Becoming Unrecognisable
A Study of the Face, Death and Recognition
in Late Twentieth Century Media Culture

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PLEASE NOTE

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning this thesis,

and the best possible result has been obtained.
Whatever we know will soon cease to exist, becomes an image.
—Walter Benjamin
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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.
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Abstract

It is often noted that the technologies of modernity have made it possible to see death on a scale never seen before: mass media makes visible the proliferating incidence of disaster, the massed bodies of war, the escalating casualties of disease. Less noted, is the other end of the scale of mortality, the close-up faces of the dying and the dead. Taking a transdisciplinary approach, this thesis looks at the face as a cultural expression of death.

The thesis argues that to find the places in media culture where the face transmits death, we need to look beyond the immobilised faces of the dead. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of the image, the thesis sees the phenomenon of becoming unrecognisable as a particular practice of the image in which the face becomes a viable site for making death transmissible. It is argued that by paying attention to instances in media culture in which a face becomes unrecognisable, we can see how death is made visible as a dialectic between recognition and recognisability, appearance and disappearance. By examining the complexity of this particular form of dialectical image in a wide range of media – photography, television and film – the thesis shifts discussion away from questions of representation and faciality that feature so strongly in recent theorisations of the face. Focussing on questions of recognition and recognisability, the thesis proposes a way of thinking about the face that leads to a new conception of death in the media age.
Introduction

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tereza is looking at herself in the mirror. She wonders what would happen if her nose were to grow a millimetre longer per day. How long would it take for her to become unrecognizable? And if her face no longer looked like Tereza, would Tereza still be Tereza? Where does the self begin and end? You see: No wonderment at the immeasurable infinity of the soul; rather, wonderment at the uncertain nature of the self and of its identity.

*Milan Kundera*

There was a time in screen culture when the face was a spectacular and mysterious object. Writing in the early part of the twentieth century, film theorist Béla Balázs claimed that cinematic close-ups of faces constituted ‘a new dimension, an entirely new mode of perception’.¹ He writes, ‘When [D.W.] Griffith’s genius and daring first projected gigantic “severed heads” on to the cinema screen, he not only brought the human face closer in space, he transposed it from space into another dimension ... that of physiognomy’ (60). But in late twentieth century media culture the face has become less and less mysterious. The ‘talking head’, for example, is the most banal unit in television’s restricted syntax. In press photography, faces are over-used as obvious and cliched expressions of humanist virtues and moral categories, while in cinema, the increasing use of computer image-enhancing techniques, such as morphing, undermines the amazing natural mobility of the human face. In stark contrast to this wash of forgettable faces, there is of course the ever-changing dazzling array of the faces of the famous. Though there is no mystery there either, for every famous face is accompanied by narratives of the procedures of making and unmaking celebrity.

In addition to the reduction of the face to a talking head and the potential commodification of any and all faces, media culture has also managed to make the sight of the faces of the dead and dying banal. In the 1930s, photojournalist Robert Capa wrote that in order to get good pictures you have to get close to your subject, which is precisely what he did when he took his Leica (light weight) camera to European war zones and snapped photographs like his famous, ‘Death of a Republican Soldier’ (1930).² The immediacy of war captured in photographs like Capa’s, brought a generation closer to death than they had ever been before. But proximity to a thing does not necessarily lead to a better understanding of it. Writing at approximately the same time as Capa was taking his photographs, the cultural
critic Siegfried Kracauer argued that the illustrated magazine was ‘one of the most powerful means of organizing a strike against understanding’. In his view, ‘the blizzard of photographs betrays an indifference toward what the things mean’ (432). For Kracauer, the rise of the illustrated magazine in this period of mass death and destruction, the intermingling of images of war with fashion spreads and scenes of exotic places, was ‘a sign of the fear of death’, ‘an attempt to banish ... the recollection of death, which is part and parcel of every memory-image’ (433). This effect has continued through the twentieth century. In television, for example, instantaneous images of death have become institutionalised as the obligatory ‘bang, bang’ shot in nightly news reports of war. The shock effect of the sight of the face of a dead soldier, a starving child, or, a desperate mother, is parried by the sheer accumulation of images of crisis and catastrophe. As Susan Buck-Morss convincingly argues, we have become immune to the sight of death – the endless CNN-style repetition of faces of the dying has, to use her term, ‘anaesthetised’ the viewer to the shock of death. Well, most of the time.

I say most, because in this study of the face, death and recognition in late twentieth century media culture it is precisely those occasions in which faces cut through the anaesthetising effects of ‘the blizzard’ of images that I shall look at. This is not an argument about authenticity: ‘real’ faces versus representations. Rather, my proposition is this: to discover when and how the face recuperates its mysteriousness in late twentieth century media cultures, we need to pay attention not to the faces of the famous or other sites of recognisability, but to places where the face becomes strange, unrecognisable. When Milan Kundera's character, Tereza, stands before the mirror imagining slight, incremental changes to her face, she sees it anew. Kundera suggests that this moment of estrangement, this entry into the dimension that Balázs calls ‘physiognomy’, engenders a particular feeling of wonderment: ‘No wonderment at the immeasurable infinity of the soul; rather, wonderment at the uncertain nature of the self and of its identity’. And so it is that I begin this study by starting from this most simple, fleeting image of the shock of a face becoming unrecognisable. The task I set myself is to seek out occasions in media culture – in both fiction and reportage genres – where the dialectic of recognition and unrecognisability opens up for us, if only for the briefest duration, the mysteriousness of the face, the uncertain nature of the self and of human existence.
The uncertainty of identity is not, however, the end point of my investigation. This is not a study of Difference. Following Walter Benjamin’s insight into the image and death, in particular, the idea as he once put it that ‘whatever we know will soon cease to exist, becomes an image’, I will examine how the shock of a face becoming unrecognisable constitutes a particular practice of the image in which death is transmitted. By turning our attention to and addressing the face in this way we can shift the focus away from the debates on representations of death and dying that have focussed on the ideology of realism and authenticity to questions of recognition and recognisability.

**Death, Society and Culture**

Death has always been a topic central to disciplines such as anthropology and philosophy. In recent years, we have seen an interest in death across a more diverse range of disciplines and areas of study. There has been a noticeable increase in academic publications and conferences devoted to the topic of death, as well as the creation of new, specialist journals, such as *Mortality*. There is even a new so called sub-discipline in sociology – the Sociology of Death and Dying. Tony Walter argues that the increased interest in death in the academy parallels a wider ‘revival of death’ in late modernity. He argues that while conditions of early modernity, such as rationalism, medicalisation, secularism and individualism, led to ‘the death of death’, this trend has been reversed in late modernity, largely through the social phenomenon of what he and other sociologists call ‘the authority of the self’. Summarising the philosophies and broad social changes that have shaped modern western conceptions of death, Peter Kostenbaum writes that death is ‘not an experience’ but ‘a felt anticipation’. Kostenbaum argues that in modern societies, the significance of death is most usually conceived of as what he describes as ‘an influential self-concept’ – ‘a key to understanding our human nature’ (7). This idea of death as a self-concept underpins a great deal of literature on death and dying, ranging from guide books on coping with death and dying to empirical studies of the experience of dying and bereavement, as well as sociological and cultural studies and popular texts.

In *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Zygmunt Bauman proposes that human awareness of death is the primary structuring force in social relations. Arguing
against the humanist tradition, Bauman contends that death is not some great social equaliser, but a means of stratifying social groups. While Bauman argues the case for a postmodern attitude to death he does not promote the usual postmodern aesthetic of ‘disappearance’. Bauman argues that the conditions of what he calls postmodernity have led to the redundancy of immortality and that, in turn, this situation has made it possible for mortality to return with a vengeance. (I will look at Bauman’s thesis in more detail in Chapter 4.) But while Bauman’s thesis provides us with a much needed critique of both humanist and postmodern theorisations of death, I agree with Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen that the problem in ‘big’ treatments of death, such as Bauman’s, is that all culture is reduced to a response to death. Goodwin and Bronfen make the very important point that when death and culture are constructed as a binary opposition, culture is conceived as ‘an attempt to both represent death and to contain it, to make it comprehensible and thereby diffuse some of its power’ (4). In other words, when all culture is reduced to a response to death, not only is culture limited by death but death is acculturated, ‘tamed’.

The problematic reduction of all culture to a response to death underlies Philippe Ariès monumental study, *Homme devant la mort (Man Before Death)* or *The Hour of our Death*, as it was re-titled when it was translated into English. The central premise of the book is that attitudes to death are useful indicators of social change or, in his words, ‘the unconscious expression of the sensibility of the age’. Briefly, Ariès designates five main attitudes to death corresponding to five distinct historical periods: ‘The Tame Death’ corresponds to the period during the early Middle Ages (beginning in the fifth century) in which death was generally approached with a fatalistic acceptance. Death was at this time a communal, public act. ‘The Death of the Self’ emerged in the eleventh century as a variation of the Tame Death. Here, death became individualized according to categories of good and evil. ‘Remote and Imminent Death’ are also variations of ‘The Tame Death.’ Ariès describes how through the sixteenth and seventeenth century, death became less of a spiritual affair and something of what he calls ‘the art of living.’ In this period, the dead body became ‘fascinating’ as both an object of scientific enquiry and as an erotic object. In the nineteenth century, he claims that Romanticism influenced a change in attitude that he calls, ‘The Death of the Other.’ This attitude led to increased sentimentality and emotionality around death and dying. In the twentieth century, Ariès argues, we find a new, distinct attitude of denial toward death. Death is avoided and becomes devoid of meaning.
Not all historians agree with this overview. In the introduction to *Mirrors of Mortality*, Joachim Whaley reports that critics of Ariès’ project have protested that Ariès’ approach to death and culture presents serious methodological problems, not the least being the fact that he projects his self-conscious modern view on past periods. Whaley responds to the criticism that Ariès’ *The Hour of Our Death* is bad historiography by suggesting that the project is better described as an ‘uncertain chronology’ than a social history – that is, not ‘a straightforward periodization’ but an argument for ‘a series of co-existing attitudes’. Nevertheless, the problem remains, says Whaley, of how to measure changes in attitudes, how to measure what is infinitely diverse (9). In contrast to these all encompassing approaches, Walter Benjamin’s cultural criticism provides a different insight into the relation between death and culture: For Benjamin, death makes itself visible ‘in the little things’, in the everyday, and perhaps most important, the manifestation of death in these *images*, as he argues they become, disrupt and thus call into question systems of knowledge and signification. And for Benjamin, the most powerful of these everyday images of death is the face.

**The Face as Image**

Any discussion of the face as image will sooner or later lead to the question of the soul. In his 1901 essay on the aesthetic significance of the face, George Simmel raises this precise question:

The human face is of unique importance in the fine arts. This importance, however, is described only in very general and approximate terms when it is said that in the features of the face the soul finds its clearest expression. What is it about the face that makes this possible; and, apart from this question, does the face have certain intrinsic aesthetic qualities that account for its significance as a subject in art?17

Here, Simmel alludes to the fact that in Greco-Christian cultures philosophers have long sought to solve the mystery of the face by associating it with the soul. In Plato’s *The Symposium*, we are told that Truth is revealed to the questing man upon the completion of a series of steps. Plato writes: ‘The man who has been guided ... in the mysteries of love, and
who has directed his thoughts towards examples of beauty in due and orderly succession, will suddenly have revealed to him as he approaches the end of his initiation a beauty whose nature is marvellous, indeed, the final goal ... of all his previous efforts’. We are also told that the steps toward the attainment of Beauty and Love begins with appreciation of physical attractiveness. The physical attractiveness of a youthful face is, Plato suggests, an appropriate first step toward the eternal gaze of the Good. Plato regards eyes as windows to the soul, to the Good and Love that he presumes lies behind surface appearance. Hence, the western concept of ‘inner beauty’.18

What we can see in the concept of ‘inner beauty’ is that while Platonism acknowledges the power of physical beauty, it attributes significance to the face only through comparison to transcendental forms – the human face is only ever a shadow of a reality that lies beyond the physical world. This profound ambiguity in Platonism is expressed in Socrates’ second speech in the Phaedrus. Here, we are told about a rapturous experience in which beauty is received as an emanation that pours in through the eyes of the beholder, rekindling a memory of ‘the soul’s wings’.19 When the beauty of the face departs, the beholder is devastated. Thus Socrates suggests that in order to protect themselves against the wounds of fascination, men do well to seek out in the faces of those around them dispositions that resemble or can be fashioned to resemble the dispositions of the gods. Socrates recommends that men treat their beloved ‘as if he were himself a god’ (60).

In this respect, the Platonic model of the face as the surface effect of a deeper or hidden reality, indeed, as that which can be fashioned to conform to ideals, is a tacit acknowledgement of the face’s potential for change. As many have noted, the Greek word for face is prosopon or mask. In the etymology of the word we find the basis of a deep-seated ambiguity. As a mask or screen, the face is, in this theorisation of it, that which can unveil a reality behind it. It is also conceived of as that which can veil or conceal Truth. Siding with the Platonic view, the art theorist E.H. Gombrich ends his essay on the topic of the face by concluding that ‘there may be something, after all, in the old Platonic claim, so succinctly expressed in Max Liebermann’s retort to a dissatisfied sitter – “this painting, my dear Sir, resembles you more than you do yourself”’.”20
Michael Taussig in *Defacement: Public Secrecy and The Labor of the Negative* challenges the Platonic view. He argues that the ‘doubleness’ of the face — mask and window — constitutes a secret that Platonic thinking has long sought to conceal. Taussig writes:

I take the face to be the figure of appearance, the appearance of appearance, the figure of figuration, the ur-appearance, if you will, of secrecy itself as the primordial act of presencing. For the face itself is a contingency, at the magical cross roads of mask and window to the soul, one of the better-kept public secrets essential to everyday life.\(^{21}\)

Taussig’s claim brings together two different conceptions of the face. First, it is indebted to Benjamin’s ‘intellectual physiognomy’, about which I will say more below. Taussig also ties his dialectical approach to the face to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s critique of the face in *A Thousand Plateaus*, and it is to the latter that I will turn first.\(^{22}\)

Whenever I tell colleagues I am doing research on the face many immediately assume I will be using Deleuze and Guattari’s work in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Certainly there are a number of advantages to this influential approach to the face, but there are also, in my view, major limitations. Deleuze and Guattari propose an anti-humanist model of the face that challenges the Platonic metaphors of window and mask. They argue that ‘concrete faces cannot be assumed to come ready-made’ but rather, they are ‘engendered by an abstract machine of faciality’ and, furthermore, this machine plays a crucial role in processes of signification and what they call, ‘subjectivisation’ (168).\(^{23}\) Deleuze and Guattari’s model of the face and faciality needs to be understood as part of their wider aim to denaturalise the body. In their philosophy, the body is conceived of as processes, organs, flows, energies and intensities. Their central concern is with what the body can do, what it is made to do and what it incites. In this reconceptualisation of the body founded on their reading of Antonin Artaud’s image of ‘the Body without Organs’(*BwO*), the head is severed from the body, thus undermining its reign in western cultures as primary symbol of the self. Faciality for Deleuze and Guattari is a critique of the illusion of the face as a representation of the self.

But what becomes of the face after the head is severed from ‘the Body without Organs’? Deleuze and Guattari’s model of the face and faciality, designed to challenge illusionary thinking, results in an abstracted and obscure image of the face — a de-facement. In their central claim that ‘concrete faces cannot be assumed to come ready-made’ (my
emphasize) we find a fundamental assumption about the body as some sort of undifferentiated mass that gets worked on by the cultural machine of faciality. From the start, the machine-like work of culture is opposed to the uniformed mass of the so-called concrete face — a flattened out image comprised of ‘white wall, two holes’. For these guys, the face is pure appearance. To put it simply, there is no such thing as a face. For example, they write that if human beings have a destiny it is ‘to escape the face’. That is, in their words:

... to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible, to become clandestine, not by returning to animality, nor even by returning to the head, but by quite spiritual and special becomings-animal ... that make faciality traits themselves finally elude the organization of the face — freckles dashing toward the horizon, hair carried off by the wind, eyes you traverse instead of seeing yourself in or gazing into in those glum face-to-face encounters between signifying subjectivities. “I no longer look into the eyes of the woman I hold in my arms but I swim through, head and arms and legs, and I see that behind the sockets of the eyes there is a region unexplored, the world of futurity, and here there is no logic whatsoever. My eyes are useless, for they render back only the image of the known ... therefore I close my ears, my eyes, my mouth” BwO. Yes, the face has a great future but only if it is destroyed, dismantled. On the road to asignifying and asubjective. (171)

In Deleuze and Guattari’s dreamed-up world we are able to pass through the face. The face of the woman has no eyes, only holes through which ‘I’(who?) might swim and thus discover some unexplored futurity. From my perspective as a flesh and blood woman, this is the language and the dream of men throughout the ages, here, the colonising dream of discovering hitherto uncharted land attaches to the territory of the body or, more specifically, the female body. Of course they claim this is not the coloniser’s dream. They say that the destruction of the face will not occur through some kind of return to a ‘primitive pre-face state’: ‘We will always be failures at playing Africans or Indians or even Chinese, and no voyage to the South Seas, however arduous, will allow us to cross the wall, to get out of the hole, or lose our face’(188). For Deleuze and Guattari, the face can only be destroyed by finding ‘ways of crossing through it’ (189). With some optimism, Deleuze and Guattari conclude that the abstract machine of faciality has two different states: ‘The face is absolute deterritorialization; the intersection of significance and subjectivisation. It can also be veritable de-facialization – it frees something ...’(190).
To summarise, Deleuze and Guattari’s critique is a theoretical model for deconstructing formations of power and subjectivity. These deconstructions – acts of passing through the face – take the form of a bi-polar movement between deterritorialization and defacialization. In this way, we can say that while the abstract machine of faciality may not, as Deleuze and Guattari insist, necessarily resemble the face, it does, however, operate like a face in its inherent two-facedness. It seems to me that to arrive at the model Deleuze and Guattari propose we don’t need to pass through the face but rather, we need go no further. If there is anything we know all too well about faces it is that they are dialectical. Hence, I ask the question, is the face ever only a construction? Is the so called concrete face ever that – that is, an undifferentiated mass? As Simmel so eloquently reminds us in his essay, the face is a truly amazing entity. It is simultaneously a constant form and a configuration of endless changes in movements of its parts. Simmel argues that the dialectic between the constancy and immobility of some parts of the face and the dynamic mobility of other parts, constitutes a model of appearance. He uses the example of the eye. Unlike Deleuze and Guattari’s writing about the eyeless woman, Simmel writes that there is no other entity he knows of ‘which, staying so absolutely in place, seems to reach beyond it to such an extent; the eye penetrates, it withdraws, it circles a room, it wanders, it reaches as though behind the wanted object and pulls it toward itself’ (281). For Simmel, the eye ‘epitomizes the achievement of the face in mirroring the soul’ (281). Not because it provides a window to some reality that Plato insisted lies behind appearances, but because it is ‘... the interpreter of mere appearance, which knows no going back to any pure intellectuality behind the appearance’ (281). Thus Simmel concludes in his essay on the face that the solution to the problem about how the face expresses the soul lies in the dialectical nature of appearance as ‘veiling and unveiling’ (281).

In Simmel’s, and later, in Taussig’s, conception of the face, the constant movement between veiling and unveiling, or, masking and unmasking, as Taussig re-phrases it, does not give forth onto some ontological truth, some metaphysical reality, but rather it reveals the processes of appearance and thus, calls the notion of the soul into question. And given that this power of the face to reveal the truth of things as an image, as surface, is intrinsic to its form, as Simmel argues, I question why Taussig ties this insight into the face back to Deleuze and Guattari’s explicit de-facement, to their constructionist notion of faciality. Throughout Defacement his asheteticisation of Deleuze and Guattri is, I suggest, redundant. Take, for
example, his invocation of a passage from Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘The Storyteller’, describing the moment when a person faces death. Referring to Benjamin’s description of this moment in which death is transmitted via the face as ‘a mode of deterritorialization’, Taussig writes:

To unfold views of the self as one dies, views in which one has encountered oneself without being aware of it – to crystallise this sequence of othernesses in the self at the point of dissolution of one’s being, this is surely the epitome and essence of defacement through masking, and we note that being faceless in this deterritorializing mode allows for other plays with identity as well. (264)

Taussig’s claim is that the facelessness of masking as a form of unmasking constitutes ‘exercises’ in what he calls ‘radical physiognomics’, which, he continues, ‘free the soul for other destinies in a series of identity deaths and transformations’ (263-264). However, abstracted through the filter of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of deterritorialization, Benjamin’s image of the transformation of self made at the moment of death is reduced to a generalising metaphor for Difference. In The Magic of The State Taussig also refers to the passage from ‘The Storyteller’. He writes:

It’s as if death reveals an irreducible alterity in the self, namely the social persona, a word also meaning mask, for death has the license to bring forth the mask at the curtain call on life, it being the social role of death to illuminate role-playing itself, and this applies with singular force to meta-death, the formative experience of modernity which makes it possible to see new beauty in what is vanishing with the death of death. (80)

In this earlier text, he places greater emphasis on Benjamin’s question of the transmissibility of death and the increasing impossibility of this in modernity. These are not concerns in Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy but rather belong to a line of “intellectual physiognomy” that uses the unique physical properties of the face as critical model. Without a sense of the reception of the face as an image, Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of faciality is limited by the very thing it challenges: representation. They propose a dream of passing through and undoing the binary formations of faciality. But the to-fro movement of facialisation/de-facialisation is a vanishing act, for in this conception the face becomes so abstracted that it is, in the end, a mere construction, a phantom figure, a representation of a philosophical point of view. In contrast to Deleuze and Guattari’s critique and their emphasis on Difference as an
end in itself, the focus on recognition in this study takes us back to the face itself, to questions raised by Benjamin, and later, by Taussig (especially in his earlier writings), about the face as an image of death that sets off in the beholder what Benjamin calls ‘recognizability’—a physiognomic sensation in which the beholder’s recognition of the uniqueness and irreversibility of death creates within her a disturbing sense of loss of self, which in turn give rise to ‘the enigmatic question of human existence’ that haunted Benjamin and underlined his attempts to understand the the fully embodied modes of exchange that mediate social relations.

**Face to Face With Death**

The figure of the face recurs throughout Benjamin’s writings. Indeed, Rolf Tiedemann has described Benjamin’s philosophy as ‘intellectual physiognomy’. And as we saw earlier, Benjamin often draws out—and on—the powerful physiological imbrication between the face and death, or what Alphonso Lingis claims is the ‘peculiar’ capacity of the living face to make death visible as something that is ‘latent’. To return to the passage mentioned above from his essay ‘The Storyteller’, Benjamin writes about how the changing experience of death in modernity limits the opportunity for the living to experience this image of death:

> It has been observable for a number of centuries how in the general consciousness the thought of death has declined in omnipresence and vividness. In its last stages this process is accelerated. And in the course of the nineteenth century bourgeois society has, by means of hygiene and social, private and public institutions, realised a secondary effect which may have been its subconscious main purpose: to make it possible for people to avoid the sight of the dying. Dying was once a public process in the life of the individual ... In the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living. (93)

Benjamin’s point is that changes in social rituals of death and dying in modernity have resulted in a loss of direct experiences of death.

Written in 1936 in the aftermath of the massive social changes of World War I and in the atmosphere of impending disaster precipitating World War II, ‘The Storyteller’ is often contrasted to Benjamin’s most well known essay, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical
Reproduction’, also written in 1936. As Marcus Bullock has pointed out, the former essay has been read as a romantic longing by Benjamin for a past era of storytelling, while the latter is regarded by many to represent the best of Benjamin’s so called Marxist phase. These are not Bullock’s views. He argues that the desire in Benjamin studies to repress either the messianic aspects of his work or its political dimensions leads to one and the same end – that is, an outlook ‘incapable of grasping the idea that a theological construction could have a vital critical function in the world’. Bullock stresses that this is not theology in the sense of ‘reasoning or doctrine about a realm which subsists in its absolute divorce from the material’ (1100). To the contrary, Benjamin’s position is, as Bullock explains it, that ‘(t)he knowledge which we need can only be achieved by a radical re-remembrance of the material domain’ (1111). That is to say, knowledge gained through the senses.

In his essay on the work of art, Benjamin states that human sense perception is not simply determined by biological processes. Nor is it universal. He writes: ‘During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well’.

In ‘The Storyteller’, Benjamin argues that early twentieth century experience of death and dying – ‘the movement of the dying further and further from the perceptual world of the living’ (93) – has impacted on our capacity for storytelling. He claims that, no longer able to face the dying, the living are literally untouched by what he calls, ‘the authority of death’, which is, he suggests, the source of the story:

It is ... characteristic that not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life – and this is the stuff that stories are made of – first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end – unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it – suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story. (93)
Here, we can see that in ‘The Storyteller’ the face is not only a metaphor and a subject of Benjamin’s interest but it also provides a model for the analysis of the impact of modernity on sense perception.

For Benjamin, the event of facing death constitutes two, interrelated perceptual experiences involving the face. First, Benjamin invokes the widely held belief that in the approach of death we see ourselves in a series of images that unfold inside the head. What Benjamin describes here is the sensation of otherness felt in moments of awareness of the absolute irreversibility of death, the sense of ‘missed experience’. This sensation of seeing oneself as never seen before is not an experience of self-identity. On the contrary, in this shock experience the images that return to us are, he suggests, images of the self we do not recognise. In this way, the shock of facing death does not reveal to us who we are, as Kostenbaum and so many others argue, but rather, death reveals to both the dying and the living around them that we are other than who we know ourselves to be. At this same point at which the dying see themselves in their unrecognisability, those around them are affected as witnesses. Benjamin suggests that in the faces of the dying, the living can recognise an authority that death lends to lived experience. Recognition by the living of this ‘authority’ establishes the conditions necessary for the transmission of life knowledge – ‘the stuff that stories are made of’. Benjamin’s point here is that the cost of the sequestration of the dying in modernity is the transmissibility of death, and thus the possibility of the exchange of experience. And as I suggested in the opening paragraphs of this introduction, in late twentieth century media cultures the faces of the dead and dying have been rendered invisible partly by removing them from sight but also, by endlessly repeating images of such faces, by bringing them closer and closer until we have reached a point in which these faces no longer register in our conscious minds as faces of death.

It is important that we do not take what Benjamin calls the authority of death constituted in face to face encounters with mortality as an ethical relation. In ‘Ethics as First Philosophy’, Emmanuel Levinas asserts that the experience of coming face to face with another is the primary experience of existence. He explains that becoming ‘I’ involves first facing up to responsibility for the Other:
Responsibility for the Other, for the naked face of the first individual to come along, a responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other, what ever act I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other before being devoted to myself. Or more exactly, as if I had to answer for the other’s death even before being.  

For Levinas, the relation of face-to-faceness constitutes a unique experience in which we recognise not that we live because the other dies but rather, that we live only to recognise the Other’s death. This recognition is possible, he argues, because of the transcendence of the face. In his essay *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas contends that sensations can create qualities that do not require cognizance. Or, as he says, ‘qualities without support’ (188). He writes: ‘sensation recovers a “reality” when we see in it not the subjective counterpart of objective qualities, but an enjoyment “anterior” to the crystallisation of consciousness, I and not-I, into subject and object. This crystallisation occurs not as the ultimate finality of enjoyment but as a moment of its becoming, to be interpreted in terms of enjoyment’ (188). For Levinas, the only given in the delirious space of pure sensation is the face. The face cuts through or transcends the nothingness of the sensual world, opening us up to the infinite relation of face-to-faceness, which, in his view, ‘recovers a reality’ that takes us beyond totalising thinking, beyond history. This experience of the infinite — a space without proportion — gives rise to the secret language of the face: the demand by the face that we respond to it. In the end, therefore, perception of the face in Levinas’ philosophy is in fact a linguistic experience — we respond to the call of the Other, which speaks through the secret language of the face.

In this respect, we see how Levinas’ conception of recognising death in the face of the Other is different from the idea of the transmissibility of death in Benjamin’s work. As we saw in the previously mentioned passage from ‘The Storyteller’, Benjamin sees facing death as a shock experience. In no way is the death of the other a metaphor for Otherness, nor does it take us outside of history. As a materialist philosophy, recognition of the uniqueness and finality of death, its irreversibility, in the face does not engender an inward looking gaze, as Derrida convincingly argues Levinas’ encounter of face-to-faceness is. As a perceptual experience that takes us outside of ourselves, the transmissibility of death by the face is, for Benjamin, meaningful precisely because it is social, because in its absolute unrepeatability it is historical. Hence, to turn to Benjamin’s writings to find the mysteriousness of the face in its
relation to death is to find something very different from the ecstatic experience of the face that is at the basis of Levinas’ philosophy.

Benjamin’s understanding of mysteriousness should also be distinguished from a notion of religious sacredness. In his essay, ‘The Face of Garbo’, Roland Barthes argues that the face of Greta Garbo belongs to a past era of cinema ‘when capturing the human face still plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy ... when the face represented a kind of absolute state of the flesh ... where the flesh gives rise to mystical feelings of perdition’. For Benjamin, the capacity of the face to make death visible constitutes a profane experience and is thus a mysteriousness that belongs not to the world of religion and other forms of mysticism, but to the everyday. This focus on the everyday in Benjamin’s writing reflects the influence of Simmel’s studies of urban experience on Benjamin’s thinking. It is also an aspect of Benjamin’s philosophy formed partly out of his interest in Surrealism. In an essay on Surrealism and surrealistic experience, Benjamin warns against a zealous conception of mysteriousness:

Any serious exploration of occult, surrealistic, phantasmagoric gifts and phenomena presupposes a dialectical intertwinement to which a romantic turn of mind is impervious. For histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday.

In proceeding chapters, I shall elaborate on what Benjamin introduces above as ‘a dialectical optic’. For now, I simply make the point that, following Benjamin, this thesis looks for the mysteriousness of the face in the everyday. I might have chosen to look at films that deal directly with the relationship between the face and mortality, such as, for example, George Franju’s Eyes Without a Face. Instead, I have selected faces that represent strategies of concealing the facelessness of death – portraiture, fame, commemoration and memorialisation. In this respect, my approach to this topic is indebted specifically to Taussig’s work on defacement, for my method of analysis is involves making the processes of the face as a means of concealment visible. More generally, my method of analysis is inspired by Walter Benjamin’s writings. Like him, I have a fascination with film and a love for toys that move and change just for the sake it. Benjamin found models for writing in all sorts of
starnge things. Here, I want to follow his lead and take the nineteenth century toy called a spinning disc, — a string threaded with a two-faced disc — as my model. Just as the spinning disc sets two images in motion to create a third, the aim of this thesis is to enable the dialectical tension between recognition and unrecognisability to be set into motion in the following analyses in the hope that this spinning/switching motion will reveal a new image of death in modernity.

**Recognition and Recognisability**

In a review of Axel Honneth’s *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflict*, Peter Osborne writes that ‘recognition is an idea whose time has come’. Osborne explains that Honneth’s main aim is to take ‘recognition out of the systematic context of Hegel’s thought, insulating it from his epistemological concerns, to concentrate on its role in the process of the formation of “human identity”’ (35). Critical of this move, Osborne writes that Honneth’s work ‘parallels Charles Taylor’s influential essay “The Politics of Recognition”’. These books represent debates on recognition, which, Osborne points out, ‘are currently taking place under the confusingly interchangeable banners of “the politics of identity” and “the politics of difference”’ (35). It is not my intention here to engage directly with this kind of social theory. I am, however, interested in the question of the part that culture plays in processes of recognition. One of Osborne’s criticisms of Honneth’s approach is that ‘(t)here is no sign of the way in which processes of recognition are mediated by cultural forms’ (36). It seems to me that this criticism can be applied more widely to debates in identity politics. By examining the forms of what Benjamin calls ‘recognizability’, enabled by the face as a practice of the image, we can not only gain a new insight into the relationship between death and recognition but also into the role of cultural forms in processes of recognition.

To begin with, recognition is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as ‘the mental process whereby things are identified as having been previously apprehended or as belonging to a particular known category, distinguished from the process of recall’. ‘To recognise’ is defined as, ‘to perceive something to be identical with something previously known, to know by means of some distinctive feature, to identify from knowledge or appearance or character’. In
The Sense of Sight, John Berger elaborates on this definition in a meditation on his personal experience of drawing his father’s death mask. He writes:

Any image – like the image read from the retina – records an appearance which will disappear. The faculty of sight developed as an active response to continually changing contingencies. The more it developed, the more complex the set of appearances it could construct from events. (An event in itself has no appearances.) Recognition is an essential part of this construction. And recognition depends upon the phenomenon of reappearance sometime occurring in the ceaseless flux of disappearance. Thus if appearances, at any given moment, are a construction emerging from the debris of all that has previously appeared, it is understandable that this very construction may give birth to the idea that everything will one day be recognizable, and the flux of disappearance cease.  

As I mentioned above, Berger’s observation about recognition is found in his personal response to his father’s death and his dream of keeping him recognisable. This dream of recognition is, Berger claims, shared by all: ‘Such a dream is more than a personal dream; it has supplied the energy of a large part of human culture. For example: the story triumphs over oblivion; music offers a centre; the drawing challenges disappearance’ (149). As I will discuss in the chapters of this thesis, no form of art – painting, literature or music – ensures eternal recognisability. Indeed, the differences between various challenges to disappearance: the photograph, painting and film, as well as other cultural forms involving senses other than sight, constitute a politics of recognition of their own. The faces I have chosen to examine in this thesis do not exhaust the possibilities of becoming unrecognisable nor do they represent all possible politics of recognition. Rather, they have been selected because each, though in different ways, brings into question ‘the dream of recognition’, thereby revealing it as precisely that – a dream.

Chapter 1, ‘When People See People’, raises the main themes of recognition and recognisability as they relate to questions of spectatorship in an analysis of television reports of the unrecognisable face of well-known British actor, Paul Eddington. An examination of the conditions in which Eddington’s face became a televisual event of recognisability shows how despite television’s best efforts to hide this face, its nakedness reveals not only the instability of identity, but the processes of the concealment of that instability.
In chapter 2, ‘The Mystery of the Face’, I return to questions raised in this introduction about philosophical models and theorisations of the face. Here, I trace the development of the science of physiognomics from ancient Greece to modern times and examine its influence on Benjamin and others in the formation of modes of ‘intellectual physiognomy.’ Focussing on a filmic account of a famous case of imposture – *Le retour de Martin Guerre* (*The Return of Martin Guerre*) – this chapter also explores the question of identity in philosophies and theorisations of the face as it informs cultural practices of face recognition.

Following these earlier chapters, I begin a series of analyses of faces. Chapter 3, “‘Am I Dead Sweetheart?’: Self-portraiture and HIV/AIDS”, looks at self-portraiture as a cultural response to the AIDS crisis. Paying particular attention to the long running, Australian community arts project, ‘Self-Documentation, Self-Imaging: People Living with HIV/AIDS, 1988 -’ the chapter examines the contribution of this self-portraiture project to the wider struggle for recognition by people with HIV and AIDS in Australia. The analysis therefore focuses on the relation formed between the viewed and viewing subject in this exhibition of self-images of people living with HIV and AIDS. Drawing on Alexander García Düttmann’s critique of Hegel’s ‘struggle for recognition’, I argue that the significance of this particular self-portraiture project lies not in its implicit claim to make authentic subjects of HIV and AIDS recognisable – that is, ‘faces of HIV/AIDS’. Instead, the project is most successful in achieving recognition in the moments it seemingly fails to, for it is in these instances that the faces of this exhibition reveal the unrecognisable historical crisis of experience of HIV and AIDS.

Recognition also refers to the processes of acknowledging excellence and awarding merit. In death, the stakes for this kind of recognition are high, for recognition of this kind offers the promise of immortality. Chapter 4, ‘Dennis Potter’s Severed Head’, examines questions of recognition and immortality in the age of television as they arise in the television event of the death of British television writer, Dennis Potter. Here, I draw on Zygmunt Bauman’s theory of immortality and modernity to argue that in the end the figure of a severed head of a dead writer that connects Potter’s two final television drama series turns on the writer, betraying his bid for immortality. This figure, intended, I argue, to serve as a model for Potter’s immortality, succeeds only in making immortality redundant.
Chapter 5, ‘Name Without A Face’, addresses questions of death, race and legal recognition in an analysis of Trevor Graham's biographical film of Australian indigenous leader, Eddie Mabo. It is interesting to note that the first definition of ‘to recognize’ in the *Oxford Dictionary* is ‘Resumption of land. (Proprietal.)’ Contemporary politics of recognition are frustratingly limited to discussion of the question of identity. Apart from other problems I have with the essentialising nature of a great deal of the literature in that field, the narrow focus on recognition as identity leads to an oversight of the social realities of legal forms of recognition and the question of sovereignty. In Chapter 5, I attempt to redress this imbalance by offering an alternative reading of the facelessness of ‘Mabo.’

In chapter 6 I take up the question of recognition in death in an analysis of the global event of the death of Diana, the Princess of Wales. My analysis is limited to the conception of Diana as a saint in the many media reports on her death. I return to Kracauer’s argument that the ‘blizzard’ of photographs of the rich and famous, the strange and exotic, that fill popular magazines is in fact a way of distracting ourselves from the social realities of modernity, in particular, ‘man-made mass death’. If in the past, the loss of individual death has been offset by the avalanche of media images, here, the ‘final’ image of Diana serves to make that process of distraction visible, if only for the briefest time.

In the conclusion to this study, I return to the question raised in this introduction about the difference between Emmanuel Levinas’ conception of the relation of face to faceness and the idea of the face as a practice of the image in Benjamin’s philosophy. My main aim is to show that Levinas’ conception of recognising death in the face of the Other uses blindness as a metaphor for ‘inwardness’. In contrast, Benjamin’s philosophy of the image as a blinding shock effect that disrupts normal modes of perception is a form of recognition that takes us outside of ourselves. In this closing chapter I introduce the notion of facial vision – a phenomenon of blindness in which the face is a receptor to changes in heat temperature and air pressure. I do so by way of engaging issues raised in my investigation of unrecognisability with the idea of ‘recognizability’ in Benjamin’s philosophy of the image. And as with all the chapters of this thesis, the conclusion attempts to mimic the practice of the face studied throughout – that is, a practice of writing that turns what is written back on itself to reveal what is concealed, to capture, though not explain away, the fleeting instances in media culture where the face turns on itself to express the power of death.
ENDNOTES


7. See Joachim Whaley ed., *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death* (London: Europa Publications, 1981). In his introduction, Whaley reports that since the mid-1970s ‘Death has become one of the most widely discussed issues at historical conferences, and the subject of numerous works of historical scholarship. It is a field which continues to fascinate historians and yet, in important ways, to elude them’, 3.

8. See David Clark ed., *The Sociology of Death: theory, culture, practice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993). This text provides a good representation of the range of recent sociological studies of death. In his introduction, Clark writes: ‘Death holds many challenges for Sociology. It gives expression to the relationship between the individual and society and to public, private and gendered experiences. Supremely, it presents us with an irreducible facticity: that human bodies are finite. That just as they are born, so too they must die. To be sure, a good deal of Sociology has ... bracketed this point, or indeed, ignored it completely’, 3. See especially in this collectionn, Chris Mellor, ‘Death in high modernity: the contemporary presence and absence of death’.


12. Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992). Bauman writes: ‘That the fact of human mortality, and the necessity to live with the constant awareness of that fact, go a long way toward accounting for many a crucial aspect of social and cultural organization of all known societies; and that most, perhaps all, known cultures can be better understood (or at least understood differently, in a novel way) if conceived of as alternative ways in which that primary trait of human existence – the fact of mortality and the knowledge of it – is dealt with and processed, so that it may turn from the condition of impossibility of meaningful life into the major source of life’s meaning. At the end of such process death, a fact of nature, a biological phenomenon, re-emerges as a cultural artifact, and in this culturally processed form offers the primary building material for social institutions and behavioural patterns crucial to the reproduction of societies in their distinctive forms’, 9.


20. E.H. Gombrich, ‘The Mask and the Face: The Perception of Physiognomic Likeness in Life and Art’, *The Image and the Eye: Further studies in the psychology of pictorial representation* (London: Phaidon, 1982), 103-136. In this essay written in 1970, Gombrich argues for a universalist psychological reading of the essence of self in physiognomic likeness. He holds the Neo-platonic view that such an essence is detected by the genius portrait artist who can see through the mask of self-performance and render the sitter as he truly is.


23. See Giles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. and ed. Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). In a chapter titled, ‘Foldings, or the Inside of Thought (Subjectivation)’, Deleuze engages with Foucault’s writings on processes of subjection and the question of interiority in History of Sexuality. Subjectivation is the name Deleuze gives to the folding process of the interiorization of the outside in the relation to oneself.


35. See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Derrida provides a critique of the history of responsibility in modern European thinking. He argues that despite the basic claim of the ethico-political point of view as a sacrifice of self for the other, the fact is that this claim conceals a secret concern for the freedom of the self.


Chapter One

When People See People

I remember staying up through the night to watch CNN’s live coverage of Yitzhak Rabin’s burial service and it was a speech given by his grand daughter at that event which brought me closest to the significance of his death.¹ The grand daughter explained to the world watching that the memorialising images of Rabin’s face was not the face she knew. This was not her grandfather we saw on the screen. On the contrary, in death, Rabin was for her, unrecognisable – ‘a smile that is no longer’. While western news services desperately tried to sustain Rabin’s recognisability, to allow viewers to continue to see him ‘as he was’ – indeed, to allow the dead to speak again through his last public words (uttered at a peace rally only minutes before he was assassinated) – it was also reported that British actor, Paul Eddington, best known for roles he played in BBC comedies like Yes, Minister and Yes, Prime Minister, died of a rare skin cancer which left him ‘faceless’ and ‘almost unrecognisable’.

While I make no attempt now to compare these disparate stories, it was the tension produced in the strangeness of these two faces coming together, back to back, as they did in many of the Australian television news broadcasts, that got me thinking in a new way about the face and death, about the dialectic between recognition and unrecognisability.²

What I saw that night after Rabin’s assassination, switching between various news services, was that just as reports on Rabin sought to restore his face in death, television news tried equally hard to smooth over the shock of Eddington’s facelessness in life. For Rabin’s grand daughter, the difference between her experience of Rabin’s death and the mass circulation of his image was unbearable. Addressing her dead grandfather, she cried: ‘The television does not stop transmitting your picture’. She asked others to recognise Rabin as she did, that is, as ‘a smile that is no longer’. At the same time networks were broadcasting Rabin’s memorial service, they were also bringing us pictures of Eddington’s unrecognisable face and while we were invited to look at Rabin’s face over and over, we were warned that the image of Eddington’s facelessness might be ‘disturbing’.

In this opening chapter I want to explore exactly what it is about facelessness that disturbs us. The more i watched that evening the more convinced I became that in the image
of Eddington’s unrecognisable face is precisely what the thousands of images of Rabin’s face are designed to conceal – that is, the horror of nonidentity. In the following I examine how Eddington’s unrecognisable face reveals the blinding non-existence of death our ‘hearts’, as Schopenhauer once said, tell us cannot possibly be true.³ Like the strange mix of tenses in Rabin’s grand daughter’s speech, the spectacular loss of Eddington’s well known face calls into question the principle of eternal sameness – the almost sacred conception in western cultures of a unitary, transcendent self. To view this face that television shows only to then warn us not to look, is, I suggest, to look in the way that Maurice Blanchot suggests Orpheus did when he ‘turned back’: that is, ‘to look into the night at what the night is concealing – the other night, concealment which becomes visible.’¹⁴ Or, in this case, to look into the face at what the face conceals – the ‘other’, mortal face of self, the face we spend our lives trying not to see.

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Channel Ten (Australia) reported on Paul Eddington’s death by showing three short grabs – two of which were images of him as he had not been seen on TV before.⁵ The first was taken from Yes, Prime Minister of Eddington. It offered the instantly recognisable image of Eddington as the character, Jim Hacker. Hacker/Eddington says:

If people saw people coming, before people saw them seeing people coming, people would see people.

The humour of Hacker’s convoluted, idiosyncratic logic, underscored by the laughter track, becomes uncanny when this shot, serving now to stand in for Eddington, cuts to the second image, a long shot of an unrecognisable figure. Although Eddington is seen in this long shot in conversation, his voice has been muted, replaced by the voice of the news reader who reports:

Of course, that’s how most people remember Eddington – the bumbling MP, star of
the TV comedy series 'Yes, Prime Minister.' But at the end he was almost unrecognisable – his skin blotchy and his hair falling out.

The report then cuts to a final close-up shot of Eddington’s (still silent), unrecognisable face. The reader concludes:

He was suffering from a rare skin disease which probably cost him his life.

Ten’s story attempted to compensate for the shock of Eddington’s unrecognisability by projecting on to him an image not simply of a former self, but a fictional self. Eddington speaks not as himself, that is, as actor, but as character. It would seem that Ten preferred to confer on to Eddington a fixed, fictional identity, to have him speak from the grave as another, rather than face the mystery of his facelessness, rather than let a faceless figure speak. Not that I’m suggesting Ten’s effort should be deplored. While their ‘before and after’ approach can be regarded as tacky, so called tasteful approaches taken by some other news services, like the ABC, for example, were equally problematic. Tip-toeing around the subject of his disfigurement by showing him only in character, the ABC spoke of Eddington’s facelessness in the hushed, holy tones of tragedy. Descriptions of the effects of skin cancer as a tragic situation were, I am sure, intended to give some kind of ‘deeper’ significance to this disconcerting calamity. But in an interview shown on Australian television a week or so after the abovementioned news report, Eddington described his condition as an ‘absurd situation’ and claimed that the look of his face was ‘grotesque.’

The grotesque is most easily defined as an un-natural excess. The grotesque face is overblown and distorted: it is an exaggeration of the face. What shocks us into the repulsive/attractive gaze of the grotesque, ‘the embarrassed smile’, as Wolfgang Kayser puts it, is the recognition of a resemblance to, or continuity between, the human form and other forms such as animal or plant forms, or even other forms of pictorial representation.” In a section called, ‘An Attempt to Define the Nature of the Grotesque’, Kayser writes, ‘We are so strongly affected and terrified because it is our world which ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we would be unable to live in this changed world. The grotesque instils fear of life rather
than fear of death.' (185) However, as it appeared in Ten’s report, Paul Eddington’s altered face was not deformed or misshapen. It did not appear overblown, nor was there any trace of animality. What appeared on the screen was a perfectly proportional face altered only at the surface – it was, to put it plainly, a peculiarly blank face, it was de-faced in the full sense of that term. Perhaps then even a term like ‘the grotesque’ is too general when speaking about this face, because it does not distinguish between the excessive facedness of deformity and the baffling facelessness of de-facement.

As if erased, Eddington’s face was not so much ‘monstrous’ (as the term grotesque suggests), but rather, quite simply, a face beyond recognition in the sense that it bore no resemblance to his former look or to other faces. In terms of the grotesque, disfigurement of this kind – that is, a situation in which all the unique lines, forms and textures of the face are effaced – is excessive to the degree that it makes visible a face which is a pure abstraction of face – surface. To see this face in this way, that is, as a face never seen before, brings us closer, perhaps, to the fear it instils. As Kayser says, not so much a fear of death itself, but of the uncertainties of life. Or to put it slightly differently, de-facement is not of the order of the fantastic but very much of this world, the visceral, the bodily.

Clearly, the unrecognisability of Eddington’s face that instils in viewers a fear of the contingencies of life constitutes a shock effect. In this way, less extreme or lasting forms of de-facement might also be considered to have a similar affect, such as, for example, those everyday fleeting moments of alienation when a face we know well, the face of a lover or a child – a most adored and searched-into-and-over face – changes before our eyes as a shock experience. Australian artist Joy Hester, once described these moments as, ‘that fleeting mobile moment in which one sees for the first time the person and this “first” time appears all the time in Gray’s (her lover’s) face’. As encounters with absolute difference, unrecognisability suspends us in the dark, grasping for impossible resemblances.

Confronted by the close-up detail of Eddington’s altered face I found myself unable to not look. I was drawn to his otherness with the same awe and amazement that I had once experienced before illustrations of flayed anatomical faces in my grandfather’s leather bound Book of Disease and Physiology. Yet, while the strange (‘estranging’) objectivity of de-
Face-ment made it impossible to relate the face before me to former images of Eddington, my response was not horror nor disgust. Rather, I found myself thinking about my grandfather, dying of emphysema, his cheek bones protruding through his skin like scars. Looking into my grandfather’s face, I had been prodded by death for the first time. Although I was only six years old I had understood completely the meaning of what I had seen. Like Rabin’s grand daughter, perhaps, I knew I had seen my grandfather’s face for the last time. The shock of Eddington’s facelessness renewed in me a forgotten childhood experience of mortality; the indeterminacy of de-face-ment revealed, or, ‘exposed’ (like some lost photographic negative) a final image of my grandfather’s face imprinted within me in some deep, unconscious way, a memory of myself as a child secretly flipping through the pages of medical books stored in his sleep-out.

But how is it that one face, indeed, an unrecognisable face can spark a forgotten memory of another? In Defacement, Michael Taussig associates what he calls ‘re-face-ment’ with Benjamin’s concept of shock effect and waking. He points out that Benjamin borrows this idea of waking or restoring memory lost to consciousness from Marcel Proust and his idea of mémoire involontaire. Something similar is found in Siegfried Kracauer’s Theory of Film - The Redemption of Physical Reality when he associates the objectivity of the photographic nature of film with Proust’s ideas on memory. In the latter text, Kracauer quotes a passage from Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past, in which the narrator enters a room in which his grandmother is seated and, remaining unnoticed, sees for the first time how she has aged:

I was in the room, or rather I was not yet in the room since she was not aware of my presence ... Of myself ... there was present only the witness, the observer with a hat and travelling coat, the stranger who does not belong to the house, the photographer who has called to take a photograph of places which one will never see again. The process that mechanically occurred in my eyes when I caught sight of my grandmother was indeed a photograph. We never see the people who are dear to us save in the animated system, the perpetual motion of our incessant love for them, which before allowing the images that their faces present to reach us catches them in a vortex, flings them back upon the idea that we have always had of them, makes them adhere to it, coincide with it. How, since into the forehead, the cheeks of my grandmother I had been accustomed to read all the most delicate, the most permanent qualities of her mind; how, since every casual glance is an act of necromancy, each face that we love a mirror of the past, how could I have failed to overlook what in her had become dulled and changed, seeing that in the most trivial spectacles of our daily life our eye charged
with thought, neglects, as would a classical tragedy, every image that does not assist the action of the play and retains only those that may help to make its purpose intelligible ... I, for whom my grandmother was still myself, I who had never seen her save in my own soul, always in the same place in the past, through the transparent sheets of contiguous, overlapping memories, suddenly in our drawing room which formed part of a new world, that of time, saw, sitting on the sofa, beneath the lamp, red-faced, heavy and common, sick, lost in thought, following the lines of a book with eyes that seemed hardly sane, a dejected old woman whom I did not know. (14) (My emphasis)

In this passage, Proust compares the narrator who sees his grandmother with a newly acquired objectivity to a photographer: seen photographically the grandmother appears to the narrator as an unrecognisable ‘stranger.’ The grandmother’s unrecognisability effaces the narrator’s loving memory of her. He is thrust into a new viewing position, a photographic viewpoint, in which she appears, ‘red-faced, heavy and common, sick, lost in thought, following the lines of a book with eyes that seemed hardly sane, a dejected old woman ...’ This description is of course charged with sexual difference: it is a kind of primal scene that reveals a history of men’s idealisation of woman. The narrator is crushed when he sees his grandmother for the first time in her mortal state. But of much more interest to me is the fact that it is not only the grandmother who is transformed by unrecognisability. We learn that the experience of seeing his grandmother ‘photographically’ also transforms the narrator, for he too becomes a stranger in his own home – ‘an observer with a hat and travelling coat.’ The shocking sight of his grandmother’s aging takes the narrator out of the comfortable space of the home and transports him into what he calls, ‘a new world, that of time’. If, as Kracauer suggests, for Proust, ‘photography is the product of complete alienation’ (15), it is also a temporal experience – a shock effect in which the narrator finds himself caught between past and present, a temporality similar to the stilled or suspended state of the awareness of mortality.

Leading on from Proust’s amazing insight into unrecognisability and Kracauer’s use of it for his theory of film, it can be said that the objectivity of Eddington’s de-facement enabled in me, and surely others, a different kind of recognition. This form of recognition is not identification but rather, a perception of ‘newness’: an experience of seeing for the first time
that takes us beyond cognitive recognition, opening up what Kracauer calls ‘crude existence’ (TF, 19). Kracauer writes that photography tends to stress the fortuitous, the unexpected: ‘... even the most typical portraits must retain an accidental character – as if they were plucked en route and still quivered with crude existence’ (19). This experience of the naked face serves to unsettle the certainty of eternal sameness and recognisability. It is not, therefore, only the other who is changed by the trauma of recognisibility: seeing the other anew, seeing ‘crude existence’ in the faces of loved ones or those whom viewers have come to expect to always appear the same – ‘The television does not stop transmitting your picture’ – forces the viewer to see him or herself differently. Indeed, it is possible, as it was for me, to remember oneself anew in the light of a hitherto forgotten trauma of unrecognisability.

By smoothing over the shock of Eddington’s facelessness in life through the so called restoration of his former face, Channel Ten’s crude juxtapositions revealed what is usually concealed – that is, the contingency of identity. Before recognisability the viewer is suspended between the familiar and the strange, the known and the unknowable. And just as recognisability reveals the mortal nature of human existence, its affect can be best understood in terms of the self-estranging affect of loss and death: that is, the shock of recognisability as an affect not dissimilar to that sudden realisation of the loss of a loved one, a shock that hits like a blow to the head, emptying us of all life’s meaning, a feeling that passes through us as a giant unstoppable shudder leaving us naked and exposed, strangers to ourselves.

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A week or so after the news report on Paul Eddington’s death, an interview with him recorded by BBC’s Face to Face was shown on Australian television. In that interview, recorded a short time prior to his death and shot entirely in close-up, Eddington was asked how he found the courage to appear as himself – that is, in his then current state of disfigurement. He said that he drew on his training as an actor. Bracing himself as one might don a mask, Eddington faced others around him as an actor faces an audience, that is, as other than self. Ironically, only in otherness could Eddington become himself, and as himself, he could not perform being other than himself. Invoking Roland Barthes’ sense of the mask, it
can be said that Eddington’s face had become a mask proper. As Barthes says, ‘The mask is the meaning insofar as it is absolutely pure (as it was in ancient theatre.)’ And in this case, Eddington’s ‘pure’ (or absolute) otherness exposes the representational practices of the face used in dramatic film as the masks they are. As he explained it, he was no longer able to act the roles he had previously performed:

“I was asked by a producer to do a film and I said, "Well we haven’t met for some time, oughten you come and have a look at me” ... I said “Let’s have a make-up test, a film test,” and we did. She wrote a regretful letter saying, “I’m sorry it’s a major part and the cameras simply won’t be able to come in close enough.”

According to Siegfried Kracauer in The Theory of Film there are two ways of approaching the face in close-up: as ‘a unit of montage’ and as ‘an end in itself’. As a unit of montage, the close-up face is a sign that points to other objects around it. Through the technique of cross-cutting between the face and other objects, film can create sympathies and inner thoughts. Through these kinds of techniques film creates an illusionary subjectivity. By allowing us to seemingly penetrate the mind of the character via the face, to see as the character sees, film invites audiences to identify with the screen subject. In this representational approach to the close-up, the face is seen as a means to an inner self, an illusion of a unitary self, which Eddington’s pure otherness would have of course shattered. Given the dominance of the representational practices of the face, Eddington found himself ‘typecast’. As he put it:

...the BBC asked me to do Henry V playing Justice Shallow. I said, "I do look grotesque you know ...” They said, "No, no, that’s what we want.” Perhaps a revival of the Elephant Man or the Man in the Iron Mask I could manage, but apart from that I shall have to confine myself to radio.

It is interesting to note that on radio, the recognisability of Eddington’s voice offset the face, while on television, the severity of his altered face quite literally de-faces his voice and proper
name: on television Eddington appears as an imposter. Hence, from around this time, Eddington performed only on radio, apart from some interviews for TV conducted shortly before his death. And it is in one of those interviews – the interview on *Face to Face* – that another kind of closeness is enabled. Discussing the second approach to the close-up, Kracauer asks if the close-up face can ever be that which the viewing subject ‘simply passes through and beyond’ (47) to other things, to other shots around it. He suggests that the close-up face can also be seen as ‘an end in itself’ (48). In terms of recognisability, the cinematic face can be read-off as a set of expressions of personality, a sign of an inner self or guide to inner thoughts. But film also makes the face perceptible as *surface*. That is to say, the face can be recognised in film as a physical entity, as ‘an end in itself.’

Citing the example of a close-up of Mae West’s hands in Griffith’s film *Intolerance*, Kracauer says that no doubt the purpose of the image is to ‘impress upon us her inner condition.’ (47) However, as he adds, this is not the only way to experience the image:

... besides making us experience what we would in a measure have experienced anyway because of our familiarity with the characters involved, this close-up contributes something momentous and unique –it reveals how hands behave under the impact of utter despair. (47)

For Kracauer, film re-opens spectators eyes to physical reality, that is, the material world. This aspect of film is crucial for, as he puts it, it leads us through ‘the thicket of material life from which they (the emotional and intellectual concepts which comprise the film’s plot) emerge and in which they are embedded’ (48). It is also this notion of physical embeddedness that leads us to an understanding of the close-up as that which can set forth in spectators unconscious memories and associations. Inviting us to enter a wholly different realm of subject-object relations, Kracauer invokes Walter Benjamin’s idea of the ‘optical unconscious’. Quoting Benjamin in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Kracauer argues that close-up images, ‘"blow up our environment in a double sense: they enlarge it literally; and in doing so, they blast the prison of conventional reality, opening up expanses which we have explored at best in dreams before"’ (48).

Benjamin introduced the idea of the camera as unleashing an optical unconscious in
his 1931 essay, 'A Small History of Photography.' In this essay, Benjamin writes how from its inception, photography was criticised on the grounds that not only was it impossible for a human countenance to be captured by a machine, but that the wish to do so was 'blasphemous' (241). Benjamin argues that rather than compare the new technology of the camera with past art forms, such as painting, it is better to instead focus on the specificity of the new, 'profane' mode of perception generated by the camera. Benjamin and Kracauer share the view that photography and film bring the world closer to viewers only to put them at a distance from what they see by revealing the world in its alienated form. In his essay on photography, Benjamin describes a photograph by Octavius Hill. He writes:

... in Hill's Newhaven fishwife, her eyes cast down in such indolent, seductive modesty, there remains something that goes beyond testimony to the photographer's art, something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in art. (242-243)

This is not an argument for photographic realism. What Benjamin opens up here for discussion in this description is the peculiar temporal dimension of the reception of photography. He suggests that the photograph captures a past moment. This process is not a matter of freezing the moment like some 'memento mori' – the 'That-has-been', as Barthes puts it. Benjamin argues that photography creates an aesthetic experience in which the past and present collide. He concludes thus:

... the most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never have for us. No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search a picture for a tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of the long forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. For it is another nature that speaks to the camera than to the eye: other in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. (243)

From this observation, Benjamin goes on to develop his idea of the unconscious optics of the camera, that is, a way of seeing that is not available to the naked eye. He says:
It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis ... photography reveals ... the physiognomic aspects of visual worlds which dwell in the smallest things, meaningful and yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams, but which, enlarged and capable of formulation, make the difference between technology and magic visible as a thoroughly historical variable. (243-244)

Like Benjamin, Kracauer was also attracted to both photography and film’s capacity to reveal historical contingencies. In her essay on Kracauer’s material aesthetic of film, Miriam Hansen reminds us that Kracauer too wrote an essay on photography, some four years prior to Benjamin’s piece, and that in his essay he too raises the significance of the specific temporality of the photographic experience. 15 Hansen goes on to explain that Benjamin and Kracauer hold similar views to photography and film: ‘... Kracauer shares with Benjamin the notion of shock ... ’(459). She writes that ‘It could be argued that Theory of Film was designed to resume the allegorical vision of Benjamin’s tragedy book, its implicit analysis of modernity as the petrified, frozen landscape of history’ (444). The difference, Hansen argues, between the views held by these two theorists is that while for Benjamin photography and film can redeem the long-past moment seared in the image for the present, Kracauer theorises a different effect in this recognition. Hansen writes: ‘For Kracauer, less overtly messianic than his friend, the breeze of the future that makes the beholder shudder is that of his own material contingency’ (455). She quotes Kracauer: “”Those things once clung to us like our skin, and this is how our property still clings to us today. We are contained in nothing and photography assembles fragments around a nothing””(455-456). In other words, for Kracauer, photography is not only a new kind of temporal experience that makes historical contingences visible, but it is also a new way of encountering mortality. In Kracauer’s words: ‘an awareness of a history that does not include us’ (456). In my view, this does not so much differentiate Kracauer’s theory of the image from Benjamin’s, but rather takes us back, as Hansen says, to the influence of Benjamin’s book on tragedy on Kracauer’s Theory of Film.

It is precisely this new way of encountering mortality that Kracauer refers to when he states: ‘The face counts for nothing in film unless it includes the death’s head beneath’ (437). Invoking Benjamin’s study into the German allegorical poets use of the death’s head as an allegorical symbol of history, Kracauer argues that the inherent strangeness or otherness of the
face in close-up reveals the inherent transience of human nature and thus, to use Hansen’s words, ‘deflate(s) the image of the sovereign individual’. Invo
ing the medieval motif of the ‘danse macabre’, Kracauer attributes to film the power of that cultural form. In the danse macabre, death is figured as a faceless skeleton, descending upon unsuspecting individuals in the course of their daily activities: a lord on his rounds of his property, a worker in the field. In her study of the motif, Sarah Webster Goodwin argues that these images of death co-mingling with the living are more than a visual reminder of mortality. She writes:

The grinning corpse, that figure than which none is more clichéd, mocks us with the indifference of indifference, and invites us over the threshold into a free-fall where no language applies because no language adheres, and words are only ironies. Death in the danse macabre exposes the fiction of personal identity, even as it grants the occasion for life’s parade.

For Goodwin, the ‘death’s head’ is a complex and ironic practice of the image that expresses the indifference of indifference and the impossibility of representing death. In Kracauer’s material aesthetic, the face in film also reveals death in moments of shock and in an indirect way. For Kracauer, film has the capacity to show the presence of death in life. He is not here referring to images of the corpse or the fantastic effects that can animate skeletons. In Kracauer’s analysis of the significance of the shot of Mae West’s hand, he points toward a material aesthetic of film is in which the visible frailty and permeability of the body reveals the contingencies of life and the inherent transitoriness of human existence. Like Benjamin’s notion of the optical unconscious, which, he argues, makes ‘physiognomical aspects of the world visible’, Kracauer insists the face is of value only when in moments of shocking the spectator into a physical recognition of the transitoriness of human existence – ‘(film) addresses the viewer as “a corporeal human being”; it seizes the “human being with skin and hair”’.

From this perspective, it is possible to see that not only is there a similarity of effect between the close-up and de-facement as a particular form of becoming unrecognisable, but there is also a reciprocity: The close-up generates the physical affect of de-facement, and in turn, de-facement brings into focus the affective power of the close-up mostly overlooked in
the reduced dimensions of television. In television culture, the talking head is the most banal unit of visual language. The bare-facedness of de-facement (as an image of irrevocable loss of face, in the case of Eddington’s de-facement, or, more generally, as the shock of the changeability of all faces) brings to the small screen something of the powerful, ‘silent’ language of early cinema faces. Most important, it reveals the contingencies of life and, as Kracauer once suggested, it seizes the viewer as a ‘corporeal human being’.

Although the relentless close-ups of Eddington’s unrecognisable face in *Face to Face* take us doubly close to the face, this is not a closeness that invites us to penetrate it. On the contrary, the viewer finds him or herself captive to the physical strangeness of the face, a strangeness that can be compared in affect to images of the first close-up faces of early cinema, the ‘gigantic “severed heads”’, which, film theorist Balázs claimed constituted a ‘new dimension.’. In the enlarging perspective of de-facement it is possible to see, for example, the minute details of the movements of the face usually overlooked in television. In *Face to Face* there is an unsettling moment when Eddington, describing how his children call him every day, falters. In this fleeting second the viewer can witness the extreme pressure of becoming unrecognisable as Eddington, suddenly distracted and confused, mistakenly says that when his children call, they ask him ‘who’ he is (rather than ‘how’ he is.) I am not suggesting that this slip of the tongue, doubly amplified in a painful, anxious look that crosses his face, reveals the ‘real’ Eddington, opposed to some other, ‘false’ impression. Just as the viewer can take this slip of the tongue as an unconscious expression of his feelings about becoming unrecognisable, so too his face can be seen to unconsciously reveal what cannot be said, what is too painful or, indeed, impossible, to express directly.

In the final moments of the interview Eddington is asked by the interviewer how he would like to be remembered. Shown in profile and in extreme close-up, Eddington says, ‘Well’, then takes a long breath and pauses. Perhaps he is conscious that he is about to repeat himself, to repeat already rehearsed lines, for he says:

*I’ve said this at the end of my book. And it sounds mock modest, but it’s not. if you think about it. You see, a journalist once asked me, what would I like my epitaph to be. and I said I would like it to be, ‘He did very little harm’.*
'That's not easy', Eddington continues, as the programme cuts to an extreme close-up of his full face. Then he explains:

_Most people seem to me to do a great deal of harm. If I could be remembered as doing very little, that would suit me._

On one level there is an absolutely predictable closure in Eddington’s effortless performance of the last line of the interview. An act of self-commemoration, Eddington speaks as the already dead. Yet, on another level, a _televisional_ level, it can be noticed that as these words are said, as his mouth is set in place, as his head makes a steady, purposeful nod and his eyes gently open and close, his face reveals to us not who he was, but something of the indeterminacy of self he proposed in his request to be remembered for ‘what he was not.’ As he says, being remembered for what we are not is ‘not easy.’ But there are examples in many cultures of prohibitions on speaking of the dead. In visual terms, this idea can be performed not only as a censure but as a stripping back of the subject as opposed to a building up. Which is, I argue, the performance mode perfected by Eddington in both this final interview and in his most well known role of Hacker in the enormously successful and popular British comedy series, _Yes, Minister_ and _Yes, Prime Minister_. The fictional role of Hacker required Eddington to perform a certain kind of light-handed comedy in contrast to the role of his fictional assistant Humphrey’s cynicism. As the ‘bumbling MP’, he was true to his name, for the constant stream of illogical non-sequiturs that serve to undercut the weighty language of cynicism and thus, in a negative, though, as I say, light-handed way, subverts the language of rationalism. In his final interview, Eddington performs another kind of negativity as he _doubly_ addresses viewers: what is seen _before_ the obvious ‘brave face’ (and here I want to stress both the spatial and temporal aspects of beforeness) is the emergence of another ‘invisible’ face, as Balázs calls it (76). This is not some kind of real face (hidden behind the mask of performance). Rather, this second face enacts a kind of cross talk or double-speak. One face performs while the other signals to observers that the actor is aware of being observed, while never giving away the act that requires him to appear unaware. Or, as Hacker put it: _If people saw people coming, before people saw them seeing people coming, people would see people ..._
Acknowledging the performativeness of this televisual moment opens the way for us to see the look Eddington signals as a double look. It is also a look that opens up the possibility for viewers of what Benjamin calls ‘double insight.’ Here, it is possible to see the way in which the face draws us into a particular spatio-temporal relation to the other, the way in which the face can make felt what cannot be seen – in this case, the material event of death, the loss of Paul Eddington’s life, smoothed over and concealed in the endless repeats of his television series. Past, present and future come together in this television moment that repeats now the image of Eddington composing his epitaph, that is, reflecting on his past, while, at the same time, looking blindly into a future in which he will no longer exist. This moment is an interlocking of blind gazes: to see Eddington not seeing us, is to recognise what Schopenhauer describes as the blinding image of non-existence. In this way, Eddington’s final performance is neither simply a self-commemoration – an immortalising image of a past self – nor a mirror image of the viewer’s mortality. Rather, this televisual moment of self-recognition is, I suggest, an infinitely present rehearsal of the peculiar temporality of facing death, an instance in which the living find themselves fully implicated as blind witnesses to a image from past or, as Kracauer says, to ‘a history that does not include us’.

In the end, Eddington’s facelessness, doubly defaced by the enlarging effects of the close-up, combines with his skill as an actor to make it possible for us to see him as if for the last time and feel what that truly means. Unrecognisability (being, for Eddington, a permanent state of being but also an everyday phenomenon that occurs in the fleeting time of the changeability of all faces) rehearses (rather than represents) the temporality of the approach of death – that is, not the eternal time of immortality but that unique suspension of time experienced in the face of the irreversibility of death. Before the unrecognisable face the viewing subject can either flee from the fullness of death revealed, that is, retreat behind the veils of tragedy and immortality, or, alternatively, the viewer can face facelessness, that is, confront the other’s unrecognisability, their absolute difference from self. However, when the viewing subject takes this latter option, ‘turns back’, so to speak, then the viewer risks, as Orpheus did, becoming part of the wholly unrecognisable world of the dead, he or she risks their own recognisability. On the other hand, to enter this world, is, as Orpheus experienced, to see the otherness of self, to learn the secret of transformation.
Paul Eddington’s skin cancer led to a state of being without a face. Television reports of this personal trauma reveal a number of important aspects of what it means to become unrecognisable. The state of becoming unrecognisable makes the subject a stranger to himself. And yet, as Eddington himself claims, it is in this image of otherness that he is able to see himself ‘anew’, to see himself as an image that will continue to exist long after he is gone.

I have also suggested that the shock of Paul Eddington’s facelessness can lead the viewer to see themselves ‘anew’. Just as the first sight of his grandmother’s ageing shocked Proust’s narrator into a different image of himself – a stranger in his own home – I have suggested that ruptures to normal modes of perception, such as the sight of Eddington’s facelessness, can have an awakening effect on the viewer. Seeing ‘as if for the first time’, it is not only possible to see the face ‘as an end in itself’, as Kracuer puts it, but to see how the representational practices in film and television render the face as a sign or symbol of the self, as that which can give forth unto some reality that lies behind it. Eddington’s facelessness reminds us that the close-up face does not necessarily have to serve that purpose. Instead, it is possible to recognise in the extreme objectivity of the close-up physical aspects of existence or, what Kracauer calls, ‘crude existence.’ As Kracauer suggests, this second perspective on the face can bring us closer to the reality of the subject’s experience than the perspective that attempts to penetrate the face and delve into the inner thoughts presumed by so many to lie behind it.

And finally, the media event of Eddington’s facelessness reveals the temporal nature of this particular practice of the image. As a temporal image, the face becoming unrecognisable points not to Hegelian forms of recognition – love, solidarity, legal rights – but rather to Walter Benjamin’s theory of the image and what he calls ‘the Now’ of recognizability. (50) In notes for his unfinished Arcades project, Benjamin explains his conception of the relation between the image and history. He writes, ‘the historical index of the images doesn’t simply say that they belong to a specific time, it says above all that they only enter into legibility at a specific time’ (50). The recognizability of the image is therefore a recognition of this moment of legibility. This is of course is a unique conception of time. He continues:
It isn't that the past casts its light on what is present or that what is present casts its light on what is past; rather, an image is that in which the Then and the Now come together into a constellation like a flash of lightning ... For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of Then to the Now is dialectical: not of a temporal but of an imagistic nature. (50)

Here in this succinct note we see that Benjamin's philosophy of the image is in itself an image of history as image, an image that constitutes a particular form of recognisability. And it is this idea of recognition of the Now that informs this study of becoming unrecognisable. In the following chapters I seek out places where the face becomes unrecognisable and ask whether the shock effect of this sight constitutes what Benjamin calls a dialectical image – an image that can enable recognition of the history of the Now, the history of the face as it disappears, as it becomes unrecognisable.
ENDNOTES

1. In November 1995, Yitzhak Rabin, then Prime Minister of Israel, was assassinated by an Israeli citizen while leaving a State organised peace rally.


20. Sigmund Freud, ‘Slips of the Tongue’ in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Vol. 5, trans. Alan Tyson, ed. James Strachey with Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 94-152. Freud argues that the work of condensation he demonstrated in *Interpretation of Dreams* applies to slips of the tongue. Giving over forty examples and detailed analysis of selected cases, he writes that the aim of this study is to show that ‘A similarity of any sort between two elements of the unconscious material – a similarity between the things themselves or their verbal presentations – is taken as an opportunity for creating a third, which is a composite or compromise idea ... The formation of substitutions and contaminations which occur in slips of the tongue is accordingly a beginning of the work of condensation which we find taking a most vigorous share in the construction of dreams. 100.

21. See Eric Michaels, ‘A Primer of Restrictions on Picture-Taking in Traditional Areas of Aboriginal Australia’, in *Bad Aboriginal Art, Tradition, Media and Technological Horizons*, foreword Dick Hebdige, intro. Marcia Langton (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994). On mortuary restrictions in Mainland Aboriginal tradition, Michaels writes: ‘The death of an Aboriginal is considered so upsetting that elaborate precautions are taken to ensure that things associated with or owned by the deceased, including his or her name, are avoided by living relations ... even words that sound like the dead person’s name may be omitted from speech’.

22. See Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 108. In a section on comedic dialogue, Kracauer observes how speech can be eroded from within. For example, he writes that Groucho Marx’s babble serves to ‘ disrupt the ongoing conversation so radically that no message or opinion voiced reaches its destination. Whatever Groucho is saying disintegrates speech all around him’.

23. For Balázs, the ‘invisible face’ is a look which *exceeds* expression and discourse. Balázs held the romantic, Platonic view that the face veils a hidden soul and was committed to anthropomorphism.: ‘When we see the face of things, we do what the ancients did in creating gods in man’s image and breathing a human soul into them’. 60. Despite this, his insight into performance is of great value. On Balázs conception of physiognomy see Gertrude Koch, ‘Bela Balázs: The Physiognomy of Things’, trans. Miriam Hansen, *New German Critique* 40 (1987): 167-177. See also Maynard Solomon’s introduction to ‘The Face of Man’, *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979).
Chapter 2
The Mystery of the Face

Picture this: In the middle of the night, a young man steals away, abandoning his wife and child. Twelve years later a mature man wanders into the village from whence the first man fled, claiming to be he. But by what knowledge can the villagers be sure? ‘Look’, the man says, eyeballing those who have gathered around him. ‘Don’t you know who I am?’ ‘I’m Martin!’ The villagers peer into the man’s face seeking signs of the boy they once knew until, suddenly, one man exclaims: ‘Oh! It’s you.’ ‘It’s Martin.’ And he is quickly followed by others who cheer: ‘It’s Martin!’ ‘He has returned!’

In this scenario, the villagers experience the shock of recognition – the powerful sensation created when a strange face suddenly becomes recognisable. The mysterious capacity of the face to be at the one time same and different is said to have given rise to the ancient science of Physiognomics. In her essay ‘The Face and the Soul’, Patrizia Magli explains how the face’s capacity to be both a stable, constant form and yet ever-changing fascinated the ancients: ‘Confronted with an ever-changing appearance, ancient physiognomists focussed their investigations on an attempt to capture an immanent and univocal essence, and they did this by establishing norms through which to penetrate the secret behind a countenance’.¹

In the previous chapter, I showed how the phenomenon of faces becoming unrecognisable in media culture raises questions about physiognomic perception. In that initial attempt to draw out the physiognomic basis of unrecognisability as a viewing position, I turned to the writings of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, uncovering a different model of the face from that which takes the face to be a window to the soul. I showed in the previous chapter how this alternative ‘physiognomic’ understanding of the face calls into question the basic tenets of Platonism by constituting a wholly different view of the subject-object relation. The aim of this chapter is to provide a clearer understanding of the physiognomic approach to the face and the power of the shock of recognition.
Mirror of the Soul

Physiognomics takes us back to the ancients. Not to Plato, but to Aristotle. Unlike Plato who maintained an ambivalence for the attractive powers of the body and the face, Aristotle proposed that the face is a mirror of the soul that makes visible vital clues about the nature of the individual. He is cited as the author of the ancient treatise *Physiognomics*. The treatise begins by justifying the science of physiognomics on the grounds of an assumed solidarity between the body and the soul:

Dispositions follow bodily characteristics and are not in themselves unaffected by bodily impulses. This is obvious in the case of drunkenness and illness; for it is evident that dispositions are changed considerably by bodily affections. Conversely, that the body suffers sympathetically with affections of the soul is evident in love, fear, grief and pleasure. But it is especially in the creations of nature that one can see how body and soul interact with each other, so that each is mainly responsible for the other’s affections. For no animal has ever existed such that it has the form of one animal and the disposition of another, but the body and soul of the same creature are always such that a given disposition must necessarily follow a given form. Again, in all animals, those who are skilled in each species can diagnose their dispositions from their forms, horsemen with horses, and huntsmen with dogs. Now if this is true (and it is invariably so), there should be a science of physiognomics.²

Aristotle’s version of physiognomics involves reading the entire body, although he does claim that some parts of the body offer a ‘clearer’ picture than others, with the face and head affording the most reliable knowledge in what amounts to a hierarchy of the body:

In all selection of signs some give a much clearer demonstration of the subject than others. Clearest of all are those that appear in the most favourable part of examination is round the eyes, forehead, head and face; secondly, the region of the breast and shoulders, and lastly that of the legs and feet; the parts of the belly are of least importance. Generally speaking, these regions supply the clearest signs, in which there is greatest evidence of intelligence. (137)

We can also see how the treatise bears traces of the medical or therapeutic use of physiognomics in ancient Greece – that is, face reading as way of diagnosing physical ailments. Aristotle was renowned for his knowledge of biology. He was the son of a physician and had an extensive knowledge of medical procedures. In the section of the treatise quoted
above, he claims that the face is ‘the most favourable part for examination.’ In an earlier section, the treatise links physiognomics to the treatment of madness: ‘Madness appears to be an affection of the soul, and yet physicians by purging the body with drugs, and in addition to these by prescribing certain modes of life can free the soul from madness.’ (107) These early physiognomic connections between the face and madness would later form the basis of clinical psychiatric photography.3

In addition to being a ‘tool’ adapted by medical practitioners in both the ancient and modern worlds, physiognomics is also an influential philosophy of Being. Magli argues that the sympathy constituted in physiognomic recognition of resemblances between sentiments and physical forms ‘establishes an ethical and passionate similarity among all things ...’ (107). Physiognomy is a way of detecting meaning in appearances. Unlike Plato’s model of the face as a transparent window, as that which gives forth unto some deeper reality or truth, the image of the face as a mirror constitutes the face as an indirect or inverted image of the soul. The face is thus conceived of as a puzzle to be solved, it ‘speaks’ an unknown language that requires interpretation. Methods of analysis in this second history of the face do not involve searching behind the face for a presumed hidden secret, as the Platonic model suggests, but rather, scrutinizing the face itself, the surface for encrypted secrets. This second history of the face, is in effect an implicit critique of Platonism. This does not mean, however, that the physiognomical model of the face is unproblematic. On the contrary, as with Plato’s window to the soul, physiognomics presumes the presence of a transcendent self. The difference is that physiognomics assumes a solidarity between the body and soul, a contiguous relation opposed to an image of the face as a transparent veil. This basic physiognomic assumption has in the past led to what we would now consider outrageous fallacies. Take, for example, the following extract from Physiognomics in which Aristotle claims to know women (as a category of souls) based on a zoological physiognomical comparison between female human beings and female animals:

Now I will try to distinguish first among the animals, what kind of things differentiates them in respect of bravery and cowardice, justice and injustice. The first division which must be made in animals is into two sexes, male and female, attaching to them what is suited to each sex. Of all the animals which we attempt to breed the females are tamer and gentler in disposition than the males, but less powerful, and more
susceptible to rearing and handling. This being their character, they have less spirit than males. This perhaps most obvious from our own case, for when we are overcome by temper, we become less submissive and are more determined in no circumstances to yield to anyone, but we are inclined to violence and to act in any direction to which our temper impels us. But it seems to me that the female sex has a more evil disposition than the male, is more forward and less courageous. Women and the female animals bred by us are evidently so; and all shepherds and hunters admit that they are such as we have already described them in their natural state. ...(I)n each class female has a smaller head, a narrower face and more slender neck than the male, as well as a weaker chest and smaller ribs, and that the loins and thighs are more covered with flesh than in the males, that the female has knock-knees and spindly claves, neater feet and the whole shape of the body built for charm rather than nobility. (109-111)

Rampant positivism, this comparison between female humans and animals is of course more telling of the structural sexism in ancient Greek culture than the nature of the sexes. But what we can also see here is that as a model for interpreting surfaces other than the human face, physiognomics introduces an interesting effect that Magli describes as a reversed mirror. She writes:

Fixed as emblematic images, animals act as reversed mirrors through which it is possible to recognise the passions, vices and virtues of men. The human world on the other hand ... establishes itself as an interpreting device, and, in turn, imitates a further semiotic process back to animal. (98)

Magli points out that the use of zoomorphism as a mechanism for analysing the human form is 'perverse', because 'it attempts to explain images through other images.' She argues that animality of this kind constitutes 'a paradoxical situation.': '... if man can recognize himself through comparison to animal, the latter returns man to animality at the very moment in which its form surfaces in a recognizable way on a human face.'(100) I agree with this important point that Magli makes. But I don’t have the same problem with zoological physiognomics as she does. It seems to me that rather than see these kinds of infinite reversals as a fundamental flaw in physiognomic logic, we can instead use this crack as an opening for a more imaginative theorisation of physiognomical correspondence, for here we can see how the so-called science of face reading intersects with the imagination. Or, to put it another way, physiognomical logic of similarity opens up infinite possibilities of otherness based on a play
with resemblance, as evidenced in the sixteenth century physiognomist Giovanni Battista della Porta’s list of what he called ‘character-masks’: ‘Goat man, Lion Man, Bird-Man, Monkey-Man’. This is an aspect of physiognomics Taussig plays around with in *Defacement*. In his analysis of animality in the films of Sergi Eisenstein, he argues that the otherness unleashed in physiognomic perception of resemblance ‘unmasks’ the secret of the face concealed in western aesthetic principles of unity and singularity. (I will return to this point below.)

**Magic Mirror**

In the eighteenth century, the ancient science of physiognomics was modified by the well-known German physiognomist, John Casper Lavater. In Lavater’s writings, the face as a mirror to the soul is transformed into a ‘magic mirror’ of the face of God. The ethical similarity, as Magli put it, that was the basis of Aristotle’s conception of the relation between body and soul — the soul as ‘the cause and principal of the living body’ is transformed by Lavater into a notion of visible moral Truth. For Aristotle, the notion of soul was not restricted to humans. He writes: ‘The soul, then, is the cause and principle of the living body, and as these are talked of in several ways, so is the soul the cause of the body in the three ways we have distinguished; for it is the cause as that from which the movement itself arises, and as that for whose sake it is, and as the formal substance of ensouled bodies ... (A)ll natural bodies being the soul’s instruments, those of plants in just the same way as those of animals, an existing, then, for the sake of the soul’ (165-166). In contrast, Lavater was a devout humanist. He begins his then popular text, *Essays on Physiognomy* by attributing a spiritual dimension to the art of face reading. In his exuberant style, he claims that the human face is no less than ‘a magic mirror’ image of God:

GOD CREATED MAN IN HIS OWN IMAGE, IN THE IMAGE OF GOD CREATED HE HIM.
How exaltedly, how exclusively honourable to man!
Contemplate his exterior; erect, towering and beauteous — This, though be the shell, is the image of his mind; the veil and agent of that divinity of which he is the representative. How does the present though concealed Deity speak, in his human countenance, with a thousand tongues! How does he reveal himself by an eternal
variety of impulse, emotion, and action, as in a magic mirror! Is there not something inconceivably celestial in the eye of man, in the combination of his features, in his elevated \textit{mein}? ... 

Survey this soul-beaming, this divine countenance; the thoughtful brow, the penetrating eye, the spirit-breathing lips, the deep intelligence of the assembled features! ... What harmony! – A single ray including all possible colours! The picture of the fair immeasurable mind within! (2-3)

In the Enlightenment tradition, Lavater claims a scientific basis for his approach. The physiognomist is a trained scientist who can see in the ‘magic mirror’ what others cannot see. Thus, in this modified quasi-religious, scientific method of physiognomy, the role of the interpreter is given even greater significance than in Aristotle's treatise. Now, the physiognomist is no longer simply a diagnostician but is a specialist, a professional conveyer of truth. Lavater warns although all humans are affected by what he calls ‘physiognomic sensation’, the everyday physiognomic knowledge based on this experience is apt to lead to generalisations or what we might call wives tales such as men with thin lips are liars, and so on; knowledge that is neither valid nor reliable. In contrast to this kind of common knowledge, his ‘scientific’ method of physiognomic interpretation is based on a comprehensive taxonomy of similarities between temperament and form. It is a highly regulated set of rules that requires a trained physiognomist to consider not one but all the signs before him. As with his ancient predecessors (and as a kind of prefiguration of the semiologist) the professionalised physiognomist considers all the characteristics of the body and face (the size, the shape, the individual markings such as moles and lines) in order to reveal the true moral character of the individual. Lavater writes that physiognomic training involves the development of the skill of seeing ‘shades’ undetectable to others: ‘Nothing can be more certain than that the smallest shades, which are scarcely discernible to an inexperienced eye, frequently denote total opposition of character’(54). In the physiognomic practice of reading, the face becomes a text. It is however, a very particular form of text. Magli suggests in her essay that physiognomics transforms the body into a moral text. In an adaptation of Aristotle’s text, she writes:

The moral language code spreads over the entire surface of the body – over every detail, from man’s head to his feet; over every shape, line or fold; over firm flesh as well as soft; over moist flesh as well as dry; over hair and nails; over the sound of
one’s voice, as well as over all the parts covered with more or less thick hair. Such a
code numbers each element as a lemma, defines it as a signifier, and attributes a
precise meaning to it. (89-90)

A large proportion of Lavater’s essays are also devoted to the problem of the
changeability of faces. From the outset, he writes that we should not confuse the
physiognomic method of reading the face with analysis of expression. When regarding the
face, the physiognomist must ignore the infinite fleeting movements that so fascinated other
influential figures in the modern world such as, for example, Charles Darwin and Charles Le
Brun. Instead, the physiognomic view privileges what is constant, that is, so called
‘unchanging traits’ of the soul embodied in dominant facial features. Physiognomy favours
‘cool’ or ‘neutral’ states of passion. Lavater writes: ‘Physiognomy, opposed to pathognomy,
is the knowledge of the signs of the powers and inclinations of men. Pathognomy is the
knowledge of the signs of the passions’ (12).

But what are the social implications of this science that claimed to be able to reveal the
powers and inclinations of men? Michael Shortland’s essay on this topic provides an
overview of the social context and reception of Lavater’s version of physiognomics. He
reports that the impact of Lavater’s text, translated into English shortly after its original
publication, was ‘immediate and considerable’. He says that this reception needs to be
understood in relation to wider moral and political debates at that time around questions of
appearances and debates that converged in the figure of the hypocrite. He cites Henry
Fielding’s writings on the topic as representative of the attitude to what was he claims was a
politically urgent question: ‘The misfortune of things is, that People draw themselves in what
they have a mind to be, and not what they are fit for’(281). Shortland writes: ‘On the truth or
falsity of physiognomical diagnoses seemed to rest the future of a general reformation of the
moral and political character of man in and out of power’ (280).

Described by his contemporaries as a ‘benevolent philanthropist’, Lavater’s wrote
primarily on matters to do with character and personality. His writings do not directly reflect
the political urgency of questions of appearances that Shortland argued framed the reception
of his text. Lavater approaches the question of appearances as a perceptual problem. For
example, he writes:

Physiognomy is a source of the purest, the most exalted sensations: an additional eye, wherewith to view the manifold proofs of divine wisdom and goodness in the creation, and, while thus viewing unspeakable harmony and truth, to excite more esoteric love for their adorable Author. Where the dark inattentive sight of the inexperienced perceives nothing, there the practical view of the physiognomist discovers inexhaustible fountains of delight, endearing, moral and spiritual (43).

Others, however, did question the social implications of his science. Lavater reports in his essays that when he met the German Emperor, Joseph II, the Emperor queried him extensively about the breadth of potential power in physiognomics. In Lavater’s account of that meeting the Emperor said: ‘But consider ... should you be able to assign precise principles, and your observations become a certain and attainable science, what a revolution you must produce in the world. All men would view each other with very different eyes’ (xxxvii). Always self-assured, Lavater consoled the concerned Emperor that he need not worry: ‘I confess ... that my head frequently turns giddy, only at the thought of all the changes which physiognomy might produce in the mass of the human race – but it will produce no such changes’ (Xxvii). Lavater was an imaginative man, but even he could not imagine how his beloved ‘science’ would later inform social theories of human behaviour.

By the nineteenth century, the ‘visible truth’ of physiognomy, as Lavater called it, was appropriated as the basis of influential positivist forms of social categorisation and subjugation. Cesare Lombroso, for example, used Lavater’s moral physiognomy as the basis of his once highly regarded, racist criminal anthropology.11 It is also argued that the invention of the camera in the nineteenth century revived the principles or philosophy of the waning science. Art historian John Gage suggests that the invention of the camera was crucial to the development and popularisation of nineteenth century ‘social programmes’, such as, for example, Francis Galton’s programme of Eugenics, which is largely based on physiognomic principles of interpretation of human physiology.12 The assumed objectivity of photography meant that photography was easily put to work in the service of these programmes of social division, typification and surveillance, such as, for example, in the use of the mug shot in criminal investigations and the introduction of medical photography as a tool of not only diagnosing the ill but categorising and identifying them for the purpose of state control.13
But it is mistaken to dismiss Lavater’s work on the basis of how his physiognomical principles of interpretation were later used. While it is a truly limited and ‘dangerous’ (in the sense Michel Foucault uses that term) form of empiricism, it does raise some important questions about processes of perception. Shortland argues ‘The innovation wrought by Lavater may best be seen if we consider his project as the establishment of a science of physiognomical perception’ (285). I would add to this that the political and social dimensions of Lavater’s physiognomics lie in its relation to aesthetics. As we saw earlier, Lavater distinguished between the inbuilt attribute of ‘physiognomical sensation’, known to all creatures, and ‘physiognomical perception’, which is a scientific skill developed by a select set of humans for the interpretation of human bodies. Of this latter type, Shortland explains that:

The scientific physiognomist assumes that the body speaks, yet recognizes that before its language can be deciphered a number of obstacles need to be overcome. As Lavater makes plain, the body will always tend to babble, to revert to a state of apparent disorder, and this anarchy needs to be dissolved not by the adoption of easy general aesthetic categories but by visual penetration. (286) (My emphasis)

Thus, we see that Lavater’s work not only diverges from classical physiognomy but it also diverges from classical aesthetics. Shortland reports that this new theorisation of cognition was recognised by commentators of the day, one of whom, he writes, coined the term, ‘optic power.’ Lavater’s ‘additional eye’ was an eye trained, as Shortland puts it, to fathom different regions of the body, penetrating to hidden layers of meaning, and prising off deceits and postures’ (294). Shortland also notes that the response to physiognomics was divided. It is well known from cultural histories that many artists, critics and novelists in the eighteenth century were directly influenced by physiognomy, adopting it as a philosophy of human character and as a method of description.14 Others, however, responded to Lavater’s unmasking of the mystery of the face by masking up. An entry in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1853-60) on Lavater (as quoted in Shortland) read thus:

Admiration, contempt resentment and fear were cherished towards the author. The discovery was everywhere flattered or pilloried; and in many places, where the study of human character from the face became an epidemic, the people went masked through the streets. (295)
Social Physiognomics

In the 1950s, Theodor Adorno wrote that ‘Cultural criticism must become social physiognomy.’¹⁵ Like other German thinkers including Simmel and Spengler, Adorno used the principles of Physiogonmy as a model of cultural interpretaion. Or, more specifically, he claimed that cultural phenomena should not be taken at face value but interpreted critically as *unintentional* expressions of truth about a faulty social totality. Adorno’s method of ‘social physiognomics’ is similar to Lavater’s method in that it emphasises the role of the interpreter – social physiognomy involves ‘a trained eye’, someone capable not only of perceiving unintentional expression, but also of making sense of the babble of the *surface* as it relates to the whole. Susan Buck-Morss explains how this works in Adorno’s study of radio. She says, for Adorno:

The structure of this totality appeared within the illusionary appearance of the radio voice, but not without the active intervention of the interpreting subject, who unlocked the ‘rebus’ of surface details, adhering to them with ‘exactitude’, yet at the same time going beyond them through the mediation of theory to demonstrate that ‘the unity’ of the radio phenomenon in itself, as far as it really has the structure of a unity, is simply the unity of society which determines all the individual and apparently accidental features – like radio’s penetration as a public voice into the private sphere of the bourgeois intérieur, its standardizing tendencies despite ‘pseudo-individuation’, the resulting atomization of radio’s mass audience, who passively consumed ‘canned’ music and whose freedom was limited to switching the station.¹⁶

By using physiognomics as a model for social analysis, Adorno assumes that the truth of social reality is not to be found lurking behind the *phenomenon* of radio (in economics) but rather, it is embodied or structured into ‘the voice of radio’, in the same way that the facial features are regarded in Physiognomics to embody the soul or character of the individual. Radio is not, then, an unmediated reflection of social reality – a ‘window’ on reality. Rather, for Adorno, it is a ‘cipher’ that continually reproduces the structures of social reality of the capitalist state. This approach is not dissimilar to one of the main points made by George Simmel on the aesthetic attraction of the face, mentioned earlier. For Simmel, the significance
of the figure of the face in art can be attributed to its ‘absolute unity of meaning.’ But because this is so, the face is also vulnerable to disfigurement. Simmel writes: ‘Aesthetically, there is no other part of the body whose wholeness can as easily be destroyed by the disfigurement of only one its elements. For this is what unity out of and above diversity means: that fate cannot strike at any one part without striking every other part at the same time – as if through the root that binds the whole together’ (276). In this way, I would argue that Adorno’s social physiognomics takes the form of a disfigurement, designed to break the ‘spell’ of unity formed in the circular pattern of the social.

Adorno was not alone in his adoption of physiognomics as a model of cultural criticism. Buck-Morss suggests that Adorno’s familiarity with and choice of physiognomics as a model of analysis was inspired by Walter Benjamin’s critical methods, who, she writes, ‘had absorbed it (physiognomy) from literary-aesthetic rather than scientific channels’ (176). But when we look at Benjamin’s writings we see there are significant differences between his form of intellectual physiognomy and that of Adorno. While Adorno’s method of social physiognomics is a more straightforward appropriation of the principles of physiognomical interpretation, Benjamin’s use of the science is more than a metaphoric one. While Adorno focuses on the role of the interpreter, Benjamin’s interest lies in the processes of physiognomic perception.

Benjamin was influenced by the German metaphysician Arthur Schopenhauer’s interest in physiognomy. This influence becomes clear in resonances in the language of their respective philosophies of history. Reading Schopenhauer’s essays is becomes evident that he was a devout physiognomist. In his essays he explicitly promotes the practice. For example, he writes:

Every human face is a hieroglyph which can be deciphered, indeed whose key we bear ready-made within us. It is even true that a man’s face as arule says more, and more interesting things than his mouth, for it is a compendium of everything his mouth will ever say, in that it is the monogram of all the man’s thoughts and aspirations. The mouth ... expresses only the thoughts of a man, while the face expresses a thought of nature: so that everyone is worth looking at, even if everyone is not worth talking to.  

Here, we can see that for Schopenhauer, the ‘speech’ of the face differs from verbal
articulation of conscious thought. He used the hieroglyph and the monogram as figures
through which to develop his very particular conception of the face as an expressive form,
something that was of interest to Benjamin.19 Schopenhauer incorporated his physiognomic
approach to the face and expression into his anti-rationalist metaphysic. In his essay ‘On the
Antithesis of Thing in Itself and Appearance’, Schopenhauer challenges Emmanuel Kant’s
notion of ‘synthetic judgement’, in which Kant introduced the significance of the role of the
intellect in the processes of perception. Kant claimed that in perception, a structure is imposed
upon the sense perceptions of the physical world, thus creating a distinction between a ‘thing
in itself’ (that which exists a-priori to perception) and physical appearance. In The world as
will and idea, Schopenhauer argues that intellect is secondary to will. And will is not
rationality. Nor is will confined to human experience. Schopenhauer attributes this
transcendent will to nonliving matter. Crudely put: will is a kind of inner force of things.20

When Schopenhauer contends that ‘the outer reflects the inner’ he is not suggesting
that this inner truth is revealed through a rational imposition of a structure on form. Rather, he
puts forth a view that takes us back to the ancients, to the physiognomical principle of the face
as a mirror of the soul. In this case, an image of the world as a face in which Will is rendered
visible:

Because everything in nature is at once appearance and thing in itself or natura
naturata and natura naturans, it is consequently susceptible of a twofold explanation,
a physical and a metaphysical. The physical explanation is always in terms of cause,
the metaphysical in terms of will; for that which appears in cognitionless nature as
natural force, and on a higher level as life force, receives in animal and man the name
will. Strictly speaking, therefore, the degree and tendency of a man’s intelligence and
the constitution of his moral character could perhaps be traced back to purely physical
causes. Metaphysically, on the other hand, the same man would have to be explained
as the apparitional form of his own, utterly free and primal will. (56) (Original
emphasis)

But while Schopenhauer is an anti-rationalist, his intention is not to redeem the natural
world. Everywhere Schopenhauer looks he sees only lack and deprivation. His understanding
of will is that it is essentially evil and destructive, as manifested in the world’s suffering. His
is a pessimistic view, in which human existence is basically an experience of suffering. In a short piece called ‘On Aesthetics’, he grounds Socrate’s speech on beauty and ‘the wings of the soul’ in historical experience when he explains that even the perception of the beautiful is negative, because in aesthetic experience the subject is more conscious than ever of ‘the pain and of thousandfold misery’ that temporarily subsides in that positive experience (155-156). This is an important point for understanding his philosophy of history. He writes:

As every man possess a physiognomy by which you can provisionally judge him, so every age also possesses one that is no less characteristic. For the 
Z\textit{eitgeist} of every age is like a sharp east wind that blows through everything. You can find traces of it in all that is done, thought and written, in music and painting, in the flourishing of this or that art: it leaves its mark on everything and everyone, so that, e.g., an age of phrases without meaning must also be one of the music without melody and form without aim or object. Thus the spirit of an age also bestows on it its outward physiognomy. The ground-bass to this is always played by architecture: its pattern is followed first of all by ornaments, vessels, furniture and utensils of all kinds, and finally even by clothes, together with the manner in which the hair and beard are cut. (223)

Just as Schopenhauer believed that any face will inevitably betray human existence as an essential experience of suffering, he also uses physiognomics as a model for locating the historical experience of world suffering – ‘a sharp east wind’ that cuts its way through the surfaces of things. This powerful negative image of the world as a face, a face weathered by the force of the sharp east wind of history, has resonances in Benjamin’s philosophy of history, although for Benjamin history is not an essentialised, universal force such as it is in Schopenhauer’s theory of will. As with Schopenhauer, who suggested architecture bears the impressions of the spirit of the age in its surface detail, Benjamin’s intellectual physiognomy led him to seek the origins of the crisis of experience of modernity in the outmoded, unfashionable Paris Arcades. Fascinated by the Surrealists’ fascination with Paris, he observed how in surrealistic experience the city becomes a face, a terrain of surfaces – ‘sharp elevations’ and ‘strongholds.’ Benjamin saw the surrealistic attitude to the city as a surface to ‘overrun and occupy’ as a form of revolt against alienation, a way of recuperating what had become alienated and lost to human experience (183).

Benjamin’s interest in Surrealism as a critical model involved arranging the fragments
and debris of the city in such a way that they would reveal the imprint of the history within
them. Unlike Adorno’s ‘critical polemic’ of reading cultural forms as images of social truth,
or, what he and Simmel perceive as ‘the whole,’ Benjamin’s aim was to arrange the
fragmentary details of the surfaces of things in such a way that they create a catastrophic
juxtaposition enabling what he calls a ‘profane illumination.’ For Adorno, the approach to the
face (of things) is more like the approach Lavater took, that is, one that privileges the
conscious, interpreting critic. Benjamin, on the other hand, emphasises the perception created
by the shock encounter. As with the commentator who once described physiognomy as an
‘optic power’, Benjamin sees physiognomical perception as a form of visual penetration. For
Benjamin, the face is not simply a visual pattern but a receptive entity, which, like the
surfaces of the world, is penetrable by the sharp east winds of history. This image of
surrealistic shock blasting historical knowledge embedded in the face of the city ‘to
smithereens’ was the method or ‘trick’(182), as Benjamin says, that he employed in his
uncompleted Arcades project. It is a method of analysis that works reciprocally with his
conception of the unconscious optics of the camera.

Adorno, who remained committed to the idea of conscious critical interpretation of
aesthetic experience, was highly critical of Benjamin’s choice to make surrealism a model of
critical philosophy. Or, to put it in terms of practices of physiognomics, we could say that
while Adorno reproduced the interpretative practices of the professional physiognomist, that
is, men like Lavater, Benjamin’s intellectual physiognomics are based on everyday experience
of physiognomical sense perception, in particular, the temporal phenomenon we call the shock
of recognition – those occasions in which a strange face or object suddenly appears familiar,
events that can, as we saw in chapter one, trigger memories we did not even know we
possessed.
Face Recognition and Memory

In the mammoth *Handbook of Research on Face Processing*, edited by Andrew Young and Hadyn Ellis, we learn that psychologists and neurologists generally agree that the special status of the face derives from its uniqueness as a pictorial experience. It is also agreed that face processing is more complex than any other kind of pictorial recognition because it relies on a very restricted number of visual features and minimal differences in characteristics such as shape, colour and the relative positioning of the features. Most researchers also agree on the importance of the configuration of the features of the face in face recognition. It is argued that we do not just recognise individual parts of faces but also the way in which these parts come together in a unique configuration. For example, this 'dual approach' to the face is the basis of the science of identification and Identikit.

A popular research method in studies of face processing involves testing people who are unable to recognise faces. Anthony Synott suggests in his book on the body and symbolism, 'Nothing indicates the significance of the face more than the failure to recognize faces and facial expressions.' Synott cites the case of a man who mistook his wife for a hat, made famous as the title of neurologist Oliver Sacks' widely read book. Sacks' patient, who did in fact mistake his wife for a hat, suffered from the specific condition of Korsakov's syndrome. There is also a 'general' condition known as prosopagnosia – an inability to recognise familiar faces. Young and Ellis report that neurophysiological studies into this condition are divided. On one side, researchers such as Damasio, *et al.*, argue prosopagnosia is not specific to face processing but a more general problem of a memory malfunction. They claim prosopagnosia is a general loss of the ability 'to evoke the specific historic context of a given visual stimulus.' Cases cited in studies such as Damasio *et al.*'s indicate that for some people the face is but an object among objects (13). That is to say, people with this condition can identify objects according to their generic categories only. For example, they can distinguish a chair from a table but cannot tell what type of chair it is (13). Likewise, some people with prosopagnosia can perceive a face before them but cannot say whose face it is (13). On the other side of the research divide, studies such as those conducted by Bruyer, *et al* claim prosopagnosia is a 'pure' syndrome (14). Most notably, Bruyer, *et al* document a case of a Belgian farmer who had difficulty recognising the faces of his relatives but could
individually identify his cows (14).

But while the scientific community ponders whether prosopagnosia is a pure condition or a memory malfunction, whether it points to some inbuilt or developed face recognition function, or even, perhaps, determine where such a function might be located in the brain, it is interesting to note that people with this condition simply get on with the business of life. It is difficult to imagine what it would be like to encounter every person as a stranger. Fortunately for people with prosopagnosia, research shows that this is not actually the case. Not being able to recognise a face does not equate with not knowing the individual whose face it is. Rather, people with prosopagnosia are simply forced to rely on other forms of knowledge, such as voice, gait, clothing and context, to help them to recognise the people around them. From this, we might say that neurological insights into the rare condition of prosopagnosia confirm for us that no instance of face recognition is ‘pure’, that is, an isolated perceptual experience. We could also say that whether or not scientists can determine the precise location of face processing in the brain, we do know for sure that face processing is always partly an imaginative process.

This is a point made by sociologist Paul Connerton, in How Societies Remember. He argues that ‘even so seemingly simple an act as ... ‘seeing someone we know’ ... is to some extent an intellectual process; for we pack the physical outline of the person with all the notions we have already formed about them’. Citing Marcel Proust’s The Remembrance of Things Past, he writes that Proust’s description of Swann’s face reminds us that in the end such notions:

... come to fill out so completely the curve of his [Swann’s] cheek, to follow so exactly the line of his nose, they blend harmoniously in the sound of his voice as if it were no more than a transparent envelope, that each time we see the face or hear the voice it is those notions which we recognise and to which we listen. (My emphasis)

Proust’s idea of the face as that which we fill with significance and in which we recognise already formed notions of the subject, indeed, memories of a face so powerful that they can survive the ravages of ageing, reminds us that, beyond whatever neurophysiological processes occur in the act of face processing, recognising a face is simultaneously physiological and
social; conscious and unconscious. Conditions such as prosopagnosia suggest to us that while we have come to see the face as the prime symbol of the self – mirror of the soul, as the ancient physiognomists taught us to believe – the relationship between face and identity is by no means stable. In this way, neurophysiological research that primarily aims to demystify the face, as did Physiognomics, results in revealing the very otherness it seeks to regulate and control.

Memory and Mask

The concern in the scientific community to cure those who see only otherness in the faces around them stems from a wider social horror of otherness. Earlier, I noted that the German Emperor, Joseph II was concerned about the potential social power of physiognomy. He was even more concerned about the problem of dissimulation. He reportedly said to Lavater: ‘I can readily admit ... that much of the power of a man’s mind, of his disposition, temperament and passions, may be discovered from his countenance; but integrity and insincerity – Oh! These are very difficult to discover by the features. With respect to these you must be extremely careful and attentive. There is too much dissimulation in the world’ (xxiv). Despite Lavater’s insistence otherwise, the emperor was convinced that dissimulation represents the ability to defy nature, for people to become other than whom they are. He was, to put it simply, concerned that even the most trained eye could mistake a mask for a face.

The problem of dissimulation takes us back to the opening scenario; to the villager who peers into the face of an unfamiliar only to sometime later recognise the face of an old friend. Or does he? The ultimate art of dissimulation is impersonation. And there is no doubt that it is a fascinating topic. Popular culture is filled with enticing narratives of impersonation, including the case of the impersonation of a villager named Martin Guerre that occurred in France in the sixteenth century, which even today, continues to inspire books, commentaries and films. The scenario I invoked at the start of this chapter is the opening scene of the critically acclaimed French film version of the case, *Le retour de Martin Guerre* (*The Return of Martin Guerre*), directed by Daniel Vigne. Briefly, the quite complex story goes like this: a young, disgruntled Martin Guerre flees from his village in the middle of the night.
Unbeknown to his wife and other relatives, he becomes a mercenary soldier. Eight years later, a man claiming to be Martin ‘returns’ to the village, to claim his land and to re-unite with his wife and child. He is transformed. Not only can he can read and write but, unlike his former self, he shows great affection for his wife, Bertrande. A second child is born, and all goes well until the day when by chance two strangers visit the village and suggest that Martin is not whom he claims to be but rather, he is Arnaud du Tilh, also known as Pansette. Rumours follow this accusation, although no action is taken until the day when Martin confronts his uncle Pierre about land owing to him. The uncle has no intention of returning the land and plots to get rid of Martin. First, he arranges to have him murdered and later, when that plan failed, he accuses him of the crime of imposture. A trial is held at the village, where a magistrate named Coras concludes that there is no proof, no document – oral or written – to suggest that Martin is not Martin Guerre. But this judgement does not satisfy a disgruntled Pierre, and the following day he produces a document which, he claims, Bertrande has signed, and which fully denounces Martin as an imposter. And so begins trial number two, held at the court in Toulouse.

It is worth looking at the scene of the hearing in the Toulouse court in Vigne’s film’s in some detail. Imagine Martin’s face, if you will, as he stands in the middle of the large court room. He is flanked by villagers on one side and a row of judges on the other. The village priest is called as the first witness. He tells the court that this is not the face of Martin Guerre. He claims among other things that Martin had a hairy mole on his neck. Using his spectacle, he looks for the mole only to conclude, ‘It seems to have vanished!’ He adds, ‘And there was a scar above his left brow’, before concluding – ‘This is not Martin Guerre.’ The priest’s testimony is interrupted by an old woman who shouts, ‘It is not true, your Honour!’ The woman announces herself to the court as Martin’s nurse, as someone closer to him than any other, that is, as someone who knew him in his nakedness. Approaching Martin, she pulls back his thick fringe to reveal a scar on his hair line. ‘At two, he took a tumble in the yard.’ ‘I remember’, she says. Next, she shoves her fingers into Martin’s mouth, foraging for a toothless hole. ‘Yes’ she says, as her finger finds the gap, ‘This is where he lost a tooth.’ ‘And he has one ingrown fingernail!’ she exclaims, thrusting the hand forward as evidence for the judges to see. The judges ask her ‘Are you sure this is Martin Guerre?’ She replies, ‘I know it as surely as my own name.’ Members of the village protest this claim and Martin is forced to
call upon an elderly blind woman to bear witness. The old woman’s fingers slowly feel their way around the shape and crevices of his face. Finally, she declares, ‘You are Martin. Martin Guerre!’

This scene in which various members of the village prod and poke at Martin’s face, in which various supporters and enemies respectively confirm and contest Martin’s identity, exemplifies the complexity of face recognition. Edward Benson in his analysis of the film suggests that the hearing scene is significant because it stages for us our contradictory desire as viewers. He says, on one hand, we want to see all, to see the imposter ‘exposed’. On the other hand, in keeping with the romantic narrative, we want to see the true identity remain concealed, thereby, allowing the love between the returned Martin and Bertrande to continue. Benson argues that this contradiction is played out across the various looks of the film: the judge Cora who recorded the case all those years ago as someone who is sympathetic to the villagers, in particular, the love between Bertrande and Pansette, yet, at the same time, someone who wants to reveal the marvellous deceit. There are also the villagers themselves. Benson notes the contradiction between ‘their efforts to use the King’s justice to crush their enemies and their desire to escape the prying eyes of Coras and his fellow parliamentarians’ (131). In addition to staging the contradictory desires of viewers, I argue that by displaying the tenuousness of recognition and the part which memory plays in it, the scene offers yet another insight into face recognition as a display of processes of spectatorship.

As we watch the priest and the old woman fill and empty Martin’s face before them in the Proustian sense of filling a face with significance, we simultaneously see in this face a good natured, honest man and a thief and a cheat. These contesting views are finally settled only when Martin is fully ‘exposed’ as an imposter by the untimely ‘return’ of a man who also claims to be Martin. The film has the members of the court gasp loudly as the second Martin enters the scene, suggesting to viewers that this is the ‘real’ Martin. Certainly, this man has lost a leg, as it was rumoured Guerre did. But maybe it is not only the fact that the ‘real’ Guerre has appeared that leads the crowd to gasp. It might also be the case that they, like spectators of the film, are fascinated by the proliferating identities; the possibility of two Martins. At the end of the trial we learn that it is not physiognomic evidence that exposed the
second Martin but a gaping hole in his fantastic story. Only when he trips himself up in a series of contradictory statements about his relationship to the newly appeared Martin, does the first Martin concede that he is not the ‘original’ Martin. At no point, however, does he concede he is not whom he has become. He refuses to reveal a ‘true’ identity, though he is keen to share the secret of his transformation. He explains that despite how it may appear, there was no magic involved, only memory. In order to stage his acts, the second Martin required only a few facts and some physical traits that resembled the first Martin’s. In order to sustain his new identity, he had to perform the much more complex task of implanting traces of this ‘new’ face in the minds of others. The challenge was, therefore, not so much convincing others that he looked like Martin, but having them remember him as Martin. Or, to put it slightly differently, the trick of imposture, his fantastic transformation, is exposed not simply as the art of disguise (for there was only ever a vague likeness) but as manipulation of the past in the memories of others. And it was surely this extraordinary insight into the processes of recognition and identity formation that impressed the magistrate Coras, for as the film’s narrator tells us, he found this to be a case of a ‘prodigious imposter’ – indeed, ‘so awesome that he recorded it for prosperity.’

But by fast forwarding to the end of the story, I have skipped an important turn in the events of the second trial. Before the other Martin showed his face (and one leg) at the court, the judges had been prepared to set the accused Martin free. They were finally convinced not by his testimony or by the physiognomical evidence presented by others but by evidence provided by his wife, Bertrande. Given that the contradictory claims about Guerre’s physical identity – which, as I’ve said, became fully fluid as the different witnesses filled the various distinguishing features of his face with contradictory memories – the judges were most swayed by Bertrande’s ‘special’ knowledge. Benson argues in his essay that the climatic moment of the trial is not when Martin is exposed as an imposter but when Coras cross examines Bertrande’s testimony. When one of the judges asks her how she can be so certain that the man before them is her husband, Coras suggests to her that perhaps it is ‘because he knew things about you that only a husband knows of a wife.’ Providing such details, Bertrande succeeds in convincing the judges. As Benson argues, ‘Bertrande’s introduction of details of her sex life serves for the fictional magistrates as the final and convincing proof of
her assertion; they pay for the prudence of their interest with their assent' (129). We might also say that this twist in the story demonstrates that the face is not simply a mirror-image to be recognised or interpreted but also a screen upon which we recall and replay memories and notions of the other. The face can be a site of projected fear. It can also be a magnificent screen upon which to project our desire.

The titillating thought of a woman sleeping with a man whom she may or may not recognise to be her husband is also the basis of great pleasure in the recent Hollywood hit film, *Face/Off.* The story of a psychotic switch of faces between FBI agent, Sean Archer (John Travolta) and the terrorist, Castor Troy (Nicholas Cage), this film has attracted attention for its gruesome special effects. In my view, the performances of the actors are much more noteworthy. Joan Allen, who plays Archer’s wife, is brilliant in her performance of pretending not to recognise her husband Sean, played by John Travolta acting like Nicholas Cage acting like John Travolta. A feat equivalent to the performance style of Paul Eddington I mentioned in the previous chapter, these performances can be said to stage the contradictory desires activated in the spectator – to have Travolta acting like Cage acting like Travolta exposed as a case of imposture of the highest order and not. But perhaps even more important, the performances in *Face/Off* stage spectators’ complicity in all narrative films: that is, the way in which spectators recognise and at the same time suspend their recognition of the face of the actor. Or, as Walter Benjamin once suggested, ‘For the film, what matters primarily is that the actor represents himself to the public before the camera, rather than representing someone else.’ And as with Benjamin’s discussion of the film actor Pirandello, whose shadow is playfully projected before the public and who must therefore be content to ‘play’, Guerre, who was surely a consummate performer, plays around with and in the space created between the various faces projected onto him by the witnesses. It is nothing short of a high-wire act.

I raise the notion of performance here, not to invoke the full weight of Judith Butler’s conception of performed identity, but to simply suggest that this performance of /on/with face recognition and the question of recognisability demonstrates not only that identity is performed but that the performance of identity is a complex form of play on metaphysical notions of appearance and reality, recognition and unrecognisability. To recognise it as play is
to undermine the authority of identity as the dominant aim of representation. It is also, at the same time, a form of double-sight. We recognise the face of the actor as both same and other; self and character. This suspended state of recognition is but one of ways in which film opens up possibilities for other non-rational forms of cognition. In the previous chapter, we saw how Siegfried Kracauer, friend and colleague of both Benjamin and Adorno, adopts and develops principles of physiognomic perception in _Theory of Film_. In a section on the spectatorship, Kracauer argues that cinematic film influences the spectator in a way no other media can: ‘... unlike other types of pictures, film images affect primarily the spectator’s senses, engaging him physiologically before he is even in a position to respond intellectually’ (158). Kracauer’s material aesthetic of film is in fact grounded in an understanding of the viewing experience of the cinema as ‘a weakening of consciousness’, a state in which the spectator is receptive to other forms of cognition. He writes that ‘free from the grip of consciousness’, the spectator is ‘free to lose their identity’.

In this way, we can say that the image of the filling and emptying of Martin Guerre’s face is an enactment of the effect of this story and it power to fascinate throughout the centuries. The story of Martin Guerre takes us back to the work of Michael Taussig and to what he calls ‘radical physiognomics’ – exercises that ‘free the soul for other destinies in a series of identity deaths and transformations.’ It also shows the full weight of the social prohibition against these forms of transgression. In the final scene of the film, we witness the execution of the second Martin – a man hung for the crime of impersonation, for taking the face/place of another. As we contemplate the final image of this hooded man we might consider how the hood serves here not only to render the criminal faceless, inhuman (and thereby fit for execution) but also to conceal the mystery of the face that Martin shamelessly revealed that day in 1576 in a Toulouse court room when he declared that his act involved no magic but only memory and imagination. Like Benjamin, it would seem that this canny imposter knew that face recognition is always more than re-cognition. It is, in fact, the place where the distinction between subject and object breaks down as we penetrate the face of the other, releasing memories long since deposited in crevices and folds. For Kracauer, such moments constitute an encounter with mortality that serves to undermine the image of the sovereign individual that dominates western culture. The question is, as Kracauer once asked:
‘To which end?’ What kind of insight into the history of human kind is to be gained in these moments of unrecognisability? The remaining chapters of this thesis are devoted to finding places in media culture where the shock of recognition produce precisely the kind of penetrating physiognomical gaze I have described here and to pursuing Kracauer’s most important question.
ENDNOTES


Am I Dead Sweetheart?
Chapter 3
‘Am I Dead Sweetheart?’: Self-portraiture and HIV/AIDS

The self-portrait artist saw in his mirror a painting (to be done); I see in his painting (finished) a mirror. The painting is like a sheet of glass without silverying: the painter is behind (on the other side in relation to me), and I surprise him in the act of looking at himself. Suddenly we become... contemporaries. The self-portrait is the only pictorial genre that has given me the poignant feeling, which Barthes describes so well with regard to photography... of having before my eyes not an image of the past, but an impression directly inscribed by it.

Philippe Lejeune.

This chapter looks at the wide spread use of self-portraiture in the late 1980s and 1990s as a cultural response to the AIDS crisis.¹ One of a range of cultural responses in western societies, the use of self-portraiture raises a number of questions about art as a form of recognition.² How is it that a cultural form that derives from a tradition of individuation can serve as a form of solidarity? What is the function of self-portraiture in the wider project of AIDS awareness? There are several things to keep in mind when considering these questions. First, photographic self-portraits of people with HIV and AIDS need to be seen as part of the wider epistemological shift in modernity to forms of self-referentiality. In the introduction to Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical, James Olney argues that autobiography is a form of ‘unofficial history’ used by cultural groups to affirm their identity and thereby contest official histories.³ In addition to this wider viewpoint, the use of self-portraiture by people with HIV and AIDS in the late 1980s and 1990s can be understood as a demand for different forms of recognition than the mainstream and biomedical images of HIV/AIDS at that time. In other words, we need to take into account the particular history of the visualisation of HIV/AIDS at the level of both the global and the local when considering the question of self-portraiture and HIV/AIDS.

My examination of the use of self-portraiture as a demand for recognition focuses on the ongoing community arts project, Self-Documentation, Self-Imaging: People Living With HIV/AIDS 1988 – (SDSI), coordinated by Sydney-based artist, Kathy Triffitt.⁴ I first became associated with this project in 1994, when I collaborated with Triffitt to present an audio-
visual ‘history’ of the project at the opening events of the first international AIDS art
exhibition, Don’t Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS. Our presentation, later
produced as a video, was titled Am I Dead Sweetheart?: Fragments from Self-Documentation,
Self-Imaging: People Living With HIV/AIDS 1988 – . As the term fragment suggests, this was
not an audio-visual reproduction of the project to which it refers, nor a comprehensive history,
but rather a programme that combined selected fragments from SDSI, including photographs,
text, diary entries and oral histories, that was to become a multimedia extension of the original
project. During the making of Am I Dead Sweetheart?, I became interested in the responses to
SDSI and what I want to call the different forms of recognition it generates. Self-portraiture is
most usually regarded as an inward-looking activity. But here, employed as a political
strategy, self-portraiture re-projects this inwardness outwardly as a demand for social
recognition. My aim is to examine the success and failure of this strategy to achieve
acceptance of people with HIV and AIDS. It will be argued that it is in the places where SDSI
seemingly fails to gain recognition that it opens up a space for an indirect image of the
particular crisis of experience of HIV/AIDS. It is also in this indirect image that it is possible
for viewers to recognise their own part in the crisis.

Giving AIDS a face

From the beginning of the AIDS crisis, the face has been an object of representational
struggle. One well-known history of images of HIV/AIDS is the use of medieval, macabre
figures such as ‘death’s head’ as metaphors for the virus and its effects. In Australia, this
dearthly face of AIDS was first seen in the notorious National Advisory Council on AIDS
awareness campaign of the late 1980s that used the figure of the Grim Reaper as a metaphor
for the virus. In a widely broadcast television advertisement, the AIDS virus was depicted as a
Grim Reaper hurtling bowling balls at unsuspecting ‘victims’, while one of the posters for the
campaign, ‘AIDS. Sharing needles is just asking for it’. staged a lethal exchange between the
living hand of a ‘victim’ and a ghastly decomposed hand of Death. Looking back, these
images could be seen as ludicrous if it were not for the fact that as some of the first images of
AIDS to enter the public imagination in Australia these hollowed-out faces of Death were
imaginatively projected onto the real faces of people with HIV and AIDS. One of the ways in
which artists responded to these popular perceptions of AIDS was to make the identities of people affected by the virus visible and thus, supposedly give AIDS a human face.

The strategy of personalising social forms of crisis is not new to AIDS. This technique has been employed by liberal campaigners for social causes ranging from The Bernardo Foundation’s photographic studies of homeless and orphaned children at the end of the last century, to photojournalists’ portraits of the victims of war. In each case, however, this representational strategy creates its own particular set of political and aesthetic limitations. Douglas Crimp traces the early history of giving AIDS a face in his essay, ‘Portraits of People with AIDS’. In this essay, Crimp challenges a number of assumptions about the virtue of photographic visibility in two prominent exhibitions. He reminds us that when US artist Nicholas Nixon exhibited portraits he had made of people in the final stages of dying of AIDS related illnesses at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1988, art reviewers praised the work for dissolving the barrier between the artist and the subject (117). For example, Crimp quotes Andy Grundberg, the photographic reviewer for the New York Times, who wrote the following:

The result is overwhelming, since one sees not only the wasting away of the flesh (in photographs, emaciation has become emblematic of AIDS) but also the gradual dimming of the subject’s ability to compose themselves for the camera. What each series begins as a conventional effort to pose for a picture ends in a kind of abandon; as the subject’s self-consciousness disappears, the camera seems to become invisible, and consequently there is almost no boundary between the image and ourselves. (117)

One of the often cited portraits in reviews such as Grundberg’s was the ‘Tom Moran’ series. In the introduction to a published collection of his work that includes this series, Peter Galassi, reports that Moran consented to having his portrait made. We also learn from Galassi’s introduction that Nixon, as a portraitist, was on a different mission from his usual one of ‘visceral intuition’. He says that Nixon hoped that if the pictures were good ‘they might matter, not in the sense that all good art matters, but in the specific sense having to do with AIDS’ (26). That may have been so, but Nixon never set aside his ‘visceral intuition’. To get these images to ‘matter’, that is, to have a social effect, he employed a 11”x14” view camera—a bulky camera similar to those used in the 1850s and favoured by modernist photographers
such as Alfred Steiglitz and Paul Strand, as well as the social documentarian, Walker Evans. Taking a portrait with this camera involves using a tripod and placing the camera in extreme proximity to the subject. In this case, to get the close-up face of Tom Moran, to capture in detail the caked, dry saliva of Moran’s sunken mouth, Nixon would have literally had to have had the camera within inches of Moran’s face. But while critics praised the work, AIDS activists demonstrated against it in the now famous extended ACT-UP demonstration on the steps of the museum.10 This ACT-UP demonstration and its slogans, such as ‘NO MORE PICTURES WITHOUT CONTEXTS’ and ‘STOP LOOKING AT US; START LISTENING TO US’ was the first public questioning of the authority of artists to represent the experience of AIDS, generating critical debate about the social effects of giving AIDS a face.

Crimp, for example, argues that the sense of proximity and intimacy generated by Nixon’s techniques has the effect of transforming the face of the viewed subject into a mirror of the future death of the viewing subject. This is, Crimp says, a disastrous affair, because in this process the subject of the photograph disappears altogether. He argues that the same procedure occurs in Rosalind Soloman’s portraits, quoting from Thomas Sokolowski’s catalogue essay for Soloman's exhibition, Portraits in the Time of AIDS 1988, ‘Looking in the Mirror’. The essay begins with an epigraph quoted from the late George Whitmore: “‘I see Jim - and that could be me. It's not a victim-saviour relationship. We're the same person. We're just on different sides of the fence’” (119). The danger, says Crimp, is that this kind of attitude constitutes a defence mechanism, which serves to deny, ‘the difference, the obvious sense of otherness, shown in the photograph by insisting that what we really see is ourselves’ (119). In this way, we might say that the early AIDS portrait projects function as commemorative art: they are no less than a visual lesson in the certainty that one day, the living will also be dead: ‘Behold, I was as you are, and you will be as I am’. Nixon’s and Soloman’s portraits betray the otherness of the subject while at the same time they become images of the absolute otherness of death. Whatever Nixon’s and Soloman’s intentions may have been, their portraits reinscribe the very facelessness they sought to counter.

The problems associated with giving AIDS a face can also be related to the wider problem of portraiture as an art of individuation. For example, the photographic work of AIDS portraitist, Lyn Sloan, adheres to the ideas of individuation that inspired the
Renaissance portrait artists. In the introduction to her exhibition, *Faces of AIDS*, Sloan opposes a notion of the social self to one of individuality when she writes:

*FACES OF AIDS* is not reportage. It doesn’t try to explain the lives of persons living with the illness, it doesn’t place them in a social or political framework, it doesn’t cover the range of their experiences. It does depict with deliberate care the integrity of each individual.\(^1\)

Joanna Woodall’s study of eighteenth century Dutch portraits challenges the historical accuracy of the opposition between the social self and a transcendent, ideal self in histories of portraiture.\(^2\) Woodall convincingly argues in her study that portraiture is never solely about the recognition of likeness to an ideal self, but also always a form of mediating social recognition in terms of likeness to a social type. In her study of Dutch portraits in the first half of the seventeenth century, she shows how portraits of leading Amsterdam citizens emulated ‘received, noble conceptions, categories and conventions’, thereby using ‘the realist mode of portraiture to claim positions equal to, but distinct from, both the heredity nobility and each other’ (96). Elsewhere, Woodall writes the humanist elites (including artists) can be regarded as ‘an alternative nobility’ that establishes individuality ‘as just another category of virtue – inspired social behaviour, even if it is a category which consists of just one person’.\(^3\) The catch is, the category of individuality (as an alternative nobility) must be recognisable to viewers. And this is where the body enters the picture. Woodall’s study shows how the uniformity of the particular type of individuality favoured in Dutch elite society at the time is distributed across an astounding production of individual portraits through the production of a recognisable individuality represented through a uniform of black and white attire, austere formats and rigid poses.

In *Photography and Society*, Gisèle Freund writes about a similar trend in eighteenth century French portraiture, arguing that it marks the beginning of the ‘democratization’ of portraiture.\(^4\) The French bourgeoisie modelled themselves after the aristocracy, Freund says that even before the French Revolution, the overwhelming demand by the bourgeoisie for self-representation led to the mechanization of portraiture (10). First came the miniature portrait and the silhouette, followed by the invention of the physionotrace.\(^5\) Freund argues that these new mechanistic modes of portraiture greatly contributed to the development of a new cult of
individualization. However, because they were mechanised, they resulted in images that were stereotypes rather than interpretative portraits. Freund cites Wilhelm Waetzold’s observation that ‘Portrait painting at the time of Louis XV and Louis XVI (was) characterised by a tendency to falsify, to idealize each face, even that of the shopkeeper, in order to have him resemble the exemplary human type: the prince’ (10). Again, as like the citizens of Amsterdam, the French bourgeoisie’s mass production of ‘princely’ faces may have been conducted in the name of individualisation but it resulted in typification. Even the invention of the camera could not resist the impact of mechanization on what Walter Benjamin calls the ‘cult value of art’. While on the one hand the photographic portrait led to a revival of the cult value of the portrait, it was eventually undermined by what Benjamin calls ‘exhibition value’. The portrait of the loved one became less valued for its ritual function as it is became entangled in the web of authenticity – the photograph as an objective document, as evidence.

To return to Sloan’s assertion that her portraits depict ‘with deliberate care the integrity of the individual’, it can be seen that such a claim is the promise all portraits make – a physiognomical claim to make the soul of the individual visible. Sloan’s claim is of course based on a notion of a transcendent self. But as seen in the body of portraits Woodall studied, physiognomical detail is more telling of changing social values of individualism and its construction than it is of souls. And like the portraits of the seventeenth-century citizens of Amsterdam, Sloan’s collection is remarkable for its uniformity. In her deliberate attempt to exclude the political and social conditions and circumstances of her subjects’ lives, Sloan’s narrow frame on the faces of AIDS serves to exclude differences between the subjects. Like the portraits of citizens in eighteenth century Amsterdam that Woodall studied, Sloan’s subjects are made to conform to a set of ‘noble categories and conventions’. Through a select set of poses, settings and photographic styles of lighting and printing, Sloan creates a recognisable face of AIDS: it consists of a begging, forlorn look of innocence, a socially isolated subject, a body weighed down by the threat of imminent death. Just as Nixon’s objectivity turned on its subjects, Sloan’s attempt to individuate serves only to typify people with AIDS.

Giving AIDS a face does not necessarily counter the generic effects of objectification and typification. Considering the many limitations of portraiture, the question can well be
asked in what possible way can it be a form of ‘revenge’, as Peter Hawkins puts it, in the war of representation that surrounds HIV and AIDS.\textsuperscript{17} For Crimp, the way to get around the problem of representing people with HIV and AIDS is to think in terms of a different kind of process of recognition. He wrote that it was necessary ‘to recognise that every image of a PWA is a representation, and formulate our activist demands not in relation to the truth of the image, but in relation to the conditions of its construction and to its social effects’.\textsuperscript{18} With People With AIDS caught between the need for political and social forms of recognition and the limitations of objectification and typification, Crimp suggests that artists adopt the political modernist strategy of self-reflexivity. In the introduction to \textit{AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism}, he says that ‘cultural producers and viewers recognise that all images are a representation, but institutions must also come to recognise the relationship between art and the communities from which art emerges’ (13). He warns, however, that this is only possible if ‘we abandon the idealist conception of art’: ‘We don’t need a cultural renaissance; we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don’t need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it’ (7). In the following sections of this chapter I will look at the Australian project \textit{SDSI} as a form of ‘cultural activism’, examining its success in achieving the forms of recognition Crimp says are necessary – that is, recognition by the viewer that all images of people with HIV and AIDS are a representation and second, institutional recognition of HIV and AIDS communities.

\section*{Self-Portraiture: From Positive Images to ‘Living With HIV/AIDS’}

\begin{quote}
i think one of the things that h-i-v has given me is a search for identity, a search for meaning and purpose.\newline
\textit{stephen (extract from personal history, July 1991)} (SDSI)
\end{quote}

By the late 1980s and early 1990s the representation of people with HIV and AIDS was increasingly dominated by forms of self-representation. It was widely believed in AIDS activist circles that self-representation offered an immediate solution to both the political and aesthetic problems of representing people with HIV and AIDS. Self-representation was seen to counter the objectifying tendencies of mainstream images of people with HIV and AIDS, as
well as offer a more accurate representation of the diversity of people with HIV and AIDS. And it was exactly these sorts of ideas Sydney-based photographer, Kathy Triffitt, had in mind when she met with close friends with HIV and AIDS to discuss ways to counter problematic representations of people with HIV and AIDS. As Triffitt says in *Am I Dead Sweetheart*, that first meeting led to the formation of what was to become the ongoing project *SDSI*. Triffitt says that the group began with an awareness that no single image can represent the complex experience of HIV and AIDS. Hence, from the beginning the project was committed to creating something more than a ‘Face of AIDS’. Following the lead of cultural critics such as Simon Watney and Douglas Crimp, the group placed a great deal of emphasis on the ongoing nature of identity formation and believed that this principle was reflected in their use of the term ‘self-imaging’ opposed to ‘self-portrait’.¹⁹

The other major difference between this project and other forms of HIV and AIDS self-portraiture was that this collective project was comprised of work by non-artists. The project was workshop based. As the coordinator of the project, Triffitt had two main roles: the first was to conduct photographic and oral history workshops for people with HIV and AIDS, thereby providing participants with the skills to record and edit their own oral histories, and to take and print their own photographic self-portraits. The second role was to collate and exhibit materials from the community-based workshops. From 1988 to 1994, Triffitt, in association with various HIV and AIDS organisations in Australia, conducted workshops in most of the major cities in Australia and in regional and rural areas, including Newcastle and Wagga Wagga in NSW and Burney in North West Tasmania. Likewise, the exhibition of the work produced in the workshops has been shown in all of these centres. In the past five years, Triffitt has mainly concentrated on working with existing participants who wish to ‘revisit’, to use her term, their stories and photographic work.

As I said in the introduction to this chapter, I became associated with the project in 1994 when I collaborated on the production of a history of *SDSI*. In December 1994, Triffitt and I also co-presented a paper at the Australian Association of Cultural Studies Annual Conference, ‘Public Intellectuals and Communities’, held at the University of Technology, Sydney. We both had strong feelings concerning the experience of contributing to the international AIDS art exhibition, *Don’t Leave Me This Way*, about the relationship between
the art-world and HIV and AIDS communities and the difficulty of achieving the kind of
recognition Crimp asserts is necessary. Despite its community-based credentials and the fact
that at that time SDSI had been in existence for seven and half years – making it Australia’s
longest running community art project – the curatorial committee for Don’t Leave Me This
Way, passed over much of the material in SDSI in favour of portrait projects such as Lynn
Sloan’s Faces of AIDS. Curators chose to exhibit only a very small selection of SDSI - a safely
representational selection of contributions by a child, a female and a gay man. Moreover, this
neat sample of the project was cordoned off in a space (come exit point) of its own,
segregating the sample from SDSI from the main exhibition, from the ‘real’ art. By treating
the work purely as representative of the social groups affected by the virus, the curators
simultaneously acknowledged the demand by the non-artists to be recognised and reduced this
recognition to what Alexander Düttmann calls mere ‘re-cognition’ or Wiedererkennen20 –
images exemplary of a range of HIV/AIDS types. So how did this occur? And to what effect?

In the beginning, SDSI contributed to AIDS awareness in Australia by providing a
series of powerful counter-images to negative, fatalistic media reports. Many of the very early
contributions to the project took the form of positive images – sexy, up beat depictions of
PWAs. In the following extract, Chris, one of the founding participants of the project, talks
about the need for positive images:

i have been one of the advocates of the hiv movement, i have always emphasised that
it is important to try and get a very positive image.
in the early days it was difficult to convince the press about that.
in 1986 ... there was a photograph taken of me for the sydney sun herald’ that looked
as if i was about to die tomorrow.
having gone through that experience and dealing with other bits of the press of having
this looking down, woe is me type attitude, we started to insist on more positive
images.
when the article appeared in the herald last year, over the mercy hospital incident, the
photograph was very positive.
i was dressed in a suit, looking very business like ...
what we trying to do is present a very positive image about people who are infected
with hiv.
chris, 1990 (SDSI)
There are a number of limitations to the strategy Chris describes. Not the least being Jan Zita Grover’s assertion that ‘Positive images are always haunted by the images and stereotypes which they are constructed to counter’. As Chris suggests, at a certain point in the mid 1980s people with AIDS found themselves caught between the facelessness of objectifying negative images and a demand to normalise AIDS by presenting themselves in a positive or acceptable way, leading of course to yet another form of typification. In order to break out of this binarized trap of acceptance and typification, participants in SDSI began to employ self-reflexive modes of representation. Generally, this is achieved by exhibiting the photographs with accompanying text that documents the processes of self-imaging. Other techniques range from something as simple as Barry’s choice of making visible the self-release cable of the camera. This ensures that viewers can recognise the image as a self-portrait. They can therefore see within the image itself the means of its construction. Some participants take more sophisticated approaches. We can look to Stephen’s self-image as an example of calling identity labelling into question by staging a dramatic burning of the imposed ‘victim’ label (see figs. 1 and 2). In the text accompanying this image Stephen says:

i really get crapped off with the Australian media use of the word victim.
i don’t want to be victim and they just use it time and time again. in the early stages of aids and hiv there was this paranoia, these scare tactics.
... i am not angry i have hiv but i am angry at the way people perceive us.
i am angry about the way we are represented ... we are human beings.
we have family ...
i am someone’s brother, i am someone’s uncle, i am someone’s son.
we are members of the community but the community is pushing us away and the media have a lot to answer for.
i don’t think the grim reaper campaign helped.
i think it just isolated and stereotyped.

*stephen, 1991 (SDSI)*

In the above comment, Stephen echoes the prevailing feelings in HIV/AIDS activist groups in Australia at the time. He also quotes the then current slogans circulating not only in HIV/AIDS communities in Australia, but also in the crosscurrents of AIDS activism discourse between Australia, the UK, the US and Canada. The effects of this kind of quotation are, however, wholly local. Following an exhibition of SDSI in 1991, Triffitt was invited by the NSW Antidiscrimination Board to consult on the campaign that came to be known as
‘Someone’s daughter, Someone’s son’. This campaign was designed to give a human face to people with HIV and AIDS by emphasising the social relations of people living with the virus. The problem is, unlike Stephen who, as an AIDS awareness activist, was willing to make his face visible and openly identify as a Person With AIDS (PWA), the television campaign chose to silhouette the faces of actors. Triffitt had a major falling out with the campaign producers over this decision and withdrew her services, arguing that the blacked-out and silhouetted faces of people with HIV and AIDS that appeared in the heavily broadcast campaign served only to reinforce notions of shame and stigma associated with the virus. But I would argue that this appropriation of the demand for recognition marked the beginning of another kind of effacement of people living with HIV and AIDS. Not now the projection of the macabre death’s head that draws an equivalence between the virus and death, but the facelessness of the unrecognised, the social dead. Around this time Gary Indiana wrote: ‘One terrible thing about this epidemic is that it has taken away the concept of having one’s own death, and made thousands of deaths into this kind of generic tragedy, which is really not even perceived as a tragedy by the culture at large, which is pretty horrifying to begin with’. Here, facelessness becomes social invisibility. The wider community incorporates the demand by people with HIV and AIDS to be recognised only to render them invisible. In practice, self-representation has formed no immediate solution to the problems of representing people with HIV and AIDS.

The Antidiscrimination Board’s appropriation of the demand for recognition of Stephen and other people living with HIV and AIDS is similar to the misguided recognition of the project by the curators at the National Gallery of Australia, in terms of Alexander Düttmann’s formulation of ‘misrecognizing recognition’ (27). Düttmann explains that the struggle by one group for recognition of their identity ‘in order to secure equality of treatment and status for themselves through legal, social, institutional and political recognition ... disappears in a reformism which only accepts, and only can accept, differences on the ground of some more fundamental unity’ (27-28). And it is this problem with the demand for recognition that Jan Zita Grover identifies and attempts to overcome by promoting a notion of open and fluid forms of identity. In her essay ‘Opportunistic Identification, Open Identification, in PWA Portraiture’, Grover distinguishes between two categories of PWA portraiture and two categories of PWA identification. In addition to covering ground on the
limitations of positive images, she borrows the concept of ‘opportunistic identification’ from US artist Mark Tidmus. She says that in the first half of the 1980s, the phenomenal use of portraiture as a cultural response to AIDS resulted in images that ‘subsumed their subject’s personal identity into his or her AIDS diagnosis’ (218). And, unlike others in the field, she argues that self-representation does not necessarily offer a solution to the problem of ‘opportunistic identification’. She writes:

Intra-communally since the late 1980s, symbolic representations of all sorts – from visual images to the constitution of boards of directors of AIDS related community organisations – have increasingly been dominated by the HIV-infected, who have the authority of experience to authenticate their leadership. Whether this practical complement to cultural theory will prove any more effective than other schemes for ensuring just representation and efficient operations remains to be seen; all calls to clear the decks for one category of experience or identity seem suspect to me. (222)

Having staked out anti-essentialist ground, Grover says that the introduction of better drug treatments in the 1990s has led to a different form of self-representation – ‘a domestication or displacement of HIV/AIDS as the primary source of identity within the HIV/AIDS community’ (222). Along with this shift she also identifies a parallel shift toward more open and fluid forms of identification, a shift embodied in the change in the self-identifying label from Person/People With AIDS (PWA) to People Living With HIV and/or AIDS (PLWHA). To support her argument, Grover refers to Albert J Winn’s US based project, My Life until Now. She says: ‘Winn’s photographs and accompanying texts are crammed with clues to their maker’s personality and interests. The signs of AIDS in these self-portraits are subtle and deeply embedded in an ongoing life’ (223). She also makes reference to the work of some participants in SDSI:

The self-portraiture of Al Winn, Andii Nellsün (sic) (repr. pp 128-129) and Stephen (repr. p.122), for example, consists of sequences or multiple images that deal with imposed, internalised, and/or newly constructed identities; with the precarious act of balancing health and illness, sorrow and happiness, death and life. (226)

Here, Grover argues that the dependency on the other’s recognition of self is short-circuited by the artist’s expression of a fluid identity, a subject-in-process.
This shift in emphasis on living with rather than having HIV or AIDS is reflected in the title of Triffitt’s project. Furthermore, the use of fragmentation of images of self that Grover ascribes to this new way of thinking about HIV/AIDS identity and recognition is found throughout the diverse self-images in *SDSI*. Take, for example, the following extract from Leigh’s contribution that takes the form of a letter.

dear kathy,
... i’d like my contribution to really give people a quite deep and personal insight into what it’s like to have aids -- a glimpse of the issues one confronts, the pain of the diverse fears and unknowns and the, at times, terrifying uncertainties and potential future.
i don’t want to be portrayed by a ‘leigh in the lounge room ’ or forlornly wandering along the beach’ picture ... that may work well for some people.
i want to do something which is graphically strong ...there is a range of recent, quite extraordinary visual material we can draw upon:

1. an ultra sound of my dilated liver canals.
2. x-rays of my stomach when swollen severely.
3. scan of my brain (it was ok, thankfully).
4. photos of the retina of both eyes, showing the damage done by c-m-v.
5. photos of my bowels, which are to be examined on Tuesday, 2 June.
maybe also...
9. as well i’d like to show that life continues amid all the medical confusion. so i want to have photos of me enjoying gardening, theatre, travel, music, food and with friends/family. after all, these are the things that make it worthwhile to keep living.
10. it's also just occurred to me it would be good to include an image of one coping with the virus’ impact upon my friends. i'm not alone in living with aids. it’s happening to numerous of my friends too -- and, of course, some have already died. that’s a more than small part of the nightmare of aids ...

*leigh, 1992 (SDSI)*

Mark, another participant in *SDSI* also constructs a picture of himself through a series of images – some realised, while others are simply left to be imagined:

my self-image ... I see myself aspiring to it, to an image of being physically fit and productive and energetic.
having lots of energy is something that I would love to have all the time.
i look at photographs of myself taken in natural surroundings like on a friend’s farm ... catching yabbies in a dam and how healthy and good looking I look with all that brown grass around me and with the trees.
just the natural surroundings.
For Mark, the key to self-imaging is to find a way of making a picture without boundaries, to keep the space of self limitless. But this is more difficult than it may seem. It also raises a different kind of problem. While I agree with both Grover and Triffitt that it is important to recognise the complexities of the lives of people with HIV and AIDS, to keep the borders open, there are, however, dangers in considering the value of these images of self only in terms of their ability to ‘wash over’ the ‘tint’ of AIDS, as Grover suggests they do (224). Grover uses contributions by Nellssün and Stephen from SDSI to support her wider argument about the difference between ‘questing’ artists who live with HIV and AIDS and those who do not. It’s an argument about the purpose of art, which is, in her view, pedagogic: ‘Few people make art without wishing to learn something from it’ (226). She says: ‘Artists who live on an intimate, day-to-day basis with HIV/AIDS and artists who do not are struck by different aspects of HIV/AIDS, challenged by it in different ways’ (226). Or, as she continues:

What he (the extra-HIV community artist) brings back to his own community is a report from a country that few know personally but many are fascinated, saddened or moved by. This does not necessarily make his map useful to the people native to the country: they have their own routes and landmarks, their own knowledge of the land. Nor, in turn, are the things that most concern them necessarily of interest to the questing artist; he is after all passing through; he has not been consigned to living there. (229)

With images such as the Grim Reaper and Nixon’s morbid portraits in mass circulation, it is understandable that Grover wants to make a distinction between intra and extra community artists. But, despite her disclaimers, it is an essentialising argument. Grover displaces one form of essentialism – limited forms of HIV/AIDS identification – with another. In order to make an argument for the kind of image-making she promotes, that is, a way of representing a ‘questing self’, opposed to ‘opportunistic identification’, she must find some other basis of solidarity for people with HIV and AIDS. Having argued it is no longer the crisis of illness, Grover implies that identification is based on the shared experience of existential crisis. Certainly, she names a trend that informs some of the self-images of
participants in *SDSI*. As Stephen puts it, he sees self-imaging as a way of searching for a purpose, a meaning. The problem being that this kind of recognition reduces the individual and shared experience of HIV and AIDS to the search for identity. Grover’s logic, along with individual instances from *SDSI*, returns us to the very position she sought to move beyond. In this way we might say that Grover and some participants in *SDSI* ‘misrecognize recognition’.

In the bid to avoid the incorporating effects of recognition, that is, the kind of recognition that effaces difference, as we saw Nixon’s portraits do, as the anti-discrimination campaign did, Grover constructs an impenetrable wall between the HIV/AIDS community and the wider community. In Düttmann’s theorisation of recognition this constitutes a misrecognition of what recognition is. He argues that while the demand for recognition can disappear in a reformism that effaces the very difference that is required to be recognised, this incorporation simultaneously involves exposing the bestower of recognition to ‘the uncertain outcome ... which it attempts to transform into stability and security’ (28). He explains that it follows thus that every recognition is an interpretative moment, for in order to understand the claim by the one requiring recognition as a demand for recognition, the demand has to be recognised as just that. Hence, he writes: ‘To interpret is to recognize’. Or, to turn his point around, to recognise is to interpret; and for Düttmann, every instance of interpretative recognition, is a moment of uncertainty that constitutes a profound contradiction.

One who demands recognition has already arrived, has already reached the destination still to be attained, and does not require the recognition that is demanded. The polemical presumption here lies in the way in which the one who is to be recognized transforms those who are to bestow recognition into those who require recognition. The roles, the functions, the positions in question thereby find themselves caught up in a constant and uncontrollable process of exchange – in the final analysis it is impossible to decide who should be recognised here and now and who is recognizing whom here and now. (30)

Düttmann’s description of the interpretive moment of recognition resonates with Proust’s image of seeing his grandmother. There, seeing his grandmother ‘photographically’, that is objectively, not only altered Proust’s perception of her but of also his self-perception. He too became a stranger in his own house. Düttmann describes this double effect of the uncertainty of recognition as ‘a constant and uncontrollable process of exchange’ (29). He writes that the
problem is that this effect of recognition is shut down by the processes of misrecognising recognition as mere ‘re-cognition’. Or, to put it more visually, recognition as an acceptance of what is a seen as *seen for the first time*, a form of seeing ‘anew’. This kind of recognition is thwarted when we instead look simply for sameness and resemblance to what is already known. This latter type of seeing is mere re-cognition. Thus Düttmann concludes that the inherent alterity of recognition formed in the tension of uncontrollable exchange, is excluded or concealed when one or both parties agree to settle for a conception of recognition as ‘a struggle for revealing-oneself-as-something’ (34). In other words, when one or both parties fall into the trap of ‘misrecognizing recognition’, as Düttmann says. Or, to return to the case at hand, when Grover insists on making a distinction between intra and extra HIV community she shuts down the possibility of otherness.

This leaves us with the question of how *SDSI* might keep open the space Düttmann claims recognition makes for alterity – recognition without the effacement of difference. This is, I argue, in part achieved by the project’s foregrounding of the question of visibility, which serves to make recognisable differences between individuals living with HIV/AIDS, some of whom do, as I have said, seek to be recognised in more or less fixed ways. It also makes visible cultural and political differences between various social groups affected by HIV and AIDS. Viewing the exhibition we learn that the language acts or degree of visibility appropriate for a Sydney-based gay man may neither be available to nor indeed safe for a gay man living in South West Tasmania. Likewise, the exhibition not only represents women with HIV and AIDS as a social group or community, but also makes known the different issues for women with HIV and AIDS. Take, for example, the following extracts:

... my parents live in a country town. they don’t know about me being hiv positive, that is my fear about going public, being photographed. i don’t want them to know. i don’t want to put them through all of that. then i think about the fact that they wouldn’t have anyone that they could talk about it to. the fact that they are up there, they might go through social isolation if they told people. i can imagine they may be rejected from their community. they may do it to themselves.
*deborah, 1989 (SDSI)*

... i have a very ferocious, protective instinct towards my four year old. i also have a very vivid imagination. i can see all sorts of terrible things happening to her at kindergarten and school if people knew i was hiv positive, though there is nothing
wrong with her. ... it’s the sort of situation even if it’s in your own imagination, you
can’t test it out to find out. you can’t say, ‘we will tell them a bit, then if it doesn’t
work we will take it back again’. once you have done it you have done it.
sue, 1989 (SDSI)

The fears Deborah and Sue express here should not be reduced to myths of female
passivity. Rather, such fears were grounded in their knowledge of what it was like to be a
woman with HIV living in rural and suburban Australia at the time, as well as the particular
language and images that had accrued around the female body. In the late 1980s Sue and
Deborah would have been very much aware of the highly publicised case of Sharleen Spiteri,
a HIV positive sex worker, who in 1989 was compulsorily detained in a locked ward of a
Sydney Hospital under the NSW Public Health Act (1902) as a dangerous ‘carrier’.25 Also, at
this time, treatment in rural areas varied. A stay in a hospital would certainly mean being put
in an infectious disease ward, even though HIV is not infectious, being treated by fully
masked, rubber-gloved attendants. What is also revealed here is the different kind of isolation
and stigmatisation women with HIV and AIDS experienced. While for gay men with HIV and
AIDS visibility has resulted in over-exposure, women with HIV and AIDS face the opposite
problem of being effaced by their invisibility. Michelle describes the consequences peculiar to
women when visibility was forced upon her in the mid 1980s:

i was diagnosed in February 1985, so it was quite early.
the doctor said it was a gay disease and i said ‘well, how come i have got it?
... it wasn’t long after that, that i had a court case pending. i went to court and i was
banned ... they wouldn’t let me in the courtroom because the magistrate said i would
infect all the staff ... that hit the headlines in the newspapers
... because of all that media hype, i actually pushed my son away from me for two
months ... i was frightened he would get aids because everyone was telling me that. ... i
was feeding into all the hysteria..
i was in prison for nearly two years ... the women sat out, they didn’t want me in the
prison
... i remember all these women, there were about thirty five or forty of them ... there
was all this hate...
i guess that’s where i became vocal about being hiv positive because they wouldn’t let
me go into work areas
it was quite a fight, but it changed things, certainly for women who go into prison.
michelle, 1991 (SDSI)
Both Deborah and Michelle were members of ‘Positive Women’, a national support network for women with HIV and AIDS that originated in Victoria. As strategies in AIDS awareness, their contributions to SDSI help to make clear to viewers the particular experience and needs of women with HIV and AIDS in Australia. The absence of indigenous participants, another affected community in Australia, is an unforgivable oversight in this project that reflects wider lack of awareness in Australia of how HIV and AIDS has impacted on indigenous communities.

It seems to me that the differences in experiences of HIV and AIDS expressed in the collection of diverse self-images that comprise SDSI bring us closer to a form of solidarity and acceptance of difference than Grover’s call for recognition of a distinct, identifiable and bordered-off HIV/AIDS community. Hawkins, in his meditation on the NAMES Quilt project, says that for him, the NAMES project was ‘a form of contact’: ‘At a time of both personal dissolution and corporate loss, the Quilt takes perfect strangers and turns them, if only for a moment, into a community’ (3). In a similar way, as a public exhibition and as an archive, SDSI can be best understood in terms of a tradition of historiography that considers form and process equal in value to content. In this way, community is conceived not as a spatial formation, as Grover suggests, but as a historical formation that exists in the moment of recognition. To follow Düttmann’s formulation, recognition of community needs to keep in place the struggle for recognition, the difference that underlines the demand. That is to say, it has to be a temporal experience and it is, I believe, the ongoing nature of SDSI, which is indicated in the dash that follows the full title of the exhibition, that allows it to be more than mere ‘re-cognition’.

In Canberra, the official presentation of the programme was complemented by a spontaneous and quickly organised performance by members of PLWHA, Canberra. One member of that group, Ken, had also contributed to SDSI. He used the presentation as an opportunity to review his former work by placing himself before a large projected image taken some five years earlier. This was not a matter of him speaking as some real version of himself opposed to his representation, but rather, a self-conscious performance that served to highlight not only how his identity had changed over time but also the inherent difference of all self-images. Meanwhile, other members from PLWHA Canberra located themselves amongst the
audience, and using spotlights and radio microphones, employed a mix of confrontational and confessional styles of self-performance to tell their personal histories. Overall, the performance may have been ‘Oprah like’, as one person complained. But it could also be said that the authority of authenticity that the participants played on and with in their ‘in-your-face’ mode of self-performance was merely an assertion of the authority granted to them by the curators when they segregated SDSI from the other work on exhibition, when they ascribed to the work the status of community representation, as opposed to capital A art work. It would also seem to be the case that Düttmann argued, that the demand for recognition in this face to face encounter with people with HIV and AIDS shows that even hard and fast borders such as ‘us’ and ‘them’, or ‘artists’ and ‘non-artists’ are ‘shifting and impermanent’. In the main theatre of the National Gallery it became impossible to tell who was recognising who.

**Facing Death**

i am not actually frightened of dying, it’s more that i am frightened of not existing. *michelle (extract from a personal history, November 1991/ May 1993) (SDSI)*

In 1996, Kathy Triffitt and I began another line of enquiry into self-imaging. It seemed to us that participants were seeking something more than the forms of recognition covered in the earlier sections of this chapter. In the process of reviewing the many visual and narrative contributions to SDSI, we found that nearly all of the participants wrote about how the process of self-imaging raised their self-esteem or helped them to find a sense of self. Of even more interest is the way in which some participants talked about self-imaging as a form of healing. Andii Nellsšn, for example, attributed a marked increase in T-cells to his involvement in the project. We saw that because our analysis of the project had up until that point focussed solely on questions of the politics of representation, we had failed to recognise the very simple but important fact that many of the people with HIV and AIDS who got involved in the project did so as a way of becoming and staying well. As one participant Mark says, ‘Self-imaging is just one of a range of ways I am using to stay well’. It is one thing to talk about ‘living with HIV and AIDS’ and quite another to actually do it. For many people with HIV and AIDS, the
experience involves facing death on a daily basis. In recognition of this, there has been in the 1990s a great deal of emphasis in HIV/AIDS activism and literature on the particular forms of grief and bereavement associated with AIDS. But for the most part this work does not address the experience of dying or the fear of it. In this final section of this chapter I want to look at the role self-representation plays in times of crisis and the approach of death.

Use of the phrase ‘falling apart’ as a description of being in a state of personal crisis is well known. In the introduction to his novel *Queer*, William Burroughs makes some interesting remarks about the main character William Lee’s experience of falling apart as a result of his withdrawal from narcotics. Burroughs also offers insight into how Lee uses his relationship with Eugene Allerton as a way of surviving that crisis. He writes:

While the addict is indifferent to the impression he creates in others, during withdrawal he may feel the compulsive need for an audience, and this is clearly what Lee seeks in Allerton: an audience, an acknowledgment of his performance, which of course is a mask, to cover a shocking disintegration ... What Lee is looking for is contact or recognition, like a photon emerging from a haze of insubstantiality to leave an indelible recording in Allerton's consciousness. (12-13)

Burroughs explains that in a narcotic, self-insulated state the addict has no need of self-image: ‘An addict has little regard for his image ... and feels no need to call attention to himself’ (10).

Burroughs says that during his own period of addiction in Tangiers, he was known as ‘El Hombre Invisible, The Invisible Man’ (10). For Burroughs, the two experiences of ‘being out-of-it’ and withdrawing from drugs, are differentiated not only by the desire and use of drugs, but also, the desire and use of images, including the presence and absence of self-image:

This disintegration of self-image (when using) often results in an indiscriminate image hunger. Billie Holiday said she knew she was off junk when she stopped watching TV. In my first novel, *Junky*, the protagonist 'Lee' comes across as integrated and self-contained, sure of himself and where he is going. In *Queer* he is disintegrated, desperately in need of contact, completely unsure of himself and where he is going. (10)

In other words, Burroughs suggests that the self-insulating effect of narcotics is
characterised by a desire to look, while the physical and emotional excesses of withdrawal -- ‘the withdrawing addict is subject to the emotional excesses of a child or an adolescent, regardless of his actual age’ (11) -- produces a desperate need to be looked at. Considering the picture Burroughs paints of the withdrawing addict: desire for self-image and a desperate need to be looked at, Lee could easily be mistaken for Narcissus – that beautiful, stroppy boy who mistook his self-reflection for an unrequited love and, upon realising his error, expired into nothingness. But on closer inspection we find a fundamental difference between the two characters. In Ovid’s myth, Narcissus reaches out and touches his reflected image, causing his loved one to disappear.27 At this moment he realises that his love is indeed a reflection of himself and he cries out: ‘How I wish I could separate myself from my body! A new prayer this, for a lover, to wish the thing he loves away’ (86). In response to the terrible knowledge that he is doomed to love the very thing he cannot have, Narcissus takes his own life. He surrenders his bodily state in order to become the essence of what he desires. Transformed into a strange flower attributed with narcotic, intoxicating powers, Narcissus becomes the very essence of his own being: desire, addiction. On the other hand, when Lee withdraws from the hazy state of addiction, he discovers that because his body is no longer protected by drugs from the shock of the real, it begins to disperse. Now he is not invisible (there but not seen), but under threat of becoming obliterated (nonexistent). In order not to disappear, that is, not to enter the space of oblivion, he must, as Burroughs writes, ‘find a reciprocating gaze’ (16). But unlike Narcissus, he does not seek a mirror image of himself. Rather, he seeks a way of becoming perceptible and thus regains that which has spilled out when the cover provided by junk is removed (11). The recognition Lee requires from Allerton is not therefore idealised love but simply ‘a port of entry’ through which Lee can get under Allerton’s skin and thus give himself a substance in the face of impending disappearance. In Lee’s case transformation does not take the form of some kind of distillation of the self, but rather it is a process of a reproduction of the self. This is of course a very different model of coming face to face, for here the face of the other is a point of contact.

In Queer Burroughs recalls one night at the Ship Ahoy, a bar in Mexico City where he first met Allerton:

Lee sat down and ordered a drink, then turned to Allerton with a casual greeting, as though they were on familiar and friendly terms. Allerton returned
the greeting automatically before he realised that Lee had somehow established
himself on a familiar basis, whereas he had previously decided to have as little
to do with Lee as possible. Allerton had a talent for ignoring people, but he was
not competent at dislodging someone from a position already occupied ...
When Lee talked, he seem to mean more than what he said. A special emphasis
to a word or a greeting hinted at a period of familiarity in some other time and
place. As though Lee were saying, 'You know what I mean. You remember.'
(37-38)

Later, in a theatre, Lee’s attempt to gain the recognition he requires from Allerton is expressed
in even more physiological terms:

Lee could feel his body pull towards Allerton, an amoeboid protoplasmic
projection, straining with a blind worm hunger to enter the other’s body, to
breathe with his lungs, see with his eyes, learn the feel of his viscera and
genitals. (48)

While Allerton’s refusal to comply with Lee’s desire also has a physical effect:

Lee felt exhausted. He fumbled and bumped into things. His voice was toneless
with strain. He put his hand up to his head from time to time, an awkward,
 involuntary gesture of pain. 'I need a drink,' he said...(48)

Finally, desperate to end his state of bodily crisis, Lee goes ‘outside of himself’ in order to get
Allerton to recognise him. He invents a fiction – ‘The Routine’ as Burroughs calls it, designed
to attract Allerton’s attention and thus maintain the contact which Lee could feel slipping
away. Doing ‘The Bobo Routine’, an impersonation of a wise, old queen, Lee tells Allerton:

No one is ever really alone. You are part of everything alive. The difficulty is
to convince someone else he is really part of you, so what the hell? Us parts
ought to work together. Reet? (51)

As a set of fantasies about various characters, ‘The Routine’ is shocking and often
funny performative device for being recognised. It does not matter that Allerton recognises
Lee only when he is performing an other to himself. This is not a psychological process of
identification but, as we see in the extract from the novel above, it is a spatial thing, and there
is no distinction made here between the body and mind. In short, ‘The Routine’ is the practice
of bodily infiltration for the purpose of ‘making an indelible impression’ (13), a procedure based on Burroughs’ conception of medieval notions of spirit possession. Burroughs interprets the process of possession as parasitic: the possessor enters the other as an impression and once there, once embedded in the body of the other, it can begin to make copies of itself, thus ensuring its survival. It is model theorised in Michael Taussig’s text, *Mimesis and Alterity*, where he reminds us of the important physiological fact that ‘seeing something ... is to be in contact with that something’, that is, ‘that a ray of light, for example, moves from rising sun into the human eye where it makes contact with the retinal rods and cones to form, via the circuits of the central nervous system, a (culturally attuned) copy of the rising sun’.28 It also resonates with Susan Buck-Morss’ conception of the body as a ‘synaesthetic system’. She writes:

This synaesthetic system is ‘open’ in the extreme sense. Not only is it open to the world through the sensory organs, but the nerves cells within the body form a network that is in itself discontinuous ... everything ‘leaks’.29

But a word of caution. Burroughs says we need to remember that this thing of getting under the skin, of making contact, is a two-way thing. Indeed, in Burroughs’ paranoiac logic it is something beyond our control. What we find in Burroughs’ language is a conflation between contact and combat, for example, when he speaks of battles, struggles and bodily ‘ports of entry’, he is also speaking of ways to defend himself against possession. The invading, opportunistic force Burroughs calls ‘Control’ and ‘Virus’, or ‘Ugly Spirit’, gets under the skin, but does not come from within. Burroughs absolutely refuses a modern concept of a flawed self. He even proposes that this ‘definite possessing entity’ (16) devised the psychological concept of inner self-possession to conceal its own power (16). Or, as he describes the Ugly Spirit, which he claims possessed him at the time of the shooting of his wife Joan, it is ‘something in my being that was not me and not under my control’ (16). This is not to say that possession leads to a total incorporation of self by Ugly Spirit (by the Other). In Burroughs’ view, the self does not become reducible to or replica of the spirit, but rather, controlled by that which it recognises as part of self but Other. Hence, the self is conveniently passive in its encounter with otherness. Or, as Burroughs claims in *Queer*, it was not him that shot his wife, but ‘Ugly Spirit’.
At the end of *Queer*, we learn that Allerton was of no use to Lee, because ultimately he refused to recognise him. Allerton's refusal to recognise Lee takes us back to the struggle for recognition in Hegel's theorisation of self-consciousness.\textsuperscript{30} For Hegel, the process of Recognition constitutes a 'split' – 'one being recognized, the other only recognizing' (113) – that takes the form of a 'trial to the death' (113), allegorised in the relation of Lordship and Bondsman. Hegel says the split of recognition does not create a fixed imbalance of power but rather, it sets off a dialectical exchange. He proposes that in the moment in which one self-consciousness faces another, self-consciousness 'comes out of itself'. We could say that this is what Lee hopes will happen when he tries to attract Allerton's attention. Hegel argued that this moment has twofold significance: 'first, it (self-consciousness) has lost itself, for it finds itself as an other human being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self' (111). This is of course the basis of Jacques Lacan's formulation of the mirror phase in his theorisation of the alienated subject. But, unlike his predecessor, Lacan, whose theory leads us inward to the inner life of the subject, Hegel dreamed of mutual recognition and social reconciliation. This cannot occur, however, by one person simply being prepared to settle for being recognised as a mere 'person' (114), for if she does this she will not have attained 'the truth of recognition as an independent self-consciousness' (114). To take this first option is to settle for what Düttmann calls 're-cognition' and its associated problems.

So how might this problem be solved? Düttmann argues that the way out first involves avoiding the trap of re-cognition and reformism and/or Hegel's dream of reconciliation, in which difference is obliterated. The trick is to find a way of maintaining the energy or mobility of the trial by death – that is the effort by both parties 'to seek the death of the other'. In Taussig's writings on shamanism, he argues that something like this occurs in the shared visions of yage in which the shaman enters 'the space of death' of the other: 'The healer becomes the cure'. Lee, on the other hand, never did find the yage that he and Allerton were searching for in *Queer*, and it was at that point in time, Burroughs says, that he was forced to turn to writing as way of fighting-off the Ugly Spirit, of becoming recognisable and perceptible, 'whether Allerton was inclined to observe or not' (13). He writes that 'The Routines' and later, fictions such as *Queer*, commit Lee to writing: '... inexorably pressed into the world of fiction ...(Lee) has already made the choice between his life and his work' (13).
In the to and fro struggle between the ‘threat of possession’ and the ‘constant need to escape possession’, Burroughs claims he has no choice other than to write his way out (18).

While I do not want to make any major claim here about self-imaging and recognition based on Burroughs’ paranoid experience of addiction, his language provides openings for a more imaginative and useful way of thinking about the processes of recognition and the crisis of AIDS, for it seems to me that what he presents here is a model of writing as a means for being recognised without having to settle for re-cognition. Certainly, there are resonances between his logic of possession and terms such as ‘Virus’ and ‘Control’, ‘combat’ and ‘incorporation’, and the language that has formed around the experience of HIV and AIDS. More specifically, a similar image to the one Burroughs paints of writing as a means of surviving crisis is found in the opening pages of Eric Michaels AIDS diary, Unbecoming, when Michaels rhetorically asks the following questions:

For whom do I write? And, worse yet, from what position? I could hedge and claim that I write for myself, in the hope that I can preserve for myself some clarity in a process which is likely to become very clouded very soon. And for myself, in the sense of a nearly biological drive to self-inscription which we recognise (but do not always forgive) at such moments. Do I imagine such a text will be read, or even published? Necessarily, a missive (missile) from the grave (which of course solves, or at least hijacks, the question of positioning.\(^{31}\)

Michaels’ diary is not a gallows text, and as the diary unfolds, we discover that Michaels takes up a number of different speaking positions. Unbecoming has been read by cultural critics as a masterful deconstruction of AIDS discourse, in particular the discourse that Michaels calls ‘Tidiness’.\(^{32}\) But as with all writing by Michaels, deconstruction is but one among many strategies he employs. Like Burroughs’ character Lee, Michaels also demands that we recognise the bodily crisis of HIV/AIDS.

The image of Michaels in the opening pages of the diary cannot be mistaken for a portrait of the man. Instead, this truly shocking, flash-lit image of Michaels – wild-haired, bare-chested, with his tongue out and his face and body covered in Karpi’s sarcoma lesions (KS) – is a graphic image of the terror of AIDS. In contrast to the passivity recorded in Nixon’s portraits – that is, the images that Crimp argued draw viewers into an intimate
relation in which the difference between self and other is erased – this highly posed, self-conscious shot bears signs of Michaels’ active collusion with the photographer to create a shocking image of the absolute otherness of AIDS. The text also tells us that Michaels granted his permission for the photograph to be published. So why did this man stage such an image? Why did he give permission for this image to be published? The image is, I suggest, part of an overall strategy in the diary to use Otherness against the possessing, parasitic qualities of AIDS. And I don’t just mean the opportunistic viruses that attack the depleted immune systems of people with HIV. As Paul Foss suggests in the preface to the diary, HIV contraction is more than a medical condition. He quotes American artist, David Wojnarowicz: ‘When I was told that I’d contracted the virus it didn’t take me long to realise that I’d contracted a diseased society as well’ (14). To view Micheals’ image front-on, to see it in contrast to the only other image of Michaels in the book, the obligatory, dust-cover snap of a beguiling and handsome man, is to encounter much more than a narrative of an individual death. Face to face with this image we find ourselves penetrated by the shock of becoming unrecognisable.

As with Michaels’ self-representation, a number of the participants in SDSJ also use the otherness of self-imaging as a way of protecting themselves. In extracts from his personal history written in 1995, Nellssún writes the following about his self-images:

being able to do this work was very useful at a time when i was sick and that was important for me to remember that by tapping into this was a way for me to look at the re-imaging of my body ...
putting it onto paper is a lot more powerful for me than just thinking it ... by actually putting something into existence.
andii nellssün (extract from a personal history, july 1995)

In one self-image, Nellssún writes, ‘in a place and time of my choosing I’ll slip from this flesh as though simply disrobing. until then i breathe each moment gladly’. In the text that accompanies the image, he describes the process of its production:

... while i was in the hospital and i was well enough to go and have a look around, i found all of this fantastic engineering trash ... using those as a base and then putting an image of myself against that was quite strange ... it was partly, again, power over the situation, for myself, rather than being a pawn in the game of hospitals and my need to
incorporate something of the hospital into my life instead of the other way around.
andii(extract from a personal history, july 1995)

In Nellssün’s haunting self-image, it is hard to know who possesses who as the power of the institution to make the body visible is inverted. Going outside of himself, Nellssün penetrates the materials of his subjugation as part of his own strategy of self-healing.

And it was this relation between self-imaging and healing that interested both Triffitt and me when we collaborated in a series of workshops held in 1996. As I said earlier, by this time Triffitt was mostly working with existing participants in the project. She had also started a post graduate degree in art therapy. The style of workshop we conducted together marked several departures from the tradition of workshops associated with the project: for the first time Triffitt introduced techniques of art therapy, while my involvement precipitated the first use of video technology as a form of self-imaging in this project. The workshop was held over three consecutive weekends at a HIV/AIDS day centre in inner-city Sydney. On arriving, it was plain to see that the centre was suffering from lack of funding and resources. The most successful programme running at that time was the daily hot lunch for the centre’s many clients. Despite a lot of publicity, the interest in our workshop was below the numbers Triffitt had accommodated in the past. It seemed there was no longer an urgency in the community for self-imaging as there once had been. The four participants who did attend admitted they came out of curiosity and to allay their boredom.

Participants began by talking about what they wanted to get out of the workshop and what they understood self-imaging to be. They talked about themselves as long-term survivors of HIV/AIDS. They all had cared for and survived at least one partner. Most had progressed from being on a carer’s welfare pension to an invalid pension. One man, Stephen, insisted, ‘Its not about AIDS anymore’. For these men, the issues were much more immediate and mundane. It was about poverty and purpose in life. Another man, Michael, talked about how two years prior he had been in a hospice and told to settle his affairs. It was difficult, he said, to get back to living once you’ve packed your life away, said your good-byes. This new phase in HIV and AIDS also calls into question, in yet another new way, issues around sex and sexuality. In 1987, Crimp argued that videos such as those by filmmakers Isaac Julien and
John Greyson, which parodied safe-sex campaigns, signalled ‘a new phase in gay men’s responses to the epidemic’. He writes: ‘Having learned to support and grieve for our lovers and friends; having joined the fight against fear, hatred, repression, and inaction; having adjusted our sex lives so as to protect ourselves and one another – we are now reclaiming our subjectivities, our communities, our culture ... and our promiscuous love of sex’. But living this is not always as easy as Crimp’s polemical language makes it seem. By the mid 1990s the issue is not simply about safe sex but, for long-term survivors of HIV/AIDS, there is also the issue of how to incorporate into sex and sexuality a body that is often rapidly changing and/or drug-affected.

On the first afternoon, Triffitt organised a work-shop on body-image that involved participants making life size tracings of their bodies and then, using materials ranging from Polaroid film to charcoal, filling in the outlines with expressions of their feelings about their body and its parts. The energy level was high and the results were quite amazing. The finished outlines were hung full-length on the walls of the small seminar room and Triffitt led a group discussion on the process. There was a lot of talk about how people felt about their bodies. There was also discussion about how the process of creating the body-outline had brought up unexpected feelings and memories. In this way, these body-outlines, which, in my eye, closely resemble the body tracings in spirit possession rituals, were not only a means of expressing inner feelings about the outer self. The life-size outlines can be also be seen as layers of skin, flayed, so to speak, to reveal to the subject who now stands outside his ‘skin’, the sub-layers of trauma, sites of old and forgotten wounds. Take for example Stephen’s contribution to SDSI based on the body-image exercise:

there is a blue discharge, blue, blue, why blue? ... drugs? could it be a rosy, bumpy, hairy, painted nipple with a blue watery discharge when i press it. it has been kneaded and licked, and sucked, and bitten, and held, and stroked, and i have squeezed it before and the stuff was white, kind of opaque, clear but now, its blue. a pale blue, sometimes deeper. why? blue is not a colour of the body, well not usually, and i am nervous about it ...

it got cultured – nothing. doctor said he’d found someone with gonorrhoea of the nipple. not this one. just a blue discharge. blue. blue. blue. and i wonder if it will ever feel a pair of lips there again. and if i were to feel it, what if the bite, the suck, and then blue?
.... my lover boy used to.

*Stephen (extracts from automatic writing, October 1996) (SDSI)*

These contributions to the wider project of AIDS awareness from Stephen, Nellssún, and other participants in *SDSI* who use shock experience as the basis of their work, enables a different sort of recognition of the social and personal experience of HIV/AIDS. Put simply, these kinds of self-portraits are repetitions of the shock of bodily crisis and in their repetitiveness function as unconscious critiques of the original trauma. This type of aesthetic experience is usually associated with avant-grade art movements, in particular surrealism. In the AIDS art exhibition held at the National Gallery, Canberra, there were several renowned examples of this kind of art work, including, for example, works by Cindy Sherman and Derek Jarman. But, as I learnt in the self-image workshops, shock experience is not limited to the avant-garde.

Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of the image, in particular his idea of the dialectical image, asserts that even the most mundane objects of everyday life can have a revelatory function, and can under particular circumstances release the energies of loss and traumatic experience embedded within them. In his writings on the French, lyric poet, Charles Baudelaire, he argues that in an era in which we find an increasing ‘atrophy of experience’, Baudelaire’s poetry manages to express that loss through shock experience. He draws on Bergson’s theorisation of the structure of experience in memory, as well as Freud’s scientific model of trauma, to argue that because Baudelaire’s experience of modernity is one of shock it cannot be expressed consciously but only indirectly. Thus, starting from this position he goes onto suggest that Baudelaire expresses the crisis of experience in his unconscious portrait of himself as isolated, as defensive or, what Benjamin calls, ‘an attitude of combat’ (118).

Benjamin finds in this self-portrait not only a distorted image of Baudelaire’s individual experience of modernity but also his relation to the social, the mass or the crowd. Benjamin writes: ‘We may discern the image of the fencer in it (Baudelaire’s poetry); the blows he deals are designed to open a path through the crowd for him’. At the same time, Benjamin adds, this path cut through the crowd is precisely where the poet ‘wrests his poetic booty’ (120).
Benjamin’s image of experience in modernity is made visible in Baudelaire’s distorted self-portrait, in the figure of the fencer striking blows at the very people who he hopes to be his readers.

Following this line of thinking, I suggest that this group of conscious and unconscious self-representations provide a visual critique of the bodily crisis of HIV/AIDS. Both Michaels and Nellssun admit a kind of compulsion to record and represent their experience. But neither do so with the intent of generating sympathy or even identification. This is not a demand for recognition of like experience. On the contrary, it seems to me that their photographs serve as a means of protecting them from further ‘invasion’, by creating images of themselves as entirely unrecognisable. It is, however, a risky strategy. Such images could easily be regarded as counterintuitive – that is, a form of self-protection that is apparently as destructive as the invading forces the subject seeks to protect himself from. Hal Foster raises this problem in his discussion of the significance of Freud’s concept ‘the uncanny’ in surrealism:

On the one hand, the repetitions ... (of shock experience) are attempts respectively to overcome loss, to defend against shock (exogenous or external), to deal with trauma (endogenous or internal); in this regard they appear pledged to the binding or fusing of the subject. On the other hand, these repetitions may also be compulsive; as such they appear pledged to the undoing or defusion of the subject. So when does repetition serve binding and life, and when defusion and death? ... when in the search of the lost object, is the repetition driven by desire, and when by death.\textsuperscript{35}

Michaels’ diary is titled \textit{Unbecoming}. This term is a fitting description of the text’s deconstruction of the discourse of tidiness, of the forms of social stigmatisation and prejudice that surround the treatment of HIV and AIDS.\textsuperscript{36} The term also describes the text’s critique of the subject. In the shock image of his bodily transformation, Michaels undoes notions of the unitary, fixed subject. Likewise, the image Nellssun created of himself formed from hospital materials – tools of ‘invasion’ – opens up a view of the permeability of the body, of the self. As Foster suggests, these kinds of images that repeat the shock experience as means of protecting the subject from further trauma, are also, in the most profoundly contradictory way, in the service of death and destruction of the subject, suggesting to us that such images defeat their purpose. But Foster also convincingly argues that ‘the death drive may not be beyond the
pleasure principle but rather anterior to it: dissolution comes before binding – at the level of the cell as well as the ego’ (11). Foster’s theory is that the death drive, that is, the force that drives the compulsion to repeat, to restage trauma, ‘serves’ the pleasure principle. 37 He also suggests that when the pleasure principle and the death drive come together in repetition of shock experience it ‘suspends’ the contradiction outlined above; indeed, he argues ‘this is its very function’ (11). In other words, where there is destructiveness of the kind inherent to the repetition of trauma made visible in the kind of images I am discussing, there is also, always, the presence of the sexual drive – Eros. From this perspective, we can see that the main difference between images like Nixon’s portraits and self-images such as those created by Michaels, Nellssün and others from SDSI, is that the latter group of images are sexually charged, creating in viewers an ambiguous response: they are simultaneously attractive and repulsive. To this I would add that it is precisely in this contradiction, in this suspension of recognition, this moment of unrecognisability, that it is possible for viewers to become cognizant of an aspect of individual and social experience of HIV and AIDS that has been almost systematically effaced in representations of people with HIV and AIDS: that is, sexuality.

This can be seen in Michelle’s self-portrait, created in response to the trauma of her forced visibility (see fig.4). This self-portrait is, I suggest, another instance of people with HIV/AIDS turning the trauma of the experience of HIV and AIDS around as a means of protecting themselves from acts of further possession by opportunistic social forms of ‘Virus’, a means of demanding recognition without effacing difference. Speaking generally, people seem to like it best when the faces of AIDS are fully recognisable. The public responds positively to fame, whether it is the ‘HIV-outed’ face of American basketball superstar, Magic Johnson, or memorable images such as the saintly face of the late British royal celebrity, Diana, reaching out to touch the hand of an unidentified AIDS ‘sufferer’. 38 And if the faces of AIDS cannot be famous, then it would seem that ‘the public’ (and I use that term reservedly) generally prefer it if faces of AIDS appear agreeable, patient and gracious in death, as they do in so many feature stories in popular magazines and in popular art shows such as Sloan’s AIDS portrait project, Faces of AIDS. In contrast to these faces of AIDS, Michelle’s image of herself pregnant presents a face of AIDS that is neither familiar to us nor necessarily
agreeable.

In her black bra and with her round, pregnant belly in full view, Michelle appropriates the primary signs of female sexual difference, routinely fetishised in patriarchal societies, to create a powerful fetish of her own. This is a dangerous image in every sense of the word, for it raises in the viewer the assumed assumption that HIV equals death. Despite slogans such as ‘People Living with HIV’, despite what we know no about zero-conversion, we continue to project the face of the grim reaper onto people with HIV, and here, in this case, it is readily projected by many viewers onto an unborn child. For right-wing conservatives, Michelle’s self-image represents the face of ‘a carrier’. After it was publically revealed that Michelle intended to proceed with her pregnancy she was physically attacked, while others sprayed ‘Baby Killer’ on her front door in red paint. Even liberal supporters urged Michelle to terminate the pregnancy. The controversy stems therefore from not only an assumption that HIV equals death, but a widely held belief that people with HIV should not be sexually active. Michelle’s self-image is then not only a public expression of her joy and hope regarding her pregnancy but a demand for recognition of her rights, which are the same rights we afford to women who risk passing on genetic illnesses. In this way, Michelle’s self-image, like many other demands for recognition by people with HIV and AIDS, brings viewers face to face with the foundational question of what it means to exist. As with Nellssún’s question, ‘Am I dead sweetheart?’ (see fig.3) – a demand to recognise him as the living – Michelle’s self-portrait also performs a series of questions. In the text accompanying her image she writes: ‘i am not actually afraid of dying, it’s more that I’m afraid of not existing’. And no one, perhaps, is more aware than Michelle is of how the wider community has found ways – in all sorts of political guises – to turn people living with HIV into the faceless, no-names of a generic tragedy, to cast them in the role of the walking dead.
ENDNOTES

1. The acronym AIDS is used in this chapter up until 1989. After this time, the term HIV/AIDS is used.


4. Henceforth this project will be referred to as SDSI. All text quoted from SDSI is taken from published extracts in Therese Davis and Kathy Triffitt, ‘The Many Faces of AIDS’, *Face to Face With HIV/AIDS*, compiled by Jillian Duffield (University of Queensland Art Museum: Brisbane, 1998). The text is reprinted here in lower case, as it appears when exhibited. Most participants in SDSI are identified by their first name, though some participants did choose to use their family names.


6. Henceforth this presentation/video will be referred to as *Am I Dead Sweetheart?*

7. For a general introduction to this topic, see Gisèle Freund, *Photography and Society* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1980).


13. Woodall, Portraiture: Facing the Subject, intro, 15.


15. The physionotrace was invented by Gilles-Louis Chrétién in 1786. Similar to a parallelogram, it was a large machine that traced the contours of the face. These tracings were then transferred and engraved onto a metal plaque. The sitter was required to pose for only a short duration thus greatly reducing the cost of portrait making. See Freund, ‘Precursors to the Photographic Portrait’, Photography and Society, 9-18.


17. Peter S. Hawkins, ‘Stitches in Time’ in The Yale Review, 83.3 (1993). Hawkins writes: ‘In the absence of a cure, it was as if the representation of AIDS were the best revenge against the virus’, 5.

18. Crimp, Portraits of People with AIDS, 126.


23. Kathy Triffitt, Am I Dead Sweetheart?


33. Crimp, Cultural Activism, 270.


36. Michaels’ diary documents his long battle with the Director of the Australian Department of Immigration, who planned to deport him. In a report published in the diary, D. Crossland, the director of Migration and Visitor Entry Branch, acknowledged Michaels’ important contribution to Australian culture, but nevertheless refused to approve Michaels’ application for an extension of his visa. The report states: ‘... weighing against approval for further stay is his inability to meet the required health standards, the very expensive health costs which will be borne by the whole community in treating him, the use of health equipment and medical resources – possibly at the expense of an Australian citizen or resident – and the health risks involved with this dangerous disease’, 170.

37. Remember Michaels’ description of his compulsion to self-inscription as ‘biological’.

Self-images from SDSI, in *Am I Dead Sweetheart?*
Severed Head
Chapter 4
Dennis Potter’s Severed Head

The first episode in Dennis Potter’s posthumously produced television drama series *Cold Lazarus*, ends with a startling image: in the half light of an abandoned laboratory, we see a human head suspended in a large tank of blue liquid nitrogen struggle to open its eyes. This painstaking gesture triggers fragments of memories to be projected onto a giant liquid screen. From this swirl of colour and shapes there emerges an image of a face that is immediately recognisable as Daniel Feeld from *Karaoke* – the prequel to this series. Here, Feeld is recalling how whenever he was in pain or in fear as a child, he would tell himself a story and make believe that he was in the middle of a book: ‘the one bright, shining thing — ’. But before the writer can complete his sentence the image breaks up and we cut to a point of view shot: Feeld’s friends leaning into his face as he gasps for air, as he makes his final request: ‘No biographies!’ When this image also breaks up our gaze is directed back to the head in the tank. With its eyes wide open and its stare fixed directly into the camera, Potter’s severed head transforms into a face before our eyes.

The distinction between head and face has a long history in the signifying practices of European cultures. Heads have always served Europeans well as a symbol of power. The expression ‘heads rolling’ harks back to a not so distant past when heads literally did roll, when a rolling head was the ultimate act of the seizure of power. Tim Burton’s film *Sleepy Hollow* (1999) uses the most advanced computer effects available to make heads roll in his camp retelling of the legend of the headless horseman. Drawing on the tradition of the gory macabre, the film is a sentient reminder of the substance of heads. As heads bump and roll like bowling balls across the screen we are reminded that they are, indeed, the heaviest part of the body. This corporeal fact is also made graphic by British artist Marc Quinn, in his sculpture ‘Self’ (1991). The piece comprises nine pints of the artist’s blood frozen in a mould of his head. As Quinn notes, nine pints of blood is the normal amount of blood in an adult body.\(^1\) This is the thing about the head: it stands for the whole body, which is then easily extended to the Self.
In her essay ‘Beheadings’, Regina Janes argues that to remove a head is literally and physically to transfer the body of power. She writes that this process was most obvious in the French Revolution, when the revolutionaries reversed sovereign power by decapitating the King and his officers. She argues that the beheading of the King was not only a symbolic destruction of sovereign power but also, a physical transfer of authority. The symbolic power of decapitation was repeated time and again during the period proceeding the Revolution, known as the Terror. It was also repeated through the mass circulation of reproductions of drawings of the original event. Janes agrees with the French historian, Daniel Arasse, that representations of the beheading of the king were crucial to the revolutionary project of ‘domesticating’ the violence of the guillotine. This was done in two ways. First, there is what Janes calls, ‘historical images’, what we might call ‘wide-shots’, in which the violence of the transfer of authority is, she says, ‘offset by the weight of orderly troops and people to whom authority is now visibly transferred’ (247). The French Revolution also gave rise to a new genre of image-making: ‘the guillotine portrait’. Janes describes a typical portrait thus: ‘In profile like the head on a coin, Louis’s head is held by a graceful hand and forearm with plebeian bottons on the cuff. The hand grasps the head by the top of the curls; the neck drips blood, and the title is a warning: Matière à réflexion pour les jongleurs couronnées (A subject for crowned jugglers to reflect upon)’ (248). In this way, the latter group can be said to allegorise the work of the guillotine. Or as Arasse writes:

The Jacobin ideology sought by decapitation to put to death a representation of the body politic in which the head (of state) incarnated the nation in his own body. The guillotine separated this head from its body, and by exhibiting it in all its regal solitude systematically deprived it of its representative value.

But as with the severed head in Potter’s series, the true scandal of this close-up image of the transfer of power is that it makes the King visible as a face. Arasse convincingly argues by making the decapitated head visible as a spectacle, the guillotine becomes ‘a sort of portraitist, a veritable, indeed a terrifying, “portrait machine”’. Moreover, as a ‘portrait machine’, the guillotine makes the King more easily identifiable. By making him visible in this way – that is, as a subject of a portrait, as a face – the guillotine humanises the head and thereby reveals its own inhumanity. For this reason, this second type of revolutionary image
has been routinely censored by historians, for, as both Janes and Arasse note, the guillotine portrait exposes the untruth of the liberal myth that the radicals took no pleasure in the violence of decapitation.

The forcefulness of this second group of guillotine images also reminds us of the mythical and fetishistic potency of the head. To some extent, Potter’s fictional image of the severed head draws on myth. In her work on beheading, Janes writes of the powerful myth of the head of Medusa, a head Freud suggested embodies male fear of decapitation as castration (249). (I will look at Potter’s problematic relation to women below.) There is also the mythic head of Potter’s own namesake, St Denis, who was beheaded for his Christian beliefs. Legend has it that after decapitation, this martyr was seen walking around the streets holding his own head, covering it with kisses. The contradiction of this image did not escape the wit of a one time patient of the famous French psychiatrist, Pinel. In Body Works, Peter Brooks reports that when Pinel told the story of St Denis to a deluded clockmaker (who thought he had been decapitated and given the head of another) a cell mate piped up: ‘But with what did St Denis kiss his face? Perhaps his arse?’ And the same question may well be asked of Dennis Potter, saint of British television. In his final television drama series, Potter invites the viewer to recognise the head of the dead writer as a depersonalised symbol of the sovereignty of the imagination, a sacred vessel of consciousness and creativity. At the same time, the head is also a human face, the prime symbol of the individual. In this respect, the image I have described above of the severed head opening its eyes enacts the contradiction at the heart of Potter’s struggle for recognition as a television author. In the modern tradition Potter seeks recognition as an Author, the head being the site of consciousness and creativity. But as with other images we have seen in this study, Potter’s head turns on its author to reveal the face of the Author. For many critics Potter’s final series represents a final unmasking of the man behind ‘the mask of writing’. In the following I want to pursue a different line of argument, for what I see in the face of Potter’s severed head is not some true face of the author but rather the face of mortality, a face Potter spent his life trying not to see, a face that insistently haunted Potter’s writings.

Death of an Author
When prominent British television journalist Melvyn Bragg heard that his one time colleague, Dennis Potter, was dying of an incurable cancer he approached him with a proposal for a ‘final interview’. Bragg’s reaction to the news of Potter’s death might well be regarded as opportunistic, as he himself considers in his introduction to the published transcript of the interview (ix). However, putting the question of opportunism to one side, Bragg reports that the response to the programme was overwhelming:

We certainly delivered a television programme which moved and even rocked many of the people watching. Thousands of people reacted directly with phone calls and letters. For some it was a living example of great courage. For others it was an address to the nation in duplicitous and dangerous times. He spoke for sons and their fathers, England and its true traditions, for the present and its infections and yet its possibilities. Of his own work and his last remaining ambition, of the experience of being alive for now. (xiii)

In both the interview and the later introduction to the book Bragg expresses his admiration of Potter’s courage. He was also clearly overwhelmed by the death made visible in Potter’s state of physical pain. There are, for example, several occasions during the interview where Bragg stumbles over the words ‘death’ and ‘dying’, while in his introduction he writes, ‘There was a passion and a translucence before the fact of death and the dreadful pain which moved and impressed so many in a way that could have been achieved by no one else I can think of’ (xiii). For Bragg, the visible ‘fact’ of Potter’s death is not representative of some general condition of death and dying. Rather, he attributes this powerful affect to Potter’s unique person and manner. He reports that after the taping of the interview, one camera man came up to him and said, ‘That was a privilege’ (xiii). But in a media culture in which the sight of actual and virtual faces of the dying is an everyday occurrence, why exactly is this face memorable? Why is witnessing Potter’s dying regarded as a privilege?

There are some obvious and yet also some less straightforward answers to this question. In production terms, the interview was unprecedented. Potter was given privileges television affords to very few others, indeed, levels of treatment reserved for the most distinguished and the most powerful, such as, royalty and other heads of state. In recent times, the only other comparable event was the BBC’s Panorama interview with Diana Spencer, the
Princess of Wales. As with the Diana interview, there was minimal editing and little editorial intervention in Bragg’s interview with Potter. Bragg writes that his main purpose was ‘to give him (Potter) as much space and time and energy as possible for as long as possible ’(xi). In addition to waving the usual tight controls on time and content, the Without Walls interview had a different look from the standard television profile. The interview was taped in a fully visible television studio, with taping beginning as Potter entered the studio and ending only after Potter stood to leave, after he turned to Bragg and said, ‘At certain points, I felt I was flying with it ... I’m grateful for the chance. This is my chance to say my last words. So, thanks’ (28). Unmasking many of the usually hidden aspects of television, the production style corresponds to Potter’s barefaced presentation of himself as a man close to death, as a man with nothing to lose. The ‘naked’ style of the interview also serves to expose the relationship between two men who were evidently familiar with each other and with the medium of television.

Some critics were appalled by the evident familiarity of the piece. Sunday Times’ A.A. Gill claimed that the event was an indulgent ‘in-house eulogy’. He wrote:

Dotter [sic] represents something very special for a whole generation of television executives, the older producers and editors who still inhabit the top rungs of the big terrestrial franchise holders. They came to television from brilliant universities in the 1960s and 1970s, and they brought a lot of chips and baggage with them.  

It is true that Bragg openly identifies with Potter throughout the interview. In one question, for example, about the influence of Potter’s working class origins on his writing, Bragg comments, ‘Now, we’ve both been through that, and we know that things were wrong – awful and terrible and so on – but there’s a glow there ... ’ (7). In addition to sharing the experience of a British working class upbringing, Bragg and Potter also shared the route Gill snidely describes as a movement from ‘brilliant universities’ to television. The television critic Steve Grant claims that the real ‘target’ of this kind of comment or, what he calls ‘the backlash against Potter’, is the kind of television Potter was associated with – that is, television developed and fostered by people like Alan Yentob (the then Controller of BBC1) and Michael Grade (the then Chief Executive of Channel Four).  

Grant writes that high profile
columnists in the Murdoch-owned press, such as Gill and also A.N. Wilson (*Evening Standard*), despise Yentob and Grade for their egalitarianism and populism, ideals, which, Grant argues, Potter remained committed to throughout his career.

For Potter, British television drama in the nineteen sixties and seventies represented an era of cultural revolution when men (and it was mostly men) like him, like Grade and Yentob, turned to television in the hope of redeeming ‘a common culture’. In the interview with Bragg, Potter contrasts this era of ‘the kind of broadcasting on television which was such a glory in British life’ to today’s ‘formula-ridden television’ (8). Potter has always seen himself as a martyr to this common cause. As Bragg comments, ‘And I loved the way he (Potter) had poured his talent with apparent recklessness into television. It was a medium which was and still is often thought of as merely ephemeral and just the people’s forum’ (xii). We would be mistaken, however, to assume that Potter’s decision to write for television was simply ideological and/or altruistic (as Bragg’s comments lead us to believe.) Potter has explained time and again in interviews how his choice to abandon a career in politics and write for television was also motivated by a personal crisis: the need, as he has put it, to ‘re-create’ himself in the crisis of illness:

My disappointment working on the so-called Labour newspaper, the weirdness of the 1964 election, the crisis of illness, the feeling of failure, the intense despair – all this made me feel blocked and empty. I felt a kind of entropy of the emotions. When I lost the election, I couldn’t go back to the *Herald*, which by then had mutated into the pre-Murdoch *Sun*, though in those days it was still a broadsheet paper owned by *The Daily Mirror*. The need to re-create myself coincided with finding the way to do it, which was through drama. I could have gone the ‘theatre’ way or the ‘novel’ way, but something – maybe the guilt and anxiety about the gap between my origins and what I had become – steered me toward television. The place of varieties in the corner of the room.  

In this way, Gill’s dismissal of Potter’s work and his characterisation of the success of working class men is not only snide and childishly put, but it also misses the mark. I would argue that while it is correct to say that Potter’s history in television is a crucial element in the shaping of the television event of his death, we also need to recognise that the *Without Walls* interview is entirely in keeping with Potter’s history of using television as a way of mediating
the effects of the crisis of illness. And in this way, we might say that Potter and Bragg use 'the fact' of Potter's dying to do what they each (differently) do best – that is, make television.

For his part, Bragg's decision not to go the usual way such programmes do and use clips from Potter's work resulted in an innovative programme. As I said, the interview looks strikingly different from the standard interview format at that time. The deliberate underproduction combined with an almost constant focus on Potter's face created a powerful viewing experience. In Bragg's words:

... for more than 95% of the time we were concentrating on the face of a man facing his own life and death in a way which was to capture the emotions and the admiration of a considerable part of this nation. The simplicity and, if one can risk the word, the nakedness of it gave it luminous power. (x-xi)

But while Bragg was rendered silent – indeed, awestruck – by the nakedness of death exposed by the physical pain visible on Potter's face, Potter self-consciously appropriated that power taking the opportunity to do some fast talking on the things he seemed to care most about: his work and the medium of his work, television. The briefest survey of Potter's writing and the critical reception of his work, which includes many interviews with Potter, indicate that Potter conceived himself as an Author in the classic literary tradition. Here, the interview primarily focusses on issues of authorship. In fact, the interview is remarkably depersonalised. There is little mention of Potter's family, and at no point in the interview does Potter discuss the fact that his wife Margaret was also dying of cancer. The only real insight we get into Potter is through his thoughts on his own experience of dying, and what we see here is that even this experience is mediated through his conception of himself as an Author. For example, his often cited description of seeing a blossom from his window (from which the published transcript takes its title) is a metaphysical image, described by Grant in his review (mentioned earlier) as comparable to the imagery of Gerald Manley Hopkins. It is true to say, I believe, that what we see in this interview for 95% of the time, as Bragg calculates, is not simply the face of a person dying, but rather, the face of a dying Author – someone who can represent and interpret his experience of facing death in a literary way. This is not to suggest that Potter is somehow false in his presentation of self. My point is simply this: Potter uses the authority of
the physical ‘fact’ of his dying as a way of mediating recognition of himself as an Author. The question is, to what end?

If we take Bragg’s view on this issue, Potter’s imminent death serves to strip back the masks and fictions of the self, thus revealing some true unadorned, pre-cultural self. Bragg makes it evident in the introduction to his interview with Potter that he holds the modern view of death I discussed earlier – that is, as Kostenbaum puts it, death as ‘a self-concept’, as that which can uncover the hidden self that lies behind the masks of sociality. Everything about this interview, from its naked production style to the line of questioning Bragg pursues, supports this ‘modern’ view of death as a hermeneutic. But Potter himself appears to take a different view. His demand for recognition in death is, I suggest, a claim to the modern aesthetic point of view of the author immortalised in his work, a point of view in which the personality of the artist, as James Joyce puts it in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ‘passes into narration ... finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalises itself, so to speak.’ But herein lies Potter’s dilemma as a ‘television author’: the modern aesthetic view of the faceless text requires that the text has a life of its own, that it can outlive the author. However, television, as we know, is not durable, but just the opposite – that is, ephemeral. In order for Potter to make a successful bid for immortality, to be recognised as an Author, he must either seek another ‘vehicle’ of recognition, or, as he chooses to do, transform television into something durable.

Returning to the interview, we see that in the final moments of taping Potter seizes his opportunity to become immortal by making television history:

Bragg: When you knew you were ... you had cancer, you decided to write. One of the things you decided to do was write. What are you writing? We’re about a month from when you were told, from 14 February?

Potter: ... First of all I was on the point of delivery of something that had been commissioned quite a long time ago, called *Karaoke*, for the BBC...as soon as the news, as soon as I knew I was gonna die, I thought, I can’t deliver this, this...whatever I’m doing now is my last work, and I want to be proud...I want it to be, I want it to be fitting. I want it to be a memorial. I want to speak, I want to continue to speak ... (24-25)
Potter claims here that he is writing two final television series in order to create a ‘fitting memorial’. But he also wants the series to be more than the immortalisations of his creative genius. Rather, as he says, he wants ‘to continue to speak.’ In this sense, Potter’s bid for immortality involves not only having a posthumous existence in the form of his (faceless) writing, but also through the enactment of a form of power that Ross Chambers describes as ‘rhetorical presence’;\(^{10}\) – he seeks to continue to speak in a future in which he will no longer physically exist. To achieve this, Potter uses the fact of his dying as something to bargain with:

Potter: What I’d like to see, since it’s my last work, and since I have spent my life in television, that life has not been insignificant in television, I would like the BBC’s part (Karaoke) to be shown first by the BBC and repeated the same week on Channel 4, and then that inherited audience for the second part, Cold Lazarus, which would have some continuity in terms of character, but could still be ...stand separately, obviously, to be shown first by Channel 4 and repeated by BBC. (27)

Potter’s request in this final section of the interview regarding the production of his two final television drama series transformed what may have been an interesting but inevitably forgettable television – in the sense that most television is forgettable – into an incident that sparked what was to become the television event of Dennis Potter’s death. BBC 1 and Channel 4 immediately announced that they would grant Potter his dying wish, undertaking to co-produce what turned out to be the most complex and expensive co-production in the history of British television drama to date. It would appear that Potter was all too aware of the fact that becoming immortal requires more than excelling in your chosen field. As Bauman reminds us, the real power to grant immortality lies with the living. Here, having struck a deal with the powerful executives of Britain’s leading networks and secured a place for himself in television history, Potter found himself faced with the task of securing a similar form of recognition from television viewers. As he intimates in the Bragg interview, this was his last shot at making something lasting, something of historical significance. And as we shall see in the following, Potter, being Potter, allegorises this dilemma in his final interconnected television drama series, an allegory that can, in my view, be summarised as a tension between the head and face; voice and name.
Karaoke: The mask of writing

I do not believe what writer’s say about themselves, except when they think they are not saying it about themselves. This is not necessarily because they have less probity than others ... but because the masking of the Self is an essential part of the trade. Even, or especially, when ‘using’ the circumstances, pleasures and dilemmas of one’s own life. Dennis Potter

Karaoke, the first of Potter’s two posthumously produced drama series, is regarded by a number of critics as Potter’s final unmasking of himself. John Cook suggests in his book length study of Potter’s work that Karaoke is the piece in which ‘the “Author” will have demonstrably made the “nearest” approach to himself’.11 Karaoke tells the story of the last week in a film writer’s life. It is a thriller, based on the protagonist’s discovery that the plot of his latest film script is unfolding around him in the events of his everyday life. While the film’s production team try to minimise the damage caused by these ‘coincidences’, including the discovery of a real life replicate of the villain in the film, the writer struggles with the concept of predestination. Using ‘karaoke’ as the key metaphor, the series marks a return to Potter’s ‘signature’ technique of lip-syncing. Or, as Potter says, ‘singing along’ is a metaphor for life. In the Without Walls interview, he explained it this way:

... there’s the music, and you have your little line, you can sing it, and everything is written for you, and that is the way life appears to a lot of people and feels to a lot of people. For some you haven’t got much space, and even the space you’ve got, although you use your own voice, the words are written for you. (24-25)

In this respect, karaoke is a metaphor for the dying writer’s response to the news of his imminent death and how this news causes him to review his relationship to writing. Karaoke is, as Cook says, uncannily similar to Potter’s own situation. But does this self-referentiality constitute an unmasking of the self. After all, behind which mask do we find the face of Potter? Feeld the writer? Balmer the fictional director? The leading actor in Feeld’s film, Ian Diarmind, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Potter? Or, what about the aged-face of a
silent Muslim woman who appears intermittently throughout the series as a ‘deaths-head’
figure, and who, at one point, shouts repeatedly that she is aged sixty-one – the same age as
Potter? Trying to locate the real Potter in the ever-changing masks of *Karaoke* is an
impossible task, for as W. Stephen Gilbert argues in his biography of Potter, in Potter’s work:

The masks are slipped on so expertly – or is it unconsciously? – that you lose
track of where the latest transformation occurred ... so the assumption of
masks, the playing of games with the reader, viewer or interviewer becomes a
prevailing method. It is a process of concealment by seeming revelation. He
eludes as he illudes as he alludes.12

Putting Gilbert’s psychological question of whether Potter creates masks consciously
or unconsciously to one side, we might instead focus on the function of this ruse in relation to
Potter’s overall desire for recognition. To do this we need to look at the unique status Potter
had as television author and examine how this status was mediated through his relation to the
viewing audience. As we saw in the earlier section of this chapter, Potter had a reputation of
using television as a way of redeeming common culture. From the beginning of his career as a
television writer, Potter also had a special status in television culture as an author. These two
forms of recognition are not unrelated. In 1987, Rosalind Coward responded to the then recent
season of Potter plays and films on British television by raising the question of television
authorship. Analysing the publicity and reception of the event, she argued that ‘we can
witness the simultaneous ‘literary’ commitment to the idea of an individual author, and the
desire to elevate the status of television through the existence of ‘great’ television writers.13
For Coward, the desire on the part of those within and outside of television to use authorship
as a way of raising the status of television to that of art, limits our understanding of the
specificity of television and of what individual programmes can contribute to that
understanding. A case in point for Coward is the reception of Potter’s drama series, *The
Singing Detective*, first broadcast on BBC television in the UK in 1986. She argues that ‘far
from “authorship” being necessary to guarantee significance, the concept, if anything, seems
to get in the way, and block recognition of some of the truly radical aspects of the series’ (84).
For Coward, the most radical thing about this series was that it can be seen to ‘emphatically
reveal the importance of the viewer as the place where the meaning of the text ultimately (if anywhere) resides’ (86).

Despite Coward’s convincing arguments, popular criticism of Potter’s work continues to focus on the question of authorship. For example, Cook’s critical study, mentioned earlier, directly contests Coward’s critique of the problematic construction of Potter as a television author. A proponent of autuerism, Cook’s text focuses on textual and production processes. He makes the argument that the system in which Potter worked ‘implicitly encouraged the writer to think of him or herself as self-expressive artist’ (7). He writes: ‘In contrast to Coward’s critiques ... individual thematic and stylistic continuities can be shown to exist and are readable across the range and variety of Potter’s writing for the medium’ (7). Following Potter’s own assessment of his work, Cook’s thesis is that the origin of Potter’s work can be found in his affliction. He argues that Potter’s physical crisis was primarily a spiritual crisis and traces the significance of this in Potter’s work. He says the crisis is found in early work, such as the controversial Brimstone and Treacle, as a despair in illness that takes the form of a preoccupation with Old Testament notions of ‘The Fall’. He also claims that Potter’s first novel Hide and Seek marks a major shift in Potter’s spiritual development. Cook suggests that this self-reflexive, self-conscious novel – about a man who believes someone is writing about him, an author who admits to manipulating a character, and so on – is a model of the spiritual movement toward ‘hope’ that continues in Potter’s later diverse writings (302). Cook writes:

Disease took (Potter) out of the real world of politics and current affairs (a world with which ... he had already become disillusioned) and made him more concerned with the inner life of the individual and ultimately, with spiritual questions about the nature of personal suffering, death and God. In that sense, though terrible in its physical nature, Potter’s disease performed a useful function for him. Issues of politics and social class which had pre-occupied him as a young man paled into insignificance beside the need to survive and to look into himself in his attempt not only to cope emotionally with the fact of illness but by so doing possibly to find a cure. (19-20)

Cook’s Neo-romantic view can thus be summarised as an attempt to sever the politico-social aspects in Potter’s work from the artistic/creative aspects by claiming that Potter’s relation to language was solely mediated by a religious sensibility gained in the crisis of illness.
While I do not agree with Cook’s thesis, I confer with him that it is difficult to avoid the figure of the Author in Potter’s writing, including the many commentaries he has made on his own work. As Coward has suggested, Potter’s construction of himself as Author and the part that this construction has played in the reception of his work, cannot be overstated. Moreover, Potter’s self-conscious construction of himself as Author relates to precisely the aspects of Potter’s writing that Cook seeks to suppress: that is, the social and political dimensions of Potter’s work. In the most recent book-length study of Potter, Glen Creeber observes how, ‘It is surprising that a man who consistently referred to himself as ‘reclusive by nature’ feels the need to give so many interviews, often going over profoundly personal details and facing the same biographical questioning’.14 Creeber also makes the important point that by the end of his life, Potter had very much become a celebrity, ‘giving interviews not only to British “art programmes” like Omnibus, Arena and The South Bank Show, but chat shows like Whicker! And Wogan’(13). Adding to this point, I would argue that in the later years of his life Potter’s status as a celebrity in British cultural life overshadowed public perception of him as an Author. In this latter perspective Karaoke appears to be not so much an unmasking of the ‘real’ Potter but as a use of the mask of writing as a final, public demand for recognition of the sovereignty of the Author, for de-personalisation in the age of celebrity and notoriety.

As the plot of Karaoke unfolds, we discover first that Feeld is dying. We also see a number of coincidences emerge that lead Feeld to believe that his script is shaping real life events. He discovers that there is a ‘real-life’ thug called Pig Mailion, who, like the villain in the film, runs a karaoke club in the East End of London. There is also a hostess called Sandra, who works at Maillon’s club. And again, there is ‘real-life’ blackmail and duplicity occurring in the cutting-room. In a self-conscious reference to Potter’s own life, it turns out that Balmer, the fictional director, is engaged in an obsessive, extramarital affair with the lead actress from the film who, unbeknown to him, is connected to Mailion and is planning to blackmail him. This complication in the already weighed down plot can be read as Potter’s public explanation for his bad judgement in Blackeyes, the series that marked the beginning of Potter’s notoriety. The rumours that surrounded the production of that series made Potter a familiar face on the pages of UK tabloids, branding him with the tag, ‘Dirty Den’. The series itself added to his infamy. Critics at the time generally agreed that the work was sexist, gratuitous and indulgent. Potter took every opportunity he could to defend what he called the sovereignty of the
imagination and, by implication, his reputation. When he gave the James McTaggart memorial lecture at the Edinburgh International Television Festival in 1993, Potter struck out at television executives and viewing audiences alike. He argued that there was no longer a place for his style of quality television. He blamed free-market privatisation for the ‘dumbing down’ of television viewers. He claimed that viewers have become dulled by formulaic television. ‘The turned off TV set’, he said, ‘picks up a direct or true reflection of viewers, subdued into a glimmer on its dull, grey tube.’ But notoriety is a vicious circle: the more Potter protested against the tabloidisation of television, the more his reputation as an Author faded in contrast to his increasing notoriety.

Potter’s attempt to regain the recognition he had once had is expressed in Karaoke as a change of heart. In the first two episodes, Feeld is preoccupied with controlling the effects of his writing. Two thirds of the way through the series a major shift occurs: Feeld learns that he did not in fact invent the characters in his film but rather, the coincidences that have led him to believe that his words ‘are out there’, as he puts it, constitute a phenomenon he calls, ‘cryptonesia.’ It turns out that the story he had written is based on a newspaper report he once read and had long since forgotten. In the face of this discovery, the author confronts his impotence. Hence, when his evasive doctor suggests to him that he should put his affairs in order and that he should do anything that he’s been specially wanting to do, Feeld’s responds by starting a word-play in which writing and life converge as one and the same thing:

Feeld: Well I was about to write a screenplay about virtual reality and cryogenics, a frozen head, you know, and medical student types, I suppose...
Doctor: And how long does it take you this scribble, scribble, scribble?
Feeld: About 12 weeks and a bit. I usually reckon on 88 days. Any chance of putting the final full stop in place. I mean there’s not all that much point in say getting two thirds of the way through. I don’t get paid by the word or per page – More’s the pity!
Doctor: I couldn’t guarantee that you would be able to finish.

At this point in the series, there is a long silence during which time a close-up reveals a look that crosses Feeld’s face like some seismic change of heart. Finally, Feeld says that he
will have to make the screenplay a bit shorter, with a nice, easy plot. And the word game resumes

Feeld: *There's an old favourite, for example, about who it is you would kill and help out humanity if you had say, eight and a bit weeks more or less to go.*
Doctor: *Yes — I've often wondered who I would execute if in such a circumstance. Apart from the secretary of State Health, of course.*
Feeld: *Of Course!*
Doctor: *Yes, I would say that such a plot was about right.*

In this exchange between Feeld and his doctor, it becomes clear that Feeld is dying of an incurable disease. Feeld also expresses his change of heart about writing — his life long profession. Recapping the plot of *Karaoke*, Feeld tells his doctor that when he was in pain he went ‘kinda dippy’. He says that he thought a play he had written had ‘somehow gotten out into the world like a contagious disease — my words, my script, wandering about out there in front of me.’ As we know from his interviews, the idea of words having a life of their own, existing in some ‘bracketed-off’ space, was crucial to Potter’s survival of his illness, one of the ways in which he managed the excruciating pain of arthropathy.

This is different from the attitude William Burroughs takes. As we saw in the previous chapter, Burroughs’ uses fiction as means of being recognised as other than himself. Potter, on the other hand, spent his life inventing himself as sovereign Author, and seeking recognition of that sovereignty as some kind of compensation for the pain and crisis of illness. Here, however, the writer faces the fact that his words are not ‘out there.’ Shocked by this realisation that his words cannot cure him, the writer claims that he now realises that ‘there’s been another story going on all the time.’ In this sense, we could say that *Karaoke* exposes writing as a sham, as a mask that cannot in the end substitute for real life. It would seem there is only the life story:

Feeld: *I always used to tell myself a story when I was in fear as a child and believe I was in the middle of this kind of book, the one, bright book, which was the shape of meaning… I can tidy up all the bits and bods, find the shape… I’m back in charge of my own story. I can take control now. I’ve got it back in my own hands. I know what to do now.*
In the final scene of the series, Feeld, having tidied up his affairs, as they say, makes his way to the East End karaoke club where the story began. In a final gesture of self-reference, beautifully realised by Renny Rye’s direction and Albert Finney’s performance, the writer lip-syncs the melancholic tune, ‘Pennies from Heaven’ before killing off the villain Pig Mailion with a single shot from the gun he stole from Sandra. In terms of the plot, Feeld’s violent act of killing (or, in his doctor’s words, ‘executing’) is justified by the fact that the death of this ‘real-life’, woman-bashing villain serves to free the writer’s ‘love-interest’ Sandra from the power of this man who, as she puts it ‘can do whatever he wants’. Or does it? Taking a second look we can say that Potter’s attempt to be recognised in death as a self-sacrificing television author staged here as an artistic suicide is, in fact, a huge cheat. In the end, Potter does not abandon writing. Just the opposite, for the final scene of Karaoke is an assertion of the Neoromantic notion of the author’s social responsibility to provide semantic control.

In Authorship and Criticism, Dugald Williamson provides a critique of a tradition of criticism that foregrounds historical and social variables connected to the genesis of works of art. He says that this kind of criticism appears to be anti-Romantic but really it re-inscribes the dialectical framework of Romanticism (form/content) as a dialectic between individual and society’ (16). Citing D.T. Laurenson and A. Swinengeood’s The Sociology of Literature as an example of this style of criticism, Williamson points out that in that study the author is constructed in ‘a dialectic between individual and capitalist society’ as an individual who alone can withstand the pressures of the crisis of alienation. As Williamson writes: ‘the Romantic notion that the author is endowed with special insight and power is given a new form. He or she has the talent to “express a wide experience of life on all social levels” and to grasp the dynamic historical forces which govern those forms of experience and of which others remain more or less unconscious’ (18). The author is constructed as a social conscience of society. Or, as Williamson continues: ‘It is by responding fully to the historical fragmentation of the self that the artist transcends her or his own position, and expresses the wholeness of individual experience in a form that is itself unified and universally valid’ (18). In this way we could say that the unmasking of the mask of writing in Karaoke does not reveal some true picture of Potter, but the construction of himself as a very particular figure of author-critic, namely, martyr-saviour. Earlier I explained how Cook argues that Potter’s crisis of illness led to a spiritual crisis. Here, I am suggesting that throughout his life Potter used the
crisis of his illness as the ‘authentic’ basis of his critical stance on the role of author in media culture.

As the first part of Potter’s final critical stand on the state of media culture, *Karaoke* promises the viewer that he intends to continue to provide for him or her in a future in which he will no longer exist. The dying author is willing to sacrifice himself for the good of humankind, but only if, in return, the viewer agrees to recognise the sovereignty of his imagination and thereby grant him the impossible power of semantic control. This contract between the writer and the viewer is staged in *Karaoke*’s love scene: Feeld tells Sandra that her all of her troubles are over because in the event of his imminent death he will generously provide for her and her disfigured mother. In return, however, she must promise to behave as he insists she should. ‘I promise, I bloody promise’, she says, in her best cockney accent. Convinced by her apparent sincerity, Feeld tells this young, attractive working class woman who has, in the span of a week, become the love of his life, that he has written down ‘in a clear way, in a language that you will understand’, what she is to do when he is no longer around to protect her. He then asks her to seal the deal with a kiss. But once the kiss is done with, Sandra turns on her heels and tells the writer she intends to carry out her plan to kill the villain who can, as she once said, ‘do anything he wants’. What Sandra does not know is that the writer had predicted that she could not be trusted to accept the ending he arranged and thus taken the precaution of stealing her gun. With the loaded gun in hand, the writer makes his way to the karaoke club, sings one last, melancholy song – *Pennies from Heaven*, of course – before proceeding to execute the villain with a single shot to the head. Redeeming himself as the saviour in/of the plot, the writer reveals his conception of the Author as an all-powerful form of social conscience, as saviour of television viewers.

*Cold Lazarus: When the head turns ...

Here’s the thing: having killed off the Author in *Karaoke*, Potter is left without a voice to dictate the terms of his recognition in death. This apparent voicelessness is, I believe, precisely the reason for Potter’s second series *Cold Lazarus*. In this series, Potter turns for the first time in his career to science-fiction as a way of reviving the dead Author. And the result is fresh and innovative. The story of *Cold Lazarus* takes place some three hundred and seventy four years in the future and is set in and around a pharmaceutical laboratory where the
cryogenically frozen head of the dead writer from the former series is the object of scientific experiments in memory retrieval. The series opens with a break through in the research process – a team of researchers watch in awe as the first transmissions of the head’s visual and aural memories are projected onto a giant liquid screen. Responding to the ‘wonder’ of the sight of a retrieved grab of a football final from 1974, the head of the research unit tells her team that these fragments offer them access to ‘an authentic past’, and even perhaps ‘an escape’. But an escape from what? It turns out that the ‘Lazarus Operation’, as the memory-retrieval project is known, takes place in a future where existence is entirely mediated. A thinly disguised allegory of a future world wholly dominated by private entertainment enterprise, *Cold Lazarus* is Potter’s pessimistic view of television culture. The head of the writer/Potter is raised from the dead in order that Potter can make a final critical intervention into the future of television, a final plea to the viewer for recognition in death as a martyr-saviour.

We quickly learn that life in the future is an Orwellian nightmare, in which every aspect of daily life is under surveillance. This is not quite a totalitarian state, though, as we learn that there are two competing forces. First there is the pharmaceuticals consortium that funds the ‘Cold Lazarus’ project. It is controlled by the overbearing, oversexed, penny-pinching Martina Masden. Her rival is David Siltz, who is clearly modelled on the television and print mogul, Rupert Murdoch. In true science-fiction tradition, we also learn that there are plans afoot for a social revolution. The ‘Lazarus Operation’ is about to become the site of a struggle for the future of this fantasy media world. In this way, the head is at the centre of a fierce ideological battle, which despite its wonderful kitsch setting, is predictably twentieth century in nature. First, there are the two media moguls who see the head’s value only in terms of capital gain. Then there is the group of scientists who, like the hermeneutic critics Potter so despised, try to access the authentic experience that they believe resides in the head’s memories in the name of knowledge. Completely powerless in its suspended state, the fate of the head rests with the revolutionary group *RON* (Reality or Nothing). Their plan is to rescue the head from invasions of any kind. For RON, the head must be protected as a sacred site of consciousness and human spirit.

The idea of the head as the site of consciousness and imagination, as the primary site of individuation, is fundamental to the science of cryonics – the practice of preserving either the whole body or just the heads of the newly dead, in the hope that they will some time in the
future be revived. Cryonics lies somewhere in the space between science and fiction. A special episode of *Quantum* on technologies of immortality, explains that the science of cryonics was first developed by US scientist, Robert Ettinger.\textsuperscript{17} The inspiration for Ettinger’s scientific process of freezing heads in liquid nitrogen was a 1930s science fiction called *The Jameson Satellite* – a story about a scientist who orbits the earth in a sealed satellite for many years only to be later rescued and revived by aliens. By adapting this model of life suspended in outer-space for a conception of life after death, cryonics posits the space of death as a suspension of time. For cryobiologists and their supporters, who are mainly future ‘patients’, or ‘cryonaughts’, as they call themselves, being frozen is a means of avoiding the finality of death. One cryobiologist and well known science fiction writer, Gregory Benford, describes cryogenics as a process similar to sleep. He believes that in some future time we will be able to ‘re-boot’ frozen/sleeping consciousness in the way consciousness is, to use his term, re-booted every morning when we wake. In this metaphor, time is suspended in death in the same way that we become unaware of time while sleeping. But perhaps the most interesting thing about the cryogenic view of the head is the fact that cryobiologists suggest that a ‘re-booted’ consciousness will know itself in some future time. That is to say, not only is time suspended in the freezing process, but this process is also a means of preserving self-consciousness. In the *Quantum* special, Benford explained that the idea of cryonics is that the ‘patient’ – ‘Let’s call him Fred’, he said – goes to sleep as Fred and wakes up (meaning he is revived) as Fred’. Despite this vision of the future being a new-world in which anything is possible, including cheating death, the technologies of immortality are very much grounded in a transcendental philosophy of the self.

In *Cold Lazarus*, the question of self-sameness in death is raised in several ways. In the final scenes of the series, members of *RON* sacrifice their lives to protect the head/the writer/Potter from further invasions. Herein lies the symmetry of the two series: in *Karaoke*, the writer sacrificed his life for the sake of the sovereignty of the imagination. Here, identifying with the revolutionaries, the viewer is also asked to sacrifice his or her life for that sovereignty. Put simply: Potter wanted to be recognised as the Author of his work, the genius of great British television. At the same time, he wants this recognition to exclude any form of personalisation: the author dies so that he might live on, free of intrusion. He wants the viewer to recognise him as St Denis was once recognised, that is, as a mouth/ voice without a face.
Potter's final escape from the probing into his head that he feared so greatly, is enacted as a spectacular release of the severed head from its suspended state between life and death. Unplugged, the head spills forth its final images. Using special digital effects that reportedly cost in the vicinity of £400,000\(^{18}\), this image of death as a release from critical invasions takes the form of a montage of fragments from the writer's/Potter's memory: scenes from Potter's many drama series, spectacular images from early cinema, as well as other fragments from popular culture, including televised football finals. The sweep of colour culminates predictably in a final wash of white light that serves to signal the end of the tunnel of the passage from life to death. Over a symphony of soundtracks from Potter's series and the loud cheers of a football final crowd, the writer embraces death by letting out a loud, resounding, Joycian 'Yes!'

But of course this is not the end. As I have suggested in my introduction, the face has an extraordinary capacity to turn on itself. Here, despite all Potter's greatest efforts to ensure his control over the semantic meaning of his final piece of work, the ending is, like all endings, open to other forms of reading. In this case, the fantastic image of the severed head that Potter invented as a lesson in the sovereignty of the imagination can be seen to turn on its author to release a very different view than that which its author intended. But then, according to Walter Benjamin, this is the nature of allegorical objects. In The Origin of German Tragic Drama, Benjamin argues that allegory is more than an aesthetic form or symbol.\(^{19}\) It is not 'a mere mode of designation' (162), 'a playful illustrative technique' (162). In his analysis of the work of German allegorical poets, he shows that allegory is 'a form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is' (162). This is most clearly seen in the allegorical poet's use of the 'death's head' (skull) as an emblem of history. Benjamin writes:

Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face — or rather in a death’s head. And although such a thing lacks all 'symbolic' freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity — nevertheless, this is the form in which man’s subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its decline. The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance. (166)
For Benjamin, the baroque emblem of the death’s head is a dialectical image. It can be read as the mortification of human life, but it is also an image of ‘nature in decay’ – nature’s subjection to the power of death. To see allegorically, he argues, is to see the imprint of history, to see how history survives in the world of dead or discarded things. The allegorical object does not therefore signify (designate), but it reveals in its two-facedness the processes of signification. Benjamin writes:

In the field of allegorical intuition the image is a fragment, a rune. It’s beauty as a symbol evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it. The false appearance of totality is extinguished. For the eidos disappears, the simile ceases to exist, and the cosmos it contained shrivels up. The dry rebuses which remain contain an insight which is still available to the confused investigator’ (176).

Following on from Benjamin’s conception of allegory, we can see that when Potter’s severed head releases its supposedly secreted memories of a past life, as it makes its passage from the world of the living to that of the dead, it is emptied of any sense of self. The head is de-faced. Or to use Benjamin’s term, it becomes a ‘death’s head’, a ‘fossil’ of a past life. But as Benjamin argues, it is in the precise moment of being emptied of signification that the hollowed-out death’s head opens up the allegorical way of seeing. From this perspective, Potter’s severed head turns on itself to reveal its own history of signifying. The story invites us to see the images that pour forth from the head as references to a reality that lies behind the fiction, as references to Potter the man – evidence of ‘a glorious past in television history’, as Potter once said, an era in which Potter reigned as television’s one and only Author. But what is also revealed in this montage of memories is the history of this kind of signifying. As discontinuous fragments, the images released by the head in the throws of death do not so much represent an era of television and cinema, but rather, they embody the modern experience of mediated existence: grabs from televised football finals, memorable key images from Potter’s drama series, such as Pennies from Heaven and The Singing Detective, the unforgettable spectacle of carnival and early cinema. Seen as images of television itself these discarded fragments are not some kind of representative sample of a pre-Murdoch authentic past in television. On the contrary, they are images of the history of television in the present: we see in the most obvious way that television itself is very much the data of individual and collective memory. We can also see that this is a different conception of history from the notion of tradition that uses in his bid for immortality.
The television event of Dennis Potter’s death, including the two final drama series, succeeded in securing a place for Potter in the history of television. But at what cost? If anything, we might say that the events resulted in what Zygmunt Bauman calls ‘the destruction of immortality’. And, as Bauman argues:

With its arch enemy, immortality, safely out of the way – in the geriatric ward, if not yet in the coffin – mortality creeps back uninvited. Its face blinks in each ephemeric moment which promises more than it can deliver and vanishes before it can be taken to court. One cannot erase this face. One can only blot it out with a thick coat of lurid paint. (199)

It is generally agreed by critics, including Potter’s most loyal fan, Steve Grant, that Potter’s two final interconnected series were not the stars in his crown Potter once hoped they might be. Rather, they turned out to be a spectacular event, ‘for the duration’. Potter’s extravagant wish to see a co-production between rival channels ended disastrously. Given the low ratings and the many problems involved in co-production, we are unlikely to see a project of this kind again (McNulty, 1996). Further, by staging the event as he did, including, as I have argued, exploiting the fact of his dying, Potter added to his notoriety. On the recent occasion of Potter’s birthday, BBC radio’s tribute to him, listed his ‘great’ works. For the most part, however, the segment focussed on the event of his death and his ‘memorable performance’ in the interview with Melvyn Bragg: the face of an author is, here, displaced by the ghoulish face of death. But it is this emphasis on the face of death that, I believe, redeems the work and the event by bringing us closest to ‘the real stuff’ of Potter’s contribution to television. Dennis Potter wanted to be recognised as a saviour of the working class; he hoped his ‘quality’ television would release working class viewers from the chains of class imprisonment in Great Britain, just has education had once served to release him. He did this by writing the story of his liberation over and over through a myriad of different masks, all the while trying to keep in question the ‘true’ face of Dennis Potter. In the final series it becomes obvious that the face Potter spent his life concealing behind the mask of writing was in fact a faceless ‘death’s head’. Yet, as I argued, in the end, it is this death’s head, this relic of television, that provides us with a clear picture of the significance of television in modern life, for it is in the televisual snatches that spill forth from the head that we can see the fragmentation and alienation of contemporary existence, and it is in the ephemerality of television that we see the transitoriness of human existence.
ENDNOTES


5. Dennis Potter, Seeing the Blossom – Two Interviews and a Lecture (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994).


15. Potter’s lecture is republished in Potter, Seeing the Blossom, 52.


Chapter 5
Name Without A Face

When Eddie Mabo’s widow, Bonita, addressed a public meeting on native title, she closed by asking people to remember the man behind the name, to recognise ‘Mabo’ as her husband’s name.¹ On one hand Bonita Mabo’s imperative can be seen simply as an invocation of the western tradition of recalling the names of the dead as a way of honouring them. On the other hand, the necessity for the widow of the man whose name is enshrined in Australia’s most important legal case to make such an appeal points to the disastrous effects of over-naming. Since the High Court’s judgement in Mabo and others v. The State of Queensland (No2) (1992)² ‘Mabo’ has become a household word in Australia. As anthropologist and witness for the plaintiffs, Jeremy Beckett, suggests in his commentary on the cultural implications of the judgement, media and politicians have added a new word to the Australian vernacular.³ "’Mabo’", he says, ‘has come to stand for the whole issue of Aboriginal land rights, as in “Mabo law”, “Mabo deal”, “Mabo show” and of course, “Mabo madness”; if it has not already become a verb, it soon will’(7). For Beckett, the overuse of ‘Mabo’ in popular discourses has, among other effects, ‘overshadowed’ the fate of the leading litigant (7). In short, ‘Mabo’ is a name without a face. And it is precisely this cultural oversight, this gap between a judgement and a historical subject, that I want to open up for discussion in the following analysis of Trevor Graham’s biographical documentary film, Mabo – Life of an Island Man (1997).⁴ I am interested in how the film presents events following the High Court judgement as a de-facement of ‘Mabo’ and how its attempt to compensate for that violence by giving the name a face relates to the wider politics of recognition that frame native title in Australia.

There are two conceptualisations of defacement of relevance to my analysis: Paul de Man’s idea of de-facement as ‘a figure of reading’,⁵ and also, a more literal conceptualisation of the term developed by anthropologist, Michael Taussig, which I have discussed already in the introduction to this thesis and in chapter two. It is not my intention in this analysis of Graham’s film to set one conceptualisation of defacement against the other. Rather, my aim is simply to show how one kind of defacement operating in the film gives way to a second; how the popular or, if you like, dominant reading of the film as the giving of a face to a name opens up a second, less noted perspective on the relationship between name and face.
Up Close and Personal

When Mabo – Life of an Island Man was first screened at the 1997 Sydney International Film Festival, it received a standing ovation that lasted more than five minutes and was voted Best Documentary Film. Since then, it has won numerous other national and international film awards. It has also had a successful national theatrical release and was recently screened on national television (ABC) in prime time. Reviews indicate that this positive reception is largely due to the distinctive personal style of the film. John Ryan, for example, writes: ‘Moving away from his earlier treatment of Mabo-the-case, Graham’s film has brought Mabo-the-Man much closer to us’. The film uses first person narration, recounting throughout details about the making of the film and the relationship between the filmmaker and its subject. The film makes great use of testimony by family members and friends and it also includes a number of re-enactments in which Mabo’s voice is brought to life by the excellent dramatic skills of Bob Masa. Indeed, a number of reviews and feature articles suggest this intimate style of filmmaking brings us closer to the significance of the historic judgement than a more conventional documentary could. Tom Ryan encapsulates this view in his description of the film as ‘an intimate history’.

But what exactly is an intimate history? What is at stake when historical discourse is replaced by ‘up close and personal’? What are the pedagogic implications of a history designed to move its audience? I ask this latter question because although the film diverges from the documentary principle of (assumed) objectivity it is nevertheless fuelled by the ideal of national education. That is, documentary as a modern, social form that assumes the ‘task’, as Terry Morden once put it in his discussion of documentary film, of ‘guid(ing) citizens through the complexity of modern life towards an active role in the democratic processes’. The purpose of the following analysis is not thus to simply assess the artistic merits of the film. Rather, as part of this study into how processes of recognition are mediated by cultural forms, I want to consider how the film organises non-indigenous spectators into a particular affective response to the death of Eddie Mabo through the language of intimacy. Certainly, the intimate style of Mabo – Life of an Island Man fits the definition of what Lauren Berlant calls ‘forms of intimate attachment’; attachments which, she argues, increasingly replacing and transforming former relations between the public sphere and the private. She says that forms of attachments, such as those between ‘nations and citizens’ or ‘churches and the faithful’, or
even more mundane forms, such as ‘the intimacy between people who walk dogs or who swim at the same time each day’, have generated ‘a specific aesthetic’. On the nature of this aesthetic, she makes the point that intimacy is an expression that relies on or is a response to what she describes as ‘shifting registers of unspoken ambivalence’ (286). She gives the example of lovers: ‘When things become ambivalent between lovers’, she says, ‘they resort to the intimacy of talking about the relationship’ (287). Likewise, she continues, ‘when citizens feel that the nation’s consented-to qualities are shifting away’ they also seek the language of intimacy (286-287).\footnote{13}

In media reports at the time of the release of his film, Graham is often quoted as saying that his aim was to tell a personal story and to move people. He also clearly states that this aim is politically motivated. He seeks to mediate a particular form of social recognition of both the case and its namesake by ‘moving’ people, that is, by getting them to feel a particular range of emotions. The first half of this chapter explores how in order to ‘move people’ the film must first make the spectator familiar with the subject. It is argued this familiarity, this particular kind of intimacy, is primarily achieved through the trope of prosopopoeia – the conferring of a face. In the second half of chapter, I will present another reading of the film, arguing that in addition to the modes of faciality employed to enable the personal, intimate style, the film can also be understood as generating a second kind of intimacy, one which is enabled not by closing the gap between name and face but by making it visible.

**Face to Face**

The stated aim of this film is, as I said, to give ‘Mabo’ a face and thus, bring spectators face-to-face with the man or person ‘behind the name’. As we saw in chapter two, this aim is predicated on the western cultural assumption that the face is equivalent to the self, an assumption that has given rise to a number of western art forms and discourses, including portraiture and biography. In chapter three, we saw how in the portraiture tradition the face is taken to be a mirror reflection of the individual’s inner self or soul. As a film portrait, interviews with family members, friends and political allies paint a picture of Mabo’s personality. We learn that Mabo was ‘family-orientated’, ‘generous’, ‘humorous’ ‘egotistical’
and ‘proud’. These interviews are intercut with numerous family snaps and other photographic close-ups of Mabo’s face, including footage from *Land Bilong Islanders* (1990) (a film Graham made in 1989 with Mabo.)\textsuperscript{14} The constant use of the close-up combined with the interviews ‘fleshes out’ (as one reviewer puts it) a rounded characterisation of the man.\textsuperscript{15} Mabo’s face becomes familiar and knowable as spectators fill his features with knowledge presented by interviewees. In the physiognomical tradition, the film invites spectators to survey Mabo’s features for traces of his soul, which is certainly what film critic Evan Williams, did. He writes: ‘...in that magnificent broad countenance, with its grey, wiry mane, there was something of the sage, the prophet, the visionary. He looked the part ... (of a hero-martyr)’.\textsuperscript{16}

The idiom of biography is also employed by the director to give Mabo a face. Combining media reports and archival images with the interviews mentioned before, the first two thirds of the film tells Mabo’s life story in more or less chronological order. The film itemises and organises selected events from Eddie Mabo’s life into a single, defining narrative of the self – ‘Island Man’. Documenting Mabo’s founding role in the Black Community School and his involvement in other indigenous organisations, such as the Aboriginal Legal Aid Service and the Aboriginal Medical Service, the film depicts Mabo as a self-sacrificing, committed activist, thus mediating public recognition of him as an influential and respected indigenous leader. Most importantly, the film represents Mabo’s relation to his island home, Mer.\textsuperscript{17} This is done predominately through extensive use of footage from *Land Bilong Islanders*. Graham’s film of the Mabo hearings and events leading up to it offers a detailed picture of indigenous activism rarely seen on national screens.

But while the film is very much a social biography, we should not forget that the genre of biography is based on the concept of the moral subject. In *Confronting Death*, David Wendell Moller describes some of the historical patterns in rituals of bereavement in western cultures, including the emergence of biography as a particular way of recognising the rich, the pious and the brave in death.\textsuperscript{18} He explains how by the end of the eleventh century the idea of universal, collective destiny in death had disappeared, to be replaced by the emerging concept of biography. Recorded on the deceased’s headstone as an epitaph, the biography was, in Moller’s words, ‘... the composite picture of the choices made between good and evil’(7).
Here, traces of this origin can be found in the depiction of Mabo as David, fighting the Goliath-like Australian legal system. One of the lawyers for the claimants testifies that Mabo conceived of himself this way. But the film is not a hagiography. To the contrary, the portrait painted of Mabo as leader-saint is tempered by revelations of his so called ‘vices’. We learn that at certain times in his life, Mabo drank heavily. There is also mention of incidents of domestic violence. While such incidents may be true, there is a danger that as a moral score card, the film fleshes out Black stereotypes of alcoholism and domestic violence imprinted in spectators’ consciousness.19

As in all social biographies, the use of a singular narrative of self as a representation of the social/cultural narrative is achieved by seeking origins of determining aspects of self in selected events and circumstances. We are, for example, told that the origin of Mabo’s fighting spirit lies in his childhood experience of growing up on Mer. He is remembered by several interviewees as a rebellious, questioning child. There is also a sequence in the film where historians, Noel Loos and Henry Reynolds, present competing claims about which event in Mabo’s life gave rise to the land claim. For Loos, it was the death of Mabo’s father, while Reynolds inserts himself into history by suggesting it was a provocation on his part that incited Mabo to initiate the claim. The film’s director leans more toward Loos’ theory. What concerns me here, however, is not the question of which event or period in Mabo’s life is the origin of the land case, but rather how the biographical act of attributing intentionality to events and actions gives the genre a specific kind of authority and one which is, moreover, embodied in the face.

In his influential essay, ‘Autobiography as De-facement’, Paul de Man argues that the epitaph is not only a biographical statement but a creation of the ‘fiction’ of prosopopoeia – that is, the fiction that the dead subject speaks his or her mind, his or her intentions.20 He says to address the dead is to posit the possibility of a reply and thereby confer upon them ‘the power of speech’: ‘Voice assumes mouth, eye, and finally face, a chain manifest in the etymology of the tropes’ name, prosopon poien, to confer a mask or face (propson)’ (926). He says that autobiography, like the epitaph, ‘… is the trope by which (...) one’s name is made as intelligible and memorable as a face’ (926). As prosopopoeia, this film gives ‘Mabo’ a face and in doing so confers upon the name the power of speech. This double move ‘authorises’
the biography as the words of the dead: ‘This is Eddie’s story’, says Graham. But, as de Man warns, just as the trope gives a face to the dead, it can also deface the living. For de Man, the double moves of the trope – replacement and substitution – constitute a figure of ‘reading as de-facement’. De Man argues the illusion of prosopopoeia is always unmasked: ‘by making death speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death’ (928). In other words, the discourse that was meant to compensate for death and loss becomes ‘our actual entry into the frozen world of the dead’ (928). For de Man, this de-facement and hence, silencing, of the living, shows that art cannot, as it is thought to do in the Romantic tradition, substitute for forms of physical deprivation and disfigurement, for art, as a repetition of the loss it seeks to conceal, is also already a restoration of mortality. We saw how this happens in the previous chapter in the discussion of Dennis Potter’s bid for immortality. Here, as an attempt to give ‘Mabo’ a face, Graham’s biographical film reproduces and thus endlessly repeats the loss of face it seeks to conceal, that is, the violent severing of Eddie Mabo’s name from his face in the over-naming of ‘Mabo’.

‘A sense of outrage’

About three quarters of the way into Mabo – Life of an Island Man, at the point at which we expect a biographical film to end, that is, after the death of the subject, the trope of prosopopoeia theorised in de Man’s essay is suddenly literalised in the shocking image of a racist attack on Eddie Mabo’s grave. The attack occurred in June 1995, immediately following an islander tombstone unveiling ceremony held in Townsville.21 Graham’s filming of the events of that day documents both the commemorative aspects of the traditional ceremony, as well as capturing the collective expression of indigenous pride and support from non-indigenous Australians. The film also depicts the friendly atmosphere of the cross-cultural celebrations held after the ceremony in a Townsville basketball stadium. But as I said, this atmosphere of cultural pride and celebration is dramatically interrupted when we cut to the ‘obscenity’, as Loos describes it, of the attack on Mabo’s grave. We learn that sometime in the evening following the unveiling ceremony, Mabo’s grave and headstone was desecrated by unknown persons. Panning the length of the grave, the camera zooms in on the gaping hole in
the centre of the headstone, left when attackers prised off and stole the newly unveiled, life-size bust. We also see the large swastikas and the racist epithet, ‘Abo’ graffitied in red paint on the headstone and grave.

In an interview after the release of the film, Graham described his personal response to the attack: ‘(I) was ... absolutely horrified and devastated ... I fell into a crumbling heap’. He has also said on several occasions that the desecration of the grave is the ‘real reason’ for making the film:

Bonita (Eddie’s wife) was pestering me to go and film the tombstone opening ... so I got a crew together who went up to Townsville to film the tombstone opening and the celebrations. Then, of course, the day after the grave was trashed ... the real reason for making the second film was a sense of outrage about his grave being trashed.

What we discover then is that the desecration of the grave is the true origin of the film. And in the light of this image, this violent origin, the film’s stated aim of ‘giving the name a face’ takes on deeper significance.

In European cultures, desecration of the dead is considered an act of war. When graves in the Jewish cemetery at Carpentras, France were desecrated by a small group of anti-Semitic demonstrators in 1990, one hundred thousand people gathered in Paris to protest. They marched through the streets of Paris, joined by the then president, Francois Mitterrand. In Australia, public response to the desecration of Eddie Mabo’s grave was mediated by what Graham aptly describes as a media battle of symbols. In The Daily Telegraph Mirror, conservative columnist, Piers Ackerman, described the incident as upsetting but nevertheless used it as an opportunity to conduct his own attack on native title. He argues, ‘this kind of thing’ would not be occurring if it were not for the (then) Labor government’s ‘ideologically driven’ Native Title Act. In other words, native title is posited as the cause of the racist violence. Under the headline, ‘Black Man’s Burden’, Ackerman describes the desecrated grave as ‘a wedge between black and white’.

In contrast, The Australian took a liberal view, explicitly condemning the attack as racist in its front-page report: ‘Racists desecrate Mabo’s gravestone’. Here, the gravestone
belongs to Eddie Mabo, not some generic ‘Black man’. Also in contrast to *The Daily Telegraph Mirror*, we are told about the two markings of ‘Abo’. Overall, the tone is that of shame and tragedy: words and phrases such as, ‘shock’, ‘disgusted’, ‘distraught’, ‘struggle’ ‘deplorable’ and ‘must be condemned’ culminate in an expression of sympathy for the family. It is important to note, however, that while *The Australian* condemns the attack more explicitly and is more sympathetic than the previous report, like that commentary it distances ‘ordinary’ Australians from the violence. *The Daily Telegraph Mirror* did so by blaming the Labor party. In that former report a photograph of Mabo’s sons standing either side of the headstone is used to illustrate Ackerman’s opinion that indigenous people are victims of divisive legislation. *The Australian* used a photograph of Bonita Mabo and two distraught grandsons huddled on the edge of the grave to complete its picture of the family as tragic victims of the act of ‘a handful of racists’. In both reports, the political implications of the attack are veiled by the return of the image of indigenous Australians as passive victims.

Graham’s approach is different again. The film represents the defacement as an attack on both Mabo the person and Mabo the case. In the documentation of the unveiling ceremony the headstone is framed as a symbol of national unity. The camera records the perfect symmetry of the figures of Bonita Mabo and Anita Keating (the latter representing the then Prime Minister, Paul Keating) reflected side by side in the shining surface of the large, black marble headstone. Here, the reflective surface of the headstone serves as a mirror in which spectators can narcissistically insert themselves into a vision of a future, unified nation. Subsequently, when we see the following images of the defaced headstone, the attack is not only a desecration of the grave of a significant historical figure, but a symbol of the deepest race hatred. And to follow de Man’s idea of ‘reading as defacement’, we could add that the non-indigenous spectator in his or her narcissistic insertion into the image of reconciliation is also forcefully de-faced and consequently silenced in this sequence. Entering ‘the frozen world of the dead’, the viewer discovers that viewing is no longer simply an act of social recognition, but a rite of bereavement.
‘The journey home’

The final section of the film is primarily a documentation of the family’s renewed mourning and the re-burial of Mabo’s body on his island home. It is also in this section that we are reminded of the close association between mourning and tragedy in western cultural forms. In Cinema Papers, the film’s editor and co-producer, Denise Haslem, is quoted as saying that when she and Graham were editing the film, ‘they realised that the three acts fell into a Greek tragedy so easily, (that) there was no other way to edit it’. The film is structured into three acts of fairly equal length distinguished by inter titles. Following the structure of classical tragedy, the film is, its director claims, a case of ‘life imitating art’. He says:

... the film is very much like the hero’s journey ... I keep comparing it to Luke Skywalker going out to conquer the universe. He’s battling the empire, but the tragedy is, unlike Luke, he dies before his great victory.

Or is it art shaping life? In Aristotelian philosophy, the purpose of tragic drama is to create an emotional experience that will turn spectators inward to contemplate the ‘true’ nature of human experience. This affective experience is grounded in spectators’ recognition of a generic plot structure, that is, a specific ordering of everyday events or what Stephen Halliwell in his study of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy calls, ‘the data of normal experience’. Halliwell says:

Aristotle’s aim cannot be taken to be a mere transcription of it (the data of normal experience); it is, rather, an attempt to discern the true or essential nature of the emotions, and to produce an ordered theory of them. (172)

Walter Benjamin in his study of the German Baroque Trauerspiel (sorrow play) also argues for the specificity of tragedy. He warns us of the problem of the modern tendency to apply the term tragedy too loosely. As part of his aim to differentiate the Trauerspiel, he argues that drama grounded in history is different from tragedy, ‘(for the object of the latter is not history but myth, and the tragic structure of the dramatis personae does not derive from rank — the absolute monarch — but from the prehistoric epoch of this existence — the past age of heroes’ (62). From Benjamin’s insight into what German Trauerspiel is not, we learn that the modern
tendency to collapse history and tragedy results in a useless generalisation of modern drama. More importantly, we learn that historical events are falsely mythologised when ‘read’ through a tragic framework.

Evan Williams’ review of Mabo – Life of an Island Man reflects some of the limitations of the reception of Mabo as mythic hero. He writes: ‘His (Mabo’s) premature death has enshrined him as a legend, a mythic figure more potent than he was in life’. In other words, he suggests, like all tragic heroes, Mabo is more powerful dead than alive. For Evans, had Mabo survived, had we seen him in his moment of victory, the film might not have been as good as it is. Or, to use his term, it might have been ‘spoiled’. By spoiled, Evans means ‘gleamingly heroic’ rather than ‘gentle, elegiac’. To be fair, it is not difficult to see why Williams turns to tragedy as a way of making sense of the strong affects generated by the violence of the desecration. When Williams describes the film as ending ‘on a note of exquisite sadness’, telling us how ‘Mabo’s body is removed from its desecrated grave in Townsville and transported to Murray Island, to be buried again to the sounds of traditional music’ he is, I suggest, responding to the redemptive impulse in the film to somehow atone for the violence of the defacement of the grave, for the de-facement of the name. The final section of the film documents the disinterment of Mabo’s body and the reburial on Mer. It also switches at this final point from documentary mode to ethnography. The ‘traditional music’ Williams refers to is in fact the sacred Malo dance, performed in honour of Mabo. Moreover, we learn from the narration that this dance had not been performed for some eighty years, let alone filmed. The focus on this sacred dance, in particular, on the giant, towering turtle-shell mask of Malo takes this ending into the archaic realm of myth, lending it a fitting tragic ending.

But to see this ending only in terms of myth, to see Mabo simply as a tragic hero, is to overlook the historical realities of Mabo’s reburial. By implying that the decision to re-bury Mabo on Mer was made by the family alone, Graham’s film fails to make clear the fact that the state also played an important role in that ‘journey home’. The then federal government initiated and funded the reburial of Mabo’s dis-interned body on the Murray Islands, arguing that if the grave were to remain on the mainland it could easily become an ongoing target for racist opposition to native title legislation. In other words, as a result of the defacement of the
grave, Mabo’s re-surfaced body was removed from sight. In his narration, Graham admits he is ambivalent about the reburial. He says that he believes Mer is ‘the right place for Mabo to be buried, but for all the wrong reasons’. In the end, however, the film suggests that the violence of the defacement of the grave is redeemed in the resurrection of the Malo mask, by the Meriam people’s recognition of Mabo as a hero. The final shot of the film is a silent, grainy image of Mabo in the shallow waters of Mer. Jeremy Beckett, who was the cultural consultant on the film, tells me the image has specific cultural significance for the Meriam people.31 But because this is such an evanescent, fugitive image, because its specific cultural significance is unaccessible to most spectators, the figure is most likely to be recognised by non-indigenous spectators as a ghostly figure of a the story’s hero who now resides in the world of the gods. In the end, the face of Mabo (which, through the work of the film, has come to embody the case and land rights in general) is revealed as an archaic death mask – a ghost of a past culture, consigned and confined to the outer-most edge of the nation.

‘The closer the look one takes ...’

So far I have argued that the only way the film can close the gap between name and face is through its own form of de-facement. That is to say, the film is not only a response to an actual defacement but is in itself a form of de-facement: it gives ‘Mabo’ a face only to render that face the face of a ghost, a death mask. I have also suggested that by closing the gap between name and face by performing the precise violence it is itself a response to, the film unleashes what Taussig calls the ‘force of the sacred’ – in this case, the sacredness of death, or, more specifically, the corpse. Or to put it slightly differently, as an intimate history the film brings spectators close to Mabo only to then put them at a distance. In the remaining sections of this paper, I want to present another reading of the film, one that argues for a different kind of intimacy. That is, not the intimacy of face-to-faceness, which, I have argued, is ultimately shattered, but an intimacy created by recognising the gap between name and face, an intimacy created by confronting the nonidentity of name and face.

To make this second approach we need to return to the scene of devastation at the origin of the film – the racist defacement of Mabo’s headstone. Like all cinematic images, the image of the defaced grave does not completely submit to the meanings intended by its
strategic placement in the three-act structure of tragedy. As many reviewers comment, this is a shocking sight, and it is the power of this image to disturb spectators that I want to examine in this second half of my analysis. Earlier, I showed how the film frames the headstone as a symbol. It is first shown as a symbol of reconciliation and later, after the attack, it is made to stand for the threat racism poses to that possibility. What I would now add to this line of argument, is that as a de-facement the film itself has the effect of making Mabo’s name visible in all its nakedness, and so, enabling spectators to see ‘Mabo’ as a name (opposed to a symbol or a sign for something else.) As the film reproduces the minute detail of the graffitied grave in a series of close-ups and pans, the name becomes a scrabble of letters, setting off a series of unspeakable associations, including, for example, the play of letters between ‘Mabo’ and the racist epithet, ‘Abo’. Before Mabo’s exposed name we might also recall the jokes based on spellings of Eddie Mabo’s name that circulated through the unofficial spaces of the pub, the taxi cab and across the back fence, at the time of the Mabo hearings – acronyms such as ‘MABO: Make A Better Offer’, and so forth.\(^{32}\)

The shock of the literalisation of ‘Mabo’, created in the defacement of Mabo’s grave, reveals the inherent strangeness of this name and of all names. Walter Benjamin, literary critic and philosopher of language, was fond of Karl Krauss’ observation that ‘the closer the look you take at a word, the greater the distance from which it looks back’.\(^{33}\) This phenomenon is never more true, I think, than on those occasions when our name is misspelt, seen out of context, attached to another, or, as in this case, under threat of obliteration. On these occasions our name stares back at us like the face of a stranger. Constructionist theories of language would tell us that what we grieve on these occasions of non-recognition is the loss of the concept of self. Benjamin’s philosophy proposes a different view. For Benjamin, all names are a kind of death or mourning for the particularity of the thing lost in the act of naming.\(^{34}\) Words are ‘fetishes’ and, as such, there is always a difference or gap between words and the things they refer to. Which raises the question about how the particularity of things lost in the act of naming can be retrieved or, to use Benjamin’s term, ‘redeemed’? Not by language it seems, not by rational thought. In fact, in Benjamin’s view the truth of things cannot be made to appear. Rather, in his words, ‘truth ... is revealed in a process which might be described metaphorically as the burning up of the husk as it enters the realm of ideas, that is to say a destruction of the work in which its external form achieves its most brilliant degree of
illumination’. He calls these moments of revelation, ‘profane illumination’ and tells an amazing story about the profane illumination of his own name in an enigmatic, fictional piece titled, ‘Agesilaus Santander’

As with the examples I gave earlier of the fleeting but, nevertheless, seismic shock we experience when we see our name emptied of its sense of self, Benjamin’s story is about the revelation of such a void in the secret name given to him by his Jewish parents. Using Gershom Scholem’s translation and interpretation of this piece in his wonderful essay, ‘Walter Benjamin and His Angel’ we can summarise the main ideas contained in the piece thus: Benjamin invokes the Jewish tradition of giving children a secret, magic name – a name that ‘may not be entrusted or disclosed to unauthorized ones’ (69) – in order to claim that mystical-religious practice for a theory of ‘profane illumination’. He vividly describes a scene in which his angel, bearing his secret name, appears to him in a time of danger (as angels are supposed to do.) Revealing to him his secret name, the angel makes the origin of the history of his current suffering visible. But most important is the fact that the angel does not present him with a picture of himself as he knew himself to be. Rather, confronting his secret name in the form of a two-faced angel, Benjamin sees himself as he has not seen himself before, and is thus, ‘awakened’, ‘transformed’, ‘matured’ (78).

Benjamin’s conception of his angel is entirely different from the Christian guardian angel associated with biography. Here, the truth of the self is not ‘summarised’ in the name but rather, as Scholem suggests, Benjamin’s encounter with his angel reveals to him the secreted otherness of self. The encounter is also of a different temporal order to the linear time of biography. Based on a shock experience, that is, a fully unexpected moment, the subject is jolted into a movement that, in Benjamin’s words, ‘pulls him into a future from which he has advanced’ (58). To fully appreciate what is meant by this spatio-temporal experience, we need to know something of Benjamin’s unique conception of origin. For him, the image of the origin that reveals itself in the fleeting face of the angel, is not simply a repetition of the past in the present but a collision of the two that enacts a kind of double take. In his essay on Benjamin’s Origin of German Tragic Drama, Samuel Weber quotes Benjamin’s description of origin as that which is ‘... recognisable on the one hand as a restoration, as reinstatement and precisely in this as on the other hand, incomplete, unfinished’ (468). For Weber, this
‘duality’ in Benjamin’s notion of origin ‘distances itself from the more familiar uses of the word ... Its effort is not simply to bring something radically new and different into being, but rather to “restore”, to “reproduce” (471).

The point of this detour through Benjamin’s philosophy of language is to suggest we might take a different view of the image of Mabo’s defaced grave. As a fleeting but, nevertheless, profound moment of nonidentity, the cinematic image of Mabo’s defaced headstone can be understood to unlock the origin of the particular history embedded in his name. This shocking moment when the name ‘Mabo’ is emptied of the sense of the person we have come to learn about in the proceeding two thirds of the film, when all symbolic and ideological meaning is disfigured, is, I suggest, not only a violation of Mabo the person, a racist act of de-personalisation but also a ‘profane illumination’. To be more specific, as a profane illumination, the defacement can be seen as a resurfacing and thus, reinstatement of terra nullius: the original, legal non-recognition of indigenous law and culture upon which the nation of Australia is founded. And as a reinstatement of the effacing violence of terra nullius, it might be concluded that this peculiarly Australian form of race-hatred is not located in some frozen past or buried deep within the psyche of ‘a handful of racists’ but rather, to use Benjamin’s terms, it is ‘incomplete’, ‘unfinished’.

While this second perspective on the significance of the defacement of Mabo’s name is less noted in non-indigenous reviews of the film it is, however, a view made evident within the film itself. In an across-the-shoulder shot, the film documents Bonita Mabo being interviewed by a young television reporter at the Townsville cemetery following the discovery of the racist attack. Forthright before the camera and the accompanying crew, Bonita Mabo does not appear tragic or pitiful. Her face is neither distressed nor broken up by tears, as activist, Margaret Reynold’s face is earlier seen to be. To the contrary, Bonita Mabo mechanically answers the reporter’s banal questions in a rigid, almost automated mode of response. Perhaps this is because for her, for her family, indeed, for all indigenous Australians, the violence of defacement is not a new experience but rather, it is a repetition of something already experienced. The idea of de-facement as a traumatic repetition of social forms of non-recognition is conveyed when Bonita Mabo responds to the reporter’s question about how the attack makes her feel. She compares the attack to a nightmare. She says, ‘It’s
like a nightmare, starting all over again’. In this way, the defacement of the grave triggers in Bonita Mabo a different form of remembrance from non-indigenous histories, making visible what Chris Healy describes as ‘a primary fissure in the collective memory of this continent’: that is, ‘basic distinctions between an Aboriginal historical sensibility and non-Aboriginal historical sensibility’.

**Reading the name**

To take this second view of ‘Mabo’, to recognise the gap between the name and face rather than close it and thereby conceal it, opens up a different view of the name and naming, a different way of reading a life story. From this perspective, we can read back through the life story presented in the film and learn that Mabo was born on Murray Island in 1936, the son of Robert and Paipe Sambo. When his mother died shortly after his birth, he was adopted by Benny (his maternal uncle) and Maiga Mabo. He was raised and educated on Murray Island until 1957 when the Murray Islander Council of Elders exiled him to the mainland, where he lived under two names. He was known as Eddie Mabo by most people, but also as Koiki, his Miriam (Islander) name by other islanders and close friends. Already, we see in this history of Mabo’s name the history of colonial contact.

Taking a closer look, we can also see how the apparent fluidity of ‘Mabo’ became an issue in the hearing of the *Mabo* case. Using large sections from Graham’s earlier film, *Land Bilong Islanders*, the film provides a detailed documentation of the *Mabo* hearings. Beckett in his commentary on the case reminds us of the well-known fact that the High Court’s decision to recognise the collective native title rights of the Meriam people of the Murray Islands was extended to all indigenous Australians (12-13). He also brings to our attention the less known fact that Mabo’s ‘own claim to land was dropped in the final stages of the case’ (7). This terrible irony, as Beckett refers to it, occurred because in the determination of facts and issues of the case conducted by the Supreme Court of Queensland, Justice Moynihan found Mabo’s claims to be ‘invalid’. Moynihan concluded Mabo was not the adopted son of Benny and Maiga Mabo and, therefore, not entitled to make his claim. In addition, Moynihan believed Mabo was ‘an unreliable witness’ and said Mabo’s explanation of Miriam inheritance custom
was ‘self-seeking’. In short, Moynihan’s refusal to recognise Mabo’s land claim was a refusal to recognise his name. In the film, Bonita Mabo recalls her husband’s reaction to this news. ‘He was devastated’, she says. We also learn that Mabo died a few months later, aged fifty-five. Mabo’s final written document was a genealogy of his name.

Like the film and Beckett’s commentary on the case, Nonie Sharp’s cross-cultural analysis of the Murray Islander’s land case defends Mabo’s credibility. She analyses the extraordinary demands placed on Mabo to explain himself during the hearing of evidence in the determination of the facts and issues of the case reporting that, ‘In the first fourteen days of the hearing of Eddie Mabo’s evidence ... 289 objections were made by Queensland’.

She argues that the demand for Mabo to explain himself, along with the subsequent non-recognition of his claim, is part of the wider trivialisation of Meriam law that occurred throughout the case. She explains how the case ignores the significance of adoption and fostering of children, as well as the wider system of name holders, including the inherent code of secrecy and specific modes of oral performance of this particular system of inheritance (78). She argues that when Justice Moynihan deemed Mabo’s claim to be ‘self serving’ he was also refusing to recognise a crucial principle in Meriam law. To claim to own the land is ‘to be responsible for it’, including the responsibility of passing it on. A claimant is what the Meriam call, a ‘name holder on behalf of the group who are the joint owners’ (78).

Of course these kinds of suspicions and trivialisation of indigenous culture are not new. Underlining the non-recognition of Mabo’s family name and the subsequent refusal of his claim to native title is the racist supposition that Mabo was not a ‘proper native’. Beckett notes how many of the legal and cultural commentaries on the judgement focus on the fact that the case differentiated between Islander and Aboriginal cultures (8-10). If, however, we read the history of non-recognition in Mabo’s name, we can see that both the Queensland Supreme Court and the High Court’s treatment of Mabo are a repetition of the state’s past treatment of Aboriginal culture and its current reinstatement of that attitude of suspicion in the form of the strict procedures and criteria of the Native Title Act (1993) (and its subsequent amendments.) The recent Yorta Yorta claim exemplifies the limitations of native title as a form of legal recognition. When Federal Court judge, Justice Olney, ruled against the Yorta Yorta native title claim to land in Northern Victoria and Southern NSW, he said that the ‘tide
of history’ has washed away the group’s native title: ‘Notwithstanding the genuine efforts of
the members of the claimant group to revive the lost culture of their ancestors, native title
rights and interests once lost are not capable of revival’. Thus, the paradox of native title: the
very history the Mabo judgement promised to overturn, is precisely ‘the tide’ used by judges
such as Olney to deny claimants their native title rights.

Lastly, the traumatic history of non-recognition revealed in the shock of Mabo’s
defaced name reminds us of the material and social aspects of naming. In modern, self-
oriented societies, the proper name is considered sacred. But only because it is widely
regarded as equivalent to what is called ‘the essence of self’. It is a view that works to conceal
the inherent sociality and power of naming. It is also a view that excludes other cultural
conceptions of sacredness. In the opening of his oral history, Mabo talks about his proper
name as something he was ‘assigned’. He also says in his description of his naming that
‘Mabo’ is the name he ‘grew under’. Here, the name is not given some transcendent identity
to self but recognised as part of a social practice that places, obliges and even limits the bearer
in relation to others. We are also reminded by Mabo’s understanding of naming that, far from
being primarily about notions of self, a proper name is that which entitles us to property and
land rights. Not the name as a bearer of the concept of self but what Judith Butler calls, ‘the
action of names’: to have a name is, she argues, to have the potential power to name another.
Mabo knew this about names, and it was because of this knowledge that the Australian courts
regarded him with suspicion. Graham’s film portrays Mabo as activist, archivist, and an
expert in white histories and law, all of which the courts perceived as too white-faced. As
Beckett, observes:

It is ironic that while anthropologists became credible expert witnesses by writing,
‘natives’ render themselves inauthentic by reading: tainted with literacy it seems they
can’t go home again! (22)

And as the film shows, Mabo did not go home again until after his death, until after his name
was defaced, yet again.
Conclusion

*Mabo – Life of an Island Man* makes Eddie Mabo recognisable to Australian audiences as a face, as *the* face of native title. But as I have tried to show in this analysis, coming face-to-face with another is never straightforward nor does the familiarity generated by this particular form of intimacy guarantee a non-hostile relationship. In May 1884, for instance, some five years after Queensland annexed the Torres Straight Islands, the cover of *Illustrated Sydney News* featured an etching, titled, ‘Only a face at the window’. The sketch is described in the magazine thus:

The illustration on our front page ... portrays what he (an unnamed artist) saw during a visit to an outlying station in Queensland, and which might have served for a replica of what Prout, Roberts, Fowler and others could have depicted as their experience of station life here in the early days. The Shepard’s wife is preparing the damper, startled by the growl of the collie dog at her feet, looks up, and sees a lord of the soil in all his native grandeur staring in, and returns the look with one of anger and defiance. In her home she is queen, and though she knows not what danger there may be attached to the proximity of the sable visitor, she, at least, will not be the first to show any indications of fear.  

‘Only a face’ the artist says, stripping the indigenous subject of his face, indeed, differentiating between face values. As a face-off, the colonial sketch is an early rehearsal of a mode of non-indigenous spectatorship which persists in contemporary Australian culture. It is a guarded, suspicious approach and yet one that assumes a familiarity with and intimate knowledge of the ‘native’ faceless subject. The editor’s of the *Illustrated Sydney News* suggest to us that this gaze is a ‘replica’ of colonial contact. In the late twentieth century, this very specific mode of spectatorship might be regarded as a perfect replica of our juridical system’s view of indigenous Australians.

As a cultural response to the de-facement of Mabo’s name, Graham’s intimate style of documentary film attempts to create an opposite point of view, a different mode of coming face-to-face with indigenous Australians than that depicted by the colonial artist. The film seeks to mediate recognition of Mabo as a person. But there is more at stake in the defacement of Mabo’s grave than depersonalisation. Graham’s biographical film is circulated and widely viewed in educational contexts as the history of *Mabo*, albeit a special, intimate kind. In this
chapter, I have not argued against the idea of intimate histories but rather argued for a reading of a different kind of intimacy than that generated by the facialising techniques employed in the film. More specifically, I have argued that the film can be understood to generate the kind of intimacy invoked in Benjamin’s piece on his (imagined) encounter with his angel, a kind of intimacy that opens the way for a different conception of the relationship between the name and face.

When Benjamin dreamed up his angel it was, as I mentioned earlier, at a time of crisis in his life. In fact, Scholem tells us the piece refers to two kinds of crisis: one personal, one political. At the time the piece was written, that is, 1933, Benjamin was a refugee. And it was in this desperate state, Scholem says, that Benjamin came to ‘review his life through a new meditation about Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*’ – a picture that belonged to Benjamin but at the time was ‘present only in his imagination’ (67). He says that, for his friend, the imagined picture ‘allied itself with the review of his life as writer, as Jew, and as unrequited lover’ (67). But even as it revealed to him these transformations, his secret name retains what Scholem calls ‘its magic character’ by joining together the angelic and demonic forces of life in the most intimate union, namely, two sides of a face.

For Benjamin, the secret name revealed to him in the two faces of his angel is, he writes, ‘a union of the feminine and the demonic most intimately adjacent to each other’ (59). (My emphasis) Different from the forms of attachment Berlant cited, adjacency implies another kind of intimacy. As a relation founded on a shared border, the choice of the term adjacency (over attachment, say) emphasises physical proximity, implying a nearness or closeness without conscious or psychological connection, that is, some kind of mutually recognised emotional bond. In terms of revealing to him a picture of himself as unrequited lover the angel shows him how he is always near but unable to connect with his beloved: ‘Where this man chanced upon a woman who captivated him, he was at once resolved to lurk on her path of life and wait ...’ Not meaning that the feminine form of the angel is some figuration of his unrequited love but rather, that he learns from this figure how he becomes conscious of love only after the loved one has moved on and how such hesitation forces him to spend his life laying in wait for her return. But with regard to political emancipation, this image of patience is quickly transformed into a violent image of accostment. From the
demonic side of the union, Benjamin learns that it is not patience that will free him but a
violent leap or spring, a direction that takes the form of yet another kind of adjacency. The
angel (who is of course a precursor to Benjamin’s ‘angel of history’) reveals his secret name
to him by standing between past and future and from this standpoint, ‘pulls him along ... into a
future from which he has advanced’ (59). It is a movement, a jolt to the senses, in which past
and present collide in a temporary form of adjacency: a temporary spatio-temporal collision.

Benjamin’s piece on the revelation of his secret name provides us with a different way
of thinking about intimacy. That is, forms of intimate adjacency: a closeness that can exist
without knowing, without possession – the other exists in one’s orbit but is always ‘beyond
reach’ in the way Jula Cohn and Asja Lacis were for Benjamin. Adjacency also describes the
spatio-temporal dimensions of ‘profane illumination’ as a kind of viewing position – an
experience in which past and present are jolted into a momentary collision. And considering
this different kind of intimacy, which I believe is enabled by this film, I want to make a final
suggestion. Rather than viewing *Mabo – Life of an Island Man* as an intimate history that
closes the gap between name and face we might instead confront that gap as it is opened up in
the processes of its concealment. That is, confront the underside of the mask made visible in a
series of de-facements throughout the film: the gaping hole at the centre of the marble
headstone where Mabo’s bust was once attached, the entirely unfillable hole in the ground in
Townsville’s cemetery where Mabo’s body was once buried, the ruptures and discontinuities
to indigenous cultural traditions as a result of colonial violence and systems of removal of
Aboriginal people from their place of origin. In these de-facements the non-indigenous
spectator can, I believe, begin to recognise the origin of the traumatic history of non-
recognition of indigenous Australians that repeats itself even today in the implementation of
native title legislation.
ENDNOTES

1. Bonita Mabo was guest speaker at a public meeting of *Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation*, Newcastle Workers Club, March 1998.


6. Other film awards and nominations to date include: Third place, Certificate of Creative Excellence for the categories Documentary, Current Events, Special Events, United States International Film and Video Festival, 1998; Finalist, Best International Documentary, ‘Hot Docs’, Toronto, Canada; Winner, Best Documentary Award, Australian Film Institute Awards, 1997; Winner, Best Script Award, NSW Premier’s Literary Award, 1997.

7. See: ‘The Man behind the Name’ (*Cairns Post*); ‘Mabo family Album’ (*The Daily Telegraph*); ‘A Portrait of the Man who was the Mabo Case’ (*The Age*) ‘Mabo the Man’ (*Herald Sun*) ‘Powerful Portrait of Mabo’ (*The Age*).


10. A highly sought educational resource, the film is distributed by Film Australia, along with accompanying teaching notes and a bibliography on native title. Publication of the script is forthcoming.


17. ‘Mer’ is the Meriam name for the larger island in the group known as the Murray Islands in The Torres Straight. The islands were colonised by the British and annexed by the Queensland government in 1879.


19. I was surprised by how often in my informal discussions about this film people would focus on the isolated incidents of heavy drinking and violence.


21. Loos provides the following background to the ceremony: ‘After Mabo’s funeral on 1 February 1992, his family decided to have his tombstone unveiling on 3 June 1995, a Saturday, as this would coincide with the Queen’s Birthday weekend and would allow people time to travel to and from the Torres Straight and other distant places. (As it turned out) It would also coincide with the Mabo Day Celebrations which had been organised annually since 1993 by the Council of Elders to commemorate the High Court decision brought down on 3 June 1992. There had been an earlier celebration in 1992 ... In 1993 and 1994 there had been public celebrations in Townsville’s Mall on 3 June, followed by islander feasts and dancing at night. Clearly this was going to be an annual event’, 179.


23. Deborah Niski, ‘No Man is an island’, The Sunday Age (Melbourne), 27 July 1997, C5.


27. Schembri, ‘A portrait of the man who was the Mabo case’, 7.


31. I am grateful to Jeremy Beckett for his response to an earlier version of this chapter and for sharing with me his first-hand knowledge of the commemorative service in Townsville, as well as his brilliant insight into the *Mabo* case.

32. The title of Murray Goot and Tim Rowse’s *Mabo: Make A Better Offer* is intended as a play on the popular joke and as such designed to counter the derogatory insinuation that Mabo was ‘self-serving’ in his land claims.


38. In his judgement, Justice Moynihan wrote: ‘I was not impressed with the credibility of Eddie Mabo. I would not be inclined to act on his evidence in a matter bearing on his self-interest ... unless it was supported by other creditable evidence’, as quoted in Beckett, ‘The Murray Island land case ’, 18.


44. *Illustrated Sydney News*, 10 May 1884, 10. I thank Ross Woodrow, for bringing this item to my attention.
Face of the Media Age?
Chapter 6

Diana: The Face of the Media Age?

While I was researching this topic, the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, resulted in a media event on a scale never seen before. Up until this point, Diana had been a kind of ghost who would appear in my study wherever I least expected to find her: in my research into AIDS, in a comparison to Dennis Potter’s self-performance. I considered that perhaps she was the face of the media age. Her death confirmed that view. The event reached global proportions when live television coverage of her funeral service was watched by an estimated one in three people worldwide, making it the single most viewed event in human history. Given this phenomenal degree of recognisability, it seemed to me that the face of Diana could be of no relevance to this study. But as the event unfolded, I came to see that even the face of an icon, a saint, no less, can become unrecognisable.

I should begin by admitting I was fascinated by Diana’s face prior to her death. In fact, in that other Diana media event – the 1995 BBC Panorama interview – I found myself obsessively watching her performance, noting her resemblance to faces of saints etched deeply in my memory as a result of a catholic up-bringing. To be even more specific, I was taken in by Diana’s martyr-like sufferance of calumny as an amazing imitation of the face of Joan of Arc. In death, Diana’s resemblance to Joan was uncanny. Both Diana and Joan were so called ‘ordinary’ women whose deaths were violent, public affairs: Joan was put to death in the spectacular medieval practice of burning at the stake, while Diana’s death was, as one obituary put it, ‘a horrible twentieth century, twisted metal, kind of death’. In death, both women have been patriotically ‘claimed’ by their respective nation states: Joan is the patron saint of France; and Diana, thanks to Elton John, has been memorialised as ‘England's Rose’; she is also England’s new mythic ‘Lady of the Lake’, laid to rest in a tomb erected by her family on a small island in a man-made lake on their estate. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Napoleon used images of a sword-wielding, banner-carrying maiden Joan as a symbol of a unified France. Likewise, pictures of Diana in 90s-style perspex armour striding through minefields in Angola continue to have a unifying effect in the Red Cross campaign for an international ban on land mines. And the list goes on. The question being, is it merely a coincidence that these two women, who are regarded so similarly by the ‘faithful’ in death,
have a remarkably similar countenance? Or, is it the case that their faces determine their saintly status?

The first thing we need to note about the processes of canonisation is that it is not so much a question about a person being saintly, but being recognised as such. In Saints and Society, Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell make the point that popular perception plays an important part in being recognised as a saint:

While the church uses heroic virtue to distinguish saints from wizards and witches, in popular belief saintly virtue was less a legalistic than a charismatic matter. A combination of the force of personality, rigorous self-denial, humility and good works led people to believe that a saint was in their midst.²

But while this may be the case, saintly recognisability is complicated by the fact that sainthood is by definition a state of perfection that only the saint can fully know. A saint's holiness is technically unrepresentable; an impossible image. In one way this fits precisely with Edith Wyschogrod's thesis on saints and modernity: that is, 'Not only do saints contest the practices and beliefs of institutions, but in a more subtle way they contest the order of narrativity itself'.³ In other words, saints trouble the basic premise of representation. For this reason, artists have turned to indirect or reflective means of depicting saints. Images of saints are not portraits – that is, images of the face as a mirror of the soul. Rather, faces of saints are emblematic of particular and easily recognisable (identifiable) Christian virtues. Saints are recognised by the faithful as 'exemplars' – models of behaviour which the faithful are encouraged to imitate.⁴ But as George Hersey points out, although imitation is meant to take the form of spiritual transformation, the fact is that in visual culture there is an unavoidable imbrication between the spiritual and the physical.⁵ Becoming a saint is a process in which the faces of the saints are the same as the faces of those who imitate the saints. Or, to put it slightly differently, in order to become a saint, one must have the right kind of face.

Of course not all saints are born with the required face. Take Joan, for example: images circulating in religious and popular culture of a beautiful, brave and innocent heroine bear little resemblance to the historical figure. In fact, the truth is that not much is known about Joan's actual physical appearance. Not that this has prevented historians from
speculating. It is generally considered that Joan was ‘ruddy-faced’, though one historian
lamently interprets the absence of any descriptions of her face as a sign that she was
unattractive. But historical accuracy is not the point here. What is of most interest is the way
in which a particular facial type has been conferred onto the historical figure of Joan. In this
way, just as I, who, as a child, read the lives of saints and prayed before statues, immediately
recognised Diana’s presentation of self in the Panorama interview as an imitation of Joan,
Joan herself is an imitation of female martyrs who came before her. Joan was besotted with St
Catherine, claiming that she ‘spoke’ to her. Joan’s love for St Catherine inspired St Therese of
Lisieux’s book on Joan, and Diana, it is reported, had a great devotion to St Therese.

In the reports of Diana’s death and tributes to her life there are numerous images of her
‘acting like a saint’. One example is the now famous image of her cradling an unnamed dying
child at Imrahn Kahn’s cancer hospital in Pakistan. In terms of perceived saintliness, many
commentators of the day noted that this highly staged performance was a very good imitation
of that other well known twentieth century female saint – Mother Teresa, who by coincidence
died just two days following Diana’s death, sparking an outpouring of commentaries on the
similarities and differences between these media-age saints. But if, as I have suggested, saints
are required to wear their virtue on their face, then Diana’s youthful beauty and crafted
glamour betray her performance of selflessness. It is interesting to note that while Mother
Teresa’s much commented on ‘plain’ face was on view in her death, Diana’s dead face was
kept under wraps. Mainstream media colluded to keep the only known photograph of the
seriously injured Diana out of public view. Hence, we might well ask what virtue did we
recognise in the face of Diana? What virtue was protected by keeping alive the memory of
Diana’s living face? And why is Diana’s saintliness more attractive than Mother Teresa’s
selfless piety?

James A Golden returns to Socrates’ view of beauty to explain the power of Diana’s
face. He argues that what we recognised in her beauty were Platonic virtues of the Good:
dignity, humility, mildness, good nature. He quotes a British journalist, who, at the time of
Diana’s death, wrote the following: ‘The Princess’ captivating beauty was obvious from the
moment she came to public attention. What changed over the years was her ability to project
her beauty [in such a way that she became] a powerful figure-head for charities and
campaigns'. But such ‘true’ goodness was not always recognised. It is interesting to note how in many of the reports immediately following her death, Diana’s often malignned, emotional and direct style of responding to situations – ‘I touch people. I believe everyone needs to be touched’ – was suddenly redeemed as a saintly virtue. Journalists and commentators who once criticised Diana for her naivety, such as the time she shook the hand of a dying AIDS patient in full view of the world’s news cameras, now claimed that her innocent, direct approach was an appropriate, if not exemplary mode of response to the world’s complex problems.

Like Joan, I believe Diana’s perceived saintliness or if you like, goodness, derived from her ability to project the quality of innocence. But being perceived as innocent involves more than having a youthful, sweet-faced appearance. Innocence is associated with artlessness. We assume, for example, that the expression on the face of a child is an unmediated expression of their state of mind. The innocent face is considered to be fully open and hence, absolutely legible. For this reason we find that in visual art, the expression of innocence is fixed in delicate child-like facial features. Fancois Rude’s romantic sculpture of Joan as a girl with far-away eyes is a good example of such an expression. However, in the age of the moving camera, the task of ‘capturing’ the virtue of innocence in a mobile face is more difficult. Many films have been made about Joan of Arc, including French director, Luc Besson’s, 1999 version, featuring the well-known US actor Dustin Hoffman playing God. But many critics agree that the best cinematic depiction of Joan’s story is Carl Dreyer’s 1928 silent film, La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc. Consisting nearly entirely of close-ups of the faces of Joan and her persecutors, the film is, as one critic describes it, an ‘orchestration of faces’.

Dreyer does not, however, try to get ‘inside’ Joan’s head. Rather he spiritualises Joan’s face by making it relentlessly and intensively express the affects of the pain and humiliation of torture and persecution. In other words, in this film Joan’s holiness is perceived in the extraordinary performance of physical pain and mental confusion she endured.

Like Maria Falconetti, who brilliantly performed the face of Joan in Dreyer’s film, Diana was also a master in the art of facial expression, as seen in the 1995 Panorama interview. The interview was a clever defence of her position in the Royal family. Instead of attacking her ‘enemies’, Diana ‘confessed’ her sins, and in so doing so, redeemed herself in the eyes of her beloved public. The success of her presentation lay in the expression of her
pain and personal suffering. This was achieved in part through her self characterisation as an innocent child who had suffered at the hands of uncaring adults, including her husband, his family, her lovers and of course, her parents. Diana’s self-infantilisation was also expressed in her face: uncharacteristic dark eye make-up and flat pink lipstick gave her a dramatic tragic quality. Her head, tilted downward and held slightly to one side added to the appearance of child-like timidity, while throughout the interview Diana’s eyes welled with tears, and her trademark upward glance sealed her innocent appeal.

To what degree Diana’s performance in the Panorama interview was a conscious act is not the issue. What is more important is the fact that this self-performance was widely regarded as artless and thus, authentic. Moreover, in the days immediately following Diana’s death images from this interview were recycled as the authentic image of Diana. The BBC, for example, used this image as the back-drop for their memorial special, hosted by Jonathon Dimbleby, screened in Britain the night following her death. They also used this image in their television coverage of Diana’s funeral service. When the casket was being carried out of the Westminster Abbey this image suddenly appeared like a ghost in the top left-hand corner of the screen. There are, I am sure, many reasons why journalists gravitated toward this image as the image of Diana, one being, perhaps, that of all her many faces – ‘lady in waiting’, ‘fairy tale princess’, ‘adoring mother’, ‘cover girl’, etc., – the face of Diana as innocent, suffering martyr makes the most sense of her senseless death. Martyrs are not supposed to survive. In fact, death and physical suffering make them all the more glorious, more beautiful, and more useful to the living. Conscious or unconscious, sincere or insincere, the face of Diana as saint is neither a mirror to some pure and holy soul, nor that in which we might recognise ourselves. I believe, rather, Diana’s fantastic capacity for self-transformation reveals the imitative nature of sainthood, thus exposing the faces of saints as the masks they are. But more than this, to look upon the alluring, radiant face of Diana in the hope that her innocence will somehow redeem our sins, or that her eternal beauty can in some sublime way make sense of a senseless world, will surely end in disappointment. For what we discover is that this face of our age is a mirror blindly reflecting back to us an image of this world as a world of mirrors. I do not mean this is in a facile or cynical way. Rather, I wish to suggest that it is precisely this distorted, negative reflection that caught the world off-guard and, for the briefest time in world history, made death visible on a scale hitherto unthinkable.
Of course the shock of this face of death was quickly recouped for other purposes: nationalism, sentimentality, profit, revenge, and so on. Two years later, collective embarrassment has set in. On the second anniversary of Diana’s death, journalists declared Diana the ‘forgotten princess’¹². Certainly by 1999 public commemoration of Diana had considerably diminished: there was a noticeable lack of attention to the anniversary of her death in the media., the British government announced it had cancelled its plan to build a statue in her honour, there was a marked decline in visitors to the Diana museum at Althorp, and sales of the many publications on Diana had fallen.¹³ But surely this forgetfulness is partly what makes Diana’s death emblematic of death in the age of spectacle and celebrity. The increasingly forgettable face of Diana shows not only that we have become anaesthetised to the shock of death, less open to its affect, but that because death is increasingly only experienced as an image we have become mechanical in our response to it.

The idea of a mechanical reaction to death is something that the French Impressionist artist Claude Monet once described in his account of his response to the death of his wife Camille, when he shocked even himself by painting her face. In *The Colour of Time: Claude Monet*, Virginia Spate argues that Monet’s painting of his dead wife, *Camille Monet on her death-bed* (1879), was not inspired by the artist’s need to document his wife’s existence, nor to record her ‘true’ nature, in the tradition of the death-mask or commemorative portrait.¹⁴ Rather, she suggests that we see Monet’s description of his response to the sight of his dead wife as ‘mechanical’ as symptomatic of his modern way of seeing. The comment is taken from Georges Clemenceau’s recount of a conversation in which Monet claimed that his mode of seeing was:

> the obsession, the joy, the torment of my days, to the extent that one day, seated at the bedside of a dead woman (his first wife) who had been and still was very dear to me, I surprised myself with my eyes fixed on her tragic forehead, in the act of mechanically observing the succession, the encroachment of fading colours which death was imposing on the immobile face ... That’s what I had come to. It’s quite natural to wish to reproduce the last image of one who is about to leave us forever. But even before I had the idea of recording the features to which I was deeply attached, my bodily organism reacted in the first place to the shocks of colour, and in spite of myself my reflexes drew me into an unconscious process in which the daily round of my life was resumed. Just like an animal on a treadmill ...¹⁵
As I said, Spate claims that the painting of the dead Camille as exemplary of what she calls Monet’s ‘bleak objectivity’. She also argues that in his determination to represent ‘certain aspects of the visible world as truthfully as he could’, Monet restricted himself to moments with no past and no future (7). In this way, Spate challenges the Realist perspective routinely overlayed on Monet’s work. Spate convincingly argues that Monet’s objectivity creates ‘images of the external world embodying his processes of shaping it into his own’. The paintings thus betray Monet’s wish to cease the flow of the rapid disappearance of pre-industrial culture. This is of course a similar line of thinking to that which Kracauer takes when he accounts for modern image-hunger evidenced in the popularity of the illustrated magazine as a repression or concealment of a greater fear of death and destruction. And in this way, Spate makes the brilliant critical move of placing Monet’s work in the context of industrialisation and the social change taking place in late nineteenth century Europe.

In a catalogue accompanying the exhibition of the Beyler collection, the entry on Monet’s ‘Rouen Cathedral: the portal (morning) 1894’ notes that this painting is part of an extensive series in which Monet demonstrated ‘an object mutating; its appearance transformed by the changing light’. Following Spate, we could say that the vision of sensuous plentitude, as this image is in all its glorious blues and mauves and wash of light, is crossed by the same mechanical mode of seeing that Monet experienced before the face of his dead wife. In her analysis of this painting and the series it comes from, Spate invokes Walter Benjamin when she describes Monet’s desire to get closer and closer to the object as a proximity that results in the object’s near disintegration. While most critics saw Monet’s interest in the cathedral as an interest in the durability of form, Spate argues otherwise. She writes: ‘... while the form of the facade remained constant through every change of light, the repeated rendering of it profoundly undermined its reality, and its “durable nature” became ambiguous, fugitive, fragmentary’. Or, as she says, even Monet himself once claimed: ‘everything changes, even stone’. 16

Monet approached the Cathedrals of Rouen in much the same way he approached the face of his dead wife – that is, with a sense of urgency, for fear of not capturing something in
the moment of its disappearance. What is more, in the same year that Monet mourned the loss of pre-industrial France in his images of architectural de-formations, the world was introduced to cinema – that cultural form of visual shock that both Benjamin and Kracauer argue can open up the spectator’s eyes ‘to the physiognomical aspects of things’. To see physiognomically, to see things in their process of disintegration as an image, can create an uneasiness within the spectator – an experience of death as that which distracts from distraction. And as Miriam Hansen argues ‘It is in such moments of almost physical recognition that Kracauer grants photography the potential to offer an antidote to its own positivist ideology, its complicity with the social repression of death’.

In this way, it can be said that Diana’s death unleashed the very uneasiness that ‘the blizzard’ of images of people like herself normally distract us from. The speed with which Diana became an image in death – here I am thinking of the way in which western television networks and press produced memorials to her within twenty four hours of her death – is only equivalent to the acceleration of processes by which techniques of reproduction increasingly influence our existence in general. When a face is seen for the last time, it reminds us of what Eduardo Cadava calls photography’s ‘ghostly character’. By this I do not mean the use of photography as memorial. Rather, I suggest that to recognise how rapidly the dead become an image is to know much more than we are destined to die. More importantly, we can see in the speed of this process how we use images themselves to distract us from the knowledge that in death ‘we will only be here as we have always been here, as images’. In no way could it have been expected that the millions who mourned Diana would remain in that state of shock. But looking back, surely those few days are not so much cause for embarrassment but, rather, cause for recognition of how Diana’s death set-off a deep collective experience of facing death that revealed, however briefly, the way in which modern image hunger distracts us from death, and more importantly how this encounter with death is enabled by the dialectic of recognisability: an image of the universally recognisable Diana as never seen before; the fully unrecognisable final image of Diana.
ENDNOTES


7. Copies of a photograph of an injured Diana, taken by one of the paparazzi who were following Diana at the time of the fatal crash, were posted on the internet within hours of her death.


Conclusion:
Facial Vision

The blind man from Puisaud ... only knows objects by touch. From what others have told him he is aware that they know objects by sight, as he does by touch; he also has been told that one cannot see one’s own face, although one can touch it. He, therefore, concludes that sight is a sort of touch which extends to distant objects, and is not applied to our face ... A looking-glass, therefore, he adds, is an instrument which presents us in relief outside ourselves ... But what puzzled him most was that our other self, which according to his idea a mirror produces in relief, can escape the sense of touch ... ‘Here’, said he, ‘are two senses which are brought to contradict each other by a little instrument; a more perfect instrument would perhaps reconcile these contradictions and yet not make the objects more real; perhaps a third instrument, more perfect and less deceptive, would make these contradictions disappear and show us our mistake. — Diderot

Walter Benjamin once made the following recommendation on the topic of conclusions. He said: ‘Do not write the conclusion of a work in your familiar study. You would not find the necessary courage there.’¹ In this suggestion, Benjamin promotes the same approach to writing as he takes in his philosophy of the image — that is, that in order to really see something you need to break the habits of normal perception. Benjamin is not then recommending a contemplative approach to writing, but one that involves taking writing outside of itself, outside of the everyday routines that for him constituted the orderly world of the study.² Outside of itself, we can see that as a form of writing a conclusion is by nature an ending or termination. The act of taking writing beyond the study requires a certain kind of decisiveness — a jump or leap. Hence, the necessity for courage. In other words, Benjamin recommends that a conclusion should take the form of a jumping off point, a point of departure. And it is in precisely the spirit of the conclusion as a leap that I begin the ending to this study of the face, death and recognition by making a sideways leap from media culture into the phenomenon of blind experience called ‘facial vision’. In the remaining pages I put forth the view that the re-configuration of the face as a dialectical image in moments of unrecognisability fulfils the criteria set by the blind man of Puisaud’s in his dream of ‘a more perfect, less deceptive’ instrument for seeing ourselves.³ Furthermore, I argue this that as an instrument for seeing ourselves the face does is not a mirror reflection, for, as the blind man from Puisaud remarks, a mirror is a contradiction of the senses of sight and touch. It is my
view that the phenomenon of a face becoming unrecognisable enables a form of vision in which the contradiction of sense and touch ‘disappears’, a practice of the image that reveals the face as an amazing two-sided instrument of transmission and reception, an instrument which I believe provides us with a useful model of the viewing experience of facing death in media culture.

‘The blinding nonexistence of death’

Throughout my discussion I have repeatedly deferred to the figure of blindness in a way that takes for granted what blindness is. Indeed, my use of blindness as a metaphor for the experience of seeing a face become unrecognisable might be taken as precisely the phenomenon of face-to-faceness at the centre of Levinas’ philosophy of ethics? Previously, I explained how in Levinas’ ethical philosophy the nakedness of the face of the other takes the form of a demand, which we find ourselves obliged to respond to. Levinas’ view is that responsibility for the other comes before ontology and self-consciousness. He writes: ‘In ethics, the other’s right to exist has primacy over my own, a primacy epitomized in the ethical edict: you shall not kill, you shall not jeopardize the life of the other.’ As I said earlier, Levinas’ philosophy of ethics is based on the uniqueness of the apprehension of the face. In Totality and Infinity he asks, ‘Is not the face given to vision?’ But as I also briefly touched on in the introduction, what Levinas means by vision is not what we normally understand it to be. He writes:

... sensation recovers a ‘reality’ when we see in it (meaning the face) not the subjective counterpart of objective qualities, but an enjoyment ‘anterior’ to the crystallisation of consciousness, I and non-I, into subject and object. This crystallisation occurs not as the ultimate finality of enjoyment but as a moment of its becoming, to be interpreted in terms of enjoyment. (188)

Here is an image of the self leaping into the darkness, into a world without resemblances. In Levinas’ ethics, the space of pure sensation is a nothingness. The only given in this empty space is the face. The face cuts through or transcends the empty time of pure
sensation opening up the infinite relation with being. Richard Cohen explains that Levinas borrows the term ‘infinite’ from Descartes in order to describe the ethical situation. Being face to face with an other is infinite in the sense that Descartes gives to this term when he writes: “in some way I have in me the notion of the infinite earlier than the finite” and that “the strength of my mind ... is in some measure dazzled by the sight.” So we see how it is that in Levinas’ view recognition of death in the face of the other ‘dazzles’ the self. Blinded, the self passively subordinates its existence to the other. Moreover, as Jill Robbins argues in her reading of Totality and Infinity, vision undergoes ‘a transformation’ in Levinas’ account of coming face to face with the other. Robbins also argues that this transformation reveals Levinas’ basic view of vision as ‘a violent way of relating to the other. It “immobilizes its object as its theme ... it is unable to seek what is infinitely other. It seeks to absorb that alterity, to draw it into the play of the Same’ (137). For Levinas, the experience of the infinite, that is, of the ethical situation, is premised on the self becoming blind: the dazzling radiance of the face of the other cancels the sense of sight thereby terminating the possibility of violence.

A consideration of the influence of Judaism on Levinas’ thinking can help us to better understand the transformation of sight that occurs in his writings. Elizabeth Grosz has argued that ‘the call of the Other’ in Levinas’ philosophy of ethics directly relates to the Judaic image of ‘the Chosen.’ She writes: ‘Levinas seeks to problematize Hellenic/Christocentric philosophies by devising an ethics from the Judaic image of “the Chosen”, the ones called upon, burdened, by the needs of the other’ (83). While we are blinded by the strangeness of the other – this other who bears no resemblance to self and is thus absolutely Other – we cannot block our ears to the insistence of the other’s demand as we recognise the Other’s demand prior to our own being. Levinas’ ethics is thus not only based on the assumption that blindness is a state of ‘nothingness’. It is also a state in which one is primarily oriented to the other by speech and language, that is, through the sense of hearing. The radiance of the face cancels the eyes only to open the ears to ‘the call of the Other’.

Clearly this is not what I mean by blindness in this study which focuses on the face as a practice of the image. On the contrary, it is yet another aspect of Judaic thinking that can help us to understand a different experience of blindness, and one which takes us back to
Benjamin’s writings on the image. In Grosz’ essay on Judaism and otherness, she explains that there is a fundamental difference between the Hellenic/Christian tradition of revelation and the Judaic tradition of interpretation: ‘The Greco-Christian tradition depends on an incarnation or manifestation of presence through visual resemblance. The Christian doctrine of spirit too is resolutely anti-linguistic ... Signs are .. Sacramental; they are mediated representations of a divine presence’ (85). In the Judaic tradition, meaning does not lie in some sort of sameness between word and thing, discourse and the real, but rather, as Grosz explains, it is formed in ‘a contiguity, a continuous web of interpretations, with no certainty, objectivity or truth, no original or derivative, simply an endless rewriting’ (86). Grosz also explains how the Torah is composed of fragments – ‘fragments of God’s words, intermixed with fragments of commentary. Always incomplete, open-ended, opening up new interpretations rather than confirming old ones ... Signs do not collapse into icons (as they do for the pagan) nor into indices (as they do for the Greek). They are irreducibly autonomous and productive. The sign produces reality in/as its image’ (86) (My emphasis).

It is of course this latter aspect of Judaic thinking that underlines Benjamin’s philosophy of the image and his conception of blindness. Commenting on Benjamin’s short history of photography, Eduardo Cadava writes that ‘If a fog encircles the childhood of photography [in Benjamin’s essay on the history of photography], it is in part because, in the experience of the photograph, it is as if we cannot see a thing. In the twilight zone between seeing and not seeing, we fail to get the picture’. The key words here being, ‘as if’. What Cadava responds to in Benjamin’s writing on photography is the allegorical impulse. It is not that we are blinded but, as I understand it, that we experience the image as if we are blind. It is well known that Benjamin was very much influenced by and fascinated with Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah, about which he learned from his life-time friend Gershom Sholem. In one of the many letters exchanged between the two, Benjamin comments on the importance of a particular stanza from a poem by Sholem on Kafka’s The Trial: ‘What we are is reflected/ In endless instances./Nobody knows the way completely/ And each part of it makes us blind.’ This experience of simultaneous seeing and blindness is very different from Levinas’ conception of blindness. For Levinas, the other’s mortality revealed in the face cancels the eyes. The situation Benjamin describes is one in which the transience of existence that takes the form of a succession of moments of seeing as if for the first time reveals the
mortal nature of human existence. And it is precisely this Benjaminian conception of blindness that brings us to the phenomenon I mentioned earlier of facial vision.

**Facial Vision**

The phenomenon associated with blindness known as facial vision was first described in 1749 by the French critic, Diderot, in his essay, ‘A Letter About the Blind, For The Use of Those Who Can See’. In this essay, Diderot remarks on his blind acquaintance’s amazing sensitivity, including his ability to perceive the presence of objects by sensing pressure or temperature changes on his face. He writes:

(He) judges of his nearness to the fire by the heat, and of a vessel being full by the noise made when pouring liquid; and he judges of his nearness to objects by the action of the air on his face. He is so sensitive to the least changes in the currents of air that he can distinguish between a street and a closed alley.11

Since Diderot’s time, this hypothesised ability in the blind to sense the presence of objects through the face has been the subject of mystical explanations, ranging from dependency on magnetism to telepathy. More recently, the hypothesis has been overshadowed by the generally agreed upon understanding by researchers in this field that the primary mechanism of spatial perception in the blind is auditory. That is to say, blind people perceive the presence of objects by listening to the sounds of their own footsteps or vocalizations.12 This view accords with Levinas’ conception of the blinding effect of the face of the Other as that which leads us to the sense of hearing. But while this latter aspect of blind experience may well be the dominant mode of orientation, it does not follow that it invalidates blind perception of changes in air pressure and temperature on the face. Nor does it follow that blind conception of space is the same as it is for the sighted.

In recent years in the academy there has been a resurgence of interest in the senses. Walter Benjamin’s work on the restructuring of the senses in modernity has been (mis)used by a number of cultural critics as evidence of the damaging effects of the hegemony of sight. Bill Nichols, for example, cites Benjamin’s concept of ‘the destruction of the aura’ (of the work of
art in modernity) to support his argument about the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction in media culture. Nichols’ (mis)use of Benjamin in this instance, puts Benjamin’s conception of the aura to work in precisely the way Benjamin warned his concepts should not be used: that is, as a ‘weapon’.14

The long history of the senses in western thinking is characterised by an embattled stance against the sense of sight. This is because the sense of sight is regarded by both the rationalists and the Christians as the only sense that can to lead to knowledge.15 In many of the studies that constitute the most recent turn to the senses, the defensive stance against sight takes the form of a liberatory impulse. In his source book in the anthropology of the senses, David Howes claims that the task of this field of anthropology is to rescue western culture from the domination of sight.16 He writes:

It is hoped that the wisdom gained by plunging into the realm of the non-visual senses – and exploring how the possibilities of awareness contained within these senses have been exploited by others – can help to liberate us from the hegemony which sight has for so long exercised over our own culture’s social, intellectual and aesthetic life. (4) (Original emphasis)

Taking us down a well-trodden path, Howes claims that the domination of the sense of sight in modern cultures has led to the collapse of the distinction between the real and its representations. Citing Richard Kearney, Howes bemoans the case of a ‘suburbanite’ who reportedly preferred her son’s photographic image to his natural good looks (4). Howes’ solution to the problem of visual hegemony is to turn to other cultures for lessons in sensory appreciation. He proposes, for example, that westerners can learn a great deal from the pulsating design songs of the Shipibo-Indians of eastern Peru. For starters, he argues that the contrast between these designs and western forms of pictorialism demonstrates the rigidity and fixity of western modes of perception. But the question is, as he puts it, ‘Is it possible for us to liberate ourselves from the latter perspective and approach the world through the Shipibo-Combo “ratio of sense”?’(6). This kind of question is typical of a particular anthropological approach to art. The main problem with this kind of inter-cultural approach is that while attention is given to ‘the interplay of senses’, it overlooks the historical and political aspects of these very different cultural forms. In this way, Howes’ vision of an
anthropology of the senses adheres to the main principle in Paul Stoller’s call for a ‘reorganization of the senses’ – that is, challenging the dominance of the sense of sight. It is thus a practice of anthropology in which sensory experience is conceived of as an end in itself, an experience that supposedly lies outside of history.

Anthony Synnott traces the history of sensationist thinking in his essay, ‘Puzzling over the Senses: from Plato to Marx.’ Synnott’s brief overview of this trajectory in western thinking (expanded in his book, The Body Social) explores questions such as whether the senses are a valid form of knowledge – that is, a form of knowledge in and of themselves. He argues that ‘the modern scientific paradigm of the senses reinforced a materialistic sense-positive evaluation, in contrast to the Christian paradigm’ (69-71). Key thinkers in this sense-positive paradigm include Locke and Hume, and later, Marx. Synnott explains that unlike his predecessors, Marx was interested in the relation between the senses and history. He says that Marx reversed Hegel’s idealist ranking of the sensorium in which the most human sense – sight – was contrasted with the most animal sense – mouth and nose (72-73). ‘For Marx’, Synnott claims, ‘the greatest difference between humans and animals ... had nothing to do with the ranking of the sensorium and everything to do with the animalization of humanity in the capitalist mode of production’ (73). Marx was thus the first in the line of modern sense-positive thinkers to give a historical significance to the senses. He wrote: ‘the forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present.’ But even though Marx includes all five senses in this history, there is, nevertheless, an ‘anti-ocularism’ at work in his implicit alignment of sight with the ruling classes – the power of the ruling class to oversee, to intrusively surveil the worker in forms of ‘bestial barbarization’ and ‘mortification’. In the capitalist forms of sensory deprivation the worker is, he argued, not only treated as an animal but also denied simple animal necessities such as light and air. Through sensory deprivation, the worker is simultaneously ‘dehumanized and alienated’.

Critical Marxists of the twentieth century such as Georg Lukacs, for example, developed Marx’s view of the senses in ideas such as ‘the spatialization of time’, which, Lukacs argued, resulted from the Taylorist methods of regulation and control of workers’ labour. As we have seen throughout this thesis, Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of the image is also founded on a questioning of the impact of modernity on the senses. In his essay on the
work of art in modernity, Benjamin writes that the destruction of the aura of art – ‘the unique phenomena of a distance, however close it may be’ – is a twofold process. The aura is destroyed first by ‘the desire of contemporary masses to bring things “closer” spatially’ – that is, the destruction of distance. And, second, he writes about ‘the bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction’. What Benjamin means by this is not the same as the fear expressed by Kearney and so many others about the collapse of a distinction between reality and representation. Nor is this a postmodern celebration of the simulacra. Rather, for Benjamin, the shock experience of mass media jolts us into another kind of recognition – a de-spatialised temporal experience in which it is possible to recognise in these distorted images the origin of the present crisis. And the de-spatialised perception of what Benjamin calls ‘profane illumination’ can renew in us a long forgotten physical, tactual connection to the world of things, a different physiognomical experience of the world.

**Space and Sight**

M. von Senden’s study of blindness *Space and Sight*, first published in the nineteen thirties, focuses on the experience of the newly sighted, that is, the congenitally blind immediately following operations. Von Senden reports in this text that upon opening his or her eyes for the first time, the newly sighted person experiences an initial stage of what he calls ‘purely visual sensation’ (129).

To begin with, the newly operated patients do not localize their visual impressions; they do not relate them to any point, either to the eye or to any surface, even a spherical one; they see colours much as we smell an odour of peat or varnish, which enfolds and intrudes upon us, but without occupying any specific form of extension in a more exactly definable way. (129)

Like Diderot before him, Von Senden’s study is addressed to the sighted and his aim is also similar: to learn from the newly sighted the things the the sighted take for granted or indeed fail to see. What von Senden describes in the above passage is a passive experience of seeing without cognition. But this account of the experience of the newly sighted also reminds us of the physiological aspects of seeing, that is, the reception and conveyance of stimuli to the
visual centres. Von Senden observes that in the initial stage of pure sensation, visual impressions do nothing ‘to induce him [the patient] to emerge from his passive state and to try, for his own part, to take up some sort of mental attitude towards the chaos of colours presented to him’ (130). We might say that this blind patient behaves in a similar manner to Burroughs’ character Lee, a drug addict, who declared he had no need for a self image and spent his days watching television in a bored and indifferent way. Von Senden reports that in this stage of pure sensation which, some patients reportedly never move beyond, the newly sighted are very often found to be indifferent to visual impressions.

Von Senden claims that the once blind man’s disinterest in the visual world is a result of a sensory overload – the chaos of colour and shape. But reading these case reports it would also seem that this indifference, which allegedly spills over into the everyday as an overall state of depression, stems from a longing to return to the tactual world of blindness, to facial vision. For example, one report concludes that:

He (the newly sighted patient) does not know what he is seeing, and everything that vision tells us concerning lines, contours, proportions, distances and motions, is unknown to him.
All his ideas were furnished by touch and hearing; those excited by the eye arrived too late; he took no interest at all in acquiring new knowledge; he continued to behave like a blind man.
My own opinion is, that he never saw anything but a confusion, and that this was his own fault; that is why your world, as it appears to you, was and remained strange to him. All the images which delight your painter’s eye flitted through his mind as a jumble of impressions, without his attention being drawn to them. (133)

While the author of this report is clearly troubled by the blind man’s reluctance to enter the sighted world, there is something to be gained for the once blind man by his refusal to see as a painter does. In fact, the newly sighted man’s indifference to and indeed suspicion of visual impressions takes us back to the writings of Benjamin. In chapter two, I argued that Benjamin’s understanding of physiognomies is different from Adorno’s. Adorno, like Simmel, sees the face as a spatial arrangement of parts that make a whole. For Benjamin, face recognition is always temporal, as we saw in his use of the face as a metaphor for surrealistic experience of the city. Marcus Bullock explains in his commentary on Benjamin that, unlike
the view held by his friends, Horkheimer and Adorno, Benjamin was suspicious of ‘inner order’ in works of art. Bullock writes: ‘These harmonies are, for Benjamin, an optical trick by which our attention is distracted from the crimes which maintain the world as it is, and from the injustice which cries out that it be changed, keeping our minds rivetted to a fiction instead’. He goes on to claim that for Benjamin the restoration of ‘real sight’ requires that we be distracted from that distraction. Likewise, the newly sighted man who continues to behave ‘like a blind man’, does not necessarily cease to see, but, rather, he finds himself suspended between two very different perceptions of space, two radically different experiences of the physical world and his place in it. As with the child’s experience of colour, which Benjamin once theorised is an experience devoid of concern for the spatial organization of objects, Von Senden concludes that initially the newly sighted are entirely unmoved by the impression of spatial organization. As we shall see, in both cases – that is the child’s perception of colour and the newly sighted’s perception of the physical world – lack of interest in spatial arrangement does not equate to lack of interest in objects and/or objectness.

The primary aim of von Senden’s text is to demonstrate the specificity of blind perception of space. To make his case he points to evidence of what he calls ‘a space of touch’ (30), citing a well-known case of a blind and deaf boy whose father would often observe him

in the following activity:


to employ many hours in selecting from the channel of a river, which was near his father’s house, small stones of a rounded shape, nearly of the same weight, and having smooth surfaces. These ... he would arrange in a circular form on the bank of the river, and place himself in the centre of the circle. (30)

Von Senden admits that this activity could be taken as evidence of the boy’s ability to reproduce the shape of a circle formed in his mind’s eye as a memory-image. However, he challenges the report’s author that this memory-image is equivalent to sighted consciousness of the spatial figure of a circle. He argues instead that the boy’s activity offers us a clue into a consciousness peculiar to the blind – the construction of a circle by means of what he calls a ‘touch-sequence “circle”’ (32). For von Senden, the circle is the ultimate touch-sequence of the blind. He suggests that the slow, methodical construction of the circle by the boy mimics the most fundamental movement of the blind: ‘the muscular sensations to (their) continuously
controlling arms as the already familiar tactual sequence 'circle from without' (31). Von Senden concludes thus that we are mistaken to equate this important schema with what the sighted understand as 'structure':

For when as sighted persons we speak, for example, of the structure of a tree, we think too much in doing so of the spatial relationship of the parts to one another and to the whole; moreover, the possession of this spatial structure presupposes that we have previously experienced the tree as a whole. But this is precisely what the blind person has not acquired, and never can, even by use of the schema ... the blind man’s schema is the same for all trees. Even when he is able, say, to finger all over a model tree and actually plant it in a tub, one still cannot say of him that he has thereby had a total experience of 'tree' as such. What he obtains from this is a series of qualitative impressions — extending from the gnarled texture of the roots to the twigs and leafage — and the temporal structure of change in these impressions, from root to trunk, branches, twigs and leaves. If he were to analyse these impressions more closely, he would be able to form a comparatively full schema of a 'tree', though it would continue to reproduce in compressed form the temporal structure of the perceptual process.(32-33)

Von Senden proposes that the concept of touch-sequence constitutes a fundamental difference between the blind and the sighted. For the latter, space is the dominant means of reference and orientation. For the blind, experience is not spatial, in the way the sighted understand space to be. Instead, experience of the world of things is always temporal. In this way it could be said that the boy's placement of the stones is an enactment of becoming blind. Moreover, it is sight itself that is mimicked here, for what we can see in this performance is that seeing is something more than the apprehension of spatial arrangement. The blind boy's enactment of his mode of being is a material lesson in the futility of the metaphysical dream of full sightedness. In this display of blindness we recognise that it is impossible to grasp the world in its entirety. Instead, there is only ever a succession of instances of first sight in which the contradiction of sight and touch disappear in a perception of 'the temporal structure of change', 'circle from without'.

First Sight as Seeing for the Last Time
In his study of the significance of temporal impressions in the blind, von Senden discovered some interesting things about blind recognition ‘at first sight.’ He learnt that the blind can almost immediately identify familiar objects such as apples, pens, dolls, rings, etc., and that they can usually say what the objects are made of. But when put to the test, these same people found it impossible to say which of the objects identified was the longest or the thickest. It would seem that the concepts of length and density are of no use to the blind. Likewise, it would seem that the blind have no use for the spatial concept of distance. When Diderot asked his blind acquaintance if he regretted not having the sense of sight, the man replied:

If curiosity did not compel me to choose sight, I would just as soon have long arms. It seems to me my hands would tell me more of what is going on in the moon than your eyes or your telescopes; and besides, the eyes cease to see sooner than hands to touch. I would, therefore, do just as well to improve the sense I already possess rather than to grant me the one I lack (252).

On one hand this excerpt from Diderot’s reported conversation can be taken as an indication of the lack of understanding in Diderot’s blind acquaintance of the sighted concept of distance. That which lies out of reach is of no interest to the blind, for to see an object is not, in this blind man’s thinking, to experience it. But while this understanding seems blantly mistaken we need to consider that this study began with the question of what it means to see the faces of the dead and dying in modernity, that is, at a distance, and given that this increasing distancing of the dead and dying has impacted on our capacity to exchange experience, it would seem that the blind man is absolutely correct in his summation. After all what is the point of seeing across the vast spaces of the globe if such images are unable to touch us.

The lack of regard in the blind for concepts such as large and small, near and far, also constitutes a different relation between the self and the physical world. Take, for example, the following observation of a sixteen-year old girl patient by Gayet, as cited in von Senden, who not only refused to relinquish touch as her primary sense but also continued to recognise faces by touch than by sight. The report reads:
I brought an uncle, of whom she was very fond, to sit by her bedside and told him to remain quite still; I stood behind him and told X to look at the face in front of her. ‘That’s your face’, she said at once. ‘Reach out for it then’, I said. She stretched out her forefinger and ran it over a quite small surface of her uncles’ cheek, and immediately her face beamed and she cried: ‘It’s my uncle!’ (53)

In blind experience, the face is apprehended through touch. The face is also a source of pure sensation, for the blind person not only identifies others by feeling out the shapes and texture of the other’s face but his or her own face is a fully sensory organ, a receptor. As another researcher cited by von Senden noted:

I presented to him (the blind subject) in succession a great number of different objects, each one of which he took into both hands, felt it most carefully over with both, then with equal minuteness with one, turning the object over and over again, in every direction; the tongue was next applied to it; and lastly, he applied it so near to the eye as to touch the eyelids, when he pronounced his opinion upon it, and generally with correctness, as to the nature and form of the object, when these were distinct. (46)

Clearly, the face takes on a very different shape and function in the world of the blind. In von Senden’s study we learn that one young patient who finally did learn to use her eyes remarked that she was ‘confounded by the discovery that each new person who was brought in to see her had an entirely different face’ (63). Confirming von Senden’s theory of the specificity of blind perception of space, she said that she had previously thought that ‘all faces were much alike except that some were rounder than others’ (63). Eyes also serve a different, tactual function. When Diderot asked his friend for his opinion of what he thought eyes were he replied: ‘An organ on which the air has the effect this stick has on my hand’. In these kinds of experience, the face is a tactile receptor of pressure changes in the air, of temperature, and other tactual forces. As with the condition known as prosopagnosia, blind experience of the face reminds us that face recognition is only one of the ways in which we identify others and are ourselves identified. It also reminds us that coming face to face with another involves senses other than sight.
Facial Vision in the Sighted; the Face as Receptor

Is facial vision limited to the congenitally blind? The answer to this question is that while it is a perceptual phenomenon many blind people rely upon, it is not limited to them. On the contrary, I suggest, that what von Senden describes as the nonspatial, tactual experience of the facial vision can provide insight into the viewing experience of faces becoming unrecognisable. Just as the blind man is forced to re-remember the object each time he encounters it through a touch-series, the shock of faces becoming unrecognisable in media culture can set off in the viewer forgotten memories of a tactile relation to the face. It does this not by shutting down the senses of sight and touch but, as the blind man of Puisaud theorised might be possible, by making the contradiction between these two senses disappear. Earlier, I invoked one of my own childhood experiences of mortality – the act of reaching over to kiss my grandfather for the last time; an experience that I remembered for the first time in the shock of the sight of actor Paul Eddington’s de-facement. This kind of ‘radical re-remembrance’, as Bullock calls it, reminds us of the tactile approach children have to faces. A child feels her way around the contours of the faces of its primary carers, let’s say its mother’s face. Children routinely burrow their heads into the curve of their mother’s neck, and they use their tongues to explore not only every object that comes their way, but that most precious object, the face of the mother. Toddlers are all mouth. It is an everyday occurrence for parents of a toddler to find themselves covered in the slobber of kisses and wet tongues that, for the child at least, constitute an experience of tactile, olfactory and gustatory delight. The same can of course be said of the exchange of affection between lovers. Indeed, Levinas makes this point. But when he does, it is, as we saw earlier, part of his wider view of the ethical situation as a cancellation of the eyes. I am making a very different point. As I see it, the child’s physiognomic perception of the face, that is, an everyday sense perception of the kind discussed in chapter two, is an experience in which sight and touch come together to open the eyes to the face as an image.

To be shocked into a remembrance of tactual experience of the face is entirely different to that other childhood experience of the face made famous in Lacan’s formulation of ‘The Mirror Phase.’ In Lacan’s theory of the subject, self-alienation is based on a primary misrecognition by the subject of the Other as self. Lacan paints a scenario in which the face of the mother serves as a mirror in which the child mistakenly recognises his ideal self. This primary identification is thus founded not only on a misrecognition but also an idealisation of self. As Lacan and others, including Julia Kristeva tell it, the developing child is subsequently doomed to spend its life searching in the faces of others for that lost, ideal apparition of self. From a physiognomical point of view, the child’s primary perceptual experience of the face need not take the form of an internalising gaze. Rather, I would suggest that the child’s perceptual experience of appearance and disappearance gives rise to a primary experience of
the face as an image (opposed to a mirror). We might even speculate that this childhood experience of loss is the basis of the delayed shock that returns in moments of the trauma of unrecognisability.

For Benjamin, photography and film, like the name, is ‘a mode of bereavement’ – it embodies the loss of the particular moment of its coming into being: ‘Whatever we know will soon cease to exist, becomes an image.’ On this basis, blindness can be said to mark the point at which a thing disappears. It also marks the point at which a thing becomes an image. It seems to me that this simultaneous seeing and not seeing of the image is a form of blindness that is entirely different to Levinas’ conception of the encounter with the other. In the first place, this latter conception of not seeing the mother’s face (in the moments of her disappearance, her absence) does not lead to the subordination of the self. Nor is it, as Levinas suggests, a form of vision that seeks to possess the other by seeing it as the same as self. The face is not a mirror of the self. I would argue that in terms of recognition, involuntary memories of physiognomic sensation enabled in moments of seeing a face become unrecognisable, memories that take a the form of a re-remembrance of the facial vision of childhood and or desire, share a formal structure with the suspended state of exchange Düttmann claims is necessary if the demand for recognition is to remain precisely that: a demand. Unlike the demand of the face in Levinas’ ethical situation, which as I have argued, inevitably becomes ‘discourse’, the demand for recognition I describe here is grounded not in a metaphor of death but the particular death of the subject transmitted via the face.

We face death in the face of the other as a blind man faces the objects around him. Awareness of mortality does not in this way lead to questions of the ‘inner life’ but to the outer-world of others and things. In his essay on Benjamin’s philosophy of the image, Eduardo Cadava reminds us that for Benjamin, modern experience is characterised by shock. Benjamin’s work concerns how the technologies of modernity – ranging from transport and the industrialisation of labour, to mundane inventions, such as the match and the flip-book – impact on the human sensorium. Cadava explains how Benjamin singles out the photograph and film as technologies of modernity that ‘raise experience of shock to a formal principle’, namely the delay of shock experience. ‘Recognizability’, in Benjamin’s writings, is the possibility of seeing missed experience as it returns in experience of delayed shock. For Benjamin, the photograph embodies this temporality, making it in its very nature ‘a farewell’, or as Cadava puts it, the photograph ‘is permanently inflamed by the instantaneous flash of death’ (226). And it is, perhaps, the case that more than any other group, the blind are aware of this aspect of the image. Their world is no more an empty, infinite space than is the world of the sighted. Indeed, it may well be the case that the blind are more aware than others that
reality is something that cannot be grasped in its entirety. There is no whole and lasting picture.

And surely this is the lesson Diderot hoped the sighted would learn when he addressed them with his account of the blind man of Puisaud’s amazing capacity to see with his face. An extract from Dufau’s study of a young blind girl, named Lucy (cited in von Senden’s text) allegorizes precisely this kind of insight. Determined to test the power of a sense she had only ever heard about, Lucy devised a series of experiments. The following is her account of her research into sightedness:

I posed myself a host of questions about this new and unknown state which had been described to me, and did my best to come to terms with them. In order to satisfy my doubt, I had the idea of trying a strange experiment. One morning I again put on a dress which I had not worn for some time, because I had been growing so rapidly then from month to month, and thus attired I suddenly showed myself at the door of the anteroom in which my governess was already working at the window. I stood listening. ‘Good Heavens, Lucy,’ she said, ‘why have you put on that old dress, that only reaches to your knees?’ I merely uttered a few idle words and withdrew. This was enough to convince me that, without laying a hand upon me, Martha had immediately been able to recognize that I had again put on the dress that was too short. So this was seeing. I gradually recounted in my memory a multitude of things which must have been daily seen in the same fashion by the people about me and which could not have been known to them in any other way. I did not in the least understand how this happened, but I was at last persuaded. And this led gradually to a complete transformation of my ideas. I admitted to myself that there was in fact a highly important difference of organization between myself and other people; whereas I could make contact with them by touch and hearing, they were bound to me through an unknown sense, which entirely surrounded me even from a distance, followed me about, penetrated through me and somehow held me in its power from morning to night. What a strange power this was, to which I was subjected against my will, without, for my part, being able to exercise it over anyone at all. It made me shy and uneasy to begin with. I felt envious about it. It seemed to raise an impenetrable screen between society and myself. I felt unwillingly compelled to regard myself as an exceptional being, that had, as it were, to hide itself in order to live (61-62).

The image of Lucy hiding from the eyes of others might be taken as evidence of Levinas’ view of the violence of the sense of sight. It is true, as Lucy says, sight not only brings the object closer, but in doing so, it allows the viewer to penetrate the object, in this case to ‘penetrate through’ a young girl. However, we can also see in Lucy’s account of her research into sight how knowing this about sight can release us in the way that Kracauer uses the term when he claimed that it is precisely in the moments that a film image destabilises the notion of a unitary, impenetrable subject, that the spectator is ‘released from the grip of consciousness’. Lucy reminds us how sight is a form of touch that physically binds us to the other. Sight can penetrate your very being, as we saw how it does for people with HIV and AIDS. Just as the sense of sight transforms us into an image, it is also the case that as an
image a subject can penetrate the viewer, cutting through the veil of the illusion of a distinction between subject and object, self and other. Lucy learnt how it was possible to shock her governess. She learnt how to use her power as an image. Whether she was aware or not, she learnt how in becoming an image, a subject can, as William Burroughs loves to do, penetrate the other in 'a blind-worm way'. This is what I have tried to show in this study of faces becoming unrecognisable. From the facelessness of actor Paul Eddington, to the unrecognisable faces of people affected by AIDS related illness, from the shock sight of Dennis Potter's severed head in his television dramas, to the documentation of the racist defacement of Eddie Mabo's grave, we can see that although the face is employed throughout contemporary media to conceal the effects of death, to cover over its terrifying unrecognisability, faces can and do turn to reveal that concealment, to show the underside of the mask, to confront and penetrate the viewer and, hence, force the viewer into a recognition of the absolute irreversibility of death.

Throughout the thesis I have consistently argued for consideration of the perceptual basis of any politics of recognition. I have tried to show that the perceptual basis of the viewing experience of faces of the dead and dying is grounded in historical and social conditions of recognition and recognisability. And here, in this conclusion, I have suggested that we can gain insight into the dialectics of recognisability not by simply invoking the figure of blindness as a metaphor but by interrogating exactly what we mean by blindness. In terms of a politics of recognition, the idea of a face becoming unrecognisable blinding us in such a way as to trigger a form of facial vision emphasises my point that politics of recognition is never simply a case of positive or negative images. Rather, by shifting the focus away from images of the face to an examination of the face as a practice of the image I have attempted to make a case for a dynamic politics of recognition. I have argued that we need to acknowledge that the face is never simply 'a social construction' but a powerful transmitter. By looking into the phenomenon known as facial vision we can see how the face is also a receptor. The face of the viewing subject is sensitive to the shock of death made visible in the disappearance of the face of the other. More importantly, this shock effect can open the way to a political consciousness of the historical conditions of recognisability by releasing the powers of death. While television's de-spatialising effect has made us insensitive to images of the dead and dying we nevertheless remain sensitive to the powers of death released by the blinding sight of a face becoming unrecognisable. Blinded, we are, I have argued, forced to see anew, forced to feel our way around in the dark in search of impossible resemblances.

In One-Way Street, Benjamin provides an instance of facial vision in his description of the face of a beloved. He writes:

He who loves is attached not only to the 'faults' of the beloved, not only to the whims and weaknesses of a woman. Wrinkles in the face, moles, shabby clothes, and a
lopsided walk bind him more lastingly and relentlessly than any beauty. This has long been known. And why? If the theory is correct that feeling is not located in the head, that we sentimentally experience a window, a cloud, a tree not in our brains but, rather, in the place where we see it, then we are, in looking at our beloved, too, outside of ourselves. But in a torment of tension and ravishment. Our feeling, dazzled, flutters like a flock of birds in the woman’s radiance. And as birds seek refuge in the leafy recesses of a tree, feelings escape into the shaded wrinkles, the awkward movements and inconspicuous blemishes of the body we love, where they can lie low in safety. And no passer by would guess that it’s just here, in what is defective and censurable, that the fleeting darts of adoration nestle.  

As I bring this study to a close I find myself faced with a choice between two forms of love as recognition. First, there is Deleuze and Guattari’s form of love, which, as we saw at the start of this thesis, implores us to smash through the eye sockets of the woman turning her body inside out so that she becomes an uncharted territory, a world of futurity for her lover to explore. In this first scenario, the woman is de-faced. Alternatively, there is the kind of recognition Benjamin describes above in which the face of the woman is the shelter of her lover’s adoration. Personally, I prefer the latter. Partly because this form of recognition allows us to keep our faces and to find attraction in all of their flaws. But mostly, I choose this latter form of recognition because what Benjamin proposes here is a radical theorisation of the face as image.

The darts of adoration may be invisible to the passer by, but it is also true that in unexpected moments when the face becomes unrecognisable – as did the faces of actor Paul Eddington, participants in SDSI, Eddie Mabo and Diana – we recognise the vulnerability Benjamin recognised in his lover’s face. We might even say that the unique spatio-temporal experience of the dialectics of recognisability that I have examined throughout this study constitute a proximity and a force similar to that which Benjamin attributes to love as a form of recognition. In his short piece on the face Benjamin proposes that recognition of the vulnerability of the beloved’s face leads us not, as Levinas suggests, to turn inward. Just the opposite. This experience of the face takes us outside of ourselves, where we find ourselves ‘in a torment of tension and ravishment’. For Benjamin, recognition of the physical defects of the beloved creates a tremendous sense of grief that gives way to the rush of ravishment. Or, if you like, a forceful desire to touch, a state of enraptured generated, I believe, by a recognition of what is mortal, human. Here, the face is simultaneously a transmitter of otherness and a receptor of parts of oneself. The lovers are simultaneously at a distance and intimately close, indeed, the lover loves embeds itself in the body of his beloved. And so it is that I suggest that
as with the blinding radiance of the face of a beloved, the image of the face becoming unrecognisable is a practice in which the face is both transmitter and receptor, an image that puts us at a distance only to draw us close, a practice that can release the powers of death that lie latent in the form of the face. It is, for sure then, I believe, 'a perfect instrument' for seeing ourselves. It is an instrument that has the force to cut through the anaesthetising effects of media culture and penetrate to the very core of the viewer, to release in us a memory of what it is to see a face for the last time and feel what that truly means.

ENDNOTES


2. One gets the feeling that Benjamin was very systematic in his approach to writing or at least wanted to be, for in his theses on the techniques of writing he recommends, among other things, that 'a pedantic adherence to certain papers, pens, inks is beneficial', 81.


6. Richard Cohen, intro. Face To Face With Levinas, 6.


10. Scholem, 124


12. For a standard text in this field see Bruce Goldstein, *Sensation and Perception*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth, 1984).


14. See Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Hammersmith: Fontana, 1992). In 1936, Benjamin wrote in his preface to this essay that Marx’s prognosis of the transformation of the superstructure ‘has taken more than half a century to manifest in all areas of culture the change in the conditions of production.’ In order to tackle questions these changes raise for the work of art, Benjamin’s essay proposes concepts for a theory of art that are, he says, ‘completely useless for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art.’ Benjamin explicitly says in this preface that his essay is not intended as ‘a weapon’ against Facsim, but to offer concepts that are entirely useless to Facsim, 236.


27. See Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). In this text, self-recognition is theorised as a recognition of the disappearance of self in the face/mirror of the departing mother. Hence, the subject is formed in what is according to Kristeva a primary experience of grief and loss.


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