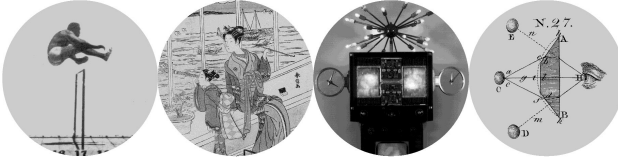


journal of visual culture



Response to Mark B.N. Hansen's 'Affect as Medium, or the "Digital-Facial-Image"'¹

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Mark B.N. Hansen has engaged in a careful study of what he calls the 'digital-facial-image' (DFI): digitally created faces that attempt, in one way or another, to interact with humans. Hansen's central claim is that the DFI enables us to rethink the relationship between humans and computer information. If, prior to the DFI, our only access to computer information was via the abstract avenues of computer coding and programming – i.e. the learning of instructional formulae and codes – then the DFI presents us with the promise of an altogether more human relation to information technology. The DFI opens up 'the potential for machines to utilize the human face in order to interface more effectively with humans' (Hansen, 2003: 224). Additionally, this is a fascinating field of visual culture insofar as it is the realm of the visual that may offer a way beyond the tedious abstractions of the digital code.

For all of their promise, Hansen's theses nonetheless fall prey to some rather misguided generalizations. The generalizations of which Hansen is guilty are principally the result of the significant overestimation of two fields that are central to his enquiry. These are, first, the *body*; and second, *communication*. On the one hand, it is the body of the human being that, according to Hansen, offers humans the chance of 'getting in touch' with computers ('getting in touch' is my term, but I think it accurately characterizes what Hansen is trying to elucidate). On the other hand, at the bottom of this whole notion of 'getting in touch' with computers, is an idealized goal of communication.

I shall try to clarify these issues; issues which are certainly not straightforward. Hansen seems to feel that there is a problem with the exchanges that occur between humans and the digital domain – in short, humans and computers cannot communicate very well with each other – and the DFI presents an opportunity for this communicative exchange to be improved, if not optimized. And the medium through which this new kind of communicative

exchange will occur is by way of the body; or more precisely, the *affectivity* of the body. And what could be so wrong with that? Well, I think what most clearly signals what is wrong with Hansen's claims is the way in which he sets them against those of Gilles Deleuze – both from Deleuze's analysis of the facial close-up in *Cinema 1: The Movement-image* (1986), and from his analysis of the face undertaken with Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Hansen unravels two particular points at which his project opposes that of Deleuze (and Deleuze and Guattari): First at issue is Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the 'facial machine', while the second point of contention is Deleuze's conception of affectivity.

Hansen correctly identifies what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the facial machine. It is that process whereby an individual's characteristics (their body, personality, class, political persuasion and so on) are all reduced to the face. In other words, the facial machine is a machine that judges all humans according to their face – the merest glance at the production line of faces in newspapers, magazines and on television confirms much of contemporary existence as being under the sway of this facial machine. The monster producing these faces out of the facial machine is, of course, capitalism: it is the capitalist process that has led to the procreation of commodity-faces on the conveyor belt of faciality.

Hansen conceives of the DFI as that which has the potential to counter the capitalist facial machine directly: instead of reducing the body to the face – as in the facial machine – the DFI has the capacity to give birth to new bodies by way of the face. Rather than being a body reduced to a face, the DFI presents us with a body *produced by* the face:

In the experience of the DFI ... the face becomes the catalyst for a reinvestment of the body as the rich source for meaning and the pre-condition of communication. (p. 208)

And yet, for all his anti-capitalist rhetoric, Hansen does go on in fact to describe what seems to me to be an exemplary facial machine: the DFI. And the reason the DFI seems to conform so sympathetically with the precepts of a facial machine is because its *raison d'être* is communication. The role of the DFI is couched in no terms other than as one which aids communication between the human and computerized domains. That is, the DFI experience is one in which a *subject* (human) and an *object* (DFI) engage in a form of communicative exchange; an exchange which, in Hansen's terms, only ever seems to be an exchange of information (or at the very least, the *aim* of which is an exchange of information). Hansen writes enthusiastically of '*an interface between the domain of information (the digital) and embodied human experience*' (p. 209; emphasis in original), while he similarly enthuses that 'Bergson's "universe of images" has given way to a *universe of information*' (p. 225; emphasis in original). Now, surely information would be that commodity (or is it a hyper-commodity?) that would gladly feed any capitalist facial machine, so coming up with a fully computerized communicative exchange of information by way of the DFI seems to me to be nothing other

than a species of supreme facial machine. The DFI, and Hansen's celebration of it, are doing nothing to deter capitalism; rather, they are providing the pathways for its further expansion and domination. If nothing else, the DFI brings the facial machine into the age of what Deleuze (1995) has called 'control societies'. For his part, Deleuze is utterly scathing of anything that smacks of the rhetoric of information:

[W]hat makes information all-powerful (the newspapers, and then the radio, and then the television), is its very nullity, its radical ineffectiveness. Information plays on its ineffectiveness in order to establish its power, its power is to be ineffective, and thereby all the more dangerous. This is why it is necessary to go beyond information. (1989: 269)

It is very strange to me that Hansen conceives of the DFI as an answer to 'late capitalist semiotic mechanisms (e.g. television advertising)' (p. 209), whereas I can see in it only a logic that only can feed the voracious appetite of that same late capitalist beast.

Perhaps the reason for my seeing things differently from Hansen can be gleaned from the second of Hansen's principal objections to Deleuze: *affectivity*. For Hansen, Deleuze is quite misguided in the *Cinema* books to conceive of affectivity (what Deleuze calls the 'affection-image') as something which is divorced from the materiality of human bodies. As Hansen quite correctly claims, 'Deleuze celebrates the close-up as a liberation of affect *from the body*' (p. 209; emphasis in original). To use a simple example, what this means for Deleuze is that when I see a close-up of a sad face on film I do not immediately think to myself, 'that character is sad'. Rather, I am affected by the emotional quality of the face itself, isolated from all other factors: *sadness*. The affect of sadness is no longer connected to a person or a body, but rather floats unaccompanied in a realm of affection which has the quality of sadness.

Hansen is fully aware of Deleuze's move here, but he fails to understand its consequences. One of the aims of Deleuze's analysis of the affection-image is precisely to remove affection or affectivity from the realm of actual bodies and subjective characteristics so that they enter a realm that can only be designated as 'virtual'. And what this realm of the virtual designates for Deleuze (certainly for the purposes of the discussion here) is nothing less than a realm which is 'beyond information': it is beyond information insofar as it does not include a *communicative exchange*. As noted above, Hansen conceives of his DFI promotion as one in which there is an ever-more fluent communicative exchange between a subject and an object, between humans and computers. Deleuze, and myself for that matter, want none of this; such a free-flowing exchange merely exhibits the characteristics of a potentially frictionless mechanism of capitalist exchange. The stakes for Deleuze, on the other hand, are precisely to go *beyond* such a communicative market of exchange. And affectivity or the affection-image is one category that offers forth the possibility of going beyond the confined logic of capitalist-informational exchange.

Hansen's specific critique is that Deleuze divorces affectivity from the body and places it in the nether-realm of the 'virtual'. What Hansen wishes to argue, against Deleuze's erasure of the body, is that the DFI *gives affectivity back to the body*, and additionally that the DFI encourages a *virtualization of the body*. To me, there are two problems with this approach. First, giving affectivity back to the body is to marry facial characteristics (be they digital or 'natural') once again to personhood; to equate facial attributes with personal types – in precisely the same way as a mugshot of a murderer on a tabloid newspaper instantly ascribes 'evil' to a criminal's face (*he* is evil), or the air-brushed cover of a fashion magazine attributes 'beauty' to an unblemished visage (*she* is beautiful). In other words, pushing the affectivity of the face back into bodies does nothing but start up the engines of the facial machine: 'he is evil', 'she is beautiful', 'he is poor', 'she is a Jew'. Hansen seems to claim that DFI artworks even encourage such crude, machinic responses: 'new media artworks turn attention back on the process of affective attunement through which facial signals spontaneously trigger affective bodily responses' (p. 211).

The second problem with Hansen's approach here concerns his notion of the virtualization of the body. Hansen is very careful to separate his notion of the virtual from that of Deleuze, for Hansen's conception of the virtual is rooted firmly in the body. These are some of the most difficult moments of Hansen's article, but by 'virtualization of the body' he seems to mean *the ability to feel new sensations*; what DFIs have the ability to evoke is the production of new sensations or new affects in the viewer-participant. This is a very different kind of virtual from the one that Deleuze proposes, for what Hansen is describing is an *experience*: the virtualization of the body is an experience in which the viewer-participant feels new sensations. For Hansen, then, the virtual is an experience whereas for Deleuze, crucially, the virtual is a *structure* (Deleuze makes the claim that 'The reality of the virtual is structure'; 1994: 209). For Hansen, the virtualization of the body carries with it the possibility for 'the production of new individuations beyond our contracted perceptual habits' (p. 216). In other words, the virtualization of the body can open us up to new experiences, but these experiences are not contextualized or in any way related to a structuring process except that of the individuations of a wholly subjectivized bodily experience. I am going to beat the same drum once again by claiming that these experiences of the virtualization of the body seem to be little less than 'bits' of information – or at the very least, bits of potential information – that seem to have no role other than that of being 'experiences'. As Hansen claims at the end of his article, 'In order for us to experience digital information, we must filter it through our embodied being, in the process transforming it from heterogeneous data flux into information units' (p. 225). What Hansen seems to be saying here is that these experiences – those experiences of the virtualization of the body in the face of the DFI – can (or will be, or should be?) transformed into *information units*: 'bits' of information that will be coming to a store near you.

Against this, and radically so, Deleuze's conception of the virtual is based on structure rather than piecemeal experience. The virtual is Deleuze's way of

trying to signal the presence of certain immaterial factors that occur alongside, underneath or in tandem with actual, material things. In this sense, the virtual is a structuring device: it gives an account of the forces at stake in an object's becoming what it is. The virtual is thus a powerful source of potential explanation for the ways of the world and its structures. It is for these reasons that the most important questions that a face poses for Deleuze are: 'What is this face thinking?', and 'What is this face feeling?'. For these are properly *virtual* questions, because they ask not only for the affectivity of the face, but also for its potential and its mystery – its virtuality is always 'open'. Against Deleuze's conception of the face and its virtualities, Hansen seems rather too keen to reduce the face to some kind of digital affectivity coding system. The DFI can produce new ways of being or 'virtualizations of the body', but such a process seems to have much more in common with the way that capitalism produces new markets – perhaps what could be called 'virtualizations of the commodity' – than any radical, anti-capitalist stance.

To try to sum things up, I initially accused Hansen of putting rather too much faith in the *body* and *communication*: the virtualizations of the body form an affective communicative exchange of information with the digital domain. But surely this is something we should all be keen to get away from rather than encourage: the reduction of the body to bits of exchangeable, communicable information.

Note

1. *journal of visual culture* 2(2): 205–28.

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