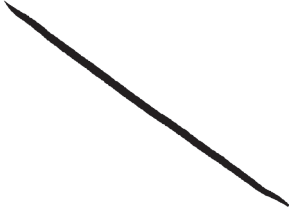


DETACHING THE ACTOR'S FACE: CONTROL AND USAGE OF THE FACE AS AN IMAGE-OBJECT

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Abstract: This article explores the extent to which the actor's face has impacted society to the point that it is no longer a personal possession and that its usage and context are difficult to control. I bring together perspectives from visual studies and celebrity studies to address the issues of face borrowing and identification. I examine the engagement of the general public with the actor's face in an attempt to create the basis for a critical analysis. I propose viewing the actor's face as an image-object, detached from the physical body and able to travel without the actual presence of the actor. Three defining stages are identified in social behaviour that are a direct result of capturing the face in a photograph: detaching, owning and wearing the face. The need for intimacy and identification that governs the relationship between audiences and celebrities has an effect on the handling of images of actors. Furthermore, this article investigates the concurrence of technological advancements that allow individuals to use actors' faces for shaping their own identities and highlights the danger that actors are facing as the rise of artificial intelligence can render them as replicable digital assets.

Keywords: actors, images, celebrity, intimacy, identity.

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Introduction

For centuries, starting with the first forms of theatre, the actor's face was hidden behind a mask. The actor would take a painted face, put it on his own face, and through a form of ritualistic transformation, he would become someone else. In that process, his own face would become irrelevant. Only after the fall of the mask in the sixteenth century did the actor's face take on the role of expressing the character portrayed on stage. The actor lends his own face to the character, and through a blending of identities, the uniqueness of the character thrives on the uniqueness of the actor's face. Until the invention of photography in the nineteenth century, the actor's face would be glued to the body. No travel was possible without the movement of the actual body. The presence of the face was linked to the presence of the actor in a particular place and time. Only in rare occurrences, when a painted portrait of the player would be exhibited for public viewing, could the countenance be visible without the physical presence of the body. Photography forever changed that by taking an imprint of the face and enabling it to travel with virtually no physical limitations. The arrival of mass media, later the digitalisation of media, and the emergence of a digital world pertaining to the internet have rendered the actor's face a mobile entity that can be copied, altered, and transferred with almost no restrictions. The actor seems to have lost control over his face's media presence and its multiple visual manipulations.

To better understand the endless propagation and recontextualisation of the actor's face, it is imperative to take a few steps back and establish the ways in which photography has aided this process. For our analysis of the relationship between the actor's face and its public, I suggest following three defining stages. The first one, *detaching the face*, has to do with the ability of the photograph to extract an impression of the face and transport it to various places without the presence of the body that contains it. Secondly, by means of analogue and digital photography, the public can receive the face as an object that leads to *owning the face*. And lastly, through diverse methods of visual reproduction that range from cosmetic surgery to artificial intelligence, humans are able to replicate and attach the actor's face to their own body, which I define as *wearing the face*. In a sense, these stages can be observed in a condensed form in the success of the Groucho Marx wearable masks, commonly known as Groucho glasses (Viegut, 2023). Made up of a pair of glasses with attached eyebrows, a nose, and a moustache, the masks embody the principles of detaching the face, owning it, and then wearing it, even though in the case of Groucho, it's the face of a character played and not of the actual performer.

Detaching the Face

We've had photography in our world for almost two hundred years. Its birth, part of a technological and social revolution, created new means for people to represent and consume reality. The possibility of having one's portrait taken, a luxury that only the rich and the elites had access to in the past, by affording to commission painters, empowered the emerging bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century. Self-representation for the newly formed social class was a need that would be met by the reproductive qualities of photography (Freund, 1980, pp. 19-35). The rapid spread of photographic studios provided an accessible form of affirmation for the middle class. It was cheap, and it was fast. People were able to express their newly acquired social status through images and promote their businesses. The *carte de visite*, a small format photograph mounted on a 2.5 x 3.5 inch paper card, was increasingly popular in the 1860s. Everyone bought, collected, and traded them; parlours and store windows were displaying them, and industrialists were using them as advertising material (Volpe, 1999, p. 43). For actors, the *carte de visite* became a powerful promotional tool. In the United States and all across the United Kingdom, *cartes de visite* of actors flourished. "It became essential, in the competitive struggle for bookings, roles, and professional recognition, that actors, artists, and musicians be photographed and their images be available to their public [...]" (Mayer, 2002, p. 229). It was the first time that

an actor's portrait could travel to otherwise unreachable audiences. The general public could then put a face to a famous actor's name that they read about in the newspaper. Detached from the physical body, the actor's face would travel and represent its wearer, creating opportunities with booking agents, and helping to develop fan bases of potential audiences.

Photography created what Susan Sontag calls "the Image-World," a visual realm that surpasses reality and encourages society to favour representation, to prefer the copy to its original. People are no longer viewing images as a form of looking at reality, but because of the innate quality of photography to be a footprint of the real, they grasp reality *as a* photographic image.

The credence that could no longer be given to realities understood *in the form of* images was now being given to realities understood *to be* images, illusions. (Sontag, 2005, p. 119)

We see a similar argument in Boorstin's highly popular book, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, where he points out that mass media has created a need for images that can only be filled with staged copies of the real. Spontaneous events happen rarely and unpredictably, so the media fabricates pseudo-events, as Boorstin calls them, to feed an audience hungry for images. In that sense, the world we see is actually a fantasy, much more interesting than reality itself (Boorstin, 1992, p. 37).

Actors took centre stage in this world of mirage, becoming idols for the viewers. In the 1920s, Hollywood developed the *star system*, a process of manufacturing celebrities that relied mostly on the looks of the actors and actresses. Besides the occasional name change and biography adjustments, a complete transformation of the actor's image was necessary. To become stars, chorus girls from vaudeville shows needed to be touched up so that they acquired the highly praised *glamour* (Dyhouse, 2010, pp. 9-48; Gundle, 2008, pp.179-180). Take, for example, Greta Garbo, considered the epitome of glamour, for whom photography played a crucial role in shaping her persona. Barthes described Garbo's countenance as an "Idea," "an admirable face-object."

Garbo still belongs to that moment in cinema when capturing the human face still plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy, when one literally lost oneself in a human image as one would in a philtre, when the face represented a kind of absolute state of the flesh, which could be neither reached nor renounced. (Barthes, 1972, p. 56)

The “deity face” of Garbo was mainly constructed through photography techniques like the *floating face* that professor Michelle Henning links to death masks, photographed as timeless white faces detached from a dark background (Henning, 2017, pp. 163-170). Here is a face that lives in its singularity, that becomes an object in itself (Fig. 1).

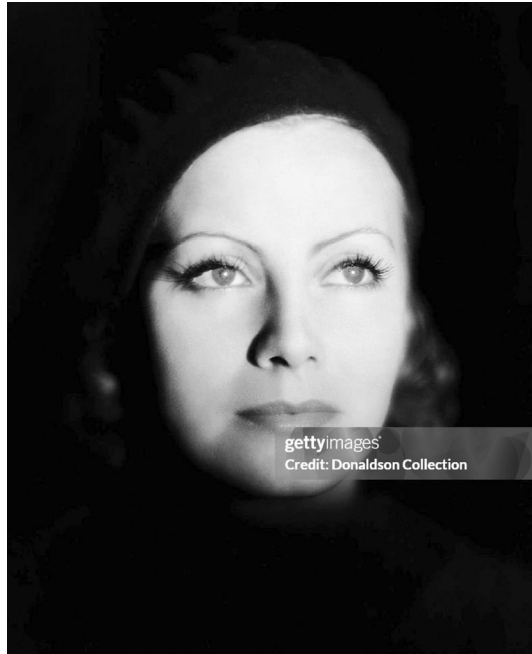


Fig.1 Greta Garbo, Donaldson Collection, (1929) “The Kiss” Film Still, Available at: <https://www.gettyimages.fi/detail/uutiskuva/actress-greta-garbo-poses-for-a-publicity-photo-for-the-mgm-uutiskuva/517553038> (Accessed 6 February 2024)

When we look at the portrait of an actor, we’re not actually seeing the face, but an image of it. We can only see an expression of that face, frozen as a mask, because, as Barthes puts it, photography can only have symbolic values by assuming a mask (Barthes, 1980, pp. 60-61). The face is something that every person carries with themselves, an animated structure of muscles and skin that gives birth to countless expressions. A photograph, bound to capture just one expression, is like a mask, one that can be separated from the body. Through portraits, actors operate in this domain of removed countenances. We could also argue that while cinema renders a sequence of images of the actor as a realistic animated experience, the extensive use of the close-up has a similar detaching

effect on the face. In Gilles Deleuze's words, the close-up "*abstracts it from all spatio-temporal coordinates*, that is to say, it raises it to the state of Entity" (Deleuze, 1986, p. 96). The actor's face that we are used to seeing is thus an entity, a symbol of the actual moving face of the real-life actor. Faces, or sometimes even parts of faces, become symbolic of the actors that own them. Someone could use an eye pencil to draw a dot on the right cheek that looks like a mole, then point down the corners of the mouth, and we would think of Robert de Niro. The actor's face that audiences are exposed to is in fact an *image-object*, a symbol that refers to the actual face that people could only see if they met the actor in person.

Owning the Face

Once photography has enabled the actor's face, or any face for that matter, to become an image-object, especially by facilitating a physical reproduction of that image, any person could possess it. Starting with the *cartes de visite* of actors, which made their way into family albums amongst pictures of relatives, people had the ability to own the images of the actors they admired. Sometimes erotic in nature (Senelick, 1991, pp. 1-49), sometimes out of admiration, the *cartes* facilitated a sense of intimacy between the owner and the subject of the pictures. As celebrity culture developed, actors achieved godlike status. I describe elsewhere how the fall of religion in modern society has impacted celebrities, offering them a similar role to that of the saints of yesteryear (Runcanu, unpublished). Fans' rooms filled with posters and pictures of actors they worship resemble shrines built for religious figures. Images of actors facilitate devotion in the private space of the devotee.

The rise of television created a new type of interaction between the actor and the audience, a *para-social relationship*, as Horton and Wohl called it, describing an "illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer" (Horton and Wohl, 1956, p. 215). As a result, "we inescapably enter into webs of intimacy with celebrities that are based on impersonal print, photographic, and electronic systems of communication" (Rojek, 2001, p. 124). Mass media intensified people's identification with the stars, which was defined as "a process by which individuals to reconstruct their own attitudes, values, or behaviours in response to the images of people they admire, real and imagined, both through personal and mediated relationships" (Fraser and Brown, 2002, p. 189).

The need for intimacy demands stripping away the fabricated image to reveal a true self with whom identification can occur. People understand that constructed images of actors are just the part that those actors are showing to the public. Everyone clearly recognises the difference between the public and

the private selves of a celebrity. In the 1960s, actors still had control over how the photographers captured them during public appearances. Snapshots of them attending events looked like covers from *Vogue*, with impeccable hairstyles and makeup and a radiating majestic glow (Cashmore, 2006, p. 22). The growth of paparazzi photography offered audiences the unseen and unfamiliar faces of stars – sometimes exhausted, saggy, and unkempt, sometimes disturbed or angry. For a lot of people, bringing down the idols to their level of human experience meant an increased identification with them. Barry Levine, the famous tabloid editor, considered that “to some people, the work of the paparazzi is as important as their own family photos” (Howe, 2005, p. 21).

The illusion of intimacy has been further enhanced with the help of the bounteous environment of social media. Celebrities have been able to partially take control over how their private persona is exposed. Having an official social media account allows them to create a direct communication link with their audiences, and from time to time, give them access to parts of their lives that otherwise would never have met the public eye. In 2021, one of the top five fashion models in the world, Bella Hadid, shared on Instagram a series of intimate selfies in which she was seen crying. Her swollen face and puffy red eyes were the exact opposite of her usual perfect retouched look, with spotless coiffure and makeup. (Fig. 2) The post was an invitation to witness some of her difficult moments by taking off the mask of perfection that social media encourages everyone to use. “Sometimes all you’ve gotta hear is that you’re not alone. So, from me to you, you’re not alone. I love you, I see you, and I hear you,” said Hadid to her fans (Eckardt, 2022).



Fig.2 Bella Hadid, (2021), Available at: <https://i.insider.com/618af85223745d001825c858> (Accessed 4 February 2023)

What she aims to say is that her Instagram account is not just a one-way communication channel but that the connection is bidirectional, and that her followers are also acknowledged and cared about in this relationship (though we know it would be impossible to establish a proper one-to-one relationship with each of them), the intimate pictures standing as proof of that. I would argue that in the digital era, owning a picture does not necessarily mean possessing it as a physical object. Knowing its location in the file structure of our devices or how to search for it online is enough to retrieve it in a matter of seconds or minutes. If the picture exists and we know how to find it, we own it. We could even go back to Sontag, who considered that a photograph “turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed” (Sontag, 2005, p. 10), so consequently consuming an image of a face *is* an act of possession. Conjointly we can consider that a superior sense of intimacy was facilitated by the public’s granted ability to possess Hadid’s crying face. As Victorians were holding a *carte de visite* of an actor that they most probably had never encountered, people nowadays are having intimate pictures of their favourite stars on a device in the palm of their hands.

Detached faces of actors have often been loaned to third parties for commercial purposes. Famous perfumes incorporate celebrity endorsements into their branding strategy (Boorstin, 2005, pp. 38-40). In the 1930s, Schiaparelli haute couture house created a perfume bottle in the shape of Mae West’s figure, and in the 1950s, Givenchy produced a perfume for Audrey Hepburn. Since then, big fashion names have associated themselves with famous Hollywood actresses. I can name just a few of the lustrous faces that so glamorously inhabit perfume shops nowadays: Nicole Kidman for Chanel No. 5, Keira Knightley for Chanel Coco Mademoiselle, Charlize Theron for Dior J’Adore and Julia Roberts, and Penelope Cruz for Lancôme. Kidman was paid 2 million British pounds for a Chanel commercial for the No. 5 perfume, so lending one’s face to a company does come at a high cost (Wigham, 2011). Perfume is a product linked to intimacy and identity, so it comes as no surprise that its promotion is based on the general public’s need to identify and create a perceived intimacy with celebrities. Pictures of actors are also being exhibited in restaurants that they have previously been to. It is a known practice to ask a celebrity to pose with the owner of a restaurant to increase its prestige. Even though actors have no culinary expertise, their presence is somehow a guarantee for a tasty meal. In these cases, the actor’s face is a token that can be traded or borrowed for financial gain.

The representation of the human countenance, and particularly the photographic picture, has always been a paradoxical play of absence and presence. The portrait is rendering an absent subject present: absent as body, present as image. Photography’s ability to convey a truthful version of reality has

been praised by some and contested by others. It is still an ongoing debate, but ontologically, one thing is incontrovertible: photography is a proof of presence. Unless an image has been manipulated, the subject of the picture was present when the picture was taken. It is this intrinsic quality of photography that people are aware of when they meet a celebrity in real life, and ask them to take a picture together. It is *presence* captured in a photograph. A selfie with an actor is an image with two faces: one of the taker of the picture, and one of the person who offers it as a free token to validate a special encounter. As the actor leaves, his detached face remains in the possession of the fan, as proof of a fleeting moment of intimacy.

Teenagers used to cut out actors' faces from magazines and newspapers, and add them to their journals or personal albums. We can understand this process as a further detachment of an already detached face with the purpose of integrating it into someone's personal life or identity. A general ownership of the magazine as an acquired object transmutes into a specific ownership of the particular face that was taken out of its editorial context, and relocated into a personal one. Once *re-detached*, the face is recontextualized, acquiring a different existence and meaning. An example of recontextualization of famous faces happens in *fake celebrity porn*, where pornographic pictures or videos are digitally altered by attaching celebrity faces to naked bodies, engaged or not in a sexual act. The actresses, as this is a practice predominantly targeting female celebrities, appear to be inhabiting an erotic context that was never real and was created for the sake of the viewer's sexual fantasies (Popova, 2019, pp. 6-8). The law is still unable to protect individuals whose faces are used in digitally altered pornographic material (Harris, 2019, p. 128). It seems that once a face has been detached from the body and has entered the public sphere, the ownership and its usage can never be fully controlled.

Wearing the Face

We have established that, through the use of photography, the faces of actors can be detached from the body, owned and recontextualized by others. By mentioning *fake celebrity porn*, we've glimpsed at the possibility of faces being attached to other bodies. Famous faces can be worn on clothing in a manner that is, most of the time, legally and commercially constrained. Faces can also be worn directly on the body as tattoos. Tattoos are subject to copyright laws (Wills, 2021, pp. 625-626), but infringements are not easily solved. At the time of writing this article, an ongoing trial has yet to decide if tattoo artist Kat von D has infringed photographer Jeffrey B. Sedlik's copyright of a photograph of Miles Davis by using his picture as reference for a tattoo created on one of her clients' arms (Luck, 2022). (Fig. 3)



Fig.3 Kat von D, (2017), Available at:

<https://copyrightlately.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Kat-Von-D-Tattoo-Case-Graphic.png>
(Accessed 6 November 2023)

Tattoos work in a majority of cases as tools for integration in a specific group of people; they are shaping self-identity by expressing interests and beliefs and are usually personally meaningful (Rees, 2022). Wearing an actor's face on the body can be viewed as a public display of affinity, but we can assume that it is a result of a perceived intimate connection with the actor. Sometimes identification can take drastic forms, such as shaping one's face to resemble a celebrity through cosmetic surgery (Blum, 2003, pp. 145-187). At the core of celebrity culture lies "the desire to imitate or copy" (Elliott, 2011, p. 140). Research has shown that in young adults, "higher levels of celebrity worship will be associated with elective cosmetic surgery, with the individual establishing an identity using the celebrity as a physical exemplar" (Maltby and Day, 2011, p. 488). A reality TV show aired in 2004 and 2005 on MTV called *I Want a Famous Face* focused on regular people

undergoing plastic surgery to look like Brad Pitt, Kate Winslet, Pamela Anderson, Britney Spears, Elvis Presley, and other celebrities. Imitating a face through medical intervention is always mediated by images, as people don't really have access to the original face. Examining photos of celebrities, and then creating an 'after' picture of the patient to resemble those pictures are the initial steps that set out the plan for the procedure. It is the detached face of the actor that is copied and carved onto a new body.

In the digital world, wearing an actor's face is much easier. With the evolving technologies of machine learning and artificial intelligence, *deepfakes*, the changing of facial appearance to resemble someone else, can be used by practically anyone. Apps like FakeApp or Faceswap can be used by amateurs to look like celebrities. An aspiring American actor has gained massive success on social media platform TikTok by using deepfake technology to create videos in which he acted as Tom Cruise (Fisher, 2022). Deepfakes are not only meant for personal use. The advertising industry has already integrated them. In 2021, a Russian telecommunications company created an ad where one of the characters had the face of the famous American actor Bruce Willis (Coffee, 2022). As I'm writing this article, the actors' strike in Hollywood between the SAG-AFTRA Union and the studios has been going on for 116 days without reaching a deal. One of the main goals of the Union is to prevent production companies from using artificial intelligence to scan actors' faces, and then generate digital performances, in effect replacing actors on set. If the actor's face has become a digital asset, specific laws must be put in place to control its usage and manipulation.

Conclusion

Theatre is a medium that is part of a system of iconic signification, and its basic unit is the image (Rozik, 2007, p. 19). Whether it was a mask or the real face, the actor operated with images of faces. As soon as the face could be detached from the body by means of media replication, the image became an object that could have an existence of its own. As an object, whether physical or digital, the face borrowed the properties of a mask. It can be owned, altered, and borrowed. It can be attached to different bodies, recontextualized, and have its significance and uses changed. Before the invention of photography, the actors' face was appurtenant to the body. It was a tool that could only be used by its owner. Separating the face from the body, transforming it into an image-object, using it for promotional purposes has practically offered it for mass consumption and usage. As one of society's chattels, it needs regulations for control of usage. Once the ancient use of the mask was not the norm in theatre anymore, and the focus was on the real countenance, the actor

was empowered as a unique performer with a unique face. Ironically, by using the face as the main tool for acquiring success, the actor lost control of it to media and technology. In danger of being digitally replicated, altered, or replaced, actors must exert themselves to maintain the ownership of their faces.

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