

Trace THE FACE: Theorising Style, Journalism and the 1980s

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It was the year of sartorial extremes and clashing alternatives: when we decked ourselves in day-glo and twinkled like so many demented but short-lived Tinkerbells under eerie ultra-violet.¹

Sally Brampton, *The Face*, 1985

For cultural critics exploring the 1980s, **THE FACE** provides a trace of the problem involved in writing contemporary history. Partial, contradictory and aggravatingly smug, the magazine is a site that reveals few traces of unemployment, youth suicide or homelessness. Instead, the text and iconography slide on the surface of the 1980s. This investigation of the magazine searches for an eighties sensibility, as configured through the construction of a specific, small, yet eminently fashionable 'community.' Tracing **THE FACE** follows the path of short-lived Tinkerbells who moved through the ultra-violent waves of Thatcher's Britain.

The major analytical task demanded by this research is the formulation of a mechanism to conceptualise a readership. There are major concerns when determining the configuration of an historical audience: a textually determinist stance explores the generic codes that govern the configuration of style journalism, while an ethnographer watches 'real people.' Neither of these approaches can tap into an audience of the past. With no actually existing readers to interview, the residue of historical audiences has to be discussed in a way that does not rely on an 'accurate' representation of contextual conditions. An historical depiction of 'a public' is always partial and incomplete. A way must be found to acknowledge the imperfect reclamation of the past, while still engaging with the myriad of memories that circulate in each moment. How do historians justify the way in which they populate their past? Historians have no apparatus to value or evaluate what **THE FACE** readers thought and felt. These emotions have been

washed from the historical record. A few vestiges of 'the audience' remain in the magazine's letter column. This textual site presents major analytical obstacles: issues of believability, authenticity, representation and relevance remain reflexive sites of inquiry.

The formulation of a readership is reliant on the division between a community and its other. Identities within the print media are hailed into existence through the cultural (re)production of 'natural' behaviour and relations. The material manifestations of ideology are both pervasive and diffused: the constitutive role of these 'normalities' result in social subjectivity being never pre-given. Differences are inscribed and displaced onto textual surfaces through the deployment of regulatory power structures. Community and otherness are terms and identifications that are reliant on alterity to naturalise and subsume defining ideologies. These two terms, as Linda Hutcheon affirms, are modernist notions:

Postmodernism retains, and indeed celebrates differences ... The modernist concept of single and alienated otherness is challenged by the postmodern questioning of binaries that conceal hierarchies (self/ other) ... Difference suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, rather than the binary opposition of exclusion.²

While modernist ideas of community and otherness confirm the spatial separation and solidity of these categories, postmodern notions evoke a fragmentation and blurring of these frameworks of power and knowledge. As Henry Giroux argues,

Postmodern criticism provides an important theoretical and political service in assisting those deemed "Other" to reclaim their own histories and voices ... At stake here is the rewriting of history within a politics of difference that substitutes for totalizing narratives of oppression local and multiple narratives.³

The plurality of difference generates power relationships that connect with a web of other binary oppositions, such as centre/margin or inside/outside. Binary oppositions not only present contrasts, but organise categories hierarchically. Ideological structures make the conscious subject 'see' and perpetuate difference. This process of intersubjectivity, which configures 'us' and 'them,' is not innate or natural, but socially configured and radically contextual. With one part of the binary constructed as acceptable and beneficial, 'the other' transforms into an undesirable entity.

Ideological formulations of community are efficiently constituted in the magazine market. Each community has its own normalities, boundaries and codes that determine membership. **THE FACE's** values and ideas are not real or normal but seem, through the workings of consensus, to make

'commonsense.' **THE FACE** hails a community of readers through advertisements, photographs, language⁴ and article choice.

'The public domain' does not exist, but mechanisms proliferate for the legitimisation and generalisation of one group's influence and 'truths.' No single magazine could service 'British society.' Margaret Thatcher's governments confirmed the death of society and the existence of only individuals and families. Such a commitment dislodged the class structure and minimised the threat of collective action. The failure of the miners' strike, and the subsequent closure of Welsh mines, verified the efficiency of the Thatcherite atomisation of society. Recognising **THE FACE**'s readership as a collection of individuals, not classes, means that affinity is blocked with outside groups. While a community is composed of individuals, 'the other' of the magazine degenerates into an indistinct mass that is unified by one characteristic that is overloaded with meaning, such as a lack of style. A community is educated to recognise both the unity and plurality of 'us' and the inferiority of the mass of others.

THE FACE was so effective in its construction of an audience during the 1980s that it has been termed 'The Magazine of the Decade.' In his assessment of this title, Nick Logan, the founding editor of **THE FACE**, reviewed the decade that his magazine had helped define. Not surprisingly, he relied on binary structures to explain the *eighties' sensibility*:

Success and failure: these are the motors that drive the decade, the one powering riots, anger and violence in the streets, the other finding its outlet in cocktail bars, nightclubs and holidays in the sun. And between them a friction that will make or break the Eighties.⁵

THE FACE is locked firmly in the confines of success. The magazine's world is restricted to the pleasurable, the stylish and ephemeral. **THE FACE**'s space is the interior of a metaphoric dance club, populated by fashionable, knowing, street-smart patrons, always drinking the correct cocktail, possessing the most up-to-date filofax insert and never appearing to try too hard. Obviously this Britain is not real: if it had been, then **THE FACE** would not be influential, let alone the magazine of the decade. To paraphrase (and change) the words of a departed English gentleman, a community is present at its own making.

The reasons for the magazine's success are many, but particular emphasis should be granted to the innovative visual literacy commenced in its pages.⁶ The layout, which consists of large, glossy, hard-edged colour images, is excessive, hyper-real and defined the nature of *eighties' style*. **THE FACE** was also able to mobilise a collective of well-known and talented journalists, such as Julie Burchill and John Savage. This team of writers, circulating on the streets, shops and clubs of London, watched style-lifers who were waiting to be invented into consciousness through an article in **THE FACE**. The casuals were mentioned in the magazine before any other media recognised their existence.⁷

Although **THE FACE** is based in London and remains myopically focused on the capital, it is sold in twenty countries.⁸ For some readers in

these other places, **THE FACE** is England and the 1980s. The nature of visual style is pivotal to the construction of a readership and the consumption of 'THE FACE reality.' The graphology of **THE FACE** and its sharp-edged presentation, which commanded readers to STOP and observe the 'Design for Selling,'⁹ offers an innovative reconfiguration of the relationship between form and content. In the same issue which displays the 'Design for Selling,' **THE FACE** features an interview with proto-FACE style lifer, Bryan Ferry. The interviewer, James Truman, affirms that 'the idea of style is not just as a communal celebration but also as a liberation from the mundane, the grey world outside.'¹⁰ Using an iconography and layout to perpetuate endlessly atomising differences, **THE FACE** hints at the troubles that undermine post-Thatcherite progressive politics.

The self-reflexivity of **THE FACE** reinforces its role in determining the language, clothing and figures of fashion. The 'Trivia' section that introduced the magazine is coded in language that requires an awareness of 'FACE English' to comprehend the articles. As one fragment, from the 'Trivia' of April 1985, articulates:

As Yohji Goes to Hollyweird carried off the Jeans and Casual Wear Fair's Best-Dressed-Band prize, organizers were suddenly struck with terror. How could *anyone*, they wondered, persuade Paul Rutherford to pose in casual wear?¹¹

To decode this statement the reader has to translate the terms (Yohji Goes to Hollyweird were Frankie Goes to Hollywood), know the identity of the mentioned fashion victim, Paul Rutherford (backing singer of FGTH who did very little except wear the correct labels, possess a finely trimmed moustache and dance) and grasp the humour (Paul Rutherford is known to pop music fans for being overdressed, never wearing casual clothing). This translation process is complex, obsessively intertextual and effervescent.

THE FACE's readership during the 1980s is not constructed as passive or compliant. It is, by definition, critical and cheeky. The letter column publishes only the articulate, clever and camp. The queer indifference of Phil Thronton's letter included in **THE FACE** of February 1987, presents a bored knowingness with the latest youth culture:

Listen, if I read the word Paninari again, whether it be in **THE FACE**, Observer, NME or on a Pet Shop Boys record sleeve, I'll go doolaly ... You may be impressing those art school, black bomber jacketed, style-by-association readers of yours, but don't tell me that I'm "in pursuit" of an Italian's dress sense.¹²

Those art school, black bomber jacketed, style-by-association consumers were NOT readers of **THE FACE**, because they tried too hard to be fashionable and, therefore, did not manage it. Instead, Phil is the archetypal reader: affirming hyper-individuality but, through language and

intertextual references, confirming his wit, boredom and irony to a wider community.

Dick Hebdige describes the path through **THE FACE** as 'not read so much as wandered through.'¹³ This semiotic journey extinguishes the referent and positions the magazine in the simulacrum. Presented as a three layered depth model (which is not terribly postmodern - **THE FACE** would not be impressed), popular cultural discourses can be drawn into three categories.

HYPERREAL
(*myth*)

THE REPRESENTATION
(*connotation*)

THE REAL
(*denotation*)

The hyperreal is the site of rabid intertextuality, a place where copies circulate when the original is lost. While denotative meanings are derived from 'the real'¹⁴ and connotations are formulated through textual representations, mythic signifiers are so marinated in ideologies that **THE FACE** can present consumption practices which never seem to graze a material base. The effectiveness of this hyperreality is embodied in their presentation of fashion spreads.

A recurrent motif in the magazine is a pair of Ray Ban Wayfarer sunglasses. Indeed, if the countenance of **THE FACE** is visualised, it would be wearing Ray Bans. Simon Mills, while discussing the murders in the United States caused by the theft of Cazal glasses, reported to **THE FACE** readership, 'Count yourself lucky that there are no such dangers in wearing Ray-Bans ... except, that is, for looking very 1983.'¹⁵ Looking *very* 1983 is not a problem for **THE FACE**: all the years of the eighties were good shopping years. Making sense of **THE FACE** requires the ability to form connections and understand the intertextual assumptions on which the images and knowledges are based.

The link between class and consumption is the most tenuous and complex of **FACE** connections. Operating in the hyperreal, **THE FACE** is disconcerting when it 'plays politics' in the material world. Such dips into the reality discourse draw much criticism from self-styled Leftist readers:

Do not promote yourself as a "Leftist," class-consciousness magazine when in essence you are a capitalist manifesto of consumption. Carry on as you are by all means, but don't offend those of us truly concerned with man's fulfilment in work and leisure.¹⁶

This authentic voice of Left politics does not recognise the irony of his position, an irony that is performed by his letter being published. Instead of selling the *Morning Star* on the street corner, thereby showing his 'concern with man's fulfilment in work and leisure,' he has bought and read 'the capitalist manifesto of consumption.' A far more effective critique of the over-the-top consumerism of **THE FACE** is conveyed within the ideological frame of the magazine:

I think it's a question of whether or not these advertisements [which had been labelled as sexist] promote an idyllic yuppie utopia which succeeds only in making the majority of your readers feel inadequate and (personally speaking) depressed. Phew! All that on the second attempt! I'm off to bed.¹⁷

The seriousness of this letter writer's point is intensified by his mockingly non-serious style. His cheeky, but skilled, critique reels off a commentary on 'an idyllic yuppie utopia' before going to bed. That, for **THE FACE**, exhibits a style that blocks readers from engaging too closely with the ideological contradictions of the magazine. The fashion advertisements in **THE FACE** are excessive and beyond the purchasing power of most of the readership. In the space between reader and desire, are attempts to render an individual style that appeals to collective recognition.

There are major questions to be asked about the politics operational within **THE FACE**. To cruise through **THE FACE** demands few commitments. The overarching present that operates in the stylistic frame of parody, irony and ambiguity means that youth subcultures are no longer addressed as embodying Jacobin-like resistance. Instead, discussions of youth are endlessly deferred in favour of investigations of shopping, clothing or leisure goods. Simon Frith and ex-FACE writer Jon Savage surmised the concerns and limitations of the magazine's writing staff: 'here were a group of writers who might not know much about social issues but who surely understood shopping.'¹⁸ The political realm of **THE FACE** is a sphere that factors out class inequality and many other social prejudices. During the fifteen years of the magazine, writers have displayed moments of consciousness and critique.¹⁹ Yet, in this regard, **THE FACE** cannot move beyond the Thatcher years. Anthony Heath and Richard Topf, in their review of the 'political culture' of the 1980s, show that the number of British citizens with a connection to a political party had fallen from 44% in the 1960s to 20% in the mid-1980s.²⁰ **THE FACE**, when it becomes 'political' in a public domain, masculinist sense, is issue based, concentrating on gay rights,²¹ the poll tax, AIDS awareness or an anti-drugs programme. It is the magazine for a stylised *New Times*.²² Margaret Thatcher, however, remains a vague but continual target of abuse:

Worrying, isn't it? You're injured in a disaster. The first thing you see when you come round in hospital is Margaret Thatcher staring at you. Naturally you assume you've died and gone to hell. The Do Not

card is the answer - don't leave home without it...
 I REQUEST THAT
 if I am injured in a plane accident or train crash,
 I shall not be visited by Mrs. Thatcher.²³

The politics of **THE FACE** is transitory and personal, focusing on specific problems that demand only temporary commitment to an issue, rather than a holistic, transformative agenda.

Occasionally **THE FACE** misjudges its readers, by being too clever and ironic. In appearing over-intellectual, and defamiliarising the connection between text and audience, the magazine suffers the wrath of its readers:

Can I be the first to congratulate you on the use of Gramsci's name in **THE FACE**? (John Sessions interview **FACE** 88) Can we now expect "war of position" and "hegemony" to enter **THE FACE** vocabulary? ... The point is I don't understand the fool's reference to Gramsci and I'm not used to such pretentious obscurities in **THE FACE**.²⁴

It is not surprising that the readers attack the magazine with great hostility when **THE FACE**, as the border between elite and popular capitalism, crosses the perimeter. Certainly the division between intellectuals and journalists was in flux during the Thatcher years.²⁵ Yet, pivotally, **THE FACE** displays the workings of hegemony (and irony for those 'in the know') by printing the letter - showing they do listen to their readers in an attempt to renegotiate the magazine's ideological position and ensure its continual financial success.

While **THE FACE** rejoices in an enthusiastic and attentive appreciation of consumption and shopping, the desire to be 'in the know' transcends all other considerations. For example, an advertisement appeared in the August 1987 edition featuring four scruffy men, dressed in black. The photograph displayed no caption or commentary. **THE FACE** was so proud of this chic knowingness that their journalists noted the cleverness of their readers, schooling them in the irony and the extent of their hipness:

Face readers are hip - it's official! Check the Echo & the Bunnymen ad, p. 34 of this issue. In other publications it's been printed with rather obvious things like Echo & the Bunnymen, New Album Etc. However WEA assumed Face readers would just know ... well you did didn't you?²⁶

The self-referential link between readers and writers displays a shared language and knowledge. Similarly, when nightclubs are advertised in **THE FACE**, the actual location of the venue is not printed. The 'sort of people' who are admitted to London clubs must work out its site within 'Nightclubfashionland'.²⁷

Identities are constructed, not reflected, by **THE FACE**. For readers of the magazine, affiliations based on gender, sexuality, class or ethnicity are de-prioritised. Knowing the right clothes to buy, the correct club in which to dance and the ability to decode 'FACE speak' are the only demands made of the readers. Yet there is a vicariousness to the reading process. Most readers can never afford to buy a Vivienne Westwood coat, attend gala openings or even manage to buy the selection of 'essential music' featured within the magazine's pages. The desire that floods the space between reader and text is motivated by the rationale that one more accessory might generate happiness and fulfilment.

THE FACE described itself in 1985 as a 'youth style magazine.'²⁸ In that same year, the magazine recognised a trend that accelerated in the remainder of the decade: 'Young Britain refuses to grow up.'²⁹ As days pass, a glimpse of the ageing face in the mirror corrupts the memories of a younger self. By refusing to grow old, 'Young Britain' tries to hold on to *the real eighties*, which are always located somewhere else. The memories of potentiality and pain, anger and empowered ambivalence, soothe the tortured temporal landscape. By prioritising endless consumption, the politics of identity transcends the categories of male and female, class and ethnicity and engages with the tenor network of Thatcherite individualism.

While there is no linear, reified path through any text, popular culture always complicates and confuses the study of the past, as much as it enlivens and enlightens living in the present. For historians, **THE FACE**'s 1980s is a world of drinking, dressing and dancing. The ephemeral Tinkerbells, who made up the magazine's readers, still twinkle in Major's grey 1990s, but they may be about to enter Blairite Britain. On this occasion, however, *New Times* may be more than the title of a fashion spread.

Notes

¹ S. Brampton, '1984: Fashion,' *The Face*, no. 57, January 1985, p.39.

² L. Hutcheon, *A poetics of postmodernism*, London, Routledge, 1988, p.61.

³ H. Giroux, 'Rethinking the boundaries of educational discourse: modernism, postmodernism, and feminism,' *College Literature*, vol.17, 1990, p.18.

⁴ S. Hall et. al., stresses the importance of language in formulating a link between a newspaper and 'target audience.' As they stated, 'the language employed will ... be the newspaper's own version of the language of the public to whom it is principally addressed: its version of the rhetoric, imagery and underlying common stock of knowledge which it assumes its audience shares and which thus forms the basis of the reciprocity of producer/reader,' *Policing the Crisis*, London, Macmillan, 1978, p.61.

⁵ N. Logan, 'Magazine of the Decade,' *The Face*, May 1985, p.3.

⁶ The visual media, as much as the verb system of the spoken and written word, employs modality. 'Modality cues' are the visual counterparts of modal verbs, and determine the boundaries of 'realistic' discourse. With metasigns working at the level of semiosis, rather than the mimetic plane, ideological directives flood the textual frame.

⁷ *The Face* letter column has its own generic codes: clever, articulate, perceptive and ironically funny. Phil Thornton wrote in the February 1987 issue that 'the "Casuals" are the original cult-with-a-crap name. The most widespread and popular youth culture and, paradoxically, the most underexposed and neglected by the media. Why is that? ... It is everywhere but nowhere,' p.61.

The knowingness of *The Face* readership, who certainly recognize both casuals and the place of *The Face* in their history, also holds a complex understanding of eighties' style, generated through regular consumption of the magazine.

⁸ The places in which *The Face* are sold are America, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Holland, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

⁹ This heading was featured in *The Face*, no. 60, April 1985, p.87.

¹⁰ J. Truman, 'Bryan Ferry: The Face Interview,' *The Face*, April 1985, p.47.

¹¹ 'Intro - Trivia,' *The Face*, no. 60, April 1985, p.7.

¹² Thornton, p.61.

¹³ D. Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light*, London, Comedia, 1988, p.162.

¹⁴ Obviously, though, the denotative layer, where 'the real' operates, is the site of the most subsumed (and effective) ideological directives. One group's truth is another's politics.

¹⁵ S. Mills, 'Intro,' *The Face*, no. 63, July 1985, p.10.

¹⁶ H. Sills, letter, *The Face*, no. 64, August 1985, p.90.

¹⁷ G. Lineham, letter, *The Face*, no. 88, August 1987, p.113.

¹⁸ S. Frith and J. Savage, 'Pearls and Swine,' *New Left Review*, no. 198, March/April 1993, p.112.

¹⁹ For example, John Savage engaged in an analysis of 'an active Conservative commitment to silence a wide range of dissenting voices ... This is the dictatorial impulse that leads Mrs Thatcher to state that she wishes to "eliminate socialism" from England's green and pleasant land,' 'The Secret Public,' *The Face*, no. 83, March 1987, p.80.

²⁰ A. Heath and R. Topf, 'Political Culture,' in R. Jowell, S Witherspoon, L. Brook (eds), *British Social Attitudes*, Aldershot, Gower Publishing Company, 1987.

²¹ For example, Marek Kohn and Motrix reported in *The Face* 'Information,' no. 82, February 1987 that 'The Beat, the pop mag given away in HMV shops, heeded its Master's Voice when the music chain objected, citing customer protest, to the magazine's gay lonely hearts ads. A fashion spread featuring Jimmy Somerville was dropped to avoid further testing the distributor's sensibilities. Customers wishing to discuss discrimination and censorship should contact HMV's Tony Hirsch. Or you could root out some Donna Summer albums from the bargain racks to show your feelings in the traditional way,' p.82.

²² New Times was the phrase used to describe the post-Thatcherite and post-Reaganite movement of the left. Commenced by Stuart Hall in the pages of *Marxism Today*, this term referred to a shift away from class-based models of society and towards a recognition of the plurality of oppressions. Occasionally, New Times has been termed a post-Marxist Marxism.

²³ 'Disinformation,' *The Face*, May 1989, p.127.

²⁴ F. O'Farrell, letter, *The Face*, no. 90, October 1987, p.10.

²⁵ As Frith and Savage suggested, 'the effect of the Thatcher decade was not simply to widen the intellectual gap between journalists and academics, but more importantly, to increase the importance of journalists as cultural ideologues while undermining the cultural authority of educators,' p.110.

²⁶ 'Trivia,' *The Face*, no. 88, 1987, p.27.

²⁷ P.Rambali, 'The Trojan Story,' *The Face*, no. 81, January 1987, p.22.

²⁸ W. Ward, 'Ital style,' *The Face*, no. 5, February 1985, p.58.

²⁹ R. Elms, 'All you have to do is win,' *The Face*, May 1985, p.56.