

Passing

Photography is not just the most efficient technology for memory work, it is also the mirror which promises to reflect the secrets of the self. The popularity of photography is linked to our narcissism. In the first decade of the camera's invention over 90% of all photographs were portraits. Throughout the Twentieth Century the representation of ideas and commodities was invariably linked to a face. The revolution had Lenin and Che Guevara. Science had Einstein with electric silver hair and eyes as deep as the universe. Revlon had Liz Hurley until wrinkles insinuated themselves into her image. Long before the camera there were statues of the Buddha and paintings of Christ, but these sacred images were not anywhere and everywhere. The face today is ubiquitous. It can inspire courage, wonder and admiration, but it is also part of the banal visual landscape through which we pass in states of boredom, anxiety and haste. How often do we stop to reflect on the meaning of a face?

Photography can stimulate the ancient art of physiognomia. Greeks have always believed that character is not only discerned by psychoanalysis but also by observing the look and features of a face. The perversion of this art into a pseudo-science by the Victorian eugenicists is not to be confused with the more metaphorical investigations into the meaning of appearances. The art of physiognomia teaches us to look for the flow of certain qualities which emerge in the expressions of a face, rather than the boundary of abilities that are indexed according to the structures of the head. Students, who are still searching for the measure of their own bodies and mind, could be seen as practising this daydreaming art when they decorate their rooms with posters of heroes and post cards of paintings by Modigliani. The lines of these faces suggest more than glamour and power, but also the feint lean of tenderness and the abstract stare of hope.

Photography has extended this contemplation into the connection between appearance and action. Every photographer questions the power of their subject in relation to their photogenia. To recognise photogenic qualities is not necessarily a qualitative statement about inherent beauty or power, but it is a way of distinguishing the intensity and expressivity of information. A photogenic face can achieve an expression that minimises the need for the photographer to aestheticize the image. With the technical effect of light manipulation or even air brushing and montage a photographer can add virtually anything to a face. The photogenic face is one which is already aestheticized. To use Roland Barthes's expression, it is already 'embellished' with certain meanings. The art of photography is not confined to catching this meaning but in working with it, transforming its field of possibilities and directing the gaze beyond mere recognition to the open space of curiosity and inquiry.

A recent series of photographs by Polixeni Papapetrou invites speculation into the

links between physiognomia and photogenia. This link is both heightened and almost overshadowed by another relationship which is staged in her photographs: the role of clothes in the projection of identity. Papapetrou's photographs, in this series, are composed in a triptych formation. At the centre there is always the reproduction of a typical Renaissance painting of a regal figure. The embellishments of the royal gowns are the most vivid and intricate display of power, but they also almost choke their subject. The expressivity of the body is not only bejewelled but also cosseted into stiff authority. By contrast these regal figures are flanked by contemporaries of Papapetrou all in uniform and loose fitting t-shirts. The only distinguishing feature in all the contemporary clothing is the name of the brand.

A whole generation has passed since Tommy Hilfiger put his logo on the outside of his clothing. He was only making explicit what every person who chose Levi over Lee jeans was already doing: making a claim about the personal meaning of public appearances. In the past decade, every fashion house from Versace to Gaultier, Calvin Klein to Donna Karan, whose label is generally associated with a luxury that only the elite can afford are now in global competition to disperse their corporate identity in cheap and mass produced basic items, like t-shirts. For people who share the same dream of being inside a space of privilege and distinction there is no easier way than the proud display of the maker on your chest. Capitalism works in simple ways. Insecurity is its starting point and its incessant refuge. The uncertainty of identity can be passed over by adopting a brand. The use of the brand name encourages the consumer to feel as if they passed into the space they dream. Not because they appear like unpaid mobile advertisements, but because the association with a brand is meant to spill over into other spaces of identification. The brand is on display to signify membership to an acceptable style of living. Like fans of sporting teams, there is a sense of belonging that compensates or protects from the peril of being outside, alone, without an identity. But these passages are always regulated and limited, and it is no coincidence the democracy of Prada is confined to t-shirts which leaves the rest of the body to the elements. Unlike the regal figures in the centre of Papapetrou's photographs, the arms of all the flanking contemporaries are naked. They maybe crossed but the fold of these arms and the contrast of their skin only helps to hold up the name of the brand. It is at this intersection that the paradox of passing is at its most exquisite. The boundary of class and distinction is crossed only to be upheld as its deferred to an ever more distant and unreachable point.

Identity cannot be found in the name of the label or even in the way the t-shirt is worn. We have to return to the more inscrutable links between physiognomia and photogenia. This link can be made explicit if we read Papapetrou's photographs horizontally. The nature of the triptych is panoramic. However, there is also the temptation to read each unit separately and then add the three units together to form a single image. This method would focus the eye in a series of vertical directions that may miss the connection that occurs between the eyes of her subjects. Within the triptych, the gaze of each person often shares a common shape. In some cases it is a conspiratorial look, in others a bold eyeballing of the camera that has 'in' their face. In every instance, the contemporary subjects are declaring that they are the imperious centre of their own identity. The brand of the t-shirt is no match to the power of this gaze. It is in the tension of the skin, the poise of the body, the countenance of the eye that we read the complex fold and maps of identity.

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