Sheffield Hallam University

I See Faces : popular pareidolia and the proliferation of meaning

LEE, Joanne <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0607-2032>

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I see faces: popular pareidolia and the proliferation of meaning

JOANNE LEE

In recent times it has been hard to avoid the contemporary fascination for 'pareidolia', that curious act of facial recognition performed upon everyday things and places, when variously smiling, perplexed or grimacing faces are identified in such unlikely objects as cheese graters, parking meters or coat hooks. Such instances are often shared online via specific sites, blogs and social networks using an #iseefaces hashtag; British comedian Dave Gorman has an amusing Flickr pool devoted to the matter, and photographer Francois Robert produced a best-selling calendar featuring pictures of the 'faces' he discerned amongst mops, sockets and hinges. That the phenomena also appeared in the 2013 Venice Biennale – when examples from surrealist Roger Callois' collection of 'pictorial stones' were exhibited, which included amongst their number an agate wherein emerges the form of a ghostly little creature to which had been assigned the name Le Petit Fantôme – demonstrates something of its enduring interest to artists and scholars of aesthetics, alongside those who find such stuff merely diverting.

Pareidolia – the term originates from the Greek 'para' (παρά - beside or beyond) and 'eidōlon' (εἴδωλον - form or image) – occurs when we perceive 'meaning' in random source material, as a result of the human visual system's tendency to extract patterns from 'noise'. It isn't just faces we see – we spot animals in the shapes of billowing clouds, letter forms in stones, and the outline of familiar countries or islands in mere marks on the wall. The tendency isn't only visual but occurs in sound too: Leonardo da Vinci described hearing names and words conjured in the sound of bells, and when John C. Lilly recorded the word 'cogitate', looped it and played it back repeatedly, his several hundred listeners identified over 2000 different words and phrases amidst the resulting audio. Having come to remark the

sheer number of posts devoted to the subject within contemporary popular culture online, I found myself thinking about the human desire to read into things, and about the way such interpretations are subsequently treated. As an artist-researcher working with the everyday, I have realized that I am committed to a project to *enlarge* what can be generated from the ordinary objects and materials that surround us, rather than coming to definitive interpretations, as might 'normally' be the case in other disciplines. I have become interested therefore in the propriety of what it is possible to think, and in what happens if these 'possible thoughts' are pursued creatively and critically.

My desire for enabling a richer panoply of interpretive routes takes up Michel Foucault's assertion that as academics we are suffering from "channels that are too narrow, skimpy, quasi-monopolistic, insufficient", and his suggestion that "we must multiply the paths and the possibility of comings and goings" (Foucault 1996, 305). It also responds to Gerald Raunig's more recent criticism of research in the current university regime through which "wild and transversal writing" is tamed by being fed into the "creativity-destroying apparatuses of disciplining institutions" wherein researchers are subjected to the 'fetish of method' and required "to squeeze the last vestiges of their powers of invention into the straitjacket of the essay industry" (Raunig 2013, 35).

My own attempt to multiply possibilities and to wriggle free from the institutional straitjacket, is made through an independent serial publication, the Pam Flett Press, Issue #5 of which, *I see faces*, specifically considers pareidolia as a kind of process and metaphor for the generation of meaning and interpretation, a method which opens up routes for critical and creative work. (See Endnote.) Whilst I came to know of the term pareidolia through the proliferation of online sites devoted to recording and sharing the phenomena, I realize that my first encounter took place long before this, thanks to the patterned Anaglypta wallpaper of my

childhood bedroom: in those twilight minutes before I slept, I'd see devilish or comic faces emerge as I gazed absently at the pattern of raised swirls… .Years later and I was still preoccupied by such things: having stripped the paper from a house during renovations, I found myself drawn to the strange faces formed out of scuffed and stained plaster, and rather than having attended, as I ought, to the necessary redecoration, instead I spent hours with a pen, recording their variety in a series of drawings.

The propensity for pareidolia seems to go back a very long way in human history. There is, for example, the Makapansgat pebble, a river-worn stone whose naturally formed contours resemble crude eyes and a mouth; it was found associated with an australopithecine burial in South Africa, many miles away from what would have been its original source. Whilst it is impossible to know how this stone was viewed or interpreted at the time, and what were the perceptive and cognitive capabilities of such beings, thanks to its apparently purposeful relocation archaeologists have hypothesized that it may well have been recognized as a face, and that this seemed to have some significance for the hominids concerned (Dart 1974).

The ability and desire to perceive 'meaning' in random source material has been a regular human occurrence. It can be discerned via the countless references in literature and art. Take for example the act of seeking and finding shapes in cloud forms – nephelococcygia – which is recorded in Aristophanes' play *The Birds*, when its characters erect a perfect imaginative city (so-called cloud cuckoo land); or how Shakespeare has Hamlet toy with Polonius as he points out a cloud he at first claims might resemble a camel, then a weasel and finally a whale. (The Simpsons surely riffs on this with a scene in The Telltale Head, in which

clouds 'start looking like stuff' – variously a cherry bomb, a guy with a switchblade stuck in his back, a school bus going over a cliff in flames with kids inside screaming, and the statue of Springfield founder Jebediah Springfield - without the head, of course…) (The Simpsons 1990) Dario Gamboni's *Potential Images* offers a compendium of artists and thinkers inspired by sky gazing: he lists Piero di Cosimo looking at the sky for pictorial inspiration; Novalis writing of figures forming therein; Denis Diderot desirous of leaving the imagination free "like children seeing shapes in clouds", and Odilon Redon's reminiscence of his father's instruction to see in the changing shapes "apparitions of strange, fantastical and marvelous beings" (Gamboni 2002, 69).

Gamboni notes how such tendencies have long been used by artists as triggers for creative work. One eleventh-century treatise by Chinese painter Sung Ti suggests that the artist use an old tumbledown wall spread with piece of thin white silk and "gaze at it until at length you can see the ruins through the silk, its prominences, its levels, its zig-zags and its cleavages, storing them up in your mind and fixing them in your eyes. Soon you will see men, birds, plants and trees, flying and moving among them. You may then ply your brush according to your fancy" (Gamboni 2002, 24). Leonardo da Vinci's *Treatise on Painting* famously recommended artists look at rock formations, walls and stained surfaces, as well ashes, clouds, mud and other seemingly unlikely sources in order to inspire landscapes, scenes, men and animals, devils and monsters: "If you have to invent some scene, you can see there resemblances to a number of landscapes, adorned in various ways with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, great plains, valleys and hills. Moreover, you can see various battles, and rapid actions of figures, strange expressions on faces, costumes, and an infinite number of things, which you can reduce to good, integrated form" (Da Vinci 1956, i, 50-1; 35v, para 76).

During the Renaissance actual 'pictorial stones' seeming to depict strange cities and landscapes were collected and enjoyed as works in themselves; in some cases they were further developed by an artist, worked up with additional overpainting, as in Johann König's 1632 *The Last Judgement* and *Crossing of the Red Sea*, paintings in which the agate itself variously makes up the cloud formations or the tumultuous sea from which painted figures emerge.

Alexander Cozens' 1785 *A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape* suggested the artist: "Possess your mind strongly with a subject" and "with the swiftest hand make all possible variety of shapes and strokes upon your paper" in such a way that was unpremeditated, unguided and unconscious. (Oppé 1952, 173) The painter should then study the shapes until some 'proper meaning such as the blot suggest' has been produced, 'taking care not to add anything not suggested by it, and leave out what appears to be unnatural'. (173) Cozens relates how he had stumbled across his idea upon pulling out a dirty piece of paper upon which to demonstrate something to a student, and had found the preexisting marks thereon had helped him to crystallize an idea.

By the early twentieth century, with representational orders called into question, artists were interested once more in potential images, ambiguity and interpretability: as a child Paul Klee was obsessed with the grotesque creatures he saw in the marble tabletops at his uncle's restaurant, and Salvador Dali gazed at the stained ceiling of his school where he found detailed images he imbued with personality. Whilst the art historian H. W. Janson resolved artistic approaches as definitively falling either into *mimesis* – artists 'discovering' what nature put there – or *fantasia* – as when artists actively read into or interpret vague forms, perhaps in clouds or flames – Marina Warner considers this too stark a binary categorization

given that mimesis "depends on a language of signs that is rooted in the world of the imagination with analogy, metaphor, and associations" (Warner 2006, 108). She describes how in the effort to figure the unseen, when artists thought they were looking empirically at hidden forms they were in fact being led by their fantasia, which in turn was shaped by "diverse, buried codes of cognition and communication" (108).

Pareidolia is not just of interest to artists: it continues to recur in religion. Following a 1992 apparition experienced by one Anita Contreras, the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe was 'seen' in the bark of an oak tree in a park in Watsonville, California. (Carroll 2015). Years later Contreras' cousin Elvira Mendoza de Vidales continued to maintain the shrine each day, pointing out the shape to visitors with the aid of a tilted mirror; she said she had come to see other sacred images in trees and on the ground. In Chicago, Obdulia Delgado told friends she had seen the Virgin Mary in the salt stains that had appeared on the wall of a concrete viaduct; by the following day a group of faithful had gathered at the site, which turned in time into a small shrine with flowers and votive candles. (Zorn 2006). Muslims too have claimed to see the name of Allah spelt out in Arabic in a host of unprepossessing locations and objects – the brown and white pattern of a lamb's coat, within the seedy interior of an aubergine, the scales of a fish… .

These days many people enjoy poking fun at the devout – whatever their creed – who believe themselves to have seen signs of their faith in some everyday object or surface. The web post *50 Objects That Look A Little Like Jesus* is typical of this in the way it sneers at the possibility of seeing the saviour's face in unlikely places: its extensive list includes a glass of chocolate milk, the patterns on a small turtle's shell, the brown patches of a discoloured grape or the skin of a bruised banana, in grease on a burger grill, and the burnt residue on the

bottom of an iron, as well as in stains on the floor, swirls of paint on a wall and the knots in timber doors and planks… (Burns 2011). For the most part such found forms and imagery are these days considered mere curiosities or a momentary amusement, their significance often restricted to the potential of an object to generate media coverage or financial reward. Myrtle Young of Fort Wayne, Indiana, became famous via her appearances on the Johnny Carson and David Letterman shows for the collection of potato crisps in which she had distinguished the faces and shapes of a host of creatures, famous people and cartoon characters – there were horses' heads, dogs and ducks, a sleeping bird, Mr Magoo, Yogi Bear and Mickey Mouse, Bob Hope and George Bush (these last rather dating their discoverer to a particular era of television viewing…). People have claimed to see the likeness of Kate Middleton in a jellybean, Elvis in a piece of toast and Mother Teresa in a cinnamon bun. This last, the 'miracle nun bun' as Nashville coffee shop owner Bob Bernstein termed it, spawned printed mugs and a range of other products until Mother Teresa's lawyers told him he did not have permission to use her image for commercial purposes and he withdrew them from the market. (Bernstein 2004). More recently, one sports fan thought he spotted Rory McIlroy's face in a Danish pastry: as a result, Rob Price bet on the golfer's performance in the 2014 US Masters tournament and though McIlroy did indeed have a hugely successful year, scooping two major titles, unfortunately the Masters wasn't amongst them. (Fearon 2014). Perhaps Price should have had a little more patience and waited a while for his pay-off: he could have followed the example of Florida's Diane Duyser who, upon 'recognising' an image of the Virgin Mary in her grilled cheese sandwich, kept her culinary-religious treasure in a Tupperware container for some ten years before deciding to auction it on eBay; it went on to make her $28000, having been bought by internet casino Goldenpalace, who planned to tour it internationally. (BBC News 2004)

Some are concerned to disavow the misperceptions of what they consider to be such gullible types. As its name indicates, Phil Plait's *Bad Astronomy* website normally specialises in debunking myths and misconceptions about astronomy, but his sceptical blog post occasioned by 'discovering' Lenin's face in stains on his shower curtain, causes him to reflect upon the long history (and enduring contemporary fascination for) humans seeing faces and creatures in inanimate objects. (Plait 2003). He reminds us that the astronomical constellations were named for the mythological figures they were said to resemble, and goes on to remark how, when photographs of the Eagle nebulae were released, many rushed to say they had discerned the face of Jesus in its cloudy masses. Whilst he admits that if you stand back and squint it vaguely resembles the way Jesus is represented in Western art, he is quick to counter: "Of course, it's not Jesus, it's just a random swirl of gas in a cloud 7000 light years away." With our human ability to see patterns in random material, he says that if he scrutinizes the Hubble pictures he could also spot a Scottish Terrier sitting up and begging, as well as a couple of cats, a buffalo, a bird, and several more faces besides.

Of course, all interpretations are culturally particular, and depend a great deal upon the society in which we live, the artefacts within our knowledge or experience (a person would not see a ship in a cloud if they had no knowledge of what a ship is, or looks like) and how we have learnt to see and think via the representational traditions of our society (when Americans look at the moon they tend to see the face of a man, whilst East Indians see a rabbit, Samoans a woman weaving and the Chinese a monkey). As Marina Warner points out in her own reference to the varying patterns found by different cultures in the random scattering of stars, people have tended to begin with the same salient constellations, but to interpret them in diverse ways: Babylonian and Egyptian traditions were adopted by European astronomers, and became the dominant way of naming of groups of stars, but the Amerindian peoples saw alternative stories and characters – for the Barasana people the zodiac includes such

evocatively named combinations as the Old Adze, Poisonous Snake, Caterpillar Jaguar, Scorpion, Big Otter, Fish Smoking Rack, Foam Egret, Large Umari Fruit Fence, Headless One, Armadillo, the Small Otters, and the Corpse Bundle… (Warner 2006, 108).

Although familiar stellar groupings seem so fixed in Western astronomy, during the Early Modern period a veritable 'constellation mania' saw astronomers 'discovering' a host of star figures which they then named for patrons and famous people of the time, motivated apparently by political or financial ambition: in 1679 one Augustin Royer proposed a group of stars in the form of a sceptre and hand in honour of Louis XIV, and in 1684 Gottfried Kirch spotted the crossed swords of the Electors of Saxony and named the constellation for Leopold I. Later, around the 1800s, stargazers saw manifestations in the form of contemporary technological developments – a hot air balloon, an electric generator, a printing office and Herschel's Large Telescope number amongst those spotted… . None of these survived the International Astronomical Union's designation of eighty-eight key formations: at this point over one hundred star 'patterns' were 'eradicated'. For artist Julia Christensen, via whose project I encountered these examples, this shows that such patterns 'are nothing more than manifestations of the imagination, constructs we dream up to help us navigate the vast cosmos in which we dwell' rather than some type of fact to be discovered and verified. (Christensen 2014, 45).

That Gaston Bachelard rather neatly described the constellations as "the Rorschach test of infant humanity" brings me to remark too on the famous test mobilized in psychiatric medicine, when patients responded to apparently abstract information contained in a collection of ink stains, with their response interpreted in turn by a trained clinician, working to a sanctioned method (Bachelard 1943, 202). In Rorschach the psychologist becomes "the

rational interpreter of irrational interpretations" but also practicing an art, investigating a phenomenon situated at the uncertain boundaries "where the actual shape of the self and the shape the world presents to it are hard to distinguish" (Starobinski 1958, 190). The technique's origins in the parlour game of 'klecksography', when players took turns to drip ink and fold paper in order to see what figures emerged, reveals the conjunction of play and imagination at work with interpretation; this is surely there too in paediatrician and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott's 'squiggle game', where a series of additive drawings, accompanied by dialogue about their potential meanings, would allow Winnicott to converse through drawing with those young patients who found it hard to put into words the difficulties they were feeling. (Berger 1980).

This relationship of psychiatry and psychoanalysis to the interpretation of abstract data continues in those forms of mental illness in which sufferers find meaningful patterns in ways that are not sanctioned. In such cases, contrary to certain popular conceptions of what it is for someone to be 'mad', it's not that things don't make sense, but rather that they start to make too much of it: things *mean* to excess. Such sensations were recognised by Klaus Conrad as marking the onset of delusional thinking in psychosis when sufferers begin to "repetitively and monotonously experience abnormal meanings in their experiential field" (Mishara 2010, 10). He characterized this as *apophänie,* inventing the neologism 'apophany' (from the Greek apo [away from] + phaenein [to show]), to describe how some psychotics initially experience delusion as revelation, but the insights they have as a result are only self-referential, solipsistic and paranoid. August Strindberg's *Inferno* gives a sense of this: "There on the ground I found two dry twigs, broken off by the wind. They were shaped like the Greek letter for 'P' and 'y'. I picked them up and it struck me that these two letters P-y must be an abbreviation of the name Popoffsky. Now I was sure it was he who was persecuting me, and that the Powers wanted to open my eyes to my danger" (Strindberg 1962, 68-9).

If seeing patterns in sticks is a sign of paranoia in some, for certain others - paranormal researchers, for instance – it may designate a way of tracking the mysterious 'Bigfoot': in Lisa Shiel's *Backyard Bigfoot: The True Story of Stick Signs, UFOs and the Sasquatch*, she notes sticks arranged in meaningful and distinctly unnatural displays, which she considers the vehicle for their non-verbal communication (Shiel 2006). I'm in no position to comment on the legitimacy or sanity of Shiel's work, but I'm interested to think how skilled hunters also read into the disposition of sticks and other debris on a forest floor in order to determine the passage or presence of animals of various sorts, and I wonder if matters here relate to a question of what it is proper and acceptable to look for at a given cultural moment?

Neuropsychologist Peter Brugger draws upon Strindberg's experiences in a paper about the role of the brain in the 'pattern recognition' of creative people, scientists, people with paranormal beliefs, and those suffering psychotic episodes. Brugger delineates a continuum, which has *detection* of real patterns at one end, and the 'hypercreative' *interpretation* of patterns in 'noise' at the other. Brugger notes "[t]he ability to associate, and especially the tendency to prefer 'remote' over 'close' associations, is at the heart of creative, paranormal and delusional thinking" (Brugger 2001, 196) and notes that the readiness to see connections between unrelated objects or ideas is what "most closely links psychosis to creativity" (205). Like Conrad, he suggests that a key symptom of psychotic experience is "a heightened awareness of the meaningfulness and personal relevance of any event together with the absolute conviction that no two things in the world are devoid of meaningful connections" (204). He quotes the testimony of two people who had encountered such

sensations in their own psychotic breakdowns. For the first: "Every single thing "means" something. This kind of symbolic thinking is exhaustive… . I have a sense that everything is more vivid and important; the incoming stimuli are almost more than I can bear. There is a connection to everything that happens – no coincidences. I feel tremendously creative" (Brundage 1983, 584). And for the second: "My trouble is that I have too many thoughts. You might think about something, let's say that ashtray and just think "Oh! yes, that's for putting my cigarettes in,' but I would think of a dozen different things connected with it at the same time" (McGhie and Chapman 1961, 108).

For Brugger, the ability to see patterns and make connections is a hallmark of the creative mind in any field, but he distinguishes between the practices of art and science, suggesting that the arts can acknowledge and take advantage of the "purely subjective aspect of perceiving", whilst by contrast, "scientific creativity requires not only the ability to detect patterns, but also the *interpretation* of their underlying cause"(205). He goes on to describe the potential errors to which the human mind is liable: "[i]ncorrectly assuming the presence of a pattern where, in fact, none exists, is labeled in the language of statistics a Type 1 error. In contrast, a Type 2 error refers to the incorrect conclusion that the data reflect 'noise' when a pattern is actually present" (205). In his thinking through the relativity of creativity – which runs, he says, from the correct detection of existing patterns to discovering pattern where none exists – he wonders why the genetic aspect of a predisposition to psychosis persists despite what he considers are the disadvantages it presents the species, and concludes that: "The price for a protection against committing Type 2 errors is a susceptibility to commit Type 1 errors" (210). Brugger asserts: "As puzzling as it may read, a proper understanding of the world sometimes requires the successful *inhibition* of associations." (207) Whilst Brugger repeatedly denigrates the projective imagination of psychoanalytic techniques, considering that they stray well beyond the 'proper' boundaries of interpretation, Marina Warner notes

how diagnostic tools relying on such techniques lie at the heart of so many nineteenth and twentieth century attempts to interrogate the psyche/self including such disciplines as clinical psychology, psychoanalysis and the activities of literary and artistic Surrealism. Warner saw graphology, lie detection, Rorschach testing, psychometrics and the like as akin to those earlier Platonist traditions in which God's messages were thought to be concealed in text, when a gifted 'scryer' could reveal the secret significance of cryptic material; she notes how both Freud and Jung had something of a divinatory practice in their discovery of unconscious symbols in dream imagery and art. As a result she writes: "When the name of Allah is found inscribed in the heart of an aubergine, or Jesus' face in a burned tortilla, or pyramids on Mars, or the Virgin Mary in a tomato, or any such items beloved of organs such as the National Inquirer, and the world-wide web, we are not straying very far afield from rather more respected methods of interpretation, surprising as it may seem" (Warner 2006, 106-7).

Warner makes the case that from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "rather than discerning the activity of occult powers or revealing the hidden workings of divine providence, now the process tends to hold a mirror to the psyche of the subject" (Warner 2006, 107). She goes on: "When we see what we think we see, this can tell us something about who we are". At which point I find myself doing just that, using my fascination with the faces seen in stained walls, or in cheese graters and other such quotidian objects – as a means to figure and reflect on my own role and methodology as an artist-researcher, and the potential 'knowledge' generated as a result.

In my own thinking through practice – essaying the everyday in writing, photography, print and audio – I want to credit the creative propensity, noted by Brugger, for making sense of data in ways usually considered improper in a serious inquiry. At art school I learnt to make connections between seemingly disparate aspects, between high and low, the popular and abstruse, the over familiar and the overlooked; to accommodate contradiction; and to read material in such a way that I could make new and mobile meanings from what is encountered. Museum director Christopher Woodward once suggested that whilst archaeologists see artefacts and sites as clues to a puzzle of which only one answer is correct, for artists, "any answer which is imaginative is correct" (Woodward 2001, 30). I am curious therefore, in the work I do, to test the effects of such an approach within the academy.

I have come to think about the criticality of contradiction itself. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, whose "willingness to embrace contradictions […] always marked his approach", according to David Blackbourn, took the essay as his favoured form, and he mocked those academics who "with an air of triumph accused the essayist of contradictions, just imagine — contradictions!" (Blackbourn 2010, 15). For the Hungarian writer Miklós Szentkuthy, the need for contradiction was explicit: "For me the most incomprehensible secret is how someone can keep writing or building on a subject in one style to the very end. To achieve that degree of consistency I would need to freeze into some sort of intellectual tetanus as I am in a constantly changing relationship to my subject, and that is the most fundamental reality" (Szentkuthy 1995 translated and quoted in Tompa 2013, 289).

In terms of a constantly changing relationship to one's subject matter, I saw how this desire has been echoed by others in recent thinking on interdisciplinary research: Paul Carter characterized such research as being like "the shuttle ducking and weaving across the warp"

of a loom, recalling the "physical sense of running hither and thither" evoked by the word 'discourse'; for him the aim of this process is "to *materialise discourse itself*" (Carter 2004, 9). For Irit Rogoff, art itself is an interlocutor: "it's the entity that chases me around and forces me to think differently" (Rogoff 2000, 10). She is clear that she is "trying to avoid the work being hijacked by some academic paradigm which would dictate a relation between objects and knowledge" (Rogoff 2000, 8).

The shifting exploration is evoked too by the 'semionaut', that figure Nicolas Bourriaud identified as someone who invents paths through culture and signs. He claims that DJs, Web surfers and certain types of contemporary artist project new, possible scripts endlessly onto culture, and describes how: "When we start a search engine in pursuit of a name or a subject, a mass of information issued from a labyrinth of data-banks is inscribed on the screen. The 'semionaut' imagines the links, the likely relations between disparate sites" (Bourriaud 2005, 19). Bourriaud's identification of a concern for 'relations between disparate sites' finally draws me back to one of the specific historical examples of pareidolia I mentioned earlier, the identification and naming of the constellations, and I want to use this as a means to figure an alternative to the linear academic thesis. I remembered how these imaginative manifestations had been mobilised by no lesser figure than Walter Benjamin in a powerful image for the historical work in which he was engaged. His metaphorical conception of the 'constellation' first appears in the prologue to his *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925) where he writes: "ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed" (Benjamin 2009, 34). In Benjamin, critical work is done in the connection between fragments and between different objects, registers and discourses… Norm Friesen connects Benjamin's constellationary thinking with that of Siegfried Giedion and Marshall McLuhan, identifying "Juxtaposition and ironic counterposition across time and space [as] obviously

modernist tropes" (Friesen 2013 under *Conclusion: Redemption or Ricorso?*). He considers such thought in relation to Mieke Bal's idea of the 'travelling concept', which are elastic ideas or metaphors, offering "sites of debate, awareness of difference and tentative exchange" (Bal 2002, 13).

So whilst those online postings about faces seen in satchels, chairs, mops, foodstuffs and culinary utensils, alerted me to a phenomena that seemed at first merely humorous and diverting, the contemporary fascination revealed a longer human history of pareidolia and its role in creativity, religion, mythmaking, science, psychoanalysis and psychiatry. I came to understand that, as Howard Margolis' classic work makes clear, "the brain has a bias favouring seeing something rather than nothing, so that it tends to jump to a pattern that makes sense of a situation" (Margolis 1987, 38-9) and indeed that there may be evolutionary advantages to humans via such a propensity (Brugger 2001, 210). But whilst Brugger suggests that this leads too frequently to erroneous conclusions, the continuum of interpretative responses to 'data' of various sorts is creatively and critically of interest to me. Artists, academics, paranormal researchers, psychoanalysts and the psychotic all have their differing take on what they think they see, and what they know as a result: I want to hold these perspectives in productive relation, rather than hierarchizing, or definitively categorizing these according to their propriety.

Seen perhaps in terms of an immaterial illusion, pareidolia allows for richer, stranger readings of the everyday material we encounter. It in fact is a method with a long history that alters our perception and changes an approach to pattern recognition, interpretation, the generation and

proliferation of meaning. Artistic research can make knowledge in the form of possibilities, but it is thanks to the very objects and their place in popular culture that my project and practice was itself rethought, and re-envisaged. By drawing together a critical constellation of references, responses and reinterpretations, I refigure what kind of knowledge I make, and what this can in turn make of me. Responding to Foucault's recognition of academic skimpy insufficiency, and to Raunig's desire for transversal, inventive writing within the university institution, I think of this work as the popular life of things creating their own complex agenda, the things think me. As a result I echo the aspiration of novelist William Gass: "you hope that the amount of meaning that you can pack into the book will always be more than you are capable of consciously understanding. Otherwise, the book is likely to be as thin as you are" (Gass quoted in Colter Walls 2013, 22).

Endnote
The Pam Flett Press – its name plays on the idea of the pamphlet and evokes those historical or contemporary connotations of political, religious or poetic pamphleteering – takes up the assertion credited to Andre Breton, and widely circulated amongst independent-minded makers that 'one publishes to find comrades' (quoted in Branwyn 1997, 52) The serial publication explores such phenomena as graffiti on urban walls, vacant lots that perforate the urban fabric, the ubiquitous plastic bag, the scatter of gum on city pavements, the pareidolic desire to see faces in ordinary objects, and through the activity of *making* (publications) becomes both a making-one's-way-into-understanding the everyday, *and* an increasingly metacritical project in which the everyday as material in turn rethinks my academic and artistic work. It pursues an interest in the creative and critical possibilities of the essay form – recalling that etymologically 'essay' comes from ideas of trial, test and experiment (French speakers will know that essayer is 'to try.') That an essay can be made from diverse material suits both the attention to disparate everyday subject matter, and my own training in conceptual art when an appropriate form or material is sought for ideas rather than having a particular medium in mind in the first instance. An essay might certainly be written, but it could also be intended as audio, as in pieces for radio or internet podcasts; it could be visual, using photographic, film/video, or employing animation or sequential images; it might be a physical exhibition, where ideas can be disposed and unfold in physical space and time; or an interactive site online. My work with the Press was also motivated by Foucault's call for "a new age of curiosity", where one takes care "for what exists and could exist" and there is "a readiness to find strange and singular what surrounds us; a certain relentlessness to break up our familiarities and to regard otherwise the same things; a fervor to grasp what is happening and what passes; a casualness in regard to the traditional hierarchies of the important and the

essential" and a need for "differentiation and simultaneity of different networks." (Foucault 1997, 305) It draws upon the insights and experiences of those within the academy that deliberately tarry in the vague terrains of practice, emerging from the apparently marginal grounds of scholarship where knowledge and knowing are themselves problematized, and multiple interpretations remain simultaneously and intentionally possible. (See Lee 2011a, 2011b, 2013, 2015)

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