

## DIGITAL FACE-ISM AND MICRO-FASCISM

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The exchange of digital images depicting partial bodies is an iconic feature of online dating and contemporary sexuality. I build on previous writing and concepts explored by Deleuze and Guattari in regards to how such images function as “affection-images” (Deleuze, 1986). I then articulate how employing an affective structure of “faciality” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) that not only orients our tendencies towards certain faces, but also bodies and body parts, is of political concern in an era of digital capitalism. The reading of faces and bodies that become “facialised”, that is, communicate degrees of affection through digital interfaces, contributes to an algorithmic averaging-out of desire. The key to this critique is that the digital exacerbates pre-existing “micro-fascisms”. These rules of acceptance or rejection that exist on a personal level in all individuals, in collaboration with the rapid availability and processing of faces and bodies online, allows such averaging-out to occur. The writing also makes significant reference to Sarah Ahmed (2006) and Judith Butler (1988).

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### INTRODUCTION

For people using online dating apps like Tinder, Grindr or Hornet, static faces catching our eyes from within smartphone and tablet screens are an everyday phenomenon. Infamous too are the images of partial bodies displayed during sexualised online chatting. Fingers press, swipe, pinch and zoom into these images for more detail. Brains engage, get turned on, and off, and judge these images of bodies in rapid succession. We might assume that in their digital multiplicity, such images constitute a liberal sexual expression, but what has become increasingly clear is that, en masse, humans are producing their own standards of participation that exclude differences from within online dating platforms, and that it is through user participation that such standards occur. This is unlike the standards handed down to the public by mainstream culture and is produced by human beings in collaboration with digital systems designed to serve human needs with maximal efficiency. I argue,

through reading Deleuze and Guattari (1987), that such tools draw-out and exacerbate micro-fascisms within users. The discussion I have in this paper is originary in my work on online dating platforms (Penney, 2014, 2015), but I extend my reading of faciality and micro-fascism to suggest a broader political application to a variety of social media through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "faciality" (1987).

Online dating platforms are influenced by a digital media design world obsessed with user interface (UI) and user experience (UX) design. Over the past few years those geniuses in Silicon Valley popularised a global design paradigm that links empathy and interface together under these two terms. UI and UX design prompt that designers must unlock the capacity to understand others rather than design for the self; to understand user stories, end-user problems and pathways to best design the experiences that others will navigate when faced with digital apps, games, social media and websites. This is generally about the order users will press on buttons or links, what kind of feedback they need, and where people will look on a screen first. The Silicon Valley, TED-talking rhetoric is that we do this to make user interfaces more efficient to improve people's lives. Interfaces must become more 'conversational', nuanced and with increased interactive fidelity to become seamless and organically relatable. The onus of empathy, however, is never on the user to understand the machine, or (more importantly) on the user to understand other users. The onus is generally on the designer and the system to understand the user, to best serve them, to provide them with the tools to consume content and make their own judgements on that content as fast as possible. This is underpinned by a capitalist system where profit is gleaned in direct proportion to the number of such interactions made. This is the production of a narcissistic subject, a micro-fascistic subject, who despite being surrounded by rhetorics of empathy (and who may even employ these rhetorics to their own ends) and a multitude of other identities, still only processes that world through a personal screen that serves and compounds individual prejudices and needs. The increase in the immediacy and availability of content presented by digital screens 'in the best interest of users' includes the rapid presentation of faces and bodies on online dating platforms. Such tools render users far less empathic precisely due to the immediacy and efficiency of their ability to sort through and judge representations of other people.

## THE PRIMACY OF THE FACE

UX and UI designers are attuned and accustomed to reading and designing the movements that users will shift through via interfaces. Press a button here, move to a link here, swipe here, give visual and sonic feedback there. Artifacts of digital media must be designed to give meaningful, fluid and swift feedback to encourage efficient pathways. Organic-feeling animation with smooth curves, easing-in and out, satisfying sound and poppy effects all

contribute to the feeling that a device is responding to our input and underpin an exchange of affect. In games this might be known as good ‘game-feel’. At current, this all operates within the tendency towards “images under glass” (Victor, 2011) where the “commanding fingers of [...] users rub numb, as if calloused, upon the surface of visual bodies” (Penney, 2014). On online dating platforms this occurs while brains rapidly parse a constantly updating array of geo-location-sorted faces that are misleadingly available to interact with. Most dating apps use this format for their UI; the presentation of a grid of faces with an interface. I think of this as ‘faces-within-a-face’, where individual faces become the micro-movements and organs of a larger digital-facial structure, but to whom many calculations and algorithms fashioned by designers and maintained by machines are hidden and remain internal to a hidden digital body; a corporate server in some unknown place. Similarly hidden are the internal worlds of other users that are presented interact with.

Perhaps we forget that the first interface that we ‘read’, from which we require meaningful feedback, and the primal and psychic structure that gives the name to ‘interface’, is of course ‘the face’ itself. The face is, as Deleuze states in *Cinema I* (1986) an “organ carrying plate of nerves which has sacrificed most of its global mobility and which gathers or expresses in a free way all kinds of tiny local movements which the rest of the body usually keeps hidden.” (Deleuze, 1986, p.98). To summarise, Deleuze discusses how the face communicates what is internal to a body, it is the surface we read to understand what is hidden in others and that communicates and exchanges affection. Interfaces as flat surfaces based on grids of pixels and design-grid systems are not dissimilar to human faces, which are also based on grids. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) together note that human faces, are measured (by humans, not machines) in terms of a grid and are recognised based on the variation of contrast within such grids. Darkness implies the openings of the face - eyes, nostrils, mouth, ears - which together form the recognisable organs on a facial surface. These darkneses are contrasted against the relative lightness of the surrounding facial structure and thus a face is recognised. This is not really any different to how digital facial recognition systems now recognise human faces; assessing patterns of contrast given a grid of pixels in a digital image to denote faces. It is important to note that Deleuze and Guattari in this discussion of dark / light contrasts consciously highlight the racism of this dominant ‘white face’ model, and are concerned for how the model of recognising white faces produces subjects that ‘tend toward’ white faces. It is implied that the orienting-towards white faces in the consciousness of people globally is a product of white-European globalisation and media power. When looking at dating apps, particularly for gay men, I am interested in how such a white face model comes to dominate the ‘faces-within-a-face’ interface.

People are lazy when it comes to reading and responding to both faces and interfaces; “Laziness is the better way to predict what will happen in the future” says designer Greg Madison (2016). Designers know that if feedback is clunky, pathways broken, welcome

screens unclear or tutorials confounding that users, generally too lazy to deal with another route, will not look further (and why should they?). The concerned app or linked content will be neglected, passed over, forgotten. So too do we engender such neglect when confronting human faces. In a human exchange, the face is a primary step in a series of branching options of a ‘user story’. We read faces (and body language) in order to determine the series of actions we take towards another human being. If we are not oriented towards a particular kind of facial pattern that deviates from a norm, or through expressive movements produces a deviant arrangement of facial organs, we may desire not to continue and eventually seek to turn away from that face over time. This fear of different facial arrangements, as Deleuze and Guattari discuss at length, is fundamental to racism. Faces that do not conform to the organisation of ‘nice faces’ are, on some level, terrifying to people; a threat to a normative and primal stability. Obscure faces, or obscure expressions (as organisations of the elements of a face) are just too difficult in the face of faces that are easier to digest; symmetrical, clean and generic. If the average white face is the line of best fit for faces, then deviation from this arrangement on a facial grid produces the rejection of alternately-arranged faces more and more over time.

In critiques of digital media people often think of mechanical and digital devices as being inhuman perversions of existing systems of human capacity and behaviour. But if we consider faciality, we can see that digital systems may actually just exacerbate and mirror pre-existing tendencies of judgement and orientation. Pop culture is filled with references to organic humans being minced through mechanical systems that sap their humanity, but humans invented such systems, and now with empathy, algorithms, and big data in the mix, they are designed to evolve from and reflect human input and behaviour. Machines learn more from how humans think and behave in their systems than we learn about those systems in return. As such digital social systems including dating apps come to caricature deep and pre-existing tendencies within humans; intensifying them through their rapidity of processing and availability of content. They give greater agency and intensity to human systems of judgement, selection, identity formation and dissolution. Below are the points that, from here, I would like any readers to consider:

- We read both real faces and other objects (such as interfaces) as faces to understand their interiority, this is known as an affection-image.
- Online we encounter many affection-images in rapid succession.
- Both humans and computers are acceptance-rejection machines that sort faces based on the arrangement of dark/light contrasts in a grid-like structure.
- Faciality not only refers to the organisation of faces but the politics that such faces come to represent.

- The ‘white-face’ model represents an overwhelming preference in Western society for white faces, and the identification of ideologies and politics that characterise the presumed interiority of such faces.
- By ‘facing toward’ certain faces over time and not others, we cultivate and compound an orientation towards certain likenesses and their presumed political preferences.
- The personal political orientations and rules that inform our acceptance and rejection of online faces are here called micro-fascisms. Internal human algorithms, narcissistic and reductive and not necessarily in-line with any meta-political polarity.
- This process of orientation informed by micro-fascisms is exacerbated by the efficiency and rapidity of digital tools - extensive browsing and sorting through algorithms, feeds, blocking, liking, following, unfollowing that get rid of undesired faces.
- This compounding speaks to echo-chamber effects and our entrance into a ‘post truth’ faciality - the rejection of faces that do not conform to our personally compounding orientation, regardless of macro-political orientation.
- Silence, and knowledge of ‘good’ language (visual or otherwise) specific to our social community allows us to hide micro-fascisms in stealth, again aided by the delivery and cultivation of a personal algorithm through a screen that is not seen by others.

## FACES AND AFFECTION-IMAGES

There are many languages we use online to communicate and understand others. As my background is in the visual arts and my own work has focused on dating apps I have come to analyse these issues mostly through the vehicle of image and I acknowledge there are many other lenses that could be used. I am interested in our relationship to images that here show not only faces, but different parts of the body framed as objects of desire and fetish, presented by users in order to maximise the number of affectionate responses received by other users. These include pictures of genitals (‘dick pics’, ‘belfies’). I rely on Deleuze in “Cinema 1: The Movement Image” (1986) to describe how not only faces, but also images of body parts (as partial objects - discussed later) come to be read as affection-images; images that give some indication of an other’s internal state. I discuss this more at length in a previous publication, “Bodies Under Glass: Gay dating Apps and the Affect-Image” (Penney, 2014).

In online dating apps images of the face or body are often an indication of interest or arousal in response to a sexualised digital encounter. Kane Race describes the gay dating app Grindr as providing a service insofar as it deals in the market of producing sexual encounters (Race, 2014). As users compete against each other in this market through the ‘faces-within-a-face’ interface; an ever-updating grid of faces and partial objects, they tweak their own images over time to be less and less specific for fear of violating a normative facial arrangement

(Penney, 2014). Specificity flees in favour of a line of best fit that produces a maximal profit of affection. I call this averaging-out 'poker-facing' because (in the case of gay men) it produces a standard of stern faces and characterless torso images that are average, plain and white over time.

To Deleuze all affection-images are 'faces'. Affection-images are a facializing of objects; the colonising and coding of representations of matter under an imposed human structure - that of 'the face'. The method through which humans do this from birth is by responding to and reading human faces, usually of their mother and father. Affection-images in Deleuze's original text refer to close-ups of the face that aim to reveal the interiority of a connected body (its emotions), either projected onto, or read from within, the workings of a face. "There is no close-up of the face, the face is in itself close-up, the close-up is by itself face and both are affect, affection-image." (Deleuze, 1986, p.98). To Deleuze, although affection-images are always 'faces' (or 'facified') they do not have to actually be faces. A close-up on a clock-face is for example an attempt at revealing the interiority of the clock, its mechanical workings and its response to the physical environment. This idea is important when thinking about digital media because we are faced with a wide variety of images from which to glean affection, none of which are actually faces, and many of which are still, unrevealing and constructed from an arrangement of pixels. The profile is the face of the person, and instead of reading muscular micro-movements in a user's facial features we read data and static imagery. Imagery is not here like Baroque painting; it does not express or externalise maximal folds of emotion or meaning, it is a close-up, generally cold, and designed to mask anything but the "objective" appearance of the person; this is the "any-person-whatever" of the person, that is, the person designed to catch the most number of affective responses.

In online dating affection-images are still rather than moving (the movement-image is the topic of Deleuze's book on cinema) and numbed by the glass interface and its reductive tropes. Affection and intimacy cannot be perfectly translated, or modulated, into the comparatively discrete packages of representation provided by digital platforms. The face that attracts the most number of other faces is generally not a revealing face, but one that allows others to project their own desires onto it (a reflective face). This is not a specific person but a person functioning as a type. What we find here is the Deleuzian distinction between "quality" and "power" in the affect-image, the difference between reading a face as having qualities "common to several different things" (the still, whole, face as a "type"), and the expression of "power which passes from one quality to another" (the ability to read movements in individual features in the face). We must read other human beings in terms of their "quality" as we do not have enough expressive information. We must fit these self-representations to what we already expect similar images to behave as. As such we find in many, a person who has self-aggregated so as not to offend, but defend, against any suggestion that they're a non-sexual person; a person that otherwise cannot capitalise in the

facial market. What is ultimately consumed in this market varies (affection, intimacy, hookups), but all begin with affection-images in the faces-within-a-face interface, and there is a burden on each user to produce an image that represents maximal opportunities in a potential encounter, digital or otherwise.

## PARTIAL OBJECTS AND AFFECTION-IMAGES

Because both faces and body parts function as affection-images, the term ‘partial object’ is apt as a post-Freudian term present in Deleuze that describes the breaking down of an object (here the body) into its component parts. Partial objects are those perceived and desired in isolation from the whole. The classic Kleinian example is of an infant desiring interaction with their mother’s breast. Often partial objects refer to sex organs. On online dating sites like Grindr isolated images of male body parts, such as erect penises or splayed bottoms, become objects of desire in isolation from the whole. Because partial objects are symbolic, they are essentially consumed for what they represent in a system of desire and do not actually fulfil desires. This exacerbates an unending process of desire and consumption as such images are produced in abundance. As users log in and out, the user browses, and the geo-location changes, the illusion of an abundance of symbolic desires in the form of affection-images and partial objects is produced. As divorced from a unified whole, affection-images as partial objects cannot be read or actually confronted, as a person faces another person, but will always reflect desires that are projected on or into them. This becomes a repetitive and perverse browsing-over-time, as the gaze skips over face after face or consumes dick-pic after dick-pic, one becomes accustomed to, or even oriented-towards, a mastery of a perverse surface, a play of bodies, and a system of unending desire without fulfilment necessarily. The optimal presentation of affection-images becomes a language game. The purity of the partial object – the promise it offers – eclipses the messy reality of non-digital encounters. Even after such encounters, the phone will buzz, the list, re-opened, and partial objects represented ready to suggest new symbolic desires and associated encounters that seduce users away from pursuing the former, and a non-digital affectionate reality that is frightening and confronting with its messier nuances.

## ORIENTATIONS TOWARD AFFECTION-IMAGES AS PARTIAL OBJECTS

‘A queer phenomenology might offer an approach to sexual orientation by rethinking how the bodily direction “toward” objects shapes the surfaces of bodily and social space’ (Ahmed, 2006, p.68). I have discussed my definition of affection-image and how I wish to use the term in relation to a facial language in gay online dating apps. I have also briefly mentioned that

the processing of these images at the level of the individual constitutes the time-based production of a standard of participation online. Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006) sheds light on how situatedness with objects-over-time (sexually) orients us. We know through Judith Butler (1988) that identifications such as masculinity rely on the repetition of acts through time; that identification is a time-based language, and we can here think about how such behaviours become normative in online settings, where the online setting is an everyday ‘domestic’ space for gay men. The repetitive consumption of images, the behaviours of pressing, swiping, blocking, typing and looking, surely orient, and have a lasting effect on, users of Grindr and similar apps.

Ahmed discusses repetition, that if “the work of repetition is not neutral work; it orients the body in some ways rather than others” (Ahmed, 2006, p.57), just as typing this paper produces tension in my arm over time, inscribes itself, physically on my identity as an academic, surely such situatedness with affection-images, and the repetitive treatment of their associated users on smartphones produce lasting qualities, inscribing behaviours and orientations in gay male users. Ahmed’s approach is phenomenological and concerned with relations to objects in the world. Ahmed invokes a primal narcissism via Schutz and Luckmann (1974, p.4) that “in such a world, everything is orientated around me, as being available and familiar to me”. This is the nature of the smartphone app, which presents other users ‘in terms of’ the individual through the personal handset. These other users are presented as ‘within reach’; their faces always face our body. We are familiar with them. It is through the turning-towards, the facing of ‘the face’ of objects we can think of narcissism differently here; affection-images and profiles constitute objects ‘within reach’ for a subject, as such objects have faces that ‘turn towards’ subjects consistently over time.

‘Putting aside any suggestion that orientation necessarily starts with objects, “We can ask what kinds of objects bodies ‘tend toward’ in their tendencies, as well as how such tendencies shape what bodies tend toward.’ (Ahmed, 2006, p.57)

As one sits comfortably in a private setting, skimming through affection-images, one faces many faces. Through reading Ahmed we might consider that in the comfort of the home (the union of the domestic and Grindr as a privately networked space ‘within reach’ of or ‘on’ the body), one becomes oriented-towards the partial object, the affection-image, the close-up, as a default mode of engagement. “The repetition of the work is what makes the work disappear” (Ahmed, 2006, p.56) says Ahmed; the practice of swiping, gazing, blocking and chatting become invisible forms of labour that shape our tendencies towards consuming affection-images and partial objects as ‘comfortable’ inscriptions on our behaviour. “Orientations shape what bodies do, while bodies are shaped by orientations they already have, as effects of the work that must take place for a body to arrive where it does.” (Ahmed,



2006, p.58) The body must therefore arrive at an orientation that faces the symbolic in affection-images, the symbolic desires of partial objects, and not of their reality.

‘The normative can be considered an effect of the repetition of bodily actions over time, which produces what we can call the bodily horizon, a space for action, which puts some objects and not others in reach’ (Ahmed, 2006, p.66).

To Ahmed, this normativity also constitutes a straightening or a ‘lining-up’ of things, so that if something is out of line, it is immediately noticeable or queer. Grindr constantly presents ‘within reach’ a certain kind of face (the white-face, the poker-face). In the Grindr interface, which relies on the arrangement of bodies in a grid, it is easy to spot bodies that participate out of line with the usual standards of participation. Queer, which is originally “a spatial term” (Ahmed, 2006, p.67) “does not follow a ‘straight line’, a sexuality that is bent or crooked” (Cleto, 2002, p.13). In the Grindr grid, bodies are co-located as affection-images. “For Merleau-Ponty, the sexual body is one that shows the orientation of the body as an “object that is *sensitive* to all the rest”, a body that feels the nearness of the objects with which it coexists” (Ahmed, 2006, p.67) although Ahmed adds that this sensitivity itself can already be a queer one. While being hyper aware of the visual proximity of these affection-images, the result is one rather of sensitive competition with these closeby bodies that produces the averaging-out that I allude to.

## BLACK HOLES OF SUBJECTIVITY

Before I get to micro-fascisms, the concept of a subjective black hole is important in a facial regime of dark-light contrasts. This concept is originary in facial features as the black holes of Deleuze’s facial grid - the point at which an individual is defined not by its reflectivity but by its subjective openings, the place where an individual sucks the external world into itself and where we perceive others to have depth (eyes, mouth, nostrils, ears) the places where the agency of the face and connected body are most powerful. ‘Black hole’ is synonymous to subjectivity, a ‘sucking-inward’ towards a personal regime of seeing. To Deleuze and Guattari black holes are intertwined with whiteness, the placement of the black holes in the reflective surface of the white face mirror the dominator influence of white man, who manipulates the world through overcoding, subjecting other languages to their own. ‘The face’ in its dominant form, for Deleuze and Guattari, is a white male political structure, over-coded so as to reflect the idea of white men themselves:

‘The face is not a universal. It is not even that of the white man; it is White Man himself, with his broad white cheeks and the black hole of the eyes. The face is

Christ. The face is the typical European [...] The face is by nature an entirely specific idea.' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.206-7)

This 'specific idea' to Deleuze and Guattari is the major topic of their chapter "Year Zero: Faciality" in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988). This concerns white-maleness as a 'face' and deviation or proximity to it as well as how people internalise this structure when judging other faces. In this culture, the face has become fixed. It is over-coded and has ceased to be polymorphous. Deleuze and Guattari claim that ours is a culture of submission to this face - to be judged and sucked into a black hole of white man - Christ, Judge, Father, Patriarch - the idolatry of such symbols of masculinity resonate with the fetishisation of the masculine in gay online dating spaces. Faciality allows for a code to be applied to all faces and subjects them to the same judgment, the same black hole. This arrangement "[...] is an affair not of ideology but of economy and the organization of power." (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.207) and therefore speaks to the territory that the white body has gained, and continues to maintain, on Grindr and elsewhere. On Grindr a user with their own subjectivity, their own status as a micro black-hole, surveys a grid of reflective faces. When every user has power over their own 'faces-within-a-face' interface, this structure hands black-hole-ism to the user who borrows or calls forth from within the agency of the white-facial standard produced over time. The user functions as a singularity that other faces exist 'in terms of', forgetting that, in fact, each other face is in turn a micro black-hole perceiving them to be a reflective surface that they project their own desires onto. This personal black hole is a function of micro-fascism. Additionally it is a tool that nourishes a rapid and despotic process of judgement:

'[...] faciality assumes a role of selective response, or choice: given a concrete face, [it] judges whether it passes or not, whether it goes or not, on the basis of the elementary facial units. This time, the binary relation is of the "yes-no" type. The empty eye or black hole absorbs or rejects, like a half-doddering despot who can still give a signal of acquiescence or refusal.' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.207)

Black holes when reading faces operate on the above logic of 'yes' or 'no' - one either conforms to an accepted degree of deviation from the norm or does not - and if not, facialisation proceeds to evaluate one's degree of deviation from the norm. Judgement occurs based on the internal standards the black hole will accept. This, as I mentioned earlier, and as Deleuze and Guattari argue, is how prejudice operates; by measuring a degree of deviation from European norms in the white face model on the macro-political level, and the internalisation of this model produced over time on the micro-political, personal level. As such the face essentially becomes the inhuman in humans. A human-generated algorithm that sorts, accepts, rejects and defines normativity based on the organisation of traits.

## MICRO-FASCISM

‘Only microfascism provides an answer to the global questions: Why does desire desire its own repression, how can it desire its own repression? The masses certainly do not passively submit to power; nor do they ‘want’ to be repressed’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.151)

If the kinds of standards I have been discussing are so rampant, then how do we come to accept it? The answer to Deleuze and Guattari is a kind of hidden fascism that operates in subtle and individual ways before culminating and enabling any larger fascisms. When Deleuze and Guattari talk about micro-fascism, they are talking about the propensity for everyone to want others and the external world to conform to their own rules. This is what operates at the centre of a black hole. This is an internalised politics functioning on the level of the individual. Micro-fascism features an internalised algorithm of judgement. We could say that the formation of micro-fascism or a black hole comes from being oriented over time – it constitutes what we will accept or reject when we face towards things, and is structured by familiarity with the things we have faced towards in the past. Here we can also depart from the face as a totally visual structure and see it as a more of a sorting algorithm. The dominant form of this algorithm shared by many is the white faced orientation, that not only turns towards white faces as faces, but makes the assumption of internal movements, beliefs, ideologies, moral-qualities and so on in relation to the surface presentation of a face. These qualities become part of ‘the face’ or ‘are facialised’ rather than operating separately. The face codes them and renders characteristics as symbolic - assumed. Whatever information is passed through a micro-fascistic algorithm to determine these qualities constructs them in terms of an identity. Google does the same with its algorithms to sell us content, and we do it with our own internalised algorithm to make assumptions of others. The personal nature of Grindr on smartphones constructs an environment for thriving micro-fascism. This is in part because the structure of judgement is very much based on the sorting of still faces. If affection-images represent desire as partial objects do, then a more perverse form of desire is repressed if our consumption of others as desire objects is limited by internalised micro-fascisms that include the internalised privileging of white bodies. Affection-image, and the face, in such an environment becomes a political structure.

## THE POLITICS OF MICRO-FASCISM

‘[...] fascism is inseparable from a proliferation of molecular focuses in interaction  
[...] fascism of the Left and fascism of the Right, fascism of the couple, family,

school, office: every fascism is defined by a micro-black hole that stands on its own [...] before resonating in a great, generalized central black hole.’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.250)

Micro-fascisms are shaped by our emotions towards things we see, especially online. Our hatred of other worldviews, our preference for white faces or our love of cats can cause us to dislike, block or like content; to craft and shape an environment around us that is familiar and acceptable. We can do this with online dating apps, and I have known people to block every single person they would not sleep with in a particular area to maximise the efficiency of their browsing experience. This forms a protective echo chamber and produces an algorithm both digital and internal that feeds us the things that we prefer to face-towards over time. Micro-fascism does not refer to the grand polarities of politics - the left or the right - it refers to the despotic tendency of any individual regardless of these metas, although they often intersect and align. I find it astonishing that people completely overlook that anyone has the tendency to be a micro-fascist, not only those people on the particular side of politics they don't know or who they don't agree with. Our own parents, father-figures, mother-figures, teachers, best friends, 'frienemies' and selves qualify as micro-fascists. Among young people an example of the contemporary rendering-intense of micro-fascism is whether something agrees or not with 'my politics'; a phrase that reflects a very direct personal claim, ownership and identification with a set of political rules amongst young people online. 'My aesthetics', a term often claimed on sites like Tumblr, is not much different, referring to personal aesthetic languages that may or may not align with particular trends, prejudices and micro-political-aesthetic groups. The politics of individuals in either case are structured by a repetitive 'turning toward' specific faces in the expanded sense - as languages and images that inscribe themselves on users and the assumed qualities perceived as internal to these faces. Such inscription structures worldviews by permitting or not permitting faces that match an internalised micro-fascistic sorting algorithm that is very much originary in humans, and is simply enhanced by the processing speed of digital tools and their browsing capacity.

Dating apps and other digital apps and websites do not serve as banal or blank tools that are simply 'there', they serve as personal henchmen for the hidden despots in all of us and our politics or aesthetics, through the closing off of frames of vision and the assertion that (through good UX and UI design) devices immediately serve any and all users and their specific personal needs in the most efficient ways possible. Google wants to 'understand you'. The tools of the digital micro-fascist are indeed the ability to block, delete, silence, select, read only certain articles and cultivate a personal echo chamber. The phrase heard here, again among young people, is "cultivating my algorithm". Such features allow us a quick departure from any views or encounters that offer even the least bit of friction or discomfort to our own goals and desires. We are all micro-fascists, digital narcissists, acceptance-rejection machines that permit and reject digital content based on personal rules

that may or may not be informed by broader political trends. Machines interpret our micro-fascisms en-masse and roll them back out to us individually for perpetual consumption through Facebook feeds and corresponding features on similar platforms, compounding and solidifying, inscribing these rules into our personal algorithm (both corporeally and digitally). We can argue in forums with an unshifting, predetermined and validated position without any actualised, situated consensus, negotiation, resolution or diplomacy. Recently the term 'post-truth' has arisen around the American election as a symptom of this concern. It reflects well that we are now in an age where individuals wish to determine what they believe, fact or no fact, without interference, aided by the efficiency of the micro-fascist's digital tools (that's all of us).

'Leftist organizations will not be the last to secrete micro-fascisms. It's too easy to be antifascist on the molar level and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and collective.'  
(Deleuze, 1987, p.251)

Other clear sites for micro-fascism or black-hole-ism are closed Facebook groups that devolve into language games that ad-nauseum enforce micro-political power structures which are often based on the subjectivities of admins in charge but are at least to some degree followed and accepted by other members in such groups. Through the participation of individuals of tiny to large degrees, particular subjective intensities gather these individual micro-fascisms into larger swarms where the shared intensities produce even more intense black holes. Without the participation of other views, the result is an endlessly updating monoculture that produces the same snippets of language over and over again, similar to the white-male-body culture on Grindr. These intensities are aided by the lack of faces (a lack of situated or nuanced affect) and the clashing of intense micro-fascisms that have no faces to reflect off - black holes trying to suck in other black holes. People on the left will know what I am talking about - the black holes of Facebook groups that construct walled spaces for increasingly limited and intense audiences - spaces that increasingly discuss, not the content, nor produce content (for fear of any specific voice having an impact against an infinite number of possible triggers and arguments) but rather devolve into unlimited discussions over the rules of language around these particular intense subjectivities. This is also the devolution of such languages into moral barometers that promote certain words, certain strings of realisation or claims about the self, as being more correct, more admirable, than others - the 'yes / no' 'pass / fail' response of the internal sorting machine. This renders the experience of language hierarchical and lacking in nuance. I'm not saying that in every case is this wrong, but it is hard to reasonably police and most attempts are futile, ending in social implosions, and fights among people who should have more important enemies.

The final issue here with micro-fascism is that people are also smart and know how to hide their fascisms behind acceptable signifiers. Silence has a role to play. If we are able to constantly deride others publically and turn down certain ideas in micro-political scenarios then we can produce a hierarchy-over-time of what is 'good' and what is 'bad' to present or express. People will say the correct thing to earn likes and social capital, especially from those they perceive as having power; social, sexual or otherwise. It's hard to know if someone is sincere, insincere, or even if a person is aware of their own sincerity or insincerity when they are reproducing popular rhetoric, or presenting themselves through a particular aesthetic style online. People who don't present the correct thing (especially with text) are called out and piled-on-top-of, chased out and left scolded. Otherwise, they are simply turned-away-from. Online the silence and stillness of faces can be crippling; those faces who have turned away from you without you knowing because you presented something that was not 'in-line' leaves you with no method of negotiation or feedback. In online dating you may watch the array of faces-in-a-face shrink as you present the wrong kind of affection-image, yet with the ability to block, the depletion of these faces that turn-towards you leave you no indication of who it was, they simply no longer exist in your field of vision. A profile that blocks us can be felt a violent turning-away, a cutting off, a banishment. For gay men this can be a castration of sorts.

## CLOSING COMMENTS

I began this paper with a discussion of empathy and its rhetoric in the digital UX and UI design sphere. I come full circle to end with an assertion that there is a problem for empathy on behalf of users where digital systems so perfectly play into internalised human algorithms of judgement and selection. This retards our ability to understand each other and emphasises the individual as user with their own desires, but not the individual as a participant in a nuanced environment where their desires clash with those of others. This is very much a political or ethical concern. Digital systems are far from banal or convenient tools. They close-off our field of vision over time, aided by our appreciation of the rhetoric that such tools are 'understanding us better' or making our 'lives more efficient'. Such tools exacerbate pre-existing micro-fascisms within us and allow us to narcissistically construct environments that reflects comfortable predispositions, something that has contributed to the 'post truth' era. I started my interest in this problem by looking at gay online dating apps in previous work, but now I can see how these models apply on a much larger scale. Online dating is a world where the privileges and attitudes of users uniquely caricature larger ones; the presentation of the body, the face, and the pressure to portray a desirable body is played up given the sensitivity of men in a sexual market system. In this example their fragility, narcissism and internalised privileging of stern whiteness is not dissolved by an app for homosexuality but rather rendered more intense by an averaging-out over time that occurs

through participation. In future work I may use this example more, although I would like to now consider the platforms that I raised at the end of this article to examine these themes in more depth and in an expanded sense.

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