

## A STAIN IN THE PICTURE

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**Abstract.** This article seeks to examine processes of subjectification as attaching oneself to and making oneself at home in networked technological screens and interfaces, particularly in the concatenated, concretized form of the smartphone. The selfie, as a pre-eminent object of social circulation on screens, provides a point of entry into the problematization of the subject's relationship with the technological screen and interface. Taking as my point of departure an image which depicts the act of clicking a selfie, I examine practices at the edge of interfaces such as 'liking' and 'scrolling'. I use the terms 'technological screen' and 'interface' in a broad sense as referring not just to smartphones, but also to other forms of everyday screens and interfaces, including those which are no longer extant, such as the telegraph key, so as to trace the operation of processes of subjectification in these cases as well. Through a series of anthropological encounters ranging from social situations in the domestic sphere of the home and ordinary social intercourse to larger politicized contexts where questions of nationalism hang in the balance, I examine the conditions that make forceful interruptions of the processes of subjectification possible.

### Selfie with a chappal



*Screen, Ajmal Shifas, CC BY NC 4.0<sup>2</sup>*

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In early 2019, a photograph of a group of children pictured in the act of clicking a selfie went ‘viral’ on social media platforms.<sup>3</sup> What is striking about the image is that, in his outstretched hand, the boy-photographer is holding not a smartphone with a front-facing camera, but a *chappal*, a piece of footwear. This image of five children – bright eyed, smiles frozen in time, colour on clothes fading, blending like their bare feet into the mud track bordered by houses with rusting metal sheets for fences – invoked a variety of responses on social media. Celebrities from the Bollywood film industry weighed in with how it captured the innocent joy of children who delight in little things against a background of stark material poverty, that it is a lesson for all on how to be happy in any given circumstance. Others saw it as a sign of the failed promises of a depraved modernity, which, even as it puts high-end smartphones and fashionable accessories in the hands of some, leaves several others on dusty roads with footwear for selfie-cameras. A few questioned the authenticity of the image, wondering if it had been photoshopped.

However, what left no one who commented on the image in any doubt was the fact that the photograph depicted the act of clicking a selfie – a ubiquitous, everyday practice of ‘smartphone culture’.

### **The sociality of the selfie**

One way into this image is to see it as parody, as mischievous mimicry of a narcissistic adult practice, narcissism being one of the most common characterizations of the practice of clicking selfies. Marwick (2015) argues that selfies on social media platforms such as Instagram serve as vehicles of ‘microcelebrity’ status, being deployed as a strategy of self-presentation that mobilizes exhibitionism and narcissism through the constant production and circulation of self-images in an economy of attention, supported by a culture of conspicuous consumption. Another interpretation is to consider the image as picturing children playing a game. Roland Barthes (1982), following the French tradition of the critique of modern children’s games, suggests that the toys children play with are

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<sup>3</sup> Virality can be thought of as an amplification of what is known as word-of-mouth enabled by the ‘network effects’ of communications technology. My usage of the word ‘viral’ here, however, comes from how the image’s circulation has been described on social media and in news media articles, as in this article: <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/entertainment-news-with-this-viral-picture-bollywood-stars-have-become-fans-of-these-kids/324939> (last accessed 28 May 2020).

invocations of objects and practices from the adult world that use the institution of play to indoctrinate the child into a grown-up world of class and the division of labour. Thus, a child with a toy stethoscope, earpieces attached to a colourful rubber cord, engages in an examination of another child who is lying down flat, invoking the clinical body under the doctor's gaze. The game played with the chappal-camera can be seen as an invocation of the transactions of a self-image or as the specular image of one's bodily person on social media screens, a practice that Frosh (2015) characterizes as central to 'phatic' sociality. For Frosh the selfie is a 'gestural utterance', the function of which is to produce and sustain sociality. He draws on Malinowski's notion of phatic communion, a type of utterance which is not so much a vehicle of meaning as an acting out of 'ties of union' in expressions such as 'How is it going?' (Malinowski 1923). Erving Goffman (1955) posited a notion of the face not as a self-image taken in the photographic sense, but as an idea of self that emerges in interaction against a grid of socially determined value. In phrases such as 'loss of face' or 'to save face', what is at stake, as is well understood, is the value of the self-image in specific social situations. Goffman coined the term 'face-work' to indicate actions, intentional or otherwise, taken to establish and stabilize socialized self-value in the flux of interaction. Face-work for Goffman is a social skill, one that is ritualized in social interaction. Putting on a brave face, maintaining poise and keeping a straight face are all different types of face-work undertaken in appropriate circumstances in order to accrue self-value. Frosh's characterization of the selfie as 'a visible vehicle for sociable communication' coincides with the selfie understood as a form of face-work, albeit extended over networked technology. Marwick's argument, that the strategic posting of selfies on Instagram is oriented towards status as a micro-celebrity, also bears traces of the selfie considered as a form of face-work as Goffman characterizes it.

I present Frosh's and Marwick's expositions on the selfie here as representative of two broad themes in the sociological study of this ubiquitous practice involving smartphones, leaving aside for the moment psychological perspectives that foreground pathological narcissism and addiction. First, the selfie is employed in the service of accruing self-value in an economy of attention. Secondly, it is a gesture of sociability akin to nodding at social others or engaging in a brief exchange of pleasantries, a part of everyday sociality, albeit one made possible by the Internet and the technological interface of the smartphone,

transacting one's self-image on screen. Goffman's notion of face-work allows both of these characterizations to be grounded in dynamic social processes that are constitutive of self-value through strategic negotiations of encounters. However, before one heads out into the world of social interactions – the world in which sociality is staged for Goffman – one spends time in front of the mirror, 'setting one's face', perhaps even taking some *enjoyment* in doing so. This can, no doubt, be considered preparation for impending encounters in the social world, a warm-up drill for real face-work, perhaps. But the enjoyment, or calming, uplifting aspect of this practice suggests that something else is at work here other than a preparation for strategic transactions of one's self-image in the service of face-work. There is a process of composing or constructing the material face going on here from which one may derive enjoyment or, on certain days, displeasure.

I would like to suggest that the photograph of the chappal selfie brings to light another aspect, one that is not contained in the contents of the image and the meanings it evokes – a function that is elusive, yet crucial to the relationship between visibility and the subject. What I am speaking of pervades the atmosphere of visibility that the photographic picture is immersed in, which, drawing on Jacques Lacan's eleventh seminar, we can call the look or, to follow the conventional English translation of the French *regard*, the gaze. Since Sartre's problematization of the gaze as the look of a subjective other that surprises and threatens to annihilate the subject who comes under the gaze, the concept has opened up a study of a range of problems related to power. Laura Mulvey (1975), drawing on Freud's conception of scopophilia (*Schaulust*), shows how the phantastic construction of the woman-image under a male gaze constitutes the libidinal motor of cinema (Mulvey 1975). The gaze for Mulvey determines the scopic subjection of women pictured under what she calls a 'phallogocentric' regime of visual pleasure.

Michel Foucault also characterizes the gaze, in three different senses. First, the disciplined gaze of the knowing subject, 'the eye that knows and decides, the eye that governs' (Foucault 2003: 89), is central to the production of knowledge through the disciplining of perception, which renders things seen and transparent, thus allowing them

to translate themselves into language.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, secondly, Foucault suggests that the gaze is mobilized as an instrument in apparatuses of power: the panopticon is a prison-machine, a ‘perfect disciplinary apparatus’ which made possible ‘a single gaze to see everything constantly ... a perfect eye that nothing would escape and a centre towards which all gazes would be turned’ (Foucault 1995: 173). And thirdly for Foucault, ‘turning the gaze on oneself’ is a practice central to what he outlines as the ethical project of the care of the self, or techniques of subjectification.<sup>5</sup>

For Mulvey and Foucault, therefore, at least in the latter’s first two characterizations, the gaze, considered as objective structure in a matrix of relations of power, is foregrounded. The anthropologist Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, who studied photographs published in the *National Geographic* magazine, suggest that photographs may be studied in the way Lacan’s treats paintings, that is, in the function of pacifying the gaze of the observer. ‘[W]hat is pacified is the gaze, or rather the anxiety that emerges from the gap between the imagined ideal and the encounter with the real’ (Lutz and Collins 1991: 136). The authors deconstruct the ‘multitude of gazes’ – of the photographer, the photographic subject, the magazine editor, the reader etc. – each ‘gaze’ suggesting a different way of looking at the image. Entangled within this intersecting field of gazes, they show how ‘very contemporary stories of contestable power are told’ (ibid.: 146). The art historian James Elkins tells us that ‘Lacan’s seminar on the gaze is like a deep well for visual theory: people draw on it, but no one really knows what is down there’ (Elkins 2007). It is therefore with caution that I proceed to draw out what I find to be of interest in Lacan’s discourse on the gaze as the object cause of desire.

### **Of the gaze and the subject’s attachment to a picture**

In his study of the gaze, Lacan insists from the outset on the fact that the function of the eye as an organ of sight must be distinguished from the function of the gaze. An instantiation of this distinction between the eye and the gaze can be seen in D.H.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘The gaze saw sovereignty in a world of language whose clear speech it gathered up effortlessly in order to restore it in a secondary, identical speech: given by the visible, this speech, without changing anything, made it possible to see’ (Foucault 2003: 117).

<sup>5</sup> This third characterization of the gaze is treated extensively in his College de France lectures of 1981-82 on the hermeneutics of the self.

Lawrence's essay 'Art and Morality', one of the earliest critiques of photographic realism that takes as its subject the moral outrage caused by Cezanne's painting of apples. Lawrence suggests that Cezanne's paintings show something that violates the normative visual regime of the day, which was dominated by a photographic realism, the symbol of which was Kodak. Cezanne, says Lawrence, 'begins to see more than the all-seeing eye of humanity can possibly see, kodak-wise'. Cezanne's intervention calls on us to 'see in the apple the bellyache, Sir Isaac's knock on the cranium, the vast moist wall through which the insect bores to lay her eggs in the middle, and the untasted, unknown quality which Eve saw hanging on a tree' (Lawrence 1925: 684). While the eye sees before it a painted apple, it is the gaze that distributes it over a space of encounters within which it acquires significance, this being what constitutes the force of a Cezanne painting according to Lawrence. For Lacan, on the other hand, the gaze is central to the regulation of the encounter between the subject of desire, as one who *wants to see*, and the world of visibilities or appearances. It operates in a field that is distinct from that of the 'geometral' understanding of light and also from realist conceptions of visuality, as in the physics of optics, or in perspectival graphics where the image of an object traverses a straight line to the vanishing point of the disembodied, disinterested eye of the observer. The gaze has a double aspect – a function of looking and, importantly, a function of showing<sup>6</sup>. Lacan indicates that the 'looking' function of the gaze elides its other function, that 'it shows': a gleam draws a quick glance, a picture captivates the eye that wants to see, dream images carry along the dreamer who sees not where it leads. The gaze is central to the apparatus of visibilization.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the disembodied, disinvested eye of a scientific observer who sees 'what is out there',<sup>7</sup> the subject of desire sees, or rather is *shown* a picture that bears a relation to what it wants to see. Here Lacan departs from his earlier characterization of the

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<sup>6</sup> The gaze, says Lacan, is 'the instrument through which light is embodied and through which... I am photo-graphed... I enter light [under a gaze]' (Lacan 1977: 106).

<sup>7</sup> The physicist Arthur Stanley Eddington, known for his experimental validation of Einstein's theory, provides a rather extreme characterization of the scientific observer and the observing eye. The observer, writes Eddington, 'can do without taste, smell, hearing, and even touch. We must keep our eyes – or rather one eye.... [I]n 1915 Einstein made another raid on [the observers'] sensory equipment. He removed all the retina of the eye except one small patch. The observer could no longer recognise form or extension in the external world, but he could tell whether two things were in apparent coincidence or not'. This mutilation, he suggests, would keep the observers from quarrelling with each other. 'We perform the experiments and let him keep watch... [A]ll our knowledge of the external world as it is conceived to-day in physics can be demonstrated to him. If we cannot convince *him* we have no right to assert it' (Eddington 1947: 12-13).

subject's relationship with the mirror image – the misrecognized identification of the mirror image with an ideal-ego – a dynamic he refers to here as an initial 'moment of seeing', an 'identificatory haste' on the part of the subject (Lacan 1977: 114-17). The correlate of the gaze, for Lacan, is the picture.<sup>8</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, in a book provocatively titled *What do pictures want?*, suggests that pictures are animistic, personological: 'They present not just a surface but a *face* that faces the beholder' (Mitchell 2005: 30). Echoing Lacan's characterization of the 'voracious appetite of the eye', Mitchell suggests that 'we do not merely "see" pictures, we "drink" in their images with our eyes ... but images are also, notoriously, a drink that fails to satisfy our thirst. Their main function is to awaken desire; *to create, not gratify* thirst' (ibid.: 80, emphasis added). Mitchell then suggests that pictures too, like people, do not know what they want and that they must be assisted, through a process of dialogue, to express this latent desire. He thus sets himself up as an analyst of the picture in so far as the picture itself is the subject of desire (the picture is an 'I'). Here Mitchell reverses Lacan's formula – 'I am a picture' under a gaze. And what this analysis might uncover, Mitchell speculates, is that 'what pictures want in the last instance is simply to be asked what they want, with the understanding that the answer may well be, nothing at all' (ibid.: 48).

Leaving the interpretation and ventriloquism of the picture's desire to the art historian, I return at this point to the discussion of the picture and its relationship to the subject and the gaze in Lacan's seminar. The picture for Lacan is a *showing*.<sup>9</sup> Under a gaze, 'I see myself seeing myself' can be understood not as a subject *identifying* with oneself in an indifferent reflexive gaze doubled back upon itself; rather, it is the gaze of the subject of desire – *I see myself in so far as I am a picture, offered for the satisfaction of eyes which*

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<sup>8</sup> Foucault too situates the disciplinary gaze in relation to the picture, but picture understood as a structure integrating the visible at the level of the surface of the body under examination and the legible – the 'language of the disease' that the disciplined clinician hears. The role of the picture for Foucault 'is to divide up the visible within an already given *conceptual* configuration' (2003: 112-13, emphasis added). This is unlike Lacan, who situates the gaze in the terrain of desire and sees the picture as the mapping of a subject sustaining a function of desire. .

<sup>9</sup> Although Lacan develops these ideas by drawing on Freud's account of a father's dream from the seventh chapter of *The interpretation of dreams*, the notion of the subject mapping himself in a picture of desire can also be seen in Freud's essay on screen memories: 'In the majority of... childhood scenes the subject sees himself in the recollection as a child, with the knowledge that this child is himself; he sees this child, however, as an observer from outside the scene would see him... Now it is evident that such a picture cannot be an exact repetition of the impression that was originally received. For the subject was then in the middle of the situation and was attending not to himself but to the external world' (Freud 1962: 321).

*want to see*. Lacan suggests that the subject is suspended in the vacillation of the gaze captivated by the picture in a function of desire. This middle space of the subject's suspension within a process of desire that composes or brings to view a picture of desire he calls 'the screen'. And the trace of the subject marked on the picture is characterized as a 'stain'. The French term *la tache* is translated as 'stain' or 'spot'. But Lacan's penchant for puns suggests another sense for the reader – *l'attache*, a clip or fastener that connects or attaches. What is attached? In Lacan's schema, it is the impossible suture of the subject as split, suspended from the object cause of desire, the cause of the subject's incompleteness and also of desire, whose locus the subject is bound to follow, suspended from the point of the stain.

Drawing to a close this rather ungainly detour through the terrain of desire on to which we find ourselves displaced by Lacan's discussion of the gaze, I return at this point to the photograph of the chappal selfie. The fascination that this image holds for us as viewers lies not in the fact that we can *identify* ourselves with the visible form of the happy children in the image, as little homunculi, petit ego-ideals. In fact, the comments in response to the image that I highlighted earlier mark the insurmountable distance or separation of the viewers from the children in the picture, either in the direction of a happiness one finds oneself excluded from, or in the sense of a poverty that is far away from the bourgeois comforts of the technophilic fans of Bollywood cinema. I suggest that the photograph of the chappal selfie presents us with a picture that embodies and exposes the circulation of looks, the map of desire in the practice of clicking a selfie, an everyday practice in the social life of smartphones, a process within which viewers of the chappal-selfie situate themselves as they populate the picture, seeking to find a place within it. Under a look that comes from outside, we turn ourselves into a picture, one that is offered for the satisfaction of eyes that want to see through the mediation of a screen from which we are suspended as subjects. And in the photograph of the children and their chappal selfie, if indeed we see something of ourselves in the picture – caught in the act, as it were, as subjects of desire – it is on the screen, in the form of stains on the sole of the chappal. It is on the other side of the chappal, the side facing the children that is not shown in the photograph, the side that would be composed of a smartphone screen for the usual selfie; the side in which the viewers of the image situate themselves by a leap of imagination when they comment on



the picture, seeing in it a picture of simple joy or the sadness of poverty, both of which they find themselves *excluded* from. It is in this sense that I suggest that the photograph of the children with the chappal is an excellent critique of the selfie, in so far as it exposes the ‘stain’ – the point of attachment of the subject mapping itself in a picture of desire in the act of clicking a selfie.

The argument I wish to trace here is that the selfie is not just a misrecognized identification with one’s idealized self-image, not just a strategic or ‘phatic’ transaction of a self-image; it is a way of turning oneself into a picture of desire that circulates in a field of looks, offering satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) *to eyes that want to see*, attached to the picture at the point of a stain. Very often, the picture is not satisfying to the eye – what one is shown on screen is not what one wishes to see – and anyone who has posted selfies on social media with any seriousness knows the number of deletions, the number of tries it takes to get it right, to find a satisfying shot, a practice not very different from fixing and re-fixing one’s hair in front of a mirror, trying out smiles and other expressions, perhaps even catching a glimpse of oneself as a ridiculous stain on the mirror, eliciting a smile from nowhere that charms us in its sudden appearance. And to comment on the picture, to find in the picture a subjective hold, one’s desire hangs on the point of a vulnerable attachment, the stain.

### **The atmospheric gaze**

I would like to demonstrate, through two encounters, that the gazes that come from the outside are not just those of the individuals with whom the self-image is transacted, it is impersonal and imaginary (or more appropriately, *imagined*). In the company of some hometown friends and their family I went on a tour of temples, at the end of which a visit to a nearby hill-station was also planned. Before heading up to the hills, we stopped at a temple in the South Indian town of Namakkal, Tamil Nadu, the final one on the itinerary. Anjaneya or Hanuman, the monkey-faced God, was the presiding deity. One of my friends, holding his young son in his arms, turned away from the almost twenty-foot-tall monolithic idol, framed it on his smartphone screen and clicked a selfie. A priest came over to him, none too pleased, and asked him to delete it. The temple was no place to click a selfie. ‘The place of Darshan (literally, the Gaze of God) is not where you fool around. What are you

teaching your son?’ My friend told him that his mother, who couldn’t make it to the temple, would be pleased to see her young grandson blessed by the Lord, and, pleading the understanding of the priest, he managed to hang on to the photo.

Following this incident, we proceeded up the Kolli Hills *ghat* road. It was a steep climb, involving the negotiation of hairpin bends, and not everyone travelling in the party was comfortable with the ride. On the way, we decided to stop at what a taxi driver in Namakkal told us was a good ‘selfie point’. He had shown us the location on Google maps. Approaching the spot, however, we found it to be too crowded and stopped a kilometre ahead, where the road was wide enough to let other vehicles pass. I was stretching my cramped legs, relieved of the weight of my friend’s son. My friends were already clicking selfies, in groups and individually, their backs turned to the breath-taking view of the valley, hills part hidden by wisps of mist rolling away into the plains in waves of green. A motor-cycle rider, coming up slowly towards us, stopped beside the car. He introduced himself as a ‘local’<sup>10</sup> and asked us where we were staying in the Kolli Hills. I answered evasively. ‘You shouldn’t stand here. It’s not a good place’, and pointing to the side of the hill-face he said: ‘Last week, a huge rock tumbled down from there. Young people just like you were standing here taking photos. They didn’t even have time to react, but thankfully the rock missed them. Their car, however, was crushed.’ To our plains-people’s eye the hill-face seemed intact, but the warning got to us. We climbed into the car and went on our way. What struck me in both these incidents was the invocation of a gaze which seemingly loomed over us from outside, a gaze not belonging to an individual, an impersonal gaze which nevertheless invokes a personality – a divinity spoken for by the priest in the case of the temple, and something like the unpredictable mood or spirit of the hilly rock-face alluded to by the local man on the motorbike. Both cases invoked a gaze that marked a threat, that sought to prevent the composition and happy transaction of a picture, a gaze that foreshadowed an impending unwelcome encounter threatening the imminent elimination of the subject, like removing a stain from an otherwise unblemished harmonious surface. In the genre of the selfie photograph is a grim category – a selfie which

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<sup>10</sup> In Tamil Nadu a particular form of social difference is produced, especially in places of tourism, between someone who is ‘local’, of the area, and someone who is ‘out-station’, coming from elsewhere, possibly by rail or bus, a mutation derived from the notion of belonging to an *ur*, a home village or town with which one is identified. See Daniel’s *Fluid Signs* (1984) for a canonical account of the *ur*.

results not in the happy transaction of a picture of oneself offered to satisfy the viewer's eye, but one that ends in a *dustuchia*, an unhappy encounter marked by a gaze from beyond which threatens to interrupt, to eliminate a subject mapping itself in a picture of desire: I speak of selfie-deaths.

### **Repetition and territorialisation at the edge of the interface**

Turning now to face the screen from the other side of the transaction, we can say that the 'social life' of selfies is for the most part sustained at the edge of the interface on social media screens. Frosh suggests that practices at the interface, such as clicks (on the 'like' button, for instance) and swipes (to scroll down the screen) etc., involve a sensorimotor reflex which is habitual. According to Wirth, 'Users are invited by the structure of the user interface as well as by the feedback of the community to post again and again, to like, to comment on pictures, and to comment on comments.' Both these accounts, while coming from opposed points of view with regard to agency (the former from the side of habitual reflex coded in the body of the person, the latter from the side of the interface that elicits a habituated response), characterize the mechanical dimension of the transaction. What is involved in a transaction at the interface, I suggest, is an evaluation of a different order from the mechanistic and the behavioural. Interfacial practices such as swiping up on vertically scrolled screens (as in the Facebook newsfeed, the core operation involved in the processing or transaction of a social media post) are better understood through the notion of *Wiederholenzwang*, a repetition that becomes automatic, compulsive. Breaking into the etymology of Freud's German expression *Wiederholen*, Lacan suggests that the verb *holen* bears connotations of 'hauling', a tiresome and exhausting activity that carries the seed of interruption within itself. Very often, having fallen into a reverie of scrolling, the lifting of one's head away from absorption by the screen is experienced as an exhaustion, in the sense of both a tiredness and of having been completely used up, when the interface itself announces 'You are all caught up', or when the scrolling hits rock bottom on the screen, refusing to move further. But that is not all. 'Repetition', warns Lacan, 'is not reproduction'. Repetition is the repetition of a missed encounter, a *seeking of the new* – not this post, not that one either, not the next one (Lacan 1977: 50-64).

However, there is more to scrolling, clicking and other practices at the interface than the compulsion to repeat. These practices are also rhythmic, pulsatile and *expressive*, in that sense being close to what Deleuze and Guattari characterize as the ‘refrain’ or *ritornello*, the rhythmic tune that marks out a *territory*. Thus a child hums to calm himself in the dark, or while doing homework, or while setting off from home on an exploratory amble, constituting a little territory which serves as a base.<sup>11</sup>

The notion of territoriality and its relation to the subject is not foreign to sociology. Erving Goffman, like Deleuze and Guattari, draws on animal ethology to conceptualize what he calls ‘territories of the self’, that is, territory conceived as that upon which a claim is staked, ‘an entitlement to possess, control use or dispose’. This claim on a piece of territory is distinct from the juridical notion of ownership of property. What is at stake, says Goffman, is the ‘exertion of current, not ultimate control’.<sup>12</sup> Such territorial claims are articulated not just in the context of one’s home or dwelling, but also in a variety of situations involving ‘temporary tenancy’ – park benches, restaurant tables, queues, train cars etc. For Goffman, territorial claims are strategic practices of space-making marked by a ‘socially determined variability’ (space understood here as in the expression ‘I need my space’).

Deleuze and Guattari, for their part, are interested in the notion of territory understood not as a subject’s possessive claim extended over space, but as a transformative intensification of space constituted through an *expressive* act. ‘The expressive is primary in relation to the possessive; expressive qualities ... are necessarily appropriative’. Such expressive qualities are signatures, signature being understood here not as an ‘indication

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<sup>11</sup> Lacan develops his notion of repetition from a reading of Freud’s presentation of the game played by his grandson, the famous ‘Fort-da’. Deleuze and Guattari argue that ‘Psychoanalysts deal with the Fort-Da very poorly when they treat it as a phonological opposition or a symbolic component of the language-unconscious, when it is in fact a refrain... Tra la la’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 349). Incidentally, Edgar Allen Poe, in an essay on the principles of poetic composition, describes the process of settling down on the refrain for his poem the raven: ‘Since its application was to be repeatedly varied, it was clear that the refrain itself should be brief’ – a single word would make the best refrain. Next, determining that the sound of the word must carry force, he was led to ‘the long O ... the most sonorous vowel’. Finally, wanting a word embodying this sound to carry a forceful melancholy, it was now ‘impossible to overlook the word Nevermore’ (Poe 1846). Recall that Freud also goes on a similar journey of incantation – going from Oooo and Aaaa to Fort-Da. Hence Deleuze and Guattari’s appeal to move away from the register of the symbolic and language to lay stress instead on the original, *expressive* quality of the sound in the utterance of the child, a quality which Poe in his essay also notes as central to the refrain.

<sup>12</sup> Goffman 1997: 53-54; see also *ibid.*, footnote 14.

of a person [but] a chancy formation of a domain'. These expressive qualities are not the possessions of the subject, 'they delineate a territory that will belong to the subject that carries or produces them'. The refrain or *ritornello* for Deleuze and Guattari is a 'territory-producing expressiveness' (1987: 315-16). On a tiring day I unlock the door to my room and find my spot on the bed, but not before turning on my usual lamp and ensuring that the fan is running at its usual speed, as showing on the regulator – these are 'territory-producing' expressive acts or *ritornellos* articulated at the edge of interfaces – electrical switches in this case – that territorialize the interior space of the house. It is this quality of an expressive territoriality that allows for the emergence of what Sherry Turkle (2011) calls 'Life on screen', understood not as a life distinct from so-called 'RL' or real-life (which is how Turkle characterizes it), but as a screenal territoriality cut out at the edge of the interface. Clicking, scrolling and swiping at the edge of the smartphone interface, in so far as their expressiveness cuts out a space into which one disappears, are acts of territory-production in the everyday.<sup>13</sup> *Ritornellos*, in so far as they are territory-producing expressive qualities, are immanent in the work of inhabitation. The visual layout of interfacial features, like commercial jingles that get stuck in the head as earworms, constitute a frame around which users' practices of territorialization coalesce. The sense of unmooring felt by users when a familiar interface is altered drastically – such as the transformation of the Gmail interface from its earlier 'classic' version to the current form, or when Facebook first introduced newsfeed, replacing its earlier profile-based display – is experienced as an unwelcome scrambling of one's territorial coordinates. It is as if a stranger had slipped into one's home and rearranged every object and rewired most switches – familiar gestures no longer find purchase, they don't have the same effect on the usual zones of the screen. New practices must be learnt, and the screen must be territorialized all over again by a subject in order to keep pace with technological transformation.

The smartphone, ever at arm's reach for the urban commuter circulating through the city, provides material support for territorialization-on-the-go. On the Delhi metro-rail, for

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<sup>13</sup> I adopt Veena Das' presentation of the everyday here. The everyday for Das is a site not just of habits or conventions; it is also dogged by skepticism and doubt which threatens the ordinary from 'within the weave of the everyday life'. It is from within such a site that we can grasp the 'fragility of the subject and of the context as mutually constitutive of the work of inhabitation' (Das 2014: 279-81).

instance, one of the first actions a person performs upon entering a compartment, crowded though it may be, is to whip out the phone, plug in the ear phone and fall into the luminous embrace of a screen-territory, cut out and stabilized by little rhythmic, punctiform gestures at the edge of the interface. Sometimes an outsider is permitted into the territory, when, for instance, a friend leans over to look at the screen. I have found myself next to commuters watching a sports game or a comedy show with volume on loud, and my eyes have fallen on to the screen, perched atop the ephemeral borders of a territory, turning away when an interfacial act such as changing to personal chat transforms the contours of the territory as it closes around the privacy of the person at the interface. On rare occasions the person holding the phone and I have found ourselves simultaneously lifting our faces away from the screen towards each other, exchanging a half-comfortable expression of acknowledgement, of having shared something. I understand that I am operating in the grey zone of ethics here, perhaps bordering on the black zone, an ethics not of an invasion of privacy understood in the sense of property rights, but of a scopic intrusion into a picture-territory in which a subject is mapped in a function of desire.

However, this question of ethics is not just one of civility in public space, it also raises a question concerning the epistemological ethics of the disciplinary practice of anthropology, which, following Malinowski's pioneering work in the Trobriand Islands, has at its core the practice of participant observation. In so far as the anthropologist as observer occupies the field of the gaze, he is already caught up in participation, for this is what we can draw from Lacan's seminar on the gaze – to observe is to participate (for the gaze has an effect), and one participates in so far as one is observed oneself (the anthropologist turns himself into a picture in the field of the gaze). The gaze of the anthropologist is not just a disciplined gaze in the sense invoked by Foucault in relation to clinical practice: it situates the anthropologist as a subject of desire, as a subject who, in the act of looking, expresses his or her *wanting* to know. And the anthropologist, as a living picture of one-who-wants-to-know for the sake of knowing itself, very often presents a ridiculous, comical figure to those in the field, as someone who is out of place, a stain on the social scene.

### **Attachment and territorialization on imagined screens and interfaces past**

On our return from the trip to the hills I described earlier, we stopped by a fruit vendor, drawn to the glow of the guavas on display. There was an argument going on: one of the customers felt he was being cheated by the shopkeeper. The customer claimed, and proved, that the shopkeeper had lied about the quantity of guavas he was being charged for. The weighing machine, as is now standard, had two numerical screens – one facing the shopkeeper, the other turned towards the customer. However, on this machine the display turned towards the customer was not functioning. The shopkeeper, with an expression of annoyance masking his public shaming, said he had misread the screen and proceeded to balance out the transaction to the correct weight. It was the customer's parting retort that caught my attention because, through his imagination, he had extended the signifying horizon of the numerical display screen: 'What do you see on that screen in front of you? The customer's face with the word "fool" written on the forehead?' The transaction occurs in the space of a territory which, for it to be ethical, has to be a shared territory in which the gaze of the shopkeeper and customer can meet as equals on the two screens. It is precisely the breakdown of this ethic, marked by a shifting balance in power, a power constituted upon the visibility that the customer was pointing to in his parting remark, that, by expanding a numerical screen into a broader imaginary surface, acts as the basis for the disagreement to be imagined and articulated. It called to mind a converse situation, the decision of many young people I know of who, deciding they didn't want their social media posts to be seen by certain members of the family or other acquaintances whose gaze would invite the unwanted exercise of power, either blocked them or created a separate circulation for their posts. When my bag has been held up in the X-ray scanner in metro stations, I have occasionally peered behind the X-ray screen to see whether it was my bag that was holding up the transaction at the checkpoint, much to the consternation of the officer there. Here again a screenal boundary is crossed that introduces a gaze that threatens the balance of power. The experience of anxiety when a traffic policeman stops a rider, demands a photo ID card and wanders off with it to the sergeant sitting in the police jeep is due to this same breach of territoriality, one that threatens the subject sustaining himself in the flimsy margins of a territory that is easily ruptured. This is all the more amplified in the structural anonymity of online or CCTV camera surveillance, where the subject as the subject of an

image or data is split from the body of the person and circulates under a surveilling gaze which may be non-human, a computer algorithm.

Thus far, I have tried to produce a characterization of the subject's relation to the technological screen as an attachment suspended by the point of a stain on circulating objects, particularly images. The subject's relation to the interface has been characterized as not just a repetition, but as expressive acts constitutive of a territory that the subject comes to occupy. I have drawn on psychoanalysis for these characterizations because the discipline, in its preoccupation with unconscious, imaginary investments, has developed powerful ways of understanding the object relations that anthropology can draw on. I have tried to situate the problem in certain ethnographic instances that demonstrate the position of the smartphone as a concatenation of the technological screen and the interface in a set of ordinary, though not altogether normative social situations. I would now like to provide a short account of the nineteenth-century technology of Morse telegraphs to elucidate this dynamic of attachment and territorialization as a characteristic of screens and interfaces.

The Morse code, as telegraphers well know, is best read by *ear*: that is, rather than translate the code into text on paper or read the visualised waveforms of the electric pulses, telegraph operators found it much easier to translate the *sound* as they heard it. In a now unclassified US War Office training video on hand-sending techniques, the instructor insists that a novice signalman ought to take the musical and rhythmic aspects of the sound of the signal sent and received on the telegraph as a guide to understanding and working with the code.<sup>14</sup> Taking the letter 'H' as an example, represented in Morse code by four dots: *di-di-di-dit*, the instructor says a well-sent 'H' will sound like a horse at the gallop. He suggests listening to the code one sends, recorded on tape, in order to evaluate and improve on the sending technique. This playful and humorous video concludes with a sender transmitting 'Vs': *di-di-di-dah*, standing for Victory, which, sent by an expert signalman, sounds like an electronic fanfare.

In a letter to his friend and long-time collaborator, Dr Leonard Gale, Samuel Morse, inventor of the Morse code and the Morse telegraphic apparatus (along with Alfred Vail, his chief engineer) recounts an incident from around 1846, one that Morse 'had specially treasured in his memory and *frequently* related as illustrative of the practicality of reading

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<sup>14</sup> TF-11 3697 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQj74Y2H8xQ> accessed 21 May 2020.



by sound'. The telegraphic line was in the process of being extended from Philadelphia to Washington via an intermediate waystation at Wilmington, Delaware. Morse, then Inspector of Telegraphs, was in the operating room of the Washington office seated beside the operator, a Mr Washington. Morse writes:

The instruments were for a moment silent. I was conversing with Mr. Washington, the operator... Presently one of the instruments commenced writing and Mr. Washington listened and smiled. I asked him why he smiled. 'Oh!' said he, 'that is Zantzinger of the Philadelphia office, but he is operating from Wilmington.' 'How do you know that?' 'Oh! I know his touch, but I must ask him why he is in Wilmington.' He then went to the instrument and telegraphed to Zantzinger at Wilmington, and the reply was that he had been sent from Philadelphia to regulate the relay magnet for the Wilmington operator, who was inexperienced.<sup>15</sup>

Morse registers his amazement at how the operator, Mr Washington, merely by listening to the coded signal, was able to deduce who it was that had sent it. It was as if Mr Washington was privy to an *auditory screen* that was not available to Morse, on which he 'read' details that Morse was completely unaware of. The inventor of the apparatus and creator of the code found himself unable to construct the auditory screen generated in the active imagination of the telegraph operator! Among telegraphers, the 'fist', or what is here referred as the 'touch', denotes a unique signature,<sup>16</sup> a peculiar rhythmic quality that constitutes the mark of every good hand-sender in the operation of the telegraph key interface. Here again we see the two characteristics outlined above: a subjectivity attached, suspended from the screen, an imagined *auditory* screen; and a subjectivity territorializing the signal through a signature rhythm at the interface of the telegraph key.

### **Interrupt**

The relationship of the subject to the screen and the interface may be sundered at the point of attachment and the possibility of territorialization interrupted. On certain evenings in Bangalore, where I spent a few months doing fieldwork, I would hang out at my friend Ramu's godown, a warehouse where coconuts were stocked and sorted by size. One evening I noticed that Suka, my friend's only employee, wasn't around, although he usually sits there at this time, dehusking the coconuts and weighing them for the next days' orders,

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<sup>15</sup> Letter to Dr Gale dated 10 May 1869, reproduced in Morse 1914: 480.

<sup>16</sup> A territorializing *ritornello*, in the language of Deleuze and Guattari.

while Ramu went over the day's accounts. I asked my friend where he was. 'That guy is crazy. He disappears sometimes.' I nodded, as if I understood. Ramu went on, 'Last week, I bought him a new phone. You remember, his phone had died after the rains?' Again I nodded. It was a feature phone with a physical keypad and small colour screen, not a touchscreen smartphone. I remembered Suka being very upset the day the phone died. He liked that phone. Ramu went on, 'He wanted one identical to his old one. He was used to the display options in the old phone's menu screen. I searched everywhere online, and it looked like that model is no longer in production. I got him a newer model of the same brand. He booted it up. The screen flashed. I thought he would be happy. He fiddled around with it for a while, frowning. Then, he bent down, picked up the rod he uses for dehusking the coconut and smashed the phone with it. I was shocked and asked him why he did it. He said the screen was showing wrong things. He couldn't comprehend the new user interface and menu items. He wanted a phone identical to the model of the old phone and said he didn't mind the money being deducted from his salary. This time I checked second-hand websites and managed to find one'. Suka, who couldn't read English, reacted to the screen on the new phone as something foreign, an interface with which he couldn't find purchase, making him feel unhomey on a screen that used to be familiar. His rather extreme reaction may seem shocking. But we see this in various degrees of emphasis, in situations where this ephemeral attachment of almost hypnotic suspension from the screen is interrupted. This might happen when the power goes off while watching a film, or someone switches channels while someone else is absorbed in the programme on screen, or when the Internet connection slows down, causing much irritation to someone who is thrown out of a territorial ensconcement at the edge of the interface. One only has to see the distress and explosion of force in a genre of YouTube video: 'Angry parents destroying video game consoles'. The videos feature enraged parents from around the world, unable to prevent their children's absorption into the territory of the video game screen, destroying the video game console and its display screen, hurling it against the ground or smashing it with a hammer. Such force is the brutal reminder of the ephemerality of the psychic thread of attachment by which is suspended the subject of the screen, whose territorialization at the edge of the interface may be interrupted when such force is brought to bear.

In March 2015, Instagram took down a photograph uploaded by Rupi Kaur, a poet and visual artist who publishes much of her work on this social media platform. Central to the photograph and its contentious removal was a stain. The picture depicts a woman lying on her side, facing away from the camera, a red stain on her pants and a red spot mirrored on the surface of the bedspread. Kaur had received a message from Instagram which notified her that the post had been removed because ‘it does not follow community guidelines’. Kaur posted a screenshot of this message too. The original photo was part of a project for a course on visual rhetoric exploring the taboos around menstruation. Following the take-down, Kaur wrote on Facebook:

thank you @instagram for providing me with the exact response my work was created to critique. you deleted a photo of a woman who is fully covered and menstruating stating that it goes against community guidelines when your guidelines outline that it is nothing but acceptable. the girl is fully clothed. the photo is mine. it is not attacking a certain group. nor is it spam. and because it does not break those guidelines i will repost it again.<sup>17</sup>

This post garnered over fifty thousand likes and was shared over ten thousand times. The censored post was briefly restored by Instagram, with a message of apology from the ‘community operations’ team: ‘A member of our team accidentally removed something you posted on Instagram. This was a mistake, and we sincerely apologize for this error’.<sup>18</sup> The politicization of this post was not due to policing by algorithms alone, for posts frequently get taken down (and restored, upon appeal) following ‘content moderation’. Kaur’s contention was that this image, which did not violate the platform’s terms of use, was removed solely in order to wipe the stain off the picture, as it were – a misogynistic act by an organization which claims that its platform is built on liberal values. It is around the stain that the collective subjectivity of women is summoned to populate the picture, investing it with a power that forces Instagram to roll back the erasure of the bloodstained photograph.

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<sup>17</sup> The post concludes with a political statement: ‘i will not apologize for not feeding the ego and pride of misogynist society that will have my body in an underwear but not be okay with a small leak. when your pages are filled with countless photos/accounts where women (so many who are underage) are objectified. pornified. and treated less than human. thank you’. This post was later re-instated by Instagram. See, for the original post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/OovWwJHA6f/>, accessed 21 May 2020.

<sup>18</sup> See also <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/instagram-deletes-womans-period-photos-but-her-response-is-amazing/>, accessed 21 May 2020.

### **Under a machinic gaze, the face is an interface**

The terrain of circulation in social media involves not just people socializing at the edge of interfaces, it also involves a lot of other professionals – interface designers, software programmers, data analysts and business managers – who remain invisible behind the smooth surface of the screen. And where there is data, there are programs that feed on data, model it, react to it. A machinic world lurks behind the screen, and the machinic gaze is at the centre of any fragment one occupies on this screen-territory – every touch on the screen, every second one lingers on any part of the screen, is recorded. To the machinic eye, the selfie, or any photograph for that matter, is composed of a single substance – pixels, but no foreground, background or subject. It is from the level of the pixel that the face emerges once again, outlined and tagged by software programs. In other words, one’s face, when pictured in the field of the software programs, is an interface.

In so far as one’s face is an interface when it is caught in a network of interconnected cameras circulated on various everyday screens, the face can trigger, or be ‘recognized’, by surveillance software, a development which has caused much anxiety in technological policy circles. This is not down to any single diabolical corporation alone, as Clearview AI has been painted.<sup>19</sup> It is right there on the surface of the smartphone, offering the very thing that such recognition systems threaten to breach – the security feature that allows phones to be unlocked by showing one’s face to the phone’s front-camera, the face as interface ‘secures’ the territorial integrity of one’s phone. Snapchat, a popular social media application, was one of the first to treat the face as an interface by introducing various playful features as filters that transform one’s face in a variety of ways, into a bunny rabbit, for instance. The beauty company L’Oréal recently bought out a start-up called Modiface, whose technological interface allows the user to apply make-up to the face on screen, without ever letting a speck of cosmetic powder touch the skin. These seemingly innocuous practices, part of a set of practices of territorialization at the interface that exemplify the face-as-interface, bear within them the conditions for the possibility to mark out a subject as a potential security risk, as a target for policing algorithms.

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<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/18/technology/clearview-privacy-facial-recognition.html>, accessed 21 May 2020.

The fact that the face is an interface interpellated in a political grid of machinic visibility does not imply the end of the territorial integrity of the subject mapped in a face-picture transacted on social screens. The artist Adam Harvey, drawing on cubism and a military-tactic from the First World War called Dazzle painting, developed a facial make-up technique called CV Dazzle. This make-up technique camouflages the face when seen by a camera, allowing the person to escape detection by automated face-recognition systems. Dazzle painting originated during the First World War, being developed for the British navy by the artist Norman Wilkinson. It involved painting ships in alternating stripes of contrasting colour tones that would camouflage the vessel against the sea and sky, making it a confusing target for enemy submarines tracking the ship's movement through their periscopes. In a paper presented to the Royal Society of Arts, Wilkinson says 'so-called invisibility against submarine attack is not only impossible, but dangerous, and consequently, if a vessel can be seen at all, it does not matter how visible she is, providing her course remains a matter of question to the attacker' (Wilkinson 1920: 264). Camouflage emerged around the time of the First World War as a mediation between the subject and its visual ground, not just as a military technique, but in a conjuncture with the plastic arts as well. Gertrude Stein recounts an episode with Picasso, one of the central figures in cubism who was also responsible for shattering the integrity of the face in portraiture. 'I very well remember at the beginning of the war being with Picasso on the boulevard Raspail when the first camouflaged truck passed... Picasso, amazed, looked at it and then cried out, yes, it is we who made it, that is cubism'.<sup>20</sup>

Adam Harvey situates his project within this tradition of cubism and camouflage: 'CV Dazzle uses avant-garde hairstyling and make-up designs to break apart the continuity of a face',<sup>21</sup> thus presenting to face-detection systems an 'anti-face' which is camouflaged into a background of pixels, destabilizing the coordinates that govern the software process of tracing the face. Lacan, in his discussion of the stain and the picture, draws on this notion of camouflage, following the work of Roger Callois on mimicry in animals and suggesting

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<sup>20</sup> Gertrude Stein, quoted in Gallois 2019: 154.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted from the artist's description in the project website <https://cvdazzle.com/> Accessed on 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2020. See the webpage for images of people wearing CV Dazzle camouflage make-up.

Prince, A stain in the picture

that in camouflage the subject as a stain maps itself completely into the picture, becoming mottled against a motley background.

### **Forcing the stain off the picture**

In late 2019, Sri Lanka's Department of Immigration and Emigration made an announcement banning excessive make-up on passport photos.<sup>22</sup> The point of controversy concerned the status of the *pottu*, a *bindi*, or a small, usually round spot or mark worn on the forehead mostly by Tamil women in Sri Lanka,<sup>23</sup> which, as a form of make-up, fell under the ban's umbrella. This move was announced as being in keeping with the regulations for passport photos issued back in 2015 by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). A backlash followed, particularly from women in the Tamil community who contended that the ICAO regulations were drawn up so as to retain a liberal attitude of respect for religious practices such as the covering of hair. They alleged that every government formulates its laws to target first women and their bodies, whether that is through the hijab or the *pottu*. Gayan Milinda, the department's spokesperson, clarified that the move was not targeted at Tamil women, that it was simply being done in order to comply with the ICAO regulation stipulating that the forehead must be clearly visible on the photo, and that other 'alterations' to the face through excessive make-up, such as 'a particularly large *pottu* which makes one's face unrecognizable', would be in violation of ICAO regulations. This was because it would affect the machine-readability of the face-image in passports.<sup>24</sup> Machines that transact the face as an interface require a naturalized, de-cultivated face, and the State Department, seemingly in accordance with the requirements of the machinic algorithm, demanded compliance by the subjects.

Invoking such machinic criteria for reasons of national security or citing the 'community guidelines' of a social network platform, statements such as 'not too large a *bindi*', 'you know the arsonists from the clothes they wear', or gestures like the removal of

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<sup>22</sup> See [http://www.island.lk/index.php?page\\_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code\\_title=215109](http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=215109), accessed 21 May 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Wearing a *pottu* or a *bindi* is a common practice in India among Hindu women, particularly married women, but in the southern states unmarried girls also wear a *bindi*, usually in black rather than the red that married women wear. It is usually the last article to be applied to the face in front of the mirror in the everyday practice of 'making-up' one's face.

<sup>24</sup> See <https://www.bbc.com/tamil/sri-lanka-50725416>, accessed 21<sup>st</sup> May 2020. I have translated the phrase from Tamil.

the blood-stained picture, and even the forceful smashing of video-game consoles by irritated parents, all represent attempts to compose a field of permissible and impermissible visibilities and territorializations. They thus seek the elimination of the subjective attachment to the circulating screen and interrupt the territorialization of the subject at the interface. Benedict Anderson suggests that the nation is an imagined community, a notion that Appadurai (1997) extends, asking us to consider imagination as a ‘social practice’. Faced with a gaze that threatens the forceful detachment of the subject from the picture, the work of a community of imagination is underway, sustaining itself in its complex heterogeneity through processes of attachment. This happens as subjects populate the circulating images, mapping themselves on to a dynamic social picture, co-habiting a territory in a motley composition of collective desire, blending, staining the picture with a *bindi*, a headscarf, a blood spot, a *chappal* – singularities without identity, where the subject dissolves as a stain among others.

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