Denigrative Views

On the Deconstruction of Visages in Print Media

In June 2006, George W. Bush was prominently featured on the cover of the Austrian news magazine *profil*. The corresponding heading said, "The Crazy World of George W. Bush. From Alcoholic to US President: How does the leader of the last superpower tick? How fanatic is he really? And how is he viewed by the Austrians?" At that time, the opinion of the Austrian readers did matter because Bush was paying an official visit to Austria and many of the citizens had mixed feelings about his stay. The headline provided a few significant clues concerning Bush´s potential image in Austria, but the following analysis will concentrate on the visual presentation of Bush on this *profil* cover. (Fig. 1)

A close-up of his face was basically crammed into the upper part of the page while the headline accompanying the image was given ample space. His forehead was cropped and additional verbal messages were superimposed on it. In terms of space, Bush appeared severely restricted and was clearly denied the necessary room to fully develop his presidential authority. In that sense, he was indeed "verrückt", which in German can also mean "moved away or pushed out," as in this case of the pictorial center. The photo was obviously taken in a moment of careless control over his facial features. Consequently, Bush looked skeptical and clueless. His appearance did not match any expectations of what a dignified statesman should look like. In fact, he looked improbable, untrustworthy, and unreasonable. In 19th century psychological studies, exaggerated facial expressions were considered an indicator of insanity. At that time, individuals whose facial expressions failed to match behavior were viewed as a threat to the concept of autonomous subjecthood. Along with the psychological impressions of President Bush also came a mass of physiological data. The close-up revealed a badly shaved presidential chin, hair growing out of his nose, a downward pointed mouth. There were pores and wrinkles, and due to the uneven lighting, the right half of the face seemed more advanced in terms of aging, which further destroyed any impression of symmetry and good form or "Gestalt."

In the print media, images are, of course, only one component of an overall strategy to convey a particular message. The corresponding visuals are supposed to support the main arguments of the journalistic text and to illustrate the points made there.

In that sense, the highly polemical view of the American president on the *profil* cover should provide a first orientation for the readers and tune them into a story of questioned authority. In fact, one of the featured stories (*profil*, 2006, p. 117) referred to a kind of psychogram of the president created by Justin A. Frank, an American Psychiatry Professor and expert in the field of Applied Psychoanalysis. In his book – it carries the symptomatic title "Bush on the Couch" (Frank, 2004) - Frank elaborated on his tele-diagnosis of Bush and contemplated the particular defaults and handicaps of his potential patient. As the *profil* article mentioned, his diagnosis was meant to topple the symbolic father figure of a nation and dismantle his claim to leadership. In that sense, the idea of Bush as a potential psychiatric patient and Regine Hendrich´s deranged close-up of the president´s face on the cover of the magazine formed a perfect match in a journalistic discourse.

Excessive Media Discourse

In the following I will not concentrate on the political dimension of these denigrating views but will, instead, have a closer look at the destructive energies at play in these dismantling processes. My point is that unfavorable close-ups of the sort described above should not just be taken as expressions of criticism and polemics, but could be viewed as acts of excess by which journalism celebrates the destruction of its own icons. To support my argument I would like to refer to Georges Bataille and his understanding of energetic processes. According to Bataille (1988), all systems – and journalism would be a significance system – are fueled by the abundance of cosmic energy circulating on our planet. These systems assimilate energy and turn it into production, growth, or the expansion of existing structures. Yet, the capacity of a system to bind energy and use it productively is limited. At a certain point, energy as a limitless resource that exceeds any possible economical context regains its anarchic, unbound status and creates waste, loss, and destruction. The exuberant energy which can no longer be held at bay by the system eventually subverts it and an orgiastic, liberating type of force is released. My thesis is that in the case of these disfigured close-ups, the media industry decomposes its own fabrications. The destructive energy involved defies cultural sublimation and subsequently creates the abject. The same energy or concern that went into the making of publicly ingrained images now goes wild and turns against its own products. As the flip side of the effort to establish positive and identifiable images for well-known faces, these unflattering close-ups are orgies of deconstruction. Something excessive and cathartic seems to manifest itself in the attempt to distort what was brought into form before. Distance is replaced by radical closeness and the logic and laws of reception seem to undergo an archaic revision. In a cathartic act, the print media apparatus frees itself from the restrictions of its own pictorial standards and conventions.

1

The Crazy World of George W. Bush
profil no. 25/37, June 2006

Photograph: Brooks Kraft / Corbis, Regine Hendrich

Constructing Iconic Faces

In order to deconstruct images, the media industry first has to build them up. Spurred on by an insatiable need for iconic images, an effort has to be made to inscribe certain views of prominent individuals in the consciousness of the public. That requires a repetitive act of presenting certain images over and over again and to achieve a branding of them. In this connection, Claus-Christian Carbon´s (2008) research paper, *"*"Famous faces as icons. The illusion of being an expert in the recognition of famous faces*"* developed at the Department of Experimental Psychology at the *University of Vienna,* proves especially insightful. Carbon basically worked with two pools of faces – famous faces and personally familiar faces. The 70 test persons involved were assigned the task of identifying these images. As it turned out, the processing of famous faces was quite impressive when the test subjects were confronted with well-known versions of a famous face. A good example of such an image would be Alberto Korda´s highly popular photograph of Ernesto Che Guevara. When the test persons were confronted with unfamiliar, less promoted views of a celebrity, the identification performance dropped significantly. Images of Che with an altered hair style, of Cindy Crawford without her beauty spot, or of the pope without his pileolus, posed problems for the persons asked to identify them.

The conclusion that Carbon (2008) draws from these results is that "the successful processing of famous faces might depend on icons imbued in society but not the faces as such" (p. 801). He points out that although we all consider ourselves experts in terms of face processing, we are in fact only good at icon processing, which is "for the most part pictorially rather than structurally based" (Carbon, 2008, p. 801). With images of personally familiar people the results were significantly different. The participants in the tests recognized these faces even if the identification job had to be done "under very restricted quality conditions" (Carbon, 2008, p. 801) or very quickly. They recognized the individuals depicted even if the photographs were from different stages of their lives or if the views had been altered. With first-hand experience or the corresponding memory of a person, the rate of identification errors turned out to be significantly lower.

It seems to be the job of the media industry to reinforce this iconic identification by etching particular versions of a prominent face into the viewer´s memory. This conditioning of the viewer happens in the form of visual bombardment and an excessive distribution of branded images. At the same time, this dissemination process is based on selection and a streamlining of the corresponding output. In the light of Bataille´s (1988) "general economy", these overdetermined medial casts are prone to breaking at any time. The available energy accumulates and builds up

to a certain point and, when reaching a level of saturation, either gets lost or turns into unbound and destructive forces. With really well introduced views of famous protagonists, the insults of these merciless dismantling acts are obviously felt the most.

The Formless, the Waste, and the Abject of the Media System

These crushed and shapeless forms can be compared to Georges Bataille´s "informe" (Krauss, 1997). It is the unassimilable waste created by a surplus of energy which undermines processes of giving form and meaning. Another example of such a denigrating representation would be Alfred Gusenbauer´s image featured on a cover of *profil* shortly after he was nominated the Austrian chancellor in January 2007. The headline read "Main Thing Chancellor" and referred to the fact that the Austrian Socialist politician had agreed to severe revisions of the original promises made during the election phase in order to ensure his chancellorship through an agreement with the conservative party. On the title page, Gusenbauer looked foolishly happy. His face, which protruded from a uniform black background, was reminiscent of a shallow disk, severed from the rest of his body. As his polemically inflated head lacked clear outlines and boundaries, it turned into an open form, unable to contain and to communicate solidity. Monumental in form, but highly fragmentary and almost fluid by nature, this "portrait" of the new chancellor was not suitable to promote him as a guarantor of reliability. For Thomas Macho (1999), this kind of representation would be a perfect example of the branded faces generated by the print media. As ghost-like signifiers of prominence, their relation to a bodily existence has been cut. They are free-floating facial logos that follow their own dynamic and logic of distribution. In Macho´s view, these severed faces with no reference to a body are particularly prone to appropriations of all sorts, including the disfigurement discussed in this text. (Fig. 2)

The lighting could be described as, what Rosalind Krauss (1997) calls, "wild light", "[…] producing the subject […] as a stain rather than a cogito, a stain that maps itself […] onto the world´s picture" (p. 242). In her elaborations on the formless and Cindy Sherman´s work in particular, she writes, "This scattered light, which sometimes takes the form of abrupt highlights on bits of flesh or fabric popping out of an opaquely undifferentiated darkness […] acts to prevent the coalescence of the Gestalt" (Krauss, 1997, p. 242). Thus, the media practice of creating alienating views of well introduced public figures confuses communication and interferes with identification. This has far-reaching psychological consequences for the beholder of such images. How do viewers react to this overdetermined form of pictorial rhetoric? In these polemically

2

Alfred Gusenbauer, *Main Thing Chancellor*
profil no. 02/38, January 2007

Photograph: Georges Schneider

distorted close-ups, an assault against the positive and pleasant form is launched and a surplus of destructive and image-eroding energy makes itself felt. As Rosalind Krauss (1997) points out, "Gestalt" as the "good form" in terms of geometry, morphology, and cognitive unity has always been a construct. What appears well-centered, in turn, centers the beholder, the so called well-built stabilizes its onlooker, and what we perceive as a whole allows the viewer to become complete.

> *For no matter how riven the body is, between up and down, front and back, and right and left, and thus how unequal the spatial coordinates, it is the centering of the conscious subject through the experience of the Gestalt itself as centrically organized image that is continually mapped onto the perceptual field. (Krauss, 1997, p. 89)*

In that sense, images like the Gusenbauer or Bush close-ups destabilize the viewer not just on a surface level of perception but also on a more precarious level of cognitive balance. Of course, these negative variations of actually positively connoted pictures create fear, rejection, and aggression on the part of the viewer, and the print media most efficiently use these psychological undercurrents to create hostility and aversion to certain people. However, from the perspective of Bataille (1988), individuals do not just fear the excess implied in these visual assaults, but they also desire them and wishfully anticipate the devastating effect that the excessive might have on their framework of normality. To gain a new distance from role models and figures of admiration and, at the same time, get rid of the straightjacket of pictorial patterns can indeed be liberating. This liberating effect may also partly explain the laughter of people as a possible reaction to such unfavorable images.

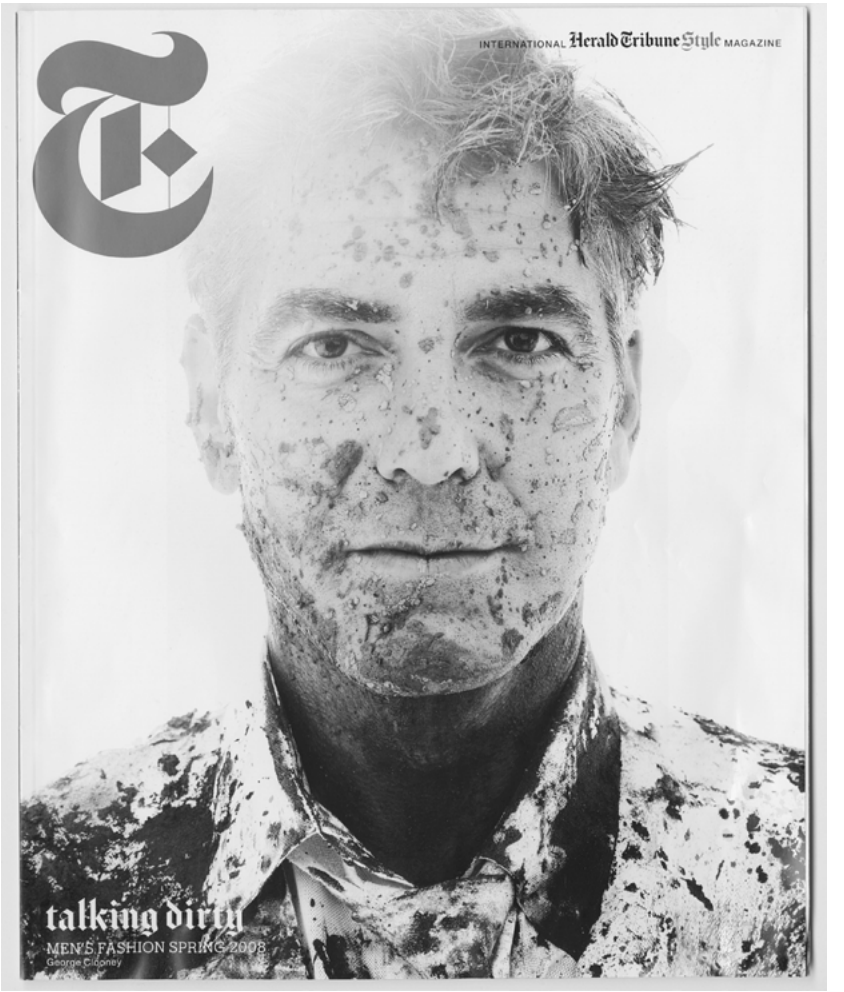
The Digital Making of the "Informe"

The spring 2008 cover of the *International Herald Tribune Style Magazine* presented a Jean-Baptiste Mondino picture of the American actor George Clooney. The text superimposed on the photograph said "talking dirty" and referred to the dirt covering the actor´s face and body. It was "dirt" that looked like a rash. The dirt particles were reminiscent of an infection that slowly eroded the perfect façade. Uncontrollable organisms seemed to grow on Mr. Clooney. They invaded his facial territory and bit into the smooth façade. Their expansion and exuberant growth were especially disconcerting considering the Clooney face as a perfect projection for male beauty. (Fig. 3)

In Mondino´s version the Clooney portrait deviated strongly from the usual, well introduced iconic images of the film star. Clooney as a brand name in film industry stands for a prim look, perfect hairstyle, and elegant clothing. On the *Herald Tribune Style* cover the womanizer´s normally perfectly combed hair was messy, and grey with dirt. His neck, which jutted out of a formerly "three-piece white cotton-and-linen suit, made to measure cotton shirt and tie" (p. 8), was all black and suggested a dirty job. The lighting was also significantly different from that of a normal photo shoot and seemed to hit Clooney´s head more by coincidence. It was definitely not the kind of lighting meant to bring out the best in movie stars. As an outcome of this random lighting, the outlines of the upper left part of his head dissolved and diffused the perfect oval of this famous face. Due to the lighting, the actor´s left ear turned into an alienating body part. It is the type of light that Rosalind Krauss (1997) relates to the luminosity and gaze structure as developed by Jacques Lacan. Clooney seemed to be unexpectedly captured by an agent of visibility that provides random visual renditions of people and denies control over these images. To those familiar with Clooney images, this did not feel right. It was not enough that the star was splattered with dirt and that his Ralph Lauren outfit was severely ruined; there was also the prospect that this gentleman might be "talking dirty." With this heading the sexual connotations of this unusual depiction of the film star become explicit. Everything hinted at low level satisfaction and liberation from the constraints of sublimation. Playing in the dirt, soiling oneself, carrying the physical marks of transgression – this was what the image signalled.

As further research on the photographer revealed *(lumiere, Jan. 1996),* Jean-Baptiste Mondino is a master of digital manipulations. In his more recent photo series "mutilations," he digitally manipulated some of the highest-paid bodies and faces from the world of models and stars. For instance, he presented Shalom with a black eye, Nadja with her throat slit, and Kristen McMenamy´s body covered with scars. Apparently most of the models vetoed the publication of these images. As to the image featured on the *Herald Tribune Style Magazine* cover, George Clooney obviously willingly agreed to Mondino´s experiments and lent him his façade for his digital transformations. He fearlessly handed himself over to operations that would not hurt, or create any bodily discomfort. As Clooney´s self-confident posture and the expression of his eyes indicate, he was fully comfortable with this digital assault that would just affect the outer layers of his persona. In this way, two media professionals cold bloodedly decided to stage something which looked like the old fashioned body-and-soul-racking excess and generated a possible version of the "informe."

Concerning Mondino´s experiment, I would argue that his representation of George Clooney can be taken as a critical comment on print media practices. Both,



3

George Clooney, *Talking Dirty*
International Herald Tribune Style Magazine Spring 2008

Photograph: Jean-Baptiste Mondino

photographer and actor collaborated on a project of reflection upon the destructive energies which lie at the bottom of all the media attempts to generate appealing and sexy images. In fact, the image producing media machinery can cancel its contract of loyalty towards its subjects at any time and subsequently destroy what it first brought into form. Of course, in most cases these unfavorable close-ups are embedded in a journalistic context which justifies the polemically changed view of a person. Still, there is something highly irrational about the verve with which these pictorial assaults, or violations of good form, are launched. In these medial fits of aggression, boredom, and annoyance with its own products, a type of energy breaks free, which is cathartic. There is more at stake than just polemics. In the course of this demontage of prominent individuals, pictorial agreements prevailing in our society and conceptions of subject hood are cancelled and called into question. In times of digital image production, this transgression seems to be easy to achieve – and George Clooney was even able to turn a denigrating revision of his well-known persona into another successful media performance.

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