

# Disfigured faces: repudiation of images within public space

## *Rostos desfigurados: repúdio de imagens no espaço público*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is about experiencing images as an interactive imagistic process, as pointed by Bergson in his book *Matter and Memory* through a dubious aspect of photographic portrait in terms of its repudiated reception within public space. We present a series of photographs taken in four Latin American cities which depict intentionally defaced headshots. Enlisting the studies of Deleuze, Bergson, Benjamin and Barthes, we advance that these photographs are documentary testimony of different reactions. The photographs urge us to move beyond what the disfigured faces mean as iconic signs, making us see them as indicial of the dynamic interaction between the portraits and the anonymous disfiguring agents as an image.

**Keywords:** Portrait, disfigurement, advertising, Bergson, image

### RESUMO

Este artigo é sobre experienciar imagens como processo imagético interativo, como apontado por Bergson no livro *Matéria e Memória*, por meio de um aspecto dúbio do retrato fotográfico, em termos da sua recepção repudiada no espaço público. Apresentamos uma série de fotografias de quatro cidades latino-americanas que retratam rostos desfigurados intencionalmente. Recorrendo aos estudos de Deleuze, Bergson, Benjamin e Barthes, apontamos essas fotografias como testemunho documental de diferentes reações. As fotografias nos incitam a ir além do que os rostos desfigurados significam como signos icônicos, para serem vistas como indícios da interação dinâmica entre os retratos e os agentes desfigurantes anônimos, como uma imagem.

**Palavras-chave:** Retrato, desfiguração, propaganda, Bergson, imagem

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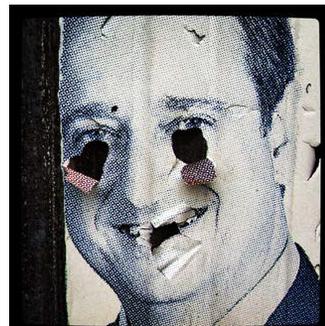
*White, Black  
and Blue,*  
Curitiba  
2015



*See No Evil,*  
Porto Alegre  
2015



*Pokemon,*  
Porto Alegre  
2015



*Once Bitten,*  
Porto Alegre  
2015



*Peppy,*  
Porto Alegre  
2015



*Glass,*  
Porto Alegre  
2015



*Duende,*  
Buenos Aires  
2015



*Innocent,*  
Buenos Aires  
2015

FIGURE 1 – Felix Rebolledo Palazuelos, *Disfigured Faces*, 2015

Source: Private collection

THE REPRODUCTION OF people's likenesses in photographic portraiture has been one of the mainstays of photography from its inception and to this day this remains one of the principal draws of artistic, commercial, professional and amateur practices: it would seem that people can't get enough of producing and consuming images of themselves and of others! Portraiture as a genre can be said to range from the formal, posed, static studio portrait to the impulsive, spur-of-the-moment selfie snapshot with a multitude of categories in between these two polar opposites. This paper deals with a dubious aspect of photographic portraiture – not in the sense of its formal production as a genre, or its aesthetics, or its commissioning, but in terms of its reception within public space. The specific aspect of reception which we wish to investigate is not so much their acceptance but their outright rejection and repudiation.

The photographs under examination constitute a series of images taken by the author depicting faces appearing on walls/surfaces adjacent to public urban thoroughfares in four Latin American cities. They were shot in 2015 in Buenos Aires, Argentina and in three Brazilian cities, Santa Maria, Porto Alegre and Curitiba. What these images have in common is not only that they were shot in the street and depict faces, but that each printed photograph affixed to a wall has been the object of violent intervention. Each image has been somehow intentionally defaced and disfigured. The perpetrator of the marks, rends, tears and gashes left behind on these images are those of some unknown, anonymous, yet wilfully intentioned, passerby. Someone had taken the time and possibly gone out of their way to do violence to these images: simply walking by was not an option! Their actions betray a particular ferocity towards these photographic images – a visceral response to these depictions of human faces.

The disfigured faces offer a parallel yet convergent text in that they exist as independent entities which are substantiated by the written discourse but speak on their own behalf. They motivate us to think beyond what the disfigured faces mean not as pictorial objects in themselves as iconic signs, but as indicial of the dynamic interaction between the original portraits and the anonymous disfiguring agents as an image. Thus, this paper is about experiencing images as interactive imagistic process as ideated by Bergson in *Matter and Memory* (1898/1988). We posit our photographs of obliterated photographic portraits in public spaces as the *materia prima* for analysis of these images which must be taken at face value – but not at the self-evident face value that engages us at the primary iconicity of disfigured faces. Our images can only be taken at face value, but according to another code: as documentary evidence of gestures of a transformative agency as a second iconicity which reveals itself by considering the

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image as processual. Portraits *are artworks* in that they are artistic creations, but their aesthetic power can be such that they become surrogates for the individuals they portray and compellingly communicate their aura of power, beauty, wealth, learning, or saintliness more effectively than their flesh and blood counterparts.

According to West (2004), the portrait is not only a capture of the likeness of the sitter, but also (re)presents their social position, aspirations, character, values and virtues. The facial features must somehow convey or serve as sign of their soul, of their inner workings and values. And overall, the portrait must inform us of the processes of commissioning. The representational depiction of portraits spans the continuum between *specificity of likeness* and *generality of type*, between semblance and uniqueness, and their representational status relative to their existential context – the portrayal evokes the representational symbolism of facial expression, bearing, attitude and most importantly the gaze as an expression of authority, power, wealth, talent, or fame and helps “create and perpetuate a public image of leaders, prominent members of society, creative people, and celebrities” (p. 97). All these depicted qualities, often idealised, indicate the subject’s social position or *inner life* as that which sets this individual apart from the rest and makes him or her exemplary.

Perhaps it is these idealisations which are so blatantly projected into the world that get under people’s skin and compel them to react so forcefully. The “real” reasons for the actions on the faces are anonymous, unknowable and indeterminable and this makes our text speculative and hopefully suggestive. It is not an empirical study in that we have not sought answers to our concerns from the perpetrators, or from a forensic scrutiny of the scene of the crimes, or a minute analysis of the acts themselves. Rather, we have sought to carry out a speculative, theoretical fabulation of what could be at play behind these seemingly desperate gestures as the action of what Deleuze (1989) might call a *people to come*. This makes our study a mythological exegesis which follows in the methodological footsteps of Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies* (1957/1991) but veers towards a mythology as foundational ideology based on the direct action of imagistic praxis. The defacement as riposte becomes a *speech-act* that expresses itself as an obliteration which unearths new, non-partisan, expressive possibility as a minor language to the dominant codes of consumer and political advertising, precisely in order to express the impossibility of living under domination (Deleuze, 1989, p. 227). Our analysis is thus an exploration of what we deem justifies the constellation of these photographs as sharing a common theme, gesture, tempo or rhythm.

At first glance, the photographs in the series presented here appear to have the same concerns as Ana Lira’s outstanding photography project *Voto!*, shown at the 2014 São Paulo #31Bial¹. We both draw from the same walls:

<sup>1</sup> The #31 Bial webpage featuring Ana Lira’s work can be accessed at: <http://www.31binal.org.br/pt/post/1368>

there is significant thematic overlap between the two bodies of work, and both articulate different aspects of a people to come. Where Lira's photographs emerge from a collaboration with the production of the documentary *Eleições: crise de representação* (not finished) our images emerge from academic research-creation into epistemological modelling. Our work is less decidedly political and more aesthetic, more preoccupied with modes of address and reception and less involved in the quotidian of the aesthetics of militancy and political expression. Where Lira's work invites us to look at her images objectively, as a consciousness of a something-done-to the images, we wish to document the evidence of gestures of a doing-with the image.

We thus seek to subvert the power of photography to objectively document and objectify the world by means of its immediate capture and instead look to photography as documentary testimony of the facticity of a past deed – the traces left behind by anonymous agents of transformation to indicate imagistic process. Rather than capture the gesture of defacement, we feature instances of its perpetration towards building a body of evidence which substantiates our case. We don't subscribe to the idea that this movement is a linear throughput of determinative cause and effect and so we consider it as a constellation of rationalisation bounded by the stimulus and the response. The text here presented attempts to effectuate the same movement as within the processual image. We know what the stimulus is and know the end result; what needs determining is what takes place between the incitement and the gestural response. How is that middle a medium that is simultaneously signifier and signified and the performative coalescence of the two? Our exposition emulates this acented dynamic: it does not follow a linear line of argumentation in the sense of presenting an initial thesis or problem, a discussion of pros and cons, and a synthesising conclusion. We problematise discursively the analysis of a series of photographs to examine the nexus of associated motivations which together as an assemblage produce a movement of thought.

This movement can be as understood as thinking process, as the movement of consciousness which produces a translation, a transference of position relative to another, which can be understood as a displacement through space or figuratively as a change in mental attitude or disposition. Yet, to say that the original images were systematically or rationally targeted would be to impute a higher degree of premeditated resolve to what appears to be a spontaneous and reflex reaction to a surfeit of advertising imagery. There is no manifest studied preciousity, no apparent technique that was mastered in carrying out the defacement, no premeditated packing of a cleaver to slice up Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* like suffragette Mary Richardson did in 1914 (Fowler, 1991). This

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is not intended to disparage or demean contestatory activity, nor to imply that there is no thought behind resistance and critique, but to indicate that a subtler affective dynamic might be at play, that the pictures affect the spectator at a level other than the production of a direct consumerist response. The affective energy that the original images were capable of generating within susceptible viewers attests to the power of images whose release surpasses the automatic imagistic reflex of acting on the advertising's unique selling proposition as the adequate perception. And here we wish to underscore the use of susceptible, not as a vulnerability or predisposition, but as the spectator's affective capacity in Spinozist terms of affecting and of being affected.

### THE BERGSONIAN IMAGE

In order to be able to posit the disfiguring gesture as imagistic interactivity, we need to define the interactive image. In spite of the super-abundance of imagistic offerings, we still have difficulty grasping what an interactive image is and how to differentiate it from other image types such as graphic, optical, perceptual, mental and verbal (Mitchell, 1984). As conceived by Bergson, an image is anything and everything that acts and reacts on all its faces and through all its parts. It is an existence placed halfway between the "thing" and the mental image or *representation*, where the body is an image among many that interposes itself between the excitations that it receives from without and the movements which it is about to execute (Bergson, 1898/1988). The body (which includes the brain) becomes the common ground between the perception of stimulus and the resultant action – thus, Bergson can write that he *perceives* "afferent nerves which transmit a disturbance to the nerve centres, then efferent nerves which start from the centre, conduct the disturbance to the periphery, and set in motion parts of the body or the body as a whole" (p. 18). "The complete process of perception and of reaction can then hardly be distinguished from a mechanical impulsion followed by a necessary movement" (p. 32). For Bergson, what fundamentally distinguishes the living and the non-living is the existence of a centre of indetermination which introduces a hesitant delay between the stimulus and the response.

This reflective dynamic which defines the image as composed of a stimulus, the indeterminate interposition of the brain, and a reaction, serves as foundation for an imagistic, interactive, processual ideation of life. That which separates the action and reaction is a centre of indetermination because what transpires within that interval cannot be readily or coherently ascertained. What we do know is that there is a jump or shift from the centripetal afferent nervous system which conveys the sensorial stimulus towards the brain and the efferent system which conveys

the reaction from the brain to the extremities. In terms of an example, if we use the human visual system, the transduced visual stimulus relayed from the retina to the brain results in a response along a different circuit which activates a muscle, a muscle group, or sets in motion a 'useful' task: this muscle can be an ocular muscle which shifts the direction of the gaze, a movement of the tongue, or a pointing of the finger, or the disfiguring of an advertising image on a public thoroughfare.

As such, the image that concerns us is composed of the perceptual cognition of the portraits, the interval of deliberation and the defacement as response. To describe the image this way is to reductively articulate the movement-image through pure perception as Bergson (1898/1988) does in the first chapter of *Matter and Memory* – and, like Bergson, we do not involve memory here so as not to overcharge the presentation, even if memory is always at stake: “complete perception is only defined and distinguished by its coalescence with a memory-image” (p. 127). Obviously, there is memory in play in the recognition and determination of what the images are and what they mean, i.e. what movement they produce, but we assume that the disfigurements are the result of a spontaneous response rather than the product of a conscious premeditation.

This interactivity is what constitutes the image for Bergson – there is no pictorial or iconic image upon which to fall back on. This is critical to this ideation in that the perceived image is not reproduced in the brain as consciousness but is projected back to where it appears to be – outside our body – so that every perception is produced where it occurs (Bergson, 1898/1988, pp. 43 and 57). Thus, Bergsonian imagistic process associates the perceptual encounter not only as an interactive dynamic but as what is traditionally referred to as the inside of consciousness and the outside of experience to simultaneously emerge as a singular becoming. Imagistic process creates an envelope for the experiential event between bodies. Bergson (1988) posits a perceptual loop which establishes a continuity between the perceiver and the perceived. This dynamic, which Deleuze recognises as operative in *Cinema 1: the movement-image* and also articulated by Michel Serres (1982), is elucidated through projective geometry and topology, (Rebolledo & Machado, in press) so that the chasm or rift between the knower and the known is dissolved and a continuity produced between the two.

## SERIALISATION AND REPETITION

There is a directness about photography – which could also be said about being in the world – that sanctions its muteness, that leaves one speechless or that warrants no explanation. Its experience and transmission commands a perspective around which it can organise itself and a point of view through

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which the narrative unfolding of the implications of that experience can take hold as the matrix for the affective colouring to come. On its own, a photograph is all too often too full of meaning-potential, which as such constitutes an indeterminable effusion of possibility which precludes the formulation of any cogent interpretation. There's always a possibility of individuating sense from a picture, of teasing it out from the surface of the picture and revealing it as the outward appearance of the understanding, no matter how silent or refractory to apprehension it may at first appear to be. But the fact remains that the 'hidden' unspeakable meaning is always in plain view even if this second iconicity is often labelled invisible.

The photographs here reproduced compose a series that together flesh out a statement. The statement is unpacked throughout the series though only one of these images is sufficient to develop the statement to a single point – specially when we know or understand the intent of the image. The series problematises the statement through the articulation of difference through the repetition of certain themes whose identification constitutes a path that leads to an inevitable intuitive conclusion: an interpretation which can swing either as the simple acknowledgement of an iteration, or as the affirmation of a *ritornello* which allows one to compose with, along and through the repetition of the statement. The photographs keep the integrity of the idea of the statement through serialisation “of a form of eternally positive differential multiplicity” which distinguishes it from the identity of the point (Deleuze, 1994, p. 288). The individual photographs must extend the movement while intensifying the amplitude, the volume of the enunciation of the statement, all the time risking the possibility of shattering the meta-stability of the enunciative whole.

It's not a matter of eyeing these images on the walls of any city street and reacting to them directly – of *freaking out* at photographs – but of internalising their gaze, of letting the gaze that is projected by these images become a part of our memorial archive and allowing them to prompt us to see ourselves the way these images look to view us, dominate us, exercise their power over us. Obviously, these images cannot see in any optical way, but through sheer ubiquitousness and incessant repetition we come to understand their dead-fish eyes gazing out at us as if they were the gaze of some real person. But because these images literally gaze at us, stare at us down, look directly into our eyes anytime we look at them, when we read Didi-Huberman's *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (1992) [What we see, what looks at us] on the image looking at us, we can take his words *prima facie*.

What a photograph is saying may not be obvious; we may not understand what it is showing, even if, as in the photographs here presented, it is staring

at us in the face. For this reason, photographs are often presented as series intending to offer hints to flesh out a statement as well as to constrain and condition interpretation. The series does not just give us hints as to the motif of the repetition, it gives us additional information in order that we may ascertain through repetition what is being stated, or perhaps what is being stuttered, what the point is the photographs are trying to convey. As such, it allows one to close-in on the statement by reducing the degrees of freedom of possible interpretation, of introducing constraints that enable attaining a semblance of conclusion without closing off expressive potential. The series produces an ensemble whose meanings cannot be exhausted pictorially nor through explanatory text: its open-endedness can only be described in terms of a theme

within a radical improvisation of the very idea of description (in and through its relation to explanation), one that would move us from hidden and ontologically fixed likeness to the anarchising of variation, variation not (on) but of – and thus with(out[-from-the-outside]) (Moten, 2003, pp. 92-93).

The problematising aspect of the serial repetition – which also makes the statement that much more defined – opens it to pluralising enunciative possibilities. Thus, the series of photographs “makes *one and the same problem* of difference and repetition” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 288). This opening reveals that the statement is made up of multiple registers “but equally of the particular inscription of an articulation linked in turn to events, institutions and all sorts of other practices” (Deleuze, 1988, p. 20). Yet, while the serialisation of the statement opens creative and inventive possibilities, the movement cannot stray from the established inevitable intuitive direction of the point. The articulation of difference walks a fine line between the constraining of expressive freedom and the creative expansion of expression. Thus, the serialisation perpetuates the threshold dynamic of the statement by extending the oscillation of variation, maintaining that simultaneous opening and closing, of divergence and convergence, of being and not-being, which repeats the passage in its different manifestations.

## THE UBIQUITY OF OBUY!<sup>2</sup>

There’s nothing more commonplace in everyday life than the ubiquitous presence of advertising images depicting human faces. These images stare intently at us, leer slyly at us, smile our way ironically, and beckon us to engage their

<sup>2</sup> This is our invention playing on Shepard Fairey’s OBEY! slogan that conflates Obey! Consume! Now! See: <https://obeygiant.com/propaganda/manifesto/>

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propositions whatever they may be. We cannot escape their constant glaring intrusion into our consciousness. Their gaze screams the pitched call to action to consume: OBUY! “Buy my pitch; benefit from my service; enjoy the product; vote for me; wear this outfit; phone me; buy this house; drive this car; get well soon!” We see these pictures of alluringly made-up and coiffed, smiling close-ups, of confidently defiant poses, of smug self-satisfaction, of idealised everydayness, of models inhabiting utopian milieus as product beyond our means, beyond our hopes, beyond compare: something to aspire to even though we mere mortals will never attain whatever it is they pitch. Everywhere we look, these faces are looking back at us: plastered on walls, on billboards, on the pages of magazines and newspapers, in tv commercials, on the pop-ups on our web pages, in the judgmental looks of the neighbour next door, the expectant gazes of our mate and the denigrative disdain of our children. Everywhere we turn, the smiling face of consumption is looking to seduce and persuade us. But as a result of this ubiquity, there’s a physical threshold, an emotional limit that these images have breached, an affective intensity that they have surpassed with their relentless advances that no other human faciality can maintain.

This incessant visual provocation is beyond an enticement or an invitation to buy – it’s the ubiquitousness of the constant insinuating pressure that gets under our skin. And what’s most galling is the active passivity of these faces, the obliviousness of these images to the active powers of that which is absently, blankly, unremittingly put forth as a gaze which we have come to internalise as our own. It is a gaze which spurs us towards compliance, obedience and passivity through an internalised mirroring, a transgressive surveillance-of-self designed to elicit a specific response. These images which impudently stare us in the eyes, which defiantly, brazenly, barefacedly challenge us to mesh with them are looking to machinically harness our shame. These unsolicited, solicitous solicitations which taunt us, which sneer at us, which condescend to our venal materialism, taunt our acquisitive aspirations, enflame our desires, judge our wants and prey on our vulnerabilities. As Susan Sontag points out in *On photography* (1973), “This very passivity – and ubiquity – of the photographic record is photography’s ‘message,’ its aggression” (p. 7). You would think that these images are only seeking affirmation of their goodwill message or a vote of confidence in their implicit truthfulness because with all that smiling going on they would only have our best interests at heart. Yet, their ubiquitousness demands nothing short of our unconditional surrender; and if the visual appeal is insufficient, they bypass the rational to work at an affective level which wears us down and compels us to submit unwittingly. You can count on these images to always win because in the stare-down of wills, their gaze will never falter, they will never blink first.

## THE GAZE AND THE STARE-DOWN

The relation between the photographic portraits we're referring to and the person gazing at them is not as innocent and straightforward as it appears. It is more than the one-way relation of viewer and object, more than the simple connection of a viewer eyeing a photograph of a person. It is a relation which must also include the photograph looking at the viewer, of the interlocking of gazes in the encounter. The experience of the photographic image needs to be seen as an interactive dialogic relation. It constitutes an imagistic reciprocity which is charged with affects which sometimes produces violent discharges as explosive expressions which can go off in a flash.

The photographs which we have selected for consideration are *head-and-shoulder portraits* which engages us directly, equal to equal, where a level gaze is exchanged between individuals of similar or equal standing; but even the fixed, level stare has strong connotations of disrespect and domination by the mere act of daring to stare at someone. It is in reply to the charged power of an imagined gaze and a presumed slight which makes Travis Bickle – the cabbie in Martin Scorsese's 1976 feature film *Taxi Driver* (Phillips, Phillips, & Scorsese, 1976) – boost his bravado and affirm his subjective power as an individual. When we see him repeatedly rehearsing in the mirror the art of the stare-down and the aggressive, confidence-building, self-affirmative riposte we can only surmise a negative outcome from the repetition of his memorable line: "Are you talking at me?". Bickle is trying to regain the dignity he has lost as an American, as a New Yorker, as a person, through a perfection of the negotiation of the power dynamics and exchange of domination implicit in the gaze. The "You talking to me?" is a rhetorical question which builds on the exchange of gazes: whatever Bickle's imaginary buddy might have said as a starter is irrelevant and at best secondary to the pre-verbal exchange of gazes – Bickle's question is rhetorical because the imaginary interchange he is engaged in is about a resolution to the perceived domination attempt and its concomitant belittling implicit in the stare-down: a slight which Bickle intends to correct by drawing his gun and shooting someone in the face. But what this shows is that he has internalised this gaze of domination and is reacting to it directly – bypassing the need for an actual *agent provocateur* – and letting his reaction become an *action directe*. Bickle's rant is designed to make any listener or onlooker perk their ears and take note: "Listen you fucks, you screw-heads. Here is a man who would not take it any more. A man who stood up against the scum, the cunts, the dogs, the shit, the filth. Some one who stood up. Here is..." (Phillips, Phillips, & Scorsese, 1976).

His newfound subjectivity represents a rebirth, an affirmation of self, a pro-active empowerment curiously reminiscent of Howard Beale's diatribe

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against corporatism (Abrasuamente1, 2012) in Sidney Lumet's feature film *Network* (Gottfried, Caruso, & Lumet, 1976) – “I am mad as hell and I am not going to take this anymore!” – also of 1976. It's even more curious how this preoccupation with the belittlement of American common man is “entering into legibility” to constitute “a specific critical point of the movement inside them” (Benjamin, 1999, pp. 462-463). Bickle's monologue conveys that threshold moment of transition, of his death and rebirth, not only through the repeated back and forth switching of temporal self-references within the monologue but also from his pronouncing it as a funerary soliloquy in the third person in the present, as a past thing. The monologue marks the crossing of the threshold, the decisive moment of transition which demonstrates “the death of the *intentio* which accordingly coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth” (Benjamin, 1999, pp. 462-463).

### THE INTERNALISATION OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC GAZE

The fear of the internal gaze of the photograph's subject is nothing new – it seems to be a concern from the early moments of the history of photography and prior to that in portrait painting (West, 2004). Benjamin (2009) reports that “people were scared to spend long looking at the earliest pictures he [Daguerre] brought out. The clarity of the figures alarmed them, making them think the tiny faces of the people in the pictures could see *them*” (p. 177). In the essay “Photography and Electoral Appeal” in *Mythologies* (1957/1991), Barthes analyses the portraits appearing in the prospectuses of political candidates and asserts that photography has a power to convert based on “something deep and irrational co-extensive with politics” (p. 91). He imputes that this power is based on the forced identification of the voter with the candidate through photographic portraits which condensate “an ‘ineffable’ social whole” (p. 91). “What is transmitted through the photograph of the candidate are not his plans, but his deep motives, all his family, mental, even erotic circumstances, all this style of life of which he is at once the product, the example and the bait” (p. 91). It is a mirror that addresses us in the second person singular, *You!*, in that mode of address we find most flattering and engaging, the mode with which we speak to ourselves in the mirror or the oftentimes reproachful active voice that our internal psychic monologue uses to berate us. These photographs of smiling faces gazing intently, yet noncommittally, at us is a constant *friendly reminder from one image to another* of our essential inadequacy, of our lacking and deficient nature.

This internalised gaze of the *You* compels us, seduces us, induces us to compare ourselves negatively with the persons depicted on the photographs

and introduces a differential, a contrast of potential which induces movement as a power dynamic. This gaze is very similar yet different from the internalised self-regulating gaze which is operative in systems of surveillance: where the internalised gaze of surveillance controls us in terms of what we may or may not do, the internalised gaze of these images feeds into our 'useless' guilt and adventitious shame. It plugs machinically into existential insecurities at a seemingly innocuous level to let us know that there is always something amiss with us and with the way we lead our lives which could be easily and conveniently corrected if only we would buy into their message of commercial or political goodwill. These constant, pesky nudges are a persistent affirmation of our limitations in the eyes of God – they do not act so much as a sublimated authoritative self-regulation, as a Foucauldian modality of surveillance, but as ready-made answers to the questions arising from the self-doubt and second-guessing which they generate. Yet, as Marshall McLuhan (1964/1995) reminds us, the medium is the message, and here the message is not only the repeated content of the *one-on-one friendly appeal* but the systemic ubiquity of the smugness of these reminders, of these pitches, that are widely put forth as an integrated media ecology which cultivates and perpetuates a global culture of need and lack by persistently prompting and enforcing our inadequacies and insecurities and on false needs arising from a demeaned vision of self as a colonisation of consciousness.

### **THE TRANSGRESSIVE *DROIT DE SEIGNEUR* OF THE INVASIVE GAZE**

A portrait is not just the result of the encounter between the subject and a photographer. It is a complex negotiation of powers and rights which almost always ends up granting absolute rights to a photographer to which the sitter must submit. The self-granted imperiousness of photography is almost a *carte blanche* to interfere with, to invade, or ignore whatever is going on (Sontag, 1973, p. 11) and capture it for posterity. It's as if the imperative rôle of the photographic record bestows magical powers on the photographer and the camera which makes them invisible and gives them free access to any aspect of life. This taken for granted *droit de seigneur* accords a total freedom of movement within the event so that the photographer's eye can fix the perspective, usurp the privileged point of view of the real protagonists, adopt the definitive frame of reference and establish the dominant gaze – as after all, the gaze is what perspectivises the event and determines the positioning of things relative to each other the way as concordant with human vision. That articulation of selection, the expression of that freedom of choice as to what to show, to allow what is to be seen, and how

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to show it defines the possible interpretations of that event or life and dictates how it will be represented or constructed – the frame becomes the foregone conclusion of what was, what is and what can be as a visual construct.

We can say the same thing about the public presence of the photographs prior to their disfigurement: they confer the transgressive *droit de seigneur* to the projective invasive gaze which by sheer repetition we have come to internalise. The gaze of commercialism extends the reach of the internalised gaze of consumerism by penetrating into our cores, overwhelming and replacing our subjectivities. Here we would be referring not only to the ubiquitousness of these images, but to their strategic placement in order to guarantee maximum exposure and maximum impact. They are placed for optimal visibility – and what they don't achieve through strategic placement, they achieve through its repetition in ubiquitousness. McLuhan has never been more correct: the medium is the message. And that medium, which we have insinuated as the middle all along, is that indeterminate centre of the image where stimulus becomes action.

### THE DRAMA OF THE INTERACTIVE IMAGE

Much of what is said about the relation of spectatorship, and more precisely, how photography as a practice consisting of gestures of invasive aggression affects its target subjects can in fact also be attributed to the invasiveness of the public presence of these types of photographs and their effect on spectators. Clearly, to impute these kinds of powers and invasive, aggressive volition onto an inanimate object such as a printed photograph, is to perpetrate some kind of rhetorical trope: we invest these images with a raw ideological animal power and anthropomorphise the dominance of their gaze. We confuse their ubiquitousness with stalking; we ascribe their inanimate stares to an active looking or peering at us; we invest their presence with the evil power of capitalism; we accuse them of taking liberties with our consciousness and attention; and we blame them for a chronic barely detectable preying on our vulnerabilities and charge them with mind control. It would seem that the images *are* the fronts for an ideological point of sale of consumption – individually they may be selling a specific good or service but as a part of the non-stop tsunami of commercialism and consumerism, they are a franchise. The mother business *is* consumerism and the images produced are only its drama. They are the imagistic show-and-tell business of the dramatisation of OBUY! But here we need to be precise in specifying the formulation of image not as the pictorial images of the photographs but as the Bergsonian image of stimulus and reaction which transmit movement within themselves as transductions of cause into action. So that it doesn't matter what

the actual purposeful content of the photographed face posted to a wall may be – in that each face is as guilty as another by association – if it is on a wall, it is the same abstract machine looking to subvert our subjectivity. The advertising image gives us the full picture, but never the whole story. It is a self-interested accounting lying by omission, betraying our trust, hooking us into the workings of consumption as the tip of the protocolary iceberg of buying into the machinic submission of consumerism and its derivative attendant gestures.

### DISFIGUREMENT AS PUNISHMENT

To do violence to someone's face is a select modality of inflicting lasting suffering. No matter its origin or cause, defacement leads to social ostracism and exclusion from the group – and particularly so when the disfigurement is the result of punishment for an offence against the social good or moral order. Disfigurement can either be self-inflicted or inflicted by others. When self-inflicted it is usually for purposes of mortification as a devotional practice, for adornment and the styling of self, or because of the acting out from psychological suffering; when meted out by others it is for personal retribution or for judicial justice by the church or state powers. Either way, facial mutilation has been part of human tradition since time immemorial: it forms part of our collective unconscious and lives in our contemporary through various manifestations.

Recent news items demonstrate the ubiquitousness of disfigurement: the current practice of facial scalping – to slice off someone's face – by Central American crime gangs as the ultimate punishment and dishonour of competitors or enemies; in 2013, the artistic director of Russia's Bolshoi Theatre, Sergei Filin, was burned by an acid attack to the face allegedly masterminded by a ballet dancer from the troupe; Bibi Aisha, the disfigured Afghan woman, also by acid, whose face was featured *au naturel* on the cover of *Time Magazine* in 2010 to raise awareness to the violence perpetrated on women by the ministration of Sharia by the Taliban.

Historically, disfigurement has included the gouging of the eyes or blinding with acid, the lopping off of ears and nose, and the excision of the tongue and the severing of lips as punishment for a wide variety of crimes (Bailey, 2012, p. 16). The face is a choice site for the infliction of punishment because of the symbolic meaning of the retributive justice as an exercise in public shaming. The punishment is designed to mark with extreme prejudice someone's face with a glaring sign of guilt which will result in social ostracism and exclusion. The disfigurement is usually not lethal but obvious and permanent: the sign of criminality would be difficult to conceal and “would be scrutinised by the

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community” since wounds to the face “were (and remain) the hardest to conceal” (Skinner, 2015, p. 199). In medieval Europe, the punishment was meted out to both men and women, but women disproportionately suffered these punishments – and mainly for sexual misconduct – as a method of rendering them so repulsive that they would engender horror and shock in the viewer and render carnal relations unpalatable and off-putting since women’s “sexuality and allure to men was thought to reside in facial beauty” (p. 201). Thus, disfigurement is to be seen as a traumatic transformation of the face as punishment for a crime where the infraction is some kind of betrayal of trust, moral transgression or social breach of conduct: by permanently marking the face of the guilty party in such a way, they will be recognised forever as a wrongdoer and duly rejected and ostracised from the community. This strategy is plainly made clear in the recent American film *Lost river* (Gosling et al. & Gosling, 2014) by Ryan Gosling. The theme of despoliation, defacement and mutilation is rife in this gritty post-apocalyptic urban drama of life on the depopulated fringes of a city submerged by a water reservoir. One of the characters has his lips removed by a self-appointed lord-and-master as punishment for a breach of trust. The impromptu surgery definitely has the desired effect of rendering the putative transgressor into an instinctually repulsive and socially abhorrent outcast.

### WHY THE FACE

The defacements are an attack on the instrumentality of the delivery of the deception. Varner (2004) demonstrates that there is abundant evidence on statues in marble and bronze, on painted likenesses and representations in relief, on coins, and gems, that as far back as Ancient Rome, that individuals were defacing public effigies of emperors discredited for corruption, condemned as tyrants or overthrown. The practice of *damnatio memoriae*, or memorial damnation, served to provide “the mechanisms by which an individual was simultaneously canceled and condemned” and destroyed their “posthumous reputation and memory” (Varner, 2004, pp. 1-2). The fundamental ideological aim of *damnatio memoriae* was to erase the identity and accomplishments of the individual emperor from the collective memory.

Portrait statues and busts were by and large generic and what personalised them was the face and head, so these were disfigured and the remainder recycled for a subsequent emperor. The defacements were therefore performed on the face and head, as those parts which individualised and personalised the representation of the emperor as an institution. The Romans understood that by removing the head, they were severing the personal from the institutional, from the actual to

the abstract – the obliteration of the head deterritorialized it from the realm of the organic and the animal, and reconnected it to processes of signification and subjectification (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 172). If the portrait personified the institution, and the face/head personalized its articulation and signified its office, then the obliteration of the facial portrayal as instrument of the deception would fulfil the intention of *damnatio memoriae* without affecting the broader institution itself. The deceptive faces are obliterated, both so that they cannot repeat their deceit and to abolish their memorial power. As such, the effigies publicly displayed and circulated are attacked as war machines, as the instruments of the deception and as symbols of the treachery of the state of mind that makes itself felt in the faciality of the perceptual encounter.

Similarly, we understand the instrumentality of the hand in carrying out a theft, and readily make the connection that leads Shariah Law to decree, “Cut off the hands of both male thieves and female thieves as the requital of what they earned and as a deterrent ordained by God” (Al-Maidah, 5:38) (Islam & The Qur’an, 2018), for without the hand, the crime cannot be carried out. In contrast, the idea of guilt imputed to the instrument has been a hot topic of debate around gun control in the U.S.A. particularly in the wake of mass shootings where opponents to gun control insist that “Guns don’t kill people, people kill people” (Robinson, 2018). This is an adaptation of a popular quote of Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 B.C.-65 A.D.), “*Quemadmoeum gladis nemeinum occidit, occidentis telum est*” – which appears *ad nauseam* loosely translated as “a sword is never a killer, it’s a tool in the killer’s hands” on websites sponsored by American gun advocacy groups as a coded message that conveys their endorsement of the American National Rifle Association<sup>3</sup>. The pro-gun lobby is unwavering in its refutation of the beliefs of firearms regulation advocates that uphold that “Guns kill people” and that if guns are eradicated, safer communities and a reduction in violent gun crime would result. The line of the discussion at this point would seem to point towards an understanding of the motivation of the gestures of the perpetrator of the disfigurements. But, in fact, we are moving towards suggesting the face as the smoking gun, of positing the face as the guilty party, and the defacement as punishment. How does the face come to be considered the mediating instrumentality that becomes the focus and objective of punishment?

The face expresses the state of mind through the motor re-configuration of its surface. There is a one-to-one correspondence between the affective and the expressive, narrativised by muscular adjustments of the face as a movement of expression, so that there is a spontaneous connection made between the image of thought and the sensori-motor revelation of affect on the face. For example,

<sup>3</sup> This is just a random sample of sites which post the quote: <<https://bit.ly/2Fr97Vj>> or <<https://bit.ly/2EH5Vri>> or <<https://bit.ly/2Hs7iq>>.

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when we strike our finger with a hammer, we scowl in pain and possibly let out a yell, but the gesture that completes the image is the immediate pulling away of the finger as response to the intensity of the sensation. The facial expression is congruent with the ideas that are being created in the mind – but it is not the idea itself. In *Cinema 1: the movement-image* (1983), Deleuze proposes the close-up as the affection-image: “*the affection-image is the close-up and the close-up is the affection-image*” (italics in original, Deleuze, 1986, p. 87), so that the affective complement to the adequate perception is what is being projected. The images that we are considering here can all be considered affective entities, in that they express the quality and intensity of whatever is crossing the mind: the face, as a close-up and as affection-image, is both a type of image and the colouring component of all images, which as an interactive processual action-reaction dynamic, expresses a motor tendency on a sensitive nerve (Bergson, 1988; Deleuze, 1986). The facial expression is congruent and cogredient with the ideas that are being created in the mind, but it is not the idea itself – this relation is arbitrary at best. The face shows the spontaneous connection made between the image of thought and the sensori-motor revelation as a quality and a degree of intensity. The expression of the face attests to the veracity of the concordance between the event as it unfolds, the thinking about the event, and the feeling of the event as quality and intensity. When the viewer is taken in by this triadic seduction of truth he comes to resent its manipulation. And when this type of encounter takes place repeatedly, the viewer comes to realise the ploy and at some point will likely react.

Our photographs (Fig. 1), *Peppy*, which depicts José Alberto *Pepe* Mujica, the ex-President of Uruguay, and *Pokemon*, are different from the rest by their simplicity and concentrated effort. The person who defaced the portraits was meticulous in scratching out the eyes and mouth of the politicians as if guided by a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of perfidy<sup>4</sup>. The intuition behind the excising of the lips is obvious and a plausible rationale can be found in *The Holy Bible*: “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord” (Prov. xii. 22). If the lips are repugnant to the Lord, they must be excised. It’s a rough-and-ready kind of reasoning which is operative in removing the instrument of deception: for if “all deception is a misapplying of those signs which were made the means of mens signifying or conveying their thoughts” (South, 1866, p. 235), their removal would preclude the further production of deceit. So that if a portrait is a representation of *inner life*, and if that inner life is rife with deception and perfidy, then, to eradicate its duplicity in public life, one must eliminate the instruments which mediate the artifice. This is all well and good, for the lips convey the formed ideas through speech, but the eyes demonstrate a subtler subterfuge.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that Mujica is a liar or dishonest politician, but that the defacer understands or feels that the politician is deceitful.

The eyes are considered the mirror of the soul, not because they are windows that open onto it, but because the micro-movements of the eye and its attendant muscular systems betray subconscious processes that are difficult, if not impossible, to control. Eye movement has a life of its own, guided by a rationality and logic that is unbeknown to us and uncontrollable by our will. As Bergson (1991) writes, “we commonly act our recognition before we think it” (p. 95) through “a performance whereby the part virtually contains the whole” (p. 94). The movement of the eyes is but a bit part of the larger imagistic movement of thought in the drama that is at play behind the scenes. The eyes thus betray our innermost desires and secret interests which our outward façade strives to contain and suppress and it is in this manner they are the mirrors of the soul. The eyes move independently of our expressed rationality or uttered concerns and through their spontaneous and indeterminate logic act out our deepest spontaneous longings and intentions. If the eyes, in their deceitfulness, fail to reveal the duplicity of the innermost purpose of these subconscious rationalisations articulated as the reflex actions of the eyes, then the viewer will never be able to trust the affective colouring which is being conveyed via the involuntary micro-movements of the eye and its attendant muscular systems. If these eyes have managed to dupe us, and have not managed to betray their duplicitous intentions, then they must be *removed* for they are the direct instruments of deception and the mediators of falseness which will likely continue to repeat their deceitfulness.

### THE IMAGE OF DEFACEMENT

The defacements we examine here are radical gestures which in terms of image creation are a display of erasure, of expunction, and of excision of meaning to generate new meaning through the very act of defacement as erasure. This is the complete opposite of what traditional painting is all about. In painterly terms, this erasure wipes, scrapes and peels away paint as a counter gesture to the artist’s application of paint. The defacement of the photographic portraits is a gesture that resonates with some of the work of Francis Bacon, both in his destroyed canvases but most notably in the *Study after Velázquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953). The gestures of defacement echo in the scream and the downpour of disfigurement that seems to lixiviate the pigment from the canvas. The effacement swills down the surface in long brush-strokes of dun-coloured streaks whose effect is a heightening of the sensation of emptiness in the underlying darkness. Bacon optically sculpts the hollowness which allows the cry of pathos to resonate through the accumulation of the traces of paint left

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on the canvas as record of the gestures which express the in-act of his artistic venting-becoming. This is reminiscent to how the visually aggrieved passer-by on the street express their frustration by tearing up the photo-portraits. There's a movement of thought going on behind the scenes which results in the violent upswell of performative expression and leaves behind a pictorial record as testimony. As James writes in *Pragmatism* (1907), "To develop a thought's meaning, we need only to determine what conduct it is fitted to produce; that conduct is for us its sole significance" (p. 46).

Henri Bergson's conception of the image as interactive sheds light into our project in an unexpected way. In *Matter and Memory* (1998/1898) he explains the structure of the image as interactive process: "I perceive afferent nerves which transmit a disturbance to the nerve centres; then efferent nerves which start from the centre, conduct the disturbance to the periphery, and set in motion parts of the body or the body as a whole" (p. 18). Thus, the image is not in the object as finished entity but in the whole of the completed interaction which comprises sensation and the ensuing reactive gesture. What we normally refer to as the image is the *objet d'art*, the object of the art – the static done thing which results from exercising a practice – a different thing altogether. The finished pictorial image in Bacon's studio is an inert object waiting to be revitalised as a subject of interest through exhibition, collection or the art market – or to be slashed and defaced as Bacon did when he wasn't *buying* into what he was painting and didn't want anyone else to do so either.

People who in the past have bought into and have been duped by advertising's duplicity might feel resentful at the deceit and strike back at that which they feel is at the root of the deception. But in the realisation of the two-facedness, there is a some self-hate mixed in with the gesture of defacement for as Spinoza writes in *Ethics* Iip9n (1677/1974) "in no case do we strive for, wish for, long for, or desire anything, because we deem it to be good, but on the other hand we deem a thing to be good, because we strive for it, wish for it, long for it, or desire it" (p. 272). One punishes the face on the wall not only for carrying out the deception but out of bitter indignation – for exercising our gullibility, for making us one with its instrumentality. The defacement is not only a shredding of the image that stares at us, but the resentful acknowledgment of its mirroring.

### PITCHING DOMINANCE

The defaced portraits are documentary traces of a Bergsonian processual image in all its fullness – the image is constituted by the passer-by's reactive, gestural, *taking-in* of the photograph on a wall, its cognitive *processing*, its

affective amplification, and the resulting defacement where the perception actually takes place. They are the *objets d'art* – now transformed into the process of transformation as the aim of a practice – of a rudimentary know-how of the aesthetics of hack and slash venting frustration against the relentless onslaught of OBUY! The defaced portraits, the images of disfigured faces, are testament to the strategic reversal of the process of domination. The depiction of the subjective exteriority of the face of consumerism is peeled away, ripped off, to show that it is a sham. It shows that what is behind the image is devoid of depth, bereft of all those profound qualities that aura ascribes to the image. By tearing away the wrapper, the superficial covering, the boundary layer that separates the ins from the outs, the us from the them, the we from the Other, the hack-and-slash artists reveal the vacant void behind the vacuous smiles.

The defacement of these public images shows deterritorialisation as a threshold moment: it is the threshold gesture of the revelation made realization – it's a gesture which carries us from perceiving things one way and then another as a game changer – like a 16th century Aboriginal seeing a Conquistador dying as a result of a wound inflicted in battle. If the aura of the imagistic façade of commercialism projects unattainability and untouchability, unflappability, imperturbability and self-contained confidence, the disfiguring defacements show us that the projection is not inviolable, untouchable, imperturbable. Like the *écorchés* of corpses used by medical people and artists to expose the material anatomical structure of their subjects of study, the peeling away of the top surface looks to show us that which is operative behind the facing. The defacements as vivisections of imagistic process show us that behind the surface is another image which instigates other actions, or images interacting with each other whose logic is indeterminate or contingently expressive, or a simple backing of plywood, brick and stone or galvanised siding. The disfigurings allow us to see that these photographs of idealised beings are not *like reality* but that they are facsimiles, simulacra, representations, empty façades, whose only tangibility is a featureless backing which is their only support. They remind us that the background to every public image is an anonymous panel, a congress of nothingness, and that if you peel away these public faces as façades of legitimacy and authority whose gazes we internalise, what one ends up with is a faceless, impenetrable void whose function is simply to present itself as generic backing to any other Hollow Man image whose function is to pitch dominance.

Where the control of human subjectivity through social media has faced so much scrutiny in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal<sup>5</sup>, in the recent presidential election in the U.S.A., the influencing of the Brexit vote in the U.K. and the parroting by Steve Bannon of Andrew Breitbart's doctrine of

<sup>5</sup> See for example *The Guardian* (2018) e Bloomberg (2018).



<sup>6</sup> See for example Friedersdorf (2017), University.it (2018) and Cadwalladr (2018).

locating politics as downstream from culture<sup>6</sup>, the gestures indicated by the photographs that are interpreted in this paper offer a documentary testimony of the response to the perceived threat or aggression from what could be understood as the weaponisation of advertising's instrumentality as delivery system of a corporate culture war – one that affectively and effectively paints a portrait of corporatism as trustworthy and avuncular. It is not only a fight over subjectivity but for control of the public space as social media. Need we be surprised at this point that the common element of these news stories is called Facebook?

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