

Electoral Persona

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Gesture politics were born with mass construction of the image. If in the 17th century allegory spread as a way of typifying the attributes of representing ideas¹, it was the 19th century that would construct facial expression as a manner of attributing emotions. It is possible that, to give an example, boredom existed before the 19th century, but it's thanks to the expressive stereotypes painted, engraved, sculpted or photographed since then that people can actually recognise it as such: as Peter Toohey says, we may not know exactly how to define boredom, but we do know how to see in others.²

The representation of emotions is directly tied to social conflict. It's no coincidence that the modern development of social identity was constructed by means of physiognomic categories: physiognomy (the strange idea that a person's personality can be ascertained by studying their outer appearance and particularly their face), and phrenology (the theory that a person's character can be established by the volume and morphology of the human crane) laid the way for many scientists to anticipate a criminal's character. A large part of modern criminology is based on these ancient postulates, as we can see from today's "identikit" pictures. For one of the fathers of those absurd ideas, the German Ernst Kretschmer, villains could be distributed into the following types: leptosomatic, athletic, pyknic, dysplastic, schizothymic, cyclothymic and viscous. For William Sheldon and S.S. Stevens, the categories were endomorph, mesomorph, ectomorph, viscerotonic, somatotonic and cerebrotonic. Anyone intending to analyse social reality had to produce taxonomies: thanks to photography, 'neurasthenics', depressives, the possessed or those blessed with Marian apparitions were classified as proof that their faces and expressions had common denominators. But also the heroes, the great men, the geniuses, whose skulls and brains were kept in formaldehyde until such time that who knows what was discovered or answered.

We were saying that all this is related to conflict, because if there is something that did (and does) obsess middle class liberalism it was the constitution of a scientific discourse that guarantees social peace. Nothing better to prevent social dissension and drift than discipline of the affections. Knowing when to laugh, when to be quiet, when to be angry, when to give in depending on the environment and context. Taking off our hats in church, smiling to the boss or placing our hands on our chins when observing a work of art in a museum: exercises of consensus; perfectly established and universally interiorised. Knowing the protocols for managing emotions and affections ensures a reasonable understanding and prevents the appearance of undesirable, unexpected gestures not particularly in keeping with good manners, which are always commercial. The appropriate handling of expressiveness is like the fixed price on a market blackboard: no haggling is allowed, that pre-modern, arbitrary and uncivil obscenity that changes the order of things.

However, evil is neither physiognomic, monstrous nor bedevilled. It is simply banal. Nor are emotions the automatic reflections of our interior, which must be kept secret and controlled at all times. Rather, they are constructs that we tend to use most often at will, according to interests and situations, like evil itself. To start with, personality comes from persona, the Greek word for an actor's mask. For Jung, the notion of persona constitutes the part of our personality that struggles with external reality as a necessary mask for assuming a part or role in society: "The persona is the individual's system of adaptation to,

1 See Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia overo Descrittione dell'Imagini universali*, Rome, 1593.

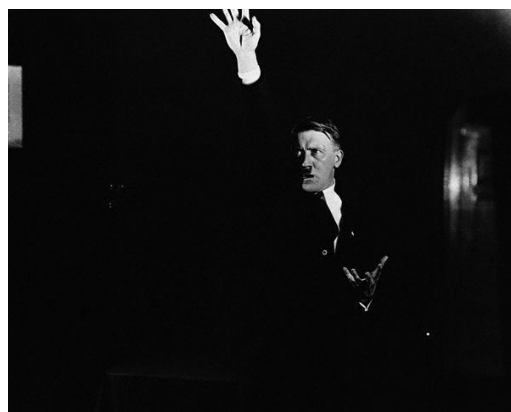
2 See Peter Toohey, *Boredom. A Lively History*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2011.

or the manner he assumes in dealing with the world. Thus, almost every profession has its own characteristic persona. The danger is that (people) become identical with their personas, like the professor with his textbook or the tenor with his voice. One could say, with a little exaggeration, that the persona is that which in reality one is not, but which oneself as well as others think one is”³.

The universe of electoral marketing directly corresponds to these patterns, and in turn, surpasses and questions them. In 1932, Hitler presented an election poster in which a cut-out picture of his face set against a simple black background left no room whatsoever for expressiveness.



The sad moron projected a supposedly neutral image, in which the message was his name and face. As Jung warned us, here we had a singer who identified with his instrument, his voice, and to an even greater extent, with the phonetic sound of his name. There is no other message. The lack of expression on that face is obviously intended to strike a difference with what Hitler considered to be the mimicry of the republic, the “idle chitchat” of parliamentary democracy. That’s why it’s particularly interesting to observe the well-known images of Hitler, taken by his private photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, while he practiced his speeches in front of a mirror.



In these images, his face portrays hysteria and histrionics, which may have led some of the scientists so fond of physiognomy to surmise that he could be pigeonholed in some kind of criminal typology... perhaps ‘fascisthymic’ or ‘turdomorph’. Although that’s hard to believe, because they all followed him blindly and even designed him a complete racial theory that he would take to we know where.

3 Carl Gustav Jung, *Obras completas*, Ed. Trotta, Madrid, 1999.

In democracy, candidates' images seem to look slightly different. I say 'seem', take note. The expressiveness of the face and body movements shown by the man or woman candidate is considered central in the strategy to connect with the voter, and for the most part, we can see the effort they make to twist their lips into a smile, to convey serenity, resolution and confidence. But they never succeed. And we know this because the hordes of electors who don't vote for them fail to find even a single one of these traits that the politician wishes to convey. Let's look at the example of Jesús Ortega, municipal candidate in Mexico City.



Unless you know Mr Ortega personally and you think he's a good guy, or you wish to vote for the party he represents, I just can't see how he would convince anyone to vote for him. He looks at us out of the corner of his eye, as if to say "I can see you". His face is also framed by the borders of the image itself. We can make out a dark jacket, white shirt and pale-coloured tie, and there is even a very small hint of a very slight smile at the corners of his mouth. You also get the feeling that Mr Ortega avoids expression, gestures, anything that could stigmatise him or ruin his political career. It's as if he was saying "well, here I am... but I'm not up for all that election stuff", something that I of course don't know, it's pure lucubration on my part. But if I was to vote for Mr Ortega, I'm sure I'd be able to see things that are invisible to me right now... perhaps his resolution, his determination or his professionalism. Whatever the case, Mr Ortega won the elections.

Now let's turn our attention to another candidate in another Mexican city, Tlaxcala. His name is Adolfo Escobar.



Mr Escobar is wearing neither a jacket nor a tie. He is looking directly at us and is holding up his thumb in the classic and popular gesture of acceptance, of confirmation. But, help! The rictus of his mouth tells us something else. Did the photographer only take one picture so that he would have no option but to choose that one? Of course not. He took lots of them, but chose this one. What, then, does Mr Escobar want to convey to us with that strange half-open mouth and the awkward sneer of his top lip? Did he want to show us his teeth? To look as if he's talking? Who knows? Whatever the case, it's obvious that Mr Escobar has little time for the commonly accepted idea that you have to convey a neutral but friendly expression: did he look at all the pictures taken and say, "that's the one I want to use for my campaign"? Mr Escobar lost those elections.

All of this takes us, in case I've lost any of you along the way, to the construction of expressive stereotypes in personalities as socially ubiquitous as election candidates. If we obey the pseudo-scientific typologies constructed in the 19th century to describe the most socially conflictive people and apply them to politics, we could say that the categories are: fascists, right-wingers, liberals, centre-stagers, socio-democrats, nationalists, ultranationalists, independence-supporters, technicalists, left-wingers, communists, anarchists, anti-system groups, ecologists, IPS (independent parties of sundry origin), and their different embellishments and variations. Most of these categories are hard to tell apart conceptually speaking, given that, as we all know, most people are both conservative and progressive, and the difference depends on where they put the accent. There are people who are right-wing for some things, and left for others. If the allegories invented in the 17th century sought to establish the way that love, hope or beauty should be represented, modern politics seem to have been driven by the need to determine chaps capable of projecting ideological categories that sell easily in the electoral shop. In other words, politics have been driven by a principle completely opposed to that of Hitler: a personality has to be invented, because nobody truly believes that the person they see in a poster or video represents the actual candidate.

Roberto Alfa, one of the best known electoral marketing pros, who died in wretched circumstances in 2008, and who paved the way for the election wins of many politicians in several countries, had clear-cut thoughts on this fundamental principle of contemporary political image: "A spot is a face. The other bits are metaphors that lend a reference framework to which we can associate that face. Let me tell you something: in spots, the candidates are set free from politics, they're only actors. That's the great strength of the spot. Voters judge the candidate as if they were in an acting competition. The spectator is trapped for 30 seconds in the unhealthy and trivial fascination of seeing 'how he does it' under the spotlights and with a script learned off by heart. Similarly, in a debate, people are attracted by the "nerves" a candidate must feel on being subjected to so much pressure: millions of spectators, thousands of communication experts, the final straight, the opponent tightening the screws, the dissimulation of own defects. We want a leader and we put him to the test. At the end of the day, an election campaign is nothing more than a game of psychofagy: the consumption of another's psychology; and on top of that, the psychology of someone who aims to become a hero. A campaign means successfully making the whole thing a big thrill, intensely short-lived, destined and designed not to last. Posters and spots are frozen in time after the elections. They no longer have any use. Their function ceases to exist. What becomes of these images? They turn into the goddamn trail that leads to our lies".⁴

4 "Diario de Roberto Alfa", en Jorge Luis Marzo & Arturo "Fito" Rodríguez, *Spots Electorales. El espectáculo de la democracia*, Turner, Madrid, 2008:
<http://www.turnerlibros.com/Ent/Products/ProductDetail.aspx?ID=270>

The thing is that the construction of the political image directly responds to the desire to categorize citizens: "We want to be like you... We are you... we're just another person on the street". Thus, the typology of the election candidate only responds to the taxonomy of the citizen: the images reflect the stereotypes to which the voters would like to think they belong. A new step in the bourgeois and liberal chimera of organising the garden so that everything is neat and tidy, like on supermarket shelves. If money cancels the relationship of inter-dependence between producers and consumers in a shop, voting does the same between the candidate and the elector. Nobody owes anything to anybody. Because, at the end of the day, "you always ends up voting for yourself", as Roberto Alfa would say.