

Facing the face: To be or not to be Don Quijote

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Addressing the viewer. (Photo by Jeannette Christensen)

INTRODUCTION: THE PAST IS TODAY

In the late 16th century, a young Spanish soldier was captured by corsairs and sold into slavery in Algiers. This was, so to speak, common practice in the Mediterranean area; primarily a commercial endeavour. From 1575 to 1580, the young man had no idea if and when he would ever get out. Imagine the feeling – or rather, the incapacity

to have any. His parents did not have the money to redeem him. A few texts have been written by eyewitnesses or fellow slaves, describing the everyday life in the *baño*, the confrontations with cruelty as well as benevolence. But by lack of personal writings, not much transpires about how the detained experienced their situation. We can only imagine. Indeed, we need the imagination, in the face of such un-representable events and situations that we call “traumatic”. Captivity is not only a horrific experience, but the worst of it is, I would think, not knowing if there will ever be an end to it. Time loses its meaning. And it stretches endlessly. Into today. This harrowing temporality is at stake in my video project *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances* (2019), staged to create a confrontation between it and the temporal liberty offered to the visitors. The project is an instance of what is currently called “artistic research”, although that term has its own downside. I call it “image-thinking”, with “thought-images” (*Denkbilder*) as its result (see Vellodi, in press).¹

That young soldier was Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547–1616). He wrote one of the world’s first bestsellers after experiencing five and a half years of captivity as a slave in Algiers. The novel, in two parts – the first published in 1605, the second in 1615 – at first sight reads like a parody of medieval epics and romances, and that is how it has been mostly interpreted. It can also be seen as a precursor of later novels that mock adventure stories, such as 18th-century *Jacques the Fatalist and his Master* (Denis Diderot) and *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Lawrence Sterne). But it also resonates with postmodern novels of the 20th century. Most importantly, and for me the motivation that drives the project, *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha* stands out in its intensity and creative expression of prolonged hopelessness, leading to, or already caught in what is termed trauma. This notion has recently been over-used and hence is in danger of losing its specific meaning, and consequently, the social recognition and the possibility to help traumatized people. In this project, “trauma” is considered as a state of stagnation and the impossibility of subjective remembrance that ensue from traumatogenic events, not the events themselves. The distortion of time and its forms constitute trauma, rather than the original events of violence.²

If such a literary work has achieved and retained the world-wide status as a masterpiece it has, it is primarily because it has not lost any of its actuality. *Its* time, too, stretches into the present. Not coincidentally, the novel is based on what the great specialist of Cervantes, María Antonia Garcés, has called, in the subtitle of her 2011 edition of a contemporary witness statement, “an early modern dialogue with Islam” (Sosa 2011). Formerly, in deep history, things happened that still happen, or happen again, today. Hence, “the past is today”. With the research group in colonial and post-colonial studies at the Linnaeus University in Växjö, co-producer of this work, we could call it “concurrences”.³

Every epoch knows of such situations that push human beings out of humanity. The novel carries not only the traces of the absurdity and madness that suggest the inevitably traumatic state in which its creator must have been locked upon his return to Spain, as transpires in the stories told but also in the novel’s poetics. It also foregrounds this consequence of war and captivity in the madness of its literary

form. The sheer-endless stream of “adventures” makes all film adaptations practically hopeless endeavours. One can barely read, let alone watch all those pointless attempts to help others, the repercussions of which involve cruelty and pain. Repetitiveness overrules narrative.

On the interface between literature and visuality, I explore the self-doubt of one of the emblematic characters from world literature, Don Quijote. Although the literary character never existed, we all think we know what he looked like, and invariably “recognize” him. Doubtlessly due to the many portraits painted and drawn throughout history, enhanced by the popularity of the images by book illustrator Gustave Doré (1863), old, lean, and mad are the features we “see” when thinking of this character. Yet, he himself is not so sure, changes his name all the time, and ends up taking on a less-than-flattering pseudonym, “the Knight of the Sad Countenance” (1950, 146), in other words, sadness is his face. In scene I, 9 of the novel, where authorship is proposed as contested, the author claims to have found the manuscript written by an Arab historian. Hence, the identity of this figure may be clearer for us than for himself, for he is very much in self-doubt. Below I present one episode out of sixteen from the video installation *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*.⁴

HISTORY IN THE FACE OF THE INVISIBILITY OF SLAVERY

Several scenes address the issue of slavery, and the difficulty we have, even today, to see it, whereas so many million people live in it, invisibly. Here, however, I will refrain from unpacking what we have done to make slavery visible without voyeurism. Instead, my emphasis is on the power of the face to undo its mortifying, subjectivity-destroying effect. In the video installation based on Cervantes’s novel, the author’s traumatic experience of captivity, and an inserted novella, one episode is specifically devoted to the question of Don Quijote’s face, how others see him, and how he sees himself. This scene is for me the emblem of the *interface* as a tool for social help toward the de-socialized traumatized. In this scene, an artist and a narrator, simultaneously, are describing and photographing the portrait of Don Quijote – as a historian and as a fictive figure. This scene accounts both for *Don Quijote*’s world-wide fame, but as a novel; and for his looks, which have become so emblematic, in spite of the fact that as such he never existed. It is also a commentary on the relationship between fiction and reality.

The scene is staged as follows. During a voice-over about the need for truth in the work of historians, an artist with a large camera, shot in close-up, is trying to capture the Knight Errant’s portrait. The figure of the actor as Don Quijote with an ambiguous identity is facing the artist as well as a mirror, a little more distant, slowly changing his face. Every time the artist looks up, the figure’s face is dramatically different. The artist frantically starts anew every time he changes, visibly a bit annoyed. The final one is the “sad Countenance”. The artist looks happy, in contrast with the sadness Don Quijote’s face expresses. She/he now “got it”.

Meanwhile, the figure ruminates his names. Cervantes, Saavedra, Don Quixote, the Captive’s name, Ruy Pérez de Viedma, DQ’s real name, Alonzo Quixano, Quixotiz, Quijada, Quesada, Cid Hamet Ben Engeli. He tries them all, as if tasting them, in

front of a mirror. Constantly we see DQ doubled and, counting the photos, tripled. A mirror image without ego, an anti-narcissus. Then he redresses himself up and tries: Knight of the Sad Countenance. Knight of the Lions. Then, sagging again, back to Alonzo Quixano.

Don Quijote is a fictional being, imagined and imaged by the brilliant writer, the ex-slave who considers himself the knight's father. Yet, few literary characters have such a distinguishing face in the cultural imagination to the extent that we think we know what he looked like. Partly this is due to the Doré engravings, but there is more to it than a cultural memory of an artwork. People sometimes even recognize the actor as Don Quijote in the street. Many people compliment me on the casting, not realizing that the actor had himself initiated the project. How do we know what he looked/looks like? This may have something to do with the wavering scraps of descriptions between portraiture and self-portraiture, inserted in the narration throughout the adventures. The novel is astonishingly visual, but not at all extensive in portraiture. There are also passages that insist on the need of telling the truth, especially in chapter nine of the first volume. Facing the figure to actively look him into returning to social existence, while the discussants stipulate the importance of the truth including the imagination, entices him to face himself and thus, in the interface created, to repair the social bond that was broken by the trauma. In this reflection on the fourth episode I connect these issues.

In episode 1 of the 16-channel installation, "Don Quijote Reading", we can look at the figure's face for a long time. He reads for minutes on end. But then he begins to get agitated, and the face is withheld from our quiet contemplation. His agitation becomes close to hysterical when he takes the synaesthetic aspect of reading literally, or rather, corporeally, and caresses, smells, and in the end, eats the pages. After that, when the Priest and the Housekeeper intervene and begin to take away the books they consider damaging for the figure's mental health, he looks ahead with a catatonic look in his eyes, until he leaves. Apart from the first few minutes of reading when he is absorbed in his book and never looks up, we are not given access to the act of facing his face.

Episode 4, "Who is Don Quijote?", instead, raises the question of portraiture, of history, of truth, as all intertwined. I contend that portraiture – the attempt to depict an individual human face – is more strongly than other visual genres, albeit ambivalently, connected to the question of history, the possibility to reconstruct the past, and the issue of truthfulness. Each society, along with all its institutions, has its regimes of truth, its discourses that are accepted as rational, and its methods for ensuring that the production, conception, and maintenance of "truth" are policed. Studying these regimes of truth is an integral part of the task of cultural analysis, but can only be done through close, political looking, in the triple sense of facing that leads up to the remedial interface: looking someone in the face, encouraging them to face their trauma, and communicating. This is the point of the project. I have shaped the installation in order to deploy theatricality in an attempt to shift museum practice from distant, one-sided looking to close, mutual looking. Such an analysis of regimes of truth is not new. For example, anticipating what visual culture analysis ought to see

as its primary object, Louis Marin analyzed in 1981 the strategic use of the portrait of Louis XIV in 17th-century France, in a visual regime of political propaganda in a book-length study (1988a). The portrait as propaganda: this makes sense when we realize that for a long time, mostly the rich and mighty had their portraits made, boasting their power.⁵

Portraiture is truth-based in the historical sense, since the sitter has existed, whether or not the likeness portraiture presupposes has successfully come off. It is not, however, the physical likeness that matters; in most cases we cannot verify that. Instead, the sitter performs a role, as Louis XIV played his role as a powerful man, according to Marin's analysis. The sitter puts on a mask, showing the face he or she wishes to show to the world. It is that role, that mask that is visible. But then, there is that other, affiliated genre, the self-portrait. In the case of self-portrait, the portrayed cannot look at the viewer, since a mirror serves to paint the self. The performance (role-playing; the mirror) and performativity (effect of make-believe; the mask as persuading us) of the two genres go together; the mirror and the mask are coextensive (Blostein and Kleber 2003).

The elements "portrait" and "self" hang together. If the individual reigns and is sanctioned by portraiture, then the self is just such an individual, although in self-portraits it is the artist, not a patron. Self-portraiture within the humanistic tradition is considered as a "more involved", more profound genre that parades as a sub-genre of portraiture. But there is a crucial artistic difference: the mirror. This mirror is most often made invisible, or, as Bonafoux (1985, 7) elegantly put it, "conjured away", made invisible but for the structural definition of the self-portrait that it keeps in place. This structure can leave a figurative trace in the represented easel from which the painting artist quickly looks away. That glance can become deictic; a sign of address, gnawing at the ostentatious "first-personhood" of self-portraiture, with the symptom of "second-personhood", the dependence on others to acknowledge, sustain, and possibly change places with the self. The contemporary painter Marlene Dumas does paint self-portraits in which the figure looks at the viewer. But that is only possible because she never paints from live models, only from photographs. Paradoxically, it is only by means of indirectness, then, that the artist can make eye-contact with the viewer, and thus engage in a dialogic look.⁶

The episode "Who is Don Quijote?" makes the elements I just mentioned explicit, yet ambiguous. The mirror is ostentatiously present, the face doubled. But due to Mathieu Montanier's brilliant acting, it is not always clear if the figure is practicing for his self-presentation or is playing his character; whether he is steeped in the real world of before, or the fictional one of after the camera starts rolling. And hence, there is a strange ambiguity – dread of what lies behind or in front, past or yet to come – of the faces he shows. Alternatively, the glance can become the figure of apostrophe, the address to the viewer as an allegorical abstraction. If the viewer is able to overcome that abstraction and puts herself in its place, the illusion of connection over time, space, and social world can be signified, and the flat image receives the benefit of the doubt.⁷



Between the mirror and the mask. Is this Mathieu pondering Don Quijote how to play the scene, or reflecting on his identity as a knight errant? (Photo by Jeannette Christensen)

PORTRAITURE: (RE-)MAKING THE SELF

“Any artist when making his own likeness is much more personally involved than when treating any other subject”, as one dictionary definition has it (Osborne 1996, 1057). Something about psychology, personality, depth, self-analysis, and intention is implied in this entry. The “self” is the core of the genre; the self-portrait is a sign. And signs can have many different meanings, according to a dynamic conception of the semiotic process, or semiosis. Jon-Ove Steihaug’s brilliant analysis of Munch’s 1926 *Self-portrait in Front of the House Wall* is entirely based on the knot of self-depiction and abstraction. But such a semiotic formulation and attitude go against the grain of the assumptions underlying portraiture (2013, 12–24).

There, the sign (or sign-event) is supposedly the “occasionality” – the reality “behind” the sign, the referent – of the documentary mode, as art historian Richard Brilliant (1991), following philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, has it in his study of the genre. It is also possible, therefore, to argue for the opposite taxonomy. Portraiture of others-than-the-artist can be considered a subset of self-portraiture. Whether or not the self is explicitly portrayed in the image, traces of the self as well as of the self’s position in the circuit of exchange between first and second person remain. This would be the implication of Louis Marin’s speech-act theory of painting and the positioning of the viewer therein. He writes: “The sitter portrayed in the painting is the *representative* of enunciation in the utterance, its inscription on the canvas screen, as if the sitter here and now were speaking by looking at the viewer [...]” (1988b, 68; emphasis added).

The portrait here is a representation of a communication situation, in which the enunciator – the “I” – is either figured by or temporarily exchanged for a stand-in, or “other half”, who is the depicted figure. This would be a derivation from the situation

in which the enunciator is the painter-“speaker” or rather, its fictionalization. The “occasionality” or documentary frame of viewing yields to a semiotic one that fictionalizes the scene. This suggests that narcissism lies at the heart not only of self-portraiture but of portraiture in general.

For the question of what/who the “self” is, this makes sense. Narcissus’s story is not only about self-love, but about alienation. Whereas portraiture assumes recognition, Narcissus’s fate was sealed because he did not recognize himself and engaged himself as other. The two presuppose each other, however. Bonafoux begins his book on self-portraiture with two formulations, each of which addresses one of these aspects. The first is, “I paint him-myself, the sitter”. The portrait remains of another person. The second is, “We may ask if the self-portrait is nothing other than the recurrent portrait of Narcissus, a monotonous repetition” (1985, 8). Both formulations imply estrangement in self-portraiture. They also propose a continuity between self-portrait and portrait.

These critical thoughts on a traditional genre in Western art were the basis of the dramaturgy (the arrangement of the dramatic elements of a text to make them stageable), the scenography (the artistic arrangement of practical, material, and visual elements on the stage) and the cinematography (the motion-picture photography) of “Who Is Don Quijote?”. The thoughts in the thought-image that the image-thinking of this episode has yielded bind the wavering between portrait and self-portrait, through the staging of an artist-photographer (played by Jeannette Christensen) who attempts to capture the figure who cannot be captured because he is ambiguously situated between portraiture and self-portraiture. The mask and the mirror are unstable, constantly swapping positions. Meanwhile, the question of truth, history and the question of authorship are kept present in the discussion among three “historians” and a fourth figure, a narrator, who recites the fictional acknowledgment of the true author as an Arab historian, and reads passages from the famous story in which Jorge Luis Borges ([1939] 1962) has a later French author literally transcribe Cervantes’s text on the subject of history and truth.

This is a literary mirror-or-mask element, played out in front of another mirror and around a table with a shiny black glass top. The dizzying play with mirroring doubles up the staged artist who is not a painter but a photographer, who supposedly captures the sitter’s face perfectly. As Ernst van Alphen writes in “The Portrait’s Dispersal” (1997), however, this is not at all the case:

Although a camera captures the appearance of a person maximally, the photographer has as many problems in capturing a sitter’s “essence” as a painter does. Camera-work is not the portrayer’s ideal but its failure, because the essential quality of the sitter can only be caught by the artist, not by the camera (240–241).

The photographer in the video is enacted by a real-life artist. Hence, her position is comparable to that of the figure-actor. Both are ambiguous in relation to the fiction-reality issue, brought up by the discussion going on at the other side of the room. Both parts of the scene, in different yet related ways, concern facing.

But the face as a specific body-part, emblem of human individuality, projection screen of racist and sexist positions, and recipient of dubious attempts to gain access

to other human beings: how can we consider it today, and bring it in connection to the title of this *World Literature Studies* special issue, with the word “interface” as a willfully ambiguous helpmate of thought and of social repair? Traditionally, the face is considered a window to the soul. But to deploy the face for the purpose of turning it into an inter-face requires the elimination of an oppressive sentimental humanism that has appropriated the face for universalist claims in the following threefold way: as the window to the soul; as the key to identity translated into individuality; and as the site of policing.

While the problems of the individualistic and potentially oppressive second and third use of the face are easy to see, the window-to-the-soul assumption harbours presuppositions that are highly problematic without being so evident. The obvious one is the expressionistic essentialism. Not only is the idea of a soul – “inside” the body – based on a classical religious idea; it has also been the basis of sculpture from after classicism, as Rosalind Krauss (1977) has famously argued. Play-acting as such counters this idea, and the very special acting by, especially, Montanier (but also the other participants in this project) is particularly telling in this respect. It is relevant, also, as a demonstration of the aforementioned image-thinking. Another assumption is the universalist logic of this idea. Common origin is a primary ideology of universalism. Creation stories around the world tend to worry about the beginning of humanity in terms of the non-humanity that precedes and surrounds it. Psychoanalysis primarily projects on the maternal face the beginning of the child’s aesthetic relationality. The discourses of humanism, psychoanalysis, and aesthetics show their hand in these searches for beginnings. Here, combining the first and the second presuppositions mentioned above, I oppose an individualistic conception of beginnings.⁸

ORIGIN, BEGINNING, AND OTHER ILLUSIONS

Instead, and also in an attempt to avoid the evolutionist view of chronology, I consider “programming” in the sense of designing a possible alternative to include futurity. A few years before his path-breaking book *Orientalism* (1978), the late Palestinian intellectual Edward Said wrote a book on novels of the Western canon, titled *Beginnings: Intention and Method* ([1975] 1985). In this book he demonstrated that the opening of a literary work programs the entire text that follows, its content and its style, its poignancy and its aesthetics. Origin, always in the past, is a forward-projecting illusion, whereas beginning, in the present, is the inevitable starting point of what follows. Therefore, in this installation I wished to explore a different sense of the beginnings – not in motherhood but in inter-temporal and inter-cultural connections, by means of interfacing as an act. With this focus, I aim to invert the latent evolutionism in the search for beginnings, and, in the same sweep, the focus on children, specifically on babies, inherent in that strange contradiction, individualistic-universalist theories of the subject.

Today, with many authorities and other unthinking people displaying high anxiety over the invisibility of the Islamic veiled face, we cannot overestimate the importance of the ideology of the face for the construction of contemporary socio-political divi-

des. Confusing, like so many others, *origin* with *articulation*, in his study of the portrait – the genre of the face – Richard Brilliant explains the genre with reference to babies:

The dynamic nature of portraits and the “occasionality” that anchors their imagery in life seem ultimately to depend on the primary experience of the infant in arms. The child, gazing up at its mother, imprints her vitally important image so firmly on its mind that soon enough she can be recognized almost instantaneously and without conscious thought [...] (1991, 48, n. 9).

Art history here grounds one of its primary genres in a fantasmatic projection of what babies see, do, and desire, as psychoanalysis tends to do. It is worth noting that these acts by babies are not knowable. Both disciplines can and must be challenged for their universalism couched in a story of origin.⁹

A second unquestioned value in Western humanist culture elevated to universal status is documentary realism. Here, too, the cinematic and its relation to acting is an important source for reflection. Brilliant’s shift operates through the self-evident importance attributed to the documentary mode. The point of the portrait is the belief in the real existence of the person depicted, the “vital relationship between the portrait and its object of representation” (8). The portraits that compose “Who is Don Quijote?” challenge these joint assumptions of baby-based individualism and realism, as well as their claim to generalized validity. Montanier stages the tension put forward already by Diderot’s “paradox of the actor” (published posthumously in 1830), a beginning text of theatre studies, with particular lucidity in the second episode, “Getting Ready, Setting Up, Setting Out” in which he seems disturbed by the real-life questioning of the actor playing Sancho Panza (Viviana Moin), who refuses to do his bidding without a contract. Here, the enacting of reality and of fiction are no longer clearly distinguishable. Montanier wrote this scene himself, in collaboration with Moin, as one of the postmodern, self-reflective moments of the project.

Video and cinema are not only visual arts, since the audio element cannot be separated out. There is another distinction to face in this episode: that between silent-looking as facing and listening to what others have to say. Like looking, listening is a practice, but as with all practices, before we can practice it, we must learn to listen. In the noisy world of today, this demands serious commitment. In an acoustic whirlwind, we must learn (acoustic) distinction, between voices, languages, tones and moods. Only then can listening be a socially useful practice; a critical one. The politics of listening runs parallel to the politics of looking. The objects of study of the humanities have the unique potential to “teach” us that practice. In their complexity and subtlety, artworks, but also other cultural practices and even, simply, languages and their uses, can help us move beyond simplistic slogans and picking up their alleged meanings overly quickly.

The use of a variety of languages in all my video work comprises a statement about this crucial multilingualism of the world. The casting of an Argentinean woman for the role of Sancho has allowed specific experimenting with the languages. This occurred in different episodes in a variety of ways with distinctive issues, including Sancho’s abundant use of proverbs, which Don Quijote critiques, and the squire’s use of wrong words, which sometimes make communication impossible. In episode 2,

“Getting Ready”, the dispute between life and art is doubled by a dialogue in French and Spanish. Listening with distinction is, here, a task for the visitor, whereas between the two characters the bilingual dialogue seems “natural”.

Dialogue is the basis, indispensable to achieve interfacing. The object of analysis takes part in that dialogue; through analysis, objects gain the agency of subjects. When making an argument about an artwork, we often quote passages or print images. I have frequently explained in my teaching the need for listening as a method by putting forward the idea that “the object speaks back”. Quotations should not be used to confirm what the student or scholar argues, but to complicate that. If we make a habit of always looking back at a quotation and carefully check to what extent it confirms our point, we will frequently notice that this is rarely entirely the case. Instead of panicking, however, thinking we are wrong, or worse, repressing the differences, this complication helps us move beyond what we (think we) already know. Listening carefully to the object, treating it as a “second person”, an interlocutor, instead of a mute “third person” *about* which we speak, is the apprenticeship of listening as a critical practice. This is how cultural analysis differs from other approaches. It is also how non-academic visitors can demonstrate their freedom-in-effort to understand the artwork.¹⁰

But how does the face become an actor, agent, willing and ready to inter-act, rather than a depiction of interiority? A first step to contemplating the questions of the face, identity, history and truth as intertwined is to perform a triple act of *facing*. *Facing* sums up the aesthetic and political principle of this video work that is an attempt to reflect on this severance and its consequences. Through this installation, and in particular the episode on Don Quijote’s identity, I attempt to shift two common, universalist definitions of humanity: the notion of an individual autonomy of a vulgarized Cartesian *cogito*, and that of a subjecting passivity derived from the principle of Bishop Berkeley’s “to be is to be perceived”. The former slogan of the alleged Cartesian dualism has done damage in ruling out the participation of the body and the emotions in rational thought by cleaving the body and its affects from the perceived superiority of the “mind”. The latter is recognizable in the Lacanian theorization of the reversibility of vision which places primary significance on being seen and observed (rather than being the subject of the seeing), and in certain Bakhtinian traditions. Berkeley’s slogan has thus over-extended a sense of passivity and coerciveness into a denial of political agency and hence, responsibility.¹¹

INTERFACING AS A SOCIAL REMEDIAL ACT

In conclusion, I wish to propose, as I have sought to (audio-)visualize in the Don Quijote project, that art can stretch out a helping hand to the many traumatized people that inhabit the same space as we all do. My concept of inter-face sums this up as the knot where this re-bonding, this de-isolating of the traumatized subject can happen. Presenting viewers with the pressing, almost inescapable urge to do this, is the goal of the video project as displayed in theatrical mode in a museal space where visitors are on stage and full participants. The scene as I have constructed it lays at the heart of that endeavour.



Portrait, Self-Portrait, Interface. (Photo by Jeannette Christensen)

As I have mentioned before, *facing* consists of three things, or acts, at once, and through integrating these, we can achieve *interfacing*. Literally, facing is the act of looking someone else in the face as an illocutionary act. It is also, coming to terms with something that is difficult to live down, by looking it in the face, instead of denying or repressing it. This is the difficult, indeed without help, impossible task for the traumatized subject, yet indispensable for healing. Thirdly, and this is the helping hand, facing is making contact, placing the emphasis on the second person, and acknowledging the need of that contact in order, simply, to be able to sustain life. Instead of “to be is to be perceived” and “I think, therefore I am”, facing as interfacing proposes, “I face (you), hence, we are”. For this reason, facing is my proposal for a performance of contact across divisions, that avoids the two traps of universalist exclusion and relativist condescendence. For this purpose, I first make the move from the two universalist views of humanity – Descartes’ and Berkeley’s – to a merger that replaces both; from *Esse est Percipi* to *Cogitote Ergo Sumus*. Berkeley’s formula *Esse est Percipi* as elaborated to exhaustion by Samuel Beckett in his *Film* (1965), is agony-inducing. And, as it happens, linguistically this shows already in the mere fact that the formula defines being in non-personal forms. If being is only thinkable in the passive form, not much is left of the agency we need to actively engage with the world. Beckett’s *Film* explores the agonizing feelings that result from a consciousness of being through being perceived. The figure played by the aging Buster Keaton flees from the notion of

perceivedness, in the “action image”. The sets of eyes that watch him and that he systematically eliminates show us the limits of what Deleuze calls the “perception image”, and the ending, the close-up of the “affection image” translates affect into horror only.¹²

In my earlier video installation, *Nothing is Missing*, I have tried to shift these views in favour of an inter-cultural aesthetic based on a performance of contact. In order to elaborate such an alternative, I have concentrated the episode “Who is Don Quijote?” on the bond between speech and face as the site of the performance of a universal: the possibility of contact. Speech, not just in terms of “giving voice”, but as listening, and answering, all in multiple meanings; and the face, turning the classical “window to the soul” into an “inter-face”. But then, inter-face as the beginning of an action, an agency to face in the three senses mentioned, and from that beginning on, endorsing and contributing to the improvement and enjoyment of a social texture where encounters can take place across divisions.

Locked up behind bars, in the project’s poster image (a superb photograph by Ebba Sund), or with chains on his feet, in Cervantes’s literary novella, that inserted story’s main character, the Captive, cannot tell his story. This is what the photograph suggests. Visually, his mouth is hidden, muzzled by the bars that, as a layer over his face, impedes him from speaking. But his eyes, sharply looking at the viewer, are exuberantly “telling”. They do not express any particular mood or emotion. But with the agency that cannot be entirely taken away from humans, they are focusing on “us”, they beg for our attention, for our empathy. “Look” or “listen”, they say. They embody a gentle but intense imperative mode, in an injunction to pay attention to the fate of those deprived of the possibility of telling their story. For that is the consequence of trauma. In this essay I have brought narratological issues to bear on the examination of how art, those allegedly refined and subtle cultural expressions, can effectively counter the fierce brutalities of the world. The case is made for a community-creating effect of art that helps repair the broken social bond that has resulted in trauma, so that narrative becomes possible again.



(Photo by Ebba Sund)

NOTES

- ¹ Ernst van Alphen proposed the concept of “image-thinking” as a counterpart to “thought-images”, an idea for which I am very grateful (personal communication 2019).
- ² The best succinct explanation of trauma in relation to narrative is provided by van Alphen (1999). The most widely-known publication on trauma as unrepresentable is Caruth (1996). In psychology, see van der Kolk and van der Hart (1995).
- ³ On Cervantes’s captivity, see Garcés (2002). On the concurrences between past and present, and the subsequent methodology of colonial and postcolonial studies, see Bryson, Forsgren, and Fur (2017). “Concurrences” is the group’s alternative term for what cannot be called “postcolonial” for the simple reason that the world is still too steeped in colonial relations. I share the resistance against the use of the preposition “post-”.
- ⁴ For a description of the sixteen scenes, see Bal (2019).
- ⁵ For excellent discussions of the issues the genre of portraiture raises, see the collective volume edited by Joanna Woodall (1997), especially the contribution by van Alphen (1997, 239–258).
- ⁶ For my understanding of second-personhood I am indebted to Lorraine Code’s book (1991).
- ⁷ For a lucid presentation and analysis of the concept of “apostrophe” see Culler (2015). Culler discusses poetry, but the concept has more general validity.
- ⁸ A more in-depth discussion of this idea, in relation to space, can be found in van Alphen (2005, 71–95). This book as a whole explores the idea of “image-thinking” (without using the term).
- ⁹ “Occasionality” refers to the reality depicted; in the case of the portrait, it refers to the sitter. Brilliant took this concept from Hans Georg Gadamer’s 1960 phenomenological methodology.
- ¹⁰ This idea was further developed and demonstrated in my book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (2002).
- ¹¹ I have been so bothered by the dismissal of Descartes as a dualist that I devoted a video project to him. See <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films/reasonable-doubt/>.
- ¹² The most succinct formulation of these three types of “movement-images” is in Deleuze (1986, 66–70). For an extensive discussion of facing, see my article “In Your Face: Migratory Aesthetics” (2015). The “image-thinking” on which that article is based is my video installation *Nothing is Missing* (<http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/installations/nothing-is-missing/>). For a lucid analysis of Beckett’s Film, see Uhlmann 2004. The qualifier of “agony-inducing” comes from that essay.

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Trauma. (Self-)portraiture. Historical truth. Authorship. Remedial interface. Don Quijote.

The article presents a “preposterous” updating of Don Quijote, in the face of trauma, contemporary slavery, and the importance of a social face-to-face, or interface, to help people to come out of their isolation inflicted on them by violence. The argument begins with the “updating” of a literary monument, an instance of cultural heritage that never lost its relevance for whatever era in which it functions. The focus on trauma makes this particularly necessary, since those on whom the stagnation and isolation violence cause has been inflicted, must be helped socially. Taking seriously not *that* but *why* some people seem “mad” is a collective task for humans. We can all contribute to that remedial interfacing. Through its special complexity, subtlety and temporality, art can facilitate this. The video installation *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances* presents an attempt to do this. Especially the episode “Who Is Do Quijote” is central in the article. There, some characters discuss the value and possibility of history, the authorship of Cervantes’ novel, and the importance of the literary imagination, while the figure of Don Quijote, in front of a large mirror, exposes himself to an artist-photographer who tries to capture his face.

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