, the ogre Shrek and his side-kick Donkey encounter, in the middle of the forest, a pussycat in boots. Introducing itself as Puss in Boots, the pussycat attacks the ogre, crawls (and claws) under his shirt, to suddenly burst out of it, hissing. The scene is a rewrite of that other, even more famous chestburster scene—from *Alien* (which, coincidentally—or not?—also involves a pussycat—albeit in the background—or rather two pussycats, if you count the pussy that's brought up in the dinner conversation). (Look it up, you'll see what I'm talking about.) In *Alien*, it is not the pussycat that comes bursting out of a human chest, but, you've guessed it, the titular alien: it also hisses, but it's no furry cat to be sure. Covered in blood and slime, and with corrosive acid pumping through its veins (as we later find out), it slithers away from the dinner table, where this scene—a kind of last supper scene—takes place.

Now, both these 'others'—Puss in Boots, the alien—represent challenges to the Levinasian face, because if there is a face here, it is the face of an animal or of an alien—not a human. But the challenge is drastically different in both cases: Puss in Boots is still a humanised, and ultimately cute other (note how the film plays with the pussycat's big eyes), whereas the alien stubbornly resists those qualifiers (the alien is and remains markedly unhuman, and not cute). And yet, as such, the alien may *really* be the ultimate carrier of what Levinas calls the face—of the otherness that the face names. It's worth noting here that when the alien first appears, it covers up the face of the space traveller whose chest it will later burst open. Note also that we're witnessing a kind of birth scene here, with a man being cast as the alien's mother. It's a birth, but it seems to unwork much of the ideology associated with birth. In fact, and judging by my experience alone (my wife and daughters will have to forgive me this one), the chestburster scene in *Alien/Shrek 2* seems to be a more realistic representation of birth than all of the rosy-coloured mother-and-child stuff that's become the order of the day. A hissing alien that comes bursting out of a spasmodic ogre—yeah, that pretty much captures it as far as I'm concerned (but I am, of course, no mother).

Finally, worth noting also at the simple, 'human' level are the voices that circulate in the scene from *Shrek 2*: Mike Myers, Eddie Murphy, and Antonio Banderas. White, Black, and Latino—and they all become fellow travellers. It's classic case of the American (US) 'buddy movie' (think *Lethal Weapon*, where white and black cop team up to save the world!) that brings 'others' together, beyond the racial differences that all too often divide us.

But isn't there a deeper difference, the difference of *Alien*, that divides us not so much from each other but even from ourselves? Isn't that the difference of the mother, and the love she inspires? Isn't that where our true face can be found—as the absence of all the facialities that are violently inscribed onto us, and that we sometimes also happily claim, even if we may realise (we've read some Foucault, yes?) that such a claim is not a claim to the truth about ourselves?

Here's the point: the climate may need a face in order for us to be able to care about it, but that face is not necessarily the smiley face that we can easily inscribe onto planet earth. Earth is not cute. It's not furry. It doesn't have big eyes. Earth is not so easily turned into a mother; or it can only be so when the mother is partly scrubbed out,

looking a little less ‘motherly’ as a consequence. (Ecology without nature, as Timothy Morton has put it. Motherfucker!)

In fact, doesn’t the planet actually look more like one of those Francis Bacon faces I alluded to earlier on, with the clouds swirling around the planet’s brown and blue ball evoking some of the visual effect of Bacon’s scrubbing away the structured distribution of the face? Bacon as a planet painter, and our relation to the planet mimicking the relation triggered by a Bacon portrait.

### 3

The climate, with its Levinasian face, appears to us precariously, as something that humans can alter, upset, and possibly even destroy. At the same time, as Levinas would have it, it commands that we should not kill: a commandment that in this case does not come from far above the earth (the place from where we are looking), but appears to be resonating from within it (perhaps God was always below rather than above?). Because, however, when it comes to the climate as other, the climate is an other in which we are all wrapped up—there is no one who is unaffected by it, unless we want to count those spending their lives in climate-controlled offices that are rendering inhabitable the climate outside by creating a habitable climate inside—the precariousness of the climate is at the same time our own precariousness. This is already so in the relation between self and other as it is theorised in Levinas; it becomes particularly clear, however, when the other is an other by which the self is enveloped. The climate is precarious, but since the climate is our living environment, its precariousness marks our own. We and the climate depend on each other; and we all depend on each other in our relation to the climate.

What we encounter here is an intensified precariousness, a precariousness that demands us to think an interdependency that far exceeds the self-other relation into the relation of all to all and to the environment in which we live. The climate as hyperobject (Morton’s term) can have this effect. Climate refugees collapse these various relations—self/climate, self/other people—into one: here’s where our environmental interdependency lies most precariously exposed. What we run into when we encounter climate refugees are the economic conditions that determine both our ‘ethics’ toward refugees (‘our social security system can’t support this abuse of the right to asylum!’) and our ethics toward the climate (we need to change capitalism if we

really want to do something about global warming, as Naomi Klein has pointed out in her powerful book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*.

Klein, at the end of her book, includes a moving chapter about what she calls “the community of the infertile.” Giving an account of her own struggle to conceive a child, and tying it to various reproductive issues that have appeared in a nature challenged by capitalism, she suggests her infertility is environmentally caused and that the continuation of the human species is already at stake in the battle for the climate. The planet may not be a mother, but many living on the planet are, or may want to be so in the future—no matter the accelerationist (xenofeminist) call for automatic reproduction. Klein, as the mother struggling to conceive, as the one barely being able to be a mother, who can be a mother only with extreme difficulty, is the face of our precariousness today—which is the precarious of a difficult humanism. Motherly love—both love for and of the mother—is reconceived here, outside of all *naïveté*, as the love of a difficult mother. The kind of precariousness that is produced by the climate (which we produce) is foundational and forces us to recommence all of our endeavours—the ecological struggle, living together, taking care of ourselves, et cetera—from this state of the difficult mother.