Filosofi(e)Semiotiche, Vol. 7, N. 2, 2020
ISSN 2531-9434

Research Note

The Face of the Creative Class: Photojournalism as Serial Authenticity

Dana Kaplan, Rona Mashiach, Roy Zunder
The Open University of Israel[1]
danaka@openu.ac.il

That the body is social through and through is in no way sociological news. Bodies are gendered, raced, nationalized, aged and classed in multiple ways (DiMaggio 2012, Vandebroeck 2017). Our social positions and identities as well as the social hierarchies within which we are situated are inscribed onto bodies and are read as meaningful social signs in various social interactions. A vast scholarship has dissected the ways in which bodies come to be classed, and, moreover, come to be recognized as classed. Sociologists and anthropologists of medicine have demonstrated that health inequalities are not just mediated by SES-related lifestyle (resulting, for example, in higher rates of diabetes, obesity and mortality for the lower classes and), but are even biologically embodied (Vineis et al 2020). Others have shown that ways of eating or the clothes that we wear and how we wear them are readable signs of class standing (Bourdieu 1984, Karademir-Hazir 2020). But sociologists of class have yet to sufficiently explore how faces are classed, that is, how class histories and trajectories are inscribed onto faces, and how certain faces and facial features might signal class origins and locations. In order to understand how faces participate in the reproduction of class boundaries, this research note reports findings from our study on photographic representations of the creative class in Israel.

An extensive body of research has shown that the expansion of the creative industries has given rise to a new occupational cluster of symbol-making, 'creative workers' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2013). Richard Florida (2012) famously called these producers of cultural and mediated goods and services "the creative class". In this he ignited a heated debate among sociologists of labour and class about the nature of creative labour, as well as on the social identity and composition of the creative class. Simply put, whereas it was previously assumed that creative labour offers workers "greater fulfilment and self-actualization than other kinds of work" (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2013: 5), later, critical views emphasized the precarious and self-exploitive nature of creative work. Similarly, the assumed meritocracy of the creative industries was gradually dispelled as a myth. It was shown instead, that even if personal traits and talents are more important than acquired skills for creative labour, significant gender, race and class biases strongly affect who can have access to creative jobs in the first place, and who is more likely to be promoted and landed in the more prestigious and higher paying jobs (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2015, O'Brien et al 2016). Thus, despite assumptions of inclusivity and diversity, Friedman and Laurison (2019) find that the creative industries are characterized by class homogeneity.

The body plays a huge part in cementing the "class ceiling" of the creative industries and in shaping the career paths of creative class workers. It should not come as a surprise that under the aegis of "scopic capitalism", defined by "the extraction of surplus value from the spectacle and visual display of bodies" (Illouz 2019: 74, Cohen 2019), embodied cultural capital can become advantageous in the workplace. As Friedman and

[1] This research was supported by the ISRAEL SCIENCE FOUNDATION (grant No. 1560/18).

Laurison (2019) show, tacit class-based signals such as accents, ways of talking and presenting, gestures, postures, styles of dress and overall embodied self-assuredness delineate organizational symbolic boundaries. Outside the workplace the scholarship has focused on creative class "hipster" artistic tastes, lifestyles and fashions (Kaplan 2016, le Grand 2020). However, the scholarship has little to say about creative workers' bodies, and even less on their faces.

Admittedly, it is much easier to accept that how bodies look, move and are being evaluated by others is socially constructed. But the social elasticity of faces is much harder to accept. However, there is strong evidence to suggest that certain facial features like teeth and oral health, or types of plastic surgery, and even certain facial prostheses such as sunglasses or makeup styles and textures, may indicate a person's economic and cultural capital (Barker 2019, Holden et al 2020, Talley 2014). A recent experiment showed that class can be inferred from faces; that perceivers successfully categorize faces to specific social class using minimal facial cues; and that perceivers can even assess employability based on these categorizations (Bjornsdottir and Rule 2017). This research also showed that attractiveness is perceived as a cue to higher social class. Indeed, economists and sociologists alike propose that "beauty pays" in a range of social spheres, most notably employment (Hammermesh 2011). Therefore,

> What the face tells others about who we are determines our status in social relations and systems of power. Its lines, colors, features, and adornment are all evidence upon which people are labeled, differentiated, and potentially stigmatized or celebrated. Put another way, the face is a powerful biosocial resource, directly affecting what Max Weber deemed "life chances" or the opportunities one has to improve one's social standing. […]. [A]s such, the face might be construed as a form of physical capital, a resource that can be exchanged for other kinds of capital, specifically. Thus, facial appearance is a currency. Material results ensue from one's face […]. (Talley 2014: 13-14)

Thus, if creative labour is so heavily premised on displaying one's body the right way, and if this display work has real class consequences, then the question is what kind of face do creative class workers have, particularly those employed in the entertainment industry? Are there typical creative class faces, expressions and looks? And what are the broader cultural mechanisms that create, codify, circulate and inscribe such classed facial standards? To the extent that media representations are public displays of social worth, "a social act by which an individual's or group's relative positive social worth is affirmed or acknowledged by others" (Lamont 2018: 423), the question is how are creatives' faces created in the media as a currency? A recent surge of scholarship on mediated images of class notwithstanding, it seems to be more interested, however, in the reproduction of class logics, dispositions and lifestyles than in actual classed bodies and visibilities (Jakobsson and Stiernstedt 2018, Maguire 2019). Our interest in media representation of the creative class stems from the simple fact that those who produce these images belong to the creative class themselves and the images they create are necessarily self-representational.

Our case study is one photojournalistic column, published consecutively from November 2012 in *Haaretz,* the leading newspaper in Israel. Each week, the *Face Matters* column exhibits an actual-size photographic portrait of a (mostly) well-known individual who works in the creative industry, most commonly as an entertainer, a performer or an artist (*Figure 1*). The portraits, together with short, candid texts gleaned

in an interview and curated by the editor, assemble a multimodal archive of creative class faces and affects. Stylistically, the photographs of the actors, artists, writers, musicians and DJs, media personalities and chefs are identical: a studio frontal headshot that strips the subject off of everyday surroundings and oftentimes also of its shirt. Lighting is natural, so as to present the person as authentic and unmasked as possible. In their realistic and confessional style, the photographs (and accompanying texts) thus signal the truthfulness and authenticity of their referents.

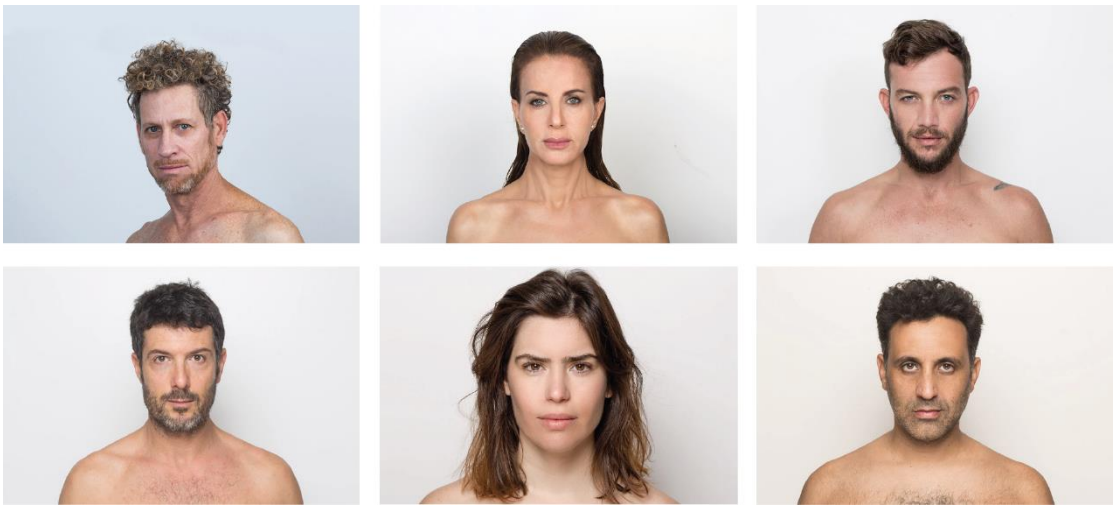

Figure 1: (clockwise) A compilation of random portraits of a singer, an actress, two actors, a screenwriter and a comedian. Photographs by Yanai Yechiel.

In this regard, *Face Matters* is one in a long list of forensic photography that originated in the 19th century and documented various social types and classes (Adler 2016, Aubert 2009, Ball 2017, Hutchings 1997, Van Alphen 1997). The realism of these photographic documents originated from the tension between two rival epistemologies: nominalism (purely particularistic and individualistic, e.g., "a famous comedian") and philosophical realism (that only acknowledges general types and categories, e.g., "creative class") (Ball 2017). To be sure, there is nothing essentially realistic or indexical about the *Face Matters* photos. Rather,

> [I]images, perhaps especially photographs, are made real through various sorts of social labor and contestation. The qualities that inhere in images are evaluated, dissected, transported in and out of specific images, such that they can become indexes of the real, or the feeling of what is real. That people believe photos are realist(-ic) is testimony to much ideological and semiotic work put into their production and interpretation. Likewise when the realism of photos is disbelieved, challenged, or otherwise undercut (Ball 2017: 163).

We would therefore argue that the realist propositionality of the photographs in *Face Matters*, their claim to index creative workers truthfully, emanates from the contestation between the enhanced ordinariness of the faces depicted in these photos on the one hand, and the era of manipulable digital photography and image enhancements on the one hand. As Mao and Shen (2020: 192) explain, this social labour of realness is a crucial aspect of the employability of the creative class because:

> deploying a creative identity requires investments in managing its reception by the audience to be genuine and sincere. Authenticity work enables creative professionals to shape a creative identity that is both distinctive and credible to help guarantee future career opportunities.

In this respect, the faces in *Face Matters* demonstrate what we call *serial authenticity work*. Week after week the creative class presents itself as real, genuine and sincere. Thus, while the actual, nominal faces change, it is the seriality of the authentic images that turns these faces into an employable currency.

Bibliography

Adler, Dan (2016), "The Apparatus: On the Photography of Thomas Ruff." *Art Journal* 75(2), pp. 66-87.

Aubert, Didier (2009), "The Doorstep Portrait: Intrusion and Performance in Mainstream American Documentary Photography." *Visual Studies* 24(1), pp. 3-18.

Ball, Christopher (2017), "Realisms and Indexicalities of Photographic Propositions." *Signs and Society*, 5(S1), pp. S154-S177.

Barker, Meghanne (2019), "Blank Faces." *Semiotic Review*, 7.

Bjornsdottir, R. Thora and Nicholas O. Rule (2017), "The visibility of social class from facial cues." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113(4), pp. 530-547.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1984), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Harvard university press.

Cohen, L. Rachel (2019), "Types of work and labour." [edited by Gall, Gregor], *Handbook on the Politics of Labour, Work and Employment*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 261-280.

DiMaggio, Paul (2012), "Sociological perspectives on the face-to-face enactment of class distinction." [edited by Fiske, T. Susan and Hazel Rose Markus], *Facing Social Class: How Societal Rank Influences Interaction*. Russell Sage Foundation, pp. 15-38.

Florida, Richard (2012), *The Rise of the Creative Class*, New York, Basic Books.

Friedman Sam and Laurison Daniel (2019), *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged*. Bristol, Policy press.

Hammermesh, Daniel (2011), *Beauty Pays: Why Attractive People Are More Successful*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Hesmondhalgh, David and Baker, Sara (2013), *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industrie*s. Routledge.

Hesmondhalgh, David and Baker, Sara (2015), "Sex, gender and work segregation in the cultural industries." *The Sociological Review*, 63(S1), pp. 23-36.

Holden, C. Alexander, Neville, Patricia, Gibson, Barry and Spallek, Heiko (2020), "Taking responsibility for the tooth: A semiotic and thematic analysis of oral health and disease in the TV show 'Embarrassing Bodies'." *Health*, 1363459320904419.

Hutchings, J. Peter (1997), "Modern forensics: Photography and other suspects." *Law & Literature*, 9(2), pp. 229-243.

Illouz, Eva (2019), *The End of Love: A Sociology of Negative Relations*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Jakobsson, Peter and Stiernstedt, Fredrik (2018), "Naturalizing social class as a moral category on swedish mainstream television." *Nordicom Review*, 39(1), pp. 81-94.

Kaplan, Dana (2016), "Sexual liberation and the creative class in Israel," [edited by Seidman, Steven and Fisher, Nancy], *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies* (3rd edition). London, Routledge, pp. 363-370.

Karademir-Hazir, Irmak (2020), "Narratives of 'getting it right': Class, culture and good taste in clothing." *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, 7(2), pp. 147-165.

Kędra, Joanna (2016), "Enhancing Visual Literacy through Interpretation of Photogenres: Toward a Genre Typology of Journalistic Photograph." *Journal of Media Practice* ,17(1), pp. 28-47.

Lamont, Michèle (2018), "Addressing Recognition Gaps: Destigmatization and the Reduction of Inequality." *American Sociological Review*, 83(3), pp. 419-444.

le Grand, Elias (2020), "Representing the middle-class 'hipster': Emerging modes of distinction, generational oppositions and gentrification." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(2), pp. 184-200.

Maguire, Jennifer Smith (2019), "Media representations of the nouveaux riches and the cultural constitution of the global middle class." *Cultural Politics*, 15(1), pp. 29-47

Mao, Jina, and Yan, Shen (2020), "Identity as career capital: enhancing employability in the creative industries and beyond." *Career Development International*, 25(20), pp. 186-203

O'Brien, Dave, Daniel Laurison, Andrew Miles, and Sam Friedman (2016), "Are the creative industries meritocratic? An analysis of the 2014 British Labour Force Survey." *Cultural Trends*, 25(2), pp. 116-131.

Talley, Heather Laine (2014), *Saving Face: Disfigurement and the Politics of Appearance*, New York, NYU Press.

Vandebroeck, Dieter (2017), *Distinctions in the Flesh: Social Class and the Embodiment of Inequality*, Taylor & Francis.

Van Alphen, Ernst (1997), "The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture." [edited by Joanna Woodall], *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, Manchester, Manchester University Press. pp. 239-256.

Vineis, Paolo, Cyrille Delpierre, Raphaële Castagné, Giovanni Fiorito, Cathal McCrory, Mika Kivimaki, Silvia Stringhini, Cristian Carmeli and Michelle Kelly-Irving (2020), "Health inequalities: Embodied evidence across biological layers." *Social Science & Medicine* 246, 112781.