

The Repainted Leader or the Ethics of Portraiture

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Portraits of the powerful have always been the subject of judgement, where the ethics meets the aesthetic. This points to the symbolic and political nature of the portrait of “leaders,” who choose how they present themselves to the world in absentia. When artist Jonathan Yeo unveiled his red portrait of Charles III—with a Monarch butterfly on his right shoulder—on May 16, 2024,¹ it came as a surprise. Was it to reveal to us the whirling *psyche* (in ancient Greek the word for soul and butterfly) of the man in the picture or to remind us of the endangered status of the Monarch as a species? Among the first commentators, some saw the king doomed to hellfire, while others thought it was a bloody symbol of past violence. Yeo, for his part, spoke of the profound “humanity” with which he wished to clothe the king, but wasn’t he like the emperor of the tale, naked in his new clothes with that little butterfly on his shoulder? And why did a fluttering wing arouse such emotion? Perhaps it’s because the *portraiture of power* (Hjorth, 2022: 678) has always fascinated us, in particular because the figure of the leader is suspended between grace (Bouilloud & Deslandes, 2015) and disgrace (Riot, 2021).

However, despite a few notable exceptions (Cornelissen, 2013), this subject of study, which has been central since Antiquity, hardly seems to inspire contemporary management research. Today, portraits of corporate leaders often obey the same codes: bust portrait, suit, smile, neutral background. Yet what may a portrait, a likeness of a person, often just a face, painted, drawn, or photographed, really show of a person? Since Rubens, Van Dyck, and Le Brun, photography has reduced the exposure time and multiplied the number of images. Does the trivialisation of the portrait on our screens prevent us from reflecting on its meaning: a “natural” reflection of a person or a simulacrum?

In the first case, the portraitist attempts to reveal a personality first and foremost. This involves respecting the expectations expressed, the tradition of the genre, current events, and the affects that transcend the pitfalls of time (Contu, 2023; Painter, Pérezts, & Deslandes, 2021). In the second case, the portrait tells a story without referring to the truth. In this case, the face represented is merely the appearance of power—a mask that, as Louis Marin points out, offers “figurative

¹<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-68981200>.

cover for a bad deed on the pretext of making it a good one” (Marin, 1997: 287). A Nietzschean interpretation would have the mask *be* power. In this reasoning, as in Kelly’s (2014) view of leadership, all but emptiness lies at the heart of the leader’s portrait.

However, as can be seen clearly in the reactions to the portrait of the king with the butterfly, conventions change and there is no consensus. That’s why, in order to get a better grasp of the ambiguity inherent in the portrait of the “great man,” we have chosen to compare the self-presentation of two men of power, Cardinal Richelieu and entrepreneur Steve Jobs, three centuries apart. One is painted by Philippe de Champaigne in a portrait exhibited at the Musée du Louvre in Paris,² the other is photographed by Albert Watson in a portrait which, since 2006, seems difficult to escape.³

The first portrait is full length. The cardinal is standing. His long, pleated purple robe accentuates the grandeur of the figure. The head is thin and small, and the keen, inquisitive gaze stares out at the viewer. The cardinal, his hands open, seems to be moving forward, as if stopped in his tracks to stare at the viewer. Creating an effect of perspective, the robe—the folds of which obey a complex architecture—represents the exercise of power, the weight of the state jacket and its entanglement of constraints. The eloquent gesture of his hands—one turned towards heaven, the other towards earth—unites the earthly and heavenly realms in this man. The details of the finery, the ornaments and the gestures make up a coded universe, whose profound intention can only be grasped by the “happy few” to whom the portrait will be revealed in the place of power. The light colours of red and white contrast with the backdrop of a dark brocade curtain, a shadow from which the triumphant grey figure emerges, now in glory.

In Watson’s photography, the emphasis here is on the gaze, and the mysterious smile seeks connivance in the minimalist setting of a black and white portrait. The gesture of the hand on the chin, adorned with a pointed beard, is reminiscent of both the devil and the magician. There are no frills in this minimalist “less is more” design. It’s a style that has made its mark and given rise to a great deal of commentary, particularly on the psychology of Jobs, a man who is both iconoclast and mystic, a shrewd entrepreneur but a genuine rebel. Everything is pro forma, designed to make it easy to reproduce on screen. In this minimalist, simplified staging, there is no perspective, no background; the ultimate key to Apple’s secret lies in Jobs’ mind, just as Coca-Cola gets everything from its syrup and Google from its algorithm.

To sum up, certain visual codes are perpetuated while others change. Thus, in Champaigne’s time, the critique of power, that of Port Royal and Blaise Pascal, emphasised the emptiness of the figure of the leader, just like the arbitrariness of human power, because it was only in Jesus, the god-made man, and in the divine

² <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010060522>.

³ https://money.cnn.com/galleries/2011/technology/1110/gallery.photographing_steve_jobs.fortune/9.html.

order of the Eucharist, that the incarnation took place. In contemporary criticism of power, an immanent analysis of the Machiavellianism of power dominates, where scepticism denies any form of transcendent legitimacy. The only thing that remains is the art of action, combining chance and strategy. All the artefacts of power—crosses, ribbons, medals—have disappeared, as if to erase all distance: the leader is “just like us.”

What remains enduring in this self-presentation is the intention to present us with the objective, visible, “authentic” qualities of the leader (Hannah, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2011), whom the artist celebrates for what they are and not for what they do, thus operating a form of stasis. Pascal, a contemporary and opponent of Richelieu’s central power, wrote that a portrait both “carries absence and presence” (Pascal, 2011: 291). The portrait’s role as a sign is determined by an “and” (light *and* dark) rather than an “either/or.” The portrait shows an absent person, and in this sense it is a fiction. But at the same time this fiction makes the person “present” through the *representation* it gives us. The mirror effect through the portrait of the leader can then give rise to a variety of interpretations, including those that point to the emptiness of the portrait of the leader or the subtle nature of what can be read into it, such as wit, grace, charm or “*je ne sais quoi*.” These are all effects that further demonstrate the power of the portrait as a vehicle for identification and expression.

It has to be said, then, that the message of the portrait is always ambivalent, between revelation and concealment. We are always looking for the underlying intention behind appearances, certain that something is revealed (Nietzsche might say, vainly), whether a face or a *persona* (mask), so that the image shows what the discourse hides. Then the controversy surrounding the portrait of King Charles should come as no surprise: every detail is always decisive, whether it designates or conceals its meaning. Every portrait of the leader imposes a complex embodiment, in which, as Marin points out, “the realm of politics is split, immanently, between its own field, which is that of lies and the trickery of the subjugated by the one who governs them, and a section of this field which, constituted in secret, is that of the withdrawal of politics into ethics, itself defined very generally as self-reflection on oneself” (1981: 287). This, then, would be the ultimate meaning of an ethics of portraiture, as Pascal first analysed it for us: the leader is the individual capable of “double thinking” and of double figure in constant display.

So how can we know anything about the “greats” as their choices affect us? We believe their style tells it all, for as Buffon said: “Style is the man.” Richelieu, who loved painting, had little taste for this portrait by Champaigne, who, close to Port-Royal and Pascal, did not like him. As for Steve Jobs, who hated having his photo taken, he let Albert Watson get very close and took a liking to this representation of himself, which he then used over and over again (like those close to him, to announce his death). The black and white portrait already had the colours of mourning. Here, the icon takes precedence over the painting. This absence of depth, this proximity on the same level, through the absence of colour and the absence of a vanishing line could almost be the mark of contemporaneity, making the portrait a mourning of the

painting. This was Cézanne's lesson: "The main thing in a painting,' he said, 'is to find the right distance. Colour had to express all the breaks in depth. It is there that one recognises the talent of a painter.' And as he said this, his fingers followed the boundaries of the various planes in his paintings. He was showing exactly how far he had succeeded in suggesting depth and where the solution had not yet been found; here colour would have remained colour without becoming an expression of distance" (Doran, 1978: 97).

This bears a lesson for leaders' styles in their presentation of self. Only through the work process may the painter judge the presentation of self of any object, be it cat or a king or a cat looking at a king. Only in perspective does it become a subject. This is why the portrait is that long process of the pose, a patient craft where a common intention appears with all the awkwardness of the presentation of self, and as a leader, no less. Instead, choosing to have one's picture taken in the instant, as fast as a butterfly flaps its wings, means choosing the depthless, sleek and flighty features of an icon. Working this way, the photographer may just capture a glimpse, as if per chance. Little if any intention is revealed in this flat surface meant for the screen, this second self. You press the button, the apparatus does the rest. The eyes in the image meet our eyes as in a distorting magic mirror. Representing oneself, just an image, is acting as a genius or a devil out of its box, neither object or subject, but with the ubiquitous visibility of a brand, always enticing, as we all know, never fully liable.

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