

Florence Lazar / Recto : *Socialisme ou barbarie*
Verso : *Jeune militant (2)*

“There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” – Walter Benjamin

What these two images offer and yet, at the same time, withdraw – or more correctly, negate – is portraiture. And as portraiture can be seen to withdraw itself, so along with the tight cropping of both images, the subject’s lower facial features retreat from focus in one instance, while an ample mesh of hair conceals any remaining lineament in the other. In each case, the “sitter” withdraws in the very act of offering an object to be beheld: here a torn and scribbled cover of a political news bulletin; there an almost entire set of the revolutionary journal *Socialisme ou barbarie*, published from 1949 to 1965.

Portraiture, at the same time, latently remains inscribed on the aging cover of the Young Socialists’ news bulletin – indeed, in its very defacement. For those scrawled words, arrows and spontaneous marks appear there as the momentary and fragmentary residue of a previous subject’s formation: involuntary pointing to a desire for cognition and, at the same time, for a libidinal release from the demands and constraints of an emerging – and in this instance, political – socialization. Here is the very image of what Cornelius Castoriadis, a founding member of *Socialisme ou barbarie*, later described as the two competing imaginaries that inform a subject’s constitution: The radical imaginary of the psyche, as a recalcitrant yet creative and subjective bedrock, on the one hand; and on the other, the social imaginary, those historically given, conventions and values that each subject ceaselessly institutes and incorporates as a social being. That both remain in a state of flux and in tension with each other, as Castoriadis argues, is what nevertheless opens to potential resistance and change – ultimately allowing for new subjective and social forms to emerge and take shape.

Admittedly, this brings us far from the discrete bourgeois subject that continues to inform the notion of what a portrait is. That notion remains centered on the mythical claim of self-realization freed from psychic and social constraints that can be traced to such early modern examples as Parmigianino’s *Portrait of a Young Man*. Parmigianino’s young sitter attests to the discreteness of the individual that had, by the late sixteenth century, made its historical debut. Hegel - during a visit to the Louvre in 1827 – described his enthrallment of seeing in Parmigianino’s portrait a convincing portrayal of “spiritual and joyous well-being.” The “inner freedom” and “freedom from external things” that he identified in the young sitter’s gaze and posture anticipates, on the eve of photography’s invention, Walter Benjamin’s description of the aura that emanates from the earliest photographic portraits. As Benjamin has famously argued, the aura stemmed from the congruency between the allure of the newly invented medium and the demeanor of its earliest sitters – a congruency which affirms a sense of self-possession and purpose shared among the members of a rising social class. Hence, the decline of the aura accompanied the “degeneracy” (Benjamin’s word) to which that class succumbed as it relinquished its cultural aspirations, the better to shore up its social and economic ascendancy. Photography’s initial auratic and egalitarian promise thereafter gave way to the demands of social control and the ubiquity of commodity exchange. Since Benjamin’s time, those demands have come to persistently mark the limits of portraiture and the attempts to revive it as an artistic genre.

Given that these are the same limits that once formed the theoretical horizon of *Socialisme ou barbarie*, the gesture of the young sitter in offering to the viewer the journal’s aging volumes no doubt points to what these images, as portraits, otherwise refuse: Not only the increasing surveillance and regulatory demands placed on the contemporary subject but the commodification of affect itself – relentlessly circulating, as pure sign-exchange, the human countenance.

Dean Inkster

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