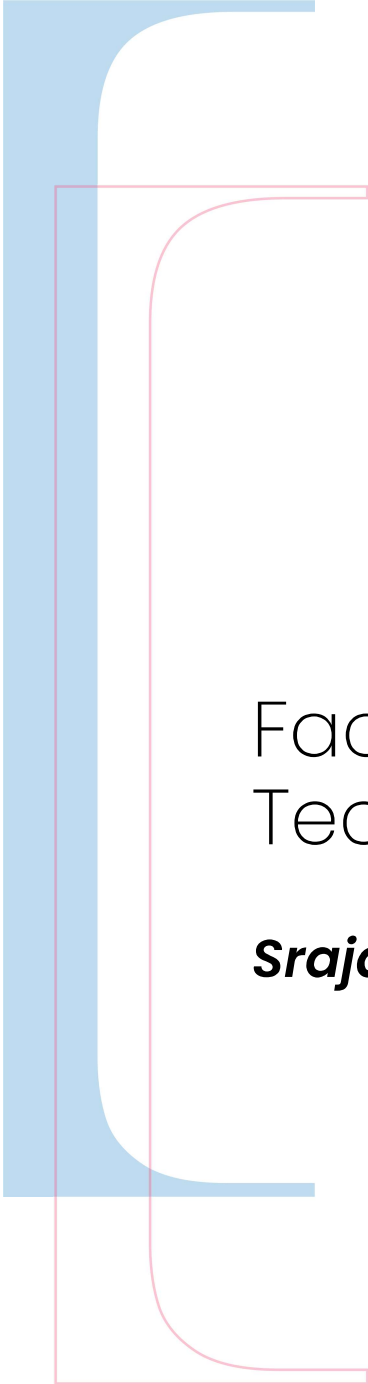




Face: An Insufficient Technology of the Subject

Srajana Kaikini

Division of Humanities and Social Sciences & Division of Literature and the Arts
School of Interwoven Arts and Sciences, Krea University
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1955-5482>
srajana.kaikini@krea.edu.in / srajanakaikini@gmail.com

Abstract

In this paper, I explore the philosophical apprehension of the face in art history to signal a moment of rupture in the contemporary times of the face and its signifying relationship to the subject. Drawing from Francis Galton's nineteenth century photographic experiments on analytical portraiture, one sees how the face when conceived as an atlas, functions very differently for the subject and its recognition than when understood as a mere image. With the advent of futuristic technology like AI and machine learning steering in much of our technocratic imaginations, where does the face and its constituency lie? Modernist artists found in the face, various motivations of their own – it was a field to explore their own subjectivities and those inclined towards the transcendental managed to liberate the subject from its image i.e. the face. This manner of freeing the subject of its image and thinking of the face as a structure of the subject, has potential to help us imagine new kinds of polyvalent subjectivities, as can be seen for instance in the works of contemporary artist-philosophers like Hito Steyerl. This paper articulates this journey of the face which began its story as the constitutive technology of the subject in the 19th century but today find its best reckoning as an insufficient one, in our quest for understanding new post-humanist subjectivities.

Face: An Insufficient Technology of the Subject

The face is a haunt for both artists and philosophers alike. Art's history has had a long-standing interest in the idea of the face. The portrait for instance is a recurrent theme in several art movements across time and cultures. Who am I without my face? Who are you without yours? What is a face that is not of an

individual? Can there be a faceless person? If you dream of a face you've never seen in the world, whose face is it after all?

In this paper I explore the face as not just a *formal* signifier of someone or something but a kind of *technology* that must work towards the creation of new kinds of subjects. In the post-pandemic context, where the world has been through an exacerbated period of work-from-home and binding social distancing norms, the need for a social inter subjective reconnection has become even more heightened. There is a manner in which the body has returned to the discussion table. The body needs an active reckoning and the body is marked by the face. In this paper, I explore the concept of the face in terms of subjects and their different imaginations and propose for a structural shift in the construction of meaning/ sense of a face. The face is first and foremost a concept that generally takes the form of an image, mostly available to perception, and thereby available for an encounter.

The Face is an Image, but also an Atlas

Thinking along Daston and Galison's critique of *The Image of Objectivity* (1992), the face could be considered perhaps as an atlas – a diagrammatic image which one can hope to traverse, navigate or crash against. The face if considered as an atlas may lead us in or throw us out, keep company or eschew it, mirror or liberate the other. The face as an atlas is therefore the precise location where one finds possibilities to extend oneself. The subject in philosophical history has been the object of continual exploration and conceptualization from Levinas to Deleuze to Foucault. What is that quality or characteristic of the face that lends itself to such extensive theorization? What is it about the face that continues to elude us? After all, when in front of one, should not the face reveal all by way of simply being that – a surface that marks the body? Then why is it that the faces of the beloved flows like water and the face of a foe is etched in stone? And what about the stranger? Does the stranger have a face at all?

Face as Subject-Less Image

The tussle between the specific and the general, is a recurrent question in philosophies of the natural sciences for instance. The scientific community is constantly invested in thinking of deciphering images from nature and making images of nature. They have responded to this inquiry over history with inventions of technologies, especially in image-making including photographing techniques, printing techniques and mass production techniques that would thereby help one access this universally accurate image that may hold good across time and space, and do away with the subjective variations and digressions concurrent with specific contexts. One of such attempts widely discussed in image-making studies are the composite portraits that Francis Galton produced in the 1800's (See Figure 1).

Francis Galton's analytic portraiture reflects early modern science's interest in accessing its subjects with objective accuracy. The aim of Galton's technique of analytic portraiture, "is to produce a photographic record of the prints of difference between any two pictures. [...] so the picture it creates is neither pleasing to the eye nor even intelligible at first sight."¹ Daston and Galison (1992, 103) argue that this *composite picture* is an attempt to "remove abstraction from the artist's pen" so that an archetypal image can be accessed which – in Galton's case – belonged to criminals, killers and murderers or were used in the service of eugenical research. This synthesized image leaves its subjects behind and acquires an existence of its own. These 'atlases', as they choose to call them are 'hybrid' images of the "idealizing and naturalizing modes" whereby although "an individual object is depicted, it is made to stand for a whole class of similar objects." (94)

1 Eva Bigg's diaries on analytical portraiture (1900)
<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/a4sss8ur> Accessed 9.1.2024

**Figure 1**

Image Caption: Photograph showing faces cropped out of what seems like a group photograph of a large familial gathering. Found in Galton, Francis' album *Composite Photographs: Family Likenesses* (1800s). Source: Wellcome Collection. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/tckt5tbz>

For instance, in the following case study of family resemblances (See Figure 2), Galton studies various faces of persons belonging to the same family and thereby eventually creates a composite portrait of the family face.

**Figure 2**

Image Caption: Galton, Francis. 1880s. *Composite Photographs: Family Likenesses*. Source: Wellcome Collection. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/tckt5tbz>

In the analytic portraiture of criminals (See Figure 3), a portrait of a synthetic criminal is produced, a face that does not belong to anyone in particular and yet

belongs to everyone it represents. A 'typical' face is created, one which does not have a subject to mark in particular and yet aspires to represent the type.

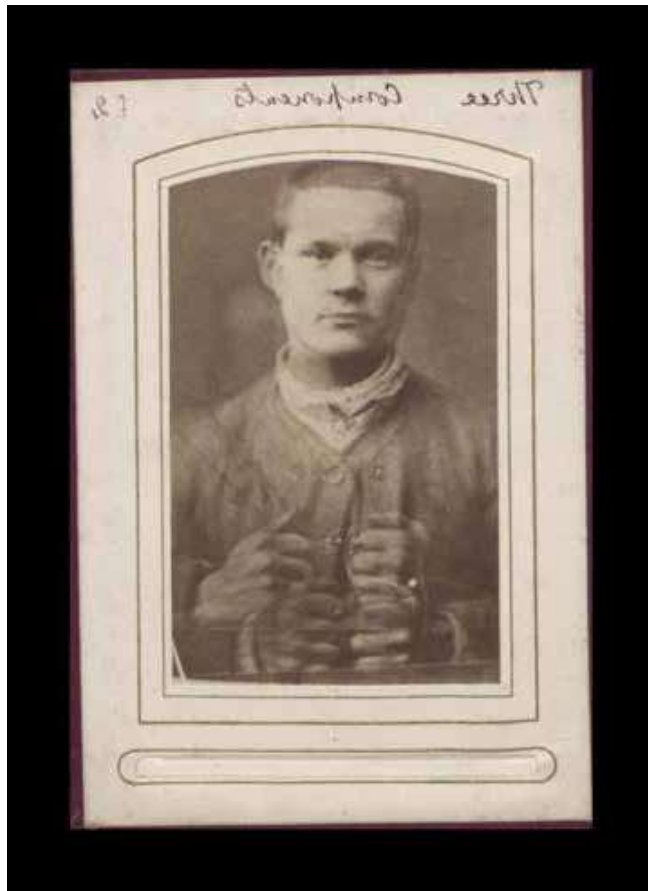


Figure 3

Image Caption: Galton, Francis. 1870. *Composite Photographs: Criminal Albums*. Source: Wellcome Collection. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/h2secqcq>

Analytical image technology has arguably taken its resurgence today in the form of AI that extracts bio-information from faces through specific 'face-recognition' software and thereby creates the possibility of shifting the face into images whose form is a completely new form of existence in the digital and virtual sphere away from the subjects it belonged to. The idea that the face has an image but is without a subject is a peculiar symptom of the quest for knowledge, one which may lead us to know the face so well that one completely does away with the materiality of the body related to it. What then are we to make of the possibility of its contrary? Can we think of an image-less subject?

Technologies for the Image-less subject

The subject without an image could take various forms in the contemporary condition, ranging from the anonymous subject to the transcendent subject. In

The Painter of Modern Life, a Baudelaire (1863) talks about the stranger/voyeur/flaneur who wanders cities and crowds and watches people, anonymous, unknown and thereafter captures them discreetly. This watching of the stranger and then painting them or making an image of them, is a significant moment. One can read this as a moment of transgressing towards the collective perhaps through dissolution of self, repetition of self or recognition of self elsewhere; a movement towards non-singularity. One where, the other is sought out through the technologizing of the face. For the artist of the modern time, this was a transformative moment. To learn that in drawing the face, your own face may be in flux was an idea alien to the classical artist but all too well known for the modern painter. While the classical artists maintained that if one was able to paint the face, one could claim to know the subject in a truthful light, the modern artist meandered through the world doubting if anything was accessible at all without reckoning the self and its own access.²

When we move to making images of those we already know or are kin with, what changes or shifts in this knowing? Does the painting or the image transform our knowledge of the subject apprehended? Here I draw upon my curatorial practice and reflect on the ways in which faces take form, shape and contours in the portraiture works of K K Hebbar and the figurations of Akbar Padamsee.³

Two artists and their subjects : K K Hebbar and Akbar Padamsee

K K Hebbar has drawn several portraits over his lifetime, although what is more well known and discussed as his signature style is not his portraiture but his abstract modernist works and line drawings. Hebbar was often commissioned political portraiture, perhaps because of the promise of fidelity to the subject that he sort to retain in his painting style. He was commissioned to make official

² See Gay (2009)

³ The choice of these artists is based on curatorial research on these works. The examples are not to say in any way that they are symbolic of the modernist aesthetic at large, especially since both these artists chose to not categorize themselves into these historical stylistic tags. Further, I have intentionally steered clear of the concept of self-portraiture as much has already been written on the modern era's turn towards the self and its representation. For the purpose of this text, I am focused on the face of the other and the face of the subject as encountered.

portraits of political leaders in office, from Nehru to Maulana Azad to Lenin. He also made portraits of his friends and family. In this collection, an unusual portrait of Nehru (Figure 4) , for instance, is striking , depicted without his signature cap, ridden with anguish and introspection – a portrait that was promptly rejected by the office and thereafter now sits in a permanent collection elsewhere.⁴



Figure 4

Image Caption: Hebbar,
Pandit Nehru. Oil on Canvas
1978. 20" X 15"

Here the image of the subject, Nehru – a figure whose image is so well etched in the social conscience of the nation, is shown quite unlike him. Nehru is without his signature cap, without his signature expression of a confident leader – presented to us in a new vulnerable light.

**Figure 5**

Image Caption: Hebbar,
*Portrait of a Family
 Member*, Photographic Ink.
 Undated.24" X 18"

Similarly, an early portrait of a grand aunt (Figure 5) made with photographic precision is another striking work from this collection reflecting a very different intention of the artist – one that wants to come as close to the ideal image of the subject as possible. In the case of these two works, one wonders – which subject lent themselves to be painted more ‘accurately’ or ‘realistically’? In the context of a skillful artist like Hebbar, who was mostly committed to capturing his subjects contextually, the use of two very different approaches towards two very different subjects can be comprehended as a distinctness with which Hebbar was able to access these ‘faces’ differently. Hebbar’s commitment to the immanent is thereby more sharply seen in his portraits – mostly made in conventional form and style – and very different in their function than his other works which explore abstraction to varying degrees.

Another artist, whose oeuvre is very different from Hebbar’s and is widely known for his series of abstract works around faces is Akbar Padamsee. Padamsee’s interest in the face emerges as a search for something more than the given or perceived. The face is reckoned with more as a window, less a mirror (See Figure 6). These faces appear to be unearthed, almost swirled into existence through

an archaeology of presences (Kaikini 2021, 2022). These faces appear to mark Padamsee's search for the reticent and the latent emerging not just in form but also in gesture through the medium that he chose to portray them in lithographs, serigraphs, etchings, giclee prints and later on experimental computer graphics. A non-singular outlook of this world would imply a capacity for inexhaustible perception whether it be of personas or of the intangible pixels of a computer screen. The non-singular, conceptually eludes a safe resolution. Sparked by an interest in the unknown, the uncharted and the undiscovered, these works straddle the idea of multiplicity –be it in the choice of the medium, the choice of the subject or the choice of the gesture embodied in the work.



Figure 6

Image Caption: Akbar

Padamsee, *Untitled*.

Lithograph. 2010. 29.5"x 22.5"

These faces appear to be constantly enmeshed in a flux of undoing and remaking. Made with an intention to proliferate, one may find a search for a quality that is elusive and incomplete. Entities that are not determined by the quality of unity promised by representation but are tinged with the possibilities of unfurling infinitely into re-invention. Padamsee's faces almost spiral towards infinity in the manner of a hazy emergence of the faces in his print works. Homi Bhabha, in

conversation with Akbar Padamsee, in *Figure and Shadow, On the Elusive Art of Padamsee* (2010, 46) makes an observation about the enigmatic 'look' in his figures. This look "is not the kind that makes the spectator feel immediately identified. It invites and at the same time elides his look, so it is more like a gaze. [...]It creates an anxiety rather than an identification."

Print based technology is an enigmatic medium for artists who were interested in challenging innate essential qualities invested within any work. The coming of print technology is a major agent in the emergence of Indian modernity and also a key player in the evolution of the specific text vocabulary for works of art invested in the image, especially in the image of the subject.

Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935) harbours a philosophical anxiousness that the age of mechanical reproduction risked a diminishing of the aura of the work of art, one can find a robust contention to Benjamin's worry in the ambitious and active embracing of printmaking as a powerful form of artistic production by modern artists. The artist was excited by the work of art literally wearing off through technology be it in the form of a lithograph reproduction or a screen print. The idea that the work altered in intensity progressively from its original and eventually faded, thereby exhausting that particular work through repetitive proliferation, was an aspect of immense intrigue for many artists including Padamsee. We may read this interest perhaps as his way of engaging with the 'possibility' of an infinite re-creation of the face as 'possible' image instead of being invested in any kind of essence or aura derived from a stable tangible image of the subject – entities that would inevitably get exhausted and eroded over time. Here, again we are made to consider the possibility of the subject as superfluous of its image, thereby attempting to reckon with the subject as potentially image-less quite on the contrary to Galton's attempts of rendering the image subject-less.

In losing its Image, the Subject exceeds the Face

Thus, we see how the face, emerges as a unique and powerful tool in art as a technological device intended to render the subject visible/invisible/more than

visible spanning a range of tasks from tracing the image of a subject to becoming an atlas of an image-less subject.

In the former case, the face, is seen by its other, then understood as belonging to a subject and thereby extracted in order to reproduce an exactitude or likeness that may hope to represent this belongingness, both to the subject and to its context. In the latter case, the face, is constructed as if from a series of thoughts, recollections, moments of encounters or meetings, and captured in this moment of becoming or belonging to a subject. This subject may or may not be a real entity, this subject may be the *other* constructed by the artist themselves, this subject may even gain identity on being seen by the viewer. Thus, the subject's existence is rendered independent of its image. The face ceases to be the image of the subject and *becomes* the subject itself, thereby making the subject image-less.

In *Mean Images* (Steyerl 2023), contemporary artist, filmmaker, philosopher Hito Steyerl ponders on the question of the face of the individual and the collective. Her works, in their exploration of AI technology, and image-based technology trying to and make sense of the politics of a technocratic world, are reminiscent of how new forms of subjects and new kinds of alterations to the image of the subject emerge. Harking back to Galton in her proposition, Steyerl questions the possibility of the face that belongs to a mathematical mean or an average of many faces. In continuation of her longstanding defense of the 'poor' pixelated image (Steyerl 2009), the mean image, is for Steyerl a way to comprehend a post-humanist image of the future, one where new kinds of faces could possibly emerge thanks to AI imaging technologies of the face. The face and its contours shift. The mean image represents the norm – a kind of "hallucinated mediocrity" (ibid). Against the backdrop of the Janus-faced nature of data mining, extraction and consolidation of data into ethically skewed typologies of mean images, of softwares that produce faces, speculative, imagined and derived from data, erasing and obliterating conveniently in this process, Steyerl argues that there is a standpoint to be reckoned with as to who collects this data and how these algorithms are coded. Steyerl consciously calls for imagining relations outside of the causal framework that leads us to singular solutions and posits the adoption of magical models of correlations that could help us circumnavigate the

unilateral production and consumption of culture –“If one Janus head looks out towards the mean, the other cranes towards the commons” (Ibid). In the world of social media filters, the idea that the face is but one of several faces that can belong to the subject is not a new. How then are we to evade becoming just one of thousand different filtered faces? What makes us more than just the image? Can the subject resist the threat of a complete take-over by the myriad face-making technologies of today?

The Face as an Insufficient Technology of the Subject

Much of today’s machine-learning data sets and statistics rely on the face as the primary marker for the subject’s existence (Ranjan 2018). The markers of the face, namely the two eyes, the one nose and mouth outlined by a pair of lips, eyes outlined by eyelids, the face framed by the ears and so on are almost taken as a stable object for the digital subject to turn into a type – be it an archetype, a prototype or a stereotype.

In a world that is under the sway of coding, what then does it mean to take cues from moderns and the futurists about the image of the subject. Is the face a sufficient image of the subject? Can the subject not have more than one face? Are the Janus faces and the multiple heads limited to myths, demons and gods? Here let us go back to art’s histories via Foucault. Foucault in his *Order of Things* (1966), talks of the human face as one mirror through which things scattered through the universe may be inspired to respond to one another.

“The human face, from afar, emulates the sky and just as man’s intellect is an imperfect reflection of God’s wisdom, so his two eyes, with their limited brightness, are a reflection of the vast illumination spread across the sky by sun and moon; the mouth is Venus, since it gives passage to kisses and words of love; the nose provides an image in miniature of Jove’s sceptre and Mercury’s staff.” (22)

In this emulation (*aemulatio*), there is a free forming of correlatives, a kinship across thought structures and image ontologies that enables one to expand the image of the subject to degrees far beyond its immanence. Just like Steyerl’s

mobilization of the figure of the two-faced Janus, Foucault mobilizes the notion of identical twins as figures where one loses interest of originality and is only stunned by the similitude in time and space. These allegories give us two of many possible ways to imagine new *kinds* of faces – those that thrive in non-singularity, be it in the likeness or in the juxtaposition of the other/s. These faces thereby emerge only in excess of the subject – never sufficiently contained within. One may find in this argument, echoes of the Cubist aesthetic or post-modernism's desire to explode perspectival and historical vision. One may also find in here a dialectical resonance of the stark abstraction of the Russian Suprematists or the cosmic-ontological drawings from pre-modern Asian philosophies. Dissatisfied with the subject as its full image and always contingent on the non-singular co-presence/co-existence of subjects, the excessive face is as such an insufficient technology of the subject. The face, therefore, as an ontological marker of the subject of the contemporary and the future, must proclaim itself as insufficient technology in order to embrace for the 'polyvalent' subject, fervently dreaming and desiring for new epistemes to access and imagine them.

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