



**In place of likeness**

**We are, nothing more**

a space of appearance in which we do not appear

***AU NOM DU PEUPLE***

Introduction to a conclusion:  
In place of likeness

The problem of a conclusion is that it proposes an end. A resolution, a solution and an answer, each are, like the notion of a beginning, fictions. The presentation of a conclusion, the uttering of a final definition or an ideal summary of what has been thought and transcribed is specifically problematic when the 'content' of this thought is 'the public' when understood as a practice of representation.

Recurring throughout this research are examples of the political production and use of ideal representations of us as a means to bend social reality to the will of a political philosophy. In this often violent 'mechanism' visions of 'the people' and the model citizen act as disciplinary conclusions to the political, as definitive full stops closing down the inherent discursiveness of social reality. In this sense representations of ourselves are antithetical to the political, when it is conceptualised as a space in which we *appear to each other* as acting and dynamic singular agents.

To be legible requires a common grammar, a syntax which can be applied. For the individual or a collective to be *read* within this grammar of the political, each of us needs as it were a full stop. But the *authority* of this mark lies with the grammar and syntax being deployed. As words in the political, each of us is brought to a conclusion by the full stop. It draws a limit and boundary to how we appear as legible entities. Politics in this sense consistently defines a conclusion for each of us and how we associate with others. It is less a matter of the political producing objective accounts of us, instead it is a matter of the political limiting what we *can* become. In this register, the full stop deployed by the grammar of the political is an evasion of contingency and immediacy, the very ground of social reality. In place of contingency, the political as a practice of representation produces and projects only historical statements, accounts of what was and not what *is* or *could be*.

Political philosophies in keeping with other metaphysical and theological systems, seek to be totalities from which no phenomena are excluded. In this wish to account for everything and everyone, political philosophy in theory and praxis inevitably operates under the 'logic of conclusions'. But there is never a last word, or a final answer to what is and can be.

## We *are*, nothing more

Haunting the category of the first person plural pronoun 'we' is the critical question of what constitutes its image.

It is a common place to define an image as an assemblage of cultural sensibilities and technical practices realised in a single perceptual experience. But this definition doesn't register the radicalised understanding of the image flowing through the practice of how the category or 'genre' of 'we' is represented. How we appear, whether in CCTV, political philosophies or advertising is governed by an infrastructure that also conditions how we experience ourselves as 'the public'. It is only in the wider assemblage of these apparatus, the multiple screens in secure rooms, the billboards and hoardings that form the fabric of urbanised space and demographics does the actual *image that speaks and appears as us* partially appear. It is in this connective assemblage of architectural spaces, remote controlled cameras, advertising billboards, face and number plate recognition software that 'we' appear and are able to see ourselves as 'the public'

The crucial play in an answer to what constitutes our image is to consider its mode of production - for example architecture, advertising and software - as a practice of *reading*. An act of reading is a duration of grammar, syntax and reference, when signification is contingently inscribed. The act of the reading is an interpretative interval in which 'we' are held in a circular loop of recording and projection.

The image in the conventional sense, of a frozen choreographed moment is the fault in this assemblage, a digressive deformation in a 'visual culture' of publicness flowing back and forth. Writing and texts have an identity with this condition of the conventional image. The text presents itself to a reader as a finished and clearly defined object. Yet this ideal object lies outside the act of reading. Once reading begins a text slips into uncertainty. It becomes object before the eye, that crucial mechanism in the production and reproduction of meaning. The eye flickering back and forth across the page or screen conjures signification from what appears as ink or pixels, but the eye does not read the autonomous condition of the image itself, rather it immediately mediates it through the contingent conditions within which the text appears.

This mediation is an act that introduces errors, misreading and faulty registrations, to appropriate the terminology of printing. In this sense what is referred to as the image - a print, a text or a moving image on a screen - is a fiction of itself overwritten by faults.

No longer legible as pixels or ink frozen as a 'picture' – a visual inscription of a specific aesthetic sensibility – the image is instead absent, an unknowable totality. Consider the act of looking at a painting, it is straight forward to read the 'content' of a landscape painting, it can be analysed within different historically specific aesthetic criteria. It is this mode of reading pigment on canvas that determines the image, while a contextual reading of this reveals a secondary landscape that is inhabited by the social, political and cultural contexts in which the painting was made. This latter reading is the domain of the art historian. Yet both readings take the painting itself as the focal point of an image, as the authorial voice of an image. But in this historical moment, in which the art work has lost its singularity as an autonomous physical object and is identified instead as a range of practices, processes and incidental objects, the *image* of the painting is no longer solely constituted by pigment on canvas, but is dispersed into the objects and processes of the world itself.



It is in this sense that an image of our selves is an image of how it is produced. 'We' are CCTV, border controls, policy studies, demographic profiles, government legislation and nothing more.

a space of appearance in which we do not appear

The images, political philosophies and historical examples occupying *paperPublics* define the appearance of 'the public'. But 'the public' that appears is not us; it is instead our rhetorical representation. Endlessly reconfigured, redrawn and re-presented, this rhetorical image is the crucial political problem of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*paperPublics* is an account of what is produced to appear as ourselves. It is a trace of what can be seen of us. Yet this work although broad in its choice of material is a work confined by what is already being circulated as being 'the public'. With this observation a problem is delineated. In its reading of 'the public', *paperPublics* encounters a public that is presupposed and instituted by politicised practices of production, representation and circulation that already define how 'the public' appears. In this sense *paperPublics* is an account of a 'space of appearance' to quote Hannah Arendt, but it is a space in which we do not appear. It is an account from which we are always excluded.

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aside:

A recurring reference throughout the approach to 'the public' which this work undertakes is Hannah Arendt's theorisation of a 'space of appearance' in her seminal book *The Human Condition* (1958) Although Arendt's text comes from a specific historical moment, it still retains pertinence in our present moment. The implicit relation between 'the public' and Arendt's space of appearance underscores *paperPublics* in the sense that to appear to others is the qualifying trait of becoming public. But what is at stake throughout this text is the question of how each of us appears before the other and what practices are operative in this appearance.

For Arendt the 'space of appearance' exists whenever and wherever people come together outside the private space of the home. It is in this exteriority that individuals are free to act without the necessities of material survival directing their actions and importantly their deeds. What is at stake in this space is the polis, the political realm in which a plurality of opinions and judgements are able to be articulated, heard and acted upon. In her influential text *The Human Condition*, Arendt seeks to find in the example of Ancient Greek city life a means to reconfigure the post-war political order. For her it is not a matter of reinstating the ancient polis, but a question of making a claim for an active and involved civic life, a political space in which judgements, arguments and problems can be continually subjected to question and revision, without resorting to violence. Writing a decade after the end of the Second World War, Arendt was keenly aware of the need to build a new politics in the wake of the totalitarian systems of the Third Reich and the Stalinist Soviet Union.

Emblematic of her work and its reception, Arendt's 'space of appearance' is paradigmatic of a plural politics. Drawing its cogency from the necessity of individuals coming together to produce a common space, it is the antithesis of totalitarianism. In the latter a single all encompassing explanation defines social and thus political reality, where as for Arendt it is a plurality of multiple speakers and 'explanations' that is constitutive of a thriving civic culture. If all can appear and importantly speak, the necessary condition of this plurality is political equality. But this equality requires that we all appear, that we become public. If we do not appear, if we do not enter into publicness, the political is moribund.

For post war politics the quintessential iteration of this 'space of appearance' is democratic elections, specifically the act of voting. It is generally only at this scheduled moment that 'the many' enter politics to express their opinion and cast judgement on the policies, manifestoes and promises of the professional politician seeking a mandate to act. This appearance of 'the many' in politics is firmly entrenched within largely predictable election cycles, but crucially the act of voting itself, the expression of an opinion within the machine of the democratic, is anonymous.

This is the blind-spot lurking in contemporary democratic politics. In the Greek polis it was possible to see who was speaking, to know the 'ownership' of an opinion. In this situation a public commitment is made to what is said. Equally in a public ballot it is possible to know who stands for what and who agrees with whom. Whilst for contemporary politics during elections it is possible, if trust is granted to the speaker, to establish who stands for what, this legibility and ownership of what is said is invested only in the professional politician or media commentator. The judgement of the individual voter is opaque to others, occurring as it does in the privacy of the polling booth. Contemporary democracy pivots on this space of 'disappearance' and it is in this intrinsic opaqueness that 'the public' as a political practice of representation operates.

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aside:

In Year III (1795) of the French revolution Article 31 of the Constitution stipulated that "All elections are to be held by secret ballot". Formally adopted in the UK with the Ballot Act of 1872, the secret ballot was seen as a means to stop intimidation and specifically in the UK to stop landlords evicting tenants who didn't vote for them. Although used in particular instances in ancient Greece and Rome, the secret ballot is a stereotypical image of modern practices of democracy. Widely criticised in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Liberals, for instance Lord Russell the last Whig Prime Minister, the secret ballot erases Arendt's 'space of appearance' in favour of a constitutive opaqueness.

The privacy and intimateness of expressing a political judgement in a curtained booth has a curious correlate in the confessional booth of the Catholic Church. A space in which sins are confessed to God's representative on earth, the confessional booth stands as an indicative prehistory of contemporary democracy. Unlike the voting booth, the confessional booth is a space of speech. But in distinction to the voting booth, the judgement is not expressed by the lay person, but by the specialist, the priest. The voting booth reverses this; the judgment inscribed as a cross on paper is made by the lay person, the specialist in this case the politician, is a distant and rarely present bearer of this mark.



Operating under the rhetoric of transparency that indelibly marks contemporary society, politics cannot publicly endorse opaqueness. Everything must be known and revealed, nothing can be hidden. In order to erase and negate this blind-spot, politics continually overwrites this absence, inscribing it with myriad images of 'the people'; white van man, soccer mum, angry white man and the silent majority being a few of the contemporary iterations of 'the people'. This rhetorical practice seeking to hide the 'space of disappearance' at the heart of representative democracy, produces an endless supply of 'publics' and it is these that appear instead of the plurality of sovereign agents espoused by Arendt in her 'space of appearance'.

The enduring aspect of this rhetorical apparition of 'the public' is its apparent plurality of content. Signifying a broad spectrum of contradictory positions that do not collapse into a coherent object, this rhetorical 'public' objectifies contingent social relations into a practice of categories, images and simulations. But this practice of representation exists purely as a 'secondary literature' of what is hidden behind the curtain of the voting booth, a literature that produces, in the literary sense, different 'genres' of the political; white van man, soccer mum and so on. It is these genres that have become the primary content of contemporary politics.

AVANCE

AM DUPE

UPLE

A recent example is the use by Marine Le Pen of the slogan 'in the name of the people' (au nom du peuple) in her 2017 campaign for the French Presidency. As a genre 'the people' is a specifically emotive designation that straddles questions of ethno and linguistic nationalism. Given that the French Revolution of 1789 attempted to put in place a 'universal' French language, the use of the phrase 'the people' in French political discourse is evocative of the desire to produce and circulate a specific demographic 'genre' that binds differences into a homogeneity.

What this demographic genre indicates is that any representation of the electorate is purely instrumental. It is political in that it produces a historically 'vetted' distribution of power. Embodied in specific forms of social relations, it constructs particular forms of common identity and importantly difference that can be mobilised. But the difference marked by 'the people' is only of us or them, a simple binary comparable to the marking of a ballot paper with an 'X'.

As a practice of representation a demographic 'genre' is the simultaneous production, marginalisation and then negation of difference. But this represented difference is not deliberate, or at least not always so, it is partly an automatic consequence of particular technologies and social practices, which have incrementally built up over time, these practices favour or foreground some differences over others. But these are then in turn retrospectively ordered or given precedence by an instrumental politics, which utilises what it finds given by existing political discourse. In the context of the French Presidential election of 2017, the political discourse at play is the rhetorical history of the phrase 'the people', nothing more.

## Pending future

In the present reality of mass surveillance it is not difficult to think that the rhetorical image of 'the public' in all its variations would give way to a conceptualisation driven by the application of data mining. Given the scope of information that is routinely collected it is imaginable that 'the public' would be replaced by concrete and non-rhetorical representations. Instead of the generalisations of soccer mums and angry white men it is feasible that designations could be drawn from opinions and judgements expressed via social media or indicated by Amazon purchases. Politicians could drop the rhetorical 'the people' with the baggage of history trailing its wake and opt for demographic categories explicated from likes and twitter retweets for example. Whether this is a utopian or dystopian aspiration, the paradox is that the increasing surveillance of our hyper panoptic world appears to reinforce the rhetoric circulating in the political. The more that is visible of ourselves to others, the greater the disappearance of any actually existing social collectivity, we disappear but 'We the people' looms larger.

Has the political succumbed to its objectifying efficiency? Has hyper visibility and legibility erased social reality, leaving only disembodied representations behind? In the light of mass surveillance is the language of the political now entirely a rhetorical literature? Does it follow that our rhetorical doubles; whether they appear as 'the people', 'the public' or 'the model citizen' are deployed to obstruct and defer ways of thinking other more radical conceptualisations of how we appear to each other?

Before these questions, which are political, can be thought through or even asked 'the public' in all its manifestations must be disavowed. It must not be understood, read or mistaken for us. *paperPublics* has sought to play a role in this process of disavowal by exploring, reflecting upon and disassembling 'the public' as a political practice of representation which consistently and deliberately produces rhetorical doubles of ourselves. Yet *paperPublics* is only a first move, a provisional gesture *towards a future* act of reconceptualising how we could appear to others as politicised agents.

It is with this sense of a future act of thought that *paperPublics* attempts to find a different path to Hannah Arendt's 'space of appearance'. It is a path that like Heidegger's *lichtung* opens on to a clearing and it is only through acts of disavowal, of dissecting and rejecting the images of ourselves that politics provides, that this open and potentially radical public space could be begin to be discerned.







