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IN YOUR FACE!

Unidentified abjects flying in the face of power

Ask Katzeff

"This is the culture you're raising your kids in. Don't be surprised if it blows up in your face."

Marilyn Manson

Throughout time the face of power has constituted a favourite target of demonstrations of dissent and social revolt. The face of the King, the Emperor, the President, the Sultan as objects of scorn and ridicule. This article investigates this particular form of physiognomic humiliation as an activist strategy, as a modification of the image of power that attempts to establish a rupture in the prevailing social order and thus open up a new field of political potential.

However, permit me to start with a small Christological improvisation. The New Testament tells us that when Jesus hung on the Cross at Calvary, 'Calvariae Locus', and called upon his god – "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?", he was offered a drink from a sponge soaked

in vinegar.¹ However, this gesture served as much more than simply a way of shutting the mouth of the prophet; rather, it was a striking humiliation of the man the Romans had mockingly called Rex Iudaeorum. At the time this sponge had its ordinary use in the Imperial public latrines for personal hygiene in connection with daily defecation. “Shut your arse,” they said to Jesus and offered him the sponge.

This gesture is fundamentally based on a simple, carnivalistic inversion trope that turns the bodily hierarchies upside down. Jesus of Nazareth calls on his god, the sponge is put to his mouth, and thus the upper stratum of the body is associated comically with the lower one, heaven with earth, the sacred with the profane; the religious invocation is associated with the defecation process. “The prime carnivalistic act per se is the mock crowning and subsequent de-crowning of the carnival king,” writes Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin in his work on Dostoevsky.² This is the form of the Crucifixion. Jesus is crowned King of the Jews and later dethroned in a carnivalistic mocking ritual.

Humiliation plays a central role in Bakhtin’s carnival theory as an element in the carnival’s socially revitalizing rite of passage, where everything elevated is pulled down through the symbolically as well as actually unclean, the decomposing but thus also fertile strata, perishing in order to be resurrected later as an independent unit in the decentralized, non-hierarchical and fundamentally open mass of the carnival crowd. This cosmic inversion figure is thus based for Bakhtin on a radically democratic principle. A trope for unconstrained social and biological exchange. Bodily as well as social hierarchies, norms and boundaries are suspended and transgressed, and the sociality is fused into one

modulatory, reproductive body.³ Here humiliation serves specifically to degrade authorities socially through what one could call ‘the extrasystemic sanction of popular laughter’. A person is made an object of mockery and laughter, and thus stripped of the authoritative seriousness on which the official culture’s representatives to a great extent base their power.

Is that what we can infer from our little Christological exercise? The account of the Crucifixion of Jesus is a very clear example of what I have called carnivalistic inversion; but it further reminds us that this kind of ritual humiliation is not *per se*, as is often assumed in the Bakhtinian tradition, locked into a kind of antisystemic popular DNA. It can likewise without further ado serve as a weapon of reaction, crushing social resistance to a repressive system. (We know this too from the medieval pillories and other forms of public punishment). My aim here, however, is not so much to determine whether this or that symbolic form corresponds to one or the other ideological password. Rather, it is to present a small phenomenological investigation of what one could call, with an expression from pornography, ‘facial humiliation’, or more academically, ‘physiognomic humiliation’.

Bakhtin links political conflict with human physiology. The upper bodily strata with their cognitive and spiritual processes must be united with the lower strata associated with defecation and not least reproduction to arouse the degrading as well as socially revitalizing power of laughter. The mockery is thus mainly directed at the face in the form of various ‘abject’ missiles – urine, blood, spit, feces, semen. “It can be said,” writes Bakhtin in his work on François Rabelais, “that excrement represents bodies and matter, which are

mainly comical – it is the most suitable substance for degrading all that is sublime”.⁴

After listing a number of examples of physiognomic humiliation in ancient literature (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Pomponius), Bakhtin further describes the throwing of excrement and urine as a “traditional gesture of humiliation”. “In every language,” he writes, “there are presumably expressions like ‘I shit on you’. (Less offensive rewritings are things like ‘I spit on you’ or ‘I sneeze on you’).” (Cf. by the way the excellent Monty Pythonesque tirade “I fart in your general direction. I bust my pimples at you and wave my private parts at your aunties! You hare-brained wipers of other people’s bottoms!”). “This gesture [...] is based on a literal humiliation understood in relation to the topography of the body, that is a reference to the lower bodily stratum, the zone of the genital organs. This signals destruction – a grave for the degraded”.⁵

Yet the trope is ambivalent, since the lower strata are associated not only with death and decomposition, but also with fertility and rebirth. Thus in the first instance we must understand that the physiognomic humiliation is linked with the possibility that something new can arise. Jesus was offered a drink from the sponge, then he gave up the ghost – life left him with this gesture, and he rose again.

As an approach to a better understanding of the face as an object of social degradation, we can turn to a sociological tradition that views the face as an area for “sociodynamic valuation”, inasmuch as the face represents social values such as “prestige, dignity, honour, respect and status”.⁶ In many languages we are familiar with this understanding of the

face from the expression ‘to lose face’, meaning that in others’ eyes we lose some of the above-mentioned emblematic qualities, while for example in North American shamanism, as Marcel Mauss remarks in his *Essai sur le don*, the expression “to have a rotten face” is used.

“[F]or the North American losing one’s face,” writes Mauss, “is the same as losing one’s spirit, which is a human being’s true ‘face’, the dance mask, the right to incarnate a spirit, and to wear an emblem or totem”.⁷ Slightly simplistically one can thus say that when one loses face, at the same time one loses the right to represent, since one’s morality and social adequacy is questioned. Put differently, one loses the potential to achieve leadership.

I would claim that it is precisely this that the following examples of physiognomic humiliation as an activist strategy attempt to achieve – to make a given authority lose face and thus lose social estimation and authoritarian lustre. This is attempted through a symbolic inversion that turns the bodily hierarchies upside down, inasmuch as one aims an ‘abject’ attack at the face of power – an attack that however, unlike our earlier Biblical and Bakhtinian examples, appears in a sublimated form, very much adapted to the mass communication of the visual media. These carnivalistic political actions thus fundamentally constitute a kind of ‘performative modifications’, which through spectacular attacks on official authorities seek to modify their mediated ‘image’, to deprive them of their face and consequently their position of social power, in order to open up a field of social possibilities.

George

The Prime Minister's Palace in Baghdad, 14th December 2008. During a press conference the then American president George W. Bush just manages to duck a pair of shoes thrown directly at him, followed by the words: "This is a farewell kiss from the Iraqi people, you dog! This is for all the widows and the orphans and all those who have been killed in Iraq!"

Just before this the shoes had been on the feet of the Iraqi journalist Muntadhar al-Zaidi from the Egypt-based TV station *Al-Baghdadia*. The action was allegedly to be understood as a response to the humiliation al-Zaidi felt at seeing his country destroyed during the American occupation. "What prompted me to act," al-Zaidi has later declared, "was the injustice that befell my people, and how the occupation wanted to humiliate my homeland by putting it under its boot".⁸ (One recalls George Orwell's gloomy prophecy from *1984*: "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – forever").

For an extended period Al-Zaidi had travelled around Iraq covering the social consequences of the invasion. He had followed the scandal in Abu Ghraib and the massacres in Falluja, Najaf, Sadr City, Basra, Diyala, Haditha, Mosul, Tal Afar etc. Iraqi territory had been violated, blood had been spilled and had made the earth unclean, and this unclean earth had been trod by al-Zaidi's shoe. "Do you know," al-Zaidi later asked rhetorically, "how many broken homes that shoe which I threw had entered? How many times it had trodden over the blood of innocent victims? Maybe that shoe was the appropriate response when all values were violated".⁹

However, besides these biographical data related specifically to al-Zaidi's shoe, we must also understand the general semiotic meaning of the shoe in a Middle Eastern cultural context. In the Islamic tradition shoes are regarded as ritually unclean, which is among other things why they must be left outside the mosque before prayers or carried (preferably in the left hand with the heels facing each other). In the Middle East footwear is very much associated with impurity and with social degradation. (We know this too from the Christian Gospels, where Jesus, as part of yet another ritualistic prelude to his own Crucifixion, death and resurrection, washes the feet of his disciples. The spiritually elevated is associated with the ritually unclean). "Shoes are used to beat servants, thieves and prostitutes – this indicates servility," explains Professor Faleh Jabar. "On the other hand if one wants to beat one's children, one will typically use a stick or hit them with the hand – never a shoe".¹⁰ The very act of showing your soles to another person is considered quite indecent.

Shoes are also associated symbolically with impurity, servility and profane materiality, and showing the soles of your shoes to someone, not to speak of beating them with a shoe, is one of the most basic ways of humiliating another person, which is why, at least in a Middle eastern context, it serves as an extremely effective (visual) political weapon. In recent years, for example we have seen among other things images of Saddam Hussein subjected to this humiliation after the invasion of Iraq, just as the face of the Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen had to undergo the same treatment after the crisis of the 'Muhammad cartoons'. In Bush's case, though, it seems to have been a special form of

performative physiognomic humiliation, since during the press conference al-Zaidi intervened directly in the normally uninterrupted flow of images in the TV transmission and thus attempted to dismantle the then president's mediated image. By attacking Bush on screen, partly by throwing his shoe at him and partly by shouting "dog" at him (also intensely insulting, since in Islamic culture dogs are regarded as unclean), al-Zaidi was trying to degrade Bush as part of a reprisal, but also to deprive him of his status and power and thus open up a field of political potential.

In the article "Uvidenhedens Tidsalder" (The Age of Unknowing), Mikkel Bolt describes the visual political attempt to compensate for the loss of status suffered by the USA in the wake of 9/11, when images of the collapse of the World Trade Center were circulated all over the world – a spectacular assault on the privileged symbol of the USA's economic supremacy. "The terror attack shook American society," writes Bolt, "and the American state apparatus has tried desperately ever since to recreate the image of American supremacy – the statue of Saddam is toppled, a wretched Saddam is displayed, Bush serves turkey to his conquering soldiers"¹¹ (a turkey that later proved to have been made of plastic and was thus meant more for the cameras than for the American soldiers). However, the images from 9/11 seem so powerful that any attempt to compensate for the shock and loss of face that the terror attack entailed is doomed to failure. The man whom al-Zaidi tried to liquidate symbolically in 2008 was thus a man whose image had to a great extent already been tarnished.

However, Bush reacted immediately by pretending not to understand the insult, and thus

tried to ignore the meaning of the attack. “I don’t know what the guy’s cause was. I didn’t feel the least bit threatened by it,” he declared subsequently and at the same time he tried to joke about the episode: “If you want the facts, it’s a size 10 shoe that he threw.” However, during the actual press conference this attempt to play down the meaning of the action took on a more ambivalent character, when Bush, as we saw al-Zaidi overpowered and beaten by the security guards and then dragged out with a trail of blood behind him, solemnly opined: “That’s what people do in a free society, draw attention to themselves”.¹² Outside, you could hear the man screaming.

Al-Zaidi was later tried by a judge and sentenced to three years in prison for assault on a foreign head of state on an official visit, a sentence which, after among other things massive protests and popular campaigns in support of al-Zaidi, was commuted to one year in prison, which he had more or less already served because of an unusually long legal process. Muntadhar al-Zaidi was released on 15th September 2009. His shoes no longer exist. A few days after the assault they are said to have been examined for explosives by American and Iraqi security staff and then destroyed. The prison sentence and the hasty destruction of the actual assault ‘object’ seems a rather violent reaction to something that the representatives of power queued up to minimize.

Milton

The Marriot Hotel in San Francisco, 9th October 1998. Milton Friedman, feted neoliberal economist, is struck on the head by a biodynamic ‘coconut creme pie’ accompanied by the

words “Mr. Friedman, it’s a good day to pie.” Behind the event was the action group Biotic Baking Brigade, known for exactly this kind of public character assassination of prominent representatives of the politico-economic elite. “Mr. Friedman serves as the world’s pre-eminent neoliberal economist,” declared the attacker Al Decker afterwards; “globalization and ‘free trade’ policies have brought the world poverty, misery, starvation, and we are at the brink of economic collapse. As a young American, what can I look forward to under neoliberal economics besides a depressing McWorld?”¹³

Besides Friedman, the group has earlier carried out similar assaults on among others the former mayor of San Francisco, Willie Brown; Microsoft’s Bill Gates; Sweden’s King Carl Gustaf, and others. The attacks of the brigade are aimed directly at the open face of power in the struggle for social and environmental justice and they have links with activist groups like Earth First!, Food Not Bombs and ACT UP. “We want to give people who are so overwhelmed by the terror of modern life the opportunity to laugh in the face of people who are destroying us,”¹⁴ declares the ‘brigade general’ Agent Apple (alias the above-mentioned Al Decker). “Pieing can be traced back to court jesters. Part of their role was to humiliate royalty or powerful people. There’s always been something tremendously powerful about getting people to laugh. It’s a way of engaging them in something they might otherwise have ignored”.¹⁵

The activists from the Biotic Baking Brigade thus draw directly on a carnivalistic tradition – formally this is a clear physiognomic humiliation strategy. However, what one has to note about the actions of the brigade is that the ‘abject’ assault missile here takes a

sublimated form: the excrement that plays a central role in the Bakhtinian tradition has been replaced by a creme pie, but the form of the ritual humiliation still emerges clearly – the victim loses face. In pornography the expression ‘cream pie’ means an ejaculation in the rectum, which is often afterwards served orally to the ‘sub’ (the submissive party), as an element in an erotic humiliation game.

We also find the cream or custard pie as an instrument of physiognomic humiliation in the comedy genre, especially slapstick, where it plays a central role in a theatricalized social conflict – a tradition that reached its peak, at least quantitatively, in Laurel and Hardy’s *The Battle Of The Century* (1927) – 19 minutes. 4000 custard pies. However, as a full-blown activist strategy, pie-throwing was only introduced far later, at the beginning of the 1970s, by the yippie activist Aron Kay, who directed his attacks at among others the homophobic singer Anita Bryant, the artist Andy Warhol and the father of the hydrogen bomb, Edward Teller.

As stylized physiognomic humiliation the pie serves to mock and ridicule official figures, and thus to deprive them of their authoritative seriousness. In a study of The Three Stooges, Professor Donald B. Morlan has described how the slapstick films often involve an anti-aristocratic, anti-elitist tendency. Socially marginal characters are plunged into an upper-class milieu where they create chaos, the facade breaks down, the social hierarchies are levelled, and it turns out that behind the facade everyone is a pie-throwing clown.¹⁶ What is thematized is thus once more a kind of social inversion where the pie in the face becomes a means of degrading the bourgeoisie and aristocracy – an abject assault weapon

in sublimated form created directly for modern visual media. The custard pie replaces the abject missiles of the carnival in favour of a clearly visual expression that signals derision.

At first this physiognomic humiliation type features primarily in the early slapstick comedies, then later it flows out of the film institution into the flood of media images as part of an activist strategy that aims to dismantle the power of the official culture. At the same time throwing a pie gives a sense of empowerment to those who throw it, and the image is effective. “Actually, we have found that the pie is a tremendous vehicle to communicate issues that otherwise wouldn’t get an airing in the mainstream media,” explains Al Decker. “It’s a chink in the media’s armor.” The Biotic Baking Brigade can thus be seen on the one hand as a kind of real-life slapstick scoundrels who create chaos at elitist self-congratulatory events, but also as modern media activists and as artists.

The members of the brigade put no little thought, creativity and effort into their baking. A cream pie is not just a cream pie. Each assault is carefully planned, the pies are biodynamic and vegan and baked with special reference to the faces they are to humiliate. (In Friedman’s case, as mentioned, it was a coconut creme pie.) Nothing, one learns on closer scrutiny, is left to chance when the brigade stages its spectacular actions. The effect of these public humiliation rituals is thus a powerful image that can easily be circulated through the mass media and can dismantle or at least question the power of the official culture; and judging from the sentences that have been handed down in the course of time for serving a pie in this way to a public figure, it is certainly an offence that (state) power takes seriously. For example the so-called Cherry Pie Three were each sentenced to

six months in prison for the assault on the then mayor of San Francisco Willie Brown. As San Francisco supervisor Michael Yaki declared: "It's not a laughing matter [...] It's an assault on public officials. It's an assault on government. This is not something the City should or will tolerate".¹⁷

Anders

Christiansborg in Copenhagen, 18th March 2003. The then Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen gets a can of red paint in the face. He has just attended a meeting of the Parliamentary Foreign Policy Committee about Danish participation in the Iraq War. It has been decided, in breach of international law and the UN charter, and without a mandate from the UN Security Council, to enter the war against Iraq by 61 votes in favour, 50 against (68 members of parliament were absent in accordance with the parties' 'clearing agreement'). This was done to prevent the use of the Saddam regime's alleged arsenal of 'weapons of mass destruction' (later more aptly described as 'weapons of mass distraction' by the British activist group Clown Army). "Iraq has weapons of mass destruction. It isn't just something we think. It's something we know," stated Anders Fogh Rasmussen at the time.¹⁸

As Fogh left the meeting he was assaulted with red (water-soluble) paint by the activist Lars Grenaa, followed by the words: "You have blood on your hands. Anders Fogh has blood on his hands! Hundreds of thousands of civilian Iraqis will die!" Immediately afterwards another activist, Rune Eltard, was able to carry out a similar assault on the

Danish Foreign Minister Per Stig Møller. The two attackers were immediately overpowered and imprisoned.

The war triggered off the most extensive global demonstrations to date, which were however dismissed by Anders Fogh Rasmussen with the remark: “They are useful idiots for Saddam Hussein”. In the post-9/11 political climate, in other words, you are either with us or against us, and this also seems to be reflected in the sentence passed on Grenaa and Eltard, who after 70 days remanded in custody were sentenced respectively to three and four months in prison, as well as ordered to pay compensation for the two ministers’ outfits and the legal costs of the case, with the aggravated circumstance (according to the judge) that the assault was directed at representatives of democracy.¹⁹

Let us look a little closer at the action itself. The red paint symbolizes blood, we understand, the blood of civilian Iraqis. It is the blood that Anders Fogh Rasmussen by all indications has – or will have – on his hands. However, the assault is also directed at the then Prime Minister’s face. Anders Fogh has paint on his face. The action functions fundamentally as an utterance where the words “Anders Fogh has blood on his hands” in magical fashion will serve to transform water-based paint to blood, as we know from the Christian Eucharist – ‘Hoc est corpus filii’ – where the altar wine is transubstantiated into the blood of Christ and the host into his body.

In many cultures blood plays a central role in various rites of passage or in reinforcing a magical invocation. Blood is a powerful element which may feature as either sacred or

unclean. In the action against Anders Fogh Rasmussen and Per Stig Møller the latter seems to be the case. The activists' performative gesture soils the two ministers with the blood of innocent Iraqi victims and they thus become symbolically unclean (cf. also the blood that al-Zaidi's shoes had by his own account trodden on), which fundamentally questions their ability to lead others. "Paint can be washed off! Blood can't!" was the slogan during a demonstration in support of the two jailed activists. In other words the paint only has a secondary meaning and can be washed off, while the guilt and the shame will stick to the two ministers forever. If the actual quite obvious madness of the Danish declaration of war against Iraq is not enough to make the Danish public lose confidence in the judgement of the responsible ministers, more spectacular means must be used. One must conjure up a loss of face.

In Chinese one distinguishes between two basic kinds of face as social categories, and consequently two kinds of loss of face, *'lian'* and *'mianzi'*. While *lian* stands for the sociality's general trust in a person's moral character, *mianzi* represents a person's social status. Loss of the former face will lead to a loss of confidence within a given social network, while loss of *mianzi* will very likely lead to a loss of authority.²⁰ I would claim that the carnivalesque actions discussed here intend to bring about a loss of *mianzi* rather than *lian* in their victims and thus seek to deprive them of the authority that enables them to exercise power over others. The deliberate physiognomic humiliation of the many faces of power in other words separates power and face from each other. Rather than president, economist, minister, what is left is rather simply George, Milton and Anders.

Each of them is humiliated in public and subjected to a loss of face. The attacks will often take place in connection with a press conference, which constitutes one of the political elite's most privileged forms of self-celebration, as a modification of a mass-mediated image. The actions are created to work in a media reality – they are spectacular and highly symbolically charged, they function as powerful counter-images in what normally constitutes a one-sidedly transmitted flow of images. However, this must mean that the political impact of the action stands or falls with the media coverage of the action. No images, no effect. At the same time politicians of today in particular seem to be characterized by their capacity to survive scandals.

Everything runs off them. Hence the expression 'teflon politician'. The symbolic blood *can* be washed off, or it runs off all by itself as the flow of images rushes on. "Nope – nothing wrong here."

Viewed from a more positive angle, these carnivalistic actions can be said to have played a role, if not crucial, at least important, in the gradual delegitimization of the now shattered global hegemony typified by the neoliberal economy and neoconservative foreign policy. Milton Friedman more than anyone embodies the former, while George W. Bush represents the latter. Thus the actions against these two, along with a long succession of other carnivalistic-activistic strategies that burgeoned globally, especially in 'alter-globalization' contexts around the turn of the millennium, can be seen as elements in the deconstruction of the hegemonic power that has typified the globalization of the last 40 years through physiognomic humiliations of its

representatives. There is no space here to offer a detailed analysis of why there has been no similar success in discrediting the regime in Denmark, but it is clear that the type of carnivalistic modifications we have dealt with here far from always have the impact one might wish.

The actions testify clearly to a wish to degrade and thus dismantle the ruling power in order to make way for a new social order. To a great extent we can understand these actions against the background of the forms of the carnivalistic humiliation rituals, but their sociopolitical effect is more difficult to measure. The great media attention surrounding these actions, as well as the unusually long prison sentences given to these attackers, seem however to testify to their significance. The very zeal with which the politico-economic elite try to create positive media images indicates what a counter-image of public humiliation can do.

However, the actions very much have the character of micro-events, which by no means appear to pack sufficient social punch to bring about the desired change. At the same time a question arises here in conclusion: what happens if the face of power is not open, or if power has no face at all? In the current situation the face of power seems increasingly to be becoming more indistinct on the global scene, while it is emerging more clearly in a closed, more authoritative form on the national scale. As the social conflicts come to a head during the current global crisis (economic and environmental, not to speak of the crisis of the nation-state) accompanied by growing state repression of political dissent, alternative culture and the endangered classes, a more comprehensive

event seems to be in the offing – an event that will move beyond the carnival's more festive and fundamental ritual forms of dissent and will appear in unmediated form. War, misery and state repression – that is the reality that the young generations of today are doomed to grow up in. It can thus hardly come as any surprise if the whole shitload suddenly explodes right in the face of power.

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