

Dreams and Disguises, As Usual.

Raqs Media Collective

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"Fantômas"
"What did you say?"
"I said: Fantômas."
"And what does that mean?"
"Nothing ... Everything"
"But what is it?"
"No one ... And yet, yes, it is someone!"
"And what does this someone do?"

"Spread Terror!!"

(Opening lines of *Fantômas*, the first novel in the *Fantômas* series by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain, popular in early twentieth century Paris)

In a painting titled *Le Barbare* (The Barbarian) (1928), René Magritte showed what seemed to be the shadow of a masked man in a hat. The shadow is seen against a brick wall, and it is unclear whether it is appearing or fading away. Magritte, always particular about the eccentric rhetoric of his practice of representation, was careful enough to have a photograph of himself (in a hat) taken next to this image. His face, quizzical, makes us wonder as if he is keeping secrets from us.

There are two particularly interesting things about this image: the first that it should be called *Le Barbare*, and the second, that it is not in fact the first or even the last appearance of a hat, or a man in a hat, in the work of Magritte. Men in hats, and hats, crowd the images made by Magritte. They refuse to go away. (1)

What does a man in a hat have to do with impostors and waiting rooms?

Perhaps, like the narrator in the first novel of the Fantômas series of fantastic crime novels, we could say, “Nothing ... and Everything”.

Perhaps one of the secrets that Magritte keeps in this image – paraphrasing the title of another of his paintings – could be that just as the image of a pipe is not a pipe, so too, the image that suggests a suave, urbane man in a hat is actually of someone else.

The shadowy visage in a hat in *Le Barbare* belongs to the figure of Fantômas (2), the archetypal and perhaps primal urban delinquent, the ‘lord of terror’, the master of disguises who appears and disappears, takes on many personae, and refuses ever to be identified. In *The Impostor in the Waiting Room* and this text we seek to continue the dialogue that Magritte began with the shadow of Fantômas, and to investigate what it means to conduct a dalliance with the imperative of identification.

The imperative of identification, and its counterpoint, the dream of disguise, are impulses we find as central to the story of our times as a threatened assassin, or a murderous corpse, or a missing person who leaves no trace, are to an obstinately intractable pulp fiction pot boiler.

In *L'Assassin Menacé* (*The Threatened Assassin*), another of his paintings from the same period, Magritte shows Fantômas attentively listening to a gramophone beside the corpse of his female victim, unaware that two detectives in bowler-hats are hovering outside the door with a net and cudgel, even as similarly attired voyeurs peer through the window. It takes a while to figure out that that all of them – murderer, corpse, police and spectators are the same person. The question as to which one is the ‘real’ Fantômas refuses, like a recalcitrant cadaver, to lie low. Magritte’s fascination with a tableau in Louis Feuillade’s third Fantômas film *Le Mort qui Tue* (*The Murderous Corpse*) is evident in the composition of this picture.

This dialogue with the figure of Fantômas that Magritte initiated was a thread that ran through much of his work. In one of his occasional fragments of writing, titled *A Theatrical Event*, Magritte outlines the

following arresting scenario: Fantômas the quarry, and Juve, the detective in pursuit, mesh into each other as disguises, reveries, pursuit, the loss of identity, and the impossibility of capture (except through self-disclosure) are woven together.

“...Juve has been on the trail of Fantômas for quite some time. He crawls along the broken cobblestones of a mysterious passage. To guide himself he gropes along the walls with his fingers. Suddenly, a whiff of hot air hits him in the face. He comes nearer ... His eyes adjust to the darkness. Juve distinguishes a door with loose boards a few feet in front of him. He undoes his overcoat in order to wrap it around his left arm, and gets his revolver ready. As soon as he has cleared the door, Juve realizes that his precautions were unnecessary: Fantômas is close by, sleeping deeply. In a matter of seconds Juve has tied up the sleeper. Fantômas continues to dream — of his disguises, perhaps, as usual. Juve, in the highest of spirits, pronounces some regrettable words. They cause the prisoner to start. He wakes up, and once awake, Fantômas is no longer Juve’s captive. Juve has failed again this time. One means remains for him to achieve his end: Juve will have to get into one of Fantômas’s dreams — he will try to take part as one of its characters.” (3)

Fantômas continues to dream of his disguises, perhaps, as usual, and the pursuer will have to get into the dreams of the pursued, he will have to participate as one of its characters ... the disguise may blur the line between Fantômas and Juve.

In the original Fantômas novels, Fantômas was at the very centre of a gang of ‘barbarians’ who lurked in Paris, called ‘The Apaches’. It is as if his wearing the accoutrements of bourgeois civility, the hat, the coat, the occasional umbrella, or walking stick was a careful disguise, a combat camouflage cloaking a raging, rampant otherness. While it throbbed closer than the jugular vein of the modern metropolis of advanced capitalism, it was at the same time at its farthest remove. Fantômas is a barbarian in a hat, or an impostor waiting to be recognized.

Looked at in another way, the disguise of the man in the hat and the overcoat is the only effective passport that the ‘barbarian’ can have into the

world enclosed by the modern citadel. The disguise is a means to travel from a world apparently in shadow, to a world where the sharp glare that brings visibility in its iridescent wake is not without the threat of capture and confinement.

The liminal zone where roles can be rehearsed, different patois perfected, the various grades of personhood that lead up to the man in the hat and the coat tried on for size, the turban or the loincloth discarded is a waiting room. One awaits one's turn to go into the arc lights.

The figure of a person biding time in a waiting room helps us to imagine the predicament of people living in societies often considered to be inhabiting an antechamber to modernity. In such spaces, one waits to be called upon to step onto the stage of history. Most of the world lives in spaces that could be designated as 'waiting rooms', biding its time. These 'waiting rooms' exist in transmetropolitan cities, and in the small enclaves that subsist in the shadow of the edifices of legality. There are waiting rooms in New York just as there are waiting rooms in New Delhi, and there are trapdoors and hidden passages connecting a waiting room in one space with a waiting room in another.

Fantômas is a denizen of these spaces. Which is why he appears in Mexico City, in Calcutta, in Caracas, and why he, before Superman or Batman, found his way into short stories, comics, novellas and films in languages spoken in places as far away from Paris as possible. If the 'Apaches' brought Fantômas with them to Paris from some forsaken wilderness, then Fantômas travelled right back to the places where he came from to the urban nether lands of places that had not yet made it in the map of arc-lights.

The passage from 'waiting rooms' to the 'stage' often requires a person to go through intense scrutiny. This happens at airports and borders. It also happens in streets, homes and workplaces. The art of the impostor becomes a guide to survival for people negotiating this rough passage. Waiting Rooms everywhere are full of Impostors waiting to be auditioned, waiting to be verified, waiting to know and to see whether or not their 'act' passes muster.

The Impostor is an exemplar for a kind of performative agency that renders a person capable of expressing more than one kind of truth of the self to the scrutiny of power. The figure of the impostor offers a method of survival that meets the growing intensification of scrutiny with a strategy based on the multiplication of guises and the amplification of guile. At the same time, the term Impostor is also an accusation. One that power can fling at anyone it chooses to place under scrutiny. It is this double edged-ness, of being a way out as well as a trap, that lends it the capacity it has to be a heuristic device uniquely suited for a nuanced understanding of a time in which criteria such as authenticity, veracity and appropriateness take on intense, almost paranoid dimensions in the conduct and governance of life's most basic functions. As concepts, the 'impostor', like the 'waiting room', can signify both thresholds meant for quick, sportive and easy crossing, portals into unpredictable futures, that come laden with the thrill that only unintended consequences can bring, and, for some, a bleak and eternal purgatory tinged with its own peculiar anxiety, distrust and fear.

The Impostor figure also comes to us by way of another lineage, one closer to home than the bleak sky of Magritte's Brussels and its drizzle of bowler-hatted men. We speak here of the tradition in northern and eastern India known as 'Bahurupiya'. A 'bahurupi' is a person of many forms and guises, a polymorph, a shape-shifter, a fantastic masquerader and pantomime, a primal 'Fantômas'. 'Bahurupis' make their living by masquerade, by the performance of different roles by itinerant practitioners, for the entertainment, edification and occasionally, defrauding of the general public. They might dress up one day as a god, another day in drag; one day as a holy mendicant, another day as a monkey, and a third day as a somewhat comical police constable – and expect to earn money by merely turning up at doorsteps, or hanging around in public spaces, and being offered money or food or shelter in exchange for nothing more than a glance, or a brief stare. Here, disguise, and a degree of necessary ambiguity about the self is a way of life, a calling, a means of subsistence and ordering in a world otherwise deeply invested in certitude.

What lies at the origin of the distinction between the 'citizen' (and here we mean also the 'world citizen' who feels at ease and has a sense of entitlement everywhere) and the person who neither belongs nor feels entitled to belong to a city, or state, or the world at large, a person who is in the wrong place at the wrong time for the wrong reasons, everywhere? When does a class of people begin to think about the distinction between themselves and others in terms that require barriers to the circulation of presences? What makes them arrogate to themselves the status of being the exclusive subjects of history?

What is it about the spaces of vanguard capitalism that produces the peculiar anxiety of the contamination of its sanity, or its sanitariness, by the uncomfortable proximity of that which lies outside it or perforates it with an insisting presence? Why is that which itself is so invasive so afraid of contagion?

Or, as Magritte might have it: Why is Juve so afraid, and of what? Of Fantômas - his quarry - or of his own reflection or shadow?

This inchoate fear is underpinned by a furiously-held telos of manifest historical development, which both demands, and provides the wherewithal for, the construction and enforcement of hierarchical taxonomies of people, space and ways of living and being – of those who have 'arrived' onto a notional centre stage of human achievement, and others that have been made to leave the stage, or are yet to make an appearance.

Those who have left the stage, or who are yet to make an appearance, are consigned to the waiting room of history, a notional antechamber in relation to the notional centre stage. And as the figure of the 'citizen' tests his paces, he also becomes confident that he cannot be upstaged so long as the motley restless crew in the waiting room is deemed 'alien'. As long as the denizens of the waiting room are seen as unconvincing in their claim to a place in the arc lights, the figure of the citizen can stay on stage. (4)

But citizenship too is a template and a score, much more than it is an

actual human condition. And an exacting template at that; the successful performance of which is always a matter of an ongoing test. One achieves citizenship, one loses it, one's performance is either applauded or it fails to live up to the demands, requirements and standards that accrue to it. To live with these conditions is to be always on trial, to know that in the eyes of the examining authority one is always, and necessarily, an impostor, unless proved otherwise. It is to know that one has to carry one's credentials at all times and that identities must be produced when they are asked for.

The bargain that is struck at the very heart of our times is the understanding that for the citizen, for the legal, for the authorized version and the eloquent oxymoron of the 'true copy' to be understood as such, the apparatus of authentication requires the lengthening shadow of the implied 'offstage' presence, or menace, of the 'alien' being, the unlawful act, the fake item, the impostor, as someone or something that anyone or anything can be shown up to be. This is why the chase never comes to an end. The eye of the state always stays open lest the impostor slip by and disappear into the night and fog of the city and its shadows. (5)

Juve must enter the dream of Fantômas to learn to distinguish himself and the part that he has to play.

* * *

A girl and her brother enter a deserted military airstrip - an overgrown concrete and tarmac ruin of a recent but already forgotten war, where rusting fighter planes lie scattered and waiting as if for the return of their dead pilots. The girl traces the path that the cracks in the tarmac make with her steps into the wind that suddenly blows in a terrifying vision of Kali, the goddess of destruction, who towers over the small child on the desolate airstrip. The girl stands frozen, struck dumb with fear. Her brother rushes in, discovers that the goddess is only a baturupi, a thin itinerant impostor with a scowl, a set of wooden goddess arms, tinsel weapons and a garland of papier mâché skulls. He asks the impostor angrily who he is and why he must scare children so. The baturupi-impostor-goddess replies, "I

did nothing; she came in the way”.

This fragment of film, the ‘bahurupi in the airstrip’ sequence in Ritwik Ghatak’s Bengali film *Subarnarekha* (*The Golden Thread*, 1965), is laden with strange encounters. A terrifying yet banal masquerade interrupts a child’s exploration, a girl crosses the path of a goddess, a military airstrip built in the second world war invades a remote corner of Bengal, rust, time and the obstinate fertility of vegetal undergrowth encroaches upon and encircles the abandoned airstrip and its forgotten fighter aircraft. Everything comes in the way of everything else. Collisions bring collisions in their wake. The girl, her brother, the goddess, the impostor, the airfield, the aircraft, the undergrowth – all seem to be saying, at once, “I did nothing, she came in the way”. (6)

When two worlds collide, one asks the other, “Who are you and what are you doing in my space?” Usually, the question brings with it an assumption that the questioner has the authority to ask it in the first place, and the confidence or the knowledge that space, and the means of circulation, can also be property. That the ‘space’ is his to enable the asking of the question to the person immediately categorized as the interloper, the encroacher, the not-quite-the-right-thing or right-person-in-the-right-place. Usually, what is being asked for is an explanation for what is seen as a trespass. When two worlds, or spaces, or beings or things collide in the course of their trajectories, and one is cast as the trespasser, there is a clear understanding that only one of them can have the right of way.

The itinerant bahurupi-goddess-impostor and the military airstrip. Which is the trespasser? Why is the sudden apparition of the goddess of destruction in an abandoned theatre of war so strange and so natural at the same time? Is she encroaching, or is she staking out her own territory? Is she in the way, or is everything else in her way?

Who must give way?

The building of a military airstrip or a highway or a dam or a resort or a housing estate sanctioned by a masterplan can suddenly turn people

into trespassers, and their way of life into a culture of trespassing. The masterplan has the right of way, as well as the means, to translate that fact into real control over space and circulation.

Sometimes this means that the inhabitants-turned-trespassers make themselves invisible, that they disappear into the cracks and folds of the plan; that they pretend that they are not there. They become impostors of absence, actors of vanishing acts. Sometimes it may mean that the trespassers may be present and visible and pretend to be what they are not, and that it is they who have the right of way. This makes them impostors of presence, pretenders in place.

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Many contemporary methods of spatial intervention necessitate the hollowing out of ways of life, ecologies and habitation practices from a space, and then filling it in with a one-size-fits-all imagination. Architectural plans, interior design catalogues and real estate brochures determine the 'value' of a location. To have a design on space is half the battle won in terms of the possession and control over that space.

Everything that is in the way – people, settled practices, older inner cities, nomadic routes, and the commons of land and water – disappears into the emptiness of the un-inked portions between the rectilinear inscriptions on the surface of the masterplan. As masterplans cordon off greater and yet greater swathes of space, they begin to come up against each other, leading to meta-masterplans that stitch different masterplans together, until more and more stretches of territory end up looking and feeling like clones of each other. The suburb, the gas station, the condominium, the supermarket, the highway, the underpass, the airport, the parking lot, the leisure centre, the school, the factory, the mall, the barbed wire fencing that protects and controls a plot of land from trespass, are the alphabets of a urban language that end up making the same statement everywhere, as the masterplan considers what it sees as waste land, or that which in its view is an urban terra nullis – “It was in the way”.

What is it that disappears when the ink on the plans has dried?

Millions of people fade from history, and often the memory of their disappearance also fades with time. With the disappearance of ways of life, entire practices and the lived experiences and memories that constituted them vanish, or are forced to become something other than what they were accustomed to have been. When they make the effort to embrace this transformation, typically what stands questioned is their credibility. They are never what they seem to be, or what they try to say they are. The annals of every nation are full of adjectives that accrue to displaced communities and individuals that begin to be seen as cheats, forgers, tricksters, frauds, thieves, liars and impostors, as members of 'criminal castes, tribes and clans' or as deviant anomalies who habitually attempt to erode stable foundations with their 'treacherous' ambiguities and their evasive refusal to be confined, enumerated, or identified.

These 'missing persons' who disappear, or appear with great reluctance, with their names, provenances, identities and histories deliberately or accidentally obscured in the narratives of 'progress' and the histories of nation states, are to the processes of governance what the figure of the 'unknown soldier' is to the reality of war. The only difference is: there are no memorials to those who fade from view in the ordinary course of 'progress'. The missing person is a blur against a wall, a throw-away scrap of newspaper with a fading, out-of-focus image of a face, a peeling poster announcing rewards for wanted or lost people in a police post or railway station waiting room, a decimal point in a statistic, an announcement that some people have been disowned or abandoned or evicted or deported or otherwise cast away, as residues of history. No flags flutter, no trumpets sound, nothing burns eternal in the memory of a blur.

The blur is not even an image that can lay a claim to original veracity, but a hand-me-down version of a reality that is so injured by attempts at effacement that only a copy can have the energy necessary to enable its contents to circulate. The patchwork of faded fakes, interrupted signals, and unrealized possibilities, which does not read well and which does not offer substantive and meaningfully rounded off conclusions, is sometimes the only kind of manuscript available to us.

Our engagement with the Impostor is an attempt at coming face-to-face with this world. We would like to do so in a manner that makes anxieties about ‘who comes in the way of the reading’ appear, at the very least, superfluous, and at best, attenuated, by a desire to listen to stories (and histories) that some might consider incomplete. We are beginning to recognize that we ourselves might appear, occasionally in them, occasionally against them.

* * *

The collision of worlds (that happens, for instance, when an empire-building sensibility suddenly stumbles upon its grand object, the colony-to-be) is fraught with the trauma of the dispersal of the assumed monadic unity of the self, even of the one we presume to be the victor. The impostor always lurks in the shadow of the unknown to claim the territory of the unsuspecting self, even if that self comes attired as a world conqueror. Sometimes, it is the notion of the unitary, monadic self, with its unique unassailable identity (its ‘it-ness’, which it witnesses solemnly to itself), that constitutes the biggest obstacle: the fundamental scotoma that makes the image in the mirror so opaque and so elusive at the same time.

The early epoch of the ascendancy of the English East India Company (when it was still a minor ‘Indian’ power jostling with the Marathas, the Sikhs, the Hyderabad Nizamate and Mysore Sultanate, and the French and Dutch East India Company for slices of the crumbling Mughal imperial cake) in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century India is full of English, Scottish and Irish adventurers turning their backs on Albion and embracing, to the horror of their superior officers, what were called ‘native ways’: converting to Islam, renouncing the world and becoming itinerant holy men, or thugs, cohabiting with Indian women (and on occasion with Indian men), siring ‘half-caste’ children, endowing temples and mosques, wearing turbans and tunics after the prevailing Mughal fashion. Sometimes they even forget the English language.

Their counterparts within the ‘native’ populations of the presidency towns of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras make moves in the other direction. Young

men full with the heady intoxication of strangeness learn to wear hats and clothes that make little sense in humid weather, break dietary taboos, cross the seas, become fervent Christians, learn to write sonnets, fall in love with English women (and occasionally men), becoming in every way possible, 'sahibs'. The word 'sahib' in Persian, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali and Marathi, meant 'master', or 'lord', but also began shading off at about this time into standing for the white man. In the long torrid summer that stretched over decades while the Mughal Empire dissolved under its own weight, until the conflict of 1857 finished the careers of both the last Mughal emperor and the East India Company, white Mughals met brown sahibs, while xenophobic Englishmen and new, nervously nationalist elites denounced them both as impostors. (7)

The edifice of Empire, which relied so heavily on the adventures of impostors to lay its foundations, also required their marginalization. The normalization of the state of power requires new garbs, even a new dress code; a new script and new persona that can help better distinguish the rulers from the ruled. It required new impostors, broken from a different mould. George Orwell speaks of "well-meaning, over-civilized men, in dark suits and black felt hats, with neatly rolled umbrellas crooked over the left forearm" who, sitting in Whitehall, could rule the world with their mastery of the global network created by the telegraph. They had made the earlier phase of empire building, the adventurous career of going east of Suez to discover a new self, redundant, ridding the world forever of the confusing 'White Mughals', and situating in their place, clones of themselves whenever it became necessary to impose "their constipated view of life on Malaya and Nigeria, Mombasa and Mandalay". (8)

With the ascent of the man in the hat, the Empire may have lost something by way of its shine, its élan and its energy, but it gained a great deal in staying power. And the apparatus of mature Empire stayed intact far beyond the accidents of changes in the pigmentation of those who grew to rule. Over time, the shape of headgear may have changed to that of a white cap that looks like a lopsided, upended boat. The cut and the cloth of the coat may have undergone transformations, Colonial cuts may have given way to Nationalist styles, even as the dull Khaki of the blunt edge of power

retained the hue of the dust of hot places. What remains constant is that something is marked as the costume of rule, the dress suit or uniform of the master, the leader, the office, the 'sahib', the 'neta' (leader). This too is an imposture. But it is a guise marked by the verifying authority of power. An attested true copy.

In modern, republican nation states, power is a function of representation. This is as true of states normally thought of as democratic as it is in states where a single centre of power (an individual, a family, a party, a military elite) holds power, metaphorically, 'in the name of the people'. The legislator, the tribune, the one who makes law, represents the populace.

We can think of this as an aesthetic problem. More specifically, as a visual, even an ocular problem. Whenever the question of representation appears, we know we are speaking of a likeness, a 'fit' between an object and its image, its referent. The representative of the people is also a likeness of the abstract generality of the people. This likeness between the citizenry and its representatives is always a question plagued by provisionality. Features alter: power gains adipose, loses hair; the citizen sometimes grows pale and thin.

How then does the figure of the citizen acquire a semblance of stability? How do the various ambiguities and inconsistencies, the combination of historical and biographical accidents that make up a life, cohere to form a uniform, monovalent image and narrative? How does the person moult into the citizen? How do the various performative stances and experiential realities that add shades and depth to personhood lose rough edges and find points of equilibria that can yield the regularity and predictability necessary to the figure of the citizen? How does a person become a political entity capable of being represented?

What garb, which guise, which face, is required for the ruled?

* * *

The production of the citizen is, among other things, an exercise in the making of a face. Just as the skilful operation of a forensic identikit system

can help reconstruct the face of an unidentified, missing or wanted person that can then be printed on 'Hue and Cry' notices and stuck on all the messy surfaces of a city, so too, the apparatus of identification that is necessary for the maintenance of governmentality must register, record and reconstruct the figure of the citizen from a mass of inconsistencies.

The tension, however, between the image and its shadowy referent, between the identikit photo and the missing person, remains. This tension between citizens and denizens, subjects and aliens, is historically resolved through the approximation of a person's visage to an administrable image of the citizen. The passport, the identification card, the police record, the census datum and the portraits that these instruments build of personhood, are key to this. The frontal portrait makes a claim to be the distillate of truth. This reduction is all that is necessary for him or her to be known as a person with a valid claim to be in a place; all else is superfluous. The man in a bowler hat is a man in a bowler hat. Correspondingly, the barbarian, the alien, the pretender, must be unmasked. (9)

This necessarily involves an operation on and with images. These images may be photographic likenesses or biometric codes or iris scans or fingerprints, but in essence they are the condensations of personhood in a manner that lends them to being distilled by the apparatus of power.

Consider the formal compositional and aesthetic requirements of portraiture as laid down by a United States passport or visa application form.

A passport photograph, in duplicate, must be as follows:

- 2x2 inches in size
- Identical
- Taken within the past 6 months and showing current appearance
- Full face, frontal view with a plain white or off-white background showing all facial features
- Brightness and contrast should be adjusted to present the subject and background accurately

- Photos without proper contrast or color may obscure unique facial features
- Color should reproduce natural skin tones
- Fluorescent or other lighting with unbalanced color may cause unwanted color cast in the photo
- Appropriate filters can eliminate improper color balance
- Between 1 inch and 1 3/8 inches from the bottom of the chin to the top of the head
- Taken in normal street attire (10)

The rigour of this aesthetic stems from the subjective methods that uninformed citizens would generally employ in the earlier half of the twentieth century while sending in photographs of themselves for passports and other identification documents. Cut-outs from family albums or reframed tourist snapshots, in which people smiled or otherwise expressed emotion, made it difficult to affix the face in the stable configuration of features so critical for quick and easy identification. The formal style of the 'passport photo', which then becomes a generic template for all images made for the purposes of identification, emerges from the dissatisfaction that identification apparatuses had with thousands of instances of incidental and unintentionally ambiguous self-portraiture.

In a statement to the London Times in the year 1957, Miss Frances G. Knight, Director of the United States Passport Office, said that "people looked thug-like and abnormal when sitting for their passport photographs". (11)

Ironically, this 'thug-like and abnormal appearance' stemmed from the effort to stabilize the visage in passport photographs. The very subject produced through a system geared towards the generation of greater credibility appeared, at best, suspect. Fantômas rears his head again. The man in a hat is actually a barbarian, and the more he tries to hold on to his hat, the more savage he appears.

More recently, another newspaper report on the introduction of new biometric passports in the UK says:

“Under new security measures all mugshots must in future “show the full face, with a neutral expression and the mouth closed”. The advice is being sent to all applicants before the introduction next year of “ePassports”, which make it harder for terrorists and criminals to get hold of fake passports. The facial image on the photograph will be incorporated in a chip, which will be read by border control equipment. But the high-tech machines need to match key points on the face – a biometric – and this only works if the lips are closed... “An open-mouthed smile will throw the scanner off.”

Eyes must be open and clearly visible, with no sunglasses or heavily-tinted glasses and no hair flopping down the face. There should be no reflection on spectacles and the frames should not cover the eyes. Head coverings will only be allowed for religious reasons. Photo booth companies, which supply most of the pictures for passports, have been required to update their equipment to ensure they are acceptable. Existing passports are not affected but the new rules will have to be followed when they are renewed...

Most people already think they look miserable enough on their passports. There is an old joke that if you look anything like your photograph then you need the holiday. A survey of 5,000 Europeans last year suggested the British were among the most embarrassed by passport photos. It found that a fifth of Britons were so uncomfortable with their images that they hid them from their families.” (12)

The passport, the ID document, is a script, the border is an audition, a screen test, an identification parade, a drill that you practice and never quite get right. Like the random slippage between a North Indian and a North American accent in the voice of a call centre worker in New Delhi talking to New York, the slippage reveals more about a person than the desperate attempts to maintain a flawless performance.

That slip, between who you are and 'more' of who you are, accompanies you as a possibility in all your waking and dreaming moments. Fantômas too inhabits Juve's worst nightmares. That slip in the accent, that gust of wind that blows the hat away, that blows your cover, is the give-away that won't let you go through. The spectator who is the policeman who is the assassin who is the corpse who is the god who is the prisoner who is the animal who is the man in a hat with a stick and an overcoat and the transposed head of a donkey... You move between one and the other. Your moves takes you back into the waiting room. Where can you, and your terror, of being everyone and no one, of being everywhere and nowhere, of being the bahurupi and the mug shot, Fantômas and Juve, belong?

René Magritte keeps his secrets. So must we.

Notes

(1) The figure of a man in a hat first appears in an image called "The Menaced Assassin" in 1926, and re-appears several times, including in "The Usage of Speech" (1928), where two men in bowler hats speak the words 'violette' and 'piano', in "Les Chasseurs de la Nuit" (1928) where a man in a hat with a rifle slung across him is seen as if leaning against a wall with his companion, another gunman, both with their backs turned towards the viewer, in "The Therapist" (1939) and "The Liberator" (1947) where he appears with a cloak and a walking stick, in "The Return of the Flame" (1943) where the man in a hat looms across a burning city, in "The Man in a Bowler Hat" (1964), with a dove flying across his face, in "The Time of Harvest" (1950), and its variant "The Month of the Grape Harvest" (1959) where the man in a bowler hat is an assembly line prototype, an edition made in multiples, in "The Song of the Violet" (1951) where two men in hats, one with his back to us, and the other profiled, stand petrified, in "Golconda" (1953), where it rains bowler hatted men from the sky, and in "The Schoolmaster", and its triune variant "Les Chef d'Oeuvres" (1954-55) where the man/three men appears with his/their back(s) to us against a sea, under a crescent moon, in "The Presence of Mind" (1960), framed

between a falcon and a fish, and finally, in “The Son of Man” (1964), which Magritte did tag as a self portrait, where the hat-wearing man’s face is obscured by a green apple.

The hat appears independently in “The Reckless Sleeper” (1927) and “The Interpretation of Dreams” (1930), along with motley other objects, and it appears as if the man has momentarily lost his hat while looking at a mirror (where he sees himself as an frontally inverted reflection) in “Reproduction Prohibited: Portrait of Edward James” (1937).

(2) For more information on Fantômas, his career as a character, and his remarkable influence on twentieth century avant garde literature, art and cinema, see the website dedicated to the Fantômas phenomenon <http://www.fantomas-lives.com>

(3) Translation by Suzi Gablik, from “Magritte”, Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976

(4) The ‘waiting room’ of history is a metaphor used most eloquently by Dipesh Chakrabarty, who in “Provincializing Europe” discusses the importance for people outside Europe, and the metropolitan West, of stepping outside the trap of considering themselves forever to be ‘waiting’ for the arrival of the contemporary moment, even of modernity itself. See “Provincializing Europe: Post Colonial Thought and Historical Difference”, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Princeton University Press, 2000, also, “Alternative Histories: A View from India”, Shahid Amin, SEPHIS - CSSSC Occasional Papers, 2002

(5) The ‘Impostor’ figure, particularly the notion of the state treating its subjects as impostors unless proved otherwise, was suggested to us by a reading of Partha Chatterjee’s usage of the trope in his recent book “The Princely Impostor”. See, “The Princely Impostor: The Strange and Universal History of the Kumar of Bhowal”, Partha Chatterjee, Princeton University Press, 2002

(6) ‘Subarnarekha’, direction Ritwik Ghatak, produced by J.J. Films Corporation, 1965. For more about ‘Subarnarekha’, see <http://www.upperstall.com/films/subarnarekha.html>

(7) William Dalrymple in “White Mughals” looks at the phenomenon of cultural and physical miscegenation in eighteenth century India. See “White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth Century India”, William Dalrymple, Harper Collins, 2003

(8) To read the full text of “The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius”, see -
HYPERLINK “<http://www.george-orwell.org/>” <http://www.george-orwell.org/>

(9) For an exhaustive history of the Bowler Hat, see “The Man in a Bowler Hat: His History and Iconography”, by Fred Miller Robinson, University of North Carolina Press, 1993

For an interesting online profile of the Bowler Hat, and a very arresting image of a crowd of bowler hat-wearing men, see <http://www.villagehatshop.com/product1687.html>

(10) For guidelines on the specifications for correct composition, lighting, exposure and printing of photographs of US Passport and Visa applications see the website of the US State Department Passport and Visa Photography Guide <http://travel.state.gov/visa/pptphotos/index.html>

(11) Quoted in “The Passport: A History of Man’s Best Travelled Document”, Martin Lloyd, Stroud, Sutton, 2003.

(12) “Look Miserable to Help the War on Terrorism”, Philip Johnston, Home Affairs Editor, The