

‘Six Characters in Search of an Author’: Fear, Art, Identity and Contingency

(A philosophical graphic essay on who we look like,
identifying fear, war and death.)

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How do we know who ourselves and the other are? What is it about an identity that allows us to situate it in a context that we can comprehend? Identification of an identity is the process by which we recognise certain markers that allow us to make the unknown known. This is, however, a most imperfect process. It depends on which elements of identity are most salient, which are themselves dependent on which referents we are predisposed to know and recognise. This paper posits that art can assist in understanding the constitution of identity. Art deals with characters from observation by decontextualising and reconstituting them in artworks. We thus find them retrieved, isolated, deconstructed and reconstructed, which opens new analytical possibilities.

A nearly infinite range of knowledge sustains this process of identification. That pre-existing knowledge shapes how we understand identities. It codifies how we understand ourselves and the other -and the two are intricately linked. It is because society has taught me to recognise hostility in terrorism, for instance, that I might recognise a man with packets and wires strapped to his chest to be a terrorist. This identification thus clearly depends on what I knew about terrorists in the first place. Because of the vast number of possible combinations of such knowledge we are stuck with a great deal of uncertainty as to what common processes of identification recognise more and recognise less.

One possible approach to limiting the vast range of possible identifications is to focus on widely-shared concerns and assess how identification of political identity responds. Returning to our terrorist, I am likely to identify

him as such because of our existing and widely articulated concerns about terrorism –and because I know our society and myself to be a potential target. Such an approach retrieves the constitutive nature of the identification process, where the terms of the openly stated concerns of some actors become part of the international vocabulary of recognition. We find here an explosive growth in how terrorism has defined (and shifted) the vocabulary of identity recognition in Western political discourse since the early 2000s, with actors as varied as Gadhafi, Assad, Netanyahu, Bouteflika and even the king of Morocco, all defining their particular wars and struggles in terms of the War on Terror. This might be for a variety of reasons, from a calculated choice to throw one’s enemy into the camp of the global bogeyman to the desire to have local issues recognised internationally. Terrorist activity itself, as we have seen with recent atrocities by IS, has been greatly affected and constituted by this problematic and wide identification of terrorism in the international. This is partly because the Islamophobia unleashed in the West by the War on Terror has pushed many into unavoidably confrontational positions and has made Islamic terror a more credible and better-known threat. Since the ways in which we recognise and identify are so difficult to account for, we should problematise and inquire into the means through which we identify identity.

Art has a special role to play at this juncture. An artist not only recognises a terrorist, he also reconstitutes him on a medium. How artists treat identities and populate stages with recognisable images and characters holds special lessons for the student of politics. In no other context can a student find these

characters intentionally de-contextualised, re-contextualised and treated as artistic elements that hold their own independent meaning in explicit isolation. And that is the greatest favour we could ask for: to find identities unnaturally isolated and individually treated for the sake of the intellectual indulgence of art. Art can isolate elements, objects, characters, and entire identities with their corollary referents. It is this power to constitute meaning and identity that led Iconoclasts to damn 'the evil art of painters'.¹

In order to do this, the language of this essay must change, turn into the florid, descriptive and adjective-indulgent speech of art critics that ignores the pressing needs of determining causality. The reason to delve into academic art treatments of identity is their capacity to retrieve the unspeakable -emotion, love, hatred, and those other descriptive and figurative matters that escape rationality. These require a language that retrieves their own terms: emotion, spirit, fear and entirely aesthetic and often metaphysical aspects of existence.

This paper takes five works of art and a documentary photograph as starting points for an informal treatment of identity. I say informal because the manner in which artists digest and produce characterisation is far from systematic. There is much to be said for exploratory ventures into worlds that do not make claims as to causality or analysis but rather hold observation and the portrait as an exercise that has its own value. At such instances art ventures into the illogical, into observations, treatments and individualisations that do not need to make empirical sense. In these few precious moments art challenges the structures and dynamics of the present to which it makes reference, among them the classifications that identity it depends upon. Not only does the canvas offer a specially isolated identity that we would never see otherwise; it also highlights cracks into our lack of understanding of what lays beyond. When we challenge the fabric of how we believe the world to be, we are reaching out to the

metaphysical, to the unreal. The metaphysical dimension of what is illogical and yet so very human comes to play: impossible for science to contemplate, and yet remaining with every one of us, call it spirit, soul, love or hatred.

This is a feeble attempt to walk along the unmarked paths of otherworldly existence, along the way retrieving how entity is constituted through means of human cognisance. The piece does not offer a formal conclusion, instead opting for the adventure of these six characters in search of an author, who will speak of their own identity and impart their lessons as to how to recognise it.

1. *Phobos*



Francis Bacon, *Study After Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, London, 1953

When considering the sober and stately nature of the original portrait of Innocent X by Velazquez, Bacon's study of it is a reflection on fear. Fear is enacted through this character via a number of visual moves achieving a breathtaking effect. This study is most interesting for most of the defining traits are retrieved from

¹ *Epitome of the Definition of the Iconoclastic Conciliabulum*, Held in Constantinople AD 754, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/iconocncl754.asp>.

the Velazquez original.² These include the chair, an undefined background (a curtain in the original), the clothes and pose of the character. The defining differences are the striped, bar-like paint gloss on top of the composition, the purple of the robes and evidently, the ripping scream.

The scream is the only element explicitly denoting fear. By proposing an anthropomorphic and uncanny expression of fear, not to say by incarnating this feeling, Bacon forces the viewer to take part, forcing the viewer's unstable empathy. The artist shows us that fear is recognisable and identifiable when possessing another person. It is the screaming pope that inspires horror, not any idea or speculation as to why he is screaming. Bacon poses a problem for us seeking to identify the origin of this reaction: that it is irrelevant, what is scariest is the sensitive approach to pain and fear itself wrecking another person: fearful empathy. Myths from Antiquity have a lesson to add. The god of fear Phobos was a demon responsible for confusion and terror. Whist Ares sharpened his sword, Phobos preferred to sow doubt, and lack of certainty. Phobos is the unknown, the uncertain, what might or might not come to pass, what might or might not be, whom you and I are and might not be. Bacon reminds us that fear requires incarnation to be recognisable, much like we require familiar signs of fear like a scream to recognise that emotion and its expression. This character is not in search of an author or narrative –he needs neither to let us identify his horror.

2. The universal



Pablo Ruiz Picasso, *Guernica*, Paris, 1937³

² see Diego Velázquez *Papa Innocenzo X*, c 1650, <http://www.doriapamphilj.it/ukinnocenzox.asp>

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Conversely, these two-plane cubist characters are not looking for an author or a story; what they lack is their own characterisation. They are nameless; they are half a dozen no-ones, they could be yourself if you were ever to be caught in the violence of war. The horse, the characters screaming in agony and the scene of destruction we perceive have nothing in particular to identify them as *Guernica* the town. In other words, there is nothing of *Gernika* (to use its Basque spelling) in this painting.

Nonetheless, this painting has become *Gernika* the town, the day, the horror. Few have ever considered why *Gernika*, was bombed in the first place, but Picasso's painting and the experience of this 1937 bombing raid have become universal. The horse and the people are universal. They speak of an experience that within two years came to be shared by most of Europe; bombing, pain, and, indiscriminate killing of thousands of anonymous victims, and the broken sword of impotent defeat. In the Roman epic *The Aeneid* Virgil does the same, two young (up to that point unmentioned) heroes sacrifice themselves to protect their people. These scenes are types, containing characters that because of their lack of explicit identity can become symbols of a universally shared experience –the young hero in the case of Nisus and Euryalus, of victims of violence in *Guernica*.

The context is therefore a scene –not to say a scenario-, a stage that we can come to recognise. The characters do need to be *anybody*, in fact we can understand them and relate to them precisely because they are *nobody*, and therefore potentially encapsulate *everybody*. It is the existence of their bodies in a recognisable scene that makes us aware of their plight. It is therefore left to the broken sword at the lower centre to clarify that the characters are not victims of another type of disaster, but rather of war. They are Dante's *everyman*, their plight is that of 'our life'.⁴ Again, we find that it is the plight of other people, especially when

<http://web.archive.org/web/20071010045304/http://www.picassotradicionyanguardia.com/08R.php>

⁴ See Canto I, John D. Sinclair (trsl.), *The Divine Comedy Vol 1: Inferno*, New edition (New York:, 1961), p. 22.

unrecognisable as individuals that brings the identification of horror and pain to our doorstep.

This highlights another problem in the process of identifying identity: there is no need for specificity or detail –no need for truth but of a medium and process of contextualisation. This painting is forever associated with that bombing raid for reasons that are outside of the painting itself. The name of the painting, its original participation at the 1937 World Fair to highlight the plight of the Spanish Republic and the intervention of the Axis Powers, the 1930s novelty of bombing population centres are the universal referents that frame this piece. This painting depicts the atrocities of bombing; it is the frame of knowledge that has long surrounded it that makes *Guernica* the symbol of Gernika.

3. ‘Bare-ass reality’⁵



Leon Golub, *Interrogation III*, New York, 1981⁶

What makes the characters in *Interrogation III* recognisable is a series of elements of identity that provide guidance as to who they are and what they are doing. These referents are in themselves at the same time narratives, judgements and arguments. I call them *Topoi* following from Cicero’s identification of *topoi*

⁵ Leon Golub cited in T. McEvelley, *The Exile’s Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era* (Cambridge & New York, 1993), p. 195.

⁶ Rights to the Leon Golub Foundation, included under fair use for critical and scholarly purposes from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:%27Interrogation_III%27,_acrylic_on_linen_painting_by_Leon_Golub,_1981.jpg

as ‘shorthand arguments’, images names and references that are linked in the public imaginary to a specific context and people.

The victim of torture does not need to be named. It suffices for him to be a victim and for his torturers to hurt him for a narrative to emerge. This narrative, this brutally depicted ‘Bare-ass reality’, as Golub said, is constructed from simple *topoi* of war, victims, torturers, violence and the terror of impotence in the case of the victim on the chair.⁷ This is no longer the *everyman* of *Guernica*, it is much more specific in its depiction of this act of violence.

These characters pass from nameless characters unknown in most ways to specific recognisable *topoi* replete with narratives, feelings and politics thanks to visible accessories, much like the world of fashion relies upon accessories to signify identity. Hipsters in London, for instance, can lately be distinguished by East German-looking military or lumberjack clothing. The uniforms in the painting play a crucial role: they signify that some organisation or government ‘officially’ condones this act of violence. The power relation between the characters is violently apparent: it is highlighted by the clothes of the victim on the table, the gun strapped to the interrogator’s waist and the victim’s powerless position. Golub’s accessories are few but salient, full of meaning and narrative: uniforms contrasted to the naked body of the tortured victim highlight that the violence is set up, planned and staged as an ‘official’ act. This last characteristic reveals much about politics: that ‘the state’, its conceptualisation, is brought about by signifiers as simple as uniforms, and yet its shadow weighs heavily upon the work as a whole. It speaks of injustice and cruelty in governance, and of course makes the piece an unavoidably political statement.

4. *Contingent Identity*

Through the tribulations of art we now reach a character that is stripped of almost any referent that might enable identification. Nothing is known about this individual. He is simply in what appears to be quick motion, his head

⁷ McEvelley, *The Exile’s Return*, p. 195.

hidden under a patterned cloth. There is no explicit scene here like we find in *Guernica*, no accessories like in Golub's haunting painting, only one colour and tone. Besides the character's human figure only his headgear provides a hint as to possible identification.



Gaston Orellana, *The Silver Heart Agreement*, detail, Varazze, 2014⁸

In this space, between ignorance of anything about this character and the presence of a single salient element of identity, identification provides poor insight. The headgear, similar to a keffiyeh or Middle Eastern headscarf, emerges as the sole referent we can grasp. Furthermore, it subjugates all other potential knowledges we might have about this character, proposing itself as a element of identity that adds meaning to all others. If the headscarf links the character to people such as those that took part in the *intifadas*, Hezbollah or other incarnations of violence in the Middle East, we can quickly interpret his movement as part of that violence, the position of his arms as a battle-ready defensive or offensive stance.

We find therefore that ignorance about this

⁸ Rights granted by the artist.

character, coupled with knowledge already existing about those that wear keffiyehs, allows for an identity to be constructed and to emerge. This identification is built around the *risk* that this character might belong to a political identity that Western discourse has previously identified as dangerous. In other words, it is built around the *contingency* that he might be associated with what we fear. If, as aforementioned, fear is hollow in that it stems from lack of certainty and needs anthropomorphic substantiation to be recognisable, then fear of this character directly depends on ignorance about him. The danger is, of course, that such identifications might be carried forward as interpretations of political will, still replete with the ignorance that was their initial condition of possibility.

5. Visible Darkness



Banksy, *Unknown Title*, London, 2012⁹

To a London preparing its Sunday best for the Olympics, Banksy brought the phantom of the 2011 London Riots. They were a moment of unusually large-scale violence for the city, only matched by the animosity in the interpretations of its source. Banksy's stencilled graffiti highlights that these coexist in the same political public spaces. In 2011, the political responses to the riots which emerged framed them as vandalism, crime and looting on the one hand or protest about police violence, rising inequality and lack of opportunity in the UK on the other.

There is, inherently, scope for this to be

⁹ CC license photograph. Banksy does not claim rights on his own works, which can be obtained free from <http://www.artofthestate.co.uk/Banksy/banksy.htm>.

interpreted as party propaganda and opportunism. I would argue, however, that a further analysis lies beyond propaganda, which mostly implies some form of adaptation, obfuscation or substitution of the truth. Since both interpretations rely on exactly the same facts, this difference of interpretation is choice, a political choice. Unlike Orellana's character who offers so little information, facts about the riots were well at hand for UK politicians. However, much like the Orellana piece, the identity of the rioters derived from the political choice one makes is politically fruitful. For the right it reified the image of young self-entitled dangerous scroungers leeching on society. For the left it was yet another manifestation of a class struggle turned violent by poverty and lack of social mobility.

This is the politicisation of identification, of figuring out who we and the other are. It is also an exercise in de-politisation, where for instance the rioters and the reason for the riots were framed as engaging in crime, rather than politics. To have one or the other identification believed pays huge political dividends. In the case of the riots, it reaffirms the visions of society offered by right and left. For the character in the Orellana painting it could mean that he is killed before we know what he was up to. It is not, therefore solely ignorance that plagues our attempts at identification. Political choice, the choice of different epistemes or world-views as to how society works, radically affects identification even when its referents and facts are clear and known.

Darkness Visible

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Islamic State, Mosul has quickly become a global emblem of danger and fear. Seen here at the Great Mosque of Mosul preaching, he adds to our previous observation on choosing how to see the world. His is a different vision of the world that we deem extreme and unreasonable. Yet over 30,000 of his volunteer fighters do see the point of that vision: it is one of Islam in danger, of believers hounded out of every western society, of the need to protect a righteous vision of society. They are now uncontestedly a new global risk and a policy priority that this picture –along with shots of

'Jihadi John'.¹⁰



Screengrab of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Mosul, 2014¹¹

This photo points to another difficulty of identification. Its identity, apparently very clear as an individual (al-Baghdadi) and as a collective (IS), risks becoming universal, like the victims of *Guernica*. Despite the photo depicting an individual, we are at risk of de-individualising him and IS, subsuming many other Muslim identities within this identity exacerbated by this new threat. I would hazard that this picture presents a comparable universalisation to his followers: Al-Baghdadi as a symbol of the plight of Muslim believers, imprisoned by Coalition forces in Camp Bucca and now rising to defend the faith. In this way, the image risks being universalised from both perspectives and, like *Guernica*, absorbing many other identities in the process. This photo has additionally participated in the constitution of a particular political identity of the West (if such a collectivisation is possible) as peacekeeper, moderate, anti-terrorist and concerned about containing global threats. This identity is emerging as I write, from the US, France, UK, Italy and other states, an image of responsible

¹⁰ 'IS Masked Man 'Identified'', *BBC*, 26 September 2014, sec. World, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-29373288>.

¹¹ Despite the original video being copyrighted, I do not expect IS to enforce rights over this image.

understanding of the need for civilised countries to contain the threat of ‘these barbaric killers’.¹²

The aesthetic constitution of identities in the context of the Levant seen through this analysis points to a further ordeal of identifications. This is intertextual, constituted by the interaction of different and sometimes conflicting or anachronous texts that is. Some of these scripts are older and have come to form identification of Middle Eastern subjects. During the Arab Spring for instance, identification of friends and foes by Western states was partly constituted through the socialist, anti-Western, authoritarian or Arab Nationalist identities built in the previous four decades, not necessarily in terms of contemporary and local context. We were so sure, for instance, that Assad was the worst evil that we might have facilitated the rise of IS. This is no surprise considering that Mubarak, Gaddafi and Ben Ali had also labelled their opponents terrorists. However, despite opinions of Assad, some of his enemies we would fight ourselves. It is time we seek to problematise how we identify political actors and weigh the politicisation of identity.

Analysis of art can, as has been shown, at least provide warnings as to the pitfalls and intersubjective complexity of identification. Art can help retrieve the most salient elements through which a specific understanding of an identity is reached. Through this process of deconstructing the elements that make up the constitution of identity it is also possible to individuate how our own previous knowledge contributes to the final identification. These are not a coherent set of understandings; they are a construction that is scattered in time, including figures from ages past, and incoherent in their contradictions. These paintings, not unlike political identities, contain emotional appeals. As such, they trade in emotion, the exposition of humanity in pain, fear, destruction and

hope, both through ostensible individuals and universally relatable characters. Bacon, Picasso and Golub have shown us that the presence of the body brings universality and the potential to relate, entering our own understanding through the –difficult to conceptualise– means of incarnating feeling in individuals. Orellana’s running headscarfed character demonstrates the danger of ignorance and how the latter can allow contingency, the *potential* for risk that is, to entirely dominate identification. We have found that not all identities relate to their authors and audiences in the same way: some like *Bacon’s pope* offer no narrative, others like the victims in *Guernica* have no individuality, but live in an aesthetic context replete of narrative. Their variety attests to the myriad ways in which different and often contradicting knowledges come to constitute identities. Art is essential to capture, visualise and understand these elements that are metaphysical, emotional and abstract. For such is the nature of many parts of the constitution of an identity: fear, the universally relatable, the crude spectacle of reality, identities caught by contingency, the obvious made dark by ideas chosen, and the obvious escaping because one was chasing other phantoms.

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¹² ‘Not Cowed by These Barbaric Killers’, *BBC*, 3 September 2014, sec. Politics, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-29047710>.

¹³ Gaston Orellana, *Gaston Orellana: Les Chroniques*, ed. Gildas Le Reste (Chatellerault, 2008), p. 6.

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